

A close-up, front-facing view of a man's highly muscular torso. The man's skin is a warm, reddish-brown hue. His chest is broad and well-defined, with prominent pectoral muscles. His abdominal muscles are also very defined, showing a clear six-pack pattern. His arms are muscular and extend outwards, with glowing red energy or fire swirling around them. The background is dark and indistinct, possibly a night sky or a dark interior. The overall aesthetic is dramatic and intense, suggesting a theme of power, fire, or supernatural abilities.

TJ NICHOLS

PHOENIX
SPY

BROTHERS OF FIRE BOOK ONE

Phoenix Spy

Brothers of Fire

TJ Nichols

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Phoenix Spy

Many deaths ago, phoenix shifter Dalmon Vecker created the Coven to protect paranormals during the witch hunts. Once again, he is running it instead of being king, or heir, or any of the other roles he's played to safeguard the secrets he and his brothers keep. Now the Coven, and the paranormal community, are under threat as some witches want to reveal the truth to humans to enable them to seize control.

For Lucian Marwood, getting arrested by the Coven means that he's safe. For the first time in five years, he can breathe without worrying that the man who'd promised him the world only to take it from him bit by bit will never know the depths of his hate. He doesn't need the Coven to explain the extent of the damage he did. He knows, and he will tell them everything to make amends.

It's a pity the head spy thinks he's a liar.

Dalmon may not remember the details of his previous lives, but seeing Lucian stirs something in his soul as if they have crossed paths before. But who he was and what happened isn't something he has the luxury of investigating if he is going to stop the Shadow Board.

Phoenix Spy is book 1 of the Brothers of Fire series about the royal phoenix shifters of Mont de Leucoy. If you love mm fated mates, past lives, princes, and spies, join the phoenixes.

Brothers of Fire is set in the same world as the Familiar Mates series, but stands alone.

Chapter One

THE FIRST TIME a Coven agent came to the house, it had taken every ounce of control Lucian Marwood had not to run downstairs and fling himself at their mercy. But that would've been too soon. And after five years, what were a few extra days?

He sensed the energy shifting and that all he needed to do was wait. He kept the smile on his face and his thoughts as still as glass, even though it pissed Hank off when he couldn't read anything off the cutlery he'd been using or the book he'd been reading.

It was easier to leave false impressions most of the time and push what Hank wanted to find into the object.

Lucian swore he was never getting tangled up with a psychometric witch again.

He was never getting involved with *any* witch again.

Though that boldly assumed the Coven would ever let him see daylight.

Now his wait was over. He'd considered walking out many times, but he was terrified Hank would hunt him down the way he had so many others. Getting arrested by the Coven was his only way out.

The wards around the outside of the property tripped in three different places. The Coven agents were probably in teams of two or four. Tripping wards meant they weren't trying to be sneaky.

Lucian sat at the kitchen table drinking a cup of coffee—he figured it was going to be a long night of questioning—and finished writing up his statement. That was something they would ask him to do, so making a head start seemed like a smart idea, plus it gave him something to do. He'd already assembled all the evidence he was aware of, mostly documents. Hank's laptops were also ready to go.

The moment Hank mentioned he was meeting with the doctor, Lucian knew the raid would be tonight.

There was a taste in the air, a sharpening of his magic.

He reached out with his magic to find the agents. They were moving closer to the house. They'd be entering in under thirty seconds, and then the wait would be over.

He signed his name, finished his coffee, and wished they'd hurry. Around his wrist was the leather bracelet Hank had given him. He wasn't sure what it did, only that he'd never been brave enough to take it off.

He wasn't safe until he was in a Coven building. He'd never wanted to hurt anyone, and by the time he'd realized what was going on, it had been too late for him too. He didn't want to end up being the next piece of leather gifted to someone dear.

His face ached where Hank had stuck his fingers into his jaw and demanded to know if Lucian wanted him to fail. He hadn't been able to answer because his jaw was locked open.

But there'd been fear in Hank's eyes, as if he knew tonight it could go either way.

There'd also been disgust. Something Lucian had never seen before.

He'd known then that if Hank's plan worked, his life was over.

Magic swelled. His ears popped, and the door burst open.

"Get down on the ground. Put your hands on your head," a man shouted.

Lucian didn't bother to stand or resist. He dropped to his knees. Someone pushed him the rest of the way to the ground. He never got his hands to his head, as they were tied behind his back.

“What is your magic?”

“Finder.” The tiles were cold against his cheek.

“How many people are in the house?”

“Just me.” He was glad the wolf had been rescued. Being forced to look after it had been when he'd started to break, and he was sure Hank had noticed. He couldn't hide every thought, all the time, no matter how hard he tried.

And the agents would search the house no matter what he said.

He was hauled to his feet. From his strength, Lucian knew the man must be a bear shifter.

“What's all of this?” the masked woman in front of him asked.

“The evidence you're after on Hank Hastings.” Something buzzed in his ear. Another magical ward? Or were they using magic on him?

“And you are?”

“Lucian Marwood.” Assistant, ex-lover, finder of shifters, broken witch. Fuck, he hated himself more than he hated Hank.

Someone put a hood over his head and shoved him out the door.

As soon as he crossed the threshold, his shoulders eased, and the tension and fear he'd been holding onto for years welled in his eyes. He was free.

Free of Hank, anyway.

Chapter Two

DALMON VECKER PACED the length of his office. When he reached the door, he turned and completed the return journey to the window. While it was dark outside, the office blocks sparkled with lights. He wouldn't be the only one working late.

He growled and turned, pacing back to the door.

Not that he was working. That would've been better.

He was waiting.

As much as he'd like to pretend that the jobs on tonight weren't affecting him personally, it was a lie because he couldn't sit at his desk and do anything useful. There were reports he needed to read on the security business that Kaine ran and that he sat on the board of as well as various Coven-related issues. Though the Coven was built around issues and solving them.

The two jobs that were on tonight were crucial, both to the Coven and him. If he lost Everest, Gerrit would kill him. Which would mean starting over. Honestly, learning that he was a shifter and reading his records—which he hadn't updated in too long—to find out what he'd been trying to achieve in his last life and then catching up on everything he missed had annoyed him for the last four lives. He couldn't imagine that ever improving.

What was the point of being immortal only to have to relearn everything with each life? If he didn't have to die and be reborn, half the Coven issues wouldn't exist.

He checked his phone, even though it hadn't buzzed.

No word from either operation.

What the hell was going on?

The job Everest, who was once again the heir to the throne of Mont de Leucoy, was doing should be a simple rescue. He snorted—as if there were such a thing. It was hopefully also a takedown of Hank Hastings, an American witch with a penchant for binding shifters and escaping justice.

That Hastings liked rare shifters, and Dalmon was sure Everest being made as a phoenix increased the danger, but there was nothing he could do about it. Nor could he keep Everest from joining the Coven as he still carried the guilt of losing Olier, even though there was nothing he could've done.

Running the country had been a hell of a lot easier with five of them, according to his books. He needed to make the time to go home and update the book on this life in case something went tits up and he died.

He needed all his brothers to be aware of the Shadow Board and the ongoing danger it presented to every paranormal, not just them. Which was the point of the second operation, the raid on the Hastings' house. While an agent had gone through it previously, this time, it would be much more thorough.

Selecting people for the jobs had been difficult because he was damn sure there was a leak. Someone who worked for the Coven was also on the Shadow Board. And while Hastings wasn't on the Board, he was connected to it and eager to set up an American version. Liaising with the States-based Coven meant that Hastings' homes and businesses were being searched too. And those witches he associated with were also being investigated.

He was also going to have to visit the States soon as it had been over a year, and as head of Coven operations, he needed to be everywhere—which was at least slightly easier with the technology available in this lifetime.

He blinked and found himself staring out the window. For how long had he been standing there?

In his hand, his phone rang. One word appeared on the screen: Lake.

Everest had opted for that surname, which was probably a good idea while he was agenting. The fewer people who knew he was a prince, and related to Dalmon, the better.

But Everest shouldn't be the one calling that the job was done; he wasn't the senior agent. His gut tightened. Something had gone wrong. Everest might be safe, but he hated to lose any agent. Especially if they had a fated mate.

"Vecker," he answered.

"Everyone is out," Everest said.

"But?"

"Farrell was seriously injured. Templeton has gone with him."

Dalmon grunted. Templeton shouldn't have left Everest, but the need to be with his mate had probably been overwhelming. "And Hastings?"

"Incinerated. The doctor is in custody."

Dalmon exhaled. He wouldn't have called it a sigh of relief, but at least the news was good. Now Hastings' death would need to be covered up. Disappearing a billionaire businessman wasn't easy. "Okay. Debrief at ten tomorrow."

There was a moment of silence which Dalmon knew he needed to fill. He'd been hard on Everest from the moment he decided he needed to join the Coven to search for Olier, not understanding that, even with Coven resources, Dalmon had found nothing.

Because of the Shadow Board. They bound shifters. They knew something, and Dalmon was going to rip it out of them tooth by tooth and nail by nail if he had to. He would get his hands bloodied for the first time in centuries if that's what it took.

This time, they were close.

“Good work, Lake.”

“Thank you.”

He heard the smile in Everest’s voice. “Don’t let it go to your head. A cocky agent is a dead agent.”

“Understood, Sir,” Everest replied formally as though there were others listening.

He ended the call and rolled his shoulders. Fates, he needed a shift. To spread his wings and set fire to something. But because of what he was, he needed to be careful when and where he shifted. If he’d been an eagle, things would’ve been easier, but then he’d only live once.

His phone rang again.

“Agent Black, we have one witch in custody and we are en route. The search is ongoing.”

“You are clear to continue. Hastings will not be returning. Who is the witch?”

“Lucian Marwood.” Agent Black paused before continuing. “He seems almost happy to be caught.”

Any trace of relaxation was crushed by Dalmon’s immediate suspicions. Hastings had been one step ahead of them this entire time. Was this another piece of his plan? What damage would Marwood do once inside the Coven?

“I don’t want him brought to the office.” He sat and pulled up a map on his computer populated with the location of Coven buildings. “Take him to safe house 11. I will meet you there.”

“I will notify the driver.” Agent Black hung up.

He could have ordered someone else to be the point of contact, but given the mole situation, he’d put himself in charge. He locked his computer, grabbed his coat, and finally left the office, even though he wasn’t leaving work. He wasn’t sure he ever left work. The Coven was his baby, and he’d be damned before he let a pack of power-hungry witches who

thought shifters were nothing more than magic battery packs
destroy what he'd built.

Chapter Three

LUCIAN HADN'T EXPECTED to be uncuffed, though he had expected the hood to be removed eventually. When his ankles were cuffed to the floor and his hands attached to the table, he realized the Coven saw him as a threat. Convincing them that he wasn't was going to be a bigger problem than he'd first anticipated.

The air in the room was heavy, as though trying to smother him. The bag on his head wasn't helping. Claustrophobia washed over him. He clenched his fists, and sweat beaded on his back as if he were being crushed and he couldn't find a way out.

Oh... He slowed his breathing. They were using magic dampeners.

And not the lightweight kind of thing that some businesses used to prevent competitors from using magic against them. This was heavy duty. The kind that was going to go from uncomfortable to painful sooner rather than later.

Add on the hood and the cuffs, and it was taking every measure of self-control he had not to tip over into freaking out again. He drew in another slow breath and tried to ignore the edge of panic gliding over his skin.

He wriggled his toes in his socks—they'd taken his shoes and emptied his pockets—and exhaled slowly, counting each second because it gave him something to concentrate on. Then he breathed in, again counting. Anything to distract himself. Were they waiting for him to break?

Would it be better if he did?

Something clicked, and Lucian froze. A slight breeze over his hands was enough to let him know it was a door opening. He didn't know if someone had been in the room with him the whole time or if someone was entering the room now.

With his next breath, the dampeners were gone.

The loss of pressure and his magic rushing to the surface almost broke him. His skin tingled with the need to do something.

“If you attempt to use magic, you will find yourself in a magic dampened hole beneath the Sahara for the rest of your life. Do you understand?” a woman asked.

“Yes.” His voice was rough. He swallowed, wanting to ask for water. Not that he could drink it with the hood on and his hands attached to the table. The chair was hard, and all he wanted to do was squirm.

“He's telling the truth,” she said.

So there was more than one person in the room, and she was a mind reader. He'd expected that. He wasn't sure if they were better or worse than psychometrics. Better, he decided, as at least they could only read things in the moment, not after the event.

Was she reading his thoughts now?

He immediately tried to make his thoughts still the way he did around Hank.

Sharp pain bloomed in his temple, and he grunted.

“If you fight this, it will be much more unpleasant,” she warned.

“Sorry. Habit.” So she had been reading his thoughts. And was probably reading them right now. He hoped she knew how uncomfortable and thirsty he was.

Though maybe she was already aware and didn't care.

“From living with Hank Hastings?” she asked.

“Yes.” How much did they know...and how deep was her thought reading? Because if she was going beneath the surface thoughts he kept on display, she knew everything, and that was rather more than he wanted anyone to know. Mostly because he didn’t like admitting it to himself.

Though to be honest, he’d much rather have them ripped out of his head than be forced to say them aloud.

“You will need to do both at some point. What is the bracelet?”

Who was the bracelet was the better question. Not that he knew the answer to that, either. “It was a gift... I think it was a shifter. It amplifies my magic.”

Or that’s what Hank had told him. He wasn’t sure if that’s what it did, and he really didn’t like the feel of it. Never had. But taking it off wasn’t an option.

Someone touched his wrist. The faint scent of spicy aftershave filtered through the hood. The man’s fingertips were warm, but the blade used to cut the leather wasn’t. Then it was gone.

After two years of wearing it, he felt naked without it.

He almost flexed his magic to see how much weaker he was but remembered at the last moment not to. Not that his magic did much. It wasn’t as though he could read minds or get thoughts from objects, both of which were very invasive. Nor could he heal or use the elements.

All he could do was find things, or more correctly, draw things to him. A skill he hadn’t even been aware of until he’d started working for Hastings. His family had no witches, or at least none that he was aware of.

His thoughts were rambling again. Was that because she was in there turning over rocks and poking around? Would it be quicker for him to talk? “What do you want to know?”

A chair scraped over the floor.

“Everything, Mr. Marwood,” the man said. His voice was deep and a little rough, and there was an aura of power around

him that wasn't only magic related—though there was plenty of that too.

“Everything? Did you read my statement?”

“Yes. As much as I appreciate the list of crimes you assisted to commit, that isn't what I'm interested in.”

“It's not?” Then what was this about?

“Don't worry, we will get to them, and there will be appropriate steps taken. However, I am more interested in Hastings' other dealings, those beyond the catching and binding of shifters. You were, by your own admission, his assistant.”

“I was.” God, he wished that was all he'd been. He wished he'd never uncovered his magic or let Hank teach him how to use it, or that he'd never been so enamored by Hank's wealth and power that he'd fallen into his bed. By the time he'd been kicked out, he'd been in too deep. Hank had manipulated him and bound him as easily as he bound the shifters. Leaving meant death.

There were several minutes of silence. Were they silently discussing him, typing notes? He wanted to be able to see what was going on.

The hood was lifted, exposing his mouth, and something metal was pressed to his lip, a straw. He took a drink, trusting that it was only water and nothing else. It tasted like water. They weren't going to poison him...not until they had their answers. When he was done, the hood was lowered.

“I know you want to punish me, but I want to help. I want to make amends and put things right.” He didn't want to rot in a Coven prison or be disappeared. He needed to do something to make up for what he'd done. For his magic to have a use beyond causing pain and suffering.

“Tell me how you met Hank Hastings,” the man said. It wasn't a question, and he was clearly used to being obeyed.

“An internship when I finished college.” He hadn't expected to get it. His grades were okay, but not outstanding. Hank had said that he interviewed well—

“This will be faster if you speak your thoughts and give my mind-reader a rest,” the man said.

Lucian doubted she'd rest; she'd just sift more effectively through what he wasn't saying. Maybe she was more dangerous than Hank.

“He said I interviewed well. I think he sensed my magic.”

“When did you become aware of your magic?”

“If he hadn't pointed it out, I would have never known.” It wasn't as if his magic was obvious.

“You are a finder? A good luck charm?”

“That's what he said.” There had been times where something he'd wanted had appeared in his life, but it wasn't as though he'd won the lottery or a new car or anything like that. Maybe that was only because he didn't know how to focus his magic on those things.

For the last year, he'd been trying to find a way out of his situation while at the same time not giving away his thoughts. He'd ended up thinking of flying. He'd watch birds and imagine being free to go anywhere. He'd used watching them to mask his desires.

“What did you do for him?”

“At first, or more recently?”

“Both. Tell me all about Hank Hastings and your relationship with him.”

This time, Lucian was glad for the hood and the way it hid his face.

His shame.

Someone pulled the hood off. He blinked suddenly at the light, and his eyes watered.

He wanted the darkness back.

Chapter Four

THE MAN in cuffs was younger than Dalmon expected. His dark blond hair was tousled, as though he'd just rolled out of bed. Marwood turned his head away and blinked a few times. No one liked it when the hood was removed, even though it was often the one thing they wanted.

Dalmon pressed his lips together. Had Marwood used his magic to ensure that happened, or was he still in charge of the interview? For the mind reader to work, the dampeners in the room had to be turned off. But he didn't trust Marwood or his odd magic.

He glanced over his shoulder at the mind reader, trusting that she'd get the message and sort it out. *I want dampening cuffs on him, now.*

She gave a slight nod and typed on her tablet, sending the message to one of the shifters in the safe house. Behind Marwood was another shifter.

He'd wanted to be arrested and had been a part of Hastings' operation for years. From his own thoughts, he had at some point been Hastings' lover.

The tablet was enchanted for want of a better word so that the mind reader could capture all of Marwood's thoughts. It was new technology that Kaine had been working on and was quite a timesaver, as she no longer needed to write up the reports after the fact. It also meant that she couldn't leave things out.

Vetting her had been Dalmon's first priority.

She'd known she was being tested and had welcomed it. That her wife was also her familiar had been a point in her favor.

“When you're ready, Mr. Marwood,” Dalmon said.

Slowly, Marwood lifted his gaze. His green eyes were glassy with unshed tears from the light. They were also completely captivating. Dalmon gripped the thought, crushing it so it couldn't dig beneath his skin.

“Where are the damn cuffs?” he muttered. Not wanting Marwood to manipulate him. That's what it was. There is no way that he could be finding him attractive. He was an accessory to dozens of murders, and Fates knew how many other crimes.

The bear shifter walked in. He roughly shoved up Marwood's sleeve and slapped the dampening cuff on him. It clicked closed. And Marwood gasped as if the metal had bitten him.

In a way, it had.

The innocent-looking silver bracelet had severed his connection to his magic. And it did absolutely nothing to kill the appreciation that Marwood had been genetically blessed with full lips and a sharp jaw.

Dalmon glared at Marwood as though it was his fault when clearly it was he who needed to get out of the office to get laid. As much as he loathed Everest's numerous indiscretions, perhaps he could do with some kind of dalliance himself.

Marwood blinked and held his gaze. “Did you need to? I said I wouldn't use magic.”

“I don't trust you.” There was something about him that was unsettling, even without magic.

Dalmon rested his elbows on the table and leaned forward. Neither of them looked away, and for a moment, it was as if he was flying, letting himself swoop and drop and draw closer as if his phoenix was welcoming an old friend.

He sucked in a breath. He knew Marwood. Not from this life. But he would stake a feather on the fact that they had crossed paths before. More than crossed paths from the joyful reaction of his shifter side.

Marwood flinched back and gasped.

Shit. Had he felt it?

Marwood's eyebrows knitted, and he shook his head as if to clear whatever thoughts he was having. "You don't need to trust me to understand that I regret accepting the job. That once I knew about magic and could use it, my life was nothing more than his to destroy."

There was a sense of truth to those words, but Dalmon couldn't shake the feeling that something was very wrong. Nothing added up the way it should. Nothing since Hastings had arrived in the country...

This little witch was probably the reason.

Marwood was the magnet messing up the magic.

"Tell me what happened from the moment you found yourself the internship." Dalmon leaned back and laced his fingers. Witches who didn't realize what they were usually ended up creating havoc, and it was hard to blame them if they didn't know. If family lore was lost or magic skipped a generation. It wasn't hereditary, like shifting. A wolf shifter never had bear cubs. Witch magic wasn't consistent in any respect. Even when it came to strength.

Marwood inclined his head as though agreeing. "In hindsight, I think I did find the job. I wanted out of the town I was living in. I wanted to live in the city, and I needed a paid internship to do it. Perhaps he was looking for a witch. I don't know. At first, it was errands and sitting in meetings about the running of the business. Eventually, I accepted the job as his PA. It didn't take him long to notice I wanted more, and soon after that he mentioned magic. He said that if I wanted something bad enough, it would land at my feet. The only things I wanted were a raise and him." He closed his eyes, and

his next words were little more than a whisper. “Both were a mistake.”

“How old were you?”

“Twenty-two.”

Older than Everest by a couple of years but young enough to be easily charmed by a charismatic older man who was already using stolen magic. And Hastings’ would have used Marwood’s wants to wrap him up tighter.

“And you got both?”

“I did.” Marwood stared at the table.

“And for a year it was...” He swallowed. “Perfect.” He shook his head. “I shouldn’t feel that way.”

In that moment, he seemed so fragile and vulnerable that Dalmon wondered if he was questioning one of Hastings’ broken victims. “You can’t change how you feel. He lured you in.”

“And I should have realized. I was learning magic. I loved my job and was sleeping with my boss. Living with him. My friends were warning me it was a bad idea, and I didn’t listen.”

“What would have happened if you’d ended it?”

Marwood looked at him, and his frown deepened. “I don’t know. I didn’t know about the other stuff. Maybe he’d have let me leave because it was too soon.”

Dalmon tilted his head. “Do you really believe that?”

He already knew the answer to the question. It was written on the screen the mind reader held. Marwood wanted to believe it. “I didn’t leave, so it doesn’t matter. He showed me ways to boost my magic. Gave me the leather bracelet. And told me how he wanted a specific shifter. That if I loved him, I’d help him. So I did.”

“How long did it take you to find the shifter, and what was it?”

“A snow leopard. Three months, I think? I didn’t believe it at first. Then he killed what I thought was his sickly pet snake

and bound the snow leopard. A few months later, a British doctor came to visit, and then I buried the leopard. That was when I realized where the bracelet had come from and what he was doing. I couldn't go to the police—”

“You could've gone to the Coven.” If he'd said something, Hastings could've been stopped. Or would he have slipped free again, the way he had the first time? The snow leopard magic helping him disappear and leaving no tracks?

“I loved him, and I thought he loved me. I don't think he ever did.” He stared at the table. Three tears dropped onto the surface. “I ruined so many lives, at first trying to please him and then trying to win him back, and then because I was terrified. I wanted to be arrested because it was the only way I was getting out alive.” He sighed. “If I was dead, I wouldn't have to live with the guilt.”

Dalmon lifted an eyebrow. Guilt didn't disappear with death.

But then again, Marwood wouldn't live again. Not the way he did anyway, and when someone from another life appeared in cuffs in front of him, and his phoenix was bursting to escape, it was unsettling at best. So who had Marwood been, and what had he meant to him before?

Chapter Five

IT SEEMED LIKE A BEDROOM, but it was definitely a cell. Even if Lucian hadn't been able to sense the wards, which he could, despite the dampening cuff on his wrist, it had that feel about it. The barren look combined with the dull colors.

There was a bed and nothing else in the room, not even a bedside light. The window was too small to climb out of and only gave him glimpses of the building next door and the sky. Not that he wanted to escape.

Hank couldn't get to him while he was protected by the Coven.

Being arrested meant that Hank couldn't hold him responsible for leaving. He lay on the bed and closed his eyes. For the first time in years, he wasn't anxious about what Hank would make him do next while at the same time needing to prove his worth so he stayed alive. He'd only messed up once.

He'd thought death would be a reprieve, only to find that when he was digging the hole that would be his grave, he didn't want to die. He wanted to live...but not like that.

Not like this either, but it had taken five years to make the mess, so he shouldn't expect it to unravel in five hours.

Not that he knew what time it was.

Or where he was.

Sleep dodged him as his mind replayed the arrest, the car ride, and the moment when the hood had been pulled off, and

he'd seen the dark-haired witch opposite him. It was rather dramatic to think that his heart stopped.

It hadn't. But there'd been something. He wouldn't even call it magic.

Nor was it lust.

Though it could easily become that. He ran his hand over his chest as if still sensing the reaction. The lift and fall like standing on the edge of a building and staring down. It was a dangerous edge and one he shouldn't be standing near. He bit his lower lip and tried to force the witch out of his mind.

Five years wasn't long enough to learn not to fall for powerful witches?

Hank had almost destroyed him. The Coven agent would do it in far less time.

And he'd be successful.

And Lucian would enjoy it.

He rolled onto his side and faced the wall, far too aware that the witch would be discussing his every thought and preparing for tomorrow's continuation of the questioning. He wasn't sure if he was dreading it or looking forward to it. Maybe both.

He scratched around the bracelet even though the dampener wasn't creating a physical itch and rolled over again, unable to be comfortable because now he was aware of the itch beneath his skin and at the back of his mind as if a mosquito had bitten his brain.

The way the dark-eyed witch had stared at him as he'd ordered the cuff, even though Lucian had promised not to use his magic, while his expression revealed nothing. Lucian was sure he'd felt the edge, too. Though why, he couldn't say.

It had been a moment.

The kind that usually happened in a club after a drink or three and ended up with them both sweaty and naked not long after. He missed those days...it had been so easy to pick up.

But it had all been magic. It hadn't been real.

Hank had once told him that witches like him were dangerous because they messed with free will and that the Coven would take his magic if he ever went to them.

At the time, especially since he'd just discovered it, the idea had been horrifying.

Now, if they wanted it, he'd gladly surrender everything that made him a witch.

Chapter Six

DALMON READ THE SCREEN. He'd ended the interview before his mind reader burned out. That Marwood appeared on the verge of breaking was also a factor. He needed him to be coherent, not a sobbing mess.

After the bear shifter escorted Marwood to his room, the mind reader remained for an extra half hour so they could see what Marwood thought about when he was alone. Having gone through the initial interview, Dalmon was now reading the unofficial part.

Which was far more disturbing, and not only because Marwood had felt that same something and didn't know what it was either. Dalmon stared at the screen without seeing the words.

What he'd felt was the kind of knowing, as though an impression had been left on his soul. The painful ones he and his brothers called soul bruises. But there were others, like the knowing of the castle he called home. He knew the layout and had never been lost even when exploring the so-called secret passageways, not because he remembered, but because it had become a part of him after so many lives.

Or when he read through one of the books he'd made in a previous life. He didn't remember the incidents, but the emotions swelled within him as though a part of him did, in fact, remember. He'd been furious Gerrit had let Everest read about the loss of Olier. If it had been him, he wouldn't have told Everest about the damn library until he was older. Not because he remembered how Everest had been before, but

because he'd made notes and was worried that the bruise would once again show through.

Which of course it had.

Was Marwood some kind of soul bruise from another life?

The screen dimmed as he tried to make sense of what he'd felt and what he knew. While phoenixes were immortal, everything else died. Phoenixes were reborn with their soul and body intact. Everything else lost their physical body, but that didn't mean that their souls didn't return.

What happened to souls was something no one had ever figured out. Did they return, did they go on to some other realm, did they get ripped up and recycled into new souls?

There were as many theories as there were kinds of paranormals and human religions.

He tapped the screen, waking it up, and read the last few paragraphs. They were even more unsettling. Marwood was either a victim or thought himself one.

Both could be true.

The trouble with mind reading was that it only revealed what the person being read believed had happened. He needed to proceed with caution in the next interview. The screen dimmed again, this time because the battery was getting low. He rubbed his eyes. It was three in the morning, and he should get some sleep.

He took the tablet with him, said goodnight to the shifters on guard duty, and got in his car. Before he'd even started the car, he pulled up Kaine's number.

Gerrit wouldn't answer during the night. Kaine would, and Kaine would be infinitely more useful because, in this life, Kaine ran security for the country and the Coven, but also because Kaine was a problem solver. He fiddled and researched until he found what he was searching for. It was his idea of fun.

"This had better be an emergency," Kaine grumbled, half asleep.

“It might be.”

“Everest?”

“He’s fine. And your device is working great.” Dalmon had mentioned the issue a couple of years ago, and Kaine had given himself the task of finding a way around it. From what Dalmon knew of his brother, he always had. It was part of him that survived every death as if some of their personalities and likes were fixed, or at the least changed very slowly.

“You didn’t call to congratulate me.” Kaine already sounded more awake.

Dalmon drove through the city. There was still traffic, but it flowed, and he’d be home in fifteen minutes.

“So, who is on fire?”

Dalmon shook his head at what Kaine thought was a hilarious pun. If one of them was on fire, they were dead. “I was questioning a suspect, and I *knew* him.”

Kaine was silent for a moment. “Like...*knew him*, knew him?”

“Yes. I’ve never met him before today. Didn’t even know his name, but when I looked into his eyes, there was a moment. Like the first time I held Everest.”

He hadn’t needed Gerrit to tell him it was his brother reborn. He’d gazed into the baby’s dark eyes, and it had been deeper than a memory, yet also more vague. A sense. A slight pressure, or inhalation of his soul.

“Is he a phoenix?”

Dalmon heard the hope in his brother’s voice, and for a moment, he didn’t want to be the one to crush it. Not one of them had ever stumbled over another phoenix, and he was sure they’d sense it if they did. “He is a witch...a finder.”

As he said it aloud, he realized that what they had needed centuries ago had arrived, albeit in the form of a criminal who’d assisted Hastings while also possibly being one of his victims.

Kaine exhaled as he realized what that meant. “Fuck... Wait. He’s a suspect?”

“Yes, big case, bad business indirectly related to the Board.” How could he lock up the man who might be able to help them find Olier...and possibly others? “And how did I know him? Have you ever run into someone and felt something even though you’d never met them?”

“Not in this life. And I don’t remember reading about it in my last two or three.”

That didn’t mean it hadn’t happened, though. “I don’t like it. What if he found me? Drew me to him?”

“What if he did?”

For most of his life, Marwood hadn’t known what he was. That he now understood how to use his magic, or at least understood what Hastings had told him, meant that it was possible Hastings had told him to find more phoenixes.

Marwood also didn’t know that Hastings was dead either.

“Did he recognize you?” Kaine continued.

Dalmon indicated and turned into his street. “At the time, I thought he did. The mind reader confirmed it.”

“And you have the transcript.”

“Yes.” While he could remove that part of the transcript, he couldn’t remove what she remembered. “But he doesn’t know why I felt familiar either. We both felt it. We must have met before. And in a way that left an impression on my soul. Who the hell is he?”

“It’s not who he is, but who he was. And who he was to you.”

“He’ll be in my books. He must be to have made a mark.” Even thinking about Marwood was giving him that rush again...as if he were plummeting to the ground. Would he spread his wings in time?

“I would assume so, but that’s a lot of books and a lot of people he could’ve been. He may not have been a he or a

witch at all in the past. Where would you even start? How would you know?"

Dalmon pulled into his driveway and waited for the gates to open, then he drove through. He parked and got out of his car, a security guard already opening the front door for him. He nodded at the man and left him to lock up.

"I need you to go through my books and find him." He made his way upstairs.

"No. We don't do that. You will have to come home."

"I don't have time." They were on the cusp of uprooting the Shadow Board or failing and facing a civil war between witches and shifters and humans. Ducking home to catch up on his own past was out of the question.

"Use the jet."

"I literally cannot leave at the moment." He shut his bedroom door and leaned against it.

"Because of him?"

"Because of the damn Board." While Kaine wasn't involved in the operations, he knew about the Shadow Board. "And I'm not leaving Everest here on his own. One of his Coven agent guards went down tonight."

"The one he was fucking?"

"The other one. He is expected to survive." The healer had sent him a message with an update. "They are mates. The agents, not Everest."

"Right. That got messy fast."

"It's the damn finder. I'm sure of it."

"Forget about who he was and find out more about that magic. It's not one I'm familiar with. But I bet it's a magic that is much sought after."

Kaine was right. It shouldn't matter who Marwood had been to him. Only who he was now and what his magic could do. Keeping him in the dampener, no matter how uncomfortable, was the best way forward. He needed to send

someone into the Coven archives to do some research. He wanted to send Everest, but he had work to do with the Shadow Board.

As much as he wanted to let go of the past, it was going to gnaw on his bones and keep him up at night until he found out. “You could always take the jet and come and see me with my books.”

“Are you seriously asking me to take the books out of the library?”

Was he? If even one fell into the wrong hands—and with the way things were at the moment, that was more than a remote possibility—their secrets would be out. He sighed. “No.”

“I’ll dig into his family, see if any were Coven affiliated. And also read the transcripts.” Kaine made a little noise. “I’m in his file. He’s a bit too pretty for you...not your usual type.”

“I don’t have a type.”

“Next time you are home, you should check out the gallery of exes. You like your women blond and your men rugged.”

“Do you think he’s in the gallery?” He didn’t really want to look at centuries of past lovers. What was the point when they were long gone and he was still there?

