



MATED  
TO THE  
HUMAN

3

A  
Vampire  
called  
*Leander*

MICHELLE FROST

# A VAMPIRE CALLED LEANDER

MATED TO THE HUMAN #3

MICHELLE FROST

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Merrick tried not to fidget. He'd been shown to this room ten minutes ago and only managed to sit down at the long wooden table at its center for about thirty seconds at a time. He hated not knowing who was going to walk through the door.

He still couldn't believe Lenette had talked him into this. The vampire could be damn persuasive. Especially when she brought his grandfather into it. Granddad had been dead for over ten years, but he still had such a hold on Merrick. Asbury Black had believed in unity between paranormals and humans. Merrick believed the same.

So he'd mate with whatever paranormal had chosen him. Lenette had assured him it would be someone who found him appealing with senses beyond what humans were capable of. It all intrigued Merrick—the paranormal world and the people and creatures that inhabited it.

The doorknob turned.

Merrick stood, sending the wheeled office chair he'd been sitting in rolling away from him. Holding his breath, he watched as the door was pulled open, eyes widening at the man stepping inside.

*Leander.*

He swallowed hard, mind not quite willing to believe this was who had chosen to mate with him. Leander was a vampire. Old and regal in a way that always made Merrick sit up straighter and seriously reconsider his wardrobe. Right now,

Leander was dressed in a charcoal gray three-piece suit, dark hair precisely styled, and dark gaze boring into Merrick from where he'd stopped just inside the door.

"Hi," Merrick heard himself say. "Leander, right?" He'd seen him at council meetings and various events around town. His last name, and the money everyone associated with it, kept him on guest lists whether he ever attended the function or not.

Leander nodded. "Leander Harlow. And you're Merrick Black."

Merrick licked his lips, unable to look away from Leander's face. "Are we...did you?"

"Yes, we're to be mates." A muscle in Leander's jaw ticked. He didn't look unhappy exactly, but there was something pulling down the corners of his mouth. Hesitance? Resignation?

Merrick's stomach did an unhappy twist.

Leander cleared his throat and walked further into the room, stopping on the other side of the table. "Do you have objections to that?"

"No," Merrick said, blushing a little at how quickly it came out. "I mean, as long as you don't."

Looking down, Leander adjusted one of his perfectly cuffed sleeves. "I chose you," he said, voice low.

When Leander didn't look back up at him for a moment, Merrick looked down at himself. Had Leander heard his name and assumed...what? That he'd find an equally well-dressed man with perfect hair and a poise Merrick would never master, not even if he had centuries to live?

Merrick knew how fortunate he was. His grandfather had made sure he understood the value of hard work and never taking anything for granted. He didn't flaunt his money, and he didn't pander to the people who tried to use him just to be able to throw his name around.

Sure, he could probably do with some help in the fashion-sense department, but that had never really been important to

him. He liked who he was. Bookstore owner. Cat dad. Philanthropist. Wearer of the comfy clothes.

He sighed internally. Maybe this was a bad idea.

At that moment, the door opened again. Lenette and two of her assistants came into the room. As they did, Leander moved to Merrick's side, pulling the chair Merrick had been sitting in back to the table and offering it to him. He met Merrick's gaze, deep brown eyes holding a question. *Will you?*

For the life of him, Merrick couldn't say no. He sat in the offered chair and signed the mating contract without another thought in his head.

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THE SUV ROLLED TO A STOP IN FRONT OF *BLACK'S BOOKS*. Leander gazed up at the old, large building, remembering when it'd housed a printing company and offices before Asbury Black had purchased it and turned the bottom floor into the largest bookstore in the city. He'd told Leander once that he liked the gargoyles clinging to the top corners of the five-story limestone building.

Now, Asbury's grandson sat beside him. His new mate.

After a brief awkward moment, Merrick pushed open the car door and stepped out onto the sidewalk. He turned back to the inside of the car and seemed surprised that Leander was sliding across the seat toward him.

"Oh, right," Merrick said, stepping back. "We're supposed to live together now."

Once Leander's feet hit the pavement, he nodded at his driver and shut the door. The SUV pulled away, leaving him and Merrick alone on the sidewalk. It was a cool night, their breath leaving faint white clouds in front of their faces. "We are, but..." He didn't know exactly how to continue. Clearing his throat, he said, "I thought, perhaps, we could take some time to adjust to each other before we decide how we'd like to proceed."



For a moment, Merrick didn't say anything, and his face wasn't giving anything away. Then, he dropped his gaze to the sidewalk. "That's fine with me. I'm, uh, really attached to my apartment." He reached into his pocket and pulled out his keys. Lifting his gaze, he frowned at the empty space where the car had been. "Why send the car away?"

Leander couldn't look away from Merrick's face. He was so expressive. From the furrow in his brow to the confusion widening his gorgeous hazel eyes. Leander still couldn't parse all the colors swirling in them—blue, green, gold, brown. He couldn't wait to see them in the daylight.

He considered himself fortunate that the sun didn't give him as much trouble as it gave some vampires. He was sensitive to it and avoided being out when the sun reached its apex in the middle of the day. Too much exposure weakened him, but he was fairly confident it wouldn't kill him.

Realizing Merrick was still waiting for an answer, he cleared his throat. "I had hoped to walk you to your door. I'll make my way home from there."

With a nod, Merrick led them down the sidewalk and around to the back of the building. From there, it was a series of locked doors to get through the foyer and into the building's interior. Leander was happy to note the presence of a security system.

Merrick pushed the up button on the elevator and fiddled with his keys. "I live on the top floor. You don't have to—"

Leander took a small step closer. "I would like to. If you don't mind."

The tiny, pleased smile on Merrick's face sent a jolt through Leander—electric and so warm it made goosebumps race down his arms. *Shit*. That wasn't supposed to happen. Hadn't happened in a hundred years. One would think a hundred years might be long enough to overcome the grip of fear suddenly closing around Leander's heart in a tight fist.

Merrick turned to the elevator doors as they opened and stepped inside.

Leander stepped back, even as his instincts were screaming to walk forward, to stay with his mate.

Realizing Leander hadn't followed him, Merrick put a hand out to keep the door from closing. "Are you coming?"

He cleared his throat, looking over Merrick's shoulder, unable to meet his beautiful eyes. "Actually, I think I will head off from here. Perhaps we can have dinner later this week to discuss how we'd like to proceed."

"Oh, um. That's fine."

Leander pasted on his most professional facade. It had served him well all these years, and until he could figure out how to keep his traitorous heart out of the equation, it would have to do for his mate as well. "Excellent. My assistant will contact you to work out the details."

Merrick smiled again, but it was a far cry from pleased. "Of course. Good night." He dropped his hand, and the elevator doors slid shut.

"Good night." Leander closed his eyes and let out a slow breath. He should have known he wouldn't be able to handle this. Merrick's scent called to him. It was the only reason he'd given in to Lenette's insistence that he be one of the paranormals to take part in her little unity ploy. It had been a moment of weakness, catching that scent and agreeing to go along.

He sighed, looking up to the arrow above the elevator moving to point to five. Merrick was up in his penthouse now. Safe. That's the best Leander could hope for. Because Merrick was his mate now, and he'd sworn long ago that loving anyone else—even another mate—wasn't something he'd ever do.

The cool night air hit him in the face once he was back outside. Every step he took away from Merrick felt like a barb digging beneath his skin. Looking up, he saw several of the top-story windows illuminated.

Taking a breath, he willed himself up into the air, rising steadily and slowly until he reached those windows. Hovering to the side of one, he peeked inside. The room directly inside

the window was dark, but light spilled through the room's open door from a well-lit living area beyond.

Merrick walked in front of the doorway, casting a shadow into the dark room. Leander pulled his head back, heart hammering in his chest. Merrick was fine. Safe and sound. *And probably hurt that his mate is a callous ass of a man.* He shook off that thought and peeked back around the window's edge, nearly falling out of the sky when he came face to face with a gray tabby cat.

Large green eyes glared at him as something unclenched in his chest. Merrick wasn't alone. The cat continued to stare, ears pinned back to its head. Lifting his hands in surrender, Leander floated farther out from the building, looking deeper into the penthouse one more time. When he didn't catch sight of Merrick again, he let a tiny sigh escape as he flew higher, turning and heading for home.

The gala hadn't been Merrick's idea of a good time—not that many formal occasions were. Still, he'd looked forward to seeing and spending time with Leander despite his better judgment, and it'd been nice to see Cane again. He'd also enjoyed seeing Hollis and Derek. Both of the other couples seemed closer than he and Leander were, but he told himself for the thousandth time that just because they were moving slowly didn't mean their mating was hopeless.

It wasn't as if he and Leander hadn't seen each other. They'd shared two perfectly nice dinners in the past week. They'd been awkward, true, but the conversations they did have about the city and books had been pleasant. It was just that Leander somehow managed to never talk about himself in any real way.

Merrick had watched him eat normal human food in fascination, saw him out in the light of the setting sun, and definitely noted Leander's reflection in the bistro window they'd had dinner in. For all his books, so many things about vampires were still a mystery. They were a tight-lipped bunch, and Leander definitely wasn't the exception. Not that the vampire parts were all Merrick wanted to know about. He just wanted to know *something* about Leander that wasn't gleaned solely through observation.

Once the speeches were over, they'd left the gala after saying their goodbyes. Since Merrick's building was only a couple blocks from the hotel where the gala had been held, they opted to walk. It was a nice evening—cool and crisp. Merrick

peeked at the man beside him and hoped that once Leander believed he could trust Merrick, he would let him in.

Less than a block from Merrick's building, Leander stopped walking, head snapping around to stare off in the direction of downtown.

Merrick stared, too, trying to figure out what Leander was looking at. "What is it?"

Leander's brows furrowed. "I'm not sure." He turned to Merrick. "Come on. I need to get you somewhere safe." He stepped forward, right into Merrick's space, and wrapped his arms around Merrick's waist.

"What—" Merrick started to say before Leander gripped him tight—one arm still around his waist while the other hand cradled the back of his head—and with a little hop, shot up into the sky. A scream stuck in Merrick's throat as he threw his arms around Leander, holding on for all he was worth and pressing his face into the firm swell of Leander's shoulder.

*Holy shit!* They were flying, and Merrick couldn't even attempt to enjoy it. His stomach flipped and swooped while the cool air turned biting against his exposed skin. What seemed like only a second later, they slowed.

"You can open your eyes." Leander's warm breath washed over the shell of his ear.

He shivered and slowly lifted his head. Peeking over Leander's shoulder, he swallowed hard at how far away the ground was. They were hovering above the back entrance of his building.

"I'm sorry for the abruptness of that," Leander said, voice vibrating through Merrick with how closely they were pressed together. "But I'm afraid something is happening, and I didn't want you out in the open." While he spoke, they floated closer and closer to the ground until Merrick felt Leander's feet settle on solid earth.

"What do you think happened?" Merrick leaned back enough to look at Leander's face from only inches away. Leander's gaze swept over him, stopping on his suddenly dry mouth.

Several things snapped into place in Merrick's brain: this was the first time Leander had touched him, he was quite literally clinging to Leander with both arms and legs, and Leander's arm that had started out around his waist was now firmly beneath his ass, holding him up.

