



CONQUERED
BY
MAGIC

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LEXIE SCOTT

CONQUERED BY MAGIC

DREXEL ACADEMY SERIES



LEXIE SCOTT

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CHAPTER 1



Niall and I strode through the door of the pub and claimed two seats at the end of the waxy hardwood bar top. A man wiping glasses with a rag that had seen better days eyed us before tilting up his chin.

“What can I get ya?”

“Fish and chips, and a pint each,” Niall called back.

The man nodded once, continuing his work as if we had all the time in the world. Not that we were in any rush. The whole point of coming in was to sit and listen, so the longer he could drag this out, the better.

We’d been in the small village of Slane for three days and hadn’t heard anything to lead us to the community of resisters Blazer promised was here. Somewhere. He knew this was the closest village, but beyond that, we were on our own.

“How much longer can we stay here without drawing attention?” Niall looked over his shoulder. “This isn’t exactly a tourist destination.”

At least his accent helped us blend in. So far, we told anyone who asked we were visiting family, but when they asked for more details, things got awkward. In a town of this size, everyone knew everyone.

“It would go faster if Theo and Kaden were here.” It wasn’t the first or even the tenth time one of us said that. Being two men down was hard for so many reasons.

My heart broke a little each day we were separated, but we had to do what we thought was best for each of us.

“I know, but we can’t force them. They made their choice. We have to respect that.” My voice came out much calmer than I felt.

Walking away from them was one of the hardest moments of my life. Each step cut into my heart, but I couldn’t change my mind. Until we took off on the plane, I hadn’t accepted they weren’t coming. I spent the entire flight curled up between Niall and Sai silently crying. None of us spoke. They hurt too.

Theo and Sai were best friends—brothers—before we formed our bond, but Sai was just as close to Daniel. He couldn’t stand the thought of leaving him, Hannah, and even Natasha in the Council’s grasp without at least trying to help.

The moment Serene told us Niall’s brothers contacted her, there was no more waiting. Niall packed the moment he heard, and I followed without a second of hesitation.

Our friends, our families, needed us. They needed someone willing to risk it all.

Anything? Sai asked through our connection. He was across the street listening to the locals in a shop. None of us knew what we were looking for, but if there was any talk of disappearances, more visitors than normal, or any strange happenings, we hoped to hear about it.

Nothing. Niall replied. He glanced over his shoulder, taking his time while I pretended to be talking to him.

At what point do we start questioning Blazer's intel?

Not until we know for certain there's nothing going on here. I told Sai.

That might not ever happen.

We'll give it two more days before we move on to the next town. Niall answered with finality. Slane might just be the biggest village in the area.

There are smaller places? Sai asked, and I could picture his brows pulled together and his eyes widening. I almost told him to join us, but splitting up covered more ground.

The castle here draws visitors. If we move on, yes, the villages get smaller.

Sai didn't respond, and Niall and I tensed. Was he listening to someone? Was someone talking to him? Was he in trouble?

This cozy town couldn't have many threats. Then again, we'd been attacked twice within the pack's compound that was supposed to be safe.

When a full minute passed, I reached out. *Sai? Are you okay?*

Yeah. Two women were talking about the sudden increase in diversity in the area and were asking each other if there was an event or concert at the castle that might be attracting them.

Niall and I shared a look. Diversity? They obviously didn't mean supernatural species. Humans wouldn't know, and supes wouldn't talk about it so openly.

They stared at me like I might have the answers. Apparently, they don't get many Indian American tourists. He sounded amused, and I smiled at his attitude. He did stick out

with his deep brown skin and nearly black hair, but he never let it bother him.

The people here were too friendly and sweet to offend. They were just curious about what had brought him to their hometown. A solo traveler here to take in the majesty of Ireland was his go-to response. That both satisfied and flattered locals.

Did they say where the diverse people have been? Niall asked, getting to the point.

They assumed they were tourists here to see Newgrange.

The barkeep set two pints of beer in front of us. “Be a min’ on the chips.”

“Thanks.” I lifted my glass and did the small head nod I picked up on from our nights in the pubs. He returned the gesture and went back to his rag.

Newgrange. Niall stared down at the bar through narrowed eyes.

Is that a supernatural site?

In my brief research, I learned the Neolithic tombs on the edge of town, passages carved under massive mounds of earth in the countryside, were older than the pyramids. Each could fit no more than twenty or thirty people inside at one time. There was no way a community could hide ... magic.

Duh. I was thinking like a human. A powerful enough Space witch could use anything as a hideout. They could turn a hollowed-out tree into an underground city.

Well, probably. I didn’t know for sure. Maybe they had limits. The point was: this was the first clue we had.

Not necessarily. At least not anymore. Niall answered.

We can go and see if we find anything. I can look for tickets. I pulled out my phone, but stopped at the sound of Niall and Sai's laughter in my head. *What?*

We need to look around more than human tours allow. Sai replied first.

How are we supposed to get in? The website said you have to go on one of their shuttles to get to the site.

Niall rubbed my thigh. *We're witches, love. We can make ourselves invisible and undetectable.*

Oh. Right. My exhaustion was showing.

I'll scope it out tonight. See what kind of security we'll need to prepare for.

Do not get caught. There's no way to explain away a wild tiger here. Niall ordered.

No shit. I pictured Sai rolling his eyes. *I'll let you guys know if I hear anything else. If not, I'll be back to the room later.*

Be safe. I love you.

I love you too. Both of you.

Niall didn't say anything, so I nudged him. He shook his head like I was ridiculous. *Love you, bro.*

"Was that so hard?" I asked and leaned back as our food arrived. We thanked the barkeep, and Niall immediately broke his fried fish into large chunks.

"What are you doing?"

He was making a mess.

"They cool faster like this."

I stared at my beautiful, crispy pieces. It should be a crime to destroy them like that. “That’s not how you’re supposed to eat them.”

Niall twisted to me. “And you’re the expert on fish and chips?”

His accent was getting thicker with each day. I was pretty sure he did it on purpose.

“I know you’re not supposed to do that.” I eyed the bar and spotted a red bottle. I leaned over and grabbed it, flipped it over my plate, and was about to hit the bottom when Niall swatted at my hand, making the bottle drop to the counter and roll past him.

“What the hell?” I gasped.

“What the fuck you doing?”

We stared at each other, both confused.

“Getting ketchup for my fries,” I said as more of a question.

“That’s not ketchup. That’s brown sauce.”

I leaned past him and picked up the bottle again, reading the label. “What’s brown sauce?”

“You won’t like it.”

That wasn’t an answer.

“How do you know?” I took off the lid, sniffed, coughed as my eyes watered a bit. “Oh god.”

“Told ya.”

“It’s strong.”

He poured a dash of malt vinegar over one of his chunks.
“I know.”

“Is that good?”

He shrugged. “It’s how it’s meant to be eaten.”

I sat the offending bottle down and pushed it far from me, then reached for the small container of vinegar on my plate. I knew better than to sniff it, but I wasn’t sure I’d like the taste.

“Just stick to the tartar sauce.”

I ignored him. I wanted the full Irish experience while we were here. I poured a bit on the corner of the fish and took a bite.

My eye twitched from the acidic, sour taste.

I reached for my pint and took a sip of the room-temperature beer. Ugh. I needed cold water, but ice cubes seemed to be a foreign concept here.

The phone buzzed in my pocket, and I jumped to pull it out and nearly cried in relief at the name.

“Masie?”

“Saige?”

Tears filled my eyes almost instantly. I hadn’t spoken to her in weeks. Blazer left us with a phone and his credit card when he dropped us off. I tried calling her and Robert a few times, even leaving messages, but this was the first time I heard back from either.

“Oh, I can’t believe it! Are you okay? Are you safe?”

I almost told her everything, but then remembered the warning Blazer gave. We weren’t to give any information over the phone—call or text—about where we were. Even emails

were off-limits. He wasn't sure how the Council was getting intel, but he didn't want us risking anything by saying the wrong thing.

"I'm okay, and for now, I'm safe."

Niall squeezed my knee.

"You're not with the pack anymore?" My aunt asked.

"No."

"And you left two of your mates behind?" Her doubt was evident. She knew us. We wouldn't have separated willingly under normal circumstances.

Don't say anything we wouldn't want the Council to know. Niall warned. *They could be listening.*

I nodded to him. "They wouldn't come with us."

"And you can't tell me where you are."

"No." Then I remembered something from the first time I met my uncles. "You'll have to reach out to Rodney to get the details."

Silence stretched on the line.

"I still can't believe he's been alive this whole time." Maisie's voice held a mix of wonder and relief.

Boy, did I want the full story about them, but that would have to wait. "Do you know how to contact him?"

"Dad's been in touch with Barret. Does he know where you are?"

Dang it. I wanted to force her to reach out to my uncle. "Probably not."

She sighed. “I’m playing catch up here, getting bits and pieces of what happened since you left the Academy. I’m beyond angry with Barret and how he failed you. He shouldn’t have kept you from calling me or Dad. Were you able to talk to your parents?”

“No, but I called them the night we arrived and let them know I was safe.”

“Okay good. Have you talked to any of your uncles since you left?”

Niall pushed a piece of hair back out of my face. His quiet reassurance was exactly what I needed. We did the right thing.

“No, I wasn’t sure if they would want to hear from me.”

“Saige, they love you. Everyone was freaking out when they realized you three were gone. It took a while for Kaden and Theo to tell them what happened, but that doesn’t mean they aren’t still worried.”

“We couldn’t stay there, Masie.” I glanced around, making sure no one was paying us any attention. The barkeep was at the other end, chatting with an older man. I put up a sound barrier, so we couldn’t be overheard. “We were attacked twice. The pack didn’t want us there, and once we heard where Niall’s brothers were, we had to go. Blazer got us—”

I cringed, realizing I said more than I should have.

“I know. I would have done the same thing.” She sighed. “Dad reached out to people he knows. He’s trying to figure out what the Council has planned or where they’re keeping people.”

“I know where.” But telling her over the phone wasn’t a great idea.

“It could be anywhere, and the Council is probably concealing their location.”

Realizing she was probably right about a concealment spell was like a blow to my stomach, knocking out my slim hope.

“We’re trying, though. We’re not the only ones who want to find their location. We’re not alone,” she said with a conviction I didn’t feel. “I’ll call Dad and reach out when I have more information, okay? Stay safe, and take care of each other.”

“Thanks. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

Niall took my hand, and I blinked away tears. “Come on. Let’s go for a walk.”

He helped me pull on my coat, and we stepped out into the brisk air together. No matter what we were about to face, at least we had each other.

CHAPTER 2



No. Please. Not again!

I knew what was waiting for me the moment I turned around, and I didn't want to face it. I took in every detail of the rolling hills, but nothing stood out—nothing I could use as a marker. I slowly turned until I saw the edge of the lake. It too was unremarkable and probably not large enough to be known outside of the immediate area.

The castle, the only landmark worth noting, was several stories high. I counted five windows, thin slits between the rocks, up from the ground floor. It wasn't like Slane castle with its manicured lawns and glass-paned windows. This one looked abandoned from the outside, with chunks of wall and roof missing.

It was probably kept that way for a reason, so if someone did happen to stumble upon it they wouldn't be interested in looking around.

I doubted the interior matched the crumbling exterior if this was where the Council was hiding.

Finally, I turned enough to see the open lawn where the guards stood, watching over their prisoners. Natasha was crying in the chest of the man I didn't know, and Daniel was holding Hannah.

One of the guards said something, and I hurried to look away. I couldn't watch them collapse in screams of pain, not again.

There had to be something I could use to help us find them. I didn't have the same dream twice very often, almost never. So there had to be a reason for this.

A few trees lined the lawn, and a dirt path led up, away from the castle. I ran to it, seeing a road ahead. Maybe there was a sign—a mile marker—anything that would help.

The longer I ran, the further the road seemed. Was this some sort of trick? Magic? I couldn't make it, but I needed to see.

I had to help them! I had to help Hannah!

“Saige.” Sai's voice ripped me from the scene, and I nearly jumped when I opened my eyes. The details of our small hotel room came back into focus.

“Nightmare?”

I nodded and curled into his chest. “I saw them in front of the castle.”

He stroked his fingers up and down the length of my spine. “Was it the same?”

“Yeah.”

“I didn't think you had the same dream twice.”

“I don't. Not normally. I wish I could ask Ms. Chronis what it means.”

Reaching out to her or Mrs. Hedgings at the Academy was not an option.

“Me too.”

“Do you think it means it’s getting closer to coming true?” I lifted my head, resting my chin on his chest to see his eyes.

“I’m not sure. Did you notice the trees? Was there snow? Were they green?”

I closed my eyes and focused on what I could remember. “The lake wasn’t frozen, but it looked like there might have been ice along the edges, and the ground was mostly brown. The patches of snow are old.”

“Sounds like it could be now.” The concern in his voice matched my own.

“But Hannah and Natasha both had visible bumps.” I thought back to my mom’s pregnancies. She didn’t show with Aiden until almost twenty weeks. “They haven’t been gone from the Academy for long enough.”

He kissed my forehead. “You’re thinking like a human again.”

I propped myself up on an elbow. “Supernatural pregnancies are different?”

“No, not normally, but I doubt their pregnancies are normal. Or natural.”

That made my stomach immediately roll. “What do you mean?”

“I’m not sure. There’s no way of knowing until we get them, but I don’t think Hannah and Daniel would get pregnant on purpose, and can you see Natasha having a baby with someone she didn’t know?”

I shook my head. “You don’t think the Council forced them ...”

“I don’t know the Council’s limits. They could have been artificially inseminated.”

I closed my eyes, not wanting to consider that level of violation. Having their agency over their bodies taken away like that made me ill.

“They might have figured out a way to speed up the process. Some spell or potion to make the babies develop faster.”

What a terrifying thought. Niall’s theory about the Council wanting to control hybrids sounded more and more likely. If they could capture and create hybrids, they could do all the experiments they wanted. They could manipulate DNA, creating powerful supernaturals with not one or two species’ abilities, but maybe even all three.

And my friends were trapped in the middle.

“Where’s Niall?” I noticed his absence the moment I woke up. If Sai was here, that meant he finished scoping out Newgrange. “Did you find anything at the tombs?”

“No. No one was there.” He reached up and brushed my hair over my shoulder. “Niall went out. Said he needed to clear his head.”

I rested my head back on his chest. If Aiden and Brielle were missing, I would be a complete basket case. I wouldn’t be able to eat or sleep or think of anything else until I knew they were safe. How was Niall holding himself together so well and for so long?

His brothers were older and at least had training, but it had to be driving him crazy now that he knew where they were.

With Hannah and Daniel and Natasha.

Who knew how many other captives the Council held there? We probably weren't the only ones with loved ones hidden in that damned castle.

"Your heart is racing." Sai tightened his hold, pressing my body against his.

"I'm scared," I admitted. "I'm scared for our friends, our families, and our bond."

He ran his hand over my head and pressed his lips against my hair. "Me too."

"What if we never see them again?"

He didn't need to ask who. There was a hole where Theo and Kaden should be. We all felt it.

"That won't happen."

"You don't know that. What if they never forgive us for leaving? What if something happens to them, or to us? What if the last thing any of us remember is walking away from them?" My mind ran away with all the things that could go wrong.

"You're right. I don't know what's coming next. I don't know what will happen or when we'll see them again." He let out a rattled breath. "That's why I don't want to waste any time we have."

I put my hand on his chest and lifted enough to see him staring back at me. "What do you mean?"

"I don't want to have regrets. I don't want to walk into a battle without you knowing how much I love you." He scooted back to lean against the headboard. I sat up and threw a leg over his and straddled his lap. His fingers traced along my

cheek and jawline before pushing my hair back. His eyes took in every inch like he was committing my face to memory.

“I love you too,” I whispered before leaning forward and pressing my lips against his.

He wrapped his arms around me, holding me close as he deepened the kiss.

I felt everything through our connection.

His love. His desire.

He wanted me. He wanted to protect me, please me, worship me.

I want you too.

Saige. Even though our connection, he sounded turned on.

He slipped his hands under my shirt, searing a path over my skin. I burned from the inside out. I wanted to feel him all over me. I dragged my hands down his shirt, then lifted it while our eyes were connected.

Once his was off, he reached for the hem of mine. I didn't stop him. I wanted this. I wanted to be closer.

His eyes dropped to my bare breast for only a second before they locked back on mine.

“Do you want ...” He closed his eyes. *Do you want this? Or this?*

His fingers trailed up and down my back until they slid over my ass and squeezed. The heat at my core had me nearly begging him to keep going.

“Yes. I don't want to waste another second. I want to be with you completely.”

His eyes flashed with a glimpse of gold from his tiger before he wrapped one hand around the back of my neck and pulled me in.

We kissed and touched until we were both out of breath and needing more. He rolled us so I was laying under him.

He sat up, trailing his eyes over me as I did the same to him.

He was undeniably sexy with lean muscles everywhere they should be. His hair fell over his eyes as he put his hands on my hips.

I reached down and unbuttoned the top of his jeans. “These need to be off.”

He smirked and pushed up to his knees, watching me as he unzipped and pushed his pants down and kicked them off, revealing all of him.

Holy shit.

He laughed, and I realized I forgot to keep my mental block up and told him exactly what I was thinking.

But what else was I supposed to do other than gawk and try to understand how that was supposed to go *inside* me? The night things got heated with us and Kaden in the hot spring, I felt him, held him, and pumped him until he came, but that was different.

This was so much more than a finger or two.

How?

I'll make sure you're ready, babe. Trust me.

I nodded, and he reached down for my shorts, tugging them down with my panties.

“Saige.” He exhaled.

He was so gentle.

This was different from the hookups we had at the pack’s compound. This felt more important than getting each other hot and bothered.

He looked at me like I was precious, delicate.

The embarrassment I expected never came. This was Sai. My mate and, before that, my friend. I trusted him completely. I loved him even more.

He kissed me once before moving down, leaving a trail down my neck and chest, before he took one of my nipples in his mouth. I moaned and arched my back, wanting him to take more.

His hand found my other peak, teasing before he pinched gently.

“Sai.” I gripped his hand, holding him there while also wanting him everywhere else.

He sucked and nibbled, then switched sides.

My core was melting. I wanted—No. I *needed* more. My body demanded it.

“Sai.” I repeated with more urgency.

He pulled his lips away from my sensitive nub with a pop.

“Yes, babe?”

“I need more.”

His eyes flashed gold again, and he moved lower, kissing the top of my hip bones. Shifting to kneel between my legs, he pushed my knees open. He moved lower, stopping so close to where I ached for him.

“You’re still taking the birth control potion?”

I nodded. It was something Serene suggested I start.

He smiled. “Are you ready?”

I hoped so. I wanted him. I wanted this more than anything in the world, but my nerves buzzed, anticipating but scared of the unknown.

“I’ll go slow.”

I nodded, and he kissed me gently as his thick head pressed against my entrance. I exhaled, telling my body to relax as he pushed in.

I gasped at the unfamiliar sensation, and he froze.

Did I hurt you?

No. Just surprised.

I’ll go slow.

And he did, moving an inch at a time to allow my body to adjust. I tossed my head back against the pillow, absorbing the sense of being full for the first time. It was beyond words. A feeling I never knew I was missing—until now.

Okay?

Yes. I bit my lip and looked down to where we were connected. *Fuck. That’s so hot.*

He pulled out, just a bit, before pushing back in. Over and over. I watched, panting. He rested his forehead on mine.

You and me, babe.

We’re one.

Just as I was getting used to this rhythm, he shifted, and a jolt went through me.

Oh!

You okay? He hovered over me, unmoving.

I nodded over and over. “Yes. That felt ...”

“Good?”

“Yeah,” I gasped.

He repeated that motion and my head dropped back.

“Oh, fuck!”

He kissed me again as he thrust. The world disappeared. It was just us. Our bodies moving as a single being.

A feeling, pressure, built deep in my core. *Oh god.*

I dug my nails into his back and clung to him. *I’m going ...*

Let it happen.

I fell over the edge, letting out a moan and calling his name as stars exploded. The room spun, and I floated in pure bliss.

He grunted with his eyes closed and collapsed on top of me, out of breath.

I love you, Sai.

I love you so much.

He kissed my temple and shifted his weight to the side to avoid crushing me. We lay like that, holding each other and soaking in the moment. I wished we could stay just like this forever.

The door opened, and I gasped, too slow to find a blanket or sheet to cover us. Niall’s eyes met mine with no reaction or emotion. He said nothing and walked into the bathroom.

Sai gave me a sheepish smile, then leaned up and kissed me quickly.

The door to the bathroom swung open. Niall stepped out with a wet washcloth in his hands. He stared at me as he approached.

When he got to the edge of the bed, he whispered, “Lie back.”

Sai scooted over, but I froze, propped up on my elbows, staring. He gently turned me so my legs dropped over the side of the bed. I lay back, my head on Sai’s thigh, nearly shaking, confused and embarrassed. My head still reeling from being with Sai.

Niall pushed my knees apart, stepping between them before tenderly dragging the cloth over my still throbbing center.

I bit my lip, fighting back tears from the show of love and acceptance.

When he was done, he bent over and pressed a kiss just above my hip bone, then turned and went back into the bathroom.

I turned my head. Sai grinned.

“I ...” I didn’t know what to say. Sorry, we were interrupted. Sorry, I acted like I was embarrassed by what we’d done. Sorry, Niall just came in and took over.

But I wasn’t really sorry for any of that.

This was us. This was our bond.

We were learning how we all worked and fit together, which was a monumental step forward.

I didn't think Niall would come in and start shouting, but I expected a look of hurt, maybe. He wasn't ready for us to take this step. We enjoyed each other in other ways, but that didn't mean he needed or wanted to see me with the others.

I should have been more respectful. I should have been listening for him.

Sai sat up and reached for my chin. "What's wrong?"

I put my hand over his. "I ..."

Dammit! Why couldn't I think clearly? Why couldn't I put into words what I was feeling?

Niall returned, and I bit my lip, fighting back the burning tears in the back of my eyes.

"Saige?" he asked.

"I'm sorry!" I blurted, then dropped my face in my hands, sitting on the bed crying where I gave Sai my virginity, still naked.

"Sai?" he asked.

"I don't know. She was fine, then all of a sudden she was upset."

"She gave you consent, right?" His voice was full of threats.

"Don't even think that," Sai shot back.

A sigh, then the bed dipped next to me. "Saige? Will you please talk to us?"

Niall had never sounded so soft.

Two hands were on my back. They were both touching me, comforting me. They weren't fighting, and Niall didn't even seem mad.

“I ... You shouldn’t have walked in on that. If I knew you were coming back,” I shook my head. “That was disrespectful and completely inconsiderate.”

One of the hands stopped. “Love? Sai told me what happened. He asked for a few minutes to clean up, but I told him no.”

I slowly lowered my hands and looked at both of them. It was too hard when they were each sitting on either side of me, so I twisted to kneel on the bed and face them. “You knew?”

Niall nodded. “I was on my way back and wanted to check in. I was hoping you were asleep, and I didn’t want to wake you.”

“But you had no problem waking me?” Sai asked with a smirk.

“No,” Niall smiled, actually smiling enough that it made the lines around his eyes appear. “He told me what happened, and it didn’t bother me. It’s not that I *wanted* to see you two together, but I wanted this to be normal.”

He ran his hand over his face and continued. “I don’t think I’m saying this right. We’re a bond. All of us. Yes, we can have private moments, but I don’t want you to think you have to hide anything.”

He wasn’t bothered?

“You’re our mate,” Sai added. “We love you and want to take care of you.”

“And we both did that in different ways.” Niall leaned forward and kissed me. “I love you. I don’t want walls between us.”

“I was impressed with you, communicating like that,” Sai admitted with a grin. “We prevented any awkward or contentious moments. We checked in and were okay with the situation. We’re figuring out how to make our bond work for us.”

My heart was about to burst. This was what I wanted, what I dreamed of. Being one unit. The guys had as much love and concern for each other as I felt for each of them.

I just wished we were complete.

CHAPTER 3



I didn't tell Niall or Sai, but I was losing hope.

Blazer was positive he heard this was where a community was gathering, a resistance. He promised, but days passed without even a whispering of anything supernatural. Not that witches, vampires, or shifters would walk about shouting about our secret world, but I figured by now we would have found at least a hint we were close.

How much longer could we hang around this small village without the locals questioning our presence?

"Maybe we should go to Newgrange again."

I broke the silence as the guys played with their food, not actually eating. None of us seemed to have an appetite anymore.

Sai dropped his fork. "I didn't see or sense anything. Those people assumed the increase of visitors was for that site. Maybe it was a school trip or people on their way to see the castle."

"We could move on, try another town," Niall suggested with zero enthusiasm.

We were all struggling, but I couldn't let us give up. We were close. I had to believe that.

“Blazer brought us here for a reason.” Sai straightened. “We’re missing something. I just don’t know what it is.”

“The other half of our bond,” Niall mumbled.

Sai scoffed.

It was hard not to feel betrayed by Theo and Kaden staying behind, but they were doing what they felt was best for them, just like we were. I couldn’t fault them for that, but it stung.

“Would having them here change anything?” I didn’t want to play devil’s advocate, but maybe if I pushed them a bit, we’d come up with something close to a plan. “What would Kaden do if he were here? What about Theo?”

Niall rubbed along his jaw. “I don’t know. I guess Kaden would remind us to stay calm and think things through. He would probably have contacts here.”

“Theo would jump right into the crowd and use his charm to ask questions without anyone growing suspicious. We’re missing the doers.” Sai smirked.

“What?” Niall asked before I could.

“We’re the thinkers, the analyzers. We take in information and formulate a plan. Kaden and Theo aren’t programmed that way. They do whatever they think they should. Kaden is more calculated than Theo, but they would be more proactive. They wouldn’t just listen. They would ask.”

He was right. Either approach could work, but they were best when they complimented each other.

We needed their help. We needed them.

“What the hell?” Niall leaned forward with narrowed eyes.

I followed his line of vision out the front windows of the café. Three people stood across the street. Three very familiar people who didn't belong here.

Sai stood and tossed cash on the table before we rushed out. I didn't bother checking if it was clear, but luckily, the quiet town didn't have much traffic.

“Masie?” I called as we approached.

She spun. Her strawberry blonde hair swung over her shoulders, and her blue eyes met mine. “Saige! There you are.”

She met me on the sidewalk and wrapped her arms around me. It took a moment to realize she was really here. I hugged her back.

I pulled away. She smiled at Niall and Sai. “Hi, boys.”

“What are you doing?” I asked before they could respond. Rainer and Rodney hovered over her shoulder. “What's going on?”

“She called us yesterday.” Rainer replied through tight lips as he crossed his arms. “She told us to get the answers from Blazer.”

Damn it. I hoped she missed that slip up.

“If you're here to lecture me, don't bother. We're not leaving until we find Niall's brothers.”

“And Hannah, Natasha, and Daniel,” Sai added.

“Saige,” she sighed, and I caught Rodney watching her with worried eyes.

I raised a brow at him. “Is there something the two of you want to explain?”

Masie tried to wave me off, but Rodney cracked. “We were good friends at the Academy. I always missed her and wanted to reconnect, and I finally found a reason to.”

I pointed at him. “We can talk later about what ‘good friends’ means and why you waited over eighteen years.” Then I faced Masie. “We’re not going anywhere.”

“I want you as far away as possible from the Council and whatever is coming more than anything, but I know you. I’m not going to try to change your mind. So, I’m doing what your parents asked and what I think is best.” She finally smiled. “I’m here to help you.”

“All of you?” Sai asked.

“We’ll do whatever we can.” Rainer looked from the guys to me. “I would have come with you from the beginning if you had asked.”

Guilt I wasn’t expecting filled my empty stomach. I hadn’t even thought of talking to him or Rodney. They hadn’t given me a single reason not to trust them or to think they wouldn’t take my side. Maybe, deep down, I assumed they would try to stop us.

“We’re here for you, Saige. No matter what,” Rodney added.

“You’re family. I know this is new to you, but this is how the Stewarts work. We protect one another. We support each other. We fight by your side in your battles.” Rainer put his hand on my shoulder. “We failed you before. It won’t happen again.”

Their words combined with their unexpected appearance and my aunt’s comforting smile broke my wafer-thin walls. I didn’t fight back the tears falling down my cheeks.

“Oh, sweetie.” Masie pulled me into a hug, and my uncles joined in. Then Sai and Niall wrapping their arms around us. We probably made a spectacle, but I didn’t care. I needed a moment to break and lean on my family before I had to be brave again.

Once I was composed, my uncles shifted into business mode.

Rodney eyed the three of us. “What’s the latest? We haven’t heard anything from Kaden or Theo since they landed.”

A few moments passed before any of us could speak.

“What?” Sai cocked his head.

“Blazer confirmed they were here, but it’s been two days. We haven’t heard anything.” Rainer looked behind us. “Where are they?”

“What?” I looked at Niall, but he was as confused as me.

“Kaden and Theo are here?” Sai asked.

Rodney shifted, and Masie put her hand on his shoulder. I’d be asking her about that later too. “They didn’t reach out to you?”

Two days? They’d been here for two days without calling? Why?

My chest tightened, and breathing became a challenge. Why hadn’t they come to meet us yet? Were they hurt?

I would know, right? I asked the guys. We would have felt it through the bond. If something bad happened. Wouldn’t we?

It’s not like we’ve really been able to test that. Thankfully we haven’t needed to.

Did you feel a difference during the attacks? Sai asked.

Niall didn't respond immediately. *I don't think so, but I can't be sure. There was too much going on.*

"What if they were taken?" I voiced my concern, so Masie and my uncles heard.

No one spoke. None of them could assure me that hadn't happened.

"There's no reason to assume the worst," Masie assured.

I added "yet" at the end in my mind. They'd been here for two days without running into us? How? There was only one bed and breakfast and one road with shops and restaurants. They would have to actively avoid us, which they wouldn't do.

Would they?

Were they that mad we left?

But they came. That meant they wanted to help.

So why not find us?

Blazer told us about the B&B we were staying in. It was safe to assume he told Kaden and Theo, so where were they?

Theo? Kaden? Can you hear me?

Niall and Sai frowned when I didn't get a response.

I tried again, reaching for them individually, but the results were the same.

Either they were blocking us out, or they weren't actually here.

"We'll make finding them a priority." Rodney glanced up the sidewalk behind us, "It should be safe to talk, but would

one of you mind—”

“Done,” Niall interrupted. “No one can hear us, and they’ll be compelled to look away.”

“Great. Then tell us what you three have been doing.”

“We’ve gone to every shop, pub, and restaurant, listening for a hint of where the other supernaturals might be gathering but haven’t had any luck,” I explained.

Sai put his arm around me, warming me before I even registered I was cold. “I heard a few locals mention an increase of diverse visitors. They thought people might be here for an event at the castle nearby or Newgrange. I checked both and couldn’t sense anything unusual. No magic.”

Rainer’s brows came together, and he dropped his head.

“What is it?” I asked.

He pursed his lips, then met my eyes. “We should check Newgrange again.”

“Why?” Sai pulled me in closer.

“Because it’s a known supernatural site, and it’s the only lead we have.” Rainer looked up the road, and his jaw tensed.

“What aren’t you telling us?” His sudden mood change had me suspicious.

“Yeah. I thought it was deserted a thousand years ago by our kind.” Niall stepped forward, a bit in front of me. Was he trying to protect me? From what?

“That’s what the stories suggest, but who knows?” Rainer didn’t meet any of our eyes.

“It could be a trap by the Council,” Masie suggested. “It’s a likely enough location that people like us would risk going to

find the rest of the resistance.”

Rainer rubbed above his eye. “When it was active, it was home to a vampire coven after they murdered the witches who lived there first. They controlled this territory for a millennium, until the witches revolted and used blood magic to destroy the coven and curse the tomb. It might not be safe to go near it. At least not for Niall.”

“You think their spells could last this long?” Sai asked.

“I’m only half. My witch side is stronger,” Niall argued.

“Wait.” I put up my hand before anyone else could jump in. “How could it be home to anyone? I haven’t been inside, but I’ve seen pictures. You could fit maybe thirty people in there, but it’s a tight fit. We didn’t sense any magic when we were there.

Rodney started to laugh, but Masie elbowed him in the side. He immediately stopped.

“Neither of you explained it to her?” Rainer asked.

Niall shook his head. “No, she didn’t question it until now, and I didn’t really think about it.”

“Why are you talking like I’m not right here?” I pulled their attention back to me.

“You know what Newgrange is, right?” Rodney asked.

“A passage tomb.”

He nodded. “And you’ve seen pictures of the inside.”

“Right. It’s a straight tunnel to a small chamber with three recesses.” It resembled a cross, which raised human suspicions given it was built in thirty-two-hundred BC.

“And you’ve seen pictures of the outside?” He pressed.

“Yes, I haven’t seen it in person, but it looks massive.”

“And you didn’t question why the inside was so small? What else was in there?”

I narrowed my eyes. “No.”

“It is a passage,” Niall clarified. “Humans got half of it right. They assume all ancient things have to do with death.”

“A passage to where?” I was almost afraid to hear the answer.

“To the tunnel leading to the rest of the chambers. The inside of each of those mounds are huge. Each could easily house hundreds of people. That’s where the witches, then vampires, lived,” Rainer explained.

“The witches closed off the entrance when they cursed it. They didn’t want anyone living there if they couldn’t,” Rodney finished.

I couldn’t believe what they were saying. “We need to go back and make sure the curse wasn’t reversed and people are living there now.”

We didn’t have a car, but maybe there was a bus to take us.

Masie grabbed my hand as I turned to leave. “I agree, but we can’t go right now. We need to wait until night.”

“But we can use an invisibility spell,” I argued. I didn’t want to waste another moment.

“It will be easier to get around without other people there.” Niall put his hand on my forearm and slid it down until our fingers interlocked. “It will give us the time and space we need to investigate.”

If he could be patient, with as much at stake as any of us, then so could I. “Okay, let’s make a plan.”

KADEN



I hated every second that passed without Saige next to me. Theo and I agreed we weren't going to find her or Niall or Sai. Not yet.

It made me feel even worse for betraying them. For not supporting them. For not following them.

Regret filled me the second our bedroom door closed, leaving me alone with Theo and Serene. Back at the alpha's lodge, I might not have agreed with them, but how could I let them walk away?

They're my bond. I loved them.

How could I do that to Saige? How could I have betrayed her trust and love?

She would never have done that to me, and that was the worst part.

Theo regretted it too. We let fear take over and were too stubborn, rather than listening to what our bond needed.

We hadn't changed our minds about feeling unprepared. We weren't fully trained or strong enough to go up against the Council, but we were stronger together. By staying behind, we weakened our bond and left Saige vulnerable. We didn't have our brothers' backs. Neither of us was okay with that.

When Blazer got to the compound, we asked him to take us to them. It took a few days for him to confirm the plane wouldn't be needed by anyone and to convince the pilot to make the journey again.

We'd been here for two days and barely made any progress.

"Any updates?" Theo dropped next to me on the grass behind the hedges lining the fields next to enormous passage tombs.

Being back in Ireland felt right. Not only because I was coming home in a way, but because in my gut, I knew Blazer's contacts were correct. This was the right place.

We were so close to finding the exact location where the resistance was gathering.

"Not really, but I keep coming back to this area," I finally answered him.

"Why?"

He handed me a wrapped-up sandwich and a bag of chips. I greedily ate the food. We'd slept outside, only journeying to the nearest gas station for food when absolutely necessary.

Blazer told Saige and the guys to stay in the nearby town, and since we knew they were there, we decided to give them space. I only wanted to make contact when we had answers, when I could ask for forgiveness, and offer them something of value. Maybe that would make up for letting them down. I finished off the sandwich and ripped open the chips, not satisfied.

"I keep getting pushed away when I fly over the land." I pointed my thumb over my right shoulder.

“Do you think it’s a spell?” Theo finished off his sandwich.

“Yes. I can’t believe it took me this long to figure out that I was being compelled away. I should have picked it up on that sooner.”

We were wasting time. I had to do better. Focus. Take in every detail. Notice what I wasn’t supposed to.

“Should there be more monuments there? Is one missing?”

His question was valid. A spell *could* make one disappear, but I didn’t know for sure. He acted like I was a walking encyclopedia of all things Ireland. Unfortunately, I didn’t know everything.

“I’ve seen the three major ones, but there are supposedly dozens of others that haven’t been uncovered.”

“Maybe the resistance is using one of those?”

I nodded and tossed a few more chips in my mouth while I thought. “It makes sense. Each of the monuments was supposed to house a few hundred people back when the witches lived here. If they were able to open them up, it would have been pretty easy to go undetected.”

“And really easy to defend,” he pointed out. “One tiny entrance into a building built into the hills with thick stone walls. It’s a pretty genius spot for the resistance to gather.”

“Yeah, I just wish they made it a little easier for people to find them.”

“If they did that, it would be easy for the Council to find them too.” He cocked a brow at me.

“I know.” I stared at the grass between my legs. “I just wish that we had some sort of sign or signal to point us in the

right direction.”

He crumbled his empty wrappers into a ball. “Maybe we just don’t know what it is. But Blazer would have mentioned that if he knew.”

Did I miss anything? Any runes or drawings? I spent so much time flying over, but maybe that was too high. What if they were hidden so only people walking by, and paying attention, would spot them?

“How about tonight we go back to the area you keep getting pushed away from? Maybe if there are people out patrolling, they’ll confront us.”

It was the best plan we had, so I agreed. “I’ll do anything at this point to get back to Saige.”

“I miss her so much,” he admitted.

“I didn’t expect to miss Niall and Sai almost as much.”

He chuckled, but it didn’t last long. We were both hurting, and it was time to make things right.



THAT NIGHT, we went to the spot with most pushback and stared out at the empty lot. Nothing but green grass until the next stone wall a few hundred feet away.

“This is it?” he asked.

“Yep. Do you feel it?”

He took a couple of steps forward and grinned. “Yeah, I do. We’re on the right track.”

“We need to figure out a spell to break it or wait for someone to confront us.”

“Which one do you think will happen first?” he teased.

“We’re both witches. We have to come up with a spell to channel our intention. It shouldn’t be that hard.”

“But it’d be a hell of a lot easier if Niall was here.”

Theo’s admission made me smile.

Niall would probably already be inside by now.

“Huh. I never thought I would hear you guys admit you needed me.”

We spun, and my jaw dropped. Niall came towards us.

“What are you—” I started to ask until I realized he wasn’t alone. Sai was walking hand in hand with Saige. Rodney, Rainer, and Masie following them.

“What are all of you guys doing here?” Theo asked.

“What are *you* doing here?” Sai shot back.

Saige kept her mouth closed. Hurt flickered on her face. We messed up. I wanted her to run over and wrap her arms around me, but I had to earn her forgiveness.

“We got a hint the resistance might be at Newgrange,” Niall finally answered, “but we scoured every inch of that tomb and couldn’t find an entrance.”

I nodded in the direction we were headed. “This is the right area, but you weren’t in the exact right spot. I’ve been flying around as much as possible over the last few days, and I keep coming to this area because every time I fly by, I want to leave.”

“You’re being compelled?” Rodney asked, and I nodded.

“Well, that’s a good sign.” Masie moved forward, stopping next to Theo. She turned to face us. “They’re right. I can feel

magic.”

“We’re trying to figure out a spell to help us break in to break through.” Theo held up his hand to the invisible barrier.

“And that’s when you thought of me?” Niall shot me a cocky smile.

Rodney moved next to Masie. “I don’t think a simple spell is going to work. These are really powerful spells.”

“So what do we do?” Sai asked, looking past us to Saige’s aunt and uncle.

“It’ll come down to you witches. I don’t think it’s going to be as easy as you hoped.” Rodney faced us and crossed his arms.

Niall moved between me and Theo. “Well, what do you guys want to try?”

He was asking us for help? That was odd. Normally, he’d give us direction.

“We can start with one for entering or maybe creating a split in the barrier. We don’t need to take down their whole shield. I don’t want to leave them vulnerable. I just want us to gain access,” Theo offered.

“Maybe we can somehow alert the people inside that we’re here,” I suggested.

“We don’t know for sure that this is the resistance. For all we know, this could be the Council,” Rainer pointed out.

“Can we peek inside?” Sai asked.

“The only thing I know for sure is that we can try.” Masie waved her hand and waited for us to line up next to her.

Niall, Masie, Theo, and I stepped up, but Saige stayed back with Sai. I could sense something changed between the two of them, but there wasn't time to concentrate on finding out what it was. We probably had to get through several layers of protection, invisibility, and alarms.

I lost track of time as we worked, trying out different spells and variations. Shockingly, no one came to meet us. Whoever set up the barriers had to know other witches were outside testing them.

My frustration started to boil until I saw Saige walk up to the barrier. She held up her hand and closed her eyes. A moment later, she stepped forward and disappeared.

“What the hell?” Theo shouted, staring at the spot next to him where she had just been.

“Well, at least one of us figured it out,” Rodney said with a light chuckle, as if this wasn't a terrifying moment.

A moment later, Saige appeared. “I don't see anyone on the other side. Maybe if we get closer, we'll find someone.”

It was the first time she spoke, and she acted as if she hadn't done what we'd been trying to do for at least twenty minutes.

I wanted to grab her and kiss her and tell her how amazing she was, but Niall got in my way.

“What spell did you use?”

“I just focused my intention. Not necessarily on getting inside or breaking through any other spells but on seeking refuge and needing answers.”

“Tell us the spell, so we can try.” Theo encouraged.

She shook her head. “I didn’t rhyme or anything. I just thought the words: I’m seeking refuge and need answers.”

“That’s it?” I questioned.

Her eyes darted to mine for a moment before she returned her attention to Niall. “It worked.” She shrugged. “Seems like we’re just overthinking things.”

He grinned down at her. “You’re brilliant.”

She blushed before giving him the most beautiful smile. I would have given anything to trade places with him to have her look at me that way.

He turned to the rest of us. “Ready everyone? Keep your thoughts and intentions focused and pure, and that should be all we need.”

Rodney put his hand in Masie’s, and Rainer offered his to Saige. She took it, and a second later they disappeared together, followed by Niall and Sai. Theo stepped in at the same time as Masie and Rodney, leaving me alone.

I shouldn’t take it personally. I could get through on my own, but no one had even bothered to check if I was ready.

Saige appeared next to me again. “Coming?”

I stared at her beautiful face, feeling worse about letting her walk away without me. She held out her hand. I stared at it, unsure if I was misinterpreting her.

“Kaden.” My name sounded like a plea. Her eyes began watering.

Things between us weren’t fixed, but they weren’t as broken as I thought.

I put my hand in hers, and together we stepped forward.

CHAPTER 5



A woman wearing a thick wool tunic over leggings stood in front of us with her hands clasped. Her long white hair danced around her shoulders in the slight breeze. Her expression gave nothing away. She stared at each of us before returning to Masie.

“You seek refuge and answers?”

“Yes, we are looking for the resistance. We want to remove the Council from power,” Masie said with more confidence than I could muster.

I was still too thrown off by finding Kaden and Theo in the middle of a random field. They weren’t trying to find us. They’d been a few miles away for two days and didn’t bother reaching out. Why?

Now wasn’t the right time to ask, so I did my best to ignore them. Anytime I accidentally made eye contact, my heart splintered again.

A small smile curved on the woman’s lips. “The resistance?”

“Yes,” Masie didn’t waver. “Those who are threatened and those who want to stop the Council.”

The woman grinned. “I know dear. I just wasn’t aware we had a name.”

Masie glanced back at us. “I guess that’s just what we’ve been calling it.”

The woman lifted her hand, waving off Masie’s concern. “I will be sure to pass it on. Now, why don’t you all follow me?”

Masie took a step, but Rodney stopped her. “Not to be rude. We greatly appreciate being allowed in, but how do we know we’re in the right place? That this wasn’t a trap set up by the Council?”

The woman tilted her head. “You don’t. You’ll have to trust me.”

With that, she turned and walked away toward the slope of another massive monument, like Newgrange.

“Should we risk it?” Rodney faced us.

“We’re not going to walk away now.” Rainer glanced over his shoulder. “I’m not even sure that’s an option. We might be stuck in here now.”

Theo and Sai looked back from where we came, as if they could see the invisible barrier we crossed.

“No going back now.” Masie took Rodney’s hand and gestured for the rest of us to follow.

The woman waited for us on the other side of the hill, next to the entrance of the monument.

“Welcome to Slán. Home to those in need.” She smirked. “And the resistance. Watch your heads as you follow me.”

She headed toward the narrow entrance, not looking back.

Rodney took the lead, and the rest of us followed behind in a single line. Niall and I went, hand in hand, with Sai right behind. Theo and Kade made up the rear. None of us spoke as we walked into the stone tunnel.

