



# Phoenix Mate: mm fated mates paranormal romance (Brothers of Fire Book 3)

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** What happens when the Chief of Security wakes up as the familiar to a man who doesn't know he's a witch? Chaos.

Quentin Silverbrook has never really belonged anywhere. At fifteen, his parents divorced, and his father took a job in Mont de Leucoy. Now twenty-two, he hasn't left even though there is nothing keeping him there...until he is blackmailed into watching the building over the road from the bar where he works.

With Dalmon back in England, Gerrit injured, and Everest ruling by proxy, Kaine Lenoir, the only phoenix shifter not part of the royal family in this life, is feeling the pressure to take down the Shadow Board before more people die and paranormals are exposed to humans.

One night to blow off some tension turns into a disaster when the man turns out to be his fated mate. Worse, he is an untrained mind-reading witch.

The only positive is that Quentin is being blackmailed by the Shadow Board. All Kaine needs to do is find a way to use that—to use Quentin—to destroy the Board. Have the Fates stacked the deck in his favor, or will he create a soul bruise that will haunt them both for lifetimes?

A one-night stand turns into forever as a witch discovers the hidden world of paranormals and takes control of his magic while being dazzled by the wealth and secrets of the phoenix shifters that make up the royal family.

**Total Pages (Source):** 30

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:16 am*

There were so many moving pieces, Kaine Lenoir didn't know if he'd be able to solve the puzzle the Shadow Board had created. It was becoming the thing that kept him up at night. That chewed at his consciousness every waking moment. There was a way to stop them. There always was. But it didn't matter how many times he read over his notes or read the files the Coven had created. He couldn't see the solution.

And if he couldn't see the solution, then he was damn sure no one else could.

Instead of going straight home or to the castle to have dinner with Everest while Gerrit wasn't there, he walked through the city center. Many of the buildings were old, not as old as the castle, but several centuries. In this area, the streets were cobbled. This was the street that often ended up in holiday photos and tourist calendars and postcards. But that wasn't what he was seeing as he walked.

How many times had he walked along this street over the centuries?

Had he overseen the construction of the road or any of the buildings?

How many times had all of this repeated over the centuries?

The Shadow Board, by a different name, trying to expose paranormals to humans. Paranormals trying to seize power for themselves, whether they be witches or shifters or something else. Even paranormals liked to forget that more than just witches and shifters existed—most of them would shit themselves if they came face-to-face with a ghoul. But they were very efficient at cleaning up the kind of messes that no one wanted to let humans find.

The cold mountain air chilled his cheeks and fingertips, but he didn't shove his hands into the pockets of his leather jacket. If anyone attacked, he'd be too slow to free his hands. A year ago, the idea of being attacked in his own bloody country would've been laughable.

A year ago, the Shadow Board had been a whisper. A rumor. A society of blue-blooded witches from England. Now they were anything but shadows, and he was jumping. They'd sent someone to kill Gerrit because they wanted Everest on the throne. For the moment, he had given them what they wanted because he wanted to see what they'd do next. He wanted to control what information they got.

In England, Dalmon, as head of the Coven, was following up on his own information. Kaine hadn't worked this closely with his older brother in this lifetime. And if he was frustrated, Dalmon was ready to tear apart everything to find the rot. Dalmon lacked patience. He wanted answers yesterday, and Kaine was rapidly reaching that point. The longer this continued, the more the risks increased.

For everyone. Human, witch, and shifter.

He raked his fingers through his hair, aware that, at the moment, he looked less like the Chief of Security for the whole country and more like someone searching for trouble.

The pistol he wore beneath his leather jacket and the knife in his boot did nothing to alleviate that appearance. He walked past the cafe that doubled as the front for the Coven in Mont de Leucoy and considered going in and buying dinner because he couldn't be bothered, going home and reheating whatever the chef had made earlier in the week. Unlike his brothers, he didn't like having staff in his personal space. Nor was he a member of the royal family this time. Logically, it made sense that one of them was on the outside.

It had probably been him who thought of that rule centuries ago.

But that didn't make it easier to be on the outside.

No, if he went into the bustling cafe, it would be filled with happy, chatty paranormals, and some of them might recognize him, but he didn't want to talk to anyone. On the other side of the road was a bar that wasn't very busy, given the early hour of the evening.

He'd sit in a booth and watch the door, have a beer and dinner and tumble round ideas. Perhaps the change of location would shake loose an idea or two. Then he'd walk back to work, collect his car and go home, which sounded even less appealing than it had been when he'd left work.

Going home to his empty house was the last thing he wanted.

Yet he hesitated.

He didn't know what he wanted or what he was doing. The longer he danced with the Shadow Board, the dizzier he became. He needed to stop for a few beats and catch his breath.

He waited for a car to go past, then he jogged across the road and into the bar. It took him a couple of seconds to scan the room and locate the best seat, and then he made his way over to the booth and sat.

For several heartbeats, he didn't move. Couldn't. He was tired and at a dead end, chasing his own burning tail. He raked his fingers through his hair again, exhaled, and reached for the menu.

He didn't want food.

He wanted a fucking solution.

Exposing paranormals to humans before the Shadow Board was not a solution he was ready to pursue. That needed to be done in a careful and controlled manner, to prevent another round of witch and shifter hunts. And they didn't have time to put together that kind of operation.

But it was something he wanted to work on because it had become clear that hiding in a world filled with high resolution cameras in every pocket, and every pocket connected to the Internet, was nearly impossible.

Dalmon and his cover-up agents and lawyers were fighting an unending tide of accidental sightings and such.

It was exhausting.

From the corner of his eye, he saw one of the bar staff walk over. He was dressed in black, aside from the rainbow shoelaces in his boots. Something about that small splash of color and individuality made Kaine smile.

“What can I get you?” The man asked. There was a trace of an accent in his French, but not enough that it grated.

Kaine glanced up and almost forgot the question because the man was so pretty. And pretty was exactly the right word for the honey-haired man who was all dimpled smiles and bubbling energy. Kaine blinked and glanced away. He wasn't looking for a distraction. He needed dinner and a solution.

“Whatever mid-strength, local beer you have on tap, and...” He scanned the menu. “And the beef pie. Thanks.”

The man tapped the tablet in his hand a couple of times and then held it out for Kaine to pay. He waved his watch over the screen and heard the beep of acceptance.

“It won’t be too long.”

“Great.” Kaine gave him a polite smile and hoped he’d wander off to go do bartending stuff.

He did, and Kaine didn’t look away, mostly because of the way the black jeans hugged his ass. As if knowing he was being watched, the man glanced over his shoulder and tossed Kaine a smile that was anything but professional and more of an invitation to follow.

Kaine shook his head. No distractions, no matter how pretty. Though he wanted to rip the elastic out of the man’s hair to find out how long it was. Instead, he pulled his notepad and pen out of his jacket pocket and, for what felt like the tenth time today, he listed everyone he knew and their connection to the Shadow Board, no matter how tenuous.

He connected those people to each other where possible.

He listed the people that he knew were on the Shadow Board and how they connected. The strongest connection they had was through Everest, but if they overplayed that hand, they would all be burned.

The man returned, placing the beer on the table. Then he hesitated.

Kaine paused. He wasn’t worried about anybody reading his notes because he wrote them in his own personal code. “Can I help you?”

“It’s nothing, just a thing of mine... I thought that script was no longer used here? It’s

the way the accent slashes through the E instead of sitting on top that gives it away.”

There were a few other differences between the standard French alphabet, which Mont de Leucoy used now, and the one they had used five hundred years ago. “You’re correct. It’s not used anymore, though I like it.”

The extra three letters and the different placement of the accents made it that little bit harder for someone to break his code. He pushed the notepad aside and turned it over so the man couldn’t make any further observations. “You’re not from here.”

Was he a Shadow Board spy, or was Kaine seeing things that didn’t exist? Flinching at ghosts and seeing monsters in the shadows?

The man laughed, rubbed the back of his neck, and glanced away. “Yeah, I’ve been told my accent is pretty bad, even though I’ve lived here since I was fifteen.”

Kaine let himself breathe a little easier. The man looked to be around twenty, which meant he’d been living in Mont de Leucoy for five years. He was unlikely to be a Shadow Board spy. But his parents might be.

And Dalmon’s PA had come from a family who’d lived in Mont de Leucoy for over two hundred years. No one was safe and nothing was sacred. Everything was an opportunity to be exploited.

So that’s what he did. “Why did you move here?”

“My father’s work. He wanted a fresh start after my mother left, but you didn’t need to know that.”

It was interesting that he stayed with his father instead of living with his mother, but the bartender was right; Kaine didn’t need to know. He was prying when he should be

ignoring. But it was the man's interest in a forgotten alphabet that sparked something inside him. "What did you mean when you said it's a thing of yours?"

"My degree is in dead languages and such. Much to my father's disappointment, as he calls it a waste of time."

Kaine nodded. He understood why most people considered dead languages, forgotten scripts, and even archaeology a waste of time. Most humans were more obsessed with looking into the future than they were about learning from the past. To them, the past was nothing more than a collection of dry bones, clay, tablets, and forgotten kings. They didn't think there was anything there to learn. But they were wrong. The past wasn't useless or primitive. Like the present day, it was filled with people whose main concerns were having enough to eat, having a roof over their heads, and finding love...or at least someone to spend the night with.

His gaze skimmed over the man's body as he considered his next few steps. He didn't need but he wanted. And he couldn't blame the beer because he hadn't started drinking yet. Maybe he needed to blow off some steam or something. He was so caught up with the Shadow Board drama and then the snowstorm and attempted assassination that he was too tight for a solution to make itself visible.

Suggesting something now was too soon. Too obvious, but he could start laying the foundations and testing to see if the man was even interested. Maybe he was being polite. It wasn't as though the bar was busy.

Kaine leaned back against the leather seat of the booth. "It's a father's job to be disappointed, but yours to make yourself proud."

The man smiled and something in his eyes changed. "Sounds as though you know a bit about that."



He knew a lot about that but wasn't sure where to start. He disappointed people in every life. It seemed impossible to be on good terms with all of his brothers at the same time, not that he believed them to be brothers by blood. There was a natural friction between him and Dalmon that had existed for centuries, according to his books.

"I know a little about many things."

"Including alphabets... Would I be wrong to guess that's not the only one?" Hope bloomed on the man's face as if he'd found a kindred spirit.

He wasn't wrong, but Kaine didn't see any reason to divulge that information. There was a part of him that was still suspicious that all of a sudden, there was a man who understood dead languages right in front of him. There were so many books in the private library that he and his brothers couldn't read because they no longer understood those languages. They didn't even have names for some of those languages.

Once again, he rued the fact that when they died, they were reborn with no knowledge of their previous lives. Gerrit called it a blessing, as it meant they were unburdened by it. He thought they were blinkered. If they learned more of their past and what had happened, then perhaps they wouldn't be the only four phoenix shifters in the world. There had been a fifth, but Olier had been taken a couple of centuries earlier. And while Everest burned to find him, in part because he felt responsible for the loss, Kaine wasn't as fussy. He just wanted to find others.

Honestly, the whole idea of dying and turning into an egg only to be lost and forgotten as a rock, waiting to be hatched, was his worst nightmare. Akin to when humans worried about being buried alive. Not only that, but once hatched, they were as helpless as a human baby until they reached puberty and could shift.

“You got a name?” Kaine asked.

“Quentin.” He offered his hand.

Kaine clasped it. Quentin wasn’t a shifter, and he didn’t seem to be a witch either. They usually had an energy about them. Quentin’s skin was cool against his, but that was common, as no one’s blood ran hotter than a phoenix. Now they were touching, he didn’t want to let go. Had it really been that long since he’d been with another person? Connected with someone about something other than work?

“Kaine.” Some people knew who he was from his first name. They recognized him by sight and by reputation. Mont de Leucoy wasn’t that big of a country, so some people made it their business to know those in powerful positions.

If Quentin knew who Kaine was, there was no flicker of recognition. It was then Kaine realized that’s what he’d been waiting for. Instead, the lack of recognition was another point in Quentin’s favor. The odds of him being a Shadow Board spy were decreasing every minute.

A bell chimed. Quentin glanced over his shoulder. “That’ll be your dinner. Are you in a rush to go somewhere after? I finish at eight.”

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:16 am*

The words tumbled out of Quentin's mouth before he could stop them. And after they were out, he wanted to scoop them up and shove them back in and then run away so he never had to face this man again. Why had he suggested Kaine wait around for him?

What was he thinking?

He wasn't.

Propositioning a customer at work might get his ass fired. He liked having his own money. And he was damn sure that if he wasn't working and studying, his father would make him do something more useful with his life. At one point, his father suggested he join the military the way he had.

Of course, there was no military to join in Mont de Leucoy, so he would have to return to England, and he didn't want to do that. Return to England or join the military.

Kaine released his hand, and Quentin missed his touch immediately. There was something about him that had caught his attention the moment he walked in. There was an edge to him, a watchfulness in his gaze as if he could take in an entire room in three seconds. He was confident without being cocky. Maybe that's all it was.

That and being unlawfully hot.

That black wavy hair and dark eyes and leather jacket. He looked like trouble but wrote in a forgotten alphabet. While Quentin had never tried drugs, he now

understood why the first hit got people hooked. He wanted to do more than shake Kaine's hand. He wanted Kaine's hands all over him. Or his all over him. He wasn't fussed.

As he walked to the counter to grab Kaine's dinner he tried to will away the semi, rubbing against the fly of his jeans.

I finish at eight.

The words echoed in his mind. He only finished at eight because it was a Wednesday night, and after the dinner service, it got pretty quiet. Not that it was busy tonight. It was extra quiet, with only four other tables taken, and two of those tables were regulars.

The extra snow the storm had brought was probably one reason, even though the cold weather didn't seem to stop people around here.

He was going to be wiping tables and polishing the bar until it was time for him to leave. He turned around, plate in hand, and added try not to stare at Kaine to the list of things he needed to do until eight.

For a few heartbeats, he had gotten control of his dick.

But Kaine was watching him. If it bothered him to be caught watching, it didn't show. His lips curved as Quentin walked back over... Okay, so he may have sashayed a little. By the time he'd been seventeen, he'd worked out that being subtle wasn't worth the hassle. That didn't mean being obvious at work was a smart idea.

And he couldn't get fired.

He needed this job, and not just for the money and freedom.

His steps faltered, and his smile slipped for a moment. No, he wasn't going to think of that until Friday. Then he'd do it, and he'd put it out of his mind for another week or until he found a way to slip the leash. But with every passing week, it was getting harder.

He should've told his father straight away. But his father wouldn't care if something happened to Mum. He'd call her a floozy or something and say she deserved it.

Kaine lifted one dark eyebrow.

Fuck.

He'd noticed. Oh god, was he working for those men? Did he know what Quentin was doing?

His stomach tumbled for all the wrong reasons, but at least his hard-on was gone. He put the plate down in front of Kaine and made sure his smile was extra bright. "Can I get you anything else?"

Kaine had barely sipped his beer.

"This will do for the moment. Since it's quiet, I'll be able to sit here and work until eight." The way Kaine was looking at him, Quentin felt naked. He had stripped away his clothes with a smile and saw exactly what was going on. Quentin didn't mind when a man undressed him with his eyes, but this was hella unnerving.

"Unless you now have to work late?" Kaine asked.

Was Kaine giving him an out? Did Kaine think he suddenly had cold feet about hooking up? It was just sex, and that was easy. Fun. He didn't need to think about it, only want it. It was about the only time he didn't need to think about grades,

blackmail, or his father.

And if Kaine was working with the blackmailers?

Quentin didn't see how that changed anything. Unless he ended up dead. Kaine didn't give off assassin vibes, though. Assassins didn't write in forgotten alphabets. At least he didn't think they did. Though it would be a good way to keep nefarious plans a secret. The people in his class who he chatted with online were all about history and making finds and thought digging up some new artifacts would be cool.

He'd rather crack a dead language so everybody could read what was written. It was why he also took classes in code breaking. Computers were smart, but they couldn't solve the riddle of dead languages from a burnt scroll or a broken tablet.

He shook his head. "Not unless we suddenly get a massive load of tourists in, and that's usually on a Thursday night."

Kaine nodded. "The joys of being a tourist destination."

"Yeah, but the Americans always tip well." He grinned. He liked it when the American tourists came through because it was easy money.

"If you smile at them like that, I'm sure they do."

Quentin laughed. "Oh God, no. Some of them are offended by my shoes."

"They're in the wrong fucking country, then."

That was one benefit of being a tiny mountain bound European kingdom. Gay marriage had never been illegal. There had never been an official religion, with Catholics and protestants and practitioners of some ancient religion, all getting along.

It was as if Mont de Leucoy was both somehow progressive and also bound in history.

It was a mix of cobbled streets and modern glass buildings.

Of jet boats on pristine lakes for celebrity holidays and thousand-year-old castles. Of snow and forests and fully equipped modern ski lodges.

Even if his father found another job and moved away, Quentin couldn't imagine himself leaving. There was an almost magical quality as if the country shouldn't exist.

He could, however, imagine himself finishing his degree, finding a job, and getting his own place. Because he was well and truly sick of living with his father. He was reasonably confident he'd be able to find work in Mont de Leucoy, if only because there was so much history.

And if he couldn't?

He needed to finish his degree first, and he had another six months to go.

The future was a problem for later. His more immediate problem was sitting and looking up at him with at least half a dozen questions forming on his rather lovely lips.

"I guess I should ask how close you live, or are you staying somewhere nearby?" He hadn't seen the man before, but he wasn't a tourist.

"I'll book a hotel room."

Quentin's mouth opened, then he shut it just as fast. As much as he wanted to say,

don't bother, come back to my place. It wasn't his place.

"What? You don't like the idea?"

"That seems like a lot of effort," was all he managed to say.

Kaine smiled. "I don't like people coming to my house. I am more than happy to pay for a hotel room. I don't expect you to contribute, as you are clearly a uni student putting some extra money in your bank account by working."

Quentin gave a slow nod. He didn't know anything about this man, and he was about to go to a hotel room with him. Which, on one hand, sounded as hot as fuck and like a great night, and so much better than a restroom or some other equally urgent place, but on the other hand, it also seemed like the ideal way to be found dead the next morning. "And what is it you do?"

His smile widened. "I work for a security company."

Right. That could mean he worked at the castle, or as a bodyguard for one of the royals, or that he worked in cyber security, which was one of the country's primary employers—and exports, apparently. The quaint little country developed solutions for problems hackers hadn't thought of yet, according to his father, or he was much more involved in the actual physical security of things.

"At the castle or..." Because the last thing he wanted was for this man and his father to be chatting and for them to realize they were both talking about Quentin. Being gay had been another disappointment for his father.

"I can't discuss what I do." He pulled the plate a little closer and picked up a fork. "I'll see you at eight."



Quentin took a step away, then turned back. “Do you do this often?”

“Do what?”

“Pick up people and book a room?”

Kaine cut a piece of the pie and stabbed it. “You put the offer out there. I accepted and will make the arrangements.”

“That answered half my question.”

Kaine considered him for several seconds, and Quentin was sure that he’d blown it from the way Kaine considered him. “No. Because it’s a lot of effort for mediocre reward.”

“Then why tonight?”

“Because it was easy. Now...” Kaine studied him, and Quentin had the distinct feeling he was becoming far too much effort.

“Enjoy your meal.” He turned, and this time, he kept walking. Even though he felt Kaine’s eyes on his ass, he didn’t turn around.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:16 am*

Kaine unlocked his phone, and as he ate, he booked a room in the hotel up the road. He had told Gerrit off for picking up a strange snow leopard. He told Everest off for fucking his bodyguards, or more correctly, encouraging them to fuck him. Was he any different?

He hadn't taken anyone back to his house in at least a year, maybe two. He certainly didn't take hookups and flings home. He didn't go to their place either. A hotel was a neutral meeting ground. They also had plenty of cameras and security.

He was sure he hadn't always been this paranoid.

And he blamed the Shadow Board for that. Because he was now jumping at shadows...and hot bartenders ten years younger than himself.

It wouldn't be the first time he found a distraction that way.

The last time had been at Everest's estate. He'd gone to check it while Everest was in England, and while there, he had found a delightful distraction, and they'd enjoyed a pleasant few days before her holiday ended. The only difference was he'd been playing the part of staff.

She had at least waited until the second night to start asking questions.

He sighed and took a drink of beer, reminding himself that it was normal to ask questions about the person you were going to get naked with.

Sometimes.

When he'd been at uni in France, there'd been times when he'd never known their name. Fuck, there'd been one night he hadn't even known how many people there were, only that the bed had been extremely full and extremely sticky come morning. And he'd been absolutely wrecked. A top ten memory that he didn't want to tarnish by ever repeating.

He glanced at Quentin for a couple of heartbeats, wishing he was that carefree and that the weight of being responsible for the security of the country and his brothers wasn't all his to bear. While it annoyed him the way Everest corrupted his bodyguards—Everest always had the morals of an alley cat in heat—which meant he had to find the straightest ones possible, it didn't bother him as much as it bothered Dalmon. It was almost a game between the two of them. So far, Everest was winning. There was something about him that bodyguards found irresistible. And Everest liked the power play.

Kaine shook his head and picked his phone up. He logged in and typed Quentin's name into the search. Was it unethical to run a quick check on a potential lover? Not when it came to him and his brothers and the running of the country. There was no such thing as privacy. Something Lucian and Malcolm were going to find out. As much as he liked Lucian and disliked Malcolm, he believed Malcolm would handle the scrutiny much better. And given time, he might come to like Malcolm, assuming he proved himself trustworthy. If he was trustworthy, his background made him an asset to the kingdom.

If.

There were only a handful of men named Quentin in the country—which Kaine had suspected, as it wasn't a common name. And only one of them was young enough to be the one who'd propositioned him. He tapped on the profile, opening it up. From the photo, he had the right man.

Quentin Silverbrook, twenty-two years old. He was studying archaeology and cryptography, which were interesting choices. They sounded like something he would've studied if computers weren't invented. Quentin's father was ex-British military and worked as security in the castle. In the part that was open to the public, so he had nothing to do with Gerrit.

He tapped on Alfred Silverbrook's profile. Divorced with one child. He applied for the job after being recommended by a former colleague, who also worked in security. He read through Alfred's military career, but there was nothing curious there. His promotions were all as expected, his overseas service was nothing extraordinary. He was the average career soldier who'd entered the army at sixteen and plugged away at it until his body was done.

Neither of their profiles have been flagged in the system for anything. They were both human—though only he and a handful of others would be able to see their paranormal status. It wasn't the kind of thing he wanted revealed to human employees.

That there was nothing in their profiles only made him more suspicious. Which meant he definitely had a problem. He was turning into his brother—Dalmon, not Everest.

Or perhaps Gerrit, who'd pushed everything aside for the running of the country and the raising of Everest until he was so miserable, he didn't want to shift back to human.

Fuck, that is not how he wanted to end up.

One night with a hot bartender might be exactly what he needed. His gaze found Quentin, and the younger man turned and smiled as if feeling the heat of his stare. Yeah, he wanted. He wanted to lose himself in the other man's body and forget about the Shadow Board for one goddamn night.

So he made a deal with himself. He would work until eight and if he didn't have the solution by then he'd enjoy a night out and when he woke up, he would get back to work. He doubted anyone would call him out for enjoying himself for a few hours.

Aside from him, that was. If something happened while he was enjoying himself, then he would be pissed. But those thoughts didn't lead anywhere good.

And his older brothers served as a warning that he was heading the same way.

With dinner finished, he pushed the plate away and turned over his notepad, hoping that while he wasn't looking the letters had rearranged themselves into the answer.

They hadn't.

The Shadow Board wanted to expose paranormals and put witches in a position of power by claiming shifters were dangerous and wild and only controllable by witches.

They wanted a foothold in Europe, thus their invitation to Everest.

They had tried to kill Gerrit to put Everest on the throne. That the assassin now warmed Gerrit's bed still made him uneasy.

They had spies amongst Gerrit's staff, including a witch who could talk to animals. He'd reviewed every witch he employed, searching for any other animal talkers. But there were none.

So far, the Shadow Board had been very organized, which meant there were other threads he wasn't seeing. Killing Gerrit couldn't have been their only plan. Not only that, but they would be watching Malcolm in case he fronted up at the Coven building and told them everything.

His gaze flicked to the door, but the Coven cafe was now dark.

Did they have someone in the Coven?

Or watching the Coven?

How many other people were they threatening and blackmailing?

With all the tourists coming in and out of the country, it was impossible to monitor everyone. It wasn't as though witches and shifters had their paranormal status marked on their passports.

Anyone that he knew of had already been flagged in the system, so he'd be alerted. But they must be aware of that.

The best course of action was to wait until they made their next move, which would probably be a request to Everest. He didn't like being this reactive. He much preferred it when he could unravel the problem and then set the trap. At the moment, it felt as though they were in the trap, waiting for it to close.

"Hey..."

Kaine glanced up at Quentin.

"Sorry, didn't mean to disturb you. I'll take your plate, and then I'm done."

Kaine frowned, then checked his watch. It was almost eight. "I lost track of time."

"I noticed. Are you done with the beer as well?"

It would be warm now. He pushed the glass towards Quentin. "Yes."

“Okay, let me sort this out and grab my jacket.” One eyebrow lifted as though it was a question, not a statement.

Kaine’s gaze slid over the younger man, and his heartbeat quickened as desire took hold. He folded up his notebook and slipped it into his jacket pocket. What he needed was to stop thinking about the Shadow Board for one night.

Sex wouldn’t solve any problems, it never did, but it was a great way to forget his responsibilities for a few hours. And maybe while he was asleep, he’d dream of the solution.

“I’ll step outside so the people you work with don’t see you leaving with me.”

“Oh...good idea.” He grinned, and a dimple formed in each cheek.

Kaine bit back on the sigh of longing. Quentin was too young and too innocent for the jaded likes of him. But that wasn’t going to stop him. Now the idea had taken root, he didn’t want anything or anyone else. Perhaps seeing two of his brothers all loved up had gotten to him. He stepped out into the chilly night and leaned against the wall. It wasn’t as though he was averse to the idea of having someone. But he also didn’t know how he could trust someone, not when he saw and knew so much. It also meant whoever was with him was in danger.

And that wasn’t fair to them.

Everything in this lifetime was far more complicated than it had been in the past. He blamed technology for that, even though he loved technology.

He stared at the closed Coven building. Well, the cafe at the front was closed. There may still be a few people inside. It wasn’t a big office like the one in London. But it was the triage point, and anyone in desperate need of help was sent to him. In Mont

de Leucoy, he was the Coven, and he only answered to Dalmon, who ran the entire Coven. It had seemed like a good set-up this time around, but he was beginning to think running security for the country and king, as well as dealing with paranormal issues, was a little too much work. Unlike Dalmon, he could at least admit when things grew too much, and he would be more than happy to offload some duties to someone trustworthy.

At the moment, he didn't trust anyone because of the Shadow Board.

But he did not like jumping at shadows.

Quentin stepped out of the bar, wearing a bright red jacket and a knitted hat, and took a moment to locate Kaine, who was dressed in black and leaning against the brick wall in the shadows. "Aren't you cold?"

His blood ran hotter than most people's. He'd need to sit out in the snow wearing shorts and a T-shirt for quite a while before he got cold and before it became an issue. "The jacket is lined." Which wasn't a lie. He peeled himself off the wall and started walking, expecting Quentin to fall into step. "And I hadn't planned on being out so late."

"I hadn't planned on doing this either." Quentin gave a little lift of his eyebrows.

It took Kaine a moment to work out what his silent question meant. "I think you'll find the hotel room is well stocked."

Quentin stared at him. "When you said hotel, you actually meant the hotel?"

Kaine pointed at the five-star hotel on the other side of the road. "Of course, I did. Where did you think we were going?"



Quentin turned around and pointed in the direction they'd come from. "The motel and backpackers are in that direction."

Kaine laughed. "No. Firstly, the security in those places is very slack. And secondly, I don't think they understand the meaning of the word discretion, and thirdly, why not enjoy a little luxury?"

Quentin nodded. "Just so clear, you're not a serial killer, are you?"

"If I was, why would I be taking you into a place which is super secure? It's the hotel visiting dignitaries stay at. No, if I was a serial killer, I would take you to the motel. The backpackers has too many people coming and going at all hours. The motel is quieter, but not as secure."

"I'm a little disturbed you've put that much thought into it." Yet he continued to walk next to him.

"I work security. It's my job to know which places are safe and which places aren't. I'm often asked to scope out destinations ahead of time, including some of the luxury resorts and such. I make security recommendations, so they are up to the standard required for the people visiting." He did those jobs himself. He had analysts and security teams who acted as the detail. He could also throw together a Black Ops team at short notice. He was the person the police came to when the job got too big. That he was having to call Dalmon for reinforcements meant the situation was grim.

"Right, so not just security."

"If you think all security is only bodyguards, you're missing the bigger picture. A lot of work goes in that no one ever sees."

The doorman opened the door and nodded at Kaine before his gaze slid to Quentin.

The doorman wasn't employed by the hotel. He worked for Kaine. All the security staff in this hotel worked for Kaine for the simple reason that this hotel was used by visiting celebrities, presidents, and royalty.

Quentin sucked breath as they walked inside.

Kaine glanced back, expecting something to be wrong. Instead, the young man was staring at the butterfly house. He'd forgotten it existed. When he was here, he was working.

He wasn't looking at the gold and marble or the chandelier.

"Do I want to ask how you got a room or how much it was?"

"I called and booked, the same as anyone." Asking for a few little extras was easy. "As for the price...it really doesn't bother me."

He may not be royal in this lifetime, but he had more money than he could ever spend. They all did because time and compound interest were always in their favor.

He reached out and took Quentin's hand for the second time that evening. The younger man's fingers wrapped around his, and he smiled. His heart was beating fast—with nerves or lust?

Kaine leaned in. "You can change your mind and leave."

Quentin swallowed and shook his head. "I'm always nervous when...um...meeting someone for the first time."

"But brave enough to be the one doing the inviting."

His cheeks colored. “Yeah, I expected you to brush me off.”

A woman walked over and handed Kaine the room key. “Everything is ready for your stay, Mr. Lenoir.”

“Thank you.”

“You didn’t even have to check in?”

“They know me,” Kaine said as if that explained everything.

“Because you come here often?”

He laughed and led Quentin toward the lifts. “For work, not pleasure.”

And while he could be assured of discretion and security here for the first time, he wondered if he shouldn’t have gone to the motel where no one would recognize the country’s Chief of Security.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:16 am*

This place was lux, and it seemed everywhere Quentin looked was another show of wealth and class. It was the kind of place he'd never stepped foot inside, even though he only worked up the road because he figured the doorman wouldn't let the likes of him through the door.

Next to Kaine, it seemed he could go anywhere, and no one blinked twice. Which made him wonder how much power Kaine had. He sure as hell wasn't just security when he knew how to case a building. It also meant he probably wasn't a serial killer, though, with enough power and money, all kinds of things could disappear. The people blackmailing him had made that very clear.

While his father didn't gossip about the castle, he always said that money corrupts. And that those who have lots of it, expect more of it. And that they expected those who worked for them to obey without question.

Much like the staff in the hotel when they saw Kaine.

Because he came here for work. To make sure it was suitable for the clientele.

Quentin couldn't imagine turning up to a fancy hotel and then demanding changes because some prince or prime minister demanded it. Who behaved like that?

The lift opened, and Kaine ushered him in.

Quentin sucked in a breath and felt himself staring. Oh my God, even the lift was fancy. All mirrors and gold and soft lighting so as not to offend rich eyeballs.

Usually, when he hooked up, he was like a six out of ten nervous, with ten being standing up in front of a crowd of people and talking. Right now, he reckoned he was an eight. Mostly because of the hotel.

Because Kaine was so far out of his league, he wasn't sure why Kaine had agreed. It wasn't as though he'd been sitting in the bar having dinner, scrolling for hookups. For a moment, Quentin wished he'd kept his mouth closed.

Not that he was very good at that, either.

Kaine gave his hand a squeeze. "You okay?"

"Yeah." Just gobsmacked that he was about to spend the night in this place. With a man like Kaine. Fuck. He wasn't sure if his life was going really well or about to skid off the rails.

Be cool; it's a one-time thing. Make the most of it.

However, no one had ever described him as chill.

"Wondering why you said yes." And went to all this effort. For him.

His birth had been an accident, but his father had done the right thing and married his mother. She had tried to do the right thing. They moved around a bit while his father was in the army, and she'd always found a bit of work singing or performing. By the time he was thirteen, their marriage was over. They'd lived together for another two years, dating other people, before his mother got a job as an entertainer on a cruise ship. He'd seen her a few times since and spent two weeks after finishing school on holiday with her, travelling around, and she'd been a different person to the woman he remembered. She'd been so full of life. So vibrant. It had been one of those moments where he'd been so happy for her, and yet it had cut him deeply that his

existence made her so miserable.

It was soon after that he'd been diagnosed with ADHD and started meds, which had improved his school grades quite a bit. Enough that joining the army was no longer his only option.

Kaine studied him in the mirror, his dark eyes taking everything in and no doubt finding every flaw. It would not take long, a few weeks tops, for Kaine to realize he was too much.

Too much talking.

Too distracted.

Needing too much reassurance. Which he'd just asked for again.

Kaine turned to face him. His hand cupped Quentin's cheek, and then his lips were on his in the softest kiss, as if they had all the time in the world, and there was no need to rush.

There was a part of his brain that was telling him to rush. To open his mouth, to deepen the kiss, to reach for Kaine's fly, and rub his dick. To get on with it before they were interrupted.

Heat flared in his blood, and all he wanted was more. As if nothing mattered but getting naked with Kaine.

Kaine drew back to look him in the eye. "Because you're cute, clearly smart, and bold enough to ask, and because I wanted to." His thumb brushed over Quentin's lower lip as if he wanted to kiss him again.

If shaking Kaine's hand had been the first taste to get him hooked, the kiss was his first full dose, and his head was spinning. Nerves tangled with lust, and he was sure his heart was going to explode or break free and fly away or something. He'd turn into one hundred butterflies and scatter on the breeze.

He knew what lust was, and it had never felt like this.

Kaine's eyebrows drew together, as if he saw something he didn't like in Quentin's eye. Then the doors opened.

At that point, Quentin wouldn't have been surprised if they had ended up in the penthouse. He wasn't sure anything would surprise him now.

Kaine stepped backward out of the lift, drawing Quentin with him. And he followed because there was nowhere else he wanted to be. They reached the end of the corridor, then Kaine reached into his pocket, pulled out the key and swiped it over the lock.

The door clicked open, and Kaine stepped over the threshold.

He could release Kaine's hand and run away, get back into the lift, and go home.

That was safe. He knew how to run home. He knew how to have furtive hookups in bathrooms. He did not know how to do this. In a fancy hotel.

But if he didn't step in, then he'd never find out, and he'd regret that for the rest of his life. Because he was sure there wouldn't be a second chance. He drew a breath and stepped in, shutting the door behind him.

Kaine reached past him and put the catch on.

His heart was going about a million miles an hour. He expected Kaine to kiss him again. When he didn't, Quentin took the chance. He leaned in, needing another taste.

Kaine pressed him against the door, no more hurried than he had been in the lift. His tongue flicked over Quentin's lip, and Quentin opened his mouth to taste him. But even that wasn't enough. He undid Kaine's jacket and slid his hand beneath. He gasped, and his hand stilled when his fingers brushed metal. It was a gun. He knew that without any further exploration.

Kaine made a noise and stepped back. He pulled off his leather jacket, revealing the pistol and holster.

Not even all the cops carried guns in Mont de Leucoy. Regular citizens didn't carry. Quentin lifted his gaze. "Any other weapons I should know about?"

"No...because you don't need to know," Kaine said with a smile, but he wasn't joking.

Right. Cool. He was in a high security, fancy hotel with an armed man. He was either in the safest place or the most dangerous place in the country. Either way, his dick had not got the memo because he was the hardest he'd ever been.

He swallowed, his brain scrambling for an excuse to go to the bathroom so he could pull out his phone and look up who the fuck Kaine Lenoir was.

"Do you want me to have a shower or something so you can disarm in private? I mean, I smell like spilled beer anyway, so it's probably a good idea. Plus, um..." Shit, they hadn't even discussed preferences and such. Usually, he had that conversation before he got this far.