“Only if you were once married or really good friends who shared a bed to keep warm over the long winters.”

Dalmon snorted. One benefit of living many times and keeping records was that one stopped worrying about some of the petty shit that troubled humans. There was no need to repeat all the mistakes from last time, though there were some that were hard not to make. In Mont de Leucoy, civil unions had been common, as had the more pagan handfasting, until more recent centuries. People fleeing the witch hunts, the French Revolution, and then later Nazi Germany had brought more modern religions, and if they wanted sanctuary, they soon realized that it was a country where others were allowed to live and love and pray the way they wanted.

While witches and shifters didn't live openly, there was still a different vibe in the air.

These days, they had tourists who fell in love with the mountain air, as they called it, and immediately wanted to move there. The entry requirements for living and working in the kingdom were very strict. They needed to be as they had such a small amount of land.

If Marwood was a past lover, that might explain the feeling of knowing.

"Have you ever had a fated mate?" Kaine asked.

He was silent for a couple of breaths. Sure, they were witch and shifter, but that didn't mean they were mates. "I said I knew him, not that I was drawn to him."

"I'm only suggesting that if you had been mates in the past, that might explain it."

Dalmon nodded, even though Kaine couldn't see him. "That would make sense."

"Great. Now we've solved that mystery. I'm going back to bed. I'll call you during business hours if I find anything." Kaine ended the call.

Dalmon got ready for bed, knowing that he would only get a few hours sleep before he needed to be at his desk again. With a logical explanation of how he knew Marwood, which might still be proven incorrect, he might be able to find some rest.

Even if Marwood and he had been mates in another life, that didn't mean they were meant to be mates in this life. And Kaine was right—he did have a type, and Marwood wasn't what he looked for in men or women.

No, Marwood was pretty and blond and with enough edges that he would cut his fingers if he handled him wrong. He was everything all rolled into one deceitful, useful, and dangerous package that he shouldn't open no matter how much he wanted to peek beneath the wrapping paper.

Chapter Seven

BY THE TIME Dalmon had done the debrief—with Farrell, who was much improved after being shot, stitched, and healed as much as possible by a witch, Templeton, who was unusually quiet, and Everest, who had back chatted far less than normal—all he wanted was another cup of coffee. Three hours of sleep while managing several active and complex cases because he didn't know who he could trust within the Coven was weighing on him.

After asking Templeton to return tomorrow, he dismissed the mated agents. Then he sent Everest to fetch coffee and food, which gave him a few precious moments alone.

He did not like the way Marwood haunted his dreams yet offered no answers. If they had been fated mates previously, what if they were meant to be again—which, given who they were this time around, seemed unlikely. Everyone thought him a fire witch, which was exactly the way he liked it. It was much safer than coming out as a phoenix shifter. He didn't want that target painted on his back.

For how many centuries had he been living with that fear?

When had witches started going after them?

Humans had gone after dragons, and while they weren't immortal, they were very long-lived. He knew of at least one fire dragon—but only because he'd asked for help to hatch the egg that was his sister, and for that, he needed a fire witch. Dalmon had wished he'd been able to help.

Actual fire witches were as rare as dragons. Same with water witches. He couldn't remember the last time there'd been an air or earth witch on the Coven database. That didn't mean they weren't out there, only that they hadn't made their way to the Coven or that the Coven hadn't found them—which only happened when there was some kind of trouble that required a cover-up. He was sure they did more cover-ups for witches than they did shifters, but then shifters were raised by other shifters, so they knew what to expect and how to deal with it.

Someone knocked on his office door but didn't wait for him to answer. Everest. Dalmon felt his heat signature through the door.

He walked in, nudging the door closed with his hip. He was wearing dark gray suit pants and a silver shirt, no tie, and his jacket was slung over the back of the chair he'd been sitting in. He looked neither princely nor like an agent. More like a disheveled intern.

And a couple of years younger than when Marwood had started working for Hastings.

“What? Have I broken out or something?” Everest put the coffees and ham and cheese croissants on the desk, then ran his fingers over his chin as though expecting to find a pimple.

“I was thinking.”

“You were staring and looking very concerned. If you're concerned, I need to be afraid.” He sat and crossed his legs before picking up the cup and taking a sip as if they were now equals, not boss and employee.

It was a line he would have to watch because there would be times when Everest needed to obey without question for his own safety and for the sake of the operation. No one in the Coven needed to know they were brothers.

But both Templeton and Farrell did.

They also knew about phoenixes.

The more people who knew, the more likely the secret would get out. There was a small part of him that sometimes

played with the idea of what it would be like to live openly among humans—not in the way Hastings wanted, where witches set themselves up as the protectors of humanity because only they could control shifters—but as the way they must have once.

How else would humans carry the lore in their myths if shifters and witches hadn't once been part of everyday life?

They had already been in hiding before the witch and shifter hunts of the Middle Ages.

There was mention of both in antiquity, and the Coven had secured some of those texts but left others as it was clear that humans thought they were talking about myths or gods or that it was a metaphor for human nature or some other misinterpretation.

Everest pushed a cup and croissant toward him. “So what is it?”

He picked up the cup, knowing that he'd need to remind Everest to return them to the café downstairs. “Hastings.”

Everest glanced away. “I know, I fucked up.”

He had, but no one had died this time, for which Dalmon was grateful. He didn't like agents having a mate because if one died, the other would pine away. That Templeton had technically died was a slight issue that he hoped the healer and bond breaker might shed some light on tomorrow. “Learn from it, move on.”

“I didn't expect to be killing people. I came here to find —”

“I know exactly why you are here, and I'm not going to let you destroy yourself about it again.” Everest was the reason they were all too close in age, not that he'd remember. Though he must have read about it.

It had been Gerrit who'd told him what had happened at the end of Everest's reign, before the poisoning, and even though the recklessness of it had irked Dalmon, he understood why because the loss of Olier had left a soul bruise that Kaine's early death had pressed on. Kaine had been the heir.

Gerrit was a baby and the next in line to the throne. And Everest, or Sebastien as he'd been known then, had realized he was an old man with a baby to raise. If he'd died, there'd have been no one to pass on the lore. Sure, they had a few servants who knew, but they didn't know everything.

Kaine and Dalmon could've been stuck as rocks. But instead of letting things be or only hatching one of them, King Sebastien had woken them both before his death. Gerrit hadn't been much older than Everest was now when he'd had to take the throne. He'd relied on the books. Sebastien had told Gerrit to read his. It wasn't something they did, but it had been a deathbed request because Gerrit didn't know everything even though, by all accounts, Sebastien had ruined Gerrit's childhood in the rush to get him ready.

Gerrit had not done the same to Everest. He'd coddled the kid. But that was who Gerrit was. He'd never had a sharp edge.

"I need you to progress with your entry to the Shadow Board. I will assign a new Coven agent to your security team." He sighed. They needed to stop them, but it was also their only lead on dragon and phoenix shifters.

Everest gave a single nod. "I think Jacob and Orion can help us."

It took Dalmon's brain several seconds to realize Everest meant Farrell and Templeton. "Farrell said he's retiring, and Templeton is doing the same to be with his mate."

The idea of retiring sometimes held an appeal at one in the morning, but he'd be bored twenty-four hours later. And while he wouldn't have said the two agents looked at each other with love, there was something there that ran deeper. An understanding. And for a heartbeat, he wanted that. He wanted someone.

Marwood's green eyes flashed in his mind.

Not him.

"I mean, they can go through the records at home and chase leads. You don't have the time because of the Coven.

Gerrit can't as King. Kaine is locked into his role as security advisor, plus the business. And I'm not allowed to go running all over the place without half a dozen people following or running ahead to open doors."

Dalmon almost smiled at the complaints. Reading his last life and seeing the technological changes that had happened, he was sure that his past self wouldn't have believed it. Or maybe he would've because there had been so many changes over the centuries. He should do a bit of future forecasting to see if he was right next time.

He bet Kaine already had. Probably had in every life. He should ask, although maybe he did in every life, too.

"You're suggesting bringing in outsiders." Outsiders who would then need to read their books. Their most private thoughts and fears, as well as the duller things that might need to be passed on.

"I am. I admit it was a spur-of-the-moment idea—"

Dalmon lifted an eyebrow. "How unusual."

Everest using his mouth before his brain. He seemed to use every part of his body before his brain. Some things never changed. Dalmon picked up the still-warm ham and cheese croissant and took a bite.

Everest muttered something in French that Dalmon pretended not to catch because he couldn't be bothered with the argument. He had enough drama without Everest contributing.

"Let's entertain the notion. Tell me, how are they suitable? How would it work?" He was already pulling it together. But could Everest?

Everest held up his hand and lifted one finger. "They are agents with three decades of experience between them." A second finger went up. "They know the truth." A third finger. "They can travel freely, as they are not royal."

All things Dalmon had already realized. "They would need access to the library and permission to read all of our books."

“If it means finding Olier, they can read mine.” Everest’s gaze hardened. “Would you prevent them?”

Those books were private, meant for their own eyes, or at least that was how it had been. He had no idea if his brothers had read his. If they had, they had never let anything slip—in this life or the others that he’d read about. There was a level of trust that needed to exist between them because they needed each other. They needed another phoenix to hatch, though he was sure these days a machine could generate enough heat to make it happen. Would a machine be able to sense when to stop?

If the egg wasn’t pulled out in time, the body would need to cool and self-ignite to reform the egg. He had witnessed the process and written about it two lives ago.

“No, I wouldn’t. But then they would know everything about us.”

Everest licked his lower lip, then took a drink. “I don’t think that is such a bad thing after my last life. If we are all eggs, someone needs to know what to do. And they need to know our history to then tell us. If I’d have been poisoned even a few years earlier, we’d have been fucked.”

They wouldn’t be having this conversation. The Shadow Board might be running unchecked, and all shifters might be finding themselves either hunted or bound. He should have more faith in the people who ran the Coven when one of his brothers wasn’t available, but it seemed as though things went to shit when they weren’t there. Twenty years had been enough time for the Shadow Board and men like Hastings to become more powerful.

For rot to set in and spread through the Coven.

“I’ll raise it with Gerrit and Kaine. We would all need to agree. Templeton and Farrell would need to want it.”

“Err... I kind of said I’d put a word in with Gerrit if they wanted a job.”

Dalmon rolled his eyes. Of course, he’d already mentioned it.

“I didn’t mention the egg finder part.”

Finder. There was that word again. They had a witch who could find things.

“You’ve got that look again,” Everest said as he picked up his croissant. He ate it in a couple of bites. “What’s the problem?”

“It’s Hastings-related.”

“Did the doctor say something?”

He hadn’t interviewed the doctor yet. “No. While you were rescuing Templeton, we raided his house and arrested his accomplice.” They’d taken everything, but so far, the only useful things were what Marwood had already gathered. It was too convenient.

“You say that as if it’s a bad thing.”

Dalmon nodded and considered the man who was his youngest brother in this life. The one who spent a lifetime searching for their missing brother only to have nothing at the end. His life had been consumed by loss. Dalmon had been a child for most of the time he’d known the Sebastien version of Everest, but what he’d written about him had revealed a broken man, running out of years, with no time for anyone or anything else, including him, his supposed son.

He didn’t want Everest to be consumed again.

If it meant finding Olier and possibly others of their kind, could he use Marwood? Or did that make him as bad as Hastings?

Chapter Eight

LUCIAN STOOD under the punishing spray of the shower. It was a little too hot, but he didn't care. It drummed on his head, driving the itch of the dampener from his mind and skin. As soon as he stepped out, it would be back.

He had managed to sleep, but it was fitful, and he'd woken with a jolt as if he were falling too many times. Then he'd struggled to find a comfortable position. During the night, he'd scratched at his arm, and the skin was raw around the cuff as though he'd been trying to claw it off...the way so many shifters had tried to escape their shackles.

The discomfort he was feeling wasn't even close to the fear and pain they'd felt. Without the need to keep his guard up, years of chained-up emotions kept slipping through the cracks, and once again, he found himself crying. At least the shower hid the tears this time, if not the shake of his shoulders.

Was he having a mental breakdown?

Did that happen when people were rescued?

"Finish off," the shifter watching him said. Sometime during the night, the bear had been replaced with a tiger. He wasn't much smaller than the bear, and he was just as unfriendly as if they had all been told he'd helped Hank bind and kill shifters.

Lucian sucked in a breath and turned off the tap.

The relief he'd felt yesterday was gone.

Today, all he wanted to do was sit on the floor of the shower with the water drowning out all of his thoughts. That he'd remained standing was only because if he sat and gave in, he wasn't sure he'd ever be able to move, and he didn't want to be manhandled by shifters who hated him.

He grabbed the towel and dried off while avoiding looking at the guard.

He hadn't bound anyone. He didn't know how.

He'd fed them and done everything possible to make their lives as pain-free as possible. Everything except letting them go, or reporting it to the Coven, or doing something useful. His mother had always said he was a mistake and that he wasn't good at anything.

She was right. Everything he had was because he'd unwittingly used magic to draw it to him. He could see that now. But doing it consciously was much harder, nor was it a quick process.

The shifter guard snatched the towel off him.

"Hey." Then Lucian saw the blood welling in the scratches on his arm. He hadn't realized he'd been scratching. Thinking about magic made the itch worse.

"Get dressed."

But he was still wet in places. His hair dripped onto his shoulders. "Can I dry my hair?"

"You'll be fine." The guard pointed at the pile of gray clothing.

Lucian pulled on the briefs, also gray, track pants, undershirt, and sweatshirt. Even the socks were gray. If he hadn't felt depressed before, he did now.

Water dripped onto his shoulders.

The shifter gave him a cool once-over. "You can eat now."

Lucian nodded and followed his guard out of the bathroom. There'd been another guard waiting outside as if they expected him to get out of the cuff and magic his way out

of what had to be a secure building—not that he knew where he was.

He expected them to return him to his room. Instead, he was led back to the questioning room. As soon as he sat, his guards closed the shackles around his ankles, chaining him to the floor.

“How do you like it, witch?” The tiger shifter hissed as he stood.

Lucian bit his lip. He didn’t. He hadn’t liked being a part of it either, but he doubted they’d believe him, so he kept his mouth closed.

A bowl of butter chicken and rice was placed in front of him, along with a spoon and a piece of naan bread. Were they near an Indian takeaway? Or was there a kitchen where someone was cooking for him and his guards and whoever else was in the building? He wasn’t sure if it was a house or an apartment.

The meal was warm, and because he didn’t know when he’d get to eat again, he concentrated on getting it all down. Given that this wasn’t what he’d call breakfast food, he was going to assume that he’d slept through it, and it was now midday or later. A plastic water bottle sat at the end of the table. He reached for it, but it was a few inches too far away. Because of the shackles, he couldn’t move any closer. And he couldn’t move the table because it was bolted to the ground.

He slumped in the chair, aware that it had been done deliberately.

If he wanted a drink, he needed to ask.

They could fuck off.

For a couple of moments, he sat there, trying to come up with other ways to reach the water, but refusing to ask only hurt himself.

He swallowed what was left of his pride. “Can you please pass me the water?”

“I can.” The guard didn’t move.

Lucian gritted his teeth. “Will you please pass me the water?”

“Now imagine asking if you don’t have a voice.”

What did the shifter guard want him to do, whimper?

How thirsty did he need to be before he did?

The shifter guard picked up the bottle and moved it a few inches closer. Lucian stretched and grabbed it. He took off the lid and took a couple of swallows. He was sure the guard was enjoying this.

At least he’d never taken pleasure in anyone’s suffering.

The door to the room swung open, and the dark-haired witch strode in and pulled out the chair. “Are you finished?”

Lucian ate the last couple of bites and then nodded.

The man barely moved his head before the guard took away the bowl and spoon. The water he left.

“I will speak with them to make sure they don’t behave like that again,” he said before the guard had even left the room.

No doubt that was deliberate. He seemed like the kind of man who made very deliberate decisions. And the kind of man who was obeyed.

“I understand why they are doing it.” If his guards got in trouble, they might find other ways to take their anger out on him.

“That doesn’t make it right.” The man set a file on the table and flicked it open. He pushed a piece of paper over. “Is all of that correct?”

Lucian scanned the page and realized it was a neat summary of his life up until the point he started working for Hastings. “Yes. How...?”

“And this?” The man pushed another piece of paper over.

This time, it was a list of names, along with an animal.

Lucian stared at it, and a sick tumble swelled in his stomach. “What is it?”

“A list of shifters who have gone missing over the last five years.”

Lucian glanced up at him, not sure what he was supposed to do with the list, only that he was responsible for some of them going missing. “I gave you the records that Hank kept.”

“I want you to look at the names and the kinds and tell me which ones you found.”

Lucian swallowed and shook his head. “I don’t know.”

“You don’t know what?”

“I never knew their names.” His eyes prickled. “At first, I wasn’t even sure my magic worked. It was only when...when he made me look after them that I...” His voice cracked.

The man pulled out another piece of paper. More names. “That is a list of shifters who we rescued from him over a decade ago.”

Some of the names were the same. The most recent one was Orion Templeton. “I don’t understand.”

“He was hunting those that we had rescued. He used you to do it. How?”

Lucian stared at the papers, unable to look up at the man. “He’d tell me what to do.”

“You are a witch. How do you activate your magic? I can see that the dampener is irritating you and that being cut off from it hurts. That means the magic is developed enough that you can access it easily.”

“What are you?” His gaze flicked up for a second. Long enough to see the man’s eyebrow jump as though he wasn’t used to being questioned.

“A fire witch.” He lifted his hand, and dark red flames formed on his skin. When he fisted his hand, the flames went out.

“Mine’s not like that. It’s not instant.” He worried his teeth over his lower lip. “He said I was barely a witch, that he could make me stronger, and that I’d be able to have anything I wanted.”

“And how did that work out?”

Lucian shook his head. “He only let me use my magic for him. Said he’d know if I was wasting it. He’s psychometric.”

“I am aware,” the man said dryly.

Lucian had the feeling he already knew everything and this was a test of how honest he was. “My magic is like awakening a craving.”

“Go on.”

What else could he say? “And when it works, the hunger is sated.” He understood that now. At first, he hadn’t recognized either sensation. “When he wanted me to find him something, he’d share magic with me. It felt different, sharper.”

“How did he share it?”

Lucian closed his eyes and lowered his chin.

Did he need to tell this man every humiliating incident over the last five years? If so, they’d be there for a long time.

“You decide how long this takes, Marwood.”

“Lucian. Please. Marwood was my father.” And according to his mother, he would never be half the man his father had been. That his father had been killed when Lucian was ten made it rather hard to live up to his memory.

When the man didn’t respond, Lucian knew he needed to answer the question.

“Sex. Then later...” He flinched at the memory of Hastings’ hand on his throat and the demand that followed. The way power pushed through his skin and into his veins as though he were a puppet. “He kind of forced me, and I had to obey.”

“When did you start and stop sleeping with him?”

“Start? Almost immediately.” He’d been charming and made him feel special and wanted. Now he just felt like an idiot. “Once I could use my magic, that was all he wanted. I was stupid enough to try to regain his interest. I did everything to prove that I was...was worthy. By the time I realized what was going on and that he’d used me, it was too late.”

“Why didn’t you come to the Coven?”

“He said you killed my kind. That’s why I was so rare.” *So special.* He wanted to throw up. “I was afraid of him, of you, of shifters. Of everyone.” He swallowed. He was still better off with the Coven than Hank. “What’s going to happen to me?”

“I haven’t decided. You helped ruin a lot of lives.”

Lucian nodded. “I didn’t know. Not at first. You have to understand how scared I was.”

“Do you understand how scared they were? Trapped in their animal form, being drained of their magic, their life?”

“I understood before you did this.” He lifted his cuffed hand. This time, their gazes clashed, and once again, his stomach swooped and soared. “Who are you?”

“Dalmon Vecker, Head of Coven operations, globally,” he said, as though offering the time. He didn’t need to growl or snap. This man was the Coven. And all of its resources were at his fingertips.

It was the kind of power Hank had always wanted.

Thank fuck he’d never gotten it.

For months, he’d watched birds and dreamed of flying free. Now, when he looked at this man, that’s what he felt. It was unnerving. Dalmon Vecker was the reason he’d known when the Coven would rescue him. “Why did I find you?”

“I would love to find the answer to that question.”

Chapter Nine

DALMON LEANED BACK and considered the witch in front of him. He appeared to be even more fragile than yesterday. It was going to be interesting reading the mind reader's transcripts after this. Without her in the room, he hoped Marwood might be less guarded in his thoughts and more open with his answers.

As much as he hated it, Marwood, while complicit, was also a victim, which made finding an appropriate punishment that much harder.

With the mind reader nearby, he didn't want to ask too many revealing questions. That would have to wait until next time.

At least Marwood admitted to using his magic to find him. Though probably not him specifically. "What was it you were hungry for?"

He used the witch's words for his magic. He was a rare type, according to records, but there was a note that they were only rare because most never realized what they were. They caused little damage, so they never needed Coven help. They were both the weakest and potentially the most powerful if they worked out what they were and understood what they were doing.

The database had raised the question about several historical figures, but that was all supposition—which he hated in the database. It was supposed to be facts and possible theories, not bloody gossip. But it left him in a tricky place

because Marwood—he couldn't bring himself to call him Lucian—could be a danger even to himself at this point.

“Freedom, but I couldn't think it because he'd check my cups. My furniture. Even my watch. He monitored my thoughts.” His green eyes turned glassy. “A couple of crows were outside the window one day. When they flew away, I wondered what that would be like. Then I realized I could dream of flight. That if I saw birds flying, I could watch and yearn.”

And there he was. Not only the head of the Coven but also a phoenix. A bloody bird.

He knew he'd been dragged into the Hastings case for a reason.

“How long did it take?”

“Six months, I think, but the hunger sharpened when we arrived in England. I knew then it was close.”

“Because it was sharper?”

Marwood frowned. “I don't know how else to describe it. Like, I could feel things moving around me, and I became hyperaware of my hunger.”

“You were ready for the raid.”

Marwood nodded. “When they entered the grounds, I knew it was over. My hunger was sated.”

“During those six months, you were also working magic for Hastings?”

“Yes.”

“What?”

His tongue darted over his lip. “Finding shifters.”

“Be specific. What did he tell you to find?”

“That he wanted the Komodo dragon who'd been stealing from him. He always had a reason.” Marwood's gaze flicked from his hands to the paper and then up to him. Dalmon bit back as the pressure formed and swelled in his chest. He did

not want to be the first one to look away. Marwood's lips parted, and for a moment, he relaxed. When he looked away, the tension was back. "He said reasons helped me focus. He also said it was the last one. I knew he'd kill me when he was done. I almost wanted him, too."

He was right; Hastings would've killed him. Though he'd have taken his magic first so he could use it himself.

Marwood leaned forward, his eyes wide. "You can't let him find me. I can't go back. Take my magic and send me to some Coven-run wildlife park to make amends or something. I don't care. I'd rather be nothing in the middle of nowhere than where he can find me."

Panic and fear laced his voice. And Dalmon didn't need the mind reader to confirm it was real. He couldn't let the young witch live in fear. "He can't hurt you, or anyone, anymore. He's dead."

Marwood stared at him. "You're not just saying that?"

"He was killed during the rescue of the dragon."

For several seconds, Marwood was frozen as if he couldn't process the information. Then he folded over, head on his arms, and started sobbing.

Dalmon stared. He'd broken the witch with good news?

Shit.

He stood and walked around and put his hand on the witch's shoulder. His stomach lifted as though he were soaring over the mountains at home. He needed to shift, that was all. But the lie was so heavy it couldn't take flight.

Marwood turned and wrapped his arms around Dalmon's thighs. His face pressed against his hip. "Thank you. I shouldn't be so glad that he's dead. But I am."

Dalmon patted his hair, the way he'd once done with Everest when he was young, as he contemplated ways to extract himself while, at the same time, enjoying the feel of his hair on his fingertips. "I'm glad he's dead, too."

Marwood pulled away and wiped his face. "I'm sorry."

So you should be. The thought surged to the surface. He stepped back, disgusted that he'd shown any compassion for the witch, yet mourning the loss of contact. His own reaction to the mess the witch was in was as unsettling as his tears.

"It's fine." He had to fight to keep his voice level. "I think we're done. I'm going to order you a psych evaluation."

"You think I'm mad?"

"No, but he damaged you deeper than you want to know. That I can help with." He took another step back, not sure why he'd wanted to comfort him in the first place.

Bloody soul bruise. That's why Marwood's teary apology had hit so hard.

If he could uncover what damage he and Marwood had inflicted on each other in the past, they might be able to heal.

Chapter Ten

SITTING in his room with only a deck of playing cards to keep him company, Lucian still didn't understand what had possessed him to grab onto the fire witch as if he were a lifeline. Only that the moment they'd touched, he hadn't wanted to let him go.

And if Dalmon—the name felt odd in his mouth, maybe because it was unusual—hadn't touched his hair, that would've been it. But that gesture had turned something inside of him, and all he'd wanted to do was beg for forgiveness.

He didn't want Dalmon to hate him.

He wanted...

His fingers traced the dampener. He was safe to want whatever he wanted. Nothing would happen. No one would get hurt.

He wanted Dalmon to tell him that everything was going to be okay. That he could fix things. Fix him. Fix them.

But there was no *them*.

And nothing could be fixed.

None of it made any sense at all. Even the way he felt, as though he was both falling and safe. Maybe he was as broken as Dalmon believed. That should bother him a lot more than it did. Instead, he was more than happy for a witch to go into his head and patch things up. If they said the only way to do that was to remove his memory of the last five years, he might agree.

He wanted it over. If that was even possible.

He shuffled the cards and dealt another game of solitaire.

The moment it was over, he was sure he'd never see Dalmon Vecker, head of the Coven, again. Which should be a relief. He was intense, mildly terrifying, hot, both to touch and look at. He was really fucked up if he was attracted to yet another powerful witch who would only end up fucking him up further.

But even as he thought it, he knew that wasn't what Dalmon would do. He was sifting through the mess and trying to put things back where they belonged. Even thinking of Dalmon caused a little flutter in his chest.

There was a pull to him he'd never felt before.

And it wasn't his magic because, at the moment, he had none.

Chapter Eleven

DALMON SCRUBBED his hand over his face and tried to focus on the transcripts of the doctor's first interview when all he wanted to do was re-read Marwood's transcript. He was a scab that he couldn't stop picking.

Sure, saying they must have been fated mates in a previous life had taken out some of the heat, but he couldn't leave it alone until he'd fixed it. Soul bruises meant something was wrong. He couldn't walk away. Otherwise, the bruise would remain, ready to bloom in another life.

It could be something that happened before they'd kept records or in a language they could no longer read, meaning he'd never find an answer. Fates, the way Marwood had looked up at him as though about to beg for forgiveness, even though his role wasn't forgivable.

Marwood had fucked up, and he was going to have to live with that. But what the fuck was Dalmon supposed to do with him?

The thing with wounds was if they weren't tended, they festered. This was not something he wanted rotting and spreading because he didn't want to poke.

How much poking would Marwood be able to withstand?

Every time the witch opened his mouth, Dalmon was sure the tangle became worse.

His phone rang. "Vecker."

“Did you sleep? Because your mood has not improved.” Kaine was far too chirpy for it to be anything other than the solving of a problem—hopefully Dalmon’s.

Dalmon closed his eyes. “The problems are getting worse. You need to come here.”

“I’ll try. Let me show you something.” The call switched to video. Kaine was standing in the private portrait gallery. “I’ve been here a handful of times, mostly because it’s quiet and has a lovely view of the lake, but I never thought anything of this until your call. So I came to be sure. Look.”

Dalmon stared at the screen. It was his wall of past lovers. He was in some of them—but the men and women could’ve all been strangers because he recognized none of them despite the life they must have shared. “We have already established that I like blond women.” There were a few blond men, too. So he liked blonds. Whatever. That was not the reason for his...his something to Marwood.

“No, look at what isn’t there.” Kaine touched the hook where a painting had once hung. “Why isn’t this spot filled?”

“I have no idea.”

“I took the liberty of checking the dates on the back. There are one hundred and sixty-seven years between the two on either side. Which means—”

“I had a life between, and for some reason, I took that one down and wanted the space left.”

“Exactly. Now you know which book you need to read.”

“When?”

“Sometime in the 1600s.”

“Peak witch hunts.” And the start of what would become the Coven.

“Not that long ago, Dalmon. Still a fresh wound for our kind.”

“I can’t leave London.” Nor would Kaine read his book. “Do you have an overlap?”

“Would I half-ass this? Of course I’ve already checked, and so has Gerrit, but I’m not sure this is something that should be told over the phone or secondhand from someone else’s book.”

Dalmon sighed and rested his elbow on his desk and his head in his hand.

“Are you alright?” Kaine asked.

“No, I’m not bloody alright.” And neither was Marwood, and if he didn’t start sorting shit out, he was sure it was only going to unravel further. “Just tell me.”

“I want you to remember that it wasn’t me or Gerrit writing this stuff. We were all different people with different experiences, and it was a fucked-up era. That and it’s all written in Middle French. We should’ve stuck with Latin—who made that decision to modernize and switch?”

On that, Dalmon had to agree because at least Latin didn’t change. Reading Middle French was quite different to modern French, the official language of Mont de Leucoy. “Get to the point. I won’t hold you responsible for the delivery of what is obviously bad news.” What had he done if Kaine was reluctant to say? For a couple of heartbeats, he almost changed his mind.

“I will send you a photo of the pages from our books. We have agreed to that—if you want it. How’s your middle French?”

“Terrible. It’s why I stopped going back through my books, so the photos won’t do me any good.” And he didn’t want to pry into his brothers’ thoughts, even if they had been different people back then. They hadn’t been that different. Their soul and flesh were the same.

“And remember, this may not be it, but it’s all I have at the moment.”

“I know. Thank you for digging.”

“Always a pleasure.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to come to London?”

“I’ll see if I can clear a few days. Ready?”

Dalmon sat back and took a breath. “Give it to me. Wait, how will I know if this is the cause of the soul bruise?”

“I don’t know. Maybe next time you see him, it will jolt more of an impression.”

Every time he saw Marwood, something jolted, and he didn’t like it. He didn’t have time for an extra case. His gaze flicked to the clocks on the wall. “I have a meeting with the US in half an hour.”

“Maybe I should call you after.”

“No.” Because then he’d dwell on it. “Bad news is better served hot and with no gravy.”

“Only if you’re a masochist. Most people like it doled out and with a little sugar.”

Dalmon pinched the bridge of his nose. “The clock is ticking. I have the Board, and Hastings, and now this. Please just hit me and let me wipe up the blood later.”

“Fine.” Kaine sat on one of the sofas in the gallery. Behind him, the faces of the past stared as if judging him. “You had a fated mate in that life. She was a witch, something you called a chercheuse.”

Dalmon grunted. A seeker. A finder. And they had been fated mates? That was too much of a coincidence.

“Is that hitting hard enough for you?”

He swallowed and nodded. “Keep going.”

“I don’t know everything that happened, only that you found her in our library. There was an argument, and you banished her and her parents from the kingdom.”

“I sent my mate away?”

“You did, even though you were cautioned against it because your lives were bound. You told us to fuck off and then threw yourself into creating a way for shifters and witches to get help. The Coven effectively.”

He was aware that he'd set up the Coven, but not the details. At some point after Olier's capture, it had become more formal.

"How long did I live without her?" He knew in his gut that he'd died young because of that choice.

"Not even a year. You were twenty-six when you returned home half dead with the pining. Apparently, I wrote the last few pages of your book. No, I'm not reading them even though I wrote them because you were too weak."

"Did Gerrit have anything to add?"

"That was the summary of both of ours. I left out the cursing of your stubbornness."

"Why was she in the library?"

"I'm guessing that's in your book. Sending away your mate and then dying of the pining will leave more than a bruise on both of you."

And Marwood's apology had been for something he didn't even remember.

Kaine was silent for a few heartbeats. "Whatever mess he is in, it may not have started in this lifetime, and he will have even less awareness of the past than you."

Yet, it had marked Marwood. And without knowing why, he'd drawn Dalmon to him. "I do not want a fated mate."

Kaine narrowed his gaze. "Why? Does it hurt to think about the loss?"

Dalmon opened his mouth to argue that it was the last thing he needed, but he realized Kaine was right. Even when he looked at Farrell and Templeton, despite the danger they'd put themselves in, he envied their connection. He was still wounded from the loss of a mate four centuries ago. "What the fuck am I supposed to do?"

"Proceed with caution. You aren't who you were, and neither is he. In fact, he is even less like the person he was than you."

“If I don’t fix it, this is going to come around again?”

“Without a doubt.” Kaine shrugged. “Are you really going to stab yourself in the heart to get back at him for something he did over four hundred years ago?”

When put like that...no...but...

“He’s a criminal, Kaine.”

Kaine nodded, lips pressed together. “I took the liberty of reading the file in case you needed to step aside. That’s why I told you to be very careful. Even I can see the way this stretches back.”

“You need to read those pages in my book. I’m not going to be able to even if I fly home tonight, and I need to know.”

Kaine closed his eyes as though preparing to refuse.