In person, the structure was similar to the pictures I'd seen, but where those stopped after about twenty or thirty feet, this tunnel seem to go on and on. I couldn't see far enough ahead to know if the woman was still there. Suddenly, Niall darted to the left, pulling me along with him through the dim tunnel.

We emptied into a large chamber so bright I had to close my eyes to let them adjust. The stones were painted white, and the witches had cast spells to mimic overhead lighting without electricity.

We filed in behind Rodney and Masie and saw three people standing in the center. Rainer stood at an angle so he could keep an eye both on our hosts and on me and the guys. Our guide moved to the far side of the chamber where she gave us a small wave before turning away into a different tunnel.

“Welcome.” The fifty-ish looking man in the middle wore outdoorsy waterproof pants and a shirt. He had thinning brown hair and wrinkles framing his brown eyes.

The two women on either side of him seemed around the same age, maybe a little younger. One had pale skin, large round green eyes and blonde hair, cut into a pixie. The other had raven black hair with brown skin and hazel eyes. They wore casual clothes, not looking at all like I expected for leaders of the resistance.

“I'm Alec.” Then the man gestured to the blonde and the brunette. “This is Cara, and this is Farah. We're the leadership team of the *resistance*.”

A smile tugged at his lips, and I wondered how he knew. Was the other woman able to tell them without us noticing? Or maybe he found the rhyming names of his partners entertaining.

“How many people are here?” Masie asked.

“Just under two hundred,” Cara, the blonde, answered with a Scottish lilt.

“Only two hundred?” I blurted, before apologizing. “Sorry, I should have waited.”

Alec smiled. “No need to take turns or ask permission. You won’t be punished for being curious. This isn’t the only safe house location, but it is the only one in Ireland. The goal isn’t for people to stay here long term. We’ve been moving people further from the Council as opportunities arise.”

Niall squeezed my hand before he spoke. “Is there a way of finding out if our families are here?”

“Of course.” Farah pulled a phone from her back pocket.

The other two leaders came forward, speaking with Rodney, Rainer, and Masie.

Watching them cross the center line and come to our side dispelled any remaining tension. Everyone’s posture relaxed, and I could breathe without worrying we were about to be attacked.

“What’s your name? Or the name of your family?” she asked Niall.

“I’m looking for my aunt, Maeve Kelly.”

She nodded and tapped on her phone. “She’s with us.”

Niall let out a breath, sagging against me, and I wrapped my arms around him as relief washed over both of us.

“She’s here,” I whispered in his ear.

“Well, not technically *here*. We moved her to the Welsh safe house a month ago, but we can bring her back or have you meet there, whichever one can happen faster.”

“Thank you. I really appreciate that.” Niall wrapped his arm around my shoulder.

Theo cleared his throat. “Can you check on my parents too?”

Why was he so hesitant? Did he think because he didn’t join us when we left that he didn’t have the right to ask? This was the reason we were here: getting information, finding families, and reconnecting with our loved ones.

“Of course.” Farah waited with her phone raised.

“Nari and Tim Bridges?”

“They’re still in the U.S., but they’re safe. It looks like they joined the Texas safe house three weeks ago. I’ll reach out to their organizers to see how quickly we can get them here for you.”

He rubbed the corner of his eye. “Thank you.”

She grinned and raised a brow at the rest of us. “Anyone else?”

Sai nodded. “I’m not sure if my parents knew to look for something like this or not, but I might as well check.” He gave her their names, and we waited in silence.

“It looks like they’re with Mr. and Mrs. Bridges. I’ll be sure to include them in my message.”

Sai turned to me with the brightest smile, and I looped my arm around his waist, squeezing him to me.

“That’s great news.”

“Yeah, it is.” he kissed my cheek then turned to Theo. “I need to thank your parents for remembering to look out for them.”

“Of course they did. We’re all family no matter what.” Theo finally met Sai’s eyes.

With all the pain we were harboring, we needed to talk things out soon.

Kaden was the last to approach Farah. “My parents are David and Amari Pratt.”

She lowered her phone. “You’re David and Amari’s son?”

Kaden hesitated before nodding. “You know them? Are they alive? Are they okay?”

She shook her head. “Sorry. Yes. I didn’t mean to worry you. I’ve just heard a lot about you. They’re not here. They’re still at the Scotland location.”

Kaden let out a sigh. “That’s what I figured. I just wasn’t sure if they moved or not.”

She squeezed his shoulder. “I’m sure you’re worried about them, but they’re still stationed there for a reason. They’re strong and know how important this is.”

Kaden looked at the ground and nodded.

I wanted to reach out and comfort him, but I wasn’t ready. We had to talk before I was willing to extend an olive branch.

“I’m sure you all would like to rest, so why don’t we give you a tour on our way to the housing levels so you can get

settled in?” Alec’s voice got everyone’s attention.

Taking on the role of our little group’s leader, Rodney agreed. We followed Alec toward the tunnel where our previous guide disappeared.

“We’ll see you guys tomorrow,” Cara said.

She and Farah waved before disappearing into a third tunnel.

The path widened until we could walk two in a row instead of single file. Alec pointed out different hallways and rooms as we passed openings, such as for the kitchen and dining areas, meeting spaces, a training area, study rooms, and other common areas. We saw a few people relaxing and talking, and it was a relief we’d really made it.

Others were safe.

We were no longer fighting alone.

Finally, we circled down a spiral, sloping ramp with several offshoots toward various halls for residences.

“Each has ten rooms, and we have several Space witches to adjust them to fit your needs,” Alec called from the front.

We circled around a few more times until he stopped.

“We have a few rooms open down here.” He paused and watched us as if waiting for a reaction or approval.

It’s not like we had a say since we kind of forced our way in, expecting them to provide us with shelter, food, and protection.

“We’re grateful for anything,” Masie spoke, filling the tight area with the sound of her echoing voice.

“Come along, then.” Alec went down the hallway and stopped before a door. “This room has two beds.” He turned the knob and pushed the door open. It was sparse with two queen beds.

“That will be great for us.” Rainer gestured to Rodney.

His brother walked in but stopped when Masie didn't follow. “You can stay with us. I don't want you alone.”

A blush crept up her neck to her cheeks, and she nodded before following him inside. She turned back and gave me a look that asked if I was okay. I smiled, cocking an eyebrow to let her know we'd be talking about this new development.

“And you five.” Alec turned to face us.

“We're a bond,” Kaden explained before anyone else could say anything. “We can be together in one room.”

Alec blinked, opening his mouth, but no sound came out. He cleared his throat. “Well, this is an interesting development. It seems that we have more we'll need to discuss tomorrow, but for now, I'll let you rest.”

There was no hint of malice in his words, just genuine interest.

Niall and Sai walked into the first room, and I trailed behind them.

“Two separate rooms will work for now,” I told Alec, not taking my eyes off him to see Theo and Kaden's reactions. “But maybe if someone has time in a day or two, we can enlarge one of the rooms so we can all stay together.”

“Sounds good,” Alec agreed. “Let's plan on meeting in the morning after you've had a chance to rest and eat. We'll find you all at ten.”

“Thanks. We’ll see you then.” I stepped inside and closed the door behind us, hoping Kaden and Theo knew that meant I wasn’t ready to talk. I was too tired and had too much to process, even without their sudden appearance.

THEO



After only a couple of days, we threw ourselves into the daily life of Slán. Just like at the Stewart pack compound, we took on responsibilities and jumped into the rotation of jobs required to keep the safe house functioning.

While things weren't as awkward with Saige, Niall, and Sai, as when we first met them, we hadn't talked things out. Saige made an effort to smile or wave when she passed me or Kaden, but we were too exhausted by the end of the day to have the conversation we needed.

I was determined not to let another night pass without clearing the air. I stuck a note on their door asking them to meet at nine when we finished our daily chores. That left me stuck in the laundry room for the day, obsessing over what I was going to say to her and the guys.

As I washed a load of sheets, I forced myself to face a hard truth. Not only did I have to set things right with Saige, I had betrayed Sai, my best friend and brother. I let him down, and that hurt as much as disappointing Saige.

The only bright side of laundry duty was that, as a witch, I didn't have to wash or dry or fold anything that came through. I simply moved everything along with a few pre-written spells left for those who cycled through in six-hour shifts.

The people I worked with here, the kitchens, or on the cleaning crew were all kind but had little to say. Fear lingered in some of their eyes and hope in others'. The strange thing was: no one talked about where they came from or what happened before they arrived. I wasn't sure if we weren't supposed to discuss it or if they couldn't bear to bring it up.

Pretty much everyone seemed to look forward to the future. During my first shift in the kitchens, a vampire a few stations down for me was drying dishes by hand when he received a message saying that he and his family would leave for one of the Central America locations by the end of the week. He cried tears of joy, and I wanted to know his story, but I got the impression it wasn't my place to pry just to satisfy my curiosity.

Seeing how the Council had affected so many people was eye opening.

It wasn't just us.

I knew that before, but it was different seeing it for myself. We weren't the only group that had lost loved ones or been hurt.

Evidence of the Council's damage was everywhere I turned. I'd known they needed to be reined in and their power put in the hands of compassionate and accountable individuals. But I hadn't thought the five of us needed to be involved in making that change.

I still couldn't understand why Saige, Niall, or Sai thought that was such a crazy concept. It was like they thought I was a bad person for not agreeing to run full speed ahead to the headquarters of the Council with our incomplete training and lack of experience.

I didn't want any of us to get hurt. That was all it came down to.

They were my bond. My family. The people I love most in this world. Evidently, I was crazy and selfish for wanting to protect them and for trying to keep them from diving headfirst into a devastating battle.

And what about Saige's dreams about me? Visibly hurt, possibly tortured, lying on the floor of a cell she couldn't get me out of and having Sai pull her away. Call me crazy for not wanting to walk into that situation.

"Theo?"

I turned.

Niall was watching me. "Are you done yet?"

I checked my watch. It was ten minutes past my shift.

"Yeah." My spell finished folding the last towel, and I met him in the hall. "Is everyone else already there?"

He shrugged. "I'm not sure. I passed you on my way down and thought we could go together."

Niall being thoughtful and wanting to spend time one on one with me was more than a little unusual, but I tried not to feel uncomfortable. He was my brother, after all. We were stuck together forever. No matter how much he annoyed me—or used to. We hadn't spent enough time together lately for him to get on my nerves.

We walked in silence until we got to our hall, and he put on his hand on my arm and stopped me. "Can I say something before we go in?"

"Yeah, of course." I faced him and waited for whatever lecture he had on the tip of his tongue.

“I understand why you didn’t come with us. I don’t necessarily want to take on the Council ourselves either, but there was no way I could sit there in the pack’s compound knowing my brothers were in trouble. That’s what pushed me to leave. Saige has seen Hannah and Natasha’s pain and suffering firsthand in her visions. It’s personal for her as well. I’m not sure what made Sai come with us other than his love and dedication to Saige.”

That felt like a dig. Like my love wasn’t deep enough. Like it wasn’t like it didn’t match Sai’s.

Niall must have sensed my defensiveness.

“I’m just saying I understand, and I think Saige does too. It might take a while for all of us to get past this, but we will. Not only because Saige is a saint and able to forgive us, no matter how many times we screw up,” he paused with a smirk, “but because we have much worse to face, and we have to do it together. This is just one mistake, and I’m sure we’ll all make hundreds more, but as long as we ask for forgiveness, accept responsibility for our actions, and try to keep doing better, I think all of us can make it.”

As if there were any other options. We’re a bond. Even if we weren’t magically spelled together, the draw to be with her was too strong to deny. I’d never be able to stay away from her for more than a few days before being drawn back.

“Thanks, Niall.”

As much as his words surprised me, I appreciated having him back on my side. It was the other two who filled me with the most dread going in. I had the most groveling to do with them.

I braced myself as we walked through the door, unable to predict what was coming. Would Sai and Saige forgive me as easily as Niall had? Was I in for a night of groveling on my knees?

Kaden was sitting on the edge of the bed furthest from the door. I sat next to him, facing Sai, Saige, and Niall on the other bed. I wasn't used to being split like this. As Saige pointed out at the compound, Sai and I were an unofficial team. We paired up, leaving Niall and Kaden together by default.

"How was everyone's day?" Kaden asked, breaking the silence first.

"Fine," Sai shrugged. "I was able to shift with some others in the training room and that was nice."

"After being restricted at the compound, it must be nice to shift with others again," I added lamely.

He nodded once before looking down at his lap. At this rate, we would be here for a week. I rubbed my clammy hands on my pants.

"Look, I know we're all tired, so I'll go ahead and address the reason that we're here. I know I should apologize for not coming with you guys initially. I haven't necessarily changed my mind about fighting the Council, but I regret letting you three leave and splitting up our bond. That's not fair to any of you or to us as a whole."

Kaden nodded. "I agree. Letting you guys walk away was the worst thing I've ever done, but I think we all could have done better in that situation. Niall, I know you were acting on instinct and fear and didn't want to waste a second before getting here, but a major decision like this shouldn't happen in the heat of the moment. We should have at least discussed it

before you packed your bags and the three of you walked out. It was a huge step. If we had talked for even five minutes, I would have been willing to come with you guys, but everyone was acting on emotion.”

“I agree.” Saige finally said something instead of staring at her feet bouncing against the bed frame. “It was something we should have discussed, and five minutes wouldn’t have changed anything in the grand scheme of things. We put you guys in a position to make a decision in a few seconds, and that wasn’t fair—especially considering you guys had already given your opinions on the matter of leaving. But we—”

She cut herself off and put her hands out. Sai and Niall each took one, and she continued.

“We acted on what we knew was right for us, but that was selfish. We can’t afford to think that way anymore.” She bit on her lower lip. “Because we’re more than that. We are a bond, and we need to be united. If one of us doesn’t agree on something, the rest of us shouldn’t gang up and force the decision. We should hear each other out and compromise.”

She finally met my eyes.

“I was hurt at first that you guys didn’t come with us, but I knew the circumstances were less than desirable. We all made a mistake that day.”

Niall and Sai nodded on either side of her.

“What hurts me.” She paused, and Sai used his free hand to rub her thigh. “Why I’m most upset is you were here for two days before we found you and you weren’t even looking for us. You guys were a few miles away, and you let us worry...” She stopped suddenly and took a shaky breath. Niall leaned in and whispered something into her ear, and she

noded before continuing. “Why didn’t you come to us when you got here? Didn’t you hear me trying to reach out to you?”

I sucked in a breath, not quite sure how to respond. Telling her the truth was the obvious answer. But what had made sense a few days before now seemed like the stupidest idea we ever had.

“We blocked our connections. We didn’t want to come to you until we had answers,” Kaden admitted. “I don’t know. Maybe it was our way of trying to make it up to you guys. Blazer told us this was where we needed to be, where we would find the answers, so we stayed. We slept in the fields. We searched nearly nonstop because we didn’t want to come to you empty-handed. It wasn’t fair to try to ask for forgiveness—”

“That’s not true,” Saige cut him off. “You don’t have to offer something or bring something to the table to earn forgiveness. It’s not a trade. Forgiveness should be given freely. What you guys said before is right. We’re even closer than family. We’re one. We belong together. We work best when we act as a group.”

“Obviously,” Sai said with a smirk. “It wasn’t until we’re all together that we found the entrance.”

She looked from me to Kaden. “I want us to move past this. Not to forget necessarily. It’s a good lesson for us to remember. We need to talk and listen more. We should take a second to breathe and communicate before jumping into something potentially dangerous or something not everyone agrees with.”

“Sounds good.” I agreed, and the others followed.

“Since we’re all about being open and communicating.” Kaden leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “I’m not trying to start a new fight or anything, but what happened while we were apart?”

“We went to shops, restaurants, and pubs to listen in on conversations to see if we heard talk of something that could lead us here,” Niall explained.

The muscles in Kaden’s jaw flexed. “Anything else?”

What’s going on? I reached out to him, but he didn’t answer. His walls were up, not letting me in.

Sai narrowed his eyes. “If you have something to say, just say it.”

They glared at each other. What had I missed?

“Fine.” Kaden balled his hands into fists. “Something’s changed between you two. I can tell.”

Saige narrowed her eyes. “We don’t need to discuss this. I’ve told you guys our individual relationships are private.”

My brows shot up. Something did happen between them. Something big.

Shit! Did you two? I asked Sai, wagging my brows.

His annoyed eye roll was all the response I needed.

Damn. I’m jealous.

Shouldn’t have let her leave then, asshat.

Fair enough. I deserved to miss out when I wasn’t there for her.

Kaden cleared his throat. “Right.”

The tension in the room fizzled out as he relaxed his shoulders.

Sai rubbed Saige's back. "Let's focus on what matters. Like our bond."

"Yeah, we can't let trivial things pull us apart," Niall added.

"Trivial?" Kaden mocked.

Saige snapped her head toward him, pursing her lips before speaking. "We need to stick together from now on, no matter what. Even if they try to separate us by sending us to different safe locations. That's absolutely not an option. We're staying together from here on out."

I agreed with the rest of the guys, but it didn't erase the dread taking up residence in the pit of my stomach.

I knew what their plans involved, and I wasn't sure I would, or could, participate.

How could I walk into a situation when I knew the ending?

When I knew it would involve me bruised and battered in a cell with Sai and Saige running away?

Leaving me alone.

CHAPTER 7



I was trying to find Alec in the maze of tunnels and rooms to ask him about increasing our room when Farah came rushing down a hall.

“I’ve been looking everywhere for you and your mates.”

It was strange to be outside the compound and still be so open about my relationship with the guys. Strange, but kind of wonderful to not hide it anymore—at least not here.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

She waved for me to come with her as she continued her search.

“We need you all to come to one of the conference rooms.”

As we walked, I lowered my mental barrier and reached for the threads of our psychic connections.

Can you guys hear me?

One by one, they replied.

Farah needs all of us to meet in one of the conference rooms.

Right now? Sai asked.

Yeah, it seems important.

They each confirmed they were on their way.

“They’re coming.”

Her questioning glance prompted me to explain.

“We can communicate telepathically.”

“Is that so?” She tilted her head. “I’m very curious what the five of you can do. I’ve never met a bond so large.”

Immediately, my instinct to protect my mates took over.

“We’re not a science experiment.”

She lowered to the folder she clutched over her chest and stopped walking. “No, Saige. I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean it that way.” She closed her eyes and lowered her chin. “Especially with what the Council has been doing. No, that’s not what I meant. I don’t want to test you guys or anything. I was simply curious. None of you owe me, or any of us here, an explanation or demonstration of your capabilities. I was just thinking out loud.”

I relaxed and felt a little guilty for attacking her. “I’m sorry too. I’m not used to being around people we can be open with, and from what we’ve seen and heard from the Council, I’m terrified of what they could do to us.”

She offered a sympathetic smile. “Let’s not worry about that right now.”

Reaching the conference room, I froze in the doorway. Maeve, Niall’s aunt, paced the opposite wall. When she heard the door open, she stopped and turned.

“Oh, sweet Saige!” She ran over and gave me a hug.

I wrapped my arms around her, tearing up. I hadn’t seen her since our bonding ceremony, and even though we only

spent a few minutes together, I loved this woman. Not because of anything she'd done for me but because she loved and cared for my Niall when he was alone. He didn't have anyone else, and she took him in. She didn't have to, especially with two boys of her own to take care of, but that's who she was. She made room in her home and heart for him, and I'd always be grateful.

"Is my boy okay?" she whispered.

I pulled away and nodded, wiping my tears. "Yes, he's safe and being as strong as he can."

She wiped my cheeks and examined me. "You've been through so much. I can see it in your eyes."

There was no denying that.

"He'll be so happy to see you," I told her.

The door opened again. Sai entered, his mouth falling open, followed by Kaden. He smiled.

Theo stepped in, eyes going wide. *Niall's going to weep.*

Don't make fun of him. I warned.

He smirked, not replying. I was about to threaten him when Niall entered.

He scanned the room and found his aunt. His entire being changed. Relief, love, and complete joy overtook both of them and had me in tears again.

They ran to meet each other, colliding with a hug. He wrapped his arms around her, and she held him like a child even though he was a few inches taller.

A sniff in the corner caught my attention. Farah wiped her eyes. "Sorry, the reunions get me every time."

Thinking of how draining these emotional scenes must be over and over again, I softened toward her a bit more. She never took these moments for granted. That they still affected her was a great attribute in a leader.

“I can’t believe you’re here. You’re really here.”

Niall put his hands on her shoulders. She stared up at him, touching his hair, his nose, and wiping away the tears coating his cheeks.

“Dear boy, I’m so glad to have you with me again.”

“Sean and Conor?” he asked, and her smile dimmed.

She shook her head. “They were taken while on a mission with several others. Their team was trying to rescue a group of about thirty witch and shifter hybrids living in a forest in Germany. Something went wrong. The Council’s troops found and captured them. A few of their teammates made it out and were able to alert our leaders, but so far, no one has been able to get to them.”

My heart broke. She confirmed what Serene told us. His brothers were brave and selfless, willing to sacrifice their safety to help those in need.

“Why aren’t we doing more to help them? To get them out?” I looked from Maeve to Farah.

“It’s not as easy as planning another rescue mission. Our scouts confirmed they’re being held at the Council’s headquarters,” Farah started to explain.

“Which is where?” Niall asked.

“They have one well-known base in northern Scotland, but it’s more of a symbol than the actual place where the Council meets and does business. They only use that estate for public

events. Their true headquarters is about seventy-five kilometers south. It's—"

"Is it a castle?" I cut her off. My heart raced. I was so close to getting explanations of my visions.

"Yes." Farah's brows pulled together.

"On a lake?" I asked.

She cocked her head. "How did you know that?"

My body sagged, and Theo got to me in time to lower me into a chair before I fell.

This was the confirmation we all needed, yet dreaded. Even though we had an idea of what the castle was, having it confirmed was too much for me.

"I've seen it," I finally answered. "In my visions."

I closed my eyes, wishing I could will away the pieces of my visions that kept popping up in my mind. Flashes returned.

The lake.

The wide lawn.

The enormous building I had to tilt my head back to see.

The first time I saw the castle, I didn't understand what it was. Niall did a dream analysis as if they were merely symbols for me to interpret. But then I saw Hannah and Natasha walking out of that same castle alongside Daniel with swollen, pregnant bellies. That's where Niall's brothers were too.

"We can't wait. We have to get to them as soon as we can. Do you know where it is?" I asked Farah.

"Yes, we know its coordinates, but why do you need to go there? What do you mean?"

Before I could answer, the door opened again. Theo and Sai's parents walked in together. My emotions somersaulted.

The guys ran to them, and a joyous jumble of long-awaited greetings filled the room. Too many people talked over each other to figure out what any one person was saying. Kaden came to my side, looking at the chaos unfolding in front of us.

"I'm not sure I ever really believed I'd see this day," he admitted.

"It feels too good to be true." I hated to be cynical, but my optimism disappeared sometime after the second attack at the compound.

After a few minutes, the shock of seeing their parents wore off. Everyone was quiet enough for Farah to direct us to seats around the long conference table, leaving a few seats empty at the head. Alec and Cara came in along with Rodney, Rainer, and Masie. They said their hellos and rounded the table to the empty spots.

Masie hugged Niall's aunt before stopping behind me and squeezing my shoulders. "Everything okay?" She leaned down and whispered.

I shook my head just enough for her to notice.

"A little bit of chaos?"

I nodded, and she kissed the top of my head before taking the seat next to Rodney. Rainer sat across from them with Alec at the head of the table.

Sai pulled out a chair for his mom, then went around to sit across from her.

"Where are your brother and sister?"

His grin dimmed. “They sent Anil to stay with Meera and my brother-in-law. They thought he would be safer with them than coming here.”

“That’s good. It’s better they’re away from here.”

“I know. I just miss them.” He pulled out a chair for me, and we sat just as arguing started.

“What are the kids doing here?” Nari, Theo’s mom, demanded the second everyone was seated. “They should be somewhere safe. They should be hundreds of miles away from here.”

“What happened to your pack?” Amar, Sai’s dad, demanded of Rodney and Rainer.

“None of us are quite sure where ‘safe’ is anymore. If it’s even possible for them at this point,” Rodney answered in a calm tone. “I’m sorry that the pack couldn’t protect them. We were attacked once news spread the Council wanted them, and there was a price on their heads. Not even our pack could keep them safe at that point.”

I hated that my uncles were being interrogated as if it was their fault. Once the news spread, people would have come after us anywhere.

Rainer leaned forward. “Their only option was to either hide or run, and neither is an acceptable life.”

Amar shook his head. “But at least they’d be alive and together.”

I felt the need to speak up and defend our decisions, but Sai beat me to it.

“Going somewhere to hide wasn’t an option any of us would consider, not when so many people are in trouble. Now

we have a target on our back. We'd be going from the pack to another place, making the people we're around targets as well. I couldn't live with that. I don't think any of us could, and spending the rest of our life on the run, disguising ourselves, and living fake lives? None of us wanted that, either. The only option was to fight back." Sai exhaled and looked around at his bondmates for support.

Theo rubbed the back of his neck. "But we have another option now. We can rest now. It's not all on us anymore. We found the resistance. Our parents are here. The adults can make the decisions, and we can let them overthrow the Council. We don't have to be involved. We can go back to studying and training. Go back to being teenagers."

I couldn't believe he was saying this again after what we'd been through and seeing how many people have been affected. People we loved. Niall's brothers and our friends were in danger.

"I can't sit back and do nothing," Niall said with more calmness than I felt. "My brothers are being held prisoner. They were desperate enough to reach out to anyone for help. We're incredibly lucky they connected with Serene. I can't rest or sit back and let other people take care of this. My brothers would do the same for me."

I reached under the table and took his hand in mine. Unlike the others, Niall's parents were gone. He'd had to grow up and think for himself. He knew the cost of just hoping things would figure themselves out. So did I.

"Hannah, Natasha, and Daniel are there." I paused, trying to gather myself before I started crying again. "I can't leave them behind knowing what I know."

"What do you mean?" Rashana, Sai's mom, asked.

“I had a vision of them being held at the Council’s castle. Hannah and Natasha are pregnant, and Daniel is there. They’re being held prisoner.”

“We don’t know for sure that wasn’t something that they agreed to,” Tim, Theo’s dad, suggested.

“No,” I snapped. “Hannah might love Daniel, but there’s no way they choose to have a baby right now. And Natasha ... There is no way. I didn’t even recognize the guy with her.”

“Natasha Badalyan?” Farah asked.

“Yes. She was my roommate at the Academy.”

Amar dismissed my concern. “Well, her grandfather’s on the Council. There’s no way he would let anything bad happen to her.”

Farah’s head snapped towards Alec, catching all of our attention.

“What do you guys know?” Rodney demanded.

“Councilmember Badalyan is one of the few who has shown opposition to what the Council has been doing,” Alec explained. “But we’ve had no visual confirmation of his well-being in two months. At this point, we’re not even sure if he’s alive.”

I squeezed Niall’s hand. We couldn’t stay silent, and we couldn’t sit back and hope for someone else to step in. If Natasha’s grandfather was dead, then they had no one fighting for them from the inside.

“See,” Theo put his hand on the table. “The five of us are no match to go up against the Council in any way. They’re willing to kill one of their own.”

“I don’t think they’re willing to kill us,” Niall argued. “We’re far too unique and far too interesting for them to kill.”

“Yeah. So instead, they’ll keep us prisoner and run as many creepy tests and experiments on us as they can.”

“I understand your sense of self-preservation, but can’t you see there is a greater purpose here?” Niall slammed his hand on the table.

Theo pushed his hands through his hair. “What part of us being untrained teenagers do you guys not understand? Saige has only known about her abilities for a few months. We’ve trained together as a bond a few times, but we’ve never worked together in a battle; we’ve always been separated. We’ve never tested our abilities in a real-life scenario. Just because we can strengthen each other’s powers when we’re messing around doesn’t mean, when push comes to shove, we’ll be able to save each other.” He sighed. “Sorry. I’m not willing to risk my mates’ lives. Call me selfish. Call me cruel. I don’t care, but I’m not going to march up to a castle and try to get prisoners out when we know we can’t win.”

We were talking in circles, and we’d never get a resolution in this room. Getting an agreement would require several hours and days of conversation.

Alec folded his hands on the table. “It seems you go guys have quite a bit of information beneficial for us to know. Perhaps if we exchange what we know, we could come up with a plan that works for everyone.”

I agreed. I was willing to work with the resistance. Obviously, we were here for a reason. We felt they could be a resource. But I wasn’t going to let them push us off to the side and discount us just because we’re teenagers. This fight was more than personal to me.

The Council killed my birth parents. They tried to kill me. They tried to take me from the Academy. They put a price on my head, sending people to kidnap us. There was no love lost.

I hated them.

I wanted to see their downfall. I wanted to be a part of it.

I wanted to make them pay for everything they took from me, but I also couldn't go back on what I said last night.

We needed to stay together, the five of us. We were so much weaker split.

How could I convince Theo to do something dangerous and life threatening if he didn't want to? That wasn't fair of me.

I couldn't force him into that situation. I wouldn't.

There had to be an answer, but I was pretty sure I wasn't the one who had it. I looked around the table and hoped we would come up with a realistic plan together.

CHAPTER 8



“We know about the castle. We know that Maeve’s sons, Niall’s brothers, are being held there, and three of our friends from the Academy are also there. They’re being experimented on. We know the Council is behind the deaths of hybrids and those in interspecies relationships sixteen years ago. And we know they’re still interested in hybrids.”

Farah wrote down notes while Alec watched me.

“Part of this information has come from visions?” he asked.

“That’s correct.”

“You’ve had other visions?”

I didn’t want to discuss this. I didn’t see the relevance. But if telling him about my other dreams made him believe in this one, I would rehash it.

“Yes, I’ve had dreams about natural disasters before they happen, but never in time to prevent them or to warn people.”

“Can anyone vouch for this?” he asked the room.

“I can,” Masie interjected. “She’s had these visions for years, before she was trained or even knew that she had witch blood.”

I noticed her hesitation about mentioning my shifter side. We hadn't had a chance to discuss it, but I guess we were going with the same information we told the pack when we first arrived there. It's better to play it safe and not give out too much information to people we didn't yet trust.

"We've confirmed people are being held at the castle," Alec admitted.

"But you're not doing anything about it?" Niall asked. "If you know people need help, why hasn't anything been done?"

Alec defended their choices. "We want to get those people out of there, but there is a process we need to follow. We can't run in without a plan. We would lose too many people and potentially put those inside at even more risk."

"So what's the plan so far?" Rodney asked.

"We're training and gathering intelligence. We need to put together a team of qualified individuals with the combined abilities to infiltrate the castle and free the prisoners without mass casualties."

Niall put his hand on the table and leaned forward. "I want to help. I want to be involved."

Alec smiled. "We appreciate the enthusiasm, but you're children. We can't possibly send any of you into a situation like this."

"I told you," Theo said from the other end of the table, crossing his arms over his chest. His parents looked down at him, then to those of us in the bond.

"Some of you were willing to go against the Council?" Nari asked.

“Yes.” I dipped my head toward Niall. I didn’t want to speak for Sai at this moment. “We are both willing to confront them ourselves.”

I glanced at Masie, expecting her to frown or shake her head like some of the other parents were, but she gave me a sad smile. She understood this was more personal to me and Niall. We both lost our parents. We lost families. Futures we could have had.

Not that I regretted being raised by my parents, but I missed the opportunity to know my birth parents. Missed the opportunity to grow up knowing I was a witch and a shifter. The Council took so much for me. I wasn’t about to let them take anything else.

Alec cocked his head. “I was under the impression you’ve only been training for a few months.”

“That’s correct.”

“You’re not capable of fighting the Council’s troops. It’d be much too dangerous, more of a liability than a help, to send you in. The best thing to do right now is to continue with our plans.” His words stung, hitting the center of my insecurities, but I wasn’t going to let him have the ultimate decision.

Farah pulled the conversation back to exchanging information. “We’re working with the intel our scouts are giving us and continuing to train and work to develop teams suited for rescue missions. We’re not going to let a group of children into a war.”

Children. I repeated to Niall.

He squeezed my hand.

That’s all they see us as. His irritation was clear.

“We’re eighteen,” Sai pointed out. “Well, everyone but Saige. But her birthday is next month.”

That didn’t seem to faze Farah. “Right now, the best things you guys can do is join the rest of the children in classes.”

“I would love to be a child. I would love to have my innocence back, but it had been ripped away from me.” I glared at the so-called leaders.

Sai made a strange noise, and I glanced over to see him hiding a smile. Niall leaned back and cocked a grin.

Theo’s eyes darted from me, to his parents, to Alec and back.

Kaden was expressionless, not showing either side support.

I couldn’t think about our problems right now. This was bigger than our bond.

“The best thing we can do is train together, not sit in classrooms.” I continued. My plan hadn’t been to argue with those who welcomed us, but I couldn’t sit back and allow more people who didn’t know us dictate what we should do.

Farah only hesitated for a moment before looking down at her phone. “There’s a training room available in fifteen minutes. I’ll reserve it for your bond to use for two hours a day. Would that work?”

“Yes, thank you.” I was trying to stay as reasonable and diplomatic as possible when all I wanted to do was stand up and scream.

They needed to get off their asses, go to the Council’s secret hideaway, and rip it stone from stone until there was no place left for them to hide, until I had my best friends back in my arms, until I knew that they were safe. Unfortunately, I

wasn't a leader. I was just a seventeen-year-old girl lacking enough training to keep these people from doubting me.

They dismissed us.

Alec, Cara, and Farah asked us to leave so the adults could talk. I couldn't believe it. I honestly could not believe they'd asked us to leave as if we were little kids who needed to be sheltered from the truth.

The only thing that had me willing to stand up and walk away was knowing that Masie, Rainer, and Rodney would let us know everything once they were done.

"Let's go to the training room," Niall suggested when we reached the hall.

He led the way, and I followed behind. Sai put his arm around my shoulder. I wanted to shake him off, but that wasn't fair. I wasn't mad at him. I was mad at the situation, and I didn't want to take it out on any of the guys.

Small screens hung outside of each training room with the name of the reservation and their time slot. Niall found the one with my name on it.

The room had a tiled floor with padded walls so we'd be able to throw each other around. I put up a privacy spell to block us from being recorded or overheard.

"Saige, I'm sorry," Theo started, but I put up my hand.

The anger simmering just below the surface was rising, and I honestly didn't want to look at or talk to him right now.

Why didn't anyone understand or appreciate the gravity of this situation? It wasn't just the people we cared about who were stuck in there. Who knew how many others might be there? Dozens—maybe hundreds—of people were being kept

away from their loved ones, tortured, even experimented on. They were forcing pregnancies on eighteen-year-old girls.

It made me sick.

Rage took over.

I closed my eyes, remembering the earthquakes I used to cause when my emotions got out of control. I let that feeling take over, ignoring my training. Ignoring how I should be channeling my abilities in a healthier way. I threw my arms out to the side, making the room shake uncontrollably.

“Saige!” Sai screamed.

“Shit! Control her!” Kaden yelled.

“What do we do?” Theo shouted out from somewhere behind me.

“Just leave her alone!” Niall’s voice came from in front of me, but I didn’t open my eyes.

I screamed, not sure if it was just in my head or if it was out loud. I didn’t care. I screamed and forced all my power, my anger, my frustration, and the sickness that kept me up wondering if my friends were okay.

I let it all out.

As the room shook, a spinning sensation took over. When I ran out of breath, I crumbled to my knees and dropped my head to the ground, panting. I didn’t want to look up at the destruction I might have caused. I wanted to stay in this empty state for as long as possible. I let everything out and now I wanted to pretend, for just a moment, that was enough.

Slowly, I opened my eyes and took in the wreckage I caused. Hopefully, it was contained to our room, but frankly, I didn’t care.

The panels on the walls were ripped. Some of them lay broken off on the ground. I'd cracked the floor, creating an opening off to the left at least a foot wide and several feet long and a fissure in the ground. The lights above were still on, but the fixtures were shattered, raining glass around us. I hadn't noticed any of it during my fit.

"You done?" Niall asked without a hint of anger or condescension. I rolled onto my back and stared up, not really seeing.

"They took everything from me. They killed my parents. They took my chance to grow up in this world and took away the opportunity to know my pack. They took seventeen years with my grandparents. They took your parents, your baby brother, and now your older brothers. I don't need more training. I don't need time to think it through. I don't need a plan. All I need is revenge."

"Saige, you need to calm down," Theo warned.

I didn't need to hear that—especially from him. I rolled onto my knees and faced him. "You don't have a say! You and your family have been able to live your truth safely your entire life. You've been protected. You've never had to hide! You have no idea what it's like having to keep half of who you are a secret. You don't know what it's like not knowing who you are and where you came from because the *adults* thought they knew better and kept the truth from you! How long am I supposed to let the people who keep failing me make my decisions?"

"Saige," Sai cautioned, "you don't mean that."

I glared at him. Who was he to tell me what I meant or what I was feeling?

“No, she does.” Theo took a step back. “She just used to care about me enough not to say it.”

With that, he left, and Sai went after him.

My shoulders fell, and I dropped my head.

“Is that what you think of me too?” Kaden asked, just loud enough for me to hear. “I got to grow up with my parents. I got to be a witch, and shift when I wanted, so I must not understand pain.”

“Stop it,” Niall cut in. “None of us have had easy lives. Each of us has suffered, and it all goes back to the Council. We need to remember that instead of turning on each other.”

“It’s hard when the future doesn’t seem much better,” I admitted. “And we’re not doing anything to change that. I can’t sleep. I can’t eat. I spend every second worrying, and we’re doing nothing.”

“You’re not the only one who feels that way,” Niall came and sat next to me.

“No, you’re not.” Kaden knelt in front of us. “We haven’t heard back from my parents. I have no idea if they’re okay or if something happened.”

Now he cared. Now that it was personal to him? I almost said the words but stopped myself. Niall was right. We were lashing out at each other. Our anger should be directed at the Council.

We needed to find them.

NIALL



*M*aeve made tea and set the cups on the table between us with scones. Even though we were underground, living in what felt like a timeless loop, she was still dedicated to her Elevenses and invited me to her little apartment to talk the day after the meeting from hell.

I reached over and took her hand, letting the emotions I'd hidden from my bond, especially Saige, run over. I needed to be strong for my aunt, but I allowed myself to be selfish for a moment, to cry, to unleash my frustration, and to wish for things that couldn't be.

"I don't know how to be there for her. We're both hurting so much. If it was just the two of us, we'd be gone already. We would be in Scotland, scouring the entire country for the castle. But that's not our reality. I don't know how to support her without repressing her, or at least making her feel like I am."

She patted my hand. "Niall, my boy, I'm so sorry. I'm sorry you're caught up in this. I wanted to protect you from the Council. I wanted them to stay away and never be able to hurt you again."

"It's not your fault. None of this is in our control." That was the worst part. What we wanted didn't matter. The

Council pulled the strings. “None of this is our doing, but I think about it all the time. About Saige, our friends, and my brothers.”

She closed her eyes for a moment before looking back up at me. “You’re doing your best. We both are, and I know Sean and Conor would say the same thing. They were doing what they felt was right.” She paused and took a sip of tea. “They were helping those in need; they don’t deserve this more than anyone else. But if the Council was able to get their hands on them, I can’t imagine what they would do to you.”

She was right. My brothers were full-Water witches and extremely powerful. They were trained not only through the Academy but by private special task forces for years. If they were captured and tortured and imprisoned, I didn’t stand a chance. My mind knew that, but my heart wouldn’t listen.

“I can’t sit back and hope someone else will step up.” I looked into her teary eyes. “You know I’m powerful, and even more so with Saige and the guys. We combine our powers and elevate each of our abilities. We don’t yet know what we’re fully capable of, but five of us might be able to go against them and win.”

“A chance,” she repeated. “A slim one at that, because it doesn’t seem like all of you are on the same page.”

I broke from her grasp and lifted my teacup to my lips. The familiarity of home should have been reassuring, but it was just a reminder of where I was compared to my brothers.

“Yeah, a few of us need to pull our heads out of our arses.”

“Niall!” she chastised, but I caught a hint of a smile. “You can’t force someone into a situation like this. They have to go willingly.”

“I get it. I completely understand why Theo doesn’t want us to go. He wants to keep us safe and keep us together. I understand and agree. That’s usually my number one priority. But I know Saige. There is no way she could ever be happy without having at least tried to save our friends. If anything ends up happening to them, she would never forgive herself. I’m not sure if she would ever forgive Theo, either. I don’t see us all being happy in five or ten years if we don’t do the right thing now.”

“That’s very true. Your decisions now will have big consequences either way you go, but you make a good point. Whatever you decide, you have to be able to live with.”

“Theo would argue not going was the only way to guarantee we’ll live at all, but what kind of life is that?” I dropped my head in my hands, wishing I had the gift of sight but not like Serene or Saige. I wish I could call up a vision of the future at will. I didn’t know if that was possible. Maybe there was a reason. We weren’t meant to know everything.

“Have faith in your brothers. They’re not weak. It will take a lot to break their spirits, minds, or bodies.”

“Saige told me she can’t sleep and can barely eat because she’s too worried about all our friends, my brothers, and anyone else that might be captive. I acted surprised, but I already knew because I’m not sleeping either. I’m just better at faking it. I lie awake all night, trying to come up with plans, predicting various outcomes, and running through all of our options. Then I go back to thinking about them. I think of them lying in some cold stone cell injured, possibly starving. How can I eat when they can’t? How can I sleep in a comfortable bed when I know they’re suffering?”

“How will you help them, or help anyone, if you allow yourself to become physically weak? They need you to be strong. Saige needs you to be strong. Your bond does. I need you.”

She leaned forward, so I couldn't look away from her eyes.

“I need you, my boy. You don't have to be tough. It's okay to be vulnerable. It's okay to let me see your pain and your fear. I would love to crumble and be a mess if that were possible, but I can't. Neither can you, but you can let people in and hold you up. We have to push through and have the courage and strength to keep going because our boys need us. They need us to be strong and not lose hope.”

“How do you do it? How do you go through the motions each day without knowing if they're even still there?” A single tear escaped, and I lowered my head. “I have to know if they're okay. If they're holding out for us. If they're staying strong so we can rescue them.”

“I'm not sure there's a way of knowing that.” Her pain filled each word.

I ran my hand over my face.

Kaden was a dream walker. Saige had visions. They had to be able to do something. Maybe someone here had an ability outside the norm.

“I'll find out.” I stood and cleaned the table, then took our dishes to the small kitchenette.

“Please take care of yourself. They need you.”

I promised her I would before hugging her and kissing the top of her head like I'd seen my brothers do as they grew up, passing her in height.

I searched for Kaden first and found him in the washroom off the main kitchens with gloves up to his elbows, washing dishes and chatting with the people around him. They all fell silent as I walked up.

He glanced over at me and sighed. I stopped next to him, hoping those around us would give us the courtesy of not eavesdropping, at least not obviously.

“What’s up?”

“I need you to try to dream walk to my brothers,” I whispered. His eyes went wide.

Of course, this was going to be his initial reaction. No, not even thinking it through, not even considering the options, or at least trying.

“It won’t work.” He bit out. “The only people I’ve succeeded with are Saige and occasionally my parents, but only when I was living in Scotland. I haven’t been able to reach them since I transferred to the Academy. I need to have a strong personal connection to make it work.”

“Being bonded to me isn’t enough?”

He shook his head. “I wish it was.”

“Fine.” I turned and walked out, ignoring him as he called my name. He could at least think about it before shutting me down. My desperation took me to the classrooms where Saige was volunteering with the youngest children.

Her eyes widened when I walked in, and she hurried toward me. “What’s wrong? What happened?”

I shook my head. “Nothing yet. I’m just going a little crazy.”

“Me too.” She took my hands in hers. “What can I do? How can I help?”

I appreciated her willingness to listen.

“I know you can’t control the visions you get, but do you think we can try? Maybe meditation can trigger something.”

Her brows pulled together. “I’ve never been able to control what I saw or when, but it’s worth a shot. I’ve had multiple visions of the castle now, so maybe that means something.”

I leaned down and kissed her quickly. “Thank you.”

That’s all I needed. A tiny glimpse of hope. Even though deep down we both knew it probably wasn’t going to work, she was willing to try.

“I love you,” I told her.

“I love you too.”

I pulled her into my chest, wishing I could hold her for the next few hours. But she had her job to finish, and I had some research to do.



FINDING an empty study room was easy. Our new home didn’t have books, but it had a single laptop with access to the contents of the Supernatural Library system so I could do my research much more efficiently.

Unfortunately, that meant I got my answer sooner than normal.

A tangle of complications meant there was no guaranteed way to reach my brothers. Even the strongest scryer couldn’t

control what they saw, especially without a strong personal connection.

“Niall?” Saige peeked her head in.

I slouched in the chair. “It’s impossible.”

