



The First Year (Marked Blood Academy #1)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: I was fanged by a vampire.

I am a wolf shifter, and even though I did not turn, I've been taken from my school and deposited in one in the middle of nowhere to make sure I cannot harm others.

I still feel like me, but nobody else seems to think so. Unlike my old school, Urban Academy, everything here is very regimented, and we are locked in our cells...rooms...at night. My closest neighbors on this floor are three incredibly hot males who also bear the marks and also have not changed. They are a year ahead of me and have been here that much longer, so I want to find a way to talk to them, learn what to expect...and if there is ever going to be any way out of this place. If big strong wolves like them are still here, what can a female with no physical abilities to speak of hope to do?

Depend on this: I am not spending my whole life in the prison the administration calls Summer Ridge and we call Marked Blood Academy. I've done nothing wrong and do not deserve to be treated like a dangerous criminal or an animal. When I complained, the uniformed guard accompanying me told me I should be glad not to be put down. Put down?

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Roxy

Being a rogue female shifter would be better than this.

The thought rang through my head as I watched the battle die down. Vampires and shifters had been sworn enemies since the beginning of time, according to shifter legend, but all I saw was carnage.

Blood.

Death.

Senseless violence to some degree but also self-defense.

If I was rogue, this wouldn't be happening. Or maybe it would.

I didn't think the shifter council would've recruited me if I was bound for being an alpha of a high-ranking pack or running on my own through the forest with no group or family to back me.

"Is it over?" I remembered one of the other shifters asking me. I didn't know her name or even when she began fighting next to me, but the blood on her clothes and the vamp claw marks along her shirt told me she had been there all the time.

I was only nineteen. They came to get me from my aunt's home on my eighteenth birthday, before the cake. Not that there would be any cake. My aunt didn't believe in birthday celebrations. Correction: she didn't believe in celebrating my birthday.

Either way, that night, I had been packed and ready to go. If the shifter council soldiers hadn't come to recruit me, and by recruit, I meant draft me without consent, I would've been gone anyway.

My aunt was one of those who thought because I'd hit eighteen, I was ready to be kicked out of the nest.

I was, but not because I was one year older but because I was tired of being in a house where my surrogate parent hated me and showed it.

"I think it's over. I don't...I don't see any more."

"There were a group of vamps over that mountain, but they retreated." The girl with flowing, red hair and bright green eyes scanned the field we were in. "There's no one to report to."

I let out a long breath, my chest still tight from the adrenaline of the fight. I let out a laugh. "What the hell do we do now?"

She began to speak but gasped instead. "You've been bitten."

"What?" I patted my skin, looking for what she was calling a bite.

"It's there. On your neck. You...you didn't know?"

I rolled through the memories in my mind. My time in the shifter council's army was a blur from the moment they came to get me until this moment. "Oh," I said. "Shit. I had one latched on to my neck, but I didn't know if he..."

We turned our attention to an incoming group of shifter soldiers. Ones whose sharp shoulders and tight jaws signaled someone in charge.

“The war is over,” one of them said. He regarded me with his head cocked to the side. A tingling fever started at the top of my head and before I could catch myself, I swayed a bit. “She’s been bitten. Take her to the healers. And be careful. She might turn.”

Turn?

Turn!

I was taken to the shifter hospital. Nothing more than a huge tent with beds inside. This was a war, after all. I didn’t expect the treatment of a hospital when we were still in the wake of such violence.

“Lie on the bed. Let’s look you over.” The woman practically pushed me down on the bed and put gloves on before touching my skin. “This is some bite. Deep too. Did they drink from you?”

I sighed. “I didn’t realize they bit me until someone else brought it to my attention. I didn’t really have my timer out when they did it.”

“Smart-ass,” she muttered.

“Are you feeling any symptoms?”

“What are the symptoms of a shifter being bitten by a vamp in the middle of a fight?”

The woman wearing scrubs unraveling at the corners of the pockets planted her fists on her ample hips. “Are you feeling the need to bite my neck? Are you hungry for blood?”

“No. I’m hungry for a damned cheeseburger.” I was tired of her shit and stupid

questions. I tried to sit up, but a wave of powerful dizziness put a stop to my movement. “Oh. My head.”

The nurse or healer, whatever she was, put the back of her hand on my forehead and stabilized me, grabbing my arm. “You are warm.”

“I just shifted back. It’s almost summer. That doesn’t mean anything.”

She shook her head. “It does. What’s your name?”

“Roxy,” I answered.

“Roxy, you’ve been bitten by a vampire. We don’t know what happens next. We have little research on shifters who have been infected. You’re young. They’ll send you to Summer Ridge, and you’ll be fine.”

Summer Ridge. No fucking way. “The school where the pack rejects go? I’m fine. I can just go back to Urban Academy. I’m fine.” I’d been a student there before being sent to do battle for the summer or maybe forever. Nobody had actually given me an end date.

Maybe if I said it enough times, it would make it true but something had changed.

“Urban Academy? You were a student there?”

Apparently when I was offered up for recruitment, my aunt hadn’t bothered to share that bit of information. “I am.”

An alpha came over, wearing a stern expression. When he opened his mouth, my life would be turned upside down. My stomach sank. “What’s your name?” He had a clipboard. It was never good when they had a clipboard.

“Roxy. Roxy Swifthunt.”

“Roxy, you’ve been bitten. The council’s orders are clear. All bitten persons between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five are to be transported directly to Summer Ridge.”

I scoffed. “Summer Ridge, my ass. Don’t you mean Marked Blood? It’s the Marked Blood Academy. No use in happying that shit up.”

“Call it what you will, female. You’ll be put on the next bus immediately.”

If I ever found the vamp who bit me, if he wasn’t ash, I would kill him myself. Maybe I already had. In the heat of battle, I didn’t always know.

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Roxy

If I was the type of girl who had a lot of friends, I would be pissed that I didn't get to say goodbye. As it was, no one from Urban Academy would miss me. Maybe the librarian. She was nice.

She probably would think I'd died in the war, if the school even knew where I had gone.

A part of me did.

"Only a few more minutes," the rent-a-cop said from the safety of the front seat. Once they knew I wasn't going to turn into a vampire or whatever they thought might happen, the council put me into a car with a metal grate separating the driver from the back-seat passenger. Even that didn't stop the fox-shifter driver from looking terrified and green at the gills. I was an anomaly to them. They didn't know what I might become and, worse, how they would contain me once I evolved. If I evolved.

Other than the bit of fever and achy bones, I felt fine.

Both of those symptoms could be attributed to anything. But the scar on my neck told them all they wanted to know. Vampires are not neat nibblers like in the movies; they were more likely to shred flesh, and I was lucky it was not much worse. Most who were bitten did not survive, dying from both the blood lost to their thirst and what spilled out onto the ground.

"Oh, goody," I groaned. "So excited for my first day. Are you going to take a picture

of me by the gates?”

His eyes met mine in the rearview mirror, but he looked away quickly. “Do I have to? Did I miss those instructions?”

Goddess. “It was a joke.”

“Oh.” He laughed a little bit too long—too loud. His nerves were showing. I couldn’t blame him. I didn’t know what I might turn into either. “Here we are. Summer Ridge.”

That name again. Who did they think they were fooling?

The driver didn’t help me with my two duffles of personal belongings. From the way they were stuffed with one of the shirts hung in the teeth of the zipper, I assumed my aunt was shackled with the task of packing me up. I had tried to message her before boarding the bus that dropped me off to get in this car, but she did not reply. People became mean when they were afraid.

I walked up to the gates and pushed my way through. Not very secure but then again, we were in the middle of nowhere, and I suspected there was a spell on the place. Felt like I was moving through a spider web as I walked closer to the front door. The huge rounded arch of the doors was welcoming, but the metal details and rivets gave off some serious castle vibes.

I had no choice but to enter.

If I attempted to go rogue, council guards would hunt me down and kill me.

My aunt most certainly wouldn’t take me back now, not that I wanted to return. Urban Academy would never put the other students, faculty, and staff in danger. I

couldn't even be a fighter anymore—something else I had not enjoyed.

At least I would get some kind of education here. Hopefully.

With my back to the door, I pushed them open and stumbled inside, nearly falling and dropping all my things at once. A couple of students snickered but stopped when I let out a growl. Probably not the way to make friends.

“Ms. Swifthunt?” a woman asked as a door opened. Oh, they must have cameras outside. Of course they did. Kind of foiled the backup rogue plan. “I’m Mrs. Adams.”

“Roxy,” I said and walked over to the woman who squinted at me despite her glasses.

“Roxy. This way. We don’t dawdle in the hallways. There is order here.” The way she said order made me shudder. People threw that word around as a good thing, but to the person being ordered, it never was.

I nearly sprinted to get the door before it shut behind her. Inside was an office with glaring overhead lights that would kill anyone’s creativity and will to live all at once.

“We need you to sign some paperwork. We already have your records from Urban Academy, and we’ve formulated a schedule based on your work there before you were drafted. Here is your new student packet. Inside, there are the rules of conduct. We take those very seriously around here. This isn’t fun time like Urban Academy was.”

Wait. When was fun time at UA? I must’ve missed that. The lack of friends and all.

Damn it.

I nodded when she looked down her nose at me. Not hard to do, since I was just five

feet tall if I stood up straight. Which my aunt claimed I rarely did. “Do you understand?”

“Yes, ma’am.” My aunt had whipped those manners into me early. She believed in strict rules too. Thought I’d graduated from that life, but here I was again.

That fucking vampire was on my list.

“Good. There is someone coming down to show you around the grounds and then to your dorm. You will be in a room to yourself, at first, and our strict curfew must be adhered to.” There was a shift in the atmosphere of the office as she said those words. Like a dark cloud moved in and hovered right over my head. I wasn’t good with curfews or authority in general, but I might be able to quell some of that to stay alive. Because if I didn’t stay here, there was a good chance the council would find a way to put me down. They were all about justice, and justice in their eyes was ridding the shifter world of wild cards. I was a wild card to them now for sure.

They were treating this place as a punishment for a crime we didn’t commit. I didn’t, and I was sure no one else chose to be bitten by a vampire. We didn’t volunteer to go into battle. It was forced upon us, both the war and the bite, and now we were being punished, the evidence on our bodies, the council the judge.

“Are you having any new symptoms you would like to discuss with our medical team? If you do, please see them as soon as possible to avoid...treat each new symptom as an emergency.” The woman looked up while handing me a slip of paper. My class schedule.

“Oh, there you are. Please show our new student Summer Ridge and then to her room. Promptly now.”

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Odin

Walking into the office, I expected a young man for some reason and was surprised to see a curvy pixie waiting for me.

“Oh, there you are,” said Mrs. Adams. “Please show our new student Summer Ridge and then to her room. Promptly now.”

When was I ever not prompt?

“Yes, Mrs. Adams.” I flicked my gaze to the beautiful, petite woman standing in front of me. As she turned, I sucked in a breath. My wolf went wild.

I chalked it up to hormones and tried to move on as quickly as possible.

“Hi. I’m Roxy. And you are?”

Mrs. Adams shooed us out of the office. “Move while you introduce yourselves, please.”

Once we got to the corridor, I stopped, not daring to shake her hand. That might be dangerous. My wolf was already mad with want for her. But that couldn’t happen. “It’s good to meet you, Roxy. I’m Odin.”

A smile rose on her face and I tried not to stare at the bite on her neck. It still looked fresh but that couldn’t be. I thought the war had ended months ago.

Perhaps I was wrong. We were not always informed about the outside world here.