Kaine kissed him again, harder this time, as if his control was slipping and the hunger



was coming out. His hand slid over Quentin's hip and gripped his ass, tugging him close to grind against him. "If you feel more comfortable having a shower first, then do so. If you also want me to shower, I am happy to do so. If there is something you want, tell me." The words were soft, but they were still an order.

What he wanted was Kaine's dick inside him. He wanted to be pinned to the wall like a fucking butterfly. "What do you want?"

Kaine gave a low laugh. "I asked first."

Damn it, he had. Fine, it wasn't as though he wasn't used to saying what he liked from a man, but in his experience, tops made it clear early on. "I like to bottom. So I'm really hoping that you like to top."

"You're in luck...though it has been a while since I've slept with a man."

Quentin's eyebrow lifted before he could stop it. "You're not married, are you?"

Because that was a line he wasn't willing to cross for anyone, no matter how hot and no matter how horny he was. He did not want to be responsible for the destruction of another marriage.

"No, and I am offended that you?—"

Quentin kissed him. "I didn't mean to offend, but some guys. Well...they marry a woman and think if they sleep with men, it's not cheating." Some thought it wasn't cheating if they were on holiday. He had a rule not to sleep with tourists. "So I had to ask."

"I could've lied."

Quentin held Kaine's dark stare. "You could have, but at least I asked."

Kaine nodded and stepped back. "Have a shower. I'll be in in five, and then we can start clean and end up dirty." The words came out as a low purr that went straight to his dick. He was sure there was already a damp spot on the front of his briefs.

Kaine opened the bathroom door for him and held out his arm so he could step through.

The bathroom was so fancy, he didn't want to use it and mess it up.

There were several soft lights pretending to be candles. Rolled-up white towels, which wouldn't be crunchy or small. A bathtub you could have an orgy in and a shower with one of those fancy heads that made it feel like standing in the rain.

He caught his reflection in the mirror.

People like him did not go to places like this.

"Problem?"

"Admiring the bathroom. You might be used to this, but I am not."

Kaine slid his hands around Quentin's waist and kissed the back of his neck. "I don't live like this, but everyone should have a little luxury every now and again. I'll give you an extra two minutes so you can admire."

From the way, Kaine was looking at him in the mirror, and the way his hand slid over the front of Quentin's jeans, it was clear Kaine was doing the admiring. It would be far too easy to get used to Kaine looking at him like that. As though he were something rare and precious.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:16 am*

Kaine shut the bathroom door and drew in a breath. Had it really been that long that he was desperate to get Quentin out of his clothes and into bed?

Heat flowed through his veins, and his cock throbbed.

For several more seconds, he stood by the door, half tempted to renege on his promise to give Quentin time alone. He wanted to be in there, peeling the clothes off him. But if he did, then Quentin would take off his, and he needed to disarm before he freaked out his lover for the night.

He forced himself away from the door and took off the holster. For a heartbeat, he was torn between putting the weapon in the safe and putting it in the bedside drawer where it was more easily accessible. He might be in a hotel room, about to be naked with someone, but that didn't mean he trusted him.

Aside from his brothers, he wasn't sure who he trusted. Perhaps no one anymore. He did not want to live the way Dalmon had been, consumed by work, cold, and aloof.

But it had a hold of him and was pulling him under. Wearing him out.

He needed this night off, and he hadn't noticed how much he wanted the distraction until Quentin had suggested it. He put the pistol and holster in the bedside table drawer and pulled out the sealed packet of condoms and lube, ripping off the plastic so they would be more accessible. There is no point in being subtle.

When was the last time he'd gone on a date?

Met someone with the intention of getting to know them, not just fuck them?

Before he turned thirty.

A few of his liaisons had developed into something that lasted more than a night, though he wouldn't call it a relationship. Nor would he say they were friends with benefits. That would imply friendship, and he didn't know them well enough for that.

He sat on the edge of the bed and unlaced his boots, pulling them off and tucking them to the side, where the knife was grabbable if he was in bed.

The shower still wasn't running.

He was about to call out and ask if Quentin needed help. He paused, mouth open, as he realized what Quentin would be doing. He'd be on his phone looking him up, now that he had a first and last name.

Fuck. He didn't care if people knew who he was, but it added a weight, a strain that a fling or an affair couldn't deal with. Shouldn't have to deal with. There was a very big difference between sleeping with someone who worked in security and someone who ran national security. He scrubbed his hand over his face.

Fuck it. He wanted to get laid. Which meant he needed to take over before Quentin freaked out, and he could guarantee that the younger man would, given his earlier reactions. Kaine unbuttoned his shirt and tossed it over the chair along with his leather jacket, then did the same with his jeans and briefs before tucking his socks near his boots.

He stood, his hard dick leading the way. Ever since Quentin had smiled at him, that part of him had known what it wanted. He stood, walked over, and knocked on the bathroom door as a shower turned on.

Quentin muttered a curse, then called out, “Has it been seven minutes already?”

Kaine had no idea how long it had been, only that he was done with waiting. “Yes, did you find everything you needed about me?”

Another muttered curse.

Kaine cracked open the bathroom door. Quentin was pulling off his clothes in a hurry, as if he didn’t want to admit that he had been on his phone doing research. His jeans were unbuttoned, his jacket was on the floor, and his black shirt was in his hand.

At least he had his shoes and socks off.

“Are you pissed with me?” His gaze jumped from Kaine’s face to his dick, which liked the attention rather too much.

“No. I did that back at the bar.” He stepped in and shut the door behind him.

Quentin opened his mouth as if surprised but then nodded. “Figures, given who you are. Did you find anything interesting?”

“Nothing, you?” He took another step forward, giving Quentin the chance to change his mind. To say, it was too difficult.

“Aside from the fact you left out that you are the Chief of Security?” His voice went up with each word.

“I didn’t lie.”

“You lied by omission.”

Kaine laughed. “That’s very common in my line of work. It’s a hard habit to break. That and my job tends to scare people off. I won’t be offended if you want to run.”

He hoped Quentin was not a runner, but it was hard to tell. Some people thought they liked the idea of dating someone powerful, only to realize it was more complicated than it seemed. However, he preferred those people to the ones who wanted to date someone powerful for the simple reason that they often wanted power themselves, and anyone who wanted power he didn’t trust. That Quentin thought he was a liar was another point in his favor, as Kaine valued honesty.

Something Kaine could never be with a human.

Yeah, well, it was only one night. They weren’t going to be dating or anything like that. It was a thought that shouldn’t bother him, and yet he wanted to push it away and deny that’s all this was. That he was already craving more meant that he was spending far too much time at work or thinking about work, and he really needed to take more time for himself.

Once they shut down the Shadow Board, he’d take some leave.

He was sure it had been over a year since he’d taken leave. And given that he often ended up working on weekends...

Oh, my God, he’d already turned into Dalmon or Gerrit...but both of them had been saved from a life of loneliness.

And while he doubted very much that Quentin was that miracle worker, he would take what he could get for as long as he could because he wasn’t a fucking idiot.

“I didn’t say I’d seen anything that made me want to run.” He gave Kaine’s now very hard dick another glance. “But I can definitely see something that makes me want to

stay.”

“At least you no longer think I’m a serial killer.”

Quentin laughed, and his dimples appeared. Then he shoved his jeans over his hips, dragging his briefs down with them. “I think the water is hot now if I turned it on correctly. Do you want to check?”

That was the invitation Kaine needed. He checked the setup and turned on the rain shower head because he loved them, and he was sure Quentin had never experienced one. Then he turned to his now naked lover.

Quentin groaned. “I was trying not to get my hair wet.”

“Why?” Kaine walked over and cupped his jaw, taking a kiss, before reaching around to the back of Quentin’s head and pulling the elastic free. “I have wanted to do that all night.”

Quentin’s hair sprung free as if it had a life of its own. The curls bounced over his shoulders. “Because Mr. Straight-hair, who never has to worry about rain or humidity, it will become a frizzy mess.”

Kaine ran his fingers through the honey-dark curls. “If it’s so troublesome, why keep it long?”

“Because I’m vain. And I like it when guys run their fingers through it.”

“Only run their fingers through it?” He tightened his hold. “Or grip it?”

From the quickening of Quentin’s pulse, the answer was both. He didn’t give him time to answer, just kissed him. Hungrier this time, giving into the need burning in

his veins. He didn't remember it ever being this intense. But Quentin matched his need. His hands swept over Kaine's ribs, over his back, and then down to his ass.

The kiss melted away as they both needed to breathe.

"We should have that shower before we become too distracted...and I can smell the stale beer." His fingers slid free of Quentin's curls.

"Occupational hazard. Better than being required to take a bullet for the king, right? Or should I not make jokes about that?" Quentin glanced away. "Sorry, I don't quite know..."

"I don't expect you to know anything about what I do. We live in different worlds. But yes, I would take a bullet for him should we be together and the need arose."

"How do you..." Quentin frowned and shook his head. "I never understood how Dad could pick up a gun and fight, either."

Kaine shrugged. "I think you're either wired that way or you're not."

Quentin glanced up and lifted an eyebrow. Always the same one as if the other never wanted to join in. "Is that a polite way to say I'm a coward?"

"No, I'm not known to be polite." Patient, yes.

"Oh." His eyes widened, and his lips parted, but a sentence never formed.

"I spend my days giving orders. Some of them need to be obeyed instantly. I don't have time to coddle people's feelings and make them feel good." Not even his own. He lowered his voice. "So, unless you have an objection, I'm going to drag you into the shower and kiss you some more before taking you to bed and fucking you, wet



hair and all.”

Quentin’s teeth raked over his lower lip. “When you speak like that, I want to obey.”

Kaine’s dick jumped, and his heart lurched with excitement. He took his lover’s hand and pulled him into the shower. As soon as Kaine was in, he tipped his head to the rain and closed his eyes, letting the warm water patter on his skin, hoping it would soothe away all of his worries.

He should put one in his ensuite. But that meant having tradesmen in his house.

It was the caress of a tongue on the head of his cock that made him open his eyes. He glanced down and drew in a breath, watching as Quentin licked and sucked.

That was not part of the plan or one of his instructions.

But he wasn’t strong enough to make him stop.

And Quentin didn’t seem to be in a rush to make him come. The licks and strokes were more exploratory than anything else, a deliberate tease, which only caused his blood to heat further.

When he realized he was being watched, Quentin stopped and stood up. “Couldn’t resist,” he said with a smile that made his dimples form.

Kaine grabbed him and licked the shower water from each one before kissing him on the lips. He wished he’d brought the condoms and lube into the bathroom...though not for the shower. Quentin took a step forward, and Kaine let himself be backed against the tile, hoping the cold would cool his blood, but given the way Quentin was kissing and touching every piece of bare skin he could reach, that was unlikely.

His curly hair was now wet ringlets and water trickled over his face. Kaine licked the hollow of Quentin's throat, learning the taste of his skin, the way he moved with each touch.

Quentin nipped Kaine's ear and whispered, "I wish you'd brought the stuff in here."

"Stuff?"

"You know..." Quentin blushed.

Oh, he knew exactly what Quentin meant.

"How can you have your hand on my cock and be unable to say lube?" But it was good to know they had the same thoughts.

He glanced away as he blushed. "It seems so...practical. Premeditated..."

"You have done this before, right?" He did not want to be breaking in a virgin.

"Yes! But if I'm going out, I'm prepared. It's different." He gave a one-shouldered shrug.

"Because I thought ahead instead of leaving the evening to things not involving your ass?" He gave the ass in question a squeeze.

"I'm not used to it."

"To what?"

"Someone thinking ahead about what I might want."

“Oh no, it was all about me. I want to take everything I can out of tonight.” He trailed his fingers along Quentin’s dick, enjoying the way it jumped and the way he sucked in a breath.

Kaine brushed Quentin’s hand out of the way and wrapped his around both of their cocks and stroked. Quentin leaned closer, resting his hand on the tiles by Kaine’s head. His hips rocked, his breath quickened, and his eyes closed. Kaine stole another kiss, unable to resist, and Quentin moaned into his mouth. Pre-cum slipped from the slit of Quentin’s cock with each stroke, and Kaine wanted to lick his fingers and taste him.

“Don’t stop.” Quentin’s other hand joined Kaine’s, his fingers sweeping over the heads made slick with the water and pre-cum.

He hadn’t planned on stopping, but he didn’t want to come yet. No matter how tempting. Quentin fucked their hands. His breath was hot on Kaine’s lips.

Quentin’s body jerked, and he groaned, his cum spilling over their fingers. Kaine bit his lip, but he couldn’t hold back as Quentin’s climax dragged him to the edge and then pulled him over.

“Fuck.” Kaine tipped his head back against the tiles, panting as if he’d run up ten flights of stairs. Desire still tumbled through his blood...along with something else that he didn’t recognize. He kept his eyes closed, trying to steady himself when a small part of him wanted to shift and fly and swoop.

What the fuck?

“Oh, I don’t think I’ve ever come so hard it made me dizzy.” Quentin rested his forehead on Kaine’s shoulder.

Kaine grunted, unable to pull his thoughts together even as he wrapped his arm around Quentin to hold him close. They hadn't even made it to the bedroom.

That wasn't like him. He usually had much more control.

His phoenix fluttered within him, and he was sure if he wasn't careful, flames would form on his skin.

Quentin lifted his head and looked at Kaine. "We didn't even make it to the bedroom."

Kaine frowned. "What did you say?"

"That this wasn't supposed to happen in the shower, not that I'm complaining, I just really wanted?—"

"That wasn't what you said." And he was complaining, because Kaine knew without any doubt that Quentin had been hoping to be railed into next week. His stomach tightened, not liking where his thoughts were going. His pulse quickened, and he hoped he was wrong.

He had to be wrong. Quentin was human.

"What's wrong? Did I do something wrong? Why are you looking at me like I've sprouted horns and a tail?"

He wished Quentin had horns and a tail that might be better. He grabbed the younger man's jaw, and peered into his green eyes as if he'd be able to see the magic lurking in there.

Quentin tried to pull back, but Kaine didn't let him. Fear flared in Quentin's eyes.

“What are you doing?”

“What am I?” He tamped down the panic and the ridiculous joy that was tangling within him. How could he be both thrilled and terrified?

“A fucking weirdo at the moment.” Quentin pushed against him, and while Quentin might have an inch on him in height, Kaine was far stronger.

“Try again.”

“I don’t know.” Quentin closed his eyes.

And Kaine let his shifting heat rise to the surface until flames bloomed on his skin, only to be doused by the shower.

“Please let me go. I’ll never speak of this to anyone.”

Oh, he wouldn’t be speaking of it to anyone. Kaine would make sure of that. “What do you sense, Quentin?”

He squeezed his eyes closed tighter as Kaine’s fingers pressed harder against his jaw until white bloomed on his skin. “Fire, okay? I’m not sure why, as I’m standing in the shower.”

Kaine snarled, a sound that was barely human. But then he wasn’t. And nor was Quentin. Why hadn’t he sensed he was a witch?

This should’ve been safe.

Quentin opened his eyes. “What are you so scared of?”

Kaine narrowed his eyes. “How do you know I’m scared?”

He swallowed. “Because you’re acting weird?”

“Because we’re fated mates,” Kaine snapped.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, but now you’re scaring me.”

“Good, you should be scared.” He released Quentin and stalked out of the shower, snatching up a towel and cursing himself for the weakness. All he’d had to do was say no and go home alone.

The shower turned off.

Kaine snatched up another towel and tossed it to Quentin. Who now looked like he was ready to run. That wasn’t going to happen.

He wasn’t going to let his fated mate take off. No, he was going to stick Quentin in protective custody until the Shadow Board problem was resolved and having a mate wasn’t a liability.

“What are fated mates?”

Quentin’s fear thrummed through Kaine.

The same way his desire had.

It was why he’d been so irresistible. Why Quentin had propositioned him in the first place, and why he’d lacked the strength to say no. The Fates had brought them together, and they had stumbled into the trap, blinded by lust and hungry for connection.

Fuck. Like he didn't have enough problems at the moment.

He needed to know what he was dealing with. "What's your magic, witch?"

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:16 am*

Quentin wrapped the towel around himself as if it was armor. There was no way he could make it to the bathroom door and escape the hotel room before Kaine grabbed him. Nor did he want to run along the ice-cold street, wearing only a damp towel. No doubt Kaine could have him arrested for public indecency.

Shit, Kaine could have him arrested and make up a charge, and no one would doubt it.

He had seemed so normal, so nice. So hot.

Been hot to touch, even in the shower. Is that why he'd thought of flames?

"This isn't the Middle Ages, and I'm not a witch." But he didn't sound convincing, even to himself.

"That's a lie—and not a lie of omission, either." Kaine dried himself as if this was a normal conversation to have after sex.

"I'm not a witch. I don't know what the fuck you're talking about, but you are freaking me out, so I'm going to dress and leave."

"No, you aren't going anywhere." Kaine's voice was firm.

"You can't keep me here... Can you?" From the way Kaine looked at him, Quentin knew he could. "Oh shit, are you going to kill me?"

Kaine gave him a look as if he'd just said something more idiotic than witches. "I'm



not going to harm you, but we now have a problem.”

Yeah, you’ve snapped, and I want to run away, but I’m a hostage. Aren’t I? What the hell is going on? He tried to sound calmer when he spoke. “And what is the problem you think we have?”

Because Quentin was pretty sure Kaine’s idea of the problem was very different to his. He could see Kaine’s thoughts churning in his dark eyes as he debated what to tell him. And for a moment, it was all too easy to imagine what Kaine was thinking. What did his psychiatrist call it? Making up stories? Projecting?

It was impossible to know what other people were thinking. He hadn’t felt like this in a long time. Had he taken his tablet this morning?

Kaine pressed his lips together. “You’re telling me you don’t know anything about witches and magic and shifters?”

“They exist in fairytales and myth.” He knew before he had finished the sentence that was the wrong answer, but he didn’t know what the right answer was.

“This is more fucked than I thought.” Kaine pressed his lips together and peered at him as if he were a puzzle to solve.

“It’s far less fucked than I expected to be,” Quentin grumbled.

Kaine laughed...at him, or at what he said? “It was enough.”

“Enough for what? You need to tell me something because I am lost.”

Kaine stepped closer. “Your magic must be something so small that you didn’t notice you were using it. So not an elemental kind. Probably not psychometric either. Do

you have an affinity with animals or plants?”

Quentin shook his head. He didn't have magic. “No, I don't have any magic. You do realize this conversation isn't normal.”

“What other not-normal conversations have you had?” Kaine walked around him as if trying to find the defect. “What weird things have happened to you? Particularly over the age of fifteen?”

“You mean, aside from my parents' divorce, moving countries, and getting an ADHD diagnosis?” He turned as he spoke, keeping Kaine in front of him. But Kaine was studying him, not trying to touch him or hurt him. He had that crease between his eyebrows as if he needed to figure something out.

Kaine tilted his head. “And what happened that they said you had ADHD?”

“The usual.”

“Humor me.”

“I couldn't concentrate, I was always distracted, and I was anxious because...” He couldn't say it because it sounded stupid.

“Because?”

“Because I kept imagining what everybody was thinking. It got so bad I wasn't getting my schoolwork done.”

Kaine stepped back and stroked his jaw. He nodded as if pleased. “You're a mind reader. And because no one in your family had magic, they didn't recognize it in you, so you were treated as if you were human.”

“I’ve had plenty of tests done, and I can assure you I am human.”

“No, Quentin, you aren’t. If you were human, we would not be fated mates.” He raked his fingers through his hair, which then settled perfectly as if he was some kind of model. “You know why you thought of fire? Why you are imagining all the things that I am thinking? Except you aren’t imagining. You are reading my thoughts. I suspect the medication suppressed your magic, which is why I didn’t sense it, and you don’t know what you’re doing.” He dropped the towel.

Quentin felt a rush of heat move over his skin, as if he was sunburnt or his entire body was blushing—even though he wasn’t. Then flames appeared on Kaine’s skin.

That was impossible.

But it was right in front of him. He stepped closer, unable to resist, and held out his hand. If Kaine had been hot to touch before, now he was untouchable.

“What is going on? And don’t tell me that we’re fated mates again because that tells me nothing.”

With a flick of his hands, the flames disappeared, but he didn’t bother to pick up the towel. “I’m going to have a drink, and then I will explain, and you’re just going to have to trust me. I know you don’t want to, because I can now read your mind.”

“You can what now?” He did not want another person in his head. It was too much of a mess for a start, and secondly, those thoughts were private.

“We share magic now, and our lives, so you’re going to sit on the end of the bed, and you’re going to have a drink, and we’re going to talk about this because this is far more fucked up than you can imagine.”

“Unlikely, I was always told I had an overactive imagination.”

Kaine snorted and walked out of the bathroom. “I bet, witch.”

“You say that like an insult.” Quentin followed him.

“No, you are taking it as an insult. I am stating a fact. In much the same way, I am a shifter. Please tell me I don’t need to explain what that is.”

Quentin shook his head. “Are you a dragon shifter? Is that why there was fire?”

“Rarer. But I’m not going to tell you what I am because that doesn’t matter.”

“It matters to me.”

“It makes no difference to you.”

“It does if I burst into flames.”

Kaine opened the bar fridge and pulled out a couple of ice cubes. He turned two glasses right side up and then opened the small bottle of whiskey and poured about three shots into each before handing him a glass. “Sit.”

If he sat, he was going to be at dick height, and there was nothing more distracting than sitting in front of a naked man. “Could you maybe put some pants on?”

He didn’t want a trip and end up sucking his cock again, as it seemed like an easy mistake to make.

Kaine smiled, then brought the glass to his lips as if to hide it.

“Did you hear that thought?” Quentin shook his head. “No way, that’s impossible.”

“The damage is done; it doesn’t matter if you suck my dick again.”

Quentin stared at him.

“But I will put a robe on so you can concentrate on what I’m saying.” He put his glass on the desk and pulled a luxurious white fluffy robe out of the wardrobe and slipped it on.

Quentin wasn’t sure if that was an improvement or not because he was still very naked underneath, and when he walked, it was entirely possible that he might catch a glimpse...

He needed to not look at him. He shouldn’t have looked at him in the bar. He should’ve kept his mouth shut. And his dick in his pants. But when he’d seen him writing in that forgotten alphabet, he hadn’t been able to help himself.

Kaine rested his hip against the desk. He took another drink as he stared at Quentin. The heat was still there, but it was banked. And it wasn’t the disappointed look he got from his father or the barely there glance he got from his mother. It was something else, as though he was actually trying to figure him out or understand him. His psychologist had just wanted him to tick the right boxes so the problem could be marked as solved.

Clearly, it wasn’t.

And the man was wrong.

Maybe.

If he believed all this magic stuff, and he wasn't sure he did. He hadn't eaten or drunk anything that Kaine had supplied, so this wasn't some kind of hallucination.

He stared at the drink in his hand, then looked up. "Are you mind reading me?"

"Yes. As much as I can, anyway, because I don't know where to begin. The witches I usually deal with can already use their magic. And I don't know how well suppressed your magic is or what will happen if you stop taking your medication."

Quentin took a drink, understanding why Kaine had been so generous with his pour. "Nothing good. Like I said, I can't concentrate because...are you telling me the reason I couldn't focus was because other people's thoughts were intruding, and they weren't my own creations?"

"I'm not sure. I don't have your magic."

"Apparently, you do." He couldn't keep the snap out of his voice, even though he shouldn't be antagonizing Kaine. He took another drink, though he was sure drinking was a bad idea.

"I have a taste of it, that's all, because we are mates."

"You said we share magic and lives." But not what kind of shifter you are? "What does that even mean?" You don't trust me. Read that, Mr. Chief of Security.

Kaine gave him that smile again, which suggested he had read all of that. "It means that I experience a taste of your magic, and you gain a shifter's ability to heal quickly, and sometimes there are other things. Mates can often communicate without words, though that can take time and effort to develop. Troublingly, if one dies, the other pines away. You can see why this might be a problem, given my position."

Oh, shit. Taking a bullet for the king wasn't so hypothetical if he was taking it by proxy.

And not only that... Don't think of it. Don't think of it.

"I'm going to ask about it, so you might as well tell me. Until you are used to shielding your thoughts, I am right there, and I will learn how to dig."

Quentin swallowed. He was fucked. "I can't tell anyone, or they're going to kill my mother. So please..."

Kaine held up his hand. "You are the second person this month to have that problem, so I'm willing to bet it is the same people. In case you have forgotten, I'm the Chief of Security. Tell me where your mother is, and I can put a security detail on her."

Quentin shook his head. "Then they'll know. Besides, the Chief of Security in this country, which is hardly?"

Kaine laughed. "Yes, this country is tiny and often forgotten about. Why do you think that is?"

The answer bloomed on his lips without thought. "Magic." The country had been hidden away by magic. Oh my God, that made so much sense. "Is everyone here a witch?"

"No. But I have resources at my disposal."

"You have a witch army? Shifter spies?"

"You need to tell me everything because right now you are the biggest fucking security breach in the kingdom, and if anyone found out, they wouldn't hesitate to

end you, to be rid of me, which would then put Prince Everest in danger, and I'm sure you don't want to do that."

"You mean the people who threatened my mother would kill me to get to you?"

Kaine leaned forward a little. "You would wish for death before they were done. I have been chasing these people for over a year. They are a danger to every single paranormal, witch and shifter alike." He rocked back and downed the rest of his drink, but he didn't put the glass down. "You need to review what you think you know about history through a different lens."

Oh, he was definitely going to do that. Assuming he lived. "How did this mate thing happen?"

"It would've been the kiss in the lift. I didn't notice it though until the hand job in the shower."

"Because my magic is suppressed."

Kaine shrugged. Quentin did not like it when he shrugged, as that meant he didn't have the answers. And one of them needed to know the answers. "What I can do is have you seen by one of our psychologists. I have a witch and a shifter on staff. Obviously, you'll need to see the witch."

"Yes, of course, obviously. Can you hear yourself?" Quentin rubbed his temple. "What the fuck kind of trip am I having?"

"I wish it was a bad trip and that we would wake up in the morning hungover and with a renewed vow not to do drugs," Kaine said as if he were serious.

A few glimmers of memories that weren't his flitted through Quentin's head. "You



may have partaken in the party drug scene at uni, but I did not because I'm already on medication."

Kaine drew in a breath. "I was miles away from home in France. No one was ever going to find out. No one will find out, correct?"

"Are you going to let me walk out of here to tell anyone?"

"Short answer, no. Long answer is also no, but it's for your own protection, as well as mine until I catch these people." He brought the glass halfway to his lips and then remembered it was empty before setting it on the desk. "You need to sort out your magic. We need to sort out this bond. I need to put security on your mother, and you need to tell me what the fuck they are making you do. Perhaps this is the piece of the puzzle. I've been missing that will let me stop them."

"And if you don't? Am I your prisoner forever?"

"If I don't, we will all be fighting for our lives. If you thought the witch-hunts sounded bad four hundred years ago, I can guarantee they will be worse this time."

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:16 am*

Quentin gawped at him as if he couldn't process what Kaine was saying. There was a storm within the young witch that wasn't spilling out the way Kaine had expected. "I know this is a lot to take in."

"You know? Have you known what you are your entire life?"

Kaine pressed his lips together. "No, I was told when I was fourteen, so I wouldn't freak out when the first signs of being a shifter appeared. Until then, I was told I came from a family of fire witches. That is what most people believe I am. And that is how I want to keep it."

"Why?"

"Because it's safer."

Quentin finished his drink and crunched on a piece of ice. Kaine waited. He was good at waiting...mostly...far better than Dalmon. But the Shadow Board was pushing his patience.

His witch swallowed. "So, we can't be mates because everyone thinks you're a witch, but apparently, I'm a witch."

"Not apparently."

"And my parents?"

"It's not hereditary the way shifting is. Being a witch is part of your soul." Something

they had only discovered after Dalmon re-found his fated mate. “Your parents did what they thought best, and by human standards, they thought they were helping.”

“It helped. You have no idea how much the medication cleared my mind.”

“By suppressing your magic...which is something else that needs to be looked at. Does it only work on your magic or on all magics?”

“There are other kinds of witches?”

“Many. And many kinds of shifters. You are dealing with this very well.”

Quentin nodded. “Can I have another drink?”

“I’d much rather gather all the intel I need to take action.”

“Are you going to do something tonight?”

Kaine opened his mouth and shut it. To take action, he’d need to pull people out of bed, and he wasn’t ready to spill his guts to Dalmon. His brothers would find this amusing. He might have if the timing wasn’t so shit...or did the Fates bring them together now for a reason?

“Why are you smiling?”

“Because it’s better than raging against the Fates about something that is already done.” That didn’t mean he was thrilled, though he’d be lying if there wasn’t a part of him that was delighted, and he didn’t know how to deal with that. He’d never wanted a mate. He’d checked his books, and he’d never had one. Or at least he hadn’t in the ones he could read, and he assumed that something as significant as a fated mate he would’ve mentioned, even if it was only to say he was searching for them.

“So we’re like married?”

“It’s a little more permanent than that.” He wasn’t ready to share the way it could be broken. It wasn’t fair to ask Quentin to give up his magic when he’d never had a chance to use it. He could become an asset to him and to the Coven.

Add in the dead language obsession...

Quentin was who he needed in so many ways.

“So if we hate each other too bad. Great. And I can’t even say I was drunk. Or that it happened in Vegas.”

“We aren’t going to hate each other.”

“Did you not just say I’m your prisoner?”

“You are my mate. My life is tied to yours, so it is my job to protect you and yours is to protect mine.”

“Sounds self-serving.”

Kaine nodded. “Yes. And the bond has been abused by others in the past. Traditionally by witches who bind a shifter and drain their strength and life.”

“So witches are the bad guys?”

“Some. Some shifters are. Some humans are. Nothing is black and white, Quentin. The people I am after are witches, but they have shifters working for them because they offer them protection and money and power.” What did the Shadow Board want from a bartender unless they knew he was a witch?

If they knew that, they were more than one step ahead of him.

“Which is what you’re doing. How can I be sure you’re the good guy?”

“You don’t. But feel free to read my mind and discover my intentions.”

Quentin stared at his empty glass. “I don’t know how to do that.”

“You do. You’ve never been taught how to control your magic or how to protect yourself from drowning in everyone’s thoughts, they are different things. Things you can learn.”

“And what if I don’t want to? I was happy. I didn’t ask for any of this.”

That wasn’t entirely true. “You wanted me...why?”

Quentin glanced up. “Because. You agreed.”

“It’s been months since I was with anyone. When you asked, I couldn’t say no, which should’ve been a warning, as you’re younger than I like.”

Quentin shrugged as though it wasn’t a problem for him. “You were hot, lonely, and writing in a forgotten alphabet. There was no way I wasn’t going to say something or give you my number.” He held out his glass. “Since you aren’t going to wake people up, let’s have another drink and enjoy the night before it all goes to hell tomorrow.”

“You pour. I’ll speak to security.”

“Security? You are security.”

“Yes, which is why I also have my own.”

“You didn’t have any at the bar. Or did you?”

“I didn’t, but when I stay somewhere, it is put on my floor.”

Quentin blinked as if all of this was so far beyond his comprehension.

“You will also be assigned a security detail.” When he was allowed to walk around. He’d also need to quit his job, but that was a conversation for another time. Kaine pushed off the desk and walked over to the door. It was only years of keeping secrets and dealing with threats that kept him calm. If he made a fuss, then others would follow his lead, and the mess would grow.

He had no problems with waking Dalmon at all hours, and his brother had done the same to him numerous times. This was not worthy of a late call.

And he didn’t want to spend the rest of the night pumping Quentin for answers. Tomorrow would come soon enough. There was still time for his mate to hate him before understanding the reasons.

He opened the door and felt the cold press of his pistol against his back.

Kaine sighed. He should’ve expected that. It wasn’t as though he’d hidden his weapons.

“Let me go,” Quentin said.

Kaine shook his head. “You won’t get past security.”

“Tell them to let me go.”

There’d been no click, so the safety was still on. Kaine doubted Quentin had ever

handled a weapon. That needed to change. But not tonight.

He spun, catching and trapping Quentin's arm. He yelped as Kaine pushed him against the wall and the pistol fell to the ground. He kicked it aside. "I thought you were taking this too well."

Then Quentin started crying. He squeezed his eyes closed, but tears escaped and rolled over his cheeks.

"Is everything alright, sir?" A man said from the corridor.

He stared at his mate and hissed in his ear. "Is it?"

Quentin nodded, even though he was clearly not okay.

"We're fine. Ensure no one disturbs us. We will leave together." He lowered his voice. "Which means if you attempt to leave on your own, you will be cooling your heels in a cell until I let you out. Understand?"

He nodded again.

Kaine reached out and shut the door. Fury simmered in his blood. Was it too much to ask that his mate trust him? Want him? He bit back on the harsh words and pulled Quentin close, holding him and stroking his back until the sobs stopped and his breathing calmed.

"I know this is not what you were looking for. Neither was I. But the Fates have brought us together. And I am not going to throw a gift back at them."

"I don't know who they are."

“Ancient goddesses. Perhaps the first, as they create, weave, and end lives. Sometimes, they weave the lives of a witch and shifter together.”

“So we can die together.”

“We can also be stronger, sharing our magic even if we aren’t close by. Running away will not end this.” It might, if they kept their distance. And if Quentin kept taking his medication and never let his magic bloom. But they were things he didn’t want to consider, which probably made him an asshole.

He’d never wanted a mate, but now he had one, he wasn’t letting him go, and he sure as hell wasn’t going to let anyone take him. His hand smoothed over Quentin’s bare back, wishing that they were enjoying the night together the way it should’ve been.

He hoped Quentin picked up that thought.

“Why aren’t you angry?”

“Because people do dumb shit when they’re scared and cornered. You’re just a highly developed animal with untested magic who was hoping to be fucked, not as you put it, wake up married.”

Quentin drew back and wiped a hand over his face. “And now I feel like an idiot.”

Kaine nodded. “Yeah. It would’ve been much better to wait until we’d left the hotel, but before we got into a car. Especially after I’d warned you there’s extra security on the floor.”

He frowned. “That’s not what I meant.”

“I know. But I’m telling you, you picked the wrong time for an escape attempt, which



means I'll double down. If you ever get snatched up, don't make the same mistake. It could cost both our lives."

Quentin took a step back. "You're serious?"

"I am. Let's have that drink, then we can go to bed, or you can talk. Your choice. Tomorrow, I will make a few calls before we leave. You need to be seen?—"

"I have classes, and my father... He'll wonder where I am."

Kaine heard the doubt and felt the disappointment. He couldn't read all of his mate's thoughts, but there was enough for him to catch an idea. "Will he? Or will it take a few days before he notices?"

"Get out of my head."

"Get into mine." He clasped Quentin's hands. "Get to know me. Give me a fucking chance because I would like the privilege of freaking out and having a major panic, but one of us has to remain in control and calm."

"You really want to freak out?"

And if he gave in, he'd be on the phone to Dalmon and Gerrit, and they needed to focus on their own corners. He needed them, but the country and all paranormals needed them more. He could wait. Or do it on his own the way he had for most of his life, their brother in kind, but not in public, so there had always been a distance between them that couldn't easily be bridged. He had no doubt that depending on their roles in each life, one of them was always in the same situation. And there was nothing he could do about it aside from making recommendations for next time.

"Yes. I wasn't looking for a mate. The odds of it happening are so small that to crave

it and seek it is setting yourself up for failure. That doesn't mean that I don't want to make this work, and what that looks like depends on us. It doesn't have to be more than mutual respect and magic."

"But if I can read your mind and you can read mine, there is a lot of fun to be had..." He glanced away as if confused. "I shouldn't be thinking about that."

"Why not? Lust brought us here. It's what triggered the bond?—"

"So if we'd ignored each other, nothing would've happened?"

"We've probably crossed paths several times before today, drawing towards each other until it was inevitable."

"Lucky we're both gay."

"I'm not. But you're pretty and smart. Exactly my type."

"If I was smart, I would have spoken to someone weeks ago..."

"You want to do that?" Because Kaine didn't know if he wanted to question him or hold him until they accidentally started kissing and fucking. In part, it was the bond, wanting to bind them tighter, but also his own need that he'd been pushing aside because he was too busy.

Quentin drew in a breath and nodded. "Then it's out there."

"Okay...it's a brave thing to come forward. They count on people staying silent out of fear for themselves and their loved ones."

"Is that your work voice?"

Kaine paused and re-ran what he'd just said through his head. "Possibly. I'm falling back on my training because then I know what I'm doing."

"Lucky you. Maybe I should pour that drink and see if it calms me."

