

HAZEL MACK



WALTZING WITH
WITCHES

HAVEN EVER AFTER - BOOK FOUR

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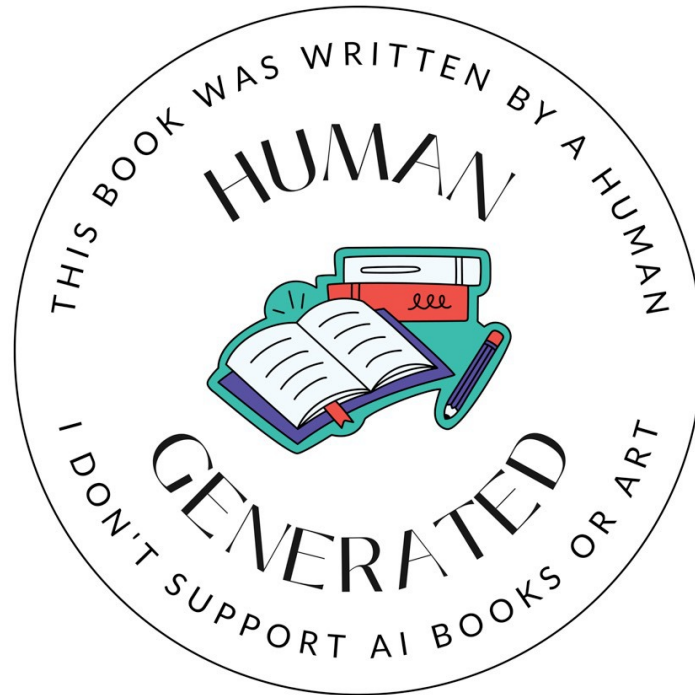
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AUTHORS ARE NOW FACING AN UNPRECEDENTED CHALLENGE - ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI).

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There’s a very real chance human authors will be forced out of the market as AI-written works take over. Yet your favorite authors bring magical worlds, experiences and emotions to life in a way that a computer can’t. If you want to save that, then we need your help.

LEARN MORE ABOUT THE HARMFUL EFFECTS OF AI-WRITTEN BOOKS AND AI-GENERATED ART ON MY WEBSITE AT WWW.ANNAFURY.COM/AI

SYNOPSIS

THE KEEPER

Morgan Hector is mine, but for her own safety, I can never claim the pretty witch. I can never sate myself on her blood or bring her to bliss with my teeth. We'll never be anything more than friends.

But when I discover she's homeless and living in my office, I do what I shouldn't—I bring her home. Being in close proximity with the mate I hold at arm's length is the most devastating torture. She's smart and kind with the mouth of a sailor. Plus she smells good enough to eat, and I'd give my right fang to devour her.

The longer we spend under the same roof, the more my control begins to fray. But the secrets I harbor protect innocent lives—including Morgan's. No matter how much I long for her, I can't give into temptation.

Just when I think I've wrestled back my desire, a dangerous warlock makes his final play against me. When Morgan ends up in his crosshairs, I have impossible decisions to make. In a war between duty and love, can I make the choice that's right for her? Or will I doom us both to loss in the name of protecting Ever?

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CONTENT NOTICE

While this book is very sweet and lighthearted, there are a couple heavy themes to mention. In particular, there's reference to recent parental death by accident and terminal illness.

If you have any particular questions, feel free to reach out to me at author@annafury.com!

To every reader who ever wrote me a DM or message about how fucked up the Keeper was. You're right. He's a damn mess. But this is the book where you find out why. I'm going to take you on a rollercoaster ride—fair warning—but the HEA is worth it. I promise.

Happily EVER after has never been this sweet...



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THE KEEPING COMMANDMENTS

RULE #1: Serve only the greater good

**RULE #2: Make decisions with others' best interests at
heart**

RULE #3: Cast useless thoughts from your mind

RULE #4: Do no harm

***as officially approved by Hearth HQ through the Cerinvalla
Act***

CHAPTER ONE

MORGAN

I drag a fry absentmindedly through my ketchup, the red substance smearing across the plate. The splash of crimson gives me pause. Shit, *everything* red gives me pause.

I blame him for that.

Something pulls my gaze out of the Galloping Green Bean's front window. As if I conjured him up by thought alone, a shadowy figure stalks past the diner's front door, nodding curtly at a group of gathered centaurs waiting for a table. The figure halts and turns to face me, slipping both hands into the pockets of tight black slacks.

His physique is tall yet muscular, his shoulders broad and thick with slabs of muscle. Eyes the color of rubies glitter in the fading evening light. The way he silently stares at me through the window is undeniably predatory. He's so still, *too* still—a starkly beautiful statue in a way a human never could be.

Probably because he's *not* human.

My nipples harden, pressing painfully against the fabric of my tee. Heat curls deep and insidiously between my thighs. I don't want to be this attracted to him, but it's impossible not to be. I blame it on his position. He reminds me of my male doctor counterparts back home—powerful assholes—and, damn my vagina, but she finds that really hot.

A shout drifts from up Sycamore Street. The male turns to look, giving me a perfect view of a long, aquiline nose and gelled-back blond hair. I know he won't turn to me now that

he's focused elsewhere. I won't get another look at the dark brows framing those shocking eyes, or the scar that slashes down the left side of his face, tugging one side of his mouth up into a permanent sneer.

A sneer he's directed at me plenty of times.

Dickhead.

He yanks his hands out of his pockets and heads toward the noise. Big, powerful strides eat up the distance between him and whatever he's looking at. I resist the urge to press my face to the glass and watch him go.

I've watched him go every day since I arrived in the tiny New England town of Ever with my sisters. Bitterness sours my gut, anger and irritation twin flames that burn bright in the furthest corners of my heart.

"Mor, honey, are you okay?" a sugar-sweet but concerned-sounding voice breaks through my fog.

I blink several times and return my gaze to the table. My aunt Lou—my mother's youngest sister, who's closer in age to me than my mother—stares at me with a worried expression. Warm chocolate eyes are wide, her dark blonde brows pressed together in apparent concern.

Next to her sits my sister Wren, happily munching on her fries. My other triplet Thea reaches under the table and squeezes my knee.

It's like I'm the kid who fell and scraped something, and my family has all gathered around to coddle me and set me back on my feet. I guess that's not too far from the truth.

Something hits the back of my head with a thunk, forcing me forward until my face nearly hits my plate. I whirl to my left on the red-and-turquoise bench seat, looking around my snickering triplet.

"Ouch!" I hiss. "What was that for?"

Thea's mate, Shepherd, smirks as he pops a handful of fries in his mouth. He chews slowly, withdrawing the spade-shaped tail he just slapped me with.

Fucking gargoyles. Way more appendages than anyone could possibly need. And I've heard way too much about what he can do in the bedroom with the wings, tail, claws, etc.

I pick up my fork and brandish it at him. "Watch it, sir, or I'm gonna put a hole in those pretty wings."

"Aww," Thea says in a soothing tone. "Don't hurt my man. He's far too beautiful to be on the receiving end of violence. Look at this jawline. Look at those gorgeous black locks! And don't forget all the snacks he brings us!"

I roll my eyes. "Being on the receiving end of violence is literally his job, what with him basically being a cop and all."

Thea snorts and reaches over to stroke her way down Shepherd's purpley-gray jaw. "Yeah, but don't damage this face. I mean, look at it!"

Wren and Lou groan simultaneously. Wren is also newly mated—to a troll—but, unlike Thea, she doesn't seem to need to remind me every two seconds.

Shepherd clears his throat and gives me a pointed look. "Don't act like you don't know why we're here." He points at Lou with the tip of his tail. "You too! You owe us details, missy." He looks over at me. "And we obviously need the tea on your breakfast with the Keeper. You haven't said a word, and I need to know, damnit! I've been exceedingly patient." He grabs another handful of fries and shoves them in his mouth.

I give him an unimpressed look. I'd like to get the attention off me and the somewhat disastrous breakfast he's referencing, so I gesture at Lou and clear my throat. "Shep's right about one thing. We need the details, Lou. You ready to share?"

Aunt Lou arrived in Ever in dramatic fashion, chased by a pack of soul-sucking evil thralls. She was bitten and scratched in the process, but somehow she's made a miraculous recovery, and *nobody* makes a miraculous recovery from a thrall bite. According to Doc Slade, anyhow.

I'm so relieved she's alright. I can't lose anybody else, or what remains of my sanity will be fully ripped to pieces.

Lou lets out a beleaguered sigh and pushes her half-eaten cheeseburger away. Normally she's jovial, fun-loving, and—dare I say—mischievous, but she doesn't look it now. In fact, I haven't seen her look this serious since our parents' funeral seven months ago.

Shepherd tosses a fry across the table. It hits Lou square in the forehead and slips down her nose onto her plate.

“Cheer up, buttercup,” he says with a smirk. He's taken to making up all sorts of humanish sayings.

Thea chuckles. Wren holds back a grin. Lou sputters but grabs a handful of fries and throws them back at him.

With practiced precision, he jerks around with his mouth open, catching most of them like a dog and beaming at her. His tail is going to start wagging in a sec, I just know it.

“Nothing to say, really,” she begins. “If I don't seem surprised by this place being a hidden monster town, it's because I've been to a haven before.”

We've guessed as much in the week since Lou arrived. The way she was unafraid of Shepherd and others. The way she says “godsdamn” with the extra ‘s’ like the monsters do.

Wren reaches up and yanks on Lou's golden-red braid. “Fess up, bitch! You're being obtuse as hell, and we need deets. Specifically—what haven have you been to and why? How'd you find out it existed? And did you always know we were witches? Are you a witch? Was our mom a witch?”

We all pause as Wren's string of questions sinks in. Even Shepherd seems to be holding his breath as Lou considers her response.

She nips at her pink lower lip, but as she opens her mouth to speak, a figure slinks up the aisle to the table. He grabs a chair and flops down into it, folding pale blue arms over the back as he leans in conspiratorially. Bright blue eyes flash, his hair waving above his head like a wreath of blue flame.

He grabs a fry off Wren's plate and shoves it in his mouth. "Are we about to hear the wild and wonderful tale of Louanna and how she came to know about the haven system?"

Lou rolls her eyes, but pink dusts her cheeks. "Hello, Dirk, and yes. I was about to share the story with my *family*." She gestures at us as if he's not part of that group, and not welcome, but he simply grabs another fry off Wren's plate and tosses it in his mouth with a wink.

"Ferget I'm even here, my beauty," he chirps. "Consider me a fly on the wall, if yeh will." He glances over at me. "That's a human saying, is it not? Later, one of yeh can explain to me why yeh've got flies on yer walls."

Lou purses her lips and narrows her eyes at the big sylph, hesitating for a moment. Silence stretches long, but when it's clear Dirk has no plans to leave, she peers around the table, tucking her sweater around her torso.

"The girls will tell you I was always witchy, even when we were kids. I was always interested in the supernatural. I always believed there was more to the world than what we could see. I consider myself a witch, although not in the way of actual witches in havens."

When the table remains silent, Lou continues, "Two human world years ago, I was driving home from work, and I hit something with my car. I assumed it was a dog or cat, but when I got out, it was a person. He was a gnome."

"And yeh didn't kill him?" Dirk's voice is soft, almost careful, his ice-chip eyes focused with hard intensity on Lou.

She shakes her head. "I wasn't going very fast. I think it's more like he ran into me. He was running from something else. There were noises that night, like wolves."

"Thralls," Shepherd snarls. "You're lucky you weren't hurt, Lou."

She nods slowly, gnawing again at her lip. "Anyways, I leaped out of the car and scooped him up—at first I thought he was a child. It was dark, and he was small, but I wasn't terribly far from a hospital. By the time I got there, he came to

and explained what he was and how he was trying to get home to a hidden world called a haven. He begged me to take him there instead of the hospital.”

I’m fucking gobsmacked. “How come you never told us any of this, Lou?”

Betrayal sinks in good and hard. Of the three of us triplets, I’m the closest to Lou. I think she saw how Wren was closest to our mother, and Thea became a detective and worked with our father, following in his footsteps. I was always the odd triplet out, except for with Lou.

She must see the hurt in my eyes, because her gaze softens. “I couldn’t tell you, honey. Gerald asked me not to tell anyone in order to protect the haven’s safety. It’s in the middle of the city. I couldn’t betray his trust.”

My mouth falls open. “There’s a fucking haven in the middle of New York City, and you didn’t tell us?” I look around Thea to Shepherd, who’s slowly nodding. “Dude,” I bark. “You know we’re from the city. You never thought to mention this?”

He shrugs. “To be honest, it didn’t occur to me. Rainbow’s gorgeous but it’s wildly different from Ever.” He grins. “Plus, I was very consumed with courting Thea. I spent days with my nose in recipe books. Days, I tell ya!”

I snort and look back at Lou in disbelief. “Let me get really clear. There’s a hidden monster town called Rainbow, and it’s in the city where we’re from, and you never mentioned it because the gnome who you hit with your car told you not to? Do I have that right?”

Lou’s voice is sorrowful. “Don’t be mad, Mor. Please?”

Dirk speaks up before I get a chance to answer, “Good on yeh, keeping their secret. Most wouldn’t have.”

Lou cuts him a curious look. “I’ve always had an affinity for protecting things; it seems hardwired into me. It’s why I’m so protective with the girls. But I’ve spent haven years in Rainbow, getting to know the monsters there and learning how havens work.”

Years. She's spent fucking years in havens and never told us.

I cross my arms. "Are you a witch? Was Mom?"

Lou mirrors my move but props her elbows on the tabletop. "I never spoke with your mom, or anyone, about Rainbow. I don't know if she was a witch, but I'm not. I got tested plenty while I was there. Gerald, the gnome I hit, was certain I must be, but I'm not. I'm just a human."

"Don't be like that, Louanna," Dirk croons. "There's nothing 'just' about yeh, about any of yeh. All are welcome here, human and monster alike."

She gives him a soft smile. I'm surprised she hasn't corrected him for using her full first name. Then again, Dirk seems to get away with about ten times as much bullshit as anyone else in town.

A snort from Shepherd breaks the silence. "What are you, Dirk, the new Ever welcome committee?"

Dirk grins, revealing two rows of pearly white teeth. "Jest being friendly, Protector."

"I need a minute to process this," Wren deadpans, green eyes flicking to mine. "Your turn to talk, sis."

I inwardly groan as I slump into my chair, picking back up with the ketchup art.

After a long, awkward silence, Lou reaches across the table and pats the back of my hand. "You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to, Mor."

I look up and around the table at the well-intentioned but curious looks from my sisters and Shepherd and even Dirk, whose typical self-satisfied smirk has disappeared.

"Breakfast was a bust," I admit. "We sat down, and the castle called him due to a ward alarm. He left right after we got to the table."

Wren sighs. Lou purses her lips together.

Thea's grip on my thigh tightens. She looks up at me with sorrowful blue eyes. "So he never came back or anything?"

"That's a Keeper for yeh, to be honest," Dirk breaks in. "The training does zap 'em of some empathy and emotion. It's unfortunate."

"So everyone has said," I repeat for the millionth time. I'm sick to death of everyone making an excuse for why Ever's de facto mayor has been so cold to me since I arrived in town. Especially considering he fucking called us here in the first place!

When I say nothing else, my companions move on to a different topic. But I'm lost in thought, staring out the window and wondering if he'll walk past again.

He doesn't, though.

A torturous half hour later, we've paid for dinner and Lou and I are walking up Sycamore Street toward the Annabelle Inn, our current home. Birds sing softly in the trees above us, the sky a myriad of swirling blues. Like always, the temperature is perfectly balmy. It's like this year-round in Ever due to magical wards that protect it from the outside human world.

Lou says nothing as we walk, her long sweater pulled tight around her small frame. I'm a full head taller than her, but somehow she's always been a big presence to me—my slightly older, much cooler aunt.

When we cross over Main Street, she slips her arm around my waist and pulls me close. It's such a motherly move, even though she's only a few years older than me. A hard lump appears in my throat. I struggle to swallow around it, tears pricking my eyes.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you about Gerald or Rainbow," Lou says softly. "I thought I was doing the right thing by keeping them a secret. You three were so busy and doing so great in your lives, I couldn't see a reason to upset the apple cart. Not with everything else going on."

Somehow I know her excuse is logical, but it still stings.

“I still would have thought you’d tell *me*,” I admit, crossing my arms. “You’re my best friend, Lou.”

Lou sighs. “I probably should have. I never could have foreseen you’d end up in a haven surrounded by magic anyhow. Or that you’d be a witch, all three of you. And I wish so much that Caroline was here so I could pepper her with questions.”

Hearing my mother’s name sends me headlong into a spiral of emotions. I miss her so much. A tear slips down my cheek. Lou senses it, even though I don’t notice her look up.

“Mor, how are you, honey? You seem...well, you seem pretty fucked-up, if I’m being honest.”

How am I? It’s a complicated question these days.

“I’m shitty,” I say when I find my voice. “The Keeper called us here, Lou. Thea and Wren are happy. They’re mated, and they’re never leaving. I don’t even want them to. But how am I supposed to deal with the fact that the Keeper announced to the whole fucking town that I was his mate, like, on day one, and he’s barely said two words to me since?”

She remains silent, and I glance down, nudging her with my elbow. “You’ve been to Rainbow, I guess. Was there a Keeper there? Is it true they’re all kind of emotionless and shitty?”

She cocks her head from side to side as if considering her answer. After a moment, she sucks at her teeth, then looks up at me, whiskey-brown eyes soft. “Rainbow has a very wild and adventurous Keeper. He’s an odd figure for sure, but yeah. He has a habit of saying whatever the hells he wants regardless of emotional impact. I’ve never met any other Keepers, but I’m told that’s pretty standard.”

It should make me feel better to hear that. Everything my new brothers-in-law have told me is backed up by what Lou’s saying. But still. It’s not like I can ever date here in Ever. Not a single monster around would ask me out knowing Ever’s Keeper is my mate.

Well, he thinks he is anyhow. But I'm smart and strong and confident, and I abso-fucking-lutely refuse to date an asshole.

Not that he's even asked me.

And I'm definitely not bitter about that.

We pass Ever's community garden, and it occurs to me to stop in and visit our friend Miriam in her gourd. But she worked a shift in the pixie dust factory today, so she's probably sleeping.

Shrugging off the need to connect with someone, anyone, I bundle loneliness around my mind like an uncomfortably thin blanket and guide Lou up the sidewalk toward the Annabelle Inn.

The Inn waggles her pink front shutters in welcome. She looks so cheerful with the pink siding and shutters and white gingerbread trim. All the lights are on inside. Catherine, the Inn's owner, passes by one of the windows with an open book in her hand.

"Catherine is so fucking cool," Lou breathes. "I've never stayed at a BnB where there weren't any other guests. It's like we have the whole place to ourselves!"

That part, at least, is true. Once Thea met Shepherd and Wren met Ohken, they moved out of the Inn. We were ostensibly here for a girls' weekend, but two convincingly hot monster males later and our girls' weekend has turned into a long-ass month.

Of course, it doesn't hurt that time passes more slowly here inside Ever's protective wards. We've been here for a month, but it's only been a day and a half in the human world. I could still go back to my old life if I wanted to.

Lou reaches over to scratch at her arm.

As a doctor, my senses ping. She's been scratching at that arm a lot, which isn't unusual for a healing wound. Except when the thralls attacked her, she healed in a week despite needing multiple layers of stitches.

"How's the arm?"

She looks up at me and shrugs, dropping her hand to her side. “Itches like a bitch, but Doc Slade says there’s nothing to worry about.”

“Lou,” I say in my most motherly tone.

She throws both palms up, her eyes wide. “I swear! I visited him this morning, but I seem to have healed. He can’t explain it, although this morning he said he wondered if I might have some of the magic blood you and the girls do which allows me to heal so fast.” She drops her arms. “I’m an enigma, according to him.” She grins. “Dirk’s taken to calling me zombie girl.”

I purse my lips in thought, but decide to keep an eye on Lou. I’m a physician, and even though most of my patients in the city were little kids, I’ll still know if something’s wrong with her. And so far, Lou seems totally herself.

We walk up the Inn’s pink-painted front steps—Catherine gave them a fresh coat this week—and the Inn swings her glass double doors wide for us.

Lou sails gracefully through, waving as Catherine comes around the corner, closing her book and pulling it to her chest. They exchange pleasantries, but I’m tired and need a few minutes alone to pick through an increasingly overwhelming mountain of emotions.

I smile at Catherine as I tap Lou on the shoulder. “I’m tired, Lou. I’m gonna head to bed. But find me in the morning for breakfast? We can go down to Bad Axe for burritos.”

Lou’s chocolate eyes flash with excitement. “Perf, Morgan! Love you, girlie!” She jumps up and wraps both arms around my neck, dragging me into a hunched position. Her enthusiasm is so palpable. Over her shoulder, Catherine smiles as she watches us, pink lips curled into a smile.

Stray hairs from Lou’s braid poke me in the face, but I don’t even care. It feels so damn good to hug someone, and Lou’s always been so free with her affection. I close my eyes and breathe her in, but scrunch my nose. Something’s different. Lou has always smelled like the same fancy French

perfume Wren loves. They discovered it on a trip when we were teenagers, and she's always worn it. But that's overwhelmed now.

As I walk away, I realize what it is she smells like.

Burnt marshmallows.

CHAPTER TWO

MORGAN

Ruby-red eyes peer at me from the darkness as a faint light flickers, a cigarette flaring to life in the black void. A tall, muscular figure lifts the cigarette, illuminating elegant features and twin white fangs poking down over pale pink lips. A scar bisects his left eyebrow and travels down his cheek to his mouth, his lip puckered slightly upward.

He pulls the cigarette to his lips, hollowing his cheeks around the tip.

Fuck my life. Why are bad boys so goddamn hot?

As the male takes a deep drag, glittering red eyes move to mine and narrow. Flicking the cigarette away, he purses his lips to let out a perfectly round ring of smoke. It curls and dissipates into the blackness surrounding him.

Heat pools between my thighs, my panties growing wet as my clit throbs. I lick my lips, desperate to ease that ache. Pressure builds in my core when his gaze travels a slow path down my body. Pale lips curl into a satisfied-looking smile as he drags his focus back up.

The pressure builds and builds, my cheeks flaming. Am I even breathing? Can he hear the furious pound of my heart?

An iron fist grips my throat, forcing the air from my lungs.

Crimson eyes narrow. How the hell did he cross the distance between us so damn fast? I didn't even see him *move*.

I can't fucking breathe.

I jerk awake with a scream, throwing my hand to my chest. My heart pounds furiously against my ribcage, so hard it feels like it'll burst out like a damn alien.

My mermaid-themed room at the Annabelle is dark, the faintest hint of light coming in from the stars outside.

A sudden creak has me tensing. I look up. My room's ceiling shimmers and shakes, the painted wooden slats almost seeming to ripple like waves. I scrunch my brows together and hop out of bed, tripping over a bag on the floor.

I look down in confusion. What's a bag doing beside my bed?

Wait.

Not just any bag.

My luggage. The luggage I brought to Ever a month ago. The bag is full to the brim and zipped up with the handles neatly folded against the faded floral fabric.

I look around, my thoughts spinning as my brain attempts to catch up to whatever's happening. Something's not adding up. How did this get here? The Annabelle has her tricks, and she's been weird with me lately, but...she couldn't have done this.

Could she?

Almost as if my thought spurred her into motion, the ceiling lets out another ominous groan. The sound of wood splintering follows it, with cracks appearing along the line where the ceiling meets the walls. Horror lifts the hair on my forearms as the ceiling splits entirely from the walls.

When it begins to descend, inch by inch, I leap into action.

"Annabelle?" I cross my arms and stare up. "What is this?"

She doesn't answer, of course, but a horrible shrieking sound has me slapping my hands over my ears.

"Annabelle, stop!" I shout. When the ceiling continues to descend, I debate running for the door to get Catherine to

come put a stop to whatever this behavior is. But it's the middle of the damn night; it's still pitch-black outside.

I slap my hands to my hips and glare up at the ceiling. "Stop it this instant! It's late, and I'm tired. Annabelle!"

If the house hears me, she gives no indication. The ceiling's low enough now that it hits the tips of the bedposts. They crack and give under the weight, splintering into jagged shards. Still the ceiling descends with slow, measured movements.

"I don't understand," I softly press. "What's wrong? Why are you so upset with me lately? You tripped me yesterday; you snapped the wallpaper at my eyeball, and now this thing with the ceiling? Please, Annabelle." I keep my tone even, despite the ceiling's continued downward trajectory.

Creak. Crack. The ceiling descends another six inches.

I turn and reach for the door, shouting for Catherine. When I grip the handle and yank, the knob doesn't turn. Apprehension spears through me as the ceiling crushes the bedposts to splinters. The fucking ceiling is still coming down.

"Stop!" I shout. "Catherine!" I try banging on the walls, but when the ceiling touches my head, I lose it, yanking and scratching on the doorknob. It's locked, and I'm trapped. Oh fuckety fuck fuck!

I sprint across the room toward the windows, but they don't move either when I try to open them. Heat flushes my cheeks as I whirl in place, looking for something to break the window with. How does nobody hear this going on?

Suddenly, the floor shifts under my feet, rippling. The planks roll like waves and knock me on my ass, carrying me toward the door. The section of floor under my bag snaps up, tossing the bag at me. I catch it as the door swings open. The rippling floor carries me out into the hall and left toward the stairs as I claw at the walls and gasp for breath. The staircase rises up to form a slide, which Annabelle deposits me right onto.

I clutch at my bag as I fly down the slippery tube toward the lobby. The moment I hit the carpeted lobby floor, it rips up, staples flying everywhere. The carpet wraps me and my bag into a heavy, dusty tube and moves.

“Annabelle! Catherine!” I shout as I pound against the interior of the carpet, choking against the who-knows-how-old brocade carpet. It gives a huge heave and tumbles me head over heels. When I finally slide to a halt, I’m on my back in the front yard, staring up at the same peaceful stars I gaze at every night. Brisk air wafts over my flushed face as my chest heaves in shock.

I dropped my luggage somewhere in the melee. With a thump, it flies through the air and lands next to me, the zipper flying open to reveal my clothes.

Anger rushes through me, my fists balling. I roll onto my belly and spring upright, raising a finger at the Inn. “What the ever-loving fuck, Annabelle?! You could have killed me!”

The Inn doesn’t respond, but the lobby carpet rolls back up the steps like a tongue. Her front doors slam shut, and the house goes dark and still.

I stand in disbelief, my heart pounding as I stare at the front steps and the dark windows. Eventually, soft sounds break through my stupor. An owl hoots somewhere. Crickets chirp. A soft breeze rustles my chin-length bangs, brushing them into my face. I swipe them behind an ear and glance around.

Ever suddenly feels so ominous in the middle of the night. Everything’s dark, not a single light glowing from Main Street a block away.

I don’t know what to do. I’m the decisive triplet. I’m always ready for anything. I’m the oldest by seventeen minutes, and I’m in charge, damnit. But as I stare into the darkness, I don’t feel that way.

This might be the lowest I’ve felt since we came to Ever. I glance down at my bag as I lift my watch to comm my sisters. Something gives me pause, though. It’s three a.m., and they’re

probably asleep with their mates. I don't want to call them with some stupid issue.

Gritting my teeth, I round the Inn and grab a small pebble from the garden. I'll throw it at Lou's window and get her to get Catherine and fix this shit.

Seriously. What the everloving fuck?

But when I aim and throw, a plank of siding rips away and bats it like a goddamn baseball, sending the pebble over my head.

"What's this about, huh?" I question, lifting both hands. I'd start shouting for Lou but somehow, I suspect she won't hear me. So I stomp back around front, jogging up the steps. When I grip the double door handles, a lock snicks loudly into place.

Oh. My. God.

I step back, hurt consuming me. Annabelle's interior is dark and silent. Her meaning is obvious—get out.

A part of me wonders if the entire town itself is simply trying to tell me I don't belong here. The Keeper doesn't want me, and now the Annabelle doesn't want me either. Is that what's going on?

I mull that over before deciding I'll head up Main to Town Hall. Nobody uses the beautiful brick building, and nobody locks their doors here either. I can crash in one of the empty rooms and regroup with Thea and Wren in the morning.

I glare at the Annabelle's front door. "This little standoff ain't over, Annabelle," I snap. "I'm telling Catherine!"

God, that sounded childish. Annabelle doesn't bother to respond.

I stand there for another minute, still disbelieving that the fucking house kicked me out. Eventually, I realize she's done with me, so I grab my bag and hike it over my shoulder. It's fucking heavy, but I turn and trudge up Sycamore toward Main Street. When I get there, I pause on the corner and look around.

Not a soul is out this time of night. Maybe there would be in Shifter Hollow, since they have a bar, but that's a long walk. And somehow I don't want to see any of the shifters or centaurs and have to explain why I'm walking around with my luggage in the middle of the damn night.

Cursing Annabelle under my breath, I hook a right and walk quietly up Main Street past Herschel's Fine Dining, Fleur, and the movie theater. My bag's strap digs into my shoulder, piling onto my poor mood until I'm so angry, I could scream. I want to stand in the middle of the street and shout at this town that's so magical for everybody but me.

Instead, I grit my teeth through the pressure on my shoulder and cross Main Street, skirting the white wood gazebo toward Town Hall. The stately two-story brick building is pitch-black, not a single light on inside. It's always been the saddest building in town to me. The Keeper and the rest of Ever's leadership all have offices here, but they never come here. In fact, every time the Keeper calls a town meeting, we meet in the gazebo. I've never even been inside Town Hall.

That fills me with a deep and inexplicable sadness.

My bag starts to slip off my shoulder, yanking my arm down with its weight. I grunt and haul it upright, staring at the quiet building. God, is she asleep too?

I clear my throat. I suppose I should be polite. "Erm, good evening. Well, good morning. I'm in a bit of a pickle and need a place to stay. Would you be—"

Town Hall cuts me off, the front doors swinging silently open. Lights cut on all the way down the main hallway. Relief floods through me, harder and heavier than I expected. I didn't realize how worried I was that the building wouldn't let me in until it did.

"Thank you." I hurry up the steps and into the main hallway.

Beautiful burlled wood doors line both sides, all the way to open double doors at the far end. A singular light is on in that room, but it kinda looks like an auditorium from here.

I'm not even sure where to start, so I stand there for a moment looking at all the closed doors. When a door creaks open at the end of the hall and another light comes on, I take that as my cue.

"Thank you!" I chirp, reaching out to pat the painted cinder block walls. The inside of Town Hall reminds me of a high school, but maybe a posh fancy high school somewhere in Manhattan or the Upper East Side. As I stride down the hall toward the open door, paintings on the wall grab my attention. I don't recognize any of the monsters, but gold placards underneath list their names.

Ankylar Stonesmith.

Sky Kimora.

Brynn Venseter.

The paintings are stunning but covered in dust. I wipe a hand across one of them, brilliant colors showing through where I removed the thin film. Town Hall shudders, the walls trembling slightly.

Something pings deep in my chest, an insistent tug. I think the building liked that I wiped the dust off the painting. Dropping my bag, I pull my sweater over my head, grumbling when my long hair gets tangled around itself. Shifting onto my tiptoes, I wipe the painting's surface as far as I can reach. I'm not quite tall enough, but every swipe of my sweater brings the painting to life. It's stunning, depicting a handsome blue-skinned troll who reminds me, incredibly, of Wren's mate Ohken, but an older, even handsomer version. He's holding some sort of giant club with a pointy rock on the end.

He looks like a badass.

A really hot, come-to-daddy kind of badass. I'd tap that.

I jump and shove the sweater at the top of the painting, but I can't quite reach.

Suddenly, the tile I'm standing on shifts and moves, steps forming beneath my feet to push me upward. I jerk to regain my balance, planting both hands on the wall as my heartbeat soars.

The steps still, and Town Hall settles.

I clear my throat. “Err, thanks?”

The painting in front of me swings from side to side on the wall, and somehow, I know it’s a thank you. Smiling, I reach up and use my sweater to dust the rest of the painting, including the top and a brass-plated lamp that sheds faint light on the canvas.

When that’s done, I step down to the floor and gaze at the painting in awe. It’s so much more beautiful now than at first glance. Vivid blues and brilliant greens shine from the glossy surface. The handsome troll male in the painting grins as if he knows the world’s best-kept secret. I’d love to know his story.

I look up the hall at dozens of equally dusty portraits. I want to know *all* of their stories. Reaching out, I rub my fingers along the wall as I peer around me.

“How do you feel about cleaning up the rest of these paintings? Would you mind lifting me up? Unless you’re busy, of course,” I tack on at the end. I don’t have a great sense of Town Hall’s personality, but—

Every door along the hall opens and closes rapidly, a cacophony of sound echoing and bouncing off the walls around me.

That’s a yes. Somehow I know it. Grinning, I grab a couple tees out of my bag and throw them over my shoulder.

Time to dust.

CHAPTER THREE

MORGAN

The sound of a throat clearing wakes me from a deep sleep. I shoot straight up in the plush fireside armchair I dropped into last night, leaping to my feet. But when I glance around the Keeper's office—the only room I could even remotely find a comfortable-looking chair in—I don't see anyone.

Slowly, the office door swings open, and the Keeper steps in, both hands slung casually into the pockets of black jeans. Like always, he's wearing a black turtleneck as well, but the material is thin enough to reveal miles of taut muscle.

God, every time I see him, my throat dries up, and I have to force myself not to pant. But, simultaneously, I always want to bitch-slap him for being so fucking off-putting.

I can't read him today, though. His expression is completely neutral. He takes another step into the room, looking around until ruby-red eyes fall on his desk. Can he tell I sat there last night? I might have looked through the drawers too. They were all empty, though.

His colorless lips pull into a half smile, or maybe it's a sneer. Hard to tell with him. Dark eyes flick from the desk to me, and he removes his hands from his pockets, crossing his arms. Nerves prickle through me, and I fucking hate that. I'm a confident woman, but everything about him puts me on guard. I channel those nerves into anger. I'm allowed to be here.

“What are you doing here, Morgan?” He delivers the question softly, but an undercurrent of steel threads his tone.

“How’d you even know I *was* here?” I bark back. “It’s not off-limits, is it?” I bite the inside of my cheek as I deliver the snark. Town Hall probably isn’t off-limits, but I have to imagine his actual office is. Except he’s never here, so...

I’m overthinking this.

He lifts one elegant, black-nailed hand and gestures. “Town Hall called me a little while ago to let me know someone was here. I thought—” his voice trails off, eyes moving to the window before returning to me. He sighs. “I’m not sure who I thought would be *in my office*, but here we are.”

“Indeed,” I purr. I’ve had a long night, and I’m in a mood to argue.

For a long moment, he watches me, dark eyes narrowing as if he’s trying to decide what to do.

Eventually, his gaze falls to my duffel on the ground, and he cocks his head to the side. “Why are you here and not at the Annabelle?”

I hesitate to be vulnerable and share the truth, but as he watches me, something crumbles in my chest. It was a long and uncomfortable night sleeping in the chair, even though Town Hall kept a pleasant fire on for me after I dusted all the paintings.

“The Annabelle kicked me out,” I admit finally.

There’s an awkward pause before his perfectly manicured black brows curve up, two angry slashes that make him even more brutally handsome. He’s silent and still, then he moves so fast, I can barely follow him, stalking across the office toward me. He stops so close, I could reach out and touch him.

If I wanted to.

Which I don’t.

Well, I do. But I won’t. It’s a matter of principle.

“What do you mean?” His voice is pure steel, the Keeper in his element as Ever’s leader. When I say nothing, he takes a step closer, close enough that my boobs nearly touch his chest. I’ve never been this close to him, not in the entire month since we arrived. Not when he took me to breakfast. Not even when the castle called him away, and he acted like he was going to hug me but then rushed out of the Galloping Green Bean like his hair was on fire.

“Morgan,” he presses again. “Tell me what happened.”

When I look up, there’s a look of real concern on his face, and it breaks the last of my defenses.

I want to hate him for being such a cold-hearted bastard, but I can’t deny the effect he has on me. Not to mention the fact that he smells so fucking good. I’ve never been close enough to know if he wore cologne or not. And I don’t think it is. Just soap, and something else.

The story tumbles out of me in a rush of word vomit, and with every sentence, his expression falls into a scowl, and finally, a mask of barely withheld fury. My cheeks heat, warmth spreading down to my chest until I’m vibrating with tension.

“She’s been weird for a while,” I finish with a huff. “I guess she’s had enough of me.”

It stings to say that, but as I say it, I realize it feels true.

The Keeper’s fists are balled by his side, but when my eyes fall to them, he unfurls his fisted hands. He says nothing in response to my story, but bends down and grabs my bag, slinging it over his muscular shoulder. Narrowed eyes meet mine as he jerks his head toward the door. “Come with me.”

“Am I in trouble?” I blurt out. “Are you trying to kick me out of town?”

He cocks his head to the side, eyes wide in apparent disbelief. After a tense moment, he shakes his head. “I’m taking you home, Morgan.”

“I don’t think Annabelle will let me back in,” I huff, tapping my foot. What the hell am I gonna do if I can’t go to

the Annabelle? I guess I can go stay with Wren or Thea, but damn, that'll be awkward since they're both in relationships.

"I'll speak with Catherine about it," he says in a flat, cold tone.

"So," I draw out the O. "I can't go home. Unless you mean New York City?"

This is it. The moment he'll tell me he needs me gone from town for some reason he's never bothered to share. And I am going to engage in an epic throwdown if that happens, because I'm not leaving my sisters or Lou here. I can't protect them if I'm not here. And I haven't even begun to learn the first thing about harnessing my own black magic. Swear to God, if he—

"My home, Morgan," he says. "Let's go."

I sputter, blinking rapidly as I attempt to process what he said. "The castle? You're taking me there?"

"That's where I live." He purses his lips as if it should be obvious to me.

"I know you live there," I grumble.

"Great." He turns and heads for the door without another word.

And fuck me six ways from Sunday, because even though I hesitate for a long moment, I eventually follow.

CHAPTER FOUR

KEEPER

My mind picks through what Morgan shared as I head up the hall toward the building's exit. The Annabelle kicked her out? What she's talking about is a level of discord I've never seen in any of Ever's buildings. Some are more pleasant than others, but this is...new. This is out of character. I suppose it's possible that the Annabelle is somehow triggered by Morgan's black magic. Or perhaps her inability to access it.

I mull that over, holding my breath as she trails silently behind me. Despite not breathing in, I can sense the blood that courses rich through her veins, fast because she's ruffled. When I arrived at my office to find her asleep in my chair, her blood flowed slowly, peacefully through her body. She suffocated me with dark chocolate and whiskey-soaked cherries. I allowed myself a moment to drink it in, but the bloodlust rose so hard, I had to tamp it down fast. I'm never out of control—I can't afford to be—but I haven't drunk from another being in nearly a hundred years.

I want to. But I don't want to from just anyone.

Only her.

And the longer she's in Ever, the higher my bloodlust stokes.

I've been holding my breath for a solid ten minutes at this point.

As we exit into the hallway, movement out of the corner of my eye brings me to a halt. All the paintings on the wall have

begun swinging from side to side on their hooks.

I pause quickly, but as I do, Morgan runs smack into me, her lithe body pressing against my back. My shirt's fabric is thin enough for me to feel the softness of her breasts against my shoulder blades.

She lets out a displeased-sounding grunt and steps back.

That fucking blood.

I start breathing.

Cherries. Chocolate. Candlelight.

The paintings stop swinging. I glance around the hallway. "Yes?"

The ancient oil paintings take up their swinging again.

Another odd anomaly with the buildings in town. Awareness prickles the back of my neck, sending a surge of coolness down my spine. New and different is bad as far as I'm concerned. Town Hall and I don't communicate. This building, in particular, has always been very silent.

I consider the alerts that came in this morning to notify me of someone's presence in my office. Maybe something's wrong with the monitoring system. I'll have to pull the wiring and check it when I get home.

Morgan clears her throat, drawing my attention. "She's trying to show you that we dusted all the paintings."

I turn, her bag still slung over my shoulder. "You what?" I glance around at the swaying paintings. They look the same to me.

"We dusted last night," Morgan says dryly. "These beautiful paintings were covered in dust."

I shrug. "We don't use Town Hall all that often."

Morgan's expression goes cold and assessing. She crosses her arms, a move that lifts her round breasts high. I bite the inside of my cheek to avoid looking down at them.

“There’s no need for regular cleaning if we’re not using the building,” I say, stating the obvious.

“I disagree,” she says vehemently. “This building is arguably the most important one in town; you shouldn’t treat her like that. Not that you care,” she tacks on with a roll of her eyes.

I cant my head to one side, examining her. Her cheeks are flushed pink, her eyes narrowed and hard. Her body’s tense. These are all signs she’s mad. But I can’t sort out why she’d be upset about the state of dust in a building that’s rarely used.

“Explain,” I direct. “I don’t understand why you care about this.”

It’s not in my nature to ask people to help me see their perspective. Keeper training zaps any need a Keeper has to seek consensus among our peers. While I have a leadership group whose partnership I value, I have the ultimate say about what goes on in my haven. I have to in order to be effective in this role.

Around us, the paintings stop their trajectory, stiling on their hooks.

Morgan’s arms go wide, and she gestures around the hall. “Because you’re responsible for it! Because it’s the heart of this town, or it should be. It’s *Town Hall*, for God’s sake. Can you not see how it needs care like everything else?”

I lick my lips. The building is as still and silent as ever. It occurs to me that she might be disappointed, and that’s why she’s gone silent.

“Tell her she looks beautiful,” Morgan hisses. “Make some kind of a comment, you emotionless cretin.”

“This is ridic—”

“Say it right now,” she commands under her breath.

The dominant side of my personality raises its ugly head and surprises me. Most of that emotion died when I underwent Keeper training. It rushes back as Morgan glares at me. When

I say nothing, she steps forward until her breasts brush against my chest.

My body betrays me, something I know can't logically be helped. She's my mate, even though I can't have her. My muscles tense and tighten as she tosses her long red locks over one shoulder, gray eyes flashing at me as her breasts pillow against my chest.

"Fucking say it. It took us ages," she growls. The sheer violence in her tone has my dick hardening painfully in my jeans. My imagination threatens to run wild with images of her underneath me, but I manage to tamp them down.

I suck in a deep breath, forgetting that I was supposed to be holding it. Her scent slams into me, drowning me in whiskey and cherries and decadent pure chocolate.

A muscle underneath my eye twitches. "It's lovely," I murmur, not looking away from her.

She lifts her chin defiantly, giving me a direct view of the vein that throbs down the length of her alabaster neck. Without warning, my fangs split my gums and shoot down to poke my chin.

Her eyes go wide, and she takes a rushed step back.

I follow, staying in her space. "Are you satisfied?" I grit out. "Was that enough for you and the building?"

Her storm-cloud gaze falls to my fangs. "Are you freaking out? Is that why the teeth came out?"

I grip her bag tighter and whirl in place, stalking toward the door. "I don't freak out, Morgan," I call out over my shoulder. "Come."

She mutters under her breath but follows me out of Town Hall into the early morning light.



"You must be joking," she deadpans as I sling one leg over my motorcycle. "You want me to get on that and, what, hang on to you?"

“I didn’t realize I’d have a passenger,” I remind her, her bag still slung over my shoulder. “I was simply responding to Town Hall’s alarm.”

Gray eyes assess my vintage motorcycle. It’s not a two-seater. She’ll have to sit in front of me. That’ll be discomfiting because I’ve never been this close to her—on purpose.

With a disgruntled-sounding grumble, she pulls her hair up into a messy bun. I’m sure it’s to keep it from flying around as we drive, but it’s intoxicating seeing her deft fingers wrapped around all that glorious red hair. It’s streaked with the occasional golden strand. And once it’s all piled up onto her head, her elegant neck is on full display.

I don’t realize I’m staring until she plants both hands on her hips.

“You’re not gonna bite me, are you? You’re staring at my neck like you can’t wait to rip into it.”

“I’ll never bite you,” I say simply.

Something changes in her expression, a myriad of emotions flickering through her features so fast, I can’t get a full read on any one sentiment.

“This isn’t easy for me either,” I say in what I hope is a gentle tone, hoping to show we might be feeling the same way.

“You are really something,” she snaps, sliding one leg carefully over the motorcycle. She leans forward over the bloodred body, careful not to touch me.

Confusion muddies my thoughts. “What did I say? Are you angry?”

She glances over her shoulder, giving me a view of her elegant nose and plump lower lip. The vein in her neck throbs with the rapid pace of her heartbeat.

I’m breathing again. I zip my lips closed and make a conscious choice not to allow her scent in. Not with how she’s seated between my thighs.

“Forget about it,” she says after a long pause. “Let’s just go.”

It's on the tip of my tongue to ask why she agreed to come with me. I'm not even sure I know why I asked her to. But if there's a safety situation with the Annabelle, I need to sort that out before I allow Morgan to return.

She sits stiffly between my thighs, muscles tense. Stray bits of hair trail down the back of her neck, taunting me. I allow myself a moment to admire the slim column. From this angle, I can't see that beautiful, plump vein along the front of her neck, but that's for the best. It's alluring, and I can't afford alluring.

It's for her own good that I don't allow myself the indulgence of temptation.

I reach around her, my arm brushing against her side. When she leans away from me, I let out a huff.

"We can't ride like this. You'll fall off the moment we go around a corner. Allow me."

She gives me a clipped nod as I turn the key in the ignition, my bike roaring to life. When I slip my arm around her waist and drag her against my chest, she stiffens. I'm careful not to grip her with my hand. I simply hold her still. But she's close enough now that her red hair is right in my face.

"I promise not to be inappropriate," I mutter.

She grants me no response, her body stiff as the dead.

I lean forward, using my hips to push off the kickstand. We surge into the street, and she grabs at my arm but immediately lets go.

"Doesn't bother me," I say in what I hope is a kind tone. I can't tell how my tone seems anymore, yet another thing Keeper training took from me. I'm barely able to read my own diminished emotions, much less anyone else's. That facet of Keeper training is designed to help us be supremely logical in service of efficacy.

I've always had my doubts about that. It's why I declined the identification process in the first place and left the haven system.

That was a long time ago, though.

In the here and now, Morgan appears tense and smells mad and afraid. Logically, I know she's likely to need reassurance.

She doesn't respond, though, and doesn't grab my arm again. Her hands move to her thighs, balled there as we drive slowly up Main Street toward Sycamore. I hook a left, the bike's throaty motor purring off the buildings.

Morgan sits rigidly in front of me, even though her arms and legs brush mine as we drive away from downtown. It's not until we're well past the inhabited area that I kick the bike into higher gear and speed along the dark road.

Fifteen minutes later, my bike is still the only sound as we pass the defunct skyball stadium. The roar of the engine echoes off the beautiful building we only used once. It's unfortunate that we can't use it for something else, but when I pick through a short list of ideas in my mind, nothing seems quite right. We typically don't even practice skyball until right before a final.

I zoom around a corner, forgetting that Morgan isn't hanging on. She careens to the side and grabs my thigh, throwing herself against my chest with a gasp. Without meaning to, I wrap an arm around her, fingers curling around her side. Her stomach is firm beneath her tee, and it makes my fingers itch. If I slipped them up underneath the edge of the soft fabric, what would her skin feel like?

Heady desire filters through me, warming my body to a temperature closer to hers. And the only fucking reason my body even does that is because she's my mate—despite the fact that I can't have her. All vampires warm or cool to the temperature of their mates to ensure coupling isn't uncomfortable.

At least the body temperature portion of it.

Coupling with a vampire is uncomfortable in other ways, especially for nonvampire species.

I've got to stop thinking about it. Morgan's still in my arms, her chest rising and falling with rapid, harried

movements. Long red hair whips around my head and neck. I call on my Keeper training, pulling mental blocks down around my sensual thoughts until I reach normal again.

No.

Not normal. I'll never be *normal*. But I feel like the Keeper once more—neutral, logical, always in control.

We fly around a corner and up the twisty road toward my castle. Black stone walls rise into dark spires that jut into the night sky. The front drawbridge is down, the double front doors wide open. I pull the bike into the circular driveway and park it.

I expect Morgan to leap off and back away from me, but she doesn't. Her eyes are on the castle, drinking it in like it's the first time she's seen it. It's not though, so I'm unsure why she seems entranced this time.

"So sad," she murmurs under her breath, gray eyes locked on the uppermost spires of the castle.

"The castle's not sad," I assure her. "She's built to mirror a Keeper. Keeper homes are always like this—stoic and quiet."

Dark eyelashes flutter against her cheeks, but she looks away from me, cocking her head to the side. Without saying anything else, she swings one long leg over the bike and reaches for her bag.

I hike it higher over my shoulder. It makes logical sense to be gentlemanly.

"You had a rough night, Morgan," I offer. "Allow me to make it an easier morning."

Pink steals across her cheeks, but she nods, slipping both hands into her back pockets. For a long moment, her eyes focus on mine, and I find myself lost in those dark depths. They're not a pale gray. Every shade of steel and stone and granite is reflected in her eyes. They're light and dark and everything in between. If I were still the man I used to be, I'd wax poetic about those eyes and how all-encompassing they are, like stepping into a thundercloud.

As it is, I allow myself to stare into them for a moment longer than I should.

Morgan's cheeks flush brighter pink, her lips parting. "What are you doing?" she questions in that throaty voice.

I pause to consider her question. What *am* I doing? I can't have her; I won't allow myself to. So why am I staring into her eyes like a lover?

"I don't know," I finally admit. Turning away from what I suppose is awkward behavior, I head toward the castle. "C'mon," I call out over my shoulder. "I'll give you the tour."

As she quietly follows, I make a mental note to comm Moira for more potion. The effects must be wearing off, and I can't have that. I can't experience Morgan in her full glory without something to tamp down my desire. Especially with her here in my house. I run through the calculations of how likely something is to go wrong, reaching the castle's kitchen before I realize I haven't bothered to explain anything about any of the rooms.

I lay her floral bag on the counter, resisting the urge to lean down and smell the clothing inside it. Calling Moira moves to the very top of today's to-do list.

"I forgot the tour," I admit.

Morgan stands in the doorway, arms crossed. But this time, she looks more amused than mad. Both brows are curled up, her lips tipped into a barely there smile.

"I noticed," she says dryly. "Good thing I've been here before, I suppose." Apprehension, or perhaps worry, steals across her elegant features. "I won't stay long. I need to sort out what crawled up Annabelle's metaphorical ass, then I'll go back to the inn."

Unwelcome emotion stabs through me at her words. Possession. Unhappiness. I think. I can't be sure. But when she mentions calling Catherine about the Annabelle issue, I don't want her to.

Which makes no logical sense. One of us needs to call Catherine immediately. The Annabelle is Ever's only guest

residence. She can't be allowed to behave like this.

I clear my throat. I need a dose of potion quickly. I don't like the emotions filtering through the fog I've been living in for decades.

Mercifully, my comm watch pings with one of the ward-specific chimes. I glance down, then up at Morgan. "I need to take care of this. Please feel free to explore. The castle will let you know if there are any rooms you can't go in."

Storm-cloud eyes narrow as Morgan's mouth drops slightly open. It's clear she's going to respond. But then she doesn't. I turn on my heel and escape the stuffy kitchen, striding through the halls to my command center.

Three walls of beeping lights greet me when I open the door. Many of them blink on and off haphazardly. They've been doing that a lot lately, and it's odd.

I drop into my chair and push a series of keys to run a diagnostic, glancing up at the ceiling. "A ghost in the machine, perhaps?"

