



The First Year Continued (Marked Blood Academy #2)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Leave it to me to bite the first guy who was nice to me.

Adjusting to the Marked Blood Academy is going about as well as I dreaded. Call it what they may, it is more of a prison, maybe like a juvenile facility, although we are all young adults, than an “academy.” And I have my experience at The Urban Academy to compare it to.

Back then, I thought I was unhappy. I didn’t quite fit in, never had a group of friends to hang out with, and everyone seemed to pair up—or harem up. Sometimes it felt like a romance academy. Not for me. I never felt the least bit of attraction to anyone anyway. But there is not one but three guys my wolf is doing growly backflips over. This is not the time to be fooling around.

Especially with what I just discovered in the shower.

We are here because we are a danger to the community. We have all been bitten by vampires in battle or elsewhere and not turned or died. Most of us got very sick for a while, but the powers that be are afraid we could turn at any time.

If this is such a safe place, how did a new vampire bite appear on my belly? Definitely not the time to be interested in romance. This is a battle for survival.

The First Year Continued is the second in the Marked Blood Academy series. When a whole new type of vampires descends upon the world, none of the rules apply. In the past, you died or were changed, but now some young people do neither...so far. And those victims are a wild card who the councils decide must be segregated from the rest. Nothing the headmistress of Urban Academy or any of the other schools sways the council. The students bear the marks, the stain, the shame of something they had no control over and are imprisoned without benefit of trial. None of the rules for their protection apply.

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Odin

Caught between bliss and anguish, each pull of Roxy's mouth sucked more of my life force from my body. I swayed toward her, bracing my hands on either side of her body. I didn't want to hurt her but knew that my strength would give out any second.

The edges of my vision became so cloudy, I closed my eyes and sank into the abyss—farther and farther. Darkness washed over me. Pulled me under. Tugged on my consciousness until I barely remembered my name.

Or if I was still alive.

“Roxy!” someone called from a distance. I recognized the voice but couldn't recall the name of the owner. “Roxy, you have to stop. Stop!”

Hands clamped on my shoulders and wrenched me backward.

I would've caught myself if it weren't for the debilitating jelly my legs had turned into.

My body weighed a thousand pounds. Clattering and rushing movements swirled around me.

I landed in a slapping heap on the cold floor.

Oh, the chill felt so nice compared to the fever that had wrapped me in its embrace.

Cold. Sleep. So damned sleepy.

“Odin.” My face stung from the impact. Ouch, that hurt, damn it.

Did Sol slap me? That insolent prince. He was going to pay for that...as soon as I could move my arms and legs again. I tried to lift my hand to bat him away, get him to let me drown, but my hands were made of lead and even my shifter strength was of no use.

“Odin, wake up. You’ve got to open your eyes. We have to make sure you’re okay.”

I would’ve loved to wake up. Damned eyes wouldn’t open.

Fight back. Wake up. Wake up!

My wolf sent me a surge of energy. Magic trickled through our connection, dripping at first, and then a big push had me inhaling all the oxygen in the room.

“There. Open your eyes, big guy.”

I shot up to a seated position and used all my concentration to force my eyelids open.

I was in Roxy’s room. Evander had his arms around her waist and his legs wrapped around her hips.

A thin scarlet ribbon made a river that started at the corner of her mouth and meandered down her jawline and to her throat.

Fangs, vampire fangs, sharp and white, protruded from her gums.

Her eyes were wild. Wide. Large. Nailing me down.

“Is she okay?” I asked. “Roxy? Are you okay?”

Her breaths slowed, and it was her turn to close her eyes.

Sol crouched beside me. “Is she all right? Are you?”

Why was he worried about me? Why me and not her?

The moments before my capture by the darkness all came flooding back. Finding Roxy in the stairwell. Bringing her to her room. This room. Yes, we were in her room. Why was it so hard to remember that?

She pulled me in. I thought she was going to kiss me.

Then she sank those fangs right into my neck. A burst of pleasure and passion took over the pricks of pain.

Then there was the throbbing of my heartbeat in my temples.

The drumming of my slowing heart.

The gulps and grunts as she pulled me closer, tugging at my clothes. Pulling me closer—closer still.

She couldn't stop. Her need flowed from me, from her body to my wound and threaded into my soul.

“Odin, gods damn it. Answer me!”

“I'm here.” I could form no other response at the moment.

“Good. About time.” He turned to look at Roxy.

She had calmed enough for Evander to release his grip. Tears flowed from her eyes, and she slapped her hands over her mouth. “Odin? Odin, I’m so sorry. I…”

“Let’s get him onto the bed. I need to see if he’s stopped bleeding.”

Evander and Sol grabbed me, hefting me up by the arms only to deposit me on Roxy’s bed. The power my wolf had shocked me but waned bit by bit and sleepiness threatened to take over again.

I lay back on the pillow that smelled like her. Evander leaned over my form and tugged at my shirt. “It’s still not closed. We need to put pressure on it.”

“Here.” Evander ducked into the bathroom and emerged with a small towel, balled it up, and pressed it against my wound.

Long gone were the fuzzy sensations and pleasure that knocked out the pain.

When he put his weight on my neck, it bit back, sending aching pain down to my chest and over my shoulder. Even my jaw hurt.

“What in the hell happened?” Sol asked, pacing. “Start from the beginning.”

I told him everything I remembered.

As I spoke, Roxy came over and took my hand in hers. She filled in the gaps of my memory. “I’m so sorry, Odin. I never wanted to hurt you. I never wanted to hurt anyone.”

“You didn’t mean to. It was not your fault.”

Evander crouched near Roxy. “We know you wouldn’t hurt us on purpose. You haven’t been doing well with the bite.”

“You noticed? I thought I was hiding it so well.”

Sol cocked his head. “You weren’t. Not from us, at least. Not sure about the others. Speaking of hiding it well, we need to talk about this. What happens next.” He pulled the towel away from my neck. “The bleeding stopped. You’ll be better once you shift, but it’s coagulating for now.”

“How do you feel?” Roxy asked. I found it funny how she ignored Sol’s conversation. No one ignored Sol.

I wished I could take her in my arms and tell her I would be fine. That I was more concerned about her and her pain. Despite liters of my blood inside her, we weren’t there yet. I was sure she was my mate, our mate, but kept my mouth shut.

“I’ll be okay. A little weak. What about you?” I squeezed her hand back.

“I’m okay. Hungry.” Every stare landed on her. “Not like that. I could really use some sugar.”

“I’ll run and get them a snack but not before we talk.” Sol was all business. All kinds of rare things happening today.

“About what?” I asked. “She didn’t mean to do it.”

“I believe that.” Evander took a seat and rested his head in his hands. “We need to talk about never telling anyone about this. Not telling a soul what happened here tonight.”

“What will happen to me?” Roxy whispered, pulling my shirt aside to look at the bite.
“I’m so sorry.”

“Nothing because none of us are going to tell anyone. No one.” Sol rose from the bed. “I’m going to go get Odin some clothes. Evander, when I get back, you find something for them to eat.”

“I can stay with him. He’s okay for now, right?” she said.

Evander and Sol shared a look. “We’re not sure that’s a wise idea, Rox. It’s too soon.”

“Oh.”

I wasn’t safe with her.

“I’ll go. Be right back.”

While Sol was gone, I let my eyes close. Roxy slid to the floor and laid her head against my hand, which she still held in hers. Sol came back, and soon Evander left. In no time, he was back as well, snacks and a few sandwiches in hand. “I told them we were studying. They bought it.”

My friends helped me sit up. I ate two of the sandwiches, but Roxy didn’t touch a bite. Once I was full, she finally took a pack of peanut butter crackers and ate them slowly.

“What happens now?” she asked. “If someone finds out, I’ll be staked. Exiled. Forced to go rogue. All of the above.”

“We said we wouldn’t tell anyone and we meant that. We’re in this together.” I

reassured all of them. Mostly Roxy. Our mate. We had a new bond now. One of blood.

Did her bite count as a mark? No. It was made with vampire fangs.

Besides, she wasn't exactly in her right mind when she did it.

"I would understand if you did." She blinked back tears. "I would understand if you all left and never spoke to me again. What I did was unforgivable."

"You weren't yourself. The responsibility lies with the vampire who bit you first. Hell, even the shifters are responsible for making us go to war. None of this is on you."

If anything, her expression darkened even more.

"If it's okay with you, we'll spend the night here. Odin's not strong enough to get to our room without being noticed and we want to make sure you're good as well." Sol looked genuinely concerned about me.

"You do?" She perked up a bit. "Even after this?"

"Always, Roxy. We'll always look after you."

We found places to sleep. They all insisted I stay on Desi's bed and made spots for themselves on the floor, Roxy in her own bed, of course. The lights were turned off. Silence took over.

"Roxy?" Evander said.

"Yeah?"

“Are you...can you still feel your wolf?”

I hadn't thought to ask her that. Did he think drinking blood had turned her fully vampire? Smart to ask.

A pregnant pause hung between us. “Yes,” she finally answered. “My wolf is still there. She spoke to me. She's not gone. Thank the goddess. That means I'm still a shifter, right?” Her cheeks, which had been flushed, paled. “A shifter and a vam—”

“Shh,” I tried to comfort her. “Let's get some sleep. We all need it after tonight.”

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Roxy

They violated all the rules by staying with me, but I was so grateful.

Desi had stayed with someone else—I wasn't sure who, but I'd heard Sol talking to her in the hallway, sending her away.

Another broken rule, but since she probably landed with another girl, she'd be able to claim they were studying for whatever class they shared.

And I had no desire to send the males away.

Fearing to be alone, I was more than relieved when they announced they were all staying.

Just one, I'd have had to turn down because I didn't trust myself not to attack again.

And it seemed I had extensive strength, if I'd been able to hold Odin in place while I drank from him.

It wasn't something I'd planned or even seen coming. One moment, I was me, and everything was chill and happy, the next, my fangs were sinking into Odin's throat, and I was drinking his blood.

When the hell did I get fangs? Or start drinking blood?

My twin bed was not exactly roomy, something that made me sad because I craved

the nearness of all three of them, but also relieved.