Leander blinked, slow and deliberate, as his tongue came out to run across his bottom lip. Seeming to shake himself, Leander set Merrick on the ground, keeping a hand on his arm to make sure he was steady, then took a step back. "Let's get inside first."

On auto-pilot, Merrick pulled his keys out and unlocked the exterior door. As soon as they were through it, Leander pushed it closed behind them and made sure it locked while Merrick unlocked the foyer door and stepped into the hallway.

Again, as soon as he was next to Merrick, Leander closed the foyer door with a firm click and double-checked the lock.

"Upstairs," Leander said, turning to Merrick and placing a hand on the small of his back.

Merrick blinked, moving toward the elevator with Leander's palm still firmly against his back. Part of him was giddy that Leander was touching him, taking care of him, and part of him was annoyed that an apparent threat was what it'd taken to get there. He wanted to know if this was actual care on Leander's part or just some protective drive because he viewed Merrick as *his*.

Biting his lip, Merrick hit the button for the elevator and stepped inside when the door immediately opened. Leander was right behind him, hand still on Merrick's back and eyes trained on the exterior doors until the elevator doors cut off his view. As the elevator ascended, he was painfully aware that this would be the first time Leander would be in his home.

The elevator doors slid open again in Merrick's small foyer. Originally, there hadn't been anything separating the elevator doors from the inside of the penthouse. He didn't like that, so he'd added a foyer with a set of solid French doors.

As they stepped out, Leander hummed in approval. “What other access points are there to this floor?”

Merrick unlocked the door. “There’s a backdoor that leads to a service elevator and the stairs.” Pushing one of the doors open, Merrick stepped into his home and kicked off his shoes on the mat beside the door. He looked back at Leander standing just behind the threshold. “Um, are you coming in?”

“If you’d like,” Leander said carefully before clearing his throat. “You’ll have to invite me. Otherwise, I can’t enter.”

“Oh.” Merrick’s eyes widened. “Please come in.”

Leander gave him a warm smile and a little nod as he stepped inside, closing and locking the door behind himself.

“Now, will you tell me what’s going on?”

Both their phones started buzzing. Merrick sighed and pulled his out of his pocket at the same time Leander stepped away from him, doing the same.

“Hello?” Merrick asked, pressing the phone to his ear.

“Merrick?” a woman’s voice said. “This is Calliope. I’m on the Paranormal Council.”

“Yes, hi, Calliope. What can I do for you?” He glanced across the room. Leander was standing statue-still near one of the windows that faced toward downtown with his phone still pressed to his ear.

“This is something of a wellness check. Hollis and Derek were attacked a few minutes ago as they were leaving the gala.”

Merrick’s stomach clenched. “Are they okay?”

“They are. Are you okay? Did you make it home? We can send a team to escort you—”

“No, no. I’m fine. Leander and I are at my apartment.”

Calliope let out a relieved-sounding breath. “Good. We’ll keep you up to date, but I’d ask that you please be cautious. A team of hellhound enforcers will be patrolling your area. Don’t hesitate to contact me or any other council member if you need anything.”

“Thank you.” The call ended, and Merrick turned to find Leander already looking at him.

“I think,” Leander said, walking back toward Merrick. “I’d like to stay here with you if that’s all right.”

He almost argued, feeling like Leander thought he needed to babysit him. Then he thought about Leander walking out the door, knowing there was a threat out there. Leander staying there seemed like a much better option. Taking a breath, he met Leander’s dark gaze with a nod. “I’d like that.”

A loud meow pulled Merrick’s gaze from his mate. Maple, his precious tabby cat, had apparently gotten tired of waiting for him to come and find her. Normally, the first thing he did when he walked in the door was to find Maple’s napping spot—wherever it happened to be that day.

“I’m sorry, Mapes,” Merrick said, bending over to scoop her up. She draped herself over his shoulder and purred her acceptance of his apology. He looked at Leander. “This is Maple.”

Leander moved closer. Maple turned to look at him, and he held out his hand for her to sniff. She pinned her ears back. He let out a small chuckle, drawing Merrick’s gaze. “I don’t think she’s ready to make friends yet.”

“Maybe she just needs to spend some time with you,” Merrick said, realizing halfway through that he wasn’t just talking about his cat.

A muscle ticked in Leander’s jaw. “Maybe so.”

“Come on.” Merrick turned toward the hall that led to the part of the huge penthouse he actually lived in. “I’ll give you the tour and find us some comfortable clothes.”

“Lead the way.”



The cat hated him.

Leander turned to follow Merrick and was met with Maple's frigid green gaze. Her ears stayed pinned back, and beneath Merrick's arm, her tail was twitching back and forth. He wondered if she hated all vampires or if her ire was specific to him.

Beneath his feet, dark hardwood floors were covered with thick, multi-colored rugs. Not some ostentatious Persian rugs he might have expected in a Black's home, but modern patterns in vivid blues, purples, and greens. Actually, everywhere Leander looked pops of color lived amongst old-world gleaming wooden beams and paneling that were probably part of the original decor.

They passed several closed doors before the hallway ended in a large open living area. There was a lone reading lamp casting a golden glow from one corner of the room until Merrick flicked a switch on the wall and several more lamps flared to life.

It was homey. There was no other word for it. Deep-set, comfortable-looking furniture sat facing a large stone fireplace with a flat-screen TV mounted above it, and every available table surface was covered in books.

"This is where I spend most of my time," Merrick said, setting Maple on the back of the couch before rubbing at the back of his neck like he was embarrassed. "Bedrooms and bathroom

are back the way we came, and the kitchen is through there.” Merrick motioned to an open archway in one wall.

They stood staring at each other for a moment. Leander hadn’t felt this out of place in a long time, but even with the uncomfortable feeling spreading under his skin, he couldn’t deny that he was also pleased to be in Merrick’s space. He shouldn’t be, not if he intended to keep this mating as formal as possible, but there was something about being surrounded by Merrick’s scent and being invited into his home that eased something inside Leander that their two dinner dates hadn’t managed.

This was a step forward, a step closer, whether he liked it or not. He knew it wasn’t fair to judge Merrick based on how his previous mate had treated him, but he couldn’t seem to stop either. He wanted to know Merrick, but he also wanted to hide himself away. He was smart enough to know that was never going to work.

“Oh shit.” Merrick’s eyes went wide.

“What is it?”

“Um...I mean, I know you eat regular food, but do you need any, uh—”

“Blood?”

Merrick’s cheeks had turned an alluring shade of pink. “Yeah.”

“I will, yes, but I’ll have my assistant bring me some things tomorrow.”

“Oh, okay.” Fidgeting with his tuxedo sleeves like he’d done at the gala, Merrick looked at him. “Can I ask you a question?”

Leander took a step closer. “Of course.”

“I don’t mean to pry, but, um, how do you get the blood?”

His eyebrows shot up into his hairline before a hard rush of anger flashed through him. “I don’t kill people if that’s what you’re implying.”

“No!” Both of Merrick’s hands came up in a placating gesture. “God, no. That’s not—” He shook his head hard. “I just meant...do you take from them *directly*?” His face was three shades darker than it’d been a moment ago. He swallowed hard. “It’s just...that seems kind of intimate.” A self-deprecating scowl formed on Merrick’s face as he quickly dropped his gaze to the floor.

Ah. Leander’s heart stuttered in his chest. Merrick didn’t think he was a monster. He just didn’t like the thought of Leander potentially being *intimate* with anyone else.

*Oh, sweet Merri.*

Moving closer to Merrick, Leander reached out and took his hand. They’d been mated a week, and he’d managed to not touch Merrick once until tonight when he’d flown them back here. Now, the moment Merrick’s hand was in his, a calm he’d rarely felt in the last hundred or so years washed over him. “You’re right. It can be intimate when a person offers to share their blood, but I haven’t drank directly from anyone in a very long time.”

“Oh. That’s good,” Merrick said, voice relieved before turning curious. “Then how?”

“Fifty or so years ago, Lenette and I set up a network of donors for the vampires under council rule in the city. Donors apply, are screened, and once they’re approved, paid for their services.”

“Wow. That’s smart.”

Leander chuckled. “Thank you.” He took another step closer. “You don’t seem too shaken about the attacks tonight.”

“Oh, I’m shaken, but I tend to deal with that by not dealing with it.” Another one of those self-deprecating smiles pulled at the corners of his mouth. “I’m excellent at distracting myself.”

Leander hummed. If Merrick wasn’t going to actively worry about his safety, then Leander would do it for him. “Does the building have security beyond the system you have in place? I noticed cameras.”

“Cameras and the bookstore has alarms on the windows and doors.”

“Okay. How many people are in the building?”

“Right now? You and me.”

Leander’s eyebrows went up. “In the whole building?”

Merrick chewed on his lip. “Yeah. I have five people on the maintenance and housekeeping staff, but they all work during the week only. And the bookstore employees are only in during business hours.”

“What’s on the other three floors?”

“Two is mostly storage. Book inventory, decorations, and old printing equipment. Three and four are mostly empty. I, uh, haven’t really decided what I want to do with them.”

Leander looked down at their still joined hands, running a thumb over Merrick’s knuckles. “If it’s alright with you, I’d like to call in some people from my security team to cover the building. I know the hellhounds will be patrolling, but I’d like to take extra precautions. These vigilantes have already gone after the other two human mates. We have no reason to think they won’t try to get to you, too.”

“If you think that’s best, I don’t mind if you call them.”  
Merrick wouldn’t mind if Leander decided to build a moat around the building if he kept stroking the back of his hand like that.

Which was probably pathetic, but he couldn’t honestly bring himself to care. After being mated for a week and only having two measly dinners to show for it, Leander was finally in his space. Finally touching him. Hand-holding was a huge step up, in Merrick’s opinion, and he was...lonely. Had been ever since his grandpa died. It was nice just to have someone to be his *person*—even if that someone was a centuries-old vampire.

Leander’s phone beeped. Giving Merrick’s hand a little squeeze, he let go to pull it out of his pocket, but he didn’t step away. Leander’s dark eyes focused on the screen for a moment before moving back up to Merrick’s face. “Lenette is requesting we come to a special meeting tomorrow about the attacks.”

“Okay. When?”

“Tomorrow evening at the Paranormal Council building.”

“What are we supposed to do until then?” Merrick asked even as he started walking toward his bedroom. He wanted out of his tux. It was nice, and he supposed he looked okay in it, but he wasn’t comfortable.

Leander followed behind him. “Behave normally, I suppose. How do you usually spend your Sundays?”

Merrick walked through his bedroom door and flipped on the overhead light. “It depends. The store’s only open half a day and usually a couple of my employees handle it. But occasionally, I work or sort inventory.” He walked to his chest of drawers and started pulling out pairs of sweats in various colors.

Glancing over his shoulder, he had to swallow against how dry his mouth had gone at the sight of Leander leaning against the doorframe, long legs crossed at the ankle, and his strong arms crossed over his chest. That tux jacket didn’t even try to hide the perfectly defined bulge of his shoulders.

“Um,” Merrick finally said after he’d forced himself to turn back to his task. “Do you have a color preference?” He turned with a pair of sweats in each hand, one gray and the other navy blue.

Leander tilted his head and pushed off the doorframe. “I’ll take the blue.”