The castle doesn't answer. She rarely ever does.

Sometime later, my watch pings again. The name Moira Finher hovers over its leather surface. Good timing.

When I direct the watch to answer, my old friend's soft voice echoes through. "Abe, how are you this day?"

"Moira, I need a higher dose potion." I open a drawer and look in. Inside, only one bottle remains. "Quickly," I tack on.

A sigh echoes through the watch. "All Keepers mate for a reason, my friend. Are you sure you don't want to let the chips fall as they may?"

"You know what's at stake," I snap.

"Well, I can't produce a higher-dose potion on command," she says firmly. "And I'm not in agreement that you should continue taking it. Not now that Morgan is in Ever."

Anger pierces me as I stand. "Moira, you've provided this potion the entire time I've been a Keeper. You can't stop now.

There was an incident, and Morgan is in my home as we speak.” My voice rises until I’m nearly shouting into the leather band around my wrist.

“My goodness,” she says quietly, as if gentling a small child. “I think you should consider that it might be fate intervening to push you in the direction you should be going anyhow.” Without another word, she clicks off, and I’m left standing in my command center, staring at a wall of blinking lights.

No potion means no dampening of the pain, the need, the intention.

No potion means allowing all of my vampiric nature to rise to the surface for the first time in decades.

No potion means I am wholly and irrevocably *fucked*.

CHAPTER FIVE

MORGAN

I stare at the kitchen after the Keeper leaves. This is so fucking awkward. I'm in his castle, alone with him, and he's left me to go to work. After my experience with the Annabelle, I half expect the Keeper's home to toss me right out the door. He and I have never seen eye to eye. Somehow, I don't imagine his castle liking me much.

We should probably get off on the right foot, if that's possible. I don't know if or when I'll be able to return to the Annabelle. Damn, at this point, Catherine and Lou are probably up. I mull it over for a minute but decide they both need to know what's going on. I can't hide what happened.

Gritting my teeth, I comm Catherine first, speaking her name into the thin leather band around my wrist. A hologram of her full name pops up.

"Morgan, darling, come down to the kitchen. Lou and I are chatting over coffee and cinnamon rolls!"

God, that sounds so nice. My throat closes around a lump as I imagine sitting in the kitchen with them. I clear my throat, apprehension heating my cheeks and chest. Anger quickly follows. I'd love to be drinking a damn coffee with two of my favorite people right now.

"About that," I begin. "I'm at the Keeper's castle. Annabelle kicked me out in the middle of the night, so I went to Town Hall, and he came to find me there."

After a moment of silence, there's muffled shouting from Lou. Behind that, Annabelle creaks and groans as if in protest.

After a solid twenty seconds of that, Catherine comes back on.

“Morgan, I am so incredibly sorry. I don’t know what’s gotten into her! She has never behaved poorly to a guest in our whole time together.”

“Yes, well, there’s a first time for everything, I suppose,” I say more harshly than I intend to. “I can’t stay here,” I whisper-hiss into the comm watch. “I’m standing in his kitchen like a weirdo!”

“Actually,” Catherine says, “now that you say that, I think I see what’s going on.”

“Thank fuck,” I bark. “Can you get her to let me back in?”

“I’ll do my best,” Catherine offers, not sounding confident at all, “but I think Annabelle’s trying to play matchmaker.”

“You have got to be kidding me,” I blurt. “Matchmaker? How’d she know I wouldn’t go straight to Thea or Wren’s?”

“Oh, I expect those homes would be in on it with Annabelle. The buildings can all communicate with one another.”

I throw my hands up in the air. “Great! What am I supposed to do, Catherine?”

Lou’s voice comes through the tinny watch. “I’m coming, Morgan. I’ll grab a bag and come hang until we figure this out, okay?” Her voice grows fainter. “We’ll figure this out, right, Cath?”

Catherine comes back on, her voice cheerful. Sounds like forced pleasantries to me, though. “Of course we will, Morgan! Don’t worry about a thing! Hang in there for a day until I can get Annabelle sorted, okay?”

I glance at the ceiling again. The castle is still around me. None of the usual creaks and groans and random noises of the Annabelle. It’s...wrong. Something is wrong with this place.

“I’ll take you up on that, Lou. Don’t rush, but get here when you can.” I click off, but when I open my mouth to call Thea next, something stops me. Pale sunlight filters through the wall of tall windows behind the sink. Some small part of

me wonders if I should take this opportunity to tour the castle and learn more about the Keeper's life. I am admittedly nosy, and he said I could help myself.

Plus, I've got to pass the time until Lou gets here. That's how I'm going to justify looking in literally every room—starting with the kitchen.

I pace a slow circle around the ridiculously oversized island, taking in the kitchen's details. This room is all harsh black lines—glossy black cabinets, tall black-paned windows, a long black breakfast table in a nook off to one side. The twenty-foot island's black marble countertop is streaked with white veining. It's beautiful, but it's so modern in comparison to the rest of the castle, which is much more gothic. It's always struck me as a little funny that a vampire lives in a place that looks like Dracula's castle, but this kitchen sticks out. I wonder if the rest of the interior is a mishmash? Admittedly, I've only ever walked from the front to his command room and back out.

Fuck. I should probably let him know I invited Lou. I rip my hair out of the bun and redo it, piling it on top of my head. Nerves bash around, my stomach filled with butterflies. I've done nothing wrong, but somehow, when he and I talk, it always dissolves into bickering.

I turn to find my way back to the comm room, but at the last minute, I glance around the kitchen. "I should definitely let him know my aunt is coming, right? He wouldn't want to be surprised."

The tall window above the black metal kitchen sink opens and shuts quickly.

"Ah, affirmative," I mutter. "Of fucking course."

I leave the kitchen and head back through pitch-black halls. I didn't pay much attention to the castle the first time I came here—I was too busy being furious at the Keeper for something—but I pay attention this time.

Black wood floors are scuffed, and dark paneling takes up half the wall. Above the paneling, a fine layer of dust has

collected. I run a fingertip through it.

“Just like Town Hall.” Glancing around, I stroke the wall. “You need a good dusting, don’t you? Poor thing.”

Two strips of red-and-black damask wallpaper peel off the wall and curl sadly into the hallway.

My heart aches at seeing this building treated like Town Hall—second class, not worthy of care and love. I close my eyes, gritting my teeth as a wall of emotion slams into me. It’s not fair that the Keeper can treat anyone like this. I could literally throw a pity party with the two buildings he should be closest to.

We can be the Pity Committee. President—Morgan Anne Hector.

I reach for the wallpaper and press it back onto the wall, rubbing it gently. “I’ll dust you in a minute, okay? I’ve got to find the command room really fast.”

The second curly sheet of wallpaper rejoins the first, sticking flat to the wall.

It’s not lost on me that, if the Keeper is *technically* my mate, then I’m *technically* supposed to get along best with this building—it’s supposed to be my home. If he were normal and not a douchebag.

I hate the part of myself that pipes up to remind me about him glamouring my costume for Ever’s version of Halloween. I try really hard not to remember how, when I thanked him for the unexpected kindness, he said, “That smile is worth it.” Because it felt—for a moment—like he and I were turning some sort of a corner. And then he invited me to breakfast.

And promptly fled the moment the castle called him.

Annnnnnd now I’m irritated. Stroking my way along the castle’s dust-coated wallpaper, I give the wall a friendly nudge. “Help me find him?”

All of the wallpaper strips curl off the wall and back up. A floorboard lifts and waggles toward a hall leading away from me. I follow twists and turns for the next five minutes until the

command center comes into view. I vaguely remember it from my one and only time here—the time I learned my sisters and I are all witches.

Not that being a black witch has done me any favors. Wren and Thea have managed to get a strong hold on their white and green powers, but I struggle to even connect with mine. I'd look for it now, but there's no point.

As much as Catherine has tried to help us, my magic is nestled deep inside with no desire to come out. I know it's there, but it's bottled up and stuck, vacuum-sealed into oblivion.

The command center door is open, light from thousands of bulbs emitting a glow that casts blue and red rays across the floor. The Keeper reclines in a spindly-legged chair, arms crossed and both feet propped up on the array in front of him. He stares at the lights and mutters under his breath.

When I lift my hand to rap on the doorframe, he glances over his shoulder. "Come in, Morgan."

A combo of heat and irritation swirls through me, and I have to remind myself to be nice. He came and got me this morning. He offered me a place to stay.

I step into the room and stop by his side. He shifts, unfolding both long legs and crossing one at the ankle over his knee. He leans forward, ruby-red eyes locked to mine. "Can I help you with something?"

I hate the blush that tinges my cheeks pink. It's the shitty side of being a redhead. I can't hide my emotions to save my life. As a pediatrician, that's helped me—I connect really damn well with my patients, and they see me as open and honest. But here, right now? It's frustrating.

"I called Catherine," I begin. "She's dealing with Annabelle, but—"

"Did Catherine have any theories on Annabelle's poor behavior?"

Oh, I am definitely not mentioning Catherine's theory.

“Not really,” I say with a shrug. “She was more shocked than anything and said she’d get to the bottom of it. But Lou insists on coming out here. I thought I’d let you know, since this is your house and all.”

The Keeper’s eyes narrow, his lips pursed.

From the doorway, the castle ripples the carpet runner.

I give the Keeper a look, daring him to tell me Lou can’t come. “The castle says it’s fine.”

He cocks his head to the side. “I can see that.” His voice is dry, toneless. I hate it when he speaks to me like this.

“Why’d you run away from me at breakfast?” I blurt out.

Oh fuck, what in the hell am I doing?

His eyes spring wide, but he stands, towering over me. Pale lips curl into a sneer, his scar tugging the left side of his mouth up higher than the right. He stares at me with such intensity, it’s impossible not to feel it settle over my skin, prickly and uncomfortable.

“Is that what you think I did?” The question is neutral, but an undercurrent of anger threads his tone.

I lift my chin. “Yep.”

He takes another step forward, pressing his chest to mine. Reaching up, he grips my chin between his forefinger and thumb, holding my gaze. My breathing goes heavy and deep, my breasts brushing against him. He’s warm and hard, and fuck my tits for being turned on by him. They’re diamond points against his chest.

Long fangs slip from his upper jaw, sliding down to poke at the sides of his mouth. His eyes drop to my neck, roving down over my throat before making a lazy trail back up. He’s a predator, sizing up his prey, deciding what juicy morsel to rip into first.

I won’t be the prey. I abso-fucking-lutely refuse. Jerking my head away from his touch, I turn toward the door. “Forget I asked,” I mutter.

Just as I reach the entryway, a warm hand closes around my wrist and pulls me back. The Keeper spins me to face the blinking lights, his big body behind mine, chest pressed to my back.

He lifts the wrist he holds and points at the array. “Every light here represents a signal from the wards, Morgan. And that panel there? That’s every building. Each one of those lights has the potential to tell me something’s wrong, that our home is in danger. Every sensor here has to be checked regularly, and everything you see is connected to my comm watch and the castle itself.”

Regret at bringing up the topic hits me. I know his job is hard, but—

“My first duty is to Ever’s safety, above anything else.” He spins me to face him, his expression guarded. It’s like he’s pulled a carefully curated mask down over his face. I can’t read what I see there. He’s as neutral as ever.

“Noted,” I deadpan, calling on Wren’s composure because I really, really want to shout at him to be real with me for once. To tell me why he’s always so cold. The dominant side of my personality rears its ugly head and takes over. Twisting my hand out of his grasp, I yank it to my side and give him a withering look.

His now-empty hand falls to his side. He curls and straightens the fingers as if working out a kink. Standing in this room surrounded by blinking lights and constant chimes, he looks like an internet hacker about to take down the whole web. Big shoulders roll as if he’s working out a kink, his eyes narrowing as tapered nostrils flare.

Is he...?

I throw a hand up, palm facing him. “Dude. Tell me you’re not fucking smelling me right now.”

His pale lips curl into a devious smile that transforms his face. He’s always been handsome, but that smile combined with the haughty arch of both eyebrows? That’s goddamn devastating.

“Don’t worry, Morgan,” he croons. “I won’t bite.”

“Oh, you’d better not,” I bark back. “I have two very capable monster brothers-in-law. Shepherd would pop your head like a grape.”

The Keeper’s smile grows impossibly large, revealing every single shiny white tooth. He looks genuinely joyous at the prospect of getting massacred by Thea’s gargoyle mate. “You think Shepherd could take me in a fight?”

I nod. I’ve got loyalty for days. “Damn straight. Ohken too. He’s big as fuck.”

The Keeper moves fast, too fast for me to even follow, crossing the room and crowding into my space. I back up until I hit the wall. He cocks his head to the side, red eyes trailing down my face to my mouth. His lips are so close to mine, long fangs indenting his skin. How can he even close his mouth with those things?

I gulp but lift my chin. “Get out of my face, Keeper,” I snarl.

He chuckles, a low, heady sound that sends an unfortunate zing straight to my clit. “There’s a reason I don’t fight, Morgan. Want to know what it is?”

“Pfft.” I cross my arms, but he doesn’t move.

He shifts closer, warm breath tickling my mouth. “I don’t fight because it would be a massacre, Morgan. I don’t fight because it wouldn’t even be fair.”

“Is that right?” I croon back. “Big ole Keeper can’t help kicking everybody’s ass? Gosh, it must be so hard to keep that badassness locked up all the time.”

He laughs again. “You have no idea what I’m capable of.”

A sudden sense of moroseness steals over me, chilling my skin and setting my teeth to chattering. “I might, if you told me,” I whisper.

Why the everloving fuck did I say that? It sounds like I care. And I don’t; I can’t. He’s been too callous. And it doesn’t

matter if he's been nice once or twice. It doesn't make up for poor behavior otherwise.

His smirk falls, and he takes a step back, the mask slipping back over his features, erasing the playfulness that was there a moment ago.

A small chime sounds, and he turns his head to look in the direction of it. I get the perfect view of his elegant long nose and the jagged scar that pulls his upper lip.

"Someone's here," he says simply. "I assume Lou, based on your heads-up. You're welcome anywhere in the castle."

"Right." I edge toward the door. "Cool. I'll just be going, then."

He says nothing as he watches me. The moment I'm outside the command center, I break into a run toward the front door.

I need backup, and I need it stat.

CHAPTER SIX

MORGAN

The double front doors slam open, and Lou rushes through them with a furious look on her face. She runs to me and throws both arms around my neck, yanking me into a thoroughly aggressive hug.

“Morgan Anne, what in the hells is going on? The Annabelle kicked you out? We had words, but she wouldn’t answer me. Tell me everything!”

Lou lets go of my neck and takes a step back, crossing both thin arms as she starts to tap her foot. “I am hopping mad!” she shouts, glancing behind me. “Can he hear me, wherever he is? I hope he plans to do something about this.”

I shrug. “I don’t know shit about vampire hearing. Do you? Maybe he can; maybe he can’t. Do we care, though?”

Lou’s eyes narrow. “I don’t know, Morgan. *Do we care?*”

I give her my best oldest-triplet-so-I’m-basically-the-mom look. “I want to figure out what’s going on so I can go back to the inn.”

She tosses her red-gold braid over her shoulder. “I suppose it was nice of him to bring you here so you’re not like... homeless. But, to be frank, you should have called me immediately. I’d hobo it with you in a tent any day, girl. You know that, right?” Lou’s eyes go wide and concerned-looking. “I’ve got you, Mor,” she murmurs. “Till the stars die out, remember?”

It’s something we started saying after Mom and Dad died in a car wreck. Lou might be closer in age to me, Thea, and

Wren than my mom, but she's still our aunt. She's always been halfway between a sister and a surrogate mother.

"Till the stars die, I remember," I murmur back, slinging my arm around her neck to pull us into another hug. I breathe in the familiar scent of her shampoo, surprised anew when that burnt marshmallow smell fills my nose. "Please come tour the castle with me. I'm nosy as hell, and I didn't feel comfortable by myself."

"Where's the Keeper?" she mumbles from my chest area.

"Keeping," I say with a laugh. "Watching buttons light up. Listening to alarms. He's a ghost. We probably won't even see him."

Lou pulls back and grins, but I sense something sad in the way she looks at me. For a long moment, I think she's about to share some wisdom she gleaned from her time living in Rainbow, but she says nothing, and it starts to get awkward. Nerves prickle down the back of my neck.

"Well," I begin. "Wanna do a tour together? I've basically only seen the kitchen and the command center."

"Fuck yes!" Lou shouts, reminding me of Thea with her exuberance. "Neither of the girls answered when I called, but we can try them again in a little bit. Wren in particular is not an early riser. Well shit, maybe I should try again now."

She lifts her wrist, but I grab it and shove it back down. "Lou. I don't need everybody coming up here to stare at me. It's awkward enough as it is!"

Lou recrosses her arms. "Young lady, do I need to remind you that you have an amazing support system in your sisters and your aunt? We're definitely calling your sisters, but we can do it later if you don't want to right now. No effing way we'd leave you to the Keeper's devices."

"Don't worry," I grit out. His devices consist of ignoring me and ignoring me, in that order. I jerk my head over my shoulder. "C'mon. I sort of know my way around, but the castle will help us."

"Lead the way." Lou gestures up the dark hallway.

Half an hour later, we've made our way through all of the first floor, which consists of three bedrooms, the kitchen, a giant two-story library, a ballroom, and a myriad of hallways—one of which leads to his command center. We steer clear of that one, and he doesn't appear. The castle does a marvelous job pointing out all of the interesting and beautiful rooms. Eventually, a door creaks open that leads us into a basement, where we find an honest-to-God two-lane bowling alley and bar.

"This is fucking ridiculous," Lou muses as we walk the length of one lane.

"No shit," I bark. "Look how dusty this place is!" I don't know why it bugs the hell out of me that every room, every surface, every single damn thing in this castle is covered in dust and decay. It's not right.

"That's not what I meant," Lou deadpans. "Who has a bowling alley in their damn house?"

"He played on the interhaven league," I mutter. Sadness fills me, my feet like lead weights at the end of my legs. "It could be beautiful if someone paid attention to it."

This entire castle seems like one big ole giant metaphor for my experience with the Keeper—linked together but discarded, unused, unclaimed, and uncared for.

Fuck that noise. I'm not one to sit around and wait for shit to happen. If he won't take care of this place, I'll do it. And Lou too, because I'm going to wrangle her into doing it with me.

LOL.

"Morgan Anne, what's that look for?" Lou asks me from her spot at the far end of the bowling lane. "You look sneaky as fuck right now."

I give her a sassy look. "Just thinking how somebody ought to take care of this place, and I think it ought to be us. The castle would appreciate it, and it's the least I can do for the temporary room. And board," I tack on. The castle did

offer us cheese when we toured the kitchen. And it was really good.

Lou sighs as she rubs a hand over her face. She gives me a look I've seen from my mother my whole life—gentle admonishment with a hint of humor. “This is a big fucking place to clean by ourselves, ya know...”

A door creaks open from somewhere behind us, a floorboard rippling. A bucket of cleaning supplies is delivered to our feet, courtesy of the castle.

I grin at Lou. “See? The castle really wants this. You’ll help me, right?”

Lou grabs a dust-covered rag from the bucket and snaps it at my ass. “Bitch, I love you, so, yes, I’ll help you clean. But fair warning—you’re gonna have to feed me partway through.”

Around us, black wallpapered walls shimmy and shake. The castle is happy and excited.

“We can do that,” I agree.



By lunchtime, we’ve dusted and vacuumed pretty much the entire first floor of the castle with the exception of the stunning library and the hall his command room stems from. The library will be a whole day on its own. It’s two full stories of books, floor to ceiling, each one covered in a thick layer of dust. When we opened the dramatic black curtains on the room’s only window, a bunch of moths flew out.

I’m not ready for moths.

Those dusty wings and creepy antennae are a hard pass for me.

A dirty rag hits my head, a cloud of dust blooming over my face. I suck it in and cough as it hits my lungs.

“Argh, Louuuu!” I shout, dragging out her name. I whirl in place and throw the towel back at her. “Who knows what kind of bacteria are on that towel at this point?”

Lou giggles and tosses the towel in the bucket, then places both hands behind her head, arching her back in a stretch. “I need lunch. Let’s go check out the beautifully clean kitchen and see if the Keeper has anything else in his fridge.”

“I don’t think there’s much,” I admit. “Or the castle probably would have offered more than a block of cheese.”

“I’m surprised he hasn’t come to say hi,” Lou says, her voice going dangerously tight as she crosses her arms.

“He probably won’t.” I grab her by the shoulders and spin her in place, shoving her up the hall toward the kitchen. “And that’s fine. That’s par for the course with us. I know what to expect there.”

“Why doesn’t he have food? I can’t eat air,” Lou moans. She’s headed for the dark side of hunger, where every sentence out of her mouth is laced with a five-year-old’s whine.

“I’m expecting company. I’ll have them bring groceries.”

Lou screams as we whirl in place.

Behind us, the Keeper stands in the hallway with a neutral expression on his face. I never fucking heard him arrive. How long has he been standing there? He lifts his hand and speaks into his comm watch, “Call Richard.”

Ruby eyes flick to me. Am I imagining his expression harden a bit? Shit. He probably heard the comment about how he ignores me and I’m fine with it. That feels...rude. But then again, he’s been rude to me from day one. I lift my chin and decide I don’t care.

Richard, the wolf shifter pack alpha, answers with a gruff, “Hello, Keeper.”

The Keeper’s eyes drift over my shoulder as he speaks into the tech, “Richard, I’ve got two houseguests who’d like to eat. Can you bring something from the bar?”

“Do these houseguests eat cheeseburgers?” Richard’s rough, low voice echoes out of the watch.

“Hells yes!” shouts Lou from my side.

His gaze moves to me, nostrils flaring slightly. I nod my agreement. Burgers sound fab.

The Keeper's lips tip upward. "Affirmative." Without another word, he clicks off, Richard's hologram name disappearing from view. Silence stretches between us, his gaze traveling back to me. He gestures around the hallway. "You two have been busy, I see. Is this your idea of a thank you?"

Something about that statement makes me want to rip the smug smile right off his unfortunately handsome face.

"Yep!" Lou chirps. "But we're also expecting thanks *from* you, because, to be frank, this place is a mess. Are all Keepers this sloppy?"

The edges of his lips twitch as he reaches up with one elegant hand, running it through pale slicked-back hair. "I don't pay much attention to what other Keepers do. I'm sure the castle appreciates it, however."

In response, all the strips of wallpaper curl off the wall and roll and unroll rhythmically.

"That's a yes," I deadpan.

He purses his lips. "I'm aware."

When he says nothing else, my cheeks start to burn. Lou is a live wire of anticipation next to me. Oh, I do believe she's enjoying this little standoff of sorts.

The Keeper jerks his head behind us. "Let's head to the kitchen. I can make you both a drink, if you like. Also, I called your sisters." Without waiting for a response, he strides past me and up the hall, giving me the perfect view of his taut, muscular ass in tight black slacks. Like always, he's wearing a black turtleneck, but his hair is getting longer, trailing nearly to the tops of his shoulders in the back.

"Damn he has a nice ass," Lou mutters. "Look how high and tight that thing is."

I slap her on the back of the head. "Yeah, but remember that he has the personality of a dead fish, so we are not enjoying looking at his great ass, okay?"

“Vampire hearing is excellent,” his voice echoes from somewhere ahead of us. “As in, I can hear everything that happens in the castle.” He pops around the corner, peering out at us with a frown. “Just so you’re aware.”

When he disappears, Lou groans but seems unable to help herself. “You could have let us know earlier!” she shouts back.

He doesn’t respond.

Note to self: don’t say anything I wouldn’t say directly to his face. I file the info away for future use.

Lou and I walk up the hall until it opens into the big dark kitchen, then we seat ourselves at the now sparkling marble bar. The Keeper is at the far end, opening tall cabinets to reveal a built-in bar.

He glances over his shoulder. “Beer is on the way. I’m expecting a grocery delivery from the General Store, but I’ve got red and white wine, as well as bourbon.”

“Two bourbons, good sir,” Lou commands.

I glance down at her. I’m tall enough to examine the top of her head. “Bourbon for lunch, Lou?”

She scoffs up at me. “You don’t have shit to do, Morgan. Might as well get drunk off the Keeper’s fine bourbon and gossip a little.”

He joins us, sliding three glasses across the bar. With a swift, practiced move he opens the bourbon and pours two fingers in each glass. I grab one and lift it, scenting the smooth caramel flavor.

He leans over the bar, propping himself up on his forearms, his eyes locked to mine. “What do you think?”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to ask if he even cares. But he did come get me this morning, and the castle has been so incredibly nice. I lift the bourbon to my lips and sip. Fire dances over my lips and tongue, trailing down my throat as I swallow.

“Jesus,” I cough out. “I can barely taste it, it’s so strong.”

“Straight from the barrel,” he says in a matter-of-fact tone.

“Most excellent,” Lou snarks with a glint in her eye.

Twenty minutes later, she and the Keeper are bickering heatedly about corn versus high-rye bourbon and which is superior. I sip lazily at mine while watching them. The Keeper’s argument is sound, but Lou’s halfway hammered and getting louder by the second.

Case in point—he casts a condescending look down at Lou’s glass. “You’re imparting a decidedly humanistic point of view on this topic, Louanna. Broaden your perspective. Monsters have been making rye bourbon since humans were Neanderthals. Corn bourbon didn’t exist until much later.”

She opens her mouth to say something, but footsteps reach us from somewhere toward the front of the castle.

“We’re not done talking about this,” she snaps at the Keeper, who rolls his eyes but refills her glass.

“Don’t egg her on.” I point to the glass as she takes it. “She’s hell on wheels if she gets full-on drunk.”

“Am not,” Lou barks.

“Who’s hell on wheels?” Richard asks as he appears in the kitchen doorway with a box in his hands. “Ah, Lou. I guess we’re talking about you?”

Lou gives him a haughty look. “Don’t know what makes you assume that, Richard.”

His lips purse into a barely concealed smirk. “Just a guess.” A second male follows Richard. He’s just as big, just as stacked. But where Richard’s tall, dark, and handsome, this male could be the ginger version of that. His skin is pale and freckled, green eyes sparkling in the low light. Red waves fan back from his face, curling around his ears and along the back of his neck. The green of his eyes is shocking, like Wren’s color but supernatural and vivid. The green of this male’s eyes is like someone shining a light through an emerald. He’s almost lit from within.

They move to me now, crinkling in the corners. “Hello, Morgan.” His voice is deep, sultry, like someone dragged glowing embers through it.

Damn, I’m getting poetic.

I blame the bourbon.

And the Keeper.

“Hi, Connall.” I smile and gesture to Lou, who’s still as the dead on her seat next to me. “This is my aunt, Lou. I don’t know if you’ve met yet.”

Elegant nostrils flare as Connall cocks his head from one side to the other. The kitchen is silent. After a tense moment, he reaches around me, holding a hand out to shake Lou’s.

She takes it and gives it a vigorous shake, but says nothing.

Lou never says *nothing*.

Curious.

The scent of burnt marshmallows fills my nose, and I glance down at her. But her eyes are locked firmly on Connall’s enormous biceps.

The Keeper clears his throat, drawing my attention back to him. “Richard, what have you found out?”

The big alpha sighs as he places the box on the table. After reaching in, he withdraws bags dripping grease and sets them on the countertop. I resist the urge to bitch about how Lou and I just cleaned, but I’m fucking starving, and I smell salty cheese.

Lou rips the bags open and tosses me a burger, then grabs one for herself and dives right in.

Richard and Connall watch her for a moment, something between surprise and enjoyment in their expressions. Eventually, Richard glances over at the Keeper.

“It’s like you suspected. When Hearth HQ raided the haven we captured, he wasn’t there. That’s why you’ve heard nothing.”

I swing my head toward Richard. “Wesley wasn’t there? Are you sure?”

The Keeper sets his bourbon glass down, then crosses his arms. “Your source?”

“Reliable,” Richard says with a low growl. “Absolutely reliable. If he says Wesley wasn’t in the haven, he wasn’t in the haven. You could have Alo check with Keira, though. She led the raid.”

“Eww, no,” I bark without meaning to. I throw both hands up. “Ignore me.”

The castle shimmies around us, the kitchen windows flapping open and shut. It agrees with me, I can tell.

It’s hard not to get involved when Wesley, fucking asshole, continues to be a thorn in Ever’s side. First he attacked the town, then he tried to abduct Catherine, and then he figured out how to build a secret haven and attach it to our damn wards.

Amazingly, Alo’s son, Iggy, discovered it with the help of a friend.

We thought we’d finally captured Wesley, but I guess he wasn’t in the haven.

Damnit.

The Keeper’s eyes drift up to the ceiling and over to the windows, finally landing on me before he breaks the gaze. “This means changes here in Ever,” he says. “If Wesley remains at large, Evenia will send another Keeper, perhaps even return the rest of Dirk’s hunter team or a small army. My mother won’t allow us to continue along like this, given Wesley’s attacks here and the attachment of a hidden haven. It’s too dangerous. Especially with Catherine opting not to relocate to Hearth HQ.”

Richard and Connall exchange a glance.

I’m processing a shitload of info and trying to keep up, so I look over at the Keeper. “She threatened to send another

Keeper before but didn't. Why would this be the tipping point?"

The Keeper sighs, and for the first time, I wonder if being Keeper exhausts him.

"Keeping up appearances is my mother's MO. If she thinks I'm not doing a good enough job, she'll replace me, despite how it would look for House Zeniphon to do so. Replacing me is preferable to losing control of the Hearth. If she loses that, she has nothing, in her mind."

I grumble under my breath. I've met Evenia and her husbands several times, and each time, I've disliked her more and more.

"If Wesley is still out there, I imagine Evenia will call me any day now to let me know who she's sending. I've got a short list of likely candidates." His dark eyes flick to Richard. "My hunch is it'll be someone who'd prefer to live in the forest on your side. We should be prepared for that."

Richard lets out a menacing-sounding growl that lifts the hair on my nape. "Hate that, but you're right. Comm me your list so I can look it over."

He opens his mouth to say more, but two voices echo from the front, and my sisters rush up the hallway toward us. Thea bursts into the kitchen first, followed by Wren. They throw themselves on top of me with a million questions before realizing the kitchen is full and we're in the middle of a meeting.

Thea's the first to step back. "Err, sorry to interrupt. We're only here for moral support. Carry on."

The Keeper purses his lips but returns his focus to Richard and Connall. "Let's head to my office to continue this conversation."

The two shifters stalk away. It's on the tip of my tongue to tell them I want to be involved, that I want to hear what's happening. But I don't.

Glittering red eyes find mine, and for a moment, some emotion I can't name flickers there. But then the Keeper

follows the other males and disappears into the depths of the castle.

For the next three hours, I catch my triplets up on everything that's happened. They go through the same emotional journey I did—shock, anger, resignation.

We're sitting at the island eating the rest of the cheese block from the fridge. I slice a piece and hand it to Thea, who shoves it in her mouth without preamble.

“Is it weird being here?” Her eyes make a circle around the kitchen.

The floorboards lift and flatten with a loud bang. The castle didn't like that question.

“Actually, the castle itself is very peaceful,” I admit. “And I've barely seen the Keeper since we arrived.”

“But he's going to call Catherine about the inn, right?” Wren urges, chocolate brows lifting in question.

I shrug. “I called her this morning, and he said he would too, but I haven't heard anything else about it, and he seems busy with the Wesley issue.”

“Maybe it's not really top of his priority list,” Lou says with a sneaky grin. “As in, subconsciously, he doesn't really want to make that call.”

“Remember that comment he made about the hearing, Lou?” I give her an admonishing look, dragging the near-empty bottle of bourbon away from her.

She blows air out from between her lips. “It's not like I wouldn't say it to his face, ya know?”

“Come home with me,” Wren says. “Easy peasy. You don't have to stay here. No offense,” she tacks on when the castle lets out an angry-sounding groan.

It would be so easy to do that, to grab my shit and leave. But when I think about retreating to the bedroom to get my stuff, a deep ache takes up residence in my chest. It spreads until it turns into a near panic.

“Mor, you okay?” Thea’s blue eyes soften as she reaches out to rub my forearm.

I nod. “Yeah, I’m good. I’m going to stay, though. I’m not done with the castle.”

“You’re staying to clean the Keeper’s house? After every time he’s given you the cold shoulder?” Wren delivers me a skeptical look.

“It’s not for him,” I confirm. “The castle has been really welcoming, and I...I feel called to help.”

Goopy warmth spreads lazily through my stomach, moving along my heart and taking up residence down the length of my spine. It sparks and sputters deep inside me.

Magic.

My magic.

My *black* magic.

“Your magic,” Lou whispers. “I can feel it.”

Thea and Wren turn as one to stare at Lou and me.

Thea’s mouth drops open. “You can feel your magic here?”

“Yeah.” I cross both arms and strum my fingers along my biceps. “I don’t think I truly realized it until right now. It’s not much, just a sense of it being there. But, in any case, I’m staying.”

My sisters and my aunt stare at me, scrutinizing me, examining me like I’m a child they’re not sure what to do with. But it’s Lou who comes to my rescue first, hopping off the bar stool and scratching Thea gently on the back.

“Come on, girls. Take me home, and we’ll check in with Mor in the morning.”

“Okay,” Thea says, but she looks worried. She grabs my arms and pulls me down for a hug. Wren joins us, and, like always, I breathe in the scent of Wren’s French perfume and Thea’s fancy shampoo. And, of course, Lou’s new burnt marshmallow essence.

So weird.

“Love you both,” I whisper.

“Be careful,” Thea says.

“Call any time of day or night,” offers Wren.

“And, oh, I don’t know, maybe get laid by the hot vampire who lives here!” Lou shouts at the top of her lungs.

Shock slices through me. I rip out of my sisters’ arms and make a leap for my dumbass aunt.

Lou shrieks playfully and sprints for the hall. I chase her toward the front of the castle, my sisters’ laughs echoing behind us.

CHAPTER SEVEN

KEEPER

Richard and Connall left hours ago, and I've been muddling over our conversation ever since. Still, it's impossible not to hear the women talking in the kitchen. It's impossible not to focus on *her*.

On that throaty voice that visits me sometimes when I dream. On the frustrated edge to her tone. On the knowledge that I could make it better.

But making things temporarily more pleasurable for her would only backfire in the long run. I can't keep her.

I toss my comm disk onto the floor and mash a button, irritated energy bundling under my skin.

A pale, feathered face appears, birdlike eyes crinkling in the corners. "Hello, Keeper," Moira says.

"I need more potion," I snap. "Our last conversion on this topic was not satisfactory."

She sighs and unfolds both wings, stretching them before replacing them back at her sides. Dark eyes turn to me, and I suspect what she'll say before she says it.

I snarl. "Before you say no again, consider that she's still in my home, Moira. Consider that I can hear her all day long. This castle has been full of visitors today. I'm irritated."

Moira's dark brows travel up. "Intense emotion returning so soon?"

"As expected," I bark. "My emotion has always run higher than other Keepers'. Hence the fucking potion. I need more."

Moira sighs, looking off into the distance.

“I hope that look means you’re considering it, old friend.” I have a trump card I can play that’ll force her to send me more dampening potion, but I don’t want to play that card unless I absolutely have to.

“I’ll do it,” she says after an interminable silence. “But, as you know, I’m visiting Celset so it’ll take some time to brew it. I’m low on supplies.”

“I’ll take what you have,” I say in a softer tone. “Please courier it immediately. I don’t know how long she’s staying for.”

Moira cuts me a look, her eyes filled with sorrow. “I’m so sorry, my friend. Sorry for my part in this, and sorry that you feel the need to take these measures.”

“Just courier it quickly, Moira, please,” I tack on. My foot hovers over the button to end the call, but I wait a moment.

“She’s breaking through the walls I steadfastly put in place,” I admit. “Having her here is already overwhelming.”

“I can’t imagine.” She ruffles the feathers that crown her head, her eyes filled with unshed tears. “Keeper, I—”

Normally, emotion doesn’t faze me in the slightest. It’s simply another indicator, another reference point for me to consider when making decisions.

This time, it’s different. I don’t want to see her face scrunch up or her beak tremble. I don’t want those facial signals that mean emotion is flowing over.

I stomp on the end call button on the comm disk, relief flooding through me when Moira’s face disappears from view. Slumping back in my seat, I steeple my fingers and consider this.

I don’t second-guess myself. I can’t afford to. I can’t spend time wondering if my logic is flawed or broken, and Keeper conditioning taught me that.

Faint humming echoes up the halls. I twitch an ear, cocking my head to the side. Morgan ushers her family out the

front door. I listen as her sisters try to convince her, again, to come home with them. They say she doesn't need to stay in the castle with an asshole, that she's welcome in their homes.

Do they hate me?

I thought I'd developed a good working relationship with both witches. I value them as members of my community.

But hearing them now paints me in a different light.

And it can't be any other way.

Morgan declines to leave, though, saying she wants a little more time with the castle. But when she finally gets Lou and her sisters on the road, I'm painfully aware that we're alone again.

As if on cue, the door to my command room swings open with a creak. The castle itself is telling me to go to her.

I can't. I won't. I shouldn't, for so many reasons.

The door waves open and shut, a more insistent demand.

I glance at the walls of lights that surround me. Everything is quiet in town—for now—and my guest might want dinner soon. My grocery delivery should arrive shortly. Logic swoops in and reminds me I promised to call Catherine about the issue with the Annabelle.

Lifting my wrist, I open my mouth to direct the watch to call my old friend. But somehow, at the last minute, I can't say the words.

I assess my actions, but I can't find a reason for being unwilling to tackle the Annabelle issue head-on. Except that I can. The reason lies within my heart rather than the safe and logical confines of my mind.

After a solid five minutes of grappling over the decision, I lower my wrist.

Irritation returns, sparking in my chest and sending unwanted emotion flooding through me in a great heaving wave.

I run both hands through my hair, noting that they've begun to tremble slightly. Moira had better send the potion quickly, or I'll be a dramatic mess within a day or two. I haven't allowed emotion to surface in almost a century. Who knows what it'll be like if I unleash it while Morgan is *in* my damn house.

Standing, I shove out of my chair and up the hall, hooking a left and a right and ending up in the kitchen. Morgan's there, but she hasn't heard me. She stands on her tiptoes to place the bottle of bourbon back in the cabinet. When she stretches, her shirt slips up, revealing her lower back to me.

I've never found lower backs all that appealing apart from their proximity to more delectable body parts. But *her* lower back is lovely. Two deep dimples frame delicately etched muscles. She's the athlete of her family, and it shows in her innate strength and elegant movements.

She drops to the flats of her feet and turns, rounding the island to grab a rag. Red waves fall into her face. My fingers twitch with the desire to stroke them back behind her round ear. Ear play isn't all that well regarded among humans, but done right, gods, they do enjoy it. I know that well enough from my time living among them.

I banish that train of thought. I haven't taken a partner into my bedroom in a very long time.

The reason for that is standing right in front of me.

She takes up soft humming as she works. I should offer to help—this is my castle, after all, but she's mine too, which means the castle belongs equally to her. Is she thinking about that while she's here?

My fangs throb, splitting my gums and descending to poke my upper chin. I hold back a groan as my cock hardens in my slacks, pressing painfully to the fabric. I thought I had control over this feeling. I thought I had it in check. But staring at her now?

If I don't get that potion, I'm going to do something I really, really shouldn't.

Kiss her, maybe.

I clear my throat, and she jumps, one hand flying up to cover her heart.

“Jesus fucking Christ!” she shouts. “You’ve got to give me a goddamn warning.”

I don’t think so. Satisfaction fills me. If I can catch her off guard, surprise her, and make her scent bloom like prey, I’ll do it. I’ll live off that scent. It’s the most of her I can allow myself to take.

So, I don’t bother to agree to her demand.

“It’s not dinnertime quite yet, and I don’t know if you’ll be hungry, but I thought I should check in.”

She crosses both arms, shifting her weight to one hip. Gray eyes spark with emotion, then drag down my body and back up slowly. Crimson lips curl into a sensual grin. “Are you hungry, Keeper?”

Oh, fuck her. I see what she’s doing.

“I don’t eat much,” I snap back. “But your needs are different. I’m simply attempting to be a good host.”

“Is that so?” She casts me a dismissive, skeptical look. “A good host, huh?”

“Precisely.”

“A good host wouldn’t call me to this godforsaken town, declare me his mate, and then act like a total dick from that moment on.”

I straighten. I didn’t come here for a fight, but the dominant side of my personality, the side I dampen through potion and magic, rears its ugly head.

“It’s for your own good,” I snap.

“Why haven’t you kicked me out of this castle yet, then?” she barks back. “Because, surely, if it’s”—she makes air quotes—“for my own good, then it sucks for you to have me here.”

We face off in the kitchen, her heart rate rising, her fingers twitching against her forearms. Her foot taps the dark stone floor. I examine her features to make sure I'm reading her tone correctly. Dark brows form a harsh vee, her beautiful gray eyes narrowed. Pink tips her cheeks and travels down her neck.

Her scent. I consciously hold my breath to avoid taking any more of it in.

"Trust me when I say it is." I hope she'll perceive my tone as gentle. "I don't want to fight, Morgan. If it could be another way, it would be."

Something desperate and fleeting passes through her storm-cloud eyes, but it's there and gone so fast, I wonder if I imagined it. Or misread it. That's more likely.

She tosses the rag onto the countertop. "You know what? I'm going to bed." When she turns from me, I slip across the room and grab her wrist, whirling her back to face me. Does she realize that, despite the angry look on her face, she's sunk into my arms, her head slightly back?

Logic plays no part in my decision to slide a hand into her hair and fist it. I draw her head farther back, looming over her as her mouth parts.

"I can't be your lover, Morgan," I say softly. "Believe me when I say I *can't*. But I can be your friend."

She shoves at my chest, but I hold her captured tightly in my arms. My gaze falls to the heartbeat that throbs in a vein along her neck.

"Friends don't grab each other by the hair and stare at their bodies," she says on a growl.

Realizing she's right, I release my grip on her hair and step far enough away that her scent doesn't flood my senses. Damn it, I started breathing again.

"You're such an asshole," she mutters. "You don't deserve me."

“True,” I admit. I don’t want to fight with her. “Come to the bowling alley with me. Let’s play. A little friendly competition would be good for us, don’t you think?”

“All that bullshit and you want to go bowling?” Her brows have traveled up now, her eyes wide. I know that look; it’s shock.

“No,” I correct. “I want to kick your ass at bowling. I beat you once before, if you recall.”

Morgan snarls and rips herself away from me. “That was a fluke,” she growls. “Game on, dickhead!”

I can work with anger. It’s a more predictable emotion than many others. I can’t do what a good mate would do about anger—fuck it out of her until she forgets why she was even upset. The only thing I can do is channel that raw rage into something else. And if I know anything about Morgan from the month she’s been in town, it’s that she’s highly competitive.

It’s intoxicating.

I raise my hand and gesture toward the door to the basement. “Ladies first.”

She stalks past me with a heated look, yanking the door open. She’s careful not to let it slam against the wall, though.

Because this house is hers, a voice whispers in the back of my mind. *Hers and yours.*

I shake my head to dispel the sentiment. It’s not useful. And thoughts that aren’t useful get cast quickly from my mind. That’s Keeper Rule #3.

My watch chimes. One of the alarms must be going off. I look at the open door to the basement. Morgan’s gone from view, but her muttering still reaches my sensitive ears. I check the alarm’s stats on the surface of my watch, determining there’s nothing to worry about. Then I head down the stairs, trailing a string of muttered curses into my basement bowling alley.

Morgan's already there, examining the balls as she curses me under her breath.

I can hear her. And she knows I can hear her. Which means she's either that distracted, or she wants me to know precisely what she thinks of me at this moment. Sneaking across the floor, I stop right behind her, watching goose bumps rise along the surface of her pale skin. She whirls in place, squeaking when she discovers me standing right there. Her arms windmill, and she leaps backward but hits the ball rack and teeters.

The scents of fury and fear bloom in the air, spiking my senses and forcing my teeth from my gums. I surge forward, wrapping one hand around her pretty neck and the other around her waist. When I return her to a standing position, I expect her to claw at my fingers or spit venom. I expect her to fight.

But instead, her black pupils eat up the gunmetal gray of her irises. Her pulse flutters wildly under my fingers, her muscles trembling. All prey signals, technically. Also indicative of arousal. Her fingers tighten around my forearms.

I squeeze her throat tighter, the breath rasping from between plump crimson lips.

Her heart rate accelerates until it's pounding hard against her chest, which rises and falls to brush mine. I let my gaze drop to high, full breasts. Would her nipples be the same dark color as her lips? A sudden ache takes residence in my gut, my cock hardening, lengthening within the confines of my slacks.

I pull Morgan closer, my hungry gaze roving over her breasts, her neck, her shoulders, her chin—all places I'd like to tease and taste.

This is not logical, nor is it useful. This is—

Reality crashes over me like a bucketful of cold water. I *just* told her we couldn't be more than friends. What the fuck am I doing?

Stepping back, I release her throat and run both hands through my hair. "Sorry," I mutter.

One of Morgan's dark brows travels up. She doesn't believe me.

Of course she doesn't. I'm sending mixed signals, and it's highly inappropriate. I'll call Catherine in the morning. Morgan can't stay here. She's shredding my control, and I can't have it.

Ignoring me, she turns and grabs a dark green ball, testing it by lifting and swinging slightly.

"Not that one," I bark. "That one's mine."

She turns slowly, gray eyes narrowed. "Aren't they all yours, technically?"

"Of course," I huff. "But that one's...special," I finish lamely.

She snorts. "This is your special ball? So I need to pick another one because you're sensitive about your balls?"

I clear my throat. "I always bowl with that one."

"Well," she says, lifting the ball to her shoulder and holding it tight. "You got down here second, so you get to pick second. Or else you'll have to take it from me." There's a challenge in her tone that matches the wicked gleam in her eyes.

I'm not rising to it. Because if I have to chase her for that ball, it'll unleash something that's been desperate to escape me. Something dark and primal. Something I've worked hard to control.

"I'll be equally good with another," I say casually, grabbing the next ball off the rack. I hate it the moment I slip my fingers into the holes. I want my green ball.

The castle creaks and groans in warning.

"I know!" I grit out.

"Aww, don't be a sore loser," Morgan taunts. "You're worried I'll kick your ass if you don't have your special ball." She bats her eyelashes and laughs as I round her and step to the command module to punch in our names. I have half a

mind to nickname her “Unwelcome Houseguest,” but I think she’d take it very literally, and we’d fight.

I don’t want to fight. Fighting brings out surges of emotion, and mine are already a rollercoaster without Moira’s dulling potion.

Once the game is set, our names flashing bright above the lane, I turn to her. “You first.”

She gives me a superior look and steps to the end of the lane. We’ve bowled before. I know she was in a club in high school. But I was once the champion of the interhaven league. I’m really fucking good at this.

She watches the pinsetter drop the bowling pins into place, then swings and stalks gracefully forward. My green ball flies down the alley, knocking down nine of the ten pins. Triumph snakes through me. Morgan doesn’t turn to look at me, but waits for the ball to return. She grabs it and tosses it again, but it goes wide and misses the tenth pin.

“Tough break,” I say as I pass her and take my place at the head of the lane.

She doesn’t bother to answer, but the tart scent of anger fills the space between us.

I grip my ball lightly, holding it to my chest as I wait for the pinsetter to replace the pins. Once they’re upright, I stalk forward and throw the ball carefully, straight down the middle for a strike. Satisfaction fills me at watching all ten pins crash together and drop, swooped back into the return by an automated arm.

Both Morgan and the castle growl as I turn in triumph. Morgan’s cheeks are flushed, her eyes narrowed, and arms crossed.

My comm watch pings. I look down—another alarm in a different part of Ever. I swipe through a series of screens, but I need more info. Morgan stands silently while I check on the wards.

“Everything okay?” Her voice is careful, gentle.

I swipe through the last screen. “I believe so. The ward monitors get tripped up by many different things. It’s probably nothing to worry about. I still have to check each time, though.”

“Do you need to go?”

I look up, and I hate the emotion I recognize in her gray eyes—disappointment.

Why would she be disappointed?

Because she wants you, that helpful voice supplies deep inside my mind. Because she’s yours, and you both know it.

And that knowledge rends my soul in two as I stand there looking at her. She’s supposed to want to spend time with me because I *am* hers—irrevocably and in every possible sense there is. I’ll be hers until the day I die. And she deserves someone who can return her desires and needs tenfold.

That isn’t me. Not anymore.

“I don’t need to go,” I say. “Maybe I’ll do a quick patrol once I’ve kicked your ass, but we’re not there yet.”

Her smirk returns. “Alright, hotshot.” She turns from me, not seeing the thrill her nickname gives me. I want every nickname, every smirk, every teasing moment.

If I wasn’t in the predicament I’m in, I’d steal up behind her right now and wrap both arms around her, tease her with my teeth at her neck while she takes her turn. And then maybe I’d fuck her on the bowling alley floor. Maybe I’d bend her over the ball return or make her ride me on the leather seats that line each alley’s head.

A soft, needy groan leaves my lips unbidden. It’s loud enough to echo, my cheeks flaming when Morgan stiffens. She heard it. Of course she heard it.

She whirls in place. “Are you fucking with me right now?”

What?

“If you’re going to play dirty to get me off my game, don’t bother!” She stomps a foot, cheeks red as cherries, and returns

her focus to the alley.

I resist the urge to moan again—on purpose—and see what it does to her scent.

Fuck me, I need my dulling potion. If it doesn't arrive tonight, I'll call Moira again. It might be time to play my trump card there. My emotions are returning fast, and I can't risk that. They run too high, too charged for Morgan to be safe here with me.

She sends the ball down the aisle, and it swings wide. A bumper shoots up and bounces the ball toward the pins, knocking all ten down. Then the bumper slips back into the alley's side walls.

Morgan turns to me with a whoop, but it dies when she sees the thunderous look on my face.

“You two are cheating,” I bark. “You and the castle. Unacceptable.”

“Hey,” she barks. “I can't be held responsible for the castle's actions. It does what it wants.”

The castle lets out a warning groan. She wants the game to continue. She's having fun.

Grabbing my ball, I toss it down the alley in a perfect line, but at the last moment, a bumper swings up and out, and my ball flops into the gutter.

Behind me, Morgan cackles hysterically. When I turn, a strip of wood off the seating area bench flips up. Morgan slaps it a high five as she giggles.

“Well done!” She reaches out to pat the wood surface, and the castle practically preens with pleasure.

I look around, noting how clean the bowling alley is.

She did this, then.

I don't have the time or inclination to clean.

On cue, my comm watch pings again, this time the alert red and urgent.

The castle stills as I look up at Morgan. “I’ve got to go.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

MORGAN

The Keeper's expression turns strained as his comm watch blares out a terrible-sounding alarm. He seems torn about leaving.

I rub at my elbow. "It's okay if you have to go; I understand. This can wait."

His expression falls, a neutral mask slipping back over his handsome features. He'll leave, just like every other time duty calls. "Do you want to come with me?"

My gaze shoots up to his.

"It's probably nothing," he says quickly. "An animal triggering the ward alarms, but if it looks like a threat, I'll protect you, of course. Actually, you should probably st—"

"I'll come," I say before he can finish suggesting I stay home.

With a quick nod, he turns and leaves the bowling alley, his footsteps quiet.

I pat the bench seat one more time. "Thank you, friend. We'll be back soon, alright?"

All the lights in the bowling alley flash on and off in a steady pattern. The castle gets it. I smile as I follow the Keeper.