“Odin? Viking god? Hugin and Muninn your best friends?” Not everyone knew about the god’s ravens; this female did.

I chuckled. I liked a woman with spunk. “My parents really didn’t give me a choice on my name but yes. That Odin.”

“Good to know. Should we start the tour, or did we want to stare at each other a little longer?”

I snorted. Yeah, I liked Roxy already. Most students came here with a chip on their shoulder and took it out on the first student they saw, who was often me. How I got this job was still a mystery, but it got me out of class once in a while. “Let’s go. This is administration. We only come here if we have a medical checkup or we’re in trouble. Try not to do the latter. It’s not fun.”

“This place? Not fun. You’re kidding.”

I shook my head and took her bags. They weren’t heavy. Not surprising. I came here with nothing but the clothes on my back the council had given me. Rags left behind by another captured shifter. “Next building is the classrooms. This way.”

Roxy mumbled something about a tough crowd but followed me. I didn’t know if it was her stature or the fact that the bite was taking its toll on her, but she walked slowly, and I had to make my steps match hers in order not to leave her behind.

“Classrooms are here. Three floors. You get the idea. For the most part, core classes are on the first floor. Second is shifter. Third is extracurricular, aka career training.”

She nodded, keeping close to me. I got no scent of fear from her, but her unease

couldn't be denied. She had nothing to fear if I was around. The council might call me feral, but I knew how to treat a lady. My father and mother instilled that in me before they were killed. "This way is the dining hall. The food is actually good despite the prisonlike atmosphere."

"Ah, so it wasn't just me."

I opened the doors to the dining hall and a couple of the staff waved at me. Not only were they used to me peeking in with a new student, but they snuck me cookies and brownies here and there. I was a growing boy, after all.

"You have a fan club." Roxy giggled. The sound shot straight through me, warming my chest.

"They're nice. I try to be respectful. My mom worked at a school cafeteria. Some people are mean to them but they are good ladies."

Roxy's cheeks reddened. "That's sweet, Odin."

"It's the truth. This way. We're going to cross the commons, and the dorm rooms are after that." We crossed the grassy area furnished with a few picnic tables and some stone benches. The architecture of this place was beautiful, but I wondered if the creator knew that one day their beautiful design would be used to corral the rejects. Maybe he did and gifted us a bit of beauty to breathe life into us. "The dorms are broken up into years. First and second years are in that one to your left. Third and fourth are in the building to your right."

"Which one are you in?" Roxy asked. The question stopped me in my tracks. Females weren't usually interested in me romantically. Sure, I was strong and built, but I was also a bit fluffy. I never turned down a cookie or a second helping.

Plus, I had a baby face. Everyone said so.

Didn't really make the ladies flock around, but it hadn't bothered me too much. I was waiting on my fated mate. Nothing would compare to her.

"I'm a third year. I think you are too. Can I see your schedule?"

She plucked the paper from her pocket and unfolded it. When she handed it to me, our fingers brushed and my wolf howled so loudly, I was certain she and every other person on the planet could hear him.

My heart beat louder than a thousand drums. I looked down at my chest, certain it would beat its way through my sternum and offer itself before her feet.

"Are you okay, Odin?"

Gods, my name on her lips was sweet agony.

"I'm okay. Let's see. Yeah. See that three by your name in parentheses? That's your year, but you have two classes where you're in second year. You were in school before? Before the war?"

Nodding, she took her schedule back. "I was. Urban Academy."

The school she referenced was in the city, hence the name. It was kind of famous in the shifter world. "You must miss it."

Roxy shrugged. "Doesn't matter now, does it?"

"If you feel it, it matters. Ready to see your room?"

“I am.”

Her room was as sparse as the rest of ours. Black bedding. Metal single bed. One lamp. One desk. One chair. A closet. A bathroom. Luxury living at its best.

“It’s so cozy,” she said, not trying to contain her laugh. She pushed past me and tried to take the bags.

“I’ll put them on the desk. Our rooms are all the same.”

“Oh?” she asked. “Been in a lot of girls’ rooms, have we?”

My turn to blush. Heat pushed into my cheeks, and I shoved my hands into my pockets, trying to keep reaching out for her. She was clearly ill, suffering from some effects of her bite and what she’d been through. Not to mention, there was a lot of mental shit to work out. Probably hadn’t hit her yet.

I hoped someone would be there for her when it did. The nightmares were the worst.

“I have been in no girl’s room. For the record, girls don’t really like me.”

“Their loss,” I heard her mumble under her breath. Roxy was a breath of fresh air.

“Well, I’d better get back to class. Maybe I’ll see you around.”

She reached out to shake my hand, saying thank you. My body tingled in all the right and wrong places as our skin made contact. I watched her look down at my arm and then with her other hand, she grazed her fingers over my scars. There were many. Maybe that was why girls didn’t like me, even though I tried to keep them covered up. “Sometime, you can tell me the story of these.”

“Not something anyone wants to hear.” I jerked at my sleeves, pulling them down to the wrist. “Take care, Roxy. Feel better. Oh, and uniforms are in the closet.”

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Roxy

My classes didn't start until the next day, Odin mentioned during the tour. They gave us a full day to settle in—more like regret our life choices.

I had to make the best of it, but that was hard when I didn't know what I was anymore. I was a shifter. But bitten by a vampire. A former soldier. A present student?

An orphan.

That one still stung.

There were times like this that one of my mom's hugs would come in handy.

But there was no one here to comfort me but myself. Had been that way for a long time. Aunt Jessie wasn't a touchy-feely aunt. She took on the role of wicked stepmother, but both my real parents were gone.

Vampires killed them, ironically enough.

I sighed. A pity party was not on the agenda. Not today or any day that I could foresee.

“Uniforms are in the closet, huh? Let's see what those look like.”

I'd seen some other students, but they were in shorts and T-shirts with Summer Ridge

written across the chest. They looked more like physical education uniforms than ones you would wear in a classroom setting but, then again, this place didn't follow the norms.

“Oh, that's classy. Bloody red for the win.” I had thrown open the closet to see ruby-red uniforms. Jackets. Sweater vests. Skirts not made for climbing stairs. Stockings right out of the nineties.

Who thought this was a good idea?

“What in the world?” I tugged on the fabric, hoping it was at least soft. It was not. It was scratchy, and would make me want to scratch myself right to death.

At least that would keep me awake.

Were the boy uniforms as itchy. I doubted it. Boys things were always comfy and long enough. Goddess forbid a man be uncomfortable.

Speaking of males...Odin was sexy as hell. I always thought myself a woman who liked a lean, tall, man, but fluffy and beefy was also my type, he'd made me realize. Who knew? He was funny and intelligent. I didn't know much about him but what I did, I already liked. If a lunch lady liked you, smiled and waved, gave you extra brownies, that meant you were a good guy in my book.

The way he talked about his mother was both sad and sweet. I wanted to ask more, but clearly I'd spooked him when I touched his scars.

I'd crossed a line, caught in some Odin stupor. He claimed girls didn't like him much, but I was hooked at first sight.

Too bad I had other things on my plate. Like making sure I didn't turn into a vampire

or suck the blood of the entire school.

There was also the question of what would happen to me if I didn't make it here.

Would they kick me out?

Imprison me?

End my life?

I wouldn't put anything past the shifter council. They were the ones who put us in this situation in the first place.

Slapping at the uniforms hung on hangers, I closed the closet and looked around my room. I didn't expect luxury accommodations, but damn, this place was like an institution. Rather, it was an institution. They were going to monitor us to find out what happened. Or what we would become.

I unpacked my clothes and put them in the small dresser in the corner. I had nothing more than the basics. I was at Urban Academy on a scholarship since my aunt had squandered all my parents' money. I was surprised she helped me pay for the bus ticket to the school.

She rarely paid for anything for me. I had odd jobs since I was a young teen, trying to buy my own clothes and taking care of my needs.

Once everything was in its place, I lay on top of the comforter and let out a long sigh. Since I didn't have to be in any classes today, it was a good time to catch up on sleep. Since leaving my station as a fighter, it seemed like all I did was sleep. This vamp bite was something else. Drained me of energy. Made me feel like a walking zombie.

Not good for school, but I was counting on coffee to help me through.

When I closed my eyes, the events from the battles came flooding in. The healers gave me some herbal remedy to help with the images and sounds that wreaked havoc on my thoughts, but they did little more than make me sleepy. Sometimes, I tried to distract myself, but most of the time, I faced them, hoping exposure therapy would cure me of the disturbing images.

So far, nothing had worked. If only there were something or someone who could calm me, bring me peace.

I hadn't known peace in my life.

My parents dying.

My awful aunt.

Bullies in school.

The war.

Now this.

My head pounded as I overthought things until my brain quit and I fell into a deep sleep.

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Evander

“You’re studying again?” I strolled out of the bathroom, nose turned up as Sol sat at the desk, reading.

“No. Some of us read for pleasure.”

I picked up his book and glanced at the cover. “Seems painful to me.”

War and Peace . Sol liked to read, but I thought he secretly only did so to avoid death by boredom.

The guys I’d once felt shackled with in this dorm room had slowly become my friends. We got along despite our differences, and this place had somehow become home with them around.

“It kind of is, but without a phone or a TV, what else am I supposed to do?”

He knew better than to ask that question.

“There is an hour before dinner,” I said, leaning against the wall. “I’m sure there’s some fun we could find.”

“No,” Sol barked, putting down his worn paperback. “Your fun and my fun are not the same. The last time you suggested something fun, we ended up in the headmistress’ office, and she doesn’t like me like she likes you.”

“She’s not so bad. You just have to flirt with her a little.”

“Do you hear yourself? You’d flirt with a poster of a woman.”

I cocked my head, thinking about the scenario. “Depends on the woman. I’m not that bad, anyway. Sometimes I’m just being nice.”

Sol shrugged. “The problem is, some females can’t tell the difference. You’ve got half the female population swooning and the other half ready to murder you with their notebook wire.”

“I…” I started to argue with him but Odin walked in. His face was red, and he closed the door behind him as though he were being chased. “You good?” I asked. Odin didn’t really get worked up about anything, so whatever happened must’ve been epic.

“There is a new student. I showed her around. Gave her the tour.”

“Is gave her the tour a metaphor because you are blushing like she gave you a tour.”

“Fuck off,” Odin replied and pushed off the door where he had been leaning. “I gave her a tour of the school and then showed her to her dorm room.”

“Oh.” I rubbed my hands together, hoping for some gossip. I didn’t spread it but loved to hear it all the same. “Do tell.”

“Stop it, Evander. Nothing happened. I showed her to her room, but she’s not doing well. She’s fresh off the battlefield. And bitten. It’s taking a toll on her.”

“We’re all bitten, Odin,” Sol replied.

“We are but…there’s something different about her. I-I think we need to help her if

we can.”

Odin was a male like the rest of us, but he hadn't shown a lot of attention to any female I was aware of. He wasn't a flirt like me, and women didn't flock to him because of his status like Sol.

“What's her name?” If there was someone who piqued Odin's interest, I would have to scope out the situation for myself.

“Roxy. Roxy Swifthunt.”

My gaze darted to Sol. He was the heir apparent to one of the biggest packs in the shifter world. If Swifthunt rang any bells, it would be his. Though from the looks of it, Odin's bells had already been rung by just a stroll around the grounds.

“What? I don't know everyone. And that name doesn't sound familiar.”

“Exactly how do you think we are able to help her, Odin?”

“She's new to all of this and...my wolf was a bit protective of her. That's all. Make sure she gets the rules and doesn't get into trouble, if we can help it.”

I laughed. “Not getting into trouble is not my expertise, friend.”