“Okay.” Merrick handed them over and pulled out a light gray t-shirt for him as well. “Um.” He looked at his bed—his unmade bed, ugh—and wondered if he should offer half of it to Leander or if he’d be more comfortable in one of the spare rooms down the hall.

Looking over at the bed, Leander seemed to guess what was on his mind. “If you’re comfortable with it, I’d like to stay close tonight.”

Merrick cleared his throat. “I’d like that.”

Leander looked down at the clothes he’d been handed. “I’m sorry if it seems I’m moving slowly.” He looked like there was more he wanted to say, but Merrick didn’t want to push.

“It’s okay.” Taking the initiative, Merrick reached out this time, threading his fingers through Leander’s free hand. “I’m not really sleepy, but I’d like to get comfortable. Maybe lay down and talk for a little while?”

Leander squeezed his hand gently. “I’d like that, too.”

---

“SO WAIT, HOW OLD ARE YOU?” MERRICK ASKED, HEAD cradled on his favorite pillow while he stared across the short expanse of bed between him and his mate.

“Technically, three hundred and seven. But I was alive for thirty of those years, so I don’t know if that counts.”

“Holy shit. I can’t even imagine that.” Merrick pressed a hand to his forehead. “Think of all the books I could read!”

Leander smirked. “Well, that answered my next question.”

Merrick chuckled. They were both in sweats and t-shirts now, and they’d been laying in bed basically playing *Twenty Questions* for over an hour. He fiddled with the ends of his hair while he thought of his next question. Although he never had before, he used a leave-in conditioner on it when he was getting ready for the gala. It’d left the usual frizzy strands super soft. “Where were you born?”

“Nassau,” Leander said easily.

“The Bahamas?” Merrick’s eyes narrowed, trying to do the math in his head. “Holy shit...were you a pirate baby?”

Leander outright laughed at that, and it clenched something in Merrick’s chest to see the perfectly civil mask he wore in public crumble completely.

“I guess you could say that. I never knew my father, but it makes the most sense.”

“What—”

Leander tsked. “I believe it’s my turn.”

Merrick’s teeth clicked when he snapped his mouth shut. “Oh, that’s mean. How can you drop a bomb like that and not expect me to have a million questions!”

Tentatively, Leander reached across the space between them and gently pressed the tip of his index finger to the furrow

between Merrick's eyes. "I'm sure, my mate, that you'll have chances to ask all of them."

Something warm unfurled in Merrick's belly. Leander lowered his hand, but before he could pull back completely, Merrick reached up and slipped his fingers between Leander's.

A slow, warm smile stretched over Leander's face. Their hands settled on the stretch of empty mattress between them.

"I admit," Leander started, voice soft. "I'm not the best at this."

"This?"

With his free hand, Leander motioned between them. "Being open. Intimate."

Biting at the inside of his cheek, Merrick shrugged a shoulder and rubbed his thumb over Leander's hand. "I don't really have much experience to compare it to, but I think you're doing alright." The smile he gave Leander felt soft on his face.

"Thank you, and thank you for being patient. I know the other newly mated couples seem to be moving much faster."

"You don't have to thank me for that. I think we should go at a pace we're both comfortable with. Regardless of what everyone else is doing." They sat quietly for a moment. Merrick used the comfortable silence to gather his courage. "I know you've lived a long time, and I can only imagine the experiences you've had, but is there...something that's holding you back?"

Leander squeezed his hand and pulled away, rolling onto his back to stare at the ceiling. He folded his hands together and rested them on his stomach.

Merrick cursed himself for pushing.

"There is, actually," Leander said a moment later. "I had a mate. Before."

"Oh." Suddenly the space between them seemed too close and too far, all at the same time. Leander's voice had dropped into such a low whisper, like the words hurt to even utter, that it twisted hard in Merrick's gut. "What happened?" He wasn't



sure if that was a rude question to ask, but knowing Leander had had a mate before...didn't paranormals mate for life?

Turning his head to the side, Leander met his gaze. "I'm going to tell you something that isn't common knowledge."

Merrick nodded for him to continue, vowing inside his own mind that he'd keep Leander's confidence.

"Vampires have the ability to bond a human to the magic that sustains us." Leander paused to take a breath and pulled his gaze from Merrick to stare at the ceiling again. "It's usually reserved for mates. Ann and I had been mated for almost five years before I offered it to her."

Merrick couldn't move. Could barely breathe. Leander sounded far away, like he was back with Ann whenever this had happened, and since this obviously wasn't a happy story, he was afraid of what came next.

"She balked at the idea. She left."

"She dissolved your mating?"

Leander turned to look at him again. "There was no human standard for mating back then, and since I'm paranormal, we couldn't marry. But I had *accepted* her as my mate, and for me, she remained my mate until she died. That's the way it works for us."

"Did she ever come back?"

"No. She married a human and had four children." Leander sighed. "It was difficult, but I *am* grateful that she was happy."

Slowly, Merrick reached out and rested his hand on Leander's bicep. His skin was cool to the touch. "I'm sorry that happened to you."

Leander gave him a small half smile and patted his hand.

"With the way matings are done now—on paper and everything—have you *accepted* me as your mate?"

"Yes."

Scooting closer, Merrick slid his palm down Leander's arm until he reached his hand and threaded their fingers together

again. “I can’t promise about the magic bonding thing, but I do promise I won’t ever leave. As long as I’m alive, I’m your mate.”

When Leander spoke again, his voice was soft. “Thank you, Merri.”

Merrick sucked in a surprised breath. “No one’s called me that since my grandpa died.”

Leander hummed and switched the hand that was holding Merrick’s, lifting his arm in invitation. “Do you mind if I do?”

Sliding the rest of the way across the bed, Merrick slotted in against Leander’s side, resting his cheek on his chest. “Not at all.”

**F**or the first time in nearly a hundred years, Leander woke with the warmth of another body pressed against him. Soft, pliant skin was separated from his by a couple layers of cotton. Merrick's heat seared along his side from chest to thigh, and Leander reveled in the feeling.

*His mate.*

Perhaps it was dangerous, feeling so possessive of Merri so soon, but the parts of him that had stopped being human didn't care. Merri was his, and it seemed a testament to how lonely he'd truly been this last century that he'd lasted barely a week before giving in to the call.

Looking down at the wild tangle of Merri's copper hair, he smiled, pressing his nose against the soft strands and breathing deep. Merri's scent was sunlight and leather and warm paper straight from the press.

Merri shifted, snuggling closer and smacking his lips. He was waking up.

Leander let him, running a steady hand up and down Merri's back while he relished this moment of peace. On the upstroke of his hand, his finger caught in the hem of Merri's t-shirt, lifting it enough that his fingers brushed over warm skin.

Leander froze, and Merri's breath caught. He moved against Leander, pressing his side up into Leander's hand, almost like a cat asking for more pets.

"Good morning, Merri," Leander said, keeping his voice low. He slid his hand further beneath Merri's shirt, nearly groaning

at the pleasure of such simple contact.

“Morning.” Merri looked up at him with rosy cheeks and sleepy eyes.

It was too much. Truly, how could any man resist such a temptation? Leander pressed a kiss to Merri’s forehead, his nose, before finally bringing their lips together. For half a second, Merri hesitated, whispering something about morning breath, but Leander didn’t care. He sealed their mouths together. Why he’d waited days for this, he couldn’t fathom now that Merri’s lips were against his.

Leaning up, he rolled them, settling himself over Merri.

Merri’s hands grasped at him, pulling him closer with a low hum as he spread his thighs for Leander to settle in between them.

For long moments, they explored each other’s mouths, tongues slick and hot, while they discovered how to move together.

“Lee—” Merri gasped, gripping hard at Leander’s shoulders as he ground his hips up and threw his head back, exposing the long line of his neck.

Leander’s fangs lengthened. Even when unextended, they were always present. A sharp reminder to anyone paying attention that he wasn’t human—not anymore. His cock, hard and aching between them, pressed against Merri’s through their sleep pants. “Merri,” he managed to say, bringing his mate’s hazel eyes back to his face.

For a split second, Merri’s gaze dropped to his lips—to his fangs—and his eyes widened. “Does—” He bit his words off, swallowing hard. “Do you want to...bite me?”

Leander stilled. “Merri. You don’t have to offer that.”

“I know.” Merri moved his hand from Leander’s shoulder to cup his cheek. His thumb brushed Leander’s bottom lip.

With a sucked-in-breath, Leander opened his lips wider, letting Merri see.

Gently, Merri brushed the tip of his thumb over one fang, then the other. “They’re part of you, and it seems like something

that could be part of our sex. The way they came out...it seems like it might be something you need.”

Unable to look away from Merri’s darkened gaze, Leander nodded. “Offering your blood is the most sacred, most intimate thing you can give a vampire. During sex, even more so.”

Leaning up, Merri wiggled until he got his shirt worked over his head and tossed it aside.

Sitting up on his knees, Leander did the same. Looking down, he rubbed his palm over the hard ridge of Merri’s cock. “Can we take these off, too?”

“Yes.” Merri’s voice was breathy, the gorgeous hazel of his eyes swallowed up by his blown pupils. He lifted his hips when Leander gripped the waistband of his sweats and underwear, sliding the whole bundle down and off.

Throwing them in the same direction Merri had his shirt, Leander maneuvered enough to get his own bottoms off until they were both bare. Before Leander could settle over him again, Merri sat up, claiming Leander’s mouth with his own. He didn’t shy away from brushing his tongue over Leander’s fangs, making him shudder.

Reaching between them, Merri grasped Leander, stroking once from base to tip, then squeezing the head.

Leander groaned.

“I want you to bite me, taste me. Whatever you need.” Merri looked debauched already, copper curls wild around his head, the shine of their combined saliva on his lips, and a ruddy blush staining his cheeks.

Lowering them back to the bed, Leander slotted them together, the hard lengths of them both caught between their bellies and catching delicious friction with every roll of his hips.

Merri caught the rhythm quickly, thrusting up to meet him.

He slid his arms beneath Merri’s upper back, bracing himself on his elbows and hooking his hands over Merri’s shoulders. Dropping his head, he kissed Merri, letting their tongues

tangle a moment before nipping along the edge of his jaw and farther down his neck.

Merri gasped, hips stuttering when Leander teased his fangs over the sensitive junction of his neck and shoulder.

He pressed a chaste kiss to the spot before sinking his fangs in.

Merri bucked, a startled shout spilling out of him.

Leander kept his hips moving, feeling Merri throb and tense before coming in a hot rush between them while his blood coated Leander's tongue. Fuck, but he tasted divine. Better than anything Leander had ever had.

Merri whined, hands scrambling against Leander's skin, lost in his orgasm. His nails dug into the meat of Leander's flank, and that was all it took for Leander to join him.

He released Merri's neck with a gasp, cock shooting all over both their bellies, mixing his release with Merri's. Pressing his forehead to Merri's shoulder, he shuddered through the aftershocks, rocking his hips.

"Oh," Merri whispered, voice breathy and awed.

Lifting himself up enough to catch Merri's gaze, Leander looked him over. Blood still seeped from the puncture wounds he'd left, staining Merri's pale skin and the sheets beneath him. "Okay?"

A smile bloomed on Merri's lips. "So okay." Reaching down, he slid his finger through the mess on Leander's stomach and brought it up to his lips, sucking their combined release off his skin.