“I don’t want to make the same mistake again.” And when he looked at Marwood, he was sure he would. But what was the mistake? “I need to know why she was in the library and why I sent her away...” It had been during the witch hunts. Had he sent her away to be tortured? “Was she killed by hunters?”

“I don’t know. All I know is that your fury killed you both.”

Dalmon stared at the clocks on the wall. London time. New York time. Sydney time.

They all said the wrong time.

Chapter Twelve

LUCIAN KEPT his eyes closed as the healer held her hand over the raw skin on his forearm. Most of the damage had been done while he was asleep when he couldn't stop himself from scratching. He wasn't getting that much sleep to start with, and while he'd like to blame the dampener, when he did sleep, the fire witch was there.

Staring at him.

No, glaring as though he'd done something to hurt him.

When he shook off that dream, he was drowning, scratching, and clawing, and waking up with blood under his nails.

“Maybe I need mittens so I can't scratch myself.” He'd meant it to sound like a joke, a bit of dark humor to prove that he was fine. He wasn't, but he wasn't sure how much healing he wanted.

The skin beneath her touch stretched and burned as though about to rip. He sucked in a breath between his teeth, and his legs jerked against the restraints.

She released him. “I will ask that they remove the cuff for an hour a day.”

Lucian rubbed the new shiny pink skin. “No. That's not a good idea.”

“Why?”

“Because I might accidentally use my magic and hurt someone.”

“Have you always feared it?”

He blinked at her, trying to remember when he hadn't been afraid. He'd been scared and stressed for so long that finding a moment when magic had been fun was hard. “No. But I don't want to hurt anyone by accident. If I do, I won't be trusted.”

“And that's important to you?”

He frowned. “Isn't it important to everyone?”

“I'm asking about you,” she said with a smile. “What is important to you?”

He should be able to answer that straight away, but getting out had been his priority, so nothing else had mattered. “I need to make things right. I'm not a bad person.”

She considered him. “Do you want to talk about Hank Hastings?”

“No.” Because then he had to talk about what an idiot he'd been.

“Not all wounds are physical.”

“I know that. I wanted to be special, and loved, and wanted. He used that. I've had months to see what I did wrong.”

“There's nothing wrong with wanting to be loved,” she said softly, and he wanted to believe her.

“There is when the other person doesn't love you and only wants to use your magic.” He couldn't remember why he'd begun picking at their relationship—he shouldn't glorify it by calling it that—only that he'd woken up one day and realized that Hank had never loved him. It had been an act, all be it a convincing one. Or perhaps he was an easy audience.

“Is that why you want to give up your magic?”

She watched him, and he stared back. It was only when he was sitting opposite Dalmon that he felt as though he might crumble. That he'd burst into tears when Dalmon had said Hank was dead... He wasn't even sure where the tears had come from. The worst part was the way he'd grabbed

Dalmon's legs as if he could prevent him from drowning in the tumble of emotions.

"Maybe. Then it would be real." What if he magicked up another lover, and they didn't really want him, but they had to be there? "I don't want to force people to want me."

She tilted her head. "That isn't how magic works, not even yours. If you don't want to be healed, I can't heal you. You can search for a partner, but you can't force someone to be yours."

"Not even if I think of someone specific? Then how did I find those shifters?" They had been specific, not that he'd known their names. Hank had given him enough details to be sure he found the right one.

"You put out the magical call, and like pieces on a chess board, things started to move until you got close. How did you get the job with Hastings?"

"All I wanted was to move to the city and find a paid internship. A friend already had a job, so I crashed with them. We were out one night, and someone else was talking about..." He stopped as he saw all the pieces that had moved to make the interview happen. He'd landed in Hank's lap, and Hank had seized the opportunity. "That's different because I chose to do those things. The shifters didn't. I called them to me."

To Hank.

"Do you really believe that?"

"That's what he said I did. I made them come."

"Or the pieces started moving—"

"Why would they make those choices if not for me?" He'd lured them in with magic.

"People make choices every day. Juice or coffee. Walk or catch the bus. Some days, you break from routine for no good reason, but each one adds up over days and months until you are somewhere other than where you started."

"Are you saying it would've happened without me?"

“No, because you made an option appear that brought them closer. They didn’t have to take it. That’s why your magic isn’t instant.”

Which only made it that much more terrifying. “I don’t know how to stop it once I’ve started.”

He couldn’t shut off the hunger and decide he no longer wanted it. All he could do was wait for the thing to happen.

“That is a different problem. But you can be taught.”

Lucian shook his head. “I’d rather give it up.”

“You’re in shock. Your mind is in turmoil. You shouldn’t be making life-altering decisions.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be fixing me?”

She gave him a small smile. “Healing, not fixing.”

“Is there a difference?”

“A wound can heal but leave a scar that aches.” She stood. “I can ease the turmoil, but I can’t take away the cause or the scar it will leave, but you will be able to move through this faster. If that is what you want.”

How the hell was he supposed to know what he wanted?

“Will it hurt?”

“Yes, but only briefly.”

“Then no, I will go through this slowly.” He didn’t deserve the easy route.

Chapter Thirteen

DALMON STOOD on the other side of the small one-way mirror, watching the man who'd once been his fated mate. Who probably was again. And maybe it would be again in the future.

Perhaps they'd done the same dance through several lives but only had a record of one. Was it the same for all fated mates, or was it different for other shifters because they were different people while he wasn't—not really. His soul was fixed, as was his body, with only small changes each time that depended on how he was raised and when he was raised.

He couldn't have a fated mate, not without revealing he was a shifter. And if he did that, he was exposing Gerrit and Everest at the very least, though possibly also Kaine. It would make witches and shifters take a harder look at their country, which would put everyone who lived there under a little more scrutiny, and if the Shadow Board was successful, they were all fucked.

Really bad timing, Fates.

The healer's talk of moving pieces had given him pause, though. If Everest hadn't wanted to join the Coven, he might not have taken such a close interest in the case. He would have taken a step back, which meant that the mole issue would have persisted.

If Marwood hadn't wanted to escape, they might not have caught Hastings, and Templeton and Farrell would have both died—if not on site, then through pining.

Even the thought of that was unsettling.

How angry had he been to send her...him, this time, away?

That Marwood's idea of freedom was watching birds was something else that caused him more than a little discomfort. The bruise on Marwood's soul wasn't getting smaller. Perhaps the longing for healing had brought him to Hastings and then to him.

Dalmon shook his head. That was the business of the Fates.

That Marwood could tap into their magic was something else.

The healer left the room, and Marwood sat and stared at his hands. He traced the fresh scar. No doubt it would be ripped open tomorrow. He didn't like putting witches in dampeners any more than he liked forcing a shifter to remain in form. They were primitive punishments.

Though a shifter who constantly made trouble and risked exposing their kind to humans was often sentenced to live in their animal form in a wildlife sanctuary. There was a prison for the irredeemable in Alaska. He'd visited it once and had no desire to go again. And in any case where that punishment was recommended, he personally reviewed it before approving it.

The mind reader handed the tablet to him.

"How are you finding it?"

"I'm loving not writing reports, but the transcription needs work."

"I'd noticed." It was much like dictation in that sometimes it missed words or got them wrong.

"Does it feel okay, using it over long periods?" She'd agreed to test it out, and until this case, it had only been with willing subjects where the information could be verified and only in short bursts.

She frowned as though trying to figure out how best to describe it. "Well, I'm not bleeding this time."

The first iteration had not been great.

She smiled. “It’s fine. Before I was catching the thoughts and needing to hold them, which meant I missed some. Now, I let them flow through me. The downside is that I am not paying attention to them because there are so many. It also means some will be junk, like wanting a drink or a cheese sandwich. It’s not going to work when interviewing agents.”

Dalmon nodded. For that, she needed to sift through the answers and dig deeper.

“I think I have enough on him now. You can return to interviewing.”

“I hate examining our own.”

“It has to be done.” And he didn’t know how else to do it. He was already monitoring data coming in and out. Well, Kaine was, as well as phone calls. But a smart mole would use a different phone.

“When I find something, I will let you know.”

“Keep an eye out for closed doors.”

“I know what I’m looking for. I know how people hide things.” She pointed at Marwood. “He hasn’t tried to hide anything.”

“How would you know if you were just channeling?”

“Because there would be a block. A rock in the river or a pinch point to keep things back. People think they can hide their thoughts, but hiding them leaves its own marks. You have barricaded a mile high.”

He shot her a glare. “You’re not supposed to be reading me.”

“I don’t need to read your mind to see them, Sir.” She inclined her head. “Nor do I read minds without permission. Even his.”

“Thank you. I’ll let you know if I need you again.”

Then he was alone, staring at Marwood through the glass.

Marwood was every problem and the possible solution.

Would he really be punching himself in the face by ignoring the soul bruise? He sighed. Of course he would. The real question was, did he want to add fresh blood and bruises by ignoring it, which would come back to haunt him next time when there was no guarantee that he'd be in a better position to do anything about them? If anything, the situation would be worse because it had longer to fester.

He left the viewing room, which was a modified closet, and entered the interview room.

Marwood startled. "I wasn't expecting you."

Dalmon shut the door. There were guards on the outside, but for the first time, they were alone with no one listening. "You need to get used to seeing me."

"If you run the Coven, don't you have other things to do?"

Dalmon sat. He did. But he also had an assistant, as well as Kaine on the back end of things, and he had agents doing the actual running around. "You are part of a major investigation that spans several continents." He placed the tablet on the table. He'd read some of it as it had been transcribed. He'd listened to every word. "But I'm starting to think you are the central spoke."

Marwood opened his mouth, and Dalmon held up his hand.

"I didn't say you were the mastermind or anything like that, only that pieces have been moving. At first, all I saw was a mess. A knot of strings that had no rhyme or reason. But if I sit you in the middle with your magic eddying around, then everything starts to make sense."

"You're saying my existence is creating trouble?"

"No, the opposite, in fact. You're at the center, which means you are the lynchpin holding the knot together. I haven't worked out how to pull you out."

Marwood lifted his cuffed hand. "I'm already out."

"I don't think so." He needed Marwood to use his magic. "If I ask you to do something specific, would you agree

because you want to make up for the damage you've caused?"

"Of course I would. I want to help."

"That's the problem. You would be once again using magic for someone else." And he did not want to be like Hastings. That was not going to help Marwood. "The healer wants you to have some cuff-free time."

Marwood shook his head.

He was actually scared of his own magic.

The need to comfort him swelled in Dalmon's chest. And beneath it was something else, a draw toward him that must be something to do with the fated mates' bond.

Caution warred with curiosity, as though his soul ached despite the years yet also craved its mate. It was messed up. A mess he'd made lifetimes ago.

What had Kaine said? That he stabbed himself in the heart to get back at Marwood. He hoped he was smarter this time. That he could heal the damage instead of making it worse.

"There is no mind reader; it's just us. So talk to me, Marwood."

"Lucian."

Dalmon knew as soon as he used his name, something would change between them. "Tell me about yourself."

"There's nothing to tell that you don't know." He indicated to the tablet.

"Humor me. Pretend we've just met. I've told you that I'm a CEO."

"I'm an out-of-work PA being watched by a secret non-government organization."

Dalmon smiled. "Why are they watching you?"

"Because my last boss was a criminal and I...I helped him."

"And outside of work what did you do?"

Marwood shook his head. “There was no life. What do you do when not working?”

“Sleep, talk to family.” Wonder why the fuck he was immortal and what had happened to the rest of his kind. Perhaps there had only ever been five of them. He added Marwood to the list of things that crawled through his mind when he wasn’t thinking about work.

“I don’t talk to mine. It’s just my mother. I was an accident. My father married her because he felt obligated. I hated moving all the time...after he was killed, we stayed in the one...” His eyes widened. “Did I kill him?”

“Magic kicks in a couple of years after puberty. Fifteen or sixteen, typically. You were what, ten?”

“I don’t know what’s magic and what isn’t anymore.”

“We think your magic is common but so subtle that most witches aren’t aware of it, so they never make themselves known to the Coven. However, it is also a magic that could be devastating in the wrong hands.”

“Like Hastings.”

“Think bigger. I’m talking about wars and the destruction of empires. There are people in positions of power who’d have paid Hastings very well to have you.”

Marwood shrank back. “That’s why I don’t want it.”

“But it’s also a magic that can help many. If you are the lynchpin, you can stop the Shadow Board. You can find missing dragon eggs and bring back a lost shifter kind. You could find Atlantis and other lost cities. Missing people...” His brother. “You have that choice, but only if you keep it.”

“Magic taken from witches can be used by others.”

Dalmon nodded. Few knew that, yet he wasn’t surprised Hastings knew and had told Marwood. “That is true. But they need to learn how to use it.”

No magic meant no bond. Was that the right thing to do? Cut Marwood free?

Even the thought hurt, and he wasn't even sure if he liked the man beyond thinking that he was attractive. More so now, his jaw was dusted with stubble.

He really did have a type, no matter the life, and this time, the Fates had wrapped it all up in one person. Marwood was everything he shouldn't have and didn't need. It wasn't only a soul bruise; it was a scab he wanted to pick at. If he did, would the pus come out so they could both heal?

“Why do you look at me like that?”

“Like what?”

“Like you're seeing through me, hoping to find something.”

“I'm not hoping to find something. I have found something, and I don't know what to do with you.” Or how much he could trust him with anything that was going on? Fated mate, their history, the mole, the Shadow Board. Yet he was at the center. Everything came back to him. If Everest learned that Marwood was a finder, he'd demand Marwood use his magic to find Olier.

A part of him wanted to do the same.

But he couldn't let Marwood be used again. The Coven protected all paranormals, sometimes from themselves.

Marwood lowered his gaze to the cuff. “Have you ever worn one of these?”

“No.” It wouldn't work on him, anyway. “I am aware it is unpleasant; the healer will come by every morning.”

“Take my magic and be done.”

Then Marwood would be able to leave and start over. “That would appease many aggrieved shifters.” Not all. Some would still want his blood, so he might need a new name and a new place to live. *Mont de Leucoy would be safe*, his treacherous thoughts murmured. “But you have just gotten out of a...terrible relationship.”

Marwood gave a low laugh. “It hadn't been that for three years.”

“Making rash decisions leads to life-long consequences.” They were both paying for his, even though he couldn’t say that.

Marwood frowned. “Lifes long?”

Dalmon nodded. “If your magic is stripped in this life, you may never get it back.”

“You believe in reincarnation?”

For everyone? He wasn’t sure. In this situation, yes. “I do.”

“You know things the rest of us don’t.”

“That’s my job.” He leaned forward. “Give me your hand.”

He didn’t need to ask for it to be the one with the cuff because Marwood knew. Dalmon touched the silver cuff that looked like a piece of jewelry. Even though he wasn’t a witch, he felt the hum of the dampener. It was annoying at best. “You want to make amends, yet you also want your magic gone, so let’s make a deal.”

Marwood’s green eyes flashed with distrust. “And then you’ll promise to let me go? Or will you ask me to do one more thing and then another?”

The barb hit and sank home. He didn’t want to be like Hastings, forcing the witch to use his magic.

“No, this is the sentence. I can have it written up if that is what you would like. So it’s formalized. If you’d rather I swear an oath, I can do that. But I do not break my word. If I did, the Coven’s reputation would be destroyed. It serves all paranormals and protects them. Since I am the Coven head, I serve all paranormals and protect them. That includes you...” he needed to say his name. It was almost a compulsion. “Lucian Marwood.”

The swelling in his chest was now more like a calling that he couldn’t resist.

He was sure that as soon as the cuff was gone, the witch would feel it, too. Then, there would be questions about how and what, and he would need to deal with them.

One problem at a time.

Lucian's lips parted as if he sensed the shift. "Before I agree...what do you want me to do?"

There were so many things. Olier should be at the top of the list. He wanted to find the brother he couldn't remember, but saving the Coven and stopping the Shadow Board was more important.

"There is a mole, a Shadow Board member in the Coven, leaking information. The Shadow Board, and Hastings, want a world where witches rule and shifters are bound, and humans are grateful for the protection of witches." His fingers moved from the cuff to the back of Lucian's hand. He drew in a breath as the need to hold on to him wrapped around him. For a heartbeat, he forgot what he was doing. He let his hand fall away, even though it hurt. "Hastings was bad, but the Shadow Board wants to expose everyone, risking more witch hunts."

He used the words deliberately to see if Lucian would react.

Something flickered over Lucian's face as if some primal fear or forgotten memory was stirring. "You want me to find the mole so you can stop them?"

"I do. Then, if you still want to surrender your magic, I will ensure that happens."

"And if I don't?"

He hadn't got that far with the plan. "Then you will need to decide what kind of witch you are."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning you could work for the Coven. There is a lot of good you could do."

Lucian didn't look convinced. "Or?"

"Or we would need to find a way to keep you safe from those who want to use your magic."

"Be used by the Coven or be used by someone else. I'll take freedom with no magic."

“You might change your mind when you experience how it feels to do good.” He pulled the key for the cuff out of his pocket and unlocked it, ignoring the way the soft pink skin of the scar felt beneath his hands.

The cuff clicked open, and the dampener stopped humming.

Lucian groaned and closed his eyes, lips parted as if in pleasure.

Which was not an appropriate thought, even though they were supposed to be, and had once been, mates. This dynamic was off. Prisoner and captor. The list of reasons why this was a bad idea was so long.

It was several breaths before Lucian opened his eyes. “You have no idea how good that feels.”

“I can guess.” His voice was a little rougher than it should be.

Lucian studied him. His tongue darted over his lip, and Dalmon couldn't look away. The need to claim his mate was so intense he wanted to climb onto the table and kiss him until neither of them could breathe. His fingers curled and dug into his palm.

How could he have sent his mate away?

What had Lucian done?

No, not Lucian. A different person with the same magic and the same soul.

It was he who was the same.

And it was the shared wound that had brought them back into orbit.

Claiming him wouldn't help. He uncurled his fist.

Lucian's eyelids lowered. “What is that?”

“What?” He heard the rough desire in his voice. He needed more than a shift. The heat in his blood was not fire or feather-related. It was lust. He was not fourteen. He had better control of himself.

Yet he had zero control over his dick as it thickened with anticipation, as though claiming his mate on the table in the middle of the interview room was a good idea.

He hadn't slept with a man for at least five years. Which he now saw as another curious coincidence—they didn't exist. It was all Fates and magic.

He wanted to shove the cuff back on the witch to cut off the need.

Lucian closed his eyes. And damn, Dalmon could feel his magic reaching out. His own shifter magic responded, and he couldn't pull it back. He watched as Lucian sighed and his back arched as though in the grip of passion. "Why do you feel like that?"

"I don't know what you're feeling." *You fucking liar.*

"Like I need you to breathe. Like I'll drown without you." Lucian opened his eyes. "It's like I know you." His cheeks turned pink, and Dalmon was sure Lucian meant in the physical sense. "It's..." he shook his head. "It's not like my magic has found you, yet there is a...a need or something." He reached out his hand.

Dalmon didn't bother trying to resist. He wanted to touch him. He brushed his fingertips over Lucian's and let Lucian clasp his hand. It didn't dull the need, but it didn't inflame it either. It was something close to reassuring.

He wasn't sure if putting the dampener back on him would erase the need to claim his mate now that it had been revealed.

Lucian's eyebrows pulled together. "You know what it is. You feel it."

"Probably not the same way as you."

If they were mates, he'd be able to use Lucian's magic. That was almost enough of a reason to lean over the table and kiss him.

Almost.

Lucian didn't know, and he didn't want magic.

But Dalmon wanted.

Needed.

Was he repeating his past or fixing it?

He didn't know, and he couldn't make those choices on his own. Lucian needed to know the truth.

Chapter Fourteen

WITHOUT THE CUFF or any kind of dampener, there was nothing to hold back the tide of sensation that Dalmon brought with him. It was deeper than lust or the hunger of his magic. And even though he should feel threatened by the head of the Coven and the way he had control over Lucian's life, he wasn't afraid.

And he wanted to do more than hold his hand.

He didn't want Dalmon to let go. If he did, he'd drift away.

Dalmon's gaze remained locked on his, and Lucian was sure there were flames in his eyes.

"It's magic," Lucian murmured. He was sure of that, even though it wasn't like anything he'd ever felt before. And he was sure his magic wanted to tangle with Dalmon's...which should feel like a terrible idea. But his body wanted to tangle with the dark-eyed fire witch.

It was only because it had been a long time since he'd been with anyone, and Dalmon was attractive in a harsh kind of way. He couldn't swallow the lie, even though it was convincing.

"Have you heard of fated mates?" Dalmon asked.

Lucian yanked his hand back as though Dalmon's skin had burned him. Immediately, he craved the contact. His fingers flexed, but he refused to reach out. "It's a bond, like what Hank did."

“It’s not the same at all.” Dalmon folded his arms and leaned on the table. “The magic flows both ways.”

The way his magic had reached for Dalmon hadn’t felt strange. It was as if he’d been waiting his whole life to find it. Which wasn’t possible because until a couple of days ago, he hadn’t even known the man existed, and it wasn’t as if he’d been trying to find a fated mate.

“I don’t want more magic.” He wanted none. All he had to do was agree to the deal, and when he found the mole, he’d be free.

Adrift.

The weight of the thought wanted to crush his ribs.

“This kind of connection is rare—”

“You knew it was there.” This whole time, Dalmon had known there was this thing between them, and he’d said nothing. And if he had, Lucian wouldn’t have believed him because he couldn’t feel it because of the cuff. He glanced at his hand as if it had betrayed him.

“Don’t worry, it hasn’t happened. It takes more than a touch.”

The way he said touch left Lucian with no doubt about what it involved. Hank had always sneered at those kinds of bonds. They weakened the witch and strengthened the shifter. Which wasn’t true if the magic flowed both ways. Wait...

“Isn’t that between a shifter and a witch?”

The heat in Dalmon’s eyes dimmed, and his face shuttered. The sharp edges returned, and Lucian was sure he felt Dalmon’s magic pull further away. He wanted to reach for him. His magic unfurled without him doing anything. He tried to draw it back. If he used magic, it wouldn’t be real.

“The fated mates bond is between a witch and a shifter,” Dalmon said. His own magic remained wrapped tight around him.

The rejection stung, and Lucian didn’t even know why.

“But we’re both witches.” Weren’t they? Dalmon had said he was a fire witch. Lucian had seen him make fire. Was it him who was no longer a witch? Had Hank done something to him? “Am I the shifter?”

Dalmon laughed. A rich sound that took the edges from his features. “You are not.”

Which meant Dalmon was. Oh God...all the shifters that he’d helped catch.

“You do not need to accept the fated mates bond, though it seems the more time spent together, the harder it is to resist. Surrendering your magic will cause it to be broken. If you tell anyone that I am a shifter, I will end you.”

Lucian tried to reel in his magic so it wasn’t rubbing up against Dalmon, but he had no control. Dalmon must think him completely untrained. A danger. But there was no pushback, even though Dalmon’s magic didn’t join in. He had control. “Why is it a secret?”

What was he if not a fire witch?

“Because people like Hastings would bind me.”

“Dragon?” He had to be a dragon. That explained the fire.

Dalmon smiled. “Will you help me find the mole?”

“Will you tell me what you are?”

“I will, so you can decide what you want to do about your magic.”

“What about what you want?”

Dalmon considered him for several seconds. His eyes were dark and unreadable. Lucian’s heart beat hard and heavy in his chest as if this were the most important thing he’d ever need to decide. Before they’d started talking, he’d been sure he wanted his magic gone.

Now?

Now, if he had no magic, he’d have no Dalmon, and that seemed unbearable. He took a gulp of air.

“I think this time, what you want matters more.” He stood. “I will have the deal written up. You will start tomorrow as a special advisor for a case.”

“Won’t everyone know?”

“No. All cases are need to know only. The people here have been vetted. There will always be a guard with you or outside my office door.”

“Why your office door?”

“Because you will be working there.”

“In your office?”

“Where else would my special advisor work?” Dalmon rested his palms on the table and looked at him. “They are the terms. Consider it probation. And a chance for us to get to know each other while considering the bond.”

Lucian blinked and nodded.

It was only after Dalmon had left the room that Lucian realized that he should’ve asked why Dalmon wanted the bond.

Chapter Fifteen

“THIS IS FUCKED UP,” Dalmon raked his fingers through his hair as he paced his office.

“I didn’t expect you to bloody tell him,” Kaine said.

“What was I supposed to do? Lie?” He wasn’t sure he could’ve not told him. “Without the dampener, it all surged up as if it had been waiting four hundred years to bite me on the ass.”

“If you hadn’t been an ass—”

“You’re taking his side, and you don’t even know what he did?”

“I read my book again, and you were feistier in that life. Always looking for a fight.”

“Are you sure you haven’t gotten me and Everest mixed up?”

“No...he was the one causing the fight. You joined in for fun. You made it your mission to hunt and kill the witch hunters.”

Dalmon paused and stared out the window. “That doesn’t sound like a bad thing.”

“It channeled your energy. I don’t know why you were so angry.”

Neither did he. Perhaps he’d been working off some other soul bruise. He couldn’t live each life trying to fix the damage

from the last. At some point, he had to live. “What was I like the life after?”

“I didn’t look.”

“Withdrawn. Aloof,” Gerrit said in the background.

“Did you catch that?”

“I did, thank you.” So he’d been hurting. “Did you not put it together back then?”

“I did.” Gerrit’s voice grew closer. “But you didn’t want to know about it. You didn’t let anyone close and threw yourself into setting up the network of safe houses. I was with you for some of it. Apparently, you wanted to go alone, but Olier insisted you have someone in case something happened.”

“So you’ve been pouring yourself into the Coven for centuries to avoid relationships. A perfectly healthy response to sending your mate away.” Kaine sounded a little too pleased with himself.

“Thank you for that assessment,” Dalmon said dryly. If it was his past being picked apart, Kaine wouldn’t be quite so chipper about it. The Coven was important and not just to him. But even as he’d held Lucian’s hand, the main reason having a mate was a bad idea was because it would be a distraction.

“What Kaine is trying to say is you need to remember how to live. Because re-reading our books with this new perspective has made us realize that we let you pull away to lick your wounds, but we never pulled you back in. You went two lives without loving.”

“That’s not true. There are paintings—”

“I said loving, not marrying so that it appeared as though we had heirs. The two are very different,” Gerrit said.

Dalmon couldn’t argue with his brother about love and loss. The woman he’d loved in this life had died. She’d been visiting her sister, and they’d been involved in a car accident. One of the random things that no one could change, leaving Gerrit to raise Everest on his own. If anyone deserved to find

love, it was Gerrit. Everest was an adult, and the duty of looking after their reckless younger brother now fell on him.

He needed to go home and read his damn books. He must have loved since having a mate, even if they were passing liaisons. Though that was like comparing a three-course meal to a piece of candy. He pressed his hand to his chest as if he could stop the ache from spreading.

Now that he knew, he couldn't forget, and it seemed even the old pain was resurfacing. "I didn't call for you to tell me I'm a workaholic—"

"I wanted to make sure you knew it has become a pattern over several lives. So it will be hard to shake. Make notes to help yourself out," Kaine said.

He was sure he had, but it was easy to say it was his life's work to build and safeguard the Coven and hide behind the needs of every other paranormal. It meant he could ignore his own needs and crimes.

"I need a profile set up for him which only gives him access to the files of those Hasting hunted and killed. He needs email, security clearance to the café and my office, and I want him tracked."

"How do you want him tracked?"

"I don't know. Stick a bell on him for all I care." It wasn't his job to solve security issues.

"He's not a house cat who enjoys hunting birds."

Dalmon circled his desk and sat on the edge. "He might as well have been. Hastings had made Everest as a phoenix and was using Templeton as bait."

"There's no indication in Lucian's thoughts that he knows about phoenixes or Hastings' end game," Kaine said.

Dalmon ran his fingers through his hair. "Did you manage to work out what I should do about him?"

The silence that followed was all the answer he needed, but he pushed anyway. "So mate or no mate. Magic or no magic...you've got nothing?"

“It’s between you and him,” Gerrit said, ever the diplomat and never giving a straight answer.

“Do you think it’s deliberate that Lucian is male this time?” Kaine asked.

Dalmon rolled his eyes and stared at the ceiling. “Focus, Kaine. Can you sort out a security profile for him by tomorrow?”

“Yeah, that will be done before I turn in for the night. I’ll put a tracker in his security swipe card, but that only helps if he’s carrying it.”

“Are you going to keep him at the safe house?” Gerrit asked.

“No, because then it won’t be safe.” He didn’t want Lucian knowing where it was. “I was going to stick him in my guest house. Along with his own security.” And then hope that he didn’t use his magic to escape. “He’s making a mess of everything.”

“You both made the mess. Working together to clean it up seems like the right thing to do,” Gerrit said as if he were talking to a misbehaving child.

“I don’t trust him.”

“No one is asking you to,” Kaine said.

“How can I have a mate I don’t trust?” He couldn’t love someone he didn’t trust. If Lucian did something to betray him or the Coven... The flare of pain and anger that followed was too much. He closed his eyes, remembering how broken Lucian had been at first. He’d been scared as if expecting, and wanting, to be punished.

“Do you not trust him in this life or because of something you don’t remember?”

“Both.”

And Lucian had expected him to be harsh even though they’d never met, because last time that was how Dalmon had behaved.

“There is one more thing I dug up. Because I had a name, I was able to find a death record. He was drowned for being a witch after surviving being burned at the stake.”

The one person he should've saved from the hunters, he'd thrown to them. His magic would've kept him safe from the flames, thus proving his guilt. Whatever Lucian had done back then did not warrant such an awful death. “Thank you, Kaine.”

That was an image he wouldn't be able to shrug off.

“It might be important.”

Why the fuck would he need to know how his mate had died the first time around?

“How could that possibly be important?”

It was Gerrit who replied. “We don't know what is important and what is junk. We're trying to help.”

Dalmon sighed. “I'm sorry. This has put me on edge. He's like a black hole sucking me close, and I want to fling myself in to see what will happen.”

“I can tell you what will happen. You'll be mates, and your lives will be tied, and if you don't sort your mess out, it's going to end just as badly, and I don't want to be sitting here in another four hundred years having the same conversation about how you self-destruct with a mate.” Gerrit's voice was firm. “Work isn't living, Dalmon. The greater good won't love you back.”

He didn't need to be loved, but he didn't have a reason why.

His house was empty except for staff and the occasional stray cat that the staff adopted. As long as there were no more than three, that was fine. There were funds to deal with any vet bills, and the cats would sometimes sit with him while he worked.

“Why am I the only one with this issue?”

“We all have our own bruises.” Gerrit sighed, and Dalmon knew he was thinking of his dead wife. “Sometimes we make them, and sometimes we heal them. You've been running for a

long time. Perhaps it's time you stop and look around before you become so lost you don't know where you are or who you are."

"Have I changed that much?"

"We only have our books to go by, and we were different too," Kaine's words were measured. "But I think it's fair to say you have become colder. You don't want that to become a permanent part of you."

Maybe it already was.

Maybe that's what made him good at his job.

He didn't need anyone or want anyone.

Or hadn't until meeting Lucian.

"You okay?" Kaine asked.

"Yes." No. How could he be okay when everything he'd worked to build over the last four centuries was on the cusp of falling down, and the mate he'd fucked over was back in his life?

Chapter Sixteen

DALMON HAD NOT GIVEN him much instruction beyond finding the Shadow Board mole. He knew what the Shadow Board was from things Hank had said—none of them had been flattering. He'd called them a bunch of stuck-up, blue-blooded, broke bastards after one meeting with them. Lucian assumed it was because they wouldn't let him into their club, not that Hank had admitted that. They'd barely been talking by that stage, which was better as he was left alone to work, as he was still Hank's PA, and to find whatever he was looking for.

Now here he was again, in a fancy office, as some kind of PA, though this time it was him doing the paying. If he added up all the deaths he'd contributed to, he was going to be working for free for a very long time. Or should be.

That Dalmon had said this was a one-time use of his magic suggested that this cleared his debt. He'd spent two hours reading the five-page document this morning and asking the Coven lawyer for clarification if he didn't understand something.

It wasn't as if a human lawyer would be able to advise him on any of this.

There were conditions he had to adhere to that, if broken, would put him back in a dampener and straight to sentencing. He didn't need the lawyer to tell him that would not go well, given that he'd admitted to everything already, but he had no intention of breaking the rules that had been laid out.

He'd find the mole, give up his magic, and be done with all of this. He'd happily signed the document in blood, which was rather old-fashioned, dressed in the not-gray slacks and shirt provided, and let the snarly tiger shifter take him to work.

It was the first time he'd ever been in a Coven building.

And he did not expect there to be such a bustling coffee shop beneath. He'd expected a bookshop, or a new age store, or something a little more witchy.

They didn't stop and get coffee. Instead, they went through a nondescript door next to the coffee shop. There was a small foyer with a security guard, who seemed to be expecting him as there was a swipe card with his name and photo waiting.

"Use this anywhere you're not supposed to be, and you will be arrested," the tiger shifter said in the elevator before handing it over.

"And where am I supposed to be?" He didn't want to get lost and set off alarms by accident.

The tiger bared his teeth. "With me."

That made things super clear. He'd ask Dalmon.