Odin countered, “Wouldn't you have liked a friend or someone to help you when you first came here?”

I thought it over. I came here with no one and nothing. Schedules thrust at me. Uniforms shoved in my direction. Medical tests. Stern professors. Rigid rules.

Yeah, I could've used a friend.

It took the three of us months to warm up to each other.

“I could’ve. Someone to give a damn about what I did and when I didn’t show up for meals. Someone to talk to who knew what I was going through.”

Sol was a softie. It suited him. He wouldn’t be an alpha, as he was destined to at birth, but if he had, he would be a damned fine one. He cared about people. So did Odin. Caring about people, in my experience, got a person taken advantage of and left with a broken heart.

“If we see her, we’ll try to befriend her. Is that fine? What’s so special about her?”

Odin shook his head. He was as confused as we were, seemed to me. “I don’t know.”

“Is she cute?” Sol asked.

Odin looked at us. His eyes were glassy. His cheeks got redder, and the blush extended all the way down his neck. “She’s goddamned gorgeous. One of the most beautiful females I’ve ever seen.”

“Now we’re getting somewhere.”

“It’s not because of that. I mean, it doesn’t hurt, but there’s more than her looks. I’m telling you, my wolf wants to protect her.”

“Don’t tell me you’ve found your mate, Odin.” Sol picked on him constantly. It was their thing.

“No. I don’t think that’s it. Come on. Let’s find something to do before dinner.”

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Roxy

A crackling noise jerked me out of the blackest, darkest, deepest sleep of my life. In seconds, I shifted right there and landed on the cold floor with a growl. The shift was painful after the bite. I kept that little detail to myself, but changing from human to animal and back again now felt like being set on fire. The muscles ripped. The tendons snapped. Nails and claws thrust through my skin with no grace whatsoever.

Maybe my wolf was angry. Angry at the vampire. Angry at me.

She wasn't the most docile of creatures under normal circumstances.

I raised my snout to the speaker near the door. Odin had mentioned something about it. They gave us calls to different things through that intercom, but I was only half paying attention.

First because I felt like absolute shit.

Second because Odin was so nice and attractive. My thoughts drifted more than once, and my eyes focused on his lips more than they should've.

“Fifteen-minute warning before dinner.”

I checked the plain, minimal clock on the wall. Yep. It was time. Odin did say something about being on time for meals. It was my first day here. Didn't want to get in trouble on my first day. I needed this. The other choices for my life, well, they weren't acceptable.

I checked the conduct book quickly to find out what the dress code was for dinner.

“Please don’t be the bloody uniform. Please don’t be the bloody... Oh, casual. Thank goodness I can wear my jeans.”

I was still in the black scrubs given to me by the medical team before transport. They’d made me shower and try to look clean and not like I’d just stepped out of war and then put me in these. They weren’t so bad. Comfortable and clean, but they made me feel like I was a patient in some institution.

I slipped on a pair of jeans and sighed as I pulled them up. There was something comforting about a good-fitting pair of jeans. I picked out my favorite black T-shirt and put on some green sneakers. My hair had always had a mind of its own, so I pulled it all up in a bun and called it a day. There was no reason for makeup because that would be like putting lipstick on a zombie.

Didn’t detract from the dead look.

Outside my room, people moved in lines toward the stairwell. Following them sounded like a good idea and, once outside, I recognized the dining hall building. I remembered Odin and how the ladies cooking meals loved him.

If we were allowed phones and if I’d ever had one, I might’ve asked him for his number. Even if he only wanted to be a friend, he would be someone kind and good to have in my corner.

I did see a few students shoving phones into their pockets before entering the dining hall. Maybe taking mine was temporary? Or theirs were contraband. Something else I’d like to ask Odin.

I’d clearly offended him by asking him about his scars, so there was a chance he

might not speak to me at all.

“Get in. You’ll get in trouble for being late.”

I felt pressure on the small of my back. A shudder passed through me as I realized it was Odin’s hand. His voice.

So much for him not speaking to me.

Once inside the dining hall, I stood in the doorway like a rock in a river, wondering which way to go. “To your left. There’s assigned seating. Your last name is on your table.”

I got in that line, and he gave a nod of confirmation. No one talked to each other. Everyone looked ahead and kept their mouths closed. The ladies serving food smiled at me and nodded, but even they said nothing. We didn’t get to choose our food—a plate was placed on our tray and that was that.

Thank the goddess there was cake.

My favorite: yellow cake with chocolate icing.

Now to find my seat. This place wasn’t like any academy I’d seen and didn’t hold a candle to the Urban Academy. Students there sat with their mates. There were people on each other’s laps. Laughter filled the air. A low roar of chatter resounded constantly. Even some fighting broke out once in a while.

But here?

No one spoke. Not just in line but while they ate their supper. No sharing stories. No tips on classes or study dates upcoming. No one in love that I could see. No mates

that I sensed.

Like a prison.

I suspected prison might be more...lively.

After a few minutes of feeling like a fool, I found my table. My name was on a piece of paper that had been recently taped to the surface. Recently, because everyone else's seemed to be stained or crinkled with use.

Almost as soon as my ass hit the seat, people began to talk.

What the hell? Were they silent because of me? Not a great way to welcome a new student.

I took a chance and glanced around. Odin and some other guys were at a table only a few feet from me, huddled together, speaking in hushed tones.

Sighing, I started to eat. I'd learned a universal rule. First days anywhere sucked.

The food was actually good, which was a surprise. Lots of things in life smelled good but were rotten inside. Like my aunt.

A trickle of sweat poured down the back of my neck. My fever had shot back up. Maybe I was just stressed and none of this overheating had anything to do with the bite. A small chance, but something to cling to.

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Sol

My friends and I parted ways at the dining hall. While they went in, I partook in a side quest to find out more about the female who had Odin in a stupor. The last thing I wanted was for my friend to get hurt.

I walked into the office right as it was about to close for the evening. Professors and administrators had to eat too.

“Sol, is there something I can do for you?” Mrs. Adams was walking around the counter, probably to leave.

“I think I left my favorite pen here. Dropped it earlier. Is there any way I can look around for it?”

Her head tilted a bit, and she squinted at me. “Your pen?”

“Yes. You can go on to supper. I’ll lock the door on my way out.”

She looked torn. Rightfully so. I wasn’t to be trusted in the midst of potential mischief. I used to be an upstanding guy, but Evander had rubbed off on me and everyone knew we were friends. This was a side of me even they didn’t know about. My father would balk at my breaking the rules. “I’m very hungry tonight. Don’t dawdle and I’ll know if anything is out of place. Look for your pen and then out with you.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She left without another word. I didn't even have to look under the letter S files because when I passed her desk, there was Roxy's file—sitting right on top.

Inside was nothing remarkable. A stint at Urban Academy. Good grades. No disciplinary action. There was no mention of her parentage, which struck me as odd, but nothing out of the ordinary. Every student here had a story, and it was rare to hear about blissful childhoods among us.

There was no picture in her file, but I was satisfied my roommate and best friend wasn't falling for some kind of criminal.

I headed to the dining room as fast as my legs would take me. I didn't want to tip off Mrs. Adams nor my roommates. Once I entered, I got my tray and sat at our table, trying to look innocent and calm. I'd gotten better at that over time. Not a good thing but not a bad thing either.

“All right. Where is she?” The withdrawal of information slid off my tongue. A misdirecting and masking question, indeed. I knew where Roxy was. We didn't get many new students here at Marked Blood, but even if we did, the raven-haired beauty would stand out amongst them all.

“She's over there. Odin has already spoken to her.”

“Again?” I asked.

“Yes, again. She didn't know which line to get into.” Odin defended himself. He usually didn't. He let us pick at him liberally without batting an eye.

We meant it all in love and jest, of course. He was our friend.

Roxy sat with another girl. I thought she was called Desi, but I had a hard time with

names. She faced me and, despite the reddened bite on her neck and the lightning burn scar on her temple, she was beautiful. So beautiful that seeing her struck me dead in the chest, causing my regular breaths to become a bit shallow.

“What else do you know about her, Odin?” Evander asked. He leaned back in his seat. He wasn’t the nonchalant type when it came to females. He flirted openly and shamelessly. When a female was being watched by Evander, she knew. Everyone knew.

“She’s from Urban Academy. She was about to finish up her second year. They gave her mostly third-year classes, but she has some second-year classes as well. Ones she didn’t get to finish, I assume.”

He would be right but I kept that information to myself. They didn’t need to know about my snooping, especially since I found nothing criminal—not even anything interesting, really.

“I know some things,” Evander offered.

“Like what?” I asked. “Have you even talked to her?”

His black eyes flicked to me. “No. You don’t have to speak to someone in order to know them. There are some things you can decipher without words.”

“Go on, then.”

He sat up. Instinctively, we huddled closer. “She’s beautiful. No doubt about that. She keeps her palm over her bite even though we all have one. Her hair covers that pigmentation over her temple, but I’ve seen that kind before—that’s the imprint of a powerful vampire. She’s paying attention to what Desi is saying, but her gaze keeps darting around the place. She’s scoping the exits, looking for danger. Must be fresh

off the battlefield.”

“Her eyes are beautiful, too.” Odin had it bad. Too bad mating and dating and fucking were forbidden in this place. The only thing Marked Blood wanted to control more than those shifters who had been bitten by a vampire was those same shifters breeding.

Or loving.

Or having any kind of fun or entertainment whatsoever.

And I was right. Roxy’s new friend was named Desi.

“Looks like even Sol likes what he sees.” Odin kicked me under the table.

I sighed. I’d been caught ogling her. Every male in the room was. She drew us all in like a giant magnet.

We had to stay away from her. Specifically me. I had to graduate from this place, prove myself not some vampiresque creature, and regain my father’s good will, so I could take up the alpha position was born for. I wouldn’t let anyone stand in my way.

Not even the most stunning woman I’d seen in my lifetime.

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Roxy

I felt their eyes on me. Sure, I was a new student and everyone would be curious—they couldn't help themselves. I would've been the same.

The eyes I spoke of belonged to the three guys sitting at the table. One of them was Odin and, despite my thinking I offended him earlier, he'd helped me find my line and given me a heads-up about the assigned seating. I really should've read the conduct book instead of taking a nap.

“What do you mean they lock you in at night?” I asked in a hushed tone. I'd garnered enough attention, somehow, without speaking loudly.

“You didn't check out your doors?” Desi asked and bussed her own tray, putting the silverware along the correct divot and all the trash into a container. I did the same.

“I came in, got the tour, checked out the uniforms, and took a long nap.”

My new friend nodded. She was in the same year as me and on the same floor of the dorms. I was the first person ever to be assigned to her meal table. She'd been sitting alone for a long time. That had to be awful for her. It was bad enough we were isolated from the world, but they also had to segregate us from each other. Even if we hadn't been bitten by vampires, we wouldn't come out of this place unscarred. They were making sure of that.

If not on the outside, then on the inside.

“I usually visit the library after dinner. It’s really the only place we can go. Do you want to come with?”

“That wasn’t on the tour.” As the words left my mouth, Odin’s head rose. The back of his neck reddened. Goddess, had he heard me? It wasn’t like I’d lied about him. He didn’t take me to me the library.

“Then I get to show you something new. You in?”

“Sure. Where do I put my tray, please? All of this is new to me.”

Desi was patient, and before we left the dining hall, I looked back one more time to the table where Odin sat. All three of them were looking at me. Odin with his ever-present blush, the lean and tall one with jet-black hair like mine, and the one whose voice had a soothing quality to it. I thought I’d heard the others call him Sol.

