



THE
NIGHTMARE

ROGUE HOLLOW ACADEMY #2

OCTAVIA JENSEN KADY ASH

The Nightmare

Rogue Hollow

Kady Ash and Octavia Jensen

Published by Flower Bone Publishing, 2023.

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THE NIGHTMARE

First edition. December 4, 2023.

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Written by Kady Ash and Octavia Jensen.

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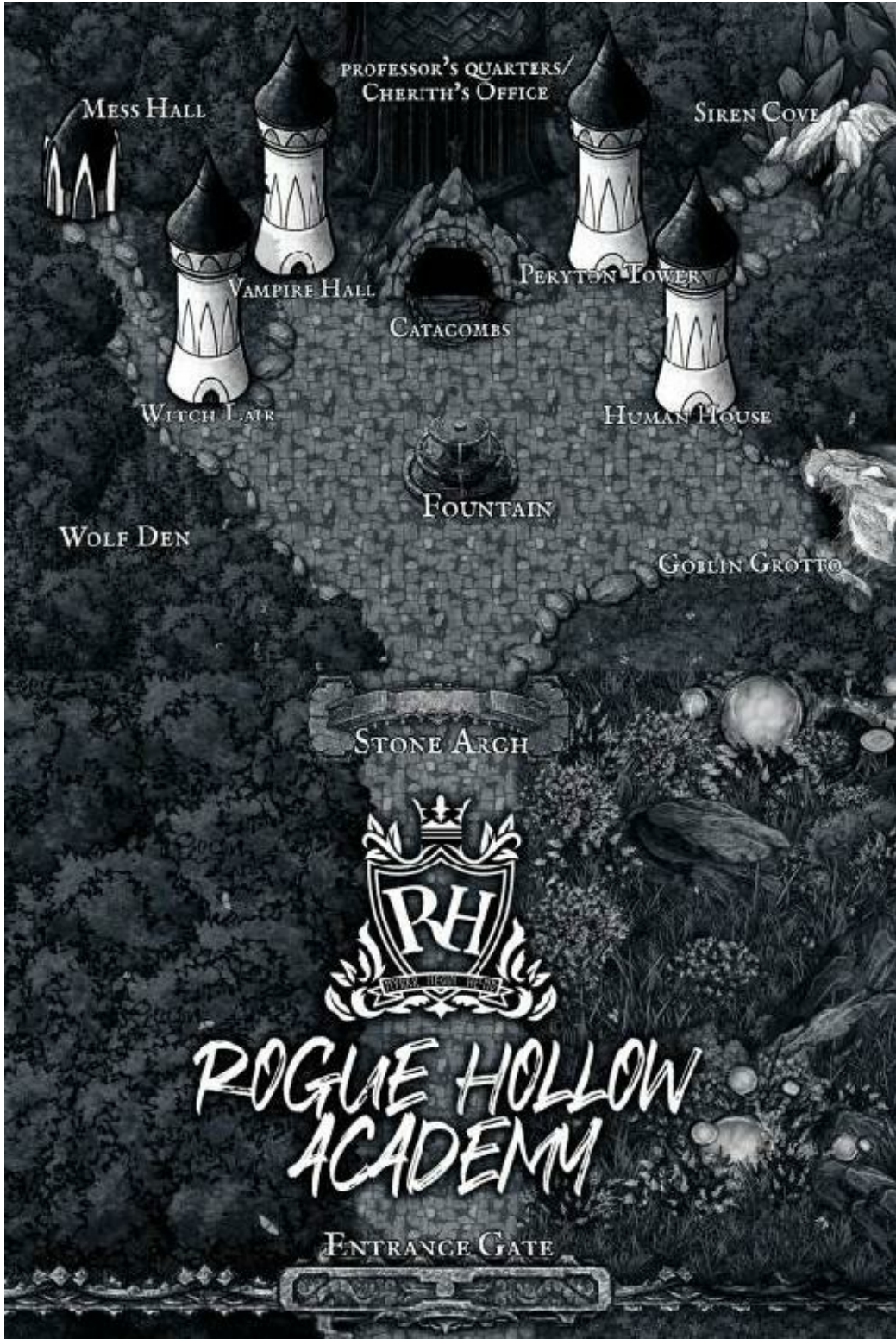
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This one's dedicated to anyone who has ever had to push through some utter complete bullshit to get where you want to be. You're strong even when you don't feel like it. You're worthy even if others say you're not. And if you think no one could ever love you... Ledger and Otto do.

Welcome back to Rogue Hollow.



MESS HALL

PROFESSOR'S QUARTERS/
CHERITH'S OFFICE

SIREN COVE

VAMPIRE HALL

PERYTON TOWER

CATACOMBS

WITCH LAIR

HUMAN HOUSE

FOUNTAIN

WOLF DEN

GOBLIN GROTTO

STONE ARCH



ROGUE HOLLOW
ACADEMY

ENTRANCE GATE

Content Warning

This is book 2 in a series, so reading book 1 is necessary to understand the storyline and characters. Nightmare is darker than The Vanishing, so please keep that in mind when applying. Most the triggers are the same ie: explicit language, explicit sex, and graphic violence. Additional triggers include, in no particular order: mentions of coerced prostitution, mentions of homelessness, mentions of/ implied past childhood sexual abuse, dubious consent that at times may border non-consent, magical coercion, some bullying, the idea that someone claimed by a supernatural being is nothing more than property, themes of self-loathing, anxiety and depression, and references to the violent death of a sibling. As well as some new ones: death of side characters, graphic murder, extreme toxicity in a relationship, and controlling, jealous OTT heroes (or not heroes).

The kinks included are, again in no particular order: public displays, bloodsucking for pleasure including a drug-like venom, claiming, praise, humiliation/ degradation, somnophilia including instances where the FMC passes out and the MMC doesn't stop, brief sharing, rough face-fucking, unsafe sex, knotting, sex between a human FMC and a fully-shifted werewolf (please read that again so you're not surprised when it happens, you've been warned), bondage, marking, pain play, and two guys obsessed with eating pussy.

Glossary

FORMS

Æsir – Associated with power, poetry, storms, war, ruling, and strength.

Vanir – Associated with beauty, the earth, fertility, the seasons, prosperity, and peace.

MYTHICS

Witches – Particularly gifted with magic, potions, crystals, etc depending on their Order.

Vampires – Blood drinking beings who can have a variety of special abilities, most of which enhance their ability to find a food source.

Werewolves – Shifters who are so in tune with the wolves inside them that the transition from one to the other is flawless and happens in the blink of an eye. While shifted, they are roughly twice the size of a normal wolf.

Peryton – Shifters who can transform into creatures with the body of a stag and the wings of an eagle. They're comparable in size to the wolves, though less prone to violence, and can speak to both deer and birds while in their shifted forms.

Goblins – Stunning, tall creatures who look like humans, but with almost too-perfect features. They're often seen with their long blonde hair done in braids and adorned with jewels. They're typically harmless tricksters, but some have darker powers.

Sirens – Sirens are the most versatile group. Some of their Mythic can shift, some are particularly strong swimmers, and some have the gift of Song which can be used to control those around them.

ORDERS

Witches

Disaster - The disasters run the gamut of weather related powers: earthquakes, floods, tornadoes, lightning, wind, wildfires, etc. They need a veik to dampen their powers while they're at RHA as their power can be so unpredictable.

Green - These magical workers are all about nature, healing, and nurturing. They draw their power from the earth, using plants, flowers, and

herbs as a primary source of spell ingredients.

Crystal - Crystal witches are deeply connected to the vibration and power of crystals, gems, rocks, and stones.

Kitchen – These witches possess surface-level Elemental manipulation skills, but find their true strength lies in the energy surrounding food, sustenance and the act of cooking.

Elementals – Elementals possess the ability to manipulate the elements around them, such as water, air, earth, and fire. Most witches can do at least some level of Elemental magic, though true Elemental witches can master one or more areas of element magic.

Seers – Though rare, Seers have a variety of abilities that include intense intuition, flashes/dreams of the past and future, dreamwalking, and the ability to forecast futures through the art of tarot and oracle reading.

Vampires

Hunter – Hunter vampires possess ruthless, intense luring abilities cultivated over centuries of being responsible for their clan's survival. This includes advanced compulsion abilities, tracking skills, and heightened senses. Their fangs also secrete a drug-like venom when they choose, to better incapacitate or pacify victims.

Guardian – These vampires have more protective natures, enhanced strength and reflexes, and have historically been tasked with keeping their clans safe.

Fledgling – All vampires start off as Fledglings until their true strengths are realized.

Werewolves

Alpha – Alpha werewolves are born leaders, strong, territorial, and prone to violence. They are the only Order of werewolf to retain their knot in human form.

Beta – Betas are smart, capable seconds-in-command, and the most common Order amongst werewolves.

Omega – Omegas are cuddly, friendly, and extremely smart. Some Omegas can possess rare forms of magic not seen in any other Order or Mythic.

Peryton

Trackers – These Peryton are shifters but their wings are useless other than for short flights. Their powers lie in tracking, and therefore are often utilized for finding new magic users, missing people, etc.

Fliers – These Peryton are also shifters who can travel long distances and even teleport from place to place or between realms.

Goblins

Mischievous – These goblins are typically harmless tricksters. They're cunning and manipulative, but generally docile and friendly other than pranks and petty crimes like thievery, etc. They can pick-pocket someone with just a brush of their hand.

Malevolent - Intentionally cruel, wicked creatures who will stop at nothing to get what they want and aren't afraid to use their charm and persuasion to get it. They can steal magic that the original user can't ever replenish. Particularly gifted in compulsion comparable to Singer sirens. They should be veiked, but most cannot be as they simply absorb the magic in the dampening tattoos.

Sirens

Shifter – These sirens can shapeshift into any sea creature at will, from plankton to the massive blue whale.

Swimmer - Extremely strong swimmers, can hold their breath under water for hours, partially shift so their feet and hands are webbed and their skin is scaled.

Singer – Singers can use their voices to manipulate people. They also need a veik while at RH.

STATUS

Pureblood - Two parents of the same Mythic, offspring inherited that power.

Halfblood - Parents are of two different Mythics, offspring inherited just one power.

Hybrid - Parents are of two different Mythics and the offspring inherited both powers.

OTHER

WORDS/PEOPLE/PRONUNCIATIONS

Amrit (am-r-it)– An herbal tea including a few ingredients meant to block a vampire’s telepathy.

Veik (vay-k) – A glowing purple tattoo placed on the wrist, meant to dampen dangerous powers.

Wanderdust – A purple powder that can be used to travel between places/realms using mirrors.

Suren (sur-in) - student

Quinn (qui-nn) – student

Otto (auto) – Alpha werewolf, student

Javonte (jah-von-tay) – Beta werewolf, student

Vineet (vin-eat) – Beta werewolf, student

Parker (park-er) – Omega werewolf, student

Ledger (ledge-er) – Malevolent goblin/Hunter vampire hybrid, student

Greylin (grey-lynn) – Hunter vampire, student

Baek (bay-ik) – Singer siren, student

Jakob (jacob) – Malevolent goblin, student

Oleander (ole-ee-and-er) – Elemental witch, student

Blaise (blaze) – Seer witch, student

Yelena (yell-ay-na) – Owner of Bone Heart Botanicals

Adira Cherith (a-deer-a chair-ith) – Headmistress of Rogue Hollow

Nevitt (neh-vit) – human reporter who works at The Hollow Mirror

Fenris (fen-riss) – Hybrid Alpha werewolf and Hunter vampire student

Evan (eh-vin) – Beta werewolf in Fenris’ pack

Celeste (se – lest) – Beta werewolf in Fenris’ pack

Chapter One

Ledger

I wake to a strange feeling weighing on me and know that Suren is no longer in my bed. It's not that I care, but normally I can feel her if she's still in my space, and right now I feel nothing.

Actually, I feel a void which only pisses me off. It means I'm getting too fucking close to her. I don't want to be close to her, I don't want to be close to anyone, and yet when I sit up and scan my surroundings for that infuriating Disaster, the only scents that reach me are hyacinth and ash.

Wanderdust.

Snarling, I leap from my bed, staring down at the mess she left behind. My body trembles at the fucking audacity it took for her to come here and use my fucking mirror to run like a coward. And where the hell would she even run? No one will remember her. She doesn't even exist in that realm anymore, and if she stayed here, she would have at least had a home. Now she has nothing and no one, and honestly, it's what she deserves.

Fuck her.

It takes everything not to put my fist through the mirror. I've never felt this disrespected before because I've never cared about anyone. Not that I care about her, but I treated her differently than any other girl I've ever been with, and this is what I get for it? This is what I get for being honest with her when she asked me for answers no one else would give her?

I'm struggling to see the point of containing the goblin in me, because that side of me wouldn't have told her shit. That side of me would have taken everything it could from her, would have claimed her darkness for its own and left her with nothing.

Instead, I always left her with some in her reserves so she'd never be completely vulnerable, and now I see that was a fucking mistake.

Who knows what havoc she will wreak on the Human Realm now that I'm not there to feed on her darkness? There's always been a part of me that wants to stand aside and watch her burn the whole fucking world down, but an even bigger part of me wants to make that powerful little shit kneel at my feet and choke on my cock.

Now I can't watch her do anything.

I'm so angry and distracted that I don't even use my gifts to clean myself up for the day. I take a shower so long the water runs cold, and not even that helps calm the fire flooding through my veins when I think about that blue-eyed, silver-haired fucking Disaster having the balls to do this to me.

I'm still just as angry once I'm dressed as I was when I first saw that fucking black dust all over my mirror, and it doesn't help that it's still there. The thought of cleaning up after her only makes the fury supersede everything else I feel inside, and before I know what I'm doing, I'm ripping the mirror off the wall and tossing it off my balcony.

Now it's someone else's problem, not that it helped my anger at all. I need to hit someone, but I also need to stop giving a shit. It doesn't matter that I can still feel this stupid-ass bond I should have never created. She's gone, and I need to move on.

I refuse to chase her.

Instead, I stalk my way out of my room and make my way down to the basement. I haven't been down there once since I met Suren, because I didn't see the need when I knew their blood could never compare to hers, but now that she's gone I don't see any reason to drink the donated blood in the mess hall that's already been contaminated by the air. I need a fucking vein to sink my teeth into, and not one I have to play nice with. These humans are here solely to keep us sated and fed. It's time I go back to taking advantage of that.

I don't recognize most of them. I don't pay attention to the students that come and go in this school, but I do recognize Chase since he was one I saw checking out Suren's ass a few weeks back. The fact that he never manifested powers makes me chuckle, but not as much as the hopeful look in all of their eyes at the sight of me. They're all addicted to the venom. I can see it in their glossy stares and the way they practically salivate at the thought of being bitten.

Why did I stop coming here again? Right, because *I* was the one addicted to something I shouldn't have been.

"What's up, Chase? Long time, no see."

He seems to take that as an invitation to move closer to me even though I've made no move to bite him. "I know. You're never down here. Are you hungry?"

He practically has heart-eyes. Thankfully they aren't for me, they're for my fangs. "Yeah, I had some delicious O+ on a tap that recently ran dry. Any

chance you got some for me?”

His face falls, but before he can tell me he doesn't, another girl jumps up to volunteer. “I do!”

I don't know this one, but I also don't care. I just need blood. In a flash, I have her hair in my fist and my teeth in her neck, only the second her blood touches my tongue, every piece of me knows it isn't my girl's.

She isn't sweet.

She has no tempting darkness calling me.

She's just... a means to an end.

Deflated, I pull away with a growl and toss her aside, then grab Chase. Although his blood is better than the knockoff, it doesn't give me half of what Suren's did, either. No one's could.

So much for that idea.

I don't make it three steps outside before my Aunt Adira's errand boy and favorite bloodbag comes running up to me, and I don't need him to tell me it's a summons to go see her — it's the only reason he ever leaves her tower, and I have to fight the urge to tell them both to fuck off.

Today is not the day.

“Any chance you know what the hell she wants?”

Hunter shrugs. “No, but she's not happy. She's been in a bad mood since yesterday.”

That means both of us are in a shit mood and this little meeting isn't going to go well. I leave him behind and use my speed to rush to her quarters and let myself inside without knocking. The look in her eyes would scare most, but not me. “What's up your ass? Did you add a second stick?”

My aunt has to fight the desire to take the bait. I see it all over her painted face and all that tells me is whatever the fuck she's mad about is serious. “I told your father I would watch over you here. That doesn't mean I won't have you punished in the pit.”

I snort. What a fucking joke. I own the fighting pit and she knows it. “Seriously? You plan on telling me what I did that's got you all pissy, or am I supposed to guess? Let me in if you want me to read your mind.”

“This isn't a game, Ledger. I am your Headmistress and you will respect me. You cannot take trips to the Human Realm whenever you please,” she hisses, and I have to admit, I don't know where the fuck this is coming from.

Until I do.

Suren.

“I haven’t gone anywhere.”

“Don’t lie to me. You’re the only one who knows where I keep my wanderdust!”

I was. Until Suren asked me about it mid-blowjob and I was too horny to think beyond her perfect fucking mouth. Not only did she ditch me after saying she was moving into my room to be mine, she fucking played me — *used me* — and I was stupid enough to fall for it.

Anger and betrayal have my fists clenching at my sides, but my aunt is none the wiser and keeps talking. “I’ve known you’ve taken it before and I’ve let it slide. I’ve let you have your fun with the humans, but leaving my safe exposed for anyone to see? The level of disrespect!”

I’ve never left proof behind before, and if she thinks I just randomly got sloppy about it, she’s dumber than she looks. But if any of us see Suren again, she’s mine to discipline, not hers. “Whatever. Can I go now?”

Adira shoots in front of me so quickly, even I don’t see the slap coming until my face is being jerked to the side so hard I nearly attack her. It takes everything I have not to give in to all the rage I have multiplying inside of me. I think of my father and how he’d feel if I killed his only sister, and that only tempts me further, so I force my legs to take me far away from her quarters before I end up in prison.

By the time I’m in the woods, I release a snarl that has birds fluttering out of the trees and wolves closing in from all sides to protect their land. I don’t have it in me to feel threatened, though. As much as I want the fight right now, I know they don’t. They’re territorial creatures just like we are, and my fight isn’t with them, anyway.

Not this time, at least.

Chapter Two

Suren

There's nothing quite like the feeling of knowing you've made a terrible, grievous, un-take-backable mistake. Gingerly, I limp toward Alec's front door. I twisted my ankle when I landed in the Human Realm a few minutes ago, but honestly... that had been the least of my concerns. Where I'd expected to be lost, confused, and maybe even a little scared, all I'd felt was regret.

Deep, crashing, spiraling regret.

Someone lied to me. Several someones, it seems. Crossing the border between realms doesn't wipe your memory at all. I don't know if that's a lie they tell to deter people from coming here without permission or if I'm just that fun to manipulate, but clearly, it's possible to cross over with your memories intact.

I remember all of it.

The shield Quinn cast to save us from that runaway truck. Professors Sterling and Velasquez stopping time itself to explain the existence of Mythics. The long walk up the drafty stairs to the top of Human House, where I once shared a room with Quinn, then slept alone. Otto Neyrus and his wolf pack, Ledger Huxley and his tricks. The look on Nevitt's face when I'd stormed into the Hollow Mirror and demanded that he follow up on the missing humans and what really happened to them after they failed to pass Magic Discovery. The catacombs full of classrooms marked with ancient Viking runes that I never fully learned to decipher.

The cowardice it took for me to steal the wanderdust from Headmistress Cherith and run away through Ledger's mirror.

I wasn't supposed to remember any of it. That was the only way I'd been able to convince myself to save my own skin and leave Quinn back at Rogue Hollow — all I'd had to do is muster up enough courage to use the wanderdust and step through, and it would be like none of it ever happened. I wouldn't regret it because I wouldn't remember.

But I do.

Nearly in tears, I set my duffle bag down and shift my weight to my good leg as I knock twice. It's nearly midnight on a Friday, if time works the same

in the Human and Mythic Realms, but I know Alec's here and not out partying. His bedroom light is on and I can hear music coming through the open window.

Knocking a little louder, I wait, and wait, and wait.

When he finally opens the door, he's still sliding his boxers up, brown hair longer than I remember and mussed like he'd been in bed. Those blue-green eyes of his are empty, and his normally pale beige skin is flushed with pink. Was he just fucking someone? "Can I help you?"

"Alec, it's me," I say softly. "I'm sorry I left, okay? Some really baffling shit happened and I couldn't contact you, but I'm back... without Quinn. Please let me in."

The door slams so fast it nearly hits me.

"Alec!" I yell. "C'mon, don't do this! We don't even have to get back together, I just need a place to st—"

Yanking it open again, he points a gun in my face. "Look. I don't know who the fuck you are, but if you don't get off my property right now, I'll shoot."

"Are you serious?" I ask, stepping back quickly with my hands up. "I'm unarmed and not trying to break in. I know you're mad at me, but..." It hits me suddenly that maybe not everything I learned was a lie. I'd been warned that he might not remember me, and what was it that Cherith said on my first day? *'Those close to you will be educated in a way they can understand.'* There's no way someone like Alec would understand any of this, so the likelihood that he had his memory wiped clean of me is pretty high. The irony of that isn't lost on me. "You really don't remember me?"

Clenching his jaw, he pulls back the hammer on that gun. "I've never seen you before in my life. Get the fuck off my property. This is your last warning."

Okay, now I'm lost, confused, and a little scared. Grabbing my bag, I hobble back down his steps and disappear into the night, heading toward the only cheap motel in town. It's almost five miles from Alec's house, but I don't see what choice I have. The money I saved up from working for Yelena at Bone Heart Botanicals won't keep me alive forever, and I'd been banking on Alec at least letting me crash there until I found a job.

Now I'm screwed.

Without wanderdust or magic to call upon, there's no way for me to get back to Rogue Hollow or the Mythic Realm at all. I'd had no intentions of

coming back so I hadn't bothered thinking of a contingency plan in case things went wrong — why make sure I could get back to a place I was positive I wouldn't remember existed?

How fucking short-sighted of me. Nothing at RHA was ever as it seemed, so why I didn't think to question everything and plan for every eventuality is beyond me. Whatever. I'm here now, right back to square fucking zero, homeless on the same streets I'd known before I was given the opportunity of a lifetime and miffed it.

What a fucking disaster.

The next morning, I take a half an hour to clean up and ice my ankle, then weigh my options. The hotel bed feels like a slab of concrete and the entire room smells like ammonia, but I've stayed in worse places before. It's cheap enough that if I got a decent job, I could stay here until I had enough saved for my own apartment, and it's close enough to several restaurants, bookstores and gas stations I could walk there if I couldn't afford to rideshare.

This is doable.

To put on the best front I can, I slip on my purple RHA skirt and choose a plain black blouse, fixing my long, silver hair as much as I can without a flatiron. My helix and tragus piercings are looking rough on both sides, and the part of my rose and dagger tattoo that peeks out under my skirt looks dry as hell. It's clear I need lotion, jewelry cleaner, makeup, a fucking straightener, and better clothes. It's not perfect, and my skin's normally cool undertones are fiery red today with anxiety. I look more like a tomato today than anything, but it's not exactly like I'm about to ask some five-star restaurant in New York City to hire me, either. This'll have to do.

Halfway to a burrito joint called Wrapz, I realize I don't have any identification anymore except for my Pedigree card that still says "UNKNOWN" across most of the categories. Since I doubt they'll accept that, I change course to walk the extra few miles to get an ID card. Without my birth certificate or social security card, they try to tell me there's nothing they can do to help me, but I don't have time or the resources to go about getting those things replaced.

"Please?" I ask. "My name is Suren Archer. I'm one of those weird people who memorized their driver's license number, so I can tell you what it

is and whatever info you need to know. Just pull it up and you'll see the picture matches. I don't even need another driver's license, just the ID card."

The woman on the other side of the counter purses her lips like she still wants to refuse, but I must look a mess. She nods once. "How do you spell it? I can't make any promises, but we'll see what we can do."

Relief floods through me as I spell it out for her and give her my last registered address, but her brow only creases further.

"I'm sorry, sweetie. I'm not finding you in here."

"Are you sure you spelled it right?" I push. "S-U-R-E-N."

She clicks a couple of times and retypes it, then shakes her head. "I don't have any record of a Suren Archer ever having a driver's license in this state. I'm sorry. With no way to verify you are who you say you are, I can't issue you any kind of ID. Come back if you get your birth certificate or social."

It won't do any good. My heart beats violently in my ears as I realize they didn't just make Alec forget. They erased me completely.

Suren Archer doesn't exist.

"Okay," I whisper, hiking my duffle further over my shoulder and heading for the door. If I don't exist, I can't get a legitimate job. Trying to get any other ID won't help me either if no one has a record of me being a person alive on this stupid planet, which means that won't change. I have no home, no prospects of finding a legitimate job to *get* a home, and I left my best friend in another realm.

Good going, Sur, the little demon in my head chides. This is what you've always wanted, right? To be alone?

No. I never wanted to be alone. She's wrong. The chasm opening up in my chest and threatening to swallow me whole proves it. I never asked for my dad to abandon us or my mom to choose her boyfriend-of-the-week over me. I never denied needing Quinn or wanting Alec to accept me for who I was. Hell, there was even a time when I considered giving in to Ledger just to make sure I was never alone.

This isn't what I wanted. And if the choice is this or whatever would've happened to me if I'd stayed in Rogue Hollow, then maybe I made the wrong one. Yelena told me that most of the humans who failed to manifest powers survived. Sure, they were gifted to one of the six Mythics to use as they pleased until the academy felt they'd been paid back for their investments, but most of them lived. Maybe I would've lived. And then who knows, after a few months of something awful, I could've moved into the town and

worked for Nevitt or stayed with Yelena. I'd have been close enough to Quinn to be there for her if she needed me. Close enough to magic to keep believing there was more to life than this.

But I'd made the worst decision I could've made, and I ran just like I always do.

I've got no one here to blame but myself.

Chapter Three

Quinn

The thought of going to a party right now makes my limbs feel heavy. I sabotaged everything yesterday when I broke up with Otto, carved my heart right out of my chest, and I'm truly struggling to remember why. I want to be a better friend to Suren; I want to focus on school and finding myself and my Order without being distracted, but I can't see how this is better. "I don't want to go. Look at my eyes."

They're so puffy Ollie scrunches up her nose, but she moves to sit next to me on the bed, reminding me how lucky I am that this gorgeous Elemental witch took a liking to us our first day here. She's been a great friend to me. "Nothing a little magic can't fix," she says, flipping her long blonde hair over her shoulder. "I know it's too soon, but you'll feel better if you hear some music and just get out of your head for a bit."

I know she's right, but I have so many what-if scenarios going off in my mind. What if he's there? What if a song makes me cry? What if both things happen? Because both are highly likely.

As if she can read my mind, she keeps going. "If you need to leave at any moment, I'll come back with you. I just don't want to leave you here like this, so if you're hellbent on staying in, I will too."

Great, guilt. I don't want to go, but I also don't want her to stay because of me, especially because I heard how excited she was in the hallway. I'd rather be with Suren, but I haven't seen her since yesterday, and I don't want to bother her with my boy drama when she's still going through so much. Plus, I just got her back. "Okay, fine. Help me with my... everything and I'll go. But no, I won't tell you if I need to leave. I'm just going to head back by myself, okay?"

She doesn't like it, but I'm glad she doesn't argue. Ollie gets rid of the bags under my eyes, helps me with my hair and makeup and even picks out a really cute outfit that isn't revealing in the slightest. The leggings hug my curves perfectly, but the shirt covers up most of my cleavage and I'm glad for it. The last thing I need is attention. I just want a drink.

Walking into the Siren's Cove still feels wrong even though the inside is absolutely stunning. It's bigger than Goblin's Grotto with a massive, brilliantly clear lake right in the center surrounded by black sand and a series of caves darting off that appear to be gilded in crystal. The faux sunlight trickling down from the ceiling bounces off everything in sight, illuminating the air around us like a sparkly supernatural disco ball, and every few seconds, sea creatures erupt out of the lake.

When one shifts into a very naked human and lands on the bank, I gasp.

"Shifter sirens always show off," Ollie teases. "I'm so jealous they can become any animal they want."

"Me too. Sometimes I wish I was a bird and could fly away from all the bullshit," I joke, but it just makes Ollie pout her ruby red lips.

"Quinn, you need a drink. Maybe ten."

"Ten sounds good to me." I force a smile for her sake and let her lead me to the bar, where I shoot down multiple shots without a break. I see Damian watching me with a weird sneer on his face, but if he knows what's good for him, he'll stay the hell out of my way tonight. I flip him off and turn away without a word. Drink in hand, I follow Ollie toward some chairs that look like really comfortable seashells. "Where's your girl?"

"Who, Kate? I dunno." She shrugs, staring at the bright purple concoction in her glass. "She's been weird the last couple of days, but I think she's coming tonight."

"Weird? Do you want to talk about it?" I ask, feeling guilty for being so wrapped up in my own crap I didn't realize.

"No, it's okay. I think Professor Velasquez has been giving her a hard time. I'm not taking it personally. I'll seduce her when she gets here and everything will be fine."

That makes me feel better. I've been a shit friend to everyone, and if I thought breaking my heart and Otto's too would help, I was wrong. But I still know I shouldn't go running back. I don't deserve him, anyway. "Good. Get laid for the both of us, yeah?"

And now she's pouting again, but it fades fast when she looks over my shoulder. "She's here. Want me to call her over instead of going to her? I don't want to leave you."

"Don't worry about me, Ol. Go get her!"

I sound much more enthusiastic than I feel, but she needs this. "You're the best. I'll be back soon, I promise. I just need to make sure we're okay and

I'm not underreacting."

After kissing the top of my head, she rushes off to join her stunning peryton Flier and leaves me sitting in my seashell alone. This is what I wanted, right?

I realize pretty much right away it absolutely isn't what I wanted. I wanted to be alone in my room, not surrounded by people laughing like nothing is wrong in the world, not when *everything* is wrong.

Suren isn't here, Otto isn't here. It's just me, and although there are probably two hundred others around, I've never felt lonelier. When Otto's pack enters the room, my heart pounds in my chest at the prospect of seeing him for the first time since he ran out of my room, but all I see is everyone else. Ciara and Parker are both under Nik's arms, Javonte and Vineet are whispering to each other like they don't want to be overheard, and not one of them is smiling.

I'm not enough of a narcissist to think that has anything to do with me, but when Parker spots me and stops walking entirely, it's hard not to.

The urge to run has me standing up and staring past them at the only exit. Only when my eyes dart that way, *he* walks in. I expected seeing him to hurt. What I didn't expect was the physical pain to be just as bad as the emotional.

Suddenly, I can't breathe. He looks like he might never smile again, and seeing the pain I've caused him nearly makes me puke. His face is scruffier than usual, his shoulders are slumped and sad, and his clothes are disheveled, almost like he didn't want to come any more than I did. But he's here, and I don't know if I'm supposed to hide so he might have a decent night or —

"You look like you saw a ghost. What's wrong? Honeymoon stage with your wolf over?"

Damian's voice is the last thing I want to hear, and it makes Otto's gaze snap right toward me. Somehow, I know I'm not the only one struggling to breathe.

"Fuck off, Damian. It's not the night, okay? Go torment someone else."

"You act like I'm evil or something," he argues. "Just trying to make friendly conversation. You look like you're about to cry."

Damian takes a single step toward me, setting Otto off. He barges over with fury replacing all the sadness I'd seen and grips Damian's throat. "She told you to walk the fuck away. Are your legs broken?"

"N-No," he stutters out.

"If you want them to stay that way, I suggest you go home. Now."

I don't say anything to help the guy. He's never said a friendly thing toward me, and I doubt that's what he was trying to do now. By now, everyone has heard what Otto is capable of and how he killed that goblin for trying to take advantage of Parker, so I'm not surprised when Damian calls us both crazy and rushes off.

Otto still looks angry when we're alone, but it doesn't seem to be pointed at me, so I reach out and touch his arm softly. "Thank you."

His skin seems to vibrate under my touch. With a clenched jaw, he growls, "Still want to break his fucking legs."

"I know." I move a little closer. I can't help it, and somehow I know he needs it even if we aren't a couple anymore. "He's gone now, though. Here."

I hold out my drink to share, watching as he takes a tiny little sip and hands it back. "Really shouldn't get drunk tonight. Will you sit with me?"

There's no world where I could deny him anything right now. How does he still give me butterflies? "Yeah, of course. How are you, Otto? Is that a dumb question? Sorry."

I move to sit down with a blush, barely hitting the seat before he's picking me up and sitting underneath me. "Better right now, Cherry baby. Can we... not talk for a bit?"

That's probably better. I nod my head and melt into his chest like I belong there. I don't anymore, but it's really hard to remember that when it feels so damn right. It's been one night without him and yet I cling to him like we just spent a year apart... like this pain isn't my fault.

For a while, he just holds me as his chest slowly rises and falls. The party fades away around us, leaving nothing to distract me from the heat coming off his body, the feel of his lips ghosting along my hair, his hand slowly creeping up my thigh.

I already crave him and I know he feels it... *smells* it. How can I fight this when it's what we both want? If we aren't a couple, then I can focus on all those things I need to focus on, but does that mean we can't ever spend time together?

Will spending that time together only hurt us both more? I honestly don't know, and I'm scared to find out.

"Cherry," he rumbles, spreading his fingers to gently part my legs. "You smell weird. Who have you been around?"

"No one," I answer honestly. "What do you smell?"

"People that aren't me."

I hear the pain in that sentence. "I'm sorry."

He shifts me so I'm straddling him and nuzzles into my neck, hands roaming under my shirt. He's scent-marking me, and fuck... I absolutely love it. He did this every morning when we were together and the fact that it's only been one morning and he already feels like he's fading away hurts. I'd hoped his scent would stay with me always.

But also... *this* hurts. It hurts knowing he needs it and I can't give him more than this. That tomorrow morning, us doing this together will only bring us more pain.

My eyes fill with unshed tears, my jaw trembling with all I have to keep myself from full-on crying right here in the middle of Siren's Cove, and I drop my face into his neck to hide there.

"Fuck." Otto's hands drop instantly. "I'm sorry, Quinn. I'll stop."

Okay, maybe hearing him call me Quinn hurts just a little fucking more. "Please... please don't stop."

"No, I can feel it. I'm making it worse." Yet his arms curl around me again, warm and strong. "I know this is a bad time, but I need a favor. It's a big one."

"Okay," I whisper, my hand fisting his shirt as it feels like he's about to leave.

"Don't tell my pack we're not together. Please."

Confused, my entire body freezes at that request. "Why?"

"Please, Cherry? I'll tell them soon, just... not yet. It's complicated."

I feel so much from him right now, but the emotion rising above everything else is anxiety. "Okay. I promise I won't say anything to anyone at all. It's no one else's business, anyway. Ollie is the only person who knows and she won't say anything either, okay?"

Sitting back so I can see his face, I watch his deep brown eyes darken further. "Thank you. Are they watching us?"

I glance back to where they were and find all of them gazing over at us. Whether he wants them to know or not, they definitely feel that something is off. They're acting so strange. "Yeah, all of them, actually. Why are they watching, Otto?"

"Fuck. Please don't hate me for this." His fingers thread through my hair and he pulls me into a searing kiss, making my breath catch in my throat and those tears finally spill over. Unable to fight it, I kiss him back just as

desperately, my legs clenching around his thighs like if they squeezed hard enough, we'd never have to leave this spot.

"Come back to the nest with me," he whispers.

I can't stop crying now that the dam has broken, so I hide in his neck and let the tears fall. "I think I should go home. Will you take me home, please?"

Pausing, Otto stands with me in his arms. "Hang on tight."

He doesn't shift but still moves much faster than I'm used to as we leave the Cove and head back to the Lair. Setting me down just outside the door, his fingers brush the tears off my cheeks. "Barrier's back up already. Guess Ollie didn't waste any time locking me out."

The guilt makes nausea return so suddenly I have to hold my stomach. "Why did you kiss me?" I cry, a sob wracking its way through my body as I fight the urge to beg him to do it again. "It's already so fucking hard, Otto."

"Shit. I — I don't have an answer that'll make it better," he mumbles.

"But if it's so fucking hard, why'd you do this?"

My breathing is hitched as I stare at him, anger returning to him more by the second, and this time, it's directed at me.

He's never been angry at me before.

"Because I — I'm a fucking burden, Otto. I was a burden on Suren, and now I'm a burden on you. I've never stood on my own, and the times I did, I fell apart. I was thirteen when I lost my virginity because I was searching for someone to take care of me, and when he didn't, I went to the next. Suren saved me then. She was the one that took care of me when I was useless and she did it because she felt obligated to. I saved her, but she saved me first, only she never saw it that way. She felt like she'd owe me forever for what I did, and all I did was make her move out of her m—her story isn't mine to tell you. I'm getting away from the point. The point is, I came here to Rogue Hollow and instantly sank my claws into you, knowing damn well I wasn't ready to be in a relationship. But I'm a selfish bitch, and the thought of you looking elsewhere only had me holding on tighter. This heartache is all my fault. If I would have just let you see one of the other girls or something, maybe you would have never had to experience this pain I've put you through, but I didn't and I'm sorry. It hurts," I admit, not even trying to catch the tears now free-falling down my face. "I've never had my heart broken like this before and I know it's my fault for needing this break — for needing to stand on my own for once in my pathetic life. But I just can't be with you

right now and I don't want you to wait for me. Find a wolf. We both know you'd rather be with one, anyway."

Scoffing, Otto steps back. "Seriously? That's what you think? That I'd rather be with some wolf or some random chick than you? Open your fucking eyes," he snaps, holding up his hands. "Pushing me away isn't going to make you a better friend or a stronger person, Quinn. But if that's what you want, fine. You win. Have a good fucking night."

He stalks off, slamming his fist into the lamppost as he passes without faltering at all, and somehow he takes all my warmth with him.

Instead of going upstairs, I run straight toward Human House as fast as I can. I need my best friend; I need to cry in Suren's arms. I'm shivering from the cold and silent sobs, but no matter how many rocks I throw up at Suren's window, she doesn't answer.

Otto is gone, Suren is gone, and now I'm stuck with the person I hate most in the entire world... myself.

Chapter Four

Otto

“Shut the fuck up,” I hiss to my wolf. I haven’t shifted since the night Quinn rejected me, I can’t. If my pack sees the broken bond mark on my chest, all hell will break loose. I’m having a hard enough time hiding it in human form. “I know you want out. Later.”

“You talking to yourself?” Javonte teases. “That’s a slippery slope. Soon, you might start talking back.”

“Trying to convince my wolf to chill. Quinn’s busy.”

Von nods like he understands, the black twists of his hair bouncing. “I get it. Nik and Ciara haven’t come up for air since he initiated her into the pack. Every time I go anywhere near them, I get a boner. Don’t know how you survive with a knot in both forms.”

Lucky Betas and their stupid normal human dicks. Doubt much of anything could get me hard right now, though. “Guess that’s why you call me Alpha. Where’s Parker?”

Our only Omega has powers far beyond the rest of us. As much as I normally crave his company with his comforting demeanor and magical, calming touch, I have to stay as far away from him as I can right now. He’ll be the first to notice I was rejected. That’s probably what he was staring at last night, and Quinn turning into a sobbing mess didn’t help me sell the fact that we’re still together.

“Uh... he’s with Vineet, I think. They went on a run after Park said Vin was getting soft.”

I can’t find it in me to laugh with him. “Cool,” I grunt. “Why don’t you join them?”

“Yeah, I might. You coming?”

Not a fucking chance. “No. I told that Singer siren Baek that I’d meet with him. Supposedly one of their Shifters got into it with Fenris’ pack last night, and Fenris won’t deal with it.”

“That sounds like it ain’t your problem, Alpha. Remember what happened last time you interfered with Fenris’ business?”

Sure fucking do. We got into a fight that nearly ended in murder. It’s exactly what I need right now. If I let my guard down for even a second, the

fucking vultures will pounce. No better way to remind them who I am than to rip a couple throats out. “It’ll be fine. Baek has a terrible reputation, but he’s not an idiot. Go find the others.”

I lace the words with enough command that Von doesn’t argue again. The moment he’s gone, I give into my desperate wolf and shift, stifling the howl that builds in my chest and threatens to shake the whole nest. They can’t see me like this. No one can.

Pacing, I give my wolf just enough control to take the edge off. Who the hell does she think she is, anyway? I did everything for her. Stepped aside during an initiation so she wouldn’t have to see me with someone else, even as a formality. Haven’t fucking looked at anyone else since I first laid eyes on her. And she has the fucking nerve to tell me I’d rather be with a wolf?

My teeth gnash with the desire to find her, pin her down, and force her into submission like I’d do any wolf who dared defy me like this — and before I know it, I’m clamping my teeth around my go-bag and racing out of the nest.

Baek’s going to have to wait.

It doesn’t take me long to pick up her scent. It leads me first to Siren’s Cove, but that’s probably from the party yesterday. It’s too stale to be fresh, so I try again. I only make it about a quarter mile toward town before the crowd becomes thicker and I realize I can’t stay like this. In human form, a fucking t-shirt hides my shame. In wolf form... nothing will. The cracked crescent moon is branded into my fur. There’s no hiding that.

Ducking behind a building, I drop my go bag and shift back, dressing quickly before taking off at a run. My senses might not be as sharp like this, but they’re strong enough to know my mate is close.

Closer.

I’m fucking salivating. I have to be right on top of her.

There she is.

The too-sweet scent of peryton hits my nose almost as strongly when I spot Carly with her. Staying back, I watch the two of them window shop and laugh together like Quinn doesn’t have a care in the world... like her life didn’t flip upside down like mine did. Like she wasn’t crying in my arms last night. But rejected or not, she’s still my mate. I can still feel the unease swirling around inside of her, the pain she’s trying to ignore.

It only pisses me off all over again.

If she's in so much pain without me, why the fuck is she doing this to me? That shit she said last night isn't a good enough answer.

I get a better one when they walk into the Night Owl Cafe and meet up with that putrid fucking Seer, Blaise. The amount of times I've smelled him all over my girl, the way he's hugging her now, the fucking pheromones bleeding off him like he's trying to seduce her — he's a dead man walking.

That's why she dumped me. She wants *him*.

Snarling so viciously my wolf would be proud, I stalk toward them and slam the door open just as it tries to close in my face. "Don't fucking touch her," I growl. "She's mine."

Blaise barely flinches. "You sure about that?" he asks flippantly. "Run along, Neyrus. No need to make a scene."

"Get your fucking hands off her." My fangs grow and my claws distend from my fingertips without being prompted, but Quinn puts a hand on my arm and stands between us.

"Otto, stop. Let's go outside and talk."

Talk? I don't want to talk. I want to lock her in the nest and knot her until her belly swells and she can't fucking deny me anymore.

But my world doesn't work like that. If I keep her captive, I might as well just shout from the rooftops that she rejected me. Grabbing her elbow, I lead her outside and cage her against the wall. "Didn't anyone ever tell you not to get between an Alpha and his prey?" I growl.

"No," she whispers, her heart pounding so loudly I can hear it. "Who's your prey, Alpha? Him... or me?"

Dragging my eyes down her frame, I lean into her space. "What's that pretty pussy telling you?"

Hearing her gasp at my words only makes the desire to take her grow. "Otto..."

God damnit. My wolf rages trying to get out. Just smelling how fucking wet she is drives me crazy. It's time to stop playing nice. "You're fucking mine, Quinn. You can run from me, you can hide from me, you can beg me to stop, to leave you alone. You can hit me, push me away, do whatever you feel you have to do, but you're mine. If he so much as brushes a hair off your shoulder again, I'll rip his fucking heart out through his chest. Do you understand?"

And now I smell her fear. "Otto, you can't just kill people," she hisses. "I won't be with anyone else. I don't want anyone else — why are you shaking?"

What's wrong with your wolf?"

The second her hand falls right over my broken mate's mark, pain explodes through my body. It's unlike anything I've ever felt, but I can't — I fucking *can't* — let it show. Fist curling against the bricks behind her, I bite back the urge to slap her hand away. "My wolf wants to take you," I grunt out. "And not let you go."

"Oh," she breathes, her gaze meeting mine. "What if he could only take me and not keep me? Would he still want me for a little while?"

Her pussy smells so fucking sweet right now, we'll take what we can get. "Craving your Alpha's cock, Cherry baby? Say it."

My mate slowly spreads her legs for me right here on the side of the coffee shop. "Yes, Alpha. I'm craving your cock... I'm craving you every second of every day."

I don't care that she basically said this was a one-and-done. I need her, and everyone in a three-block radius needs to know she's still mine, at least like this. Slipping my hands under her purple academy skirt, I tug her panties down and drop to my knees, ghosting my fingertips up her black knee-high stockings.

Just need... a little taste.

Nudging her legs apart further, I lick her messy, wet clit just to remind myself she really wants this. The taste is all Cherry — all conflicting emotions and surging, driving need, coming together in a mix so fucking intoxicating, I almost stay right where I'm at.

But as her arousal drips on my tongue and her breathy, gaspy little moans fill my ears, my cock throbs. Standing quickly, I shove my sweats down below my ass and lift her up, pressing her back into the brick wall as she wraps her legs around me.

My Cherry.

Mine.

Slamming deep inside her, I catch her yelp in a crashing, almost violent kiss. Her arms wrap around my neck like she's scared I might drop her, but what she doesn't realize is I'm not letting her go until I've knotted what's mine. Nails find my back as I pound into her, her tiny, whimpered cries flooding my ears and spurring me on.

"Louder, baby," I growl, squeezing her thick, round ass and grinding up until she's taking every inch of me. "I can't fucking hear you."

“Ouch! Otto!” she moans, her noises getting louder just as I commanded. “It hurts!”

Fuck, she really did reject me. She never had a problem taking me before. “Does it, Cherry? Does it hurt?” I ask, closing my teeth over the claiming bite I left, not sinking in yet — just threatening. She’ll stay right here and take my knot even if it rips her in half.

“My back,” she mumbles, sinking her nails into my neck as I continue to own her. “Wall hurts.”

We’ve got an audience now. I can hear their whispers and smell their shitty cologne. Good. Let them see who she belongs to. “Let them hear you scream for me.”

“Otto!” she yells, her shoulder pressing into my teeth as she clings to me, and I can’t fucking help it. My wolf needs to bite, to own, to make sure she never fucking forgets that she’s mine no matter what she says.

My teeth sink in as my knot swells, making her cry out and plead for me to slow down, but I don’t miss the way her pussy clenches at my bite and she comes all over my cock. No matter what, this woman was made for me.

Snapping my hips harder, I lick the fresh bite as the tight, soaking fucking wet heat of her pussy squeezes my cock and drives me to the edge. I want to stay here forever fucking her into the wall, taking her apart in front of a crowd, but I can’t. My knot pops and cum spills out in waves, pumping my Cherry full. “Good fucking girl, I knew you could take it.”

Quinn hides her face in my neck, and by the way she’s breathing, I know she’s fighting the urge to cry. “Otto,” she whispers, still clinging to me with her arms and legs, even though she couldn’t go anywhere, anyway. “Do you feel better?”

No, I fucking don’t.

The sadness in her chest is ruining this for me — I hate making her sad, but I don’t know what else to do. She doesn’t understand.

“Mhm,” I lie, shuffling to the side to shield her from the crowd and ease her off the wall. “Always feel better when you’re close.”

I feel her nod like she agrees, but she doesn’t say it out loud. She doesn’t say any of the things that could fix this and change what we’re going through, she just... hides there. “You know I don’t want anyone else, right?”

“No, I don’t know that. Can’t fucking fathom why you’d push me away if it wasn’t for another guy. You could’ve just asked me to give you a little more space,” I mutter.

“I did. Multiple times, Otto. You would just pace outside my door, and I didn’t know how else to get you to understand. At least this way I’m not stringing you along, and you can choose someone else if you find them. I just need to focus on myself for a little while. I never wanted to hurt you.”

My knot goes down faster than it ever has, even back when I had to use my hand. I set her down gently, fixing her skirt as it gets difficult to breathe. “Don’t worry, Cher. I got the message loud and clear this time... just can’t promise I’ll stop coming around overnight.”

Everything about her is asking me not to go: her watery eyes, the hand clenching my shirt, and her posture that’s leaning into me. Everything but her fucking voice. “Okay.”

“What if I do better?” I whisper, fingers curling around her side. “What if I promise to do better?”

And now she’s crying, those tears spilling down her beautiful face like summer rain. “How? It’s been two days and we’re already gravitating right back to how we were. Only now, you’re angry with me and I feel it everywhere.”

Fuck. I want to kiss those tears away, hold her until she understands that yeah, I’m mad, but it’ll never dampen the way I feel about her. I can’t even offer Parker up to help because then he’d know.

I can’t do fucking anything to help her except give her the space she wants, which will only cost me fucking everything.

Is she worth it? Yeah, she is. If I had to choose between losing my pack and continuing to hurt her like this, I know what I’d pick. It’s just easier said than done.

“Be good to yourself, Quinn,” I whisper, touching her cheek one last time before backpedaling. “I guess I’ll see you around.”

Chapter Five

Ledger

Why the fuck am I still thinking about her?

I wake once again to an empty bed, a parched throat, and a rock-hard dick. I don't know why the hell I haven't fucked anyone else yet, but just like the blood, I know no one else can compare to that fucking silver-haired brat. I tell myself it isn't even about her, that it's about the darkness inside her and that's it. I refuse to think it's anything else.

It's the first day back to school since she ditched me and I'm angry all over again that I can't have her as a fucking snack before class. I dress in a blur, forcing all thoughts of her from my mind as I fuck with my tie in my new floor-length mirror. This one is better anyway, it pivots so I can face it toward my bed the next time I fuck the hell out of someone... which better be fucking soon or I might have to go on a murder spree.

Giving up, I leave the purple piece of shit loose around my neck and shoot downstairs for more of Chase's blood, then head out toward the bustling catacombs. I run into Jakob before I enter, hanging back to talk to him for a while, but after five minutes of the fucker rambling about last night's three-way, I find myself looking around for Quinn.

"You seem distracted," he taunts, his goblin ass always looking for a weakness in everyone, whether he realizes it or not.

I shrug, attempting to play it off, but his gifts are too strong for that to work. I know he senses something. Malevolent dick. "I'm fine, just lost track of my favorite bloodbag and I'm going to make her ass pay when I see her again." *If* I see her again, but I'm not letting him know she got out of this realm. And since when do I plan on seeing her again? My fucking thoughts are a mess, and I think I actually hate her for it.

"You mean the one you claimed? With those tempting-ass lips, hips, thighs and —"

I snarl at him before I can stop myself, making people move to steer away from us in case a fight breaks out, but Jakob only holds up both hands and laughs so hard I want to punch him in the face. "Whoa, whoa, whoa. Little touchy about that one, huh?"

Ignoring the fact that I'm half goblin, I quip, "Go to class, asshole. Don't you goblins roll around in the mud first class so you can be one with nature and stop sucking all the life out of the room?"

He only laughs harder. "Okay, hybrid. Don't you vampires have to take a class on bondage and blood play so you learn restraint?"

For some reason, his description actually makes me huff. "You just made mine sound way better than yours. Was that supposed to be a dig?"

"It is, because you and I both know what really happens in there. All torture, no fun. You didn't feed this morning, right? Isn't that part of the rules?"

It is, but that doesn't mean any of us listen. Even the teacher feeds before this class, because no vampire could actually hold back if they were starving and blood was dripping freely from a vein.

Wonder which human will be tied up for us today.

Before I give him any sort of response, I smell my bloodbag's wolf lover BFF in the air and shove past him to go find her. If anyone will know where the hell she would have gone in the Human Realm, it's Quinn. Even though I tell myself I don't actually plan on searching for she-who-must-not-be-named, I like the idea of knowing I can if I want to.

I grab Quinn by the arm before she knows what's happening and whoosh her away so we can talk alone, backing her against a tree so she doesn't try to run off or fight. She has her magic now, but there's no way she's a match for me.

"What the fuck, Ledger!"

"Where is she?"

"Suren?"

I see it clear as day in her mind. She has no fucking clue her best friend skipped out on her, and that's pretty comical. "Yeah, but I see you have no idea."

I chuckle, only making her narrow her eyes behind her glasses. "Even if I did know where she is, I wouldn't tell you, Leech." I know that, but I also know she really wants to find her friend now because she's worried about her. "What do you even mean, anyway? Hasn't she been with you all weekend? She wasn't at Human House at all. I've been looking for her."

"For some of it, yes," I answer honestly, but that's all I'm giving her. "Answer something hypothetical for me, yeah?" Quinn crosses her arms like she's about to deny me, but I continue before she can. "If Suren had a chance

to go back to the Human Realm, where would she go? Where would she think she'd find safety or comfort?"

I know she isn't going to tell me anything, but the best part about being me is I don't need her to. I just need her to think about it, and like everyone ever when asked something like this, she does. I see the quaint little house Suren used to share with the boyfriend she tried to deny me for, the one that absolutely won't remember her, but that doesn't mean he wouldn't allow some beautiful girl inside.

Especially if he thinks he might get laid.

"I'm not telling you anything, Ledger. Let me go to class or Otto will rip your head off your shoulders."

The thought of Suren's ex touching her at all makes me want to go over there right now and kill them both, but Quinn saying that last bit brings more things she doesn't want me to know flashing to the forefront of her mind.

She and Otto broke up, and neither of them is doing well.

Of course that rejected mate isn't doing well, but when I dig a little deeper, I see Quinn doesn't even know they're mates. Fucking yikes, and I thought my relationship was a mess right now. That information is exactly what I need for a good laugh, and I don't stop laughing until the clueless girl is well on her way to class and running from me as fast as she can. She thinks I'm insane, but that's the least of my concerns.

My amusement fades as quickly as it began when I remember where Suren is, that she's probably being touched by some ex who thinks he got lucky when she knocked on his door.

I don't want to care, but because I claimed her, I do — and unless I break this bond, I'm going to be crawling out of my fucking skin until she's back underneath me.

Once again, I lie to myself. I say I'm going to go grab her ass and drag her back here so I can break the bond and can kill her without blinking, but even as I consider it, my fangs distend, not on board with that idea at all. I ditch school altogether so I can go talk to that hag of a witch about some wanderdust.

My aunt will have upped security for a while to keep me away, but luckily for me, I know Yelena has some in her shop. I just have to get it out of her.

Naturally, the wards to keep me out are still up, so I have to knock on the open door instead of just walking in. Sure, I could siphon the magic out if I took the time, but her believing this can be a civilized conversation can't hurt. "Come on, Yel. I'm here as a paying customer. Let me in."

She eyes me from the counter, waving a hand and muttering under her breath to drop the shield. "Suppose it's useless now, anyway. What do you want?"

Aside from the natural stench of the place, I can still smell Suren here. "I need wanderdust."

"I'm not allowed to sell that to students."

I move in closer, knowing damn well she's much harder to use compulsion on, but harder doesn't mean impossible. Especially for someone as strong as I am. "Then keep it off-record. I need to go get her, Yelena, and I'm not asking."

It doesn't matter how powerful she is. I'm stronger, faster, and if I wanted to, I could suck every drop of magic from her body without breaking a sweat.

"Mmhm. And I'm guessing you want to go get her because you claimed her and can't handle the separation, not because you actually care about her, right?"

"Don't make this sound like some trivial romance. I actually want to suck all the blood from her body and fuck her corpse, but you can put it however you need to in order to justify it. You know what she is, I know you do. So tell me, is her being alone in the Human Realm really a good thing?"

Yelena flinches. "I wondered if you'd worked it out yet. No, it's not a good thing, but she made her decision. We should respect that. I won't allow you to bring her back here just to kill her."

"I'm not asking you to allow anything," I growl, slapping the money on the counter without breaking eye contact while my gifts flood into her whether she wants them to or not. "Did you miss the bit where I said this wasn't a request? Give me the wanderdust now, or I'll kill your little boyfriend while he walks back to the Professor's Quarters and make it look like an accident."

I didn't need to add the last bit, but I'm hungry and annoyed and honestly, I just fucking wanted to.

She tries to fight it like it'll do any good, but her feet move on their own. Unable to say a word, she grabs a large vial of wanderdust and walks it back over to me.

There's nothing but fury and the promise of retribution in her eyes, but I smile widely and flash my fangs at her like we're old friends. "Atta girl. Guess you can teach an old dog new tricks. Now... forget I was here, but remember the threat. Play nice next time."

I take my leave and make it home in record time. Of course, the fucking stone door holds me up longer than anything else, but before I know it, I'm standing in front of my new mirror about to make yet another mess. This is different though, because someone else isn't using my shit without my knowledge. *I'm* making the mess, *I'm* dragging that Disaster of a witch back where she belongs by her hair, and I don't give a fuck if she hates me for it.

In fact, it's preferred. At least that way, it'll keep me from being soft with her again like last time. I let her choose whether I bit her for the briefest of moments, and somehow that gave her the impression she had a say in any of this.

It's time she learns she doesn't.

Picturing that soon-to-be-dead man's house, I use the wanderdust to get me there, strolling up like I own the place and knocking hard enough to wake the dead. I swear if he's touching my girl in any way, I might rip his head from his shoulders so I can fuck her in his blood and remind her exactly who she belongs to.

The door swings open and reveals a fucking twat. If this is Alec, I have no idea what Suren saw in him — he's so fucking ordinary it's laughable. "Can I help you?" he asks, eyeing me like he's sizing me up.

I tilt my head and search out every thought in his mind, seeing her and how fucking scared she actually was and how this mundane asshole put a gun in her face. In seconds, I'm shoving my way inside and grabbing him by his throat with a snarl.

"Why would you need a gun when a scared girl came to you for help? What kind of fucking coward are you and what did she ever see in you?" I slam him against a wall and squeeze tighter, cutting off his airway completely.

Gasping, he tries and fails to speak. His thoughts are loud enough. He thought she was some homeless bitch trying to rob him, and as I watch him shove that gun in her face, my fangs shoot out and I feel raw fear seeping out of him at the sight. It's intoxicating, and the closer he gets to death, the more delicious it becomes, so I soak up as much of it as I can before I pull him forward and slam him back so hard I feel his throat crush under my palm.

I watch the light leave his eyes as he sinks down to the floor, and then walk away like he's nothing.

Because he is.

All that matters is my girl, and she's so damn close, I can feel it. I just need to find her.

Chapter Six

Suren

Gods, why did I do that to myself?

Walking out of Grill Scape, I shake off the disgust I feel. I cannot believe that I stooped low enough to go back to Quinn's dad and see if he'd make me the same deal again — he doesn't remember me or his daughter and I knew he wouldn't, but once a pig, always a pig.

Turns out that *this* particular pig is all high-and-mighty now. Maybe he only agreed to pay me as the company's free-use slut last time because I was his estranged daughter's best friend. I don't know, but he chased me out of there faster than Alec had. It was the second time in two days I've had a gun in my face.

I really hope this isn't becoming a pattern.

Unfortunately, that doesn't mean I can stop. Selling my body for sex is the only way I know how to make money under the table since I don't know the first thing about selling drugs, but with my only sure-fire avenue gone, I don't know where to go. Do I just... pick a corner and hope for the best? That doesn't sound right, it sounds dangerous and stupid. But coming back here at all was dangerous and stupid, so what's the difference?

Starvation, that's what. It's been days since I came through the portal. I'm rapidly running out of ideas and money, so it doesn't matter what I have to do. Suren Archer always fucking survives.

It's getting late, so I limp my ass over to the shadiest part of town and casually start strolling. I can see I'm not alone out here, but I'm definitely in the right spot. Within ten minutes, three other people get into cars and take off.

Holy shit, I don't want to do this.

"You're new," a deep voice growls from behind me. "Haven't seen you around before."

Yeah, that's the story of my life these days.

Turning slowly, I take in the behemoth of a man in front of me. He's a hair shorter than Ledger's 6'2, but he's built like an army tank, and I'd say he's gotta be part werewolf if I didn't know better. This man could rip me to shreds.

Noting the expensive suit he's wearing and the gleaming gold watch on his wrist, I fall in line. I've put my body through worse for less. "It's my first night," I whisper like I'm telling a secret. "I don't really know what I'm doing."

Bingo. His eyes flash like he just won the lottery. "No? Does that mean I get a discount if I show you the ropes?"

Wincing internally, I pull my bottom lip between my teeth and twirl my hair around my finger. "Maybe. I was told to charge \$200 an hour since I'm fresh meat, but if you promise to be nice, I'll see what I can do."

Burly crowds my space until the overpowering scent of his cologne is assaulting my nose. "Does it look like I'm a nice man, pretty? I like it rough, so maybe I should find someone a little more suited for that. You look like I'd break you in half."

My stomach rolls, but memories flash through my mind a hundred miles an hour of Ledger and how it felt when he was rough. "I can take it. Let me prove it."

Darting my tongue out over my lip, I relax as Burly melts into a little, manageable puddle. "That's a good little whore. Come with me. My car is a few blocks over. Appearances, and all."

As I follow him, I can't help but wonder who he is and why he gives a damn about appearances. With the suit he's wearing, maybe he's a lawyer or a politician? He's got the attitude for it, and at the end of the day, all that matters is his money. I can do this.

I have to do this.

But when he rounds the corner onto Jules Street, we're stopped dead by the towering column of jet-black smoke pouring out of Grill Scape. I'd just been there not even an hour ago. "What the hell?" I whisper, grabbing Burly's arm. "There were people in there!"

"So what?" he grunts. "Fire department will come soon enough. Police too, so let's hurry it up. Walk faster."