His gaze drifted to the buttons. Most were numbered. There were three on the top row that were not, and they were going to one of them. Tension crawled through his muscles as the elevator traveled upward.

He reminded himself that if the Coven wanted to make him disappear, they didn't need to bring him here.

He'd signed the document and so had the lawyer on behalf of the Coven. He didn't think the Coven, or Dalmon, would break their word. And if they did, what would happen?

Another question to ask Dalmon.

It was becoming quite a small list.

The elevator stopped, and the doors opened to a carpeted corridor.

The tiger stepped out, and Lucian followed him past several closed doors.

At the end of the corridor was a set of double doors, also with nothing written on them. It was like they were hoping people would become lost. Or that they didn't find this floor.

He didn't need a sign to know where he was going because as soon as he got within three paces of the double door, he felt him. It wasn't any sense Lucian was used to, not even the magical hunger. It was a lifting as though he was about to break the surface and take a gulp of air.

The tiger opened the door, and then Lucian could breathe.

Dalmon sat behind a large desk, reading something on the screen in front of him. He pointed to the side of the room. "Yes, I agree. There is—" He hit something on his desk, and while his lips moved, there was no sound.

What the hell?

While Lucian gawped like a fish, Dalmon kept talking, but his gaze was now on him, not the screen.

"Over here, witch," the tiger said, dragging his attention away from Dalmon.

To the side of the room was a small conference table, big enough for four people to sit around.

But it was set up with a laptop and some papers and pens so he could fake being busy. Lucian took his seat. His personal guard remained near the door.

Lucian didn't know what to do. He hadn't expected to be sharing an office with the head of the Coven. He'd expected to remain in his gray room in his gray sweats, playing solitaire until he died of boredom or the mole turned up. It was a fifty-fifty chance as to which would happen first.

For the first few minutes, he sat there, watching Dalmon's profile as he talked and scrolled through whatever was on his screen. Dalmon laughed once, then shook his head, his features returning to sharp seriousness. He was more handsome when he smiled.

Not that he should be thinking about what Dalmon looked like.

Or should he?

If they were supposed to be fated mates, checking him out was part of the deal. And as much as he felt calmer around him, he was still very aware that he had put his life in the hands of a powerful...not a witch...shifter...man.

He needed a distraction and since he didn't know how to use the laptop yet—no one had told him how to log on—he wrote the five rules of his agreement on a piece of paper so he would see them all the time. He didn't want to accidentally break one.

Not that he could accidentally flee, destroy or steal Coven property, or attack a Coven employee. Using his magic in a way that achieved any of those four things was the one that he was worried about.

His ears popped.

“Welcome to Coven central,” Dalmon said as he stood and stretched. He was wearing another three-piece suit. This one was a dark gray pinstripe that should make him look stuffy, and without the red shirt, it might have. From the lines of the suit and the way it was molded to his body, it had been made for him. He was used to looking at expensive suits. Had even been given a couple in that first year because Hank had wanted him to look the part.

He swallowed and lifted his gaze. “Thank you. I didn't expect to be here.”

Dalmon nodded at the guard, and he stepped out of the room. “Your guard will be on the other side of the door at all times when I am here. He will be in here when I am not.”

“Why would I be here when you aren't?”

“I have meetings.” He checked the wall of clocks. “I have to be in operations in forty minutes, so if you have questions, now is the time.”

He had a list of them, but now that Dalmon was walking toward him, he couldn't remember any of them. “I signed the agreement.”

“I know.”

Of course he did.

“I read it and approved it before it was sent to you. And the signed copy is on file.”

Dalmon’s gaze scanned the desk and paused on the rules, but he didn’t say anything. Then his gaze lifted to Lucian’s.

“Can he hear us?” Lucian tilted his head at the door.

“No. If you attack me, I will incinerate first and ask questions after.”

Lucian nodded. Attacking Dalmon wasn’t what he wanted to do.

“No questions?” Dalmon perched on the edge of the table, facing the massive window that Lucian hadn’t paid much attention to before. He turned his head, fixing Lucian with his dark stare, and that bond thing flickered hot in his chest.

“Why would anyone want the fated mates bond?” Hank had called it demeaning. A witch should always be in control of the shifter.

Lucian didn’t think anyone had ever been in control of Dalmon.

Dalmon considered him for several seconds. “It increases the magic of witch and shifter. Sometimes, it’s simply a union of magics; sometimes it’s more. It is what is termed a natural bond.” He pressed his lips together in a small smile. “If you log in, I have allowed you access to certain files. Things that will fill the gaps and correct the education Hastings gave you.”

“How do you know he gave me the wrong information?”

“How else do you control someone than by telling them only bits of information?”

“You could be doing the same.”

“I could be, but how does letting a barely trained witch, who knows very little of the paranormal world, benefit me, the Coven, or anyone, including you?” He tilted his head, and for a moment, Lucian was prey. As if his worth as dinner were

being assessed. “It doesn’t,” Dalmon answered his own question. “I like paranormals to know what they are and how to use what they have so they can operate safely in a world that doesn’t want to believe they exist.” He pulled the notepad over and wrote a long chain of letters and numbers. “This is the password. I suggest you learn it.”

“It’s twenty characters.” He had five passwords that he used on rotation. That thing would make a computer-generated password seem weak.

“Twenty-three. Did you have other plans for the day?”

Lucian shook his head. “Only to find the mole.”

“Good, then you can learn it and do some reading. If you find something that you want to know more about, I will check and have it unlocked if needed.”

“How do you know that I’m using my magic?” He could be faking.

Dalmon’s gaze narrowed, and his eyebrows drew together as if he wasn’t quite sure of the question. “I can sense it.”

The next second, flames bloomed on his fingers.

Lucian stared, but he also wanted to reach out and see if they were hot or some kind of illusion.

“Can you feel it?”

He was feeling something. Awe. Desire. Curiosity. He lifted his gaze. “Can I touch them?”

Dalmon laughed, that deep rough sound. He reached out his hand. “You can try.”

Lucian got within an inch before the heat radiating off the flames stopped him. He tore off a strip of paper and used that to close the gap. The paper burned, forcing him to drop it. Dalmon caught it before it landed on the rest of the papers and set fire to them. The flames went out.

There was nothing fake about them. And he’d almost broken the don’t destroy Coven property rule.

“You haven’t learned to sense magic,” Dalmon said.

“I felt something walking into the building.” And if he hadn’t been staring at Dalmon when he walked into the office, he might have noticed something more.

“It shouldn’t be *something*. You should be able to sense there are wards, both in the foyer and in my office. You should feel my magic ramp up. And you should be able to stop your magic from rubbing up against me like a cat seeking attention.”

Lucian bit his lip as heat crept up his chest, crawled over his throat, and flooded his cheeks. “I didn’t realize it was so noticeable.” Could everyone tell? Was his magic reaching out and doing whatever it wanted when he wasn’t paying attention?

“I think your magic is a little more...expansive than most witches’ because it is out there searching. It’s not bothering me, though it does mean I need to keep a tighter rein on mine.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t want to get used to it.”

“You don’t want me as a mate.” Lucian didn’t blame him. He was the head of the Coven; he had a reputation and such.

“You don’t want your magic, and I don’t want to miss it when it’s gone.” Dalmon didn’t move, but something did because now the image of his magic behaving like a cat was in his head. He was sure he felt a warm hand run down his magic’s back. He was aware of how his magic wanted to curl up against the heat and bask in the attention. Finally, Dalmon sighed. “The mates thing is a separate issue. Do your reading. I need to prepare.”

He got off the table, and if Lucian concentrated and imagined his magic as a cat, he was able to stop it from following.

Dalmon glanced over his shoulder and gave him a small smile and nod of approval.

His heartbeat quickened. He wanted more of those smiles...because they were fated mates or because of something else? He looked at the password. What were the

odds he'd lock himself out of the laptop trying to get that right?

Chapter Seventeen

THAT EVEREST HAD GOTTEN an invitation to a Shadow Board meeting was a blessing and a curse. While the initial meeting had only been two hours, he'd spent an extra one with Everest going through additional things.

If anyone thought it odd that Dalmon was being an active part of the job, no one said anything. Perhaps they all understood the seriousness of it. That it was a very small team, and that there were to be no discussions at all with anyone outside the team, reinforced the need for secrecy. Anyone outside of the team asking questions was to be reported to the head of security, no one else. Kaine would then investigate.

It was well past lunchtime by the time he was done. He sent his actual PA to go to his favorite Italian restaurant to fetch him and Lucian lunch. If it hadn't been so late, they could've actually had lunch there, but it would be closed between sittings, and while they would send meals made of whatever they had to hand, they wouldn't let him in, despite his title. He'd tried, hoping to escape the office one time.

In exchange, his PA had informed him there were several files on his desk and that the man in his office had left once for half an hour before returning. She had paused as if waiting for him to explain what was going on, but he'd simply reminded her he also wanted dessert because he had no idea when he was going to get dinner. Or if he was going to *get* dinner.

The Coven in France and Germany had both requested meetings.

They wanted a face-to-face because of the rise in shifter binding. If he had to meet with them, then he might as well stop home and read his damn books. But he didn't want to do any of that while Everest was in the field.

He walked into his office and stopped.

Lucian stood by the window with half a dozen birds circling in front of him. The tiger shifter stood nearby as though he saw that kind of thing every other day. When one worked around witches and shifters, there were odd things most days. Or someone walking through the building in their animal form.

Or doing training in animal form. There was a wolf who liked to use the treadmill.

Lucian's magic didn't slink cautiously toward him the way it had at first. Now, it seemed to bound toward him. Not that magic could bound, but that was the energy behind it. The enthusiasm. Dalmon couldn't help but smile.

The tiger glanced at him as if also sensing the out-of-control magic.

Dalmon erased his smile and sighed instead of reaching for Lucian's magic.

"Go and grab some lunch. I'll be fine for half an hour."

The tiger shifter gave Lucian a last hard glare before walking out and shutting the door. It was only then that Dalmon let his magic reach out.

In those few seconds between his entrance and the door closing, Lucian had pulled his magic back. The moment Dalmon sent a tendril of heat its way, Lucian lost control, and their magics crashed together.

He'd lied this morning. He was already going to miss this when it was gone.

The way Lucian's magic behaved was as though it had been too long, as though it had missed him. Well, it had been centuries.

“How was your morning?” He pulled off his jacket and slung it over the chair before loosening his tie.

“Interesting.”

“All these birds, yet no escape attempt?”

Lucian nodded but didn't turn. “Why would I escape from somewhere I feel safe?”

Few people would describe standing in his office as a place of safety. For most, getting summoned was a source of great angst, mostly because he only requested they see him if they had fucked up so badly, he wasn't sure if they were doing the right job.

Dalmon stepped up next to Lucian. This view was his favorite part of the office, if only because it let him imagine flying. There was a photo from the sixties of the same view on the other side of the office. He put his hands in his pockets so he didn't reach out and brush Lucian's fingers.

Standing so close was dangerous.

It was a temptation that their magics couldn't resist, even though they weren't ready for what it meant.

“I have ordered lunch. I didn't expect the meeting to take so long.”

“It's fine.” Lucian still hadn't looked at him.

“Clearly, something isn't. I can't compel you to be honest with me, but I would appreciate it.”

Had he read through the files on the shifters Hastings had caught and bound? Or was it the fated mates files that were bothering him?

Lucian sighed, and the birds wheeled away as though bored with whatever had fascinated them. “I was seeing what I could do and trying to really feel it and control it. It feels different without the leather...”

His fingers brushed over where the leather bracelet Hastings had given him had sat.

“I bet it does.”

“He said it boosted my magic.”

“And you didn’t know enough to feel the lie.” He’d had the bracelet examined. It hadn’t been to boost Lucian’s magic but to, in a crude fashion, restrict its use so that he could only do one thing at a time. That had failed, though, because Lucian’s own desire for freedom had snuck between the cracks until it had found a way.

“There wasn’t much on my magic.”

“We don’t have much. Witches learn from those with similar magic or through trial and error. It’s the error part that attracts Coven attention.” He wanted to ask if he’d read about the bond, but pressing wasn’t a good idea. Lucian was still figuring out his magic and what had happened with Hastings. The last thing Lucian would want was to rush into something else.

And he didn’t want to push and cause some other kind of soul bruise that would bite him on the ass long after he’d forgotten all about its making. Bruises had never been at the front of his mind before, or at least not in this life. Now, he was questioning everything. That Kaine and Gerrit both thought him cold hadn’t helped.

However, he understood why he might have avoided romantic entanglements. Part of his soul would have been scared of getting hurt.

Was still scared. He’d never had his heart broken in this life, mostly because he’d never let anyone hold it. Never wanted to. And he wasn’t sure that had changed just because his mate had turned up. Lucian was the witch responsible for destroying his heart in the first place.

There was a knock on the door, and his PA walked in carrying three bags of food.

“Would you like me to set it out?”

“No, that’s fine.” He should read through the matter the Vegas office wanted his comment on over lunch. Usually, he either read or arranged things with his PA. He glanced at Lucian. He didn’t want to ignore him to solve other people’s

problems. They had problems that were just as important. “That will be all for the moment, Andrea.”

He walked over to the conference table and pulled the carefully packed food from the bags. He was sure Gerrit would be thrilled to see him eating out of the tubs, but he wasn't running around with royal stamped on his forehead, so he didn't care. He filled the carafe from the sideboard with water and put two glasses on the table.

By the time he'd done that, Lucian had walked over. “That's a lot of food.”

“I wasn't sure what you liked.” And he hadn't been about to waste time by asking. It was easier to get an assortment. He sat and waited for Lucian to do the same.

The laptop was open, though the screen was dark.

If he wanted, he could find out exactly what Lucian had been reading, but he'd wait and see if he opened up.

Lucian took the seat opposite him. He'd rolled up his shirt sleeves, his hair was tousled, and there was a nice amount of scruff on his previously clean-shaven face. It was a little too easy to imagine this being a regular occurrence. All they needed was a bottle of wine.

The wariness returned to Lucian's eyes as if he didn't trust anything. His magic was giving off very different signals, which was very confusing. It probably was for Lucian, too.

He had to remind himself that this wasn't a witch who'd been trained and that, for years, he'd been very guarded with his thoughts and words. He'd been abused by Hastings...and wounded by him.

Dalmon handed Lucian a set of bamboo cutlery before flicking open the lid on one of the boxes. Giant pillows of handmade gnocchi in what smelled like a marsala sauce. Perfect.

He cut one and popped it in his mouth while Lucian sat there as though not sure what to do. “Help yourself. Try this.” He nudged the tub over. “It's their specialty.”

“A sandwich would’ve been fine.”

“Yes, but I wanted something nice. This is from my favorite restaurant, and I wasn’t going to eat this in front of you. So enjoy.” He opened another tub. Arancini balls. He could take or leave them. The next tub was the winner. Ribbons of pasta loaded with lobster and scallops, sage leaves and grated truffle scattered over the top to complete the dish. “Are you allergic to anything?”

That was something he should’ve asked at some point.

“No allergies.”

Dalmon frowned, his scallop-heavy fork halfway to his mouth. “I’m not going to guess why you are so pensive. You either tell or you don’t. If you don’t want to eat, don’t. But magic uses energy, so I would recommend eating something. Most people would kill to get a table at this restaurant. And they don’t usually do take away.”

“They do for you.”

“They do.” Dalmon put the scallop in his mouth. There were benefits to being the uncle to the king. One of which was the human doors it opened. To them, he was a prince. He sat on the board of various companies, though they were all family-run. And he made sure he was seen in the right places and that he donated to the right charities to maintain that illusion.

Usually, he travelled a lot more. The Shadow Board issue had nailed his feet to the ground, and it was irksome. He considered Lucian. It wasn’t only the Shadow Board keeping him in London.

Lucian raked his teeth over his lip, then gave a single nod as if coming to a decision. “So you aren’t a witch, but everyone thinks you are. You run the Coven but are all up in the Hastings and Shadow Board business. You don’t like shifters being bound, but were honest about us being fated mates, which is a method of binding shifters.” He picked up his fork and scanned the table. “And I don’t know what any of this is.”

Dalmon ran through the dishes for him. It hadn't occurred to him that it might be unfamiliar. "What are you used to?"

"Nothing this fancy."

"We're eating out of the tubs."

"What's in the tubs is fancy. You're wearing a tailored suit in the penthouse office of a building in the middle of London."

"It's not central London. That's over there." He waved his fork in the vague direction.

"You know what I mean." He cut the arancini ball into quarters before taking a careful bite.

"I'm not sure that I do. And I don't like to guess—that leads to mistakes. Mistakes get people killed." Dalmon was not going to wait for the food to grow cold. That, and he was starving. Breakfast was a long time ago, and even though he didn't shift often, he used his magic and burned through calories like any other shifter. The lobster was perfect, almost buttery, as it melted in his mouth. A bottle of something crisp and white would've been perfect, but drinking and working was never a good combination.

It was Dalmon who broke the silence first. "Did you want to try this before I eat it all?"

"Thank you." Lucian reached over and stabbed a scallop.

"You could've asked for some."

Lucian shrugged. "You were enjoying it. It's good, rich."

"I don't eat like this every day."

Lucian tasted a few more bits, his gaze on the food, though he was clearly miles away in his thoughts. He put his fork on the table and looked up. "A part of me feels as though I should trust you. You've done nothing but try to help me, even after what I've done, but the rest of me is terrified that this is all some kind of trap, and I'm going to end up in an even worse situation." He frowned. "And my magic wants to rub up against you, which is weird and embarrassing."

It was also very flattering, and Dalmon liked the way it felt, possibly a little too much, which then led to thoughts about what it would be like to be pressed up against Lucian.

Lucian sighed. “I don’t know what’s going on with anything. I don’t know if I can trust you, and I know that makes me sound ungrateful, but I don’t know you...even though I feel as though I should.”

“Some of that will be the bond.” It was an odd sensation for him, and he knew what it was and understood magic far better than most.

“And how is that different from binding shifters? It’s all binding, even though the magic flows differently. I don’t know if I want to live like that. I saw what it did to Hank and the shifters. I don’t want to bind anyone.” Once again, his green eyes were glassy as if he didn’t know what to do with everything that he was feeling, and it was welling up in an unexpected way.

Dalmon didn’t know what to say. Was he rushing things?

Lucian was still coming to terms with everything that had happened, everything that he was, and the possible bond, and it was all too much. Yet, at the same time, he didn’t know how to go slow. He was used to going after what he wanted and getting it. He was used to giving orders and being obeyed.

But Lucian wasn’t staff.

And it was clear Dalmon wasn’t handling any of this very well, even though he was trying. Was making the deal and encouraging him to use his magic to help the wrong thing to do? He couldn’t fuck this up again. “What do you need from me to help?”

Lucian shook his head. “I don’t know. Even that feels like the wrong thing to say. I should be begging for forgiveness for what I’ve done. You’ve given me a chance to help, and I’m quietly freaking out about everything.”

Dalmon considered the witch who, only days ago, had been trying to find a way to escape and now seemed to be finding freedom too much. “Are you freaking out?”

He didn't look as though he was freaking out. He seemed confused, maybe a little worried, neither of which was the same as a freak-out. Dalmon popped the last bite of the lobster pasta into his mouth, not wanting to waste it.

“At this exact moment, I'm not. But I was while you were away. I felt like I was drowning in all this new information.”

The pasta turned to a solid mass in his mouth, and it was like swallowing a rock.

Drowning.

Was Lucian aware on some level that was how he'd died the last time they were together?

Dalmon put his fork down. “I didn't want to hold things back. I prefer to have all the information so I can make informed decisions and choices. The same goes for the people around me.”

But Lucian didn't have all the information.

He didn't know that Dalmon was a rare phoenix shifter and what that meant, or that he was the uncle of the king of a tiny European country. Dalmon wasn't sure how to help him, but he didn't think it was by giving him another deluge of information. “So you don't want to ask more questions because then you'll have more to process?”

Lucian sighed, and a faint smile flickered over his lips. “Exactly. I need time to think. God, I have spent so much time with my own thoughts over the last two years that I should be done with thinking.”

“Not just think but practice freely. I don't mind if you let your magic out while we're here alone.” It would give him a better sense of it, too.

“I should understand how to control it, so I'm trying to stop it from bothering you.”

“It's not a bother.”

“But you don't let yours...play? I don't know how to describe it.” He glanced away. “It feels as though I'm reaching

for you, and you're ignoring me, and I don't like that. It would be better not to feel anything at all."

Dalmon winced because he knew that desire far too well and had been living that way for the last four centuries. It hadn't done him any good either because now he wasn't sure if he was capable of loving anyone.

And if he couldn't love anybody, what business did he have claiming a fated mate?

And if he couldn't love the man who was supposed to be his fated mate, was he too broken to love anyone?

That seemed like a very grim existence and one he'd brought on himself.

He wasn't sure if he was protecting or harming by holding back while Lucian was searching for something to hold on to. Dalmon loosened his hold on his magic and let it unfurl, reaching for Lucian. He could offer that lifeline this time and stop him from drowning.

Chapter Eighteen

LUCIAN PACKED up the food while Dalmon took a call in another language. He didn't bother to use the magical privacy thing. Maybe it wasn't sensitive, or maybe he knew Lucian didn't speak what sounded like German.

When he got off the phone, he called his PA to take the leftovers. What happened to the rest of the food after that, Lucian had no idea. He sat back at the table and logged into the laptop. He had avoided the files connected to Hank all morning because he didn't want to deal with what was in there.

He still wasn't.

They were dead, and he'd helped.

He re-read the pages on fated mates, well aware of the warmth of Dalmon's magic nearby. He'd been battling to keep his close ever since Dalmon had let his flow out. He hadn't believed Dalmon about magic using energy, but this was exhausting. With a sigh, he gave up fighting. As soon as he let go, he felt the two magics collide and eddy. Dalmon glanced over from another call in another language and smiled.

Lucian's lips moved before he could think about it.

Working with Hank had never been like this. The thought was enough to kill his smile. He was on the other side of the ocean but in the same predicament, working for a powerful witch.

Dalmon sensed something because he frowned.

Lucian pretended to be reading. The fated mates information was on his screen. He'd read about the Fates and how it was meant to be a blessing, a union of magics that perfectly aligned. Though, in reality, it was far from perfect, with lives and magic tied together, meaning that the death of one killed both.

That did not sound like a good deal.

It discussed the benefits for witch and shifter as well as the different styles of relationships. It noted that most fated mates bonds seemed to be same-sex and suggested that was because witches and shifters couldn't have children together. Shifters needed another shifter, one of their exact kind.

Witches didn't need other witches.

With their magics playing, reading about fated mates made more sense, though he was pretty sure he did not deserve the honor—if it could really be called that—of having a fated mate.

Why him?

Why Dalmon?

They lived on different continents. And came from different backgrounds.

Dalmon stood and stretched. He picked up his jacket. "Are you ready?"

Lucian blinked. He wasn't the one actually doing work. He'd zoned out and had no idea what he'd been reading.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah." He stood and glanced at the screen again. It was the part about shifters and their role in the bond. He'd read something about the Shadow Board and their use of shifters. Words tumbled off his tongue. "It's not a witch."

"What's not a witch?"

"The mole..." There was a part of his magic that was on the hunt. While he'd been staring at the screen, he'd been somewhere else. "I think it's a shifter."

“What makes you say that?”

Was this a test and Dalmon already knew who it was? But Dalmon was standing there waiting for an answer.

Lucian frowned, not sure how to describe it. “I zone out sometimes, and when I return, the first things I notice are a clue to what my magic has found.”

“Got anything else? What kind of shifter? Because that will narrow things down fast.”

Lucian shook his head. “Not yet.”

Hank would demand he return to finding as if he could force Lucian’s magic to move faster, even though it didn’t work that way. He wasn’t sure how it worked, aside from he started by creating the need, the hunger, and waiting for his magic to lead him to the meal.

Though they were Hank’s words for what it was. Not his own.

He needed to find his own description. “How do you describe your magic?”

“It’s fire.”

Lucian shook his head. “How do you describe mine?”

“Like a cat that wants to be petted.” There was something in the way he said it that made Lucian pause. Cats might be predators, but Dalmon was the shifter, and when he looked at him like that, there was no doubt Lucian was the prey. “Why?”

He shut the laptop. “Because I don’t want to use Hank’s words for my magic.”

Dalmon nodded. “You can work on that tomorrow. There might be something about finding the words to name your magic in the archives.”

“No, I’ll figure it out. Less information, not more.”

“Right, of course.” Dalmon put his hand on the door and glanced at him. “I really don’t understand that.”

“I think it’s because I can only process so much at a time, and with my magic out—”

Dalmon snapped his fingers, and Lucian half-expected fire to appear. “That makes sense. You’re taking in everything your magic is finding, sorting through it, and sending it out again, all without realizing it. And because you use magic for processing, wearing the dampener meant you couldn’t deal with getting arrested and everything else.”

“You’re making me sound like a magical computer with limited capabilities.”

He considered Lucian and made a little noise that could have meant anything. “Can you reel it in before I open the door?”

Dalmon did that at the same time he spoke. One minute, Lucian was enveloped in warmth and feeling pretty relaxed and sure of himself; the next, it was gone. He had to take a breath and bite his lip to stop from gasping at the loss. It shouldn’t sting, but it did.

He managed to gather his cat in—it helped to think of it that way. It gave him something that he could imagine, which was much easier than thinking of magic as energy.

Dalmon said goodnight to the tiger shifter, who’d been sitting outside the office all day, except for when Lucian had wanted to go to the bathroom. He’d then been escorted to what had to be the executive bathroom on the same floor because it was ridiculously fancy.

They took the elevator all the way down to the underground carpark.

A man in uniform got out of a black car that was parked in the nearest bay and opened the door for Dalmon. “Monsieur.”

Dalmon nodded and got in.

The man shut the door and indicated for Lucian to follow him around to the other side. He opened the door for him, and Lucian got in. Dalmon had his head tipped back, with his eyes closed. “I don’t always use my driver, but it’s been a week, and I couldn’t be bothered.”

Lucian ran his finger over the cream leather seats.

Nothing about Dalmon screamed wealth, yet it was the smallest things that hinted at money. The black car didn't look that special at first glance, he wasn't even sure what badge it had, but the windows were tinted dark, there was a screen up between them and the driver, and the leather of the seats was like butter. Dalmon's watch was silvery metal, and Lucian was damn sure it was worth more than his last car.

Dalmon took off his tie and shoved it in his pocket. As he did, he cracked one eye open. "I can feel you watching me."

"I was thinking."

"About me."

It was a statement, not a question, so Lucian nodded. "The Coven must pay well."

He smiled. "We pay our agents very well."

"Not you?"

"I was an agent for a time, so I could learn what it's like before I began making life and death calls."

Lucian shook his head. "So it's family money?"

"You want to ask questions now?" Dalmon twisted to face him. "Ahh. Your magic returned with a prize, you sorted and sent it off, and now you can focus on the physical until it returns with more." Dalmon's gaze flicked over him, and his magic swept over Lucian, causing heat to flicker through his veins.

What did he mean by physical? Because it surely wasn't kissing because they led to the bond forming. Which meant the lust swirling through him was going nowhere.

But Dalmon was right. It was easier to pick through what he'd been reading and pay attention to both Dalmon and his magic. While he liked the way his magic felt, he'd much rather find out how he felt.

He drew in a breath and pressed down on those thoughts. They'd do him no good.

It's not as if he planned on keeping his magic, anyway. And if they weren't fated mates, Dalmon would have no interest in him.

"So is it family money?" Lucian decided it was safer to keep asking questions instead of wondering what Dalmon would take off next.

"Yes." He gave a slight nod.

"Old money."

"Very."

"So why aren't you Shadow Board?"

Dalmon lifted one eyebrow. "Think that question through."

"You don't agree with them...oh...you're not a witch."

"Both are true." Dalmon sat up and reeled his magic in as the car slowed, then turned into a driveway.

The gates swung open.

"This is not where I was," Lucian said as he stared up at the gated, grand building.

"No. This is my house."

It was a bit more than a house. At three stories tall and with at least one security guard that he could see, it was more of a heritage estate in the middle of the city. The kind of house that sold for millions because it was exclusive and with its own past and pedigree.

"Okay. But why am I here?"

"Because I can't keep you stashed in one of our safe houses if you are an advisor. You'll be staying in my guest house."

It had a guest house, too. Of course it did. "Family house?"

"Yes. I believe it was purchased in the 1700s."

The car stopped, and Lucian went to open the door. Dalmon put his hand on his arm. "Wait."

The driver opened Dalmon's door, then walked around and opened his.

He hadn't noticed while in the car, but it had started to drizzle. Dalmon grumbled about English weather and jogged up the steps. The door was opened for him before he had to knock.

The man at the door inclined his head. "Monsieur." His gaze flicked to Lucian. Dalmon murmured something, and the man spoke rapidly in another language.

By the time Lucian walked over, Dalmon's jaw was tight. He ran his fingers through his hair, then let the dark locks drop back against his temple.

The man asked a question, and Dalmon responded.

"Oui, monsieur." Another duck of the head, and then he issued orders to someone Lucian couldn't see because of the door.

"Is there a problem?" Had they not been expecting him, or worse, did they know what he'd done and hated him?

Dalmon's hot gaze raked over him. "The Fates are fucking with me."

Chapter Nineteen

OLD BUILDINGS DEVELOPED LEAKS. He knew that, having grown up in a castle with parts that dated back one thousand years. His estate in Mont de Leucoy was a lot younger, though not what anyone would call modern.

But for a water pipe to break while the guesthouse was being cleaned for his fated mate to stay in? That was just the Fates being dicks. It was the kind of thing that he'd heard happening to other people when their mate was nearby.

He was beginning to understand why Farrell and Templeton gave in to the need in the middle of an operation. When he was in the same room as Lucian, it was becoming unbearable not to touch him. Any longer in the car, and he wouldn't have trusted himself not to lean over, grab Lucian by the collar, and kiss him.

"It seems the guest house has flooded. A suite is being prepared on the second floor."

"What does that have to do with the Fates?"

Dalmon didn't tell him to shush, but he felt that push. "I will show you around."

"The fire is on in your study, monsieur." The butler said in French.

"Merci." He might as well take Lucian there. "Downstairs is all entertaining, kitchens and such. Second floor is guest and assorted other rooms...I don't use it much. Third floor is family. Mine. My study is up there."

Taking Lucian into his private quarters was not a smart move because it would be so hard to let him leave. Spending an entire day with him had been more difficult than he'd expected, and for entirely different reasons.

He'd thought that sharing his space would grate, but instead, he'd liked it.

What he hadn't liked was the constant yearning of his fire to crawl all over Lucian. And his need to make sure that he was okay.

Lucian wasn't a child. He was twenty-seven.

But like all paranormals who came to the Coven, he was in a bind and needed help. *He* needed fucking help. This was ridiculous. It shouldn't be this hard to resist the man.

"Let's go to the guest lounge." He turned to the butler, but the butler was already moving. He'd turn on the heater and lights.

"How many staff do you have?"

"In total or here tonight?"

"Um...tonight?"

"Five." Dalmon arched an eyebrow. "Looking for escape routes?"

"No. It seems secure."

"It is."

Lucian licked his lip as his gaze tracked around the entrance. The God-awful statue that Everest had won at the charity auction lurked near the stairs. It was meant to be art, and Everest liked so he needed to hold on to it until he was out of the house that had been set up for him to use while studying and agenting.

Once this Shadow Board business was done, he planned on making a strong case for Everest to be kicked back home.

"English isn't your first language."

"What makes you say that?" Most people didn't pick it up.

“Your staff spoke to you in French? Was it French?”

“It was.” How much would he tell Lucian if he kept asking?

Had he debated the same thing last time? It felt as though he was trying to bridge two lives, and he couldn't. It wouldn't work if he was second-guessing himself in this one.

Yes, there was the past, and it had left marks, but they couldn't change that. He had to deal with what was here now. His fingers curled with the need to touch him.

It was bloody tempting to stick the dampener back on Lucian so he couldn't feel the pull. He knew it was the bond. That it was only magic and history. But that didn't change a damn thing when need was ricocheting around his body.

“And you made calls in other languages. How many do you speak?”

“Fluently or well enough to order a meal?”

Lucian stared at him.

“Three fluently, another three well enough to get by, while the locals politely laugh behind their hands about my grammar and word choice.” He led Lucian up the stairs. Voices murmured from the end of the corridor. “Your suite is down there. Your things that were delivered to the guest house will now be there.”

“What things.”

“Your clothes and such were removed from Hastings' house, along with all signs of your presence.” He turned away from the suites and into a much larger room. He called it the guest lounge, though he was sure it had once had a grander name. If he was having parties, he preferred it to the ballroom. That he liked to use for shifting. “Guest lounge. You can help yourself to the bar and snacks. The chef will be in the kitchen from six, so if you want an omelet, pancakes, or whatever, she will cook it. The security on this level will show you the way.”

“I didn't see anyone.”

“He will be near your suite.”

“Making it secure?”

“This is not a prison. However, should word get out about you, the Shadow Board would have more than a passing interest.” Which should be the top reason not to encourage the bond with Lucian.

Dalmon helped himself to a brandy. “Drink?”

“Sure.”