“Act like you don’t care,” Desi whispered in my ear as she threaded her arm through mine.

“What?” I asked.

“They were staring at you the whole time. I’ve never seen them pay attention to anyone.”

“Oh. I’m sure it’s just because I’m new. What are their names?”

She giggled. “Well, you know Odin. Evander is the one with the black hair, and the platinum prince is Sol.”

We walked through the common area, which I recognized from the tour. But beyond the dorm room buildings was a cathedral. Or it looked like one. Points and arches all

around, more like a medieval church than anything, but that made it all the more interesting.

Our conversation soon turned to the library. “I come here to get away. It’s my own little vacation. Sometimes I study, but mostly I entertain myself with romance novels, daydreaming, and dissociation.”

I snorted. “Sounds like a good time.”

“Anything is compared to this hellhole. Let’s go find ourselves a seat. I’m sure you have some questions before class tomorrow.”

I definitely did.

We found a worn couch in a corner that had a lamp next to it. There was soft lighting and the musty smell of the books gave me an instant calm.

“The uniforms. Please tell me those are a joke.”

Desi laughed. I’d missed the punchline.

“They aren’t. It’s kind of disgusting once you think about it. Like in case we bleed, it blends in? Because we are nothing more than the bites on our bodies now? It’s like the puncture wounds define us as people and shifters now. They see nothing but the bites, I swear. Their prejudice bleeds into everything, and they’re not subtle about it.”

“So I do have to wear them,” I groaned, tipping my head back.

“Yeah. I wear shorts under the skirt if that helps. And a shirt under the jacket. They keep the classrooms like a deep freezer, so it will help as well.”

I sighed. “What happens after we graduate?”

Desi shrugged. “A part of me thinks the shifter council will monitor us forever. I hope they don’t because that’s no kind of life, but they hate not knowing.”

“Yeah. I think you’re right.”

We sat in a comfortable silence for a while until a huge gong made me slap my hands over my ears.

“We have to go. That’s the bell. They lock the dorms in a few minutes.”

We sprinted up the stairs of the dorm building. Somewhere along the run, I lost track of Desi and ended up in between buildings.

I stopped and frantically looked up and down, trying to get my bearings.

Fuck. I was already lost.

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Roxy

“You’re new, right? The new girl everyone is chatting about.”

Number one: I doubted everyone was chatting about me. I wasn’t anything special other than being the new student.

Number two: Who says chatting?

“My name is Roxy.”

He huffed out a laugh. “Roxy. Right. That’s the one. What are you doing?”

I sighed. The sun was already set and there wasn’t a lot of lighting in that part of the school. Wherever I was.

“I was in the library and heard the bell, so I tried to get to my room and...I’m lost.”

He looked left and right and then back to me. Thank goodness he didn’t flash that overly large flashlight in my direction. “You’re in between the administration building and the dining hall.”

I turned around. The lingering smell of dinner wafted in the air along with the strong perfume scent that seemed like a permanent fixture of the administration office. It never faltered for the few minutes I was in there earlier that day. “Oh. I think I am. Not at all where I need to be.”

The male who'd stopped me was a shifter but smelled more like fox than wolf. My wolf was on alert not only because he was another species, a cunning one at that, but because he was in my personal space. Even so, he stepped closer. "Why should I believe you?" he asked, looking me up and down.

"Because you just said it yourself. I'm new here. No clue where I even was. I heard the bell, ran my ass off, clearly in the wrong direction, and here I am."

"Here you are." He stepped forward again and I found my back against a brick wall of the administration building. "You're far away from your room, you know."

"I realize that now. I'm sorry. I can make my way now."

He tsked and put his arm out to stop me. Ah, damn it. Now he was giving off creeper vibes. I had enough on my plate without dealing with an entitled man with a flashlight trying to prove a point. "You could, but the thing is, you've broken the rules, Roxy."

"I know. I'm sorry. I'll make sure it doesn't happen again. I promise."

All I wanted in that moment was to get away from him. Sure, I could've clocked him in the balls, but I had to stay here or else face the wrath of the shifter council. With the way beady black eyes and thin lip s guy was looking at my tits, I seriously thought about taking my chances with the council. "You promise, huh? Why should I believe you. You're new here. No one knows who you are. What if you're lying to me."

"Then I'll get in big trouble, get expelled and, you'll never see me again."

"What a shame that would be."

Eew.

“Look, I seriously got lost. I wasn’t trying to escape or anything.”

“Hmmm.” The sound rolled along my skin like a venomous snake. A billion goose bumps filled my flesh. “You can’t escape this place, you know. But an infraction like this...usually it would warrant five demerits.”

“On my first day? Doesn’t seem fair.”

“Look around you. This place. The fact that we’re here. How is any of this fair?”

“It’s not. None of this is fair.”

He sighed and lifted his hand as if to touch my hair but then let it drop to his side. “Don’t let it happen again. I won’t hesitate to give you a demerit or a dozen if I catch you again. The dorm rooms are that way. Go to your room and the door will shut and lock behind you.”

I didn’t wait to confirm.

“You owe me big, Roxy!” he called out. I waved him off and sprinted toward the building with the dorms.

Except, within seconds, and without the sun above me lighting the way, I soon found myself lost again. Shit.

I wasn’t going to run into creepazoid again, so I opened the first door I saw and took a chance that it was the dorm building.

Nothing seemed familiar.

I was usually good with directions but this place and this headache and the damned fever that surged and fled made it hard to concentrate or think clearly. I went up a set of stairs, hoping that something seemed familiar but nothing did.

Maybe I could get back outside and find a placard or someone to help me who wasn't throwing around his big flashlight and his even bigger ego.

Once outside, I scanned the area. I was in between the building and a gate that was at least twelve foot tall and menacing with points on the tips of each pole. I was surprised not to find barbed wire across the top.

“Damn it. First day, and I'm more lost than when I arrived.”

A scent hit my nose, and my wolf snarled a bit before letting out a howl.

There was someone close.

“I'm sorry. I'm lost again.”

“Is that right?” I heard the voice and tingles broke out along my skin. Not the icky ones from the guy before but a signal that someone my wolf liked very much was near. “What's a girl like you doing in a place like this?”

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Evander

I watched her for a few minutes. For a second, I thought maybe I'd found a partner in crime, until she turned toward me. Her eyes were wide, and a sheen of sweat lay across her brow.

She wasn't out here to cause mayhem like me, even if it was only a bit of fun. Roxy was scared and, for some reason, it stirred my wolf.

“What’s a girl like you doing in a place like this?”

Roxy’s hand flew to her chest. “You scared the fuck out of me.”

I laughed. A girl with a foul mouth. Roxy was growing on me more and more. “You’re late getting to bed. Shame on you.”

She scoffed. “I could say the same about you.”

I shrugged one shoulder. “Eh, there’s a glitch in our locking system. I can get out anytime I want without tripping the alarm.”

“So you galivant around the academy at all hours of the night preying on young women?”

My gaze traveled along her curvaceous body. Hips that begged to be gripped. Legs that demanded praise. Lips I somehow knew might be the end of me.

“Just one, actually.”

“Where is she?” Roxy asked. A lilt of flirtation coupled with her sweet scent nearly got the best of my wolf. He howled inside me, demanding to show him our other form.

He could kiss my ass. This woman was in trouble in more ways than one. The circles under her eyes had somehow gotten darker since dinner. Her skin tone more pallid. Her chest moved in and out with shallow breaths but, then again, they could be from her running from or toward something.

Silly female, thinking there was someone else.

“It’s you. You’re the female. You do know being outside after the bell rings is an instant demerit if you’re caught, right?”

She sighed and bit down on her bottom, plump lip. “I do. I ran into someone who threatened me with demerits but then said he would let me go because it was my first day.”

My wolf let out a bit of a snarl. “Who was it?”

“I don’t know his name. Big flashlight. Kind of sleazy.”

Immediately, an image of Patrick popped into my mind. “That’s Patrick. He’s the king of brownnosing and ass-kissing. He’s practically made it a profession.”

“That sounds like him.”

“And yet, you are still tempting fate being out here.”

Her shoulders sagged. “I can’t find my way back to my dorm room. My head is all fuzzy. I need to get to bed, but I can’t find the damned thing.”

Tingling washed over my arms and down the crown of my head. She was vulnerable in this moment, and I had a feeling she didn’t do that very often—get vulnerable with another person. “How about I help you find your bed?”

She stepped back. “Now, you’re the creep.” She laughed.

No wonder Odin was taken with this feisty sprite. “I swear, I only meant to help you find your room. I bet you’re in one of those dreadful solitary confinement rooms since you’re new.”

“I am. And yes, it’s awful.”

“There’s only one floor with those rooms. Let’s go find it and get you to bed. Just you in the bed, to be clear.”

She giggled. “That would be very nice of you...”

Oh. I’d been so struck with her presence I’d let my manners float away with the evening wind. “My name is Evander. I think you’ve already met my roommate Odin.”

“You have roommates? That’s...less depressing.”

“Come on. Before you get in trouble. You’re undead on your feet.”

We had begun walking, more like speed-walking when she stopped. “Was that a bitten-by-a-vampire joke?”

“Maybe,” I shrugged.

“That was actually funny. Thank you. Everyone ignores the one thing that brought me here.”

We took the stairs and soon found Roxy’s room. I made a mental note of which room number it was in case Odin wanted to visit her. Wait, he probably already knew it.

Remember it for us.

My damned wolf.

“This is it. Go get some sleep. First day of classes for you.”

She was halfway through the doorway when she looked at me over her shoulder. “Thank you for helping me, Evander.”

“You’re welcome.”

The warmth in her voice washed over me. My wolf sent images of tucking her in bed and making sure her den and nest were safe and warm. Even of changing into my beast and lying on her floor beside her bed, to chase away any nightmares or anything else that might try and get her.

I stepped back at the rapid influx of visuals, surprised and shocked.

My wolf had never done anything like that before.

“Is something wrong?” she asked.

“No. Um, actually, yes. I have to go before I get caught. I’m too cute for detention or

demerits. Good night, Roxy.”

I turned to leave, but she stuck her head out the door. “Hey, I never told you my name.”

So, I did the only thing a man like me could do. I whirled around and winked at her. “You didn’t have to.”

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Roxy

The past few days felt like years. Decades. By the time I said goodbye to Evander at the door, I was so tired I could barely hold my head up. Getting lost—twice—and being threatened by the maybe-fox guy was almost more than I could survive. And I felt like shit. Had since the battle, although my chaotic life changes had been a fairly encompassing distraction.

But with the door closed behind my rescuer, all alone in this small, spartan room, there was nothing to protect me from the memories that threatened to destroy me.

My bathroom wasn't any better than the bedroom. It had all the necessities, but nothing more. One inadequate towel and washcloth, a bottle of shampoo/conditioner guaranteed to leave my hair feeling gummy, a bar of generic unscented soap, toilet paper...not even a hair dryer.

I opened my bags and searched through them, but whoever had packed for me at Urban Academy had probably been rushed—they missed a whole lot of things. For now, I'd have to towel dry my hair as best I could.

Maybe there was a way I could earn money to replace some of them or send a message asking my roommate to forward my missing items? We weren't close friends, but we weren't enemies either, so she might be willing to do it.

Having assessed the situation and determined that I had none of my personal toiletries or other such items, I stepped into the shower stall, barely large enough to raise my arms to shampoo my hair without bumping my elbows on the tile. The water

was...adequate as well. Whoever put this place together must have been given minimum requirements and instructions not to exceed them.