A few minutes later, I find him in the command center, staring at a row of red lights on the giant board that takes up one full wall. He glances at me over his shoulder when I enter, then points at the row of red.

“This indicates an actual disturbance to the ward. It’s usually nothing, but sometimes it’s thralls attacking the wards. It’s almost never been anything worse than that, except for the night Lou arrived.”

That night scared the shit out of me. Her arrival in Ever was supposed to be peaceful. Instead, a pack of soulless thralls chased her into town and almost through the wards, injuring her in the process.

“Let’s go.” He swoops past me and toward the front of the castle. When we get there, the castle opens both double front doors for us. The Keeper’s motorcycle is still parked out front.

“Oh, goody,” I mutter. “This again.”

“Takes too long to get my truck out,” he barks from ahead of me. He reaches the bike first, swinging one long, muscular leg over. He grips the handlebars with his right hand, laying his left on his thigh to make room for me to get on the bike too.

I slide my right leg over, settling carefully onto the seat. The Keeper shifts forward with a punch of his hips, and we take off into the night. I force a scream back down my throat at how fast he’s driving, but he wraps his left arm around my torso and hauls me back against him.

Rough lips come to my right ear, his warm breath tickling my skin. “I’ve got you, Morgan. I won’t let you fall.”

Sensual words delivered in that tone should turn me on. Except I know that’s not his intention. And he’s let me fall so many times already. Every time he was callous or cruel. Every time I saw him and he ignored me. Most especially the time he asked me to breakfast and left me sitting there alone.

The worst thing about that wasn’t knowing he wouldn’t return. I knew he wouldn’t—or couldn’t.

No. The worst thing about that day was the kind and understanding looks from the Evertons, like it was exactly the behavior they expected from a Keeper.

How is it that all Keepers are mated except this one? I can’t imagine it. It must be like being a politician’s wife. Do

you ever get to have fun or feel like you're that person's priority? Sure as shit doesn't seem like it, and I'd never want that for myself.

I'm lost in thought on that topic as we rumble through the night, headed for the forest behind the Keeper's castle. We drive until the road stops, then he turns us onto a dirt path and continues. The forest is quiet save for the throaty purr of his engine. He lets go of me long enough to put his left hand on the handlebars, checking his comm watch with the right.

He slows the bike and parks it, slipping off behind me. Ahead of us, the wards glow a faint and peaceful green.

Inside me, something warm and pleasant unfurls. My magic, drawn to the wards.

"They feel okay to me," I say without thinking.

The Keeper's head turns slowly, a look of disbelief on his face. "You can sense the wards?"

I shake my head. "I don't know for sure. I've never been very good at sensing my magic, but I feel it now. Like it's tumbling around pleasantly in my stomach. It doesn't feel worried, but I don't know how accurate that would be."

The Keeper checks his comm watch again, then stalks toward the ward, laying a hand on it. "Come here, Morgan. Place your hand on the ward, please."

A spike of apprehension hits me. When Thea, Wren, and I arrived in Ever, Thea's white magic punched a giant hole in the ward, and thralls got through, attacking the town.

"It's okay," the Keeper says carefully. "Black magic is healing magic. Every black witch is a little different, but your magic won't hurt the wards."

"What can be healed can be unhealed," I say. "I'm a physician, remember? I know that better than anyone."

"I've never known black magic to work that way."

"Yeah, well, it wouldn't surprise me if I was the first to be weird or different."

The Keeper purses his lips but says nothing. Instead, he reaches his hand out, palm up. I eye it cautiously, but when he makes no further move, I lift my hand, placing it in his. His long fingers slip down the underside of my hand to my wrist, which he grips and raises to the ward.

When my palm touches the surface, warmth explodes inside me, filling me to the tips of my toes and fingers. A sigh leaves my lips.

The magic is so beautiful, so encompassing, so heady and powerful. I let it course through me, the ward pulsing softly against my palm. A smile tips my lips up. I haven't felt this peaceful in—

“Morgan,” the Keeper's voice cuts through the bliss, dragging me back to the moment. I'm not ready to stop touching the ward though.

I bring my eyes to his, ready to see disappointment, but instead, his gaze is full of wonder.

“Look at the wards, Morgan,” he says softly.

I blink and turn my head to look. Beneath my palm, the opaque ward glows bright like neon. The brilliant shade radiates out from my palm in a starburst pattern, trailing fifty feet on either side of my hand.

“Oh my God,” I whisper. “What did I do to it?”

The Keeper leans one shoulder up against the ward and crosses his arms, his eyes flashing with intensity. “You healed the ward here, Morgan.”

“No,” I say automatically. “I don't know shit about my magic. I can't even feel it most of the time. I definitely didn't heal the ward.”

“You did,” he says with finality. “Believe me when I say that is exactly what you did. Each time something hits the ward, think of it like a rock chipping at a moving car. It's not a big deal, but over time, those little chips mess with the wards. One result of that is me getting an increasing number of alarms. Another result of that is eventual cracking. Most

havens replace their wards every fifty years or so because of this.”

I sputter, “But Thea’s white magic helps the wards, I thought.”

He nods. “True. Her magic strengthens the wards in general, but the cracks still pile up, and the wards would still need to be replaced eventually. These have been in place for about forty years, so it would be time in another ten or so.”

Underneath my palm, the ward shifts, and emotion fills me.

Unhappiness.

“The ward doesn’t want to be replaced,” I whisper. “She’s unhappy that you even said that.”

The Keeper sighs. “Wards are sentient in the same way homes are. But a ward can only be healed by a black witch who lives within it. Otherwise, the few identified black witches would travel around and heal wards all the time as their primary role.”

“This would have been helpful information to know when I started working with Catherine.” I try not to sound too accusatory. “I could have—”

“Felt pressured,” he says. “In the same way Thea and Wren did once they started to have control over their magic. Magic is a gift, Morgan. But with that gift comes a heavy responsibility to use it well. Catherine told you as much about your magic as we usually tell those who are learning to wield it. Typically, as you progress, you’d learn more and more. Black magic, in particular, is very difficult to master.”

An angry huff escapes me. “I’ve noticed.”

His gaze grows thoughtful. “The good news is that black magic is more innately intuitive than green or white, or blue, for that matter. It’s not so much about skill in mastery as it is about understanding yourself. It’s a more emotional magic.”

I don’t love that. I consider myself a highly rational and logical person. I don’t want to be ruled by emotions. The

moment I think that, my magic coils deep inside me, retreating from the wards.

“You can’t rule it with a heavy fist,” the Keeper says softly. “It doesn’t respond to force. Black magic is wild and free, and you have to treat it that way.”

I growl as my fists ball up. “How the hell am I supposed to learn to use it then?”

“You don’t really ‘learn’ black magic in the way you learn the other colors,” he says with a soft smile. “You experience it. You coax it out of you and into what needs healing. You nourish and partner with it, and it’ll reward you tenfold.”

It’s not lost on me that his explanation could be a metaphor for our relationship. We can’t force it, but I feel like if he took the time to understand me, to know me, I’d unfurl into a flower under his touch.

Jesus, that bourbon must still be coursing through my system. I roll my shoulders to shake the sorrowful thoughts out as I glance back at the ward. It still glows a bright green, sunbursting out from my obvious handprint where the color’s brightest. I healed the ward. I want to do more, but exhaustion slips over me like a cold, wet blanket.

“Takes a lot out of you too,” the Keeper says. “Let’s swing by Herschel’s and grab some food, then we can go home, and you can get to bed.”

“What will you do while I’m sleeping?” The question’s out of my mouth before I realize I asked it.

The Keeper’s lips twist into a pursed smile before he responds, “Stare at the grid. Monitor the wards.” His smile morphs into a broad grin that reveals sharp fangs. “Listen to you snore, probably.”

“Preposterous,” I snap. “I don’t snore. Thea or Morgan would have told me.”

He doesn’t answer, pursed lips barely withholding the smile. “All people snore. Let’s go; your stomach is rumbling.”

It's on the tip of my tongue to say that he's wrong, but I hold back. We've always bickered, ever since the day we met. It doesn't sit right with me the more time I spend around him. I hate to say I'm coming around to the whole "Keepers are a different breed" argument so many monsters have given me. And I can't necessarily excuse poor behavior.

But I think I'm starting to understand him a little bit better. Not that it means I'd ever date him. There's too much water under the bridge for that.

We don't speak the entire motorcycle ride into town. By the time we get there, I'm falling asleep from the steady thrum of the engine beneath me. The Keeper leaves me to run into the restaurant and returns with a bag full of takeout. He stows it somewhere, mounts the motorcycle, and pulls me close to his chest.

As we speed off into the darkness with his big, warm arm around me, I stop caring about what happened between us in the past. In the pitch-black night, we're just two people coming to a sort of mutual understanding, maybe even the beginnings of friendship. He offered that. Maybe I should take him up on it.

His arm tightens around me, holding me to his broad, muscular chest. And as we round a corner, the warmth of his arms lulls me into a dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER NINE

KEEPER

I'm done for. My dulling potion wore off sometime during the drive to check the wards. Decades of pent-up emotion have been battering me nonstop. I barely notice the road ahead as Morgan's sleeping body lies lax in my arms. Using her black magic really took it out of her. Her head has fallen onto my right arm, her neck bared to me.

The urge to strike, to sink my teeth into that beautiful creamy skin, hits me so hard, I stop the bike. A desperate groan rips from my throat. Pale moonlight shines down on her, a vein throbbing slow and dull beneath her skin.

Bloodlust rises, my body tensing and fangs elongating.

I can't help it.

I bend down, pressing my nose to her neck. Flaring my nostrils, I breathe her in. Candlelight. Chocolate. Whiskey. I drag greedy breaths into my lungs as her heartbeat pulses so close to my mouth. It would be so easy to bite her, to wake her with my teeth buried in her throat.

But I can't do that to her. Not only because she hasn't consented, although I would always want that. I'm already taking it too far by scenting her without her knowledge. Cold reality crashes down over me, swallowing me in waves of grief and guilt.

She's here. Right *here*. In my arms. Lying relaxed in them like she belongs here, because she does.

I drag my nose along her shoulder, memorizing how every inch of soft skin smells. And then I trace a path back up her

neck, where the scent of her blood grows impossibly strong. Drinking her would be like drinking the finest of rare wines. I allow myself a moment before I force my mouth away from her neck.

She trusts me enough to relax in my arms.

I can't violate that trust. Not now. Not ever.

My mouth fills with bitter blood. My own. I'm biting my lip so hard, I've split it. It dribbles down my chin as I kick the bike back into gear and speed for the castle. I've got to get her out of my arms and safely into bed. And then I'm comm'ing Moira. If I don't get my fucking potion, I'm going to lose control.

I run through my options. Morgan can't stay with me if I can't get ahold of myself. The risk to her is too great.

When we pull up to the castle, I hope she'll stay asleep so I can carry her inside and keep her in my arms for longer. But she wakes and stretches, long arms coming alongside my head. I relish the feel of her taut, lithe form moving against me.

She casts me a quick glance over her shoulder. "I fell asleep."

"I noticed."

"Did I snore?"

"No."

"I never snore."

My lips twitch with the need to rebuke her sass with my teeth.

She falls silent, her body still comfortably within my arms. My fingers move of their own accord, trailing the edge of her shirt. Without really thinking, I slip them just underneath the soft fabric, brushing the backs of my fingertips along her side.

She hisses in a breath, arching against me as she throws her head back and to the side.

Inviting me.

It's so natural, the way she responds. If I were a normal male, I'd bite my way up that pretty neck and slip my hand into her pants to tease her. Then I'd carry her inside, maybe go wild in the hallway, and then chase her through the house.

I stifle the groan that threatens to give away my thoughts.

Morgan beats me to it, a soft moan releasing from her throat. One of her hands comes to mine, resting flat along its back. I press my fingers further up her side, then trace a path along the side of her abdominal muscles, over the dip of her belly button and back again.

Suddenly, she jerks in my arms, her body stiffening. She grips my wrist and rips my hand from her skin. Sliding off the bike, she cuts me a narrowed look. "We really shouldn't touch. You said you wanted to be friends, and you don't seem like a friends-with-benefits sort of guy."

The loss of contact sends me reeling, a cascade of emotions battering me as she stands there, glaring. The wrongness of this response isn't lost on me, even though I've worked to ensure it since she arrived.

Shoving my natural instinct way down, I dismount the bike and reach into the saddlebag, grabbing the takeout. Rounding her, I head for the castle without a word. I don't trust myself to respond, not now with my emotions running so high.

Keeper Rule #2: Make decisions with your people's best interests at heart.

Morgan trails me inside, all the way to the kitchen, where I set the groceries down with a bang.

"You seem upset," she says in a gentler tone than I have a right to expect.

I hold up a hand to stop her. "You're right. I've given you no indication I want to start something physical. I shouldn't have touched you."

She slips gracefully onto a barstool, undoing the knot that holds her hair up in a messy bun. It falls in elegant red waves past her shoulders. She shakes it out, running her fingers

through it, her gray eyes locked to mine. “Can you answer a few questions for me, Keeper?”

My nape prickles. I sense we’re in dangerous territory, the same way a prey animal might sense a predator around. But the reality is that I’ve never given her the full story about her and me. I can’t get away with it much longer. Not with her here in my home.

Our home.

I’ve got to get her out of here. I’ll do it tomorrow.

“Why’d you become a Keeper?”

I reach for the takeout as bitterness swamps me. “I had no choice. Once you reach adulthood, every monster goes through the keeping assessment, a series of logic tests. If you’re determined to be suited to the Keeper role, you become one. It’s a critical role, so it’s not optional.”

A displeased-sounding hum is her only answer. “What were you like before the training?”

I try desperately not to slump onto the counter in a miserable heap.

When my eyes find hers, it takes everything in me not to run from the room.

I find myself answering honestly. “I was not a blunt asshole. I was sarcastic and funny. Artistic. Creative. Kind, I hope. Empathetic, if you can imagine that.”

“It’s a little hard to picture,” she says. “But sometimes when the sunlight shines on you the right way, I can sorta see it.”

I set a container of pasta salad down on the counter. “You’re teasing me.”

Morgan laughs, and warmth spreads through me. My fingers twitch. I need to touch her again. I just said I wouldn’t.

But she’s right here.

In our fucking castle.

I round the island, placing one hand on the flat surface as I halt in front of her, looming into her space. “You are a godsdamn menace, Morgan Hector.”

For tempting me.

For being here.

For existing so perfectly.

She grins wickedly up at me, gray eyes sparkling with mischief. “Wanna play truth or dare?”

“Sounds fun,” I answer without even thinking about it, another sure sign my potion has worn off. “I shouldn’t,” I blurt out immediately after. “I need to check the command center.”

Morgan shoots me a sly look. “The castle will let you know if anything’s wrong. Right?” She glances up at the ceiling.

The ceiling tiles ripple in great waves in response to her. The castle has never responded to me like this, not with such big emotion.

But I can’t take my eyes off her. “I suppose I owe you some answers.”

She nods as she slips gracefully to a stand, poking me in the center of the chest. “You absolutely do, Keeper. I think it’s time you shared them, don’t you?”

“Not really,” I mutter. My story has no happy beginning, middle, or end. But when it became clear she planned to remain in Ever, I knew this day would come. Better to rip off the Band-Aid now, I suppose. My Keeper training kicks in, and I run through all the possible outcomes of letting Morgan in on the reasons for my distance from her.

None of them are good. Which might actually serve the purpose of getting her out of the castle more quickly. I really, *really* need to call Catherine in the morning.

She turns from me and steps onto her tiptoes, reaching for my liquor cabinet. She can’t quite access the top shelf, so I join her, highly aware of how close our bodies are. Need and want slice through me like blades, fangs elongating. Another

step forward and I could press her to the cabinet, draw her neck to the side and bite her. She'd come right here in my arms.

What does it even look like when she unravels?

I want to know.

My mouth waters, but I shove all of that down.

Because what I tell her tonight is going to piss her off, and I don't know what she'll do after that—probably what's best for both of us and shun me. It's what she should do, because I'm steadily losing control living under the same roof as her.

And it's only been a day.

I take that next step forward to feel her body against mine one last time. There's nothing logical about the choice, but when my chest brushes her back, a deep sense of rightness settles over me. Morgan stiffens, sinking back onto the flats of her feet. I reach high above her head, then pause.

I bring my face close to her head. "Bourbon or wine?"

She leans back, glancing over her shoulder at me, gray eyes wide and serious. "Bourbon, Keeper." She pauses, eyes searching mine. What's she looking for, I wonder?

"What's your real name?" Her voice is soft, curious.

I frown and straighten, grabbing the bottle of bourbon. "Doesn't matter. We drop it once we take on the Keeper's mantle. Nobody uses my real name anymore, not even my mother."

"Well, your mother is a raging bitch," Morgan huffs.

"Oh, agreed. Evenia and I were never close. I wasn't close with Abemet either. Betmal is the only parent I have any relationship with at this point."

Morgan turns, her breasts brushing against my chest. "What's it like having three parents? And if Betmal is the one you're close to, what's he like? Do you have siblings? Where were you born? Or were you made?"

I grab two glasses from the cabinet to her right. “Seems more like twenty questions than truth or dare.”

She shrugs. “You’ve always held me at arm’s length. I’d like to know more about you if I’m going to remain your houseguest.” Gray eyes flash. “Unless you’d like me to leave.”

This is a precipice of some sort. A test of my worthiness. A test to see what my answer will be. I’m standing on the edge with wind buffeting my back, praying not to fall to my death.

Tell her to go, I will myself. Tell her to get out right now and go somewhere, anywhere but here.

“There’s no need for you to leave,” I say softly. “The castle would be distraught.”

On cue, every window in the kitchen opens and shuts, wild wooden clacking noises filling the kitchen.

Morgan grimaces, slapping both hands over her ears. “I get it! I’m not leaving you. Chill out, dude!”

I cock my head to the side. “Dude?”

Morgan brings her hands down and grins up at me. “Yeah. The castle is not female. All the other buildings seem to be. I guess that’s a haven thing. But the castle is different.”

The walls shimmy and shake. The castle is agreeing with her.

Shock ripples waves through me as I stare at Morgan. “Buildings are *always* female. *Wards* are always female. That’s how it is.”

She shrugs. “Well, that’s not how it is with *this* house.”

“How do you know?”

She nips at the edge of her lower lip. “Just a sentiment, more than anything. The castle has a very masculine energy to me. It’s so different from any of the other buildings. Except for Town Hall. Very feminine energy, but also distinctly different from the others. Speaking of which, I need to go back there soon.”

Confusion turns my thoughts to mud. “Why?”

Morgan sighs as if the answer is obvious, and she's disappointed I haven't been able to reach it. "Because they're your buildings, Keeper, and we need to fucking *keep* them. I mean, you do, obviously." She tacks that last bit on as if to distance her plans and mine.

The island countertop splits from the base and leaps up into the air, banging back down onto the support cabinets several times.

I stare around in wonder as the castle reacts to Morgan's statement. She looks confidently up at me like it's every day she rocks my world with a realization I never came to.

"So, the castle's a dude," I repeat. "Do I need to be doing anything different with...him?"

"Be cool," Morgan says, grabbing the bourbon out of my hand. "You coming or what? You still haven't answered the questions." She casts me a playful wink and heads out of the kitchen.

Planting both hands on my hips, I glare up at the ceiling. "This whole time you've been a male?"

No response. She, wait, no, *he* doesn't bother to answer me. But Morgan's voice echoes from the hallway outside my office. She's chatting with him.

Shock morphs into fascination, so I follow her, trailing her through the dark halls as I pick through a mountain of tumultuous thoughts.



When I open the door to my office, Morgan's already inside. She's seated in my chair, both long legs up on my desk. The room's singular fireplace roars at her back.

She jerks her head toward the fire. "Hope you don't mind. I love a good fire."

I incline my head. I love a good fire as well. Ideally, I'd have her splayed below me on a rug in front of it. I could

spend hours bringing her to bliss, over and over and fucking over again.

I choke down a needy whine, reaching across the desk to grab the bottle of bourbon. “Forgot the glasses.” I lift the bottle to my lips and drink deeply.

When I set it down, Morgan’s nostrils flare. “Do you get drunk?”

“Rarely.”

“Why not?”

I grin as I settle myself down into the ancient wooden chair in front of my desk. “Vampires run hot, Morgan. I burn through liquor faster than it can affect me. Worst I can do is get a little tipsy.”

She rolls her eyes. “Must be nice. That would have saved me quite a few hangovers in my younger years.”

It’s my turn to roll my eyes. “Twenty-eight is quite young.”

Steely eyes flash at me. “Not that young, Keeper.”

I smile. “Regarding your earlier questions. Vampires don’t get made, we’re born like most other monsters. I was born before the haven system existed, in the tiny town which is now Hearth HQ. I stopped counting birthdays several hundred years ago.” I run a hand through my hair. “Shit, I’m pretty old, come to think of it, even in human years. Was there another question?”

She gives me a look. “Siblings?”

“None. I imagine Evenia had me and decided not to try her hand at parenting ever again.” I glance at my watch, examining a series of quiet alerts that come through.

She sighs. “We really suck at communicating, you know that?”

Of course I know that. It’s been purposeful on my part.

I look back at her. “We do.”

She steepled her fingers in front of her chest. “Have you ever thought that maybe we should change that?”

I look away. “Truth or dare, twenty questions, whatever game you want to play—it’s a bad idea, Morgan.”

Why am I still here? Why did I even follow her? I spin the logic path around in my mind and can’t find any reason except that I want to be. She’s a gravitational force, and I am helpless when she’s this close.

“Why?” She pulls her feet off the desk and leans forward, planting both elbows on the burlled surface. “You have been an absolute dick since I moved here, yet you called me here. Why?”

Grim satisfaction fills my chest. I did my job, then, keeping her at bay. Because gods know that’s not what I want.

“Let’s table this topic,” I say. “Ask me something else. I don’t want to start with the heavy stuff.”

She sighs and sits back, opening her hand. I pass her the bourbon bottle, watching with delight as she brings it to her soft-looking lips and sucks at the opening. My cock hardens, lengthening and pressing against my thigh. A gnawing pain takes up residence in my chest.

Morgan sets the bottle down, wiping a stray drop of bourbon from her lips. I grip the arms of my chair to resist leaping across the desk to suck it off her myself.

“What would you have been if you weren’t a Keeper?”

I let go of the chair arms and cross one leg over the other. “Architect. I studied for it in another haven and then lived in the human world for a while. A long while,” I murmur, thinking back on the decades I lived outside of the haven system.

“Tell me everything,” Morgan breathes.

I smile softly. “Seattle is home to a vampire-and-witch hybrid coven. It’s been there since Seattle was founded in the mid-1800s. It’s a unique city; there are actually a lot of

monsters there who prefer not to live within the haven system.”

Morgan looks at me with rapt attention, gray eyes wide and lips parted.

“There’s not much to tell,” I admit. “I lived in the human world for a while, studying, working, living with the coven there.”

“Why’d you come back to Ever?”

I reach for my turtleneck, pulling at the thick fabric. The room suddenly feels heated, my cheeks flushed. I can see no way around sharing the rest of this story with her, no way around breaking her heart. I wonder if I subconsciously knew it would come to this that day I broke down and called her to Ever?

I uncross and recross my legs, clearing my throat. “I, uh —”

I expect Morgan to encourage me to continue, but she remains silent and focused.

Here goes. “Three human years ago, I was at an Anberlin concert in Seattle with some friends. It was New Year’s Eve.”

Morgan hisses in a breath, but now that I’m sharing this whole awful story, I want it out. It’s like a wound I can’t stop picking at, festering and festering away. I just need to lance it and deal with the consequences, dire as they may be.

It’s all for the best, anyhow.

“It was a great concert; they put on an amazing show.” I look up at Morgan. She’s barely breathing, her heart racing. “I noticed a beautiful redhead all night, drifting in and out of view. She was there with friends, if memory serves. But when the countdown to midnight began, she and I locked eyes, and I couldn’t look away. I crossed the dance floor as the clock began to chime, stopping in front of her, in front of *you*,” I clarify.

Morgan stands. “That was you? You kissed me at midnight and disappeared. You? Why don’t I recognize you? That was

you; are you fucking kidding me?!” Her tone rises, blood rushing angry and hot through her veins.

I resist the urge to stand and pull her to me, to ask her to understand.

It's better to push her away.

“I was glamoured when I kissed you at midnight, Morgan. And I returned immediately to Hearth HQ because I knew what you were to me the moment I tasted your lips. I returned home to call you to me, to claim you, to keep you. I returned home filled with joy.”

She crosses her arms, a furious look on her face. “But you didn't call me!”

I shake my head. “No, no, I didn't.”

Her eyes fill with unshed tears, her voice a mere whisper. “Why?”

Reliving the memory now fills me with shame and dread and self-loathing so overwhelming, I can barely continue speaking.

“When I returned home to tell my parents the joyous news, Evenia kindly reminded me that I left the haven system before the keeping test. She demanded I go through with it, said she couldn't make an exception for me. I agreed, of course. I had no desire to be a Keeper. I was so fucking sure it would come back negative. But it wasn't negative.”

The first tear trails down Morgan's cheek, and part of me dies as I watch it slide to her chin and drop to the floor.

Better to put the final nail in my coffin now.

“I fought tooth and nail not to go through with keeper training. I told Evenia I'd leave the haven system permanently to find you, but she forced me through it anyhow.” My tone is bitter, angry. “And once it was done, I knew I was half the man I'd been before. They took so much from me, Morgan, and I couldn't bear to inflict all of that on you.

“Fate wasn't done with me, though. I came to Ever determined to make the best of a horrible situation. I knew

you'd thrive in the human world. You were fierce and perfect, and some man would make you happy, I hoped. A man full of emotion and empathy who could put you first. I wanted that for you. But vampire mate bonds run deep. We have only to identify our mate for them to form and solidify for us."

"What does that even mean?" she whispers, tears sliding faster down her face.

My voice cracks as I deliver the final blow. "It means, when your parents died, I felt your heartbreak. I felt your devastation and your pain. Something in me snapped, and I called you."

"You called me and shunned me, you mean." Her voice is bitter, venomous.

And there it is.

"Even heartbroken, you were full of life and joy and fire," I admit. "And I realized my mistake. Once upon a time, I could have matched you toe-to-toe, Morgan, when I was whole. But now?" I gesture at myself. "You don't deserve to be saddled with this life."

Morgan swipes at the tears with the back of her hand. "And you decided this all on your own. Did it ever occur to you to fucking talk to me about any of it?"

I shake my head. "That's why I invited you to breakfast that day. I wanted to share it with you. But then..."

"The castle called, right?" she snaps.

I stand. "There's more, Morgan. More I should tell you."

She throws both hands up and backs out from behind the desk, shaking her head. "I don't think so, Keeper." Her tone is cool, collected, a wild dichotomy to the throbbing intensity of her heartbeat. "I don't need to hear anything else. You've said enough."

I reach for her, but she backs against the wall with eyes wide and wild.

My Keeper training takes over, that need for logic and quick action making me clear and direct. "Morgan, every fiber

of who I am now is designed to make decisions with my people's best interests at heart, no matter how I may feel personally."

"That's enough," she hisses. "I don't want to hear another word about it." She eyes the door, looking like she's about to make a run for it.

The emotional side of my brain begs me to tell her not to go. But I say nothing. It would be better for her to run far, far away from me.

She stands tall, glaring daggers at me. "I've been here over a month! You could have told me all of this up front. You could have explained!"

"I suppose I could have, but it wouldn't have been any easier," I state. "There is no easier way to explain my decisions."

She sidesteps toward the door. "You are a foolish ass of a man, and I don't have a single fucking thing to say to you except that I need space. You won't have any problem giving me that, I assume?"

Without waiting for my answer, she darts out the door. The sound of her footsteps pounding the carpet as she flees for the stairs echoes, each one a punch to the gut.

I knew this story wouldn't have a happy ending. I just didn't realize it would still hurt so much.

CHAPTER TEN

MORGAN

Oh my God, I am mad. I am *hopping* mad.

Who does he think he is? And it's the middle of the goddamn night, so I can't even call Thea or Wren or Lou to complain about what a fucking asshat the Keeper is.

Even so, a small part of me drags my emotional self back to the Anberlin concert. Back to that night where a mysterious stranger kissed me at midnight. Back to the night where he kissed me like I was the other half of his soul. Then he disappeared into the crowd, and I never saw him again.

I stomp up the stairs before remembering my luggage is on the first floor. So I stomp extra loud back down, grab it, and fling the first bedroom door open, remembering at the last second that the castle might not take kindly to violence.

"I'm sorry, I'm so fucking mad!" I shout at the ceiling.

The door to my room shuts with a quiet snick.

"Who does he think he is?" I yell, pacing toward the wall of windows. "Making all these damn decisions without bothering to ask how I feel. Misogyny at its finest. You know what? Go toss him out on his ass, would you?"

The castle goes silent and still, admonishing me.

I flop down in the window seat, gazing out at the beautiful dark pine forest that surrounds us.

Crossing my arms, I let my head fall against the wide window frame. "You're right, of course. He needs a place to sleep."

The closet door opens, and the floor ripples, shoving a box across the room toward me. It stops at my feet. The floor bops once, the top of the box flopping open.

Dusty magazines fill the box.

Keeping Daily

Adjusting to Your Role as Keeper

What to Do When Keeping Sucks

Each one has the Hearth HQ logo printed along the bottom. Gross. Propaganda from monster headquarters, then. I grab the top three and sit back in the window seat, flipping absentmindedly through the pages. After a few minutes, I realize what the castle's doing—trying to get me to learn more about Keepers.

I glance around the dark, opulent room. “You’re saying I should try to understand? Do you not see why I’m mad?”

All the black covers on my bed lift and rise on an invisible current, twisting and torquing before flopping neatly back onto the mattress.

“Okay,” I bark. “I’d *like* to understand. But for someone to be your mate and make all the decisions without consulting you is, *like*, really a dick move. Thea and Wren’s mates didn’t pull this horse shit.”

A floorboard under the box of magazines shoots upright, dumping them all out. A small box tumbles free—an honest-to-God VHS tape.

I pick it up. The faded and worn label says “Keeper Transition—A. Zeniphon.”

Oh my God. Is this a video of the Keeper becoming the Keeper? A rush of alarm sweeps through me. If that’s what this is, do I want to see it? Downstairs he said Evenia forced him to go through with it.

The castle goes still and silent like he’s holding his breath. Anxiety prickles along my skin, my fingers twitching.

Outside my bedroom window, an owl hoots softly. I glance out, watching the moon high in the sky.

It's the middle of the night, and my thoughts are a whirlwind. I'm mad. I'm disappointed. I'm...intrigued. But I need a minute to think this through. I set the VHS down and grab the stack of magazines. Crossing the room, I fall into bed and flip through them until I fall asleep.



I wake at the ass crack of dawn, my eyes springing open to stare at the ornate wood ceiling. Two of the tiles flip-flop places.

“Good morning to you too,” I groan, rubbing a hand over my face. “What time is it?”

Five tiny chimes emit from somewhere across the room.

Fuck me. Five a.m.

My bed covers ruffle, shifting the keeping magazines and depositing them on my chest. They slip and slide until they cover my face. I grab them and sit upright.

“Chill out, wait.” I look around the room. “You need a name. I'm so used to calling the Annabelle by her name. Do you have one already?”

Silence.

“How about Ben? You seem like a Ben to me. I worked with a really nice nurse named Ben once upon a time.”

Every door in my room opens and shuts slowly. A yes.

“Okay, Ben”—I pull my hair into a bun on top of my head—“I suppose you think I need to watch this VHS, huh?”

The castle yanks all the covers off the bed, dumping them in a heap on the floor.

“Rude,” I huff, sliding out of bed. “I don't suppose you have any idea where I can locate a VHS player, do you?”

One of the magazines flips open, the pages flying by themselves until it falls flat. On the left page, a smiling centaur

stands in front of a beautiful old building, holding a stack of books in her arms.

The title reads, “Historical Societies and Their Role Within the Haven System.”

Ah.

“Thanks, Ben,” I mumble as I head for the bathroom.

Twenty minutes later, I’m showered and headed out the door with the VHS in hand. I snatch the Keeper’s bike key on my way out—fucker deserves for me to steal it—it’s mine for the day. He is in the wrong here. And he gets wronger and wronger by the minute, I swear.

A tiny guilty twinge sounds off somewhere in my mind, but I don’t let it take hold.

Ben waves both front doors at me as I slide across the bike seat and stare at the dark road ahead. Awareness pricks at the back of my neck. I whip around on the bike, but nobody’s there.

I squint into the dark, but there’s no one.

Although, it wouldn’t surprise me for the damn Keeper to be in that forest watching. He moves around silently.

Asshat.

I flip the quiet forest a middle finger in case he’s there, and then I put the bike into gear, roaring down the dark road.

I’m unsteady on the bike at first, but I get the hang of it quickly, even though it’s too big for me. The handlebars are set at the right height for the Keeper, so I have to lean pretty far forward. Even so, it’s thrilling to have the wind in my hair. It doesn’t occur to me how loud the bike is until I drive slowly down Sycamore and hook a right on Main Street. The engine’s throaty purr bounces off the buildings.

Shit, I’m gonna wake up the whole town.

It’s too late, I suppose.

Grimacing, I troll slowly up Main, parking the bike in front of the historical society. It’s dark, which I expected. To

my left, Town Hall stands quietly. A deep, aching sadness takes root in my stomach. It's so wrong how Town Hall never gets used. I want to change that.

Jogging across the street, I head for the empty, quiet building. I make my way up the steps and place a hand on the front door. "I'll come visit with you shortly, alright? I need to do some research at the historical society."

The front door shimmies. Town Hall gets it, but she's sad.

I can't have that. I stroke the front door fondly, then jog back across the street to the historical society. A sign on the door indicates that, while the society doesn't technically open until nine a.m., anyone is welcome to come in and look for what they need.

I push the front door open, a bell tinkling just inside the entrance. The scent of thousands of books hits me, and I suck it in greedily. Wren has always been the most bookish of the three of us sisters, but I still love a library or bookstore. Smiling, I cut a light on. Somehow, I sense the society is awake and listening to me, even though there isn't an employee here yet.

Placing my hand on the wooden front desk, I pat its surface lightly. "Hello, friend. I'm on the hunt for a VHS player. You wouldn't happen to have one, would you? Ben—err, the Keeper's castle, seems to think you do."

A door creaks open somewhere in the back.

"Thank you!" I shout as I rush down a row of bookshelves toward the sound.

The historical society is deceptively big, as it turns out, and it takes me a few minutes to make my way through the labyrinth of bookshelves to find any sort of door. But I do find it, along the backmost wall of the society building. I push through and fumble around for a light switch.

When I turn it on, I'm in a small classroom. It looks straight out of the 50s, complete with the all-in-one desk and chair combo. A tiny shelf underneath each seat provides space to put your books on. A giant black chalkboard lines the front

of the room. Faded lines indicate someone has used this room to teach.

There's no teacher's desk in this classroom, but a VHS player on a stand sits to one side.

"Yes!" I shout, rushing across the room to the player.

But when I get to it, I slow down.

Am I really doing this?

And am I really doing this alone?

Without thinking, I lift my wrist and speak directly into my comm watch, "Please call Thea Hector."

Thea's name hologram blinks above my wrist for a few seconds.

"What's wrong?" Her voice comes through clear as a bell. I'd think she'd be tired, but she's a detective at heart. She can wake up in about half a second and be ready to go investigate shit.

"Not wrong, exactly," I say. "Can you come to the historical society?"

Through the watch, I hear a rustle and a deep, manly groan, followed by light footsteps. "On my way. Need anything from my place if this isn't an emergency?"

"Nah, I'm gonna call Wren," I say.

Thea clicks off. I hesitate for a moment. Do I want to be surrounded by people when I watch this tape? I second-guess myself for a moment, then remember that my sisters and Lou are my favorite people in the entire world. I call Lou and Wren next, and like Thea, they rise to the occasion.

I sit in the classroom, VHS tape in hand until they arrive. I try to use the time to mull over what the Keeper shared last night.

He asked if I remembered him.

That's a dumb question.

That New Year's Eve kiss rearranged my DNA. I think about it every year at New Year's, and I've compared every kiss since then to his. Nothing ever came close.

Holy shit, I've actually kissed the Keeper. That's so... weird.

Turns out fate has a sense of humor.

The front door opens loudly, and the sound of my sisters' voices echoes back.

I stand and make my way toward the front, grinning when the girls come into view.

Thea's wearing jeans and a tee, her blond hair pulled into a messy bun that matches mine. Wren's got a silky black robe over a floor-length negligee of some sort, black lace peeking out around the edges. Lou is wearing one-piece teddy bear pajamas that hug her curves indecently.

"Jesus, you three are a sight," I huff out.

Lou sips at a cup of coffee, her eyeballs barely open. "Listen, bitch, till the stars die and all. We love you, and we're here; don't expect a lot more at this time of day. If the sun isn't up, we shouldn't be either, ya know?"

Thea rolls her eyes. "Wholeheartedly disagree. What do you need, Mor?"

I quickly fill them in on the Keeper's bombshell from last night. By the end of the retelling, even Wren looks gobsmacked.

"Wait," she huffs. "He's Mister New Year's Kiss?"

"Yeah." I still can't wrap my mind around it. I tried to forget it so many times.

"Gods, that's so sad," Lou says.

We all turn to look at her. She takes another sip of her coffee then whirls her hand in a circular motion like she's trying to get the point across.

"You know? Because time moves so much faster here in Ever. That kiss was what, not this past new year, but a couple

before, right?” She glances up, squinting. Ah, she’s mathing.

Her voice goes mournful, her gray eyes locked to mine. “That means, for him, he met you almost a hundred years ago, Morgan.”

Oh, fuck. She’s right.

“Oh, fuck,” Wren deadpans as I slump against the nearest bookshelf. “So he’s literally been dealing with this for that whole time? Is that what we’re saying?”

“Pining for ten decades is more accurate,” a voice echoes from the front.

All four of us scream. I drag my sisters and Lou into my arms, yanking them to the side so I’m in front of them slightly.

A shadow stands in the darkness between two bookshelves.

A shadow with feathers.

“Moira?” I call out. “Is that you?”

The shadow coos and steps into the light.

“Moira Finher, you scared the absolute shit out of us,” I shriek.

The harpy woman steps closer with both wings raised, her crown feathers rising and flattening in a pattern. “I’m so terribly sorry, Hectors. And Lou.”

“Wait.” Thea crosses her arms. “How did you know we were here?”

Moira’s cheek feathers blush pink at the root, the color traveling to the tips. Interesting. “The Keeper called me when Morgan left the castle. He didn’t think his presence would be helpful. But he hoped I might be able to shed some light, or at the very least answer your questions, Morgan.” Amber eyes flick to mine and soften. She crosses her wings over her front, looking like a schoolmarm.

“I, uh—” I sputter.

“That’s nice of him,” Lou says thoughtfully, then looks over at me. “See, Keepers aren’t all that bad. He kinda knew you were pissed.”

“It doesn’t sit right with him,” Moira offers.

“Except he’s been trying to push me away since I arrived here,” I snap a little more harshly than I mean to. “We met—

“Nearly ten Ever decades ago,” Moira says softly. “I know all about it. I was his betrothed once, remember?” She gives me a little wink.

Lou clears her throat. “Was this before or after Morgan’s identification?”

I shift from one foot to the other as Moira clears her throat delicately. “After. Our betrothal was, what’s the human saying? For show. I’d be happy to tell you more. It’s never been romantic between the Keeper and me. My sexual preferences lie elsewhere.”

“Oh, Jesus,” Thea says with a huffy laugh. “The plot thickens.” She makes the *round ’em up* gesture over her head. “Let’s find somewhere to sit. We need the whole scoop, the entire scoop, like right this second.”

“Let’s go to Town Hall.” The words are out of my mouth before I realize I’ve said them. All four women look at me, but it’s Moira who agrees first. “Of course, friend. After you?” She gestures toward the front of the historical society.

I turn toward the darkness. “I need to grab something,” I shout over my shoulder, jogging back to the classroom. When I get there, I pat the wall gently. “May I take the VHS player over to Town Hall for a while? I promise to return it.”

On cue, the VHS stand rolls across the tiled floor toward me.

“Thank you!” I shout, tucking the VHS tape under my armpit. I grab the player stand and wheel it out of the classroom toward my girls.

When I rejoin them, Wren looks at the player skeptically. “We watching old movies, Mor?”

“You found it, then,” Moira says with a preen of her crown feathers. “The Keeper’s transition video?”

I nod, discomfort niggling in my chest. “Do I want to see this?” My eyes are locked on the bird woman.

She sighs, shaking her head. “It won’t make you happy to see this, Morgan. But I hope it will help you to understand him a little bit more. All of you, really.” She looks around at the group.

“Hey,” Thea barks. “I get the whole being-a-Keeper-zaps-your-empathy thing, kinda, but it doesn’t excuse poor behavior.”

“It doesn’t,” Moira agrees. “But you don’t yet know his full story, and you lack the context about how everything came to be. Let’s go watch the video, and I think you’ll see what I mean.

“Oh God,” I moan. “I don’t know if I want to, now that I have a way to.”

Moira steps closer, reaching around me with one long, elegant wing. “You’re his mate. And I know it sounds trite to say he pushes you away because of his love, but it’s true. I have watched him struggle with this for decades.”

Something angry and ferocious bursts inside me. The idea of him struggling over me feels wrong.

“Ah, there you go,” Moira whispers in a conspiratorial tone. “You’re beginning to see the yin and yang of Keepers and their mates. You don’t want to be mad at him, do you? It feels wrong?”

Silence descends as my sisters and aunt stare at me. I look deep into Moira’s whiskey-brown eyes.

“No,” I admit. “I want to understand. But I’d like him to be forthcoming.”

“Ah,” Moira says, patting me on the lower back. “Once you have this context, I’ll encourage him to share the rest of his story with you.”

“I need breakfast for this shit,” Thea grumbles. “You guys wheel that stuff over to Town Hall. I’m going to the Galloping Green Bean to pick up some French toast and whatever you might want.”

“Let me go,” Lou says quickly. “It’s more important for you three to be together. I’ll grab a bunch of food and be back in a few, okay?”

I pull her in for a quick hug. Her skin is burning up, scorching mine. My magic curls and tumbles in my chest, beating a pattern against the back of my ribcage. I step back, throwing a hand over my heart as I suck in deep lungfuls of air.

“What’s wrong?” Thea barks.

I reach for Lou again, resting the back of my hand on her forehead. “You’re burning up, Lou. When do you see Doc Slade next?”

Her eyes go hooded. “Later today,” she says, rubbing the back of her elbow. “I haven’t been feeling all that well, but he says it could be a side effect of the thralls.” She forces cheer into her tone. “If I was going to become one, it would have happened by now, though, so that’s good!”

We all fall silent. The thought of Lou becoming one of the soulless, depraved monsters is more than I can bear. I yank her back into my arms, wrapping her up tight as my magic twists and snatches inside me.

“I’ll go with you to see Doc Slade later,” I whisper into her hair. “I don’t know shit about my magic, but maybe there’s something I can do to help.”

“Mmkay,” she mumbles from my neck area. “Let go, Mor, you’re suffocating me, woman!”

Reluctantly, I release my hold on her. Lou gives me a soft smile, then turns to leave. She pats both Thea and Wren on the way out.

I clap my hands together. “Okay, kids, let’s do this!”

Moira and my sisters trail me as I push the VHS stand out of the building and across the street. We drag it up over the curb onto the sidewalk, then push and pull it across the grass and up the steps. On a whim, we wheel it all the way to the Keeper's office. Feels fitting.

A small, still-mad part of me wants the monitoring system to let him know I'm in his office.

Again.

Town Hall helpfully lights the fireplace, casting warmth into the chilly room.

"Thank you, friend," I murmur, patting the fireplace mantel.

Moira smiles at me as we settle into his office chairs. "Are you ready, Morgan?"

Am I ready? I take a moment to contemplate that. I'm not. I don't think I ever could be.

"Ready as I'll ever be," I mutter. "Let's just get this over with."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

MORGAN

A pprehension chokes me when I slide the VHS tape from its protective cardboard box. My fingers tremble as I push the tape into the TV's slot. The mechanism grabs the VHS and pulls it in, a series of clicks and whirls telling me it's beginning to play.

“Well, that’s a blast from the past,” Wren mutters.

The TV cuts on, the picture grainy and faded. Inside a stark, tiled room sits a single chair with straps at the feet, armrests, and head.

A chill steals down my spine as I grind my teeth together. Whatever this is, it looks like a torture chamber.

“The initial Keeper training is more of an unraveling,” Moira says softly. “It’s hard to watch. But this first session is a rewiring of Keepers’ brains. After this is done, they go through more formal training on the ins and outs of fulfilling their roles.”

A title pops up on the screen: *Keeper Transition—A. Zeniphon.*

My mouth goes dry.

The small room’s only door opens, and Evenia strides through with both hands clasped behind her, hair pulled into a high, tight bun. She stops beside the chair and lifts an arm, resting it along the chair’s back.

“*D*o not fight me on this, Keeper,” she growls, her tone cruel and callous.

A figure falls through the doorway onto his knees. He slips gracefully back to his feet and rounds the chair.

The Keeper.

“Don’t call me that,” he says. “I’ve already told you I have no intention of becoming a Keeper. I don’t even live within the haven system.”

Evenia drops her hands, black claws glittering as she glares at her son. “You don’t get that choice. You should have taken the keeping test long ago. You would have if you’d been living in the system like your fathers and I asked you to. This isn’t optional.”

“I won’t,” he barks, balling his fists. “I’ve identified my mate, and I won’t pull her into the life of a Keeper’s mate. She doesn’t deserve that.”

“Do or don’t.” Evenia shrugs. “Although, at some point, you’ll have to take a partner. Keepers don’t succeed without a partner; you know that.”

“You can’t force me to do this,” he spits. “I don’t want it.”

The older vampire shoves her way into her son’s face until he backs into the wall. “You can and you will, Keeper.”

“Stop calling me that.”

“Stop behaving like a child.”

Two more figures enter the room, trolls. Muscle is stacked on top of muscle. They’re easily three times his size.

The Keeper’s eyes flick to them, then back to his mother. “You wouldn’t.”

She grins at him. “Oh, I would, and I will. You don’t have a choice in this.”

The Keeper slumps to the tiles, his voice breaking. “Mother, please. I’m begging you not to do this to me. I’ll leave the haven system. It won’t disgrace the family. Don’t make me do this. I can’t do this to her. I won’t be me anymore. I’ll have nothing to offer he—”

A slap rings out as Evenia backhands him. Blood sprays the wall as he snaps his fangs at her. She doesn't flinch, standing toe-to-toe with him.

"Mother," he whispers. "I've waited my whole life for her, and she's perfect. Don't make me do this. I'll leave; I'll go. Don't take this from me."

The quiet stretches as Evenia frowns down at him, seeming to consider what he's asking.

A red tear slides down his cheek, but powerful muscles bunch, and then he shoots across the room, knocking Evenia to the ground. He darts between the trolls and out the door, only to be backed into the room again by a fourth giant figure.

One of the trolls grabs him around the neck, slamming his body into the chair. He writhes and twists, slashing with his claws and snapping with his teeth.

Evenia rises and rounds the chair, spitting blood at her son. "How dare you fight this?! None of us have any choice, Keeper. We all serve the system for the greater good! Keeper Rule #1!"

He's beyond words, bellowing into the room as the trolls struggle to keep him in the chair. He slips out more than once, but a troll has a grip on his arm and yanks him back. His joint pops, his arm hanging limply by his side.

And still he fights.

He fights and bellows as they strap his arms and legs and head to the chair.

Evenia steps back. "You had better be a good Keeper after all of this. Mark my words, if you don't, I'll find her and do what I must to ensure you do your duty. Do you understand, my child?"

He spits blood at her, thrashing against the restraints.

A new noise fills the room, a resonant thrum. The lights snap and flicker, and his body jerks.

"Morgan!" he cries out. The straps around his head light up, blasting him with some unseen energy. He jerks and

writhes and fights, eyes rolling back into his head.

“Morgan, no. Morgan.” The name falls from his lips as the lights continue to flicker. Foam appears at the edge of his mouth, dripping down his chin as blood runs from his nose and ears.

“Morgan.” His voice grows softer, his body twitching and jerking as the restraints’ lights pulse and quiver.

He stops thrashing, his body only moving with the occasional twitch.

And still he whispers that name, over and over.

When the whirring sound finally stops, blood drips steadily from his mouth, nose, and ears. Evenia gestures to the trolls, who undo his straps. For a long minute, he doesn’t move. He’s still as a statue.

But then he rises gracefully from the chair, his face now a neutral mask. Elegant fingers come to the neck of his collared shirt. He straightens his tie as he gives his mother a bored look.

“Hello, Mother.”

“Hello, Keeper,” Evenia purrs. “I will say the same thing to you that I say to every Keeper who enters our system—we welcome your sacrifice. Your care and trust for others is the only reason our system works. May you succeed in your mission.”

“Naturally,” he drones.

Evenia steps aside, gesturing for the troll guards to move. “Off you go, Keeper,” she chirps. “Aberen is waiting to escort you to training.”

The Keeper inclines his head respectfully and heads for the door. When he passes his mother, she grabs his upper arm and leans close. “Don’t fuck this up, my son. Remember, I know about her.”

He jerks his arm out of his mother’s grip. “She is a nonissue, Evenia. It’s like I told you. I wouldn’t bring her into this existence if my life depended on it.”

She crosses both arms and watches as her son stalks from the room without a backward glance.

The video clicks off. The room around me is completely silent. Tears stream steadily down my cheeks as I slump into the chair.

No one says anything for a long time. I'm so shocked and horrified, I can't even bear to look at my sisters.

Moira's the first to speak. She shifts forward and rubs the back of my arm with her wing. "It's a terrible thing to see, but perhaps you understand a little better why we all seem to sympathize with his personality."

"I can't believe his mother did that to him when he didn't want to be a Keeper," I finally whisper, looking up at her.

Moira's amber eyes are full of tears. She nods slowly. "It's not supposed to work that way. While it's true that becoming a Keeper isn't optional if you identify, it has always been the rule that if you don't want to become one, you can leave the haven system. She broke the law to ensure he'd fill the role."

"Why?" Thea's voice is edged with steel. "She should be in jail."

Moira turns to my triplet. "I can't say for sure, but it's my suspicion that the Keeper living outside the haven system seemed like a slap in the face to her. They've never been close, but he was always well regarded before he left to live with the humans."

"Did you know him then?" Wren asks.

Moira shakes her head. "I didn't meet him until he began Keeper training." Her eyes fall, and she ruffles both wings before settling them against her side. After a long, silent moment, her gaze finds me again. "I know his behavior has been off-putting, and you've struggled to understand why he is the way he is, Morgan. Keepers *need* to lack emotion to operate from the logical place they do. And I'm not saying it's right for him to push you away. I don't believe he should and we've had many conversations about it. But I do think it's helpful for you to understand where he came from."

“But he called us here,” Thea says indignantly. “He literally called us with the map.”

“Yes,” Moira says with a fresh shake of her head. She glances back at me. “When your parents died, he raged for weeks on end. He was distraught. Keepers aren’t meant to feel that level of emotion, but he was always more emotional than other Keepers, even after that initial session we just watched. It’s my theory that it’s because he went through the training much later than other monsters do. That, and—”

She looks up at me.

Heartache hits me swift and fast, cutting me to my very core.