He poured one for him. and handed it over. “It’s the last bottle of this vintage, so enjoy.”

It had been his favorite last time, a life when he’d been king and unable to do anything with the Coven. Apparently, his tastebuds didn’t change.

“What is it?”

“Two-hundred-year-old—”

Lucian almost choked. “How much... No.” He stared at his glass. “I don’t want to know.”

He wouldn’t have been able to tell him, anyway. It was the last. It was delicious, so probably priceless. That he’d saved himself a case for this life was something he was very grateful for. He must remember to do that again.

“Have a seat.” Dalmon didn’t wait, choosing the burgundy sofa. “Ask your questions.”

Lucian sat at the other end with enough distance between them that they wouldn’t accidentally end up too close. Was Lucian as hyper-aware?

“What are you?”

“Not that one. Not yet.”

Lucian sipped his brandy and watched him as though expecting him to pounce. It was bloody tempting. They weren’t that far away. It would be no trouble at all to pin him to the sofa and claim his lips. Then him.

He was going to have to shift to burn off some of the lust.

That didn't always work. What were the odds that this was one of those times?

"Why remove my things and bring them here?"

"That's a better question. A dead millionaire attracts attention. You should be the first suspect. Steps have been taken to ensure that you are not. The Coven steps in between paranormals and human police where possible. A shifter in prison is bad. Witches are not much better. We deal with our own."

"What about presumption of innocence?"

"Magic and mind readers trumps everything the humans have." Dalmon smiled. He glanced over at the doorway and nodded at the butler. Lucian's suite was ready. "You weren't guilty of his death, but the humans would've found that you were."

"So, now I owe you for that as well." Lucian swirled his brandy.

"That is my job."

"And this?"

"This is me trying to get to know the man the Fates wouldn't let sleep in my guest house."

Lucian gave him a curious smile. "You really believe that part?"

Dalmon shrugged. Sometimes no, today yes. "Why did a pipe burst tonight if not to ensure you were under my roof?"

"Does it make you fall in love?"

"In lust, to cement the bond. After that..." He took a drink. He needed more than one, but that would be dangerous as guards would be dropped.

"If we are mates, then I should know who you are, *Monsieur* Dalmon Vecker."

Dalmon swirled the last of his brandy and smiled. If Lucian had a phone, he could've searched the internet and

found him in a heartbeat. That wasn't a secret he needed to keep.

“It's actually, monsieur le Prince de Château Astre, de Mont de Leucoy.” He finished his drink and set the glass aside, wishing he'd brought the bottle over even though an extra drink wasn't what he needed. A better question would have been, ‘Who was I?’

Chapter Twenty

PRINCE.

Dalmon was a prince? Not that he'd ever heard of the place he claimed to be from. Maybe he was joking. But the staff and the monsieur-ing? The obvious wealth?

Several other questions ran through his head.

Dalmon, or should he not be thinking of him that way? "What should I call you?"

"You can use my name. At work, many people use my last name."

"Is that your actual last name?"

"It is the family name." He pulled his phone out and unlocked it. He typed something in, then handed it over. "Most people couldn't find Mont de Leucoy on a map to save themselves."

There it was, wedged between France and Switzerland. He zoomed out, and it didn't take much to lose the country altogether. Was it rude to say how small it was?

He glanced back at Dalmon. "Does that mean you'll be king one day?"

"No, my nephew is the king."

"What was the rest of the thing you said?"

"Château Astre is my estate and part of my official title."

He was sitting next to a damn prince. His fated mate was a prince. But anyone could claim to be a prince of such an unknown country. “Not to be rude, but can you prove you are the prince?”

“You may use my phone to search my name.”

He typed in ‘Prince Dalmon,’ and the search engine was smart enough to know what he was looking for. There was a photo of him at some event, where he was dressed very formally, and in the snippet of the article, his title was used. Even though he ran the Coven, it was unlikely that he’d created an entire country and fictional life, and what purpose would it serve?

He handed the phone back. “So why work at all?”

“The Coven is my family’s creation, and I enjoy it. Contrary to much of what is written, I do not spend my days lolling around.”

So, on one hand, he was a public prince, uncle to the king, and on the other, he ran the Coven. “Aren’t you supposed to marry other royals or something?”

Dalmon laughed. “Several hundred years ago, maybe. These days, we are much more lax. Though we do tend to marry other paranormals, as it makes life easier.”

Lucian nodded. “Is my phone with my things?”

“No technology is. It is evidence, and at the moment, while we are creating the web to ensure you are clear, it is a risk. You will be given a cover story. Is anyone expecting you to check in?”

Lucian shook his head. He called his mother for her birthday and saw her at Christmas, but their relationship was strained even though it was better since he’d moved away.

“I could disappear, and no one would care. Is the only reason I’m not already gone because you are my mate?”

“No. Though I would not be spending time with you if you were not. I would have finished the interviews and made the deal with you. I don’t like stripping magic; in much the same

way, I don't like ordering shifters to be sent to wildlife sanctuaries."

"To live as animals?"

"Yes. There is also a prison. Like the human population, we have serial killers and such. Had Hastings lived..."

Lucian nodded. He'd have been stripped of his magic and packed off to Coven prison. He shivered and finished his drink. The warmth of liquor spread through him. He watched Dalmon, and Dalmon watched him.

It would be too easy to move closer, to kiss him. He'd taste like the brandy. Like heat. He still didn't know what kind of shifter he was, only that he could make fire.

"You want the bond."

"I'm thinking about it." Dalmon's eyes were dark and filled with lust. "It's distracting. Consuming...and not solely my choice. I cannot force it on you."

And Lucian wouldn't dare because of who Dalmon was. Dalmon could do far worse things to him than strip his magic. "The desire isn't real. It's the bond wanting to form."

He'd read about the need and that the only way to escape was to put some distance between them. Though that seemed unlikely, given the situation.

"Is it?" Dalmon reached out and grabbed Lucian's ankle. He hadn't even realized he'd turned and put his knee on the sofa to face Dalmon, inching that tiny bit closer.

His touch was warm, and he moved closer until their legs were touching. He didn't release Lucian's ankle. His thumb brushed over the bare skin and sent heat tumbling through his blood. His body, his magic, wanted Dalmon.

"Are you even gay?" His words were a whisper.

Dalmon laughed. "I don't label myself. Though I'm sure there has been something salacious written about my sex life."

Not love life.

"Is magic real?" Dalmon asked.

His hand was still on Lucian's ankle. It hadn't crept any higher. His grip wasn't tight. Lucian could move his leg and end this...whatever this was. "Of course magic is real."

"So why would anything created by magic not be real? If the fire I can make can destroy, why would anything the bond seeks to create be less than real?"

Lucian opened his mouth but didn't have an argument. He couldn't win a magical argument with Dalmon. Dalmon had been dealing with magic for decades and ran the Coven, so he knew more about magic than many witches. He hadn't needed magic to notice Dalmon, though—he was the kind of man who once noticed was hard to forget. "You aren't worried about the bond?"

He was fucking worried about the bond; he didn't want his magic to be stronger. He wanted it gone.

"I didn't say anything about making the bond. I wasn't planning on kissing you."

That hurt more than it should. But he was a criminal, an accessory to murder at best, and Dalmon was a fucking prince. An actual, legit prince, who spoke multiple languages, had an estate, and ran the entire fucking Coven.

There should be a terror flowing through his veins. But when Dalmon looked at him, there was only heat—he blamed the fire magic—and even when Lucian had been shackled to the chair, he'd been relieved. A little scared about what would happen next, but he hadn't feared for his life the way he had for the last three years with Hank and Dalmon was far more powerful.

Lucian licked his lower lip, and Dalmon's gaze dropped to watch. Was this a test to see how much he'd read and understood? Because it wasn't just kissing. There had been a recent update that said sex could also allow the bond to form, even without kissing. "No sex either."

That a hand on his ankle could make him think of nothing but sex suggested that he had issues, aside from the fact it had been ages. His dick pressed against the zipper of his pants, but

he didn't dare glance down to see if it was obvious because that would only draw Dalmon's attention.

"No exchange of fluids."

How the fuck did he make that sound hot instead of clinical?

Now all Lucian wanted to do was swap fluids and to hell with the consequences. "Then what are you proposing?" Because Dalmon was definitely suggesting something. "When I give up my magic, the bond will be broken anyway, right?"

"It will. But I do not want to feel that loss, nor do I want to muddy what is already a complicated decision for you."

It actually wasn't that complicated. Except that without magic, there would be no bond and no Dalmon. Oh. That was the complication.

"Besides, there are other things." He moved, glided, or something, and was then straddling Lucian and gazing down at him. "Two rules. No kissing. No removing of pants." He leaned in and licked the curve of Lucian's ear, sending a shiver through his blood. "Break them." The edge was back in his voice. "And make the bond, and you will feel the full weight of the Coven." He nipped Lucian's earlobe hard enough that he gasped.

His back arched, and he felt every inch of Dalmon's cock rub against his. "I don't want the bond."

"You say that, but the lure is stronger than a siren's call. I know what it is and the dangers, and I want nothing more than to surrender." He rolled his hips as though enjoying the feel. "It would be safer for me to walk away, but I don't think I can right now." He leaned in again, his lips grazing Lucian's cheek as though he'd missed his target. "Tell me you don't want me. Push me away."

"I can't." Because that would be lying. He wanted everything that Dalmon wasn't offering. So he'd settle for the crumbs because when this was all over, at least he'd have something to remember.

“Then put your hands on me and stop being scared of touching me.” Dalmon rubbed his cheek against Lucian’s.

But he was a prince. It felt wrong to grab his hips and tug him closer, even though that was what he wanted to do. How far away was security? Were they watching?

He let his fingers brush over Dalmon’s calves, then his knees. He hesitated, waiting to be told off or for Dalmon to pull away. But he didn’t move. It was as if he were giving Lucian the chance to end it. His hands moved, his palms rubbing over Dalmon’s thighs before reaching his hips and pausing there. “Are you sure this is safe?”

“No magic is safe. But I am sure no bond will be made.” His voice was deep and low in his ear. He shrugged out of his jacket and let it fall to the floor.

Fuck, he was still wearing so many clothes. If he undid one button, he wouldn’t be able to stop. He wanted all of Dalmon’s clothes off so he could run his hands over his skin. He turned his head and kissed his jaw. The dark stubble teased his lips. It would take only the smallest movement, and rules would be broken, and bonds would be made.

He couldn’t remember why that would be a bad idea. This was his mate. It was meant to be, so it had to work out. But in the pit of his stomach, he knew if that were true, then Dalmon wouldn’t be resisting, and there wouldn’t be so many warnings about it.

Playing with fire, Dalmon could do.

This was something far more powerful, and if Dalmon was concerned, he should be fucking terrified.

That did not stop him from gripping Dalmon’s hips and dragging him that little bit closer. The layers of clothing between them didn’t seem like enough, while at the same time being too much.

He buried his face against Dalmon’s neck to avoid kissing him. The scent of this morning’s aftershave lingered on his skin, filling his lungs. The collar of his shirt rubbed against his lips. If he kept his head there, it was safe.

Dalmon's fingers threaded through his hair as if to yank his head back, but instead, he held him there as he ground against him. The friction of his underwear and the hard edge of the zipper made every movement a slow torture. It would take only seconds to reach between them and free their cocks.

His grip loosened.

"Don't..."

"How do you know what I was—"

"Because I want to feel you naked and beneath me, and I wouldn't bother undoing buttons." Dalmon's voice was a low growl. He was gripping Lucian's hair so he didn't tear off his clothes.

That image did nothing to cool Lucian's need. His dick throbbed in its confines.

Dalmon rutted against him, and even though he was sitting on Lucian's lap, Lucian had the distinct feeling that it was him getting fucked. Dalmon murmured something that might have been words in another language.

He was not fourteen. This shouldn't be enough.

It wasn't quite enough.

He demanded more. His fingers dug into Dalmon's hips as he tried to find the right amount of friction. Of something.

Dalmon yanked Lucian's head back, exposing his throat.

His heart thumped against his ribs as he stared at the ornate ceiling, not sure if he was about to have his throat ripped out by the shifter's undisclosed animal side or if he was about to come. Dalmon's hand pressed against his chest as he leaned in and licked up Lucian's throat, ending beneath his chin with a small nip.

"Fuck," Dalmon growled. His body vibrated with tension as he groaned.

As he came.

That was enough to tip Lucian over the edge. He closed his eyes as his balls drew up, and he let go. Wet heat spread

against his skin. He jerked against Dalmon, but he was unable to move. He was pinned. Helpless.

He needed more.

Heat bloomed on his chest.

A whimper escaped his lips before he could stop it.

Dalmon swore again. He released Lucian's hair and patted his chest.

Lucian lifted his head and glanced at his chest. The heat was fire, licking at his shirt.

By the time he released his grip on Dalmon, the flames were out.

"That doesn't usually happen." Dalmon scowled. "Are you burned?"

"I don't think so." He had no fucking idea. His body crawled with unmet need, and if they stayed like this much longer, he may not be able to keep his promise. He wanted him.

Needed him.

Why were they resisting again?

Dalmon brushed aside the remnants of Lucian's shirt, then paused to stare. He jabbed his finger at the tattoo on Lucian's chest.

"What the fuck is that?" he asked, a little too breathlessly for it to sound threatening.

"A phoenix." Did he not like tattoos?

Dalmon lifted his gaze. "I can see that. Let me rephrase. Why the fuck do you have one inked on your skin?"

"When I left home, it seemed like a good idea. You know, reinvent myself."

Clearly, Dalmon did not know from the deepening scowl on his face.

Lucian's heart was racing, lust was coursing through him, and somehow, he'd pissed off Dalmon by having a tattoo? He

added confusion to the mix because all he wanted to do was grab him and kiss him.

Dalmon stared at him. His eyes were dark, but Lucian saw flames flickering in his pupils. His nostrils flared as he considered Lucian.

Then he eased back, sliding off him.

“Dalmon?” Lucian reached for him.

But he lifted his hand and took a step back. “If I stay...” He drew in a breath. “I need distance.”

He scooped his jacket off the floor and swept out of the room as if they hadn’t just...just narrowly avoided becoming mates. He put his hand over his heart, over the tattoo. Beneath his palm, his skin was tender as if sunburned, but his chest ached as if Dalmon had walked out of his life forever.

Lucian sighed and collapsed onto the sofa. “What the actual fuck?”

Chapter Twenty-One

DALMON STRIPPED OFF HIS CLOTHES, tossing them to the side, needing to get the scent, the taste, of Lucian off his skin. Getting the feel of him, the sound of him, out of his thoughts, was so much harder.

He doubted a shift would burn them away, but he tried anyway. Stepping into the bathroom, where there was nothing to accidentally set alight. He spread his arms in the darkness and exhaled. The shifting heat was fire in his blood. His body became fire as he shifted to a phoenix.

His arms became wings, and for several seconds, he hung in the air, reveling in the release that was sometimes better than sex.

Not today.

The fire didn't calm him.

He let out a cry of frustration, then swept out of the bathroom and around his suite, not caring if he set it alight. He'd burn it all down. His flames went from red to white.

It took everything he had to pull back from the self-destructive edge and return his flames to a less damaging red.

Twice in one night, he'd resisted.

As he dropped to the ground, he shifted. His hands hit the carpet. He was breathing hard. Skin sheened with sweat.

A feather drifted to the floor, burning away to nothing before it hit the carpet.

Despite becoming fire, all he could taste was Lucian's skin on his tongue. He wanted to go down there and drag him up here. Fuck that. He'd claim him on the sofa. He didn't care how, only that he needed...

He dropped from the crouch onto his knees as if seeking salvation.

From whom, he wasn't sure.

The Fates didn't care. They had done this to him.

He had done this to himself.

If he hadn't made a mess last time, then he wouldn't be kneeling there now.

Where would he be?

Happily mated? Would they have met again?

Or was one lifetime all they got?

They hadn't even had that.

He hung his head.

He didn't know if he wanted it this time, yet not having it hurt. His fingers clawed into the carpet. If Lucian opened the door and walked in, Dalmon wouldn't be able to push him away.

He sucked in a couple of deep breaths, needing to find some peace. But there was none. There was only a raw, burning need that was destroying all the reasons why this was a bad idea.

Chapter Twenty-Two

TWO DAYS LATER, they were still not speaking.

When Dalmon had said he needed distance before abandoning him in the guest lounge, Lucian thought he meant in that moment. The first morning, he had been driven to work at monsieur's orders and met by the tiger shifter. The end of the day had been the reverse.

The next morning, Lucian expected much the same. He was eating breakfast in the kitchen—in his own clothes that had been washed and neatly hung in the wardrobe—when the butler told him monsieur would be ready to leave in fifteen minutes. The implication being that he should also be ready.

The driver took them to the office with the screen up so he and Dalmon could've talked, but Dalmon was busy on his phone. Working from the looks of it. He narrowed his gaze at the screen as though it were paining him, then made a call.

It rang several times before being picked up.

Lucian stared out the window and pretended not to care. He didn't care about the call; he cared that Dalmon was ignoring him. Treating him as less than staff when all Lucian wanted to do was run his hand up the prince's thigh and sprawl in his lap.

The man on the other end said something.

“Agent Carver, it's Dalmon Vecker, London office.”

There was a pause before the man on the other end spoke again.

“I need you on a plane tonight. I’ll have my PA sort it and send you the details.” Dalmon nodded. “I understand, but your expertise is something I need because of the breach.”

Lucian glanced at him. He was doing his best to find the mole. Wasn’t he?

Could he make his magic move faster?

Dalmon didn’t even glance at him. “I hope so, too. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

He lowered the phone and pulled up another number without even looking at him. “Don’t say anything, Lucian. My control is only so good.”

He didn’t even know what to say. “I’m trying.”

“I know.” Then he made another call.

In the office was no better. The tiger was already by the door, so Lucian walked in while Dalmon gave instructions to his PA. He didn’t even sit at his desk as he made more calls.

Was he calling in favors?

“Kaine, I need you to authorize the Coven history for Marwood.”

Lucian winced at the use of his surname, then realized he’d stuffed up the stupidly long password and started typing it out again.

Dalmon switched to French and spoke rapidly, his words clipped. Lucian stared as Dalmon made a fireball and bounced it against the glass, the way a human might a rubber ball, as he spoke.

Lucian didn’t speak French, but he heard the word phoenix and realized they were talking about him. Right in front of him, as if he weren’t sitting there.

The fireball bounced off the glass and into Dalmon’s hand, and the hard edge slowly left his words. Just how much was he telling this Kaine person?

Dalmon caught the fireball again and closed his hand, extinguishing it. With a sigh, he hung up. “I have meetings.

My PA will bring you lunch. You should have some more reading available within the next thirty minutes.”

“That’s it?”

Dalmon pressed his lips together and studied him. “Yes, that’s it. I am trying to stop the Shadow Board. I have teams on three different continents, and each operation has more moving parts than a clock. There are multiple operations, and I have no idea who I can trust. The other night was... I forgot myself.”

“Or found yourself.”

Dalmon’s gaze narrowed. “I don’t need you telling me how to live. Fates know I have enough people trying.”

“You know what would make finding the mole faster? You. You said the magic flo—”

“Do not bring that up again.” He stalked closer. “Or I will begin to think all you want is a shifter to bind.” He put his palm on Lucian’s desk and leaned over, his pupils flickering with flames. And for a moment, Lucian thought Dalmon was going to grab him by the shirt and kiss him. He gritted out his next words. “Am I clear?”

Lucian held his stare even though it burned through him. “Yes.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

THE CRACKLE of flames filled Dalmon's ears as he left his office. He didn't have a meeting for another hour, but he couldn't sit in there with Lucian. The office had never felt so small.

He sat in the meeting room down a level that was being used as the operations hub but was sure he could feel the witch through the layers of concrete. He checked the logs of who had entered the room. Paying attention to any shifters.

Kaine had already gone through the list and found nothing suspicious. Everyone who'd accessed the room was supposed to be accessing it. That didn't mean shit. He might have approved the mole without realizing.

As well as ordering Kaine to London, he'd also summoned Agent Sam Carver from Australia because he'd, until recently, run the cover-up branch for the country. Now, he was involved with training. But he was trustworthy. That he'd been a familiar until his witch husband had given up his magic was a bonus.

Flames licked over his fingers. He stared at them. They shouldn't be there, but they were becoming harder to control.

Kaine's brilliant idea had been to roll with it and to claim his mate. *Have you tried not being so controlling?*

Kaine was an asshole. Brilliant, but an asshole.

Yes, claiming his mate would solve all of his problems. Just leap in. What could possibly go wrong?

Given how well it had worked out last time...

He raked his still-burning fingers through his hair. Heat flowed through him like lava. Neither a shift nor sex had helped.

Kaine had laughed about the tattoo. Thought it was cute that somehow Lucian had subconsciously known what to look for. It was bloody creepy. That's what it was. It meant he'd been searching for Dalmon from the time his magic had come in.

Or at least since getting inked.

He opened his laptop and logged in, then pulled up everything he had on Lucian—particularly where he'd been and when. Then he did the same for himself to see how many times they had crossed paths without realizing.

The tattoo had been after he'd left home, and while Dalmon didn't know the exact date, it was enough. He'd been in the US for half that year.

When Lucian had moved to New York, Dalmon had been in Canada for Coven and prince work. The date that Lucian started working for Hastings, Dalmon, had been in New York. Had they passed in the street?

Had a light turned red, and they'd missed each other?

He closed his eyes and leaned back. And what would he have done five years ago?

This mess with the Board hadn't been so bad. He'd been following reports of a witch stealing magic and of shifters who had been rescued years ago disappearing. The two cases had seemed unrelated at the time, though both were about witches craving more power.

Since then, everything had become knotted.

Maybe he'd have recognized Lucian was his mate; maybe he wouldn't have. Would he have hesitated? He wasn't hesitating.

He was pushing him away.

The same as he'd done last time.

Everest stepped into the room and shut the door. "Kaine said you needed to see me."

Of course he had. "I wanted to ask how your meeting went."

He'd read the report, and there was nothing to discuss. That part was going smoothly.

"Fine. But you know that." He dropped into a chair as though boneless. "Got a party tomorrow. I've been working on the binding magic or something that approximates it, anyway. Gerrit said he is negotiating with Templeton and Farrell."

Dalmon nodded. He wasn't sure about bringing outsiders in, but there was no argument against it.

"And you are hiding from your mate." Everest's lips curved as if he found it amusing.

"Is that why Kaine sent you?" He was going to pluck his brother for sending Everest to tease him. "He shouldn't have even told you."

"We watch each other's backs. He's worried."

Dalmon snorted.

The lazy grin dropped from Everest's lips, and he leaned forward as his gaze sharpened. "What would you tell me?"

"To stop fucking your bodyguard."

Everest glared at him. "You should try it."

"You are out of line."

"I'm speaking as your brother," Everest snarled.

"So am I," Dalmon said through gritted teeth. His fingers flickered with flames again as his annoyance surged.

"All I'm saying is that if he doesn't want his magic, then you won't be mates for long. Enjoy it. Life is meant to be fun." His teeth worried at his lower lip. "And selfishly, I need you to be focused on me and the Shadow Board because I

don't want to be bound to one of their witches and disappear... unless it would help me find Olier."

"Do not wish that. We will find him." He couldn't lose another brother.

"It's been two centuries."

"I know, and I know it has bruised your soul." Everest shot him a baleful glare. "My fated mate is my bruise. Kaine did not give you all the facts."

"Neither did you."

Dalmon nodded. "I want you to focus on the job, not me."

Everest was also right. He needed to focus, and Lucian was a distraction and would be until they were mates. That was not a good reason to take a mate. Nor was speeding up the magic to find the mole and then hoping Lucian stuck to his word and surrendered his magic.

"The mole is a shifter. I don't know what kind yet. Possibly one connected to the Board's shifter families." He hated not being able to trust the people he worked with.

Everest's eyebrows pinched together. "How do you know it's a shifter?"

"I just do." Kaine hadn't told Everest that Lucian was a finder.

"So let's set a trap."

"You think I haven't considered that?" If it looked like a trap, they wouldn't catch anything, and if it wasn't enough like a trap, they caught the wrong person. "Traps are not easy to set. Wrong intel has already been dispersed."

"Were you going to tell me?"

"No. Because you shouldn't know."

Everest grunted. "You don't trust me with anything."

Dalmon rubbed his forehead and ran his fingers through his hair. "Please, Ever, as prince or agent, you wouldn't be aware. It's better not to know because if they have mind

readers or another psychometric amongst their ilk, you will not be tripped. I am protecting you.”

“Fine.” He lifted his chin, and it was clear Everest didn’t believe him.

“Don’t you have work to do?”

“I have an essay I need to write, but I thought I’d annoy you until you go back to your mate and sort out whatever you did to him in the past.”

“What makes you think I did anything?” He still didn’t know what Lucian had done to be banished. Being in the library didn’t feel like enough, not that he wanted anyone in the library, even though they might be able to help. His reluctance to enlist the help of Farrell and Templeton was probably related to the Lucian incident.

Everest lifted his hand. “You are cold, calculating, and entirely consumed by work. As much as that used to bother me, I need that part of you because I’m scared. Yet you’re sitting there, unable to control your fire like you’re about to pop your first shift, while I’m about to jump into bed with the Shadow Board. I can’t tell you what to do, but fuck...” he shook his head and looked away.

“You think I want to be resisting him? That I’m enjoying this? I am trying to weigh what is best for everyone, from him to the Coven.”

“And what about you?”

Dalmon shook his head. “If everyone else is taken care of, I’ll be fine.”

“You’re literally on fire. If you are not fine, the Coven and everyone else will suffer.”

“I can’t take a mate because it will make me feel better.”

“Why not? The Fates put him where you couldn’t avoid him because even they knew you’d find a way to ignore him otherwise.” Everest shook his head. “Is that what you did last time? Ignore him?”

“Get out.”

“Mon Dieu. You’re willing to repeat a past mistake. For what?”

“I said get out, Agent Lake.”

“Pulling rank?” Everest stood. “Monsieur, you forget yourself.”

The little shit expected him to stand because he was the heir, and he was just the uncle of the king. Dalmon got to his feet, glaring at the man who was, this time, his younger brother.

Everest pressed his lips together and smothered a laugh. “Your hair is on fire.”

“I’m aware.” His voice was like gravel. He was becoming a danger to everyone. He was the out-of-control paranormal about to expose them all to humans. “You think I should go up there and fuck him on my desk?”

Everest gave a small shrug and tried to look innocent.

Dalmon grimaced. “I’ve sat at your desk.”

Everest pressed his lips together and lifted his eyebrows. “I think maybe that’s what you need.”

“What about what he needs?” He couldn’t decide someone else’s life. Yet, as head of the Coven, he did it every day.

“Perhaps he needs a work-obsessed mate?”

He’d become like that after the first time.

“Have you asked him? Or are you assuming that you know best, the way you do so often?” Everest tilted his head as though he had some kind of moral high ground despite the mistakes he’d made over his numerous lives.

“And am I usually right?” They’d come so close to creating the bond last night. He wouldn’t be standing there battling his own magic if they had.

“That’s not the point.”

“It is, though. I don’t want to end up hurting him.” Or using Lucian for his magic.

“So you’re deciding for him how it’s going to be. Again. Can you hear yourself?”

He could, and he didn’t like it, but he didn’t know what else he was supposed to do. He held out his fire-wrapped hand. He’d lost control last night, too. It was getting worse by the hour, as if his magic had been waiting four centuries for this and was done with holding back. “What if I get hurt?”

“If he hurts you, you have my word that I will use every resource I have, the Coven has, to hunt him down and make him pay. We all will.” Everest put his hand over his heart. “Even if you don’t trust the Fates or your heart—if you have one—logically, what would be the smart thing to do?”

“To have kept away from him.” Though between the Fates putting Lucian where he couldn’t avoid him and Lucian’s own magic searching for his lost mate, he seemed to be damned.

Everest sighed. “Fine. I have tried. Who would you like to arrest you for flaming in public?”

“I’ll sort it.”

“There is no sorting it, Dal. What the fuck am I supposed to do if you are out of control? How are you supposed to claim him if you are on fire, or worse, shifted?”

He’d almost hurt him last night, and they’d kept their clothes on. “My own desperation is a poor excuse.”

“Desperation. Desire. A need that must be sated... What better reason is there for sex?”

Dalmon closed his eyes and shook his head. “Because it’s not just sex. That would be easy.”

“Our immortality is a blessing because we can try again, but it’s a curse because we know our past. Perhaps our records hold us back instead of setting us free.” In that moment, Everest didn’t sound like the nineteen-year-old prince. He sounded like a king who’d seen too much.

Dalmon scowled. “Did you memorize that from last life?”

“Did it make me sound wise?”

“Get out.” He hooked his burning thumb at the door.

This time, Everest walked toward the door. “If you won’t do it for yourself, do it for the Coven, or me, or whatever excuse you need.”

“Thank you for your motivational speech.” Which would no doubt be relayed directly to Kaine. “Tell Kaine not to send you in his stead.” Dalmon opened the door.

“You can tell him yourself when he gets here.”

Dalmon shut the door and leaned his forehead against it. He fisted his hands, wanting nothing more than to unfurl and shift, but he did not want to destroy his clothes.

Avoiding Lucian hadn’t helped. If anything, the need had gotten worse.

He didn’t even know what would happen if he lost control and shifted. Would he be stuck like that? Would he shift back while he slept?

Or would it drain him to the point he died?

He squeezed his eyes shut. Then he’d have to start all over.

Chapter Twenty-Four

HISTORY HAD NEVER BEEN his favorite subject, and reading through dry accounts of the Coven's past was not changing his opinion. It wasn't even distracting him from the lust. That's what he was calling it, given that it felt as though he'd been half-hard since the not-a-hookup on the sofa.

He couldn't even rustle up some low-level annoyance about being brushed off. All he had was hurt because he didn't know what he'd done. He was beginning to think it wasn't about him but Dalmon's reluctance to be bound—which he could understand. Not that a man like Dalmon could ever really be bound. Holding on to that amount of power would be fatal. If not for the pull of the bond between them, he wouldn't even be thinking about getting him naked.

He paused and realized that while he'd read the last couple of paragraphs, he hadn't taken any of it in. "I need a coffee."

The shifter at the door didn't even acknowledge that he'd spoken. He stood and stretched, which drew the man's gaze, but he didn't move. If he strolled over to Dalmon's desk, would the shifter stop him? He was tempted to give it a go to have something to do.

His heartbeat quickened as he eyed the desk.

Then the door to the office opened, and Dalmon was walking in as if everything was fine. *Got to keep up the act in front of the employees, right?*

Lucian didn't even notice his guard step outside and shut the door, but he was suddenly aware they were alone. Dalmon

put his laptop and files on his desk.

“You haven’t snooped.”

“Why would I?” *Aside from getting your attention.* “How can you tell?”

“Wards.”

Were there scorch marks on the files?

A curl of flame formed along Dalmon’s jaw. Even though it would burn, Lucian wanted to lick it.

“We need to talk.” Dalmon rested his butt on his desk.

Lucian didn’t step around his own desk to move closer, even though that’s what he wanted. His toes curled in his shoes as though it would keep him in place. “Yeah. The other night...I don’t know what happened.”

Well, he did. He’d stopped thinking about anything but wanting to feel Dalmon rub up against him.

“The bond wants to form.” Dalmon glanced away. “I thought a little space would help, but it’s only made it worse.” Flames crawled over his knuckles. “For me, anyway.”

“My magic is...I don’t know. Hopefully doing its thing? Not being near you hurts. I thought I’d done something wrong.”

Dalmon shook his head and sighed. “Not this time.”

“What does that mean?”

He was silent for several heartbeats. “That we have been mates before, in another life.”

Lucian wanted to laugh, but Dalmon wasn’t smiling. “How would you even know that?”

“Because of what I am. It ended badly. You did something, and I sent you away, and you were killed.”

“But that would mean you also died.” What the fuck had he done to be sent away? Was he a shit in every life?

“Yes. I won’t be able to unravel it until I go home, which I can’t do at the moment because of everything else that’s going

on. It's been centuries, but here we are again, and I have no idea how to fix what happened last time—”

“Why do you need to fix it?” Assuming he believed they had done all of this before, which he wasn't sure he did. “We are different. This life is different.”

The corner of his lips twitched. “It is. I am trying to protect all paranormals from exposure, yet I am the danger.” He lifted his hand. “This is going to become worse until I am forced to shift. After that, I may not be able to return to human.”

“So you want to be mates now?” Because for the last two days, Dalmon had been acting as though it was the last thing he wanted.

“I don't know what I want. I don't like to be like this. This heat and craving is distracting me when I need to be on top of everything. Which isn't a good reason to agree.” He stared at Lucian. “None of what is going on is a good reason to do this.”

“What would be a good reason, if there is one?” He moved around his desk and mimicked Dalmon's pose, resting against it as if the table had enough gravitational force to stop him from walking over and kissing him, flames or not.

“Love?”

“Wouldn't that come after, given that the bond brings people together?”

Dalmon shrugged. “Sometimes. For some, it's a working relationship.”

“Not to be overstepping—”

“You can speak freely around me.”

“Until you snap at me.” But even then, Lucian wanted to silence him with a kiss.