But a shower in the quiet of my private room was better than the quick washup after the battle that had been mostly about scrubbing me down in search of wounds and puncture marks. The spray might be sparse, but with enough scrubbing, I finally felt clean again. And the water was hot, so that was good.

After rubbing my hair as dry as possible, I patted my skin and was way too happy to find a bottle of generic skin lotion and a new deodorant in the cabinet over the sink. Not a fussy girly girl, I could get by as long as I was clean, smelled decent, and my skin wasn't dry. Wearing my favorite knee-length T-shirt and a pair of panties, I crawled between the sheets and fluffed up the single flat pillow I'd been provided with.

Clicking off the lamp beside the bed, I curled up in the fetal position, praying to the Goddess for a single night of good sleep. I'd need it if I was going to face my first day of classes here at Marked Blood. The students all called it that, apparently, and it was the perfect name for it. But there was nothing more I could do about it tonight, so I closed my eyes and breathed in through my nose to a count of seven, held it in for seven, and exhaled through my mouth for a count of seven. We did that in a mindfulness class at Urban Academy, and at the time, I'd thought it was a waste, but mentally and physically exhausted, with every one of my muscles in knots, I had to try something.

At first, it hurt even to try to inhale that deeply, but after a few minutes, my lungs seemed to expand better and my shoulders eased somewhat. My calves still ached—something that always happened when I overdid—and I was shivering with a chill, but I still managed to fall asleep eventually.

He was gripping me, pinning me against his body, his claws digging into my back.

Hisses and snarls took the place of words in this lost creature's vocabulary. He reeked of rotting meat and old, dried blood, and the fangs he bared were not the gleaming white of a movie vampire.

They were yellowed and broken, and when they sank into my flesh, they spilled blood down my chest in a flow that had two of his friends coming to get their share. Their tongues lolled out, their eyes glassy and dead, and I hung there between them, sure I'd be dead any minute.

I didn't volunteer for the service; it was never my agreement.

But no choice was proffered. My guardian gave me over. Maybe she got money for me. But no matter when I'd soon either be dead or undead. I had struggled all I could, and now I was bleeding out.

That mean dead, right? Because undead was so much worse. These things that were feeding off me were the lowest kind of vampires, enslaved shells of the kind that gave them their orders. We'd heard of them at the academy but thought they'd been beaten back, at least for a while.

As these thoughts streamed through my dying brain, blackness and silence took over.

I shot straight up in bed, gasping and choking, hand clamping on my throat, on the puncture wounds. Tears streamed down my cheeks, and my sobs were so loud I was amazed nobody came in to see what was wrong. Were the walls so thick here? I scrambled to the door and grasped the handle. It didn't move.

I was locked in. It was true. Me and my misery, alone together.

How would I ever survive this?

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Roxy

I woke on the cold tile floor in front of a locked door. What door it was, my fuzzy exhausted brain didn't know, but after lying there for a few minutes, it came back to me. Marked Blood Academy, the prison I'd been sent to because I'd been injured in battle.

Countries often treated their veterans poorly, but I'd never heard of one that locked them up for an unspecified time of incarceration because of it. Of course the shifter council was not a country, and they did not run the packs under them in a democratic fashion. In theory, each pack made their own rules, but if the council didn't like them, or if they wanted something, like fang fodder, they demanded people as tribute.

Once I'd gotten into the war, I appreciated that it must be fought, but somehow didn't appreciate it being fought by me. I'd had less than a week of training because my superior officer insisted that the defense classes that had been part of the Urban Academy's curriculum should be sufficient. And thank the Goddess I'd had that much because without it, I'd have died sooner. Not that I died. But would I still be likely to?

Nobody seemed to have any idea what was going to happen with me. When I'd asked, I got shrugs and the occasional, "We'll have to wait and see." Or similar comments. And when I tried to find out about other people's situations, symptoms, survival rate, I got silence. But, here at Marked Blood, there were hundreds or maybe more of those who did not die right away or, presumably, turn into vampires, and most of those I had encountered the day before appeared to be in good health.

Unless they had a basement for those who did turn? I'd been told execution was the solution, but who knew for sure if that was accurate or if they just locked them up in coffins in a dark hole under this creepy school?

The dark timbre of the gong I'd heard the day before resounded, followed by a series of messages about the coming day and schedule changes and other things that didn't mean much to me as I pushed to my feet, moaning at the stiffness a night on a cold floor could bring. Considering how poorly I'd been sleeping, it was amazing I'd managed it in such an awkward position and without even so much as a blanket. Maybe the fever that was spiking at night had helped with that. But listening to the announcements over the intercom hidden somewhere in this room, my weird sleeping arrangements were not too important.

Apparently lunch was not going to be tacos, and the afternoon shifts were canceled. At least, that was how I interpreted the garbled drive-thru-style voices. If there was something critical on there, I'd probably miss it. Maybe translating the mechanical noises emanating from the speaker was an acquired skill.

Either way, I needed to get ready for the day, and hopefully if there were any changes in my schedule, someone would tell me. In a normal world, I'd get a text or a DM, but not at Marked Blood.

Here, phones were not allowed. At least for me.

I checked the door, but it was still securely locked. Although I was fairly confident they'd let me out eventually, I still didn't like the confinement.

After another shower in the adequate bathroom to rinse off any dust from the floor, I pulled out the uniform and laid it on the bed. Desi's advice about the shorts came to mind, and I dug through my things and found a pair of reasonably short black bicycle shorts that should do the job. I had a hairbrush in my purse that somehow ended up in

my bag, along with a tinted lip balm way down at the bottom, and that would have to do it for self-care.

Just as I swiped the balm on my bottom lip, a loud click came from the door. I nearly tripped over my own feet in my rush to get there and out into the hallway. Nearly forgetting the book bag that must have been dropped off while I was lost in the dark.

Even with the information I had been given, there was no possibility I could find my first class, so I headed for the dining room instead with the hopes of getting a cup of coffee and maybe something handheld to eat while I tried not to get lost again. I never had this problem at Urban Academy.

And of course I couldn't find the dining room. But I did stumble upon the administration building, which worked out better than I could have hoped. The student manning the receptionist's desk informed me that someone would take me to my first class, and I should just have a seat.

I expected Odin, since he was doing that kind of job the day before, and a familiar face would be welcome, but instead, it was one of his friends from his dining table.

Sol.

Sol

“Oh, I thought Odin would take me,” she blurted then blushed so becomingly, I wanted to place my palm on that rosy skin and warm it there, slide it into the soft hair at her temples, and draw her in close. “Not that you aren’t just fine. I mean...”

“It’s all right,” I hastened to say, shaking my head to free it of thoughts that would do nobody any good. “Everyone wants Odin. But I’m here working off demerits, so if you won’t let me take you, I won’t be able to get credit for that.”

“I wouldn’t want to do that.” She shifted her bag higher on her shoulder. “Do you have time to walk me past the dining room so I can get some coffee? My mind doesn’t really switch on without caffeine, and I have a feeling I’ll need all the brain power I can get in my classes.”

“You haven’t had anything yet?” I tsked. “What kind of brain power will you have on an empty stomach? Let’s grab you that coffee and maybe a breakfast burrito or a scone for the road.”

“You have scones?” Her eyes lit up, and I wanted to find lots more ways to make that happen. “I love them. It was the only good thing my aunt ever made.” The light dulled. “She just usually didn’t share them with me.”

“So you had to watch others enjoy your favorite thing?” Outraged, I began plotting ways to make her aunt pay for that and what I suspected were many other crimes against this female.

“No big deal. I snuck them when she was sleeping. After the first day, she thought they were stale anyway.”

I reached for her bag. “Let me get this from you. It looks heavy.”

“It kind of is. At Urban Academy, most of our books were on tablet, but if what I was issued offers any indication, that’s not the case here.”

“No, we’re very low-tech.” I guided her out into the hallway and toward the dining room. “What kind of scones do you like?”

“She only made orange cranberry. But at Urban Academy, we had chocolate chip a few times. They were delicious.”

“Let’s go see what we can find.” We didn’t have scones every day, but I’d spotted some when I grabbed my sausage and egg muffin on my way to the office. “They’re really popular, so I hope they aren’t all gone.”

“Me too!” Roxy picked up the speed of her steps. “I wonder what kind they will be.”

Please let there be some.

It wasn’t as if I could just dash out and buy her some or even order them overnight online. As we proceeded toward the dining room, I surreptitiously crossed my fingers. “Here we are.”

No line remained, although a few students lingered at the tables. Classes would begin shortly, and showing up late was a guaranteed demerit nobody needed. When a student received orientation, they were warned to avoid them by following the rules. Simple enough, we all thought until we learned that there were so many rules, some of which changed without notice, that no one could remain demerit free.

I always had enough to be just on the good side of danger, so I took on various jobs around the school to keep from crossing that line. Nothing I did was terrible, at least nothing I got caught for...but the threat of what might come if we were booted from this prison was never clear enough for me to be willing to take the chance. Not yet, anyway.

“Look, chocolate chip scones.” Roxy piled three on her tray then stopped. “I’m being greedy. How many are we allowed?”

I shrugged. “If it was earlier, I’d say keep it to a couple until everyone has a chance, but that ship has sailed, so take all you want.”

“Really?” Her smile brought that light back to her eyes and melted my hard heart. “I think three is enough. Maybe I can wrap them in napkins for later?”

“There are actually some waxed bags at the end of the line you can use.” I glanced at my watch. “But you’d better get your coffee so we can move. Class starts soon, and according to your schedule, it’s not one of the close rooms.”

“I can skip the coffee.” She chewed on her lip. “I don’t mind.”

“We have time for that.” I took her arm and guided her to the large coffee urns. “We don’t have fancy coffee here, but it’s not terrible.”

She held one of the cardboard to-go cups under the spout and pushed down on the handle, letting the rich brew pour free. “It smells very good.”

“I actually like it better than a lot of the ones at coffeehouses—at least to my memory.”

“Urban Academy has coffee carts that also sell pastry for a quick snack on the go.”

She twisted her lips in a grimace. “I didn’t appreciate it while I was there.”

“You’re not the only person from Urban Academy, but there aren’t many. Usually, people don’t end up in battle unless their individual pack is attacked or something similar. Even then, families keep them in school if they can.”

“My parents are dead, and my aunt doesn’t give a f—darn about anyone but herself. I am surprised she even remembered me long enough to send me to war. She said I was recruited.”

“Doesn’t usually work that way.” But families were unpredictable, and mine wasn’t much better. I hadn’t thought that until the battle that sent me here, though. “Anyway, we’ll have other opportunities to talk. Your classroom is right up ahead. I’ll walk you in and introduce you to the instructor.”

“No need for that.” The girl she’d been chatting with at dinner, Desi, poked her head out of the door and grabbed Roxy’s free hand. “I’ll take care of it. You can get to your class before you get any more demerits. You have about a minute and a half.”

Which was not enough time to argue. I probably could have said I was completing an assignment for admin, but it was easier just to hand Roxy her bag, tell her I’d see her later, and sprint off into the sunset.

Roxy

“Now you’re spending time with Sol?” Desi led me toward the front of the room. “I thought you were hanging with Odin.”

Had I even told her that? I wasn’t sure. “Odin helped me out yesterday, and the office assigned Sol to get me started this morning.”

“That just leaves Evander, then.” Desi approached a big wooden desk on a platform. Behind it sat a man wearing a black jacket and slacks, his gray shirt open at the throat. Dark hair matched his clothing, but his eyes were steely and seemed to cut right through me.