He grabs me roughly and drags me past the flames. Screams pour out from the chaos that have me wrenching my arm back to go help, but his grip is so strong, I'm right back to thinking he's part werewolf.

"We had a deal, pretty. Don't make me fucking carry you. I'm taking that pretty little cunt of yours whether I do it at my place or right here on the fucking ground."

I barely have time to react before a loud *crack!* echoes over the sound of the flames. Burly's grip goes slack a second before his giant body slumps to the ground, and everything seems to go still and silent as I register the man now standing in front of me with murder in his eyes.

"Ledger," I gasp.

I've never seen him this way before. He looks as if he has a million things he wants to yell at me, and yet the rage that has him trembling as he stands there also has him speechless. Suddenly I'm being slammed back against a wooden fence, one of his hands tangling in my hair while the other digs into my chin and his growl makes a shiver travel straight down my spine. "You seem to have forgotten whose pussy that is, little whore. Is this the fucking life you longed for?"

Fuck. I'd have been better off with Burly and ten of his most violent friends.

Clenching my jaw against the pain in my scalp, I grunt out, "No. Everyone lied. How was I supposed to know this was the one area they told the truth in? I don't exist here. I didn't know what else to do."

"You should have never fucking left!" he yells. "You don't belong in this world, Suren! Fuck!"

Ledger yanks my head to the side and sinks his teeth into my neck without a single drop of venom. It burns through me, dragging a wrecked, pained sob from my chest as I uselessly try to shove him off.

And to think I'd been happy to see him for a moment. "I don't belong anywhere!" I cry out. "Stop, please!"

He doesn't, I feel his possessive growl all throughout my body as he takes what he needs from me, and when he presses his hard length against me, I realize I'm still going to have to trade my body for survival.

Just not quite like I thought.

Reaching down, I palm him hard and jerk when he takes too much blood. "I can't suck your dick if I'm un-conscious," I gasp. "S-Stop."

The teasing of my hand gets him to finally release my neck, but when he pulls back and I see my blood dripping down his chin, I can see he's far from done with me. "You want to suck my dick for more information, Suren?" The warmth I used to get glimpses of in his eyes is long gone. "I have a different idea, and the next time you think you don't belong anywhere, remember you belong with me. You're mine, and I can do whatever the fuck I want with you."

This time when his teeth sink into my neck, his venom floods my system so abundantly my legs give out and my entire world goes blurry.

I struggle to stay afloat, but it's getting harder to remember why I was so scared just a moment ago. He's so warm, so strong. I'm safe here. It would be so, so easy to just give in, to let him take all of me. I wouldn't have to struggle anymore.

I could finally be at peace.

Going limp, I let my eyes flutter closed as I whisper, "Go ahead, Ledger. Do it. Take... take it a—"

Everything hurts.

From the back of my head to my still-throbbing ankle, I'm in enough pain to know that I'm definitely not dead.

Of course he couldn't show me that mercy.

Trying to sit up, tension drags on my shoulders and ropes dig into my wrists. I'm mortified to find I'm completely naked except for a pair of panties and the only limb that isn't tied to Ledger's bed is my sprained one, but I'm still too dizzy to figure out how to use that to my advantage.

Fuck.

"Seriously, Ledger?" I yell, looking around for the bastard himself. "Let me go!"

He walks back into the room shirtless like we've been here a while, a glass filled with amber liquid in his hand as he looks me over with a huff. "Straight to demanding? That's how you want to play this, Clumsy?"

"Oh, are you telling me I'll get further by being nice? You fucking kidnapped me," I hiss.

"And you fucking played me." His tone turns menacing in seconds. "Who was the asshole first?"

"You. You tricked me first, remember? Told me you'd give me the information I wanted if I let you have a little blood, conveniently leaving out the fact that you'd own me forever afterward. How is what I did any different, or are you just mad that you didn't see it coming?"

Ledger tosses back his drink in one go, then closes the distance between us with his jaw clenched. "You had that fucking tea, Suren. Don't think for one second you would have ever gotten one over on me if you hadn't."

Smirking, I finally, finally feel like I've got the upper hand. "I didn't drink my amrit that day, Ledger. Don't you remember? You read my mind when I wanted you to make me touch myself with your cock still in my throat. All the information was right there for you to take. You just never imagined some little human would be brave enough to cross you like that. You *slipped*."

"Fuck you," he snarls, only confirming exactly what I'm saying. "I wasn't reading your mind because I was so used to not being able to, and then you yelled what you wanted. Nice to know you remember that in such detail, though. How about I watch your betrayal from your point of view?"

I feel him enter my mind like a rush of cold air, extracting every little thought, feeling, and desire I had that day from my memories. The foreign, odd sensation of having someone rifling around in my mind is bad on a good day, but right now? Combined with the fact that he's stripping me bare and stealing all the things I'd tried to keep hidden?

It's the worst thing that could happen.

When he's done taking what he wants, I get to watch his face scrunch up before he looks away, disgust clear on his features as he shakes his head. "I got soft, but you can trust me, baby. There's nothing soft about me now. Think what you want, but that bonding wouldn't have ever worked if deep down, you didn't want it too."

Unease grips my stomach. Is that true? Did some broken little part of me want this?

Yes. I'm sure of it. Why wouldn't I have wanted him? He's gorgeous, strong, capable of handling me. He told me the truth about my lack of powers when no one else would. He warned me what would happen if I stayed here without manifesting, showed me that Greylin wasn't loyal to me.

Most people would see all of that as a bad thing, but me? It's the realest relationship I've ever been in.

And it's ruined. Spoiled just like everything else. The Ledger I left here in this same bed is long gone now, and I don't think I'll ever get him back.

What the fuck was the point of any of it?

Deflating, I stare up at the ceiling. "I almost stayed," I admit. "I'm sure it doesn't mean anything to you and you probably saw that when you read my mind, but I did. I hesitated, even after having everything I needed."

"Doesn't mean shit anymore, right? You still went." Ledger paces the room for a moment and then releases a humorless laugh. "Cherith thinks it

was me, you know. The one who stole from her and didn't even put the portrait back on the wall. Don't worry, I let her believe it so she wouldn't be looking for you. You were mine to find. No one else here gave a shit you were missing."

Squirming, I try to tell myself he's lying — but maybe he's not. Quinn's got her own thing going on and I don't really have anyone else here. Humans go missing all the time and no one seems to care. "Well, congrats then, Ledger. You've got me."

My tone keeps him from being happy about it, and he stops walking, closing the distance until he's standing over me and scowling down. "You were really going to fuck someone else, huh?"

"Yes," I admit. Clearly, I have no way of blocking my thoughts from him. My only option is to tell the truth and hope he takes it well. "I knew I could make money like that and couldn't figure out any other way to keep myself alive with no identity. It was survival, nothing more."

"Nothing more?" He climbs on the bed, his hand reaching out to ghost along my stomach toward my hip. "So you weren't wet for that fucking douchebag?"

God, it's hard to focus when he touches me. "You were there. You know I wasn't."

His jaw is still clenched as he continues touching me, his eyes flashing clear as he takes in my body. "Want to know a secret?"

Ledger grips my panties and rips them clean off my body without so much as blinking. "Is your secret that you're allergic to cotton?" I mumble. "What?"

Slowly, he reaches to press two fingers against my clit while his other hand reaches to push on my chest like he wants to feel my heartbeat as he tells me whatever it is. "Before I tell you, answer me honestly. Do you still want to fuck me?"

My stupid, traitorous heart flutters. "No," I say firmly. "I don't."

Ledger grins, seeing the lie in my mind and feeling it in my pulse. He doesn't say anything else after that, just moves between my legs and shoves his sweats down. "Say it again."

I don't want to give him what he wants, but I'm also not about to tell the man who just crossed realms to kidnap me that for some insane reason, I still want him. "I don't want you to fuck me, Ledger. Don't. I'll scream."

All that does is make him laugh. “You think you’d be the only human screaming in this dorm, Suren? Go ahead... join in our favorite song. It’ll only make my dick harder.”

He strokes himself, letting me watch his cock grow to its full potential like I need a reminder of what’s coming.

Bracing myself, I close my eyes and exhale hard. I won’t scream, I won’t moan, I won’t make a sound. He’s too angry with me for this to mean anything good, and I can’t stop the chaos in my chest long enough to look on the bright side.

“I can hear all of that just as clearly as I can hear that you want it. You want me to fuck you the way I used to.”

Two fingers slip inside of me too easily. God, what’s wrong with me? He’s right. He’s always fucking right. “I want you to fuck me the way you did the day I left. When it actually felt like I was more than a hole and a blood bag.”

“So that was my mistake, then?” He rolls them over my clit and then uses my wetness to coat the tip of his cock, slipping inside of me with a gasping moan that gives me the impression he hasn’t gotten off at all since I left. “I take care of my girl with multiple orgasms and she still leaves me?”

“No, that — fuck it, never mind,” I mutter. “You won’t hear me, anyway. What’s the stupid secret?”

Ledger moves in and out of me teasingly, slowly, his hand moving right back to feel for my heartbeat, and then he leans in to whisper in my ear, “What is your cowardly ex-boyfriend’s name again? Oh, right. Alec.” He snaps his hips, a sneer on his face that makes me suddenly not want to know his secret. “I guess I should have said *was*.”

It takes several seconds for me to figure out what he’s trying to say, but when I do, the world seems to open up and swallow me whole. He killed him. Alec’s dead, all because I was stupid enough to go ask him for help.

Forget whatever you know about the word ‘danger’ and replace it with Ledger Huxley.

It had seemed so dramatic before, so over-exaggerated. Ledger wasn’t dangerous, he was just a bit of a dick and pretty misunderstood. But this, the real him? Maybe Oleander was right.

“You’re lying,” I whisper desperately, trying to jerk out of the ropes. “Why would you do that? It doesn’t make any sense.”

Ledger doesn't answer for a while, he uses my body for his pleasure for so long I don't think he's going to answer at all, and even when he does he still catches me completely off guard. "One day, every man that ever touched you will be dead, Suren. Every single fucking one."

My pussy clenches so violently, it stops him for a second. I want to hate that, to scream at him and tell him to stop and to leave me the hell alone, but I can't. Some twisted, repressed part of me is clawing her way out of the depths, responding to the monster inside of Ledger Huxley.

My own monster.

And she loves it.

"Is that supposed to scare me?" I ask, voice steadier than I expected. "I never gave a shit about any of them."

I meet his gaze and find a genuine smile on his face as he reaches out and holds my chin, his hips stilling. "It's not meant to scare you, it's a promise. And I always keep those."

My lips part as my heart beats harder, faster. "Do you?" I picture the men who hurt me, the line of assholes my mom dated who always tried to get a little on the side. "Have at them. Maybe save one or two of them for me. You still don't scare me, Ledger. You can't break something that wasn't whole to begin with."

"Don't want to break you yet, girl. I'm not done playing with you."

He starts fucking me again after dropping his head to my neck, but this time, I don't fight him. I don't try to pretend I hate it. I don't do anything but sink into the feeling of his thick, brutal cock filling me exactly the way I crave. "Ledger," I moan softly. "H-Harder."

He goes slower, like he's specifically trying not to give me what I ask for, but his restraint is failing and he only lasts that way for a few seconds before he's cursing and fucking into me hard, teeth scratching against my sore neck.

There he is. It's about time.

"Did you miss me, baby?"

"Shut up," he growls, but he feels way too good for there to be any bite in it. "Fuck... I'm so fucking horny."

Gasping, I wrap my free leg around his ass and bend the other as much as I can, angling to take him deeper. "Then what's holding you back? You killed for this pussy, Ledger. I almost let someone else touch me."

He snarls, hips snapping even more violently as he loses control, fangs scratching a cut into my skin so he can lick at the blood. It stings, but I can

tell he's getting close. "Did you at least miss my blood?"

"Had to feed on fucking off-brands and desperate bloodwhores," he grumbles, cock pulsing inside me as he comes with a growl and continues to fuck it deeper.

He wasn't ready for it to end, but regardless of how angry he is at me, he still hasn't fucked anyone else. I just wish it mattered at all. He didn't miss me and barely admitted to missing my blood. "Why'd you come back for me?" I ask. "Why bother?"

"Because you're mine." He pulls out of me and stands, his heavy wet cock hanging in front of him as he surveys me. "And I wasn't done with you."

"Great," I offer lamely. "You gonna untie me?"

I watch his eyes scan my body, watch the way they linger on my cum-filled pussy for a second too long before he gives me my answer. "Nah."

"Cool. I'll just stay here then." Closing my eyes, I try to remind myself that even naked and tied to a bastard's bed, I'm still probably better off than I was a few hours ago. He'll feed me and I'll be safe, and if all he wants in return is a little blood and a little pussy, I can handle it.

I've still put my body through worse for less.

Chapter Seven

Quinn

It's been far too many days since I've seen Suren, and every single day that passes only makes me more worried about her. I've asked everyone who knows her — including multiple professors — and everyone seems to think I'm overreacting. Yelena wasn't here the two times I stopped by earlier this week, but this time, I see her open sign flipped exactly how I'd hoped I would be. Rushing inside, I leave Otto behind like I don't know he's following me.

He's stalked me since the day I ended things, something I really thought he'd slowly stop doing as time passed, but so far he's only gotten more and more obvious about it. Like he doesn't care who knows he's following me. Knowing Otto, he probably doesn't... even if all he's doing is hurting us both more by continuing.

Pushing all thoughts of my wolf to the back of my mind, I sigh in relief as Yelena walks out to welcome me as I look around like I might see my best friend hiding in the back. “Hey, sorry to bother you, but have you seen Suren?”

Everything about her face says she knows something big, but I also see she won't tell me. I'm not sure why, but I also might be looking for signs that aren't actually there. “Sorry, I haven't. I had some personal things to deal with for a few days and she hasn't been by.”

“So when's the last time you saw her?” I push, needing something — *anything* — that will tell me she's okay.

“Last Friday. If she comes by, I'll let her know you stopped in, okay?”

Friday. One week ago. The same day I saw her last. The same day *anyone* saw her last.

My stomach drops at the realization that my friend is actually missing, Yelena's face is full of pity and unspoken words that she still refuses to speak. I don't have a clue what's going on, but I had hoped she was hiding out with Yel and avoiding school, and knowing that isn't the case is almost too much.

Without another word, I take my leave with my heartbeat pounding in my ears and nausea rolling in my gut. So many scenarios flash in front of my

eyes, each one worse than the last until I'm so fucking scared she isn't okay my lungs are constricting and breathing becomes difficult.

Is this what a panic attack feels like? Like your chest is being crushed, and every breath you take becomes shallower and shallower, until the act of breathing itself becomes a chore? If so, that's exactly what's happening to me, and if not, I might just be dying.

"Quinn?" Otto's voice is close, but I can't really see him. I can't see anything but the fucking Grim Reaper looming over my best friend in the entire world.

"Otto?" I squeak out, my arms reaching out in search of him. I just need to feel him, to feel something solid, warm, and safe, and despite all the bullshit happening between us, Otto will always be those things for me.

Always.

"I'm here, Cherry. C'mere." He pulls me in tight, face smooshed against his chest as his massive arms cage me in. "What happened, baby? Who did this to you?"

I shake my head, trying to find the words as his presence calms me in a way only he can. Parker isn't the only magical one with a calming touch. My Alpha has one too, only his is tailored to me. "Something is wrong, Otto. I think something happened to Suren."

"Huh? What makes you say that?"

His lips brush the top of my head, and I finally feel my breathing even out. Goddess, I love the way he smells.

"No one has seen her in a week. I've met human students who went missing after not manifesting, and she still hasn't. You've noticed it too, right? Where do they go?"

His body stiffens. "Dunno. I'm sure they just go home," he mutters. "Maybe Suren went home?"

"Home? To what home? We were homeless," I whisper. "Her boyfriend kicked us out, and if they kicked her out too, then that means two different realms have rejected her. How do you think she feels right now? Fuck... if they kicked her out, then I want to leave, too. I won't fucking abandon her like everyone else, I can't."

"Whoa, Cher. Breathe for me." Scooping me up in his arms, Otto starts walking back toward the school. "We'll figure this out, okay? If you say something happened to her, I believe you. Let's go back to the Lair and talk about it, okay?"

I can't help but cling to him and let him take me home. We walk in silence for a while, the steady beat of his heart keeping me grounded as I think back to the very first time I laid on his chest and felt it. I was amazed at how much faster it was than a human's, and how much power each thump had to have behind it to keep this beast of a man moving.

That was back when his heart belonged to me, back before I broke it.

The second we get back to the Lair, I cling to him a little tighter and let him past the shield so he doesn't try to put me down. I'm too scared for my friend to pretend I don't need this as much as he does. "Do you still feel it when I'm upset?"

"Not as strongly as I used to," he admits, sitting on the edge of my bed as he holds me. "But yeah, Cher. I'll always feel it."

I feel his pain as well, only his is every second of every day. To keep us from going down that road, I change the subject now that we're here. "Can you ask around a little and see if any of the wolves have seen Suren?"

"Of course. Do you have anything of hers? Scent helps. I can ask my pack to scent her out. Maybe Nico's and Lordan's packs, too."

"I can get something from her room. I got in there yesterday and her stuff is mostly all there. I can grab it on my way to the Vampire Hall."

I hate the thought of visiting that place, but I haven't seen Ledger either since he accosted me, and if anyone has figured out where she is, it's him. Him or Cherith.

Tensing, Otto growls. "I'm coming with you. If you're going anywhere near those bloodsucking fucks. I'll be right behind you."

Still as protective as always. "I'll be okay, Otto. If Ledger wanted to hurt me, he would have done it ten times over. Would you rather ask him for me and I'll just go see Cherith?"

"If you're seriously offering that, yes. I'll find out what he knows."

"Okay, then I'll just go straight to Cherith and see if she knows anything or if she can at least help search for her. I wonder if any of the witches know a location spell or something? I haven't learned about those yet."

"It's possible. Are you feeling a little better? Why don't you grab something of hers while I run over to Leech Hall and see if Ledger knows anything? Then we'll meet back here and I can go to the wolves if needed and you can go to Cherith."

I nod, moving to stand up in front of him and touch his cheek softly.

"Yeah, I feel better. Thank you for always being there for me. I don't deserve

it, but I appreciate it.”

“One day, you’re gonna understand that I was made for you, Cherry. I don’t care how long it takes. I’ll be here.”

His soft demeanor is so starkly different from the angry wolf who fucked me up against the wall at Night Owl that I forget all about the healing bruises on my back and accept the fact that this is really hard on him.

All breakups are hard, but there’s something different at play here, something I don’t understand yet, but my poor wolf is going through it. Letting him have me again hurt both of us, but even with the pain it caused, I can’t lie and say we didn’t need it. Something in his eyes tells me we always will.

One day, wolfy. I will be yours again. I just have to figure all my shit out... please don’t give up on me.

“I hope so.”

Knowing I shouldn’t, I still lean forward and press our lips together. It’s only for a second, just long enough to kill us both a little more while simultaneously bringing us five seconds of peace, and then I rush out of there to grab one of Suren’s shirts.

Ollie taught me how to shield my magic enough to pass as human so the doors open, and once I find one of her dirty school shirts that fell on the side of her bed, I rush back over to the Lair to wait for Otto.

By the time he returns, I’ve taken a seat at the picnic tables. I can tell from his body language alone — the frown tugging at his lips, his slumped shoulders — that he’s not bringing me good news, but I bite my tongue and wait until he sits down and tells me that himself.

“Couldn’t find him,” he explains. “Grey wouldn’t let me in, not even when I told him it was for Suren. He was the only one outside. I’m sorry, Cher. I’ll try again later.”

“Okay, that’s okay. I doubt Ledger would help us anyway.” I can see how much he wants to help and touch his hand softly so he can feel how much I appreciate it. “Here. I found this in her room and I’m pretty sure she wore it to class. It has a stain on it, so hopefully her scent is still on it.”

He takes it, grimacing like he’s embarrassed right before sniffing the armpit. “Yeah, still smells like her. I’ll see what I can do, but it’s been a week, Cher. If she’s not here anymore, her scent will probably be gone from wherever she was last. But if she is here, we’ll find her.”

I nod, knowing all of this is a long-shot, but I have to do something. I have to try. “Thank you, Otto. Seriously, you helped me focus again when I thought I was losing my mind. You were right last Saturday, I’m not stronger yet — actually, I’m still pretty fucking weak, but I’m getting there. I want to be the best me I can be, and one day, I will be. Hopefully sooner rather than later.”

“I shouldn’t have been a dick, Cher. I’m sorry.” Standing, he holds the shirt in his hands like it’s precious. “We’ll find her. I promise.”

Without another word, he leans in to kiss the top of my head, then walks off toward his nest and leaves me there to gather the courage to go see Cherith. I take my time walking there, trying to pick the best way to approach her that won’t put her on defense. I want to question her about all the missing humans and where the hell they go, but something tells me that won’t get me anywhere. I need to focus on Suren and keep the conversation on Suren alone if I want to get anything out of her.

With that in mind, I still find myself nervous as I sit down before her in her office. I try not to look flabbergasted at all the photos she has of herself on the walls and the wingback villain chair she’s perched on, but it’s obvious I fail when I lock gazes with her and find her expression cold.

Shit.

“Good evening, Headmistress. I won’t keep you, but I haven’t seen Suren in a week. No one has.” It hits me she has hundreds of students to keep track of and she probably doesn’t know Suren from her first name alone, so I continue. “She’s the last human in Human House. Long, silver hair... she’s missing.”

“Missing?” she asks. “And what makes you say that?”

“No one has seen her in a week,” I rush out. “I know her. She wouldn’t just ditch class and ignore everyone. Plus, I’ve been up to her room. She isn’t there.”

Cherith eyes me intensely like she’s trying to pick out a lie. “You said she’s human? Perhaps Professors Vinter and Caius sent her home. We don’t keep humans here indefinitely, Miss...?”

“Garcia.” Her words sink in, making my heart rate pick up and my stomach turn. “No... no, she’s not a human. She just hasn’t manifested yet. They can’t... she can’t... she just needs a little more time.”

“If she’s been sent home, it’s too late. She’ll have no memory of Rogue Hollow or the Mythic Realm at all. It wouldn’t be possible to give her more

time. If you're truly this concerned about her, I will check with the professors and confirm that's what happened."

"Okay," I whisper, the desire to be back in Otto's arms rising inside me, but I shove it down. If I'm going to be strong, I need to learn to handle things on my own. Standing, I nod at her and thank her for her time, stopping just shy of leaving to add one more thing: "If they didn't send her home, then I believe Ledger Huxley might know something."

"Oh?" she asks, finally looking interested. "And what do you suppose my nephew has to do with this?"

Shit. How the hell did I forget they were family? Regardless, I push on, wondering how much she actually knows about her nephew's bullshit. "He claimed her without her consent and treats her like she's nothing more than a bloodbag. Before she went missing, she was looking really pale. I'm worried he has her in his dorm or something."

Relaxing, Cherith sits back in her chair. "What you're insinuating is impossible, Miss Garcia. It's a limitation of our Mythic that we cannot claim someone who doesn't wish to be claimed. She may not have realized it or admitted it, but if he was able to claim her, some part of her wanted it enough to let it take hold. As for the rest of it, he knows better than to drain her. Their lives are intertwined now, for better or worse. You needn't worry."

That's news to me, and I'm positive it's clear as day on my face. "So if she's claimed, would she still be sent home? What does that mean for them?"

"It means what happens to her is no longer your concern," Cherith says coldly. "But in the interest of your peace of mind, I will find out what happened to the girl. It is still possible she was sent home if Vinter and Caius were unaware she'd been claimed."

Seems unlikely thanks to the fucking scar on her neck, but I can see I won't get anything more than that today. "Okay, thank you."

I take my leave, my mind reeling all the way back to the Lair. When I get there, I offload all of it on Ollie in hopes I'll feel better after. I don't, and something tells me I won't feel better until I see my best friend is alive and well again. I just hope that happens soon.

Chapter Eight

Suren

That absolute shitbag.

Squirming, I try again to free myself from the silk restraining me, but the bastard used so much magic that I doubt the Hulk could break free. It's slightly better than the rope he'd used originally, but I'm freezing, naked, bound to the four corners of Ledger's annoyingly soft bed, and livid.

It's one thing for him to leave me here long enough to shower or something, but he's been gone for two hours. Jakob and Baek stopped by to see me all tied up and then stole him to go to some stupid party, and the asshole had the goddamn nerve to just leave me like this.

If I've ever hated anyone as much as I hate him right now, I can't remember it.

I'm still fuming when I hear them all come back, the door slamming slightly before Ledger laughs in a way I've never heard before. A way that gives me the impression he's *very* drunk.

Fucking perfect.

"Ledge?" I call, trying to sound sweet. "Did you have fun?"

I can't understand the mumbles they all share, but they only keep me waiting about thirty seconds before the man himself comes stumbling inside. His hair is messier than it was when he left, his appearance ruffled, but it's his wide smile that pulls all my attention. "I did have fun. Did you?"

Hungry eyes scan my frame as he moves closer, making me hate him just a little bit more. He doesn't deserve the blush spreading across my skin.

"Yeah, I had a blast," I deadpan. "I'm a little sore, though."

"Just a little?" Jakob asks. "Told you, Ledge. You're not being rough enough."

"Fuck off," he quips, not turning his gaze away so he can reach out and ghost his fingers along the dagger tattoo on my thigh. "Isn't she fucking stunning?"

Baek makes a noise in agreement that has me feeling more exposed. "Hell yeah, you sure you don't want to share her?"

Ledger growls, making both of them laugh, and I don't know whether to thank him or punch him. "Guess that's your cue to leave," I snap. "Bye, guys."

Thanks for stopping by.”

That makes them laugh harder, only Ledger actually joins in. “That was a little rude, Clumsy. Just because they can’t touch doesn’t mean they can’t watch.”

Shit, shit, shit. “Very funny, Ledge. Ha-ha. Stop screwing around and just untie me.”

Baek licks his thin lips as he sits on the edge of the bed and grabs my ankle. “We came here for a show, girl. Do you think we’re stupid? All three of us can see how shiny your pussy is already. Just admit you want it, and this will go a lot easier.”

My heart thunders louder, more violently against my chest. I see what that does to Ledger, the way his pupils blow as his gaze locks on my neck so he can watch the skin rise and fall. His fangs grow just like his cock does, one hand gripping my breast painfully tight so he can hear my heart beat even faster. “Come on, baby. Be a good girl and admit it for me.”

Slowly, he reaches down to play with my clit until my hips jerk and I let out a broken little whimper.

A Singer siren, a pureblood Malevolent goblin, and a hybrid Malevolent goblin/Hunter vampire with telepathic abilities. Not one of them needs to hear me say it out loud, but they’re still going to make me.

“Fine,” I whisper as his finger moves faster and my thighs twitch. “I want it.”

Shame radiates from my core as Jakob and Baek both sneer, both of their hands moving to press down on their crotches. “Fuck... there isn’t a piece of her that’s lying,” Jakob mutters, and Ledge releases a pleased moan when he dips two fingers inside my wet pussy.

“Beautiful girl loves being my little captive. Loves when I walk in the room and use her pussy like a toy.”

I bite my tongue hard, trying to stave off the pleasure threatening to drag me under, but it’s no use. He’s right, they’re all right. I just fucking hate him a little for taking advantage of it.

So, I fight back the only way I know how: hitting his ego. “It doesn’t really have anything to do with you,” I goad. “I’d be just as happy as Baek’s captive or Jakob’s. Greylin’s too.”

The almost adoring look he had in his eyes is gone in a flash, replaced with a malice that has me wondering if I should have kept my mouth shut

before taunting him in front of others. Especially when his friends laugh and begin to tease him.

His fingers leave my body as he steps back, a look overtaking him I've never seen before. That playful expression he had when they walked in is completely gone. "You really think so, Suren?"

I'd be happier not being a captive at all, but whatever. It figures this is the one time he's not helping himself to my thoughts to see that I don't want things to be like this at all. "Yep," I push, knowing even as I say it, it's a mistake. "What's it matter to you? You're not giving me a choice, anyway."

Ledger grunts, walking out of the room so I'm now alone with his two friends.

"Damn, you like to play like that, huh?"

Jakob's voice is still too low, too sensual. I refuse to look at him. "I don't want to play at all. I want him to let me the fuck up so I can pee and put clothes on, but whatever. He'd rather show off his conquest to his friends. It's not even fucking impressive. I'm human," I rant. "Big, bad hybrid managed to kidnap and restrain a human. Good for him."

At this point, I don't know what I'm even doing. Under different circumstances, I'd probably love to fuck Ledger in front of these two — maybe even let them join — but not like this. Not when he's doing it just to prove a point.

"If there's any point I was trying to prove," Ledger's voice echoes inside my mind, *"It was how fucking perfect you are and why I don't want to share. But we can do it your way."*

I feel the connection cut off like a switch just before both of his friends stand over me and reach out to run their hands along my skin. "Bout time he lets us have a taste."

"Yeah," Baek agrees. "He's been selfish with this one."

Gritting my teeth, I thrash trying to get their hands off me. "Stop," I snap. "Let me go! Don't—"

Baek pinches my exposed nipple as Jakob's hand cups my pussy. "Bet she can take both of us," he croons, slipping a finger into me. "We can leave her nice and messy for Ledge. Use your song, Baek. Make the whore beg for it."

As Baek opens his mouth, I scream so loudly, it shreds my throat. "Ledger! Ledger, please don't let them do this!"

A loud, rattling crack of thunder drowns out my desperate plea. The man himself comes running in with his fangs on display, but he holds himself back. I see the way he's shaking with the need to defend me thanks to our bond, but he's using all his restraint to do the opposite. "What, Sur? You don't think you want to be theirs now?" They both look amused as rain begins to pour on the rooftop like we're in the middle of a hurricane, their gazes flicking to the window in confusion at how suddenly it came on, but Ledger still seems completely focused on me. "Say it."

I can't fucking breathe, let alone speak. I'm ripping at the ties, ready to snap my own wrists to get out — and all I can see is the stupid look on his stupid face. "I don't!" I yell. "I don't want to be theirs!"

The window to my left slams open, shattering as the pane hits the wall.

"Get out!" Ledger bellows, amusement gone off all of their faces as his friends look from the window to me to him multiple times. It isn't until he releases a snarl that leaves no room for questions that they take their leave without another word, and Ledger climbs onto the bed fully clothed to sink his teeth into my inner thigh.

It's worse, so much worse, and then it's... better.

His venom floods my system until I can't give a shit about Baek, Jakob, or the storm. The whole of Rogue Hollow could run a train on me for all I care — I'm warm and safe, and... why was I so mad?

Slowly, the entire world calms around us as his angry growls become sated moans and he drinks his fill. By the time he pulls back, I can hardly see anything but him. He sits above me with my blood on his lips and a strange expression on his face. If I wasn't so woozy, I'd think it was fear, but that's insane. What the hell does Ledger Huxley have to fear?

"You look silly," I giggle. "Why's your face doing that?"

Rolling his eyes, he licks his lips clean and sits up, reaching to untie me — which is something he only does after getting me high on his venom when he knows I can't try to escape. "You drive me insane, you know that?"

"Why? Because I'd rather we have a conversation before you invite your friends to see my naked body?"

"Yes," he responds plainly. "Are we supposed to have conversations about things I can see in your mind? Your body is immaculate, brat."

I really hate it when he opens his mouth and logic comes out. "Look, I'm still trying to adjust to just you. Can we put a pin in the other stuff, just for a little? They're really intense."

He shrugs, moving over to his window with a curse. “Fucking old-ass building.” He slams the broken window frame closed. “And yeah, they’re intense. They’re incredibly powerful and you look like the most delicious prey in this school all tied up for them. They got me drunk on purpose. They just don’t know I know they did.”

My stomach sinks a little. Every time I think I’ve got him figured out, he proves me wrong. “Oh. Well... sorry I ruined your fun, then. You could’ve just told me you wanted to share me. I’m always scared if I do or say the wrong thing, you’ll put me in a cage or something.”

“The thought’s occurred to me,” he admits. “And I don’t want to share, but I do want to watch. It’s irritatingly confusing. Don’t you have to pee?”

My sluggish brain does a self-check, and I realize yes, very badly. I bolt to his bathroom and take a few extra moments to clean up, then sneak a peek out his bedroom window. The scene outside is crazy — the storm is over, but two buildings are missing roofs and a half dozen trees are upended. “Whoa.” Backing away, I join my captor on the edge of the bed. “I get it, though. How I feel about you is also irritatingly confusing.”

Ledge leans back on the bed and watches me intently, but I can tell he’s not digging around in my mind. “Must be that girl inside you, the one that secretly wanted to be claimed. She just can’t hate me no matter how much you try to convince her.”

“Yeah, maybe. Or maybe I just remember how you were with me the day I left and I’m holding onto some delusional hope that he’s still inside you somewhere.”

He takes his time processing that, his eyes closing as he lounges with his arms behind his head well before he ever gives me any sort of response, and even then it isn’t about what I said. “I’m curious. When you landed over there and remembered everything, were you relieved or upset?”

“Upset,” I admit, knowing he’ll see it anyway. “But not because I wanted to forget everything. I was upset because I thought I wouldn’t know what I was missing, and I did.”

“You miss your friend? The annoying one with the tattoo that broke up with her wolf.”

My brain is still a little sluggish, but not enough to miss that. “Wait, what? Quinn broke up with Otto? Why? Is she okay?”

“She wanted to be a better friend and a strong independent woman,” he snorts. “It’s not working. Neither of them are doing good, but it’s pretty

entertaining to watch.”

I smack his shoulder roughly. “Ledger! That’s not funny, you’re an ass. Let me go to her,” I rush out. “Please.”

With a laugh that tells me he’s still drunk, he grabs me and yanks me onto the bed, rolling so he’s pinning me down and I can hardly move an inch. “Nah, you broke my window, so it’s gonna get cold in here. Gonna use your body heat. Go to sleep.”

“Le— wait, what?” I ask, shoving him to keep him awake. “I didn’t break your window.”

“It’s your fault just cause,” he mumbles, and it’s not lost on me that this is the first time he’s ever even remotely cuddled me.

I’d enjoy it a lot more if I wasn’t so worried about Quinn. “Seriously, Ledger,” I say quietly, running my fingers tentatively through his hair. “Please let me go see her tomorrow.”

All he does is hum at the contact, and then he’s quiet for so long I know he’s fallen asleep. That’s okay. One way or another, no matter what I have to do to convince him, I *will* see Quinn tomorrow. I made the horrible mistake of abandoning her once. I’d rather die than ever do it again.

Chapter Nine

Otto

Sniffing the air, a growl rips through my chest when I scent the bastard I've been seeking for two days. Von told me the fucker was at a party last night and I should've sucked it up and confronted him then, but I could barely stay in human form. My wolf has been dying to take over and fix all the things that human me has broken, and I couldn't leave the fucking nest.

But I've got it under control now and it's time to figure out what he knows. I promised my girl.

Following the scent of blood and his shitty cologne, I track him to the mess hall and catch him filling up a tray of actual food. "Got company?" I ask, moving into his space. "Or have you suddenly found a taste for pancakes?"

"What's it to you?" Ledger replies flippantly. "Doesn't everyone love pancakes?" He bumps my shoulder with his as he moves past me, and today is not the fucking day.

Grabbing him, I whirl him back around to face me. "Where's Suren?"

Flashing his bloodsucking fangs at me, the dick snarls. "Feel like losing your hands today, mutt?"

"If that's what it takes? Bring it on. Just tell me where she is. Cherry's freaking out, went to Cherith and everything. You know that's bad for everyone involved."

Something flashes in his eyes, but it's gone before I can place it. "So you really are a lost puppy, huh?" He leans in to whisper so we can't be overheard. "Running around playing fetch for the mate that broke your heart? Take some advice from me, lock her ass up... then she can't go anywhere."

With a grin, he tosses me a wink and steps back, telling me everything I need to know.

He has her.

"Ledger, don't be fucking stupid," I hiss. "You can't keep her any more than I can keep Quinn. She's not gonna stop until she finds her friend. Just let her go."

Ledger huffs. "Don't compare our abilities to keep a girl, Otto. Yours was designed for you by nature and she still walked away. Mine won't stop

begging for more. Let your witch know Suren went back to the Human Realm, and that's all she needs to know."

Pushing past the lancing pain in my chest, I shove him. "I can smell her all over you. She's here, and you've got her. Don't bullshit me. You don't wanna do the right thing? Fine. Let your aunt defang you for it. I was ready to help you, y'know. But fuck off."

"Help me?" Ledger laughs. "You're here for me? No, this is about your girl, and nothing more. She wants to see her friend? Tell her to come right on up to my dorm alone. I'll take care of them both."

My blood turns cold. "Watch your fucking mouth. You go anywhere near my mate, I'll make sure you see that brother of yours sooner rather than later."

Whatever faux friendliness Ledger was faking is gone in a second, replaced with a rage that has his eyes turning to pits of black and his fangs snapping out as he swings with his vampire speed and his fist connects with the side of my face.

His tray of food is knocked all over the ground as he lunges at me, tackling me back on the floor as my face starts to heal and unfiltered, primal anger makes it almost impossible for me not to shift.

Headbutting him hard, I laugh as blood coats his stupid blonde hair. "You do bleed. Funny."

I lurch forward, flipping him onto his back just as someone fucking massive lugs me off him. Spinning, I come face to face with Braun Walters — the Æsir vampire who teaches Magic History. He's one of the few motherfuckers at this school with strong enough Norse blood to be a problem. "Alright, alright," I placate. "We're cool. Just a little friendly scrap."

"No such thing as a friendly scrap when there's an Alpha and a hybrid involved. Go!" he barks just as Ledger jumps to his feet and tries to hit me again, but this time, Walters is grabbing ahold of him. "Go back to your pack, Otto. You both got hits in. This needs to be over or you'll both be punished."

"Who gives a fuck?" Ledger spits, blood still clinging to his face even though the cut has closed.

I'm so tempted to throw him under the bus about Suren, but I crossed a line bringing up his brother. I know that. We'll work it out another day, I'm sure... but I'm not fucking with Braun. Not today.

"Calm your tits, Huxley. He's right. It's over," I grunt out. "Go back to your dorm and lick your wounds."

Still fuming from what an assclown he is, I leave the mess hall with my skin vibrating and a hurricane in my chest. Every step gets harder as my wolf tries to break free, to run back in there and rip his fucking throat out, to find Quinn and knot her defiant little ass until she submits.

And then I spot Fenris.

Sneering, the hybrid Alpha approaches me with his nose in the air and vampiric fangs poking out of his lips. “Don’t worry, Neyrus. I’ve stayed away from Baek’s precious little sirens. Didn’t know you turned tail on us like that. What do they have on you, anyway? You breed one of their Shifters because you’re too dumb to know the difference between a fish and a wolf?”

The growl that rips through me sounds different even to my own ears. “No. They don’t have anything on me. Baek came to me and asked for my help since you’re too stubborn to listen to him. All he wants is for the packs to stay away from Siren’s Cove unless we’re invited. It’s not that difficult of a concept. I’m sure you don’t let goblins into your nest.”

Fenris runs a hand through his messy, loose curls like he’s bored. “I don’t let anyone in my nest except my pack. So yeah, I get it. What I *don’t* get is why some Singer bitch thinks you’re the king of all the Alphas at this school, or why you think you can make decisions for the rest of us. It wasn’t your business to get into.”

Six months ago, I’d have lived for this, the challenge. I’d have pushed and prodded and poked until the fucker shifted and fought me right here so I could show him exactly why Baek and all the others think I’m the king of all the Alphas at this school — but I fucking can’t. Not with my broken bond mark. Not when the fabric of my fucking DNA is weakened. Not when I almost just got my ass handed to me by a different hybrid. “I came to you as an equal, Fenris. Not some king. I didn’t make demands or any of that shit; I told you what he said and asked you to back the fuck off. Don’t make this more than it is.”

He sniffs the air again, stepping closer to me. “Hmm. You smell funny. Almost like... a Beta. You move on from that little witch whore of yours already? Weird. Smart money said she was your mate.”

The word makes me whimper, giving Fenris all the ammunition he needs. Snarling, I try to cover it up, but it’s too late. The spark of recognition in his eyes tells me he knows. “You don’t know what you’re talking about,” I mutter. “I was with her yesterday. If you’re smelling Beta, it’s probably

because my pack and I ran a train on one of yours last night. Should've heard the way Celeste begged for a real Alpha's cum."

His fist connects with my jaw faster than I can react. It shatters for the second time today, but immediately starts cracking and weaving itself back together before I can even swing back. The problem is, my reflexes are already slower. My fist swings through empty air, just missing my now-shifted target. Fuck. I've never tried to fight a wolf still in my human form, let alone one who is also half vampire. I was full wolf the last time I fought him, and he was half the size he is now. Before she rejected me, I might've been able to pull this off — but not now. His jaw clamps around my leg and sends shooting, insane pain rocketing up through my system until instinct takes over and I shift just to get out of his grip.

The next several minutes are a blur of teeth, body slams, and blood. Every part of my body hurts and my movements feel sluggish, like my limbs are taking an extra second to react after being given a command. And then it's not one set of teeth, it's two. It's three. His whole fucking pack showed up.

This is it.

"*Submit*," he growls into my mind. We can't do telepathy outside of our own packs while in our human bodies, but we can like this, and I fucking hate it. I won't submit to him, to anyone, mate or not. I'm still a fucking Alpha for now.

"*No*."

His teeth close around my neck as one of his Betas clamps down on my flank, and it should be over. By rights, it should. In one little movement, he could end me entirely and all he'd have to do is tell the Council of Elders that I interfered with his pack and threatened his Beta and he wouldn't even get punished for it.

I *should* submit.

But that's not me.

Drawing on the faces of my own pack flashing through my mind, I brace myself, let him think I'm done fighting and I'm about to do what he wants. I let Parker, Javonte, Niklaus, Vineet, and Ciara remind me in my head that we have the largest pack here for a reason — because I'm the strongest, the fastest, and never one to let anyone put me down. I've never lost a fight.

And then I see Cherry. My beautiful mate. If she didn't want me when I was at the height of my powers, why would she ever look twice at me if I

lose here? If I'm bested by some bastard Alpha and two Betas who are half my size?

She wouldn't.

"Submit," he repeats, tightening his grip on my throat until I can feel his fangs piercing my skin. "*You've lost, Neyrus. We see the truth written all over you. She rejected you. You're weak. Just give in. I'll take good care of your pack... and your mate.*"

Fuck this.

Steeling my nerve for the pain I'm about to be in, I force my wolf to back down and shift back into a human. It makes me small enough to slip out of the jaws of both wolves, but I don't waste a second. The moment I'm clear, I grab Evan by the scruff of his neck and hurl him against the outer wall of the mess hall, then flip onto Celeste's back and lock my arm around her throat. Staring straight at a growling Fenris, I smirk. "Down, boy. You don't want your precious little Celeste to go home without a head, do you? Rejected or not, you know I'll fucking do it."

She tries to buck me off, but I dig my thumb into the pain point just under the crux of her right front leg, sending her collapsing to the ground. From here, I've got her pinned.

"Do it, Fenris," I warn. "Back the fuck off and I'll let her go. Or better yet, just fight me one on one. What kind of bitch ass Alpha needs to bring his whole pack to a fight? You that convinced you can't take me on your own?"

As Celeste whimpers in pain below me, I angle her head to show him exactly how serious I am. She's a nice girl and I don't want to kill her, but can't — I *won't* — let this asshole take over my pack. Not if I'm still breathing.

Precious seconds pass without anyone moving, but I can see the flash in his eyes that tells me he's talking to her. I don't have long before Evan wakes back up and joins in, so I can't screw around. It's now or never.

"Five," I warn. "Four. Don't be so selfish that you let her die for your own pride, Fenris. Three."

Fenris howls, whining as he bends his leg and bows to me.

It's enough, so I glance down at the white wolf below me. "Blink twice if you agree." Her crystal blue eyes open and shut twice, so I climb off of her and retrieve my shredded clothes, broken bond mark on display as both wolves shift. "Go tend to Evan. He'll be fine, but let this be a lesson to you not to fuck with me. Even three on one, you're still not a match."

“Fuck you, Otto. If you’d have minded your own business, this wouldn’t have happened,” he spits. “But believe you me... this isn’t over.”

Flipping him off, I turn to race back to my nest. I’ve kept this secret from my own pack for a week, but if they hear it from someone else first, I’ll have bigger problems than Fenris.

I’d just rather fight him a thousand times than admit to my pack that she left me.

Forty-five minutes later, I’m pacing my nest fully clothed and mostly cleaned up. My wounds healed, but the crusted blood is fucking everywhere. It’s too much to get rid of without a full shower, and I don’t have that kinda time right now. I’m sure half the wolves in Rogue Hollow already know my truth, and the best I can hope for is that my pack was somewhere off campus and hasn’t heard yet.

Judging by their confused but curious faces as they walk in, I think I’m safe.

“What’s wrong, Alpha?” Parker asks, curling against my side. “You haven’t commanded us to come home in a long time.”

“Yeah, I know. I’m sorry about that, you guys know I hate forcing you to do anything, but this is important. There are things you guys need to know. About me, specifically... and the future of this pack.”

Nik and Ciara take a seat as Vineet and Javonte stay close, and Parker doesn’t leave my side. “Okay. What?” Ciara asks. “You’re kind of scaring me, Alpha.”

“Me too,” Von admits. “Where’s Quinn? I know she’s not a wolf, but shouldn’t she be here if it affects all of us?”

Pain lances through me and makes Parker wince. “Oh, goddess,” he whispers, stepping in front of me and placing his hand over my heart. “Alpha, what happened? She... no, she couldn’t have.”

“Couldn’t have what?” Nik snaps. “Will you just spit it out, Otto? I’m still fucking hard. I was halfway to blowing my load when your command came through.”

Meeting his eyes, I see the fire there. If I have to worry about anyone in my pack using this information against me, it’s him. He’s never been content being a Beta, not since he found out they could, in fact, challenge an Alpha and take over. “Quinn’s not gonna be around anymore,” I explain, selfishly

tugging Parker back to me and drawing from his strength. “What I need to tell you... that is, what I should’ve told you a week ago... she rejected me, okay? The bond mark broke. I thought I could get her to change her mind, but it’s not happening. At least not yet. And if it takes her months to come around, it’ll be too late. It might already be. Fenris came after me today.”

Stunned silence meets the admission.

“That’s why you’ve been avoiding us and not sleeping here,” Vineet mutters. “You knew we’d find out. Smell it. See it. Feel it. This whole time, we assumed you were locked up in the Lair or something knotting the hell out of her. And you’ve just been... what? Hiding?”

“Yeah.” It doesn’t feel good to say it, but it’s the truth. I owe them that after everything. “I have. I thought if you knew she rejected me, you guys would, too. You know how this shit goes. An Alpha’s biology demands that we claim our mate in order to cement our status. I failed, so... I’ll fight it as long as I can, but eventually, I won’t be able to be your Alpha anymore.”

“Just fucking take her, what are you talking about?” Nik pushes. “Your biology doesn’t give a fuck if she’s willing or not. As long as you keep her close, it should be enough. Want me to go get her? We can chain her to the fucking wall.”

“No,” I snap. “No. I won’t do that to her. She rejected me because I was too much for her to deal with. She wants to live her own life, and I won’t fuck that up by taking her just to save myself. It’s why I never told her she was my mate. She has her own life, and I didn’t want her feeling obligated to be with me because she’s my mate. I wanted it to be real, and I guess it wasn’t. For at least some of you, I was only your temporary Alpha, anyway. Like you, Park.” I kiss the top of his head and step away so he doesn’t get assaulted with the emotional bullshit threatening to split my chest open. “One day, you’ll find your true Alpha. The one you’re supposed to be with forever. It’s not me and it was never me. And Vin, you were always meant for bigger things than Rogue Hollow. No way you stay here once you graduate. We talked about that the day I took you in. Ciara and Nik, you two will probably go on to make your own pack. And Javonte... I guess you’re the one I’m really fucking over. You have plans to stick around, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I did,” he agrees. “You might’ve told Vineet it was only temporary, but I thought you were my Alpha for life. You told me I’d always have a place in your pack. I don’t have anywhere else to go. My family was fucking wiped out by goblins.”

They explode into arguments about what to do, pulling Parker into it and leaving me off to the side. This will be the new normal now, I'm sure of it. Whether they realize it or not, things are already changing. Before the bond broke, they'd never leave me out of a conversation like this. They'd be sitting there wide-eyed and waiting for their Alpha to tell them what to do, but now, I might as well be a fly on the wall.

Leaving them to it, I sneak out of the nest and walk deeper into the forest to clear my head. I hate the fact that letting her live her own life is going to cost Javonte a safe place, that it's going to prompt Parker to choose a new Alpha before he's ready. What if they don't appreciate him like I do? What if they use him? His gifts are so fucking rare, so fucking unique that I can't imagine what'll happen to him if he makes the wrong choice, but I can't help any of them now. I'll hang on as long as I can, but in the end... if she doesn't change her mind soon... all of this ends.

And there's nothing I can do about it.

Chapter Ten

Ledger

Stupid fucking dog!

I'm seething as I walk back to my dorm, the urge to rip his tongue out of his mouth making my fists shake at my sides. It's nearly impossible not to run after him. The fact that he's a wolf only makes it worse, because how dare that fucking mutt bring up my little brother? The one *his* kind took from me.

I nearly break the stone door as I shove my way inside and sprint up the stairs, but I need to wash the blood off my face before another vampire smells it and senses any sort of weakness.

I left Suren on the couch this time, and her head swivels to me so fast I hear her handcuffs clank against the metal table she's restrained to. It's in that moment I realize I forgot her fucking food. "Fuck!"

She flinches back. "I didn't move! I didn't even try!"

The desire to trash this whole damn place has my eyes darting around for something to break, but we just got that fucking window fixed. "I forgot your damn food," I growl, making her shrink as far back into the cushions as the cuffs will allow her.

"Oh. Great," she says with tight lips. "It's fine. Can you breathe, please? The power coming off you is suffocating me."

My gaze flicks to her and fucking hell, her fear is delicious. The scent of it alone is enough to distract me from wanting to break some inanimate object, and have me focusing on breaking her pussy instead. "Is it?"

I step closer, forgetting all about cleaning off my face as she recoils from the sight. "Ledge," she whispers. "What happened?"

"Otto happened," I answer honestly. "And he's lucky he's still breathing... for now."

That intoxicating terror spikes and that throbbing, pulsing heart inside her chest beats faster. And faster. And faster.

"You know what's going on with him," she argues weakly. "I don't know what he said or did, but you crossed realms and murdered people when you lost me and you don't even like me. Cut him some slack."

I can't fight the huff that causes. She's wrong, I do like her. She's infuriating and I also want to kill her at times, but I think I'd regret it if I did. I like her, she just doesn't need to know that. "I'll cut him some slack if he never mentions my brother's death again. Otherwise, I won't walk away until he's dead at my feet."

I reach her then, running a finger along her cheek softly as I imagine fucking the hell out of her throat. Yeah, that'd help with my aggression for sure.

"Your brother died?" she whispers. "Ledger, I'm so sorry. What happened?"

My hand falls, her sympathetic expression feels like a punch to the gut I didn't expect, and for some reason that hurts more than the Alpha's headbutt that would have killed a human. "It was over a year ago. I don't want to talk about it."

"Okay," she agrees softly. "How can I help?"

I haven't seen this look in her deep blue eyes since the day she left me. Wide and full of something close to actual devotion, it blows out the anger I was holding onto faster than her wind broke my window. It's stunning and has me hard for a completely different reason.

Slowly, I reach out and ghost my thumb along her bottom lip, telling her what I need without words, and she nods. "Take it out for me."

Why can't it always be like this? Her tied up and willingly wanting to suck me off. Fuck, it's beautiful... but I also love it when she fights, so I'm not too upset about it.

I could take her cuffs off and help her get comfortable, but I don't. Instead, I pull my cock out for her and press it against her lips, pulling back when she tries to suck me in, only to repeat the motion. "Come on, baby. Tell me you want it."

"You forgot my food, remember? So feed me," she teases, flicking her long tongue out over the slit. "I want it, Ledge. Let me make you feel better."

"Good girl," I breathe, slipping my cock inside her warm and hungry mouth with a groan, not stopping until I'm completely sheathed inside. "Tight little throat was made for this."

She balks at the size of me as always, but for once, she doesn't fight. Her eyelashes flutter as she sucks me like she's greedy for it, and fuck, I love the way her moans vibrate the head so perfectly.

"Look so fucking good at my mercy, Suren."

Quickly, she slides off to lick my balls. “Do I?” Her lips press against my shaft, trailing messy, wet kisses before she sucks me back in, and this time, I hear her thoughts. *“Then put me at your mercy, Ledger. Take it out on me.”*

The breath I release is more growly than I intended, but I grip her hair to pin her nose to my pelvis and grind.

Gagging, my girl tugs on her restraints. *“Just like this. Fuck, my pussy’s so wet, baby.”*

“Yeah?” I bite my lip, enjoying her blocked airway for a few seconds longer before I pull back and watch the string of saliva snap down her chin. Reaching out, I swipe it up, then reach down to roll my fingers over her clit with it, but I stop before she can get too close to the edge. “Suck me more.”

I slam inside, grunting when she chokes and clenches those beautiful thighs. Her lips tighten around me as she bobs her head, and I slide out just to watch her chase me.

She can deny me all she fucking wants, this girl loves sucking my cock.

“Give it back,” she rasps, mouth open and slutty little tongue hanging out.

“Beautiful little whore. Fuck, I’m hooked on you.”

I don’t realize what I said until after she’s choking on my cock again, and by then, I don’t fucking care. Hand fisted in her silver hair, I force her eyes up to mine and dig deeper into her mind.

This time, there’s no deception. Nothing she wants other than my cum. She’s not trying to trick me or fool me, she just... wants to make me feel better.

I’ll deny how fucking soft that makes me until the end of time, but it feels better than anything has in a very long while. I already knew I’d kill for her, but in this moment, I might actually die for her, too.

Fuck, that’s such a strange concept for both of my Mythics that I shove that shit away and focus back on the squirming little witch with my cock in her mouth. “So good for me when you want to be, hmm?” I wipe a tear off her cheek. “You crying for this cum?”

“Let me have it, baby. Please, Ledger.”

I can smell how wet she is as her thighs rub together and she struggles to suck me faster. I’m tempted to release her so she can play with that soaked pussy, but I’ll just have some fun with it when I’m done. “Here you go, baby. You beg so fucking nicely, how could I deny you?”

She moans low and deep as I take over and ruin her throat, snapping my hips as I pin her in place by her hair. The first angry throb of my cock sends

cum spilling into her lungs, but I want her to taste it. I drag back a little with every spurt until it's spilling out of her mouth, then slap her lips with my cock as I gather it up and shove it back in.

Gasping, Suren licks me clean. "Please, Ledge. I was a good girl, right? Let me come. Help me."

"Such a good girl," I agree, kneeling down on the couch so I'm close enough to smell my cum on her face, and then I grab her chin roughly, my fingers finding her clit without looking away. "Whose pussy is this?"

"Yours!" she breathes. "Yours, baby."

Hearing it and knowing she means it gets my dick hard again, giving me every intention of fucking her after she comes, but the second our lips touch someone bangs on my door. "What the fuck!" I growl, but then it's my aunt's voice in my ears that makes my fingers stop moving.

"I've stopped by three times, and every time, you're fucking that girl. I've let you have your fun. Open this door or I will have it removed."

"Come back later."

"I'm the Headmistress of this academy *and* your aunt. Show me some respect."

With a growl of frustration, I stand up and stomp my way over to the door, shoving my cock away so I can open it and glare at her. "What?"

Her stupidly bright red lips purse. "You've had enough fun, Ledger. You cannot keep that girl locked up in here."

"Why not?" I adjust my rapidly softening cock and ready myself for an argument. "She's mine, I've claimed her... you can come see the scar if you don't believe me."

"Oh, I believe you. That does not give you the right to interfere with her education or her well-being, particularly when so many people are asking questions." She shoves past me, heels clacking annoyingly with every brisk step. "Girl, are you well?"

Suren's eyes are huge as she tries to squeeze her bound arms together enough to block her tits. "Um... I—"

"That's what I thought."

"She's fine," I mutter through gritted teeth, bringing my fingers up to my lips to suck them clean and make my aunt scrunch up her nose in disgust.

"We were just having a little fun, huh, baby? You gonna tell me you don't tie up Hunter every so often on the DL?"

"I don't hold him prisoner in my quarters once he gives me what I want."

“Ehh, whatever. Don’t kinkshame me in my own house,” I argue, undoing Suren’s cuffs in hopes it’ll make her leave. “She’s mine. I don’t want her scent being fucked with. And who the hell is asking about her besides Quinn? She’s no one, anyway.”

“I do not have to explain myself to you. Give the girl some clothes and send her back to Human House where she belongs. Miss Archer, you will resume your classes tomorrow. If you miss even one, I daresay we’ll know where to find you.”

“This is bullshit and you know it, Adira. Why do you even care? She’s the last one there anyway. Might as well just let me keep her and clean that whole building out for the next swarm of humans.”

She scoffs. “Yes, because you’ve proven so adept at keeping her contained. Or are you telling me that she *isn’t* the one who stole my wanderdust and escaped the entire realm on your watch?”

“Sorry!” Suren blurts. “Oh, god. I’m so sorry. It’ll never happen again.”
Fuck.

The hesitation is all my aunt needs to feel like she won, I see it all over her face. “That was before I was keeping her here, and I take full responsibility for that. Things are different now.” But I’m already losing this argument, I can feel it. “If anyone else touches her, I will kill them. You know that, right?”

“You’re lucky I didn’t call your father the second you claimed someone,” she snaps. “Don’t talk to me like I haven’t done you favor after favor when it comes to this girl. And for what?” She stares at Suren’s naked body. “A couple of tits?”

My girl’s about to run, I can feel it. That darkness is growing, shrouded with shame and such a bottomed-out sense of self-worth that I don’t have a choice but to play my hand, but to show my aunt an Achilles heel. “Don’t,” I growl, stepping in so she can feel my power. “Don’t speak about shit you don’t understand. If I was going to claim just anyone with tits, we would have been here a long time ago. She’s different than all the other bitches at this school, and she’s *mine*. Suren, go get some of my clothes to put on, baby. I’m not done talking to our Headmistress.”

She moves quickly to get dressed, stumbling as she steps into a pair of my sweats. My aunt seems completely unfazed not only by my power, but by the fact that I told her it’s different. “Be that as it may, you cannot keep her.

Have her as often as you want. Keep her chained for whole weekends for all I care, but she *will* go to class.”

With Suren close, I make sure to speak into my aunt’s mind instead.

“*You’re making a mistake.*”

“*Oh? And why is that?*”

I don’t want to tell her shit, but she sees the way my eyes flick to Sur.

“*You just are.*”

“*That’s not good enough, Ledger. You’ll survive. It’s not just the Garcia girl who is asking questions, now. Her absence has been noted by three of her professors and that witch she works for. You may not see it now, but I’m doing you a favor.*” Gesturing to Suren, she says aloud, “Come, girl. I’ll walk you back to your dormitory.”

I imagine myself killing them all for ruining this, but even now with how angry I am, I know that isn’t a logical idea. I don’t have a choice here.

Turning away from her to block Suren’s path, I check out how good she looks in my clothes before backing her against the wall. “Say it one more time before you go... who do you belong to?”

I tilt her gaze up by her chin so she can’t look away. “You, Ledge. She’s right, I can’t stay here. But look.” She tugs the collar of her borrowed shirt down to show me the teeth marks permanently embedded in her skin. “It’s not going anywhere.”

I lean in to swipe my tongue up her mark and press myself against her, licking all the way up to her mouth to catch her in a kiss.

It makes my aunt walk toward the door like she doesn’t want to see this, and I’m glad for it. Her perfume has already fucked with my dorm enough. “I’ll make you come as soon as I can, alright? You were good for me today.”

Clinging to me, she lets out a tiny little noise that tells me something’s wrong. When she doesn’t say it, I peek at her thoughts — she’s afraid of what’ll happen to her when everyone realizes she ran away like a coward.

I don’t have time to talk her through that. Adira snaps her fingers and uses compulsion to make Suren move, and the act alone makes me want to snap her neck. “She’s fucking coming. Let her go.”

My aunt only laughs at my irritation and closes the door when I try to follow, leaving me alone and angry all over again.

Suren and I made some real progress today with our bond, and something tells me us being separated again is only going fuck all that up.

I guess I’m not done killing people for my secret Disaster just yet.

Chapter Eleven

Quinn

My anxiety is through the roof with Suren missing, and to make matters worse, I haven't seen Otto since I asked him to look for her. I know I should probably be relieved he's giving me the space I asked for, but I'm not. Something just feels wrong. It's not like very much time has passed, but usually he's around me, staying close regardless of what's going on. I decide to go to his nest and check in myself so I can actually get some damn sleep tonight, because I can't imagine going back to classes this exhausted tomorrow. There's no way I learn anything if I am.

It was sunny earlier, but now the sky is overcast and the breeze has me hugging myself the second I walk outside. Before I can even consider running back up for a jacket, though... I see her. Thank god I put on my glasses before I came down, because with them, I can just make out Suren's silver hair across the courtyard walking next to Cherith. I find myself relieved she's alive and shocked Cherith actually came through and helped find her. From the state of her clothes, I assume Ledger had her like I suspected. I run over as fast as I can, wrapping her up in my arms so tightly I hear her gasp. "Sur! Oh my fuck, I was so worried about you." I turn to Cherith. "You found her. She was with Ledger, wasn't she?"

