



SURROUNDED

BY

MAGIC

N. Dune

Surrounded by Magic

N Dune

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Trigger Warning

If you have read *Within Her Magic*, you know what you are in for, so proceed. If you are coming to my book, all brand new and sparkly, you might want to read *Within Her Magic* first for a better experience, but if you choose to proceed, then let me tell you this is called a dark paranormal fantasy for a reason. Things that may concern you are the lack of morals my characters have, their constant need to have sex, their language, and their violence. In addition, you have a touch of dub and non-con mixed right in there with the good stuff. This book contains the use of magic and characters who will literally do whatever the hell they want. I cannot be held responsible for any of this or the fact you might need to 'sort yourself out' whilst reading this book. Just have a quick check in and make sure that your hand has not strayed to your imaginary (or real) pearls. If it has, shut this book now and find something more suitable. If you want me to just get on with the good stuff, then please turn the page.

*To all the readers who love a little darkness in their fiction. I
see your darkness and match it with my own.*

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***As always, thank you, lovely ladies, for making my book baby
shine.***

I

Lils

IT'S DARK, SO VERY DARK AND DAMP. MOISTURE IS RUNNING down the walls. The stench is unbearable, but I can't pick myself up off the floor. I've failed her yet again.

"Lils... Lileth, wake up, my love." Soft, gentle tones lace a voice that I know well now. A cool finger traces my cheek. My eyelids are heavy and feel wet as I open my eyes and look into the dark green irises of my lover.

"Ana?" I have to check I'm not still dreaming. The nightmares started after we returned to the castle following the battle with Caleb and his mindless masses. It's like my mind finally wanted to remind me, after all that bloodshed and effort, that I had still lost my first love, Maria. I couldn't save her from the bastards who took us and the brutal way in which she was killed.

"It's me, yes. You were dreaming again," she states matter-of-factly. Ana very rarely shows emotions, except perhaps when in battle, then you can hear her whooping with joy as she bites and hacks into anyone standing in her way. My mate is a force to be reckoned with.

"Just another nightmare," I confirm, sitting up on the makeshift bed of leaves and moss. I lean over and stoke the fire idling in the stone fireplace. We camped in a ruined house in the middle of the woods tonight. "Where's Hunter and Oren?" I look around the dark, dingy room, illuminated only by the glow of the resurrected fire. Shadows flicker in the corners of the ruins, expanding and contracting; they appear to hold secrets. As my eyes adjust to the dim lighting, I stare

intently into each nook and cranny. The feeling of something lurking has the wolf inside me stirring, ready to fight.

“They were scouting the perimeter and said they’d bring back food.” She lifts a strand of my hair off my face brushing it away from my neck. Her eyes start to glow a little in the firelight. “Want me to help you forget?” she asks, softly placing her lips against the tender skin of my neck, raising goosebumps all over my arms. With just one bite, she could bring intense euphoria or, in the case of her enemies, extreme pain, but I have been relying on her far too much for this distraction.

Turning my head, I kiss her soft lips and then stand up, stretching my aching limbs. “No, love, I can’t keep relying on you to take reality away from me. At some point, I need to face it.”

Ana nods; she understands me better than I understand myself sometimes. I’m about to say more when the snap of a twig in the woods outside gains both of our attention. Our men are both light-footed, and since we spent so much time with Rissa, Hunter, in particular, has lost his clumsy gait when hunting. Oren seems to flow across the ground in a way I’ve never witnessed before, and I can’t deny it is alluring, even if the fae in question is slightly annoying.

My beautiful vampire mate is on her feet in seconds, flicking her fiery red hair off her shoulder so it falls down her back. My fingers itch to tangle in the wavy masses, and her eyes, the colour of dewy pine needles, almost sparkle with amusement as she catches my thoughts. My wolf huffs in my head as I force myself to concentrate. We stand there in silence, allowing our supernatural senses to stroll outwards to assess where the sound is coming from. It may well be an animal, but I’ve learnt to be more cautious, and Ana is always jumpy and ready for a fight.

“*Get out. Run!*” Urgent words are thrust into my mind by Ana. A repeat of words she just received from Hunter is my guess. She has been doing that since they mated. Ana must have more information as she starts to dart around at super

speed, packing up the few items we both have strewn around the room.

“Why are we leaving Hunter’s stuff?” I ask as I pull the backpack she’s just thrust at me over my shoulders and follow her into the shadows surrounding the mansion. We keep our backs to the crumbling walls, careful not to dislodge any bricks as we enter the forest on the east side of the property. Just as we’ve cleared the tree line, I pick up the sound of approaching footfalls and whoever it is, they are making no effort to hide their movements. Ana pulls on my shoulder, and we duck down behind some vegetation. Long tendrils of weeds cover what may be the stump of the fallen tree to our right.

A group of male wolf shifters, by the scent of them, emerge from the west. One rather burly-looking, unshaven, dark-haired male is pushing Hunter in front of him. My body goes deadly still, needing to hear everything, and I try to ignore the apparent bruising on Hunter’s face and the rope tied around his hands, which are bound behind him, causing him to stumble with each push from the arsehole shifter.

My wolf stomps in my head, ready to charge and attack them. I tell her to calm her shit, needing all my wits about me. We are outnumbered, which shouldn’t be too much of a problem with Ana by my side, but I need all the facts. Hunter is alone, so where is Oren? And how did they manage to capture my witch mate?

“Hunter says to stay out of sight. Oren has portalled out of here. They were arguing when they were ambushed.” Ana’s voice coats my mind. She sounds as though she is about to start laughing, but as I glance to my left at her crouched-down figure, I see no outward sign of this. She’s not even looking at me. Instead, her focus is solely on Hunter.

I know the two of them have had sex. They aren’t exactly quiet about it, and I thought I would be bothered by this as Ana is my mate, but I’m not. It has taken me some time to come to terms with the fact that I have more than one mate and that two of them are male. I wouldn’t say I’m completely happy about it, and I’ve no idea why this is happening to me

because it is unheard of for a wolf to have more than one mate. Our recent meeting with some of Ana's older vampire acquaintances didn't shed any more light on the subject but did give me a sense of calm about it. The vamps were intrigued and honestly nicer than I expected them to be.

My mate snorts in my head as she no doubt reads my wayward thoughts. Ana is much better at this mate bond stuff. She has taken it all in her stride, whilst I'm still coming to terms with it all. Ana draws my attention, and I glance at her as she shuffles slightly, fingers gripping the dirt as Hunter is thrust forward violently and lands on his knees. The rough treatment of our witch mate has my wolf wanting to rip everyone's heads off. I quietly exhale, trying to calm myself.

"What more do we know?" I ask, pushing the words into her mind as gently as possible, hoping to distract her before she goes full vamp on their arses. *"And where the fuck is Oren?"*

"I've no idea where the fae has gone, but Hunter told him to leave. The stupid witch is trying to gain intel from these fuckers. They are Joseph's." Ana's words are laced with fury, not only at Hunter for putting himself in such a vulnerable position but also because these bastards are from the same pack that captured and tortured her. Thoughts of Maria briefly flit into my head, and I push them away. Not because I no longer care about what happened to my first love, but more because I need to concentrate on what is happening in front of us. The shifters enter the building, climbing over the remains of the anterior of the property and head inside the last intact parts of the structure, where we left the fire burning.

"I told you I was out here on my own." Hunter's words are mumbled through a broken lip, but I can still hear them, as no doubt my beautiful vampire mate who crouches beside me can. Having supernatural hearing has its benefits, but having it greatly enhanced because you are mated to a vampire is even better. I can hear the loose stones crunching under their feet as they make no effort to hide their progress through the rubble. Cocky bastards, definitely Joseph's men. The thought of my 'betroted' has my gut clenching in anger. Ana suddenly

moves her hand over my mouth and startles me. It's only then that I realise I have been growling. My wolf is going nuts in my head, my fingers have elongated into claws, and I hadn't even noticed. I sink my teeth into her hand just enough to make her let go, but instead of settling down next to me, her hand grabs the back of my head, fisting my hair and dragging my lips to hers.

“Now is not the time to turn me on, Little Wolf.” The words slip in a whisper past her fangs which now graze my lips, causing me to stifle a moan. Fuck, precarious situations have started to mess with my libido. I want nothing more than to thrust my tongue into her—

A hiss from Ana derails my thoughts as she moves away with speed, panting. She cocks her head to the side, an unnecessary move, but it reminds me that we are supposed to be listening to what is being said inside the building in front of us. Our mate is in there with some West Pack fuckers, and we need to retrieve him.

2

Hunter

I CAN FEEL THE ANGER RISING IN MY MATE; FOR A VAMPIRE, she struggles to hide her internal emotions. You wouldn't know it to look at her. She's all warrior on the outside but, dare I say, softer on the inside. Not something I'd ever say to her face, though.

Looking up from my position on my knees, I eye the six wolves around me. I've got some idea of what I'm up against now. My fault, really, for getting ambushed in the first place, but that bloody fae is relentless in his quest to mate all three of us. Ordinarily, I'm not attracted to males, but there is something about him that calls to me. However, if he thinks I'm going to bend over or suck his cock just because he's pretty, then he is wildly mistaken. I sent him packing as soon as we were aware these buffoons had surrounded us. Guessing they were from Joseph's pack was simple; their unkept, arrogant demeanour was easy to spot. Oren had protested, but I insisted that he portal out of there to find our mates. I wanted to get more information from these wolves. Joseph has been slinking around the countryside, trying to find allies that would be willing to take down Malaki's newly formed pack in the North, and I need to know more about their plan.

I've never belonged anywhere. My own family abandoned me to be raised by humans in a slum, not that I hold that against them. I can't remember my parents. The couple who took me in, William and Mary, had been caring and into herbal remedies, which I was able to enhance with magic as I got older. Mary had a friend who was a low-level witch, so every week, we would visit her, and I would learn more about my

magic from Simone. However, I never really felt like I belonged. So, finding my mates, even though the circumstances had been brutal, has given me a sense of purpose—a reason to survive.

“There’s no one here.” The bullish male in front of me, whose name I believe is Paul, stirs me out of the past where my mind rarely dwells since I was rescued by Rissa and set on a new path. A path with a future worth fighting for.

I hate to say I told you so, but I do because I love getting a rise out of these guys who really are as thick as shit. It must be a prerequisite for Joseph when including people in his pack, or it’s a result of inbreeding between them all. I hold the chuckle in because that is probably pushing my luck, and I won’t be able to gain intel if I’m dead.

The rough stone ground is hard as it meets my face, and adds to the cuts and bruises I’ve already sustained from the guy behind me, who has taken great glee in shoving me at every given opportunity. My guess is that it was a hard kick to my back from him, which landed me here face-first. Fortunately, I had been on my knees already, so it wasn’t too far to fall, although my nose is likely broken, and I can taste blood at the back of my throat. I’m surprised the idiots around me can’t feel the anger of my vampire mate because I can feel it as I lie here on the floor. It permeates the building, and I hide a smirk because I know what’s coming.

I pretend to be unconscious, keeping my eyes closed as I recuperate on the cold uneven ground, once the floor for this house but now strewn with weeds and rubble, like most properties which were left to rot after the great purge. A word Mary used to describe what the supernaturals did in each of the countries as they reduced most human-made structures to dust, leaving only a few remaining and encouraging nature to rebalance itself.

I focus on the movement around me as the shifters add wood to the fire that my mates left burning in the broken fireplace. I had told these wolves that I was here alone when they demanded that I take them back to where I was camping. They probably expected to come across a few humans or low-

level witches travelling together. I know that I sometimes give off the impression that I'm human to the untrained, but they should have been able to tell I was a witch. This lot are not particularly good at using the senses they were born with, and quite clearly, they have not been trained well. Joseph prefers to use brute strength instead of skill it seems.

"You had better have all the information you need, Witch, because we are coming in whether you are ready or not. Your vampire is losing control, and the beautiful Lileth has already shifted." Oren's softly spoken words take over my mind like a tune you cannot forget, getting lodged in every area of my brain so that he is the only person I can think about. I'm assuming it's fae magic which allows him to access the mind of another being because it's usually only witches who can do this outside of a mate bond. Although Ana informs me that vampires are also able to communicate with each other.

"Give me two more minutes, and then they are yours." I send my thoughts to Ana and Oren, getting barely anything back from my vampire, only a singsong acknowledgement from Oren. Slowly I raise one eyelid so that I can get a better view of what is happening. Around me, the wolves settle on the floor close to the hearth, appearing to have forgotten I'm even here. Paul warms his hands by stretching them out towards the fire.

"What are we doing with this witch, then?" Burly twat, who likes shoving people around, says to Paul, who seems to be more senior in rank.

"The boss got wind of that little bitch wolf in the area with a witch, vampire, and fae in tow. He's mad as shit that she killed Jeff and his men," Paul states without turning to the burly twat. "It's clearly not this witch, as he's on his own."

Great observational skills, you idiot.

Opening the other eye, I look up through my hair, which is tangled all over my face and providing excellent cover, as I watch the burly twat get up.

"So, can we kill this one?" His voice holds a sense of hope, and a murmur goes around the group in agreement.

Guess the idea of a witch for dinner is making them happy. I do not doubt that they will shift and tear me apart given half the chance. So it's clear that Joseph is looking for Lileth because he thinks she killed his men. I wasn't sure they would ever be found, but I guess if they were supposed to rendezvous with Joseph and didn't, he may have sent someone looking for them. They wouldn't have found much as Rissa burnt down the building we were being held in, but some wolves out on patrol likely escaped.

“Yeah, this one is no use to us. We feast, rest, and then continue on their trail. Joseph wants that wolf bitch back so he can make her suffer while her brothers watch.” Paul is awfully chatty for a dead male walking. I force myself to stay motionless, not to give away the growing anger inside me.

“Malaki ain't nothing to worry about; it's his brother and that witch he mated.” The lanky, smelly one, who they call Nath, pipes up, as he gets up to join the burly twat, presumably so they can shift and kill me. He spits on the floor at his feet, only a metre away from my head, as he goes off on a tangent about inter-species breeding being an abomination and how Rissa needs to be taken down for all that she has done. *I'd love to see you try, fuck head. Rissa would gut you like a pig without even thinking twice about it.*

“That she would, Witch, that she would. Prepare yourself. We are coming in.” Oren's voice calms me as I watch the two idiots getting ready to shift, so that they can rip me to pieces. Maybe I should feel concerned, fearful even? But I don't. I have total confidence not only in my own abilities but also those of my mates. Good job, really, as I'm still lying here bound and unable to move from the floor. I calm my breathing, reciting a long ago memorised spell, manipulating the ropes that bind me. Fortunately, they didn't have magically enhanced handcuffs like the others that captured Ana, me, and Lils, resulting in us being rescued by Rissa and Rogue.

My ability to manipulate metals and make objects smaller had done nothing for me in that instance. Since meeting Rissa, though, I have found a greater affinity for spells and potions, which has been a valuable addition to my arsenal; along with

the training drilled into all of us by them both, we are becoming a powerful fighting team.

My body is already starting to heal itself. I can feel the broken bones bind together, which is not a pleasant experience. My natural healing has increased in speed since Ana and I were mated. I keep all this to myself, barely breathing as the two ugly, now naked wolf shifters approach me, laughing and joking about what parts of me they are going to devour first. Nice.

Then it all happens at once. As I pull myself up to a sitting position, much to the surprise of the two about-to-shift wolves, a reddish-grey wolf comes charging in, taking down the ugly lanky one with its jaws around his neck. A sickening crunch puts a stop to the almost scream on his lips. Paul shifts running towards me, just as Ana flies past me in a blur, dropping a sword in my lap as she takes out the burly twat, breaking his neck and ripping into his flesh for good measure. Rivulets of blood drip from her fangs, down her chin, as she gives me a manic grin, eyes glowing in blood lust. I feel myself getting hard just looking at her, my vampire mate is a sight to behold, and my dick hopes we will be benefiting from this fight later.

Even though my knee is still healing from what was likely a cracked bone, I pull myself to my feet with the help of Oren, who appears silently behind me, looking on as the other two go to town. To anyone else, it would seem he is just standing there, letting them get on with it. However, I didn't miss the vine that twisted around Paul's neck as he shifted, pulling his wolf form tight into the wall where the vegetation smothered him before he had time to make a sound.

Two more shifters run at us amongst the chaos of their falling comrades. Back to back now, Oren and I swing swords, slicing into barely shifted flesh. The spray of blood coats my face, and as I turn to Oren, he quickly dispatches the other wolf without breaking a sweat. His white-blond hair, covered in blood splatter, is doing strange things to my insides. I have never been so turned-on by violence as I am when I'm around my mates. Sure, there are occasions when our fights have been so intense that I've worried for their safety, but they are all

more than capable of taking care of themselves. Now with this fae, whose sharp features stun even our enemies with their beauty, we simply portal out of any situation if we so choose. Mostly though, our choice is to fight and rid our world of the evil that wishes to possess it.

“You are getting quite poetic, Hunter.” Oren reaches out, brushing a tangle of hair from my face. My gut reaction is to move further from him, but instead, I find myself unable to look away as our eyes connect. Icy blue irises assess my body as Ana and Lils finish off the last of the wolf shifters and come to join us.

“You could have been seriously hurt, you bloody idiot.” Lils approaches me, totally naked and covered in blood and guts. Fuck she looks amazing and furious. I try and hide my smirk, but she must see it in my eyes. The next thing I know, I have a fist hurtling towards me, which I deflect easily, grabbing her and using the momentum to pull her into my arms. She fidgets for a bit, as is often the case when I try and embrace her. Falling for a male, or possibly two, given the way Oren and her are interacting lately, has blindsided Lils.

Having this many mates is unheard of, but our connection is undeniable, and right now, that connection is thrumming with emotions. Add in a fight, and the atmosphere in this small dilapidated ruin has become heated, and it has nothing to do with the fire roaring in the broken hearth.

“Shhh, I’m fine. Look at me, Lils. Look.” I pull Lils’ chin up with my finger forcing her to look at me. Her eyes are a fiery amber as she huffs at me in disgust, causing my lips to pull up further. Fuck, I love this woman. There I said it. I love her and Ana, maybe even have feelings for the irritating fae, who is currently playing with fire as he touches the still blood-crazed vampire to my right. Lils and I both turn our heads to watch that scene play out. Ana has him on his back, down on the floor within seconds, the fae allows it, and I look on as she rips at his clothes, catching his skin in her frenzy. He cries out in ecstasy, a feeling I know well as Ana latches on to his neck, sinking her fangs in. Oren’s eyes appear to roll back into his

head as Ana straddles him, hitching up her skirt, which I'm sure she only wears for ease of access.

Lils' breath hitches, and I return my attention to her, feeling the need to explain why I put myself in danger, even though I'm sure it is evident to her now. Her grip on my ruined shirt tightens as the noise beside us turns animalistic. The panting of her breath suggests that she is turned-on. Although we can't yet link mentally unless Rissa connects us in the heat of battle, I'm in no doubt about her feelings just by looking at her dilated pupils and the almost burning heat rolling off her body. My cock stands to attention as if answering a call to duty.

"I couldn't bear it if you got hurt." Lils whispers her confession, one I wasn't expecting but gladly accept. Fingers brush my skin, as with one hand tightly bound in my shirt, she pulls herself up onto her tiptoes, initiating our first kiss. I don't count the one forced on us by an interfering fae, even though it still has me rock-hard when I think about it. Her lips feel soft, and I allow her time to come to terms with what she is starting. I have been as patient as I can possibly be with her, not wanting to force our bond. Now she is here, in my arms, taking matters into her own hands. I let her tongue explore for a second, opening to her kiss.

Pulling back, I have to be sure. "Do you want this, Lils?" I search her passion heated face, hopeful but knowing I may need to pull away if this isn't what she wants.

"Yes." Her whispered words blow softly against my lips as she seeks me out again. My cock is painfully hard between us, and I catch her moan with my mouth, plundering and tasting in a way I have only imagined doing since the fae, Carys, forced our first earth-shattering kiss on us after the battle with Caleb.

Gentle hands pull me down onto the floor, and I go willingly, ignoring the proximity of our two other mates fucking nearby. Lils grinds her body against mine, trying to find the friction that will allow her the pleasure she needs.

"This is her first time with a male. Go slowly with her." Ana broadcasts her words in my head in a rush as if they were

an afterthought, but they come through with some strong feelings and a threat of death if I don't listen to what she is saying. Lils is our centre, our core, the sun we orbit, and although we are found mates, not fated, and technically would not perish if one of us were to die, this need to protect Lils and gravitate around her has us feeling that to lose her would be our undoing.

“Is this how you want our first time to be? In amongst all this carnage, blood, and sinew?” I whisper the words against her ear, pulling her closer to me as I caress the skin along her ribs.

“I can think of no more perfect time. We were never meant for soft beds and rose petals, Hunter.” Her answer is honest, and I take that as all the permission I need to flip her over, nestling in between her thighs.

3

Lils

HUNTER'S LIP IS STILL BLEEDING, LEAVING A TASTE OF HIS lifeblood in my mouth as we devour each other with hard sloppy kisses. Fuck, I want this witch as my own. My wolf is fully on board with the idea as she pants and huffs in my head, wanting out so she can take part in our mating. *'Another time,'* I assure her, because this will not be the only time I am with Hunter. But this is the only first time I will have with any male, and I want it to be mine, all for me. My feelings, my pussy being stretched as never before, plus I'm not all that sure how Hunter will feel about fucking my wolf, so that will be a bridge we cross another time. Maybe a partial shift would suffice if I could pull it off.

I've never wanted a male like this, but the constant pulsing of my pussy is insistent and downright needy right now. I start tearing at his jeans, needing them open so I can reach his cock. A part of him I have secretly admired when we bathed together in the freezing water of rivers as our journey progressed. I've found it impossible not to think about what it would feel like between my legs, rutting away like Oren is currently doing with Ana. I turn my head a little just for a second to admire my beautiful vampire. Her face is slightly flushed or a tone more than the palest of pale that she usually sports. Her fangs are distended and dripping blood. Her head is thrown back as she cries out with pleasure.

A warm hand forces my face back around as Hunter locks eyes with me, and I see just how much he is holding back. I don't want his restraint. I want every moment of his passion, his need. I pull at the final button of his jeans and push my

hand inside, finding him naked and hard underneath. For a second, I can barely breathe. Such is my need for this man. This may be the first time I've touched someone's cock voluntarily, but I've seen enough to know what I need to do. He grinds against my palm as I use my other hand at the back of his neck to pull his face closer to mine so I can capture his lips again.

“Need to be inside you.” His voice sounds strained as his hips continue to move. His body feels heavy on top of me, and I fight the urge to flip us back over and take control again. I feel a surge of his magic as the air fills with the smell of sex, blood and the distinct scent of fae and witch magic. It's a heady concoction which has my wolf prowling in my head and my nails elongating. I remove my hand from between us, worried I might hurt Hunter with my wolf so near the surface. He seems to take the move as my need to push things forward, and within seconds he stands naked above me. Lean, hard muscles fight for my attention. I feast on the sight of my mate, my breath leaving my lips in sharp pants. I can feel the arousal between my legs, and I'm convinced the floor underneath me is soaked from it.

Hunter stands before me, his eyes roaming my skin. I lift my hips, urging him to continue, needing him to put out the fire burning between my thighs. A whimper escapes without my permission as I gaze upon his body in a lust-filled daze. Propped up on my elbows on the dirty, disgusting floor of this broken-down mansion, I am about to lose my virginity to my witch mate, and I can't help but wonder if all that we have gone through together has led us right to this moment. There were plenty of times when we were held captive that I thought I would lose this final shred of my innocence in the most heinous of ways, and maybe if Rissa and Rogue hadn't saved us, I would have.

“Hey, Lils, look at me. We can stop.” Hunter's voice drags me from the memories I have tried to keep buried. His face is full of concern and at complete odds with the glowing emerald of his eyes and the bobbing cock resting against his pelvic area, which is covered in fine, curling dark hair. I may have

drooled a little at the sight of his large cock patiently waiting for me to grow a pair and voice my need.

“Make me forget, Hunter. Just for a moment, I want to forget everything.” I don’t know if he understands, but he doesn’t hesitate to kneel between my legs. I place my feet on the floor, disregarding the feeling of thick liquid under the pads of my feet. Instead, I focus on the male in front of me and open my legs wide, unashamed of the arousal he will no doubt see weeping from my needy pussy.

“Fuck, Lils, look at you. So fucking wet and ready for me.”

I expect him to climb on top of me and notch his cock in my entrance the way I’ve seen him do before with Ana, when they were so caught up with themselves they didn’t realise I was watching like a turned-on creeper beside them. Instead, he bows his head, and within seconds the soft rasping sensation of his wet tongue swiping through my pussy lips has my head hanging back and my gaze hitting the open sky through the broken roof above us. I watch the stars twinkle and shine, their meagre light seeming to pulse in time with my core.

There is nothing soft about his ministrations, and I find myself barely able to catch my breath as it escapes my lips in sharp bursts, the feeling of my impending climax tightening my muscles. As I push my heels harder into the dirty, stony ground, I feel our connection solidify in my chest. If I concentrate, I’m sure I would hear his thoughts, but I’m past the point of being able to think straight. Hunter sucks my clit into his mouth, biting down. A silent scream opens my mouth, but no sound comes out as my breath is trapped in my lungs, and I come hard. Bloody fuck, this male’s mouth is magic.

A snickering between my legs draws my attention. I guess someone can read my thoughts now, I roll my eyes, but I don’t have time to comment as he crawls up my body. I lie down, thankful for the patch of weeds sprouting from a crack in the floor and providing a makeshift pillow behind my head. Hunter’s stubble scratches a glorious path up the skin of my stomach and stops briefly at my breast as he pays homage to both soft mounds, sucking and biting my nipples, causing me

to wrap my legs around his waist, pulling him into me and hoping to urge him on. Urgency, like no other, takes over my body, insisting that we complete our mating. A warning of our vulnerable state niggles away in the back of my mind.

“I understand your concern, Lils, but I won’t take you like a savage for your first time.” Hunter’s words sound loud in my head and cause an embarrassing gasp to leave me. He swallows the sound with his lips as they reach my mouth and devours me like a male starved.

“I appreciate the sentiment, but my gut is telling me we need to hurry, and I want you far too desperately to take it slow.” I’m no fragile flower, I don’t need to be coddled by any male, and I make those feelings clear, thrusting them into his mind. Hunter stills, balancing on his forearms either side of my head. His shoulder-length hair hangs in tangles around us, giving a false sense of privacy as his glowing eyes search mine. I hope he finds what he is looking for because my greedy pussy is pulsing with need again as the head of his cock brushes up against my clit.

He reaches between us, lining himself up and thrusting forward. The head of his cock starts to stretch me in a way I have never experienced before, and it takes my breath away. I struggle to fight my wolf back as she threatens to intervene and take control of our mating. *“Look at me. Show me your eyes so I can see how it feels for you as you take my cock for the first time.”* Hunter’s voice has taken on a rasping quality in my head, as if he is holding on by a thread to his own needs trying to make this all about me. I appreciate his thoughtfulness and comply, opening my eyes and staring into his as he pushes further into me.

I’m full, so very full. I exhale loudly, opening my legs wider, hoping to open my entrance to alleviate the slight burning sensation. Then my body takes over. I can feel myself getting wetter as he works his cock in and out of my needy pussy, slowly at first, but then as he starts to groan low in the back of his throat, his tempo increases and I cling to him like a life raft as his hips piston at a pace no human would be able to pull off. His mating with Ana has given my witch a

supernatural speed which he is using to his benefit now as he thrusts in and out of me, giving in to the mating instinct that I feel flowing through me and now, with our connection, in his mind as well.

Hunter grips my thigh, holding it back and opening me up further so he can push in and out harder and faster. A cry of passion, pain, and such overwhelming need pulls out of my lips as the pressure builds inside me, threatening to overtake my body. "Harder!" I demand between moans. The urgency is reaching a fever pitch, and I'm damn sure I want that orgasm which I can feel just out of reach before anyone interrupts us. Hunter pulls his body onto his knees, taking me with him and splaying my thighs wide as he watches our joining with glowing eyes and hungry moans.

"You are taking me so well, my beautiful wolf. Show me how it feels to have my cock opening your tight pussy for the first time." His grunts become animal-like, and I manage to bring myself up onto my elbows so that I can watch our joining too. His cock is so big, and I watch in needy awe as it disappears inside me, only to pull out again covered in my juices and a tiny amount of blood as he stretches and thrusts into me over and over. Sounds I never knew I could make escape my lips as I watch, entranced as Hunter moans deep in his throat and thrusts between my thighs, which glisten with a sheen of sweat from the heat of our mating.

The tightness starts low in my stomach, building and spreading with each invasion as the angle of his cock hits the bundle of nerves inside me over and over.

"Hunter, I need to come!" I cry, still balancing on the precipice. He pulls out of me, and I seriously have to fight to hold back my wolf. My claws dig into the ground on either side of my body, and a growl forces itself out of my throat. His brief chuckle is dark and gruff as his gaze takes me in. He looks about ready to devour me.

"Turn over, Lils." It's not a request, but a command, one I would normally fight against but the ache between my legs and the near frenzy from my wolf has me flipping over onto my stomach and then pushing myself onto all fours. I can feel

Hunter's warmth behind me, then a delicious stretch between my legs as he thrusts into me again. A growl settles in my throat as my wolf starts to surface, and I dig my claws into the hard stone floor.

"Oh, fuck yes, that's it!" Hunter cries out behind me as he pulls me up so I'm kneeling, my back against his front. I would take a moment to compliment his stamina and agility, but I'm beyond words and fighting a losing battle with my wolf. His pace is punishing, and although his teeth on my neck are no sharper than a human's, just sensing his want to bite has my wolf losing her shit and grinding into him, meeting his upward thrusts and pushing down onto his large swollen cock as it impales us over and over again. My breasts sway viciously, and as Hunter's fingers find my clit, I know it's game over. The pressure is too much, and with a scream, I come so hard my vision blurs, but still, he keeps moving. It's too much, I try to tell him, but I can feel another orgasm building. This one causes my whole body to shake as Hunter draws it out of me, biting down into my shoulder with an agonising cry of pleasure as he pumps his seed inside me.

Our bodies crumple, in what feels like slow motion, onto the dirty hard floor amongst all the grime, blood, and body parts. We lay there, breathing heavily, facing each other, oblivious to our surroundings as the bond between us tightens and binds us. No more talking through Ana. I can hear my witch mate loud and clear in my head as he checks that he hasn't hurt me. I scoff out my answer, telling him I'm fine, but the ache between my thighs reminds me that I have had sex with a male. It wasn't forced on me. This was something I initiated and am now likely to want again. My mind having been utterly blown by the way he made me feel.

"You were spectacular." Oren's voice reminds me that we are not alone and irritates me slightly, even if my wolf perks up inside me with the prospect of another male to mate.

"That she was." Ana moves in beside us and strokes my hair, leaning in close. "Next time, I will join you." Her words hold a promise and send a shiver of anticipation through my

weary body. “Now, though, we must move. Oren is preparing a portal.”

Ana’s words stoke the feeling I’d had in my gut, the urgency to be away from here. Hunter nods his agreement, claiming my lips in a punishing kiss before helping me with my clothes pulled hastily from a backpack Ana had retrieved. My muscles feel like liquid, and I know I need to rest but here is not the place for that. Hunter finds his bag of potions and readies a few around the room. Oren opens a portal away from the fire and the potions Hunter has set. Ana grips my hand in hers as we clear our possessions from this ruin and follow Oren into the portal. Not a form of travel I particularly love, but it does the job. A loud explosion from behind has me hurrying as Oren closes the portal behind Hunter.

“You cut that fine, Witch.” Oren gripes as we exit the portal. Hunter’s shoulders rise in a shrug. He looks undisturbed by the fae’s ire. His attention is on where we have landed.

“Where the hell are we, Fae?” Hunter asks, taking up a defensive position by my side as he turns to check behind us. On my right, the opposite side to Hunter, Ana is also on high alert. She looks as though nothing just went down at the ruin, her hair is still a cascade of flaming red waves down her back, and her clothes are all back in place. I look down at my own attire, noting with some satisfaction that apart from some dirt and grime, I also seem reasonably put together. Oren stands in front of us, appearing relaxed, as his shirt, which hangs in tatters about his perfectly sculpted torso, flaps in the breeze. His pale blue eyes scan the area around us, then return to me. The full force of his gaze lands on me as he appears to assess my body like a specimen in a jar. I know I’m wearing clothes again, but I feel totally naked under his intense stare, and it’s not a particularly comfortable feeling. Shaking my head, I try to rid myself of this thought. I’m likely just tired.

“We are on the outskirts of the city once known to the humans as Bristol. The remains of the houses you can see are where the vampires kept their human pets for a time, but they now find it more convenient to have them locked up in their

breeding pens or private accommodation.” His voice is monotone, as if he isn’t just providing me with a detail that I wasn’t aware of, or information that I don’t think is widely known.

“Their what now?” I ask, looking towards Ana for an explanation. She shrugs her shoulders at me, and it’s obvious that she is avoiding my gaze.

“I was a renegade soldier used for retrieving runaway humans, finding new stock and protecting the area around the city. I had nothing to do with the way some of the vampires treated humans once the world changed.”

“But you were aware of what they were doing?” I ask, looking ahead at the outline of the towering buildings, the likes of which I have never seen before. The city takes over the horizon, but I can’t see enough from here to understand what I am looking at. Are the buildings ruined? Or still in the condition they once were when the humans lived here?

“Most humans enjoy their captivity. My kind has always been generous to those we choose to feed from.” Her eyes light up as she looks at me in a way that suggests the untold pleasures she can give me when she feeds. I’m only too aware of the addictive nature of her bite and the orgasms it has pulled from me.

“Do they have a choice?” I wonder aloud, my head turning from Ana to Oren before looking to my left at Hunter. “Did you know about this?”

“I know a little, Lils, but not all of what goes on in the cities. I have made it my life’s mission to stay away from them, lest they use me for my magic or breeding.”

“They breed hybrids?” My voice raises an octave or two at this revelation, and I curse my brothers for their overprotective nature that kept me locked up in the castle most of my life. Of course, I understand why they did it and how it was wise to keep me away from my father, but seriously I sound like a complete idiot, and my mates’ looks of sympathetic understanding are making me squirm. I want to kill something.

4

Ana

MY MATE LOOKS ABOUT READY TO KILL SOMETHING. IT MUST be difficult for her to understand, but to me, it's just normal behaviour for my kind. Vampires have fed from humans for as long as both have existed. Some say demons themselves created the first vampires, but however we came about, we have always needed humans to feed and to increase our population as we are unable to breed. When they started to die out, vampires took it upon themselves to claim males and females to ensure that our food source survived in some capacity as the supernaturals set the world back to the way it should have been.

I look at the city in front of me, trying to see it through Lils' eyes. Does she see the colours of the vegetation the way I do? Hear the insects crawling along the branches of the nearby trees? I still find all the different pigments I once took for granted as a human stunning now that I can see them in the light again. I guess I have the witch to thank for that. Meeting Ris, Rogue, and the others was unexpected, and them saving me from being burnt alive was even more so. A pang of some long-forgotten emotion flows through me and is swiftly gone when I think of that human. Rogue was special, unlike any human I have met before or since.

Pulling myself from this train of thought, I focus on the small pack I belong to. What a motley crew we are, a witch, a wolf, and now a delicious fae. We are all connected through Lils, and although I share a similar bond with Hunter, I cannot put a finger on the feeling I have for Oren. It seems different somehow, but there is no denying that his blood tastes like a

fine wine, as described by the ancient vampires when they reminisced about their human days. I have never personally tasted fine wine, but I remember sweet-tasting alcohol from my youth before that bastard took my life and turned me into a killer.

“We’ll camp here and see the rest of the night out, then approach the city in the morning. It will be much safer in the light,” I state as I assess our immediate area with all my senses. Unless the vampires of this city have started recruiting witches, which is highly unlikely, they will not be outside in the daylight, thus making travelling through the city a lot easier. It is our intention to seek out an old friend of mine from my warrior days, and the quickest way to where he was when I last worked with him is through the city. Hopefully, I will be able to pick up some intel whilst we travel. Right now, we need information about mates, fated and found, and we need allies. It has been some time since I’ve heard of mates, never once having come across a being who had found theirs let alone been fated. The world is shifting into territory unknown, and Merissa, Kayden, and the rest of us need more information and a deeper connection to other species.

“It’s a good spot, yes,” Oren agrees, nodding his head, and I watch, transfixed for a second, as his long white-blond hair shifts with the motion. What is it about him that has me so obsessed? When was it that he began to feel like our mate? I haven’t felt like this since I was newly turned, desperate for blood and any form of sex I could obtain. Blood and lust go hand in hand for me, and it seems I have met my perfect match with these three. That scene at the ruin was pure animalistic rutting; if I hadn’t caught a whiff of wolf approaching, I would have loved to explore their bodies further. Maybe it’s for the best, though, as Lils is still coming to terms with being attracted to a male, and I can sense through our bond how unsettled she is now after completing her mating with Hunter.

Lils sniffs at the air, her eyes darting around as she, too, assesses our planned site for the rest of the night. I should be offended that she doesn’t take my word that we are safe, but I completely understand her need to reassure herself. Our bond is not soul-deep as a fated would be, but found mates are

connected enough for me to feel her unease about being this close to a city full of vampires, particularly as we have just encountered a small hunting party of wolves.

“No fire,” Hunter chips in his opinion as he sheaths the weapon he had in his hand when we walked out of the portal. I still don’t relish travelling by portal, but it saves us time and has so far kept us safe. I would argue with him, but it’s only Hunter who needs the warmth in these temperatures, so if he is okay without it, then I agree drawing attention to ourselves with a fire is not a good plan. It is still dark enough for some vampires to be on the prowl, although I doubt they will venture this far from the city. Most of my kind have become lazy and complacent, preferring to cultivate their food and relying on their reputation to keep intruders away from their territory.

“I’ll take the first watch with the witch. I don’t know about you, but I feel invigorated.” Oren glances at Hunter, but his eyes soon turn to Lils. There is something in the way that he looks at her that has me on edge, which is ridiculous. I’ve felt the pull to Oren ever since we were at the castle, just as I did with Hunter when I first encountered him whilst we were both held captive by the wolf pack that later brought Lils to us. Although the witch regularly gets on my last nerve, I cannot deny my attraction and need to protect both him and our wolf mate. However, with the fae, it is different. Maybe years of not trusting their kind and the manipulative ways I have seen them use has tainted my thoughts towards Oren?

I can see Lils about to object, the stubborn wolf that she is. Using my speed, I reach her side and pull her into my embrace, silencing her objection with a kiss on her pink malleable lips. “I can hear a stream not far off. Why don’t we wash some of this grime off so we don’t attract the flies,” I suggest, whispering my words in her ear more for effect than anything, as I know the others will be able to hear me. Lils leans into me, accepting my embrace and words the way I knew she would. For me, she is vulnerable, and it would seem she is willing to submit to Hunter too, but our mate is no weakling, having proved herself time and time again in battle.

“That’s settled then. We will return once the sky bleeds with the light of the sun.” Oren glances at Lils again before turning and heading off into the surrounding woodland. His shirt flapping around him brings a smile to my lips as I remember the reason he is barely clothed still. Hunter drops a pack of our belongings next to us.

“I’ll be looking for wild herbs whilst we survey the area, but if you happen to spot any evening primrose whilst on your travels, can you bring some back with you, please?” Hunter asks as he kisses Lils and then me lightly before turning to head off into the woodland in the same direction as Oren. “Oh, and if you see any autumn crocus, don’t touch it but note where you saw it.” He flings the final request over his shoulder but continues to follow the fae, knowing we will bring him what he needs if we find any, and that neither of us will touch the other poisonous plant he mentioned.

Finally, alone with my little wolf, I take her hand, something I have found I enjoy doing when we are not in fear for our lives. We walk side by side towards the sound of the water I can hear in the distance. A glance tells me she is deep in thought, and I use our bond to intrude on her internal musings.

“What has you tied up in knots, Lils?” I push the thoughts into her mind and feel her squeeze my hand in response.

“My mating with Hunter. I’m not sure how to deal with all the emotions or what they are even.” She has never been one to beat about the bush, instead preferring to give straight answers.

“Do you love him?” I question out loud, wondering if the feeling I have for her and Hunter is love.

“I’m not sure I know what love is anymore. When I look at Mal and Melody, I see a bond that was forced on them by magic and circumstances, but they grew to love each other intensely. They share some powers and can communicate with each other, like us, because Mel is a witch.” She fiddles with the sturdy handle of her blade, sheathed in the belt around her waist.

“Then, when I see Kayden and Ris together, I’m in awe of their bond. It was an instant attraction. Kayd knew straight away she was his fated. They could speak to each other in their minds before they were mated fully.” She continues musing, and I let her get whatever it is that has her thoughts tied up in knots out in the open. Maybe sharing them will help. Something else I am learning to do. I can’t resist a little dig at my mate’s innocence.

“You can say sex, Lils. They had sex.” The corners of my mouth start to creep up as I try to lighten the mood.

“I’d rather not say that in the same sentence as my brother’s name.” Lils huffs at me, sending me an annoyed look which only makes the smile that was beginning to creep up my face bigger. I try to hide it by turning my head and letting her continue.

“What they have is spiritual. It defies all that I have been taught. Fated mates are something entirely different to what we have. If one of us dies, the other will live on.” Her thoughts continue to come out in rambles through her lips, but I feel the need to stop her there.

“Don’t.” I can’t have her mentioning death again. The thought of losing her puts me in a feral haze, and I want to kill anything that threatens what we have. We may not have a soul-deep connection, but we have something I never thought would be possible for me. I’m a monster, pure and simple. How many monsters get to find what we have?

I continue pulling her towards the stream through the tangle of weeds and plants that have managed to grow under the dark canopy above us.

“If you love him, you should let him know. None of us has a promised tomorrow.” Sensing her sorrow, I stop our motion and look again at her beautiful face. Lileth is several inches shorter than me, so I lift her chin with my finger to get a proper look at her. Carefully I brush away a tear that has begun to leak from her eye, shaking my head at her show of human-like emotion. I want to make her pain disappear, so I give her a

truth, one I have sensed since she was held captive with us all those months ago.

“He loves you and has done since we first met you. Found mates don’t happen that often anymore, Lils. We should be grateful that we have found each other. Don’t second guess our bond. Embrace it for what it is.”

“I guess I was concerned that it wasn’t real, that it couldn’t be possible for me to feel this way about more than one being,” she admits. Her blue eyes have lost their colour in the dark under the trees, but I know that hue by heart and seeing them swim with moisture from her unshed tears has me leaning in to take her in my arms again, wanting to push away all the confusion I see in them and protect her from any pain.

“I didn’t think it possible either, but here we are, feeling a bond that none of us could have anticipated. We shouldn’t question the fate that brought us together, Lils.” My lips take hers gently, intending to kiss away her thoughts and redirect them to matters more pressing. “We are here on this journey to find answers and to make allies for the fight to come.” I remind her of our purpose as I pull away. Lils’ hand, which had slid to the back of my head when I kissed her, draws me closer, and she refuses to let me make any more room between us as her tongue demands that I allow her access to my mouth. Who am I to argue when my mate is in need, and the ache between my legs, that was sated not all that long ago, returns full force, pulling a moan from my throat as she deepens our kiss.

As we pull apart, my chest heaves with breaths I no longer need to take, but my foolish, no-longer-beating heart has my body out of sorts. Lils’ breathing is equally erratic as she eyes me with unconcealed lust. I belatedly realise how exposed we are in this clearing. Just seconds from the stream, I hear gurgling to our left. Not that I can sense any danger, but where pleasuring my mate is concerned, I lose most other senses. Funny that I didn’t have that with Oren earlier.

“We should wash up and get back.” Lils sighs, sounding slightly disappointed. Reluctantly I nod before pecking her on the lips one more time. I slide my hand into the warmth of hers

so that we can walk down to the stream and wash some of the fight and fucking off of our skin.

Lils instantly complains that the water is freezing, so we wash up quickly and then return to the sheltered area we had arranged to camp in for the remainder of the evening. Tipping my head up slightly, I assess the surrounding trees. Many are almost bare, having lost the last of their leaves as the season changed. Fortunately, some evergreens are growing amongst them, and I choose one of these for us to rest in, having decided it would be better to have a higher vantage point. Ordinarily, Lils would be happy to shift and curl up next to me in her wolf form to rest. However, this close to the city, there is no telling who might come across our camp, and while I doubt other vampires will be out this close to sunrise, I refuse to be careless.

“Are you looking at my arse?” Lils winks at me over her shoulder as she climbs the tree ahead of me. Using her claws to dig into the trunk, she moves swiftly, finally stopping at a large wide branch in the middle of the tree. I don’t bother to answer. She knows I’m admiring her curves.

Pulling myself up next to her, I settle myself against the trunk of the tree while Lils stretches out in my arms and gains some strength with the sleep she requires.

5

Lils

THE SUN WARMS MY FACE WITH A GENTLE TOUCH AS IT FIGHTS the shadows caused by the tree's canopy. A chilled breeze blows through the leaves bringing with it the promise of colder weather and the smell of rain.

I stretch my aching limbs, feeling a pleasant throb from my thighs and pussy, reminding me of what happened between Hunter and me yesterday. Movement behind me has me lifting my chin and trying to catch a glimpse of my lover's face as Ana rubs my arms awake with expert hands.

"Sleep well?" she asks, her voice close to my ear, sending goosebumps scattering along my skin as I moan my confirmation that I am better rested. "Good," she says, kissing my neck and brushing her teeth along my sensitive skin.

"Do you need to feed?" I ask, not hating the idea of her sinking her teeth into me as a way to wake up in the morning. I check my surroundings using all my senses. This high up in the tree is a good place to be, but it doesn't hurt to be sure there aren't any other beings nearby. Feeling the absence of anything other than a few tiny animals makes me wonder what has happened to Hunter and Oren.

"I wouldn't say *need*. I'll be fine on the fae's blood, even if it did have a bitter aftertaste. You, however, pretty little wolf, are a sweet addiction." Ana chuckles, then licks my neck, nipping gently at my ear as I settle further into her embrace, squirming a little at the fire that has sparked in my core from her words. Visions of her with Oren yesterday flit through my mind, and I push back a tiny hint of jealousy that tries to

surface. Coming to terms with multiple mates and their attraction to one another, as well as me, is something my wolf is only just getting comfortable with.

“No need for that jealousy, my little wolf. I am yours as you are mine.” Ana’s words are rasped, letting me know that her fangs have distended. As if wanting to provide me with further proof, she scrapes along the juncture of my neck and shoulder to the point where my skin is exposed. Suddenly my clothes feel too tight, and I wish I were naked and able to straddle my mate. With a hiss, her hand moves from my arm and finds the belt of my jeans, tugging at them. “Undo them now!” she demands, holding me tightly, so I don’t fall out of the tree as I comply with her command. Pulling down my zipper quickly as I feel the urgency rising inside me and in my mate. We have always wanted each other at the most unconventional times and now is no exception. Oren and Hunter could arrive at any time, expecting us to be ready to move.

Cold fingers put pay to those thoughts as Ana wastes no time moving her hand below my knickers and finding my clit with her expert touch. We have danced this dance many times before, but each time feels like the first as with precision from years of experience Ana bites down into my neck, taking a large drag of my blood with such force that I feel lightheaded for a second. A growl sounds from behind me, and my wolf answers with one of our own as fingers that I’ve seen delicately remove sinew from bone now push between my soaking folds and hold me captive against her. Two fingers, then three, have me panting and widening my legs as much as possible, given our position and the restriction of my jeans. “Yes, Ana, like that! More, I need more!” I chant, insatiable as the euphoria of her bite takes hold, promising an intense orgasm which I know is waiting for me just out of reach.

“Play with yourself, Little Wolf. I want to hear you scream my name.” Ana’s voice inside my head sounds full of lust as I do as she asks and slide my fingers over my needy bud, rubbing it in tight circles.

The feel of her cool fingers inside me as she fucks me roughly is incredible and sends sparks racing through me. My head falls back against her shoulder as she stops drawing blood for a second. I can almost feel her gaze on my hand and hers as we work together to answer my body's desperate need.

My hips rock violently, and I spare a second to think about whether or not I will kill us both with my movements, but then she takes a long pull of my blood, sending me spirally over the edge. With a howl from my wolf and a scream of ecstasy from me, I come, feeling my pussy walls clenching against her fingers as she slows her movements but continues to work me through my climax. "So beautiful, Little Wolf." Ana whispers her words against the shell of my ear, then licks the wounds on my neck, sending shivers through my body.

"As amazing as that was to feel. I would rather have been there. We are on our way back. It's time to move." Hunter's voice in my head is still new and causes me to squeak out an embarrassing sound as I come down from my high. I shuffle about, pulling my zipper up as best I can.

"He's very annoying but right. We should get moving." Ana huffs out from behind me, clearly annoyed at the interruption. With well-practised moves to rival any tree-dwelling animal, we make our way down to the ground, where I have just enough time to straighten my clothes before the males arrive in the clearing.

"We should avoid the major parts of the city and stick to the outskirts," Ana states as we gather our few belongings, each taking a backpack. "Less likely to have our scent picked up when it gets dark again. I don't want the enforcers tracking us," she says, referring to the band of vampires she once belonged to. Vampires for hire, who are generally clanless, they attach themselves to a larger clan by offering themselves up as warriors who will protect the main city and those who reside there. In turn, the enforcers are under the protection of the main clan and are provided with food, lodgings, and a purpose. These rogue vampires would have lived happily in the world before it went to pot, blending in amongst the humans and feeding on the lowlifes of society.

“Worried that you will not have the ability to defend us against them?” Oren asks, his tone suggesting that he is interested in her answer rather than mocking her. He glances at Ana as he walks alongside her, batting a branch out of the way ahead of us. He has on a fresh white shirt with the sleeves rolled slightly and his jacket slung over his shoulder. As I watch them awaiting Ana’s response, Oren scratches his arm absentmindedly. I wonder if fae get bitten by midges? I guess no being is immune to those feisty little bloodsuckers.

“I guess you have never come up against a group of vampire enforcers, Fae. Not something you want to mess with. Yes, we could probably take them, but I can’t guarantee we would all survive.” Ana stops walking briefly to look at Oren with eyes that blaze with conviction. I have to admit I’m no shrinking violet, and I’ve found a sense of peace in battle that I didn’t think was possible, but the idea of coming up against several vampires like Ana does not fill me with a sense of glee. Maybe if Ris and Kayd were with us, we would stand more of a chance, or if we have the opportunity to portal out of here before they attack us we might survive. However, I’ve seen Ana in stealth mode, and it is still something my wolf and I are training hard to recognise. That disturbance in the leaves that is just a little too much to be wind, the feeling of impending doom is also a sure giveaway that I am starting to understand is my gut telling me something is wrong.

“Not sure I would want to meet more Anas.” Hunter voices my thoughts, chuckling as Ana elbows him in the ribs. He moves past her taking the lead and pulling me along with him.

“Are you okay?” he asks quietly, trying to give the impression that we are having a casual conversation. The other two behind us branch off either side of the path we have found and leave us alone for a minute. I know they are within hearing distance, but their thoughtfulness curls the corner of my lips slightly before I school my features again.

“Why wouldn’t I be?” I decide to play dumb, even though I’m sure he is referring to us having sex. I like to make him work for it a little. His hand grips my arm and stops our forward motion. I take a deep lungful of the morning breeze as

it flows through the trees around us, bringing with it the distinct scent of my mates as well as the earthy smell of the forest and something else, something less familiar.

Hunter's fingers grip my jaw, forcing me to look at him. The sensation is not unpleasant. In fact, my wolf wants me to rub up against him in pleasure at his dominant behaviour. I tell her to fuck off and stand my ground, but I don't attempt to pull away.

"You know what I'm talking about, Lils. Don't try and play off what happened between us as nothing. It meant more than that. At least, I thought it did." His hand drops back down to his side, and I realise a little belatedly that he feels a little uncertain about our connection. It comes off him in waves, and as he pulls his gaze away from mine, I stop the movement with my own hand, rubbing my thumb along his jawline, feeling the kiss he plants on my palm right down to my core.

"It meant everything, Hunter. I'm sorry, okay. I don't know how to deal with all these emotions or this connection we all have. It's all very new, but I promise you what happened between us... it was special, and just for the record, it won't be the last time." My lips curl up into a smile, pulling an answering one from his lips as I drag his face down to mine and kiss him with what I intended to be a brief touch, but as I'm fast finding out, nothing between my mates and me is fleeting, the intense need for each other outrides everything else. A growl rises in my throat as he palms my nape holding me to him with that hand as the other grips my arse, squeezing it and pulling me against his hardening cock as his tongue lays claim to mine and our kiss deepens.

"Fuck, you make me hard, Lils." I smirk against his lips as his words come out, sounding as though he is in pain. I pull back, and he releases me only to take hold of my hand as we return to the path and begin walking again. "So, you want to do that again?" His tone suggests he is joking, but I can feel his need for my confirmation that I'm accepting him as a mate.

"Yes, Witch, I want your cock buried deep in my pussy at the next available opportunity." My cheeks heat at my boldness, and I let go of his hand striding ahead, then throw

him what I hope is a cheeky smirk over my shoulder. I can't help but chuckle when I notice he has stopped and is giving me a look of disbelief as well as pure lust.

"Fuck me." Hunter curses under his breath as he hurries forward to catch up with me.

"You have only yourself to blame." Ana laughs as she joins us from our left. Her comment has us all joining in. I don't mind a little laughter at my expense. My wolf loves the attention, and if she could purr like one of the cats we have at the castle, she would.

"There is a pack of wolves not far off, towards the east, I feel." Oren approaches from our right, cutting into our merriment and bringing a more serious tone.

"How far?" I ask, drawing in a breath this time with the sole purpose of tracking any foe. My wolf goes on high alert as I pick up the faint hint of shifters.

"Reasonably far away for now, but we should perhaps spend less time discussing sex and more time paying attention to our surroundings. I don't wish to be taken by surprise again. It is an embarrassment." Oren huffs out as if the very idea of the attack yesterday that led to Hunter being captured was an insult to him personally.