“And who have we here, Miss Desi?” he asked, folding his hands on the desk. All right, we wouldn’t be shaking hands. I never planned on it anyway, but it still made his point. “Oh, wait.” He shuffled papers on his desk and nodded. “Ah, yes. Roxy Swifthunt. You have been recovering from your injuries and just arrived...yesterday?”

“Yes.” I cleared my throat, the words hard to get past the giant lump that had formed since I walked in here. “Yes, Mr...”

“Haley. I moderate homeroom for your class and also teach shifter history with an emphasis on wartimes.”

“I think I’ve had enough of war. Am I signed up for the history class?” I probably should have known the answer to that, but I was so busy worrying about getting

places it never occurred to me to wonder what the actual classes were. Maybe that was partly because I had little faith in them being useful or interesting to me. The fact that history was all about wars confirmed that.

“You are, and maybe if you’d understood how battles worked, you wouldn’t be here.”

The hair on the back of my neck lifted in outrage. How dare he accuse me of causing my own injury. “Maybe if we’d had more training, I wouldn’t be here,” I blurted before I could stop myself. “Maybe if we even know the reason for the war we were thrust into.”

Before I began to speak, there had been a low hum of conversation within the room, but as the last words left my lips, silence descended.

Mr. Haley’s eyes burned brighter, and his jaw shape broadened. What the? “Miss Swifthunt, if you want to get along in this school, you’ll learn not to make waves or smart remarks. Now, take your seat.”

“If you’ll tell me—” Desi’s elbow in my ribs shut me down.

“I’ll show her where to sit, Mr. Haley.” She towed me toward a pair of empty desks in the back of the room and pushed me down into the nearest one. A severe stare warned me not to say anything more.

There were only about twenty students in the room, but the teacher took attendance as if he couldn’t tell who might be missing, before going over some more announcement and then giving a lesson on rules.

He went over everything I’d been told so far as well as another dozen or so concerning dining room behavior, how to address staff, and other things. Was everyone else new here, too/ Desi wasn’t... Flicking glances around the room, I

spotted the other students hiding yawns and staring past the teacher's head. None of them appeared to be listening at all.

Goddess. Did that mean we would be barraged with this sort of lecture every morning? Every few minutes, I was reminded of why I didn't like it here.

After our reminder of all the rules, Mr. Haley pulled down a map and launched into the promised war history lecture. Considering the level of PTSD I was experiencing, it had me ready to climb out of my skin, and I decided to stop by admin and see if I could get out of this class while I still had some of my mind left.

After a while, I did the one thing I could, which was to ignore as much of what the teacher was saying as possible. I slipped deep inside, where my wolf lurked, and kept my gaze focused front, hoping nobody would notice. And that I would not be called on to answer any questions. None were asked anyway. It seemed Mr. Haley enjoyed the sound of his voice more than anyone else's.

Right at the end of class, he announced a quiz the next day based on today's "little talk." I was so screwed. How many demerits for failing a quiz?

The gong rang again, and we all filed out into the hallway. Desi checked my schedule and since we were going in the same general direction, she walked with me most of the way and helped me understand where I needed to go until I could meet up with her again at lunchtime.

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Roxy

I felt so much better by lunchtime.

Not that I was in the least happy to be confined here, but I had managed to find the rest of my classes and even wind up in the dining room. My stomach growled as I joined the end of the line. Although I had finished my coffee on the way to homeroom, I had forgotten about the scones wrapped up in my bag. They'd make a good snack when I was locked in the room tonight. I sure wished there were a way to avoid that locked door. Never considering myself claustrophobic in the past, I had found a part of me that just dreaded the coming of night.

At least I didn't have a fever at the moment. Those were mostly at night and early in the morning now, but it still made me afraid that the venom was working inside me yet.

“Roxy!” Desi's voice pulled me from my thoughts. She held up her filled tray. “See you at the table.”

Today's offerings were indeed not tacos, so maybe I had heard the intercom voice correctly. Instead, there was a tossed green salad with three choices of dressing and a big pot of beef stew. The salad appealed, the stew not so much, but I had missed breakfast and it was a long time until dinner, so in addition to a large serving of salad, I filled a bowl with stew and helped myself to a couple of slices of bread. For drinks, there was milk, water, and iced tea, which was my choice.

Desi sat in our regular place, digging into the stew with such pleasure, I expected it to

be way more delicious than it smelled. But the first bite I put into my mouth tasted like cardboard and it only got worse. “You like this?” I stared into the bowl and saw smallish bits of meat and vegetables floating in a greasy broth.

“Compared to some things around here? It’s great. But if you don’t want yours?” She reached out grabby hands, but I kept my food on my side of the table.

“Gotta keep up my strength,” I intoned, and forked up some salad. The Caesar dressing I’d chosen was a bit salty, but it tasted good in general. “What a morning.”

“Yeah?” She dipped her bread in the stew. “Anything in particular happen?”

“No, it was just a lot to take in. That history class was the worst. I tried not to let myself get upset, but that teacher is majorly into blood and guts, isn’t he?”

She shrugged. “You get used to it eventually. But at first, it triggered me pretty hard.”

“Me too. Enough that I kind of shut it out after a bit and now we’re going to be tested on it?”

“I have notes.” She reached down into her book bag, identical to mine, and pulled out a notebook. “You can have them. I was listening.”

“I wish I had been able to.” I accepted the notebook from Desi. “But thank you so much. I promise to do better next time. It was just such a shock.”

“I know. Let’s talk about something more pleasant so we don’t end up with upset stomachs.”

“Like what?” Because I truly couldn’t think of a thing.

“Those guys you’ve been palling around with.”

“I told you, Odin and Sol were just assigned to help me, by the office, and Evander...” Oops.

“What about him?” Desi leaned across the table. “Evander doesn’t work in the office.”

Just then, the three guys came in at the same time and got in line.

“Lower your voice,” I hissed. “They’ll hear you.”

“Ooh, you have to tell me everything. What did you do with Evander?”

“I didn’t do anything. After we separated last night, I was trying to rush to get to my room, and you know how lost I’ve been.”

“So, two seconds after I left you, Evander found you? How romantic?”

“It wasn’t like that at all. First, another guy with a foxy face found me, and he threatened me with demerits.”

“Foxy as in the animal rather than the antique expression meaning he’s cute?”

“Yeah. He was awful and bragging like he had some kind of power over the other students.”

Desi was getting near the bottom of her bowl of stew, and she wiped it clean with the bread. “Yeah, I know the one you mean. Reinard. He doesn’t admit it, but rumor has it he has some fox in his lineage. Mostly wolf, though. And he is not powerful, but he is a powerful kiss-ass. Avoid him.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice.”

“And speaking of twice, did you get lost a second time?”

“I did, and that was when Evander found me and walked me home.” I forked up some salad. Lunch was only a half hour and I hadn’t eaten very much. “Right to my door.”

“Wow. That could have gotten him in trouble if he’d been caught. Wonder what he was doing outside after curfew.”

Me too. I also wondered.

“Tell me about Sol. He seems a little bit stuffy to me.”

Desi nodded. “I don’t know any of those three well, but Sol is the one with the most tragic story, I think. He was going to be pack alpha, and now that he’s been bitten, his daddy dearest has said he’s out. Won’t even let him challenge for the position. And they say he was raised like a little prince.”

“No wonder he’s reserved. That must be a phenomenal letdown. What will he do when he gets out of here?”

Desi was silent.

“Desi, we do get out of here, right? Eventually?”

She set her fork down and started piling her dishes on the tray.

“Desi?”

“I don’t know. Nobody that I’m aware of has left since I’ve been here.”

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Evander

“I was assisting at PE and she didn’t look good.” Today, PE had consisted of shifting in the auditorium, and the little female had barely managed it. To be fair, most of our wolves hated shifting indoors, but it was more than that. “I don’t think the venom has cleared out of her system yet.”

“We don’t know that it’s out of ours,” Odin pointed out. “But I understand what you mean. Where is she, anyway?”

“I don’t see her.” Sol stood up and looked over to where Desi sat alone. “She’s late. I’m going to go ask her friend if she knows anything.” Without waiting for us to object, he was on his feet and moving toward the other table.

“He’s talking to her,” Odin put in unnecessarily. “I wish we could hear what they’re saying.”

“Me too, but he’s coming back.”

Sol sat down again and picked up his fork. “They call this steak? I can barely cut it with the dull knives they give us.”

“Shut up about the food. What did Desi say?” I asked. “Is Roxy all right?”

“She told Desi she was going to call in sick for dinner, running a low-grade fever again. She tried to explain why she should show up anyway, but she didn’t listen. I told Desi we’d try to talk to her.”

“Not good. She’s not processing the venom well at all, is she?” Odin’s brows drew down. “We need to go see her. Find out if she needs anything.”

“After dinner.” Sol glanced toward where the faculty member assigned to watch us at this meal stood. “If we get up and leave now, we’ll be getting more demerits. Just finish your food and then we can casually head toward the library.”

“But we aren’t going to the library,” Odin pointed out.

“Duh. It’s just to throw off anyone who might be nosy. Eat!”

We managed to down the steak despite how difficult it was to chew, and as soon as we finished, we bussed our trays and left.

There were a lot of students milling around and especially going toward the library. Since we weren’t allowed outside after dark or after dinner in general, there was no place else to go. We just joined the general flow of people until we got to a side hallway where we peeled off. “We have to be careful,” Sol reminded us. “It’s against the rules to be on someone else’s floor, you know.”

“I knew that last night when I walked her up,” I pointed out. “Just act like you know what you’re doing, like we have somewhere to be.”

We kept to the shadows crossing the courtyard, but nobody accosted us, and it wasn’t that far to the dorms. “Do you think we should have brought her something?” Sol asked. “If she’s not feeling well?”

“We can ask what she needs.” I took the back stairs two at a time, passing Odin along the way. “And then go get it for her.”

“Deal.”

There weren't many students in the dorms yet, but there soon would be, so we moved as quickly as possible, wanting to get a look at Roxy and see what shape she was in. There had been a number of students who had come and not lasted long, the poison in their systems making it impossible for them to continue.

And we were never told where they went. That couldn't happen to Roxy. My wolf was not going to allow it. He didn't seem to have an idea what he would do to stop it, but he was adamant.

"Here's her room." I stopped in front of her door. "I'll knock."

"Go ahead." Odin shook his head. "Knock yourself out."

Sarcasm suited him. I lifted my fist and knocked on the door. "Roxy, are you in there?"

After a moment, she replied, "Yes. Evander?"

"And Sol and Odin. You weren't at dinner, and we were worried. Can we come in?"

"No." She sounded breathless and tired. "You can't."

"Why not?" Sol leaned over my shoulder to speak to her. "We won't do anything inappropriate. We're nice wolves."

"Little Red Riding Hood's grandmother believed that, too. But that's not why."

"Then?"

"Try the knob." She huffed out a breath. "The minute I came in here, it locked."

“Roxy,” I said quickly, wanting to get this out before anyone else showed up. “You can’t miss meals or classes or tell anyone you’re not processing the venom fast enough. If you are sick with it, you will end up getting sent away.”

“W-where?”

“We don’t know,” Odin said. “But it can’t be anywhere good. No matter how you feel, show up and don’t mention it to anyone but us or Desi. It’s too dangerous.”

A sob broke from her throat, and my fists clenched. I needed to comfort her, but the door was a barrier we couldn’t cross.

“Roxy, we have to go because it’s going to get crowded out here,” Odin continued, “but we’ll check back later.”

“Okay,” she sniffled. “I feel like such a big baby.”

“You’re not. You’re sick, but we are going to help you get better, all right?” I planted my palm on the door as if I could feel her through it. “For tonight just rest.”

