



SAVED
BY THE
ENEMY

WAVERLY SAGE

Saved by the Enemy

Vampire Shifter Enemies to Lovers
Romance

Waverly sage



Copyright © [Year of First Publication] by [Author or Pen Name]

All rights reserved.

No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the publisher or author, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law.

Contents

1. Chapter One
2. Chapter Two
3. Chapter Three
4. Chapter Four
5. Chapter Five
6. Chapter Six
7. Chapter Seven
8. Chapter Eight
9. Chapter Nine
10. Chapter Ten
11. Chapter Eleven
12. Chapter Twelve
13. Chapter Thirteen
14. Chapter Fourteen
15. Chapter Fifteen

16. Chapter Sixteen
17. Chapter Seventeen
18. Chapter Eighteen
19. Chapter Nineteen
20. Chapter Twenty
21. Chapter Twenty-One
22. Chapter Twenty-Two
23. Chapter Twenty-Three
24. Chapter Twenty-Four
25. Twenty-Five
26. Sneak Peek into “Taken”

Chapter 1

Chapter One

Lillian

I took a deep breath; the night air was cool and refreshing. Spring was just around the corner. I could smell it on the earth. The sleeping flowers stirred beneath the frozen ground. It will be an early spring this year.

“Mom, we should start planning your spring garden,” I chirped, linking my arm with hers as we strolled along the short, moonlit path toward the house. They had come out to walk with me and enjoy our version of brunch. Though it was closer to midnight, and the rest of the world was fast asleep. I wasn’t like the rest of the world, and my parents adjusted their daily life to match my needs as they raised me.

“A bit early for that, don’t you think?” dad responded, chuckling under his breath before pulling at his tobacco pipe.

“No, it’s the best time to start planning,” I insisted, smiling at the old man who had raised me. I could still see the youthful face beneath his wrinkles, his eyes still full of life, as the smoke curled in the air between us.

We reached the door to their small home, the smell of freshly cooked food carrying out when my dad opened it, allowing Mom and I to enter first. The house was warm, a fire burning near the dining table, set with a pot of hot food and two places. The third chair had no place setting, only the seat.

I didn't eat food. Not like mom and dad. My diet consisted more of the liquid side. Red in color. Preferably fresh. Usually from Mom. Like any mother, she nursed me as a child, just not in the traditional state.

"I'll be donating for you tonight, Lillian," dad stated, taking his seat at the table after pulling Mom's chair out for her. "Your mom thinks she may be coming down with a cold."

I looked over at my mom, concern flaring in my gut. "We don't have to take that walk tonight, not if you aren't feeling well!"

Mom waved me off, shaking her head. "It's only a cough. The doctor says the cold air is good for my lungs." She began to fill her bowl with the stew that steamed at the center of the table. "Eat, Lillian, that way your dad can eat after and be energized for our walk."

Smiling, I turned to my dad, his arm already outstretched in the offering. They were getting too old to be my donors. I would eventually have to find another source, though the thought of drinking from a stranger didn't sit well with me. I had the faintest memory of others who would donate their blood to me. An entire community of people like me. My birth family and the humans who cohabitated with them.

It had been so long since I thought about it. The night that my adopted parents found me. Covered in blood, alone, and scared. It was a miracle they knew what I was and were able to care for me appropriately. If not for them, I'd be dead. Cymarthian females don't survive well on their own. Though

we have all the strengths and abilities of a male, there was the risk of rogues. Males turned their backs on our kind and hunted females to force bonds.

I only vaguely understood what the bond meant. I was too young to know much more than that mate bonds were two people destined to live their lives together, forever. With the bond, the males gained stronger powers to protect their mates and children. That was what rogues were after. That increased speed and strength could only be rivaled by another mated male. That was all a rogue desired.

Though it hadn't been a rogue that left me orphaned and alone in the Carpathian Mountains. That was the work of hunters. Humans who made it their life mission to kill my kind. They were the things that went bump in the day for Cymarthian children. The makings of nightmares. A nightmare that haunted me every day as I slept, only to be forgotten with the sunset, leaving only the tale signs of the sweated brow and labored breath as I woke.

I finished my feeding, wiping the blood from my dad's wrist as he pulled out a bandage for himself. It would be healed by morning. My saliva would see to it. I didn't like seeing the wounds I made on my parents any better though. I hated that I had to feed from them. Hated that I couldn't just enjoy the savory scented stew that my mother had made.

"Well, that rabbit certainly went a long way," dad commented, accepting the bowl Mom had poured for him and

taking a spoonful to his mouth. “Mm, your mother is a wonderful cook, Lillian.”

I smiled as Mom shook her head and chuckled. “You seasoned the meat, Albert. I only put it all together in the pot.”

“Ah, Anezka, you are too modest. Lillian, your mom will never admit it, but she taught me how to season the meat. It’s all her.”

He smiled broadly at my mom, making both of us laugh. I watched as they both finished their meal, helping clear the table and clean the now-empty pot and bowls before our evening walk.

Once all was clean, we made our way out the door, laughing together along the mountain path. My family owned the surrounding land, though they swore it was only on paper.

“The mountain is owned by the Cymarthians, we only hold the deed,” dad once told me. The property ran in his family for generations, and with the land came the secret of the creatures that lived beneath the soil of the land.

A gust of wind blew through my hair, bringing with it the song of the mountains. A song that I could only hear, but I danced ahead nonetheless, feeling so free and happy. Mom and dad trailed behind me, whispering together, and watching me prance along the stones with bare feet. I barely noticed the sharp pebbles on the path. I was one with the mountain, just as I was born to be.

A low growl had me pausing, turning my head all around to try and locate the origin of the sound, my senses leading me to my left. There was no scent, the creature staying upwind, but my ears never failed me. The sound came from that direction.

I turned to warn my parents. I was intending on turning back and forgoing our evening walk after all, but the creature charged from the bushes with a blur of brown fur.

“Bear!” mom screamed, pulling dad’s arm to run.

“Don’t run!” He yelled back, panic in his voice. “It will only chase you, make yourself bigger!”

The bear was running straight for them. It hadn’t even given me a second glance. I could tell by the way it zeroed in on my parents that no matter what they did, it would attack them.

I had to be the one to act.

I took off, running as fast as I could. The fear in my mother’s eyes made me go faster than I ever had run before. Starting on two feet, I shifted in mid-run, jumping into the air with four white paws, my claws extended to attack the bear.

Snow leopards had become my favorite animal ever since my parents took me to a wildlife sanctuary in the UK. The creatures were on the vulnerable species list. Rare, like me. I took its form anytime I shifted, only occasionally taking the form of a bird to enjoy evening flights.

I intercepted the bear just before his claws reached out for my dad, biting into its throat with the intention of breaking his neck, only the bear managed to avoid the fatal attack. I let out

a frustrated snarl, swiping my claws across its face with the furry of a hell cat.

He didn't fight back. A fact that should have given me pause, but the drive to protect my family only increased my adrenaline as I raised my claws again to bring down the bear's chest. I fully intended to gut the beast and prevent him from ever attacking another soul on this mountain again. Then, I smelt him. A stray gust of wind blew over us and carried his scent up to me.

Finally, I paused, looking into the intelligent eyes of the bear. Far more intelligent than your average bear.

He moved, gently as possible trying not to startle me into attacking him again, holding my eye contact as his snout began to shrink down before my eyes. The brown fur covering his body retreated into skin, tanned, smooth, muscular skin that on any other evening would have given me the most impure of thoughts.

His eyes were a deep earthy brown, nearly matching the dark bark of the trees surrounding us. His hair lightning from the dark brown of the bear to a golden brown, a color I would picture to match the mountain top at sunrise. It would fit him to compare him to daylight. The very thing that weakened me and sent me hiding below ground, because looking into this golden god-like man, I felt weak, yet powerful, all at the same time.

"You're a Cymarthian," I breathed, after shifting back to myself, staring in awe at the first one of my kind that I have

met since the day my village had been destroyed.

“Will you let me get up?” He growled, making me frown.

I looked over my shoulder, suddenly remembering my parents there. Then I remembered why I was on top of this male. Why I had only moments ago intended to kill him.

“You attacked my parents,” I growled back, shoving my knee into his throat. “Why shouldn’t I kill you?”

“Lillian,” my dad called out, coming up from behind me. “Let him up so he can explain. He doesn’t appear to be a rogue. He isn’t dangerous anymore.”

Reluctantly, I listened to him, removing my knee, and allowing the male to get up as I stepped back, placing myself firmly between him and my dad. Mom was still closely tucked behind Dad, peering over both our shoulders to see the male who would have killed her without any cause.

“He might still be close enough to go rogue,” I whispered to my parents, keeping my eye on the male. “He ran straight for you both. He intended to kill you for no reason. I don’t trust him.”

The male cracked his neck, rolling his dark brown orbs at me. “I had my reasons.”

“I’m sure you did, son,” dad spoke up before I could, patting me on the shoulder with a silent command to stand down. “Why don’t we return to our home, and you can explain it to us, yeah? Come on, Anezka, Lillian.”

There was no argument, gears turning in my dad's mind as he ushered my mom and me to lead the way down the path toward our home. I didn't feel comfortable bringing the male there. Didn't like having him at my back either. I looked back over my shoulder at him, making sure my eyes showed every suspicious thought I had about him. I wanted him to know that I was watching him, he couldn't just attack my family the way he did and not reap the consequences.

"Do you drink, son?" Dad asked, walking beside the male. "I have a nice stock of Becherovka. Some of the bottles date back to the first world war."

"Tristan," the Cymarthian stranger answered back. "My name is Tristan, and yes, I would love a glass. Thank you."

I scoffed, rolling my eyes. "A thank you! You should be apologizing for nearly killing the man who now offers you his best drink."

Mom nudged me, giving me a look that said I needed to calm down. The others in our group remained quiet, ignoring me, then continuing their discussion on my dad's collection of vintage drinks.

When we reached the house, I had had enough of the discussion. Taking my place in one of my parent's favorite armchairs, I gripped the arms, glaring as mom and dad poured their would-be killer a drink.

"Great, you have your drink. Now talk."

Chapter 2

Chapter Two

Tristan

I swirled my drink, watching the two humans and the female Cymarthian closely. It had been a surprise when she attacked me. I saw her shift, but I had thought she was running away from the humans who appeared to be stalking her. Though, now looking at these frail beings up close, I could see how mistaken I had been to assume that.

My gaze returned to the female Cymarthian, the fire crackling in the hearth behind the girl, giving her an ethereal glow, a halo appearing above her head, giving the appearance of an angel come to cast judgment upon me. She was alluring, even as her eyes cast daggers straight into my heart.

Lillian, they called her, she had called them her parents, and she protected them as such. My eyes moved to the bandage on the man's arm, signs of them willingly feeding her. How long had they been caring for her to have her call them her parents?

"I thought you were Vanators," I answered, taking a sip of the spiced drink, hints of cinnamon and clove dancing along my tongue.

"Vanators? You thought my parents were hunters? How?" she gasped, looking her parents up and down in disbelief.

I didn't blame her for her distaste for me. I had attacked her family.

In the shadows of the night, they had looked far less innocent and frail than they obviously are, causing me to believe I need to act fast to protect a female of my race. I would have been just as pissed if someone attacked my family the way I had, no matter their reasons.

The older woman let out a cough, covering her mouth with a small square fabric as she turned her head to the side. She smiled softly at me as she dabbed at the corner of her mouth with the cloth, careful to hide the flecks of red. She was sick. Far sicker than she seemed to be letting Lillian know.

Lavender mixed with the scent of blood from the cloth, her way of hiding the proof of her illness from her daughter. Smart, they were well educated on the Cymarthians and their abilities. I could only smell it because I was far older than the young female before me.

Why don't they want Lillian to know how sick she is? I wondered to myself, turning back to the haughty female still watching me with narrowed, suspicious eyes. I didn't blame her for not trusting me. It was smart for her to keep her guard up.

"I didn't analyze the situation too far, I couldn't risk your safety," I answered her again, taking another swig of my drink.

"Maybe analyzing the situation could have saved us all this trouble. Did you ever think about that?" She remarked, crossing her arms, and leaning into the chair.

"It's fine, Lillian," her mother said, giving the younger woman a pointed look. "We are all right now. And he is our

guest.”

“Mom, he was going to kill you,” she insisted, leaning forward and reaching for her mother’s hand.

“But he didn’t. You stopped him just in time.” Anezka replied.

I watched as Lillian pouted, giving in to her parents and dropping the subject of my attack. Relief sagged in the older woman’s shoulders, hope filling her eyes as she looked back at me.

Had they been waiting for a Cymarthian to come and claim Lillian? I contemplated, turning to the old man as he spoke up once more.

“How many of you are left?” Albert asked.

Frowning, I took another sip of my drink, looking between the three of them as they watched me, waiting for my answer.

“What do you mean?” I asked, leaving my tone level, nearly bored sounding.

“How many other healthy Cymarthians are out there? We hear about the rogues. Thankfully they have never been seen around here, but we know that their numbers are growing. How many of you are still,” the man paused, looking for the right words, then shrugged and shook his head.

“Normal.”

Normal. Maybe not the most eloquent of words, but it was a fair one.

“There are still many villages throughout the mountains. The King has returned to the castle on the other side of the mountain. There are more than enough of us to fight off the rogues, if need be,” I nodded to Lillian, watching her narrow her eyes at me again. “She should be in a village though. She is vulnerable out here. The you two can’t protect her from the rogues.”

But I could protect her. I could at least get her to the safety of numbers, no matter how inconvenient it was for me. I had been running in the opposite direction, doing my best to stay away from the village. Running from the psychotic hunters who have me marked as a rogue and threaten to harm anyone protecting me. Maybe I wasn’t the safest person to be around, but I was at least safer than two elderly humans.

The couple nodded while Lillian huffed, her eyes widening as she looked between her parents and me.

“What does that mean?” She demanded, “I can take care of myself. Did I not just knock your bear ass to the ground?”

“Language, Lillian.” The old woman cut her off. “Tristan is right, you belong with your own kind. We are getting too old to care for you. What happens when we are gone?”

“Or if a rogue finds us.” Her father added, taking his wife’s hand, and squeezing it. “We wouldn’t stand a chance to protect you. Your mother and I have often worried about this. It’s why we sent Dasha to live with your aunt as soon as you matured. It’s a miracle no other male has found you till now.”

Lillian stood, pacing in front of the fireplace like a caged animal, casting razor-sharp glares at me. The phrase, if looks could kill, crossed my mind as I held her gaze, impressed by the power rolling off her. She was certainly not a normal Cymarthian female.

“Do I get no say in this? Do I get no credit for my own strengths?”

The couple exchanged looks, then turned to me, their eyes pleading for me to help.

“You can have a say. Either come with me to the village or expose your family to the risks of rogues or Vanators attacking. Vanator hunters consider any human who helps our kind targets as well and will kill them without questions. Don’t even get me started on what rogues do. It is a wonder that you have lasted this long without trouble finding you.”

The blood drained from her face, some distant memory flashing behind her blue-green eyes, her glazed look moving from me to her parents. Their faces also paled.

It must be the memory of how she came to be with them. I thought. There was real fear there, and I wanted to do everything to take that fear away, to shield her from whatever evils she must have witnessed as a child. I shook my head, confused as to why I would feel this way about a woman I had only just met. A woman who only moments ago would have gladly killed me, who would probably still kill me given the chance.

“What will you do if I leave?” She asked her parents, walking over and kneeling before her mother. She looked up into the woman’s eyes, searching for answers there. “Who will take care of you?”

The older woman patted her hands, smiling lovingly as only a mother looking upon her child could do. “We will be just fine. We have Dasha, we can go stay with her. She has been wanting us closer for a few years now. And your cousins, they can take on the land. They know the family history as well as we do, so they will be prepared for rogues should one appear.”

Lillian let out a sigh, setting her head in the woman’s lap. “If you both really think that going with him will save the two of you, then I will go. But I’m not going to be happy about it,” She glared at me from over her shoulder. “Will I be able to visit them?”

“You aren’t going to be held prisoner, however, it will be up to the King and Queen, or your mate, should you find him in the village,” I felt an unfamiliar tug of my heart at that mention of her mate, the idea of those fierce blue-green eyes turning to another male was unsettling to me. I shook my head, downing the last of my drink.

She scoffed, rolling her eyes. “What do you mean it will be up to my mate? If he is my mate, then he will know that he can’t stop me.”

“Lillian,” her mother warned again, a hidden smile playing at her lips. “Don’t take it so personally.”

Well, I could only guess where she learned her independence from. I mused, nodding when her father offered to refill my glass. We seemed to exchange a silent conversation of our own. One where he warned me that I was only seeing the tip of his daughter's personality.

I looked at the two women, now whispering quietly together.

What exactly am I getting myself into?

Chapter 3

Chapter Three

Lillian

I went outside after Mom went to bed. Dad was still up, drinking and laughing with the Cymarthian male they welcomed into our home. The man that I would be leaving with at sunset tomorrow.

Listening to the sounds of an owl hooting in the distance, missing the sound of crickets that would not return till the warmer summer nights. Watching a pack of deer, awake for early grazing, walking along the tree edge. I let out a sigh, leaning my head back to look up into the star-filled sky, wondering what the stars would look like in the Carpathian village.

I pouted. I was still not happy about the thought of leaving my parents, but I did know that Dasha had wanted them to come down from the mountain to live with her and her family. She hated that she couldn't bring her husband and kids up because of me. Our parents were on my schedule, and it didn't do well for the other part of the family to visit, not when our waking hours were their sleeping hours. Or for the fact that Dasha's husband didn't know the family secret. He had only met us once before their marriage, and only three times since. Once for each child that Dasha gave birth to. They would visit the ancestral land to baptize the infant under the full moonlight as was the family tradition. A tradition adopted by my people.

Dasha often begged them to transfer the family land to our cousins during those visits. Begged them to come down and let her take care of them. She always did this when she thought I had gone to sleep, just before daybreak when she would wake to leave at the end of the visit. It was only a matter of time before my parents would listen to her and go. It was for the best. I just wish it didn't have to be with Tristan taking me away.

Rolling my eyes, I leaned back against the roof of the house, watching the fading stars in the sky, a soft light cresting the horizon behind me. I would need to return to the earth soon before the sun stole all my strength and left me vulnerable. I had done that a time or two as a teenager, often discovered by my sister or parents and scolded for being reckless as they dug the hole for me to crawl into. I still pushed my boundaries, experimenting with how close to watching the sunrise I could get. I had it down to a science now.

A breeze whipped around my hair, bringing with it a strange scent that sent a shiver down my spine. I turned my head in that direction, watching the tree line for any sign of who or what the scent belonged to. But there was nothing but shadows, shadows that were slowly disappearing with the increased sunlight. Still, I couldn't shake the feeling that I was being watched.

The sound of the door below opening and closing stole my attention. Listening to the sound of boots walking away from the house, before pausing. A stronger, masculine scent erasing

the memory of the faint scent the breeze had brought to me. He stole my entire attention and irritated me with his presence.

“The sun is rising, shouldn’t you be getting below ground?” He asked, his deep sexy voice holding a hint of command.

“Last I checked, you were my escort, not my father,” I allowed myself to slide off the roof, landing skillfully beside him with a flip of my hair. “I think the sun is affecting you more than it is me. I can go another thirty minutes.”

Tristan narrowed his eyes at me. “Are you always this careless?”

I merely shrugged, walking away from him towards the old barn where I often slept beneath, calling out behind me as I went. “It’s only reckless if you don’t know your limits.” I sashayed away, smirking to myself at the sound of his growl and the retreat of his steps towards the tree line.

The next evening, I woke slower than usual, dragging my feet to wish my parents farewell. I wasn’t certain when I would see them again, and a part of me wanted to back out of leaving them. Why couldn’t I go with them to Dasha’s? Male Cymarthians leave the mountains all the time, looking for their mates. Why couldn’t I leave to be with my family?

I decided I would ask just that, finally picking up my feet and marching into the house. Mom was packing boxes and a suitcase, while Dad carried out the packed boxes to the old truck. They must have been up most of the day packing away the house, including their food, leaving only a few canned items that wouldn’t perish if left for too long. I felt a tug at my

heart, seeing how different my childhood home was looking, how empty it already felt before any of us even left.

Mom looked up at me, waving me over to help her close the suitcase. I walked over, hopping on top of the case, allowing her to finally close the over-stuffed valise.

“What if I come with you?” I asked, cutting right to the issue, and smiling as my mother’s golden-flecked eyes locked with mine.

“Lillian,” She sighed, taking my hands in her own. “You belong with the Cymarthians. You won’t be safe, even if we leave the mountains. Only the other Cymarthians can protect you.”

“But I feel like I belong with you. You, Dad, Dasha, and her family. All I have to do is bring some soil to sleep in,” I insisted, squeezing her hands desperately. “I’ve never been without you before.”

The door behind us opened again, bringing with it a cold breeze and the smokey scent of my dad. My mom turned to him, sharing a look that told him exactly what she was dealing with. What I was asking of her. They always knew how to speak without speaking.

“Lillian, you have to go with him. It’s the only safe choice for you,” Dad insisted, pulling me into his arms for a tight hug. “You will always be our baby girl, and as your parents, we must do what is best for you. You trust us, don’t you?”

I reluctantly nodded as he wiped a tear from my cheek as both my parents hugged me, kissing my forehead before stepping back. Dad took the suitcase I had sat on, dragging it out to the truck to be loaded, straps holding down a tarp to prevent anything from flying out as they traveled down the mountain.

Tristan stood next to the truck, checking the chains on the tires, and looking up at the sky.

“It’s going to be an early spring,” he commented, giving the chains a final check before standing up. “But the nights are still freezing, so take care while driving. If you have to stop, do so and continue in the daylight, it may be safer to travel in the day anyway.” He looked towards the tree line with a frown, the same tree line that I had caught the strange scent from earlier before sunrise.

“Thank you, son,” Dad said, tapping Tristan’s shoulder. “Take good care of, Lillian. She’s our baby girl.”

Tristan nodded, looking at me for a moment before turning to the west, into the mountains. As he looked away, Mom and Dad kissed me goodbye once more and then climbed into the truck. I watched them drive away, waving to my mother as she hung out the window, waving back at me. It wasn’t until they were out of sight that Tristan approached me.

“Come on, we need to travel as much as we can before sunrise. It’s a long journey to the Carpathian village.”

I sighed, turning back towards the barn without a word. Tristan followed me, grumbling about me being hardheaded

under his breath. I chose to ignore him, entering the barn and grabbing the bag I had packed when I woke up this evening. It had only a couple of dresses that were gifts from Dasha, an extra pair of shoes, and a blanket my mom had knitted for me as a child with a photo of my family tucked in its folds. My most precious possessions. The items I saw as my treasures that I couldn't leave behind.

I looked around the structure that had been used as my room since I was a child. Remnants of toys covered with blankets and tarps collected dust in the back. Trunks and barrels filled with old family heirlooms were in the opposite corner. I wondered what my cousins would do with all the things my parents left behind. The things I could not bring with me. Would they keep them? Or would all my memories be replaced with their own?

My shoulders drooped, a silent tear escaping my eyes, quickly wiped away before its salty scent could reach Tristan behind me. I took a cleansing breath, straightening my back and face.

I can do this. I chanted to myself.

“Okay,” I sighed, turning to the annoyed male. His face softened a bit as if he could sense how much this hurt me. “I’m ready.”

Chapter 4

Chapter Four

Tristan

I helped Lillian down a rocky path, subconsciously stroking the back of her hand with my thumb. Her eyes glanced down at the touch, making me pull away, grunting at her to hurry up.

It had been like this since we began our travel. The longer we spent together, the closer I felt to her, yet it didn't seem to affect her the same way it affected me. If I could only see inside her head, know if it was all in my imagination or not, know for sure if she was my mate.

Because that was what it felt like to me. And there was danger in that. The Vanator twins wouldn't see me mated as proof I wasn't a rogue, they would just kill her with me. They were cruel like that. Yet still, I couldn't help myself but long for her.

"Exactly how much farther do we have to travel?" She groaned behind me, my eyes scanning our surroundings before moving forward. "We've traveled for two nights now."

"What's wrong? Is my company not to your liking?" I growled, glancing at her over my shoulder, her blue-green eyes narrowed to slits. "The village is on the other side of the next mountain. It will take some time to travel. Even at our increased speed." I turned my head to the sound of a twig snapping, relaxing my shoulders only as a fox darted from the

bushes in front of us, disappearing once more into the mountain forest.

“How am I supposed to visit my family from so far away?” She muttered to herself, looking back over her shoulder as if she could see the home, she left behind two days ago.

“We need to keep moving, Lillian,” I told her as gently as I could, the drive to get her to safety urging me forward. The thought of Kai and Aleesha Vanator finding us fills me with more dread than if it was only me out here. If they hurt her, I wasn’t sure what I would do. If she was my mate, I would turn into the very creature the twins believed I already was.

We only made it a couple more feet before the putrid scent filled the air, each of us sensing them at once. Lillian gasped, turning so our backs were pressed together. I was impressed by the instinct, ensuring that neither of us would be attacked from behind. I didn’t look back at her, sensing that she was watching the tree line just as I was, waiting for them to show themselves.

With another snap of a twig, we simultaneously shifted to both our left and right, the air, reeking of their decaying flesh, becoming harder to breathe.

The first of the two rogues stepped out to my left, his eyes zeroed in on Lillian, sniffing the air around her, lust filling his darkened eyes. “Female,” he rasped to the second rogue, now stepping out from my right.

“You will come with us, on your own or by force. I am just fine with the latter.” the second ordered, both ignoring my

presence, Lillian holding their entire attention.