"Get the stick out of your arse, Fae. We got some reasonably good intel, at least. Now we need to make this last stop, get a few more answers and assurance of an alliance and then head back through one of those fancy portals you create and give Ris the low down." Hunter sums the situation up neatly as if we weren't trying to make allies with a bunch of vampires who owed us nothing. We had been lucky with the clan we visited last. They were small compared to the number of vampires I imagine living in the city we are skirting around, but still deadly. They had been surprisingly interested in our relationship and the news that Malaki was now Alpha of the North, but their main interest had been in the potion Ana had that allowed her to walk in the sunlight. After some discussion, we established that they were well aware of a change in the balance in the country and Eion's plans to

overthrow the other Alphas and declare himself ruler of all wolves. Their leader, Drake, had eagerly agreed to a meeting with Malaki to discuss the matter further and was interested in learning more about the potion we had.

“We need to get back to Malaki and arrange for him to meet with Drake,” I add as my thoughts stray over our meeting with the tall chestnut-haired vampire. The sound of flowing water reaches my ears, and I stop to listen for a second.

“It’s the river,” Ana states as if she read my mind, which she probably did. “It runs this side of the city, out to the sea. When I was younger, before the world changed, the water was sludge brown and kept rising and rising, flooding became common, and we lost huge acres of the land surrounding the city.”

I remember Ana telling me how the water levels had kept rising as the humans, intent on their own greed, had caused the climate to change so drastically the oceans had risen up to claim the land, drowning them in the pollution they had created. Disease was rife, and crops failed. Some might say the humans got what was coming to them, but like all beings, there were likely those who tried to make a difference, only they were too few, and it was far too late.

“What is it like now?” I ask, wondering if we will see the river on the path we are taking. Ahead appears to be remnants of tall buildings, which lie in ruin, partially covered in dark green climbing plants, the likes of which I have seen many times before. I think the humans called these types of plants weeds, but to me, they are just part of the everyday landscape.

“When I was here last, I could only see it in the dark, so the water was colourless, and I could not tell you what it truly looked like. However, I understood, having discussed it with a few humans, that the water is now much clearer and remains within the banks of what once was the original river.” Ana’s voice tails off as we reach the deserted buildings that tower above us, even in their ruined state. I crane my neck, taking in the vast structures.

“This was once partially submerged, and that over there.” She points to a broken road-like structure jutting out over the river.

Finally, I get to see the large expanse of flowing water I heard a while back. The water is deep, or so it appears, as I cannot see the bottom. It’s dark but not the sludge brown Ana described, more a dark blue. The banks are muddy and festooned with vegetation above the watermark. The river is clearly tidal as the scent of salt hits my nose. Not that I’ve ever been to the sea, but it’s been described to me enough. As I marvel at the water in front of me, I realise Ana hasn’t finished what she is saying. Instead, she stands there looking at the water.

“What is it?” I ask, standing next to her and slipping my hand into hers.

“That was once a bridge over the river, and when I was young, the bridge would swing around when a large boat came into the harbour. Strange how I would remember that now. It hasn’t been there for decades, and the water is most certainly cleaner than I remember.” Her lips pull up into a small smile. They are rare on my mate’s lips, but she seems happy to see the river in the daylight for the first time in goodness knows how many years.

“While this trip down memory lane is pleasant, we should move on with our journey?” Always the one to put a dampener on the situation, our fae mate.

“That we should, Fae. It is interesting how you can easily forget the brilliant colours of nature when you only see them in shades of black and grey as night,” Ana muses as she follows our mates, who have already started to walk again. Her hand pulls me along next to her, and I lengthen my stride to match hers.

“He’s such a buzz kill,” I grumble, not giving a shit if he can hear me, which of course, he can. I am rewarded with a stern look over his shoulder, which does funny things to my insides. Oren redirects the tangle of brambles which had been crossing the long-forgotten path we are now walking down.

His magic is impressive, although I'm not sure we have seen the full extent of it yet. But with each use, he seems to become more drawn and tired looking. Do fae need to recharge like vampires? I really don't know enough about the fae as a species, which is appalling as he is supposed to be one of my mates.

I watch him closely as he appears to float across the grass and weed-covered path in amongst the tangled hedges and vegetation, his hands flick around in what seems like agitation. Did I hurt his feelings, or has he got something else on his mind? Fae aren't usually phased by emotion. That much I have established. They are quite similar to the vampire race in that regard. Which means I will need to pay more attention to the little changes in his demeanour if I'm to gain any information about him that might help us to connect. Because although I feel a pull to him, I don't get the same desperate need to be intimate with him the way I do with Ana and Hunter.

We walk for most of the morning, skirting around the outer parts of the city, which appears deserted. My ears pick up the faint sound of life, but it's too far away to recognise what it might be. Oren explained that the portals he uses leave a magical signature which is why we are limiting the use of magic as much as possible so as not to draw attention to ourselves.

One look at the sky tells me we are past midday as the sun has already begun its gradual descent. A rumble in my stomach reminds me that I haven't eaten for a day, which brings to mind my witch mate, who requires food much more frequently than I do.

"Are you not hungry, Hunter?" I ask as the thought crosses my mind. He turns around to look at me, barely slowing his gait.

"Not as much as I usually am, no." He looks confused, but then I guess it dawns on him as it does me that with our mating, he has not only some of Ana's traits but mine too. I hadn't even given thought to what we might share now other than being able to communicate properly with the help of our

mate bond, which I feel thrumming through me as a reassuring constant companion.

“We will rest soon,” Oren states from his position ahead of us. *Who appointed him the leader?* I try and rein in those thoughts. I’m not sure why he irritates me so much. I don’t remember him doing that before we discovered he was our mate. Surely, I should be getting more patient with him, more able to read his body language and understand him better. But he is still an anomaly.

Thinking about my feeling for the other two and how close we have become causes a need to rise inside me. One that has started to increase whenever we are all together. Even my fae mate looks inviting, and even though I barely know him, I’m shocked at how I long to feel him between my legs. It comes upon me in waves which I find difficult to ignore.

6

Hunter

FEELING MY MATE'S AROUSAL THROUGH THE BOND SHOULDN'T come as a surprise to me as I've been bonded to Ana for a while, but with Lils, it seems to have increased the need tenfold. When she came earlier, my cock went on full alert, and I felt a desperate urge to be with them. I usually have more control over my body—I like to fuck—but I've never been this obsessed with the need to pleasure a female, now two. My sexual preference before meeting these two was a quick one-night affair, where I made it my business to ensure the female in question enjoyed the experience as much as me but had no expectations of a repeat performance. Travelling around as much as I needed to do, meant that I couldn't take the time to form a relationship with anyone, and I honestly didn't think I was missing out.

However, since meeting Ana and Lils, my whole ethos has changed. My sole purpose in life is now to protect them. That thought alone makes me laugh silently to myself. Neither one needs my protection as they are both deadly killers, but we have become quite the team. Something seems a little off, though. When we were travelling and fighting alongside Ris and Rogue, we merged together as one, like the dawn chorus, no one voice louder than the other. But since Oren joined us, it hasn't been like that. There is no denying that there is a pull between us all, and I suppose Ana and I bicker, so it shouldn't surprise me that Oren and I bash heads occasionally.

“We should make it there before the sun goes down. Let's stop for a second. Lils, you should eat, you too, Hunter.” Ana's tone brooks no argument, and I think she's probably right.

Lils, of course, starts arguing about stopping but is soon shot down with a look from our vampire mate. I chuckle silently to myself, earning me a glare from Lils, which makes me want to laugh harder, but I pull out a bag of dried meat and occupy my mouth instead. I give a piece to Lils to appease her and turn to see if Oren wants anything to find him bent down near us with his hand hovering over the ground.

As I look on, chewing on the tasteless dried substance that was once meat, the plants under his hand begin to sprout red berries, which look like wild strawberries. “Impressive, Fae,” I admit as I finish my mouthful and bend down next to him to examine the fruit. They look perfect, heart-shaped and larger than average wild berries. I already imagine the burst of flavour on my tongue.

“Taste one,” he says, standing up and gesturing to the fruit. I’m unsure if he meant Lils or me as he stares at her while she stands there, looking at the fruit patch with hunger. I pick a berry and offer it to my mate. Lils walks over to stand next to me, and with a glance at Oren, who is still watching her intently, she opens her mouth. I hold the berry by the stalk and place it on her luscious lips. Her eyes take on a mischievous glint as she opens her mouth, only to suck the fruit inside almost up to my fingertips. Then without taking her eyes off of me, Lils bites. Red juice spills from her lips, and I’m captivated watching as it trickles down her chin, unable to move as a moan hums out of her, and she finally shuts her eyes, releasing me from her spell.

I reach out, brushing away the juice with my thumb, but I can’t help taking it further. Leaning in, I lick her lips, and the sweet taste of the berry explodes on my tongue.

“Enough messing about, Oren. Leave them be,” Ana demands as I shake my head, freeing my mind from the lust fog that seems to be descending.

“You’re no fun, Vampire,” Oren grumbles in an out-of-character show of emotion.

“Stop fucking about with my mind, you dick!” Lils turns around to face the fae, clearly annoyed at his interference. It’s

becoming hard to say what is my attraction to my mates and what is the bloody fae's meddling. Oren's ability to mess with emotions is becoming annoying. I can't trust what I feel anymore.

"The fruit needed a little extra to encourage it to grow." Oren shrugs. "I don't see using your attraction to your mate as an issue." He points to the patch where the strawberries are growing. There are at least a dozen more plants there now.

"I've never heard of plants needing lust to grow, Fae," I add, looking at the amount of fruit before me. I bend and pick a handful of berries, passing them to an irate-looking Lils, then help myself to several. Oren looks a little confused, but soon, the stone-cold look of indifference returns. I've not known him long enough to know whether he spends all his days looking like an ice sculpture, but on the rare occasion he does let loose, his whole demeanour changes, and he is like a different male.

"Let's get moving," Ana says, bending to pick up her discarded pack and handing Lils hers. "We can scout the area in the daylight before the local clan come out to play. I need to assess whether Eilam is still in this area."

She refers to the vampire and leader of a moderate-sized clan she once worked for. He is the one we are trying to bring over to our side. Ana believes it would be better to try the more medium-sized clans first. The larger ones would be harder to convince that they needed to get involved as they are pretty happy with their lives and won't see any change in rulers in other species or inter-species fighting as any of their concern. They are smugly sitting at the top of their food chain with no interest in anyone else.

"Do you have enough potion to spare if Eilam wants to try it himself?" I ask, referring to the blend that Ris and I concocted with her magic and my potion skills, which now allows Ana to walk freely in the sunlight.

"Yes, there's enough as long as this is our last stop. We will need to return to Malaki's territory as soon as we are done," Ana confirms as she moves a large bramble out of the

way, holding it in place so Lils and I can walk past it before she lets it go. She snickers as it narrowly misses Oren, who gives her a withering look and then redirects the bramble back into the hedge it was sticking out of.

When we have more time, and a proper space for me to practice, like the one at the castle, I can get to work with Ris' help on something a little bit more permanent for my vampire so that she doesn't get fried in the daylight. I do wonder if it was never attempted before because witches like to keep everyone in their place, and the idea of helping another species doesn't always come naturally to them, unlike the fae, who were the first to step up when the world started to decline. But they did get the land they wanted, which is now linked with their realm. The rest of us had been co-existing with the humans since time began, forced to disguise ourselves and hide our true natures for fear of persecution. Well, I guess the shoe is on the other foot now.

"We'll portal back once we are done, won't we, Oren?" Lils throws the question over her shoulder, and we all turn to look at the fae when he doesn't respond. Oren is doubled over, clutching his stomach.

"What's the matter?" Ana's tone is without sympathy.

Oren straightens up and appears to shake himself off. A wall comes down over his features, and he returns to his nonsense nonplussed self.

"There is nothing the matter with me, Vampire." He states as if she is being absurd, and as if to prove his point, he stomps past us all and into the lead.

"You don't even know where you are going, Fae!" Ana calls after him, but it falls on deaf ears as he tries to prove a point. "Stubborn arse!" she says as we continue following the overgrown path heading to what Ana described as a part of the city less refined than the central areas occupied by the more prominent clans.

Oren relents, or at least that's how I see it, as he allows Ana to retake the lead after a few minutes and starts to walk beside Lils. Something shimmers for a second around him, but

it's gone again before I have time to assess what it might be. A trick of the light, maybe, as the sun is starting to go down and shadows are getting longer. We have walked miles now, and up ahead, the buildings grow taller, some are ruined, but there are a lot that appear still functional. As we wander down what looks to be some type of road between a row of shops on either side, we garner a little attention from the humans and what feels like low-level witches as they open their premises, throwing the shutters wide. Enticing smells of cooked meat and spices permeate the air and have my stomach sending out an answering call.

Lils giggles and turns to look at me over her shoulder. "I can hear that from here." I shrug my shoulders. The jerky and berries weren't enough to keep me going. Honestly, I was getting sick of the food. At least when we travelled with Ris and Rogue, they knew how to cook. Unfortunately, I hadn't ever mastered that basic of tasks, but I vow to start when we return to the castle, and I intend to drag Lils with me so that if we end up on another journey like this, we will be better prepared.

"We'll stop at the next eatery and grab some food. We can ask about Eilam there." Ana motions to a large fire pit with what looks like wild boar being spit roasted on a metal rotisserie with a wooden handle. The young human woman near the fire pit occasionally turns the handle, running her forearm across her forehead as the heat makes her sweat. Even from this distance, I can see the glistening beads forming on her skin.

It turns out that she is quite chatty, and she takes an instant shine to Oren, which makes questioning her easy. The fae is oblivious to the woman's interest, but Lils seems to take note and plays on it as we coax information from the shopkeeper.

Leaving them to chat with her, I settle down with a bowl of stew, rejoicing in the taste of the tender meat, vegetables, and thick gravy. With a slab of homemade bread in my hand, I sit with Lils on the rickety wooden chairs they have strewn around the front of the shop, quietly eating and watching as the streets come alive with humans and witches alike. They

seem to have adapted to a more nocturnal lifestyle in keeping with the vampires, who, I'm guessing, will start roaming the streets soon. Currently, it is just those selling their produce or eating food who are out.

"Doesn't seem like there are a lot of wolves around these parts," Lils whispers to me, and I try not to chuckle at her naivety.

"That's because wolves and vampires don't generally get on. That goes back way before the world changed." I add the last bit as an afterthought because they've never got on, which is what makes Lils' relationship with Ana so unique. Added to that, they are both females, which isn't unheard of in vampire culture if what Ana says is true, but I know it isn't looked upon with great joy in the wolf communities I've met, as they view their females as breeders of the next generation. I say as much to Lils.

"So out of date and ridiculous. It's like the world went backwards when the humans died out," Ana states, wandering over to us, clearly having heard our conversation.

"Well, it did, didn't it? Go backwards. The way I see it, we have more or less gone back centuries in human terms of technology and development. Barely keeping anything that they, with the help of some of the supernaturals, had invented," Lils states, looking at our vampire mate for confirmation as Ana sits next to her and runs her hand along Lils' thigh as if to soothe her.

"True, not that they knew at the time they were getting help from vampires and other supernaturals. Which is why it makes me curious. Why go to all that trouble only to reduce it to ash?" I wonder aloud.

"Fae," Oren interrupts, coming to sit down next to me. "It was decided that technology and the making of it had contributed to a lot of the issues the humans had and the way they caused the climate to change in such a dangerous way that they all but exterminated themselves. The fae were adamant that things should return to nature."

“Sounds like you weren’t totally in agreement with this idea?” I turn my attention to the powerful being sitting next to me.

“I’m not, and I wasn’t alone. We were overruled by the more powerful courts of the fae, those in particular who wanted a more natural state to balance the Earth and its atmosphere.” He looks past me for a second, and I imagine that Lils and Ana are listening intently to what he has to say. Oren is a lot older than all of us put together and knew the Earth before it drastically declined because of the humans, and he is well aware of what it took to repair it.

“They weren’t wrong because it is certainly healthier now. But certain things could have been salvaged.” Oren looks bitter for a second. “The oceans are still healing, and with their rebirth should come balance.” He finished as if quoting a passage from a book. Likely this is something the fae have been stating over and over again. I hadn’t had a chance to see the oceans in a very long time but judging by the colour of the river we passed earlier, things were returning to the way they should have been, so the fae are likely right.

Our conversation is interrupted by the noise of approaching horses. Not something you hear every day, but the people here seem to be used to it as they continue to go about their business. Discarding our now empty bowls, we stand side by side, and I know I’m not the only one with their hands inching closer to a weapon or two. Glancing over at Ana, I watch as she runs her tongue over her elongated fangs. An inappropriate shudder of lust flows through me, making her smirk—bloody vampire.

I return my focus to the large black animals now coming to a standstill in front of us.

IT'S BARELY DARK; THE SUN HAS LEFT A LINGERING GLOW ON the cloud-covered sky, but here in front of us are five good-looking males on top of equally beautiful horses.

“Your presence has been requested by our Lord Eilam,” one of the cloaked, dark-haired, pale-skinned vampires states, eyeing our small party with obvious displeasure. I mean, sure, we look a little travel weary, but I don't think our attire is worthy of that look of disdain on his face.

“Then you are in luck. We have come to meet with Eilam. Lead the way.” Ana flashes her fangs at the vampire closest to us.

The male dismounts in a flash of flying cloak and squeaking leather, leaving his mount prancing at the sudden loss in weight. Before any of us can react, he is in front of my mate, toe to toe. They're nearly equal in height, but he has an inch on Ana. She appears to have been expecting this reaction as she hasn't moved, not even to defend herself. Which suggests she either knows this vampire, or she isn't in the least bit afraid that she won't be able to beat him if shit happens.

“Analucia?” His question answers that. He knows her. I feel a twinge of unease through my mate bond with Hunter.

“Good to see you again, Luca,” she replies, her body taking on a deceptively relaxed pose. “I guess you didn't think you would see me again. After leaving me for dead?” She sneers at him, and the male, Luca, seems to have a look of discomfort momentarily before he shuts it down. It's difficult

to tell with vampires as they keep their emotions in check, much like the fae, but I'm beginning to see little differences now. Likely due to our bond and the amount of time we spend in each other's company.

"That is not how it went down, as I recall." He does look uncomfortable. I'd go as far as to say he seems a little squirrelly.

"Then you need to check your memories, Luca. Because that is exactly what happened." She turns to the other vampires. "I see that you still have no qualms about who you allow in your ranks." The four other males are watching the interaction with barely disguised interest. Their mounts begin to fidget with the inactivity.

I feel the calming balm of Oren's magic spreading out like a blanket, and the horses immediately still, much to the shock of their riders.

"I'm sure you have a lot to catch up on, but time is of the essence, so if you would kindly lead us to Eilam, we can discuss what we are here for and move on," Oren states in a matter-of-fact, almost bored tone. He seems oblivious to the hatred I can feel coming off Ana in waves towards this tall, dark vampire in front of us. Luca looks as if he was going to argue, but a glance towards Oren and the rest of us have him nodding. It's then that I feel the dagger heavy in my hand. I hadn't even realised that I'd pulled it out of the sheath at my thigh. My teeth have elongated, but my wolf seems calmer than she should be at this threat. Interesting.

"Oren is calming your wolf. Although I don't think she sees these vampires as a threat. She knows we can take them if we so wish." Ana thrusts the words into my mind.

Whatever Luca saw when he glanced over at us and then back to Ana must have been enough to convince him to pick his battles. Without further words, he returns to his horse. Mounting and turning the animal in the direction they had arrived in.

"Follow us." He sneers the command as the riders take up positions around our party. Ana leads with me, Oren and

Hunter behind us. I can still feel Oren's magic, but it's muted. So he can't be using a lot, just enough to keep things on an even keel around us. I want to ask him to stop because every time he uses his magic, it seems to be exhausting him. However, I know the stubborn fae won't listen. Hopefully, we can get him to rest when we arrive at Eilam's residence, which from the intel we managed to gain from the shopkeeper, isn't that far out of this part of Bristol. We are moving further from the river and the city with each step but still well within the vampire's territory.

"The outskirts, in all directions, are patrolled by warrior factions of vampires. There are a few overlords responsible for these separate factions. The city vampires are governed by three ancient females, and there is a tier system in place. A hierarchy, if you will. The overlords are in charge of protecting the city, and they report directly to the top," Ana explains to us in a hushed tone as we walk along the dirt road, which appeared reasonably well-kept.

I let this information sink in. This is the most we have spoken about the vampire culture. She doesn't mention it a whole lot, but then she isn't much of a talker. Hunter and I generally fill in the gaps in conversations. It had once felt as though they looked to me for leadership when we weren't with Ris, but it has become more of a team effort these days.

Thinking about our time with Ris brings my thoughts back to my family, and I find myself desperate to return home to see them. I hadn't spent nearly enough time with them after the black magic was eliminated from our territory, and I honestly feel much more at ease when we are with Ris. Her leadership and no-nonsense attitude have the same calming effect as Oren's magic. My wolf would happily follow her into a fire, which for a wolf is saying something.

The sun had disappeared completely, and only the moonlight spilt over the earth around us, casting everything in shadows and draining the colour from the world. The horses beside us picked up pace, indicating that we were nearing our destination. The streets on the city's outskirts had given way to more forest. Ana informed us that this once was a built-up area

with houses and roads, but since the evolution of the planet, many such places have ceased to exist. I often wondered how it was decided what would stay and what would not. There was the odd building now and then dotted within the trees, each looked to be in a state of disrepair, but occasionally we might see one with a glow from a lamp or fire.

Up ahead, a wrought-iron gate hung slightly off its hinges in between two stone pillars, partially covered in moss, on either side of the narrow-looking dirt road that branches off of the main track we are currently walking upon. A stone wall encloses a section of the trees stretching along the dirt track and curving off in the distance. I would guess that the stone wall stretches around whatever property boundary Eilam has set up to protect or separate his residence from the main track. I very much doubt he encounters a lot of attacks. Not many beings are stupid enough to go up against a clan of vampires, especially if they do not know the size of the clan inside the walls.

Movement inside the walled woods catches my eye and draws my attention. I note at least three more vampires dressed similarly to those on horseback next to us.

The three inside the walls casually saunter out into the middle of the gate, blocking our path. I feel their eyes wandering over my mates and me before they move out of the way, and we continue our supervised journey. A show of strength or posturing; either way, it's not lost on me. We aren't in our territory now, and there is no way of knowing whether our visit will meet with polite interest or outright hostility.

I'm not sure what I expected to find at the end of the dirt track, which was wide enough for us to walk side by side with our escort in front and behind, but the mismatched-looking building in front of us wasn't it. The right half looks a little like a castle but smaller. On either side of an arched-stone doorway stand pillars. Beside them, what once must have been windows, appear to be boarded up. Above the intricate stonework of the entrance are square protrusions resembling the top of a castle's turrets. I imagine it must be a small balcony, as the large windows above it are slightly set back.

These, too, are boarded up with what appears to be wood. The two parts of the mansion on either side of the door jut forward with what once would have been bay windows on each floor all the way up the three-storey building. The stone frames where the glass would have been held are still there, but all the windows are either boarded or bricked up. The left side of the building is a complete contrast and, clearly, an add-on to the ancient building on the right. The roof is flat, or so it seems from the ground. The walls were possibly once white, but the paint is peeling off, and ivy has taken over most of the building, encasing it in foliage.

“This was once a hotel owned by humans,” Ana informs us as the riders stop in front of the building and dismount.

Several humans, judging by their smell and slow gait, appear from the side of the mansion and take the horses from the vampires.

“You will follow us inside.” The vampire next to Luca states, his gaze showing a complete lack of interest as he turns his back on us. Clearly, he doesn’t see us as a threat. He’s wrong, but that’s okay. I like surprising my enemies. They take my small stature and the fact I am a female to mean that I’m weak. What they aren’t aware of is the Alpha blood flowing through my veins from my dick of a father and not only the strength of my wolf but that of my vampire mate.

Unlike fated mates, we don’t have a complete exchange of power, but I am beginning to find that we do have a few that transfer and got stronger whenever we are intimate together.

“*Fucked, Lils. For goodness sake, you can say it.*” Ana chuckles in my head, taking the sting out of her words. For her to laugh, has to be a good sign. Right.

“*Stop eavesdropping on my thoughts.*” I try to project indignation through our bond but earn a smirk from Ana and Hunter, who stand deep in thought to my right. Oren hasn’t said a word for the entirety of the walk, but that isn’t unusual for him.

As we walk through the entrance, I am surprised at how clean and tidy the interior is. Above us, large circular metal

candle holders are suspended from the ceiling. The candles are lit and cast a warm glow on the wide hallway. There is a threadbare patterned carpet on the floor, no dusty stone floors for this place. It is still pretty dim, but I suppose that's how the vamps like it. I remember it taking Ana a while to adjust to the sun's brightness, even with the spell that Rissa and Hunter had developed. Fortunately, with the amount of tree coverage where we had been, she wasn't often exposed to the full brunt of its light.

I don't have time to pay too much attention to our surroundings, but going on scent alone, I gather there are a few humans in the mansion and quite a few vampires.

"Wait in here. Our Lord Eilam will be with you shortly." Luca's stuck-up colleague states as we are shown into a room off the large entrance hall. Inside, the boarded-up windows are covered with thick opulent, velvety curtains, a far cry from the dusty old tapestries at home. Turning around on the spot, I take in the rest of the room. There are a couple of fabric-covered long chairs, sofas I think Ana said they were, and some wooden tables. Dotted along the walls and attached by metal stands are more candles which flicker and dance adding a warm, welcoming glow. There is a large fireplace which at the moment has no fire in it, but I can imagine this room had once been cosy to sit in.

We all take up position by the fireplace, with our backs to it so we can face the door, which is now shut. I can sense the vampires standing guard outside it, so I guess we aren't getting out of here without a fight if things go sideways. Of course, we could just portal out of here if push comes to shove, but where is the fun in that? My wolf starts to prowl in my head, eager for a fight now Oren isn't messing with his weird, chill mojo.

I look over at the fae where he stands stock still in the corner, giving off disinterested vibes, but I can see that he is already assessing the situation and no doubt has some magic up his sleeve.

The door opens, and a tall, stunning-looking vampire walks in, flanked by two of his lackeys. I can assume this is

Eilam by the way he holds himself. He is dressed in black trousers, which fit snugly to his slender muscle-bound legs, and a white shirt with the first couple of buttons undone—showing off a physique that in a human would be hard to maintain. His dark hair is short to his collar but full and wavy. Eilam obviously takes good care of his appearance, but that doesn't fool me into thinking that he is in any way soft, as he gives off a 'don't fuck with me' vibe that I can feel all the way across the room.

“Well, what do we have here?” he asks, his voice holding a slight accent that I can't place.

“*He's Italian.*” Ana provides in my head, and I think of the globe back in my tiny study at home. In my mind, I conjure a picture of a boot-looking country. “*He was born in Italy and moved to this country about three hundred years ago,*” she adds, and I try and keep my surprise off my face.

“*Christ, he looks amazing!*”

Hunter moves closer to me, which doesn't go unnoticed by Eilam.

“I'm not interested in your mate, *Stregone,*” he states matter-of-factly, but then his lips curl up into a smirk. “But if she is willing to share you...” Eilam lets out a laugh which abruptly stops, and he is right back to business.

“*What's Stregone?*” I send the message through our mate bond.

“*It's witch in Italian.*” Ana and Hunter say together. I guess I'm the only uncultured one.

“Leave us.” Eilam turns to his guards, who look shocked at his request, but they nod, bow their heads and leave the room, closing the door behind them.

“Now, is someone going to tell me why you suddenly appeared in my territory with one of my warriors?” He motions to the sofas. I get the feeling that it's not really a request, more of a demand that we sit.

“I am not one of your warriors, Eilam,” Ana says, taking a seat next to me and leaning back as if she is having a casual

conversation over a drink with friends.

“All of the warriors in this area are under my protection. You are still part of my clan, whether you accept that or not. Nothing has changed in your absence. However, we have more important things to discuss. You have arrived unannounced in my territory, and it would appear that you have found a mate in a wolf and a witch if my senses aren’t mistaken.”

That’s strange; why doesn’t he mention Oren, and why does the fae not react?

8

Oren

“HE HAS DISMISSED YOUR CLAIM AS THEIR MATE. WHY ARE YOU just standing there doing nothing, you stupid weak fae?”

The voice taunts me, and I try to block it by counting the leaves on the dirty, partially torn painting hanging on the side wall. The frame is mostly intact, and I guess it must give this ancient vampire some sense of history. I have no idea why this species clings to the old ways so much. They are gone and will never return.

“We can bring about the change that you so crave.” The voice whispers to me, trying to entice me, hoping that I will give in my fight against the creature that has overtaken my body.

When we portalled into the Northern Wolf Territory in search of my sister, we could not have known what we were entering into. A black mass had encompassed the entire area, a volatile dark magic with a host which was dying and one already dead, unbeknownst to us. Whilst we were strong enough together to disperse the explosion, I hadn't realised in my attempt to dissipate that mass that the host, Caleb, transferred his energy to me.

The essence of the dark and seriously disturbed being is now crawling through my insides, attempting to take possession of my body—no easy feat when encountering powerful fae magic. Oh, but he is trying, even going so far as to try and use my magic to convince the others of a mate bond that doesn't exist. Lils is his target because she is the key to the other two, but she has not yet succumbed to my invader's

will to mate, and for that, I am grateful. I like the little wolf and her companions, but they aren't fae, and they are not my mates. Seeing Merissa and Kayden has given me hope that my mate might accept me one day. There may also be a chance that more mates will be found or even fated if we can just get the species to balance and harmonise together again, but I fear that a battle is coming. There are those, like my parasite, who would see destruction and chaos rule so they can have a larger slice of the pie—as that human saying once went.

I miss the humans; for all their faults and primitive ways, they weren't all bad. Sure, there were a lot that were, but then no one species is perfect. Unfortunately, it always seems to be those few selfish beings with nefarious agendas that end up in power—destroying everything for others without care, and for what? Where did their money get them when the crops started failing, their land flooded and when they began to die in large numbers? No amount of money could save them as the planet became unstable.

“You sound like an old woman, Fae. Now look at that fine specimen of a vampire. Wouldn't his mouth look fabulous around your cock?”

The infiltrator's voice is back, so I commence my counting again. My thoughts stray to the time I spent between the vampire's thighs and the bite that finally gave me a little relief from this pest inside me. It was short-lived, but as Caleb fed on the euphoria of violence and sex, I found a little calm and managed to shore up some of my defences. There are blank spaces, things I think I may have said, but I don't remember. Messages sent but to who? I didn't realise it was happening at first, but now, now I am fortifying my mind and trying to protect my consciousness.

I need to get back to my realm and my fae brethren. We are a small group of elemental fae, aligned with the larger Spring and Summer Courts but not large enough, apparently, to have any say in the discussions that related to Earth when the species got together and decided the fate of this world.

“Fae! Are you listening?” The irritatingly handsome vampire raises his voice, and I realise that I have zoned out

from their conversation with the internal battles I am having with the parasite trying to claim my body.

“No, Vampire, I have not been listening, nor am I interested in your posturing. What we are offering you is a good deal, and you know it. You are also old enough to feel the change in the temperament around you. You will have felt the evil growing, and it is time to choose sides.” As all fae do when faced with this situation, I improvise and assume the outward pose of someone who has a clue what they are talking about.

“Woah, okay, excuse my fae mate for being a little zoned out there. We have been travelling a large distance and using a lot of his magic to do that,” Lileth states, holding her hands up to placate Eilam, who looks about ready to tear my head off or fuck me. Either is apparently fine with me at the moment because this disgusting growth inside me likes males. I prefer females, but I can see the attraction. The vampire is a fine specimen. I dig my nails into my palm to rid myself of that train of thought. I have no issue with the idea. It is simply not my inclination.

“There is no need to make excuses, Lileth. This vampire knows what we have to offer.” I feign disinterest, knowing we have the vampire right where we want him. He is aware that Analucia can walk out in the sunlight, and he will either accept our offer or try and obtain the potion by force. However, he must know I will portal them out as fast as we arrived. It will be so fast that even his vampire speed won't help him unless he wants to come along for the ride. Even though using my magic to that extent will likely exhaust me, I will do it. I will not let those I am starting to consider allies, friends even, be put in danger unnecessarily.

“They seem a little het up. Why not make this a little more intimate?”

That voice again. I know that if I ignore it for too long, the pain will start, so I allow the leech to have his way and leak a little of my magic into the room.

“Stop, Fae.” I can’t decide if that’s a plea or a demand from Hunter as he pulls Lils into his arms and starts to kiss her with abandon.

“That’s enough, Oren,” Analucia states, her annoyance evident from the tone of her voice. Unfortunately, she, and the other vampire, are entirely immune to my power.

“*Not for much longer.*” The spawn of evil inside me assures me. I need to contain it soon or take myself back to the Fae Realm so that I can find assistance to rid myself of this pestilence. Caleb, or whatever this thing is, cannot be allowed to wreak havoc on the Earth again.

Every time I use my magic, it, he, whatever it is, grows a little stronger. The tiny dot of black that I mistook for a spec of dirt upon my usually perfect white skin has grown. The black tendrils are creeping up my arm on the inside of my wrist, and thus far, I have managed to hide them from the others. I resist the urge to scratch the infestation on my skin.

Analucia drags a complaining and growling Lileth away from the now-angry witch. He advances on me but is stopped in his tracks, surprisingly, by the vampire. Eilam is beside him in a second, taking hold of his arm and placing himself between us.

“It is not worth your ire, *Stregone*. Let us discuss this proposal some more.”

“*He is trying to get between you and your mates.*” That irritating voice tries to coax a reaction from me, wanting me to use my magic and create higher emotions in the room, no doubt to feed him.

I don’t bother to reply to the blight. These are not my mates, even though my body tells me they are.

I tried reasoning with this thing when it became apparent that I had a hitchhiker shortly after we left the Northern Territory. I had wondered why I felt compelled to follow them on their quest when I should be returning to my own lands with my sister. However, the pull towards Lils, in particular, was strong. I had been intrigued to find out why, until this

voice had started, and by then, it was too late. It is not the fae way to ask for help, and I am still convinced I can handle this on my own or with the aid of my brethren.

My mind wanders as the conversation drones on around me. I pay no attention, focusing on the growing struggle of keeping the black magic at bay. My attention is drawn back in as Eilam stands.

“Your proposal is indeed tempting. I will need to discuss this with my advisors. So, for now, why don’t you take a moment to use the sunken baths in the basement of this building and freshen up?” Eilam asks, looking at us all. I’m sure that he is seeing every speck of dirt that we have acquired on our journey. My sore limbs ache from the constant battle within, the use of magic and the continual walking. The thought of soaking in heated water is very appealing.

It is not usual for me to walk everywhere, and I have found myself more than once missing my *Capall* on our journey. His black mane of soft curly dark hair and his sure-footed approach to travel would have made it more bearable. I have had him since he was a tiny *Searrach*, all legs and feisty temperament, and we have been on many adventures together. What I would not do to be galloping across the open green plains of my homeland right now. But we had left the mounts in the Northern Territory with my kin. They intended to return to the Fae Realm with my sister once the territory had been restored.

Why am I thinking about these inconsequential things now? What were we discussing? Ah, yes, a bath, maybe that will refresh me.

“That is very gracious of you, Eilam.” Lileth has become the little diplomat her brothers raised her to be.

“There is just one thing before you go,” Eilam says as everyone starts to move towards the door. “There have been sightings of wolf packs skirting the territory with a few breaches reported. Are these wolves with you?”

“No, they are not ours. More likely Joseph’s, the Alpha of the West,” Lileth replies, gaining a nod from Eilam.

“Then you will have no objection to us dispensing with them as we see fit.” The vampire’s eyes turn a dark shade of red as he discusses shedding blood, and I feel the mirrored stirring of the being inside me who craves bloodshed nearly as much as debauchery.

“None whatsoever. Kill them all,” Lileth confirms as if ordering a plate of beef stew at a tavern, her obvious hunger for their demise evident in every syllable.

“As you wish, *Giovane Lupo*.” Eilam chuckles as he shows us out of the room.

“Please ensure our guests have all they need and show them to the pool,” he instructs his warriors and then disappears with a final goodbye and an assurance that he will reconvene with us later tonight.

We are led through corridors and down a flight of dimly lit stairs into what can only be described as a grotto, akin to those in the caves of my homeland. It is as if a fae male had been here and provided a perfect location for the seduction of his mate. The rock walls sparkle with hidden gems, lit by candle sconces secured to the walls. The air is thick with warmth and smells of essential oils and plants that appear to grow in amongst the moss.

“This is not natural,” Lils comments as she looks around, eyes wide in awe. The warriors leave us with towels and clean clothes, shutting the door behind them. I listen for a bolt being pulled across, but there is no such sound.

“You’re right. This is enhanced with magic, but it is ancient, and the spells were cast some time ago. This was made for Eilam. I would say,” Hunter says as he examines the water, feeling the magic with his own. The atmosphere in the cave cut out of rock underneath the mansion is intoxicating, and I feel not only my body relax, but also the parasite feels as though it is calm too. I take the opportunity to remove my clothes and dive into the warm waters of the lagoon at the bottom of the cave before the others have even considered bathing. The light is dim enough that they should not notice the black veins taking root in the skin of my arms.

Having finished her check of the surrounding environment, Analucia begins to remove her clothing. I cannot take my eyes off her even though I want to look away. My cock stirs in the warm water as her lean, hairless body is exposed. Next to her, Lils strips and places her weapons within easy grasping distance. Not that she needs them, she could just shift. Thinking about how she can rip a man's head off has me hard in seconds, which can only mean my parasite is surfacing and watching too. It is he, it, or whatever this thing is that desires violence. It feeds off it. I try to push down my body's reaction, but my attention is drawn to the witch.

Hunter is the last to remove his attire. Having checked the females are safely in the water, he sheds his clothes. I have to admit he is a fine figure of a male. His muscles lean and honed with many hours of fighting and travelling. Hunter had not spent much time resting and feasting, which shows in his physique.

There is a smattering of dark hair across his chest that matches the hair in his pubic area. His dick swings half erect between his muscular thighs, a permanent state when around his mates for an extended period of time, not helped by my invader, who is doing everything in his power to instigate an orgy. I try to fight it off, but the cave's magic messes with my ability to prevent Caleb from taking more control.

Caleb has been devious in his bid to imitate the mate bond, fooling my body and that of Hunter, Analucia, and Lileth. I tried to combat it as much as I could but often failed. This parasite inside me is growing stronger daily, and here in this moment, I can admit to myself that I may be losing my battle against it. Any weaker being would have succumbed by now, and that thought alone bolsters my spirits. What I need is a bite from that beautiful vampire to make all this disappear, even if it is just for a minute. Shaking my head, I try to clear my thoughts. Is it me thinking that a bite might help or this thing inside me? I am unclear, but the hard appendage between my legs is fully on board with the idea.

I swim closer to Analucia, pressing my body against her back as she holds Lileth in her arms, casually kissing her. A

groan escapes her as I push my fully erect length against her perfectly formed soft behind and snake my arms around them, pulling them to me. Not to be outdone and likely feeling the erotic pull of the atmosphere in this place, Hunter slides up behind Lileth and begins touching both females. I let my head fall back, and the moan I have been trying hard to suppress builds inside my throat and escapes as our bodies, coated in the warm water and oils, slide and writhe against each other. I can't stop it. It feels too good.

9

Ana

THE FEEL OF LILS' WARM BODY IN FRONT OF ME AND OREN'S behind has my nipples hard in seconds and my pussy ready to play. I'm not one to skip out on getting fucked seven ways to Sunday, especially by my mates. But something in the back of my mind is trying to replay the words that Eilam said when he mentioned mates. Before I can grasp them, Hunter leans forward over Lils' shoulder and plunders my lips. Our docile witch mate is anything but when it comes to sex. He loves it rough and dirty, and I am only too willing to give him what he needs. Opening for him immediately, I allow his tongue to dance with mine as we both touch and fondle Lils. Her panting grows rougher as breath see-saws through her lips, and judging by the feelings I have through our bond, I imagine Hunter is now entering her pussy with his fingers. If I shut my eyes, I can almost see it.

Wanting some of that sweet heat myself, I move my hand from her neck down her soft skin, taking a moment to squeeze and tease her nipple before finding the curve of her hip and feeling her thrusting desperately against the invasion that Hunter is providing. I find her clit with the ease of two mates who know each other's bodies intimately, at the very same time as Oren finds mine with his deft thick fingers. It's carnal, messy and desperate. There seems to be no time when we are together that we can take things slow and spend time making love—a foreign concept to me but something I wish to explore with my mates. However, the world is moving at a fast pace around us, and danger is ever present. Something inside me is

constantly on full alert, so we need to snatch what moments we can with each other.

I barely register the words as Hunter asks Lils if she is able to take him so soon after their first time. Such is the building need between my legs. The fire is insurmountable. A whole army of vampire warriors could march in here to kill us all, and I have a feeling none of us would register their presence, so caught up are we in our pleasure. I widen my stance as Oren kicks gently on my ankles, bending and pushing my arse back a little; I latch onto Lils' nipples, continuing my assault on her clit with firm circles, just the way she likes it. Her lips release moans which become barely comprehensible words as she begs and pleads with us to make her come. Lils is our centre, purpose, and most cherished possession. I would kill any manner of being to give her whatever she asks for.

Hunter must feel the same way as with a low groan; he pushes through her folds. I feel his cock enter her as my finger slips lower. Their joining has heat flooding between my legs. "Oren," I command the fae to make this heat stop. He obliges within seconds, seemingly caught up in our madness. The blunt head of his cock stretches my pussy wide. He is big for a male, and I am glad it is me taking what I know will be his punishing thrusts rather than Lils, who has only just gotten used to the idea that she might enjoy being penetrated by our witch. I latch onto her nipple again, sucking with abandon as the stretching between my thighs continues. Oren holds my hips tight in a grip likely to leave marks on a lesser being. I know anything that he does will heal within minutes, so, taking my mouth off of my mate for a second, I encourage him to do his worst—pushing back onto him, taking his thick meat into me agonisingly slowly, making the feeling of being impaled last that little bit longer.

I leave my bond open, allowing the other two to feel what I am, helping them to reach the euphoria I am not yet experiencing. I still hold Lils, my fingers working furiously between her legs, where I feel Hunter's hard thrusts as her hips sway with the movement. My other hand holds tight to her hip now as I concentrate not only on her pleasure but my own. My forehead rocks into her chest over and over again, but she is

beyond caring, and as the fae starts to grunt and moan behind me, I lose my rhythm on Lils, causing her to cry out in desperation.

“Ana, please, harder. Fuck. Oh yes, Hunter like that, just like that.” Her voice echoes in the cavern, mixing with the panting and animal-like noises. My small breasts bounce with the momentum that the fae has begun, and I use it to gain control of my hand, gripping Lils tightly with one hand and circling hard on her clit. She begins to shake uncontrollably, causing an answering tightness low down between my legs which radiates to the inside of my thighs.

“Get on your hands and knees, Lils, now,” Hunter demands, and I lose my grip on her as she immediately sinks into the shallow water in front of me. I am rewarded with a delicious view of Hunter straining, his abs working hard as he pumps in and out of her from behind, his fierce glowing eyes glued to their joining. “Fuck yes!” he yells, letting his head fall back for a second, losing himself to the emotion.

Oren’s hand leaves my hip as he pulls my body tight against his, with a hand on my throat. I would kill anyone else who tried to manhandle me in such a fashion, but I’m so turned-on by the spectacle in front of me and the feeling of my tight entrance being opened over and over again. A silent exchange between my mates has Lils eyeing my body like a female starved. Oren spreads my legs further, and Lils crawls forward, then grabs my thighs, pulling herself up slightly. The muscles in her neck strain as she latches onto my clit. Fuck, the warmth of her mouth against my cool skin is my undoing. A silent scream rises from my throat as I come hard—Lils’ tongue laps at the joining between my legs. I look down once I come back to earth at the raw need in her eyes. Oren creatively curses behind me as Lils begins to use that skillful tongue of hers, lapping at my folds and his cock whilst Hunter leisurely pushes in and out of her from behind, seeming to be content to watch my undoing.

“That’s it, Ana, come again for us. Can you feel that fae cock stretching you open whilst Lils’ tongue licks your pussy?” Hunter’s dirty words have my body lighting up like a

fire started by magic. It is as if my lungs need the air that is being pumped in and out of them in short sharp bursts as I strain to reach my second orgasm. It's there, right there, just within reach. Oren thrusts forward right up to the hilt, filling me as his grip on my throat tightens. I feel the warmth of Lils' mouth as she sucks my clit between her lips, and a cry strains from my throat as I come again.

“So fucking beautiful.” Hunter groans as he pulls Lils away. “Now, how about you ride my cock, my gorgeous wolf, and show us how good it feels?” he suggests as he pulls out of her in one swift movement, causing a gasp to leave her lips. Hunter picks her up, and as Lils wraps her legs around his waist, he takes her to the edge of the pool and sits down on a flat rock with his legs in the water. As Lils straddles his lap, reaching between them, she holds his cock and slowly impales herself on his hard length. I feel the moans that leave them right down to my clit as I stand there, mesmerised. My pussy pulses around Oren's cock, still hard inside me. Lils places her feet flat on the rocks and, using his shoulders as leverage, begins to rock up and down. Each movement displays their joining and has my mouth watering. Hunter grips her hips and encourages Lils to go faster. The sound of slapping flesh, splashing water and moans of ecstasy fill the cavern.

Then I lose sight of them, and all I can do is listen, the image of their joining burning brightly in my mind as Oren turns me around. I go willingly, allowing him to pick me up. Vines appear from the ceiling where there had been none before, and they wind their way around my arms, holding me in place as his mouth finds my mound. I cling to his shoulders with my legs and rock my hips as he starts to feast between them. My head falls back, and I listen as the sounds behind me become frantic as my mates near their climax. Oren may have realised my attention to his administrations has slightly waned, as, within seconds, I find myself dropped into his arms. Winding my legs around his waist, I cling to his hard body as he thrusts into my needy hole. The head of his cock stretches me in the most delicious way, and I let him take control, revelling in the feeling of his show of strength. Oren is, as most fae are, very tall and full of muscle, and for once, I feel

small and dominated. He thrusts into me hard and fast, chasing his pleasure and using my body to obtain it causing my thoughts to scatter at the feeling.

“Bite me,” he demands in a barely recognisable tone, and I oblige, lost to the sensation of being claimed and fucked mercilessly.

I sink my fangs into his neck, and as they puncture his skin, I have a second where my gut tells me to pull back, but the smell of fae blood is too intoxicating for a vampire to resist. I suck hard, enjoying the warm blood flowing across my tongue and down my throat. The fae stills his movements, impaling me on his pulsing length as my hips rock in time with my feasting. Over and over, I take his cock and blood inside me until, with a roar that shakes the air around us, both Oren and Hunter come simultaneously.

The fae’s blood isn’t as sweet as I had once been told fae’s blood would be, but it’s satisfying nonetheless, and the boost to my energy levels is far greater than when I feed from Lils or Hunter. I guess that’s why they say you could become addicted to fae blood.

We collapse into the water with a loud splash, and I let the warm liquid encase my body, surfacing slowly. I enjoy the languid feeling of being thoroughly fucked. Oren emerges from the water next to me with a look of bliss on his face that I haven’t seen since we last had sex. He looks almost peaceful, which shakes me. I am used to Oren being so expressionless that it is difficult to gauge his thoughts or feelings. Right now, though, his feelings are written all over his face as he lies back in the water, making a star shape with his body on the surface, his slowly softening cock lying against his thigh. White-blond hair billowing around his head like a halo. There is no denying that Oren is stunning, but the level of heat I feel when I am with him is not the same as when I’m with Lils or Hunter.

Refusing to ruin this moment of peace with my strange thoughts, I push them aside and turn my body to search for my mates, finding them tangled up with each other in the water by the rock where I last saw them. Hunter pushes the hair back from Lils’ face as he gently kisses her lips. I make my way

over to them, wading through the waist-high water where they are. A little shiver runs through Lils as I touch her back. Her skin raises in bumps as my fingers run over it. Her wolf growls softly, and I ignore it knowing that sound means that she is past the point of wanting more sexual advances for now. Instead, I wrap my arms around them both, content to feel my mates near me.

“We should clean up and get dressed,” Hunter says, his tone reluctant, as he lifts Lils gently off his lap, placing her into the water. I watch as his biceps bunch and stretch with the movement. Now that was enough to get me wet again. His eyes seek mine, and he smirks, clearly reading my thoughts. Giving him the middle finger, an amazing gesture I poached from Ris, I turn my back on them and dive head first under the water.

I hold my breath, then blow out as I surface. Although vampires don't need oxygen to survive, our bodies retain some of their human instincts, such as breathing. It's not necessary, but I find it comforting.

Rubbing the scented water over my body and rinsing my hair in a little waterfall in the corner of the cavern doesn't take long. I'm the first to emerge from the pool. The droplets of water stick to my skin, and I hasten to get dry. Not because I feel the cold, but so I can get dressed and find out what is happening with Eilam. There is no way I'm being sucked into the warrior life again, my freedom was hard-earned, and I nearly died again. I don't belong to anyone. Well, maybe my mates, but that's mutual.

“You ready?” Lils' voice from behind me has me spinning around to face her. I should have heard her creeping up on me. “You okay?” she asks, as startled as me that she managed to get that close without me noticing. “You look like you need to feed?” Lils adds as she pulls on her clothes and eyes me up and down.

“You offering, Little Wolf?” I ask, keeping my genuine concern to myself and schooling my features. I cannot show any weakness, even if they are my mates. Only they get to see me at my most vulnerable, during sex, and now that time has

passed. I pull my defences down tight. Not wanting them to know I am feeling a little off-kilter. Why is everything a little fuzzy? Maybe it's Oren's blood? I will have to bite the bullet and ask Eilam if he knows much about feeding from fae.

Hunter

FOR A MOMENT, I FORGET WHERE WE ARE, STUPID TO BECOME so relaxed and complacent in enemy territory. I want to feel angry at myself, but I can't. Feeling Lils' body close to mine and being inside her again was exhilarating. Our bond is strengthening every time, just as it did with Ana. I'm faster, stronger, and more agile than I have ever been, and my magic is reacting and evolving.

I glance over to Lils and Ana as they are getting dressed, noting that Ana's fangs are still down. She looks hungry and not in a good way. Having only just fed from the fae, that is the last thing our vampire mate should be. I wade out of the water towards them, about to ask questions, when I hear the sound of someone approaching the cavern. Hastily I dress in the clothes they provided for us, not because I'm ashamed of my body, far from it, but because I prefer to be prepared if there is going to be a fight. I pick up my potions bag snapping it on around my waist. Behind me, the sound of splashing water indicates Oren is thinking the same thing as he suddenly appears next to me, fully clothed. Within seconds, two humans arrive, asking if they might take our dirty items.

Ana and Lils have already strapped their weapons back on, so they hand their dirty clothes over. I take a moment to untangle my belongings before doing the same. We follow them up the path leading out of this underground cavern and up the stairs back to the main house. We are ushered back to the room where we initially met Eilam to find him deep in discussion with another vampire, kitted out in warrior attire. As we enter, they stop talking and look at us.

“It seems you have brought trouble to our door, but I’m not going to hold it against you. This is not the first time Joseph’s wolves have flexed their ridiculously puny muscles and ventured into our territory.” Eilam seems in good spirits as he gestures for us to sit down. A human enters the room with a tray of drinks, and I notice the deep red liquid in the glass offered to Ana. It looks and smells like blood which sets me on edge. It is easy to contaminate blood.

“Easy, *Stregone*, that blood is clean. I have a glass myself.” Eilam lifts a glass and allows the human to pour more from a small pitcher, which is also on the tray. I know he can’t read my mind, but his observations regarding my concern for my mate are spot on.

“Your body language gives you away. I strongly suggest you all work on that, or it will be used against you.” He looks lost in thought for a second, then returns to business.

“I have sent Luca and several of my warriors to dispense with the wolves and chase them off our land. The overlord to the left of my territory has sent word to me.” He gestures to the other warrior who stands relaxed against the fireplace, one elbow on the mantelpiece and a foot on the hearth. “That they, too, are having issues with wolves.”

“We can assist with the disposal of your intruders,” Ana suggests. “It is likely that they followed us here,” she adds, obviously thinking back to our fight at the ruin. Although how they managed to find us after we portalled away from there, I’m not sure.

“I wouldn’t mind getting my hands on one of those arseholes for questioning,” I add, thinking it’s about time we find out more of Joseph’s plans to trap Ris.

“I’m sure my warriors can handle it.” Eilam looks unperturbed by the news that wolves are invading his territory and the one next to his. “I think it is more important to discuss the reason you are here.”

Oren and I take up position behind one of the sofas, having helped ourselves to a drink. I opt for water whilst the fae seems in need of something sweeter and picks up a glass of

what looks like fruit juice, likely apple, given the colour. Ana and Lils seat themselves in front of us. Their relaxed manner is deceiving, as I know they are both ready to pounce at a moment's notice. I can feel the tension through our bond.

Lils explains what has been occurring in the Northern Territory that was once ruled by her father, the Alpha of the North. She only briefly mentions our kidnapping, bringing Joseph's wolves into the conversation before describing the battle that nearly annihilated the territory and claimed her father's life, leading to her brother, Malaki's rise to Alpha. Eilam listens but doesn't seem that interested, or maybe he has heard rumours about what has been happening. It's hard to say, and before Lils can launch into the need to align the species against a mutual threat, Eilam interrupts.

"You say that there is a potion that allows you to walk in the sunlight? I have heard the rumours. Is there truth in them?" Eilam looks over at Ana and converses with her directly. The other vampire by the fireplace makes a snorting noise as if that cannot be possible.

"Those who have observed me walking in the sunlight are telling the truth, as I told you. We have a potion that allows me to once again venture out in the day," Ana advises him. She now has both the vampires' undivided attention as they stare at her. The shift in the atmosphere is instant.

"You lie!" Eilam's companion raises his voice. His tone is harsh, but I detect an underlying hint of need, hope, maybe.