Leander swore if he'd been able to get hard again, he would have at the look of blatant bliss on Merri's face. As it was, he dropped back down, claiming Merri's mouth and licking the taste of them together right off his mate's tongue.

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LEANING OVER THE VANITY COUNTER, MERRICK INSPECTED THE two small holes at the base of his throat. Leander had been

careful. There was no bruising and no tearing. Just perfectly round punctures where his mate had fed from him while they'd had sex. A whole new round of blushing worked its way from his chest up to his cheeks.

He'd never blushed so much in his life.

Behind him, Leander stepped out of the shower stall. Merrick had been in there with him but had ducked out after he'd washed his hair while Leander finished rinsing his. Merrick's hair was currently still damp and slicked back against his head for the five minutes it would remain tame until it began to dry.

Letting his gaze rove over Leander's frame, a dark pull of want bloomed low in his belly. He'd never felt more sated, and yet, the sight of his mate's leanly muscled form was enough to get him going in record time.

Looking up, Leander met his gaze in the mirror. Raising a brow, he asked, "Alright, love?"

Voice lost for a moment, Merrick nodded.

Leander wrapped a towel around his waist and came to stand behind Merrick, wrapping his arms around his waist and dropping his gaze to the reflection of the bite marks on Merrick's neck. "Do you regret it?"

With a start, Merrick's gaze snapped to Leander's before he turned around completely, putting them chest to chest. "No, no regrets."

Just as Merrick tilted his chin up for a kiss, a loud buzzing came from the bedroom.

Leander sighed, dropping a quick kiss to his lips before stepping back. "That's probably Ammon."

"Ammon?" Merrick turned back to the mirror and squeezed out some of the leave-in frizz control he'd bought for the gala. It made his hair so soft and so much more manageable, he was kind of pissed he'd never tried using it before. He walked to the open door while he ran the product through his hair.

"My assistant," Leander said before he picked up his buzzing phone off the nightstand. He looked at the screen and then

over to Merrick. “Do you care if he comes up?”

“Of course not.”

A small smile pulled up Leander’s lips. “Okay. I’ll throw on something and go let him in.”



**A**mmon was an unfairly beautiful man. From his light brown skin to his ridiculously long and full eyelashes that were as deep black as his perfectly tousled hair, Merrick felt like a potato just standing in the same room as him.

“Merrick, it’s so nice to meet you,” Ammon said, thrusting the bags in his hands at Leander and walking toward Merrick with his hand extended.

“Oh, um, it’s nice to meet you, too.” Merrick shook the hand offered to him, only startling a little at how warm Ammon’s skin was. It could have been because Leander’s skin was noticeably cooler than the average human, making Ammon feel very warm in comparison, but Merrick didn’t think so. He wondered what type of paranormal he was. Obviously not a vampire.

Leander huffed from his place just inside the door, but there was a smile on his face. “I was going to make introductions.”

“Already on it, boss,” Ammon said, tossing a wink at Leander over his shoulder.

“I can see that. Don’t get too cozy while I put these away.”

“No promises,” Ammon called as Leander headed toward the bedroom.

Something fluttered in Merrick’s belly at how at home he seemed already. It felt surreal that just days ago, he’d been worried they’d never even kiss. The bite mark at the base of his throat ached, and his cheeks went pink at the thought of what they’d been doing less than an hour ago.

“Um,” Merrick stuttered out. “Can I offer you some coffee or tea?”

Ammon smiled at him, one dark eyebrow raising. “I’d love some coffee. Did you and bossman have a nice evening at the gala?”

A loud sigh reached them all the way from the bedroom down the hall.

Merrick’s eyes widened, but Ammon only laughed.

“As I’m sure you’ve already noticed, Leander is a touch dramatic.” Ammon rested his hand on Merrick’s elbow, turning him toward the kitchen like he was the host instead of the other way around. “Oh my gods, who is this enchanting creature?”

Maple sat on the long counter where her food and water bowl rested. Her tail twitched unhappily.

“Shit, I’m sorry Mapes.” Merrick hurried over and pulled the bin of food out from the cabinet beneath the counter, and scooped Maple’s breakfast into it. He scratched behind her ears, earning a half-hearted purr before she started to eat. “Don’t worry, I’ll get you some banana to go with it.”

Merrick turned around to find Ammon already starting the coffee.

“She’s beautiful. She really eats bananas?”

“They’re her favorite.”

“So that’s the way to her heart,” Leander said, walking into the room as he adjusted his navy blue suit coat. “I never would have guessed banana.”

Merrick stared at him. The suit was a touch more casual than the others he’d seen him wear—no vest or tie and the first couple buttons on his perfectly pressed white shirt left open—but *come on*. “Leander.”

“Yes?”

“Do you have a meeting or something today?”

Leander frowned. “No?”

“Then why are you in a suit? It’s Sunday. I was hoping we wouldn’t have to leave the house, but how am I supposed to cuddle you on the couch in that!”

Ammon choked on his coffee, coughing and sputtering. He held out a hand toward them when they both looked his way. “Don’t mind me.”

A furrow appeared between Leander’s brows as he dropped his arms to his sides. “I could take the jacket off for cuddling.”

Running his teeth over his bottom lip, Merrick tried not to laugh. This ridiculous vampire was *his*. “Okay.”

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THE MEETING AT THE PARANORMAL COUNCIL BUILDING WAS exactly what Leander feared. A hate group targeting paranormals—HAP, apparently—had taken offense to humans agreeing to be mated to paranormals as part of Lenette and the mayor’s unity push. Not only that, but there was suspicion that the city’s police commissioner—Hollis’s uncle—was the one calling the shots.

With a sigh, Leander rested his hand on the small of Merri’s back as they moved toward the conference room door. Merri hadn’t been targeted in the initial round of attacks, for which he was grateful, but he couldn’t shake the feeling that it was only a matter of time.

Merri hadn’t seemed conflicted when Leander spoke up and agreed he’d like for the hellhounds to provide protection for Merri when he wasn’t there. Even though he had his own people watching Merri’s building, it wouldn’t hurt to have the enforcers on hand when the humans decided to try their luck. He was aware that the inaccessibility of Merri’s building and the added security of his own men watching it was probably the reason it hadn’t happened yet.

He intended to keep it that way.

“Merrick,” Cane Harding called before they’d reached the door.

Merri looked over his shoulder at Cane with a smile before he stepped away from Leander. "I'll be right back."

"Okay," Leander said. Lenette caught his eye, motioning him over to her. "I'm going to speak with Lenette." He'd known her for what seemed like forever, but really it'd only been a century or so, long before there was a Paranormal Council for her to be the leader of.

When he reached her side, she leaned in, speaking so low he doubted even the hellhounds in the room would hear her. "How are things going?"

Meeting her eyes, he let a small smile slip onto his face. "Better than I'd hoped."

She arched one manicured eyebrow at him. "That's not telling me much." She'd heard his dissatisfaction about being chosen to mate, *at length*.

He sighed, looking over to where Merrick was talking with Cane and Jake. "He's wonderful," he said simply. He turned his face back to Lenette. "Thank you for bullying me into this."

She smirked. "You're welcome."

He squared up with Lenette. "Now tell me we'll bury HAP and anyone else who comes along that might want to hurt him."

"Oh, I fully intend to bury them." She lowered her voice. "I put in a call to the seer's guild with an official request for assistance."

Leander's eyebrows climbed up his head. "The mages? Will they help?"

"I believe they will. HAP won't stop at targeting our human mates. If we don't squash this quickly, every paranormal in the city will have to constantly look over their shoulder. I won't stand for that."

Leander's face hardened. "Neither will I."

Merri stepped up to Leander's side, looking between him and Lenette. "Neither will you, what?"

Looking down at him, Leander slipped an arm around his waist and pulled him close, pressing a kiss to the top of his head. “Let anything happen to you.”

A blush stained Merri’s cheeks. “I know.”

Lenette smiled at them, some of the sharpness of her last statement still lingering in her gaze. “Be safe going home. The hellhounds are going to escort everyone from the building.”

“Good.” Leander started to turn them toward the door.

“Will you be in the office on Monday?” Lenette asked before they stepped away.

He glanced down at Merri, who said, “I’ll need to be in the bookstore.”

“I’ll be in the office.” Leander nodded at Lenette and kept his arm around Merri until they were safely ensconced in the back of his SUV and on their way home.

The next morning, Merrick opened the bookstore at nine o'clock just like every Monday since he'd opened it. Maple had ridden down the elevator on his shoulder like she always did, happy to join him on the ground floor of the building and bask in the attention of some of their regular customers and rays of sunshine alike.

There was something syrupy-slow and fresh about mornings in the store that Merrick loved. Especially the quiet moments before he unlocked the door when he could stand among the shelves, books spanning out in every direction, and almost imagine that his grandpa was maybe only an aisle over, checking out the thriller titles. He'd never felt closer to Grandpa than here.

Sighing, he leaned his elbows on the counter, running his hand over Maple's head and thinking about how nice it'd been to wake up with Leander. Again. Only twice, but they'd moved around each other between bathroom routines and filling up coffee cups in the kitchen like they'd been doing it for years. Merrick, of course, noticed the stainless steel thermos jug that had appeared in the fridge and how Leander had turned his back when he poured from it into the travel mug he was taking to work.

Blood. Which Leander needed to survive. Merrick frowned. He appreciated the gesture, he supposed, but he didn't like that Leander felt he needed to hide it. He'd drank from Merrick, and Merrick wanted him to do it again. He'd honestly never

felt closer to anyone in his life than when Leander's fangs had pierced his neck.

"Thinking hard there, boss?" Ammon walked toward the front of the store.

Merrick chuckled. "Just enjoying the quiet. Mondays are typically slow unless there's a holiday coming up." Leander had insisted that Ammon stay with Merrick today. Apparently, he was acting as Merrick's bodyguard until Leander got back from the Paranormal Council building.

"Will anyone else be working today?"

"Oh yeah. Cheryl will be here just before lunch, and then after, a couple others come in to work through until close. I usually head out around five."

"Nice. Being the boss has its perks."

Merrick chuckled. "It really does."

The day carried on, a small rush of customers from a bus tour hitting just after Cheryl walked in the door. Around lunch, Merrick decided he wanted lemon cookies and an iced coffee from the shop across the road, so he headed out the door after he grabbed Cheryl's order. Ammon had stepped into the back to take a phone call, but Merrick would grab him some cookies and caffeine, too. He should probably let Ammon know he was leaving the building, but he didn't think there was much risk right now. It was the middle of the day, and he was only going across the street.

"Hey, Merrick," Gavin, the barista, called as soon as Merrick pushed open the coffee shop door.

"You're here early," Merrick said, stepping up to the counter. Gavin usually worked nights. More than once, on a particularly lonely evening, Merrick would find himself making his way across the street to curl up with a book and a hot cocoa in the corner of the coffee shop. Sometimes having people in his vicinity eased the ache of missing his grandpa and the hole in his life where family was supposed to be. That ache hadn't been as demanding since Leander walked into that

conference room and told Merrick he'd chosen him as his mate.

"Covering a shift," Gavin said, short blond hair tucked behind his ears and blue eyes looking tired, but happy. "What can I get you?"