“Because our connection was so instant, so strong,” I whisper, looking up at my sisters. “He told me vampire mate bonds cement immediately. So, this whole time, he’s been able to feel my emotions.”

My stomach drops as I sink forward, putting my head in my hands. “I don’t know what to make of all this,” I whisper.

My sisters join me, wrapping me up in a tight hug.

“Give yourself a day or two to process it,” Wren says. “Come stay with Ohken and me, or go to Thea and Shepherd’s. Chill with us while you think this through. You’re right that none of this excuses his behavior, but it’s not like...a normal human situation. I’m all fucked up trying to sort it out myself, to be honest.”

Thea huffs. “I swear to God, I don’t know how that bitch runs Hearth HQ when she’s such a villain. How does she get away with it?”

I look up at Moira. “That’s a good question. How *does* Evenia get away with all this shit?”

Moira sighs. “The haven system was her idea in the first place. While I agree that her approach leaves a lot to be desired, she’s done wonderful things for monster safety.”

I stand, yanking my hair out of the loose bun. As I retie it, I look at my sisters.

“Raincheck on the food, okay? I need to talk to the Keeper ASAP.”

Thea’s eyes soften, and Wren nods stoically.

“Go get him, girl. And then call us to tell us everything!”

CHAPTER TWELVE

KEEPER

I pace the kitchen as I mull over what happened with Morgan last night. Truth be told, I've been thinking about it nonstop. When I called her, I knew it would come to this—that I'd tell her about our history, and she'd be beyond angry.

She has every right to feel that.

I feel it too now that I'm fully off Moira's dulling potion: blind, raging fury for the loss of what we could have been. But now? I'm a husk of who I was. She deserves who I was before in my full, joyful glory.

Growling, I rip the fridge door open and grab a beer. It's early in the day, but my body hums with the need to do something. I could handle the discord between Morgan and me before she was in my damn castle. But having her here, watching the castle fall so quickly in love with her? I'm undone.

My comm watch pings. When I glance down, Betmal's name hovers above the thin blue strap.

I direct the watch to answer. My father's silky deep voice echoes through it. Somehow he always manages to sound like he's in the room with me. He's the only monster whose voice doesn't sound tinny through the system. I suspect it's something to do with his power of influence.

“My son, how are things?”

How are things? I debate how much to tell him. He's been on the receiving end of my complaints for nearly a century.

“The situation is not ideal,” I mutter.

A resonant laugh echoes from the watch. “So I’ve heard. Your mother is in a rage about this Wesley situation, and the castle tells me you have an interesting guest.”

Ah. It’s an odd fact that my castle has always liked one of my three parents. They communicate...somehow. I’ve never quite figured it out. I assume there’s a magical artifact somewhere here, but the castle refuses to say.

I bet Morgan could weasel it out of him.

Him.

I shake my head.

“Did you know the castle is male?”

A moment of silence stretches long.

“Buildings are always female.”

“Not this one. Morgan says the castle’s male, and he’s confirmed it. She named him Ben.”

Not that she told me; I simply overheard it like I hear everything. Including the conversation they had last night that she probably forgot I could hear. Or wanted me to hear.

Gods.

Betmal chuckles. “Your little mate is an interesting creature. Have you given in yet?”

“No,” I grumble. “I can’t. You know I can’t.”

A soft sigh reaches me. “You should try, my son. For both of your sakes.”

Bitter anger streaks down my spine. I open my mouth to shout, but my father continues, “In any case, I won’t press you on the topic of her. I imagine it’s dreadful enough scenting her and hearing her all day long, particularly if Ben adores her, which it sounds like he does.”

“Right,” I grit out.

“I called because your mother has decided to send another Keeper. Thankfully, I was able to influence her enough to

ensure it's someone you like. Perhaps you remember Arkan from your time at the academy?"

A mixture of panic and relief washes over me in confusing waves. I knew this day was coming the moment I learned that Wesley wasn't in the portal we captured. Of all the Keepers Evenia could send, Arkan was in my top five.

"He's mated now," Betmal continues. "His wife is a black witch, incidentally."

"How very coincidental." This is my father through and through, shoving and moving people across his chess board. He does it to Abemet and Evenia, and I'm sure they know. Of my three parents, Betmal is the most soft-spoken but the most powerful.

"Such a happy coincidence," he says cheerfully. "In fact, they arrived a while ago. Richard should be delivering them to the castle shortly."

"Father," I grumble.

"Oh, goodness," he continues in a cheerful tone. "Your mother is calling me. Got to go!" He clicks off without another word.

On cue, a noise reaches me from the road out front. I twitch an ear to hear it better.

A diesel truck. That'll be Richard with Arkan and his wife, I presume.

I'm almost thankful for this turn of events because it'll give me something to focus on other than Morgan and how furious she is with me.

Striding toward the front, I sense a nervous energy. I spin around; it's almost like someone's behind me, that niggling sensation along the back of my neck. When there's nobody there, I glance around at the castle. "What's wrong?"

I lift my comm watch, but no alarm pings. No hologram messages display above the band. Everything seems to be okay.

Suddenly, a nail pops out of the wall and whizzes toward me. I duck, throwing myself against the wall with a hiss.

Another nail zooms through the air. I step aside, and it embeds in the wallpaper beside my head.

“I get it!” I shout. “I can’t do anything about her right now. We have guests!”

I don’t wait around to see if the castle is mollified. The carpet under my feet rips up and ruffles, sending waves of fabric toward me. I scramble up over it for the door, irritation building in my chest.

“Cease this this instant!” I shout.

The floor runner separates into pieces and wraps around me, suffocating me with its heavy, dusty weight. I can’t see a thing, but I sense movement. Then, the rug unfurls and tosses me forward. I fall flat on my face on the stone walkway in front of the castle.

“Hello, Keeper,” a smooth voice purrs.

I look up, spitting dirt out of my mouth.

“Arkan.” I incline my head respectfully as my old friend reaches out a hand. Taking it, I allow him to pull me upright.

The big centaur stands with a huge grin on his face. To his right, a lovely female centaur stands, her lips pursed to hide a smile. Richard and Connall stand on Arkan’s other side.

Richard gives me a look. “I take it things are going well?”

I wave his comment away. “Nothing to worry about.”

Arkan’s grin grows so broad, I see every one of his teeth. He takes a step back and rests his hands on the female’s lower back. “Keeper, this is my mate, Hana. I’ve been singing your praises, but it seems we’ve caught you at an inopportune time.”

“Not at all.” I reach for Hana’s hand and shake it.

“Lovely to meet you, Keeper,” she says. “I’m sorry the circumstances are somewhat awkward.”

I wave that comment away too. “Not awkward, although certainly unfortunate,” I admit. “Wesley must be stopped. And, in any case, I’m thrilled to have the help.”

“Oh, that’s a lie.” Arkan laughs and claps me on the back. “But I’ll take it anyhow.” He jerks his head toward the castle, long black hair swinging around his shoulders. “Can we grab a drink and talk through what’s going on? I got the lowdown from Evenia, but I’d prefer to hear your version.”

I nod and look at Richard and Connall. “You two should join us.”

The shifters both nod. Turning, I lead the group back into the castle, praying and hoping he’ll behave while they’re here. Still, I’m unsurprised when a floorboard pops up to trip me as we enter the kitchen. I fall to both knees, uttering a curse.

Hana reaches for me. “My goodness, Keeper. Your castle has quite the personality. Is everything okay?”

I stand and thank her. “I’ve been bickering with a house guest.”

Arkan rounds the island and stands in front of the sink, black eyes glittering. “Ah, the mate you have yet to claim, if your father is to be believed.”

Godsdamn Betmal and his meddling.

I gesture to the fridge. “I don’t have much food at the moment, but there’s beer and water if you’d like something.”

Arkan shakes his head. “We’re headed to the Galloping Green Bean after this for a late lunch. I’ve missed Alba’s famous burgers. Talk to me about Wesley.”

For the next half hour, I fill Arkan and Hana in. Richard and Connall add detail and context until they’re up to speed. Arkan peppers me with questions, and it takes everything in me not to be infuriated by them. He’s here to help. Our primary objective is to keep monsters safe. If we must work together to do that, that’s fine with me.

Truly.

“Where are you staying?” I look from Arkan to Hana.

“Shifter Hollow,” Richard cuts in. “We’ve got plenty of space, and since you live up here, I thought it might be nice for them to spend time on our side of Ever.”

“To keep us out of your hair,” Arkan jokes with a wink. Hana gives him a sly smile. Their love is obvious. I marvel at how much of his original personality Arkan seems to have retained. But then, he was always an infectious person—utterly joyful and pleasant before the Keeper training.

“Not out of his hair,” Connall confirms. “You’ll be more comfortable with us.”

“True,” Arkan says, glancing around at the castle. “Plus, it seems like there’s enough personality to fill up your castle.”

I cross my arms and glare at my old friend.

He lifts both hands with a laugh. “Alright, point taken. I need to grab lunch and get to the Hollow.” He gives me a wry look. “We’ve brought my father, Vikand, with us. When we left to come here, he was in a huff about not having room for his books.”

Richard sighs. “I think we’ll have to move him to another spot. I can’t magic up fifteen bookshelves.”

Arkan winks again.

“Send him to the Annabelle,” I say. “Although, on second thought, she’s a bit testy lately.”

Arkan beams. “Catherine’s still here in Ever, if I’m not mistaken?”

Hana glances up at her mate with a soft smile.

I manage to get everybody out the door, but Richard lingers behind, both hands slung into his pockets.

“What is it?” I bark.

He gives me a knowing look. “You okay with all of this?”

I cross my arms. “You’ll have to be more specific, alpha.”

He sighs. “Everything. Another Keeper. The Keeper’s wife. Morgan living under the same roof as you?” His eyes

soften. “How are you doing?”

I grit my teeth, my fangs descending as emotion rocks me.

“It’s not ideal,” I mutter. “I’m out of dulling potion, and while Moira agreed to send more, she hasn’t done it.” I look up at him. “My emotions have been a challenge to manage.”

He nods, looking at the castle around us. After a long moment, he returns his steely gaze to me. “Perhaps it’s for the best, old friend. Your mate is wonderful and powerful. She’s a lot like you, in many ways.”

“I can’t.” My voice breaks as the reality of that crashes down on me. “It’s killing me not to touch her, Richard. But I can’t.”

His expression becomes stern. “I don’t usually meddle in your personal life, but there’s a reason all Keepers are required to marry or mate. Look at Arkan.” He waves toward the front door. “He looks blissfully happy. Their partnership makes him better. That could be you.” He falls silent, staring at me in that alpha way that makes lesser men cower.

I lift my chin. “Thank you for your insight, alpha. Is that all?”

He cocks his head to the side, eyes roving my face as he assesses me. I wonder what he thinks he sees. A stubborn, cruel Keeper who refuses to do what he knows he should?

Perhaps.

But my duty is to keep my monsters safe—including Morgan Hector.

And the only way she can be safe is if she stays far, far away from me.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

MORGAN

I rev the bike toward the castle, anxious to get home. What I saw on the VHS replays over and over in a horrifying loop in my brain. I'm going to have fucking nightmares about it, I know it. And if I didn't already hate Evenia for being such a horrible woman, my hatred is now bone-deep, sunk into my marrow like a cancer.

How could she force him to do that? She stole me from him in every possible way. She took something he wasn't willing to give, and now he thinks he's totally broken. Shit, maybe he *is* totally broken.

Wren's right—none of this excuses his cold behavior toward me for the last month—but I understand it a little more. He was right when he said he tried to drive me away. But fate seems to have other plans, because the harder he pushes, the harder circumstance, and buildings, seem to shove us together.

I don't know how I feel about that, but at the very least, we need to have a conversation about it. We need all the cards laid out on the table.

When I pull up in front of the castle, the stones in the round turrets spin in place.

"Hello to you too," I murmur, smiling up at the rocky black walls.

"The castle's been grumpy since you left."

I whirl around to find the Keeper standing in the shadows of the trees.

“What are you doing?” I shout. “Do you always have to terrify me?”

He slips both hands into his front pockets. “Ben’s been shooting nails at me for the last hour. He’s unhinged.”

At his pun, Ben’s front doors literally fall off the hinges, landing flat on the black cobblestones leading to the entrance.

I purse my lips to hold back a cackle. Glancing at the doors, I lose my fight against the smile. “Ben,” I say in my most motherly chiding tone, “I’m back. Will you please behave?”

He doesn’t answer.

“What did you do to him to deserve that treatment?” I return my gaze to the Keeper.

Dark brows curl up in surprise. “Fought with you. He doesn’t like that, apparently.”

And here we are, back on the precipice of a terrifying conversation.

I yank my bun out and redo it hastily. “Yeah, well, we should talk about that.”

He crosses the driveway and stops just short of me. Even so, he looms over me, overwhelming me with his closeness.

When I look up into his dark eyes, my heart skips a beat and stops, paused as I relive what Evenia did to him.

“Morgan,” he murmurs, “did Moira find you?” He lifts a hand to the side of my head as if he’ll stroke an errant hair away, but then he lets it fall to his side. Dismay settles good and hard in my chest. What would he have been like if Evenia didn’t zap his brain to bits?

“She did,” I confirm. Reaching into the bike’s saddlebag, I grab the VHS and wave it. “We watched this and talked for a long time.”

He frowns but nods, taking both hands from his pockets to cross his arms over his chest.

Now that I've opened this can of worms, there's no getting out of this conversation. I set the VHS down on the motorcycle seat, butterflies pinging off my insides like tiny hammers.

He clears his throat. "Would you like to discuss it?"

I lift my gaze to his, the familiar neutral mask my only greeting. "I'd like to discuss it, provided that you're ready to be truly honest with me. If we part as friends, that's fine, but no more of this *push Morgan away and make decisions on your own horse shit, okay?*"

He nods, uncrossing his arms and extending a hand toward me, palm facing upward. His fingertips twitch.

It feels like everything will change if I take that hand. But as I look at it, I know I will. Despite how we got started. Despite every drop of water under our proverbial bridge, I want to know more. I want to understand. And, yeah, I want a grovel too. But most of all, I want to be on the same page.

I lay my hand flat in his. His palm is warm and rough, and he immediately closes his fingers around my wrist and pulls me flush with his chest. I tilt my head back to see his eyes narrowed and fangs descending from his upper jaw.

"Trust me for a moment?" His whisper is a silky caress against my mind, soothing the frayed nerves and jangled emotions.

"Just don't break it," I whisper back.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

KEEPER

I grin, one side of my smile pulled tight by my scar. It still hurts sometimes, especially when I smile.

Looking deep inside, I call on the shadows I typically keep buried. They snake up my back and sprout from my shoulders, forming to points that rise high above my head as they billow out on either side of me.

“What the fuck?” Morgan shouts, stepping back as my shadows unfurl into gigantic black wings that soar to twice my height.

I give her a pointed look. “Vampires don’t turn into bats, Morgan, but that fallacy developed from these.” Lifting a hand, I stroke one shadowy feather, never taking my eyes off her. “Fly with me. I’ve already promised not to break your trust. Or drop you,” I tack on in a serious voice.

She rubs at her forehead, her expression a mixture of confusion and resignation. “What else don’t I know about you?” she huffs, crossing her arms.

I stalk across the small distance between us, folding my wings tight to my back. “I’ll admit, there’s a lot, Morgan. But you have questions, and you deserve answers.”

And once you have them all, you’ll run from me.

As you should.

I reach for her again, waiting for her to take my hand, to take that first step to knowing everything there is to know about me and why I’ve pushed her away so hard.

Delicate fingers lift, trembling slightly as her eyes take in my wings curling above my shoulders. When she sets her hand tentatively in mine, I nearly growl at the pleasure that fills me.

But it's overshadowed by grief. Because I have more of my story to share. And none of it's good.

With a slow tug, I pull her into the cocoon of my arms. Leaning down, I press my mouth to her ear. "Hang on to me, Morgan."

She reaches up and slings both arms around my neck as I hunch down and grab the backs of her thighs, dragging her up and draping them around my torso. Storm-cloud eyes come to mine with a curious look I can't read.

My eyes drop to her mouth, then flick back up. "Are you alright?"

She gives me a curt nod, her expression returning to neutral.

I hunch down and then push off the ground in one swift move, bulleting up into the sky. Air whooshes around us, buffeting us from every side as I slip a hand up her back to rest between her shoulder blades. Morgan claws at my back, her thighs tightening around my body as she buries her face in my neck with a shocked-sounding screech.

"Easy, witch," I murmur in her ear, trying to keep my voice a steady, smooth rumble. "I would never allow you to fall."

"Easy for you to say," she shouts, not looking up from my neck.

I've let her fall so many times, figuratively. I won't drop her physical body from this height, but I've got a final secret that'll spell the end of us for good.

Flapping my wings, I even us out and tap between her shoulder blades. We're far above the castle at this point. "Open your eyes, Morgan."

"No!"

“I want you to see Ever from here. I have two favorite times of day—early morning when I drive through on my bike, and late at night when I can enjoy Ever like this.”

She clasps my neck more tightly but turns her face, glancing over her shoulder. A terrified half scream escapes her, and she buries her face in my neck again, her lips soft against my skin. She can't possibly know the riot of emotions this produces in me. I struggle to tamp it down because it feels so natural to invite.

My hand slides further up her back, my fingers tracing a path up her neck. I curl them around it, squeezing tight so I can pull her face from my neck. Gray eyes sear me as my mouth hovers just above hers. We're paused in place, my giant shadowy wings beating the air around us as we bounce softly in the sky.

“Hear me on this,” I say with a growl. “I would never drop you or allow you to come to harm. Can you trust me for a little while, Morgan?”

Asking her to trust me is a loaded question.

She can't.

She shouldn't.

But in this, at least, she should.

“No,” she admits. “I'm terrified.”

The discord her “no” produces in my mind sends me into an immediate spiral. Hate and fury well up and spill over as I rage internally at the forces that exist between us. Angling to the side, I swoop down through a cloud and drop out of the sky like a stone.

I don't want her terror. I want her happiness. But I can't give it to her. So I say nothing as I even out, flying until we soar over the skyball stadium, Morgan's body eventually relaxing in my arms. She clutches my neck like a lifeline, still glancing to one side over her shoulder. I swoop down toward the ground, rolling us in playful circles before pushing hard back up into the sky. She screams, but it's less terrified, her body pressing harder to mine.

And it is glorious, the way she fits me, her frame perfectly cocooned within my arms. Emotions too numerous to name batter me from every angle. I could hold Morgan at arm's length before she became my houseguest. But now? Without the dulling potion and with her being so close, I'm lost.

Gone.

And still so deeply, madly, wildly in love.

I never thought being in love could hurt so badly after so much time, but my heart aches, and my stomach is tight and uncomfortable. Bringing my head down, I bury my face in her hair and drag in a hit of her scent even though I shouldn't.

Candlelight, chocolate, and whiskey fill the forefront of my mind, populating immediate visions of her naked beneath me, on top of me, beside me. I groan without meaning to, and she stiffens, fingers tightening around my neck.

Her legs thread more tightly through mine, her body rubbing against me. Hot shards of pleasure streak through my core, thirst building as my fangs descend. Her beautiful neck is right there. Biting her as we fly would be the ultimate pleasure, and I could take it right this very moment.

I choke down a needier, harder groan and slip my hand up her chest, wrapping my fingers lightly around her throat. Resting my fingertips over her pulse, I focus on the steady thump of her heart. It's fast, much faster than mine. What would it feel like to sink my fangs into her and feel that blood splash against my teeth and soak my tongue?

My cock hardens, throbbing against my thigh as I imagine taking Morgan's blood for the first time.

We swoop toward the forest. My wings are too wide to fly straight through the trees, so at the last second, I flip us sideways. Morgan screams, the sound echoing along my fingers and yanking on my cock. Vampires are naturally predatory to, well, everything else. Most of us are civilized in this day and age, but I will always prefer to chase her.

Trees whip past us in a blur until I find the clearing I want, touching down on the ground. I set her gently on her feet, but

she doesn't step away. Instead, her hands fall to my chest as she turns to look at me.

"Why do we have to have this conversation here?" she questions. "Why not at the castle?"

We're having the conversation here because, out here, I can focus on logic. Out here, I'm not one door away from a bedroom. Out here, I can *attempt to be rational*.

"You don't trust me, and I've given you no real reason to," I say with a shrug, stepping away and slipping my hands into my pockets. "Let's talk about what you saw, Morgan. I'll answer any questions you have."

She shakes her head as she crosses both arms, leaning against a pine tree. "Nuh-uh. I know what I saw happen, and I hate your mother more than ever. What I want to know is why you were so determined not to involve me."

I gesture at myself. "This is me all the time, Morgan. I'm not the man you met that evening. I'm not capable of regulating others' emotions and responding to them. I left you in a diner because the castle called me, and it did not occur to me that it might upset you. Even now, instead of worrying about how you'll react to this conversation, I'm playing out all the possible ways it might end so I can plan for that."

"Jesus H," she barks. "Why is it that all other Keepers are required to be mated, then, if you've got the emotional wherewithal of a rock?"

That stings, but she's not wrong.

"For the average Keeper, their mates help them learn to emotionally regulate. It makes them more effective. But I'll never take a mate," I state, praying my voice doesn't break.

Instead, something deep inside me shatters as I say the words, watching a myriad of emotions play over her elegant features.

"Why?" She seems barely able to get the word out, which makes my chest go tight and numb. "Is it because of how she forced you? That was...awful."

This is it, the moment I've dreaded since I first saw her on Main Street. Seeing her for the first time in fifty years nearly broke me, and it took me hours to call a town meeting, knowing I'd have to push her away.

"Evenia is a terrible person, save for the fact that she thought up the haven system and helped organize it into being. She's a brilliant strategist; I should have seen it coming."

"You were going to call me, though," Morgan whispers.

"I was." I suck in a slow, steady breath. "Even after the transition, I was more emotional than most keepers. I struggled to deal with it during training. I didn't want you to deal with what a Keeper's life is, but then I got this." I stroke my left hand down the scar running from my left eye to my mouth.

"What happened?"

And this is it. The most important of all reasons why I can't keep Morgan, not in the way she deserves to be kept.

I drop the final bomb fast. "I'm sick, Morgan. That's the rest of what I would have told you last night. It's not the reason I pushed you away to begin with, but it's the reason I've fought so hard to push you away since."

Confusion fills her expression as I try to compartmentalize her responses to understand them.

Brows furrowing, she looks up. "Sick? What do you mean?"

I sigh as I launch into a secret I've kept for nearly a hundred years.

"Keeper training lasts about a year, and we remain at the academy at Hearth HQ for that time. Part of the time is spent living in a training haven there, monitoring the wards and such. One day, while patrolling, I discovered an injured harpy outside the wards. Something had attacked her, and while the injury wasn't that bad, she'd lost some blood and passed out.

"I picked her up and carried her home, but when she came to, she was frightened and defensive. She attacked me, and I got this during the scuffle."

My chest tightens remembering that day.

“Harpy venom is something like an infection. It’s always fatal at some point, although it kills some monsters faster than others.” I glance at Morgan, but she’s frozen to the spot, her mouth dropped open.

I rush on, anxious to get the full story out. “I managed to convince her that I was a friend, and she stayed in my home for months in secret. We became friends, and I learned what a smart, kind monster she actually is. Eventually, she felt comfortable enough to leave my house and begin to join the society in the training haven. She became well-liked, even loved, and eventually she applied to work for the Hearth.”

“Holy shit,” Morgan whispers. “You’re talking about Moira, aren’t you?”

I nod.

“But wait,” she sputters. “You’re still alive, and you were engaged to her for a bit. How did that come about?!”

“Harpies don’t typically live in havens,” I remind her gently. “Most are predatory and carnivorous to other monsters. Evenia wasn’t inclined to allow Moira into the training program she applied for, so she and I cooked up a plan to get married in name only. Being my betrothed opened doors for her that gave her a chance to shine. She’s something of a darling at HQ these days.”

Morgan’s brows scrunch together. “But what about you? What did you get out of this entire arrangement?”

I sigh. “Well, the idea was that working for the Hearth would give Moira access to resources I didn’t have, even as a Keeper. She has always hunted for a cure for the infection she gave me that first day. But there isn’t one. I’ve looked for it myself ever since.”

Morgan sputters. “So that’s it. You’re infected with...some harpy poison. And that’s why you never called me?”

I nod. “I didn’t call you because I knew I’d be a man obsessed if you were within my reach. Moira has provided me with a potion to dull my bond and emotions for years. But

when your parents died, and I broke down and called you, she encouraged me to lean into our bond. She believes it's fate that I called you anyhow."

I resist the urge to stroke a strand of red hair away from her forehead. "So here we are. I've driven you away in every way I could, and those are the reasons."

"Why didn't you tell me?" she demands, anger overtaking the shock she must have initially felt.

I shake my head. "I made up some excuse for the wound. Nobody knows what Moira did to me. If they did, they'd kick her out of the system. I can't risk it, and I don't blame her for it. She has fought tirelessly every day since to find a cure."

Morgan takes a few steps away and then starts pacing like a caged lion. "So she gets all this great benefit from your choices, and you, what? You get to watch her while dealing with the consequences of her actions?"

I run both hands through my hair. "I suppose you could look at it like that, Morgan, but I try not to. She is the only person I really call a friend. We've tried hundreds of cures over the decades that have passed."

Morgan huffs and puts both hands on her waist, still pacing back and forth in front of me. "I'm a doctor and a black witch. It didn't occur to you that I could maybe help?"

"This isn't a human infection," I remind her gently. "And Moira and I went to a well-known harpy black witch from her tribe once a few decades ago. She confirmed there is no cure for this."

"So, that's it, then?" Morgan snaps. "You've accepted that there's nothing to be done?"

"I made peace with it a long time ago," I say gently. "And now, I focus on doing as much good for my haven as I can."

She throws both hands up in the air. "I can't accept that! It's not in my nature to accept it, and I don't want you to ask me to!"

“Morgan, come here,” I command, crooking my fingers at her.

Her nostrils flare, but she obeys, stepping close enough for me to touch. I grab both of her hands and slide them up the front of my shirt to rest against my upper stomach. Her fingers curl and rub against my abs, sending warmth spreading lazily through me. This is selfish, so selfish to put her hands on me after what I told her.

And I can't help it.

“What are you doing?” she whispers.

“Close your eyes and tell me what your magic says.” I rub the back of her hands with my fingers.

Her eyes search mine for a moment. When she closes them, I admire the chocolate lashes that fan against her cheeks. Her nose is long and elegant, pale freckles peppering the bridge and the tip. High cheekbones accentuate a pink bow mouth, her lower lip far plumper than the upper.

She's so hauntingly beautiful, I can barely stand it. I'll never get to have more than what we have right now, but her hands on my body are utter, pure bliss.

I can't feel her magic in any tangible way, but I sense it probing and searching along my skin. She doesn't have control of it necessarily, but then again, black magic isn't controlled like the other types. It simply *is*, and black witches learn to direct it through regular use.

She hisses in a breath, yanking her hands out of my shirt as she steps back. Her chest heaves, eyes wild. “That's...I don't know how to even explain that.”

“I know,” I whisper.

“How long do you have?” Tears fill her eyes again.

“I have no idea,” I admit. “According to Moira, it should have killed me long ago.”

A tear slides down Morgan's cheek. “I need to speak with her immediately.”

I understand the reaction. I searched high and low for information once I realized the extent of what my injury meant. But no cure or answer exists. And Morgan might have to learn that through her own research.

“Moirra is staying with Celset outside Shifter Hollow if you’d like to visit her,” I offer. “But for what it’s worth, most infected simply decline for a time before they go.” I gesture at my powerful frame. “I look pretty okay, for now.”

Morgan huffs. “This isn’t a joke, Keeper.”

“Abe,” I correct softly. “My real name is Abe. Short for Abemet, a combination of my fathers’ names.”

Her mouth drops open, then closes. More tears slide down her cheeks. I step forward and brush them all away, cradling her face in my hands.

“You are everything I ever wanted,” I whisper, long-withheld emotions getting the better of me. “I was an asshole to protect you from all of these horrible secrets. I hoped you’d be happier without them to weigh you down. I”—my voice breaks—“I thought I was shielding you from that pain. I wanted to shoulder that burden so you didn’t have to. I...” My voice trails off, blood tears streaking down my face to drip from my chin.

Her tears come faster.

“Kiss me,” she whispers instead. “I want to remember that night.”

Shock fills me, followed by a surge of lust, even though thinking about the night we met sends a dagger through my chest, stealing my breath.

“I can’t,” I mutter, brushing a thumb over her plump lips.

“You can,” she demands, pressing her body hard to mine.

I’m lost, then, because when she was simply mad at me, it was easier to handle. But instead of pushing me away like she should, she wants a kiss.

Lost.

Lost.

Lost.

I bring my face closer to hers, hovering my mouth above her lips. They part for me, her body sinking against mine. Her eyes close, her body soft. Sliding one hand up her shirt in the back, I rest my palm between her shoulder blades against miles of soft skin.

“So fucking soft,” I murmur into her lips. “Just like I remember.”

“Abe,” she whispers. Hearing my preferred name fall from those beautiful plush lips undoes me.

I slant my mouth over hers with a slow, gentle swipe. Electric energy barrels down my spine, pooling between my thighs. Running my left hand up her cheek, I fist it in her beautiful hair and crush her to my body. The next pass of my lips over hers is harder, rougher. When she slips her tongue into my mouth, I curl mine around it and suck.

Morgan’s answering groan sends explosive energy rushing through me, goose bumps rising along my skin, my fangs lengthening. But I have to be so careful not to cut her or nick her with them.

Urgency screams at me to remember my Keeper rules, to remember my logic.

But a needy swipe of her tongue along mine banishes all rational thought. Her lips grow demanding, her arms coming around my neck as she shoves up onto her tiptoes.

With great effort, I retract my fangs, and then I devour her. Our lips clash together in a wild frenzy of kinetic need. Sucking, lapping, biting. I’m lost to her taste, her scent. Dragging her head farther back, I nip and kiss my way down her chin to her neck, tasting every inch of that beautiful pale skin.

She groans in my arms, her body smashed as close to mine as she can get.

My fangs threaten to burst from my gums with every pass of my mouth over her neck. Morgan's a live wire in my arms, moaning softly, her neck bared completely to me. Nothing has ever turned me on this much. Nothing has ever been as beautiful as my mate offering herself so completely for my bite.

Does she even realize what it looks like to me for her head to fall back the way it does?

But I can't bite her. I know that. Bitter anger brushes the lust aside, reminding me to calm down, to get control. Logic fights hard to tamp down rampant lust.

Do no harm, Keeper Rule #4.

I open my mouth wide and clamp down on the gorgeous spot where her neck and shoulder meet, sucking gently at the skin as she cries out. But I don't pierce the skin. I can't.

Releasing the bite, I drag my tongue up the side of her neck with a huff. "You taste like heaven," I whisper into her ear.

"I need more." She drags those gray eyes to lock onto mine. "I need a lot more than that, Abe."

"I can't," I whisper. "I am at the very limits of my self-control. If you push me, I'll give in, and if I give in? Who knows what will happen. Push me away, please, because I am losing this fight."

She frowns, eyes dropping to the ground. I can almost see the wheels of her smart mind working their way around the problem. There's a part of her that thinks she can fix this.

That was me, once upon a time.

Storm-cloud eyes flick up to mine. "If you weren't sick, you'd drink from me, wouldn't you?"

I nod.

"And how long has it been since you filled that need?"

"Since Anberlin," I murmur. "I haven't taken a lover since you, Morgan. Blood and sex are inextricably intertwined for

all vampires. We don't have one without the other.”

Her nostrils flare. “Since I'm not a vampire, would it hurt me if you bit me?”

I shake my head. “Our bites are orgasmic for our mates, so no. But I can't bite you, or I'll infect you. I refuse to do that.”

She pauses, her mind wandering. After a long minute, she looks at me with a sorrowful expression. “I assume you don't want me talking to anyone about this?”

“It would be best not to,” I confirm. “Although I misspoke earlier. Celset and Betmal know. I'd like to keep it a secret for now.”

“What about Doc Slade?”

“He can't help,” I confirm. “I'm certain of that. Betmal has been on the search for information the whole time. There is nothing.”

Morgan crosses her arms. “Let's go home. I need to think.” She turns and presses her back to my chest, pulling my hand up to rest above her heart.

“I'm sorry,” I whisper into her ear as I call my wings from my back.

“Me too,” she says softly.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

MORGAN

My mind spins all the new information around like rocks in a tumbler. Except that, instead of coming out smooth, the facts are jagged shards that stab me when I think about them.

The Keeper—no, Abe’s—behavior makes sense now. I still don’t agree with his approach, but if he would have laid all of this on me when we met, I don’t know how I would have reacted. It was already a lot to learn about what Ever was, much less that I had some fated monster mate. I don’t think I even *could* have understood it in the beginning. I didn’t have enough context about the monster world.

That feels like a lifetime ago. All I want to do is call Thea, Lou, and Wren and ask for their advice. I’m in desperate need of a friend.

I look up over my shoulder at the Keeper. God, I don’t think I’ll get used to calling him Abe, even though the name suits him perfectly. “Drop me at Celset’s would you?”

Something like resignation and understanding pass through his gaze, but he nods.

He unfurls his fingers, resting them flat against my chest. His left arm comes around my core as he lifts his leg and tucks it around mine. Then he scrunches down, powerful muscles bunching beneath me. When he bullets up into the sky, I choke down a terrified scream. Flying is glorious, but I’m also really afraid of heights.

How many times will I get to fly with him?

I don't know.

Grief batters me, bringing me back to that horrible night I found out my parents had died in a car wreck. I remember getting the call in the break room at the hospital after visiting a young patient admitted for pneumonia. I recall dropping the phone and sinking to the floor, Thea's teary voice a blur on the other end of the line.

The days and weeks that followed were a blur too—so many visits and tear-filled phone calls. So much planning and organizing. And then there was the funeral. Every police officer and detective Dad worked with showed up to give us their condolences. Thea, Wren, Lou, and I stood in a line greeting people. And despite the fact that I'm only a few minutes older than my sisters, I *feel* like their older sister. Not to mention that being in charge of my parents' estate meant that—

Strong fingers hold me pressed face down into his warm chest, bringing me back to the present. "Tell me what you need," the Keeper whispers into my ear.

His wings beat a soft melody against the air, sending gusts of the chilly breeze to whip my hair side to side.

"I don't know," I admit. "I was thinking about how this reminds me of when my folks died."

Grief sinks deep, dragging my mind down into a dark place. The world around us spins, so I cling tighter to Abe's turtleneck, pulling the fabric down to burrow directly against his skin.

He lets out a pleased-sounding hum and tightens his arms around me, so tight I can hardly breathe. But I like it, because it reminds me of the here and now.

We say nothing as he flaps effortlessly along the ward ceiling. I assume we're headed for Shifter Hollow, but I almost don't care. Flying in his arms is comforting in a way that nothing else has been for me for a long while.

Eventually, he swoops down and lands gently. When he sets me down, glance up into his gaze. Indecision wars with

some other unnameable emotion in his eyes. I think he might kiss me again, but he pulls my hair tie out, and my locks tumble down around my ears.

One hand comes to my bangs and tucks them back out of my face. “Beautiful,” he murmurs.

I choke up, my throat thickening. These are the words I’ve wanted to hear from him for a long time. And now I understand why he never said them, because an edge of sorrow underlies them, like each syllable might be the last thing he ever utters.

Maybe it will be.

“I need some time to think,” I admit. “I need more information, and I’d like to talk to Moira alone, if you don’t mind.”

He inclines his head. “Of course, Morgan. We’re here, see?”

When I look around, I let out a scream and grab on to his shirt. We’re standing on a two-foot-wide branch at the top of an impossibly tall tree.

“Holy shit!” I screech. “A little warning would have been nice!”

The Keeper grins. “I was lost in your eyes, Morgan. I meant to warn you, but I forgot it the moment you looked up at me.”

I grimace. “Now you’re a sweet talker?”

He shrugs. “I attempted to steer clear of you for both of our benefits, but now that you know every last one of my secrets, I lack the energy to hold you at arm’s length. On top of which, I can’t do it when you need to be carried places. And I can’t do it with you living under the roof of the castle I designed for us.” He straightens, rolling his shoulders as if to work out a crook in his neck, his expression dour. “I can’t love you like you need to be loved, but I am at your command.”

“What does that mean for us?” I wrap my arms around my torso with a frown. And where do I even want to go from here,

now that I have the full story?

“I don’t know,” he says softly. “Talk to Moira and Celset. We’ll talk more when you come home. I imagine you want to think about things.”

Why does that sound so perfect, so lovely?

“Okay,” I agree breathlessly. “I’ll see you later, then?”

“Later.” His lips curl upward, fangs slipping out from his upper jaw. “I look forward to it, Morgan. Perhaps a game of bowling over drinks?”

I smile, but it’s half-hearted. I have no idea how to navigate this sudden opening of the floodgates. It’s like I’m seeing who Abe is for the first time. “Are you asking me on a date?”

His smile falls. “I’m asking for whatever you want to give. It could be nothing. It could be friendship. And that’s your prerogative. I’ve made the decisions by myself for too long. You’re in control, Morgan.” His eyes narrow, nostrils flaring as he leans closer to hover his lips above mine. “Although you’ve always been in control of me, always guided my decisions, always filled my thoughts. I relish the chance to give control fully up to you.”

“Sounds hot,” I rely on my usual snark, beaming up at him. “I love being in charge.” I don’t feel snarky though; it’s how I deal with shit. And I am up to my elbows in shitty news right now.

“So I’ve noticed.” He spreads his shadowy wings wide enough that they blot out the sun. “Celset’s cottage is tucked into the trees above us. There’s a ladder. I’ll stay to make sure you don’t fall. Comm me later, or have Celset return you to the castle, if you like.”

He falls silent, and I take a moment to look him over. His lips are pursed together in a barely hidden smile, both thumbs slung through the loops in his slacks that hug his long muscular thighs. The fabric of his shirt clings to his biceps and chest. Like always, he wears a turtleneck that covers the

beautiful tattoos on his neck. I've never seen them, but he showed Thea once. She told me they were "having a moment."

Shadow wings lift high behind him, each individual feather flaring out. And still he stands silently, allowing me to openly stare and admire.

"I'm in awe of you," I say softly, bringing my eyes back to his.

His smile grows a little bigger, but his eyes are sad. "Don't be, Morgan. I've done nothing to deserve kindness from you. I chased you away on purpose, remember?"

"Yeah," I admit. "But I know what it feels like to be the one who looks out for everyone else. That's me all the time with my sisters, even though they're grown women."

He nods, but when he opens his mouth to speak, no words come out. His brows scrunch together, and he shakes his head more vigorously.

I step closer. Should I touch him? Maybe slide my hands underneath his shirt and let him feel some affection? He must be starved for it.

A hundred years without touching someone? I can't imagine it.

So, I touch him.

Reaching for the hem, I shove my hands up underneath and lay them flat on rock-hard abs. He hisses in a breath as I trace each muscle with my fingers, my eyes locked on his. His eyes narrow, his jaw tightening as his fangs descend.

I rub gently over his stomach until I reach his chest, and then I fan my fingers out. His nipples are hard points against my fingers.

He lets out a soft growl that sends heat flaring between my thighs. "Morgan," he huffs. "This is a dangerous game."

I rub a circle over his hard pecs. "Has anyone touched you since you met me, Abe?"

His jaw clenches rhythmically, and he shakes his head.

“Everyone needs touch.” I slide my right hand farther up, stroking my fingers along either side of his neck. His heartbeat throbs in a vein on the side. His chest rises and falls with faster breaths as he closes his eyes, his head falling forward.

“I’m undone,” he whispers. “Your touch on my neck is everything, Morgan. I don’t deserve it, but please don’t stop.”

All the pent-up anger and disappointment between us turns to dust and ash and floats away on the wind. Deeper understanding settles in its place as he shifts forward and presses his forehead to mine, wrapping an arm around my waist to pull me closer.

My poor, broken Abe.

I think I’ve been so mad at him this entire time because—it’s like he said—we’re drawn together. And fate keeps throwing fuel on that fire.

“I’m almost thankful for Annabelle’s poor behavior,” I say. “Because at least it led us to honesty.”

Ruby-red eyes open, and he slants his head sideways, mouth hovering above mine. When he speaks, his lips brush my skin.

“I never called Catherine about your issue because, even though I couldn’t admit it to myself, I didn’t want you to leave the castle. Logically, looking back, those are the mental steps I took. It puts you at risk, though.”

I nip at his lower lip, pulling it between mine. He groans, the arm around me tightening. When I let it go with a quick swipe of my tongue, he growls and brings his mouth to my ear. “Moirra is waiting patiently upstairs for you. Like vampires, harpies have excellent hearing. Let’s pick this up later, shall we?”

I pinch his nipple playfully. “You could have told me that!”

His mouth comes below my ear, and he sucks in a deep, slow breath. “Mmm, chocolate. Your blood smells like dark chocolate to me. I’d give anything to taste you.”

My clit throbs in time with my heartbeat. Do I want that?

I slip my hands out from under his shirt. “Go home, sir, before things get indecent on Celset’s front porch.”

He takes a step back and smirks. “You’re aroused. I can taste the pheromones in the air. It’s exceedingly difficult to walk away from such obvious need.”

“Oh. My. God!” I whisper-hiss. “Can you not talk about my fucking pheromones right now?” I turn from him with a grumble. Before I take a step, he slings an arm around my waist and yanks me hard to his chest. My breath leaves me with a grunt, my head falling automatically to the side.

His mouth is on my neck before I can get a word out. Sharp teeth drag a path from my shoulder to my ear. He sucks on the skin below it with a ragged snarl.

“See how you respond to me, Morgan? How your head falls so naturally to the side? Your body can’t *help* but respond.”

Oh, this fucker. How we’ve gone from fury to grief to halfway fucking in the span of hours is a mystery to me. But I’d be a liar if I didn’t admit to daydreaming about fucking him hundreds of times at this point.

And in every one of those daydreams, he bites me over and over and over again.

I reach behind my back, feeling for the hard-on I know he’ll have. He grunts when I cup it through his slacks, running my hand down the length to his balls. I say a thank you to the gods that slacks are thinner than jeans, because I get the perfect handful of sack, rolling and kneading him between my fingers.

“Fuck,” he moans into my ear. “I’m going to lose my godsdamned mind if you keep doing that. Do you want answers today or not?” His voice is tense, frayed, like he’s on the very edge of sanity.

I step away and turn, shooting him a haughty look. “We’ve never covered the topic of my sexual preferences. But I love a good tease.”

He stares at me, eyes narrowed as he reaches up to straighten his turtleneck.

“Noted, witch.” He flares his wings out wide and lifts off the giant tree branch, zipping up into the sky. I watch the powerful wings at his back as he grabs a current.

“Who knew he had wings?” I mutter.

A polite cough floats down from somewhere above me. Celset or Moira, I expect.

“Oh, I’m sure you knew,” I say under my breath.

The sky above is a pale blue, the Keeper a tiny black dot against the horizon. I turn to see a ladder leading up into the tree above me. It looks like it’s made out of the tree itself, but it’s easy enough to ascend.

Except it goes on for literal fucking ages. I must climb a hundred rungs before I come to the treetop and a flat wooden surface. The ladder stops at the mouth of a hole, and when I pop my head up, it’s a tiny porch. The front of Celset’s home is a darling small green cottage with brown trim. Moss and ferns spill out of window boxes along the front four windows. The front door is, well, not a door. It’s simply a round opening like a hobbit hole.

A figure appears in the doorway with a sad smile.

“Hello, Moira.” It’s hard to keep the anger out of my voice at seeing her.

She flutters her wings, lifting them off her body and tucking them back down. The feathers on top of her head lift and flatten twice. “I expect Abe told you everything?”

“He did,” I confirm, pulling my way up onto the porch. Awkward tension fills the space between us.

“Good,” she says after a long, tense beat. “I’ve encouraged him to share that with you since you arrived. Please come in, and we’ll talk.” She turns and disappears into the cottage’s depths.

I straighten out my tee and put my hair back up into a bun as I step through the doorway.

Here goes nothin’.



The inside of Celset’s cottage is...well, it’s only three-quarters of a cottage. I came through the front, and there are two more sides, but the entire back of the home is open to the tree, with giant branches poking into the main room. There’s an obvious hole cut through them.

“That’s our exit,” Moira says with a nervous-sounding laugh. She lifts her wings. “On account of these. The ladder is for visitors.”

“What about centaurs?” I ask. “Doesn’t seem super accessible for them.”

Celset comes out of a second doorway that must lead to an adjoining room. She frowns at me. “Most harpies don’t have visitors. The only reason I have a ladder is for you. We grew it when you arrived in town. Moira and I knew the day would come that you’d have questions for us.”

I cross my arms. “No offense, Celset, but why are you involved in this?”

The two women exchange a glance.

Celset crosses the room and wraps a wing around Moira, rubbing her beak along Moira’s. “I’ll be in the other room if you need me.”

Oh. OH.

They’re partners. Got it.

Celset leaves us, retreating back through the doorway she came from.

Moira gestures at a small dining table with two chairs. “Please sit, Morgan.”

I follow her to the table and take a seat, laying my palms flat on the shiny wooden surface. “I need you to tell me everything, Moira. I need to hear his story from your perspective.”

For the next half hour, Moira shares how she met Abe when he saved her. How she attacked him with the intent to kill because she was being chased. When she awoke, she thought he was the monster who chased her. She shares how she's hunted for a cure ever since, but there's never been anything.

“What about his sickness?”

Moira sucks in a breath and closes her eyes. When she reopens them, they're glossy with unshed tears. “No cure exists, Morgan. Our venom is filled with a virus that's meant to subdue either prey or attackers. Usually, it kills quickly. I don't know how he's held on so long.” She looks stricken. “It's my theory that he held on so long because of his deep connection to you.”

My chest goes impossibly tight. So, I was right.

“And now that I'm here?”

Moira swipes at a tear. “I can't say what'll happen. He's seen a black witch from my people, and she couldn't do anything either. I'd take it all back if I could, Morgan. I'm so sorry.”

I grit my teeth. I can't start crying right here, or I'll never stop. I'm desperate to call my sisters and Lou. I really need them.

“This is crazy,” I shout. “I'm a black witch. I healed the wards yesterday, Moira. Why shouldn't I be able to help him? It's not fair.”

“It's not,” she whispers, her beak trembling. “None of this is fair in the slightest. I do have a theory, though.”

A spark of hope blooms in my heart.

Please, God, let there be a theory to help him.

Moira's soft gaze finds mine. “He struggled not to be obsessed with you after he chose not to call you. He was constantly wondering where you were, what you were doing. I think your bond keeps him going.” She looks out the back

window. “There’s no medical reason for that to be the case, but what he feels for you is so strong.”

“Enough,” I whisper. “I can’t hear any more of this.”

“I know,” she says. “I’m so sorry, Morgan.”

I stand. “I need to think. I’m going home.”

Suddenly, all I want is to be at the castle with Abe. If she’s right, then who knows how long we have.

I don’t want to miss any more of it.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

KEEPER

I intended to go back to the castle, but somehow I can't bear the thought of being there alone without Morgan. Instead, I check the comm system and do a visual check of the wards. I half expect to see Alo or Shepherd on patrol—I'll get some teasing about letting my wings out in the daytime.

Away from Morgan, logic begins to pepper me with all the things I haven't been doing because I've been focused on her and the castle.

The fact that Wesley is still nowhere to be found eats at me. I haven't spoken to Evenia. No doubt she's got a hunter team looking for him. I need to check in with Dirk. And Richard. And both of the gargoyles.

Scratch that, I need to check in with *everyone*. I haven't spoken to my protector team all day. Lifting my comm watch, I start making calls, beginning with Richard. All's quiet in Shifter Hollow. Next, I comm Shepherd, but nothing's new with him. He confirms I don't need to call Alo because Alo and Miriam have taken Iggy swimming at the lake with Ohken and Wren. So, I don't call Ohken either.

Can things really be this peaceful with Wesley still out there somewhere?

I could check in with Arkan, but he was at the castle this morning. Morgan should meet Hana—having two black witches within a haven is unheard of—there's a lot Morgan can learn from Arkan's mate.

But instead of making a plan to do that, my mind wanders to Morgan's conversation with Moira. I wonder how she'll feel about everything afterward. I wonder how she'll feel about me. Us.

Not that there's an *us* exactly.

Swooping above Sycamore Street, I land and tuck my wings away. Some days it's easier to think if I literally walk my haven and observe.

"Ayo, Keeper, haven't seen you about much!"

I turn to find Dirk jogging up Sycamore toward me. The big sylph grins as he comes alongside me, blue lips splitting to reveal dual rows of conical teeth.

"Hello, hunter." I give him a polite look. "I was just about to comm you."

"Oh, I'm sure yeh were," he says with a playful wink. "I've been busy."

My brows rise. "Oh? Still looking for Wesley here in town?"

He laughs. "Sarcasm noted, Keeper. Technically, Evenia recalled the team but left me here to keep an eye on things. She doesn't trust yeh, although I suppose yeh know that."

I narrow my eyes. "Wesley is not in Ever. We've surmised this."

"Well, you and I know that," he croons. "So I'm keepin' an eye on the Hectors' pretty little aunt instead. Yeh know, ensuring she gets acquainted with the town and whatnot."

I roll my eyes. "You've only been here a few weeks yourself, Dirk."

"And yet I've seen every inch of yer lovely little haven, Keeper. And I'd like to show Lou every inch, if yeh know what I mean."

I grimace. "You won't make it far with jokes like that."

He gives me a haughty look, casting blue eyes down my frame and back up. "Oh, and yer the paragon of romantic

endeavors, are yeh?”

“Howdy, boys!” Arkan’s voice rings up Sycamore.

Dirk and I turn as the other male canters gracefully toward us. He stops next to Dirk, and despite a friendly acquaintance with Arkan, I find I don’t want to introduce him as our secondary Keeper. I choke down completely illogical rising ire and look at Dirk.

“Dirk, this is Arkan—”

“Canterbury, I know,” Dirk finishes, reaching for Arkan with his hand outstretched.

Arkan beams and grips Dirk’s hand, shaking it vigorously. “And you must be Dirk the famous hunter. I was always sad not to meet you at HQ, but no doubt you were slinking around in the shadows chasing assholes.”

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. He was chasing *something*, I’m sure.

“I’ve never stopped chasing assholes,” Dirk says with a laugh. He stares at Arkan’s shirt, which I hadn’t noticed until this moment. “Heh, seems I’m not the only one, eh, centaur?”

I squint my eyes at the print on Arkan’s tee.

Oh my gods.

He points to it with a big grin. “If you think anal’s hard, try stallion style!” When he gives me a pleased look, I groan and slap my hand over my face. “That is hardly appropriate for a Keeper!”

Arkan shrugs, the smug smile growing a little bigger. “Never said I was a conventional Keeper. I stay pretty chill when I’m at HQ so Evenia thinks I’m a good boy, but I’m not really a good boy.”

“Wicked cool,” Dirk says with a snort. He glances at me. “I like ’im already, Keeper.”

I give Arkan a chilly look. “Cover it around the kids, if you insist on wearing it.”

“I’m well practiced, Keeper,” Arkan says with a stomp of his forefoot. “This ain’t my first rodeo.”

“Noice,” Dirk chirps. “Human sayings. I love that one. Also ‘different strokes for different folks.’ Louanna taught me that one recently. Gods know I’d love to give her a few strokes.”