“Okay.” More sniffing. “This sucks.”

It so did.

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Roxy

It was so nice of the three guys to come just to check on me.

But somehow it made it worse when they left. Their voices faded as they went down the hallway back to wherever their room was.

I wanted a shower but didn't have the energy to take one, so instead, I just undressed and crawled into bed. I'd thought the fever and aches were getting better, but after the whole school day, I had come back here to change for dinner and just wasn't able to get out again. I'd been warned already about missing meals, but my arms and legs ached and my head was pounding. Locating the speaker in the corner of the room, I found it could also be used as an intercom and told whoever answered in admin that I couldn't make it to dinner.

Desi had warned me when I told her I wasn't sure, and now all three guys had said the same thing. I was sent here because I was bitten but hadn't turned or died. And now, just because I was still sick, there was a danger I'd be sent somewhere even worse?

Shivering, I wrapped the blanket tighter around me and tried to sleep. Somehow, I'd had an idea that when I was unable to show up to eat, someone would bring me some soup or something, but nothing could be further from the truth. Instead of tea and sympathy, I was locked in early with no sustenance whatsoever.

Or so they probably thought.

I reached for my bag and dragged it closer, in search of those scones from this morning. I wasn't going to go hungry if I could help it. As I rummaged in the bookbag, I found the three scones and also the notebook Desi had loaned me.

If a shower sounded hard, studying battlefield strategy and injuries for a quiz sounded much worse. But I'd be damned if I was going to allow this school to beat me down. So, with a glass of water on the table next to me and my scones, I settled in to study.

At least my stomach was holding up, and the scones were delicious. Whatever everyone else was having for dinner, it couldn't be better than mine. Probably healthier but not tastier. The ladies Odin introduced me to in the kitchens had outdone themselves.

Unfortunately, my head was not as cooperative as my stomach, and the letters and numbers swam before my aching eyes. A subject I wanted no part of made it even harder than it could be. But I for sure didn't want the demerits associated with failing the quiz or the reputation I would likely obtain with Mr. Haley for it.

A chill ran over my arms and legs, and I shivered, pulling the blanket as high as I could while still allowing my arms free to hold the notes. A little guilt remained at taking Desi's only copy, and I promised myself I'd get up early enough to be in the dining room when she arrived for breakfast or coffee or whatever she had before class. That way, she'd have a little time to study. If they allowed tablets or other electronic devices in this place, she could have shared her notes with me without suffering herself.

Amazingly, even the detailed gore of the "history" class couldn't keep me awake after my long day, and my eyelids grew heavy. The notebook dropped from my hand, and I fell asleep amid the crumbs of chocolate chip scones and shattered dreams.

Much later, according to the old-fashioned clock on the nightstand, I woke again,

sucking in a breath to scream. I'd been full on in the war again, the vamp closing in, his rancid breath on my face, chipped and broken fangs piercing my flesh. In the movies, the vampires always had sharp clean fangs, or maybe bloody but nothing like the reality.

It was far too early to get up, still dark outside the small, high window in my dorm room—my cell. But I was not going back to sleep, nor could I study those nightmare-inducing notes. However much I'd absorbed would have to be enough to pass.

Folding the unfluffable pillow in half, I propped myself up to do some deep thinking. My life, before the war, had been far better than I ever recognized. Sure, my aunt was cheap and dismissive, so I never had fashionable clothes or expensive makeup, and I never quite fit in at Urban Academy, but I had a comfortable room, wonderful coffee, and the ability to come and go at will.

No, I didn't go out often, but I'd give almost anything to do it now.

But all of that was the past and one I'd never be able to revisit. If I planned to survive this for as long or little a time as they chose to keep me here—please let it be little—I would have to perk up and pretend everything was awesome. And that I felt well. Perfect.

Not going to be easy, but I'd been lucky so far to have Desi and the three guys who were willing to put themselves out there to help me adjust. I wouldn't make their efforts worthless by getting tossed to wherever those who didn't succeed here ended up.

Were they executed like those who turned? Or locked in a true dungeon?

I would not be finding out from personal experience.

Sol

When I was bitten, I lost more than just my pack alpha future. I was scooped up on the spot and transported to this place after what amounted to a Band-Aid on the ragged, seeping wounds left by the three vampires who fed off me. So anemic, I couldn't stand up, I was brought in the door on a gurney and taken up to the room where my roommates were already ensconced.

If not for them, I would have died. They not only stole medical supplies from the infirmary to treat my wounds but lied to the teachers and staff, claiming I was making great strides in healing and only needed a week to be back on my feet.

Nobody allowed that kind of time anymore, which was why we were being so pushy with the new girl who currently sat two tables away from us having breakfast with Desi. The day before, it had been three tables distant, but we'd done a little trading with the dessert-loving people in between to switch. Technically, this was against the rules, but as long as it wasn't a dramatic switch, nobody seemed to notice. And we were close enough now to hear most of what Roxy and Desi were saying. Honestly, we got the best of the deal. Any cakes or pies for the next week was a cheap price to pay. Particularly since Odin had an in with the cooks and could get us extras. Cheating on the trade? Maybe a little, but if everyone was happy, where lay the harm?

“What are they saying?” Evander asked. He had the seat farthest from the pair, and the dining room was crowded and loud.

“Something about a quiz,” Odin said. “History class.”

“They have Mr. Haley, don’t they?”

“Yes.” I knew because I’d dropped her off there the day before. “He was my first homeroom and history teacher, too, and his methodology is questionable at best.”

“He gave me nightmares,” Evander growled. “Look at Roxy. She is either wearing too much blush, or she’s still running a fever.”

“She’s following our advice,” Odin said, jaw gritted. “But she belongs in bed getting lots of TLC.”

Not that we could do anything about it. “I think she looks a little better.” At least I hoped. “Maybe we can get a look at her bites and see if they are healing at all. You know what mine were like when I got here.”

“A gory mess. And mine weren’t much better.” Odin pushed his plate of eggs aside. “I don’t know how anyone gets better here.”

The two guys launched into a discussion of how we could help Roxy heal without getting her in any trouble. We got demerits all the time, but that was the last thing the female needed after all the trauma she’d been put through. I kept my eyes on Roxy and my ears on my friends’ conversation. If I wasn’t mistaken, they both were far more interested in her than I’d ever heard them with anyone else. Basically, we hadn’t been looking for relationships, any of us, more interested in figuring out how we could get out and get back to our lives.

Now, all that had changed. While Roxy and her friend had their heads bent over a notebook, they were making awful faces but also laughing together, and it warmed my heart to see her smile. This female needed joy in her life, and my wolf was positive we were the ones to give it to her. The uniform that looked so dreadful on so many actually was cute on her, emphasizing her trim waist and flaring hips. Among

other things. Maybe I was wrong to be ogling someone who at this point needed compassion and kindness more than a mate.

My mate-to-be in the pack had never been fated. We'd been betrothed very young with the intent of creating connections between powerful alphas, and when I was stripped of my future position, so I was stripped of my future with Madison. Although we'd been thrown together regularly over the years, and she was nice enough and certainly stunning, losing her had been the one part of my old life I'd never been able to bring myself to care about.

I only hoped she'd be happy with my younger brother who she'd been handed off to, I'd heard, like a possession with no say whatsoever in her life. Here, I couldn't come and go at will, and I was locked in at night, but nobody was trying to force me into a relationship that I didn't want.

One plus to this prison school.

If Madison left me cold, Roxy heated my blood. I already knew I'd lay down my life for her not out of duty, which would have been the case with my former betrothed, but because I chose her life over mine.

"Sol?" Odin elbowed me. "Daydreaming?"

"Something like that." My friends had been talking about Roxy nonstop, and I wasn't sure what that meant. Still, the most important thing was to help her get through her first days if not unscathed, at least no worse than she'd arrived. Way harder here than many realized when they first showed up.

Anything else, we could discuss later. What were the odds they also had strong feelings? I believed she was my mate, and therefore not theirs. If they attempted to take things beyond friendship and protection with her, I would just let them know she

was my fated. It would be fine. “Let’s make a pact to keep an eye on her. I think she’s overdoing what we told her to do, and we don’t want her to draw attention by acting too healthy. Nobody will buy that either.”

“Anything can be a problem here,” Odin said. “I’m in.”

“Me too.” Evander’s gaze lit on Roxy. “Whatever she needs, I will protect her.”

“Deal, then.” It was only about caring for her. Nothing more. Until I claimed her as my mate.

Roxy

No shifting today.

At Urban Academy, there was some in-class shifting, but we could also do it in the courtyard or a few other places on campus. There were even locations off campus where we could walk or hitch a ride with someone to run in the hills outside of the city. And local restaurants and shops and all sorts of museums and concerts if we wanted to go.

Not that I'd had money for any of the expensive things, but museums were often free to students and other cultural-type events offered discounts. My stepmother wouldn't have sent me an allowance if I was going to die without a chocolate bar from the canteen, but I had picked up some work-study hours tutoring first-year students, and that helped me to manage the basics. I made a mental note to ask in admin if there was any such thing because my clothes were not only not fashionable but at this point were close to falling apart, and I didn't want to wear this itchy uniform forever.

After Mr. Haley announced the change in schedule, I whispered to Desi, "Can we just go do it ourselves in the afternoon?"

Her eyes widened, and she looked left and right. "Ourselves? Without supervision?"

"Uh yeah?" I'd been doing it unsupervised since my first shift that happened when I was all alone in the forest. "Pretty sure I know how."

"No way. That's like fifteen demerits...twenty maybe? Don't even think about it."

She sat up very straight and folded her hands on the desk. So many folded hands around here. “Now sshh. Time for the test.”

I followed her gaze to the front of the room where the teacher held a sheaf of papers. We were going to take a test on a printed-out form? Why not mimeographed if we were stepping back into the past? In the olden days, my grandma told me, one of the few times I saw her before she died, they had a machine with a strong smell that nobody who had ever scented it could forget. She described it as chemically, but smiled while saying it, and told me how she was privileged to use the machine to turn the handle and magically make the letters transfer onto the test sheets.

Funny how I could miss someone who I’d spent so little time with, but my father’s mother had a magic about her that made her unforgettable.

The happiness and nostalgia of that memory flitted away, replaced by a present where a man wearing what looked like the identical jacket and pants from the day before was glaring down at me and holding out the test I’d been dreading. “Miss Swifthunt, are you prepared for this quiz? I noticed you were daydreaming yesterday as well.”

Bastard was probably hoping I’d fail. I’d never give him the satisfaction.

“Of course, Mr. Haley, I was listening. Your lecture was so filled with interesting details, it was a lot to memorize, but I promise to do my very best so you know I appreciate all the work you put into your lecture and our education.”

I heard Desi suck in a breath at my outrageous remarks. A bit over the top, but the teacher didn’t seem to notice. Rather, he preened. “We shall see, then. I get little enough appreciation around here.”

Holy shit. He bought it.

I added a winsome smile. “I’m sure people are just intimidated. I can’t wait to see what the next lecture is about. History has always been my favorite subject, especially when we learn about our own history.”

He narrowed his eyes, and I was afraid he’d caught on to my sarcasm, but then he shrugged. “Just do your best, and no one can ask more.”

When we left the room, Desi grabbed me by the arm and towed me aside. “What was that?”

“That was hypocrisy in action. Didn’t you like it?”

“You scare me, new bestie, but I did enjoy it. How do you think you did on the test?”

“Good, I think.” We started off down the hallway and toward our next classes. “But I will be sure to take my own notes next time so you don’t have to do without yours. In fact, if we both do, we can maybe study together in the library?”