“Like hell,” She growled back at them, pressing against me, her fingers wrapping around my hand, the touch zapping me to action.

Mate, protect my mate. The instinct sang inside my head, barring my teeth to the two rogues, spinning Lillian around to hold her in my arms protectively. The two rogues snarled, suddenly seeming aware of me.

“Stand back, she belongs to us,” he first snarled at me, his darkened eyes reflecting a red hue in the light of the moon.

“I don’t think she got that memo,” I taunted, holding her tighter to my side, a small gasp escaping her lips. “She seems to want to be with me.”

They both moved at once, faster than they should have been able to move. One aimed for me, the other for Lillian who let out a scream, ducking from my arms, out of the way of the incoming rogue. Her movement gave me the opportunity to grab both rogues by their necks, slamming their heads together with a satisfying crack.

Both monsters let out shrieks of anger and pain, breaking free of my grip and regrouping in front of me. They began to circle us. Like wolves, ready to strike at the first sign of my guard dropping. I reached down, pulling Lillian back to my side, gripping her hand.

I had to protect her. My brain repeatedly screamed at me to protect what was mine. My future, my life. Without her, I

would be nothing, a shell of the being I was meant to become with her at my side. I didn't understand how my mind could be so made up about who this girl was to me, but my instincts did not allow me to question it. Not yet. Not now.

They rushed us again, both now aiming to take me down. I shoved Lillian back, hearing her curse as she fell to the hard ground. A small voice chastised me for pushing her, but a louder voice reminded me that it was to save her. She was safe, and that was all that mattered.

The dark-eyed rogue's teeth sank into my neck, his partner's teeth marking my right bicep, a howl of rage rattling the earth beneath our feet. I could hear Lillian scream, cursing at the rogues who drank my blood without my consent. It was taboo to drink another's blood without their permission, and it was considered an intimate exchange between the Cymarthians. But these rogues didn't care. They were little more than animals at this point, and they knew that they could weaken me by taking my blood.

I roared, my right hand turning into a bear claw as I slashed it down across the chest of the rogue to my right, pushing my claws deeper and deeper. He howled, startling the other dark-eyed rogue, my blood dripping down his chin as he gaped at his partner, my claws now deep enough to break his sternum, the blood-filled muscle beneath pulsing in fear.

With another roar, I tore his heart from his chest. Watching as he fell to his knees, the other rogue let out an animalist shriek as he tore away from me, disappearing into the dark.

Lillian stepped up beside me, watching the rogue's corpse wither and decay before our eyes, ultimately turning to dust, his no longer beating heart joining him in the late winter breeze, returning to the mountain from which we all come.

"I've never heard of rogues working together," Lillian breathed, wide, frightened eyes looking off in the direction that the dark-eyed rogue had run.

"They've been gathering in packs recently. I have come across a few in the cities and towns around the mountains, taking care of them as much as I can. But they're like rats. Where one dies, two more appear."

I could hear the snarl and howl of the escaped rogue carrying on the wind. Calling to more. The realization sent a shiver down my spine.

"We need to keep moving and fast," I commanded Lillian, grabbing her hand and pulling her along, ignoring the stinging pain of the bites left by the rogues.

For the first time since meeting her, Lillian didn't argue. She only listened, moving with the same urgency as myself. I could feel her eyes moving over the bites, concern radiating off of her, matching my concern for her safety.

It was the glimpse inside her mind I had wished for. Because within her eyes, was a concern for her mate, not for an escort and certainly not for the man who had attacked her family.

The bites began to burn, the loss of blood weakening me just as the soon-rising sun did the same. I wasn't certain how much farther I could go.

"A cave, there is a cave over here," Lillian gasped, now pulling me from the path I had been leading us.

The cave was little more than a den. How she had seen it baffled me, but I didn't question it. The sun was going to be up soon, and my strength was gone.

I fell forward, barely raising my arms to catch my fall, though I didn't hit the ground. Small, yet strong arms wrapped around my waist, her grunts telling me that it was not with ease. Lillian gently laid me across the den floor, stamping her foot and opening the ground below us, the earth gently pulling me within her embrace.

The den was only big enough for one hole, and just as I opened my mouth to object to her not taking the den for herself, she climbed in beside me. She curled herself around me, careful of my injuries before the earth closed above us.

Even in the dark of the ground, I could see her. Sense her. Smell her.

It was a relief to feel her closeness. The voice of my instincts purring with satisfaction.

She was safe. I saved her. I protected her.

I closed my eyes, the world disappearing around me, the sound of her breathing like a lullaby to my ears.

Chapter 5

Chapter Five

Lillian

I opened the earth from around us just as the sun set, helping Tristan out of the hole and onto the dirt floor.

It was the same den that my mother had hidden me in. My mother that was now gone, dead at the hands of the Vanators, but not before saving my life by hiding me here. It was poetic that I would return here again, taking refuge from a different enemy than the one from that day.

Finding this den, and recognizing the area told me one important thing. We were close to my birth home. Or at least what was left of it.

Tristan let out a grunt, the pain of the bites still affecting him. I leaned over him, taking a closer look at the bite on his neck, grimacing at the amount of puss I found there.

“You should be healed by now,” I thought out loud, speaking mostly to myself as I reached into the ground, taking a handful of damp dirt.

Tristan let me pack the wet soil into his wounds, watching as I tore off a piece of my skirt to wrap around each of his wounds. “Some rogues have venom; it takes longer to heal from those wounds. But I will heal. With another day or two.” He responded.

Our eyes met static crackling in the air between us, taking my breath away.

I couldn't understand it. Only hours ago, I couldn't stand him. Hated him. There had even been times that I thought about killing him and running back home. I wouldn't do it of course. I wasn't a murderer, but the point was I had felt that way. And now, now I feel warmth when our skin touched. I wanted to be close to him.

I had been relieved when he killed that rogue. Not for my own safety, but for his. The sight of them biting into his flesh had not only sickened me, but it enraged me. As if they were taking what belonged to me. It was illogical for me to think that way, to feel as if I had a claim to him, yet I did feel as if I had a claim.

Was it because he protected me?

He had prevented the rogue from grabbing me. Protected me with his very life. Was I developing some messed-up attachment over it now? Stockholm's syndrome maybe? I wasn't exactly his prisoner, so I wasn't certain I could call it that. Was there a syndrome for falling in love with a savior? I was certain there would be a term for it.

"I'm going to sweep the area, get rid of our scent, then we should get moving again," he grunted, turning away from me, breaking the spell that had fallen over me.

Yeah, there is no way I'm actually into him. I groaned internally, rolling my eyes while collecting my bag from the den.

We set off an hour later, leaving behind the small den, and moving closer to the village that I had been born into. I kept

myself from thinking about it too much. Watching the back of Tristan's head, thinking about how much I had wanted to kiss him back in the den.

Maybe I just need to get it out of my system. I thought, heat growing up my neck at the thought of kissing him.

I've only ever kissed one boy in my entire life. My cousin, Ivan. We had been caught quickly and scolded. Told that just because we weren't blood didn't mean we could be kissing cousins. Though, my aunt had been laughing at the phrase as she said it, making the entire scolding confusing. Nonetheless, I never kissed him or another boy after that.

The heat along my neck quickly burned out with the memory of my cousin, though my curiosity about kissing Tristan remained the same.

What would it be like?

I knew that most Cymarthian women spent their entire lives waiting for their mate to claim them, but I wasn't exactly raised as a traditional Cymarthian. Even if Tristan isn't my mate, what harm would it do to kiss him? To see just how far these new feelings of mine went.

The thoughts burned in my mind, taking my attention away from the path ahead of me. When I stumbled for the third time, catching myself against Tristan's back, he stopped and narrowed his eyes at me.

"Why are you pretending to be clumsy? We don't know where that rogue went, or how many others are with him now.

I don't give a shit if you don't want to be away from your parents, you are even less safe now that the rogues know you exist." He growled at me. I didn't appreciate his tone, stepping up so I stood chest to chest with him as I growled right back.

"I'm perfectly aware of our situation. Maybe you should lead down a less treacherous path instead of blaming me."

Our breath intermingled, his scent filling my senses with a growing desire. I wanted more than a kiss, I realized, my breathing growing heavier, the heat along my neck returning.

I looked into his eyes, gasping at the reflection of the same desire staring back at me. I hadn't even realized I had reached out my hands, not until they pressed against hard muscle, running up the flannel fabric of his shirt.

He didn't stop me, didn't move. He only kept his eyes locked on mine, letting me make all the moves. I liked that.

In all our time together, he had been calling the shots. Making decisions that affected my life, leaving me with little choice in any of it.

Yet here, I was in control. It was my choice what we did next. He was giving me the choice of how far I wanted it to go.

My hands reached the collar of his shirt, toying with the buttons there, enjoying the heat in his eyes growing hotter. It was a powerful feeling, to see how much desire I could raise in him. The power of knowing that if I stopped and walked away,

he wouldn't stop me, wouldn't say a word about it. No matter how disappointed he might be from it, or relieved.

There was a small battle being waged behind those teddy bear eyes. Something inside him told him to stop me, to act. I wondered why he didn't. Why did he give the power of this choice to me?

He was an alpha a-hole with a capital A, there was no reason for him to not do whatever he wanted.

Did he know that it was wrong because I wasn't his mate? Was that the battle in his eyes? I licked my lips, watching his pupils dilate as they followed the movement. It was like witnessing the end of a great war, the battle within him ceasing from that small subconscious movement.

I rose up on the tips of my toes, pulling him by his collar to me, and pressing my lips to his. He tasted surprisingly sweet, his tongue sweeping along mine, surprising me. Exciting me.

I wanted more of him, pressing myself against his chest, my hands releasing his shirt only so I could wrap my arms around his neck. He let out a low moan, his hands gripping my hips, pulling me against him. I let out a gasp, finding him growing hard, his hips rocking towards me as our kiss deepened.

It was like nothing I had ever experienced. The sensations rising within me overwhelmed me, and the rest of the world fell away. Only he existed. For all I knew, we had gone to a new dimension. One without rules, without danger. Just pleasure, excruciating pleasure.

We pulled apart if only to catch our breath, staring at one another before colliding once more, our hands moving for our clothes. I was desperate to feel more of him. To feel the warmth of his skin against mine.

I nearly had his shirt off, my lips moving away from his to trail along his neck, following the path of my hands.

“I smell her,” a raspy voice whispered from the trees, freezing me in place.

Tristan pulled me against his chest, neither of us breathing as we realized our mistake.

“Arousal,” a second voice breathed, the sound of him taking a deeper breath. “She smells like apples and cinnamon.”

A growl rumbled in Tristan’s chest, lifting me off my feet to move backward, his head moving around to find the source of the voices.

Pine needles began to rain around us, turning our heads instinctively above us to find two glowing eyes staring down at us.

“Hello, sweetheart” the first voice greeted, his smile revealing rows of decaying teeth, only his fangs remaining fully intact.

Both rogues jumped at us, a scream bubbling in my throat, muffled by Tristan’s still bare chest as he pressed me closer to him, taking off at a run. I closed my eyes, allowing him to keep me pressed to his chest, grateful for his scent, certain that it was blocking out the putrid scent of death from the rogues.

I could hear them following us. Their laughter as they commented on the scent of my fear being better than my arousal.

Tristan growled, hearing their taunts, but refusing to stop and face them.

I moved my hands to his shoulders, pulling myself up his body to peer behind us at the charging rogues. There were three now, the third rogue's taunts promising that more would come.

How could there be so many? It was unheard of.

Yes, Cymarthians were social creatures, but rogues? No, rogues were not social. They were warped. Insane. They shouldn't be able to work together, especially not with a female involved. They should be tearing each other apart, each wanting to be the leader. Yet they almost seemed to be herding us.

My eyes widened.

"They're herding us like sheep to the slaughter!" I gasped into Tristan's ears. "It's a trap!"

My realization was too late. The reeking stench of five more rogues surrounded us in a clearing. Their laughter sent a shiver down my spine as Tristan's arms finally set me down, our backs pressing together just as we had the night before.

Eight. No, nine. There were now nine of them surrounding us. Snarling and howling like beasts. The makings of every nightmare I could ever remember. All I was missing was the

hunters who haunted me, and this would be my worst nightmare yet. Each one looked as if they should be dead, reminding me of the zombie movies that Dasha use to sneak into the house when we were growing up. They were every bit the undead monsters that inspired such tales amongst humans.

I looked over my shoulder at Tristan, my heart catching in my throat when I saw the bite mark, once more exposed. He still wasn't healed.

"Here kitty, kitty, kitty," a rogue taunted, wiggling his finger in invitation for me to come closer.

"Go to hell," I growled back, pressing against Tristan.

"Remember," a familiar voice rasped out, my eyes finding the dark-eyed rogue from last night amongst the mob. "She can't be harmed. But you may kill the male who killed my brother."

They all moved at once. Some shifted to monstrous-looking animals, unnatural in every way, others only charged, their eyes, so full of bloodlust, locked on Tristan.

"Lillian, stay close to me," he whispered, taking on a defensive stance that I quickly mimicked.

"You don't have to tell me twice."

Chapter 6

Chapter Six

Tristan

The bites on my arm and neck still sting. Whatever venom the rogue had, has prevented me from healing as well as I should. It felt like it was weighing me down. As if I wasn't moving as fast as I should have been able to against the mob of rogues who now rushed toward me and Lillian.

I told her to stay close to me, my instincts still driving me to protect her, to push past the pain and disadvantage I now felt. It had been a relief to feel her press closer to my back, agreeing to the plan. The closer she kept to me, the easier I could maneuver around her, keeping myself between her and any attacker.

They came from all directions, some of them flying down from the sky in the shape of grotesque birds, half decayed and the sight that not even nightmares could summon. I shoved Lillian down, knocking the first of the rogues away from her, his claws aiming for her hair. It would seem he had hoped to claim her while the others went for me.

She let out an annoyed grunt but allowed me to move her around, keeping close as she had promised she would, but I didn't miss the shifted claws at the end of her fingers. She wanted to fight back, and I could respect her for that. The only issue was that they were very strong. Stronger than they should have been and twice as fast. I could barely hold my

own against him. As strong as she was, I doubted that she could have protected herself from them.

“Tristan!” She warned, ducking before I had the chance to shove her down myself, giving me the perfect window to rip out the windpipe of the next rogue who came at her. His blood rained over Lillian’s head as she stood back up, giving me a little grin. A grin that quickly disappeared as a rogue snuck up from behind me, his claws digging into my side.

I let out a roar of pain, dropping to a knee but not without killing the bastard, and bringing him to the ground with me. He was dead before he hit the ground, his claws falling from my abdomen where they had dug in, deep. I stumbled back to my feet, gritting my teeth at the pain, covering the wound with a hand.

Lillian’s scream with rage caught my attention, turning to find her hand inside a rogue that must have attempted to charge me. The rogue who was trying to take advantage of my weakened state. His bloodshot eyes bulged as he met Lillian’s green gaze, gasping for air. It took me only a moment to realize why. She had punctured through his lungs and now gripped his heart in her hands, just as I had done to the rogue the night before.

I didn’t have the opportunity to see her finish him, yet another attack aimed at me took me by surprise. The coward attacked me from my blind spot, his stench barely warning me of his approach. When I turned to counter his attack, I found the second of the rogues who had attacked us last night. The

one who now led this mob, and who aimed to take Lillian from me.

“You killed my brother,” he hissed at me, pushing between Lillian and me, smiling at the panic in my eyes as I registered what he was doing. “Now, I’ll kill you, and take the woman for my mate.”

I let out a growl. “You wish,” my growl fell to a yelp, pain from the claw marks stealing the strength from my legs, dropping me to my knees as the rogue approached with a victorious grin.

“We coated our claws in silver.” He boasted, showing off the glimmering tips of his fingers. “We learned how to keep it from affecting us. A perfect weapon against Cymarthians such as yourself.”

I winced as the effects of the silver began to weaken me, feeling it coursing through my blood, weakening me with each passing moment. The rogue stood over me, his rotting mouth grinning wide as he raised his clawed hand over his head dramatically.

“Goodbye.” He purred, but his arm didn’t come down. Screams from behind him distracting us both, turning our attention away from each other.

He whipped his head around, letting out a hiss of anger as a white leopard took down two more of the rogues, running straight for us. I smiled as those green eyes met me, a fire burning bright behind them.

Her white fur was coated in the blood of the rogues she had killed, but it did little to distract me from the beautiful creature she was. If anything, it enhanced it.

I kicked myself for ever doubting that she could hold her own against these rogues. Watching as she charged at the rogue before me, knocking aside any other who attempted to stop her. I suppose it did help that they were ordered not to harm her, but even so, they wouldn't have been able to stop her.

She pounced into the air, swiping at the retreating rogue, refusing to let him go. Not this time.

I watched as she grabbed him. Heard the crunch of his bones and the blood-curdling scream, quickly replaced by his silence. His headless body fell to the ground before his head joined.

Lillian shifted back, the white fur retreating as she turned and ran towards me, fully shifted back when she reached me. Marveling at her beauty as she spoke to me.

“We have to go, now,” She commanded, pulling on my arm while the remaining rogues stalked toward us, looking from her to their dead leader on the ground.

Snarls rose from the reformed mob, a few crying out to kill her, though most disagreed. They needed her. Wanted her, but only for one thing. To mate and gain the power that comes from the mating bond. A power that did not belong to them. She was mine.

I snarled back at them, forcing myself to my feet despite the pain and grabbing her by the waist. There was no way I could fight them. Not in this state. So, I ran, the sound of stampeding rogues falling close behind, their stench overpowering me, preventing me from scenting my way through the woods.

“On your left!” Lillian called from my shoulder, hanging on for dear life while I ran, pushing myself despite the silver weakening me.

I maneuvered to my right, avoiding two diving rogues, their claws shining with the silver tips.

“There are two more coming up right behind us,” Lillian called out again. “Can you go any faster?”

I shook my head, trying hard to do so. “They coated their claws with silver! I’m already weakened from its effects.” I explained to her. “This is as fast as I can go.”

I heard a curse escape her lips followed by another warning of rogues closing in, helping me to dodge their reach.

I could feel the closeness of dawn approaching. Each day as the solstice came earlier, the night’s drawing shorter as we approached the end of winter. The thought of the sun coming and weakening me more while still running from the rogues made me uneasy, pushing me to try and move faster once more.

I have to protect her. I thought to myself, my grip tightening around Lillian as we dodged yet another of the charging rogues.

They began to fall back, giving me a moment of relief as I thought that we were finally outrunning them. We broke through a clump of trees, my legs bending as I intended to take to the trees, hoping to leave behind no trace of Lillian and myself for the rogues to follow, but I skidded to a stop.

Lillian let out a frightened squeal, her hand slipping up my chest at the sudden stop. Her eyes searched mine for an answer as to why we had stopped running.

“They’re still coming, Tristan. We have to go!”

“You won’t get very far, Little Dove,” A voice called out from the much larger mob of rogues ahead of us. A tall blonde rogue stepped forward from the gathered troops, each of the rogues regarding him with respect. I had thought the other rogue to be the leader, but there was a charge of power in this rogue. This was their true leader. This was the rogue who sought to take Lillian. The one who ordered her to be captured unharmed.

Lillian’s head snapped around to follow the sound of his voice. Her eyes widened with fear, disbelief, and recognition.

She knows him. How did she know him?

I looked back at the rogues, my lips pulling back into a snarl, looking for any way to get us out of this. My hand reached out instinctively, pulling Lillian to my chest, making sure that no one could sneak up and take her from me. The sting of my wounds only gave me a slight pause, hiding my flinching from the enemy. Refusing to allow them to know of any weakness they could use against me.

I looked again at Lillian, her face still filled with shock, opening, and closing her mouth as she stared at the blonde rogue. Who is he?

Chapter 7

Chapter Seven

Lillian

I couldn't believe my eyes. It was like seeing a ghost, a vision I couldn't bring myself to believe to be true. But it was. There he was, standing before me. One of them, but he didn't quite look like them. My memory of his smile is still so strong in my mind, even though it had been decades since I had last seen him.

Anton.

I shook my head, stepping back from the ghost of my past, my back pressing against Tristan's chest. I vaguely heard him intake a breath, the pain of the wound on his abdomen bearing down on him.

"Lillian," Anton called me, extending a hand toward me. I stared at his sharp, claw-like nails, swallowing hard as I shook my head.

"I thought you were dead," I finally gasped out, Tristan's arms wrapping protectively around my waist, flinching from the pain of his movement.

"Lillian," Tristan whispered to me. "Who is he to you?"

I parted my lips, wanting to answer him, but nothing came out. My thoughts were too wrapped up in the memory of the last time I saw my brother, the day he left the village to find his mate. It was the very next day that the hunters found us and killed everyone. I thought for sure they had intercepted my

brother as he left. The timing had been too close for them to not have at least crossed paths. Yet here he was, alive and well.

“Come here, Lillian,” Anton sang to me, his voice colder than I remembered it being. “Don’t keep your big brother waiting. You know how impatient I can be.”

A small part of me wanted to rush to my brother’s side. I wanted to hug him and tell him how much I missed him. Explain to him where I had been all this time and what had happened to our family. But the logical side of my brain forced me to stay put, allowing Tristan to tighten his grip around me once more. My brother narrowed his eyes at my companion, a few of the rogues around him letting out snarls and growls.

“If you wish, we can bring your friend with us. I could always use more soldiers,” Anton continued, his tone persuasive with an undertone of commanding. He had always been a bit pushy, even before he left the village. He always had gotten what he wanted and was a natural leader. Many of our villages believed he would return with his mate and take over leadership of our area. It had been his dream to lead.

I looked around at the army of rogues. It would seem that he had gotten what he wanted, though not as expected.

“Is this really your brother?” Tristan asked, his voice low. I shivered at the feeling of his breath against my ear as I nodded.

“Anton,” I answered him.

Anton let out a dark chuckle, stepping away from his minions as they snarled and snapped in our direction. He was dressed in dark denim pants and a black shirt that didn't fit the time of year. Of course, the weather didn't exactly affect our kind.

“Lillian,” he sang again, leaning forward as he shoved his hands in his pocket. I had no doubt he was attempting to appear less threatening. It might have worked, had the wind not switched directions and blown his rotting scent toward me.

I let out a gag, falling deeper into Tristan's arms and he let out a growl at my brother.

“That's close enough, Anton,” he snarled, attempting to move me behind him.

I watched as Anton's green eyes turned an unusual color of violet. His face morphed into the face of a monster, and his fangs elongated like that of the vampires from the movies Dasha use to watch with me.

“Is that a command, Cymarthian?” He challenged me, stepping forward again.

A wave of power exploded from Anton, the air around us growing thin, I instinctively grabbed at my throat, feeling the weight of the power push against my own.

“I don't take orders.” Anton continued, taking another step forward. I could feel the earth shake with each step he took, power rolling from him in waves, like a tsunami coming to destroy the land set in its way.

How could he be this strong?

“Lillian belongs with me, Cymarthian. She is my ward.”

I snapped out of my shock, narrowing my eyes at my brother and pushing through the wave of his power, latching onto my own power to steady myself.

“I haven’t been your ward for decades, Anton. You don’t even know me anymore.” I growled, pushing my power out as he did with his. The widening grin told me he felt it, had wanted it.

Was this some sick test?

“Come now, Lillian,” he cooed, pausing his steps and reaching his hand out to me once again. “You think I didn’t know where you have been all these years? About the humans who were raising you?”

I hesitated, stepping away from Tristan, despite his attempts to keep ahold of me. Anton smiled, keeping his hand held out to me. “I always knew where you were, Lillian. I have been watching you, waiting for when you were old enough to leave.”

I remembered the feeling of being watched the other night. The flash of movement that I had disregarded when Tristan stepped out of my parents’ home. Had that been him? Had he really been watching me all these years?

“Lillian!” Tristan warned, his hand grabbing my wrist. “He’s a rogue. He’s not your brother anymore.”

I knew he was right. Yet I still felt the pull to go to him. To find out how he came to be a rogue. To find out why he had allowed me to believe he was dead all these years. I paused my steps, looking back at Tristan. He had wild desperation within his eyes. Fear. He was scared to lose me to the rogues who surrounded us.

My gaze moved over each terrifying face, then landed once more on the face of my brother.

His eyes teetered between a green much like my own, and that ethereal violet color.

“Come here, Lillian,” he demanded, the violet taking over once more, the waves of his power again overtaking me.

“NO!” I screamed, backing up against Tristan once more.

Anton’s face gave way to disappointment and rage. He hated it when things didn’t go the way he wanted them to, and that personality only seemed to increase within his rogue state.

“You don’t really have a choice,” he growled, disappearing into the mist blowing in the wind, taking his scent with him.

“Take her, do your best not to harm her. Do whatever you want with the Cymarthian,” his voice called out to his army before disappearing completely.

My eyes shifted from the disappearing whisp of air to the snarling army surrounding us. Fur replaced the hard chest I had been leaning against, and when I looked up, Tristan, in his bear form, let out a battle cry in the form of a roar.

I nodded, understanding what he wanted when his brown eyes met mine. We were going to need to fight our way out of this. I pounced forward, shifting to my snow leopard form, my claws taking out two rogues who had nearly reached us.

It felt like utter chaos around us. Snarls and blurs of fur, yet I could always tell exactly where Tristan was at each turn. Pushing our way toward the tree edge where we might be able to make a break for it.

I could sense the sunrise coming. We had wasted so much of the night running and fighting these rogues. I could only imagine the toll it was having on Tristan with all his wounds.

We pushed on, occasionally coming in contact with each other, as if he were checking to make sure I was still with him, pushing, biting, and clawing our way to the edge of the battleground to make our final retreat of the night. It had to be our final retreat.