What if the fangs came back?

Never imagining I'd get any sleep, I no sooner closed my eyes, than Sol was shaking my shoulder. "Roxy, you need to wake up."

"No. Tired." I rolled onto my stomach, bringing my pillow with me to cover my head.

"Sorry, sweetheart." He sat on the edge of the mattress and rubbed my back with such gentleness, I nearly melted. "If we don't go to class, we're going to have bigger problems."

I let him guide me onto my back again and pushed to sit against the headboard. "Bigger than me becoming a vampire and eating all my friends." I grimaced. "Sorry, drinking them. That's about as big a problem as anyone could have."

"You'd think." He eased the covers down and tugged me onto his lap. "But we're not sure exactly how the venom is affecting you, and I hesitate to say you're fully a vampire."

"Why not? I sure acted like one last night." My gaze fell on Odin, still asleep in Desi's bed and pale as milk. "Look at my victim." A dreadful thought followed that horrible word. "Oh goddess. Did I turn him as well? Is he a vampire now too?"

"Again, there are reasons to think you are not, at least in the traditional sense. Yes, you bit him and apparently grew fangs, but I want to point out that you are sitting in a pool of sunlight. And you're not dead."

"Oh." I blinked in the glare, but certainly was not turning to a cinder. "My stomach

hurts, though, like a bee sting kind of. Could that be a reaction to the sun?"

"I don't think so." He shook his head. "Maybe you do have a bite of some kind."

I drew back in horror. "Another bite?"

"Like a mosquito. I think you'd have noticed a bee. Here, pull up your shirt a little and let us see."

Since I was wearing a sleep shirt and shorts, that didn't sound too embarrassing, so I lifted the hem above my navel.

"A mosquito bite would be itchy. It wouldn't hurt.

So I— What the hell?" Two perfectly round marks, with blood crusted at the edges, adorned my belly.

"Did one of you bite me while I was sleeping?"

"None of us bit you." Sol stood up from where he'd been lying on the floor and came to look. "But someone or something did. And it wasn't during the night because I never closed my eyes."

"It had to have happened before I attacked Odin." As my voice rose, the wolf in question's eyes opened. Shadows ringed them, and his lips were nearly void of color. I did this to him.

"Morning, Roxy. What's all the fuss?" I'd nearly killed him and he asked that?

I couldn't find words, but Evander turned me on his lap. "Look. She's been bitten a second time. Thinking that might have something to do with what happened."

He sat up slowly, grimacing. “Roxy, when did it happen?”

I searched my memory, pushing past the guilt that filled most of it.

“I don’t know, but it looks so fresh.” It had to be yesterday since a shower would have washed away the mess around the two marks.

But when? Where? And the big question. “How did a vampire get on the grounds? With all the security, I doubt an unauthorized squirrel could get through.”

“I have another bite as well,” he said.

More guilt washed over me, and I climbed off Evander’s lap. “Of course, you do.” I’d put it there, and it was not two neat holes, either. It lay beneath his collar, but I remembered what it looked like. “I hope it won’t get infected.”

“I don’t think that’s the danger we’re worried about.

But remember, the guys disinfected and bandaged it with some supplies from the bathroom.

” At least this school provided those! He offered me a smile, but the strain in his face did not ease.

“And I wasn’t referring to this.” He tapped his shoulder. “But this.”

Lifting his shirt, Odin revealed a pair of wounds similar to mine but more healed.

“When did that happen?” I asked, leaning in to look more closely. “It’s not very old.”

“I noticed it a while back, but I didn’t want to say anything.”

Sol and Evander crowded in to look as well. They didn't comment, but they didn't have to.

I did. "When you noticed it—were you already here at Marked Blood?"

"Yes. If I'd had it before, they would have spotted it in the examination. It was quite thorough."

I shuddered at the memory. Of course, I'd been under the care of the healers for more than just admission here. My injuries were quite severe, but there had been some parts of my treatment that had no relation to my injuries.

Evander rocked back on his heels. "You were both bitten here. Within the school walls. By someone or I should say something that shouldn't be here."

"That is far less than reassuring."

The guys didn't want to leave me alone, but Desi was going to come back to get ready for class, so I shooed them out and headed in to take a shower.

Rebandaging my bite, I tried to treat it like any injury instead of something that might mean the end of my life as I knew it.

This school was kind of like a prison, but it was better than a real one or, worse, execution.

Any of those things could happen to someone who was found to be a danger to their fellow students.

My behavior the previous night would be proof of that to anyone.

I hurried to dress and only crossed paths with Desi long enough to tell her I'd fill her in later and thank her for giving us the room. She grinned and started to say something then sobered and nodded. Clearly, I didn't look like someone who had fun all night with three hot wolves.

Shaky, but hoping for another chance to live and make things work—maybe not bite anyone else—I settled in for my first class of the day, Vampire Wars.

Excellent.

After that, I had shifting, and Evander was in that one with me. I wasn't sure if that was good or bad. If I couldn't shift, he'd probably protect me, in fact, I was sure he would, but what would happen then?

Why would they want any part of me if I couldn't shift anymore?

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Evander

Besides my neck killing me from sleeping on Roxy's hard floor, worry ate me up.

Roxy had attacked Odin. If we hadn't gotten there, would she have bled him dry? No, she wouldn't do that. Not to mention, she had already pulled away from Odin when we burst through the door.

Then again, maybe she was taking a break. If we hadn't come in, would she have finished him off?

I shook my head of the thought and hitched my bag higher on my shoulder. I carried too many damned books around but found a reason to pack them in every day. And by the end of the day, my shoulder was killing me and the skin pockmarked with broken blood vessels.

"Hey," I said, walking up to her as she reached for the opening of her jacket. Roxy's beauty surprised me every day, but today, she was rosier. Stronger.

From Odin's blood.

Goddess, this was hard. I didn't want to think anything negative about Roxy. Considering her a stone-cold vampire bloodsucker was about as negative as it got.

She wasn't. None of this was her fault. We were sent to fight in a war we didn't start, and the ends and means would never affect us personally. But we would suffer the trauma and the loss and the mental blows for the rest of our lives.

Such was war.

Roxy didn't deserve what she was going through. None of us did.

Plus, it was pretty hard to imagine the person I thought was my mate as a killer—an enemy.

The regret had been written all over her face. She didn't want to hurt Odin.

I dreamed about all the blood. Smearred all over Odin. Running down Roxy's face.

“Hey.” She looked down. She still felt bad about attacking Odin and probably would for a while, no matter how much we tried to convince her otherwise. She nudged me with her elbow. “Waiting to see if I'm still a wolf?” Her cheeks reddened.

“No. I have class too, you know.”

“Liar.” She stripped her jacket off and toed off her shoes.

My bag landed on the ground with a thump. “Maybe a little curious.”

She laughed, and the sound connected directly to my heart. The damned thing stammered a bit before resuming a natural beat. “It's okay. I'm kind of curious myself. It's one thing to talk to her, but quite another to make sure I can still...”

A group of students passed us. The females giggled.

“You three get a lot of that, I've noticed.”

She pulled off her skirt and, although nakedness was an ordinary happening for all shifters, I forced my gaze to her eyes. Everything was different with Roxy. Watching

her undress wasn't bland or normal, not an everyday occurrence.

When I watched her undress for the first time, it would be private—and I would have my sights set on marking her as mine.

It was becoming harder and harder to stay away from her.

Odin had a thing for her, I was sure. Maybe Sol as well. Which was crazy because we weren't a pack. We were friends. Sure, there were harems popping up more and more in modern shifter society but was that the case, or were two of us very wrong about Roxy?

I just hoped it didn't tear us apart.

“Well, here goes nothing.”

Roxy shifted beside me. Her wolf a stunner just as she was.

“Evander and Roxy!” One of the administrators stepped onto the field. “You're needed in the office. Now.”

Roxy's wolf whined and gave the lady a bark. The woman lowered her nose and shook her head. “I said now.”

“Time to shift back,” I said and watched Roxy to the point where her four legs became two and she stood upright again.

We both dressed. I hefted that heavy bag back on my shoulder.

“You know, there's these cool metal cabinets called lockers here,” she snarked.

“Oh, really?” I asked. “That would be great, but mine’s in the one building where I have no classes. Does me no good.”

“Mine is in the main building. You can use it if you want. That shit looks heavy.”

“I think I’ll take you up on that. But let’s get to the office and see if we’re still students here first.”

She sighed and pulled a black hairband from her wrist. “Let’s go.”

The secretary had us sit down and wait for the headmistress. Who was not there at the moment...or in the next half hour.

“Is there any reason for us to wait like this? We’re missing class,” Sol finally said.

“No talking,” she snapped.

We all exchanged a look then slumped back in our chairs.

Clearly, we were in trouble and not going to be let off the hook simply because the headmistress was too busy to see us right away.

The chairs we were seated in offered a view of the gate and the gravel drive, not that we could expect a lot of traffic out there.

Delivery trucks came in another gate, and parents never came here.

But, to my surprise, the gates opened and a long, black car drove through the opening and approached the buildings.

Interesting. Possibly menacing for those of us who were waiting for the other shoe to

drop.

I elbowed Sol, and all of us watched the car stop and the headmistress hurry down the steps to meet the suit-clad man who emerged from the back seat.

He clearly had a driver, but not one who got out to open his door. Seemed odd.

The secretary noticed our attention then and got up to close the blinds. What the heck was going on?

Almost another hour passed while classes changed, and everyone went to lunch before the door to the hallway opened to admit the headmistress and the man in the suit as well as another man who clutched a tablet and wore a shirt and tie but no jacket.

Maybe the man was PA, but if he'd also been in the car—which he logically would have had to be—we hadn't gotten to see him get out. Maybe he'd been the driver?

None of these were the questions we really needed answers to, but the others were far more alarming.

“Thank you for the excellent meal,” the man was saying. “Not what I expected from academy cafeteria fare.”

“As if we'd feed you that swill,” she joked, opening the door to her office. They headed inside, closed the door behind them, and again we were left to wait.

But not for long.

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Roxy

Four chairs sat in a row in the middle of the headmistress' office.