"I suppose she's going to tell you anyway, so yes. She was. I trust you've got her from here?"

"Yes, thank you. Hope that asshole gets in trouble," I spit, grabbing Suren's arm and steering her away so we can whisper. "Please tell me you're okay. What happened?"

She shakes her head quickly. "Can we go inside first? Maybe grab some food? I promise I'll tell you everything, but I'm starving."

"Yes, absolutely. You want me to get us food and meet you there? I'm sure you don't want to see people right now."

"God, I love you." Suren throws her arms around me again, squeezing tightly, then steps back with a blush. "I like your dorm better, but can we go to mine?"

"Yeah, of course. I know how to get up; I'll be there as soon as I can. I'm so happy you're back."

I squeeze her hand and rush off to the cafe, filling up two plates with all her favorite foods before carrying them back to Human House as fast as I can.

When I walk into my old room, Suren is still in Ledger's baggy clothes and staring out the giant window I used to love so much. She doesn't even hear me come in.

"Hey," I call softly to keep from startling her too much, but she still jumps at the sound of my voice. "You okay?"

I carry the plates over and sit on her bed, giving her space and a few minutes to wolf down her food.

After a while, she stops to wipe her mouth. "I'm a terrible person, Quinn."

"No, you're not," I argue, hating what that bastard has done to her. "You're one of the best people I know, Sur. The only one I always know I can rely on."

Gasping, her eyes fill with tears. "Don't. Don't say that, you don't know. This wasn't Ledger's fault."

"How was it not? He's kept you locked away and lied about it. He had the audacity to come ask me where you'd been like a fucking psychopath."

I take her hand as tears slide down her cheeks. "He didn't know, Quinn. I ran away," she admits breathlessly. "I stole wanderdust from Cherith and tried to go home but no one remembered me and I didn't have an identity anymore and I didn't know what to do and didn't have a home or money and if Ledger hadn't come and found me, I don't know what would've happened," she rambles. "They lied, Quinn. You don't forget anything when you go home, but everyone else forgets you."

"What the fuck?" I gasp, standing up with my heart pounding in my chest. "Sur, you went home alone? And they just... erased us? Like we never existed?"

"Yes. Alec put a gun in my face, your dad did too, and the lady at the license bureau said they had no record of me ever having a driver's license. We're gone from that realm, Quinn. Completely."

I pace as the horrible news sinks in. It's so much to unpack I can't even find it in me to be angry at her for leaving me without saying goodbye. I'm sorrier that she had to deal with it at all. And did she say... I spin back around and tilt my head. "Did you say my dad?"

The tiny little bit of color left in her alabaster cheeks vanishes. “Oh, fuck. Um... okay. I need to tell you something. A lot of somethings, probably. Can you come sit? You should sit for this.”

That makes me want to pace a hole in the floor, but I move back over slowly and sit without breaking eye contact. Something is wrong, and I need to be a friend right now. “Okay, Sur. You know you can tell me anything.”

“You’d think, but no. I swore I’d never tell you this. I never told anyone at all before Ledger, but that’s part of the reason I need to tell you now. It’s all connected and I’m so, so tired of hiding things from you. If you hate me after, so be it.” Reaching over, she takes my hand. “Do you remember the summer that Ray kicked us out and I found us that little apartment on 9th? You asked me a hundred times how I could afford it and I told you I got a job washing dishes at a restaurant?”

“Yeah, of course. I was surprised when you quit, honestly.”

Suren’s body tenses. “I wasn’t washing dishes, Q. And it wasn’t just any restaurant. I was desperate because the odd jobs I found weren’t cutting it anymore, so I... I found your dad. I thought maybe I could guilt him into helping out, maybe throwing us some money. He—” she licks her lips, staring at the floor — “he offered something else.”

For some reason, I need her to say it. Her body language is telling me exactly what he offered her, and yet I need to hear it. “What, Suren?”

“He paid me to stay in his office and I-let his employees... take turns. He never touched me himself,” she adds, like that makes it any fucking better at all. “I quit because I couldn’t take it anymore.”

My hands fly up to cover my face, angry for so many reasons it’s hard to pick one. I always knew my father was a piece of garbage, but I never expected this. “You dealt with that alone?”

Once the question is out, I realize that’s my biggest concern above everything else. I hate that she had to go through that at all, let alone all by herself.

“I knew you’d never let me do it and you’d lost so much weight,” she whispers. “We needed food and shelter so I did what I had to do. I don’t regret it.”

Everything she’s done has been for me, I refuse to forget that no matter how conflicted I feel. Am I mad she went to my dad in the first place? Yes. Am I mad she never told me? Also yes. But I cannot ignore the fact that she loves me more than anyone ever has, and that she’s shown it since the

beginning. “I’m sorry,” I breathe, pulling her to me. “I’m so sorry you had to experience that, and that my father took advantage of our situation. I’ve never hated him more.”

“Well, if it makes you feel better, he might be dead now,” she mumbles. “Ledger burned his restaurant down and I’m pretty sure he was still inside.”

“Holy shit.” Yeah, that’s too much for my brain right now because it’s not funny at all and yet I’m laughing like a fucking maniac at the fact that Ledger fucking Huxley might have been the one that took my dickhole father out.

Suren reaches up to feel my forehead. “Okay, you’re laughing and not feverish. This is good. Do you want me to keep going? That’s the worst secret I’ve ever kept from you, but some context to the Ledger thing might help.”

“Yeah, okay,” I sigh, just happy she’s opening up to me at all. “Please keep going.”

Taking a deep breath, she starts word vomiting. “A while back, I started having suspicions I don’t have any magic. Ledger made a deal with me and told me he’d look inside me and find out, but I had to open up to him. Something about needing to establish trust and shit, I don’t know. So he made me tell him about what happened with your dad, then bit me. Fucker didn’t tell me he was claiming me too, but whatever. That’s how that happened,” she explains. “He told me I had a drop of magic inside me but it would never be enough to make a difference, and then Caius and Vinter almost killed me. Caius turned into this huge snake and Vinter started a wildfire. Count that as the first time Ledger saved my life.”

“Jesus,” I gasp, struggling to see him as the hero in this story. “Well, I’m glad he saved your life, but of course he manipulated you first. That guy, I swear. Okay, and what happened next?”

Suddenly a lot less talkative, Suren shrugs. “I tried to survive. But I didn’t belong here, and Ledger... you know how he is. One day he’s sweet and I feel like he really cares about me and the next he’s treating me like I’m garbage. I manipulated him to find out where I could get wanderdust, stole it, and left through the big mirror in his room. I regretted it instantly. Alec didn’t remember me, so I took the money I had saved from Bone Heart and got a shitty motel room, but I couldn’t find a job because I’d been erased. I went back to your dad and he didn’t remember me either, so I was literally picking

a guy up on the corner when Ledger found me. He killed that guy and admitted he burned your dad's restaurant down. Brought me back here."

"Shit, Sur. I would have gone with you." I squeeze her hand tighter. "I'm so sorry I wasn't there for you. I wanted to believe Ledger was someone different behind closed doors and hoped he actually made you happy."

"That's the thing, Q. Sometimes he does. It's complicated. I wouldn't be back here if it weren't for him. Hell, I probably wouldn't be alive. I don't know." Sighing, she brushes her thumb over mine. "I did hate him a little for not letting me see you, though. He told me what happened with you and Otto, and I begged him to let me out. I guess it's my turn to apologize for not being there for you. Are you okay?"

My traitorous eyes water when I try to nod. "I mean *no*, but I don't get why I'm not. I thought this is what I needed."

"Funny how instantly regret hits you like that truck almost hit us, huh? Sometimes what we think we need and what we actually need are two entirely different things. We're just too close to the situation to see it."

I nod, wishing this place never pulled us apart so we wouldn't have to play catchup. "Let's just promise to communicate more like we used to. We'll have nights just us, and no one else so we don't lose touch like that again."

She scoots in closer, guiding me down against her chest. "For as long as we can, yes. But Quinn... I still don't have magic. The cycle is just going to repeat. I don't know what Cherith's playing at making me go back to class, but it won't do any good, and now we have another terrifying thing to face. If no one remembered me, I doubt anyone would remember the other humans, either. So where did those who didn't manifest go?"

I stiffen, a chill making me shudder when my mind goes to the worst possible scenario. "I—" A strange sense of foreboding settles in my stomach and I know it isn't good, but I don't even know where to begin guessing. "I have a bad feeling about them, but I don't about you. I feel something in you... we can talk about that later. Where do *you* think they go?"

She shifts to look me in the eyes with an intensity I haven't seen in a while. "It's funny how all of the Mythics here would have uses for humans, right?" she asks, pointed and accentuated.

"Yeah, like how the wolves would probably love to hunt and knot them, and the vampires..." Wait, suddenly I have a feeling I know what she's trying to say. "They wouldn't... would they? They can't."

“Sorry, did you ask me if the sky’s blue? The answer is yes. I’m positive of it.”

“What the fuck?” I stand, rage coursing through me at how fucked up that is. “What the actual fuck! What if they die?”

It doesn’t look like she can really answer me. She’s opening her mouth, but no sound is coming out — which tells me it’s bad. And if that’s part of the reason why Suren tried to leave Rogue Hollow, then maybe it’s worse.

“Completely unrelated,” she forces out finally, “Ledger is much better at talking about things than I am. Weird for a guy who’s petrified of feelings, but whatever. He’s taught me a lot.”

So I can get the answers from the leech, got it. Ugh, who am I kidding? Like he’d tell me anything that isn’t *fuck off*. “Okay. I hear you, Sur. This is all so fucked up. Do you think I can even get him to speak to me?”

“Maybe not, but I can. I happen to have something he wants.”

“And what does someone like Ledger want that isn’t blood and tears?”

Her eyes darken. “That’s just it, Quinn. He chased *my* blood across realms. Told our Headmistress to her face that he’d kill anyone who touched me. And I’ve learned from my time with him that there’s one thing I think he wants even more than my blood: submission.”

Fuck. God, I hate him so much, but knowing he’s protected and killed for Suren makes everything about him confusing as hell. “And how do you feel about that?”

“Probably as conflicted as you feel about Otto,” she admits. “Reason tells me he’s an asshole, but I can’t deny there was a big part of me that was so relieved to see him in the Human Realm that I’d have married him if he asked. And there are times when he looks at me like I’m the most important thing in the world to him. It’s so easy to slip into that, you know? Whatever, the point is that I’m more than willing to do whatever he wants in exchange for telling you the things I can’t. Now tell me more about you and Otto.”

There’s just so much to unpack here that the last thing I want to do is start crying over Otto. I’ve been trying to be strong. I rarely ever cried before going through this, but now, it’s really hard to put on a brave face with my best friend. The one person I believe will never judge me. “I broke up with him right after I saw you last. I was a shit friend and a shit witch, and I just wanted to focus on those things because it felt like you and I...” One tear falls. “It felt like we were slowly drifting away from each other and I still don’t know my Order which is so fucking frustrating even though everyone

says it's normal and too soon. It's just... Otto knows exactly what he is, what he wants and where he's going. I'm fucking lost." Another tear. "I wanted to give him a chance to find a wolf or something... someone better than me, but he won't. He's still always around and I'm so fucking happy he is because I'm selfish and the thought of him actually moving on makes me want to launch myself off of Human House without a shield, because that impact would hurt less. I'm so... stupid."

And now they're free falling and I've officially made this night about myself. Goddess, I suck.

"Hey, come here." Suren wraps me up again, lips brushing my hair. "If he really loves you, he'll wait. You're not selfish. It's not selfish to choose to work on yourself. Men think the whole stupid world revolves around them, and then have the audacity to get mad when it doesn't. That's not your fault."

I hear her, and if this were reversed, I'd be saying the same thing. I just feel like something is wrong, something deep in my chest. But I guess this is what real heartbreak feels like. "I feel selfish because I keep giving in and I think I'm stringing him along. Staying away is so hard."

"Has he asked you to stop?"

I shake my head no. "I hurt him, Sur. It doesn't seem like he can stay away, and he's said he'll take anything I'll give him. He also asked me not to tell people, especially his pack. I don't know why, but something feels... I don't know."

Her fingers trace lazily along my back. "If he doesn't want you to tell people, it's probably some macho Alpha crap. I bet he's used to being the dumper, not the dumpee. But if you really think it's more than that, I say don't give up. You won't be Orderless forever and you and I will be fine."

Of course we will. We may have rocky times, but Suren and I will always have each other's backs regardless of everything else. I won't let anything happen to her if they believe she doesn't have magic, but I still believe with all of me it's in there. I just know it.

Chapter Twelve

Suren

I'm not sure how long we lay there like that, but eventually, Quinn gets up to go lay in her old bed and I find myself thinking about Ledger.

The bastard left me hanging earlier in more ways than one — he edged me twice, and now that I'm not chained to his bed, I don't know where we stand or what the rules are. Am I really free, or is it a facade? Do I even want to be free at this point?

The way he looked at me earlier...

“How the hell am I supposed to sleep with all that pining going on?”

Quinn gasps in fear from her bed, but Ledger only chuckles.

“It's only been two hours, Clumsy. You already missing me?”

Fuck. Squirming, I sit up to see him standing at the foot of my bed.

“Maybe a little.”

“Mmhm.” He looks way too pleased with himself until he glances over at Quinn's bed and frowns. “Aren't you going back to the Lair?”

“No.” She sits up straighter, her arms crossing stubbornly as she regards him. “I'm staying with Suren.”

“Of course you are,” he deadpans. “Guess I don't mind an audience while I make her come.”

Quinn's jaw drops, but even I can see she's amused — which is good, because I don't think he's kidding.

“Speaking of which, can you do me a favor?” I ask, biting my lip. I know I won't be able to say it out loud, but I've had no issues thinking about it. “I was trying to explain to her what happens to humans if they don't manifest, but I can't say the words. You can.”

Ledger frowns a split second before he snorts. “Funny. Where were we?” He climbs on the bed and tugs on the comforter, revealing the fact that I'm still in his clothes.

“Please, Ledge?” Reaching up, I touch his face softly. “I'm willing to barter.”

“Barter?” he asks, the word getting much more of his attention. “Why do you even want her to know? She can't change it. None of us can.”

I don't miss the way his face leans into my touch. Swiping my thumb over his lip, I whisper, "I'm not keeping secrets from her anymore. I want her to understand. Please?"

"And what will you give me, little hustler?" His hand slips under my shirt to grip my side. "What do you have that isn't already mine?"

My heart skips a beat. Nothing, I don't have anything that isn't already his. Shoulders slumping, I realize maybe I was wrong about him. Maybe he doesn't value my submission as much as I thought. "Um... I won't drink amrit anymore."

He hears all that go through my mind, his head tilting as he thinks it over and his eyes light with his answer before he says it. "Your submission is everything, Suren. And I accept. No more tea and I'll tell her what you want her to know."

"Sur, no. You need that tea," Quinn argues, but Ledger doesn't even look her way when he responds.

"The deal is already done, wolf girl. And it's all your fault. How will you carry that guilt?" he sneers, disappointing me all over again. Even when he gets what he wants, he's still an ass.

"I'll be fine, Quinn. I can't promise he'll always be happy about the thoughts he helps himself to, though."

"Ehh, what else is new? Your hate tastes just as good as your lust, baby." Suddenly his lips press to mine for the briefest of seconds and then he pulls away entirely. "Just sealing the deal. Alright, so you want her to know about the human toys, yeah? What else?"

"Excuse me?" Quinn asks, but he ignores her and waits for me.

"All of it. The stuff you told me, and what happens to them after."

Ledger releases a heavy sigh and moves to sit with his back to the wall, one hand still on me while the other perches on his bent leg. "So the humans that don't manifest have to pay back their free housing and food somehow, right?" He looks between us and rolls his eyes when all he sees is apprehension. "Nothing is free, girls. That's not how the world works."

"But we don't have money to pay it back."

"Exactly. So how do you think they would be able to pay anything back, Quinn?" She shrugs, but I can see that it's already starting to click as he continues. "They get gifted to the other Mythics. Vampires need blood. We have donated blood, but it's not the same, so we have dungeons below the tower. Any of us are welcome to stop by for a drink at any time. And they're

begging for it, so don't go storming the gates, alright? However long they were a student is how long they have to stay... give or take a few weeks. They rotate which Mythic gets them with each failure. I think the wolves are up next. I haven't really been paying attention. Any questions?"

Her jaw is still on the floor before she mutters, "like a million," but he just keeps going.

"Moving on. So once they've paid their debts, they have a choice. Move into Rogue Hollow and be an upstanding citizen or go back to the Human Realm with no memories of this place at all. Oh, or you can be gifted to a Mythic outside of this school to continue a life of service. More people pick it than you might think, honestly."

"It's not that surprising," I admit. "Now that I know what it's like to be back home, I'd never choose it again."

"Yeah, I didn't know the world would forget you. I knew your family and friends would, but not that your entire identity was erased. The last human we got was a guy named Chase, and he seems to love being a bloodwhore. Not as much as you though," he jokes, reaching over to touch the scar on my neck proudly.

"So what happens if they die?" Quinn asks, making him glance her way and his smile fade.

"Then they die. Not like people remember them, anyway. It doesn't happen often, but it has happened. This is a hypothetical situation, but if I were to kill one, I'd have to plead my case and tell them it was an accident. The nature of my crime would dictate which of my Mythics punished me. If I drained someone of their blood, I'd have to starve for three days and fight in the pit as punishment. The pit is below the fountain, and there are tunnels from each of the dorms to get there. If I used goblin influence and it led to a death, I'd be thrown in solitary for two weeks first. I don't know what the other Mythics do, I've never cared. But if we're found to have killed without cause and it happens more than twice, vampires are defanged and goblins are given the choice between years of confinement or losing their hands, since we need touch to steal magic. But there are loopholes more often than not."

Something about that makes my blood run cold. "So have you killed without cause before?" I ask.

"No, though I'm not a stranger to the pit for other reasons." He meets my eyes. "You know why I killed everyone in the Human Realm, and before

that, it was the wolf pack that killed my brother. I went to trial, and revenge was more than enough cause.”

So that’s why he got so mad when Otto brought him up. Fuck. “I’m sorry, Ledger,” I whisper, squeezing his hand. “I can’t imagine what that must’ve been like.”

“It’s over now,” he mumbles just for me to hear, but no matter what he says, I know something like that could never be over. “People don’t fuck with me now... usually.” He glances at Quinn. “You can let your ex know our fight isn’t over, though. There won’t always be a teacher around to save him.”

“Wait, what?” she asks, sitting up abruptly. “You and Otto fought?”

“You mean he didn’t come running to you after so you could help him lick his wounds?”

“No. I haven’t seen him all day. Why did you fight?”

Ledger shrugs, clearly already bored with their conversation. “I made a comment about you, he made a comment about my brother, shit got real. Are you seriously staying here all night?”

It’s obvious she’s concerned for Otto, but she’s as hard-headed as I am. “Yup. I was invited to stay, asshole. You just let yourself in like you own the place.”

“Don’t I?”

He lays down next to me like he doesn’t expect her to answer, but her eyes flick to me for judgment. “I definitely don’t want you to leave, Quinn. But I don’t think I want him to leave, either. Is that okay? Can you two co-exist for a night?”

I’m a little surprised when she smiles at me and nods. “Of course, Sur.”

Ledger, on the other hand, releases a sigh like I just asked him never to drink blood again. “Fine. But if she wakes up to my cock inside you, I’m not going to stop.”

Her disgruntled *ugh* tells me she’d hate that, so I wiggle to put my hand on his chest. “Or maybe you can behave tonight and I’ll make it up to you later.”

“Behave?” he grumbles, one of his hands finding my hip. “I don’t know what that word means.”

“Then let’s try something new tonight, hm?” I wiggle closer, tentatively laying my head on his chest. “Maybe we just sleep.”

“Maybe we just don’t,” he whispers, moving me onto my back before slipping his fingers down to my clit. “Maybe we finish what we were doing

and you keep it quiet.”

Heat explodes through me as I cover a gasp with my palm. I’ve never been very good at keeping quiet and this bastard knows that — but I won’t do that to Quinn. I can be quiet for her. Nodding quickly, I keep my hand clamped over my mouth and spread my legs.

“*Good girl,*” he praises into my mind, teeth scratching down my face as he continues to rub. “*I could feel you missing me. Feel this pussy crying for me.*”

“*Shut up,*” I argue halfheartedly. I don’t want to miss him, don’t want to crave him like this. But I do. My hips are rolling to chase more of his touch and I’m already so wet, I’d be shocked if Quinn really couldn’t hear it. “*I’m allowed to come, right? You said so earlier.*”

Ledger nods, his lips finding my neck as he works my pussy exactly how I love and his fangs tease my skin. I swear, I can feel all the blood in my body rushing to that spot, wanting him to drink, to bite, to own. “*Do it,*” I beg. “*Bite me, baby.*”

He hasn’t fed from me since this morning, so he doesn’t hesitate to sink his teeth into me as his venom instantly floods my bloodstream. It’s enough to have me whimpering into my palm as I come, soaking his skilled fingers and baring my neck to give him more space. The pain, the rush, the secrecy... fuck, I really do crave him. All of him.

I can feel how pleased he is as he retracts his fangs and laps up the mark to heal it, his voice low even in my mind when he brings his hand up for me to suck them clean. “*My good girl. Now we’ll both sleep better.*”

I slip my tongue between his fingers with my brows pinched. I don’t know how the hell he does this to me, but right now, I can’t bring myself to complain. Instead, I curl up to his chest again. “*Fine, but now we do it my way. Goodnight, psycho.*”

“*Fine,*” he tosses back, his arm falling on top of me lazily like he wants to hold me too. “*Goodnight, bloodbag.*”

Mmhm. He just admitted to me that he’s got a whole basement full of those to go to, and yet he’s here. He may not want to admit it, but he’s just as hooked on me as I am on him.

I just can’t figure out if that’s a good thing or a bad thing yet.

Chapter Thirteen

Quinn

Ledger's gone when we wake up. Suren acts like she isn't disappointed by dressing with her head held high and walking with me to the Lair so I can do the same, yet I know better. She expected him to stay.

Still, it feels amazing walking to class with our arms linked. Between the fight we got into before and her disappearance, I'd really started to think I was never going to see her again. But not even this place could change the bond we've had our entire lives. No matter what, we'll always find our way back to each other. We have to.

Halfway to the catacombs, we run into Otto. Despite everything, my stomach fills with butterflies at the sight of his huge frame coming toward us. I'll never be able to get enough of him. "Hey. Look who I found."

His eyebrows perk up in surprise as he checks her out. "Shit, girl. It's good to see you."

"Thanks. You too," she offers.

"Seriously. I got caught up with some pack shit yesterday, but I was meaning to come find you, Cherry. I knew he had her."

"Yeah, I already talked to the asshole, too. She's okay, though. Aside from some blood loss and bondage, I guess he was treating her okay most of the time. Not that he's off my shit list yet." I look him over and see tension coiling around him like an aura. "Are you okay?"

Dumb question. Of course he isn't, and neither am I.

"Breathing," he laughs awkwardly. "Can I hug you?"

"Of course." I melt into his arms and cling to his blazer, his scent enveloping me and calming me in a way I didn't even realize I needed this badly.

But *he* did. It starts tentatively, just his fingers sneaking under my shirt to touch my back as his nose dips lower, through my hair and down to my neck. My heartbeat skips, anticipating a kiss that doesn't come — he just nuzzles in to scentmark me again. "Stupid vampire," he grumbles. "Hate it when he's near you."

I chuckle, baring my neck more for him. "I know, Otto. I'm sorry... if it helps, he doesn't like my smell either. He calls me wolf girl."

“You are a wolf girl,” he confirms, licking just behind my ear. “You just forgot for a little. You’re my girl.”

“Quinn, we’re gonna be late.”

Suren sounds amused as she tries to save me, and his words feel so good — so right, I can’t even pretend to deny them. I know he smells what that lick does for me too, but I search deep inside me for strength and pull away anyway. “We have to get to class, and she already missed a week. I’m not letting her walk there alone. I’ll see you later?”

“Just try to keep me away.” He grips my chin and kisses me fiercely, slipping that sinful tongue between my teeth. I don’t try to fight him right away. I can feel his need and desperation pouring into me as he completely owns me in front of everyone, and I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t just as desperate for him.

My thighs clench together when I finally get the strength to make him stop, and I immediately regret choosing a skirt today when I see his pupils blow. It’s cold enough out, I definitely should’ve worn pants. “Sorry, Otto,” I breathe. “We have to go to class.”

“I know,” he agrees, tugging me back in for another searing kiss that makes my knees weak. Growling as he pulls back, he plants his lips softly on my nose, then winks. “See you later, Cher.”

Suren’s jaw is on the ground as Otto walks away. “Yeah, babe... you two aren’t broken up.”

I’d deny the whimper I release if she called me out on it, but my best friend doesn’t rub salt in the wound. Not this time. “Shit,” I gasp, finally able to breathe again. “I think we’re just horny or something.”

All of me knows that isn’t it, and so does she. “Okay. So go make out with—” she looks around quickly — “Greylin! Come here.”

He freezes like a deer in the headlights. “Am I about to get punched?”

“What?” I screech. “No. I — no.”

“I thought maybe you’d want to help Quinn out with a little problem she’s having,” Suren laughs.

I smack the hell out of her shoulder. “Stop it! I don’t need help. I’m fine.”

Greylin looks between us with a confused expression, but his eyes linger on Suren a little longer. “Oh... kay. Good to see you again.”

“You too,” she laughs. “Sorry, Quinn was trying to tell me she’s just horny and not definitely still basically dating Otto. You’re one of the hottest guys at this school, so I was proving a point.”

“I am, aren’t I?” He smirks, looking her up and down like he still wants her. “Saw your two not-boyfriends fighting the other day in the café. It was pretty entertaining, actually.”

“That’s not funny, Grey,” Suren mutters. “Otto was talking shit about his dead brother.”

His entire face drops, his smile fading to a frown so quickly I have to fight the urge not to press, and then fight myself even harder not to defend Otto. “Why would he talk shit about Ren? He got a death wish or something?”

“Ren? Is that his brother’s name?”

The courtyard is clearing out, but none of us make a move to leave. “Yeah, Renley. They were like eight months apart or something.” He looks around like he isn’t sure if Ledger will come flying in like a bat outta hell. “They had different moms. His dad had an affair with a goblin and they made the spawn of Hell you two know, but Ren was different. Sure, he was rough around the edges like Ledge, but he was also... fun. He was my best friend.”

“Shit. I didn’t know,” Suren whispers. “I’m sorry, Grey.”

He nods. “I don’t blame anyone for it like Ledge, though. He blames me because I wasn’t with Ren during the eclipse, but I didn’t know he ran off, and just because we were best friends didn’t mean I kept tabs on him. He thought he could take on a whole wolf pack and he couldn’t. That’s all there is to it. Werewolves feel the same shit vampires do during an eclipse. We can’t help it, so we’re supposed to avoid each other or shit like that happens. I didn’t know Otto was talking shit about him. I wasn’t paying attention to them until Ledger hit him, but he hits everyone who brings up Renley, so I’m not surprised. Otto has like twelve siblings, why would he even go there?”

“He has seven, but there’s more to this fight than any of us know. I know he wouldn’t just say some shit like that to hurt someone for no reason,” I argue. “All three of us know how Ledger is. I’m not excusing it, but it had to have been provoked. Plus, Otto went to him looking for Suren.”

“Which is a whole story for a different day,” Suren rushes out. “We’re about to be very late. Let’s catch up later, Grey. Yeah?”

“Yeah, see you later. Glad you’re alright, Sur.” He walks away and Suren and I rush off to class without another word.

By the time 2pm rolls around, I'm over school entirely, but I'm excited Suren and I are walking in together after eating a delicious lunch in the mess hall.

"I think I missed this class the most," she says excitedly. "It's the only one I'm good at right now. You don't need magic to play with poisonous plants."

"I know, and it's always so damn interesting."

Professor Blanch is an amazing Green witch with an eccentric personality I think we all love. She's also the only professor we have who shows up to class looking like she's going to prom — and today is no exception. Her bright red ball gown is the first thing I notice as we walk in the door, accentuated so perfectly by her blonde updo and sparkling silver jewelry that she looks like she just walked off the front page of a magazine. Her familiar Zoey is walking at her feet as usual, and is just as gorgeous. She's a long-haired grey tabby cat with bright green, knowing eyes, and a pink floral collar.

"Choose your seats wisely today," she sing-songs. "It's going to be a good one."

"I could use a good one," I mutter low for only Suren to hear, making her giggle.

"I offered Greylin up. You passed."

I release a sigh. "I probably couldn't even come with someone else, Sur. That's how bad I'm doing with this breakup that feels less like a breakup every day."

Blanch clears her throat. "If you two are finished, I'd like to begin."

"Sorry!" Suren blurts. "Just really excited to be here. I'm so sorry I missed the last week. It was — well, unavoidable. Completely."

Humming, she gestures to a little yellow flower on her desk. "Now that you're back, would you like to tell me what this is?"

Suren studies it, then gets up to look a little closer. "Um... I don't know. I've never seen it before, I don't think. Smells weird."

"This particular plant is called henbane," Blanch explains. "And every part of it is toxic, Miss Archer. I wouldn't poke it if I were you."

Blushing, she scurries back to her seat next to me, rubbing her finger furiously on her skirt. "Oops."

"Sur, if you ever want Ledge to stop calling you Clumsy, you have to stop poking the poisonous plants," I whisper, then raise my hand for a question. "Is it deadly, or would we just get sick?"

“Why don’t we wait and see?” she suggests, turning a curious look toward Suren. “How do you feel?”

“What?” she hisses. “Am I gonna die?”

Laughing, Blanch shakes her head. “No, no. To answer your question, Miss Garcia, it *can* be deadly in high concentrations or quantities. In passing, it ranges from helpful to dreadful, but not deadly. Henbane has been used for thousands of years by everyone from the ancient Greeks to the Druids and the Vikings to the modern witch.”

“Oh. So it has to be ingested?”

“No, but that is an option. Here in the Mythic Realm, it’s often been crushed and snorted as a recreational drug or burned and the smoke inhaled as an aphrodisiac. Mythic blood is better at burning off the unwanted effects, but that doesn’t mean the humans haven’t gotten creative with it.”

“Creative how?” Damian asks.

“Take the Viking berserkers. The secret to the trance-like rages their warriors would find themselves in during battle... is henbane. The Druids used it in ritualistic magic. The ancient Greeks, Romans and Egyptians all used it for medicinal purposes and to commune with the dead. The oracles in Greece, for example, would often call upon henbane’s hallucinogenic properties to... embellish a little. And the more modern day human witches, well...”

“What do they use it for?” he asks, eyes locked on the plant like he might try and steal a few leaves. “Sex?”

“Flying,” she corrects. “The witch’s flying brew often contained hyper-hallucinogens like henbane, mandrake, deadly nightshade and jimsonweed. However, all four are highly toxic. Witches discovered that mingling henbane with fat would allow them to enjoy the high without the dangerous side effects, because using it topically prevented the toxins from hitting their digestive tract. They’d spread it like a salve where their skin was thinnest — typically the anus, vagina, or armpit — and it would make them feel like they could legitimately fly. And yes, there have been reports that some witches would spread it on a broom handle, and—”

“Oh, goddess,” Tris groans. “Seriously? No wonder they were burned at the stake.”

Everyone in the class laughs. It’s probably one of the few times I’ve felt like I was right back in the Human Realm, and we were all just regular people in a regular class... just living our lives.

It feels fantastic, even if I know it'll never last.

We're not regular people anymore, none of us.

"Please tell me we don't do that anymore."

"We never did that," she corrects. "Blame the humans pretending to be us."

"Oh, like Suren?" Damian laughs. "Want me to get you a broom so you can demonstrate?"

And there goes my good mood. Fuck, I hate him. "Fuck off, Damian. Of course you'd be the one to go grab it from your closet."

He shrugs. "What? She's the only human in this class and rumor has it she'll fuck anything."

"She still doesn't have her powers?" Tamara whispers. "I thought that was a joke."

Suren's staring at the henbane like she's trying to displace it toward her, and I wish she would. That'd teach them all to shut the fuck up. "There's nothing to joke about," I hiss, but the professor begins talking again to cut off whatever else they were planning on saying.

When the door flies open, a few of us gasp, but I get the feeling those assholes got to Suren more than she's letting on when I see Ledger. He had to have felt it like he had the night I tried to throw a party in my room and screwed everything up.

"Sorry to interrupt. I'm thirsty."

No, he isn't here to make her feel better. Damn it.

He runs over so fast it knocks the plant over on the teacher's desk, but he doesn't seem to hear any of her protests as he yanks Suren out of her chair and sinks his teeth into her neck.

"You're such an asshole!" I yell, wishing I was strong enough to throw him off of her.

"It's okay," Suren whispers, eyes shut tight and face screwed up in a grimace. "It's okay. I'm okay. It's okay."

I get the hint she's talking to herself more than anything, and even though I attempt to give them privacy and look away, I see everyone else is watching them. Great, they look way too fucking amused.

I glance back to find both of his hands on her ass and their bodies pressed together. Her face begins to relax, lips parting in a silent moan that doesn't exactly stay silent.

“Mr. Huxley!” Blanch snaps, Zoey hissing at her side in solidarity. “Do you mind?”

He growls, making her keep her distance and those of us closest to them want to cower away. I’ve never heard that type of growl before, but I know with all of me it’s a warning.

When he finally pulls back, he has a sated smile on his bloodstained lips and Suren’s clinging to him like a lifeline. “Why’d you stop?” she mumbles. “More.”

“Yeah?” he coos, licking his lips before he slips his hand up her skirt. “You want more, my little whore?”

I think I die a little for her as she spreads her legs and wraps a hand around his neck. I can’t hear her anymore, but the pleased chuckle Ledger lets out tells me he likes whatever she’s thinking.

What the fuck is she doing?

The fact that I can hear Damian laughing makes me want to drop kick him, but instead, I sit there trying to conjure up a shield that people can’t see through. I don’t know how or if it’s even possible, so I feel helpless as that asshole persuades her and parades her.

“Suren!” I yell, hoping to break through the fog, but Ledger growls at me, too.

Growly fucker.

“Sorry, baby. Seems you have an audience. You want them all to see you beg for my cock, right?”

“Yes,” she whispers.

“Good girl.” He swipes his tongue along her neck to heal it, and although I can’t see his hand, I get the impression he just touched exactly where she craved when she practically sings his name.

My cheeks burn with embarrassment for her as her hips jerk and her mumbled pleas seem to be amplified throughout the room. “Miss Archer!” Professor Blanch yells. “Mr. Huxley! This is completely unacceptable behavior. Stop this instant!”

Ledger pulls back with a laugh, leaving Suren flushed and blinking rapidly. Suddenly, she slaps him so fiercely, his head snaps to the side. “What the hell was that?” she yells, making Damian snort.

“That was you proving my point,” Damian says. “You sure you don’t want me to get you that broom?”

The fire in Ledger's eyes has me shrinking in my seat and fearing for my best friend's life. He doesn't even spare Damian a glance for his joke, and not one person laughs at it — we can't with the dark power radiating off the monster in front of us.

I inhale suddenly when he lunges forward and grabs her by the chin, but they're both gone before I have the chance to react to any of it. "Fuck. Professor, what if he hurts her?"

Blanch shakes her head. "I know you think I should've done something, but that is not our way. It's common knowledge that he claimed the girl. He won't hurt her. Probably."

Everyone else is dead silent now, giving me the rare opportunity to listen to my heart pounding in my chest as she carries on.

He probably won't hurt her, and if he does, one day I'll kill him myself.

Chapter Fourteen

Suren

My head is foggy as hell as Ledger carries me out of Poisonous Plants and drops me around the corner, deeper in the catacombs. I really, really fucked up. Palm still stinging from the force of that slap, I back myself against the wall and try to keep my chin up. “I’m not sorry,” I snap. “You’re an ass and have the *worst* timing.”

“Suren,” he says through gritted teeth. “I felt you were upset, and I came to make you feel good. How was I supposed to know why you were upset? Want me to break Damian’s jaw? It’s my specialty.”

He moves closer again, a little slower this time, but I still can’t believe him. “Is the answer to everything sex or violence with you?” I ask.

Based on the expression on his face, it is, and he’s never seen anything wrong with it. “Are those two things not the answer to everything? What else do I do in this situation to fix it?”

“I don’t know, maybe verbally defend me. Tell me they’re wrong. Try a hug sometime, you emotionally constipated walnut. Don’t do the very thing that proves their point. I was having a really good day,” I finish much quieter. “The first in kind of a long time.”

Ledger proves how emotionally constipated he is with how awkwardly he pulls me into a hug, but once my face is against his chest, I can’t help but melt into it. “So I should verbally assault them and not physically assault them, even if they make you upset?”

“Yes,” I mumble. “An eye for an eye, an insult for an insult. Though you might’ve made him pee his pants, so I’ll take it.”

Ledge hums. “Why did you call me a walnut? Those are disgusting, and we both know you love the way I taste.”

“I thought it was safer than calling you an asshole.”

“Cause you’ve never done that before,” he deadpans, tugging my head back by my hair so he can see my face. “I don’t know why they were saying you’re a whore when you’ve only been mine since you arrived. A couple kisses with Grey don’t mean shit, you’re mine. They don’t know anything about you, so their opinion doesn’t mean shit either.”

“That,” I whisper as my chest flutters. “That’s what I meant. Just being supportive. They think I’m a whore because as far as they know, I’ve spent the last week and a half locked up in your room like a sex slave, and any time we’re seen together, I’ve got my legs spread for you. So when you came in with your venom and magic fingers and turned me into a moaning, desperate little mess, it just proved their point.”

“Whatever. You’re *my* whore and the next person who says it that isn’t me will have their... jaw threatened to be removed. That’s still verbal.”

Rolling my eyes, I shove him playfully and try to back up, but Ledger’s arms tighten around me. “You’re bad. I need to get back to class before I get in trouble.”

“You’re in trouble with me, so does it really matter?”

“Wait, why?” I ask. “Because I slapped you?”

“Smart girl,” he grumbles, tugging my hair again a little harder than the last. “Where shall I slap you back, hmm? Since you’re so... eye for an eye.”

Oh, shit. My thighs clench, knowing exactly where I want to be slapped — and I see the moment he reads my mind. The devilish smirk on his face sends a chill down my spine. “That’s not right. Don’t take that seriously.”

“No?” He tilts his head, backing me against the wall and lifting one of my legs as high as it’ll go. I know I look ridiculous, but thankfully, the catacombs are empty when he reaches under my skirt to slap the fuck out of my pussy.

Gasping, I brace against the concrete behind me and force myself to keep breathing through the shock. The muscles in my thigh are straining from the vertical split as that delicious pain/pleasure combo rockets through me, but it’s the look in his eyes that really kills me.

“I would make you say sorry and beg for forgiveness, but I have a much better idea for my ego.”

I can hardly move, let alone stop him from taking his cock out, and when he gets into position, I know there’s no denying my arousal. He flips up my skirt and moves my panties aside to slip in with ease, a pleased growl leaving him when he feels how wet and ready I am even if I don’t want to admit it.

I’m always fucking wet for him.

“Ledge,” I breathe. “You’re p-proving their point again. We’re in p-public.”

He doesn’t say anything for a few moments, just fucks me slow and deep with one hand holding my chin in a way I know will leave fingermarks after

he's done. "You belong to me in public just as much as you do in private, Suren. The words of some low-grade ass witches don't matter — they don't mean anything, because they are nothing. You are not just some whore, you're *my* whore, which makes your life much more important than theirs."

Oh, god. Why is he so confusing? I want to hate him, but I don't. I can't. Feverishly, I pull him into a kiss that strains my thigh further, but I don't care. I need the violent way he kisses me when he's mad.

He delivers, that tongue pushes it's way inside possessively as my legs burn from the position, the whimper I release only spurring him on to fuck me harder. His fang scrapes my lip before he latches onto it for a taste, and I no longer give a shit if every student in this school sees us.

Hell, part of me hopes they do.

Wrapping my arms around his neck, I reclaim my lip and bite his instead, sucking it between my teeth. The look in his eyes is borderline unhinged as he fucks into me harder, each thrust hitting my clit perfectly to make everything else disappear.

His hands drop down to grip my ass so he can squeeze, and pain flares through all the little bruises he's left behind the past few days. As he pushes my body to the limits of my flexibility, I tense, clenching around his cock and nearly kicking him out. I don't know if I have permission to come or not, but the way he growls and snaps his hips like a man possessed makes it impossible not to.

I think I'd collapse if I wasn't pinned to him in every way.

Ledger looks almost amused as he continues to own me, but that amusement fades as his own orgasm builds. He fucks me faster, harder until he's flooding my body with a groan and lifting me off the floor to pin us together.

"Feel better?" I whisper breathlessly. "Seems like you're pretty hooked on me, too."

He hushes me quietly, but I'm happy he doesn't try to deny it. Even when he pulls back, he has a sated, sideways smile as he looks over the mess he's leaving behind, only solidifying how right I am. "Yeah, I feel better. And so do you." He fixes my panties and slaps my pussy again, biting his lip when he feels how wet they instantly get from his cum. "You'll smell like me all day now."

"Oh good. I've got Magic Discovery next, so just when I thought *that* couldn't get any more uncomfortable."

“Those two dumbasses.” His smile fades at the thought of my professors, and even without him saying it, I know he’s thinking of that fire. “Come on, I’ll walk you.”

Shaken from yet another crapfest in Magic Discovery, I’m relieved to find Ledger outside.

What a one-eighty I’ve done.

“I’m fine,” I say quickly. “Don’t look so growly.”

“Don’t feel fine. Do I need to headbutt one of them again? Vinter got it last time but Caius is due his.”

Blinking, I tilt my head as I start walking away from the room. “When did you headbutt Professor Vinter?”

His gaze lingers on the door in a threatening manner for a moment longer, and then he falls into step with me. “Last time he pissed me off. Where are you going?”

“Into town to see Yelena. I’m sure she’ll want to know I’m okay, and I’m hoping she’ll give me my job back if I grovel hard enough.”

“You won’t have to grovel. She likes you. Want a lift there?” he offers, making me stop in my tracks.

Oh, I’m suspicious of this.

“You don’t like Yelena and most of the time you don’t even like me,” I remind him. “What’s your angle?”

“Nothing,” he shrugs. “I thought I was being supportive or whatever like you asked, but I’m no good at that anyway so I’ll stop. And no, I don’t like Yelena at all. She’s... unhelpful. Why do you like her, anyway?”

Shit. “Ledge, don’t be like that. Yes, I want a lift. And I like her because she was one of the first people here to be nice to me. She’s cool, smart, and gives me all the gossip. What’s not to like about her?”

“The fact that she tries to keep me away from what’s mine,” he states simply, then tosses me over his shoulder to shoot me there at lightning speed.

When we arrive, he’s breathing like he wasn’t just sprinting at all, and before I can catch my breath, he’s grabbing me by my hair and sinking his fangs into my neck.

I lose myself there for a few moments before the door flies open and Yelena is yelling at him to get off me, but all he does is snarl and pin me to

him harder. “You proved your point,” I mumble, reaching up to push him off me. “L-Ledge, c’mon. You just fed.”

He relents, licking up my neck one more time before he backs away with a grin, and when Yelena starts muttering some sort of spell under her breath, he flips her off and disappears.

“Fucking animal,” she hisses, reaching out for me to make sure I’m okay, and then she tugs me inside in a flurry of movements. “Suren. How are you back here?”

“The animal came and got me,” I quip.

Yelena rolls her eyes and looks me over, her face filled with anger at all the marks he’s left, but she keeps that comment to herself. “I had a feeling,” she mutters. “I didn’t want him to get his fangs back into you. The look he just gave me as he fed... it was like he was challenging me.”

My stomach roils with nausea at the thought. Every time I think he’s getting better, something happens to remind me I’m fucking insane for thinking he’s capable of it. “I’m sorry, Yel. He probably was.” Hugging her tightly, I exhale as her familiar scent envelops me. “If it helps at all, I’m glad he came and got me. Going back home was the worst decision I’ve ever made.”

Confusion overtakes her before realization settles in. “I imagined starting completely over would be hard. I knew I had to let you take your own path, but I wasn’t sure where you’d end up.”

“Yeah, starting over is pretty hard when I don’t even have an identity,” I agree. “No record of me at all, Yel. It was... really isolating and lonely. Ledger showed up just as I was about to make a really stupid decision, so as mad as you might be with him, I’m grateful.”

She looks like a compliment is the last thing she’ll give him, and then she nods. “I am glad you’re back. What’s happening with your schooling?”

I fill her in on what Cherith said, ignoring the anger sparking across her gorgeous features when I tell her how she found me naked and bound in Ledger’s room. “As far as she’s concerned, it’s business as usual. Which means I’m in the market for a job again if you know any gorgeous, immortal witches who need help with their apothecaries.”

My cheeky grin helps calm her a little, but she still seems stressed over Cherith. “Of course. I told you, you’d always have a job here. I just don’t understand what she’s playing at. Has she had Professor Vinter check into your magic yet? Malevolent goblins can taste magic.”

My face burns as I remember what Ledger told me the day everything changed. “I don’t think he has,” I admit quietly. “I already know the answer, Yel. I was claimed by a vampire who’s half Malevolent, remember?”

“Shit,” she breathes, her body slumping like she’s exhausted. “I don’t imagine he tried to sugarcoat it?”

“Nope. Told me I have a drop of magic, but not enough to ever make a difference. I’m in trouble, Yel. Cherith bought me time, but eventually they’re gonna figure out I was brought here on Quinn’s coattails and se—” again, the words die on my tongue, but I know she knows what I mean. I don’t need Ledger to translate this time.

“That fucking school. If you have a drop, you have some. It won’t be easy, but don’t give up yet. I sense something in you and it’s infuriating I can’t put my finger on it. I don’t think that goblin feeding from you is helping.”

It never once occurred to me that Ledger sucking my blood twelve times a day could be draining my magic. Never once. How the hell could I overlook that? “Do you think he’s stealing it? Is that why he wanted me?”

She shrugs. “I honestly don’t know. I can’t see anything where he’s concerned, and everything with you is fuzzy. I wouldn’t put it past him. Would you?”

“No, but he didn’t bite me until after I was already sure I didn’t have magic. That’s why he claimed me in the first place. He tricked me into opening up and telling him something private that I’ve never told anyone before by saying that was the only way he could tell if I had magic.”

“He’s a fucking liar,” Yelena exclaims, anger lining her features again. “Goblins can sense it from something as easy as a touch. He didn’t need to know your secret to tell you if you had magic, that was for claiming you.”

All the air rushes out of my lungs in search of a safer place to hide. He didn’t have to do that to me, he just did it because he could. Because he wanted all of me and knew I’d never agree otherwise.

Am I really that desperate for connection that I’d fall for something that vile?

Apparently, yes.

Clenching my jaw hard enough to hurt, I shrug like it doesn’t matter.

“Guess he really earned it then. Good for him.”

“I hate that he put his sights on you. I’ll make you some amrit and work on something else too, maybe something that will change the way your blood

tastes so he'll fuck off."

My stomach sinks further, which has to be some sort of record. "I can't drink amrit anymore, Yel. I made him a deal."

"Fuck his deals. He lied from your first one, you don't owe him anything." Yelena starts mixing ingredients together like a woman on a mission. "Fine, no amrit. But did you make a deal about all my teas, or just that one?"

"Just that one. I wanted him to tell Quinn about the thing we can't talk about, and that was his price. You really have a tea that'll make him hate my blood?"

"Possibly. I don't know what it is that draws him to you, but I can make it bitter if he finds it sweet. Has he ever specified?"

I run back through my encounters with him, but he talks about my pussy way more than my blood. "He doesn't seem like the sweet type, does he?"

"Probably not. Bitter bitch," she mutters, and I hate the stupid part of me that still wants to defend him.

That better be the bond talking, because I can't honestly be this dumb. "So maybe make it really sweet. Like tooth-rotting sweet."

Yelena chuckles. "You got it. But I think it should be a gradual thing. Drink a few sips a day and work your way up to more so he doesn't notice it. I can also block this from your thoughts if you want me to, so you only remember it when you're around me. It's tricky magic, but it's easier if you're willing."

"How will I remember to drink the tea?" I ask.

"I can keep it here. I know that doesn't help for the days you're off, like the upcoming full moon, but at least you'll have it multiple times a week."

God, the full moon. "I'm gonna need it the most then," I grumble. "No way he stays away from me."

"Right. Shit... okay, come see me that day and I'll give it to you here and send you on your way."

Here I am playing with fire again. Am I ever going to learn? "Do it," I say firmly. "If that bastard is somehow making it harder for me to access the little bit of magic I have, I want him to stop. So let's do it."

Chapter Fifteen

Quinn

Another full moon arrives and I find myself needing to feel her rays on my skin. Otto avoided me for days last week while I was ovulating, and it must've become easier for him to stay away because I haven't seen him this week, either.

Is he finally moving on? Will I be able to handle that? Probably not, but I know the full moon will drive us together, so I'll see him today. I have to admit, I miss him more than I should.

"What's wrong?" Tris asks, Blaise's attention snapping over to me as well. Patricia has been hanging out with us more the last couple of weeks and I'm actually glad for it. She's fun.

"I'm fine," I placate, making Ollie relax as well. "I'm excited for the full moon, honestly. I fucking need it."

"Good. Then eat up. We're heading to the woods in less than an hour and definitely won't be back until dawn."

Ollie points to my plate full of fatty foods and I realize I haven't taken more than three bites. I shove a fry into my mouth and ask, "Where are the twins?" before Ollie can see my nerves.

"They're coming in a bit," Blaise says. "They spend the first couple hours alone. Some kinda twin thing, I don't know. Suits me just fine."

"Oh." I stuff my face some more and then toss the rest, moving to change into my skimpy lingerie like there's no one else in the room.

One thing I learned fast at RHA is not to be shy about naked bodies, even when Blaise cat-calls me. "Leave it off, Quinn. Don't you want the full effect?"

With a heavy sigh, I toss it aside and make a 'happy now?' gesture, then saunter my naked ass toward the door. "Did you bring the booze?"

"Damian and Samira are bringing it this time. They should already be there," Ollie explains, stepping up to follow me. "Did you invite anyone else?"

I don't need to ask to know she's talking about Otto. "Nope," I shake my head, hating that Damian will be there, but maybe I'll get another opportunity

to kick his ass. Or maybe he'll just be *less* of an ass. "Just us. I'm sure we will see other people around, though."

I lead the way outside, desperate to feel the moonlight seeping into my skin, and when I do, I release a deep breath. Then I instantly crave my wolf. Fuck.

"There you guys are," Damian's voice interrupts my thoughts, but for once, I'm happy for it.

"I heard you were bringing the booze," I reply, pointedly not looking at his naked body — but I don't miss the way he's hungrily staring at mine.

"We did. More than you can drink, Sexy. Sam, start the music." Winking at Samira, Damian spins to pour me a drink twice the size of a normal one as a flirty little tune fills the woods around us.

I take it warily, but I really fucking need it. Thanking him with a small smile, I take a sip and begin scanning the woods for Otto even though I know I probably shouldn't. But the trees are still, and I can't feel him watching me the way I normally do. I find myself drinking much faster than I should.

I really need to get my mind right. I can't be down tonight of all nights. The moon is shining so beautifully up in the sky, and I need to thank her in the only way I can: by not wasting a moment of tonight being sad.

"So Quinn's not a newbie anymore," Blaise says loudly. "She's got a full moon under her belt now. Does that mean we don't have to pretend to be prudes this time? Our girls are late, Ol."

She flashes me an amused grimace, then tucks her bottom lip between her teeth. "I don't know. Maybe it's too soon. She's still healing."

"Wait, what are you guys talking about?" I ask, glancing between all of them curiously as I drink some more. "I never thought any of you were prudes."

Oleander giggles. "Then come on, dance with us. We'll show you."

"Okay," I say happily, polishing off the drink to show them I'm no noob and then toss my cup to Damian so I can take her hand.

She guides me in so close, my bare nipples brush her skin. "Remember what you learned day one in Magic Replenishment?" she asks, sliding her hands down my sides. "Nothing gets us there quite like physical touch. We have no rules out here, Quinn."

Oooh, shit.

I see exactly what they were talking about now. Fuck, they want to have an orgy! I am not ready for this.

She must see my panic, because she offers me a sad smile. To be honest, Ollie is drop dead gorgeous, and if I wasn't so in love with Otto, I wouldn't hesitate to have some fun with her under the moon, but I am. I am, and I want him here next to me so badly my chest feels like it's being squeezed by an invisible anaconda. "Sorry, Ollie. I — I'm not ready for anyone else to touch me like that. God, I want to. I'm so damn horny, but... Otto."

Please find me, Wolfy.

"Told you she wouldn't be down," Tris says flippantly. "It's fine. We can go another moon behaving ourselves... mostly."

"Speak for yourself," Damian spits. "The whole point of these parties is to let go, not to control ourselves. She needs to get over the damned w—"

A flash of fur flies past me and knocks Damian to the ground, but it's not Otto. I can tell by the kaleidoscope of colors in the fur that it's Parker.

I've never heard him snarl like this.

"What the fuck!" Damian yells, trying to shove the wolf off of him and I rush over to talk to Parker calmly.

"Hey, Park. What's wrong?"

The excitement causes the alcohol pump through me in a rush, making me glad I only had one drink. He snaps his teeth at Damian and steps back slowly, meeting my eyes as he jerks his head toward the forest.

It feel it now — Otto's attention. His frustration. His... fear.

He sent Parker out here instead because he was ready to kill someone.

Shit. I instantly turn and head toward him, tripping slightly as I rush to Otto to calm him.

"Fucking crazy animals!" Damian growls. I yell at him to shut up before practically begging Parker to come with me.

"Otto," I call, heading deeper into the trees until the branches are scratching my exposed skin. "Otto!"

"He's close," Parker mutters, human now and moving in front of me to clear the way. "I'm sorry you had to see me like that. And like this... y'know, naked and stuff, but that guy was putting off some really bad vibes. I think he wanted to hurt you."

"Seriously?" I ask, looking back quickly in fear, but I know I don't have to worry with Parker here. He'd take care of me. "Is Otto okay? I can feel his... anger. Is he angry at me?"

"Honestly? I don't know. He won't let me touch him." He stumbles into another clearing full of blankets and half-empty drinks, but no one's around

except Otto himself. He's still fully human and fully dressed as he comes crashing toward me, wrapping me up until I can feel how badly he's shaking.

"Otto," I whisper, wrapping my arms around him tightly. "You're okay, we're okay. I'm here."

Muscles roll just under the surface of his blazing hot skin as his wolf tries to break free. "Just tell me you're okay and I'll... let you go back."

"No. I don't want to go," I mumble into his chest. I can't lie to him, not tonight. "I wasn't okay... I am now."

His rough, broad hand tugs my head back by my hair as he catches me in a chaotic, desperate kiss, but he pulls back too soon. "Cherry, I—"

"Otto, don't," Parker snaps. "You said—"

"I know what I said," he snarls, yet the anger vanishes almost instantly from his face as he stares at his only Omega. Voice soft, he whispers, "What did you just call me?"

I'm so fucking confused I glance between them as tears build in Parker's eyes. His sadness leaks into the air around us, making my chest ache for him and for Otto. I don't know what's happening, but I'm scared.

"I— I meant Alpha."

Rubbing over his heart almost absentmindedly, Otto nods. "Yeah. Course you did, Park. Why don't you go back to the nest? It's not safe for you to be out tonight."

"I'm with you, Alpha," he argues desperately. "You'll protect me. You always do."

"No!" Otto roars suddenly, sending the birds in the trees scattering through the air. "I can't protect you. I can't protect fucking anyone!" Paralyzed with shock, I can't seem to move a muscle as he rounds on me. There's no trace of my Otto left in his warm yellow eyes. No glow like I remember from last time. "You want to live your own life, then fucking do it, Quinn. Quit fucking doing this to me."

His clothes shred as he shifts and darts off through the trees, leaving me and Parker behind.

My heart shatters more in that moment than it ever has before. "Otto!" I yell, moving to chase after him, but Parker stops me. "Park, what's going on?"

"You have to let him go right now," he says gently. "Trust me. He's not in a headspace to hear it. It's my fault."

“Why? I don’t get what just happened. Why can’t he protect anyone, and why does he care that you called him Otto?”

Parker’s lip quivers as he guides me toward one of the blankets and helps me sit, then hands me another one to cover up. “There’s a special bond between Alphas and their Omegas, particularly when there’s only one Omega in the pack, like me. I shouldn’t be able to call him by his true name. My Alpha commands my total respect and complete submission. The fact that I could just shows that his grip is slipping more than he thought.”

“Why is it slipping, Park? What’s wrong?” Knowing Otto is hurting feels like a knife in my chest, and not even Parker’s normally comforting touch is doing anything to dull it this time.

“An Alpha’s biology is different, Quinn. I know you’re still pretty new here, but certain Mythics have Orders that can change. Like the vampires, for example. They all start off as Fledglings. Some become Hunters or Guardians quickly, and some never do at all. They stay Fledglings forever, vampiric only in the sense that they need blood to survive. For us, we get our Orders when we hit puberty without fail. But for those of us who present as Alpha, there are... rules. Caveats to keeping such an elite status.”

“Okay, and how has he not done that? He’s an amazing Alpha. He’d do anything for you guys.”

“He would, that’s true. He’s literally killed for me. But it’s not just about forming and protecting a pack, though that’s necessary too. If you don’t form a pack, or fail to protect them once you find them, things can get bad quickly. And then when an Alpha finds their mate, things change. An accepted bond can cement their Alpha status for the rest of their life, while a rejected bond can snap it. Their DNA starts to change. The things that made them a good Alpha aren’t true anymore. They become slower, weaker. The commands they give aren’t as absolute and can be ignored. It becomes easier to challenge them. Eventually, they just... won’t be an Alpha anymore.”

“That’s so fucked up. I didn’t even know wolves had mates,” I breathe, imagining Otto meeting some other person who was made just for him and finally leaving me behind... and then what Parker is saying hits me.

But I need him to say it.

“And did he?” I whisper. “Did he meet his mate?”

“Yes,” he says simply. “And you rejected him.”

Suddenly I can’t breathe.

I don't hear if he says anything else; I don't hear anything at all but the world crumbling around me at how fucking obvious this has been. That's why it doesn't feel like a regular breakup, why the pain only seems to be getting worse, why we can't stay away, and need each other more than anything else... why I've been so fucking selfish. "Oh, god," I gasp, nausea rolling in my stomach at the amount of pain I've caused him.

I never wanted to hurt him. It was never his fault I had to break away. I was trying to prove to myself that I was strong and independent when I never have been. When I never will be.

I felt like I was becoming Quinn Neyrus because I fucking was, and I ran away like I always do because nothing that pure and good ever happens to me. I couldn't believe it, and now I've cost him everything. "I didn't know."

Tears fall down my face as I stand to go find Otto, but Parker grabs me gently. "Quinn, wait. I know this is a lot, but you have to wait. You have to be sure before you talk to him again. Please just let me take you home. We've got fall break coming up in a couple days. He'll be home with his family and you'll have some space to really think about things without the bond messing with your emotions. You can talk to him after."

"I don't want to go home. I don't want to wait weeks. I need to tell him how sorry I am. I fucked everything up so I could be a selfish bitch. How does he not hate me?"

"Because you were made for him. Because he understands wanting to be your own person. He never wanted to make you choose, which is why he never told you himself. But you have to be sure, Quinn. He's already been in two fights because other packs are sensing he's weak. Every time you leave him, it gets worse. *He* gets worse."

"Okay, then I won't leave him again. I don't want to ruin his life, Parker. I've already done enough — I just need to know he's okay." I feel horrible for crying this hard in front of Parker, but I can't seem to stop. "How can I go home while I know he's out there alone and hurting?"

Slowly, he reaches up to the blanket I've got wrapped around me and carefully moves it to the side. "Because you still haven't accepted him. It's not as simple as knowing the truth and loving him. It's so much deeper than that," he explains. "The crescent moon over his heart is his bond mark. When you truly accept him, you'll get one too. It's not there yet. Please just listen to me."

I feel like I want to hide in a hole and die, but he's right... my chest is bare. "He said it was because he was special. I wish I'd known. I knew we had something special, but... fuck. I'm the worst."

"You're not. I know you love him and he knows it, too. Just breathe with me, okay?"

His comforting magic ebbs through me as he takes my hand, lacing our fingers and guiding me toward the Lair. It makes it hard to focus on the chaotic, painful thoughts swirling through my head, but every step I take knowing the truth makes it harder.

I don't want to walk inside when we get there. "Will you please go find him? I have to know he's okay. He's never... looked at me like that before."

"I will. But you have to go inside so I know you're safe. He won't let me near him if I leave you vulnerable. Please?"

His endless dark eyes widen as he pouts, and I nod, hating that I did this to all of us, his pack included. "I'm so sorry, Parker. I know my decision caused you pain too. I'll go inside, but if he wants to come to me... tell him he knows where to find me."

But I have a strong feeling he won't, not after he looked at me the way he did tonight.

"I'll tell him." He launches himself forward, hugging me tightly, then shoos me inside the door. "I'll see you soon, okay? It'll be fine. You love him. It'll be fine."

As he takes off, I can't help but notice it sounded like he was trying to convince himself, not me. With one last glance back, I make my way upstairs almost in a daze.

I do everything I can to avoid the mirror as I pull on one of Otto's shirts and then climb into bed to hide.