"Hush, Cassius, let her speak. I have heard this from many different sources. I do not think she is lying." Eilam touches the arm of the other vampire in what looks to be a very familiar manner, but maybe that is just how ancient vampires behave with each other. I've made a point of avoiding their species as much as possible until I met Ana.

"*They are in a relationship.*" Ana casually informs me in my head.

"*Obviously,*" Lils chips in. "*Cassius hasn't taken his eyes off Eilam until now.*"

“This is not the time for gossip. Stick to the plan,” Oren adds his contribution, and I’m reminded again that the fae can speak to you in your minds whenever they want if there is a magical link, and now that I’ve mated with Lils, he will be able to access both my mates through me. Usually, he doesn’t bother, and surely as he is our mate too, it shouldn’t concern me. So why are the hairs on the back of my neck rising?

“How is this possible, Analucia? Surely we would have known about this before now if it was a case of just taking a potion?” Eilam asks, pulling me out of my musings. I concentrate on the stance of the vampires. It seems Eilam’s words have not quite calmed Cassius down. His body vibrates with energy which I anticipate he will release if we don’t hurry up and explain.

“We have created a potion. That, combined with a spell Ris and I worked on, has made it possible.” I interrupt their conversation, getting straight to the point.

“And this is something that could work for any vampire?” he asks, obviously curious, which we wanted. This is our bargaining chip, and it’s a bloody big one, but we need the vamps to have the courage to try it.

“I’ll be honest. We haven’t used this on anyone but Ana. However, it should work for any vampire.” I feel being truthful here would be more beneficial.

“Good call, Witch. Eilam is an ancient vampire. He would sense a lie a mile off.” Ana’s words invade my brain. I sense her pride that I have made an effort to understand him.

“I’d want to know the truth.” I send back and feel my shoulders pulling up slightly as I shrug, even though she can’t see me as she is still facing Eilam and Cassius.

“Then we must see this for ourselves,” Eilam states. “You will stay until first light so that we can witness this phenomenon.”

“And if you are satisfied?” Lils asks, wanting to get an accord or some sort of promise that they will align themselves with her brother Malaki.

“If there is truth in what you allege and you can make this potion readily available, I would be willing to travel to the Northern Territories to discuss the matter with your brother further,” Eilam confirms. Cassius starts to argue but is rewarded with a stern look from the overlord.

“You must inform your master. Ithos is of the same thinking as myself. Something is brewing, and we need to investigate it properly before informing the sisters. He will likely want a representative to witness the claimed properties of this potion, and if it proves to be all that they say, then Ithos will most definitely want to send someone with us to the Northern Territories.” Eilam turns to Cassius, whose features have become impossible to read. The other vampire nods at the clear dismissal and leaves the room without a word.

“You will have to excuse his behaviour. Sometimes, he forgets his place. But he is loyal and a trusted second to my friend Ithos, and I find myself enjoying his company,” Eilam explains. “However, if you want access to the larger clans of vampires, run by the sisters, then you will need both myself and Ithos on board at the very least. We will not bother them with politics unless it is necessary,” he adds.

“How many overlords are there around the city?” I ask, thinking it would be a wise idea to see what we were dealing with.

“Now, that is an interesting question. All you need to know is that you need at least two overlords on your side before the sisters are advised of a circumstance that may affect the equilibrium of their perfectly ordered existence.” Eilam shuts down my line of questioning as Ana gets up from the sofa bringing an end to our meeting.

“If you have someone show us to the guest rooms, we will wait for sunrise.” Ana’s tone suggests that there will be no more questions, even though I have plenty that I want to ask, I will be led by her as these are her people, and I don’t want to ruin our chances of getting the vampires on our side. There will be plenty of time to quiz this ancient vampire on our travel back to the Northern Territory because I have no doubt

at all that he will be joining us once he sees Ana out in the sunlight.

“Of course.” Eilam nods slightly as a female vampire enters the room. “Gina will show you to our guest quarters.” The blonde-haired girl bows at Eilam and gestures towards the door. As I pass her, the hairs on my arms raise as I feel the vampire’s perusal, and I’m reminded of the feeling of being hunted.

“If you wish to keep your eyes in your head, you will keep them off of my mate,” Ana growls out as she passes the other female. The comment earns her a chuckle from Eilam.

“Oh, this is going to be so much fun,” he says, giving the impression that he is enjoying our presence more and more with each passing minute.

“If you don’t mind, I would be grateful to spend some time in the woods outside.” Oren, who has not moved from his position behind the sofa, finally speaks, having remained silent throughout the entire exchange. He addresses Eilam directly, not glancing our way.

“I will have one of my warriors accompany you,” Eilam confirms, walking towards Oren, but the fae moves to join Lils by the door.

“I’m sure that your warriors have better things to be doing. I can see myself out.” Oren’s not expecting any argument, he never does, but Eilam won’t hear of it.

We leave Oren and follow the female, Gina, as she leads us up a staircase with intricately designed metalwork on both sides. On top of the metalwork are handrails, which I imagine were once shiny. Now they are tarnished, but they look clean. In the middle of each step is a patterned carpet running all the way up. It’s slightly threadbare and discoloured, but it smells clean. A little magic would probably restore some of this, especially the metal components, but I guess as long as the place is clean and functional, the vampires aren’t that worried about its appearance.

“Eilam was once close to a witch. This place used to look a lot nicer, from what I remember, even after the humans left it unoccupied.” Ana must have been reading my thoughts again. My thirst for knowledge is something she has become accustomed to, or at least puts up with, as she often fills me in on inconsequential details.

“What happened to the witch?” I’m not sure I’m that interested to know, but learning more will hopefully pass the time until the sun graces us with its presence.

“He was killed.”

Lils

WHILE ANA FEEDS HUNTER'S CONSTANT NEED FOR knowledge, I scan the building looking for exits and potential threats. This has all been a little too easy and a little too nice. I may have trust issues, and Eilam may be this intrigued about the potion Ris and Hunter made. Or he could be giving us a false sense of security. I use all my senses, which are slightly more heightened since I've mated with Ana. I've yet to establish if I've received any power transfer from Hunter, but as we are all only found mates, not fated, it will not be that much.

Hunter and Ana stop chatting internally just as a sound reaches my ears. The sound of fighting.

"We are under attack." The female with us sounds shocked. I guess this is not a regular occurrence. These vampires seem to have become too complacent in their role as guardians of the territory.

"They do not usually reach our den. They are intercepted before getting anywhere near the residence," she continues as she pushes past us in a whirlwind of action, drawing a dagger from goodness knows where.

I follow her path with my eyes, turning my body on the stairs and preparing to fight whatever is approaching the house.

"Let's go." Hunter's tone suggests he is ready for action as he starts to descend the stairs ahead of us. Ana bypasses him with ease, still faster than either of us unless I shift. My wolf,

who is currently stomping inside my head, baring her teeth, ready to rip the heads off of anyone who she considers a threat, huffs out her agreement. It's one of her favourite things to do, tearing a head from a foe, and I feel the tug of my lips as a smirk forms at the thought of all the destruction she is capable of. The violence we are all capable of. I can already feel the excitement of the fight taking over Ana and Hunter. Before we reach the main door, Eilam and several of his warriors join us.

“I want a full report informing me how this has happened,” he instructs one of his warriors. The female who had been with us on the stairs opens the doors, and we file out, forming a tight group. As I prepare to shift, I feel the hair rising all over my body. I hold off my shift needing to assess the situation. I wasn't expecting the sudden halting of all the vampires as they vibrate with hostility around me. Eilam steps forward, and I muscle my way to the front along with Ana and Hunter, trying to see why we aren't fighting whatever threat has approached the building. The sound we previously heard has stopped, and the air is thick with an eerie silence. I smell wolf, vampire, and...

“Oren,” Ana's voice holds steady, but I can feel the concern running through our bond. Our fae is being held in shackles between two wolf shifters. These smell like Joseph's pack, and those shackles are likely spelled as that appears to be their speciality because they aren't strong enough to contain Oren without the use of magic. The question is how did they get the drop on him.

Eilam moves his weight from one foot to the other before standing up straight with his hands behind his back, projecting the illusion that he is relaxed when the foot shuffle suggests he is anything but. With the wolves are Luca, one of his warriors and Cassius, who should have been long gone.

“*Cassius came back to warn Eilam of the breach in security and that the wolves have assistance,*” Ana informs Hunter and me. I open myself up to our bond completely, readying for a fight. They have my mate, and that is not going

to happen. He might be annoying and aloof most of the time, but he is still ours.

“I can’t get a read on the spell that coats the shackles. It’s like there isn’t one there.” Hunter sounds annoyed. He hates it when he can’t figure out how spells tick. I remember him sitting for hours poring over books with Ris in the RV. I shake my head to free my mind from the distraction—*Focus, Lils.*

The moon casts shadows of speckling light throughout the woodland surrounding the mansion. Even without her assistance, I can see at least sixteen wolves plus Luca and two other male vampires in addition to my fae mate and Cassius, both of whom are bound and look like they have been beaten.

“What is the meaning of this, Luca?” Eilam asks, sounding only mildly annoyed. What does it take to get an emotion out of this one?

“The meaning? Does there need to be a profound meaning for everything that we do?” Luca asks. “Could it not be as simple as the promise of wealth and an abundant blood supply?”

“Have you lost your mind? You have never been without blood here,” Eilam answers, sounding a little irritated. So the great one can feel an emotion or two.

“Ah, but the choice has been limited. We are no longer allowed to hunt freely, and where is the fun in that? The thrill of the chase and the sensation you get when you capture an unwilling victim only for them to succumb to your bite. Don’t you miss that?” Luca seems quite genuine in his plea to be understood.

“We have not needed that for some time, Luca. Our humans are willing and enjoy our attention. Even the sisters have seen that taking care of their humans’ needs has provided better results and a willingness to breed.”

“The sisters have grown weak and lazy—” Luca starts but is cut off by a roar from Cassius as he stumbles to his feet in outrage at the other vampire’s words. It’s clear that Cassius is bleeding profusely, which is not a good thing for a vampire.

He launches himself at Luca, but even I can see he is weaker than he should be.

One of the wolves shifts and takes Cassius out, plunging its teeth into the vampire's neck. The sound of crunching bone and tearing flesh together with the scent of blood is too much for my wolf, and I allow the shift that has been looming since we walked out of the door. Rejoicing in the pain as my wolf is set free. If I'm going to die, it will be on my terms. Ana hisses next to me, pulling a dagger and preparing to run headfirst into the wolves, some of whom have started to shift. There are still several surrounding Oren in their human-like form. Those are the ones I intend to kill first.

"No!" Eilam shouts. His anger and raw emotion vibrate through my wolf's body, and she answers with a howl. Within seconds the clearing erupts as Eilam speeds towards the wolf who attacked his lover.

My wolf is done taking shit from anyone and is ready to put an end to this. The sound of fighting rages around me, but we have blinkers to the carnage as my wolf runs over and around other people engaged in their own skirmishes. We reach one of Joseph's pack catching him mid-shift, and my wolf growls in satisfaction as she sinks her teeth into its neck, tearing out his windpipe and dropping him like a rag to the floor. Pain at our scruff alerts us as a large male wolf attacks from behind. My wolf rolls, preparing to shake it off, but the attacker disappears, and she howls at the injustice.

"Enough!" A loud male voice bellows over the fray, and I feel a pull on my mate bond as Hunter lets out an angry curse. My wolf growls as I shift back to take stock of what is happening. The fighting has stopped, and the area in front of the mansion is littered with bodies. Eilam is kneeling next to Cassius's body which is headless and slowly crumbling to dust. The overlord has vines coating his legs, holding him to the floor and binding his arms to his sides, whilst a large wolf from Joseph's pack stands over him, holding his hair in one hand and a vicious-looking knife at Eilam's throat in the other.

My throat vibrates with a continuous growl as I stand naked and dirty, looking at the scene in front of me. Oren is no

longer shackled but has Ana held against him, gagged and bound with the shackles that once held him and black weeds that don't look natural. Her eyes are flashing angrily, and whatever spell I can sense on those weeds seems to be preventing her from communicating with us, as I can no longer feel her in my mind.

“What the hell are you doing, Oren?” I ask, trying to keep my wolf down, but even as the words leave my lips, the nails on my fingers are growing again.

“Such simple beings, and oh, so predictable.” His tone is less musical, deeper even. Oren ignores my question, inhaling deeply as if he had been holding his breath for a while. “A little violence was just what I needed to keep this ridiculous fae down.”

His comment is confusing, and I glance at Hunter, who stands a few feet from me. His muscles are bunched and on display. The shirt he was given earlier has been ripped from his arms and lies in tatters around his torso.

“*That's not Oren,*” he says, his voice quiet in my mind. “*Look at his arms.*” Hunter nods ever so slightly towards the fae. If I weren't so in-tune with his movements, I wouldn't have noticed the inclination of his head.

I take a closer look trying to ignore my fury at my mate's betrayal and how he is threatening Ana. Oren's arms have black veins crawling up them in a spiderweb pattern. *Well shit!*

“*That's black magic.*” I hiss quietly in Hunter's mind. Again, the slightest of movements of his head tells me he agrees as he keeps his eyes trained on what's happening.

“Let me explain this to you in simple terms, so you will all understand.” The haughty voice is like Oren's, but there was no gentleness or sense of calm, which he would usually use to get his point across at a time like this. There is still a lot of low growling and hissing from the wolves and vampires that are left as they face off. Aggression vibrates through the air, and my wolf stomps about, eager to be released again.

“This,”—Oren’s hand waves at the large stocky-looking wolf holding Eilam—“is Roan. He is Joseph’s second in command. They are both working for me, and those of you who I deem necessary to my plan will come with me.” He says this matter-of-factly as if we are just going to agree.

“In your dreams, asshole!” The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them.

“Ah, Wolf. I’m afraid you have no choice unless you wish to see your mate die?” Oren’s eyebrow raises as if asking me a serious question, but I see his fist clench on Ana’s stomach as he holds her tightly and presses an evil-looking dagger to her throat, drawing blood.

Hunter reaches my side and holds me back as my wolf starts to take control. The warmth of his tight embrace seeps through me.

“Easy now, we need to play along and see where this is going. Take a breath and calm yourself. Ana is in danger.” His words soothe my wolf enough for me to see sense in what he is saying. It’s no good going off half-cocked. We need a plan.

“Oren is still in there, I think.” I flash the thought back to Hunter as I inhale deeply, smelling the blood-stained forest floor.

“You won’t hurt her. She’s your mate,” I reply to Oren’s statement with as much confidence as I can muster.

“Oh, foolish wolf.” Oren laughs, but it doesn’t sound right. “Did you really think that your pussy was so magical that it would attract a fae?” He continues to laugh as Joseph’s dickhead wolves join in.

I try not to show how Oren’s words sting and play on my insecurities. Instead, I focus on the pieces of Luca turning to dust a metre or so from Eilam; at least, that is one traitor out of the way.

“Fae magic is so very exciting, isn’t it.” Oren sounds like he’s losing his mind. “The control of emotions of those around you was easy to manipulate, with a touch of my magic, to make you all think he was your mate. Even the poor fae

thought he might be for a while. Why they do not use this power of theirs continuously, I don't know."

Oren's body moves with Ana further into the open area in front of the mansion, herding us all back towards the building.

"We will need to recharge a little before we attempt to travel back to the Northern Territory. The portals are an unstable form of transport without full control of his magic." Oren's head turns towards Roan, ignoring us as he no longer considers us a threat. Ana's eyes are trying to tell me something, and if I'm guessing right, it would be to run and leave her to her fate—Not going to happen. She is most definitely my mate, and there is no way I am leaving her with these arseholes.

"We'll take the wolf, witch, and vampire lord. The rest are no longer necessary." As Oren's lips move with these words, the plant which covers half of the mansion, Ivy, I think Hunter called it, starts to turn black and shoots out from the building, wrapping itself around the remaining vampire warriors. Several break free only to be snared in the woods again and pulled back, being tied tightly to the brickwork of the mansion, hissing and yelling until their mouths are bound with leaves and weeds. I try not to look, as out of the corner of my eye, I see Gina, the female who led us up the stairs, break free and flash away into the woods. I hope she has gone for help, but chances are she is just saving herself.

Oren

I HIDE IN THE CREVICES OF MY MIND, HOPING TO KEEP MY sanity safe from the powerful invader. The sex in the pool and the fighting between the vampires and wolves, cleverly orchestrated by the Caleb entity, was like a power surge feeding the evil inside me. It has control for now, and all I can do is watch in horror as it uses my body and what little fae power it can access to influence those around it.

Analucia is in terrible danger. She has been infected with the contaminated blood I feel oozing its poison through my veins. Her body is held by mine, bound by magically charged vines and gagged with a nasty form of weed crushed and mixed with deadly nightshade. If she were human, she would likely be dead. Her heart cannot stop, but extended contact with her skin will start to burn, and if she accidentally ingests some of it, she may become paralysed. I've never heard of the poison being used on a vampire, so I can't be sure of the exact effects. Fortunately, Analucia has enough sense not to try and talk or swallow.

The slender vampire squirms in my arms, trying to pull herself free, only the magic emanating from my body is making everyone around us lethargic and horny. This is not what my power is meant for. The fae do not influence others unless it is essential or to prove a point temporarily. Using it to control other beings permanently is against our code of conduct, and there are dire consequences under fae law for doing this. At this time, I would happily pay with my own life if it meant ridding the world of this evil once and for all. Each

second that it contaminates my body is too long. I need to formulate a plan.

My body moves towards the mansion, pushing the others with intent and a threat to harm their mate. The ancient vampire, Eilam, is bound tightly and being carried by the wolves. The sun is breaching the horizon. I can feel it, not enough to pull on the awakening nature around me but enough that the vampires who have been tethered to the outside walls must be aware that the sun is rising.

Gagged though they are, there is muffled shrieking, and their overlord roars with the knowledge that he is about to lose the warriors he had left. Already his lover has been slain. This will have been an enormous blow to a being used to being the predator, the leader, and the one in control. It must be a bitter pill to swallow.

“Take the vampire and witch to the pool room. The wolf stays with me.” My lips move, but I am no longer operating my limbs. I can feel a weakening in the hold that it has, and I double my efforts to regain control, looking for any signs of exhaustion. I will reclaim what is mine, even if it is temporary. I need to be able to communicate with others again, having shut down the ability which allows me to communicate with them in their minds, lest this dark infestation gets a hold of it.

There is resistance, as I would expect the mate-bonded trio are a tight-knit team. So far, I have only been forced to infect one of them, the vampire Analucia. Damn, I did not see where they were taken. I must pay more attention, but to feel what this being is feeling would give away my resistance to his occupation. He believes he is finally rid of me, but fae are not so easily killed. I am grateful that we have kept ourselves separate from the other supernaturals. They have no idea what we are capable of. However, this evil infestation was not something I had been prepared for. I should have taken more precautions, but the danger was too imminent for me not to act as soon as we left the portal and came across the dying Caleb about to spill the evil dark magic that had corrupted him.

“We are alone, Wolf. There is nowhere for you to hide now. If you want to see your mates again, you will get on your

knees like a good slut and suck this fae dick.” I am pulled out of my musings as I focus on what my body is doing.

“Like fuck I will!” Lils says, looking about ready to slit my throat, which wouldn’t kill me instantly but might let enough blood out that I could regain control a little whilst my body is vulnerable. I urge her on, hoping to have some influence on proceedings, but Caleb is holding most of the strings. He is the puppeteer. I recognise this now and berate myself for not seeing it more promptly.

“You want this dick. You are wet just thinking about it.”

The black magic swirls around my body, pulling on my power to push the suggestion to the unwilling wolf.

“That’s it, Wolf, on your knees. Now take it out and show me what you are capable of now that you’ve found a taste for cock.”

I have no idea why he is that interested in Lileth. In life, it is my understanding that the witch was interested in males, but now that he has taken my shell hostage, my preference for females still appears to be governing my body’s reactions. Sex has a powerful energy, so it would seem—the dirtier, the better. Unfortunately, the more power it gains from such activities, the more I find myself falling out of touch with my physical self.

The sound of slurping and moaning pulls me full force back into consciousness. I can almost feel her mouth’s soft, warm wetness as she chokes and gags on my hard length being thrust in and out of her. He has my hands holding her hair and the side of her head as he takes her over and over. The sensation is causing my consciousness to shut down. I am sickened by the act that my body is being used for.

“That’s it, just like that. Suck it harder, Wolf.” My voice sounds deeper, harsher and more demanding, showing rudimentary emotions that I don’t allow myself to feel. The gagging continues as he forces my body into hers. I push against the black magic, willing my limbs to stop and obey me instead. I have never, not once in my entire existence, taken a female who was unwilling or had the need to use my power in

such a way that they were coerced into taking part in a sexual act that they would not normally agree to.

“Harder, Wolf.” The sounds of asphyxiation fill the air as Lileth struggles to breathe. All too late, I realise the entity is holding her nose, slamming into her mouth repeatedly and only allowing her to breathe when it seems she might pass out. The power Caleb is gaining from this intoxicating domination is like nothing I have ever felt before. Black tendrils swirl out of my body, caressing Lileth’s skin, causing her to jolt at the contact. The invader of my body is so preoccupied with this disgusting act it fails to notice something that I am sensing as I try to regain control.

Pain slices through me, and my body rears away from the wolf, who is left heaving in breath after short sharp breath on the floor at my feet, as she holds a dagger now dripping with my blood. Clever girl.

I use the distraction to push my consciousness forward quickly. Knowing that I won’t be able to hold him back for long. I manipulate my vocal cords with effort, managing to control my mouth just barely as I struggle to get my message across.

“Lileth, I do not have that much time. Caleb has infected my body and is slowly gaining control. Analucia was infected with black magic when she ingested my blood, and he will use her along with anyone else he can control to gain more power and go after Merissa.”

Lileth looks at me with disgust at first. Then slowly, recognition takes over her flushed, sweaty features. Her breathing is beginning to even out, so the slight movement of her head is the only indication that I know she has understood me.

“I can’t hold it back...” I try desperately to convey more and to hold tight to my body, but the crack of my hand against Lileth’s face signals my defeat. I have no choice but to beat a hasty retreat into the corner of my mind that I have carved out for my hiding place before Caleb is able to find me.

“You will pay dearly for that, Wolf. As will you, Fae.”

A knock at the door thankfully interrupts whatever deviant act the pestilence inside me had on its mind.

“What?” My lips snarl out the command as my hands reach down and arrange my softening member into my trousers. That is one part of my body he has not got complete control over yet, and thankfully my erection dissipated once my true feelings about Lileth shone through during my short gain of power.

“I thought you would wish to know that the sun has arisen and the vampires are beginning to smoke outside.” The irritating voice of Roan filters through to my consciousness, and I feel Caleb bristle at the interruption.

From what I have gleaned so far, Roan is easily manipulated, as many of Joseph’s wolves are. He has been in command of Joseph’s pack members as they scatter along the border of the vampires’ territory, gaining intel. Now, it seems they are actively taking one of the overlords, readying a party to head north and join Joseph in his quest to enter the Northern Territory and challenge Malaki for the position of Alpha.

“Bring the others up. They can witness this to remind them that I can and will take what I want now that I have this fae under control.” Caleb clearly doesn’t want Roan to know that I have some fight left in me, or he is that confident of his ability to keep me out and eventually push me out of existence that he feels it is not worth mentioning.

If I can prevent him from forcing others into sexual acts or acts of violence so he becomes weaker, I may stand a chance of regaining control. That thought bolsters my spirit and determination as he grabs Lileth with my hands and uses more magic to pull her with him towards the mansion’s entrance.

Ana

SOMETHING IS VERY WRONG. I CAN FEEL IT WRITHING IN MY veins, but I haven't had time to decipher what might be the cause. The strong wrench on our mate bond had Hunter and me pounding at the door to the pool, demanding to be let out. Lils pulled strength from us, something only ever done in emergencies as we don't share power the way fated mates do. Now we find ourselves tired and in need of sustenance to recuperate, and for me, that means I need to feed. The connection I felt to Oren has been severed. It is clear he is not who we thought he was and certainly not our mate.

It makes me feel dirty how easily I fell for the magic that made me desperately want him between my legs when all I was doing was feeding the black magic within him with my lust.

"Stop thinking about it, Ana. You can't be held responsible for what that bastard did," Hunter whispers in my mind as we are led back up the stairs and out of the house. Eilam is being manhandled behind us, and I can feel his growing anger as we are taken outside. Hunter and I have agreed to bide our time until we formulate a plan with Lils, so we stay outwardly calm, waiting to see how it all plays out.

"He had better not have hurt her, or all bets are off, and I take the arsehole out." I seethe at the thought of that fae touching Lils.

"What use will we be to each other if one of us is dead?" His voice sounds calm, but I can sense the unease in his body as he holds his emotions in check. He is just as concerned for

Lils as I am. That jolt on our strength was likely Lils fending off an attack.

As we exit the mansion, I can feel the call of the sun; rays of orange and gold paint the lightening sky, and I can hear hissing, albeit muffled by the leaves of the vines holding the vampires in place. The smell of burning flesh is pungent in the air as the light starts to hit part of the mansion. Eilam strains against his captors, fighting the magic that binds him. His rage increases, no doubt tinged with a dose of fear as self-preservation kicks in. He will only be able to stay exposed a little longer before he is turned to ash along with his warriors. Oren stands there on the gravel drive of this once magnificent building watching with a look of morbid fascination as the burning begins.

Next to him, her chest heaving with barely contained emotion, is Lils. My anger rises as I note her swollen lips and red face, which begins to fade right in front of my eyes as her natural healing kicks in.

“Don’t react,” she says in my mind, no doubt feeling my anger through our bond. *“It’s what he wants. Oren has been possessed by black magic. He called the entity Caleb.”* I carefully school my features. She must have misheard him. Caleb is dead. I return my attention to Lils, allowing my eyes to rake over her body.

“What did he do to you? I’m going to kill him.” I clench my fists, wanting nothing more than to sink my teeth into that fae bastard and suck his life force from him whilst ripping out his throat.

“It doesn’t matter. What matters is that the thing inside him is flooding our surroundings with power, influencing everyone so that it can draw on the energy produced by their emotions.” Lils’ voice is strained as she, too, attempts to hold her emotions in check.

“Fae magic doesn’t work on vampires. He can not influence us the way he can you.” I remind her of when we first met the fae, and Oren’s companion thought she was

helping by calming everyone and adding a little lust into the mix.

“Normally, you would be right, but Oren is infected with black magic, and you have been feeding from him. He was eager to let me know you had been contaminated.” Lils is worried, and she has good reason to be. This is something I have not encountered before. We were cautious when we entered the Northern Territory with Ris and Rogue. We established that it was teaming with black magic, and I wasn’t allowed to feed. We didn’t eat or drink anything once we hit the black-mist-shrouded territory.

“This is serious. I need some supplies to work on an antidote. Can you speak to Eilam, Ana?” Hunter asks. *“Maybe he has come across this before?”*

“I’ll try, but right now, he’s pissed as hell and no doubt being bombarded with internal screams and requests for help from the rest of his warriors.”

Before I have a chance to try to reach Eilam with my mind, one of the vampires attached to the tangle of weed outside the building ignites. Flames pour out of its disintegrating body. Eilam slumps to the ground in defeat, roaring his anguish. The crackle of fire has me on edge as aided by magic, the plants covering the mansion begin to flow with orange, red, and green flames as, one by one, the vampires succumb to the rising sun, their exposed flesh that the ivy doesn’t bind starts to blister and bubble.

Like a siren’s call, the emotions of the dying vampires seem to flood the fae’s body. I can almost see it as Oren’s body reacts, and to a minor extent, mine does too. The infection I now know is in my bloodstream is growing, seeping through me and demanding that I fight or fuck something. I need to get my mates away from here before I am incapable of controlling my body and I do something that will irreversibly damage our bond.

“You need to get Lils out of here, Hunter. I’ll distract the fae,” I speak to Hunter individually, hoping that he understands why this needs to be done.

“We can cure you, Ana. I just need some time.” He insists but doesn’t move a muscle as he stands next to me lest he alerts the wolves around us guarding our rag-tag bunch of mismatched species.

“What we need, Hunter, is Ris and Kayden.” I push the urgent message into his mind knowing that they are our only hope of defeating this sort of power.

“We won’t make it that far. He’ll hunt us down.” Hunter is getting agitated and angry at my suggestion that we split up.

I feel Oren’s power increasing. With that amount of black magic flooding the area, it will soon be impossible for any of us to escape. Eilam must realise this too as he surges to his feet as best he can with the ties that bind him, only to be set upon by two burly wolf shifters.

“I want him alive.” Oren’s voice is loud over the muffled screaming of the vampires. I know from experience the taste and scent of evil on those plants. Unfortunately, the other vampires are not making any effort to prevent the ingestion of the pungent vegetation. Not that it will be a problem for them for much longer because the sun’s rays are seeping through the cloud cover and the trees surrounding the property, and if that wasn’t cause enough for concern, the plants encasing the mansion are now slowly beginning to burn as well.

The wolves cheer as another vampire turns to ash, and my eye twitches as I flinch, the plight of the dying vampires seep into my very being, making me want to scream at the injustice. My body shakes ever so slightly as I use all of my strength to keep my emotions in check and school my features to ensure I don’t react. Not that any of them notice. They are all caught up in the chaos and destruction. Eilam snarls, his fangs extending as he lashes out with the only weapon available to him at the moment, his mouth. The wolves taunting and punching him haven’t noticed that he is slowly undoing and slashing through the vines tying him. The magic holding him is waning as Oren’s invader loses concentration and revels in the noise and mayhem surrounding us.

Slowly I have been inching closer to Oren, the call of his black magic pulling to that which is already tainting my body. I can feel a sense of lust building, but I'm trying hard not to give in to it. The timing is crucial. We won't get another opportunity like this, not whilst I am still semi in control. I send a thought to Hunter, telling him the time is close. He has already started to move cautiously towards Lils, who is busy wrestling with Roan as he holds her tightly against his body. The large wolf shifter has an arm across Lils' chest, holding her back to his front. Laughing and howling at the devastation and licking Lils on the side of the neck, grinding his lower half into her arse. Her disgust is evident on her face as she loses her fight to contain her emotions.

I reach Oren's side, and he pulls my body into his, which is vibrating with excitement that feels contagious, only I know that isn't my will or my body's natural reaction to him. I rejoice in death and destruction in a fair fight, but not like this, not when magic is being used against those without it. Still, in the back of my mind, my pity is tainted. I resent that these warriors had become so self-important that they believed themselves ready for any attack.

"Hindsight is a beautiful thing, Young One." Eilam's voice is like a caress in my mind. I had forgotten just how soothing it could be when speaking to your own species. *"Prepare yourself to leave. I will create a distraction."*

"Today is not the day you sacrifice yourself, old man. I will stay and help. I am already contaminated with black magic." I focus solely on my conversation with the ancient vampire, hoping that my mental walls are still strong enough so as not to alert Oren's occupier of my intentions. I have no idea whether this entity can read my mind, and I won't take any chances.

Running my hand up his chest, I hope to reassure the entity within him that I am losing my fight against the lust he is thrusting my way. It is almost overwhelming, and I cannot contain the moan that leaves my lips. Clenching my thighs at the onslaught, I concentrate again on what Eilam is saying.

“You fed from the fae?” Eilam sounds intrigued and alarmed in equal measures. *“They do not allow vampires to feed from them.”*

“I don’t think the being encased in Oren’s body is aware of that.” I push the thoughts to him as he continues to take a beating from the wolves seeming unaffected by their blows.

“That is something we can revisit at a later time. My bindings are about to give way. If you are staying, get ready.”

I warn Hunter and flash an intent to Lils, shutting my walls tight just the way Ris taught us to, she said it would be important when you needed a break from your mates, but I don’t think she meant for us to use it when we were perilously close to dying. Glancing over at Lils, I see her trying to reach one of her hidden daggers as she fights against the influence of Oren’s magic, which is flooding the area. I won’t let Roan touch my mate in the manner that it is evident he is going to, as he starts to grope her roughly.

Oren’s body shakes with laughter, and I grip him tightly, allowing the kiss he instigates. His tongue plunders my mouth, and my body reacts immediately, in a way that it would if one of my mates were to kiss me in this fashion. I now know that there is no mate bond with Oren. All this time, it has been the black magic imitating it, drawing us all to it, using our need for each other to fuel its possession.

His hand reaches between us, squeezing my breast, and another moan escapes me. I’m losing control of my body as it reacts to his magic, fusing with the darkness crawling inside me. If I don’t act soon, it will be too late.

I trust Hunter to do what I asked, even though he is resistant to the idea of leaving me. He must see that this is bigger than just us. We need Ris and her magic. Combined with Kayden’s, it’s the only magic I’m aware of that might be strong enough to fight this thing, whatever it is, and we need Oren back if that is possible. Maybe the fae will know how to free him if we can get to them in time. These thoughts shuffle through my mind at a rapid pace as I try to retain some

semblance of me, and distract myself from the battle I am losing against my body.

Oren's hand moves slowly down my body, taking his time to caress every slight curve of my lean frame. My borrowed attire is a simple dress of deep green with long flowing sleeves. Strapped around my body are various daggers, but I mostly rely on my natural strength and sire-given gifts of sharp, deadly fangs, which are even now dropping into my mouth, filling me with a need to feed again. I haven't known hunger like this since I was a fledgling vampire, and my sire abandoned me to fend for myself. My mind is wandering again. I need to focus.

Around us, in slow motion, chaos begins. Eilam is free, and I can feel his presence as he rips into the wolves who were taunting him. The smell of blood and destruction fuels my need. I break away from Oren only long enough to reposition myself. I leap at him, wrapping my legs around his hips, feeling the hardness of his arousal close to my burning heat. His hands grip my arse, and I sense us moving further into the trees, away from the fighting. He has no care for the outcome; the entity within him seems so confident that he will win. Power pulses from Oren's body, causing the trees to shake with the presence of great evil as a black mist starts to swirl up from the earth.

My back hits a tree, the bark rough through the thin material of the dress I wear. Holding me against the trunk, Oren mauls and paws at my clothes. Without a conscious decision, I help him, pulling up the skirt of my dress and reaching for the button of his trousers. Hands are touching me, magic holds me against the tree, as the earth shatters around us and the tree roots are thrust out of the ground creating a cage. One winds around my body, tying me to the rough bark. All the while, sounds of need and encouragement flow unbidden from my throat. I can't even turn to see what is happening with my mates. Instead, my eyes are fixed on the beautiful fae in front of me as he frees himself from the restraints of his black trousers, dropping those to his ankles. He wears no underwear, so his heavy thick cock is free in seconds.

Then Oren's body is against mine, pushing the skirt of my dress up my thighs as I wrap my legs around his body, pulling him to me, needing him to take me.

"You want this just as much as I do," he husks out, his voice unnatural now. Despite the black veins writhing all over his skin, he is still the most beautiful thing I have ever seen, and I can't get enough.

"Take me, Fae," I half beg, half demand as I feel the thick head of his cock pushing through my wet folds. I'm so wet and dripping for him that there is no resistance as he impales me with one hard thrust. The back of my head hits the tree trunk as a silent scream opens my mouth, and then a low moan rumbles out of me, answered by a groan from Oren as he thrusts into me over and over again.

I'm vaguely aware of someone yelling my name, but it is so far off I can barely hear it over the rushing of blood in my veins and the feeling of pure lust that floods my body with each motion of his hips.

"Bite me, Vampire!" Oren commands, and I obey, lost in sensation and completely consumed by the pull of the black magic and my orgasm. I chase the high like one of those drug addicts I remember seeing in the city I lived in when I was human. I want it; it's my right. It's the only thing I need, and only the fae groaning and straining inside me can give it to me. I sink my fangs into his delicious flesh, relishing the bitter taste of his tainted blood, and allow the final part of me, trying to resist this false connection, to let go.

Lils

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING? WE NEED TO GET TO ANA,” I YELL at Hunter as he pulls on my arm, dragging me away from the mansion that is beginning to burn in earnest, fueled by magic and the heat of dying vampires. Eilam is losing his shit on the wolves. Roan had thrust me aside when he saw Eilam was loose and attacking his pack members.

“Oren’s magic is centred on her for now. That is the way she wanted it. Whatever has a hold of his body is struggling to manage the fae magic in multiple locations, but I have no doubt it will get stronger,” Hunter explains as he continues to drag me away from the fight that my wolf was very much invested in.

“We can’t just leave her here, Hunter. He’ll kill her.” I try and turn around, but Hunter uses our mate bond to keep me with him. I throw him a look of disgust at this cruel trick.

“You can hate me all you like right now, but Ana asked me to get you out of here, and that is what I am doing. Do you think I wanted to run from that fight?” He gets up in my face, stopping abruptly as we reach the road we came in on.

“I don’t know what you want, Hunter, because I’ve clearly been left out of this discussion about what is best for me.” I know I sound like a spoilt brat right now, but I can’t help it. My mate is in danger, and I’ve just effectively run away, leaving her to her fate. I couldn’t help her when Joseph’s wolves tied her up in the greenhouse before Ris saved her, but here, I was able to try at least.

“And you would likely have got yourself killed, or worse, captured and used by that fucker who had his hands all over you.” Hunter spits the words out as he reads my mind. “Oren’s magic is strong, Lils, and currently in the wrong hands even if the entity has no idea how to wield it properly. Ana was only too aware of what she was getting into. She is infected, and we need to help her by getting out of here and sending word to Ris and Kayden.”

“What if it’s a trap? We pull them away from the Northern Territory, leaving Malaki exposed.” I ask angrily as my mind tries to process the best course of action now that we are away from the influence of black magic.

“You could be right, but I think the idea was that we were all dragged north to meet up with Joseph and the rest of his pack.” Hunter muses as he considers the little we know. “I think the intention was to control us all, then we would arrive at the castle looking as though we had successfully brought Eilam over to our side, only for Joseph to attack once we were in the castle.”

We start to move on foot down the road towards the city; the sun has risen and casts a misleadingly warm glow on the woods and surrounding fields. Areas have been cleared and are already being worked by humans producing their own food. It looks to be a gloriously sunny day, despite the frigid temperature of winter, which is already upon us. Even though I rarely feel the cold, I can still sense the approach of snow. We will need to move fast if we have any hope of getting to a town where we can send word to my brother. I could travel in wolf form and head north if I was alone. It would be a lot faster, but Hunter won’t make it even with his added speed, not in the time that we have available.

“We need to get off the main road and stay hidden.” I look behind us; the smoke from the mansion is curling into the sky now and will no doubt start grabbing attention. We don’t need to be mixed up in that or mistaken for the arsonists. Hunter nods in agreement, and we change course, moving through the wood to the left of the road, taking a turn away from the city and further from Ana. My heart hurts at the thought of what

she is enduring. My only consolation, if it can be considered that, is that she hopefully won't know what is happening. Unless she is trapped in her mind the way Kayd was. No, I cannot think of my beautiful vampire trapped and unable to stop what is happening to her.

We travel for hours, heading north, away from the city, on a different route than the one we arrived on. Without Oren's portals, it is slow going, but with supernatural speed, a lot quicker than a human would manage. Every so often, Hunter insists we stop as he picks plants he needs for potions. He tells me we will be concocting some evil brews tonight, and I find myself unusually excited at the prospect, which leads me to wonder if that is coming from Hunter. The rain starts in the early afternoon and doesn't relent. Soon large puddles form on the roads, and I am thankful we are walking through the woods with their tall canopy providing some shelter from the constant deluge.

"We'll need a fire tonight, so it would be better if we were near some form of a populated area. Then our fire could be misconstrued as one from a village or town," Hunter suggests as we continue through the rain. I agree with a nod, focusing on the way ahead as we navigate dense undergrowth in the protective shade of the evergreen trees.

"Why do you think they aren't following us?" I ask the question that has been bugging me since we left.

"What makes you think that they aren't?" Hunter shrugs as I throw him a questioning look. "They will know where we are heading. It's the same direction that they are going. Our only hope is to find a messenger before they head us off and capture us again."

"Well, you are a positive soul today, aren't you," I reply sarcastically at his lack of faith that we might evade them.

"You must know it's inevitable, Lils. If Joseph intends to use you to gain access to your brother's castle, he isn't just going to let you go. Oren can't turn up without you. So it stands to reason they will recapture us at some point." Hunter

stops by a large oak tree and takes a moment to examine some moss growing on the bark.

“So why let us get this far?” I ask, taking a moment to use my heightened senses to check our surroundings.

“Whatever has taken over Oren’s body is likely occupied with the heady power it now possesses. It has been fighting with Oren and appears to have won. That thing, Caleb or whatever it is, has an overconfident vibe. Did you feel it?” He turns to me with a hand full of moss and starts pushing it into his potion bag, which rarely leaves his waist.

I contemplate what he has said. Did I get a vibe? Only of the evil inside Oren as he thrust his fucking cock in my mouth.

“He did what?” Hunter is on me instantly, his fingers under my chin forcing me to look at him. “I was angry enough when I thought he had hit you.” His fingers trail down my face where the bastard smacked me after I stabbed him in the thigh. I know there won’t be any evidence of it now, as I have already healed. “I will kill him!”

“We will deal with Oren, don’t worry. Only it wasn’t him, and we need to remember that. He is as much a victim as the rest of us, and I think he has been fighting this thing a lot longer than we have.”

Hunter places his lips on mine with a reassuring kiss, then holds my hand as we start to move off again.

“What makes you say that?” he asks, looking around and trying to steer us through the best path.

“Think about it. Where would the black magic have come from? It must have been when they were trying to expel it with Ris. We haven’t encountered any unusual magic since we left the castle.” I say my thoughts out loud, convinced that Oren must have been infected months ago.

“So, he has been fighting it all this time without saying anything?” Hunter sounds astonished and a little annoyed.

“He’s stubborn, a fae trait, I believe. I doubt he wanted anyone to think he was too weak to deal with it, and we don’t know how much control he has had from the beginning.”

“No, I guess you are right. Oren thought we were mates too. The pull was real. At least, I thought it was.” He muses as he pushes a thorny-looking bramble aside with a stick, so we don’t get caught up on it.

“You weren’t the only one. We all felt it,” I reassure him. The further away we are from the influence of whatever had a hold of us, the clearer I can see that Oren was never my mate. “I can’t tell what is real anymore and what is fake.” I’m exhausted suddenly and questioning everything that I feel for Hunter. My mate bond with Ana is certain as we connected long before we met Oren, but what if I’m not actually Hunter’s mate? My heart hurts just thinking about him not belonging to me.

“I am your mate, Lils.” He stops and turns around in the bracken and fern, giving me a heated gaze. “If we weren’t mates, I wouldn’t be able to read your mind or feel what you are feeling.” His matter-of-fact explanation is accompanied by a sensation of such want that I inhale sharply. Feeling his need for me as if it were my own.

My body moves instinctually until I’m standing right before him. Reaching out, I touch the stubble on his face feeling it prickling deliciously against my skin.

“Don’t doubt what we have, Lils, or belittle it because that magic made us feel things that don’t exist. What we have is real.” To prove his point, he grips my hips and pulls me against him, and I feel the zing of our bond as the hairs on my arms stand to attention and goosebumps begin to blossom. He’s hard, and already I am growing wet between my thighs at the thought of him inside me again. Above us, the clouds are growing darker, and the rain continues to pour. I catch a glimpse of them as I look up, and I let my head drop back as Hunter starts kissing my neck, his mouth open with hard sucking kisses marking me. My wolf is so on board with this she starts to howl in my head. Hair erupts along my arms, and my nails extend into claws.

Hunter spins me around, my back to his front, one arm across my chest as the other hand urgently pushes under the waistband of my borrowed jeans. He spends a moment

undoing the button before unzipping them and continuing to bite softly at my neck. Inhumane moans and whimpers escape my lips as the urgency rises in me. Hunter answers my wordless plea and slips his fingers between my wet folds, rubbing my needy clit in tight circles with his thumb.

“I’m going to show you just how real what we have is, Lils. Your wolf is mine!” His voice is husky with lust. He can’t possibly mean he’s going to claim my wolf? I almost orgasm at the thought as she pushes forward further. I’m starting to shift.

“On your knees, Wolf,” Hunter demands, and I hear the zip of his trousers before he yanks my jeans to my ankles and pushes me forwards into the dirt. The ground is wet and covered in ferns and bracken, but my wolf doesn’t care. Flinging my arms out in front of me as I fall onto the sodden dirty floor, I lean into the fall and land on all fours; my wolf digs her claws into the mud, anchoring us to the wet ground. I try to keep her in check. I can’t let myself shift completely. Hunter kneels behind me, and I throw a warning growl over my shoulder, needing him to know how close I am to losing control of my wolf.

“So fucking beautiful and so fucking mine!” He growls out as the thick head of his cock finds my dripping entrance from behind. I’m barely able to open my legs enough to accommodate his girth, but he thrusts in regardless. I’m so full. My wolf growls a needy sound; she wants more of our mate. I can barely see straight, not quite human, not quite wolf, and a mix of pants and growls leave my lips between my extending teeth. The rain drenches us from above as Hunter grips my hips hard enough to leave a mark and starts to pound into me. My heavy breasts sway with the rhythm as our claws dig hard into the earth to steady our body so that we can take the stretching between our thighs as Hunter’s thick cock thrusts inside us over and over.

“Take all of me, Wolf. That’s it, can you feel that? That is your mate fucking you so hard you will feel me inside you for the rest of the night.” He punctuates his words by pushing his cock inside me up to the hilt. I can feel his heavy balls

smacking against my pussy as he pulls back and thrusts back inside me within seconds. There is no letup, no escaping, even if I wanted to, which I don't. The feeling is unreal, otherworldly, as the tingle of our bond hums between us, strengthening as Hunter hammers into me.

My tongue hangs longer through my lips and elongated teeth, dripping with saliva as I pant my need bowing my head to the ground submitting to his dominance. I can no longer form words but snarl and whimper through my laboured breaths. I can feel my orgasm building with every fibre of my being. My hind legs start shifting as my wolf tries to break free of the jeans, restricting our movement. I feel the spread of my legs rather than having any control over them physically and hear Hunter grunt his approval as he continues his bliss-inducing assault on our body. I've never shared this type of experience with my wolf before. No one but a mate would be able to take my wolf, she wouldn't allow it, and I would have no control over her decimating anyone who tried.

I'm not entirely shifted, and I need him to come before my wolf tries to take over completely, and he's fucking an animal. Although, given the noises he is making, I don't think he would notice. I glance over my shoulder at Hunter. He's breathing hard, his body inhumanly fast as he fucks me, eyes closed, grunting his need, lost to the sensation. Focusing forward again, I use my claws to maintain a matching rhythm pushing back into his thrusts. Hunter's hand on my upper back pushes my head down to the ground changing the angle he enters my body.

It's game over. A strangled sound, not quite scream, not quite howl, wrenches out of my throat and into the damp air around us as the tightness in my inner thighs and fluttering of the internal walls of my pussy explode into a sensation that floods my body. My pussy clamps down on Hunter's hard cock as my orgasm shatters me, and I'm barely aware of Hunter crying out behind me as his warm cum fills me and he finds his release. My arms and legs shift back as I collapse onto the soft, wet earth with Hunter on top of me. His weight crushes me briefly before he rolls off to my right, taking me with him, so we lay next to each other, his front to my back,

on the ground, both attempting to gain the use of our lungs again.

Lying here in the quiet with our breathing and the soft patter of the rain through the leaves, I start to get nervous that Hunter may be put off by my wolf trying to take control whilst we were intimate.

“There is nothing about you that will turn me off, Lils. Your wolf is part of you, and you are both mine.” Hunter’s words reassure me as his warmth radiates from behind me.

We remain like that for a few minutes kissing and whispering nonsense words; all the while, our bond strengthens and pulls us tightly together. Eventually, we surface into reality, realising that the light is failing.

“We should move.” We both say simultaneously, chuckling as we get up and dress quickly. Hunter extends his hand, tangling my fingers with his as we walk closer to the scent of humans, hoping to find somewhere to camp for the night.

Ana

THE DARKNESS FEELS LIKE A MIST SWIRLING IN MY BRAIN. I fight it with all I can, coached by the constant presence of Eilam's voice and thoughts of my mates. My senses are slowly returning, but they are dull, blunt if you like.

"Fight harder, Analucia. You are a vampire with a strong lineage. Now fight!" Eilam's voice guides me to the surface of the thick sludge that has taken over my brain. With force, my eyelids obey and gradually open, but I'm still not quite capable of making sense of my surroundings.

"Where are we?" I manage to croak out, my voice feeling rusty and unused.

"We are in a basement room of some sort of large estate home," Eilam supplies, probably reading my confusion.

My sense of smell floods back, and I'm assaulted with individual aromas of dampness and wine. There are racks along a brick wall full of dusty but intact bottles. No light, but that doesn't matter as my eyes adjust and my vision improves. Eilam is shackled to a wall on my left, and judging by the smell of burnt flesh, I would say they are spelled shackles. This triggers something in my befuddled brain, and as I gain use of my limbs, I can feel the sting of metal around my wrists.

"There were too many of them for me to kill. You were busy fucking the fae's brain out. So, when reinforcements arrived from Joseph's pack, they were able to overwhelm me," Eilam explains, shaking his shackles in obvious frustration and

barely hissing at what must be painful burns where the metal touches his alabaster-toned skin.

“How did I get down here?” I ask, still having no recollection of events past telling Hunter to run with Lils.

“You were pretty feral, not dissimilar to a newborn vampire. I believe the fae blood to be too intoxicating, and you continued to feed. Finally, Oren threw you off, and the wolves took turns to...” He tails off and averts his eyes. A sick feeling takes over my stomach.

“They raped me?” I need clarification, the lower half of my body is still numb to me, and I can barely feel my legs, but I am standing, so they must be there. I look down only to find myself completely naked, chained at the wrists and ankles to the damp wall behind me. The chains aren’t tight to the wall, and if I don’t mind dealing with burnt flesh, I could move closer to Eilam. I will my limbs to obey, making the most of the numbness to ignore the burns. Finally, I manage to move a little.

“Not exactly, Analucia. You were very keen to take part in the orgy that then ensued, which fed Oren and replenished the energy you took from him by draining his blood.” Eilam looks thoughtful but thankfully not disgusted.

“It wasn’t me. I have no recollection of those events.” I try to scour my mind for any memory of their touch. Thankfully there is none.

“I am aware. However, it was unpleasant to witness, and they wanted me to be fully aware of what black magic is capable of doing to a vampire. My guess is we will be starved and only allowed to drink from a contaminated individual such as Oren.” Eilam looks resigned to this fact, but I’m not going down without a fight. I will see my mates again.

“It is fortunate that your mates were not here to witness it. They won’t get far, unfortunately, and if what I heard is correct, Oren has every intention of using you to obtain them again.” He shuffles a little in his confines until we both sit down next to each other, backs against the wall facing the wine racks in the pitch-black cellar.

“So the question is, why am I now lucid?” I ponder this fact aloud just as Eilam starts to chuckle.

“You got a little carried away with one of the wolves who dug his claws into you repeatedly, leaving you bleeding heavily. You sucked that heathen dry.” Eilam’s laughter fills the space echoing off of the stone walls and bringing a smirk to my lips.

“Well, at least that’s something.” I feel a little absolved. At least I took one of them out even while I was possessed.

“You were pretty impressive—” He starts to say more, but movement upstairs, close to what I assume is the entrance to the basement, has us both staying quiet so that we can listen and prepare. Not that we can get free from these shackles, but I’m not muzzled, so all bets are off if they get too close.

Voices drift down to us, the muffled sound still accessible to my ears. Sounds like Oren and at least two others, one I recognise as Roan, but the other is older and has more of an authoritative tone.

“If you had kept it in your pants, you would have noticed that the other two were missing.” The angry older voice states as the sound of a door opening and then heavy footsteps descending on what I assume are a set of stone stairs judging by the noise.

“My dear, Joseph, such crude comments from one who likes to rut as much as I.” Oren’s laughter sounds false even to my ears and puts me instantly on edge. That fae is like a powder keg ready to explode. Completely unstable.

Light precedes the voices as the three men enter the room we are being held in. Roan carries a burning torch, which he touches to one on the wall, then moves to the other side and does the same. Sconces are fastened to the wall in metal holders. The light briefly aggravates my eyes, but I stay silent, unwilling to give any weakness away. Roan retains the original torch and returns to the tall but stocky-looking older male with dark, silver-flecked hair and a matching unkempt beard. His face holds his many years well. He is not an unattractive man, but his eyes are pure evil.

“So, this is the vampire that my bride-to-be prefers between her legs?” Joseph laughs at the words bride-to-be as he refers to Lils, and her bastard—and thankfully dead—father’s deal to give Lils to Joseph in exchange for the other Alpha’s loyalty. I keep my features neutral, all the while assessing the male in front of me, dressed in tight leather trousers, with his hairy chest barely covered by a black shirt that is open all the way to his stomach. The boots on his feet have sharp-looking metal toe pieces, which I’m sure would do plenty of damage in a fight. Here is a wolf who prefers to get his fists dirty rather than just shift and be done with an enemy.

I remain quiet, anticipating that the question is not for me but also unwilling to giveaway that the black magic has subsided. I can still feel its lurking presence, but I have the full use of my mind and body for the time being.

“They enjoy each other’s company as mates will,” the fae confirms, looking at me with swirling black eyes, which are no longer Oren’s. For a brief second, in the flickering fire light of the wall-mounted torches, I see a ghostly face almost pull out of the fae in front of me, it has similar features, but its piercing blue eyes are apparent even in this light. Oren is still trapped in there.

Knowing that the fae is a prisoner in his own body held captive by the imposter in front of me has my fists clenching in anger, but I keep them close to my naked thighs, not willing to give my feelings away.

“Mates,” Joseph scoffs as he moves closer to me, gripping my chin and pulling me off the floor with his wolf strength. I allow it, holding back a growl that threatens to pull itself out of my throat. Lils would be proud of my restraint. “There is no such thing anymore unless the bond is completed magically with an ancient ceremony known only to a few wolf packs.”

I can’t stop the snigger that releases from my lips at the words of this pompous, self-important prick.