Not in front of the desk or along the wall but right there, as if ready for the interrogation to begin.

My anxiety had been sky-high in the outer room, but looking at those chairs, I wanted to turn and run as far and fast as possible.

But sanity and logic prevailed. As far as possible was to the walls surrounding this school, which were patrolled by security who would be alerted the moment I made a break for it.

And how fair would that be to these males who were treating me so well to leave them to face not only whatever had been intended for us originally but worse because of my behavior?

After last night? I owed them so much. Poor Odin whose blood I had drunk like a... I couldn't even think the word, didn't want it in my mind. Instead, I moved to stand in front of one of the chairs, feeling as if I'd be facing a firing squad any minute.

Headmistress sat behind her desk, suit guy stood by the window, looking all slimy and formal, and the other guy had taken a seat in the corner. The room was larger than I'd realized, or maybe it was just my impression that the real estate around our chair qualified as acreage.

This might be a panic attack. I'd heard of them but never had one. Not even in battle when the vampires attacked me. Now would be the very worst time to start. The guys lined up next to me, and we all stood in front of the chairs, waiting. So much waiting!

“Sit down. You all look foolish.” The headmistress gave a small shake of her head. “We give them every chance, and you see how they behave.”

Suit guy pushed away from the window as we took our seats. “They don't seem—”

“It's all my fault.” The words burst from my lips before I knew they were going to happen.

Every head swiveled toward me, and I swallowed hard.

The guys' expressions all said shut up, but it was too late to stop myself, and I wouldn't take it back anyway.

For one thing, it was my fault. All of it.

They'd been stumbling along doing their best in this horrible place until I came along and messed it all up.

They'd missed classes, missed dinner, and who knew what other violations of the rules I didn't even know about.

Not counting the elephant in the room—one I hoped was hiding behind the curtains.

I had to take the blame I'd earned because Sol, Evander, and Odin deserved the best they could manage under the circumstances.

Nauseated, slightly dizzy, and feeling generally like crap, I struggled to focus on

everything going on around me. To make good decisions for everyone concerned.

“What’s all your fault?” The suit guy loomed over me. When had he moved?

“I—”

“The library book.” Odin cut in. “She left it out in the rain and is afraid to return it.”

Headmistress was on her feet and joined the man in his looming. “Are you sure that’s it? She’s confessing to a wet book?”

My lips were parted to spill more things I didn’t need to say, things that would submarine me and save the guys, but before I could, the suit man sneered and said, “Books? Don’t waste my time. I came a long way to get here.”

“Well, that’s all I had to report,” I said, suddenly getting a feeling that there was more going on here than I’d expected. “Sorry to offend you.”

“If you aren’t here because of the book, why are you?” Sol asked. “Because we’ve already missed a couple of classes and lunch.”

“And you think those things are important in the grand scheme?” The suit man’s expression grew even more condescending. “I need to find some students here to help us figure out what is going on in the school. There is a vampire among you, we believe, but we are unable to determine who it might be.”

“Well,” Odin said, “wouldn’t it be someone who couldn’t stand sunlight? Isn’t that their hallmark?”

If so, it meant that I wasn’t one because I’d had no issues going outside on my way to class. I had also understood that vampires would turn to ash in daylight, but somehow

I'd never considered that might apply to me.

"Not necessarily," the man said. "Not in every case. We've identified a genetic mutation that makes it possible for some to go out in daytime, so that would not be a way to find our enemy among you."

"That is why Mr. Tyrol believes you can help. You three boys are popular. People like you."

"And me?" I asked, wondering how I fit into this. I was definitely not popular like them. "Why did you call me in here?"

"Because we need a female to get into conversations that the males cannot. Something is going on here, and we believe it is a vamp infiltrator, but it may be something else. We need to eliminate that as an option first. Are you willing to help us?"

"I am certain they are. It would be a shame if any irregularities were to come up otherwise." Headmistress stared us down. "Am I correct?"

"Yes, ma'am." Did that mean we were getting a pass?

Or they weren't going to be looking too closely at us?

And could we trust any of that? Probably not, but it served my purpose to find out who the hell bit me.

Who—besides me—bit Odin. Yeah, I was all in, but not because we were getting vaguely threatened.

I was heartily sick of being bitten by vampires and had a terrible feeling that enough

bits would add up to something I didn't want to consider at all.

Like, if I became a vampire, would my wolf leave me? Could she leave me? How did that even work?

"I'm glad you're all going to cooperate. My superiors will be glad to hear it." The suit man nodded and gave us an icky thin-lipped smile. "It is far better than the alternative, I assure you."

In the corner, his assistant, or whoever he was, tapped away on his tablet, taking notes, presumably, making a record of our agreement to go along with the plan.

Who were the superiors he referred to?

I was starting to have way too many questions and not nearly enough answers, but at least we weren't being sent away, and if the administration and whoever the suit guy was knew about the past twelve or so hours, they weren't admitting it.

We had our marching orders, but we still sat there in a row while the headmistress and her guests put their heads together in the assistant's corner and spoke in low tones.

So low, that even my shifter hearing only gave me the odd word and none of them added to my understanding of what was happening here.

"Well?" The headmistress broke herself away from her meeting and arched an eyebrow. "What are you waiting for? You know what you need to do. Report back as soon as you know something. Now, go! You're missing classes."

We'd already pointed that out, hadn't we?

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Sol

We were all but pushed out of the office and we went, stunned into the hallway. We stood there for a few minutes before we were told to stop dawdling.

“Sol?” Roxy asked as I didn’t immediately move with them.

“I’ll be on my way in a minute.”

I pretended to look for something in my bag when I saw suit guy exit the office but instead, he hung back, talking to the headmistress in the more public area of the office. He was followed closely by the other male. Their scent held a hint of shifter.

But something was off.

I wouldn’t even call him mister because he was that weird. But the headmistress addressed him by name. Tyrol.

The way he showed up here and commanded the headmistress was not the usual.

Even his suit was not what it appeared. To the untrained eye, it was an expensive thing, I thought. But being a former well-dressed prince, I knew the seams. The lines.

I had a feeling this man was as fake as his pseudo-designer suit.

I pulled a random piece of paper from my bag, just to look like I was doing something productive and backed up to watch from a vantage point where I wasn’t so

obvious. I was good at this. Sneaking around. Except it wasn't dark.

And even though everything about this man oozed fake, the danger, I was sure, was real.

My wolf had raised his hackles and snarled when he loomed over Roxy, even though he was talking about nothing more than wet books and a potential vampire among us.

I didn't even know if that story was real. Had there been reports of vampire attacks? Did anyone else have mysterious new bites?

If someone heard of it, there would be no need for secret meetings. Because other students would want the vampire to be found, too. All of us were dealing with enough with our own trauma and post-war wounds both inside and out to want anything to do with a vampire around.

The man who followed Tyrol around, broke off and headed toward the door of the office. His shiny shoes clicked on the floors of the academy as he beelined for the front door, letting the light in upon his exit.

I followed him outside, not too far away so as not to lose him. Outside, the long black car was parked in the driveway. Huh. I hadn't seen this driveway since the day I arrived here. It was only a few years ago but sometimes, it felt like I'd been at Marked Blood Academy for a decade.

I tried to duck behind a tree since that was the only hiding place outside but as I sidestepped, the man turned around to face me. Slowly, he took off his sunglasses and tucked them into the pocket of his black pants. He was dressed in all black. No suit like the other guy. He wasn't as important.

“What are you doing, young man?”

“I go to school here.”

He wasn't amused. “Yes. I'm aware of that. What I mean is, what are you doing out here? Shouldn't you be in class or, I don't know, not following me?”

I scoffed. “I go to school here, and you are the guest. What makes you think I'm following you?”

“Because there are no classes out here.”

He really needed to stop making points. It was pissing me off. “I came out to get a breath of fresh air.”

“Is that right? Even though there's a courtyard inside the school? Running grounds? A common area?”

Clearly, he'd gotten a tour of the academy.

“Yes. I like the air out here.”

“Either that, or you were following me to find out more about my boss.”

I stepped out from behind the tree. I was only halfway hidden, and there was no fucking point anyway. I'd been caught. That in itself made me cringe. I was never caught sneaking around the academy. I blamed it on the lack of hiding places. “Who is your boss?” I asked.

“Didn't you just have a meeting with him and the headmistress? Do you have a memory issue? If so, that might hinder the investigation into the vampire.”

Smart-ass.

“I mean, who is he really?”

Employees of people like the suit guy were disgruntled, in my experience, more than willing to talk shit about their employer.

“He is my boss, and he is looking for you and your friends to help us find the vampire among you. Any other details are of no consequence to you.”

“You want us to just blindly work for some guy because he showed up and claimed he was looking for a vampire?”

“Mr. Tyrol is not to be played with, Sol. I suggest you go back to class and begin what you were tasked with.”

I was so tired of everyone telling us what to do. So many rules. Overbearing leaders. Oppression all around us. And now this? Just shut up and do what you were asked to do. “Why?”

“Because.” He stalked over to me. He wasn’t as intimidating as Tyrol, but he had an air of power.

His scent was shifter, but there was more.

No, not more—less. Like he wasn’t all shifter.

He was part. “Mr. Tyrol is a very, very dangerous man. You don’t want to find out what happens to those who cross him. Trust me.”

A few seconds later, Tyrol came out. He didn’t spare me a glance. The assistant or goon of Tyrol opened the back door for him, and soon they tore out of the driveway and onto the road.

My heart thrummed in my chest.

I could simply run away.

Take off right now and run. I would be rogue, sure, but being alone, making my own rules didn't sound so bad. If it weren't for the shifter council hunting me down, or worse, the other paranormals out there who hated shifters, I would've done it.

No. No, that wasn't true. I turned around to face the school.

No. My friends were in there.

Roxy was in there.

My wolf would never let me leave any of them, but especially her. Not that I wanted to. She needed us.

And as much as I'd tried to deny it, I needed her. My wolf claimed she was mine. Mine.

Not some girl I wanted to fuck or date or have something casual with, which I didn't do, but we wanted Roxy to be ours.