“You are all gung-ho now! What changed?”

We paused outside the door of my class, and I offered her that same winsome smile, but she read it correctly and laughed.

“I listened to you and to Odin, Evander, and Sol who all basically have told me to maintain and not show any weakness, at least if I am reading it all correctly.”

“You’re right. That is the way to get by here. But maybe tone it down just a bit. Haley is gullible, obviously, and as long as you can keep up a level of ‘appreciation,’ you’ve probably got him wrapped around your little finger. I can’t believe I never thought of it. You’ve done this before, right?”

“Not at all. I’ve always prided myself on being honest. So this is a switch. I wonder how many other authority figures it will work with.”

“Guessing not many, so take it slow. If one figures it out, they’ll all talk about you.”

The gong went off and she pushed me into the class. “See you at lunch.”

Evander

PE on a non-shifting day was usually something exciting like walking in circles inside the fenced area, two by two, with no conversation allowed. On a hot day like this one, it was pretty awful without a lick of shade to relieve the unrelenting sun's glare.

I didn't usually participate in this particular session, but the instructor was in a meeting and I was assigned to supervise the class until their return or if it ended, whichever was first.

Of course, I had no interest in being an enforcer, but if I didn't at least keep things close to the rules, everyone would pay. So, I sat on the steps to the building, watching students march around and around, sweat dripping from their foreheads, their gym clothes dampened, but unlike the regular teacher, I made sure they got plenty of water and breaks. If someone looked out the admin window, they would probably see what I was up to, but there was only so much I was willing to do. It wasn't unusual for someone to keel over in these forced marches.

I also allowed talking, as long as they continued to look straight forward and speak quietly. Desi and Roxy were in the class, and I did not want to see either of them suffer. Whoever called this PE was a complete idiot.

Funny how shifting was indoors but marching, that would have been just fine to do in that same auditorium where it was at least twenty degrees cooler, was out here. I checked my watch. Another half hour, and while nobody looked great, Roxy looked bad. She stood straight, taking solid strides, but when she passed me, her pale cheeks

and clenched jaw told the story. I wanted desperately to tell her to stop and sit down. I'd have taken her place if I could, but of course that wouldn't fly.

With no way of knowing for sure when the teacher would be back, I had to keep things as normal as possible, and that meant Roxy continuing with the others. My wolf raged inside me, demanding we take her to our den and offer her a cooling drink. Twenty more minutes to go. I picked up a squeeze bottle of cool water, left the steps, and moved out into the yard to walk alongside the various class members. I offered encouragement and a squirt of water for anyone who wanted it. And they all did. I tried not to show favoritism to anyone. It was at least ninety-five degrees out there, and since it was the first hot day of the week, I wondered if they had deliberately scheduled this class to make them suffer.

Not a comforting thought.

By the time the hands of the clock worked their way to the hour, I was sweating more than the class members, and Roxy's steps were far less sure than at the beginning.

"That's it, everyone!" I headed back toward the steps. "Be sure to hydrate a lot more before your next class, and thanks for doing such a great job."

One by one, the students passed me on their way inside, but Roxy and Desi lagged behind. It was too soon for her to have to do a death march in the blazing sun, and I hovered, watching, afraid that if I ran out to help her, someone in admin might see it out the window and realize how weak she still was.

As she wobbled, I tensed, but then Desi burst in to laughter and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "You're so funny, Roxy!" She giggled and guided her toward where I sat. "Come and tell Evander what you just said. He's going to die."

At first, Roxy swayed, but then she laughed as well. It was weak, but it let her lean

into her friend and hug her waist, whispering in her ear to all appearances.

“Evander,” Desi said, “Can you believe this girl? She just got here and she not only kept up with everyone out there but told me the funniest joke just now.”

At this point, they were close enough to the building to be out of sight of the windows, and I was on my feet and on Roxy’s unsupported side instantly. “Hang in there.” Desi was not that much bigger than Roxy who was quite petite, but she’d managed to keep her going all the way back to where I could help. “You’re both rock stars.”

“Sit down for a few minutes and drink water,” I insisted.

“You’ve got this, right?” Desi made to leave but I patted the steps. “You, too. I cannot believe you and the others were put through this for no reason. I’d fix it if I could.”

“The only reason we were all upright, and I mean all of us, was because of you and that squeeze bottle,” Desi burst out. “I am so angry I could kill someone. Thank the Goddess the regular teacher wasn’t here. He would have let us all drop.”

She wasn’t wrong.

But all I could do for right now was get them hydrated and send them on their way with full water bottles. Maybe Odin or Sol had some better ideas to make the situation better for Roxy and Desi and the others because I felt horribly inadequate.

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Odin

After the incident at PE a few days before, Sol, Evander, and I were trying to figure out how we could start a sea change here at Marked Blood. Not one of us were criminals, at least not that I'd ever heard of, but we were treated as if we were. We were victims at worst and survivors at best, and if they were all so afraid to have us roaming the general community, there were going to have to be some kind of improvements.

Sometimes it just felt like school, like a strict academy, but then they did something like the marching in the sun. Walking the fenced area happened often, but not when it was that hot. Shifters were stronger than humans, but most of us had been weakened, at least temporarily, by the attacks that put us here.

And, frankly, we were veterans of the war. That was the description we should be wearing proudly. Although most of us had not signed up for it but been drafted or volunteered by our packs, we had honorably fought, with little training, almost no equipment, and few supplies in many cases. Our reward? Confinement under the supervision of a faculty and staff with varying degrees of sadism. To be fair, some were fine, and I'd heard Mr. Haley was coming around since Roxy had spoken kindly to him. Other students had taken up her method, and now the ogre was much improved. Who knew he was feeling undervalued and disrespected? But some, like Mr. Xexus who had been the one who set the PE plan for the day, were just mean. They got off on bossing people around, loved power, and my wolf wanted to tear out their throats. I actually thought it sounded like a good idea, but there were enough security and staff around, wearing weapons, that I probably couldn't take out enough of them to do any good.

Yet.

“Odin?” Desi slammed into me in the hallway outside my last class before lunch.

“Have you seen Roxy?”

Instantly alert, I grabbed her by the shoulders, keeping her from falling. “What do you mean? Didn’t you have homeroom together?”

“And one other class, but she wasn’t in either. I’m scared. Also, you’re hurting me.”

I released her and apologized. “I’m sorry. You caught me off guard. When did you last see her?”

“Breakfast. She was going to make a quick stop on the way to class, so I went on without her. But she never showed up. Where could she be?”

“What stop?”

“Her room, she said. She forgot something for class—didn’t say what. But she never showed.”

I closed my hand around Desi’s elbow and towed her out of the flow of traffic and into an alcove. “Did you have a chance to go to the rooms and look for her?”

“I was going there now, but I ran into you.” Literally. “Odin, what if something has happened to her? Since that yard march the other day, she hasn’t seemed as strong. Oh, she’s faking it, but I can tell. I need to find her.”

Hell, I should have known she was in trouble. That girl could really fake it until she made it. Which was what we told her to do. “We didn’t mean for her to hide her problems from us, just the staff.”

“Did you tell her that?”

I thought about it. “Actually, no. I thought she’d understand but...” But I was an idiot. We all were. “You go ahead to class so you don’t get in trouble.”

“What about you? If you don’t show up, you’ll get—”

“Demerits. I know. But I don’t care. I have a lot of them already, what’s one or two more?” At some point, I’d have enough they’d do something serious, but that wasn’t important right at this moment. My priorities were clear. “Go to class and I promise we’ll find her.”

“Okay but if you don’t, at lunchtime, I’m going to start searching and not stop until I know she’s safe.”

I gave Desi a quick hug. “That’s why you’re such a good friend. Now...go!”

She darted back the way she’d come and I stayed in the alcove and, facing away from the hallway, pulled my phone out of my pocket and texted Sol and Evander.

Roxy missing all morning. I’m going to look in her room.

Their replies came back fast. Sol first. On it. I’ll check the library.

And I’ll sneak around admin and see if they’ve got her there for some reason.

Cell phones were forbidden for most students, including us, but they sure came in handy.

Shoving the phone away, I ran down the hall toward the dorms. Behind me, the classroom door closed, making me absent without permission. Guaranteed demerits

but worth it.

The hallway was nearly deserted. In fact, I thought it was until I rounded the corner to the stretch outside Roxy's dorm room and spotted the figure slumped against her door.

"Roxy. Oh no." I scooped her up in my arms. "Do you have your key, Roxy?"

She was so hot with fever, she nearly burned my arms, her cheeks bright red. "No no no no. No bite. Don't want to bite."

"Shh. It will be okay." I patted her pockets and found her key, used it to open her door, and carried her inside. "Just gonna put you down on the bed then see if Sol or Odin will bring me some of the supplies from our room, okay?" I sent a quick text to them both. We didn't have anything like antibiotics anymore, so far as I knew, but maybe something I wasn't thinking of. At least fever reducers.

She mumbled some more, her eyes nearly closed, and I leaned closer, the heat radiating from her fanning my face. "What is it, female? Try to tell me what you need."

Her eyes opened, their color a dull gray, sightless, and she lunged toward me. I grabbed for her, trying to fend her off and keep her from hurting herself at the same time, but it was no use. Fangs, either from her wolf or something else, descended and she snarled, struggling, trying to get to me.

"Roxy, stop, you're okay. Stop. Ahhhhh." If the original bite I'd sustained had hurt, this one flamed into my veins, sending acid fire through my limbs as she latched on and sucked hard, draining me.

I grew weaker, barely aware of the pounding on the door, my friends shouts for us to

open up and let them in. I wished I could tell them why I couldn't. What good friends they'd been. But the female my wolf and I believed was our mate was drinking me down and not in the good way.

She finally stopped, pulled back with crimson lips, and her eyes returned to normal. She fell to the floor just as the door slammed open and Sol and Evander spilled inside.

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Everything will work out.

But that's hard to believe when I can barely afford a hot, tiny apartment that reeks of whiskey and has a floor vibrating with music from the bar downstairs most nights. Not to mention the loud laughter and occasional rattle of the walls from brawls that make me check my door lock and huddle under the quilt my late mother made for me. The pub is frequented by rough types as well as people from the local university where I work for a pittance.

Joe, short for Josephine, my landlady, has offered me a job downstairs, but so far I've held out. Unless something else comes up, I'm going to have to accept the offer, but I'm not sure I have the fortitude to deal with what I can barely tolerate at a distance.

When my folks died, my sister and brother-in-law took me in, but they had things to work out in their marriage and were offered the opportunity of a lifetime. Move to Fiji and work mostly from home while living right on the beach. Sounded like a cure for divorce to me.

When my sister looked at me with hope in her eyes, I did the only thing I could. Lie. I told them I had an opportunity of my own and needed to move across the country to pursue it. Convenient. Right?

One night, a growl louder than my empty tummy snaps my attention to the window outside the classroom I'm mopping. I peek through the blinds to find a massive gray wolf with the bluest eyes staring right at me. A wolf in the heart of the city?

The wolf's form shimmers, muscles and bones twisting and reshaping into a man

with those same eyes, and, when I come to a while later, there's no sign of the animal or its aftermath. Skipping dinner must have been a mistake.

So much for surviving on my own.

Urban Academy Semester 1 is the first story in the brand-new Urban Academy series by bestselling author Mazzy J. March. The first three books follow the story of Valentina's new life in the city at The Academy where she learns that the world is much broader and more varied than she ever dreamed, and sometimes a human girl's fate may twine with that of another kind of being. Or three.