“Do you find something funny, bitch?” Joseph sneers at me, pressing my body against the wall behind me with force. This time I don’t hold back, allowing a snarl of my own to

take over my features and purge my anger through my lips as my fangs elongate, ready to attack.

“Sir, I would be careful of that one. She is feral,” Roan warns his Alpha with a respectful tone, all the while lowering his eyes as Joseph turns his attention to his second in command.

“Not so much feral as *posseduto*. Possessed.” Eilam, who has remained silent all this time, offers his false observation and provides them with a translation as he brings himself to stand close to me.

“Who is this?” Joseph asks Oren, ignoring his second. He looks over his shoulder at the men standing slightly behind him while firmly gripping my face. He hasn’t realised that with the turn of his body, his hand has moved and is now—

A howl of pain wrenches out of the Alpha as I bite down on the soft, supple flesh between his thumb and forefinger, so hard that my fangs almost protrude out the other side before I pull back and prepare to strike again. But, before I get a chance, my head jars to the side with a punch I don’t see coming as Joseph’s other fist connects with my face. The pain of the blow is short-lived; I recover quickly, spurred on by the hissing encouragement of Eilam, who no doubt smells the blood as clearly as I do. The intoxicating scent fills the air, and it’s then I understand just how hungry I’ve become. I shake my head to rid myself of those thoughts. I need to think clearly and not be crazed by hunger. I lunge at Joseph, ignoring the burning of the spell-bound chains around my wrists and ankles.

“Tsk, tsk, Vampire.” Oren’s voice is dark and luring, sending waves of lust through me, stopping me in my tracks as the swift change in mood disorients me.

“*Fight it!*” Eilam’s words inside my head have me gritting my teeth, trying to prevent the rise of black magic. Looking at my hands, I see the tell-tale spider web of black veins creeping up my arms.

“Her arousal is alluring, isn’t it,” Oren says as Joseph inhales deeply before moving away from me. A look of

disgust quickly hides any agreement with that statement.

“I will leave rutting outside your species to you, Caleb.” The wolf states before nodding to his second. I’m fighting the building moan that threatens to overtake me as lust slams into me over and over. Rubbing my thighs together to alleviate the ache, I hiss at the approaching second in command, but even to my ears, the threat just isn’t there.

“Your wolves had no issue experiencing the pleasures you can gain from experimenting.” Oren’s lips move. Wait, did Joseph call him Caleb? My addled brain tries to catch up, and I hear Eilam humming inside my head as he contemplates this information. All the while, I fail to notice the threat right in front of me.

The sharp pain brings me to full focus. Looking down at my body, I see the dagger protruding from my flesh. Blood rises to the surface and oozes out around the wound in my chest.

“Again.” Joseph encourages his second.

I try to bite him, but another wave of lust makes me incapable of moving fast enough to avoid the blade that again pierces my body, this time lower near my right hip. Eilam strains to get closer to me, but his chains pull him up just short as Roan steps away from the furious vampire. He then looks over his shoulder as Joseph, seemingly satisfied with events, starts to turn and walk away. Roan’s eyes glow amber with flecks of black. Hinting that he, too, has been tainted by black magic. His fingers curl around the dagger, and with his other hand, he pushes two fingers inside the dripping folds between my legs, thrusting them in and out as he repeatedly stabs me with the dagger in time with his thrusts. All I can do is moan and writhe as the black veins of poison climb up my arms and the sensation between my legs takes over everything. My vision starts to dull, and my mind clouds.

“Fight it, porca puttana. For fuck sake. You are stronger than this. Focus on the pain. On the smell of blood.” Eilam thrusts words into my brain. He rarely swears, considering it too vulgar and unnecessary. This thought, as well as his

constant angry words battering my mind, begin to push the swirling mists away as, with panted breaths, my climax builds, drawing with it a slowly rising anger at this manipulation of my body.

“You love it, don’t you, bitch. Love my fingers between your legs fucking you. I bet you want my hard cock there, too, don’t you?” Roan is as lost in this frenzy as I am. He is no longer stabbing me but rubbing his cock through his trousers.

The door closes upstairs, signalling that we are alone with this wolf who is playing with my body in a way that I don’t fully understand or want. Still, my juices flow, but the lust is starting to wane with the departure of that bastard fae. I focus on what Roan is saying as he unzips himself and pulls out his hard, angry-looking dick.

“You’re going to take this cock so deep between your legs, bitch. If you had a functioning womb, you’d be pregnant with the amount of cum I’ve got for you.” Roan is delusional, but as he kicks my legs apart, I try not to react as he pulls my thigh up high on his hip, trying to find an angle to enter me.

“Play along, Analucia. Conserve your strength. We will kill these bastards and get back to our kind. Manoeuvre him so I can get closer,” Eilam encourages me. I sense no disgust in his words at what he is seeing. Like me, he is a warrior, and like me, he will do whatever it takes to win a battle. Even if, in this case, what I am about to do goes against everything that my mate bond would tell me is right. I have used my body many times before meeting Lils and Hunter to lure unsuspecting prey. I tell myself that this is no different as the blunt head of his cock pushes into me. I release what I hope is an encouraging moan as there is no enjoyment anymore, I’m barely feeling the effects of the lust, but the magic is still trying to take over my body, so I concentrate on the small things. The rigid feel of Roan’s cock stretching me ever so slightly. I focus on the fact he is nowhere near as big as Hunter but then push that thought away as guilt threatens to taint the concentration I must use.

Roan grunts, moving his dagger hand and placing the blade against my throat. *Not completely a fool, then.* The other

holds my thigh again now that he has managed to notch himself inside me. He thrusts up, pushing into me and grunting and groaning, finding a pace that suits him. His eyes, which had been watching our bodies join, return to my face, and with a vicious lust-filled smile, he starts to fuck me.

“You want this, don’t you, you filthy whore vampire. Tell me how it feels to have my cock buried inside you again.” His face is so close to mine that his rancid breath is now tainting my senses.

“*Keep moving.*” Eilam projects his words. I hadn’t even realised that I was unconsciously steering our joined bodies with my raised thigh turning the rutting wolf, so his back was closer to Eilam. I thrust down onto his dick moving my hips all the while swivelling us using what little strength I have left. I feel the exhaustion rising as blood continues to flow from the many stab wounds still trying to heal. I need blood. Untainted blood.

I’m no longer using my built-in mechanism to breathe, conserving every ounce of strength, not that Roan has noticed. Instead, his eyes are closed as he chases his release with no care for my enjoyment. I am just a hole to be used for his pleasure.

“*Closer,*” the voice in my head urges as Eilam tries to keep quiet, straining against the chains. The smell and sizzling sound of burning flesh fill the air. I moan loudly, hoping Roan will think that it is just my flesh burning as he carelessly rams into me, not caring about my body’s position in relation to the wall or the shackles. He is paying no attention to anything other than the joining of our bodies as his gaze is fixed between us. Filthy words stream out of his lips as he tells me all the things he is going to do to me now that they have me at their mercy.

Stupid, stupid wolf. He is about to understand that no one gets to take anything from me without my permission. Not if they want to continue to live.

Roan lets out an incoherent word as his thrusting stutters and as he begins to come inside me. With everything I have

left, I push the unsuspecting wolf away from me, cum continues to spurt from his cock. His eyes open and go wide, but it's too late for him to react. My lips pull up in a satisfied smirk as I take a moment to enjoy watching Eilam's arms wrap around the wolf's torso, chains rattle and scrape as, with a roar of pure violence, my vampire friend sinks his teeth into Roan's neck, biting so deep he punctures an artery. Blood gushes out of the wound, the stunned wolf tries to move, but Eilam twists Roan's neck, and the sound of snapping bone echoes in the otherwise silent cellar. Eilam, his mouth full of flesh and sinew, spits on the floor while dropping the wolf's lifeless body.

"Find the keys he put in his pocket when he chained you, then feed from me. We are getting out of here," Eilam states, his eyes glowing, teeth protruding over his lips. This vampire might be hundreds of years old in human terms, but he is as strong now as he ever was, and I've just watched the life return to his face. Now he is buzzing with purpose and determination. Laughter threatens to leave my lips, but I keep it in check as I drag the jeans off the dead wolf. Still undone at the waist, they slide off easily.

"I will not belong to you." I want to confirm this because feeding from an overlord is rarely done. They are powerful, and to feed from one would mean to belong to them and serve in their clan.

"I understand, and for now, we will forego the formalities because you need clean blood, and I need you and your mate bond to get us to the others." His sense of urgency has me thrusting my hands into pockets until finally, in the back pocket of the jeans, my fingers touch the cold metal of a key. Pulling it out, I set about releasing myself, rubbing gently on the burnt and blistered skin. Then I drag myself over to Eilam, immediately undoing his ankles so he can move more freely. Fortunately for him, they left his trousers on and cuffed him over them, so his legs are unblemished.

"Give me the key, and I'll undo my wrists. You feed," he insists, clutching at my neck, pushing me towards his, and not even offering me a wrist, which would be usual protocol. I

underestimated this vampire lord. I had little to do with him as a mobile warrior in my early days, and I am beginning to realise he is unlike others I have met.

“Don’t overthink it, Young One. Just do it,” he urges, and with that, I sink my fangs slowly into his neck, pulling a groan from my lips and his. Feeding from each other isn’t something vampires often do unless it is in the throws of passion or to pledge allegiance to that lord if you are welcomed into their inner circle. His rich blood coats my tongue, and as I swallow the dense liquid, power thrums through me even after just one pull, and I find it a heady, almost overwhelming experience. I manage two more pulls, feeling my skin knitting together where broken, my wounds healing, and energy buzzing through me for the first time in a while, and I feel alive again.

Eilam gently pushes me away, and I remove my fangs, carefully licking closed the puncture wounds as a mark of respect.

“Let’s get you some clothes and leave this disgusting, evil-infested place.” Eilam’s voice is determined as he helps me stand on wobbly legs. Within seconds my strength returns, and I flash my fangs at him as my lips curl up into a smirk. I know the intention is to be stealthy and leave quickly, but that doesn’t mean I won’t get to kill something along the way.

Hunter

THE RAIN IS COMING IN HEAVY SHEETS, AND EVEN UNDER THE canopy of the dense trees of the wood, we cannot escape the chill and dampness of the downpour. After our impromptu fucking, we had taken a moment to regain our strength and connect on an intimate and personal level, our bond strengthening with each touch and whispered affirmation of our love. Being disconnected from our other mate by distance and likely the cloaking of black magic around Ana had us both a little uneasy, but our connection is now stronger than ever.

“There’s a building up ahead. Can you see it?” Lils’ words interrupt my thoughts and have me squinting through the water droplets clinging to my eyelashes. Sure enough, there are a couple of houses clustered together. Two have lights glowing from what I imagine are candles or a fire, and the other looks empty and is set a little way off from the other two houses. Smoke drifts up from the chimneys of the occupied buildings as we make a beeline for the empty one. I stuff what dry bracken and sticks I can find into the pockets of my borrowed hoodie and jeans. Glancing at my bedraggled mate, I note her doing the same. Hopefully, we will be able to start a fire, and then we can look for more material to burn; it doesn’t have to be much, as I have a spell that should keep it going all night.

Quietly, we skirt the houses, listening for movement and any signs of danger.

“They are human,” Lils states, inhaling deeply. I implicitly trust her sense of smell, as it is far superior to my enhanced ability. Humans pose little threat to us, but we won’t disturb

them. Lighting a fire in the unoccupied building will likely have them staying safely in their properties rather than wanting to find out who has disturbed their small area of peace. This far out of the city, they are unlikely to be affiliated with any vampire clan and should stay indoors until sunrise.

The windows and doors of the abandoned house are boarded up, but with a quick touch of magic, the nails on the board covering the backdoor release effortlessly. The door seems relatively intact, even though it is coated in a film of green algae. The old uPVC frame and partially glazed door are well preserved. With minimal concentration, I undo the lock, which is pointlessly still in place, and with a creak of complaint, the door opens inwards.

Conjuring a ball of light with a few whispered words, "*Parva lux,*" I step over the threshold, instantly greeted with the musty smell of dankness and decay. Dust covers every surface, but it must have been sealed well because the floors are not caked in mud or water damage.

"Smells a bit, but at least it's dry," Lils states, echoing my thoughts as she shuts and locks the door behind her with the key, which is still in the lock on the inside. It won't keep supernaturals out but will give us some notice if someone tries to enter. The scurrying of tiny feet draws her attention further into the kitchen, which appears to be the room we have entered and to the hallway beyond. "Rat for dinner?" She laughs as I mock excitement at the prospect.

"I'll go out and hunt. I smelt rabbit not far off. If you get started here, maybe leave some space on the fire for cooking food, not just your evil potions?" She taunts but still sounds more interested in magic than she usually is.

"Sure," I agree as she unlocks the back door again, shutting it behind her as she leaves me alone in the small dwelling, which was likely once part of a much larger terrace of houses. Long ago, the surrounding area was likely strewn with roads and homes like this one, but now there are only trees as far as the eye can see.

My thoughts are interrupted by a jolt of excitement coming from Lils as I sense her starting to chase something. This prompts me to move further into the house to search out the fireplace. When fuel prices became too high, most households reverted back to open fires or log burners. Some had fireplaces to uncover, but others had them made if they could afford it or had a go at making them, but judging by the accounts I have read of that period, it usually ended in disaster.

Fortunately, this house has a functioning fireplace which I located in the lounge area. It may have once been quite cosy, but now looks dark, damp, and disused. I pull a potion out of the spelled bag I carry on my waist. The bag hangs down on my right hip within reaching distance and was a present from Rissa before we left.

Resting the potion carefully in the hearth, I step back and, with the use of my magic, unseal the metal cage holding the cork top in place. As the wire encasing the cork loosens, it begins to open with the pressure of the potion inside pushing against the cork that held it captive. A final pop and the fireplace lights up with blue and green magic, that swirls around at speed and then zips up the chimney. The soot and debris lodged there will have shot out of the top with the cleaning spell. Some soot escapes into the room, pulling a short cough from me before it disperses.

“You better have that fire going, Hunter. This rabbit is skinned and ready.” Lils’ words bring a smirk to my lips. My beautiful mate is hungry.

Wasting no time, I arrange the sticks I picked up along with some dry, dead leaves and plants, then reaching into my bag again, I mumble the words needed to find the potion I want that is somewhere in the abyss inside this pouch. Immediately a paper envelope is in my hand, and I sprinkle the dry powder contained within it onto the assembled kindling and close my eyes, briefly conjuring a spark of fire with a simple word, *“Ignis.”*

The backdoor opens just as the fire roars into life, burning hot and steady just the way I like it. Checking around the almost empty room, I search for something metal to fashion a

spit roaster out of. There is an old curtain pole. That will have to do.

“How are we doing?” Lils asks as she comes in naked, carrying a rabbit skinned and bloody, along with her clothes. Then, handing the dead animal to me, she proceeds to get dressed.

“You could stay naked?” I suggest lewdly, knowing her answer but still feeling my cock stir a little at the thought of being inside her again.

“As much as I would love to fuck you. I think we should eat.” As if agreeing with her statement, my stomach starts to rumble, and I concede that now is not the time. I bend the pole and trim it until it is precisely what I want and then push the rabbit’s carcass onto it, placing the ‘A’ shaped frames and rod with our dinner skewered on it over the fire.

“Oh, that smells good.” Lils moves to stand next to me as the meat starts to cook, circling an arm around my waist and resting her head on my shoulder.

“Once we’ve eaten, we work. Then we sleep.” I state the obvious, needing to confirm this to myself as time is slipping away, and I have this gut feeling that we don’t have long before Joseph or Oren find us.

The rabbit wasn’t all that meaty, but we supplemented it with apples and nuts, which we had picked up from the forest floor. Cutting around the bruised pieces of fruit and pulling out any bad parts, we make do. What I wouldn’t give for proper food right now so that I could ensure my mate is fed adequately, not that she complains, as we have all become accustomed to living on the move. Which in itself makes my blood boil. I don’t want her used to foraging and slumming it. She should be sleeping in a bed, not curled up on this musty carpet in front of me with only a small fire for comfort. I managed to steal some logs from the neighbours’ stash, which I noticed on the way in, but I didn’t want to take too much. The winters can be cold and unforgiving. Stretching my legs, I try not to disturb Lils as I move away from her and stand up. Quietly I make my way to the fire to check on the potion I left

simmering. As I lift the lid, a nasty smell of rotten flesh creeps out, and I quickly replace it.

“That stinks.” A sleepy voice startles me. Turning in the dim glow of the dying fire, I see Lils sitting up, rubbing her tiredness away. Something inside me clenches at the sight, and my imagination has us in a four-poster bed in our own castle with Ana. My mind conjures something similar to Malaki’s castle as it is the only one I have ever stayed in. I want something similar for us to live our days in peace.

“Peace is boring,” Lils says, reading my mind and chuckling as she jokes. Her mood pulls my lips into a smile.

“It is, is it?” I question. “So, you don’t want to settle down somewhere safe where we aren’t watching our backs every minute and maybe raise a few young?” I don’t know where that question came from. I haven’t thought about having my own offspring before.

“I haven’t thought about young, Hunter, but when I do, I want them to be with you and Ana,” Lils confirms, and my feet find their way back over to where she is sitting. Kneeling, I reach out and touch her face.

“We will have that someday. There will be peace, and the supernaturals will learn to work together instead of against each other or burying their heads in the sand, thinking that the fighting amongst species doesn’t affect them.” I make this promise, genuinely feeling in my heart that it will happen someday. We are living proof that species can co-exist. That mates exist and do not need to be magically forced together, as many like her father believe.

Lils turns and places a tender kiss on the inside of my palm before taking my hand and standing up, pulling me along with her.

“If that disgusting concoction is ready, we should move,” she states, wrinkling her nose at the lingering stench. Then, picking up her weapons belts from the floor, she straps them to her body. I nod my agreement and begin the process of carefully bottling up the potions.

AFTER TWO DAYS ON FOOT, FINDING SHELTER IN TREES OR abandoned buildings, we are further away from the city but nowhere near the north where Rissa and Kayden are. We did manage to find a witch with a spell that assisted us in sending a message to them and our general location. It was limited but enough to let them know we needed help. Skirting the towns after we found the witch, we managed to avoid confrontation, but it was clear from the ones we did venture into that there was a lot of unrest brewing. According to our knowledgeable magical friend, skirmishes were breaking out all over the country. Wolf packs were fighting for dominance, witches were being kidnapped, and the vampires were leaving the cities to fend off attacks on their borders. The fae were still staying out of it, but there was some intel that there may be some fae up north, although that couldn't be confirmed.

“It's started then.” Lils had said when we'd left the witch's little cottage on the outskirts of a predominately human village, and I'd had to agree with her. The atmosphere, in general, was one of pent-up anger and unrest.

The wind has picked up, and it feels like a storm is brewing. Only it doesn't feel quite right because the air is charged with magic, and my gut tells me something is wrong. Lils' hair starts to whip around her face as she's left it down. Pulling mine free from the twine band I have it in, I pass the band to her as we stop for a rest. Thanking me, she braids it quickly and ties it up.

“This wind doesn't feel natural,” I say, looking at the sky, which has become a dark grey, almost black, and although it's about midday, there is no sun to be seen. It's not raining yet, but the smell of ozone and the hairs standing up on my arms suggest it will be shortly. I'm beginning to feel uneasy the way I did before we encountered black magic. It's a feeling deep down inside of wrongness. I pull the magical tracking spells the witch gave us out of my bag.

“We need to ground these and attach them to our skin, Lils.” Finding a large oak, I nestle the grounding potion deep within a hollow and release the cap from the bottle. Turning, I start to smooth the other spell over my arms like a lotion, closing the gap between my wolf mate and me; I rub some over her exposed collarbone and down her chest, asking her to pull up a sleeve. I’ve just managed to get the last of the potion on us as a blinding light cuts through the sky, and the area around us starts to hum. A noise we both recognise well. It’s a portal opening.

“Run!” Lils yells above the loud humming, which is accompanied by thunder and lightning. This is no ordinary fae portal. This one has the stench of black magic. I turn to run behind Lils, dragging out two potion bottles from my pouch and throwing them towards the light ball that is getting bigger and bigger, announcing the entrance of the portal.

The sound of howling momentarily brings a smile to my lips as I glance over my shoulder to see two wolf shifters disintegrating before Oren steps through the portal and disperses the spell.

“Shift, Lils,” I shout, knowing she will get further in wolf form than on foot.

“I’m not bloody leaving you, Hunter!” My stubborn mate states just as a tree root erupts from the ground. The world tips and I start to go down, breaking my fall with my hands. There is a snapping sound, but I resist the urge to cry out as a sharp, stabbing pain radiates through my wrist. Instead, I bite out the words, “Now, Lils.” But it’s too late.

Lils

HUNTER SHOUTS AT ME TO LEAVE DESPITE THE PAIN I CAN HEAR in his voice. Even if I wanted to, which I don't, I couldn't go anywhere. Black magic swirls around the woods, and the trees sway wildly in an unnatural wind reminding me of Ris' magic. Only this isn't her doing. This is all on that bastard fae, possessed by a dark, demented, black-magic-infused being, the one Oren called Caleb, and if that is true and somehow that elemental witch has managed to infect the fae, then we are all fucked.

Vines and brambles fly out from every direction, crawling with sharp thorns all the way up my legs, across my body and arms, and slicing into my skin. I call on my wolf, using all the strength I can muster and attempt to shift, but my wolf is silent. Even with my growing panic at being smothered by the vegetation and the yells I can hear from Hunter, I cannot get her to respond. It's like that part of me is dormant.

“Breathe, Lils. Stop fighting and stay still. There is too much magic for us to fight right now. Conserve your energy. He doesn't want us dead. Not yet, anyway.” Hunter's words are like a salve. My breath is coming out in sharp panicked pants, and my mind is confused without the ever-reassuring presence of my wolf. She isn't there. It's just blank.

“I can't use my magic either. Something is blocking it.” Hunter's tone is calm despite the seriousness of our situation. I latch onto his calmness and pull at it through our bond, weaving it around myself slowing my breathing and relaxing my muscles with each inhale and exhale. As Hunter promised,

the brambles stopped slicing into my skin and remained where they were, digging in but no longer ripping my skin open. I can smell the blood from each cut, but not acutely. It's like everything is muted.

“Such primitive creatures, wolves,” the infected Oren states, his voice growing closer with each word. I expect to hear a complaint from one of the shifters, which I can smell with him, but they say nothing. I can't see them as I'm face down, wrapped in my leafy, thorny cocoon. I turn my face to allow me to gain some cleaner air or at least air that doesn't contain little bits of earth and bracken.

Without warning, a sharp pain pulls a scream through my lips as a boot or something similar makes contact with my side.

“Leave her alone, you bastard—” Hunter's words are cut off with a grunt of pain.

“*Hunter?*” I push my words through the fast-developing haze of darkness, needing to know that he is okay. I can't see him from my position. The vines around my neck tighten slowly, cutting off my air supply and causing my vision to blur.

“*I'm here, Lils. Take shallow breaths. He's just posturing.*” I get the sense from the strained tone of Hunter's voice that he is also experiencing something similar.

Closing my eyes, I focus on our bond, keeping my breathing shallow as instructed. A sigh of boredom precedes the loosening of the bindings, and I pull in a large gulp of black foggy air. Immediately feeling the effects of the dark magic on my body as my mind begins to numb. Clever really. I briefly recall the black fog that we fought through when we were attempting to rescue Ris and defeat the brain-dead infected masses. It wasn't like this, though, this fog has something else.

“*Fight it, Lils. The fog is laced with fae magic. I don't think it's a full dose—*” Again his voice cuts off in my mind, but this time I don't think it's to do with pain. He sounds confused. My thoughts wander off as I think about Ana, wondering where

she is if this Caleb thing is here. Then that thought is gone just as quickly as it arrived with the movement of my body as I feel myself being dragged by my feet across the uneven forest floor. I try and reach Hunter to check that he is still with me, only to hear a disjointed conversation he appears to be having with himself but broadcasting to me. Names of plants and their uses run through our minds pulling my focus. I concentrate on each word, the tone of his voice. Ignoring the pain that races through my body. Until my head hits something hard, shooting pain into my skull and pushing a breath out of my lips in a whoosh.

“I want her alive, you idiot.” Is the last thing I hear before everything goes black.

“*LILS?*” THE WHISPER IS BECOMING LOUDER AND MORE insistent, but my head hurts, and I want to ignore it. I would prefer to return to that black blissful peace I’ve just been dragged from. That dream world where I had mates, and we lived a simpler life, where we would hunt together in the woods near our home and laugh together as we swam in the lake nearby, the dream calls me to return.

“Wake up, bitch!” An annoying voice interrupts my descent into the dark abyss. Then my head jolts to the left as the sound of skin slapping skin brings my eyes open suddenly, with the hint of a sting on my face following shortly behind. Did someone just hit me? Anger rises, and I try to move my arm to hit back, finding it already clenched in a fist and in front of my face. Laughter fills the room as rough fingers grip my chin. My hand disappears as the person in front of me bats it out of the way as if it was just a minor annoyance. Words whisper around the room, pulling at my body. I close my eyes at the dizzy sensation, only to open them again and find myself standing. I can’t feel my feet.

A face swims in front of my face, blurry then clear as my eyes adjust to the dim candlelight. I catch the flickering of tallow candles in the corner of my vision before I focus on the

beauty of this being in front of me. His face is perfect—pale skin but not the same almost translucent colour as a vampire. I know a vampire? I try to force my brain to think, to focus. I can almost remember the feel of cool fingers touching me.

“There you are, Wolf. I thought we may have lost you a little early then, and that would have been such a shame.” His voice, do I know that voice? Something about it seems slightly off, but I don’t know how I know that. Do I know this being? I don’t remember.

“What have you done to her?” Another voice in the room. I turn my head to the sound. Wow, what a stunning-looking man. He kneels on the floor, covered in blood and bruises, with his hair hanging loose to his shoulders—I’ve never seen anything so gorgeous. His angry emerald-green eyes lock with mine, and it’s like he is trying to tell me something. Then he moves his head and gives our companion a look of utter hatred. Why don’t they like each other? Are those chains on his wrists? Has he done something wrong?

“She’s fine.” The same voice that called me something that made me angry has me moving my head a little slower this time. Pain still throbs behind my eyes as I take in the other male in the room. This one makes something inside me clench. It’s not fear, I don’t think, but something is wrong. This male is not my friend. Are any of them? Where am I?

“Now, Joseph, I think it’s clear that Lileth isn’t fine *per se*, but let’s just say she will be more compliant now with this unexpected but rather fortunate head injury.” The beautiful-looking being speaks, his voice bringing my gaze to his perfect face. A smile from those lips brings one to my own as I look at him and feel a connection to this wonderful being in front of me. My body moves without me needing to command it, bringing it closer to the perfect creature, who is so tall I have to crane my neck when I am close to him.

“Come, my dear, let’s go and find you some food. You have been asleep for a little while. You must be hungry.” Soft fingers claim mine, pulling me gently against his hard body before he removes his warmth and guides me beside him, still holding my hand. A pleasant zinging feeling runs up and down

my arm; it warms and excites me. I try to recall the words he said. Did he mention a head injury? My hand won't obey when I want to touch my head to see if I am still bleeding or have a bump. Then I forget what I was trying to do as the smell of cooked meat wafts towards me as we enter a large room, where a long table stands surrounded by chairs. There are several men seated already, but they stand as we enter. The man, Joseph, who has accompanied us, moves around us and stands behind a chair, holding it out.

“Take a seat, my dear wolf.” The pretty being gestures to the chair Joseph is holding out, and my body walks towards it before I can decide if that is what I want to do. This lack of control is unsettling, but my mind doesn't stay on that thought for long as Joseph helps push my seat in before sitting down on my left.

A dish full of bread and meat is placed in front of me by a thin-looking young male who doesn't look at me when I turn my head to thank him. My words stick in my throat at the dead eyes that stare back at me from his face. It's like there is no one there. A shudder runs through me. I want to question why this male looks as he does. However, a warmth draws my attention to my thigh and has my eyes looking down to try and figure out what it is.

Am I wearing a dress? The fabric is soft, like the pelt of a deer. I squint at the digits of a hand as they run circles over my twitching muscles; all the while, I try to recall what a deer is and why I know what its skin feels like.

Food is placed close to my lips, and I realise just how hungry I am as the intoxicating scent has me opening my mouth and allowing the beautiful being seated to my right to feed me a small morsel of the delicious cooked dark meat.

Dizzy, my mind feels fuzzy. Did I fall asleep at the table? I hope not. That would be considered horrible manners. My father would hurt me if I did that. Do I have a father? Why would he hurt me? My thoughts stutter when another sensation brings me back into the dining room. There are fingers under the skirt of my dress, insistent fingers searching for what? Do I want them to find it? Yes, I need them to find what they are

looking for. That much I do know. There, yes, just there. A glance to my right tells me the being is still talking to the other men at the table. Turning my head to my left, I can see Joseph is not paying attention to me either. Yet still, the fingers have started to push inside me. A gasp leaves my lips, and I bite down gently on my bottom lip, not wanting to bother those around me or stop the intrusion, which feels so good between my legs.

“Caleb,” Joseph’s voice has me gripping the table as I try not to show what is happening to me. Would he be angry?

“Yes?” The being, is his name Caleb? It doesn’t seem right, but I guess it must be. Oh, that feels so good. I want to move my hips and chase the feeling that those thick fingers are pulling from me as they pump lazily in and out of my entrance. I’m wet, or so I think. I feel wet. I can feel how easily the thick digits are sliding in and out.

“Is it our intention to continue with our plan and head north?” Joseph asks, shoving a large amount of meat in his mouth and chewing with it wide open.

“Yes, we will head towards Malaki’s castle. You will wait out of sight while I take her in with the witch.” Caleb turns to face Joseph talking across me as if I wasn’t there, as if someone’s fingers weren’t inside me, edging me closer to that elusive feeling I think I want.

“Don’t you think they will sense the change in you?” Joseph asks, pulling off a chunk of bread and waving it in front of my face. “Eat this. You need your energy,” he says, pushing the bread between my lips as I shift my hips, opening my legs wider under the table, needing more. I hold the warm softness in my mouth, biting down, muffling the moan that wants to fight its way around the food in my mouth as a third finger pushes inside me.

“They may, but I am sure with Lileth here blooming with young and seemingly happy, their focus is likely to be on her.” Caleb smirks at me when I look over at him, wanting to know who this Lileth is. Are we friends?

“You want me to impregnate her?” Joseph asks, appearing happy about that prospect if the smile on his face is to be believed, but his eyes tell a different story. “She isn’t your sort after all.” He adds with a slight chuckle.

“Very true, my friend. The idea is repulsive to me, but your sacrifice won’t be necessary. This fae body responds to the female form.” Caleb looks thoughtful for a second as I chew the bread slowly. It wouldn’t do to choke on my food as I try and control my erratic breathing. I take a second to glance down. Something inside me jolts at the realisation that it is Joseph who has his fingers inside me. I’m not sure he knows what he is doing as his sole attention is on Caleb and their discussion.

“How interesting it will be to see what type of young a wolf and fae manage to produce with the aid of my magic.” Caleb taps his chin, and just for a second, I swear I see his face change. It looks pained as different eyes look at me pleadingly, but when I blink, it’s gone. “Make her come.” Caleb’s words are spoken over me to Joseph, whose eyes go wide as if he suddenly realises what is happening. He looks down, shaking his head, but the hand under my skirt picks up its pace. My breathing increases. I hastily swallow the bread, afraid I might choke on it with the sounds being pulled out of my throat. No one pays attention to us, the room is too loud, but I can hear my rapid inhaleds and exhaleds see-sawing out of me in time with the thrusting of the thick fingers inside me.

“You must know how to do it, my friend. You have boasted so many times of your conquests. She is of your species. A beautiful wolf, yes?” Caleb’s voice is so close his arm supports me behind my back. I’m leaning back into it, opening my thighs, desperate for something which feels just out of reach. “It is no use fighting it, Joseph. You will find that doing as I ask is much more pleasant for you and your pack.”

A cry of pain sounds from across the table. I can’t see what is happening as my eyes clamp shut with my need and another feeling I can’t quite decipher. My mouth feels dry as I pant repeatedly, and a desperate whimper leaves my lips.

Joseph growls low in his throat, but it cuts off as his fingers curl inside me. I'm so close. I want to ask for more, but something tells me I shouldn't want this. It's a tiny thought that I lose as Caleb's hand grips my thigh so hard it hurts. "Show me that I still have a use for you, Alpha," he taunts, and Joseph increases his efforts. My hips thrust and chase the high that I think is coming.

"You love his fingers inside you, don't you, Wolf? Such a needy pussy you have. I bet you can't wait until I push this fae cock inside you." Caleb's words are whispered in my ear, and he has barely finished talking before I scream out as a feeling close to pain, but euphoric bliss takes over my entire body, locking my thigh muscles and causing my vision to blur. There is almost clarity in my mind for just a second. I think that the Lileth they were talking about might be me, but then that thought is gone as the thick fingers between my legs are withdrawn. Caleb takes his hand off my thigh, and I find myself feeling empty without the attention as he moves away and continues his meal. Beside me, on my left, a look of disgust passes over Joseph's face as he licks my juices from his fingers and then picks up his drink, taking a large gulp whilst appearing to check on the others at our table with his eyes.

I feel sick, but the nausea passes as Caleb places a drink in my hand, tilting it towards my face. I take a large sip of the bitter liquid. I wasn't thirsty, yet still, I swallowed it down. Across the table, one of the wolves is holding his blood-covered hand out on the table in front of him while his companion removes a knife from it. Both wolves look confused.

Oren

IT TOOK ME A LITTLE WHILE TO REALISE THAT THE BEAUTIFUL paradise I had found myself in was fake. Caleb had created it to trap me where he wanted me. I had tried to fight him, pushing back against the black magic that had possessed my body, but he was too strong, and without my fae brethren, I reluctantly admitted to myself that I wouldn't manage this alone.

When I used too much energy to try and reach out to Ana, Caleb had snared me in a magical net and pushed me into a cage of his making. How he is this powerful is something I want to find out. If I can somehow cut off the source, I might be able to untangle my powers from him. He is abusing fae magic to such an extent it feels tarnished to me now. The gilded cage I was trapped in was pleasant, and I could easily have stayed there listening to the sounds of pretty coloured birds only found in my realm. The purple skies and musical sound of the ocean lashing against the shore of sparkling multi-coloured sand was so accurate it must have been pulled from one of my memories. Only he pushed it too far, bringing Meghan to my little haven. He had got that all wrong. She was not the gentle, meek creature he presented me with. That's when I knew the whole place was a lie and began to see the faults and pick them apart—starting with Meghan. No one uses my mate against me.

So I pulled apart my paradise cage, and here I am, hiding inside my mind. The place I am in is a dark place. Part of myself I kept in check, the part that was beaten out of me as a young fae by a mother who refused to admit that I had

inherited any darkness from my father. She had been taken during a skirmish between opposing Fae Realms, used by my father and returned during peace talks, unknowingly pregnant. Even after hundreds of years of existence, my mother refused to divulge my father's name, taking the knowledge with her when she was granted permission to end her existence.

"I know you escaped, you foolish fae. I will find you, and this time I won't be quite so lenient with where I place you." Caleb's words echo around my mind, trying to gauge where I am and to get a reaction from me. Still, I stay silent. I am unable to feel anything that my body is being used for now, but I have no doubt that I will not be fit to pursue my mate any further. Caleb's fury at not being able to control the sexual orientation of my body is one of the only things making me laugh. He is so desperate to fuck Hunter that it's pathetic. But I've caught wind of his latest scheme as it rattled around my brain. To impregnate Lileth and use this as a way to protect him against detection from Malaki. Her brother will undoubtedly be happy with the news that his sister is settled and pregnant.

I keep my anger in check as best I can, no female shall carry my young but my mate, and I will do whatever I can to ensure that is the case. I haven't been able to assess why Lileth is being so compliant. It could be that she has been infected with black magic. Her Alpha blood should keep her safe inside her mind—one thing her father had bestowed upon her that we can be thankful for. Unfortunately, the more a weaker being is exposed to this type of magic, the more likely it is that the recipient will lose their mind and become nothing but a mindless vessel for this evil puppet master.

Taking a chance, I lower my magical protection, only to find that we are seated at a long table with what I sense is magically infected food and drink. Caleb weaves the magic haphazardly around the room. Laughter sounds inside my head as he watches Lileth come apart. She is beautiful, and as I try to reach out to her whilst he is occupied, I come up against a massive blank space and swirling thoughts of uncertainty. Just before I sense Caleb has realised I've moved from my hiding place, I see the wound on her head that has dried blood,

causing her hair to knot. She has clearly been injured, but why is she not healing?

“Her wolf is dormant, asleep if you will.” Caleb’s presence is too close. I retreat, feeling like a coward but aware that I need to do this to protect myself and in the hope that I can be of some assistance when the time comes to fight this evil witch. Even now, as he laughs at me, telling me that I’m deluded if I think anyone can beat him, I know the time will come. I have to believe it.

“Even death couldn’t stop me, you weak fae. No one can stop what is happening. I will become the supreme being. Entirely responsible for all the supernatural species in the United Kingdom and then the world.” His words are shouted, the echo bounces around my mind infiltrating every cell of my being.

“Never!” I return before securing myself behind my wall of magic in the dark depths of my mind, biding my time. I will regain control of my body before taking my leave and returning to my home realm one last time to petition our queen to be allowed to initiate the end of my existence. I am convinced that she will agree when she is made aware of the evil that has been done in our name.

A tiny part of me considers that Lileth carrying my young would at least allow part of me to continue. But even if I wanted to entertain the idea, which I don’t, I doubt much of me would be transferred with Caleb in control of my body the way he is. My thoughts are erratic, changing from subject to subject which is not a good sign, and the movement around my mind whilst trying to avoid the witch has exhausted me. I need to rest.

TIME HOLDS NO MEANING TO ME NOW, AND I’M NOT SURE I AM really ever switching off, as when I become more conscious of my surroundings, I know things that I don’t remember hearing or seeing before attempting to rest. The whole experience of

hiding within yourself is exhausting, it would be so easy to give up and allow this disgusting entity inhabiting my flesh to take over, but I won't. If only so that I may apologise to Lileth, Hunter, and Analucia for the treatment they have received at my own hands. I can only hope that they will understand that it was not me. This is not how fae behave. I am mortified at the thought that they might believe it is.

It appears we have moved again, although I have no idea where we are. Portal magic will eventually drain his reserves, but I will not be one to point this out. I do not need to add to the depravity he uses to feed the monster of evil inside us. Black magic is volatile and will eventually kill you if kept unchecked and unbalanced. Maybe that would be better? To allow the black magic to burn this body out. Only I have no guarantee that he would not infect another flesh-and-bone vessel. He keeps plenty close at hand. No, this entity needs to be stopped and disposed of properly.

“Please,” a pleading voice disturbs my thoughts, and I chance a quick check in with our surroundings.

“You want to beg for your life, Witch?” Caleb now has complete control of my voice and my functions. I am but an essence within my shell.

Who is he talking to? The voice sounds female. I can't feel the magic of the being in front of us, but when I chance a look, I see an elderly witch on her back with her hand raised towards us.

“You are no match for me. Give up your power, and I will make this less painful.” He is lying, of course, because he enjoys the pain he inflicts on others and feeds off of their anguish as well as their power.

The witch throws a spell directly from her hands, no potions involved. An elemental, if I had to guess. It's the type of power Caleb covets, his original magic and why he is so obsessed with Merissa and her power. He wants it for himself.

My hand moves, batting the spell away with a shield and redirecting it at the elderly female on the floor. She receives the power back, absorbing it and appearing to revitalise with

its recovery. She starts to stand. Fighting off the swirls of black magic that writhe like serpents on the floor of whatever shack we have entered.

I pull back, listening instead to the other sounds trying to gauge who is with me. The whistling of winds whipped into a frenzy has an unnatural sound as it rushes past the ramshackle building we are in. Concentrating harder, I can hear the screams of several others, but I cannot determine who they might be. Finally, I bring myself back to the scene in front of us.

“Your sisters will not be able to help you now. I have already garnered magic from two of them, and no doubt the others are not far behind. Why fight?” Caleb’s voice takes on a musical tone, a cadence I have used myself when using my power to help alleviate stress in a person, to calm them and make them see reason. The witch will not be able to resist the charm. Only vampires are immune.

For a second, I consider what might have happened to Analucia and Eilam. I cannot trawl through memories gained whilst Caleb has been in possession of my body for fear that he will find me. I did not see them when I noted Lileth at the large dining table, however long ago that might have been.

“Evil cannot win over good,” the witch states, her tone tired but still full of fight.

“On the contrary, Witch, I think I am living proof that it can. How else would I have been able to take over such a good-natured species such as a fae?” Caleb laughs as the witch raises a shield again, only to have it pulled apart by the black magic he is wielding. “Aren’t we all harbouring a little darkness inside?” He continues to advance on her, and I watch, powerless to prevent my body from overpowering her, as he finally gets close enough to capture the female in his arms. “Don’t we all wish we could loosen the confines that beings less powerful than ourselves have put in place to restrict our magic?” Caleb whispers in her ear as he places my hand on her neck and holds her against the wall. Her feet dangle in the air as her face changes colour owing to the lack of oxygen now being drawn by her lungs.

I try to put my total concentration into that hand, attempting to loosen it, but all I succeed in doing is drawing Caleb's attention.

"Such a pathetically predictable creature you are, Fae." His voice comes close to where I am hunkered down, trying hard to have some effect on the limb, slowly suffocating the old female with the use of magic and power far stronger than hers. He has enjoyed riling her up and the attempt she has made to fight him off. I can feel the adrenaline running through my veins, powering the beast that has control of me. "Shall we see if she still has a hole to fuck? Or do you think that has withered up and died without use?" Caleb says this out loud. The words are aimed at me. He wants me to show myself, to try and save her and, in doing so, doom myself to capture and imprisonment inside my mind. This time I may not be strong enough to fight my way out. I may become trapped forever as he tortures me with visions of the things he does with my body and his abuse of my power.

"Or shall I just kill her and pull that wonderful energy from her?" As before, the question isn't for her. I pull back, turning my back on the scene in front of me, sick to my stomach that I am choosing the coward's way out and hiding when there is another being in need of my help.

"Kill her it is," he singsongs with a final strangled cry. I feel, rather than see, the elderly witch die. Power infuses my body, and I slam down my walls tight so as not to be infected by the black magic that dances and engulfs the old witch's magic as it is absorbed.

Failure stings and burns through my consciousness, leaving me with dark thoughts of revenge. Will there be any good left in me, any light in the darkness? Or will I become no different than the beast that controls my body?

Ana

THE SPEED VAMPIRES CAN TRAVEL DEPENDS ON THEIR AGE, BUT all are faster than humans and most other species. With the boost of Eilam's blood, I have been restored, and as we run, we feed briefly on willing humans and the occasional witch. Now though, we are both restricted to travelling at night. The spell and potion on which I have become so reliant have worn off, and I am no longer protected. Hiding out in old barns and one large tree trunk reminded me of my time as a warrior when tracking or patrolling. The dense foliage of the mostly evergreen trees and the darker beginning of winter days have helped keep us moving a little longer, but I had forgotten just how lethargic a vampire could feel as the sun rises—even one as old as Eilam.

“We will need to stop, Ana,” Eilam states and I turn to smile at him. He is finally using my preferred name. We have grown closer over the course of these weeks on the run together. For an old vampire, he is actually quite with the times and good company.

We slow to a more natural walk, and I gaze at the horizon. Sure enough, there is a sliver of light appearing, and already I can feel an answering tingle on my skin, which has me urgently scanning the area for shelter. We had skirted the city known as Birmingham; the vampires in charge of that city were not known for their hospitality, and now we find ourselves in the more barren landscape of the Peak District.

“There's not a lot of cover in this area, and I can't see any buildings.” I look around in all directions. I've not been here

before, so I look to Eilam, sensing he is deep in thought.

“This area has vast underground caverns, and if I’m correct, we should find the opening to some directly north of here, but we need to hustle. Do you need to feed?” he asks, looking at me with what might be considered concern if you looked hard enough.

“I’ll be fine. Let’s move.” I grit my teeth against the pull of slumber as the dark starts to bleed with light. We increase our speed, and the landscape blurs as I follow Eilam’s lead. Yet, even at this pace, the rising sun makes its presence known. I shield my eyes with my hand, knowing we don’t have much time left. “Eilam, where is this fucking cavern?” I ask, feeling the desperation running through my body.

“So eloquent, Ana.” He chuckles as I feel my brows pull into a scowl wanting to growl at him to stop being so bloody cheerful. “It’s over there.” Eilam points to a pair of gates that have fallen off their hinges. Breathing out an unnecessary sigh of relief, I follow him to the rusted remains of the humans’ attempt to keep people away from the cavern and through the entrance into the blissful damp darkness of the vast cave entrance. A hiss from Eilam is followed by my own as the sun breaches the horizon, flooding the lightening sky with oranges and yellows. At least those are the colours I am imagining as we move further down into the depths of the earth using a stairway carved out by humans when they made these caverns a tourist attraction all those decades ago.

My body begins to relax in the cool darkness, my eyes no longer sting from the exposure to light, and as I brush my hand over the water trickling down the cavern walls, my skin instantly feels less heated.

“You miss that potion they made for you, don’t you?” Eilam asks as he leads us further into the depths of the echoing underground chasm.

“I miss the freedom it gave me and the ability to watch the sunrise without turning into ash, yes,” I answer, hearing my snark resonate off of the walls. Off to the right, water cascades down like an underground rainfall from the ceiling above, and

I find myself drawn to it. Taking off the jacket that I stole from one of the wolf shifter's rooms before we left, I place one arm and then the other under the spray, rubbing the cold water over my skin to soothe the tingling the rising of the sun caused.

"It has been a while since my skin warned me of the approach of daylight," I confirm as I turn to Eilam, who has joined me. I watch as he reaches out, takes a cupped handful of water, and rinses his face.

"I want to feel that. It has been centuries since I felt the sun warming my skin and watched it rise." His voice sounds a little melancholy as he recalls what that was like. Having recently had the pleasure of seeing the sun, I can understand his desire. "You should feed." He shakes his head as if freeing himself from whatever thoughts had brought about the sadness on his face. Once again, Eilam schools his features into an emotionless mask.

His words bring forth a hunger that I wasn't aware was simmering under the surface. With my mates continually at my side, I had not felt this need for blood; it is unusual for me to be so hungry so quickly.

"The dark magic has messed with your body's chemistry," Eilam says as if reading my thoughts, which he may well have done. His intrusion is silent and not unexpected. He sits on a protruding rock and motions for me to sit next to him as he undoes the buttons of his shirt and pulls the collar back out of the way.

"You want me to take your neck again?" I ask, unsure that this is wise. The act is intimate, and now that there is no rush for me to feed, it seems unnecessary. His wrist would suffice.

"I have not sired a vampire for many years, nor have I any interest in you as a female. Don't worry, Ana. I simply wish to feed you in the fastest, most effective way possible. Is it not pleasant and a more informal method?" His logic puts me at ease, and I relax, sitting next to him on the slightly damp stone.

I lean in, willing my body to relax. Having been completely misled by Oren or whoever he is, I am a little wary

now. An involuntary moan leaves my lips as my teeth sink into his soft flesh. I lose myself in the delicious taste and scent of his ancient blood. Power flows through me; it's intoxicating.

"Easy, Young One, that's enough." I barely register the words or the pressure on my body. "Enough, Analucia!" The command is something I cannot ignore, not now that I have shared his blood. His words still me as an Alpha's order might a wolf in his pack. Pulling myself off of him, I snarl, moving off the stone, but we are both caught up in the feeding, and Eilam is on me in an instant for my challenge. He pins me to the hard wall behind us before I have a second to register that we have moved.

"Take your fucking hands off of her!" A voice I haven't heard for what seems like years but is barely months resonates throughout the cavern with a threat of death encased in its tone. A smirk pulls at my lips as I turn to face Ris. She stands at the entrance of the large expanse we are in, her eyes glowing blue with tinges of orange and her hands dancing with flames which have me cringing back against the wall and pulling Eilam with me in a bid to preserve our unnatural lives. Eilam takes up a fighting stance, fangs extended, fists clenching, yet fear flashes briefly through his eyes as he sizes up the powerful witch in front of us.

"Rissa, for fuck's sake, wait next time." An annoyed Kayden says as he enters behind her, followed by a dozen or so wolves looking rather queasy and a fae with long golden hair. She is stunningly beautiful with brown eyes, the colour of acorns.

"No time to wait for you, Wolf. This asshole was trying to kill Ana." Ris looks Eilam over in disgust, then takes in our surroundings. "Where's the rest of the crew? And who is this?"

"I'm glad to meet you finally. My name is Eilam, and I can assure you I was not going to kill Ana. However, I take challenges to my status as her master seriously." He straightens his shirt and relaxes his stance.

“You are not my master, you prick,” I huff out, giving him what I hope is a filthy look.

“The blood flowing through your veins suggests otherwise, *Giovane*,” he smirks at me, deliberately saying young one in Italian to warn me to tread carefully. Although I want to argue, I know the rules and the consequences of ingesting the blood of a vampire as old as Eilam. He is able to control me in a way no other but my sire, the useless piece of shit, would have been able to. We will discount the black-magic-wielding arsehole that is currently Oren.

“Well, this is a shitstorm. You’d better start talking, Ana. Where the hell is my sister?” Kayden growls out the last words.

“You might want to sit down for this. A lot has happened since we left the castle,” I state, walking over to the rocks that Eilam and I were previously sitting on. I take a seat and wait for those assembled to get comfortable before I relay, as speedily as I can, what has happened since we left them.

Ris finally extinguishes the fire that has been rolling up and down her arms when I explain who Eilam is and that he has, in fact, saved me. She fishes a couple of potions out of her pocket, whispering words I don’t understand before walking towards me and handing one to me and another to Eilam.

“Drink that, Vampire. It will mean we can get moving as soon as this lot recovers from travelling through Meghan’s portal.” Ris chuckles and turns to her mate, who flips her off with his middle finger. I don’t miss the smirk that graces his lips before he turns to those present and starts to give orders.

The beautiful fae had remained quiet all this time, barely showing any emotion except when I mentioned the atrocities Oren has caused whilst possessed.

“Where did she come from?” I ask Ris in a quiet moment alone. Eilam has joined the others, and Meghan wanders around the cavern, touching the walls, which glow with luminous light everywhere she makes contact with them. I track her with my eyes whilst waiting for Ris to answer.

“Meghan came through a portal not long after you left. She was looking for Oren. She said she sensed something was off. He is her fated mate.” I swing my eyes back to Ris raising my eyebrows.

“Another fated mate pairing?” I’m sure the astonishment registers in my tone even though I try to keep it as a whisper, but the fae must have heard me as she glides towards us.

“Apparently so, Analucia, is it?” Her voice is musical, reminding me of the tone Oren once used. How had we not noticed the change in him?

“I was not ready to admit to feeling the bond. I thought my mother had made some sort of deal with Oren’s Queen to link our courts together, and I refused to be tied to a mate,” she explains, looking fierce as she stands there in a black dress with an overlay of lace which sparkles when it catches the light. Around her waist, a black belt lies horizontally from her left hip, low slung on her right, with the glinting handle of a sword showing from the scabbard that the belt holds in place.

“I felt the change in him, the darkness creeping in, but I can no longer locate him.” She finishes after explaining that her mother, the queen of the Winter Court, gave her permission to seek her mate in this Realm. “I should kill you for sleeping with my mate,” she adds as if this is a normal conversation to have, and I feel my fangs descend with the challenge. “But I understand that these circumstances are far from normal.” She looks thoughtful, as if she is considering whether it is worth attacking me.

“Ana is under my protection, Fae,” Ris warns, and I feel the push of Alpha command in her words and note Kayden’s glance in our direction. Ris shakes her head ever so slightly at him, and he returns to what he is doing, but his stance is more rigid and ready for action.

“The person I had sex with was not your mate.” I feel that it is essential to make that point not only to Meghan but to myself. If I found out that someone had slept with my mates, I, too, would feel murderous. “We were fooled into thinking that he was one of our found mates, but clearly, that was just the

black magic at work. This entity is strong and highly skilled,” I add, looking at Ris as well as Meghan.

“You three ready, or do you need a little more rest?” Kayden’s sarcastic comment interrupts our conversation. Ris looks straight at him and growls low in her throat, bringing forth an answering one from Kayden at her challenge to his dominance. My lips draw up in a smirk. I’ve missed these two.

With this realisation comes that familiar wave of longing for my own mates, but I push it back down again. I cannot allow myself these feelings. There is a strong possibility that Oren and Joseph may have recaptured them. If that has happened, they may not still be alive, and I don’t want to even consider this—life without them will not be worth continuing.

As we leave the cavern, readying ourselves to travel through the portal Meghan has prepared, I take a moment to appreciate the feel of the winter sun on my skin. Eilam, who was far more cautious than me about leaving the dark depths of the cave system, has been standing stock still next to me, his face raised to the sky, eyes closed with a look of unconcealed bliss on his face.

“What the hell was that?” I hear Kayden’s astonished tone and look behind me to see what seems to be residual magic skating along Ris and Kayden’s bodies.

“It’s a locator spell, a little old school, but it does the job,” Ris replies, looking around.

“Meghan, we need to change direction and pick up the homing location so that we can track them. Lils and Hunter are in trouble.” She looks at me in concern. I nod. Even though I had guessed that this could happen, my mind still whirls with all the things they could be facing. My body goes on high alert, and around me, everyone becomes more serious. It’s time to rid the Earth of this black magic once and for all. But first, I need to find Lils and Hunter.

Hunter

THE PAIN WAS SOMETHING I COULD LIVE THROUGH, BUT THE heartbreak of watching my mate so confused and totally at the mercy of the infected fae bastard was not. I wanted to kill him so badly that my teeth itched to rip out his throat. This feeling was undoubtedly something I had gained from Lils' wolf, who was sadly nowhere to be found at the moment.