Damn it. Life was hard enough with being a shifter and young and now having a potential mate without adding fucking vampires to the mix.

Plus, there was Roxy and Odin and the fact that she had almost drunk him dry.

The scene replayed in my head, no matter how I tried to shake it off.

I put my hand on the door handle and sighed.

What was inside this school was infinitely more important than some short-lived freedom. I made a resolve right then and there to ensure, one way or another, that we made it out of here, and hopefully in one piece.

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Roxy

I made it through the afternoon classes, barely, but by dinnertime, I just wanted to go back to bed.

Odin had to be even worse, but you'd never know it to see him laughing with a couple of classmates as he came out of his last session of the day.

In fact, his openness and relaxed demeanor were not what anyone who knew him would expect.

Overcompensating much?

I lifted my feet a little higher, using energy I didn't have to try to catch up with him as he left the people he'd been talking to behind and moved down the hall.

"Roxy?" Desi's voice caught me and slowed me down again. Not hard, since I had run down on about the fourth step after Odin. "Wait. I need to talk to you."

"Hi, Desi. Thanks so much for last night."

She linked her arm with mine. "You're welcome, but my cooperation comes with a price. I take it you didn't want me to make myself scarce for a romantic evening with your mates."

"Mates? I am not mated to them. They're helping me out with whatever is going on and oh...Desi, it's so much worse than that."

“What?” She dragged me toward an outside door. “We need to have this talk in private, I assume.”

“We don’t have time.” I dug my heels in. “I can’t miss dinner again. I’m on thin ice already. The only reason I’m still here is they don’t know... Oh, Desi, it’s all such an insane mess.”

“I know a spot. Come on. We have a half hour, and you can spend it telling your bestie all about it. She led me toward a copse of trees I’d never noticed, or maybe only as background foliage, but in the middle, there was an open space.

“This is private for sure, unless there are ears in the trees.”

“There are not. No ears of any kind. I’ve checked. And with open space all around the trees, there is no way anyone can sneak up on us. Mostly, I just come here for privacy. That’s hard to get in this place.” She released my arm and dropped to sit down.

“No kidding.” I sat cross-legged in front of her. “If I get through the mess I’m in.”

“Okay, tell your bestie all about it. How did you spend the night with the three hottest guys in school who are clearly insane about you and just waiting for the word to mate you, and manage not to have fun.”

“I bit him...Odin. I grew fangs and launched myself at him and drank his blood like your typical vampire.”

I expected her to reel back, to be repulsed, maybe to run, but not Desi. She was made of stronger stuff than that. “Okay, since I just saw him walking down the hallway, you didn’t kill him.”

“No...”

“Or even debilitate him.”

“I wouldn’t go that far.” I swallowed, remembering what happened. “But it was close.”

“And the others saved him?” She reached for one of my hands and held it between hers. “Lucky they were there.”

“They weren’t and they didn’t. I stopped.”

Her eyes widened. “You did? Okay, let’s start at the beginning. What made you want to bite him?”

“There was no want or thought. It was like being in a trance. One minute, I was fine and the next, I was drinking his blood.”

“Enjoying it?” No judgment colored her tones. I didn’t think I’d be as calm. No, I absolutely would not be.

“No. It wasn’t like that, but I didn’t think I could stop. And then, I managed. How are you even still sitting here? For all you know, you’ll be my next victim. Oh Goddess, I have victims.” I tried to pull my hand free, but she held tight.

“At best, a victim, and I doubt he considers himself one.” She stroked the back of my hand. “Any idea what brought on this episode?”

I used my free hand to push down my skirt. “Look.”

“Is that...oh, Roxy! When did you get a second bite?” Even if she wasn’t judging me,

her voice came out high and tight. “I’ve seen you getting dressed—not that I was staring. I don’t like girls that way.”

“I know.” Sharing a room and a bathroom made it hard not to see each other naked. Also being shifters.

“And that wasn’t there...”

“I don’t suppose you remember last time you saw it not there?” It would help if I knew when I’d been attacked. “Because I have no memory of it happening.”

She tapped her cheek. “I don’t really know because I’m not paying that much attention, but for sure a couple of days ago?” Her jaw dropped. “You got bitten on school grounds. Unless you somehow were outside the walls?”

“Not to my knowledge, but then I can’t imagine when I was approached and bitten on my stomach.” The true horror engulfed me. “What if something else happened? What if they...I’d know if they did worse right? If they r—”

“We are not going there. I have to think if they had, there would be signs of some kind. Let’s deal with what we do know. You have been bitten a second time on school grounds and since your, umm, encounter, so has Odin.”

“A third time for him.”

“What?” She dropped my hand and pulled up her shirt, examining her abdomen. “Was it his stomach too? What if we’re all getting bitten? Does he remember his experience?”

“The one me, yes. The other, no.”

“Oh hell, what are we going to do? There is a vampire among us.” She held my gaze.
“And it’s not you.”

“Anyway, I’m not sure if I’m supposed to share the rest of this, but let me tell you where I spent my morning.”

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Odin

“Take a walk with me?” I enfolded Roxy’s hand in mine and gave it a tug.

She looked conflicted. I hated that for her. “I don’t know.”

Sol and Evander exchanged a glance.

“It’s okay.” Evander reached out and touched her shoulder. It was strange. Them touching her never bothered me. Now, the thought of another male touching her made my wolf want to growl, but my friends? Nothing. They would never hurt her.

My friends would never hurt my mate.

“What if something happens?” she asked, tearing up. It broke my heart.

“Do you feel out of control?” I asked. “Are you in pain or anything?”

She shook her head.

“Then I trust you. Come on.” The word mate was on my tongue, but I dared not speak it.

We weren’t allowed to mate or have a mate at the academy.

It was forbidden. Their reasons were stupid and cruel, but while I didn’t care about getting in trouble myself, I cared about her getting in trouble. I cared about her above

myself.

“Okay.”

There were some students and staff up ahead, so I released her hand. There were no rules about hand-holding, but I didn't want to bring any more attention to Roxy other than the attention she already got.

All the males looked at her. She was stunning. I didn't blame them. The females were upset at her. They made comments in passing and right to our faces about how we'd never spent time around females before.

What they didn't know was that I would never spend time around a female again, none but her.

Maybe Desi if she was around. She was a good friend to my mate.

“Are you okay?” I asked when we rounded a corner and were finally in a private-ish spot. We sat on a concrete bench. She sat close to me. So close, our thighs were touching.

“I don't know.” Roxy shrugged and tucked some errant hair behind her ear. The evening was getting chilly. The seasons were changing. I could smell autumn creeping in. The leaves were ready to turn. The trees settling in for the time of rest.

Roxy shuddered as a wind blew through the alcove we'd found. Instinctively, I put my arm around her shoulders and squeezed. “If you're cold, we can go inside.”

“No. I like it here. It's quiet and...unless you don't want to be alone with me. It's getting dark.”

The oranges and pinks of the sun setting could be seen over the trees, but that was the only indication of sunset. I hoped that one day, I could take Roxy somewhere where we could see the sunset. Watch it together. Be at peace. Right now, that dream felt unattainable.

“I’m not afraid of you,” I whispered in her ear.

“I gave you every reason to be.”

“Did you want to bite me? Did you wish for it and make it happen? Were you conscious of that choice?” I asked, already knowing the answer. My mate wouldn’t ever hurt me on purpose. She was out of her mind. Something about her bites affected her in a way our bites hadn’t.

“Of course not. I would never hurt you. It’s all a blur. It was like someone else was in my body. I wasn’t in control of myself. I’m scared every minute it will happen again.”

“It won’t. And if it does, we’ll deal with it.”

My wolf howled inside me as Roxy leaned her head on my shoulder. “Thank you. You three could’ve turned me in but you didn’t.”

“We care about you, Roxy. All of us do. But me the most.”

She giggled and I wallowed in the sound. We had very few moments of happiness in this place and since the wars, so every laugh was precious. Every smile. “Of course you the most.”

We sat there for a while, a comfortable silence between us.

She snuggled into my hold deeper and deeper until we were tangled in each other's embrace while the world changed from day to night around us.

Surprisingly, no one came around. I could hear students and other people moving around, talking, making noise, but no one bothered us.

I wished we could stay like that forever.

“Do you want to go inside? It's getting cold and today has been a doozy.”

She laughed. “It really has been a day. Can we stay here a bit longer? It's peaceful.”

“We can do whatever you want to, sweetheart.” The words poured out of my mouth effortlessly.

“What did you just say?” She turned, breaking our bubble.

“It just slipped out.” I cupped her face with my hands. “But I mean it. You're my sweetheart.”

Her cheeks immediately turned red. Goddess, she was gorgeous in this moment. My mate was beautiful all the time, but right now? I'd surely been blessed with her.

“Odin, after what I did to you...”

“Hey, I'm trying to have a moment here. Forget about what happened, okay? It doesn't change the way I feel about you.”

She cocked her head and pressed farther into my palm. “How do you feel about me, Odin?”

Every time she said my name, my wolf wanted to claim her right then and there. This

wasn't fair. None of it was. Us being forced to be here. Her being bitten. All of us being bitten.

We deserved to have a life, not just survive.

"I feel like I want to kiss you, female."

"I feel like I want you to kiss me too."

My heartbeat throbbed between my temples. It was so loud and powerful. My wolf whined inside me.

I moved my face toward hers, slowly, in case she changed her mind. "Are you sure?" I breathed.

She didn't answer with words. Instead, Roxy wrapped her arms around my neck and leaned forward. Her scent intensified. I was surrounded by her smell. Fire, rain, the wind before a winter storm, leaves. None of the elements were left out.

And then her lips were on mine. I sank into her embrace. At first, the kiss was sweet, chaste, almost. Her lips were soft, softer than anything I could've imagined. Her silken lips opened and I gasped as her tongue licked my bottom lip.

I opened my own mouth, and we turned our heads, deepening our kiss as though we'd been doing it for years.

My hands reached into her jacket and I pulled her closer.

Her body was so warm, so damned inviting.

If we weren't here. If we weren't under the supervision of this place, I would've

invited her to my room. Out for a date.

To be my mate.