Dalmon tilted his head, silently telling him to go on.

“It seems as though we need the working relationship part. You'll be able to use my magic to find the mole.” Or he could use Dalmon's shifter strength to up his magic, but that was a

sore point he didn't want to mention again. "And you won't be distracted by your fire going wild."

"And what about you?"

"I'm here for the ride. Maybe I'm making amends for shit I did in this life and the previous one with you. Maybe we use our magics to shut down the Board and then end the bond. Magic wasn't something I ever wanted. People used me because of it."

"And I don't want to be one of them."

He couldn't fix a past life that he didn't know anything about, but he wanted to make amends for helping Hastings. If that meant letting Dalmon use his magic, that was fine. "We're fated mates. That's different. And I want to help."

He needed to help so he could prove to himself that he wasn't a terrible person.

He pushed off the desk, knowing that with each step closer to Dalmon, he was running out of chances to change his mind. Distance only hurt them both, though in different ways. "So, how do we do this?"

"You don't even know what I am."

Dalmon was something weird—that much he was sure of. "You'll tell me, or show me, when you're ready."

"You might get some of my magic and sprout flames."

"I'll deal with that if it happens." He stopped three feet in front of Dalmon. "So if it's business, there's no sex, right?"

"Correct."

"That already seems like a shit idea because all I want to do is rip off that expensive suit."

"The lust will fade when the bond is made."

"Are you sure about that?"

Dalmon's silence was the answer. He wasn't sure.

"Well, I guess we're going to find out." Lucian didn't step closer, even though he wanted to. No, Dalmon was going to

have to leave the safety of his desk and do it—that way, Lucian couldn't be accused of binding a shifter. He crooked his finger, beckoning Dalmon closer.

Dalmon's pupils flickered with gold and red, and fire danced between the strands of his dark hair. He was going to get his fingers burned by this man, and he was looking forward to the pain.

Chapter Twenty-Five

HAD it been a rush of need with no thought of the consequences last time? Or had Dalmon debated every step along the way only to have it end in disaster, anyway?

It had reached the point where he almost didn't care. He could smell the desire on Lucian's skin, see it in his green eyes. They were both caught in the Fates' web, and giving in was the only way for him to survive and do what he needed to save everyone.

He peeled himself off the desk and took one step forward.

Two feet between them. If he lifted his hand, he'd be able to grab him and haul him close. His hand was already lifting as though unable to resist.

One more step. He grabbed the front of Lucian's shirt and tugged him close. Their lips crashed together, hard and clumsy. His fingers curled tighter into Lucian's shirt as though unable to let go.

Magic swelled around them. He'd heard it described as a spark, but to him, it was more like standing in the center of a furious firestorm. Lucian's tongue slid over his lip, and Dalmon opened his mouth, inviting him closer.

Needing him.

The bond snapped between them, and the heat of the magic settled into his blood. It should be a work relationship. It hadn't been about work from the moment the hood had been pulled off.

Lucian pushed Dalmon's suit jacket off his shoulders. Reluctantly, he released Lucian long enough to let the jacket drop to the carpet. It was quickly followed by his waistcoat. He still had too many clothes on. Lucian had all of his on.

Lucian took a step forward, backing Dalmon up against his desk.

"You're on fire," Lucian murmured against his lips.

Was he? He hadn't been paying attention. "It won't hurt you now."

"I was worried about my clothes."

"I'll send my PA out for more." He tugged Lucian's shirt out of his trousers so he could slide his hands beneath. His skin was cool beneath Dalmon's palms, and he let out a little moan when Dalmon gripped his ass and dragged him closer.

Lucian felt better than he remembered, as if they fitted together perfectly.

He tried to remember that it was just magic, but he didn't care, as he untangled his hands from beneath Lucian's shirt to undo the buttons. Lucian helped, their hands knocking together as they battled to undo shirts and pull off ties.

They paused for breath. Noses only an inch apart, shirts hanging open.

What the hell was he doing?

He didn't do this.

He couldn't stop, either.

He'd been waiting for too long, and he did not want to keep his pants on this time.

But he wasn't prepared either.

"What is it? Have you changed your mind already—"

Dalmon shut him up with a kiss. "No. I don't know what you like, and I don't have anything."

Because he didn't fuck people in his office. And he wasn't going to drag Lucian into the bathroom. With Lucian pressed

against him, he wasn't going anywhere.

For the first time, he realized Lucian was taller. Only by a couple of inches, but he hadn't noticed all the other times because he'd been so withdrawn that he had appeared smaller.

Lucian worked open Dalmon's zipper. "I am not waiting until we get home. I may not burst into flames or shift, but I will die." He dropped to his knees and glanced up. "We can flip a coin to see who gets fucked later."

"You're assuming I don't have a preference." He sucked in a breath as Lucian licked along his length.

"If you did, you would've said." His tongue flicked over the slit before taking him into his mouth. His tongue swept along the underside, stealing rational argument.

His new preference was watching Lucian suck him. The way his lips wrapped around his cock...

Flames flickered up his belly, but he wasn't about to shift. That need was gone. All he needed was his mate. His fingers threaded through Lucian's messy blond hair, tight enough that he couldn't pull all the way off. Heat pooled in his belly and tightened his balls.

Lucian glanced up as if sensing how close he was. He shouldn't be this close.

How close had he come to losing control?

The lust in Lucian's eyes was enough.

Heat erupted on Dalmon's skin as he came. He sensed his shirt burning, the remains falling away. Felt the flames extend out of his back like wings, and there was nothing he could do to hold it in. His phoenix wanted out to celebrate having its mate back.

Lucian swallowed, his gaze never leaving him, even though his eyes widened.

Chest lifting with each quick breath, Dalmon gentled his grip on Lucian's hair, and Lucian drew back.

He sat back on his heels and ran his fingers over the ink on his chest as if he knew the shape of the tattoo so well he didn't need to look. "You're a phoenix."

He could deny it, but with the bond between them, Lucian should be able to sense his animal side. He gave a single nod. The flames on his back were already receding. "That doesn't usually happen."

"The wings or this?" Lucian indicated between the two of them.

"Both." The tension that had been clawing through him for weeks had dissipated. It hadn't been work-related stress. It had been his magic, knowing that his mate was close and not wanting to miss the connection again. And now he had it.

He had a witch. A mate.

And he was a familiar. He wanted to growl a reminder that he wouldn't be used, but from the look on Lucian's face, he wasn't even thinking about magic.

Dalmon cupped Lucian's jaw. "Are you okay, or is it too much?"

For someone not used to magic, the bond could swamp them. While Lucian's magic was subtle, his was not.

"Yeah." Desire was still rough in Lucian's voice.

Already, Dalmon could sense Lucian's thoughts. He'd been around magic his entire life. He knew how it worked and what it felt like. There were tendrils that wanted to go searching. Lucian's was a hungry magic, never resting even without direction. "You're always learning, aren't you? Always looking for something to feed your magic?"

He helped him up, and Lucian stumbled and rested his hand on the desk. "I never used to notice the way I'd get interested in something and find out all about it before moving on to something else."

Dalmon ran his hand up the front of Lucian's trousers, enjoying the thick ridge made by Lucian's cock. He pulled his magic back until he was sharing only a trickle because it was

too much for the young witch. Between them, the bond was thick as though it had existed for years, not minutes.

Is that how it had been before?

He kissed along Lucian's jaw, loving the way his stubble felt on his lips.

Lucian's hand trailed over his ribs as though he needed to touch him. "I want to fuck you."

"I cannot send my PA out for lube."

He chuckled against Dalmon's neck. "I suppose not. Tonight?"

"Tonight..." Dalmon drew in a breath, knowing exactly what he wanted, and that was Lucian sprawled beneath him, breathless and lost his own pleasure. "And then I will flip you over and fuck you." Lucian shuddered in his arms. He didn't need magic to know how on edge he was. He worked open Lucian's trousers and stroked his length through his briefs. "Right now, I want to see you come."

"I can wait."

"I can't." He was half-hard, thinking what it would be like to be filled and then what it would be like to sink into him. It had been years. He needed to taste him, even though sucking dick was not his favorite thing to do.

The front of Lucian's briefs dampened with each caress. If he slipped his hand in, the head would be slick.

"You're not going to get on your knees, are you?"

"I'm not." He might have if Lucian had bent over the desk and offered his ass up for eating.

Lucian rested his head on Dalmon's shoulder, his arm still around him, as Dalman explored his cock through the tight fabric before giving in to the need to touch. He pushed his hand in and wrapped his fingers around Lucian's cock.

"Your fingers are hot."

"Burning?" The flames may not burn, but they could still be uncomfortable.

“No.” Lucian shook his head.

Dalmon swept his thumb over the slit, teasing the silky skin. His lips brushed Lucian’s ear. “I want to taste you.”

He let his own need to feel Lucian come in his hand seep through the bond.

Lucian made a little noise. “The mess...”

He didn’t give a fuck about the mess. “Show me how much of a mess you can make.”

Lucian’s grip on him tightened, and his hips rocked as he thrust into Dalmon’s hand. A tremor ran through his witch as his breath hitched. His cock swelled, and he came spilling over Dalmon’s hand. Some splashed onto his stomach, and Dalmon milked every drop out of him before pulling his hand free of Lucian’s briefs and bringing his fingers to his lips. He licked his fingers clean, then leaned down and licked his belly.

Lucian’s breathing was fast, and because he was being watched, Dalmon took his time before standing. He’d barely gotten upright before Lucian kissed him, demanding to taste himself in Dalmon’s mouth.

“Regrets?” Lucian murmured against his lips.

“No.” He’d wanted it. The need had been so deep within him that it had been a choice between giving in or being consumed. “You?”

Lucian drew in a breath. “No.”

But there was something there. Fear? Lucian was afraid of him? After last time, he shouldn’t hold that against him. Or maybe it was because of who he was. Some people were attracted to the power—they were tedious and only liked him because of the doors he could open—others feared it and wouldn’t go near him because of it. This was neither of those things. They had been brought together, and he had to believe it was for a reason and that it was the right thing to do. For both of them. For everyone.

He placed a soft kiss on Lucian’s lips. “You should put your shirt on and go to the bathroom.”

“The shifter will know.”

“He will think we are lovers or that I am using you.” He put his knuckle under Lucian’s chin and held his gaze. “The important thing is that he doesn’t know we are mates.” He let his hand drift to the phoenix tattoo on Lucian’s chest. “My kind is believed to be extinct, and we would like to keep it that way so we don’t actually die out.”

Lucian nodded. The green of his eyes was almost swallowed by his pupils. His lips were a little puffy, and he looked as if he’d had the wits fucked out of him.

His cock twitched. Later. And he wanted that same expression so that he didn’t have to think or be in charge for a little while.

“What about your shirt?”

“I’m a fire witch,” he said out of habit. “I keep a change of clothes in the office.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

LUCIAN SPLASHED water on his face and then dried off on the fluffy white hand towel. This wasn't like any office bathroom he'd ever used. It was bigger than some offices...some apartments...he'd had. Two stalls, two showers. Not a urinal in sight. Fresh towels. It belonged in an upscale hotel.

He doubted many executive bathrooms were like this.

Princely bathroom? Maybe.

The urgent lust that had consumed him was now a simmer. They were mates and all that meant. Magic-wise, he had an idea. Day-to-day what that was going to look like, he had no idea, mostly because of who Dalmon was. What he was.

A phoenix. Those fiery wings had been glorious and mesmerizing, and he wanted to see him shift, to bask in the magic and wonder. At the back of his mind, he knew this couldn't last, no matter how good it felt, because of who they were. He didn't deserve any of this. The Fates were wrong.

There was jitter in his blood, and he wasn't sure if it was him or Dalmon or fire magic or the bond. Or something else entirely. He'd sucked plenty of dick, and he'd had plenty of hand jobs, but nothing had ever come close to that. He felt as though he'd been fucked for an entire weekend. His legs weren't really stable, and his mind was elsewhere...down the front of Dalmon's very expensive suit.

He blinked, and for a moment, he didn't recognize himself, and not only because he hadn't shaved. He'd thought about it, but he liked the way Dalmon rubbed against his cheek on the

sofa, and then again today. He couldn't go back to clean shaven.

He used the wet hand towel to give his stomach a wipe, even though Dalmon's tongue had done an excellent job, then did up his pants and shirt, making himself presentable. The man in the mirror still seemed like a stranger. Even though nothing had changed.

Everything had changed.

Their lives...their magics...it was all tied together. And had been for centuries. Why?

He glanced at his hand as if expecting it to burst into flames.

It didn't. His magic didn't feel any different, either. What did stronger magic feel like? Stronger magic was the last thing he wanted, but if he found the mole faster before anyone else got hurt, that was a good thing. Then he'd give up magic and break the bond and leave. He winced as the thought stabbed through him and twisted.

He tossed the towel in the laundry basket and opened the door.

The tiger shifter wrinkled his nose. "I can still smell it."

Good for you. "I didn't ask for your thoughts."

The man who was guarding him drew his lips back into a silent snarl. "He might be fucking you, but men like him don't play with the trash for long."

Lucian smiled. "You'd do it if you had the chance. Jealous?"

"Like I'd go anywhere near a witch," he growled. "Move it. I want my lunch break today."

Lucian walked past the PA's office—her door was shut as usual—and back to Dalmon's, glad to be shutting the guard on the other side. Dalmon was on the phone as if nothing had happened.

No, that wasn't right because when he glanced over, he smiled. Actually smiled as if he were glad to be his mate.

"I don't care. I need you and your husband in England by tomorrow morning. I will arrange the private jet to collect you." Dalmon tilted his head. "You're right, I can't force you, but I can make things very difficult with the French authorities. No, that was not a threat. It was a statement. Now, your father is part of the Board, and you and your husband have magics that will assist in stopping them from exposing us all." He nodded. "Yes, that would be a fucking disaster. Mmm. I am sure that is what they are going to do. That's my job. I run the Coven." Dalmon laughed. "Good. My PA will be in touch with the details."

He tossed his phone on his desk and raked his fingers through his hair. "Eighteen months ago, I saved their asses, and they don't want to get on a plane and assist. They are now, but still..."

"You're calling in favors."

"I'm calling in people I can trust. There is a difference."

"Are they all staying with you?"

"No, that would be too bloody obvious. Carver will. The Lumin's will stay elsewhere."

Why did he know that name? It was easy to find the answer. "Hank met with him."

"Lumin senior is Shadow Board. His son fled the country with his fox shifter familiar, now husband. They are not of noble blood, but because he runs a media empire, and the Board finds his money and power useful, he is a *valued* member."

Lucian nodded. "They don't trust him because of his son."

"Correct. I am sure he and Hastings got on great until Hastings wanted in on his own terms."

The answers that he wanted were there if he reached for them. He rocked back onto his heels. "I don't know if it's my

magic being stronger or because of what you know, but...I know things.”

Things Hank had never told him and that he couldn't have read.

“You probably always did, but you never put them together.”

Is that what was happening? His magic was skipping through everything and pulling it all together? “What if it's wrong?”

Just because the pieces fit didn't mean the picture was correct.

“I can verify. This weekend is important. I have agents in places, and I need my people on standby.”

“And you needed to not be distracted.” It was better that they were mates until this was over. Perhaps that's why the Fates had brought them together now, so they could stop the Shadow Board.

Dalmon lifted his hand and shook his head. “Don't do that.”

“What?”

“Where you push yourself to the edge so you don't get hurt.”

Lucian opened his mouth to argue that it had been a practical thing to do. It didn't mean anything. But it felt as though it meant something.

Dalmon walked toward him. He was a couple of inches shorter, but the way he moved and carried himself, he took up all the space and drew all the attention.

“You are my mate. The bond may have been made out of necessity, or work, or any other terrible reason that you want to name for giving in to the desire, but that does not change where we are now. You are the most important person to me.” He cupped Lucian's jaw and kissed him. “What that means outside of this room is up to us to decide.” He stepped back

with a sigh as though he wanted to keep kissing him. “But I do need to focus this weekend so people don’t die.”

And he could help with that if he found the mole.

“Does the mole know about your operations?”

“Some of them. Some are known only to me and a couple of others.” His hand brushed Lucian’s as though he needed to touch him, but he didn’t grab hold. “We are going to have to figure out the magic side of things because if you have an emotional spike, you might generate flames.”

“Might or will?”

Dalmon shrugged. “The bond is individual to the couple. There are no hard rules that it follows.”

Of course there weren’t.

“Can you sense the bond?” Dalmon lifted an eyebrow.

“I think so. I can sense you, and I thought I sensed what you were feeling before.” Lucian glanced down, trying not to remember how easy it had been to drop to his knees.

“Hmm. Bonds usually take time to grow.”

Lucian bit back on the groan. “Let me guess, this one didn’t. Because of our past.”

There would be no slowly getting used to it.

“Correct. At the moment, I’m holding back my magic, but when you were searching for the answers, I was aware of you drawing on the bond. Be aware that if you draw heavily, you risk draining me. Your increased power comes from my energy.”

“That seems kind of dangerous.” For him and Dalmon, he could barely use the magic he already had.

“Use it wisely.”

Lucian nodded. “What do you get out of this?”

“Traditionally, a protector and access to your magic, though that requires some training.”

“Your magic seems like the kind that requires training.” He didn’t want to set fire to himself, his clothes, or anything around him.

“You’d think that, but every time you go looking for answers, pay attention to if you are using magic or drawing on the bond.”

Was that a warning? It probably was.

“Is there anything I can do to help this weekend?”

Dalmon considered him for several seconds. “Find the mole.”

Lucian frowned. “You just told me to be careful. Besides, you can do it. You can use my magic.”

“I can’t. I don’t know how to use it yet. It won’t take me long, a week or so, but I need that time.”

“Which you don’t have.”

“Not right now.” He leaned in again, and his lips brushed Lucian’s in a ghost of a kiss. “And when I’m close to you, magic is the last thing I’m thinking about.”

The kiss was over before he could enjoy it. “I can’t sit around and do nothing.”

“You’re learning. That is important, even if it does seem dull.”

Lucian sighed. “I’ll go and read up on Coven history.”

“I’ve also allowed you access to information on Mont de Leucoy.”

“Your country is the Coven database?”

“No, it’s the country’s website full of history, tourism, and such. I haven’t looked at it in years. I believe you can apply for a visa to visit on the website.” He shrugged. “I will take you, but everything will be sorted for you, so don’t worry. I also have your passport. It’s not missing, if you were wondering.”

“I hadn’t thought about it.” It hadn’t crossed his mind that his passport was missing because he hadn’t thought about leaving. “How many of you are there?”

Dalmon’s gaze narrowed for a heartbeat, and Lucian felt the sharp edges forming. Talons that would tear him apart if he misstepped.

“You mentioned going extinct so not many...and if you are with me, you won’t be able to have children and...um...” He was rambling. But he was sure there were a hundred reasons they shouldn’t be together.

They weren’t going to be staying together. When the bond was broken, Dalmon would be gone from his life. Why did that hurt as if his ribs were breaking?

“There are only a handful. And children are not an issue. None of us have ever managed that with anyone, witch, shifter, or human. I do not need to marry to continue my line if that is what you were hinting at.”

“I have no idea what I was hinting at.” Only that he was curious about phoenix shifters and what was going to happen when he told the king he had a criminal witch as a mate.

Lines formed between Dalmon’s eyebrows. “You’re thinking of the end.”

“Well, when I give up magic, it will end.” Was he that readable, or was the bond giving away his every thought?

“The bond will end. What does that mean for us?” He shrugged. “We don’t even know what that bond means for us. We’re barely on the journey. Perhaps try to enjoy it instead of planning for the end.” He glanced at the clocks. “I have a meeting in a few minutes. When I return, we’ll leave.”

“You don’t need to finish early because of me.”

“I didn’t say I’d be finishing early, but I do want to spend the evening with you.” His fingers brushed Lucian’s, and then he walked away.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

“So, you are the witch who has been stirring up Dalmon’s past.” A tall man walked in and shut the door. He had dark hair, but whereas Dalmon had dark eyes, his were tawny. And he strolled in as if he had every right to be in Dalmon’s office.

Lucian wasn’t sure if he should tell him to leave or ignore him. “Who are you?”

“Kaine Lenoir, Chief of Security,” he said with a slight accent.

Right, so he couldn’t tell him to do anything.

Kaine appraised him, and Lucian wasn’t sure if he was passing or failing. “I’m the reason you were allowed out of holding and given access to certain information.”

“Access to what you want me to know,” Lucian corrected.

“Access to what it is safe for you to know. You are a finder, un chercheur. You would become lost in the catacombs of bytes without even realizing.”

Dalmon had called him that, and he was sure that Dalmon had been on the phone with this man at least once while he sat in the office, not that he’d understood anything as they’d spoken French.

Kaine made his way over to Dalmon’s desk.

“He said it’s warded.” And Lucian didn’t want to be blamed for setting them off.

“I know. Chief of Security, remember? I created the wards.” There was a faint smile on his lips, as though he found all this rather amusing.

While sitting alone and reading about the history of the Coven and Mont de Leucoy was tedious, he preferred tedious to dangerous. Kaine seemed like a dangerous kind of man. Dalmon, he had power, but that was not the same as being dangerous.

“He’s in a meeting, and I’m not sure when he’ll be back.” So Kaine should shuffle off to his own office and wait there.

“I know where he is and what meeting he is in.”

Kaine probably knew a lot of things about everybody, including him. Who was Kaine to Dalmon? Because Kaine was rather too comfortable sitting at Dalmon’s desk.

“Relax, I know everything about Dal and you. What I want to know is if you did it?”

Lucian blushed, even though Kaine wasn’t asking if they’d had sex. No, he was asking if they’d made the bond, which was almost the same thing. “What business is it of yours?”

“Chief of Security of the Coven and also Mont de Leucoy. It’s my business to know everything about the prince and his dealings. Since he summoned me to attend at his leisure, and you are a potential security breach for him personally and professionally.” Kaine leaned forward, elbows on his knees. “Has he claimed his fated mate?”

He was sure his cheeks were about to burst into flames. He had to stop himself from patting them to be sure they were simply hot. If he kept thinking about fire, would he burst into flames? Think of water. No, ice was better. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Kaine laughed, actually tipped his head back and laughed, as if it was the funniest thing he’d heard all day. He settled back into the chair, using one foot to swing it from side to side. “You don’t need to play coy with me, Lucian.”

And yet he was going to.

“I have work to do,” he said, even though Kaine knew he didn’t.

“I can feel your magic, reaching out to me and searching for answers.” Kaine grinned. “You should try asking.”

Lucian doubted he’d get any answers. “You seem to know all about me, but I know nothing about you aside from your connection to the Coven and Mont de Leucoy.”

“Your French is terrible.”

“I’m not French.” And he’d only just learned of the country and wasn’t sure he could find it on a map if his life depended on it.

“Neither am I.” Kaine put his hand over his heart. “Just because our official language is French does not make us French any more than you speaking English makes you English, *américain*. So searcher, what have you found on me?”

It was a challenge, so Lucian concentrated on letting his magic out. It was a cat seeking prey. A hunter. It moved around Kaine.

Kaine didn’t move, but his magic did, snapping across Lucian’s face. His cheek stung as if he’d been slapped. That time, he did lift his hand. His eyes watered, and he wasn’t sure if he should make a run for the door, but Kaine could go everywhere he could and everywhere he couldn’t.

“You don’t get to be head of security without knowing how to avoid inquisitive, probing magic, and you wield it like an ax when it could be a scalpel.”

What were the odds that the country was also heavily warded? It would explain why so few people seemed aware of it. Were they all phoenixes there? Is that what they were hiding?

“So you can either answer my questions, or we can trade magics,” Kaine said.

When it came to magic, Lucian was always going to lose, so he nodded, conceding defeat while hoping that Dalmon didn’t kick his ass later.

“Are you mates?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” That he wouldn’t answer because he’d promised to keep the secret. He didn’t care who Kaine was, only that he wasn’t breaking his word the first time it was tested.

“Do you understand how answering my questions works?” He picked up a pen and spun it in his fingers.

“Ask something I can answer.”

He smiled. “You are fun. I’ll order some coffee so we can talk properly.”

Kaine picked up Dalmon’s phone and ordered someone to fetch coffee and cake. Was it Dalmon’s PA or someone else? He didn’t bother to ask Lucian what he wanted.

And Lucian wasn’t sure he’d be able to eat anything. His stomach was a knot, and he wanted Dalmon to return. Did that need reach through the bond?

Chapter Twenty-Eight

DALMON TOOK a breath before entering his own office. He'd been sensing Lucian's agitation for the last hour, but there had been nothing he could do about it. He'd thought claiming him would make him less distracting; instead, Dalmon was more aware of him. Though that was a little different from bursting into lusty flames.

The agent acting as guard sat in the hallway reading.

Was he still needed? Probably not. Plus, Carver would arrive tonight. "You can go for the day." He stopped short of telling him to ask his supervisor for a new assignment come Monday.

The man stood and nodded, "Yes, Sir."

Dalmon opened his office door. Kaine sat at his desk with his feet up. The remains of afternoon tea were all over the place, and Lucian was sitting on the edge of the conference table looking as though he was having a grand time, though Dalmon sensed that was far from the truth.

Kaine swore and dropped his feet to the floor. And Lucian looked at him with such relief that Dalmon had no doubt his brother had been grilling Lucian far worse than he had.

He swore in French, then addressed Kaine in the same language and in a polite tone, even though his words were not. Lucian didn't need to know he was about to give his brother a dressing down. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Chatting to your mate." Kaine kept his tone equally civil. "Is he your actual mate? He kept pleading ignorance?"

Dalmon glanced at Lucian, and a small smile formed. He hadn't told. "Yes."

"So now we have a new set of problems."

"If you suggest that I am going to repeat the same mistake —"

"No, you would not. Not knowingly, anyway."

Dalmon growled.

"Watch yourself, brother. I have your interests at heart." Kaine stood. He pulled a cell phone out of his pocket and placed it on the table.

"As well as your own," Dalmon countered.

"And our country's."

"As do I." All he'd wanted was to walk into his office and soothe Lucian's agitation. Now they were in the same room, he needed to kiss him, but he was loath to do anything in front of his brother.

Kaine switched to English. "Monsieur, you need to prepare your mate and consort for the reality of what that means for him." Kaine glanced at Lucian. "There are expectations, *Américain*. Rules and etiquette."

"I wasn't raised in the woods," Lucian snapped.

Dalmon tamped down his annoyance to prevent it from bleeding through the bond and into Lucian. "I have been rather busy today—"

Kaine smirked. "I'm sure."

"With Lake." He used the surname Everest had taken while working for the Coven and slid the conversation back to work because that was much safer ground than the unexplored territory between him and Lucian.

That erased Kaine's smug grin. "I have not forgotten."

"Good. Then let's hope we do not need to meet before Monday."

Kaine held his stare. “We both know that’s a lie because we will both be here over the weekend.”

He didn’t want to be, but he would be. He couldn’t send Everest in to play with the Shadow Board without being on standby himself.

Kaine walked over to Lucian and held out his hand. “It was nice to meet you, Dalmon’s mate. Don’t disappear on him even if he pushes.”

Dalmon wanted to tell Kaine to keep his hands off his mate, but the contact was so swift that he didn’t have time to make the words in any language.

Kaine stopped in front of him and murmured in French. “This time, try not to throw away what the Fates have blessed you with.”

“I still don’t know what happened last time.”

“Maybe it’s for the best.”

Maybe, but he doubted it. His gaze tracked Kaine as he walked out and shut the door. Lucian was already gathering up the coffee cups and paper bags that had once held cake from the café downstairs.

Dalmon curled his fingers so he didn’t grab him and pull him close. If it was only work, he shouldn’t indulge the lust that rolled through his veins. If it was going to be more, he had no idea what he was going to do because Kaine was right. There was a whole slew of things they needed to discuss.

“I didn’t know he was going to...” Be such an inquisitive brat? He should have expected that. As much as he loved Kaine, he was also the one who annoyed him the most. And always had.

“It’s fine. He’s head of security, and I have mated into the royal family—which is a really odd sentence—so he probably needed to vet me.”

“There is a difference between vetting, which was done before you were released, and being bloody nosy for the fun of it.” Dalmon picked up the cell phone. “This is for you. It is

secure. However, it is also locked up tight, and everything you do will be tracked.”

“Still not trusted?” But Lucian held out his hand for the phone.

“I never knew you four hundred years ago, and I still don’t know you now.” He was the one who’d ruined it last time. Whatever Lucian had done couldn’t have been bad enough to warrant a death sentence for both of them. “And you would be a fool to trust me without knowing who I am as a man, not the rest of the trappings.”

“Yet, I have little choice.”

Dalmon nodded. “That is true. And if we weren’t in the middle of an operation, it would be easier to be more open. But we are, and you are new to the Coven and my family. Sharing what I am was not easy, Lucian, because it affects others.”

“The king is also a ph...fire witch.” He caught himself as though realizing that even saying it aloud was dangerous.

“Exactly.”

“And the prince...the heir? How does that work because you said you couldn’t have children?”

“Do you really want that conversation, or would you rather go home?” He wanted to take him home and lose himself in his body until he forgot that the Coven existed.

Lucian’s magic was already sniffing for answers, but he was as antagonistic as Kaine. No wonder they hadn’t gotten on. They both would’ve been cagy while trying to pry information out of the other. As soon as he told Lucian about Olier and possibly other lost phoenix eggs and the dragon eggs, he would start looking.

Lucian’s tongue darted over his lip, and he closed his eyes. “I want both.”

“Not tonight.” Dalmon checked over his desk and made sure anything that needed to be locked away was. For all they

knew, the mole was a cleaner. He glanced at his mate. “Any progress on the mole?”

“I don’t think so. I feel like there’s something missing because I’m hunting and hungry.” He frowned. “This should be easier. Also, I don’t know if I find things or if they come to me.”

“Both can be true.” He could feel that questing energy and that there was only so much because it came from Lucian himself. “I appreciate there is a lot you want to find out, but can you focus on this one thing, at least for the next couple of days?”

Lucian sucked in a breath. “I’ll try.”

“Good.” Then Dalmon gave in to the need to touch him. He closed the gap, sliding his arm around Lucian’s waist to pull him close, even though he wasn’t sure if Lucian would want distance until they knew what they were doing.

Lucian hesitated for only a heartbeat. “I don’t know if I am ready for any of this.”

He’d heard that before. It was all fun until the media wanted to know who the partner was. Until they were expected to be seen in the right places, not just the ones they wanted to be at. It was a level of responsibility and scrutiny that he didn’t wish on anyone, even though it served his purpose fine.

In public, he was the king’s uncle. He sat on several company boards and that of a charity. That was enough that no one looked at what he did for the Coven.

Holding Lucian was enough for the moment. He pressed his cheek against his mate’s and breathed him in. If Lucian didn’t want more, they were going to have to work that out. “You do not need to be my partner in public.”

Not yet, anyway. But if they continued...

And when Lucian gave up his magic?

If he did?

What then?

He didn't know.

"What are you worried about?" Lucian murmured.

"Too much." There is a lot riding on the operation. And on them. But he didn't need to burden Lucian with his fears. With a sigh, he released him and tried to hide his thoughts better. "Come on."

He needed to pretend that everything was going to work out fine. That the knots would unravel, and no one would find themselves in a tightening noose.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

THE NEED TO kiss Dalmon that first time had been strong enough to burn away all doubts. Now they were back. And they'd brought friends. Lucian hadn't been joking about mating into the royal family. He didn't care how small the kingdom was; Dalmon was still a prince.

And he was still keeping secrets.

Trying to stop his magic from hunting them down and dragging them into the light was harder than he expected. On the way home, Dalmon's home anyway, it wasn't his, and he didn't know if it ever would be. He closed his eyes and herded his cat-like magic to find the mole. The person who worked for the Coven and also the Shadow Board. The shifter.

He was sure that it focused on one questing creature instead of a multitude, prowling through the building and sniffing out answers.

Dalmon's hand landed on his thigh, jolting him out of wherever he'd been. Not the Coven building, that was for sure, because he'd never walked around it. "We're home."

Lucian blinked a few times. They were. He glanced at Dalmon, not sure what he expected now they had the evening together. They were both overdressed for what he wanted to do. But he wasn't sure if that's what Dalmon wanted.

He'd said they didn't need to rush or go public. Was that because he didn't want to?

Then there was the disaster of four hundred years ago...

The driver opened the door for Dalmon, and he got out, and because Lucian was supposed to wait for his door to be opened, he did. Dalmon waited at the bottom of the steps and watched him a little too closely.

“What?” Had he nodded off and drooled? He rubbed his mouth but found nothing there.

“I don’t want you exhausting yourself.”

“You told me to—” Dalmon kissed him. It was as hard and as hungry as it had been the first time and did nothing to cool his own need. “I did, and I want you to remember that it has a cost. To both of us.”

“I know.” If they were kissing like that, this wasn’t about magic. And when there was no magic? Would Lucian be enough?

Dalmon’s fingers threaded with his, and they walked up the steps toward the open door. Lucian guessed the staff assumed they were sleeping together. Did they know about magic and mates?

The more people who knew Dalmon’s secret, the more likely it was that it would be spilled. And it wasn’t just Dalmon’s.