I saw the edge, picking up my speed to reach it, feeling hope lighten my heart as Tristan appeared beside me once more, running ahead just a bit to take down the rogues who stood in our way.

Suddenly, a light flash of pain blinded me. My paws fell out from under me, sending me tumbling over, shifting back to my Cymarthian form with a scream of pain.

One of the rogues had scratched me, cutting deep into my side, the silver burning as it slipped into my bloodstream.

“Tristan!” I cried out, stumbling to my feet to run toward the bear who knocked aside five rogues at once.

He turned his head at the sound of my cry, letting out a roar of warning just as another rogue’s stench reach my nose followed closely by bloody claws around my upper arm.

“I’ll get the honor to mate you since I caught you,” he cackled, digging those silver-coated nails into my arm.

I let out a growl, shifting my hand to white claws as I swept them over his face, taking his left eye. He released me with a roar, grabbing at his empty socket just before a pair of bear claws knocked him away from me, his body flying into five others.

I didn’t hesitate, grabbing a hand full of the bear’s fur and pulling myself to his massive back. He turned, running as fast as he could, crashing through low-hanging branches that scratched and whipped at my cheeks. I buried my face into his fur, holding on tight as the pain in my side throbbed, the silver stealing my strength. Just hold on, we’re almost away.

The thought promised me. A thought that didn’t quite seem like my own.

Chapter 8

Chapter Eight

Tristan

I pushed past the pain, the shift helping a bit to heal my wounds despite the silver and venom still running through my veins. I had to get us as far away from that undead army as possible, refusing to slow down until their scent was gone.

Lillian had been hurt. I could smell her blood and feel its warmth soaking into the fur of my back, kicking myself for letting her get so far behind me. I should have stayed at her side. Had I been there, she wouldn't have been hurt. They would never have been close enough to touch her.

A growl rumbled in my chest, pushing on through the trees, the sounds and smell of the rogues retreating behind us.

The sun was going to rise soon. I did not doubt that the rogues were only retreating to escape the light of day.

Even as rogues, they couldn't escape the weakening powers of the sun. Though some believed that rogues turned to dust, the sun snapped that small tether of life holding them in this world.

"Tristan," Lillian whispered, sensing the retreat of the creatures. "They're gone."

I finally slowed my pace, agreeing that we were at least safe from their pursuit for now. We needed to find a safe place to rest and soon.

Lillian sat up on my back, my mind flashing to the knowledge of her thighs squeezing me while she innocently held on. Her fingers stroked through my fur absentmindedly, turning left and right as she took in our surroundings.

“I know where we are,” she whispered, her voice barely audible even to me.

I stopped moving, allowing her to climb down from my back, wincing at the sound of her struggling to draw air in from the pain of her wounds. My body shifted back the moment her feet hit the ground, lifting her back up gently and looking around the area.

She didn't fight me. A surprise to both of us if her questioning eyes said anything. Instead, she pointed to our right.

“Go that way,” she instructed, her voice filled with confidence.

I did as she said, following every step she told me to make until the trees broke into a clearing, a mountain wall shadowing the remains of a village from the light of the moon.

“How did you know this was here?” I asked, setting her on her feet to explore the dilapidated buildings.

It was a Carpathian village. Long abandoned, forgotten to time. I could make out signs of fire along the homes, but not much more than that to hint as to why this place had been abandoned.

I looked back at Lillian, her eyes distant as she walked towards one of the fallen homes. She pushed aside the remains of a wooden door, allowing it to fall from the hinges as she stepped over it to enter what was left of the home. I followed her inside, watching as she dusted the ground, picking up a straw doll from the dirt near the bed.

“This was mine,” she sighed. “I can’t believe it’s still here.”

Realization hit me, looking around at the ruins of the village once more. This was her village. The one she had been born to.

When I looked back into the decaying home again, Lillian was sitting on what was left of the bed, smiling at the straw doll.

“Anton helped me make this, just before he left to find his mate,” she reminisced, tears sparkling in her eyes. “I can’t believe he never found her.”

I didn’t want to tear her away from her memories, watching her eyes move around the single-roomed home. All her childhood memories seemed to play before her eyes scene after scene. But the sunrise was quickly approaching, and we still had no solid place to rest. The grounds beneath the homes filled with too much carbon from whatever had happened here in Lillian’s past.

“We need to find shelter,” I coaxed, stepping towards her, and offering out my hand.

She nodded, setting the doll on the bed, and accepting my hand. “There is a cave against the mountain wall.”

The cave wasn't far off, well hidden from the rest of the village and seemingly untouched by whatever had transpired to the rest of the village, though time still had its way with the wooden arches of the doorway. It was their ceremonial cave from what I could tell. A true blessing, it had remained untouched by foreign entities. The holiest of places for the Cymarthians.

Lillian went in deeper, collecting the dirt to pack in her wounds while I waited outside, watching the tree line for any sign of the rogues. Though sunrise was soon approaching, I couldn't trust that they weren't out there, waiting.

I hadn't realized Lillian approached me. Not until her hand moved up my arm, cupping my cheek to turn my gaze from the trees to her.

“They're gone,” she promised, stroking my cheek. “It's just us here.”

I watched her lips as the tip of her tongue ran across the bottom. A reminder of what we had been up to before the rogues found us. I wanted nothing more than to continue where we had left off, but I resisted, watching her eyes search mine.

I moved to turn away, to return to my watch until the sun rose, but she stopped me, grabbing my face between both of her hands and pulling me into her. Our lips collided, the taste of her driving out all resistance I had held onto.

My arms wrapped around her waist, ignoring the stinging pain of my wounds as I walked her backward into the cave, my hands ripping at the torn remains of her dress. I hadn't even realized how torn up it had become from the fight and running through the woods, leaving it little more than scrap fabric across her body.

"Tristan," she moaned, my name never sounding so good as it did coming from her lips.

A growl vibrated up my throat, shrugging out of my shirt, her hands running down my chest to undo my pants with a desperate need that matched my own. With a kick of my legs, I was as bare as her, letting out a moan at the feel of her breasts pressing against my chest. I pulled her back, looking down at her body. Reveling in the sight that I was certain no other man had ever laid eyes on before.

She was flush, the color complimenting the green of her eyes as she looked up at me. Pleading for me to take her. I didn't leave her waiting a moment longer, picking her up she wrapped her legs around me, my hardened cock pressed against her wet center. She gasped at the feeling, a moment of realization of what we were doing. I almost pulled away, if not for her lips once more pressing against mine, opening for me wanting me to taste her.

"I want more," she gasped between our lips, her hands burying into my hair, pulling my head back and exposing my neck to her.

Her lips trailed kisses down my neck, her teeth teasing at my pulse, testing me, waiting for my permission to take it a step further. I should have said no. A better man would have stopped it right there. But I wasn't a better man.

"Take whatever you want," I groaned, pressing my hard throbbing head against her opening.

She gasped as I pressed into her, her teeth sinking into my neck at the same moment I thrust into her, pressing her back against the wall of the cave. I groaned with pleasure, moving gently inside her as she took her fill of my blood, my own teeth tingling with the desire to taste hers in return.

My pace increased with each gulp she took, her nails digging into the back of my neck as she held on tight to me, muffled moans growing louder between us. She pulled back from my neck, pressing her back to the wall and baring down on me, moving in rhythm with my thrusts.

I watched her breasts bounce with each movement, my mouth watering from the appetizing sight of her creamy skin. She let out a command for me to bite her, pulling the back of my neck down over her chest. I didn't hesitate, my teeth sinking into her breast, tasting the sweetness of her blood. It wasn't like any I had tasted before. Something in it gave me a boost of energy, even with the approaching sunrise. I could feel the silver receding from my blood, my wounds healing as they should have already done.

I brought us to the ground, laying her gently across the dirt floor, releasing her from my bite and pressing my lips to the

already healing mark. I could feel myself coming. My thrusts increased as I chased my own climax, feeling Lillian coming with me with each thrust, her cries, and moans growing louder, echoing off the walls of the cave.

My roar mixed with her cries, her back arching into me as she pulled me deeper within her. Her face glowed with the orgasm, a soft smile touching her lips before my own pressed once more to them.

We lay there, wrapped in each other's arms, waiting to see how far we could remain connected before the sun chased us to sleep. We were deep enough within the mountains that we didn't need to open the earth. We could just sleep here, wrapped around each other with no way of telling where one ended and one began.

I breathed in her scent, cursing myself for having allowed this to happen. For not being the man, she deserved and for not keeping her safe from the danger that followed me. Because at that moment, feeling her drift to sleep in my arms, I knew that I was never going to be able to let her go. She was my mate. There was no denying it anymore.

Now we only have to finalize the bond, so long as she will have me.

I didn't want to think about what would happen if she didn't choose to complete the bond. I stroked her hair, marveling at its shine even in the dark of the cave.

Chapter 9

Chapter Nine

Lillian

I curled into Tristan, soaking in his scent with a content sigh. The sun was setting, though it hadn't yet fully disappeared, giving me a few minutes to enjoy this moment.

Once it set, we would be back on the move. Dodging my brother and his rogue army, our destination set for the Carpathian village that Tristan came from. I listened to him breathe, wondering how many more days I would have left to sleep in his arms, knowing that once we reached the village, we would have to go our separate ways.

He was an unmated male. And though the thought of him going out and finding his true mate turned my stomach, I wanted nothing more for him than to have that happiness. I was beginning to understand why Cymarthian women waited for their intended mate to find them. It was becoming clear to me as I looked up into his sleeping face that he had raised the bar far too high for my mate to meet. Knowing that someday I would see him again, but with another in my place. Another who would be able to look at him the way I did now, and do so for the rest of her life, while I could only watch from a distance.

Why do I want to keep you so close? I thought to myself, my brow wrinkling as I looked up at him.

I brushed a lock of his chestnut hair from his forehead, my fingers grazing down the side of his face then followed the line

of his jaw to his lips. The lips that had tasted like nutmeg and cinnamon. It was like tasting becherovka. As if he had only just been drinking it before we arrived in the ceremonial caverns. I bit my lip at the memory of the taste, my hand pulling away from his face.

My gaze moved from him to the stone walls surrounding us, gently rising from his warm embrace, finding my torn bag where I had placed it before the sun rose over the horizon. I found a new dress within, sighing at the sight of the scraps left of the dress I had been wearing last night. Mere ribbons after the fighting with the rogues. I could only hope that the rogues left us alone from here on out, at least for the sake of my remaining clothes.

Once I had dressed, I walked deeper into the cave, running my hand along the walls, and reminiscing about the ceremonies I had attended within this mountain as a young child. I had watched the vows exchanged between mates, though too young to truly understand the significance of it or to remember their words.

I had also watched the birth of other children, my mother being the midwife. She believed that I should witness the miracle of birth. Her hope was for me to one day take over for her as the village's midwife.

I moved to the next chamber, the very one where many of the children had been born. Children who no longer existed. A tear slipped down my cheek, looking around the familiar

cavern, dark now, though signs of the torches which once lit the room still remained.

“Lillian,” Tristan breathed behind me, a hint of worry in his voice. I’m sure he had been startled to wake without me there. I looked back over my shoulder at him, seeing the remnants of panic along his brow. I looked back to the room, feeling bad for having worried about him.

“I’m sorry,” I answered before I could stop myself, surprising us both. I hadn’t shown him much respect the entire time of our travel. Been little more than a brat towards him, yet now, I barely wanted to act out. Barely. A small part of me still wouldn’t roll over completely for him.

I smiled, leaning against his chest as his arms wrapped around me. Soaking up any touch from him while I could.

“My mother attended every birth in this room for three centuries as the village midwife,” I told him, “I attended maybe four, though that was within my first five years of life, so we had very fertile females here.”

Tristan nodded, looking into the room with me. “What happened here?”

A lump rose in my throat. I knew the question would come up, though I had hoped it wouldn’t. I swallowed back down the lump, letting out a deep breath before allowing myself to relive the memories of how I ended up where he found me.

“They came at dusk. Somehow, they managed to hide their scent and the sound of their movements. No one knew they

were there.” I began, turning to look up into his eyes, needing the strength I found there to continue on. “Vanators had never reached our village before. We didn’t have any precautions in place for the attack. They began slaughtering everyone in the village as they rose from the earth. Men, women, and children. There was no discrimination they killed everyone they saw.

“My father was one of the first that rose that evening, taking the brunt of the attack, but he was a strong male. He fought back, killing the Vanator who had invaded our home, commanding my mother to take me and run. So, she did. She ran as fast as possible till she found that small den we stayed in. She hid me there, making me promise to stay and keep quiet till she came back. But she didn’t come back.”

More tears escaped my eyes, flashes of the bloody scene I had witnessed as my mother ran with me. No matter how fast she moved, she wasn’t fast enough to hide the chaos that surrounded us. Narrowly avoiding attacks as she rushed past the hunters. Witnessing my friends and their family’s last breaths. The sound of their screams came to the forefront of my mind. Memories I had thought were long gone. Though deep down, I knew they still haunted my dreams.

“The parents I now call mom and dad found me three nights later when I finally left the den wondering around in shock. I was starving, so I caught a rabbit and was drinking its blood. I didn’t know that animal blood was bad for me.

It was lucky that they found me when they did. That they knew what I was and what I needed.” A weak smile pulled at

my lips at the memory of my dad coaxing me to him, holding out a blanket even though he knew I didn't feel the cold. It was only for comfort, and it was exactly what I needed.

Tristan pinched my chin softly, keeping our gaze locked. "I'm sorry I had to take you from them."

I shook my head, "I'm not. Not anymore."

I could tell he meant it. See the regret ripping at me from all that I knew reflected back at me in his eyes.

And I meant it as well. I still wasn't certain why I no longer resented him. Let alone why I trusted him so wholeheartedly. I was uncertain as to why I was so drawn to him or why I refused to think about being apart from him. I could only hope that I would understand eventually. That some light would be shed on why my feelings had so rapidly changed for this man who had been a stranger to me only a few nights ago. A stranger who had attacked me and my family, yet now guarded my life with his own.

"We need to get moving," He sighed, brushing a soft kiss across my forehead. "We can't risk the rogues finding us again."

I nodded, allowing him to guide me back to the main chamber, gathering our things and setting off into the night. Stopping just at the entrance, both of us listened for any sign of life beyond the cave.

The night was quiet. No sign of the rogues or my brother as far as either of us could tell, but still, we refused to let our

guard down. So long as the sun was gone, the rogues could appear and our battle for survival would continue once more. It made for a stressful traveling mood, though our new morning routine helped to lessen that stress before sleep.

At sunrise, after relieving the welled-up stress of staying on guard all night, we returned to the earth, wrapped in each other's arms until the next sunset.

The pattern we had developed did little in helping me understand why I felt so comfortable with him. It did nothing to explain why I craved his touch when only days ago I wanted nothing more than to rip him limb from limb. And most of all, it did nothing to help me with the knowledge that he would be leaving me in that village and returning to his search for his fated mate.

I looked over at Tristan, feeling my heart breaking over and over again. That longing never quite went away, no matter how much my logical side tried to remind me of its impossibilities.

I wish I was yours.

Chapter 10

Chapter Ten

Tristan

I rose before Lillian for once, opening the earth and watching her slowly wake under the light of the stars. The moon was now disappearing, it would be in the new moon phase when we finally arrived at the village, making it more easy to creep through the shadows for both of us, and the rogues.

It had been several nights since they attacked us, and though my guard was still up, I was much more relaxed than the previous nights.

Lillian let out a small sigh, drawing my eyes to her lips. Lips that tasted of all the best things in life, all the sinful joys that I couldn't quite get enough of.

She was my mate. There was no doubt about it now, and there was no way I was going to let her go, no matter how selfish it might be.

I pushed away the thoughts of the Vanators, reaching down and brushing a strand of her golden hair from her face, marveling at how perfect she truly was.

Who would have thought I would be blessed with such a strong woman as my mate? I thought, smiling as her brow wrinkled, the hair I had moved tickling her face.

I wanted nothing more at that moment than to lay with her all night. To hold her and show her just how special she truly

is. But we didn't have time for that.

Even if we weren't running from the rogues, one of whom is her brother whom I had no doubt would still be coming for her, I couldn't completely push away the thought of the Vanators. Despite the agreement between their leaders and the King, the two who hunted me wanted my head above all else. I had to get Lillian to the safety of the village or else they might just take her head with mine.

She began to stir, her hand running down my chest with a mind of its own, making my muscles tighten and leaving a lump in my throat. My entire body instantly became aware of hers, demanding I claim of what was mine, a reminder of how she tasted on my tongue.

I looked up into the night sky, smiling at the final rays of the sun behind the mountain. Maybe we had at least a little time still before we had to continue on. I shifted my body, settling her head gently on the ground while my arms supported me over her.

Slowly, her eyes fluttered open, a smile gracing her pouted lips, still slightly swollen from the morning we spent before sleep.

She raised her hand up, running it over my brow, twirling a strand of my hazelnut hair. I watched her lips pucker out, lifting her head to kiss my lips, but I had other plans for my mouth. Plans that I knew she would enjoy.

I bowed my head over her, avoiding her lips, her small whimper telling me she was disappointed, but not for long as it

was replaced by a sigh when my teeth grazed her neck. I moved lower, kissing her neck down to her collarbone, my teeth occasionally grazing her skin, teasing her as I moved lower, my hands cupping her breasts.

My tongue circled her stiffened nipple, moving from one to the other, her sighs growing into moans as her hands tangled into my hair, attempting to bring me back to her lips.

“Shh,” I told her, pinching her right nipple between my thumb and finger, drawing a gasp of pain and pleasure from her pouting lips. My knee wedged between her thighs, encouraging her to open for me, growling as her knees fell apart and the scent of her heat reached me.

I rubbed my leg into her, pleased to find her wet, her eyes filled with anticipation of what I was going to give her. I leaned back over her, taking her left nipple between my teeth as my thumb rubbed the right, her hips rocking against my leg. Her way of telling me where she really wanted me, where she burned for me.

Releasing her rosy bud, my lips trailed lower along her abdomen, my hands holding her hips down in place as she attempted to buck against me.

She let out a whine, fists closing into my hair. I could feel her frustration. I had never taken it this slow with her before. We had always been racing against the sun, getting what we needed before our strength was taken, but now, we only grew stronger with each fading ray.

“Tristan,” she whimpered, trying once more to rock her hips up, my teeth grazing her hip bone between kisses.

“Mmm,” I grunted, biting down on her thigh before licking the wound. I hadn’t broken the skin, yet. There was another part of her I wanted to taste first. A place that my tongue had yet to explore these past few nights, though other parts of me had.

I moved down between her legs, taking each of her thighs in my hands and pushing them further apart, marveling at her and licking my lips in anticipation of tasting her. I never felt as thirsty as I did, her glittering folds calling to me to drink its nectar.

I turned my head away, biting into the soft skin of her thighs, her cries telling me it had been unexpected. As much as I wanted to taste that sweet arousal, I wanted to drive her mad first.

My finger grazed her opening, spreading her excitement up to her clit, swirling the swelling bud of pleasure around as I took another bite into her flesh, kissing away the pain as I moved closer to the apex of her thighs.

She let out a cry mixed with a moan, one hand still in my hair while the other buried into the dirt beside her. My thumb replaced my finger at her clit, my mouth finally reaching the sweet scent of her, my tongue greedily lapping at the rewards of my teasing, her hips again bucking, pressing herself closer to my lips.

My hands moved up to her hips, once more holding her still as I feasted on her, drinking every drop as she squirmed and cried for more. My tongue darted in and out of her before sweeping up and sucking in her clit then returning to devour more of her.

“Please, Tristan, please,” She cried out just as a waterfall flooded from her, coating my mouth and soaking the dirt below her. I smiled at the mud, wiping my mouth with my fingers and licking them clean as I moved over her, my dick hard, throbbing for release.

I pressed the head of my dick up to her soaking folds, rubbing it slowly, her gasps were music to my ears, still sensitive and recovering from her orgasm. Slowly, I pushed myself inside her, her arms wrapping around my neck, nails digging into my back as I filled her completely, pushing myself as far as I could go.

Lillian’s legs wrapped around me, her head falling back into the dirt as she arched her body into me. My hips moved, pulling myself back before slamming back into her, her muscles contracting around me, pulling me back into her.

“Tristan,” she cried out once more, her eyes closing as I thrust into her again, my hand moving between us to tease her clit.

Her body was shaking, her muscles contracting around me as I began to move faster and harder with the feeling of myself coming closer with each thrust. My abdomen tightened, a final hard thrust sending me over the edge as I filled her with my

seed. My lips finally collided with hers, keeping us connected, and coming apart together.

We stayed there a moment longer. Silence filled the space between us as we caught our breath, staring into each other's eyes. I decided that I would tell her she was my mate when we reached the safety of the village. When we could complete our mating bond once and for all with our vows and the witnesses of our people.

I wondered what she would think when she found out we were mates. If she would accept me as she accepted me now, or end up rejecting me, believing that I had kept her in the dark for too long.

“We need to get moving,” I sighed, kissing her forehead, and rising, finding my clothes where I had left them that morning, dressing quickly with my back to her.

I could hear her do the same, could sense her every movement as she pulled on one of the few dresses she brought with us from her family's home. Turning my head, I dared a peak at her, my eyes moving with the skirt of her dress as it fell over her body, hiding her flesh from view.

I decided then that when we completed our bond I was going to keep her unclothed for a month and only leave the house for food as needed.

“Come on,” I called out, turning fully and holding my hand out to her with a smile. “We better get moving before we lose too much time. The sooner we get to the village the better.”

I watched her face drop slightly, tilting my head as I wondered what had upset her, but her smile returned, taking my hand and pulling me as she took the lead herself.

“Why are you always so slow?” She teased, throwing her bag over her shoulder.

I shook my head, hiding my amusement from her, and marveled to myself once again at my luck. Even with the Vanators hunting me, I couldn't get over how wonderful my mate from the fates truly was. She was the light to my dark, and I wasn't ever going to let her go, even if I had to kill to do so.

Chapter 11

Chapter Eleven

Lillian

I could smell him. Truthfully, I had been sensing him for days now. A hint of pine and winter just under the smell of rot. It was faint nonetheless; I could only catch it because I felt his presence more than anything.

Anton was following us. Keeping just enough distance to go unnoticed by Tristan.

I considered telling him. Warning him that we were still being followed, but some part of me still held on to the loyalty of blood. A loyalty that I could never fully break, no matter how unhealthy it might be.

Even as Tristan took claim of my body this evening, I still couldn't bring myself to betray my brother.

He wasn't my brother, not really, not anymore. Yet my instincts to protect him could not understand that. Looking at him, sensing him, smelling past the rot, and the decaying scent of the rogue he had become, he was every bit the brother I remembered. At least that was what my mind was believing.

I looked up at Tristan from the corner of my eye, wondering what he would think if he knew that I was hiding this from him. Would he hate me?

My gut clenched at that thought, the other side of my mind screaming for me to tell him. Begging me to beg for his forgiveness for not telling him sooner.

“We only have about two more nights and we’ll be in the village,” Tristan said, pulling me out of my thoughts.

I smiled at him, shaking my head trying to get my brother off my mind and skipping up to Tristan’s side. “That close huh? I’m sure you are excited to get this unscheduled journey over with.” I teased, though my heart hurt, my underlining comment left unsaid. You can get back to your life and find your true mate now.

He smiled at me, giving a shrug. “It was a bit out of my way, but I’m glad I did it.”

I smiled back at him. That little comment alone brightened my night, my steps becoming lighter as I bumped into his side playfully with my shoulder.

We were still a couple of hours away from sunrise, but I wanted to stop for the day. I wanted to keep this light feeling between us. Bottle it and tuck it away to bring it out as a memory in the future when I would no longer be in this forest walking with Tristan.

Most of all, I didn’t want to get to the village just yet.

Tristan looked back at me, puzzled by my sudden stop.

“Let’s rest,” I answered his silent question. “You said we are two nights away, that won’t change much if we stop here and enjoy the rest of the night.”

Tristan frowned, looking in the direction we had been walking, then back in the direction we had just come from before his gaze landed on me.

“Lillian, it’s dangerous. The rogues aren’t the only thing we need to worry about here.”

I looked around, smelt the air, and listened to the sounds around us. Nothing. Not even the faint scent of my brother I had caught before. It was only us and the few wildlife creatures that roamed the night.

“I think we will be safe,” I insisted, stepping up to him and placing my hand on his chest.

“Please?”

We stared into each other’s eyes, my hand remaining on his chest, each waiting for the other to give in. In the end, it was him. He let out a sigh and shook his head as he looked around.

“Let’s find somewhere to set up for the day.”

We quickly found a place with soft dirt and a clearing in the trees, giving a beautiful view of the stars overhead. Tristan dragged a fallen tree over for us to lean against as we sat on the ground looking up, counting the stars.

“Look!” I cried out, pointing into the sky. “It’s a shooting star, make a wish!” I squeezed my eyes shut, making my wish, and ignoring Tristan as he chuckled at me.

When I opened my eyes, I stuck out my tongue at him, making him laugh more. “What did you wish for Lillian?”

Shaking my head, I looked back up at the stars. “I can’t tell you. It won’t come true if I do.”

Then again, I thought. It won’t come true if I don’t.

I wished for him to stay with me in the village. Never leave my side, but that was a selfish wish. I knew it wouldn't come true even if I told him. If anything, it would serve only to push him away, reminding him that I wasn't the mate the fates promised to him.

I scooted closer to him, laying my head on his shoulder. Even if I couldn't have his forever, I wanted to at least have his right now. My hand wove around his arm, turning to look up at him and finding his deep brown eyes looking back at me with a fire burning red hot at their center.