I don't know where he is tonight, but I can feel his pain, and now that I understand the connection, it's egregiously overwhelming.

Somehow, I know deep down that neither of us will survive staying apart, so I have to fix it.

I just fucking have to.

Chapter Sixteen

Suren

Walking back from Bone Heart, I can't help feeling a little jaded. The sun is just setting on a full moon night. I'm sure it'll be great for most people here who will get to dance until dawn while magic floods their systems, but me?

I know what's coming for me, I just don't know when.

Human House is eerily empty as I climb the stairs to my room. I hate that I'm the only one left now, the only one who hasn't manifested or vanished. It reminds me that I need to pay a visit to Nevitt at The Hollow Mirror soon — I dumped a pretty big responsibility on his shoulders before running away, and now that I'm back, it's only fair I help him out.

It doesn't matter that Ledger said Chase is happy. What about Darwin, Kendall and Lacey? And what's happiness to a hybrid like Ledge, anyway?

Probably not something the rest of us can relate to.

It's just not fair. We never asked to come to this school. If their stories are anything like mine, they were brought here whether they wanted to be taken or not, so why are we responsible for paying back a debt we never agreed to in the first place?

I hate it.

It has my stomach in knots and my heart in my throat as I open my rusted, crooked door and step into my room. At first glance, it's as empty as the rest of the house. Quinn's old bed is made tidily while my side is a bit of a mess, and the draft from the massive window that never seems to go away is holding strong.

But he's here. I know he is. I can feel him.

Staring into the darkness, I shift on my feet. "Just come out. Why are you being so creepy?"

"I'm not being creepy," Ledger replies. "I just wanted to watch for a bit. What's wrong?" He's watching me inquisitively as he steps out of the shadows, sensing the unease inside me.

"Just thinking about all the people who used to live here," I comment. "Wondering if I should bother moving to a lower room or if it would be a waste of time."

“You can always move into my room,” he offers, moving toward my bed to lay on it. “It’s better than this place by a long shot, fuck what Cherith says.”

“And why would I do that?” I ask bluntly. “You lied to me, Ledger. You said you never would, but you did. You didn’t need me to tell you about Quinn’s dad so you could suss out my magic. You did it so you could claim me.”

I’m surprised when he actually looks caught off guard. Does that mean he wasn’t reading my mind? “To be honest, I didn’t know the claiming would work; I just knew you opening up would help. But once my fangs were in your neck, I realized I didn’t even need that.” He sits up. “You wanted this. Maybe I lied about a couple things to get us here, but I was also the only one that told you the truth. I wanted you, and I wasn’t going to stop until I had you.”

“But why?” I push. “Why me? Why go through all of that for someone who supposedly doesn’t have magic? It just doesn’t make sense.”

He’s standing now, moving toward me slowly in the beaming moonlight. “How would it make sense to you? You’re just a human. You know nothing of my kind, either of them.”

“I do. I know Malevolent goblins steal magic. Drain it from people so they can never get it back. I know that Hunter vampires take what they want from who they want, they don’t bind themselves to humans for sport. So which is it, Ledger? Huh?” I ask, stepping closer with my hands curled into shaking fists at my side. He’s just manipulating me again, I can feel it. “Did your Malevolent side *have* to have me to steal all the magic I supposedly don’t fucking have, or was it your Hunter side that thought some little human would be so hard to get that you had to claim her to keep her around as a bloodbag?”

“Does my answer even matter? All you see right now is a liar, I see it clear as day in your mind, Sur. All the truths I shared are dwarfed by the lies, so believe whatever the fuck you want. I don’t need your affection, I just need your blood.”

“Fuck you, Ledger.” For the second time, I slap the hell out of him. But where I got away with it last time, I can tell by the fury lining his face that I won’t be so lucky this time.

With a snarl he grabs me by my throat to pull me in even closer. “It would be so fucking easy to end all this bullshit right now, Suren.” His grip

tightens. “Why the fuck do you constantly push me?”

“Because I’m not your slave,” I grunt out. “I’m a person, yet you treat me like a toy.”

“Do you think I’d let a toy slap me and not rip it to pieces? I treat you better than anyone else in this entire world, and it’s not enough. You want something I can’t be, and I won’t fucking give you up, so where does that leave us, huh? It leaves me as the villain and you on your knees. Good thing you like it down there.”

Holy shit. Stomach flipping violently, I claw at his arm to try and get free — but maybe he’s right. Maybe I push him because I need this. I crave this. The back and forth, the fucking hurricane. It’s the only time I feel anything at all.

“So get on with it then,” I snap. “Show me how you really feel about me.”

Ledger’s mouth crashes into mine hard, his fangs scratching at my tongue so he can get a taste while he lifts me off the ground and carries me to the bed. The growl he releases sounds almost surprised and thick with arousal as he lays me back and slots between my legs. I can do this, I can be his toy for a night. Maybe it’ll feel like it did the day he came to me and said he wanted to forget everything that isn’t my body.

But maybe not.

Reaching down, I palm him through his jeans while he gets my clothes off, tugging on them like they’re offensive until I’m naked and on display and he’s still fully clothed. Wild, clear eyes scan my body before he drops down between my legs, but instead of licking where I want him to, he sinks his teeth into my inner thigh and starts to finger me.

Crashing pleasure surges through me as he gives me just enough venom to take the sting out of his bite. “Fuck, that feels good,” I admit breathlessly. Too good. My hips roll, pumping more blood toward his greedy mouth.

I can practically feel him gulping it down, the groans leaving his lips vibrating through me until he sits up and grins with blood on his chin. “Fuck. Taste so fucking good tonight, Suren. What’d you eat?”

He doesn’t wait for me to answer, he just bites my other thigh as my eyes roll. “Um... I— I had a bear claw,” I gasp.

“Eat more of those,” he groans, his fingers working inside me until I’m lightheaded and he’s sitting up with a hungry glint in his eyes and a boner.

My eyelids are heavy, but before I can get too far gone from the blood loss, his hand pops me in the cheek hard enough to wake me up. “That’s for earlier.”

“Really?” I laugh. “You call that a slap?”

I shouldn’t have said that, because the next one is hard enough to make me gasp. “Better?” He pulls his shirt off over his head and tosses it aside. “Want to fucking eat you when you slap me, but goddamn it gets my dick hard.”

Good. Cause I’m not done. It feels really fucking good to get a little revenge.

Leaning up, I slap him again. “Like that?”

In a blur of motion, he stands to get the rest of his clothes off, and before I even realize he’s back in position, he slaps the hell out of my pussy.

“Harder,” I growl. “Quit acting like you’re capable of breaking me.”

“Quit acting like you aren’t going to cry about this tomorrow,” he quips, slapping my pussy even harder and then my breast.

“Screw you.” I’m done wasting tears on him. “Let me guess, you set your sights on me cause I was the only one desperate enough to fall for your shit? Couldn’t get anyone else?”

“Go ahead and keep guessing, because it wasn’t for your personality, I can tell you that much.”

Ledger thrusts completely inside me in one go, stealing my ability to think for a moment, let alone speak.

But two can play this game. “You gonna slide in sometime soon? I’d rather deal with the head that doesn’t piss me off.”

Ledger huffs a laugh, his hips snapping in and out as he continues to stare down at me. I don’t miss the way his eyes have changed again, they’re as black as his soul, which feels fitting for tonight. “Don’t feel that, Suren? Good. Now none of us will have to hear you bitch and moan about your cervix. Maybe if you used your mouth for something other than talking, your cervix could get a break.”

“Maybe if you’d give me something worth sucking, I would,” I retort, digging my nails into his chest and dragging them down. “It’s the best way to get you to spill all your secrets.”

His smile is gone with that reminder, his hand reaching to grip my throat again as he fucks me even harder and finally looks away. “You’re just as deceitful as I am. You just look prettier doing it.”

“You can read my fucking mind,” I remind him sharply, but god, it’s getting hard to stay mad when his cock feels this amazing. “I can’t read yours. All I know is the shit you say and the lies I catch you in. It’s not the same. We’re not the s-same.”

My eyes flutter closed as he dangerously slows the blood flow to my brain, but he doesn’t loosen his grip. He holds my throat for so long his words sound muffled and far away when he finally speaks. “Poor little human is always the victim. You have no clue how powerful you are. Wake up.”

He abruptly lets go and slaps me again, making my pussy contract with an orgasm I didn’t see coming. “Good girl.”

When his fangs sink into my shoulder, I don’t try to fight it. The venom is so strong this time, so warm and comforting that I don’t care how he sees me or what he says. I just never want this to stop.

“Ledger,” I moan hoarsely. “Baby, please.”

The noise he releases as he pulls his teeth out sounds pained, like he didn’t want this to ever stop either, but he’s too damn close not to cave.

He fills me up with a growl, reminding me suddenly that I’m due to say the birth control spell.

God, I hope she was right that it’ll work without magic.

“Nei barn, nei þunguð,” I whisper under my breath.

“What was that?” Ledger huffs, lifting slightly to look at me. “Did you just curse my dick?”

“No, I cursed my womb so it wouldn’t be infected by your dick,” I quip. “You act like you’ve never heard it before. Did all the other bitches you came inside just decide to chance it?”

“I didn’t come in other bitches’ wombs, and my cum isn’t an infection. You’d be blessed with a Huxley baby.”

Ledger bites my cheek but he doesn’t break skin, surprising me more than the weird shit he just said. “Oh? Since when is childbearing an honor that hybrids bestow on their human toys?”

“Since I said.” He shrugs, pulling out of me with a hiss and collapsing onto the bed like I invited him to stay. And more importantly, like that wasn’t a joke.

“Oh, and now you want to cuddle?” I ask, wincing as I sit up. “How many times did you bite me?”

“We don’t have to cuddle, and I dunno... a few. Your blood tastes tempting as fuck, don’t remind me.”

He tosses an arm over his eyes, making me want to slap him all over again. Don't *have* to cuddle? Who even is he?

Groaning, I wiggle down to lay on his chest and try to slide under his arm. "Fine, you big, violent, needy baby. Quit begging. I'm right here."

He snorts, letting his arm fall over my body to keep me there. "Whatever you have to tell yourself, Clumsy. How about you tell yourself you tripped and fell into the cuddles, yeah?"

I can't help it, it makes me laugh. It bursts from my chest until I'm hiding my face in his armpit to quiet down, but god, it feels good to laugh. "You're an ass."

"So are you — no, you were an actual dick today. You graduated."

Beaming, I tilt my head up and kiss his chin. "I'm not sorry. You're a lot more tolerable when you're slapping me and making me come."

"I'll keep that in mind," he grumbles, pulling me closer, and I can tell he's a little buzzed from all the blood. "Thought you'd kick me out tonight."

Honestly? Me too, but I feel... light. Strong. Like his venom is a thousand times stronger than normal even though he barely gave me any. I don't want to be alone for this. "Who said I was done using you yet?" I tease. "Can't kick you out."

"The feeling is mutual."

What is he saying that to? What I said inside my mind or what I said out loud?

"Both."

Fuck it, good enough. Flipping to straddle him, I grip his chin and kiss him deeply as I grind my pussy on his cock. For the first time, I might understand why everyone spends the full moon fucking all night — and we're just getting started.

Chapter Seventeen

Otto

“Just remember this next time you try to call me Otto,” I mumble to Parker. “The only reason we’re here is because I’d do anything for you. You know that, yeah?”

My Omega beams up at me, his soft brown eyes nearly disappearing as his face scrunches up. “Yes, Alpha.” But that smile fades quickly as his soft hand slips over my forearm. “I know this is gonna be hard, but they’ll understand. You need your family right now.”

No, I need my mate right now. I need this to not be happening. The last thing I need or want is to walk into my family’s den and let them see me like this — rejected and weakened. But Parker told her the truth about who she is to me and now I *have* to give her the space to think it through, no matter what. She deserves at least that much after everything. I just wish it was easier to ignore the hole in my heart that never seems to go away. “Can you help me out a little?” I ask quietly. “You know I wouldn’t ask, but I need to stay calm, especially if Rodyn’s here.”

As my oldest brother and the only other Alpha in our family besides our father, he’ll be the one to give me the most shit over this. The fucking day I presented, he challenged me, and he hasn’t stopped since. And he can say it’s to make me stronger all he wants, it won’t change the fact that it’ll do more harm than good right now unless I win.

With the way my chest feels like it’s caving in on itself, I’m pretty sure I won’t.

“Are you sure you need it? He can’t be that bad,” Parker argues.

“You haven’t met him. Just do it. Please?” I ask, pouting my bottom lip until he hums a little reluctantly. His magic weaves its way through me, sending warmth and comfort pulsating through me until I feel okay enough to cross the barrier, but only just.

This is gonna be a nightmare.

Unlike most wolf families, mine lives in a den they built in the middle of the woods full time. No walls, no ceilings, just magically-enforced boundaries that keep out rain and unwanted visitors. It’s primitive as hell. No kitchen or bathrooms, no beds. Just nests of blankets and pillows scattered

around the ground and up on some of the thicker tree branches. The clothes they keep are stored in hollowed-out tree trunks. The simplicity of it all makes me a little nostalgic, but the semesters I've spent at Rogue Hollow have fucking spoiled me. I don't want to bathe in a river or shit in the woods like a fucking animal anymore.

What would Quinn think if she could see—

“Otto!”

I'm knocked off my feet by a furious hug, and I'd know even without her scent that it's my little sister, Rina. For a Beta, she's fucking strong. “Okay, Rin. Hi. Yeah, I missed you too, now get off me. I landed on a rock,” I grumble.

Her wild black curls completely obscure my vision as she stands with one hand on her hip and a blinding smile. “Your reflexes suck, big bro. Last time I did that, you caught me and launched me so high up into the trees, Daddy had to come get me.”

Shit. Rubbing my chest, I try to brush her off. “Gotta let you win sometimes, y'know? But jeeze, I do you a favor and you make fun of me for it. I see how it is.”

“Oh, good grief. I was just messing with you. Come on, everyone's waiting.”

I stay put as she tries to tug me along. “Wait, Rin. Who's everyone?”

“Like everyone. Well, everyone except Luka. He's still at Iron Lake, their breaks are different from yours. Can you believe I'll be at Rogue Hollow next semester?”

God damnit. Of all my four brothers and three sisters, Luka has to be the one who didn't come home. He's my best ally here. “Shit, is it that time already? What about Kahn?”

“He's my twin, duh. Of course he's choosing RH with me. Though Tad's still convinced he's following Luka to Iron Lake, but that's just because Rodyn went there and he's obsessed.”

Luckily for me, my other two sisters are both older and already graduated. “So Annalee and Wynne are both here?” I ask. “Did they bring my nieces and nephews?”

“Ugh, no. Mom told them both we don't have room for everyone.”

“It's fine, we can just kick Rodyn out. He takes up enough room to house a small village,” I quip, but there's such a defined level of underlying seriousness that Rina balks.

“Wait, is there something up with you two? You’re not gonna fight again, are you?”

Parker saves me this time by peeking his head between us. “Uhm, hi. I know I’m small, but I’m here. Remember me? Parker Collins, Omega... we met at Yule last year.”

It works like a charm. She stops grilling me and starts assaulting him with questions instead, allowing me a chance to slip away and actually make it to the main part of the den. No one else greets me quite as ferociously as Rina did, but my mom sure gives it her best shot.

At least this time, I stay on my feet. “Hey, Ma. Miss me?”

“We don’t live that far, Otto. You could’ve come to visit on a weekend, or a random Thursday. But no, we haven’t seen you since your spring break. What’s kept you away?”

“A girl,” my dad says without looking at me. “Isn’t it always a girl?”

Uh, no, Dad, but whatever. Rolling my eyes, I kiss the top of my mom’s head and hug my sisters, then nod once to Rodyn without meeting his gaze. “I uh... yeah. I was busy. School’s been nuts this semester in a lot of ways. Sorry I haven’t been around as much.”

The problem with having werewolves for parents is that they *always* know when I’m hiding something. Part of it’s the familial pack bond, some of it’s scent, but most of it is just raising eight kids who think the rules don’t apply to them. “Care to explain?” he pushes. “I don’t remember your mother or Annalee complaining like this about Rogue Hollow. Maybe it’s a good thing you didn’t choose Iron Lake.”

Ahh, yes. The ‘Otto’s the dumb one’ joke came out early this time.

“It’s not that.” Fuck it, they’re gonna find out eventually. “I found my mate.”

Silence falls throughout the den as every single pair of judgmental fucking eyes turn toward me. And I know why — I don’t smell like an Alpha who claimed his mate successfully. Fucking bullshit biology. Luckily for me, the pushback in their gazes only brings the anger out of me. At least I won’t be sobbing as I tell them. “Yeah, I know you can smell it. She rejected me, okay? It’s not a big deal.”

Rodyn stands, his towering 6’8 ass making me feel small as he stalks closer. “Baby brother got rejected?” he sneers. “Is this supposed to be news? You were always the weak link. Where is she? Maybe I’ll claim her for my own.”

Snarling, my wolf breaks free before I can fully process the thought. But Rodyn's reflexes are faster and sharper than mine even on my best day, so his mammoth white wolf is fully formed by the time I reach him. Doesn't matter. I know his weak spots. Diving immediately for his hind legs, I catch the left one between my teeth and clamp down as hard as I can until muscle shreds and blood fills my mouth.

"Stop it!" Rina shrieks. "Rodyn, let him go!"

Confused, it trips me up just enough to give him the space to break free. Rodyn didn't have me, I had him. I had—

Oh, god. The leg I'm clamping down on isn't white. It's tan. It's Kahn's. And Rodyn's jaw is around my neck.

"One little move, baby brother. That's all it'll take." His paws dig into the grass around us, settling his stance on top of me. How the fuck did this happen? *"Just submit. Prove to everyone here that you're no Alpha. You're a Beta with a fucking boner."*

My knot is more than that. It separates me from the rest — it's proof that I've got Alpha DNA, just like him. Just like Dad. "No."

His fangs shift as his body lowers, flattening me to the ground. I feel the sharp sting of teeth piercing close, too fucking close to my jugular. *"I'll let you into my pack, Otto. You and your little mate. I'll take good care of her. Maybe you'll see how a true Alpha leads. Just submit."*

Goddess, it would be so easy to. Rodyn commands respect and obedience, even amongst other Alphas. I'd be safe with him. I wouldn't have to fight to keep anyone safe, wouldn't have to watch my back every fucking day. But I won't let him have my girl. *"You'd better just kill me then, Ro. I'm not giving her up. I may not be able to beat you in a fight right now, but I'll never submit to you or anyone else. I'm an Alpha."*

His growl ripples through the air as he bites with every intention of killing me — but a heart-wrenching whimper stops him in his tracks. Letting me go entirely, Rodyn turns to face the source of the noise: Parker.

I'm panting and covered in blood as I shift back into my normal body. "Park, I'm o- fuck, I'm okay," I rush out, clamping a hand over my neck to stop the blood until the wound can heal. "Don't look at me like that, I'm okay."

But that's not what's wrong. He's worried about my safety, sure... but he's clutching his chest and staring at me like he doesn't even know who I am.

“No,” I whisper. “No, no. Parker, I’m still your Alpha. *Come here,*” I command, throwing all my authority behind it. “*Now!*” He doesn’t move, just shakes his head with devastated eyes. It’s enough to have me seeing red and tasting the need for Rodyn’s blood. “This is your fault!” I yell, jumping on his back and reaching down to pry open his jaw with every ounce of strength I’ve got. “Swear to fuck I’ll snap it, Rodyn. *You fucking submit. Show my Omega that you’re nothing compared to me.*”

“Wait,” Parker breathes. “Don’t. Don’t hurt him. He’s — he’s —”

“He’s what?” I snap, but it’s then I notice the glow in Rodyn’s eyes as he glares up at me. The very golden glow. “Oh, hell no.” I let go like he’s burning me, sliding off as I try to wrap my fucking head around it. “No.”

Rodyn doesn’t seem to remember I’m even here. Shifting, he steps forward slowly until he’s cupping my Omega’s chin and tilting his head up. “Mine.”

The word sends a chill down my spine.

“Whoa.” Parker’s fingers splay over the glowing crescent moon on Rodyn’s chest, then pull back quickly as he turns a terrified expression to me. “Alpha, I’m so sorry! I—”

“I’m your Alpha now,” Rodyn growls, picking him up and sneering. “Otto, baby bro. You want to watch? I’m about to show you how a real Alpha claims his mate. Maybe you could take notes.”

I can’t breathe as I watch him carry Parker out of sight. Losing Quinn was the worst thing that’s ever happened to me, but this? Knowing my asshole of a brother is going to snuff out everything pure and precious about one of the world’s rarest types of Omega... has got to be the second worst.

And now I’m bleeding and alone, staring at my parents.

I should’ve never come here.

An hour later, Parker comes back by himself. He’s still fully clothed and I don’t see any claiming marks or mate bonds glowing through his shirt, which confuses the hell out of me — but also fills me with something a little like hope. “What happened?” I demand.

“I told him no, and he didn’t like that very much so I... sort of filled him with magic until he went to sleep,” he admits sheepishly. “Mate or not, I didn’t come here for him. I came here for you, and *you* are my Alpha until I decide otherwise. I don’t care what anyone says.”

Speechless, I sit there slack-jawed until Khan wheezes with laughter. “You told him no? Oh man, he’s gonna be hard to be around. Serves him right though for picking on Otto like that. It’s not your fault she didn’t want you, right?”

It’s my turn to whimper, though I think I keep it suppressed enough that no one notices but Parker. “It is. I came on too strong. She’s not a wolf, she’s a witch, so she’s not accustomed to how things work with us. She’s got all these hard-headed tendencies from growing up in the Human Realm, so she wants to do things her way. But hold on a sec.” Pivoting, I pull my Omega into a tight hug, whispering, “Thank you,” quietly enough that only he hears. “You didn’t have to do that. But I promise, I’ll do whatever I have to in order to protect you from him. You’re safe with me.”

“I know. It won’t be necessary,” he explains. “I know this is how things work, so I won’t fight this or reject him like that. I will be his one day, but not today. Not while I’m still at Rogue Hollow with you. I don’t know what that will mean for us or for his Alpha status, but I’m hoping since the intent is there, it’s good enough.”

Good enough like Quinn loving me *wasn’t* good enough. Yet what the hell do I care about Rodyn’s Alpha status? Maybe I’ll get lucky and Park will break him so thoroughly, he’s not even a fucking wolf anymore. The thought makes me laugh, but if anyone can pull it off, it’s my Omega. People look at him and see some tiny little weak thing who couldn’t fight his way out of a paper bag, and I see him as one of the most special people to ever walk the realm. He’s got powers wolves like Rodyn could never dream of. He doesn’t deserve him.

Maybe I don’t, either.

“You know he’s gonna try to find a way to get you anyway, right?” I ask. “Just like me. I’ve been stalking Quinn and she *did* flat out reject me. If I’m not giving up, he won’t either. Not when it’s his whole identity on the line.”

Parker shrugs as he sits next to me and cuddles close. “He might be my mate, but you’re my Alpha. Biologically, I won’t be able to fight it forever, but for now? Nothing is changing. I’m not leaving you, and you’ll see soon enough that Quinn isn’t either. She just needs a little time and she’ll come back. You’ll see.”

It’s hard to argue with him when he’s this close to me and using his magic like a soft little weapon. And hell, maybe I don’t want to argue with him. My world has been upside down since Quinn rejected me, and I don’t

know if I can take much more of it. I honestly don't give a shit about being Alpha anymore.

I just want her.

Chapter Eighteen

Suren

It's strange being at Rogue Hollow when it's so empty like this. But I can't deny it's also nice to breathe — most of the witches are gone so no one's calling me a whore right to my face, and even Ledger's been scarce for a couple of days.

It's been great just hanging out with Quinn.

“Do you want to run some errands with me?” I ask.

“Yeah, of course,” she replies, moving over to get her shoes on.

Something's been going on with her, but she hasn't said much. It's probably something with Otto she isn't ready to talk about, but I'll be patient with her. “Are we leaving campus?”

“Yeah. Remember that thing I gave up amrit to get Ledge to tell you?”

“Ugh, that dick. Yeah, I remember.”

My chest pangs a little. Why does it bother me that she hates him? Most of the time, I do too. We only get along when we're too horny to fight anymore. But still. “I told this reporter guy about it before I left. Well, tried to. I couldn't give him the details, but I'm hoping he figured it out. At any rate, I need to tell him I'm back so I can help now and I also want to go see Yelena.”

“Shit, I hope he did. Fingers crossed.” I watch her gaze flicker from her jacket to the window to check the weather, then back on that jacket before she moves it aside to grab a black hoodie that looks way too big to be hers. “I'm ready.”

It nearly reaches her knees, telling me everything I need to know. “Knew I smelled dog,” I tease.

Quinn's entire face falls like I slapped her before it twists to something like anger. “That was fucking rude,” she hisses. “You don't hear me telling you that you smell like that leech.”

What? “Maybe not, but you did just call him a dick. You insult him every time he comes around or I bring him up,” I remind her. “Look, it was a mean thing to say and I'm sorry, but don't act like you're any better with mine.”

“I didn't know it bothered you.” Quinn wraps her arms around herself like she's cold. “I'm sorry, okay? I'll try not to say things like that. I thought

I was insulting him in solidarity.”

What the hell is happening? Shaking my head, I step closer and pull her into a hug. “You are. Ledger’s a dick, I just... I don’t have an excuse here, honestly. I’m as dumbfounded as you are. Who knew I’d open my mouth and Ledger would come out? Isn’t it supposed to be the other way around?”

Quinn laughs, holding onto me tightly like she doesn’t want me to let go. “Gross, I pictured that. And it’s okay that you’re confused when it comes to him. He’s got layers like Shrek, I get it. If you ever want me to cuss him out, just let me know. Otherwise, I’ll be nice.”

“You’re cold,” I mumble, ignoring the thing about Ledger. “Are you sick or something?”

“Maybe, I don’t know. I’ve been cold as hell for days. I’m okay though, I have this giant thing to keep me warm. Let’s go see your reporter friend.”

A little reluctantly, I pull back and grab my own coat. “Yeah. Come on.”

Ducking into Gristle’s Odds and Ends, I greet the massive store owner with a sheepish grin and take the absolutely ancient pocket watch he gives me. I want to grill him about his love life, but I have a feeling Nevitt will give me more details than he will, so I take Quinn’s hand and rush to The Hollow Mirror.

I’m not surprised at all to see nothing’s changed. We’re still utterly invisible to the busy reporters, meeting no resistance as we make our way to Nevitt’s desk.

“Hi,” I rush out, dangling the pocket watch in front of his startled face. “I come bearing gifts and also apologies.”

“Now I thought you were leaving,” he replies, eyes locked on the watch so intently he doesn’t even seem to notice Quinn.

“Hi, I’m Quinn,” she says anyway, holding out her hand.

He takes it without looking, then snatches up the watch with a smile. “I see you told Gristle hi first, hmm?”

“You know I don’t come see you empty-handed. How are you two, by the way? Make any big moves yet?”

“Possibly,” he says, nodding his head toward a hallway for some privacy. “I think dinner number five is pretty big, he’s going to cook for me tomorrow.”

My chest swells. “That’s fantastic! I’m so happy for you.”

“Thank you. Enough about me, how are you? You look pale.” Quinn chuckles under her breath and lifts the hood up to cover her head like she’s still cold, and Nevitt looks her over. “You’re pale too. It’s that school, isn’t it?”

“More the students than the school,” I mutter. “But that’s kind of why we’re here. I know I couldn’t tell you much last time, but were you able to work out what I meant?”

“You didn’t give me much at all, Suren, but you gave me enough. I haven’t found out much else. I’m pretty peeved I didn’t know of this sooner, but that just proves how tightly they keep this under wraps. I’m still digging. Do you have any new information for me?”

“Maybe?” I grimace. “It sucks so bad I can’t speak about it freely, but I know where some of them go, at least. What I really need to know is this: who said it’s okay? Did this come from the Council of Elders, or is it specific to Rogue Hollow?”

“I don’t know that answer yet, but if I had to guess, I’d say the Council. It’s too big for just Cherith, but I know she’d never complain. Humans mean nothing to people like her.”

“I’ve noticed.” Unbidden, the memory of her telling Ledger she’d stopped by a couple times and left us alone so he could play with me comes to mind. “We don’t seem to mean anything at all. I’m gonna keep searching. Will you do the same?” I ask hopefully.

“Of course. Come back to see me before the semester ends and we’ll see what we have. I’d love to bury all those crooks.”

“You and me both.” Hugging him quickly, I lead Quinn back out onto the street and run smack into Greylin of all people. “Whoa,” I laugh. “We really need to stop meeting like this. Were you visiting your mom again?”

“Yeah, I’m spending break with her, but I had to get out of there for a bit. I swear, if I have to hear one more story about the vampires down the street I’m going to lose it. Hey, Quinn.”

My best friend offers him a smile and a small wave. “Is it just you and your mom?”

Grey shakes his head. “My sister is around too, but she’s a few years older than I am. She has a new boyfriend so we haven’t seen her much. Where are you two heading?”

He glances at The Hollow Mirror, and then back at me with an inquisitive look. “To Bone Heart,” I deflect. “Then I think we were going to go to Night

Owl. Wanna join?”

“Yeah, sure. I have a few hours. Surprised Ledger isn’t around, honestly. I know he doesn’t go home for breaks.”

From the little I’ve gleaned about his family, I’m not surprised to hear he stays behind. “I’m sure he’s around somewhere, but things have been weird between us lately. I mean... weirder than normal. He’s probably sick of me.”

“He’s stuck by you longer than anyone else, so who knows. I don’t get how he could be though.” I don’t miss the way his gaze looks me up and down, reminding me that I’d had other options if I hadn’t let Ledger trick me.

Better options. Nicer ones... yet is Greylin really that much nicer? Pursing my lips, I banish the memory of someone sucking him off during my first full moon here. At least Ledger only wants me. “The point is he isn’t here right now, so let’s go before Yelena closes up for the night.”

We walk in silence until the doorbell lets Yel know we’re here and she spots Greylin. “Oh, for fuck’s sake, Suren. Another vampire?”

“Yikes,” he mutters, and I have to say, I agree.

“Who said he’s here for me?” I argue.

“I can tell. He looked at *your* ass when you entered, not Quinn’s.”

Quinn turns toward Grey a little offended. “Hey, I have a nice ass, too.”

“I wasn’t—” he stops that lie in its tracks and shrugs. “My bad.”

“You two come in. He’ll have to wait outside. Nothing personal, vampire.”

“It feels personal, but I’m gonna just assume this is about Ledger and go on my way. See you guys at Night Owl in a bit?”

Okay, maybe he is better than Ledge. Chuckling, I agree to meet him there soon, then exhale hard once the door shuts behind him. “See? He left without breaking anything. He’s not so bad.”

“Yes, he’s a little better. I don’t think Ledger would let him live if he did, so at least this one isn’t biting you. Speaking of... how’s that going?”

“Oh, y’know. These days, it’s a lot of slapping and name-calling, then he’ll defend me and cuddle with me. So it kind of feels like permanently being stuck on a steel roller coaster,” I admit, but something wiggles in the back of my mind. Yelena’s face, tea... my blood. “Oh! Whoa, that’s weird. The tea you gave me for the full moon didn’t work. He bit me like seventeen times.”

Her eyes widen, before she curses. “Motherfucker. Of course he has a sweet tooth. Did he notice anything was off?”

“What’s going on?” Quinn asks, and Yelena mutters a spell before she moves away to start mixing more ingredients. “She won’t remember when she leaves here either, go ahead and fill her in, then tell me about your seventeen bites.”

Turning to Quinn a little sheepishly, I whisper, “We tried to make my blood taste really sweet thinking that Ledger would hate it. It’s a tea she gives me while I’m here, but I don’t have any memory of it outside this store so Ledger can’t read my mind.”

“That’s genius. So it didn’t work, can you do the opposite? Maybe gentian?” She turns toward Yelena and moves closer. “It’s one of the most bitter herbs, right?”

Yel looks pleased. “Yes, it is. But if we go too bitter, he’ll catch on too fast. We need him to slowly lose interest. Do you have another suggestion?” I can tell Yelena doesn’t need to ask this, but she’s quizzing Quinn.

“Um... maybe milk thistle?”

“We could. How about barberry?”

“That’s sour, right?”

Yelena smiles at her. “You’ve been paying attention in class.”

The grin Quinn dons makes her look more alive than she’s looked in days. Great, now I feel like an even bigger dick for telling her she can’t work here. She’d be really, really good at it.

Proud of her, I throw my arm over her shoulder. “It’ll be doubly effective since two of those are gonna make me shit my brains out. Might keep him from biting south of the border at least, and since his favorite spot is the inside of my thigh, it should work.”

“What a visual.” Quinn fakes a gag and they both begin to laugh.

“We’re going to avoid those, Suren. We can’t have you spending all your time in the loo.”

“I should be fine. It’s not like I’m gonna chug the stuff. But... can I tell you guys something terrible?” I ask with a sheepish smile. “I’m gonna miss the venom just a little.”

Yelena’s smile fades but Quinn’s doesn’t. “I can’t judge you, I miss Otto’s knot and that’s such a weird sentence to say out loud. I want to know more about the venom, though.”

“I’m probably not the person to ask. All I know is that Ledger can choose how much to give me. If it’s none, his bites hurt like hell. Sometimes he gives me just enough to block the pain of his fangs, and sometimes he gives

me more. It's unlike anything I can describe to you. None of the drugs back in our world compare. There are no negative side effects and no crash. It's just... bliss," I say simply. "The kind of high that makes the weight of the world just slip away into nothing."

"It's addictive, Suren," Yelena cuts in. "You have to be careful. Knowing him, he's giving you just enough to keep you hooked."

"Way to take the fun out of it," Quinn mutters under her breath, so I squeeze her shoulder.

"I'm not shocked at all to hear it's addictive," I admit. "It's Ledger we're talking about. He never gives something for nothing."

"When you said there was slapping, does that mean you got to slap *his* ass good?" Quinn asks.

"Twice." Winking, I try to change the subject to the real reason I came here before things spiral any further. "Yel, I know I asked this once and you already said no, but I have to ask again. Is there any way you can show me how to use temp magic?"

Quinn's expression turns curious as Yelena's turns wary. "Suren, I told you how dangerous it is."

That isn't a no, so I continue.

"I know that, Yel," I say softly. "And I trust you, I do. I haven't gone looking for it on my own, and I won't as long as you can look me in the eyes and tell me it's more dangerous than me not manifesting at all."

"Shit," she hisses, knowing damn well she can't. "At this point it's not. It's far too close to the end of the semester and your time is running out."

Quinn grips my hand tightly at the warning in her tone. The solidarity, the support... god, I really missed her. "The classes with Vinter and Caius are getting harder. Vinter just won't pass on me for some reason, but since I'm the only one left, there's no one else for them to pick on. I'm more worried about them accidentally killing me than anything else."

"If they did, it'd be the last thing they ever do." There's no room for question in her tone and I'm immediately reminded of why so many people fear her. "I have conditions if I'm going to agree to this."

Hope soars in my chest. "Anything," I say quickly. "Whatever I have to do."

"You have to keep it to a minimum. No showing off. You use it to pass your classes and that's it. Are you sure you want to do this?"

Jesus. That sounds fucking awful, yet I really don't see what choice I have. She's right, there's only about two months until the semester is over. It's now or never. "Yes. I'm sure."

"Fucking hell. I never had kids for a reason, you know that? Now here I am ready to burn that whole school down for you." I can hear the adoration in her tone, and it makes me fucking blush. She's the closest thing I've ever had to a mother who actually loves me.

"Hopefully, there won't be a need for that. This'll work, Yel. I'm stronger than I look. We can do this."

"I know you are." She offers me the bitter tea with a sad smile and disappears into the back, leaving Quinn and I alone for a moment.

"Sur, I feel like temp magic is exactly what it sounds like so I'll skip the part where I ask what it is. I'm scared for you, is there any way I can help with something?"

She shivers despite Otto's giant hoodie completely swallowing her. "I feel like I should be asking you that question" I say softly. "Are you sure you're okay? Maybe Yelena can make you something to help."

"No, I'm fine. It's just cold here. You're not cold?"

"Not at all." Worry for her twists in my gut. "Quinn, is there something you're not telling me?"

"Um... yeah. Can we talk about it back at home, though? I don't want to make this about me."

I've done nothing but make things about me, but I won't make her tell me right now. "Of course, okay? We'll have another sleepover and you can tell me all about it. Just give me a few minutes to finish up here and we'll grab food from Night Owl to go. Greylin will understand."

Not leaving any room for argument, I follow Yelena to the back to see if I can help. I just need those little life-saving capsules and then, no matter what, I'm going to be a good friend.

She deserves it.

Chapter Nineteen

Ledger

I've done everything I can to pretend I have a life and stay away from Suren, but the truth of the matter is... I don't. The only two people I actually consider friends have gone home for break, she's avoided me since our hate sex the other day, and I'm pretending I don't care. Scratch that, I *don't* care. I fucking can't. That infuriating human has crawled under my skin enough, and I need to get my shit together. I used to be able to claim I wasn't a liar, and now here I am, lying to myself.

If I was smart, I'd cut all ties together and stop letting her blood suck me in, but fuck... just thinking about it gets me hard. Fuck it, I'll go get a quick taste and then leave so I don't have to deal with the consequences of biting her, but even as I rush over to her, I picture us cuddling again. Why does this girl have me all twisted inside? I don't fucking cuddle, that isn't even like me, so why the hell do I let her?

The second I open her room door, Quinn gasps at the sight of me and then groans like I'm the last person she wants to see. "Rude," I mutter, turning my gaze on Suren whose expression actually matches Quinn's. "Double rude. Don't pretend that you haven't missed me already."

"How can I miss you if you never go away?" she quips. "It's only been a few days."

"I did go away, now I'm hungry," I reply through gritted teeth. She's been a fucking handful lately and I'm honestly having trouble not compelling her to be a good girl for me. "You going to offer or do I have to just take it?"

Sighing, she stands up and pulls her silver hair behind her shoulder. "You get five seconds. I'm hanging out with Quinn today, so you need to go."

I glance over at her glaring friend and snort a laugh at how she looks. "Cold or something?" She's wrapped up in that dog's sweatshirt like it's a blanket and only responds with her middle finger. Saw that coming. I can feel how not welcome I am here so I shoot in toward Suren and tug on her hair to make her gasp. "And what if I go over your little five second rule, Clumsy?"

She knows damn well there's nothing she can do to stop me. If I wanted to, I could strip her right here and make her choke herself to death on my cock, but for what? What a waste of a good throat.

“Please,” she whispers. “I want to spend time with her. If you just take what you need and go, I’ll... spend a whole weekend with you and won’t tell you no about anything. I promise.”

“Fine.” Her offer is enough to keep me from being too much of a dick about it, so I sink my fangs in as my eyes flutter closed and wait for that sweet, addicting warmth to coat my tongue.

Only... it doesn’t.

My eyes snap open when the most bitter blood I’ve ever tasted oozes into my mouth, and makes me pull back with a snarl. I didn’t need her five seconds, hell... I didn’t even last three. “What the fuck?” I search her mind for any sort of answer and find nothing aside from some healthy breakfast she ate this morning. “Gross. Your blood is as bitter as your attitude today. Eat a damn bear claw or twelve. I’m out.”

I shoot away without a glance back and spit onto the grass the second I’m outside. The aftertaste lingers on my tongue, and as annoyed as I am at her for dismissing me, I know I have to actually stick to our agreement. I feel the power growing in her, and if I want to stay close enough to keep that levee from breaking, I have to at least be on speaking terms with her. To stay there, I have to give her a little breathing room every so often.

Seeing as it’s break, I don’t have shit else to do to kill the time so I push all thoughts of her bitter blood aside and do the one thing I *haven’t* done since I came to Rogue Hollow... I go home. Not that it’s ever felt like home for me.

Each break I’ve had, I’d stayed here, drinking, feeding, and fucking my fill without a care in the world, but this break is different. This break, I only have one annoying Disaster of a witch I want to feed from and fuck, and seeing as she wants a break from me as well as one from school, I’m pretty fucking screwed on two of my vacation activities. Yeah, I feed to survive, but not for fun, not for sex. Kinda feels like I’m on a low-calorie diet and every other source of blood I ingest tastes like grass.

My dad lives about ten minutes from RHA, so in theory, a loving family would get together as often as they could. That’s not us. We’re far from the perfect family he tried to portray us to be the last time we were together at my brother’s funeral. Vampires are theatrical as fuck when one of our own dies, holding huge, eventful funerals on sacred land that only we’re supposed to walk on, and all of our kind are invited. Aside from vampire Hybrids, no other Mythic is allowed to visit our cemeteries. If they do, vampires have

cause to attack. When that law was enacted, I believed maybe it was all about the ground being sacred and not wanting anything to be tainted, but these days, I know it's all about how it looks. It's a respect thing. I'm not stupid though, I know other Mythics sneak into them on dares.

My little brother's funeral was no different than any other vampire's. There were people there who had never met him, people who spoke of him that had had no more than two conversations with him, all there for show. When my father, Graham Huxley, stepped up and began painting us as some close as fuck, happy little family, I stood up right in the middle of his speech and walked out.

I haven't spoken to him since, so it's not hard to understand his surprise when I enter his house like I still live there and waltz my ass right up to his mini bar. "Father."

He's speechless, actually speechless, and I have to hide my smirk behind a glass of aged whiskey at the fact that this has to be a first. Too bad it doesn't last.

"What do you need, Ledger?"

What a loving father. I should get him a t-shirt or something. Before I answer, I lean against the wall and swirl the amber liquid around, staring down at it as I try to come up with an answer. What the fuck am I doing here? This was a stupid idea. "I just wanted a drink."

"Bullshit," he hisses, standing up to close the distance and snatch my cup away the second I polish off the glass. "You haven't spoken to me in over a year. Haven't said a word since you disrespected me in front of all of Rogue Hollow."

It absolutely wasn't *all* of Rogue Hollow, it was only the vampires, but in his mind that's all that matters. It makes me wonder why he ever fucked a goblin. Before I can stop myself, that question blurts out of me like it has a mind of its own. "Why'd you have an affair with a goblin, Father?"

Shock overtakes his face at my bluntness. In all my life, he's never spoken with me about my mother. When I was a kid, I made up a story about them being in love. Kind of like some old romance novel, where they're both married to someone they were forced to be with, but they knew that person would never truly have their heart, and then they met the love of their life at some bakery and had some secret, passionate affair.

Even the memory of that childhood imagination is embarrassing. Why the fuck was I so romantic?

Graham isn't capable of passion, and by the time I was old enough to know that, he wouldn't tell me shit. In fact, he'd slap me for disrespecting my step-mother and demand I never bring her up again.

I don't even know her name.

All I know is my step-mother killed her the second she showed up at his doorstep with me in her arms, then tried to kill me, only my father wouldn't allow it. It's probably the nicest thing he's ever done for me.

She never forgave him, and when she died when I was sixteen, Renley was convinced it was on purpose. I still don't know if he was right and I honestly don't care. She wasn't the loving type, so even though he was sad he lost his mom, I think he was most distraught at losing the prospect of her getting better. Like maybe when she got older, she'd be like a lot of other vampires that realize how hard they were on their kids so they make up for it when they're adults by being amazing grandparents.

I don't think she would have, just like I know the man standing before me won't, either. Some vampires are just fucking cold.

"Why are you asking me this now?"

I shrug, tugging my glass from his hand to refill it, only this time I pour him one too and offer it over. I'm surprised as hell when he takes it.

"I don't know," I answer honestly. "You never told me anything about her, and now that it's just us, I think it's time you do. No one left to disrespect."

My father's spine straightens. "Why would I tell you anything after you embarrassed me?" Like me, my father can read minds, which means he can also keep people out of his — a skill I've been trying to master all my life. But this dickhead has been doing it longer. "Ah, I see." He sneers, and just like that, I know he'll never tell me anything. "You've been wanting to know this your whole life, huh? Ever since you were a boy and you used to hope we were secretly in love?"

Fuck. I hate him, and I hate that he knows that even more.

When all I do is clench my jaw at him, he releases a bone-chilling laugh at my expense. "Poor little step-son never got to feel a mother's love. Does it keep you up at night?"

Not anymore. I never felt a father's love either, so I didn't see the point in losing sleep over things I'll never understand. "Forget it," I toss out, keeping my tone as flippant as I can, but he's not done fucking with me.

"How would you feel if she was a whore?"

My blood boils at his words, but not because it's possible that she was. I don't care if she sold her body for money, what I care about is that he'd toss that around like that makes her less than him. "I don't care. All that does is make you look even worse. You were a married man."

My father laughs again. "Since when has that stopped anyone? My only mistake was not pulling out and making her swallow you."

My fist connects with his face before I realize I'm throwing it, and after a brief scuffle, my father is shoving me away and backing up. It doesn't matter that he's older than me, taller than me, better at reading minds... I'm still stronger.

He doesn't want to fight me, because he'd fucking lose.

"Get out of my house."

I could kick his ass, but what would that help? I couldn't kill him unless I wanted to go to prison, and something tells me if I started beating his head in the way he deserves I'd never stop, so I turn away and leave instead.

Fuck him, and you know what? Fuck Suren, too.

I don't need anyone.

Chapter Twenty

Quinn

I don't know how Otto's doing and I hate it. I can only speak for myself when I say this break has been fucking brutal, and I still hate myself just as much as I did before he left.

I miss him. I feel so fucking cold the only explanation is his heat being gone, or maybe the distance between us, but every day without him I feel colder than the last. I'm so scared I'm going to get sick if I don't find a way to get warmer, I've been sleeping in bed with Suren so I don't freeze to death in my sleep.

I feel closer to her now than I have since arriving, and this break of us being able to just be together has helped our friendship more than I could have anticipated. We fucking needed it, even if we've both been trying to pretend we aren't pining for our guys. The ones that aren't actually our guys.

When did life become so complicated?

“Are you nervous for school to start again?”

One look at her tells me she knows I'm talking about her temporary magic, but she shrugs it off. “More excited than anything. Come Monday night, I'll be moving into the Lair with you. It's about damn time.”

“It really fucking is. There's a room three doors down from Ollie's that is open and I've already scoped it out. It has a great view of the courtyard, and as soon as you move in I'm changing rooms. I already talked to Ollie about it.”

“Are you sure she's cool with it? I don't need any more enemies here,” she mutters.

“Of course. She knows how close we are, she wasn't even surprised. She was the one that told me about the room. All those other bitches can fuck off. Oh shit, remember when I told you about the full moon stuff?” My mood drops instantly at the reminder, but I know I forgot something important.

“Before Parker came to get me they were all trying to talk me into an orgy. I wasn't down, and Ollie wouldn't have pressured me, but Parker jumped on Damian and said he could feel he was planning on something bad. We really need to watch our backs with him.”

Her nose scrunches. “Funny, Ledge almost let Baek and Jakob have me. But Damian? That’s weird. I knew he was gross, but I didn’t take him for someone we actually needed to be scared of. Shit.”

“Yeah...” I tilt my head. “Wait, back up. You almost had a foursome?”

Her eyebrows shoot up. “What? Huh? You almost had a full-on orgy?”

“Not really,” I argue with a grin, but it falls instantly when I think of Otto again. I don’t want anyone touching me but him, and I’ve known that since the day we met. Why the fuck did I ever break his heart? “Just answer this... did the idea of it excite you? Because I’m picturing it, and it sounds pretty damn hot.”

Suren’s eyes dart around like Ledger’s hiding in the shadows or something. Knowing him, he fucking might be. “Just between you and me? Fuck yeah. The circumstances that night were shit, but I’ve had like three sex dreams about them since. They’re all so fucking hot it’s cruel.”

It’s easy to agree. “They really are. Well, if it happens I want details, okay? Details of the details. Don’t leave anything out.”

“I won’t. They may never offer again, though,” she laments. “And I can barely survive Ledge on his own. The three of them would ruin me.”

Shrugging, she leans forward. “Tell me more about his knot.”

“Oh god,” I chuckle, but even she can see it’s laced with sadness. “It kind of hurts, but in the good way. I feel it start to swell as he gets closer and as soon as he comes it pops open and locks us together and those moments of being stuck together... there aren’t words, Sur. We feel like two halves of a whole.”

I shiver again, my muscles straining from days of this until I almost can’t take it.

“You really miss him, huh?” she asks quietly. “You guys are mates, I mean... it makes sense. But it’s still an insane concept.”

“Isn’t it? I didn’t know that was a thing. I never meant to hurt him and string him along. I didn’t know. Humans don’t have mates, I’ve only been in this realm a few months. Do you think he’ll forgive me?”

“Of course he will. He loves you, Quinn.”

Those words have tears burning my eyes, and as much as I’ve been trying not to let myself feel it, I can’t help it. “I miss him. I feel like I’m sick without him close... is this what I’ve been doing to him? If it is, I deserve this.”

“Don’t do that.” She moves closer to me, pulling me in. “Don’t. You don’t deserve to feel like this, Q. You didn’t know. He didn’t fucking tell you.”

“He wanted me to choose him on my own... he deserves a mate that will, not one that’s scared of that level of commitment.”

Her arms tighten around me. “Don’t think of it like that. You didn’t want space because you didn’t care about him. We were thrown into this world with almost no help or information. I’d have done the same thing, anyone would.”

“I keep telling myself that, but then I get these flashes of the look in his eyes every time I turned him away. They make my chest hurt, and none of my things smell like him anymore.”

“So let’s go steal some of his shit,” she offers. “Can’t be that hard to get into the Den, right?”

“Well... no. I mean, they have their own security measures but he’s always just carried me right on in. I’m not sure if anyone is there but... shit, can we? I need a new hoodie like yesterday.”

I feel excitement course through my veins at the prospect of smelling him, of being in his Den again with its soft nests and piles of pillows and blankets. Suren seems to sense it, because she doesn’t hesitate even for a moment.

On her feet, she tugs me to mine with dark, wild eyes. “So lead the way. Let’s go.”

My heart is pounding as I take her hand and drag her along, walking so fast I can feel her needing to speed up to keep pace. I don’t have it in me to apologize though, I actually feel warmer with each step closer to the Den, and when we finally arrive, I start sprinting inside without waiting to see if someone or something will stop me.

But the second I enter Otto’s pack’s area, I spot Von laying there and gasp when he growls at me. He stops the second he realizes who it is though and I feel my cheeks flush. Yeah, I’m definitely warmer now. I can already smell him. “Sorry, I thought... I didn’t know anyone was here.”

“He’s not here,” he says bluntly. “Still home. Might be back in a couple days.”

Suren finally catches up, eyeing Javonte. “Oh, we know.”

“Yeah, I didn’t know if he’d want to see me but—” I release a breath and just blurt it out. “This hoodie doesn’t smell like him anymore.” If anyone

would understand what I'm saying, it's a wolf. "Can I just... swap it out for one he wore before leaving? Maybe lay down on his pillow for a minute?"

My eyes begin to water and I want to gauge them from their sockets for making me look so weak, but then I remind myself crying isn't weakness. It's just an outlet.

He licks his lips nervously, then nods. "Go ahead. Just pretend I'm not here."

I pull off his sweatshirt without hesitation and set it on the chair, then grab one that has his scent still clinging to it so strongly I have to hold it up to my nose and inhale before I tug it on.

The breath I release as I lay down on Otto's bed feels like I just took ten pounds off my chest, and before I can stop myself, I curl up into a ball and begin to sob. It's pathetic, even I know that, but I don't care. I can't.

Suren steps forward tentatively. "Do you want me to come over there? I don't want my scent to mess anything up."

"No, I'm okay," I sniffle, whispering into Otto's pillow how sorry I am before I sit up and wipe off my face. "I'm okay. We can go."

Leaving causes something to tighten in my chest, but I know I need to. I can't do this to myself.

"All you gotta do is accept the bond and it'll stop," Von says gently. "It'll stop for all of us."

"I'm sorry, okay!" I don't mean to yell at him, but I can't fucking help it, my emotions are too high. "I didn't know."

"I know. But now you do. You gonna tell me you don't want him?"

"I do. I want him, Von. I always wanted him, I only needed time, but if I would have known... I thought I was doing him a favor, and then we just couldn't stay away. I didn't understand it, but fuck, I want him back."

His shoulders visibly relax. "Then don't worry about it, girl. Get him back. All good."

"When will he be back? Is he staying for the weekend?"

"Dunno. I'm surprised he stayed this long, honestly. He had to tell his dad about what happened."

"Shit," I breathe, my chest aching in a way that's becoming familiar. "His family is going to hate me."

"Nah. The way they'll see it, it's his fault, not yours. He's the Alpha. He should've been exactly what you needed," he explains, making Suren snort.

“Don’t they know that’s impossible? No couple is 100% perfect for each other.”

“Mates are.”

“Does that mean there’s something wrong with me? I mean, he was perfect for me and yet... I wanted to focus on school of all things.”

His long twists bounce as he shakes his head. “No. He should’ve known that and backed the hell off. That’s the thing. This wasn’t on you, at least not all of it. You didn’t have to walk away, but he didn’t have to be so damned clingy.”

And now I’m defensive of him. “Yeah, but... I think he needed me to know I’m loved. Aside from Suren, I’ve never had that. He knows that so... I don’t know. I loved how clingy he was, I just needed some space every so often so I could find myself. I’d do anything for him to be right here being clingy right now.”

Slowly, he gets to his feet. “If you’re serious, and I mean dead fuckin’ serious, Quinn... I’ll go get him. It’ll take about a day because his family’s den is hidden.”

“Really?” I ask hopefully. “His family won’t be upset?”

“Not if they know he’s coming back to properly claim you,” he assures me. “Told you, he probably doesn’t wanna be there anyway. He’s probably just sticking it out for Parker.”

“Okay,” I blurt out breathlessly. “Please, go get him.”

Javonte’s giant ass abruptly picks me up, spinning me around and almost crushing me in a hug. “Thank the fucking goddess.”

It feels really damn good. Since day one I felt welcomed by Otto’s pack, like I was instantly family, and the last few weeks I haven’t. I’ve really missed them. “Thank you.”

Setting me down gently, he grins sheepishly as he backs toward the door. “I told Niklaus you’d come around. He didn’t believe me. Idiot.”

Without another word, he shifts into a stunning silver wolf and bounds out of the Den, leaving me with a slack-jawed Suren. “I’ll never get over how fast that happens.” Picking up his shredded clothes, she giggles to herself. “Gives a whole new meaning to ‘ripped jeans.’”

I snort, feeling better than I have since the full moon. My wolf is coming home to me, and I have a fuck ton of groveling to do when he does.

Chapter Twenty-One

Otto

“I still can’t believe you told him no,” I laugh, shaking my head at my fiery little Omega. “I’ve never seen him so angry.”

“That was almost two weeks ago, Alpha. Are you ever gonna stop giggling about it?”

Absolutely not, but that’s my business. I’m near desperate for things to take the edge off, and my tiny, harmless-looking twink of an Omega refusing to let my big, bad Alpha brother claim him is at the very tippy top of the list right now. “I’m sorry,” I concede. “But watching him leave here all pissed off might be the second greatest thing that’s ever happened to me.”

“What’s the first?”

On instinct, my fingers dance over the broken moon on my chest. “Cherry. At least for a couple months, I got to know what it’s like to be with my mate. Some people never get to experience that at all, so I guess I’m lucky.”

“Not lucky. Just... good.” He rolls to face me in the dark, resting his hand on my shoulder. “I’m really proud of you. I never knew your dad forced your mom into it like that. You could’ve done the same with Quinn, but you didn’t. You’re giving her a choice.”

Even the thought makes me squirm uncomfortably. “I always hated hearing about it growing up. My dad talked about it like it was some great achievement, y’know? Like an Iron Lake pack coming to Rogue Hollow to hunt for sport was something to be celebrated to begin with, let alone the fact that he found his mate and didn’t even try to make her like him. She hated him for years but accepted the bond when she got pregnant with Rodyn because she thought she had to. His Alpha status was cemented and her fate was sealed. It wasn’t until the twins were born that she actually started to love him. I don’t want things to ever be like that with me and Cherry; it’s why I refused to tell her she was my mate to begin with. I don’t want her to be with me out of some archaic sense of obligation. I want her to choose me.”

Parker’s whole face lights up as we hear the footfalls of a familiar wolf. “Is that Von?” he asks excitedly. “He’s outside the barrier. What’s he doing here?”

Scrambling up, I follow him to the edge of the magic and step through. Sure enough, my favorite Beta is standing in front of us panting and doubled over. “Thank fuck. Goddess, remind me never to run here again. Not far, my ass,” he wheezes. “I’m outta shape. But you — go back to school. You gotta – shiiit, hold on. Can’t breathe.”

Immediately, my hackles rise. Javonte wouldn’t run here unless something was wrong, so why is he smiling? “What happened?” I ask sharply. “Von, tell me.”

He waves a hand to get me to shush for a moment, then exhales hard. “Okay. Your girl broke into the Den and cried all over your pillows. I got lost three fuckin’ times trying to find this place or I’d have been here last night. Come on, you gotta go back. I think she’s ready, Alpha.”

I don’t need to hear anything else. “Stay here and rest. Take care of Parker on the way back, okay? I gotta go.”

Not stopping to say goodbye to my family, I hastily shuck off my sweatpants and put them between my teeth, then shift to run the few miles back to the school. I feel bad for Von if he really got lost for that long, but I’ll make this up to him later. Right now, I need to run.

Faster. Faster. *Faster.*

I can’t stop the howl that rips through me as hope threatens to split me in two. Is this real? Is she ready? It’s not too late. I can feel it. If she accepts me now, everything will be fine. I’ll gain full control of my pack again, be strong enough to fight Fenris off if he starts something else. I can have it all again. I can have her.

Pushing my wolf to his limit, I reach the school just as the sun positions directly overhead. My nest is empty when I get there — no Cherry, no one at all — but I can smell her all over my pillows, my blankets. She was here, he wasn’t lying. She’s mine, mine, *mine*. Nose to the ground, I follow her scent to the courtyard in front of the dorms, where it mingles disgustingly with a bunch of others. Suren, Oleander, Tris, a hybrid I don’t recognize. Greylin? That doesn’t make sense. Damian, I’ll fucking kill him — and Blaise.

Growling, I lift my head up to see them all laughing together. The sight confuses me enough that I don’t move for a moment. Why’s she laughing with them? If Javonte was telling me the truth, why isn’t she in my nest where she belongs, waiting for me?

It’s *his* fault, has to be.

I'm just about to bound over there and rip his fucking throat out when my girl's laughter dances through the air. Pausing, I watch as she sends a pillar of water shooting fifty feet above her head, spiraling back down in a tight wave. My heart beats for her to keep going. Is she an Elemental like Ollie?

C'mon, Cherry, I urge silently. Do it again. Show them all how strong you are.

Afraid to disturb them and ruin this for her, I wait in the shadows, shifting to pull on my sweats again as she curls her hand and sends the water streaming back into the fountain, where it explodes in a kaleidoscope of color that cascades out and floods the courtyard in a sea of rainbow. I've never seen magic like that before; it's... gorgeous. Like all the warm, beautiful things inside her are finally finding an outlet.

Even Suren looks impressed, and she's always seemed resentful of Cherry's magic. I watch from the safety of the alley as she hugs my mate with a blinding smile, but it only lasts for a moment. The second the hug breaks, Cherry's entire body twitches so hard all of the people around her stop talking.

"Quinn?" Ollie mutters, just before my beautiful mate collapses hard onto the ground and begins to convulse.

I don't wait. Sprinting over, I reach them and shove Blaise out of my way as I drop down to steady her. "Cherry? What the fuck happened?" I snap to Suren. "The fuck did you do to her?"

Face paler than I've ever seen it, she shakes her head quickly. "I didn't do anything! I didn't — it wasn't me! Someone help her!"

Blaise of all people shoves me aside and puts two hands on her face, making the desire to shift and rip his head off return in full force, but then he shushes everyone. "Come on, Quinn. Listen to my voice. Come back."

The panic radiating off of Suren makes Greylin move closer. "Let me take her to the Lair. She needs a Healer's touch and you're not helping, Blaise."

My mate continues to jerk on the ground, her breathing hitching in quick, terrifying bursts as her gaze remains locked with mine. I can feel her fear.

"I think I might be a Healer," Tris rushes out, moving in to place a hand on her forehead, but all that does is make Quinn's eyes roll and her breathing slow.

"Even if you are, you're still training," Grey argues. "I'm the fastest one here, let me take her."

“I can do it,” I growl. “Just move.”

Greylin fixes me with a cold stare as he holds his ground. “I’m faster than you and you know it, but by all means, go slower. Waste the time she’s got.”

I pull back like he slapped me, hissing, “Run,” to him as he lifts her up and takes off. As much as I hate to admit it, he’s right — in either form, I’d still be slower. She needs help more than I need to be the one to help her.

I’m about to shift and take off when Blaise speaks, and for once I don’t want to bite the guy. “She’ll be okay, Otto. We’ll catch up... go.”

Nope. Still want to bite him. Since when do I need his fucking permission to go after my mate?

I’ll deal with him later.

Sprinting back to the Lair, I run smack into the barrier meant to keep non-witches out, but that doesn’t make sense. I’ve never had a problem getting to her before, she’s my mate. That supersedes everything else. There will never be a barrier she can hide behind that I can’t break down... but the tether between us is... snapped.

She broke it, and now I can’t get to her.

Pounding on the door, I scream for someone — anyone — to let me in. I don’t care if I have to fight every fucking witch at this school; they will not keep me from her.

No one will.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Suren

Panic grips me as we all stand frozen near the fountain. “It wasn’t me,” I whisper. “I didn’t do anything to her.”