She let out a little whimper as our tongues met, and it was the end of me. My cock strained, punching against the restraint of my pants. Her legs scissored against themselves and me.

I'd never wanted anyone as much as I wanted Roxy in that moment.

A sound from behind Roxy made me pull away from the kiss. The bushes behind her moved. Not a shake from the wind or a branch falling on them.

Someone was in there.

"Get behind me," I said, putting my body between her and the bush. Everything went still for a second. The bush. The wind. The sounds around us. The night became immobile. Ringing began in my ears, and my wolf snarled and snapped his teeth, wanting out. There was someone in the bush.

Someone near my mate.

And they didn't smell like anyone I knew.

"What is it?" Roxy whispered from behind me. She clutched my shirt in her fists. Her body pressed against my back.

"I don't..."

A figure darted from the bushes and to my right.

It was so fast. Faster than a shifter moved.

I watched for a few seconds as the shadowy person or thing ran a distance and then stopped.

I could see it a bit more now. It had a body.

A shape like a human or an unfazed shifter.

It was on two legs. Even though it shot out of the bushes and ran, it wasn't breathing hard.

Could this be the vampire Tyrol wanted us to look for? Either way, my wolf immediately thought this person was danger. Danger to me. To the students. But most importantly, to my mate.

“What should we do?” Roxy asked.

I didn't think about the answer. Didn't hesitate. If this was a vampire on our academy ground, there was only one thing to do. I'd killed vampires before. This one wasn't getting away.

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Roxy

He took off. Odin did. Before I could do much more than register the fact that there was a danger, the male I'd nearly drained dry was flying across the grounds after the racing figure.

It had burst out of the bushes and torn away.

I was on my feet, too, but they were both running so fast, I couldn't keep up.

How was that even possible? In our training to fight in the vampire wars, we learned that drinking blood was where they got their strength.

And shifter blood was like caffeine or something.

An energy drink. So, in theory, shouldn't all that shifter blood I'd drunk have given me super strength or something?

Or at least helped me to be as fast as the one I'd weakened?

I ran after them, but I was not only not catching up, I wasn't positive I was still going in the right direction.

But what choice did I have? The grounds here were more extensive than at the Urban Academy, since we weren't in the middle of the city like that wonderful school was, but they weren't so big that I should be able to lose Odin and whoever he was chasing.

I spotted the trees where I'd sat with Desi, coming up on my left and paused to glance at the glade inside, but there was nobody there.

I hadn't expected to find them because if Odin had caught up to the other, there would likely be noise of some kind.

Feeling more than foolish but unable to think of an alternative, I ran on, staying in the shadow of the walls as much as possible.

We wouldn't be alone out here even in the evening.

Security was out here. Had they been told not to do anything about us because of our special mission?

I had no idea. But certainly I was not accosted on my way.

After a while, my steps flagged, my breathing harsh.

Drinking blood had sure not given me any superpowers.

If anything, I felt weaker than at any point in my life save after my injury in the wars.

And yet, I didn't even have a memory of being bitten that second time.

The first one had nearly killed me. I stopped, hands planted on my knees, panting, heart pounding.

Maybe there was a delay in the reaction of the second bite and it was only now kicking in?

And maybe the reason the blood I drank didn't give me the ability to fly or at least

run fast was because I wasn't a vampire?

I'd begun to think I was, and if it weren't for the fact Odin was out there chasing someone or something that could bring him harm, I would be relieved at the likelihood that I was not.

When I got my breath again, I straightened, ready to go but with no idea where that might be that I should be headed.

The grounds were silent, the lights from the buildings where the rest of the student body and the staff were going about their evening in calm and relative safety, shining out onto the lawns.

Time to go find Sol and Evander and tell them what was going on.

This wasn't a situation I could handle by myself, anymore.

If it ever had been. The moment I lost sight of Odin, I should have gone right in for them.

My racing aimlessly around campus might have cost him his life.

As would standing here chastising myself. I could wallow in guilt later.

But before I could act on my sudden burst of sanity, the figure that had exploded from the bushes came out of nowhere, charging back in the direction we came from.

No sign of Odin, but hell if I was going to let them get away this time.

What if they'd harmed him? They were going to have to tell me where he went, or I'd do whatever it took to make them.

Without thinking, my tongue ran over my upper teeth. In search of fangs?

I'm not a vampire!

It would be handy to have fangs or maybe claws.

I didn't let my exhaustion slow me down this time.

Whoever I chased, I would catch them, but within a couple of minutes, they were out of sight.

What the hell? How fast was this thing? The vampires I'd fought had been very fast too, but I wasn't sure that was what I was after.

Leaving the walls behind, I moved closer to the buildings, searching, watching, and then there it was again, as if it appeared from darkness, shooting past me again.

Was it toying with me? What had it done with Odin?

I stopped, shuddering, unable to control myself or anything else, as my wolf took over and carried me into a shift that shredded my clothing from my body.

I'd been shifting since adolescence, and never before had my wolf done this.

Or had it been this brutal. Instead of the smooth shift I'd grown to expect, I felt every bone break and remake itself, every hair force itself from my skin.

Fangs appeared, but not of the vampire variety. The wolf ones burst from my gums in a spray of blood and pain. Exquisite agony in every cell of my body held me in place.

What are you doing? I screamed in my head, but my wolf only growled. I can't bear

it.

While I stood shivering in my fur, I heard noises from behind me. Wolves, and a voice.

Odin! He was alive!

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Odin

“Fuck!” I screamed into the night.

A noise from behind me made me jump and I turned, ready to attack the person I’d been chasing all night. Except, instead of the shadow person, I found myself in front of Sol and Evander.

“What the fuck, man?” Sol said. “What is going on?”

“There was someone in the bushes when I was with Roxy. He leapt from the bushes and ran, almost like he wanted me to chase him.”

“Where is Roxy?” Evander asked, scanning the area. We were back where we started. The bench where I’d kissed Roxy right next to me.

“I don’t...I don’t know. We were running together but she was behind me for a bit. Then I lost her. I lost her!”

“Okay,” Sol said. He was trying to remain calm, but I saw the way his chest heaved, working for each breath. “We need to find her. More than whoever you were chasing, we have to find her.”

He was right.

“Where do we even start?” I asked. “What if he got to her? What if I failed?”

Evander clapped me on the shoulder. “We can’t think like that. Focus, Odin.”

I nodded and took a cleansing breath. “You’re right. Let’s shift and scent her out. We all know her scent. We can make better time that way.”

We stripped as fast as we could and shifted into our wolves. We took our clothes into our mouths and began to run. As a pack. Together.

It was too bad we couldn’t speak to each other as packs did, in our minds.

Where is she? Where are you, mate?

There were trails of her scent everywhere. Hints of her around every corner but nothing solid for at least an hour or so. It felt like years went by when we saw her silhouette in an area near the dining hall. Darkness was all around her but there was one light above her.

My mate was not okay.

We ran over and saw her shivering. Her eyes were wide. Darker. She wasn’t herself.

There was nothing behind her eyes.

“Roxy!” I said, shifting back and putting on a pair of pants, only.

“What?” she asked.

I took a step toward her but when I reached out to touch her, she gasped. It was loud and pronounced, like she was trying to suck in all the oxygen out of the world. She cried out as a shift took her over. This wasn’t Roxy shifting. The shift was taking her.

In seconds, she was a wolf in front of us. Silent. Not moving.

Something was happening to my mate. The shift wasn't natural.

But in its wake was a scent I didn't recognize. Not shifter. Not the blood of a vampire, metallic and tangy.

The scent was something or someone I didn't recognize. Sol and Evander were still in their wolf forms. "Scent her," I asked. "Did someone touch her?"

They would know if she was hurt by someone. Touched by someone. The scent would be all over her.

"Shift back. Let's get her to her room before they come back."

Evander and Sol shifted back to two legs and got dressed, but Roxy hadn't moved.

She shook in her wolf form. Whether it was cold or fear, I couldn't decipher.

Either way, we had to get her to safety.

She was my first priority. I'd been a fool, chasing that thing, person, around and not making sure she was behind me—safe with me.

Such a silly male thing to do.

"Roxy, can you shift back?" Sol asked her, crouching down so that his eyes were level with hers.

"We have to get out of here," I reiterated. We weren't safe here. He knew that.

“I get that, Odin. I do. But if we’re seen carrying Roxy in her wolf form around campus, it’s not going to be a bit alarming? We will be called into the office and it won’t be to become some weird guy’s spies.”

Ugh. He was right. I hated when Sol was right. I would surely hear about it later.

“What do we do? She’s freezing and clearly in some kind of shock. Plus, whoever we were chasing or was chasing us, I’m not sure which now, we have to get her away from them.”

Just as Sol opened his mouth, probably to argue with me, Roxy shifted back to her human form. Her clothes were in shreds, but we managed to get one of our sweatshirts and a pair of sweatpants on her while trying like hell to keep her modesty.

“Well, that takes care of that. Let’s go.

Rox, we’re going to carry you to your room now.

” Evander spoke to her so softly. He picked her up, honeymoon style, and we followed them across the common area, trying to stick close to the shadows and then to the dorm building.

Roxy’s room was on the second floor, but Evander didn’t seem exerted at all.

Roxy was far too thin for her own good. She needed to eat more, but we weren’t yet in a position to coax her to do so.

Once she knew how much I cared about her. How much we all did—we could maybe ask her to eat more.

For now, we had to get her to safety.

Up the stairs and into her room, Desi saw us. “Is she okay?” Roxy’s friend asked. I’d never spoken to Desi much before Roxy came along, but she was good to our girl. Cared about her.

“We think so. We’re going to bring her to her room and warm her up. I’m sure she’ll tell you everything. Don’t worry.” Sol stopped to speak to her while Evander and I rushed toward her room.

Inside her room, we wrapped her up in blankets but she was still shivering. Her lips had lost all their color. Long gone was the blush she’d had only hours ago when we were kissing under the alcove. She was paler than I’d ever seen her.

“Roxy, sweetheart, can I put you in the warm shower?” Her eyes flicked up to mine, the first sign of life since we stopped chasing the person or thing from outside. “I won’t look. I swear.”