“Enough!” I snap. “Pursue her or don’t, but if she says she has no interest, please refrain from chasing her like she’s a piece of meat. She’s still recovering.”

Dirk’s blue eyes go narrow and cold, his blue hair flowing above his head like glittering blue flames. “I’ll chase however I want, Keeper. I’m a hunter. Hunting is what I do, and if I want to hunt Louanna, it’s no business of yers.”

Arkan claps Dirk on the back with a tight smile. “Consent is king, friend.”

It’s Dirk’s turn to roll his eyes. “Naturally. I like my bedmates screaming with pleasure, not terror.”

I tug at the neck of my shirt. It’s stuffy, and I can’t wait to take it off.

At that moment, Lou walks across Sycamore toward Higher Grounds, the coffee shop. She appears lost in thought, thin arms crossed over her chest. She mutters something even I can’t make out under her breath.

Dirk, Arkan, and I all watch her in silence. She must sense us staring, because she pauses in the street and turns. Mahogany eyes flick to Dirk, and she purses her lips.

When I look at the big sylph, his blue eyes are firmly cemented on her, his gaze intense. His muscles quiver slightly when she walks up the street toward us.

When she reaches the group, she plants a hand on her hip and wags a finger at Dirk. “Are you following me again?”

Arkan and I turn as one to look at the big sylph. He glances at us as if he doesn’t have a care in the world. “I’ll follow until yeh let me take yeh for a coffee, my sweet.”

Lou rolls her eyes. “Not happening, blue man.”

Dirk pretends like someone's stuck a knife in his heart, stumbling back a step and crashing into Arkan.

Arkan chuckles and kicks Dirk upright with a front leg. Lou watches impassively, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Everything alright, Lou?" She's frowning but also looks to be hiding a smile. Still, there's a strained edge to the wrinkles at the corners of her eyes.

She shrinks from me, eyes going shuttered as she nods. "Just fine, Keeper. Thank you." Her eyes narrow when they fall on Arkan's shirt. "Oh my gods, that is fabulous. I don't know where you got it, but if a troll version exists, Wren needs one. She has an obsession with crazy tees."

Arkan smiles. "I'll comm you the info. I'm Arkan, by the way."

I notice he doesn't introduce himself as our secondary Keeper. I should probably do it, but I'm feeling protective of my haven. I don't want another Keeper here meddling, no matter how pleasant he is.

My comm watch pings, Morgan's name popping up above the strap. Relief floods me. I'm not accustomed to that bodily response, and I find it uncomfortable the way warmth spreads up my chest, my cheeks heating. It's illogical, and therefore, not useful.

Lou's eyes drop to her niece's name, then move back up to meet mine. She grits her jaw.

Stepping away from the group, I answer the comm. "Morgan, everything alright?"

"Where are you?" she asks.

"Sycamore. I'm with Lou, Dirk, and the new Keeper."

After a moment of silence she responds, "I'd really like to talk with my sisters and Lou about what's going on. I know you asked me to keep certain things a secret, but would you be willing to flex on that?"

Indecision wars inside me. Part of being the Keeper means being dependably trustworthy. If she tells her sisters, they'll

undoubtedly tell their mates. Will my leadership group lose trust in me if they learn I'm ill?

But fuck it, there's already another Keeper here to back me up.

And Morgan needs this. I can hear it in her tone.

"Of course," I murmur. "Want me to send Lou your way?"

"No. Come get me. I'm ready to go home. I'll make a lunch date with the girls tomorrow. Today was a lot."

"On my way." I click off, turning to find the trio standing in the street staring at me.

"Everything okay?" Lou asks. "Does Morgan need me?"

I shake my head. "Nope, all good." I turn from the trio and head back up Sycamore toward Celset's cottage.



A few minutes later, I arrive at the base of Celset's tree to find Morgan already there. She leans against the thick trunk, both arms casually crossed over her chest. When she sees me, she gives me a sad smile.

I knew what Moira would tell her, and it crushes me that I can't make it better for her. If I could, I would.

"Are you alright?" I close the distance between us, planting a hand above her. I want to be close, even closer than this, but I can't imagine how she's feeling after the conversation with the harpies.

"I've been better," she murmurs, tipping her chin up to look at me.

"How can I help?" I stroke the backs of my fingers along her jawline to her ear, then down her throat before realizing I shouldn't touch her. We're on shaky ground. The attraction's there between us, so intense I can barely breathe around it. But everything else is tender and tense.

Gray eyes lock onto mine. "Moira has theories about why this hasn't already killed you when it should have. I assume you know her theory. Do you agree with her?"

I grit my jaw.

“She says it’s our connection, how deep it is.” Morgan’s voice is soft, curious, maybe even a little afraid.

“I agree with her assessment,” I bite out. I feel like a man standing in his doorway, watching a tornado swirl toward his home. Like if I agree and open the doors to something with Morgan, I’ll spin her up into myself and destroy her.

“Morgan,” I murmur. “I’m terrified you’ll get hurt.”

“And I’m terrified to be hurt,” she says. “But I’m already hurting, Abe. I’ve had so much hurt in the last six months, and I don’t want any more. Living with you and Ben has been fascinating and infuriating and fun. I want that.”

I choke down a sob. “I don’t know how long we’ll have it.”

She makes a strangled sound, wrapping her fingers around my wrist. “However long we have it, I want it,” she whispers. “I’ll never give up trying to find a way to make this better. Unless trying together isn’t something you want?”

My mind spins around the implications of what she’s suggesting and the ways I might support her in the decision. “I’ll introduce you to Arkan and Hana tomorrow, if you like. Actually, Arkan’s father is here as well. He’s a well-known researcher regarding dark magic. Perhaps you’d like to speak with him.”

Morgan’s brows lift. “You’d let me speak to others about this?”

I nod. “I formally relinquish control of my secret to you, witch. Do with it what you will.”

She smiles. “That’s a gift, Abe, thank you.”

I want to tell her to call me mate, because nothing would be better than that. But it’s too soon, too fast.

“I want to try too,” I whisper. “I thought I could build walls up between us to keep you safe, but I can’t do it anymore. I don’t want to. But I want you to set the pace,

Morgan. I don't want to take more than what you're willing to give. Agreed?"

I slide my hand up her throat, bringing the pad of my thumb to her lower lip. Rubbing it, I revel in how soft and plump it is. I kissed this mouth today for the first time in almost a century.

She cocks her head to the side, closing her lips around my thumb and sucking.

Heat explodes throughout my body, blood rushing to my groin, where everything tenses and tightens.

"Morgan," I growl, fangs elongating. "What are you doing?"

She gives me a saucy look and sucks my thumb deep into her mouth. She's hot and soft and wet, and her tongue makes a tantalizing pass over the pad of my finger. She releases it with a pop and smirks at me.

"Sounds like we're in agreement, although I'm sure this is the first of many conversations. I've never had a chance to tease you, and the reality is that I'm a huge flirt. I think it might be kind of fun if we put our past aside for a little while and start from scratch. What do you think?"

I shove my body against her, pressing her to the tree. Her curves hug my frame, her breasts crushed to my upper stomach. "Let's be clear. Are you proposing to date me? What's off-limits?"

"Date you. Play with you. Touch you," she murmurs. "I want to try all of it. I don't want limits right now."

Pleasure laces with reluctance as I debate the intelligence of this plan. Because when it comes to her, I've been lost from the moment we met. Lost deep in a soul-binding bond that will remain with me my whole life. And I've grieved over not having her for so long.

But she's right here.

And she wants me.

Walls snap up inside my mind, but something bashes them back down.

“Alright, Morgan. Tonight we’ll go home. Tomorrow, I’ll take you dancing.”

Her eyes flash with pleasure. “I fucking love dancing. I’m a really good dancer.”

I laugh. “Is there anything you’re not good at?”

She purses her lips. “Not if I set my mind to it.”

I bring my lips to her ear and growl. “You’re not a better bowler than me, witch.”

She slaps her hands to my chest and shoves me away. “Game on, dude. Let’s go home!” Slipping out of my arms, she dances sideways with a laugh.

And I follow because, when it comes to Morgan Hector, I’m incapable of not following. I would follow her to the end of this world and into the next if she wanted me to.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

MORGAN

He still stands with one hand on the tree trunk. He glances over, dark eyes flashing. His gaze drops to my chest and then farther down as he bites his lip. I've never enjoyed men ogling me. But I'm fucking enjoying this.

He bites his lip harder, a drop of red blood appearing below one of his fangs.

"You look ready for a chase, Keeper," I taunt. "Think you can catch me?"

He pushes off the tree in an easy, smooth move and pauses, hands falling to his sides. The fingers on one hand twitch.

"I haven't told you much about vampires or myself specifically, Morgan, so here's a little fact. All vampires are predatory. We love to chase. We love to dominate. You shouldn't tempt me like this. We have to be careful."

I walk backward, making the bring-it-on motion with both hands. "Oh, but I want to tempt you."

"Too dangerous," he huffs, balling both fists. "Stop, Morgan. We can only tease so much."

"No."

"I could hurt you."

"I trust that you won't." The moment I say it, I realize it's true. After everything I've learned about him, I know one thing for sure—he will always put himself last and everyone else first. He won't hurt me.

Spinning on my heel, I sprint up the wooded path toward Sycamore Street.

A snarl rings out behind me, followed by pounding footsteps.

He's on me before I make it ten feet, crashing into me from behind. I fall to my knees as he slides a hand around my chest, up between my breasts to grip my throat. His chest heaves at my back, every moment sending charged electric pleasure through my core.

I let out a soft whine as he brings his lips to my ear. "Told you, witch."

"Maybe I let you catch me," I snark. His arm is a hard bar between my breasts. But I want more touch than this; I need it. I rub my neck against his mouth, grinding my ass into his crotch.

"Don't," he snaps. "I'm halfway to losing my mind, Morgan. Don't push me."

"I'll never stop pushing you," I huff. "The sooner you realize it, the better."

Fangs clamp around the base of my neck, their sharp points digging into my skin but not breaking it. I cry out as pleasure streaks to my clit, throbbing sensations radiating from the juncture of my thighs outward.

When I moan, Abe whines into the bite. He rakes his teeth over my skin, then follows with a rough trail of kisses down to my shoulder.

"This is a dangerous game," he whispers, biting my neck again, just hard enough to pinch but not hard enough to pierce my skin.

"Maybe," I admit. "But it feels so fucking good."

His answering growl floods my panties with slick heat. I cry out, but his grip on me tightens. He shoves us forward onto all fours, then his wings cocoon us and beat the sky, lifting us off the ground. I tense instinctively, but his left arm comes around my waist, holding me tightly to his much-larger frame.

My legs dangle until we lift high enough for him to wrap mine between both of his. And then I'm caught as he swoops into the darkening sky and heads for the castle.

I'm still too afraid of heights to tease him midair. What if he accidentally drops me? But I can't miss the enormous hardness pressed against my back, or the way it jerks in his pants when I shift at all.

A tense cramp begins low in my body and thrums outward, anticipation building and building inside me for what'll happen when we land, my body alive with energy. My cheeks and chest flush hot.

"Morgan," he snaps in my ear. "I'm going to fucking crash if you keep this up."

"What?" I whine. "I can't control my damn pheromones!"

"You're grinding your goddamn ass against my cock," he growls against my neck, "and I'm going to come right here if you keep going. It's been a long time, remember?"

I cock my head to the side so I can see the very edge of his face. "Don't you take care of that yourself?"

His jaw tightens. "Very infrequently, and not in many years."

Shock makes me forget where we are, and I wiggle around until I can face him. "You're telling me you haven't had an orgasm in years? Literal years?"

He shakes his head. "If I don't, it's easier to shut the need down. Once I allow myself to do it, the thirst is all-consuming. It only made logical sense to stop doing *that*." A pink hue covers his cheeks.

I stroke my fingers along his scarred brow. "Abe, have you made a single decision for your own benefit since you became the Keeper?"

He frowns, eyelashes fluttering against impossibly pale skin. "I can't afford to," he says finally. "And Ever is one of the most successful havens as a result. Our growth rate is unparalleled—what?"

I give him an unimpressed look. “I don’t give a shit about the damn growth rate. What about this, Abe?” I slide one hand down between us to grip his cock. It leaps in my palm, pressed against the front of his slacks.

His wings pause for a moment, dropping us lower. I choke back a scream, grabbing his dick like a handle.

He grunts and flaps his wings again, steadying us. Dark eyes narrow at me. “Don’t stop.”

Grinning, I move my hand to his waistband and unfasten the button. When I slip my hand into his pants, I find he’s not wearing underwear.

“How convenient,” I deadpan, wrapping my fingers around his cock and stroking.

Abe snarls, his fangs slipping farther down, almost to his chin. He squeezes his eyes shut, lips falling open as a soft pant leaves his mouth.

God, nothing is hotter than making a man moan.

“I’m going to get you off at least once before we get home,” I whisper.

Red eyes flick open and narrow. “If I asked you to wait until we weren’t flying, would that matter?”

I grin and stroke his cock again, rubbing my thumb over the tip. Precum drips steadily from him.

“If it’s truly a big deal to you, I’ll wait,” I confirm. I slide my hand back down his rigid length, admiring how fucking thick he is. “But I really don’t want to.”

He groans again. “I’m yours to command, Morgan.”

I laugh joyously. “Good. I’m bossy, so this pleases me.” I slip my hand farther down his cock, rolling both balls in my palm. It’s hard to get good access crushed to him like this. On a whim, I yank his turtleneck down with my free hand and lick a stripe up his throat to his chin.

The effect is immediate. Abe bellows, dick jerking in my palm as precum streams from him, soaking my fingers.

“Oh fuck!” he shouts. “No, no, Morgan, I can’t do this.” He reaches down and yanks my hand out of his pants. “I will definitely crash.”

“Aww,” I whine. I was having fun. Bringing my hand up to my mouth, I slip two fingers between my lips, sucking his precum off them.

His nostrils flare, then he bends down, his mouth joining mine as he licks my fingers clean. When our tongues swirl together around my middle finger, he snarls as his mouth crashes into mine. This kiss is frenzied, out of control, as if I’m the last bit of oxygen in the world, and he needs me to fill his lungs.

The salty tang of his precum coats my tongue. I groan as he slides his tongue around mine, tugging on it. It’s like he’s trying to fuse our two souls together with this kiss. It sears me from the inside out, my body wrapping itself around him through no conscious thought of my own.

I thread my arms around his neck, my mouth tangled with his as we begin to descend. Then we’re landing gently, and I can only hope we’re at the castle. The creak of Ben’s front doors opening tells me we’re home, but I can’t stop kissing Abe.

He never puts me down, wrapping my legs around his torso as he stalks into the house and throws me against the nearest wall. His lips hover above mine for a second, then crash into me again.

He’s heat and light and every decadent thing I’ve ever dreamed about. My body is alive with need, every inch of me tense and aching. I bite his lip, pulling it between my teeth.

“Give me your neck,” I growl. I need to see that reaction again.

“Dangerous,” he snaps, licking a path along my upper lip, then my lower one. One of his hands moves to my breast, pinching my nipple. My body jerks involuntarily in his arms, pleasure and pain warring with the throb in my clit.

“Give it to me,” I order.

He ignores me, palming my breast and rubbing a thumb over my aching, pulsing clit. I grab the hem of his turtleneck and surge forward, locking my teeth around his throat.

Abe gasps. The noise is followed by a low, needy groan, and his head falls back.

Is this what the ultimate power feels like? Something predatory rises in me at seeing him bared like this. I bite hard, ripping at his skin as he begins panting.

And then I do it again, over and over all the way down his neck. And I do it yet again along his muscular shoulder. Five bites in, Abe is snarling and wheezing, his big chest heaving.

I have to know what it looks like when he comes undone.

I lick a path along his collarbone. “Could you come from just this?”

He pauses, bringing his head up, ruby eyes locked with mine. “Yes.”

“I need to see that,” I admit.

“Tell me what you want.” His hand slips up under my shirt and bra, deft fingers playing with my nipple. It pebbles under his touch. He lets out a soft, needy groan, eyes dropping to my chest. “You are fucking glorious, Morgan Anne Hector.”

“Wait until you see what I can do with this tongue,” I say with a laugh.

He purses his lips but can’t hide the smirk. After a minute, his expression goes serious. “I’m serious when I say we have to be careful, Morgan. I can’t bite you, or I’ll infect you. If I tell you I’m losing control, please believe me. That’s one limit we have to have.”

Dread fills me, souring my stomach. I wanted a few hours where we didn’t have to think about this.

I rub both hands up his chest, looking into his eyes. “Agreed, but I’m a hair’s breadth from fucking you. Should we take a step back and do something else for a bit?”

He nods slowly, pulling his hand out of my shirt. “It’s for the best. If we fuck, I’ll bite you. I—I can’t do that.”

Sadness joins the dread in my chest. What if we never get the chance to fully experience each other physically because of his illness? Resolve swiftly follows the other emotions. I’m a physician and a highly motivated person in general. I’m not ready to give up the fight over Abe’s sickness.

“You look ready to go to war, Morgan,” he whispers. “Are you alright?”

Looking up, I lose myself in his scarlet gaze. “Let’s bowl. I’ll kick your ass without Ben’s help.”

On cue, a strip of wallpaper unfurls from the wall and slaps the Keeper on the back of the head.

He snarls and bats the paper away, but I pat the wall lovingly. “Ben, you need to let me win my own battles, okay?”

The castle lets out a dreadful creaking noise that’s so loud, I clap my hands over my ears.

Abe laughs. “He disagrees completely, witch.”

So he does.

Hours later, after demolishing him in consecutive games of bowling, he tucks me into bed with a gentle whisper for sweet dreams.



Something wakes me in the middle of the night. Groaning, I sit up and look around. I’m alone in my room. The spot where Abe lay down next to me is cold. He’s been gone for a while.

I look up at the ceiling. “Ben, where’s Abe?”

A sharp pain in my stomach has me grunting and doubling over. No, no, no! Ugh, this is the worst timing!

I throw the covers off me to find I’m seated in a pool of blood. My fucking period.

A second cramp hits me, and I groan. God, do I even have tampons? This little trip to Ever was supposed to be for a girls' weekend, not that my period has ever been predictable.

Damnit, I'll have to shove a bunch of—

My bedroom door slams open, hitting the wall with a loud crack.

Ben shudders.

Abe stands in the doorway, both hands gripping the doorframe hard enough that the wood splinters beneath his black nails. The castle lets out a warning rumble that echoes through the room.

Crimson eyes narrow on me, dropping to the pool of blood in my bed.

“Abe,” I say gently. “What’s going on?”

He slips across the room so fast, I can't even track the movement. Black wings flare open behind him as he shoves up onto the bed on all fours in front of me, pupils eating up his dark irises.

He surges forward, burying his face between my thighs. When he sucks in a deep breath and groans, heat splinters through me. My panties are soaked in blood, the fabric wet and uncomfortable.

Abe reaches out with a hand and shreds them from the hem down, tossing them. They hit the floor with a horrible splat.

“Abe.” I use my most gentle tone. He's intent on the blood, unfocused on anything else. “Talk to me, please.”

“Your blood,” he growls, “is the most sinful, perfect, delicious scent.”

Oh fuck.

He's too far gone. I sense it instinctively.

He grips my knee and shoves my thigh to the side, dragging his nose along the inside of my leg, dark eyes locked onto mine. And the Abe staring at me like he's about to eat me

alive is not the Abe who laid ground rules with me earlier tonight.

“Fuck!” I cry out, because he’s so fucking close to my clit, and I’m so sensitive during my period. “Let’s take a second!”

He growls and licks a path through the wet blood smeared on my thigh, groaning as it coats his tongue.

I can’t decide if I’m horrified or turned on or some combination of them both. But then he slips his fingers between my legs, deep inside me in one smooth, easy move. They don’t fill me, but goddamn, it feels good when he rubs a slow circle over my G-spot. When he removes his fingers, blood drips from them down his palm and forearm. Bringing both fingers to his mouth, he licks the blood off them with a wicked smile.

A ragged groan rips from his throat, and before I can protest or beg or say a goddamn thing, he surges forward and buries his face between my legs. Warm lips come to my clit and tug. I fall back on the bed as heat radiates from his mouth through me in huge crashing waves.

I grip the sheets when two fingers slip into my channel again, rubbing roughly at my G-spot as he licks a stripe along the length of my clit and down one side of my pussy. His tongue spears inside me along with his fingers, sending a wash of pleasure echoing along my skin.

Dangerous, oh God. This is so dangerous. Too dangerous. He’s not in control!

“Abe!” I cry out his name when his tongue returns to my clit, rubbing gentle circles over the sensitive skin. Orgasm builds fast and hits hard, my pussy clenching around his fingers.

He roars and fucks me with his hand, both fingers pressed to that magical spot inside. And just when I think the pleasure won’t end, and I need to push him away, he drags his other hand through the bloody mess and presses a finger to my ass. When it slips partway inside me, I scream as release batters

me. My body is a mess of ecstasy. Am I screaming? Totally silent?

I have no fucking idea. All I know is that when Abe rises from his spot between my thighs, the entire lower half of his face is covered in blood. He licks his lips with a groan, wiping both hands down his cheeks to gather the blood. Then he licks his fingers clean in a frenzy of quick movements, snarling the entire time.

In a flash, I know I want his teeth buried in my neck. In my breast. In my side. I want those fucking teeth everywhere. I'd never have thought this was hot in a million years, but seeing him totally undone? I have to have more of this.

“Abe,” I whisper. “We need to slow down.”

Every movement stops, his body freezing. He snaps his teeth at me, then looks down at the fucking mess in my bed. Something like realization flashes through his eyes, and he shoves away, falling off the bed onto his ass.

“Oh fuck,” he chokes out. “Holy shit, Morgan. I could have bitten you. I *would* have bitten you.” He runs both hands through his hair, blood streaking through his blond locks. A horrified-sounding moan leaves his mouth as he clamps one hand over his lips, his eyes closing.

He looks so distraught, I can't help but slide off the bed, blood dripping to the floorboards at my feet. I rub my knuckles along Abe's cheek with one hand and guide his gaze up to me as I slide into his lap. I'm probably covering him in blood, but it seems like that's the last thing he'll care about right now.

When his beautiful crimson eyes meet mine, the black pupil shrinking to its normal size, I press a kiss to the tip of his nose. His eyes close as I press a trail of gentle kisses along his angular cheek to his ear.

“I don't deserve this attention, Morgan,” he whispers as I bring my mouth to his ear and tug with my teeth. A hissed moan is my reward.

“I've got an idea,” I reply. “Keep your eyes closed.”

When I move my lips to his neck, he groans and lets it fall backward. Reaching down between my thighs, I drag two fingers through my pussy lips, coating them with blood.

“Kay, I’m going to try not to be disgusted by this,” I admit. “But it’s hot for me to see you so turned on.”

He gives me a noncommittal grunt, but when I bring my fingers to his lips, the noise turns into a series of desperate-sounding snarls. His long tongue swirls around my fingers, pulling them both between his lips. When he hollows his mouth around them and sucks, I feel it all the way between my thighs.

My answering moan of need matches his as he drops his head, eyes flicking open.

“Disgusting, indeed,” he says with a wicked smirk. “Do it again.” His hand slides down my tee, down my stomach, between my thighs. Warm fingers rub gently over my clit and down both sides of my pussy.

I don’t mean to let my head fall back, but he’s really fucking good with those fingers. They stroke the edges of my pussy, tracing a line to my back hole and forward again. They’re soaked in blood when he slips them back inside me and presses against my G-spot.

“Ride them,” he commands, shifting forward until his breath tickles my neck. “Take your pleasure from me.”

“I don’t want to push you too far,” I moan. “Is this okay?”

His lips close around my throat and pull softly, a tease of the pleasure I suspect his bite would bring me. “Sex and biting go hand in hand for vampires. We don’t have one without the other. I can give you this, though.”

“What happens when we want more?” I question, rocking down onto his elegant fingers.

He groans. “We can get creative, but there are some things I may never be able to give you.”

I let out a cry of dismay as pleasure builds and swirls, my cheeks on fire as his hand works between my thighs. “Maybe

I'll tie you up and have my way with you."

With a wry laugh, he fucks me harder, his free hand coming to my hip so he can grind my pussy into his palm. "If you think there's a restraint in this world that would keep me from you under those circumstances, you're out of your mind. Nothing would hold me back, Morgan."

Rocking up and down with his help, I fall forward, my head on his shoulder as he strokes and rubs.

"That's it, witch," he says on a growl. "Let that pleasure build. Cock your head to the side and let me look at that pretty little spot where your vein is so close to the surface." He brings a hand up to press his thumb against the side of my neck. "I'd love nothing better than to spill it and drink you down."

Pleasure rises and rises and pauses, my body snapping tight at the top of that crest. And then it's a rollercoaster down into bliss that explodes from my pussy outward in ever-expanding waves. I can't even find it in me to worry about the blood, not with the way Abe praises me for coming so beautifully all over him.

When ecstasy fades, I bury my face in his neck as I struggle to catch my breath. I'm covered in blood and slick and his fingers still work slow circles over my G-spot, coaxing my body into round three.

"Let me make this clear, Morgan." His voice is a deep, resounding croon that lights up my whole body as he presses his lips to my ear. "Your blood will always call me. But blood during a menstrual cycle? It's everything I could want and more. There's something incredibly seductive about the idea of you being fertile while we're intimate. It conjures up images of you swollen with my child, us with a family. It bolsters my need to dominate and protect you. There is nothing sexier than a period." He gives me a sad look. "If I could, I'd fuck you all the way through it."

"I want that," I admit with a groan.

“Mmm, me too.” He bites softly at a spot below my ear, making my body jerk uncontrollably.

“How do you feel about coming again?” he questions.

With a wry laugh, I point at my lap. “To be honest, this is my first foray into blood play, and I kinda wanna clean up. It was hot, so hot, but look at the carpet.”

Abe glances around us and throws his head back to laugh.

I stare in awe at the way his throat bobs. Is this the first time I’ve ever heard a true laugh from him?

I don’t know, but as he helps me up, lifting me into his arms to carry me to my bathroom, I know I want to see it again.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

KEEPER

Is it possible to be brokenhearted and falling deeply in love at the same time? I stand silently in the shadows of my basement gym, watching Morgan attack a punching bag with vigor. She's shirtless, working out in just a bra and tight yoga pants. My gaze moves from her wild red hair pulled into a sensual bun, down the length of her elegant neck, down to those incredible breasts, breasts that spilled out from between my fingers last night.

I left her aching. I know I did. Because, even after three orgasms, her body called mine for more. She will always want more. I left aching too. And for the first time in decades, I went to my room and stroked myself while gasping her name. What we did wasn't enough, not nearly enough for me.

And it wasn't enough for her either. Evidenced by the wash of pheromones filling the gym.

She's frustrated in the light of day, and I can't fix it.

Regret and anger war inside me. But it's like she said last night—can't we take whatever we can get for now? Except I know it might never be enough for either of us, this half-life where I can't fill her the way she needs. It's exactly why I didn't call her in the first place.

But thinking about it has me hard and needy, my fangs throbbing with venom.

“You gonna stand there and watch me all morning, or would you like to take the place of the punching bag?” She

doesn't turn to look at me, hitting the bag with an uppercut that sends a cloud of dust into the air.

Chuckling, I stalk across the mat and grip the back of her neck, turning her to face me. I bring my lips above hers, drinking her in.

"You smell fucking delicious," I murmur. "But you're upset. Do you want to talk about it?"

"I need a workaround," she says, unwrapping her wrists and tossing the tape aside. "Scratch that. I demand a workaround. Because if we keep doing what we did last night, I'll lose my fucking mind and start chasing you around the castle. Last night was so hot, but what you said about not being able to fuck. I don't know if I can get on board with that."

A streak of heat flashes down my spine, and I crack my neck from side to side at the intensity that vision produces within me.

Gray eyes spear me with yearning. "You know why else I need this workaround, Abe? Because I have gotten the shit end of the stick my entire life when it comes to family, and I won't accept it with you."

"Holy shit," I mutter, dropping my grip on her neck. "That's precisely what you're getting with me if we continue to date." I try not to grind my teeth together but fail spectacularly.

"Well, I don't accept that," she snaps, crossing her arms. "Ben and I came up with a workaround already."

I glance around the room, but to his credit, the castle remains silent. They must have talked this morning while I was out patrolling with Shepherd.

I lift a brow, cocking my head to the side. "I'm listening."

"We're gonna tie you up."

My mouth drops open.

Morgan smirks at me. "Ben's going to hold you down, and I'm going to ride that fat cock, or, so help me God, I'll start

chasing.”

I scoff. “It won’t work. I’m really fucking strong, Morgan.”

She gestures around us. “Ben is a goddamn castle, Abe. I have faith that he can do this. Can you have faith with us?”

My throat goes dry. I want this. I want this desperately, even as the logical side of my brain runs through every way this could go wrong. There are only a few rules for Keepers, and ‘do no harm’ is one of them. I examine her face for any indicators that she’s joking, but the slight curve of her brows and the wrinkle between them tell me she is deadly serious.

“I have to patrol again and meet with the other Keeper.”

Morgan rolls her eyes. “We don’t have to fuck this minute, but we’re doing it later.”

“We said we’d go out later,” I remind her.

“Jesus Christ, you’re so literal,” she mutters. She places her hands together as if measuring something. “Sometime after you patrol and before we go out, I’m riding you. I won’t accept a no.” She casts a dismissive glance down my body. “Unless you don’t want to do it, of course.”

A growl rips from deep within me. I whip out a hand to grip her throat, pulling her until she hits my chest. Her cheeks go pink, her eyes wide.

“It’s never been about a lack of desire, witch,” I snap. “It’s about not tempting fate. But if you’re determined to do this, I will do my level best not to kill you.”

I’m trying to scare her a little. I want her to remember how fucking dangerous this is.

Instead, she grins. “Perfect. I like being alive; I have shit to do.”

She slides both hands up my shirt and around my sides, stroking my lower back and up. Soft fingertips probe gently at my shoulder blades. It’s a tender, playful touch.

And I can’t stop staring at her.

“Are we really going to do this?” I whisper. “Or am I dreaming?”

She grins. “I don’t know, Abe. Did you dream about fucking me?”

“All the time,” I huff and press my forehead to hers. “The reason I don’t sleep is because, when I sleep, I dream. And when I dream, it’s always about you.”

She makes a choked sound, swallowing hard, her throat bobbing underneath my fingers. Gray eyes come to mine, filled with tears. “How is it, after all the bullshit, you can say things like that and make me feel so fucking deeply?”

“I worked hard to keep my walls up,” I admit. “I’ve already told you that. But you ripped them down the moment I brought you home. My self-control is only so good.”

“I’m glad,” she whispers. “I’m so glad to see this side of you. I was starting to think it didn’t exist.” She laughs, eyes falling to my neck. “Lean down here so I can kiss you.”

I run my hands over her perfect ass, gripping it and hauling her into my arms. Taking a few steps, I press her against the wall, never taking my eyes off her.

“That better?”

She brings them to the neck of my shirt instead, yanking the fabric down. The cool basement air on my exposed skin feels so good. Sighing, I close my eyes.

The first featherlight kiss below my chin sends a trill of desire through me. The next is more insistent and with more teeth. I groan. “Neck play is a particular fantasy of all vampires. You are undoing me, witch.”

She doesn’t bother to respond, biting and sucking at my skin as her hips rock against my stomach. Morgan goes wild, biting and licking my neck and shoulders until I’m a growling, snarling mess. When the thirst rises, my fangs elongate. I drop her and step back. Every muscle in my body trembles with the aching need to bite her. To sink my fangs into that pretty jugular while I spear her with my cock.

I want it so badly, I can taste it. It occurs to me that I could look into muzzles. I'll order one. Yes, that could work.

"Give me a moment," I demand, running both hands through my hair before I straighten my turtleneck.

Morgan's chest heaves, eyes wild. And I marvel at this person the gods crafted just for me. She's calculating and loyal and sensual and fierce. She is quick to anger and quick to soothe. Most vampires are afraid of fire.

But not me.

I want Morgan Hector to burn me alive.

She lifts her chin, walking past me. When we're side by side, she lifts her ferocious gaze to mine. "I'm hanging with my sisters this morning. Comm me when you've got a break. It can be our first official date."

She dares me with a look to deny her what she's asking for.

But I can't. I'm past the point of even trying.

What Morgan wants, she'll get. I'm done fighting.

Deep inside my mind, every moment of Keeper training rings alarm bells. What I'm doing goes against everything they rewired within me. I should be thinking about her safety.

"I should pack your shit up and toss you out of this castle," I growl. "You'd be safer somewhere else."

She gives me a haughty look. "You won't, though. We already agreed we'd date." Leaning close to me, she winks. "Besides, you don't really want to. And Ben would run you outta town."

He groans around us, the gym floorboards flapping up and down as if he's giving her a standing ovation.

"See?" She shrugs as if to say, "I told you so."

I watch her move gracefully out of the gym, her footsteps trailing up the stairs to the first floor. The wheels of my mind spin. Placing my hand on the wall, I pat it a few times.

“She’s determined to do this, Ben. No matter what happens, promise you’ll protect her from me, even if that means hurting me in the process.”

The wall shivers under my touch.

“I’m serious,” I snap. “I managed to shove my thirst down for a long time. But if we open those floodgates...” I glance around the room. “It’s been a long time for me, Ben. Please.”

The door swings open and shut once: a yes.

“Thank you,” I murmur. “I’m counting on you to have her best interests at heart.”

Ben doesn’t answer, but I feel a little more confident that he can control me.

I wish I had that much confidence in myself.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

MORGAN

“Wait a second,” Thea says. “He’s dying?!”

I wipe a rag over one of the chairs in the town hall auditorium. I’m determined to get this place cleaned up. “Apparently.” I keep moving along the row of chairs. Wren and Lou are seated in the front row, watching me in silence.

Thea sputters and sinks down into the chair next to Wren. “Okay, but...shit. I don’t know what to say about this.” She glances at Wren, her face a mask of distress.

Lou clears her throat, lifting her eyes to mine. “This is all very interesting.”

“Interesting?” Wren turns in her seat and glares at Lou. “Nothing is interesting about Morgan’s soulmate being sick.”

Lou shakes her head, looking bashful. “Of course not. You three have been through so much. This is a terrible blow. I mean if it should have killed him long ago, then Moira must be right—his bond to Morgan is sustaining him somehow. Who’s to say that couldn’t go on for a really long time?”

I fall into a seat in the row behind the girls, my energy for cleaning zapped.

A knocking sound behind us has me whipping around.

A beautiful centaur woman stands in the doorway, her palm pressed flat to the wood. She beams at us. “I’m terribly sorry to interrupt you ladies, but the Keeper told me I could find you here. I wanted to introduce myself; I’m Hana.”

Hana. Hana. Why does that sound familiar?

“Oh! The other Keeper’s mate, right?” I stand and exit the row of chairs, walking up the middle toward her. My sisters and Lou follow.

Hana clip-clops toward us, reaching out a hand once we’re close. Black lips part into a stunning smile as she takes my hand and shakes it vigorously.

“That’s right! You must be Morgan.” Green eyes flick over my shoulder. “Thea, Wren, and possibly Lou, your aunt?”

“You’re good,” Thea says.

Hana laughs, the sound echoing around the room. “Since you’re all registered with the Hearth, it was easy to do a little research before we arrived.” Her smile falls a little. “I know the circumstances for Arkan and me coming here are awkward at best, so I thought it might be nice to know a little about you to show you how much he and I care for Ever.”

“How does that work, exactly?” Wren lifts her coffee to her lips and takes a soft sip. “You just got here.”

“The protective bond between a Keeper and their haven, even just temporary, slips into place the moment a keeping contract is signed,” Lou states.

Wren, Thea, and I turn as one to look at her.

She chuckles. “I lived in Rainbow for a while, remember? The Keeper there taught me a lot about the haven system. He was very cool.”

“Ah, yes,” Hana laughs. “He is most unusual. Although I think Arkan takes after him a bit. They’re perhaps a little more cheerful than your average Keeper. I’ve often wondered if they started changing the training a little after—” She pauses, green eyes moving back to me.

“After my Keeper?” The question slips out of me in a whisper.

She nods. “We all knew the circumstances around him becoming a Keeper weren’t good. The transition was hard for him. It’s been hard for others too.” She gives me a look. “Most

of the newer Keepers since yours seem to have retained a little more of their original personality.”

“I met Arkan this morning at the coffee shop,” Wren says, “and it surprised me that he introduced himself with his name instead of his title. I thought all Keepers were called Keeper.”

“Typically, they are,” the centaur says, clasping her hands at her waist. “But Arkan refused to do so. And being a Keeper is such a critical role, Evenia did not fight him on it.”

“Must be nice,” I mutter. “She fights our Keeper on everything.”

Hana purses her lips. “She’s a real bitch.”

“Oh, I like you,” Thea says with a smile. “I like you a lot. You get it.”

“Indeed.” Hana laughs, the tinkling sound filling the auditorium. She glances around. “This place is so lovely. I can’t believe you don’t use it, although it seems you plan to change that, Morgan?”

I toss my cleaning rag over my shoulder. “Absolutely. Town Hall and Ben, err, the Keeper’s castle, could use a little TLC.”

Thea bumps my hip. “The castle’s name is Ben? The fuck, Mor! I need these details!”

“Well,” Hana says, gesturing at my rag. “If you’ve got any more of those, I would love to help. I can sense the building’s pleasure that you’re here spending time within her walls.”

A moment of jealousy spears through me. I don’t want another Keeper’s wife taking over my Town Hall. But then I remember that she’s here to help. If I were in her shoes, I’d do the same thing she’s doing.

I jerk my head toward a bucket up at the front. “Rags are there.”

Hana presses two fingers to her forehead and draws them down her face and chest, fans her arm straight out in front, then in an arc toward her side. “That means ‘thank you’ in my

culture.” Her voice is deeply comforting, and I can’t help but grin.

Wren lifts a palm, and Hana slaps it. “That’s pretty much the same for us,” she says with a laugh.

Hana clops down the aisle toward the front, grabbing a rag. Planting both hands on her hips, she grins at us. “I don’t know if the Keeper mentioned it, but I’m also a black witch. I’d love to speak with you about your magic. I initially trained at the Hearth to become an instructor, so I’m versed in all four types of magic, although I don’t teach these days.”

“Ah, the life of a politician’s wife, eh?” Wren says with a knowing look.

Hana chuckles. “Something like that.”

For the next hour, we dust and mop the auditorium. Hana tells us about how she met Arkan when they got snowed in together while hiking. It sounds like a romance novel the way she saved him from a snowdrift, and then he wooed her over the course of the storm. They’ve been inseparable ever since.

He sounds cool, and even though I haven’t met him yet, I like him already.

The four of us pepper her with questions about her last haven. She gets misty-eyed talking about leaving it, but it’s obvious from the way she talks about Ever that she’s thrilled to be here, despite the circumstances.

We clean for another hour after that, joking, laughing, and it’s the closest to pure happiness I’ve felt since my parents died. Thea, Wren, and Lou are lighthearted. Hana, as it turns out, is fucking hilarious. And she has a story for every possible situation. We’re in stitches for most of the morning.

Eventually, Lou and Wren leave to meet Ohken and work on a new batch of mead. Shepherd calls Thea about patrolling the town’s wards. Only Hana and I remain in Town Hall.

She dusts the auditorium’s door frame. “Morgan, would you like to talk about anything now that it’s just you and me?”

“Gods, yes!” I practically shout. “It sounds like you didn’t really have to woo Arkan, but how the hell do other Keepers’ mates do it? Mine is...”

She cuts me a knowing look. “Off-putting? Horribly literal? Holds you at arm’s length while he plays the martyr?” She throws her hand dramatically over her eyes, faux fainting into the wall.

When I growl, she chuckles and tosses her dirty rag back in the bucket. “That’s always been the way of things. Most of my friends who are mated to Keepers know you really have to break past that barrier they put up. They’re so hardwired to think about themselves last.” Her smile goes devious and broad. “But once you break through, they’ll love you so damn hard. They take a little convincing, which sort of feels like you’re setting feminism back a few decades.”

“Right?” I huff and throw my rag in the bucket with hers. “I don’t want to chase a man, and my Keeper was rude as hell to me for a whole month. He’s done his damndest to drive me away. Joke’s on him, though,” I say with a laugh. “The Annabelle kicked me out, and he had to take me in. Now he’s toast. We’re going on a date later.”

Hana chuckles. “He had to take you in, did he?” She winks at me. “Seems to me like some part of him knew he was done for.”

“I hope so.” My train of thought turns serious, remembering how he’s fucking sick, and nothing I can do will change that. I want to tell Hana, to ask her opinion about it. And Abe said I could do what I wanted with that information. But it feels too soon to share a secret that big. Because, if I tell her, she’ll tell Arkan, and I don’t know anything about him.

“Morgan,” her soft tone breaks through my runaway train of thoughts. “I know there’s more going on with your Keeper than you’re letting on. I can see it in the way your expression has changed.”

I let out a grunt of confirmation.

She clasps her hands in front of her chest again. “I’m happy to talk about it, but the look on your face tells me you might be skeptical of that, which is one-hundred-percent understandable. So, let’s switch gears. Want to talk about your magic? Black magic is handy for so very many things.”

For the next half hour, she gives me a primer on all four colors of magic. I know most of the white and green details because of Catherine’s help teaching Wren and Thea. But my black magic has always been fickle, and I’ve never even heard of blue magic.

“Blue magic is a battle magic,” Hana says confidently. “The rarest of the types and normally reveals itself under extreme duress. You’ll likely never meet a blue magic witch your entire life. I’ve never met one.”

“Sheesh,” I huff. “I thought the black magic was wild enough.”

“Oh, it is.” She laughs. “A little birdie told me you already healed the wards with yours.”

“A little birdie, huh?” I give her the side-eye.

She chuckles. “Okay, it was Abe.”

I jolt in place. “Wait! You called him Abe! You know his real name?”

Black lips split into a friendly smile. “I would only call him that when you and I are alone. Sort of a Keepers’ mates thing we all do. Otherwise, it gets really hard to figure out who in the hells we’re all talking about when we get together.”

She called me the Keeper’s mate.

Hana claps me on the shoulder. “There are a group of us who get together once a month to play poker. Are you familiar with that game?”

I pat the back of her hand. “Yes, dear. We have an entire town dedicated to that game. It’s called Las Vegas.”

Her laugh is positively infectious. “Sorry! I know very little about the human world. Poker has been around in the

monster world for thousands of years.” Her smile softens. “I’d love for you to come with me sometime, if you’d like to.”

“I’d love that,” I whisper. More sisterhood? More women friends? I crave it.

My comm watch pings, and the Keeper’s name hovers just above it. I clench my thighs together as a wash of heat spreads through my tummy.

Hana gives me an understanding look and waves goodbye, clip-clopping out the door toward the front.

I answer quickly. “Hey.”

Abe’s deep voice echoes out of the watch. “Morgan. I’ve finished my tasks for the morning. Are you ready?”

Am I ready?

God, I want to tease him.

“Ready for what?”

He clears his throat. “You mentioned having a particular schedule in mind for today.”

I choke back a laugh. “Not a dirty talker, Abe?”

After a moment of silence, a deep, needy-sounding growl comes through the watch. “Shall I pick you up at Town Hall?”

An idea has been brewing in my mind all morning.

“Nah. Meet me at Higher Grounds in fifteen.”

Per usual, he clicks off without a goodbye or anything. I’ve really got to get him out of that habit. I don’t know if he realizes how utterly dismissive it feels.

Placing a hand on the auditorium door, I thrum my fingers against the beautiful amber wood. “Be back soon, okay? I’ve got big plans for you, girl.”

The door vibrates under my palm. She’s happy. And I fucking love that. I turn to look around the room. Every surface sparkles, every chair’s in the right place. The stage looks fresh and clean, the speaker’s podium gleaming in midday sunlight that streams through now-clean windows.

“Lookin’ good.” I let out an appreciative whistle, and the doors flip flop open and closed in thanks.

I leave Town Hall and head up Main Street toward the coffee shop, Higher Grounds. Monsters of all species wave and greet me as I pass. When I get there, I notice a crack in the coffee house’s front door. Something inside me unfurls and spreads, all my focus moving to that crack.

It shouldn’t be there.

Wrong.

Without thinking, I place my hand on it. Heat sears up the length of my arm, but I don’t move my palm from the wood.

My mouth drops open in astonishment as the wood knits itself back together, the crack disappearing beneath my palm. And then it’s gone.

Fucking *gone*.

I blink, removing my hand from the door. Where there was a long gouge in the wood, it’s now smooth and glossy like the rest of the door. I clear my throat, trying to understand. Did I use my black magic to fix this door?

A bell hangs over the door to let the workers know when someone is entering. It jingles now, clanging loudly.

And I understand what it means. The coffee shop is thanking me.

“Holy shit,” I mutter. I can feel the coffee shop. I sense her relief at having the crack fixed. It was bugging her like a toothache.

I’m sure I look confused as I enter Higher Grounds, but other than a few waves and nods as I enter, nobody gives me a funny look. When I step up to the counter, Pietro, one of the two vampire owners, beams at me.

“Ah, Miss Morgan, lovely as always. What can I get for you?” He rolls the *R* in my name, and it always makes me chuckle. Wren’s name is about fifty-two syllables long when he says it.

I lean over the counter, giving him a conspiratorial look. “I could use your help, Pietro. If I wanted to, say, woo a vampire, what’s something special I could do?”

His eyes flash white for a moment, fangs elongating. He shakes his head and leans against the wall behind the checkout station. “My apologies, Morgan, that was an inappropriate response on my part.”

I gesture at his mouth. “The teeth?”

“And the eyes,” he says. “You have not seen the Keeper do this?” He stares at me, and his eyes flash white and stay white.

“Holy shit,” I bark. “What the hell is going on?”

The white disappears, and he smiles at me. “Vampires have a second eyelid much like a shark. It covers our eyes when we wish to bite something...or someone,” he tacks on with a wishful look. “It is considered rude to do so to another vampire’s mate.”

“I can overlook it,” I say gently. “Can you give me any insight?”

“Of course,” he croons, rolling that *R* again.

He grabs at his necklace, pulling it over his head and laying it on the counter between us. “This is a *ziol*. Gifting one of these to your mate is an ancient vampiric tradition. Vampires commonly mate between species, and bloodletting is a favorite gift of ours. For mates who do not have the ability to puncture their own skin, the *ziol* is a way to release the blood so we may drink it.”

He pushes the necklace across the counter toward me. “You may borrow this *ziol* from me for a time.” His tone goes bitter. “I don’t see myself needing it anytime soon.”

I grab the necklace to get a good look. The chain appears to be a thick golden strand with a chunky cross dangling from it, its surface inlaid with jewels of every possible shade of red.

Pietro strokes the surface. “Red for blood, as you might imagine. We vampires adore symbolism.” He shoots me a wink as I admire the beautiful pendant. His fingers move

deftly, pointing at each corner. “There is a button on the back. If you press it, the corners become sharp edges you can puncture yourself with. Try it.”

I rub at the back, feeling a small button. Careful not to hold the cross by the edge, I depress the raised surface. Four sharp points slide slowly out of the cross’s four sections.

“And that’s the gist of it,” Pietro says happily.

I smile up at him. “Thank you so much, Pietro.”

He crosses his arms and gives me a big grin. “Let me make you his favorite drink. If you were to, say, puncture your finger and drip a few drops into it, he would, hmm”—he waves his hand around as if looking for the right words—“lose his mind.”

I chuckle and press the button, admiring how the points sink back into the pendant’s edges like they were never there.

Pietro turns and reaches into a refrigerator, bringing out a giant glass jar of milky liquid. I’d guess it’s some kind of milk, but it seems almost viscous, sloshing slowly around the jar.

I clear my throat. Pietro turns with a questioning look. When I point to the jar, he raises both brows and then throws his head back to laugh. “Ah! I suspect you are wondering if this is something similar to the troll whip. What a surprise that was, eh?”

He’s referencing the time we discovered that troll whip was actually whipped troll jizz. Not only was it jizz, but it came from Wren’s now-mate, Ohken. Totally a monster tradition that does not translate well into human terms. Jizz as a coffee topper is completely inappropriate.

I shudder, thinking about the sheer number of times I drank a latte topped with the frothy sweet cream.

Pietro returns to his latte making, humming as he pours liquid from a variety of containers into his mixer. I slip the ziol over my neck and tuck it into my shirt, watching him work. A minute or two later, he turns to me with a grin, pouring the steaming mixture into a to-go cup.

When he's done, he slides it over the countertop with a grin. "A few drops of your blood will be enough," he says. "Any more than that, and he might go insane."

I dip my head in thanks, but as I do, an odd sensation hits me. I jolt, looking around to see if anyone's close to me.

Pietro leans over the bar. "Morgan, are you alright?"

I set the cup down and press both hands flat to the bar top.

There!

The building's hurt somewhere deep. Closing my eyes, I focus on the pain, twisting and following it through blackness. I blow out a breath as my palms heat against the wood. My senses blur, sound and smell diminishing to nothing. Pain zings up my fingertips, but identifying the problem is out of reach.

Without thinking, I spin away from Pietro and dash toward the back of the coffee shop. I've seen a set of stairs here before. I think someone shouts my name, but I'm too focused on her, on her pain, on her desperate call for help.

I yank a door open and run headlong down a flight of dark stairs. It's not until I get to the bottom that I realize I don't know where the lights are.

"A little help?" I call out.

A light flickers on and spins, pointing toward the back wall. I run past boxes of cups and lids and a stack of wooden chests, slamming my palms against the wide flat stones of her foundation.

Electric energy shoots up my spine, and I scream. Something's digging away at her, something dark, something deep underground.

I yank my hand from the foundation as Pietro and his brother, Alessandro, rush down the stairs.

"Call the Keeper," I shout into my comm watch.

"Mor—"

“Get to Higher Grounds now!” I snap, disconnecting the moment I’m done. I turn to the vampire brothers. “Call Richard, Alo, and Shepherd!”

They stare at me, brows furrowed in confusion.

“Now!” I shout.

The coffee house creaks around us, letting out a terrible groan. Pietro’s face goes white, and he lifts his wrist to speak urgently into his watch.

I throw myself against the wall, whispering to my magic. It’s in the tips of my fingers, in the heat that radiates into the stones through me.

So much darkness lies on the other side of this wall.

Sound, scent, sight, hearing. They all disappear as I stay with the coffee shop, reassuring her, trying desperately to comfort her.

I jerk when a body wraps around mine, pulling my hands from the stones.

“Nooo!” I shout. Around us, the coffee house shudders and heaves, floorboards above us creaking.

“I’m here,” Abe murmurs into my ear. “We’re all here. I need you to step back, Morgan.”

My senses are blurry. Someone calls my name. Another hand reaches for mine and pulls me to the opposite wall. Darkness blots my vision, and I shout. It’s a wing, a leathery wing. Right in front of me.

Muddled thoughts clear in a second, and I peek under my brother-in-law’s wing. Across the basement, Abe stands with Richard, Dirk, and Alo. Pietro and Alessandro stand opposite them, swords in their hands.

Abe barks orders, and Richard lifts a giant hammer the size of a goddamn tree trunk. He yanks it effortlessly up behind him and brings it down onto the wall with a grunt.

Stone chips explode out from the hit, and the coffee shop screams. Literally screams like a person. Pietro lets out a

terrible cry but grits his teeth. Richard lifts the hammer and bashes the wall over and over until a hole starts to form.