“Of course you didn’t,” Blaise responds, and when I hear him huff a laugh, I nearly flip out on him.

“Was that—”

“Yup,” he cuts Ollie off and grabs her hand to tug her toward the Lair. “Let’s go catch up. She might be asleep for a while.”

He grabs my hand too just as Ollie tells the others we’ll fill them in later, then all three of us take off. My mind races with questions as Blaise forces us to go faster, and I can’t help but wonder if it really was my fault.

Did one of my temp magic capsules break open or something? She’s never had seizures before, so what the hell is this, and why does Blaise look so smug?

The second we stop, I ignore a whimpering Otto and force the witch to face me. “Why do you seem happy about this?” I snap.

“I’m not happy — or maybe a little,” Blaise says, holding up both hands when Otto growls. “Hold on, I’m not happy she busted her head, okay? I’m happy because she just figured out her Order. We should all be fucking happy for her. That wasn’t some seizure, she had a vision. Quinn’s a Seer.”

Ollie releases an excited, breathy laugh to my left, but her words sound far away. “Shit! I had a feeling when I saw her eyes... they seemed glossed over, almost colorless like I’ve seen yours get, but then they rolled and yours don’t do that.”

“That’s because it was her first real vision. She’s had great intuition her whole life, but this was different. I don’t know what she saw, but my first one was brutal like that too. They get easier with each one, and clearer too. She’ll probably only remember random flashes right now, but eventually she’ll learn how to watch them almost like a movie. Even I’m still working on that, though.”

This makes more sense than anything I’ve ever heard in my life. All those times when her gut instincts saved us from disaster, all the nightmares she’s

had that have seemed to come true in various ways. Of course she's a Seer. "So she'll be okay?" I ask weakly. "You're sure that's what this is?"

"Positive," he says with a wave of his hand. "And I'm sure they know it in there too. She's probably done now, but I can't say how long she'll sleep it off. Could be 5 minutes, could be an hour. Her mind needs to find its way back to her body."

His words don't make me feel any better. That sounds terrifying in ways I can't imagine — and clearly, Otto feels the same way.

"Quit fucking around and let me in," he snarls. "She needs me."

Ollie walks over to the him and puts a hand on his shoulder. I don't know what she's doing until it looks like something passes between them and she waves her hand toward the Lair. "There, you can come and go, but if she wakes up and says she needs that space, I'll have to block you. You know that right?"

"Fine. Just take me to her," he insists. "Show me where she's at."

Ollie pushes open the door and slips inside with Otto and me right on her heels, but before we make it to the infirmary, Grey comes walking out with a small frown that instantly melts away when he sees me. "Hey. Seems like the worst of it is over, she's just sleeping now, but I got the boot. Sure all you guys will be welcome back there though." His eyes flick to Otto. "Probably."

"He's her mate," Ollie responds. "The witches will understand why he needs to be close while she's vulnerable."

He nods like that isn't news at all to him and it takes me a second to remember he can read minds. How do I keep forgetting it about him while Ledger never lets me forget it?

"Thanks, Grey. I'll catch up with you later, okay?" I say softly. "I really appreciate your help."

"No problem. See you later, beautiful."

He tosses me a wink and speeds off in a blur, and then we follow Otto toward Quinn. It looks like he's following her scent as he moves through the Lair like he owns the place, and when we enter Quinn's room, she's laying on top of a blanket looking peaceful.

"How is she?" Ollie asks the Healer standing next to her.

Kaori smiles at us warmly and moves away so Otto can be close to her. "She's fine. Sleeping like she just ran ten miles, but I imagine that's how visions feel. Did she have a feeling she'd be a Seer?"

“She talked about it, but mostly she was frustrated about not knowing for sure.”

God, what a selfish bitch I’ve been. Moving past them, I sit down next to Quinn and brush her bangs out of her face, wondering why she takes the time to speak to me at all anymore. I’ve been so wrapped up in my own shit that I’ve been ignoring what’s right in front of me. Maybe if I’d have been there for her, encouraged her, told her this was the most obvious answer, things would be different. Maybe it wouldn’t have happened like this. She could’ve been prepared.

But I didn’t, and now Blaise is right. All we can do is wait for her to find her way back to her body.

“I need all of you to get out but Kaori,” Otto says through clenched teeth. “It’s nothing personal, but anyone who stays in here after I count to three is gonna get hurt. I’ll send word as soon as she’s up.”

I want to argue with him, but how can I? I can see the way his skin is vibrating like he’s barely hanging on to this form. No one will keep her safer than he will, I know it. “Otto’s right, guys. We should go.”

“One—”

“Okay!” Ollie hisses. “Okay. We’re going. C’mon.”

Squeezing Quinn’s hand once, I stand up to follow the others out before things go from bad to worse. And with the way my luck has been? That might be sooner than I think.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Quinn

My head is pounding when I try to wake up. It's not like most mornings though; I don't feel peaceful as I drift toward consciousness, I feel chaos. My brain throbs trying to remember what happened, how I went from playing with magic to lost at sea. Not literally at sea, I was absolutely standing on land as the world twisted and contorted around me, but it felt like I was rocking on that door Rose should have shared in *Titanic* and everything else was floating away.

My body aches when I find the strength to move, and when my vision finally clears, I see the one person I need to see more than anything. My mate. "Otto," I whisper, reaching out to touch his face. "I missed you."

"I'm here, Cher. Not leaving your side."

I hum, letting my heavy hand fall as I look around the room. I'm surprised none of my friends are here, but when I meet his eyes again I know exactly why they're not. My protective wolf needed to keep me safe. With a smile, I ask him, "When did you get back?" as I slip our fingers together.

"Right before it happened. Javonte's a little directionally challenged and had trouble finding me, but I came as soon as he told me you were looking for me." He lifts our hands to kiss my fingers. "I'm so sorry, Cherry. You were right... about all of it. Everything."

"No," I croak out, moving to try and get up so I can climb into his lap. "No, I was selfish, baby. I hurt you so much."

He stops me, laying me back gently. "Don't move, you'll hurt yourself. But Cherry, don't you see? You told me a million times you needed space to figure things out and discover who you are. I thought I knew better, but—" his eyes drop, and I swear I can feel the tightness in his chest — "you were right. I left you alone for two weeks and now you know who you are. All you needed was for me to get out of your way."

Those words make my stomach turn with guilt. My mate was trying to be everything for me, and I made him feel like he was in my way. Otto Neyrus is not in my way, he *is* my way. "I want you, Alpha."

The whimper he lets out doesn't make any sense to me until my eyes drop a little lower. This is the first time I've seen him without a shirt on since our

fight, and the evidence is written there all over his chest. The once-glowing moon is now broken and cracked, so faded into his skin, I can barely see it. It's more like a scar than a burning testament of love.

"Say it again," he whispers. "Please. Just try again."

My hand flies to his mark, I sit up before he can stop me and place a kiss to it, willing that beautiful glow to return to us. "I'm so sorry I broke this. I want you, Alpha. Every single day, I'm going to wake up and choose you all over again, because I'm honored to be your mate. I love you."

Nothing changes despite the way he tugs on my collar to check my skin. It's as blank as ever, and his doesn't change.

"It... it doesn't matter," he rasps. "I don't care. If you mean it and you promise you mean it, I'll take it. I don't need to be Alpha. I just need to be yours."

"You are mine. I wanted that even before — wait, you said I know who I am now?" I take a second to recap what happened to me and where I am, and then it slaps me in the face like a bucket of cold water. "Shit, Otto what happened to me today?"

His brows crease. "You don't remember anything? Blaise says he thinks you had a vision. That you're a Seer, like he is."

I remember pieces of the vision, but it's the other stuff that's fuzzy. "I remember we were all hanging out and then suddenly I was somewhere else. Like I was in a dream, and now I'm here. Did I just collapse there?"

"You had a full-on seizure, Cherry. Blaise says it's normal for the first time and they'll get easier as time goes on, like his. But you hit your head on the ground." Concern lines his face as he leans in, gently touching the spot. "You've been out for hours."

"Hours? It felt like minutes... seconds really, because the vision was so jumbled." Vision. It feels surreal as it truly sinks in that I'm a Seer, but it also feels really fucking right. Like it's something I should have always known. "Baby, I'm a Seer."

"That's my girl," he whispers, tears filling his eyes as he gently kisses me. "I'm so proud of you, Cherry. I'm gonna be better for you this time, I promise. Tell me what you remember."

He's already perfect for me, but that isn't an argument I want to have. Everything is going to work out for us regardless. I let my eyes close as I try to remember the vision as clearly as I can, but it still feels far away. "I

remember standing in the middle of the courtyard and the world was twisting all around me, like I was in the center of a tornado.”

“Tornado? Like a literal one?” he asks. “We’ve been known to have some pretty crazy storms, but tornadoes aren’t common around here.”

“Yeah, it was weird though. It wasn’t what you picture when you hear the word, it was like... shit.” My head pounds, making me squeeze my temples as I try to find the words. “Like the whole world was in the tornado.”

“Whoa. Okay, Cher. Just lay down. I’ll get Kaori, she said she healed you.”

“I’m okay. Honestly, just want to get out of here. Did she say I had to stay?”

His lips turn down as he takes my hand again. “Not once you woke up. She didn’t want me moving you until then, but I can take you to your room if you want.”

“Yeah... or... did you want to go to the Den?”

I was just there and I already miss the smells, the comforting familiarity of his nest, the way he fidgets so much before finally laying down and getting comfortable. Going anywhere else just seems wrong, so I’m happy when Otto’s shoulders relax. “Yeah. C’mon, climb up.”

He holds out his arms as Blaise peeks his head in. “Yeah, let’s pretend I wasn’t eavesdropping. I’m not tryna die today, but I think I can offer a little insight.”

Otto’s growl makes him stand straighter like he’s about to throw up a shield if he needs to, but I climb into his arms as a distraction. “It’s okay, baby. I’m a Seer like him now, and he can help. I’ll stay right here while we talk.”

“And I’ll stay near the door. Like I said, today can’t be the day I die. It’s going to be much more dramatic than a grumpy, protective werewolf.”

“Then say what you need to say,” Otto mutters. “She needs rest.”

Bowing his head a little, Blaise says, “Most visions — especially early ones — are more metaphorical than literal. You mentioned the whole world was inside a tornado? That could mean anything. Maybe the whole world’s in danger, but maybe it’s just your world. And the tornado itself doesn’t necessarily mean danger, either. It could be upheaval, change. Chaos, which isn’t always a bad thing. The point is, I wouldn’t lose sleep over it if I were you. Chances are good you’ll never know what it meant. Clairvoyance class will help.”

“Do you have a lot of visions you never find the meaning to?” It sounds frustrating as hell, but might explain why he’s so cranky sometimes.

“More than you’d think. Or it’ll hit me a year later something small happened that explains one of them.”

I groan, letting my head fall against Otto’s chest. “Sounds stressful as hell. When will I get my new class? They won’t wait until next semester, right? I need to start learning as soon as possible.”

“Probably Monday, this place doesn’t waste time. Check your board before classes start.” He steps back slowly, waving to us. “See you then.”

“Bye, thank you.” I release a sigh and say goodbye to my peace of mind, because if I’m going to have visions that may or may not mean anything at all, I don’t imagine I’ll ever get it back. What happens if I under-stress a vision that could mean someone gets hurt? Or if the opposite happens and I freak everyone out about some damn tornado that was only meant to be metaphorical? How the hell will I know what’s important or not? “Can we stop by Human House so I can tell Suren I’m okay? Then I want to go straight to your nest. I need your award-worthy cuddles.”

“Course, baby. Just hang on.”

I can tell Suren is happy I stopped by when she hugs me tightly, but we only stay there long enough for me to tell her about my vision before we’re on our way to Otto’s. He’s walking slower than he normally does, and somehow I know it’s because he’s worried I hurt myself when I fell. Hopefully they can teach me to have visions standing up so that doesn’t happen every single time or I’m going to start feeling like I got the short end of the stick here. The phrase “be careful what you wish for” is starting to sound more and more applicable.

But at least I have Otto again.

“Is anyone else there tonight?”

“I think Von and Parker are still at my parents’ and everyone else is still at home until tomorrow. It’s just us, Cherry baby.”

Good. I just want him. “Okay. Otto, why don’t I have a mark yet? I love you with all of me. Is there something wrong with me?”

He doesn’t answer me until we’re inside the Den and he’s setting me down near his nest, and I don’t dare push him as he rearranges blankets and pillows, looking more agitated by the second. Finally, he picks me up and lays me down. “I don’t ever want to hear you suggest there’s something wrong with you again, do you understand?”

The intensity in his tone makes me shiver, but it's nothing like the shivering I was doing for nearly two weeks. I'm finally warm again. I nod, fingers curling against his skin as he lays down with me.

"Good girl. Now, to answer your question... I don't have a fucking clue. I'm out of my depth here, baby."

"I ruined us, didn't I?" My voice breaks as I speak, but I don't feel like crying. It's just heavy. "How do you not hate me?"

Carefully, he takes my hand and puts it over his heart. It's beating so fast and so hard it reminds me that he's just different — that even his heart is superhuman. "You don't think I've done my fair share of hating you? Do you remember what happened in the alley outside Night Owl?"

I nod, my gaze dropping in shame as I remember the pain in his eyes.

"I wasn't exactly leading with love and forgiveness that day," he admits quietly. "But Cherry, I mean it. I love being an Alpha. I love my pack. I love the power. But without you? None of it'll mean anything in five years."

"I'm so upset I didn't realize what I was doing to you and your pack. I wish I understood more about wolves so I could say the right thing, but you're my Alpha, okay? You always will be."

He checks my chest again with a sad smile. "That's the right thing to say, Cher. You're perfect."

Stupid blank chest. I know it's my fault, but I don't know how to change it. I mean, what am I saying? I knew he was the one I wanted even when I asked to go on a break, I was just stupid. And right now, I'm far from perfect, but he's sweet for saying it. "Were you cold when we were apart? I know you never get cold normally, but did you feel it at all? I couldn't stop shivering."

"I'm always cold without you, Cher. It's why I don't care about the marks or any of it but you."

With a soft smile, I lean in and kiss his lips, needing him to feel my longing for him so he knows it matches his. I was trying hard not to think about it while we were apart, so I worked my ass off to fake it like I was okay.

I wasn't, and I'm done pretending.

Otto and I are real.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Ledger

Turns out, I lied and I do actually need Suren. Coming to this conclusion is annoying as fuck, but after drinking my weight in alcohol this past week, I still couldn't drink that infuriating Disaster out of my mind. It's fucking ridiculous the way I count down the days to the last weekend of break, and even more ridiculous when I wake up finally feeling a semblance of normal because I know that damn girl will be in my dorm again.

Why did I have to claim her? Why the hell did I do this to myself?

Too late now, so I hastily get dressed and make my dumbass way over to Human House as I try not to think about how her blood tasted the last time I bit her.

Shit was bitter as hell, and I don't know why. I couldn't see anything in her mind that told me it was on purpose, and Suren can't block shit off when it comes to me. She isn't capable.

I'm happy to find her still sleeping when I walk in her room, because it makes forgetting about that encounter much easier now that I'm looking at her.

Yeah, I'm not doing this nicely.

Without a word, I grab her off her bed and toss her over my shoulder as her wake up call, gripping her tighter as she screams and flails. "What the fuck!" she shrieks. "Put me down!"

"No can do, Clumsy. You have a deal to fulfill, and I'm here to collect. Hang on tight." I rush off toward my tower with her still squirming in my arms, and I don't bother saying anything else or setting her down until we're inside my bedroom. "Did you sleep in your panties to give me easy access?"

I toss her on the bed, grinning when she bounces and cusses me out. "Fucking fuck, Ledge! No, I didn't do it for you. I thought you went home."

"Nope. I went to see my father, but this is my home. How much did you miss me?"

I tug the shirt off her body and let her pretend it wasn't mine, even though I can hear every embarrassed thought that runs through her head. "I missed you about as much as you missed me."

“Good to know.” She’s actually not lying and it’s cute, but I pretend it’s not. “So you remember our deal, yeah?”

Huffing, she nods a little and scoots forward to splay out for me. “Yeah. One weekend, I stay tied up in your room and submit to you. I won’t tell you no about anything. A deal’s a deal, Huxley.”

“Good girl,” I growl, freeing her of those panties that smell so good from a distance I have to pull them up to my nose for a sniff. “Fuck, your pussy always smells go good when you wake up.”

Before she can say anything, I use my vampire speed to restrain her arms to the bed, leaving her legs free so I can bend them to my will.

Her thighs twitch as she spreads them for me. “Just when I wake up?”

My gaze is locked on her gorgeous pussy as I shake my head. “All day really, but when you’re here in the morning, it’s my favorite smell to wake up to. Like it’s fucking calling to me.”

I reach out to finger her slowly, devouring the internal struggle she’s having. She loves this, being at my mercy and having my hands on her, but her pride won’t let her say it. Won’t let her beg like she wants to.

Good thing I can hear it clear as day, even though she’d sell her soul for me not to. “How many times did you think about me sneaking in your room and fucking you?”

“Once or twice,” she breathes. “Or a lot.”

I’ll hate myself later for how happy that makes me, but for now, I’m going to just let myself enjoy it. “Think about my tongue, too?”

Retracting my fingers, I meet her gaze as I pull them up to my lips for a taste. It makes her shiver under me. “And your fangs,” she admits so quietly, she barely says it out loud at all. “And other things.”

“Other things.” For once, I don’t probe for those other things yet. I don’t know why I hold back, but instead of searching her mind for the things she desires of me, I lie to myself and say it’s *all* of me, then drop down to eat her pussy like it’s breakfast.

“Oh, fuck,” she moans, tipping her head back as she tugs against the silk around her wrists. “I’ll never understand how your tongue feels so good when your mouth says such infuriating things.”

I want to laugh at that and say ‘right back at you’ but that’s not what I’m focused on right now. I can’t stop wondering about every single thing she missed about me, and I know that makes me pathetic. “Tell me,” I grumble against her. “Tell me the other things you missed about me.”

She tries not to, so I stop, spitting on her pussy. “Shit, okay! I’ll never repeat any of this, but your eyes. The way they go from almost clear to pitch black. Both are gorgeous... and then... how sinfully, dangerously hot you look with my blood dripping off your fangs.”

That makes my cock twitch so hard I grunt and instantly search her mind for the lie, and I’m glad I don’t find one. “Fucking love it when your blood is in my mouth, girl.”

“So do it,” she blurts, wriggling under me. “Bite your favorite spot, baby.”

She’ll never have to tell me twice. I sink my fangs into her thigh and groan the second her blood oozes into my mouth, and once again it’s bitter, but it’s a little better than the last time so I drink a few gulps before I pull off. “I’ll go get you something sweet in a bit. For now, come for me.”

I go back to eating her pussy once she gets a good view of my bloody fangs, and god damn, she wasn’t kidding. The way her hips jerk as she tries to ride my face proves even without scanning her thoughts how turned on it makes her — and what’s more, I can feel the darker parts of her waking up. Calling to me.

Fuck, I want to feed those parts. I want to lull them out and play with them, fucking lick them until they’re bending to my will and curling into me the way her body does. “Don’t hold back. I want to hear you scream.”

I scratch her clit gently with my fang and then suck it into my mouth until she’s giving me half of what I want. She doesn’t scream, but the way she whisper-moans my name as she comes all over my tongue is good enough.

For now, I need to be inside her.

I strip down before she can even take her next breath and lift her ankles up to rest on my shoulders, my cock finding home in one brutal thrust that finally makes her scream for me. It’s loud and broken, ending in a choked-off sob that has my dick so hard, I can’t see straight.

“So fucking tight. I know you’ve been hanging around Grey again, but he can’t fucking have you. This pussy was made for my cock.”

Whimpering, she meets my eyes with her brows pinched and her jaw slack. “He called me b-beautiful earlier,” she admits.

“Yeah? Did he also tell you the sky and your eyes are both blue?” I ask, snapping my hips in and out of her. “Want me to state facts for you, baby? Out of the two, I prefer the blue in your eyes. Especially when you’re angry. Fucking breathtaking.”

Wait, what the fuck is happening? The darkness inside her is slipping through my fingers, fading fucking fast. “Ledger,” she gasps, like no one’s ever given her a compliment she believed before.

No, no, no, no. Come back to me. Fuck. Sorry, Suren. “Don’t get soft, I still want to fuck your mouth until you pass out every time you open it.”

There it is. The reminder that she’s just a toy has her chest tightening and her pussy threatening to kick me out, but it’s back. Growing by the second.

“Screw you,” she huffs.

“Nah, I’ll do the screwing here, Clumsy. You’ll be the one that lays there and takes it.” I pull out all the way so I can slap her clit hard, then shove myself back in.

“You sure it won’t be Jakob and Baek?” she goads. “You almost let them. Or wait, you stopped because you were afraid they’re better than you.”

That actually makes me laugh, because the cool part about reading minds is knowing when you’re the best guy in the whole fucking room. No one here is a threat to me in that regard, and I’m confident enough to prove it if I have to. “I could let them both fuck you and you’d still picture me when you came.”

I let her legs fall to the sides so I can lean in and scrape her cheek with my fang, not surprised when she tries to turn away from me. It’s fine. I can feel my prize through every inch of her body that I’m touching — the more she thinks of how badly she wants all three of us, the more she hates herself for it.

And goddess, it tastes good.

I’m thinking this needs to happen. “You want that, Suren? You got three holes for us too. Tell me where you want us all.”

The word ‘no’ dies on her tongue. My girl doesn’t break her promises... not to me. Not anymore, anyway. “You can sit off to the side while Baek breeds my ass and Jakob breeds my pussy. Or you can fuck my throat. Keep your cock somewhere I can bite it.”

So she’s still a fucking liar.

I can see it in her mind as she pictures it — and nothing she said was true. Jakob’s in her ass, Baek’s in her mouth, and I’m right where I fucking belong.

But we can play this her way.

“No more talking then, huh? Got it.” My hand flies up to her throat and I squeeze, snapping into her like I’m trying to break her cervix until I feel her

scream vibrating my palm.

There she is. That's what the fuck I love to hear.

I don't stop. Deep down, I know she loves this and loves riding that line between safe and near-death just like I do, so I cut her airway off completely and then I compel her to do what I want. "Rub your clit, girl. You can come or you can die. We'll see what happens first."

I rip the silk restraining her right hand free and watch her try to fight it, but she can't. Her fingers find her pussy as she chokes trying to get air, eyes alight with sheer, unfiltered lust.

For a moment, I consider actually doing killing her. It would solve so many fucking problems, and I can do it in a heartbeat. I'm strong enough, even if she's an unweaked Disaster. But as she clenches and gives in, soaking my cock and strangling it as thoroughly as I'm strangling her, I find that I couldn't kill her if I tried. I haven't gotten my fill of her yet, and fucking hell, I wish I had.

I follow her a moment later, slamming deep so I can breed her and remind her this pussy has been owned and claimed as mine.

Her whole body trembles as I let her neck go and let her gasp for air. But for once, nothing bratty comes out of her mouth — just a mumbled 'thank you' and a half-hearted, shame-filled request for me to hold her.

It's honestly one of the things I don't think I could ever deny her. I'd never say it out loud, but I actually missed holding her these last two weeks, so I plan on taking advantage of this weekend.

She'll be sick of me come Monday.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Suren

Amrit would really come in handy right about now. The insatiable bastard let me shower, but then bent me over the arm of his couch and restrained me again. This time, my hands are bound behind my back just above my exposed ass, and my cheek is digging into the cushion uncomfortably as my toes barely scrape the ground. I need the amrit because... I fucking love it.

Him knowing that is frankly just embarrassing.

“Are you done staring yet?” I goad. “Take a picture next time.”

“I just did, actually. A mental one your mouth decided to ruin. Thanks.”

A broad hand slaps down on my ass with a pop, making my pussy clench in response. “You’re welcome,” I quip. “Can’t have you falling in love with me or something.”

Ledger laughs, his hand smacking down again on the other side.

“Actually, I like seeing my handprint on there even more. Keep being an asshole.”

Jokes on him. I have zero objections to this. “Are you sure you’re leaving a handprint?” I ask, wiggling my ass. “Feels like you’re tickling me.”

The next one takes my breath away, and the power behind it is enough to make him growl. “How was that?”

Before I can answer, two slick fingers dip into my ass and don’t feel like tickles at all. “Better,” I gasp. “Much better.”

“There’s my girl,” he coos, and I swear there’s more praise behind those three words than anything before them. “Fucking intoxicating.”

I don’t know what he means, but before I can ask, those fingers go deeper and deeper until they can’t anymore and I know what he did with me earlier was just the beginning. It constantly surprises me how much he desires me, all of me. The fire, the ice. The bratting and total submission. This is the only place I’ve ever felt seen.

“Gonna fuck my ass this time, baby?” I ask, slowly clenching around his fingers so he can’t pull them out yet. “My mouth and pussy not enough for you this weekend?”

“Fuck no,” he grunts, his fingers leaving me as he moves fully behind me. “All three of your holes will ache when you think about me next week.”

I remind myself I'm not allowed to tell him no about anything, so I don't try to deny that I'll be thinking about him. That I'm *always* thinking about him, even when I don't want to be. "And what about you? Will your cock be sore because you refuse to admit you have a limit?"

"I have no limits, Suren." He presses against my hole and pushes the head inside. "You belong to me. Say it."

Chuckling quietly, I start to think I'm going to regret the deal I made. "I belong to you, Ledger."

"Good girl." He slams the rest of the way inside with one solid thrust. "Now tell me how much you love my cock inside your ass."

Fuck. Fuck, fuck. I can't breathe for a moment as the shock of him splitting me open pulses through me, but it might be preferable to saying what he just told me to. Yeah, I'll definitely regret this. "I— fuck. I love having your cock in my ass."

The asshole laughs and begins fucking me slow and deep. "You're being so good for me today. Finally putting a voice to all the little thoughts you hope I don't hear."

My face burns, and I close my eyes as each long drag of his cock makes me a little wetter. "So return the favor. Tell me the thoughts you wish I wouldn't hear."

"You'd like that, huh? You want to hear about how good you make me feel? How addicted I truly am to all of you? Hell, how addicted doesn't even begin to grasp what you do to me? I'm fucking obsessed."

He snaps his hips harder as he holds my bound hands for leverage. Those words fill me up and make my chest swell in ways I wasn't expecting — in ways that make it easier to obey him.

"So big, baby. Show me whose ass this is."

"You need a reminder, don't you, clumsy girl?"

Nails rake down my spine hard enough to split the skin and make me bleed. I don't need the reminder. Every day is a reminder that I belong to him, that I'll always be his. "No. Maybe I just like it when you get all growly." And right now, with his hips making my ass bounce and his cock so deep inside of me I know I'll feel him for days... I'm in the mood to please him.

His cock throbs as he leans down to lick up my blood, making me gasp and jerk my hips when he slips his hand under me to pinch my clit. "Am I

allowed to come?" I ask, wishing like hell he was the one not allowed to say no. "Please?"

The pressure leaves my clit. "Do you want to?" He grinds his hips before I can answer, making my eyes flutter.

"Fuck. Yes, Ledger. People typically like to orgasm when they have sex."

"In that case, no. Not with that tone." He slaps my clit and lifts up to start fucking me hard again until I'm screaming from the force of it. Every rough movement has my clit rubbing the arm of the couch, so fuck it, I don't need his permission. I can get what I need anyway, just a few more —

Ledger stills.

"No, you *do* need my permission. You need my permission to fucking breathe this weekend, Suren." His hand is suddenly on my throat, and when he speaks again, his words are heavy with compulsion. "You will not come unless I say so."

I feel the magic travel down my spine straight to my clit, and I know without a doubt, he means it. God damnit. "I'm sorry," I croak out. "It just feels so good."

"Of course it does. Your body is getting the only cock it craves. Doesn't matter what hole I'm in, your body needs me as much as I need it."

Straining from his grip on my neck, I squirm on his cock. "So give it to me, Ledge. I won't come. Use me."

Yanking me up by my neck, his other hand wraps around my throat too so he can use it as leverage to pound into me. It's such an intense feeling, riding the high of an orgasm I won't reach. The slowed bloodflow, the brutal thrusts that split my ass open, the complete and utter lack of control I have here... this is fucking bliss.

Unable to speak, I close my eyes and relax my body as he takes me apart.

Is this how you like me, Ledge?

"Pliant and at my mercy? Yes," he growls honestly. "I'd keep you here just like this every second of every day if I could."

He shoves my hips down just enough to make the friction on my clit pick up, and twice I think I'm about to come and it doesn't happen. It leaves me shaking and ready to beg, but I won't disobey. I keep my promises. I won't disobey. I won't.

"Fill me up," I beg instead, ragged and broken thanks to the pressure on my throat. "Please. Breed my ass, baby."

“Yeah? Beg for me, beautiful. Beg for my cum, and maybe I’ll let you come with me.”

I’m too gone to care if he lets me or not, and I hope he hears that. “Please, Ledger. I need it, baby. Please let me feel it. Come inside my bratty little ass.”

“Suren,” he growls, fucking me like I’m a doll instead of a human until he slams deep inside me and pumps me full just as I asked.

My clit throbs as I feel him pulsing, and when his fingers reach under to rub me, I’m so fucking overstimulated it makes my eyes water. “Ledger, please,” I gasp. “I—I can’t t-take it.”

“You can. My girl is strong... just a few moments more.” He tortures me like that, refusing release until I’m crying his name and jerking so hard, he nearly slips out. “Now come for me. Let me feel you clench.”

The command shatters me. It has me sobbing and shaking as the orgasm that hits me never seems to end, tensing my muscles and leaving me floating. He works me through it exactly how I need, knowing when to ease up and slow before I even realize it’s what I want. It’s probably the best thing about dating a mind reader. “It should be,” he teases. “Once you’re clean, you should nap while you can. I’ll want your mouth in a few hours.”

“Seriously?” I huff, breathless and sated for the moment even as my ass aches. “Okay. Untie me, baby. You can wake me up by slipping that perfect cock between my lips.”

I feel it twitch inside me at my words. As he slides out and undoes my restraints, I notice he’s gentler than usual, rubbing the spots the silk was wrapped around and helping me stand on my shaky, jelly legs. Slowly, I spin to face him, so close I can see the flecks in his eyes as I look up. “Will you lay with me?” I ask quietly. “Please?”

“Maybe.” He smirks, kissing my lips once before whisking me away into the shower.

Once we’re clean, he tosses me on the bed and climbs inside, leaving us both naked for whatever he has planned. It just means that I can feel every inch of his body as I snuggle in against him, exhaling slowly as I let the weight of the last few months leave me for a little while. Here, in this room, nothing exists but us. I’m not foolish enough to believe that Ledger will stay all soft and malleable like this forever, but for right now, this weekend?

I’ll take what I can get and say thank you.

Just... maybe not out loud.

The brute wasn't kidding. Three hours later, I'm pulled from sleep to find his cock already fully seated in my mouth. It's heavy on my tongue, hot and already throbbing.

How long has he been doing this?

"There she is," he rasps. "You were dreaming about me... fucking calling my name. Well here I am, baby."

He pulls out an inch only to push back in, and I realize I'm bound to his bed again as I go to reach up and stroke him. Heat snakes it's way into my belly as I open further for him, letting him into my throat as I meet his eyes.

Make me choke, baby.

Ledger grins, his eyes clearer than I've ever seen them as he pushes all the way in again and groans. From this angle, I can't really breathe at all. I need to get him off quickly if I want to stay conscious this time, so I don't hold back as I suck his beautiful, perfect cock.

His moans tell me exactly how perfectly I suck him. "So fucking good! Just like that."

My lungs burn as I keep the pace, closing my eyes to picture every stupid thing that's ever happened with us. The first time we met, the first time he bit me. The sex that followed. How good it felt the day he wanted to forget everything but my body... and everything since. We may not get along outside of the bedroom, but god, I love sucking him off as he reminds me I don't need to breathe.

What the hell is wrong with me?

You hear that, Ledge? You've got me right where you want me.

"Fuck yes. My perfect girl... deep down, you know this is where we belong."

Precum oozes into my mouth as he starts to fuck harder, telling me he's close again and I'll be able to breathe soon if I just hold on. Tugging the restraints for leverage, I lift up and angle better to suck him in the way that drives him crazy — the way that makes tears freefall down my face, all frenzied need and disregard for my own safety.

It sends him over with an aggressive growl, cock pulsing and catching me off guard with how much cum this guy still has. "Don't swallow yet," he breathes, emptying himself before sliding out and opening my mouth to see it. "Beautiful... *now* swallow."

Logic tells me to be embarrassed, but I just can't be. I love when he's like this. Swallowing slowly, I tip my head back so he can watch my throat as I do, then open wide to show him it's gone. "Thoughts on real food now?" I ask. "I'm starving."

"I'll get it." He unties me so quickly, his movements are blurry. "You stay here and relax. You'll eat and get some strength and then take another nap. I'm far from done with you."

He's gone in a blink, but it takes me a few seconds to move — I know how precarious my situation is. He's being nice now, but one misstep could send things downhill fast.

And there's no one around to save me.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Quinn

The second my board changes to add my new Clairvoyance class, it all feels real. I'm no longer Quinn the Orderless witch, I'm a fucking Seer, and it feels so damn good to know. Not only that, but I also got my man back even though I never should have put him on the back burner. I never should have pushed him aside, yet he waited for me, and I'll spend forever making up for my selfishness if I have to.

He's there to walk me to my classes, picking up on the nervousness creeping through my system as we approach the catacombs for my new class. I've been excited for this all day, but now that it's actually here...

"Hey." He tugs me close, brushing my hair out of my face. "You've got this, okay? You're gonna be great. I give it two weeks before you're Seeing circles around the clowns who've been there all semester."

With a smile, I kiss him deeply, thanking him with my lips and roaming hands, and then we part after a promise to fuck each other's brains out later. He really knows what to say to help my moods, and it shows when I enter the classroom feeling a little more confident than I felt not even two minutes ago.

"Hey," Blaise calls, waving me over to sit near him, and I'm surprised at how small the class is.

Knowing him and most of the students around him have been here longer than me only brings the nerves back, but I remind myself of Otto's words and take a seat near them while he introduces us.

First he introduces me to Quincy, an intimidatingly tall Black guy with tattoos all up his arms and neck and a warm smile. He assures me everyone calls him Quince, so I'll still be the only Quinn, and when he tells me how hot our teacher is, I find myself a little excited to see him. I'm positive Otto is hotter, but that doesn't mean I can't appreciate a good-looking teacher, especially when Quince tells me Professor Stewart is better looking than any of the others at this school. Those seem like big shoes to fill.

Next, Blaise introduces me to a hybrid with short, spiky black hair named Manni, and I swear I've never seen eyes like his before. They're a magical blend of blue and green that stand out against his deep umber skin, making

me think his other Mythic is siren. Those eyes could get the Headmistress to streak naked across campus and no one could convince me otherwise.

Lastly, he introduces me to Samira, whom I've already met, so our introduction is much shorter. "I had no clue you were a Seer," I say with a smile, happy to know someone else in this class.

"Today is my first day too. I had my vision the day we went on break, so I had to wait two weeks for this."

"What was it about?" I ask curiously, making the other three turn quickly as if they don't know. Didn't they ask?

"It was really fuzzy, but I saw my little brother falling from a tree. He didn't, he didn't even make it to the branches before I screamed at him the following day, but whether it would have come true or not, I don't know. I almost wish I'd waited to see."

"I think you did the right thing," a redheaded boy to our left cuts in. "That was a pretty direct vision, right? Like there isn't much else it could have meant."

"Not necessarily." I glance at the door as our professor enters and I swear the bowtie he's wearing only adds to his exceptionally good looks and style. He has short dark blonde hair, and his eyes look hazel from this distance, but I can't be sure. If I had to guess, I'd say he's only a few years older than some of us. Definitely early to mid-twenties, and when I glance at Quince, I have to bite back a smile. Somehow I can tell he knows what color eyes he has as well as every freckle dotting his pale beige skin. Poor guy is crushing hard, but I don't miss the way Professor Stewart offers him his own smile. "Visions about falling in any capacity could mean a wide variety of things, especially if you're the one falling. Now, catch me up here. Who had this vision and who was falling?"

Samira raises her hand with a small blush, and I can see she's even having trouble with how handsome he is as she introduces herself. "It was my first vision." She fills him in as he watches her closely, then finally sets his stuff down on the desk so he can sit on top of it.

"Is your brother going through any sort of changes right now?"

She shrugs, thinking about his question for a moment before muttering, "Does puberty count?"

He chuckles with the rest of us as he nods. "Yes, absolutely. There's a huge possibility you saved him from falling from a tree, but puberty is not something you can save him from, unfortunately. That's a huge change in our

lives, especially for those of us who are hybrids.” I had no clue he was a hybrid, but now I’m dying to know what it is. “I come from a family of witches, but somewhere along the way, some wolf DNA got in there and every so often someone in my family presents as a hybrid. It happened to my grandmother, and then me. Not saying that might be happening to your brother or anything, but puberty is around when it happens.”

A wolf... I wonder if he has a pack.

Samira leans forward in her seat. “We have goblin ancestors. Is it possible that’s why my brother has been feeling so insecure about everything?”

“Possibly. If you’d like to discuss that further, you’re welcome to stay after class for a bit.”

She nods excitedly before Professor Stewart turns to me with a welcoming smile. “And you’re Quinn.”

“Yup.”

I probably should have said more, but I’m a little nervous.

“Would you like to share your first vision with us?”

Oh, that’s why the other students didn’t drill us about our visions the second we walked in, they know the professor will do it for them.

“Sure.” Since that day, more of my vision has come back to me, specifically the fact that I wasn’t alone. “I was standing with my best friend in the courtyard and the entire world was twisting around us like we were in the middle of a tornado, and when I looked around at the spinning and back at my friend, she was gone. It was just me watching the world twist away.”

“Hmm, and your friend, did you see her again at all?”

“No. I mean it happened so fast, and I don’t remember much after that.”

Stewart crosses his arms and ankles as he responds. “That’s common, especially in the beginning. Eventually, you’ll be able to slow everything down and see a lot more, but for now, you get what the Goddess allows you to have. Tornadoes are tricky, they indicate feeling out of control — which can be applied to so many things. You’re a student, probably dealing with some relationships that feel rocky, whether that’s romantic or platonic. You’re at an age where we all feel out of control. But it can also mean power, transformation, danger, or a warning. There are so many ways you can take a tornado vision, but the most obvious way is weather. Seeing as our unpredictable weather rarely ever gets that severe, it’s easy to assume this is more metaphorical. But never count anything out. In this class, we’re going

to be looking closely at our visions, dissecting them as much as we can to have the clearest understanding, and eventually, we'll have sessions where we reach out to them without waiting for them to come to us. This first semester is all about coming to terms with your new gifts, so you two coming in when you did doesn't put you at any sort of disadvantage. You're all unfortunately stuck with me until you finish here at Rogue Hollow."

That makes Quince smile, but I glance around and see almost everyone else is too. At least this professor isn't an asshole.

"We've done this before, but tomorrow I'll be having a vision, and letting you all know what I see so you guys can break it down. Do we have a volunteer?"

I tilt my head curiously as a few hands go up, but Stewart's gaze lands on Quince. "You're volunteering again?" he says with a smile, one that makes Quince lean forward on his desk.

"I don't mind you looking into my future, Professor. Last time, you kept me from eating the spaghetti at that restaurant off campus and three other guys I know got food poisoning."

Stewart laughs. "Maybe next time. I think Blaise wants a turn, hm? You haven't had one this semester."

"Huh?" he asks, glancing around the room and then down at his hand that's definitely not raised. "Wait, I didn't volunteer. I'm supposed to be working on dreamwalking tomorrow."

"Yeah, but you wanted to volunteer," he retorts with a lopsided grin. "So tomorrow, Blaise will be helping us out and we'll all get a look into his future. Maybe keep him from getting food poisoning this time, yeah?"

Everyone laughs, and when I walk out of class a while later, I feel really fucking good. Even if I did keep something that might have been important out of my vision recap, something I haven't told anyone at all: Suren was smiling.

"Hey, you okay?"

Otto's voice is full of concern, but I force a smile and jump into his arms, thinking back on my class and not the fact that my best friend seemed to be enjoying the tornado that was destroying the world. Hopefully, all it means is the change that's coming is good for her in some way. "I'm great. That class was fucking..."

"Eye-opening?" Parker adds with a teasing smile. "Do you See clearer now?"

“Funny,” I chuckle. “Why did I just think of that song, ‘I can see clearly now, the rain is gone?’” They both look at me like I’m insane with the accent I chose to sing in, and it hits me they probably don’t know many of the songs we had in the Human Realm. “Really? You guys don’t know Johnny Nash?” To be fair, it’s the only song I know from him too, but whatever.

“No, but feel free to keep singing in that accent for Otto.” Parker hugs me before taking off, and Otto squints at me.

“Guess we need to spend some time getting you caught up on Mythic Realm pop culture,” he jokes. “We know some of the human stuff, but not a ton.”

“I’m always here for some new music as long as I can dance to it.” I kiss his nose as he carries me outside for our break, and then settle into his neck. I think he’d carry me everywhere if he had the option. “How was your class?”

“Annoying,” he admits. “Fenris was talking shit under his breath the whole time. Fucking hate that guy.”

“I hate him too.” I think of the random kisses he’s started blowing my way lately and shiver. “Dude’s got issues.”

Setting me down near the fountain, he sits on the stone rim and gazes up at me. “I don’t wanna talk about him. Before you had your vision, you were doing some really cool shit with the water in here. Can you show me?”

“Yeah?” My mood lifts instantly. “Are you okay getting a little wet?” I toss him a wink and pull my bottom lip between my teeth, focusing on the water so I can make an archway above our heads, petals of water curling out from it like we’re standing underneath a romantic alter, and just like I warned him, small droplets fall from it onto our faces. My wet glasses make seeing him harder, but I’d have to be blind to miss the pride written clearly on his face.

“Fuck, Cherry. You’ve gotten so good at that,” he praises. “You sure you’re not an Elemental, too?”

“Can I be?” I ask, completely losing focus so the water falls onto us in a heap. “Shit! Sorry, baby.”

We’re completely soaked, my shirt clinging to my body in ways that make Otto growl with arousal. “Yeah, you can,” he grunts, standing up to kiss me fiercely.

His warmth wraps around me like a blanket, making falling into him easy as I melt into the kiss. “Let’s ditch the last couple classes,” I whisper, loving the way he bites my bottom lip in response.

“No. You need to focus, Cher. I’ll come get you when you’re done with Magic Replenishment and we’ll celebrate how awesome you are tonight... but don’t invite anyone. It’ll be a party just for my tongue and your pussy.”

His words make me whimper and grind against him slightly. A month ago, he would have picked me up and sprinted away from our classes, not caring about anything but us. This is good, this is growth, and I can’t make this harder on him than already it is. “I love you, Otto. I’ll be counting down the minutes to our party.”

“Love you too, Cher. Go be great.”

Kissing me one more time, he pulls back to brush my chin with his thumb then takes off for the woods where his next class is.

I’m still soaked, so I rush off to my room to change, making it back to class just in time. The fact that he’s trying so hard to be exactly what I need is so endearing it feels like my heart swells in response. I miss him when we’re apart, but I’d be lost without the support he’s been giving since we got back together, so I wouldn’t change any of this for anything.

Even if I’m still a little distracted sometimes, it’s easier to manage now that I know my days with Otto aren’t numbered. He won’t look elsewhere because I’m busy during the week, all he’ll ever want is me. And goddamn, that feels pretty fucking amazing.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Otto

Pacing outside the catacombs, I'm crawling out of my skin by the time Cherry comes up. Saying no to earlier was the hardest thing I've done in a while — on a list that includes not ripping Fenris' throat out. "Cherry baby," I call, jogging up behind her and scooping her off the ground. "You're mine now, right? If you made other plans, tell me now."

"Only you," she whispers, leaning in to swipe her tongue up my neck in a way that drives me crazy. "Where are you taking me? Where are you going to fuck me and claim me, baby?"

Anywhere. Everywhere. Goddess, she makes it hard to think. "The Den, unless you want me to put you up on my shoulders and eat that delicious pussy right here."

"Tempting... but let's go to The Den, so I can smell like your bed when I go back home tonight."

"Who said I'm gonna let you leave?"

Flipping her onto my back, I shift and hold steady just until I feel her fist her hands in my fur, then take off into the trees as she hangs on and giggles like she's on some sort of ride. It isn't until we make it there that she responds, her voice breathless from the trip here. "I promised Suren I'd hang out with her tonight to tell her about Clairvoyance."

Fuck Sur— no, bad Otto. Supportive.

Dipping my head in acknowledgment, I bend to let her off and then nuzzle her crotch. I've denied my wolf enough, and maybe my dad was onto something. I won't force her, but the more interaction she has with this form, the better.

Quinn smiles up at me knowingly, then slowly backs up toward my bed, and with each step closer she strips off another article of clothing for me.

The sight of her makes my mouth water. Those thick thighs and generous hips have me baring my teeth at the thought of her *ever* leaving, but the scent that fills my nose when she lays down in my nest and spreads her legs makes me forget about everything else.

Carefully, I step over her thighs to trap her, then slide my tongue all the way from her clit to her slender neck. "Fuck, Alpha," she gasps, arching into

me as she reaches up to pet my fur and tug it. “Feel so good, Wolfy. Does your wolf need me?”

All of me needs her. My cock is heavy and desperate to sink inside her, but I made her a promise. Holding her gaze, I flick my tongue over her nipple until she twitches then head south to my true prize. Need pumps through me in violent bursts as I taste her, as she moans my name in that sexy voice of hers and reaches to play with her breasts.

Quinn responds to every flick of my tongue, her body rolling into me like she can't get enough, even in this form. I wish I could read her mind. It's driving me crazy that I can't yet — but one day, there won't be a single filthy thought she can hide from me as I nuzzle her clit with my snout and dip a little lower to fuck her with my tongue.

It makes her scream, makes her beg me not to stop, and with the length of it I'm able to keep that perfect amount of pressure on her clit that has her writhing below me. When she comes all over my tongue, I give her a second to breathe by lazily licking her. I swear I could stay here all night, taking my fill of the way she tastes, but I heard her earlier. As much as I don't want to let her go, she's got plans that don't include me.

It's fine. I'll make sure she can still walk... but barely.

The moment she seems to relax, I love her clit and don't let up, even when she tries to squirm away and whimpers. “Baby... oh fuck, Otto!” Her gaspy little moans kill me, and when she comes again, this time her fists tighten in my fur and she tugs me away. “Fuck me. Take me, Alpha.”

All restraint I might've had snaps. Our bond isn't so broken that I can ignore my mate when she's desperate like this — and I don't have time to make sure she meant this form. With a whine, I cage her under me and rut forward searching for my prize, and it takes five attempts for me to find it.

When I do, Quinn stops breathing entirely, her pussy suffocating my cock as I slip in painfully slow, trying not to hurt her.

It's fucking torture. She's just so small compared to me, so perfect and tight that I have to keep my cool if I want her to live.

I lick away her tears as I stretch her to the limit, stilling when I'm sheathed inside of her so her body can adjust to me, and start to move when she catches her breath.

She makes different noises when I'm shifted: desperate, pained ones that are thickly laced with arousal and need. Like her body knows it was made for this, for me, to take my cock like no one else alive is capable of.

She's mine.

Fucking mine.

My teeth close around her shoulder to hold her in place as the pleasure takes over and I snap my hips, drilling into my perfect Cherry. There's a brief moment where it almost feels like I can hear her thoughts, because more than just her lips is calling for me. Our heartbeats pound in sync, hers fighting to keep pace with mine as she comes again and nearly fucking kills me. Perfect sloppy pussy, so fucking wet for me. She's so good for me, taking me like this. Like a mate should.

Mate, mate, mate.

My cock leaks inside her as my knot swells, and though I'm peripherally, vaguely aware that Von just walked in with Parker, I don't care. Her body is blocked fully by the sheer size of me and I'm too damn close to stop.

Take it, baby. Take it. Take my knot. Gonna pump you so full of cum it'll leak out of you for fucking days—

Oh god.

I whimper as it pops, drowning out the way Quinn screams my name while my cock pulses. I can feel her trembling when she clings to me like she's as thankful my knot will keep us tied together as I am. My perfect mate.

Fuck. I need to kiss her for real.

Shifting with a popped knot is almost goddamn impossible, but I do it for her in jerky, uneven movements that look like they scare her a little. "It's okay, Cher. Just me."

"Alpha." Her arms fly around my neck to pull me in, tears still staining her face while she kisses me heatedly and her legs wrap around my body like she still hasn't gotten enough.

"Cherry baby," I grumble. "Park and Von are here."

"Hi," Parker blurts. "I wasn't watching. Promise."

"Oh shit," she gasps, a beautiful blush spreading across her cheeks.

"I was," Von adds, a smile evident in his tone. "Definitely your mate, Alpha."

Quinn meets my eyes, and all I see there is love and acceptance. So why the hell is her chest still blank?

Leaning in, I kiss the spot softly, hoping to coax it out of her somehow.

"The only partner I'll ever need," I confirm. "My Quinn."

She hums, fingers running through my hair like we're still the only ones here. "Only yours, Alpha. Forever... even if I'm broken."

I can't take it when she talks about herself like that. "Don't," I breathe, burying my face in her neck. "Don't say that, baby. You're not broken. I just have more work to put in, that's all."

"You're doing everything," she whispers back, still clinging to me like she's scared I might pull away. "I'm sorry I'm such a handful."

Chuckling, I ghost my fingers down to squeeze her gorgeous ass. "You kidding? That's my favorite thing about you."

That brings out a smile, one that breaks into a laugh before she kisses me. "Good. I can't seem to stay away from the carbs, so you better love it."

"Course I do. I'm obsessed with your body, Cherry. Even if you weren't my mate, I'd have still chased you across campus until you agreed to a date me."

Man, she's so beautiful when she smiles. "Good. Do you think you would have still thrown me in the air?"

"Mmhm. Had to mark my territory and get your attention somehow," I tease. "But don't worry. There isn't a world where I'd have ever let you fall. I was always gonna be the one to catch you."

As I kiss her again, I realize how serious I am. Bond or not, it doesn't matter. I'd have chosen her with or without it, in this life or the next. Past, present, and future... it's only her.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Suren

Every part of my body hurts when Ledger finally lets me go Monday morning. If I thought there was a world where he'd let me off easy, I was wrong. Very, very wrong. That virile little bastard alternated holes every three hours until I was demanding to see the tea he was drinking to get hard that many times. There was none. Just a hybrid getting off on having complete control of someone else.

After the longest shower I've taken in a while, I slip on my purple collared shirt and black slacks. It is getting colder now that we're smack in the middle of October, but that's not why I chose to ditch my usual black shirt/purple skirt/black knee-highs combo. The skirt — however cute it might be — would fail to hide the dozens of bite marks and hickeys Ledger left behind on my thighs, and it also lacks the pocket I need to hide the temp magic capsule. Come hell, high water, or both, I'm getting out of Magic Discovery today. Four months of that class is four too many.

Unfortunately, I didn't account for the way the capsule would make me feel like I have a target on my back. All through Intro to Magic, I sit waiting for Professor Sterling to point out its presence and throw me in a dungeon or something. I haven't heard much about temp magic in the halls of Rogue Hollow, but I know enough to know it's illegal to have and could get me in serious trouble if I'm caught with it. The joke's on them, though. I'm more worried about what'll happen to me if I never show an affinity for magic than I am of getting caught with contraband.

Maybe that's just shortsightedness.

When Sterling doesn't call me out about it, I'm convinced that Professor Velasquez will in Intro to Mythics. The more she talks about the million witch Orders, the more I start to sweat in my seat. But again, nothing. No "a-ha!" moment comes.

Professor Walters, though intimidating with his huge stature and perpetually-dripping fangs, wouldn't notice me if I got up and danced naked in front of him. It makes Magic History the class I'm least scared for, but every second that ticks by takes me closer and closer to the real trial. As much as I love Professor Blanch, she's too wrapped up talking about

belladonna to pay attention to anything else at all, let alone a concealed bit of magic tucked away.

And that's it. It's time.

With my heart nestled in my throat and my stomach doing perpetual somersaults, I make my way to the arena across the catacombs. It looks a little like the Colosseum with its stone arch walls and archaic feel, but by now, I know it's not quite as impressive. This is the third week of my classes being in here instead of the ruined classroom or the clearing in the woods where they attacked me with bees. Day nine.

"You're late," Vinter growls.

"It's not my fault I had to make it from the greenhouse to here," I remind him. "I didn't ruin your classroom."

The two exchange almost nervous glances before Caius clears his throat. "Be that as it may, we're here now and rapidly losing patience. We've tried just about everything with you. Rats, giant beetles, heights, enclosed spaces, fires, torrents of water, sensory deprivation, snakes, physical peril, mental strain, emotional battery, and just about everything in between. Better people than you have given up for less," he comments. "It's put us in quite a predicament. You've got just enough magical potential to keep you here, but not enough to have you moving on, it seems."

"Barely," Vinter mutters. "But we've got a new approach. And if this doesn't work, well... I can always absorb whatever piddly magic you do have and send you on your way."

With a jolt, I realize just how lucky I am to have convinced Yelena to help. Would this have been my last class either way? Maybe, especially since Ledger spent the weekend doing god-knows-what with the little bit of magic I do naturally possess. Without the temp magic, this would've been the worst day for them to make some final stand. But I'm prepared.

"I thought I had until the end of the semester?" I press. "That's what I was told."

"By whom?" Caius asks. "Does it seem like we gave the others the full six months? You're here until we decide there's nothing left in you to concern ourselves with, girl. And we're bored with this."

Bored of terrorizing helpless students? Seems unlikely.

"Then let's do it. I'm feeling good about things today," I admit. "I feel strong. I've been working on connection and replenishment, so maybe it'll help."

Vinter just rolls his eyes and snaps his fingers, drawing out a Mischievous goblin I vaguely recognize from the first party I attended in the Grotto. Gaeric, I think. Nearly as tall as Ledger, his crystal eyes are full of promise and laughter as he guides some hovering, hooded figure toward us by a rope around their neck.

I know enough about this class, this place, and these Mythics to know that I'm not going to like whatever bound creature is under that hood.

"I know this girl," Gaeric comments. "Ledger Huxley's bloodwhore. You should've led with that, Professor. This'll be fun."

No, buddy. What'll be fun is telling Ledger that you helped them torture me, and then watching him bend you in half until you snap like a fucking twig. "Get on with it," I mumble, slipping my hands into my pockets trying to look casual. My fingers close around the capsule as Gaeric reaches up in slow motion to remove the hood.

Just a shield, I tell myself. Or maybe a jet of scalding hot water to knock it back. Something simple and small to get me out of this without drawing suspicion. I can do this.

I can do this.

I can do—

The hood slips off and reveals a middle-aged woman with soft brown hair falling around her hollow cheeks. Her eyes are closed, but it doesn't matter. I know exactly who it is and why she's here.

"Mom?" My voice comes out softer than I meant it to, all broken and weak like I'm sixteen again and begging her not to let her boyfriend touch me. Like then, it doesn't seem like she can hear me. "Mom! Wake up!"

"Tsk tsk. You don't want that," Caius croons, and I can feel his siren magic seeping into my skin. "If she wakes up, she'll have to be conscious for what's about to happen. You see, you seem impervious to the things we do to you. Perhaps you won't be so blasé when our potential victim is someone you care about."

Blood thunders through my veins until I can hear it like a war drum in my ears. It feels like getting shot in a video game when the edges of the screen turn red and everything seems to slow down — the piercing, ringing sound makes it impossible to hear for a moment as I register what they're saying.

They're done hurting me. Now they're going to hurt her, and they think she's someone I love.

Is she? After everything I went through growing up, all the times she hurt me herself, all the times she let others hurt me. All the bruises, the neglect, the emotional warfare. The times she'd scream at me and call me names until I just wanted to cry myself to sleep alone, only to flip a switch and force affection on me like she wasn't the one who broke me in the first place.

No. This woman is the reason I am the way I am. She's the reason I had secrets to spill to Ledger fucking Huxley in the first place. The reason it was so easy for him to manipulate me. The reason I'm incapable of seeking out healthy relationships... why I'd choose a bastard like Ledger over a decent guy like Greylin.

She's the reason I never finished high school and Quinn almost starved to death because she wouldn't let me be homeless alone.

I don't love her. I *can't* love her. She never taught me how.

"Wake her up," I hiss, rage fueling a fire inside me that burns Caius' influence away. "I need to say something to her."

Curious, Gaeric waves a hand in front of her sunken face until her blue eyes open wide. My eyes. The only goddamn thing I inherited from her.

"Suren?" she croaks, looking around wildly. "W-Where am I? What's going on?"

"It's gonna be okay, Ma," I lie, cocking my head to the side as I finger the capsule in my pocket. "They just brought you as a surprise for me. Did you miss me?"

Blinking, she takes in Vinter's imposing frame and Caius' misleading good looks. Finally, her gaze rests on Gaeric. "You're with me but you want her," she muses. "Why?"

"This isn't about you!" I interrupt. "Stop making it about you. You're here to see me, your daughter. He brought you to see *me*."

Her eyes are glassy as she takes in my appearance. "Suren. It's about time you stopped dressing like a slut."

Is she fucking high?

"What'd you do to her?" I snap at Gaeric. "Did you give her something when you took her?"

"Enough of this." Vinter steps behind her, binding her wrists together so she can't fight back. "Bring in the direhawk."

The screech overhead is enough to send a shiver of true fear down my spine. It's so loud it rattles my teeth and disrupts the loose pebbles below our feet, but not even the sound it makes prepares you for what it looks like. At

least three times the size of an Andean condor, the direhawk has massive talons that look like they could lift a werewolf with ease and spiked horns protruding from its massive head.

Mother or not, if they wanted to scare me into using magic, they should've brought this thing out day one.

"Give the command on ten," Caius mutters to Gaeric as the direhawk circles overhead like a vulture. "That's how long you've got to stop it, Miss Archer. Ten seconds. Nine."

Fuck. I've got one capsule. One shot.

"Eight. Seven."

I know the word to activate the magic. I know how to bend the dust inside it to my will.

"Six. Five."

I can move on. I can go live with Quinn, start our journey together.

"Four. Three."

I can be free.

"Two—"

"Reisa," I whisper as I crack the capsule in half in my pocket. With all eyes on the direhawk, I hold my breath and fling the dust, willing it to become a corporeal manifestation of the gaping hole I have inside my chest. The hole she created. The magic shifts, swirling and darkening until it forms a black hole that swallows my mother up whole just as Gaeric gives the order for the direhawk to attack.

Confused, it seems to take the beast several heartbeats to realize its target is no longer there. It takes even longer for Caius and Vinter to work out what I did — and all the ways they misjudged me. "Looks like you were wrong about two things," I say flippantly. "I do have magic, and I only loved my mother as much as she loved me. You picked the wrong girl to play savior, Professor."

"You killed your own mom?" Gaeric shrieks. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

Snorting, I ride the high of magic use, adrenaline, and something darker swirling inside me that makes me feel whole. "Nothing. She had it coming."

"Jokes on you," he retorts, backing up a step in fear. "She wasn't real. It was an illusion based on your memories."

Suddenly, her weird responses make sense. I've heard her say all those things before, just in different context. It feels like all the breath leaves my

lungs in one, brutal gut punch.

My grand moment, my retribution and revenge, was a fucking lie.

“Get her out of here,” Vinter mutters to Caius. “Before she murders us all.”

I don’t have it in me to fight him this time as he uses his fucking Singer bullshit to convince me to leave peacefully. If they think this is over, they’re wrong.

It’s only just beginning.

A few hours later, I’m sitting in my room at the top of Human House alone. Ledger and Quinn are presumably busy, but it’s for the best. I lost it today. I tried to kill my own mother when all I had to do to pass the class was toss a shield over her to protect her from the direhawk. Why couldn’t I have just played along? It wasn’t even real. And now all three of them know how broken I really am.

I guess I should be happy that in the chaos, none of them caught on that it wasn’t really my magic. The board above my bed is dark now. It worked, then. I should be moving into the Witch’s Lair with Quinn and Ollie and all the rest of them. A huge celebration should be planned with all the weird pink concoctions I can drink, and I should be happy.

Yet... I just feel hollow.

How long have I wanted to kill my mother? How long has that evil little part of me been there? And why did it feel so, so good when I thought I succeeded?

No wonder Ledger’s obsessed with me. It must be amusing as hell for him to sift through my feelings and thoughts, seeing all the things I hide from myself. Fuck. I’m not ready for the smug look on his face when he tells me I’m no better than he is. He’s a murderer too, but at least he did it to avenge his brother. I did it because I’m too weak to just fucking move on.

And what’s more, I understand now why Yelena was so reluctant to give me temp magic. Already, the extra capsules I have seem to be calling to me, begging me to use them, to blow the whole fucking school to smithereens. If I could channel this chaotic rage into something good, I could take Cherith out. The Council of Elders too, if Nevitt’s theory that they’re the ones sanctioning the shit she’s doing here with the humans who don’t manifest. I could burn the world, but it’d burn me out, too. I feel it. My muscles hurt

worse than they did this morning. I'm starving, but in a way that food won't sate. And I'm so desperate to take the edge off that I'd offer Ledger anything he wants in the world in exchange for enough venom to make me forget today ever happened.

But he's not here and I don't have the time to find him or the inclination to call to him. Fucked up or not, I passed Magic Discovery today. It's time to move, so I pack my things quietly and take one last look at the room I've been in for months.