Neither of us spoke, each of us leaning in closer to the other, our breath mingling between us before he made the move to connect our lips and steal my breath right from my lungs. My arms moved up to his neck, pulling myself into his lap, my legs sliding to each of his sides, straddling him there like a freshly broken stallion.

I could feel every inch of him, hardening with his desire beneath the fabric of his pants. A slight breeze blew across my exposed skin, the skirt of my dress now ruffled around my hips, Tristan's hands teasing along the line of my underwear.

A gasp escaped my lips, breaking our kiss as his fingers found the front of my panties, grazing along the wet fabric that separated our skin. I rocked my hips, rubbing myself against his hand, the deep growl in his throat making me wetter than I would have thought possible.

He was wild, untamed, and exciting. Everything I could possibly have wanted in a mate.

I paused, my breathing heavy as I looked into his eyes, that fire of desire burning brighter than ever. But he wasn't my mate. That word sent daggers to my heart. The reason my wish would never come true.

I leaned deeper into his waiting kiss, needing to feel more of him to chase away the ache of knowing this was all temporary. That this was all coming to an end quicker than it had started.

His hands worked my dress up, pulling the fabric over my head between kisses, his hands cupping the swell of my breasts. His fingers pinched and teased at my nipples, drawing gasps and moans from me, muffled by his mouth against mine, his tongue sweeping the sounds away.

My hips rocked once more, rubbing against the swell of his pants, cursing the fabrics that remained between us. I needed more. I needed to feel all of him to truly chase away reality.

"Tristan," I whimpered, his answering growl telling me he knew exactly what it was that I needed.

His hand wrapped around my back, lifting me and then laying me flat on the ground, the stars sparkling and dancing behind him as he leaned over me, reaching down and shimmying out of his pants.

My fingers worked swiftly, unbuttoning his shirt and running down the hardened muscles of his chest. His body was a work of art fit to grace the halls of any palace, I moaned in awe with each ridge and dip my fingers found.

I could feel the tip of him teasing me at my entrance, my hips once more rocking to meet him, begging him to enter and put me out of my misery.

He didn't leave me begging for long, seeming to sense my deep need for this, his lips again claiming mine and muffling the gasping moan with the sudden thrust inside me. My hands gripped his shoulder, and my legs wrapped around his hip, widening their gap to take more of him within me.

My hips rocked in the rhythm he set, my fingers dragging lines from his shoulders to his chest.

“More,” I moaned, my head falling back against the ground. “Please, God, Tristan. More!” I knew my words made little sense. My mind flooded with the ecstasy of his body within mine. A feeling I never wanted to forget.

Mine. A small voice whispered in the back of my head. A feral voice that sounded so similar to my own, yet different all at once. Mine.

The voice repeated the word over and over, my teeth itching to take claim of him on a level that only the Cymarthians could understand. The same claim I had seen made within the chambers of the ceremonial cave. I wanted to mark him inside and out. Ruin him for his future mate as he ruined me for mine.

His thrusts deepened, quickened to a pace I could barely keep up with, losing my mind to the pain and pleasure. My hands dug at his back, looking for any tether I could find to ground me, my mind and body ascending from the earth.

I hadn't noticed my movements. Hadn't realized my head had lifted from the ground. Not until his blood filled my mouth, the sharp, blissful pain of his teeth breaking my skin following, did I finally feel where I belonged.

Waves of pleasure rushed through me, joining with his climax, neither of us releasing the other, acting on pure instincts alone.

I released him with the last of the waves, my head falling back to the dirt below, sighing as his teeth released me. We stared into each other's eyes, sharing in the pure intimacy of what we have done. What we have been doing every day since our first attack.

Neither of us spoke, my body curling into his as he rolled off of me, his arm cradling my head from the ground. We stayed there, just like that. Naked and unaware of the cold winter air around us, not moving until the first rays of the sun drove us beneath the earth.

I wish with all my heart that this man could be mine forever.

I drifted to sleep with that final thought in mind. A wish that would take a miracle to make come true.

Chapter 12

Chapter Twelve

Tristan

Stopping had taken us back more than a few hours. Especially when we hadn't gotten started again a few hours after sunset, too wrapped in one another's arms. It would take us at least another day's rest before we entered the village now, but as much as I desired to get her to safety, I couldn't say no to the call of her body.

We made our way back along the path toward the village, talking along the way. I enjoyed hearing more about her childhood. The happy memories she had shared with her human family.

As she told me about her sister and her sister's children, I scanned our surroundings. I was careful not to draw her attention to my actions, wanting to keep her relaxed so long as there was no danger.

I didn't trust the rogues to stay away much longer. My gut told me they would make a move again soon.

There were no denying facts. They wanted Lillian, and I would be damned if they would get to her. Not on my watch, it would have to be over my dead body.

The music drew my attention to the wind. The sounds reached Lillian's ears as well, her eyes brightening as her head turned in the direction it came from.

A small village, just a short distance from our path, was lit brightly in the darkest of the dark. Bright enough for us not to miss it past the trees and hills that sat between us. The music carried to us on the night breeze, festive, lively in the way that said it was a large affair.

“What day is it?” Lillian asked, sniffing the air as the scent of vendor food joined with the sound in the wind.

“Tuesday,” I replied, reminding her of the day we had parted from her family home.

Lillian’s eyes lit up even brighter than before, an excited grin breaking across her face as she turned to look up into my eyes.

“It’s Mardi Gras! My family would always celebrate! Tristan, can we please go? We have to go.”

I wanted to tell her no. We had already lost enough time in our travel, turning our two nights left into three nights at least, but I couldn’t. The look in her eyes told me that this wasn’t a request. It was a demand. A demand that I didn’t have the heart to refuse.

When we reached the village, it was loud. Louder than I had anticipated. I scowled at the noise, wincing at the bass of the band and the squeals of children running through the crowd.

Everyone was in masks and brightly colored costumes. Vendors lined the street with carts that were offering food, jewelry, and more colorful masks.

Lillian gravitated to them, smiling at a young girl offering out a white mask with leopard spots and blue beaded fringe lining the bottom like tiny icicles. The design and color were as if they had been designed just for Lillian, and it would seem the girl agreed.

Lillian pulled out a purse from her bag, offering the young lady the cost of the mask to which she refused, giving Lillian the mask as a gift.

“You are the only one I’ve seen today who can pull off this mask. It is yours.”

I watched as Lillian attempted again to pay for the mask before giving up and thanking the girl, turning back to me with her new accessory in place. Though it hid half of her face, somehow it did well to enhance her features, the green of her eyes sparkling around the white of the mask as the tiny blue beads danced along her olive skin.

“How do I look?” she asked, smiling brightly up at me.

I tilted my head, smirking as she waited for my answer. I watched her eyes dance, challenging me to say whatever it was she thought I would say. It was entertaining, leaving her in this suspense. So, I turned and looked away, taking in the sights around us, hiding my smile when I heard her scoff.

I followed her into the crowd, keeping close to her as she shimmied her hips to the music. A few of the village men turned their heads and watched, then quickly looked away when they met my eyes, daring them to come near her.

She was my own ray of light, the closest I will ever come to walking in the light of day. And her light shone bright enough that even the humans around us could see her true beauty.

My eyes moved from the humans watching her, scanning the area for any sign of rogues. A piercing scream took my attention, turning my head to see what it was, only to find a woman being thrown playfully over a man's shoulder, spinning around in a drunken dance.

Lillian paid no mind to the commotion, her eyes lighting up as she spotted a parade in the distance. She turned back to me, pointing to the decorative floats, bouncing on the balls of her feet like a child in a toy store who was told they had no limit.

“Tristan,” she cheered. “Come on! Let's go! Hurry!”

She began to push her way through the crowd, laughing back at me as I struggled to maneuver my larger body around as she did, bumping into people left and right. A few drunken men turned to swing at me, missing and falling face-first into the street as the crowd around them erupted into laughter.

The spirits were high and the drinks were free, bringing the spirits even higher with each cup the people consumed. Children ran wild, zipping in and out of the crowd and under the feet of the drunken adults. Each child was masked just as the adults were, though theirs seemed darker, making them look more like demons and monsters than the beautiful masks of the adults.

It was their night of sin, and the children it seemed were taking it to mean being hellions, disregarding any rules or

manners they no doubt had been taught. The sight made me smile then, though it disappeared when Lillian looked back at me, not wanting her to know I was beginning to enjoy myself.

My gaze moved along the crowd once more. A suspicious feeling ran up my spine. As if we were being watched, stalked like prey. Yet still, I saw nothing but masked humans dancing and drinking. Smelt nothing but the vendor's food and the scent of humans, their blood slightly calling to me.

I had to turn that sense off. It had been too long since we last fed, and from what I could tell, none of these humans were donators. If I didn't watch myself, I could give into the feral needs of a rogue.

I looked over at Lillian as she paused and greeted a vendor walking the crowd with a tray of smoked meat, taking one as if she could actually enjoy the human food. She was the only thing keeping me from going feral, I realized. The small tether of the bond was already strong enough for me to recognize the strength she gave me to keep in control of my instincts. I wondered just how strong it would be when she accepted me, and we shared our vows to seal our bond for eternity.

"Tristan!" She called back to me, holding up the smoked meat. "Try it! It's delicious!"

She walked back to me, holding out the meat on a stick, smiling as I took it, eyeing the food carefully.

Her laughter lit up the air around me, poking me in the stomach playfully. "It's not poisoned, I promise. I haven't tried to kill you in days, Tristan."

I smiled, taking a large bite out of the smoked meat, its flavor exploding over my tongue. It made me think of the way she tasted, a devilish smile taking over my lips.

“It’s not as delicious as you, Lillian,” I purred to her, a blush overtaking her cheeks. I leaned in closer to her ear, my lips brushing against her lobe. “That mask really does suit you, little leopard. It’s no wonder all these people can’t take their eyes off of you.”

Her eyes widened, her face turning another shade of red before turning away from me with a laugh. I thought she would run off into the crowd from me again, only she didn’t. Instead, she took my hand and began pulling me once more in the direction of the parade.

A low growl sounded in my ear, making me pause for a moment and look around. Still, my senses showed nothing but humans around us. Was it only in my head?

Lillian looked back up at me, turning her head left and right as I surveyed our surroundings.

She gave me a puzzled look, tilting her head to the side and pulling on my hand once more.

“Come on,” she prodded. “I want to see the parade.”

Chapter 13

Chapter Thirteen

Lillian

The music of the street bands drummed through the streets. Masked humans dance and cheer to one another as they celebrated together, surrounding us while I led Tristan deeper into the crowds to get a better look at the parade ahead.

I couldn't help the smile growing on my face. This was just what we needed. Life! I swung my hips to the sway of the music, my hands rising above my head as we made our way through the crowd, enjoying the lightness of the mood as it intoxicated me.

We had run so much this past week. Avoiding rogues, worrying over every sound and noise that the nocturnal creatures of the mountains made. It had taken so much out of me, but here, with these humans and the bright vibrations, nearly corporeal in the air around us, I felt like myself.

The self that had grown up celebrating this day with distant family whom all traveled to the mountains to see my parents, sister, and me. I had only ever participated in this part of the tradition in the privacy of my family's home, telling the family goodbye just before sunrise Wednesday morning as they left to attend mass.

I joined the cheers when we reached the edge of the crowd, pointing out the dancers along floats in the parade.

“I’ve never been to a parade before,” I sighed, resting my head against Tristan’s chest, “Have you?”

He nodded, though his eyes were looking everywhere, barely paying attention to the dancers or the floats. “I have been to Carnevale in Venice.”

I gaped at him, awestruck at both his experience of one of the world’s biggest celebrations, and the way he made the claim with such a straight face. As if it wasn’t amazing that he has seen more of the world than most humans, let alone any Cymarthian woman.

A human child ran up to us before I could say anything, startling Tristan for a moment, instinctively pulling me behind him and confusing the child as she looked up at him.

“A flower for the pretty lady?” She held up a yellow rose that had pink edges on each petal, a small basket with a florist’s business name held in the crook of her elbow. I smiled at the little girl, nudging Tristan as I pushed back past him.

“Thank you. How much?” I asked, accepting the rose and reaching for my bag where I had stashed the money my father had slipped me.

“Just in case,” my father had said.

The little girl shook her head, “Free today only for the festival.” She recited with a well-practiced curtsy, “Please consider Jose’s for all your floral needs.” Then she skipped away, in search of others to present with a rose and give her speech to.

I laughed, sniffing the beautiful flower and looking back up at Tristan, his eyes sparkling at me.

“The flower suits you,” He smiled, brushing a strand of my hair from my face.

I could feel heat begin to rise up my neck, attempting to hide my face in the single blossom. Another lively song picked up behind him, and people began to dance there, creating a dance floor on the open streets. It gave me the perfect escape to hide the way he made my heart race, though I was certain he already knew.

Laughing, I pushed past him, rushing into the crowd of dancers, allowing any man or woman to spin me as I passed them by. No one saw me as a stranger. There were no strangers today. It was so freeing. The excitement in the air was intoxicating.

I twirled in a circle, losing sight of Tristan for a moment as I laughed and cheered with those around me. Clapping my hands and stomping my feet to the beat of the song, one I knew thanks to Dasha who insisted on sharing her taste for music with the entire family.

Slowly, the world around me began to fade. The volume of the sound around me slowly dropped with each twirl I made. Like a bubble had been formed around me, isolating me from the world. It had been so subtle, that once I realized it was happening, I was already alone.

No, I thought, sensing another presence. Not alone.

I looked over my shoulder, gasping, though no sound came out. Anton stood facing me, looking just as he had the day he left home in search of his mate, smiling at me.

“Hello, Lillian,” he purred, reaching his hand out to twirl a stray blonde curl. “You look just like Mother. Did you know that?”

I shook my head, unable to speak as I watched him drop my strand of hair and walk around me, looking up and down my body.

“Yes, but you have our father’s shade of skin. Slightly darker than normal for a Cymarthian. You know, they used to say it was because father pushed the boundaries with the sunrise. Some would say that he tanned his skin with each morning as he stayed past sunrise, the sun darkening his skin as he crawled into his den.”

My head snapped to look back at my brother, now on my other side. I didn’t have memories of my father doing that. Couldn’t recall anyone mentioning it in my childhood either.

“Do you do the same, Lillian?” Anton asked, his smile telling me. He knew that I did.

He told me he knew where I was. Where I had grown up. Said that he had been watching me all these years. He must have watched me push myself past sunrise. Watched as Dasha dragged me to the barn to help me into the earth. But why was he bringing this up? Why comment on any of this at all?

“We are family, Lillian. There are things that only family can know and understand about one another. Like your desire to see the sun, even as it breaks your strength down. I was the same way, just as our father was,” he let out a sigh, taking my hands in his, his eyes locking with mine. “You need to come with me, Lillian. It’s the only place in this world where you will truly belong.”

Finally, I found my voice, looking back into those jade-green eyes through brimming tears. “You’re a rogue, Anton. How did that happen? How can I belong with you? I won’t be safe.”

He shook his head, his hands tightening around my own. “That’s not true, Lillian. I found a way for the rogues to be controlled. That’s why they follow me. We have the strength to protect you. To treat you as a princess, or a queen.”

His head shot up, turning to look behind him as if someone were there. I looked over his shoulder but found no one there, heard not a sound.

“If you come with me, you will find your mate. He is a rogue, but if he finds you, he can turn into something different. Neither Cymarthian nor rogue. And Lillian,” he took a deep breath, drawing out the tension in what he had to tell me. “The sun will have no effect on him or you as his mate. You will be the first-ever daywalkers.”

My eyes widened at his claim, shaking my head. “How can you possibly know that? Anton that is impossible. All of it is.

You can't know who my mate is, and there is no way that any of us can step foot in the day."

Anton smiled, lifting my chin with his finger so he could look me in the eyes.

"There are a great many things you learn when you become a rogue. Senses you didn't know you had become enhanced. Think back, Lillian. Have I ever lied to you?"

I tried to answer, but the vision of him disappeared. The crowd around me returned, and the music was suddenly too loud. I covered my ears, dropping down to my knees.

Had Anton ever lied to me? I couldn't recall a time in my past that he had. Though I was so young when he left. How could I know if he ever had it or not?

I could feel myself hyperventilating, the people around me brushing against me as panic began to set in.

Then, he was there. The man that my mind had cried out to without realizing it. His arms wrapped around me protectively, carrying me away from the crowded village streets and back to the quiet, open air of the forest. Yet my mind was still clouded with questions. Did Anton really know who my mate was? Was he a rogue like my brother? Was everything he told me the truth?

I looked up at Tristan through the veil of my hair, confusion clouding my mind and tears filling my eyes.

I don't want anyone but you. Why would the fates be so cruel to make me fall in love with you, and you not be my

mate?

The tears in my eyes began to burn at the thought. My mind pleaded to the fates to have mercy on my heart, as I wanted nothing more than to remain in Tristan's arms and forget I had ever heard the term fated mate or the knowledge that came with it.

Chapter 14

Chapter Fourteen

Tristan

I couldn't figure out what had happened. One minute she was fine, dancing and smiling, then I lost sight of her for one minute, the longest minute of my life, and when I found her again, her shine was gone. I could have sworn I had heard her cry out to me, though no humans had reacted to the sound. Any joy or laughter she had held before that lost moment was gone, replaced with a look of devastation.

Looking around, I began to wonder if this had been too much for her. I hadn't wanted to stop here myself. The crowds made me uneasy, but she had insisted. Maybe she had overstimulated herself by being around so many humans. We hadn't fed since leaving her parents. Maybe she became overwhelmed with the scent of their blood. It weighed on me, fighting the pull to satisfy my hunger with each human who casually bumped past me.

I gathered her in my arms, being careful not to draw attention to us, and rushed us back to the woods. Back to the solitude of nature where we belonged.

When I stopped, finding a cave hidden amongst fallen rocks, I sat her down, brushing the hair from her face to better see into her eyes.

“What's wrong? Did something happen back there?”

Something flashed in her eyes, too fast for me to understand what she was feeling. Too fast for me to know if what she said was a lie or the truth, though my gut told me she was lying.

“No, nothing. I just missed my family is all.” She turned away, and walked into the cave, taking the bag that I had been holding for her.

I followed her inside, my brow pulling together as I watched her sit on a rock, her head resting on the wall behind her with her eyes closed.

Just what happened in that village?

I looked back out of the cave, considering returning to the village and finding the person who took away the shine within her so quickly. Wanting to rip it back out of them and present it to her like a knight presenting spoils of war to his Queen.

“Tristan?” She called from behind me. Her voice was soft and sad, making my heart ache for her.

“What is it, Lillian?” I asked again, walking back into the cave, and kneeling in front of her. I searched her eyes for my answer, finding them clouded with tears.

Her hand reached out, stroking my cheek as a tear escaped her. I reached up, wiping it with the pad of my thumb, my hand moving behind her head to pull her to me.

We sat there in silence, her forehead pressed against mine, tears dripping into her lap. I wrapped my other arm around her waist, pulling her into my lap to hold her close. I couldn't understand what had happened to her. I wished she would just

tell me what was wrong, but until she was ready to answer me all I could do was hold her. Let her take comfort from me.

Her fingers gripped my shirt, burying her face into the crook of my neck as her shoulders shook. I held her there, just letting her fall apart in my arms until she was ready to talk. Ready to tell me what was upsetting her.

“It’s okay, Lillian,” I whispered to her, rubbing her back in gentle circles. “I’m here. Whatever it is. I’m here for you.”

She let out a shuttered breath, lifting her head from my shoulder and looking into my eyes. Her cheeks were stained with tears, stragglers still remaining along her lower lid. “Hold me.”

Just those two words. That was all I needed to hear. My arms tightened around her waist, lifting her from the ground and cradling her in my arms, marching deeper into the cave like a newlywed couple crossing their threshold.

I gently kissed her head, then moved to her cheeks, tasting the salt of her tears as I kissed away their trace. I worked my way to her lips, her breath catching in her throat as her arms wrapped around my neck possessively.

With that kiss, I made up my mind. I couldn’t keep it from her any longer. She deserved to know what she was to me. The truth behind my words. She needed to know that she was my mate and that I intended to claim her, but first, she needed to know what it meant to be my mate and all the things that came with it.

I wasn't even certain what all she knew about our kind and fated mates. How it worked. The vows. The ceremony with our people there to witness. I had planned to wait till we reached the village to tell her. Give her a chance to think it over within the safe boundaries of our home, but something told me she needed to hear it now.

My hope, my wish, was for this news to bring back her light.

"Lillian," I whispered, stroking her head softly.

"No," She answered back, kissing me greedily. "No talking. Just hold me, Tristan. Please."

I would tell her. But not tonight. Tonight, I would do as she wished and hold her till whatever troubles plagued her were washed away.

Every night I had brought her to the mercy of pleasure. But not tonight. Tonight, she needed more than that. She needed my love, and I was going to show her just how far my love for her went.

My hands remained gentle, softly pulling the straps of her dress down her body, letting it pool around her waist as her exposed breasts pressed against my chest. She gasped, arching back with an unspoken command to taste more of her flesh. And so, I did. Slowly kissing her neck, down to her chest, my arms keeping her suspended in the air while carefully bending my knees to the ground in worship of her body.

Her sighs and moans told me that this was what she felt she needed at this moment. Her hands prodded me to do more, maneuvering her body around me so her legs wrapped around my waist, the dress slipping to the ground during her aerobic act. Her feet never touched the ground.

My hands gripped her bottom, helping to position her over myself, my stiffened member pressing against the constraints of my pants. Her hands were already moving to undo them, allowing me to keep her balanced in my lap as her hands reached inside the tight fabric and freed me.

I groaned at her touch. Her soft hands gripping me, moving up and down, her fingers running over my head and spreading the drops of moisture along my shaft.

“Fuck,” I groaned as her grip tightened, her other hand woven in my hair and pulling my mouth back to hers.

She leaned into me, forcing me onto my back on the ground, her legs straddling me on either side. She looked amazing looking down at me, positioning herself over me, the heat of her center pressed against me.

I couldn't figure out how the tables had turned. How she had suddenly taken control of this situation, rubbing along my cock with soft moans as she worked the buttons of my shirt loose.

My hands found their way to her hips, but I did not take back control, not yet. She needed this control. I could see it now.

Ever since I came into her life, she had lost control. Lost control of her choice of where to live. Lost control of who she was with. And though she didn't know it yet, she lost control of whom she would spend the rest of her life with.

So, I let her have control of this.

Her hands disappeared beneath the skirt of her dress, still pooling around her waist, flowering around us like a curtain. I let out a moan, her fingers wrapping around me once again, holding me positioned at her core. My hands gripped around her hips tighter, growling as I pushed back the desire to take back the control, her body slipping around me with a breathtaking sigh from her lips.

She looked down at me with hooded eyes, lifting herself back up and then down. Taking in more and more of me with each movement. She started with a slow pace, picking up the speed of her movement as her hands pressed against my chest, keeping her balanced.

She allowed me more control, letting my hands move her to the pace we both desired, occasionally holding her in place as I pumped up into her quickly, her moans delving into cries.

And when she was ready to give me complete control, she fell over my chest, pulling me to roll with her to her back, her golden hair spread along the floor of the cave like a sunrise coming over the mountain peaks.

“Tristan,” she moaned, lifting her hips, and wrapping her legs around me as my thrusts quickened, ready to spill myself inside her.

I could feel her walls contracting, her head falling back on a cry as she squeezed me from within, pulling my orgasm with hers. We both looked into each other's eyes, my hand stroking a few stray strands sticking to her swollen lips.

There, in her eyes was the light I had thought she had lost, shining back at me with the intensity of the sun. But unlike the sun, this light only strengthened me. Strengthened me more than I could ever think possible.

Chapter 15

Chapter Fifteen

Lillian

Resting my head on Tristan's chest, the earth bubbled around us like a den of a fox, I thought about my brother and everything he had told me. Wondering if maybe I truly did belong with him at his side. I let out a quiet groan, careful not to disturb him, squeezing my eyes closed.

I felt the pull of my blood to him. That familiar bond calling me to him, but each time I considered going to him I stopped.

I looked up at Tristan's sleeping face. He looked so peaceful when he was sleeping.

Nothing like the well-trained and rather irritating male that I have come to know and adore.

Why was I so attached to him? Why did I feel such a loyalty to him that it combated the loyalty I felt towards my own flesh and blood? Was it really only because of all the times he has saved me?

I have saved him on just as many occasions since we began our journey. Did he feel this same sense of loyalty to me as I did to him?

"I'm here for you." That was what he had told me, but did he really mean it? Could he really mean it?

I absentmindedly traced the lines of his muscles along his chest, trying my best to understand what it was that I felt between us.

It had only grown stronger since we slept together. I had hoped doing so would help get it out of my system, but it was the opposite and the feeling only grew with each time we slept together. With each kiss, each touch, I only felt that much closer to him, dreading the moment we would reach the village.

As much as I longed to meet the King of legend, I knew that reaching the destination still meant I would have to say goodbye to Tristan. Unmated males weren't allowed in the village. It was for everyone's safety. A male had to find his mate or face the choice of becoming a feral rogue or death.

I felt Tristan stir, his eyes opening as he looked up at me. Sleep quickly gave way to a frown, his hand running up my back.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, worry crossing his eyes.

I couldn't tell him the truth. That my brother found me in the village and told me that I belonged with him. That I had a place at his side. Yes, many of the things he had said to me were insane, but if they were true then didn't I deserve to give it a try? It wasn't like I would be doing much in the village. Not after Tristan leaves me there.

I shook my head, doing my best to smile at him. “Nothing is wrong. I was just waiting for you to wake up.”