She walked around the table and sat in my lap.

“If there’s one thing I’ve learned in the past few months, it’s that nothing in this world is impossible. Difficult or unlikely, sure, but not impossible.”

I kissed her temple. “Thanks, love, but I think this time I’m asking for too much.”

“We can try my visions.”

“But you only have those when you’re sleeping, and you haven’t been lately.”

She lifted a small vial from her pocket. “I got this from the clinic. We’re not the only ones struggling.”

“You don’t have to.”

My attempt to stop her was half-hearted, and she swallowed the substance before I could even finish speaking.

“Think of your brothers and send them to me.” She lowered to the ground.

I sat next to her on the floor and took her hand while projecting my favorite memories of my brothers. Playing football with them in the yard. Chasing after them, laughing at having successfully stolen ice pops from the freezer without Aunt Maeve catching us. Sleeping outside under the stars in the summer, squished between the two of them because I was too scared to sleep on the end.

Fuck.

I missed them.

I needed to find them.

Saige's eyelids twitched as she reached REM sleep. I shifted my thoughts from my brothers to her, hoping I could see what she was seeing if she left our connection open.

I closed my eyes and found myself back in her dorm room.

Natasha was rolling her eyes while Hannah and Saige laughed on her bed. Hannah propped herself up on her elbow and smiled at Natasha.

"Admit it, deep down you love us."

She narrowed her eyes, and Saige threw a pillow at her. She caught it and finally grinned. "I don't dislike you."

"We won!" Hannah cheered and Saige rolled off her bed, then dove on top of Natasha. Hannah joined in, crushing Natasha as they broke out in giggles.

Was this a memory? A vision of the future?

Either way, it wasn't anything to do with my brothers, so I opened my eyes and closed our connection. I didn't want to wake her during such a happy moment. At least, for now, she could be with them.

I scooted back and leaned against the wall, zoning out while thinking about my brothers.

She moved without my noticing until she sat up, watching me.

"It didn't work." She sounded guilty, which was the last thing I wanted.

I reached for her, and she crawled into my arms, resting her head on my shoulders.

“I’m sorry.”

“Please, don’t be. I’m grateful you even tried.” I kissed the top of her head.

“Can you lock the door?” she asked.

“Yes.” I did, adding a silencing spell. “No one can come in or overhear us. Is something wrong? Did you see something?”

She shook her head. “No, but I need something.”

“What is it?”

“You.”

She wrapped her hand around my neck and pulled me down until I was draped over her. Then she kissed me with a desperation I hadn’t expected.

I moaned against her lips and pushed my hand into her hair.

I’ve been waiting for this.

This? I could barely think clearly with her hand sliding down my back, then she grabbed my ass. I bit her lower lip.

We haven’t been alone.

And now that we are?

She pulled back, and I met her eyes. “I don’t want to rush, if you’re not ready, but—”

“I want you,” I interrupted. “It was stupid of me to waste so much time. I hate that I ever stopped us.”

She shook her head and ran a finger along my cheek. “I don’t regret a second. We needed to build to this.”

She was too perfect. I still couldn’t believe she was mine.

I didn't want to wait another second. I tugged off my shirt, then helped her pull hers over her head. We each took off our pants, like the desperate teenagers we were.

I didn't picture it happening like this. I wanted to make it special. Have dinner and dessert and a comfortable bed, not the floor of a study room.

But I wasn't stopping this now.

She leaned back on her elbows, naked and waiting for me.

Me.

The loner. The geek. The outsider.

How did I ever get so lucky to have her as my mate?

"Niall." Her voice pulled me back to the moment. I was lying next to her, naked, stroking myself without realizing.

"Sorry." I rolled to my knees in front of her, suddenly forgetting everything. Things we'd done before. Things the guys explained to me, tips and warnings.

She smiled and lifted one hand, cupping my face. "It's just me and you."

I nodded. Right, just us.

She let her knees fall to the sides, revealing herself to me.

I licked my lips and trailed my eyes over her exquisite body.

"Niall."

I blinked and met her eyes. Her hand slid down from the base of her neck, skimming over her skin. She touched her right breast, palming it and squeezing, before continuing down her stomach. When she reached the top of her mound, my body snapped out of its daze.

I conjured water and shot a pulse just below her fingers, and she gasped then laughed, relaxing back on her elbows. I controlled the flow and pressure, teasing the path between her folds.

She dropped her head back as I reached the apex again. “Oh, Niall.”

Fuck. Hearing her moan my name was my new favorite sound.

I shifted closer to her, then dipped my head, taking one of her nipples between my teeth and tugging while making the water between her legs pulsate.

Fuck, Niall. Please.

I sucked on one breast while kneading the other until I couldn't take any more. I needed to be inside her.

I stopped the water. The sounds of her panting drove me crazy.

Ready?

God yes.

She lifted her hips and gazed down between as I positioned myself at her entrance. I pushed against the resistance until I slipped in.

She tightened around me, and I dropped my head with a moan. She rocked her hips and the ribbing of her walls pulled at my hard length.

“Fuck!”

The feel of her was so much better than anything I'd ever experienced or imagined. Better than my wildest dreams.

She pushed against me, taking me in all at once, and my vision went black for a second. I couldn't move. If I did, I would come, and I wasn't ready for this to be over.

I braced on one elbow and dug my fingers into her hip, recovering for a moment with my eyes closed.

When I opened them, she smiled blissfully up at me. I looked at where we were connected and moaned again. She was mine. I was hers.

The instinct to move, to thrust in and out of her, took over. I pressed as much of my body to hers as I could, and we moved in a perfect rhythm.

My vision tunneled, and the familiar sensation washed over me before she screamed out my name. I finished inside her.

I collapsed on top of her, and she laughed before wrapping her arms around me. She kissed my cheek, and I dropped it to her shoulder.

“I can't move.”

“Me either. I think we're stuck like this forever.”

“Sounds good to me.”

I love you.

I love you too. I kissed her bare shoulder and stared at her for a moment while we smiled at each other like fools. I pulled out of her and used magic to clean us both up before reaching for her shirt.

She stopped me. “Can we just stay in this moment for a while longer?”

“Yes, love.”

I lay back down and wrapped my arms around her. She rested her head on my chest.

She deserved more of this. More love. More support. More connection. More from us.

We needed to do better.

CHAPTER 10



Standing in front of our families, a random memory of my elementary school choir concerts popped into my head. I remembered the awkward sensation of standing in front of an audience waiting for me to perform. I wasn't fond of the feeling, but unfortunately, this was necessary.

The guys and I had spent the past week working together in the repaired training room. We improved in channeling our energies toward each other. Now, it was more of an instinct than a thought we had to focus on.

I was familiar enough with each of the guys' threads inside me that I didn't have to consider if I had the right one before pushing my power toward them. Unfortunately, all our work hadn't brought us any closer. We were still living in two separate rooms, and the us-versus-them mentality was prevalent every moment outside of this room. This is the only space where we came together. We pushed aside everything else, leaving our problems at the door and pushing ourselves.

The resistance had training programs much like virtual reality without the need for any equipment, thanks to magic. The room alternated in front of us between different settings and opponents, presenting an infinite number of combinations

so we could never get too comfortable or relaxed as we practiced.

We never would have had that opportunity to see how we worked together in semi-real situations if we'd stayed in the compound. As Kaden put it, we were just playing around before. Now we could see what we were capable of doing.

It was encouraging, and just enough to keep me pushing through each day. I might not be able to get to our friends or Niall's brothers yet, but I was doing something, preparing myself, each day. That was enough to calm my racing thoughts at night.

We'd come so far. When we first arrived, I was ready to storm the castle with just my rage driving me and not a care about my own survival. Now I could see there was a very distinct possibility of getting in, freeing our friends and the other prisoners, and making it out alive.

"Are you ready?" Kaden looked around and each of us nodded.

Another simulation started. We were in a dark forest, the stillness more unnerving than peaceful. I looked around, trying to anticipate what would happen next, which was impossible.

My left. Sai warned, and we turned as one, sending our energy to him. He shifted and took off with more speed than any of us had ever seen before.

He disappeared into the trees and only seconds passed before he shot through the center of our group, dropping an opponent, a featureless grey human form, to the ground.

One down. He shifted back to his human form, and we continued moving as one in a practiced formation when I

caught movement out of my left eye. Theo ducked to the ground.

Over here!

I immediately pushed my power toward him, but didn't watch as he took off running with super vampire speed. I watched our surroundings, not trusting that the simulation would give us one opponent at a time.

There! I pointed past Niall and shot more of my energy at him.

A drop of water grew until it was the size of a small car, and Niall shoved it forward trapping another opponent. It dropped to the ground before Niall released the water.

Run! Theo burst from the trees behind Kaden. We took off after him.

What's going on? What did you see? Sai asked.

I found where they're coming from. If we can destroy the source, it will limit our number of opponents.

That had never happened before. We'd never been able to find where the simulation started, so we sprinted after him coming out to the small clearing at the base of a mountain. A narrow cave entrance was half hidden by foliage. We all ducked when Theo waved his hand down and waited. Sure enough, a moment later, another featureless body stepped out.

Theo threw a bolt of fire through the form before it made it five feet from the entrance.

How do we close it? Sai asked.

Earth. I told them. I felt their foreign powers pushing into me and stood knowing that they would have my back while I got to work and called on the material of the forest. A clay-like

substance emerged, and I filled the hole. I knew that wouldn't be enough. After it was fully covered, I pulled at a cliff sticking out from the mountainside, shearing off enough to cause a rockslide to block the entrance. Finally, I forced moss and vines to grow over my barricade, holding everything in place.

I stepped back, wondering what would happen next, when all hell broke loose. Somehow our opponents had known, maybe they felt our attack, and they were coming at us all at once from every side.

We moved into position with our backs facing each other in a circle. I threw out spears of ice, aiming for the chest and heads of the first lines of opponents coming toward me. Then I closed my eyes and caused an earthquake to ripple through us, knocking them off balance and creating as many fractures in the earth as I could, hoping more of them would fall in.

Sai sprinted around us using his claws and teeth to rip open any of the beings who got close to us.

Heat flashed on my back, and the skies went red. Theo used fire to create a perimeter. Only the ones within a few yards of us would be able to get reach our formation now.

Niall! I pushed some of my energy to him, which he accepted. *Ice!*

We threw up our arms at the same moment, creating a sheet of ice on the ground. It was a simple but highly effective way we'd discovered to disarm our opponents.

Watch out! Kaden called.

Over my shoulder, he raised his arms, slowly moving them to the right. In the sky, a massive tornado of fire swept a path in front of us.

Luckily, our opponents made no sound as they were killed. There are no screams letting us know they'd been caught in our traps, but that also meant we didn't know how many were left. The simulation would only stop once we eliminated all our opponents.

What else? I asked them as I watched the tornado go by.

That should take out several, but since we're still in the forest, we aren't done. Kaden replied.

I have an idea. Niall said.

We redirected our energy to him. He closed his eyes and put his hands up in front of his chest. He sucked in a breath before pushing it out as he moved his hands straight forward. Some sort of sonic wave went out in every direction around us. The fire in the distance went out a moment later.

I sucked in a breath before the forest disappeared around us, and we were left in a blank room with our parents and families staring at us with wide eyes.

“Holy shit,” Rainer said.

All the adults asked questions, congratulating us, and speaking all at once.

“This is amazing!”

“Why don't you tell us?”

“Do you know what this could mean?”

“We can't let the Council find out.”

“Did you see what he did?”

“I can't believe this.”

Rodney stepped forward and raised his hand, and everyone else fell quiet. “I'm truly blown away by what you guys are

capable of doing. With how much stronger you've become and how you've managed to learn to work together this flawlessly, but this doesn't mean overthrowing the Council or breaking out the prisoners is your responsibility alone."

"Of course not," Tim, Theo's dad, crossed his arms. "None of this changes the fact they're children. They're not going to be sent to do what only trained professionals should—"

"It's not like we have an army," I cut him off. "We don't have hundreds of troops just waiting for the call to deploy. We have us."

"And those in the various communities," Tim countered.

"But what does that even mean?" I was close to pulling out my hair. "Every single one of the people in this compound and those around the world have been hurt. They've lost someone because of the Council. They've lost their homes and been forced away from their friends and family because of who they are. What they are. They've been here for how long? How many weeks? How many months? And what's been done?"

"Alec said he has a plan," Nari objected. "We just have to trust them."

"Why?" I asked. "Why do we have to trust them? What have they done to earn that?"

She stepped forward, raising her finger. "They let you in." Another finger went up. "They protected you." A third finger. "They protected all of us." A fourth. "They reunited all of us, and what have we done in return?"

"I wasn't talking about those of us in the room," I argued. "I'm talking about all of those who have taken refuge. Why aren't people doing more? Why aren't they acting? They can't possibly be okay with life underground and being kept from

everyone else that they've ever known just because they're safe. That doesn't mean that they're really living."

"That's not true!" Theo yelled before taking a breath. "Sorry. I didn't mean to yell at you. But that's not true. They are living. They're getting up each day, and they're working. They're learning. They're trying."

"They're pretending," I argued.

"Overthrowing a government isn't something that can happen overnight," Maeve stepped in. I was shocked by her words. I thought she was on our side. I thought she wanted her boys back. "We can't just storm in there—not if we want to prevent complete chaos in the supernatural community. Certain things need to be in place before we move in. Established leadership. Decisions about what will change and how those changes will be implemented. We need to know what councilmembers will stay in their positions. We need to decide what will happen to those we remove. We don't have the same judicial system you're used to. There are trials and judges, but for an atrocity like this? I'm not sure anyone would want to risk them escaping. For all we know, there might be a kill-on-sight order. That's not something I want to put on your, Niall's, Sai's, Theo's, or Kaden's shoulders. That's a lot to ask for anyone."

I took a step back, shaking my head. "I'm not afraid of doing that. I *want* to make them pay for what they've done, and I know we can do it."

None of the guys agreed.

"Fine. I can do it myself. I'll split open the ground and make the earth swallow them whole."

"Saige," Masie tried to come to me, but I put up my hand.

“I have no doubt you could, and would, if the opportunity presented itself,” Rodney didn’t move as he spoke. “But I think what they’re saying is that you shouldn’t have to.”

“I don’t see a line of volunteers anywhere,” I countered.

“Please,” Masie started, but I wasn’t interested in listening to more.

“Don’t.”

I ran out of the room. I didn’t want to hear more excuses. How could I be the only one ready and willing to risk it all to get to the castle? Why didn’t anyone else care?

“Saige?”

Niall’s voice reached me, and I considered not stopping. He hadn’t stepped up. He hadn’t supported me. But he was one of the few people in the world who might come with me when the time came.

I leaned against the cold stone walls and waited. He and Sai appeared around the curve and slowed to a walk.

“They’re on our side, love.”

It doesn’t feel like it. I said to both of them.

Sai stopped in front of me. I tilted my chin up to meet his eyes.

I love you.

It wasn’t what I was expecting, but it was exactly what I needed to hear. I stepped closer to him, burying my face in his chest.

I love you too. I reached out and found Niall’s hand. *Both of you.*

We know. Niall spoke to us. You have to know how frustrated I am too, but we need help. We can't just go to Scotland and hope we stumble upon the Council. It will happen. We just need to be patient a bit longer.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. I could do that. I had to. It was my only choice.



I was sick and tired of our bond being split up. It was ridiculous, but there was no easy compromise. No one answer would please everyone, but I wasn't going to stand by anymore and let this division grow. I finally managed to corner Theo alone after Kaden left the room. I shut and locked their door behind me.

He stared at me from his bed with his legs stretched out in front of him and his arms folded across his chest. "What do you want?"

Well, from that warm welcome, this wasn't going to go nearly as smoothly as I'd hoped. I sat across from him on Kaden's bed and took a deep breath before starting. I needed to go into this conversation calm and level-headed so things didn't escalate out of control.

"I know you want to protect all of us, especially Saige. I know that there aren't many options, but we have no future as a bond or as a society if things don't change."

"I'm aware of all that. But that doesn't mean that we need to be the ones that instigate the change. Why am I the only one who accepts the truth? We're a bunch of eighteen-year-olds who basically dropped out of school and don't have any real-world experience, let alone experience in battles fighting off

other people.” He gave me an appraising look. “Do you really think you could kill someone? That Niall could? I’m not sure I could, but you guys are all pretending like that’s not something that we have to consider.”

“I understand.” I tried to placate him, but he swung his legs off the edge of the bed and faced me.

“No, I don’t think you do. I don’t think any of you guys have stopped to consider what could happen. Of course, I like the idea of being the ones to go in and rescue our friends and Niall’s brothers. I feel the same sense of responsibility toward Hannah and toward all of them. I hate the thought of *anyone* suffering and not being able to do anything about it. But it seems I’m the only one who has thought of what would be required of us and what the consequences would be. Not just any of us getting hurt or even killed. Though that seems to be a given. It’s what would come after. Would each of us be able to recover from what we would have to do? From purposely injuring and even killing people? Would you be able to look at yourself in the mirror after that?”

“If I’m doing it to protect the people I love, then yes.”

“You don’t know that!” he yelled then took a deep breath. “You can’t possibly know that until you’re in that situation.”

I ground my teeth. “Don’t tell me what I think or what I know. I understand it would be different from the simulations. I was willing to fight to the death to protect Saige during the attacks at the compound. I didn’t care what I would have to do. I wouldn’t regret hurting or killing anyone who tried to hurt any of us. It’s survival. It’s different in a battle. It’s not personal.”

He huffed. “Their soldiers are people, just like us. Some of them might not even have a choice of being there. Do they

really deserve to die?”

“If there are soldiers who don’t agree with the Council and they’re not doing anything to stop it, then yes.”

He shook his head. “I don’t agree with that. I don’t think someone should die for a cause they don’t believe in if they’re being forced into the situation.”

“That’s the cost of war, Theo. We don’t have the luxury of making peaceful decisions or asking each soldier why they’re there. They’re torturing and experimenting on our friends and families. How is that not enough to push you to want to fight them?”

“Because I know that I can’t succeed against the Council. I know none of us can.”

“How do *you* know that? You’ve seen what we’ve been able to do. How much we’ve progressed. What if we’re the only ones who can?”

“We’re kids!”

“Everyone but Saige is eighteen, so stop using that as an excuse! We’re far more powerful than most of the adults here, and I know that’s scary and overwhelming. None of us asked for this, but it’s the truth. You’ve seen what we can do. You felt the power, so stop downplaying it. Stop hiding because, eventually, you won’t have the option. They’ll see to that.”

“I know we can’t hide forever. I don’t want to live underground for the rest of our lives, but we’re not the ones responsible for making the change.”

“How can you say that? We’re being hunted by them for being ourselves, for being a large bond, for you guys being hybrids. We have to take a stand, not only for ourselves, but for all the other hybrids out there.”

“Why aren’t they the ones stepping up?” he argued. “Why is this on us?”

“Maybe they’re saying the same thing you are. What then? Saige is right.”

I bit out each word, and it felt like talking to a brick wall. Neither of us could hear the other. I wished I could convince him, but he dropped his head in his hands and rubbed his temples.

“This fight is so much bigger than just us,” I continued. “It’s about the future of our society. It’s about having the freedom to live as the people we are. It’s about making a world where our children will be safe. Where they can grow up and be whoever they are. Without having to hide a part of themselves.”

He snapped his head up. “What do you know about having to hide? You don’t understand. At any point in this, you could go.”

“What?” I stepped back, “Go where?”

“You have no stakes in this. You’re not one of the targets. You can walk away and go live a normal life without any fear.”

“Is that how you really see me?” Years of being best friends, and the truth was finally coming out. “You think I can walk away from Saige? From you? From our bond? You clearly don’t know me at all.”

He clenched his jaw, “You’re normal. You’re not under attack, you never have been.”

I sucked in a breath to keep from punching him. “I’m in this as much as all of you. My heart and soul belong to the bond. I might not be a hybrid, but the people I love are, and

that makes this just as personal as if it was me at risk. If anything, it's more important to me to protect those that I love. It doesn't stop me from wanting to fight for each of you!"

Niall slammed the door shut behind him. "Bloody hell! What is wrong with you guys? I could hear you screaming from down the hall."

Theo and I glared at each other.

"He's trying to guilt me into changing my mind about fighting the Council."

I rolled my eyes. "I'm not trying to guilt you. I'm trying to point out that you're not considering the grand scheme of things. The bigger picture."

"I understand perfectly," he argued.

"Both of you. Shut up." Niall moved toward us, stopping at the end of the beds with his hands on his hips. "This is exactly what can't happen—us fracturing and turning on each other."

I opened my mouth, about to tell him that was what I was trying to do, but he kept talking.

"We're at risk of hurting the bond. Do either of you want to end up in a magically induced coma?" He looked at each of us. "Didn't think so. We all need to remember what matters most, sticking together, not just physically. We can't be split down here."

"Why are you guys yelling?" Kaden asked as he slipped inside and closed the door.

"Because we're all morons who don't deserve Saige," Niall stated.

Kaden nodded. "So nothing new?"

“How can we stick together if we don’t agree?” Theo asked. “This isn’t a majority rules relationship. We should all have the choice to do what we think is best.”

“For yourself or the bond?” I challenged.

“It’s always one and the same for me.” He narrowed his eyes.

“It’s all well and good to talk in circles, but I thought you might want to know one of the councilmembers just arrived. The leaders are talking to her now.”

“Hell! Why are we standing here?” Niall pushed past him and ran out.

We followed him up the twisting tunnels to the conference rooms. Our parents and family members were already there, including Saige.

“Why can’t any of you go in? There should be representation from the people,” she asked Rodney.

“Farah, Cara, and Alex are the representation.”

They’re idiots. She argued. I wasn’t sure if she meant to say that to us since she didn’t even acknowledge our arrival.

“They will let us know what information is important when they’re done. Let’s give them some space,” Masie put her arm around Saige’s shoulder, but she pulled away.

“No, I don’t trust her. I don’t trust anyone from the Council,” she protested.

“Alec said there were some good people trying to make changes from within,” Rainer reminded her.

“She’s in the perfect position to do something, and she hasn’t. That tells me all I need to know,” Saige snapped.

Niall hurried over to her. “You don’t know that. She might have had to be discreet. Just because we haven’t heard of it, doesn’t mean it didn’t happen.”

She relaxed, allowing him to pull her into his arms. She was exhausted and defeated, and we were just adding to that. The worst part was this wasn’t the first time. Why did it feel like, more often than not, we caused her stress rather than taking it away? We should be improving her life, making it easier, and being her rock. She rarely came to us, and now I saw why.

We were failing her.

No one tried to get us to leave. Saige made it abundantly clear she wasn’t going to move an inch until she had answers.

Finally, after about an hour, the doors of the conference room opened. Surprise slipped over Alec’s face before his shoulders dropped, as if he knew what was waiting for him.

“You all might as well come in, so I don’t have to repeat myself.” He waved our large group forward, and we lined the walls around the conference table.

The councilmember, Josephine Levitt, looked up from her phone and offered a practiced smile.

“Hello.” Her voice was cheerful.

Saige’s hand grabbed onto mine, and she squeezed a little too tightly. *She’s such a fake.*

Maybe she’s trying to keep the appearance of calm for our sakes. I wasn’t sure I believed that, but I didn’t want to rile up Saige even more.

“Councilmember Levitt,” Rodney stepped forward and offered his hand.

“Please, call me Josephine,” she said as they shook.

“I’m Rodney Stewart of the Stewart pack.”

Her eyes widened for a moment. “Oh yes, I’ve met your father, I mean, Alpha, several times.”

“Then maybe you’ve heard of his granddaughter,” Rodney stepped back and raised his hand to Saige. She squeezed my hand one more time before stepping forward and going to her uncle’s side.

I watched for any signs of recognition, but Josephine was much more practiced than the average person. She wouldn’t give away anything by accident.

“Saige. Yes, I do recall hearing that you made it back to your pack. After—”

“After my parents were killed and everyone assumed I was dead too,” she finished.

“Oh, my,” Josephine looked around for a moment before laughing lightly. “I wasn’t told of how much you take after your grandfather, always direct to the point.”

Saige didn’t crack a smile. “You’re in a prime position to change things, Josephine, and yet nothing has.”

Josephine eyed her up and down. “This isn’t a war of battles. It’s a political strategy. I don’t have time for all this bull ... to go into detail.”

“I’ve had dreams about the castle where the prisoners are being held. I’m aware my friends and family are there. I’m also aware they’re running experiments on the prisoners.”

Josephine’s eyes widened a fraction before she quickly schooled her expression. It was small, but I caught it. Did she

not know about the experiments or was she surprised that Saige did?

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“We can’t leave them there,” Saige ignored her. “They’re being tortured. You can’t stand in front of me and try to smile, pretending everything’s all right when I know the truth.”

Saige step forward, but Rodney blocked her, pushing her back a little.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, prisoners and torture and experiments.” Josephine waved her hand in the air as if she could make the words disappear.

“Then you’re blind, and willingly so. You can’t tell me you have no idea of what your fellow councilmembers are doing.” Saige straightened. “When was the last time you were at the castle? Not the estate you guys choose to let the public see, the *real* headquarters.”

Josephine smoothed out the nonexistent wrinkles on her dress before meeting Saige’s eyes again. “I’m aware there are several councilmembers who no longer hold the values we were sworn to, and I can promise you while it might not look like it from the outside, myself and another are doing everything we can to remove them from power without sparking a rise in conflicts and keeping our society from collapse.”

“So while you’re trying to make a good impression and lie to the public, my friends and family members are supposed to keep suffering?”

“Saige, let’s go,” Rodney pulled her elbow.

Saige never broke eye contact with Josephine. “You’ll be held accountable.”

Masie took her other arm and led her out of the room.

“You and whoever else is aware. I will make sure of it.”

I followed her out with Rainer.

“Did you just threaten a councilmember?” Rodney demanded as she wrenched free from them.

Saige pushed her hands into her hair and closed her eyes. “She’s just standing there doing nothing!”

“Saige, I know you want everyone to act on your timeline, but that’s not always possible,” Rodney snapped.

It was the first time he raised his voice at her. I almost intervened, but she needed to hear this. She didn’t understand the Council, being raised in the human world, but there were things you couldn’t do or say in front of them. If treason was still a punishable crime, she would be heading to the gallows.

“She might be just as frustrated as you, but she knows she has a game to play. She has to keep up appearances. You never know who is watching and where are their alliances lie. I know how frustrating that is, but the one thing you don’t want to do is get on her bad side! We need to stay calm and stay together.”

Rainer looked around before leaning over and whispering to Masie. She nodded then whispered a spell.

“No one can hear us now.”

“Good.” Rainer turned to us. “I’ve heard some talk from people. There are pieces that not everyone knows about. There are individuals on the outside working on bringing messages in. Not people the leadership is aware of. Family members and friends of other hybrids and those at risk are doing what they can while staying off the Council’s radar.”

“If we have a million pieces scattered around the compound or several compounds, that’s never going to help us.” Saige looked up at her uncles with pleading eyes. “There might be ten different families in here that have information that will never come together. They’ll never share it because they don’t know anyone else is trying to fix this. How’s that going to help anyone?”

“That’s what I’m working on now,” Rainer assured her. “I’m spreading the word quietly that we’re looking for information. That we’re a safe place and we’re gathering everything independent of the leadership. But there’s no way of knowing who knows what, and there’s no way of forcing them to tell us.”

Saige fell against the wall. “I just want to go and find them. I’ll use an invisibility spell. I’ll silence myself. I’ll get in and out of the castle without anyone knowing. I’ll kill if I have to. I would risk it all. Maybe that makes me selfish, but how am I supposed to live with myself knowing that my friends are trapped and helpless and hurting?”

She closed her eyes and rubbed her face. “I would give myself in their place. I’m more valuable. I’m the freak show the Council is after all. Maybe I can offer a trade.”

“Saige!” We all screamed within a few seconds of each other.

“That’s no way to think,” Masie scolded. “What good would that do?”

“It would free my friends. It would lighten the burden on my shoulders. It would take away the guilt.” Her voice cracked, and she choked on a sob. “My heart is breaking every second they’re in there. I don’t know how much longer I can take it.”

“You’re not alone,” I sped forward and wrapped her in my arms. “We’re all hurting. We all want to get that to them, and we will. I swear to you we will.”

I wasn’t sure how I fulfill that promise, but I would find a way.

CHAPTER 12



I probably should have been embarrassed by my outburst, or at least regretted how I acted toward Josephine, but I couldn't conjure up those emotions.

I was tired. Physically, emotionally, and mentally.

On top of that, I was going absolutely stir crazy. I used to think having to take the tunnels at the Academy to get to our classes once the snow started falling was hard, but this was a whole new level. I'd never been claustrophobic before, but with each passing day, the walls felt closer and closer.

I needed more to do, but my daily chores and two hours in the training room were all I had to distract me. I felt better knowing I was doing something to help others, directly or indirectly. The free time was making me go insane.

"Come with me." Niall rolled off the edge of the bed across from me.

I was staring at the ceiling and only glanced at him long enough to see his outstretched hand. "No thanks."

"Trust me. You'll want to see."

Since I had nothing else to do besides sit around and mope, I did what he said and trusted him. He smirked at me before he opened the door.

“Don’t tell anyone what we do, okay?”

I promised, without even knowing what he was up to. We went through the hallways, passing the kitchen and dining floor, the training floor, the conference floor, and up once again to the open chamber where we first met the leadership.

With confidence, he strode into the tunnel we’d taken when we first arrived.

“Are we going outside?” I asked him. “I don’t think that’s allowed.”

He glanced over his shoulder and shot me one of his signature smirks. I wasn’t sure what he was up to, but I was excited to find out. *That* was a refreshing feeling. I expected guards or at least a door or a fence to block the entrance. But we stepped outside, and the fading warmth of the setting sun hit my skin. I let out a sigh.

“I didn’t realize I missed the sun that much.”

“I figured you need a little vitamin D. This way.”

He led me across the field, but I froze when I saw two people walking toward each other. They passed with a simple nod and continued in opposite directions.

“Aren’t the guards going to see us?”

He laughed. “You don’t have enough faith in me.”

“I didn’t hear you cast any spells.”

“I didn’t need to.”

Because he was that good. He could simply think them, a skill I hadn’t mastered yet. We walked across the field, climbing up and over a stone wall before continuing our silent trek. I appreciated that Niall didn’t have to fill the air with

chatter. He never had. He spoke when he had something to say, and the rest of the time, he was comfortable being together. He was perfect for this moment.

We made it to the top of the hill, and he stopped walking. Rolling green fields stretched out as far as I could see. The sun set across the horizon, lighting up the sky in hues of pink and orange.

“This is beautiful.”

He nodded and pulled me against his chest with his arms wrapped around me. “It is beautiful.”

“Is it good to be home?”

He laughed lightly in my ear. “It’s good to be back, but I wouldn’t call this home. I’m from much further south in County Kerry.”

I nodded, as if I had any idea where that was. I needed to do more homework on Ireland and Scotland to understand and relate to him and Kaden. It was the very least I could do to understand my boys. Maybe I could do that with all my downtime rather than brooding.

“Do you see that river?” He pointed straight out in front of us to the river’s bend before it disappeared behind another field.

“That has significance just like the tombs behind us.”

“Yeah?”

“Do you know anything about the Irish gods and goddesses?”

I shook my head against his chest. “No, I don’t know you guys had your own.”

“Ey, this river is named after Boann, an Irish goddess. She was a member of the Tutha Dé Danann. They were supernatural as well.”

I twisted enough to meet his eyes, and he nodded. “Maeve and my mom grew up believing that’s where some of our powers originated.”

“That’s so cool,” I whispered, as if our voices might disturb the magic.

“Boann was quite scandalous for a goddess.”

“Weren’t most of the gods and goddesses that way?” I joked.

He nodded, rubbing his chin up and down my hair. “There are several stories about her, but the one Maeve taught me was that Boann was married. There’s some debate over who her husband was.”

“Maybe she had more than one.”

He laughed and nodded again. “I think that would be the correct answer. Boann lived in this area with him. And one day the Dagda, who was kind of the father figure and king of the gods, sent her husband away on an errand for the day, and those two had an affair that led to her getting pregnant.”

“So maybe she had three husbands, and things got lost in translation.”

He chuckled. “Honestly, at this point, that wouldn’t surprise me. Anyway, they wanted to hide the pregnancy from her husband, so the Dagda cast a spell on him, making the sun stand still so he wouldn’t notice as time passed for nine months, allowing Boann to give birth to their lovechild without him knowing. Some people think they represent the

winter solstice anomaly that happens at Newgrange. Remember the small opening above the door?”

“Yeah, light comes directly through only on the winter solstice.”

“That’s right. They say the sunbeam represents the Dagda entering the inner chamber, which represents the womb of Boann, when the sun’s path stands still, like it did while she was pregnant. The birth of their son, Aegis, represents the rebirth of the sun and a new year.”

“Did her husband ever find out that she cheated and that he wasn’t the dad?”

He laughed again. “This is where the story gets complicated. According to legend, Dagda gave the child to his foster father to be raised safely away from the husband, just in case he ever found out. Eventually, they meet when Dagda is passing out some sort of gift. The translation has never been clarified on what it was exactly. Anyway, he forgets to give one to his illegitimate son, Angus, and he calls him out on it. Dagda tells him how to trick and defeat his mother’s husband.”

“The one they originally tricked?” I asked, making sure I was following along.

“Yeah, this is when the story gets confusing.” He paused. “The husband and Boann had a child together. A girl. She comes in at one point, and she ends up as the lover of the foster father of both Dagda and Angus.”

“Whoa, so she ends up like dating her grandpa?”

“Yeah, I mean, she had no relation to him, but it’s still weird. So they’re lovers, and her dad finds out and kills him

and then Angus kills *him* for killing his foster father, using the information Dagda gave him.”

“Huh.” I stared out at the setting sun over the river. “It loses a bit of its poetic beauty when you dive deeper.”

“Yeah, it does. Just focus on the main story.”

“The one about the adulterers and the secret baby and the lying and freezing time?” I teased.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Just focus on that.”

I laughed and rested my head against his chest. “You Irishmen are really confusing.”

“Maybe the ancient ones. I don’t think we’re that way anymore.”

“Do you really think that some of our powers could have come from them?”

“Anything’s possible.”

“What happened to them? The gods and goddesses?”

“The Celts arrived, and there was a battle. They lost. They were forced into the Underground.”

“The Underground?” I asked. The story was getting increasingly complicated.

“The Underground is a magical realm. It’s why we warn people to stay away from fairy circles. You can get trapped there, but they’re also entrances.”

“Entrances to the Underground?” I repeated with a slight tease in my voice.

“Exactly. You’ve got to be very careful. Ireland has a strong history with the supernatural.”

“I can tell.”

“It’s also known for its beauty.”

“That I figured out on my own.” I let out a sigh and relaxed against him. “I needed the reminder that there is a world still out here. That there is still beauty to be seen and appreciated.”

“It won’t always be like this,” he promised, and I knew he believed that.

“How much longer?”

“I don’t know, love. I promise when this is done, when we’re free to be who we are without having to hide or pretend, we’ll have a home of our own.”

“Oh yeah? Is it going to be here?”

“It can be. It can be anywhere you want.” His chest rumbled as he spoke.

“Even if I want a mansion on the beach?”

“I’ll make it happen.”

“Or a treehouse in the Amazon?”

“I’ll build it myself.”

“How about a penthouse in the tallest skyscraper?”

“If we can’t have it, I’ll build one taller.”

“What if I want to go back and live with the pack?” I asked.

“Then we’ll spruce up our little cottage, and I’ll make sure there’s a bed big enough for all of us.”

“What if I want to go with Rainer to Alaska?”

“Then I’ll buy you a parka.”

“You’d really follow me anywhere?”

“No.”

I twisted in his arms and looked into his crystal blue eyes. “So, you do have a limit?”

He kissed my forehead. “No, love. I won’t follow you. I’ll be standing at your side, holding your hand.”

It was the most romantic thing anyone had ever said to me. If I was the swooning type, I would have my hand draped over my face and my foot popped into the air.

“How can you go hours without saying anything, but come up with the perfect words at the perfect time?”

“Because I don’t waste them. I mean everything I say.”

“I know you do. It’s one of the things that made me fall in love with you.” I stretched up on my toes and kissed him.

“Are we still invisible?” I asked against his lips.

“Yes.”

He kissed me again, and I pushed off his jacket. He flung it to the side and removed his shirt with one hand before tossing it into the pile.

His body was always a surprise. He never wore anything tight enough to show off his physique, which made the times I got to see it all the better. He was a runner, and his long, lean form was proof of his dedication. He wasn’t bulky or as defined as the other guys, but his body was a work of art.

You’re staring.

You’re perfect.

He shook his head and stepped forward, pressing his chest against mine, which would be so much better if I wasn’t still

wearing a sweater and jacket. He trailed a finger down my arm, and my clothing disappeared.

My jaw fell open. I forgot he liked to use that trick.

“Much better.”

His hands landed on my waist, then explored my stomach until they reached my breasts. His thumbs caressed the underside, driving me crazy. I wanted him to touch me, to take me in his mouth, but he moved so slowly.

Niall, please.

His stupid smirk tugged at his lips. He knew exactly what he was doing. Between the chilly air and his teasing, my nipples were as hard as ever, begging for him to take them, devour them, like he had when we were at the compound.

Making love for the first time together had been perfect, a bit awkward but intoxicating. Our entire relationship condensed into that single moment in time.

But now, I wanted the assertive, aggressive version of him back. The one who took what he wanted and left me needing more of him.

He picked me up and lowered us to the soft grass, aligning my body with his. Our pants, shoes, and underwear disappeared, and I felt his skin against mine.

“I hope you can get those back,” I smiled up at him.

“You doubt my abilities?”

I bit my lip and shook my head. “Never.”

“Good.”

He kissed me, taking every thought from my mind except him.

He didn't go slow. Didn't hesitate as he worked his way down my body, licking down my neck and chest until his tongue circled one breast. His hot breath danced over my nipple, and just when I thought he would claim it, he moved further down, trailing down my stomach until he reached the spot where I was craving him most.

He didn't pause, didn't get me a chance to prepare, before he took what was his. He slid between my folds, lapping at my center like a man starved.

"Fuck!" I cried out and dug my hands into the grass.

When his fingers joined, rubbing and flicking and pinching the spot that had me arching my back, I screamed his name.

His tongue pushed inside me, and I fisted his hair. "Niall, please!"

I watched him, growing impossibly more turned on. His eyes flashed to mine before he licked up my center one more time.

He moved up my body, kissing me hard. I tasted my own arousal and moaned. His head nudged my entrance. My only warning before he thrust in.

I cried out, the flash of pain crushed by a wave of pleasure.

His hips moved as the pressure built up in my core.

I gripped his hips, not caring if my nails hurt him. I had to hold on to the only thing grounding me or I would float away. Lose myself in this sensation.

He bit my shoulder with a nip that rocked through my entire being.

I came with him, gasping for air. Clinging to him.

His uneven pants tingled my neck.

“Sorry. Too quick.”

I shook my head. “No, this was perfect.”

It was hard and fast, but full of passion and tenderness. It was us.

But as I stared up at the blue-gray sky, I knew it was a stolen moment. An untouchable memory we never should have been able to create.

The world was crashing around us, and we couldn't ignore that.

CHAPTER 13



*M*y emotions were scattered, and I couldn't keep living like this.

I couldn't look at Sai and Niall and feel my heart nearly burst with joy and love. I couldn't sneak glances at them, brush my fingers against them every time we passed, and share our secret smiles when my stomach knotted up every time Theo or Kaden accidentally met my eyes. Avoiding them was especially hard, since we were crammed in a small space.

Somehow, we all manage to have the same chore today. We were on the serving line after having helped prep dinner, and now we were passing it out to our fellow refugees. The only thing keeping me focused was seeing the many faces pass by. Their pain, fear, and loss. Every single person was affected, and it put into perspective just how truly lucky we were.

Despite being physically together, the mental and emotional chasm between us remained, which was mostly my doing. I needed to be the one to make the first move to repair things.

It was easy to steep in misery and fixate on everything that made me feel hopeless. But I was here with all four of my

mates and most of their families, and that was something I needed to be grateful for.

How many of the people we served couldn't say that? So many people had lost family, friends, loved ones, and even their mates, yet still made it through each and every day. They showed up for others and gave up their time and energy without letting anyone know how much they suffered. I was holding on to the hurt Theo and Kaden caused, and they were right here. I could change things. Many of the people I saw every day didn't have that option.

The hardest part was they weren't coming from of a place selfishness. Theo wanted us to all be safe and stay together. Just because we didn't agree didn't mean I should hold him at arm's length. I shouldn't punish either of them for being more cautious than me, Niall, and Sai.

"I'll be right back. Can you cover me?" I asked Sai.

He nodded without even asking where I was going.

I pulled off my apron and gloves, hanging them up before going on my search. Hopefully, it wouldn't take long, and I'd get back to my post quickly. I found Cara sitting in the dining room with a group I didn't know. When I approached, she smiled and stood.

"Hi, Saige, is everything okay?"

I nodded. "Sorry about interrupting. Do you have a second?"

"Of course." She put her hand on my shoulder, and we moved further away from the table. Not that there weren't plenty of shifters who could overhear if any of them cared enough to try.

“Alec mentioned Space witches could adjust our apartments to fit my whole bond.”

She tilted her head. “Has that not happened yet?”

“Not yet, but it’s my fault. I haven’t followed up. I was wondering if I could get done soon.”

She looked around the room, and a grin broke out when her eyes landed on someone. “I can make it happen right now. How many rooms do you want?”

I thought about our setup back at the Academy. Should I do three rooms again? Or what everyone wants their own? Or would we prefer one big room like we had at the lodge? It was hard to say.

I wanted to give the guys their own space, but was that really the best rest right now? Maybe a little forced proximity would help things or turn everything into a complete disaster. I wished my visions were helpful for everyday life, but there wasn’t really no way of knowing how this would work out.

“You can always change it later if you’d like,” she offered, probably sensing my hesitation.

I should have thought this through before I came to find her. “Can we have five individual bedrooms, one of them bigger, though?”

She eyed the food line where my mates were still standing. “With a bed a big enough to fit five?”

I felt my neck and cheeks warm, but I didn’t deny it. “Yeah, that would be great.”

“Okay, I’ll have that done for you by the time your shift is over.”

“Thank you so much.”

I hadn't expected it to be done so soon, but I was grateful we wouldn't have to wait much longer.

I went back to my position as people came through the line again for dessert or seconds.

"Everything okay?" Sai asked, and I nodded, offering the woman in front of me a big smile.

"Have a good night."

Her tired eyes met mine. She attempted to lift the corners of her mouth, but the smile fell flat.

I wanted to know what she was going through, but that probably wasn't for the best. I was frustrated enough. If I knew more people's personal stories, my patience would dry up. I'd push again to take action. That wasn't the right answer. Not yet.

Maybe when this was all over, she—and all the others here—would get a happy ending. Families and friends would be reunited and get the justice they deserved.

We finished serving and cleaned up the kitchen, and the back door opened. Cara stuck her head in. She gave me a wink before turning and letting the door close. That was the only sign she gave to let me know things were ready.

I took a deep breath and hyped myself up. I had no reason to be nervous. These are my mates, and no matter what, we would get through this challenge. Still, I was scared Theo or Kaden would reject it or I'd offend any of them by preferring individual rooms.

We could discuss changes after I revealed the surprise. I dried my hands on a towel and faced them.

"Are you guys ready to head back?"

Theo shrugged, and the rest followed me out. Niall put his arm around my shoulders as we walked.

Everything okay?

Yeah, just a little nervous.

Why?

You'll see like.

He kissed my temple, and I pretended like I wasn't freaking out until we got to our door.

“Do you guys want to come in? We can do a movie night or something.”

Theo and Kaden exchanged looks, and I had a feeling they were talking to each other privately.

“Sure,” Kaden replied.

I opened the door. Our space now had a small living area and kitchenette with five closed doors along the walls.

“What's this? When did this happen?” Sai asked.

“While we were working,” I replied, turning around to gauge Theo and Kaden's response. Kaden's small smile tugged up the corner of his lips, but Theo stood motionless, his expression unreadable.

“I was hoping you guys would move in with us. I asked for all of us to have our own rooms, but if you'd like to change that, we can. I thought it would be better for us to at least be together, even if you need space.”

“I was never the one who wanted space,” Theo barked out before lifting his hand and rubbing his face.

“Let's not go through this argument again.” Kaden put his arm on Theo's elbow and ushered him in. “This is really nice,

Saige. I'm happy we can all be—I guess not under the same roof—but together again.”

“Me too,” I agreed.

Niall dropped onto the couch. “Yeah, having some space is pretty great.”

“Should we check out the rooms?” Sai asked.