She opened her mouth to speak but instead of saying anything, her teeth chattered and her chin quivered.

Instead, she nodded.

“Come on,” I said to Evander.

Sol came in and closed the door. “Desi is worried but said she trusts us to take care of her. Where are you going?”

“She said we could put her in the shower. We can’t look.”

Sol nodded. “Of course. Let me help.”

In minutes, all three of us were in our boxers, and Roxy was covering her front

private parts and breasts with a small towel.

As soon as her body hit the warm water, she let out a groan of contentment.

Her knees wobbled, so I reached out and held her by the hips. “Tell me when you’re ready to get out.”

She stayed under the spray for what felt like hours. Finally some blush returned to her cheeks and the trembling subsided.

“Can you get yourself dressed?” I asked. Sol and Evander were outside the shower with their backs turned. We were nothing if not gentlemanly.

I wouldn’t betray my mate like that for anything in the world.

“I can. Thank you.”

I made sure she was out of the shower and had enough towels and a robe before we left the bathroom. We waited outside, listening to the sounds, making sure she hadn’t fallen or hurt herself. When she came out with a robe on and looking better, we all let out a breath of relief.

Somewhere along the line, we really needed to have a talk about us and who Roxy was to us.

“Do you need something to eat? Are you ready to talk?”

She sat down on her bed. “I’m fine. I think...I think I can talk about it now.”

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Roxy

The shower helped. At least it stopped the shivering.

I'd never been cold in my fur before. Nor had anyone I knew ever mentioned feeling something like I just experienced while in wolf form.

Of course, generally I made the choice to shift, and in this case, that decision had been made for me.

Standing under the warm spray, I tried to fix in my mind everything that had happened.

It felt a lot like a dream, even the part before my wolf took over. I never wanted to experience that level of pain again. Sure, I knew that all those bodily changes happened, but before, it had always been muted, the first few times a little uncomfortable, but never like this.

“You okay, Roxy?” Evander called from the doorway. “Need anything?”

“No. I'll be out in a minute. I'm all right.” At least I hoped so. I was better, for sure.

“Desi is here, too.”

“She knows what happened in the office,” I called. “I filled her in.”

“So she says. And we're doing that with what just went on. At least as much as we

know.”

He left me alone, then, and I turned the water off and grabbed the fluffy towel from the rack nearby. At least they had good towels here. It helped because my skin felt completely raw. Muscles ached. Bones throbbed. Hell, if this was what a forced shift felt like, count me out in the future.

I needed to protect you.

Now you talk to me. My wolf had been conspicuously silent while taking me to hell and back. Why would you do that?

I already told you. In your weak two-legged form, that thing would have eaten you. Eaten us.

What is it? A vampire?

Not like what we fought in the wars, no.

“Roxy, are you coming out ever?” Desi was in the doorway, holding up a pair of my pajamas. “I thought you’d want these.”

“Thanks.” I let the towel drop, not shy in front of my bestie. “Would you look and see if I have any more mystery bites? I don’t want to ask the guys.”

“Sure.” She walked around me, examining me as carefully as any healer might, even checking a few embarrassing places, but I could put up with whatever I had to in order to be safe.

I was fairly sure the thing hadn’t bitten me again.

If it had been the one who had. And since I didn't remember that other bite, and I'd been out there all alone for who knew how long, who was to say it hadn't?

It was going to kill you this time.

"I don't see anything," she said. "And the one on your abdomen is healing. Roxy, what if we're all getting bitten and don't know it?"

"Want me to check you?"

She was fine, not a mark on her, but by the time we finished, they had to be wondering.

Sure enough, when we emerged, Sol said, "My father would have asked if someone fell into the toilet if they stayed in there that long."

I laughed again then sobered. "We were checking each other for bites."

"We'd have been glad to check you, Roxy," Evander said with maybe the tiniest bit of flirtation in his tone.

"Sure, and leave me unchecked. I get it." Desi started for the door. "I'll leave you all to it."

"No, wait." I grabbed her hand. "We need to keep you in the loop. If something happens to the rest of us, you'll need to get hold of someone on the outside."

This left scary behind long ago. You're the one that the headmistress and Tyrol, or whatever his name is, doesn't know is in on everything. Okay?"

"All right. Cindy is expecting me for the night, though. We're working on a project

together, so she thinks we're just being sneaky to get it done."

"That's good." Odin went to the hallway door and peeked out. "It's getting close to curfew, so we need to get you filled in fast and off to Cindy's room before you get stuck here."

"Also, we drew straws. From now on, one or the other of us is going to stay with you overnight, and tonight it's me, so the other guys have to go." Evander did not look unhappy about this.

"You drew the short straw?" I asked.

"Hardly." Sol shook his head.

They each held up a cut drinking straw from the collection we had in a desk drawer, and Evander's was definitely the longest. "I won."

"Okay, before we're out of time," Sol said, "Odin and Roxy, you tell us what you saw and what happened. Make it fast."

We both launched into the story, talking over one another in our hurry to get it all said and get things settled for the night.

Between us, we were able to come up with a description of the thing we'd been chasing.

Tall, very thin, gender uncertain. Okay...

not very much of a description, but Desi suggested we all meet in the library in the morning, since it would be Saturday and no classes, and take the information we had from Tyrol and our own experience as minimal as it was and see if we couldn't learn

more.

A gene mutation seemed key here. If the creature was vampire and could be in daylight, they for sure weren't anything I'd ever heard of before. The question was whether it was natural or lab mutation.

Everyone went their own way just before curfew, and Evander and I settled in for the night. In our own beds. Which I didn't love at all, but after what I'd done to Odin, I was afraid of what might happen if he had no space to escape and I was overtaken by blood lust again.

Being a real vampire must suck.

The next day, we spent eight hours in the library and found nothing at all that helped us in our quest. That sucked too.

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Sol

“What is that?” Odin asked while I was putting some things in a small duffel. It was my turn to watch over Roxy. We had two reasons to watch over her. Make sure she didn’t attack anyone else and make sure the shadowy person from the other night didn’t come back.

Plus, I wanted to be with her. For no reason at all. Get to know her better without talking about school or vampires or threats. Get to know the person I was sure was my mate.

The other night sealed it all for me. Seeing her so vulnerable. Feeling that she was in danger. All of it answered the question my wolf already had an answer for.

Roxy was my mate.

“It’s a game of checkers.”

He snorted. “Sleepover with the most beautiful, sexy woman, and you’re bringing checkers. I thought you were some heartthrob prince.”

“Fuck off,” I said, stuffing the game into my bag. “I stole it from the library. It’s the best I’ve got with no TV and no other entertainment.”

“The rebellion,” he scoffed.

Evander hadn’t said a lot since the other night. He had the first turn with Roxy and

probably wanted to be with her every night. We all wanted to spend time with her, but the constraints of the school and our limited time, these nights were our best bet. Plus, it ensured we kept her safe.

“I’m off. Good night.”

I slipped out of our dorm room and made the walk to Roxy’s room. She protested with great dramatics when we told her our plan of staying with her at night. We were breaking the rules. We were going to get caught and kicked out. We were going to lose sleep. The woman did protest a lot.

Still, we won.

While I was stealing the checker game in question, I stopped dead in my tracks, thinking of the trajectory we were on with Roxy.

One of us were going to get hurt. Two of us, actually.

We hadn’t said the words out loud, none of us would admit it yet, but Roxy was my mate.

And I was pretty sure Evander and Odin felt the same.

That would be a problem.

We were friends. Best friends. But this was my mate. I didn’t want to lose any of them.

We really needed to have a talk about it.

No idea how to start that conversation.

I raised my fist to knock at the door. My heart dropped to my stomach when Roxy didn't immediately answer. I almost knocked again when the door swung open. There she was. The woman of my dreams. Dressed in some black pajamas with her black hair twisted into a braid.

"Ah, my protector for the night. Come on in."

At least I didn't have to argue with her this time. I walked in and was immediately assaulted by her scent. My wolf went ballistic. He threw all the shifter mating terms at me at once. Claim. Mark. Mate. All of them.

"I brought snacks and a game," I said. I was a bit proud of myself. No resources and I'd brought the date to my girl. I wished things were more normal. I wished I was normal and we weren't being held here in this school.

I would take Roxy on a date. Court her. Bring her breakfast and send her flowers. Spoil my mate rotten.

"Are you serious? How did you manage that?"

"If I tell you, you might be an accessory." I pulled out the game and some chips and salsa from the dining hall.

She put her palms out. "Nope. I'm in enough trouble as it is. Hell, I am trouble all on my own."

"You are not trouble. You are a person, a good person, who has been dealt one hell of a hand. You're not trouble for me."

Roxy bit down on her bottom lip. Such a shame to do that to those perfect plump lips.

“I feel like I’ve come into your lives and wrecked everything.

I know it’s not entirely my fault, but you guys were good before I came along and now look at you.

You’re stealing and sneaking around all night.

Not to mention the decrease in morality of the female population. ”

“What?” I laughed, taking a seat on her desk chair. “First of all, I was a delinquent way before you. You’re giving yourself too much credit, beautiful.”

If she was surprised, she didn’t give it away. I hadn’t called her that before but it fit.

“You were not, Sol.”

“Yes. I was. I actually pride myself in causing chaos. A little bit of trouble is the spice of life.”

“I must be every spice imaginable, then.”

“You are. And what was that comment about the female population?”

She shrugged and came to stand near me. She leaned against her desk, resting her ass on the edge. Those little things made her three times more attractive. Had no idea why but they did. Too much more, and I was going to break the mating rule.

“The comments I get in the hallway. The whispers. The nasty looks. They all think that I’m seeing you or Odin or Evander. They can’t make up their minds, but they are not pleased with me or the situation.”

“Who cares? Even if you weren’t here, I wouldn’t be with any of them. What matters

is what you want.” I paused. We were treading into new territory. “What do you want, Roxy?”

“In general?”

“In general. Specifically. Broadly. Obtusely. Tell me all of it.”

She nodded but a yawn took over. She stretched her arms over her head. “Can I get in bed first? I’m sorry. I know you brought a game but I really just want to get in bed.”