I opened the earth from around us, climbing out into the dusk. The sun had not yet fully set, but my body did not react as much as it had once done. I felt stronger than before in everything.

Tristan followed me out, his face still hardened into a frown as he watched me collect my things from our den.

“The sun isn’t fully set yet,” he commented, nodding to the small rays of sun coming over the mountains.

“I can walk, can’t you? And with the sun not fully down, it means no rogues will be following us.”

It sounded logical, and as I watched him consider it, I knew he couldn’t disagree. With a nod, he covered our resting place, the earth appearing undisturbed once again as if we had never been there.

As we walked, my mind continued to wonder about the one question my brother had left me with. The one that haunted me the most.

Was my mate really with him? Or was this a lie to gain my trust?

I looked at Tristan, suddenly feeling guilty for the nights we had spent together. The way he made me feel. How I didn’t want anything to do with this so-called mate if it wasn’t Tristan.

I felt selfish. If my mate was truly a rogue, then I was the only one to help him, but I didn’t want him. I didn’t want to be his savior. I didn’t want to bring him to the light. However much I didn’t want it, I knew that there was no fighting the fates.

What even was a mate if not someone whom you wanted to be with? I was young when I first heard of mates. The day that

Anton had left to find his mate and when he discovered that she must have been born human. The way everyone had spoken of it, it was a feeling that could not be matched. A magnetizing feeling of not being able to be apart, no matter how much you tried to fight against it.

With Tristan, I felt something like that, but he wasn't my mate. The truth of that was in the way he pushed to get us to the village as quickly as possible. I was a duty to him. A package that needed to be delivered safely to its rightful owner after he had played with it a bit.

What if my rightful mate was this rogue that Anton spoke of?

I was so lost in my thoughts, I didn't notice Tristan stopping or turning to look at me, running into his chest and nearly falling over if not for him catching me.

"What is wrong with you?" he demanded, searching my face for an answer.

There was concern in his eyes, a deep concern that I only ever saw in my parents when I was late to go under the earth. I blinked up at him, curious as to just how deeply he felt for me.

"I'm fine," I answered, stepping back from his arms. "I was just enjoying the scenery. This part of the mountain is beautiful."

I turned to look around, anywhere and everywhere but at him.

I wanted to be selfish and believe that he cared about me. That the look in his eyes was proof that he would stay with me in the village despite me not being his mate. However, I knew better. That wasn't how the Cymarthians worked. Even if I didn't understand mates completely, I knew that a male without his true mate would never truly be happy. He would never meet his full potential. Never gain the strength needed to protect his family and people. And he could never have children. We could never have children, because of all things, un-fated mates were not compatible genetically.

As much as I wanted it to be so, I just couldn't do that to him.

I started walking again in the direction he had been leading, looking back with a smile on my face.

"You are coming?" I called back to him when I saw he hadn't moved, his gaze following me, that concern still present.

I laughed, shaking my head, and looking forward again, doing my best to put on a happy face. "You know, I have no idea where I'm going. I might get us lost here?"

Finally, he moved, running up to my side and guiding me in the direction of the village he had been telling me about. The village he had grown up in.

We walked in silence for a while. The sound of our steps was all that could be heard in the dark forest. Until Tristan cleared his throat, drawing my attention.

“Tell me, Lillian,” he said, looking ahead of us as we walked, his hand brushing against mine. “What do you know about mates?”

My breath caught, wondering if he had somehow heard the message my brother had sent me in the village. Or maybe I had said something in my sleep. My mind raced, my eyes widened, and my throat was dry.

I swallowed hard, looking away from him. “Not much. Why do you ask?”

“Well, let’s start with what you do know,” We both looked at each other, a new kind of concern in his eyes. He was nervous, and for the life of me, I couldn’t understand why.

I chuckled, looking away. “If this is some kind of sex talk, I think we are a little late for that don’t you think?” Butterflies erupted in my belly at the thought of our shared nights. I did my best to keep my face from betraying my thoughts, my desire to stop walking there and then repeat exactly what we had done every night and morning for the past week. Slowly, I looked back at Tristan, heat in his eyes as if he was fighting the same desire. He closed his eyes, taking a deep breath before opening them again.

“What exactly do you know, Lillian? What do you remember from your time with your Cymarthian family?”

I stopped walking, tilting my head as I thought it over, still unsure of where this was going.

“Why are we talking about this now?”

Chapter 16

Chapter Sixteen

Tristan

I looked into Lillian's eyes, swallowing the lump that has formed in my throat as I stalled for time. She watched me with a firm look, like the one she had given me in her parents' home.

I longed to see her smile again, hoping that the firm look wouldn't become permanent once I told her she was my mate.

"It's something that every Cymarthian needs to know," I answered, watching her bottom lip stick out and her brow crease.

She turned her back on me, continuing to walk in silence. I followed behind her, holding my breath as I waited for her to answer me. Wondering if I was going to have to explain everything about Mates to her.

"I know that without finding a fated mate, males will face a dark existence," She finally answered, watching me from the corner of her eyes. "If they can't find their mate in the mountain, then, they leave and search the earth for her. Sometimes it takes them centuries to find her amongst the humans."

She looked at me, tilting her head slightly. "I know that since my brother is a rogue, his mate must have rejected him. Or died and he didn't follow her in death."

"Do you know how to tell who your mate is?" I asked, certain she wouldn't have the answer.

A shake of her head confirmed it, her eyes finally returning to my face, waiting for me to explain it to her.

“There is a pull,” I began, looking for the right words to explain this to her. “It’s magnetic, a force of nature that cannot be denied.”

“Then how does a female manage to reject her mate?” She cut in, asking the golden question.

“Only humans tend to be able to reject their mate,” I answered her. “It’s rare for a Cymarthian woman to do so. Not when she knows the fate the male will face if she rejects him, and the gift that it is if she accepts him.”

“Is this your way of telling me that my mate is possibly in this village? Or maybe out in the world searching the human world for a mate that isn’t out there but here in this mountain?” she asked, a hitch in her voice that pulled at the strings of my heart.

“No, your mate is not in the village,” I answered before thinking, biting my tongue as she looked at me skeptically. Those green eyes of hers were clearer than they had been the night before, glaring up at me as if I had offended her.

“Okay, how do you know that? How could you possibly know who my mate is? No one can know that until I find him, and we have that magnetic feeling you mentioned.” She ranted, throwing her hands in the air as if fed up with the subject. The reaction took me completely off guard, watching her curiously as we continued down the path.

“I just don’t get it,” She went on, giving me no time to respond in her raving as if voicing a dialogue, she had been repeating in her head already. “There is no possible way for anyone to know who someone else’s mate will be, where they are, or anything else. I can barely understand how the mates can recognize one another. Now you tell me, oh no Lillian, I know without a doubt that your mate is not in this village that I’m dragging you to, but I’m going to make sure you know what a mate is just in case he shows up for you.” She deepened her voice, mocking the way I must sound in her ears, a smirk pulling at my lips as I listened to her.

“Lillian, that isn’t what I was trying to do,” I spoke up when she stopped to catch her breath, glaring up at me as I offered my hand to help her over a log in the path.

“Well, then why are we talking about any of this? It’s frustrating.” She turned away from me again, a pout on her lip while she looked away. “Has a male ever rejected his mate? Or take a mate who wasn’t his fated mate?”

I was taken aback by the question, my brow pulling together even more. If she confused me anymore, I was certain I wouldn’t ever get to the point I was trying to make with her.

“Why would a male ever reject his mate? She is his destiny. Without her he will never be complete,” my frown deepened, watching her shoulders stiffen, putting a bit more distance between us. Had I not been paying attention I wouldn’t have noticed it, but I noticed everything about her. Had since the day I found her. “Are you worried that you will be rejected?”

I watched her shrug, moving further away from me with a sidestep. I couldn't believe it. Even if she wasn't my mate, she was a beautiful woman. No male in their right mind would reject her as their mate.

She was strong and full of life. She saw the beauty in everything around her, in every moment. Despite the way the night had ended, I had truly enjoyed myself for the first time ever in the village, celebrating amongst the crowds and loud music. And that was all because of her. She brought that energy from me.

In all my years of searching for her and believing her to be out there in the world, I had never once stopped and enjoyed myself amongst the humans. Never allowing myself to do so.

I stopped walking, reaching across the short distance she had created, and grabbed her wrist, pulling her into my arms. I stood there for a moment, just holding her, stroking her hair, and resting my chin on her head.

She didn't need to hear that I am her mate. Not yet. As much as I wanted to tell her, it just wasn't the time. I still wasn't even certain she understood what it meant to be a mate, if she believed her mate would reject her.

When I finally moved, it wasn't to continue our journey toward the village. Instead, it was to find us a nice tree stump to sit on, pulling Lillian into my lap and lifting her chin so she would look me in the eyes. She was pulling away from me, and I just couldn't seem to figure out why.

“I can guarantee you, with my life on the line, that your mate will never reject you, Lillian,” I promised her, touching my head to hers.

She let out a shudder, her arms forming small, hair-raising, goosebumps at our closeness, the reaction bringing a smile to my face. Despite having spent every morning and evening in each other’s arms, the things she has done to me, and the things I have done to her, her reaction to our body’s being this close never changed.

Deep inside, her soul knew mine, knew what we were to one another, and craved my touch just as much as I craved hers.

“A male cannot reject his mate. Not without facing the consequences that come with a life of no mate. And if he does take another, the bond would not be pure enough for him to hang on to the sanity that all males only barely have a grasp on.” I told her, going over everything I had been taught when I was only thirteen, preparing to find my mate. “A male will be drawn to his mate above all others. He will not deviate from his attention in finding her. He physically cannot do it. Just as a moth cannot resist the light, a male cannot resist seeking out and finding his other half to complete him.”

I watched as her brow drew together, seeming to begin to understand what it meant to be mates. And possibly, I hoped, that connection that we held for one another.

“When a male finds his mate, he will bring her back to his Carpathian village,” I continued, her eyes rising to my own,

widening. “There, they will finalize their mating with the exchanging of vows and witnesses of family and friends to their bond. His vows are to always protect her above all else and if he ever fails, he is to follow her in death.”

“I remember hearing those vows when I was a little girl,” She whispered, nodding. “Her vows were to forsake her past and to follow him to the future.”

I nodded, smiling at the twinkle returning to her eyes. “Yes, though most Cymarthian women don’t need to give those vows. Those are typically for the humans who must sacrifice their past for their mate and eternal life at his side.”

I rested my chin once more on her head as she moved, leaning into my chest. I couldn’t see her face, but I could almost feel her thoughts moving about in her mind. Some mystery now uncovering before her eyes. I could almost make out what she was thinking, until she popped up out of my lap, a fresh smile gracing her lips.

The light was back, brighter than ever as she pulled at my hands, urging me to my feet.

“Well, let’s get a move on then,” She insisted, smiling as if she now knew something that I didn’t. “Don’t want to keep the rest of my life waiting much longer, do we?”

I laughed, once again confused but happy to have my sunshine back. As I looked back down at her, smiling up at me, I realized just how much she reminded me of a picture I had once seen of a sunny summer’s day. Her eyes were green as a meadow, cheeks, tinted slightly with a red blush that

blended into her olive complexion, almost unseen. And finally, her hair, blonde, golden as the sun that shown down over the summery scene of the picture.

I had compared her to the light of day in my mind before, but looking at her now, I had never been so certain that she was the sun incarnate. My hand moved with a mind of its own, brushing a loose strand behind her ear.

“I have another question for you,” I whispered, her head tilting in a confusion that matched my own earlier.

“Yes?”

“Why were you up so close to sunrise the morning before we left your parent’s home?”

“Weren’t you worried about the sun stealing your strength and potentially killing you?”

She opened her mouth, then paused and closed it, tilting her head back and forth in thought. I waited patiently, my hand resting on her cheek where my thumb traced circles near the corner of her mouth. My mind wandered to the way she tasted, feeling the urge to taste her once more.

Finally, she opened her lips again, seeming to have the answer to my question. “For as long as I can remember, I’ve always wanted to see the sunrise. It’s like it calls to me. There have been many mornings that my family would find me, stranded above the ground, with no strength to so much as open a fissure in the earth to crawl into. As frightening as it was to be that weak, and as much as I had been scolded for

doing it, it was always my favorite thing to do. I loved watching the sun, feeling the burn of its touch on my skin.” Her fingers grazed over her arm, seeming to remember the feel of the burns on her skin there.

“I have very few memories of my biological family,” She continued on, smiling sadly, yet the twinkle still remained in her eyes as she spoke. “One thing I do remember though is my father was the same way. He would stay up until the last minute, my mother often having to leave the fissure open for him to fall into as the sun rose over the horizon. She always feared he would die doing it, but she also would claim that my father was the bastard son of the sun and moon, doomed to live in the shadows of night, longing to walk in the light of the day.” She smiled at the memory, letting out a chuckle. “I guess it’s an inherited trait.”

She touched my hand, still resting on her cheek, her smile growing as her fingers intertwined with mine. “Does that answer your question?”

I smiled back, holding her hand in mine as I allowed my hand to move from her cheek, pulling her once more into my arms. “Yes, it makes complete sense to me now.”

She tilted her head again, another question sitting on the tip of her tongue.

“You,” I quickly answered, “remind me of the sun. Powerful, beautiful, and so full of life that you share it with those around you.”

I kissed her before she could say anything else, a soft moan drawing from her lips. When I drew back, I pulled her back to the path we had abandoned before, continuing on our way toward the village.

Tomorrow night, I decided. Tomorrow night I will tell her that she is my mate.

Chapter 17

Chapter Seventeen

Lillian

He is my mate.

I should have seen it before, it makes complete sense now. That magnetizing pull. My desire to never be without him. The way I fell apart inside at the thought of him being with another woman, despite only wanting the best for him. It was all because he is my mate, and I am his.

I smiled up at him, walking along the path toward our home that we would share, my mind going a million miles, jumping from the joy of realizing what I had and rage at the realization that Anton had indeed lied to me.

My mate wasn't a rogue in his army. I wasn't destined to do the impossible and bring a rogue back from the decaying creature he had become. No. My mate was a strong and faithful Cymarthian man with soulful brown eyes.

Tristan.

There was a skip to my steps now. My hand itched to reach out and hold his as we walked along the path. I was living on cloud nine and nothing could bring me back down.

He was mine. Mine for all eternity.

The biggest realization I had in all this was that our bond was complete, yet he didn't seem to realize it. He believed that we had to exchange the vows as if they were some magic spell, but back when he was telling me what he knew about

mates, it triggered memories of what my mother and father had once told me before Anton had left.

“The vows are a formality really. What is important is that you are beneath the earth and exchange blood, binding you as one in the sacred lands of our birth. For a human, it will change her body while bonding her life to her mates. For me, as a natural-born Cymarthian, it simply will bond you to him. So be careful exchanging blood with just anyone. You could accidentally bond yourself for life before really knowing them.”

I chuckled to myself at the memory, realizing I did just as my mother had warned me not to do, but I didn't care. He was everything I could have asked for and more. A part of me wondered how he would react when he realizes the bond was completed already. That same part of me also wondered how he didn't realize it. He should have felt stronger, faster, more powerful. Yet, he clearly didn't seem to have a clue about what we had done in that cave all those days ago.

He should hear my thoughts at the very least, I thought to myself, watching his face closely for a sign of hearing my inner voice.

He didn't react, though he seemed to sense me watching him, turning to face me with a questioning look. I returned the look with a smile, bumping into his side playfully.

“How much further do we have to go?” I asked with a grin, my question confusing him once again.

“What has gotten into you? You didn’t seem so keen on getting to the village yesterday.”

“All this new information has me excited about getting to the village,” I answered cheerfully.

“I’m sure my mate will be glad to return home for me and begin our new lives together.”

I watched him balk for a moment, fighting some internal battle. Perhaps he did know that we were mated for life now and he was fighting to find the right moment to tell me.

The Idea only furthered my desire to tease him, skipping ahead a few steps and turning to walk backward so I could watch his face more closely. “What do you think my mate will be like?”

He frowned, “You are going to fall, Lillian.” I chuckled at his warning, jumping backward over a rock that should have tripped me.

“I am quite adept at walking this way, Tristan. I did this every evening during my midnight strolls with my parents. Now, can you answer my question.”

I smiled at his deepened frown, watching my every step closely. I had no doubt he would dive for me should I stumble, preventing me from so much as touching the ground.

“He’ll be a real prick,” he answered, causing me to at last stumble in my surprise. His arms were around my waist in record time, proving his speed to have increased from our bond.

Why doesn't he notice it?

"Notice what?" he asked, my eyes widening. Did he even realize I hadn't spoken those words out loud?

"Notice that you have lint on your shoulder," I answered, picking the imaginary dust from his shoulder with a smile. "You could be right though. My mate is probably a real prick.

Maybe I should reject him and live my life without a prick in it."

It was hard not to laugh, especially when his face contorted to one of horror at my mention of rejecting him. My hand moved up to his cheek, my thumb gently rubbing away the worry lines around his eyes as I laughed.

"Then again, I found that I am rather fond of pricks."

His hand flexed at my lower back, turning his head to the left and right, listening to the forest around us. Slowly he lifted me back up, clearing his throat and gesturing to me to continue on our way.

"Come on, just a little further and we will make camp. We lost some time in that human town, so we should arrive at the village by tomorrow morning."

I nodded, following him once again, his hand wrapped mine, though he didn't seem to realize it. I smiled at the link to him, holding his hand tighter as we made our way to the clearing, he had marked for our rest.

There was no cave today, only the clear night sky over us, the signs of breaking dawn in the east. The light chased away

the stars as the brightest star of the sky took over the sky.

Tristan prepared us a place to open the earth, taking meticulous care with the preparations. I realized quickly that he was nervous. The nerves buzzed along the bond, so clear that I wondered how I had not noticed it before.

He had something planned. Something he wanted to be special for me, pulling a smile at my lips as I knew exactly what he wanted.

I approached him, touching his shoulder gently to steal his attention from his nervous preparations. The moment he turned to me, my arms wrapped around his neck, pulling him to me, our lips brushing. The kiss was gentle at first, reassuring, but soon it deepened, pulling us over the edge as his hands gripped my hips, pulling me against him.

Yet another sign of our bond that I had missed. That magnetism wasn't just about being near one another. The bond drove us to mate. Over and over again. It was a wonder there weren't more Cymarthian's in this world with the way the bond drove us into each other's arms. Though it would seem Mother Nature found a balance to keep our population in check. After all, it would be hard to hide an immortal race from the world if they reproduced like rabbits.

Tristan's hands gripped the sides of my dress, raising the skirt higher up my thighs until his fingers met skin, an approving growl rumbling in his chest when he found I had omitted my underwear. I gasped between our lips when he reached around, grabbing my ass to lift me up against him. My

legs instantly wrapped around his waist, my arms tightening in a circle around his neck.

“Lillian,” He groaned, the hardened length of him rubbing against my bare clit, his pants the only barrier between us now.

I moaned into his mouth, deepening our kiss as I rocked my hips against him, chasing that sweet friction against his cock. His hands massaged my ass, assisting in the rocking motion of my hips, his length growing harder beneath his jeans.

“I need you,” I gasped, pulling our lips apart. I wasn’t certain if he could hear that desperate urgency in my voice as much as I did, but I didn’t care. I reached my right hand down between us, undoing his pants to set him free, the head of his cock hitting me just below my belly button, his hips rocking slightly with a mind of their own.

I climbed up his torso, helping to adjust him below me before slowly sinking onto him, moaning as I stretched and molded around him, my nails digging into the back of his neck.

His hands remained on my ass, lifting me up and then back down on him, his moans mixing with mine in my ear with each movement.

At some moment he had moved us to the tree line, my back hitting the rough bark. I threw my head back with a gasp, Tristan’s thrusts began to pick up speed as he used the tree for leverage, thrusting deeper inside me.

“Fuck,” I gasped, his hands rocking my ass faster against him, my clit hitting his pelvic bone sending sparks of pleasure through my body with each thrust. My hands wove their way up his neck, digging into his hair and crying out to the brightening sky.

I could feel the sun stealing my strength. Tristan’s thrusts seemed to struggle as his strength buckled, fighting the draining effects of the rising sun. Somehow the danger of the approaching sun added to the pleasure, my cries not matching the weakening state of my body.

“Tristan!” I screamed out, his arms wrapping around me as he moved back to the clearing, keeping me suspended in the air, our bodies molded together as one. I could feel myself coming apart, feeling as though I was flying, my eyes closed in the bliss of my orgasm.

It was the thump of our bodies landing on the ground that had me opening my eyes, realizing Tristan had fallen backward, opening the earth for us to fall into while my orgasm had stolen all reasoning from my mind.

I now straddled him, looking down at him with my hands resting on his chest and his brown eyes sparkling up at me, a mysterious smile spreading across his lips. He gripped my hips with both hands, holding me still before his hips began to piston into me, my head once more falling back as the air filled with my screams.

I was still not yet over my first orgasm as he began sending me back over the edge, his cock hitting that perfect sweet spot

inside me. I cursed and blessed his name in one breath, my nails digging deep into his chest. I could feel him swelling inside me, throbbing at his need for release.

“Don’t stop,” I demanded, tightening myself around him, my body pulling him deeper inside me, urging him to fill me as the bond drove us to animalistic desires.

He let out a roar as he filled me, his cock pulsing inside me with every drop of his essence. I finally allowed myself to collapse over him, my head nuzzling into the crook of his neck, drinking in his scent, both of us catching our breath as the earth closed around us, the shining light of dawn disappearing, casting us into the dark embrace of the mountain soil.

We lay there in the dark, holding onto one another without a word. His thumb traced along my shoulder blade, his hair curling around my finger as I twirled it around.

It wasn’t long before his breathing evened out, sleeping taking hold of him and calling my name. I pushed my sleep away for a moment longer, doing my best to look up at Tristan in the darkness of our rejuvenating bed, smiling as I made out the shape of his face, my finger moving to brush along his lips.

“I don’t reject you,” I promised him, certain he couldn’t hear me in his deep sleep. “I love you, Tristan.”

I kissed the line of his jaw, nuzzling back into the crook of his neck and finally allowing sleep to claim me. Dreams of our future came to my mind, a smile pulling at my lips, even as I slept.

Chapter 18

Chapter Eighteen

Tristan

This was it, our final night of travel.

We were less than a mile from the village. If we wanted to, we could easily make it there before sunrise, but there was something else I wanted to do before crossing the boundary line of the village. I didn't want to enter the village with my mate and have her unaware of what she meant to me. What we meant to each other.

I knew she was joking the night before, but the thought of her rejecting her mate. Rejecting me, was still unsettling. I needed her to know that I was her mate and that I would do everything in my power to make her happy if she only accepted me. We could walk into the village tomorrow night and straight into our mating ceremony if she agreed to it. I only needed to ask her first.

I spotted the perfect place to stop, turning to Lillian and nodding to it. "How about we stop for the night? We can go the final mile tomorrow, give us the entire night to introduce you to everyone and get to know the village."

She looked around the clearing, giving me a puzzled look. "Why not just get to the village tonight? What about the rogues?"

I lifted my head, sniffing the air and turning my ear to listen to the forest around us. I could smell the Cymarthians in the village. Certain that they must be aware of us just as I was of

them, but they didn't approach. It told me they felt no threats from us, putting me at ease that they must not sense any danger around the village.

"We haven't seen any rogues for days," I assured her. Holding out my hand for her to join me in the small clearing. A small mossy boulder looking comfortable enough to sit on. "I think we are safe. If we need backup, there is an army of mated Cymarthians just over the hill."

She took a moment, thinking over my words before taking my hands. Smiling as if she could read my mind.

I led her to the rock to sit on, kneeling on the ground before her. I couldn't help but laugh at the position I had placed us in. She perched on the small boulder like a queen on her throne while I knelt at her feet like a knight pledging fealty to her.

"What are you laughing at?" She scolded a laugh of her own ringing out with mine. She pushed my shoulder with her foot, losing my balance and falling into the dirt with a laugh.

"Just laughing at how regal you look. Too bad there is already a queen in the village. You would make an excellent ruler."

Lillian smirked, leaning forward, and tilting her head. "Have you met the King and Queen?"

"Once," I answered, leaning back on my elbows, picking at the baby grass that was peeking through the thawing ground.

"What are they like?"

I frowned. It wasn't exactly the conversation I wanted to have with her, but the look in her eye shone with such interest I couldn't help but answer her.

"They aren't exactly what I would have expected from ancient immortal rulers." I thought about my words, trying to find the best way to explain to her what I meant. "They are very friendly and laid-back beings. I'm fairly certain the King was responsible for a prank I fell for. Though I have no way of proving it aside from a wicked look he shared with his mate."

"What kind of prank?" she asked, her curiosity peaked at the mere mention of my falling for it.

I narrowed my eyes at her. "You seem a little too excited at the thought of my embarrassment. Lillian. Why is that?"

She shrugged, pretending innocence. "I have no idea what you mean! Tristan. It's simple curiosity, that's all."

She could do little to conceal the wicked smile on her lips. I chuckled and lay all the way back on the ground, looking up at the star-filled sky. There were still a few hours left till sunrise, giving us plenty of time to talk before retreating from the sun to the earth. I wondered if it would be together as it had been these past days, or if she would in fact reject me and sleep alone.

Could I sleep alone now? I wondered to myself, turning my head to look at my mate. Her eyes sparkled brighter than the stars she gazed at. A smile still turning the corners of her lips up. I couldn't quite tell what gave her that smile. Though the

more I thought about it, the broader it got. As did the pink of her cheeks I noticed.

Does she realize I'm watching her?