The building's pain eats at me like a knife to the gut, stabbing over and over every time they hurt her. But there's so much relief alongside that pain, relief that help is here for her.

The hole's big enough for someone to crawl through.

"Stand back!" Abe shouts at the other monsters just as a snarl echoes out from the hole.

I blink, and in a moment, a figure covered in dirt leaps out of the hole, knocking Alo and both vampires to the ground. A thrall.

Holy shit. This one's easily twice as big as the others, and where its body looks like some sort of enormous wolf, its head looks horribly like Ohken's. A shifter. Or what used to be a shifter, maybe?

The monster whips around with a snarl, but Alo, Richard, and Abe are on it in a second, stabbing and slashing. In moments, nothing's left of it but a pile of limbs.

Alo kicks at the monster's hindquarters, his big chest heaving. Dropping to his heels, he grips the thrall's back foot and lifts it up, his eyes flicking to the Keeper. "Wesley's sigil. How? And how did Shepherd and I not feel it?" He looks over at his brother, his face a mask of concern.

Shepherd tucks his wing out of my way with a fierce look. "Sorry, sis. Had to keep you safe, or Thea would have my balls."

"Noted," I mutter. "Thanks."

Abe's red eyes flick to mine, a flash of relief moving through them before he looks back at the thrall. "I need to know how it got into town, and how none of us noticed." He glances at his comm watch. "No alarms from the ward monitoring system either."

"It looks sort of familiar," I murmur, staring at the face.

"Oh gods," Alo says, his gray face turning pale. "Is that—"

“Leighton,” Richard barks. “From my pack.” He crosses both arms and steps back. “I spoke to him yesterday morning.” His green eyes narrow at the shifter. “How could this happen?”

Dirk peers into the hole in the wall, then looks over at the Keeper. “Somehow, Wesley’s here. I dunno how he could manage it, but he is.” He stands. “I’ll need to recall the team and update Evenia.”

Abe nods, staring absentmindedly at the bloody figure on the ground. Lifting his comm watch, he calls Arkan and tells him to meet us at Doc Slade’s. My mind wanders back to the first time I met Doc Slade. That was to examine a thrall too. I guess history repeats itself.

Fuck.

Footsteps pound down the stairs. Thea and Wren burst into the basement, looking side to side before they run across the small space and yank me into their arms.

“Jesus!” Thea shouts at me. “What the fuck?!”

Wren squeezes me tight. “You scared the shit out of us, Morgan.”

I hold my sisters close, grateful they weren’t here or in danger.

But they could have been if this thing got out.

Richard’s deep baritone breaks through my thoughts. “How’d you know it was here, Morgan?” His tone isn’t accusatory, but I sense suspicion.

“She touched the counter,” Pietro replies. “And the shop told her something was wrong.”

“The building was in pain,” I offer. “And I couldn’t quite figure out why from upstairs, so I ran down here and...” I wave a hand at the wall.

“Beautifully done,” Abe murmurs. “Black magic at its finest. We owe you a debt of gratitude.”

Richard sighs and gestures at the fallen figure. “Help me get him to Slade’s. I’ll have to notify Leighton’s family

immediately.”

I pull my sisters closer.

“Do you want to go with them?” Thea whispers into my ear. “Or we could skip the thrall autopsy and go get drunk at the Green Bean. Whaddya say?”

I look over at Abe, but his face is a carefully neutral mask. And I’m zapped of energy. I pull out of my sisters’ arms. “A drink sounds good. I need a minute.”

Abe gives me a soft smile. “I’ll find you when this is done.”

“I’m holding you to that,” I whisper.



Ten minutes later, Wren, Lou, Thea, and I sit in a red-and-turquoise leather booth at the Galloping Green Bean.

Word that something happened is already getting out. Monsters sit hunched at tables, their heads together. Shock and sadness sink deep as I bring a hand up to my heart.

“I didn’t know Leighton,” I whisper. “Do any of you know who Richard’s talking about?”

My sisters and aunt shake their heads.

A clip-clopping sound rings through the half-empty diner. Hana comes level with our table and kneels down onto her front legs, putting her a bit taller than us in the booth.

“Are you girls okay?” Her green eyes are filled with tears. “Arkan’s with your Keeper and the others. I thought I should check on you all.”

“We’re all okay,” Lou says softly, chocolate eyes flicking to me. “Morgan discovered the thrall. She saved our asses. If that thing had gotten out inside the coffee shop...”

Hana’s lips twitch. “Your black magic is such a gift, my friend. I’m sure you’re exhausted, but if you feel up to it at some point, we can work to heal the coffee shop of the injuries inflicted during the thrall attack.”

I sit up, my palms itching. “Like we can fix the hole in the wall?”

“Yeah,” Hana says with a soft smile. “But the shop will be fine if we wait a few days. I visited with her now, and she felt so relieved. That is all thanks to you, Morgan.”

“You kicked ass, bitch,” Thea shouts. “I always knew you’d have the coolest magic.”

“It’s so rare, too,” Lou says. “Rainbow is a very eclectic haven, but in all my time there, I never met a black witch.”

Pride joins the other emotions spinning through me. I look up at Hana. “What do you spend most of your time doing as the black witch in a haven?”

She smiles as Alba, the diner’s owner, shoves a giant platform-like seat toward Hana. The centaur stands and seats her back half on the platform. She still towers over us, but at least she’s not on her knees.

“Well,” she says. “This is something we could do together, since we both technically live here now. We could visit each building and feel for issues.”

“Just like that?” Wren sounds incredulous. “I thought black magic was really hard to control.”

Hana and I shake our heads at the same time. She laughs when she sees my response, clapping her hands at her waist. “Not so hard to control, just very difficult to identify. The closest thing I can approximate it to is riding a bike, not that I’ve ever done it. But I’m told it’s difficult to find your rhythm, but once you do, it’s easy to learn fast.”

I nod. “I looked so hard for the magic, and it almost hid from that sort of focus. Each time I’ve used it, it was instinctive. I didn’t think about steps to take at all.”

Thea and Wren both nod.

“It was sort of like that for me too,” Wren admits. “Focusing helped to a degree, but once I felt what successfully using it was like, I picked it up faster.”

Thea snorts. “Doesn’t hurt that you had a sexy-as-hell teacher.”

Wren purses her lips to hide a smile. “No. That, err, definitely moved things along.”

We all laugh at that. Alba arrives moments later with five spiked milkshakes. She sets them down with a thankful look toward me. “There’s extra booze in yours, Morgan. I’m not really sure what all happened, but it sounds like we have you to thank for keeping Ever safe.”

“It’s what we do,” Thea says with a beleaguered sigh. “Honestly, I don’t know what the hells you did before the Hector triplets came to town!”

Alba stomps one foot, planting both hands on her hips. “Now listen here, Althea.”

But time stops for me as the hairs on the back of my neck rise. I whip around in my seat to see the Keeper standing just inside the door, his dark eyes intense on me. He jerks his head toward the door, asking if I’m ready to go.

When I turn toward my sisters, Lou and Hana, they all have the exact same expression on their face—amusement.

“Get outta here, sis,” Wren encourages softly. “Call us later if you need anything at all. We haven’t wanted to interrupt you at the castle, but we’ll come out there or meet you somewhere, or literally whatever you want, okay? We’re here for you both.”

“Thank you,” I breathe. “Love you guys. I’ll catch up with y’all later.” Slipping out of the booth, I resist the urge to look back at my family.

I walk up the row between the bar and the booths until I reach the door. Abe casts a quick look down my body before leveling me with a possessive gaze. “Shall we head home?”

My fingers twitch with the need to reach out and take his hand, to walk out of here like we’re any other couple on a date. But what we have is so crazy, so new and so unconventional. I don’t know if he’ll want that.

Taking a step closer, he reaches for my hand and threads his fingers through mine. With a soft smile, he pushes the door open, guiding me through. Once outside, he directs me to his bike, holding my hand as I mount it. Fuck me, I know my sisters and Lou are probably staring at me from inside. I can't bring myself to look up; I might burst into hysterical anxiety-driven laughter.

I told Abe I wanted to fuck him for our first date.

What in the hell was I thinking?! I mean hells. What in the hells?

Abe slides onto the seat behind me and wraps an arm around my waist, settling me against his big chest. With a turn of the throttle, we drive off down the street and toward home.

I close my eyes as he drives, my head resting against his chest. It's hard to talk on the bike like this, and I don't even know what he'll want once we get home. I imagine he delivered the bad news alongside Richard. And I don't know what might help him carry the burden of being in charge of this town.

Not to mention, when the Hearth finds out that someone actually died on his watch? I choke down sorrow wondering what Evenia will do. But that's a problem for tomorrow.

I trace lazy stripes up his thighs and back down, willing the smallest amount of peace to comfort him. His muscles are tense beneath my hands, but after a few minutes, he rests his chin on top of my head.

When we reach the castle, Ben swings his doors wide for us. Abe hops off first, offering me his hand. When I slide off the seat, he presses me against it, caging me between both muscular arms.

"You were wonderful," he murmurs, brushing my lips with his. "Astonishing. Incredible."

"Oh my gods," I say with faux surprise. "Is this a compliment, Abe?"

He grins, eyes dropping to my lips. "Richard tells me you might appreciate a compliment from time to time." His

expression turns serious. “That doesn’t diminish the truth of it, Morgan. More lives could have been lost today if not for you.”

I lift my gaze to his. “What’s happening with Leighton?”

Abe grits his jaw, the muscles working tight under his skin. “Leighton’s family wants to bury him tonight and celebrate his life tomorrow. That’s traditional for shifters.”

“Did you have to deliver the news? What happened with the thrall?”

His eyes fall to the ground. “I delivered the news with Richard. He and Connall will be the primary support for Leighton’s family over the next few days, as is their way. We didn’t learn anything new at Slade’s. The thrall is Wesley’s. How, we can’t say. Arkan is calling Evenia now.”

“Jesus,” I huff out. “I hope she doesn’t show up.”

“She won’t,” he confirms. “She’s likely to send an army, though. And once we catch Wesley, I’ll be removed from my post, if I had to guess.” Crimson eyes find mine. “I don’t care about any of that right now. Let’s steal an hour or two for ourselves. My evening will revolve around this.” Dark eyes come to mine. “I’m sorry for that. I know you need support too.” He runs a hand through his hair. “I’m not sure how to... do this.”

I slip under his arm and grab his fingers, pulling him with me. “We’ll figure it out. In any case, I’ve got something for you. It’s why I was at Higher Grounds to begin with.”

He trails silently after me, through the doors and up the halls into the kitchen. I drop his hand and round the island to the coffeemaker, pushing the button to start it. I turn to Abe with a soft smile. “Sounds like we’ve got a long night ahead of us, so I think coffee’s in order.”

His lips twitch as he slides onto a barstool. As the coffee hisses and drips behind me, I watch him. And he watches me watch him. He sits up straighter, cocking his head to the side, eyes roving leisurely down to my waist and back up.

“You’re assessing me,” he says carefully. “What for?”

“I’m checking you out,” I correct. “Because I don’t get many chances to stare at you.”

Elegant nostrils flare, his fangs descending to press against the sides of his mouth.

“Does that make you hot?” I lean onto my forearms on the dark island top. “Knowing I’m looking at you, that I like what I see?”

He swallows hard, chest rising and falling with quick breaths. His eyes drop to where my tits are pressed together by my arms.

“Morgan.” His already deep voice goes deeper, rougher, my name ragged.

“Yes, Abe?” I say with a soft smile. God, I love a good tease. When he doesn’t immediately say anything, I turn to the coffee and pour two cups. I add a touch of cream to each cup and then set them on the island. Reaching for the chain around my neck, I pull the ziol out of my shirt.

Abe’s eyes go wide as he rises from the barstool. “Where did you get that?”

I lift the ziol and spin it in the low light, pressing it to my finger. When I depress the button on the back, the points slide fast into my skin, puncturing the pad of my forefinger.

Abe lets out a choked sound, slipping up onto the counter on both knees. He grabs my wrist and the ziol, unwrapping my fingers where I’m holding the pendant. When I open my hand, he snarls and grabs the ziol, tossing it away from us. It hits the wall somewhere to my right, then falls to the floor.

“Get rid of it,” Abe snaps at Ben.

A floorboard creaks, snapping out and back into place.

“I was just borrowing that,” I shout. “I’ve got to return it!”

“I will return it to Pietro,” Abe barks. “With an order not to gift my mate a single fucking thing.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to mention the second eyelid thing, but I don’t want to put Pietro on the Keeper’s shit list.

“I approached him,” I admit. “I wanted to know what I could do that you’d appreciate.”

He gives me an incredulous look, his fingers still wrapped around my wrist. “Why?” The word is spoken so low, I can barely hear it.

I push the coffee cup under my hand. Then I squeeze my fingers together until the blood drips into Abe’s coffee.

“Morgan,” he gasps.

I push the coffee toward him, a slight red hue swirling in the creamy foam on top. “I’ve seen another side of you, a side I didn’t know existed. I want us for however long we have.”

He slips off the counter and crushes his lips to mine, placing my arms up around his neck. His arms go around me, pressing me flat to his broad chest. His lips are frantic, frenzied. Innate power is obvious in the tight bunch of his muscles against mine. One of his hands comes to the back of my head as he devours me. And I lose myself completely in a kiss that says what he hasn’t said—that this thing between us is so real and powerful, we couldn’t deny it if we tried.

When we part, chests heaving, he brings both hands to my face, his gaze focused on me. “I’m sure you’ll think it’s far too soon for me to say this, but I’m in love with you, Morgan Anne Hector. Before I met you, I loved the idea of you because we’d had no time. And then I loved the version of you I thought I’d lost. But the real you, the you that’s here now in my arms? I am deeply, wildly gone for that woman.”

My eyes fill with tears, but he’s not done delivering the emotional blows I needed. He brings his forehead to mine, brushing his lips down the bridge of my nose. “You are my favorite person in this entire universe. I don’t deserve you, but if you want me despite my many, many shortcomings and failures, then I’m yours.”

I’m his favorite. I was never *anyone’s* favorite.

I hop up onto the bar and wrap my legs around his waist, hauling him closer. Reaching for the coffee, I lift it to his lips.

“Then you’re mine,” I whisper. The words “I love you too” are on the tip of my tongue, but somehow I can’t say them yet. We’ve moved so quickly. He doesn’t press me to, either. Instead, he lifts the cup to his lips and takes a tentative sip. Black lashes flutter against his pale cheeks as he takes another sip, and another. His tongue peeks out to lick along the edge of the cup.

“Jesus, that’s hot,” I manage.

He groans and licks his way along the edge of the cup before taking another deeper drag of the hot liquid. When he bites the cup again, I watch in utter fascination.

“Pietro said this would make you wild,” I say. “Guess he was right?”

Abe sets the cup down and plants a hand on either side of me. “Give me your neck, Morgan.”

Without thinking, I let my head fall back, anticipating the press of his warm, rough lips.

“This is a problem,” he mutters. “Because Pietro’s right. I am on the knife’s edge of losing control.” His fingers come to my chin. He strokes a line down my throat as I rock my hips against him. “Your very existence is the headiest of enticements. But this? The way you offer your neck so willingly? I want to bite you so badly.”

The part of my mind that’s fucking horny and hot from all this teasing wants to tell him to fucking do it. That I’m a black witch, and we’ll figure it out together. But the rational, scientific side of me rears her bitch head to remind me that Abe and Moira have been looking for an answer for decades, and they know this world far better than I do.

I fight to raise my head and look at him. He looks so torn, brows furrowed, his mouth slightly open. I can’t imagine how long it’s been for him since he felt real pleasure. After this horrible fucking day, all I want is to give that to him, so he can have a few hours of peace.

“Abe, hold still,” I command.

He cocks his head to the side. “Why?”

“Because I asked you to.”

“For what purpose?”

“It’s a surprise.”

He purses his lips. “Another gift from Pietro, I suppose?”

I chuckle and slip off the counter, patting it again. “Are you jealous, Keeper?”

He snarls and sits on his ass, hanging his legs over the edge to part his thighs and pull me between them. His eyes move to the ceiling. “Ben, bring me the black box on my nightstand, please.”

An answering rumble and then a series of creaks and moans are my answer. Abe doesn’t take his eyes off me, and I’m caught between him and the island. A long minute later, rippling floorboards carry a black box into the kitchen. Another board pops up, tossing the box onto the counter.

“Thank you, Ben,” I say as the Keeper grabs it, flipping an ancient-looking latch upward.

“I bought this for you right after we met,” he says, opening the box. “I had intended to give it to you if we attempted dating, but I can’t watch you wear another male’s ziol.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

KEEPER

I spin the box around to face Morgan. Reaching in, I extract the ziol and lay it in her open palm. Blood still drips from the wound at her fingertip. My fangs ache with the need to bring that wound to my mouth and drink directly from her.

“It’s beautiful,” she murmurs, flipping it over.

“This ziol has been in my family for dozens of generations,” I share. “Betmal gave it to me when I came of age. It was his father’s before that.”

“He’s the parent you’re close to, right?” She flips the ziol back over to admire the front.

I nod. “You would love him if he could visit alone. Unfortunately, it takes him considerable effort to manage Evenia and Aberen. He has a strong gift of persuasion. It’s rare for vampires to have any sort of gift at all, but he does.”

She clutches the ziol to her chest. “Can I wear it now?” Her expression is so hopeful, so expectant.

“It would be my honor for you to.” I choke back the obvious emotion in my voice then take the pendant from her and place it over her neck, tucking it into her shirt. This means my fingertips inadvertently brush against the tops of her breasts. She hisses in a breath that sends heat exploding through me. Flipping my hand over, I drag the backs of my fingers over the swell of one large breast and then the other.

Morgan lets out a tense breath, nipples pebbling against the tight fabric. Sliding my fingers down over the surface of her breast, I rub a small circle over one taut nipple. Goose

bumps cover her skin, her head falling to one side as her eyes flutter closed.

Her exposed neck calls to me, a vein throbbing beneath the surface. I tamp my need down hard, focusing on her instead. Slipping my fingers down the curves of her stomach, I grab the hem of her tee and pull it over her head.

Gray eyes flick to mine, black pupils overtaking her irises as I reach around her back and unclip her bra. I catch it as it falls off her, revealing perfect, round breasts tipped with dark nipples. A groan rips from my throat at seeing her exposed to me like this.

Her hands come to my thighs and slide upward, her fingers gripping my length and stroking. We groan together, my hips rocking to meet her touch. Heat flushes my skin as I pinch first one nipple, then the other, marveling at how it swells and tightens into a perfect rosy-red tip.

I reach down to pull her into my arms and suck that nipple into my mouth, but she shakes her head, grabbing at the waistband of my pants. I watch with a mixture of awe and lust as she unbuttons them and slides the zipper down.

My cock falls heavy and hard out of my pants, bobbing in front of her face. Gray eyes meet mine again, deviance playing across her expression. Her hands come to my knees, and she shoves them wide.

“Hold back as long as you can,” she teases, patting my hip. I oblige, lifting off the counter enough for her to pull my slacks all the way off. I lose the shirt next. And then I’m naked in front of her, drinking in the way she looks at me with eyes full of desire. Not just desire, open longing.

Logic begins to snap walls up around a mountain of desire, reminding me how easily it would be for me to accidentally hurt her. But just as fast, the look in her eyes pulls them right back down.

Deft fingers close around my cock and stroke me from base to tip and back again. I gasp, crumpling in half as pleasure streaks down my spine to coil in my sack. Everything

in my lower half clenches and tightens. I don't even realize I've squeezed my eyes tightly shut until a warm mouth closes around the tip of my dick and sucks hard.

“Morgan!” I scream into the kitchen, pleasure ripping through me in great waves that eat me up from the inside out. I fist her hair in one hand, steadying myself with the other as I look down.

And what a fucking sight she is. Pink lips close around my cock as her eyes flutter shut. It takes every ounce of control I can muster not to thrust up into that hot, wet heat and take more.

A strangled noise leaves me when she licks up the underneath of my cock as her mouth slides off me. My fist in her hair tightens as I sit up, brushing hair out of her face with my other hand. She presses one of my knees farther out to the side, holding me wide as she devours my cock over and over. When she strokes me, depositing a small trail of blood from her finger, I howl at the pleasure that fills my body, demanding I spill into her.

I pant and gasp and growl every expletive I know as her movements grow faster, wilder. The smell of her blood permeates the air, a sensual layer on top of her natural scent. Images of her on top of me, beneath me, succumbing to my bite, batter me as I chase orgasm within her heat.

My jaw locks up, my fangs clamping around air as she sucks my mind out through the head of my cock.

Immediately, the countertop breaks apart and reforms into cuffs around my wrists. My instinct rails against Ben's intrusion, but the pleasure Morgan wrings from me with her mouth has me at the end of my rope.

And then there's nothing. I cry out and thrust my hips, jerking into the air.

My devious mate chuckles and swipes at her mouth. “We had a plan for this afternoon. I'm thinking now's a good time to make good on your promise.”

My cock bobs between us, strings of precum dripping steadily down my length as my chest heaves. I jerk against the stone cuffs holding me to the counter, but Ben lets out a warning groan.

Grinning, Morgan steps backward and spins in place, bending over to pull her jeans off long, muscular legs. I groan when I get a hint of shaved pink pussy. She's bled through her tampon, streaks of heady menstrual blood dripping down her thighs.

"Morgan!" I bark out her name as she hops onto the opposite countertop and brings one foot flat on top of the counter.

"I'll be honest," she murmurs, "the idea of fucking around with menstrual blood freaks me out a little bit, but the look on your face is worth it."

"Let me out!" I shout at Ben.

"Do nothing of the sort, Ben," Morgan commands. Not moving her gaze from mine, she reaches down and tugs quickly on her tampon. It slips out of her pussy, blood dripping down her hands and to the floor. "Ben, the trash please," she directs. A door swings open under the sink, and the trash can pops out. She tosses the bloody tampon into the garbage as a needy whine leaves my lips.

"Nooo," I cry out. "Morgan."

"I can't fuck with tampon sex, like, if you were gonna suck on that tampon like a lollipop or something?" She shudders. "Even I have my limits."

I yank against Ben's hold on me. "Tampon lollipops are a hard pass, got it. Come here."

"Not just yet," she croons, slipping her bloody hand between her thighs to rub slow, soft circles over her clit.

A rush of heat sears through me, my cock jumping between my thighs as I yank against the rock cuffs again. "Let me out!" I shout. Ben ignores me as Morgan plays with her clit, her hips beginning to move softly to meet her touch.

“I did this so many times and thought of you,” she murmurs, her touch growing more insistent. “You don’t know how many times I came with your name on my lips.”

I roar in frustration, straining to get to her, to answer the call of her blood.

“I want you to chase me,” she says, sliding off the counter with a grin. “And if you catch me, I’ll fuck you until you lose your mind.” She pats the countertop behind her. “Ben, give me ten seconds or so, okay?”

When she takes off around the corner, blood dripping onto the floor as she goes, I roar over and over into the quiet kitchen, straining and yanking and pulling against Ben’s hold. Possession and fury and thirst all rise up, spinning around inside me until every sense narrows on the trail of blood leading me to her.

My witch.

My mate.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

MORGAN

When the house goes silent, I know Ben has released Abe. Being hunted adds tension to the anticipation. Abe is far faster than me. The only chance I have is to surprise him. I sneak into his office, shutting the door quietly behind me as I snake along the wall toward the fireplace. This is where I want our first time to happen, in this beautiful space.

A clock chimes across the room, the sudden noise making me jolt in place. I slip into the dark corners of the bookcase, thankful for blackout curtains that make this room so dark.

It's not until I hear a low, satisfied-sounding chuckle that I realize the game was over before it began. I look up and let out a terrified squeak, freezing in place. Abe is crouched upside down on the ceiling, watching my every movement, his body a blur of shadow against the dark wood.

"You lost," he purrs, dropping to the floor in a move so smooth, so impossibly easy, I can't fathom it. He hits the ground in a kneeling position and rises, crossing the room to his desk. His eyes are pitch-black; the red iris gone. When he sits down in his big office chair with a haughty look, my competitiveness rears her ugly head.

"Come here, mate," he commands, patting his knee.

"I don't think so," I reply in a sugary-sweet tone, feeling my way along the wall for the door. If I can get close enough, I can dash out and get Ben to lock him in here for another minute.

“Do not even think about running out that door.” There’s a faint whoosh, and then a shadowy figure grabs and flips me, yanking my arms above my head. Abe pins my wrists to the wall with one hand, the other running up the back of my head. He pulls gently, baring my neck. Fangs come to my skin and press hard, hard enough that, despite a shock of pleasure that swirls through me, unease follows it.

My body goes tense as he laughs into the hold he has on me.

“This is where I’d bite you if I could,” he whispers into a spot halfway down my neck. “Right here, where your blood is closest to the surface. I’d spill you and drink every drop down, Morgan. You’ve never known pleasure like the pleasure derived from a vampire mate bite.”

“We can’t,” I cry out, letting my head fall into his hand. God, I want what he’s describing so badly.

Behind me, his body is a wall of tension. I grind my ass against his hard cock, praying for it to slip down between my thighs so I can get him where I need him. I’m achy and throbbing and desperate.

Sharp fangs come to my neck again and drag downward in a quick line. The pain is so immediate, so all-consuming that, for half a second, I think he’s bitten me.

“Just a scratch,” he says with a dark laugh. “Just the tip of what I want to do.”

I’ve pushed him too far; I know it now. Because this Abe is so utterly focused on the bite and not at all focused on the rest of this experience.

He must come to that realization at the same time I do. He buries his face in my shoulder and guides his cock between my legs. “Morgan,” he moans into my skin, “we have to stop this madness. I’m half a breath from doing what I shouldn’t.”

I scratch at the wall underneath my fingertips, and Ben takes the hint. In one swift move, the wall’s wood panels grab Abe’s wrist and flip him, dragging him to the ground as I step out of the way. The wall encircles his wrists as he stares up at

me in shock. But that shock turns into a lazy smile as he looks up at me.

“That’s more like it,” he whispers. “Get on top of me.”

I take a moment to admire him, splayed out on the ground for my taking. One knee is drawn up, the other out to the side. The ripples and ridges of his abs flex under his skin, leading my eyes up to his chest and the beautiful red and black swirls.

“Ask me what they mean later. Fuck me now.” His voice grows insistent, his tone demanding as he rolls his hips once. His beautiful cock bobs up to lie flat on his lower stomach.

I drop to both knees between his thighs, reaching out to admire his impossible length. He hisses when I stroke my fingertips up the back of it. It bobs up against my hand, beads of precum glistening from the tip. Thick veins run the length of his shaft, his head broad and flared and flushed dark pink.

I can’t help myself; I have to tease him again. What we did in the kitchen lit me up in a way blow jobs never have before.

Because it’s him, a helpful voice says in my head. And he’s yours.

When I rock forward and grip him, guiding him to my mouth, he smiles, his head falling back against the wall.

“Ah, Morgan,” he moans. “Your mouth is heaven.”

Wait until you feel my pussy.

But I don’t say that; instead, I suck him like a lollipop while I stroke the part of him I can’t reach with my mouth. He’s so damn big and thick.

Abe’s soft groan grows louder, more unhinged as he starts thrusting up into my mouth. He strains against the cuffs, his voice ragged as he roars. Heat flares out from my clit, vibrating through my body as my pussy clenches around nothing. I lose my mind, sucking and licking on him, every sound he makes driving my lust higher and higher.

For a man who had emotion stripped from him, it seems to have come back in abundance.

When he pauses, mouth falling open on a scream, I know he's on the very edge. I slip off him with a pop. He slumps, chest heaving as glittering eyes come to me.

“You are the very worst of teases, witch.”

Grinning, I press his right knee down and slide up over his big thighs. His eyes fall to my pussy, to what I'm sure is a trail of blood pooling between us. I try not to think about that as his fangs descend, mouth falling open. He looks ready to combust.

And I'm ready to toss a match on us and let us burn.

I reach down and grab his cock, settling him between my pussy lips. With one hand on his chest and one on his length, I rock my way up him, his spongy head nudging at my entrance. Then I slide back down, coating him with blood.

He moans and rolls his hips, sending his thickness up along my clit as I gasp.

“Yes,” he hisses. “Give me more of that.”

“So bossy,” I murmur with a smile. “I didn't realize you'd be bossy in the bedroom.”

He grins, rolling himself through my pussy lips again. “Do you like it?”

I thrust against him, pausing at his tip as I grin. “Makes me wanna fight you,” I admit. “Being competitive and all.”

He grins, punching his hips once, driving the head of cock inside me. I gasp as he lets out a self-satisfied chuckle.

“Good. Rough sex is a hallmark of vampire relationships. The more we fight, the hotter it'll be when we come.”

“Oh God,” I moan, pulsing around him. “You're so thick, I —”

“Can take every inch,” he says with a growl. “Sit down on it.”

Heat flushes my cheeks, a sheen of sweat breaking out across my forehead. I fall forward, planting both hands on his chest as I sink down onto him. Pain and pleasure war in my body at the intrusion of something this damn big.

“That’s it,” he croons. “Give yourself a minute to adjust. I’m big, mate.”

“I know,” I snap. “This is like trying to fuck a damn tree trunk.”

He scratches at the wall. “Let me free, Ben.”

Ben makes a terrible sound that I know means no.

Abe snarls, “One hand is sufficient. You can keep the other.”

With an irritated rumble, Ben pops a cuff open. Abe’s left hand comes to my clit and rubs. A wash of pleasure floods me as I clench harder around him, my muscles trembling.

“Let your pleasure rise, Morgan. Close your eyes and feel what my touch does to you.”

Obedying, I sit upright on my knees, my head falling to one side. Deft fingers stroke my clit and pussy lips, my body relaxing. His free hand comes to my hip and pulls me farther down, his cock head brushing against my G-spot.

“Oh God!” I cry out. “Abe, fuck!”

“Stay there for a moment,” he murmurs. “Ben, give me my other hand; I’m fine.”

The cuff snaps open with a pop, but I don’t open my eyes. I wait to feel his hands on me. They grip my hips and rock me in a steady circle on top of him. Every move activates my G-spot until I’m tense and panting.

Abe pulls me farther down into his lap, growling as my pussy brushes the base of his cock. With a quick thrust, he punches all the way inside me, his back arching as his mouth falls open on a silent scream.

“Abe,” I gasp, unable to keep still, my hips rocking, driving the pleasure higher and higher. I won’t last two minutes like this.

He shifts to the side, lying flat on his back as he grinds me hard against him. Pleasure spikes through me, building and flowing as we fuck each other. My cries rise in volume.

Orgasm has never built like this, never lit me up so completely.

“Mine,” I whisper, eyes flicking to his. “You’re mine, Abe.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

KEEPER

Pleasure and dominance war inside me, demanding I fill my mate's need. The sound of our sloppy fucking drives me to the ends of sanity. Each time I thrust inside her, she coats me with blood and arousal. It drips down my length to my balls, every sweet drop imprinting her scent on me.

“Mine. You're mine, Abe,” she whispers, storm-cloud eyes narrowed, her mouth open. Her body pulls me deep, her muscles clenched tight as her thighs begin to quiver. She breathes fast, hard, eyes closing as she begins to unravel.

The bond I ignored for a hundred years, tamped down by dulling potion, is alive and taut between us, allowing me to feel her emotion in ways I haven't been able to for decades.

She's about to come all over me.

I fuck faster, punching up into her even as I grind her clit over my pubic bone. When orgasm hits her, she explodes into desperate cries, screaming my name over and over. Whipping a hand up, I grip her throat to feel her voice reverberate through my bones and deep into my soul.

Bliss hits me next, exploding from the inside out as cum rushes through my shaft, spilling inside her so intently, my vision goes black.

No, not black.

White.

My second eyelid.

“Ben!” I roar as my focus narrows to that intoxicating spot where Morgan’s neck and shoulder meet.

The castle whips out, yanking my arms above my head as I lurch forward to strike. He grabs me at the last possible second, my teeth snapping inches from her neck. Morgan’s eyes spring wide, then roll back in her head as a second, more powerful orgasm overtakes us both.

I yank against Ben, ranting and raving to get at her, my mate, my love, my blood.

“Morgan!” I cry. “Fuuuuck!”

Her fingernails dig into my chest, scratching grooves over the muscle as she pulses around me. Her breath leaves in a whoosh, and she flops forward over me.

“Not. Too. Close,” I grit out, my eyelid still covering my eye. “Gods, please. Don’t get too close,” I whisper, the last bit of orgasm wringing me dry as she shudders around me.

Ecstasy fades, the only sounds our combined heavy breathing. The scent of her soaks the air around us. Blood, cum, slick arousal, chocolate, cinnamon, moonlight.

Ben holds me tight as she nuzzles my heaving chest, her tongue and lips tracing a path from one nipple to the other.

“Don’t stop,” I encourage. “That feels...incredible.” My skin is on fire from the feel of her lips. I’ve dreamed of this for so long, wanted it for years.

Morgan’s warm mouth closes over my other nipple, sending my lust soaring back to sky-high heights. I roll my hips beneath her, my eyelid closing over my eyes again.

Something chimes again.

“Ben is trying to be polite,” she whispers as she licks a flat path across my chest. “But someone needs something.”

I groan as my eyelid retracts. Morgan watches me, her face flushed. The pink shade travels all the way down her neck and chest.

“That was...”

“Perfection,” she says with a slow, sensual smile. “So much more than I ever imagined.” She slaps my chest. “I can’t believe you weren’t gonna let us do this! I’m mad all over again!” She laughs, though, and when Ben releases me, I can’t help but pull her higher up my chest to bury my nose in the hollow of her throat.

My scent combines with hers, and it’s strongest here.

“You smell filthy,” I whisper. “I’ll be sad to wash this off you.” I pat her hip. “Head to my bathroom and turn the water on. I’ll check with Ben and join you in a minute.”

Laughter rumbles from her throat as I kiss my way up and down it. “Is this going to be like that time you asked me to breakfast and then went to check with Ben?”

“Nothing like that time,” I reassure her. “I know better than to leave you places now. Thank you for the lesson.”

She chuckles and presses off my chest, looking down at the carnage in my lap. Blood coats us both.

I grin when she makes a disgusted sound. “If you hadn’t made that sound, I’d offer to lick every drop off you, but something tells me you wouldn’t find that particularly pleasing.”

As she scrunches her nose, a board flips open beside my head, and a roll of paper towels falls out. Morgan laughs and grabs for them, rising slowly off me. I sit fully up and rub my sore wrists. When I rise tall above her, she smiles up at me, and it’s blisteringly gorgeous. There’s something new in this smile, something open and raw. If I think about cataloging all the emotions I’ve seen on her face, this one is new.

It’s joy, if I had to guess. Perhaps happiness, something I denied us by shutting her out.

Reaching for her throat, I pull her to me and brush my lips playfully against hers. “I can’t stop touching you,” I admit.

“I’m dripping on the floor,” she says with a huff, laughing into my lips.

“I would drop to the floor right now and lick it up if I didn’t think you’d be disgusted,” I admit.

She fingers the ziol around her neck. “I could possibly be coerced into trying to find that hot. I guess I don’t really know what I might find attractive if it’s you doing the seducing.”

Grinning, I release her throat and stare as she sashays to the door and out into the hall. I stand like a fucking idiot, listening to her ascend the stairs toward my room. Thirty seconds later, Ben groans, and the whoosh of water flowing through pipes reaches me.

I peer around my office. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to enter this room and not think of it as the place I took my mate for the first time. Even if I had to get Ben to hold me back. Striding to the door to head for the comm center, I pause at the last moment, stroking my hand down the door frame.

“Thank you for your assistance, Ben. I think you’ll agree she is our greatest treasure. I...” My voice dies as my thoughts unravel. The thought of hurting Morgan, of being the one to do that to her, it’s more than I can take. Especially now that she’s sunk so deeply into my soul.

A strip of wallpaper unpeels from the wall and snaps at my ass like skyball players in a locker room. I jump out of the way in time, laughing as I jog to the comm room. The usual tension in my chest is gone. For the first time in a hundred years, I feel...light.

Long minutes later, I’ve identified that there’s nothing to worry about, and Ben has sent me the sound of water running in the tub multiple times to remind me of the woman waiting for me upstairs.

Pulling myself from the work, I rush up to my room and across it, stopping only when I get to my bathroom. A black metal tub sits in the middle of an all-black room. Not a single window lets light in on the ornately burlled black wood and black slate tiles.

Morgan sits in the tub with bubbles up to her chin, her hair piled on top of her head in a seductive bun. When my mouth

drops open, my breath coming faster, she laughs.

“You look ready to burst, Abe. Everything okay?”

I cross the room in half a second, dropping to my knees and dipping my hand into the water. “For so many years, I thought this wasn’t a possibility,” I admit. “To see you in my tub, soaking as if you don’t have a care in the world? It’s blissful, Morgan.”

“Get in here with me and let me show you bliss.” She grabs my hand and pulls me toward her.

I quickly slip in, water sloshing over the sides. She giggles as I straddle her and rest her head against the tub’s edge, kissing my way down her slim neck.

“Can’t. Stop. Kissing,” I whisper into her skin, wishing this afternoon would never end. That we’d never have to leave and deal with the fact that a male is dead, and I have no idea how someone managed it.

Half an hour later, the water’s cold as I take my mate’s lips over and over, kissing, biting, tasting. When we part, she strokes my jaw.

“Spending this time with you has been delightful, but we’ve got to get ready. Ben has been politely flipping the lights on and off for about fifteen minutes.”

Chuckling, I extricate us and step out of the tub, not missing the way her eyes drop to my dick. I’m still hard for her. I want what we did earlier again. But duty calls.

I reach down and slip my arms under her thighs and around her back, lifting her carefully out of the tub. Morgan laughs, her head falling back.

When I set her down, sliding her soapy, wet body along mine, I can’t help but growl. After gripping her wrists, I pull them to her lower back. Dark nipples pebble as her eyes flash in fading afternoon light that comes in from the bedroom’s windows.

“If we start this up again, we will most certainly be late,” she says on a growl. “And I’m coming with you.”

I bring my mouth to her ear, sucking gently at the lobe. “Next time, I want you to chase me, Morgan.”

A pleased sound leaves her throat. “Sounds fun, minus the part where you’re really fucking fast.”

“And competitive,” I remind her. “And I can fly, which is an unfair advantage.”

She sighs and presses both hands to my chest. For a long moment, her black magic heats my skin.

“Sorry, I don’t know if it was appropriate to use my magic on you; it felt so strong for a second. I can feel the thing inside of you, Abe. Like a wrongness that makes me want to scream.” Her voice becomes a whisper. “I don’t know how to fix this; it’s like it’s trapped.”

Sorrow fills me because I don’t know the answer, either. And I can’t make this situation any better for her.

“C’mon,” I whisper, stroking her hair away from her forehead. “We don’t have to think about it right now. I’m fine.”

She nods, but her eyelids flutter as her gaze drifts away. She is most definitely still thinking about it. Turning from me, she leaves the bathroom and heads for my closet. I stand in the doorway and enjoy the view of my mate walking away from me. When she pauses inside the closet, I cock my head to the side. What is she doing?

She casts a sultry glance over her shoulder. “Ben moved all my things in here while you were in the comm room.”

I grin. Cheeky castle.

“Shall we move them back out?” she asks, her voice careful.

Crossing the room, I press my body to hers and walk her against the wall, kissing a path from her shoulder up her neck. “Absolutely not,” I whisper. “Ben knows best when it comes to us.”

She laughs and rests her head against my chest. But there’s something unspoken between us, some question that needs

answering. I can sense it in the same way I sense what many people need, despite sometimes having trouble understanding their emotions.

“Move into this room with me,” I murmur. “Sleep with me every night. Get dressed with me every morning. I want all those moments with you, if you’ll give them to me.”

She flips in my arms, her expression serious. “Okay. Are you sure it’s not too soon? Technically, this was our first real date.”

For a long moment, we stare into each other’s eyes.

“I am developing an obsession with you,” I admit.

She grins. “Good. You should. I’m awesome.”

Ben flips a piece of wood from the wall out for her to high-five. She does it with a laugh that sends joy through me—an emotion I’ve rarely felt. It’s headier than I remember, all-encompassing and thrilling.

And hopeful.

Ben extends a black dress on a bar out into the room. Morgan cuts it a look and sighs. “Guess fun time is over. Let’s go do this.”

I choke down a groan. I’ll need to call a town meeting tomorrow to address what happened with Leighton.

Morgan slips out from between my arms and begins to dress. I turn from her to pull fresh slacks on, but as I button them, a soft touch surprises me. Her hands slide up my back and over my shoulder as she rounds me, stroking my tattoos.

“What do they mean?” she asks softly.

I cock an eyebrow. “You mean to tell me Thea hasn’t already told you?”

She smirks. “Of course. But I’d rather hear it from you.”

I grab her hand and guide her fingers up to the tattoos under my chin. “It’s a family tree. Every swirl represents someone in the Zeniphon line, starting here with our ancestors.” I slide her fingertips down my neck and along my

collarbone, down to the brightest part of the tattoo between my pectorals. “And this is the tattoo for my immediate family—Betmal, Aberen, Evenia, and me.”

She smiles up at me. “It’s beautiful, and it has such a lovely meaning. Why do you cover it?”

I clasp her hand more tightly. “You’ve seen Evenia in action. She’s...horrible. I don’t want my tattoos to be reminders of how the Hearth lords their power over the haven system. It was a brilliant coup for my mother’s power-hungry nature to create the system, but it plays right into her need to control every single fucking thing.”

“Even you?” Morgan asks, the question quiet.

I grit my teeth to keep from grinding them together. “She has always interfered.”

Morgan sighs as Ben tosses me a turtleneck. I slip it over my shoulders and pull it down, but she eyes it like it has personally affronted her.

“You know what? No,” she snaps, folding the turtleneck down. “Never hide who you are, not because of anyone, and especially not because of your bitchy mother.” She yanks at the turtleneck again, pink dusting her cheeks. “Damn, it looks stupid rolled down. Tell me you have some other kind of shirt that’s not a turtleneck?”

Ben slides a post out with one of my old collared shirts.

Morgan grabs it and yanks the turtleneck over my head, casting it aside. She hands me the collared shirt with a demanding look. I don’t look away as I take it and slip it over my shoulders. When I move to button it, she bats my hands away and begins to do the buttons herself, starting at the bottom.

Ben tosses a fitted vest at her, and she grabs it out of the air in a single deft move. Slipping it over my shoulders, she focuses on buttoning it too.

And I stare at her expression, at the fierce determination in her gaze. “You are a miracle,” I whisper.

She fastens the last button and looks up at me. “I thought I was a menace. Which is it?”

I chuckle as I pull her arms up around my neck. “Miracle, menace, misfit. You’re all of those things, Morgan Anne Hector.”

“You forgot *mine*,” she whispers with a wink.



Thirty horrible minutes later, we’re standing inside the church in Shifter Hollow. Every member of leadership comm’d me at least once on the way here, and Evenia’s name hovers over my band as we speak.

The Shifter Hollow Church is nothing more than dozens of sawed-off tree trunks set in a circle deep in the woods on this side of Ever. I stand up front with Richard and his second, Connall. Next to me is Arkan and the rest of the protector team.

In the middle of the circle, the shifters built a pyre. Leighton’s stiff, dead body lies in the middle, his face a mask of pain and anger.

His parents stand in front of the pyre, his mother holding the ceremonial branch that’ll be used to light the entire thing. Tears stream down her face.

I grit my teeth as Richard begins to speak. As leader of the shifter community in Ever, this is his ceremony to perform. Morgan’s eyes find mine and fill with tears as Leighton’s father lights the branch. His mother touches it to the pyre, and the burning begins.

Could I have prevented this? I’ve racked my brain for every possibility. How could Wesley accomplish this? And how can we get one step ahead of him instead of the other way around?

“Body to dust to moon, we return our brother Leighton to you, Goddess. Return him to the halls of our people that he may run free in the dark forest of your embrace,” Richard says the final words as Connall lifts a ceremonial bowl for his

alpha. Richard grabs a handful of purple dust from the bowl and steps forward, tossing it on the flames. They billow green then blue then purple, symbolically carrying Leighton's remains up to the shifters' moon goddess, Alaya.

Connall turns to Arkan and me. "Keepers, it's your turn."

I gesture for Arkan to go first. He grabs a handful of the dust and waits for me. Once I have mine, we walk together to the pyre and throw our dust on. Once it shimmers purple, we retreat to the edge of the circle.

I glance over at Morgan, but her face is tight, her chin held high. Lou, Wren, and Thea all sit with her, the girls clinging to one another. The firelight dances in their eyes. Lou softly strokes Morgan's hair, her arm around as many of her nieces as she can fit.

It's traditional to remain at the pyre until the fires begin to die down, which takes some time. The whole town isn't here; it's the shifters and centaurs and my protector team.

Once the flames begin to die, Leighton's parents approach Richard, Arkan, and me.

"I trust you'll figure this out quickly," his father hisses. "We came to a haven for safety, and look what it's gotten us."

"We will not rest until we find Leighton's killer," Richard assures them. "None of us will rest."

Leighton's mother opens her mouth to say something, but closes it, tear-filled eyes flicking to me. "Please, Keeper. Don't let this happen again."

As the crowd dissipates, Arkan turns to me, his gaze steely. "We promised his mother that we'd find Leighton's killer, and I have no fucking idea how to do it."

Richard and Connall join us. "We need to put the town on a lockdown with curfew."

"Agreed." I turn to Arkan. "We're dealing with something new here, something we've never seen Wesley do. Dirk is calling his team back, but can you think of anyone from the hunter team who might be specialized in something like this?"

“I’d love to help,” a deep voice rings across the clearing.

When I turn, a pitch-black centaur with tan skin and dark, wavy hair crosses slowly toward us.

“Dad,” Arkan hisses.

The older centaur waves his son away. “Psh. The study of dark magic is not a perfect science.”

“You can say that again,” Arkan grumbles.

“I’m open to anything.” I look up into the big centaur’s amethyst eyes. “What are you thinking?”

“I’m not certain yet.” He strokes his chin as he swishes his tail back and forth. “I’ve been reading all day after what happened to that poor, unfortunate male. I’ll know more by tomorrow. Can we meet in the morning?”

“As quickly as you feel ready with an idea.” I remember at the last second that I should probably ask Arkan what he thinks about this instead of making the plan, but old habits die hard. Coleading isn’t in a Keeper’s nature.

As we leave the funeral, my eyes drift to my mate. Thea and Wren have gone, but Morgan and Lou stand together, arms wrapped around each other’s waists as they watch the funeral fire burn to embers.

I stare at them, cataloging a look I’ve seen many times before. I’ve seen it between siblings, between parents and children, between friends and lovers.

It’s love.

And as I watch the women, I know I will do anything—*anything*—to protect it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

MORGAN

Abe is lost in thought the whole ride home. I squeeze his thighs as we round a sharp corner and drive up the last hill to the castle. Seeing Ben makes my heart clench up tight. He makes the phrase “coming home” feel so perfect, so right. And after tonight? I need that.

The funeral was beautiful and fucking awful. Being there and watching the grief brought me back to my parents’ funeral. It hasn’t been that long—seven months or so—and watching another family deal with devastating loss? It was terrible. Not to mention that watching Leighton’s body made me wonder if I’ll have to do that one day with Abe. If one day his illness will rear its ugly head and take him from me.

I shove that thought down. When I touched him tonight, I could feel how dark, how dangerous the virus is. It cowered away from my magic but lashed out at me the moment I called my magic back. But unlike my work with the buildings, I didn’t get the sense that I can fix it for Abe.

That’s devastating.

I suspect tomorrow will be hard too. He has meetings all day with Arkan and the protector team. He’ll call a town hall meeting as well, and that’ll be fucking gutting. I wonder if monsters will choose to leave Ever and go somewhere else, somewhere where Wesley isn’t focused.

When Abe parks the bike, I resist the urge to grab his hand and put it over my heart, to center him around its beat. To remind him that I’m here. His beautiful mouth is set in a

frown, his eyes narrowed like they do when he's thinking. It's a look I've seen so many times on him. He's lost in thought.

I used to think he was just scheming up new ways to be an asshole, but living here with him has changed my opinion on that.

He runs both hands through his hair, one stray blond lock falling right back over his scar. "I need to check the monitoring system and make a few tweaks. Want to come with me, or..."

"Abe," I say softly.

Dark red eyes find mine, a storm of emotion obvious in them.

"Yes?" His voice is soft, too soft. The tone of a male who feels broken by what life has dealt him.

"What do you need?"

His eyes shutter, his fangs descending, but he shakes his head. "No, mate. What do you need? Grief is written so plainly on your face. Tonight must have been hard."

Sliding off the bike, I hop up into his arms and thread mine around his neck, holding us close. My heart thumps steady and deep in my chest.

"Let's check on things together," I whisper into his neck. "And then go to bed together. And we'll tackle tomorrow together too."

He supports me with one big arm, his opposite hand sliding up my back to grip my neck. When I nuzzle the skin beneath his ear, he lets out a soft groan.

"I wish I could bite you," he admits. "It's such a centering, connecting function for vampires. I want to rant and rage at a world that stole that from us."

I call on the hundreds of hours I've spent in therapy over the course of my life, ensuring I could manage all the emotions that come along with being a doctor for very sick kids.

“I wish you could bite me too, but you know what? You are enough without being able to do that.”

He turns to look at me, some unspoken emotion filling his crimson gaze. “There are a few workarounds,” he says. “It’s just my venom that carries the virus. We could get you teeth caps, and you could bite me. Perhaps we could—”

“I’m perfectly capable of biting you with these lovely flat teeth,” I snark, running a hand through his hair.

He smirks. “If you say so.”

I point at the castle. “Take me inside, mate, and I’ll show you exactly what I can do with these teeth.”

He freezes, body going tense beneath me.

“What’s wrong?” I bark, searching his face for any sign of pain or injury.

His voice comes out as a whisper, “You called me mate. You’ve never called me mate.”

He leans forward, chest rising and falling steadily. When his lips crash into mine, I give up all control. His tongue dips into my mouth, his hand holding me tightly to him. It’s not a sweet kiss. No, this is him staking his claim over my body and soul. He cocks his head to the side, tongue swiping deep into my mouth as his lips crush against mine.

My body lights up, demanding more from him, demanding everything.

“Inside,” I gasp as he groans and buries his face in my neck, dragging his lips down my throat, punctuated by tiny bites.

“Yes,” he growls, turning and jogging toward the castle with me in his arms.

Ben swings the doors wide as we rush through dark halls that used to feel ominous to me. Now they’re comforting like a cup of coffee and a blanket on a rainy day.

By the time we reach the comm room, Abe is losing his mind. He flops into his chair and sets me down, but I’m done

playing. I need him, even if he has things to do.

Slipping off his lap, I drop to my knees. “By all means, check what you need to check. I’ll be down here distracting you,” I say with a sultry wink.

His eyes flash with need as he watches me unzip his slacks and pull out that gorgeous, thick cock.

“Jesus, this is beautiful,” I murmur. He’s perfectly veined and so damn thick. I’ve never come as hard as I did with him earlier. When he never stops staring, I gesture to the control panel. “Didn’t you need to check on things, Abe?”

His fangs descend as he tears his gaze from me, punching a button on the comm keyboard. With a happy hum, I lean forward and trace a slow, teasing path around his cock head. He jolts and groans, big hips thrusting up toward my mouth.