Once again, he is taking her in front of me, determined to try and pump seed into my mate whilst I am forced to watch, unable to help her. The body of a dead elderly witch lies on the floor, sightless eyes gazing up from where she had fallen. Caleb likes to put on a show, and had toyed with the witch before killing her and demanding that my mate get on her hands and knees.

Lils' face shows her efforts as her tight pussy strains to take the large cock unceremoniously thrust into her after the witch lost her battle. I was handcuffed to the pipes which once transported gas around the cottage. The cuffs are spelled and slowly draining my magic. Before she had died, the witch had tried to release me so that I could help her cause, but that didn't work; they weren't loose enough for me to get free. Outside I can hear the dying screams of the witches living in this coven as they are fucked, judging by the noises, and then killed. Joseph's men binge, and their Alpha is amongst them, leaving Lils and me here to witness this disgusting display of Caleb's power.

Each death recharges him, causing the black veins that have started to spiral across Oren's skin to increase. His white

hair is beginning to turn black, just like his eyes. The same eyes I can feel watching me with no doubt a smug look on his face as he holds Lils by her hair, dragging her head back so I can see her face.

“Look, Witch, look at how well your mate takes my cock.” His voice commands my attention, and I again attempt to resist the urge to comply, fighting the black magic that twists and billows around the room, getting thicker and thicker as the fae’s body becomes more and more out of control with lust. I try to ignore that the heavy scent of death and sex is beginning to turn me on and that the whimpers and moans Lils is making has my dick becoming hard. Which in turn makes me sick to my stomach.

My head is pulled violently up by a thick tendril of magic, and there is a burning sensation as it threads around my face and holds me in place so that I can see the tightly closed eyes of my mate and her loose jaw as she pants through the invasion she is being forced to enjoy. I find myself unable to look away, not just because of the magic holding me in place but because of how beautiful she is, even now, even in this situation. Her legs are spread wide as she kneels on the floor only metres from me. Her hands hang loosely at her sides, and her neck is extended as Oren’s body pumps away behind her. Lils’ gorgeous breasts bounce and sway with each thrust. Her skin is flushed pink with the exertion of the hard fucking she is taking.

“I bet you would love to be inside her, too,” he says, each word punctuated with a hard thrust, making her cry out, the sound a mix of ecstasy and pain.

“No!” The word pulls out of my lips before I can stop it. I know better than to speak when he is like this. It will only worsen whatever vicious act Caleb can come up with, and my anger does the same. It pushes him into more depravity. Sure enough, he lets go of Lils’ hair, shoving her face-first onto the floor. She only just manages to break her fall with her hands. The sound of air leaving her lungs in a whoosh is soon replaced with more moans as he continues to hammer into her moving her body closer and closer to mine with an evil grin.

I'm struck again by how in control he is as he takes her. He isn't enjoying the sex. He is purely using the body he is in to get what he wants.

My beautiful mate, her hair falling over her face, huffs warm breath over my crotch. My trousers have been open since I was pushed down on the floor. Caleb has been watching my ever-growing cock with eyes full of lust. Now, as he continues to work Oren's body in and out of Lils, he watches me intently. I keep my features as neutral as I can, not wanting him to have the satisfaction of seeing my emotions.

"Suck him off." He grunts, his hands are on her naked hips, and from this angle, with her face in my lap, I can see the round globes of her plump arse and the indents his fingers are making as he grips hold of her in his determination to finish.

"Lils, no." I try again in vain to reach her, but the head injury she sustained isn't healing fast enough. She needs to shift, but even I can feel that her wolf has gone silent, and I can no longer reach Lils through our bond. It's as though something is blocking it. If we were fated mates, maybe I could push through it. I can only hope that inside, my mate is somewhere safe, that her Alpha blood is keeping her soul intact because I can't bear to consider that she might already be gone.

Warm lips circle the head of my dick before she takes me deep into her mouth. I consciously seal my mouth, holding my lips firmly together to prevent a groan of ecstasy from escaping as Lils begins to bob up and down, sucking me in and out of her warm, inviting lips, taking me further and further down her throat with each thrust from behind.

This should not be the first time I'm getting head from my mate. The thought pushes to the front of my mind, and I try to pull on the handcuffs that hold my wrists away from my body on either side of me; the action jolts pain through my shoulders, but I don't care. I use the pain to clear my head, to free me from the constant pulse of magic swarming my body.

"Give up, Witch, you can't get free. That's right, Wolf, suck him harder." His eyes start to glow as magic thrashes

around us, upturning the table and chairs, the shutters on the windows flap against the outside walls and the fire stutters in the fireplace.

“I will never give up, never stop fighting, and you will pay for the abuse of my mate,” I grit each word through my teeth, straining to keep my hips still and as wave upon wave of command hits my body, demanding that I take what is mine. This is my mate. She is mine! I roar out in anguish as Lils’ skilled lips bring me closer to the edge, and she continues to take me deep in her throat as Caleb’s laughter booms around the room, coating every corner with the unnatural sound.

“You can not stop me, Witch, and the pathetic attempts of the fae to stop his seed from impregnating this wolf will not last either.” Caleb lets out a frustrated sound and suddenly pulls out of Lils, causing her to whimper as she once again doesn’t get to finish because he hasn’t come again. Her mouth stills on my slowly deflating dick as the magic in the room changes. Caleb’s anger is evident as he withdraws the fae magic that has been influencing my body and, no doubt, Lils’.

Caleb continues to rant and rage, thrusting his still-hard cock back into his jeans in a way that is bound to hurt, and I hope it does. I would honestly rejoice if he had the bastard thing cut off if it weren’t for the fact that the body he currently inhabits is not his. Oren is in there. I can feel him sometimes, but his presence is muted.

Lils pulls up onto her heels, looking confused. “*Look at me, beautiful. Please show me that you can still see me.*” I beg once again, hoping to reach her mind, but instead, she turns her head to stare at Caleb, and I try not to let my frustration show. I won’t give that asshole any ammunition. He starts to straighten his clothes. Shaking his arms a little, he pulls on his shirt’s cuffs, withdrawing the black swirling mist and then striding back to Lils.

“Get dressed, Wolf. We have places to go.” He pulls Lils up by her hair, and I swear I see her fist clench, but it’s gone before I can get a proper look. The burns on my wrists tingle as I relax against the handcuffs, trying to decide if it was just an illusion. I run my tongue over my cracked lips, wracking

my brain for a way that I might be able to bring Lils back and remind her that she has mates that love her.

Caleb walks to the door. “Put his dick away. We can’t have all the wolves salivating over the sight. They’ve had enough debauchery for one night, and he is mine.” His eyes flash with possession as he turns to look at me, his gaze fixed on my limp cock. I feel a stir, and I know he is trying to use magic to make my body respond. I refuse to look at him. Instead, I concentrate on Lils as she moves around the room, slowly picking up her knickers and putting them on awkwardly as if she might be a little stiff, and that thought enrages me further. I keep it down. There will be a time for it, a time when I can use this rage to enact my revenge on anyone who has touched my mates. I smirk as I think of all the potions I want to use on these bastards.

Once she is fully dressed, Lils kneels in front of me and gently puts away my semi-hard dick. Her eyes don’t meet mine, and I wait until Caleb has left the cottage before attempting to speak to her.

“Lils, look at me, my beautiful wolf.” I keep my tone calm even though I feel anything but right now. It is rare for us to have time alone. Lils lifts her head. Black rings mar her once flawless complexion, her skin is far paler than it should be, and her hair is matted and unkempt. Her eyes meet mine, and instead of recognition, I see only slight interest.

“Can you make me feel better?” She asks in an uncertain voice, nothing like the feisty female I know her to be.

“I can try. Can you put your hand in mine?” I ask, knowing we don’t have much time and she cannot be caught anywhere near me. She has done what he asked and should return to her knees in the middle of the floor just the way he has been teaching her to. I want to gut him with a blunt instrument and pour hot poison into the wound.

Lils hesitates but continues to look at me like I might have the answers to the confusion clouding her brain. Soft fingers touch mine, and I refuse to look away. Love flows through me, still hitting a brick wall where our bond once was. It might be

my imagination or wishful thinking, but I feel like there might be a crack in there—no time to think about what I can do to open that wider. I don't have much of my magic left, but I will give whatever I have to make a difference to my mate. Her grip becomes more determined, and I push magic into her where our skin touches, hoping that the handcuff is loose enough and that what's left will be sufficient to kickstart the healing process that her body should automatically have been doing. Without the presence of her wolf, Lils is lost.

She moans a little, but it's not enough, not nearly enough, and a sense of urgency overtakes me.

“Kiss me, my beautiful wolf. Take everything I have because I cannot continue to live if you are no longer mine.” My words escape my lips, and her eyes widen as something stirs. Lils leans forward, her lips lingering above mine. “Kiss me,” I repeat, pushing urgency into my tone, begging her with my eyes to comply.

The second her lips touch mine, the hesitancy is gone. Her hand grips mine as she crawls onto my lap, demanding I open to her. Gladly I allow her to take control, just this once. I want her to have something she hasn't had in weeks. Her independence and the ability to take what she wants. Her hips move, and her pussy, only covered by knickers under the long skirt that bastard has her wearing, rubs up and down my hardening length. All around us, what remains of my magic begins to trail over her skin, clinging to her and wrapping around my beautiful wolf as she grinds and pants on top of me, seeking the release that was denied her previously.

“That's it, take what you need. Use your fingers, then give them to me. I want to taste you,” I whisper to her, allowing all the dirty thoughts of the things I want to do to her to leak out, pushing at the barrier that has been placed between us. This chemistry with Lils and Ana surpasses any normal lust; this is something else.

She snakes her fingers between us, using the hand not holding on to mine. I can't look down to see, but I imagine her finding her clit as her moans increase, her kisses become more demanding and then she pulls back, resting her forehead on

mine, panting onto my lips, eyes closed as she gets caught up in the urgency of her need.

“Harder, Lils, fuck yourself harder. Come for me.” I husk out, beyond turned-on by this female writhing on top of me. What I wouldn’t do to be able to touch her. I strangle her fingers with my own in our clasped hands.

“Oh... Oh...” She pants harder, so close I can smell her impending climax as only a mate can. Her lips slam down on mine once again, and I swallow her silent cry as she stills, her legs quivering against my thighs.

“Hunter?” Her breathless words are the last thing I hear as the blackness engulfs me. I am spent, but I go willingly, happy that my mate finally knows who I am.

Lils

I SCRAMBLE OFF OF THE GORGEOUS MAN'S LAP. I KNOW THIS man. My mind is telling me so. His name is Hunter, and I'm sure the master hasn't told me the witch's name. Caleb taunts Hunter whenever he is inside me but doesn't say his name. So I must know him.

Is he alive?

"Hunter?" I repeat his name. The memory of it on my lips is as sweet as the first honey from the bees at the castle. So many images try and take shape in my head, but I push them aside for now and crawl over the prone body of my witch. He is mine. I can feel it, just as I can feel the thready pulse in his neck, signalling to me that he has just passed out and not died. A breath escapes my lips that I didn't realise I had been holding, and a half sob emerges with it. My attention is drawn to the door and a loud conversation outside. That fae bastard is returning. Something in the back of my mind is niggling at me, but there is no time. I search the tiny cottage, lingering briefly on the dead female on the floor. Did I kill her?

Black mist starts to spill under the door, and the handle begins to turn. Frantically I search, and my eyes lock onto something in the kitchen. There, on the worktop, is a half-cut onion and a small vegetable knife. It will do. I run as fast as I can, feeling the ache between my legs, complaining at my sudden movement. I reach the blade and manage to return to the middle of the floor, slamming down onto my knees just as the door is opened. I ignore the pain; it is nothing compared to

the glowing ember of hatred festering inside me with each passing second as my head starts to heal.

“What a good little bitch you are.” Joseph’s sarcastic tone rolls around the room. I don’t lift my eyes, playing the game. *I know who you are now, bastard, and I will take my revenge. Come closer, you fucking oaf. Let’s see how you feel about a knife in your throat.* The Alpha walks over to Hunter and kicks his shoe. “Stupid, weak witch, no point keeping you alive,” he mutters to himself and reaches into his pocket, pulling out the key to Hunter’s magically enhanced cuffs. The colours that swirl around the metal restraints intrigue me but only briefly. As soon as Joseph is crouched down, undoing the cuff around Hunter’s left wrist, I make my move. Thrusting myself up off the floor with all the strength and speed I can muster.

I leap, across the remaining gap, landing awkwardly on Joseph’s back. He lets out an ‘Oomph’ sound and falls face-first onto the floor. It will be a matter of seconds before he recovers, so I waste no time bringing the knife I still have in my hand down hard straight to his temple. The body below me goes limp, blood seeping from the wound. I’m not taking any chances. I lift his head by the hair and forehead and run the sharp knife across his throat several times, cutting deeper each time.

“Lils, stop. He’s dead. Get me out of these bloody handcuffs.” A familiar husky voice draws my attention to the left. Something inside me is stirring, awakening, and I want to continue to hack at this miserable excuse of a wolf shifter until he is a pile of mush on the floor. My gaze lands on the tired green eyes of my mate. Yes, that is who he is. I push the bloody body away from me and finish undoing the cuff. Then I climb over Hunter’s legs to undo the other one, but he shakes his head.

“Too late, my beautiful wolf. There is a back door. Run, Lils.” I stand there for what seems like minutes as time stands still. Then the sounds of feet moving towards us reaches me.

“You had better not be touching my property, Joseph. You know the penalty for touching without permission.” That voice, the one that will undoubtedly haunt my dreams.

“Go, Lils, please. Do this for me,” Hunter insists. A sense of *déjà-vu* surfaces, a time when I didn’t do what he asked, and all that happened after comes flooding back. Yet, I’ve only just found him again.

“He won’t kill me, but you need to go. I don’t think Oren can hold him off much longer. The thought of him...” He trails off. We are out of time, and the door which Joseph must have pushed shut behind him starts to open. With one last look at my witch, I turn and run to the rear of the cottage. The back door is resting ajar on its rusty hinges. As I push through the door, an angry roar from behind me spurs my body on. Something inside me shifts, and another presence begins to surface. My wolf! She howls her anger at being suppressed and springs forth, erupting through me. I allow her to take over, needing the time to recoup and address the fact I have just left my mate to die. It doesn’t matter what Hunter said. Caleb will no doubt take my disappearance and the death of Joseph out on Hunter.

Just when I am considering circling back and taking whatever Caleb throws at me, a portal opens up in front of me, and I fall headlong through it.

“Nice work, Meghan, that’s Lils.” A voice that I recognise complements the gorgeous-looking fae female all dressed in black, looking more like an assassin than a fae as she stands in front of me, eyeing me with no emotion showing on her face.

My wolf snarls, still pissed at being subdued for so long. Fae is not her favourite species right now. An answering growl full of Alpha dominance and command freezes us in place. Not just any Alpha, my brother. I turn my head ever so slightly and see him standing next to Ris, eyes glowing amber as his wolf rises to the surface. Not giving it a second thought, I bolt at him, leaping high and shifting as I do, barely giving him enough time to catch me. Then I’m there, wrapped up in a secure hold, the one I have known since I was a baby. I can’t stop the tears that flow, and just for a second, I allow myself to let go.

“Get my sister some clothes,” he snaps out over my head, “It’s okay, little Lil, I’ve got you.” The use of the nickname

my brothers gave me when I was young, which used to annoy me immensely, has my arms gripping him tighter as I try to reign in the temporary breakdown I seem to be having. A cloak is placed around me, and gentle hands rub my back. Magic tingles and explores my body, causing me to come to my senses quickly.

“Please don’t,” I beg, asking whoever is using magic on me to stop.

“It’s okay, Lils, it’s just me. I’m checking to see if you are hurt.” Ris’ voice is unusually soothing.

Then the magic is withdrawn, and Kayden lowers me to my feet. His finger under my chin forces my eyes up to his, which are blazing with anger.

“Who hurt you?” Kayd’s voice is thick with emotion as his gaze flicks to the person behind me, which I assume is Ris, and they appear to have a silent internal conversation, causing him to dial down the anger, which I feel flowing off of him in waves.

“I’m only just getting my memories back. Oren is possessed by Caleb, and Joseph was with him.” I sum it up in a matter of words. Growls and expletives fill the air, and it takes me a moment to register there are more of my pack here.

“You say Joseph was with him?” Ris asks, and I turn around to face her.

“I killed him.” The words are a matter-of-fact as they leave my lips, with no emotion. I feel nothing. His death was necessary, and if I could go back and do it again, with more time to make him pay for all that he has done, then I would.

“We will sort it out, Lils,” Kayden reassures me, but I don’t care. I know the laws about killing an Alpha. I can say it’s in self-defence, but his pack will unlikely listen as they have no regard for females. So I will have to answer for killing their Alpha.

“Those with him will be infected too. They won’t know what happened,” Ris reasons, “We can make it look like he

died in a fight?” She looks to Kayd, and another silent exchange is made. He nods, then returns his attention to me.

“Where’s Hunter?” he asks as he leads me to a fire I hadn’t noticed until now. Before I answer and give away the fact I’ve left my mate to the wrath of the unstable fae, who is a witch, I take in my surroundings. A fire has been started outside a cottage which looks to be in good condition. Ivy climbs haphazardly up the ancient brickwork, but most of the dwelling is well-kept. “Lileth?” Kayd’s command has me returning my gaze to his, and as always, despite my maturity, I still want to bow my head in his presence. Such is the influence of his Alpha genes and the strong magic I feel pulsing between Kayd and Ris as they stand side by side.

“He is still with Caleb,” I mutter, knowing that they will hear me anyway, but to speak the words too loudly would be to admit the truth that I want to forget, to bury, to go back and undo. “He told me to run,” I add but, even to my ears, those words seem a weak excuse.

“Hunter wanted you to be safe.” A strong female voice has me twisting around as Ana and Eilam enter the clearing around the cottage.

I rush over to her, hardly believing my own eyes that she is safe. Ana meets me halfway, gathering me in her arms and holding me close. “*How bad?*” she whispers in my head. All my memories rise to the surface as if she has called them to her, ready to share my pain. Some are still clouded in fog, but the sounds and the feelings are there, leaving me in no doubt about what happened to my body whilst I was not in control of it, and although she may not be able to see my memories, I am left in no doubt that she feels my pain.

“I’ll kill him, gut him like the pig he is,” she growls, the words sounding feral, and then a sense of calm comes over her and leaks into me through our bond. “Stop that, Eilam. I have a right to be angry.”

“Yes, you do, but going feral is not going to help your mates.” Eilam’s voice is right behind us, and I lift my head off Ana’s shoulder to glare at him.

“What did you do to my mate?” It’s my turn to be angry. What sort of vampire voodoo is he using on Ana?

“It’s a long story,” Ana states, leading me over to the fire with her arm around my waist. “First, let’s get you some food. You look exhausted.”

We spend what seems like hours catching up. Kayden nearly blows up a nearby tree when I get to what happened with Oren. I try to keep some details to myself, but it all comes tumbling out. Meghan apparently has that gift. I don’t begrudge her for it. In fact, it’s a relief to get it out of my head, but for those around the fire, it must be a harrowing tale if their responses are anything to go by. The rest of the pack has moved away into the woods to scout the area and leave us with some privacy, so it’s just Ris, Kayd, Meghan, Ana, and Eilam with me.

In return, once I have recovered from my purge and eaten my weight in wild boar with potatoes and carrots, I listen intently to them as they tell me what has happened in my absence. I’m not quite sure how I feel about Eilam’s connection to Ana, even though they have both assured me it’s not sexual. Meghan stays silent, sharpening an evil-looking knife as she sits a little way off from us. She reminds me a little of Rogue, and a pang of pain shoots through my chest when I think about that loveable, grumpy assassin. However, there is nothing loveable about this fae. She is attractive sure, all the fae I’ve met so far are by default, but there is something deadly about her. As if hearing my thoughts, brown eyes find mine, and a look of anguish takes over her face for seconds before her mask is drawn down again, and she looks ready to murder someone. Maybe it’s me? After all, it turns out she is Oren’s fated mate, and I have shagged him, albeit without my consent. I try not to think of that or how my body betrayed me.

“If I thought you had slept with my mate, I would kill you, Young Wolf.” A feminine musical voice in my head has my wolf growling at the intrusion. *“But it was not my fated, was it?”* There is almost a pleading tone to Meghan’s words, and as I look at the mask she has pulled over her face, I can see her eyes are betraying her. She is in pain. Learning that her mate

has been possessed and all the things he has been made to do must hurt. I'm sure of her hurt; I feel it as strongly as if it were my own. I would be hurt if my mate had been made to do those things. A pang in my chest reminds me that I have done things I am ashamed of, and I'm pretty sure my mates have suffered as well. Which leads me to wonder when will this all end and what will be left of our bond when it does?

Ana

“YOU WON’T MAKE HER FEEL BETTER ABOUT WHAT’S happened,” I say to Lils, putting my arm around her as we watch the tortured fae walk off into the woods. “Come on.” I gesture towards the cottage, which used to belong to Ris’ grandmother. We leave Ris and Kayden talking to the rest of the pack as they eat by the fire, and we walk over to the little building.

“She must be in so much pain.” Lils briefly looks over her shoulder in the direction Meghan went before entering the cottage in front of me and looking around. “This is beautiful and in such great condition,” she states as she reaches out to touch an old-fashioned wooden coat stand by the door.

“It was protected within a magical bubble. It only took Ris seconds to have everything functioning properly.” I recall leading Lils to the back, past the lounge with the large fireplace and the kitchen with its large wooden table and dropped rectangular white sink. “Why are we eating outside? When it’s so much nicer in here,” Lils asks as she allows me to pull her by the hand to the back of the cottage.

“There were too many of us, and Ris doesn’t like to disturb the cottage too much,” I answer as I open the door to the bathroom.

“Oh wow! Is that bathtub working?” Lils turns to look at me with an expression of pure joy on her face. I walk to the long tub standing proudly on clawed feet against the back wall.

“Yes, the water is all working. So is the toilet. I’ll run you a bath, and you can wash the stench of fae off you,” I add, unable to contain the words even though I’m sure it hurts for her to hear them. My sense of smell is so heightened, more so with Eilam’s ancient blood, that I can’t get away from the scent of another male on my mate, and it’s making my fangs ache with a need to wipe every memory of that bastard’s touch from her body. In the back of my mind, a little voice is telling me I haven’t a leg to stand on after I let that wolf inside me so I could kill him. But what happened to Lils is different; she had no control over it, she was used and abused, and if Lils weren’t as strong as she is, that might have been too much for her to bear.

I turn on the taps, running a hand under the water to see whether warmth has started to seep into the flowing torrent. Ris assured me that the water from the well out the back was perfectly fine and magically heated as it pumped through the cottage travelling through ancient pipes.

“I didn’t ask for the head injury, the black magic or that bastard to fuck me, Ana.” Lils looks at me with anger in her eyes, clearly having been festering on my comment. I gather my thoughts, trying to find the right words to say as I pour a large amount of the bathing tonic Ris concocted. The room instantly fills with the smell of lavender and chamomile as the heated water begins to steam and bubbles gather on the top of the slowly filling tub.

“I had no intention of it sounding as if you were in any way at fault for what was done to you. I have things that I must confess for us to move forward, but Lils, it’s all I can smell right now, and it’s making me almost feral with a need to mark and claim your body as my own again.” The breath I don’t need comes out in short pants as my chest rises and falls unnecessarily, with emotion that I struggle to get in check. It’s like being reborn, this lack of control.

“Feral, you say?” Lils has a glint in her eyes that I hadn’t even realised had been missing.

“Yes.” My breathing increases, and I curse myself for allowing my feelings to show. She needs rest, a bath, and

probably a spell to help her forget.

“I won’t forget what has been done to me, Ana. I will never forget. But this will not define me. I will not curl up and let what happened prevent me from finding the happiness I deserve,” she states firmly, looking determined as she removes the cloak and thick jumper given to her not long after she was pulled through Meghan’s portal.

My legs carry me towards her without conscious thought, and I reach out, touching her face before bringing my lips down, intending a gentle kiss, but my mate has other ideas. Her hands curl into the black blouse I am wearing, holding tight, and as she meets me halfway, her tongue demands that I open for her. Her breathing is fast and urgent, and just when I think our kiss will lead to more, Lils pulls away, panting and looking distressed.

“I can’t. I want to, believe me, I want to, but my body betrayed me before, and I need a little time to take back control and know that the feelings I have are real.” Her eyes beseech me to understand. I reach for her, pulling her stiff body into mine, rejoicing when I feel her relax against me.

“We don’t need to do anything, Lils. I love you, and I always will. However long it takes, whatever it takes, you will feel safe in your body again.” I promise her, knowing I will do everything in my power to keep that promise.

“Now, why don’t you get in that bath and let me wash your hair?” I suggest, gesturing to the bath, which is now filled with warm, scented water.

“That sounds like heaven. I want to wash it all from me. Help me?”

She doesn’t need to ask me. I will do anything for her. With a nod, I acknowledge her need to remove the physical evidence I can still smell clinging to her skin. I reach for the natural loofah I noticed hanging on a hook by the dark green tiles covering one entire bathroom wall. I remember this type of loofah being imported back when humans had control of the planet. Now trading routes between countries are almost non-existent, and whatever we need is grown either in the

countryside around the towns and cities or in large greenhouses owned by the witches, who charge a premium for luxury items like this.

I dip the long loofah into the bath water and rub a little homemade soap on it before using it gently on Lils' skin.

“Harder Ana, I want to scrub my skin off right now,” Lils admits, and I apply more pressure but not enough to harm her skin. I know what she is feeling. I remember feeling a little like that when Eilam revealed that the wolves had used me when I was under the influence of black magic. Although I knew my body accepted what was happening to it, I was not in control. If I had been, I would never have let it happen. They would all be dead.

“I had no idea what was happening to me or who I was. I didn't even recognise Hunter,” Lils states, likely reading my mind because I hadn't been shielding my thoughts. I know that Eilam can also read my mind, but he is mercilessly silent, allowing me time alone with my mate.

“From what you've said, you had a head injury that wasn't allowed to heal fast enough. So Hunter used what magic he had left to heal you. That sounds very much like him.” I laugh a little as I say the final words knowing Hunter would love to be considered a hero.

“He saved me, Ana, and I left him there to die.” Her voice hitches as she speaks the words she's been holding inside her—the ones rolling over and over in her head, driving her crazy.

“Hunter is cunning and resourceful, Lils. He will do whatever it takes to get back to us and likely try and save Oren in the process.” I add the last part knowing it's true because if there is one thing that is clear to Lils, if I'm reading her feelings correctly and to me too, it's that Oren is a victim too.

“He's still in there, Ana. I know he is,” Lils confirms, looking over her shoulder at me before lying down in the water and soaking her hair. I contemplate her words, wondering how long that fae can hold on before he is obliterated by the black magic that has a hold of Caleb and has bound his soul to its dark cause.

“I’m not sure how much of him is left, but we will try our best to remove the parasite that has his body and seems determined to start a war between the species,” I state as I pour shampoo from a glass bottle and start to massage it into her scalp.

“Mmmm, that feels so good.”

My lips lift as the noise of satisfaction leaves Lils’. Steam fills the room, and the warm moisture caresses my skin as I work the scented oil into her hair, ensuring every strand is covered. I want her to feel clean as well as be clean. The distinction isn’t lost on me. I condition her hair, running my fingers through her tangled locks, easing it apart and making it smoother.

“Lils, I need to tell you what happened after we parted.” I decide now is the time. I can’t wait a moment longer to admit to my transgressions. Like a waterfall, everything cascades from me as I confess my betrayal and feel her stiffen under my fingertips, then relax as I explain why Eilam is now my master by vampire tradition but assure her that he is not the overbearing type she was starting to imagine.

“I understand, Ana. This is war, isn’t it?” I nod as she looks at me. “Then we must do whatever it takes to survive.” She looks at me, and I instantly feel her forgiveness that I used my body to obtain my freedom. It floods our bond, and her beautiful features soften for an instant before she becomes serious again, her anger rising.

“What we have will never be affected by what we have to do,” she adds, and I lean down and kiss my fiery wolf mate. She may have been through hell, but she is still the feisty female I know her to be, even if she needs a minute to collect herself. There is no time for sensitivity with what is coming—species fighting for dominance over each other when we should be working together. For too many years, there has been a separation between the supernaturals that did not exist to such a large extent when humans were in control. We mingled and assisted each other, but since the world went to shit, so have our relationships and our ability to find mates.

“What we have is unusual, Lils. Finding your mate is almost unheard of these days, and you have two.” I add the last part, my tone hopefully relaying how amazing that is.

“But we aren’t fated!” Her tone is bitter as she abruptly gets up from the water and turns to me, all naked and glistening. I want so much to taste her skin now that she no longer smells of fae, but I push those thoughts down, faced with my mate’s agitation. Needing to clear this up once and for all.

“And this matters why?” I ask, reaching for a towel to dry her off as she steps out of the tub, eyes searching my face.

“We are able to have sex with others,” she starts, but the low growl in my throat pulls her attention. I hadn’t consciously made the sound but felt my anger rising at the suggestion that she sleep with others who are not her mates. “And if something happens to us, we don’t die.” The last part is added bluntly, and I can’t decide why this particular aspect of being found mates rather than fated should be a problem. To me, it seems a bonus that should something happen to one of us; the others would still survive. Our souls were not bound the way fated mates are.

“Would you want to?” I can’t decide which part I want the answer to, but she gives me both as she allows me to dry her.

“No, I never want another being other than my mates to touch me again. But don’t you see, we don’t know if Hunter is alive. He may already have died, and we wouldn’t know. We can’t feel him.”

Ah, now I see the problem. “Would you rather we both dropped dead and weren’t able to avenge our mate?” I asked, letting my annoyance at her suggestion that we are less because we are not fated. “Surely what we have, our bond, should not be so easily discounted. Would I physically die if something were to happen to one of you? No, but I would never be the same again. I would forever carry a part of you within me.” My throat feels scratchy, having spoken more than I am used to while trying to get my point across.

Lils hangs her head, conflicting emotions roll around inside her, leaking through to me, and I reach out, pulling her into my arms. Her soft body encased in the towel grows limp against me, and I belatedly realise just how tired she must be.

“I forgot you both...” Lils’ voice is so soft, just a breath against my skin. I might have missed it if I didn’t have such sharp hearing.

“You didn’t forget us, Little Wolf. You had a head injury and were infused with black magic. It’s only because of your Alpha blood and your strength that you retained enough of yourself to bring back.” A pang of something tugs at my chest at the thought of me losing her forever.

“I’m sorry, I’m just so tired and overwhelmed with all the memories and feelings that are returning to me,” she admits pulling me tight against her.

“Come, let’s get you dressed and find somewhere to sleep. You must regain your strength as we leave to find Oren and Hunter at dawn.” I add the last part, having just been linked into the wider group by Ris. So now I have all of their annoying voices in my head. Lils chuffs out a laugh bringing a smile to my lips. I guess she heard that thought.

“*I think we all did.*” Ris’ voice is loud and clear, with a tinge of amusement.

“I’ve missed this,” Lils says, stepping into fresh jeans that had been left outside the bathroom for her. “Being part of the wider pack. My wolf is feeling more at ease now.” She confirms, slipping on a long-sleeved top, then a fur jacket.

I had spent many years fighting alone or in small groups, never really feeling the need to form attachments to anyone until I met Lils and Hunter. Once Ris saved us, she reluctantly started her own little pack. My lips curl at the memory of training together and travelling in the RV, and I began to see the benefits of fighting in a tightly-knit group.

“And the magic, don’t forget the magic,” Lils mumbled, reading my mind again. A chuckle escapes my lips as I watch her curl up on a pile of furs in the corner of the living quarters

near the fire. Within seconds her breathing becomes steady as sleep claims her, and her mind goes quiet. I lower myself into a chair, giving me a good vantage point to view the closed front door and my slumbering mate, guarding her so that she can sleep peacefully. I try not to think about what my other mate might be going through. Hunter is nerdy and a little annoying sometimes. I chuckle quietly at the thought of his continuous search for knowledge, but I know he is also strong and will do anything he can to get back to us. My fists clench, and I fight the urge to leave now and find him, focusing my attention back on the beautiful female asleep on the floor. There will be a time to seek revenge on those who have harmed us.

Oren

FINALLY, CALEB SLUMBERS, HAVING EXHAUSTED HIMSELF, punishing Hunter for Lils' disappearance. I chance a glance at the mess of blood and flesh chained once again to the wall. We have moved from the old witch's cottage. The entire village was burned down in Caleb's fury at losing his prize and having his plans thwarted. He cared very little about the death of the Alpha, as he now uses black magic to control the other wolves. Most are mindless and little more than vessels for the dark force that swirls out from my body, controlling all living creatures in its path. Caleb's strength grows daily as he absorbs the life forces and any magic he can obtain from those he hunts down. If they are useful, they will be used to fight. If they are not, they are drained and killed.

His sexual fascination with Hunter has not diminished, but still, my body refuses to cooperate. Not that it has helped Hunter. As if hearing my thoughts, the witch groans and I take another look through my eyes, which I cautiously open. Caleb is slumbering, but the black force around us is not. It weaves and twists across my skin, now crisscrossed with a dark spiderweb of black veins.

Hunter lies on his back, the chains loose and unnecessary at this point, but Caleb wants him to feel vulnerable, and as the cuffs are spelled, he is without magic to both heal himself and combat the constant flow of black magic that surrounds him and threatens to drown the very essence of the male I have come to respect.

Searching quickly with my right hand, I find a loose bit of rubble on the floor and throw it at Hunter, hitting him on the leg. I do the same again. Then force myself to remain still, aware of the stirring of the parasite that has taken up residence inside my useless shell. If I were breathing, I would be holding my breath to see if Caleb would wake up to find me using my body to gain the attention of the injured witch. It looks like I am in luck. The infestation continues to sleep. Hunter's head moves slowly until his face, all swollen, cut and bruised with one eye barely open, looks over at me cautiously.

"Oren?" he whispers, his breathing uneven, likely due to some internal injury that isn't healing.

I chance a reply, keeping my voice just as low, "Yes." I assess the slumbering monster inside me again to check that he hasn't awoken. Using that much magic all at once, especially when using another being's body, can be exhausting, but I know it won't be long before he stirs again. I dare not chance speaking to Hunter in his mind in case I allow access for Caleb to infiltrate the witch's consciousness. Something I know he has been unable to do thus far, much to his annoyance.

"If you see them, tell them I love them." He wheezes, not needing to explain who he is talking about. I am fully aware of his love for Analucia and Lileth. They are his reason for trying to hold on, and I can understand that sentiment, for I wish to hold on long enough to apologise to my fated mate for my behaviour. Fae rarely apologise, but I feel that in this instance, I have grave need to do so before I cease to exist. It is only because I am such a powerful being that I have managed to withstand thus far the constant barrage from Caleb and his efforts to remove my existence so that he can take complete control of my body and mind. With that, he would be unstoppable, and our powers, combined with black magic, would pose a grave danger to the Earth. So far, and with a lot of effort on my part, he has little control of my fae power, but it is only a matter of time.

"You will not die tonight, Hunter." I breathe the words, sure that he can hear me still over the rattling in his chest.

I ponder the dilemma of how to push magic into the witch to help him heal without waking my infestation or the swirling black magic which continues to linger around the room. We are alone in this previously occupied dwelling. Once a large house on the edge of a wood, no doubt owned by a rich human, it has since been requisitioned by a number of human families. Their bodies were bloody and broken by the time Caleb arrived, having sent most of the wolves in front to clear the place whilst he continued to throw Hunter at every single tree, or so it seemed, that we passed on our way here. I managed to soften the blow occasionally, but each time I surfaced, Caleb sought me out, ready to annihilate my consciousness. Allowing him to do so would be too easy, and I am no coward. I will face my peers when all this is done, and I will accept whatever punishment is deemed necessary for allowing this to happen. Part of me knows this was never my fault, but that is not the fae way.

“Can you move closer?” I ask, careful to keep my tone and voice as low as the rustle of grass from a gust of wind. Even now, despite his injuries, he still raises an eyebrow at me as if to suggest that what I am asking is ludicrous. Caleb has fallen asleep on a mattress close to the chained witch as he never lets Hunter out of his sight now.

Despite his apparent mirth at my suggestion, Hunter still strains to move a leg or arm closer to my foot, the only part of my body he might be able to reach. The pain from this is etched on his face, but still, I say nothing to deter him. This is the best option if my calculations are correct, which they usually are, *but you didn't account for the black magic from Caleb leaking into you with his essence attached, did you?* I berate myself again for my lack of attention when we portalled to the North, just as Kayden had killed Caleb and the witch exploded, sending unfiltered black magic flying into the area. We thought we had contained it and dispelled it to the source, and for the most part, we had.

The rattle of chains and a low curse draws my attention again. I wonder how long my mind wandered that time, my memories have remained my own for now, and I find myself

often lost in what has been rather than the present. Likely this is Caleb's doing, but I have no way of combating it as of yet.

A light touch to my socked foot notifies me that Hunter has achieved what I thought may be impossible. I act fast, aware that time is ticking away. Regaining control of that foot, I filter magic slowly into the touch, pushing what healing I can through the light connection. A power shared with most powerful witches and one I know Merissa possesses. If I had time to contemplate it further, I would wonder about her lineage. She is adamant that she is a pure witch, but her magic far exceeds that of a mere witch, no matter how powerful.

The swirling increases around us as if reacting to the use of magic, and I hasten to add more healing to Hunter before it realises where the magic is coming from. Without its host awake and guiding it, the dark magic is relatively unintelligent, or so my observations have concurred. However, I am reluctant to test that theory. Inside me, I feel the beast stirring as Caleb's consciousness begins to surface.

"I must stop. Stay strong, Hunter," I whisper the words as I retreat, and contact is lost with my body. My eyelids rapidly shut as I hasten to take myself away to the haven I have carved into part of my mind. Protecting my trail as best I can.

I feel the irritation and hear the roar released from my throat as Caleb becomes aware that I have been lurking in my body. He will not be able to tell what I have been doing, but he will no doubt have felt my presence and be enraged that he has been unable to capture and contain me. If I had a mouth, I would smirk at his tantrum, but that thought dies as he yanks Hunter up by his hair. His intention appears to be to get the witch to suck my dick, which I am relieved to feel is still flaccid. I can't chance a look, but I can assess what Caleb is doing.

"Suck it, you bastard, good-for-nothing piece of shit." How intelligent he sounds in his rage. I roll my metaphorical eyes at his ridiculous behaviour.

"I would rather die. No offence, Oren." Hunter's voice is strained but stronger. The last part makes me laugh, and I

ensure that Caleb is aware of my mirth at the witch's words. I take no offence, in fact, I am pleased that my body does nothing for him. Caleb tries to use my power, but I have become wise to this, and even as he tries to influence Hunter, I manage to shut it down. As soon as I was able, I began the process of ensuring that he could not control that particular facet of my magic. It is bad enough that I have been party to several sexual encounters not of my choosing, but I will not continue to allow this disgusting witch access to the power to manipulate others. Unfortunately, I have no control over the black magic he wields or how he can control another being with it. However, I have made it my mission to do whatever I can to prevent my magic from being involved.

The sound of bones cracking and a grunt of pain from Hunter kills my joy as Caleb kicks him down onto the ground again. Hastily I try something I haven't attempted before, it may not work, but it might momentarily distract the evil witch long enough to give Hunter a reprieve. I taunt Caleb telling him he is impotent without me and that my body will no longer be used to defile other beings. That isn't true, and he knows it, but his pride will insist that he take up the challenge. He knows I am not attracted to males, and as far as I am aware, there are no females with us, so he'll have to suck it up for now.

In a rage, Caleb leaves the part of the house where we are resting. The black magic paws at him, swirling and agitated, trying to ease his temper and tempt him into using it for any form of nefarious purpose. I hear its whisper and feel its promise as it winds around my body like a black cape flowing in a strong everlasting wind. The evil is inside me and all around me, and I try hard not to lose faith that I will prevail.

For I have felt her, I knew the instant my fated entered this realm and portalled into England. Even though the distance between us is great, I know she is here. No doubt she felt my possession and the change in me and came to investigate. Her mother is likely pleased that she is finally registering me as her mate. Caleb will have no clue why he is being drawn in a specific direction, but I do. I know that we are seeking my mate, and there is nothing I am able to do about it. Secretly I

crave to see her one more time, but I know that to be near her is dangerous. I have no doubt in my mate's brutality. She is of the dark Fae Realm, the Winter Court, whereas I am of the Spring. Fated mates have become a rarity, and any that are found are coveted, especially if they mean strengthening ties between the courts. But my mate is not one to be tied to anything. She is a fighter, and for that, I am relieved because the parasite I house would want to possess her and debauch her beautiful body to spite me and cause me to come out of hiding.

"We leave now!" Caleb bellows an order which brings me out of my musing. I am losing time again. I must try and stay focused. It seems Hunter is no longer chained to a wall as I can feel his presence close by but dare not chance a look. Caleb is furious and unhinged as he lashes out and grips one of the shifters by the neck. I sense the satisfaction building in us as he cuts off their air supply. Then it's as if he registers my presence because the direction of his concentration changes, and he throws the wolf away as if the lanky male were just a leaf in the wind.

"I know you are there, watching me like a silent stalker, Fae!" he says as we begin to walk away from the house and into the forest. "You think you are clever, but unfortunately, you are not. You may have stopped the witch from dying, and I might say that I am grateful to you for that, as I may have gone a little overboard with his punishment. But you have also provided me with a fantastic boost of power."

I try to get a lock on his thoughts to see what he means, but Caleb has gotten wise to me listening in on his plans and has managed to separate us further in my mind. We are co-existing more and more, becoming separate entities in one casing. I have not heard of that being successful unless you are a wolf shifter. He has managed to shut me out enough that I no longer get wind of his intentions.

"Oh, you see, the cuffs attached to the delicious witch feed magic back to me. So now I have his power and a little of yours that you rudely refuse to share." Caleb cackles, and I feel my body move with mirth at my predicament. In helping

Hunter, I have inadvertently given some sort of boost to this evil occupant, who it seems was waiting for me to lose control of my tiny hold on reality so that he could draw on my fae power for himself.

“You won’t win, Caleb, so you can bask in the scraps of my power all you like. The rest will never be yours.” I hope I pushed enough truth into those words for him to believe them because I need to believe it, too.

Hunter

I TRUDGE ALONG BEHIND CALEB AS HE RANTS AND RAVES TO himself. Well, not at himself, he is arguing with Oren from the sound of things. This briefly pulls my lips up into a smirk. I might not have made it if the fae hadn't risked his life to ease mine. Caleb's temper was increasing, and my ability to heal had become nonexistent as I used what I had left of my magic to heal Lils. I can only hope that she got far away. In my mind, I imagine that she finds Ana, and they will both manage to evade Caleb somehow. In more fanciful moments, I see them living happily in the countryside together. A dream I once had for us all.

Having no way to replenish my magic due to the cuffs that are my constant companion, I make do and use my other ability—my brain. From an early age, I have felt the need to seek knowledge, to know how things work and why something does what it does. So I've studied the wide-banded cuffs in detail, which look similar to regular handcuffs used by human law enforcement, before the world went to shit, or so I've been told. Just a little wider. I assessed that the lock would be reasonably easy to pick if I could find something suitable, which is why I was hard pushed to cover my glee when I found an old hairpin in amongst the dust and rubble of the house that we were staying in last. Instead of magic to bend the metal to my desired shape, I used the floor and my strength, which thankfully, with the help of Oren's healing, hadn't been entirely lost, and I fashioned myself a makeshift pick. I just need a moment to use it.

“Keep up, you useless excuse for a witch!” Caleb shouts the insult over his shoulder, but I pay no heed. I have grown immune to his constant insinuation that I am less of a witch because I am not an elemental witch. Little does he know that my powers and excellence with spells and potions are something I’ve honed over the years, and thanks to Ris and my mates, I am now comfortable in my abilities and their usefulness to others. Working as a team and fighting alongside Ana and Lils, I have found my place, my family.

Caleb continues to throw insults at me. Clearly, Oren has retreated to conserve his energy, and now the evil infestation has turned his sights on me. I grunt where appropriate, not wanting my silence to draw attention as I manoeuvre the pin into place. Then, using touch alone, I begin to pick the lock as I can’t chance looking at the cuffs or falling over while I do that. Treading on sticks to cover any sound I might make, I keep my eyes ahead to be sure that I’m keeping track of Caleb and the wolf shifters.

Joseph’s pack is in disarray with the Alpha and Beta dead. I have no idea who will be next in line for Alpha of his pack, as I know little if anything about the wolves in the west. Something I plan to rectify as soon as I am able. Know your enemies, as the old human saying goes. There’s a tiny, barely audible click, as with a final minute movement of the pin, the locking mechanism releases. The cuffs are still spelled, so it’s not as simple as just unlocking them, and I do not have a counter spell that will work against Caleb’s magic as he has taken my potions bag. Even if my power were restored, it would take far too long to work out how to get through his spell, so I will wait.

“Isn’t that right, Witch?” Caleb’s voice cuts through my musings and internal celebration at being able to pick the lock on the cuffs. Fuck, what did he say? I grunt again, raising my eyes to look at the tall fae’s body in front of me. Oren’s once white-blond hair is now almost entirely black, and his skin has a spider web of black veins writhing over every inch of it, even reaching up his neck and onto his cheeks. His eyes have grown darker too. Caleb stands by what looks like an old rusty van. The vehicle was likely abandoned by the single-track

road that we had just reached. Already the wolves, who had mostly been travelling in beast form, are shifting and sniffing the van suspiciously. I doubt most of them have seen a human vehicle before. They look too young, and most packs prefer to travel as wolves. They no longer have use for these archaic machines.

“Let the witch look at it,” Caleb suggests gesturing for me to move closer. Damn, I hope he doesn’t notice the cuffs are unlocked. They haven’t opened, but they will once the magic binding them is released. I move closer to the van so that Caleb is behind me.

“I’m unfamiliar with these machines and I have no magic to fix it.” I keep my tone even as I glance at the dilapidated mangled metal object in front of me. “If you give me my powers back, I should be able to do something with it,” I add, trying not to sound too hopeful. He isn’t that stupid, but maybe, just maybe, he doesn’t see me as a threat.

Three of the six wolves travelling with us are inspecting inside the van, having opened the rusted doors with brute force. The others scout the perimeter, which is flooded with the swirling black mist that moves with us wherever we go. So far, I have managed to evade being infected, but I think that’s sheer luck and unlikely to continue. Caleb grows stronger every day, but he doesn’t seem focused, not in the way I had imagined him to be. His behaviour is erratic, disjointed, and governed by emotions that seem volatile. He encourages the wolves to fight and fuck, feeding off their energy which feels unstable even to me without my magic. Thanks to my mates, I still have extra senses, and as I use my enhanced vision to assess the rusting metal heap in front of me, an idea forms. I know what has to be done to stop this.

All this time, I’ve kept my movements calm and inconspicuous as I walk around the vehicle, having already seen what I need. Caleb has been watching me the whole time. Finally, he speaks.

“I will allow you some of your magic, but I am not taking off the cuffs, so you will make do.” He seems chuffed with his concession, and my cheeks ache with the force I use to keep

from crowing at him that removing the magic on the metal bindings around my wrists is precisely what I need. Instead, I simply nod my acceptance, keeping my eyes averted from him so that he cannot see the truth.

The instant that the magic is removed, the cuffs loosen. I hold them in place a little longer, pretending to assess the best place to start the restoration. Caleb orders the wolves to scout the area for food and water whilst I ignore them all and bathe in the return of my magic, quietly calculating how long it will be before I have enough. I fix a door panel here and there. Straighten out the roof and chassis as I wait, biding my time. There will be only one attempt, and it could easily backfire, but I have to try. My body is slowly trying to repair itself, and I hold back a groan as my broken nose finally returns to normal.

“Hurry up, Witch. I want to be on the road in the next hour.” Caleb shouts at me, and again I just nod as I lean over the engine and quietly loosen the panel work and bonnet hinges. As I touch the metal, my power starts to surge, replenishing.

I feel him walking up behind me. His presence is like a darkening of the sky before a storm. As I have my back to him, I allow my lips to curl up into a smirk. Without looking, I can't be sure and can only hope that he is close enough as, with great effort, I rip the body of the van apart, sweat beads on my forehead with the strength and use of my weakened power. The loud screeching and grating sound of metal being torn apart fills the air, and I know it will catch the attention of the wolves. I waste no time manipulating the pieces as they rearrange themselves around Caleb, caging him tightly in a metal sarcophagus. His outraged roar echoes from inside the twisted prison. The black magic circles the construction, twisting and turning itself over the body as it shakes, and dents begin to appear.

I need to move. Shaking the cuffs free, I turn to run as I hear the crashing sound of the wolves returning. There is a time to fight and a time to leave and recalculate; this is the latter. My feet are moving before I finish the thought. Running

through the ferns, tangle of weeds, and tree roots the smell of the forest invigorates me. My speed increases, and I am thankful to both of my mates for their supernatural speed. Behind me, an explosion vibrates through the woods, sending birds screeching into the air.

“HUNTER!” A roar rocks the air around me, amplified by magic, and the trees begin to shake. Still, I run. I have no idea where I am going, but the urgency and need to keep moving propels my body forward. Even though my lungs are burning with the effort of keeping my weakened body moving, I don’t stop. In the back of my mind, I imagine that I can feel my mates close and that my direction is towards them.

A force hits me from behind, and pain instantly radiates through my shoulder. I don’t have time to assess where the object sticking out of my body has come from. I can feel the dark magic, evil in its intention, drowning out the feel of nature behind me and closing in.

“You think you can escape me!” The words echo around me, trying to throw me off and make me think that he is closer when in reality, I think I can feel that he is at least a mile behind me. *Focus Hunter!* I wish I had my potions bag, but Caleb stole that and now has it around Oren’s waist.

Blood oozes and soaks my torn shirt, and my body aches as it tries to heal the wound around the shard of metal protruding from my right shoulder. Reaching over with my left hand, I shrink the fragment slowly before pulling it out, holding it in my hand. My legs begin to slow, and no matter how I command them to keep moving, they feel too heavy. *Fuck! The metal was poisoned.* The thought comes out of nowhere, but I know it to be true. My whole body is beginning to show the signs. Sweat beads on my forehead, my hands are damp, and my breathing shallow and uneven—one of my own potions used against me. I would laugh at the irony, but I’m too busy thinking of the antidote, which I keep inside my bag. Running through the spell and ingredients keeps me going as I stumble over the uneven ground. The muscles in my arms and legs start to spasm painfully.

“I will rip you apart, little piece by little piece and enjoy hearing you beg for mercy.” Caleb taunts me, and as much as that sounds like a fun time, I refuse to give up without a fight. If Caleb wasn’t housed in Oren’s body, I would have no qualms about fashioning this metal into a sharp projectile and sending it flying through his brain, but I cannot harm Oren—the fae deserves to be set free.

I had hoped I would be a party to that release. That I would be able to assist as Caleb is extracted and finally exterminated for good this time. It has become my greatest daydream. Something I thought of many times as the evil entity housed in Oren’s body continually burned and sliced my skin, only to heal it partially and do it all over again. However, the poison that he must have grabbed from my bag, although fortunately a slow-acting one, is deadly, and he won’t get the pleasure of ripping me limb from limb and getting a reaction from me because I will already be dead.

My body starts to shake violently, and the dull pain in my stomach that I have been ignoring flares into a roar, bringing bile up my throat and into my mouth. Leaning against the old oak to my right, I expel what little contents I have in my stomach and try as I might, I am unable to convince my body to go further. As I slide down to the ground, the bark shaves off layers of my skin, and I enjoy the pain that tells me I am still alive, if only for a moment. Rolling onto my back, I look up and watch the leaves and branches swaying in the violent wind, no doubt created by Caleb. Vines crawl along my body, preventing me from moving, but I laugh at the feeling. I couldn’t move even if I wanted to. The power that had started to return to me flickers like the dying embers of a fire, but it still attempts to heal me. Only there will be no healing from this. A brief burst of light causes me to close my eyes for what I fear will be the last time. As the darkness descends, dragging my mind away from my convulsing body and into blissful peace, my final conscious thought is of my mates, and even as I slip away, I imagine that I hear their voices calling to me. *I will see you again, my loves.*

Lils

WE TOOK TOO FUCKING LONG! THE THOUGHT SCREAMS IN MY mind as I exit the portal and see Hunter's prone body on the forest floor.

"He's still alive," Ris reassures me as she erects a shield between us and the fast-approaching swirling black mass containing Caleb and several wolf shifters. The barrier enables Ana and me to go to Hunter without worrying about being attacked. Not that I think Caleb stands a chance as my brother, his wolves, Eilam and Meghan, with at least a dozen fae, are pouring through the portal behind the shield. Some are warriors like her, but others are from the dark realm, where apparently, they are proficient in containing and destroying black magic. A practice that had been seen as unnecessary, but I am certainly glad the fae continued to retain the knowledge.

Jer, my brother's closest friend and a wolf-witch hybrid, runs over with Ana and me to assess Hunter. He immediately starts to pump Hunter full of magic.

"He's been poisoned." Jer looks over at me from his crouched position by Hunter's head. "We need an antidote to save him but to do that, we need to know what poison it was," he adds, straightening up. "Let him know you are here and keep him comfortable. That's all we can do for now." His words strike like an arrow to my heart, and Ana, who has been silently watching from a standing position, guarding us all despite the shield in place, lets out a low hiss, her anguish flowing through our bond.

Eilam is with us in seconds. Jer glances at him, then lowers his head, looking anywhere but at the vampire, before walking away and joining Kayd and Ris as they shore up our defences. Eilam bends down next to me and touches Hunter's clammy skin. Then without warning, he bites into his wrist, swiftly draping it over Hunter's lips. Ana moves just as fast to remove it, but Eilam glares at her. I have a feeling words were being said that I am not a party to, and this annoys me no end.

The vampire turns his attention to me. "He will die if we don't get him help soon. This will only hold that off for a short while. He is not a vampire, only mated to one."

I look at Ana, and she nods; moving back and returning to her protective stance, she rests her hand on my shoulder, her touch easing my angst a little.