On cue, she turned and looked down at me. Her smile softened. I watched her slide from the boulder, laying on the ground with me to stare up at the sky. I listened to her point out the constellations she knew and talk about the ones she didn't know the location of. It was impressive what she did know. Explaining to me that her father had gotten her a telescope when she was a child. Used it to tutor her.

“Since I was up at night. He wanted to ensure that I could always find my way by looking at the stars. Mom, however, took care of my other lessons. I have a master's degree. Dasha managed to get the test for me to take at home during my high school days. And when the internet started, I was able to do online classes. I'm as educated as any human.”

She pushed out her chest a bit with the boast, proud of her education. It was certainly impressive. With how concealed our people were in the mountains, most females were only educated enough to read and write. Mostly they were focused on being available for their mate when they were discovered. For her to be a born female Cymarthian with this sort of knowledge and passion for education, was remarkable.

I found myself pushing out my chest in pride. This was my mate. I couldn't help but feel like the luckiest male in the entire world.

Now, how do I tell her she is mine?

I began to contemplate just how I could convince her of our bond. How could I tell her, so she doesn't reject me? Should I just come right out and say it? Or should I ease into the subject?

We had been discussing mates just the night before. It could be easy to change the subject back and finish our discussion on what she understood of mates.

"Tell me more about the village. What about your family?" Lillian asked, interrupting my thoughts.

I looked back at her. Surprised by her question, throwing me off track in planning out my discussion of mates. I looked back to the sky and sucking in a deep breath before answering.

"I only have a brother left. He and his mate are expecting a baby, soon. My parents passed together a few decades ago. They had lived a long time and decided it was time for them to move on from this place."

"I'm sorry," She sighed, her hand brushing against mine.

I shook my head, grabbing hold of her hand. "You shouldn't be. They chose to move on.

"It's not the same as the way you lost your parents." I looked at her. Her eyes misted over with unshed tears.

"It doesn't make it any easier." She whispered, squeezing my hand. "You can be sad that they are gone. Even if it's only with me."

We laid there silently for a while. Just staring into one another's eyes. I wasn't even certain how long we rested there.

Neither moving, save for blinking a few tears. It warmed my heart to know she was willing to be a safe place for me to spill my heart to. Encouraged me to believe that she would not reject me as her mate.

She was accepting me here and now without even knowing what we were to one another. This was a good sign that she was feeling our connection without truly understanding what it meant, but would she be willing to accept it once I told her?

I opened my mouth to finally tell her. As I started swallowing down the fear that had kept me silent, a sound stopped me from speaking. We both heard it. The distinct sound of rustling leaves. The sound of a foot crushing a twig.

There were multiple steps. Each moving fast from all directions and closing in around us. The stench of rotting flesh carried on the wind. I cursed myself for stopping us here. For not going ahead and taking her to the safety of the village. It was too late.

I just had to break the news to her before reaching the boundary. What the hell was I thinking? I should have prioritized her safety over my fear of her rejection. I didn't deserve to be her mate.

“Focus, Tristan!” She growled, both of us jumping to our feet. The rogues emerging from the shadows of the trees. Growls and maniacal laughter bubbled from the mob surrounding us.

Lillian looked in the direction of the village, then back to me. Her question was in her eyes before she even spoke the

words. “How far is the boundary? Can we make it?”

I shook my head. Watching the rogues closing in around us and blocking our way to the village.

“Not close enough.”

She let out a snarl at a rogue who stepped closer to her. Her hands morphing to claws, swiping in the air toward him and forcing him to take a step backwards. I grabbed her wrist pulling her against my back. Her back pressing against me as we had done before when we encountered the rogues.

“I shouldn’t have let my guard down,” I growled, tightening my grip on her wrist protectively.

“You couldn’t have known. There was no scent of them.” She assured me.

She was right. There had been no scent or sign of their presence. How could they have hidden that rotted scent that clung to them so potent? Even if there had only been one, I should have sensed him.

I didn’t have time to think more about it. The rogues all moving as one, charging at us. My body shifted, taking on the form of the large bear I favored just as Lillian took her leopard one. Her white fur blurred with speed as she fought against the rogues who aimed for her.

I tried to stay with her every move. I pushed my way back to her as I swung at every rogue who drove a wedge between us. Yet it wasn’t enough. They pushed me back, further away

from her. Their claws and teeth flashing in every direction. I couldn't understand how there could be so many.

Where are the other Cymarthians? I questioned, looking in the direction of the village. Hoping to see the charge of males to help us. They should sense the danger. The size of this army shouldn't be able to be hidden from so many fully mated males. They should have had scouts investigating at the very least, but nothing came. Nothing but more rogues.

I lost sight of Lillian, but I could sense her. She was still here, but she had stopped fighting.

She had taken back her original form, unharmed as far as I could tell. She was talking. No, she was arguing with someone. I could feel her irritation but could not make out her words. The rogues attacking me were keeping me distracted. I could not tell whom she was talking to or what she was talking about. Two rogues charged me at once, jumping on my back. Attempting to bite through the thick fur pelt of my bear form.

I didn't pay them any attention aside from bucking them off. I was confused by how detailed I could sense Lillian without seeing her. Even with the distractions of the rogue's attacks. I knew exactly where she was in the mob.

How can I feel her so strongly now?

Two more rogues rushed me, one aiming for my underbelly. Finally stealing the part of my attention that questioned how I could feel my mate so vividly without a complete bond. I had to guard my vitals so I could make it back to Lillian.

I let out a furious roar, hoping the sound would carry to the village and alert the other males there. Hoping that one of the males that would hear would be my brother or his best friend, or better yet, the King himself.

Chapter 19

Chapter Nineteen

Lillian

They came out of nowhere. I hadn't even smelt their rotting flesh till they had surrounded us. It was unnatural. They shouldn't be able to sneak up on a fully mated pair, yet they had.

I hadn't realized the gap they wedged between Tristan and me, not until it was too late. No matter how hard I swiped at the rogues who stood between me and my mate and more rogues just replaced them. This was what they wanted of course. All this time it had been all about getting to me. Taking me. But Anton had been wrong. My mate wasn't among his rogues.

I continued to fight, my paws a blur of movement as I swing at every rogue who approached me. Snarling warnings to those who tried to come behind me. I wasn't going to allow them to take me. I would sooner die than go with them willingly and abandon my mate.

Tristan fought just as hard, a spark of panic running through our bond as he realized we had been separated. Shifting back, pressing my spine against a tree, I sent back to him reassuring vibrations. Not wanting to startle him with our connection too much. Just enough for him to know I was safe.

"You need to come with me," Anton whispered from behind me. The familiar mixture of rot and home scent filled my nose.

I looked over my shoulder at him, my brows pulling together in annoyance. “No, I don’t belong with you Anton.”

“You think you belong up there in that village? Wasting away waiting for a mate who will never come for you?” He shot back. Stepping from the dark shadows of the trees as the rogues parting like the red sea for him.

We glared at one another. Our matching eyes refused to yield to the other. I could feel a push of his dominance against me. Pushing for me to submit to him, but I wasn’t submissive. I had my own dominant push. Tristan had compared me to a queen just moments earlier. He was right.

I pushed my power out at Anton, watching his eyes widen in surprise. Clearly, he hadn’t expected me to resist, much less push back as strongly as I did now.

“Have you forgotten what I told you, Lillian?” He coaxed. Bending his finger to me, silently commanding me to come to his side. “You have a destiny that can only be fulfilled if you come with me.”

I shook my head, planting my feet on the ground. “No, You’re wrong, Anton. My mate isn’t one of your rogues. He isn’t with you.” I pointed in the direction of the bear that was still fighting against the swarms of rogues attacking him and keeping him distracted from me. “He is my mate and I intend to stay with him.”

Anton’s face morphed before my eyes. Gone was the face of the brother I remembered. I barely recognized the creature in front of me, his face so cruel and filled with cruelty.

“Little Dove.” He said, his tone mocking the soft voice he had used with me before. The soft voice that had belonged to the brother whom I remembered so vividly. “You are confused. This isn’t an option for you.” He stepped closer, his aura growing darker with each step. “You have a destiny that will change our world for all our kind. Cymarthian and rogue alike. I will have you at my side whether you like it or not.”

We now stood nose to nose, the stench of him making me nauseous. There was nothing left of my brother inside this monster. I had been tricked by the mask he wore to lure me in.

A trap that I had fallen into and had no defense for. He knew exactly what it was he needed to do to draw me close enough to get what he wanted.

“Take her.” His voice was a whisper, ordering the rogues close enough to hear. Their clawed hands taking me before I had time to react.

How did they sneak up on me again?

I fought back, kicking and screaming as they dragged me into the forest. I called out to Tristan and heard his desperate roar as he realized I was being taken.

More rogues rushed in towards him, holding him back. They overwhelmed him with their numbers. They shouldn’t have been able to hold him back as they were. He was fully mated to me, even if he didn’t notice. He was stronger, faster, and more powerful than an unmated Cymarthian. That was all a rogue was, an unmated male. He should have been able to break through them and reach me.

These aren't normal rogues.

The thought filled me with dread, my mind racing through the facts. Sorting over the things I knew. They were faster than they should be. Stronger than a fully mated Cymarthian. They had powers that were only spoken of in stories. Disguising their scent, coming to me in my mind. Staying completely undetectable, helping them to ambush us.

But only when Anton is with them.

I looked toward my brother, following me and my captors. Erasing our trail as he went with a kick of his feet. What was it about my brother that gave these rogues such power? How did he have them so united under his control?

“Don't harm her.” He warned when one of the rogue's claws dug too deep into my skin. The scent of my blood made them growl hungrily. “We need her in one piece.” He paused, looking down at me with that cruel smirk firmly in place. “For now.”

I had stopped struggling, realizing there was no use in fighting. The sun was quickly approaching and the sounds of the rogues fighting with Tristan were fading. It was too late. I would only get myself hurt and Tristan killed if I continued to struggle against these claws.

The wild look in the rogue's eyes told me my brother's control over them only went so far. If more of my blood spilled, they would drain me. I needed to remain calm and calculating.

My brother claims to have watched me all these years, but he must not have watched me close enough. Because if he had, he would have known that my cooperation was not a good sign. Would have recognized the look in my eyes as the gears in my head began to turn, forming a plan to help me get out of this mess.

I watched our path closely. Marked each tree, every bush, and rock as I was sending the images down the bond to Tristan.

The fight with the rogues was over. I could sense the males from the village arriving, helping Tristan finally drive the rogue army back. I had been correct. Their hidden presence had something to do with my brother.

I spotted a cave ahead. Sending the vision of it to Tristan, not missing a single detail as the rogues guided me toward the mouth. The coloring of the rocks was unique for the mountains. The foliage and evergreen trees dying as if affected by the occupants of the cave.

There were hundreds of rogues around the entrance> Snapping and snarling as we approached, only quieting a bit when my brother took the lead. Raising his hand to them to step back.

“How are there so many of you?” I gasped, not meaning to speak my question aloud. Nor was I expecting an answer.

“I assembled them. They are all victims of the Vanators. Their villages and mates were killed before their eyes. Just like us, Little Dove.”

His tone was soft. My eyes drew to him as I asked my next question. Once more, not expecting an answer. Why would he? “What are you planning to do with so many?”

Anton turned to me then looked away once more with a shrug. “We plan to get revenge of course.”

Every rogue’s eyes remained glued to me as I passed. Not a single one so much as blinked as they watched me. We moved deeper into the darkness of the mountain. The crowds of rogues grew thicker as we went. I wondered if they could even remember what they were gathering for or remember the love they must have felt for their families before they changed. A few snapped their wicked grins toward me, pulling back with a single look from Anton. Drool dripping from their chins, their teeth stained brown, and the smell of rot was becoming unbearable. The entire cave reeked of death. The smell did not entirely come from the rogues.

I turned my gaze from the watching eyes. Regretting it within seconds of doing so. Countless humans, all of different ages, shapes, and sizes. I gasped in horror at the sight. Their bodies were drained of blood, left decaying in piles along the walls of the cave. Most of them seem to be women.

The blood on my face drained, my eyes locking with the emerald orbs glowing in the dark at me. Anton smiled. Reaching his hand up to my eyes, blocking my sight.

“Now, now. Don’t judge the mess. I promise, I properly dispose of my meals. It’s these other rogues that are the slobs here.”

His hand was freezing, shocking me at the mere touch. I shouldn't have been able to feel the cold. I had never felt the cold before. But his icy touch only added to the unnatural state of his being. Rogues shouldn't exist. Everything about them went against the nature of this world.

“Why are there so many females?” I asked, my voice shaking despite my best attempts to remain calm.

Rogues chuckled darkly around me. My eyes were still blocked by Anton's icy hand, preventing me to see the creatures stalking me. I could feel their eyes on me. Feel the way they circled like lions to a lamb. They didn't see me as a woman. I was prey, just as the humans whose bodies lined the cavern were.

“They were mates who did not make it,” Anton answered softly, the sound of the gentle brother coming through once more. The tone struck hope in my heart.

There is still a piece of him there, I gasped. My only hope is to reach him. If I reach through that part of him maybe there is a chance to save myself and him.

“They will be properly tended to soon.” He continued, taking my arm. He led me deeper into the cave, removing his hand from my eyes as the scent of rot lessened.

I found myself in a large cavern, crystals sparking in the stalactite that hung from the ceiling.

If not for the creatures that inhabited the cave, it would be a beautiful place to rest. This chamber alone is fit for a

Cymarthian King to reside.

Looking around, it seemed to be the home to a particular king. I looked at my brother, finally recognizing him for what he was. A rogue king.

There were no other rogues within this chamber. No other way in or out. The entrance was crowded by rogues who watched, daring not to enter the royal chambers.

Anton pointed to a bed, pelts of different creatures piled to add a soft cushion. It wasn't as though I needed it. My normal resting place was the soil of the ground, but he urged me forward nonetheless.

“Rest!” He ordered. “The others will not come beyond the threshold. The sun is rising. I'm sorry you can't see it from here. Come nightfall, we will begin the main event.”

I looked up at him, tilting my head in confusion. “What main event?”

The cruel smile returned, his eyes darkening to a green that was nearly black. “To see who will win the right to call you, their mate.”

He didn't give me a chance to respond, disappearing back through the crowd of rogues. I watched closely, waiting for one of the rogues to step past the makeshift door. Preparing myself to fight off whichever brave soul would dare to come near me. None did. Just as Anton had assured, they did not come even a toe over the line.

I slumped into the bed, the rising sun draining me of my strength. I fought against sleep, thinking over a plan of action to get me out of there. Sending what I had seen to Tristan to help him find me if I couldn't get out of there on my own.

With the last remaining bit of my consciousness, I made my plan of escape.

Some part of my brother was still there. I just needed him to see the reason. I couldn't mate with another male. Not since the bond between Tristan and myself was completed. My only hope was that Anton didn't want to see me die because that is what would happen if another male forced a bond on me while Tristan was still alive.

Tristan don't give up on me. Darkness claimed me with that final thought. Uncertain if I sent that message through the bond, or simply thought it to myself.

Chapter 20

Chapter Twenty

Tristan

I roared at the top of my lungs. Feeling Lillian going further and further away from me, as flashes of what she was seeing came flooding into my mind. At first, the flashes confused me. I couldn't understand how I was seeing what she saw. How I was feeling exactly what she was feeling. It was when my brother and the others finally arrived. Taking out many of the rogues who had me pinned down that I realized what it was. My mind finally connected the dots of what the visions meant.

Our bond was complete.

How is this possible? When did this happen?

I didn't know how. Didn't know when it happened. But I knew without a doubt that at some point in our journey here, we had completed our bond. I didn't really care about the how or when. This was a good thing. Her visions would help me track her and get her back sooner. I reassured myself of this, as a shadow cast over me, my eyes moving up to see what was coming now.

Andrea diving from the sky, shifting just before his feet hit the ground. As he started glaring down at me with a look of disapproval. The last time I had been near the village, I had the Vanator hunters on my ass. It was Andrea who had found me then too, and it had been him who told me to leave. Making me promise to never bring danger to their doorstep again. Yet

here I was, surrounded by an army of rogues just a mile from home. Danger just seemed to follow me wherever I went.

Two wolves and a large bobcat chased off the remainder of the rogues. A falcon swooping down and landing next to my brother, the earth shuddering under his feet. Both males now glared down at me as I shifted from my bear form, wincing at the bites and scratches of the rogues. Their venom coursing through my body. My arm hung limply to my side, my brother's eyes narrowing on the injury, yet he didn't move to help me.

I opened my lips to tell my brother what had happened. Explaining why I was here, what the rogues had taken from me, but a deep calm voice cut me off.

"I smell a female, but I don't see her!" The voice mused. I turned to the sound, searching the tree line for the owner of the voice. From the shadows where the rogues had run, he stepped out, covered in rotted blood. The others each bowed to him, showing their respect to the powerful Cymarthian. His power rolling off of him in droves. His eyes landed on me, tilting his head expectantly. "Well? Where is she?"

I growled deep in my throat, more flashes of Lillian's surroundings coming through. I closed my eyes, focusing on the sights she had focused on. Holding on to her emotions, marveling at her strength. She never stopped amazing me.

"They took her." I answered. "To a nearby cave."

"Who is she? Why didn't you bring her to the village?" Andrea growled, grabbing me by the shirt and ripping it.

I growled back, pressing my nose to his, a challenge in my eyes meant just for him. We quickly were pulled apart, Alexandru stepping between us with crossed arms. Just like when we were children. Always taking my brother's side, always pretending to be a middleman between us. I sneered at the male. My challenge now extended to him as well.

“Enough!” The powerful Cymarthian boomed, his voice still somehow remained calm. I turned to him, bowing my head respectfully for the King. “Who is she?”

I met his eyes, a crease between his brows the only sign of his concern, the rest of his face remaining calm and regal.

“My mate, Lillian!” I answered, watching my brother from the corner of my eye as the blood drained from his face.

I knew why. As much as we fought, he still loved me. And if the rogues took my mate, if they killed her, he knew that my fate would be dark.

“Her brother was among the rogues.” I continued, nodding in their direction. “He is leading them.”

“Bullshit.” one of the wolves, now shifted, growled. “Rogues don't have leaders.”

“They also don't hold up well against a fully bonded Cymarthian!” I growled back. “But as you can see, they weren't your normal rogues.”

The bobcat let out a snarl, shifting as he approached me. “What did they say?” He demanded. “Did they say what they planned to do with your mate?”

I shook my head, my fists closing and opening at my side. “Not exactly. As I said, Lillian’s brother is leading them. He claims to have been watching her for years. But a couple of the rogues made comments of taking her as their mate.”

He snarled again, turning to the King once more. “It’s just like the bastard who tried to take Theresa from me.”

The King nodded, looking towards the sky, the first rays of sunlight breaking over the peaks of the mountain. I watched in horror as he began walking back towards the village, turning his back on the direction that Lillian had been taken.

He looked back at me as if hearing my thoughts. “We need to prepare. Tell me everything you can see through your mate’s eyes. Leaving nothing out. Even the smallest details could be the difference between your mate’s life and death.”

I swallowed a lump in my throat. Uncertain of when it had formed, following the King towards the village. Allowing more of the visions from Lillian to flood into my mind.

Does she know she’s sending me all this? Or is this pure instinct acting on its own? I wondered, feeling her horror and disgust at what she witnessed inside the cave, as her brother forced her deeper inside the cave.

“Tristan!” Andrea nudged me, taking my attention from my mate and drawing a growl from my throat. “Why didn’t you bring her to the village if you knew the rogues were out there?”

I felt all their eyes on me now, each of them with the same question on their lips. It was a valid question. I knew the dangers of stopping. We were so close to home. If I had not insisted on stopping the rogues wouldn't have been able to reach us. She wouldn't now be their captive. She'd be in my arms.

"I thought we were safe," I growled low, turning away from my brother and the others, feeling their judgment heavy in the air. "I checked for them, there wasn't even so much as a scent of them. I had no idea that they were that close to us."

"That doesn't explain why you wouldn't bring your mate home when you were so close." I felt my blood boil, turning to my brother and growling. "I was going to tell her she was my mate! Let her have another night to decide if she wanted to be bound to me for the rest of her life."

"We have no room to judge him there." The King called back, interrupting my brother with his mouth hanging open on an unspoken word. "We didn't even know the rogues were there. Tristan had taken out half of them before we were aware ourselves." He looked over his shoulder at us, frowning, something clearly bothering him. "Whatever they used to cover their presence, it had disappeared once they took his mate."

That explained why they only arrived after Lillian had been taken. It didn't explain what had hidden their presence.

"How long had they been out there without me knowing?" I thought aloud, crossing the boundary into the village where six

females waited. Their faces searched each of ours, anxious for answers to what had happened.

Deidrea's eyes jumped between my brother and me, her red hair flying wildly around her face, a hand resting on her rounded belly.

"Tristan!" She sighed, choosing to speak to me over her mate. "What happened to you?"

"He lost his mate." My brother answered for me, pulling his mate into his arms. "You need to get to our cave. The sun will be here very soon."

I watched the fire burn in her eyes, her hand swatting at my brother in annoyance. "What do you mean he lost his mate? How are you going to tell me that and then usher me underground as if that is nothing?"

The other females gathered, their mates' jaws ticking in annoyance as their instincts told them to bring them to the safety of the earth with each ray of light that reached over the mountains.

"What does that mean? Did he lose his mate? Where is she?" The women asked their questions aimed at my brother, but it was the King who answered.

"Rogues kidnapped her. A large number of them, it would seem." He looked to his Queen and Alex's mate, nodding to them. "We will need to call for help from the Vanators."

The Queen looked at the younger female, as the female's hands moved to her hip and pulled out a cell phone. The

device looks completely out of place within the ancient mountain village. She typed out a message, and an immediate ding sounded signaling a reply had been given, looking back to the Queen with a nod.

“They will meet us at dusk, normal place.”

The Royal couple each nodded, turning to look at me with the others. “There is nothing more we can do. For now, just keep the bond open between you and Lillian. Let us know everything you see.”

Everyone began to disperse, leaving me with the Queen and King, uncertain of where I should go. My instincts roared at me to chase down the rogues that took my mate and bring her to safety even as the rising sun stole my strength. It took the remainder of my strength to keep myself from rushing back into the forest. To follow my mate’s scent, to follow the trail she had painted with her visions like breadcrumbs.

“Come, you can stay in the castle.” The Queen insisted, taking my arm, and pulling me towards the castle. Which was hidden behind the trees, built deep into the mountainside. “We will get her back. I promise you.”

I allowed her to guide me, hoping that she was right, all the while preparing myself for the worst. I swear my life to you, Lillian. I swear to protect you with my own, and should I fail to do so, I will forfeit my life and follow you in death.

I repeated the vow over and over, sending it down through the bond, hoping she would receive it.

I got back more images of the cave. A bed of animal pelts in the deepest chamber of the cave with only one way in and out. Beyond the doorway were the rogues, pacing like caged animals, staring at Lillian like a piece of meat. I held in the growl that rumbled through me at the sight, filing away each face I saw to memory. I would kill each and every one of them for even thinking of touching my mate.

My only relief was that they seemed to be unable to enter the room Lillian was being kept. Some unknown force was keeping them out. Lust filled their eyes as they watched her from a distance.

A new realization dawned on me as I watched the desire in their eyes. They wanted to mate her, but she was my mate. Our bond was complete, even if we hadn't known exactly when it happened. If they tried to mate her while I still walked this earth, it would destroy her. She wouldn't just die from it, her soul would be ripped from within her for breaking the bond we now shared, even if it was without her consent.

I won't give up on you, Lillian. I'll get you back. I won't let them do that to you.

My strength gave out and I fell into the bed in the chamber I had been led to, the world going black before my eyes.

I could almost make out Lillian's voice in my head. Her message was lost in my mind, yet I could feel her promising me something as well. My instincts once more took control. I'm coming for you, Lillian.

Chapter 21

Chapter Twenty-One

Lillian

The sun was gone. I could feel its absence even here in the cave, deep beneath the earth. I had forced myself awake before the fading sun was fully gone. Hoped that I could escape with the rogues sleeping, but they slept in front of the doorway, blocking me in with their corpse-like bodies.

Then my hopes turned to finding a weak point in the chamber walls. A hole that was just big enough for me to shift into a mouse and slip out of there, but the room was nearly airtight. It seemed as though it had been carefully designed this way. Ensuring that not even the tiniest of creatures could escape.

However, since I couldn't escape, I would at least hide. I did shift into a mouse, slipping between the pelts of the bedding, hoping that I would be too small for the rogues to sniff out. I could hear them stirring, their bodies beginning to move more and more with the vanishing sun. Their voices began to ring out in the air, as each one noticed my disappearance.

I could hear panicked snarls and frantic sniffing, but not a single step into the room. Anton said they wouldn't enter, and though I had my doubts, now I suspected that it was a matter of them being unable to.

How does he hold so much control?

First, he could cover their presence and enter my mind so vividly, now it would seem he had complete control over the

feral monsters. And yet, I had no explanation for any of this.

“Move out of my way,” Anton growled, the sound of shuffling feet coming after. I held my breath, not daring to move a single muscle. His footsteps came closer, the first steps to enter the room since the sunset.

I listened, his steps evenly paced, moving around the room, sniffing each area I had checked while looking for a way out. I held my breath still, sitting on my tail, doing my best to stay as still as possible within the bed of pelts.

His steps came closer, his power teasing at the edges of my psyche. He knew I was here. I hadn't fooled him for a moment. I held in a squeak of surprise as each pelt was thrown from the bedding area, Anton's deep chuckle proceeded by another pelt being discarded.