"As long as you don't attack me with the bottle." Kaine gave a little laugh.

Quentin didn't.

Too soon to be making jokes.

While Quentin poured two more whiskeys, Kaine retrieved his pistol off the floor and slipped it inside his jacket before pulling out his notebook.

"Do you want to take a seat?" Kaine indicated to the end of the bed.

"No, I'm getting into bed." He got in on the side furthest from where Kaine had left his boots and weapons and dropped the towel on the floor.

Great, now there was no getting the fact he was naked out of his head. His dick gave a twitch as though it could pull him closer.

Then Quentin patted the bed. "It's the only one."

How could he question his mate in bed?

But it was where he wanted to be, so he grabbed his glass and walked over. However, he didn't take off the robe or get under the covers. He took a sip, enjoying the way the whiskey slid down and bloomed hot in his gut, and then he flicked open to a new page. "Where would you like to start?"

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:16 am*

Nowhere.

That's where Quentin wanted to start, which was different from where he needed to start. He'd meant it when he'd said he should've done this weeks ago, but he'd been too scared, and he hadn't known who to turn to.

If he couldn't trust the Chief of Security, who could he trust? Who else could help him? Help his mother?

With Kaine sitting next to him, at least he didn't have to look at him, which made this easier. If it could be easy.

None of this had been easy since the shower, and he still didn't know about the witch and shifter thing. While every culture had them, he'd always thought it was a way to explain things before science, not that they were real. And if they were real...

"Quentin..." Kaine's voice was firm. "I can feel you spinning out."

"Sorry. I'm still getting past the fact I have magic, and you can turn into an animal." His eyes widened. "Is that rude?"

"No, asking what someone shifts into can be...it depends on the situation and your relationship."

"Hello, Vegas-husband. I should know something like that."

"And when you start using your magic, you'll figure it out fast. But it's another secret

you'll need to keep. Let's keep them to a minimum for the moment."

Curiosity burned through his veins. All he knew was that Kaine was warm to touch and that he wasn't a dragon. No, he was something much rarer. He crossed wolves and such off the list. Was there even a list of shifter species...kinds...what were they called?

Kaine cleared his throat.

Quentin blinked and refocused on the other issue. "Mum is on a cruise ship in the Mediterranean. It's the one she likes best, but she's also been to the US and up through Scandinavia. She's a performer; it's what she loves. I was an accident that they tried to put right by getting married...getting married didn't solve anything, by the way." He shot Kaine a look. They weren't married. They were fated mates, which was much more serious and, as Kaine had said, much more permanent.

And dangerous.

Were shifters and witches warned about it? Had he missed out on some important lessons because his parents hadn't known what he was? Maybe if he had known, he'd have realized Kaine was a shifter, and he wouldn't have said anything. Until next time they crossed paths, if Kaine was to be believed.

There was nothing about him that suggested he was a liar. Usually, he got a vibe off people who had bad intentions...oh that was because of his magic.

And the serial killer jokes he'd been making? Had his magic been warning him that his life as he knew it was going to end, but he hadn't understood the warning?

"I'm going to need her name and the name of the liner." Kaine passed him the notebook.

Quentin wrote down both.

“I will make that call before we leave in the morning. You will be tempted to call her, but I suggest you don’t break your usual contact routine. And she will not be aware of the security detail.” Kaine reclaimed his notebook. “Do you have your appendix?”

“Why?”

“In case you need a cover story for a few weeks. If people vanish, it tends to be noticed.”

“Yes.”

Kaine made some notes in the old alphabet. But he wasn’t writing in French or English. He noted that Quentin was watching. “You are bursting to ask about it.”

All he could do was nod. “What language are you writing in?”

“French.”

“Then it’s in code.”

“It is. But it’s not a substitution cypher. It’s more complicated than that.”

“You do it like it’s a real language.”

“I’ve been doing it a long time. Plus, I only ever write it with my left hand. My right hand is for the things I want people to read.”

“You taught yourself to write with your left hand, too?”

“I went to boarding school in France at the age of twelve. I wasn’t big, and I was fairly nerdy, so I spent a lot of time in the library reading and teaching myself things. By the time I was shifting and had learned the truth... well, it was all very useful.”

Quentin smiled. He’d spent as much time out of the house as possible, especially when Dad wasn’t away. He’d played sports and tutored other kids for money. Until they’d moved here. Then he’d spent a horrible six months not understanding anything because the French he’d learned in school until that point wasn’t good enough for much more than buying a loaf of bread and a coffee. “I can’t imagine you being an unpopular nerd.”

Kaine gave him a tight-lipped smile. “It’s the school where the royals go. I’m the son of King Sebastien’s butler. He promised my father to treat me as his own.”

That was the first lie Kaine had told him. Quentin wasn’t sure what it was that gave him away, but he tasted the bitterness.

“I didn’t belong at that school mixing with the rich and elite, and they knew it. It was a relief to graduate. University was much better.”

That wasn’t a lie. So that meant the lie was to do with the previous king. Was Kaine a royal bastard? He wanted to ask, but that definitely wasn’t polite, and he didn’t want another lie from his lips. So he filed the question away for later.

“Good job at derailing the conversation. How were you approached, and what did they ask you to do?”

“I naturally derail conversations. It’s my...is that part of my magic?”

“Only because you can’t shut off and shield yourself. Your meds can only do so much, and perhaps being my mate is strengthening your magic, in which case your

meds are going to struggle.”

“Which means I’ll struggle. Joy.” He took a couple of swallows. It was good whiskey. The kind that was on the very top shelf. He should be sipping and savoring unless this kind of thing was part of his life now. His gaze slid to Kaine. There were a few things he could get used to, but he didn’t like feeling as though he were trapped and without choice.

Not that he hadn’t been trapped before. It was just a more familiar cage. One that his friends could relate to as they all juggled jobs and uni and living at home or struggling in share houses.

That struggle would be gone...but he was now a witch with a mate, and it all sounded dangerous and not in the fun and exciting ways like zip-lining or abseiling or any of the other adventure activities on offer to tourists.

“I will arrange lessons.” He tapped his pen on the paper. “Stay on track. When were you approached?”

“Three weeks ago. It was a phone call during the day when I was at home alone.” He’d checked the street and out the back to see if he was being watched, but no one had been there.

“What do you remember about the call?” Kaine wrote as he spoke, looking at the page, not him.

“English accent, polite but clear that if I told anyone, my mother would suffer.”

“Anything odd in the weeks preceding?”

“No.”



Kaine glanced up. “Nothing? You weren’t followed? No weird calls?”

He shook his head and took another drink. “I don’t think so. The week before, there were some Brits in the bar, talking to all the staff and being super friendly. They were in every night for about three days, and they kind of made my skin crawl. But that’s not weird.”

“No, but it might be relevant. I’ll have someone take descriptions and go through the entry records.” He made several dot points that were only a few letters long.

“Abbreviations?”

“Yes. What did they ask you to do?”

“They wanted a copy of the security camera feed that watches the building over the road.”

Kaine grunted as if he’d been hit. That building was important. “How do you give it to them?”

“I take it to a post office box.”

“When is your next drop off?”

“Friday.”

Kaine was silent as he wrote. Filling up the rest of the page and flicking to the next one.

“Is it bad?” He didn’t want to be responsible for getting someone killed.

“Well, it’s not good. They would’ve researched you and decided you were the easiest target to break. That your father works at the castle is a bonus; perhaps they’re hoping for a way in there.”

Quentin laughed. “He doesn’t tell me shit, and I never go there. I mean, I did when I first arrived, and there was a school excursion, but not since then.”

“You help with this job. They implicate you in the fallout, and then you end up working for them because you don’t want to go to prison for twenty years.” Kaine shrugged.

“I don’t want to go to prison. I didn’t want to do this, and while Dad may not care what happens to Mum, I do. Or was that a lie?”

“Not a lie. The other man lost his mother and both siblings. Dead before he’d even finished the job.”

Quentin’s eyes widened. “Are you saying she might be dead already?” If so, he’d been doing it for nothing. He’d put people in danger...

“Do you know who her next of kin is?”

“Me, since I turned eighteen.” He drew in a breath and exhaled slowly. “If something had happened, I’d have been told.”

“Correct. For the moment, we can assume they are waiting for the next trigger.”

“What does that mean?”

“That something needs to happen before they take out your mother, up the stakes, and make their next request. And I think I know what that is.” Kaine made a couple more

notes and then closed the notebook. “Congratulations, you now work for me. It pays far better than bar work, though you’ll maintain that cover.”

“I thought I needed to disappear?” He wanted to disappear and hide from the danger. He wasn’t a spy. And he was pretty sure that’s what Kaine was, despite his title of Chief of Security. Or maybe because of his title.

“You might. It’s always useful to have a few excuses prepared. Appendicitis. A sick relative. Something that explains you dropping off the face of the Earth for a couple of days. Hospitals are easy because I can leave a paper trail,” he said as if this were normal.

“Do you need to do this often?”

“What? Disappear people or stop threats to the country and other paranormals?”

“All of it, I feel like I’ve just married into, like, this super weird, dangerous family, and I’m going to end up dead.”

Kaine held up a finger. “Firstly, being married would be easier because then our lives wouldn’t be bound. But yes, you have married into a weird family that you don’t know the half of yet, and I’m not prepared to tell you until this is over?—”

“Because if I’m caught, I’ll spill.”

“Yes. The people I’m dealing with aren’t fucking around. They are quite happy to kill. And no offense, but to them, you are human collateral, so worth even less than a paranormal.”

“But if they found out about us?—”

“They’d kill you to be rid of me, as it would leave a massive hole in National Security. Which is why protecting you is now at the top of my list.”

To protect himself. And the country. Not because Quentin’s life mattered. And while he was used to not mattering, it still stung. Kaine sighed and his expression softened. “At the moment, your life is all I can promise you.” He put his hand on Quentin’s thigh. “I know that’s not enough. I can sense your disappointment.”

Was it disappointment? He didn’t know what he wanted out of this. It was all too, too weird, too sudden. “I don’t know how I feel.”

Kaine grunted. “Elated. Surprised. Why the fuck now?”

“Because you need me to crack open your case.”

“Yeah, one way or another, this is going to end.” He stood up, finished the rest of his drink, and dropped the robe on the floor—giving Quentin a glorious view of the globes of his tight ass—before sliding into bed.

Now, they were both naked and under the sheets.

“And then what happens?” Quentin wasn’t sure if he was asking about them or work.

“If we’re both alive, we can actually figure out our own shit. If we’re dead, it won’t matter.” Kaine glanced at him. “Can you kill the light? I need to get some sleep.”

Quentin stared at him. He didn’t know how much this hotel room cost, but the intention hadn’t been to come here to sleep. His body was caught somewhere between needing to kiss Kaine again and wanting to shove him out of bed and move as far away as possible, as though all of this was his fault.

“You’re going to sleep after...after everything.”

Kaine tucked one hand behind his head, the curve of his biceps begging to be licked, and studied him. “We already decided I wasn’t going to make midnight phone calls.”

Quentin hated himself for asking, but it had to be done. “What about the mates thing?”

“We are already mates...what do you want me to do?”

“I don’t know.” And he didn’t know what he expected from Kaine. “Don’t worry about it.” He turned off the light and lay there, staring at the ceiling, feeling as though there should be more. Which was ridiculous, as they’d only just met. How could there be more? Had he imagined the heat?

Kaine reached out and pulled him close. “The forming of the bond is going to play havoc with your emotions. There is a need to be with your mate.” He closed the gap, his chest and hips against Quentin’s back and butt. “But every...interaction strengthens it, and I am wary of overloading you when you aren’t used to magic.”

That was the lamest excuse he’d ever heard. “What makes you think I want an interaction, anyway?”

“Because I am used to dealing with magic every single day, and all your emotions are washing over me. The confusion, the distrust, the desire, and the fear. I recognize them because I feel much the same. We don’t know each other well enough to trust. I am worried about your safety?—”

“Only because you don’t want to die.”

“I want the chance to get to know my mate.”

That wasn't a lie, which made it easier to swallow. "And what if this is never over? What if I'm now stuck in this weird magical nightmare?"

"At least we're stuck in it together? I don't remember a time when I didn't know about witches and shifters, so I can't help you navigate this. It has always been my reality."

Quentin nodded. And it was the truth. It was him and every other human who didn't know who had been living the lie.

Kaine pressed a kiss to the back of Quentin's neck. "I cannot hold you like this all night, or neither of us will sleep, and by the time we walk out of here, the bond will be well and truly made."

He untangled himself.

"Can it be unmade?"

There was a moment of pause that he may not even be aware of with another person, but he was already starting to recognize Kaine's tells.

"The bond is forever." He rolled onto his back, not touching Quentin at all.

Quentin turned onto his side to face him. "You didn't answer my question."

Kaine gave a low laugh as if he found being called out amusing. "I did. And even though this is unexpected, I like the idea of having a mate. Of having someone to call mine. And someone to call me theirs. And you have no idea how much effort it is taking for me to keep my distance and give you space." His voice lowered. "When all I want to do is pull you beneath me and claim you properly."

Quentin swallowed. Saying things like that didn't make it any easier because the need to touch Kaine thrummed in his blood. Was it lust, or was it magic? Would he be forever questioning what was real and what wasn't?

But if magic was real, then did that make what he was feeling real?

“So we're not going to have sex until this is over? Because that seems like a really bad idea, especially if there's a chance that one of us, both of us, could die.”

They were now facing each other. His eyes had grown accustomed to the darkness, and he could make out Kaine's shape and see the glint of light in his eyes.

“You aren't worried about your magic becoming stronger?”

“You said I'd get lessons.” Instead of it being something he couldn't control, it was something he could use. It wasn't a defect, and he wasn't lazy or stupid.

He was a witch.

A thought that almost made him giddy.

For the first time in his life, he knew who he was instead of trying to be who others expected him to be.

Kaine's fingertips trailed over Quentin's cheek. “Sleep on it. Things are different in daylight.”

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:16 am*

Kaine woke before dawn. The room was lighter, but the sun wasn't yet up. He checked the time to see how much longer he could linger, then got up and padded across the room to the bathroom. He hadn't brushed his teeth before going to bed, and last night's whiskey didn't taste so great. He helped himself to a toothbrush, brushed his teeth, and had a drink of water, knowing he wouldn't go back to sleep even if he went back to bed.

Last night churned through his head.

All of it. Every time he took another step forward, ten more roads opened up, and he had to decide which one was the right one. He was sure five of them were booby-trapped, and one held an ambush.

Only one held a future with his mate.

For a few moments, he paused at the bathroom door to watch Quentin sleeping. He was glad he hadn't tried to run during the night, as that would've made things awkward.

More awkward.

"I know you're watching me." Quentin's voice was soft with sleep.

"Can't help it." And he wasn't sure that getting back into bed was a good idea. Even though his dick thought it was and now pointed at his mate when three seconds ago, it had been behaving itself. He wasn't sure he had the ability to resist his mate and bring down the Shadow Board. Quentin was a distraction and a complication and



possibly the answer to every prayer he'd never dared to whisper.

"Come back to bed," Quentin murmured.

"I'm not sure that's a good idea." Not when he didn't trust himself.

"It's the only good idea."

Kaine snorted. "Explain how."

Quentin pushed himself up on one arm. "It strengthens the bond. Strengthens my magic. And if I've interpreted all of this correctly, it should strengthen you...though I'm not sure how."

"I'll have access to your magic." Which meant he'd have access to other people's thoughts once he'd learned how to use the magic, and that would be useful. "And we will be able to draw strength from each other."

"That sounds like a good thing given the situation, and even with a weak bond, if one gets killed, the other is going to die, correct?"

"Correct. How long were you awake for last night?"

"Long enough to realize I want to be a witch. I need to know that part of myself. And maybe I also like the idea of having someone to call mine. Though that could be because neither of my parents wanted me."

Kaine smiled. At least Quentin had parents. Kaine assumed he'd had parents once, many lifetimes, and thousands of years ago. Since none of his brothers knew, they kept hatching each other and hoping for the best. Given that none of them had ever fathered a child, he assumed that could only happen with a female phoenix. And they

had no record that they could read of such a thing.

Unless the five of them were something else. Something other than regular shifters. Perhaps there had only ever been five of them.

“I’m sure they loved you, even if you didn’t interrupt their life plans.” Which is what Quentin had done to him. He walked over to the bed and sat on the edge.

“That’s a very big assumption, and if you’d met my mother or my father, you’d reconsider.”

“Once you’ve got your magic under control, you might want to revisit your assumption. When you dig into someone’s thoughts, you find things even they don’t want to acknowledge.”

“How do you know that?”

“I have worked with mind reading witches.”

“So I’m not rare or special?”

Kaine put his hand over Quentin’s. “You are both. No one else could be my mate. Some witches and shifters spend their entire lives looking, and we ran into each other.”

“Let’s make it deliberate this time.”

He wanted to. But he didn’t want Quentin to decide in three days’ time that being a witch with a fated mate was too hard and too dangerous, and all he wanted was his quiet life back. In fact, his life would be improved if he gave up magic. He had seen the change in Lucian after giving up magic and breaking the bond. Lucian was

happier. And Dalmon didn't seem to mind the broken bond. If anything, it had made their relationship stronger. This was their second time as mates, as far as any of them was aware. Would there be a third?

And here he was, just finding his mate. And he was one hundred percent sure it was the first time. That didn't mean there hadn't been near misses in previous lives. He needed to look through his books and see if he had come across another mind reading witch.

"Everything we do will strengthen the bond." Kaine kept throwing out warnings because he didn't know how to say no.

He didn't want to say no. He wanted to snatch this little piece of happiness, potential happiness, and hold on to it for as long as he could.

Quentin nodded as if he'd put everything together while Kaine slept. Had he practiced reading Kaine's mind while he dreamed? "You make that sound like a bad thing."

The bond was made. Did it matter how strong it was?

Would it hurt more or less, or would the other pine faster or slower, depending on the strength of the bond? Jacob and Orion had gone all in believing that a stronger bond would make them both stronger, and it may have saved their lives, but he didn't want to find his mate, only to risk his life and find out the worst possible way.

"It's not. It's a fact."

"We're in this expensive room...we should make the most of it."

Kaine laughed. "I can assure you that sex is not improved by the cost of the location."

Quentin moved, sliding towards him and straddling him. “Care to elaborate?”

He did not want to talk about past lovers while his current one was sitting naked in his lap. He ran his fingers through Quentin’s messy curls. “What made you decide to embrace your magic?”

“Is that a hint of suspicion?” He looped his arms around Kaine’s neck and brushed his lips across Kaine’s mouth in the softest of kisses.

“It’s more than a hint. I’m suspicious of everyone at the moment.” Somehow, his hands ended up cupping Quentin’s ass.

“Because the bad guys think I’m human, because maybe for the first time in my life, I will have power. It might’ve saved me a lot of bullying at school.”

“Or brought more. Being able to read people’s minds is not one of the easy magics.”

“And what is an easy magic?” Quentin rolled his hips, the hot length of his cock brushing against Kaine.

He wanted to wrap his hand around it, around both of them, until they came. He wanted to suck on the velvety soft head and taste the salty pre-cum. He wanted to slick his cock and fuck him. Claim him. Mark him.

Quentin’s eyes were bright as if he’d heard every thought word for word. At the moment, all he probably got were emotions and a sense of knowing...though there was no secret about what Kaine wanted, given the way his dick strained towards his mate.

“Is shifting an easy magic?”

“The body wants to, but I wouldn’t call it painless or easy. No shifter does. There are plenty of witch magics that are also painful. Electricity witches have a tendency to die before they can be trained. I suspect that the other elemental magics are just as dangerous. Every magic has its hazards.”

“So does being human.”

“You were never human, Quentin. And maybe your grandparents were witches or an aunt or an uncle, and if they had been more involved, they might have recognized the signs or sensed the growing power.” While it didn’t run through bloodlines, witches often had witches in their family tree.

Quentin continued to rock against him, his pre-cum slicking Kaine’s belly. “I can’t be the only one to not know.”

“You aren’t. I’m sure there are plenty of witches out there who have a magic they are keeping secret or can’t explain. It is harder for witches because the magic is tied to your soul, and unless you are born into a family where someone is a witch, then you are on your own. At least with shifters, it is blood.”

“My father was adopted...so I never met his parents. And my mother didn’t speak to hers either. She left home at sixteen to perform, and they disagreed with her lifestyle choice.” He grinned. “They’d also disagree with mine. And I doubt they were witches.”

“Witches and shifters can be as bigoted as any human. We are not one homogenous paranormal community with one viewpoint. We are not one religion.”

Quentin pushed Kaine back onto the bed.

He could stop this. He was stronger and faster, but as Quentin caged him with his

body, he wanted to see how far the young witch would go. How hot his desire burned. The tips of his fingers traced the cleft of Quentin's ass, sweeping over his sensitive pucker.

"I gathered that from your talk about the bad guys."

Kaine smiled. He already saw the way they slotted together, complimented each other. And it was far too easy to imagine long nights spent in the secret library going through old books in languages that no one knew the names for. Quentin could unravel those riddles, those lives.

"Hmm..." Quentin frowned. "You just got excited for all the wrong reasons."

"What do you mean?"

"Like, I can tell how much you wanna fuck me, but you're holding out. But then you had an idea that created a different spark. I don't know how else to describe it, but I sensed they were different. Or am I completely wrong and doing this all wrong?"

"You are correct. And you aren't doing anything wrong." Kaine glanced down to watch the way Quentin moved as though they were already fucking. "If not for the mate thing, neither of us would've slept last night."

He would have taken everything he could from the encounter, leaving them both aching and sore. It would've been worth it.

It was all he wanted to do now.

"You've already said this is a dangerous situation... Why can't we both enjoy something?"

“Because I don’t want to push, and I don’t know how much of my feelings are bleeding into you.” He released Quentin’s hips and closed his eyes. “I don’t want you to discover with a little training that this was all me, and the bond clouded your mind.”

When had he started being so honorable?

Ten years ago, he wouldn’t have given a fuck.

Was it getting older or the assumption of responsibility?

Quentin licked a line up Kaine’s throat that ended beneath his jaw. “Fine. You tell me to stop, and I’ll stop. Until then, you are mine.”

He licked and kissed his way over Kaine’s chest, pausing to lick one nipple and rake his teeth over the hard nub.

Kaine kept his eyes closed, trying to find the ability to say ‘stop, let’s take it slow’. But as the kisses trailed lower, he couldn’t find the word in any language.

Quentin’s hands smooth up his thighs, and his breath caressed the head of Kaine’s cock, but he didn’t stop for a taste. He licked Kaine’s belly button, the line of his obliques, and the crease of his thigh.

His pulse quickened, and so did his breathing, and he was sure that wherever Quentin touched, flames were about to bloom on his skin. It was the bond that made his magic flare.

Quentin continued to kiss and taste and explore, nudging Kaine’s legs further apart to kiss his sac. His tongue traced a line up Kaine’s dick to the head. He held his breath, waiting.

He was going to burst into flames without shifting. “Fuck it. The lube is in the drawer.”

“It’s under my pillow. I moved it when you went to the bathroom.”

Kaine reached overhead and pulled the lube and condom from beneath Quentin’s pillow.

Before he ripped the foil open, Quentin’s mouth closed over his cock. His tongue flicked over the head and pressed against the slit.

“If you keep doing that, you won’t get anything.” He was already on edge. And he blamed the bond for that, too.

Quentin released him. “Pass me the lube.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t already prepare.”

“I thought about it, but I didn’t want to be caught with my fingers up my ass. Although maybe that would’ve been the way to go, given the way you’re smiling.”

“It made for a nice image.” He rolled the condom on. They would talk about the lack of need for them later. He watched as Quentin straddled him again and reached his slick fingers behind. His teeth pressed into his lip, and Kaine knew exactly how many fingers Quentin had inside his ass.

Kaine stroked his mate’s cock, giving his hand a little twist each time and sweeping his thumb over the head. Pre-cum leaked from the slit, slicking each movement. The little noises he made were like a drug. He needed more. He wanted to keep going until Quentin spilled all over him.



Quentin pulled his fingers free. “I don’t want to come until you’re in me.”

“I might come as soon as I’m in you.” He couldn’t remember feeling this keyed up ever.

He didn’t release Quentin’s length as he lifted up, angling Kaine’s cock so he could sink onto it millimeter by millimeter. Kaine’s toes curled. It was too slow and too much. The tight heat of his body around him was like coming home. As if he’d found a place where he belonged. And someone to belong to.

Quentin muttered little curses with every movement.

“Too much?” They were going slowly, but there hadn’t been much prep.

“You’re thick. And...” He groaned as he sank halfway down. His ass clenching around Kaine. “Oh, fuck.” His cock twitched in Kaine’s hand, and he came, spilling over his fingers and onto his belly.

He needed a taste.

Unable to resist, he brought his fingers to his mouth and licked them clean, watching as Quentin sank the rest of the way, taking him all.

He gripped Quentin’s hip with his other hand and thrust into him. With the taste of his mate on his tongue, he slid over the edge too fast. The climax burned through him, stealing his breath. As he came, Quentin gave a shudder of pleasure, his ass milking Kaine for every drop.

The tickle on Kaine’s skin was enough to let him know he’d failed to hold back his flames and his orgasm. He sighed. “I usually last longer.”

He'd wanted longer. It felt as though everything had a time limit, and they were running out.

"Same. Do you usually do the fire thing?" He pointed without touching.

"No." Not since he was sixteen, anyway, and having a wank could end up with setting fire to the sheets. "It's my magic being affected by the bond. They won't hurt you, as you're my mate."

Quentin reached out and ran his fingers through the flames dancing across Kaine's chest. "They feel warm. You're always warm to touch."

"I am. I pass for a fire witch." With his next breath, he got control of himself, and the flames went out.

"Got it. You're a fire witch, and we met for a hookup, and you discovered I am also a witch in need of training."

Kaine would've skipped the hookup part, but it was always best to leave as much truth as possible. "Has anyone told you how smart you are?"

Quentin smiled. "Only if it's accompanied by talk of how if I talked less and paid attention more, I'd be a whole lot smarter."

"No...you're perfect the way you are."

Quentin shook his head. "Untrained and dangerous?"

"Aside from that part." Kaine sat up, keeping one arm around Quentin, not ready for him to pull away. "You can take the first shower, and I'll make the first of my calls."

“Can I order room service while you’re in the shower?”

“Yes. Get whatever you want.”

“And for you?”

“Coffee, chocolate croissant, and fruit.” Maybe they could linger over breakfast and put off the start of the day a little longer.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:16 am*

While Quentin had walked past the building before, he'd thought it was just another government department. He hadn't realized this was the building where the people who worked for national security did their jobs.

That Kaine had received confirmation, while they were eating breakfast, that someone was en route to join his mother's ship had been a shock. He hadn't expected it to happen so fast. From everything Dad said about the military, it moved slowly as there were too many people who needed to have their input.

Apparently, when Kaine ordered something, it happened.

There had been a car waiting for them around the back or the side. He wasn't sure, only that it was the discreet entrance and exit. Last night, they had walked through the front doors.

Today, everything was different.

He was different.

The world was different.

There was a part of him that still expected to wake up and find it had all been a dream. Who didn't want to pretend they were suddenly magical and special and all of that? That there was something else going on, and the world was far more exciting than it appeared...

He remembered having a conversation with his mother the year before she left, and

he asked her about magic and stuff. She laughed and said he read too many fantasy novels about heroes plucked out of obscurity and thrust into greatness—which he had been because he’d wanted to escape the reality of his parents bickering—but she’d also said performing was like magic because for a little while people were transfixed, and they forgot their worries.

Quentin blinked and stared at the woman opposite him. “Sorry. I’m not sure what answers you’re looking for.”

Kaine had left him with her so she could assess him. She’d introduced herself as a mind reader, like him, and a psychologist.

She smiled. “I’m not looking for anything specific. I’m trying to establish a little background, so it doesn’t matter if your thoughts wander.”

Quentin winced. “I don’t want them to wander into inappropriate places.”

“You wouldn’t be the first.”

That did not make this less awkward. Though he was glad they were concentrating on his upbringing and family at the moment.

“So you felt an affinity for magic, even as a child?”

“I think so, but don’t most children?” Some of his classmates had been more interested in football teams than books. That he’d rather read than talk player stats had been one of his many problems at school.

She gave him that smile again.

So no, most kids didn’t want to wake up and discover they were something other than

human with human parents. Sometimes, he would've liked to wake up in another house with parents who didn't argue or pretend he wasn't there.

"I think we've established that I'm a little messed up. When can I start learning about my magic?"

"When I'm done. I have to make sure that you are stable enough to learn magic."

"Stable?"

"Learning magic can be destabilizing, and some witches cannot handle it. Especially those not raised around it. Once you begin to sense it, it can be very hard to turn away from it. As a mind reader, the most important skill you can learn is how to shield yourself. You need to learn how to protect your mind first before you learn how to read others."

Kaine had said something like that as well. That he needed to make sure he didn't drown. This wasn't the same as learning how to ski. Breaking his mind was a lot harder to fix than a broken leg. But now that he'd tasted the possibility, he wanted to spread his wings and see what would happen. He knew from his first ski trip in Mont de Leucoy that going too fast, too soon, resulted in a broken leg. And zero sympathy from his father, who had told him to toughen up.

"Was your father around much when you were growing up?"

"Not really. He was overseas a lot, and it was...peaceful. I don't wanna drop him in the shit. He likes his job, and even though we share a house, most of the time, we rarely cross paths."

"Because you work at the bar and study at the library and stay out of his way."

She plucked that right out of his thoughts. He'd texted his dad this morning and said that he was with a friend and would be home tonight after work. His father had given him a simple thumbs up. Had he even realized Quentin didn't come home last night?

Not that it mattered. He was an adult and could do whatever the fuck he wanted. He told Dad out of politeness and because he couldn't afford to rent anywhere on his own. Nor did he want to live in a university share house. That was far too many people for his liking. So it was easier to pay Dad some rent and keep out of each other's way. Occasionally, they shared a meal or watched a game.

Sometimes, Dad brought a woman home.

Quentin never brought a boyfriend home.

"Would you have rather lived with your mother?"

"Yes...but she didn't want me." The reminder of the wasted years spent child raising when she could've been singing and dancing. She lived for bright lights and applause, and for a little while, she'd lived through him as he'd learned the piano and done various performances through drama at school. "How does this help you assess how stable I am?"

"From your verbal answers and from your thoughts. Don't worry, I'm going to recommend you for training."

Quentin slumped back in his seat. Kaine hadn't mentioned that not being approved for training was a possibility, though he had mentioned that he needed to keep taking his meds until told otherwise. "So, what happens now?"

"You go with the agent who has been assigned to you. He's waiting outside."

His own personal babysitter...bodyguard. Kaine had said he'd be getting one, but again, he expected it to take a couple of days, not hours. "And then what?"

"That I can't answer. I'm a psychologist, not an agent, and not a trainer." She stood, indicating that their time was over.

"So you won't be teaching me even though we have the same magic?"

"No, just because we share a magic doesn't mean I can teach you how to use it."

Quentin hesitated. "What's it like being a witch?"

"I've never known otherwise, so I can't answer that." She opened the door, and Quentin stepped out into the hallway.

Leaning against the wall on the other side was the man he assumed to be his bodyguard. The man was dressed in jeans and a dark shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. His skin was tanned, and his eyes were dark and he assessed Quentin with a sweep of his gaze. "I'm Orion. I'll be looking after you."

"Looking after me, how?"

"You're going to have something to eat and drink because getting your head read always leaves people kind of iffy. Don't argue with me on this one, or I'll be picking your passed-out ass off the carpet and dragging you to the cafeteria, and neither of us wants that. After that, I will follow you around while you go about your day-to-day life until it's time for you to have some magic lessons."

"So you're here to stop me from getting killed?" There was a buzzing in his ears, which hadn't been there before, and everything felt fuzzy around the edges like it wasn't quite real. Or maybe he wasn't quite real. Perhaps he was about to wake up



and find this was a dream.

“More like to stop you from doing something stupid that will result in you getting killed.” He sniffed and wrinkled his nose. “Food, and then you’re going home to change because you reek of sex, and every shifter in the building will smell who you spent the night with.”

For a few seconds, Quentin was sure flames flickered up his throat and burned his cheeks, but there weren’t any, of course.

Orion peeled himself off the wall and walked along the corridor, expecting Quentin to follow. “Lenoir should’ve known better.”

Unless Kaine wanted other shifters to know.

They went down one floor in the lift to a small cafeteria.

“Sit and do not move.” Orion pulled out a chair. “You can have your phone back now. It’s clear but not secure.”

Quentin did as he was told. And when Orion put a cup of coffee and a rather large slab of brownie in front of him, he ate without arguing. Orion didn’t seem like the kind of man he should argue with. When he’d eaten half, he took a drink of the coffee, not sure if he was supposed to eat it all or if that was good enough. “You’re a shifter?”

“Yes.”

“Can I ask what kind?” Kaine had warned him it could be offensive.

“Komodo dragon.” For a heartbeat there was a red sheen over Orion’s eyes. Then it

was gone, and Quentin could've imagined it. "I suggest you keep your other questions until we are alone."

Alone meant getting home.

It meant Quentin caught the bus, like usual, but with Orion on the same one and getting off at a different stop.

When Quentin got out of the shower, Orion was sitting on his bed, thumbing through one of his textbooks. He put his hand over his heart and swore, sure the shock of finding the other man in his bedroom had been enough to kill him. He hadn't heard the shifter come in. "Have you heard of knocking?"

"Then you would've freaked out in the shower, and that could've been way worse. You might have slipped and cracked your head." He put the book on the desk.

"Aren't you a joy to be around?"

Orion smiled as if it had been a compliment. "There's a reason I was assigned to you."

"Can you turn around or something so I can dress?"

Orion shook his head but turned away. "I'm a shifter. Nudity is really not shocking."

"Well, I've only just discovered I'm a witch, so I'm not prepared to get naked in front of random people I've only just met."

Orion laughed. "I find that hard to believe, given that you knew Lenoir for all of five minutes before becoming his mate."

Quentin froze while trying to pull his underwear up underneath the towel, which wasn't working at all. No one was supposed to know that. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"You hesitated for too long before denying it. Work on that. I have a fated mate, and I know what Lenoir is."

"Then you know more than me."

"Until you can lie smoothly, that is for the best. Are you dressed?"

"No." He pulled his briefs up, tossed the towel into the bathroom, and grabbed the shirt and jeans that were in the clean laundry pile on the pile of books in the corner. The clothes he'd worn last night were in the laundry basket. "Okay, now I am."

"Right, you're going to give me a rundown of your daily schedule. Your classes, your tutorials, your work schedule. Any place where you need to be, I need to know when, and I need to know where. That includes your security footage drop-off. I also need to know which camera and how you're copying the footage."

"Okay, I can do that. Just give me a moment to pull up my schedule." He flicked open his laptop lid.

"Before you do anything on that, I need to check it."

"Check it for what?"

"Spyware. I swept your house for bugs as well while you were in the shower. There was one in the living room and another in here."

Quentin felt his eyes grow rounder, and the brownie threatened to rise up his throat

on a tide of coffee. He wasn't sure if he needed to sit down or throw up. He swallowed hard and opted for the former sinking onto the carpet. He pressed his fingers into the loopy wool, hoping that if he held on tight enough, everything would settle.

“They were in my house? Spying on Dad and me?”

“I don't know who was in your house, but someone bugged it, and it wasn't national security. What's your password?”

“My mother's name and the year I was born.”

“You're going to change that and every other password you have, but not today. When you are told to.”

Quentin nodded. Orion kept talking about things being compromised and needing to be careful without changing his routine or looking suspicious, typing on the keyboard the whole time.

He hadn't gone to sleep and woken up a witch. He'd gone to sleep and woken up in some kind of spy...no, not a movie because this was now his life. He ran his fingers through his hair. “Shit.”

It had been all fun and fucking when they'd been in the hotel room, hidden away from the world. Kaine had warned him. But he hadn't realized what it meant.

“If you're going to faint, lie on the floor.” Orion glanced at him. “I should've fed you two brownies.”

He'd only just managed to eat one.

“I’m not going to faint.” But he turned and rested his back against the bed, needing a little more support than what the carpet offered. “How deep is the shit I’m in?”

“Hard to say, beyond you can’t touch the bottom, and you’re bloody lucky your mate has given you a life raft.”

“How do you know about that?”

“I smelled him on you.”