“If you want. If you guys need help moving your stuff in, just let us know.” I stood back as the guys split up, checking out each room.

“Dibs on this one,” Sai said after opening the second door.

Kaden then rushed to the third one. “I'm guessing this one is Saige's.”

They all dipped their heads in, then turned to me with smiles.

“That's the biggest bed I've ever seen,” Niall confirmed.

I crossed the room. “Bigger than the one that you created?”

“Oh, yes.”

The bed took up one entire wall, about fifteen or sixteen feet long, covered with gray and white pillows and several fluffy duvets. I almost laughed. It looked like the perfect place to build a fort or take the most luxurious nap of my life.

“What about these two?” Kaden checked out the last two rooms. “They're about the same as the others, just different colors from the one Sai claimed.”

“It's green, and that's my favorite color.” He crossed his arms.

Kaden smirked. “It's fine.”

“I’ll take the red one,” Theo said, walking back to the first room.

“Do you want gray or blue?” Kaden asked Niall.

“Blue.”

“Sounds good.” Kaden waved him into the third bedroom door before turning to go to the fourth. Somehow, they ended up back in their normal split. Even though I don’t like them divided at all, it felt more normal, especially when I realized that, once again, I was standing alone.

“Thanks, Niall,” Theo called from his bedroom.

I walked across the room to his doorway.

“What did he do?” I looked around. All his bags were in his room. “Oh, nice.”

“Yeah, I could have done it myself, but he was faster.” He eyed me up and down. “In a lot of ways.”

My hackles went up. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

His jaw flexed before he turned away. “Nothing.”

I stepped into his room and closed the door behind me. “Theo, we can’t go on like this. It’s not healthy, and it’s not fair for either of us. We have our differences of opinion, but making passive-aggressive comments isn’t okay.”

“Right, so first I can’t have an opinion unless it’s the same as yours, and now I’m not allowed to have feelings either?”

My mouth went slack, and I glared at him, wondering where this version of the Theo I loved came from. “What do you mean?”

“You expect me to not be jealous of the fact that you’ve slept with both of them? How am I supposed to turn that off?”

He dropped onto his bed.

I started to speak, but he ignored me. “You don’t want us to compare, but it’s pretty hard when I can see you looking at me like I broke your heart. Then you turn to one of them, and your whole being changes. You fucking light up. I’m not sure how I’m supposed to live with that?”

He dropped his head and kept talking.

“The easiest answer would be to apologize, say that I was wrong and you’re right. But that would be a lie. My opinion hasn’t changed. I still don’t think we should be the ones to fight the Council. I don’t think we should go anywhere near the castle.”

“Is it because of the vision I had?” I had to know if that influenced him at all.

He sucked in a deep breath and let it out as his shoulder fell. “If I was a better man or a stronger man, I would say no, but that’s not true. I’m absolutely terrified of what might happen not only to me, but to all of us if we go there. But, yeah, knowing you’ve had a vision of me beaten in a cell with you and Sai having run away, that’s terrifying. I’m trying as much as possible to avoid that situation. Call me selfish or whatever names you want, but I think I have a healthy dose of self-preservation and respect for my life. Plus, I love you and the guys enough to not want to put you through losing me. I can’t imagine how hard and painful it would be to lose a member of a bond.”

I hated to admit he had a point. Not only did he have a right to be scared about what might happen to him, but he wasn’t being selfish. He knew it would destroy me, all of us.

“We won’t let that future come to life.” I sat next to him on his bed.

“So far, all of your other ones have.”

“Yeah, but we’re stronger now. I’m stronger. Maybe it wasn’t what it looked like.”

“Do you think your visions of Hannah and Natasha are wrong? Do you think it wasn’t what it looked like?”

“No,” I finally admitted after a long silence.

“Exactly,” he said with a sigh. “I think your vision is real too, and I just don’t know how I can go there knowing what’s going to happen to me. I’m not strong or selfless enough.”

“Don’t say that.” I scooted closer as more pieces fell into place.

“I get why Niall has to go. I want to be there to support him one hundred percent, and you know the thought of our friends being prisoners and being experimented on absolutely kills me. I want them out more than anything, but I genuinely don’t believe we can help them. We’ll only distract the teams who can and put them in more danger.”

He didn’t believe in us? After how much work we put in? How powerful we’d become?

“The number of worried loved ones would double. Do you really want Maeve to have to worry about losing Niall too? What about Hannah and Daniel’s parents? Do you think they would want us to risk ourselves?”

“Do they know?” I asked.

He stared at me for a moment before dropping his head. “Yeah, my parents reached out to them. They’re devastated, but it’s safer for them if they stay away. If the Council wanted

them, they would have already taken them and held them as prisoners as well.”

My hands shook as the gravity of his words set in. Everything was bigger and worse than I could handle.

Theo sighed. “I don’t think there’s a right answer. Not yet. We need more information from the outside to know what is going on there. How many guards they have. Where they’re stationed. How many prisoners there are. Escape routes. Ways in. There are so many factors we don’t know and running in blind could lead to all five of us being killed.”

Neither of us spoke or moved for several moments until he draped his arm around my shoulders. I leaned into him with my head against his chest for the first time in weeks. I fisted the front of his shirt, fighting back tears.

He was absolutely right.

I didn’t want to accept it, but we needed more information. The only answer was to wait.

THEO



I didn't expect things to go back to normal between me and Saige after one good conversation, but I woke up with her still wrapped in my arms. She didn't leave, and I needed that.

"Jagiya," I whispered, and she hummed back. "Are we okay?"

She propped herself up on her elbow and blinked at me. "Yes. I don't want to waste any more time being angry."

I held the back of her head and pulled her down for a kiss.

That was all I had intended, but she opened her mouth and slid her tongue along my lips.

I let her in, sucking on her as my hands explored under her shirt. She was braless, and I cupped her breasts, squeezing and kneading them.

She moaned and moved to straddle me without breaking our kiss.

I was hard beneath her, but she didn't seem to notice or care. I pinched her nipples, and she jerked, grinding against me.

Fuck.

She didn't stop. She moved her hips back, dragging herself along my length in the other direction.

Shit. She knew exactly what she was doing.

I wanted her so bad. I'd been waiting for this—if it was going where I hoped.

“Saige?” I rested my forehead against hers.

“Hmm?”

“What are we doing?”

She pulled back with a wicked smile. “I thought we were about to have sex, but if you want to stop...”

“Hell, no.” I kissed her like my very life depended on it.

She giggled against my lips.

Her hand wrapped around my dick, and I jerked involuntarily. She pumped me a few times, and I panted. “Fuck me.”

“I'm trying to,” she teased.

Her thumb rubbed circled over the tip a few times before she slid her hand down the length and tightened slightly at the base. She didn't move, and I opened my eyes.

“You okay?”

She didn't move her hand, but her gaze met mine. She opened her mouth, said nothing, then bit her bottom lip.

I pushed myself up with my hands behind me, so we were closer to eye level. “What's going on?”

Where had my confident vixen gone? Why did she look so timid and shy all of a sudden?

Her eyes dropped. My cock was rock hard and firmly in her grasp.

Jagiya?

I want to try something.

Okay. I waited for her to explain, but she stayed silent.
Saige?

I cupped her face. “Talk to me. What’s wrong?”

She closed her eyes, scrunched her face, then let out a long breath. “I don’t know why I’m so nervous.”

She was nervous? About what? We’d messed around before. She slept with Niall and Sai already. Had they scared her? Shit. I bet they messed up, and now she’s freaked out. Idiots.

“I want to try something,” she blurted out so quickly it took a second for me to process each word.

I grinned and fell back with my hands behind my head. “Try away, baby. You can do anything you want to me.”

A blush crept up her cheeks from her chest. I loved it.

She gently began pumping my length again. “I’ve never done it before.”

I was too lost in the feeling of her hands on me that I didn’t immediately comprehend her words. “Wait. What haven’t you done?”

Kaden normally teaches me. He lets me try things and walks me through what to do and what feels good.

That lucky bastard.

I pushed away my jealousy and tried to figure out what she needed. “Do you want him to come in?”

Shit! Did she want a three-way? I was down for anything, but we hadn't been together one-on-one, and I was hoping to do that before bringing in any of the guys.

"No, sorry." She groaned. "I shouldn't be embarrassed."

I reached for one of her hands. "Never. Please, don't ever be embarrassed with me. I love you. This is a safe space for both of us. We can do and try and fail at whatever you want."

She pursed her lips, then nodded. "I've never done a blow job."

If my eyebrows could have flown off my forehead, they would have. I hadn't expected that at all.

"And you want to?"

She nodded.

Fuck. Damn. Hell!

Don't blow this!

Literally.

I shook my spiraling thoughts away. "Okay, but you know you don't have to, right? You never have to do anything that makes you uncomfortable."

"No, I know. I'm not uncomfortable. I'm just nervous. I don't know how to make it feel good."

I closed my eyes and thought of horror movies and baseball and anything to keep me from coming immediately. She wanted to make *me* feel good? What world was this? She was a goddess meant for me to worship, and here she was panicking over figuring out how to make me feel good?

I wasn't worthy.

"Saige, jagiya, I love you."

Her eyes dropped back down to where she was holding me. “Walk me through it.”

So I did.

“You can use your hand and your mouth at the same time.”

She held my eyes as she lowered her mouth, closing her lips over my head.

I sucked in a breath and jerked when she flicked her tongue.

“Oh fuck, yes.”

After a second, I pulled myself together. *You don't have to try to take all of me, but start taking in more.*

She lowered her lips an inch, then two, as I closed my eyes.

“So good.”

She moved her hand from the base up to meet her lips.

Yeah, like that.

Her teeth dragged on the underside, and I flinched. “Careful.”

She opened her mouth and looked at me with panicked eyes. “Did I hurt you?”

“It's okay,” I assured. “Some guys like that, but it hurts me.”

She nodded. “No teeth.”

I smiled as she made the mental note.

“But the rest?”

“Fucking amazing. You don't have to keep going if you don't want to.” I was grateful she was being vulnerable with

me and wanting to bring me pleasure, but I didn't want to overwhelm her.

Her brows pulled together. "I want to."

"Okay." I lowered my head back to my hands. "I won't stop you."

She licked her lips and took me back in, pumping her hand as her head moved up and down in the same rhythm.

Nothing in the world could compare to the feeling of her warm mouth on my cock. Sucking and licking as I told her what felt good and when to be gentle.

It was amazing.

Fuck. I'm going to come.

Okay.

I didn't want to go in her mouth, so I warned her. *Not this time.*

I tapped her shoulder, and she sat up just as I released on my stomach. She watched with pure fascination, then used her Water magic to clean it up.

I couldn't move if the building was on fire, and she snuggled into me.

"Was that good?"

"Unbelievable." I admitted. "Give me a second, and I'll return the favor."

I turned my head and kissed her hair.

"No, I like what we did." She traced my chest and stomach with her abs. "Thanks for being patient."

"Anytime. Literally, whenever you want."

She laughed, and I held onto her.

I almost ruined this over my fear. I almost lost her.

I would never let that happen again.



IN THE FEW DAYS AFTER, tension left our group. A tiny weight compared to everything else that was going on, but it was one less problem for us to worry about.

I wasn't sure if she and Kaden had made up and wouldn't make it any of my business. We trained together, even better than before, and she and Kaden were fine talking to each other. I didn't push it. That was a lesson I didn't want to learn again. If it didn't directly affect us as a bond, our personal relationships should stay personal.

But when Mom found me after dinner to bring me into a meeting without any of the rest of my bond, I was suspicious.

“Why can't Saige and the others be here?” I asked Dad as I sat at a conference table across from him.

Alec sat at the head of the table with Masie, Saige's uncles, Maeve, and Sai's parents, as well as a few others I didn't recognize.

“What's going on?” I asked.

“We have some new information, but we don't want to share it quite yet.”

“Share it with my bond?” I clarified.

Alec nodded. “We already know their stance on things, and this information will only drive them to act irrationally.”

“So why am I here?”

Mom looked at me. “Because you understand, dear. Things like this take time. You won’t follow your gut instinct. You think things through.”

I wanted to defend Saige and the guys, but if I was about to get information they were withholding from them, I couldn’t miss this chance.

“All right, what’s going on?”

Alec cleared his throat, and everyone turned toward him. “We received an updated report about the number of deaths and missing individuals from last month.”

“And?” Rodney leaned forward.

“And it’s nearly doubled from the month before,” he finished quietly.

Gasps went up around the room, but I held my reaction in.

The situation was going from bad to horrible, and they didn’t seem like they were doing anything to stop it.

Maeve leaned forward. “What does that mean? Are we talking a handful, ten, a hundred? Can you clarify for those of us who haven’t been here long enough to have a gauge?”

Alec pressed his lips together. “Forty-five deaths and seventy-one missing.”

Someone cursed.

I dropped my head into my hands. Over a hundred people? In one month? *And* things were getting worse? Any of those could have been our family members or friends. We wouldn’t know for a while if we knew any of the victims personally, but that didn’t matter. These were other people’s friends and family—each of them loved and missed by someone.

“This can’t continue,” I whispered so only my parents could hear.

“They’re working on it,” Dad replied.

I wanted to keep believing we needed more time—or that we had more time—and that more information would make our choices easier. But wasn’t this information enough?

The Council couldn’t be allowed to continue like this. They were destroying the lives of so many. I couldn’t continue to hide from the crisis. Having an actual number put things into perspective. I couldn’t ignore the gravity of the situation.

And I was sick of being a coward.

I hid behind self-preservation and excuses and told myself I was putting logic ahead of emotion. But how could I go to sleep tonight knowing more people were being killed or taken with each passing day? Now, I’d never be able to forgive myself if I ran, if I stayed hidden, if I didn’t do something to help them.

“We did receive more information from the community in Scotland. The supernaturals had all been evacuated, and no one was allowed back in the immediate area of either the castle or the estate. The local community leaders are working to move those refugees further away, so we should expect their arrival in the next few days,” Alec stated calmly.

“How many should we prepare for?” a woman I didn’t know asked.

“About forty. Some are also being sent to England, Wales, and France or further, if the people have families they can stay with.”

How was everyone just sitting here listening? I wanted to jump out of my chair and run for the exit and get on the next

boat or plane to Scotland.

I took a deep breath, forcing myself to remain calm and to get as much information as I could. “What about those scouting the castle?”

“They’ve watched movement.” Alec’s eyes flick to mine before going back to the tablet in front of him. “They’ll let a group of prisoners out but only for a few minutes at a time and always with at least four or five guards.”

I exchanged looks with Masie. That was exactly what Saige had described.

“Have they gotten close enough to be able to give a description of the prisoners?” Rodney asked.

Alec cleared his throat. “They did mention the women appear to be pregnant.”

I covered my mouth with my hand and looked away, suddenly ill. Yes, I knew it was true. I believed Saige, but we also didn’t know how much time we had. I thought it was longer. But we were running out of time. Those girls couldn’t give birth in the clutches of the Council.

I didn’t want to know what they would do to the babies. What sort of testing or experiments would be done on the innocent little ones?

“Only the guards and the prisoners went out regularly. There’ve been no councilmembers seen for weeks,” Alec finished.

“That’s just as I said.” A female voice rose from the end of my side of the table.

I leaned forward. Josephine sat next to Farah. I hadn’t noticed her before.

She was aware of this information and was either lying to herself or comfortable lying to the rest of us. She'd said she didn't know about prisoners or experiments. I glanced around the room, waiting for someone to challenge her.

"Do we know how many guards are there?" another man asked.

"The scouts identified fourteen who had patrol shifts outside, as well as those who came out with prisoners. It's impossible to know how many don't leave the castle," Farah offered.

"Plus, whatever staff is there," Rodney added. "You know those two young women didn't get pregnant on their own."

"Now how do we know that?" Josephine barked.

"Have you met either of them?" Masie challenged. "Are you aware of who they are?"

She tilted her chin up in defiance. "I met Miss Natasha Badalyan when she came to visit her grandfather."

"But you didn't see them in the castle?" Masie pressed. Finally, she was going to get caught in her lies.

She paused before answering. "No, I did not."

"Then you have no idea what's happened to them," Maisie argued.

"Why haven't you been back to the castle?" I asked, not caring that I was speaking out of turn.

"I haven't been required. It'd be very unusual for me to show up there without a specific purpose." Josephine kept her air of indignance in place.

“You’re a councilmember. Aren’t you allowed to visit the headquarters?”

“The estate, yes.” She didn’t bother looking at me as she answered. “As I said, it’d be very hard for me to go to the castle—”

“Who normally goes there, then?” Rodney interrupted.

She listed four councilmembers.

“And are those the ones we believe are behind these attacks?” Rodney turned to Alec.

“Yes,” Cara answered before Josephine could speak.

“What do we do with this information? What are our action items? How do we move forward?” Dad pushed the conversation on.

“Well, we can continue to wait on reports and make sure that the situation is clear and understood,” Alec repeated his mantra.

“So we’re going to do nothing?” Maeve asked. “Don’t we have enough information to at least try to infiltrate the castle? We know there are fourteen guards who show themselves, so double or triple that to be safe. Add another dozen or so to take down any staff who might pose a threat.”

I waited for Alec to agree, to say that sounded reasonable. Maeve was suggesting military plans, which was surprising, but someone had to do it. Someone needed to push these people into action.

“We will continue monitoring the situation,” Alec declared. “And I will let you all know as soon as we have any new reports.”

He and Josephine stood and left the room before anyone could ask questions. The others began trickling out until it was just me and our families.

“They’re not doing anything,” Rodney whispered. “This can’t continue, but I don’t know what to do.”

I looked around at the hesitant adults. “We just got confirmation Hannah and Natasha need help as soon as possible. We can’t leave them in there long enough to give birth, and we don’t know exactly how far along they are. And I’m not sure if it’s possible, but what if the Council has found a way to speed up the gestational period?”

Mom’s mouth twisted, and her eyes watered a bit. “I can’t imagine what those poor girls are going through.”

I watched her. Was she changing her mind?

“Someone should send trained professionals to help them,” Dad urged.

“We don’t have the power to do that,” Masie pointed out. “At some point, we’ll have to take things into our own hands.”

“Let’s not get hasty,” Dad put up a hand. “We can’t react without thinking things through.”

“Like Maeve said, we’ll need about sixty people to consider staging an attack.” Rainer briefly locked eyes on me. “We have eight right here, plus the five of them in the bond. That’s a good start.”

“You’re not including the children in this.” Mom put her hand on the table, leaning forward to see him. “They’re too young. They don’t need to be involved.”

“Hannah and Natasha are too young to be involved as well. They didn’t have a choice in this, and neither do we. They

need us,” I pleaded with her, but she shook her head. “Then, we’ll find a way without involving you and Dad.”

A fire-craving action lit within me, and I finally understood why Saige couldn’t tolerate doing nothing.

We had proof!

Hannah and Natasha were there and more vulnerable than ever. It was past time to rescue them.

How could they not see that? The Council kidnapped and impregnated innocent witches against their will. How was that not enough to storm the fucking castle?

We needed to gather whoever was willing to go, like Rainer said, and just go.

Alec had been right not to tell the rest of my bond. They would have revolted immediately, demanding we leave to finish this war.

And they were right.

They needed to know what I learned and how this changed everything.

CHAPTER 15



I don't know this place.

I was able to recognize immediately that I was in a vision. I was getting better at doing that, which gave me additional time to survey my surroundings. I didn't panic anymore or waste time thinking I was in a dream.

The quaint village reminded me vaguely of the one where we stayed before finding the entrance to the resistance's community.

I read the store signs, grateful they were in English, and ran down the street, taking in as much information as I could.

Was I still in Ireland? Was I in England, maybe Scotland or Wales?

Was I close to another one of the communities? I memorized a few signs to look up later, trying to beat the clock to whatever was about to happen. This quiet, picturesque setting was about to change.

The night was still. I was alone in the street. Something in my soul signaled trouble. It always did.

An eruption boomed louder than anything I ever heard. I spun. The shops where I'd been first standing blew apart, and the whole area engulfed in flames. Debris flew everywhere.

The buildings were mere skeletons of what had been there seconds before.

The worst sound I could possibly hear filled my ears. Wailing men, women, and children flooded into the streets, crying. The fire raged, and a group just started to organize when another explosion came at the opposite end of the road, closer to where I was standing.

The force of the blow was so powerful, I fell to the ground with everyone else around me. I managed not to get hurt, perhaps because I wasn't actually there.

I rolled toward the woman next to me. Her face was frozen in horror. I jerked away. A long piece of wood protruded through her center. I gasped and tried to stand, but people ran in every direction, stampeding over others and knocking me back.

“We’re under attack!” someone screamed.

I needed to wake up so I could tell someone and help them. But I couldn't control my visions. I had to wait it out and hope that when I woke up, there would be enough time. Each second burned a new image in my mind.

Bleeding and crying children.

Bodies on the floor.

Blood and another explosion.

I ducked and covered my head, but it was further away, coming from the next block over.

“Why was this happening?”

“Who was doing this?”

I couldn't tell if these people were supernaturals. I didn't see any witches casting spells,

Innocents were being targeted.

Finally, when I thought I couldn't take it anymore, I woke up in my bed between a sleeping Kaden and Sai. I flipped the blanket over and climbed to the foot of the bed, taking off running as they shouted behind me.

I didn't have time to tell them. I had to get to one of the leaders to warn them before it was too late. I sprinted down the residence halls and up the twisting corridor, passing the kitchen and training rooms. It was too late for anyone to be using them. I got to the conference floor, checking each room. I saw lights on in one.

I sprinted, hoping someone with authority or the ability to contact the outside world was inside. I flung the door open, pausing the ongoing conversation. Alec, Josephine Cara, Farah, and a few of our family members turned in my direction.

"There was an attack! A small town. English signs." I closed my eyes, "Macalester Pub. Eternal Love Florist." I thought of the street signs, fighting to remember the names.

"Kerrywell," Alec said with anguish in his voice.

"You recognize the places?" I asked, hoping for the best.

He took off his glasses and rubbed his tired face. "No, I just got off the phone with the compound in Scotland. It was only a few kilometers away. They heard the explosions and sent scouts to investigate. The entire thing was burned to the ground. We're not sure how many survivors made it."

My knees buckled, and I started to fall. Someone caught me.

“Grab her a chair.”

Kaden’s voice came through behind me. “Sai!”

He pulled out one of the chairs, and they helped me into it.

“Kerrywell?” Kaden repeated. “I know that town.”

Alec didn’t seem to hear him, or care. “We’re not yet sure what the intention was. Perhaps councilmembers”—he glanced at Josephine—“those with malicious intent are trying to oust the location of the compound. Maybe they have a rough area and are trying to either force them out, thinking that they’d run or they’d come to the aid of the nearby towns.

“H-How?” I stumbled. “How can you already know? I just dreamed it.”

“It happened about an hour ago,” Cara said in a gentle voice.

I shook my head. “No, I got—I got here in time. There’s a there’s always a few hours, at least, until it happens.”

“Not this time,” Masie said, standing and coming to me before she looked over my shoulder and ran forward, putting her arms around Kaden and making him sit in a chair next to me.

She put her hand on his forehead. “Kaden, honey, you need to breathe.”

He shook his head. “I know that town. I know people who live there. Their method is going to work. The people in the area will come out, trying to help those in need. The Council’s going to find my family. They’re going to find all of those who are hiding.”

“I don’t understand how it’s possible.” I was in denial. Not that I wanted there to be a second attack, but I thought I had

time to prevent it from happening.

I tried so hard, but maybe I was in the vision for longer than I realized. Long enough for it to take place in the real world.

This wasn't fair. This is supposed to be different.

"When do we leave?" Kaden didn't lift his eyes from his lap as he spoke.

"What do you mean?" Farah asked.

"When do we send aid to the community in Scotland?" His voice was flat like he wasn't really there. At least not mentally.

"We can't act yet. We need to wait for more information. Running in with a large group of people will only attract more notice. The best thing we can do is wait for them to report and let us know what they need," Alec reminded him.

"So, we sit here and do nothing?"

I watched him, wondering what changed. Why he was suddenly ready to run into battle when just days before he'd refused to even consider the idea? Was it personal now? He didn't know Hannah, Natasha, or Daniel well enough for them to be an incentive? Did he not care about Niall enough to want to save his brothers?

No, he needed it to hurt *him*. Not just the rest of us.

I turned away. Now wasn't the time to address his very questionable motives. I'll deal with that later, but I was also at my breaking point.

"How many more people have to die before you'll do anything?" I asked them as a group. "Another hundred? Two hundred? I saw that village for myself. I saw the damage. I saw the death. I already know what happened. So how many

more must be sacrificed for it to be worth your notice? How many more people do we have to lose? How many friends and family members must be taken before you do anything?"

I was so tired. Not just from a restless night but from feeling alone in this responsibility.

"We're close to having a completed plan," Cara reassured.

"Close?"

"People are arriving from other communities, and certain pieces need to be in place."

I glanced over at Josephine. "And how much of that was her idea?"

"Excuse me?" she demanded.

"Are you here just to postpone things? To make it seem like we have more time? To make it seem like things aren't as bad as they are? Are you here to distract? To act as a decoy? To bring their focus to you rather than what's really going on?"

"How dare you!" she snapped.

"Miss Stone! That is unacceptable." Alec stood.

Maybe. Maybe she had nothing to do with the attack.

But from my point of view, she was the one person in the room in position to make a change. And yet she sat here, a country away, instead of taking action.

I stared her down. "Then prove me wrong. Can you?"

She didn't care about my opinion of her, but I hoped my words might spark something in the other adults in the room. They could pressure her into doing something, anything, that mattered.

“Come on, you guys. Let’s go.” Masie looked past me, and Sai stepped forward with Rainer on his other side, helping Kaden out of his chair. Masie pulled me up by my elbow, letting me lean on her as we walked out of the room.

“I can’t do this anymore,” I admitted as soon as we were in the hall. “I can’t keep seeing terrible things happen and not doing anything about it. That woman might be able to sleep well at night, might be able to look at herself in the mirror and smile, but I can’t close my eyes. I can’t put into words what I experienced. The complete and utter devastation.”

I thought of the children I’d seen with blood and tears coating their faces.

How many of them have survived? I didn’t want to know.

“We should go. We should just go and get there and see how we can help.” Kaden stared at me.

I started nodding. “We’ll go.”

“No, you won’t,” Masie cut me off. “You need to wait until we have more information. I’m not telling you”—she cut me off when I opened my mouth—“to wait for Alex’s approval. I get that is asking too much. But we at least need to wait until we hear back from that community. For all we know, going anywhere near there right now would just put an arrow over where they are. We can’t act rashly.”

I didn’t speak. I just wanted to hear what Kaden would say.

He stared. “Fine. But if they need help, I don’t care who tries to stop me. I will get there. I will get to them.”

“I understand,” Masie agreed.

“Go on back to your room.” Rainer looked at me with sympathy. “We’ll let you know as soon as we have any

information.”

“Thanks,” Sai lead us away and walked between both of us.

I was more stable now that the shock and adrenaline had worn off, but I couldn't say the same for Kaden. He was breaking, and I wasn't sure how much more he could take. I didn't have the heart to kick him while he was down, to point out the hypocrisy of his anger and demands to leave. That wasn't what he needed right now. He needed our love and support.

We got back to our apartment, and Kaden and I walked back to my room. Sai left us alone. Maybe to update Theo and Niall.

It didn't matter. Kaden needed me most at this moment. We lay down on the bed next to each other. I scooted in, putting my head on his chest and splaying my fingers across his stomach.

“I'm so sorry,” he whispered. “I should have been on board from the beginning. I never should have hesitated. Never should have let you walk away. I'm sorry I wasn't with you from the very beginning. It wasn't that I didn't care about our friends or Niall's brothers, I just thought that I cared about you and the bond more. I realize how selfish that is. I'm sick to my stomach over how selfish I've been lately but even more so thinking about the treatment of people. They deserve so much better. They deserve leadership who will protect them, not hunt them.”

I nodded, giving him the space to continue if he needed.

“If it takes five teenagers to change things, then we'll do it. I'll do anything to stop this.”

I twisted enough to look at him and ran a finger along his cheek and jaw. I wanted to comfort him. Promise we could stop the pain and suffering, but I couldn't. No one could.



I WOKE WRAPPED in Kaden's arms. I propped myself on one elbow and stared down at him. The shock of what happened wore off, and I was left with the realization we were living on borrowed time.

All we were guaranteed was this moment, and I didn't want to waste it.

I didn't want another day to pass without letting him know how I felt.

Me either.

"Kaden?" He was awake? I left my mental walls down, and he heard me. I put them back in place.

He lifted his head. "Baby?"

I searched his face, wishing I could read his mind to know if this was terrible timing or just what he needed.

Theo told me being together was a safe place. There was no embarrassment or judging. That was the same with Kaden; it had always been that way with us.

But this time, I had to ask for it. If he wasn't in the right headspace, I didn't want to taint our first time.

"What's wrong?" His voice was quiet, full of concern.

"Nothing. I'm just trying to find the words."

He put his hand on my hip. I rolled over, so he was looking down at me. His body pressed against my side. "You can tell

me anything.”

My heart pounded, and my core heated up with his proximity.

“I’m not sure if this is the right time.” I finally admitted.

“You were right. All we have is right now. Yesterday was a harsh reminder of that. We don’t know how long we have, and I don’t want to waste a single moment with you.”

“I love you. I want to be with you.”

He blinked, then a slow smile emerged. “I love you too.”

I let out a breath, and he slipped his hand under my neck before lowering his lips to mine. I pushed at his shirt, wanting nothing between us, wishing I knew Niall’s spell. He lifted enough to pull it off in one quick motion. I arched my back, then lifted mine off. His hand slid around my ribs and unhooked my bra. I reached for the straps, but he stopped me.

“Mine.” His eyes flashed with heat.

I laid back as he removed it, then went for the waistband of my pants without a second of hesitation.

I was naked before him, and he rubbed his jaw, muttering something under his breath.

“What?”

He blinked and met my eyes. “I can’t believe you’re real. Or that you’re mine.”

I smiled and rubbed my foot over his pants. “Your turn.”

He dropped them and kicked them to the side, leaving him standing in all his perfect glory.

I licked my lips. He smiled, then crawled over me, kissing from my ankles up my legs. I sucked in a breath when he got

to where I wanted him most. He skipped to my stomach, and I groaned.

“No teasing.”

He chuckled while licking the underside of my breasts, and I immediately forgave him when his lips latched onto one peak. His palm found the other, squeezing and kneading.

My core was on fire. I needed him. Now.

Please!

He didn't stop. He licked and bit and switched sides until I was ready to burst. Then his other hand appeared at the apex of my thighs. One touch. One circle, and I came with a scream. All the tension released as I dug my nails into his back.

He lifted his head with a wicked grin. “Put your knees over my shoulders.”

I obeyed, not capable of thinking or wondering.

“Ready, baby?”

I nodded and put my hands around his neck.

His tip slid in, stretching me, and I gasped.

Okay?

I scrunched my eyes closed. It was too much. He was too much.

He froze, and I let out a slow breath, pleading with my body to relax.

I nodded, and he pushed in a bit more. I pulled his head down, and he kissed my chest.

We can stop.

No! Just go slow.

He did, giving my body time to adjust and accept him until his entire shaft was in me.

I soaked in the feeling. Being so full.

Then he moved.

And I screamed.

Fuck!

Good or bad?

Good. So fucking good. Don't stop!

That was all he needed. He pumped into me, and I was coming undone. Split in half. I was too full.

I whimpered but dug my nails into him, not letting him stop.

He moved faster, pushing my knees to my shoulders and burying himself in me.

I cried out. Moaned. Screamed.

I couldn't contain it.

Finally, when I thought I was going to burst, I fell over the edge. "Kaden!"

He thrust a few more times before moaning into my ear and going still.

His eyes were closed, and I reached up, stroking his face.

He dropped his head to my shoulder, catching his breath.

He didn't speak. Didn't tell me he loved me or that it had been good, like the others. Was something wrong?

"Kaden?"

He hummed.

“Was that ... um ... was that okay?”

He groaned as he pulled out of me and dropped to my side.
“I can’t move, baby. You broke me.”

I giggled. “I’m pretty sure I was the one bent in half.”

He reached out blindly, and I took his hand. He pulled it to his mouth and kissed my knuckles. “That was the greatest experience of my life.” Kiss. “I love you.”

I pulled our hands back and kissed the top of his. “I love you too.”

“Let’s stay like this forever.”

I rolled over, cuddling with his arm. “I wish we could.”

He opened his eyes. “Me too, baby. One day, we’ll be able to stay in bed for weeks. No Council to worry about. No kidnapping. No attacks. Just us.”

That sounded like a dream. One I wished would come true.

We just had a war to survive first.

NIALL



It took a while, several days actually, of asking vague questions and following unhelpful tips to find the person I was looking for. Not that I knew *who* I was looking for, specifically, but I was hoping I could find someone like Serene, whose magic was open to receiving, and hopefully sending, messages. But I wasn't sure how rare her abilities were.

It didn't matter anymore because when I knocked on the nondescript wood door and it pulled away, revealing a very average-looking, middle-aged man, I knew I'd found him.

Somehow, maybe through my magic connecting to his, I knew.

"You've been looking for me." He opened the door wider.

"Yeah, it would have been helpful if you could have worn a sign or something. If you knew I was looking for you, why didn't you come find me?"

He grinned. "Now where would the fun in that be?"

I glared back. "This is a life-or-death situation."

"Sometimes part of the magic needed is the sacrifice, the anticipation, the absolute need. Wanting it more than anything else in the world."

I thought of Serene. She'd been searching for any signs of another attack after being forced to participate in the previous one. Had she been at that point? She cared about us that much? Cared about Saige? She must have for my brothers to reach her through her spell.

“Do you know what I'm looking for?”

“I don't. That information hasn't found its way to me.” He offered me a chair before taking the other one opposite a fireplace burning, despite the compound being temperature controlled through magic.

I didn't know how much this guy already knew, and frankly, I didn't care if I was revealing anything I shouldn't. “My two older brothers are being held prisoner at the Council's headquarters.”

“The estate?” he asked casually.

I stared at him again, trying to figure out how much he knew.

“Ah,” he sighed. “The castle.”

“Yes,” I confirmed.

“And what would you like me to do?” He leaned back and pulled his ankle to cross over his knee.

“They were reached out and contacted a witch I knew to let her know where they were. I'm hoping to reach back out to let them know we're coming and to not lose hope.”

The man's brows pulled together. “Are you actually planning to go get them?”

“Of course! I wouldn't lie about that.”

He made a humming sound. "I'll give it a shot. It's not very often in my control who I contact, but if they are putting out a message, I can open up myself to receive it."

I nodded.

Was he starting? Would we have to wait for something special? Did he cast a spell first?

He gave me another appraising look before dipping his head and closing his eyes. He stayed like that, unmoving, as minutes passed. After what felt like a decently long time, he spoke without moving the rest of his body.

"Conor and Sean?"

"Yes, that's them." I nearly jumped out of my seat. "This is Niall. Tell them it's Niall."

He didn't say anything aloud, but I hoped he was passing on the message.

"Tell them we know where they are. We're coming as soon as we can."

I wish I had more specific details about at least how much longer they had to fight to stay alive.

"Ask them to not give up. I'm with Mom, and we'll get to them."

He jerked his head to the side. "No. They want you to stay. They're begging you to take Mom and run."

"I can't do that!" I argued as if they were in the room. "Neither of us is going to give up on them. We will find them, and we'll get them out."

Another moment passed, and he opened his eyes. "They're gone."

I let out a long breath. At least I knew they were alive. They were still there, so there was a chance of us getting them safely out.

“Thank you so much,” I finally said as I stood. “Is there anything I could do for you in exchange?”

He seemed to think it over. “You’re going to get out all the prisoners, right?”

“Yes,” I promised without hesitation.

“That’s good.” He looked down.

“Do you know anyone in there personally?”

“I can’t confirm, but my niece has been missing for three months. She might be in there with them. She might not.”

I could see his pain peeking through his mask. He didn’t want to get his hopes up, and I understood.

“I promise we will do everything in our power to get everyone out safely.” I didn’t waver.

He stood, brushing his hands off on his slacks. “That’s all I can ask. Best of luck to you.”

“Thank you.” I walked out the door he held open for me.

I was so lost in my own head. I didn’t even notice the people I passed. I needed to tell Maeve.

“Niall?”

I lifted my head. Saige walked toward me down the hall. Worry filled her eyes, and she hurried to me, putting her hand on my cheek.

“What’s going on?” She scanned my face. “You seem frazzled.”

I looked around the empty hall, but just because I didn't see anyone didn't mean they weren't there.

“Let's get back to our room.”

We rushed down to our residence level. Once inside our apartment and the safety of our spells, I caught her up on what happened.

“They're alive! That's wonderful.” She beamed.

“Yeah, now I just need to figure out how to get to them.”

“I know.” She wrapped her arms around me, squeezing me tight as she rested her head on my chest. “They just have to hang in there a little longer. All of them. Rodney and Rainer think they have a lead on some guys who can get us out of here and over to Scotland.”

“Really?” I pulled away.

“Yeah, but it sounds like there's a lot of missing information and details. The people are planning to go are just going to wing it.”

My excitement deflated. “I don't want to jump in with a group who doesn't know what they were doing. That mistake could lead to our downfall before we ever got close to the castle.”

“Just don't give up yet.” She trailed her finger along my jawline.

I bent down and pressed our lips together, needing to feel her presence. I only meant for a brief kiss, but the more she leaned into me and dragged her hands up and down my arms and back, I couldn't resist. I pulled her cardigan off her shoulders, needing to feel more of her skin. Her hands slid under my shirt with her nails lightly dragging over my abs.

I reached down and picked her up. She wrapped her legs around my waist. Her center rubbed against mine, and she let out a delicious moan.

A door swung open. Whoever it was cleared their throat, and I tried to find it in me to care.

“Not that this isn’t something I could watch all day, but we need to talk,” Kaden said.

I growled and lowered Saige back to the floor. She pulled away, flushed.

“We’ll continue that later.”

She winked before facing Kaden. He wasn’t the only one waiting for us. Theo and Sai peered around him.

“What’s going on?” I asked, trying to reposition myself discreetly.

“What’s going on here?” Sai countered with a smirk.

“He was able to contact his brothers. They’re still alive,” she answered for me.

“Really?” Theo rushed forward, no longer caring about walking in on the two of us. “That’s great. That’s a great sign.”

I nodded, then looked at Kaden. “What’s up?”

He headed to the couches. “Can we all talk for a minute?”

That didn’t seem like a great sign, but I couldn’t think of a reason to put this off. We all took our seats. Saige sat between me and Sai, with Theo and Kaden facing us on the opposite couch.

“We both have to apologize to all of you,” Kaden started, “but I don’t want to speak for Theo, so I’ll just go first. I should have been with you guys from the beginning. I never

should have hesitated for a moment when I knew that your brothers were in trouble.”

He met my gaze, and I nodded. Now wasn't the time to hold on to grudges. We needed to move forward. Together.

“They're my family as much as yours now, and there's nothing more important in the world. That doesn't mean that I didn't care when I found out about Natasha, Daniel, and Hannah being taken. I think I distanced myself from those feelings because I figured they had their own families who would fight for them.”

He looked at each of us, starting at Saige before clearing his throat.

“I wanted to keep our bond safe. It took Kerrywell for me to realize it didn't matter if I knew any single person who was involved now or in the past. Doing nothing wasn't the right answer. We're as close as anyone is going to get, and I can't put my needs ahead of the well-being of so many others. I'm sorry for not seeing this sooner.”

He fell quiet, and Theo took over.

“Ever since Alec told us how many people have died and gone missing in the past month, I haven't been able to sleep. I won't be able to until I do something about it. I know as long as we stay right here, we'll be fine, but that's not an option everyone has. Our bond is the only thing that matters to me, and because of that, I'll do anything to make sure we have a future together where we can live without hiding who and what we truly are. I'm sorry that it took me this long to realize that. I'm willing to do whatever we have to. I won't hesitate.”

Kaden nodded. “Can you forgive us?”

Saige looked from me to Sai.

“Yes,” I said before Sai could get the word out.

“Thank you!” She jumped up and threw her arms around Kaden and Theo’s necks, bringing them in for a group hug. Sai laughed and joined in behind her.

Theo looked over her shoulder with a wry grin and waved me in. “Come on, bro.”

I rolled my eyes, but my normal discomfort about getting physically close to any of them had dwindled to the point where I almost didn’t care at all, which was quite remarkable.

Maybe it was the magic of the bond. Maybe they had worn me down, but it finally felt like they were my family.

CHAPTER 17



*R*elieved was an understatement for when I opened the door to see my uncles, Masie, and Maeve, standing in the hallway.

“Hi.” I ushered them inside and called for the guys to come out of their rooms.

We’d done nothing but chores and training for the past five days and were running out of patience.

Not that we weren’t finding fun and creative uses of our downtime and new reconciliation. My promise to Sai was coming true. We were past the point of keeping track. My physical relationships with each of them were stronger and much more satisfying than ever. I couldn’t count how many times I’d been with each of them, even if I wanted to.

I had to admit, confinement was a great way to break in our sex lives.

“What’s going on?” Niall rushed to his aunt, wearing only a pair of shorts with his hair still wet. He must have jumped out of the shower when he heard me calling. I trailed my eyes down the ridges I’d had my tongue on this morning before snapping out of it and focusing on his aunt.

“Let’s sit down,” she said, and we filled the two couches.

I sat on Kaden's lap to leave enough room for all of us to cram on one.

"Do you have news?" Theo asked.

Rodney nodded. "Finally, we do. There's a group going to the Scottish community to provide backup."

"The community closest to Kerrywell? Where my parents are?" Kaden's chest rumbled against my back as he spoke.

"Yes," Rainer confirmed.

"When do we leave?" Kaden asked.

We agreed that when the time came, we would go as one. No more doubts or hesitation. We were stronger and more unified than ever and nearly flawless in the training room. We could read and predict each other's needs as we fought the faceless opponents.

I had a feeling I knew the reason for that as well.

"We volunteered," Masie glanced at Theo and Sai. "But your parents haven't. They might try to convince you to stay, but you guys are old enough to choose for yourselves. We won't force you, and we'll do our best not to influence you—"

"We'll go," Theo interrupted. "All of us."

Sai agreed.

Masie's eyes landed on me, and I nodded.

"We're all going."

"Do you have any of the details?" Kaden asked.

"The plan is to leave tomorrow night. There's a Space witch coming who can provide transportation by folding us between matter." Rodney offered.

“I don’t think that’s right,” Rainer told his brother.

“Whatever,” Rodney ignored him. “I don’t know the physics of it. I just know that it works. We’ll get to Scotland instantly. Hopefully, in the right area—”

“Or close enough,” Masie finished. “The correspondence between their compound and ours has been patchy since the attack. We’re not sure if they’re trying to lie low or if something is affecting their ability to reach out. We’re hoping they’re able to receive the message that we’re on the way.”

“How many of us are going?” I asked.

“Twenty in this first round. If everything goes smoothly, and we’re able to reach back out to the leaders, they’ll send groups of twenty over the next few days until there’s about a hundred of us.” Rainer seemed confident.

One hundred was more than I expected. I hoped our leaders would follow through and not suddenly change their minds the moment we were gone. I had to hope we weren’t the only ones persistent in wanting to help and go to the front lines.

“What do we need to do until then?” Sai asked.

“Get ready to leave. Pack light, whatever you can fit in a backpack. We’re not sure how long we’ll be there, but I’m sure whatever we need, we can borrow,” Rodney answered.

“Or create,” Masie reminded them.

“In the meantime, just rest,” Maeve said as she started to stand. “If we get any more information, we’ll let you know.”

“Thank you.” I stood, and the guys followed as I walked our relatives out.

Once I shut and locked the door, their words finally sank in. We'd been waiting so long.

I turned to face my bond. "It's happening."

"This is our chance, not only to save those being held captive, but this could be the beginning of taking apart the Council from the inside. Maybe once we get the prisoners out and make what they're doing public knowledge, society will rise up, and we won't have to do this alone."

Theo agreed. "There are plenty of powerful supernaturals around the world who didn't have political agendas. Maybe once we raise the signal, they'll come."

I could hope for that, but I wouldn't rely on it. As far as I was concerned, we were doing this on our own. Sticking to the worst-case scenario could keep me from being disappointed.

It was already fairly late, so we decided to go to listen to Maeve and go to bed. I wouldn't be able to shut off my mind and doubted they would either.

"Does anyone need my sleeping potion?" I offered.

"Yeah, I'll take some," Sai said.

"I'm good. Good night, love." Niall gave me a hug and a brief kiss.

"Night."

The others followed me into my room, where I pulled the bottle from a shelf in the bathroom, offering it to them.