A squeak worked its way up my throat, clamping my jaw tighter to keep from letting it out. The animal instinct to escape became harder to overcome with each pelt that was discarded from the bed. He was toying with me. Like a cat playing with its food before devouring it. The image was all the more fitting that I had taken the form of a mouse. I mentally kicked myself, but it was the smallest creature I could take to hide.

I had hoped they would panic, search the cave for me and give me the opportunity to escape, but of course, Anton wasn't fooled. Ever proving to be a different breed of rogue than the rest.

“I know you’re here, Little Dove.” He purred, ripping another pelt, leaving only the one over me now. “Come out, come out, wherever you are.”

He grabbed the next pelt, the squeak ripping from my throat just as the pelt ripped from the bed, sending me flying with it and landing in a pile of fur and dirt. Anton cursed, realizing what I had done as I scurried out of the pelt, doing my best to rush towards the door, seeing the rogues distracted by Anton. They hadn’t caught on to what I did. Maybe it was because they had grown so used to human mates coming and going, that they forgot that I was a Cymarthian in their panic at seeing me missing. Forgot that I could shift and move just as fast as any male of our species. Though not fast enough.

Anton grabbed me by my tail, chuckling as I squeaked and squirmed in the air, dangling me just out of reach of the now rabid rogues beyond the doorway.

“If I let you go.” He spoke to me, his eyes glowing red, looking between me and his army. “They will destroy you. Leaving nothing useful of you. Is that what you want, Little Dove?”

I froze, dangling in a circle by my tail, my nose twitching in the air, smelling the danger of his words. Anton smiled at me, turning away from the rogues at the door and back to the bed.

A fresh dress now lay in place of the tossed pelts, a dress I hadn’t realized he had brought with him.

He sat me down, holding his arms over his chest and nodding to me. “Shift back.”

The sound of his command gritted at my ear, my stubborn side demanding I not listen, but the threat of being torn apart by those rogues still hung in the air. One look at Anton told me he would do it, though I doubted he'd let them get far enough to kill me. Only hurt me, though that was enough of a threat given their numbers.

My bones grew and cracked, shifting me back to the proper size and shape to fit the dress that he had laid beside me on the bed. Its purple and gold fabric reminded me of the sky at dusk as the final rays of golden light touched the darkening sky. I looked back at Anton, wishing I could knock that smirk look off his rotting face.

“Clean up, no more tricks. We have a long night ahead of us,” He stated, turning back towards the door.

“What are you going to do with me, Anton?”

He paused, looking back over at me, a single flash of the brother I once knew crossing the once again green eyes. He smiled. A flash of memory blinded me to what my brother had become.

“I’m going to give you to whoever wins tonight’s events. They will mate you and take the gifts that come with being your mate.”

He left before I could speak. A rock dropped into my gut.

I couldn’t mate any of his rogues. I already found my mate. I told him this. Told him that I knew my mate and that I belonged with him.

My bond with Tristan was complete. There was no going back on it. If Anton forced me, it would kill me. I would rot from the inside out for breaking the already completed fate's bond.

I had to tell him. It was the only thing I had left to do, that would hopefully get me out of this. I wasn't worth anything if I was dead. Right? I had seen a piece of my brother still inside him. There had to be a part of him that wouldn't want me to die. A part of him that may even let me go now that he knew I wasn't of any use to him.

I picked up the dress, recognizing the style as the ones the females of our village often wore to their mating ceremonies. A prickle of tears burned in my eyes as I wondered if this gown had been meant for Anton's mate. Whomever she may have been, there was no way that Anton hadn't cared for her. The idea of him holding onto something so precious was giving me hope that my plan just might work and get me out of this mess.

Pulling the dress on as carefully as I could, I sat back down on the bed. Watching the red glow of eyes just beyond the doorway as the rogues pushed and shoved one another to look at me. If I had felt close to the snow leopard in the zoo before, it was nothing compared to how close I felt to her now. I was a caged animal here, with different strangers staring at me for their own desires and amusement.

If I get out of here, I'm going back to the zoo and letting all the caged animals go.

When Anton returned, whatever spell he had to keep the others out was now gone. At least it had for the two who had brought me to the cave the night before. I stood, backing away from them until my back hit the wall. Their cold hands wrapped around my arms just as they had the night before, dragging me from the chamber that had kept me safe from the monsters beyond the threshold.

“Anton.” I pleaded, looking at him while he was leading the way through the masses. The rotting stench of so many rogues made me gag for fresh air. “Anton, please. You need to listen to me. If you do this, I’ll die. I won’t be any use to you then.”

“Oh, Little Dove.” He sighed, not even bothering to look back at me as we moved to a different part of the cave. He leads us to another doorway; one I had missed the night before when he took me to what I thought was the deepest part of the cave. I could feel our descent, feel as we went deeper and deeper into the mountain.

There was power in the land. The deeper we went the more prominent the feeling of that power became. It was the perfect place for any of our people’s ceremonies. I had never felt so close to the earth as I did within these caverns. Even with the rogues infesting it, I could still feel the pureness, and the goodness that would bless our people with all the earth had to offer.

“If you were about to tell me how you and that bear were able to complete your bond and that a new bond will only kill you. Well then you can save your breath.” He looked back at

me finally, the green of his eyes once more turned to red, it's glow in the dark resembling rubies floating in the air. "You reek of his stench. You have for days now. However, we don't need you to survive the bond. Were those rotting corpses not a big enough clue to you?"

The blood drained from my face so quickly that my head spun, my feet stumbling beneath me.

"Anton?" I gasped, hoping that I had misheard him.

"Do you know what happened to my mate, Little Dove?" I shook my head, or it felt like I had. I could barely feel my body, still hoping that I had misheard him admit that he was willingly killing me. "I killed her. And then I took a second mate. And I killed her. Each time that I did this, I discovered a new gift. I even managed to convince the last three females that I was truly their fated mate. Made it so much easier to get them to complete the bond with me."

We reached an even bigger chamber than the one I had slept in. The crystals were larger than the stalactites by them. Their sharp edges poked from all sides of the rocky room. At the center of the room was an altar surrounded by candles. Black straps tied to all four corners, flecks of silver reflecting within the material by the candlelight. Anton led us to the left of the room, passing by the altar, running his finger over its edge as we passed.

Two thrones sat along the wall, the smaller of the two bore the same silver-flecked straps as the altar had. The two rogues forced me into the seat, making quick work of the straps

around my wrists and ankles while Anton took the larger throne, smirking over at me.

“Why?” I asked, tears threatening to escape my lids. The two who strapped me to the throne stepped back, moving down the dais steps at the flick of Anton’s wrist.

Anton frowned, tilting his head to the side. “You know, there have been so many of them and so much time has passed, I don’t remember exactly why I killed my mate. However, the reason I killed all the others is simple.”

He looked back at me, his frown returning to the cruel grin that seemed to be his true face now. “The power is just so addictive. It’s that very power that helped me bring all these rogues together. Though, not all of them realize it.”

He stood up before I could respond, the room now filling with the rest of the rogues. They came in from all sides. Hundreds if not thousands assembled before the thrones, their eyes shifting between me and back to Anton as he addressed them.

“Will the three who won last night’s games, step forth,” He called out, smiling at the three rogues who stepped forward. Their faces resemble every bit of the zombies in Dasha’s favorite horror movies. I wasn’t sure if they had simply rotted that way, or if they earned their ripped faces from whatever games they had won. “Tonight, you will fight for the right to mate my sister. The prized gift that comes with becoming her mate is of the most coveted gifts. It’s the gift of day walking.”

Cheers ran out around the chamber, shock once again shaking my core.

He's lying. He has to be lying. Tristan was my mate already. He didn't have that gift. He was as weakened by the sun as any Cymarthian.

I shot a mental call down through our bond line to Tristan. Panic rose in my chest as Anton began the fight, cheering on their brutality with the rest of the rogues in the chamber.

Please, hurry, Tristan. I can't hold on much longer. They have started and I can't get out of here on my own.

Chapter 22

Chapter Twenty-Two

Tristan

The Vanators came in several black SUVs. They looked as if they were secret police escorting a political leader. Men and women stepped out of the vehicles with loaded weapons. All were dressed in all-black uniforms, lining up like the well-trained warriors they were. I scanned the line, holding my breath while searching for the two familiar faces that had been hunting me. The reason I had run to the other end of the mountains where I had found Lillian. However, they weren't among the small army, and the lack of their presence only did so much to comfort me as I waited to know why we were even meeting with these people.

The final one to exit the vehicle was a woman dressed in what looked to be an expensive black dress suit. Her brown hair was pulled into a perfect updo, and brown eyes searched our ranks and landed on Alexandru's mate.

"Camilla," She greeted, her voice sounding flat and cold, yet her eyes glimmered with a mixture of love and sadness.

Camilla stepped forward, Alexandru letting out a warning growl as one of the armed guards pointed his weapon at his mate. Neither woman paid either man any attention, their eyes locked to one another. Camilla wore a similar outfit as the one the woman wore, though hers was less pressed. Signs of tearing along the seams showing it had been well worn for some years now.

“Mom,” Camilla greeted back, a flash of anger crossing the woman’s face, yet her eye’s emotions remained the same.

“I told you not to call me that. My daughter died the day you chose him.” It was only then that the two women looked back at Alexandru, his muscles flexing along his arms. A silent threat for anyone to say more.

Camilla smiled and shook her head as the Queen stepped forward next, placing a hand on Camilla’s shoulder.

“We can squabble about family ties at another time. We called you here for a more important reason.”

The Vanator woman looked to the Queen, eyes narrowing suspiciously. “Yes, however, I’m confused as to why you believe you can simply call us whenever you want. We do not work for you. Rather, we hunt your kind. Our being here is purely a formality. Lest we meet the fate of my husband from one of your warriors.” Her eyes narrowed once more on Alexandru, clear distaste for the male in her eyes.

I vaguely knew of the circumstances around the Vanators and Alexandru. His mate had been their future leader before she discovered her bond with the Cymarthian male. Between their mating and now there seems to be some conflicts between the couple and her former family. Disagreements that didn’t seem to be ending any time soon.

A growl rumbled in my chest. Agitated with wasting time. A time that could be better served in saving Lillian. I couldn’t understand why they thought we needed the hunters.

When my brother and the others arrived last night, we managed just fine against the rogues. Why bother even attempting this partnership with those who would rather see us all dead?

Andrea shook his head, watching me from the corner of his eye. Deirdre had remained in the village with the twin's mates and a few strong males to guard them. With her due date being so near, I could tell that Andrea found it hard to be away from her, his body tense with unease. For once, I didn't want to push him further, so I shut my mouth and listened to the three women speak. Bartering with the devils to save my mate's life.

"This isn't just a few rogues," Camilla urged, reaching her hands out to the Vanator leader, only to stop halfway, letting them fall to her side. "We can't do this alone, and you Vanators can't either. We have to work together, or it could mean the end of us all."

"Camilla is right," The Queen nodded. "Hundreds, possibly thousands of rogues. And somehow, they are able to hide their scent from us. That is how they managed to steal the female. If we can't even sense them, what hope do you think your people will have against them?"

The woman scoffed, crossing her arms over her chest. "What evidence do you have to this? The word of that male there? Claiming that his mate, this kidnapped female, is sending him visions of this rogue army? Camilla, I know you have made some questionable choices these few years, but I still would expect more from you."

Andrea's arm reached across my chest, keeping me from moving, a snarl on my lips. I wanted to scream and yell. Demand they stop the bickering. We were wasting precious time. The sun waited for no one, and I had no doubts that Lillian's captors felt the same as me. Whatever they planned to do with her, it would begin soon.

I opened my mouth to do just that, but I was cut off by Andrea. My eyes widened as he defended me from the Vanator woman.

“Why would we waste our time calling you humans if we didn't believe him? After all these centuries of your kind hunting and killing us, you still don't know half of what we are capable of. You still don't understand the bond we form with our mates. Just how deep into our soul it truly goes.” He looked at me, nodding before turning back to the three females. “My brother is fully mated. Any one of us can feel that bond. Her scent is all over him. That is proof enough for me. Even without having seen the number of rogues he had been fighting. That number alone was extraordinary.”

“Rogues don't work together,” Was all she replied, though she said it to Camilla and the Queen, disregarding my brother completely. “They don't play well together. Too territorial.”

“Isn't that what you manage to think about any Cymarthians?” Jakob laughed, his mate hanging close to his side. “Theresa, what was it that you were taught about us?”

“That you were bloodsucking parasites who only worked alone,” She answered, smiling. “It was that belief that got my

brother killed.”

The older woman narrowed her eyes at the blonde female, looking her up and down. “I wondered what had happened to you. Theresa Markus, your brother was Damien. Am I right?”

Theresa’s lip curled back, giving the Vanator woman a look of pure venom “Yeah, surprised you people even remember us at all. What with you not even sending a word or thought after his death.”

“Those who were in charge at that time saw things in poor light. My condolences on Damien. He was a wonderful hunter.”

“He was an even better person,” Theresa snarled, the Vanator woman turning back to Camilla and the Queen.

“We don’t have as many resources since your father passed,” she continued. “What you see here would be all I could offer you to help with this little pest problem of yours.”

“It’s not just our problem. For God’s sake Mother, these rogues are not normal. They are twice as cruel and twice as powerful as the rogues you are used to encountering. Even these fully mated males had trouble going against them. How can I make you understand just how serious this is?” Camilla scolded.

“This is a waste of time,” I growled under my breath, Andrea shaking his head at me, though Alexandru seemed to agree.

“Perhaps we aren’t making this extremely clear,” the Queen interjected, smiling at the Vanators, a sweet venom was hidden within the expression. Her eyes sparkled with a challenge that only centuries of experience could back up. “Either you help us, or we will rescue the stolen female, possibly losing a few good men in the process, though that certainly wouldn’t bother you. But then, we will disappear. You will have no way of knowing where we are. No contact with us, just as I had done to my husband. The first hunter. And we will leave the rogues to you to handle. All by yourselves.”

Her voice was so calm, the threat within the words sounding far more sinister than the words entailed. A few of the warriors behind the Vanator woman visibly shivered, their eyes focusing on their leader.

“We are all quite aware of how well you can disappear, Cassia.”

“We had a deal, we would point you to the rogues in exchange for keeping the status quo,”

Camilla added. “Before we disappear, we will release evidence of us. Showing our kind as peaceful and the truth of the rogues along with proof of your organization refusing to help us against them.”

“Camilla, yet another disappointment. A weak threat like that barely deserves my acknowledgment.”

Tristan!

My knees buckled, and a rush of emotions and images raced through my head, catching myself before I fell to the ground. Lillian's voice echoed through my mind; a sound beautiful yet heart-wrenching all at once.

I snapped my head up, feeling Lillian's terror. Hearing her call out to me in a panic I had never known her to feel. Andrea looked at me, realizing my reaction, recognizing the look of a mate being called to help his bride.

The only good thing about receiving that call was that I now knew that she was okay. She was still alive. Whatever they had planned for her had yet to begin, though the images of the ceremony gown told me they were about to.

“What is it? What's happening?” Andrea asked, drawing the attention of everyone in the room.

Camilla and the Vanator leader paused in their arguments, looking at me with the same question as everyone else in their eyes. While the Vanator leader seemed more annoyed,

Camilla's lips sat into a look of concern, turning from her mother to give me her whole attention. I had no doubt the female would fight for my mate. She was a warrior just like her mate.

“They are going to force the bond,” I growled, moving towards the door. I could hear the Queen gasp, and see the King finally come from the shadows where he had stood this entire time. Allowing his mate to handle her descendants.

A fire burned in his eyes as he looked back to the militia of Vanators and then back to me. Jakob and Andrea flanked me, turning away from the meeting. Blood bonded us together with each step as the twins and Alexandru joined close behind them. We would all fight for our own. Some of us may even die.

We would each do it for any of our mates. It was the true calling of the Cymarthians. Family.

We fought for family. Even without blood connecting us, we all came from the same soil.

We were family.

Just before reaching the tree line, Jakob looked back at the Vanators, nodding to his mate who joined the Queen and Camilla. “If you don’t believe the dangers of these rogues taking Tristan’s mate, just ask Theresa about the job you sent her and her brother to all those years ago. Ask her about the power behind that rogue there.”

We left those words hanging in the air, each of us taking off into the forest, shifting to our preferred animal of choice. Andrea and Alexandru took to the sky, the soft sound of their wings beating against the air as they rose above the tree. Still, on the ground, Jakob and the Twins moved into formation around me. Each of our clawed paws pounded against the cold ground, allowing me to take the lead as I followed the tether that tied me to Lillian, using the images she had shared to pinpoint exactly where the Rogues hid.

Images of a new chamber came to my mind. This one was filled with snarling and drooling rogues, only her brother standing between them as he dragged her to the center. I pushed myself to go faster, growling for the others to keep up.

I'm on my way, Lillian. Don't give up. Keep fighting. Just a little bit longer.

Chapter 23

Chapter Twenty-Three

Lillian

I watched in horror as the three rogues tore one another apart. Snarls and cheers echoed off the cavern walls as the mob around them egged them all on. Anton smiled from the throne beside me as he watched.

It was sickening. The rotting scent of them all only grew stronger with their spilled blood. I couldn't hold back the gag, watching as it went flying into the crowd, those closest to it now fighting to claim it.

Anton laughed, seeming to find the entire event entertaining, drinking putrid-scented blood from a cup. I could only imagine where the blood had come from. It was certainly not fresh, though it would seem that part of our diet never went away with becoming a rogue. That, or it was part of the torture that my brother seemed to enjoy putting me through.

He finally turned to me, that cruel smile widening at seeing my face. I was certain he could see every bit of my disgust and horror written there in my eyes, on my lips, and in the way my body repelled away from him, repulsed by what he was, and he liked it.

“Which one would you prefer, Little Dove?” He taunted, nodding towards the fight. There were now only two standing, the third among them had moments ago been ripped to shreds, slowly turning to dust and returning to the earth where he should have gone long before. “I'm partial to that larger fellow

for you. Did you see the way he tore that smaller rogue right in half? Imagine what he could do to you.”

Just as he had said it, the larger rogue took the other’s arm, ripping it from his body, a spray of blood going everywhere as the mob cheered, jumping to take the torn appendage. I had no blood left in my face, my head felt light. I had never fainted once in my life, but the thought of that male touching me had my sight tunneling, the world around me fading away.

It was becoming increasingly obvious that he would be the one chosen to mate me.

I sent another scream to Tristan, showing him the chamber, the way to the heart of the cave where this horror show was taking place. I pleaded for him to hurry, urging him that I couldn’t do this without him, I had tried and failed.

Another roar of cheers came from the crowd, my eyes refocusing on the bloody floor, the smaller one now on the larger one’s back, biting into his neck and spewing more of the dark rotting blood.

“Well, this is a turn of events,” Anton said, leaning forward with interest. “I suppose one should never underestimate the little ones.”

I watched the final moments of the larger rogue. Watched in a mixture of horror and relief as the smaller one ripped his heart out through his back, the larger rogue falling to his knees before turning to dust, leaving nothing left of himself.

The winner stood triumphantly, holding up his single arm to the roar of applause and heckles, turning his greedy eyes to me, then to Anton.

Anton stood, looking down at the victorious rogue who awaited his prize. “You fought well,”

He praised, extending his hand toward the rogue. The victor wasted no time, climbing the steps to touch my brother’s hand, his eyes raking over me as if I were his last meal.

“Unfortunately, I have no place for a single-armed warrior.”

Anton plunged his hand into the winner’s chest, delivering him the same fate he had delivered his opponent. A look of shock and betrayal flashed in his already dead eyes, his dust falling to a pile at my feet. I gasped, looking from the former rogue to my brother, dusting his hands off.

He scanned the now silent crowd, stepping down the steps as he inspected each one of them, until finally, he pointed, gesturing to the singled-out rogue. I watched the rogue, a good second in size compared to the rogue who lost his heart in the fight, step from the crowd, standing before my brother as he examined the behemoth.

“Yes, you will do just fine,” Anton purred, gesturing him to the edge of the dais, both looking up at me where I was still secured to the throne. “Meet your new mate, do with her as you like.”

The mob erupted, the two who had secured me to the throne returning, releasing me from my bonds and leading me down

the dais. They didn't stop beside my brother and the newly appointed winner. Instead, they lead me in the direction of the altar, the mob parting like the red sea as we approached, making a perfect path to my doom.

Anton appeared at my side, taking my arm as the two rogues fell back, leading me with his head held high as if this were simply my wedding day and he was to give away the bride.

"Anton, please," I begged as quietly as I could, looking around at the snarling faces of the rotting rogues. "I'm your sister, there has to be some part of you that still sees that. I've seen it in your eyes. I am going to die if you make me do this."

Slowly, we approached the altar, Anton's arms tightening around mine, giving me hope that he heard me. That I had reached that piece of him that knew what he was doing was wrong. That he should be protecting me, not feeding me to his mob.

I looked up at him, my hope sparkling in my eyes, his own green eyes set turning to me, sparkling like the day he left the village. So joyful, so happy, and full of love.

"You are right, Little Dove," he whispered softly, my breath drawing in for a relieved sigh.

"There is a part of me that recognizes you as my little sister. And it's that part of me that is preventing me from mating you myself for that special power you have to offer."

I barely had time to react, my body flying through the air and landing hard on the altar. My breath escaped my lungs with the impact. I gasped in more, attempting to get up and run, but strong hands held me down, my arms and legs once more secured with the silver threaded rope.

I watched in horror as Anton hovered over me, smiling that cruel smile. Gone was any resemblance of my brother, his eyes now glowing that cruel blood red that showed him as a rogue. His rotting breath hovered around my ear as he leaned in, taking a deep breath before speaking with enough malice in his voice to make me want to hate myself.

“I never loved you. Even before I left the village. You were always a nuisance. It had been a mistake on our parent’s end to bring another child into this world, much less a girl. The only good you can do now is pass on that bond-blessed gift of yours and make this rogue a daywalker.”

I knew it wasn’t true. I could remember the joyful look of my brother, the one I had known as a child. Yet his words still stung. He leaned in closer, taking a deep sniff of my neck.

“You should have died with them you know.” Those final words finished the job. A final nail in the coffin of my brother.

He wasn’t him. He was a monster possessing the body of the only blood family I had left. I spat in his face, throwing away all the hope and love I had felt for him. My brother was dead. This creature in front of me was nothing more than a monster.

Anton chuckled, wiping my spit from his cheek, the crowd chanting in the ancient tongue of our people. A language that has not been used in centuries. I couldn't understand the words, but felt the power behind them, my heart quickening as their voice rose.

I watched Anton turn his back on me, raising his hands and lifting his head to face the ceiling. My gaze followed his, noticing the largest of all the crystals directly above me, emitting a glow.

With each chanted word, the glow grew brighter, filling the cavern with light that matched that of the sunrise. I flinched away from it, expecting to feel my strength drained, the familiar pinpricks of discomfort as the light touched my skin, but nothing happened. The light was cool, calming even. As I opened my eyes, I found it was easy to stare into it, awestruck by the beauty it radiated.

There was a familiar pull to the crystal. A sense of belonging. It felt wrong that the rogues had possession of this place. It didn't belong to them.

It belongs to the women.

The thought danced in my mind, uncertain of how I knew, but I did. Slowly, I turned from the light, watching the rogues chanting, the large, chosen winner stepping to Anton's side, his eyes raking over me as he licked his lips. The sight repulsed me, my stomach rolling as if I would be sick then and there.

“Today, we make history!” Anton called out over the chants. “We have collected the strength, the numbers, and the ancient powers long forgotten to the Cymarthian kind. With these, we can finally wipe out the Vanators. End their hunts on us once and for all and take back the mountain from the false King who abandoned us in our time of need. With this final mate, we take the power of the sun!”

The chants rose up once more. The rogues’ hands lifted above their heads as if they were worshiping a god, and Anton stood before them, acting as that god, awaiting his sacrifice.

I was the sacrifice. Me and all the women who came before me. Sacrificed mates who should have found their happily ever after in these mountains, but instead found only death.

All for the sake of revenge that was made void by the evils committed to achieving it.

Anton and the rogue at his side turned to me, stepping closer to the altar. I tried to move away, pulling at my restraints, and hissing at the burn of the silver in the rope. The rogue reached out, his hand wrapping around my ankle, slowly moving up my leg, his finger pausing at my knee and tracing my joint.

“I hope you survive this,” he breathed, grinning with his rotting teeth. “We could always use a breeder after we take back the mountains.”

Anton smirked, dropping his hand over the rogue’s shoulder. “Don’t get your hopes up, Peter. There will be others. Now, let us begin. Do you, Peter, swear to take the gifts

offered in this bond, and fight at my side to achieve our goal of purging the world of those who fight against us? In doing so, pledging your life in servitude to me?”

“I do,” Peter answered, his hand traveling higher along my leg, squeezing at my thighs.

I shuddered, pulling harder at the bonds to pull away from him, to guard my body against his touch. I could feel myself screaming down the bond to Tristan. Begging him to hurry. I could feel him close now. Feel him coming for me, but I was beginning to fear he would be too late, the rogue’s hand moving higher still, slipping within the slit of the ceremony gown.

Anton smiled, pleased with the answer of the rogue, looking up at the glowing crystal before his gaze turned back to me.

“And you, Little Dove,” He purred, the pet name now making me sick.

“Don’t call me that,” I growled, jerking my wrists against the rope, wanting nothing more than to break free and tear both of these men apart.

Anton ignored me, continuing with his blasphemous vows. “Do you accept your fate? Do you give over the power inside you to your mate, under the light of the crystal?”

I opened my mouth, ready to scream my denial of the vows, but a voice in my head stopped me. The same voice that had told me the crystal was meant for me. For all the females who had lain beneath its light.

Without a second thought, I answered, affirming to the fates that my gifts would go to my mate.