Quentin shook his head. There is no point denying what had happened, not that he liked discussing who he slept with. “We could’ve just had sex.”

“He told me.”

“He told me not to tell anyone.”

“And that’s still your instruction. Like I said, I’m a familiar, and I have a mate, and I know about Lenoir. To everyone else, you’re two witches who are having fun. You don’t get to disclose someone else’s secret. Especially not someone like him.”

“Because he’s the Chief?”

“That too.” The laptop beeped, and Orion grunted. “Your laptop isn’t secure. But I don’t want to remove the program yet as that will alert them that we are onto them.”

“What about the bugs in the house?”

“The one that was in here is now in your father’s room. I’ll return it once we are done. I’ve left the one downstairs.”

“I don’t want people listening in.” Oh my God, had they heard him last week when he watched that video with the sound up and jerked off? That was mortifying. The conversations he had when gaming weren’t much better.

“Putting bugs in people’s houses means someone is monitoring them. It’s going to make it a lot easier for me to locate them. For the moment, we disturb nothing. Understand?”

Quentin nodded but suspected he didn’t look very convincing.

“Do you understand? The danger starts when they realize something is up. Enjoy this little reprieve.”

That wasn’t what Quentin would’ve called it.

“Give me your schedule, and I’ll do my job while you go about your life.”

And in that heartbeat, Quentin forgot what it was he did all day and how to do any of it.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:16 am*

Kaine had so far made it two days without contacting his mate. But by Saturday night, there was a clawing in his veins nothing seemed to sate. It helped that he was busy, putting things in motion, liaising with Dalmon and arranging for Malcolm to come to the city—which neither he, nor Gerrit, were thrilled about.

But Kaine was willing to bet that the only reason they were watching the building from the bar across the road was because they were waiting for Malcolm to turn up at the Coven. And if that's what they were waiting for, that's what he was going to give them.

So far, they hadn't made any demands of Everest, but then he'd only been in the job for three weeks. They wouldn't be able to stretch out Gerrit's recovery much longer. The Board must know that Everest was only filling in.

"You're distracted," Everest said.

Kaine had thought having dinner with Everest and discussing the Shadow Board would distract him for another night. It wasn't working. "There's a lot going on."

"More distracted than usual." Everest took a sip of wine. He'd eaten the steak as if he was starving. Was he looking a little too thin, even for a bird shifter?

Even if Everest wasn't shifting regularly, he was still burning up calories like only a shifter could. "Are you holding up, okay?"

"There's a lot going on." He threw Kaine's words back at him. "And no, I have nothing new for you. I have given you everything they have told me."

Kaine snarled in frustration. They had a list of suspected Shadow Board members, and only a couple of definites whom Everest had met. One of whom was acting as his handler.

Had he been wrong about them wanting Everest on the throne?

No, he didn't think so. They were waiting for something. Probably Malcolm.

When Malcolm turned up, he needed to make a show of arresting him. After careful negotiations with his brothers, he had agreed to name Malcolm a hero and such, but only after this was concluded because they needed him in play as the would-be assassin of the king.

He tapped his fingernail against the base of his glass, sure he was missing something. Yeah, his mate, that's what he was missing.

Quentin was fine. He'd completed the drop as expected and attended classes and work. Orion had made regular updates, as requested. Apparently, Quentin was now stressed about it all.

Who wasn't?

"What's really going on?"

Kaine drew in a breath, ready to tell another lie by omission, but paused. He couldn't keep his connection to Quentin a secret forever. That never worked, so it was better to tell a plausible lie. And once they had sorted the Shadow Board drama, he would tell his brothers the truth. He didn't want them worrying, and the fewer people who knew, the better.

"I may have found someone, a cryptographer with an interest in dead languages. I'm



running background checks at the moment. Extra background checks given what he'll be reading."

Everest leaned forward and stared at him as if he'd just claimed that he was no longer a shifter.

"I'm happy for him to look only at my books. I don't expect everyone to be?—"

"If he reads yours, he may as well read about all of us because we'll all be exposed."

"I realize that, which means it will be put to a vote. But I was actually thinking of the personal things we put in our books, not our history."

Everest shrugged. "I'm not sure the thoughts and feelings I considered important six hundred years ago or two thousand years ago matter. What I want to know is were there more of us? How many brothers have we lost?"

Kaine frowned. "I know from my books that the thoughts and feelings I have today are not that dissimilar from the ones I had three hundred years ago. It seems as though a lot of my hopes and fears carry across lives."

Everest's lips curved. "I have been looking at mine more closely. Bodyguards and men in power have always been a draw." He took another sip of wine.

Kaine groaned. "You've only been here a few weeks. I don't want to replace your bodyguards already."

"Please, don't. Give me at least one thing to enjoy. Because I can tell you that running the country is like dousing my feathers in iced water. I can't believe I did it for so long last time."

“You were good at it. You will be good at it again.”

“And if I don’t want to be?”

“There is no one else...you caused this clot of ages. And I can’t see anybody volunteering to die so that you can have a child and put the pressure on them.”

Everest slumped back in his seat and stared up at the ceiling. “I know. And I know Papa isn’t going to abdicate any time soon. I made him this unhappy in my last life and in this one. Do you understand how that feels? I feel like the worst parent and the worst kid at the same time. Meanwhile, I’m trying to read through hundreds of pages of bloody boring policy documents.”

Kaine laughed. “You don’t have to read any of the security ones as they come to me.” And he read every page.

“They are so boring.” He sounded like any nineteen-year-old, not like a king in the making.

Until recent events, there had been a lot more trust in the ministers, and Gerrit had only skimmed and signed. Between the two of them, they were reading everything. Or at least he trusted Gerrit was reading everything.

“So, how much are you skipping?”

Everest’s jaw worked, and it was several heartbeats before he answered. “I’m reading most of it.”

Kaine’s gut clenched. “They aren’t going to make the request to you. They are going to slide it through in the policies and laws. In the trade agreements.”

Now he was going to have to read everything. He needed to ask Gerrit to double check anything he signed.

“Why? What are they hoping to gain by having me here, aside from a friendly face?” He made quotes around friendly face.

“This is their foothold in Europe. They know we sit on a mountain of gold and that we have a high population of shifters and witches, as well as a witch on the throne.” Unless that animal talker had revealed their secret, in which case the Shadow Board knew they were phoenixes, and then they were on the countdown until they were fucked. Everest had enough to worry about without adding that. Another lie of omission, as Quentin would say.

“You checked all the ministers and their aides.”

“That doesn’t mean I didn’t miss something.” There was so much blackmail and bribery going around. It wouldn’t be hard.

Everest reached across the table and put his hand over Kaine’s. “You can’t suspect everyone. No one can live like that.”

Yet there he was, alive and living.

He needed enough distrust for the both of them.

“Let’s slow everything down further and wait to see who gets frustrated.” That way, he could also catch up since he was behind. He’d bring the government to a halt if that’s what it took to draw them out.

“What is it? You’ve got that look on your face.”

It wasn't only the gold and the kingdom. "That meeting you had with Hastings... He was interested in the security businesses and wanted a meeting with Dalmon."

At the time, Hastings had been hoping to join the Shadow Board.

"Or were they interested in the Coven? If they seized control of that..." Everest lifted his eyebrows and drained his glass.

"They didn't do that when they had Dalmon's PA. She could've handed over control."

Everest grinned. "I doubt that. You and Dalmon are both too paranoid."

"Fine." He let Everest take that point. "But they would've come close."

"So if they took over one of the security businesses, what would they gain?"

"If they have someone who knows what they're doing, a back door into everything." And not only Mont de Leucoy but every business and country that used their security systems and software. That was much more effective than taking over one tiny country.

Everest watched him. "One of them is privately held, so there are no shares to buy. The other one is publicly held, and we can't stop them from buying shares if people are selling. But even then, we hold the majority."

"They might be able to buy enough to become a major shareholder and impact votes. To put their own person on the board. To hire their own people. I need to check the share registry." And about a dozen other things. He needed to talk to Dalmon since he sat on the board of both.

“You’re suggesting that it’s not going to be a kingdom takeover but a corporate takeover?” Everest didn’t sound convinced.

“And who is the biggest holder of stock in the public company?”

“The royal family?”

“The king, which is you at the moment.” He needed to check the laws about acting kings.

“That’s why they wanted me on their throne?”

“But Gerrit is alive.” And he’d just ordered Malcolm to the city, the man who would protect his lover with tooth and claw until his last breath. Fuck.

Everest’s face paled as if he’d just had the same realization. “I’ll call Papa.”

“Yeah. I’ll make some other calls. And I want to speak to the minister of defense tomorrow.”

“It’s Sunday tomorrow. Most people take the day off. Do you ever take the day off?” Everest shook his head and pulled out his phone. “Of course not. You don’t care about the weekend. You’re as bad as Dalmon.”

“Keep going, and I will remove your favorite bodyguard from your personal servicing.”

Everest gave him an exaggerated pout. “The straight ones are always more fun.” His expression changed as the phone connected. “Papa, I was having dinner with Kaine, and we think it’s going to be a corporate takeover via the shares the king holds.” With those few sentences, Everest sounded like a veteran agent, not a king.

Kaine walked away from the table and called Dalmon. Giving him much the same rundown as Everest was giving Gerrit. It was nice to hear him calling him Papa again. “I don’t suppose you know the answers off the top of your head?”

Dalmon paused. “I don’t, but I can look into the company tomorrow, and I will go through personnel records and such.”

“Do staff still own shares?”

“They have the option to buy them if they are available. The only reason the king might sell shares would be if he needed money, and we don’t. I have a feeling someone sold some in the eighties as part of a company acquisition. Oh...”

Kaine waited several heartbeats for Dalmon to continue. He didn’t. “You can’t say that and then go quiet.”

“One of the directors is looking into an acquisition of another company. I can’t remember the details. I skimmed through it because I was dealing with the Hastings issue.” Dalmon swore in a couple of different languages.

“But we have the funds to buy the company outright.” They didn’t need to sell anything.

“Unless the current owners of the company want shares and a seat on the board. And then if they think they’ve got the king’s shares as well, and he will vote with them...”

“They then have a controlling block in how the company runs.” Kaine finished.

They didn’t need to take over the kingdom physically; they could take over the kingdom and the Coven with electrons and code. They could take down every country that used their security systems. Every power station, every water pump,

every food producer. Fuck, even some militaries would come to a standstill.

That was how they were going to take over and put witches in charge. “They know we’re shifters, and they’re going to blame us. And they’re going to sweep in as saviors of humanity.”

And that’s when they’d take over the kingdom and destroy it for its gold.

Everest went silent.

Dalmon said nothing.

He wanted one of his brothers to tell him he was overthinking and being paranoid. That this time, he’d gone too far.

“Papa wants to be on speaker,” Everest said, sounding less sure of himself.

“Put me on speaker, too,” Dalmon said.

They put the phones on the table, but Kaine couldn’t sit. “I don’t think we can let them have this one, but as soon as Everest refuses to vote with them, they will know.”

“Agreed,” Gerrit said.

“We can refuse to buy the company. There’s been no binding agreement drawn up. That I would be aware of. I will go through the company records, acquisitions, as well as staffing. Do you need extra manpower to protect Everest and Gerrit?”

Kaine closed his eyes for a couple of heartbeats. Most of the people who worked in National Security were witches or shifters, but very few had military or agent training. They were analysts, not agents. And his black Ops team was small. He often

made jokes about how it wasn't the size of the army but how you used it. But right now, he needed more than a dozen who were trained to fight. Because once the Shadow Board realized they weren't playing the game, they would change the game.

"Can you spare anyone?" He didn't want to leave the London office short-staffed when that's where the Shadow Board was based.

"I'll send them from France or Germany. Maybe a team from each. I'll let you know, but they will be coming in as tourists and unarmed."

"I can sort that." Weapons were the easy bit.

"I will alert teams in the countries that may be impacted and put the Coven on standby. If they think we know, they may attempt to hack in and release a virus."

"Can we not halt any updates?" Gerrit asked.

Kaine ran his fingers through his hair. That assumed they hadn't gotten to one of the staff and that there was a package waiting to be deployed. "Not without waving a red flag."

"Or create a dummy, which is what everyone thinks they are updating, while the real one is locked away...you can do that, right?" Everest stared at him as though he expected Kaine to nod and solve all his problems.

"That will take time, and we don't know where we stand," Dalmon said.

"It is something that I can action," Kaine said cautiously. Not a dummy, but he could take steps to lock down the amount of potential damage. "But I need forty-eight hours." It's not as though there were other things he'd rather do with that time. He wanted to lose himself in Quentin.



What if he died, and they'd only had one night?

That wasn't fair to either of them. The idea of the soul bruise that would cause made him shiver.

"And what about Malcolm?" Gerrit asked.

"He will approach the Coven as planned."

Gerrit grunted. "Make sure you return Malcolm to me in one piece and with all his pieces. And once this is over, we are going to sit down and have a long talk about how best to reveal the existence of shifters and witches because technology has moved past our ability to stay hidden."

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:16 am*

Quentin pressed his hands to his temples, hoping his head was not about to explode or his brain wasn't going to leak out of his ears. Magic required focus, something which was hard to do when other people's thoughts were pushing past his skin and whispering in his ear. He'd forgotten what this was like, and he wanted—no, needed—the clarity his medication brought. But if he used it, then he couldn't even feel his magic.

After three days of training, he could at least sense the magic—it had taken him an entire day of trying to grasp the invisible inside of him to even do that.

Since then, the witch teaching him had been trying to get him to shield his mind so that other people's thoughts weren't derailing his own. He was extremely de-railable.

He wasn't even sure he had rails.

He wouldn't be surprised if all he had were unmarked trails going in multiple directions.

Not only that, but they hadn't even ventured outside the witch's office into the real world, where there would be hundreds of people all jostling his thoughts.

“Witches often think of their magic as something tangible. The idea of the shield and the train aren't working for you. I know another mind reader who thinks of it as a fishpond. Other people's thoughts are the fish. She can see them, and watch them, but they don't impact her unless she puts her hand in to seek more information.”

He had thought the train idea would be a winner and that he could watch other

people's thoughts go past on their own tracks. The visualization that she used was of a shield, which didn't work for him either.

Quentin glanced up at her. He didn't know how much more of this he could take. "Have you ever hated being a witch?"

"Have you ever hated breathing?" she countered.

Right now, with the headache thumping between his hands...possibly. If he passed out because he wasn't breathing, he wouldn't be in pain until he woke up.

"This is the most important thing you will learn about your magic. Back in the day, mind readers who didn't control their magic ended up in asylums."

"Why is this one so difficult? There must be easier magics." He dug his fingers against his scalp, hoping to find some relief. His nails caused a different pain, but it wasn't enough to distract him. The irony almost made him smile. When he wanted to be distracted, nothing worked.

"Every magic is difficult when you're learning. Your type of magic doesn't have a high fatality rate."

That implied that some people did die from mind reading, which wasn't reassuring at all.

"Would you like me to call the healer so we can continue?"

"No." He lowered his hands and sat up straight. That was a mistake he'd made on the first day. While he could imagine there were some situations when magical healing was great, and the pain far outweighed what would happen otherwise. It was unpleasant, and there'd been a couple of heartbeats where he was sure he was about

to have an aneurysm, or a stroke, or some other medical disaster.

All he really wanted was to see Kaine. It had been five days. An entire weekend had disappeared, and all he had done was work, study, or try to learn his magic. He had been hoping to spend time in bed fucking, not recovering.

“Okay, then. Find a way to visualize your magic. You need to have a separation between your thoughts and everyone else’s. Yet you also need the ability to reach in and examine, because there will be times when you need to study someone else’s thoughts.”

He doubted she would think assessing if his mate was actually into him was a good use of magic. In the hotel room, he’d believed Kaine had wanted him. Now?

The absence stung even though he should be used to people walking away from him.

Her lips curved in a sad smile. “I know the idea is unpalatable, but it might save your life or the lives of those you care about.”

But did the people he cared about care about him? He could find out once he knew what he was doing. Did she also know about Kaine?

“You should be able to scoop up my most surface thoughts, which is different from digging. Remember, when dealing with other paranormals ethically, you need to ask permission before using magic on them.”

The Fates hadn’t asked permission before tying him to Kaine.

“But not when it comes to humans because they don’t know about magic.” Maybe if he kept her talking, the clock would run down, and he could leave this for another day. Perhaps he could demand that Orion take him to see Kaine.

He doubted the shifter would as he took orders from Kaine, and clearly, Kaine didn't want to see him. What had he done wrong?

"That is a gray area. They don't know about us, so how can we ask?" She leaned back and sighed. Her gaze flicking to the clock. "I'm sorry, but I can't let you leave until you can protect yourself."

Quentin closed his eyes. "What if I choose wrong? Can I change it later?"

"Of course you can. It's your magic. Some advanced users don't need to think of a tangible. They feel it within themselves so deeply, it's like another limb."

They must be like monks or hermits who did nothing but practice magic to reach that point.

Okay, come on, brain. We need a way to describe this magic so we don't lose our shit. And maybe if I can do this, I'll be able to see Kaine.

He was sure he felt the other witch's thoughts dancing around him, touching his, like a sweep of...of butterfly wings.

The butterfly house in the hotel.

For a moment, he was sure that Kaine was standing next to him. He should've asked to walk through the butterfly house. Should have grabbed Kaine's hand and dragged him inside so he could feel the tiny wings.

Imagining other people's thoughts as butterflies was safer than imagining them as trains, which would take him out if they crashed into him or if he accidentally stood on the tracks.

As much as he wanted to imagine walking through the butterfly house. Instead, he stood on one side of the glass and stared in, watching them flutter and fly. Although, at the moment, there was only one butterfly, and she sat opposite him. She bounced against the glass, and he felt nothing. The pressure in his skull decreased, and he relaxed back into the chair, feeling as though he'd done a lap of the country. He was sure he was sweating.

He was also hungry.

“I think I'm doing it.”

She smiled and also appeared relieved that he'd accomplished step one of the training process. He suspected she'd never had a student so slow on the uptake, but then he hadn't touched his magic in seven years, and it had taken a day just to find it.

He had it, and he could block out other people.

Take that, psychiatrist. I'm off my meds and fine.

“Now, I want you to dip in and brush the surface of my thoughts.”

He did not have it.

How the fuck was he supposed to do that?

As soon as he reached for her thoughts, it felt as though the wall would fall, and then the other much smaller and more distant butterflies would swarm him.

“I'm not sure how to do that without being inundated again.”

She was still smiling. She hadn't expected him to get it. “Have a think about it. You

might need to review and tweak your visualization. I suggest doing it in a quiet place away from other people in case whatever you're testing doesn't work. For the moment, though, you have one that does even though it's not functional."

"I mean, it's stopping all the thoughts from getting to me. Isn't that functional?"

"Only at a very basic level. It's enough to protect your mind but not enough to be useful. You seem like the kind of person who wants to explore what you can do sooner rather than later. You aren't going to be happy knowing enough to be safe."

He didn't know if the psych had written something in his file or if she had made that guess about him. But she wasn't wrong. Now the headache was gone. He wanted to see what other people's thoughts looked like, even if he didn't touch them.

"Does it help that I can see your thoughts?"

"That depends on what you're seeing."

He wasn't sure he wanted to share the butterfly visualization, but if it helped...

"I'm using a butterfly house. I'm on one side, other people's thoughts are on the other. The further away the people and their thoughts, the smaller and more distant they are in the house. You are close and curious and a nice soft blue."

"The first problem with that is that you have tried to enclose other people's thoughts. You need to adjust that. But since the strength and distance to other people's thoughts are already represented, the colors may also mean something. What they mean is something you will have to figure out as they are colors your mind is assigning."

He'd achieved one thing, and now he had a dozen other things that he needed to focus

on. “What happens if I forget to think about the butterfly house?”

“Nothing. You’ve tapped into your magic now, and your mind recognizes it. If you feel as though there are too many pressing against you, you can shore up your defenses, increase the thickness of the glass, or do something that works for you. But for the most part, you should be able to hold it without thought. You aren’t going to forget how to use your magic, either.”

Quentin frowned. “So now I have connected to it. It’s just about learning to use it?”

“You’re a witch, Quentin. All you needed to do was to find your magic and feel it. It will become instinct if you let yourself breathe. How do babies learn to walk?”

“I really have no idea.” Sure, he’d been one, but he didn’t remember what it felt like to learn to walk.

“They stumble round and hold someone’s hand, and then they take their first step, and instinct takes over.”

“They still fall over.” As he spoke, he was sure he felt Kaine’s warmth against him, his hand on his lower back as if to encourage him. He wasn’t sure either of his parents had done that.

“Everyone does, including witches and shifters. Some are just better at hiding it.”



*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:16 am*

After five days without seeing his mate, drinking too much coffee and working to secure the entire system without causing disruptions for users or raising suspicions with staff, he had done it in forty-six hours. Which also meant he hadn't slept in close to forty hours and he was exhausted and hurting in a way he wasn't familiar with.

There was an ache that he couldn't soothe, and it was because he'd been ignoring Quentin. Hell, it was probably his mate's hurt that he was feeling. He had tried to push something comforting through the bond—when he took a break and remembered to—but he didn't know what he was doing, and Quentin had only gotten ahold of his magic three hours ago, so perhaps nothing had gotten through.

He read through Dalmon's email again, as well as the attachments, to make sure he hadn't missed anything. The good thing with companies was that the names of the directors and major shareholders were public record, which meant they now had a list of people, and Dalmon was digging. So far, Everest had confirmed that three of them had been at various Shadow Board parties.

As suspected, they wanted shares and seats on the Board, and Everest's handler had also been in contact.

With the lockdown of the company operating system, and Dalmon stalling negotiations on the purchase—which is why Everest's handler had been in contact to get him to speak with his uncle—tomorrow Malcolm was going to walk into the Coven office opposite the bar where Quentin worked.

If nothing else, that should bring any Shadow Board operatives in the kingdom out into daylight.

He rubbed his eyes.

A knock on his office door had him wishing he'd left already. "What?"

He should've left hours ago but had been tying up loose ends because the last thing he wanted was a too clever employee, finding a thread and thinking that the company had been compromised when they hadn't been, and it was just protection. They couldn't reveal their hand yet.

However, the acquisition had to go through because the shareholders had already voted on it. Having a private company was much easier. Everest—King Sebastien in his last life—had thought it a good idea to make one publicly listed and keep the other one private, so it's not to have all their eggs in one basket.

It was as though all the actions they'd taken over millennia to keep their secret and be safe had been stripped away. How long until someone revealed they were phoenixes?

Orion opened the door. "He wouldn't leave until he'd seen you. And I thought carrying him out kicking and screaming would make too much of a scene."

Quentin glared at Orion and then at him. He had his arms crossed over his chest and was scowling hard enough that it had to hurt. "You've been ignoring me."

Kaine glanced at Orion. "Shut the door. We won't be long."

The Komodo dragon shifter did as he was asked. He didn't need to be told to stay on the other side.

"You could at least tell me what I did wrong. Or if you've changed your mind or something." He took three steps into Kaine's office, which left a vast distance between them.

Kaine stood and stretched. His back cracked, and for a moment, the idea of shifting was very tempting. When he was flying, nothing else mattered. Or that was how it had been. Would that feel different now he had a mate?

He walked around the desk towards Quentin. “I have been working on an imminent security breach. So it was not my choice.”

Maybe a little?

Because while it had been fun in the hotel room, beyond that sanctuary, he was surrounded by danger, and having a mate seemed like the biggest security breach of all. The thing that could bring him, and his brothers, down.

Quentin’s lips remained pressed together, and his arms tightly folded. “I’m used to hearing excuses. I thought you would be different. I have done everything you asked of me.”

“I know. I was updated.”

“It’s been five days, and you couldn’t spare five minutes to stop by and say something?” Quentin snapped.

It was no longer an ache inside of him. It felt as though something was tearing away and leaving him breathless and bleeding.

“Firstly, I can’t be seen with you on the street. Once was a hookup, a chance encounter. If we went out again, then anyone watching you would be aware that you have been compromised. If you are compromised, you are expendable. And the Shadow Board doesn’t care how bloody their hands become.”

“I have spent plenty of time in this building—is that not a risk?”

Kaine stood in front of him. If he reached out his hand, he would be able to run his hand up Quentin's arm. Touching him seemed like a bad idea right now, even though it's what his skin craved. "Your comings and goings have been protected. The staff do not know why you are here. They do not know who you are."

"Am I going to be your secret forever? If you're done, just say so."

Kaine considered him for several heartbeats. "Why would you think I was done?"

"Why wouldn't I?" He looked away and closed his eyes. "I've been ignored and brushed aside, unwanted, my entire life, and for some reason, I thought this would be different because we're fated mates and magically married. I should've known better." He drew in a deep breath and squeezed his eyes closed tighter. "Shit." He swiped at his eyelashes. "Why the fuck do I care?" He glared at Kaine. "Stop staring at me."

"I would have loved to have taken this entire week off and spent it with you on my estate. However, you needed to learn your magic, and I had to work. I agree, it's not an ideal start. But I tried to use the bond to reassure you—though it's a new magic to me and I don't know if it worked. Maybe it didn't because you didn't understand your own magic and so couldn't sense it."

"I did sense something today. I thought I was imagining it." Quentin scowled. "You could have texted in the previous four days. You could've done anything...instead, you left me with Mr. Surly. Who knows exactly what's going on, by the way."

"That's why he's the one I assigned to you. He's ex-Coven and has a mate. He also used to work Shadow Board cases."

"You say that like it's meant to mean something to me."

“They are the bad guys. They call themselves that because they run a shadow government in England.”

Quentin blinked. “A shadow government?”

“As in they are rich and powerful and titled witches who can sway the government to do what they want. What they want is to expose all paranormals and lay the blame for the world’s ills at the shifters’ feet. You may not be familiar with paranormal history, but there was a time when witches would bind shifters, usually in their animal form, and then drain them of their magic. The Board still does that; they traffic shifters, and they want nothing more than to seize global power and bring shifters to heel. So, when I say I’m working on a security breach, it’s a big fucking deal that I can’t hand off to my staff because I don’t know which of my staff have been compromised. And those that have been, I have left in play because I don’t want to reveal how much we know. It’s why you’re living at home with your father instead of me. It’s why you’re going to work instead of looking at some of the dead languages that I need translated. I have an entire fucking library of ancient books and scrolls and such that I’m sure you would love to get your hands on...but I can’t give you any of that because it’s better if you seem to be a human uni student.”

Quentin’s mouth opened, then closed without a single word being spoken.

Kaine huffed out of breath. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have raised my voice. I’d like to blame my lack of sleep and the anger and hurt I can feel through the bond, but I should know better.” He needed to do better. Quentin was his to look after, and he was doing a piss-poor job of it.

“If it’s new to you, why should you know better?”

“Because I understand how it works, even if I’ve never had it before.”

“There’s a difference between understanding how something works and doing it...trust me. I’ve spent the last five days unsuccessfully, understanding what I’m supposed to do and not being able to do it until today. Hoo-fucking-ray, because now there’s harder stuff to learn. Your thoughts are hot, by the way, and your butterfly is burning.”

Kaine snorted with laughter and then covered his mouth. “It’s not funny, but I kind of got an image. And I’m not sure what butterflies have to do with it.”

Except butterflies flew, and when he did, he was also on fire, which meant Quentin was very close to working out what kind of shifter he was. And since the Shadow Board probably knew, what did it matter if he told his mate?

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:16 am*

Quentin stared at his mate, torn between anger and wanting to hate him and the clawing need inside of him to touch him. Which is why he was keeping his arms crossed and his hands locked between his elbows and ribs. If he released them, he'd do something stupid like grab Kaine's cheeks and kiss him until they didn't need to breathe.

His toes curled in his shoes as he resisted the urge to step forward, to be close to him. He should be used to being abandoned. Unwanted. Yet this time, it hurt, and he wasn't sure why. They hadn't decided to get together... Well, they had decided to get together to fuck, but they hadn't decided to date or be married without the option of divorce. But his mate should give a shit, and while Kaine said he did, and he had a good excuse, wasn't it just an excuse? The same kind that he'd been hearing from the day he was born.

"The only reason I'm hurting is because you ignored me. You don't know what it's like to have people say they love you with one breath but act as though you're an inconvenience with the next."

Kaine's thoughts flared bright and sharp as if his butterflies had wings made of razors, red hot razors that would cauterize every wound they made. "You're right, I don't understand that feeling. But my family is complicated."

"Because you're a royal bastard? There is quite a resemblance between you and the king."

Kaine's smile tightened as if Quentin had hit a nerve. "That would be easier."

“How would it be easier? Or is that another secret that you can’t tell me?” Lashing out was not going to make Kaine want him, but it was safer if there was a distance because then Kaine couldn’t hurt him.

Kaine stared at the carpet and sighed. “I’m so used to keeping secrets that telling someone isn’t easy. And this, mid-argument, is not how I wanted to tell you.”

Quentin tilted his head but kept his arms crossed. He wasn’t ready to forgive Kaine for leaving him with his staff for the last five days. Sure, he got to learn a bunch of cool stuff, but Orion wasn’t the most talkative guy, and he was as strict as fuck when it came to what Quentin should be doing and what he shouldn’t be doing. Turning up at Kaine’s door was one of those things, and Orion had nearly picked him up and hauled him out of the building. “How did you want to tell me? Perhaps a text?”

“Stop being such a bitch. I know you’re hurt. I can feel it.” He tapped the center of his chest. “The bond, remember? I can sense what you’re feeling and the edges of your thoughts. It won’t be long until you can read mine. I don’t know how long it will take me to learn how to read yours.”

“Ah, so you want to tell me before I find out for myself?”

“I want to tell you because it’s the right thing to do. You’re my mate, and because I was raised with all this stuff, I know how much that means. Not everyone gets a mate.” Kaine raked his fingers through his dark hair. From the mess it was in, it looked as though he had done it a lot today. “I get it. I’m failing you even though I’m doing my best to keep you safe.”

“You’re keeping me in play. That’s the right words, yeah? I’m carrying on as if nothing has changed and grabbing the footage and?—”

“Because that is the safest option. As soon as they work out that you have told



someone, your life is in danger. I'm not lying about that. It's why I can't be seen on the street with you. Why you can't come to my house. Because if it was up to me, I would've already moved you in."

"What makes you think I want to move in? I don't even know where you live. It might be further for me to travel to work."

Kaine laughed and shook his head. "You wouldn't need to work at the bar anymore."

"Why?" It wasn't as though he loved the job, but it suited him fine for the moment.

"Because you wouldn't need to work at all."

Quentin stared at him. "But you work."

"Let's call it family obligation, for the moment. I don't need to work."

The Chief of Security must be on a pretty good pay...but enough to stop working? Or was there family money? And he hadn't denied being related to the royal family, only that it was more complicated than being the product of an affair.

Kaine stepped forward. He ran his hands up Quentin's arms to his shoulders. "I know asking you to trust me is a lot."

Every cell in his body trembled with delight that Kaine was touching him. They were only inches apart. He wanted to lean forward so there was nothing between them.

If he uncrossed his arms, he'd fall into Kaine's waiting embrace, and then where would he be?

Would it be another five days of waiting and hoping?

“Tomorrow, we’re pulling one of the triggers. Nothing may happen, or everything may happen. Or perhaps the Board will give a nervous flutter. I don’t know. You need to use this new magic of yours to be alert, and if you sense anything that doesn’t feel right, you need to tell Orion.”

“What if I’m wrong?”

“I’d rather you be wrong and alive.”

“Can I just stay with you?” He hated the needy whine in his voice. What the fuck was wrong with him? He was used to being on his own and not needing anyone. His hands slipped free of their prison, but he wouldn’t let himself move closer.

“No. Because the moment they see you in my house, they will know. And I have no doubt that my house is watched. It’s what I would do.”

“If you were them and you pulled the trigger, what would you do?”

“It depends on if I had everything ready to go. If I didn’t, I would either ignore it and see it as bait to draw me out, or I might take out those I had blackmailed and clean up loose ends. I would also speed up preparations and act as soon as they were ready. But I would wait two days before acting because, for the first day, everyone would be on high alert. On the second day, everybody will be dealing with the fallout from pulling the trigger. They’ll be distracted.”

“And where am I in all of this because I’m assuming I’m one of the blackmailed people?” And he didn’t want to be thought of as a loose end that needed cleaning up.

“You aren’t the only one. And where you are depends on what happens. I have already sent Orion instructions.”

“I want to know.”

“You’re not an agent or an operative. You’ve never dealt with people who are armed with guns and magic.”

“And I don’t want to deal with any of that stuff, but I want to know what I’m supposed to be doing.”

“Hiding.”

“In your secret library?”

“I never said it was secret.” His hands were warm on Quentin’s shoulders, and it was becoming harder and harder to resist moving closer to him. Was he being a bitch?

Quentin frowned, sure that Kaine had. “Did you think it?”

“There is a secret library. And I want you to look at it. But I need the king’s permission, and for that I need to tell him I have a mate, as it’s also a security risk.”

“Oh...and for how long am I supposed to be your security-risk secret?”

Kaine stepped forward, closing the distance, and wrapped his arms around Quentin. “You aren’t a secret. You are my beautiful, wounded mate. A glorious distraction that I have been trying to resist, so I can save the world as we know it.”

For two breaths, Quentin stood there with his hands by his side, not wanting to relent. But he didn’t want Kaine to hate him. To think that he was a bitch and that it was all about him when there were bigger issues.

But it felt as though it was all about him.

He had issues... He always had issues, but this time they were different, because they involved Kaine, and magic, and other things he couldn't talk about to other people.

With an exhale, he let his arms lift and wrap around Kaine's waist. The tension drained out of Kaine's body, which let some of the anger flood out of him. Maybe not all of the anger was his. If Kaine could sense his hurt, then perhaps he could sense some of Kaine's emotions too, even if they weren't in the same room.

"How can I tell which are your emotions and which are mine if they're blending together?" His words were muffled against Kaine's shoulder.

"Practice. It also takes practice to not let the other person bring you into their internal turmoil. I know all of this in theory, but I can't do any of it yet."

"So it would be helpful if I wasn't annoyed with you for the next couple of days."

Kaine nodded, his cheek brushing against Quentin's. "That would be nice. Because I'd like to not die or be responsible for the death of any of my operatives."

"Yeah, I'd like that too." He did not need the weight of that responsibility, directly or incidentally. "I thought being a witch was going to be fun. That having a mate would..."

He'd hoped magic would somehow fix everything. Instead, it complicated everything in ways he could never have imagined.

"Nothing is fun when you're first learning it. No one likes to feel like an idiot when you're used to solving all the puzzles and being ahead of the game."

"I'll remember never to play chess with you."

“Or any other strategy game. Apparently, I’m always like this.” He drew in a sharp breath, realizing that he’d said too much.

Quentin curled his fingers into the soft fabric of Kaine’s shirt to stop himself from asking, but it was burning him up. “What do you mean, always like this? And I didn’t even know you had brothers?”

It was the first time Kaine had ever mentioned family. It was as if he’d hatched.

“Give me a day, please.”

“What if you die, or I die?”

“I don’t know.” He swore in some other language. “I wanted to do this so differently. I thought we’d go to my estate?”

“Estate?” That was the second time Kaine had mentioned one.

“I have an estate and a title, not that I use either much.”

Quentin drew back to look Kaine in the eye. “What’s your title?”

Kaine paused for a heartbeat as if weighing the answer. “Duc de Maison de Falx.”

“Do you actually have falcons on your estate? Where is your estate?” When he suggested hooking up, the idea that he was picking up a duke with an estate had never crossed his mind. He hadn’t even known Kaine was the chief of national security. “Don’t dukes have royal blood?”

“They do. But I’m not a royal bastard. Everything I tell you makes your life that little more dangerous.”

“I think I have the right to know.” Didn’t he? He didn’t know the protocol, and he was sure there was some. And if Kaine was a duke, what was he? Aside from a glorious secret. What if the king said Kaine couldn’t have a mate?

Kaine’s thumbs swept over Quentin’s temples. “Your mind is like rapids tumbling over questions. I don’t have the time to answer all of them. Not tonight. Hopefully after all this shakes down, I will be able to tell you everything.”

“Then choose the three I really need to know,” Quentin said because he needed something.

“Or the three you will believe?” Kaine countered, his hands still on Quentin’s face.

“I only found out about shifters and witches a week ago, and yet here I am. I think I can handle whatever you tell me.”

“You freaked out about being a witch a week ago.”