“No problem. Whatever you want.”

She cocked a brunette eyebrow. “Whatever I want?” She bit that lip again. Dangerous woman. “Can you sleep with me? Just sleep.”

“Of course. Give me a minute.”

I ducked into the bathroom and brushed my teeth. I was already in a hoodie and some shorts and they would stay put. The last thing I needed was her skin touching mine any more than it already would.

Then again, holding her all night sounded perfect.

“Lights off?” I asked, stepping out. Roxy lay down on her side and had moved over to make room for me.

“Yes, please.”

I walked over and got in bed with her—my chest to hers. It was a single bed, so there was no stopping our bodies from being pressed together. I heard the click of the lock to the dorm room. Sure, I could bypass it if I wanted, but I didn’t want to.

There was nowhere else I wanted to be.

We lay there for a few minutes not speaking. I laid my arm over her waist and she hooked one of her ankles over mine. “You wanted to know what I want.”

“I do.”

I could almost hear her thinking. Hear the cogs turning in her head. “I want a normal life. As stupid as that sounds. I want to go to Urban Academy. Finish school. Find a career-driven purpose for my life. Find my mate or mates.”

“Mates?” I asked. “Are you destined for more than one mate, Roxy?”

For some reason, the thought didn’t bother me as much as I thought it would. As long as I was one of them.

“I think so. There was a girl at my old school, Valentina. She had a reverse harem. She was happy and they all worked like a pack. It stirred something in my wolf.” I felt her shrug. “I don’t know.”

“What else? Give me the details.”

“I want a cabin. In the woods. With a greenhouse. A hobby that makes money on the side, but I don’t care if it does because it makes me so happy.”

“Sounds like a great life.”

She nodded. Even in the dark, my shifter sight let me see her as though it was day.

“You think so?” she asked. Her hand moved to touch my face. I sunk completely into the sensation.

“I do.”

Another pause hung between us. I could feel her getting tired beside me. Her scent matched the same feeling.

“What do you want?” she whispered. Her eyes were closing and she wiggled deeper into my embrace.

“A mate. A beautiful mate with long silver-streaked black hair. A strong female. Build a house for her. Treat her like a queen.”

She leaned over and kissed me. “Sorry.”

I closed the distance and pressed my lips to hers. “Don’t be. I want that. I want you.”

“I’m scared. I’m scared of hurting you or the others. What I did to Odin...”

“He’s okay. We’re all okay and we are going to figure this out together. Tonight, let’s just rest, okay? You’re safe with me.”

“I know. Thank you, Sol.”

“One second. I have to use the bathroom.” I got up and went to the restroom. Of all the times I need to pee. While washing my hands, my wolf’s hackles rose. Something was wrong.

I opened the door, thinking Roxy was scared or was having a nightmare. She’d been on the cusp of sleep as I slipped out of the bed.

But instead, I found her bed empty. The sheets torn from the bed ripped away and strewn across the floor. Comforter missing. The door to her room was open.

Roxy was gone.

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Roxy

One moment, I was hanging out with Sol for an evening of snacks and checkers, and the next, I was wrapped up in my blanket and hanging over someone's shoulder.

My head spun, dizziness from my position making it hard to think.

An arm clamped over my hips held me in place, layers of fabric muffling my outraged cries.

Must have done a great job, too, if we were traversing the halls of the school and nobody came out to see what was going on.

Where was all the security that generally made life hard?

A dull thud told me we'd exited the building, and then my captor began to run.

Carrying me. A bony shoulder poked my abdomen, right at the spot where they'd bitten me a few days before.

I had no doubt that this was the perpetrator.

Although there might be others, this one had a familiar scent.

With no memory of the whole thing happening, somewhere deep in my brain, that scent had lodged.

It was nasty, but it was there to be remembered.

He carried me then dropped me and dragged me by my feet, somehow still all wrapped up then picked me up again.

I wanted to say “sorry if I’m too heavy for your weakling arms,” but breathing in my wrapping was about all I could manage.

I tried to struggle again, but they’d managed to bind my arms to my sides, and then it was climbing. The school wall?

I was grateful for the comforter when I landed on the ground from a height. It probably kept me from breaking bones. Then he grabbed my hair and towed me along behind him. I lost track of time and only hoped I wasn’t going to be bald. My wolf was fighting to come out, but it wasn’t working.

Lethargy overtook my limbs. And my mind. I’d heard of the vampire gaze, but if this one had gazed at me, I didn’t remember it.

And the guys didn’t even know I was gone. I was all alone and at the mercy of this creature. Nobody could save me this time. I might as well just accept my doom.

But under whatever spell held me in thrall, in apathy, a trickle of energy remained. I struggled to hold on to it.

By now, Sol would have come out of the bathroom and gone to get the others. They would be looking for me. I just had to hold on. Fight to get my wolf out if I could. Fight with my own nails and teeth if that was all I had.

I couldn’t let this spell hold me back from defending myself.

From defending my mates. Odin and the other two who I had not even mated with yet—if I didn't stay alert, how could I protect them from this evil thing that held me in place.

Then the drag on my hair ceased and I lay on the ground, panting and holding on to my sense of self with every bit of mind power I had left.

The creature leaned close, searching my face, and I swung a fist, clopping it in the nose. It snarled and clamped its bony hands with long, dirty claws on my cheeks, holding tight. Making me look into dark eyes swimming with stars.

Peace lies within. The stars hold everything you ever craved, yearned for. Rest, dream, come to me.

I breathed slower, heart rate descending, adrenalin seeping out of my limbs. Yes. Rest. Peace. Dreams Stars. Wait! How the fuck are you in my head?

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Source Creation Date: August 3, 2025, 10:16 am

Odin

It's been four hours. Four hours since Sol broke the electronic locks on our door and burst inside, telling us the bad news.

Roxy had been taken. Sol went to the bathroom for three seconds, his words, and when he came out, she had vanished.

And by the way everything was a mess, it wasn't her choosing.

She'd been taken from us. From me.

Sol had left shortly after he told us the news. Took off in his wolf form into the night. He'd run the perimeter of the whole school and found nothing. We caught up with him on his third round of scenting things out, but he had found nothing.

"What in the fuck do we do?" he asked, shifting back so we could talk.

"We split up. That way we can cover more ground." I didn't see any other way to find her.

"I'll take the east," Evander said. "We should check the buildings too, but what if we get caught?"

"Who the fuck cares if we get caught!" Sol yelled, getting red in the face. We were all worried. All upset that someone took my mate, our, whatever. Roxy. But getting angry with each other didn't solve a single thing.

“If we get caught, Sol, it means we can’t look for her.

Whoever has her might do...I can’t think about what would happen, so not getting caught is paramount, don’t you think?

” Evander got in Sol’s face as he said the words.

Not trying to instigate a fight but standing up to what was a frantic and desperate friend.

“You’re right. Of course. You’re right. Okay. We’re wasting time. Let’s split up and look.”

I shifted in place, not caring about the shredded clothes. My wolf ran with a vengeance. Our mate was missing.

My paws soon were cut up as I damned the boundaries of the school and scrambled over the wall, landing on some broken glass. It didn’t matter.

I’d found a scent.

Roxy. She’d been here. The scent was faint, barely there but it had to be her.

It had to be. I treaded lightly, letting my nose to the leading.

The grass was patted down in a path that led away from the school.

Someone dragged her. The images popped up in my head without permission.

Roxy being dragged by her feet or her hair.

Was she knocked out? Drained? Worse. No.

It couldn't be. Fate wouldn't do that to me after I'd just found her.

Roxy, me, Sol, and Evander had been through hell with the war. We deserved a good life.

Roxy deserved everything.

At some point, the scent faded so much that I doubled back, not knowing where it stopped. I found myself running in circles until I couldn't get a lock on the scent at all.

The grass didn't lie down anymore. It was like at this point, she had vanished.

I stopped and raised my muzzle to the moon. I took a long, deep breath, trying like hell to center myself. Scents didn't just stop. I'd just lost it. I could find it again.

That's when something inside me tugged. Like a rope knotted around my heart, it pulled and beckoned me on. I couldn't get a hold on the scent anymore. No path to lead me on.

But something in my blood called to me. That was it.

I was tethered to Roxy in a way shifters aren't usually. This was different from a mate bond. Kin to a mating mark but somehow more. Deeper. Closer.

My blood was inside her. It flowed, buried inside her own.

It locked me to her and now, it pulled me toward her.

I stopped sniffing and ran with my instinct as my only compass. I followed a line of trees until I came upon a scene that shot freezing-cold blood through my veins. Roxy in the arms of a pale vampire. He was whispering something in her ear and from the looks of it, she was being hypnotized.

I had to decide on my options. I could attack him in my wolf form or take my chances as a human. I had more flexibility as a human but better healing as a wolf.

One way to find out. I ran full speed toward the vampire. He was so busy speaking to Roxy that he didn't see me coming until the last second.

I attacked him, jumping as high as I could, trying to go for the head with my fangs out.

I didn't land my bite. Instead, the vampire flung his arm out, throwing my wolf to the side as though I weighed nothing. I landed against a tree with a thump. Roxy screamed, or so I thought. My ears rang. It took me a few shakes of my head to get my thoughts together.

“Stupid mutt. She's mine.”

The fuck she was. I ran after him again, this time sinking my canines right into his thigh. He might be a vampire, but injuries to the thigh hurt no matter what species you were.

“That's it.” He dropped Roxy who instantly came to her senses once he wasn't touching her.

The vampire rounded me, ready to strike.

Then Roxy shifted. She shifted, and now I had another fighter on my side. Too bad

Evander and Sol weren't here. This vampire would've been dead at first sight. Not that I wasn't a good fighter, but a little help never hurt anyone.

I snapped a few times at the pallid bloodsucker, trying to keep his attention off my mate. He had no scent, which I found interesting. No wonder I couldn't pick it up that night. I was sure now, the shadow person we chased was him.

He'd come to get my woman.

Roxy lunged forward, piercing his calf. I heard the sound of her fangs crushing against his bone. He cried out and landed on his knees in front of me.