"You two guard Hunter. We are lifting the shield and taking down that black-magic-wielding bastard," Ris states as she opens up communication between us, linking everyone except the fae and Eilam, who can listen in and respond where necessary without needing her magic. Gripping Hunter's hand, I angle my body so that I can keep an eye on what's happening whilst still being able to monitor my mate, whose chest is barely rising as his breathing becomes more and more shallow.

"Stay with us," I whisper to him and pull out the dagger my brother gave me before we stepped through the portal, ready to kill anything that comes near my mate whilst I curse silently under my breath at the time we lost getting to Hunter.

The tracking spell had needed some alteration now that Hunter and I were separated. Ris had made the adjustment whilst Meghan returned to the Fae Realm to gather reinforcements which she said would be needed to separate Oren from the dark-magic entity that was Caleb and then to contain that black magic before eliminating it. Ris and Kayd will be helping with that, but I had not listened intently to the details.

"Lils," Hunter's voice is so soft and strained I nearly miss it with the noise around me and in my head as the shield comes down and the wolves launch into attack. My wolf

growls, annoyed at not taking part in the carnage, but equally, she wants to protect our mate, so like me, she is torn, and so my throat continues to vibrate with her sound of irritation.

“*Hunter, don’t move.*” I push the words into his mind, looking over his body from my crouched position by his side. His eyes are still closed, and his skin appears pale and clammy.

“*My poison.*” Even in my head, his words are barely above a whisper. Ana glances at us over her shoulder; a glimpse of concern breaks through the mask of her resting bitch face, which I have come to love. She smirks at my thought, then returns her attention to the approaching black magic. Keeping our bond open so she can feel what is happening with Hunter.

“*Ris!*” Ana shouts in our heads, and within seconds we are contained in a bubble of magic. The sounds of the fighting outside are muted ever so slightly. The tendrils of black swirling mist, which Ana must have seen approaching, climb over the shield, trying to gain entry.

I can sense Ana’s frustration at not being in amongst the fighting, but that instinct is overruled by her need to protect us. She starts to pace in front of Hunter and me; glancing over her shoulder at us, she speaks to Hunter aloud.

“Yes, you’ve been poisoned, asshole, and we’ve come to save the day again.” Ana chuckles a little as she calls him this, and I see Hunter’s lips twitch in response. I hear his weak laughter in my head, but then he starts to cough, and blood seeps from his mouth.

“Don’t you fucking die on me!” I say with a mixture of anxiety and anger, this is not how this is going to end. I’m aware that with the lives we lead that death is inevitable, but not like this, not before we’ve had a chance to really explore our mate bonds.

The bubble shakes, and I catch a glimpse of Caleb in amongst the furling black mist and foliage. His whole body vibrates with rage as he uses more and more magic, feeding off the chaos.

“You are making him stronger,” I yell through the connection with the others. *“Look!”* Did the message get through? I can’t see enough to tell. The body of one of my brother’s wolves slams up against the shield, and I hear a roar as Eilam takes out Jer’s attacker and unceremoniously throws him through the magic shielding us. Well, that can’t be good—the bubble of magic shimmers and shakes.

“It will come down in a minute unless Ris strengthens it, but I think she has her hands full.” Ana points through the black magic, which is parting with the fierce wind that Ris controls as she fires hit after hit at the shield Caleb has erected around himself. The fae have formed a circle around him. Hands joined at the palms, their bodies glowing so white that it hurt my eyes to look too closely.

I return my eyes to Hunter. Ana has him propped up against her now, her body behind his, her wrist at his mouth oozes blood, and some drips down his face as she tries to get him to drink from her.

“I carry Eilam’s blood. It has to be worth a go. Drink, dammit, Hunter!” She cries out her frustration as most of the blood flows down his neck and onto his shirt. But at least he’s stopped coughing and is calmer. Meanwhile, my mind is working overtime, going over the words Hunter managed to squeeze out. I analyse the feelings that were behind his words and the tinge of sadness that went with them. It was as if we weren’t fully getting what he was trying to say.

“He said he was poisoned, but he must know that we know that by now. What if that’s not what he meant? What if he means that the poison is one of his?” I ask Ana but keep my eyes on Jer, who has now shaken off his wolf and stands naked and dazed a little way off. His hand glows as he touches the bubble and looks about to leave the shield.

“Stay behind that shield, Wolf,” Eilam shouts at him as he takes up a fighting stance in front of the bubble and Jer. Interesting.

“Typical that when I find my mate, it’s a psychotic vampire!” Jer states, shaking his head.

“I heard that.” Eilam glares at him over his shoulder

“You were meant to. There isn’t even anyone left to fight.” Jer huffs out, and I look around, taking in the bigger picture and realise that he is right. The mist has cleared, and I can see Caleb struggling against whatever the fae are doing to him. A huge dome has formed over his shield.

“You could be right, but that doesn’t help us much, as Hunter is the only one who knows where the antidote is.” Ana draws my attention back to them and the questions I asked. In the seconds it took to take in the current situation, Hunter has opened his eyes a little. I try not to react to the bloodshot gaze that looks at me, then at Ana.

“Caleb has my bag.” He manages to get out before wheezing again.

“Don’t talk. Save your breath. I’ll get the bag.” I get up amongst protests from Ana and Hunter in my mind. “We aren’t losing him,” I state, looking at Ana and hoping she understands my determination.

“Let me out, Ris. We need Hunter’s potion bag. Caleb has it. The antidote is in there.” I’m again thankful that Hunter is one of the few witches who bother to make remedies for the potions he concocts. Usually, it’s to keep someone alive a little longer so that we can gain information. Poison them, give them the antidote and then use something else on them, that can go on for days. Very effective, though.

The shield comes down, and Jer shifts, running over to Ana and Hunter to take up a fighting stance in front of them, growling every so often at Eilam. If I had time, I would find it funny. But time is of the essence, and although the fight was over quickly, we still have to exorcise Caleb out of Oren, and I need the bag I can see around Oren’s waist. With that thought in my mind, I make my way over to where my brother stands with Ris and Meghan.

“It’s too much of a risk, Rissa,” Kayden growls as I get there.

“I’m not hearing you coming up with any better ideas, Wolf.” She snarks at him, earning herself a glare from my brother. Meghan just looks at them, rolls her eyes and trains her gaze once again on the fae who are still taking down Caleb’s shield.

“It is my decision to take that risk, Kayden. I simply need you and Merissa to ensure the magic is correctly funnelled whilst we contain it,” Meghan states without looking at the two, who are currently having a glaring match. Their eyes glow with power that makes my hair stand up on end as their magic rolls around them, entwining and posturing almost.

“Fine! But we leave if shit gets out of control,” Kayd states, gaining a nod from both females.

“I will portal us all out of here if this doesn’t work, and we will regroup,” Meghan says in agreement.

“Okay, someone explain what’s happening.” I look at them all as I say this, needing to know that I will have my hands on that bag as soon as possible.

“In short. Meghan will walk through the shield because she will be able to as she is Oren’s fated, and that shield appears to be attached to his magic and Caleb’s. So it will recognise her and let her in. The risk is that Caleb is able to overpower her. As long as that doesn’t happen, Meghan will start pulling the black magic out, and we will syphon it into a containment bubble until it can be dealt with properly.” Ris throws the words out as they start to walk towards the fae ring.

“Stay back, Lils.” My brother insists as he follows his mate. “Meghan will get the bag from Caleb, and we will pass it to you.”

I want to follow them and be close enough to see what is happening, but my attention is drawn by a zing of magic that narrowly misses me. Caleb has managed to make cracks in the dome surrounding his eroding shield.

“We move now.” Meghan’s voice is tight, as if she is speaking through gritted teeth. No doubt she will be feeling the torment of her fated, whose face appears every so often as

the strain of trying to keep the black magic controlled and to remain in situ with a body that isn't entirely his starts to show. Whatever the fae are doing, it has the desired effect, and boy, Caleb is pissed off about it.

"She is feeling the effects of the attack on Oren's body," Ris confirms my suspicion as she looks back at me. Her concern for the fae assassin is evident.

Meghan ducks under the arms of the nearest joined fae, followed closely by Ris and Kayd, who remain outside the dome as Meghan enters it. Both of their bodies begin to vibrate with magic; the orange and blue colour of the spiralling glow around them is a sharp contrast to the white glow of the fae.

The world around us seems to move in slow motion. I watch, mesmerised, as Meghan stabs Caleb repeatedly, bleeding the black smoke and blood from Oren's body as she moves around him with the agility only the fae possess. They fight hand to hand, but Caleb has no weapons other than his magic, and the body he is in is clearly fighting against him, as Oren must be battling from within. The black magic swirls aggressively inside the dome, and as it is released from Oren's body, Kayd and Ris pull the dark mist into a bubble next to them as they battle the magic into submission.

My brother grabs Ris, holding her tightly as she sways and the magic blips slightly for just a millisecond before they continue. The fae chant in an ancient language that I don't understand, and their bodies hum with power that looks to be putting a strain on them if their faces, which are usually emotionless, are anything to go by.

As I watch, Meghan manages to extract the bag from around Oren's waist by cutting straight down his back. Caleb roars, calling her a fae whore, resulting in an unnatural sound coming from him as Oren's voice emerges briefly with threats to the dark witch. Meghan laughs, tilting her head up to the sky as she throws the bag through the air to Ris, who promptly uses the air to send it back to me. It lands softly a few steps away, and I break off my silent observation and retrieve it with

speed, turning as I pick it up and running back to where Ana is holding up Hunter's body, still seated on the ground.

"Give it to me," Jer urges as I hand the bag over without question. Eilam stands off, keeping an eye on us and the proceedings within the dome of magic. Jer starts to rifle through the bag, which I know is spelled to make room for all the potions and shit Hunter keeps in it. Being half-witch, Jer manages to unlock the spell on the bag and sets about finding the correct bottle with the antidote in it.

I bounce on my feet, wanting him to hurry but equally needing him to find the right one. How will he know? All these thoughts run through my head so fast I can barely register them.

"Green bottle, gold coloured cap." Hunter pushes the words one at a time into my head, and I hastily relay them to Jer.

"Got it." He produces a dark green bottle from the bag and drops the bag on the ground before leaning down over Hunter and placing the potion to my mate's lips, whispering what sounds like a spell as, drop by drop, he releases a foul-smelling liquid into Hunter's mouth.

"Hold him." Ana gestures to Hunter's legs which have started to jerk uncontrollably. Immediately I throw myself down on his limbs, sitting on them and hoping my weight will hold him still as his body reacts violently to the antidote that Jer is trying to drip-feed him. Will the extra time Eilam's blood gave us be enough to reverse the damage done?

Oren

I WASN'T AWARE THAT WE WERE CHASING HUNTER UNTIL Caleb used the words of a spell Hunter used many times to open his bag. Naturally, I was curious to see what he was taking out and why, so I pushed myself out of my hiding place, which was getting harder and harder to do as I tried desperately to keep my powers away from Caleb as much as possible. It was exhausting, and he had already managed to access some of my power despite my efforts.

I knew that we would be lost once he managed to conquer portal travel again. There would be nothing to prevent him from taking himself and whoever he managed to infect or recruit to the Fae Realm. Caleb could also portal inside Malaki's castle, and there would be no need for Lils' help. He could waltz right in and launch a surprise attack. There was no way to tell what he would do next; even though his thoughts had become loud, they were erratic, and he appeared to have no planning or thought going into his actions.

When Hunter managed to trap us, I was relieved, hopeful even that it would stop him for at least long enough for my friend to get away. But, as power surged around my body, the relief was short-lived. Metal exploded with such force it stuck into nearby trees, and the power drained me, forcing me to hide deep to conserve my energy and prevent my consciousness from being wiped out completely.

I surfaced again quickly, even though I wasn't fully recovered. But I was unable to stop Caleb from using the disgusting-looking potion on the shard of metal he sent flying

through the forest after the witch. What I did manage was to unleash enough directional distraction that it didn't pierce his heart. The elements were in my favour as I enhanced a wind blowing in that direction. It took so much out of me that I nearly didn't make it back to hide when Caleb lost his temper at my interference, but I made sure to laugh loud enough that he knew what I had done.

It was then that I felt her, my other half, the piece of my soul. Her essence proceeded through the portal that opened, drawing Caleb's focus from Hunter. His pull on the dark magic increased, and although I couldn't feel it anymore, I imagined the tightening of my skin as the black veins writhed in answer. My energy was minimal, and it took all the effort I could muster to stay focused on the call of my soul to that of my fated mate. I couldn't allow her to get in harm's way.

Then I feel it, the connection, but not just with my fated. If I could control my lips, they would be pulled up into a smirk.

"Oh, you are in jeopardy now!" I make sure to push my joy in with the words that I echo around my mind so that Caleb can pick them up. Because not only has Meghan arrived, but she has brought with her my brethren, and from the sense I'm getting, these are fae of the dark realms, Winter and Autumn.

"They are no match for my power." Caleb's words are full of bravado, though I don't think he is entirely sure of himself.

The sounds of battle draw my attention, and I feel a pull. My energy and consciousness are being called upon to return to my body. With that comes the realisation that my body is under attack. Swift cuts, one after another, slice through my skin, and as my body leaks my life fluid, the black magic within me is being syphoned out.

Caleb is enraged. Anger, like I've never experienced myself, flows through me as I gradually regain a connection with my physical being.

Meghan dances around me, and I begin to feel her intent. She shows no mercy, stabbing me and easily avoiding Caleb's sluggish attempts to hit her with magic. I spend a moment

admiring her as I fight for dominance in my body. Caleb throws a disparaging remark at my fated, and I surge forward with a roar. No one talks to my mate with that tongue. Meghan rolls her eyes at me. Actually rolls her eyes! This just spurs me on, I push with the pull, which I assume is coming from the fae surrounding us, but as I regain more senses, I note the aura of another powerful being and her fated. Combined together, Kayden grounding Rissa against the pull of the dark magic, they are a mighty force, and I can only be thankful that they have agreed to help me. However, the guilt of what I have done starts to weigh on me again.

“Fight!” Meghan’s voice sounds loud and close to my ear, and I’m startled from my morose thoughts, which threaten to drag me down again. Whatever punishment awaits me, I will not hide in here like a coward. I will face my fate like the strong Fae of Spring that I am. A fae of note and wealth. A fae of magic strong enough to withstand the possession of a dark force. These internal affirmations bolster my resolve as I push harder to evict the treacherous invader. I pull on the close contact of my brethren, my fated, and even a little of the witch’s potent magic, clawing my way out of the darkness, grateful for every slice of my skin. The pain proves I am alive and my body is still my own.

“More!” Merissa shouts from somewhere close by, and I feel another stab to my chest, which I know must be hurting Meghan just as much as it is hurting my body. We are linked her and I. Our souls are entwined together forever. If I fall, so will she and I will not let that happen. I have survived this long so that I could get back to her and apologise for all that my body has done. To throw myself at the mercy of the Queens and request that my fated live on as I enter the oblivion that is the only sure punishment for me after my grave misconduct.

“*Will you stop flaying yourself and concentrate!*” Meghan’s voice interrupts my thoughts. This is the first time she has communicated with me in my mind, which must mean that we are winning. Caleb is silent, but I still feel him writhing in agony as he tries to cling desperately to my body in an attempt to live.

“There will be no mistakes this time, you bastard. You will die once and for all!” Merissa shouts as magic pulses around me, pulling at my body. The agony is bliss, and I deserve every second of it. Overhead, thunder rolls and lightning strikes nearby, charging the area with electricity.

“You can not get rid of me. I am the one true witch.” Caleb’s voice moves my lips, but it is weak and barely audible above the hum of the chanting fae.

“Such utter nonsense you speak. You were never more than a willing vessel for evil. Black magic was the entity in control. You were simply a mouthpiece, a nothing, replaceable.” Meghan’s taunts are huffed out, and with each word, another opening is made in my body to release the magic that has its hooks in me. Caleb screams in outrage inside my head without using my lips, which proves that he is losing control of my body. Again I push harder and harder, hoping I have the energy to see this through; after all the effort made by the others, I must try to do my part to regain the functionality of my physical being.

I concentrate on the voices of those around me, latching on to them as a lifeline in a stormy sea, pulling myself out of the darkness and into the light. Then I see her, really see. My eyes are now my own.

“Ah, there you are. Nice of you to join us,” Meghan says as she continues to move around me, slower now and with a look of strain on her beautiful features.

“Is it done?” I move my lips, and finally, the voice that leaves them is my own. I search inside, checking in, but there is still lingering darkness.

“Nearly,” Merissa answers, and I turn my head, marvelling at the use of my body. Then, a little way off and outside the fae circle, I catch sight of Hunter on the ground, pinned under his mates, his body convulsing.

“Hunter.” My voice sounds scratchy, barely my own, but it is no longer infused with the lower tones of Caleb. No, his voice is finally silenced.

“We will deal with that as soon as your body expels the remnants of the black magic. Jer is handling it with the help of the others.” Merissa’s tone is concerned, but she continues to pull on the tendrils of black mist that are thinner now but still leaking from my body.

I stretch my fingers and move my arms; they feel as though I have been sleeping for too long. Pins and needles plague my already battered body. Still, I don’t complain. Each sense, each uncomfortable feeling, is another confirmation that I am finally whole again. I grit my teeth against the sensation of the final pieces being removed. It is as though they have claws and are gripping my insides, holding on for all they are worth in a bid to remain alive. With a final scream of rage Caleb and the black entity that contained him are pulled out of me and into the magic bubble pulsing with evil, held inside the dome. My legs give way, and I land on the earth with a thud, knocking the wind from my lungs.

Healing, I can feel my body healing itself and the powerful magic of the fae being pumped into me as hands touch my skin.

“If you have this handled, I’ll see what’s happening over there.” Merissa’s voice is muffled as if I am underwater, but with a pop, the sound comes back again as the magic goes to work on my body. Skin stitches together, there seems to be some internal damage from the black magic, but I leave the analyses to the others as I open my eyes and look at the now clear sky. White clouds are just about visible through the canopy of the trees. A crisp winter’s day, the scent of snow in the air reminds me of my visits to the Winter Court.

“Feeling nostalgic for my court, Oren?” Meghan asks as she slumps down on the floor next to me. I turn my head in her direction and watch her clean her knife on the weeds before she sheaths it on her hip. Her long blonde hair has escaped from the complex braids that must have bound it out of her face. Now there are wisps of her straight hair hanging around her beautiful features like a frame. As if she can feel me looking at her, she reaches up and tucks the errant strays away from her eyes and glances in my direction. The look of

concern is brief and then replaced by disinterest, but I saw it. If it were a few months ago, before I entered this country, the look would have given me hope that maybe she had started to feel something for me other than anger at her misconception that her feelings were being forced on her by our connection. Even now, my tired body reacts, wanting to soothe her to find solace between her legs.

“You can stop thinking like that right away. It’s not going to happen. Ever.” Meghan gets up abruptly and walks over to the other fae, who are all sitting on the ground, recharging. Her words sting but aren’t unexpected. I have never been left in any doubt that my fated does not want or need me in her life. That became clear the moment I met her, and after what I’ve done, I cannot blame her for not wanting me.

Before my thoughts can spiral down further, I draw strength from the surrounding nature and pull myself up to sitting so I can see what is happening to Hunter. From my vantage point, I can only see his feet on the ground. He is surrounded by his friends, with magic pulsing over him from Merissa, Kayden and Jeremiah, but there is also another who I recognise. My sister! Was she here?

“Your sister is stronger than you realise, and it’s about time you gave up on the backward thinking you and your court have that females are to be protected and that they are not equal to males.” Meghan is beside me again, and my eyelids shutter briefly. I hadn’t heard her approach. She reaches out, and I accept her stretched hand, allowing her to assist me in standing.

“You are aware that is not how I see you.” I defend myself even though I have no right to her kindness or consideration.

“How you see me is immaterial now. We must leave. The black magic is unstable, and my mother wants it returned to the dark realm where it can be disposed of properly.” Meghan leaves me with those words and walks over to the others. I try to follow, but I am instantly surrounded by the rest of the warriors from the Winter Court.

“I am sorry, Sir, but you are not to move from this spot. We have our orders.” A tall male, just shy of my stature, pushes back his shoulders and addresses me. I am pleased to see some respect is still there for my position, but I concede and do not move. They must know that if I wanted to, I could portal out of here, and they wouldn’t be able to stop me. However, rules are rules. If I am to be detained, then so be it. I am ready to face whatever punishment is to be dealt.

Hunter yells in pain, but that is a good sign. It means he can feel, that he isn’t leaving this earth just yet. I can almost hear the collective sighs of relief, or maybe that was my own. I have become quite fond of them all. Something I didn’t know was possible, having had little to do with other species in all the time that I have been alive. I have led quite a sheltered life in the Fae Realms, never venturing to Earth until it was required when my sister went missing as she snuck through a portal to, in her words, seek adventure and experience. I was tasked by our mother to retrieve her. A straightforward mission, I thought. Yet I was unprepared for what I found.

Meghan stalks over to me, purpose in her stride as she moves amongst the gathering of fae who guard not only me but the bubble containing the writhing black mass that was once Caleb.

“Merissa and Kayden will join us briefly to aid in the transportation of the bubble. Then I will return to take all their party back to the castle.” She informs those around us, not even looking at me. I feel her disdain as if it were my own. A loathing of what I have become. *I am a fae of worth.* The words seem weak now inside my head, which now feels empty as the only thoughts there are my own. Unfortunately, I am left with an echo of the memories of what my body was made to do. Each one is as sordid as the other. No doubt Meghan is privy to this information as I have not yet had the strength to lock down my mind.

Around us lie the dead, mostly Caleb’s wolves who, with his control, could not shift to fight the wolves that attacked them. Some of Kayden’s men and women must have shifted to

patrol the area as they now return and are retrieving clothes from backpacks handed to them by their companions.

Hunter sits with his back against Analucia's chest as Lileth sits next to them. Briefly, his eyes catch mine, but I lose sight of him as Merissa and Kayden make their way over to us.

"I don't want to be away long. Let's get this settled. Then the entity is your responsibility." Kayden speaks to Meghan, his fists clenching at his sides and jaw taut in obvious anger. I do not need to read his mind to know his thoughts, and I don't blame him for his anger towards me. Yet out of all of them, he is the one who must be aware of how powerless you are to stop what is happening to you when you are under the influence of dark magic and in my case, I was possessed by an entity, not just a spell.

"As you wish, wolf. We will leave now." Meghan opens a portal, and the fae warriors glide smoothly into formation around me.

I breathe in one last time, the smell of the woods and the damp earth, before being escorted through the portal to my fate.

Hunter

WITH A POP, THE PORTAL CLOSES, AND WITH IT THE BLACK mass that caused so much chaos in our lives is gone. It's almost anticlimactic, but killing Caleb would have been impossible whilst he was infecting Oren's body. Now at least this way, he is reduced to a swirling angry black fog which will no doubt find a swift demise at the hands of the fae.

Their magic still lingers in the forest, clinging like dew to the leaves of the evergreen trees and the branches of those who have shed theirs for the winter. I chuckle at my thoughts. I think some of that vampire blood has turned me poetic.

"You always notice the little things." Lils laughs, reading my mind, and I feel Ana's chest shuddering as she chuckles behind me.

"I guess I do." I laugh out loud this time, feeling the joy of being alive and finally with my mates again. Being around them is rejuvenating—that and the magic that has been pumped into me from Jer, Kayden, and Ris. My own magic has returned, and I'm feeling stronger by the second. Gone is the agony of my body shutting down as I began to die a slow, painful death. I honestly didn't think that I would survive despite the efforts of my mates and friends. I'm just thankful that they arrived when they did, as I am in no doubt that Caleb would have killed me had he had the chance. He was beyond rational at that point.

Ana pushes me up, and I grip the extended arm Jer holds out for me, pulling myself up to standing on wobbly legs and feeling my feet for the first time in what seems like ages.

When really, I think we've only been here about an hour if the sun's position is anything to go by.

"Here, eat this." I look at Hayley, one of Kayden's trusted inner circle and nod my thanks as she passes me a chunk of bread and some meat from her pack. Cautiously I take a bite, not sure how my stomach will deal with the sudden introduction of food after that poison, but the magic has done its work, and I steadily chew the bread as I look around at the assembled crew. Eilam is talking to Jer, who is sitting on the ground eating and replenishing his strength after using so much magic to help me survive. I think Eilam is trying to get the wolf to feed from him, but Jer is refusing. Lils is standing to my right, watching me like a hawk. My lips pull up into a grin, and I give her a wink to reassure her that I'm fine.

Once we have all eaten, drunk some water carried in skins by the wolves, and are all feeling more replenished, an unease grows as everyone shuffles about, waiting for Kayden and Ris to return.

"They should be back by now, surely?" Lils asks Ana as if she would know anything about how long it takes to travel to the Fae Realm. None of us does. The fae kept to themselves before the humans almost destroyed the planet, and the higher-ranking supernaturals called upon them to intervene. Together with the witches, they were the only ones capable of saving what was left of the Earth and reversing the damage.

"Time passes differently in the Fae Realm, *Giovane Lupo*," Eilam states. He must have overheard our conversation as he begins to walk towards Ana and Lils. My wolf mate stiffens a little, causing me to go on alert immediately.

"*What's wrong, Lils?*" I ask through our connection, keeping my outward appearance the same as I finish off the last of the bread and glance at the sky, which is beginning to show signs of the sun going down.

"*Seems Ana has got herself a new master.*" Lils huffs out the statement in my head, sounding slightly annoyed by this.

"He is not my master," Ana says out loud, and my eyes bounce between my two mates as they look at each other. Ana

is clearly annoyed with Lils' statement.

"Technically, I am now your master." Eilam helpfully supplies, causing Lils to gesture to him with her hand with a 'see' expression on her face.

"No, you are not, Eilam. However, I am very grateful to you for saving my life." Ana bows her head in respect to the older vampire.

"So, how did that happen?" I ask, looking between Eilam and Ana for an explanation. Weirdly I'm not in the least bit put out by this development, unlike Lils.

Eilam comes to sit with us, and between the two of them, they catch me up on all that transpired whilst we were apart. I get the sense that hearing it again settles Lils a little, not to mention Eilam's obvious interest in Jer, who appears to be doing everything he can to avoid the vampire's glances.

"He has no interest in Ana as a mate, Lils." I make my tone as reassuring as possible, and reaching across, I try to take her hand, but she pulls away.

"The thought of someone having control over her the way that..." Her words trail off, and she looks into the forest. Not before I see the anguish that crosses her features. I want to comfort her, take her in my arms and remind her of the love we share, the love that got me through even the toughest of times at the hands of Caleb. But, instead, my thoughts turn sour, and I have to unclench my fists at the thought of all she was subjected to and how I couldn't do anything to prevent it. I don't blame her for not wanting me to touch her. I failed her.

As my mind spirals out of control, the clearing lights up with a portal opening. It's so bright that I need to shield my eyes for a second with my hand.

"Go. I will get us home. Thank you for returning us." Ris shouts behind her through the portal, which must be linked directly to the Fae Realm, given the light it produces.

Then just like that, it's gone, plunging the whole area into twilight again. Ris and Kayden look a little flustered but unharmed.

“What’s going on, Boss?” Jer is the first to ask as the wolves draw close to their leader. We are all standing now, making our way to them as their power and presence call us in. I feel it, and the others must do too.

“The fae are having their own issues. Oren has requested his mate bond be broken so that he can leave his physical being and effectively die.” Ris looks around, the sadness evident on her face.

Kayden looks conflicted and remains silent. I guess it is difficult to differentiate between Oren and Caleb as they shared the same body and abused his sister. However, having witnessed just how hard Oren fought to maintain some semblance of control, I find it hard not to see him as a victim in this as much as the rest of us. Particularly as he has a fated mate. The things he was made to do would definitely make someone like him feel inferior and unworthy. Maybe I understand him more than most.

“Surely that would kill them both?” Lils asks as we all start to pack up the makeshift camp and get ready for travel.

“Fae’s have a different way of doing things. But it may leave Meghan unable to find another mate as he is her fated. She seems unconcerned about this but feels that allowing him to die is too easy a punishment.” Kayden shakes his head. This is clearly beyond his comprehension, and given his love for Ris, I can understand why. Most supernaturals die if their fated is killed, so this is new information and something I’d like to look at further when I have a moment to catch my breath. So little is known about the fae and their ways, and I want to learn more.

“She will not allow him to die. No matter how much she resists the pull of her bond.” Ris sounds as if she is talking from experience, and Kayden flashes her a smirk earning him a middle finger as she turns her back on him and begins looking at the trees as if they were significant.

“We leave now, make some headway and then camp for the rest of the night.” Kayden is all business again as we follow them out of the clearing. Several wolves shift and circle

us, some in front, scouting the area as we walk through the darkening woods. Jer chooses to shift much to Eilam's obvious annoyance.

"Leave him be, Vampire." Kayden's words brook no argument, and his eyes glow as he throws the command over his shoulder, glaring at Eilam, who looks about ready to argue but then decides against it.

"Wise choice." Ana chuckles as she nudges Eilam on the shoulder with her own as she keeps pace with him up ahead of Lils and me.

"About earlier..." Lils' tone is low, trying to keep our conversation quiet, but in a group of supernaturals with advanced hearing, that is pointless. I hold up my hand. "*Don't. You have nothing to explain. I failed you, and I understand that you are not ready to forgive me.*" I speak to her through our bond, knowing that only Ana can hear me, which is apparent by the stiffening of her shoulders even as she continues her conversation with Eilam.

A small hand on my arm pulls with a strength I could choose to resist, but I allow her to stop our forward motion.

"What? No!" Lils exclaims, looking up at me in shock. "Hunter, no! Look at me." I return my gaze to my mate, who stands in front of me and let out a huff of breath as I see her eyes well with tears resisting the urge to reach for her again.

"Let's get this straight. There is nothing to forgive. You didn't do all those things to me, and there was no way of you getting free to help me, and even if you did, we were outnumbered, without magic and without my wolf!" Lils reaches out and briefly trails her hand along the stubble on my jaw. "If anyone needs to apologise, it's me. I left you."

I feel a wave of shock course through my body at her statement, and this time I don't hold back. I grasp her face between my palms, looking directly into her eyes. I try to ignore her wince and concentrate on getting my words out instead.

“There is nothing to forgive, Lils. I asked you to go. Begged you to save yourself. You didn’t do anything wrong.” I gently bring my forehead down to hers but don’t move to close the distance between us and kiss her even though my whole body is crying out to do just that.

“Okay, so you both did shit, neither of you was at fault, and no one needs to be forgiven. Good, now can we move?” Ris shouts at us. My lips lift in a smile at her tone, and Lils lets out a chuckle.

“Someone’s hangry.” She laughs, earning herself a growl from Kayden, which she completely ignores. Instead, her hand slides into mine and with a shy smile, something I’m not used to seeing on her face, she pulls me along to join the others.

Ana

LISTENING TO THEIR CONFESSIONS OF GUILT LEFT ME WITH A bad feeling, knowing that I had been less than pure with my behaviour. However, I have been able to detach myself from what happened to me and what I needed to do to survive. Now that I know Lils is only worried about Eilam controlling me rather than blaming me for him becoming more involved in our lives, I can work on that. Eilam may joke around, but he does not try to control me or invade my privacy, especially now that he is having difficulty coming to terms with the stubborn witch who appears to be his mate.

Kayden's wolves had accepted me despite their ingrained hatred for vampires, and they were slowly learning to trust me. But Eilam is new to them. Understandably they are weary, and he exudes power much the same as Kayden. There is no mistaking him as an overlord, although he is less pompous and demanding than any I have previously had dealings with and for that, I am thankful.

"Why thank you, Young One." Eilam interrupts my musing, and I throw a glare his way.

"Stay out of my head!" I grumble at him as we come to a halt in a large clearing in the never-ending forest we have been trudging through for what seems like hours. Snow has started to fall, and the temperature drop is likely to take a toll on those who are warm-blooded. Little clouds of steam are forming in front of the faces of those who need to breathe, illuminated by the full moon, which is bathing the clearing in eerie white light.

“Start a fire. We’ll rest here for the remainder of the night and leave early in the morning,” Kayden states as he drops the pack he is carrying onto the ground. Ris forms a pit in the earth using magic while Kayden’s wolves gather what dry wood and bracken they can find on the forest floor, which is fast being covered in white powdery snow. Ris starts the fire, instantly drying what wood they have found using her powers. It wouldn’t be much of a heat source if magic wasn’t involved, and not for the first time I am taken with the usefulness of this power. Maybe if humans were more accepting of such things, they could have been helped.

“They would have exploited us at the first opportunity or tried to dissect us.” Hunter stands next to me and answers my thought.

“Do you think so? Humans live amongst supernaturals without a problem now.” I know it isn’t that simple, but I love engaging his brain and enjoy the banter which has been missing between us for some time.

“You know they have no choice. There are so few humans on this planet now they are severely outnumbered by the supernatural population. They are no longer the top predators in this world.” He laughs, clearly having got wind of where my thoughts were going. “I’ve missed you too. There will be plenty of opportunities for you to argue with me on this trip back north.” He chuckles as he sets the pack he is carrying for Lils down. She shifted before we reached this clearing and went ahead with some of the others to hunt.

I can feel her close by, and the excitement must mean they have caught something. My fangs start to ache at the thought of flesh and blood.

“You should go join her.” Hunter nods into the black gloom of the thick trees in the direction where our mate is likely to be. My lips curl up into a smile, and I give him a brief nod, then let Eilam know where I’m going, so he doesn’t seek me out. The image of my mate’s snout plastered in blood has everything inside me tingling, and I set off at a run, racing through the trees, light on my feet so as not to make a sound.

I follow the noises of wolves bringing down their prey. The sound of snarling and tearing of flesh have me licking my extended fangs in anticipation. I am not disappointed when I come across the group as they jostle and fight a little over what looks like two large deer. Their fur is coated in blood and entrails, and their faces' greys, whites, and tans are now all tinged red. In unison, they turn and start growling at my intrusion, which only makes this more enticing. Will they try and fight me? Lils won't because even now, her blood-crazed wolf has recognised me as her mate, and she shifts, remaining on all fours and panting with excitement. She is a sight to behold.

"I'm not here to take your kill, Wolves, but the rest of your pack is hungry, so you might want to cease your games and bring them the food." I laugh a little at the look of indignation on some of those furry faces. Not something you would see on a natural wolf. These shifters are so expressive even if they don't see it themselves. I notice every tiny little nuance of their features, their body language.

Jer's large grey and white wolf huffs, which I assume is him agreeing with my statement, and as the others turn to him, I can tell he is communicating with them, even if it would be rudimentary in this state. They grip the carcasses between them and bolt away in the direction of the camp, leaving my mate and me alone. As soon as I know they are out of earshot, I move purposefully towards Lils, who is now sitting back on her heels, watching my approach. Her eyes flash amber, giving me a clear indication that her wolf is still out to play.

"You see something you like, Vampire?" Lils' voice is husky and strained, her teeth long and protruding over her bottom lip. Her claws are still extended slightly as she tries to shake off the adrenaline coursing through her body from the hunt. I stalk her, and she doesn't move a muscle; she rests her naked body on her heels, panting. Short puffs of steam leave her mouth, drifting away in the cold night air.

My core clenches at the sight. Blood drips from her chin, down her neck, where her pulse captures my attention as my senses go into overload. I need to taste her.

“You,” I answer her question as I circle her knowing she can feel me just as I sense the building arousal as her scent permeates the air around us. I bend in a crouch in front of her, lifting her chin with my fingers so that I can look her in the eyes. She flinches ever so slightly.

“Do you want me to back away before I get to taste you, my little wolf?” I ask, winding a little seduction through my tone. My long skirt billows around me as I sink onto my knees, running my finger along her jaw. I’m desperate to lick that blood from her face and every other part of her body that she will let me, but I won’t make a move if she isn’t ready.

“No.” The word is breathed out on an unsteady exhale and so quiet that it could easily be missed. I lean forward, my lips brushing her mouth, and I use all of my senses to detect any form of withdrawal from Lils. Taking a chance, I gently lick the side of her lips, where a drop of blood lingers. The taste of animal blood doesn’t usually excite me this much, but when it comes to my mates, I’m finding anything goes. I continue my ministrations, licking down her neck and over her throbbing pulse. My teeth ache to sink into her skin.

“Don’t treat me like glass, Ana. Bite me.” Those words drop from her lips unsteady but with a hint of desperation.

“As you wish,” I answer softly against the shell of her ear, feeling and hearing the intake of her breath as she holds herself still. “*You are so brave. Let me make you feel good.*” I push the words slowly into her mind, feeling her heart rate kick up against my lips as I kiss her neck gently before sinking my fangs in so very slowly it makes us both moan as the contact floods my pussy, and without provocation, Lils takes my hand and thrusts it between her legs. She widens her stance, allowing me further access. Her core throbs with need so strong it would take my breath away if I were breathing. I take a long hard pull at her neck—her blood, her essence, explodes on my tongue as she cries out her need, urging me on. Then, with one hand tangled in her long thick tresses, I angle her neck the way I want it and begin to suck, taking short sharp pulls as I thrust my fingers into her dripping, needy pussy, letting her feel the stretch of two then three at once.

“Yes, oh yes! More, Ana, more.” Her words are staggered between cries and moans as I find the bundle of nerves deep inside her, rubbing it with each thrust of my fingers. Her legs begin to shake, and I know she is already close. I’ll let her come fast, just this once. It’s what she needs right now. I stop drinking but leave my teeth in her neck as her hips move frantically against my hand, desperate to find her release.

“Come, Little Wolf, show me how good I make you feel.”

Another rush of juices coats my hand, and I grip her hair a little tighter, fingering her needy warm hole as she moans deeply. Just as she is about to reach her climax, I take a long hard pull of gorgeous blood from her neck. She screams into the night, coming hard around my fingers, clenching them with her inner walls and holding on to my wrist in a tight grip with her hand, urging me to continue as I help her ride through her orgasm. My lips tug into a smirk as I pull my fangs from her skin, licking the wound closed. Her other hand, which had been hanging limp at her side, reaches up, and I feel pressure on the back of my neck as she draws me towards her lips. I oblige, kissing her whilst keeping her head angled. There is no need to demand access as she opens her mouth to me, fighting me with her tongue, desperate to regain control, and I let her.

Just as I willingly allow her to push me to the ground on my back. I lean on my elbows, watching as, with feral eyes, she bunches my skirt to my hips. “Lie back and let me claim you.” She husks out, her wolf so close to the surface that red and grey hair has begun to sprout all over her body. I push back the age-old urge to fight, instinct telling me that a wolf shifter is not my friend. No, this is my mate, I call out in my mind to no one but myself as I lie back, hands fisting the fabric of my skirt. In all our time together, Lils’ wolf has never tried to claim me. This sends as much of a thrill through me as the feeling of my knickers being shredded from my body and the scrape of sharp claws on the sensitive skin of my inner thighs.

I will not question why now, as it appears to be an obvious need to claim back some control of her life, and her wolf seems entirely on board with this plan as its long rough tongue

swipes through my folds. I have no idea what to expect, but as my core tightens and I wring the material at my hips into clumps, I no longer care. The feeling of being taken like this is so animalistic it sets all my senses spiralling as Lils holds my thighs apart wide and begins to feast with abandon. Her thick tongue pushes inside me, filling me in a way I have not experienced with her before. I'm consumed with a need to see, to watch her taking me, but still, I obey, lying as still as I can, not wanting to enrage her wolf as it surfaces with a growl, plunging its tongue into me over and over again, her teeth graze my throbbing nub, and I can't hold back the cry of ecstasy that releases from my lips.

Her hold is brutal, and whilst I know I could still throw her off, I don't. I dare not even mutter a word. She is so focused on bringing me pleasure I just lie back and take it. Over and over again, the feeling is almost too much as I start that heady climb. The grunting and growling between my legs turn me on just as much as the sensation of being filled, licked and sucked. Lils is everywhere. Her teeth graze and bite, breaking the skin in places and filling me with a heady need. I can feel her arousal and want as I urge her on with my mind, not overly sure it is getting through or how much control she has over her beast.

My legs quiver as I ride the waves of sensory overload. I'm so close. Then she stops, a needy whimper escapes me, and before I can react, I'm thrown onto my front, my bare arse on display. I turn my head, so my face is not crushed into the snowy mud, amused by the turn of events. I feel the tickle of hair as her body covers mine in what I assume is a show of dominance by her wolf, and I'm not complaining, well maybe a little that I haven't reached that heady climax I know I was about to. Then I feel her hot breath on the back of my neck, and I still, my legs open further and my weeping entrance spasms at the thought of her biting me. I can feel her intention before her teeth touch my skin, and I moan my assent wanting her to mark me as hers.

First one, then two, then three fingers push their way inside me one at a time, and with each withdrawal, another is added, stretching me. A hand in my hair pulls me up onto my

elbows, my arse high in the air, her fingers plunge in and out from behind. The angle is so exquisite I can barely contain my cries. I bite down on my lip, groaning as she rubs the nerves of my inner walls repeatedly, thumbing my nub in tight circles.

The teeth that had been teasing the skin of my neck, making tiny hairs stand on end, push in slowly. I stretch my neck back as she pulls my hair to the side sinking her teeth in further with such restraint I can feel her whole body trembling behind me.

“Don’t. Hold. Back.” I grit the words out through my lips, trying to suck in air I no longer need. I want this more than I’ve wanted anything in a very long time.

I hold the weight of both of our bodies as she clamps her jaw down onto me. Her hand between my legs stops moving in and out, but her fingers rub wide circles on my bundle of nerves, stretching my soaking wet entrance with the motion. I’m so full and so close, and my whole body is quaking in need. Her other hand snakes around my body and grasps my breast. Two fingers find my puckered nipple through my top, twisting and squeezing with such a fast, punishing force that I explode. Lights dance before my eyes as I come hard on Lils’ relentless fingers. She doesn’t ease up. Her teeth hold me still as, without a word, she forces my body to obey her command. Another orgasm floods my body, or maybe it’s still the same one; it’s not stopping. My body collapses as she releases me, licking the wound on my neck, which sends a shiver skating along my skin as she removes her fingers, although I swear I can still feel them inside me as tiny spasms from that earth-shattering climax continue to wrack my body. I lie on the cold hard ground, legs open, unable to move, and for a second, I think she’s disappeared. Then I feel the warmth of her tongue on my pulsing entrance as she licks through my folds one last time.

My body feels like it’s liquid as I roll over with a groan and, within seconds, find myself covered in a warm hard body. Now returned fully to her human-like form, stunning eyes of blue stare at me with such love that if I had a heart, I know it would be swelling with emotion.

“I love you, Analucia,” she says as her gaze darts between my slightly hooded eyes. I feel sated, wanted, and claimed as our bond thrums strongly between us.

“As I love you,” I whisper back.

Hunter

WHEN THE OTHER WOLVES RETURNED WITH TWO DEER between them, but my mates were nowhere in sight, I knew what had likely happened. Ana is always excited after a kill, whether it's her kill or not. I decide to leave them for a little while, not wanting to disturb what I can feel happening between them, but something is different, more powerful, and it draws me away from the others like a moth seeking a flame. I mumble that I'm taking clothes to Lils, but really I want to know what has caused such a shift in our bond.

Finding them is simple. Anyone could have stumbled upon them, which makes me a little annoyed at how careless they have been, but the feeling fades as I see them sitting up, Lils in Ana's lap with her legs twisted around Ana's back, holding her to her body. It feels wrong to intrude.

"Come here, Hunter," Ana calls out as I turn to go, but she doesn't take her eyes off Lils. I hold up the bag of clothes I brought as an offering to Lils as she turns her gaze to me. Seeing her naked body on top of Ana's gets the attention of my cock, but I don't feel that it would be welcome here. The atmosphere between them is intimate.

"Thanks, I'm starving." Lils pulls herself out of Ana's embrace and stands up. Our vampire mate moves swiftly to her feet and stands in front of Lils, shielding her body from my eyes. The move guts me.

Clearing my throat of the emotion, I toss the backpack closer to them. "Food's ready." I throw the words over my shoulder as I leave the clearing before I make a fool of myself.

I know when I am not wanted, and I'm not about to grovel for whatever scraps are left after the fuckfest they've had, the scent of which hangs in the air around them as clear as if they had told me about it. Lils' wolf has claimed Ana, that much I can sense being this close to them, even if I hadn't glimpsed the healing bite marks on the vampire's neck as she had turned to look at Lils.

"Hunter, wait," Ana shouts after me, her tone pulling my feet to a stop as she rounds my body to stand in front of me.

I drag my hand through my hair, which hangs loosely around my face, tugging harder than necessary to try and free myself from this feeling.

"I'm sorry," she starts, but I hold my hand up to stop her.

"It's okay. I get it. Lils was only interested in females before I came along. It stands to reason that her wolf needs to return to that after the abuse she has suffered." The pain that lances through my heart tells me it's not fine, but I'm not going to act like a pathetic, jealous idiot. If this is what Lils needs and her wolf wants, I won't stand in her way. "You were protecting her, but just so that we are clear, I would never hurt either one of you."

"We know that." Lils' voice is full of emotion as she approaches from behind and comes to stand next to Ana, fully dressed if a little dishevelled looking.

"But maybe your wolf doesn't." I shrug my shoulders, then straighten my back, changing the subject completely. "Why don't we go and see if they've left you any venison?" I pull my lips into what I hope is a convincing smile as I shut down the walls in my mind to block out the intrusive probes I can feel from both of my mates. I will not make them feel shitty about their relationship.

Lils huffs a little but takes the offered change of subject and strides out in front of me. "They had better have left me some. One of those kills is mine." She breaks into a run, leaving Ana and me to trail along behind her.

“She’s been through a lot, Hunter. Give her time. Healing is different for everyone.” Ana slips her hand in mine, and I squeeze her fingers before letting go. I know what I have to do. I love them both, and because of that, I need to step aside.

“You are her mate, Hunter.” Ana pulls on my arm, slowing me down again. I hadn’t realised how fast I was walking.

“I’m not sure that matters in this instance, Ana.” I give her a sad smile and nod towards the clearing; the fire’s glow is visible now. I don’t want to discuss this further, and luckily Ana doesn’t push the subject anymore. We walk into the makeshift camp in silence.

Ana moves straight over to Lils, who is sitting on the ground by the fire, tearing into a large chunk of meat with such abandon it kicks the side of my lips up into a grin. Ana slides in behind her, and Lils passes her a bite of her meat, and although Ana doesn’t need to eat food, she still takes the offering, placing a tender kiss on Lils’ temple whilst whispering something in my wolf mate’s ear. It’s a beautiful scene. One I can’t tear my eyes from until I feel the powerful presence of Ris moving closer to me.

“You okay?” she asks, looking between me and my two mates, who are so wrapped up in each other they are totally oblivious to any of the others.

“Lils’ wolf claimed Ana,” I blurt out, immediately wishing I had kept those words in as even I can hear the hurt in my tone.

“Ah.” Ris nods but doesn’t say anything else, and for that, I’m grateful.

“Well, I have a mission. If you could do with a change of scenery for a while?”

I turn my full attention to the dark-haired witch beside me. “What would that be?” I ask, curious as to why I might be the one she is suggesting takes a mission away from the others.

“When I was in the Fae Realm, my powers felt different, more controlled. The place called to me.” She starts, then sighs

a little. “I don’t know how to explain it, but it was like getting a power boost. Like I belonged there somehow.”

Kayden, who is never too far from his mate, walks over and puts an arm around Ris, pulling her into his side. “I told you everything is bound to feel weird there. It’s not a place any of us have been before.” He tries to reassure her, but she shakes her head.

“No, this is different. I felt like my magic was at peace. More so than it usually is when I’m around nature.”

“So, what do you need me to do?” I ask, wanting to defuse the growing tension between them.

“I want to make a little detour to my grandparents’ cabin. It’s not too far, but also not on our way. I need to do a bit of research. Which is where you come in.”

“Rissa...” Kayden growls his disapproval.

“I’m going, Wolf, so you’d better get your head around it.” Ris pulses with power, her eyes flashing amber and then glowing blue. Kayden turns her in his arms, and they stand there, both shimmering with power which dances and plays along their bodies. My own magic ignites, excited by the proximity of such a force.

As the trees start to shake, more snow falls softly on the ground around us, and the whole clearing is alight with swirling magic as these two face off. A bolt of lightning has me stepping back as it narrowly misses Kayden’s feet. His lips curl in a smirk.

“You know what it does to me when you try to kill me, Witch.”

Their exchange feels suddenly too intimate to be standing so close, and I move further back into the shadows of the swaying trees. Averting my eyes as Ris jumps into Kayden’s arms, they kiss each other as if it was their final kiss and the world was about to be torn apart. Then, without warning, I feel myself being lifted, and the whole scene drops away.

“WITCH!” Kayden’s roar fades, and I try not to look down as I find myself balancing in thin air and being transported at

an alarming pace next to a giggling Ris as she commands the elements like they are part of her somehow.

“He’s going to be so pissed.” She singsongs next to me like this is the funniest thing ever. Not sure I would want Kayden that angry with me, but I know she can handle him, so I allow myself a moment to laugh along with her before the venison I ate earlier tries to make a reappearance as we swoop down through the trees, barely missing a few branches, and into a clearing right in the middle of nowhere.

Magic shimmers and shakes as we land with a slight bump. I bend in the middle taking in great lungfuls of air, with my elbows on my thighs as I try to keep my food down. With a pat on my back and a ‘let’s go,’ Ris disappears through a magical bubble that I can now see as I straighten up. A gap appears, and she beckons to me. Behind her is a small log cabin set off the ground with a large porch at the front that houses a couple of chairs and a magical heating element. I stare at the cabin as I walk through the protection spell, feeling the pinch on my skin as it assesses whether I am a friend or foe. Lights appear in the windows, and smoke starts to billow from the chimney before Ris has even opened the front door. It must be connected to her magic somehow.

“Welcome to my grandparents’ hideaway. They left this to me and only me. No one else knows where it is,” she says as she starts to take her boots off inside the door.

I go to correct her, to say that now I know where it is, when I suddenly realise I haven’t got a clue. We arrived so fast, and from above the trees, that I have no idea where we are or in what direction the others might be. Bending, I follow Ris’ lead and take off my worn boots, loosening the laces and toeing them off by the door as I shut it behind me. The interior has a cosy feel to it and is a lot bigger than it appears from the outside. Off to the left is a living area with a large fireplace, currently ablaze. In front of the fire are several sofa chairs in various sizes and colours—all mismatched but looking like they belong together.

“There’s a kitchen at the back. It’s fully stocked all the time. But what we are here for is down this way,” Ris says as

she wanders down a corridor to the left of a set of stairs. Lights from wall sconces ignite as she continues forward, and I follow behind her, taking in my surroundings and trying to figure out the spells that must be in place here to keep this place running the way it does. The magic feels ancient and not just the magic of witches.

“Have you ever considered that you might be part fae?” I ask, putting all of my conclusions into a crazy idea forming in my head.

“Before, I would have told you don’t be ridiculous. I am a purebred witch. That has been drummed into me since I was old enough to understand language. However, I’m just not so sure now. This is why you and I are going to do some investigating,” Ris says as she opens a large wooden door off to the right and in the centre of the corridor that seems to stretch further back into the dark.

The door is intricately carved with symbols and pictures portraying the elements, and if I were in any doubt about the elemental magic Ris wields, I wouldn’t be now. Inside the room, another stone fireplace roars into life. I stop as the heavy door slams shut behind me, sealing us into the most incredible room I have ever seen. Rows upon rows of bookshelves glow in the darkness, seeming to stretch on forever.

“Pick your jaw up, Hunter. We’ve got work to do.” Ris laughs as she heads off down the middle of one of the rows. “The family’s history is all in books and parchment at the back of this aisle if I remember correctly.” She runs a finger along the shelves, and they seem to shimmer and glow at her touch.

“It’s only because of my grandparents’ quick thinking that any of this was saved. My parents squandered everything, and if they had been able to find this cottage, all of this...”—she gestures around—“Would have been lost forever.” Ris shakes her head at the thought.

“So your sister doesn’t know where this cabin is?” I ask as I gently pull a weighty tomb from its resting place on the middle shelf of the bookcase I am looking at, only for it to

become too hot to touch as it pulls itself out of my hand and returns to its rightful place within the row. Ris laughs as I blow on my fingers, using my magic to heal the blistering flesh.

“Don’t touch unless I give you permission. That was mild compared to what some of these will do if you remove them from the shelves.” Chuckling to herself, she gestures that we must continue down the never-ending wooden bookcases full of the most incredible books I’ve ever encountered. I could spend the rest of my life here, and I would be happy. A slight twinge pulls on my heart at the thought of never seeing Lils or Ana again, but I brush it away with a rub of my chest.

“No, Mel has no idea this place even exists. My parents thought it was all destroyed when my grandparents died. But the directions came to me in a dream, and I just knew I had to keep that to myself. I wasn’t even sure it meant anything.” She stops at a large wooden table and chairs that appeared at a crossroads of sorts between the shelving. “Years later, I discovered that this place actually existed and that the dream I had was likely from my grandmother. It unlocked when I most needed to believe I wasn’t alone.”

“Just like their magic?” I ask, taking a seat and finding the chair far more comfortable than it looks.

“Yes, just like their magic. That has been filtering in slowly over the years. Just when I think I’ve reached my magical maturity, I get blasted with another gift.” Ris says the last word as if it were a joke, and with a gesture that suggests that I stay put, she disappears into the darkness and the faint glow that follows her fades.

The wall sconces remain lit in the area where the table sits, and the temperature appears to be consistent, not too hot and not too cold. I’m about to start pulling things from my bag for something to do when a large book lands right in front of me.

“Get started on that one, will you? It will let you open it but be careful with the pages; it’s particular about creases.” Ris’ voice echoes from far away. The scholar inside me just about has an orgasm at the size and age of this book. “Put the gloves on before you touch it. The pages are soaked with

poison.” Great, now she tells me. Thankfully, I hadn’t even begun to open it because I was too busy studying the swirling pattern on the front. Thin gloves appear on the table next to the book, and I immediately put them on, amazed at how well they fit.