"Let me have three large iced coffees and a dozen lemon cookies, please."

"More than Cheryl working today?" Gavin asked, moving to get Merrick's order together.

"Oh, uh," Merrick fumbled his words. How did he explain that his mate's assistant was acting as his de facto bodyguard? "Um, a friend of my mate is hanging out with us today."

Gavin's eyebrows went up. "Your mate?"

Heat, along with a dopey smile, spread across Merrick's face before he could stop them. "Yeah."

Setting a holder with the coffees and a bakery box on the counter, Gavin smiled. "You'll have to bring this mate in one evening. Char and I would love to meet them."

"Him," Merrick said. "Leander."

Gavin grinned. "Congrats, man." He pushed the coffee and cookies toward Merrick. "On the house. Count it as a belated mating present."

"Thank you," Merrick said, feeling silly at the lump gathering in his throat. "That means a lot."

With a wave goodbye, he stuck the money he'd pulled out of his wallet into Gavin's tip jar once he moved on to the next customer, grabbed his items, and headed out the door.

Cool air rushed over him as he smiled to himself and stood on the corner waiting for the walk sign. He found it so unbelievable how drastically things had changed in just a few days. He'd woken up with Leander's arm thrown over him this morning, his skin cool and perfect against the furnace Merrick turned into under the covers. They'd kissed goodbye as Leander headed off to the office and him downstairs to the bookstore.



It was so easy. Like Leander had been there all along. He knew they still needed to discuss permanent living arrangements. Leander hadn't been back home—and Merrick had never even seen it—since the gala. He wanted to be where Merrick was. Honestly, Merrick would be surprised if Leander stayed at the office all day.

The light changed and Merrick started across the road, still lost in thought. He reached the halfway point when a dark van screeched around the corner and slammed on its brakes, stopping only a couple feet in front of him.

“What the hell,” Merrick yelled, stopping so fast he almost dropped the coffees. As the side door slid open, Merrick's brain caught up to what was happening. Two men in black masks jumped out, reaching for him. With a scream, he threw the coffee and bakery box at them and turned to run.

He made a couple steps before he was yanked to a halt. Hands grabbed the back of his shirt, hauling him backwards. Still screaming, he fought, pulling and yanking to get away. People were getting out of their cars. Several with cell phones pressed to their ears. The hands changed tactics, sliding around his waist and lifting him bodily off the ground.

A roar—wild and animalistic—tore through the air, and the sound of metal crunching rang out from behind them.

Merrick's mind screamed out with new fear. *Run!*

The men trying to take him started shouting, and the arms holding him went slack. Merrick took the opportunity and elbowed the man hard in the chest and shoved his way to freedom.

He started running again when a motorcycle slammed to a stop in front of him. The man riding it jumped off and reached for him. He tried to bat the arms away, but strong hands gripped his upper arms.

“Merrick!”

He looked at the man's face. One of the hellhounds that had been at the meeting. Bacchus.

“Oh my god,” Merrick gasped, slumping in Bacchus's hands.

“You’re okay,” Bacchus assured him, moving him so Merrick was behind him.

It was only then that Merrick looked back toward the van. The top was crushed in—a big crater in the middle making the whole frame sag. The driver was slumped against the steering wheel, his window shattered, and the two men who’d tried to grab him were on the ground.

Standing over them was a beast. Huge and muscular, with dark claws extending from its toes and fingers and sleek black fur covering most of its body. Merrick’s eyes widened when his gaze made it up to the beast’s face. Its muzzle protruded like a wolf’s, ears pinned back against its head, and a mouth full of gleaming sharp teeth.

*I always thought werewolves were quadrupeds*, he thought a moment before the bipedal wolfman in front of him began shrinking before his eyes. A minute later, Ammon stood—completely naked and smeared with blood—over the two men who’d attempted to abduct him.

Merrick’s eyes were wide, and his knees were shaky.

“You alright, Merri?” Ammon asked, stepping over the men like they weren’t worth his time.

Merrick had to swallow twice before he could answer. “Yeah. I-I’m okay.”

In front of him, Bacchus swore, “Fucking hell, Ammon.” He turned and tore open one of the motorcycle’s saddlebags and pulled out a leather jacket. “You couldn’t have shifted back indoors?” He stepped up to Ammon and wrapped the jacket around his waist.

Ammon smirked at him. “Maybe I wanted to give you a show.” He held the sides of the jacket together on one hip and reached for Merrick with his other hand. “Come on, Merri. Let’s get you inside.”

Sirens blared in the distance, and Merrick’s head felt fuzzy, but he followed Ammon back to the bookstore.

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“MERRI!” LEANDER SHOUTED AS SOON AS HIS FEET HIT THE sidewalk. He’d flown straight there the moment Ammon had called him. The sun was high in the sky, but he could barely feel the drain of it. Since the moment his phone rang, all he could think of was getting to Merri.

Police cars had the intersection in front of the bookstore blocked off while an ambulance loaded a person in the back. Ammon had said he’d left them alive. Part of Leander wanted to storm over there and finish the job himself, but he knew keeping them alive was better. Dead men didn’t talk.

“Leander,” Merri’s voice reached him from inside the store.

Turning, he ran inside nearly colliding with his mate. He wrapped his arms around Merri, lifting him off his feet in his need to get Merri as close as possible.

“I’m okay,” Merri whispered against his shoulder, holding him just as tightly.

Leander pulled him closer, absorbing the feeling of Merri safe and warm in his arms. After another moment, he pulled back far enough to cup Merri’s face in his hands.

Merri grasped his forearms. “I’m okay. Not a scratch.”

Letting out a slow breath, Leander brought their lips together, kissing him slowly. When they broke apart, he rested his forehead against Merri’s. “Tell me what happened.”

“They tried to grab me from the crosswalk. I was on my way back from the coffee shop.”

Glancing over his shoulder, Leander met Ammon’s gaze where he was leaning against the bookstore’s front counter.

“There were three. One driving and two in the back.” Ammon stood up and walked over to them.

“Ammon stopped them. Bacchus was there, too,” Merri said, pressing himself along Leander’s front and laying his head on his chest.

Leander kept his arms wrapped tight around him as he spoke to Ammon. “Thank you.”

“It’s what I’m here for, bossman.”

Glancing down at the top of Merri’s head, Leander asked, “Have you given your statement to the police.”

“Yes. They said I was good to go, and if they need anything else, they’ll be in touch. Apparently, CCTV caught the whole thing, so I don’t think they’ll really need any more from me.”

“Good. Let’s get you upstairs. I need to call Lenette.”

**A**fter the near abduction, Merri wasn't even allowed to leave the building on his own. Under other circumstances, he may have found it overbearing, but while he was still jolting awake in the middle of the night at the phantom jerk of hands trying to steal him away, he was more agreeable to the company. And it's not like he was someone who constantly ran all over the place. The grocery store. The bank. The coffee shop. That was really it.

He was perfectly content to have Leander or Ammon with him on every little errand. Seeing a hellhound lurking around—usually Bacchus—didn't hurt his feelings either.

“Hi, Mapes,” Merrick said, petting Maple from head to tail. “I'm sorry you can't go with us, but I'm guessing you'll have more fun here anyway.”

It was early evening on a Saturday, and he and Leander were getting ready to head out to the paranormal gym Cane had been training at for his first fight night there. Merrick had never been to something like that and found he was excited and nervous in equal measure. Cane and Hollis had become his friends over the last few weeks. They'd come into the bookstore the week after his almost-kidnapping to check on him. Then Cane had added all three of them to a group chat, and the rest was history.

“Ready, Merri?” Leander asked as he came out of the bedroom.

“Ready.” He turned to see what suit Leander had decided on for the evening, only to stop and stare. Leander wasn’t wearing a suit. Instead, he had on dark jeans, a soft-looking deep-blue sweater, and was slipping his arms into a black leather jacket. “Oh.”

Looking up, Leander raised his brows. “Oh?”

“Mmhm,” he hummed, making his way over to his mate. Without stopping, he slid his arms beneath Leander’s jacket, feeling just how soft that sweater was against his fingertips as he wrapped his arms around Leander’s waist. “You look so sexy.”

Leander held him close, looking down at him with hooded eyes. “Sexier than a three-piece suit?”

“Close second,” Merrick whispered, raising up to press a soft kiss to Leander’s mouth.

Leander sucked in a breath, dipping his tongue between Merrick’s lips and sending a thrill skittering down his spine, before pulling back entirely too soon. “If we don’t leave now, we’ll be late.”

With a fake pout, Merrick kissed him one more time and stepped back. He looked over at Maple. “Be a good girl, Mapes. We’ll be back later.”

Merrick watched in amusement when Leander stepped over to Maple and offered his hand for a sniff. Maple took him up on it, and even pressed the side of her face against his fingers for half a second before hopping down from the chair she’d been lounging on and trotting off.

“I think I’m growing on her,” Leander said with a small, surprised smile on his face.

Merrick chuckled. “Only because you’ve been sneaking her pieces of banana when you think I’m not looking.”

Leander didn’t dignify that with a response.

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THE GYM WHERE CANE WAS FIGHTING WAS A LARGE FREE-standing brick building fifteen minutes from downtown. The Viking who owned it—Sigurd—had been in Solston for almost as long as Leander had. They weren't exactly friends, more friendly acquaintances. Leander had never been here before, even when it was strictly a boxing gym back in the 40s.

The car service driver pulled the SUV to a stop in front of the entrance. Leander thanked him as he and Merri climbed out of the back seat. Seeing that they would be in the company of the other mated pairs and many other paranormals—including some of the hellhounds—Leander had given Ammon the night off.

A wash of old, powerful magic flowed over Leander's skin as they stepped into the gym. By all outward appearances, it was a completely modern structure, but its foundations had been laid with magicks born half a world away and far, far older than the country they currently resided in. Beyond being a warlock in the Saint coven, Leander didn't know what Sigurd was. One brush of his magic and *ordinary* went falling right off the list.

Looking around, Leander spotted members of the Saint coven as well as at least three wolf shifters and several other vampires. His crowd scanning stopped when he realized that in each corner of the building, a solitary man stood with their back to the wall. He only recognized one of the men—Rook, one of Derek's hounds. The other three looked calm, vigilant, and if he focused, he could feel the subtle undercurrent of their power from where he stood just inside the door.

“Merrick!” Hollis's voice called from the metal bleachers surrounding an elevated octagon fight cage in the middle of the gym.

Merri waved at his friend, grabbing Leander's hand and tugging him along. They climbed the bleachers and sat in the empty spots in front of Hollis and Derek, and Leander let himself relax and left the sentinels in the corners of the building to do their duty.

“Hey!” Hollis said with a big smile. “Glad you guys could make it.”

“We wouldn’t miss it,” Leander said, nodding at Derek in greeting.

“You’re just in time.” Derek pointed to the cage.

“Go, Cane!” A group of women to the right of them shouted. Leander knew most of them and chuckled. Looking toward the cage, he saw Cane’s gaze sweep over the crowd. Merri waved back at him when Cane waved in their direction.

Before he knew it, the fight was on. Cane and the other man—Parker, he thought the announcer said—circled each other. He found himself on his feet and cheering along with the rest of this section when Cane got a takedown, plummeting himself and his opponent to the ground.