Kaden took it first, putting it to his lips and taking a swig. He passed it to Sai, then kissed me on the cheek. "Good night, baby."

"Night, Kaden."

Sai swallowed his dose, then pulled me in for a hug, kissing the top of my head. “Night, babe. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Good night.” I held his hand until he was far enough away that our hands dropped.

Then I turned to Theo and offered the bottle. “Do you want any?”

“No, I just wanted to talk to you.”

“Okay.”

His furrowed brow and slight frown were so unlike the happy, confident mate I’d had back for the past week. “What’s going on?”

He took my hand and led me to my bed. I slipped under the blankets, and he followed, cradling me against his body.

“Talk to me.”

He put up a silencing bubble around us, even though I already had one in place. Each of our bedrooms did, so we had privacy.

He closed his eyes. “I knew it would happen, but I guess it’s hitting me differently now that we’re leaving. I can’t pretend like it’s some far-off thing now.”

“Going to Scotland?” I asked, wanting to make sure I understood.

“Yes, and me getting captured and imprisoned and beaten.”

I put my hand on his cheek, stroking my thumb against his sparse stubble. I didn’t know how to comfort him. The words weren’t coming to me. I couldn’t promise him it wasn’t going to happen. I couldn’t tell him we would change things. None

of my visions had been altered so far. Unfortunately, they were accurate no matter how much I didn't want them to come true.

"I'm scared," he admitted, opening his eyes, meeting mine. "Not just of the pain but of being separated from you and our bond. What you saw means something's going to go wrong—unless, for some reason, I need to be used as bait."

"I wouldn't ever ask you to do that."

"I know. Maybe I volunteer for some reason. Maybe I'm the only one who can get in. I am a known hybrid kid, so maybe that means something. Maybe I can entice the Council in a way no one else can. Maybe I turned myself in so we can get someone on the inside. I'm not sure. We don't know what your vision means, just that it's going to happen. And I'm terrified."

"I love you. I'll do everything I can to get you out of there if it happens." That was the only thing I knew for sure.

His lips curved for a moment before falling again. "I want you to promise me you'll do whatever you can to get yourself to safety."

"Theo, I can't."

"You have to because I've thought about it a lot, more nights than I should have. I put myself in that position and tried to figure out what I would want most, what would be enough motivation to stay alive, to fight to get out of there, and to get back to you. The only thing I can think of is knowing you're safe on the outside. That would be enough to keep me alive and fighting. Can you please promise me that?"

I bit my lip, fighting back tears. I remembered the vision of Sai lifting me away from his cell, screaming for us to run, us

having to leave Theo behind. I refused to accept that as the end. I would go back for him no matter what.

“Jagiya, please promise me you’ll do everything you can to get out alive and stay safe, even if it means leaving me—”

“No. I refuse.”

“You have to,” he begged.

“I can’t live without you,” I told him, wrapping my hand around the back of his neck. “Please don’t ask me to try. It’s not just me. I don’t think our bond would survive. We need you.”

He closed his eyes again. I leaned in, kissing him softly.

“Please understand how much we all need you. I can’t bear the thought of having to live without you. I can’t do it any more than you could bear the thought of living without me.”

He cringed. “I just want to say before—”

“No. We’re not doing this. No goodbyes. No last words. If you still want to tell me something when all this is over, you can, but I won’t let you get anything off your chest.”

When his eyes met mine again, I repeated the only thing that either of us needed to know.

“I love you.”

“I love you too.”

This time, there was no hesitation. I didn’t doubt. I didn’t pause to overthink.

We pressed our lips together. My hands were in his hair as his groped my ass.

He rolled away for a moment and pulled his shirt off, then started on his pants while I watched. His long, lean body was

proud and ready.

He muttered something, and my clothes disappeared. I laughed and narrowed my eyes. “Are you guys sharing secrets?”

“Niall thought we might enjoy that spell.” He crawled over me, straddled my hips, before dropping down to kiss my neck.

My hands moved up his arms, appreciating every dip and bulge of muscle before rounding his shoulders. I dragged my nails lightly down his chest, and he groaned in my ear.

He sat back on his heels, finding my nipple with his mouth. He sucked and flicked his tongue over the sensitive spot until I arched into him.

Theo!

He switched sides, giving my other breast equal attention as his hand lowered down my stomach. His thumb pressed between my folds, rubbing until I saw stars.

My hips jerked, and he slid his thumb down to my entrance.

You're ready.

Yes! Please!

He chuckled and kissed me as he pressed himself at my center. I sucked in a breath as he filled me.

Relax, jagiya.

I remembered how to exhale, and my muscles went slack. He moved in and out, slowly at first, but when I moaned, he picked up his pace.

I wrapped my hands under his arms, holding onto his shoulders as his thrusts shook the bed. My legs tightened

around his waist.

His head shot up, and he groaned. *You feel amazing. So good.*

I cried out when he hit a spot that sent electricity through my limbs.

The tension building in my core was almost too much. I was about to slow him down so I could catch my breath when the pressure exploded.

“Theo!” I screamed, and he grunted, biting his lip as he slowed his movements.

He dropped his forehead to mine and blinked open his eyes. *Holy shit.*

I pulled him down, wanting his full weight on me as we came down from the high. I ran my fingers through his hair. This was true bliss—being with my mates. No more walls or barriers between us.

I loved them more than I thought possible.



A WHITE ROOM.

Machines and monitors like you'd see in a hospital.

A bed.

I was tied down at my wrists and ankles.

Screaming.

But it wasn't me.

It was me, but I wasn't the one screaming. I was watching myself.

I jolted awake, expecting the dream to fade like my nightmares usually did. But this was still as vivid as when I saw it.

A vision.

But how? I never had one of myself like that. Outside of my body.

What did it mean?

I cuddled closer to Theo and held onto him. Where was that? What was happening to me?

Torture.

The word came to me, and I knew it was true.

Was I going to be a prisoner like Theo?

What was coming for us?

It didn't matter. We would face it. We would overcome.

Telling the guys wouldn't change anything, so I focused on slowing my breathing and trying to relax.

We would survive.

We had to.

CHAPTER 18



*I*t turned out Rodney was right about the Space witch or as close as any of us could imagine. We met as a group outside of the passage tomb, gathering in a circle. About twenty were willing to aid the Scottish community. Theo and Sai's parents didn't come with us. Niall tried in vain to encourage Maeve to stay, but she insisted on getting closer to her boys and not letting Niall out of her sight.

Buzz, the Space witch, told us to take each other's hands. He brought up his own in a wide arch until they met over his head.

"Follow me." He closed his eyes, and we did the same.

"All right," he called out.

I opened my eyes.

Just like that, we were in the middle of another green field without any distinguishing landmarks. The tomb was gone. Hopefully, that meant we made it to the right place.

"This way," the older man chosen to lead us commanded. He waited for us to follow, and the energy around us shifted. Various protection spells went up, encompassing our group.

We ascended a hill and reached an overlook of the valley below.

“It’s just there.” Our leader pointed to the bend in the river that cut the valley in half.

We trudged down the other side, walking in a packed group, until we came to the point he’d indicated. When we stopped, we waited in silence for about two minutes. A figure stepped out from thin air. They removed their cloak, revealing a middle-aged woman with salt and pepper hair pulled low into a braid.

“Thank you for coming. Everyone’s here?” She scanned each of us.

“Yes, ma’am,” our leader assured her.

“Very well.” She swung her cloak back, revealing an archway that hadn’t been there before.

Without hesitation, we filed in. I assumed this was somewhat normal for them, and I was trying to act like my mind wasn’t blown by the magic. The Academy was much easier for my human-trained mind to understand.

We descended a set of stone stairs with glowing orbs lighting our way to the bottom. It opened to a wide but short room with thirty or so waiting adults. I didn’t see anyone younger than their early twenties. Niall took my hand in his and squeezed a second before Kaden took my other.

The woman who led us moved to the front. “Welcome. My name is Liza, and I’m the interim leader. We appreciate your willingness to come to our aid.”

“Is this all that’s left?” someone called from my left.

“Yes, we’ve sent as many as possible to the other communities. Those of us remaining have volunteered. We know the risks.”

This must be personal for them too. I said to all the guys.

That's good. They're ready to fight. Sai replied.

Masie was toward the front with Rodney, Rainer, and Maeve. She glanced over her shoulder at us before turning back. "Are the Pratts here?"

"No," Liza shook her head. "They left to take supplies to a nearby community of shifters who didn't want to leave."

"Why didn't they leave?" someone else asked.

Liza hesitated. "They don't feel threatened by the Council."

I wanted to roll my eyes. Just because they didn't think the Council would target them, they felt safe enough to stay in the vicinity? That seemed idiotic. If it were up to me, I would have forced them to leave weeks ago with everyone else. I would have cleared the area weeks ago, before the attack at Kerrywell.

"What's your plan?" our leader asked.

Liza lifted her chin and swiveled her eyes around the group. "We're here as the last or first, depending on how you think of it, line of defense between the Council and the rest of our society."

"So we *are* near the castle?" I realized I asked out loud rather than to just the guys.

Liza stepped forward, trying to find me. "Yes, that's correct."

She seemed to be appraising me, and a few of the people who came up with us began to murmur.

"A castle?"

“What castle?”

“What are they talking about?”

Are they not caught up on everything? Did they not have all the details before they chose to come here?

“The Council’s castle where they’re holding prisoners,” I told them.

“And performing experiments on hybrids,” Niall added.

“I thought the Council was based up North at the estate?” A woman near me asked.

“That’s more of a public symbol,” Liza answered. “It seems we have some catching up to do. Why don’t you set your packs down? We’ll get you guys organized into rooms. We can meet and discuss plans.”

Her group stepped forward, offering to take our backpacks and promising to make sure we would all be in one room together. Then we followed her down a short hall into another room with seating for all of us and more. It must have been one of their main meeting rooms when they were closer to their full capacity.

She looked around and shook her head. “I don’t like this arrangement. Can everyone please stand?”

We did, and she waved her hand. The chairs and couches rotated to create a circle, so there was no longer a front of the room.

“Thank you. That makes me feel much better.”

We all sat, and she continued.

“Again, my name is Liza. I’m an Air witch, and my husband and I have been helping with this community for just

under a year. He's away right now with the Pratts. Hopefully, you will meet him soon."

I glanced around our group. This felt more like a get to know you for a new class than a war debriefing.

"It seems some of you did not receive all the available information before you arrived, and I apologize. You are here to help our small community. We want to remain open to any refugees that come through the area, but our main purpose has shifted with the attack on the nearby human community of Kerrywell. We believe the Council's plans have changed. They've done their best to keep the castle a secret, but attacking Kerrywell seems like a decision to show more of their cards."

"The castle? What are you talking about?" an older woman asked.

"Just let her finish," Buzz said with annoyance.

Liza shot him a smile. "Right, so Kerrywell is the closest town, and the attack has drawn supernatural and human attention. Our first thought was they were creating a distraction to relocate their staff, guards, and prisoners from the castle, but our scouts have been watching around the clock. There's been no movement. None of us can say why, but I do feel it's time to take measures into our own hands rather than passively waiting to see what they do next."

"Wait," a guy sitting next to the woman called out, and everyone turned to him. "So there's a castle nearby where the Council is keeping prisoners and performing experiments on them? How did none of us know this?"

"Because it's been one of their best-kept secrets," Rodney answered.

“Then how did she know?” another man pointed at me.

Rodney started to answer, but I interjected. “Because I have visions, and I’ve seen it for myself. I’ve seen what they’re doing there.”

He nodded and slumped back into his chair.

“So we just entered the front lines?” The man sitting next to him asked no one specifically.

“You knew you were coming here for a fight. You knew there were risks involved.” The first guy sat up.

“Yeah, no, I understand. I just would wish I had all the information. This doesn’t change anything. I still would have volunteered to come. I just would have had more time to process.”

“Same.” The guy next to him said, and the others around them agreed.

“I’m assuming that you are all here because you have personal stakes in taking down the Council,” Liza said.

“Of course we do,” another woman said loudly.

That was what I needed to hear. I believed it to be true. But I hadn’t heard it from anyone. We weren’t the only ones with personal reasons to be here. What the Council was doing wasn’t just an atrocity to those of us in this room. It was personal, and we all understood that to some degree.

“Where is the castle specifically?” Maeve asked.

“It’s about an hour north,” Liza replied.

“What’s our plan?” Rainer leaned back in his chair.

“Right now, we’re waiting for a signal. Our scouts have patrolled for three straight weeks, trying to find patterns, any

moments of weakness to capitalize on.”

“And is there anything so far?” I was grateful he and Rodney were here. They had experience protecting their pack. They knew what to ask and how to make decisions.

“Yes, a guard rotation takes place once a week. About twelve guards leave the site and are replaced by another twelve. There’s a gap of fifteen minutes before the new batch arrives. We’re trying to plan an attack for them.”

That was amazing and exactly the kind of information we could exploit to our benefit.

“If we know that, why don’t we have a plan? Why haven’t we already attacked?” one of the men asked.

Liza sighed. “Because there isn’t a definitive time. The switches don’t take place at the same time every week. They just take place once a week.”

That sucked up a bit of my enthusiasm.

Rodney squeezed the back of his neck. “If there’s only a fifteen-minute window, and the place is over an hour away ...”

“Exactly,” Liza picked up where he trailed off. “It makes the logistics of an attack a bit hard.”

Buzz threw up his hand. “I can help with that.”

“Yes,” Liza offered a smile to him. “We’re very grateful you agreed to come. Your talents will be a tide-changer in this war.”



THE NEXT DAY, we gathered, studying maps of the area and every detail the community had on the layout of the castle, but

one critical piece of information was missing. No one had been inside.

Despite me arguing, Liza reached out to Alec to have Josephine tell us as much as she could. At this point, she had no reason to hide anything from us. If she didn't tell, I hoped they'd finally believe me when I said she wasn't to be trusted.

After two days, I had every bit of information memorized, and Josephine gave vague descriptions of the entry hall, chamber rooms, and private offices. She claimed she'd only ever been on the first level, but I didn't believe her. What councilmember would allow themselves to be at an unfair advantage? How could she sit back and allow others within the Council to have secrets like that? It didn't seem possible, but then again, she was a snake between both sides, able to disappear in a crack while no one was looking.

Kaden dropped his plate next to us at the dining table. "Three days and still no news about my parents. I finally cornered Liza, and she admitted she hasn't heard from her husband. He's missed multiple check ins. She said this has only happened one time before. One part of their group had been captured, and he left their supplies behind to go after them."

"Does she think that happened this time?" I asked.

"She didn't come out and say it, but I have a feeling she's keeping an optimistic outlook for everyone else."

"What do you want to do?" Niall asked. "We can ask for their route and retrace it. We can go after them."

Kaden shook his head. "That's not what we're here for."

"But they're your parents," I argued. "None of us would have a problem going to find them, especially since we don't

have an idea of when we're going to the castle."

"Let's wait and see if they put together a group. Then I'll volunteer, but for now, I have to trust that Liza wouldn't put her husband at risk if she could do something about it."

I put my arm around his back and rested my head on his shoulder. The energy here was different from the compound in Ireland. Back there, people were more relaxed. They had safety and security. They were over the worst part, at least in their mind.

But here, tensions were higher. Everyone was on edge. At any moment, we could be summoned for battle. We had to be prepared mentally and physically at any time. We did as much training as we could without pushing ourselves past the point of exhaustion and forced ourselves to sleep and rest, so we were in the best shape when the call came.

"Do you guys mind if I sit here?" A guy in his late twenties with long brown hair tied back into a ponytail sat in front of us, without waiting for our response.

"I'm Trevor," he said with a thick Scottish accent. "I heard you're Amani and David's son."

Kaden nodded.

"I'm sorry they haven't been here. They're incredible people."

"I know," Kaden replied, staring at his untouched sandwich.

"Hopefully, they'll be back here any day." Trevor ate his sandwich in a few bites, then used his napkin to wipe his mouth before looking at Niall. "And I heard you're Sean and Conor's little brother."

“That’s right.” Niall met his eyes for only a moment before looking away.

“They came through here on their way to their mission. I only met ‘em the once, but I can tell you they’re strong, mentally and physically. I don’t know what they’re going through. And I hate myself for not volunteering to go on their mission with them. Not sure if I would have made a difference—”

“Don’t think like that,” Niall cut him off. “None of us can change the past, and you’re right. They’re very powerful. I doubt they would have let you come if they didn’t think it was necessary. They wouldn’t have wanted to risk anyone else.”

“I just want you to know that it would take a lot to break those two, especially if they’re still together. I’m sure that they’re doing everything they can to go back to you and your mum.”

I put my hand on Niall’s knee under the table. He wasn’t good at accepting compliments, and, obviously, even worse at accepting condolences.

We’re going to find them, and we’re going to get them out.
I promised him.

“You all are planning to go?” Trevor asked. “I didn’t think they’d send you all in.”

“Why else would we be here?” Kaden asked.

“Well, for your parents. If not that, I’m not sure.”

“We’re a bond,” I explained.

He’s eyes darted to each of us. “The five of ye?”

“Yes.” Niall bit out.

“Hell’s bells!” He slapped the table. “Aye, that changes things.”

“What do you mean?” Sai asked suspiciously.

“I met a bond of three once. Most powerful witches I ever met. Blew my mind what they could do!” He froze. “But you’re not all witches.”

Sai shook his head. “No, I’m a shifter.”

“And I’m a vampire and a witch.” Theo tilted his chin up.

“Hybrid!” Trevor slapped his hand on the table again. “I knew there was something special ‘bout you lot. You’re not just some rando teenagers. Man, I gotta sign up to be in whatever group you are. I want to see the five of you kick some arses. I bet you won’t even need the rest of us.” He laughed and shook his head again. “A bond of five? And hybrids at that. Never in all my life!” His boisterous laugh caught the attention of those around us. He waved to the table next to us, where five men and women sat together.

They stood and came over, and Trevor repeated what he just learned. “Aye! These five are a bond! And hybrids! Can you fuckin’ believe that?”

“Nooo!”

“How?”

The group around us began asking questions, fascination in their eyes. There was no judgment. No hate. Just admiration and a fresh determination to join us.

It was a glimpse of what our future could be.

KADEN



A full bloody week passed without a single word from anyone in my parent's group. I went to Liza every single day, and today, I caught her standing in the hall looking down at her phone screen.

"Liza," I called out.

She spun, wiping away at her cheeks, but her red eyes made it painfully obvious she was crying.

"What's going on? Have you heard anything?"

She cleared her throat and sniffed before straightening up. "No, I haven't."

"We don't even know if they're alive or not at this point, do we?" I said mostly to myself.

"No." She crossed her arms, almost like she was holding herself. "I don't want to do this. I don't want to have to ask this of anyone, but I think it's time to send a search party."

"I'll go." There wasn't a second of hesitation before I volunteered. "My parents are out there. They would do the same for me."

Although they might be angry with me later, I couldn't live with myself waiting for another day to pass.

“And my bond will go.”

“Are you sure? I want to, but I can’t leave.” She stared at the floor.

“I understand. You’re the leader here.”

“No, your parents are the leaders. They volunteered to do this run. I was more of their right hand. I should have been the one to go. Originally, it was my husband and I leading the group.”

“Then why did my parents go?”

She blinked rapidly. “They felt strongly their abilities would be needed. They’re the type of leaders who would never let anyone volunteer for something they wouldn’t be willing to do themselves. This is just the first time they’ve not come back. Not made contact. They have led numerous missions—this is the first time ...”

“The five of us will go,” I promised her. “How many more do you think we need?”

“We should keep it small. It’s easier to travel unnoticed. I’d say no more than ten. We also need people here in case we get the signal to go for the Council.”

“Okay, give me an hour, and we’ll be ready to go.”

I could see in her eyes she wanted to tell me not to not risk myself, but she must have known her words would be in vain.

I had nothing holding me here, not like her, and I needed to make sure my parents were okay.

“One hour,” I told her before turning and looking for my bond.

Can you guys meet in our room? If you see Maeve, Rodney, Masie, and Rainer, bring them with you.

Heading there now. Saige was the first to reply.

Coming with Rainer. *We're going to find my aunt and his brother. Be there as soon as we can.* Niall said next.

I just found Masie. Meet you there. Sai added.

Less than ten minutes later, everyone gathered in our room. I didn't waste time. "Liza finally agreed to send out a rescue party for my parents' group, and I volunteered."

"Then we'll all go," Niall said. I knew they would agree, but I appreciated how quickly he was willing to put aside waiting for the call to go to his brothers.

"We'll all go," Rodney said.

Rainer nodded with him. "We're really good at tracking in our wolf forms."

"I'll come," Masie said next.

"No," Rodney told her.

"Excuse me? You're going, but you're trying to tell me—"

He lifted her hand to his mouth and kissed the back of it. "Please, I'm not telling you no to keep you safe or whatever. We need people to stay back here who are committed to getting to the castle. That's why I think you and Maeve should stay. We need you guys to put pressure on them to not let too much time by without making an attempt. A full week passed, yet we never got the call about the guard exchange. I don't want to think anything negative about Liza and her leadership, but you both understand how important it is to keep pushing."

Maeve nodded and put her arm around Masie. “You’re right. Something’s up. But we’ll figure out what it is.”

Masie finally agreed. “Fine.”

“Hopefully, we’ll only be gone a day or two, but I want you guys here just in case.”

Rodney then turned to us. “Sai, Saige, and Kaden, you three will be in your shifter forms. Theo and Niall, you’ll go on foot with protection spells in place, of course.”

“I’m going to go recruit a couple more. Maybe another vampire for speed and healing in case we need it,” Rainer said. “Pack light. Niall and Theo will have to carry our things while we’re shifted.”

“I’ll pack our stuff, then we’ll meet back upstairs,” Rodney told him, and Rainer left.

I went to the closet, grabbed our backpacks, and tossed clothes in.

Masie called Saige over, and I glanced over my shoulder to see them talking with Niall and Maeve hovering next to them. It felt too much like a final goodbye, and I wasn’t okay with that.

“We’ll be back soon,” I promised everyone, not that I had any authority. I wanted them to share my confidence.

Theo took the backpacks, tossing one to Niall. We should have what we need to last a few days.

“Let’s get going.” Masie led us upstairs where Rainer and Rodney waited with three guys I didn’t know.

Trevor jogged up the hall. “Aye! Guys!”

We paused, waiting for him to catch up.

“I wanted you to know Rodney asked me and my mates to come. And we would, but we thought you would want us here in case we get the signal. I wanted you to know we’ll do everything we can to bring back your brothers if you aren’t here to come with us,” he told Niall, then looked at Saige. “And we heard about your friends. We’ll get them.”

Saige teared up. “Thank you. That means a lot. My aunt and Niall’s mom are staying back too, but it helps to know you’re here to have their backs as well.”

He nodded and took her hand. “I promise I will do everything I can.”

“Thank you.” She gave him a quick hug.

“You guys ready?” Rodney called from the front where he was waiting with Liza and the others who congregated around them.

“I gave him a list of contacts we had, as well as their planned routes,” Liza explained. “Here are some of the party’s belongings if they’ll help you get a scent for what you’re tracking.”

She passed them around, and we each took a sniff, memorizing the scents. It might not make much of a difference while I flew in my hawk form, but I never knew. Maybe someone had a spell to increase our senses in our shifter forms. I don’t want to ask the bond for increased power from them over something that might not make a difference. I’d rather send more power to Sai and Saige in their predator forms.

“All right, let’s go.” Rodney turned and led us out.

None of us spoke as we followed the tunnel up to the riverbank with a mixture of anticipation, excitement, and fear.

We were leaving the safety and protection of the compound and heading into the unknown, potentially walking into a trap. Who knew for sure?

When we reached the exit, we stopped to get organized. The shifters took off their clothes, putting them in the packs of those who stayed in human form. Rodney and Rainer took the lead with Saige and Sai next. Those walking fell behind them and a black bear, one of the three volunteers, took up the rear.

I flew ahead to scout the path while circling back to make sure we weren't being followed. Not that it would matter if a witch was the one trailing us, they'd be using the same invisibility and protection spells we were, but it felt good to have a mission and a job.

Night came and went without us taking a break. We followed my parents' planned route, but I didn't see anything to indicate a group had passed through recently.

What if something changed as soon as they got out? What if someone met them and they took on a different path or stopped somewhere first? What if they split up and we were actually looking for two or three small groups?

It was impossible to know, and I was driving myself crazy thinking through the various scenarios.

It seemed strange we'd gone this long without picking up their scent or seeing any sign they might have left behind. The longer we went, the more anxious I became.

Something doesn't feel right. I finally told them.

I've been thinking that for the past few hours. Niall agreed. *We should have come upon something by now, but I haven't seen anything that even suggests they came this way.*

I thought it was just me. Saige admitted. I thought my lack of experience in tracking was the reason why—

No, love. It's all of us. Niall reassured her.

What does this mean? She asked.

Theo interrupted before anyone could answer. *Have you been scouting further ahead, Kaden?*

Yeah, I've flown a few miles in every direction. But I haven't seen anything of note.

What do we do? Sai asked.

We don't have a reason to deviate from the plan yet. Niall sounded more confident than I felt. *We have to follow their planned route. Maybe if we make it to their destination, they'll have answers for us.*

Our destination was another half day away, and I wasn't sure I could last that long without knowing.

I could probably make it there in a few hours.

Do not even think about it. We're not separating. Saige ordered.

She's right. The last thing we need to do is lose another person. Sai agreed.

Fine. I understood, even though getting caught in my bird form was unlikely.

What was that? Sai froze, making the group come to a stop.

I flew low, looking for any threats.

“What is it?” Niall asked out loud.

I sense something.

Send him your power. Saige ordered.

We did, and Sai immediately snapped his head to the left.
“There’s something here. Someone—”

A heartbeat later, all hell broke loose.

The group was surrounded by masked guards covered in strange material from head to toe.

Niall and Theo cast out spells, but none of them seemed to work. It was like they bounced off the attackers.

They’re wearing something to protect them.

“Don’t waste your time on spells! Physical attacks only!”
Niall called.

Sai pounced on the nearest person to him, scratching and biting until his opponent lay unmoving beneath him. He bit one more time, tearing through the neck before he jumped off.

Rodney and Rainer took on two opponents each. The bear had no trouble clawing his victims.

It was Theo, Niall, and the two others standing in the center that I was concerned about. Niall turned the ground into a sheet of ice, and Theo had created a border with fire. I swooped down, trying to draw attention away from them, but a scream cut straight through my heart.

Saige.

Something was wrong.

Go to her. Niall demanded.

I shifted, landing directly in front of her bloodied wolf form, and ripped the attacker off her. I had him in a chokehold when everything went black.



WITH A GASP, I shot up.

Where was I?

I was cold. Naked. Surrounded by stone.

Shit! Shit! Fuck!

I knew exactly where I was, and the attack came back to me. We'd been ambushed. It might have been a trap. They might have known we were coming.

Were my parents here too? Were they already prisoners?

Shit! Saige!

She was hurt. She was bleeding. I got that guy. I got him off of her. But was that enough?

Did she get away? Did any of them get away?

Hello? I reached for the bond but felt nothing.

Oh, no no no no no no.

Saige? Sai?

I waited to hear anything back from their individual threads.

Niall? Theo?

My heart raced. My head was spun. I had to concentrate and not let fear take over. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath to calm myself into focusing my thoughts on the present and what I could control.

The cell was probably blocking out our magic. Just because I couldn't connect to them didn't mean they weren't alive.

“We’ve got a live one.” A deep male voice called from outside my cell. I scooted back into the corner, hoping to give myself a few moments to prepare. As they stepped inside, the need to attack rushed forward, but my body was weak. They’d done something to me. Plus, I didn’t have access to any of my witch abilities. I was too vulnerable to try to fight them.

The guard smirked when he took me in. “Looks like it’s time for another dose.”

He took a step forward.

Another dose. Hell no. I needed to keep my mind clear. I needed to be awake.

He took another step toward me with a syringe in hand. I felt the pull of my hawk. He was here. I immediately shifted and flew up, hitting my back on the ceiling.

“Dammit!” the guard yelled. He tried to jump and his arms held out, but thankfully, the ceilings were tall enough he couldn’t reach me.

Another guard poked his head in. “We’ll have to remember to double dose him next time. Come on. We’ll just wait until he’s asleep.”

They shut the metal door, locking me inside. I shifted back dropping to my feet. Either they hadn’t given me enough of a dose to block my hawk, or they couldn’t prevent shifting. I wasn’t sure, but I was grateful for the delay. They’d be back and more prepared next time. But so would I.

CHAPTER 20



I couldn't open my eyes. I'd never been so exhausted, but it was more than that. It felt like they were glued shut. I tried to rub them, but I couldn't move my arms.

Was I paralyzed?

That didn't make sense. What happened? Why couldn't I remember anything? I started to panic when it all came rushing back. We'd been attacked. Kaden pulled someone off me. Then they knocked him out and put a syringe in his neck.

Is that what happened to me too? Had we been drugged?

I tried to open my eyes again as more feeling in my body returned and reached out for them. Our connections weren't there. I called, not expecting a reply, but still felt dread when they didn't.

They're being tortured.

I wasn't sure where that thought came from, but the moment it entered my mind, I knew it was true. Wherever they were, they were being tortured.

But why wasn't I?

Maybe I was too bruised and battered to even feel it, and my mind had gone to another place.

I tried to summon my field, the one where I met Kaden, but I couldn't because I wasn't asleep. Floating in between.

When I returned to consciousness, I was aware time had passed. I don't know how or if that was true or not, but I could sense it.

I had more feeling throughout my entire body, and this time I opened my eyes without much effort. The bare room around me came into focus. I was in a bed covered in a hospital gown.

Had we been rescued? Had someone else found us?

I looked down at my fingers and wiggled them, testing out each limb one at a time. I could feel them, but the act of sitting up seemed impossible. I was still too tired.

I tried calling out for the guys again. No response. I heard movement on my right and turned my head. Tears filled my eyes. I hadn't been rescued. I wasn't in a hospital. I was in the castle because Hannah and Natasha were staring at me. Looking as devastated to see me as I was to see them.

"No." Hannah covered her mouth and shook her head. "No, no, no, no, no, no."

She backed up, hitting the wall behind her before slowly sliding to the ground and breaking down in sobs.

Natasha turned from her to me like she didn't know who to go to first. I stared at Hannah, praying this was some sort of nightmare, a vision I could get out of and figure out a way to make sure it never happened.

But this was too close to the vision I had the night before we left for Scotland. I knew then what would happen eventually. I just didn't think it would happen like this.

Would it have changed anything if I warned the guys? I didn't think so. I lost any faith it was possible to change the outcomes of my visions.

I just didn't think an attack would be how I got inside the castle. Things were not going according to plan.

Natasha helped Hannah stand and brought her over to my bed, making sure she was situated before coming around to the other side and sitting down. She took my hand in both of hers.

"Saige," she said in a whisper. "I'm so sorry."

I shook my head and tried clearing my throat. My voice came out weak. "I'm sorry. We were supposed to come rescue you." I tried to recall exactly what happened. "We were ambushed, attacked, and I woke—I think I was in a different in a room—but I couldn't open my eyes or move."

Hannah let out another sob. "No."

Natasha squeezed my hand. I could see her eyes watering, but she was staying strong. I looked down and confirmed what I already knew: they were both pregnant.

"If you woke up where we did, then it's likely you're pregnant too." She caught my stare I shook my head.

"No." I didn't have a vision of that. I was just injured.

She dipped her chin. "They didn't tell us anything on the first day. I remember waking up and smelling strong antiseptic."

I nodded. "It smelled really sterile."

"I couldn't move either, couldn't open my eyes. I felt like I was kind of floating between sleep and awake." She perfectly described what I went through.

Hannah stood up and turned like she was looking for something.

“Hannah, calm down. There’s nothing we can do now.” Natasha spoke in a smooth, steady voice, and Hannah finally listened, sitting back down but not looking at me.

“Is Daniel still here?” I asked.

Natasha nodded. “How did you know?”

“I’ve seen visions of you guys. That’s why we came.” My thoughts were moving too slow. “Niall’s brothers are here too.”

“You came for us?” Natasha whispered.

Hannah looked at me. “You fool. You saw what was happening to us and you still came?”

“Of course I came for you. We’ve been trying to get to you for weeks. We got to Ireland and were waiting for a plan to get us to Scotland. It took a lot longer than we thought it would. There was supposed to be a signal from some scouts who have been watching the castle. But it didn’t come, and another group has been missing for over a week. We were going to try to find them when we were ambushed.”

“You came to Scotland for us?” Natasha didn’t seem to understand.

I nodded. “We’re here to get you guys and Daniel.”

“And Ben,” she added.

“Is he?”

“Yes.” She touched her rounded stomach, understanding what I was asking. “He’s a vampire. They took him three days before us. He’s not a hybrid, but his parents, his mom and

stepdad, are in an interspecies relationship. His three-year-old brother is a hybrid.”

So they took him as punishment? I didn’t understand the Council’s actions, but I doubted I ever would.

“Are you guys okay? Other than?” I couldn’t even say the words.

“Yes, they don’t treat us like they treat the prisoners. They’re in cages in the dungeons below. We’re not exactly free to walk around, but we’re at least able to stay in this room together.”

“But Daniel and Ben are kept in the cages,” Hannah said in a detached tone. “I’m not sure why they let them see us once a week, but they’re allowed to join us when we go outside.”

“That’s when I’ve seen you in my visions. You’re outside, surrounded by guards.”

Natasha nodded. “We’re the only ones who get to go outside, but they watch us so closely we can barely speak to each other.”

“Can you use your abilities out there?”

She looked at my blanket. “We don’t have magic here. Our abilities are blocked even when we go outside.”

“But Niall’s brothers were able to reach us,” I explained.

“Maybe there are fewer spells in the prisons. They keep them so weak I doubt they expect anyone to be able to use their abilities.”

“What do you mean, they keep them weak?”

“They give them a serum that suppresses them. Most of the time, they’re just asleep. They only wake them up when they

need them for something,” Hannah explained.

“Need them for something like what?”

“Testing,” Hannah said. “They run a lot of experiments.”

“Were your guys with you?” Natasha asked.

I nodded. She didn’t say anything, but I’d watched her expressions for long enough to know this was bad. This was so bad. And not how this was supposed to go at all. We were supposed to rescue them.

“When I’ve seen you in my visions, you’re outside with Ben and Daniel, then something happens, like you’re in pain.”

Natasha tucked her hair back. “They put these cuffs on us. When it’s time for us to go back inside, they knock us out, so we don’t know the way in or out of our rooms. It’s not a pleasant experience.”

Monsters. The Council was a group of actual monsters. How could that do that to other people? It was ... probably the least offensive thing they were doing.

“How often do you get to go out? Do you have another one coming up soon?”

Hannah let out a humorless laugh. “There is no schedule here. Time doesn’t exist like it should. We’ve only gone twice, and last time, they told us to tell them goodbye.”

“The guards are sadistic like that,” Natasha said with a fraction of her usual venom. “It’s been a long time, I think. Much longer than we had to wait last time, so maybe they were right, maybe that was it.”

“Have you seen anyone else? Anyone you know?”

“No,” Hannah muttered. “We don’t see any of the other prisoners.”

There was no way of knowing if anyone from our group was okay. If Rodney and Rainer were okay. We’d only been gone for a day and a half when we’ve been ambushed. When would Masie and Maeve start looking for us? We were meant to check in every six hours, but how much leeway would they give us? They let that first group go seven days before sending in a team. Would they do the same for us? Would we all survive a week in here?

“What else do I need to know?”

“They give us three meals a day and make us take these pills. I think they’re some sort of prenatal vitamins or something. It doesn’t matter,” Hannah said. “We can’t refuse.”

“We’ve tried,” Natasha said with a haunted look. “It’s better to just take them.”

I nodded. I wanted to put up a fight, but I trusted them. I trusted they already tried.

“How long have you guys been in here? Since you were taken from the school?”

“Yeah,” Hannah said quietly. “Are our parents looking for us?”

“They were, but they’re being kept away. So far, the Council hasn’t targeted them. So they were moved to a safe location, hoping to not draw attention.”

“Anything about my grandfather?” Natasha asked.

“He’s one of the three we haven’t heard anything from. I have no idea what side he’s on.”

“He may be on the Council and his morals are definitely on the gray side, but he’d never let this happen to me,” she spoke with certainty. She wasn’t the type to lie, even to herself. “He might be held prisoner too.”

“Maybe,” I agreed. We didn’t know much of anything anymore. “What happened to you since you’ve been here?”

Hannah’s eyes were glassy when she met mine. “We woke up here in this room together after whatever happened in the sterile room.”

“Whatever happened?” Natasha scoffed and pointed to her belly. “We know exactly what happened. They impregnated us.”

Hannah cringed. “Right, they said Daniel is the father of mine.”

“And Ben is the father of mine,” Natasha finished.

“They told you?” I wondered if they would tell me. Was it one of the guys? What if it was one of the three volunteers? Or a stranger. That thought made me ill, not that I could do anything about it now if they did impregnate me too.

“They don’t do any experiments on us other than regular checkups. They’re magically speeding up the process, though.” Natasha put her hand on the top of her belly. “We should only be three months along. But obviously, it’s more than that.”

“They think about six months,” Hannah said quietly, staring down at her bump.

I hated seeing the defeat on both of their faces, but they’d been here for a long time. They lost hope. My arrival wasn’t exactly inspiring for either of them. It only meant there were more of us in here to rescue.

CHAPTER 21



I recognized this room based on the scent alone, since I never actually saw it. There were three hospital beds lined in a row with motionless bodies strapped to each one. Daniel, Ben, and Niall. I cried and ran to his side, but there was nothing I could do. Nothing I could see wrong with him. He was just lying asleep, hooked up with cords coming from his neck, chest, arms, and fingers. What were they doing to him?

Daniel gasped and jerked. I ran to his side, trying to soothe him, but he remained fast asleep.

I didn't think he could feel my touch.

I was having another vision, but somehow, I knew this wasn't far off. This could be happening now or in the next few minutes. I wished I could do something, anything, to help them.

Niall cried out. "Saige!" he screamed, jerking against his restraints before his body went slack again.

I covered my mouth, muting my own cry.

What was happening to them? What was the Council doing to them?

"Saige!"

Someone was shaking me. I opened my eyes to see Hannah and Natasha standing over me.

“Are you okay?”

I shook my head and sat up. “No, I saw them.”

“Who?” Hannah asked.

“Daniel, Ben, and Niall. They’re in that experiment room, strapped down to gurneys. They seemed like they were unconscious, but they kept crying out and screaming. I couldn’t do anything.”

I was shaking, and Natasha put her arms around me while Hannah scooted in. I rested my head on her shoulder.

“You’re having these visions almost every time you go to sleep now.”

“I know, but I don’t have access to my sleep potion.”

“Have you seen anything else recently?” Natasha’s voice broke. She learned about my visions when they started three days ago. It seemed as if every time I went to sleep, I had some sort of nightmare, usually about the guys and what they are going through. I just had to hope I was wrong, that they were just regular nightmares and not visions.

“Ben didn’t scream out that time.”

She sucked in a breath. “But you saw his machines. He was alive?”

“Yeah, I saw his heartbeat, and he was breathing on his own.”

She nodded and pulled away, standing up and facing away from us for a moment before she turned, her eyes glassy. “We have to stay strong.”

“You’re right,” Hannah whispered. “It’s just so hard.”

“I hate how lost I feel,” I admitted. “It’s getting more confusing each day.”

Disorientation was taking over. Each time I woke up, I had no idea what time it was or how long I’d been asleep. Since we had no windows, it was impossible to tell.

“This is the best way we’ve found to keep track of time.” Hannah helped me up and over to her bed, tugging back the blanket to reveal her metal frame with the paint scratched in dashes. “I mark each time they serve what we call breakfast, but there’s no way of knowing what time it actually is. It was just the one thing consistent enough to track.”

“How many marks are there?”

“Ninety-four.”

I rubbed my face, trying to get myself to wake up more, to think clearly. There was a fog that took over and settled in my brain, making it hard to concentrate. Every day felt wrong. I was sleeping way too much. The pattern didn’t make sense.

Sleep, eat, sleep, exercise, sleep.

It was confusing. But I knew we were being medicated through injections, but I had a feeling that they were feeding us something as well, to keep us subdued.

Maybe that’s how their babies were growing so fast.

It had been three days, at least I thought it was, but so far, I didn’t feel any different that way. I didn’t feel pregnant. Not that I knew how that felt.

“Why do they drug us?”

“I think I might be at fault for that,” Natasha fisted the front of her gown. “I tried fighting them in the beginning. I demanded to see Ben and Daniel to make sure we knew they were okay, but they refused. A guard hit me.”

“He did?” I gasped.

Hannah looked ill. “He never came back, and they’ve never hit us again. But they do threaten. They do use the guys against us. They threaten to hurt them if we do anything to step out of line again. And you’ve seen how they look when they allow us to go outside. I can’t do anything to cause Daniel more pain. Not with what he’s already going through.”

“What do you mean? What are they doing to him? Besides holding him prisoner?”

“They do a lot of experiments. He wouldn’t tell me the details, though.” Hannah’s voice lacked her usual emotions, no teasing or giggles. None of her usual flair for the dramatics. Just a monotone explanation of what was going on.

Anger rose in me again. “We have to do something. We have to let people know where we are.”

“You said Masie and Maeve are back at the compound. Shouldn’t they know by now that something happened?” Natasha asked.

“Yeah, that’s the only thing giving me hope right now. But I don’t know if they’ll be able to figure out we were taken. Although it does seem kind of obvious.” I stood from the end of Hannah’s bed and paced.

“Niall’s brothers were able to get a message out. I know you said the wards are different up here, but maybe we could try something together with the three of us. I’m a lot more powerful than I used to be.”

Natasha offered a sad smile without a drop of her usual condescension. “We’ve tried everything, even blood magic. You can give it a shot. But I don’t think it’s worth wasting any energy.”

“You did blood magic?” The last bit of my hope disappeared.

“Yeah. They even have wards against that.”

I blew out a breath. “Okay, well, we can try again. Maybe having three of us will—”

“Don’t.” Hannah interrupted. “Please. I can’t handle more disappointment. And frankly, I don’t have the strength to practice any magic that would make a difference. The only thing I can do right now is rest so I have some strength to protect my baby.”

She put her hands on her bump.

“You guys can’t give birth here. We have to get out before then.”

Natasha agreed. “I have a feeling they don’t plan on letting us keep our children.”

“No. Niall had a theory they’re just going to be taken away and used for testing.”

“No!” Hannah cried. “We can’t let that happen. I refuse.”

“We’re going to do everything we can to prevent that,” I promised, taking in the deep purple bags under her eyes. Even though we spent most of the time asleep, they both looked exhausted and much too thin.

Everything the Council did was calculated. Were they keeping them just healthy enough to have a healthy pregnancy

and nothing more? Did they even care if they died or were the babies all they wanted?

“I’m so tired all the time,” I admitted.

“Wish I could tell you that you’ll get used to it, but we’ve felt that way since we got here.”

I rubbed my face. “They’re doing this on purpose. To leave us confused. Maybe to make the passing of time seem more normal for how quickly your pregnancies are going.”

Natasha touched her bump protectively. “Maybe.”

There was a knock at the door, the only way in or out of this room, before the panel at the bottom was opened and three trays were slid inside. The guards didn’t usually bother coming in to give us our meals.

“Do you think they drug the food?” I voiced my theory.

“Probably,” Natasha said as she picked up two of the trays, handing one to me before picking up the third and taking it back to Hannah on her bed. “But we can’t *not* eat—and not just for ourselves.”

I nodded.

“I don’t want to know what they would do to us if we refused. It’s not worth finding out.” She had a fair point. “The Council will get what they want. No matter what pathetic attempt at fighting back we contrive.”

We were powerless.

“Does this count as a mark?” I look down at the potatoes and roasted meat.

“No. This is either lunch or dinner,” Hannah said between bites.

“Which means sleep,” I closed my eyes, trying to focus, “and then exercise later?”

“Usually. They keep the pattern pretty similar, but I’ve noticed there have been times when things change. Probably because of the guards or something,” Natasha explained.

“Maybe that’s when they do the switch,” I said, wishing I could give that information to someone else. Someone who could actually do something with it.

“Yeah. Probably.”

I could feel my body growing tired, even though I’d only been awake for a few minutes. I wanted to fight it. I wanted to keep talking, to keep planning with them, but I was just so tired all the time. And sleep sounded so good. I put my half-empty tray back on the ground near the door and crawled back into my bed, wishing I had one of the guys to hold on to and tell me that things would be okay.

I wished I could fight sleep, so I didn’t have another nightmare. But as the darkness pulled me under, a shot of fear went through me.