“You’ve got to cut me a little slack for that because it was an unexpected situation. If I’d known who you were, I would’ve never...”

“No, but you would’ve come to my attention some other way, maybe because of what you were doing, and then things would’ve been different, but we still would’ve ended up here at some point.”

Quentin didn’t know if that was reassuring or terrifying. At least when he’d jumped in, he hadn’t realized the dangers. If things had been different, he might have run. How far would he have gotten? “It doesn’t bother you that this was inevitable, or am I thinking like a human, not a witch?”

“I am grateful to have found you...” He gave another one of those sighs, as though

the weight of the decision was too much. When he lifted his head, there was something else in his dark eyes. They flickered with a kind of dark light. “I not sure how old I am or how many lives I’ve lived, Quentin. I am a phoenix shifter.”

Quentin’s mouth popped open, and he grinned. “That explains the burning butterflies.”

“Not to me, it doesn’t.”

“It’s how I’m visualizing my magic, so I’m not swamped by everyone’s thoughts. What does a phoenix look like?”

“A bird made of fire.”

“No body of flesh and blood?”

“None. It was weird when I first started shifting, but I’m used to it now.”

“And if you are a phoenix, you have no parents.” That must be nice.

“Correct. I was raised by one of my brothers. When we die, we hatch as a baby with no memory of our previous lives.”

While he was careful not to say his brothers’ names. Quentin suspected the king was one. Did that also make the prince one? “And your brothers are also phoenixes?”

“Yes...though we may not be blood related. We don’t know our own past because we can’t read the records in our secret library.” He gave Quentin a small smile.

“And here I am.” Like magic...like fate.

“Exactly. I’m hoping that we found each other in this life because you are the exact person I need. Maybe we met in a different life. I don’t know. I haven’t had a chance to look to see if I have ever crossed paths with a mind reader. It’s not something I recall reading in my last two lives. Though my last one was cut short.”

“Meaning you died?”

Kaine nodded. “I was forty. Hunting accident.”

“You don’t sound convinced.”

“I was the heir. Another had to be hatched, and more lies had to be told.”

Understanding of the situation was bright and clear. More lies of omission, but his family was complicated. And he was so used to keeping the secrets and telling the lies that it came naturally to leave bits out. “How come you aren’t royal this time?”

“Because we have found it to be safer if one of us isn’t. I was the king before Sebastien, so as much as it grates to be on the outer, it is simply the way things fell this time. Next time...” Kaine shrugged. “Who knows?”

“What about me?” Since Kaine had mentioned looking through his past for mind readers, did that mean there was a chance of other lives and futures? “Do we find each other again?”

“It seems as though it’s possible, but it’s stuff we’re only just figuring out or figuring out again. Who knows how much has been lost to time? We lost one brother, but have we lost others who we’ve forgotten about? I have so many questions, but I can’t ask you to dive into records that date back thousands of years because it will impact my brothers, and I need their permission. And I don’t know if that’s something you even want to do.”



Quentin stared and blinked. “That’s literally what I’m studying to do and so much better than working in the back room of some museum. A secret library for me? I never need another birthday present again.”

“So you’re not mad at me anymore because I can give you a secret library? I don’t know how many times I’m going to be able to pull that off.”

Quentin lifted his eyebrow. “Are you planning on ignoring me so I get mad at you lots of times?” Though now he understood more, none of the anger remained. It still felt a little like a weird dream that was going to be snatched away. Like it couldn’t be happening to him because nothing this good ever happened to him.

“You are hard to ignore. Do you know how tempted I was to go to where you were training and interrupt? I don’t need my staff gossiping about me.”

“But they will when you can talk about me, right?” He watched Kaine’s eyes, searching for shadows where half-truths hid. “I’m your mate, but I don’t know where I stand in your world.”

“My world?”

“You’re a freaking duke.” Sure, they were both paranormals, but that’s where everything ended.

“Oh.”

“Oh? That’s all you’ve got?” How did he make Kaine realize how out of his depth he was? It wasn’t only magic. It was suddenly secretly dating someone very important, with money and power.

“Well, nobody is going to say anything when I say we’re engaged. It’s not as if it

needs to be managed like Dalmon.”

“Prince Dalmon?” From what he’d read about the man, it seemed as though he spent all his time traveling or going to parties. Since he was also a phoenix shifter, how much of that was also a lie?

“He’s engaged, but it hasn’t been announced because anything like that needs to be managed.”

“Why does it need to be managed?”

“Because his fiancé is also his PA, and that’s the easy part. They are waiting until the Shadow Board issue is resolved.”

“It seems as though everybody is putting their life on hold.”

Kaine gave a small nod. “Maybe it’s the wrong thing to do, but if we fuck this up, shifters take the blame, and the bad guys seize control of the world. And I don’t think any of us want to live in a world run by power-hungry witches.”

“Will that be any different to a world run by power hungry-humans?”

“Yes, because shifters who step out of line will be bound and drained. For most shifters, it will only be for that one life. But dragon shifters live a very long time...and phoenixes live forever.”

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:16 am*

Kaine hadn't meant to spill quite so much of his guts and put them on display. But once he started talking to Quentin, it was too easy to let the truth out. Which was how it was supposed to be between mates, and he understood and made correct guesses, and he wanted to help—if only to sate his own curiosity about the library.

And once he stopped talking, there would be no reason for Quentin to be in his office, and he'd have to let him go. Once he walked out that door, Kaine had no idea if he'd ever see him again if things went badly...

He didn't have the strength to let him leave, even though it was the right thing to do. The right thing by who? Him? Quentin? The country? The world?

It was too much.

The right thing for them was to be together, and to make the most of the time they had.

Quentin nodded slowly as if turning everything over. He wasn't an agent, but he was smart. "I can see how that might be a problem. And humans might also take to hunting witches and shifters."

"No might about it. Humans will fight back, and it won't be pretty. That's what I'm trying to stop."

"Next time, you try to save the world, just text me or something." Quentin forced a laugh and glanced away as if embarrassed that he'd made a fuss.

“You had every right to feel hurt, and I will try not to do that again.” But there was no time to sit and digest the news and discuss it the way they could’ve been if they’d been at his estate. They could have hiked and talked, and drunk hot chocolate by the fire. Made love and figured things out, until they both understood what was going on, and their bond was strong, and they could both use it. That’s what he wanted.

It’s what Quentin deserved instead of this flyby, with his fingers crossed, while hoping for the best. He didn’t want to be the person who was always promising it would get better because there was no guarantee that it would.

There was always some crisis, though this was the first one which had a global impact. It was the biggest thing he’d ever worked on, and he was sure it was for Dalmon.

“Let’s take tonight just for us,” the whispered words fell off his lips as soon as he thought them.

“You’ve got things to do. I don’t want to be the reason this all falls over.”

“For the moment, I’ve done everything I can. I was going to go home.” He’d been thinking of taking Quentin to his estate for a few weeks after, but they could escape to somewhere much closer and steal a little time. “But we could go to the castle instead.”

“Are you gonna sneak me in? Your brothers won’t find out?”

“I have my own rooms...” The idea sprouted and grew tendrils that wrapped around him. “I can say I have an important guest staying who needs protection. The staff won’t say anything. Though they might be cross that I didn’t give them much notice.”

It also meant taking Quentin out of play. But he’d be safe in the castle, away from the

operation and danger.

Kaine hated staying at the castle, mostly because he wasn't part of the royal family this time, so even though the rooms were his and had always been his, he was achingly aware that he didn't belong there. Tonight, though, there was nowhere else he wanted to be. He leaned in and pressed a quick kiss to Quentin's lips.

The moment they touched, all he wanted to do was keep going, especially when Quentin opened his mouth, and his tongue flicked over Kaine's lips, igniting the heat in his blood and sending a jolt of lust to the tip of his already hard dick.

"I need to make two phone calls." Another kiss.

"What about Orion?"

He would still be waiting. No doubt Orion would appreciate the night off. "Two phone calls and a quick chat, and then I'm all yours."

Neither phone call took long. One was to call Frederick, his driver, to bring a secure car around. The other was to tell housekeeping he needed his rooms prepared. He didn't bother informing Everest, as he didn't need to know. With luck, they wouldn't cross paths. Not tonight.

Tomorrow, he would think of something.

Quentin sat on the two-seater leather sofa to the side of the office, perched on the edge, as if he didn't know what to do with himself. For a heartbeat, it was tempting to join him and claim him on the sofa. But he wanted more than a quick fuck, and he didn't want a psychometric witch to come in and see what they had done or for a shifter to come in and smell it for the next two weeks.

He drew in a breath, and he resisted the urge to walk over, run his fingers through Quentin's hair, and kiss him on his way to opening the door. Orion was on his phone, leaning against the wall. He was halfway down the corridor, no doubt to make sure he didn't hear anything or smell anything.

His tongue flicked over his lip as he looked at Kaine, and a small frown formed. "Is everything okay?"

"Yes. I'm taking him to the castle tonight. I have my driver coming."

"And tomorrow?"

"I'll let you know. Enjoy the evening with your mate."

Orion held his gaze for a couple of heartbeats, then gave a single nod and put his phone in his pocket. "Do you want me to walk him to the car so you aren't seen leaving together?"

"That's a good idea. Thank you." They were only going to be apart for a few minutes, but it already felt like forever. He stepped back into his office, and Quentin was already standing with his hands shoved into his pockets. "Orion will see you to the car. I'll be down shortly."

He studied his mate. The hurt and anger might've subsided, but some turmoil remained. He reached along the bond, or at least that's what he thought he was doing, trying to examine the sensation and what it meant.

Quentin frowned. "What are you doing?"

Kaine paused. "What's wrong?"

“I don’t know. It feels a little more serious this time...leaving with you, I mean. And I’ve only ever been to the bit of the castle open to tourists. Am I going to be in trouble?”

“No.” A couple of quick strides was all it took to be close enough to hold him and kiss him, and he knew it was a mistake because now he didn’t want to stop. This kiss was hungrier. And when Quentin’s hands ventured out of his pockets to grab Kaine’s hips, he didn’t resist. He let himself be drawn close as his fingers tangled in his mate’s hair.

Quentin rocked his hips, grinding against him. “You should’ve kept the door closed.”

He’d left it open, thinking that Quentin would walk out.

His phone buzzed in his pocket. “That will be Frederick.”

But they didn’t pull apart. It had only been five days, but it felt as if it had been so much longer now Quentin was in his arms. Five minutes was nothing. He placed another soft kiss on Quentin’s lips and then forced himself to step back.

“Go. And I will lock up here.” He took another step back. And then another before he turned around and walked to his desk, where he had spent far too many hours over the last two days.

Quentin paused in the doorway. “If you’re not there in ten minutes, I’m coming back up.”

Kaine smiled as he shut down his computer. “I will be there.”

He checked the ward on his computer and his desk. Then he checked the window. No one had tampered with them, but then he didn’t expect them to. This wasn’t the

target. The target was two blocks away. Another modern, bland office building that most people overlooked because of the magic protecting it. But that was where the security system for so many companies and countries was housed. It was where people worked on updates and patches and modifications so that it worked for whatever purpose the company wanted.

And they were still doing that.

But none of their changes were getting pushed through unless he vetted them and then applied them to the real working version. He had someone going through all the previous updates. How far back did they look? Or had the Shadow Board been there from day one, waiting for an opportunity?

If Quentin had noticed a resemblance between him and the king, perhaps whoever had Olier had also seen something and had worked out their secret.

Technology had made all kinds of things possible. It also made hiding that much harder, especially as a royal family. If they'd been commoners, it would have been so much easier to disappear.

But as commoners, they would have lacked the power centuries ago to build a country where being paranormal was safe. He locked his office door. Even security was a double-edged sword.



## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:16 am*

The car was fancy with black tinted windows so no one could see in. There was a screen between Quentin and the driver, and if he wanted to talk to him, he needed to push a button. None of this seemed real.

He was going to wake up in hospital and find out he'd been in a coma or something. But as he ran his fingers over the black leather seat, it all felt very real. He could still taste Kaine on his lips, feel the sweeping flutter of fire of his thoughts. Not fire because he was angry, but fire because he was a phoenix.

There was a small part of Quentin that thought that should be the final straw. That it was all too much to take in. Yet, if witches and shifters were real, why not a phoenix shifter? Until a week ago, witches and shifters had been myth and fairytale, but they were real.

And he was a part of it.

And he was definitely real.

He opened and closed his fist a couple of times, leaving nail marks in his palm to be sure. He wasn't quite sure how an accidental army brat had ended up in a fancy car, about to sneak into a castle with the Chief of Security, who was also part of the royal family, but not in this lifetime...

He shook his head and leaned back.

Had his birth been accidental because the Fates had conspired to bring him and Kaine together? Is that why his father quit the military and took the job in Mont de Leucoy?

How many other tiny steps had been taken so their paths would cross?

And why?

Why him?

While he questioned everything, Kaine simply accepted it. As if while unexpected, it was completely normal to find yourself bound to another.

The door opened and Kaine slid inside. He knocked on the glass and the car started before he'd even done up his seatbelt. "Six minutes."

"I know." Because Quentin had spent those six minutes overthinking everything, and he couldn't blame that on magic. He had so many questions, it would take decades to answer them all.

Kaine put his hand over Quentin's. "You will meet my brothers. I promise you won't be a secret forever." He sighed and glanced away. "Nothing is ever a secret forever."

They weren't talking about him anymore.

And he wasn't sure he was ready to meet the king. He didn't even know what one was supposed to do. It had never been part of his reality...now it was.

He let his thoughts reach towards Kaine. Now they were touching, it was so much easier to let that fiery butterfly settle and examine it.

Kaine glanced at him as if aware of what he was doing.

With Kaine, his magic felt different. Like the butterfly was with him, not in the enclosure. He was sure that was something to do with the bond, and he wasn't sure

how to shut that off yet, or if he even wanted to.

“You think exposure is inevitable?”

“Yes. But I also think it can be done in a controlled way, with as little bloodshed as possible.” He lifted Quentin’s hand and kissed his knuckles. “I want to leave those worries behind until morning.”

He saw, or imagined, Kaine pulling his clothes off and kissing every inch of his skin. His heartbeat quickened, and the frustrated lust that had driven him to Kaine’s office door sparked up again, flooding his veins.

Kaine smiled, and Quentin was sure there were flames in his dark eyes.

“Did you deliberately do that?”

“That depends on what you think I did.”

Quentin lowered his gaze, his cheeks hot, and hoped the shadows in the car hid the very obvious bulge in his jeans. “Well, it added new meaning to undressing me with your eyes.”

“Oh, I plan to use my hands and take my time. But I wondered if you’d sense my intentions.”

“Was it a test or a promise?” Could he do the same? Did he just need to think about something and Kaine would know?

“Both.”

“How did you do it?”

“I imagine the bond between us and sent the thoughts through it. A lot of magic is?—”

“Visualizing what is happening.” Quentin finished for him. “Do you do the same when you shift?”

“Not consciously, not anymore. When I first started, I had to consciously draw up the energy and imagine myself shifting, but it didn’t take long for shifting to become no more difficult than switching hands to write or switching languages.”

Quentin nodded. Magic was a part of him and always had been. He didn’t think about every step he took; it was instinct. And magic would become the same with time. In the little thought Kaine had sent him, he had been kissing and licking as though he wanted to taste every part of him. So before he doubted himself, he showed Kaine exactly where he wanted his tongue.

Kaine laughed. Which wasn’t quite the reaction Quentin had been hoping for.

“Too much?” Some guys didn’t like it, and he wasn’t sure what Kaine liked because they’d spent so little time together.

“I have every intention of taking my time and kissing you everywhere until you are squirming and begging.”

If his cheeks hadn’t been burning before, they were now glowing like the sun.

“And I don’t want to use a condom. I am happy to shift first.”

Kaine wasn’t the first guy to say he didn’t want to use a condom, but Quentin had always insisted. “Back up. Why would you shift first?”

“Because nothing survives the shift. That’s true for any shifter, and you are the only person I’ve slept with since my last shift.”

That kind of made sense. After all, it wasn’t as though animals could catch human germs. “You aren’t worried about who I’ve slept with?”

“Only if you’ve slept with someone since me,” Kaine growled.

“No. I haven’t had the time or the chance...not that I would have.” If he’d thought about it, would Kaine have been more attentive?

Kaine’s gaze narrowed. “Do not seek to play games like that because you will not like the result.”

It was the first time he’d seen a sharp edge in Kaine. He didn’t want to test how deep that blade would cut. They were mates, but there were still boundaries.

“And no, I am not worried because I can shift.”

“But I should do a test? They won’t be able to tell I am a witch?”

“You should do a test for your own health, and no, they won’t be able to tell. Human STI tests are not designed to pick up paranormals.”

The car stopped, and Quentin glanced out the window as a security guard let them through. He is now on the castle grounds and not in the tourist area. He had gone twice, once with the school and once to see his father.

The trip with the school had been much more enjoyable.

“You don’t need to shift first, but I would like to see it at some point. It doesn’t have

to be tonight.” He wanted it to be tonight.

The car rolled to a stop, gravel crunching beneath the tires. A car door opened as the driver got out. Quentin reached for the door handle, but Kaine stopped him.

“You wait. He will open your door after mine.”

Before Quentin could speak, the driver opened Kaine’s door. Kaine murmured his thanks and apologized for the short notice.

“It’s not a problem, sir. It gave me something to do.”

“I will try to use you more often so you don’t get bored.”

“Thank you, sir.”

A couple of seconds later, the driver opened Quentin’s door. While Kaine had slid out as a cat, Quentin was ungainly, like an oversized puppy who didn’t belong.

“Thank you.”

“Enjoy your stay, sir.”

He wanted to say that he wasn’t a sir, but the driver was already getting back in the car to take it to wherever it was parked. Leaving him staring up at a part of the castle he only ever saw in photos.

“This part is over five hundred years old,” Kaine said as he took Quentin’s hand.

“Doesn’t look a day over four hundred.” The gray stone had been well-maintained over the centuries. Most of the windows were dark, but light spilled from a few.

“Come on, I promise it’s a lot more modern on the inside.”

The area open to tourists showed how the castle had been added to over the centuries, and some of the rooms had been done up in the style of the period they represented. The original castle had been a little more than a fort and it was well over one thousand years old.

“You and your brothers built this, didn’t you?”

“We did. We founded the kingdom. We have some records in Latin, which we can read, and from them, we know we lived here before Rome fell because we have a record of that.”

The little flutter of excitement in his chest had nothing to do with the man and everything to do with the secrets.

“I don’t know if I should be offended that you got excited by that, or talk dirty to you in Latin.” He unlocked a door with his thumbprint and held the door open for Quentin.

“Sorry,” he said, as he brushed past.

“Don’t apologize for something you are excited about. I want to find out what’s written in some of those scrolls.” He shut the door and locked it. “Perhaps it’s boring castle maintenance, or a lost piece of history, or…” He shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“But you think that’s why we’ve been brought together?”

“Maybe. I don’t want to question the Fates or appear ungrateful.” He led Quentin down a corridor. “That was my private entrance. There are two other entrances into my quarters. One for staff and one into the rest of the castle.”

“Which is how you knew you could sneak me in, and you trust the driver not to talk.”

“My driver gets paid extremely well for doing about five hours of work a month. He’s not going to talk.” Kaine stripped off his jacket and hung it up, and Quentin followed suit.

“Even with the staff?”

Kaine glanced at him, a small smile on his lips. “I am sure some things are talked about. But because of my job, he knows that anyone I am with never gets mentioned.”

“I’m not the first person you’ve snuck in.” He shouldn’t be surprised about that.

“No. The last person was a prince from a country who would not appreciate knowing that the third in line to the throne enjoyed having male lovers. I think he’s unhappily married now.” He sighed. “That was about five years ago. Besides, it’s my job to know how to sneak people in and out. And how to stop them—Everest was a pain in my ass for a couple of years.”

Quentin stared at his mate. He’d called the prince a pain in the ass.

“His royal highness seems lovely when he gives interviews.” He was the kind of man who looked so proper and spoke so well. It seemed as though he never said a bad word about anyone.

Kaine laughed. “He has a very good speech writer and has been getting a lot of coaching while he is acting king. He also swears like a sailor, corrupts every bodyguard I give him, and he’s the only person who has ever beaten me at chess.”

“He’s gay?”



“He has never pretended to be otherwise in this life.” Kaine paused with his hand on the door handle. “I don’t know if it’s living for as long as we have or because of what we are, but none of us has ever been what humans call straight. Maybe because he had to pretend for so long in his last life, that in this one he’s gone in the other direction.”

Kaine opened the door.

Quentin had expected to be stepping into a bedroom, not a cozy sitting room. The dark wood and leather gleamed in the golden firelight. Heavy curtains covered the window, and on one wall was a very large TV.

“I thought we were going to your room.”

“My rooms. This is part of my public facing section.” He walked over to the coffee table and poured himself a glass from the open bottle of wine. “Drink?”

“No.” Alcohol was not what he needed.

Kaine tilted his head. “You want to see the rest?”

He shook his head. He wasn’t sure how much more he could process. Just as he was getting on top of all the changes, there was something else. “I’m a little overwhelmed.” And it wasn’t from too many competing thoughts. “It was one thing when you were super important...but now you’re a...a not-a-prince.”

“That’s the bit that’s bothering you? Not the paranormal aspect?”

Quentin shook his head. “It’s easy to believe in the magic. But this? You snuck me into the castle. To your rooms. When you said I didn’t need to work, I thought you must be paid well, but now...and I...not that I’m only interested in the money. I need

a moment.”

“Why don’t you go upstairs to the bedroom and have that moment?”

“Yes.” That he could do. “God, but I don’t want to walk away from you, either. It’s like my body is craving you.” He walked over and kissed Kaine hard enough that it even shocked him. He tasted of red wine and heat, and when his arm snaked around Quentin’s waist, he didn’t want him to ever let him go.

“Some of that is the bond. I feel it, too. Even when you were angry with me, I was delighted that you’d come to me.”

Threatening to scream if Orion tried to stop him had not been his finest moment, but everything had bubbled to the surface, and he hadn’t been able to stuff it down.

“So I’m not losing my mind.”

“You are not. But I do want to take you upstairs and get you naked and in my bed.”

Kaine’s eyes were dark, and his grip on Quentin was firm. “I suggest you take that moment now, or we may not make it that far.”

There was a roughness to his voice that hit Quentin in all the right places or was it the surge of heat and desire that wasn’t his own? He was so used to closing off parts of the world, to trying to fit in and be normal, that now Kaine was flipping open doors and windows and telling him to fly it was unnerving.

For a few heartbeats, the familiarity of the rush and stripping before making it to bed was what he wanted because if he hoped for more, it would be taken away.

But they were mates.

It was meant to be.

The Fates had decreed it—while Orion wasn't chatty, he did at least answer his questions, or at least some of them.

And if it was meant to be, then everything would be fine.

Kaine's cheek brushed against his. His stubble was rough, and his breath was warm on his ear. "You deserve good things, and I intend to make up for being absent."

"You are used to good things." People like Kaine didn't know what it was like growing up with two working parents who were always bickering over money.

"Which is how I know you are a good thing. Someone I want in my life." He released him. "Come on, I'll show you upstairs."

Quentin let Kaine lead the way. The stairs were steep and made of stone as if they had never been upgraded. The center of each step had been worn into a dip over the centuries, and the wooden railing was also smooth with use. The staircase spiraled around, and then they were upstairs. He expected cold stone walls and old-fashioned heavy wood furniture. Instead, the bedroom was quite modern. The bedframe was metal, the walls were a soft white, and there wasn't a tapestry in sight.

Kaine smiled over the rim of his glass as if he knew exactly what Quentin was thinking. He probably did because of the mate bond. That was either going to be really annoying or really useful, possibly both.

Quentin sighed. He might as well admit Kaine read his thoughts correctly. "I was expecting it to look more like the rooms on display in the wing open to the public."

"There are formal rooms that look like that, but this is my private quarters, so I can

decorate them how I want. We all have private quarters. Plus, there are the official quarters for the king and the royal family. Private quarters mean that we always have a place.”

“No four-post bed with curtains?” That might have been nice.

“Is that what you were hoping for?”

Quentin shrugged.

“Curtains are a fire hazard. Besides, we have glass in the windows, better heating and insulation, so the need for curtains around the bed is gone. If you want to see some history, there is a section of the castle that is original. We’ve talked about doing something with it, but it’s a nice piece of history. And our names are carved into the stone...the names we had at the time.”

“How do you know they’re yours and not the stonemason’s?”

“Because we have a rule of writing the date of death and the new name at the end of the dead brother’s book, we also fill any last wishes. But it means we can guess dates and names, even if we can’t read what they say.”

“It must be incredibly frustrating. All of this.” He flung up his hands. He was struggling with the enormity of it all. With the idea of living time and time again but having to relearn everything. To lose so much, while holding on to so much.

“It is, and at times some of us have wanted to discontinue the books or burn them all because of the weight of history, but without that history, we would repeat the same mistakes again and again and again. It also helps to know that there is always a next time, even if it will be very different.”

He swallowed, needing an answer, even if it scared him. “You said my magic is in my soul. Does that mean I get a next time?”

Kaine drained his glass and put it on the dressing table. “It appears so.”

“It appears?” They didn’t know?

“We don’t know everything; we are only just putting some things together because it’s taken four hundred years for the answer to become clear to the question that was never asked. Not all of my brothers are as patient.”

But Kaine could be.

“Let me finish the grand tour of my not-so-grand private quarters.” He opened the door to the bathroom. It was all black-and-white tiles and gold taps and mirrors. The bathtub had gold feet and was big enough for two. When it was installed, this bathroom must’ve been expensive. “The running water was added in my last life...but I believe this was quite fashionable when indoor bathrooms became all the rage.”

Quentin turned, sure he’d be able to see himself from every angle.

Kaine watched him.

“Either you’re worried about getting killed in the bathroom, or you like...” He’d been going to say that Kaine must enjoy watching himself fuck, but there wasn’t a polite way to say that.

That lazy grin formed again. “Watching my lovers squirm and writhe?”

Quentin’s cheeks were on fire.

“I do. That’s why there’s a massive mirror on the dressing table. As well as the full-length dressing mirror in the bedroom.”

He wasn’t sure he wanted to watch; sometimes, even watching porn was awkward. But he could keep his eyes closed.

Kaine cupped Quentin’s jaw with one hand and pulled his hip close with the other before kissing him. It was almost too easy to sink into the kiss and forget about everything else. Is that why Kaine enjoyed coming here? In these rooms, nothing else existed. The rest of the world could go to hell, and they were safe, protected by the thick stone walls that had protected the castle for centuries.

Kaine’s hand slid under Quentin’s clothes. His touch burned his skin, and his hunger was already flowing through Quentin’s veins. Between kisses and touches, Kaine pulled off the shirt and then his undershirt, and Quentin felt as though he needed to hurry up and catch up. He didn’t want to be the only one naked.

“I like the idea of you being the only one naked.” Kaine’s fingernail raked up Quentin’s fly, bringing his half-hard dick to attention. He licked and kissed over Quentin’s throat and along his collarbone as though he wanted to taste every inch. His hands were everywhere, caressing his bare skin, cupping his ass through his jeans. Dragging the zipper down.

And he was struggling to undo even the buttons of Kaine’s shirt.

That was the problem with living in a cold country. There were too many layers of clothing to take off. Which is why he didn’t usually bother. He took off what was needed. Nothing more.

If he didn’t want more, it couldn’t be taken away. Because nothing this good ever happened to him, he was expecting it all to end.

“You’re stuck with me, witch.” Kaine’s voice was soft as he whispered in Quentin’s ear. His teeth raked over the lobe as his hand slid into Quentin’s jeans to stroke his cock.

“I’m not sure if that’s an insult or a compliment.”

“It could just be a statement of fact.” He licked one of Quentin’s nipples, then gently bit, drawing a gasp from him before moving lower.

There went any chance he had of getting Kaine’s shirt off. He undid Quentin’s boots so he could step out of them. As soon as he did that, his jeans were coming off.

Kaine glanced up at him. This time, Quentin saw the red flames in Kaine’s eyes.

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:16 am*

Kaine wanted to burn away the doubts that threatened to drag Quentin away from him. They swarmed and nudged and tried to worm their way between them. Quentin was his, and no one else was going to have him.

He wanted the reward of the fated mate. He wasn't going to fuck it up like Dalmon had. He ran his hands up the back of Quentin's legs and pulled his jeans down, leaving him only in a pair of black briefs that hugged the length of his erection.

Unable to resist, he leaned in and nuzzled the ridge from balls to tip.

Quentin sucked in a breath, and his eyelids fluttered closed as if he couldn't look in the mirrors and he couldn't look at Kaine. He should be looking in the mirrors so he could see how good he looked. So he could see what Kaine saw when he looked at him.

If he shared what he saw, would it be too disorientating?

Probably.

That was an experiment for another day.

Instead, he tried to let Quentin know how he felt. How much he wanted him. All of him. He would burn away the fears. He encouraged his mate to step out of his boots and then his jeans. He tugged off his socks and licked along the crease of his thigh before returning to kiss his cloth-wrapped cock.

Quentin's fingers curled and flexed as if he didn't know what to do with his hands.



“You can touch me.”

“I was wondering if I’ll be in trouble for grabbing your hair.”

“If I don’t like something, I’ll tell you. And I trust you to do the same.” Though because of the bond, they’d sense it first.

Quentin’s fingers carded through his hair, gently at first as if he didn’t want to assume any kind of control.

When people found out what he did, it was often a barrier. They forgot how to be with another person, as if somehow, he became only his title. But he found that more honest than the alternative, where they loved his title and fawned over him.

He tugged down his briefs, and Quentin took a shuddering breath. Kaine continued his slow exploration with little kisses and licks. This was how it should’ve been the first time.

And maybe if he’d known beforehand...not that it was possible to know. The magic happened with the connection. And because they’d never had a connection, there had been no inkling. He lapped up the drop of pre-cum that slid along Quentin’s dick, then rocked back onto his heels to admire him. “Put your hands on the vanity.”

“Why?”

“Because there’s still part of you I haven’t kissed.” He lifted his eyebrow.

Quentin’s cheeks reddened. “You don’t?—”

“I want to, or I wouldn’t have said it.” He pulled Quentin’s briefs down to his ankles, and he stepped out of them as he turned to the vanity. His pulse was rapid, and his

skin tasted like lust as Kaine kissed the back of his thigh.

“Maybe I should shower first.”

“If I wanted to taste soap, I’d lick a bar of it.”

Quentin swallowed hard enough that Kaine heard it. He nudged his mate’s legs apart and took his time working his way higher. He nipped at one pale ass cheek, leaving a small mark that made Quentin gasp. And he tongued the dimples on the back of his hips before kissing the top of his crack.

He glanced to the side so he was watching every movement Quentin made as well as feeling it. In the soft lighting, his skin and hair were golden. His head was lowered as though he didn’t want to look at his own expression.

Kaine ran his hands over his mate’s ass cheeks, gently smoothing and separating with each circle his palms made until his thumbs brushed over his sensitive little hole. He ducked his head and licked Quentin’s sac, breathing in the musky scent of sex.

With each kiss, Quentin took a small, sharp breath. His teeth pressed into his lower lip, and his hips rocked back ever so slightly, betraying his need.

Kaine swept the flat of his tongue over Quentin’s hole.

Quentin groaned and lowered his head to his hands.

“Look over.”

His head moved only slightly, but their gazes locked in the mirror. Kaine teased him with the tip of his tongue. He spread Quentin’s ass cheeks further, so he could use his thumbs, as well as his tongue, to work open the little pucker. It twitched and eased

and tightened, responding to every touch. And Quentin gasped and groaned, but he didn't look away even when Kaine fucked him with his tongue until his thighs quivered.

A drop of pre-cum hung off his cock before dripping to the floor.

Kaine reached around to swipe up the rest before it spilled on the tiles. He licked his fingers and stood, pulling off his shirt. His skin was hot, even to his touch, as though flames were about to flicker over the surface.

He kicked off his shoes, not wanting Quentin to move while he undressed.

With his pants undone, he leaned over to taste him again and leave enough spit there that he could slide two fingers in and fuck him slowly while he shoved off his pants with his other hand.

Quentin watched more intently now, not worried when they made eye contact in the mirror.

Kaine leaned forward and pulled open the middle drawer to grab the lube. He didn't pull his fingers all the way free, just squeezed some on and let it run down the channel between them and into him. He fucked him slowly, spreading him and then adding a third finger. Enjoying the way his mate rocked back, asking for more.

He wanted to keep going, to keep teasing him until he came, but he needed to be in him. He wanted them to come together and to feel it flow between them. A few flickers of flames formed on his skin, but he ignored them. He would have to get control of them as he couldn't go lighting up every time he was with Quentin.

But for the moment, he didn't care.

He pulled his fingers free and slicked the length of his dick with lube before pressing the head to Quentin's soft, hot hole.

Fuck me. I need you.

Kaine heard the words in his head as if Quentin had spoken them aloud. He thrust forward, sinking into him. He wasn't sure who groaned, only that he needed to take a moment before he continued. His gaze flicked from what was in front of him to the mirror so he could see Quentin's face or at least half of it.

Quentin's lips were parted, and he was watching. Their gazes locked for a heartbeat, and then Quentin blinked, breaking the connection.

Kaine's fingers gripped Quentin's hips as he drew back and slipped free before thrusting in again and sinking deep. He watched the way Quentin's ass stretched around him, gripping tight as he withdrew and swallowing him again as he thrust in deep. He didn't know where to look. He wanted to see everything, and he didn't want it to end.

He wanted to be consumed.

It wasn't sweat on his skin but flames, as though the heat in his blood was too much to be contained.

The wash of desire through the bond swept him up. He didn't care that it wasn't his...no, he loved knowing how his mate felt. The way his back arched as he needed more, and he met every thrust.

The little noises Quentin made were almost too much.

Kaine sensed the change in Quentin's heartbeat the moment before he came. He

cupped the end of Quentin's dick, working his thumb over the head as he spilled and using the cum to slick each stroke he made. His ass tightened as though milking Kaine's cock, hips rocking as he fucked Kaine's fist.

And Kaine gave in, fucking harder and faster until he tipped over the edge, drawing another moan of pleasure from Quentin as if he was sharing in Kaine's pleasure. For a few heartbeats, it was as if they were spiraling higher together, caught in the rush of the shared connection.

Gradually, they came down.

In the mirror, he saw it wasn't a few small flickers of flame on his back but two large, fiery wings.

"That...didn't happen last time," Quentin said as if forming words were difficult.

"No," was all Kaine managed. As his dick softened, the wings petered out to nothing. It was only then he thought about moving, and even then, he wasn't in a rush.

\* \* \*

Kaine turned off his alarm. It was dark, and Quentin was curled up against his back. He wanted to call in sick, order breakfast up from the kitchen, and spend the day in bed.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd called in sick. It wasn't as though he got sick, and if he was injured, one shift and he was fine. If Malcolm wasn't walking into the Coven today, he would've been tempted to stay in Quentin's arms.

"What time is it?" Quentin mumbled as he flopped onto his back.

“Too early.” But people needed to be moved into position. There were teams to brief and weapons to prep, and since he was running the operation, he needed to be there, not balls deep in his mate.

Quentin didn’t have to get up, though, and if he stayed here, no one would know where he was, which was infinitely safer than following his normal routine. That was going to be blown out of the water after today, anyway.

He rolled onto his side and kissed the corner of Quentin’s lips. “I’d like you to stay here today.”

“I’ve got an assignment I need to do.”

“I’ll have Orion bring your things. Jacob can show you the library, not the secret one.”

Quentin’s lips curved against his for a moment at thoughts of the secret library. “And where will you be?”

“Centre of operations. I need to coordinate a few different departments.” Somehow, his hand had ended up smoothing over Quentin’s ribs, into the dip, and then around his hip. His wrist brushed over the hot length of Quentin’s morning wood.

Quentin pulled him closer, and Kaine didn’t resist. He eased over him, his thigh between Quentin’s, so they were nestled together. Quentin’s hands traced up his spine. “You’ll be safe, right?”

“Yes. And all of this prep and tension might be for nothing. It might take days for a response.” But he doubted it. It was time for the cards to be put on the table to see who had the best hand.

It was going to be close.

“Does that mean I’m stuck here for days?”

Kaine rolled his hips, not in a rush to get off. Just enjoying the way Quentin moved with him. The way his voice was still sleepy, but he was asking all the right questions. “I don’t know. It depends on what happens today. I’ll try to keep you informed.”