It's not much, but it's the only real home I've ever known. The only place that was truly mine, even if there was an asterisk attached. And now I'm standing in the doorway with a bag slung over my shoulder for the second time trying to leave it behind for something I believe will be better.

I was wrong last time.

Am I going to be wrong again?

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Quinn

The second Otto puts me down, I see Suren walking toward the Lair with a bag over her shoulder. I didn't know we were having a sleepover, but I find myself a little excited for it all the same. "Sur, you spending the night? Do I need snacks?"

My legs ache as I stand, making me lean into Otto for support as she closes the distance. "I've got you," he whispers. "Sorry, Cher. Maybe I should've gone easier on you."

That's the last thing I want, but the wide grin on Suren's face stops me from arguing. "I did it," she rushes out. "I passed Magic Discovery! I'm moving in!"

"Shut up!" I yell, adrenaline helping me launch myself at her for a tight hug that pins her to me. "Sur! I knew it! I knew you could do it!"

"Easy," she laughs. "But can we talk about it after I move? I'm beat."

"Yeah, of course. Do you need any help? My cervix feels like it was hit repeatedly with a hammer, but Otto can help us, right, baby?"

I pout my lip at my mate, who nods quickly with deeply red cheeks. "Hell yeah. Anything you need."

"It's just this bag, really. Everything else belongs to RH. Can you just... show me my room, Q?"

The slightly pinched look she's giving me clues me in that she wants to talk without my big-mouthed mate, and I offer her a smile back to assure her I hear her loud and clear. "You're sweet, thank you. Since it's just this bag we got it, I'll see you in the morning."

I pull him in for a hug and kiss, impressed when he only takes what I offer him and leaves with a wave. The moment he's gone, Suren tugs me toward the door. "That was cute," she comments with a soft smile. "Are you two better now?"

"Definitely. It was rocky for a bit, but now that we've both laid it all out there for each other, things are better. I still don't have my mark, but he won't let me feel bad about it. We can talk about that more later though." I refuse to let this night be about me. "I'm so fucking happy you passed."

I lead her up the stairs toward our new room, watching her face light up as she sees how much better it is than the dusty fucking attic she'd been living in.

"Holy hell, this was worth it. I think I like it better than the one you share with Ollie."

It's much wider than Ollie's, the window arched with deep purple drapes that will definitely help us sleep in on weekends, and the giant plush rug in the center is directly under a cascade of stars I imagine someone put on the ceiling before moving out. The bed is double the size of the ones they have in Human House. I let her pick her side of the room while I run my finger along the bookshelf on my way over to the window. "I'm not waiting for permission. I'm moving in tonight too. You can see the fountain from here."

"Yeah? Nice," she says. "Good acting job out there, by the way."

"Mmhm," I hum, moving to plop on my new bed as I watch her unpack. Most of me wasn't acting out there. I'd hoped she did it on her own, and even if she didn't, I have hope this will take some of that pressure off and she'll be doing magic on her own soon. "Tell me about it."

She avoids my gaze completely. "Caius and Vinter were tired of playing games so they upped the stakes. Brought in Gaeric to do some stupid illusion of my mom I thought was real, then sicced a direhawk on her."

"What the hell? I swear, those two are twisted. What'd the tablet help you do? And you'd think they'd pick someone you actually cared about, but I guess they didn't know how horrible your mom is."

I can feel something wafting off of her, something that feels a lot like guilt, and I hate that she feels it. Magic is hard. She shouldn't have to feel like she did anything wrong by getting a little boost.

"Yeah, I sorta think they got that hint when I sucked her into a magical black hole."

I gasp, my eyes bugging out of their sockets at her admission. So that's the guilt I feel. "Holy shit, Sur. I didn't realize temp magic was so powerful... or maybe that was actually a little bit of you." It has to be, I refuse to think otherwise. "But that's... heavy as hell. Are you okay?"

Shrugging, she sits down in a heap. "I'm fine. It wasn't real."

Thank the goddess above. I don't give a shit about her mom, but I never want Suren feeling bad about anything, especially something that big. "Well good. You shouldn't ever have to see her again. Are you excited to be done with those crazy professors? We'll have a lot of the same classes again."

“Hell yeah. Those assholes have tried to kill me enough,” she mutters. “It still feels a little surreal. I’m so used to fearing for my life every day at 4pm that I don’t know what I’ll do tomorrow when I don’t have to. That’s Magic Replenishment now, right?”

“Yeah, and honestly, it’s so chill. Most days we sit together and just open up, or we’ll go outside and be one with nature. It’s pretty damn relaxing honestly, which is a nice change in this realm.”

“I bet. I get to relax now instead of run from killer bees? I’ll take it. And I’ll take this bed, too. I’m so fucking happy it’s over.” Flopping back, she moans as she stretches until her back pops. “I wish tomorrow was Thursday, though. I feel like I could sleep for a month.”

“Maybe that’s the temp magic?” I offer. “Yelena said it takes more, maybe you’ll be a little more tired on those days.”

Our door swings open abruptly, making both of us jump up at the intruder, but when I see it’s just Ledger I lay back on the bed with a sigh of my own.

“A little birdie told me you manifested today, Clumsy.” He walks in like he owns the place, and I hate how easily he found her. “That true?”

Rolling her eyes, she doesn’t even bother moving — or lying. “I used temp magic to get those fuckwits off my back. So no, not really, but close enough.”

Ledger seems to contemplate that for a moment as he moves closer to her, his gaze locked on her like I don’t exist. “Do you plan to continue using it?”

“It would be a little suspicious if I manifested and then never did anything magical again, so yeah. I don’t really have a choice. Can we do this later?” she asks, finally sitting up again. “I really just... need a friend tonight.”

“I’m a friend,” he responds, then laughs at how ridiculous that is. “But fine, you want wolf girl. I just want a snack anyway, so stand up. If I climb on that bed, I’m not leaving until I get a very different kind of snack, and I don’t care if she watches.”

I fake a gag loud enough for him to hear even though what he said was hot as hell, and then scowl at him when his grin tells me he heard my thoughts loud and clear.

Nosey fucker. I meant hot from anyone but you.

He ignores me as he tugs Suren up by her throat, and I pretend I don’t see what that does for her or how it makes her thighs clench together.

“Oh god,” she whispers, curling her fists in his shirt. “Okay, that’s — just do it. Please.”

Yet her eyes are drooping and she’s curling closer to him, but what pisses me off is the way Ledger looks straight at me and fucking grins like he has her right where he wants her. Is this a game to him?

He sinks his fangs into her neck in a blur of motion, the sensation making her moan and squirm in his arms as he takes what he wants, but I’m surprised when he pulls back in less than a minute. “You forgot your danish today, Suren.”

His tone is growly as he pulls away from her abruptly, flipping a switch in her. “Oh, fuck off,” she blurts, swaying a little as she tries to sit back down. “You’re awfully bitchy lately. Don’t you have a hobby or something?”

“Bitchy?” he argues. “I’m the bitchy one and you’re telling me to fuck off? Sure, whatever you say. And for the record, I do have a hobby, you just couldn’t handle my type of fun.”

“Your type of fun? Let me guess, you kill innocent animals?”

Ledger huffs, flipping me off without breaking eye contact with her.

Suren doesn’t back down. “Bullshit. You didn’t think I could handle any of this, and look at me. Still in one piece, not broken, and moving up in the world. Taking what I’m owed instead of waiting for it to just happen.”

“Yeah, because that’s how it works.” He steps into her space again and lowers himself to her level. “You think you can handle it because you used fake magic? Fine. I’ll show you on the full moon. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

He’s gone as quickly as he came, and I’m moving over to sit with my best friend. “Ugh. Are you okay?”

Her guard drops the moment the door shuts. “Holy fuck, I’m high. Hold on a minute.”

I snort, laying back with her as I give her a moment to enjoy the one good thing that comes from him biting her. “Is it bad I’m curious how it feels?”

“No, it feels like sex and cake had a baby and that baby had no carbs and could make you immortal. Don’t let one bite you though, they’re all liars.”

“Of course they are. Nothing that good comes free, right?” I think about how she described it and start laughing. “That was a great description. You should run an ad for vampire venom.”

“No, it’s mine,” she grumbles. “They can’t have it.”

That only makes me laugh harder. “Oh, Sur. You’re the best.”

“Ugh, I hate how good it feels. He’s such an ass but I’m addicted to everything about him.” She lifts her head to pout her lip. “What did I volunteer myself for?”

“I don’t have a damn clue, but I’m scared for you. Weird to admit this, but I’m pretty positive he won’t actually harm you, so there’s that at least,” I offer, trying to make her feel better. “If he wasn’t an ass 90% of the time, could you actually see yourself dating him?”

“I mentioned I’m high, right? So tomorrow when I’m not high, can we blame what I’m about to say on that?”

“Absolutely. We’ll pretend it never happened,” I assure her, suddenly a lot more curious.

Licking her lips, she nods shyly. “Yeah, I would. It won’t ever happen like that. I mean, I guess we’re dating? But I don’t think he’s capable of real love and I’m positive I’m not, so this is the best case scenario. But if things were different? If we were like you and Otto? Yeah. I feel safe when I’m with him, even when he’s actively trying to kill me.”

It sounds so backwards I nearly argue, but I catch myself. If she feels safe, that’s what’s important, and I have to trust that means he’s never *actually* trying to kill her. He’s just... extremely rough. “You are capable of real love, Sur. I know you are.”

“I think there’s a black hole that begs to differ,” she huffs. “Alec knew it too. It’s okay. I can feel lots of other things.”

“Like vampire venom and your best friend’s hugs? Oh, and let’s not forget your love affair with those cafe rolls. Fuck, now I’m hungry.”

In my attempts to make her laugh, I instead make my stomach growl, but she’s on her feet faster than I expected. “I was already starving from the magic. Let’s go before they close.”

She doesn’t have to tell me twice. “Alright, then after we’ll stop by my room to pack up a bag.” Not everything, but I want to get enough for the week so I can finish up on the weekend. It’s been a bit since I did laundry, and we’re far too exhausted to deal with my closet tonight.

All that mess can wait.

Chapter Thirty

Ledger

She's not going to last five minutes, and I can't wait to taste her fear. My dick is already aching in my sweats as I make my way to the Lair for her, the moon's power licking her way along my skin and making my fangs distend before I can even smell my girl. The thrill of the hunt is already settling over me as I walk barefoot along the grass, ignoring all the naked people dancing and acting drunk, because none of them are my prey tonight.

Only her.

I up my pace as I draw nearer, happy I chose the bare minimum of clothing so I can fully give in to my Mythics... or maybe not fully, seeing as I want her to survive tonight, but close enough to it to have her truly afraid. I may want her to live, but I don't want her to know that. They taste so much better when they're scared for their lives.

I hear her voice before I see her, my ears naturally programmed to pick her out of any crowd, but I don't care that her friend is trying to convince her to stay for the celebration. She's mine. Just as I hear her telling Quinn she can't, I rush to Suren's side and flash my fangs at her friend to back off, chuckling when she stumbles back with a gasp. "Ledger, what the fuck? You look like a wild animal."

"Am I not one?" I ask, turning my attention to Suren before Quinn can talk to me again. "Ready to have my kind of fun?"

To her credit, Suren seems unfazed — but to her credit, she thinks she's seen me at my worst already. "I wasn't expecting you until later, but sure. Bring it on."

It hits me then that she's wearing lingerie like her wolf-girl friend. Lacy black lingerie that barely covers her body. I can see her nipples through the sheer fabric and the string on her thong is so thin, I could snap it with a pinkie.

My gaze rakes her body hungrily, my hands reaching up to cup her breast without me giving it a second thought. "You shouldn't have made yourself look this delicious."

"Why not?" she asks, grabbing my dick through my sweats. "You wanted to have fun, didn't you? Something tells me we're not about to go to dinner

and a movie.”

“No dinner for you,” I assure her, reaching down to lift her up by her thighs so she can wrap her legs around me. “But it’ll be more entertaining than any movie you’ve ever seen.”

“Gross. Bye, Sur. And don’t hurt her, Fang Boy. I’m getting stronger by the day.”

I snarl at her for her pointless-ass threat and then take off at a blurring speed toward the forest. Halfway there, Suren catches her bearings enough to bite my neck, then licks a line from my collarbone to my jaw that makes me stumble slightly and have to fight the urge to stop. I don’t want to hunt her near the school though, I want her completely out of her element and begging for fucking mercy. So I keep running until all she’ll have out here is the moonlight and her instincts, and if we don’t cause a storm tonight, then I’ll renounce my claim to her entirely.

But I don’t doubt her powers at all by now, and I have every intention of pushing her to her limit.

I set her down in a clearing and look her over, my cock straining as my fangs tingle with desire. I want to fuck her right here before we ever start our game, I suppress the urge with a deep growl.

Stay. Focused.

With my eyes locked with hers, I watch her pupils blow with lust when I flash her my fangs. It doesn’t matter what she says, this girl loves my bite.

“You have five minutes, Suren Archer. Run.”

“Run? Or what?” she challenges.

“I’ll just drain you until you can feel the moment your heart starts to give out, and then leave you here bleeding while I go find someone more fun to play with. It’s been one minute and you’re already dulling my favorite game. Does it look like I’m in the mood for your shit? Have you taken a break from your constant pity party to learn anything about a vampire’s hunt? The *only* ending is you bleeding at my feet. How you get there is up to you, and I can tell you right now, I’m not the only monster in this forest. Four minutes.”

“What the fuck,” she hisses, stumbling as she pivots and tries to run. The ground scrapes her knees and hands as she falls, filling the air with the tantalizing scent of her blood — and my girl finally gets the hint. Pushing herself to her feet, she sprints off into the trees, making a feral growl leave my chest that I know she can hear. I follow my end of the bargain, I stand there in the same spot, my eyes closed as I reach out to her and become more

in tune with her than I ever have before. I can hear her breathing, tiny gasps filled with a fear she'd never willingly admit to me. She never wants to appear meek or scared, but my beautiful Disaster is both when it comes to me, and it's fucking delicious.

Three minutes.

I shove my pants down to my thighs and begin stroking my cock, my movements matching the pounding of her heart as she slips again and whimpers.

A twig snaps to the side of her, making her breathing hitch, but even though I meant what I said when I told her there were others lurking and hunting in these woods, none of them would dare to touch what's mine.

Two minutes.

Fuck, the anticipation is killing me, making my cock leak in my fist as her fear calls to me in a way that has my feet stumbling forward a step. This minute drags on longer than the others, my inner clock screaming at me as it ticks down.

One minute.

With one last squeeze, I force my cock back in my pants and bounce on my feet, a snarl ripping its way out of me as those seconds tick down. When my brain reaches one, my eyes snap open.

“Game on, Clumsy. I can smell your blood, your fear, your fucking arousal. How wet are you for me, hmm?”

She isn't close enough to hear me, but I know she can hear me in her mind as I begin to make my way in the direction she ran.

“Fuck you. Stay away from me!”

Her blood thunders louder as she runs faster over the rough ground.

Her fear is enough to make me salivate on its own, but the hatred in her, the darkness growing and trying to protect her... that's something else entirely.

Believe it or not, I actually do try and fit into society by suppressing my inner predator, but with the way her delicious fear is pulling me in, I can't deny how ingrained it is in me. I'm at the top of the fucking food chain, and she knows exactly what she is — that's why she's so angry. She knows she's nothing more than prey.

Clicking my tongue, I dart around a tree even though I know she isn't there, but I want her to hear me getting closer. “I'm not the one that's fucked tonight, Suren. You thought I needed a hobby, but baby, you *are* my hobby.

And now you're playing my favorite game. Go ahead, tell me how much of a bastard I am. It'll only make my dick harder."

She doesn't answer me at all, at least not on purpose. But I can hear the thoughts running through her head — the misplaced belief that if she's quiet enough and stealthy enough, I'll leave her alone.

That I won't be able to find her.

That I won't kill her and fuck her corpse right here on the forest floor.

Wrong.

Wrong.

Fucking wrong.

In fact, I've never wanted to kill someone with my cock more in my life, and the image of being covered in her blood while I fuck the life out of her overtakes my mind and has me stalking directly toward her hiding spot.

I don't want the hunt to be over yet, but fuck, I need to sink my teeth into those veins and drink her darkness more than I need anything else.

Her blood has tasted like shit for weeks, but tonight under the moon with her darkness out to play, there's no way it still does.

Just the thought has my mouth watering like I haven't fed in days. "Fuck, you're dripping for it. My girl knows what she's good for, doesn't she?"

Thump thump. Thump thump. Thump thump.

Fuck, her heart is racing.

"Ledger wait," she begs, out loud and just out of reach to my left. She's spinning around searching for me but looking right over my hiding spot — giving me a perfect, unobstructed view of the terror on her face. There's no hiding it now. "Ledger, please. I know you don't like me, I know I'm just blood. But please—" her breath hitches in a startled gasp as I snap a twig on purpose — "Please don't!"

The sight of her, the begging, it's too much. My cock throbs, making me squeeze it tightly as I speak directly into her mind so she can't seek me out. "*Please? What happened to your 'fuck you' energy?*"

Her cheeks burn with uneasy embarrassment. "I finally get it," she mumbles. "You don't like the taste of my blood anymore so you're over me. There's nothing stopping you from really killing me this time." Suddenly, her face screws up. "So yeah, I guess... fuck you. If you're gonna kill me anyway, I'm not going down begging. Fucking make me, bastard."

With a snarl, I run out from my hiding spot to grab her by throat, needing to see and feel the fear if she's going to run her mouth and lie to me. "So

fucking infuriating.”

Her scream vibrates through my palm, echoing around us until thunder builds in the sky. *Good. Let it out, baby. Make the world quake around us.*

My eyes are wild as I tug her close, her bloodied knee rubbing against my white sweats just like I’d hoped. I want to go home covered in dirt, my girl’s blood, and cum. “Love it when you scream for me.”

I move us over so I can pin her to a tree, chuckling as she claws at my arm. “Let me go,” she grunts out, screaming in frustration and terror when I squeeze her throat tighter. “Fine!” she yells. “Do your worst, Huxley.”

Lightning strikes the ground so close to me, I drop her, giving her a split second to wriggle free and take off again.

Did she do that on purpose? I wonder, glancing up at the sky before I take off after her with a growl. I have to bite her before her darkness swells under the moonlight. She’s not demanding anything of her tonight, and if that strike of lightning is any indicator, the moon is definitely feeling giving.

“You couldn’t handle my worst,” I call out, needing to bring her down before she actually does manifest right here in these woods. “Your body isn’t capable of it, little human.”

She stops, spinning to face me with a fire in her eyes I’ve never seen before. Not from her, anyway. “Yeah? I think you need me,” she challenges, stalking toward me. “I think you picked me because I’m the *only* one who can handle your worst. The only one who doesn’t need the love you refuse to give. The only one who can take that cock of yours at vampire speed without snapping like a twig.”

Her lingerie is dirty and tattered, her nipple exposed as I close the distance between us. She’s still scared, but just like that, it’s secondary to her desire for me. “How wet are you for this cock, Clumsy?”

I reach down to feel for myself, grunting when I feel the flood under my fingertips. The thoughts in her head.

Every part of this did something for her.

“So go on then,” she pushes as the wind kicks up and it starts pouring. “You caught me.”

I’m not prepared for the way she kisses me, all vicious teeth and frenzied need. I match her desire with every swipe of my tongue and lift her off the ground, my teeth catching her lip so I can taste that delicious blood.

And fucking hell, is it good tonight. All I taste is her. I rip her underwear off, leaving the remains on the ground without a care in the world, and then I

lay her back right there in the mud to own her.

Before she can inhale her next breath, my teeth sink into her neck, seeking not just her blood, but that terrible, stunning dark thing that lives inside her. It's so much stronger now than it had been a couple days ago, and it's not hard to find out why.

The day she manifested.

I coax those memories to the forefront and watch it all, but this is better than a front row seat. I can taste the things she refused to tell her friends. The things she can never hide from me.

Groaning, I pull my teeth from her skin and rut myself against her center, letting her feel how hard she makes me just by being her. "Tell me about the black hole." I kiss down her neck and chest, leaving bite marks the whole way down so I can tease myself. "Tell me how much you liked that dark power."

She grinds up, rubbing her clit on my clothed cock as she reaches down to grip it. Stroking, she whispers, "I fucking loved it. I've never felt so strong. It's a shame it wasn't real, she had it coming."

"Fuck," I growl, leaning up to kiss the hell out of her again. "You wanted to kill her... do you still want to? Do you want her to suffer?"

I let Suren shove my pants below my ass so my cock can search for its favorite place as she tries to shut down. She's not used to being open about this, she's used to hiding it. Licking the bite I left on her neck, I compel her to tell me the truth.

"Yes!" she gasps. "Yes, I wanted to and I still want to. Yes, I want her to suffer. I want her to bleed."

A dam breaks until the malevolence inside her rivals my own and the storm becomes so strong, it fells a tree not twenty feet from us. Suren screams, squirming under me — this girl, so afraid of me, so afraid of herself. Terrified of her own fucking gorgeous, endless power.

I wish we could stay right here and be the savages we were born to be, but I know this bliss has to come to an end. "If my girl wants her to bleed, then that bitch should bleed." I meet her gaze while I slip inside her, my weight keeping her pinned as the storm thrashes around us and I begin to siphon that perfect darkness inside her.

Rain hammers my back as I thrust deeper, splitting her in half, and goddess, I don't know what tastes better. Her blood, her darkness, or the devotion I finally see blooming again in her ocean eyes.

This, at the edge of sanity, at the edge of the world... is where she belongs to me fully.

“Ledger.”

That wrecked, gasped little moan nearly gets lost to the monstrous thunder shaking the ground under us, but I hear it.

“Suren,” I moan back, lapping at the blood leaking from her skin so I can move to the other side. “No storm could keep me away from you. The whole world could burn, and I’d stay right here.”

I fuck her hard and fast against the ground until she’s screaming for a whole new reason. Her nails dig craters into my back as she clenches and takes it, legs slack and spread for me.

What a tightrope I’m walking. The more connected to me she feels, the more her power grows. One day, I’ll have to make a choice: let her in and capture her so completely under my spell that her power explodes and she reaches her full potential, or protect the world and keep her at arm’s length. Keep her feeling weak and worthless to make sure that power stays quelled.

But today isn’t that day. Right now, all I want is to enjoy every inch I can take from her before she reaches that limit. “You feel it too, baby? Feel how connected the moon lets us be?”

It’s so much more than moonlight, but she can’t know that yet.

“Yes,” she breathes. “I — oh, god.”

Her eyes flutter as she comes, my fingers pressing against her pulse point so I can feel it rise and fall through her orgasm. I swear if I could record the sound of her heart beating I’d listen to it every single night. It’s better than any song, than any nature noises or ocean waves. None of those ever brought me comfort, but the pounding of this woman’s heart has me in a fucking chokehold.

“Good girl. You were made to be fucked like an animal, made to hang off my cock or my teeth and nothing more. One day you’ll be purely mine, and you’ll realize that I’m all you need in your corner.”

Something inside her lets go and the wickedness she holds so close envelopes me fully. It surges through me until I feel stronger than I ever have and something inside me snaps, too. I sink my teeth into her neck again, drinking as I fuck into her messy, sloppy, greedy pussy.

We could die right here and I don’t think I’d have a single complaint. It’s actually quite terrifying to admit, because what we’re sharing here tonight only shows me I’ve let this girl in too deep. I’ve given her pieces of me I’ve

never given to anyone before in my life, and I really need to pull my shit together.

By the time she comes again and I retract my fangs, my girl is woozy and pale, but she's right where I want her. If only I could keep her here. "Taste so good tonight, Suren. Finally taste my girl again."

"Your girl," she mumbles, eyes closed and rain-soaked hair clinging to her face. "Say it again, baby. Do you mean it?"

There's no way she'll remember this tomorrow. She's too gone, let off too much power tonight and lost too much blood. She'll probably sleep for a week and wake up feeling hungover as hell, so I indulge her. "You're my girl. You're all I want to feed from and fuck, and one day, you'll know I'm all you need too. All of you is mine."

I slam deep inside her as I come, pinning my hips against her so she can practically taste it as it oozes inside of her. Steadily, the storm calms around us until the birds return to the battered trees and the moonlight hits us again.

It's almost too much. Seeing it reflecting off her silver hair, the sated, trusting expression on her face, the guttural sense of possession and connection I feel buried inside her... I've never seen anything more beautiful.

I was right to be worried about her ruining my favorite game, because now I know I can never play this with anyone else again. Absolutely no one could compare. She's the only prey I'll ever need, I just need her blood to continue tasting this good for me.

The bitterness has got to go.

Chapter Thirty-One

Suren

My chest feels like it's sitting under an anvil as I walk into Bone Heart Botanicals for my shift. The main floor is empty, giving me a moment to set my bag behind the counter and jot down my start time, but I start to get even more uneasy when Yelena still hasn't shown her face after ten minutes.

Not wanting to waste her time, I restock the vervain and breadseed poppy, then water the huge cobra lily she keeps for insect control. The picky carnivorous thing only seems to like rainwater and bugs, so when the bucket she used during the recent rainstorm is empty, I take it out back to refill it again.

Yelena's back when I re-enter the store. "Hey," I say casually. "Did you have to sneak Professor Sterling out your office window or something?"

She releases a little huff at that, but doesn't confirm nor deny it. "What's wrong? I can feel you stewing over something."

Oh, great. Hesitating, I realize I'm in the safest space I could ever dream of finding around here — she already knows my dirty little secret *and* this shop is 100% Ledger-proof. "Well, the temp magic worked. I'm out of Magic Discovery now and I've moved into the Witch's Lair with Quinn."

She nods, grabbing her cards before beckoning me to follow. "And how do you feel about that?"

"Good, mostly." Sitting, I brush my fingertips over the purple velvet tablecloth. "It was a little more powerful than I expected. Is it... intuitive?"

"Of course it is. Magic always is, regardless of where it originated. Temp magic seems to latch onto darker parts of us than other magic, but it's connected all the same. Do you want to tell me about it?"

Not particularly, but I explain what happened anyway. I just conveniently forget to add the bits about Ledger hunting me on the full moon and making me feel more alive than I've ever felt. "So, yeah. I guess it's good to know it was definitely the temp magic and not my own snaking in there."

"Temporary magic always needs something to latch onto, and I wouldn't be surprised if it did in fact, touch your own magic." She lays the cards out after shuffling them for longer than usual and proceeds to tell me where to set them as I pull. "How did you feel inside?"

Mmm yeah, I'm not going there. Not the full truth, anyway. It was one thing admitting it to Ledger in the moment when he was compelling me to tell the truth, but here? It doesn't feel as good. "The situation was awful, but leaving and knowing I didn't have to go back? That was pretty cool. I was starving after, though."

"That's standard. You'll probably eat more than usual if you continue to use it, but I don't want you to give up on your magic yet either, okay? It's in there. Maybe this will help you find it."

Sighing, I wait for her to read my cards for me — but as usual, she takes mental notes and cleans up the deck without saying a word. Maybe it's for the best. "The tea works, by the way. The bitter one. He doesn't like it."

Yelena laughs about that a little harder than I expected. "And what has he said about it?"

"That I need to eat more bear claws," I giggle. "He's been mean about it, but whatever. It's deterred him at least a little."

"Bear claws are an interesting choice. How mean has he been? Do you need to start drinking more yet or do you think he might catch on if we add some?"

"I honestly don't know," I admit. "It's so hard to tell because I don't realize it's happening in the moment, so it's hard to remember to focus on his facial expressions and stuff. And I'm not sure the dose is high enough right now; he took quite a bit from me a couple nights ago. I think it'll be fine if we up it. Maybe he'll just assume I hate him or something and go find someone else to terrorize."

"That's the hope," she replies, but the look on her face says she's not betting money on it. "Come help me brew an attentive potion for Trevor's nephew."

Chuckling, I grab the sage and bring it to her cauldron. "So is it getting serious with you two yet? I'm dying for details."

"Details?" she repeats with a laugh. "You can say that. I didn't want you to worry about this, but when you were gone, something happened to me. My memory was altered, so I don't know who or why — I've been trying to meditate and get them back, but whoever did it is very powerful. Anyway, all I remember is a threat... like they wanted me to remember that part and only that part, and the way I felt knowing Trevor's life was threatened on my behalf. I don't know how to explain it." She continues crushing the herb as

she stares down at her fingers. “Naturally I tried to break it off entirely to keep him safe, but he’s not having it.”

Something deep in my gut churns with foreboding. “Yelena... I really want to talk about this, but I have to ask. Did Ledger come see you?”

“I have considered him, but whoever it was actually paid for whatever it was they took. Does that sound like him?”

“If he’s trying to cover his tracks, maybe.” My heart beats faster. “Did you take inventory? Are you missing wanderdust?”

“Yes.” She looks me over curiously. “But I had thought that was you, was it not?”

Silently, I crush up some of the materials she needs, pretending that accusation doesn’t hurt. “I would never steal from you, Yelena. I stole it from Cherith. You really thought it was me?”

“I didn’t consider it stealing.” I don’t hear any trace of doubt in her tone. “I knew you had to follow that path however necessary, and that you knew I had some. I guess I just didn’t see it that way, so I’d been trying to figure out what else was missing. How’d Cherith handle that?”

Holy hell. “Oh, uh... I guess I got away with it?” I muse. “Ledger told me he took the fall for it.”

“Let him be good for something, especially if you think he stole my wanderdust. The threat seems right up his alley.”

My stomach squirms with anxiety. Did he pay for it? Would he deserve it? Is he capable of this? I’m so, so fucking tired of being confused about him. He had me half convinced on the full moon that I was in love with him, and yet again, all the good feelings I built toward him get erased by what an ass he is. “Yes, Yelena. I think it was him,” I say firmly. “He had enough to come get me *and* drag me back here. Who else would have a motive? Your true paying customers would just walk in and ask for it.”

She nods, narrowed eyes glancing up at her door as she crushes the herbs a little forcefully. “I’ll get him back. No one comes in here and threatens the people I care about and gets away with it.”

“You sort of are,” I remind her. “You’re helping me rob him of his favorite blood source.”

“Yes, and that feels great. But I’m not done with him yet.” She winks at me and moves on to the cauldron, making me nervous all over again.

Somehow, when people mess with Ledger, I’m the one who takes the brunt of his anger. But he can’t just get away with this, either... so what do I

do?

And why does it always seem to come back to this?

Disgruntled, I skip Gristle's and head right into Nevitt's office after my shift ends. "Hi," I grumble. "Please tell me you have good news for me."

"Good news? No. News, yes." He leads me away without another word, this time to a room with checkered walls and a couch for us to sit on. "The same thing has been happening at Iron Lake, only they don't keep it some dirty little secret. I've never looked into them before because Rogue Hollow has been hard enough to follow, but now that I have I found out, they use it as a scare tactic to motivate their new students."

My mind races from one question to another, nearly too quickly to keep up. "So that's another academy?" I ask. "And they just... admit this shit?"

"Yes. The local humans know exactly what they're getting into before they apply at the academy, but the humans from your realm don't until they arrive."

"No, we never do," I correct. "Not until it's too late. The only reason I know at all is because the Headmistress' nephew took a... liking to me."

"Ledger Huxley," he responds. "He wasn't the one that was with you the first time we met. I know Ledger Huxley, I covered his little brother's funeral. He didn't seem like someone you'd want to be tangled with."

The reminder that Ledger's been through something like that only makes me feel more conflicted about him. "He's fine," I lie. "A little rough around the edges, but mostly harmless."

"Didn't seem harmless that day. I wasn't allowed to touch the ground so I was up in a tree watching — had a great view though. The kid stood up in the middle of his father's eulogy, looked him dead in the eyes with a set jaw and walked out. Word has it they still haven't spoken since that day. I tried to look into the family more after that, but my boss forbade it. Oh well, I can't cover all the juicy stories. Now, why would he tell you something that serious? What's his angle?"

Ledger Huxley is nothing if not a man crafted from angles and fine lines. "He likes my blood," I admit. "And in the interest of full transparency—" *fuck, red alert, don't tell him* — "he claimed me because of it."

Nevitt's eyes widen and drop to my neck. I'm a little taken aback when he moves my hair to the side and steps away. "Sweet moon," he gasps. "I'm

so sorry.”

“Don’t be,” I say quickly. “It’s fine, really.” If by fine, I mean I feel strung out and so confused, it’s exhausting... then yeah. Totally fine.

“Mmhm.” But I don’t miss the pity in his eyes. “Well, do you imagine he thought you’d ever tell someone?”

Shaking my head, I tug my hair back over my shoulder. “He knows I told my best friend. I couldn’t get the words out so he had to do it for me, but no. I don’t think he expected I’d go to a stranger about it.” Back on the right topic, I press, “So what do we do? If it’s like this at other academies, it really is bigger than Cherith. I don’t know how to fight something like that.”

“I don’t either, but I’m still digging on her specifically. I’m trying to find proof that any of the students actually make it back to the Human Realm.”

Something about that makes my blood run cold. “Okay. I can try to ask Ledger more questions, too.”

“Yes, do that. Come see me when the semester ends and hopefully we’ll have some real leads.”

Already, I’m wondering what this round of questions is going to cost me. There’s always a price, always another shoe dropping. But this is worth it, the humans are worth it.

The truth is worth it.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Otto

Something is very, very wrong. I feel it in my bones as my eyes shoot open, and every single Alpha instinct I have is buzzing with chaotic, frantic energy. Flipping up to a crouching position, I scan the Den and clock Von and Parker sleeping peacefully, Vin reading a book in the corner, and my Cherry baby still curled up where I left her.

Nik and Ciara are gone, but that's nothing new. They fuck so violently we've kicked them out more than once so the rest of us could sleep.

My first thought is Rodyn. He might've let Park go over break, but it won't last. There's no way someone like him just lets his mate run free like this, not when the line between "not now" and flat out rejection is so thin, it's barely recognizable. A growl rips through my chest at the thought. Parker is *mine*. My Omega. Rodyn doesn't deserve him or his love, and definitely not his magic. Though, if anyone could tame my brute of a brother, it would be my Omega. Maybe that wouldn't be the worst —

No. Stop.

Shaking those thoughts off, I slowly get to my feet and check on him, anyway. He's breathing, plastered against Javonte's sleek form, looking peaceful. His aura is fine, so what's the problem? If my mate and my Omega are okay, why the hell is my wolf trying to rip through my skin?

It has to be Nik and Ciara. Wherever they are, they're in trouble. Shifting, I curse myself for not taking my favorite sweats off first and scent them out. Yeah, they were definitely messing around before they left, but if they ran afoul of an enemy...

"*Nik?*" I call through the bond. "*Ciara. Respond.*"

Silence.

"*Niklaus,*" I repeat. "*Answer your Alpha. Where are you?*"

Nothing.

There's no point in trying again to reach Ciara. Since Niklaus initiated her into the pack, she's barely recognized me as her Alpha. If Nik can ignore me, she can too. Steadying myself, I close my eyes and breathe slowly, deliberately. "*Niklaus,*" I command. "*Respond.*"

As the seconds tick by in utter silence, I'm forced to face the truth. There are only three reasons a pack-bonded Beta would be able to ignore their Alpha's command. One, he's dead or grievously injured. Two, the Alpha's grip has slipped so much that commands just aren't commands at all anymore and his pack is dissolving. Three, the Beta has somehow become an Alpha himself.

Given what Parker told me the last time I tried to summon them all, option two is the most likely — which means the fucker is ignoring me simply because he can. He's one of the strongest Betas I've ever met, so he didn't join my pack for protection. He joined because he wanted someone else to take responsibility, and because he's one of my best friends. This isn't a good look for him.

"Alpha?" Parker whispers. "*What's happening?*"

"*Shit.*" Looking down, I shake my head slightly. "*Go back to sleep, little Omega. I didn't mean to wake you up. Nik and Ciara are gone, but I'm sure it's nothing to worry about. Just go back to sleep. I'll handle it. Watch over my mate while I'm gone.*"

Without waiting, I follow Nik's scent out of the nest, then out of the Den entirely. There's something off about it this time. Normally a subdued, almost vanilla aroma, it's now bitter and strange. Still undeniably his, but... what's wrong with it? Has he been poisoned?

I run a little faster, out of the woods, past the fountain and the entrance to the catacombs. They're not in the Siren Cove or Goblin Grotto, not up in Peryton Tower. I know he'd rather die than find himself unprotected in Vampire Hall, and I can't see any reason why he'd go to Witch Lair, which means they're not in any of the dorms.

Calling his name over and over, I chase his bizarre scent out of the bounds of the academy toward town. It's the middle of the night. None of the shops or hangout spots are open except Night Owl Cafe, but he hates that place. Fuck, what is going —

There.

A hundred feet in front of me, Nik is standing with Ciara and two young wolves I don't know very well. I've seen them around the Den, but that's about it. Stalking closer, I start to pick out their voices. "So what happens now?" the shorter one asks. He looks like an Omega, but his scent is all Beta. "Do we move in with you guys? What's your nest like?"

“That’s the beauty of it,” Ciara replies. “We’ll get to make our own. Together. We won’t be staying in our current nest since it belongs to another wolf pack.”

Though every part of my mind is sharper in this form, it still takes me several long seconds to work out what she means because it’s so incredibly fucking unbelievable. Her nest is *my* nest. Her pack is *my* pack. But as my keen eyes travel down the length of Nik’s body and focus on the bulge in his sweats that wasn’t there before I went to sleep, it all makes sense. I was wrong. It wasn’t option two at all... it was option three. Somehow, Niklaus has become an Alpha. At least that explains his scent.

Reason tells me I should turn around and go back to the rest of my pack, to my mate. I didn’t build my pack based on fear and forced submission. I built it on trust, friendship, and the need to be connected to others. Each of them knew they had a choice when they joined, and all of them chose this, chose me, willingly. If he’s changing his mind now, that’s fine. I should let it go.

But that’s not how things are normally done. That’s not how my physical make-up *demand*s things to be done. Fighting it before was one thing. But fighting it now, when he didn’t even have the fucking decency to tell me his Order changed and he was leaving my pack? No. I can’t let this slide, not when I’ve still got a rejected bond mark on my chest. Things are too volatile and precarious right now for me to just walk away.

Knowing they won’t be able to hear my thoughts and communications anymore, I shift back into my human form and step forward. “There you are, Niklaus,” I comment, sounding almost bored. I need him to fucking say it. “What’re you guys doing clear out here in the middle of the night?”

Ciara huffs. “What’s it to you, Otto?”

The name makes me grunt. “I’m still an Alpha, you little shit.”

“Mhm, I know. But you’re not our Alpha anymore.”

Ignoring her, I set my sights on Nik — the one who really betrayed me here. Ciara was a lost cause from the moment I let someone else initiate her, and part of me knows that’s why he’s standing in front of me with a knot barely hidden in his pants. I put him on this path. It’s my fault. “Niklaus, see reason. You might be an Alpha now, but there’s no reason to leave the pack. You know I don’t command you to do things you truly don’t want to do. Why leave?”

“Because,” he says simply. “You’ve spent all your time and effort on that mate of yours, and you’ve forgotten all about us. Ciara’s pregnant, did you even know that? With my pup. You’ve had your ass shoved so far up Quinn’s ass that you can’t see what’s happening around you anymore, Otto. And I get it, she’s your mate. But she rejected you. Watching you try to act like everything’s fine and that she actually loves you is just... fuck. It’s sad, is what it is. Tiptoeing pathetic. Not a good look for a wolf period, let alone a pureblooded Vanir Alpha. It’s time to let go. Give Von and Vin the chance to find a real Alpha, and Parker... I’ll take him unless you want him to end up with Rodyn.”

I can handle a lot of things. Insulting me when it comes to how whipped Cherry has me, fine. Saying I’ve been distracted, whatever. But threatening to take Parker from me? My Omega? Snarling, I lean into my instincts, the generational demand for Alphas to fight and conquer and own. I let it fill me with the strength of Alphas who have come before... and I pounce. I’m in full wolf form again by the time I’ve got Niklaus pinned to the ground. It’s not enough for him to submit to me anymore. Not enough to just punish him for leaving. I want to kill him, to rip his fucking throat out for suggesting that Parker is better off with someone other than me. That I’m fucking weak for being in love with my mate, who loves me too.

This broken mark means nothing in the grand scheme of things. I’m Otto Neyrus, Alpha, and it’s time I proved it again.

My teeth catch his pulse point a split second before he shifts under me, throwing me off balance as he whimpers from the wound. The sound only spurs me on. How dare he think I’d just let him walk away? Tightening my jaw, I drag him back several steps to get him away from the others. Nik goes limp with a soft howl as triumph thrums through my veins — I’ve got him. So fucking easy. He’s no Alpha, at least not compared to me.

“Stop!” Ciara screams. “Please, Otto! Don’t kill him. He wasn’t lying, I’m pregnant. Please don’t kill him.”

Fuck, it’s not my problem. Ciara letting herself get knocked up by a traitor isn’t my goddamn problem, and yet it’s not the pup’s fault. I can’t be the reason he grows up without a dad, even if his dad is an asshole.

“Please,” she begs, her chest wracked with barely controlled sobs. “I’ll do anything. Just let him go, don’t hurt him!”

Ugh. Fine. Showing mercy, I unclamp my jaw and let him go, standing over him as I meet the eyes of his supposed new pack. I should take them in

myself now, but fuck that. The young ones could've come to me directly and Ciara never should've been a part of my pack in the first place. They're not mine, and I won't offer them sanctuary. Mercy is all they're getting from me today.

As I step over Nik to go back to my nest, he bites my hind leg. The force of it shatters the bone and sends driving, exploding pain ricocheting through my body. Fucking bastard. Cheating, lowlife bastard. I channel the pain into a vicious growl, turning and biting his face until he lets me go, then stop holding back. The blood all over his head is like a homing beacon showing me weakness and providing a target for my strikes, but he's faster than me now. One slip has his teeth sinking into my shoulder, tearing skin and making it almost impossible to put any weight at all on my left side. This isn't like it was with Fenris, where the wounds were superficial and manageable. He's got me, and it's taking everything in me to stay upright as my howl rips through the air.

Cherry. Parker. Vineet. Javonte. My pack. The people I'm meant to protect. Cherry. Parker. Vineet. Javonte.

With a wild yelp, I wrench my shoulder out of his grasp just as a mass of grey fur flies past me and knocks him away. I'd recognize his form anywhere — Vineet. If he's here...

Whipping around, I spot Parker blocking the other three wolves as Von races toward me in his human form. "C'mon, Alpha. Shift, I can't carry you like this. I know it'll hurt, man, but you have to. C'mon."

The angry snarls coming from behind us prove that Vineet and Nik aren't done yet, and I need to help them — but the second I go to turn their way, my legs give out. I'm no help to anyone, not like this. Not until my hind leg heals, at least. With every last shred of determination I've got, I force my wolf back until I'm laying naked on the bloodied grass. The pain intensifies tenfold, blurring my vision and making me panic.

"Don't move," he says firmly. "I'm gonna lift you up and take you home, okay? Just brace yourself. Vin's got this, he's chasing Nik back. He's fine."

A Beta going up against a new Alpha doesn't sound fine, but I know my pack. Vineet is strong. He's smart and agile and ruthless. Nik is too confident, too brash to understand the nuance needed to win a true fight. It's why he had to sneak attack me after it should've been over. "Good. Hope Vin rips his goddamn throat out for this. I don't care how many kids he's having."

Javonte pauses. "Wait, what? Doesn't matter. Okay, big guy. Up ya go."

His arms slip under me and I'm positive that I've never been more embarrassed, but the blinding, stabbing pain ensures I can't focus on anything else as he hails Parker and we make our way carefully back to the nest. My Cherry baby is still sleeping, but not peacefully anymore. Her brows are scrunched and her lip is turned out, accentuated by weak little grumbles and frightened groans.

"Put me next to her and go get Parker to help her. Make sure all three of you make it back here safely and I'll explain everything, but I can't leave her right now. Even if I could fucking walk, I wouldn't."

"You got it, Alpha."

As he starts to pull away, I grab his arm, giving him one more command: "I mean it, Javonte. Get yourself back here alive and in one piece, or I'll kill you myself."

It's a terrible demand to lay on someone, but his mouth quirks up in a half smile. "I plan on it."

He takes off, leaving me bloodsoaked and broken next to my mate. I'm sorry she's having a nightmare, but at the same time... I can't help but think that whatever she's dealing with in her mind is easier on her than seeing me like this would be. At least this way, I should be healed by the time she wakes up, and that's all I can really ask for right now.

I've already lost enough.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Quinn

My heart still aches for Otto and his pack, especially with the heaviness of knowing all of this is happening because I denied him.

It's been two days since Nik and Ciara left. Although physically he's mostly healed, I can tell this left a deep scar beneath the surface, and unfortunately, it's one nothing can ever heal. He hasn't opened up about it yet, but marked or not, I can feel the turmoil he's battling inside. I just wish I knew how to help him. He'll always be my Alpha, and I'm so thankful for the loyalty Parker, Von, and Vin have shown him during this time.

Since Nik left the pack, I've noticed Otto hasn't left my side. I don't mind it. I know he needs me close, so when I'm able, I never hesitate to pull him in or cuddle in his lap. Plus, I love the way his arms open for me with no hesitation every time I step in. "Hey, baby. How's your leg?"

"I'll live," he comments. "I should've gotten it set, but whatever. Will you still love me with a limp?"

"Of course," I assure him, holding his chin so I can kiss his lips softly. "No matter what. Want me to look at it? I'm not a Healer, but..."

"Nah. It won't be like this forever. Every time we shift forms, our bones change too. It'll course-correct eventually."

I nod, running my hands through his ridiculously soft hair as I stare into his eyes, but I break it the moment Suren and Greylin approach. It's the first time they've come to hang out near the Den, so I flip around in Otto's lap with a smile and push the sad thoughts away. If only Otto could do that, too.

Squeezing his hand, I wrap his arms around me and greet them. "Hey, did you guys stop at the cafe first?"

Parker plops down to my left, and I find myself glad Otto brought enough blankets out here to keep us all comfortable. Originally I thought it was too much, but when Sur and Grey take a seat and I see there's still room for whenever Vin and Von join us, I know my man had the right idea.

Never mess with a wolf who knows how to nest.

As Suren settles in, she licks her lips nervously. "Yeah. I was starving. How's everything here?"

Parker's eyeing her with concern like he's about to ask what's wrong, but I don't need him to. I know what it is. She's afraid Ledger's going to come out of nowhere and punish her for being with Greylin.

I'm positive Otto doesn't want me bringing up what happened, but Suren is my best friend, and apart from our classes, we really haven't had much time to speak. She knows the gist though, so at least I don't have to go into details. "It's... going. His leg still has some healing to do, but Nik hasn't shown his dumb face around, so there's that. How are things with you?"

I stop myself before bringing up Ledger because I honestly don't know what's going on with Grey, but he's actually a good guy despite his bloodsucker status. I don't want to make him uncomfortable.

"Fine, I guess," she says. "Just always a little on edge these days."

Otto snorts. "Yeah, I think there's been a lot of that going around. Even the weather seems more fucked than usual."

I glance up, thinking of the night of the full moon with a frown. "That storm the other day was crazy, huh? During the full moon. It was so bright, and then suddenly there were storm clouds everywhere."

Grey huffs. "Yeah, that shit came out of nowhere, but I was already inside by that point. I called it a night pretty early."

He glances at Suren like he wants to ask what she did, so I cut that conversation off before it can go any further. "I don't really mind the rain, personally. Does it snow here?"

"After Yule sometimes," Parker chimes in. "Usually not much, though. Did it snow a lot where you're from?"

"Not really. Probably about the same amount, only we didn't celebrate Yule. We had Christmas, and it was a whole season that started right after Halloween, even though people fought about it and wanted it to start after Thanksgiving. Wait, do you guys even know what Halloween and Thanksgiving are?"

"Yeah, but you're not gonna find those celebrations here," Grey says with a slight smirk. "You guys aren't the first humans we've ever met, you know."

Suren nudges him. "No duh."

The flirting between them only makes me smile and wish Ledger just wasn't in the picture. If he wasn't around, maybe Grey could actually be good for Suren. I still want to slap him for getting that full moon blowjob a few months ago, but it isn't like they were together at the time. We can all blame Ledger for that as well.

“Well, whatever. I don’t need a holiday to pig out on food. Sur, remember that one time we got one of those grocery store chickens and pretended it was turkey?”

“You mean the one I stole and shoved under your shirt?” she laughs. “Watching you try to convince that old man you were pregnant was the highlight of the season.”

“So ridiculous, that fucker was hot. Burned the shit out of my stomach, and I had to turn on my acting skills.”

I laugh with her, my hand curling behind Otto’s neck to feel him, and suddenly I imagine myself actually pregnant with his pup. The image makes me squirm, and although I know I’m nowhere near ready to be a mom, I know there’s only one person I want to travel that road with.

“Whoa,” Otto whispers, turning his face to lick my chin. “What’re you thinking about, Cherry? You got all... warm and fuzzy.”

I don’t know if I should tell him, but I might have if we were alone. “You,” I answer as honestly as possible. “Us.”

“Good.” He kisses me quickly, then nods to Suren. “Where’s your fuckboy?”

“Otto,” I hiss, tapping his arm lightly, but I can’t fight my smile at his accuracy.

“Ouch.” Greylin laughs. “But he’s not wrong, there’s no better way to describe Ledger Huxley... besides asshole.”

Suren’s eyes widen so much, I’d laugh if I wasn’t suddenly afraid for her. “Are you guys insane? All of you?”

Parker doesn’t hesitate to reach out and touch her hand to comfort her. “Are you afraid he’ll hurt us, or you?”

He tilts his head like he’s feeling something else churning inside her, and I can’t place the look in his eyes as he watches her relax. It seems like it’s harder for him to calm her than it is for him to calm others, but it works nonetheless. “Whoa,” she whispers. “You’re awesome.”

Parker’s blush only makes him more adorable. “I’m sorry you’re tethered to Ledger.” Slowly, he releases her hand. “His mark is dark.”

I don’t understand what that means, but I have an idea when Suren looks down at her hands. Why does this dick have her so twisted inside? I believe her when she says they have good moments, but it’s so hard to imagine it when he leaves her looking like this. “If you were given the choice right now, would you break that bond?” I ask.

For a moment, it looks like she doesn't understand the question — or maybe she just doesn't understand the answer. "I don't know. Can we talk about something else?"

"Of course," I rush out. "Let's talk about the Samhain Celebration. Only witches are allowed. Do you boys feel left out?"

"Nah. We've got our own shit going on that night," Greylin laughs. "You guys have fun with your seances or whatever it is you do."

"I honestly don't have a clue, but I'm excited. Wonder if it's a tits-out kinda celebration," I add playfully, wanting to feel my mate growl behind me.

He does, tightening his grip on me. "Cherry, you know I'm not allowed to be there."

"I know," I turn, placing a kiss on his nose. "I promise I'll keep my bra on."

"All of your clothes," he grumbles. "Wear a coat."

I try not to laugh at how grouchy he just got, but it's so damn adorable I can't help it. "All my clothes, no coat," I bargain. "Besides, am I really going to be without you all night? I doubt it."

"Babe, you'll never be without me again. I know this might be a touchy subject given our history, but it's not safe anymore to just let you wander off on your own. We can stay back, but one of us will always be close to you, just in case."

I had a feeling, and with his growing number of enemies, I have absolutely no argument for it. "I get it. Sometimes I'll want to just hang with Suren, but I don't mind one of you sticking close."

Suddenly Otto stiffens before he even breaks eye contact, and when I hear Fenris' voice, I know exactly why. "Is this your new pack, Otto? Witches and vampires?" He laughs. "Heard Nik was smart enough to break away. Did Javonte and Vin leave your ass in the dust, too?"

"I'm here for the girl," Greylin admits shamelessly. "Otto wouldn't have me, anyway. I asked."

Surprised, Otto nods. "My pack is still intact, Fenris. Just a few pounds of dead weight lighter."

"Looks like all the dead weight was left behind. Looking good, Quinn," he says. I refuse to even look his way or acknowledge his presence, but I know that level of disrespect will piss off my Alpha — especially when he

continues, “You know where to find me when you’re sick of a second-rate Alpha that’s probably going to lose his knot soon.”

Chuckling without a single discernible trace of humor, Otto’s fingers curl tighter around my waist. “I’m surprised you even know what a knot is, Fenris. Pretty useless thing on a guy like you.”

Fenris growls low, but when I finally look up at them, I see one of his pack mates pulling him back. “Yeah, we’ll see who’s knotting her in the end, Neyrus.”

He turns to stalk away, but I yell out after him, anyway. “It will never be you.” I hate the way he was just talking about me, but I hate how it made my man feel more. He doesn’t deserve that. “You okay, baby?”

I touch his cheek softly, and he forces a smile. “Of course. Shit like this happens all the time with Alphas, don’t worry about it.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Grey argues. “Two months ago, he used to deliberately stay out of your way. Everyone d— ow,” he grunts as Suren elbows him. “I mean... what do I know? I’m not a wolf.”

I’m glad for the elbow, but he’s right. He doesn’t understand wolf stuff, and yet he still seemed ready to stand up next to Otto if it came to a fight. I have to appreciate that. “Yeah, it was actually my fault. Or it is my fault... still. Let’s just say, when destiny knocks on your door, fucking open it.”

Greylin only looks more confused, but shares an intense, silent look with Suren. When realization dawns on his face, I don’t have to ask why. She told him. “If you want me to eat him, I will,” Grey laughs. “He smells like a junkyard, but I can plug my nose.”

“I don’t need your help,” Otto responds coldly. “I may not be as strong as I was a few months ago, but I haven’t lost yet. And I won’t, either. It’s only a matter of time before the bond mends and I’m back at full strength.”

“That’s right,” I agree. “I’m not going anywhere, Otto. I promise.”

“I know, baby. Thank you.” He kisses me again, just another short, quick peck that tells me there’s still a lot on his mind.

I wish I could ease all his troubles, but more than anything, I wish that fucking mark would appear over my heart. It’s all we’re missing. I’m already giving my all, just like he is, but it still hasn’t appeared. It makes sense, most things take longer to fix than they do to break, but I’ll keep doing all I can to continue mending what I broke.

One day, it will be enough.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Suren

As much as I love my new room, it really doesn't feel that different. Quinn's barely around. I'm happy for her that she's working things out with Otto, but I can only watch so much tv before I feel like banging my head against the wall.

So when Ledger walks in looking like he's expecting something, I'm honestly a little relieved. Whatever he's got planned for me has to be better than the monotony of laying here alone. "Sorry, we're closed," I tease.

"Closed?" he repeats, moving toward me in a blur to spread my legs. "Not for me."

"Especially for you." Biting my lip, I lie, "Jakob's coming over soon."

"That's not funny," he grumbles, climbing on my bed so he can nudge my legs open wider. "He knows better than to touch what's mine without permission. Come to my place."

He's almost cute when he's grumpy. "Okay. Can I put pants on?"

"Since when are pants necessary when you're with me?"

Fair.

Sighing playfully, I swat his hands away and swing my legs over the side of the bed to get up. I'm wearing his shirt, panties, and absolutely nothing else, but something tells me that's the only reason he didn't just drag me out of here by my hair. "Fine. Let's go."

Ledger scoops me up in his arms and speeds off, his scent enveloping me as the world blurs and I lose all sense of direction. When we get there and wait for the door to open, I'm surprised when he kisses me so sweetly it sends butterflies scattering through my stomach.

That's fucking new.

"Whoa," I whisper, unsteady in his arms. "Where'd that come from?"

"Just been thinking about the full moon," he admits. "Already want to hunt you again." He zips up the stairs, setting me down in his living room and giving me a perfect view of the bulge in his pants as he moves into the kitchen. "Want a drink?"

Damn. If this is how he'll treat me after I let him hunt me, maybe we should make it a weekly thing. "Yes," I say slowly, suspicious but cautiously

optimistic. “That’d be great.”

“You liked being my prey, didn’t you?”

His dark gaze is still locked on me as he pours them, and I find that I don’t want to lie. Not here. Not now. Not when I have a pretty sizeable bone to pick with him when the time is right. “Yes, I did. I don’t think I’ve ever felt more alive.”

How pleased he is with that response is written all over his face as he brings me the glass. “Tasted so fucking good, the memory makes my dick hard.”

“Yeah?” I sip slowly, watching him through my eyelashes. “My blood really does that much for you?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” he asks, his gaze locked on the spot he loves to bite so he can watch the thumping of my heart. “Your blood is unrivaled.”

Okay. There’s an opening. Just do it, Sur. Call him out.

Fuck, I don’t want to. This Ledger, the way he’s being right now... it’s so rare. I don’t want to ruin it, and yet I owe it to Yelena. “Is that why you stole wanderdust from Yelena and altered her memories?” I ask gently. “Because I took my blood to a different realm?”

His eyes meet mine before he answers, and although he’s straightforward, I can see I’ve already changed his mood. “Yes. Does it matter?”

God. Of course it doesn’t matter to him. People like Ledger Huxley take whatever they want with no regard for who they hurt in the process. “No,” I mumble. “Guess not. Blood is just a stupid reason to hurt people.”

“I didn’t hurt her, and even if I did, I don’t agree. Blood is everything to me. Without it, I’ll die, so yeah, if I need to hurt some people for it, I will. Would you not fight for the air in your lungs?”

“Funny thing about the air in my lungs, Ledge. When it leaves, I find new fucking air. I don’t steal it from the person who breathes it in next.”

Scowling, I take a drink. It’s so hard to be mad at him about this because he saved my life by coming to get me — but now, I’m latching onto the fact that he basically admitted he only came to get me because of my blood. He didn’t miss me. He just missed the way I taste. “It’s fine. Yelena knows it was you, so you’ve got bigger problems.”

“Yeah, because you told her it was me, and I’m not worried about her. Have whatever pity party you want about my reasonings for going to get you, but yeah, I could have gotten blood elsewhere. In fact, I did, but I wanted yours because you’re fucking *mine*.”

Jesus, I miss amrit. My face burns with embarrassment as I stand up, draining the rest of the whiskey. “Screw you. Every time I think we’re getting somewhere, you remind me what an asshole you are. I’ll see you later.”

Ledger’s blocking my way before I can fully turn, his jaw set and anger radiating off of him. “Where were we getting then, Suren? I’ve been the same asshole from day one, you just get to pick and choose which parts you like. You hate me because I’m willing to threaten or kill anyone who touches you or keeps you from me, yet you secretly love knowing I’m willing to do those things for you. Be real with yourself for once and admit you love being claimed by someone who’d cross realms and burn everything down for you.”

“Not for *me*,” I argue. “For my *blood*. It’s honestly not as much of a compliment as you think it is.” Yet he’s right about one thing, he owns me. “Just take what you want and let me go back to the Lair.”

With a snarl, he sinks his teeth into my neck with one hand tugging on my hair and the other digging into my hip, but he doesn’t last longer than five seconds. “What the fuck!” He pulls himself away and wipes at his mouth, that anger amplifying so strongly I have to take a step back. “What is happening with your blood?”

“Maybe it hates you too,” I snap, startled and more than a little afraid. “There’s nothing wrong with it.”

I watch him search my mind, his breathing only becoming more and more ragged as he looks for something that doesn’t exist. When he finds nothing, he throws his cup against the wall with a growl and backs away from me with a bitter expression on his face. “You really don’t want me anymore, huh? Fine.”

The door slams closed behind him, making me flinch. I don’t understand what’s happening — I haven’t done anything to my blood. I’m the same girl, I’m just upset because I always want too much from people who can’t give it.

Embarrassment burns in my gut like acid when he returns with a glossy eyed girl with long blonde hair. “This is Sharon. Sh—”

“Shannon,” she corrects, but with how she’s looking at him, he could call her Bob and she wouldn’t care. “Unless you like Sharon better?”

Ledger huffs humorously. “Right, Shannon. And she’s been here for how long? A year now?”

She nods, moving her hair so her neck is exposed for him whenever he wants it.

“Suren here doesn’t want me biting her. Can you believe it?”

“More for me then,” she giggles. “I’ve missed you, Sir.”

My jaw clenches almost painfully as his eyes meet mine again, and all the warmth he had in them earlier is gone. “It’s just blood, right? Not worth fighting over.”

He doesn’t look away as he begins to drink from her, stealing the breath from my lungs. My traitorous eyes fill with stinging tears that I pray won’t fall, not here. It’s not even that he’s feeding from someone else. It’s the cruelty in his gaze, the ease with which she admits how much she loves it.

“No,” I agree as my hands shake at my sides. “Not worth fighting over.”

The girl moans, her hands reaching for Ledger as he gulps her down like she’s delicious, and he lets her cling to his shirt.

“You even lie to yourself.”

His voice feels like an intrusion in my head, no matter how true it is. “Lying is better than being vulnerable to people who would seek to hurt me,” I argue aloud. “You’re proving it. So have fun with her. She seems ready and willing to call you Sir and be a good girl. She’d let you drain her dry. She’s everything you always wanted, isn’t she?”

He must bite a little harder then, because she whimpers in pain, but he doesn’t pull back. *“If she is, why the hell do I constantly seek you out?”*

“I’m right here!” I yell, horrified when trapped tears spill down my heated cheeks. “I’m not good enough unless my blood is sweet. It’s not even something I can control!”

Ledger shoves Shannon away with a snarl, her blood dripping down his chin as he moves closer. “Yes, it is. You found a way to fucking lie to me, and I’m going to find out how. You’re only here because you’re bored. If Quinn was home, you would have told me to fuck off or rushed me away. You’re only here without a fight because you were sick of watching tv and knew I could make you come. Why is it only okay for you to use me?”