I was down in the prison cells—or so I assumed by the damp, cold stone floors, walls, and ceilings. I ran toward the first opening I saw and looked through the metal bars. Rodney. He was unconscious, laying on the floor. I called out his name, but he didn’t move. He couldn’t hear me.

I continued to the next one, finding Rainer with cuts and scrapes and blood all over him. How long had he been like this? Was this from the ambush, or had he sustained more injuries since we arrived?

I continued to the next one, recognizing one of the guys who joined our failed rescue mission, then turned down the

next row and fell to my knees in front of Kaden's cell.

He lay unmoving, completely naked, in an unnatural position. It looks like his legs and arms might have been broken. I didn't bother holding back my sobs. No one could hear them.

I reached through the bars, but he was too far away. "Kaden, I'm here. I'm here. Please feel me. Please know that I'm not going to leave you alone like this. I'll figure out a way."

I wanted to find the rest of the guys, but I could feel the threads of the dream coming undone. And I opened my eyes to the silence of our room. Natasha and Hannah were still sleeping. I never felt so hopeless in my life.

THEO



I closed my eyes and fought for consciousness. I didn't want to black out, not again. Not so soon.

"Increased to level seven," an old man in a white lab coat said, staring down at a clipboard. Never once had he met my eyes in all the times I'd been in this room. It was probably easier for him to pretend like I was simply an experiment, and not an actual living, breathing person, as long as he didn't look at me.

I braced myself as another short of electricity went through my body. I jerked off the table, pushing my limbs against their restraints until the machine cut off. I slacked, and my body went limp.

"Interesting." He made a note before turning to the technician operating the torture device.

I wasn't sure what was interesting. This was the same routine they did each time I come in here. What was this, the eleventh or twelfth time?

I was losing track of days, of routines, and how many times I'd been in this damned room. The white walls, metal trays and tables, and stink of strong cleaning supplies filled my nightmares. The guards had walked me past similar rooms, but I'd never been in any other. Just this one.

Once I swore we passed three people lying on beds similar to this in another room, but we moved too fast for me to identify any of them. It just reminded me we weren't alone. I wasn't alone here.

I'd yet to see Saige or proof of her being here, and I had no way of finding out. The only time I had access to my abilities was for brief moments during these sessions, when they tried to push me to use my fire magic to test how strong it still was post-torture. Unfortunately, whatever they did during that time prevented me from doing anything else, even communicating with the bond. Maybe that was because the others were still locked up and had no access to their powers when I did.

I tried to focus on the threads to each of them, praying that since I still felt each one that meant they were alive. I had to hold on to that hope. It was the only thing getting me through not only these sessions, but the recovery after.

"Let's move on," the old man said. The tech pushed away the electrocution machine and pulled out a sledgehammer.

I closed my eyes, wishing I could fast forward through what was coming next. I hated these days. They pushed me as close to death as they could before allowing my body to heal itself.

Well, not entirely. They always kept me somewhat broken, so I couldn't get too strong to fight back.

"Start with the left tibia."

Before I could process the order, the sledgehammer connected with my leg. I bit down on the leather strap they shoved in my mouth at the beginning of each of these sessions. I tried to hold in my scream.

The monitors beeped behind me, providing all the information the doctor is interested in.

“Right femur.”

My eyes shot open just as the sledgehammer came down on my thigh. I grunted, grinding my teeth into the leather as the taste of blood filled in my mouth.

The old man watched the monitors behind me, then made a note. “When was the last time he was given blood?”

I bit down harder, dragging my nails across the sheets. It had been so long since I’d fed. Even before we were captured, it’d been a few days before we left the Ireland compound.

I had no idea how long it had been. Weeks maybe?

“According to his last test results, there is point nine remaining.”

I wanted him to explain. I wanted the technician to explain to me what that meant, but the doctor didn’t ask any follow-up questions.

They were keeping blood from me, preventing me from being able to heal myself, and driving my vampire side absolutely insane. In the very terrifying, literal sense, I was losing my mind. Not just because of the torture I was enduring, but because my body was lacking an essential nutrient. Our bodies couldn’t survive without food or water, but because I was a vampire, I couldn’t survive without blood. I never tried to max out to find what my limit was, but I learned in classes it was about sixty days. I had to be approaching that.

The scrape of the door opening caught my attention, but I couldn’t move my head to see who had entered. Rage filled me when the sound of his voice gave him away, sending a shiver

down my spine. Councilmember George, the one that had come to the Academy. The one that tried to take us.

“Mr. Bridges, we meet again.”

I ignored him, staring straight ahead at the paneling on the ceiling.

“Things would have been so much easier if you and your friends had come along on your own, and we hadn’t needed to capture you.”

Yeah, as if anything would have changed. We would have just been here for months already.

“No bother. It always works out in the end.”

I swallowed back the bile and blood in my throat. I had to focus on something good. Saige, my jagiya, my heart. Our bond, the guys. My parents, at least they were safe. I wish we could have at least seen Kaden’s parents before we were captured. Not knowing where they were was another problem my mind fixated on, another distraction, which wasn’t necessarily a bad thing when I was in this room.

“We’ve allowed your parents and you to live as the poster child for hybrids for the past seventeen years and look at where that got us. You know, you’re lucky. I wanted to take you away from the moment we knew of your existence. Think of how much further along we would be in our understanding of hybrids if we hadn’t wasted nearly two decades, allowing you to think you were some sort of normal person.” He let out a heavy sigh. “There is no use in looking back. Only onward. We’re going to make an example out of you.”

I could feel his eyes on me but refused to give him the attention he wanted.

“I see you’re testing his tolerance limits, Winston.”

“Yes, Councilmember George.” The old man, I hated that I knew his name, replied.

“And your findings?”

“Not entirely conclusive. He is still able to heal himself to some point with very little blood remaining in his system. We are waiting for it to drain entirely before we can see what else he’s capable of.”

“Very well. Does he still have his Fire magic?”

“We haven’t checked today,” Winston said.

“Go ahead.”

Shit. Shit. Shit!

I tried to prepare myself for what was coming. I heard the flame of the blowtorch and closed my eyes. As the heat touched my skin, the smell of burned flesh filled the room, making my stomach turn.

I coughed as acid and bile rose in my throat, but there was nothing in my system to throw up.

“Now release his magic.”

The order came, and I felt my ability return to me, taking control of the fire, and dowsing it was a single thought.

“While this is all fine and interesting, we’re wasting time. We need to see what his absolute limit is. Where he breaks, and we need to get there faster.”

“Of course, Councilmember,” Winston gave in. “We will run his blood through our dialysis machine to see if we can cleanse it faster.”

“Very good. The rest of the Council will be here soon and are expecting results.”

“Of course.”

I wanted to throw up at the man’s lack of backbone. He was willing to do anything to me without a care as long as the order came from a councilmember.

“What about the others?”

I tried not to show any signs of interest. What others? Who is he talking about?

“They’re all progressing quite nicely as well. Showing signs of weakening.”

“Well, push all of them as quickly as possible. I want to know what each species can handle and how we can break them faster on a larger scale.”

Were they trying to tear apart all society, not just hybrids? What was their goal? Control?

It was the same word Niall had brought up. They wanted to control us, maybe out of fear. I guess their purpose didn’t really matter.

“We’re bringing in the next batch in a few minutes,” Winston told him.

No! No, I wanted them to focus on me. I wanted them to keep torturing me because then the other guys were safe from this cruelty.

NIALL



I knew it was coming. The moment I heard footsteps approaching, I lay on my stomach and peeked out through the small opening at the bottom of the door where they slid in our food, on days they remembered to feed us. They dragged Theo's limp form into his cell. He was bleeding and both of his legs looked broken. He made a sound as they tossed him in and close the door behind them. That was the only way I knew he was alive

I rolled away and stood. I was next. The guards did an excellent job of keeping us weak and confused, especially with the sedatives keeping us mostly asleep, but I kept track of everything that happened whenever I was awake. I'd broken off a small chunk of stone from the wall and scraped what happened onto the floor. While most of the rotations seemed random, I picked up on the pattern. I didn't go after Theo every time they took him out and returned him, but every third. Usually, when he came back looking near death, that's when I knew I would be going next.

This was exactly what Saige saw in her vision. This is why Theo didn't want to leave the pack's land. It wasn't because he was afraid for himself. He knew if he was here, that meant we all were, and he was trying to prevent that from happening.

I'd had that feeling, too, but I was so focused on saving my brothers and Hannah, Natasha, and Daniel, that I didn't stop to think about what it would mean if we were all locked up as well.

I was pretty sure Saige knew this was coming. I'd been asleep when she had the vision of herself being locked up here and projected it through the connection, but she never told me, never told any of us. I let her keep her secret.

Maybe she knew what I did, that it wouldn't make a difference. Her visions had a way of coming true, no matter what anyone else attempted to change.

Right on time, my door opened, and two guards stepped in. I turned around and put my hands behind my back, not bothering to put up a fight. It didn't work. It only made things worse. Getting hit a few times by their baton before going into the lab for experiments only drew out the pain, giving that sadistic doctor more of what he wanted. I wasn't planning on making this easier for him.

Without a word, one of the guards handcuffed me, then slipped a blindfold over my head. This was new. Maybe they figured out I was more perceptive than I was letting on. Or maybe they were taking me somewhere. They didn't want me to know the route. Maybe they would pass something I wasn't supposed to see.

It didn't matter. I couldn't change it. Struggling only led to more pain.

Within minutes, the sterile scent stung my nose, and I knew where we were. My handcuffs were taken off, then the blindfold. I was tossed onto the bed, my restraints replaced before I had a chance to think of fighting back.

“Are you still refusing to speak today?” the doctor asked. He was a young man, maybe thirty, with bright red hair and an American accent.

I stared back at him.

“That’s fine. We’ve found out your secrets without you having to tell us.” He moved from the foot of my bed to my left side. “Isn’t that right, little vampire?”

I didn’t flinch or react. I knew they’d figure I was a hybrid, eventually. In fact, it took them longer than I expected. But I didn’t want to rub that in their faces.

“You should have been killed along with your parents and brother.”

I clenched my jaw, then was angry at myself for giving him any reaction.

“How long has it been since you fed?”

I had to think back. Sometime in Ireland. When we first arrived, maybe? It was already at least a few weeks by the time we got to Scotland, and I was pretty sure we’d been here for at least two more. Not that I was going to give that information over to him willingly.

“See, it’d be a lot easier if you would answer the questions I asked. I have the lab results, so I know the amount that’s in your blood. But I don’t know how long it took to get to this point.”

He eyed me, waiting me out. I didn’t respond.

He looks back at his clipboard. “You’re different from the other one. Your need for blood isn’t as strong.”

The other one? Was he talking about Theo?

“It’s interesting. We’ve now seen more hybrids than we have ever been able to study before. I have a working theory.”

This piqued my interest, but I didn’t want him to know that. Maybe it was my heart rate. Maybe he saw another indicator, but he smiled.

“You’re interested. Do I want to know what my theory is?”

Yes. But no.

“I believe hybrids aren’t equally each species. One is dominant and one is recessive. Like the other genes you inherit from your parents. I believe you’re a dominant witch, recessive vampire, but the other one is a dominant vampire, recessive witch.”

I didn’t say anything, but I had that theory as well.

“If only your parents were here. I could run more tests on them, comparing them to you. That’s one miscalculation the Council made, killing them off before we could study them. It doesn’t matter now. We have the next generation coming.”

Was he talking about Natasha and Hannah and their babies? It gave me a drop of hope they wouldn’t kill them immediately after they gave birth. They wanted to study the parents, which at least gave us more time.

“I can’t wait until we complete our individual analysis and start to study you all as a bond.” My eyes widened, and he grinned. “Yes, we know about the five of you, and we’re all very excited to get our hands on you together.”

I knew he phrased that in a creepy way on purpose.

He eyed me up and down. “I’m sure you’re curious about them. I will tell you one thing. They’re alive. At least for now.”

That sadistic son of a bitch.

“I’m sure you’re worried about your nucleus, Saige.”

I wanted to rip out his throat for even thinking her name.

“I could tell you, of course, but you have some information you need to share with me first.”

Oh, so he thought we would trade? That I would give into his games. I wanted to know where Saige was, if she was okay, if she was being tested on as much as the rest of us, but I also didn’t want to do anything to make her situation worse. I didn’t want to give any information to him they hadn’t already figured out for themselves.

“Or about your cousins.”

I dropped my eyes.

“Don’t you want to know how they’re doing? They’re the primary reason you’re here. Aren’t they? I can tell you what happened to them.”

Happened?

“All you have to do is answer my questions. And I’ll answer yours.”

I closed my eyes, trying to repress the urge to find out more. Information was my preferred currency, and I had to resist the temptation. For the sake of my bond and my family.

I wanted him to get on with it, to start his normal routine of injecting me with serums that make me lose my grasp on reality. The ones that loosened my tongue and took away my ability to control any part of my body. He didn’t disappoint.

Once he was sure I wasn’t going to crack, his smile twisted. He held up the first syringe, stabbing me through the

thin hospital gown into my leg. I gritted my teeth to keep in the scream as flames ignited, spreading up and down my legs, through my core, into my arms, and up until they reached my head.

I was being burned alive. No matter how many times I said that it wasn't really happening, I couldn't deny the pain.

I hated him and every single person on the Council. Every person who was a part of this. I wanted to make each of them suffer, and one day, I would. I promised myself. It was the one thing keeping me from completely breaking down.

I saw the way they left Theo bruised and bloodied. Why they didn't use that form of torture on me? Why did they allow me to walk around looking whole? My scars were internal, the damage psychological.

He filled another syringe and turned to me, pushing it into the crook of my forearm.

"Let's see what today brings." He cocked his head and watched my face as my vision blurred.

The scene changed into my childhood home. Maeve standing beside me as we watch Sean and Conor kick a football around. I'm at peace. I'm happy. Then Maeve dropped to the ground beside me. Her face morphed into a scream, her skin turned to wax before melting off her bones. I looked at my brothers. They too had been melted. The fire inside them took them from me. The same one I was experiencing.

I looked down at my hands in horror as the flesh begin slipping off my fingers. I cried and howled, but nothing changed until I was on the ground next to Maeve, staring up at the gray- blue sky.

I blinked, and I was surrounded by my bond in a chamber filled with smoke. Flames came through the gaps in the ground. Saige was sobbing, begging me to help her. Kaden leapt over the flames, trying to reach her, but the gap widened and he fell through. His cries disappearing in a second. Theo tried next, but his body was already on fire. Sai reached for me, wailing for help when the ground he was standing on fell, and he followed Kaden down into the fire.

I looked back at Saige, her eyes pleading. Each time I tried to move, my body fought back. My limbs frozen in pain. Then I realized why. I was on fire.

There was nothing I could do to help her.

To help any of us.

When the hallucinations stopped, and my vision returned, I didn't move. I didn't want to know if I was still burned, if I lost my limbs, if my skin was gone.

The guards returned, waiting for me to get up like I normally did. This time, I couldn't sit up. Couldn't stand. My pride wasn't enough to lift me from the bed even after my restraints were gone.

This was the worst session.

I couldn't break through the hallucinations. I couldn't remind myself none of it was real. My body was still too warm.

A guard lifted me into a wheelchair, not even bothering to handcuff me to the armrests. They dumped me onto the cold floor of my cell, and I relished the relief. No heat. No fire.

I tried to hold on, to make a new mark on the wall, but I had nothing left in me. I fell into the black.



I didn't bother trying to walk as the guards gripped my biceps, holding me up as my feet dragged behind me. I didn't have the strength or energy to lift my head. Everything was confusing. I was pretty sure they were starving me. I heard the scraping of trays on the ground, and smelled food, but they only came to my door every three or four times. They were keeping me weak on purpose. I figured that out within the first week.

At least I thought it was a week.

I couldn't keep track.

There were no windows, nothing but a few glowing orbs that dotted the hall, sometimes filtering into my cell.

A grunt sounded to my left. I thought I recognized Niall being thrown into a cell we passed, but it happened too quickly. My mind was too slow to process if it was him for sure.

As I let my head fall back toward the ground, one of the guards shook me as he handed me over to his partner, who tossed me over his shoulder like a sack of flour. Normally, I would have never allowed this to happen. In my mind I protested, but my body had nothing left to give. Fighting was no longer an option.

My head swung back and forth with his strides, and I opened my eyes in time to see through the metal bars of a cell where a man lay unmoving, his limbs pointing in the wrong directions. He was missing part of one of his legs.

Who was that? Was it one of the guys? One of Niall's brothers? Rodney or Rainer? I wanted to go back and get another look. But I wasn't exactly in control of what was happening.

They were taking me to the white room. The one that smelled of bleach and had nothing to look at. I crumbled into a heap as the guard dropped me unceremoniously onto the hard white tile.

I tried to sit up but was barely able to move my legs into a less painful position before giving up. The guards left me alone, and I closed my eyes, knowing that time was passing but having no way to track it and no reason to care.

After a while, another door opened, and the doctor finally came in. I didn't know if he was actually a doctor, but he wore a lab coat. It was easier to use that label than figure out what his real job was here. So far, I considered myself lucky compared to the other men I saw. Only because they allowed me to heal myself before I left this room. They gave me just enough energy through an IV for my body to heal the broken bones and cuts, then left me drained completely once again before carrying me back into my cell.

It was a terrifying form of torture. I woke up each morning not knowing if it was real. I pat myself down, feeling for the pain, looking at my clothes for any proof that what happened in this room was real, but they always gave me a new hospital gown and cleaned off the blood. I could never know for sure how much of this was happening in my head.

“Hello, Sai. Are you ready to get started?”

I turned my head just enough to look at him, knowing he could see the disgust and hate in my eyes.

“I have a special treat for you today.” He turned around, going back to the door, opening it slightly before coming back and setting a tray in front of me. “I took a guess that you prefer your meat on the rare side.”

I looked down at the steak, my mouth salivating at the smell.

“I thought you might need a little extra boost.” He stepped back, giving me plenty of space as if he was trying to tell me that he wasn’t going to take it away from me.

This wasn’t a trick. He was providing me with a meal. One significantly better than I’d had since leaving the Stewart Pack.

“Go ahead,” he encouraged.

I didn’t care if it was laced with poison or drugs. My body acted before I could even think it through. I tore the large cut in half with my teeth, barely chewing it enough to swallow, then forced the second half into my mouth.

I laid back with my eyes closed, savoring the rich flavor before swallowing. The effects were too fast to be natural. I felt my mind clearing, my strength returning enough I was able to sit up with my back against the wall. At least I wasn’t completely vulnerable on the ground.

“Feel better?” he asked, as if he did me a great favor rather than being the source of my weakness. “We have a long day ahead of us, we should get started.”

A long day?

He didn't make me wait for an explanation. There were two types of sessions: interrogation and torture. He slipped a scalpel from his pocket. I had a feeling I knew which one today was.

"We've run all sorts of tests on you. We know you're a tiger shifter. We know your family lines, and we know about your bond."

I didn't bother reacting. He'd hinted at the guys and Saige before, and I wasn't going to give him any indication he was heading down the right path.

"What I don't understand is what you're doing with them."

Doing with who? Was he talking about the resistance? He thought because I wasn't a hybrid myself I wouldn't have a problem with what they were doing to other people?

"You're the only one in the bond who isn't a hybrid."

Oh, right. He was asking about that. Did he expect me to have answers? Didn't he know how bonds worked? It wasn't like we had any choice in the matter.

"It's interesting, from my point of view, of course, to compile all the data about the five of you to compare each of your strengths and abilities, your tolerance levels, but you're the anomaly. You don't fit in."

What was he trying to get at? Was he saying I was weaker than the others? Lower tolerance? Less interesting? Sure, I wondered myself why I was the only full-blooded shifter but not enough to let it bother me. Why should it? No one in the world understood how bonds happened or why. So I wasn't going to pretend like we suddenly had more insight than anyone else.

You ended up with who you're meant to be with. And that was it. Why waste time questioning? I wanted to tell him that, but I didn't think he would listen to me.

"I'm trying to figure out what you specifically bring to a bond. Why you would be required when the others bring the same, if not more, to the table?"

Was he trying to make me insecure? Was that his goal? Make me hate myself or the others enough to do something or admit something?

This guy had never been in love.

Maybe he didn't even have a family because the desire to protect the ones I cared about was stronger than the need to protect myself, and there was nothing he or anyone else could do to change that.

"What can your bond do? What do you offer them?"

I ignored him, prepared to wait out his questions, but then he whispered something. My body went still. I couldn't move anything below my neck. When he took a step closer and pushed his heel into my ankle, I realized I could still feel pain.

"I'll start asking again. What do you offer? When the five of you are together, what changes?"

Each time I didn't offer an answer, he cut me.

"What can you do?"

Slice.

"What can the five of you do?"

Slice.

"Why are there five of you?"

Slice.

“What can your bond do?”

Stab ... and slice.

The questions varied little, and after one leg and arm were full of cuts, it became clear the doctors were stuck on this. They're trying to figure us out, and they had no idea what we're capable of. Not only were we a large bond, but we are mostly hybrids.

They're probably scared of us. Not that they had a reason to be with how weak they kept us.

The Council probably didn't like the idea of our existence.

“This will go a lot smoother if you just answer me.” He slid the blade deep into the inside of my arm and dragged it down to my wrist. The strength I felt from the steak was disappearing, leaking out through my blood.

“We're going to get our answers. It's just a matter of how and when.”

He stood, wiping off his blade on my chest before going back to the door and holding it open as he pulled a TV on a rolling stand into the room. He turned it on.

“Maybe this will give you more motivation.”

A similar room filled the screen, but this one had a bed and several machines hooked up.

Someone stood in front of the camera, blocking out who was on the bed. Then they stepped aside. Kaden's face was barely recognizable through the swelling. He didn't move, didn't react as a bat came down on his gut.

Was he even alive?

The footage changed to Niall. He was screaming, thrashing against his restraints, jerking his body off the bed, but I couldn't see anything wrong with him.

What were they doing to him? He was moving. That was a good sign.

It changed again. Theo. A man with a sledgehammer stood next to him, slamming it into his legs. The bones cracked, and Theo bit down on something in his mouth before his body went limp, passing out from pain.

I wanted to cry out, beg for them to show me where they were now.

How could Theo survive that?

I didn't want to see anything else, especially not Saige being hurt, but when the feed stopped, the screen went black.

That was worse.

Not knowing how she was, if she was even here, if she was alive. At least I had proof of the others. The bastards were purposely leaving her out of it, so I had no way of knowing.

This was a whole new level of hell.

The blood loss started making me lightheaded.

“Tell me about the vampire.”

I closed my eyes not understanding.

“The hybrid!”

Theo or Niall? I didn't know, and it didn't matter. I wouldn't say anything.

The blade sliced into my skin.

He repeated his questions, cutting before he even finished, not giving me a chance to answer. I was losing too much blood and fading quickly.

Wasn't he going to let me heal myself? This was normally when someone else came in with a syringe, but he wasn't stopping. He kept repeating the questions. His voice grew louder, more impatient, as he carved into my flesh over and over and over again.

Why wasn't the pain dulling? Why was I still conscious? Shouldn't I be passing out from blood loss?

Maybe there was something magical about the knife, or maybe there was something that they put in the steak. I felt the sting of each pierce as if it was the first time.

My mind began to blur. Should I be answering his questions? Would that be better? Not for me but for the others. If I answered, would they spare them? Would they stop torturing them? I didn't know. I couldn't to make a decision. My mind finally faded to black.

CHAPTER 25



The moment six guards entered our room, I knew something was wrong. Something out of their routine meant nothing good for us. My theory was proven correct when I caught Natasha's shock.

"Come on, let's go," one of the guides said with a clipped tone as he walked behind me. None of them touched us, which was odd. Were they ordered not to? They herded us like cattle towards the door and surrounded us, so all I could see were a few inches between each of them as we walked down the hall.

They led us to an exam room with one bed and monitors surrounding it. The smells didn't match my memory of the first room, though it wasn't pleasant or inviting. The white walls are purposefully blank. As soon as we were in, four of the guards left. Only two remained to watch us.

There were two chairs. Not enough for all of us. Were they going to examine us or torture us one at a time, making the others watch?

I exchanged a look with Hannah and Natasha. We froze, unsure what to do.

Another door opened, and a woman in a lab coat walked in. Her big brown eyes met mine, and I swore I saw a bit of

guilt and apprehension in them before she blinked and looked down at her clipboard.

“Hannah, we’ll start with you today,” she said in a detached tone.

Hannah looked back at me, and I gave her a nod, trying to be reassuring even though I had no idea what was going on.

Another woman, younger than the doctor but older than us, helped Hannah onto the bed before taking a seat next to her in front of one of the monitors.

The door opened again, and three people walked in: an elderly man I didn’t know, Councilmember George, and Josephine Lovett.

Natasha gasped next me. “Grandpa?”

The old man turned his head towards her, taking her in with a blank expression before looking away. She started to tear up when I grabbed her hand, squeezing it, letting her know she wasn’t alone. That whatever was going on, we would figure it out together. Somehow.

I glared at Josephine. I always knew that woman was a traitorous bitch.

She wouldn’t meet my eye. Coward.

The only one who looking at us was Councilmember George. He had a glowing smile across his face. I hated that man before, but now it grew to a level of rage I never experienced before.

The doctor turned towards the councilmembers. “Patient one is a full-blooded Air witch. She’s been bred with a full-blooded shifter.”

Bred? The word made me ill.

“What type of shifter?” Josephine asked.

“Mountain lion,” the doctor replied, not looking up from her folder.

“And what will the child be?” Josephine asked while Councilmember George stared at me. I wanted to flip them off. But giving him any reaction would be letting him win.

“We don’t know yet.”

“Can’t you do a test?” Josephine asked, annoyed. “I thought that’s what your team was supposed to be doing. Genetically altering them to get us the results we want.”

“There wasn’t much we could do outside of the artificial insemination. We selected a healthy embryo, but there’s no way of knowing if it will be a hybrid or what species will be dominant,” the doctor explained.

“There’s no test you can run?” Councilmember George asked in a bored tone.

“It would be too dangerous. It could lead to miscarriage,” the doctor replied quickly.

“That would just waste more time. We might as well just wait it out,” he said to Josephine.

“Fine,” she relented. “But we want to see the baby and hear the heartbeat to make sure everything is going according to plan.”

“Of course.” The doctor nodded and stepped toward the younger woman. “Go ahead and get Hannah prepped.”

The assistant pulled a blanket over Hannah’s legs before lifting her hospital gown, revealing her swollen belly, and squirted a gel over her skin before lifting the wand.

They're doing an ultrasound just like humans used? Didn't they have some sort of magical way of knowing?

I stared at the assistant, watching her movements. I had no experience with supernatural pregnancies and never had a reason to ask before, but I couldn't think of what magic could be done. I don't want to think of any possibilities. If the doctor said it was too dangerous, then I was grateful the councilmembers weren't pushing for her to try anyway.

A moment later, a swooshing sound filled the room, and the councilmembers stepped closer, staring at the monitor as the doctor pointed out the physical features of the baby.

Hannah didn't look, but tears rolled down her cheeks.

"Do you know what the sex is yet?" Josephine asked.

The doctor hesitated. "It's a girl."

Hannah let out a sob before covering her mouth and turning her head away from the rest of the room.

I hated this. I hated that the councilmembers were here, that they were standing so close to her, that they knew anything about her baby. Even if they were technically the ones responsible for its creation.

I just wanted to protect her and Natasha. I wanted to get us out of here, at least back to the privacy of our room.

"Let's continue." George glanced over at me and Natasha with a smirk.

The assistant helped Hannah clean up while the doctor walked over to us. She briefly met my eye before turning to Natasha. "You'll go next."

I felt like she was trying desperately to communicate something with us, but I didn't understand. I wasn't sure I

cared enough to figure it out.

Natasha stood, and the doctor helped her over to the bed, while the assistant walked Hannah back towards me. I took her hand as soon as she was close enough, and she fell into the chair, weeping silently. I rubbed her arm, wishing we could communicate telepathically like I could with the guys.

“This is patient number two. A full-blooded Fire witch bred with a full-blooded vampire.”

“Interesting choice,” her grandfather said with a flat expression. He was looking at her the same way he looked at Hannah, detached with only vague curiosity. Didn’t he recognize his granddaughter? Was he okay with her being impregnated by his peers?

I wanted to shake him and demand answers.

They went through the same steps prepping Natasha. Her grandfather took a tiny step closer. I watched him the entire time they listened to the heartbeat and announced she was having a boy. His eyes watered, but as soon as I saw it, it disappeared as if he’d spelled away the emotion. He was treating her with indifference. But was it a mask?

Was he here voluntarily? Was he being kept here by the Council? A glorified prisoner? Last we heard, he’d been out of reach for months. Was it because he was here? Was he pretending to support the Council’s decisions? Was he trying to protect his granddaughter?

I wanted to know desperately, but there were too many untrustworthy ears here.

Sooner than I expected, she was led back towards us. The doctor offered her hand to me, and I accepted it automatically.

Why was she leading me over? What was going on? Why was I been included?

Despite what Natasha and Hannah said about where I'd woken up and what had to mean, I'd been in denial up until now.

They were pregnant. I wasn't. I would feel something.

I would know.

My body would have told me by now. I would have had morning sickness or spotting, something to indicate a change. I tried to keep my gown down as the assistant tugged at it, but she gave me a look before her eyes darted towards the guards and then back to me. She was warning me, so I relented, allowing her to lift the gown and exposing my still flat stomach.

My heart raced as she put the cool gel on my skin, then lifted the wand.

"This is patient number three. The hybrid. Half witch, half shifter."

"Ohm, yes, I know this one," George said, taking a step closer.

Natasha's grandfather gently shifted, blocking him with his own body from getting any closer to me.

"Interesting. And what was she bred with?" Josephine asked with the same level of interest she'd given Hannah and Natasha.

"Another hybrid," the doctor answered.

My mouth went dry. Another hybrid? Not Sai. One of my bondmates?

“What type of hybrid?” George asked.

“A vampire and a witch.”

Theo? Niall?

Or was there another prisoner like them?

Josephine cocked her head as if she'd never heard of such a thing. “And what do you expect that mix will result in?”

“We don't know,” the doctor answered honestly. “It's impossible to know what will happen. Which genetics will be dominant in this situation.”

“Where did you find the other hybrid?” Josephine asked. Why was she pretending like she didn't know us? Like she hadn't met our bond?

“They all came in together,” the doctor answered. “We thought it would be more interesting to see what two hybrids would create rather than breeding her with a purebred.” I hated her word choice. It made me sick, but then the sounds the swishing sound filled the room, and I realized that the technician had already started my ultrasound without me noticing. I flinched away from the wand, but it was no use. My ears were ringing. Nausea was rolling in my stomach, reaching up my throat.

This couldn't be real. This wasn't real.

“Is that her heartbeat or the baby's?” Josephine stepped closer.

“The baby's,” the assistant said, pointing to the monitor.

No, this wasn't happening. I didn't have a baby inside me.

“How far along is she?” Natasha's grandfather asked.

“She was impregnated on the fifth, but with the accelerated gestational period, she’s closer to four months.”

I wish she had said weeks rather than a date that meant nothing to me. Four months was way too far along. I haven’t even been here for a month yet, had I?

“Can you tell the sex yet?” George asked.

The assistant moved the wand around faster than she had with Hannah and Natasha.

“Doesn’t look like we can get a clear view,” she told the doctor. “We’ll have to wait until the next appointment.”

Josephine nodded before taking a step back. “Very well. Keep us updated on their progress.”

Without looking at me, she turned and headed towards the door, followed by George and Natasha’s grandpa, who didn’t look back either. Once they left, the assistant handed me a towel to wipe my stomach off. The doctor came over, staring at the monitor.

“I’m a prisoner as well,” she whispered, so quietly I wasn’t sure I heard it. “We both are. We were taken from our homes five months ago because of our training with supernatural pregnancies. We’re not a part of the Council. I’ll try to help you as much as I can.”

“The guys. My bond. Are they okay?”

Her lips drew into a tight line. “They’re alive.”

It wasn’t the answer I wanted, but it was the best she could give me.

“Daniel and Ben?”

She nodded. “All alive.”

“Thank you,” I glanced at the guards, making sure they were still against the wall. “Am I really four months along?”

“Yes.”

“Is that normal?”

“No,” she shook her head. “They’re speeding it up using hormones against my recommendation.”

“How far along are Hannah and Natasha?”

“Eight months.”

I gasped. “They could give birth any day now.”

She nodded. “I’m aware.”

I thought we had longer.

“Keep taking the vitamins I send. I’m trying to counteract what the Council is giving you, trying to give these babies as much time to grow naturally as possible. I don’t want you giving birth in here anymore than you want to.”

“You have to get us of here,” I told her as she shared a look with the assistant.

“We’re working on it.”

Before I could ask any more questions, the guard walked up, keeping his eyes off my exposed stomach.

“It’s time to take them back.”

“Of course, I just needed to get one more image.” The doctor offered him a smile before stepping back.

He led me back toward Hannah and Natasha. The walk to our rooms seemed to last twice as long as normal. As soon as the door shut behind us, Natasha turned to me.

“What was the doctor saying?”

I took their hands and pulled them to the opposite side of the room. I wasn't sure what spells were in place, but I hoped no one could overhear us.

“She’s not a part of the Council. She doesn’t support them. She and her assistant were taken and forced to work here. She said the prenatal vitamins she’s giving us are slowing the pregnancies. She’s trying to counteract what the Council is doing to us.”

I still couldn't believe I was a part of this. I was pregnant too. I couldn't deny it anymore.

“She said the guys are alive.”

Hannah started crying. I wanted to comfort her, but there was more. “She said you guys are eight months along.”

“What? How?” Natasha was shaking.

“I’m not sure, but we’re running out of time. She said she’s trying to get us out before you guys give birth. But I’m not sure how that’s going to happen.”

I sighed, relieved I got it all out until I remembered. “Why did your grandfather pretend like he didn’t know you?”

Natasha stared down. “I have no idea. I don’t know if he’s just playing a part. Or if someone’s put a spell on him. I’m not sure.”

“He protected me from George,” I told her. “I caught him moving toward you too. I think he’s playing along for some reason.”

She turned her head and wiped under her eyes.

“One more thing. I know the woman, Josephine.”

“You do?” Natasha’s brows pulled together. “How?”

I told them about meeting her in Ireland. “I don’t trust her at all, but she did pretend like she doesn’t know me or my mates. I’m not sure what she’s doing, but I doubt it’s for our benefit.”

“I don’t think we can trust anyone at this point.” Hannah wrapped her arms over her stomach. “It’s up to us to get out of here before our little boy and girl are born.”



I ROLLED over and felt resistance. I opened my eyes and reached down, feeling a significant bump. I sat up and lifted my hospital gown to see my swollen belly.

“What the hell?” I gasped.

It had only been a few days since the exams in front of the councilmembers. Right?

How had I grown this much?

“Natasha! Hannah!” I called to them, hoping to wake them up.

“What?” Natasha asked groggily.

“Look at this!” It took them both a moment to sit up due to the obstacles in their way. They, too, looked significantly larger, as if they would give birth any day.

“Holy ...” Hannah trailed off.

Natasha swung her legs off the bed and came over. “How was that possible?”

I pointed her in her stomach. “How is that?”

She pushed her hands down over the globe tightening the gown, so she could see the form. “Oh, my gosh,” she cried.

“How am I this big?”

Hannah wobbled over. “How long has it been since the ultrasounds? I thought it was only a few days.”

“Me too.” Natasha stared at the ground as if she was trying to work through her memory as well. “There’s no way of knowing. They could have kept us asleep for weeks.”

Unfortunately, she was right. They could knock us out, come in and give our bodies nutrients through feeding tubes or IVs or something. I wasn’t sure of everything that would be required to keep us and our babies alive, but I didn’t doubt the Council would find a way.

“Why would they do that?” Hannah said, staring down.

“More time asleep, the less time we have to plan, to come up with schemes, to figure out a way out of here.” I looked down at my stomach, trying to remember what Mom had looked like when she was pregnant with Aiden and Brielle.

This was not a four-month belly. I had to be closer to six or seven months. But how? And if that was true, then how come Natasha and Hannah hadn’t had their babies yet?

Maybe the prenatal vitamins slowed down the progress toward the end.

Nothing made sense.

“We’ve got to get out of here.”

“We all agree on that, but how? There is no way out without going through that door.” Hannah pointed to the only exit. “And even if we got through, we’d be met with guards, and we have no magic.”

I wanted to pull my hair out. I wanted to scream.

I wanted to feel the threads of the connection with the guys.

What was happening to them?

Even if we could get ourselves out, it's not like any of us could leave them behind.

I hated feeling so out of control.

"What was that?" Hannah cocked her head towards the door. "Do you hear that?"

I stood up, letting the gown fall over me, and hurried over. Pressing my ear against the door. There were screams. Male. Full of agony and pain. My heart cracked. I swore it was Niall. I tried to fit my fingernails between the cracking of the door between the doorframe enough to open it. Natasha pushed my hand away.

"Don't bother. I already tried that. It's sealed shut."

"I think it's Niall," I told her.

She listened to the screams and didn't meet my eyes. "Doesn't matter who it is. We can't help them."

"So what can we do?" I pleaded with her. I needed a plan, a goal.

"Something we probably should have a while ago."

"What's that?"

"We stop eating."

"What about the babies?" Hannah asked.

She was right to be concerned. It wasn't like we were gaining a healthy amount of weight, especially for how long far along we were. If anything, we were thinner than ever, minus our pregnant bellies. We received the bare minimum.

“We’ll try it. The next two meals.” Natasha sounded surer than I felt.

I was pretty sure two meals meant two days, but didn’t bother objecting.

“We can see how long we stay awake, and what happens to us when they think we’re asleep.”

It was the only plan we had, so we agreed.

A short time later, the panel at the bottom of the door lifted and three trays of food slid in. I scooted them away from the door, so the guards knew we took them, before returning to Natasha’s bed, sitting next to her while Hannah sat propped up by pillows on hers. We stared at the trays of some sort of noodles with cut up fruit on the side. No prenatal vitamin.

What did that mean?

Did they hear what the doctor told me?

Was she okay?

I didn’t tell the girls my concerns. Worrying them wouldn’t help anything.

“So now we wait?” Hannah asked.

“Yep.”

KADEN



*I*t took two weeks to figure out I was overthinking.

The guards were using our meals to control us. That question was easy enough to solve. But beyond that, they weren't masterminds, bending time and space just to fuck with us. No, they are normal people with normal sleeping schedules and routines.

Once I stopped eating, it only took me three days to work out how to tell the passing of time. After that, I was able to sleep and eat around the guards' schedule while still being able to track the days.

While that did help give me some sense of understanding, and a tiny bit of control over my situation, it didn't exactly take away the anxiety of how often I was being taken out of my cell and interrogated.

It happened once a week on what I decided was Tuesday. There was no way of knowing if I was correct or not, but when I started keeping track, I was pretty sure I was right based on when we left the compound and were ambushed.

I was only being taken once a week, but there was much more frequent activity in the surrounding cells. Were they experimenting on the others more often? Interrogating them? Torturing them? Why weren't they coming for me?

It was unsettling and increased my panic when I thought about what was happening to the guys, to Saige. I wanted those bastards to focus on me more often, so that way at least I knew the others were safe. If only for a few hours.

It seemed I'd fallen low on their list of priorities. Maybe they'd caught on, maybe they realized I wasn't falling into the same predictable haze as the other captives here. I wasn't making their lives easy.

I didn't plan on changing that.

Especially now my plan was in place.

I ate and slept just enough to keep my connection to my hawk at the ready. Whatever they were putting in the food was blocking my magic, preventing me from being able to reach Saige in her dreams or using any of my witch abilities.

Somehow, I kept my Hawk within reach.

The guards would be coming for me soon. It was my turn to go back for interrogation, but I was prepared this time. I sat with my back against the stone wall, staring at the door, waiting for the sound of footsteps.

Right when my gut told me it was about time, heavy footsteps made their way down the hall, and I started preparing myself for what was coming.

One guard would unlock and open the door. The other would come in with handcuffs. Expecting a docile hybrid. Instead, the moment the door opened, I shifted, flapping my wings until I hit the ceiling. The first guard stepped in, and I shifted back, swinging my legs out as I came down, wrapping my thighs around his head and landing on top of him with a snap of his neck.

I couldn't think, couldn't process what I'd done.

Because there was one more to go.

The other guard rushed in at the noise, unprepared to find me crouched and waiting. The moment I saw him, I sprang, aiming my shoulder at his gut. I tackled him and, reaching up, snapped his neck before we hit the ground.

I pulled his body into my cell with the other guard, then ripped the boots and pants off one of them. I dressed and took their sets of keys, shoving them in my pockets and shutting the door behind me.

I should have grabbed a shirt and coat to look more like a guard, but I didn't want to waste any time.

I had an idea of where Sai was and headed straight for his cell first.

One row up, turn left, first cell on the right.

When I got there, I searched for the right key, then realized I was wasting precious seconds. I tried the biggest one, and it slid into the slot with ease.

I pulled open the door and found Sai laying on the ground unconscious. When I shook his shoulders, he blinked up at me.

Recognition slowly came to his eyes. "Kaden?"

"Come on. We've got to go."

He stood slowly, a little unsteadily. I took his arms, waiting for him to find his balance before continuing.

"How are you in here? What's going on?"

"We're getting out. We need to find the others."

He seemed to snap out of his confusing. "I'm pretty sure I know where Niall's brothers are, but I haven't seen the others."

“Show me.”

He nodded, walking out of the cell on his own, but I could see this way in his body swayed. He'd become too thin. I put my arm around his waist, letting him put his weight on me as we hurried down the row toward the exit we used to get to the interrogation rooms and cringed, hoping more guards wouldn't come looking anytime soon.

“Right here.” He stopped in front of the door with metal bars along the bottom half unlike ours, which were full metal.

I used the same large key, grateful it was apparently the master, and swung the door open.

If Sai looked bad, Sean and Conor looked horrible. But when I bent down and shook them, they woke instantly.

One of them jerked back. “Who are you?”

“Kaden and Sai. We're a part of Niall's bond.”

“Niall? He's here?” one of them asked.

“Yes, we've got to go.” I tried to get them to stand.

The other one stopped me. “No, not today.”

“What do you mean?” I demanded.

“No tomorrow, tomorrow. Tomorrow's the day,” the other brother explained, “We've got messages out. They're coming tomorrow.”

Well, shit. This is what happens when we can't coordinate.

“It's too late. We've got to go.”

They helped each other stand. I handed them the other set of keys. “The biggest one unlocks the cell doors. We need to let everyone out.”

They didn't hesitate. "We'll start this way."

They moved together. Why they hadn't been separated? Why had the guards and the Council allowed them to be together?

That wasn't exactly something I could waste time thinking about right now.

"This way."

I pulled on Sai's elbow, and he followed me, moving quicker. Hopefully, adrenaline was kicking in, and it would last long enough to help us get out of here.

We moved to the next cell, unlocking and opening it. Sai went in and woke the prisoner while I continued down the row, unlocking and pulling each door open, and peeking in to see if it was Theo or Niall before moving on, continuing our routine.

We were on our second row when I finally recognized someone inside.

"Daniel. Sai!" I called him over, and he ran in.

"Daniel. Oh, shit. What have they done to you?" He shook Daniel, who was barely able to open his eyes he was so beaten and bruised.

"Sai?" he asked, confused.

"It's me, man. We're here. We're going to get you out."

Daniel allowed him to help him stand. "Hannah. We can't leave without Hannah."

"I know. We're going to get them out."

"Ben's next door."

I wasn't sure who Ben was, but I was already moving on, opening unlocking the door and throwing it open for them to enter. Sai came back out with a guy about our age, barely able to walk with his arm over Sai's shoulders.

"We've got to keep moving," I said. "If we want any chance of finding the girls, we can't get stopped down here."

"Natasha," Ben whispered.

"I know we're going to find her. We're going to find her, Hannah, and Saige."

We didn't see Niall's brothers as we continue down the rows, and we still haven't found Theo or Niall, but we did find the bear shifter from our rescue team. He told us the other two guys had died in the attack.

Our group grew until about twenty men and women were following me, acting as lookout as I opened the doors, and they helped each newly freed prisoner from their cell.

We were getting close to the end of the last row when I opened the door and froze when I saw who was inside.

"Mom?" I knew that black hair anywhere, but the frail woman crumbled in the corner barely resembled the woman I'd left just a few months ago. "Mom." I ran in, taking her face in my hands. "Mom, can you hear me? It's me. It's Kaden."

She barely lifted her eyelids enough to see me before a small smile tugged at her lips. "My sweet boy. I'd hoped I would see you."

"Mom, I'm alive. You're alive. We've got to go."