“Don’t take too long reading everything. Kayden is having a hissy fit about me disappearing, and we don’t have much time.” Ris’ voice startles me out of my hunched-over position at the table where I have been pouring over a book of her family’s history. I had been so engrossed that I hadn’t noticed her returning with her arms full of books and parchments.

“I’ve told him we’ll meet them further north. We’ve only been gone a day.” She huffs out as if he is being inconsiderate. Wait what?

“A day? But we only just got here.” I must look confused as she settles into the chair in front of me.

She laughs. “Time stands still a little here,” is all she says. Then, gesturing to the table, she adds, “You should eat something.”

The empty table is now laden with food and drink, all manner of vegetables and fruit, some I have never seen before. I pull off my gloves and begin piling food onto my plate, taking a little of everything, wanting to try all the meats and vegetables.

“Try that gravy. It’s my grandmother’s recipe and tastes amazing.” Ris has a nostalgic look in her eyes as she begins to put food on her own plate. “I’ve missed this place. Rogue loved it here.” I note the catch in her voice and reach across the table, squeezing her hand in mine before letting it go.

“I bet he did.” My lips pull up into a smile that widens with the thought of the rough assassin in a place like this.

“I still miss him so much,” she admits before shaking her head and starting to eat. I let the conversation go, not wanting to bring up that hurt or knowing what to say about it. Rogue had a big personality, and although Lils, Ana, and I only spent a short time with him, he became quite a part of our lives too. I

can barely imagine what Ris must feel, as she grew into the deadly witch she is today with his love and guidance.

As we finish eating, the food disappears just as quickly as it arrived, leaving behind just a jug of water and two glasses. I wrap my fingers around the cool unfamiliar glass. It's rare to see now; mostly water and other beverages are drunk from carved wooden mugs or pottery if clay is available in the area. Witches can produce utensils and goblets if they have the right spells, but most don't bother with the finer things in life when surviving is more important.

"We should shower and rest, maybe hit the books again in the morning." Ris pulls me out of my thoughts about the finer things and how I want a nice place in the country with a room to create my spells and a large bed to share with my mates. I want an end to the unrest between species and world peace; that last thought makes me chuckle and earns me a curious look from the dark-haired witch in front of me as she shuts the book she was reading.

I pull off my gloves and leave them on the table next to the unrolled parchment I had been trying to decipher.

"I think that would be wise. My brain is overloaded with all this information." I agree as we get up from the table and start making our way back to the door. I follow Ris because I have become completely disorientated, which I think is part of the charm of this expansive room.

"My family has a lot of secrets," Ris states as the door to the library looms up ahead, "Yet, I've not found a connection with another species. There are holes in the information from about two generations ago." She turns to me with her hand on the doorknob.

"Yes, I noticed that. Of course, you could put that down to poor record-keeping, but I think that's the idea to send you in another direction. I came across a page of parchment which felt spelled much more heavily than the last ones." I had started to pick apart some of the words, but it was taking a long time.

“I’ll take a look with you in the morning. Fresh eyes and all that.” Ris leads the way out of the room, shutting it behind us and points to the stairs. “You’ll find the guest rooms up those stairs and to the right. The family rooms are on the left.”

“Where are you going to sleep?” I ask, wondering if she is going to rest at all.

“I’ll just pop outside and send a message to Kayden, it’s all very muted in here, and I can feel his growing concern.” She rubs her chest, and I nod, not that I can feel anything from my mates. Likely, I am too far from them now.

Heading up the wooden stairs, I take the suggested direction at the top and enter the first door I come across. The room immediately springs to life. A fireplace blazes in the small nook on the back wall, and the tiled surrounding is all white and shiny. An overhead light is in the centre of the white-painted ceiling, which has black beams running across it. The lights are all softly glowing, flickering with magic. But it’s not that which holds my attention. I strip out of my clothes as soon as I’m through the bathroom door. A large shower head is set over a sloped tiled floor, unencumbered by a cubicle, beckons me, and I don’t resist its call—a wet room. I’ve only heard about these and have never seen one myself. I’m intrigued. As I turn the metal tap that works the shower, the jet of perfectly hot water flows freely and runs down the plughole in the tiles.

Underneath the cleansing deluge, I allow all my thoughts to clear and my worries to rinse away with the water and soap I take from the little shelf on the wall. The scent is woodsy and masculine, as if it were placed there just for me. Here in this magical cabin in the woods, I feel like I belong, that once again, I have a purpose, and I can’t help but feel a little saddened that my mates aren’t here to enjoy this with me.

Lils

“HE JUST LEFT,” I SAY FOR THE THOUSANDTH TIME TO ANA AS we trudge endlessly through the snow, which has been steadily falling for days. The travelling is gruelling, and we are spending more and more time shifted to speed up our progress and to stay warm. The hours have given me a lot of time to think about how Hunter must be feeling and to process my own emotions. Being around my pack has been healing and has helped bring a sense of calm to both my wolf and me.

“Ris needed his help, and you know how he is with studying.” Ana tries to soothe me again. I’ve been through all of the emotions. Anger that he left without a single word which Jer helped me work through as we watched my brother set fire to a tree in rage, only to douse it out again before picking a fight with Eilam. Then there was the sadness that Hunter might feel that our mate bond was in tatters, and to be fair, I had considered that it might be, but the longer he is away, the more I crave him, need him closer. My wolf has also shifted her opinion on men, having been cared for by the male members of the pack as we have been travelling. It seems offering her the prime pieces of meat is enough to get on her good side again.

“They are on their way back,” Kayd says over his shoulder, clearly having heard our conversation. He looks towards the sky as the wind picks up around us. His whole body seems to relax a little when Ris and Hunter appear ahead of us on the dirt road we are currently walking along. “Make camp,” Kayd orders as he strides with purpose towards his mate. Magic ignites between the two, and Hunter, who looks

to be gaining his breath back, moves swiftly to the side as my brother picks Ris up and throws her over his shoulder, slapping her on the arse as they go deep into the woods on the side of the road. Chuckles erupt around us as everyone busies themselves making camp. Guess the fire will need to be made the old-fashioned way.

“Go and talk to him,” Ana urges as she takes my backpack off my shoulders and walks over to the others.

Feeling suddenly shy, I take my time crunching through the snow towards Hunter. He is dressed differently and looks clean-shaven, with his long hair tied neatly behind his head in a bun. I itch to run my fingers through it and pull it loose so that it hangs around his gorgeous face. My wolf perks up in interest as I close the distance between us. Hunter turns to face me as I approach, but he makes no move to come any closer, and that stings, as does his look of uncertainty. I put that there, and even though I had good reason, I should have done more to reassure him that we weren't over and that I still felt my bond with him. It's bruised and battered slightly, but it's still there.

“Lils?” he asks as if he's not sure why I'm approaching him. I don't know what to say. I find myself unable to put together all the words I want to, so instead, I fling myself at him. Trusting him to catch me, and he does. Strong arms circle my body as I bring my legs around his waist, crossing them behind his back in a bid to get as close to Hunter as possible. A moan leaves my lips as my core rubs against the hardness of his stomach. My arms link around his shoulders, and I fist his hair, bringing my forehead to his. Hunter's eyes search mine. “We should talk,” he says as I touch my lips to his and hum my agreement, then kiss him hard on the mouth. Hunter tries to talk, but I use the opening of his lips as an invitation and begin to explore the warmth of his mouth with my tongue. A heady groan from my mate has a pulse starting way down deep between my legs as my juices start to flow in desperate need. Talking will have to wait. If my body is ready, then so am I.

“Trees,” I gasp between kisses as Hunter takes control, deepening our connection and making promises with his

tongue that has my core clenching in anticipation.

Hunter is moving with me as I cling on for dear life, sure that if I let go now, the spell will be broken, and my mind will try and deter me from quenching the thirst that has arisen from just the mere touch of his body on mine.

“We really need to talk,” Hunter says, slamming my body against a tree trunk and pulling my focus away from the haze of lust I am in. We are deep in the woods, thankfully in the opposite direction to the one my brother took.

“And we will,” I manage to pant out as breath is pushed through my lips at an alarming rate. My heart is beating so fast that it might explode if I don’t get the connection I need. My wolf howls with impatience, and I move my hips in an effort to speed things along. I’m just at the right height now to feel his hard cock against the seam of my jeans, and the friction is delicious but not enough.

“Lils.” Hunter tries to move away slightly, his breathing is just as erratic as mine, but I can see he is still in his head about this. Time to kick things up a gear. I use my legs to bring him closer, thrusting against him.

“We will talk, but right now, I want you to fuck me, Hunter. Would you deny your mate her wish?” I know I’m being a brat, but I can’t help it with him, and I also know how much my nerdy, sensible mate likes to take control when we are intimate. I bat my eyelashes at him for good measure, moaning and writhing whilst sending my need through our bond. Hunter growls, his face tipping to the sky briefly. Then when he returns his gaze to mine, I feel the full force of his desire. The lust is there, shiny in his eyes and pulsing through our bond.

“You are being a bad wolf. Now get on your knees,” he husks out, and I let go of his waist with my legs, dropping to the ground on my knees in a split second. Saliva pools in my mouth at the thought of finally getting to suck his cock, not because I’m being made to, no, because I want to. I’m desperate to eradicate all the memories that still haunt me when my mind is not occupied enough. I reach for his zipper,

briefly admiring the heavy material and multitude of pockets in the trousers he's wearing as I unbutton them and pull his zipper down. My mate never wears underwear, and today is no exception, which provides me with perfect access. I release his thick, heavy cock, flicking my tongue across my lips, wetting them in anticipation.

Looking up through my lashes, I take note of Hunter watching me, his eyes hooded, a mixture of lust, need, and concern flooding his steady gaze and through our bond.

"I want this," I reassure him, hoping he can feel my desperate need as I lean forward and take the angry-looking purple head of his cock into my mouth. The musky taste, mixed with salty pre-cum, explodes on my tongue, and I can't stop the moan that vibrates through my mouth as I suck and lick him, slowly at first, as I grip his hip and move my other hand to the base of his cock. There is no way I will be able to take all of it in my mouth, but I'll have a damn good try. I feel his hand snake through my hair, gripping it a little too gently. So I bob my head with more velocity humming my need, sucking him deep into my throat, gagging and breathing sharp, rapid breaths through my nose. His hips start to move.

"So fucking beautiful taking my cock in your pretty little mouth." His voice is husky and stuttered between thrusts and moans. I want so badly to taste his cum that I start to work him harder. Feeling the pressure between my legs increase, I rub my thighs together, desperately seeking relief. Then without warning, Hunter pulls me off, and I wonder for a second if I've done something wrong. However, he reaches into his bag, which still hangs on a leather belt above the open waistband of his trousers and pulls out something flinging it onto the ground next to us before taking off the belt.

It's a rug of soft fur. He pulls me off my knees, kissing me deeply before he sits down on the rug, pulling me along with him. "I need to be inside you. Ride my cock, Wolf, and show me just how bad you can be." His smirk and gesture to his crotch have my lips tugging up into a smile. I stand up, shedding my jeans and knickers at lightning speed. As he pulls down his trousers to his thighs. We don't need fucking beds

and soft linens. We just need each other wherever and whenever we want, and right now, that is in the woods, not far from my pack, with the cold snow falling around us.

I straddle his lap, a knee on either side, while taking his cock in my hand and notching the head into my soaking wet entrance. Hunter rests back on his elbows, watching me intently. Sinking slowly, I savour every single inch as I'm stretched fully. I widen my legs and cling to his shoulders, pushing down and taking him all before lifting and circling my hips. Emotions flood our bond, they are so intense that I can't tell if these feelings are mine or his. Hunter leans forwards, pulling me down onto him as he brushes the hair from my face. My forehead touches his as I grind in his lap, and short breaths leave my lips in tiny clouds. He crushes his lips to mine, taking control of my mouth as he uses his other hand on my hip to aid with my rocking motion. Hunter swallows my moans just as I take his with my tongue. An urgency to move unfurls within me. My wolf makes her presence known as my nails elongate into claws. I'm careful not to dig them too far into Hunter's shoulders as I release a cry of pure ecstasy, pumping my hips faster and harder, taking pleasure from my mate, taking control, taking back what is mine.

"Oh... Fuck... Lils... Yes! Ride my fucking cock," Hunter shouts, lying back on his elbows again, his eyes riveted to our joining. I can only imagine the sight of his thick member disappearing inside my folds, only to reappear seconds later, coated in juices as my pussy floods. With an intense groan of pleasure Hunter lies flat on his back and I drop down onto my hands, placing them on either side of his head. My breasts sway inside my T-shirt as I continue to ride him. With each thrust down, I take him balls deep, rubbing against the bundle of nerves in my inner walls just right. Gasps leave my lips as my climax starts to build. I'm so close, but I can't reach it. Hunter's grip on my hips tightens as he thrusts up, meeting my downward motion as he throws his head back with a curse leaving his neck exposed. Hunter bites his lip, grunting in the sexiest of ways as he thrusts up into me. I stop moving, digging my claws into the ground next to his head as I allow him to take over.

His cock stretches me as I take its thick length inside me with every hard pump of Hunter's hips. It's almost too much to bear as the emotions roll through me. I'm wound so tight I feel like I might detonate any second. Then my wolf pushes through, demanding we take what is ours. Throwing my head back, I open my mouth wide, and a howl escapes as my teeth descend. My body starts to shake as I sense my wolf's intention. Lowering my head, I bite into the soft flesh of Hunter's shoulder, tasting blood and claiming him as hot cum pulses inside my spasming pussy, and I climax in rolling waves, causing us both to cry out as my inner walls clench around his hard cock milking every last drop.

The tug in my chest as our lips crash together in a soul-deep kiss reassures me that our bond is still there and stronger than ever now that my wolf is once again happy to accept Hunter as our mate. I ease myself off of him, lying down in his arms, my head resting on Hunter's chest where I can hear his heart beating fast and strong. Now that our baser needs are satisfied and my wolf sated, I know I need to clear the air.

"I probably should have asked you before claiming you." Not the first thing I wanted to say, but I blurted it out with a hurried exhale. Now those words are out there, and I can't take them back.

"It was never something I didn't want. I just didn't think that you did," Hunter admits. "You went through so much, and I failed you, Lils. So I can't blame your wolf for not considering me a suitable mate."

"That was never the issue. You didn't fail me, Hunter, there is nothing you could have done, and I know you did what you could. I remember the beatings you took and how he made you watch." My voice breaks a little as the memories threaten to take over.

Hunter pulls on my arm, which I have slung over his torso, drawing me up. I prop myself up on his rock-hard chest, loving the feel of his muscles contracting underneath the soft material of his T-shirt. He hadn't even had the chance to take off his jacket. My lips curl into a smile briefly at how desperate we were for each other.

“It just took a while for my body and mind to adjust. All the memories came back to me in a flood, and it was too much. I just needed some time.”

One night while Hunter and Ris were gone, Kayd had talked to me as we sat around the fire whilst the others slept. We’d discussed what he went through when he wasn’t in control of his body, how it made him feel, and the shame of being unfaithful to his mate. But it was Ris who helped him get over that, who made him stronger with her love and the physical bond they shared. He had mumbled a little when trying to discuss how sex between mates can help to heal, and how for wolves, claiming their mate is the most important thing for them.

I relayed this to Hunter as we slowly got our clothes straightened, and he picked up the blanket, tucking it away into his bag, along with the cloth he had so lovingly cleaned me with before I pulled on my knickers and jeans.

“What we have between us is special, Lils. It’s something that many never find.” Hunter pulls me to a stop before we reach the road. “We get all the benefits of mates without all the soul-wrenching agony that fated mates go through when apart or the unfiltered sharing of memories.”

“That’s true. I wouldn’t want you to have my memories. I’m sure yours are just as bad, and I don’t want to share them.” We both fall silent, so many thoughts try to filter into my mind, but I push back now, using the memories of claiming my mates to override them.

Ahead on the other side of the road, the crackle and snapping of a roaring fire grab my attention, and suddenly I can’t wait to get closer to it. The air temperature dropped whilst we were losing ourselves together, and now without Hunter’s body heat and the afterglow of sex, I am starting to feel the chill in the air despite my naturally warm body. Hunter must be freezing.

“This jacket I have on has a fleece layer which is spelled. Ris has one too. We found it at the cabin she took me to. There were so many amazing things there.” Hunter zips up his

jacket; his voice full of excitement. “I was going to wait to give you this, maybe as a parting gift.”

“Wait, what do you mean a parting gift?” My stomach clenches at the thought of him leaving me again, and my wolf starts to growl in my head. I don’t even notice that I’m growling, too, until Hunter holds up his hand in a calming manner.

“I thought that it would be best for you and Ana if I made myself scarce. I love you both, and I would never stand in the way of your happiness.”

“Without you, we would never be happy.” I look into his eyes, hoping he can see the truth.

“I see that now.” He nods as he fumbles around in his bag, whispering what I assume is a location spell for whatever item he has in there. Then gradually, a large amount of fluffy fabric appears. “I know you don’t usually feel the cold, but winter is upon us, and it feels unnaturally chilly at night.” He gestures around us as we continue to move towards the fire.

“What is that?” I ask at the long thick item of red and green fabric. Hunter stands still, and I follow suit, watching as he wraps the material around my neck, tucking it into my jacket.

“It’s a scarf, quite a thick one. If you wrap it around like that and cross it over your chest, it should keep you warm under your jacket. Hopefully not too hot, though.”

I’m struck dumb by his thoughtfulness. He was away with Ris trying to find information that might help her discover more about her magic, and still, he thought about me and whether I would be feeling the cold. Even whilst he thought I might reject him.

Pulling Hunter against me, I wrap my arms around his neck and kiss him hard.

“I love you so much. Thank you.”

“I love you too, my beautiful wolf,” he says, pulling back, the glow of love shining clearly in his eyes as he kisses me

once more before taking my hand and leading me towards the fire.

Ana

WHEN LILS AND HUNTER RETURN TO THE FIRE, I CAN TELL BY the way they look at each other and the scent of sex that they have sorted their problems in the way that we tend to. Physically. This might not be a healthy way of dealing with issues between us, but it works for the three of us and strengthens our bond. I can already feel the two of them flooding our bond with love, and my lips kick up briefly into a smile.

Stretching my hand out to Lils as she looks my way, I gesture for them both to join me. Lils sits next to me with Hunter on her other side. As it should be, our wolf is in the middle, our centre, the moon that we orbit together, and all feels right in the world once more.

Hunter and Ris, who finally returned to the fire with Kayden, relayed the information they had discovered. It wasn't much, but it would appear that at some point in history, the supernatural species had lived undetected in harmony alongside humans. The fae had kept to their own realm, with access portals in various areas of the world. They would emerge at the change of seasons to assist with the natural process. They had tried to warn the human officials that their abuse of the planet was having dire consequences, sending disguised fae glamourised to look like humans, but not enough people listened.

“What about the other supes? Did they not get involved?”
Lils asks

“They were too busy hiding. The witches had been persecuted for many years and had no love for humans anyway. The shifters were too busy amongst themselves and trying to stay off the humans’ radar. As for the vampires, well, they just fed from the humans and didn’t care as long as there were enough humans to turn and feed from.” Hunter explains, looking disgusted that our races were so selfish they didn’t see the demise of the humans as something to get involved in.

“As the planet began to change and natural disasters became more frequent, the supes did notice, but many had become engrossed in the destructive nature of the humans. The wars and killing amongst them gave them some sport. Those who noticed began a council and invited the fae to join,” Ris says as she finishes the food Kayden handed her when they sat down.

“So, what does this have to do with your powers?” I ask. Much as the history lesson is interesting, I think we can all agree the supernatural species can be selfish and just as self-destructive as humans once were. The only difference is we survived, and they nearly didn’t. There are so few left now that they will never regain control of the planet, which is a blessing. At least we respect the planet we live on.

“It seems during the time that all the supernaturals gathered together before the humans became almost extinct, several witches and a couple of fae were captured by some secret Department of the Human Government.” Ris stops for a second, and we can all feel her revulsion and anxious response to whatever she is about to say. “They must have had supernatural help because there is no way humans could have got the drop on one witch, let alone a few.” She continues, looking deep in thought.

“I thought that too. It was likely another faction of witches or maybe even vampires?” Hunter joins in with his assumption. I would be offended by his suggestion, but as I know how self-centred some vampires are, it wouldn’t surprise me. I look over the flames at Eilam, who is sitting next to Jer, and he nods, having no doubt read my thoughts.

“And?” Lils’ knees bob up and down as she becomes impatient for them to get to the point. I rub my hand over her thigh, hoping to provide some calm. It seems to work as her legs stop moving in agitation.

“And, it would seem, although it was tough to get a straight answer from the hidden texts we found, that there was some sort of forced breeding or maybe a fae fell in love with a witch, who knows, but the result is there is some fae blood in my line, and the power that produced has chosen me to be its vessel.” Ris quickly finishes explaining as if a little embarrassed that she is not as pure-blooded as she thought.

“My hybrid mate.” Kayden pulls her close and kisses the side of her head. He doesn’t seem shocked by this revelation, the benefit of shared memories, I guess, but as he chuckles at her glare, the rest of us are coming to terms with this new information.

“That explains the power you have.” Eilam is the first of us to speak. “And maybe why I find you so attractive.” This last statement causes an uproar. The wolves are on their feet, and Kayden looks about ready to tear into my stupid master. My feet have already carried me to his side in answer to the threat, but I roll my eyes at him whilst Ris restrains Kayden with magic.

“Sometimes you just don’t think, do you!” I throw my words over my shoulder as I take up a loose fighting stance in front of him. Eilam looks a little put out by their reaction, not that anyone else would see that on his face.

“I was simply stating a fact. I did not suggest that my interest was of a sexual nature, *Lupo*.” He rises to his full height, eyes blazing at the challenge before him.

“Will you guys quit it! We don’t have time for fighting.” Ris sounds exasperated and gives both males a filthy look which would wither a lesser being.

“The ancient power of her fae blood is likely to be enticing, yes, but Ris’ combined power and strength are what draws supes to her. Do you feel a pull to her because of the fae blood?” Hunter makes this observation ignoring the posturing

of the males and addressing his comments to me as the rest of the pack sit down again, and Kayden pulls Ris into his lap. She tuts at him but remains there.

Eilam comes to sit with me by Lils and Hunter as I contemplate Hunter's question.

"We met in difficult circumstances, and Ris saved my life, but her strength is something I admire, and her leadership something I follow without question. I don't think it has anything to do with her being part fae. She gave me a family. Accepted me for who I am and has never once questioned my choices." I give her a nod; it's probably the first time I'm expressing how I feel about our reluctant leader.

"Who wouldn't want such a bloodthirsty fighter on their crew?" Ris laughs, brushing away the compliment, and as the others nod their agreement, the tension eases.

"You have created quite a unique pack," Eilam comments. "Two alphas, a male and female. Fated mates at that—wolves, witches, and vampires. Not something I have seen before. Instead of working for your own benefit, you work together." He ponders this for a moment.

"I guess we are a little unusual. My parents would not have thought it possible for species to live harmoniously or as equals, let alone be naturally mated to each other," Ris agrees, looking at all of us huddled in a circle around the fire.

We fall silent; the only sounds are the crackling of the fire and the soft thunk of snow falling from the trees when the burden becomes too heavy for their branches. Any animals have hunkered down for the night if they aren't already hibernating for winter. Even the nocturnal predators are silent. It's a peaceful silence and a welcome lull in the chaos that our lives have become.

"Let's bed down, get some rest and start again at first light," Rissa suggests breaking the quiet contemplation of the surrounding crew.

Just as several of the wolves start to strip down, preparing to shift, a flash of purple shooting through the trees at an

incredible speed catches my eye. I don't feel alarmed, as the protection bubble Ris always puts up around our camps should be enough to keep any magic out, but I am curious.

“What's that?” I ask, raising my voice enough to be heard over the hum of conversation and activity whilst pointing to the approaching orb.

Ris raises one hand whilst holding Kayden back with her magic as he tries to dive in front of her. “Not today, Wolf.” She chuckles, seeming unaffected as the purple glowing orb breaches her defences and stops directly in front of her hand as Kayden swears up a storm fighting off her magical restraint. “Chill the fuck out. It's a message from Mel. We used something similar as kids, but it was never capable of reaching this sort of distance.” Ris looks a little concerned as we gather around, and the orb gains in size before her.

“Mer, I hope this works. I don't know where you are, but if you are returning to the castle—don't. We are under siege. I have a protection spell in place, which you will no doubt be able to pick your way through, but you need to stay well away.” Melody's voice fades in and out then the orb disintegrates, sending purple sparks down to the ground at our feet before completely disappearing as if it hadn't existed.

“Like fuck we will stay away!” Kayden rages.

“Get packed. We're leaving!” Ris yells, but there is no need. We all know that we are going to the castle. There will be no keeping us away. The wolves are naked within seconds, having stuffed their clothes into backpacks. I glance at Lils, ready to take her pack, but Hunter has it in hand. Lils' wolf paces with evident agitation by his side.

“This is not your fight. I will understand if you wish to leave now.” Ris looks at Eilam, who is already pulling on his coat and checking the fine-looking array of knives he has strapped around his body.

“I will accompany you,” is all he says as Ris puts out the fire and nods at him accepting his decision without any further comment.

“*Ready?*” Ris opens up the link between our crew, and we all voice our confirmation, apart from the wolves. Kayden has them moving out of the clearing ahead of us already. My fists clench and unclench at my sides as excitement flows through me at the prospect of a fight. Although, I’m not sure if it’s just my emotions or the adrenaline of the group around me.

Barely a whisper of sound is made as Ris aids our speed with the help of a wind that came out of nowhere, taking Eilam off his feet before he corrects himself and scowls at me for finding it amusing.

I listen to the chatter about magical potions between Ris and Hunter, most of it goes over my head, but I’m pleased to hear my mate returning to himself. His enthusiasm infects our bond, and my lips briefly pull at my cheeks as I smile.

“*I hope you’ve changed the spell on your bag so those concoctions cannot be used against you again.*” I rib him sending a lightness with my words, not wanting him to know just how worried I was when we nearly lost him.

“*Funny.*” His tone is sarcastic, but I don’t miss the smirk on his face as I whizz past him to catch up with the wolves.

I love the feel of the wind in my hair. The wild abandon that comes from running at lightning speed through the trees in the dead of night. With the aid of Ris’ magic, we are making good time when we stop for water as the sun crests the horizon heralding another freezing cold but beautiful day. I am grateful to Ris and Hunter for taking the time to find a spelled potion that allows me to witness the fantastic colours of the morning sky and see the world again the way I haven’t seen it since the bastard turned me without my consent.

“*If he were alive still, I would take his head,*” Lils growls her words in my mind. We stand side by side, staring over the vast lake as it laps against the shore, as those needing to hydrate do so.

“He died. I know because I felt it, but I’d love to have seen you take his head.” My lips lift in a smile briefly at the thought of her ripping off that bastard’s head.

“Who are we requiring headless?” Eilam asks as he arrives quietly by my side.

“The bastard who sired her without asking her permission,” Lils offers helpfully, giving Eilam a side glare as if it was his fault.

“I could apologise for the spineless behaviour of some of my kind, but I would be doing that forever.” That wasn’t what I was expecting him to say, but nevertheless, it is true. “Is he alive?” He growls out the last words directing them at me.

“No, he died after the great hysteria.” I see him nod at me out of the corner of my eye.

“What is the great hysteria?” Lils asks, moving slightly in front of me and looking intently at Eilam and then at me.

“When the humans started to die in large numbers, some of our kind panicked that their food source was disappearing. It led to some vampires taking their own lives. Others began stockpiling any healthy humans they could find.” He shakes his head at the behaviour of some of the older vampires who couldn’t cope with the drastic change.

“That’s disgusting!” Lils looks horrified. “They just started stockpiling humans as food?”

“I’m afraid that is the way that some reacted to the crisis, yes. If they had asked the humans, I’m pretty sure there would have been many willing to stay by the side of a vampire for the life they can provide.” Eilam looks out over the water as he says this.

“I guess we will never know,” I say. For the first time, I am beginning to see that the way my species reacted could have been handled differently. At the time, though, we had all been fearful for our undead lives, and although I didn’t hoard humans, I made no bid to stop those who did.

“We cannot rewrite history, Young One. All we can do is endeavour to live better lives now and in the future.” Eilam squeezes my shoulder before leaving us and returning to where the others are starting to get ready to go.

Hunter

DESPITE THE USE OF RIS' MAGIC, IT HAS TAKEN US WEEKS TO get up to the outer borders of the vast Northern Territory, and I'm not the only one feeling the urgency as we see thick smoke hanging in the air in the direction of the castle.

We divert off the roads and into the surrounding forests, every village or town we come across is deserted, and a feeling of déjà-vu strikes me. This is exactly what it was like when we entered the territory when Caleb and his sister had taken over. Only this time, there is no magical black fog lurking on the earth or in the trees. Instead, the birds continue to sing and flit around the branches as if nothing were amiss.

"The villagers would have either left the territory or taken refuge at the castle," Ris explains as we race through the forest with the wind aiding our speed. My stomach revolts as usual, but I try to ignore it. We've been doing this for weeks, and you would think I had gotten used to it by now. I make a mental note to work on a potion to ease this feeling. As I look around, I'm reassured that I am not the only one feeling queasy at the speed of our travel.

"I can only hope that we are in time," Ris adds, as up ahead Kayden, who is currently travelling in wolf form, darts off and away from our protection bubble. "Bloody wolf!" Ris yells and calls a halt to our movement. "Stay here," she says as her body dematerialises into a mist.

I take a moment's reprieve to pull out a tonic containing mint and camomile. It's not really strong enough, but it does the job. I pass it around to those who look in need.

Jer, who took off in the same direction as Kayden, returns with blood covering his snout. He shifts rapidly, dragging in a shuddering breath as his body returns to its human-like form. Eilam is by his side in seconds.

“Are you hurt?” He asks as he hands Jer his backpack and eyes his body as if looking for damage.

“No, this is not my blood.” Jer looks slightly embarrassed at the heavy scrutiny he is under from the vampire. Then, shaking his head as if to free himself of some thought but likely the intrusion of the vampire, he starts to pull on his clothes, and he turns his attention to me.

“Ris has asked that you prepare some potions. They are bringing in a shifter for questioning.” His smile is slightly alarming as it’s not something you often see on the face of this usually serious shifter but added to that, his face is covered in blood, making him look slightly sinister even though he has clearly had a great time killing something.

Lils passes him a flask of water which he uses to clean his face off and quench his apparent thirst, and I set about rummaging in my bag to find a couple of my less nasty potions that will create quite effective side effects, plus the antidotes to those. Then finally, I pull out a dark blue glass bottle containing one of my favourite poisons. Unlike the one used on me, which contained the autumn crocus, this one isn’t as slow acting. It will get to work immediately. So if we are looking to move swiftly after we have gained the information we need, this will kill the victim instantly.

“Have you got everything we need?” Ris’ voice precedes her entrance into the area of the forest we have stopped in. She finally becomes visible through the trees as the tall undergrowth parts allowing her to walk through. Behind her, she drags a bubble of magic, within which is a rather bedraggled-looking male, covered in blood with teeth marks all over his body. As Ris saunters in, looking as if she hasn’t a care in the world, Kayden, still in wolf form, follows behind, along with two of his wolves, Aiden and Rob.

“I’ve got what you need, yes. What have we here?” I ask, peering around her into the bubble that contains the silently shouting wolf. Before she has a chance to answer, his eyes flash amber as his body vibrates and starts to shift.

“Now stop that and play nice,” Ris says, and there is a huff from Kayden’s large black wolf beside us, which is as close to laughing as I imagine a wolf can get. Ris lifts the bubble in the air, drops it rapidly, and then lifts it again, shaking the wolf up and down until he shifts back. I’m guessing she has done that a couple of times, as he seems to know staying in wolf form is futile.

As a team, we secure the wolf, now in a human-like form, to a tree. He is bound not only by magic but also by a whole array of tangled weeds that Ris used in addition to brambles. Around us, a bubble acts as a shield from intruders and masks any sounds that our unwelcome guest might make.

“I have nothing to say to you, Witch.” He growls out as I approach him.

“Oh, but you see, that’s where you are wrong,” I answer as I remove one of my potions from my jacket pocket, then hang my coat up on a nearby branch. I don’t want to get it dirty after all.

Rolling up my sleeves, I release the bung in the top of the bottle and reach forward, gripping the wolf’s jaw in my hand, I wait patiently for him to protest or use some snarky remark staring him in the eyes. I challenge his wolf with my magic. I could use a spell to make him open up, but there is a certain amount of satisfaction about waiting until the victim opens their own mouth. As expected, he starts to call me something unsavoury and with a swift wrist action, I pour the liquid from the bottle between his lips using the speed I have gained from both my mates. The slow-to-react wolf doesn’t see it coming.

I hold his nose in one hand and keep his jaw shut with the other forcing him to swallow as he tries to fight me and spit out the liquid. I am a lot stronger than he is even though he is a shifter, and I put that down to my usual strength and the new

enhancement I have from my bonded mates, who I feel approaching me from behind.

“Did you start without us?” Lils sounds like she is pouting, and Ana chuckles beside me.

“No, you’re just in time, my love,” I answer, letting go of the wolf. He spits on the ground at my feet, but it is too late. The potion has already been ingested and is beginning to take effect. The male screams in agony as I turn my back on him.

“Ah, perfect.” Ris walks over to join us with a now fully clothed Kayden by her side. The rest of our crew appear to be taking this opportunity to rest and eat, occasionally looking over at us with interest.

I pull out my dagger from the sheath strapped to my thigh—a recent purchase when we stopped at a town on our way up north. The end is curved slightly, and the handle is made from beautifully carved wood.

“What would you like to know?” I ask, not taking my eyes off the wolf who is trying desperately to get free from his bindings. His face is screwed up in agony as he writhes and howls in pain.

“I’m not telling you a thing.” He manages to grit the words out, sending us all dirty looks before yelling again.

“I have the antidote.” I tap my dagger on the bag hanging at my waist.

The wolf eyes the movement, and a desperate look crosses his face before his eyes close, and he screams out in agony again.

“Who is your Alpha?” This comes from Kayden, and I feel the command through my body as he infuses his words with power. The trapped wolf starts to shake his head, the only part of his body he can move, but he looks scared as another wave of pain has him howling again.

“Okay, okay, make it stop, and I will tell you what you want to know.” He looks defeated. I look to Ris and Kayden, asking them with a raise of my eyebrow whether they want me

to give him the antidote. Ris nods, and I pull out the bottle from my bag.

“Ooo, let me,” Lils says, taking the bottle from me. A laugh pulls itself from my lips at her playful tone. Ana moves closer but not too close. We both know not to smother Lils with protection. She doesn’t appreciate or need it.

Kayden, however, goes to intervene but stops as I imagine Ris giving him a shake of her head. Lils pulls the wolf’s hair back and tips the potion into his waiting mouth. Foolishly, he attempts to bite her, but a swift punch to his face from Lils soon puts that wolf back in his place. She bares her teeth at him and growls.

“You don’t want to piss my mate off, Wolf.” I laugh, which becomes a full belly laugh at the look on his face.

“Wolves should only ever mate wolves,” he states as if it had been drummed into him from an early age.

“Well, that’s a ridiculous theory,” Ris says, “And my mate here would beg to differ.” She gestures to Kayden, who smirks at her and then growls as the wolf strapped to the tree begins to say something but thinks better of it.

“The next words coming out of your mouth had better be the name of your Alpha, or I have another much more painful potion to use on you, and I won’t hesitate to do so.” I lift the flap of my bag, ready to remove another bottle, hoping my threat will do the trick. Unfortunately, I don’t have an infinite supply of potions, and something tells me we are going to need them soon.

“Just let me bite him. That will soon make him talk.” Ana moves closer, and if the wolf could move back further against the tree, he would. Instead, he cowers in the presence of my beautiful vampire mate.

“Vampire!” He states the obvious, but given that it is daylight, I guess it may be a little shocking for him.

“Now, wolf, I’m losing my patience.” I let my magic flow freely, knowing my eyes are likely glowing as I pull another bottle from the bag at my waist.

“Okay, Okay! Just don’t let that vampire near me.”

Good to know the threat of being poisoned again frightens him less than a bite from a vampire. Ana bares her teeth and hisses at him for good measure. I keep my face in check as best I can, but the urge to laugh is strong as the wolf pisses himself and the foul smell of urine floods the air.

“Gross,” Lils says, wrinkling her nose up and stepping back out of the way of the trickle of liquid that has started to cross the ground by the wolf’s leg.

“Get on with it!” Kayden commands, clearly bored with the pathetic excuse of a shifter in front of us.

“Joseph must have died because his brother Bernard recently became Alpha.” The unkempt-looking, lanky wolf seems to think that’s enough information.

“What are you doing in my territory?” Kayden asks, folding his arms and outwardly giving the impression he is unbothered by these wolves being on his land.

“I’ve nothing more to say. Now let me go.”

You have to give the wolf credit for his bravado, but it’s short-lived as Ana moves in, gets close to him, grabs his greasy-looking hair, and yanks his head to the side. A squeal of pain and fright releases from his lips.

“Stupid wolf, did you really think we were just going to let you go?” She hisses the words close to his ear. “Now, we can do this the hard way or the easy way. The decision is yours.”

“Oh, please say the hard way,” Lils adds, her words pulling a chuckle from my lips.

“I’m bored with him. Just end him, Ana,” Ris says as she turns her back on the wolf and looks to be walking away.

“No, wait...” His words sound strained due to the extreme angle Ana is holding his head, exposing his neck to her teeth.

“Hurry, Wolf, my mate grows impatient. You don’t want to see her when she loses her patience.” Kayden’s lip curls up into an evil-looking smirk as his eyes glow amber with a tinge

of blue. Fire leaps from his hand, and Ana moves back out of the way as Kayden sets light to the wolf's torn and dirty jeans.

“You say I'm the impatient one!” Ris rolls her eyes as she douses the flames with a heap of snow from the trees, soaking the wolf in the process. “How's he going to talk if he's burning?” she asks, raising an eyebrow at Kayden, who looks pissed that she stopped his fun. He shrugs as if he doesn't care whether we get an answer or not, but I know this is all an act. I keep my eye on the wolf and watch as his gaze darts from one to the other. He must be figuring out right about now what sort of company he is currently in, and it is not the nice sort.

“I don't know much. I'm not in Bernard's inner circle. We were sent to scout the area to round up any villagers that hadn't hidden behind the magic. Alpha is making an example of them.” He almost smiles at the last part, but Kayden's growl has him looking at his feet.

I throw my knife, narrowly missing his ear on purpose and gain his attention.

“What is Bernard's business in the Northern Territory?” I ask, wanting to know what brought the newly appointed Alpha here and why he is holding the castle hostage.

“Unlike his brother,”—the wolf's features sport a look of disdain when mentioning Joseph— “Our Alpha believes in the true calling of the wolf and refuses to deal with witches or use their magic. We are the purest pack and should therefore be the ones in control of the larger Northern Territory.”

I wish I could be surprised by the bigotry of this wolf, but I'm not. Joseph was a traditionalist but still used spelled cuffs to detain other species. He had clearly been dealing with Caleb for a while, even though he firmly believed wolves were the higher species. Caleb's black magic put paid to that, but now that it no longer infected the pack, Bernard had obviously taken it upon himself to continue his brother's work to take over neighbouring territories.

“You thought that you could just stroll in here and take over the territory?” Ris sounds amazed at the wolf's stupidity.

“Bernard had been told you left the territory, and he believed it would be easy to take the castle.” The wolf looks confused, as if it wasn’t expected that they would come up against resistance.

“Well, you clearly didn’t get the proclamation that my sister is mated to the Alpha.” Ris laughs, shaking her head.

“Bernard didn’t bring the full pack. They will arrive shortly.” Mr Chatty continues to spill his guts as Ana and Lils circle him, and he gives them wary looks. Ana retrieves my dagger and hands it back to me with a peck on the lips. I can already sense her arousal at the prospect of a kill. But as my body reacts to hers, I swallow back a groan, now is not the time.

“What is the smoke coming from the direction of the castle?” I ask, trying to keep my thoughts away from fucking my mate and on what needs to be done. We need to know what we are walking into.

“Bernard is burning the villagers as he rounds them up.”

He didn’t get to say anymore. Lils pulled back her fist and hit him with all her might, bashing his head against the tree and knocking him out.

“Lils, I hadn’t finished questioning him.” Ris tuts, but the smile on her face means she isn’t that bothered by Lils knocking him unconscious. “Kill him.”

Ris turns back towards the others, throwing over her shoulder that ‘we leave as soon as it’s done.’ Eilam comes over, passing Kayden on the way. Both males nod to each other before the vampire comes and joins us.

“I understand there is killing to be done.” His eyes turn red, and an answering hiss from Ana has Lils shifting, her wolf howling at the prospect of blood. Ris releases the magic holding the wolf to the tree without looking back, and tearing fills the air as my mates and Eilam set about killing him. He doesn’t even regain consciousness, more is the pity, but a swift kill was asked for, and that is what they achieve in a matter of seconds; his body is in pieces, and I stand watching with my

cock painfully hard as Lils shifts and kisses Ana full on the mouth. Both are covered in blood, and I have never seen a more beautiful sight.

“Fuck.” Jer managed to creep up on me and is now standing beside me, watching as Eilam finishes drinking and stands up, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand and staring intently at Jer.

“Quite something isn’t it.” I agree, my eyes glued to my mates as they continue to kiss passionately.

“Let’s move.” Kayden’s voice is full of Alpha command and has us all pulled out of our blood lust and into the present. We move to join the others heading towards the castle and whatever we might find there.

Lils

RETURNING TO THE NORTHERN TERRITORY SHOULD FEEL LIKE coming home, but it doesn't. I'm beginning to realise that the only home I need is wherever my mates may be. Would I like us to have a place we can call home, with walls and a bed? Possibly, but I will happily walk the earth for the rest of my days without settling in one place as long as I have them beside me.

Ana, who has been walking next to me, reaches out and squeezes my hand with her own; the cool touch of her skin sends tingles up my arm, and the buds of my breasts tighten at the feeling. I will never get enough of my vampire or my witch. The thought of having the two of them to myself is what spurs me on. Whatever we find when we get to the castle, I have no doubt we will deal with it and be sleeping in a warm bed tonight.

Staring at the pile of burning bodies and the dancing, almost feral wolf shifters, I wonder if maybe I might have been deluding myself. What the actual fuck have we just walked into?

“What the fuck!” My brother yells, and I'm thankful that the bubble Ris insists on us travelling in is soundproof because we are close enough now that the wolves would hear us, and then our element of surprise would be gone.

“The shield around the castle is wavering, which means Mel is struggling to keep it powered. I need to help her,” Ris says, looking about ready to mist out of here.

“Don’t go anywhere, Rissa. Wait just until we assess what we are dealing with.” He places a restraining hand on Ris’ arm, which she looks at with disdain but doesn’t mist out. Turning to the wolves in our crew Kayd tells them to shift and do a sweep of the area so we can assess how many we are dealing with.

“That’s more wolves in one place than I’ve seen in a long time.” Ris agrees as she watches the magic around the castle. For the first time, I’m able to see a distortion in the air, but I bet those dicks dancing around the pile of burning bodies can’t understand why they aren’t able to get close to the castle. As far as I can tell, there are no witches with them, which would tie in with the information the tasty wolf shifter gave us. I lick my lips, thinking of the taste of his fresh meat and my wolf paces in my head, hoping for more as we eye up the group of shifters.

“Why hasn’t the Alpha and Merissa’s sister left the castle to deal with these scum?” Eilam asks as he stands next to me, his eyes following Jer, who has shifted and is running off, along the line of the woods to the right of us.

“My guess is that they have most of the population behind the shield, and as we are only just recovering from the previous destruction of our territory, there aren’t enough fighters to deal with this amount of shifters and keep those within the walls safe,” I answer, keeping my eyes trained on the high stone walls of my home. It looks intact, just a few flaming torches dancing in the wind on the battlements but no signs of life.

Eilam’s stance relaxes ever so slightly as Jer returns and quickly gets dressed, shivering slightly in the frigid temperature. It’s bitterly cold this far north, and the snow has settled heavily on the ground. The earth around the shield has turned to slush, where the wolves have been stomping around and lighting fires.

“Their pack is large, Kayd, but nothing we haven’t seen before. I estimate there are about fifty, maybe sixty shifters. I couldn’t spot their Alpha, though. Doesn’t mean he isn’t amongst them,” Jer states, looking at my brother intently.

“What aren’t you saying?” I ask, as it’s clear they are having a conversation between them without filling the rest of us in.

“The tunnel at the back of the castle isn’t included in the shield,” Kayd answers, “There’s no way of telling whether they have got inside or not.”

“Fuck this. I’m not waiting around here any longer. I need to find my sister.” Ris moves her weight from one foot to the other, rage flowing from her as the magic which is always at her fingertips dances up and down her arms.

“Agreed. We enter the castle through the tunnel. It won’t set off any alarms with the shield in case those inside are compromised. Against these numbers, all we have is the element of surprise.” My brother confirms as he starts to strip and thrust his clothes into a backpack.

“I’ll come with you,” I say, starting to remove my top, but my brother’s hands still my action.

“I need you to stay here, Lils. You are the last of our line. If something happens to Rissa and me, you take the rest and get out of here. Regroup, gain more allies and take back the territory.”

His words are like a punch to my gut. I’ve never considered my lineage or where I stand concerning the Alpha title because it wasn’t something I felt would ever happen. My brothers were meant to lead and have been trained to do that since they were young. I have no idea how to be an Alpha, and I’m not sure our pack would follow a female leader.

“You would be a perfect leader, and you wouldn’t be alone.” Hunter’s voice soothes my turmoil as emotions flow through me at a giddy pace.

“Don’t look like that. Nothing is going to happen to us. Kayden is just being dramatic.” Ris brushes off the comments my brother made, bringing more calm with her joking tone than I think she realises. Kayd looks about, ready to argue, but as always, a look and touch between them, a sure sign they are having an internal conversation, stops him and the slight

movement of his head as he nods to her means whatever she said made sense.

“Take care of my sister,” Kayd says to Hunter and Ana as he pulls me into his arms, holding me tightly for a second before letting go and shifting. His large wolf shakes, his black fur rippling with the movement, and with a growl, he runs off with Jer and Mat in tow. Ris mists out to join them without a word, but I feel her sentiment as if she had spoken to us.

“What’s the plan?” Ana asks, shifting her attention to me, “We taking out these bastards?” She gestures with her head to the howling wolves. They are so caught up in their disgusting celebration that they have no idea we are here. Ris left her shield around us, but I have no idea how long that will be there, so I make a quick assessment and look around at the crew we have left; the rest of Kayd’s inner circle, Eilam, Hunter, and Ana. Between us, we can cause some damage, but we are going to need to use speed.

The shifters are spread out around the castle, and the closest group near this fire is only about ten strong. It shouldn’t be a problem for us.

“We go in fast and hard, take them out and retreat, move back to that group of trees to the right,” I point at the large clump of tightly-knit Magnolia, Spruce, and Holly trees.

The others nod their agreement with the plan, and we ready ourselves to go in. Choosing not to shift, I remove my favourite long-bladed dagger from the sheath around my waist and give the signal to move.

I’m grateful that the shield moves with us until we are closer to the fire. As we get nearer to the shifters, it is evident they have been drinking. Glass bottles litter the site as they dance around, jostling each other and spitting on the burning pile of bodies. I try not to notice the different sizes of the unrecognisable shells of those who have lost their lives. The stench is enough to make me gag, but I use the anger it produces deep in my gut to spur me on.

Eilam and Ana get to the shifters first, spiriting in before they are even aware that death is upon them. The beautiful

violence of the two vampires causes me to pause momentarily before I hone in on the shifter closest to me. I feel the adrenaline flowing through my veins as I reach the tall shifter. He raises his head to the sky to howl, and I leap from the ground with my dagger raised, bringing the blade down; he barely murmurs as the blade sinks into his right eye and lodges in what little brain he has. My lips curl as a smile raises my cheeks, and I pull the knife out, letting his body drop to the ground.

Searching quickly, I find my next target, blinkered to the carnage around me as I jump on the back of a half-shifted grey wolf who was readying to attack Hunter from behind. Meanwhile, Hunter picks up an incapacitated wolf and throws him screaming into the fire. His hair has come loose from the bun at the back of his neck, and as he turns to me, eyes glowing, his smirk has my pussy flooding. I slit the throat of the wolf I was holding and throw the body to the side, reaching Hunter within seconds, I leap into his waiting arms and kiss him hard before he lets me down, and we both go in search of another victim, leaving a promise between us for later.

A loud hiss and curse grab my attention. Across the fire, I can see Ana pulling a broken bottle from her shoulder. The sound of ripping doesn't register with me, nor the thud of my dagger hitting the ground as my wolf erupts, taking me to the side of our mate within seconds. Our jaws open with the loudest growl I have ever heard, releasing from our throat as the unshifted enemy turns to look, leaving his partner in crime at the mercy of my seriously pissed-off vampire and Hunter, who has raced to our side. Pushing off the ground with her hind legs, my wolf stretches her body as her teeth clamp down on the head of the drunken wolf. He tries to lash out, but our jaws ripping his head from his body soon puts an end to his miserable existence. The taste of blood floods my mouth, and a snarl releases as I shift back. Telling my wolf to cool her shit, I go to check Ana's wound, which is already starting to heal as she feeds from Hunter. His arm goes around me as I get closer. Ana's hand lifts my hair away from my face as she finishes feeding and looks at us both.

“We need to get back to the forest,” he says, reaching forwards and stealing a kiss from my lips. “You taste delicious.”

Looking around us, I realise that the wolves who were dancing drunkenly around the fire are all silent. Blood and body parts are scattered about the ground surrounding the roaring fire, staining the snow and mud red. No one has been left alive. Our group are not amongst the dead, which means they must have all returned to the trees. Nodding my agreement with Ana’s suggestion, as we move away from the warmth of the fire, Ana picks up my dagger, and I allow my wolf to take over. Being naked in this weather is not something I enjoy.

Besides a few gashes and teeth marks, most of our crew are unscathed. As we prepare ourselves to take on more of the enemy, Hunter dishes out a healing accelerant that Ris gave him. Hayley hands me my backpack of clothes, and after thanking her, I hastily get dressed again, pulling on another pair of jeans; this pair is black with pockets in the front and back. I feel the soft fabric of my scarf and resist the urge to put it on again. I don’t want to risk damaging or losing it if I have to shift again.

I feel his presence as Hunter walks up behind me, pulling me against him. “You doing okay?” he asks, kissing my neck and leaving me wanting more as he turns me around so I can look at his gorgeous face. Reaching up, I run my fingers along the prickly stubble of his jaw, wanting nothing more than some quiet time with my mates. I’m willing to admit, if only to myself, that I’m exhausted, but we don’t have time for that now.

“I’ll be fine.” I take the dried meat he offers me gratefully, tearing at it with my teeth and chewing it whilst I try and decide the next best course of action.

“We could just stay here and wait?” he suggests, but I can tell that’s not what he wants to do or expects me to decide either.

“I’ll follow you to the end of the earth.” His whispered words in my mind settle me as the warmth of his hands on my face has my eyelids drifting closed. Hunter’s soft lips brush against mine; the pressure is light but intimate. Then he withdraws them and rests his forehead briefly against mine before moving away and leaving me missing him.

Ana

I ROLL MY SHOULDER, RELIEVED THAT THE SKIN AND MUSCLES have knitted together nicely. I'm annoyed that the shifter got the jump on me and managed to lodge the broken glass in my skin.

"There were two of them, Young One," Eilam says, joining me as we trek quietly through the forests surrounding the castle.

"Still shouldn't have happened," I answer, annoyed still, but I change the subject to try and improve my mood, "Any news from Jer?"

"He doesn't like to communicate with me. That wolf has something against committing to our mate status." Eilam laughs, but I can hear the hurt in his tone.

"Give him time. He will realise you are his one."

"Is that what happened with you, Lileth and Hunter?" he asks. The hopeful look that crosses his face has me wishing I could lie to him.

"No, not exactly. We were in a stressful situation. Kidnapped by Joseph's pack, our emotions were heightened. I knew as soon as I met Hunter that he was mine, and even though Lils was hung up on another female, our connection was instant."

I look over at Eilam, but he's not listening to me. His face is blank, although it seems like he is hearing something. I check in with our surroundings to assess the threat but find nothing.

“Eilam?” I reach out, touching his arm. He startles a little but looks over at me.

“They are fighting within the castle. There is another section of Bernard’s pack inside. They have killed some of the residents. Jeremiah says they haven’t found Malaki or Melody yet, and there aren’t many villagers from the territory behind the walls. It’s quite empty.” He tips his head to the side as if he were replying to Jer. His fists clench a little at his sides, but his features don’t betray his emotions.

“We’ll take out the shifters by the wall.” Lils’ voice interrupts my thoughts, and I turn my gaze to my mates. They’ve stopped ahead and appear to be discussing our next course of action. I turn my attention to the group of shifters Lils mentioned. There are no burning bodies in their fire. They seem to be relaxing around it, some sitting on bales of hay, others lounging on what looks like piles of clothes. I move a little closer to the edge of the trees. No, those aren’t just piles of clothes; they are bodies. A growl from my right has me shooting out my arm to stop Lils from running in there to obliterate the disgusting creatures sitting there, laughing and joking as if it were normal to be seated on other species’ remains.

From this distance, I cannot tell if the bodies are human, but if I had to guess, I would say they are. A breeze picks up the scent of rotting flesh and confirms my initial assumption they are mostly human, maybe one or two wolves.

“And they call vampires callous,” Eilam tuts as he comes to stand next to us. “What do you want to do, Lileth?” His question surprises me a little as he defers to Lils despite his elevated station in vampire culture.

“Same as before, we go in fast and take them all out. Do it as quietly as possible. We can’t have other sections of their pack sneaking up on us and outnumbering us.” Lils strips down as she says this, obviously deciding to shift and go in wolf form this time. Some of the crew remain in their human-like forms, pulling out an array of weapons. Hayley pulls out an impressive-looking crossbow and notches an arrow readying herself to pick off any shifters who might be

overpowering one of ours. I know how much she must want to get involved in the fighting, so this sort of control warrants my respect.