“Morgan, this won’t work,” he snaps. “I can’t fucking concentrate.”

“Bet I could do it,” I snark.

He glances down at me with an arch of the brow. “Is that a challenge, witch?”

I don’t answer, wrapping my lips around his dick and sucking instead.

He snarls, head falling back as he brings one hand to the base of my neck, holding me tight. His hips move, thrusting gently into my mouth.

Precum beads at his tip, teasing me. But I want his orgasm, his bliss, his absolute pleasure.

“You’re not working,” I tease between playful bites along his rigid length.

“Can’t,” he mutters. “Too good.”

I arch a brow and nip at the tip of his cock. He jerks in the chair, hissing as he barks my name.

“Get up here,” he commands, pointing at the chair. When I try to slide onto his lap, he shakes his head. “You do the work,

and I'll distract you. And we'll see if it's truly possible for you to focus when I'm devouring you."

Heat flares through me, but I drop into the chair and unbutton my jeans.

He stares at the juncture of my thighs. "Leave the tampon in, or we'll be here all night."

Grinning, I step my legs out wide, letting him look his fill.

"Hands on the keyboard," he directs me. "Punch the following sequence into the middle keyboard—orange, blue, red, green. Then tell me what comes up on the screen."

He sinks gracefully to his knees, but I can't tear my eyes from the sight of him. His focus is entirely on my body, red eyes roving over my waist and thighs. Gripping my jeans, he pulls them gently down, tongue swiping over his lips when he's got them around my knees. He pulls them down my legs and off, tossing them aside.

"You're not working, witch." His deadpan reminder gets me in gear. Turning to the keyboard, I punch in the color code he told me. Immediately, the closest monitor begins to light up with rows and rows of numbers. Squinting, I try, but can't make heads nor tails of them.

But then warm lips close around my clit and tug softly. My body arches, a desperate cry releasing from my mouth. Without thinking, I run one hand through his hair and grip it. He chuckles and lifts his lips off me.

When I let out a grunt of distress, Abe chuckles. "What does the screen tell you, witch?"

I glance over at the data, which appears to be calculating. "Just a bunch of scrolling numbe—God! Oh God, don't stop, please!"

His warm tongue swirls over my clit in soft circles. My body is on fire, sparks shooting down my legs and radiating from my core.

Abe groans, both big hands coming to my knees and holding me spread wide. His mouth and tongue move faster as

he devours me, focusing entirely on my sensitive clit. I've always been crazy sensitive during my period. Every swipe of his tongue sends me crashing headlong toward complete bliss.

“Don't stop,” I moan as he shakes his head from side to side, dragging his mouth over the top of my pussy.

When he lifts his gaze to mine, dark eyes flashing, I lose all control. There's a tense, wild moment where my body freezes, then everything locks up and explodes. My back arches, release flooding from between my thighs as Abe groans and continues his torture.

Stars burst behind my eyelids, my senses dulling to nothing but the fast throb of my heart in my ears. There is nothing but the feel of his warm, wet touch and the alternating pressure of his lips and tongue.

My body jerks, but still he doesn't stop his crazed, frantic attention to my clit. And the sounds coming from him are enough to force pleasure to build and crest again, a second, more powerful, orgasm overtaking me.

I'm sure I'm gripping his hair hard enough for it to be painful, but I can't seem to ease up or let go. Because, if I let go, he might take that incredible mouth off me, and all I want to do is stay like this, exploding all over him.

Eventually, I return to reality, and ecstasy begins to fade, leaving me wrung out and exhausted. Chest heaving, I glance at Abe, only to see a supremely satisfied expression on his handsome, angular features.

I release my hold on his hair, but he grips my wrist and turns his head to the side, closing his eyes. He drags his nose along the inside of my arm from wrist to forearm and back again. Lips coated with my bliss nip and suck at my skin. My body reacts instantly, and I clench my thighs together.

“I wonder how many orgasms in a row I could wring out of you?” he muses, red eyes opening to focus on me.

“I don't know, but you were right,” I admit. “Hard to do the work when you're on your knees.”

He grins as he bites the inside of my wrist hard. “Tell me what the screen says, mate.”

I glance over. The numbers have stopped scrolling, and a singular sentence flashes across the screen.

All systems green. No anomalies reported.

I give Abe a thumbs-up. “We’re good.”

Around us, Ben rumbles in agreement. I press my hand flat to the surface around the inset keyboard, feeling for anything like what I felt at Higher Grounds. I release a relieved breath when Ben sends a rush of love back to me.

“Love you too,” I murmur, stroking small circles on the surface.

Abe freezes between my thighs, his intense focus tangible as goose bumps rise to the surface of my skin.

Realization hits me. Abe told me he loved me, and I wasn’t ready to say it back. I was scared, if I’m being honest with myself. Scared that I’d somehow end up disappointed or heartbroken. But as I sit here staring at the man I’ve come to understand, I realize I do love him—deeply and with my entire soul. And even if I only get a short time with him, I want every second of it.

“I love you too,” I whisper. “So damn much.”

His lips part, a pink blush spreading across his cheeks. When his eyes go glossy, I worry I’ve gone too far. But then a blood-red tear slips down his cheek, leaving a pink trail against his pale skin.

I slide off the chair to straddle his lap, wrapping my arms around his neck. Pressing my forehead to his, I brush our mouths together. His lips move against mine, and when I keep them playfully out of reach, he chases my mouth, wrapping a hand around my neck and holding me in place while he devours me.

And it’s soul-rending, that kiss. It yanks me back in time to that night beautiful melodies filled the air around us, pumped

through enormous speakers, and all I could focus on was the man kissing me.

My hands burn and itch with the need to fix what my magic feels is wrong with him, but I brush all that aside as I devour him in return. I don't realize we've risen off the ground until the hallways pass by in a blur. A door opens, and we slip across his bedroom—our bedroom.

Abe deposits me carefully in bed before crawling on top of me. He cages me between his big arms, his lips still crushed hard to mine. We kiss and touch until my eyes start to close out of pure exhaustion.

He flips me over and kisses his way down my neck and back, along both shoulders, and down my spine. He trails those kisses up over the swell of my ass and down my legs. His warm mouth is in direct opposition to the chilly room, and I can't resist arching up to meet his warmth.

"I prayed for you for so long," he whispers into my skin. "I prayed to the stars and the moon. I prayed to every god the monster world has. I prayed my entire life, mate." His mouth closes around a spot on my shoulder blade, his kiss reverent.

Tears fill my eyes at the weight of what happened today and the promises he's imprinting on my body and soul with every touch.

"I have loved you across space and time," he murmurs, moving to the back of my neck and kissing again. "I loved you before I even knew you. And now that you're here? There is no depth, no end to what I feel. I'm not a whole person, Morgan. I'm deeply flawed. But I will spend every day attempting to become someone worthy of such a gift."

The tears do spill over then. But Abe flips me over and brings his mouth to mine, staying any response I might have.

He kisses me until I fall into the deepest, most restful sleep of my entire life.



re you ready for today?” I grab my ziol and make a small cut in my forefinger, dripping blood into Abe’s coffee.

“A His nostrils flare as he leans against the wall, watching my blood drip into his drink. “I suppose,” he murmurs, dark gaze moving back to mine.

“I’m here for you,” I remind him.

“I seem to still lack emotion when it comes to anything unrelated to you,” he says tersely. “I should be reminding you that I’ll be there for the emotional rollercoaster that today will be.”

I smile and hand him the cup. He takes it, but grips my hand and brings my finger to his mouth. When he slips it between his lips and sucks, we both groan. And then I pant watching him lick and suck on my finger like it’s the rarest of delicacies. His eyes close, brows furrowing as he hollows his cheeks.

“Abe,” I murmur. “I’m going to knock that coffee out of your hands and attack you if you keep sucking on my finger like that.”

“Healing you,” he says with a smirk. “Vampire saliva has healing properties we can elect to deposit or not.”

Well, that is fucking fascinating. The scientific side of my brain begins to sort and pick through the questions I have about that. I wonder immediately about the practical applications of such a thing in the human world.

“I lost you,” he says with a laugh. “What are you thinking about?”

“Fixing sick kids with your magical healing saliva,” I admit.

His smirk becomes a soft smile. “It doesn’t work at scale, unfortunately. It must be done with intent. Although maybe one day monsters will feel safe enough to make ourselves known. We’d be happy to help.”

I sigh. “It’s difficult to imagine that ever working, isn’t it?”

He nods. “Yeah. Especially having lived in Seattle for so long. Monsters would become science experiments. The government would see us as a threat.” He drops his hold on my hand and strokes my hair, pulling it over my shoulder to fall at my back. “I’ll be in meetings with Arkan and the protector team all day. Plus, I’ll be needed for help with Leighton’s life ceremony. You’ll be alright by yourself today?”

“Yeah.” I turn to the coffee machine and start mine. Glancing up at him, I smile. “Me and the girls are meeting Hana to talk about black magic.” My smile falls. “I still haven’t given up on the idea that I can help with this.” I place my palm on his broad chest, his warmth a comfort.

He moves his hand to cover mine, his expression turning neutral. “I don’t want to discourage you, but I don’t want you to be devastated if it doesn’t work, either. I feel fine, truly.”

“I can’t give up,” I whisper.

“I’ll never ask you to,” he promises. “And I’ll do everything I can to help.”

I lean forward and kiss his chest. “Fight alongside me, Abe. Don’t accept it, okay?”

He sets his coffee down and wraps both arms around me. “Okay.”

For a long moment we stand in silence. “I have a habit of succeeding where others have failed,” I say with a snicker.

“And a tendency to rely on humor in dark situations,” he jokes.

“True.” I lift my head from his chest, fingering the neckline of his black tee. “You’re not wearing a turtleneck, I see.”

He wraps his fingers through my hair and pulls my head back. There’s a slight pinch, his grip is so tight. He buries his nose in my neck and growls. “Someone convinced me not to hide the tattoos. So, this is me, not hiding.” He sucks in a deep, ragged breath that has my panties wet. “You win, witch.”

“I love winning,” I say with a laugh. “And you folded like a house of cards, sir.”

He lets go of my hair, bringing a fingertip under my chin when I look up at him. “Morgan, you mentioned a grovel under your breath once, and I don’t know how to do that. Have I...done it?”

I hold back a laugh because he seems serious about the question. “Are you familiar with the concept of a grovel?”

His dark eyes flash. “Not really. It seems purely emotional, and it’s difficult for me to operate from that place.”

Reaching up, I run my fingers down his throat, admiring the black-and-red swirls that mark his heritage. “A grovel is typically a grand move made after you’ve done something wrong. Most typically you see this in romantic relationships. One person acts out and then does something extreme to make up for it, a grand gesture of sorts.”

His brows furrow. “What might this grand gesture look like?”

Sudden visions of Abe dropping to his knees in the middle of town assault me. I don’t want him to have to do something like that.

I give him an earnest look. “You’ve expressed your love for me over and over, Abe. I was mad in the beginning; you already know that. But I don’t need a grovel at this point. I’m happy without it.”

“Hmm,” he says. “I’ll ask Ohken if he’s heard about this. Of the males I’m close to, he seems to have a good handle on relationship matters.”

“If you must,” I say with a laugh, grabbing my coffee.

Once we’re done with breakfast, Abe drives me into town and drops me off at Higher Grounds. I kiss him hard before hopping out of the truck. My sisters and Lou sit on a bench in front of the coffee shop. Hana stands next to them, her palm splayed flat on the wood beside the front door.

Thea, Lou, and Wren turn as one to watch Abe drive away, his big truck rumbling backward to Sycamore before he turns and heads toward Shifter Hollow.

“Well, well, well,” Wren deadpans.

“Spill the beans, witch,” Thea says with a laugh. “You leaned over and kissed him like you haven’t been enemies for an entire month.”

“You look happy,” Lou says. I swear there are hearts in her eyes.

Hana laughs and folds her hands at her waist. “Did you break through?”

I wink at her as my girls turn to look up.

“Break through?” Wren sips at her latte.

Hana chuckles. “Keepers are a tough nut to crack, all that logic getting in the way of mating. But once you break through...”

Thea snorts. “So, you finally broke the Keeper’s nut, huh?”

“Erm, well, Abe’s not like that,” I’m quick to say.

“Wait, what?!” Wren shouts. Then she whisper-hisses, “His name is Abe?”

“Be quiet!” I wave at her to keep her voice down. “That slipped out; I shouldn’t have told you.”

“Of course you have to tell us,” Lou barks. “We’re your damn family! And, awww, that’s so cute! Is it short for something?”

Hana and I exchange a look. When she shrugs, I take it to mean it’s not a huge deal if I expose Abe’s name.

“Abemet,” I huff. “Mix of his fathers’ names.”

“It suits him,” Wren says finally. “I like it.”

I preen. If I know anything, it’s that my sisters’ and Lou’s opinions matter. I don’t think I realized how much I wanted them to be okay with our relationship until right this moment.

“You guys don’t think this is weird, me and the Keeper finally getting together?”

“You’re soulmates,” Hana says definitively.

“But did he apologize or explain it in a way that makes you feel okay about it?” Lou sips her coffee and levels me with her best mom impression.

I gulp around a sudden lump in my throat. “He asked me this morning if I felt I needed a grovel, and what that might look like.”

“Good for him,” my sisters say at the same time.

Lou laughs. “Does he know what a grovel is? It’s pretty uniquely human.”

Hana breaks in, “What in the hells is a grovel?”

For the next half hour, we teach Hana all about what a grovel means. She thinks it’s ridiculous and expounds at length on how a simple apology should suffice.

While we talk, I put my hands all over Higher Grounds. But there’s none of that dark, insidious blackness I felt when I touched her the first time.

“She’s good, thanks to you,” Hana says, resting her palm on mine. “Shall we go along Main and check in with all the buildings? We can fix anything we find along the way.”

“Hell yes,” I breathe. “Let’s go.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

KEEPER

I've left a meeting with the entire protector team. We're ready for tonight's celebration of life for Leighton. But more than anything, a fire burns deep and hot inside me. We need to get ahead of Wesley for once.

The problem is that he's both brilliant and incredibly powerful—one of the many reasons he managed to escape being seen for what he was for so long. It wasn't until he attacked Ever that any of us realized the extent of his treason.

And now? So many attacks in a short time. I think it's about more than snatching his ex-mate Catherine, although he'll obviously do that if he can. He never believed in the haven system, never wanted monsters to hide from humans.

I'm racking my brain in between fielding calls from Aberen and Evenia together and now Betmal. The first is highly unpleasant, all hissed reminders about my failure as a Keeper and son. Those comments don't sting like they once did, though. My only concern is my people.

Betmal's call might break me, though.

"Abe, how are you?" his deep voice floats through the comm watch.

"A male is dead," I mutter. "And none of us knew he'd been turned."

"Mmm," he says. "Even the gargoyles did not sense the intruder?"

My heart clenches in my chest. “They didn’t. A black witch did.”

Silence stretches long.

“Are we speaking about your mate?”

Even hearing her title sets off something deep and primal in my chest—some insane and pressing need to immediately find her and tangle myself up in her.

“Abe?”

I clear my throat. “That’s right.”

Betmal sighs. “Know that you have our full support. Your mother is sending an—”

“Army, I know,” I snap. “First another Keeper, who also wasn’t aware of the thrall within our bounds. This is bigger than we can handle, Father.” I’m on the verge of admitting something I hate purely because I know how true it is.

I don’t know what to do. I don’t know how to catch Leighton’s killer.

“I’m headed to Ever shortly,” Betmal says in a soft tone. It’s like he thinks I’m a grenade about to blow, and he wants to shove the pin back in before I can be set off.

“To do what? How can you possibly help?”

“I’m not coming to fix this,” he says, steel re-entering his tone. “I’m simply coming to be there with you and meet my daughter-in-law. I’m coming to be with you no matter how this plays out. I’m coming because I love you, and it has been far too long since we had time with just the two of us.”

I cough around the giant lump in my throat, but before I can respond, someone calls my name.

“I’ve got to go, Father,” I say gently. “See you soon.”

“Of course,” he says with all the usual charm he imparts. He clicks off without another word.

I turn in place to see Arkan and his father walking up the sidewalk toward us.

“Keeper! We must speak urgently,” Vikand says in that impossibly deep voice of his. “I’ve discovered something that might explain how we were unable to sense the thralls.”

Arkan gives me a wry look. “Father has already shared his idea with me, and I have to admit, it has merit. We should talk about this with Slade.”

My senses ping at that. “Dark magic?”

“Pitch-black,” Vikand says with a sorrowful sigh. “Doc Slade has long been a renowned scholar in this field.”

Arkan and I share a look, but he gives a little shrug. “We should hear him out. What can it hurt?”

I point up Main toward Slade’s cottage-turned-clinic. “Let’s walk and talk.”

A few minutes later, Arkan and I stand with our mouths open as Slade and Vikand pore over drawings in an ancient-looking leather-bound tome.

Slade stands tall, black horns curling up and away from his high forehead. “Holy hells, Vikand. I’ve never even heard of this spell, let alone anyone who mastered it.”

Vikand frowns. “Do not even ask me how I came across this book, but I’m glad I did.”

Arkan rubs at a spot between his eyebrows. “So let me get this straight. Somehow, Wesley seems to have sorted out how to hide a thrall in plain sight by glamouring them to look like something else, something innocuous.”

“Basically,” Slade says, pointing at the open pages. “If this is right, he could make almost anyone or anything appear to be something familiar.”

A muscle works in Arkan’s jaw. “Including himself?”

His father shakes his head. “Probably not, but it’s impossible to know with any certainty. The spell is specifically for thralls under one’s control. But Wesley was always brilliant. Who’s to say he wouldn’t figure out how to extend this? It’s truly impossible to say.”

I sigh. “But Higher Grounds and Morgan both sensed the wrongness of the thrall. How could they do it? And why was he under the ground?”

“And does that make the buildings, Hana, and Morgan our best chance at keeping everyone safe?” Arkan gives me a worried look. I’m sure our brains went to the exact same place—our mates being on the forefront of a war with Wesley is the last place we want them.

Slade crosses his arms over his broad chest. “Well, this is only a theory, but most magic has its roots in darker magic from our more, errr, let’s call them primitive days. We may use most magic with positive intent now, but that wasn’t always the case. Black magic in particular is the closest to that old magic. It’s black magic that originally built life into the houses and buildings after Catherine created the haven system. That’s why Morgan and Hana can fix them.”

Vikand cuts me a look. “I watched Morgan put her hand on the Higher Grounds door yesterday and heal a split in the wood. She’s remarkably powerful for someone learning what she could be capable of.”

Pride and satisfaction fill me. Of course she is. She’s remarkable in every possible way.

I look from Slade to Vikand. “Does this book say anything about how we might tackle this magic?”

Vikand shakes his head slowly, sorrow filling his dark eyes. “Not a thing, Keeper, I’m sorry. Truly, this means our black witches are our best line of defense. The rest of us haven’t a fucking clue, to put it bluntly.”

And just like that, control is ripped completely from my hands, wrestled away by the person I most want to protect.

“I need to put my woman in a plastic bubble,” Arkan says with a snarl. “I fucking hate this.”

I can’t even summon words, despite knowing Morgan and Hana are going up and down Main today to check on all the buildings. The thought that a thrall could burst out of every corner sets my teeth on edge.

Slade reaches out and claps me on the back. “Come, Keeper. We need to inform the town and celebrate Leighton. We’ll tackle the rest tomorrow.”

“The castle’s on high alert as well,” I state. “I’ve got Ben monitoring every inch of every building, focusing harder there than the wards.”

Arkan smiles, but it’s strained. “Ben?”

“Yeah,” I say with a laugh, running my hands through my hair. “My castle is male. The first building ever to be male, as far as I know.”

“There have been others,” Vikand says with a knowing smile. “Very rarely, but it’s been documented two or three times.”

“To what end?” I bark. This is new news.

He clasps his hands together. “Particularly troublesome Keepers have, on occasion, received male residences. It says a lot about you that Ben is male.”

Arkan nudges my shoulder with his hip. “Way to go, friend. You’re like a Keeper level two.”

I mull that over before reaching down and punching the command in my comm watch to have Ben ring the town hall bells.

Mere moments later, the bells begin to slowly chime, audible throughout the entire haven.

I couldn’t dread this meeting any more, so I’m thankful when the entire group is joined by the protector team and their mates. We head up Main toward the town hall gazebo. But when we arrive, Morgan’s there, directing the Evertons toward Town Hall.

“That way if you don’t mind,” she says with a smile. “We’ll be in the auditorium!”

My heart thwomps like a helicopter when her gray eyes find mine and flash with barely withheld joy.

I cross the gazebo's paneled floor and press her gently against the railing. My hand traces a path up the front of her shirt, up over round, perfect breasts to grip her throat. I press my thumb to the spot where her vein throbs visibly, desperately calling for my bite. The consistent rhythm of her heart comforts me. I hear that beat deep in my soul. It's the only drumbeat I want to march to.

"The gazebo is tired," Morgan says quietly, reaching up with both hands to stroke my forearm. "She could really use a break, and Town Hall would love to take over for a while."

The gazebo groans around us, her ceiling beams shimmying in agreement with Morgan.

Another surprise. The gazebo has never really spoken with me.

"Let's get this over with," I whisper into her lips. "I missed you all day."

"Me too," she whispers back, nipping gently at my lower lip with her blunt teeth. "But Hana and I visited every building on Main, and there was nothing amiss. We fixed a couple issues, but I never got that same sense again."

"Good." My eyes flick to Town Hall, her doors flung wide for the Evertons. "She looks happy," I muse.

Morgan lets out a wry chuckle. "Oh, I had to convince her that hanging streamers from the front windows was not appropriate today, but next time is probably okay."

"I didn't know she had streamers," I mutter.

One of Morgan's dark brows rises as she gives me a look that screams, "Duh!"

Hand in hand, we stroll to Town Hall. When we arrive in the auditorium, I'm surprised at how lovely the room looks—dust free and organized. There are plenty of extra chairs and even three rows of the long resting benches the centaurs prefer.

Morgan pinches my side gently. "You want me up front with you, or are you and Arkan okay tackling this yourselves?"

“Come with me,” I say without even thinking. “I want you with me.”

Pink tinges her cheeks, her smile huge. “Let’s go,” she says, pulling me toward the front of the room. Arkan and Hana stand there with the rest of the protector team. Every smile is strained, every expression resolute or downright anxious.

I squeeze Morgan’s hand tighter as we join the group.

The meeting passes in a blur as I explain what happened to Leighton and where to go for his celebration of life ceremony tonight. Arkan and I answer questions, but the Evertons are most curious about how Morgan felt the thrall in the first place.

She answers each question thoughtfully, Hana pitching in with occasional points about black magic in general. I don’t share what we learned from Vikand; that information’s probably not for public consumption.

Arkan raises his voice, his deep baritone booming around the room. “To recap, we’re asking you to be cautious. We’ll shut the businesses down before dark, and the protector team is doing double patrols.”

“Including Hana and me,” Morgan shouts over the din. “We won’t stop until we figure this out!”

There’s a moment of silence as she steps slightly in front of the rest of us. “Everyone is scared, I know that. I can feel it in the air and the tension in our buildings and homes. But we will protect this place until our last breath; you have our word. Now, please, if you’ll head across to the movie theater parking lot, the celebration of Leighton’s life is happening there.”

For a moment, no one moves. Despite the obvious tension in the room, everyone is focused on Morgan. Some monsters are clearly in awe, others worried. A few seem purely determined.

She’s giving them hope that, despite Wesley’s power, we have a chance.

She’s giving *me* hope.

The crowd begins to dissipate, leaving Town Hall for the celebration across the street.

The protector team gathers around. Arkan gestures for his father to share what we learned earlier. Hana listens in silence, but Morgan gasps and sputters her way through the explanation.

Lou rounds her nieces to wrap an arm protectively around Morgan. Her mahogany gaze is fierce, as if she can keep the danger at bay simply with her will to protect.

When Vikand finishes sharing, Morgan turns a curious gaze on him. “If this is Wesley’s doing, why not send an army of thralls? Why send only one? And to chase that thread a little further, if he’s only powerful enough to do this spell with one monster, what good is that, really? He might kill another person or two, but he surely couldn’t take over Ever like that.”

Vikand slowly nods, crossing his big arms over his chest. “I have been considering this angle myself, and I have two theories. The first is that the thrall at Higher Grounds was simply a test, as Higher Grounds is always heavily busy. The second is that he wasn’t necessarily trying to kill Leighton, but perhaps tack on some other spell that didn’t work.”

“Like what?” Arkan barks, looking incredulous.

“I don’t know,” his father admits. “Why was the thrall underground? That indicates a reason he wasn’t left out in the open. There are many unanswered questions. It pains me to say so, but nothing else in my book suggests what spells could be combined with this one.”

“It’s a problem for tomorrow,” Lou says gently. “Let’s sleep on it and reconvene in the morning. Maybe our dreams will bring us useful ideas.”

Morgan rests her head on her aunt’s, stroking Lou’s ginger-blond braid.

The other two triplets join them, holding one another tight. As our group begins to disperse, they still cling together, happily oblivious to everyone else leaving.

“You are miracles, my girls,” Lou says softly. “We’ll figure this out, okay?”

I almost feel like I’m intruding, watching Lou encourage her nieces. But then Morgan lifts her hand, gray eyes full of promise. When I take it, she pulls me into their group. To my complete surprise, Wren and Thea each wrap an arm around me, and then I’m smushed in between the four women. I should find it awkward. Maybe I would have a month ago. But these women are my mate’s family, which means they’re my family.

From this angle, I can’t see anyone’s face to attempt to read how they feel, but my mate bond tells me her emotion is peaceful.

That’s the moment I fully understand why all Keepers take mates. Our job is hard, but having a mate and family means we’re not alone. Morgan tempers me, burns and molds me into someone I’m proud of. And without experiencing her furious emotions through our bond, I feel more settled.

We stand for long, quiet moments before Wren looks up at me, her green eyes glossy with tears. “Welcome to the fam, Keeper.”

“Drinkin’ Lincoln for the win!” shouts Thea.

For a moment, everyone drops their embrace and turns to her.

Wren chokes out a hysterical laugh. “What did you call him?!”

Lou and Wren fall to pieces, doubling over as I resist the urge to join them.

“Drinkin’ Lincoln?” I barely hold in a laugh. Maybe the first deep laugh I’ve laughed in years.

Thea nods, wiping tears from her eyes. “Yeah, like Abe Lincoln, you know?!”

I cross my arms. “I am aware of who Abe Lincoln is, thank you very much. I was there when he ran for the presidency!”

My stern response only sends all four of them further into hysterical laughter. Hana glances at me over their heads, her lips twitching.

When I scowl, she purses them together and looks away from me.

But the thing is, I don't hate it. Not at all.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

MORGAN

“Oh my *gawd*, Thea!” I shriek. “You are a crazy bitch!” I can’t stop laughing. And the serious, almost disappointed look on Abe’s face is making it worse. He looks so disgruntled, except that the corners of his eyes are wrinkled. I think he’s trying not to laugh.

When we manage to calm ourselves, he opens an arm wide and points at the door. “If you’re finished, shall we attend Leighton’s ceremony?”

That puts a damper on the group. Thea’s smile falls, although she nudges me in the ribs as we follow him out of the auditorium and toward the front of Town Hall.

“That was pretty good, right?” she asks in a hushed tone, but Abe glances over his shoulder.

“Super hearing, Althea. I’m sure Lou mentioned it to you.”

“Noted!” she shouts to him over the group.

I zip my lips together but wrap an arm around her for a hug. Wren and Lou walk hand in hand, and Hana brings up the rear with Thea and me.

The streets are full of monsters headed back down Main toward the movie theater. We follow the crowd through the walkway between the bowling alley and Fleur and into the back parking lot. Like the last time I was back here, music ricochets off the building, echoing around the big open space. A band plays soft music outside the bowling alley’s back doors.

In the middle of what'll be the dance floor, Richard stands with Leighton's parents. They're both misty-eyed, and I'm thankful when the band quiets and he speaks on their behalf. "Leighton was an amazing male and good friend. We lost him to a tragedy, but tonight is about celebrating who he was to this vibrant community. Please dance, celebrate, love, eat in his honor." He pulls Leighton's parents in for a quick hug, then steps aside.

"Oh, this'll be quite lovely," a voice says to my left.

When I glance over, Dirk winks at me, glacier-blue eyes shocking every time I see them. They flick over my shoulder to Lou. "I'll need a dance with yeh, Louanna. Don't leave without takin' me up on my offer."

Lou rolls her eyes, but smiles anyhow.

Uh oh.

Dirk stalks away, and I whip around to my aunt. "I know he's flirty, but are you and Dirk, like...starting something?"

She rolls her eyes so hard, I worry they'll get stuck. "He flirts with everybody," she says flippantly. "I can't be bothered. I'm more worried about you girls."

Thea leans over, inserting herself directly into the conversation. "Except that he doesn't actually flirt with anyone else. I see him a lot, you know, on account of all the patrols Shepherd and I have been doing."

Lou ignores my triplet, grabbing Thea's braid and twirling it around her finger. "Your hair looks good like this, Thea. I love it."

I bump her with my hip. "You're changing the subject, *Louanna*."

She flips me off at the use of her full first name. She never even tells anyone that Lou is short for Louanna. I find myself wondering how Dirk even knows. Come to think of it, the Keeper calls her that too. Hmm.

But then the band starts up, a symphony of sounds from drums and guitars and violins all joining together into a jaunty

song that reminds me of an Irish jig.

Leighton's mother wraps her arms around her husband, and he sweeps them across the parking lot in a rush of movement. They press their foreheads together and dance like they're the only ones there. The music rises and rises, all the monsters cheering for his parents.

It's then that I realize I'll never go back to the human world. I was so torn about Ever with the drama between Abe and me. It was so hard watching my sisters and their instant happiness with Shepherd and Ohken.

But now? I search the crowd for him.

There! He's across the parking lot speaking with Richard and Connall, although Connall's eyes are locked on Leighton's parents as they move wildly around the open space.

Abe must sense me looking. He turns slightly, crimson gaze locking with mine. A slow, sensual smile turns his lips upward. Richard says something, and he turns back with a grin. When they part, I get a view of his back as he stalks through the crowd and to a table filled with flagons and barrels of what I assume is Ohken's famous mead.

He fills two big glasses and rounds the crowd, never looking away. My skin prickles with apprehension as everyone else fades away.

When my mate stops in front of me, I stare up at him in awe. "You're so damn beautiful," I murmur, a smile splitting my lips.

He hands me a drink. "Aren't I supposed to say that to you, witch?"

I take a sip of the drink—strawberries burst across my tongue, followed by a hint of something hoppy and earthy. "Damn, that's good."

Abe winks at me. "Don't ask Ohken where the earthy flavor comes from."

"Ewww," I whine. "It's worms, isn't it? Or mold or some other horrible thing."

He strokes my bangs out of my face. “I can tell you, or I can keep it to myself and simply allow you to enjoy it.”

I consider it for a moment, taking another sip. “Keep it to yourself,” I mumble. “S really good, and I don’t want it to be ruined. Wait,” I snap. “It’s not some kind of jizz, though, right?”

Abe lets out a loud guffaw, surprise twisting his brows up. “No!” he says. “No, it’s not anybody’s jizz.”

I chuckle and lean in close as other monsters begin to join Leighton’s parents in a rowdy, celebratory dance. “I’d drink yours, Abe.”

Nostrils flare as he leans down, his lips barely touching mine. “Say it again.”

“I’d happily drink you down, Keeper.”

His eyes roll back as he lets out a sensual groan. “The idea of you drinking from me is enough to send me over the edge, mate. Let’s dance for as long as is socially appropriate, and then we’ll go home.”

“Sounds great.” I chuckle as he leads me out onto the dance floor.

He picks a spot for us, turning to face me. Both hands come to my elbows and lift my arms around his neck. “Most monster music for celebrations like this has a rhythm similar to either salsa or bachata, if you ever danced those in the human world.”

“I eat salsa,” I deadpan. “I’ve never danced it.”

A smirk pulls the scar lining his face. “I’ll guide you, but you have to let me lead.” Crimson eyes burn with intensity. “Can you trust me to do that, Morgan?” He searches my face, his fangs slipping out of his gums to press against his lips.

It feels like he’s asking about so much more than this dance, and we both know it.

I stroke the back of his neck with one hand. “Lead the way, Keeper.”

His fierce gaze morphs into a beautiful smile, one arm wrapping around my waist and the other hand on my upper back. When he takes the first step, pushing me backward, I nearly trip and land on my ass. But his big arms keep me upright, and with a small chuckle, he starts again. I'm ready this time, and we take the first five or six steps with no issue. But then I try to move us right, and he shifts us left, and we nearly break apart.

He scolds me with a look, his fingers tightening against my back. "This is one place where we literally can't compete. We have to be unequivocally on the same page." He leans down and brings his lips to my ear. "In dancing, I'm the dominant partner. But I can only be dominant if your energy is submissive. Your willingness to follow is what allows me to lead. I can't do it without you." He places a soft, wet kiss just under my ear, sending a flash of heat down my spine to curl pleasantly between my thighs.

I stare into his beautiful eyes when he straightens. "I'm ready. For real."

This time, when he moves with the music, I relax and wait for his hands and body to push me where he wants me.

And it is glorious. His hands and hips move us around the dance floor, swaying as a single unit to the sensual beat of the music. Now and again my sisters and Lou dance by with various partners. They grin as they swing past, but me?

I can't take my eyes off the way Abe's big body moves so naturally to the music. He never moves his eyes off of mine, and never allows anyone to cut in and take time from us.

We dance until we're coated in sweat, and a song comes on that's a little darker, a little more sensual than the rest. The party rages around us, but as our hips rock together, his obvious erection grinds against my front. Except he's nowhere near where I want him, where I need him. I'm practically whining by the time the song ends, my hard nipples pressed against his chest.

Every rock of his hips drags his body against mine, a smirk playing at the edges of his smile. "You look ready to go," he

murmurs, sliding his hand up into my hair. When he fists it tight, I choke back a groan.

“So ready to go.” I need to be absolutely manhandled, and, after however long we’ve been dancing, Abe is ready. It’s obvious in the tension of his muscles and the way he’s staring at my mouth.

“Give me a moment,” he says. “I’m leaving, but I promise to return.”

I choke out a laugh. “I’m not worried, Abe.”

His expression turns serious. “This is not like that day at the Green Bean. I will return for you.”

I unhook my arms from his neck and slide my hands to his chest, patting gently. “I know you will.”

He hesitates a moment, indecision splashed across his face as he nibbles his lower lip.

“Go,” I encourage. “I’ll say goodbye to my sisters and Lou.”

He nods and lets go of me, turning to disappear into the crowd.

I look for my girls, but they’re all dancing with their mates, or in Lou’s case, she’s wrapped up tight in Dirk’s big arms. I’ve never seen the sylph look so serious, but right now, he’s focused only on Lou, one big hand holding her arm around his neck and the other at her lower back.

I watch them for a moment. He moves her so easily, so sensually, even though he’s not touching her anywhere that could be deemed inappropriate. She moves in his arms, her body relaxed.

Then again, Lou is good at so many things, and she’s always loved dancing. They make it look easy, and I have to wonder if Abe and I looked that natural.

I’m pondering that when an arm comes around my waist, a warm frame pressed to my back. Lips come to my ear, my mate’s breath hot against my flushed skin. “I’m ready for bed, witch.”

Heat flares between my thighs, my clit throbbing in time with my rising heart rate. A rush of air tells me that he's called his wings. I press hard to his chest, pulling his arm around my waist as I try not to scream. When his muscles tense behind me, I close my eyes for that moment when he'll push off the ground and up into the sky.

When he does, I open them long enough to see my sisters and most of the crowd staring up at us with shocked expressions.

Oh, I am going to have to answer some questions tomorrow.

The music fades the higher we go, Abe climbing up through a cloud. When we burst through, moonlight shines down on the sparse clouds, illuminating bits and pieces of Ever below us.

I hold tight to his arms as he soars over downtown and past the community garden toward the castle. He's so fast like this, far faster than driving through town.

He's quiet, despite the evidence of his arousal at my back. So my thoughts turn to the evening and how beautiful it was to celebrate Leighton the way we did.

By the time we arrive home, I'm lost in thought.

Abe drops us onto the stone balcony outside his bedroom window, setting me carefully on my feet. A rustling of feathers tells me he's putting the wings away. With a soft whine, I turn in his arms.

"Could we ever play with the wings, Abe? Are they sensitive?"

Dark eyes flash as his fangs descend. "They're not sensitive, no, but we could absolutely play with them." He shoots me a mischievous grin. "There are so many ways we can play, Morgan. In fact, Ben and I had a little conversation about this earlier."

My brows lift. "Oh yeah?" I take a step back.

Abe follows, pressing his body into mine until I hit the stone wall beside the exterior door. His hands come to the neck of my tee, gripping the fabric. When he rips it, exposing my chest to the chilly night air, I hiss.

Abe's eyes drop to the swell of my breasts under my bra. "Fucking glorious. Take it off."

I reach behind my back and unclip the bra, dropping it slowly so I can watch Abe's expression change. His throat bobs, eyes narrowing when my nipples appear. Thin lips part, his body going into that predatory mode that's so impossibly still, I can tell he isn't human.

He reaches down and grabs the backs of my thighs, lifting me against the wall with my tits at face height. I'm still not ready when he leans down, his warm mouth closing over one nipple and tugging lightly. My back bows as I arch to feed more of myself into that warm heat.

When his tongue swirls over the sensitive bud, I let out a cry that echoes off the castle and into the night around us. Abe groans, the vibration tightening my body as slick wets my panties. He bites and plays with one breast while his hand cups the other, touching and teasing.

Is it possible for me to come just from nipple play? I never have, but right now, I'm on the very cusp of exploding in his arms. The contrast of his warm lips and the cold night air is so delicious, so—

A creaked groan interrupts my spiraling train of thought.

Abe grunts and pulls me off the wall, stalking inside without ever taking his mouth off me. He travels a rough path between my breasts as he lays me on the bed. Before giving my other nipple the same treatment, he straightens and reaches for my pants.

"Ben's impatient. He wants to join in on the fun tonight. What do you think?"

I shift as he grabs my jeans, pulling them down my legs. Skepticism fills me. "Ben wants to join? Meaning what?"

Abe's grin goes wicked, and before he can answer, the bed sheets tangle up around me, twisting around both wrists and ankles and dragging me to the center of the bed. I'm so shocked, it takes me a moment to realize Ben's controlling this, splaying me open as Abe rounds the bed to the foot and stares at the juncture of my thighs.

"He wants to participate, and there are so many ways he can," Abe says with a rough laugh, scarlet eyes coming up to meet mine. "There are a lot of objects in this house you can fuck, Morgan."

My cheeks flush with heat that spreads down my chest and belly. Is he saying what I think he's saying? That I can fuck the castle? That the castle wants to get fucked?

Oh my God.

As if to answer, a series of creaks and groans emanate from deep inside Ben.

Abe's devious smile returns. "Told you so."

I roll my hips, confusion overrun by primal, feral desire.

He sits up, eyes scanning my face. "I can't read your expression. Excitement, but...fear? Are you afraid to involve Ben?"

The sheets holding me tight loosen at his words. Pulling my hands and feet free, I sit upright, looking around. I can't totally read the sentiment coming from Ben right now. Confusion. Distress.

Shaking my head, I look up at my mate. "I'm surprised, is all. It never occurred to me that we would involve Ben."

Somewhere deep inside the castle, something shakes and rattles, an unhappy sound. Abe smiles softly, stroking long fingers along my collarbone, his expression thoughtful.

"I designed the castle for us, and while I could never have foreseen that Ben's energy would be masculine, he's hardwired to be connected to you." Crimson eyes sparkle with mischief. "It was Ben's idea to get involved in our bedroom play, and I am completely on board."

Long fingers reach around the back of my neck, wrapping my hair up and guiding my head slightly backward.

“He wants to be part of us in ways I never could have foreseen. He’s our castle, our home, our partner in protecting and monitoring this community. We would only do this if you were equally excited to do it.”

Above us, the ceiling tiles ripple in a sunburst pattern away from the middle of the room. It’s Ben telling me we’re connected, I know that’s why he picked a sunburst. He monitors the wards. He’ll know that my magic made that same pattern when I healed them.

I smile, looking back at Abe. “What does it mean, practically? And what about when you’re not home?”

A soft groan leaves his lips. “The idea of you and Ben playing when I’m not home makes me unspeakably hot.”

My mouth falls open as one of the bed posts curls over and nods like a person would.

“Our only goal would be to treat you like the queen you are,” Abe murmurs. “If you’re unsure at all, th—”

“I’m interested,” I admit.

Sheets that had fallen around my body move of their own accord, wrapping me up tight. As they softly sway me from side to side, I realize Ben is hugging me, reassuring me, and for some reason, it feels perfect.

I grin at Abe. “Is Ben as dirty minded as you?”

Abe chuckles and reaches for his vest, unbuttoning it slowly and casting it to the floor. His shirt follows as I watch, my breath coming faster as he unveils his beautiful, muscular body.

“Ben wants your ass first, Morgan. So yeah, I’d say he’s fairly dirty minded.”

To his left, the bedpost curls downward, pointing at me like some kind of giant wooden snake. Abe glances at it and grins before looking at me.

Oh my God. We're really doing this.

I stare at the slightly wavering bedpost and its rounded tip. There's a tiny ball at the very end that lengthens into a long, smooth cone.

Concern fills me.

"I think if you want that, we're gonna need a lot of lube."

Abe jerks his head toward the pillows. "Already waiting."

"Oh my God," I hiss. "Have you two been planning this?"

He shrugs, reaching for his pants. "Ben has shared his sentiments with me. Shall we begin?"

I glance at the knob again. "Take it slow, alright?"

The bed creaks and groans, the sunburst pattern flaring out from the ceiling tiles again. Ben's excited but cautious.

"Let us take care of you," Abe whispers, pressing me down onto the mattress. "As a team. Let us make you feel good, mate."

I shift onto my elbows to watch as Abe crawls on top of me. At the first warm lick of his tongue through my folds, I arch, thrusting my hips for more of that heat. I can't sit up enough to see much more than the top lines of his back and head as he dips down and sucks gently on my clit.

Pleasure explodes through me, even as I keep one eye on the bedpost. When it snakes down toward Abe, I jolt and stiffen, but another swipe of his tongue has my eyes rolling back into my head, my legs falling open.

"That's it," he murmurs into my pussy. "Trust us to bring you pleasure, Morgan."

Oh God, I'm about to get fucked by him and the house at the same time, and I don't even know what to make of that.

I groan when the ball tip of the bedpost touches my pussy and pauses. Another soft suck from Abe makes my legs shake. He breathes against my clit as the bedpost presses forward and slips inside my pussy lips. It's not warm like Abe. It's cold but hard, so damn hard.

This part isn't thick, but as it presses forward, the cone grows wider, filling me to the brim as Abe licks and sucks in slow, rhythmic waves. I'm too overwhelmed by the various sensations to take stock of them all. My body is tense and tight and quivering, but then the bedpost begins to move, slipping out of my pussy and back in with slow, measured movements.

Abe and I release matching sounds of pleasure as he closes his lips around my clit and pulls. My back arches, and Ben picks up the pace.

Thrust. Suck. Groan.

The sunburst pattern of the ceiling tiles pulses again, radiating outward in continual motions. It's like Ben's guiding my pleasure by reminding me about the black magic I'm full of. The same black magic that made him what he is.

I scream with need as they match their rhythm enough to make me wild and not quite enough to get me off. Yanking at the sheets that hold me in place, I rock my hips to meet the length inside me. But he drags it out and pauses. Abe pauses too until I let out a string of demanding curses and threats.

They surge forward at the same time, Ben filling me deep as Abe attacks my clit with renewed vigor. He moans and pants as he sucks on me, and knowing he's losing his mind while our house fucks me throws me over the edge. I clamp around the bedpost, screaming as ecstasy slams into me. I can't move, tied up like this, so I shout and beg and tremble as I coat Ben and Abe with release.

It seems like hours later that the pleasure fades. Ben is still moving in and out of me with measured, regular strokes. "Oh God," I groan aloud. I could go again.

And we do go again. Ben takes me from behind while I ride Abe. And then he holds Abe still while I ride his face. We fuck for hours until we eventually pass out.

As I fall asleep in Abe's arms, Ben's covers wrapped comfortably around us, it occurs to me that I've never been this happy.

I just hope it lasts.



When I blink my eyes open the following morning, a folded slip of paper lies on top of Abe's pillow. Smiling, I grab it and sit up, unfolding it.

I know it's his handwriting—it's scrolled and elegant and beautiful—just like he is.

*My witch -
Find me when you wake.*

• *A*

I bring the letter to my nose and inhale. The faintest scent of pine and lemon still clings to the thick sheet of paper. My muscles are sore from last night's play. Reaching above my head, I slap the wall playfully. "You were naughty as hell last night, Ben!"

He rewards me with a playful slam of all the doors in our room.

"Kinda hot, though," I mutter. My mind spins with all the ways Abe, Ben, and I could play together. Ben must be considering it too, because there's a sudden tension in the sentiment I sense from him.

I roll out of bed and stroke my fingers along the wall as I head for the closet. A deep groan echoes from somewhere in the bowels of the castle.

"Are you teasing Ben?"

Abe's deep voice shocks me, and I jump, whirling in place. His eyes fall to the bounce of my breasts before venturing farther down. He makes a leisurely pass back up my frame as I cross my arms and give him a stern look.

"Still scaring me, I see."

He waves the comment away. "You were distracted, playing with our house."

My cheeks heat. “Well, umm...” I can’t think of a thing to say.

Abe crosses the space between us and presses me up against the wall. “Vampires are very sexually creative, witch. There’s no limit to the fantasies you can conjure up that I’m not willing to partake in with you. Assuming Ben is willing to keep me from biting you. Or that you’re down with the muzzle I bought.”

My cheeks flame hotter than the sun. “Muzzle? What?”

He hovers his lips just above mine, fangs descending as he noses my chin upward so he can bite his way down my neck. “Muzzle, yes. Would you like to be shared?” His breath is warm against my throat, but his words pull goose bumps to my skin. “Maybe have someone or a whole host of someones in bed with us?”

“You don’t strike me as the type of man who’d want to share his mate,” I manage between increasingly hard breaths.

His dark chuckle makes my pussy clench around nothing.

“Whatever would bring us pleasure together is what I’m interested in, Morgan. Would you like me to fuck you while you ride another male? Or female?” he tacks on.

I can barely catch my breath around his suggestion. “Maybe,” I admit. “I’ve never—”

“I can guide you.” His warm tongue trails to the hollow at the base of my throat. “Maybe you’d like to be mounted by a centaur while I watch. Hmm? What do you think about that?”

“Oh God! Abe,” I gasp, clawing my way down his chest. I’m on fire, and only he can save me. “Help me, please,” I beg.

In a moment, he drops to both knees and buries his face between my thighs. My period stopped yesterday, but that doesn’t seem to deter him. He rubs his mouth from side to side over my clit, both hands sliding up the back of my thighs to grip my ass. My head hits the wall, both eyes rolling back as he wrings every ounce of pleasure he can from my abused body.

Before I know it, I'm exploding all over him, flooding his tongue with release. And the way Abe groans sets off a second, stronger orgasm. My legs are trembling jelly by the time he emerges from between my thighs.

Dark eyes find mine, a smile splitting his lips. He slides his tongue between my legs and licks a slow path up my clit.

"You've been sleeping a long time," he murmurs. "Must be worn out."

I struggle to catch my breath as he slurps my clit between his lips, the sounds wet and messy and thrilling. I'm going to come again if he keeps that up.

"How is everything?" I gasp out. "Nothing's wrong?"

He pauses his lazy perusal of my pussy with an understanding look. "Everything's quiet. I don't like it." When he rises, I know playtime's over. "I'd almost rather Wesley attack and be done. I don't know how long we can keep doing what we're doing."

His voice falls to a whisper. "I don't want to lose anyone else. I don't want to lose you." Deft fingers thread through my bun and drag my gaze up to him.

When he swallows hard, I reach up to cup his cheek. His beautiful scarlet eyes close as he leans his head into my hand, rubbing his stubble against my palm. Like this, he looks so peaceful, so innocent.

"I will protect you until my last breath," I murmur.

Dark eyes snap open, his hand coming to rest at the base of my throat. "You won't have to, Morgan. That is a promise I will keep until the day I'm dust and stars."

But I make a promise to myself then. Abe has given up everything to protect others and ensure they have the happiest possible existence. He's done all of that at incredible expense to his own happiness. He threw that happiness away for a century, choosing others first.

Now, I'm choosing him.

And I'm choosing us.



By dinnertime, I'm starting to wonder about that promise. While it's a lovely theory, I don't know how to carry it out in practice. I called my sisters, Lou, and Hana this morning, and we've spent the last six hours visiting every building and as many homes as we can to feel for anything amiss. Shit, I even visited every pixie gourd in the community garden and the pixie dust factory in the top of the garden's only tree.

There was nothing. Wren even used her green magic to get a sense for the plants, but they all seemed happy to her.

"It sucks how little use my detective skills are here," Thea grumbles as we shove cheeseburgers in our face at the Green Bean.

"Not useless," Hana mumbles around a mouthful of veggie burger. "Merely on hold."

Wren snorts and rubs Thea's shoulder. "Not even on hold. You're still keeping an eye open and patrolling with Shepherd. If there's something to be seen on your watch, I trust you'll see it."

"Absolutely," Lou says, reaching across the table to pat Thea's hand. "You are a badass bitch. Not finding this Wesley asshole is not your fault." Her eye twitches as she stares at my sister.

"Lou, you okay?" Wren asks.

Our aunt sets her burger down and nods. "Yeah, I'm... Havens have always been safe places. Living in Rainbow was such a dream for me. And Ever is famous for its hospitality and beauty among havens. After what happened with your parents, I really want peace for you girls. Peace and happiness." A single tear slides down her cheek.

I lean over and wipe it away. "We *are* happy, Lou. And, yeah, there's some sour along with the sweet, but we love it here."

"You too?" she asks, her tone thick with tears. "I know it's been hard."

“Yeah,” I say with a smile, looking around at my girl group. “It all worked out in the end.”

“Yay for breaking through! You did it!” Hana says with a giggle, shoving another bite of veggie burger in her mouth.

“Hell yeah.” I laugh and take another bite of my burger.

By the time we finish dinner, I’m reinvigorated to keep patrolling town and seeing if anything is amiss. The protector team is doubling up on patrols as well. Dirk already called his team, and Evenia’s literal army is arriving tomorrow. I’ll have backup soon.

Thea and Wren head home after dinner, and Hana takes the first shift. I’ll come back in a few hours and take over. I haven’t asked Abe to join me, but I know he will. In fact, I think it’ll be kinda nice to fly around a quiet town and patrol together.

Lou and I walk to Scoops and grab ice cream, but by the time we’ve eaten it, she still looks mournful.

“Lou, we’re good, I promise.” I twirl her braid around my finger. “Is that all that’s bugging you?”

She crosses her arms. “Yeah, I just...life can seem so unfair. You three have been through so much. I wish I was a witch so I could do something to help.”

Oh. OH.

I wonder if not being a witch is bothering her more than she’s let on.

“Not being a witch doesn’t make you any less,” I remind her. “You’re the best, kindest person I know. Like, literally our favorite.”

“I know,” she says with a huff, even though she grins at the compliment. “You know I’d do anything for you girls, I just... do you want to grab a nightcap and chitchat? I’m kind of dealing with something, and I could use your advice.”