Shit. I’ve never seen him this angry, not at me. I back up quickly, trying to put some space between us. “I’m not lying,” I rush out. “I haven’t done anything and I’m not using you. You never stop reminding me that I’m your property, so what do you want? You get mad when I fight, now you’re mad that I didn’t fight?”

“I’m not mad at you for not fighting, I’m mad at you for being a hypocrite. Isn’t it fucking obvious you’re — you know what, forget it. Tell that witch I’m fucking onto her, and I’m not going anywhere this easy. You’re still mine.”

Wow. I'm a hypocrite for wanting him to actually care about me. Okay. "Yeah, well, get over it. Enjoy your new toy."

For a moment, we just stare at each other, but he breaks it with a humorless laugh. "Right. Will do." He moves past me in a blur, returning a second later to throw a pair of sweats at me on his way to open the door. "Put them on and get the fuck out."

The sight of her blood on his lips makes me irrationally angry. How is this any different than Greylin getting sucked off in the woods? They both claim it's my fault because I can't be what they need when they need it, but fuck that. Maybe they're not what I need.

"Keep your fucking sweatpants," I mutter, stomping past him until I realize I'll have to walk all the way back without pants on. I can already hear the storm brewing out there, so I pivot and snatch them from his hands. "Fine. Thanks."

"You're welcome. Don't hurt yourself on the walk back, Clumsy. Enjoy your television."

The door swings shut before I can respond, and I stand there staring at it for a long moment. How the fuck did this happen? One minute he's kissing me and making me feel something good, and the next I'm thrown out so he can... can what? Drink more of her blood? Is he going to fuck her?

Jealousy and anger spike until I'm ready to kick in his door and hurt him for all the times he's hurt me, but I don't have my fucking capsules with me. If I had my temp magic, I could blow this fancy door right off its hinges and make him understand exactly how I feel right now.

This is a sign that I shouldn't ever leave the Lair without it again.

Putting the sweats on with jerky movements, I make it outside just as the storm really hits. The air is alive with electric promise as the rain falls and the clouds darken further, but for once, I'm not afraid of it. For once, I wish it would grow stronger and blow Ledger Huxley right off the fucking map.

For once, I wish it would rage until the chaos inside me finally calms down.

But this isn't my storm, and Ledger isn't mine to get jealous over. I belong to him, not the other way around. And if I have anything to say about it, I won't belong to him for much longer, either. There has to be a way to break the bond. I just have to find it.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Quinn

Suren hasn't talked about it, but I know something bad happened with Ledger recently. Her entire mood has been down, and it's been really hard to give her space about it or not run up and slap him again. Slapping him is still a safe bet, because even if she never tells me, I know all of it is his fault. It always is.

But today is Samhain, and we're not going to wallow all night about Ledger fucking Huxley. No, we're going to have our first celebration together as witches. "So fucking glad Ledge didn't show up and try to make you miss this the way he did the full moon. Are you excited?"

"Yeah. A little scared too, but I'm ready," she says. "I've got a couple of capsules on me in case I'm expected to do magic."

I hate that she needs those, but once again, I'm hoping her magic manifests soon. "Good call. I promised Otto I'd wear clothes, does this count?"

I have on some skin tight leggings and a crop top, but I throw on an adorable leather jacket Ollie let me borrow and strike a pose for Suren.

"If it were me? Yes," she laughs. "I'm not sure your feral wolf-mate is going to agree."

"Hey, this is a compromise," I retort with a grin. "I know it's not a full moon, but still. It just feels different to be naked outside now. Back home, I'd be a hippie, but here, I'm just a witch at one with nature. Let's go."

Suren rolls her eyes playfully as she follows me out, one hand shoved in her pocket, toying with the temp magic capsules. I'm worried for her, but I'm also beyond excited to finally have her join us for something witch-related. Especially when we get down to the rec room and find it full of people in hooded black robes that completely obscure them.

"What in the Dementors of Azkaban is this?" Suren hisses.

Her guess is as good as mine. There are six of them in total, separated from us by a long, wide picnic table that looks like it can seat a hundred people or more. It's decked out with pumpkins, artificial leaves, cornucopias, and spider webs, matching the alter-looking thing erected behind our hosts.

“Um... hi?” I mutter, taking her hand so we can stand tall. “What’s all this?”

I recognize Professor Beckett’s voice the moment she starts speaking. “Over a thousand years ago, the Vikings Halfdan, Sigrid, and Gudrun were blessed by the Goddess and brought here to the Mythic Realm. They were among the first to colonize our world, bringing rich traditions, much needed skills, and the forethought to build our great academy for the generations to come.”

“Whoa,” Sur whispers. “I never knew that.”

I shush her quickly as Beckett continues, “And as our world grew and cultures mixed, some of the older traditions fell by the wayside. The Álfablót and Dísablot, for example. But in their place, the citizens of Rogue Hollow have formed a new tradition: our own little take on Samhain. Tonight is a night to offer thanks for the harvest, to prepare for the dark days of winter, and to honor the dead. This altar is for them. Come, raise your glasses with me.”

Suddenly, a golden goblet appears in front of each of us filled with spiced cider. The aroma draws me in as I curl my hand around the stem, my eyes wide as we all wait for her to speak again.

“Til árs ok friðar,” she chants. “For a good year and peace.”

“Til árs ok friðar.” Raising my glass, I sip with the other witches around us as excitement buzzes through my veins. People move almost immediately, filing out back to the gardens, and Suren drags me after them so we don’t get left behind.

Ollie pops up a moment later. “We’re safe out here since the whole Lair is surrounded by a shield. Come on, it’s time to build the effigy of the Goddess!”

“Did you feel like a fish out of water your first Samhain here?” I whisper to her just as Blaise tosses an arm over mine and Suren’s shoulders.

“Fuck yeah, but I felt lost here with all my firsts. It helps that people are so understanding. Blaise taught me the ropes last year, so now I’ll teach you.” She points behind us to where a few witches are already gathering straw and dead plants. “I let them do this part. They know the bits that are best to use.”

I recognize them as Green witches and watch as they examine each piece like they’re checking to see if it’s worthy before setting it inside a basket. I appreciate the care they’re putting into this, even though I don’t fully

understand it. “And we’ll use these to put together a goddess? What happens to her after tomorrow?”

“Apparently, they’re supposed to stay in the Lair all year, but Angelique accidentally set fire to last year’s.”

“Yikes,” Suren giggles. “I can smell smoke. Are there bonfires around?”

“Yeah, there’s a few, but they keep them away from the gardens. I plan on dancing all night around those babies,” Blaise says with a wide smile.

“How long will you guys be staying out since you’re both basically married?”

Suren’s face falls. “I’m divorced now.”

“Ouch,” he replies. “Want to talk about it? Or we can fuck and forget he existed?”

“Pretty sure she wants neither of those things with you, Blaise,” I jeer. “Just because you’re handsome doesn’t mean everyone wants to fuck you.”

“Most of the Lair says otherwise,” Quince adds, moving in to give me a quick hug and introduce himself to Suren. “Don’t cave. He’s not even that great in bed.”

“Why is everyone so mean to me tonight?”

I can tell by Blaise’s face he isn’t taking any of the teasing personally, and Suren seems to lighten up because of it. “Better you than me,” she laughs. “Is there anyone around here you haven’t fucked though?”

“You, of course, uh... Quinn. Thought I had a chance, but I think Damian ruined that.” I shake my head no to let him off easy and he shrugs. “Alright, I never had a chance, but fine. Okay, you two, a lot of the guys — believe it or not, some dudes aren’t into other dudes. Uh, Ollie let me be a third party, but that’s as close as we’ve gotten. There are a few older witches that won’t give me the time of day. Tris, uh... Samira. There’s a lot, okay? I’m not that bad. I have a lot of love to give, is all.”

I snort. “That’s one way to put it.”

“I’m starting to think you have the right idea,” Suren says. “Maybe if you guys let me tag along next full moon, I’ll see what all the fuss is about.”

Blaise’s eyebrows shoot up as he checks her out. “Why wait?”

“Guys, they’re done,” Ollie interrupts. “You two can hook up later. It’s time for food.”

My eyes flick from Blaise to Suren curiously, and although I’m worried Ledger might get mad at this conversation, I can’t help but grin. Fuck Ledger, he had plenty of chances. “Good, because I’m starving.”

We follow the others back inside to find the giant picnic table filled with food. It smells so incredible, I'm almost too busy drooling to notice the witches set the effigy at the head of the table like it's a real person — and I'm not the only one confused.

“Um...” Tris mumbles. “You guys aren't gonna make her come to life, are you?”

“No,” Beckett laughs. “She's a symbol of the Goddess, and as such, deserves a place here. We'll serve her first as an offering and then dig in.”

“Don't worry Tris, she won't actually eat it. Wouldn't it be nicer if we got to eat first?” Blaise asks, and Beckett shakes her head at him.

“You asked the same thing last year and the year before that, and the answer is the same.”

She turns to grab another golden chalice for our Goddess, then fills up a plate with the help of Professor Liu, and it's that moment I notice Professor Stewart is here as well. Go figure Quince is hanging around our side of the table more than usual. I bump him with my elbow when I catch him staring at Stewart, but when he drops something and bends over, I give up on getting his attention entirely. I wonder if there are rules in this realm about professor/student relationships.

“Do we dig in now that she has her plate, or is there something else we should say first?”

Chuckling, Stewart shakes his head. “Just offer a friend some well-wishes for the year to come.”

Instantly, I turn toward Suren and take her hands. “Sur, if anyone needs all the well-wishes for the coming year, it's you, no one else deserves it more. I hope the next year is good to you.”

With flushing cheeks, she whispers, “You too, Quinn. Here's to a new era. One where we finally come out on top.”

“Fuck yes.” I pull her into a hug and squeeze. “I love you. Okay, enough mushy stuff.” I turn and offer well-wishes to all my friends around me with handshakes instead of hugs, and then we fill up our own plates. “Think our Goddess is getting full?” I whisper teasingly, gasping when I see Blaise steal a roll right off her plate.

“What?” he asks as he shoves it into his mouth. “We agreed she wasn't gonna eat it.”

Suren laughs so loud, it draws the attention of almost everyone at the table, which only makes her laugh harder. There are a lot of funny things in

the world, but my favorite one has to be her laugh. It's fucking infectious to the point that even Professor Stewart joins in, ignoring the stolen roll entirely. It's definitely a laugh we all needed.

"I like her," Blaise mutters around his food. "I'm glad you're here with us now, Sur."

The shock on her face fades quickly to a happy, almost embarrassed grin. "Thanks. Me too."

"Now hush so we can get to the good part," Ollie scolds playfully. "It's almost time to go play with ghosts. Finish your food."

"Ghosts," I mock, not allowing myself to believe it. It's not that I don't, I just... don't want to, I guess. "Have you actually seen one before?"

She nods gravely. "A few. The ones who come around here aren't typically bad, but it's best to be safe, anyway. Come on, finish your food and we'll get our torches and go."

Suren doesn't have to be told twice. She stuffs her face like this is the most normal thing in the world, and I follow suit so I don't get left behind. I've always felt like I could feel them around me, and if Ollie is being honest, then I'm about to have those suspicions confirmed. I'm not sure how I feel about it.

By the time we're walking outside again, I feel plenty full, but I decide to pass on the torch as it's being handed over. "No thanks. Last thing I need to do is burn my hair off while I'm trying to pretend I'm not scared."

"You're gonna wanna take it," the girl says. "Trust me."

Suren grabs one and so does Ollie, and that feels like enough. The insects sound louder tonight, fireflies lighting up the pathway toward the woods, and as we get closer, the chatter around us fades into the background. "How long do we normally walk for?"

"It's up to us. Some people only stay for a few minutes, some stay all night. Like our full moon parties," Ollie explains. "It depends on how long it takes you to get freaked out by the ghosts."

"Shut up, I'm fine." Though my body language says otherwise when I feel like I'm being watched. It's probably Otto or another from his pack, but still, it feels odd. "I think. Okay, why does everyone have their own torch?"

She points up ahead. "Humans use citronella to keep bugs away, we use fire to keep spirits away. Look, you can see a few now."

Squirming, I follow her gaze to a group of shimmering, glowing dots in the sky. They're not much bigger than the fireflies, but they're an eerie blue

instead of cheery yellow.

You can feel the life force coming off of them, and it makes me stop breathing entirely. “Oh. Uh, fuck. I think I made a mistake. Fuck my hair, I need a torch.”

Giggling, Suren steps closer to me. “Here, I’ll share. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

I know she won’t, but as those dots slowly move closer, I don’t know if anything can protect us if they decide to cause harm. As they float to my left, I find myself curtsying to them like a complete idiot. “I didn’t want to offend,” I hiss when Ollie laughs at me and calls me a dork.

But for once tonight, Suren isn’t laughing with us. She’s squinting at the ghosts with her lips drawn in sadness.

“Sur, are you okay?” I tug her closer as the auras close in.

“Yeah,” she says quietly. “Just thinking about who they were and how they died.”

Yikes. That’s definitely not a rabbit hole we need to be going down, especially if their ghosts are here because they were taken before their time. Something tells me we’d all end up in tears for them. “Well, I’m glad we have a night for them.”

Slowly, mesmerized, she reaches up to touch one. “Suren!” I scream, but suddenly I’m not standing there with her anymore. I’m not with anyone at all. No Ollie, no ghosts, just me surrounded by trees and tall grass that seems to be moving in slow motion with the wind. “What the f—”

A loud snarl behind me makes me gasp and spin around, but the massive silver and tan wolf isn’t attacking me, he’s attacking my mate. Only his back is turned, and even with how fuzzy everything is, I know he doesn’t have a clue. A deep sense of foreboding settles in my stomach at the sight, and I know I have to warn him. “Otto!” I scream at the top of my lungs just as my eyes are shooting open and I see my friends kneeling over me in a panic. “Shit. I fell again, huh?”

“Are you okay?” Suren rushes out. “You were screaming.”

“Yeah,” I grumble, letting them both help me sit up. The auras are gone and flashes of that vision come crashing back to me. “I had a vision about Fenris and Otto and now it feels like I haven’t slept in days.”

“Damn.” Suren rubs my back, concern written all over her features. “Do you need a Healer?”

I shake my head, letting them pull me to my feet with a groan. “I need a damn nap, but first, I need to tell Otto about it. I don’t know what to say really, but I just feel like he needs to know.”

“I’ll go with you.”

My body and mind want nothing more than to go to sleep, but I have to admit, that vision was definitely easier than the first. Suren’s got me until we reach Otto, and when we do, my wolf will keep me safe while I rest. There’s no way I’ll sleep at all anyway if I don’t at least tell him what I saw, even though I know he’s going to try to convince me not to worry. It won’t work though, the one thing that hasn’t changed since the day I met him... I’m always worried about him.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Ledger

I've been pacing my room for over an hour. Baek and Jakob just got here, and although I know they're already sick of it, both of them know better than to tell me to stop. "You two honor your dead tonight?"

Small talk was never my thing.

"The dead don't have anything I want," Jakob says flippantly. "So no."

"Speak for yourself. I'd rather honor them than piss them off," Baek argues. "But what about you, Ledge? I'm surprised you're not balls deep in your favorite toy."

I snarl at him without realizing, his words conjuring an image of my girl splayed out on my bed for me. "Haven't in days. Fucking icing me out because I told her how good her blood tastes. How the fuck is that not a compliment?"

"Goddess' tits, Ledge. Is that why you're pacing? You lost a fucking blood source?" Jakob laughs. "Are you a goblin or not?"

"Fuck off. You don't understand what I'm dealing with, so don't Mythic shame me for not embracing my inner goblin. That asshole eats plenty. Suren isn't like all the other girls."

They both stare at me like I've sprouted tentacles. "Okay," Baek scoffs. "Didn't realize you were in love. Our bad."

"Love?" I scoff. "Hi, I'm Ledger Huxley. I'm a vampire/goblin hybrid, the illegitimate child of the coldest vampire in Rogue Hollow. Love isn't in the cards for me."

"Then what the fuck is wrong with you?" Jakob pushes, mocking, "*She's not like other girls.*"

"I didn't sound like that. You made me sound like a whiny bitch." It's then I realize that's exactly what I sound like and run a frustrated hand through my hair. "Whatever. She's been under my fucking skin ever since I claimed her. I can feel her right now bonding with other people and I want to go rip their heads off."

Baek eyes me over the rim of his whiskey glass. "Why? She's gorgeous, sure. But so are plenty of other chicks around here. Guys, too. Just pick one."

“It’s not that simple,” Jakob says for me. “It’s not her blood, or her body he’s after. Is it, Ledge?”

The accusation in his tone has my hackles rising at the prospect of having to defend her. “It’s all of her.” I know he knows. It’s clear as day on his face that he felt it the first time they met. “Her blood, her body, her infuriating personality... her power.”

“So steal her power, gag her, and fuck her while you drain every drop of blood she’s got,” he says like it’s honest to fuck that simple. “Problem solved.”

“No.” That feels safer to say than ‘I can’t.’ “Because then she’d be gone, and I don’t want that. I want her there to keep me sated forever.”

They’re both still looking at me like I’m nuts. “So go get her,” Baek mutters. “I don’t see what the big deal is. You’re acting like you can’t touch her.”

It feels like I can’t. “She’s not talking to me right now, and yeah, I can go force her, I know. I’m always the one that goes running to her, and she knows I will because her blood has me in a damn chokehold. I’m pissed off at her, but I’m the only one suffering from it.”

Licking his lips, Jakob leans forward. “Okay. I’ll indulge you. Why isn’t she talking to you? If she let you claim her, she has to see something worthwhile in you.”

“I think she did, but that time has passed. Now she doesn’t even taste like she wants me to bite her anymore and it’s... not the same. She’s mad I tell her how superior her blood is to everyone else’s and the lengths that’d I’d go to in order to make sure no one ever touches what’s mine. Yet, when I try to have a night where I treat her like more than a bloodbag, she has to talk shit and piss me off.”

“You can literally read minds,” he points out. “What does she want? You can bitch all you want about me Mythic shaming you, but we both know that between your telepathy and our Malevolent gifts to sense desires and fears, you’ve got no excuse. You know what she wants. Either give it to her, or force her to do what you want and get over it.”

The problem with that is I don’t know if I’m capable of being what she wants. “Yeah, I’ll do that, thanks.” I begin my pacing again and try not to think about her. But it’s impossible. “Have either of you ever had an actual girlfriend?”

“Fuck no.” Jakob sits back. “Do I look like some pussy-whipped bitch?”

Baek smacks him. “I’ve had one. Dismiss it all you want. All it took was a couple of compliments and a little cuddling and she sucked me off twice a day. Couldn’t get enough. And once she trusted me, she let me Sing to her in bed. I don’t know if either of you two have used compulsion on someone you’re fucking, but there’s nothing like it. There’s also no blow job better than one given by a chick so desperate to please you, she’d pass out before she quit.”

He makes it all sound good, and if all it’ll take is more cuddling, I was actually on the right track for that. “I compliment her all the time, because anyone can see how beautiful she is. It’s just a fact.”

“No, no.” Baek wags his fucking finger at me like he wants me to break it off. “Don’t compliment shit she can’t control. The taste of her blood, anything to do with her genes. I mean, tell her she’s pretty or whatever, but compliment the shit she’s in control of. Tell her she’s funny, or she did a good job. Tell her she makes you feel good. She can’t read your mind, can she?”

“Obviously not.”

“Then you don’t even have to mean it. Obviously, whatever you were doing before wasn’t working, so switch it up.”

“I’m still on team ‘go get her and the three of us will fuck the holy out of her,’ but yeah,” Jakob says. “What he said is probably better.”

“Maybe we will, and fine. I’ll try a different tactic when I’m in the mood. Right now, I just want to stop thinking about her. It’s only making staying away harder. Been days since I got my fill of her and none of those bloodwhores downstairs are cutting it.”

Jakob stands. “You have fun with that. As great as it’s been watching you come apart over this chick, I’ve got things to do. I’ll see you guys around.” He leaves with a wave, removing one of my only distractions.

When Baek gets up to follow, I roll my eyes at how pathetic I’ve been. “Want another drink?”

“Nah. I think I’m gonna head out too. Sorry, Ledge.”

Fucking ridiculous. What good is having friends if the assholes aren’t around when I actually need them? I flip him off as he disappears through the door, then ditch my glass in favor of the whole bottle. If I can’t have her tonight, I need something to take the edge off.

But I swear, her scent just keeps getting stronger.

Like a fucking siren song, I follow that scent all the way to my front door, but I manage to find my head again before I can open it and chase after her. I can't go running to her when I'm this desperate for her. I'll only make a fool out of myself.

Growling, I force myself to go back to my room even though her scent seems permanently buried in my nose. I can't fucking outrun it. I can't outrun her. I'm about to force myself to go to bed when someone knocks, and I know with all of me it's her. It has to be her, or I've thoroughly lost my fucking mind.

As I walk past my balcony, a blue orb floats off in the distance as if it's watching me, and without hesitation, I move out toward the edge to pour some of my alcohol out to the spirit beyond. "Good to see you, brother."

Calmer, I move toward the door and swing it open, locking eyes with my blue-eyed witch even though Jakob stands right behind her. "Suren."

I move aside so they can enter, but she doesn't make it that far. She launches herself at me, arms wrapping around my neck. "Ledger," she breathes, lips ghosting over my ear. "I missed you, baby."

My eyes meet Jakob's as he smirks. "Picked up a stray outside the Lair. Figured you'd want to play a little."

Asshole. But fuck, this is the most beautiful lie I've ever seen, so I'll take what I can get. "I missed you, too." I realize with a jolt that I absolutely mean that and lift her up to carry her in. "I've been waiting for you."

"Really?" The crashing hope pulsing through her reminds me that my Suren is definitely still there underneath Jakob's compulsion. Her lips meet mine once, twice, tongue flicking out as she squirms down to her feet, then drops to her knees.

The greedy, desperate look on her face as she fumbles to pull my cock out of my sweats has me so fucking weak, I can't even bother telling that asshole to leave. Guess he can watch as a thank you.

"You miss letting me fuck you, Clumsy? Miss choking on my cock?"

"Yes," she whimpers, pulling my soft cock in and suckling until I'm growing hard and heavy in her mouth.

My fist tangles in her hair as Jakob croons, "Go on, girl. Apologize to Ledger for making him so tense. Show him how sorry you are."

Round, glassy eyes stare up at me in wonder as she takes me deeper. Her thoughts are mud thanks to the interference, but it doesn't matter. Not really.

I can hear how easy it is for her to give into it. How thirsty she is for my affection, my praise.

But there's something else as she slips her tongue under my cock and draws me deep. Her power isn't hidden right now. It's not buried somewhere lying mostly dormant until I coax it out. It's just under her skin. I don't know how the fuck she doesn't feel it. Whatever the hell happened tonight, whoever she was with... she felt connected.

Now I have to remind her who she belongs to. "Suren," I moan, my gaze locked with hers as I pin her to me so my whole cock is in her throat. "You're mine. I need you to stop forgetting that, do you understand?"

Her body convulses as she gags, nails digging into my hips. "Yes."

"Good girl. Fuck, sometimes you're so good for me it's hard to believe you're real. Suck me, baby. Show me how much you missed me."

I ease my grip, impressed when she doesn't back off at all. She keeps herself speared, choking and gagging until she's got my cock so coated with spit I could fuck her ass with it. Her lips close around me as she bobs and fucking slurps, making the muscles in my thighs lock and my toes curl.

"Maybe Baek was onto something," Jakob chuckles. "Look at her go. I'm not even compelling her now."

"Good," I grunt, loving the fact that it's all her even if it took a little magic to get her here. "Told you she's not like other girls. None of them compare... that's why I haven't been with anyone else since the day I met her."

That part is more for her than Jakob, but I need her to know I didn't fuck that Shannon chick after our fight. I didn't even try to. She slips off, staring up at me with apprehensive eyes. "You mean that? No one else? Not even when you're feeding from other people?"

I nod. "Yeah, no one. I feed to live and move on. They're not you, and it's more than your damn blood, even if I don't know how to act like it is." I'm a hybrid, not a human, so talking like this feels foreign on my tongue, but she leans in slowly to kiss the tip of my achingly hard cock.

Slowly, she tugs her shirt off, unhooks her bra, and stands to strip the rest of the way without ever taking her eyes off me. I can hear how fast her heart is beating, the muddled thoughts becoming clearer as she convinces herself this is good enough. That things will be better if she just gives in to me, and that's exactly what I've been trying to tell her for fucking months.

I grip her by the throat and crash my lips into hers with a possessive growl, needing her to know that no matter how many times she tries to escape me, she'll always end up right back here.

Right back where she belongs.

Shivering from the chill in my room, she breaks out of my grip and drops back down to lick my shaft. "Say it again, baby."

"It's more than your delicious blood," I repeat, assuming that's what she needs to hear again more than anything. "It's all of you."

Spreading her knees, she sucks me in again and closes her eyes this time, losing herself to the way my cock feels pressing against her tongue and teasing her throat. Having her thoughts open to me like this... it's so much fucking better than last time.

"You owe me for this, Ledger," Jakob cuts in. "And I'm talking more than just a little favor."

"Yeah, whatever," I groan, because at this moment, I don't care what he wants, and I already knew he'd never do something like this for free. He might be my friend, but he's still Malevolent like me. "Don't stop, Suren. Your mouth is exactly what I need."

As she takes me in deeper, I let my own eyes close and my head tip back in a soundless moan, only peripherally feeling Jakob slip behind me.

"Own her, Ledger. She tried to run from me when I came to get her for you, you know. Fought me. Said she'd rather stay with that Seer cunt, Blaise. Make her pay for it."

I can feel his powers flooding into me, and I'm too far gone to fight it. And when you mix the coercion of a goblin with the words he's saying to coax my monster to the surface, I'm powerless to stop it. She tried to stay with that fucking witch? Did she want to fuck him? Has she fucked him? A quick search of her mind tells me she hasn't, but it's clear as day that she considered it, and I shove my cock all the way in and hold there. "You thought about letting someone else touch what's mine?"

Choking hard, she tries to yell into my mind that she wouldn't have done it — but I'm not stupid or blind. I can see the interaction in her memories, and she would've.

"Remind her what happens to bad girls," Jakob croons in my ear. "What happens to disobedient little whores who think they can play you."

Him talking about her that way makes me snarl at him, but I focus my gaze on her now-watering eyes as I fuck her mouth hard. "You're mine."

“Harder. She doesn’t need to breathe.”

Tears stream down her face as she twitches and uselessly fights for air. The squeeze of her throat every time she tries to inhale strangles my cock so perfectly, I struggle to convince myself to pull back at all. But his damn coercion has me fucking her harder, even though I’m pushing against the fog. *Get out of my head, asshole.*

“Fuck, that’s a good girl. You’re no one’s whore but mine.” My cock twitches. “You can breathe again when I come.”

Her fists pound my thighs as she tries to tap out, but he’s still fucking whispering behind me and every word is sounding better than the last. I don’t manage to kick him out again until my girl is limp, slumping with her head trapped between my hands.

“Now that’s better,” Jakob chuckles darkly. “She can’t fight you anymore, Ledger. And you need release so, so badly, I can feel it. She’s kept that from you. Stolen it from you. Take it back.”

Fuck. I pull myself out of her mouth so she can breathe, taking one quick second to focus on her heartbeat before his powers flow through me again and I’m laying her back on my couch, settling between her legs. My cock is so hard it throbs as I push inside of her, groaning at how wet she is from being used. “She loves this.”

“I know,” he comments, reaching around me to pinch her nipple hard enough to make her pussy clench. “She was made for you, Ledger. Why do you ever let her forget that?”

“I don’t,” I growl, fighting the urge to bite his hand, but that clench has me calm almost instantly. “I just want her to choose me like I’ve chosen her.”

If Jakob responds at all, I don’t hear it. Suren stirs below me and moans my name, eyes fluttering open as her hand snakes down between her thighs. “Ledge, what’re you…”

Hearing her voice and seeing those dazed blue eyes has me immediately slamming deep inside her with a groan, filling her up for the first time since the full moon. My rampant thoughts finally calm as I pin her down to fuck it deep.

“Le— what the fuck?” she mumbles. “What did you do?”

“Nothing,” I grumble, settling in like an earthquake couldn’t move me. It probably couldn’t. “Just got a little rough, but you’re okay. I got you.”

The chaos and confusion in her chest only feeds the writhing, dark thing inside her. I know she doesn’t understand this, how she went from willingly

choking on my cock to being used like this, but I know what she needs to hear to calm down. “I missed you.”

And there it is, the thing Baek was talking about. The little piece of herself she’s trying to stitch to me, all from a little bit of placating. It’s drowned fucking immediately by self-doubt. “I’ll be better next time then,” she gasps, flattening her hand on my chest. “So you won’t have to knock me out. I’ll be better. I promise.”

“You didn’t do anything wrong,” I say truthfully. “Nothing except try to be with Blaise, at least.”

Her nose scrunches. “Oh. That.”

“Mmhm.” I drop down into her neck with a huff, forgetting all about Jakob, Blaise, and everyone that isn’t her. “You keep walking away believing I won’t follow you. When are you going to learn?”

“You didn’t follow me,” she reminds me. “Jakob did.”

“That’s not the point. The point is you won’t escape me, and why do you think he went to get you? The goodness of his heart?”

Suren bares her neck, ignoring the question completely. “I’m sure you’re hungry. Go ahead.”

“I’m trying to prove something here. You can’t tempt me like that and expect me not to bite.”

Startled, she meets my eyes again. “I don’t understand.”

“I told you I want more than your blood. I meant it.”

Ugh. This feels... soft. Not me. Yet, when she lifts up to gently kiss my chin, I feel something thaw inside my chest. I’m mad at her, but I’m also not really mad at her. It’s fucking confusing.

“That’s not very specific, Ledger. I thought you meant my body, which you clearly got with or without me saying yes.”

“You did say yes, just not with your mouth,” I argue. “It’s all of you, dumbass. How are you not getting that?”

She sighs heavily, relaxing against the cushion below me as she reaches up to touch my face. I can tell she’s still not entirely satisfied, but at least it’s enough to make her kiss me. “Okay, Ledge. Thank you.”

I don’t know how to explain it any more than that, so I kiss her again and then carry her to bed. I’m sure we’ll be fighting again tomorrow over something dumb, but one day we will speak the same language.

I can already feel that day drawing nearer.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Suren

I'm hardly paying attention to Professor Liu's lecture on what happens when you use too much magic without replenishing when I feel him. I can't hear him, see him, or smell him... but I feel him. He's maybe ten feet behind me, staring at the back of my head as a hush falls over the class.

I sit up a little straighter. I know what he wants and why he's here, so there's no point in fighting it. I'm not even sure I want to, he has me so bent up and confused.

Slowly, I pull my silver hair over my left shoulder to expose the right side of my neck. There's no way he'll take from his favorite spot here, not after what happened last time. "Well?" I call back. "Go on."

He walks over slowly, ignoring everyone else as he closes in on his prey. "But it's so much fun when you try to fight me, baby."

Quinn fakes a gag to my left, but I don't miss the way another girl shivers from his tone a few feet away.

"Mr. Huxley, I'm sure there's a better class for you to interrupt than this. She needs to learn replenishment."

He ignores the teacher entirely and runs a finger across my jaw, sending a chill down my spine.

"It's okay, Professor Liu," I say more calmly than I feel. "I'm okay."

But am I? Is this the Ledger who makes me cry just because he likes the taste of my tears, the Ledger who hunted me on the full moon, or the Ledger who admits he misses me and holds me like I matter? Somehow, I think I know.

"Of course you're okay, because I'm here." Teeth sink into my neck in a blink, his venom seeping into my skin as a growl vibrates from his chest. He doesn't give me a lot of it, but it's enough to keep the pain away and make me wet.

But I won't react this time. Not outwardly, anyway. My classmates don't deserve a repeat. Licking my lips, I think, "*Feels good, baby. I'm dripping.*"

Strong hands find my hips as he tugs me up out of my seat and against him, letting me feel how hard he is for me, but it ends as abruptly as it began. "Suren," he whispers sharply. "Why is it still so fucking bitter?"

“What?” I ask, blinking as the venom starts to fade. “I’m not bitter, you are.”

“Maybe I am, but so are you.” He releases me with a set jaw and takes a step back. “You going to see that witch later?”

“Mr. Huxley,” Professor Liu interrupts, making him turn toward her with his fangs bared and looking more like the evil hybrid everyone believes him to be than ever. “Get out!”

“Are you forgetting who this girl belongs to? She’s mine, that trumps your puny little title, *Professor*.”

Suddenly he’s grunting in pain, one foot being forced in front of the other until he’s shoved from the room completely and the door is slamming shut. “Miss Archer, are you okay? I’ll be sure to report this to Cherith.”

The entire class is watching me all over again. I tried to stop it, tried to just give him what he fucking wants, and it’s never enough. “Don’t bother,” I mumble. “She’s his aunt, and he’s right. He claimed me. There’s nothing anyone can do.”

My eyes burn with unshed tears as I gather my things and ask to be excused. Liu purses her petal-pink lips like she wants to deny me, but my guess is it’s obvious I won’t be paying attention either way. I don’t want to be here. I don’t want to live like this anymore, where people stare and Ledger takes. Where I’m a joke to those around me, reduced to a walking, talking bloodbag. Actually, it’s worse than that. They all know I’m more than just a warm O+ tap. I’m also his personal little whore, so desperate for him that I’ll moan and whimper and let myself be used in public. It’s so fucking degrading it has nausea rolling in my stomach. And the kicker is that if he’d have ever paid attention to the thoughts he helped himself to, he’d know that under the right circumstances, with some consent and some praise at the end... I love being degraded.

Just not like this.

When Liu doesn’t answer with words, I just shake my head at Quinn so she doesn’t try to follow me and walk out. What’s the worst that’ll happen? Liu will throw me in detention? It’ll be a vacation compared to whatever Ledger will do to me for this, I’m sure of it.

Out in the catacombs, I run my fingers over the rough stone and trace the path back to the entrance. I don’t want to go to the Lair right now. Something has to change, and the only way I can think of to make that happen is to ask for help from someone more powerful than Ledger.

I only know one person like that.

Jogging toward town, I push myself to run faster. The wind whipping through my long hair feels phenomenal, freeing. Hell, maybe I won't stop. Maybe I can run past my target, past the Hollow Mirror, past the edges of town and into the oblivion beyond.

But he'd find me again. There's nowhere in this world or the next that I can hide from him, not while he's got a hold on me.

So it looks like I need to break that hold.

Changing course, I duck into Bone Heart and open my mouth to yell for Yelena, snapping it shut when I see she's with a customer. I take a few seconds to calm my racing heart as she goes over the ins and outs of the potion she brewed for them, and once we're alone, I'm feeling a little more level. "Hey, Yel."

Her eyebrows raise. "You're sweating. Why are you sweating?"

"Oh, you know. I don't get enough exercise these days because Rogue Hollow doesn't seem to have a gym, so I ran here," I say flippantly. "Why aren't you sweating?"

"Because I keep it cool in here, and the wolves have a gym, they just don't share. Come here. What's wrong?"

Nothing? Everything? Now that I'm here, the memories of the tea that makes my blood bitter come roaring back. So that's why. God, why do I keep doing this to myself?

Slumping, I head over and take a seat near her. "I can't do this anymore, Yelena. With Ledger, I mean. The tea, the lack of amrit, the bond. I'm so tired."

Her shoulders slump as she moves closer. "Fuck him. Drink the damn amrit and tell him to go to hell. Is he being pissy about your blood again?"

"Yes, but the thing that sucks is that he knows it's me doing it, he just doesn't know how and I don't either. So in the moment, I'm being punished for something I don't even remember doing." God, I hate the way my nose burns with bottled up emotion. I don't want to feel like this, not about him. "It's cruel."

"Okay, we'll stop the tea. It wasn't supposed to make things harder on you. I knew they would be harder on him, but I'd hoped it would make him uninterested. Has that happened at all?"

It's hard to quantify. "It depends on what you mean by uninterested," I admit. "He's biting me less, but that doesn't make it any easier on me. At

least when he's satisfied with me, he treats me better."

"Self-centered prick," she mutters. "So would you like to stop the bitter tea? It would be out of your system in a day or two if we did."

Anxiety festers in my chest as I nod. "Yes. And I need you to tell me how to break the bond," I say firmly. "And don't tell me you can't. We both know there's a way, you just didn't tell me because it's dangerous or whatever. So is staying with him. I have to end this."

Yelena stares at me for so long I nearly lose my mind. "I'm sorry, I can't break it," she finally says. "*He* can... and possibly Mary."

Ledger won't break it, there's no way. "Who the hell is Mary?"

"Mary from Mary's Mortuary in town. She's a couple blocks away, but Suren. It's a risk. Everything comes with a price, and I don't even know if she can. I may be old, but I've never helped someone in this situation before. Most either keep the bond or get killed for not wanting it. This isn't a common issue, so don't get your hopes up, okay? If she can't, we'll have to get some old books and find out the hard way."

Something horrible occurs to me, something that might be even worse than staying with him. "Yelena, can he kill me for doing this? For breaking the bond?"

Her face says it all before she even opens her mouth. "Possibly. Do you fear he might?"

"I don't know. Maybe? He's had plenty of opportunities to kill me already."

"And it's possible the bond saved your life, but it's also possible he doesn't want you to die."

Fuck. I'm so, so tired of this. I want off this ride, I don't care what it takes. I don't even care if he kills me in the end. "I want it gone," I say firmly. "I'm fucking pathetic for wishing things we're different, but I'm done."

"You're not pathetic." Yelena pulls me in for a hug to comfort me, but all it does is make me hate myself a little more.

"Why do I care, Yel?" I ask, barely a whisper. "Why does it bother me that he's like this? If it didn't, things would be so much easier."

"He's just gotten under your skin, Suren. You need some distance from him so you can see clearer. He's not a good man."

She says that, and yet... I can't help but think of all the times he's been there for me. He saved me, crossed the realms to find me. Covered for me

with Cherith about the wanderdust. He's made me feel things I never imagined I could... no.

I can't do this to myself. Come hell or high water, I want off this ride. If we make things work when he doesn't have a physical claim over me, that's fine. At least I'll know it'll be real.

"I'm okay," I tell her honestly. "But I'm gonna need that address like yesterday."

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Quinn

When Suren finally walks into our room, I feel myself relax. Somehow I knew Ledger wouldn't hurt her, but sometimes it's easy to be unsure. The man's got a few screws loose and a short fuse. "Sur, where have you been?"

Her eyes flick to Ollie. "I went to see Yelena about my parasitic problem."

My eyebrows rise slightly at her expression. "Did you get good news?"

"Maybe? She told me to go see a witch named Mary. If anyone will know how to do it, it's her."

"You don't have to tiptoe," Ollie sighs. "I can leave if you don't want me to know, but I won't tell him."

We both know Ollie would never betray her, so I ignore that. "Okay, so where's Mary? Let's go find her."

"Mary as in Mary's Mortuary?" Ollie asks, peaking Suren's interest.

"Yes, her. What do you know about her?"

"I mean, I don't know much about her personally, but I've been there. She's a necromancer."

That makes a chill run up my spine. "Did Yelena have any clue how a necromancer could help?"

"If she does, she didn't tell me," Suren says. "She just said that she'd be the one to know how to break the claim he has on me, and if she doesn't know, I'm basically boned unless we manage to find something in an old-ass grimoire. Ledger mentioned one called the Book of Black one time."

"Of course he'd know of the book too," I groan. "If only we could compel him to break it himself. That's doable, right?"

"We couldn't, but someone strong could," Ollie adds. "Also, regardless of how this turns out, we should petition for the teachers to help us build our mental shields. Most older witches are able to block out basic vampires and goblins, even sirens with a veik, but it's not something we're taught until later. And lastly, I know that book. It's in the library, but we're not allowed to touch it. We might be able to get our hands on some ancient vampire books, but I say we visit Mary first and cross our fingers and toes she knows the easiest way to break it."

Suren licks her lips, steeling her nerve. “We’d better get going then. Yelena gave me amrit before I left so Ledger won’t be able to read my mind, but who knows what he’ll do if he finds out I’m trying to escape again.”

“Fucking psychopath,” Ollie mutters. “I knew that dick was bad news the moment I saw him.”

I hate that I can’t do more to help her. “I don’t know if you want this, but you can wear one of Otto’s hoodies to throw off your scent.”

“No, it’s okay. Thanks.” Despite her flippant tone, defensiveness is written all over her face. She’s bristling every time we say something bad about Ledger. “Let’s just go.”

She’s more confused than we are, so I don’t hold it against her. Instead, I put one of Otto’s hoodies on and link my arm with hers as we take off. “God, I hope this works. We’ll be able to talk so much shit after that mark is gone, and you don’t have to feel loyal to someone who was never loyal to you.”

“He was, though,” she argues quietly. “He hasn’t been with anybody but me. Not once since the first time he laid eyes on me.”

“Is that what he said?” I ask softly, no judgment in my tone. There’s a chance she’s right, but there’s also always the chance that he’s lying. “Do you believe him?”

She nods, staring at the stone under our feet. “I do, yeah. I don’t think he’s been with anyone else.”

“Oh,” I reply, because I seriously don’t know what else to say. Ollie takes her other arm the second we leave the gates of RH, and we walk in silence as I contemplate that.

If I’m being honest, I’m not that hard to confuse, but Ledger is by far the most confusing person I’ve ever met. He’s hot yet cold, tender yet rough, loyal yet a master manipulator. The boy’s got issues, and if it’s possible to break this hold and free my best friend, it’s the best thing we can do for her. He can go be confusing somewhere else. “So Grey’s been coming around a lot,” I toss out, trying to lighten the mood.

“Yeah, I think we’re getting past all the awkward shit. He’s a good friend.”

“Friendzoned, ouch,” Ollie teases. “Does he know that?”

“I think so? Who knows?”

“You know he doesn’t, but who cares? Even if this works, he’d have to wait a while. My girl needs a damn break from bloodsuckers.” I get the feeling she was never really into him to begin with, but she doesn’t argue as

we turn down a street I've never been on before. These storefronts are plain and all seem to be formal — law offices, advanced Healers, things like that.

The only one on the whole block that seems to have a personality is our destination, Mary's Mortuary. With a bright pink door, the outside seems almost cheery.

It's clear quickly that's where it stops.

Inside, the air is foggy with incense and somehow I just know it's to keep certain Mythics away. "Hello?" I call, moving in to press a bell, but before I can push down, an elderly lady with big blue glasses appears and folds her hand over mine. "Oh, Hi. We're here for Mary?"

"Of course you are." A bat screeches from the ceiling, and I'm surprised when she glances up and speaks to him like he's a human. "Shut it, Poe. Sorry, he's my familiar, and he has really bad timing with his interruptions. How can I help you three young witches?"

Suren's cheeks flush almost imperceptibly. "Hi. I'm Suren Archer. I work for Yelena Blackforge. She... told me you might be able to help me with something. I wish I'd have known about Poe, I'd have brought him something."

"We both love cinnamon buns for next time." She pats my hand before finally taking hers back and I move behind Suren to let them talk. "What can I help you with? If Yelena is sending you because it's not in her power, then I imagine it's quite the doozy."

"I was claimed by a Hunter vampire," she explains. "But he's also a Malevolent goblin. A hybrid. I want the bond broken."

Mary's nose scrunches up at that. "Going to take a wild guess that this is the Huxley boy?"

"Does everyone know him?" Ollie grumbles. "It's like he's a rockstar or something."

"No, nothing like that. I knew his mother," Mary says somberly. "Shame the boy ended up more like his father."

I'm sure Suren has a million questions as to why this witch is saying it's a shame Ledger didn't end up more like his goblin counterpart, but we can't be deterred. "Okay, so can you break it?"

"Unfortunately no, I can't." All three of us deflate before she continues. "A vampire has to."

"Any vampire?" Sur pushes. "I know a dozen of them. You're telling me this whole time, any of them could've saved me?"

“No,” she corrects with her lips pursed. “There are stipulations, child. The vampire has to want to assume responsibility for you and the bond. And you have to return their desire in kind.”

“So a claiming mark for a claiming mark? There’s no other way to escape them?”

My heart breaks for Suren when Mary nods. “Unless the vampire dies, of course. That also breaks the claim, but I don’t imagine you three plan on committing murder?”

“No,” Suren says quickly. “Even if I wanted to, I don’t think we could.”

“Right, so you said you know a dozen of them? Any of them happen to be in love with you?”

Her face falls. “Maybe, but I don’t feel right asking him.”

“I mean, it’s one way to know if he’s serious, Sur.” I take her hand so she faces me. “If Greylin really likes you and wants to help, he will.”

“It’s not fair,” she argues. “I’m not in love with him. How can I ask him to do this?”

“Yeah, but if you guys try it and it doesn’t work, he can break it, right?” I glance at Mary. “The vampire who claimed can unclaim?”

She looks a little exasperated as she peers at me. “Yes, but it’s unlikely he will.”

“Naturally,” I add, sighing at the nightmare Suren is in. “You have to try, Sur. At least Greylin isn’t crazy.”

“I’m sorry this isn’t the news you hoped for,” Mary says to her. “Are you sure you want the bond broken, girl? Having an ally like him could come in handy one day.”

“I’m sure. I’ll talk to Greylin.”

“Then I’ve nothing more to tell you. Cinnamon buns next time.” She slips her glasses back up the bridge of her nose and points at us each. “And you tell Yelena that payment for this will be coming off my tab.”

Somehow, I know Yelena won’t mind since it’s helping Suren. “Um, one more thing. You seem very... wise.”

“Old?”

Shit. “No, of course that’s not... I just mean knowledgeable.”

“Spit it out, Q,” Ollie teases, making me narrow my eyes at her before I finally get the words out.

“Any chance you know anything about werewolf bonds? My mate is an Alpha and my mark still hasn’t appeared even though I’ve accepted him.

Have you heard of that?”

A long, red nail taps against her chin. “He’s bitten you?”

I nod, moving the collar of his hoodie so she can see it. “But my chest remains bare. He had one, but I broke it, and now it hasn’t healed and mine won’t come.”

“Broke, you say? And he’s still an Alpha? How long ago was this?”

“Not that long ago.” Shame creeps up my spine, and the memory of that time apart alone is enough to make me shiver. “But he’s losing his Alpha status more with time. I just want to fix it.”

Humming, Mary eyes me like she’s trying to read my mind. “And you’ve told him this, I presume? Attempted to show him you’re in this?”

I nod quickly. “Yes. We’re together. Even when we broke up I knew he was perfect for me. I just wanted to find myself. I didn’t even know this world existed a few months ago.”

“Then it’s quite simple. Either there’s still something holding you back, or it’s not your bond to fix. Perhaps your Alpha hasn’t quite forgiven *you*.”

The shivering is back for an entirely different reason now. “Oh.” Fuck, why did I ask? Now I found a way to make something about me yet again. Goddess, I’m such an asshole. Of course he hasn’t forgiven me. “Right. Thank you. Come on, Sur. Let’s go find Greylin, yeah?”

Suren wraps her arms around my neck tightly. “Don’t spiral, Q. He loves you. It’s gonna be fine.”

“Yeah, I know,” I assure her, or maybe I’m assuring myself. “And so are you. We’ll figure out all this boy drama.”

“Now you both see why I stay away from them.” Ollie grins, waving goodbye to Mary and Poe as she pushes us toward the door. “If you two ever decide to branch out, I’ll have dates for you within an hour.”

“Are you the date?” I joke, feeling a little better as we make our way back to campus, and although this trip didn’t help us much, I have hope Greylin will step up for Suren.

He has to.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Suren

The amrit tastes bitter on my tongue as I drink it down. Somehow, it still feels like a betrayal to Ledger that I'm using it at all — but what choice do I have? Every thought that runs through my mind has the potential to become a weapon. He's already proven he's not above getting his friends to coerce me by any means necessary, so it's not like it matters. Even with the telepathy-blocking tea, he still has half a dozen ways to bend me to his will.

For now.

If I have my way, this will be the last day I spend as Ledger Huxley's plaything. All I need to do is explain to Greylin how important this is and beg him to help me out. He'll understand, I know he will. That forest, full moon blowjob he got seems so insignificant now in the face of all I've learned, all I've suffered at the hands of the hybrid who claimed me.

He *has* to understand.

Shaking slightly, I tug the big, black Bone Heart Botanicals hoodie Yelena made me over my head. It's getting colder by the day, but it's almost impossible to dress for the weather around here. It'll be blizzarding one minute and sunny the next, only to spiral into a tropical storm by evening. I've given up trying to be prepared for every eventuality.

Smiling warily, I loop my arm with Greylin's as I meet him outside the Lair. "Hi," I say softly. "Thanks for doing this. I know I haven't exactly been around a ton the last couple of months, but I don't exactly have to tell you why."

"Ledger."

"Yeah." I'm not quite ready to ask him what I need to ask him yet, so I switch tactics. "How have you been, though? I haven't really seen you since right before Samhain."

Grey shrugs, an offhanded movement that gives away a lot more than his voice does. "I've been fine. Mainly doing odd jobs for Cherith, honestly. She likes having a telepath around who isn't her nephew. I don't get the vibe they're a very close-knit family."

It took all of four seconds to bring the conversation back to *him*. Goddess above, I can't wait until he's not a part of my every waking thought anymore.

“They’re not. What does she have you do, though?”

“Boring shit, mostly. Sometimes she’ll bring me in with another student to see if they’re lying to her, sometimes she’ll have me help settle disputes with professors. A couple days ago, she called me in because someone said Professor Stewart was fucking that Quincy guy.”

“Really?” I laugh. “Is he?”

“Oh, absolutely, but I didn’t tell her that.” His eyes light up playfully. “I’m no snitch. It’s not even a bad thing around here since you have to be eighteen to make it through the gates. They’re supposed to declare it though in case there are any complaints of nepotism, and they didn’t. If they want to keep it to themselves, who am I to ruin that for them?”

It’s hard to contain the smile on my face. Not just because I’ve been shipping those two since the first time Quinn told me about their chemistry, but because Greylin really isn’t the type of person to hurt someone without cause. It’s such a stark change from Ledger that it makes me almost giddy. “Did you see all the dirty details in his mind?” I ask in a hushed whisper. “I need those, stat.”

“A gentleman never kisses or watches extremely kinky porn in a professor’s mind and tells, Suren.”

Oh, hell. I definitely need those details now, but maybe Quinn and I can get them out of Quincy. “You’re a tease,” I quip, stepping through the door to the Night Owl Cafe as he opens it for me. It’s busier than usual today, but there’s an empty booth in the corner for us, so I save the spot as he heads over to the counter to grab us some food.

When he comes back with a bear claw and an iced latte for me, I nearly kiss him. “Fucking hell, I love these. They hardly ever have any when I come,” I grumble, shoving half of it in my mouth at once. Maybe I’m prolonging the inevitable now, maybe I’m not. All I know is that being here with him is nice even if it makes my stomach swoop uncomfortably. There’s a terrible little part of me that knows what I’m about to ask him to do is flat out rude. I shouldn’t be putting this on him. And maybe I don’t even want to. Things with Ledger suck because I feel so completely out of control, but I can’t help it. There’s a wild, untapped potential there that just doesn’t exist with anyone else. I can’t imagine Greylin hunting me under the light of a full moon, or getting me so high off his venom that I’m not even awake when he comes inside me. As much as I hate the fighting and the fact that Ledger can’t see any part of me but my blood, I know I’d miss the misery.

What the fuck is wrong with me?

Unfortunately, Greylin doesn't miss the full-body shudder of disgust that has me putting down the rest of my bear claw. "Suren? What's wrong? Is it spoiled or something?"

"No, it's... it's not the food," I admit, wringing my hands together. "Look, I didn't just ask you to hang out because I missed seeing you. I need to ask you something. It's a favor, really... but possibly the biggest favor in the history of the world."

His eyes darken like he knows exactly what I'm about to say, but that's impossible. I've seen to that. "What is it? I can't read your thoughts, but I can still feel your energy. Whatever it is really bothers you."

You can say that.

Sucking in a breath, I buy myself a second to make sure I really want to do this. I don't love Greylin. I don't even have a crush on Greylin. This feels like every guy I dated back in the Human Realm — just superficial connections forged in the name of self-preservation. I hurt every single one of them in the long run, and I'll probably end up hurting Greylin, too. I'm just not meant to be in a loving, happy relationship. It's not in my cards.

Yet as I remember all the fights I've had with Ledger, all the times he tore me down completely and refused to put me back together again... I know I don't have a choice. For better or worse, I want off this fucking rollercoaster. "Okay, here goes. I don't want to be Ledger's toy anymore. I didn't think I had a say in the matter, but it turns out I do. There's a lady who works down at the mortuary who told me there's a way to break a vampire's claim. Have you heard anything about it?"

"Yes," he grunts out. "We all know how it's done. We learn about it at the same time we learn how to claim someone in the first place. Have you found someone willing, or are you honest to fuck sitting here expecting me to offer?"

Jesus. My chest pangs with embarrassment and rejection. I didn't even get the words out and he's already saying no. "I don't expect you to do anything," I argue. "I know it's a lot to ask since I'd be your responsibility. But it might be different with you, I don't know. I don't mind when he feeds from me when he's not being an asshole about it, and he really seems to like my blood, so maybe you will too? I don't know, Grey. I know this is a lot. It's more than I have a right to ask of you after everything, but I have to do something. If I stay his, I don't know what will happen."

Greylin leans back, rubbing his jaw with an incredulous, disbelieving expression. “And you understand that if I lose, the hold he has over you will intensify tenfold, right? And I won’t be around to save you.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to be, but... wait, what do you mean lose? She didn’t say anything about a competition.”

“Of course she didn’t, because it’s not a fucking competition, Suren. I doubt she told you the full story. If you want to break the bond with Ledger, you have to find someone else willing to claim you. Someone you *want* to claim you. When it happens, the hold he has over you will break, but he’ll also be fully protected by the Council of Elders and the Vampire Creed if he wants to rip my head clean off my shoulders. Did she tell you that?”

My heart thumps wildly, banging against my ribcage as my thoughts get fuzzy. “N-No, she didn’t. She just said...”

“That it would be all sunshine and rainbows? That you’d bat your pretty eyelashes at me and I’d claim you and that’d just be it? That Ledger would take it lying down and just let you go? I don’t know what it is about you, Suren, but I’ve never in my life seen a vampire more obsessed with someone. He’s a fucking hybrid. I survived the last big fight we got into, but that was only because he wasn’t really trying to kill me. He was heartbroken over his brother and just needed to feel something. But if I do this, what you’re asking me to do? I won’t stand a fucking chance and you’ll be right back in his clutches, anyway.”

It’s not a no. God, that’s such a terrible thing to take from that, but it’s all I hear. It’s not a no. He’s mad, he’s afraid, but he said “if.” Maybe if I help him prepare somehow, if we can convince Yelena to help us brew some kind of potion to weaken Ledger before it happens — no.

Oh, god. Even just the thought makes my stomach sink and my chest tighten so painfully, tears fill my eyes and threaten to spill over. I don’t want Ledger to be weakened. I can’t do that to him. It’s the same thing that made me decide immediately that I couldn’t kill him to break the bond. The thought of hurting him at all, of leaving him defenseless as I betray him... I can’t do it.

And I can’t ask Greylin to risk his life for this, either.

“I’m sorry,” I breathe, hugging myself to stop the impending panic attack. “Grey, I didn’t know all that. You have to believe me. I never would’ve brought it up if I knew it was going to put you at risk like that. Please don’t hate me.”

His eyes soften as he reaches over to squeeze my arm. “I don’t hate you. I just don’t know how to help you and I wish I did. Maybe if I was stronger or he wasn’t a hybrid, I might be able to. I wouldn’t mind having you as my own, so don’t think that’s why I’m saying no.”

So it is a no, then. Even if I get desperate enough to ask, he won’t do it. It’s shameful of me to be disappointed by that, and yet, Ledger said it himself. There’s nothing he wouldn’t do, nowhere he wouldn’t travel, no one he wouldn’t fight or maim or kill to protect me and keep me close. No one else has ever or will ever be that devoted to me, so maybe I should just take the bad with the good. Things are better when I set my pride aside and give in to him. He’s nicer when he thinks I want to be around him. And if there wasn’t such a gigantic part of me that was so weak it was desperate to be really, truly loved... I could probably be happy with him.

So maybe that’s what I need to do. Instead of putting Greylin in a position where Ledger will have the right to kill him, I just need to kill the part of me that wants to be loved.

Yeah. I can do that.

Chapter Forty

Ledger

My girl smells like him again. I didn't even say anything to her this time, because every time I speak to her, we end up arguing, and I don't really have anything to say, anyway. I just wanted to smell her. Only I smell that fucking asshole Greylin instead. I swear, he's moving in on her. He's been hanging around her like some lost puppy every time she's not talking to me, and avoiding me at all costs. I've got his scent right now though thanks to Suren, and there isn't anywhere he can hide from me.

With a burst of speed, I sprint my way over to Vampire Hall, catching the asshole while he's waiting for the door to open, but I have no intentions of letting him get inside unscathed. In seconds, he's being tossed like a rag doll twenty feet away from the building and then I'm on him before he can get to his feet. As expected, he smells like her. "I see you're still obsessed with my girl. When are you going to take a fucking hint, asshole?"

Grey shoves me off so he can get to his feet, fangs bared like he's finally ready for a real fight, and I fucking welcome it. "You're the one obsessed with someone who doesn't want you. You know if you didn't claim her, she'd have been mine. Your desperate ass knew it was the only way someone would stay with you."

Yeah, he's definitely feeling the bloodlust just like I am. About damn time.

"For someone who likes to preach about our damn Creed and claiming bites, you really don't know shit, do you? You really think I claimed some innocent girl that didn't want me?"

I can see other vampires keeping their distance from us and our standoff, all of them knowing better than to intervene or move in too close. "No, I think you caught her when she was vulnerable and took advantage. She didn't know what she wanted, but she loved it when I kissed her." I can't fight the growl that elicits, and I hate the fact that it makes him sneer. "You had to show her I was getting head from someone else to get her to even look twice at you, and now we all know the big bad Ledger Huxley actually has no fucking game. All he has are goblin tricks and sharp fangs, not enough to keep a girl."

“The fuck do you know about keeping a girl? You swap out a new one every single night and then walk around like you’re some gentleman. At least she knows who I am. She doesn’t know shit about you but the lies you’ve fed her because you know she wouldn’t even want to hang around you if she did. I’m not here to argue with you about who the hell my girl likes more. She’s mine. *Mine*. And you need to stay the fuck away from her before I break more than your jaw.”

Greylin laughs, only making me want to murder him even more. “I know more than you. Sure, I don’t stick to just one right now, but if I wanted to, I could. You forced yours into this, and she’s desperate for a way out. Desperate for a way to free herself from you.”

He’s got his walls up, but I don’t need to read his mind in order to know he’s being honest. It’s clear as day on his face. “No fucking way. She’s just pissed at me right now.”

“She’s just pissed at me right now,” he mocks, moving in closer to me with a shit-eating grin I want to rip off his skull. “Maybe you’re right, but that doesn’t change the fact that she’s asked me to help. She’d rather be claimed by me.”

I’ve heard plenty of people use the phrase ‘I saw red’ when they’re about to lose their shit, but it’s never been that way for me. Red is my favorite color, red is my life force, red is everything. So no, I don’t see red when I launch myself at Greylin Sharp without another word. Red is what I *want* to see. I want to see his blood coating my skin and the grass around us so I never forget the moment I took his life with my bare hands.

Maybe I used to think I didn’t like killing, but that time has long passed. I’d kill anyone who stands in my way for Suren, and I don’t care what that makes me.

There’s a part of me that knows I shouldn’t kill him here, not unless he actually touched what was mine or I’ll end up dealing with a world of bullshit, but that part of me is quiet as I feel his cheek shatter under my fist.

When he hits me back, I know he’s been training. He hits harder than the last time he tried to hold his own against me, but it’s a powerful feeling to know someone has trained to fight you, yet they’re still not strong enough. He never could be.

Still, I have every intention of drawing this out because his face makes for the perfect punching bag and I’m just now beginning to have fun.

Fists fly in what I imagine is a blur to anyone who isn't a vampire, both of us trading blows and bleeding within seconds, but I'm not the only one with a grudge here and it shows.

"Once a bitch, always a bitch," I taunt, laughing when he growls at me and tries to scratch my eye out.

"I'm the bitch?" he yells. "I'm not the one chasing some girl that doesn't want me."

He is, but he doesn't need me to point that out again, and I'm pretty damn sick of his voice so I put some extra oomph behind my next punch and laugh when his jaw snaps. Blood drips into my mouth, only spurring me on and making me lap at it hungrily as I watch him try to heal himself as fast as he can.

"When are you going to realize you can't fucking win?"

Jakob's laugh steals my attention for just enough time for Greylin to pull something from his blazer, but by the time my gaze flicks back to him, a giant blade is being jammed into my stomach before I can dodge it and the asshole twists it for good measure.

Fuck.

I hear Jakob curse off to the side, but I know he still won't intervene even if I am losing more blood than I ever have in my life.

Dropping to my knees, I snarl at him for using a weapon as blood pools in my palms. "Little... bitch."

"Not a bitch because I bested you," he mumbles, the words choppy from his broken face. "If you were so fucking unbeatable I wouldn't have been able to—"

"To stab a man when he wasn't looking?" Baek spits. "Sounds like a bitch to me."