A man from our group pushed forward. He was larger and much stronger than the rest of us. He must have only been in here for a little while. He lifted my mom in his arms.

“I’ve got her,” he promised, ushering me back out of the cell and on to the next one where I found my dad in not much better shape.

“I’ve got him,” another guy called out, helping my dad to stand with his arm around his thin waist to prop him up. “I’ve got him. Let’s move.”

Everyone looked at me for instructions, but I hadn’t thought past this point. I honestly wasn’t sure we’d make it this far. I wanted to go back to find Niall’s brothers and see if they had Niall or Theo yet, and Rodney and Rainer. But we couldn’t waste time. I had to trust that they would do everything they could to find their little brother and Theo. They wouldn’t leave without Saige’s uncles.

“This way,” someone called from the back of the group. “This is the door that leads to the delivery area. We’ll be able to sneak out this way.” He led our group in the opposite direction, and I pushed forward, finding the right key to unlock the door and pushed it open.

The scent of fresh, crisp air hit us all at once.

“Go, go, go!” I shouted out. “Get as far away from here as you can.”

“What about you?” the man carrying my mother asked.

“There are still people I need to find. Please take care of my parents,” I said to the other guys helping my dad walk. He was barely able to keep his eyes open, and I didn’t think he was aware of what was happening.

“Of course, with our lives.”

“Thank you.”

Once it was just me, Sai, Daniel, and Ben, we stared at each other.

“You guys need to go,” I told them. “I’ll go find the girls.”

“No,” Daniel shook his head. “We’ll go with you.”

I looked over him and Ben. “You’re in far worse shape than we are. Get yourselves to safety. Niall’s brothers said there was help on the way. There was supposed to be an attack tomorrow. Maybe you can find them and alert them that we need help now.”

Daniel shared a look with Ben. “I don’t want to leave her behind.”

“You’re not. You’re going for help.” I urged them out.

“Okay.”

I was grateful he didn’t continue to argue. He and Ben turned and took off running.

Sai and I listened for a moment but didn’t hear gunshots or screams. Somehow, they made it to the nearby forest unnoticed. Maybe there was someone looking out for us.

“I don’t know where the girls are,” I admitted.

“The only option is up.”

He was right. We had to go past the laboratories. “Let’s go.”

We took off running and skidded to a stop at the end of the hall when we found another large group.

“This way,” Sai called, waving them towards us. “We left the back door open.”

People took our directions, running past us, but I didn’t see Niall’s brothers or anyone else we knew.

I couldn't focus on that right now. I couldn't take on everything. I had to focus on getting our girls out alive.

CHAPTER 27



We skipped two meals and slept in shifts. So far, nothing happened. There was no one coming in when we should be resting. It didn't prove anything, but I didn't see it as a waste of time, either.

I felt more alert and more like myself than I had since arriving. I could see a difference in Natasha and Hannah as well. We were all a bit weaker from lack of food, but Hannah wasn't nearly as emotional as she'd been lately. Natasha had some of her fire back, not literally. Not her magic, but there was a spark in her eyes and words.

We kept one knife from the food trays. It was a dull butter knife. Nothing we could use to damage ourselves or another person, but it was something thinner to put in the gap of the door to try to pry it open.

"Let me give it a shot," Hannah offered after I'd been trying for a few minutes. I moved back, let her take over. None of us expected anything to happen, but it felt good trying something different.

She slipped the knife in and immediately an alarm sounded from the other side of the door. She dropped the knife and jumped back. "Holy shit! What happened?"

“Since the door’s still locked and in place, I don’t think that was from us,” I told her.

Natasha came forward and put her head against the door. “No, it sounds further away.”

“Do you think it’s still from inside the castle?” I asked. She nodded and put her finger over her lips, shushing us.

“I don’t hear the sound of footsteps coming our way either.”

I straightened. “Maybe this is it. Maybe help is coming. Maybe the attack is finally happening.”

I’d almost given up hope that anyone from the outside was coming. So much time had passed. Surely, the transition between the guards had come and gone several times, but rescuers never did.

“Someone’s coming.” Natasha took a step back from the door, and we gathered together as it flew open.

I gasped, covering my mouth.

Sai and Kaden!

They were bruised and bleeding and looked terrible, but they were actually standing in front of me.

“Is it really you?” Kaden looked me over, pausing at my stomach. There wasn’t time to talk or explain.

Sai reached out and grabbed Natasha’s hand. “Come on. We’ve got to go.”

“We need to get the others,” I said.

We followed Kaden down a back set of stairs we’d never seen before.

“We’ve freed all the other prisoners from the cells. It’s just you guys left.”

“Did you see Daniel and Ben?” Hannah asked.

“Yes. They got out. They went to get help,” Sai explained.

I couldn’t believe this was happening. It felt like a dream. But Kaden was here. Sai was touching me. This was real. We’re finally going to be free.

“Stop!” a sensation I couldn’t explain called to me. I stood in place for a moment, letting it sink in.

“We don’t have time.” Sai tried to pull me away, but I jerked my hand free.

“No, something’s wrong.” I turned around, taking in the stark white hallway. There was only one other door on this floor, and something was telling me that I needed to check.

“This one.” I pointed. “I think there’s someone in here.”

Kaden moved past me, before pulling a ring of keys from his side and unlocking the door.

“Oh, shit,” he muttered. “Sai, help me.”

Sai pushed past us, but I followed them, staring at the cell. It wasn’t like our room. It was made of the material of the castle stone with metal bars like a cage.

Theo.

I barely recognized the limp, unconscious form. My vision was coming true.

“We have to go,” Sai said. “Kaden, get him out. I’ll lead you guys to the exit.”

“No, I’m not leaving him behind. I’m not running.”

“Saige,” Sai stared at me, silently begging me to listen to him. “You know what this is?”

I nodded. “I’m not going to let it happen. I’m going to change it. I’m not leaving him.” I turned to face Hannah and Natasha. “You two can run. Sai will lead you there.”

“No, I won’t. I’m not leaving you either.” Sai protested.

“No one’s getting left behind,” Natasha snapped. “We’ll get him out.”

“There’s no keyhole.” Kaden cried, shaking the bars. “There’s no way to get him out. I have the keys, but there’s nowhere for them to go.”

We scoured the room, looking for anywhere a key might be inserted. But all we found was one electronic touchscreen at the entrance to the room that wouldn’t turn on.

“What do we do? What do we do? What do we do?” Kaden repeated it to himself, staring at the keys in his hand as if they might hold the answer.

I was about to answer when I felt like someone had just sucker punched me in the chest. I gasped, looking around at everyone else who appeared to have felt the same way.

“What was that?” I whispered. Putting your hand over my stomach protectively.

“Magic.” Natasha scowled, holding out her hand as a flame erupted. “Holy shit! Our magic’s back.”

Hannah turned to the bars using Air magic, trying to pull them apart.

“I’ve got it,” I said, staring out the metal and stone. This was Earth, and I could control it. I called to the stone, asking for it to crumble where it met the metal bars. Within seconds

rocks fell away from the ceiling, and Kaden pushed out the bars, making them fall to the side. Then he rushed in and picked up Theo, throwing him over his shoulder.

“Let’s go. The barriers are down, which means—”

“Which means what, exactly?” Sai asked as we descended the stairs. “We didn’t do that.”

“Maybe help’s out there,” Kaden suggested.

“It doesn’t matter right now,” Natasha cut in. “We’ve got to get out of here.”

It wasn’t until we reached the end of the staircase, and our footsteps quieted, that we realized we weren’t alone. There are more following us down the stairs. Our only option was to go out through the door, which I was pretty sure led back into the one of the hallways of the castle.

“People are out there,” Natasha said. I nodded.

“I can hear them. They’re fighting.” Sai turned toward us.

“Well, we can’t stay in here,” Kaden reminded us from behind.

Sai shifted into his tiger. I was about to pull off my gown. Natasha stopped me. “Don’t. You can’t shift when you’re this far along.”

I didn’t know that, and I was grateful she’d been able to figure out what I was about to do.

“Just be ready,” she said with her hands up.

Hannah pulled open the door, and Sai jumped out first. We followed, running straight into the remains of a battle.

Bloody bodies laid all over the floor, some wearing white lab coats, some guard uniforms, some in casual clothes. Who

were they? And who was attacking them?

“Saige,” I turned toward the voice that called my name, seeing the doctor running towards us. “You’ve got to get out of here. The three of you need to run.”

“We don’t know how,” Natasha said as a guard rounded the corner and sprinted toward us.

He fired, and the doctor ran back in the direction from where she’d come, waving for us to follow her. We took off, but Sai stayed back. I want to do tell him to come with us, but I knew he wouldn’t listen. He made sure the guard couldn’t hurt us before he followed.

“This way,” the doctor opened a door that led to another hallway. “Straight down, make a right, and use the last door to your left. My car will be there. Here are the keys.” She handed them to me.

“What about you?”

“I need to find Maribel, my assistant. She has a car too. We’ll be able to get out.”

“Thank you.” I told her as Sai came skidding around the corner, he roared. And I knew that meant he wanted us to run.

“Come on!”

A shot rang out.

Hannah screamed I turned to her, but she hadn’t been hit. It was the doctor. She crumbled to the ground, blood pooling beneath her.

“Oh, god.” Natasha grabbed my hand, pulling me along.

“Straight down, make a right. Straight down, make a right,” she was chanting as we ran, one hand holding her belly.

Hannah was doing her best to keep up with us, but I could hear her labored breathing. Another roar, and I glanced back in time to see Sai attack another guard, ripping through his neck. I turned back without needing to see what came next.

We made the turn to the right, and once again, all hell broke loose.

Only this time, the battle was still raging.

“I don’t know where to go.” I panicked.

Should we turn back? If there were any guards close, they’d be coming after the sound of gunshots. They would know someone was there once they saw their man down. No, we had to go through this hall.

“Isn’t that?” Kaden stopped next to me.

“Tom!” he yelled, and I saw two wolves covered in blood running towards us. They shifted when they got in front of us. It was Tom and Steven.

“How are you guys here?”

“You’re alive!” Tom said at the same time I spoke.

“Come on. We’ve got to get you out. Follow us.” Stephen shifted back into his wolf form, running straight back in toward the guards fighting, who I had to assume were the others on our side.

“Ben?” Natasha screamed and ran toward the guy recognized from my visions.

“Natasha!” He crashed into her, kissing her briefly and touching her belly before looking past her to the rest of us. “This way! Come on!”

He took two steps forward before a gunshot rang out. He wavered for a moment before falling to the ground.

“No!” Natasha wailed.

I grabbed her arm, forcing her to continue. Sai rushed toward us, tearing into a guard who had been running towards us.

“Come on.” I wished I could comfort for her right now. Redo the last ten seconds, but that wasn’t an option.

Another gunshot rang, and I ducked, pulling her with me. A hand touched my shoulder. I looked back seeing Hannah’s horrified face and took her hand linking the three of us.

Keep moving! Kaden yelled.

It was hard with so many bodies on the ground, but I followed Steven’s wolf, pausing when he did, and tried not to flinch when Tom pounced on a guard who appeared seemingly out of nowhere.

Tom tore into his neck just as the guard lifted his hand, gun aimed for us.

The shot rang out.

Tom’s wolf let out a whimper.

They fell to the ground together. The guard dead.

“Tom!” I called.

He didn’t move.

Stephen turned his head toward him, howled, then continued to run.

“Last door on the left!” Natasha yelled.

Steven somehow heard her, throwing his massive body into the door, cracking through the drywall, and taking the whole thing down.

The dark night sky appeared. I nearly cried at the sight of it and at the smell of fresh air.

“Over there,” Hannah pointed to a car parked behind some bushes.

We ran towards it, and I unlocked the doors. Stephen shifted back into his human form and helped Kaden lift Theo’s body into the back, then called for the keys. I tossed them to him.

“Everyone, get in,” Sai called, opening the doors and make sure Natasha and Hannah climbed in before he did. I ran around to the front seat, getting in with Kaden.

Another shot sounded.

My body jerk to the right as pain radiated through me. I couldn’t think. I didn’t know how to process. Had I been shot?

“Saige!”

Voices yelled out.

I’ve got you, baby. Kaden said as he pulled my body over his and slammed the door. I heard the rev of an engine, then nothing.

CHAPTER 28



*R*eality filtered in slowly, then all at once. Without opening my eyes, I could tell I was no longer in a car. I wasn't moving, and there was no smell of the outside.

Things felt still, quiet, even calm. The pain in my chest told me I was still alive. Either that or heaven was especially cruel, making me feel the cause of my death.

"I think she's waking up," a voice said, drawing me closer to the surface.

I heard footsteps and finally managed to open my eyes.

Several people looked down at me. All wearing white lab coats.

I gasped, shying away.

More doctors.

Was I back in the castle?

We didn't escape.

No. No! We'd been so close.

What happened?

Kaden?

I blinked, making sure I was really seeing him. He was still thinner than normal and had some bruising that hadn't healed on his face, but he was with me.

What was going on?

"Mom?" The word escaped as soon as I saw her. She ran forward, pulling me into her arms. Dad was right behind her, holding us together.

"How? Where are we? Where are Aiden and Brielle?"

"They're here. They're playing with your cousins and Gloria."

Gloria?

We're back on Pack Stewart's land. Kaden explained.

I was so grateful to feel our connection again. I tried to feel for Niall and Theo, but there was a bit of resistance. What did that mean?

Sai?

I'm here. Just giving you time.

I looked around, finding him against the wall.

Why couldn't I feel Theo and Niall?

Where—

"Her heart rate is increasing."

One of the white lab coats moved toward me. I flinched. The woman with dark skin and kind brown eyes froze.

"I'm sorry," she said quickly. "I didn't mean to startle you. I was just going to turn off the sound."

The beeping. I hadn't even noticed it until she said something, but one of the machines behind me was making an

obnoxious beeping sound.

“Although you should probably try to calm yourself down as well.”

Calm? Right. Be calm. How did I do that?

“What—” I scanned everyone’s faces, stopping on my parents. It finally sank in. Somehow, I was alive, and they were here.

“We can’t be here. It’s not safe,” I said, angry at whoever brought us here.

“It is, sweetie.” Masie rubbed the top of my foot. “It’s over. It’s okay now.”

“Masie?” I had too many questions but was too overwhelmed to process which one I should ask first?

“What happened?” That seemed like a pretty good one to start with. Maybe if someone explained how we got here—or further back to how Kaden and Sai made it to our room in the castle—other things would start making sense.

“We should check on her now that she’s awake,” another white lab coat suggested.

I started shaking my head when the first doctor spoke up.

“We can wait. Let’s give Saige a chance to get caught up and relax. We’ll be back in a little while.” She led the other doctors, or whoever they were, out of my room until it was just my family with me.

“Who were they? Can we trust them?” I asked, not knowing who would have the answer.

“Yes, there are a lot of new faces around here that you won’t recognize from before. After the last attack, we ...” The

Alpha hesitated for a moment. “I guess the best way to explain is we banished those who were involved in the attacks on you and your bond.”

“You banished them?” I repeated. “What does that mean? Just from here? Are they on some remote island somewhere?”

His smile turned a bit sinister. “They aren’t here. They’re on a sort of on a blacklist, I guess you could say, for supernaturals. They won’t be receiving help or an invitation to stay in any other supernatural community. They’re on their own. They either have to survive alone or with the humans. The people here have signed binding contracts not to cause harm to any of the pack members or individuals specified by me. If they even attempt to, they will be marked and punished.”

“Marked?”

“Traitor will be carved across their foreheads by their own hand.”

I cringed. That didn’t sound very nice, but then again, it’s what they deserved.

“I promise you and your family are safe here. You have nothing to worry about.”

So we were under no immediate threat. We were back in Michigan. Far away from Scotland and the awful memories there.

“Where is everyone?” I looked around at the concerned faces.

“Steven and Rainer stayed back,” Masie started. “They’re helping the survivors find safe places to stay to recover and getting the bodies of the victims sent back to their homes.”

A memory flashed in my mind, but I couldn't recall if it was real or not.

“Ben?”

“He died,” Kaden confirmed.

My heart cracked open. “Natasha? Is she okay?”

How could she be? She was carrying his child. A boy she barely knew. And he died without the chance of her changing that, without the chance of him seeing his child.

“She took his body back to his family to spend some time with them. I checked in with her this morning, and she's going to her parents' house tomorrow,” Sai answered.

“Her parents? Why didn't they do anything before? Where were they?”

“Apparently, under house arrest by the Council, unable to leave or reach out for help.”

They were prisoners too?

“But they're okay now?”

“Yes,” Masie said confidently.

Another flash of memory hit, and I shook it away. That couldn't have been real.

“Tom,” I said carefully. “Is he ...”

The Alpha lowered his head. “He was killed as well.”

“We brought his body back,” Masie added quietly.

“He saved us.”

“He did,” Kaden confirmed. “A guard had his gun aimed right for us. Tom killed him, but not before he got the shot out. He took it so we could live.”

I took in a shaky breath. No, he was invincible. He was one of the strongest shifters I'd ever met. A bit gruff, and not necessarily the most welcoming of all my uncles, but he still came for me. For our family. He fought until his last breath to save us.

“Who else?”

“What do you mean?” Kaden asked.

“Who else died?”

“A few of the people we met in Scotland and Ireland. Trevor,” Sai paused, “didn't make it out.”

Trevor, the one who had promised to save Niall's brothers if we didn't make it.

“Where are Theo and Niall?”

“They're recovering next door.” Sai said. “From what the doctors here can tell, they were being starved of blood. Neither of them looked very good when they were found, but they're doing better now.”

“Niall's brothers?”

“They're here. Maeve's with them. They're bouncing back quicker than anyone expected.” Kaden rubbed his thumb over my hand.

“Hannah and Daniel?”

“Both safe and together. Their families arrived a few days ago.” Sai smiled.

“Okay.”

Everyone was safe. Steven and Rainer would be back soon.

I adjusted, trying to sit up a little, until the pain in my chest shot down my arm, and I flinched.

“I was shot.”

Kaden frowned. “By a bullet that had been poisoned.” He paused and swallowed before shaking his head.

Sai took over. “It was touch and go there for a while. We weren’t sure if you were going to make it, but the doctors here were able to figure out what poison was used and made an antidote fast enough to prevent any permanent damage. You’ll be sore for a few weeks. You might have to use a sling to keep from re-injuring the area.”

“We’ll let you get some rest.” The Alpha hesitated before coming forward. He put his hand on my forehead, pushing on my hair, and taking me in like he couldn’t believe what he was seeing.

“If you need anything, let us know.” Masie squeezed my foot.

“I love you, baby girl.” Mom moved in, and Kaden stepped back. She smiled at him and squeezed his arm before leaning down to hug me gently. “I missed you.”

She stood up, and Dad took her place. “I’m so glad you’re okay, sweetie. I love you.”

“I love you too.” I looked at both of them, trying and failing to wrap my head around the fact that they were really here.

“We’ll see you in a bit.”

Once it was just me, Sai, and Kaden, they climbed in on either side of me, lying on their sides. Kaden rested his head

on my uninjured shoulder while Sai carefully avoided my injured arm.

I soaked in their comfort, reeling from the fact we were free.

“What happened that night? How did you find me?” I asked.

Kaden cleared his throat. “I’d been watching the guards and tracking their routine for a while and figured out when they’d be coming for me.”

“How?” I asked. “I tried to keep track of things, but it was so hard. Time didn’t make sense.”

“I stopped eating,” he said. “I figured out they were drugging us that way.”

I nodded. “We did too, but only for the few days before you guys came. We figured out they were keeping us mostly asleep, but we weren’t sure why.”

“Right. I knew whatever they were giving us was keeping me weaker than normal, even under the conditions, so I stopped eating and tried to keep track of the guards’ routine. It wasn’t that hard once I was more aware of my surroundings. I was also able to keep my hawk close.”

“You were able to shift?” Sai asked.

“Yeah.”

“I wasn’t even able to.” He seemed impressed.

“I’m not sure how or why it happened, but I had a plan for the next time the guards came for me. I shifted when the first one came in to handcuff me and then dove on top of him and ... knocked him out.”

I noticed how he paused. Had he killed them? It didn't really matter. It was about survival.

"I took their keys and found Sai. He knew where Niall's brothers were, so we got them out, and I gave them the second set of keys. We split up to unlock all the prisoner cells while looking for Rodney and Rainer and Theo and Niall, and then we found my parents." Kaden kissed my temple. "That's when someone said they knew a way to get out. We led everyone to the delivery bay. Ben and Daniel found the group Niall's brothers said were preparing plan for an attack the next day. Tom and Steven were in that group. They'd been trying to figure out the best way in when Ben and Daniel told them about the open door."

"That's when you found me, right?"

"Yeah."

I know what happened from then on, and I didn't want to think about it. Watching the doctor who helped us die. And Ben. And Tom.

"What happened after we left?"

"The battle continued, but the guards didn't put up much of an effort," Sai explained. "The councilmembers who were there tried to fight back until they realized they were outnumbered and surrendered."

"Josephine, George, and Natasha's grandfather, right?"

"Right. But Natasha's grandfather was killed when our guys initially broke through their protection spells. It turned out he was being held prisoner there. He was against everything the Council was doing."

Poor Natasha. Not only did she lose Ben, but she lost her grandfather.

“And George and Josephine?”

“Unfortunately, they both survived,” Kaden muttered.

“The castle was destroyed, and all councilmembers are in custody and awaiting individual trials,” Sai finished.

“I thought there wouldn’t be trials.” Maeve said the supernaturals didn’t work like the human world. “When will we know what happens to them?”

“One has already been found guilty and was immediately executed.”

I flinched, and Sai stroked my arm. “There are still four trials left. Since Natasha’s grandfather and another were killed during the battle.”

“Was Josephine right? Is there chaos now?”

“No. Right now, there’s a global truce—basically a peace treaty throughout our world.” Kaden sounded calmer now. “As we watch what comes from this, it’ll take a while for decisions to be made. If another Council is the answer or if it’s time to change our form of leadership. We don’t know yet. And right now, I think everyone is recovering and taking care of their own rather than plotting how to take advantage of this situation.”

That surprised me. If anything, now would be the best time for vampires, witches, or shifters to try to take over, but maybe we weren’t the only ones sick of the fighting. Sick of the uncertainty and the inequality.

Maybe change would happen.

CHAPTER 29



*A*fter allowing me to rest, the doctor returned with only one other white coat.

“I’m sorry about before. Given the circumstances, I should have been more aware and asked more of the staff to leave. We weren’t expecting you to wake, though.”

“It’s okay,” I lied. I still didn’t want any strangers, especially doctors, around me.

“I’m Dr. Walters, but you can call me Linda. This is my assistant, Deeann.”

The petite woman with short black hair offered me a smile as she pulled a stool from the corner toward the side of my bed while Linda moved a machine in front of her.

“We’ve been monitoring your baby since you arrived,” Linda started.

My brain fog cleared enough for me to realize I hadn’t even thought of the baby. I’d been too overcome with grief, pain, and confusion.

I looked down at my round stomach. My parents saw me like this. The Alpha had. Masie.

Did they know? Had the guys told them about my visions?

The doctor at the castle told the councilmembers the father was a vampire-witch hybrid, which meant Niall or Theo. They weren't here. They were still unconscious.

What if it wasn't one of them? What if it was a random prisoner?

"Calm down, babe." Sai rubbed my shoulder.

The machine was beeping again. My heart was racing.

Kaden. Sai.

They knew I was pregnant.

But did they know it wasn't either of theirs?

The foreign being I'd barely been able to comprehend in the castle, the one apparently using my body to grow, was real. I was out, and it was still there.

It survived me being shot. Poisoned.

Or had it?

Up until now, I hadn't been focused on myself. It had been too important to get Hannah and Natasha out before they had their babies that I pushed my own to the back of my head. It was easy to pretend my pregnancy wasn't real. The doctor didn't tell me the gender. I barely comprehended when I was hearing its heartbeat.

The baby and I were separate. A reality I could face later.

Once the girls were safe.

Now they were.

It was my turn.

I couldn't ignore the changes to my body. I couldn't ignore my growing belly.

“We would like to start with an ultrasound, if that’s all right? Check the progress, then talk about—”

“That’s fine,” I interrupted. I just wanted to get it over with.

I put my hand out, hoping one of the guys would take it as Deeann gently pulled the blanket down enough to tug my fresh hospital gown up over my protruding belly.

Kaden’s hand slipped in mine, and I squeezed as the gel was applied. Deeann lifted the wand.

I closed my eyes, fighting back the images of the last time this happened. The councilmembers staring at me. George’s sinister grin.

“Hey, focus on us, baby,” Kaden’s gentle voice pulled me back, and I locked eyes with him as the room filled with a familiar whooshing.

“That’s your heartbeat,” Linda explained. The wand moved, and the whooshing increased. “And that’s the baby’s.”

I bit my lip. Tears filled my eyes.

This was real.

“You can look,” Linda offered.

I turned toward the screen, and Deeann pointed to the black and white blur. “This is the head.”

She went on, moving the wand and explaining what I was seeing.

A baby.

A growing, moving baby was inside me.

“Oh, my god,” I whispered.

I fought to keep a wall between myself and this truth while I was in the castle. It wasn't something I could face. I didn't have the capacity to worry about it, but now? I was safe, and the wall was vanishing.

“My baby?”

“Yes,” Deeann smiled. “Would you like to know the sex?”

Kaden's grip tightened. He wanted to know but was letting me choose.

Did I?

It didn't matter if I was having a boy or a girl. I would love them regardless, but it felt wrong to find out without Theo and Niall there. Not just because one of them was likely the father, but because this was ours. All of ours.

At least, I hoped so.

“Not yet,” I finally told her.

“Okay,” she glanced at Linda. “Anything you want to take a look at?”

“Just take measurements, please.”

Deeann agreed and went to work quietly while I watched the shapes change on the screen. A head, a hand, feet. I could recognize a few body parts on my own, but too dazed to focus, I didn't look too closely.

“The baby is measuring at twenty-four weeks,” Deeann announced.

“How is that possible?” Sai asked. “We were in there for twelve.”

Twelve weeks? We were in there for three months? It somehow felt longer and shorter than that.

“They were giving us something to accelerate the babies’ growth. The doctor was giving us pills to try to counteract that, but obviously, it didn’t work.”

“It helped,” Linda assured me. “According to the blood work from you and Hannah, what she was giving you was balancing out the magic.”

“How is Hannah? When we were last checked, they said she was eight months along.”

“She and her baby are doing well, all things considered. We’re monitoring her and her baby is measuring at thirty-nine weeks, so baby could come any day.”

“We won’t know if there are any problems until she’s born?”

Linda nodded. “That’s right. We didn’t want to put them through any additional testing, so we won’t know if there are any effects from the magic or pills.”

That was probably for the best. I wasn’t sure I wanted to know if there were any problems until the baby was born.

“Do you have any other questions for me?” Linda asked.

My mind was racing with too many things to focus on just one.

Mostly, I wanted to be alone with Sai and Kaden.

“Not right now. Thank you.”

She and Deeann left. Sai moved to my other side, sitting on the edge of the bed, and took my hand into his. The three of us sat in silence until I couldn’t take it anymore.

“When do you want to talk about this?”

“What do you mean?” Kaden asked.

I look down at my stomach. “This. The fact that I’m pregnant, and it wasn’t my choice. It wasn’t planned. We don’t even know who the father is. The fact that we’re eighteen and haven’t graduated from high school. We have no idea what we’re going to do in the future, yet we have to figure it all out and we’re also having a baby.”

Sai leaned forward and pushed some of my hair away from my face. “Hey, the circumstances of how you got pregnant don’t change the fact that we love this baby. And we love you.”

“How can you say that? How can you love this baby?”

“Because it’s a part of you,” Kaden answered. “And even if it wasn’t planned, even if none of us are the father, it doesn’t matter. We’ll love this baby and raise it as our own.”

“At eighteen?” I sniffed. The enormous weight of our reality dumped onto my shoulders. “We’re kids with no idea where we’re going to be in a few days or weeks.”

“It doesn’t matter as long as we’re all together.” Kaden assured.

“What about Theo and Niall?”

“Their injuries were severe, but they’ll be okay. We can go visit them so you can go see for yourself,” Sai offered.

I wasn’t ready.

For any of this.

Should I tell them what the doctor said? That is most likely Niall or Theo’s baby? Would that cause a rift? Was it better if we just left it unknown or would that be unfair? What if one day the baby wanted to know who their father was? Would we want to make it a big deal and have to get a DNA test done

then? Or would it be better to have the answers and let the child grow up knowing who their biological father was? How was I supposed to do this? It wasn't a decision I ever planned on making.

How had I never seen this future coming? All the times I thought about Hannah and Natasha, I never stopped to consider that it might happen to me. That if we ever got caught, I would end up in the same exact situation.

How had I been so blind, so confident that we would be able to save everyone without getting caught? All it took was a day and a half outside, and we'd been ambushed and taken prisoner.

There was too much to think about, too much to process. Part of me wanted to curl up and cry for a few days over what happened, then grieve the people we lost, and allow myself time to accept the irreversible changes in my life.

I couldn't afford to close myself off or shut down for a few weeks. I had too many decisions to make.

I wasn't the only one who had been through something hard. We all suffered loss.

The guys still hadn't told me what happened to them, but I knew they'd been tortured. What psychological scars were left now that their bodies had healed physically?

"What do you want to do you now?" Kaden asked after a few minutes of silence.

"I don't know," I admitted. "I don't know who I want to see first. My parents or Niall and Theo or Rodney and Masie or Hannah."

I was being pulled many different directions, and they all felt like a top priority.

“Well, we can work our way through.” Sai helped me off the bed and into a wheelchair and draped a blanket over my legs, making sure I was comfortable before Kaden open the door.

Niall and Theo were in the room to the right. I could only spend a few moments in there before I broke down in tears and asked to leave. I had to see them for myself to know they were safe, but not being able to reach them through our connection was too much. They were both too pale and thin and taking too long to heal. They didn't look like themselves, and it was more than I could take.

“Come on. Hannah's across the hall.”

Sai pushed my chair into her room.

Hannah beamed when I came in. Daniel was lying next to her on the bed.

“There you are!” she cried.

Sai push me all the way to the side of her bed, so we could hold each other's hands. I wanted to hug her, but neither of us was able to move easily.

“How have you managed to get bigger?” I laughed through my watery eyes.

“I don't know,” she admitted. “I feel like if she grows anymore, I'm going to explode.”

Daniel smiled at her, kissing her hair and stroking her arm. The love in his eyes was undeniable.

“Are you okay?” She looked better than I expected, but I still needed to ask for myself.

“I'm hurting for Natasha, but other than that, I'm doing well. At least as well as can be expected.”

She tried to adjust in her bed and gave up. Daniel and Kaden helped her get comfortable, and she continued.

“It is nice having our families here. We have to thank your grandfather for that.”

“Daniel, you’re okay?”

“Yeah, nothing permanent. Still working through some stuff.”

He glanced at the guys. They seem to understand and nodded.

“Yeah, it’s taking some time,” Sai added.

This was what I was worried about earlier. Would they be able to recover from the trauma? I was just glad they weren’t going through it alone. They’re here together to help each other in ways no one else could.

“The doctor said she could come any day now.” I changed the subject.

“Yeah.” Hannah let out a little laugh. “I wouldn’t mind if she stayed in there for a while, though.”

“What did your parents say?”

“They’re happy we’re safe and healthy. I think that’s all that matters.” She looked at Daniel, and he kissed her forehead. “This isn’t something we had control over, and while this wasn’t how I planned for things to happen, I’m not angry. At least not anymore.”

“You’re not mad at what they did?”

My emotions were all over the place, but I definitely hated the people behind our pregnancies. It was the worst kind of violation. Even if I was coming to accept and love the life

growing inside me, I could separate that from the fierce hatred I harbored.

“At least Daniel’s the father. They could have been cruel and switched him and Ben.”

That was true. I had a feeling that had to do more with a doctor than the Council.

“What do you guys plan on doing next?”

Hannah laughed. “I’m not thinking beyond more than a few days ahead. Right now, it’s just about rest and recovery. We can think about tomorrow when it comes.”

I wished I had her attitude, but I couldn’t stop thinking about how things would change. And I wanted to know what her plans were. Would they go back to the Academy? Could they? I didn’t know of any students with children, but maybe they would make an exception.

Did they even want to go back to school? Did it matter at this point? Was graduation as important in the supernatural community as it was in the human? Would not graduating from the Academy impact our ability to get jobs? Or was it just a matter of learning and strengthening our abilities?

I wanted to get that figured out, but Hannah was right.

Now wasn’t the time. I didn’t need to have all the answers. I needed to focus on staying healthy and waiting for Niall and Theo to wake up.

And they would. They had to. I couldn’t lose either of them.

Neither could our baby.

CHAPTER 30



“*Y*ou said they would be waking up soon.”

My eyes darted from Niall to Theo, waiting to catch movement from either of them.

“We’ve taken them off the potion keeping them unconscious, and we’ve been feeding them blood,” Linda stated.

I tried to avoid looking at the O-negative bags hanging next to each bed. It was a reminder of how their bodies had been abused, and how it wasn’t helping them now.

Were they too far gone? Was the internal damage too much to recover from? That didn’t even begin to address the mental trauma they would need to heal. Sai confessed a few days ago that part of his sessions included being forced to watch videos of how the guys had been tortured. How they did something to Niall to make him hallucinate. They beat Theo, breaking and re-breaking his bones after allowing his body to heal itself.

“So why aren’t they waking up?”

Linda turned and offered one of her kind smiles. She was used to my repetitive questions by now.

A week passed since I woke up, and I was feeling better, although I had nearly constant heartburn and my back ached

from my growing belly.

“You already know the answer. They will wake up when they’re ready. You should go back to your room and rest. We’ll alert you as soon as anything changes.”

She said it as a suggestion, but I knew she meant it as an order. I turned and marched back to find Kaden and Sai sitting in chairs with their feet kicked up, watching TV. I refused to leave the health clinic until our bond could walk out together, so Sai, Kaden, and I claimed my room as our little home. No one tried to make us leave.

“Nothing?” Sai asked.

“Nope. They’ve been off the potions for three days. What’s taking them so long?” I crawled onto the bed and curled up with a blanket Gloria brought over the day she came to see me.

“They have a lot to recover from.”

“We all did.” I wrapped my arms around myself.

“Hey.” Sai stood up and climbed in behind me. He draped his arm over mine, placing his hand on my stomach. “They’ll come back to us. We all went through horrible things, but they were drained of a necessity. Their bodies aren’t meant to survive without an external source of blood. The damage will take longer to reverse.”

I knew that, but I still wanted to whine about it. I missed them. I needed to talk to them, hold them, and let them reassure me they were alive and not going anywhere.

“Do you want to go visit Hannah?” Kaden offered.

Hannah and Daniel were still across the hall. She was under baby watch, which required constant monitoring.

Neither of them cared. They were safe and together with their family close by.

“No, they have people constantly coming and going. They deserve to have some time alone when they can get it. Maybe we can have dinner together or something.”

“I can call your parents and tell them that you’re awake,” he tried.

I let out of slow breath. I wanted to see Aiden and Brielle. Each day I went without their hugs and kisses killed me, but I didn’t want them to see me in the health clinic. I don’t want to scare them.

“You’re looking a lot better than when you first woke up. Your skin has its color back, and you don’t look so thin. The bags under your eyes are almost completely gone too.”

“Sure know how to make a girl feel special.”

Kaden rolled his eyes and got up from his chair so he could sit on the end of the bed and face me. “Well, if none of those are the reason why, do you want to discuss the real reason you don’t want them to come?”

Sai put a bit of pressure on my stomach, and I look down at our hands, side by side.

“How do we explain this to them?”

“What do you mean?” Sai asked.

“Babies are supposed to come from mommies and daddies. Last time they saw me, I was leaving for my senior year of high school. Now I’m bonded, basically married, to four guys they’ve never met, and I’m pregnant. I don’t know how to explain that to them.”

“First off, they’ll just be happy to see you. Brielle is too young to understand, and we can explain things to Aidan and answer any questions that he has.” Kaden made it sound so easy.

“But how do I tell him the truth without telling him the whole truth?”

“We could just say that we’re all friends,” Sai offered.

“No, that doesn’t feel right. I don’t want to lie to him.”

“Maybe talk with your parents first. They might have ideas. Or you can ask Masie. Rodney and Rainer might have more experience with this from within the pack,” Sai suggested.

It was frustrating not knowing what I wanted to do. This wasn’t something that should involve the opinions of so many. I should just follow my gut.

I wasn’t sure Aiden would understand the complexities of our relationship, but we would probably just have to tell him once and he would accept it.

“I want to talk to my parents first.”

It was the only thing that felt right.

“I’ll let them know.” Kaden pulled out his phone and typed out a message. “They’re at the lodge, so they’ll be here in just a few minutes.”

“Okay.”

I tried to roll to my back with Sai’s help, but that position made my lower back hurt. I groaned and tried to shift again.

“Nothing’s comfortable,” I complained. “It wasn’t this bad at the castle.”

Sai frowned and moved my pillows so I could lean on them. “Well, you also weren’t conscious for most of it, and whatever they were doing to speed up the process might have eliminated a lot of the symptoms.”

He and Kaden had been so supportive about the pregnancy, not that there was anything we could do about it at this stage. I never considered trying to end the pregnancy—even if I didn’t know who the father was and I didn’t ask for this.

But it happened, and that was that. Knowing I wasn’t alone made it a lot easier to come to terms with the truth. The baby would always be surrounded by love and would always know who they were and where they came from. Unlike me.

Sai slid off the bed, and a moment later, the door opened. My parents stepped in.

“Hi, sweetie.”

Mom came to my side and gave me a hug. Then Dad snuck in and held me tight. Having them here was completely unexpected, but absolutely what I needed.

“How are you? Is everything okay?” Dad asked.

“Nothing’s changed. Niall and Theo still haven’t woken up yet.”

“We passed Linda in the hall,” Mom said. “She told us it should happen anytime now.”

“I hope so.”

All eyes were on me. I figured it was best to skip the small talk and get to the point.

“I want to see Aiden and Brielle.”

“Okay,” Dad took a step towards the door. “Do you want me to go get them?”

“No,” I rushed out. “I ... I ...”

I stopped and licked my lips, turning to the guys.

Go ahead. Sai encouraged.

“I don’t know how to handle this situation. I don’t know how to explain this,” I admitted and gestured to my body. “How to explain the guys?”

“They already know you are married to all four,” Mom replied. “Masie explained that when she got back from your bonding ceremony. She showed them a picture of all of you, and both of them were excited.”

“Did Aiden have questions?”

My parents shared a look.

“It wasn’t anything negative. He just asked if he really had four new brothers. He was pretty hyped about that.” Dad laughed.

“And what about the pregnancy?”

Mom smiled. “There’s not much to figure out. We tell them you’re having a baby.”

I let out a sigh.

“Honey, no one’s going to judge you, least of all them. They’ll be excited no matter what,” Dad assured me.

“It won’t be confusing for them?”

“It might. If it comes to that, we’ll do our best to explain,” Dad offered. “I think more than anything, they just want to see you. They’ve been having fun staying here, but they ask about you several times a day.”

I felt guilty for making them wait. “Okay, I’m ready to see them then.”

Dad called Gloria, and she offered to walk them over. The second I saw my little brother and sister, all my worries and doubts disappeared.

“Saige!” Aiden screamed, running straight toward me and flinging himself on the bed. Dad caught him in midair and lifted him up so he could lie next to me.

Brielle shouted my name, pumping her hands in the air and making fists, telling Mom she wanted to get up too. Once I had them in my arms, nothing else mattered. I buried my face in Brielle’s hair and let out a few tears, kissing the top of her head before I turned to Aiden and smothered him with kisses.

“Why are you crying?” he asked.

“These are happy tears. I missed you both so much.”

Brielle snuggled against my shoulder, resting her head in the crook of my neck. I closed my eyes and inhaled, soaking her in.

Aiden looked me over, stopping at my round stomach. “What’s that?” he asked with pure excitement.

“That is a baby,” I told him.

Bri shot up. “Baby?”

“Yeah,” I smiled at both of them. “I’m pregnant. I’m going to have a little baby soon.”

Aiden’s eyes went round. “Like a real baby?”

“Yes.” I laughed.

He put his hand gently on my stomach. “Is it a boy or girl?”

“I’m not sure yet.”

Brielle crawled down and rested her head on my belly.
“Where baby?”

I laughed, and a fluttering sensation I’d never felt before came from deep within. I gasped, putting my hands just below my belly button.

“I just felt something.”

Bri giggled and put her head back down. “Baby!”

There was more movement, like a fluttering, then pressure.
“Oh, my gosh. What is that?”

I stared at Mom. She came over and put her hand where mine had been and waited.

Fluttering and another push of pressure.

“The baby’s kicking,” she told me with a grin.

“I want to feel!” Aiden put his hand over her mom’s. She laughed and then pushed his hand on my stomach.

We waited a second, and it happened again.

“I felt it! I felt the baby,” he cheered.

Kaden and Sai watched in stunned silence, so I waved them over. “Come feel.”

“Is this the first time?” Mom asked.

“Yeah, I think so. Maybe it happened and didn’t realize it, or I’d been asleep too much to catch the movements.”

Kaden and Sai put their hands on my lower belly, laughing and nudging each other as the movement continued.

Dad came to Mom’s side and smiled down at me. “I’m proud of you. I know this is hard. It wasn’t planned, but you

have all of us to help you. We all love you.”

“I love you too.”

My heart was full at this moment except for two pieces missing. I couldn't help but wish they were here for this. Even though I had my entire family together, I felt their absence.

I could do this without them. I would find a way to survive and push through, but I didn't want to.

CHAPTER 31



*H*annah and Daniel welcomed their beautiful baby girl, Cora, two weeks later.

Sitting across the hall, listening to my best friend go through labor and delivery was traumatic, especially knowing I would have to do the same thing soon.

She swore it was worth it, but I harbored serious doubts.

A new routine emerged. Kaden and Sai stayed with me most of the time, but they also meet with my uncles and the others to discuss what was happening in the world and what needed to be done.

My parents came every day with Brielle and Aiden so we could spend time together as a family, something we knew wouldn't last forever.

Hannah and I usually spent the mornings together, while Daniel and the guys were off at meetings. I gave her a break from taking care of Cora while also getting practice in. I helped with Aiden and Brielle when they were babies, but this was different. We were the parents now.

I mentioned to Masie how I didn't like being alone. My thoughts went back to the castle and what had been done to the people I loved. Then I worried about how long it was taking

Theo and Niall to wake up. So, she filled in the gaps. I had a feeling there was a schedule or sign-up sheet somewhere making sure I was always occupied, and a few months ago, that would have bothered me. Now I was just grateful so many people loved and cared about me.

She was with me tonight after the guys left to eat and take a shower in our old room in the lodge.

“What do you want to happen next?” I asked her.

“I don’t know. There’s a lot to consider,” she said very diplomatically, and I rolled my eyes.

“I’m not asking Masie Stone, girlfriend of Rodney Stewart, the potential Alpha. I’m asking you, my aunt, my friend, and confidant.”

She sighed, leaning into me as we lay next to each other on my bed. The TV was on, but the volume was turned down low.

“We wasted way too much time apart. We love each other, and we want to be together. That’s not up for debate, but we aren’t sure where we want to end up or if we want to be tied down to one place at all. I think he always had his heart set on helping Rainer with Alaska before moving on to doing something of his own.”

I was glad they were planning together. Wherever they settled, they would have one another.

“Saige,” a voice called from the hall before my door burst open, and Deeann, the nurse, came right into the room. “He’s awake.”

I sat up straight. “Which one?”

“Theo.”

She pushed a wheelchair to the side of the bed and helped me climb in. Masie ran ahead, opening the doors.

He was groggy, unable to keep his eyes open for more than a few seconds at a time. When he saw me, he smiled.

“There is my jagiya.”

A sob burst out of me. I carefully stood up and flung my arms around him.

“I’ve been so scared,” I admitted with a sigh.

“I’m sorry. How long has it been?”

“We’ve been back for almost a month,” I told him.

“A month?” He closed his eyes and rested his head back. “Well, shit. What did I miss?”

Masie helped me sit up and laughed. “Quite a bit.”

He smiled and opened his eyes to look down at me again. “Whoa,” he gasped when he saw me holding my ever-growing belly. “You’re pregnant.”

“Yeah.”

I didn’t say anything else, letting him take in the news. His mouth opened and closed a few times.

“I don’t know what to say. I’m sorry?”

I shook my head and squeezed his hand. “There’s nothing to be sorry about. None of us could have done anything to prevent this.”

I didn’t want it to become bad news, especially while he was still taking it in.

“Hannah had her baby a few days ago. Her name is Cora.”

He grinned. “That’s a beautiful name.”