Beside him, Merri shouted and clapped or hid his face against Leander’s shoulder depending on what was happening within the cage. It was incredibly endearing. His lover was a gentle soul, Leander knew, but he still wanted to support his friend in this violent sport Cane enjoyed.

At the end of the match, Cane stood victorious. The fight had been a good one. Cane and Parker embraced with a laugh after the final whistle blew, knowing they’d given their all and showing that respect and camaraderie were achievable even if you’d just been throwing punches at each other.

Sigurd raised Cane’s hand, declaring him the winner just before all the lights went out.

In the sudden dark, Merri tensed beside him. A few worried voices carried through the room, but every paranormal—especially those like himself who could see as well in the dark as they did in the light—looked to the windows and doors. If the city was experiencing a power outage, it was interesting timing, but the likelihood that something else was happening couldn’t be ignored.

Leander wrapped his arm firmly around Merri’s waist. In the next instant, three of the corners in the room were illuminated with raw magical power. Mage power. Lenette said she’d



requested aid from the seer's guild, aka the mage's keepers. Bright green, vivid orange, and hypnotic blue light spilled from them, pulling their magic to them like shields.

"What's happening?" Merri whispered against his shoulder.

"I don't know." He pulled Merri closer, eyes scanning over the high windows at the top of the building before he looked over at Derek. "Scent anything?"

"No," Derek said, keeping Hollis as close as Leander was holding Merri.

Next to them, one of the women shifted, wings sprouting from her back. A gargoyle. Nice.

"I'll guard them," the gargoyle said, meeting Leander's gaze.

He looked at the group with her, immediately recognizing Calliope, Jake's sister and the co-leader of the Saint coven. Calliope gave him a nod. "We all will if you and Derek want to find out what's going on."

Merri was already backing out of his arms. "Go, I'll be fine."

Leander pressed a kiss to Merri's forehead. "I'll be right back."

Derek and Hollis shared a similar exchange then he and Leander were making their way off the bleachers and toward the doors.

A deep, booming voice shouted, "Get down!" In the next second, the back half of the building exploded.

**M**errick pried his eyes open with effort. He didn't know where he was. He was moving, prone in the back of some type of vehicle with the hard floor digging into his back, but he still couldn't see anything.

His breathing sped up. He tried to remember what had happened. They'd been at the fight, and there'd been an explosion. Glowing, magical shields had sprung up all over, but the force of the blast had still knocked him off his feet.

Everything went hazy after that. People coughing. Some passing out. Paranormals falling over like they were human. Fighting. Loud snarls and guns discharging. Then, hands grabbing him. He'd screamed for Leander...or tried as a black bag had been slipped over his head.

That was it. He wasn't blind. There was a bag over his head, and they'd managed to take him this time. *Oh gods.*

---

“MERRI!” LEANDER SHOUTED AGAIN, CRAWLING ACROSS THE gym floor, throat and lungs on fire from silver laced gas those human fuckers had somehow gotten a hold of. He wasn't the only one down. Every vampire and shifter was on the ground. The demons and witches were putting up a good fight, but the humans weren't without weapons for them either it seemed.

They had a tanker truck connected to a fire hose. The hellhounds roared, skin sizzling, when the hose turned on

them. Holy water. It had to be.

Strong, clawed hands gripped his arms and hauled him to his feet. The gargoyle. Her lips and nose were red and raw. His felt the same. That damn silver vapor was as clever as it was painful. He could feel himself healing, but every lungful of air he sucked in felt like breathing razor blades.

“They have your mate,” she said, voice rough.

Rage exploded in his chest, dulling the pain still trying to bog him down. “Where?” he managed to grate out.

“Van,” she growled, pointing one claw tipped finger at the road heading east.

He leapt into the air, using every ounce of anger and fear to propel him up into the sky. Once he cleared the gas hanging over what was left of the gym, cool, crisp air filled his lungs. He flew forward, shooting off into the night toward where the gargoyle had pointed.

Reaching into the inner pocket of his jacket, thankful Merri’s teasing had made him wear the leather tonight, he pulled out his phone and activated the emergency SOS that would signal Ammon that something was wrong. He didn’t know where they were taking Merri, but he wanted all the help he could get in getting him back safely.

The sound of flapping wings reached him over the air whipping past his ears. He glanced back, finding the gargoyle hot on his tail. A second later, a wolf howl went up somewhere in the city. Another moment and it was joined by another, then another, and another until the night was filled with a symphony of battle cries. The wolves were coming.

Bolstered, Leander flew on, gaining altitude as his eyes sought out the van carrying his heart.

---

“WHAT IS THAT?” A MAN’S VOICE SAID. “SHIT, IS THAT THE fucking wolves?”

“Hurry up,” another voice urged.

The vehicle rocked uncomfortably beneath Merrick as it accelerated. Straining to hear what they did over the sound of the road beneath them, Merrick’s heart leapt up in his throat. He hoped one of those howls was Ammon. That meant Leander was alive and knew Merrick had been taken. They’d be coming for him.

Tears pricked his eyes. He just hoped they found him before these men got him wherever their destination was.

---

LEANDER CAUGHT SIGHT OF A BLACK VAN. IT WAS CAREENING along the road, taking curves at dangerous speeds. Behind him, the gargoyle let out a roar and swooped low. That must be it then.

Following right behind her, Leander knew they’d have to be careful how they attacked. He was sure the kidnappers wouldn’t have bothered to buckle Merri’s seatbelt if they’d even put him in a seat. He couldn’t risk Merri being injured as they stopped the van. Humans were so *damned fragile*.

Flying faster, he grabbed the gargoyle wrist.

She looked over at him, slowing a fraction.

“We can’t wreck the van,” he shouted over the wind.

She nodded.

Releasing his hold, they both sped up until they were flying directly over the van, twenty or thirty feet above the roof. Leander hoped the darkness and proximity would keep the humans from spotting them.

The rumbling roar of multiple engines carried up from behind them. Glancing back, Leander saw a tight formation of motorcycle’s gaining on the van. The hellhounds.

He wanted to swoop down and tear the vehicle apart with bare hands, shred his way through metal and flesh and anything

else between him and Merri. He wanted his mate back in his arms.

---

THE VEHICLE SLID TO A HARD STOP, SENDING MERRICK sliding across the hard floor and cracking his head against something metal.

“Fuck,” he breathed out, wishing his hands were free so he could rub at the ache.

A moment later a door slid open and those grabbing hands were back, hauling out of the vehicle before they let him get his feet under him. The bag over his head was ripped off, blinding him for a second as harsh fluorescent light made him scrunch his eyes closed.

“Bring him over here,” an authoritative and somewhat familiar voice said.

Merrick frowned, squinted his eyes open and struggled to keep his feet as the men holding his arms dragged him forward.

“I do apologize about the rough treatment, Mr. Black, but it seems we’re going to move up our schedule.”

Merrick’s eyes finally adjusted, and he looked around. High ceiling, concrete floors, metal walls, and the old tang of motor oil lingering in the air. Directly in front of him, a chair sat alone with a portable construction lamp illuminating it and the area around it. There was a line of men standing behind the chair—all armed with black masks covering their faces.

Sweat sprang out on Merrick’s body as fear, cold and bone rattling, settled in his stomach. He was going to be sick. He was going to die. His hysterical thoughts ground to a halt when his gaze landed on the man who’d spoken, the only one without a mask and standing off to the side of the chair, away from the light—Neal Riven, the police commissioner and Hollis’s uncle.

“You son of a bitch,” Merrick spat suddenly, rage overcoming his fear and body jerking against his captors’ hold. “Hollis was

right about you.”

“My nephew is rarely right about anything,” Neal said with a sneer. He looked to one of the men holding Merrick. “Shut him up and get the camera.”

He fought. Of course he did, but they held him down. One of them punched him in the face. The blow knocked his head back against the ground, sending a jolt of blinding pain up through the back of his head to meet the one radiating out from his cheek. In his dazed state, they pressed a strip of duct tape over his lips before sitting him in the chair and securing his wrist to the arms with more tape.

“I do apologize that it had to be you Merrick, but what better way to make our statement than with the wealthiest man in the city? These paranormals and their human pets need to know that if we can get to you, we can get to anyone. No paranormal sympathizer is safe.” Neal walked to stand in front of Merrick, bending down enough that they were eye to eye. “I’ll take no pleasure in your death, but that vampire you’ve tied yourself to? His death and all the others at that gym tonight are only the beginning of the clean slate we’re going to give this city.”

Neal stood up and walked back out of the light. Another man stood in front of Merrick with a phone pointed his way, like he was recording a video. He felt someone step up behind him as the sharp edge of a knife rested against the front of his throat.

“Neal!” A shout from outside. *Was that Hollis?* “You fucking coward! If you want Richard to see the light of day tomorrow you’ll give us Merrick right now!”

Leander landed with a light thump on the other side of the road from the old warehouse the van had disappeared into. The gargoyle landed beside him. He held out his hand. “Leander.”

“Bellicent,” she said, grip sure and the redness from the silver fading fast from her face. She healed as fast as he did apparently.

The group of motorcycles slammed to a stop in front of them, and movement in the shadows around them caught Leander’s eye. Ammon came running out of the shadows a moment later. He was in wolf form, looking half feral as he scented the air and a low growl started in his chest in the direction of the warehouse.

Leander placed a hand on his friend’s shoulder and turned to Derek. The hellhound leader was still on his motorcycle, half his face blistered and raw from the holy water. Arms slipped out from around Derek’s waist as Hollis slid off the bike.

“Let’s surround the warehouse,” Derek said, voice rough, like the holy water had damaged his throat as well. A second later Derek was off his bike, taking off after his mate who’d already stomped his way halfway to the warehouse.

“Neal!” Hollis screamed. “You fucking coward! If you want Richard to see the light of day tomorrow you’ll give us Merrick right now!”

Leander’s gaze whipped back around to the other hellhounds. There, on the back of Rook’s bike, was a man tied up and

gagged. They'd wrapped his arms around the hellhound and handcuffed his wrists together to keep him on the bike. The man's eyes were wild as he tried to spit curses from behind the bandana tied around his head and stuck in his mouth like a bit.

"Who?" he said to Rook.

"Richard Riven. Neal's son. He led the attack on the gym."

Something vicious clawed its way up Leander's throat as he moved forward and grabbed one of Richard's arms. He and Rook dragged Richard over to where Hollis and Derek were standing ten feet back from the warehouse's big sliding door. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the wolves and other hellhounds moving to surround the building like Derek had ordered.

Bellicent came to stand at his side.

"Neal!" Hollis yelled again. "You have ten seconds to open this door and give us Merrick unharmed or so help me god, I'll shoot Richard myself!"

Leander looked over at Hollis. There were tear tracks on his face, but his hands were steady. The rage he was feeling was plain to see in every line of his body. It matched the fire in Leander's own chest. He wasn't as generous though. If he didn't lay eyes on a whole Merri in the next five seconds, he'd tear the whole goddamn building and Richard apart.

Hollis sucked in another breath, ready to yell again it seemed, when the door started to move.

"We're opening up!" A shout came from inside the building.

Leander steeled himself, keeping a hard grip on their hostage.

When the door rolled all the way open, he nearly sagged in relief at the sight of Merri standing under his own power. That relief lasted only a moment as his gaze zeroed in on the bruise blossoming across Merri's cheek and the thin line of red on his throat.