“Uh-huh, your track record with that is not great.”

“Touché.” Not many people called him out either. Had Quentin processed this latest round of news and surprises overnight, or was he, settling into the bond? “We have the bond, and unless things are really fucked up, I should be able to send you some kind of text message. Although your phone isn’t secure, so they’ll come via Orion. I need to arrange a secure phone.”

“Mmm.” Quentin arched his back. “And laptop. Orion said it’s as compromised as fuck.”

There was a slickness forming between them as Quentin leaked pre-cum. He nibbled the underside of Quentin’s jaw and licked the hollow of his throat. As much as he wanted to take his time and keep going until one of them came, he didn’t have that luxury—usually, time was the one thing he was never short of. He pushed up on one arm and reached between them. There was more than enough pre-cum to make things slick as he wrapped his hand around them both and stroked.

“You going to come for me? Make a mess of my sheets?”

Quentin moaned, his hips lifting as he thrust against Kaine. His fingers kneaded Kaine’s ass cheeks, urging him on.

He rubbed his thumb over the head of Quentin's cock. "I love this. The way you leak when you're excited." He pressed his cheek to Quentin, liking the rough feel of his stubble. "I want to see you in track pants and nothing else so I can tease you until a wet spot forms."

Quentin's breath caught, and he bucked his hips as he came.

Kaine groaned against Quentin's neck, letting his mate's lust push him over.

For a few more heartbeats, he lay there. Quentin's hands on his ass, his nose against his neck, breathing him in and listening to the beat of his heart. Enjoying the fall as desire spiraled away, sated for the moment.

"You meant that," Quentin murmured.

"Meant what?" Kaine asked without moving. When he moved, he had to get up and shower and dress and be the Chief of Security in charge of this rather delicate operation to both risk and then return the king's lover in one piece. Most people weren't aware of who Malcolm was. Not yet, anyway.

Quentin squirmed and turned his head away.

Kaine propped himself up and found his mate's lips. "You mean the thing about wanting to see you making a wet spot on your pants because you're so turned on?"

Even though Quentin had gone still, Kaine felt the tingle of embarrassment as if it was the last thing Quentin wanted to be discussing. Which, given the mess they'd made, was amusing.

"Of course I did. I just need to think which color of track pants is going to give the best result. And then that will be the only color you can wear when we're home



alone.” He was teasing now, but he did like the idea. “If you had lovers who didn’t like it, that’s because they didn’t know anything.”

“I hate it.”

Kaine kissed him again, not as deeply as he wanted to. “It means when I suck you, I have longer to taste you. Like this, I like knowing that it’s you on my skin. Can you feel how much I enjoy it?”

If he was able to spend the entire day in bed, they could work on the bond. That was important, and it mattered to him in a way so few things had in recent years. Quentin was his, and only his, and he didn’t have to share him with ministers and staff and all the other people who buzzed around him, demanding his attention. Who needed him to solve their problems.

No, Quentin had solved one of his without even realizing it.

“I can feel how much you like me.” But his voice was cautious.

“Because I do. And when I return, I’ll find you the oldest book in our library in some weird forgotten language so you can do what you do with it.”

Quentin laughed. “Analyze it, compare it to known languages. Examine frequencies of symbols. There’s a lot of math involved. And most people dropped out or changed majors because it’s not as cool or exciting as finding artefacts and lost kings and kingdoms.”

“We have plenty of lost things here, far more than you know. Plus, our library is old.”

“Older than Alexandria?” The sleepiness was gone from his voice now.

“I don’t know. Like I said, we have records in Latin of the fall of Rome. And some of it hasn’t been dated because we don’t know what it says and we don’t want talk of phoenixes getting out.” He gave Quentin another quick kiss, then pulled away. He texted Frederick to be ready in twenty minutes and bring coffee, which would give him enough time for a quick shower.

He glanced back at Quentin, sprawled on the bed, one arm flung over his head like some kind of erotic angel. “I’ll grab a washcloth so you don’t have to get up.”

Quentin opened his eyes and took a moment to locate him in the dark room. “How well can you see in the dark?”

“Well enough that I can enjoy the view, so don’t move.” He went to fetch the washcloth and returned. He licked Quentin’s stomach, unable to resist, before taking another kiss. “I need to haul ass.”

Quentin licked Kaine’s lip. “Go. I can’t promise I’ll be in bed when you get back, but I’ll be here.”

“That’s good enough.”

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:16 am*

Quentin had cleaned up, taken a piss, and gone back to bed for another couple of hours. It wasn't a restful sleep, and he wasn't sure if it was because he was worried or because he could feel Kaine's busyness and the way he was doing a hundred different things at once. At least, that was how it felt. He had no actual idea what Kaine was doing.

When he got up, he had a shower and then took his time opening drawers and cupboards. Not sure if he was snooping or looking for something to wear. The clothes in the wardrobe were clearly Kaine's. The clothes in the dressing table drawers were all black and didn't seem worn and there was everything from socks and briefs to track pants and long-sleeved T-shirts.

He went downstairs, wearing only a bathrobe, and made coffee. Next to the machine was a note informing him to grab something out of the dresser to wear.

While swanning about in a bathrobe was fine before breakfast—Orion had messaged to say he would bring some, along with his laptop and books—he wanted to put on clothes for the rest of the day.

Dressed from socks to top like he was about to commit a crime, he padded back downstairs to wait for Orion and finish his coffee.

Someone knocked on the door and his stomach gurgled, anticipating food, because aside from coffee and tea and a few frozen meals, there wasn't anything else to eat. Probably because Kaine called the castle staff, and they brought him whatever he wanted.

He opened the door and stopped, frozen. “You’re not Orion.”

The man in the doorway looked far too much like Kaine. It was the sharp features, dark hair and dangerous eyes. He’d never seen Prince Everest in person, yet there he was in ripped jeans and a dark blue sweater.

“I’m not. And you’re not Kaine.” Everest smiled and then walked through the doorway into Kaine’s private apartments without waiting for an invitation.

Did he need an invitation?

Quentin was one hundred percent sure Kaine was not going to like this. No one was supposed to know he was here. “Um...Kaine won’t be back till much later.”

“I know. He’s got an operation on.” Everest flicked his fingers. “I don’t know the details, and I’m sure you don’t either, so let’s not worry about that.” He dropped onto the sofa and leaned back.

Quentin realized he was still holding the door open. He shut it softly and tried to come up with a plan. He couldn’t ask the prince, the acting king, to leave, could he?

Where was Orion?

Sure, they weren’t friends, but Orion knew what he was doing, and Quentin trusted him, mostly because Kaine trusted him, and Orion was assigned to protect him. Not that he should need protection in the castle.

Instead of ignoring the edge forming in his gut or telling himself not to overreact, he listened to the warning vibe.

Really listened—though not enough to read any of the prince’s thoughts because

again, it seemed like a bad idea to let the prince find out he was a witch.

“Would you like a coffee?”

“I’ve had breakfast, thank you. Sit down, and tell me who you are, aside from the stranger in Kaine’s quarters.”

Quentin sat in the armchair, although that was a generous description when he was kind of perched on the edge, ready to take flight. “I’m Quentin, his...er... lover?”

He hated the way he sounded so uncertain. They hadn’t talked about any of this. They hadn’t had a chance.

“Yes, I can smell that.”

“You can what?” He thought it was better eyesight and quicker healing. He didn’t realize Kaine could smell everything better too.

Everest grinned as if this was fun. Maybe for him, it was.

What had Kaine said? Everest was smart, reckless, and liked to seduce bodyguards. Everything else he knew about the man in front of him was rather dry and official. None of it helped him now. He kept the wall solid between his thoughts and Everest’s. But he watched.

“Kaine doesn’t usually bring lovers here. He likes to keep his work and private life very separate. Yet here you are.” His eyes narrowed.

Quentin sensed the beating wings of a curious, razor-sharp butterfly. It was beautiful and glittery and deadly. Could he skim Everest’s thoughts without cutting himself? He hadn’t got that part of his training, but it was just instinct, right?

If he knew how to keep people out of his head, it couldn't be that hard to let them in.

He understood now why the butterfly house didn't quite work. He couldn't contain everyone, but he could be inside the enclosure and let one or two in.

Kaine was in, a fiery butterfly that perched on his shoulder and sometimes whispered in his ear.

He didn't think Everest would hurt him, but he couldn't lie as smoothly as Kaine did. He took a chance and let that sharp butterfly in.

There were a dozen different competing thoughts, all of them trying to figure out who he was, and why he was there and what it meant.

What is Kaine up to? What does he know? Did he send you to befriend me?

Everest's eyes narrowed as if he sensed a change.

"What are you?"

"I'm a student, studying dead languages, something he's interested in." He gave a one shouldered shrug, as if it meant nothing but failed to hold the prince's stare.

If anything, Everest's curiosity only sharpened as he fluttered closer, the blades of his wings gleaming in the light. "No. That doesn't explain why you're here. Which secrets has Kaine told you?"

Ah, this was the paranormal version of the 'are you gay?' dance where no one wanted to blink first. And Everest didn't want to be the first one to say it in case Quentin didn't know.

“I’m not discussing his secrets with you...Your Majesty.” He remembered to tack that on at the last moment. And remembered that he had failed to do it until now.

Everest was still grinning. He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees.

In Quentin’s mind, he heard the whispered questions. What are you, and who are you to my brother? You don’t smell like a shifter. But I don’t think you’re human, which means you’re a witch. You’re a witch...

Everest sat up straight, the smile gone from his face.

Quentin needed to cover and get him out of there. “I didn’t mean to be rude. I’m kind of shocked to see the prince here.” It was the only thing he could think of saying, even though his lack of manners wasn’t why Everest was suddenly on guard.

“I don’t care about that right now. Though he should’ve told you what to do in case our paths crossed.”

Quentin wanted to point out they wouldn’t have crossed if Everest hadn’t knocked on the door, but he kept his mouth shut.

“You’re a witch.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Because if you weren’t, you would not have asked me that.” His lips twitched. “So Kaine snuck a witch into the castle and left him here smelling like this morning’s predawn activities. That is not like him.”

“He likes my brain as well as my body.” They were both true, but that wasn’t whatever Everest was fishing for.

The prince shook his head. “No. He always likes his lover’s brains, possibly before he even tastes their body.”

“You make him sound like a zombie.”

Everest laughed. “Well, they do rise from the dead.”

Was that meant to be a phoenix joke? Should he laugh and show that he got it? The moment passed while he was thinking about it, and then it was too late to do anything.

“There is only one reason he would sneak a witch into the castle, and that was if he was your familiar.”

“My what now?”

Everest kept staring at him, and his unspoken questions swirled around him. You’re fated mates. When did he find the time to find you? What other secrets has my brother been keeping?

“You know, fated mates. A shifter becomes the witch’s familiar... Did he not tell you that?” Everest leaned back as though happy the mystery was solved.

Fuck. Quentin stared at the carpet for a couple of heartbeats. There was no point in denying it. “We are mates. He didn’t want to say anything until this Shadow Board business is over.”

“So you know about them, too. Interesting.” The way he said it suggested it was more troubling than interesting. His thoughts were sharp and bright, as though he could cut away the meagre protections Quentin had managed to put up, to find the truth.



“Only in the vaguest sense, in that they are the bad guys who want to upend the world as we know it.” He was saying too much. He needed to shut up. Where the hell was Orion? “How did you find out I’m here?”

“Yesterday, I saw his driver leave the grounds, and since Kaine rarely uses his driver, I knew something was up, so I waited to see what was going on.” Everest gave him that smile again. The one that was far too cunning. He was the kind of guy who was super fun and exciting until he was exhausting. Then he would be trouble. He’d key the car, break into your house, and create drama with your family—but they’d love him and wonder why you’d ended it.

He hadn’t stayed up alone, though. Everest’s thoughts of last night were a little too clear, and Quentin didn’t want to know which bodyguard had been fucking him while he watched the window for the car to return.

“What kind of witch are you?” Everest asked, as though that was perfectly normal to drop into a conversation with a stranger.

“Why does it matter?” As soon as the words left his lips, Quentin realized he’d said the wrong thing, from the small change in the way Everest sat to the twisting of the butterfly in the air.

“Because I asked, and I am the acting king, and you’re in my Chief of Security’s private quarters. Being his mate is something I need to be aware of. He told you of the risks?”

“He has, Your Majesty.” Quentin eased back into the armchair as though he were at ease talking to Everest. They weren’t that far apart in age, a couple of years. But in life experiences and expectations, they couldn’t be more different. “Which is why he thought it best that I remain here, away from the trouble.”

“You didn’t answer my question. But congratulations on trying to evade.”

“I am a mind reader.”

Everest’s eyes widened, and the butterfly drew back as if afraid. The movement was so small and so fast that if Quentin hadn’t been using his magic, he’d have been sure that he’d imagined it. The prince was very good at schooling his features, though.

“The Chief of Security and Secrets has a mind reader for a mate. He must be thrilled about that.”

Quentin bit the inside of his lip to hide the smile that the memories of this morning’s events and conversation caused, the way Kaine had felt not only on him or grinding against him but within him. His thoughts. “He seems to be.”

Everest stood and brushed an imagined piece of lint off his jeans. “I’m guessing that’s why he didn’t make you break the bond.”

Break the bond?

But he didn’t need to ask because Everest used Quentin’s magic against him to reveal how to break the bond.

All the witch had to do was give up their magic.

“Enjoy your stay, Quentin, the mind reader. I’m sure I’ll be running into you again if you are going to be living here, locked away from the dangers of the outside world.”

Quentin didn’t have time to respond as Everest showed himself out. There was a murmuring of voices, and then Orion stepped in and shut the door.

“Are you okay?” Orion dropped two bags of food, warm pastries in one and fruit in the other, on the coffee table.

Quentin blinked and shook his head. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Because the Prince...he’s a handful.” And Quentin didn’t need to dig deep to know Orion had firsthand experience in how much of a handful Everest was. “It was before Jacob and I became mates. He wouldn’t come between mates, and you’re not his type.”

Quentin frowned. That wasn’t the problem. Kaine had lied by omission again. “Is it true the bond can be broken if the witch gives up their magic?”

Orion snarled, and his eyes flashed red as his shifter rose to the surface. “One day he’s going to interfere, and get his fingers bitten off.”

“So it is, and Kaine either forgot or flat-out lied when he said it couldn’t be broken.”

“You want to give up magic? I thought you were delighted to have found yourself.”

“I don’t want to give up magic, but I had a right to know.” Didn’t he?

“When you’re messing around with people who run a country, one that most of the world forgot about for centuries, what you think you have a right to know is often very different from what it is safe to know.” Orion slid the backpack off and dropped it on the floor at Quentin’s feet. He squatted down in front of him. “You give up magic and choose to break the bond. How do you think that is going to affect Lenoir? Not just as a man, but also his magic? The wound needs time to heal, and right now, there is no time to do anything but survive.”

Orion stood. “The distance between the life you had and where you are now is like

someone falling asleep two hundred years ago and waking up today. It's not just a different level. It's a different game, and the rules are written in a different language. Even Everest doesn't know what he's playing with. He's too fucking cocky."

"Should I be worried that he knows about me?" He wasn't about to tell Kaine. He didn't need the distractions. It could wait.

Orion blew out a breath. "He won't use it against you, but the next time he and Lenoir clash?—"

"Kaine said they got on."

"And they do, the way only brothers who have known each other for centuries, who know each other's flaws and strengths, and know exactly which buttons to push, do."

Quentin's stomach grumbled. He pulled a paper bag containing a pastry out and took a bite of the chocolate croissant. Orion remembered how much he liked them.

"I'm going to make coffee. Do you want a fresh one?"

Quentin glanced at his half-drunk coffee, forgotten on the end of the coffee table. It would be cold now. "Thank you."

"Do your assignment or whatever, and when Jacob gets here, we'll take you to the library. The main library."

Quentin smiled. "Can I ask why Kaine never gave Everest a female bodyguard? That seems like the obvious solution."

Orion laughed; it was the kind that suggested Quentin had missed the point. "That would change the rules of the game."

“And what is the game?”

“You would have to ask them, and I suspect it has been going on for so long and through so many lives that neither of them could tell you exactly, only that they enjoy trying to outsmart each other. They are both exhausting. So good luck if you get caught between them.” And by ‘caught between them’, Orion thought that Quentin physically wanted to be between the two phoenix shifters.

Quentin shook his head. As soon as he thought he knew Kaine and they were connecting, and everything was good, some other secret proved how little he knew. How much did he want to keep digging, and if he kept digging, what would he find? “I’m not sure I can even handle one.”

Orion turned. “Then you’d better learn. Because he might need you and your magic. That the fates brought you together now, at this point in time...” He paused. “This is one of those moments, the kind you read about in history books and wonder what would’ve happened if things had gone the other way. If you can’t sense that?—”

“I can.” And he understood what was at stake. “But I’m a no one.”

“Everyone is a no one until there’s someone. Even these guys were once no ones. They didn’t become rich and powerful overnight.”

“They had centuries. Millennia, even.”

“Yeah. Welcome to the big league. There are no safety instructions and no exits. So hang the fuck on.”

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:16 am*

In the car, Kaine called Dalmon. “You ready?”

“Yes. It’s either going to turn into a mess, or nothing is going to happen. I don’t know which is worse.”

“Neither do I.” Kaine scrubbed a hand over his face, wishing he’d had an extra couple of hours of sleep. Although, with Quentin in his bed, they wouldn’t have been sleeping. He wanted to ask his brother what it had been like to have a mate before Lucian had given up his magic. But he didn’t know what to ask or how to ask it. But Dalmon was the only one to have ever had a mate. The first time, it had been a disaster, and the second time, it hadn’t gotten very far either. Was that because of who Dalmon and Lucian were, or was it that phoenixes weren’t supposed to have mates?

He wanted this. It was something he didn’t have to share with his brothers.

Quentin was only his. But he couldn’t lock him away in the castle, not forever. At some point, he’d have to tell his brothers. At some point, someone would realize he wasn’t a fire witch.

Given that they were now working on the assumption the Shadow Board knew what they were, it wouldn’t be long until word of phoenixes spread. The only reason it hadn’t happened yet was because the Shadow Board thought they owned Everest.

“What’s happening with the acquisition?”

“It’s going ahead. They’re getting shares and a seat on the board. I did some digging,

though. The company is shifter-owned, which is probably why we looked at acquiring it in the first place. When I looked deeper, though, I discovered that some of their major shareholders are witches who we suspect are part of the Shadow Board.”

“Okay, what does that mean?”

“It means they’ll nominate someone to the board, and I suspect it will be a Shadow Board member. That’s not the most troubling thing.”

“Okay, how much worse can it be?”

“One of our employees used to work for them. She’s been with us for over a year, but four months ago, her brother went missing.”

Kaine snorted. “Let me guess, she’s one of the coders.”

“She is. And she has the skills to hide a package in the program that would give someone a backdoor entrance. You know more about that than me.”

Kaine stared out the window. They were almost at the office. “I don’t have time to keep up with all the latest things. My coding and hacking skills are rusty at best.” It’s why it had taken him so long to do what he had.

“One of the security guards at the office is also compromised.”

“Fuck. Who did they kidnap this time?”

“No one. He’s a shifter who has received some large amounts of money into a bank account he thinks no one knows about. There have been two payments—one last month and one that’s just gone in.”

“Send me the dates, and I will see if anything abnormal happened.”

“I can already tell you the first date was when the company we’re acquiring had a tour of the facility.”

Frederick parked the car. Kaine didn’t move, and neither did Frederick.

“When they go to deploy the package, nothing is going to happen.” The lights wouldn’t turn off, security systems wouldn’t become vulnerable, and the humans wouldn’t freak out.

“That’s when everything is going to happen. They will already have a plan in place.”

“Tell me you have a plan in place.”

“I have informed some authorities that we suspect someone is testing out our security system. Because I didn’t want this to kick back onto us. By saying upfront that we are experiencing cyber-attacks, we are the victim.”

“When nothing happens, we’re going to experience more than cyber-attacks.” If the Shadow Board wanted to destabilize the world and blame shifters for it, and nothing happened, they were going to be pissed.

“I agree.”

“They will come after us.” Kaine ran his fingers through his hair. “Do you have enough security?”

“You are the one with the least.”

That’s because he wasn’t royal. He was supposed to be able to move freely, or at least



more freely.

“Are you going to be okay, Kaine?” Dalmon asked.

“I’m not in the field today.” Which wasn’t an answer.

“That’s not what I meant. You seem... Is there something you need to talk about?”

So many things that he didn’t know where to start, so he sidestepped.

“Given what we know now, I’ve been wondering if my early death last time was a hunting accident.” He had been the heir, the one who was supposed to take over from Sebastien. When he’d died, Sebastien had been forced to keep going, and Gerrit had been pushed into being king too young.

“It’s not going to change the present. And it’s not like you to turn to the past.”

“I was asking because I was thinking of the future and what we’re going to do. Because this is at an end, regardless of whether or not the Shadow Board is successful.”

“Let’s hope they aren’t, and then we will plan, and the Coven will plan for paranormals to come out, so humans don’t start waving pitchforks.”

“You mean semiautomatics?” He wasn’t sure even if a phoenix shifter could survive that. And what if they destroyed the eggs after to make sure they never lived again?

Dalmon made a small noise. “You’re grimmer than usual.”

“I’ve never felt so cornered.” So exposed, and perhaps that was part of having a mate. He couldn’t hide because someone else knew how he felt and what he was thinking,

and even though he could shut Quentin out, he didn't want to. He didn't want to be cut off from everyone. He, out of all of them, should have seen Gerrit's pain and empathized; instead, he'd been so caught up in protecting him and everyone else that he had stopped seeing him as a brother and only as a problem to deal with. "I bet you're glad you no longer have the bond to worry about."

Kaine tried to keep his voice light but knew he'd failed from the silence. "I should go. I need to keep Malcolm alive."

"Kaine—"

"Forget it. We can talk later."

"We're talking now." There was an edge in Dalmon's voice that he wasn't willing to push against, and not only because Dalmon outranked him in age, princeliness, and security clearances. Dalmon liked answers before he asked them, and dropping hints was always going to get a bite. They may not always get on, but he trusted Dalmon the way he didn't trust Everest. "What is going on with you?"

Kaine worried at his lower lip. This should be exciting news to share and instead, he was terrified. "I found my mate."

More silence.

Great.

"The timing is bad. But it was accidental. He didn't know he's a witch."

"You need to give him the choice, Kaine."

"How can he choose when he doesn't understand what he'd be giving up?"

“It’s still not your decision to make. It’s his life.”

“I decide people’s lives every day. I decide their fate.” And most of them didn’t know and didn’t care unless he fucked up. “I don’t want him to break it, but I’m terrified of him keeping it, of what will happen to him if we fail? I want this. You don’t understand how much?—”

“I do. And I’m guessing that’s why I’m the only one you’ve told.”

Kaine nodded, even though Dalmon couldn’t see him. His vision blurred, and he blinked a few times. What the fuck was wrong with him? This was not the time to fall apart. “You are. It’s a weakness I don’t want exploited.”

“That you see it as a weakness is your first problem. If I thought it was a bad thing for you, I would tell you. This is the first time for you...unless you lied to me when I found Lucian?”

“I didn’t. There is nothing familiar about him. It’s like he dropped out of the sky and into my lap.”

Dalmon laughed. “It feels that way, but I bet he didn’t. I bet you a case of ‘79 whiskey that you have crossed paths before.”

“I haven’t had time to look.”

“So ask Templeton or Farrell to look.”

“Er...Orion is supervising him.”

“You put your mate under watch?”

It was worse than that. “Castle arrest.”

Dalmon laughed. “And I thought I was paranoid.”

“It comes with the job...after this, I want to quit.” That meant finding someone to take over.

“You want to work on the coming out instead?”

If they all survived this, he wanted to explore the things he enjoyed. He wanted the time to unravel their secrets. “My mate is a dead language specialist. I want to go through our library first.”

“Has there ever been a mystery you didn’t want to solve?”

“Probably not.”

“Let’s make it through the next couple of days, and then we can discuss with Gerrit. I don’t say it very often, but you’re right. We need to go through our past.”

“Thank you.”

“And tell your mate the truth...all of it. Because you like to flirt with the edges of honesty too much.”

“I will.” But not today. Maybe not tomorrow. He just wanted to hold on to the bond for a little longer. To pretend that it would all be okay, and that Quentin would understand.

“Good luck. Please don’t die because otherwise, Everest and I will be flipping a coin over who plays your father.”

That brought a smile to his lips even though it didn't travel much further. "I feel so wanted."

Dalmon laughed. "Don't worry. Lucian and I will raise you the same way we'd have stepped in and raised Gerrit. I don't trust Everest with a hard-boiled egg at the moment."

"Why's that? Aside from the way he's constantly pushing everyone's buttons and all boundaries."

"For that exact reason. It's as if he's making up for being responsible for so long last time and is determined to go off the rails at every opportunity, and you encourage him."

"I do not."

"Please, you need to stop feeding the bodyguard habit. It's time he suffers with his exes."

There was merit to that idea, assuming the bodyguard would do his job as expected. "You can break that news. I'd like to remain the good cop."

"Fine. Also, he's still obsessing over Olier. He's been searching the Coven database for references on incidents involving fire witches."

Kaine whistled. "That is brilliant."

"I'm aware he outsmarted us both in that respect. Watch him. There is nothing more dangerous than an obsessed and reckless genius."

"If I'm not locked into security, I'll be able to help him." And by help he meant made

sure he didn't end up egging himself when there was no one around to pick him up and bring him home. Which is what Everest felt he'd done to Olier all those centuries ago when he'd done as ordered and hidden.

They couldn't save everyone.

"Sort yourself out first, Kaine. That's an order."

\* \* \*

Kaine wasn't part of the field operation, but that didn't mean he wasn't ready to join in should the need arise. The team had taken over the bar via the delivery dock. He had people in the cafe and someone in the Coven building who'd been called in to fix an alleged electrical issue. Even the couple further up the street enjoying a morning coffee at the bakery were his people.

He watched the camera as Malcolm walked up the street, hands in pockets, knitted hat pulled low, and his head tilted down as if trying to avoid being recognized. He didn't make the rookie mistake of looking up at any of the cameras in position, even though he knew where they were.

But then Kaine didn't expect him to. He'd done enough tours of duty to have learned when to follow the orders that mattered and what to do when the rules got fuzzy.

Kaine was expecting things to go fuzzy fast, but he hoped he was wrong.

It wasn't only his unease turning circles like an unsettled cat in his gut. Quentin was anxious. Kaine imagined sending reassuring vibes through the bond and hoped that he was doing something. He wanted to be with Quentin, sorting all of this out. And yes, he should've told him that he could give up magic and be human, but after the initial shock, he hadn't wanted to give him up. He knew how rare it was to get a fated

mate.

He wanted Gerrit to be happy, and Dalmon too, so he was allowed the bloody same thing, wasn't he?

There was no point in serving the country if it took everything in every life, including his life.

The reason for Gerrit's newfound joy, pushed open the door and stepped into the Coven run cafe and magical problem triage center. There wasn't even a second before the feed switched to follow Malcolm inside.

Just stay alive. Gerrit will kill me. Hopefully not literally.

Quentin's disquiet spiked.

Had he heard those thoughts?

Everything is going to plan, Quentin. But I'm not going to be able to relax until this is over.

And by over, he meant the whole Shadow Board thing. It was like playing with a hydra at the moment. Chop off one head, and there were three more wanting a bite out of his ass.

Malcolm ordered a drink and took a seat to wait to be seen.

If the Board was any good, they'd know Malcolm was in.

He'd run through so many options of what they might do, including if they did nothing, which was the worst outcome, as it gave them no new information. He noted

which Coven agent ushered Malcolm deeper into the building.

One of his people confirmed that he had eyes on Malcolm. The only meeting room with heating was the one downstairs near where the electrician was working.

His phone rang, though it took him a moment to realize it was his as the ring tone had only been used once before. And only a few weeks ago.

He answered the call, already knowing what it would be about. “Lenoir.”

“Yves, sir. The lodge is under attack. Operation Candlelight is ready to go.”

“Understood. Proceed.” He hung up. His gaze was on the screen, refusing to look at anyone in the room. Someone who knew the plan was the traitor. “Get him out of there. Now.”

Before Malcolm got his throat cut and bled out before he could shift.

It was a short list of people who knew everything.

The three with him. The agent playing electrician. Two in the Coven.

Everyone had been told it was a training mission where they were supposed to note Malcolm’s movements throughout the day and be unobserved themselves.

Only four people knew who Malcolm was and why he was important.

And only three, including himself, that he could discount immediately.

It should have been four.



*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:16 am*

Orion's phone rang, and Quentin glanced up from his assignment. From the look on Orion's face and the way he stood to walk away, he knew something was wrong. He reached out with his magic, needing to find out if Kaine was safe.

Orion snarled and pointed at him. "Don't you fucking dare."

"What's going on?"

"I don't know yet." He put his phone to his ear and walked out to stand in the corridor, closing the door after himself. His voice was muffled but sharp as he spoke.

Quentin did a quick search for news. There was nothing in Mont de Leucoy, but there was a breaking story about a bombing in London. He clicked on the news article, only to find there were no details, not even on location. Not officially, anyway, but there were already snippets of videos people were posting to social media.

What were the odds of that happening at the same time Kaine was running a mission? Bad things happened all the time, and according to Kaine, there were always missions going on. Some small, some large, some involving other countries. The world didn't sit still and wasn't as stable as he thought it had been, and there was a hell of a lot more magic thrown about than he'd ever suspected.

"Change of plans. No library trip today."

"It's related, isn't it?"

"Yeah. Jacob is on his way. We are to keep you here until the situation stabilizes."

“So I’m a prisoner? On whose orders?” He barely got the words out before his phone rang. Even though there was no number on the screen, he sensed it was Kaine because of the urgency. But he didn’t know what to say to him.

Refusing protection seemed like a bad idea—and his refusal wouldn’t go far. Orion wouldn’t put up with any bullshit. He’d probably find himself hog-tied and shoved in a closet.

“You’re going to want to answer that,” Orion said.

It was Quentin’s turn to stand and walk away, but instead of stepping into the corridor, he went upstairs to the bedroom. “Hello?”

“Orion told me about your meeting this morning.”

Quentin winced. “Yeah, it was interesting.”

“I need to know everything you told him.”

“He watched us arrive last night. He figured we were mates. That was it.”

“Nothing about today?”

“I don’t know anything about today except that you’ve been feeling anxious all morning, and now there’s stuff going on in London.”

“Was the Shadow Board discussed?”

Quentin closed his eyes and thought for a moment. “Only that I’m aware they are the bad guys. He was worried about the secrets you’re keeping and what you knew. He thought you might have sent me to become his friend.”

Kaine gave a bark of a laugh. “Does he know your magic?”

“Yes.”

He sensed Kaine’s agitation ratchet up another notch.

“Are you safe?”

“Yes. They know everything. They know all our moves before we make them. And some of those moves are only known to my brothers.”

Quentin didn’t need magic to feel Kaine’s pain at that statement. The words were enough, but the swelling ache and bitter taste of betrayal filled him. “You think it’s the prince?”

“There is a lot you don’t know about him in this life and past lives. He is young and reckless and has made some very bad decisions. When Jacob arrives, they are going to detain him. And you are the only mind reader I have available.”

Quentin blinked twice, not sure he wanted to understand what Kaine was asking him to do. “What are you saying?”

“You know what I’m asking. I do not want to make an order, but Gerrit has been forced to flee his lodge, and the bomb in London was outside a Coven location. I need to know what’s coming next before more people die.”

“Do you really believe he betrayed you to the Shadow Board?”

“I don’t want to. But it wasn’t me, and it wasn’t Gerrit or Dalmon. Who does that leave who knew everything? Who sat opposite me as we discussed the problem over dinner... I need to be sure.”

“What makes you think you won’t be next?” If the two other brothers had been openly attacked, it made sense that Kaine was next. Panic scratched beneath his skin. If Kaine died, then he’d die. Not immediately, but Orion had described rather graphically what it felt like when the pining process began.

“You can help make sure I’m not.”

Yes, he understood that. But that didn’t mean he wasn’t terrified. “I don’t even know what I’m doing. I’m guessing.”

“Ask any witch, and they’ll tell you that half of magic is guessing. You’re smart, Quentin?—”

“If I was smart, I wouldn’t be messed up in this.”

“Yeah, you would be. I don’t know how it would’ve played out, but you were going to be always involved. Why else would you take a job opposite the Coven building?”

“I didn’t know what it was. I didn’t know who you were.” He didn’t know anything.

“You have two ex-Coven agents with you. I trust them with my life.”

“Shouldn’t they be with you?”

“You are my life. It is my job to protect you.”

And his to protect Kaine, and the only way he could do that was to use his magic on the prince. “He’s going to have his bodyguards lock me up in a dungeon somewhere.”

“I doubt that since I picked his bodyguards.”

“You aren’t the one they’re fucking.”

Kaine grunted. “Is he doing both?”

“I didn’t pry. It feels wrong to pry. He’s the prince.”

“And I am the Chief of Security, and I am giving you permission to dig. Please.” The last word was carried on a wave of desperation.

“What about the mind reader who assessed me?”

“She’s a psychologist, and she’s needed elsewhere.”

“The one who taught me how to use magic?”

“She is not a mind reader. She communicates with plants, but she is an excellent teacher of many magics.” People were talking in the background. They were calling Kaine ‘chief’ and asking questions. “I need to go. If I need to make it an order, I will, but I do not want to.”

“I don’t want you to... I don’t know if I can do what you need me to.” A week ago, he hadn’t known about magic, and now he was being asked to use it to save his fated mate and possibly all paranormals. He could’ve given it up and walked away from all of this. Then he’d be sitting at home watching the news and wondering if he’d made the biggest mistake of his life. “I don’t want to fail.”

“I believe you can. Our paths crossed for a reason, and I don’t believe it’s because the Fates were messing with us.”

“He said you must hate having a mind reader for a mate.”

Kaine was silent for a heartbeat. “I’m used to keeping a lot of secrets, yet to you I am an open book. It’s uncomfortable. The bond is uncomfortable. I don’t like feeling like a crab without a shell. But I will get used to it.”

Quentin swallowed and took the chance to show he knew Kaine hadn’t told him everything. “Or I give up my magic, and then you don’t need to be uncomfortable.”

He muttered a curse. “I would never ask a witch to give up a part of themselves.”

“You didn’t give me that choice.”

“Because you can’t make that choice if you don’t understand what you’re giving up. I wanted you to understand who you were. And you were so excited to learn...” More talking and orders in the background. “I need to go. Orion will contact me if there are any difficulties.”

“You mean, if I can’t.” Quentin now understood what people meant when they said they had performance anxiety. He was pretty sure his magic had gone soft and crawled somewhere deep inside of him, never to be found again.

Kaine snorted. “Thank you for that rather graphic depiction.”

“I didn’t realize you’d get it.”

“Neither did I. The bond is still developing. Which means it’s hard to separate what is shared at the moment.”

Quentin stared up at the ornate ceiling, his eyes burning as if tears wanted to spill. “Be safe. Maybe I’ll be able to update you in real-time.”

“You be safe, too, because if I’m right, you’re in danger.”

“I hope you’re wrong.” Because he didn’t like thinking that Everest could betray his brothers. His family was shit in that he was an unwanted disruption, but neither of his parents had harmed him—growing up, he’d had friends in worse situations.

The call ended before he’d even decided how to say goodbye. The hand holding the phone shook, and he stood there, trying not to be afraid. He failed. And he couldn’t keep it within himself. He squeezed his eyes shut, and just when he thought he was going to break, it was as if Kaine held his hand, and reminded him he could do it. That he was a witch and magic was in his blood.

He heard Orion’s footsteps on the stairs.

He was out of time.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:16 am*

“You’re going to need this, too.” Kaine handed Malcolm a pistol and belt, holding several magazines. He hoped they were spares and not needed.

Malcolm put them on without a word.

Kaine didn’t need to like him to know that Malcolm was not the traitor, or to trust him not to shoot him in the back. Right now, they wanted the same thing, which was Gerrit, and the kingdom and by extension all paranormals, safe.

Because Kaine had kept the information segmented, it had been too easy to whittle down who was telling the Shadow Board everything. He’d suspected, but if he’d flinched too soon, they wouldn’t have gained any ground.