One second couldn't be wasted. I stepped forward and bit down on his neck as hard as I could. His acid-like blood filled my mouth, and my wolf turned to spit it out, poison as it was. His body thumped on the ground, lifeless, even though he was undead in the first place.

I shifted back to two legs and ran over to Roxy. "Roxy, I'm here. Shift back. I've got you. It's over."

She looked at me with wide wolf eyes and in seconds shifted to two legs. I checked her body, not caring anything about her nudity but looking for new bites, new wounds. Anywhere that fucker had hurt her, but I saw nothing more than the bite to her stomach and the one on her neck.

Still, who knew what plans he had for my mate once she was all the way under his spell.

"You saved me," she said, out of breath.

"I will always come for you."

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Source Creation Date: August 3, 2025, 10:16 am

Roxy

He saved me.

“I almost killed you, and you saved my life,” I whispered. “Maybe I really am a vampire.”

“You did not almost kill me. Under the most duress possible, you withdrew and did not drain me. I don’t know a lot about vampires, but I suspect stopping isn’t in their repertoire, at least not unless they have a master making them do it. Come on, Roxy, let’s go home.”

“I’d have said Marked Blood isn’t home, but now, I feel like anywhere you and Sol and Evander are is my home.” I tried to take a step but wobbled and nearly fell. “I might need help. Can you take my arm?”

“I’ll take all of you.” He lifted me into his arms, the second time that had happened with someone tonight, but this time instead of being tossed over a shoulder with my head hanging down, I was cradled gently against his chest. “Come on, Roxy. You’ve had a long night.”

“You don’t have to carry me.” No matter how secure it made me feel. Loved...even. Though we hadn’t said the words.

“I don’t have to. I want to. You’ve ruined your clothes again, by the way. Isn’t undressing before taking our fur, Shifting 101?”

I sighed. “The first time, my wolf was in charge, and she doesn’t much care about clothes. Tonight, there just wasn’t time. I had to fight with my ma—with you.”

He started toward the building. “Say it, Roxy. Say the word.”

“I can’t.”

“Then I can. You shifted and ruined your nightclothes to fight with your mate. Do you have any idea how sexy that is? That my mate wants to fight with me?”

“Sexy?” Panicked was more like it. “What would that thing have done to me?”

“Let’s not think about it. I’m going to take you to the room where you can rest.”

“Mm-hmm.” I let my head rest on his shoulder, arms looped around his neck, while he carried me all the way to my room and laid me gently on the bed. “Thank you.”

“You can let go, mate.” He moved to stand, but I pulled him in closer.

“No, I can’t.” I looked up at the male who’d saved me from the vampire or some approximation of one. “Would you kiss me? Just one time?”

“Roxy, if I kiss you, it won’t be one time. I’m pretty wound up from the whole rescuing the heroine from the villain thing, and my wolf suggests I close the deal with you.”

“Then why aren’t you?”

Lucky we were both naked already because whatever we might have been wearing would have been shredded anyway.

Adrenalin and affection and lust all wound together into a cocktail too potent to resist as my mate's lips met mine and our bodies came together in a celebration of our victory.

One that involved a lot of kissing and caressing and a frenzy of desire.

I wound my legs around Odin's hips, urging him closer, nipples scraping the hair on his chest. Like when my wolf drove that one shift, my body was alive in every cell.

But not with pain. Even when he thrust inside me, stretching me beyond what I'd dreamed possible—not that I'd thought about it much—it hurt in a great way, gliding right into pleasure.

We fit together as if we'd been born for one another, which fated mates were, right?

"Easy, mate," he murmured. "If you keep writhing like that, I won't last a minute."

"Sorry, I'm new at this," I moaned, not able to cooperate with his request. "But I'm doing my best."

"That's the problem. Your best is too good." He paused for a second, and I squeezed my internal muscles around him, grinning at his groan. "And you don't play fair."

"Mate me, mate," I chanted. "I'm—oh Goddess, I'm going to, ohhhh." Everything within me tightened on its own, ripples of pleasure rolling over me as my mate brought me to orgasm.

"Too, too good." His words were followed by spurts of hot cum filling me, and then he bent and sank his wolf fangs into my throat. "Mate."

Unsure if it was usual but knowing it was right, I returned the favor, marking him,

tasting blood but not drinking.

I had another mark, but this one I would wear with pride. We held one another for a long moment before he got up with a sigh. "I would go look for the others if I knew where to go. I don't suppose one of them left any clothes here?"

"Check the laundry basket."

"Evander's shorts. It's better than nothing."

He went to shower, joking that he'd bring me with him, but then we'd be in there all night.

I rinsed off next, going over and over in my mind the events of the night.

I realized something. I might not know what that vampire did when I got the second bite, but he did not rape me.

Because my mate's lovemaking had pierced my hymen.

The smear of blood on my thigh proved it.

He'd been my first. But he wouldn't be my last because my wolf was convinced two other wolves were my mates as well.

I might need a little time though. Odin had left me sore in all the best ways and places.

Was this over, the whole vampire thing? I doubted it.

Tyrol and his assistant came from not the shifter council but somewhere else, and

they were tracking these creatures that could live in daylight and may have other mutations for all I knew.

Were the other guys okay? I wished they'd hurry and get back. Just because one was dead didn't mean he was the only one here or elsewhere. And like many predators, killing one could draw many more.

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Source Creation Date: August 3, 2025, 10:16 am

Odin

Roxy took a shower while I waited for the others. I had no idea where they'd gone to, but they couldn't exactly answer their cell phones while they were in wolf form. So, I waited.

A lot had happened in their absence. A whole hell of a lot.

"Did you find her?" Sol and Evander rushed down the hallway, seeing me stand outside her room.

"I found her. She's okay."

"Tell us everything." They came in and shut the door behind them.

"I followed a scent trail into the woods way beyond the school's boundary. A vampire had her. One I've never seen before. He spoke very little, but I really didn't give him a chance to. I attacked and got her away."

Sol grabbed my arm. "He's dead? Or dead again? Whatever happens to vampires?" I nodded. I had a hell of a lot more to tell them but for now, my mate was safe. Was she my mate? We had a bond. It was through blood and mating only. No mark. But she was mine. Mark or not.

"How is Roxy? Did he hurt her?" She wasn't hurt. He did some kind of hypnotizing thing on her. That's how he got her not to shift or fight him back. She did some, here in the room, but after that, he had her under his spell."

“I want to see her,” Evander said. “Is she...she’s in the shower?”

I sighed. This was the part where I had to tell them what happened. All of it. They would know sooner or later but even though they were my best friends, what happened between Roxy and me was private.

“She is.” The water shut off in that instant. “And now she’s not. I’ll let her explain the rest.”

“The rest?” Sol stepped to the side to get a better vantage point to the bathroom door.

They said nothing else and asked no more questions until Roxy came out, dressed only in her robe.

Her long hair still dripping from the shower.

“I’m here. I’m okay.” She came over to me and I tucked her under my arm.

The others looked from her to me and back again.

“Did something else happen?” Evander asked. There was a hint of hurt in his tone, and I felt awful, not for having sex with my mate but for the way they were left in the dark. Plus, I was sure Evander had feelings for her the same as me.

Never thought I’d be the first one to get a girl between us.

“You two had better sit down.” They followed her command and sat on her bed, side by side. “The reason Odin was able to find me, we think, was because we are blood-bonded.”

I interrupted, “The scent trail only lasted so long. Then I realized I could sense her another way. It was like she was calling me but without words.”

“But there’s something else.” Couldn’t get anything past Sol.

“Once we got back, we were so relieved and our bond was so strong. We…” Roxy trailed off, but from Sol’s and Evander’s wide eyes and open mouths, they clearly got the gist.

Evander stood and looked Roxy in the eyes. “You’re okay though? The vampire didn’t hurt you.”

“No, Evander. He didn’t hurt me. He didn’t get a chance to.”

“Okay.”

Then he walked out, shoulders slumped. Head down.

Sol was next. He stood up and walked over and placed a kiss on Roxy’s temple. “Good night. I’m glad you two are safe.”

And then he followed Evander’s lead.

This was exactly what I was afraid of.

“Are they angry?” Roxy asked. “You know them better than me.”

I shook my head and wrapped her up in my arms. She was still warm from the shower. “Not angry. No.”

She sighed and leaned her head against my chest. “This is something we need to talk about. With all of us.”

“Okay. Tonight, I think you need some rest.”

“I do. And you do too. Stay with me?”

How could I ever resist my mate? “Always.”

We lay down together and shut off the lights. She was safe here, in my hold.

“Should we report all of this?” I asked. “I think this is what the Tyrol dude was talking about. Reporting vampires. But I don’t think that one was one of us. I’ve never seen him before around school. There’s no way he would pass for a shifter.”

“We should. I don’t want the headmistress or Tyrol to find out any other way. It might look like we were making everything up or covering it up for the vampire. We don’t need anyone thinking we’re involved with vamps. They think we are all vamps anyway.”

“Are we?” I asked, piercing the sweetness between us. “Are we vampires now?”

She sighed. Her sweet breath fanned over my face. “We still shift into wolves. That makes us shifters. You know how witches are human but they have magical powers?”

I nodded.

“Maybe that’s what we are. We’re shifters with a little something special added. Except we weren’t born or gifted with those powers. They were thrust upon us.”

“Maybe so.”

Roxy fell asleep soon after my last words, but I stayed awake, staring into the darkness. Overthinking, of course.

Were we shifters? If they found out Roxy and I exchanged blood, would they kill us? Send us away to be rogue? Hand us over for assassination by the shifter council?

I'd run with her. I'd run with my mate. Hide her. Keep her from harm. Rogue or not, we'd make it.

I also hated that I'd potentially hurt my friends. They cared for Roxy as well.

There were so many facets of our lives in the air, open to interpretation depending on perspective.

Roxy made a noise in her sleep and cuddled in closer. She made it all worth it. My wolf wasn't happy about not marking her, but he was content with the bond we had even though it was foreign to him. He still recognized it.

Tomorrow, I decided, we would go to the headmaster and tell her everything, come what may.

I'd never been more terrified in my life.