Merri's gaze met his, eyes crinkling as he smiled behind the duct tape on his mouth. Leander loved him so much in that moment, he nearly burst with it.



Two men flanked Merri, one holding on to each of his arms. The same way he and Rook were holding Richard.

“Your attack dog has given you quite the pair of balls, Holly,” Neal Riven said, walking out from behind the door. “Too bad you couldn’t have found them on your own.”

Derek growled low, his power leaking out of him in a vicious rush. The air around them all went thick with it.

Neal swallowed hard as his eyes widened.

Leander took a step forward, dragging Richard with him. “Send Merrick over and you can have your son back.”

Neal tore his gaze from Derek and Hollis to look at Leander. “You know Leander, out of all the freaks, you were always the one I despised the least. A businessman. I could respect that to a degree, and you didn’t choose this. Since vampires are born human, I thought I could give you the benefit of the doubt.” He sighed. “Imagine my disappointment when you hitched your wagon to that bitch’s plan to *unify* the city. This city doesn’t need unity. It needs purification!”

One of the men holding Merri lifted his other hand away from his leg, a silver knife reflecting in the security lights. Leander sped forward as shouts and growls erupted around him. Merri’s hazel gaze widened, but he never looked away from Leander’s face.

Leander hit the man holding Merri and didn’t stop, knocking the man backward even as white hot pain lanced through his shoulder where he’d blocked the knife from its intended target. With a vicious twist of his hand, he snapped the man’s neck.

Chaos ensued around them, the wolves and others waiting around the warehouse taking that as their cue to attack. Screams and gunshots rang out, but Leander couldn’t be bothered to worry about anyone else. He turned, going to one knee as the silver knife still embedded in his shoulder, ate away at his strength.

Merri was there, on his knees in front of Leander, tearing the duct tape away from his mouth with his hands still bound. “Lee,” he sobbed, frantic red rimmed eyes, searching his face.

“It’s alright, love. You’re safe now.” He was tipping forward, unable to keep his balance.

“Help!” Merri yelled, trying to hold Leander up with his bound hands.

Ammon appeared beside Merri, back in human form and as naked as the day he was born. “Easy boss,” he said, voice uncharastically serious as he took hold of the knife’s hilt. “Let’s get this poison out of you.” As soon as Ammon’s wrapped around the hilt, he hissed, smoke rising from his skin. “Fuck,” he said through gritted teeth. “That’s some potent shit.”

Leander grunted at the pain tearing through his shoulder. It felt like the silver-laced fumes from the gym were being dumped directly into his veins, searing pain burning through every inch of him.

Ammon released the knife handle and laid him back on the ground. “Merri, I need your shirt.”

“Move,” Bellicent said, appearing over Ammon’s shoulder. She reached past him and grabbed the knife, pulling it out despite the same sizzling smoke rising from her own skin. Dropping the knife, she used a claw to cut through the layers of Leander’s jacket and shirt. “It’s not too deep. He needs blood.”

“Here,” Merri spoke up, shoving his way back into Leander’s line of sight. He pressed his bare wrist to Leander’s mouth. “Drink baby, come on.”

He didn’t want to. Didn’t want to take blood when Merri was injured, but the pain from the silver grew and his instincts took over. Fangs extending, he sank them into Merri’s wrist and a hot delicious rush of life raced over his tongue.

Merri let out a sigh, sounding the opposite of pained. He wriggled around, settling with Leander’s head in his lap and his other hand spread out on Leander’s chest.

Leander drank for another moment, just until the pain receded enough for him to function. He pulled his fangs from Merri’s wrist and licked over the punctures he’d made. He reached

into his pocket and pulled out his handkerchief. Pressing it to the wounds, he gripped Merri's wrist in a firm hold to stop the bleeding.

"That wasn't enough," Merri said, trying to pull his fingers away.

"Merri." Leander looked up at him. "I'm okay. The healing has started."

"But—"

"No buts, love. You need your strength too and the fight is over."

"You both are going to be the death of me," Ammon grouched. He'd sat down beside Leander's hip.

With his free hand, Leander patted Ammon's knee. "Thanks for coming."

"You don't have to thank me, bossman." Ammon grabbed his hand and gave it a squeeze.

Leander moved his gaze to Bellicent. "Bell, thank you. You're a hell of a warrior."

She chuckled. "Heal vampire. I have a feeling our war is just getting started."

Leander nodded and looked up at Merri. Merri carded his fingers through Leander's hair, his eyes still red rimmed. Leander knew Bell was right. He also knew he'd fight forever if it kept Merri safe.

Merrick opened his eyes to afternoon sunlight, his favorite soft blanket draped over him, and Maple asleep in his lap. He didn't have to wonder where Leander and the others were because their quiet voices were drifting in from the kitchen. Derek, Hollis, Cane, and Jake had all come over to check on them after last night's attack.

The mages had apparently saved the day at the gym, using their shields to keep the occupants from permanent harm. They hadn't managed to save the building, but buildings could be rebuilt. The humans who'd done the attacking were mostly in custody—including Neal and his son Richard.

Merrick felt a vicious surge of triumph at that. Even if some of the other masked men had managed to slip away.

"I thought I heard you wake up," Leander said, coming around the corner with a steaming cup in his hand. He sat down on the couch by Merrick's hip, facing him. Maple didn't budge and even let Leander run a hand over her head. "Here. Entirely too much sugar, just how you like it."

Merrick chuckled and pushed himself up to sitting. "I didn't mean to fall asleep while we have company."

Leander leaned in, pressing a kiss to Merrick's lips before handing him the coffee. "Don't worry about it, love. You went through quite the ordeal last night. You need rest to recover."

"I'm not the one who got stabbed."

Leander shook his head with a smile. "Vampire healing works a touch faster than human healing, I'm afraid."

With a sigh, Merrick took a sip of his coffee. It was perfect. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“No, I mean...” Merrick lowered the cup and reached one hand out to lace his fingers with Leander’s. They hadn’t had much chance to talk, just the two of them, since the night before. They’d both been exhausted by the time they got home, and Ammon was determined not to let either of them out of his sight for the foreseeable future. Then their friends had shown up. All of which Merrick was grateful for, but he needed some time for just the two of them too. “Thank you for coming for me.”

Leander’s dark eyes widened before turning unbearably soft. “That’s not something you ever have to worry about or thank me for.”

Merrick nodded, taking another sip of coffee.

Leander squeezed his hand and lowered his voice. “How about I tell our friends you need your rest and shoo Ammon out the door? Then, I’ll find myself something cuddle-appropriate to wear, and we can spend the rest of the day right here.”

Merrick smiled at him. “You’re perfect. You really are.”

---

LATER, AFTER THE SUN HAD SET AND ANOTHER MOVIE WAS getting ready to roll credits. Leander carded his fingers through Merri’s curls. His mate’s head was in his lap, that same soft blanket still draped over him. They’d finished off a pizza and some lemon cookies from the coffee shop across the street.

Merri’s breathing was slow and relaxed, but Leander could tell he hadn’t drifted off again.

Taking a breath, he spoke softly, not wanting to burst the peaceful bubble they found themselves in. “I knew your grandfather.”

“What?” Merri sat up immediately, searching Leander’s face.

“We weren’t close, but I’d see him at various parties and things around town. He was always kind to me. Friendly acquaintances, I guess you’d say. He truly believed that humans and paranormals could live in peace.”

“Wow,” Merri said, awe written into every line of his face. “You’ll have to tell me everything.”

“I will, love. He’s the reason I call you Merri though. I hadn’t seen him in years, but then I ran into him at city hall. He’d gotten much older and when I asked how he’d been, he told me about his enchanting new grandchild, Merri.”

Merri’s eyes turned shiny. “He always gushed about me. Even when I was there and old enough to understand.”

“He loved you.”

“Yeah.”

Leaning over, Leander kissed his forehead and drew Merri against his chest, holding him close and letting his hands rub soothing circles over his back.

“Can I ask you something?” Merri said after a while.

“Of course.”

“Will you tell me about the bond that vampires can make?”

Leander swallowed, hope dancing in his chest. “It would bind us together. Your life to mine.”

Sitting back up, Merri held his gaze. “So I’d be...immortal too?”

“Yes, but it’s not without risks. It would bind our life forces completely. Meaning if one of us was killed, the other would follow.”

Merri seemed to chew on that for a minute. He threw the blanket off his legs and sat up, throwing one leg over Leander’s lap and straddled him, settling himself on Leander’s lap. “Is that something you want?”

Leander gripped Merri’s hips. “Yes.”

Leaning in, Merri took his lips in a hard kiss, wasting no time slipping his tongue between Leander's fangs.

"Merri," Leander gasped, pulling back to rest their foreheads together. "Are you sure?"

"Very sure."

Gripping Merri's thighs, Leander stood and carried him to the bedroom. "Clothes off," he said, setting Merri on the bed before stripping out of his borrowed sweats. When he turned back to the bed, a naked Merri was waiting on him, kneeling in the middle of the messy covers.

Leander went to him, settling himself in front of Merri. Before he could open his mouth, Merri said, "Don't ask me if I'm sure. I already told you I am."

He nodded, a small chuckle sneaking out of him.

"So how does it work?"

Leander looked up at him, keeping his gaze trained on Merri's. "It's easy. I'll take a little of your blood and offer you a drop of mine."

"That's it?"

"It's the intent behind the actions that matter."

Merri let out a slow breath, the only sign he might be a little nervous, and reached out, getting his hands on Leander's shoulders. "Okay."

"Come here," Leander said, pulled Merri over to straddle his lap. He licked his palm, reaching between them to grip both their cocks. He stroked them slow, letting the pleasure build.

"I'm close," Merri whispered, squirming on Leander's lap and pressing messy open mouthed kisses to his mouth.

Leander kissed his chin and down his throat, stroking them all the while. When he reached Merri's pulse, he sank his fangs in, taking a perfect mouthful of blood before pulling back and licking his lips. He lifted his other hand to his mouth while Merri gasped against his cheek and punched the tip of his index finger. A fat drop of blood welled up as he pulled away.

Merri grabbed his wrist, bringing that finger to his mouth and sucking it in.

Leander groaned, coming undone as Merri sucked him clean.

Merri let go of his finger with a shout, hot stripes of his release painting Leander's chest and coating his hand.

The moment Merri's orgasm passed in sucked in a hard breath, back arching. When he brought his eyes back down to Leander's, his smile was impossibly wide. "Holy shit, I can feel you."

Leander smiled too, cupping Merri's cheek and relishing in the golden glow settling into his chest, where their blood bond would live forever. Merri was going to be with him forever. "Thank you," he said, face wet with tears he hadn't realized he'd spilled.

"Loving you is not something you ever have to thank me for," Merri whispered into the narrow space between their faces.

"Now who's the perfect one?" The answer was simple, *his Merri. His mate.*



## EPILOGUE

## LENETTE

The office was quiet. Most everyone had already gone home for the evening, her assistant included.

The quiet emptiness wasn't the reason she felt his presence long before he made it to her office, but it certainly amplified it. Sitting back in her chair, she watched as the shadows lining her walls seemed to tremble.

He was close now.