The retaliation in London had been anticipated, but it was a distraction. Or at least it was supposed to be. Dalmon wasn’t there, and neither was Lucian. They were both in France.

If the Board was a bit more thorough, they would’ve known his driver had taken an empty car to the office while Dalmon had taken the tunnel—they would’ve expected him to use the jet.

Everest hadn’t been told that part of the plan.

He hadn’t been told about Candlelight either. That was specific, and only three people knew about it. Yves, Gerrit and him.

Arresting Everest was going to break Gerrit’s heart.



Dalmon was going to be furious because Everest was their in with the Board. But Everest had used it for his own purposes. His single-mindedness might have damned everyone. He was too smart and too reckless for his own good.

Kaine got out of the car, the bullet-proof vest beneath his coat a weight he didn't like, though it didn't seem to bother Malcolm.

From a second car, two others got out. The same ones he'd had with him in the bar. He wouldn't have said he was confident with their loyalty, but it was all he had unless he wanted to involve the human police, which he did not. Besides, these people had been vetted by the Coven and had been clean a few weeks ago.

His heart thumped as he walked toward the building. The stinging wound that his suspicions left was something he needed to ignore. His worry for Quentin was something else he needed to push aside. Everest and the Board would want to use him as leverage, to force Kaine to open up the system.

He expected that.

He hoped Everest would realize the depth of the shit he was swimming in. All he'd needed to do was wait and trust instead of rushing ahead, thinking he was smarter than everyone else.

That he usually was smarter didn't help.

Kaine flashed his badge at the guard on the desk. "No one leaves. Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"They will assist you." He nodded at the two extras that he'd brought with him, then he and Malcolm walked up the stairs to the second floor to where the woman with the

kidnapped brother worked. He quietly walked up to where the woman was grabbing her handbag as if to go out.

She looked up, and her face paled.

“Can you come with me, please?” Kaine murmured, but people were looking up, wondering what was going on.

“It’s too late,” she whispered.

Kaine said nothing.

“I had to. You don’t understand.”

Kaine shook his head. “I do. You should’ve come to me or your manager. Instead, you put nations at risk.”

Not yet, but she didn’t know that.

She began to cry. “I just wanted my brother back.”

“I can assure you he was dead the moment you released the virus,” Malcolm said, his words hard and bitter as he put handcuffs around her wrists.

“No, they said they’d set him free if I did...” Her words were choked off by her sobbing. “I had to.”

Kaine glanced at Malcolm. He’s been saying those same words not so long ago. The one thing the Shadow Board did well was pick who to use. Who was wary of asking for help and afraid of law enforcement? Those who were already isolated with no one to turn to.

What were they seeing when they looked at Everest?

Where had the three of them gone wrong with him? What should they have done differently? Was there anything they could've done?

The lights in the building flickered.

“Everybody, make your way downstairs. There’s been a security breach,” Kaine said. Power held for another thirty seconds, and then the building went quiet and dark. He counted to five, and by the time he was done, the backup generator had turned on.

In another thirty seconds, the Shadow Board would be aware that the only country impacted was Mont de Leucoy.

There was nothing he could do about that, and it wasn’t as though there was an army on their doorstep ready to invade. These days, it would be a few fighter jets dropping some strategically placed bombs. He wasn’t sure magic could defend against a few megatons of detonation.

The Shadow Board didn’t have control of anyone’s military, not yet anyway.

Not today. They’d played their hand.

And it failed.

He should be happy, but there was a knot in his gut because he knew this wasn’t over.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:16 am*

Everest closed his laptop and stood. He needed to get out of there for a bit, or he'd burst into flames. He didn't bother to check that his bodyguard was following. He would be. He wasn't sure why the power in the castle had gone out, only that the backup supply had kicked in.

The power wasn't supposed to go out.

Kaine and Dalmon were supposed to stop this. He ignored the flicker of fear that thinking they had failed caused. They were his back up. The ones who would make sure this didn't all go to hell. He hadn't expected the bombing in London, either. For the first time, he worried he had bitten off more than he could actually chew.

It was one thing for the Coven to use him to get close to the Shadow Board, but another for him to use the Shadow Board to get close to Olier.

He made it as far as the corridor and came face-to-face with Jacob and Orion. Behind them was Quentin. Because they were babysitting him, or because Quentin had come to question him?

Was he wrong about him being Kaine's fated mate? Had that been a lie so Kaine could sneak a mind reader into the castle?

Had he been out-manuevered? That didn't seem possible. No one had beaten him at anything since he was sixteen.

"I was about to find out why the power?—"

“Don’t bother,” Jacob said. His expression was grim. Even when he’d been shot, he hadn’t looked as though the world was about to end.

Everest nodded. So Kaine had worked it all out, which meant the power was off deliberately. No doubt, the entire fucking country was in the dark. He glanced at his bodyguard. He had a sneaking suspicion that the bodyguard wouldn’t do jack shit if the orders came from Kaine.

“Put your hands on the wall,” Jacob said in a tone that suggested he should comply. If it had been coming from one of his bodyguards, that would’ve been quite the turn on.

He put his hands on the wall and Orion did a very quick and thorough and impersonal job of frisking him.

Everest forced a smile. “I believe the last time you manhandled me, we had a lot fewer clothes and a lot more fun.”

Orion growled and yanked one of Everest’s hands behind his back. “I’m no fucking lawyer, but I would advise you to keep your smart mouth shut, as it’s gotten you in a lot of trouble.”

He pulled Everest’s other hand behind his back, and the other cuff closed around his wrist. He let the shifting heat rise to the surface and shimmer over his skin, but no flames formed.

“What have you done?” There was more panic in his voice than he wanted to share.

“They prevent you from shifting. Unpleasant, isn’t it? The Shadow Board prevented me from shifting for months.” Orion’s words were little more than a hiss in his ear. “And you helped them.”

“They have Olier. I’ve seen him.” He was so close to getting his brother back, to making up for the mistake he made two centuries ago.

Jacob put his hand on the wall next to Everest’s head. “Do you know what this ring is?”

“An engagement ring?”

“Does it look like I’d buy my mate a fucking gaudy bubble like that?” Orion’s hand was between his shoulder blades, keeping him pressed against the wall.

He couldn’t shift, and even if he could, where the fuck was he going to go? His emergency plan was always shifting and flying away.

“When Lucian gave up his magic, it was put into three rings. One for the Coven, one for Lucian, and one for the kingdom to use. Do you know what his magic is?”

Everest would’ve shaken his head, except he didn’t have room to. “No.”

He was beginning to think there was a reason he wasn’t told. What other secrets had Kaine kept from him?

“Lucian is a finder. Orion and I aren’t here to go through the library and collate history. We are here with a specific purpose, to learn how to use this magic and to find eggs.”

Orion growled in Everest’s ear. “Take the time to think about what that means. And how badly you fucked up.”

“You haven’t found him.” If they were meant to be finding eggs, why the hell hadn’t they found Olier and brought him home already? “Lucian hasn’t found him.”

“You’re probably aware we took a little trip not that long ago, and we did bring home an egg. Not a phoenix egg, but a dragon egg. Unfortunately, it appears phoenixes can’t hatch dragons, so now we are searching for a fire witch.”

“Why are you wasting time with dragons?” Everest struggled against Orion’s grip and achieved nothing.

“I haven’t learned to differentiate between dragon eggs and phoenix eggs yet, but I have the location of about half a dozen other eggs. Of course, at the moment, I don’t have the luxury of travelling anywhere. And because of you, Olier will most likely be moved, which means I will need to start tracking him again. You can’t just walk into a Shadow Board?—”

“I can. I can walk in and take my brother.”

“Only if you were successful in handing over the control of several major nations to the Shadow Board. You were prepared to sell out every paranormal for your brother.”

Everest closed his eyes. “It wasn’t supposed to go this far.”

“Save it,” Orion snapped as he jerked Everest away from the wall.

Quentin stared at him.

“Are you even Kaine’s mate, or were you sent to spy on me?”

“I’m here to read your mind.”

“I don’t give you permission. I’m the acting bloody king.”

“I have permission from the Chief of Security, and you’ve been arrested for treason.”

Quentin's voice was quiet. His gaze flicked from Everest to something behind him.

Treason?

Everest lowered his voice. "Kaine wouldn't dare."

"I would," Gerrit said.

Until that moment, Everest had always thought the phrase of the world falling away was a bit dramatic for people who didn't fly. But given his current lack of wings and the way his stomach was in freefall, he understood exactly what humans meant.

Orion turned him to face Gerrit.

"It's not as bad as it seems, Papa." Okay, it might be as bad as it seemed. And from Gerrit's expression, it wasn't going to get any better.

"Don't bother. I have realized that was an act." There was more than enough pain in those few words to leave a wound that would be hard to heal in this lifetime. Were they destined to keep wounding each other?

He needed to break the cycle but hadn't figured out how. Not yet anyway. "It wasn't an act. You are my father as I was yours."

Gerrit stared at him, and Everest wished he could burst into flames and disappear. "Yet you couldn't trust any of us when we said we were working on getting Olier back."

"Because you've been working on it for over two centuries. You didn't even want to tell me this time."



“Because it has become an unhealthy obsession. I knew you last time, and I knew you would be worse this time.”

Worse? Gerrit didn't know him. But how could he? “So why didn't you stop me?”

“Because we thought you'd like to help in some capacity. That working for the Coven would be good for you. We were wrong.” Gerrit turned to Orion. “Take him downstairs, make him comfortable. He might be there a while. Quentin, do what you need to.”

“You can't do this to me. People will wonder where I am. You aren't going to publicly try me for treason, are you?” That needed to be avoided at all costs.

The hurt in Gerrit's eyes was almost unbearable. “I haven't decided what I'm going to do. Nor will it be only my decision.”

“Please, don't make this mistake. I'm so close to getting Olier back.”

But Orion was already walking him away.

“I don't want to live with this for another life. It's not a bruise. It's a festering, gaping wound.” It would kill him. He needed to rescue Olier. That was all that mattered.

“Because you didn't listen and didn't let it go,” Gerrit said.

“He's our brother,” Everest shouted, not caring who heard him making a scene as he was marched along the corridor, hands behind his back, like a common criminal.

Gerrit didn't answer, which was so much worse.

Silence was always worse than shouting.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:16 am*

“Stop. Lift your hands nice and slow,” a man behind Kaine said.

Malcolm was a few meters ahead with the woman. There was no one else on the floor. The computer screens were blank, and only half the lights were on.

Was this the security guard?

Had he been watching over the woman, waiting for something to happen?

Kaine lifted his hands as he was asked. He drew up the shifting heat so it was close to the surface, but he didn't let it bloom on his skin, not yet anyway.

Malcolm took a few more steps and disappeared into the stairwell with the woman.

Kaine frowned. From what Gerrit had said, Malcolm's hearing was exceptionally good. He must have heard the man. Which meant he was working with him or preparing his own surprise attack. Kaine hoped for the latter, but he would act as if he were alone.

He turned slowly until he saw the man and confirmed it was indeed the bribed security guard.

“So what now?” Kaine asked, buying as much time as possible for his people, though unfortunately, that also bought time for the Shadow Board.

“You finish what she started. Only this country has been affected. Fix it.”

“Affected by what? The power outage?”

The man swung the gun towards Kaine’s head. He caught the strike with both hands before it connected, breaking the man’s elbow and then smashing his own elbow into his face. As the man folded, Kaine brought his knee up. There was another satisfying crunch of breaking bone and the scent of hot blood. Before the man recovered, Kaine had the pistol pressed hard against the man’s skull. His other hand gripped the man’s collar.

There were flames on the back of his hand now, threatening to burn everything they touched. Via the bond, he was aware of some shit happening with Quentin. As much as he wanted to do something, he pushed it aside for later.

For two heartbeats, he was tempted to pull the trigger. But he wanted the man alive to question him. They needed to pick this apart once and for all. “I want names. Who’s paying you? Who contacted you? How did they contact you? Everything.”

The man’s shifting heat rippled over Kaine.

Fur pushed through the skin of his face as it elongated into a bear’s muzzle. Getting eaten by a bear was not on his list of things to do today.

Kaine fired twice into the shifter’s skull. Blood and brain matter splattered over the floor and desk and him. The noise echoed through the office.

“Fuck!” He dropped the corpse.

The man hadn’t shifted to fight. He shifted because he’d known Kaine would kill him. Because he’d wanted a quick death versus the slow and painful death his employers would give him if he talked.

The stairwell door flew open. Kaine turned, pistol ready, as Malcolm stepped out.  
“Are you here to finish the job or to help?”

Malcolm lowered his weapon first. “Help. But I see you’ve taken care of it.”

“You heard him, then?”

“Of course I did. But I didn’t want him to realize or to take out the prisoner.”

Kaine gave a single nod. “Next time, give a signal. Let’s go.”

His phone pinged. He pulled it out and read the notification. “Someone is trying to access the system from the basement.”

“Can they do that?”

“There’s only a handful of people who have clearance.” And he was one of them.

“If they hack in, is that going to fuck things up?”

“That depends.” What he’d done wasn’t meant to be a permanent solution. He’d contained the country, limiting the virus’s reach. But it wouldn’t take much to release it. “If they hack in and have enough time, they will find what I did and go around it.”

“So we’re going to the basement?”

“We are. But I don’t want bullets flying around. Bullets and computers don’t mix.”

“I’ve found bullets don’t play nicely with most things.” Malcolm holstered his pistol.  
“Plan?”

“Not yet.”

Malcolm lifted his hand and made a small circle. “This is all backed up in the cloud or something, right?”

Kaine lifted one eyebrow. “Yeah, it’s all backed up.”

When the power went out, everything would’ve been locked down. The first thing that happened when the power came back on was a backup.

“Does it matter if we ping a few things?”

Data-wise, no. Equipment replacement-wise, yes, even though any damage would be covered by insurance. “I’d really like someone left alive to question.”

Malcolm glanced past him to the body on the floor. “You need to work harder on keeping people alive.”

“You’re still alive.” He studied Malcolm a little harder. Malcolm wasn’t only ex-military. He was a shifter. “Shift and use some of that snow leopard sneakiness.”

“It’s not sneakiness. It’s invisibility.” Malcolm said, as he took off his bullet-proof vest and his shirt without undoing any buttons.

“Sure.” His phone pinged again. “Shit. They’re in.”

He glanced up from his phone, catching Malcolm mid-shift. Plenty of shifters didn’t like to be watched while shifting, and it was always a little disconcerting, watching a human body morph into something else. Malcolm gave a shudder, resettling his spine, then trotted towards the door.

Kaine opened it for him, and they took the stairs to the basement.

With everyone downstairs in the lobby and only the lights on, the building was quiet. Malcolm moved silently, slipping in and out of the shadows, and even though Kaine knew what to look for, it became hard to track him. He didn't want to be impressed, but he was. Malcolm could've been a very dangerous assassin.

They reached the basement and found the door closed. Perhaps they weren't expecting to be bothered, but as soon as he opened it, he would be a target.

Kaine took a moment to assess which way it opened, then moved to the side with his pistol held close.

Malcolm looked up at him. Kaine held up three fingers and counted down. Then he opened the door. Malcolm slipped through the gap on his belly. Kaine waited another heartbeat, then peered around the corner.

Malcolm had already disappeared into the shadows.

There were two men. One standing guard, the other working.

"Get your hands off the keyboard and keep them where I can see them," Kaine said as he stepped through. He didn't recognize either of these men. Were they why the security guard had been brought on, to let them into the building?

That meant they had an unknown number of hostiles inside, as Kaine doubted there were only two.

"I've been waiting for you to join us." The man standing guard said in English with the British accent.

Kaine stayed where he was. “I don’t know who you are, but you shouldn’t be in here. It’s restricted.”

They wouldn’t care about legalities and technicalities like that, but he was buying time so he could figure out his next move and for Malcolm to get close. He could shoot one of them, and maybe he’d be lucky and not damage anything. If he shot first, he assumed Malcolm would attempt to take out the other guy, who hadn’t looked up and was busy getting deeper into the system.

“Login.” The man waved his gun as if indicating for Kaine to come and take a seat.

“No.” They could waste time hacking in.

“Then I’ll shoot you.”

Kaine shrugged. “You kill me, and you’ll never get in.”

“I didn’t say I’d kill you, just shoot you.” The man waved his gun again. People who were trained didn’t wave guns around. They kept them aimed at their target.

“You think shooting me will make me cooperate?”

“People will do anything if you cause them enough pain.”

That was partially true. Some people would do anything. He sensed Malcolm moving around the edges. His own weapon was still held close to his body. In the dim lighting, perhaps the witch didn’t see it.

“Login and undo what you have done.”

“I don’t work for this company. Why do you think I’ve done anything?”

The man turned to him. “I know you duplicated the system.”

That hurt more than a bullet. That little lie he’d told had travelled. He hadn’t duplicated anything. “Your virus took out power to the country. As a result, everything is in lockdown. You can’t get in and do anything. It’s called security protocol.”

“For a man who doesn’t work here, you know a lot about the set up.”

Kaine smiled. “I’m the Chief of Security; I’m supposed to know.”

“I know who you are. And I know what you are.”

“I don’t know who you are, though, witch. Perhaps you could enlighten me?” If the man on the keyboard was good enough and had enough time, he would find a way in. Nothing was ever one hundred percent secure. And the Shadow Board had a head start on what they were looking for.

There was a twitch in the man’s arm as he glanced at something to the side.

Kaine dropped to the floor, aimed, and fired up at the man’s chest. The witch took a couple of steps back, crashing into equipment. His pistol clattered to the concrete floor.

Kaine kicked it away from his hand and turned to the other man. “Stand up and step away from the keyboard.”

Sparks formed on the man’s fingers.

Oh shit. Electricity witch. He did not like getting shocked.



Malcolm lunged out of the shadow, his teeth clamped onto the man's calf, and he dragged him out of the chair. The electricity witch scrambled to hold on to something as he screamed.

Kaine's heart gave an odd beat as if it had forgotten what to do.

"You feel that?" the witch on the ground rasped.

Kaine turned and put his hand over his heart. He struggled to swallow. What the hell was wrong with him?

The witch had his hand over the gunshot wound. Dark blood leaked between his fingers. "I'm a blood witch. And you're a bag of blood. Login."

The other witch had gone quiet. Perhaps Malcolm had smothered him. Maybe he'd ripped out the man's throat. Kaine didn't care.

Kaine took the seat, mostly because he needed it. His blood was too heavy, and his head too light. His heart wasn't working...it was failing. He was dying.

"Don't worry, I'll let you live long enough to see the end of the human age and the beginning of the age of witches. Next time you are reborn, you will be in the service of a witch. Your brothers, too."

Kaine inhaled in a shaky breath as pain radiated through his chest and back and down his arms. Is this what it felt like to have a heart attack? Was Quentin also feeling it? He put his hands on the keyboard. There was only one thing he could try, and it may not work.

Did the shifting heat flow through his blood, or did it just feel that way? And if it was in his blood, would the blood witch control that too?

“You’re losing a lot of blood. You’ll be dead before I get in,” Kaine said, his voice strained.

“I can control my blood flow. Reinforcements aren’t far away. I suggest you make a start.” The witch drew in a breath, and Malcolm let out a howl of pain.

Kaine cleared what the other witch had done, backtracking and unraveling as he brought his shifting heat back up to the surface.

As he did, he reached for Quentin. He wished they’d had more time to work on the bond; then perhaps he’d be able to read the blood witch’s mind.

If they’d had more time, he could’ve gotten to know Quentin so much better. For a moment, everything they hadn’t done consumed him. They hadn’t even gone on a proper date. He hadn’t introduced him to his brothers. He hadn’t put Quentin’s name or magic in his book. How is he supposed to find him in the future if he didn’t remember him?

There were so many things he should have made time for instead of thinking he always had more time, if not in this life, then in the next one. It didn’t seem fair to have found someone he wanted to explore the present with only to have it taken away before he had the chance to live.

He wanted to make the most of this life.

He didn’t want to wait for another.

His eyes prickled, and he wanted to blame the magic slowing his heart, but it was a lie.

He’d wasted his life...and also Quentin’s. He reached for his mate, and for a moment,

he didn't know where he was. He stood in a corridor, confused by all the doors. Where was Quentin, and what was he doing?

He turned and saw Everest, but his brother was different, and there was something terrifying about him. It took him a moment to realize they were in Everest's mind. What were all the doors?

Kaine? Quentin's voice filled his head.

I'm sorry.

He wrapped his fire around Quentin to protect him from Everest. He should never have asked.

Did he deserve a mate? He talked of the Fates and how it was meant to be, but he felt very mortal, and he didn't understand how they could do this to Quentin. To them. It was cruel to bring them together just to have them die.

Why, once again, he was doomed to die young?

"Why are you doing this?" He kept his fingers moving, but they were slow.

The heat increased, but he wasn't ready yet, and he'd only have one chance.

"The age of secrecy is over. If we don't want to be hunted, we need to be the hunters." He did something that made Kaine's heart squeeze too tight.

It was hard to breathe. He needed to shed this body.

I...was it love? I want the chance to fall in love with you.

He didn't know if Quentin was receiving the thoughts. Write my book for me. Do something amazing with the weeks you have if I don't make it.

"Why enslave shifters?" He forced the words out.

"Why not? There has to be a villain for witches to be seen as the heroes." The blood witch moved as though to get to his feet.

Kaine let the heat bloom, fast and brutal. His clothes ignited as he broke free of flesh and blood and the witch's magic.

The fire alarm sounded, and the sprinklers overhead burst to life.

Kaine let out a cry and flapped towards the door. He hated the rain, and he hated being indoors when shifted.

All he wanted was his mate.

Find me.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:16 am*

Quentin sat on the other side of the cell. He knew it was an old castle, but he hadn't expected dungeons to still exist. Or for the phoenix shifters to use them. He didn't know if this one had been prepared for Everest or if they had modernized them at some point so the cells had a proper bed. They certainly weren't dank, cold, stone rooms filled with straw and little else. The lack of natural light was disturbing, though. As was the way Everest stared at him.

He was still wearing the cuffs, though Orion had separated them so Everest could be more comfortable.

"I need to know everything you've told the Shadow Board."

"Give me pen and paper, and I'll write it down for you."

Quentin shook his head. "We both know that's not how this works."

He hoped he sounded as though he knew what he was doing.

"You're a bit too young to be an agent."

Quentin smiled. Aside from the fact he wasn't, he was also older than Everest. Though not by much. "They like my magic and my other skills. As you noted, Kaine does like brains."

Everest kept his glare steady, and his thoughts focused. He was doing a bloody good job of blocking him.

“Let’s try something different. Why didn’t you trust your brothers that they had it in hand?”

“I already answered that.”

But the change in question was enough for Everest’s focus to waver. That was how he did this. He kept asking different questions, forcing Everest to constantly think up new responses.

“Were you really willing to risk the exposure of all paranormals to find your brother?”

Everest blinked and shrugged.

And Quentin saw the crack in the facade and slipped through.

He didn’t know what he thought being in somebody else’s mind would be like, but it wasn’t like his at all. Everest’s seemed so much bigger, as though he could wander forever and never find what he was looking for. He walked along the corridor past open doors and closed ones, and while it twisted and turned, there seemed to be no end. Yet there must be. There must be a first memory from this life.

Or were these all of Everest’s memories? Of all the lives he’d ever lived? Was it all here, even though he didn’t remember?

For a moment, Quentin forgot what he was supposed to be doing because he wanted to go all the way back to the start. Not that he knew where that was in this endless corridor...

Nor did he want to dig that deep, because it would be far too easy to become lost. And if he got lost in here, he’d never find his way out.

Focus.

He needed to know about the Shadow Board.

As he thought about it, some doors opened and others closed.

He peered into the first one, and he realized it wasn't this life because Everest was an old man. And yet, he must've known about the Shadow Board in that life.

The old man turned to him. "Get out."

"What did you tell the Shadow Board?"

"What they wanted to know," Everest said from behind him.

Quentin turned. Everest seemed younger now, a little more scared, as though he couldn't lie to himself with as much ease as he lied to his brothers.

"And what was that? I know you're trying to help Olier."

"I had to because no one else cared. They abandoned him. I abandoned him."

"So when you had the chance, you took it?"

"The Shadow Board and the Coven are using me, so I should get something out of it."

"How did you decide which information to feed them?"

Everest smiled, and the sharp wings of his butterfly swept over Quentin's skin. "The trick with information is to give someone just enough?—"

Quentin turned as the fiery heat of Kaine's butterfly brushed against him. Was he real or another part of Everest's mind? He had to be real because no one else knew that was how he saw his mate. "Kaine?"

I'm sorry.

Kaine's words echoed in his head, and then everything was burning.

Quentin blinked and rocked back in his chair, clutching his head. His pulse was heavy and slow, and his blood was on fire. He sucked in a breath, but it wasn't enough.

I want the chance to fall in love with you. Kaine was still talking to him. Whispering in his mind. Write my book for me. Do something amazing with the weeks you have if I don't make it.

Orion swore.

Jacob asked him something.

Everest laughed. "Come into in my head again, witch, and you'll spend the rest of your life opening and closing doors, trying to find your way out."

He was sweating as if... He reached for Kaine. The bond was still there, but it was different. It was wilder and hotter, and Kaine was different, too.

Jacob put his hand on Quentin's shoulder and then pulled it away as if burned. "Are you okay?"

Quentin stared at Everest. He might look nineteen and act as though all he cared about were sex and parties, but that was a mask.



Somehow, he'd unlocked his memories of the past. He knew everything.

Everest's smile sharpened. "What did you see, witch?"

"That you will burn the world to absolve yourself of the guilt of abandoning Olier." Quentin stood. "The guilt over losing one brother is bad. Imagine what losing four will feel like."

"I only have three."

"You think Olier will want to associate with you after you hand all shifters over to the people who have held him captive?" He stepped back. He never wanted to step inside Everest's head again. "Spend some time thinking about what you've done...all of it."

Everest's eyes widened for a split second as he realized what Quentin had seen. Quentin gave him a single nod as confirmation, then left the room. As soon as they were out of earshot, he turned to Jacob.

"I'm fine, but Kaine has shifted, I think. How can you tell?"

Jacob looked at him. "If it felt as though he shifted, he did. Trust your magic."

Orion jerked his head at the door that now separated them from where Everest was being held. "What about him? What did you learn?"

The heat fluttered inside of him. He plucked his shirt, half tempted to take it off and just wear his undershirt. "That's a much bigger conversation." And one that the other phoenixes needed to be there for.

Find me.

The hot whisper ran through him.

The only reason Kaine would have shifted was because he was in trouble.

The Shadow Board had been waiting for him. And Kaine was the only one who could stop them. “We need to find Kaine.”

He did not want to write in Kaine’s book or only have two weeks left to live while he pined for his lost mate.

A mate who didn’t love him but who wanted that chance.

He wanted that chance, too.

Jacob pulled his phone out of his pocket, and Orion propelled Quentin along the corridor. Neither of them questioned him. They just accepted what he said because he was Kaine’s mate and assumed the order had come from Kaine.

Had he imagined it?

No. There was an urgent beating within him, and it wasn’t his own fear of magic. There were no thoughts pressing into him and demanding attention. He could sense Jacob and Orion’s thoughts, and if he paid attention to them, he’d be able to watch their butterflies and read their surface thoughts. But the thoughts that weren’t his, the thoughts that were within him, belonged to Kaine.

And he was still far too hot. Usually, he wouldn’t complain, given that he was so used to being cold. But this heat felt different.

And he didn’t like the way it ran through his veins.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:16 am*

Kaine shot out of the basement and up the stairwell. And all he could think about was freedom and finding his mate. Nothing else mattered.

Everywhere inside the building, it was raining.

He tried to find an exit, but everything was shut. And he couldn't open doors while shifted.

A snarl made him spin in the air. The snow leopard bounded after him. There was blood on his muzzle and his front paws. Malcolm walked up to the fire escape door, put his paws on the handle and pushed, freeing them both. He glanced over his shoulder as if to say, 'who's the better shifter now'?

The urge to find Quentin thrummed within him, but the panic was settling. He dropped to the ground and drew the flames into himself, returning to human. For a moment, it was as though his lungs were on fire, and he'd swallowed a dozen razor blades that were making their way through his insides. He'd learnt not to be in a hurry to eat but to give himself a few minutes. He was sure that when his body reformed, his insides took a few minutes to knit together, and it hurt.

He kept his eyes closed and swallowed a couple of times, grounding himself with the gravel biting into his feet and the cold breeze on his bare skin.

He had no clothes. That was going to be a problem.

A fire engine was already drawing close.

“Was your witch alive down there?” His voice was rough.

Malcolm nodded. He hadn't shifted. He took a moment to lick his paw and then wipe his face to clean off the blood.

Neither of them had a phone.

Kaine glanced back at the door. It was closed. Bloody fire doors doing what they're supposed to do.

New plan.

He glanced at Malcolm, who was still washing his face. “Go around the front and send one car to me. Everyone has been evacuated, so there will be people everywhere, but the front is the only other way out. I'll stay here. Retrieve those witches. The Coven agents should have magical dampeners to neutralize their magic. Warn them about it.”

Malcolm huffed out a breath and slunk off around the side of the building.

Kaine slowly stood. His skin was sensitive, but the hair on his arms had regrown already.

It was only then he sensed Quentin's frantic concern.

I'm alive.

He didn't know how long that would last. If the blood or electrical witch came out the door, it was going to be hairy. There was no cover. No plants to hide behind. And only a couple of cars on the street.

The four-wheel drive was a rental.

I'm only a few minutes away. With Jacob and Orion.

Kaine heard the words as if Quentin was standing next to him.

Bringing his mate to the scene probably wasn't the best idea, but at the time it had been what he needed.

Still needed.

He was torn between what he wanted and what had to be done.

He walked towards the four-wheel drive and peered inside. There were files on the backseat. Some bags and binoculars. In this part of town, where it was all light industrial housed in modern buildings, there wasn't anything for tourists. He pressed his hand to the lock and pushed heat through it. The paint blistered under his palm, but when he gave the handle a tug, the door opened.

He flicked open the file and saw a picture of himself with a short bio. Definitely not tourists. There was also a file on Gerrit, Malcolm, and Everest. Everest's had a warning that he was a double agent but still useful.

Gerrit and Malcolm, they wanted dead.

They wanted him alive to add to their collection.

"Fuck you."

The witches wouldn't go to hell, they would be reincarnated with the same magic. But they wouldn't be the same person. Not the way he was. But he still wanted to

send them to hell, if only for a short visit.

He didn't damn himself by vowing to make their next life hellish.

Tossed over the back of the chair was a black hoodie. He pulled it on, even though it was a size too small. Then he frowned and looked into the back of the four-wheel drive. There were clothes all over the place. The jeans would be too small, so he grabbed what appeared to be a pair of green checked pajama pants and shimmied into them before sliding out of the backseat.

At least now he wasn't naked.

The car he asked Malcolm to send pulled up, and the woman lowered the window. "Looks like you didn't need me."

"Very funny. This is their car; I want to know everything about the people who hired it."

"Malcolm said they're going in. They have the dampeners and that, hopefully, they'll meet you here with dinner. Does that make sense to you?"

"Yes." Malcolm was going hunting for witches and wanted him to wait. He watched as the firetruck went around the corner, followed by two cop cars. Malcolm had better hurry; otherwise, he was going to be caught with blood on his hands.

The woman made a call.

The fire escape door opened.

"Gun." Kaine stuck out his hand.

She handed it to him without pausing as she gave the number plate of the four-wheel drive to the person on the end of the call.

Kaine moved, crouching near the back of the car. While the black hoodie was the right color for being sneaky, the bright green pajama pants were not doing him any favors.

The blood witch stepped out; Kaine flicked off the safety and aimed for the other side of the man's chest.

But the witch's hands were behind his back, and pushing him along was Malcolm—who'd managed to pull on a set of spare clothes from the car. The electrical witch was next, and he was limping and covered in a lot more blood.

Kaine exhaled and relaxed. He stood and opened the back door to the vehicle. "Get them in. I want them locked up and ready for questioning."

He did not want to have to deal with the police. Especially since he'd incinerated all of his things. Explaining to humans what happened was not his specialty. He called Dalmon.

Malcolm shoved the witch into the car, not caring that he banged his head on the way through. Then he handed Kaine a soggy bundle. "It's what's left of your stuff. Mine is..." He glanced up at the building.

"I'll work that out. At least your ID says you're with national security." The cops would still want to speak to him. "Go with the prisoners. Then at least you're not here."

Malcolm gave a small nod as if he knew what Kaine wasn't saying, which was to make sure they didn't die or disappear en route.

“What do you want me to do, sir?” Kaine glanced at the other shifter who’d helped Malcolm. “I want that four-wheel drive towed and processed top priority. And once we find out who they are, I want their hotel room and anything they’ve touched processed. There are no other cases.”

The bundle in his hand dripped on the gravel. They both stared at the wet mess.

“Understood, sir. Do you need me to do anything for you?”

Kaine dropped the bundle and picked through it until he found his ID and phone. The bullet-proof vest had protected some of his things when he burned up.

He slipped his ID over his head. The phone was likely a lost cause.

A familiar black car pulled up on the other side of the road.

His lips curved. “I’m fine, thank you. Just take care of the four-wheel drive. Do not let the cops take it away because I don’t want to deal with that paperwork.” From the look on the man’s face, he didn’t want to deal with it either.

Kaine crossed the road but only made it halfway before Quentin was out of the car and flinging himself at him. He caught his mate and held him tight, kissing whichever part of him he could without easing his hold. His neck, his cheek. He breathed him in, not sure how he’d stayed away from him for five days...or how he’d lived without him when even holding him was a rush like soaring and swooping.

“What the hell happened?” Quentin drew back. “You shifted?”

“Yes.” Kaine pressed his lips to Quentin’s, needing him to understand that whatever this was, he wanted to see where it would go and what would grow. He didn’t want to wait until his next life. “What is going on with Everest? What were all the doors?”



Quentin shook his head, and a strange, haunted look flashed over his eyes as he shivered. Icy fear ran down Kaine's spine, but when Quentin spoke, his voice was quiet and level. "We can deal with that later."

Orion and Jacob got out of the vehicle.

Orion handed Kaine a pile of black clothes. "You might want to change before you speak to anyone official."

"Thank you." He still had his arm around Quentin. Though to dress, he needed to let him go. He moved closer to the car with Quentin. Between the door and Jacob and Orion—who both turned their backs to him—he was reasonably well hidden.

As he changed, he gave them a quick rundown while trying not to let go of Quentin. "There's a dead bear shifter on the second floor, along with Malcolm's clothes, pistol, and ID. And blood in the basement. The two witches we caught said that there were others. The two in custody are being questioned. We don't know who the others are."

Quentin ended up letting go and helping him dress. Doing up his shirt buttons without hiding the thought that he'd rather be taking the shirt off.

"And you haven't seen anyone who didn't belong?" Jacob asked.

"No, which makes me think they are staff." And they would be milling about in front of the building, waiting to be let back in. "I have two more people acting as security, but no way to contact them because I fucked my phone." He did up the fly of the suit pants, grabbed the front of Quentin's coat, and pulled him in for a hard kiss.

"You need to put your shoes on," Quentin murmured against his lips.

What he needed to do and what he wanted to do were very different things. He ran his

fingers through Quentin's hair, the curls wrapping around his fingers. "I don't know how much you heard through the bond, but I meant it all."

"I heard...and I want that, too. I thought you were dying."

"So did I, for a little bit. Blood witch. I had to shift, so I had no blood for him to control." If he'd been any other kind of shifter, he would be dead or dying.

Jacob gave a visible shudder.

"I'm dressed. You can turn around." He said on the edge of the car seat and pulled on socks and shoes. At least now he looked like the Chief of Security instead of a homeless man with wild tales of witches and shifters.

"You will be wanting a phone, sir." Frederick handed him what would be one of the many backups he kept—this was not the first one he'd destroyed.

"Thank you." He put it in his pocket.

Orion and Jacob turned, and Quentin leaned against the door.

"I don't want anyone going back in that building. I want everyone questioned, and we're going to need a Coven cover-up for the bear shifter."

"I'll call Vecker." Despite the change in his job, Jacob still called Dalmon by his surname, as if he were his boss, even though technically Kaine was. "He's expecting my call, as I told him we were on our way," Jacob said. "Also, the king arrived safely at the castle, and the prince is in a holding cell on his father's orders."

Kaine stared at Jacob, then turned his head to look at Quentin. He'd expected there to be lies and secrets, but not for Everest to be detained. "How bad is it?"