I pull out my sword, weighing it in my hands and readying myself to sprint. Eilam pulls out a few throwing stars from his jacket. A look of delight crosses his emotionless features, and his eyes start to change, blood red bleeding into his irises. An answering surge flows through my body as blood lust rises. My limbs become liquid as I run forward with the others.

“I’ll take the left.” I use our link with the entire crew, and we split down the middle as several join me going left. The first shifter I come to has his back to me. They don’t hear us coming even though we no longer have the shield around us. It appears that Ris has pulled most of her magic back, likely using it inside the castle. I lift my sword; there is no time to play. We have many, many shifters to kill. Using all my supernatural strength and some given to me by my mates, I bring the sword down on the wolf’s head, splitting him from skull to tailbone. The bloody halves separate with a satisfying sound and land horizontally on the hay he was sitting on. The shifter next to him leaps up, spinning around to face me, a look of murder in his glowing amber eyes.

I tip back my head and laugh as I swing my sword separating his head from his shoulders before he has a chance to move. Blood sprays across my arms and clothes, and still, I move forward, leaping the hay bale, careful to remain a fair distance from the flames of their campfire. Around me, the others take out the ill-prepared wolves without much effort. This is what you get when you train and work as a team. With our internal dialogue guiding us with who needs more help or where a wolf may be trying to escape, the group around the fire is decimated within a few minutes. An arrow flies past me. I turn, my hair flying around my face as I look over at Hayley, *“Sorry,”* she shouts in my mind, looking a little sheepish. I wave off her apology as she just took out the last shifter who was trying to escape behind me.

We regroup in the trees, leaving only the dead behind. So far, we have managed to get in and out without too much

damage to our crew. I know that is pure luck, living the lives we do; we have to accept that death is inevitable and losing those we care about is part of the everyday. Although this never used to bother me, I now have a bond that I didn't before, and the thought of losing either of my mates fills me with a dread that I have never known before.

Hunter reaches out, takes my hand and kisses it. Our eyes lock. No words are needed because I can feel his emotions as strongly as my own. We have something worth fighting for, worth dying for.

“No dying, Ana. I’ve only just got you both back, and I have plans for us once this fight is over.” Even though he sounds like he is joking, his words are meant to drag me from my morose thoughts, but I know he is serious.

The sound of an explosion and the shaking of the ground do the job more than his attempts to suggest that there might be time for us to get intimate later. The bricks of the castle wall closest to us start to crumble, drawing the attention of the rest of Bernard's pack, who are scattered around the exterior of the stone structure. There are shouts of rage and pain, and wolves descend on the breach in the wall. All the while, we hang back and watch. Finally, I turn to Eilam, “What's going on? Are the others okay?”

Before he can answer, Ris walks through the rubble surrounded by a bubble of magic, and the clouds above the castle collect in a swirling dark grey mass. Lightning lights up the sky, and thunder claps loudly overhead. The trees around us start to sway violently in a wind that wasn't there a moment ago. Within her bubble, the rest of our crew stagger about in human-like form. Kayden is holding up Jer, who is bleeding from many injuries over his body. Kayden fires off magic, igniting a group of shifters who attempt to get too close.

“Eilam, no!” Hunter pounces on my mentor, and my body moves to aid Eilam, but my bond fights against the pull, and I end up throwing myself at them both. With the help of Lils, we contain Eilam, who is so desperate to get to Jer that he is almost feral in his attempts to get away from us.

“Where is your fucking Alpha?” Ris’ voice booms over the crowd of shifters, the vibrations of magic knocking those in human-like form over onto the ground. Her eyes glow with rage. I look at Lils, who raises her shoulder, clueless like me. Something isn’t right. Only our little crew is emerging from the rubble. No humans, no Malaki and no Melody. Where is everyone?

“Save me a few for questioning. Kill the rest.” Ris’ voice is pure venom in our minds, her anger an almost physical caress over my body. Lils shifts immediately, and Eilam throws us off, running headlong into the pack of wolves who have been attempting to get to Ris, Kayden and the others behind the shield. It takes me a second to realise there is no magic surrounding the castle; when did that come down? I may not be able to see it, but I can sense it, and in all the fighting, we hadn’t been paying it much attention.

“Fuck, Lils, wait!” Hunter yells over the growling and howls coming from our crew, who are now all shifted and ploughing into the fray, bolstered by Ris and Kayden, who have emerged from the bubble fighting. Pulling out my sword, I run after my mates hacking through furry bodies whose sharp teeth tear at my clothes, skin, and any part of me that they can get near. Sheathing my sword temporarily, I lunge at one particularly aggressive wolf, sinking my teeth into his neck. I rip through fur, skin, and muscle, not stopping until my teeth scrape the bone of his spine. Taking a large pull of blood to rejuvenate my body, I kick his body out of the way, looking for my next victim amongst the crowds of fighting wolves and witches. Ris is blasting bodies into pieces all around her, as she occasionally launches at one and stabs it through the head. Lils is ripping heads from bodies, and Hunter has one wolf pinned under him as he throws a potion at another. His dagger sends a spray of blood all over him as he disposes of the wolf he was practically riding. I have never been so turned-on. The mayhem and carnage are triggering my body. The need for my mates rises till it’s all I can feel.

A laugh releases from my lips, the sound evil and chaotic in the growing quiet. Only a few of Bernard’s pack remain. Some have tried to run but are now being held in bubbles of

magic. They try in vain to free themselves, but they will not escape.

“Wrap it up. We stay here tonight. Feast, drink and fuck. Whatever you need to do. We leave at dawn for the West Pack’s territory.” Kayden’s words are spat out, his anger unsated even by the fighting.

“We should leave now.” Ris turns to her mate, her eyes flashing, her magic barely controlled, as the storm continues to rage above us. Kayden pulls her aside, “Don’t fight me on this, Witch. I want them as much as you do, but we can’t go in injured and half-cocked.”

I stand there listening and watching their exchange, my chest heaving as my body continues to go through the pretence of breathing heavily after the exertion of killing so many, so fast. The adrenaline flows through me, and I feel my mates closing in on my position. Hunter’s arm slides around my waist, pulling me against his hard body, bringing the start of peace within me. Lils shifts and walks over to us, lifting her hand to my face, her features soften.

“Stand down, my love. There will be more to kill tomorrow.” Her promise is sealed with a kiss on my lips as she presses her naked body against me, whispering words that stir the slumbering lust within me.

We pile the bodies up, and Ris sets fire to them, not caring whether they are completely dead or not. No one is spared. The screams feed my agitation, churning up my need for my mates, reminding me that it hasn’t been sated. My sensible head knows I need to find out what has happened, but my body isn’t on board with that plan.

“I will soothe that ache as soon as we have found out where my brother and his pregnant mate are.” Lils’ words are like acid on my skin. I pull myself together. All I’ve been thinking about is getting my pussy slammed by my mate’s cock while bringing my other mate to release with my fingers, and I’ve not spared a single thought about Malaki and Melody or what is behind the walls of the castle.

Hunter

BLOOD DRIES ON MY CLOTHES, FACE, AND IN MY HAIR, BUT I pay it no mind as we gather in the great hall, having cleared it of bodies. Those of the enemy are chucked on the pyres outside, but the bodies of those who sought shelter in the castle and were brutally murdered by Bernard's pack have been lined up with care, and Ris has turned them to ash, using the wind to release their remains over the gardens at the back of the castle. It has taken most of what was left of the daylight to clear the bodies, and as I look around, I can see the exhaustion on the faces of those who are left. A few wolves who had remained behind with Malaki managed to hide some of the humans in the walls. They emerged as we started to clear the place.

Ris and Kayden recounted the fight inside the walls and the signs of struggle and blood they discovered in Malaki's room. There aren't as many villagers, wolves, or witches here, dead or alive, and it has been confirmed that a lot escaped out of the territory, and many left the castle before Bernard's wolves got inside through the tunnels. The West Pack had only found the entrance when a group of the castle staff were spotted escaping. Those captured were forced to show them how to enter the tunnels and the castle rooms before they were slaughtered.

No one knows what happened to Malaki and Melody, but the Alpha was here. He left some of his pack here. We can only guess that they thought to give the illusion that the siege was active, or maybe it was when we first arrived in the territory. That is unclear. Ris took the shield down just before

they blasted through the walls, a result of Ris' anger at the wolf that attacked Jer.

I look over at Jer, who is healing quickly and still refusing to feed from his mate, much to Eilam's annoyance.

"You need to rest. Take your mates to one of the guest rooms, and I'll make a start on the questioning and then meet you in Melody's potion room. We will need to stock up," Ris says as she walks over to me, cleaning her blood-stained hands on a cloth as she speaks.

"Rissa, you need rest too." Kayden's voice drifts over to us as he joins us. "I'll start the questioning. I want to know where my brother has been taken."

I can see an argument brewing, so I move away to find Ana and Lils, who are sitting close to the fire in the huge stone fireplace. The flames crackle and pop as they dance happily over the logs piled in the hearth. We have all eaten, having found a meal half prepared in the kitchen that hadn't been touched. Some of it was salvageable, and there was just about enough to feed those who survived and our crew.

"Ris suggested we get some rest in one of the guest rooms." Lils and Ana nodded, none of us mentioning that Lils no longer had rooms of her own here. Eion, her father, had converted her room into a guest room as soon as he gave her to Joseph's men, erasing every trace of Lils' existence from the castle. We hadn't stayed long enough when we returned to change that, and she didn't seem that interested in having her own room here again. We leave the great hall heading towards the stairs, each lost in our own thoughts.

"I need a shower and some fresh clothes." Lils motions with her hand to her blood-splattered clothes, and looking down at my own, I note that they aren't much better. Ana is also covered, and some of her clothes have been ripped in the fight leaving patches of pale, smooth skin on display.

I'd felt her need rising after the fight, but now it is muted, nothing but a passing glimpse as both of my beautiful mates seem to be thinking about what lies ahead. Once we reach one of the rooms, I throw a potion into the fireplace, setting alight

the kindling and logs that are always kept ready in case they have unexpected guests.

“Want to shower together to save time?” Lils asks as she starts to pull off her stained and damaged clothing. I nod my agreement as I walk away from the fireplace towards Ana, who hasn’t moved from the centre of the room since we came through the door, shutting and locking it behind us.

“You okay?” I reach out and brush her matted hair from her face.

“Yes, it just feels strange being in a room with a bed after all this time.” She looks around the room, then starts taking off her weapons and placing them on the chest of drawers, which is against the wall to the right of the door.

“Don’t worry. We will be slumming it again in the forest tomorrow.” Lils chuckles from the bathroom. The sound of running water has me looking over to the half-open door, imagining my naked mate moving around in there. I start to walk over to the bathroom, removing my clothes as I go. I can feel Ana watching me, then a rush of air as she shoots past me and through the bathroom door. Her actions and Lils’ squeal have me hurrying into the bathroom with a wide grin pulling at my cheeks. I shut the door behind us, hoping to keep the steamy room warm. The space houses a large shower cubicle, sink and toilet. Inside the glass enclosure, I can see Ana has Lils pinned up against the tiled wall. Her hand is twisted in Lils’ hair pulling her neck to the side as she kisses her way down to Lils’ collarbone.

Watching them together, their hands exploring each other, has my dick swelling with interest. I reach down, giving my cock a hard pull as my mates start to moan. Their breathing becomes heavy as Ana reaches between them. I can imagine where her fingers are going and can almost feel the soft, plump flesh of Lils’ pussy as if I was touching her myself.

“Hunter.” A strangled plea leaves Lils’ lips and has me pulling the door of the enclosure open, so I can enter the misty shower. Closing it behind me, I step forward, bringing my body behind Ana. She is almost the same height as me, so as I

pull her long red hair to the side, I'm able to kiss just below her ear lobe, sucking at the skin on her neck. She moans, all the while flooding our bond with lust. Her need surrounds me, sending answering pulses directly down to my cock, which I press up against her arse, pushing her into Lils.

My wolf mate brings her leg up, resting it on Ana's hip. Then, using the heel of her foot, she shows me what she needs, pulling me closer to her.

"You want us both, beautiful?" I ask, my tone gruff with barely restrained emotions. My hips jerk involuntarily as she tugs me against them again by way of an answer. Ana's arm continues to move as I run my hand from her shoulder down between their bodies, feeling rather than seeing Ana's hand on Lils' pussy as she thrusts her fingers inside our mate. Lils' leg tightens on us both, and I hold it high on Ana's hip, angling my body so that I can rub my thumb over Lils' clit circling and applying pressure which has her moaning and whimpering as her hips jerk. She rides Ana's fingers with abandon, pulling her down for a searing kiss before leaning against the tiled wall. Her soaking wet hair hangs loosely down her back, and her eyes are shut, but I don't want her getting lost in her head, and as I feel a pang of anxiety drift through our bond, I know it's time to remind her that it's just us here.

"Move her in between us," I whisper to Ana biting her neck a little, just wanting to taste her before she moves. She turns her head and captures my lips. Her tongue dances with mine before she lets go of Lils, turning her so that we are all under the large square showerhead. Lils is between us, her back to Ana's front. Her pupils are blown wide with lust, and amber swirls around her irises as her wolf awakens. I grip her arse cheeks, lifting her with ease. Her legs wind around my hips as she tugs me closer, resting her forehead on mine. Our breath mingles as she peppers my face with kisses.

"Stay with us," I warn her and feel the slight nod of her head.

"Fuck her." Ana's voice is lisped, and a look over Lils' shoulder confirms that her fangs have descended, her eyes

have darkened, and the desire, clear as daylight in them, forces a groan from my lips.

Lils pants above me, moving her hips and rubbing her clit against my hard cock. The friction feels so fucking good I have to concentrate hard so as not to blow my load too early. Ana manages to get her hand between us, her cold fingers encircle my dick and, as if in some synchronised dance, Lils lifts and impales herself on me right up to the hilt, pulling a groan from my throat as she cries out.

“So tight, fuck, Lils. Move, beautiful. I want to feel you come on my cock.” I husk the words out as Lils leans back into Ana, and the water flows down all over us. I trace a stream that runs like a river over the soft mounds of Lils’ breasts, licking first one and then the other before taking her nipple into my mouth and biting down. Lils gasps out a curse, and the flutter of her inner walls tells me she is getting close. Her jerking movements become more rapid as she chases her release, and I grip her arse, thrusting up and meeting her downward moves with my own. The sound of running water accompanies our sensual dance like rainfall as it falls from the shower head. The deep moans and breathing as all three of us move in unison to cement our bond and seek the pleasure that only true mates are capable of finding with each other echo around the enclosure.

Ana moves her hand and grips Lils’ hair, holding it tight as she moves the long sodden strands to give her easier access to the milky skin of Lils’ neck. Ana’s eyes lock with mine as she bites down, blood seeps from the wounds and a cry of ecstasy releases from Lils’ lips as she comes hard, her movements stuttering and her inner walls spasming around my cock, I’m so close, but I don’t want this to end. I hold Lils up as she leans back against Ana, her eyes appearing to almost roll back in her head. She is so high on the feel of Ana’s bite. I slow my movements, content to watch, holding off my climax as Ana stops feeding, and Lils turns her head to kiss Ana’s blood-covered lips before leaning forward and kissing me. The taste of blood has me deepening our kiss, and my hips move again without my consent. As I slide in and out of Lils, she moans

greedily into my mouth. As I break off our kiss, I glance at Ana, who is watching us intently.

“Make Ana come while I fuck you.” The words leave my lips, but my eyes stay on Ana. A ghost of a smile pulls at her mouth, and her grin widens as I pull out of Lils, placing her gently on the shower floor, ensuring she is steady on her feet before I let go.

The rectangular glass enclosure is fortunately large enough for all three of us to move around without too much effort. I sit down on the tiled floor, pulling Lils with me, her back to my front. She lifts and rotates her hips until she is fully seated on my cock again. The angle is different and feels so, so good. I grip her hips, helping her move, then hold her still as Ana stands above us. She rests her hand on Lils’ head and guides her to where she wants her. Ana throws her head back, gasping as Lils starts to lick and suck Ana’s clit. Using my grip on her hips, I help Lils to ride my dick as she tongues Ana’s pussy, strangled cries and whimpers release from her as she tries to concentrate on bringing our mate to climax as I continually hit her G Spot.

“That’s it, Little Wolf, oh yes, right there. More, Lils, yes, yes...” Ana’s head tosses from side to side as her fingers dig into Lils’ hair, and she moves her hips, riding Lils’ tongue, fucking her face as I thrust up harder and harder. My balls tighten at the sights and sounds inside our glass paradise urging me on. Lils’ tight, warm pussy spasms and flutters as Ana drops her head back, letting the warm water run over her face. She cries out, urging Lils on.

I know just how much this is turning on our wolf mate. Her pussy grips my cock, and forces a grunt out of me as I feel the familiar feeling of my impending climax. Throwing my head back, I thrust up hard into Lils and roar my release as Ana cries out, finding her own. She collapses down next to us, reaching over she thumbs Lils’ clit causing her to clamp down on my still-hard dick as she comes again.

We stay slumped over each other on the tiled floor of the shower for a moment, catching our breath and occasionally stealing kisses before quickly washing off and leaving the

glass enclosure. The room is filled with thick swirling steam, which is slowly filtering out of a grate high up in the wall. A shiver runs over my skin, causing bumps to rise in response. The air outside of the shower is colder. I grab a towel for Ana and Lils, then make quick work of drying myself whilst they do the same. We don't hang about, preferring to return to the bedroom where a fire continues to roar, warming the large room.

Having towel-dried her hair and braided it, Lils moves over to the bed. She pulls the covers back, gesturing for Ana and me to join her. I climb in next to her, Ana follows me, and I find myself sandwiched between the two of them as I lie back on the soft pillows, their heads resting on my biceps, hands resting on my chest. My eyelids grow heavy as Lils' breathing evens out, and Ana rests in my arms. "Sleep," she whispers, and as the darkness pulls me down, I relish the feeling of having both of my mates close and safe.

Lils

THE SOUND IS TOO LOUD. WHAT ON EARTH IS IT?

“Wake up, Little Wolf. We’ve got to go.” Ana’s tone is urgent and has my eyelids popping open. I rub the sleep from my eyes, staring around the room. It takes me a moment to register that Hunter isn’t with us and that Ana is fully dressed and shoving clothes and weapons at me.

“Where’s he gone?” I search my bond, feeling relieved when I find it pulsing strongly, which means Hunter is close by. “What on earth is that sound?” I ask as I hurriedly pull on some knickers and a T-shirt. I rarely wear a bra, the damn things are too restrictive, and on this occasion, it serves me well as I’m dressed and strapping on daggers in no time.

“He’s been with Ris since the early hours, the sun was barely creeping on the horizon, and that noise, I believe, is some sort of alarm.” Ana turns to look at me as she pulls a brush through her long straight hair and then throws it on the bed. I don’t have time to unbraid mine and brush it. The sense of urgency coming from Hunter has me grabbing the last of my weapons and sheathing them before heading towards the door. Before I can reach the handle, the heavy wooden door swings open, and I find myself pulled back as Ana thrusts her body in front of mine. I would roll my eyes, but it’s lost on her, and I don’t have the time.

“We need to go,” Hunter says, entering the room and giving it a quick once over with his eyes. He is already fully dressed and has his bag of potions strapped around his waist,

as well as an array of weapons strategically placed around his body.

I pick up my backpack, which I had no chance to unpack last night and loop the straps over my arms. “I’m ready. What is that awful noise?” I ask as the sound has become louder since the door is open.

“That’s just something Ris and I rigged up this morning. Wolves are approaching from the west, another large contingency. If we want to reach the West Pack’s territory, we must move before we are trapped in the castle.”

“Okay, let’s move but make that damn sound stop. I can’t hear myself think.” I yell over the noise, which is becoming increasingly louder as we run down the hall to the stairs which lead down to the lower areas of the castle.

“When that noise stops, it means we are too late,” Hunter states as he throws a look of concern over his shoulder at me, and I bite back any retort I might have had.

“*Assemble in the great hall, now!*” Kayd’s command comes through the link Ris uses and has my feet picking up pace as we take the stairs two at a time. Ana flies down them, appearing not to touch the ground as she hurries to reach the others.

My wolf, who didn’t appreciate the rude awakening any more than I did, is snarling and growling in my head, pushing me to go faster to find out what is causing this surge of adrenaline rushing through our body.

When we arrive in the hall, it’s packed full of all the survivors and our crew. Most carry packs, and all have weapons, including the few humans who hadn’t managed to leave the castle and hid in the walls with the wolves.

“What do we know?” I ask, approaching my brother and Ris, who are deep in conversation with Eilam and Jer.

“No one is quite sure what happened to Melody and Malaki. It is possible they were taken by Bernard. There were a lot of villagers who managed to escape the castle, and many who left the territory before the West Pack arrived. We need to

round them up. We are going to need all the numbers we can find.” Ris answers, the stress of her sister’s absence showing clearly on her features.

“They wouldn’t have just left the castle with villagers and some of the pack inside,” Kayd reassures Ris and likely himself as he reaches out and touches her arm. He’s right. My brother wouldn’t shirk his Alpha duties. He would ensure everyone was safe, putting their needs first.

“So, what’s the plan?” Ana asks. She stands next to me, with Hunter on my other side. Both are ready to run into battle at a moment’s notice.

“We gather numbers heading south out of the territory. Then west behind the wolves who are approaching to take the castle. I think they are hoping to catch us inside and surround us. I have a shield in place, but we don’t have enough food to outlast a siege. The stocks have already been depleted.” Ris waves a hand in the direction of the kitchens. “They won’t be expecting us to attack, we are vastly outnumbered, but that has never stopped us before. We can’t waste our efforts here. We need to move and attack the heart of the West Pack. We need to find my sister and Malaki.”

I nod my agreement and move to the closest table to grab an apple and some bread before resting my arse on the edge of the table and waiting. Ris and Kayd move to the front of the room, and all around us, the chattering and movement stop.

“As you know, it looks likely that the West Pack has taken your Alpha and his pregnant mate,” Kayd states, with obvious anger in his tone. Touching a pregnant female goes against every species’ inbuilt need to survive. Pregnant females are generally cherished, but recent events have made me realise that not all feel that way about them. The angry murmurs that started when he spoke die down as he raises his hand for quiet.

“We will find them and kill all those who had a part in this,” Ris adds, and an eruption of noise from those in the room confirms their agreement and intention to come with us.

“No one can stay here, but if you feel that you will not be able to fight, we will see to it that you have safe passage from

the territory.” Kayd’s statement proves how different he and my brother Malaki are from our father. That bastard wouldn’t have given anyone a choice, but I have a feeling that not one of the assembled crowd will be taking that option.

“Okay then, let’s find those who have been scattered and fast. We head south, then west and strike them at the heart of their operation.” Ris yells over the din of everyone moving at once towards the rear of the hall. Ris disappears, and from our link, I know that she is getting ahead of the crowd to take down the shield so we can leave the castle in the opposite direction of the approaching wolves. We must hurry before they get close enough to fan out around the castle.

I have zoned out to the alarm, but I’m grateful for its constant presence giving us a sense of hope that we will be able to leave the castle and move away from it before the contingency of wolves from the West Pack get closer. Backpacks are picked up in mouths as many of the wolves shift and head for the tunnels. Kayd has opened the passages that lead out through the walls at the back of the castle and into the outside escape route, which emerges deep in the forest. Those who can’t shift will have to crawl, but we are out of options, and no one is complaining.

Hunter takes my bag, holding it open as I quickly stuff my clothes in. We stand off to the side; most of our wolves have already shifted and are making their way through to tunnel and out of the castle, followed by the humans amongst us. I wish I had time to explore the passages inside the castle’s walls. I had never been privy to their existence, but I guess I can understand why.

“You’d have been out of the castle and no doubt causing trouble if you had known about them.” Hunter laughs as he reads my mind. I can’t argue because he’s right about that, so I smirk at him before I allow my wolf to take control. I welcome the familiar pain of the shift as my claws grow and my body changes shape. Shaking out her fur, my wolf huffs at Hunter before taking off through the dark, dirty tunnel after the others. Our Alpha commands us to assemble in the woods, and my

wolf hurries through the darkness heading towards the light showing ahead of those who are running in front of us.

As we break through into the daylight, it takes us a moment to adjust to the brightness. Snow is falling in large chunky flakes collecting in the fur of the surrounding wolves like jewels. Behind us, our mates emerge from the darkness, and we feel the cool touch of Ana's fingers as she runs them through the fur on our back. Hunter stands next to her, waiting for our next move. As the last of us exits the tunnel, followed by my brother, who came last in case of any problems, we start to move off swiftly through the forest, following Ris, who we can sense is up ahead. I urge my wolf on, content to stay in this form as we move forward with quiet paws, a magical shield surrounding us. Even those who cannot shift run alongside us, aided by a wind which blows along the top of my fur. My wolf lifts her snout, sniffing the air and checking for the enemy. On high alert for any threat to our pack, but only the familiar scents of our own are carried upon the air, and she lowers her head, pushing forward, weaving from left to right as if herding those at the rear, including Ana and Hunter.

I leave her to take control, relishing the feeling of the soft cold snow beneath our paws as we stretch our limbs in a slow lope winding our way stealthily through the trees and away from the castle. She has no fear for what might lie ahead, seeming to be completely at ease running with this pack of mixed species.

As long as our mates are near, there is nothing we cannot face together. We will find my brother Malaki and his mate. I feel the intent flowing through our pack bond, no doubt from Kayd and Ris, as they lead us all away from what was once our home.

As the sun starts its downward path announcing the end of another day, we gather in a clearing at the southern edge of the Northern Territory. I shift fast and dress quickly, the temperature is dropping for the evening, and although we have hunted on the way, it has been agreed that we rest and allow those who can't eat on the run the way the wolves can to relax and have some food. The two boars the pack brought down are

dropped in the middle of the clearing, and several humans rush to prepare them. Ris starts a fire, and Hunter fashions two large spits to roast the meat.

I walk over to Ana, who appears to be arguing with Eilam. “What’s going on?” I ask as I approach, and they go silent, standing like statues glaring at each other.

“Eilam is leaving.” She all but growls out, and he looks at her with what I’m beginning to recognise as his ‘I am your master, remember your place’ look.

“What? We are about to head west and attack a fortified pack residence, that’s if we can make it through the territory, and you want to run away from the fight?” It doesn’t sound like the Eilam I’ve come to know. I look at Ana, then Eilam. “Wait, you aren’t taking Ana with you.” There is no way I’m letting that happen.

“Young One, I will be fine.” Eilam looks at Ana, reaching out and placing his hand on her arm. It’s almost as if I haven’t spoken, and they are just continuing their argument. However, he then turns to me.

“I am not leaving you to fight alone, *Giovane Lupo*. I am leaving to bring more support to your cause. You are going to need more than those we have here,” he says, looking around at the thirty-strong group assembled in the clearing, working together to make food and a place for us to relax temporarily.

“Where will you find more allies?” I ask, unable to get my head around him leaving. He has become part of our pack, I’ve even got used to his outburst when he starts spouting Italian, and it feels wrong that he should be going it alone without us to protect him. I inwardly scoff at that thought; he is more than capable of taking care of himself, as he has repeatedly proven.

“My friend Ithos is heading north. He is close enough now that I can feel and hear him. He has brought his clan of warriors, which would be a great addition to our cause, no?” His lips lift at the corners. He almost smiles, but it pulls an answering one from me.

“I will not be taking Analucia with me, and she may not be happy about that, but her place is here with you and Hunter.”

I nod my agreement; that is exactly where she should be. Hunter crunches across the snow to join us and slips an arm around Ana’s waist, clearly feeling the conflict inside her as I am.

“He will be fine, Ana. Besides, I don’t think he will be alone.”

“No?” Eilam looks around. “You cannot spare anyone; you need all the numbers you can get. I will move faster by myself anyway, and thanks to your fantastic potion, we will be able to return with more speed than they are currently travelling.” Eilam looks off into the distance, in the direction from which I assume the vampires are approaching.

“My brother sent out scouts to pick up stragglers still around the edge of the territory. We will have more. I’m sure of it.” I try not to sound too desperate, but we haven’t managed to pick up many on our travels. We are moving fast and can’t sidetrack, plus it now seems likely a lot of villagers have hidden in the mountains further north of the castle, which would explain why there haven’t been that many in the direction we have taken.

Ris and Kayd come to stand with us. “How long till you make it back to us?” Ris asks, clearly already aware that Eilam is leaving.

“A week, maybe. It is hard to tell how far they are, but then we must find you again.” Eilam confirms, and now I realise why Ana wanted to go with him. Not just to protect him but because she would have been able to track us through our bond.

“I don’t want to leave you, but we need them, and we can’t wait for their trackers to pick up a scent and find us,” Ana confirms, speaking her concerns aloud.

“He won’t need their trackers.” A male voice has us turning in unison. Jer stands behind my brother, looking a little embarrassed at the attention as we all look at him.

“Are you sure?” Kayd asks, likely having had a conversation with Jer internally before voicing his question. Jer nods and clasps my brother’s hand, which he has stretched out to his best friend. Kayd pulls him into him before they separate.

Jer moves away from us and picks up his backpack as Kayd turns to Eilam.

“You will take care of my best friend, Vampire. He is like a brother to me. If anything happens to him, I will have your head.” His tone is deadly serious, and Ana starts to shuffle from one foot to the other with the threat.

Eilam nods at my brother. “You have my word. I will protect my mate until I turn to ash.”

The sincerity in his words pulls at my heart. I know that feeling. I, too, would put the lives of my mates ahead of my own. No more is said as Jer joins us. He has stripped out of his clothes which are no doubt packed away in the bag Eilam reaches for and takes in his hands. It doesn’t escape me the way the vampire’s eyes roam over Jer’s naked body.

“Until we return,” Eilam says by way of a goodbye as he tears his eyes away from his mate. Jer gives him a look, then shifts, and they disappear at an unnatural speed, soon lost in the darkness of the trees, leaving a swirl of falling snow behind them.

Ana

EILAM HAS NOT RETURNED, AND WE HAVE FOUND NO MORE North Pack on our travels towards the Western Territory. Our numbers are few, but our resolve is strong. We will free the Alpha and Ris' sister, and if it takes our lives to do that, then so be it.

I reach out absentmindedly to hold Lils' hand as she walks in her human-like form next to me and I pull her body against mine, stopping our forward motion.

“Don't you dare say goodbye. We will get through this. All of us,” she says, reading my mind.

“You're not getting weak on us, are you?” Hunter questions, his tone joking as he tries to get a rise out of me. I oblige, hissing at him through my fangs. His features soften, and his light touch on my face is nearly my undoing. I resist the urge to drag my mates away and hide us somewhere safe. I'm no coward, but the thought of losing either of them makes me almost feral.

“Get ready.” Ris' voice echoes around the shield, holding us all safely inside. Ahead is a vast metal fence topped with sharp-looking barbed wire. Ris has already misted out of the protection bubble and scouted the area. She reported back that there is a whole complex behind their fortifications comprised of several large stone structures plus many smaller houses. They already know we are coming because we have been fighting wolves since we entered the territory a week ago.

Around me, the other members of our pack—humans, witches, and wolves—stand amongst each other. They’ve fought side by side, protecting one another regardless of species. We draw weapons, swords, daggers, bows, and potions, readying to face a common enemy.

“I love you both.” Hunter kisses first Lils, then me. Our tongues tangle in a desperate attempt to taste each other one more time. Lils loops her arms around us, and I pull back from Hunter to kiss her. I taste the salt from her tears, but they are gone when I move away from her, swiftly brushed away by the back of her hand.

“We will get through this, and then we are going to take some time out. Just the three of us,” Lils says, her tone is determined as she nods, convincing herself as much as us, or so it seems.

“I love you both, too.” I let my lips lift in a smile at Lils’ words.

“As do I.” I let them go, drawing my sword and rushing forward with them both at my side. Hunter mangles the gate open using his special brand of magic, and Ris sends flames flying through the gap Hunter made as we all rush forward in two waves, a mix of strong and weaker fighters in both. Overhead a storm rages, and as lightning strikes one of the buildings inside the compound, a flood of shifters leak out.

A roar goes up from the West Pack as they run forward to meet us. Leaping up and over one enemy wolf, I slice right through its neck as I continue moving and land behind its prone body. I don’t even check to see if the wolf is dead, knowing that those following me will see to that, as another shifter launches himself at me in human-like form. His jagged knife makes contact with my arm, slicing through the cloak I’m wearing and the blouse underneath. A hiss leaves my lips at the pain as it spurs me on. The wolf’s eyes widen in fear as the hood of my cloak falls away from my head, giving him a full view of my face, fangs sharp and resting against my bottom lip.

“What’s wrong, Wolf? Never seen a vampire before?” A laugh escapes me, a mad sound, and as he raises his knife again, I move at high speed knocking his weapon out of his hand in one swift action, before gripping his head and shoulder in my hands, sinking my teeth in. This is not a lover’s bite—no, this is pure venom meant to cause pain and kill. I rip my teeth out of his skin, pulling away a large chunk of muscle. His screams die in a gurgle as blood undoubtedly fills his throat. I take a large pull of his blood, fueling me as I rip his head from his shoulders, throwing it to the ground, not caring where it lands as I move on to the next one.

They keep coming, and I continue to slice through them, occasionally stopping to rip a few apart with my teeth, feeding as I do to aid my healing from the wounds I continue to receive. I check briefly in on my mates through our bond. I can’t use my eyes, unable to take my gaze from the next enemy approaching. Lils is hurt, but it doesn’t feel life-threatening. I feel her shift which should aid her recovery, and an evil snarl sounds beside me as her wolf launches through the air. Her beautiful jaws clamp down on the back of an approaching shifter from the West Pack, she rips through him, and a howl of pain is cut off as she kills him and moves on to the next.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see the large wolf running towards her as she fights another. Hunter yells to gain my attention, he cups his hands, and I run. One foot makes contact briefly with his clasped fingers as he lifts and throws me. I bend my knee, using the momentum to jump in the air, lifting my sword over my head as I go. A snarl of anger bursts from my lips as I bring my sword down, cutting the dark tan wolf in half as it uses its rear legs to leap at Lils. The howl of pain dies as the two parts fall on either side of one of his companions. The other shifter is still in human-like form and looks at the head half of his fallen pack member in utter disbelief. Those seconds while he processes what has happened, standing there covered in the blood of his fellow wolf, are his last. Hunter throws a bottle which shatters on contact with the stunned shifter’s head, and his body melts so quickly he doesn’t even make a sound.

I take that brief interlude to look around and assess our position. Hunter stands next to me, another potion in one hand and his dagger in the other. Lils' wolf rests her body against mine, and I absentmindedly reach out and run my hand through her blood-stained fur. Around us, the fighting continues, but in my brief rough assessment, I can see that we are still outnumbered, and more of the West Pack is pouring out of one of the larger buildings ahead.

I do a double take as Joseph walks out behind them. "That's his brother, Bernard, I'm guessing," Hunter says, nodding toward the wolf who looks just like his dead brother. The smug look on that shifter's face is all I need to bury the weary feeling that had threatened to take over my body, and I allow the anger to rise. As we move forward together, Lils takes out two more, and Hunter throws a potion into the crowd close to the building where Bernard stands. A small amount of wind from Ris has the bottle travelling the distance. Her evil grin tells me she knows exactly what is in that bottle. We don't have long to wait to find out for ourselves. As soon as it hits one of the shifters, a loud explosion sends body parts flying as those around the shifter fall foul of the potion.

"Nice," I laugh, lifting my head back and allowing the sound to travel. Those closest to me join in; a kind of hysteria starts as crazed laughter flows through our pack, and we continue to fight our way through the enemy. I will give them their due, they fight well, but they don't have the same lack of care for their existence as us. They aren't willing to take risks or put themselves in harm's way to take out another being, and that is their mistake. We are killers trained and tested, and we never stop moving forward until we kill every last one. As we close in, the smug bastard still stands there, sending more and more of his men and now women to their death.

The women have no idea how to fight, but they try. Their wolves unaccustomed to battle. If they weren't trying to rip into us, I would almost feel sorry for them, maybe enough to let them live. But I don't. My sword comes down on another female, halving her body down the middle lengthwise. I push through the pieces letting them fall where they may. My body is coated in blood, sinew, and what might well be brain matter,

I conclude as I remove it from my shoulder with a flick of my finger.

“Leave some for me, Young One.” Eilam’s voice in my head causes me to lose my concentration.

“Ana!” Hunter yells as a potion goes off close to me, body parts fly past my face, and I turn towards my mate, lifting my lips in a smirk by way of thanks. He shakes his head in mock exasperation, but his eyes sparkle with the mirth and relief that floods our bond. Blowing me a kiss, he turns and thrusts a dagger into the wolf fighting with one of the humans next to him.

“Eilam is here.” I send the message through the pack-wide link and receive a cheer from those in the first wave ahead of us. They are taking a battering, and as spread out as we are, no one is shielded, and because of that, Ris and Kayden have refused to use their magic to protect themselves. Up in front of us, I can see the auburn-haired witch swinging her sword and next to her, Kayden’s large black wolf takes out another West Pack shifter throwing its body over his large back before moving on to another.

Overhead the storm that accompanies Ris whenever she is angry rages on. The smell of burning flesh fills the air as she directs the lightning, killing several shifters at once. Fighting this closely together is preventing her from using some of her magic, but what she can use is having a devastating effect on a dozen of shifters at a time.

I can feel Eilam approaching from the rear, and then he passes me in what would be a blur if I weren’t a vampire and accustomed to such speed. He uses bodies to run across the crowd to the front. With him are more than a dozen vampires. They give a whoop of joy as they launch into the fray, and I feel the sense of relief that their sudden appearance brings within our crew. It fills me with pride that my kind is accepted by those of the north and that they rejoice in our help. They don’t show fear as the vampires flood the area between the houses, joining the fight with abandon, some using weapons, others using their strength and teeth to rip through the enemy. Jer flies past me in a flurry of fur and growling angry wolf as

he appears to chase down his mate, throwing himself at the shifter on Eilam's back. My feet are already carrying me forward as I fling my weight through the throng of bodies fighting around me, keeping track of my mates as they follow me as my blood bond to Eilam urges me to his side now that he is close by and under threat.

With the influx of vampires, the tide starts to turn in our favour. Seeing vampires out in daylight is enough to turn some shifters to stone. I knew Hunter's insistence that Eilam take extra potions with him was likely to sway some of the vampires, who might otherwise be reluctant to join a fight that wasn't theirs. But as I look around, I can see just how much they are enjoying themselves. Clad in black cloaks, they fight viciously with a grace that only our kind can pull off. We were built for this. A West Pack wolf staggers towards me, naked and bloody from several deep stab wounds. His whole demeanour radiates exhaustion, and as he drops to his knees just in front of me, he raises his head and levels me with a stare, his eyes showing he accepts his fate. I lift my sword and give him the death that, without words, he is asking for—the death of a warrior fighting for his home.

“Enough!” Ris' voice booms across our heads, punctuated with a clap of thunder. I stand, sword still in hand, the wolf's dead body at my feet, looking at the building where Bernard emerged not that long ago with a look of victory and malice on his face. Those emotions are no longer gracing his features. No, they have been replaced with fear and shock as Kayden stands behind him, holding his head by its short grey hairs. Blood flows from the gaping wound in his neck and drips from Kayden's short sword, which hangs in his hand by his side. He stands naked, covered in dirt, blood, and goodness knows what else. A roar of victory leaves his lips as the body of the slaughtered Alpha falls forward, leaving his head in Kayden's hand.

“Wolves of the Western Territory, your Alpha is dead. You will submit, or you will die.” Kayden shouts across the crowd. The full force of his Alpha power sends shock waves through the shifters assembled. Even I can feel it. Lils pushes through those standing close to me, and no one challenges her. In fact,

what is left of the enemy shifters, drop their weapons to the floor or shift and stand with their hands raised.

“Kneel and pledge your allegiance to Kayden Xavier Clell, your new Alpha.” Ris’ words shock me. How has Kayden become their Alpha?

“There was no more of Joseph and Bernard’s line left. It would be down to a fight amongst those left, but none of them is strong enough to be an Alpha; it’s not in their blood. Kayden is the most powerful shifter here and without a next in line, and because he has challenged and killed their Alpha, he has become their leader.” Ris explains through our pack link, keeping us all informed. The explanation has the North Pack shifting and standing up straight as the members of the West Pack who are left, and there aren’t that many, fall to their knees. A couple don’t immediately kneel and are soon pushed down by our crew, and a dagger or sword is held to the necks of those who try and voice a complaint.

“Take all those remaining from the West Pack into that far-right building and hold them there until we can process them.” Kayden’s words through our link make it clear that despite them kneeling, he doesn’t trust any of them, and I don’t blame him. A few moments ago, they were trying to kill us.

ONCE THE SURVIVING MEMBERS OF THE WEST PACK ARE rounded up and detained in one of the larger stone buildings, guards are placed on them. Among those to volunteer are some of the vampires Eilam brought with him. The warriors belong to Ithos. The tall red-haired overlord stands with Kayden, who is now dressed and seated at the head of a long table in what once must have been Bernard and Joseph’s residence. Food has been sourced and is now being prepared on the great fires roaring at both ends of the hall.

Lils approaches her brother’s table, and Hunter and I follow behind, greeting some of the other members of our pack as we walk through them. Hunter gives a healing potion

to Aiden, one of Kayden's wolves, who is sporting a slowly healing deep gash to his arm.

"This will speed that along." Hunter says as he whispers words over the open bottle and hands it to the wolf, who takes it with a weary grin and a "thanks."

"What's the plan?" Lils asks Kayden, and he chuckles a little at her enthusiasm. Even though her fatigue is clear from her gait, she would fight again if he asked her to. We all would.

"We are sweeping the complex, but Malaki and Melody aren't here. Ris can't reach her sister, and she's been trying since we got here," Kayden answers, running his hand over his face. "We need to return to the north and inform any remaining West Pack that I am their new Alpha." He chuckles a little at his last words.

Ris walks up beside him, resting her hand on his shoulder. He grips her fingers and pulls her down onto his lap, resting his face on her neck for a moment. That's the only concession he appears to make to his own fatigue, but he holds his mate tightly against him.

"We all need to eat, rest, and heal. Then we will question what's left of Bernard's pack—"

"Your pack now, Wolf." Ris interrupts him and laughs a little at this new development. Kayden huffs out his annoyance, clearly not enthralled with the idea.

"Not something I wanted, but it does appear that I am now the leader of this territory. Malaki will get a kick out of that." His voice trails off as he looks across the hall, maybe hoping that his brother will walk through the doors.

"He can take the piss out of you when we find him." Lils agrees, her words bringing a smile to her brother's lips.

"Take your mates and rest. We move out tomorrow." Kayden reaches out, and Lils takes his hand, squeezing it before resting her hand on Ris' shoulder and then turning to us. Hunter and I have stood silently next to each other,

witnessing the exchange and feeling the pain these siblings feel because of Malaki and Melody's absence.

"We will find them." I offer what I hope is not an empty promise.

"Yes, we will," Ris confirms, nodding at me.

I turn to leave them, linking hands with Lils as Hunter drapes an arm over her shoulder. We stop briefly by the fire and take the offered cooked meat and vegetables, with a chunk of homemade bread and a cup of mead for Lils and Hunter. I accept the food, not really needing it, but my body reacts to the scent, and I feel inclined to humour it.

Once we have got our bearings, we follow several of the others to the rear of the building and find rooms that house beds and what appears to be a communal bathroom at the end of the hall. Hunter and Lils take turns making use of the facilities returning to the room I've claimed on the left side of the hallway. I've pushed the two beds in the room together, and there is now enough space for us all to sleep together. I leave them to organise any bedding they might need and to eat their food. I finished mine whilst they showered.

In the bathroom, I find several stalls holding showers and others with toilets. Entering the first vacant shower cubicle, I turn the metal knob letting the water flow as I remove my ruined clothing and leave them in the pile that is now growing by the doors. There are others in the showers, but I don't stop to converse with anyone. Using the soap on the little shelf above the controls, I lather my body and clean as best I can in the lukewarm water before returning to my mates, who are both curled up together on the bed. Hunter holds Lils from behind, his body curled around hers. He lifts his hand sleepily as I enter the room and beckons me closer. The usual adrenaline-fueled lust that takes over my body after a fight is absent and replaced with the need to rest and hold my mates close.

I move over to the pile of clothes one of them thoughtfully left out for me and hastily pull them on, discarding my towel over the chair in the corner. Then I climb onto the bed in front

of Lils, resting my left arm over her and touching Hunter at the same time. I allow my body to fall into a slumbering state, not quite the sleep that has already claimed my mates, because vampires don't sleep and I will always be alert for danger, but my limbs rejoice as I lie still in this dark, quiet room listening to the soothing sound of the other two breathing. For now, we can heal and rest. Who knows what tomorrow will bring, but with these two amazing beings by my side, I know we can face anything.

Epilogue

Lils

RECLAIMING MY HOME WAS ANTICLIMACTIC, AND AS I LOOKED around at those who lay dead or dying on the ground outside the castle walls, I wondered when I became so numb to all the killing. We lost a couple of our own, and there will be time to grieve for them, but we have bigger problems right now.

My brother Malaki and his mate Melody are nowhere to be found, and despite torturing many of the West Pack for information, no one knows what happened to them. Bernard told his pack it would be easy to take the Northern Territory, they lay siege to the castle, not expecting much resistance, but the magical shield prevented them from entering it. Until one of the patrols noted wolves were leaving the tunnels. They captured them, forced them to show them the tunnels and then entered the castle. Only Malaki and Melody were already gone.

“My brother wouldn’t have just left without ensuring the safety of *all* of his pack,” Kayd says again, something he has been repeating to anyone who would listen as we have had many consultations to decide our next course of action. We are spread thin, and both the West and North Territories are now in Kayd’s hands. They can’t be left without some form of control. The East Pack has already started sniffing around, and although we’ve never had any issues with them, two territories without a full quota of resident wolves are way too tempting.

“They must have had a reason to leave, or they were taken. That is the only explanation,” Ris agrees. As she wanders a path behind his chair, the need for action is evident in her

constant movement. My brother looks stressed with all the weight on his shoulders.

“I can take a small crew and search for them,” Ris says again, and I know my brother is going to shoot this idea down because she’s already mentioned it, which led to an epic argument between them. This is why we are all once again sitting at the long table in the great hall of my father’s castle, trying to devise some sort of plan because nothing has been agreed upon.

“Witch!” Kayd starts to get up from the table, his anger evident as he slams his hands on the table. Ris moves behind him, resting her hands on his shoulders, and she pushes him back down without much effort. He has to know that this is the only option.

“We’ll go with her and check back in regularly.” I don’t need to ask my mates for their agreement. I can feel it in our bond, which is growing stronger daily. We are one, a team. Where one goes, the others do too. I look around the table at the mishmash of species, listening intently, ready to take action. This is our family, and I will do anything to protect it.

“*As will we,*” Ana’s voice is echoed by Hunter’s as she reaches for my hand and squeezes my fingers in hers before we turn to Kayd.

“You know this is the only plan, Kayd.” I try again, hoping this time he will see sense. I know that the thought of Ris being anywhere but by his side is causing him anxiety, but they were separated for years, and hopefully, it won’t be that long before we find a lead.

“We will aid you here in the territories. The sisters have been informed, and I await their messenger any day now who will, I’m sure, bring more vampires to your side,” Ithos says, sounding confident. I look over at the red-haired vampire, his hair cut short with a carefully maintained beard. He looks every bit the overlord that he is, but I’ve seen him fight. He doesn’t mind getting his hands dirty and is absolutely lethal. My brother listens to him at least, and his guidance has been essential as Kayd has been dropped into the deep end with the

politics of running two territories. It was never what he wanted to do. My brother is a fighter, a warrior, but now he is a leader of many, and the adjustment is taking its toll, so I am grateful that we have the vampire overlords with us.

I look over at Eilam, who is brooding, or at least I think that is the look in his eyes. His face is giving nothing away as he listens to the conversations going on around the table. His gaze is constantly drifting back to Jer, who sits beside my brother trying to convince him that we will need to leave soon before the trail goes completely cold.

“We can head into the mountains and send back those who are hiding. Malaki and Mel may be with them?” Ris suggests, sounding hopeful.

“Kayd,” I say, and his eyes search out mine. “We are just going around in circles. I know you don’t want us to split up, but this is the only way. You are needed in the territories, and until Malaki returns, you are the Alpha and need to protect the West and North Packs. Ithos has said they will help with this.” I nod to the vampire and thank him. “Ris and Hunter have worked on the communication spell so we can keep you abreast of our movements.”

My brother runs a hand through his hair, pulling it hard at the ends. It’s likely that Ris is in his head as their eyes are glowing, and the sizzle of their magic is standing the hairs on my arms up on end.

“Okay.” His tone is reluctant but resigned, and even as Ris lets out a ‘Whoop’, he holds up his hand for silence, “You will keep me informed of your movements every day.” Ris agrees even though she rolls her eyes at his overprotective behaviour.

“If you scent trouble, even a little whiff, you return, and we regroup,” he insists, looking around the table, then settles his gaze on Ris, who has stopped her pacing. They stare at each other, not speaking out loud, and then finally, Ris nods her agreement. I might be the only one who sees her fingers crossed behind her back, and I school my features, trying not to laugh, covering my efforts with a cough behind my hand, so my brother doesn’t see my smile.

“Let’s get ready before he changes his mind.” Ris looks over her shoulder and addresses me, giving me a cheeky wink. Of course, there is no way anyone can stop her from doing exactly what she wants, but the fact that she is trying to consider Kayd’s feelings on this reassures me and shows how much their bond has grown.

I get up from the chair. “When do we leave?” I ask Ris. There is no need to discuss whether we are going or not. She knows we will follow her wherever she leads.

“At dawn,” Ris states as the scraping of chairs on stone signals the end of our discussion, and we all leave the table going our separate ways to ready ourselves for the upcoming journey. As I exit the hall with Ana and Hunter by my side, I look over my shoulder. My brother is standing in front of the fire, his hands gripping the mantle, and his head hangs low. I can feel his anguish as if it were my own, and I find myself unable to tear my eyes away. Ris runs her hand up his shoulder, and he turns his head to look at her, the moment is intimate, and this time I do avert my gaze, not wanting to intrude. I can’t imagine what he must be feeling. The thought of Hunter or Ana leaving without me sends a shudder through my body.

“You okay?” Hunter asks, reaching for me as we enter the corridor leading off the great hall.

“Yes. As long as I’m with both of you, I will always be okay.” I hope he can see the truth in my eyes as I get lost in his emerald-green gaze for a second. Ana’s arms snake around my waist, and she pulls me against her.

“We will always be by your side.” Her words are spoken against my neck. This time the shudder that flows through me has nothing to do with the thought of being separated from them and everything to do with Ana’s cool fingers sliding under my T-shirt and stroking the underside of my breast. My breath hitches as Hunter leans forward. His lips barely touch mine, but as his eyes bore into me, I find it difficult to breathe, and any thoughts I may have been having fly out of my mind leaving me with only one.

“I need you.” I don’t need to say the words because they can no doubt feel my arousal through our bond. But it’s too late, they have escaped my lips in a plea as a whimper follows them when Ana begins to roll my nipple between her finger and thumb, tugging slightly but not enough. Then I’m airborne, with only a view of Hunter’s phenomenal arse and the sound of Ana’s chuckle in my ears as he runs with me up the stairs and through the door to our room.

Love floods our bond, mine for them and theirs for me. I never once thought I would truly feel this kind of soul-deep love or be fortunate enough to find a mate, let alone two, but fate has brought me these incredibly vicious and loyal beings who match me perfectly in every single way, and no matter what our future holds we will always have each other and this love that binds us so absolutely, not even death will be able to break it.

Dear Reader,

Well, crikey, is your heart pumping? Mine is! What an epic adventure!

Let me calm down and take a moment to thank you for reading *Surrounded by Magic*, and ask that if you enjoyed this story, please consider leaving a review. It would mean an awful lot to me. Reviews help self-published authors like me reach other readers, so every single one counts and we really appreciate them. Thank you in advance.

Now, when I wrote the first book, *Within Her Magic*, I had no idea how much this world would evolve, and as I began Lils' book, because she insisted that I did, the story exploded. There are so many characters now, and I love every single one of them. Will there be more books? Yes, I can assure you there will be, and these books now have a series title, *Trust in Magic*.

So, I'm sure you have questions, and I assure you I do, too. Where have Malaki and Mel gone? What has happened to Oren? Will Meghan ever forgive him? And does Jer want Eilam? I don't know about you, but I need to know. Hopefully, some of these questions will be answered in the following books. Although knowing my characters, they will no doubt give us more things to ponder along the way.

When will the next book be out? I'm afraid I cannot give you a timeline on this, as those who know me well will testify that is not how I write. I don't have deadlines because it stunts my creativity. I am a mum, a wife, and I also have a job, so my writing and authoring have to take place around these things, and I can only write when my characters speak to me. I am a total pantsner, so there is no planning, and I'm as surprised as the next person with how these stories evolve.

If you would like to keep up to date with what I'm writing or what's happening in my life, why not follow me on my

socials? I'm on Instagram, TikTok, Bookbub, Goodreads, and I have a wonderful readers group on Facebook (N Dune's Readers Pod). Please do come and join us. We love to talk about books.

Before I go, I need to thank my family for putting up with my absences when I write, especially my wonderful husband who is also my Alpha reader—I couldn't do it without you, my bear. To my fabulous and incredibly supportive author friends, you know who you are. Thank you for putting up with my awkwardness and my highs and lows—I love you all. Finally, to my amazing street team, thank you for accepting my craziness and for being such fantastic cheerleaders. I appreciate everything you do for me, and our chats keep me sane.

I promise I will stop waffling on now, but not before I say a big thank you to my readers—you encourage me to continue to share my stories. Knowing that other people love the words I write makes it all worthwhile.

Until next time my lovelies.

N Dune

Other Titles by N Dune

All of N Dune's books are exclusively available on Amazon, in the kindle store, paperback and FREE with your Kindle Unlimited subscription.

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