I barely manage to hold back a smile. “Of course! This thing you’re struggling with wouldn’t be a certain handsome sylph with flaming blue hair, would it?”

Her cheeks flush bright red, and she looks away.

I whip out a pointer finger and wag it in her face. “Louanna, it is! Oh my God, so all the flirting isn’t really one-sided, is it?”

“Well,” she grumbles, “it’s complicated.”

I guide her around the side of Abe’s truck and open the door, gesturing for her to get in. “If you please, m’lady. Let’s drink and talk blue boys.”

She snorts and clambers up into the truck.

Half an hour later, Ben swings the front doors wide for us. I gesture up the hall. “Lou, honey, why don’t you go pour us a couple of drinks? I’ve got to check the monitoring system.”

I don’t really need to check it, but now that Abe’s taught me a little bit about how it works, I feel compelled to see for myself that nothing’s amiss.

She rubs at the back of her elbow, looking sheepish. “Actually, can I see it?” A tiny laugh rumbles from her throat. “I’ve never been in a Keeper’s comm room, and I’m kind of fascinated. I’ll never be part of a protector team, but you know I’m nosy as hell.”

Laughing, I pull her along with me to the comm room. When I swing the door open, spinning her around the small space, her mouth drops open.

“Holy shit,” she breathes. “This is incredible. So much information in one place. You know how to work all of this?” She turns shocked brown eyes on me, taking a step back.

“No.” I shake my head, flopping down in Abe’s seat. I punch in the code he taught me, pointing at the screen. “This code tells the wards to compile a cohesive report of what’s going on and spit out a notification of anything amiss.”

Lou doesn’t answer, and something about her silence lifts the hair on my neck. I turn slowly in my seat, eyes springing wide as my aunt glares with hate-filled eyes.

“Thank you, witch,” she says in a voice I don’t recognize. It’s deeper, rough, masculine. My body tenses, ready to spring

out of the chair. Lou's face shimmers and morphs as if something's trying to claw its way out of her, overlaying a diaphanous glamour on top of her more feminine features.

"Morgan, help!" she screams, and the plea sounds like her, but, the next moment, the Lou I know is gone. A dark, ghostly figure is transposed over her terrified face. Elegant, hawkish features form into a cruel sneer.

Alarms begin to blare inside the castle as realization hits me.

The dark magic.

Posing as something familiar.

Wasn't trying to kill Leighton.

Oh my God.

"Wesley," I croak.

"Hello, witch," the dark figure singsongs, Lou's face a visible mask of pain beneath his transparent smile. "Her physical body has been so helpful in carrying out my plans."

I smash the face of my comm watch. "Call Abe!" I shriek before Wesley forces Lou's arm out, tossing me across the room as magic burns over my skin. Fire dances within me, scorching from the inside out with invisible flames. When I open my mouth to scream, nothing happens.

Lou's body is forced into a seated position in Abe's chair. She seems to fight Wesley, clawing and screaming, but his ghostly black figure lifts her hands and begins mashing buttons with clinical efficiency. He knew what he'd find when he came in here. Lou's body is nothing but a puppet to him.

"Stop!" I manage. He doesn't bother to turn as he punches in a series of commands I don't recognize.

Ben unfurls a strip of wallpaper and reaches down, wrapping it around my arm. Carefully, he helps me up to a stand. Wesley has Lou forced forward, staring as information scrolls quickly across the giant screen in front of them.

Black magic sparks and sputters in my chest, giving me the uncomfortable sensation of heart palpitations. The magic is both drawn to Wesley's and equally repelled by whatever spell he's using to control Lou's body.

"Let Lou go," I demand as her fingers fly over the keyboard.

A harsh, barked laugh is Wesley's only response.

When I sprint across the room, ready to throw myself on top of them, he jerks Lou's body up out of the chair, raising her hand, palm faced toward me. The moment Lou's hand flicks up, I hit an invisible wall and bounce backward, falling to the floor on my ass.

Black, ghostly eyes blaze with fury, Lou's face a mask of terror visible through his. Wesley sneers at me as he jerks Lou's head toward the monitor. "Thank you for giving me such direct access to the command center, witch."

"Let her go," I demand again. "You got what you want, right? Just let Lou go."

"Not possible," he says with a sigh, lifting Lou's hands and glancing lasciviously down her body. "I had planned to leave this ridiculous body and enter a more powerful one, but I wasn't able to complete the magic. This one has done nicely enough."

Tears stream down Lou's face as she tries to force his gaze back up, but she can't. My magic flares in my chest, drawn to her obvious hurt.

He's hurting her.

Fury courses through me, my fists balling by my sides.

Wesley tsks at me, eyes dropping to my trembling hands, his venomous smile growing broader. "Worry less about your aunt and more about your precious wards. They're down, you know."

A chill snakes down my spine. Oh fuck. Wards down. Where the hell is Abe?

Wesley mutters something I can't understand under his breath, and whatever he says puts Lou in some kind of a trance. Her hands drop to her sides, and she stares blankly through the transparent visage of his aura.

"That's better. This one fights me far too much," he mutters. "The big shifter would have been better. Big and dumb. He didn't turn fast enough though."

Every monitor alarm goes off at that exact moment, red blaring across the comm wall. Wesley casts a triumphant look at me, raising Lou's arms as if the whole world is bowing to him.

"Now my army arrives," he purrs, dark eyes glittering in the low light. "Ever is one of the largest havens. Did you know that? So much can be controlled if one controls Ever."

"You'll never get away with this," I bark, advancing on him.

Just as he lifts Lou's hand to stop me, the door bursts open, and Abe rushes through, knocking Lou's body across the room. She slams into the wall with a thud, letting out a strangled gasp as she sinks to the ground.

Abe shoves me toward the door. "Ben, get her out of here!"

But as time slams to a standstill, I see everything as clear as day. Leaping out of Ben's reach, I vault across the room and throw myself on top of Lou with a battle cry.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

KEEPER

The humans have a saying I've never truly understood about your life flashing before your eyes before you die.

I understand it now as my mate launches herself across my command center toward Lou, a wraithlike figure transposed over her features.

As I realize with horror that the wraith is Wesley, my life zips past me in a blur.

A quick vision of when my fangs came in fills my mind. How Betmal gifted me my ziol then, even though Evenia and Aberen didn't celebrate.

There's the day I decided to leave the haven system and make my way to Seattle.

Zoom, flash. The vision changes, and I'm staring at Morgan across a smoky little music venue. The crowd rages around us, but those granite eyes hold me locked in place. And that first kiss? The touch of her silky lips set me ablaze.

In the here and now, her body crashes into Lou's body. Lou screams as a ghost-like figure reaches her hands up to slam their joined palms against Morgan's body.

He's trying to kill my *mate*.

I'm death itself, slipping across the room on black wings. I rip Morgan bodily from him, gripping Lou's throat at the same time. When I squeeze, Wesley grunts, forcing the pained sound from Lou's throat as he scratches at my hand with one of his.

Morgan shouts behind me, but all of my focus is on the male who has rained destruction down on my people.

On my mate.

He'll die for that if I have to rip him from Lou's body myself.

Yanking Lou's arm up, Wesley slaps her palm against my chest. The connection sears a path on my skin that flays me open, my body arching as my vision blurs, every sense diminishing.

Morgan screams, but nothing exists outside of the fire burning me alive.

A blast from Lou's hand throws me away from her body and halfway across the room, where I land with a thud, the breath leaving my lungs with a whoosh. Morgan screams again, but everything moves in silent, slow motion. Boards rip from the walls, grabbing Lou's body and Wesley and hauling them high up onto the wall, hands pinned above Lou's head.

The floorboards beneath me rumble, shoving me up onto my knees and tossing me toward the far wall. Ben grabs me and drags me up next to Lou, pinning me in place with boards across my chest and legs.

My energy flags as the thing in my chest writhes, tearing at me from the inside out. It's killing me; I know that, logically.

She screams, but I can't hear it, there's just the opening of her mouth, and the tears streaming down both cheeks. Veins pop in her neck as she reaches up and slams her palms against my chest.

Calling on the only bit of strength I can muster, I bring forth my shadow wings and cocoon them around her so it's just us inside the barrier.

Protect her.

Only her.

Always her.

Gray eyes blaze with fury, or maybe terror. But our bond is tight with a single sentiment—trust.

Next to us, there are sounds of a struggle, although I keep my mate shielded from it. Wesley forces Lou's body to fight, ranting and raging against Ben's hold, but every time he breaks through, Ben rewraps him in thick, wooden plans.

Morgan's magic sinks into me, healing and soothing my pain, but that terrible thing in my chest that fights, fights her the entire time. Pressure builds inside me as my energy flags.

"Morgan," I whisper with a smile. If this is the moment I die, I want her name to be the very last thing on my lips.

There's a loud pop, and something concussive blasts Morgan away from me and out of the protective barrier of my wings. I suck in a deep, painful breath as I struggle against Ben's hold. He drops me painfully to the ground as a black shadow twists in the air between Morgan and me.

To my left, Wesley stares with wide eyes through Lou's features, which are frozen in a mask of shock.

The dark mass spins, forming shape after shape after shape. A gargoyle, a rat, a centaur.

And then, a snake. It spits and hisses as it coils in the air, tiny explosions of lightning emanating from its smoky body. I try to struggle against Ben's hold, to get that fucking thing away from my mate, but my body doesn't respond.

Morgan steps forward and reaches out, grabbing the writhing black mass in one hand. The mass spins and snaps and whirls, but it can't seem to reach the hand she's holding it with.

"Nooooo," Wesley moans, the sound a mix of Lou's voice and his.

Morgan lets out a scream that lifts every hair on my body as she slams the snake against Wesley's spectral chest.

The warlock's transparent figure jolts like he's been shot. The snakelike figure strikes at his murky chest, ripping a piece of his phantom body open. He roars and claws at the magic,

but it begins to burrow its way inside him. With a scream, he tries to sink back into Lou, a silent cry echoing from his throat as light fills him from the inside out. He grabs at the virus's tail and pulls and tugs, but it's buried good and deep.

I'm frozen as the last bit of the virus disappears into the hole in his chest. It closes around the snake as his black eyes flick to Morgan and narrow.

"You fucking bit—" With a pop, he explodes to dust. It fills the air in the room and floats weightlessly, a black cloud joining the dust motes as my vision begins to go dark.

I can barely keep my eyes open as the dust floats through the air. But Lou is Lou again, with no sign of Wesley. Ben drops us carefully to the ground as I catalog other sounds.

Richard. Connall. Dirk.

Morgan throws herself into my arms with a sob, bringing her forehead to mine as she feels my face and neck and chest. "Oh my gods, Abe. Are you alive? I thought I fucking killed you!"

I hold her tight as she rakes her fingers down my face and chest. My breaths come short and fast as I summon enough energy to reach up and wrap my fingers around her throat.

"Beautiful," I murmur. "Mine."

I'm vaguely aware that the other males now stand in the doorway with shocked expressions.

"To quote the humans, Jesus Fookin' Christ," Dirk shouts. "What the fook happened?!"

On cue, Lou yanks her knees to her chest and wails, rocking back and forth with her head on her knees. Her forearms are covered in bleeding gashes, blood dripping down her torn skin.

Morgan turns in my arms, but Dirk slips across the room and hauls Lou carefully into his embrace, cradling her to his chest. "There, there, Louanna," he murmurs into her hair. "It's all over, beauty."

She reaches for Morgan, who throws herself on top of Lou, crushing Dirk in the process.

Richard and Connall cross the room and grab me under the arms, pulling me upright.

“Keeper, are you alright?” Richard’s voice is shocked, dark eyes searching mine with apparent concern.

My legs tremble, and I throw a hand on his forearm for support. “Fuck,” I mutter. “I’m not sure.”

Morgan turns from Lou and slips a hand up my shirt, splaying her fingers over my heart. Storm-cloud eyes focus on mine. “You will be, Abe. You’re free.”

Everyone fades away then as her words register.

Free?

My heart pounds in my ears and drowns out the din around us. There’s Morgan and me and that word.

“Say it again,” I command, gripping her throat gently. My thumb moves to her pulse, that comforting, repetitious rhythm I love so fucking much.

“You’re free, Abe,” she says with a laugh. “The virus is gone. I—”

“Transferred it to Wesley,” I finish as the realization hits me of precisely what just happened. I choke in a breath, pressing a hand to my chest right next to Morgan’s. Where I’ve always had that innate sense of wrongness, it’s simply gone. When I flare my nostrils and suck in a deep breath, it fully fills my lungs.

Ben politely chimes to remind me that every light blares red. I stumble to the keyboard. My fingers fly over the screen to see what happened.

“The wards are down,” I breathe, mashing the buttons to bring them back up. One by one, the red warning lights switch to green. My comm watch lights up with Alo’s name.

When I answer, his gruff voice comes through, “Wards are restoring themselves as we speak. I’m running a search for

breaches now. So far we've found about a dozen thralls in different parts of Ever."

"Neutralized?" I bark into the watch. "Casualties?"

"Of course," he drolls. "And none. Everything alright at the castle?"

I fill him in on what happened as we leave the comm room and congregate in the kitchen. After grabbing whiskey, I pour a glass for everyone as Dirk sets a shaky Lou down on one of the barstools.

Her hands tremble when I pass her the glass. She's shaking so violently, the whiskey spills all over the counter.

"Oh gods, I'm sorry!" she stammers, setting the glass back down.

"Louanna, yeh're safe and free," Dirk croons, rubbing his fingers over the back of her arm. "Morgan saved yeh."

Morgan drops onto the stool next to her aunt, stroking sweaty hair away from Lou's face. "Honey, can I check for anything that needs healing?"

Fresh tears make tracks down Lou's freckled cheeks. "It hurt so bad, Morgan. Fighting him all the time. And w-we killed Le-Leighton!" She sobs and throws her forehead down onto her arms.

Morgan gives me a pained look and places a hand on Lou's back, closing her eyes.

Richard and Connall stare in silence as she assesses Lou. Connall's jaw works with tension, muscles contracting as he watches the scene.

Dirk leans around Richard and gives Connall a look. "She could do with a little comfortin', yeh know, bein' as how yeh're from Leighton's pack."

Connall crosses his arms and shoots Dirk a shitty look.

Richard glances at his second. "Con, I've got this if you wanna head back to the hollow and check on things."

Connell takes the hint and nods at his alpha before taking his leave.

Richard's eyes flick to mine. "Shall we call your mother and tell her to fuck off?"

That pulls a wry grin to my face. "Absolutely." I round the bar and place a gentle hand on Lou's back, over Morgan's hand. "Mate, I need to take this call. Will you be okay here for a minute?"

She looks up, her expression somewhere between sorrowful and relieved. "Go on. We'll be okay, and Dirk'll stay with us, right?" She looks over at the big sylph.

"Tell Evenia to tell my team they're not needed. But I'm not goin' anywhere," he croons, blue eyes focused on the top of Lou's head.

Half an hour later, Evenia's been updated, and I'm hoping to gods I won't ever have to speak to her again. Although I do owe her an extremely lengthy report on the details of what transpired in my comm room.

Morgan's sisters come and stay for a while, fussing over her and Lou and making my mate retell the story a hundred times.

Eventually, Richard is first to leave, returning to Shifter Hollow. Lou insists that Morgan remain with me while Dirk takes her to Slade's to get checked out. I thankfully manage to convince Morgan's sisters that we're both fine, so they leave as well.

Now, I sit with my mate in the kitchen as we comm every member of the protector team. In all, they killed nearly twenty thralls who came through while the wards were down. But we've identified and slain them all.

And what's more? We're finally free of Wesley too.

I leave Morgan in the kitchen pouring another round of whiskeys as I slip into my office to make one final call for the evening.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

MORGAN

After everything that happened, after freeing Abe from the virus, you'd think we'd fuck each other six ways from Sunday in celebration. But once we stop drinking and head for our room, I'm half dead.

We've checked with the protector team and the monitoring system a million times.

Ever's safe.

Ever's free.

And what's more...Abe is free too.

He strokes elegant fingers down my back as I lie on my stomach and stare at him. "How'd you know it would work?"

I smile. "My magic was going wild when he emerged from Lou. And then, when you burst through the door, it's like I could see the virus straining to destroy. I knew it would destroy you if it didn't have an alternate path. Wesley wanted to destroy everything too. I sensed the virus wanted to feed on energy and emotion, and he was so full of hate. I figured they were a match made in heaven."

Abe chuckles. "I maintain my opinion that you are an absolutely wondrous creature, Morgan Anne Hector."

I flip onto my side, pressing a palm to his big chest. "When vampires mate, do they change last names?"

His grin tugs his lip to one side where his scar is. "Are you thinking that Morgan of House Zeniphon sounds pretty good?"

“It sounds great,” I whisper, slipping my hand around his throat to feel the steady, constant thrum of his heart.

“Perfection.” He pulls me close, continuing languid strokes down my back, and before we can finish our conversation, I fall into a deep and dreamless sleep.

The following morning, Abe surprises me with breakfast at the Galloping Green Bean. Downtown is bustling, although every conversation I overhear is about what happened last night. Somehow, word of it has spread. But, if anything, the town feels peaceful to me, almost relieved.

Abe grins at me as he swallows a bite of blueberry pancake. Sliding his hand across the table, he jerks his head at his watch. “Press that for me, would you?”

I narrow my eyes, giving him a look. “You look guilty, Keeper.”

His eyes roll briefly back as he lets out a pleased hum. “Mmm, I love it when you call me by my title. Press it, mate.”

I scoff but press against the leather band. A tiny chime sounds, and moments later, the town meeting bells begin to chime.

“Well, Town Hall will be extremely pleased about this,” I joke as I lose myself in my mate’s scarlet gaze.

He rubs his knuckles across my cheeks. “I let her know that streamers would be very appropriate. She was thrilled.”

I swear to God, I tear up. “You did? She will fucking love that!”

“She was very grateful,” he says. “And I only know she cares about that because of you. I understand, now, why most Keepers are mated. You make me better, Morgan. In every possible way.”

Smiling, I grab my hair and flip it over my shoulder as I steal one of his fries. “Oh yeah, I do. You’d have been lost without the Hector triplets in town.”

“One triplet in particular,” he says with a wink. “Let’s go. I don’t want to be late.”

I think I like this version of Abe who jokes and winks and praises me.

We walk hand in hand up Main. By the time we arrive at Town Hall, the building is packed full of Evertons. I manage to find Lou and my sisters in the crowd. This morning Lou's face is drawn and pale.

I pull her in for a hug as Abe goes to the front of the room with Arkan, Hana, and Richard. Hana shoots me a quick wink.

I rub Lou's back as she turns tear-filled eyes to me.

"How are you today?" I keep my tone gentle. When I press my palm to her back, Lou feels fragile to me, like she could disintegrate at any moment. My magic sparks and sputters, emanating through my palm into Lou's skin. I note that the scent of burnt marshmallows is gone. She's all Lou once again.

She closes her eyes when the magic warms her, her throat working as she swallows. "A man is dead because of me," she whispers.

"Correction," Thea barks. "A man is dead because Wesley figured out some fucking age-old dark magic spell, attacked you, stole your body, and used you to carry out his nefarious plans. What part of that is your fault?"

Lou glances around at us. "I know that, logically. Even though I couldn't control my body when Wesley took over, it was my voice that called Leighton into the alley behind Higher Grounds. My hands that stabbed him with a knife. I buried him when the magic didn't work fast enough. And I couldn't tell any of you or even talk about it, he kept me from being able to *warn* anyone. I just...I don't know how to ever recover from that."

"You will," I assure her. "And we are here every step of the way, okay? You've been there for us, Lou. And we're not alone in our support of you." I cut her a soft smile. "Sounds like you've got support from other areas too."

That, at least, brings a smile to her face. The hair on my neck lifts, and when I turn, Dirk sits across the aisle, glacial

eyes focused on Lou. She gives him a soft smile before wrapping her sweater around her torso. I make a mental note to talk to my sisters and figure out the best way to support Lou as she deals with what happened. Leighton's death wasn't her fault, but if I were her, I'd probably feel the same way.

I wonder what the magical monster version of therapy is?

Abe's deep voice brings me back to the present. "Evertons, let's get started."

When I glance up at him, there's an honest-to-God smile on his face—something I've never seen him do at a town hall meeting.

He slips both hands into his front pockets and looks around the room fondly.

"I'm sure you all expected to come here and learn about what happened last night. I know theories are flying around already. But I've got an announcement to make before that."

Crimson eyes move to mine, and his smile broadening. "I'm stepping down as Keeper, effective immediately."

I shoot up out of my chair as the room erupts into mayhem. Everyone is shouting questions at him. But he lifts his hand to me, gesturing for me to join him.

Heart pounding, I take his fingers and let him pull me to the front of the room.

"What are you doing?" I hiss. "We have not talked about this."

Abe pulls me close, bringing his lips to my ear. "And this is the last time I will ever make a decision without you," he murmurs. "I should have done this so long ago, Morgan."

My eyes go wide as I try to understand what he's saying. He's quitting?! After we finally beat Wesley?!

He peers around the room, and the Evertons fall silent again. Once they do, he turns his focus back to me.

"Morgan Anne Hector, I have loved you since the day we met. And when I thought I couldn't be what you needed, I

pushed you away. But so much has happened since then.” His smile grows soft and thoughtful. “You’ve burrowed your way under my skin and into my life and absolutely destroyed my daily schedule.”

Someone chuckles in the audience as my cheeks heat.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way,” he states. “I have served my people for nearly a hundred years. It’s time for me to turn my attention to you. I want to visit other havens with you, take you to sights you’ll never believe. I want to show you this incredible, wide world through a new lens, and I want you to do the same for me.

“I was an asshole, and this is my grovel,” he states, reaching into his back pocket.

“Holy shit!” Thea whisper-hisses from the front row.

Coherent thoughts don’t form in my brain when he drops to a knee and takes out a box. Elegant fingers lift the top to reveal a frankly enormous diamond ring.

“I bought this the night we met,” he whispers. “There are vampire traditions, but the giving of an engagement ring is beautifully human. There’s never been a man who loved a woman as much as I love you, and I can’t let another day go by where you aren’t my only focus. Marry me, Morgan.” His voice wavers at the end of the declaration.

My face is on fire, my heart pounding so loud, I can barely understand. All I can do is blubber and nod as I throw myself into his arms, wrapping mine around his neck.

“Yes!” I whisper as he gracefully rises with me clinging to him like a spider monkey.

He presses his forehead to mine, whispering something low enough that only I can hear it. “You look shocked but happy. Did I grovel correctly? Ohken helped...”

“Perfect,” I sob, pressing my lips to his. “Absolutely perfect.”

The room erupts into chaos then, and the cheers hit the floor and ceiling, bouncing around until it sounds like we’re in

a concert of joy.

Abe slants his mouth over mine and kisses me, and although the whole town is watching, I don't notice. Because, for the first time, we're free. Free of the weight of responsibility. Free of the virus that wanted to take him. We're free to simply love, and I can't wait for that.

When we finally part, I turn to face Arkan and Hana, pointing a finger at my new friend. "You sneaky thing. You knew about this, didn't you?"

Hana shrugs but grins and looks at the sky with faux guilt. "So what if I did? Would you have me discourage this most excellent public proposal?"

"No." I laugh as Abe slings his arm around me.

The room is silent, and I find myself wondering what they think of this whole thing.

Arkan steps forward, bringing his arms wide. "Evertons, please know that Hana and I will strive to live up to the incredible reputation of your Keeper. We have big shoes to fill, and we are excited to do so. A lovely little cottage sprang up next to the community garden this morning, and it called to Hana, so it appears this is truly meant to be."

Oh God, that means Ever believes it has a new resident. When my sisters and I came to Ever, Catherine shared how homes spring up for new residents who need them. I can't wait to meet the new house. My eyes fill with tears as I rest my cheek on Abe's shoulder.

Arkan smiles at the crowd. "Let's take a moment to share our appreciation for the Keeper, shall we? If anyone would like to say a few words, please do so..."

Richard rises from the crowd, a huge grin on his face. "Thank you, Abemet," is all he says as he begins to slowly clap.

Alba, the purple-haired centaur who owns the Galloping Green Bean, stands and cheers loudly. Her nephew Taylor trots in place next to her, his face a mask of joy. One by one, the entire auditorium rises to their feet, shouting their thanks until

the noise is absolutely thunderous. When I glance up at Abe, a single red tear slowly tracks down his face. He's grinning, though, so I squeeze his waist and plant a tender kiss on his shoulder.

I find my sisters and Lou in the crowd. They're all sobbing, clapping as they huddle together. When I look around, I'm surprised to see a tall figure standing in the auditorium doorway.

It can only be Betmal. He looks almost exactly like Abe save for silver streaks that start at his temples. He wears a proud expression as he claps along with the townspeople.

Abe nudges me, looking down with a smile. "Arkan's going to take questions about what happened. We should probably stay for that. But afterward, we have lunch reservations at Herschel's to celebrate."

"I suppose it was a bit of a foregone conclusion that I'd say yes?" I question with a grumble.

"Ben assured me you would," Abe says with a laugh, slipping his fingers underneath the hem of my shirt to stroke my side. "And so did Hana."

I beam at my new friend, but she's focused on her mate, who stands waiting for the Evertons to become quiet once more.

The next two hours are a blur. We answer every question except one—whose body Wesley took over in order to gain access to town. Arkan's father, Vikand, joins us up front to explain the dark magic we assume Wesley used. The monsters who were there last night know, but it seems like they want to protect Lou from having to deal with questions about it, which is probably good for now.

Shock is clear on the crowd's faces when we explain about Abe's virus and how I used it to infect Wesley's aura. But in a back row, I catch Moira's eye as Abe explains it. Tears flatten her face feathers, but there's a huge, relieved smile on her face. I return it. I don't blame her. It's like Abe said. He doesn't blame her either.

Eventually, the meeting is over, and the last Everton has filed out of Town Hall. My sisters, Lou, and the protector team are the only monsters who remain. Betmal still stands in the doorway, as if he doesn't want to interrupt us.

My sisters and Lou huddle around, demanding to see the ring.

Thea looks over at Abe. "This thing is gratuitously ridiculous. You know that, right?"

Abe smirks. "Stunning on her hand, though. Don't you think? Wait, I can't read your expression. Are you being serious? It's too much?" His smile falls.

"You did good," Ohken says, clapping him on the shoulder. "A most excellent grovel."

I swear the slightest bit of pink tinges his cheeks.

Richard pulls me into his big arms, squeezing tight. "He's lucky to have you," he murmurs into my hair. "So damn lucky. Congratulations, Morgan."

When we part, I tear up. I haven't lived here long, but Richard's never mentioned a partner of any sort. I wonder what his story is.

After another ten minutes, Abe glances at his comm watch and clears his throat.

"Mate, we have reservations. Shall we?"

My sisters, Lou, and I hug one final time, and then we say our goodbyes. Everyone but Abe and I file out of the auditorium. My sisters pass Betmal, who inclines his head politely at them. Once they've passed him, Wren and Thea both turn around and give me a *what the fuck?* look.

We'll cover it later, I'm sure.

Abe and I stop in front of Betmal, whose eyes flash when he sees us. They're so much like Abe's but more angular. He could easily be Abe's *superhot* older brother.

"Congratulations, my son," he croons, his voice the same silky purr as my mate's.

“Thank you, Betmal,” Abe replies, placing his hand on my back. “May I present my mate and fiancée, Morgan Anne Hector.”

Betmal turns his intense focus to me, reaching out with one hand. “Miss Hector, what a pleasure it is.”

“Are you sure?” I ask quietly. “I’m certain I’ve been the topic of one or two of your dinner conversations, and I can’t imagine they were pleasant.”

Now that Abe’s father is standing in front of me, I’m kinda mad. Scratch that, I’m big mad. Because this is his *father*, and he allowed so much to happen to Abe. I don’t know if I can reconcile that, even if Abe says they’re close.

Betmal’s lips twitch at the corners. “No doubt. Evenia has most certainly cursed your name up and down over dinner. Aberen too. That is, perhaps, why I already like you so much.”

My mouth drops open as I look from him to Abe and back again. “I don’t get it.”

Betmal’s thin lips—the same lips as Abe’s—curl into a wicked smile. “The best thing to come out of my connection to Aberen and Evenia stands beside you with the love of his life. I couldn’t be more pleased.”

I struggle to choke down the lump in my throat as Betmal’s gaze turns fierce.

“If I were you, I would never forgive Evenia for forcing Abemet through the Keeper training, especially once he found you. Believe me when I say I did not know until it was done. I’d have ripped the world apart to keep him from that, if I could have.”

The look on his face is so truthful, so full of fury, my ire fades a bit.

He’s not done, though. His focus moves to Abe, his eyes softening. “When I realized what she had done, I used my power of influence to make changes to the transition program.”

I lift my chin. “Okay, well, know this. If any of the three of you does anything to hurt him ever again, I might learn dark magic to put you in your place.”

Betmal grins, glancing from his son to me and back again. “She is a treasure indeed, Abemet. How thrilling!”

Abe drops a soft kiss with the slightest hint of teeth on my shoulder. “I know,” he murmurs into my skin, trailing those teeth up the side of my neck.

When I shudder, Betmal chuckles. “Well, I’m staying at the Annabelle, but I’d love to catch up soon. And I’d love to know if you’ve spoken to your mother about your resignation. Something tells me she doesn’t yet know.”

Abe wraps both arms around my waist and pulls me to his chest. “I updated her on the Wesley situation this morning, but I’m saving that particular call for after dinner. I thought Morgan might enjoy delivering the news with me.”

Betmal’s dark eyes flash conspiratorially. “You are absolutely wicked. I love it. Evenia will lose her mind.”

“Would you like to come to lunch with us?” I blurt out without thinking.

Shit, what am I doing?! This was supposed to be a romantic celebration, I imagine.

“I couldn’t possibly,” Betmal says with a shake of the head.

“Please do,” Abe rumbles. “Morgan and I will celebrate privately afterward.”

Oh, sweet Jesus. Something about the way he said that has me rubbing my ass a little harder against his front.

Betmal inclines his head and gestures up the hall. “After you, my sweets.”

And somehow, in that moment, I don’t mind that Abe’s father has a nickname for us. Because finally—*finally*—things are going my way.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

ABE

Is what I feel happiness? It can't be. Happy doesn't begin to describe my current sentiment. It's not warmth and sunshine and joy. It's something deeper, something laced with darkness and inlaid with sunlight.

As Morgan, my father, and I stride down Main toward Herschel's Fine Dining, I ponder the events of the last day.

I'm free. We're free. The weight of responsibility and my illness was so heavy, so brutal, I didn't realize how truly terrible they were until they were gone.

But now? The future is bright.

Herschel himself holds the door open for us, a grin on his big face. His smile falls only slightly when he sees Betmal. But if Father stays in town for a few days, he'll win everyone over. He's always at his most charming without Evenia and Aberen around.

In all truthfulness, I'm certain there was never any love between the three of them. At least not for Betmal. He shared some of their story once. Now, I find myself wondering if he could formally split from them and perhaps find a mate who would appreciate him for all his gifts.

As Herschel leads us to our table, I grab his elbow. "Please get started with Betmal. I need a moment with my mate."

He inclines his head. "Of course, Keep—err, Abemet. My pleasure."

That'll take some getting used to. But the Keeper title belongs firmly to Arkan now, and I can't imagine a better male for it. I've watched him over the last week. He's good, kind with the Evertons in a way I wasn't capable of being.

I grab Morgan's wrist and pull her into the dark entryway inside the front doors. When I press her to the wall and bring my thumb to her lips, she sucks softly on the pad.

"I wanted a moment with you," I admit, leaning down to breathe in her scent. Moonlight. Whiskey. Cherries. "You smell delicious."

Morgan's throaty laughter rumbles against my lips. "Know what I thought of?"

I press a kiss to the hollow at the base of her neck. "Tell me."

"You can bite me now," she whispers. "We don't have to worry about that anymore." She presses her hands to my chest, her black magic warming my skin through my tee. "It's gone, Abe, for real."

Heat spears through me, my fangs elongating as I drag my lips to the side of her neck and give her a playful nip.

"Oh, Christ!" she grunts. "So hot."

I bite softly, then a little harder, letting venom fill my fangs for the first time in decades. My dick is a steel rod between us as I infuse the slightest bit of venom into the bite.

Morgan jolts in my arms, arching into me as her head falls back. "Ohgodohgodohgod!"

I laugh darkly as I drag my teeth along her shoulder, releasing just a hint of the powerful aphrodisiac.

"Finally," I say with a growl. "Let's go home right now." I thought lunch was a good idea. But all I want is to get her home and bury my teeth in her throat.

"No," she huffs, chest heaving as her scent blooms around us. "This is the best edging ever. Let's go celebrate, and then when we get home, we can go wild." Stormy eyes lock onto mine. "Feels right to do this with Ben, don't you think?"

“Ben has already pinged me several times through my comm,” I deadpan. “He wants us home stat.”

“Quick lunch, then.” Morgan rubs her cheek along the side of my face. “I need you, mate.”

Heat fills me, my fangs throbbing knowing I’ll get to bite her tonight. And every night for the rest of our lives.



Admittedly, the meal is rather short. I can’t keep my hands off Morgan. I didn’t realize until today that a small part of me continued to hold back from her because I thought I could never fully have her. But without that barrier between us, I am a male obsessed.

Every bob of her throat as she swallows, every gravelly laugh as Betmal entertains her, all it does is stoke my need higher and higher until I’m ready to combust at the table.

When Herschel appears with dessert menus and Morgan cups my cock under the table, I politely decline. “Not today, old friend, thank you.” I fight to keep obvious desire out of my tone. It’s not long before my father begs his leave, claiming he’s going to miss the check-in time at the Annabelle. We all know it’s a lie, but he smiles broadly as he goes.

I drop a few bills on the table and grab Morgan’s hand. “Let’s go home,” I murmur into her ear.

She looks up from under thick, dark lashes. “What are we going to do at home, Abemet?”

Lust surges through me at her use of my full name.

I take a final sip of my whiskey as I look at her. She raises a defiantly playful chin and smirks at me. Bringing my free hand to her throat, I push her head to the side and stroke her neck. “When we get home, I’m going to bite every inch of this pretty neck. And after you’ve come a dozen times, I’ll fill you with my thick cock and fuck you until you’re boneless.”

Morgan’s lips part, tongue peeking out to wet her bottom lip.

“Once that’s done,” I croon, “I’ll flip you over and kiss your body while you rest. Then I’ll do it again and again until you’re spent.”

“Abe,” she murmurs. “I need that right now. Let’s go.”

Laughing, I pull her toward the door. I parked my bike outside Herschel’s earlier, anticipating that we’d want a quick getaway if things went according to plan. I’m thankful for that as my smiling mate throws one long, muscular leg over the bike and pats the black leather seat. Sliding on behind her, I press my body to hers, burying my face in her shoulder.

Her skin is hot to the touch, her blood calling mine. She fingers the ziol around her neck, glancing over her shoulder at me. “Should we play with this on the way?”

“Do it,” I hiss into her skin, my fangs elongating. But I don’t want to bite her here for the first time. I want our bed.

In our castle.

In the home she brought love to. Ben and I were in a dark place before Morgan opened the curtains and forced love into our world.

She pricks her pointer finger with the ziol, lifting it to my mouth. As her blood drips onto my lips, I struggle to hold back a groan. I lap at her finger, sucking it between my teeth as I coax more blood from the small wound.

“Not enough,” I moan around her finger. “Need more.”

She laughs when I crush her to me and rev the throttle, taking off up the street. Her body is relaxed within my arms, her wild hair blowing over my shoulder as we hook a left on Sycamore and head home.

The purr of the engine ricochets off the buildings, echoing around us as we cruise up the street and leave downtown. Civilization fades into dark forest as my senses attune to the woman in my arms.

The steady thrum of her blood rushing through her veins has me hard and ready. I’d love to stop the bike and chase her

through the forest, but she's right. I want this first time to happen in our home.

Morgan reaches behind her back and grips my hard cock through my slacks, stroking her fingers up the length of it. I hiss out a guttural, needy sound and push the bike faster. Got to get home.

When her hand closes around the tip of my dick and squeezes, stars dance across my vision. I could come from this tease, from the idea of taking her in every way.

Finally. Finally. After decades of want and need. After I pushed her away and she came right back.

She's a gift.

I park in front of the castle just as Ben swings his doors wide, welcoming us home.

Morgan hops off the bike. "Ben! I can't believe you were in on this too!" She walks backward, grinning at me. "I do believe you and Ben ganged up on me."

Heat flares between my thighs as Ben's stones shimmy in place, his version of a pleased chuckle.

When Morgan turns around, a shocked gasp leaves her lips.

The final surprise.

Rows of string lights crisscross Ben's front hallway. Streamers in black and red and gold hang from the ceiling trim and wave softly on an invisible breeze.

"Oh my God, Ben," Morgan whispers, spinning in a circle as she takes in his celebratory decorations. She turns to me. "Was this you?"

"All Ben," I admit. "He wanted to celebrate your return home as my fiancée, assuming you agreed to spend your life with us."

She clasps her hands together over her chest, admiring the beautifully festive hallway. "It's perfect."

Ben's carpet runner waves us toward the kitchen. We dutifully follow to find a bottle of whiskey wrapped in a red bow. Two crystal glasses sit next to it. Morgan strokes the black island countertop as she drops onto one of the stools at the bar.

I sit next to her and unwrap the bottle, pouring two fingers into a glass. When I slide it to her, she lifts it. "We've got to toast to something."

I pour myself a glass and grab her still bleeding finger. Directing it into the liquid, I stir as her blood mixes with the whiskey. Her eyes flare when I remove her hand from the whiskey and lick her finger clean.

"Perfect." I lift the glass and clink it to hers. "A toast to long life. To health and happiness. To second chances."

"To faith," she adds on. "And fuckable castles."

Oh my gods.

The kitchen windows open and shut, another version of Ben's chuckle.

"I'll drink to that." I bring the whiskey to my lips and swallow it in one mouthful. The flavor of Morgan's blood enhances the alcohol's natural tannins. She bursts across my senses, filling me with longing.

Her blood thrums through her veins faster as she sips from her glass. My focus drops to the soft swallow of her throat. That neck is begging for my teeth.

"Morgan," I whisper. "Come here."

Gray eyes flash as she sets the glass down and climbs into my lap.

"Bare your throat to me," I command.

"You're awfully bossy." She leans forward to nip at my chin.

"And haughty. And wildly imperfect," I agree. "Now show me that beautiful neck."

When I reach up to cup her head, she lets it fall back in my hand, exposing her throat. A faint dusting of freckles covers her skin, but they're fainter here than elsewhere on her body. Reaching up, I scratch gently down her pale skin, goose bumps rising to the surface. Bending forward, I savor her scent freely for the first time, knowing I'll taste her tonight.

Finally.

Finally.

I drag my lips and fangs down the front of her throat, pulling her tee to the side to repeat the motion along her shoulder.

"Abe," she whispers. "When was the last time you got to bite someone?"

Her question registers after a moment of shock. I lift my head, guiding her chin back down to meet her questioning gaze. "Morgan, are you asking me when I last took a lover?"

Gray eyes flash. "Do you only bite lovers? Do you ever just *feed*?"

"Yes and not really. There are couples with feeder relationships, but it's uncommon. For us, blood and sex are intertwined. One without the other is...improper."

Her dark brow lifts. "Improper, huh?"

"Think about it for a moment," I murmur, fisting her hair in my hand. Pushing forward, I stand her up and use my free hand to shove her jeans off her pretty thighs. I hold eye contact as I place her on the edge of the stool opposite mine. When I slip my fingers between her thighs, they're already coated in rich, slick honey.

Even seated, I'm more than a head taller than her, so it's easy to lean down and nuzzle her neck playfully. "You're wet."

"No shit," she barks. "I've been wet for hours, Abemet."

Since she arrived, I've been studying her tone. I used to have such a high emotional quotient, but I lost that in the

transition. I know every dip and rise of her voice now, though. Sarcasm and that tone equal frustration.

“Do you need to be filled, Morgan?” I purr into her ear as I slide my fingers into her sopping channel.

Her body rolls to meet mine as she emits a needy whine.

“Do you want my mouth first, witch? Is the teasing too much?”

“It is,” she grunts when I curl my fingers to rub slow circles over her G-spot. “Oh, fuck! I need your teeth, Abe! I need to know!”

“Let’s get to bed, then,” I murmur, shifting to rise.

She brings her face up to level me with a gaze. “Do it right here, mate. This feels right to me, being in the room where we had our first conversation with Ben.”

Blood rushes through me, my heartbeat thudding in my ears as my gaze narrows to the spot on her neck I long fantasized about.

“Shirt off,” I command. “We might ruin it.” I run both hands through my hair—I am unexpectedly nervous. What if the virus isn’t all gone? What if a particle remains, and this moment of bliss dooms her?

She reads me like a book. “I promise you’re good, Abe. It wanted out; it was happy to leave because it couldn’t destroy you fast enough.”

I jolt, emotions too numerous to process slamming me one after another. Guilt. Grief. Fear. Joy. Happiness.

Hope.

Desire.

I stand and pull my shirt over my shoulders, depositing it on the floor. Morgan does the same, watchful as I move my hands to my pants, unfastening the button.

“Strip poker is our next game night,” she says in a playful tone. “I love the idea of kicking your ass and staring at your naked body.”

I chuckle and slip the zipper down, cupping my aching balls. “News flash. I’ve been alive for thousands of years, Morgan. I’ve mastered nearly every game that exists.”

“Gee,” she deadpans. “Confident much?”

“In my skills, yes.” I shove my pants all the way off and settle back onto the stool next to hers, my thighs encasing her body. Reaching for her, I pull her into my lap and slide one hand to the back of her neck. The other goes around her ass so I can play with her back hole while I bite her.

“A bite from me means instant release,” I remind her.

A throaty chuckle is her answer. “So if Pietro bit me, I wouldn’t come?”

My fangs split my jaw and descend so hard, I nearly pant from the pinch of it.

“Fuck no,” I bark. “And while vampires are huge fans of orgies, I draw my limit at him for allowing you to borrow his ziol. He should have known better.”

“I sought him out, Abe,” she says with a happy sigh. “He was being kind.”

Pfft. Kind, my ass.

“Let’s not talk about Pietro when you’re about to come,” I say finally. “I don’t want his name on your lips. I want mine, maybe even Ben’s. Definitely not Pietro’s.”

Morgan wriggles in my lap. I’m beginning to think nerves are making her extra talkative. “What about Alessan—”

I strike like a viper, sinking my fangs into the spot where her neck and shoulder meet. When my teeth pierce her skin, she jolts in my arms, a grunt leaving her lips. There’s a half second pause, a freezing, that moment when prey realizes the predator has won. I suck at the bite, simultaneously releasing my venom into her bloodstream.

Morgan’s body is tense within my arms, but then her head falls back. Her scream of pleasure raises every hair on my body. I bite harder, sucking and depositing more venom at the same time. It flows freely through my fangs, my cock jerking

between my thighs as her bliss sparks mine. I bellow into the hold on her neck as I press my fingers to her ass.

A burst of her release coats both of us and drips down the chairs to the floor, joined by a stream of cum as I lose my mind.

Pleasure twists and whirls like a tornado between us as I drag the bite on for longer than I normally would. This is heaven. This is home. Right here with my teeth buried in the woman I love.

Flashes from the night we met play like a movie reel in my mind. That first glimpse I got of her as she ordered from the bar. The way the bartender hit on her, but she saw me across the bar and ignored him. How the night went on, and we always seemed to find each other.

That kiss. All of that led us to the now, where her soul is wrapped tightly around mine.

When we eventually part, she falls forward, pressing her forehead to mine. Her chest heaves, muscles trembling as the after spasms continue to hit her.

“I wouldn’t normally stop at one.” I brush the tip of my nose against hers. I want to breathe the very same air as her, to take it in, to share it like I want to share everything. “Typically, I’d bite you a dozen or more times.”

“A day?” she gasps. “I think I’d die of dehydration!” She licks her lips, pulling apart enough to level me with a serious gaze. “Abe, that was the most beautiful, intimate thing I’ve ever experienced.”

I stroke sweaty hair away from her forehead. “It’s what we would have had if I’d called you immediately.”

She shakes her head, lifting both arms around my neck. “We traveled the path we needed to. My magic comes from a place of light and dark. If I hadn’t experienced what I experienced in my life, I don’t know if I would have tapped into it so easily.”

I stroke her back, marveling at how smooth and soft she is. “Seems to me you were complaining about it not that long

ago, witch.”

She nods. “Yeah, but you were right. Once you identify it, it comes fast. It’s as easy as thinking to me now.”

Rising, I pull her into my arms and head for our room.

“Abe!” she shouts. “I’m dripping all over Ben’s runner, oh my God! Let me get a towel!”

“No,” I command. “I promise you Ben doesn’t care. Like me, he’s eager to be in the bedroom.”

Her dark brows shoot upward. “Oh, we’re doing a little house play again, are we?”

“Yes,” I say with a delighted hiss. “Yes we are.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

MORGAN

“M ate, are you ready?”

Abe’s deep voice brings me back to the present. I was daydreaming about last night and all the biting and Ben, Jesus. Who would have ever thought a house knew how to fuck?

My eyelids flutter as I blink to compose myself. “Yes, let’s bring this bitch down a peg.”

My mate chuckles. “You really do not like my mother.”

“What’s there to like?” I huff. “I don’t think Betmal even likes her.”

Abe gives me a wry look, but when his lips twitch, I can tell he agrees. I’m seated in his lap in the comm room, holding the flat disk that allows hologram communication between havens.

“Whenever you’re ready,” he says softly, stroking my cheek, “my wonder.”

I lean down, shimmying my ass against his lap as I set the comm disk on the floor. Abe groans and grips my hips, grinding his hard cock against me.

“Call Evenia,” I bark into the comm.

I sit up, waiting for the moment when his horrible bitch of a mother shows up. I don’t have to wait long. Two or three seconds after I give the command, Evenia’s hologram rises up from the disk, and I get the pleasure of seeing her for the first time in a while.

Looking at her now, I find myself searching for any trace of Abe in her features. Maybe the set of her eyes or the slant of her high cheekbones. It's certainly not there in her pitch-black hair and crimson eyes. The only thing he might have gotten from her is the dismissive look she's giving me right now.

I level her with my best *fuck-off* smile.

"Hello, Evenia," Abe says with perfect coolness.

Evenia's eyes flick to me. "We have a call scheduled for this afternoon, Keeper. What is the purpose of this one?" She spits the word "Keeper" like it's got four letters. As much as she wanted Abe to be one, I can't believe how she treats him.

I keep the smile plastered on my face as Abe leans forward and slightly around me. "I am tendering my resignation, effective immediately."

Evenia's mouth drops open, eyes springing wide. "You can't do that," she whispers. "Your fathers will be horrified. A Keeper has never quit, and certainly not a Keeper from—"

"House Zeniphon," he finishes for her. "I know. But I do quit. As the current Keeper, I've already picked my successor. Arkan has accepted the permanent role, and the townspeople have been notified." He levels a cruel smile at his mother.

"You told the Evertons?" she shouts, fists balling by her side.

Oh gods, I am really enjoying this. I don't even fight to stop my smile from turning into a wicked smirk.

"You can't do this, Abemet," she finally hisses, as if she can control him simply by saying his real name aloud.

"Oh, he did," I clarify. "It was his choice, something I know you're fond of taking away."

Sick burn. Point to Morgan.

Evenia narrows her eyes at me. "It's called sacrifice, witch, something you don't know anything about, I'm sure."

That does it. I rise from Abe's lap. Standing, I'm a head taller than his mother. "This isn't a pissing contest to see who

can sacrifice more. We lost so much time, and I blame you for that, while we're being honest. Not to mention, I killed Wesley when not a single other monster could even locate him. Not your hunter team, not the new Keeper, not our protector team. Not Abe, and not you. It was me. So, as far as I'm concerned, you can pretty much fuck off."

Abe slides a hand down the swell of my ass and gives it a playful squeeze. I do believe he's enjoying this little standoff. And if I'm honest with myself, it's been building ever since she was mean to Alo's five-year-old, Iggy.

Who does that?

When Evenia sputters, Abe looks around my waist. "That'll be all, Mother. If you need me—don't. Morgan and I are taking time off to travel. As we are newlymateds, I'm sure you can understand the importance of alone time."

She opens her mouth to respond, but Abe doesn't bother to wait. He clicks off and stands, spinning me around in his arms.

"That last bit about killing Wesley. Sounds like you were working on that one for a while." Crimson eyes soften in the corners as he reaches both arms around me, playing with my hair with both hands. "That was brilliant."

I grimace. "Maybe also a little rude. I didn't mean to throw you under the bus about Wesley."

"I don't feel that way." He brings his lips to the side of my neck and makes a path down to my shoulder and the spot that's still a little tender from his first bite last night. "She was going to fire me this afternoon anyhow. That way, she could say I simply failed in my duties."

Something about that makes me a little sad. I run my hands under his shirt, up over his cut abs and up to his beefy chest. "Will you miss it?"

"Yes," he says without hesitation. "And no. Once a Keeper, always a Keeper in a sense. But I will be too busy showing you the rest of the monster world, or perhaps even visiting the human world again. We could spend a weekend there without losing too much time here."

“Three months,” I murmur. “Three days outside the wards would be three months here.”

When he says nothing, I think about my sisters and their mates. Do I want to lose three months at a time with them? Is it worth it to be part of the world I spent my whole life in? Shaking my head, I mentally close the door on that option.

“I don’t think I want that, mate.”

He grins. “I’m done making decisions on our behalf.” With a sly look, he reaches behind his back and pulls something out of his pocket. When he hands it to me, and I unfold it, I gasp. “Is this a map?”

He grins. “Pick a place, and we’ll visit, although I have a couple of ideas for where to go first.”

I unfold the map, geeking out over the interconnected circles that mark each haven. There are so many, all over the world. “I want to see them all,” I whisper.

Abe points to a spot in South America. “A secret concert is scheduled to happen here in a week or so. The shifter king’s daughter is rumored to be playing, but who knows if she’ll show up. How do you feel about hard rock?”

I grin. “Monster style? Hell yeah.” I give him a thoughtful look. “Would Richard know for sure if she’s going to be there? I’m all about a surprise appearance.”

Abe gives me a wicked look. “He’s the king’s best friend, and she’s not allowed to make public appearances, so I suspect not.”

Ha, love that. A fiery, rule-breaking shifter princess who plays hard rock? Sounds like my kinda girl.

“I love this, Abe,” I murmur, stroking my fingers over the iridescent markings on the map’s surface.

“Thought you would,” he says with a knowing smile. “This all started with a map, Morgan. It only seemed fitting that we should end this journey and begin a new one with another.”

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hazel Mack is the sweet alter-ego of Anna Fury, a North Carolina native fluent in snark and sarcasm, tiki decor, and an aficionado of phallic plants. Visit her on Instagram for a glimpse of the sexiest wiener wallpaper you've ever seen. #ifyouknowyouknow

She writes any time she has a free minute—walking the dog, in the shower, ON THE TOILET. The voices in her head wait for no one. When she's not furiously hen-pecking at her computer, she loves to hike and bike and get out in nature.

She currently lives in Raleigh, North Carolina, with her Mr. Right, a tiny tornado, and a lovely old dog. Hazel LOVES to connect with readers, so visit her on social or email her at author@annafury.com.