The king and the heir... Wait, did that mean Kaine was too?

Dalmon glanced at him as if he’d heard every word.

Lucian’s eyes widened. Had he?

That was a fated mates thing. As well as sharing magic, the couple could start to feel each other’s emotions and hear each other’s thoughts. The bond did not seem to be set up to be a working-style relationship.

“Where will you be taking dinner, monsieur?”

Dalmon glanced at the butler. “In the dining room.” He checked his watch. “Eight?”

That gave them about ninety minutes. Lucian wasn’t sure if they could cover much ground in ninety minutes besides

burning off some of the tension that touching Dalmon was causing. His body was behaving as if he was fourteen, while his mind was spinning with magic.

The butler nodded.

Dalmon led them up to the guest level, then paused.

“Did you forget which room is mine?”

“No...I assumed that was where we were going, but your thoughts are all over the place. I don't know what you want from this.”

“You could ask.” Was he so used to ordering people around that it hadn't occurred to him?

“And you could tell me. Because if it's work you want, not the rest, then we should try to keep that boundary.”

Fuck that. If it was only until he found the mole, he wanted everything because then it would all be gone, and he'd go back to being no one special. He'd be extra un-special because he wouldn't even have magic. Thinking that caused a very sharp pain in the center of his chest. Dalmon sucked in a breath as if he'd felt it too.

Lucian didn't want to hear anything else he had to say. He cupped Dalmon's face and kissed him, and as he did, he tried very hard to focus on only one thing...

Getting Dalmon naked.

His tongue slipped past Dalmon's lips. This was a hunger he understood, and it had nothing to do with magic.

He drew back. “Unless you only want work?”

And he'd shoved his tongue into his mouth and groped him even though Dalmon was politely trying to push him away. That probably broke some kind of princely etiquette. He could hear Kaine calling him American as though it was an insult.

The flicker of flames in Dalmon's eyes made him seem almost demonic... Had people once thought fire witches and phoenixes were demons?

“If I only wanted work, I would have kissed you to make the bond. And sought nothing more.” he grabbed Lucian’s hand and placed it over his very hard cock, and Lucian couldn’t stop himself from curling his fingers around it. He wanted it in him. Dalmon continued. “I would have suffered until this lust scouring my veins departed.”

“Why leave it up to me?” He knew fuck all about anything in Dalmon’s world. “When it’s more dangerous for you?”

“It’s dangerous for both of us.”

“What happened before?” He gripped Dalmon’s cock.

“I’m saving you that burden.”

“Bullshit. You’re too scared to tell me.”

Dalmon stared at him. “Because I don’t want you second-guessing yourself the way I am. I don’t want to hurt you again.”

Lucian shook his head. “That’s not everything.”

“You aren’t the same person.”

“Neither are you.” How could he be when it had happened four hundred years ago?

“I am effectively, though I lose my memories and start over.”

Lucian stared and then frowned. His hand pressing against Dalmon’s cock. “What is the point of that?”

“I ask myself the same question almost daily. And I’m asking you if you want to keep this cool, if you—”

“I want to burn.”

Dalmon laughed. “That’s not actually possible now.”

“Show me. Fuck me.” He punctuated the words with kisses. “I want everything.”

Because he could hear the clock ticking.

Chapter Thirty

DALMON SHUT THE BEDROOM DOOR, shrugged out of his jacket, and dropped it on the floor. His tie followed along with his shirt. “I want you naked this time.”

“Same.”

Lucian’s need roiled through him like a storm that threatened avalanches, but he didn’t want to seek shelter. He wanted to stand in it and feel the rush of power. With every piece of clothing that hit the floor, Lucian moved closer to the king-sized bed.

Dalmon undid his shoes and stripped off his pants, then stalked Lucian. Flames raced down his back and over his shoulders. He caught his mate and kissed him hard, and because he wanted it, he let the flames trace over Lucian’s skin. They licked their way up his arm and over his chest.

“Fuck,” he breathed as he glanced down to watch. “I should be freaking out.” He lifted his gaze. “Right? Why is this not terrifying?”

“Because you know it won’t hurt you?” Had he laughed last time?

“There’s that look again.”

“It was a grim thought.” One he wished Kaine hadn’t discovered.

“Hard to burn me at the stake?” His eyes widened. “Oh shit. Is that—”

Dalmon kissed him. “No.” He wasn’t doing this. “We have less than ninety minutes. And I don’t want to spend it talking.”

Lucian groaned into his mouth. “I don’t have lube.”

“In the bathroom.”

“Since when?”

“Since always.” Dalmon broke away. He walked into the ensuite, pulled open the bottom drawer and, as expected, there was a selection of more personal conveniences. He pulled out the lube and a couple of condoms.

When he turned, Lucian had turned down the sheets and was sprawled in the middle of the bed, stroking his dick.

He had a mate, and that was equal parts terrifying and amazing. He walked toward him, not sure if it was a blessing or a curse. A blessing because he’d been given a second chance to make it right...a curse because in this life, he hadn’t managed to have anything more than a string of superficial affairs. Not one of them had known that he worked for the Coven, and only a handful had known he was something other than human.

“You’ve gone all serious again.”

“It’s my default.” He climbed onto the bed with him, moving over him until he could claim his lips. “I was thinking how lucky I was to have this chance again.”

“Same...it’s kind of cool that we were lovers before. Did we keep it a secret?”

“You were a woman, and no. We were married.”

“Oh.” Lucian’s fingers traced lines over his body. “And you really don’t remember?”

“Nothing.” He licked along his neck. “And I would much rather make the most of this one than spend all my time trying to find out about the last one.” That wasn’t entirely true because he did want to find out what Lucian had done, but it could wait.

“You say that, but I can see the hold the past has on you.” His eyelids lowered. “It’s wrapped around you.”

For a moment, Dalmon felt it binding him, trapping him, and choking him. He’d never be free of it. “The curse of being immortal yet having a human lifespan.”

He smoothed his hands over Lucian’s chest and traced the tattoo that had given him pause. Lucian had been searching for him without knowing. Would Lucian stay despite his duties to country and Coven?

Or would he find it overwhelming and want to hide?

Did he want him to stay? The idea was far too tempting, and it must have been the last time, too. He’d been fine with being alone until he’d seen Lucian.

“I need to stop you thinking.” Lucian rolled, and Dalmon was on his back, staring up at him. “Did I just break some kind of royal protocol? Thou shall not put a prince on his back.”

“No, but I prefer being on top.”

“So you can be in control?”

He didn’t like that he was read so easily. “Do you have to question everything?”

“Yeah, I do.” he frowned. “And I can’t blame my magic because I’ve always been like this. Do you have to be in control all the time?”

Dalmon rolled Lucian off him. “I do. That’s literally my job.”

“I’m not your job.” Lucian propped himself up on his elbow to stare at him.

Dalmon’s body ached for his mate, but tangling with the lust was annoyance. Because he couldn’t get what he wanted? Because Lucian was starting to push back?

Lucian trailed his fingers over Dalmon’s stomach, which wasn’t where he wanted his hands. “You aren’t used to being questioned.”

He wanted to look away but made himself hold Lucian's gaze. "I am not."

Even his brothers thought him cold and controlling. That wasn't who he wanted to be, but it was who he needed to become. He scared people away.

It was easier to be alone than hurt. His chest ached as he realized how deep the soul bruise ran. In that breath, it felt more like an open wound that had never healed.

Lucian's hand paused over the ache as though he could sense Dalmon's hurt. He didn't like that it was obvious. But if his mate couldn't see him and heal him, then no one could. He needed to give Lucian a chance instead of keeping him at a distance.

And when Lucian gave up his unwanted magic?

He closed his eyes for a moment.

Lucian's palm was cool on his skin.

They were both naked, in bed, and his body craved his mate, but his mind was caught up in Lucian's turmoil. How had they lost the moment?

The condoms and lube were scattered on the bed around them. They hadn't even discussed using them or not.

Lucian picked up a condom. "You're a shifter. You don't get sick."

"Correct, though it depends on the frequency of shifting and sex." Shifting once a month but having multiple partners during that time was hazardous to the partners, if not the shifter. "But I thought you might be more comfortable." Some men preferred it for anal, and if his lover didn't know what he was, then he played along with being the responsible human. "The healer said you are fine."

"Thank you for running medical checks without consent."

"It wasn't like—"

"I know. You had to make sure that I was okay and all of that." He studied Dalmon, gazing down at him, his hand on his

chest as if he could pin him to the bed. “I would be more comfortable if we were on level footing...” Lucian looked away. “Or as much as possible.”

Fates, it would be nice to toss aside his titles and magic. He studied his witch. His mate. And in that breath, he saw how easy it would be to love him. And how easy it would be to have his heart ripped out, so he wished for death.

He’d done all of this before. He didn’t want to repeat it, but he didn’t know how to avoid it either. The situation was different. Lucian was different. Hell, he was different because of the hurt he carried.

Which he’d keep carrying if he didn’t take the chance. “When I’m in bed with you...when I’m with you in private.” That sounded better. “I’d like to be just a man.”

“Do you know how to do that?”

For a moment, he was tempted to lie, but he couldn’t keep doing that with his mate. “No more than you know how to be a prince.”

“Then what do we do?”

Dalmon wished he had an answer. Beyond that, it was meant to be, and they had things to fix. He’d lost control the moment he’d given in to the need to claim his mate. “I can tell you what I know if that’s what you want.”

Lucian considered him. “I’d like that.”

“Are you sure?”

“You know everything about me, including what toothpaste I used when I was three.” He smiled. “And I know nothing about you except for what is on the official page about the royal family. Which I’m guessing is mostly fake because the heir hatched.”

“Gerrit was married. She died in an accident, and he was devastated. That part is true. She was a shifter, and she knew the truth about him. Me being the playboy younger uncle is less true.”

“I can’t imagine you ever being drunk, as that would involve letting go.”

Dalmon cut him a glare even though it was the truth. “We keep records, diaries for our future selves to refer to. There have been a couple of times where we nearly lost the eldest and were all children.”

“Would it be terrible to not have the weight of centuries?”

“I don’t know any other way. We have records we can’t even read because the language is so old. That knowledge is lost. Maybe it tells how we came to be and what happened to the others.”

“Why do you think there are more?”

“Because one of my brothers was captured two centuries ago. Those who died in ancient battles will be an egg that looks like a rock. Lost without another phoenix to hatch them. Perhaps there were once phoenix women?”

“Why do the records matter?”

“Two things you need to know. We never read each other’s books. We do note the day of death and often the manner after the last entry. Sometimes, there’ll be a note if we’ve chosen our next name or if there is something we want done, such as asking for a longer rest. And we don’t let outsiders in to see our records.” Or they hadn’t. Now, they were bringing in Templeton and Farrell to help with the search for Olier and others. It grated on him in a way he couldn’t explain, though he understood it was connected to his previous life with Lucian.

How Templeton had resisted making the bond of nearly a year was beyond Dalmon. He’d barely made it to ten days.

“Kaine and Gerrit both read their books when I told them I knew you. I told them to read mine, but they refused.” He was glad they had because he wasn’t sure if he wanted to know everything. “They told me what they’d written. The last time we were together, I caught you in our library. I assume you were reading the books. I was furious and sent you away

against the advice of my brothers. Neither of us lived much longer, as it was during the peak of the witch hunts.”

Lucian stared at him. “So all the good bits are in your book.”

“The good bits? There are no good bits.”

“How did we meet? How long were we together? Was I a finder? What was I doing in your secret library? How old were we? How do you know we both died soon after?”

“There is the record of my death, pining for my mate. It’s a hemorrhage of magic from the severed bond.”

“But it’s safe for a witch to lose their magic, to break the bond?”

“It’s the only way to safely break the bond so that both survive.” The Shadow Board had a way that killed the shifter. He placed his hand over Lucian’s, covering his heart. To protect it or to thaw it? “Using the dates and your name, Kaine found your death record.”

Lucian was silent for a moment. “You mentioned the witch hunts, so I’m assuming the worst.”

“It was worse than what you’re thinking. You were immune to the flames because of the bond, so they drowned you.”

“That explains why I hated swimming lessons.”

Dalmon smiled. “It’s not that simple. The correlations...” He shook his head. “But you were a finder. Ma chercheuse. Mon chercheur, maintenant.”

“I have no idea what you said, but it sounded as sexy as hell.” He moved a little closer. “Same magic, different lives.”

“It seems that way. The records are helping to unravel how magic works. If you give it up, I don’t know that it will come back next time.”

“Worried I won’t find you again?”

Was he? Maybe a little.

Lucian's lips brushed his. "I want to know about you in this life."

"You don't want to know why you were in the library?"

"It's in your book. I'm assuming that you will eventually read it and tell me. I'm also assuming that since you lost your shit, I wasn't there with honorable intentions. Another thing I seem to carry."

Dalmon gripped his chin. "We don't know. For all we know, I lost my shit without a good reason. You don't need to carry the weight and scars."

"But you do? We made mistakes. We paid for it."

"You make it sound so simple." He wanted it to be simple. As though he'd found his mate and there wasn't this history between them. He regretted asking Kaine to dig, but it was in their nature to review the past and hold on to it.

"You know what is simple?" Another kiss. "Lust. The whole time we've been talking, my body has been humming with need, waiting for you to touch me. I need you to touch me." He picked up the condom and tossed it off the bed. "They can fuck off. Because I want you in me." Lucian moved over him to straddle his hips. "And I'm going to be in control."

"Really? You're pushing that?"

"Yeah, guess I am. And if I didn't want your hands on me so badly, I'd pin you down."

Dalmon laughed. "I'd like to see you try. I may be an incorporeal bird, but I have a shifter's strength."

"I can tell you are a shifter...all this ripped muscle." Lucian ran his palms over Dalman's chest and abs, raising goose flesh on his skin. "Humans must think you do nothing but work out."

"Well, aside from cutting ribbons and going to parties, I don't have anything else to do."

Lucian's lips curved as he bought into the lie. "So we can stay in bed all day?"

“Yes. I’ll order food when we get hungry.” He ran his hands up Lucian’s thighs, loving the way the blond hair on his legs felt beneath his palms and the way his cock jutted forward, hard and ruddy.

Lucian picked up the lube and used it to slick Dalmon’s dick. “And other supplies.”

He drew in a breath as Lucian’s hand tightened around him, and a bead of pre-cum slipped from the tip. “Oh, if we’re spending the weekend in bed, you’re going to be so full of cum you won’t need extra lube.”

“Is that right? I was under the impression you were a little more flexible.”

“I am.” He gave Lucian’s dick a stroke. “I also like being fucked so well my legs are shaky.”

“Does that happen often?”

“No.” Mostly because he found it hard to let go.

“I’ll see what I can do.” He lifted his hips and moved so Dalmon’s cock pressed against the tight pucker of his ass.

Dalmon held his hips. “You’re rushing.”

He wanted him to rush. He wanted to be balls deep in his mate.

“It’ll only sting for a moment.”

Dalmon held him still, even though Lucian’s need was like wildfire. Insatiable. It rippled through him, feeding his own. His grip on Lucian’s hips tightened.

“Let me make my own choices, Dal. I know what I like and what I want.”

He softened his grip. “You like it to hurt?”

Lucian didn’t sink down. His tongue darted over his lip. “I like that first push.” He lifted his eyebrows. “Well, I like the second and third a lot, too.”

“You like the breaching.”

“You made that sound very unsexy.” He lowered down until the head of Dalmon’s cock pressed against the tight ring of muscle.

Dalmon watched his face and searched the bond. Lucian bit his lip, and then Dalmon was sinking into him. Barely the head, but it was enough that he held his breath so he didn’t become lost in the sensation or the heat of Lucian’s body around him and the pleasure rippling through the bond.

Dalmon lifted him up. “You want me to fuck you properly?”

“No. You can suffer.” He sank down again, his hole offering less resistance, taking him deeper.

It was beautiful to watch, but he wanted to flip him over so badly. He was holding Lucian’s hips hard enough that white bloomed under his fingertips. Lucian rode his cock the way he wanted to, as if he didn’t care what Dalmon wanted.

Dalmon let him until the need sharpened into something he couldn’t control. Better to fuck him hard than set his bed alight. He lifted his hips, slamming into him fully. Lucian’s cock dripped pre-cum onto his belly. Neither of them moved. Dalmon was one thrust away from coming. He released one hip so he could take Lucian’s dick in hand.

Lucian moaned, and his ass clenched around Dalmon. He leaned forward, finding Dalmon’s lips, then he rocked, fucking Dalmon’s fist, before taking him deep again.

The movement was so small, but it was too much. He dropped over the edge, coming with a shudder as he filled his mate. Lucian panted against his lips, his body tightening as his cum spilled over Dalmon’s hand.

Their breaths mingled. They were sticky and sweaty, and he wanted Lucian to fuck him.

“We should skip dinner,” Lucian whispered.

“Can’t. Agent Carver is coming.” He kissed Lucian. “But I want to.”

His ass clenched, wanting to feel Lucian inside of him.

“I’m beginning to get a feel for this bond thing. Because that thought was very clear.”

“Good.” He did not want to be the first one to pull away, but they needed to shower and shower well because he did not need the wolf shifter agent to know everything about him. His hand smoothed over Lucian’s back. “Just so you know, he’s not only the best cover-up agent, but he was also a familiar. His mate gave up magic.”

Lucian lifted his head. “Is that why you brought him over?”

“No. I want his eyes on your case, and on the Shadow Board job. There can’t be any gaps. I want you to be safe, not a suspect.” He didn’t want to lose Lucian, yet he didn’t know how well he held him.

Lucian’s tongue dipped into his mouth. “How do you want to be fucked?”

“Slowly, it’s been a bloody long time.” And they were running out of time. That didn’t stop his dick from hardening. A glance between them revealed that Lucian was ready to go again.

Lucian’s lips curved. “I’m not sure if it’s lust or magic.”

“Both, you’re reacting to me and me to you in a vicious cycle.”

“I wouldn’t call this vicious.” Lucian lifted off him, and Dalmon smothered a groan.

“It is when it’s anger or fear.” Or pain.

“Roll over. I want to see you do the wing thing while I’m fucking you.”

Dalmon laughed. “That has only happened once, and flames and bed sheets don’t go together.”

“Oh.”

“But if we go to the bathroom, we can find out.” And he could stop holding his fire in. He hoped that settled because

the last thing he wanted was to catch fire every time they were in bed.

Lucian eased off the bed and held out his hand. “I know you have one eye on the clock, and if you want me to go slow...”

Dalmon clasped Lucian’s hand. “Make me late for dinner.”

“Really?”

Dalmon sighed. He wasn’t ready to give up control. “No, another time?”

Chapter Thirty-One

SOMEHOW, it was easy to forget he should be the main suspect in Hank's disappearance. So listening to the expert cover-up agent dissect everything that pointed to him was more than a little disturbing.

Lucian kept his mouth busy eating and let Dalmon and Sam Carver talk Coven stuff. His stuff, mostly. Or it had been so far.

"I do have some suggestions for the actual cover-up," Sam said as though Lucian were guilty of murder.

"I didn't actually kill him." An agent had done that.

"He's been reported missing by his housekeeper," Sam said as though Lucian hadn't spoken. "The human cops will already be taking steps."

"Will they be calling my phone?"

"They have," Dalmon said.

That should be a problem. Yet neither of them seemed concerned. He was not going to freak out. They knew what they were doing.

Sam glanced between them again, his gaze a little too sharp. Could he smell sex on their skin even though they'd showered? Even though Dalmon had fully shifted after so Lucian could see the full fiery spread of his wings before returning to human and showering.

"You've also been reported missing, by the way," Dalmon added. Flames flickered in his eyes before he blinked them

away.

“That doesn’t look suspicious at all.” He was fucked.

Dalmon reached out and put his hand over Lucian’s. “You’re going to be fine.”

“Two witches can’t be fated mates, so someone is lying.” Sam’s gaze settled on Dalmon as if deciding that he was the liar. “I don’t want to know. But what I do think needs to happen is the building of this affair. You need to be seen out as if you’ve been cooped up in here, oblivious to the rest of the world.”

“How did we meet?” In his old life, his social circles didn’t overlap with princes.

“That’s easy. Hastings wanted to meet with me because of the security company I’m on the board of. You, as his PA, were present.”

Sam nodded. “I noticed you were both in New York five years ago. A torrid couple of nights back then, a reconnection now...”

“We were both in New York when I got the job with him?” No way. He stared at Dalmon. Had he known that? Of course he had.

“It’s not uncommon for mates to have several near misses before connecting,” Sam said as though it were something Lucian should know.

“If you can tell, will everyone else notice?” Why was Dalmon not more worried?

Sam was silent for several heartbeats. “I think the loss of the bond made me sensitive to it in others.”

“Did it hurt?” Lucian had to ask. “Losing it?”

“Yes.” Sam held his gaze.

“Do you regret it?”

Sam shook his head. “I still have Mark, and that is more important. We were not good mates or husbands. We worked

too much and assumed the bond would fix everything. It didn't. If anything, it magnified all the problems."

Lucian glanced at Dalmon. Their problems were big enough to be seen from space.

"We'll have brunch tomorrow, be seen in public, make sure someone notices. I'll have my palace people sort it. Then I need to go into the office." Dalmon said as though checking things off a shopping list.

He'd gone from feeling like the center of Dalmon's world and his most treasured thing to being...to being little more than another task. "Wow. You seem thrilled about that first date."

"It's not a date. It's the work of image management. Which is as ridiculous as it sounds."

Sam nodded. "It's good timing because you haven't been seen out for a while, which builds on the story."

"Do I get to know the story? Because I'm going to have to talk to the cops at some point." And he did not want to be the one to mess this up. If he did, the shit would splatter on Dalmon, and that was not something he could recover from.

"No, you won't. Unlike some jobs I've worked, you have the resources to have a glamoured siren do the talking and say all the right things."

Lucian blinked. The words had been in English but made no sense. "A what now?"

"A siren is a witch whose voice is compelling," Dalmon said. "Another witch casts the illusion so the siren looks like you. The longer the lead-up to the job, the better the cover-up. Carver did some very complicated, time-pressed jobs, some of which are now being used to train our agents better."

"I'm only here to advise and teach." There was an edge to Sam's voice as though he didn't want to get dragged back into covering up crimes full-time.

Dalman inclined his head.

There was definitely something Coven-related going on, and he did not want to get sucked into it. “So I can go on the not-a-date, or do you need my magical double?”

Dalmon gave his hand a squeeze. “We can still enjoy it. We need to. Think of all those happy couples snapped having breakfast, where they don’t seem to realize shots are being taken? That is going to be us. Not every photo is random. I get a certain amount of privacy due to magic, but as Carver said, I have been absent because of the Shadow Board.”

“If you disappear too much, people talk?”

“Sometimes it’s better to give them the correct thing to talk about. I will get wind of the photos, and then the palace responds with a prepared statement, and everyone is happy.” Dalmon said as though it were obvious.

Even Sam seemed happy.

Lucian suddenly realized that this was Dalmon’s life. He juggled running the Coven with being a prince and being seen just enough that no one started to wonder what was going on. Every date or fling was a potential risk. How many times had Dalmon rolled out of bed, looked at his lover, and wondered if it was worth the hassle?

When he said he was always in control, he hadn’t been joking.

While Lucian’s life was a mess, it had at least been his. Kind of. Well, not for the last five years. And it wasn’t his now either. His blood ran cold, and his stomach knotted. He shoved his chair back. “I need a moment.”

If he stayed there, he was going to be sick.

He walked out of the dining room and onto the patio. It was raining, and the breeze carried some of it to him as he stood in the dark, staring out into the garden. It was all shadows to him, but he could make out the solid mass of the guest house in the ambient light.

He scrubbed his hand over his face. A part of him wanted to go and stand in the rain. It would be icy, unlike the shower he’d shared with Dalmon.

For a few minutes, they'd been normal. It had felt easy, and they had been in synch.

Now it was back to Dalmon running the Coven and being the prince and all the other things he did. And he was what? Nothing, except for a problem to be solved. He was with Dalmon by chance, by Fates.

They didn't belong in the same world.

He gasped as his magic latched onto something.

Dalmon's hand landed on his lower back, and he jumped, drawing in a breath as if he'd been holding it. He didn't remember walking into the rain, but he was drenched. "Are you okay? It's been fifteen minutes."

"The same world," he mumbled. "That's it." That was the piece he'd been missing. "The shifter is from the same world as you."

Dalmon frowned at him.

"The mole. It's a shifter from your world." He could feel it now, the magic reaching out and winnowing out the options. "One of three."

"Who are the three?"

"I don't know. Fuck. I'll know them by the feel of their magic." He grasped Dalmon and kissed him, trying to impart what he knew and what he couldn't put into words.

Dalmon kissed him back for a second and then pulled away. "Your magic senses things differently from mine." He shook his head as if to clear it. "I can't make sense of it. Stop drawing on me and pull back."

His hands curled into Dalmon's sweater. "I'm almost there."

Then he was falling.

Chapter Thirty-Two

“IS HE AWAKE YET?” Lucian was lying on the sofa in the guest lounge, wrapped in a blanket and looking rather pale.

“No,” Carver said.

Dalmon swore in a couple of languages. He wasn't sure if it was him clamping down on the bond or Lucian spreading his magic too thin that had done it. Either way, he shouldn't have pushed.

“From your world and three suspects, it helps but not a lot,” Kaine said down the line. “If he meant noble, there are plenty. They have titles but no money, so they need to work. If he meant from Mont de Leucoy, there are also a few.”

Mont de Leucoy was a small country. The biggest employers were the tourism operations. Outside of that, it was retail or security, either national or Kaine's company. There were not many options, and some witches and shifters liked to do a few years with the Coven as it gave them the chance to travel around Europe. A few years in Spain, a few in Germany, and so on.

“And none drew flags?”

“No, or I would've said something, wouldn't I? I need to speak with him.”

“He doesn't know,” Dalmon growled. “His magic doesn't give a list of names.”

“Those from Leucoy, we trust a bit more because they are from home. Let's start there,” Kaine said.

Dalmon pressed his lips together. “I’d be looking at the nobles, who might have Board connections or want Board connections.”

“That was the first thing I checked. Along with bank accounts for unexplained money—I only did that to the shifters. I couldn’t do it for all London staff.”

“It may not be London staff. You have offices all over the country,” Carver said. “I think you need to warm him up. Have you released your chokehold on the bond?”

Dalmon ran his fingers through his hair. He eased his grip on the bond and perched on the edge of the sofa next to Lucian. He must have walked into the rain at some point. Had it been deliberate, or had his magic led him out there? He unfolded the blanket and put his hand over Lucian’s heart to infuse him with warmth. His skin was so cold.

I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have yanked the magic back so fast.

But he’d been worried Lucian was going to suck everything out of him. He’d felt faint before clomping down on the bond, and if they were both passed out, that was dangerous.

“It’s someone with a connection to everything.”

“Agent Black, Agent Fallon, or your PA. They are shifters with noble blood and are Leucovian,” Kaine said.

“It can’t be my PA. She’s been with me for nearly ten years, and she was vetted by palace security. And he would’ve sensed it sooner.”

“Are you sure about that?” Sam crossed his arms and scowled. “Because from everything you’ve said, he’s like a spider in the middle of a web. He will only sense something if a strand is disturbed.”

“That’s not how it feels to me. It’s more like sending out an army of inquisitive cats and then seeing what they bring back.” And each little bit of magic was a bit of Lucian.

“You need to learn how to use it,” Kaine said softly. “We need to find—”

“I bloody well know why.” Now wasn’t the time to learn a new magic, and he couldn’t do it while Lucian was unconscious either. That his magic made him zone out was also a worry. What if he walked in front of a bus? “What he needs to do is learn how to get answers instead of waiting for the thing he’s been searching for to come to him.”

Kaine grunted. “I’ll arrange for those three to be in the office on Monday. Asking them to come in on the weekend will be a bit weird.”

“Black will be with Everest this weekend.”

“I will speak with him directly, but he will have his regular with him.”

“Not good enough. Call him into the office—make an excuse. New tech or something.”

“Or, you take your witch on a drive past his place.”

“And what if he needs to be up close?”

“Then we can work something out.”

“If it’s Black, Everest is made.” Dalmon stared at Lucian.

His eyes were still closed, but he was warmer, and his magic was responding to the flow of energy through the bond. Untrained witches were a bloody danger. To themselves and their mates.

“As an agent only,” Kaine said softly as if aware that Carver’s wolf hearing might pick up every word.

Dalmon sighed and closed his eyes. Carver sat on the sofa near Lucian’s feet. While Dalmon had carried him inside, Carver had helped get him up the stairs and gone to pull a blanket off his bed.

“Fallon and Black were on the raid that grabbed Lucian.”

“I know. I’m running more detailed checks on all three at the moment.”

“What about magic checks?”

“I couldn’t do that for every shifter in the office, but for three, I can do something.”

“Were they all screened by the mind-reader?”

“She started with the witches and has only just switched to focusing on the shifters.”

“For fuck’s sake.” And she wouldn’t be able to do anything until Monday. Monday would be too late. He needed another agent he could trust with Everest. The Board party would be crawling with witches. They were sending some of their own to watch from a distance, and raids on the attending witches’ places were also prepped.

Dalmon glanced at Carver. “Want to play bodyguard at a Shadow Board event?”

Carver rolled his eyes. “Mark is going to kill me if it’s more than that. Who am I babysitting?”

“My nephew. Prince Everest, also known as Agent Lake.”



GETTING Lucian to bed was much easier because he was at least conscious. But he still couldn’t have gotten there on his own. He stumbled between Dalmon and Carver before flopping on the bed.

“Are you going to be right with this?” Carver pointed at the boneless and semi-alert Lucian, sprawled on the bed in his still-wet clothes.

“Yes.” And if he wasn’t, it didn’t matter. Lucian was his mate, and he wasn’t going to abandon him.

Carver left and shut the door.

For several heartbeats, Dalmon stood there wondering where he’d gone wrong for everything to be coming undone. The reason lay on the bed. He’d been the one tangling everything as he searched for his mate.

“Come on, I need to get you out of the wet clothes.” Dalmon walked over and pulled off Lucian’s shoes and socks. This was not how he’d planned on getting him naked tonight. Or the room he’d planned on sleeping in. But he wasn’t going to leave Lucian alone, and dragging him upstairs was too much effort.

He undid the fly of Lucian’s pants.

Lucian’s fingers wrapped around his wrist. “I’m sorry.”

Dalmon didn’t look at him as he pulled free of the barely there grip and worked his pants off. “Do you know what happened?”

Was he annoyed? Yes.

Worried? Yes.

Was it all getting to be too much? Yes.

It had been too much for a while. The Shadow Board was consuming his time as though it were candy. He didn’t want to devote his entire life to stamping out danger.

He wanted to actually do some living. Do something other than work.

Though, until meeting Lucian, he wouldn’t have been able to put the restlessness into words. It wasn’t that he hated his life. It was that it was unbalanced.

“I felt weird, and I went out for some air, and then...I don’t know.” Lucian tried to prop himself up but didn’t quite manage it. “What’s wrong with me?”

“You said that the mole is from my world but didn’t elaborate on what that means.” He unbuttoned Lucian’s shirt, his fingers lingering over the phoenix tattoo. “And you started drawing on me as you chased, for want of a better word, the possibilities. I shut you down, and you passed out. I should be the one apologizing.” He glanced up. “I clamped down on the bond too quickly. I am sorry.”

Lucian stared at him with wide eyes. “I didn’t mean to draw on you.”

“I know. It’s because we aren’t used to working together, and your magic is... It’s expansive. As though it will keep spreading and searching until it finds what you’re after. You spread yourself too thin, and when I cut you off, you didn’t have enough magic or energy to function.”

He pulled Lucian up so he was sitting. Once upright, he seemed to be okay.

“You must have been out in the rain because when I found you, you were saturated.” He peeled off the damp shirt. “That’s twice I’ve seen you zone out. What if you were crossing a road or driving? Does it happen often?” He tilted Lucian’s chin so his mate had to look at him.

“If it does, I don’t remember.”

There had to be a way of limiting or directing... The bracelet Lucian had been wearing. No doubt it was sitting waiting to be analyzed. He held Lucian’s hand. “How did Hastings stop it from happening?”

Lucian shook his head. “He didn’t. He would push more into me.”

“Not from himself, I’m guessing.”

Lucian’s gaze slid to the side. “No. I won’t draw on you again.”

“It’s not about that.” Although it was a little. “It’s about you not being so magically stretched that you forget where you are and what you are doing and pass out. It’s about learning to use your magic safely. Not all magics are safe, and witches do die from misuse. I always thought electro mages were the worst, but now I’m wondering if finders also wind up in trouble, though with fewer sparks and destruction.” He ran his thumb over Lucian’s lip, and then, because he was unable to resist, he leaned in and kissed him. “I was worried about you. You scared me.” While Lucian had access to extra energy to send his magic further, there was still only so much information his mind could process. Finding lost eggs might be worse. “Get your briefs off.”

Lucian’s lips curved. “You just want me naked.”

“I do like you being naked, but I think you should rest.”

“Are you leaving?”

Dalmon pulled off his sweater. “No.”