“She’s pretty cute. I’m sure they’ll bring her over as soon as they hear you’re awake.”

He rolled his head to the side. “Niall?”

This time, his hand tightened around mine.

“He hasn’t woken up yet.”

Theo stared at his unmoving form. “What about Kaden and Sai?”

“They’re okay. They got us all out.”

“I’m sure they can’t wait to brag about that.” He rested his head back with his grin still in place.

“They went to get showered. Masie, can you let them know?”

“I already did. We’re really glad to have you back.” She went to do his other side, pushing his long hair out of his face.

“My parents?”

“They’re safe, but they stayed back with Sai’s parents. They helped reorganize the refugees in Ireland, and now they’re in Scotland. Volunteers were needed to run the election.”

“The election?”

“The final trial of the councilmembers was last week. Only two remained. The other five died or were killed as punishment for their betrayal of the supernatural community.”

It had been frustrating not having a live feed of what was going on, like the humans did when elections or transfers of power were taking place. Most of what we heard came from the Alpha, through Gloria or one of my uncles. It might make me a terrible person, but I was relieved when I heard George

and Josephine had been executed for their crimes against our Society.

“The Council is being rebuilt,” she explained.

That was the one thing our society could agree on. For hundreds of years, a council was the correct way to govern. It was the people in power, not the system, that was broken.

“Kaden’s dad and the Alpha are at the top of the list of likely replacements.”

While I was proud of my grandfather being recognized as having integrity enough to lead all of society, rather than just his shifters, it left things around the pack feeling unsettled. If he became a councilmember, he and Gloria would move to Scotland, leaving the pack to be governed by ... who?

“The Alpha? As in your grandfather?” His brows shot up. “That’s crazy.”

“I know. And with Tom dead, the pack doesn’t know who would take his place.”

“Tom’s dead?”

Oh. Right. I forgot to tell him. “He and Trevor didn’t make it. Neither did Ben, the father of Natasha’s baby.”

He closed his eyes. “Wow.”

Masie met my eyes over him. “So not only does the Council have to find new members, but the pack needs a new leader.”

Theo squirmed, and Masie helped him sit up. “Wouldn’t Steven be next in line?”

“Yes, but he’s hesitant to step up.” She paused, staring at the floor.

Rodney was another solid choice, but he and Masie had made their relationship official. They weren't sure if they wanted to stay. That left Rainer, who was still set on going to Alaska and establishing a community there.

Uncertainty could be felt even each time a doctor, nurse, or visitor came by.

She cleared her throat and continued. "He's going through a lot. There's guilt and pressure, and he's having to deal with a lot of his own demons, all while trying to keep the pack going."

"How's Tom's wife doing, and their kids?"

I hadn't seen them, but Gloria told me they were happy I was here and safe.

"She's putting up a strong front, but I can tell that she's hurting. Abi told me she feels lost, and I think that's part of the reason Steven doesn't want to step up. He doesn't want to hurt her any more than she already has been."

"It's not like she would be banished if he became Alpha," I objected.

"No, I know. I don't think that's the issue. It's just the plans they had, the life they expected, has changed. And that's hard to accept."

"I think he would be the best option," I admitted.

Not just because I didn't want Masie to have to stay here. Stephen was generally on the quiet side, but he was respected and loved by the pack. I didn't think anyone else would be accepted as well as he would.

Theo rubbed his thumb over the back of my hand. "How's it looking for Kaden's dad? And the Alpha? Do you know

when decisions will be made?”

“Voting closes on Friday,” Masie answered.

“When we have results?” I asked.

“Thanks to the help of magic, we will know as soon as it closes.”

“So we only have to wait three more days.”

“Yeah. Three more days, and then it’s time to focus on the pack’s future. Even if the Alpha doesn’t get elected, the plan of succession needs to change.”

“There he is!” Kaden burst into the room, nearly pushing me aside to wrap his arms around Theo.

Sai paused next to me, kissing the top of my head before he pushed Kaden away, taking his place to get to Theo.

“You had us pretty freaked out, man.”

Once they stepped back, Kaden lifted me so I could sit next to Theo. They sat on either side of the end.

Masie smiled. “I’ll give you guys a minute to catch up. I have a baby to go snuggle.”

She closed the door behind her, and I leaned against Theo. “Is this okay, or am I hurting you?”

“This is perfect.”

He reached up and put his hand on my cheek, leading me down so I could rest my head on his shoulder.

He dropped his palm to my belly. “I’m still trying to process this. It happened while you were there?”

“Yeah.”

“Don’t take this the wrong way, but you’re pretty big.”

I laughed, understanding what he meant. “They were giving us some sort of potion to speed up the pregnancies. Hannah and Natasha were only pregnant for about four to five months.”

“And what about you?”

“I’m measuring twenty-eight weeks now.”

“What does that mean?” He asked.

“She’s seven months along,” Sai explained.

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“It is pretty hard to wrap your head around,” Kaden agreed.

“What about Hannah’s baby? Is everything okay?” Theo asked.

I nodded. “So far, yeah, she’s healthy. They’ve done a few basic tests, but they can’t tell if she’s a hybrid or not. No one’s pushing for extra tests or experiments.”

“Good,” he relaxed into me. “So what are we having?”

I loved that he said we and that he was so accepting of this.

“We don’t know yet,” Sai answered. “It didn’t feel right finding out with you and Niall.”

“So we just need that lazy bastard to wake up?” Theo teased.

“Yeah, that would be nice,” I said, looking over at Niall.

“So what else did I miss?” Theo asked the guys. They didn’t hesitate to retell the story of how they broke out and freed the prisoners.

I was too focused on watching Niall's chest rise in the fall, reassuring myself that he was still alive to listen and wishing he would open his eyes and come back to us.

"What was that?" Theo jerked his hand away from me.

I laughed. "That's the baby kicking."

"You're joking."

He stared at my stomach. The movements were subtle, but you could see them through my thin hospital gown. His eyes went wide again.

"That's nuts."

Sai reached over, and I put his hand on the spot the baby last kicked. "Does that feel weird? From the inside?"

"Yeah, it's hard to explain. It's like weird shifts of pressure and a fluttering."

"That's so insane. There's really a baby in there." Theo just stared.

I laughed. "That was Aiden's first reaction too."

"He's here?"

"Yeah. With my parents and Brielle."

"Wow. Everyone really is here." Theo smiled.

"Except for our parents," Kaden reminded him. "But it's different this time, knowing they're at least safe, and we don't have to worry about them."

"We can call them if you want," I offered.

Kaden pulled out his phone. "You should. They've been checking every day."

Theo took the phone and set up a video call. We all scooted as close as possible to him while we waited for them to pick up.

“Kaden, what’s—” Theo’s mom froze. “Tim! Get over here! Get over here right now!”

His dad came panting into view. “Theo? You’re awake?”

He chuckled. “Yeah. Apparently, I’ve been asleep for a little while.”

“How are you feeling?” his mom asked.

“Good. No pain. Just a little tired. I’m pretty sore.”

“That’s to be expected. I just can’t believe you’re finally awake. It’s so good to see you.” His dad sounded so relieved.

“You too. How’s the voting going?”

His mom scoffed. “It’s fine. Don’t worry about that. Just focus on getting better.”

“We’ll try to get to you as soon as we can,” his dad promised.

“No rush. I know you guys are doing what’s important. I have plenty of people here to help me.”

“Okay,” his dad said, but I knew Theo’s words hadn’t changed their minds.

A groan came from the other side of the room, and I snapped my head in the direction, seeing Niall’s fingers twitch.

“Holy crap,” I whispered.

“Um, Mom and Dad, we have to go. I think Niall’s waking up.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful. Call us soon!” his mom yelled before Theo ended the call.

Niall groaned again, and Kaden jumped off the bed, lifting me and rushing over to Niall. He sat on the side of the bed with me in his lap. I reached out, tracing my finger over Niall’s face.

“Niall, love? Can you hear me?”

His eyelids moved but didn’t open.

“Niall, we’re right here. You’re safe. We’re back at the pack compound. Everyone’s here. We’re safe. I just need you to wake up.”

I put my hand on his shoulder and ran it up and down his arm. I locked eyes on his face, hoping something would change.

Finally, his eyelids fluttered, and those crystal blue eyes met mine.

“Love?” His voice was so faint. If I hadn’t been so focused on him, I wouldn’t have heard it.

I struggled to take a full breath as I collapsed on top of him, crying into his chest. He was awake. He was here. All four of my men were here.

“Are you okay?” The question came out graveled.

I tried to sit up and got stuck. I reached for Kaden to pull me back up. “Yes, I’m fine. I’m here. I’m here.”

Niall reached up and put his thumb on my cheek, wiping away the tears.

We just stared at each other until Sai helped Theo stand and walk over to Niall’s bed.

I looked at each of my mates. We were really together.

I hadn't allowed myself to picture this moment. Just in case it never happened, but overwhelming relief swept over me. Niall wiped my cheek again before lowering his hand, bumping into my stomach.

He looked down, and his eyes went wide. "What's going on?"

I took his hand and kissed it. "I'm pregnant."

The guys took turns catching him up on everything that happened, from the escape to the recovery, to the Council, and where we were at now.

"I'll let Maeve and your brothers know you're awake," Kaden said.

CHAPTER 32



No one pressured me to leave the clinic, but I got asked every few days if I was sure I wanted to stay here. It probably seemed weird to prefer a confined area after what happened to me in the castle, but this was different. This was my choice.

It was reassuring, knowing that help was always within reach. If anything happened to the baby, I would just need to press a button for immediate assistance. Linda or Deeann or one of the other doctors would come rushing into help.

Even going to the lodge, which is right next door, didn't feel right. Maybe it had something to do with Hannah staying close. Neither of us had any desire to leave, even though she'd been assured that everything was fine with Cora. She was perfectly healthy and right on track, hitting all the benchmarks she should.

We made it a point to reach out to Natasha at least once a day. She had her baby at home, and he was doing well. She named him Benjamin after his father. He had her dark hair and olive skin with Ben's light eyes.

The three of us were in some sort of stasis, not wanting to make the next move. Not wanting to see what was coming next because right now, things were fine. The unknowns of the

future were too much to handle, especially since the latest measurements of the baby were off. I was still progressing faster than I should. With Benjamin and Cora both being happy, healthy babies, I had to believe mine would be too.

The guys and I talked, running scenarios about what I would want to do if X, Y, or Z happened, but I didn't know. I didn't want to have to decide because I didn't want anything to change. I knew my parents couldn't stay at the compound with us forever. They had jobs and lives in the human world. I didn't want Aiden and Brielle being raised here, thinking they were less than for being human. I wanted them to have happy, fulfilling lives in the world where they belonged.

No matter how much I fought it, and how badly I didn't want to happen, people were moving on. Gloria left. She packed up her and the Alpha's things and was on a flight to Scotland the day after the election results came in.

Kaden's parents probably wouldn't ever be visiting us since his dad also was elected to the Council.

There was contention here about who will take over as Alpha. The majority were leaning toward Steven, but the decision wasn't final. The pack was holding meetings with open floors so people could discuss their concerns and expectations for the future.

Some people believed that the next Alpha should be from the committee that was already helping run the pack. Others believed it should go to one of the elders, whoever had the most seniority, but the bulk of the pack believed the position should stay in the Stewart line.

While the contention wasn't leading to violence or even disagreements outside of the meetings, I didn't want to be involved. The pack's drama wasn't ours. I might technically be

a member, but this never felt like home. We're visitors, and that wouldn't change no matter who became Alpha.

There was a knock at the door, and Masie peeked her head in. "You awake?"

It was the middle of the afternoon. I'd been contemplating taking a nap after she left to go run an errand, but I hadn't expected her to get back so soon.

"What's up?" I adjusted the bed to help prop me up.

She stepped in with my grandparents behind her.

My feelings towards Robert changed after he helped us escape the Council when George tried to take us from the school, but I hadn't seen Susan since she dropped me off on my very first day at Drexel Academy.

"Hello, dear," she said in a tone void of affection.

"Hello." I looked at Robert. "What are you guys doing here?"

"We wanted to come to see you," he explained. "We wanted to come earlier, but there was a lot that needed to be taken care of."

"They were helping with the elections as well," Masie said, taking the chair next to me, so she was sitting on my side.

"Okay." I waited for them to tell me the real reason they were here.

"We're both very sorry for what you went through. You and your mates. And we're both relieved you're safe and healthy. We brought you this." She held up a pastel gift bag and handed it to me.

I pulled out a few gender-neutral baby outfits. “Thank you.”

That was a sweet gesture, but I wasn’t ready to lower my guard. I’d been hurt before by these people. They turn their backs on my parents when they needed them and when I was a vulnerable baby who needed them.

“So you approve of this child?” I asked flatly. “Is it because one of the fathers is the son of a councilmember? Is it because I’m now the granddaughter of a councilmember? Am I now good enough for you guys to claim?”

Susan looked stricken and dropped her head while Robert moved to my side. “That’s fair. We made mistakes, several of them, but we want to do better. We want to be here for you and for your child in the ways we weren’t for your mom and you.”

I looked at Masie, wishing I could communicate with her like I could with the guys.

Was I supposed to believe them? Forgive them and let them into my life? Just so they could potentially hurt me again, hurt my baby?

I cradled my stomach. We had enough love in our lives. I didn’t need to let them in, but should I? Was it the right thing to do?

Susan finally spoke up. “We’re so sorry. I can’t tell you how ashamed I am of how I let my daughter go and put the expectations of society in front of her. I didn’t protect her or you when you needed me the most. I know I’m saying this now when you are safe, but the rest of society will be slow to follow. The Council might not have a problem with interspecies relationships or hybrids anymore. It will take a

while for the rest of our world to catch up, and we want you to know that we are on your side.”

“What do you want from me?” I had to know.

She turned her head slightly, as if I wounded her. “We don’t want anything from you. We just want you to know that we’re here. That we ...” She hesitated. “That we love you.”

Her voice cracked, and she wiped under her eyes. I felt how deeply she meant her words. I felt her remorse and her hope.

“Okay. I’m not sure what this will look like, but I don’t want to keep you out of my life anymore. I don’t want us to lose more time together than we already have. I’m just not sure what that will mean.”

Susan agreed. “We understand. There’s a lot that you and Masie need to figure out, but just know we’re always an option. If you ever need somewhere to go, our door is open.”

Robert turned to Masie. “For both of you.”

She nodded once, not looking at him. I hadn’t thought about what this would mean for her. She had much more to forgive than I did. She might need more time to accept them back into her life.

“We’ll be here for a few days,” he said. “The new council invited us to participate in some discussions.”

“Okay.” That seemed to be one of the few words I could utter.

They took hands and smiled at us.

“We’ll be back later to say hi,” Robert said before they stepped out the door shut behind them.

Masie sucked in a breath and slowly let it out. “I wasn’t expecting that.”

“Neither was I.”

“But you can forgive them?” she asked.

“I think so. I felt like they really want to do better for both of us.”

“All three of us,” she smiled down at my stomach.

“I think we should let them. I mean, I’m not ready to completely let them in to my life. But I don’t want there to be a wall between us, either.”

“Yeah. I think that there’s been enough unhappiness and grief, but I swear if they hurt you or your baby, I’ll make sure they never see any of us again.”

“I know,” I said. “So, what’s the latest update from the outside?”

Things changed fast here, but news was slow to make it to me. Even when someone came back to report from one meeting, there were always three more that could have changed decisions from the first one. It was confusing, and I was learning to wait before getting worked up over what was likely not a final decision.

“Tonight’s the last pack meeting to decide the Alpha.”

“Finally.” I sighed.

She nodded. “Then we need to settle on what the rest of us are doing.”

“You guys can stay here,” I reminded her.

“Rodney will always have a place here and a connection, but neither of us wants to spend the rest of our lives in one

spot. What have the guys told you?” she kicked her legs up on the side of my bed.

“We almost have too many options. Kaden’s parents have invited us to move to Scotland. Niall’s family is moving back to Ireland and invited us. Sai’s parents said that we’re always welcome to stay with them. And Theo’s parents want us to move closer, preferably somewhere on the West Coast.”

“Well, that’s what everyone else wants you to do, but what do the five of you want?”

I stretched, feeling cramped in my own body. “I just want somewhere safe where we can be happy without the shadow of the past.”

“That can happen anywhere you listed.”

“Yeah, but I also think if we did go to any of them, it would feel like we’re picking one set of parents. That’s not fair.”

“So, you want somewhere that you guys can make your own?”

“Yeah, but I also don’t want to leave Hannah, Daniel, and Cora. I like everyone being together, just not here.”

She laid her head back, staring up at the ceiling. “Together sounds really good.”

CHAPTER 33



Steven was voted in as Alpha.
Robert and Susan left for Scotland.

Mom and Dad went back to Pennsylvania with Brielle and Aiden.

Life was returning to normal, for everyone else.

At least, that's how it felt.

But we were in between.

For now.

"I'm not saying we have to make a decision today, but we can't keep putting it off either. The sooner we leave, the sooner we can get to work," Rainer sighed and looked at me. "I'm not trying to rush you."

Kaden stepped forward. "You'd better not. She's at thirty-three weeks, but at this rate, we have no way of knowing if she has a few days, weeks, or months left. You can't expect us to pick up and move to the middle of nowhere right before she's supposed to give birth."

I straightened, arching my back and rubbing my ribs. The discomfort Natasha and Hannah warned me about was in full

force. The baby was running out of space, and I was getting more miserable by the day.

Rainer was right. His Alaska-bound group needed to leave as soon as possible to start building the community before the cold set in. They might have all spring and summer, but that wasn't very long, considering how much work needed to get done.

"Why doesn't one group go up first, and the rest will come in a bit?" Masie offered.

"Oh, that's really fair," Hudson, Tom's oldest son, bit out. "We're supposed to do all the work. Then you come in and relax."

Rodney pinched the bridge of his nose. From what I heard, Hudson was normally extremely kind, hardworking, and charismatic, but since he returned from the mission the previous Alpha sent him on, he'd been different. Then, he lost his dad.

He had an excuse to be a dick, at least in my opinion.

"You're right." I surprised myself by speaking up. Normally, I let everyone else fight things out and watched. "That isn't fair. I'm willing to go as soon as we're ready. I might not be able to do much in the way of construction, but I can cook meals and do chores."

"No, you really can't." Masie crossed her arms.

"I wasn't talking about you, Saige." Hudson was a bit calmer now. "As many people who can come, should."

"That's what I was saying," Masie and Rodney shared a look. "The only ones who need to stay are Hannah and Daniel, and Saige and her bond."

“All four of them?” Hudson challenged.

“Yes,” I answered before anyone else could.

“Why? Only one is the father—he can stay.”

My good opinion of him was quickly disappearing.

“We are all her mates,” Niall sneered. “The DNA doesn’t matter. That child is all of ours.”

Hearing that nearly made me cry, but Hudson didn’t feel the same.

“That’s ridiculous.”

“Hudson, shut up!” Rainer roared. “For once in your life, just be quiet. You aren’t in charge. You don’t even need to come with us. You should stay here and be with your mom.”

Hudson straightened to his full height. “She’s coming too.”

“What?” Rodney shouted. “Since when?”

“Since she can’t stand to be here anymore. There are too many reminders of Dad. We both want somewhere we can start new.” He finally backed off a bit.

Rainer dropped his head. “Well, fuck. We did a final headcount last week. We didn’t include her. Should we include Warren after he graduates?”

Hudson shrugged. “That’s a year from now.”

“We’ll need an additional cabin,” Rodney gazed into the corner of the room.

“Good thing you have witches going with you to help,” Masie reminded him.

Are we sure we want to go with them? Sai asked.

Alaska is cold. Theo teased. *How about somewhere tropical?*

Scotland is beautiful this time of year. Kaden joined.

Saige? Niall called to me, and they all turned to face me at the same time.

“What’s wrong?” Theo blurted, interrupting whatever argument was taking place.

I closed my eyes, gritting my teeth against the searing pain. “Hurts.” I panted.

“Call for Linda!” Masie yelled as she came to my side.

“What’s going on?” Rainer asked.

“Clear the room,” Rodney ordered.

I ignored the voices, bearing down as the pain returned. This couldn’t be contractions. The pain was too close together. They were supposed to start at least a few minutes apart.

“Move!” Linda’s yell made the room silent. “Everyone out!”

“Not the guys,” I struggled to get out each word.

“They’re not leaving, sweetie,” Masie assured.

“I’m going to lay you back,” Deeann warned before the bed went flat, and I was on my back.

Linda moved to the foot of the bed, lowering the panel. “Bend your knees for me. I’m going to take a look.”

Hands were on my legs, helping move them into position, which was great because my body was having trouble doing anything but feeling pain.

It’s okay, baby. Theo said in the most soothing tone.

The rest started to speak, but I closed the connection. It was too much. I needed space. I needed to breathe.

“Have you been having pain today?” Linda asked.

I swallowed. “Just some discomfort. *This* pain just started a few minutes ago.”

She didn’t say anything back, and I peeked open my eyes to see her still looking between my legs.

“Is something wrong?”

“You’re fully dilated, Saige. It’s time.”

“What?” I exhaled.

“You’re already crowning.”

“Holy shit.”

“Fuck.”

“We’re not ready.”

The guys started to panic, but Masie stood at my side, stroking my hair. Niall positioned himself on my right, holding my leg up, and letting me squeeze his hand.

“Everything’s all right.” He spoke in a calm voice.

“Promise?”

“I promise everything’s going to be fine.” He didn’t smile. He didn’t joke. He believed his words.

“Kaden, go to her other side and lift her leg,” Linda ordered.

He got into position, but I didn’t let go of Masie’s hand. I needed her here.

Sai and Theo stood on either side of Linda, watching what she was doing with mixtures of fascination and horror on their

faces.

“When you feel the pressure build, when you feel like it’s time to push, you need to push as hard as you can. Okay?”

I shook my head. “Not okay.”

None of this was okay. I wasn’t ready. I thought I had more time.

As the pain started again, my body’s instincts took over. I dug deep for the strength I needed to push, squeezing Masie and Niall’s hands with all my might.

When I reached my limit, I sucked a breath, ready for this to be done.

“Almost there. We’ve got to keep going,” Linda encouraged. “One more big push.”

The urge came again, and I used what strength I had left, praying it was enough.

Time froze. One more push turned into several.

I cried.

I screamed.

I wanted to be done.

I couldn’t do it anymore.

The level of exhaustion was surreal.

“I can’t,” I panted.

Theo grabbed my foot, pushing healing power through my body for the third time. Giving me strength to keep going.

“One more!” Linda called.

I screamed and bore down.

The distinct sound of a baby's shrill cry filled the air, and the pressure was released as Linda helped the rest of the body out.

"It's a girl," Sai said, with tears in his eyes.

"It's a girl?" I repeated, out of breath.

Linda held up our sweet baby with dark black hair and light skin and showed Theo how to cut the umbilical cord. He brought her over to lie on my chest, and a moment of indescribable peace settled over me as soon as I felt our little girl in my arms.

She wasn't what I asked for or what I expected, but she was absolutely perfect.

"I'm going to take her for a second," Deeann warned.

I almost tighten my grip.

"She's got to get measured and checked out," Niall explained, and I let go so she could take her.

I felt her absence as soon as she was gone and started crying.

"It's okay," Kaden reassured me, wiping my tears, but they were coming faster and faster.

Masie let go of my hand and stepped away as the guys surrounded me.

"You did so well."

"You're so beautiful. So powerful."

"You're amazing."

I continued to cry, feeling too many emotions all at once.

I was overwhelmed and exhausted and could hear our little girl crying. It was killing me.

“Is she okay?” I whispered.

“She’s perfect,” Masie called back. She watched Deeann, watching as she worked quickly. “Ten fingers, ten toes, nineteen inches long, and just over five pounds. She’s so tiny. Cora’s huge compared to her.”

Finally, Linda finished with me and went to check on the baby. She returned and laid my baby on my chest. She was cleaned up now and swaddled in a white and pink blanket.

Deeann came to my side with a small bottle. “This potion will help you recover quickly. I’m sorry it happened too fast to get you pain medicine.”

I took the bottle and drank it in one gulp, getting instant relief. I nodded, handing it back to her, more exhausted than I’d ever felt in my life.

“We’ll be back in a bit to get you cleaned up.”

Deeann left, along with Linda.

Masie stepped over to the door. “I’m going to go tell Hannah the good news.”

I smiled, and she left me with my men and our little girl.

“Do you have any names picked out?” Sai asked. “Has anyone thought of anything?”

“Olivia? That’s cute,” Theo offered.

Kaden shook his head. “Too popular. She needs a unique name.”

“One that means something,” Niall agreed. “Like Erin.”

“We’re not naming her after Ireland.” Sai cringed. “Or Scotland.”

“Gracie, Gwyneth, Faye, Diana,” Theo read from his phone.

“What list is that?” Niall asked.

“Names that mean blessing,” Theo shrugged.

“Can I see?”

He handed me his phone, and I looked up one name that kept coming to my mind, but I wanted to make sure there wasn’t a meaning I didn’t know behind it.

“What do you guys think of Nadia?”

I waited for their initial expressions before continuing. None of them reacted.

“It means hope.”

It was also a small nod to Natasha and Hannah. The people who gave me hope through the darkest times.

“I love it,” Niall said first, and the others agreed.

“What are we going to do about the last name?” Kaden looked around.

“I was thinking about that,” Niall said. “Since there’s five of us, I don’t think that we should use one of ours. I think that we should pick a new surname for the six of us.”

“I like the idea of having something that’s ours.” I looked down at our baby. “Something that shows we’re all family.”

They took turns holding her while I watch sleepily from the bed. I couldn’t believe this was real. This was our life now.

CHAPTER 34



“*A*re you sure about this? We can wait a few more days or even a few weeks.” Kaden paced the room, bouncing Nadia even though she was fast asleep in his arms.

“Yes, I’m positive. I’m fully recovered. We all are, so it’s time to go,” I replied.

“It’s been three days since they got there. They’re not going to mind if we’re a few more days behind.”

“They need me, Masie, and Hannah. The work they’re doing can be sped up with our help,” I reminded him.

Sai joined in. “It feels too soon. She’s only a week old.”

“And she’ll be fine on the plane. We’re going.”

Linda had already given us the approval to travel.

“You really think leaving a perfectly comfortable and safe environment and going into the middle of the Alaskan wilderness, with a week-old baby, is a good idea? You can’t be serious?”

“Theo, we’ve been through this. You guys agreed that when I said I was ready, we would go. I’m telling you that I’m ready.”

“Well, maybe I’m not,” he said, looking at our baby girl.

“We should wait until they at least have one building done,” Sai tried to negotiate.

“That will take weeks without us. We can get that done in an afternoon.”

The guys turned to Niall.

“What do you think?” Kaden asked.

“I think that we need to trust her. If she says it’s she’s ready to go, then it’s time.”

Theo sighed. “You always agree with her.”

“Because she’s usually right.”

“If it’s too rugged, we can find the closest hotel and stay there while things are getting built.” I tried to compromise.

“It’s a three-hour flight from anywhere,” Sai groaned.

“You guys, do you remember we survived living underground?”

“Yeah, but we didn’t have her,” Kaden so helpfully pointed out.

“If only we had something that would help keep her protected and warm and perfectly comfortable all the time,” I said sarcastically.

“You know, for someone who didn’t grow up with magic, you’re pretty reliant on it.” Sai narrowed his eyes.

“I never would have pictured all four of you—”

“Hey,” Niall said.

“All *three* of you as being helicopter dads. You don’t see Daniel freaking out over taking Cora up.”

“That’s because Cora is six weeks old, not one week. It’s a big difference.” Theo crossed his arms.

I loved them dearly for taking such good care of Nadia and me, but we couldn’t stay at the clinic forever. It was time to go. It was time to move on and start a new life.

There was a knock at the door.

“Come in,” Niall called.

Masie stepped inside. “Please tell me you guys are packed. We’re supposed to leave right now.”

“We are,” I said at the same time Kaden blurted, “We’re not ready.”

“Yeah, maybe next week, we’ll come up,” Theo agreed.

Masie sighed, then looked at me. “I thought you said they were okay with this.”

“Last night they were, but they’ve had a change of heart.” I threw up my hands.

She put her hands on her hips. “Guys, no one wants to put Saige or Nadia in danger. Every single person in Alaska loves them. We will do everything to make sure they are perfectly safe and comfortable, but they need our help.”

I shot the guys an I-told-you-so look.

“Fine.” Theo was the first to cave. Then Sai.

Kaden finally relented. “If she gets a cold, don’t come crying to me.”

He hefted her diaper bag over his shoulder. Theo and Sai helped Daniel carry our bags. Hannah was waiting for us in the hall. Niall took Cora from her arms.

“I need uncle time,” he told her as he walked away.

“Do you ever feel like you never see your baby?” she asked.

I nodded. “Sometimes I only get her when she needs to be fed, and even then, they take turns with bottles. It’s kind of hard being fifth in the rotation.”

She laughed and hooked her arm around mine. “Don’t act like you mind. It’s nice having all the help.”

“That’s true.”



THERE WAS HALF A CABIN.

That was it.

I stayed back with Hannah, watching as the guys checked in with Rainer and Rodney. Kaden claimed it was his turn with Nadia, and Theo was holding a sleeping Cora, leaving Hannah and I to work.

“Well, this is not what ...”

“I expected.” I finished for her, which was saying something because I really wasn’t expecting much, but half a building and a dozen tents? Where were they sleeping? Cooking? Eating?

“What have we done?” I whispered.

“We’re here to help, remember? With your Earth magic and my Air magic, we can get these cabins built in no time.”

“You’re right. That’s why we’re here,” I reminded myself. Shifters might have strength on their side, but being able to manipulate the Earth and use Air currents to lift logs would make things go much quicker.

“There you are.” Rainer came over, giving me a hug and kissing the top of my head before going and hugging Hannah. “Thank you guys for coming. I know this was a sacrifice.”

“Of course. We’re here to help, so put us to work.”

“Thank you.” He turned toward the center of the opening. “We’ve spent most of the time clearing out this area, but it would be a lot faster if—”

“Masie and I did it,” I told him.

He smiled. “Yeah. And we’ve built the foundations of a few more cabins over there, but knowing you guys were coming, we wanted to get a lot of groundwork done. That way, you guys could come in without having to wait on us.”

“Sounds good.” I looked at Hannah, and she nodded.

“I’m ready to go. Just show us where to start.”

Rainer clapped his hands. “Okay. Where is Rodney?”

“Rodney?” I spotted him talking to Masie. “Is he in charge of construction?”

“We haven’t delegated tasks or made anyone leader yet.” He rolled his shoulders.

“Why not?” Hannah asked.

“Because everyone’s assuming I’m going to be Alpha here, and I don’t want to be.”

This was new. Up until they left, that had been the arrangement. This was Rainer’s project. His community. He’s been working on making it come together for years.

“I thought that was the plan.”

He looked from Hannah to me. “Well, things changed. We’re not a wolf pack. We’re not even a shifter group. We’re a

community for all supernaturals. And I want the leadership to reflect that. I don't think having one wolf in charge represents the needs of everyone."

That made sense. This was originally an extension of the Stewart Pack, but with everything that happened in the last few months, anyone who wanted a fresh start was welcome.

We got permission to invite Natasha, Malik, and Travis to move up, knowing this would be a safe environment for them to be who they are with no judgement or social pressure.

"So what are you guys thinking?" I asked.

"We should have a committee, maybe three or four leaders, to start. If the community grows, then we can add on. At the very least, each species should be represented."

Hannah couldn't hide her surprise. "That's interesting. How are the people here responding?"

He shrugged. "There hasn't been any loud protest, but I think most are focused on getting the community built. A governing body isn't the top priority."

"It will be as more people arrive," she warned.

"I know," he scratched his chin. "We're doing what we can as the needs arise."

He turned and called for Rodney. "He's been over the supply chain right now, so he'll know better where we've stored things. I think they're separated for each cabin, but I want to make sure."

After letting go of Masie, he finally made his way over to us and pulled us in for a hug.

"Hi, girls. I'm really glad you both made it. Masie's getting started back over there, so I'll have you to start with

this row.” He walked us over, and Rainer took off in the other direction.

“We cut down these logs, and they each have notches so they should fit together easily.”

I eyed them, noting how they were set in piles. The shorter ones allowing for doors and windows. He explained the general concept, large rectangular buildings, nothing too fancy.

“Let’s get started.”

Hannah and I moved closer to the stacks, and Rodney pointed out which one to start with before leaving us to it.

I hesitated before we started. “Are the logs going to listen to me? I’ve only ever worked with live trees.”

“They should, but give it a try.” Hannah lowered her hands.

I called to the first log, feeling a connection. It wasn’t as strong as normal, but that’s all I needed.

I nodded to Hannah, and she raised her arms, lifting it while I called for moss and mud to fill in the gaps as she set it down. We moved like that; me filling in the cracks and crevices as she piled the logs on top of each other, rotating around each side as we stacked higher and higher. It took us about twenty minutes before we ran out of logs next to the first foundation.

I looked around. “I feel like someone should probably inspect our work. Make sure we’re doing it right.”

She nodded. “Sounds good to me.”

Rainer and Rodney weren’t in sight, but I spotted Hudson. So, I called him. He jogged over, looking a bit hesitant.

“Hey, about before, I’m really sorry about what I said in your room. I hope that I didn’t cause you to go into labor early.”

I waved off his concern. “You were right. It wasn’t fair to expect any one group to put in the effort while the rest waited around.”

He eyed the cabin. “Especially if this is what you guys can do in a few minutes.”

“Can you make sure we’re doing it right?”

He’s started on the outside, walking the perimeter, and checking our work before going inside. “It’s amazing. It’s actually perfect.”

“All right, then we’ll keep on going.” Hannah started toward the next one, but I stopped her.

“They didn’t tell us anything about the roof. I’m assuming there’s another plan for that?”

“Yeah, Rainer put in orders for the metal a few months ago, and they should be arriving any day now,” Hudson said.

“What about the interiors? Are they just going to be one room on the inside?”

“I think for now,” he shrugged. “Maybe once everyone sees how fast you guys can put these together, they’ll come up with more detailed plans.”

“Sounds good,” Hannah grinned. “We’ll yell if we need anything.”

He shook his head, surprised. “Yeah, great. If you guys need anything, let me know.”

I smiled when he realized he just repeated Hannah.

“I’m going to walk away now while I still have some pride left.”

I laughed as I joined Hannah, and this time it went even faster since we found our groove with the first one.

The first two were smaller than the rest. They were tall enough to fit two stories, had more cutouts for windows, and had an opening for a door in the front and back. By the time we got to the last one, it took us eight minutes from start to finish.

We walked back to the center of the clearing, taking in our work. They looked incomplete, without roofs, doors, and windows, but they were beautiful and waiting for the next step.

Several guys that walked by complimented us on our quick work, offered their congratulations on our babies, as well as thanking us for coming so quickly and helping.

“It’s kind of nice being appreciated. As an Air witch, I get overlooked a lot of the time,” Hannah said.

“But now they know. If they need something heavy lifted, you’re the one to call?”

She flexed her arm and wagged her brows. “Damn right.”

“Should we go find our babies?” I asked, glancing over my shoulder.

She narrowed her eyes. “It has been suspiciously quiet. You don’t think they actually changed diapers, do you?”

I chuckled. “It’s funny how it suddenly becomes our turn to hold them when they cry.”

We teased the guys about that, but they were amazing fathers. Especially when they could turn it into a contest. Who

was the fastest at changing diapers or who got the burp first? Daniel was the reigning king of getting Nadia to sleep, but my bond swore it was only because he had a few more weeks of experience.

I looked around the clearing and realized we were alone. “Where did everyone go?”

“Maybe there was a delivery,” Hannah guessed, and we headed back in the direction we’d last seen them.

No one was around. I stopped and put my finger to my lips to single Hannah to be quiet. I focused solely on my hearing and finally made out voices out on the road.

“I think they’re this way.” We took the marked trail toward them. “I don’t know what kind of delivery requires everyone.”

“Maybe it’s the metal.”

That could be it.

We were nearly to the main road when we came to a stop. Everyone was gathered in a circle with three men in the center. They were naked.

Shifters.

“Do you know them?” I whispered.

She shook her head.

I searched until I found my mates. Sai was holding Nadia, standing a bit behind Theo and Kaden, blocking her from view. Daniel was next to him, cradling Cora to his chest.

Hannah straightened, likely sensing what I was.

A threat.

My instincts took over. My baby was in danger.

I stepped forward, out of the cover of trees.

That got the attention of the shifters, and one lifted his arm, pointing to me and Hannah. “Those two.”

Everyone turned to see us. Rodney and Rainer glared at the visitors. Not exactly hostile, but not welcoming either.

“Who are you?” I asked the rude one who must have never learned it was rude to point at people.

“You have witches here,” the one in the center said, looking back at my uncles. “And vampires.”

“Yes, like we said. We’re a community for all species,” Rainer with a sigh, like he was annoyed.

The third man spit on the ground, then glared around the circle. “That’s not how it’s done.”

Rodney crossed his arms over his wide chest. “It is now. The world is changing.”

“Not ours,” the one in the middle said. “We don’t bow to the Council, never have and never will.”

“That’s fine,” Rainer threw up his hands. “We’re not here to make you. We didn’t even know about your pack.”

“Because it’s not registered,” one of the men in the circle stated, looking up from his phone.

“We don’t owe the Council anything, not even knowledge of our existence.” The pointer growled.

“Which is why we didn’t know about you,” Rainer said, as if this wasn’t the first time he made that point. “Look, your land is what? Fifty miles north?”

The one in the middle nodded.

“None of the people here have any reason to ever go there. Nowhere even near your land.”

“You’ll bring the Council’s attention,” the middle man argued.

Rainer inhaled slowly before answering. “I can’t promise they won’t ever visit.”

He left out of the minor detail his father was now a councilmember, probably a good choice.

“But we won’t tell them about you. We have no reason to. We’re here to create a safe space for all supernaturals. That’s all. Things between us can be peaceful.”

The pointer scoffed, but the one in the middle stared at Rainer for a long moment before nodding.

“Stay away, and we don’t have a problem.”

“Perfect. Sounds great,” Rainer stepped forward.

The shifters dropped, and three grey and white wolves stood in their place.

They turned and ran off into the trees on the opposite side of the circle from me and Hannah.

“So, those were our neighbors?” She asked.

“Yup.” A feeling of dread washed over me. This was supposed to be a fresh start, without the fear and repression of the Council and supernatural society’s expectations.

Now we had a pack of off-the-grid, anti-government wolves watching and waiting for a reason to attack.

EPILOGUE



Two Weeks Later

“Does everyone get their own song, or are we making the longest list ever?” Malik asked as he helped clear our dining room table.

“Please, just once. I can’t bear to hear it six times,” Natasha cringed. “And we don’t have to list each person’s name. We can just say ‘everyone’.”

“That’s not fun.” Malik sulked.

“Plus, this isn’t for everyone. Just those of you that didn’t get to celebrate.” Niall picked up Nadia from her bouncer and kissed her cheeks.

“Right, Saige, Hannah, Sai, Daniel, and Travis.” Malik counted on his fingers. “This is about them.”

Travis kissed Malik’s cheek. “We celebrated my birthday.”

“Alone in my dorm room while hiding from the hallway terrors.” He objected.

Life at the Academy hadn’t been easy for those that stayed behind. Not that they would have traded places with us, but the Council cracked down on the students. They installed cameras across campus and in the halls of the dorms, and hired willing

students to monitor their peers and report back anything suspicious or against the rules.

But at least they graduated. They were the only two that made it to the end.

A piercing cry came from the living room. Benji, Natasha's son. It was crazy how easy it had become to identify each baby based on their cries.

"Got him!" Travis called before running out of the kitchen.

He and Malik moved into Hannah and Daniel's cabin when they arrived. We had a small one ready for them, but when they found out where Natasha was living, they wanted to be close to her. So, all five of them shared a cabin and helped with the babies.

Malik and Travis didn't want Natasha to raise Benji alone, even with Hannah and Daniel around. And for that, I would always love them.

Serene took the cake out of the carrier she'd packed it in, and I burst out laughing. She scrunched her nose. "What's so funny?"

"That's just a lot of colors." I eyed the frosting. Red, blue, green, pink, and purple split from the middle in a swirl and fell over the sides.

"I wanted to make sure it represented all of you. Missing your eighteenth birthday is a tragedy, and we wanted to make it up to you."

"Thank you." I gave her a side hug, then peeked through the archway to see if our guests were ready for dessert.

My guys were spread around the living room, lounging on the four couches with Rodney, Masie, and Rainer. Travis

paced along the large window, bouncing with each step. Benji was quiet in his arms, and Natasha came to my side, looking at them.

“Did you ever think you would see this?”

I rested my head on her shoulder. “No. Even before, this is so much better than anything I could have ever dreamed of.”

Her cheek met my hair. “Me too.”

None of us spoke about our time in the castle. Just before and after. That was all that mattered.

Going to stay with Ben’s family gave her the closure she needed. She was able to learn more about him, and they agreed to being as present as she wanted in Benji’s life. They offered to help financially, but she declined. The trust her grandpa set up for her would take care of both of them. Instead, she asked that they be there when Benji has questions about his dad. She didn’t want them to cut him out of their lives. She wanted her son to have the option of family, of unconditional support and love.

“Who’s ready for cake?” Malik shouted, breezing past us with Serene carefully balancing the cake behind him.

Everyone stood and made their way back to the table. I was still in shock at how the guys managed to make this into a home so quickly. Granted, they had Masie’s help, but within two days of us being here, we had a beautiful kitchen, furnished rooms, and all the comforts we could ever need.

Hannah and I were expecting to live in the empty shells of cabins for a few months, but we were underestimating our family. We both had beautiful homes, right next to each other.

Everything came together quicker and smoother than I expected, especially after our initial run-in with the neighbors.

Our community voted for Rainer, Masie, and a vampire named Ryan to act as the governing committee. Rodney was still on the fence about establishing roots here, but with Masie so naturally slipping into a leadership role and the people looking to him as a liaison, he was softening to the idea.

“Come on,” Kaden took my hand and led me into the center with the other belated birthday boys and Hannah.

I put my arm around Daniel and hid my face in Sai’s shoulder as the horribly off-tune song started around us.

“To you!!!!” Malik, Theo, and Kaden dragged out the last note longer than necessary.

“Make wishes!” Serene called, and we leaned down together to blow out the candles.

Masie stepped next to Serene to help cut and serve the cake.

I took my slice and laughed at the three layers: chocolate, vanilla, and red velvet. Serene winked and shrugged.

“Theo! Travis!”

I spun in time to see Rainer running toward us with his phone at his side. “I need your help.”

Travis stood immediately, and Theo handed his plate to Kaden.

“What’s going on?” Rodney asked.

“One of the guards on patrol smelled something. He followed the scent and found a wounded wolf about twenty miles south.”

“A shifter?” Theo asked.

“Yes.” Rainer’s eyes darted to Rodney. “She might have been on her way to us.”

“She?” Masie asked. “I’ll come too. If she wakes up, I don’t want her to freak out at the sight of you three.”

“Fine.” Rainer went to the front door and held it open. “Come on.”

They followed after him, leaving the rest of us shocked and confused.

“I guess we should get used to that,” Kaden broke the silence.

“This is what we signed up for.” Rodney sat his empty plate down. “Serene, can I get your help at the clinic? I want us to be ready when they get back.”

“Of course.” She glanced around, then found my eyes. “Sorry to leave this mess.”

“It’s okay, you guys go.” I walked them to the door. “Let us know if we can help.”

Rodney nodded and kissed the top of my head. “Happy late birthday.”

Serene squeezed my hand, then they left.

I slowly turned just as Cora let out a whimper from the portable bassinet we kept in the living room.

“Dibs!” Kaden, Daniel, and Sai called as they jumped over the couches and shoved each other to be the first to reach her.

I met Hannah’s eyes and smiled.



Thanks for reading the Drexel Academy Series!

I hope you enjoyed meeting Saige and her friends!

If you enjoyed [Conquered by Magic](#), I'd love for you to leave a review on [Amazon](#)!

What's next?

Follow Rainer as he continues to build the community in Alaska in the

Sterling Bay Shifters Series!

Grab your copy of [Her](#) Pack Revealed!

Xoxo,

Lexie



My mother had one rule growing up, don't draw attention. If you do, run.

I spent my life hiding who, and what, I am. One night, one stupid mistake I'll regret forever, changed everything. They're coming and I have no way to stop them and not enough time to get away.

Thrust into the world that once made up my bedtime stories, I'll have to embrace my secrets in order to survive or succumb to the nightmare.

ALSO BY LEXIE SCOTT

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Secrets in Her Eyes

Read Between the Lies

Anything but the Truth

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