I hear murmurs of agreement from the crowd watching even though most of them hate me. It isn't about me, it's the principle of a cheap shot. "And now everyone knows it."

"Fuck you," Grey snarls, reaching for his blade again the second his jaw is set, but another vampire is quicker than he is and kicks it away.

I'm in no condition to keep fighting, not without Suren close and her blood to help heal me. Suren. Fuck, I need her.

I'm surprised when Grey begins to back away, and whether it's because he actually has a conscience about what he did or if he knows trying to

continue fighting me will only hurt his reputation more, I don't know, but he leaves without a glance back and I let myself finally feel the pain in my gut.

"He needs blood," someone mutters. I don't know who it is, and I don't really care because I don't need just any blood. I need hers. "I can go get him someone if you guys can't carry him inside."

"No," I growl, spitting blood out onto the grass. "Suren."

"Fucking hell," Jakob groans. "Where would she be?"

I don't know, and I don't need him to go get her. I know she can feel me. "Suren. Come to me."

It's not a command. It should be since I'll be in for a long and painful night if she doesn't show up, but it isn't. I have to see for myself if she'll come.

The wounds on my face are healing by the time I feel her presence moving closer, and my head jerks to the side a second before she comes into view. "Ledger!"

She came.

I gave her a choice, and she came for me because she's *my* fucking girl.

"Damn, I didn't think you'd come," Jakob says. "Your boy tripped, so he needs a little assistance."

"Tripped?" she shrieks, dropping to her knees and reaching out for me. "And what, fell on a fucking scythe? The fuck are you guys just standing here for? Go get him a fucking Healer!"

"I don't need a Healer," I grunt out. "I need you. I need your blood."

Her eyes are wide as she holds out her wrist to me. It's shaking with adrenaline, fear, and genuine concern as I sink my fangs into her vein with a groan. With her flavor comes a surge of dopamine and power, and the knowledge that whatever the hell she was doing with her blood the last couple of weeks has faded. It's hard to believe Greylin when everything else points to her coming back to me, not pulling away, but it's also possible she only came because she couldn't fight our bond.

The only way to know is to read her mind, and it takes three seconds to see that she's blocking me out again. She's drinking amrit.

I pull my teeth back the second I feel my wound close and meet her eyes, an emotion I don't understand pooling in them as she watches me. "Did you try to break our bond?"

"Yes," she whispers. "How'd you know?"

I release her instantly like she's burned me, and honestly, that probably would have sucked less.

"Who do you think stabbed me?"

Tears fill her stupid blues as she traces the bite marks I left behind. "I didn't know he would do that," she admits. "He told me no. Here, drink more."

She shoves her wrist at me again, but I move it aside, my fangs screaming at me with the need to sink back home. "I just needed a little bit, I'll be able to do the rest myself. Thanks for coming when I needed you."

"Ledger, don't be stupid. Take it," she urges. "Do it."

I get to my feet like I'm fine, swaying slightly because she's right. Not feeding more right now is stupid, but if I stay around her any longer, I don't trust what I might say. "Go back to your friends. I'll come by so we can talk when I'm healed. Seems like we have some shit to work out."

"I don't get you," she mutters, standing up and shaking her head. "I fight, it's not good enough. I give in, it's not good enough. I try to leave, you're mad. I try to stay, you're mad. But fine, we'll talk later."

She was good enough from the start, she just needed to stop fighting me, but the longer we do this dance, the more I wonder if it's the fight in her that calls to me. I'm not going to sit here and pretend like I don't know she tried to break my claim to her by asking Greylin of all people though, I can't.

Do I want her to stay? Yes.

Is her staying for the better? No.

And yet...

"You want to stay?"

"I want you to not get stabbed when I turn my back for five minutes," she deflects. "I'm... sorry he did that to you. I shouldn't have gone to him."

"Yeah, you shouldn't. Whole fucking school of vampires that'd love to challenge me, and you went to the one that fu—" I stop myself and look around at the few people standing around us, snarling at them. "Fuck off!"

They scatter quickly, and even Baek and Jakob take their leave. "I went to him because he's the only one I thought might want to deal with me," she admits. "But I didn't want to ask him. Honestly, he'd have been my last choice if the rules of this shit were different."

"Yeah? And who's your first choice?"

"My first choice was not to be claimed by anyone. But if I had to pick a vampire, I'd have gone with someone I don't care about at all. Someone who

isn't interested in me, either. Someone who would claim me then release me immediately because I'm not worth it. But it doesn't work that way."

"And what about the one who does think you're worth it?" The words are out before I can think through the consequences, darkening her eyes and drawing her in until there's no space between us at all.

"I'd tell him he's insane." She kisses me softly, stepping back as her fingers lightly graze my jaw. "Come find me when you're better, Ledger. Like you said, we have a lot to talk about."

I watch her walk away from me before turning and going upstairs. I don't know how that girl doesn't see what she does to me, but one thing is for sure — I *am* fucking insane when it comes to her. It's something I've known for a while.

Chapter Forty-One

Suren

“No boys tonight,” I announce, slamming the door to our dorm shut behind me. “Not one. I swear, if one so much as tries to get in here tonight, I’m going to temp magic their ass into the next dimension.” Sighing, I plop down on my bed, kicking off my Converse. “I just want to sleep for a month.”

“You wanna talk about it before you go to sleep?” Quinn offers, laying back on her bed with her gaze on me. “Take it you saw Fang Boy?”

“Something like that,” I grumble. “I got this crazy, gut-wrenching feeling that something was wrong and I... heard him calling to me. Greylin fucking stabbed him.”

“What?” She sits up in her bed. “That’s fucking crazy. Was he calling to you because he was hurt? And where is Grey now?”

My head throbs, and no amount of rubbing my temples seems to help. “Yeah. He was bleeding all over the place, it looked like he was dying. He needed my blood. And I don’t know where Grey is, he was gone when I got there.”

“Of course he needed your blood — wait, did he stab him because you guys talked? Did he agree?”

“No, he didn’t. He told me no because Mary didn’t tell us the whole truth.” Realizing I need to back up, I pinch the bridge of my nose.

“Apparently, breaking another vampire’s claim is grounds for justifiable homicide, like every other fucking slight in this realm. Grey said if he claimed me like that, he’d have to fight Ledger and chances were good he’d lose and Ledger’s hold on me would only intensify. How he went from saying no to stabbing him, I have no idea.”

For a moment, she just sits there and takes all that in. “Okay... so what the hell? I mean, yeah, he’d probably lose, but—oh, maybe he tried to fight him to see if winning was possible at all? And it sounds like it was. I mean, I didn’t know vampires fought with knives, but maybe this was a trial run for Grey?”

“If it was, he’s an idiot. Ledger will see it coming now. There’s no way he gets away with that twice,” I say. “But Quinn... I don’t think I want him to.”

My best friend hastily grabs her glasses from the nightstand and shoves them on to see me better. “Come again? Are you saying you might actually want to stay Ledger’s now?”

“No,” I rush out, but fuck me sideways, it feels like a lie. “I don’t know. All I know is that Greylin might not be the guy we think he is. I mean... think about it. How many screws have to be loose in your head for you to jump Ledger Huxley with a knife and then not finish the job? And Ledger’s been different lately. Kind of.”

I don’t expect her to understand, even though she knows how complicated relationships can be. “Do you think Grey told him what you asked of him?”

“Oh, I know he did.” The bitterness in my tone might be rude, but he deserves it. “Ledger flat out asked me if I tried to break it.”

She sighs loudly. “What the hell? I thought Grey could actually be trusted. Now Ledger knows the one thing he absolutely shouldn’t know. Go figure you’re having second thoughts. How did he seem when he asked you? Murderous?”

I think back to the look in his eyes. It’s not one I’ve seen before, and I’ve absolutely seen Ledger feeling murderous. This was something entirely different, something I wasn’t prepared to see. “He seemed sad,” I say quietly. “Sad and disappointed.”

“I didn’t know he was capable of feeling sadness,” she mutters. “Did that make *you* sad?”

The question makes me squirm, my stomach twisting in uncomfortable somersaults. “When I felt him the first time, I was so scared, Quinn. Not happy or vindicated or anything like I expected. And then... yes. When he was looking at me like my betrayal hurt worse than Greylin stabbing him, I —” huffing, I chuckle humorlessly — “I thought before that if I could just kill the part of me that wants to love and be loved, I’d be fine. But I’m starting to understand maybe it’s too late.”

“Shit, Sur.” Quinn moves from her bed to mine to pull me into a hug. “I — I don’t know what to say, but you should never have to give up on love. You deserve so much.”

Maybe I do. Maybe Ledger will get there, maybe I’m stupid for even considering it. All I know is that my hands are still shaking and I wish he wouldn’t have denied me again. The thought of him still being in pain because he didn’t take enough of my blood makes my chest hurt.

“Thanks, Quinn. Now tell me about you. How are things with your magic?”

She hesitates for a moment like she isn't done talking about me, but I know she knows I am. “I'm okay. I'm getting better at displacement, and I weirdly feel close to water. I know I'm not an Elemental, but still... I don't know how to explain it.”

“Ooh, maybe you're part siren,” I tease, realizing quickly that would actually be badass. “They said it's rare for humans to be other Mythics, but not impossible.”

“Yeah, I doubt it,” I laugh. “I do love to sing, but it's never gotten me what I wanted unfortunately. Otto said I might actually be a Seer/Elemental, but I don't know.”

Finally, some good news around here. I hug her again, tighter this time. “That's amazing, Quinn. Seriously. You might be a hybrid? That's so fucking cool.”

“Don't tell anyone. I'm probably not. It was just something he said that had me thinking. I mean, I haven't had much luck with fire and Ollie is great with all elements.”

“So maybe it's something else,” I offer. “There are three types of sirens, remember? The Singers, sure. But there's also the Swimmers and the Shifters.”

“Shit, I forgot about them,” she says with a chuckle. “Whatever, I'm still trying to get a handle on everything I have on my plate right now. I'll worry about that part next semester or something. For now, I just need to keep trying not to bust my head every time I have a vision.”

“Has it just been the two so far? The tornado and the one on Samhain?”

“Yeah. I've been having a shit ton of dreams though, and I can't remember any of them once I wake. Professor Stewart said that's common, and to try to wake up my mind before my body so I can start clinging to them, but I don't know how the hell to do that. How does someone wake their mind and not their body?”

That's a great question, and suddenly I'm not that sad I don't have magic. “I usually have the opposite problem,” I remind her. “My mind is constantly awake whether I want it to be or not. Try becoming excessively neurotic like me and maybe that'll help.” It's a terrible joke, but Quinn huffs all the same and lays her head against my shoulder.

“Remember back in the Human Realm when we thought we knew what stress was?”

Oh, I knew what it was. I still know what it is, but I’m glad that it seems I kept her from the worst of it back home. “It really is different here, huh? If it makes you feel any better at all, I have some juicy gossip about Professor Stewart.”

“Oh, god what I would give to only have to care about gossip. I’m way too excited for this,” she exclaims as she sits up. “Fuck everything else, spill.”

“Don’t say anything to either of them because I’m not even supposed to know, but he’s absolutely, definitely banging Quincy,” I laugh. “Grey covered for them with Cherith.”

She gasps, eyes wide as she grips the hell out of my arm and squeaks like she really is extremely happy for them. “Go Quince! They eye-fuck every single class and I wasn’t sure if it was just the tension of them fighting this desire for each other or something more, but I’m so damn glad they are. Good for them. I wonder how it started... I wonder who tops... I wonder — I have so many more questions now than I did before knowing.”

“I’d ask Grey, but I’d rather not go anywhere near him right now.” And just like that, I’m thinking about Ledger again. Wondering how he’s doing, where he’s at, what really started the fight between them today. What he’s going to say when we talk about all of this... and maybe most importantly, what I really want from him now. The hot and cold nature of our relationship is exhausting and a stark reminder of why I wanted his claim on me gone in the first place. “Honestly,” I continue, “I just hope they’re happy. Whatever the details are.”

“Me too,” she sighs, feeling the shift in my mood like she always does. “Want to watch a dumb Mythic movie and forget about everything else? There’s a new one about humans and their evil cell phones coming to our realm. Could be funny even though it’s supposed to be scary.”

Snorting, I nod. “Could be more realistic than they think. Someone has ours, after all. Hope whoever it is enjoys all the pictures I took of my tits when I was trying out those fake nipple rings. I still can’t believe we got kidnapped a week before I was supposed to get them done.”

Rolling my eyes, I get comfortable as Quinn queues up the movie. I’ve seen enough Mythics with piercings and tattoos to know there has to be a

parlor around here somewhere, so I make a mental note to ask around about it soon. If I'm going to be staying here forever, I might as well enjoy it.

Chapter Forty-Two

Quinn

It's late. I'm not exactly sure what the time is since I'm facing away from my board, but I know it's late as hell and I'm completely exhausted. Yet, I lie here unable to sleep. I can't stop thinking about Otto, and although this is a normal thing for me, it feels different. Yes, I miss him, but there's something brewing in the air. I can feel it in my bones as I sit up and look around.

It's after midnight. Suren is fast asleep, and knowing she's sleeping peacefully gives me the permission I need to go see my wolf.

He needs me tonight... and I need him.

After slipping on my shoes and a pair of leggings, I grab his hoodie and rush out, the cold air wrapping itself around me the second I step outside. It's colder tonight, which somehow feels fitting to what I feel inside.

Not even a few minutes in, I regret that I left at all. I feel eyes on me, which in turn makes me remember the ghosts from Samhain — but this feels different. And it doesn't feel like someone from Otto's pack. "Vin?" I call out. "Von? Are you guys close? Fuck, I should have brought my glasses."

I'm pretty sure Parker is with Otto tonight in the Den since they were watching the Lair last night, so when no one answers, I glance back toward where I came from and seriously consider going home.

No. I just have to make it to the Den and I'll be safe.

Once I steel my resolve, I begin walking again, but I'm pretty sure I'm hardly breathing at all when I hear a low growl not too far away. "Guys?" *Please be who I hope you are.*

I didn't get this far off my intuition to start ignoring it now, but before I can take off in a run, that growling multiplies. Wolves are fighting. I can hear the whimpers and snarls of a brawl, and I hate that I can't see who it is.

Is my vision coming true? Is Fenris attacking my mate?

Those questions have me sprinting toward the Den without looking back, my heart pounding in my chest as I force one foot in front of the other until my path is blocked by two wolves with bloody, matted fur, and neither of them are my friends.

I'm terrified, but with shaking hands, I take a fighting stance and try to focus on creating my shield. "I'm not looking for a fight. I just want to go see

my Alpha.”

That’s something wolves will respect, right?

Wrong.

The white wolf leaps forward with a growl, the beige one following right behind her as I back up. I shove them back with displacement, surprised when both of them are pushed off their feet, but by the time I’m gearing up to try something stronger, they’re both stalking toward me again.

“You’re going to regret this,” I warn, my threat falling on deaf ears when suddenly there’s a metal collar being snapped around my neck from behind and a deep chuckle reaches my ears. With a surge of effort, I try to displace the giant man behind me, but my magic is gone. I can’t feel it at all. “What the fuck is this, Fenris?”

“I think it’s you who will regret tonight more than anyone. Should have watched your back little witch, because now this collar will ensure your magic can’t reach you. Not even your Sight.”

Something about his tone and demeanor have fear slamming into me and the blood splattered on his chest doesn’t help, so I do the only thing I can think of. I scream. I scream Otto’s name as loudly as I can, desperate for him to hear me, but it’s cut short by a backhand to the face. I fall to the ground and try to crawl away, but the giant only grabs me and tosses me over his shoulder.

“Stop. Please. Just let me go home.” Why the fuck did I ever leave the Lair? “I won’t tell Otto what you’ve done if you let me go now.”

Fenris laughs, and by the snorts that leave the other two wolves’ snouts, I’m positive they’re both laughing too. “Otto is weak, and once he and everyone here see his rejected mate take a real knot, he will be eliminated.”

My stomach turns at his words. The thought of being taken by this mammoth of a wolf is almost enough to make me puke, and his giant shoulder digging into my abdomen isn’t helping. “I’d rather die.”

“That can be arranged, but not until you’re hanging off my cock in front of your broken mate. Actually, that’d be quite the show for him. Me taking you, you moaning for me and calling me Alpha, then once you’re knotted I’ll claim you and rip open your jugular so he can watch you drift away.”

“And so the mate that never wanted him leaves in the end, what do you know,” a girl’s voice pipes up, and I don’t have to look to know it’s Celeste.

“I always wanted him. You guys don’t know anything,” I argue, looking around at my surroundings as a gate I didn’t know existed swings open and I

realize they're taking me off campus. "Where are we going?"

"Sounds like it's you who knows nothing," she teases. "She really is a pretty one. Are you sure Evan and I can't have a turn first?"

"Shut up and shift, Celeste. What if Otto and what remains of his pack show up?"

"Yes, Alpha."

I hear her shift more than I see it, but I'm also not trying to watch her. Instead, I'm working on digging my nail into my palm so I can leave my scent behind for my mate. I know blood is more likely to get the attention of a vampire, but Otto would know it's me, and he would have some semblance of an idea of where to find me.

My face hurts from where he struck me, but unfortunately there's no blood happening there, so I have to squeeze my fist hard enough to break the skin which turns out to be much harder than I anticipated.

By the time I'm able to leave a few droplets of blood behind, we're already over a half a mile off campus in an unknown direction and my fear is only amplifying. Why, oh why, did I think I was untouchable? Everyone at school knows Otto is my mate now, which means almost everyone keeps a respectable distance from me. It gave me some false sense of security all the while knowing this barbaric asshole was gunning for him. Of course I was a target, and my dumbass walked right into his trap in the middle of the night, leaving my poor Alpha at a disadvantage. I swear if he trades his life for mine, I will find a way to kill every single one of these bastards, and hope that in the process, they somehow kill me too. I don't want to live in a world that Otto isn't in. I can't even bear the thought.

It feels like it takes forever, but eventually we arrive at some run-down cabin in the middle of nowhere. When he sets me on my feet, I notice the boards over the windows and instantly take my chances and try to run. I make it four feet before he's snatching me by my hair and dragging me inside, anger radiating off of him at my painful whimpering, and when he tosses me on the floor and I hear a deadbolt snap closed, it sounds an awful lot like my fate.

It's as run-down on the inside as it is outside: ripped couches, dusty photos that are too blurry for me to make out, cans and bottles tossed about like whoever comes here doesn't care at all about how dirty it is. It's a real shithole, which I can only assume means it belongs to Fenris. Shitty place for an even shittier wolf. Fitting.

A pounding rattles the door a few moments later, and a dumb swell of hope blossoms in my chest at the possibility of it being Vin or Von here to rescue me, but when Fenris opens the door and sneers at whatever he sees, I know for a fact it isn't. "You leave the one I killed behind? I want to be there when Otto finds him."

My heart pounds in my chest as I hang onto every word, not bothering to struggle as Evan wrangles me into an uncomfortable wooden chair.

"Yup," the newcomer says. "This one is hanging on, but I wouldn't be surprised if he doesn't make it through the night. He can't even shift back."

"If he does," Fenris replies, "Otto can watch him die first. See if you can get your hands on Parker. He's the only one left."

No. If what he's saying is true, then either Vineet or Javonte is dead, and they're going after Parker next. That means my man will be all alone in this world without a pack, and his heart will be shattered. Knowing that is enough to make breathing nearly impossible as they drag in Von's unconscious body, his silver and black fur coated with blood. He's alive, but barely, and poor Vin is dead. Grief weighs on me as I stare down at the floor and try not to focus on the fact that all of this is my fault.

I should have listened to Suren and stayed home. She said no boys tonight, and maybe if I had listened, none of this would be happening. I'm not an idiot. It's obvious this pack has been planning and waiting for an opening for a while. I kick-started this entire mess by rushing outside after midnight, and now so many people I care about are going to suffer. If only I wasn't such a useless Seer.

Oh, Otto. I'm so fucking sorry.

Chapter Forty-Three

Otto

Out of a dead sleep, I wake to my chest exploding with pain. It rockets through me until I can barely move my limbs from the stress of it. What the hell is happening to me? “Parker!” I yell, but there’s no one around. My nest is empty for the first time in weeks. Scrambling up to yank my sweats off, I flip onto all fours and shift to better communicate. Throwing whatever Alpha power I’ve got left behind it, I command, “*Parker, Javonte, Vineet. Get back to the Den. Now.*”

It feels like there’s a gaping hole on the other side of that command. No response comes, and every passing second makes my stomach twist and my hackles rise. They know better than to fucking ignore me like this, even if my grip is slipping.

“Alpha?”

Whirling around, I spot Parker by himself wearing one of my hoodies. The sight calms me just a little, but not enough to stop me from snarling when I see he’s alone. Shifting back, I stand to draw him in. “Where were you? Where are the others?”

“I don’t know,” he admits quietly. “I couldn’t sleep. I didn’t mean to leave, I just needed some air. I thought maybe if I went for a walk to clear my head, I’d feel better. Something doesn’t feel right, Alpha. I think something’s wrong.”

Next to Quinn, Parker’s got the strongest intuition of anyone I’ve ever met. I’m not crazy, then. This twisting, aching feeling in my chest probably has a source. “Okay. Stick by me, we’ll figure it out.”

“Why didn’t the others come? Your command came through, though it didn’t feel very strong. They should’ve answered.”

Neither Von or Vin have the same connection to me Parker does, so it doesn’t surprise me that they were able to ignore a weak command when my Omega wasn’t, but it’s not like them to do that. Niklaus was the rebel who defied orders just because he could, and he’s gone. The others wouldn’t do that to me.

It just cements the fear that something went wrong... they were on duty watching Quinn tonight.

“If something happened to my mate, I swear to the Goddess herself, I’ll burn this whole fucking school down,” I growl, shifting to chase the scent of my Betas. Parker’s nose brushes my tail as he keeps pace with me out of our Den and into the main part of the forest, and where I expect their scent to lead me toward the Lair where Cherry’s supposed to be tucked safely for the night, it veers off toward the eastern edge.

For a moment, I’m torn. Do I go check on my mate or go after my Betas? The primal need to do both nearly rips me in half, but the truth is, they’re probably all together if my Betas were doing what they were supposed to be. But why would Cherry be clear over here? It doesn’t make any sense.

The closer I get, the more my instincts scream. There’s still no answer from either of them as I scream their names through our pack bond over and over until Parker’s whimpering from the pressure of my anxiety in his head, and that’s about the only thing that makes me stop. They’d have answered by now if they could.

Nose to the ground, I start picking up other scents. Cherry, for sure. A couple of peryton who probably went by earlier... a couple of wolves I don’t recognize and Fenris’ whole pack. Evan, Celeste, and the bastard hybrid himself.

Blood. I smell blood, it’s everywhere. Blood and death and...

No.

A dangerous, broken howl shreds my throat as I follow the smell to Vineet’s mangled body. His throat’s been ripped out and almost every inch of his orange-tan fur is matted with blood and dirt, crisscrossed with claw marks and the evidence that he was jumped. Frantically, I search the area around him for Javonte, expecting to see him the same way, but there’s nothing but a trail of thick blood covering drag marks through the grass.

If he’s alive at all, he’s hurt badly.

And Cherry’s nowhere to be found.

Fenris did this. I know he did, I smell him everywhere. Rage and grief war in my chest as my legs give out and I rest my head over Vineet’s torn neck, wishing I had the power to fix it, to take his place. He died protecting my mate, a mate who might not ever truly accept me. If I’d have kept my shit together, been better for her, been a better Alpha, he wouldn’t be going cold already underneath me.

Not even Parker’s magic can make me feel better now. I need to go, I need to find Fenris and rip him to fucking shreds, but I can’t move. My

strength as an Alpha comes from my mate, from my pack. With Nik gone and Vineet dead, Javonte possibly dead as well, and my mate still not accepting the bond, I'm so weak I can barely move.

"Alpha," he whispers, cracked and full of despair that tugs on my heart. "Alpha, they're coming back. We're not safe here, we have to go."

I don't care. I can smell Fenris and his pack coming, but I won't leave Vineet. Not like this. Not when he made the ultimate sacrifice trying to protect my mate. Shifting back, I force myself into a sitting position to face my Omega. "Run, Parker. Please," I beg. "I can't protect you. Run."

"Yes, Parker," Fenris laughs from behind me. "Run. Run like a scared little puppy back to... hmm, wait. You don't have anyone to run to now, do you? There's no one around to protect you at all anymore. But don't worry. You'd make a good enough fleshlight that I won't hurt you much. It's not really you I'm after, anyway."

No, it's not. It's me.

Whimpering, I move to hide Vineet's body from the monster in front of me. "You'll pay for this, Fenris. He did nothing to you. Even if you kill me, even if I'm never an Alpha again, you'll pay for this. The Council won't let you get away with it."

"Won't they?" he asks. "Your mate is already begging for a real knot. All she'll need to do is tell the Elders she rejected you and you disobeyed our Creed, and that we were helping her. Your little mutt was simply trying to keep her captive with you. He got in the way."

She would never. My Cherry would never do that to me or Vineet, not for anyone. "Fuck you, Fenris. We're fixing things. Her mark will show up any day now. You'll see."

"Oh, I'll see it, alright. After I bite her and claim her as my own, it'll be my mark that shows up on her perky little tit. Bet they're a handful, hm?"

I launch myself at him, falling short as he lifts his leg and kicks down on my face, crushing me to the dirt.

"Now, now. I'd kill you right here, but what fun would that be? I'm looking forward to the day I make you watch your mate scream for me. I told her it would be a nice little show for you, but maybe I'll invite the whole school, hm?" He grunts, digging his heel into my cheek as Parker screams, begging him to stop. "Put her pretty pussy on display as I tear it open and let her show everyone that some Pedigrees are just better than others. Goodbye, Otto. I'll see you soon."

He's gone in a flash, leaving me sobbing on the forest floor as Parker rushes to my side. "Alpha," he cries. "Alpha, it's okay. She's alive, so we'll find her. We'll save her. Von too, okay? I promise, but you have to get up. We... we can't do this alone."

So Parker's lost faith in me too, and how can I blame him? I'm a miserable excuse for an Alpha right now, but I can hardly see past the pain of losing a Beta long enough to get up. But he's right. Javonte might still be alive, and Quinn is in a lot of danger. I can't let anything happen to them no matter what it costs me.

Slowly, I stand, brushing the dirt from my cheek that Fenris left behind and try to gather my thoughts. Help. We need help, but who? Fenris has enemies everywhere, it shouldn't be that hard. "Lordan," I grunt out. "His pack has always been friendly with ours and his nest is the closest. We'll get dressed and go now."

Nodding, Parker shifts with me and stays close as we race back to the nest. We don't linger long. There isn't time. Shrugging on a t-shirt and sweats, I grab a go bag knowing it'll be needed for later and head to the nest a few down from ours.

"Lordan!" I call. "It's important, open up!"

I hear a shuffling on the other side of the door, then it swings open to the vast expanse of his nest. "What is it?" he rumbles, butt naked and one eye closed. "It's like two am, Otto."

"Fenris took my mate," I say as calmly as I can. "Vineet's dead, and Javonte's either dead too or captive. I need your help. From one Alpha to another, please. I'll do anything, owe you anything. I can't go alone."

Lordan's pale blue eyes scan my frame, noting the dried blood and dirt caking my arms. "You're serious. Fuck that, I'm not tangling with him. He bit me the last time I pissed him off, and not in the wolf way. Fucking vampire. I'm sorry about Vin, really. He was a good guy. But I can't help you. I won't put my pack in his crosshairs."

"Wait," I beg, stepping forward to stop him from slamming the door in my face, but it's too late. My palm bounces off the wood. "God damnit!" I yell. Between Lordan and Niko, Lordan's the ballsier one. He was supposed to be my sure-thing. If he won't help me, there's not a chance in hell any of the others here will.

"It's okay. We can do this together, Alpha. You're stronger than you think, especially when people you love are threatened. We can do this."

“No,” I argue, shaking my head and grabbing his shoulders to lead him back home. “You’re staying here. I know you can hold your own and I can’t deny that your magic might be helpful, but I’m not risking you too, not for anything. You’re too important, Parker. To me, to this whole world. I’d never forgive myself if I let you come with me and something happened to you. You’ll only distract me if you’re there.”

The fire of determination in his eyes diminishes quickly. He knows I’m right. As much as he might be able to help, he’s also going to be a liability I can’t afford. “I’ll stay,” he promises. “But you had better come home to me, Alpha. Bring back Javonte and Quinn.”

Something tells me that’s easier said than done, but I won’t abandon them no matter how weak I am. “I will.”

I hug him tightly for as long as I dare, then backpedal toward the door in case this is the last time I ever see him. So many thoughts are vying for space in the forefront of my mind right now from Vineet’s body laying there in the woods to how I’m going to take on a hybrid Alpha and his pack all by myself, and it hits me.

If there’s one person in this entire school who has a reason to help me, it’s Ledger Huxley. The thought of asking him for help makes my stomach sour, but it’s true. He hates wolves after what happened to his brother, Renly. I can tell every time one of us walks near him that the revenge he got on the pack responsible wasn’t enough for him, and no amount of bloodshed will ever truly quell the hatred he’s got for my kind. He may not like me much, but Quinn is his bloodbag’s best friend, too. If he won’t do it for me or for Renly, maybe he’ll do it for her.

It’s worth a shot. It’s the only chance I have at all of succeeding.

Chapter Forty-Four

Ledger

The abundance of reasons why I shouldn't be standing outside of the Lair in the middle of the night somehow still feel insignificant as I watch Quinn sneak out. I can't stay away, and maybe it's time I admit I don't actually want to. I'm mad at Suren, want to chain her to my bed and spank her ass raw with a paddle, but I still want her around and if I stop fighting that fact, maybe I'll stop losing my damn mind. Maybe.

She's awake and alone as I make my way into her room, her gaze watching me warily as I close the door behind me and move to sit on her bed with her. Her thoughts are hidden, my body aches, yet somehow I still feel better now that I'm here. It's infuriating.

"Look like you got a little sleep," I say lamely, reaching out to mess up her already bed-fucked hair.

"Not really. Quinn got up and left without saying anything. I think she went to see Otto, but... it feels like there's violence in the air today. It's making me uneasy."

"You feel it too?" I ask, pretty amazed with this woman's power, while she doesn't even realize it's living inside her. "Maybe I should take advantage of that feeling and get my revenge on Grey."

She frowns deeply, her full bottom lip jutting out. "That'll just make it worse. How's your wound?"

"Fine." It's not a lie, it is fine, and completely healed at this point. "A little tender still, but it's nothing but a scar now. I could fight."

I don't know why I add that last part, especially because I have no intentions of seeking revenge on Greylin today. That asshole dug his own grave, and I'd like to see how the shame of it weighs on him. Vampires won't forget his cowardice. But a part of me thinks I said it because of the state she saw me in last. She saw me weak and on my knees, I can't have her seeing me that way.

Slowly, she reaches up to touch my face. "You scared the shit out of me today," she whispers. "I hate him for doing that to you."

I don't need to read her mind to know she means it. It's written all over her face, in the bottomless depths of her eyes. She was... worried about me. I

scan her face for a moment, and lean into her touch, taking in her endless beauty while I try to remember why I even came here. Why was I mad again? Oh, right. She wants my claim on her gone.

There's a second where I consider releasing her from it right here and now, but as swiftly as that thought blossoms, I stomp it out even faster, because that's not who I am. I'm selfish, and she's mine. "So you don't want him to claim you now?"

"I told you earlier I don't want anyone claiming me."

I look away at her words because that isn't something I can give her. It's just... not. I don't know how I became this guy that actually wants to please her in more ways than sex, but I'm here, and I don't have a clue how to navigate it. "That's why you're back on the amrit? And no, I didn't try to read your mind here. I tried when you came to me because I wanted to know how you felt when you saw me like that, but you've got me blocked again."

"Don't take it personally. I didn't want Greylin hearing how unenthusiastic I was when I asked him to help me. And I know I promised you I wouldn't drink it anymore, but I needed space to breathe, Ledge. I needed to feel like I was in control of something, anything, and that was it."

I can work with that, I think. "Fine, but if you're ever unenthusiastic with me, I want to know. And no, I won't break my claim to you because I can't. I don't care what that makes me."

"I'm unenthusiastic with you most of the time," she mumbles. "You're kind of a dick."

I'd be offended, but the slight, playful smile teasing her lips tells me she doesn't fully mind it. "You're a dick too, you know?"

"I know. Honestly, that's why I don't want to be claimed, Ledge. I feel like all we do is fight because of it," she says. "What do you think things would be like if you didn't have this crazy connection to me that I'm constantly rebelling against? Would we be... normal?"

Now's the time where I'd normally deflect and move on, but instead... "That's the thing, Suren. What is normal? I'm a vampire/goblin hybrid from a different realm, I don't know what normal is for you."

"I don't know." She stares at her fingers, tapping them on the blanket. "Holding hands and supporting each other. Being happy instead of constantly at each other's throats. Being equal instead of one of us being property."

I've seen couples hold hands around campus so it's not a foreign thing in this realm, I just never saw the point. But if the point is to make your girl

happy, then that's something that might be possible. "If you wanna hold my hand, we can hold hands. Happiness is something I have to work on, and I like you being my property — but I can see why that doesn't feel fair to you. You know I'm as much yours as you are mine, right? I may have fed off other people, but that's it. I haven't looked at or been tempted by another woman since I first saw you."

She nods a little, slowly reaching out to take my hand with jerky, unsure movements. "Do you... do you think you could ever love me? Or will I always just be a bloodbag you're a little bit fascinated by?"

Threading our fingers together, I sigh. "Love isn't something I ever thought I was capable of, but I — fuck, Clumsy. I don't know. If love isn't burning the fucking world for the girl you need, then I don't know what it is. Could you ever love me? I'm not lovable."

"I didn't think so," she whispers. "But if love isn't running out of class in a panic because the guy you supposedly want to get away from might be hurt, then I don't know what it is, either. Maybe we're just not the type of people who are cut out for love. If you won't release me and no one else is brave enough to challenge you without knives, then I guess it'll have to be good enough."

It sounds a lot like she is capable of love and she actually feels that toward me, but if her statement was an admission to love, does that mean mine was too? "You are good enough," I rush out before I can stop myself. "I've been mad your blood has been bitter. I was so sure that witch was poisoning it, but there was nothing in your mind about it so I just needed someone to blame." I'm so out of my element right now I want to just walk away, but her hand is clinging to mine, and for some reason, that makes me want to stay. "I don't know what I'm doing, but maybe shit would have been different if I was honest when I claimed you. I thought I'd have to force you into a corner to make you mine, so I did."

The way she's grimacing makes my eyes narrow. "Um," she mumbles. "The bitterness won't happen anymore. Promise."

And there it is. "So I wasn't fucking insane? Is that what you're telling me?"

"We thought it would make you lose interest," she admits breathlessly. "That's why it was so sweet that one day. I didn't know what you'd like, so we had to do trial and error, and it fucking sucked because she put something in it that only let me remember while I was at Bone Heart. So you were

yelling at me and punishing me and I didn't have a clue why until I got to work. I stopped, though. I promise. I told her I didn't want anymore."

"That bitch," I say through gritted teeth, feeling like my threat to her boy toy wasn't enough, but my shit with Yelena isn't what I need to focus on right now. "So your blood will go back to normal? Because if you're wondering if there's a way for me to not be hangry every single day like I have been for weeks, that will help."

She rolls her eyes. "Yes, Ledger. I'll go back to being your perfect little bloodbag."

Man, that sentence sounds good coming out of her mouth. "Can you say that one more time?" I lick my lips, staring at her as her expression goes from obnoxiously sarcastic to curious.

"I'll go back to being your perfect little bloodbag."

"Fuck," I whisper, my cock instantly wanting to be invited to this conversation, but that fucker has to wait. "How is that not a compliment again? I'm not being a dick right now, I really don't get it and I'm trying here."

"Context, Ledger. Fucking context. Read a room," she jokes. "In the bedroom, if you want to treat me like a dirty little bloodwhore who was born to choke on your cock, then do it. But outside of it? I don't like basically being compared to a fucking sirloin."

I tilt my head toward the ceiling as I contemplate her comparison. I still don't see the problem. I mean, sirloin isn't the best cut of steak, so there's that. I would probably consider her more like a filet than anything, especially with that juicy ass, but that doesn't seem like a hill I want to die on right now. Not when she just said she'll still be my bloodwhore in bed. "Alright, I'll try to keep that in mind. Long as you keep in mind that I'm a vampire and a goblin who was born and raised in this realm. We're literally from two different worlds, so you can't walk around thinking shit will be perfect. I'm still me, and you're still a stubborn ass human who likes seeing me angry. And don't deny it. I've heard enough of your thoughts to confirm that suspicion."

"Maybe I like it when you choke me and kiss me like you hate me," she says flippantly, but the blush on her cheeks tells me she's serious. "But again, Ledger. Read a room. That's all I'm saying."

"I've never had to read the room. They've always adjusted to me," I reply honestly.

She lets go of my hand with an exasperated sigh. “Then maybe you should’ve picked someone from your world. Someone who bows to you just because everyone else does and is happy about the fact that you think being a hybrid is an excuse to be an ass. I don’t think I’m asking for much.”

I’m actually surprised it took me this long to say the wrong thing. I’m a little proud of myself, even though she looks like she wants to slap me. “I don’t want someone from my world.” It isn’t until the words are out that I feel the truth of them. “I want you.” Without her permission, I snatch her hand again. “So you’re stuck with me.”

The way her lips part in shock almost makes me laugh. “Like that,” she whispers. “That’s good.”

Fuck, why am I smiling right now? I look like an idiot, fuck this. I lean in and press my lips to hers before she tries to say anything else. I’m all talked out, and now I need to make us both feel good in the way I know I can. “Open up for me, baby. It’s been too damn long.”

Her fist clenches in my shirt as she spreads her legs to let me shift between them, and the infuriating girl kisses me like something changed between us today. Tongue swiping into my mouth, she has me groaning and rock hard by the time I sense another presence close.

Knock knock knock.

Pulling back from her is hard, but I manage to turn my head toward her door with a growl in my throat and my fangs shooting out. “Go the fuck away.”

“Please,” Otto whimpers. “He took Cherry.”

The pain lancing his voice has Suren shoving me off of her and tripping as she gets to her feet.

“Fuck me,” I groan, sitting up to push my raging boner down just in time for her to swing open the door. As much as I don’t care for the wolf standing on the other side of it, the guy looks like he’s had a hell of a night, so I decide not to make him pay for the interruption. “You look like shit.”

“You don’t,” he comments. “I need your help. Fenris made his move.”

“What the fuck does that mean?” Suren snaps. “Otto, where is she?”

He doesn’t take his eyes off me. “Vineet’s dead, Ledger. He’s got Javonte and Quinn. Parker’s safe for now, but I don’t have anyone else. Please.”

How the fuck is this my problem? “That sounds like wolf business to me. Sorry about your friend, though.”

Suren smacks the shit out of me. “That’s my best friend!” she yells. “Fine, fuck you. I’ll go with him. C’mon, Otto.”

He still doesn’t even look at her. “You’re not hearing me, Ledger. He killed my Beta and took my mate. That’s grounds to kill his whole pack. Are you coming with me or not?”

The sting of her slap only makes me want to kill every wolf I can, but even without it, the offer is far too tempting. “I get to actually kill them even if your mate is fine?”

“Go on. Read my mind, find out just how serious I am. I can’t do this alone.”

A quick glance through his thoughts shows me how embarrassed he is to even have to be asking me, but he’s not exaggerating. There’s murder in his heart tonight.

“Ledger, please,” Suren begs. “Come with us.”

I nod at him once and look Suren in the eyes. “You’re not coming. We’ll finish our talk when your friend is back safe, and don’t think I’m going to forget about that slap.”

I grab her by the chin and kiss her hard, using just enough compulsion to make sure she stays put. The last thing I need is her running around all chaotic and shit with a werewolf like Fenris on the warpath.

She melts a little, gripping my shirt again. “Just be careful. Bring her home. Please.”

“Will do. Oh, and Clumsy...” I spin back to add one more thing. “I planned on letting you know this while I was inside of you, but seeing as I have to go to battle with blue balls, I’ll tell you right here. If you ever try to break my claim on you again, I’ll take away all your freewill and embrace the monster everyone believes me to be. You’re mine.”

I leave her there gaping at me and follow Otto out of the Lair at a speed she can’t follow. That girl might drive me up the wall, but best friend or not, I’m not risking her life for anyone’s mate.

I’m the only one who can be a threat to my girl.

Chapter Forty-Five

Quinn

I don't know how much time has passed, but I know it hasn't been long. There's no way Otto isn't out looking for me, and I find myself thrilled and terrified at that fact. Who's with him? Parker? Will anyone else help him? Fuck, this is bad, and Von hasn't moved an inch beyond his heavy breathing and low, throaty whimpers. "Can I have some water or something?"

Fenris reaches into his sweats to pull his cock out, shaking it. "How thirsty are you?"

I don't try to hide my gag. "Oh god. I think I'm going to puke. How are you so tall with that small of a dick? Eww, and it looks like a fucking anteater slurped up a hot dog. Go figure you hate everything."

The bastard chuckles. "Body shaming doesn't suit you, Quinn. Be better."

"You gonna knot her, Alpha?" Celeste asks. "Show her exactly what you're packing?"

"Soon. I'm waiting for something."

The audacity of this beast is criminal. I know who he's waiting for, but I refuse to lie down and make this time easy on any of us. Goddess, I hope Otto has backup. "Be better? Are you fucking kidding me? Don't body shame someone who threatens to rape and kill innocent people? Yeah, you can take your morals and shove them up your ass. Keep that thing away from me."

I spit on the ground at his feet, earning me another solid backhand that rattles my brain. "You're still alive for one purpose and one purpose alone, girl," he growls. "To teach the mutt you call a mate how to mind his own business. He stepped in mine one too many times. But if you'd prefer to watch me kill him from beyond the grave, that's fine with me. May the Goddess greet you." His fangs elongate as he grips my hair and yanks my head back, and I hate myself for it, but I scream.

"No! Don't! Please don't bite me."

He pauses, but doesn't let me go. "Apologize to me. Make me fucking believe it."

I realize then that dying might not be so bad. At least then there would be no pain. I wouldn't have to feel anything at all. I picture Otto and Suren, the only two people that have ever really loved me, and I close my eyes just as a

tear falls down my cheek. I never want them to hurt, so I suck up every ounce of pride I have and exhale it out into the world. "I'm sorry, Fenris."

"Mmm, I think you can do better than that, don't you?" he coos. "Look at me. This doesn't have to be bad for you, you know. I can give you more than he ever could."

"I don't want anyone but him." I know he could never understand, but I don't care. "I love him."

Celeste laughs at me like I just told a joke, but Evan's growl cuts her off. He moves in to whisper to Fenris, but they're still so close I can hear them. "I smell a vampire."

Vampire? Shit... is this because I left blood?

Fenris' eyes flash black as his fangs distend, dripping with venom. It's such an unnatural look on a werewolf that I feel my body recoil and call out to Otto in a way I've never done before. I can't hear him, and I didn't use words, but I feel him.

"Take care of it. I wasn't done with her."

"Want me to go with him, Alpha?" Celeste asks, dragging a grunt from Fenris that has her shifting and sprinting outside.

For several long seconds, nothing happens. He just stares at me like he's wondering if this is all worth it. "Where were we?"

I shrug and try my hardest to distract him. "Do vampires come out here often, or is this a bad thing?"

"Bad for them, a warm-up for us." Reaching out, he cups my chin and tilts my head. "I don't understand what he sees in you, but I've made do with less."

"We're mates," I argue, trying to move out of his grip. "It isn't about my looks."

His nails dig into my skin as he holds me tighter. "Yeah? I've had about enough of waiting. Maybe I'll let him walk in while you're licking my knot, hm?"

Fuck. "Why? What is the point of all this? What'd he ever do to you that was so wrong?"

"He pissed all over my territory, girl. Walks around here like he owns the place, scolding me for a fucking spat with the goblins. I told him then he'd pay for it one day. And that day is today."

Letting my chin go, he strokes his cock furiously until it really is bigger than Otto's. I'm weighing the consequences of trying to bite the whole thing

off when a shrieking, pained howl fills the air and Fenris freezes.

He seems to sense something is horribly wrong because he shoves himself away and moves to take a step toward the door, only he doesn't make it two steps before it's flying open and my mate is walking inside with the severed heads of his pack. He's covered in blood, a murderous level of pain in his eyes as he sees that I'm alive, and then he tosses the heads at his feet.

"I warned you, Fenris." he growls.

I'm shocked as hell when Ledger comes barging in behind him, but I'm not shocked that he's also covered in blood, he's just grinning about it. "I get to kill this one too, right?"

"No. This one's mine."

That seems to be good enough for Ledger, because his smile only widens. "Definitely thought your friends here would have put up a fight. Shit was pathetic."

"How fucking dare you," Fenris snarls. "I'll kill you both for this."

With a speed I wouldn't have been able to see with or without my glasses, Ledger zips to the other side of the room, and Fenris falls to one knee with blood oozing from his leg. "Just... disappointing."

His nails are covered in Fenris's blood, but the vampire doesn't even attempt to taste it. He just wipes it off on his dirty shirt and crosses his arms as Otto steps forward.

"You want to kill me? Try it. No one else dies but you or me. And I've still got something left to live for."

Fenris is on his feet just as he reaches him, and I'm surprised neither of them shift. Fists fly like they're nothing more than men, and it's so barbaric it's difficult to watch — yet I can't look away. I can't even blink as I watch the man I love take hit after hit like he's got nothing more to lose, and then suddenly Ledger is standing next to me and gripping the metal collar with a tug. "What the fuck, Ledger?"

"Shh," he hisses, my magic slowly returning a second after he rips it off of me and tosses it aside. "You gonna just sit there, or are you gonna help?"

Still an asshole.

I don't give him a response as I stand, focusing completely on Fenris before I blast him hard with a gust of wind. Otto stumbles away from it but recovers quickly, jumping on Fenris before he can get his footing.

Using the wind I've already conjured, I shove it down onto his face, making him choke on air as Otto grips his throat with his palm and fucking

rips it open with his bare hand.

It shocks me so much my powers cut out instantly, and then all we can hear is heavy breathing and Fenris choking on his own blood. “Otto,” my voice cracks as I run to him, jumping into his arms with a sob. “I’m so sorry.”

Grief radiates off him in waves as he holds me tight. “Vineet’s gone, Cher. That fucking animal left his body in the woods.”

“I know. I shouldn’t have left the Lair. I had such a bad feeling and I just wanted to be in the Den with you. I can’t believe he did this.”

“It’s not your fault,” he whispers, pinning me to him. “Is... is Javonte still alive?”

“Yes.” I try to pull away to show him, but he’s clinging to me so I point over to where he’s laying. “He needs a Healer.”

Ledger moves closer after giving us a moment. “I can heal certain things, but his best bet is an actual Healer. He’s lost a lot of blood.”

“Can you take him there for us?” I ask.

He looks to Otto with an eyebrow raised. “That what you want?”

“Yes. I know I’ve asked a lot of you tonight, but would you?” he pleads. “I can’t lose him too.”

“Alright, tell Suren how heroic I am next time you see her, yeah?”

He lifts Von up, ignoring the whimper he releases as he shoots off, and although I have a million questions, I don’t ask any of them. “You should see a Healer too, baby.”

“Fuck that. I’ve got you.” He kisses my chin, my cheek, my lips. “Did he hurt you?”

“I’m okay,” I lie, knowing he can see the welts on my face from his blows. “It all hurts more on the inside than the outside. I’m so sorry you’ve had to deal with so much loss, Alpha.”

I can tell by the stunned look on his face that he’s still in shock and probably won’t process things for a while, at least not right now. “You’re safe, Cherry. That’s what matters to me right now. We saved who we could.”

Standing, he tells me he’ll carry me back and then shifts, bowing for me to climb on.

He howls the entire way back to the Lair, mourning the loss of his Beta loudly, and then two other howls join him when we’re a mile away from Rogue Hollow.

I tense on his back as they appear in front of us, but relax when I recognize Parker in wolf form. He shifts the second they’re close enough to

speak and I appreciate him for letting me be a part of this conversation. Especially since I don't know who the huge wolf behind him is.

“Alpha? Where's Javonte?”

Hastily, I climb off Otto's back but stay close as he shifts, too. “Ledger took him to a Healer,” he says, staring at the giant white newcomer. “Park, what have you done?”

He blushes as the wolf growls, and I realize for the first time that the new one has a half-moon mate mark, too. “He came to help. I didn't know where else to go, and he felt my anxiety. He was close by. Don't be mad at him.”

“Why would he be mad?” I ask, eyes locked on him as he looks me up and down. “Who are you?”

“He's my older brother,” Otto mutters. “And apparently, my Omega's mate.”

The wolf shifts into a man of Otto's golden-brown complexion, but he's somehow even taller, broader, and his eyes look nearly silver in the low light. “He needed me. I'd have done whatever was necessary, Otto. I didn't come here to fight you.”

That makes me relax.

“Please don't be mad, Alpha,” Parker whispers, but I'm still watching Rodyn.

Otto has told me about his drama with his older brother, but if he's worthy of being Parker's mate, then he must be worthy of something. I grip Otto's arm and step forward with my hand stretched out. “I'm Quinn. Otto's mate.”

He shakes it warily as Otto growls low. “Rodyn. Is it over, then?”

“Yes.” Otto steps forward. “Your help wasn't needed. Go home.”

I move back next to Otto and take his hand. “He's here, baby. He came to help. Maybe let them have a little time to talk while we go let Suren know I'm okay, and then we can all go check on Von?”

My mate looks hesitant as hell, but one nod from Parker has him relaxing. “Fine. I'll see you back at the nest.”

He shifts again, bowing so I can climb on, and he doesn't stop again until we're just outside the Lair. Dashing inside on foot, I make it through the door to find Suren crying in Ledger's arms.

“Quinn!” she shrieks, running toward me and slamming her arms around me. “He said you should've been back by now, I was so worried!”

I squeeze her back just as hard, the realization that I might have never seen her again slapping me in the face now that I'm safely home. "We ran into Parker and Otto's brother. Sur, I shouldn't have left."

"I'm just glad you're safe. Fuck, don't do that to me again."

"Okay," I whisper, pulling back to look at Ledger who's standing there awkwardly, but I pull him into a hug, anyway. "Thank you."

He doesn't hug me back. In fact, it doesn't even seem like he knows what a hug is with how stiff his arms are at his sides, but I don't care. He still helped my mate. "Suren, can you get your friend? I'm not encouraging this contact, but I also don't want to hurt her. This doesn't count as me touching another woman."

I let him go with a huff and look at him like the strange creature he is as Suren just sighs. "I'm not going to get jealous of you and Quinn. She wouldn't touch you if you were the last creature alive, even if you begged."

"Rude, but I'll allow it." He turns back toward me. "Where's your man?"

"He's outside. We all need to go check on Von. He has to see him."

"I need to go? I didn't even really know him," he argues, so I toss a pointed look at Suren until he gets the hint. "She probably doesn't want me there, either."

Of course he wouldn't get it. Stupid hybrid. "Have you asked her?"

He looks like he never even thought of that, and I have to fight an eye roll as he meets her gaze. "Do you? Do you even want to go?"

"Yes, I want to go be there for Quinn and Otto. You don't have to." She turns her back on him with a frown, taking my arm. "Let's just go. We shouldn't keep Otto waiting."

I'm surprised when Ledger follows us down the stairs, but neither of us look back at him as we walk. "It's weird to think I actually had a warning about this one with my vision. It wasn't like that at all, but I knew who the threat was and that Otto was being targeted. One of my visions actually came full circle."

"That's wild," she agrees. "I'm so sorry it happened like this, but you're definitely, really a Seer. How does it feel?"

"Like a fucking nightmare, honestly. It's nice knowing my intuition and shitty dreams all came from something real, but it isn't about to be an easy road for me. Imagine having visions, and then having to figure out if they will even happen at all, and if they're literal or metaphorical. It's not a blessing, it's a fucking nightmare." I sigh, feeling a little better now that I'm

talking it out. “But I’m ready to figure it all out. I want to be the best Seer I can be.”

She squeezes my hand tightly. “I’ll be there for you however I can, Quinn. You got this.”

I hope she’s right, but as we step through the door to the infirmary and find Von sitting up but barely awake, I can’t feel anything but relief. Otto is already by his side, making my chest tighten at the sight. “I’m so happy you’re okay, Von. I’m sorry.”

He shakes his head, leaning into Otto, and I swear I can see their bond as clearly as I can see them. “Vin...” he groans, sending a pang of despair through Otto I can feel from across the room.

“Hey, don’t talk,” Otto whispers. “Just rest, okay?”

He nods, letting my mate lean him back, and when Parker runs in and curls up on his bed, I know none of them will be leaving his side any time soon. They need these cuddles, and although I’m not a wolf, I move closer to sit next to Otto and hold his other hand.

I know there’s going to be a lot of shit we’ll all have to deal with thanks to Fenris, but I can feel that it’s all going to work out in the end. I just have to master my powers, and then I’ll be able to avoid anything like this ever happening again.

There is no other way.

Chapter Forty-Six

Suren

Mercifully, things seem to have gone back to normal around Rogue Hollow. After a handful of devastating funerals, word is spreading like wildfire about what happened to Fenris and his pack, but Quinn is safe, Otto and Parker are safe, and Javonte has made a full recovery. Ledger's still a dick, but I'm getting used to it, and he's at least being a little softer on occasion. Well... as soft as a bloodthirsty vampire/goblin hybrid can be, anyway. My only gripe is that somehow I'm still losing weight despite eating at the mess hall five or six times a day. The temp magic is really starting to kill me, which makes Magic Control ten times harder than it needs to be. How am I supposed to control magic that basically comes out of a pill?

Groaning at Quinn, I snap another one open in my pocket and exhale hard as the dust seeps into my fingertips and makes me feel alive. The only thing better in this realm is a vampire's venom, and I swear I'm still riding that high from this morning as I focus on the candle in front of me and coax the flame to grow.

As a general rule, I don't like fire anymore. I can't look at the shimmering, flickering flames without thinking about the inferno from Magic Discovery. It makes me twitchy and scared, but more than that... it makes some dark little part of me come alive. That wildfire was power in liquid heat. Capable of destroying everything if it got out of hand. If we'd have been outside like this at the time instead of in the catacombs, it might've — and what would that have looked like? Scarred buildings, wasted trees, the screams of everyone caught in its path. For what does wildfire have to fear, anyway? Nothing. Beautiful and cruel, wildfire takes and shapes and changes people. It commands respect, terror. It —

“Suren, enough,” Quinn hisses quickly. “Chill, girl.”

I blink rapidly, coaxing the SUV-sized fire back down to the single lick of flame atop the candle. “I did that on purpose,” I lie. “See? All under control.”

She eyes me like she's not convinced, which only makes me laugh. At this point, I shouldn't be surprised that she knows me better than I know myself.

Maybe I got a little carried away. But it felt good, right. Like taking back control of something I'm scared of. If I'd have been able to call up something massive the day Quinn was taken, maybe I wouldn't have been left behind. I could've helped. I could've made sure that no one ever hurt her.

"Try again," Professor Beckett says. "That was good, but this time, try to stick to something a little more realistic. Spread it out to a bonfire."

That's boring, the little demon in me croons. *Go bigger. Show them what you can do.*

Pinching my tongue between my teeth, I pray the temp magic holds out long enough to do what I want. I don't even know how the thought occurs to me, but it's right there at the forefront of my mind like it's been there all along, just waiting for a chance to come out. Will there ever be a better time than now, when things are so volatile around here?

Gently, I coax that tiny, insignificant little flame to grow again despite what she said. I don't want a bonfire. I want a dragon, one that could engulf this whole school if I wanted it to. One that will protect me and the people I care about. A dragon that could bury anyone who tries to hurt me.

It grows and spreads fiery wings, still meek at first until it's large enough to ignite nearby trees. Urging it higher, my dragon expands farther until the size of it dwarfs the very sun. The sight of it sparks laughter and power inside me. I'm that tiny, insignificant candle flame, blown out by the slightest puff of air. But this, the dragon above us causing people to scream and scamper... that's inside me, too. I don't know how I know it, but I do. This isn't the temporary magic. It's fucking *mine*.

Laughter punches through me as the heat coming off my dragon burns my skin. My classmates are running scared, and even Beckett is shielding her eyes from the brightness of it as she tries to put it out, but this is *mine*. This dragon answers only to me, to the one who created it from years upon years of trauma. The scared little girl craving love and attention isn't here right now. She's towering above us all, raining hell down on all the people who laughed at her, mocked her.

And then I see Quinn. Her eyes are rolling in her head mid-vision, and that's the only thing in the world that could convince me to let go of the power I just found after months of believing it doesn't exist.

The dragon vanishes.

"Quinn!" I yell, rushing over to her as Beckett does damage control in the trees. "Quinn, are you okay?"

Groggy and disoriented, she flinches back from me for a second. “Yeah,” she grumbles, rubbing her temples as she takes another step back. “I saw you covered in blood... but it wasn’t yours.”

“Maybe we’re bringing back the Álfablót?” I joke nervously. “Could be the animal I sacrifice for that.”

“No. It was someone’s blood. I don’t know who else was there, but you weren’t alone. Suren, I don’t know what kind of warning this is, but I felt scared.”

“Of me?” All the excitement I’d just felt, all that elation vanishes. “I’m sure it’s metaphorical or something.”

She seems to realize she was stepping away and moves back in. “No. No, of course not. It was probably the situation.” She lowers her voice to a whisper. “Sur, how’d you do that dragon? I think that was more than the capsule.”

Now I’m hesitant to admit it, but I nod anyway. “It was, I think. It felt like me. I think maybe I’ve been doing magic for a while and just haven’t realized it.”

Quinn’s eyes widen as she pulls me in for a hug. “I knew it! It feels insane, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah. A little. We should go, though. Beckett looks mad.”

“Shit, she does.” Quinn takes my arm and tugs me away with a nervous wave, and although I know our professor isn’t going to let this go, she lets us leave for now. As usual, Otto is waiting for Quinn and she jumps into his arms excitedly. “Baby, you should have seen Suren’s power. She made a fucking dragon with fire.”

He smiles halfheartedly at me and offers congratulations. I know he’s still upset about Vineet and probably won’t be himself for a while, but it almost seems deeper than that. Like he could use a dragon or two of his own. “I saw it. Badass.”

“We’ve got some time before Intro to Mythics. Why don’t you and Otto go do some more prep for his hearing?” I ask. “The Elders are coming soon, right?”

“They won’t come until after Yule, so I have a few weeks. But I should check in with Parker, anyway. Coming, baby?”

Quinn looks at me like she doesn’t want to leave me yet. “You want to come? Parker will be stoked about the dragon.”

“No, I’m hungry and I think I should talk to Yelena just to make sure I’m not overreacting. I’ll catch up with you guys soon, okay?”

“Okay. I’ll come by the Lair later to check in. Let Ledger know. He’s a grump, but he’ll still be happy for you.” She gives me a quick hug and jumps onto Otto’s back, waving as he carries her away.

But I have no intentions of finding Ledger right now. As I walk back toward town alone, the knowledge that I really do have magic in my system, way more than a drop, angers me as much as it makes me happy. Did Ledger know that? Is that why Caius and Vinter let me carry on so long in Magic Discovery instead of passing me on to be gift-wrapped?

How many of them knew and lied to me about it... and why?

Granted, I’m not sure how many other students could make a magical flying fire dragon the first time they legitimately tap into their powers, but that can’t be the whole reason. There’s something going on I’m not privy to, and I’m just not ready to argue with Ledger *again* about something like this. There have been so many lies, misdirections and bullshit arguments that I’m mentally exhausted by all of it. And what will happen now? Will they buy the fact that I suddenly went from shitty parlor tricks to a full-blown magical spectacle? Or will they make me admit that I’ve been cheating?

I’m not sure it matters since one way or the other, I’ve manifested. They can’t send me back home, and I’d like to see a werewolf use me for knotting practice now. I’d singe the hair right off their bodies.

Grinning to myself, I barely register the pained, desperate look on Greylin’s face as he approaches me. “Move your hair,” he growls.

“What?”

“I said move your fucking hair.”

Taking a step back, I do no such thing, but he whips toward me with blinding speed and pins me against the bars of the wrought-iron gates.

“You’re mine now, Suren. Don’t fight this.”

I don’t have time to process what he’s saying before his fangs are sinking into my neck and sending a blinding pain through my system. It’s twice as painful as the worst of Ledger’s bites, and the sensation of him sucking my blood makes me nauseous. “What the fuck!” I yell, shoving him off me and clamping a hand over the bleeding wound. “What are you doing?”

“It wasn’t worth it before,” he rushes out, eyes black as night and fangs dripping with my blood. “But he killed more wolves, didn’t you hear? He has

to be stopped. Someone has to stop him. And if I can take you in exchange —”

“He did it to save Quinn!” I shriek. “You fucking idiot, where’d you get your information from! Otto went to him for help and they killed Fenris to save Quinn, not out of revenge!”

Horror seeps into his too-perfect features as he registers what that means. “So I — so it — it’s for nothing? It’s all for nothing?”

A sickening crack makes me jerk violently. Blood sprays all over me, coating my face, my hair, my shirt. It drips down before I can even figure out where it’s coming from, but then I hit a spell of *déjà vu*. A headless body hits the ground in front of me, and behind him, all I can see is Ledger Huxley’s twisted, deadly smirk.

“Run.”

To be continued...

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