“Let’s call it an eleven out of ten and leave it until this mess is sorted,” Orion said.

“Quentin?” Kaine stared up at him.

“Worse than anyone can imagine.” The haunted edge was back. “Don’t ask me to go back in there because I won’t be able to get out. You pulled me out.”

Kaine pressed his lips together. A part of him had known that he needed to protect Quentin and he hadn’t questioned it. His gaze darted to Jacob as he used the bond to speak to Quentin. Did you tell them?

No, but Jacob saw I was shaken.

Do we need Dalmon here?

It’s probably safer that you aren’t all in one location.

Kaine sagged against the seat. His leg pressed against Quentin’s. He’d always gotten on with Everest. They pushed each other in this life and others. He and Dalmon agreed on the bigger issues, but their approach was so different, they’d argue before agreeing, and Dalmon often grew frustrated with him. Gerrit never had a bad word for anyone. Out of all of them, he led with his heart. While Dalmon had pushed his heart aside for centuries, Kaine hadn’t wanted to risk it, not in this life anyway. He assumed he had in the past. But love wasn’t the same as having a mate.

And Everest? He’d been a good king, though he had made a mistake in hatching them all so close together. He was smart, a risk-taker who saw everything as a game to win. He put pleasure above duty...or that is how it seemed.

Beneath that was the soul bruise caused by the loss of Olier. A brother Kaine had only read about. He should miss him, but it was hard to miss a man he didn’t

remember. And while he wanted to find him, it was more because of the academic challenge and the desire to end Everest's pain.

How much of a threat is he?

Quentin bit his lip. I don't know...but the man he appears to be isn't who he is.

Is Gerrit in danger?

I don't think so. He loves him as a father. He thinks he's close to getting Olier back.

Kaine closed his eyes. Or was that what the Shadow Board wanted him to think? He needed to put Everest aside for the moment and sort this out. With a sigh, he opened his eyes and stood.

"Right...call Dalmon." As Jacob stepped away, Kaine turned to Orion. "Do you think you can sniff out anyone who associated with a blood witch?"

Orion rolled his eyes and sighed. "It will be easier if I have something of his."

"The clothes I was wearing came out of their vehicle." Kaine nodded at the four-wheel drive.

"I'll check out the vehicle, then mingle." Orion walked toward the man standing by the vehicle.

"I'll be round there soon. Got to call the chief of police first." Who was a shifter and so would offer some assistance with the humans. Finally, he turned to Quentin. "I don't want to leave you, but I can't have you here either."

"I know. I'm not an agent or anything."

“And I don’t expect you to be. I don’t want you to be.” Right now, he didn’t want to be. He wanted to go home and let someone else deal with the drama. Dalmon enjoyed it. He enjoyed the puzzle, not the actual action. He cupped Quentin’s jaw and rested their foreheads together, stealing a few more seconds.

“I’ll return to the castle and send your driver back for you,” Quentin said, giving him an out.

That made sense as he didn’t know how long he’d be. “I’d rather you be here…”

“Same, but it’s safer at the castle.”

Kaine nodded. “I will have Gerrit meet you. Stay with him and his security team—I’ll call ahead.” He kissed Quentin, his thumb sweeping over his cheek. “My life isn’t usually this exciting.”

“You mean terrifying.”

“Yes.”

“To be fair, if it weren’t for the secret library…” He smiled, and maybe if his hand hadn’t been on Kaine’s hip as if he didn’t want to let him go, or he couldn’t feel Quentin’s attraction, he might have believed his words. “I’m joking.”

“You just want to learn more about magic,” Kaine teased.

“That too.” Quentin sighed and glanced away, but for a moment, Kaine glimpsed his mate’s very real fear. “But I guess you’re part of the package.”

“You’re dealing with this all very well. I swear when it’s over?—”

“Will it ever be?”

“Yes. We’re going to burn the Board to the ground so nothing rises from the ashes.”

## Page 26

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:16 am*

Quentin sat in the king's private lounge room with a glass of brandy in his hand. He'd never drank brandy, and he wasn't sure he liked the taste or the way it burned, even though it was over one hundred years old, but he took another sip because he didn't know how to tell the king that brandy wasn't his thing.

The king sat on the sofa opposite him, holding his second drink while staring at him. Quentin was trying hard not to accidentally read any of the king's thoughts, but it was so tempting to take a taste.

There was a bodyguard in the room and another on the other side of the door. All three had met him at yet another entrance to the castle, and he'd been directed to this room and given a drink. Food had been brought and set on the coffee table, and while the king had eaten a little, Quentin hadn't.

Were they not talking because of the class difference or because there was nothing to say in front of the bodyguard?

The king put his glass on the table and gave a small nod as if deciding something. "So you are the language expert."

"Um...yes...Your Majesty."

"With all this excitement, you haven't been shown the library."

Quentin sat up a little straighter. "That's correct."

"Well, I may not be an official archivist, but I know where the library is. And where

the archives are. Perhaps I can interest you in a tour of that section.”

“If it’s not too much trouble.” He didn’t want to be any trouble. That he was being babysat by the king and his security detail was imposition enough, not that the king seemed to mind as they were both waiting for someone.

“I could do with the distraction.” The king stood.

Quentin followed him, and the two guards followed them both. After a couple of minutes and several stairs and corridors, he finally found the words to say something. “Are you always followed like this...Your Majesty?”

He kept forgetting to add the honorific. Hopefully, that wouldn’t get him into trouble.

“No.” The king pushed open a rather nondescript door. “The main library. The oldest texts are to the left. The very old texts are in the archive.” The king started toward the older books.

One guard remained at the door. The other walked a lap heading in the other direction. Then they were alone.

“How long have you been his mate?” The king’s words were soft.

“A week, Your Majesty.” It felt like longer. Like his life before magic had been lived by someone else.

“You don’t need to keep saying it. We’re in private and having a conversation. It would be like me calling you Mr. Silverbrook all the time.”

“I didn’t know.” He bit his tongue to keep from tacking on the honorific again.



“I suspect there is a lot you don’t know.”

Kaine had called the king and asked him to watch over his mate. He had heard the king’s shock, but there had never been a moment of doubt or refusal.

“I suspect I know rather too much at this point.”

The king made a small, wounded noise. “When Kaine returns, we will discuss that situation. Until then, we will distract ourselves by finding you something rare and strange to study. How do you feel about pre-Roman texts?”

“Pre-Roman?”

“We have a book made of lead sheets. We have no idea what it says, but the gold on the front indicates it is important.”

“And the lead that it was made to last.”

“Exactly. So perhaps that is a place to start.”

“Do you have other things written in the same scripts or translations?” Because if it wasn’t written in something another academic had worked on, it was going to be difficult, especially as he didn’t even know what it was about.

“I don’t know...Olier was our historian. He was the one who wanted to keep records of the past. If he worked on any translations, they would be in the archives.”

“Do you keep the same names?”

The king paused and looked at him. “He really hasn’t explained much.”

There hasn't been time. "I was kind of busy learning how to use my magic...there isn't a witch who can magically read some of these?" That would be a very cool magic to have. It also meant he'd spent three years at university learning something that could be done with magic.

The king shook his head. "Not that I have ever heard of. I could invite a psychometric witch to see what he can sense from the books, but given how many people have touched them over the years, sifting back through centuries will be dangerous."

Quentin's lips parted as he thought of all the doors. All the lives in Everest's head. "It would take forever to sift through them."

"Exactly." The king studied him for several heartbeats. "Too much past can be a burden...but there are some of us who long to know everything until perhaps they learn too much."

They weren't talking about books, or libraries, or magic anymore. They were talking about Everest.

Quentin licked his lower lip and took a chance. "I think there may be answers in the more personal recollections." He glanced at the bodyguard, who was walking closer as he made his lap. "Though Kaine said you don't read each other's diaries."

"You are correct. When the others return, I suspect the conversation will be long and unpleasant." The king paused at a set of shelves with a glass front.

"I'm sorry."

"It is a talk that has been a long time coming. Though it is only now we have the pieces to understand. I do not think it is an accident that a finder and a mind reader have found their way within our walls. Though I am curious to know if this is your

first time crossing paths with Kaine.”

“He said he didn’t know me and that there was no soul bruise.”

The king laughed. “I suspect Kaine has few of them. He has always been careful. He prefers theory to practice, and he hates loose ends wrapping around his throat.”

“Can I ask something?”

“You have been, so why are you having doubts now?”

Because it was weird, and he was trying to piece things together from snippets. “You live many times, but that’s because of what you are. But then for me to have crossed paths...that means I have also lived before. Does everyone?”

The king shrugged and stared at the books behind the glass. “We don’t know everything. We tend to recognize people. A push or a pull toward them if we have known them in the past. It appears a witch’s magic is tied to their soul, as Dalmon and Lucian have been fated mates before. We think all paranormals have many lives and that it is to do with magic. How that works for other shifters, I do not know, but I am sure this is not the first time I have run across Malcolm.”

“And you don’t question it?”

“I question when and where and what happened, but not the rest.”

“So only two of you have fated mates?”

“It is rare, and usually same-sex couples.”

“Someone really needs to write a book, ‘you’ve found your fated mate...now what?’”

The king smiled at him. “Perhaps someone does.”

“So does that mean that all the other fated mates have also been mates before, but they don’t know because they don’t have diaries?”

“Possibly...most likely. Even humans have theories that when people reincarnate, it’s with those from previous lives.”

“Except humans don’t?”

“I do not know for sure, but I would guess not because they don’t have magic. Do you want to examine the book?”

“As in, hold it? I don’t have gloves.” What if it is cursed?

The king opened a drawer and handed him a pair of white gloves before pulling a pair on himself. From the same drawer, he pulled out a key and unlocked the glass door.

Even the dust smelled old.

The king lifted the lead book out and offered it to him—the king wasn’t worried that it was cursed. Or that Quentin would drop it.

“Um...can I turn the page?”

“You want me to be the book stand?”

Quentin glanced up at him, knowing he’d overstepped. “I didn’t mean it like that, Your Majesty.”

Had he gotten too casual?

“I’m joking. Of course you can turn the page. I’d be delighted if you said you recognized the letters and could translate it in a few weeks.”

Quentin felt his eyebrow lift. “There are experts, not students like me, who would kill each other in the stampede to be the first to study your old texts.”

“I cannot allow humans in as there may be mentions of witches and shifters. It may be our lore. That has been our problem for centuries...and now you appear on this cusp of change.”

No one had ever called him a solution, only a problem.

He carefully turned the page. The edges were soft, and bits had broken off over the centuries, but the words that had been engraved were still legible.

“It’s written in Greek letters, and I have studied enough Ancient Greek to be sure it’s not written in that language. It’s probably Gaulish. I can check a reference, as there are some, not many.” And if it was Gaulish because there had been other translations done, he’d have a bit of a head start. If it was something older...

He looked up at the king and was willing to bet it was something older, but that didn’t mean that it wasn’t related to Gaulish or some other language that also used the same alphabet. “Do you have something in the same language that isn’t so precious?”

“I don’t know. That is a question for Dalmon or Kaine, or you can look around here. This is the oldest section.”

“The oldest section on display.” There would be so much more in their diaries, not that he wanted to read their diaries, mostly because they had written them, not some long-dead person who didn’t care that people were reading their innermost thoughts three centuries later.

“I will arrange archive access.” The king put the lead book back into the cabinet and relocked it. The gloves he dropped into a basket at the side. No doubt someone would come along and wash them and return them. “The other, more private section will need to be discussed. Until then, you may return here whenever you like, and the kingdom will be most grateful for your assistance in this matter. Though you may not publish your work. Not without it being vetted first.” The king gave him a look that suggested publishing anything without permission would be a career-ending move and that even being Kaine’s mate wouldn’t save his ass.

He’d have the job of his dreams but no recognition. No one, besides the phoenixes, would ever see his work.

It wasn’t a hard decision to make. “Of course I want to assist.”

“Whatever you need, just ask.”

What he wanted was Kaine.

But not even the king could grant him that, so he settled for something much simpler to kill some more time for both of them. “Perhaps you might like to show me some of your favorite parts of the castle?”

The king smiled. “We can fill the hours that way. Shall we start with the most recent and go backwards, or would you prefer to start in the past and come forward?”

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:16 am*

It had been so long since Kaine had worked on such a big operation that he had forgotten how long it took to process everyone. And he wasn't even doing the processing. He was coordinating or on the phone or meeting with other high-level people.

And while he had spoken to Dalmon once, the rest of the time they had been exchanging voicemails as they both moved from meeting to meeting.

All he knew was that in Britain, the Shadow Board was falling. Several witches had been arrested, and Dalmon had played the shifter trafficking card, though to the human authorities, it was viewed as human trafficking. They had been piecing this together for so long that watching the Board unravel was more relief than anything else.

And even then, it was more of a reprieve than an end because of Everest.

It was dark, and he was starving by the time he left. He kept working in the car, checking the news as Frederick drove around to pick up Malcolm.

Gerrit had released a statement about the cyber-attack on Mont de Leucoy, saying that it could've been much worse and that it appeared to be a test run for a much larger operation. That they were working with the authorities. He didn't specify which ones, but the people in the know would assume all the major security organizations were involved. None of them would be aware of the work of the Coven.

Kaine had no doubt that several countries were now shitting themselves. Including Britain, since that is where the attack had begun. It was not a good look for either

country. He had no idea how the high-profile arrests were going to play out or how they would be described to the media. And he didn't care.

What he did know was that they had been incredibly lucky.

The car stopped, and Malcolm got in. He leaned back and closed his eyes as if ready to take a nap.

But the day wasn't over. Not for him anyway, because there was still the Everest problem to deal with. Every time he thought of his brother, the knife in his gut twisted.

"I'm assuming you need me tomorrow," Malcolm said.

"I need everyone I can trust for the next couple of weeks." That's how long it was going to take to dig through some of this.

"Were you ever going to tell me about the attack?"

Kaine blinked, and it took him several seconds to realize what Malcolm was talking about. "Gerrit is at the castle. With so much going on, I..." He hadn't given much thought to the attack once Gerrit was away and safe. "How did you hear about that?"

"He called me."

Kaine's grip on his phone tightened. Quentin hadn't called or messaged. But neither had he. For a while, he had even forgotten about the bond, too distracted by other things. He reached for him but didn't get a response.

By the time they reached the castle, his stomach was grumbling.



“When is the last time you ate?” Malcolm asked as he got out of the car.

“I can’t remember.” That should be the first thing he did, but he needed to be with Quentin.

He needed to speak with Gerrit.

And he hoped he could do all three at once.

As it turned out, he could. Gerrit was waiting for them in one of the larger private lounges with a spread of sandwiches. Quentin was asleep on the sofa, but as soon as Kaine walked in, he woke and blinked as if not sure where he was or what was going on.

“Hey.” Kaine knelt next to the sofa. He ran his palms over Quentin’s thighs, needing to touch him. “I’m sorry it’s so late.”

“What time is it?”

“After eleven.” They all needed to sleep, but none of them would sleep well with worries about Everest stalking them.

Quentin grimaced. “Gerrit said Dalmon should be here.”

“We’ll call him.” Kaine glanced over his shoulder at Gerrit, who was holding Malcolm close and whispering to him. They were both smiling. Something he hadn’t seen Gerrit do in a long time before Malcolm.

Malcolm was good for his brother and was working to prove he was trustworthy.

Had proven it.

He was the one who needed to let go of the grudge before it caused damage. Gerrit kissed Malcolm, then turned as if sensing his attention.

Kaine sighed. He'd give Malcom the medal himself just for making Gerrit happy.

"Shall I call Dalmon?" Gerrit asked, but he was looking at Quentin. In the time they had spent together, they seemed to have reached a level of familiarity that made Kaine almost envious.

"Yes...but don't be mad at me."

Kaine pulled him close and kissed his cheek. "You saw what you saw, and we need to know."

Quentin nodded against him.

Kaine's stomach gave another growl.

"Eat something. You're making my stomach hurt." Quentin pushed him away.

Kaine laughed. He sat next to his mate and helped himself to the sandwiches while Gerrit greeted Dalmon, gave him an update, and told him who was in the room before putting him on speaker.

Dalmon didn't bother greeting them all. He launched straight in. "I have a few issues, such as sending your mate, an untrained mind reader, into someone else's mind, but it's done, and he's not trapped, so let's move on. Quentin, do not do that again. I will send a mind reader to train you once they have some availability."

Quentin bit his lip, but the rebuke was for Kaine. The one he got in private would be much sharper, though perhaps Dalmon might skip the dressing down this time.

“Thank you. Do you want me to just tell you what happened?” Quentin looked at Kaine. “I’m not sure how these meetings work.”

“Yes, tell us what happened and what you sensed.”

“At first, he blocked me. Then it was almost easy to enter. I expected more resistance. Once in, I was in a corridor with hundreds...thousands...of doors. Some of them were open. None were locked. He didn’t say it, but I knew that each of those doors was a life.” He glanced at Kaine. “He remembers all his lives. And he knows that I know.”

“Are you sure? Another person’s mind can be a strange place.” Dalmon asked.

Gerrit was silent, his hand wrapped around Malcolm’s.

“I saw the doors via the bond and had the urge to protect Quentin. I pulled him out. If I hadn’t seen it, I would also have doubts,” Kaine said.

There were a few seconds of silence as if everyone were digesting the information.

“That first year of shifting and then after he learned about Olier was difficult. He was different. I thought I had him back.” Gerrit stared at the carpet, unable to hide the hurt.

“He does love you. I felt that. But he knows everything. Every life. All your history.” He could have become lost because while getting in was easy, he’d never considered how to get out. “It’s a lot.”

“And it will kill him,” Dalmon said. “The brain isn’t made to hold millennia of memories. I believe it’s why we forget each time.”

“It’s why he’s so smart,” Kaine added. Why Everest was able to jump so far ahead. “And why he thought he could take what he wanted from the Shadow Board.”

“He wants Olier,” Quentin said. “That’s all. He calls the loss a festering wound.”

“Because he hasn’t let it go,” Kaine snapped. “He blames himself.”

Quentin put his hand on Kaine’s knee.

“Not all of us can let go as easily as you,” Dalmon said with a sigh. “But that is not the problem now. He conspired with the Shadow Board, to damage the kingdom and every other country, to save Olier. And in the process, unlocked more history than he can handle.”

“Too cocky and too reckless,” Gerrit murmured. “He always was.”

And probably always would be.

“The question is, what do we do now—privately and publicly—when at the moment, we can’t trust him?”

No one spoke. Kaine ate another sandwich as he chewed through the problem. “There are only a few options. None of which are great. We let him go and offer assistance, which he may reject if he no longer trusts us. We find someone to seal up the past before it breaks him. Or we egg him.”

Gerrit inhaled sharply.

“Sorry, but it is an option.” And not one Kaine wanted to take because, in public, Everest was the prince.

“I think we should find out how he unlocked the past because if I were him, I’d have written that down so I could do it next time,” Quentin said.

“The Shadow Board is breaking up...he could step in as the savior and offer them refuge,” Dalmon said.

“Walking them into our hands.” Kaine nodded.

“Correct. Assuming he will work with us. And so far, he has been more interested in using us.”

“Then use that. Give him enough rope.” There was a bitter edge in Gerrit’s voice.

“We have lost one brother; we don’t want to lose another.” No matter how much Everest strayed, he was one of them, and they didn’t know how long he had until his mind collapsed under the weight of the past. “Do we have any idea about the damage the memories will cause?”

Quentin shook his head. “I didn’t sense any, but I wasn’t there long, and I didn’t know what I was looking for.”

“No one is blaming you,” Dalmon said. “No one is blaming anyone.” The words did nothing to remove the stricken expression from Gerrit’s face. “It’s late; we need to think. And I know this will be unpopular, but Olier has been gone for a couple of centuries...we should read his books. Maybe there is something that can help us.”

Gerrit grunted as though hit. “We must all agree.”

“I do not think Everest gets a vote,” Kaine said, half expecting Dalmon to disagree on principle even though it was his idea. “We are all here. I vote in favor.”

“I suggested it,” Dalmon said. “Gerrit?”

“It pains me, but yes. Our history is becoming a problem. There are too many secrets. We need to plan our coming out.”

Malcolm gave a hard-edged laugh. “The world might be ready for a bisexual king, but shifters are going to be much harder to swallow.”

“Then we need to prepare, in our spare time, between saving the world and saving Everest.” Kaine didn’t know if the latter could be done. But they had to try. “Someone should speak to him.”

“I do not know what to say...” Gerrit stared at his hands, the fingers of one laced with Malcolm’s. “How did I miss this?”

“No one could’ve seen it,” Dalmon said. “It’s late. Leave him for tonight. Kaine, can you talk to him tomorrow?”

“Yes, but we need to come up with a plan soon. A couple of days at most. People are used to seeing him.” If he disappeared from view, then there would be too many questions. It was all becoming too complicated.

Quentin leaned his head on Kaine’s shoulder. They were all exhausted and shocked. And if Kaine were being honest, he was scared. Scared for Everest and all of them. Everything they thought they knew about each other and the world was coming undone, and there was nothing he could do to stop it.

“Go to bed, everyone. We can reconvene tomorrow after dinner,” Gerrit said as he stood, dismissing everyone.

No one disagreed.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:16 am*

Quentin stepped out of the shower and Kaine wrapped him in a towel and pulled him close. "I thought you'd be in bed."

"I couldn't bear to leave you." Kaine kissed him, and while there was heat, it was banked by exhaustion and worry, yet Kaine held him close. "I should have told you it's possible for a witch to surrender their magic, but I didn't want to give up this chance. It was selfish, and I'm sorry."

"It's okay, but did you really think I wouldn't want to learn more about magic?"

"Some witches don't. Mind reading is not an easy magic, and you have experienced the impacts." He exhaled and rested his cheek against Quentin's. "I'm not used to being scared, and since meeting you, that is all I have felt."

"All?" Quentin murmured in his ear.

Kaine gave a low laugh as he rubbed Quentin's back. "Maybe not all. Which is why I was scared of losing the bond before I'd...before we'd gotten a chance."

"I was scared today. For you and Everest after what I'd seen."

"I shouldn't have asked. Dalmon is going to give me a bollocking about that later." He released Quentin to help him finish drying. Though with Kaine's help, it took longer.

"Will he, really?"

“Yes, because I thought the ends justified the means, and I can’t even say I regret it. You found something invaluable and terrifying.”

“Did you deliberately put me at risk?” He didn’t believe that was what happened, though it had been risky.

“No, I thought you knew enough and were smart enough to work it out. I trusted you. And I’m glad I did...” Kaine bit his lip.

Kaine’s sense of failure swept over him, and it was crushing.

“You didn’t fail Everest.”

“We all did. We failed Dalmon and let him become cold and driven. And I didn’t notice the depth of Gerrit’s loneliness.”

“And how did they fail you?” Because Kaine couldn’t blame himself for all the ills of his brothers. It would be easy for Quentin to blame his parents for so much, and sometimes he did, but they hadn’t known what to do with him and had done their best. In return, so had he.

Quentin took the towel away from Kaine and slung it over the rail.

Kaine’s gaze swept over him, but he was frowning. “I am not part of the family...and not only in this life. I have often felt like the outsider, the one who didn’t belong.”

“They do not see you that way.”

“We are family because of our secrets. Because of what we are.”

“And we are together because of magic. Does it matter?” Quentin offered his hand to



lead Kaine to bed. “Or is this lesser?”

They were magically married and needed to figure it out. They had to.

“It’s not less because of the magic, it’s more.” Kaine took his hand and followed, flicking the bathroom light off as he went past.

“But you discount your family for the same reason.”

The bed sheets were already turned down, and the room was softly lit. All he wanted to do was crawl between the sheets.

Kaine huffed out a breath. “Does this mean you will stay and give this a chance?”

“I’m here and about to get into your bed.” He considered pointing out the change in topic but let it slide. Kaine was smart enough to reflect on his family on his own, and they could talk about it another time when they weren’t aching to lie down.

“You might just want sex.”

Quentin laughed as he sat on what was becoming his side of the bed. “I want to sleep.”

Kaine got in on his side. “There is a third option. Some fated mates have a business relationship.”

“I like you, and it won’t take much for me to fall for you. And I don’t care if it’s because of the magic. I want to explore the part of the world I never knew about. And I want to do it with you.”

“And I want to show you. I love watching curiosity light up your eyes. I want to share

my secrets...I hope you'll still like me after you learn too much."

"Being mates means there is a lot of oversharing." There was no hiding how he felt, but he liked that, as he knew where he stood. And while neither of them knew exactly where that was, they could find out together. "There is some oversharing that might be a lot of fun... I want to know what it feels like when you're fucking me." He glanced away.

Kaine laughed and pulled him close. "I am always interested in trying new things. I'm not used to letting anyone in."

"Then I'll let you in first so you can experience what I feel. Unless I'm pushing too much and being too?—"

Kaine kissed him. "No. You're not too much. This is more honesty than I am used to. More closeness. But I want it even though having a mate scares me. It's what I need. You are what I need. And I know you have a life outside of all my bullshit, but I would like it if you quit your job and moved in with me while you finish your studies."

"Move in here, or move in at your other place?"

Kaine drew in a breath. "My actual house."

And Quentin knew exactly how big that step was, as Kaine had shared the way he never had lovers over. Perhaps because he had been waiting.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:16 am*

Kaine woke up to a hand that wasn't his wrapped around his already hard dick. Then there was a lick a moment before the head of his cock was engulfed by the wet heat of Quentin's mouth. Not wanting to ruin the moment, he tried to pretend he was asleep, but Quentin was sharing exactly how much he enjoyed having Kaine's cock in his mouth.

He also shared that he was aware Kaine was awake.

But if you want to keep faking, go for it.

Kaine was drowning in the physical sensation of Quentin's tongue and lips and the mental sensation that made it seem as though he was sucking dick because in that moment, he was both Quentin and himself, and it was as confusing as it was exciting.

Quentin made a noise and took him deep. The head of Kaine's cock nudged the back of his throat. He gripped the bedsheets as his balls tightened, and his cock throbbed. Then he slipped a little deeper. Quentin swallowed around him but couldn't take all of him. He drew back slowly as if determined to make Kaine come.

And he was almost successful.

Kaine didn't know if it was being woken up like that, or the sensory overload that was breaking him. But if he watched he'd be gone. He needed a second or two.

"Have you ever swallowed the entire length?" His words were a little breathy, and he hoped Quentin answered with words, not the bond.

“No.” Quentin’s hand stroked the spit-slick shaft. “But I’m happy to keep trying.” His tongue swiped over the slit and traced around the head.

Kaine groaned as Quentin’s mouth slid over the shaft. His hips bucked as flames formed on his skin.

Shit. He needed to get control of that.

Quentin hummed his approval as though he liked the flames. The vibration through his dick, coupled with Quentin’s delight, pushed him over the edge. Quentin gave him a final lick while Kaine tried to catch his breath. He was sure that he’d singed the bedsheets.

“Get up here, take your hand off your cock.”

Quentin gave a frustrated gasp but moved up to kiss him. That hadn’t been what Kaine wanted. He pushed the thought to Quentin. It was one thing to share sensations, but another desires. And while he could’ve spoken the words in his head or even aloud since they were testing things...

Quentin paused, his lips against Kaine’s and his tongue in his mouth. “I think I got that, but it’s gonna be embarrassing if I’m wrong.”

“You’re a mind reader, so read my mind.”

“I was concentrating on sharing with you using the bond rather than using my magic.”

“You can use them both at the same time. You will be able to, anyway.” He gave Quentin a little tug to get him moving, already anticipating the first taste of pre-cum.

Quentin moved to kneel over Kaine's head.

Kaine ran his hands over Quentin's thighs and slid down the bed a little. He licked along Quentin's length, cleaning the spilled pre-cum off his skin. "Put your hands on the headboard."

"Just so you know?—"

"I am aware you feel very exposed." Kaine licked a couple of fingers and ran over Quentin's hole to prove the point. "But I like being able to access everything."

He licked Quentin's balls and up his shaft, keeping his fingers where they were to tease his hole. It was his turn to overshare every sensation.

A bit of pre-cum slid from the slit. Kaine caught it with his tongue, then let his head drop back to the mattress, leaving no doubt what he wanted.

There was a moment of hesitation, but only a little as Quentin rolled his hips forward and his cock slid into Kaine's waiting mouth. With one hand on his mate's hip and the other brushing his hole, it was easy to control his thrusts and encourage him to go deeper each time.

And he made sure that Quentin felt everything.

Including the pressure as his dick slid into Kaine's throat. He swallowed around him. And dragged him closer to take the last little bit.

Quentin jerked and came with a moan. And every swallow Kaine made caused him to groan again. When his lungs were burning, he pulled Quentin back enough that he could breathe, but he didn't release him. He kept tormenting the head with his tongue.

It was only then Quentin responded with his own oversharing, as each sweep of his tongue became torture. Kaine's dick throbbed from the shared oversensitivity, and he released his mate with a groan and lay there gasping for breath. Quentin didn't move either. He leaned on the headboard as if he was unable to support himself.

"That was..." Kaine sighed.

"Yeah..." Quentin opened his eyes and stared at him. "Though, if we over share together. At the same time..."

"We're both going to end up coming in under thirty seconds."

"But you're also going to get hard again much quicker."

There was no hiding that.

"The lube is under my pillow."

Kaine slithered out from beneath him and grabbed it, slicking his cock and then Quentin's hole in a hurry. He was barely there when Quentin pushed back, and he sank in. He didn't know who groaned, only that they both went still.

"It's too much." Or they weren't used to it.

"Yeah," Quentin closed his eyes. "I'm pulling back, but your dick is kind of distracting."

So was Quentin's ass, but Kaine also tried to pull back from the bond. He felt Quentin wrestling with his magic and the moment he got it under control because he was adrift and missing a part of himself. "Oh..."

He wanted it back, even though it was too much.

He rolled his hips slowly, half expecting to drown again, but there was only the tight heat of Quentin's ass.

"I'm okay. Give me a bit of what you feel," Quentin said.

Kaine released his grip on the bond, expecting something to flow back to him.

"Are you going to share?" He punctuated the sentence with shallow thrusts.

"Mmm. In a bit." Quentin's enjoyment was clear even without the bond, but Kaine wanted more.

He gripped Quentin's hips and thrust harder. "Is this what you're waiting for?"

"Yeah." He arched his back and met every thrust. "God, I didn't realize fucking someone felt so good."

Kaine almost paused. "You've never topped?"

"No," he gasped. And his ass clenched around him as if he was coming. It was then Quentin opened the bond, so Kaine was once again swept up in his mate's pleasure and the feeling of fullness from being fucked, and the slight sting of his rim. It was delicious and something he wanted to experience.

His grip tightened, and he gave a couple more thrusts before letting go.

Quentin shuddered in his arms. "That...ohh."

And he felt it too, how aware Quentin was of every small move, every sensation and

the way he liked that there was nothing between them. That Kaine had come in him.

He wrapped his arms around him. Well aware there were flames on his skin but not trying to contain them. “If you ever want to...we could.”

He didn’t want Quentin to think it was off the table.

Quentin laughed. “You’re still sharing everything. And maybe...it’s not something I’ve thought about. Because I like this.”

“I do too, obviously.” There was definitely an art to keeping the bond open without sharing every thought and feeling and he did not have it. Not when they were together. Not yet anyway.

“That’s because of my magic. It made the mind-reading part happen faster. When I have more control, it will be easier for both of us.”

He ran his hands up Quentin’s chest and thumbed his nipples, enjoying the way he squirmed.

“If you keep going, I’ll think you want more.”

It was tempting to stay in bed, in his quarters, but the rest of the world was waiting. And he was needed. “I’d promise to meet you for lunch, but I can’t.”

Quentin lifted his head and glanced over his shoulder. “Dinner. Here, or...?”

“Here, for the moment. Take Jacob or Orion if you go home to pack. Frederick is yours, as needed. He knows this.”

Quentin put his hand over Kaine’s, stopping it from moving. “But I don’t know how



to contact him. You haven't given me what I need to stand on my own. I don't even have your phone number."

"I'm not used to sharing that information." And it hadn't occurred to him. "I will arrange a secure phone today, and I'll make sure you have that information. You are going to need to tell me what you need."

"A shower would be a good start...breakfast...the code and key to your rooms..."

Kaine slapped him on the ass and pulled out. "Okay, point taken. I will get that taken care of."

His phone rang. Gerrit.

"Get the shower going. I'll be there in a minute." He picked up his phone and watched Quentin as he crawled over the bed and walked toward the bathroom. "What is it?"

"Everest is gone."

"What do you mean, gone? Did someone let him out?" Which guard had he fucked?

"I've watched the camera footage. He got the dampening cuffs off and flew out."

"Are you shitting me? Where did he go?"

"He stopped by his rooms as there is a scorch mark on the balcony, and then he left via a secret exit. If you're out of bed, come and see for yourself."

"Why didn't you call sooner?"

“Because he had already been gone for eight hours when I realized. Another two weren’t going to matter.”

Quentin stood in the bathroom doorway, face pale. The shower ran in the background.

Kaine raked his fingers through his hair. “He’s going after Olier and what’s left of the Shadow Board.”

“His mind is a time bomb that will kill him. We could lose him.” Gerrit sounded like a worried father, not a betrayed king.

“How do we find a man who remembers a thousand lives and who doesn’t want to be found?”

“You find Olier first,” Quentin said, as if that would be as easy as finding lube under a pillow.

Gerrit sighed. “You read Everest’s books and find out who he really is.”

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:16 am*

“Where do you want me to start?” Quentin ducked as he stepped under one of the ancient beams. Unable to believe he stood in the secret library.

It was dusty and smelled of old paper, and leather and other things he couldn't place, and he was trying to act chill, but he was fairly sure Kaine knew he was anything but.

Kaine gave his hand a squeeze.

There were five desks, each separated by shelves, and the shelves were filled with books and scrolls and tablets and all kinds of things—a lot like the archive room. Only this was the phoenix's secret library. This was where they kept their diaries.

Gerrit placed his hand on one desk. “You may only read Olier's and Everest's books. This is Everest's desk. The one at the back is Olier's.”

“I want you to read mine, but that is best left for another time,” Kaine said.

They had discussed the diaries, and while Kaine had admitted he wasn't good at being open in person, he didn't feel the need to keep his previous lives a secret. Quentin wished he had something to share. Around Kaine, he often felt as though he were swimming, and every time he glanced down, he realized he couldn't see the bottom and that if he stopped, he'd sink.

Gerrit gave Kaine a sharp glance, then turned his attention to Quentin. “Lucian is coming to assist. He should arrive this afternoon. And while he can't read French, he will find the pages we are looking for, meaning you won't need to translate as much. I'm hoping that most of what we need is in the centuries Kaine and I can read.”

Quentin frowned. "If you've never read each other's diaries, how do you know what language they are written in? Kaine writes in code."

"You write in code?" Gerrit asked as if he didn't believe it.

Kaine shrugged. "Only for the last six or so lives."

"And if Everest can remember everything, he could be writing in Sumerian cuneiform." Or Gaulish, or something he didn't have a name for.

Could finder magic be used to assist with translating? That was something he wanted to find out.

Gerrit stepped aside and motioned Quentin forward. "You will start with Everest. I would much rather do it, but Olier's will be much harder for you to read."

Quentin stepped up to the desk and sat. For a couple of heartbeats, he didn't move. His gaze scanned the shelves. The sheer amount of history, of knowledge in this room, in the castle archives. He understood why the phoenixes were buried by their own past but also why they kept it.

Why make the same mistakes over and over again when they could learn from the past?

"Do you think all the history you've kept will help paranormals step out into the world?" He was stalling, not quite ready to open the book. On the desk were a couple of modern ballpoint pens. Nothing special. The book was fancy, leather bound with silver corners.

"I hope so because if we can't find the answers in the past, why have we been keeping it for so long?" Gerrit flipped open the cover of Everest's diary. "We need to find him."

“We need to find them both,” Kaine said. “I hope Jacob has better luck now he has something of Olier’s.”

“We need to find how Everest remembered and how to undo it because if we find him and can’t save him...” Gerrit’s voice caught.

Quentin didn’t voice his concern that Everest may not have written everything in his diary. They had enough problems without him trying to find more before they’d even started.

He turned to the first entry.

There were tear stains on the page, and his first entry was about his life being a lie and the loss of Olier. From the date, Everest couldn’t have been much older than sixteen.

What did you do, Everest?

Quentin turned the page, both dreading and hoping to find the answer.

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