Old and powerful as she was, she still felt her stomach jolt when his shadow started creeping along the floor through her open door. A moment later, there he was, looking just like he had five hundred years ago when she met him for the first time.

"Your majesty," she said. She didn't rise or bow or any of that nonsense humans associated with royalty. Kerak was the King of Demons, potentially older than the core of this planet, and she had no doubt he could snuff the whole thing out if he decided to. That—thankfully—had never been on his agenda.

"Lenette," he said, voice never as deep as she expected it to be, but no less chilling if you found yourself on the wrong side of him. "You've been busy."

She chuckled. "As have you."

Walking into the office, his gaze didn't waver from hers. The demon king was a handsome man—black hair, black eyes, and a razor sharp smirk. The power that rolled out around him like ocean waves was just as cutting with twice the promise of destruction. "True. Solston was supposed to be the city I didn't have to keep my eye on, but in a matter of a few weeks, my lieutenant has shifted to his true form for all the world to see and the humans seem determined to see all of you extinguished. Why is that?"

Lenette sighed while he settled himself in one of the leather chairs across from her desk. "What can I say?" She shrugged,

demure. “They aren’t fond of a woman with an agenda.”

That smirk turned up a notch. “They never are. As for your agenda...” he let his words trail off, black eyes still trained on her face.

She swallowed. “How’s your mate?”

He didn’t move. He didn’t have to. The whip-crack snap of his power shot up her spine all the same. It didn’t hurt—only a press—and even though she didn’t need the reminder of exactly who sat across from her, she’d known exactly what she was doing bringing Reid into the conversation.

“He is, as ever, in excellent health.”

A slow smile spread across her face. “I’m delighted to hear it.”

A muscle in Kerak’s jaw flexed. “If you believe I’ll ever forget the debt I owe you, you’re mistaken.”

“No, I don’t believe you will, but I am curious why my agenda concerns you.”

“Because I’d like to add to my tab.”

She folded her hands on the top of her desk. “I’m listening.”

“The problems in Solston are nothing compared to those in other cities. Here, at least, there’s peace on the paranormal side. That’s not the case in many places.”

“I’ve heard.”

Kerak nodded. “I’d like you to use your gift to do for some of my lieutenants what you once did for me. What you did for Derek, Jacob, and Leander.”

“Find their mates,” Lenette said with a tilt of her head. Every vampire had a special power. Something unique to them. Leander’s was flight. Hers was matching paranormals with the mate that suited them best. Would help elevate them to their most complete and powerful selves. “You know,” Lenette continued as she considered the request. “We may not be the ones in the worst position, but we’re still in a war here. This battle, we won—”

“But the next is already on the horizon.”

“Yes.”

“What would you have as payment?”

She thought carefully. She could ask him to reduce the city to ash, and he’d probably do it with a snap of his fingers if it suited his purpose, but she loved this city. Had fought for a place in it. Would be fighting to keep that place. It was a fight she was determined to win. “The mages. I need them to stay in the fight.”

“Done.”

Standing, she reached across the desk. Kerak did the same, clasping his hand around her forearm as she did the same to him, sealing their deal. “Send me names and locations. I’ll see your hounds matched with their perfect other half.”

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*AUDIOBOOKS*

Cold Light

PARANORMAL PROTECTORS: ATLAS  
SNEAK PEEK

“Atlas!” the barista called.

*Gavin*, Atlas thought, happy to have finally caught the cutie behind the counter on a day when he was wearing a name tag. Making his way to the counter, he tried to paste a pleasant look on his face. Gavin’s blue eyes only widened a tiny bit as he approached.

“Atlas?” Gavin asked, setting the cup on the counter. The dim lights of the coffee shop made his blond hair shine gold. He couldn’t be more than five and a half feet tall and slim enough he pulled his apron strings to the front to tie them. Atlas felt like a towering oaf next to him. Even with the counter between them.

“I’m Atlas.” He reached for the cup.

“Have a nice night,” Gavin said, already turning away to make the next drink.

Atlas watched him go. “You too,” he whispered before returning to the small table he’d claimed near the back. His phone buzzed in his pocket as soon as he sat down. Pulling it out, he sighed at the sight of his brother’s name on the screen. Hitting accept, he put the phone to his ear and took a drink of his latte.

“How’s your barista crush this evening?” Lark asked in lieu of a greeting.

Heat rushed to Atlas’s cheeks. He grunted. “None of your business.”

Lark laughed, the sound warm and comforting despite him being an asshole. “I hate to cut your drool session short, but [SEER NAME] had a vision. They need us all in.”

“I’m on my way.” Atlas hung up, grabbed his latte, and stuffed his phone in the pocket of his leather jacket on the way out the door. He only paused for a moment once he hit the sidewalk, looking back into the shop at Gavin behind the counter. Maybe in another life he’d ask Gavin for his number, but in this one, Gavin was a normal human guy. Atlas was anything but.

Thankful he’d only ordered a small, Atlas tipped up his latte cup and sucked down the burning liquid with a wince. Moving toward where he’d parked his motorcycle down the street, he tossed the cup in the trash and waited at the crosswalk for the light to turn.

A revving engine caught his attention. Coming down the road toward him, several motorcycle headlights made him squint against their brightness. The lead biker flipped on his turn signal and coasted to a stop next to where Atlas was standing. The rest of the bikes drove on by.

“Derek,” Atlas said, giving a single nod to the Hellhound Alpha. Derek was a big man—not as bulky as Atlas, few people were—but he had a presence that seemed to fill up the whole street.

Derek killed the engine and settled back in the seat, letting his hands rest on his thighs. “Atlas.”

They stared at each other for a moment. This city, Solston, like most cities in the world, was a blend of the mundane human world and the paranormal one. The humans had their own government, and while the paranormals were expected to abide by human laws, they were also governed by the Paranormal Council of the city. The Council worked in tandem with the humans to keep Solston’s paranormal citizens in check, to protect the humans, but to also protect paranormals from humans.

Derek and his Hellhounds were some of the Council’s main enforcers. They represented the demon presence in the city.

“Did you need something?”

“You hang out in this area a lot?” Derek tilted his head. He had inky black hair, pale blue eyes, and dark stubble on the square set of his jaw. One of his hands clenched into a fist, and Atlas wondered what he was really asking.

“I do.” Atlas indicated the corner coffee shop. “That’s my favorite coffee shop.”

Derek inhaled, likely trying to parse the truth from Atlas’s scent. After he stared for a few more seconds, he seemed to make a decision and his posture relaxed...a little. “We’ve heard rumors that a paranormal hate group is plotting something in this area. Have you seen anything suspicious?”

Atlas frowned. Had he been so focused on Gavin that he missed something like that happening right under his nose? “No, I haven’t. But, I just got a call that one of the seers had another vision.”

Derek nodded. “I’d appreciate a head’s up if the target’s in this area.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Good.” Derek started up his bike—a hulking beast of a *Harley*—and rocketed off into the steady flow of evening traffic.

Atlas watched Derek’s tail lights disappear before moving to his own bike. Once he was in the seat, he spared the coffeeshop—Gavin—one more glance. He needed to stop coming here. Gavin was a beautiful daydream. A beautiful, *human* daydream. He allowed himself one solitary moment to mourn the death of that dream then he gripped the throttle and turned his eyes toward the road ahead.

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“Aww, your hunky lovebug didn’t hang around this time?” Charlotte asked with a wink. She was standing at the espresso machine getting ready to pour up the next customer’s order.

Gavin frowned. “First, he’s not *my* anything, and I’m guessing lovebug wouldn’t be on the approved term of endearment list. Second—”

“That was two already.” Charlotte laughed, shooting him a grin over her shoulder. Her curly brown hair was putting up a valiant effort to escape the elastic band she’d used to put it up before they left their apartment. They’d been roommates for two years, best friends for longer.

“Second,” he said again, raising his voice over her cackling. “He doesn’t hang around. He drinks his coffee and then he leaves.”

Charlotte placed the order she’d finished on the pick-up counter, shouting the customer’s name before turning back to Gavin. “He orders a tiny latte, sits with his back to the wall, and stares at you while he drinks it.”

Scrunching his brows, Gavin moved to the sanitizer bucket and pulled the towel out of it, wringing out the excess liquid. “He doesn’t stare,” he grumbled as he started to wipe down their work area. They’d had a steady stream of customers this evening, but it was slowing down. That’s one of the reasons he liked the evening shift better than the morning. Not only was he absolutely not a morning person, but evening in the coffee shop was much more laid back than the crazy rush of people trying to get their caffeine fix before they headed to work in the mornings.

“I wonder what kind of shifter he is,” Charlotte said, refilling the cups and lids from the stock they kept below the counter.

Gavin stood up straight, towel dangling from his hand. Secretly, he’d wondered if Atlas was paranormal, but he hadn’t said it out loud. Not even to Charlotte. “You think he is?”

She shot him a side-eyed look. “He definitely is.” She lowered her voice a bit. “I just can’t tell *what* exactly.”

As far as Gavin knew, no one else at the coffee shop knew Charlotte was a witch. In her own words, she wasn’t *uber badass or anything*, but she did always have a sense about

things that had proved true, time and time again. “And you don’t think he’s dangerous or anything, right?”

Charlotte stopped what she was doing and glared at him.

He cringed. “Sorry. That was rude. I’m sorry. I just...he does stare sometimes.”

“I’ll forgive you just because I know you’re not actually an ass.” She tilted her head, obviously thinking through her words. “He is dangerous.”

Gavin frowned. He knew that somehow. He’d felt all kinds of things when Atlas was there and looking at him, but in danger had never been one of them.

“Not to you,” Charlotte said, quickly, catching the look on his face. “Or me.” She huffed. “Let me start over. He’s good. Righteous. But he’s also dangerous. I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s a cop or works for the paranormal council.” She shrugged. “He just has that feel.”

Gavin could imagine that. What he couldn’t imagine was why the giant, apparently *dangerous* man was interested in him. Rolling his eyes at himself, he went back to wiping the counter. Who said that Atlas was interested in him. Maybe he thought Gavin looked shady and needed to be checked up on.

The bell above the door rang, and Gavin looked up. A man he’d never seen before approached the counter. He was stocky with light red hair and matching scruff on his face. Charlotte called out a greeting, but the man ignored her, never looking away from Gavin.

He dropped the towel he’d been using back in the bucket and walked toward the register. The man watched him every step of the way.

“Hi, what can I get you?”

Pursing his lips, the man glanced at the menu, but immediately brought his gaze back to Gavin. “Coffee. Black.”

“Sure.” Gavin rang up the coffee and took the bill the stranger handed him. All the while feeling the burn of the man’s eyes on him. It didn’t feel the same as when Atlas looked at him—

friendly, appreciative. He imagined this must be what it felt like to know someone was looking at you through crosshairs.

Charlotte poured the man's coffee and set the cup on the pick-up counter.

The man picked it up, never once looking anywhere but at Gavin and moved toward the door. Gavin breathed a sigh of relief when the man finally turned and reached out to push the door open, but before he stepped out, he looked over his shoulder. "Thanks, Gavin. I'll definitely be back."

The hair on the back of Gavin's neck stood up. Atlas may have been dangerous, but this man—who hadn't actually done a damn thing—was terrifying.

*Get Paranormal Protectors: Atlas*