Anton smiled, but it didn't last long as snarls and screams echoed through the cave. The sound of fighting reached us thru the tunnels above. His eyes jerked up to the entrance, growing red with anger at the interruption to this false ceremony.

I looked as well, smiling as I felt the mate bond grow stronger, and felt Tristan tearing his way through the cave, following the bond that connected us. My face turned back to my brother, smiling brighter at his enraged expression. I felt a wave of power run through me, the words I needed to say on the tip of my tongue, echoing in my mind as I closed my eyes.

“My mate is here,” I sighed. “And I give him all that I have to offer, under the light of the crystal, so let it be.”

Chapter 24

Chapter Twenty-Four

Tristan

We reached the cave entrance, finding less than a dozen rogues standing guard. If the images I had received from Lillian were accurate, then the majority of the rogues were in the chamber she was being held in. I looked to the sky, watching as Alexandru and my brother leaped from above, taking out two of the rogues before they even knew we were there. It was our cue to charge, the four of us rushing towards those who remained. We were still outnumbered, but I had confidence we could handle these few rogues, even if they were more powerful than they should have been.

I took out the first rogue I could reach, ripping out his throat before he could react. His blood dripped from my jaw; his body turned to ash beneath me as I turned to find my next mark. I watched the others take on their opponents, while the twins struggled a bit against their marks, Jakob excelled in killing his, turning to help each of the twins.

As I shifted from my bear form, I watched him fight, it became clear that he had in fact done this before. He didn't seem at all surprised by the strength of the rogues. Rather, he seemed underwhelmed by them.

"These fuckers are nothing compared to the one I went up against in the states," He mused, moving past me to the entrance of the cave, where more rogues surfaced from the shadows, snapping and snarling at us.

I could feel Lillian inside, feel the pull from her through the bond. That pull was all I needed to charge in, passing Jakob to take the lead. I jumped on the first one I reached, feeling a rush of power go through me. I ripped his head from his neck, holding his head by the scrapes of hair. He turned to dust before hitting the ground, power waving off of me in every direction, making rogues pause.

The power kept coming, the deeper into the cave I went, the stronger it grew. I couldn't understand it, but one look at my brother and the others and I knew I wasn't the only one.

There was something about the cave that boosted our strength, taking us further than the power of the completed bond. Even if these rogues held the power of bonds, they didn't seem to be gaining as much from the cave as we were, and the look of confusion in their eyes told me they saw it too.

I let out a roar, leading the charge into the cave, hearing more feet behind me than I had expected. Spinning around, taking out two more rogues with my shifted hands, I saw why.

Camilla led the charge, Theresa and the Queen flanking her with the small Vanator army closing in behind. Gunshots began to fire, and rogues fell, slowly turning to dust as silver infected their bodies. I watched in awe as Camilla fought at Alexandru's side, just as Lillian had done at mine. They looked as if they were dancing. In perfect synch with the other's movement. A true testament to the bond between mates. Theresa seemed to be out of her element, though she

picked up a gun and seemed to fire it just fine, taking out any rogue that attempted to sneak up on Jakob.

“There is something ancient here,” the King stated, appearing from thin air behind me, his gaze darkening as he looked to the dark caverns ahead. “Something far older than myself.”

He stepped ahead, his Queen joining his side, each taking out any rogue who came near them with ease. Their power is growing every step of the way. Whatever it was that he sensed, what we all sensed within the cave, it was doubling every Cymarthian’s strength just by being within the cave. Yet it did nothing for the rogues.

I felt a panicked tug on the bond, looking up in the direction the King and Queen disappeared to, running towards my mate. Andrea quickly appeared to my side, his skin appearing to glow with power the deeper we went, killing anyone who stood in our way.

We barely acknowledged the rotting corpses that lined the walls. Girls of all ages who may have been mates to a Cymarthian someday and a few men who must have been drained to feed the never-ending hunger of the rogues. It was the Vanators who stopped, shocked by the sight.

“Keep moving!” I roared at them over my shoulder. “Let their deaths be what drives you.”

I didn’t look back to see if they listened. I kept moving, passing the cavern where Lillian had slept, watching for the

hidden path that would lead me to the chambers that flashed in my mind, following the tether between our souls.

“Tristan,” The voice of the King called, appearing from the shadows I had narrowly missed.

“This way.”

I followed him, the others on my heels. I could hear a commotion up ahead. Could smell the reek of the hundreds of rogues who occupied the cavern. The few who blocked my passage let out snarls of rage just before being cut down.

A wave of power rushed through the bond. A blinding light stopped me in my tracks, letting out a roar from the shock. Everyone rushed past me, Vanator and Cymarthian rushing into battle as allies. All except Andrea, his hand landing on my shoulder to keep me from falling over.

A new strength filled me, shaking me to my core as I adjusted to this strange power. That familiar light showed brightly behind the lids of my eyes. Her light. The very light that I saw within Lillian with every smile she blessed me with. The very fire that burned in her eyes, now coursing in my veins.

It was farther than completing the bond between us. Farther than it had ever been explained to me by my parents and friends. We were one being with two bodies. Her power was my power just as my power was hers.

My sight returned to me, meeting the serious gaze of Andrea, searching my face for an answer to what had just

happened to me. I had none for him though, only a reassuring smile to tell him I was okay. Straightening my back, I marched into the cavern, the sound of gunfire and snarling beast echoing back to me.

I stepped into the chamber, shocked to find it so bright. The carnage illuminated as if I stepped out into full sunlight to find a battlefield before me. My eyes moved past the blood and gore, finding the one person in all this that mattered more to me than my own life.

Our eyes met, a flash of relief filling the emerald eyes of my mate as she pulled against the ropes binding her wrists and ankles to the stone altar. I ran to her, my still-shifted hands cutting through any rogue that crossed my path, never once slowing me down in my path to reach her.

Not until he stepped in front of me. His face was so similar to hers up close, it was a wonder I hadn't known they were related the moment I saw him. The only real difference, aside from the rotted skin, was his blood-red eyes and his cruel smile.

“Nu-uh-uh,” He chided, wagging his finger at me as another rogue stepped forward. “If you want Little Dove, you will have to defeat him.”

The newcomer puffed out his chest, doing his best to make himself look bigger than he already did. I wasn't impressed, however. I was a bear; at best he was a stag. I smirked, feeling that power once more coursing through the bond, sending

some of my own back to Lillian, urging her to break the binds that held her.

I moved quicker than I ever had, my hand cutting through the rogue's neck, leaving only the brittle bone attached. Anton's eyes widened, staring at the golden glow of my hand as his rogue's blood dripped from my fingertips. The glow was a surprise to me as well, but the look on his face told me he hadn't expected me to take down the rogue he placed between us.

He moved to run, his eyes seeking out an escape as the rogues who had followed him fell at the hands of the army we had brought. Before I could stop him, a petite hand ripped through his chest, holding his still-beating heart.

"Never underestimate the little ones, brother," Lillian gasped, dropping her brother's heart as he disintegrated around her arm.

He turned, eyes widened in surprise, but a smile pulled at his lips. "Very well played, Little Dove," he coughed. "Mom and Dad would be proud."

I locked eyes with Lillian as the dust of her brother settled on the ground, tears brimming in her eyes. I pulled her into my arms, pressing her head to my chest and stroking her hair, her tears falling down, mixing in with the blood on my torn shirt.

"I've got you, Lillian," I breathed into her hair. "I'll never let you go again."

“He’s gone,” She sobbed out, her fingers digging into the scraps of my shirt. “I killed him.”

“No, Lillian,” I consoled her, stroking her hair. “You set him free.”

The last of the rogues fell around us, their dust mixing together into the cave floor, the light that had illuminated the room dimming, returning to his natural darkness. I looked up, finally seeing where the light had come from, a feeling of familiarity washing over me as I looked up at the large crystal hanging from the cave’s ceiling.

“A beautiful sight,” The king sighed, walking to my side. “I had heard stories of this place when I was a child. I always thought they were just that. Stories.”

“What is it?” I asked, lifting Lillian into my arms as she fell asleep.

“It’s home,” He answered, turning to look at my mate. “And it seems to have connected to her. This place will belong to her now. Be sure you both take care of managing it.”

Before I could respond, he left, Queen Cassia joining his side, leading the way back to the surface. The Vanator’s leader joined them and Camilla, their voices fading as they proceeded up the tunnel. Plans of clearing out the human remains passing between them.

The remainder of the Vanators followed their leader, silently marching with their weapons in hand.

Andrea looks at me from the entrance, the other's around him, nodding to me in question. I tilted my chin back, letting them know I would be coming soon, walking back to the altar where Lillian had been held.

I gently laid her there, her eyes fluttering open, the light of the cave returning with those emerald eyes. She smiled at me, my hand caressing her cheek.

"I'm sorry about the bond," I sighed, closing my eyes as her finger stroked my jaw. "I had no idea we completed it. I had the plan to tell you we were mates. To ask you to accept me."

Her finger moved to my lips, shaking her head at me with a smile. "I'm not sorry. I was so happy when I realized what we were to each other. That we were complete. I would have accepted you no matter what, Tristan."

I took her hand in my own, kissing her fingers. "I, Tristan, vow to always protect you, and should I fail to do so, follow you in death. I swear to love and respect you, and to make you the happiest woman in the world."

"And I, Lillian, swear to be faithful to you. To stay by your side and grant you the power of my bond."

The light of the crystal burned brighter than before, the dust of the rogues lifting into a gust of wind. Flecks of crystal glittered with the dust as it rose up, joining with the crystals there, leaving behind a feeling of cleanliness as the wind disappeared.

“What was that?” I gasped, looking around the cavern, feeling at a loss for words.

“That was magical,” Lillian answered, smiling as if she knew more than she would share.

“Take me home, Tristan.”

Chapter 25

Twenty-Five

Lillian

I stepped out of the cave, shaking the dust from my skirt. The others stood at the tree line, waiting for me and for what I had to say.

It had been a month since we got here, and in that time, we discovered a few important things. For one, the cave was the original home of our people. The place where all Cymarthians were once born, the place where bonds were to be completed. And for the second reason, the crystal had chosen me as its voice. It was the crystal that made the soil in these mountains so sacred. The reason we couldn't live without it. Its power thrumming through the mountain, leaking into the caves of every hidden Carpathian village.

I had been made a priestess of the cavern. Seeing that the crystal had bonded with me just as I had bonded with Tristan. I wasn't certain how or why the crystal had chosen me, but I accepted the duty and all that came with it.

There were still many mysteries about the crystal and the cave where it resides, but we would learn them as the time came. For now, I would guard it, just as my mother had kept the ceremonial cave of my village safe. I would do the same here.

Though the cave still held some residual presence of the rogues, we had begun cleansing the space, starting with the crystal room. We had finished that room just in time for Deirdre and Andrea to welcome their child to the world. The

first Cymarthian girl to be born in the cave in centuries. The first of many children to come.

I rested my hand over my belly, smiling at the thought of what that meant for me. Just a few more months and it will be us there.

I looked up, turning towards everyone who waited for news from Andrea and Deirdre.

“Well?” Alexandru asked Camilla, elbowing him in the stomach for his tone.

I smiled, looking at the faces that surrounded me, frowning at the one missing. Tristan. He had said he would be gone, though I had hoped he would be back in time for this moment.

“Andrea is with Deirdre. She is doing well and is anxious to introduce you all to her new daughter.” I announced, watching the light shine in everyone’s eyes at the announcement.

They all cheered, hugging one another before pulling me into the hug with them all. I could feel the life around us all. The purity of the love you can only get from a family. Even with me only being here for a little while and having brought the army of the dead with me when I arrived, I was accepted.

I left everyone behind to celebrate, making my way back home to the cottage I shared with Tristan. When I arrived, I began to organize the new baby clothes I had been gifted by my parents and sister. They were excited to hear from me after so long apart. Even more so when I shared the news of my bond and my pregnancy. They had decided to come to visit

around my due date with the hope of being here when my child arrived. In the silence of my home, I thought back over the past couple of months. How much my life had changed in such a short amount of time.

I went from being a young woman, living her life with no care or worry other than how to care for my parents, to being a priestess and midwife to my people. A woman who had changed and gone through so much heartbreak and while having that broken heart filled with so much love.

Thoughts of my brother and parents came through my mind as I rubbed my belly, thinking about how they would never know my child. I wondered what it would be like, had they survived. If my brother hadn't become the rogue who nearly destroyed me in his need to avenge our parents. Part of me wished that I could go back and save them, but as I looked at the sleeping gown my mother had hand sewed for my baby when I was a child myself. I shook the thought away.

Fated mates or not, I may never have found Tristan if it weren't for him attacking my family.

His mistake of thinking they were kidnapping me. I chuckled at the memory of pinning his bear form to the ground in my snow leopard form.

“What are you laughing about, Lillian?” he asked, stepping in the doorway with a letter in hand.

I turned to him, smiling as he dipped down and kissed me. “There you are, how was the meeting with the Vanators? Are you still their number one most wanted? I was just thinking

about the day we met. Was telling the baby how I was able to pin you down even in your bear form.”

“No, I am officially off their radar, and you mean how I let you pin me,” he replied, giving me a cheeky smile and bending to his knee to kiss my stomach.

“Sure, you did,” I laughed, pointing to the letter in his hand. “What’s that? It can’t be another letter from mom and dad. We just got one yesterday.”

“I don’t know. It’s addressed to you. One of the Vanators had it in their possession. Given the new arrangement we have, they thought that it should be handed over to you.” He stood back up, setting the letter on the table beside the clothes before walking to the closet to put a few blankets I had on the bed away.

I took the letter, opened it, and gasped at the content. It was a letter from my mother, my biological mother.

Lillian, if you are reading this, then you are alive, but unfortunately, that also means I am not. We have had word of hunters coming closer, but due to so many women expecting, we are unable to leave the village. I have a plan to protect all of the children, and since you are reading this, it must have worked.

I am writing this letter to you because it is important for you to know what you are. Your father is not a normal Cymarthian. His affinity for the sun is not because he is crazy, it is because he has light within him. Light of an ancient source that once was within all of us, and you are the same as him. Let that

light guide you, Lillian. Don't hide it, let it shine. It will bring you to where you belong, and when you find your mate, share that light with him. It holds more strength than anyone could ever know.

Always with you,

Your Beloved Mother

Tears hit the page, surprising me as I hadn't realized I began to cry. I quickly placed the page on the table, saving the ink from smearing in my tears. Tristan wrapped his arms around me, not saying a word, only holding me as I cried.

My mother's words warmed my heart, bringing with them a reminder of what Anton had believed about me.

He had known what I held inside me because my parents had known. He just didn't understand what it meant.

I am light. I am the sun that shines in the night, and I have shared that light with Tristan through our bond. My brother was right after all. My mate and I were daywalkers. Just not in the literal sense.

"Are you okay?" Tristan asked, his hand resting on my belly.

I smiled through my tears, nodding up to him. "Yes, I just feel so complete."

He bent down to me, pressing his lips to mine. His kiss chased away all my sorrow, all my regrets.

There was nothing of the past that I could change. All I could do now was look to the future.

The future that I have with my mate and our child.

THE END

Did you like this book? Then you'll LOVE

“Taken by the Shifter Enemy”

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0BSGL9ZPS>

My mission was to kill the vampire,

I never expected him to be my fated mate.

The assignment was simple: move next door, follow him,
and gather evidence.

Except I broke the rules.

When I find myself trapped and alone with the adversary,

Mesmerized by his sculpted body and sapphire blue eyes.

I forget that we're natural enemies.

And my family believes his death will preserve the human
race.

But with each passing moment,

I question whether I can live without him.

Falling in love with him makes me a traitor.

And my mate will sacrifice everything to keep me.

Now, I must choose: my mission or my heart.

Did you like this book? Then you'll LOVE

“Taken by the Shifter Enemy”

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0BSGL9ZPS>

Chapter 26

Sneak Peek into “Taken”

**Start reading NOW! “Taken by the Shifter
Enemy”<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0BSGL9ZPS>**

Sneak Peek into Chapter one.

Tonight is the night. After months of investigating, I have all the proof I need to continue this hunt. My first hunt. It is almost bittersweet to end it like this, especially given how much I enjoyed watching my new neighbor. It’s too bad he is what he is, and I am what I am, but the minute I discovered the truth all the attraction went out the window. That’s what I keep telling myself, that is.

I had pretended to lock myself out of my house, turning to my handsome neighbor, Alexandru, for help.

“Hey, Alex! I’m so sorry to bother you so late tonight,” I greeted him after knocking on his door. I knew he was awake, even before I had proof. He was always up at night, never seeing him in the light of day.

“What can I help you with, Camilla?” he asked, his Romanian accent tickling my ears as he voiced my name. I shook off the heat the sound drew up in me, giving him my sweetest smile.

“I locked myself out of my house, and it’s late. I’m kind of nervous about waiting outside for the locksmith. Would it be okay if I waited over here with you?”

I watched him pause, a flash of hesitation crossing his baby blues before finally nodding and stepping away from the door

to allow me to enter.

“Oh, may I use your bathroom? I really need to go. I was this close to going in that bush out there.” I held my fingers up to show just how close I came to turning his petunias into peenunias, while bouncing up and down like a child on the verge of wetting her pants.

Alexandru grunted at me, nodding to the hallway just off of the living room. I thanked him, skipping down the hallway. It wasn't all show; I really did need to pee. The moment I purposely locked my front door, it hit me like a ton of bricks, but it now gave me the excuse to poke around for the evidence I needed, slipping into the master bedroom as soon as Alexandru looked away.

I gently rummaged around some drawers, wondering precisely what I expected to find when the floor near the bed creaked. The sound caused me to freeze, wondering if he could hear it and come to inspect the sound, but after a few moments, listening for the sound of his steps, I released the breath I was holding. I bent down to feel the floor around the bed.

There was a hatch hidden beneath the rug beside his bed. Had I not been paying such close attention; I may not have ever known it was there as the latch lay flush with the floorboards. When I pulled it open, I knew I had found what I needed. The earthy smell reached me before I even had the hatch fully opened. Only one creature in this world would

have a hatch filled with dirt, the very creature I was born and raised to hunt.

Alexandru was a Cymarthian, a blood-sucking monster who preyed on humans. His handsome face and bad boy attitude attracted his prime prey to him like the light of an angler fish in the depths of the sea. So focused on the beautiful thing before you, you don't notice the beast behind the facade.

I heard him coming down the hall, so I carefully closed the hatch and pulled the rug before jumping into the adjacent suite. I flushed the toilet as soon as I heard him open the bedroom door. I pretended to wash my hands at the sink and flashed a smile.

“Sorry, I think I made a wrong turn, but I couldn't hold it anymore. You don't mind, do you?” I batted my brown eyelashes at him. I have been told that my smile can light up an entire room, disarming anyone who meets its gleam, but it seemed that Alexandru was immune to my charms.

“The locksmith is here,” he grunted, his eyes drifting to the rug that covered his secret.

“Oh, great! Thank you so much for letting me wait, Alex,” I said, watching him move to the drawers and pull out a few changes of clothes. “You're going somewhere?”

He looked at me, his eyes moving up and down as I did my best to keep my face as innocent as possible. I was just a nice neighbor asking a friendly question, that's all.

“If you are, I could watch your place for you. Water your plants or collect your mail,” I continued, drawing my hands behind my back as I rocked back and forth on my toes.

“It’s fine,” he answered, walking back to the bedroom door. “You coming? Or are you trying to spend the night?” He flashed a toothy grin, almost as if he was inviting me to do just that.

“Oh, ha-ha,” I laughed, walking out of the room ahead of him. “No, I guess I better get out to that locksmith, huh? If you need anything, just let me know.”

I rushed out the door, finding Lucian in front of my house, a fake locksmith logo on the side of his truck as he jiggled the knob like he was working on the lock. As soon as he saw me, he miraculously opened the door, greeting me like a customer and asking for his payment.

“Sure thing, come on in, and I’ll get my wallet,” I replied, gesturing for him to come inside.

As soon as my door was closed behind us, I looked out the window, watching Alexandru loading the pack into the saddlebags of his bike and heading back inside his house for whatever else he needed for his trip. I had a rough idea where he was going. I had followed him a couple of times when I noticed his monthly pattern.

“Well, babe?” Lucian asked, pressing behind me to look over my shoulder out the window. “How did the search go?”

I leaned back against him, letting out a sigh. “We are going to need to follow him. We were right, and we can’t risk him disappearing. I hope you came prepared.”

We followed Alexandru into the forest - where he always went - and I knew his usual spot, thanks to my months of undercover work. Now, I was seeing the finish line for this mission. My first hunt for my family was nearing completion with my partner in life and crime at my side. This was it. As soon as we completed this hunt, we would be married and become official members of the Vanators.

That same bittersweet feeling filled my mind along with memories of my first meeting with Alexandru. He was a beautiful man. Was it appropriate to call a man beautiful? Maybe, maybe not, but that is what he was. He was almost angelic, but as my father had always told me, the most beautiful things are often the deadliest.

I had Lucian pull over, deciding to walk along the trail so we might ambush the Cymarthian on his usual route. I had memorized it the last two times I had followed him up there. Never followed him too far into the forest, but enough to know which trailhead he followed and where it intersected with others. It would be the perfect place to catch him by surprise.

“My mother wants to know what flowers to have at the ceremony,” Lucian whispered as we hiked to the spot. Ever since we were given our first mission, he had wedding plans on his mind, even now with us hunting a dangerous monster at night in the forest far from civilization.

I smiled up at him, hoping my eyes were filled with as much love as his, although ever since meeting Alexandru, I couldn't help but notice things about Lucian that I wasn't attracted to. Then again, our marriage wasn't all about attraction. We were two powerful Vanator families coming together for the benefit of the organization. No matter if I was attracted to him to begin with or not, this marriage would be happening.

“Let's get through this night, then I will let you both know about flowers,” I told him. “This is the spot. He should be coming up from there.”

Just as I pointed down the path, the call of a falcon came, quickly followed by an earthshaking crash just behind us. We whipped around, gasping as Alexandru appeared before our eyes, glowing with power as he let out a challenging blood-curdling roar. I nearly dropped my gun, stunned by his sudden appearance and the terrifying glare in his eyes as he took us in.

“Quick!” I yelled to Lucian, turning to where he had been standing, only to find the place empty. I looked over my shoulder, seeing him running back down the path. The sight of him fleeing left me stunned once more. He had left me. *He fucking left me behind to die at the hands of an angry Cymarthian male.* He hadn't even tried to grab my hand to pull me with him.

A joke I had often heard growing up flashed in my mind, “How do you outrun a bear? You don't. You outrun your friends.” He was outrunning me to get away from the Cymarthian.

I quickly snapped myself back to reality, turning to Alexandru and raising my gun to fire. Only, he was fast. Far faster than I had been led to believe he should be. He ripped the gun from my hands, breaking it easily before throwing it into the bushes, half to the left and half to the right.

Adrenaline kicked in, my fight or flight mode telling me to fight. I wasn't going to die. Not like this. I was the daughter of the most decorated man in the Vanator organization. This was my first time facing these monsters; I was destined for greatness, not death. I punched him in the jaw before kicking at his kneecap, hoping to blow out his knee, giving me time to run.

Again, he was faster than I had anticipated. His grip caught my leg, and he flipped me on my back with a hard thud before he grabbed me again, throwing me over his shoulder. I struggled against him, his hold only tightening as I kicked and pounded my fists against his back, screaming for Lucian to come save me.

“Your little locksmith isn't coming back, Camilla,” he stated, slapping his hand on my ass, leaving a slight sting even through my jeans. “Sit still. If I drop you, it will be on your head.”

His threat didn't stop me from struggling. Even if I fell headfirst, I had confidence in my training to land on my hands. I wasn't going to go into my death willingly. I was going to get free and make it back to my family, and when I did, I was going to punch Lucian right square in the nose. One punch for

every second I was held prisoner by the Cymarthian. His mom wanted to know what flowers I wanted for our wedding. Now a better question was what flowers his mother was going to send to her son's hospital bed.

Despite his threat and no matter how much I struggled, Alexandru didn't drop me. He was carrying me deeper and deeper into the forest. He soon left the trail, his steps sure and confident, as if he were walking in his backyard. Eventually, I gave up and stopped struggling, doing my best to watch our surroundings for landmarks to help me find my way back when I escaped. And I would run. No matter what, I was going to get away. I was going to live.

Start reading NOW! “Taken by the Shifter Enemy”

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0BSGL9ZPS>

Do you like FREEBIE Romance books?

**Sign up for my newsletter and get Fated to
the Enemy: Vampire Shifter Enemies to Lovers
Romance for free!**

(Exclusive Newsletter Group

where you will only receive updates about Waverly Sage
Books and updates,
No other promotional emails)

Falling for the enemy could destroy me.

But fated mates are bound for life.

I joined the hunt to reconnect with my brother but instead, I
bonded with the enemy.

At first, he seemed like a savage and an evil monster, until I
looked into his warm loving eyes.

At that moment he became a savior.

It was drilled into me that all vampires were bad.

But since falling for Jakob, I've discovered what true love feels like.

I don't want to lose it.

Jakob denied the connection until my life was ripped out of his hands.

He must accept the bond and protect me from others who want me as their own.

The family is right on our heels, and we are running out of time.

The rising sun is stealing Jakob's strength.

Jakob must finish the bond with me, or I must return to the family who wants to kill me.

Do you like FREEBIE Romance books?

**Sign up for my newsletter and get Fated to
the Enemy: Vampire Shifter Enemies to Lovers
Romance for free!**

(Exclusive Newsletter Group

where you will only receive updates about Waverly Sage
Books and updates,

No other promotional emails)