Chapter Thirty-Three

LUCIAN KNEW he wasn't alone in bed before he was fully awake, not because the other man was snoring, but because of the heat he generated and the way it was seeping into him even though they weren't touching. He cracked open his eyelids.

Dalmon had his eyes closed. The stern lines of his face were missing while he slept, and Lucian wanted to reach out and run his fingers over his cheek to be sure he was real and not something he'd imagined. He also didn't want to disturb him.

He was well aware that he'd fucked up last night, even though he didn't have any control over his magic. Which, of course, was the problem. But he didn't know how to control it and find the mole and help Dalmon.

Hank had given him a list of attributes. At first, he'd claimed the shifters he was hunting were criminals. And Lucian had believed him. It was only later, when things soured, that he wanted to discover the truth. Finding it had only made things worse.

If he had something specific to look for, maybe his magic worked better.

Like if he was searching for a missing person or something.

Find the mole...well, that meant his magic was seeking something much vaguer, and it was obviously a lot more taxing. That he didn't remember walking into the rain or much

of anything until Dalmon undressed him and put him to bed was worrying.

That he'd started drawing on Dalmon was worse.

He swallowed and closed his eyes.

This was like some kind of messed up getting back with the ex, except he didn't remember the ex, and the ex didn't remember him but had kept a diary. And what would it have been like if Dalmon hadn't asked his brothers to read their diaries?

If they had just acted on the bond that wanted to form?

He wasn't sure magic could fix the differences between them.

Dalmon was someone...in his public life and his secret Coven life, while he'd always been a no one. And a bad no one both times, it seemed. Sneaking into a secret library wasn't the kind of thing one did for good reasons.

Why did he deserve a familiar and one as glorious and as rare as Dalmon?

The Fates had gotten it wrong; that was the only answer.

He slid out of bed, careful not to wake Dalmon, and crept over the carpet to the bathroom. When he came out, Dalmon was awake with his hands tucked behind his head as if he were ready to get the day started and waiting for Lucian to join him so they could make plans.

For a couple of heartbeats, he hesitated, not sure if he should get back into bed or retreat back to the bathroom for a shower.

Dalmon watched him. The heat of his stare made Lucian's blood heat, and his dick got all kinds of ideas. He wanted to be brave and say that they should cool it, keep it professional, but all he wanted was Dalmon and a taste of his world. The other life that could be his if he knew how to hold onto it.

"We need to spend a little time playing with magic," Dalmon said as if it were a normal morning greeting.

“Sure. Shall I put pants on first?” Then he could hide his erection.

Dalmon’s lips curved. “Don’t feel that you need to on my account.” He sat up and patted the bed, and Lucian couldn’t refuse.

He was weak. He’d like to blame everything on magic, but Dalmon was the kind of man who would’ve held his attention anyway.

And if it was fated, why try to fight it?

Why not enjoy it?

A part of him was still waiting for Dalmon to decide that he wasn’t worth the trouble. “I’m sorry about last night.”

“You’re largely untrained and now have access to more power. That’s always a bad combination. Though I share some of the blame for asking you to assist me.”

“I wanted to help.” Needed to, as if it would erase the damage of what he’d done. He sat on the edge of the bed.

The morning light glanced over Dalmon’s muscles. He’d heard that shifters were built differently. That they were lean muscle and always looked ripped. That was not a lie because he hadn’t seen Dalmon hit the gym once.

“What do you have planned?”

“A little sharing, so I can get a better feel for your magic and you mine. It’s going to be easier if we’re touching, at least to start.” Dalmon beckoned him closer.

Lucian nodded and sat next to his familiar.

“Closer,” Dalmon murmured as he flicked back the blankets and indicated that he wanted Lucian to sit between his legs.

Lucian eyed the length of Dalmon’s morning wood. “If I sit that close, it’s not magic we’re going to be practicing.”

“I’m not going to do anything until we’ve practiced. So you can either move or keep finding reasons to stall. I can feel what you’re thinking.”

“So why can’t I feel you?”

“Because I’m not letting you. Come here, and I’ll teach you.”

“Cause that doesn’t sound dodgy at all.”

Dalmon laughed. “Humor me, then we can play with the lust.” He shared that through the bond. A hot rush that was enough to steal his breath and make his dick throb. Dalmon smiled, as if well aware of what he’d done.

Lucian moved between Dalmon’s legs and leaned back on his chest. The hot length of his cock pressed against Lucian’s ass in a reminder of what they’d done yesterday. Dalmon wrapped his arms around him as if this were a thing they often did.

Had it been?

Was it an echo?

Was all of this some kind of remnant because they’d fucked up?

Lucian turned his head so he could see Dalmon. “Just how clear are my thoughts?”

“Right now, it’s as if you’re whispering in my ear.”

Lucian’s cheeks heated.

“I have the same concerns. You aren’t alone with those tangled thoughts, and I don’t have the answers you want.”

“But you’re doing everything to make this work?”

“Why wouldn’t I? It is fated, so there is no reason for me to fight. We fucked up, as you put it, so why not make amends? And maybe I kind of like the idea that I don’t need to date and lie and that you are mine, and it will work out.”

“Until I give up my magic.”

Dalmon sighed. “That breaks the bond. It doesn’t break everything.”

“So you’d still want to date me?”

“I don’t see why not. You know everything. And I know you. I’m going to let you into my thoughts because I don’t need the bond to sense your disbelief. It’s in your body, like you’re waiting for the end.”

“There is always an end.”

“And a beginning.”

“Just because you live forever...” He sucked in a breath as his mind cracked open, and Dalmon was in his head.

Immortality is overrated.

That was easy for the immortal to say. But was he immortal when he died and didn’t remember? Or was it something else?

Take that up with Gerrit. He is the philosopher. You two would get on well.

Worried he’ll be interested?

You’re not his type.

Because I’m male?

Dalmon laughed. “No, that kind of thing has never seemed to matter to my kind. I don’t know why. Maybe because we’re immortal, we don’t restrict ourselves when searching for love.” He lifted one hand, and fire flickered on his fingertips. “I understand my magic, so let’s start there. It’s much the same as fire witch magic, except I make the heat. A fire witch draws from the environment. Try not to set fire to the bed.”

Lucian lifted his hand. “You want me to make fire? Aren’t I dangerous enough as it is?”

“It’s about control.” Dalmon’s tongue swept over the shell of Lucian’s ear.

“If you do that, I won’t be able to concentrate on anything.”

“Just helping your blood heat up.”

“Uh-huh.” He wasn’t sure how helpful that was going to be.

“Feel the heat in your body and send it to your fingertips.”

“I feel like this is how people spontaneously combust.” He wasn’t ready to die by accidental magic use.

“That is a risk untrained fire witches run. I am neither a witch nor untrained.”

“I’m both.”

“Yes, but it’s my magic you’re borrowing. And I am keeping control of how much I am allowing you.”

“As a percentage, how much would that be?”

“One percent?”

Great. He could feel Dalmon’s thoughts pressing into him, including his worry and desire. He was sure if they did the thought thing well enough, they wouldn’t even need to have sex.

Dalmon gave a small laugh against Lucian’s ear. *I’m happy to try.*

That seems slightly safer.

“Make fire, Lucian, and then I’ll see if I can make you come from thought alone.” His teeth raked over Lucian’s earlobe.

Fire. Right. All he needed was one tiny flame.

All the heat in his blood was in his cock, or his ass crack where Dalmon’s hardon was nestled. If he could draw it away from there and to the tip of his fingers, he might be able to do it.

“What does the fire feel like to you? Does it spark or bloom?”

“It will feel different to you. No two witches with the same magic describe it the same way because they experience it differently due to their different lived experiences. For me, it feels almost tidal. It’s always ebbing and flowing around my body.”

“That’s a weird description for fire.”

“Ask Kaine, and he’ll tell you something different.”

He wanted to avoid Kaine.

“If spark helps you visualize the magic, use that.”

“But the visualization doesn’t cause it?”

“No, it just gives your mind something to latch on to. To comprehend. If you’ve been raised around magic, it’s not so hard to understand.”

That could’ve been a jab at his lack of magical education, but his words were soft, as if it mattered to him that Lucian understood. Not that it mattered because while he could feel the heat sliding through his veins and he was sure his fingertips were burning, no flames appeared. He tried snapping his fingers, pretending they were matches. Nothing.

Feeling Dalmon’s magic was very different from using it himself.

With Dalmon touching him, he could feel the ebb and flow in his mate’s body; he could feel it sliding through him, but he couldn’t push it out of his fingertips to make fire appear.

He tipped his head back and rested on Dalmon’s shoulder as frustration coursed through him. “I don’t know what I’m doing wrong.”

“Nothing.” Dalmon kissed his cheek. “I didn’t expect you to succeed this morning.”

Lucian huffed out a breath. “Does that mean you’ll find it just as hard to use my magic?”

Dalmon’s fingers traced small circles over Lucian’s hip bone. “Probably not because I’ve had much more experience with magic than you. Do you want me to try?”

Lucian kept his eyes closed. If Dalmon could use his magic better than he could, it made sense for him to try. “How do I push it to you?”

“You don’t need to because your side of the bond is fully open. You actually need to close it. You need to learn how to

shutter your thoughts, so you have privacy. I'll teach you how to do that, too."

"How did you know how to do that when you've never had a mate?"

"But I have. And my magic remembered."

Lucian sat up straight and twisted around to stare at him. "What?"

"It was how I knew you were my mate the moment I looked into your eyes. My magic, my phoenix, recognized you, or your magic anyway. It was quite unsettling because I didn't know why I knew you. It was Kaine who suggested it might be a fated mates thing. He went through the gallery—"

"Gallery?" That was the first time Lucian had heard of a gallery.

Dalmon stared at him. "The palace has a gallery where paintings of our previous selves and lovers hang. It's an interesting record. My looks have barely changed."

"What did he find in the gallery?" That was what mattered.

Dalmon was silent for several seconds, long enough that Lucian knew the answer wasn't pleasant. "Nothing. I pulled your painting down, or at least we are assuming I did because it's missing."

"Wait, how does that connect to the library?"

"The missing painting gave Kaine a clue as to which books of his to read."

Right, of course, because if each life had a book, there must be so many. "And because I have the same magic as last time, it made it easy to figure out who I was."

"It's given us a new theory as well. We think witch magic is tied to souls. It explains why it jumps around in families, and there's no consistency."

He was so glad that this mess was helping them unravel magic, though what good it would do, he had no idea. Maybe it would help someone in the future.

“Do you want me to try to use your magic? If you don’t, you need to tell me.”

Lucian raked his teeth over his lower lip. “You might as well try. And then you can show me how to stop you from reading all my thoughts.”

“Or maybe you’d like to read some more of mine?” Dalmon lifted an eyebrow as his hand skated across Lucian’s lower belly.

His dick gave a hopeful twitch, but Dalmon stopped short with a grin. “Magic first, fun later.”

Lucian’s sighed dramatically and leaned back. “Next time, it should be fun first and magic later.”

“If the major operation wasn’t happening tonight, I would be more than happy to spend the day having fun.”

It was just another reminder that while Hank was gone, the Shadow Board was still at large, binding shifters and threatening a new world order where witches ruled, and shifters were second or third-class citizens.

Dalmon drew in a breath, and while he didn’t move, Lucian felt the ground drop away, and he didn’t have wings.

Chapter Thirty-Four

LUCIAN'S THOUGHTS swept around like air currents high in the mountains of Mont de Leucoy. Dalmon hadn't flown there for a long time, but it was still familiar. It was home. And that was how Lucian's magic felt. Maybe they'd been mates in more than one life. And maybe some of them had been successful.

While he could have used Lucian's magic through the bond without his permission, that was unethical, and he wouldn't do it because he wouldn't want it done to him. He had to treat his mate the way he wanted to be treated. So, while he drifted on the currents of Lucian's magic, he also let his mate deeper into his thoughts. Though he could control which thoughts Lucian could access.

Figuring out how to use the bond had been so easy; it was as if it had always been there and was just another part of him. If they had more time, or if he was at home, he would shift and fly so Lucian could share that experience.

"I'd like that," Lucian said. "I want to see you shifted for more than a heartbeat."

Dalmon kissed his neck. "I will take you home and show you once this is done."

He dropped into Lucian's magic, and Lucian flinched as though feeling the intrusion. Dalmon waited for him to relax before examining the magic further. Lucian was all over the place. And Carver's suggestion that it was like a spider web helped Dalmon visualize the magic, although it was in three

dimensions, not two, and the end of each strand wasn't fixed to a point. Instead, it was the cat-like hunting energy.

In the center of that three-dimensional web, Dalmon stood, not sure what he was looking for or where to start, as it was so confusing. It would take him a lifetime to follow every single line. And Lucian lived with this confusion all the time. It was no wonder he wanted to give up his magic.

Which strands lead to the mole?

He waited for Lucian to find his way to him.

Is this my magic?

Yes, I'm sharing what I see. If you see it differently, you can share it.

Why is there so much of it?

Probably because you haven't recalled your magic when you've finished searching, or you forgot about it and left it out there. Now you can see it as I do...perhaps you can start drawing some of it back to you. It would be less dangerous to you, as you wouldn't be so spread out.

Dalmon was surprised Lucian managed to function at all.

How do I recall it? Or should I just cut it?

No, don't cut it. Because then you'll be losing little parts of yourself. Start with the smallest threads and feel as though you're drawing them back, calling them home.

I like that you think my magic feels like home.

You feel like home. Dalmon refocused on the web. *Show me the ones that go to the mole before you start drawing in some of the others.*

Lucian indicated three thick strands. *What are you going to do?*

He wasn't sure yet. But he had names. Maybe he could label each one for Lucian. *For the moment, I'm just going to get a feel for each strand. If something stands out... Do you know why these three?*

No. My only instruction was to find the mole, so unless they are mole shifters, then something must have gotten my magic's attention.

A connection to the Shadow Board?

Or to bound shifters. That is the magic I'm familiar with.

That made a lot of sense.

Dalmon traced each line to the end, hoping to find something he recognized, but what he knew about the suspects and what Lucian knew were so different that there was nothing he could use to label the threads. He wasn't even sure he could feel shifter-binding magic.

He returned to the center to find Lucian carefully gathering up some strands of magic that had a little cat-like hunter at each end, and he was putting them all in a basket.

Why didn't you just reabsorb it?

You said gather.

Oh, he was going to have to be a lot clearer with his instructions when it came to magic. *Well, I'm glad you're learning to visualize it effectively, but you do need to reabsorb it. You can't carry it around in a basket.*

How do I do that?

Dalmon looked at the basket of magic and then at Lucian. *I think if you just hug it and visualize it, it should work.*

But you don't know.

I'm fairly sure. If you prefer you could eat it.

Err no. Lucian scooped up a bundle of magic and hugged it to his chest. In a couple heartbeats, it was gone.

How does that feel?

Kind of nice. Thank you. I'll keep working on that on my own. Maybe if I wasn't so distracted by all of this, I'd be more successful with the fire.

Possibly. Because his mind was so busy processing all the bits of information, his magic was returning, trying to learn

more magic, which required concentration, had been too much. *So, since we're here, in the middle of magic, did you want me to get you off?*

Lucian's excitement rippled through him. *That sounds like the fun kind of magic.*



“JUST REMEMBER that we are supposed to be loved up and stepping out for the first time in a week.” Dalmon glanced at Lucian to ensure he understood the assignment.

He hated the prearranged promo stuff almost as much as he hated the unplanned paparazzi shots. This had to look authentic, not like they were playing for the camera.

Lucian nodded. “Got it. Coming up for air after a week of fucking.”

Dalmon blinked. “That’s not what I said.”

“It’s what you implied.” He smiled. “I can pretend to be madly in love with you.”

Dalmon wasn’t sure that he was pretending. He liked Lucian a lot, and he didn’t care if that was because of the bond or their history or something else entirely. Dalmon leaned over and kissed him. “Not everything is pretend.”

Lucian closed his eyes, and because they were touching, he had front-row seats to all of Lucian’s doubts and desires. He didn’t want to fall because he didn’t want to get hurt. That he thought Dalmon would toss him aside so easily stung, even though that is what he’d done last time. The driver parked, and he and the bodyguard got out.

When doing princely things, he was never alone.

He gave Lucian’s hand a squeeze. “We have to be touching to hear thoughts, okay? If you aren’t sure about saying it aloud...touch me.”

“Ugh...how will I cope, having to touch you all the time?” But he grinned for a second before becoming serious. “I won’t

fuck up.”

Dalmon hoped not, as it was mostly for Lucian’s benefit that they were doing this.

“So, is this the first official event I’m doing with you? Or is this unofficial?”

Dalmon wasn’t sure how to answer. “That depends on if you’re going to freak out about the official stuff or if you’re okay with standing around a tux while pretending not to be bored?”

“This is all new to me. I don’t think any of it’s boring.”

Dalmon didn’t need to hear his thoughts to know that Lucian was trying to suck up every experience because he was waiting for the end. And he didn’t know how to reassure him because he wasn’t sure himself. He’d had too many people decide being with him was too hard. For some, it was because he was a prince; for others, it was because he was keeping too many secrets; and for those who knew he was a witch and a prince, it was because of the time he spent working. He couldn’t give them the attention they deserved.

Why would he think Lucian would be okay with that, with him and the half-a-life he could offer? He didn’t get a chance to say anything else as his door was opened, and he had to put his game face on. The mask was so easy to pull on but uncomfortable to wear, and this time, he noticed the weight and the way it interfered with what he wanted to do, which was spend a week in bed with Lucian.

He stepped onto the sidewalk, lips curved in a small smile even though it was drizzling. On the other side of the car, Lucian was getting out. He quickly joined Dalmon on the sidewalk and took his hand as though he couldn’t bear not to be touching him. Dalmon’s smile widened, and he kissed Lucian’s cheek. That wasn’t part of the act. He liked kissing him, and he liked the way Lucian looked at him and the way he blushed.

They made their way into the restaurant and to the table that had been set aside for them near the window. The view

was lovely, overlooking the park, but it also made it easy for the photographer to get a shot. The driver and bodyguard had a table nearby. He was so used to being followed that he barely noticed they were there now. When he'd been Everest's age, it had irked him. He'd wanted his freedom and privacy, but being born a prince, he didn't get any of that.

Kaine was lucky this time around as he wasn't part of the royal family—it was always useful to have one of them on the outside but still involved in the running of the country.

The waitress brought the menus and asked if there was anything special they wanted.

Dalmon ordered coffee for Lucian and tea for himself.

Lucian's hand brushed his, and he leaned closer as if he were about to whisper something.

So can I order whatever I want, or is there some kind of rule?

Dalmon clasped his hand, and as much as he wanted to bring it to his lips, he restrained himself because that would be overdoing it, even though it was what he wanted.

“Whatever you want, and if you want to try three different things, order them all.”

Lucian's eyebrows lifted slightly.

His mate wasn't used to unlimited funds. And while Dalmon's bank account wasn't endless, it would take a whole lot more than a simple brunch for questions to be asked. Gerrit had asked more than once why he didn't spend more. But he didn't need more. And he wasn't just going to spend it... Although buying Lucian a new wardrobe had been a little fun. That he was wearing the jeans, shirt, and sweater he'd picked out also pleased Dalmon.

Though Lucian would probably die if he'd seen the price tags.

To hell with being too much. He lifted Lucian's hand and kissed his knuckles.

He couldn't spend his funds on himself, though it would be too easy to spend it on someone else. Not that money made up for the fact that he was always working.

Did you mean to share that thought?

Dalmon nodded. *You're not the only one with concerns about how this will go.*

You seem to have more faith than me.

That's because mine hasn't been destroyed. I have never been mistreated. But I have had plenty of breakups for all the reasons that cause me concern.

And you also picked until you uncovered the scar from last time.

"That is true." We do have to use the words, not just our thoughts, because we are in public.

Lucian laughed. "And I suppose I should look at the menu."

"We both should." He released Lucian's hand, and they perused the menu.

He hadn't been here in a while, and the menu had changed. There'd been a time when going out for brunch on the weekend had been part of his weekly plans. To catch up with friends and non-work related things. Now, he wasn't sure he had anything but work. Though it was because of work he'd found Lucian, because he'd insisted on overseeing the Shadow Board-related cases.

The drinks arrived, and they ordered some food, and then silence returned. They didn't know each other well enough to have a conversation about non magic, non-work topics.

Lucian rests his elbows on the table and his chin in his hands. "So, what was it like growing up in your isolated country?"

"When you're a child, you don't realize your life is odd. I was probably eight when I realized my dad, Sebastien," He made sure to keep the timelines and lies straight for Lucian as he wasn't used to them. "Was older than most. And that he

wasn't only my father but also the king." He was giving the public version. Beneath the table, his leg brushed Lucian's. *When I was fourteen, I learned about shifters and witches.* "As for the isolation, that never impacted me either. I went to France for boarding school, as per tradition, and spent the holidays at home."

"That wasn't hard, being away from home?"

Dalmon shook his head. "No. Not at first, anyway. When my father died and Gerrit became king, that was hard. He's technically my nephew, but we're so close in age, he's always been more like my brother." He smiled because no matter their roles or ages, Gerrit was always his brother. "He was so young, and I got terribly homesick."

That Gerrit had been left to help raise Kaine, who they'd passed off as a staff member's child, hadn't helped. While he understood why Sebastien, now Everest, who'd been king at the time, had woken them all instead of leaving a better gap, it was problematic.

"I suppose you can ski and such."

Dalmon nodded. "Of course I can. My estate includes the best ski resort."

Lucian's eyebrows twitched.

"What did you do as a child?" He knew the facts. The things on paper, such as his father's death in the military and the way he was raised by a single mother. He could read Lucian's report cards and medical records, but that didn't tell him about the man.

"I liked riding my bike; it got me out of the house. I read and played video games. We moved around a lot because of my father's job and then after that because my mother was always looking for work and to get away from the people she owed money to. Things were a bit more stable by the time I was sixteen, but the town we were living in was not that friendly towards boys like me. I got into college and left."

It sounds as though you had the more isolated childhood. At least he'd always had family who loved and cared no

matter the secrets they kept.

Lucian considered him for several seconds before nodding. "Maybe I did."

Their food started arriving. Half a dozen plates of bits and pieces.

And then they were eating and talking and laughing, and he forgot that there was a photographer out there until he got back into the car, having eaten too much.

He tipped his head back against the leather seat.

"You okay?"

"Just realizing I want more of that and less of what's coming." He couldn't lie about what they were going to do next. "We're not going straight to the office."

Lucian sucked in a breath. "What do you need me to do?"

"Why do you ask that?"

"Because you wouldn't tell me otherwise."

Dalmon put his hand over Lucian's. Sure, the screen was up, but he wasn't about to discuss Coven business out loud, not when it concerned Everest's safety. *One of the suspects is with Everest as his bodyguard. I need to be sure the heir is not in danger. Will you be able to do that?*

I don't know.

Chapter Thirty-Five

NO PRESSURE, just the fate of a kingdom rested in his inept and untrained hands. What if he got it wrong and said that Agent Black was fine, and he wasn't? Or said he was the mole, and he wasn't? Or got nothing at all, leaving them all in the dark?

Just do your best. I'll be with you this time.

Lucian was sure that was meant to be reassuring, but it wasn't. That was more power to fuck up with, even though Dalmon would regulate what he used. He wished Dalmon had been able to look at his magic and figure out what he was missing so it was easy to tell who the mole was.

And they were assuming that his rambling about being from the same world meant people who were from Mont de Leucoy and who worked at the Coven. That there were three, and he'd said there were three suspects did point to it being a correct assumption. But it was all guessing.

He did not want to get this wrong.

He'd never forgive himself if something happened to Everest. Not that he'd met the prince, but he was Dalmon's brother...officially his nephew. It must get so complicated to keep things straight. Dalmon was officially Gerrit's uncle, even though he was younger. Gerrit's father was the king's heir—not that he'd known his father because he'd died young.

Not that any of them had fathers.

It was all fiction, so the family tree made sense to the outside world. His head hurt thinking about it. It was easier to believe the lies than make sense of the truth.

“We are approaching the house. We aren’t going to stop out the front, but we can stop nearby if you need.”

His stomach twisted and tightened. He shouldn’t have eaten so much, but they’d lingered and talked, and it had felt like a first date, the kind where he got to know the other man instead of just meeting and fucking.

And a big improvement on their first meeting, where he’d been in shackles.

He drew in a breath and tried to focus.

“Okay. Why do they think we’re here?” He nodded toward the front of the vehicle.

“They don’t ask.”

Lucian nodded, then shook his head. “Why not?”

“Because I’m a bloody prince,” Dalmon snapped as though it were obvious.

Lucian opened his mouth and shut it. He was doing the asking too many questions thing again when he should be concentrating on magic.

He glanced down. Dalmon’s hand. It was still over his.

Oops.

Dalmon gave him a lazy smile. “You need to work on keeping your thoughts private.”

“You were too busy magically jacking me off for me to practice.”

Dalmon’s gaze dropped to Lucian’s crotch. “As fun as that would be, I do need you to focus on this one thing.”

Lucian closed his eyes. The three threads that went to the moles were easy to find. *Am I supposed to be able to tell physical proximity?*

I don’t know.

Then Dalmon was standing with him. Or at least that was how he pictured it. A heat that wasn’t lust flowed into him, though it could easily be turned into desire, as Dalmon had

shown him this morning. Dalmon's fire magic was ready to be used.

Can you find Agent Black and see if the magic links up with an existing thread?

“Yes.” The words were soft on his lips. “Give me something more about him.”

He's with Everest. You should be able to locate another phoenix.

That wasn't what he needed. *What shifter is Black?*

Bear. We're on the block.

Lucian drew a little of Dalmon's heat into him, then sent out his magic to hunt the bear shifter called Agent Black, who was near another phoenix shifter.

His magic lit up almost instantly, as if knowing that Dalmon was a phoenix had made it easy to find another—and the bear nearby.

Black was one of the suspects because the magic ran alongside another thread. Both he and Dalmon paced the length and looked at the end, which now ended in a black bear.

What now? Because aside from confirming he'd tagged one suspect correctly, this experiment had been a bit of a fail.

Why did your magic attach to him? What did you ask your magic to find, specifically?

To find the mole selling out the Coven to the Shadow Board.

Hmm. Dalmon touched the magic, and Lucian shuddered. *Show me the link to the Shadow Board.*

The little magical hunter took off as though eager to obey Dalmon. The next link was no easier to read.

Show me the size of the link, Lucian asked his magic.

A tiny link formed.

Dalmon grunted again. *It could be because of what he does. I'll review his interactions with the Board.*

Lucian turned to the other two mole threads. *Show me the size of the link.*

Both threads formed small links, much like Agent Black's.

He was about to curse, but then one kept growing and growing. Then, it added other links of equally massive size.

I believe you've found the mole.

Yeah. I don't know who it is, though.

"Monsieur." The driver's voice was tinny in the speaker.

Lucian snapped open his eyes, and for a few seconds, he wasn't sure where he was. He blinked and glanced at Dalmon.

Dalmon ran a hand over his eyes. "What is it?"

"Shall I drive you to your meeting, or did you want to go home first. You will run late if you go home."

Dalmon checked his watch, and his eyes widened as he showed Lucian the time. They'd just lost an hour. Lucian was not surprised. At least he hadn't wandered into the rain this time. But he did need a nap or something.

He'd used more magic in one day than he ever had, and it was all very specific.

"Take me to the meeting. Have the butler call Carver a cab."

"Of course, monsieur." If the driver was wondering what the hell they'd been up to, it didn't show in his voice.

"That did not feel like that long," Dalmon murmured.

"It never does, though that was much more conscious than how I usually work."

"Easier?"

"None of it's easy. I need to spend some more time rolling the old bits in." That was making a difference to how easy it was, or maybe it was because of Dalmon.

"You can do that while I oversee operations. And keep an eye on those links. And make sure you eat and drink because it will sap your energy."

He was well aware of that. Hank had occasionally withheld food if he wasn't finding fast enough. Not that hunger helped. Hank claimed it sharpened senses, and a witch in control used hunger to their advantage.

You know that's been disproven; a Coven study was done eighty years ago on food and magic. And food and shifters... Shifters can get stuck if they don't have enough energy.

What about witches?

Usually, their magic sputters out, but it will take from their body first, so they become wasted. It can happen quickly, and it has caused deaths. Be careful. Set an alarm on your phone, and don't go under for more than an hour. Then stop and eat. Move around and ground yourself.

You'll be able to pull me out, right?

I'd like to think so, but I couldn't wake you last night. However, the bond is stronger today. The more magic we use, the stronger it becomes.

The more it will hurt to break.

Dalmon expression softened from concern to sadness. It washed through Lucian in a way he hadn't expected.

He squeezed Dalmon's hand. "It's dangerous." *I'm dangerous.*

Dalmon lifted his other hand and touched his chest. "I like having you here and knowing you are mine."

He couldn't disagree. "Same."

"After today, we can deal with it." *I don't want to lose you.*

"You didn't know you were looking for me." Dalmon hadn't been aware he existed as a person or a mate.

"You did. You have been seeking me since your magic came in. Give us time. That's all I'm asking."

"And if there were no magic, would you be saying the same thing?"

“How can I answer that when I have never known you without magic?”

It felt a lot like being wanted for his magic all over again. Even though this time, he liked the man who wanted him. He wanted to believe in fated mates and that he'd learn how to use his magic and how to date a prince.

“Is my life already too much?” Worry filled Dalmon's dark eyes.

“No. This is all me and the magic I never wanted. I feel as though to keep you, I have to keep the magic. I don't want to lose both.” He was ripping open his chest to show Dalmon his heart, and it wasn't measuring up. It was somehow defective, like his magic.

Dalmon pulled him close as the car stopped. “You don't need to keep the magic to keep me.”

“I'll be no one and nothing to you.” His eyes were burning. This was ridiculous. He wanted to blame it on using too much magic.

“That is not true. You will always be my fated mate, no matter what.”

Lucian nodded against Dalmon's shoulder and pretended there wasn't a tear rolling over his cheek.

“Maybe it's me who needs the bond so you won't leave the way every other lover has.”

Lucian sniffed and laughed. “I could get used to brunch and new clothes.”

“Then I'll buy you brunch every day.”

Lucian drew back, hoping that there were no tears clinging to his lashes. “I was joking. You don't need to buy my affection.”

That was just as messed up as relying on the bond.

Dalmon nodded. “You're right.”

Fuck me. You're still listening to all my thoughts, aren't you?

You weren't listening to mine?

Not the words...more the feelings. Which meant he understood how lonely Dalmon was and how he filled the gap with work. And how there would always be a gap because it was where he fitted.

“Monsieur.” The driver waited with Dalmon’s door open.

Dalmon closed his eyes. *We will continue this when I have brought the Board down.*

We will.

Dalmon released him and slid out of the car.

Lucian got out and stretched. Even though they’d eaten not that long ago, the idea of food and coffee after so much magic seemed like a good idea. “I might get a coffee from the café; do you want anything?”

Or was he not allowed to go by himself?

“Get me a coffee, too. Put it on my account.”

Lucian let go of the tension. He wasn’t a prisoner. Dalmon trusted him. He walked over and kissed his cheek. “I won’t be long.”

Chapter Thirty-Six

LUCIAN STROLLED out of the dim underground carpark and onto the sunlit street. He glanced up. There were ominous gray clouds looming in the distance, but for the moment, the sun was winning.

Maybe he could, too.

It wasn't about magic with Dalmon. What it was about, he wasn't sure, but he wanted to find out. And until he was fully in the clear for Hank's death, he was owned by the Coven unless he wanted to be found guilty of something he didn't do.

His lips curved as he made his way into the cozy café.

This was the first place paranormals came if they needed the Coven's help. The staff would assess and contact the right person. It was also where new agents started, so they could get some experience with people in trouble without making it worse by getting into trouble themselves.

Nothing about the café screamed paranormal. It served the humans who worked nearby, too, and was full of comfy mismatched armchairs and books and had an excellent selection of cakes. As well as good coffee, something he appreciated.

This was the first time he'd been in on his own; usually, the tiger shifter who hated him was glued to his side. He walked up to the counter. "Hey, can I get two cappuccinos?"

"No worries." The woman smiled as if waiting for him to say he had a problem. "On your own today?"

“Yeah, doing the coffee run.” He eyed the cakes but decided it would be better to leave them for later, like this afternoon when he’d actually need the sugar fix from doing more magic.

“How would you like to pay?”

“The Vecker account.” Could anyone do that?

She tapped a few buttons. “And you are?”

She knew him by face, not by name. “Lucian Marwood.”

“There you are. I’ll call you when they’re ready.”

Was he on Dalmon’s account? Is that how the tiger shifter had been paying?

He turned around, and Dalmon’s PA waved at him from a nearby table. He wandered over.

“I’m just finishing up my coffee break.” She had an open book on the table in front of her and the remains of a cake.

“I didn’t expect to see you here today.”

“Well, someone has to tick all the boxes before things get going.” She leaned in. “No one wants to be pulled over with an expired driver’s license, but it happens, and it can really mess things up.”

He could imagine.

The hairs on his arms lifted, and he wasn’t sure why. He’d spoken with her a few times over the last week, usually when she dropped things on Dalmon’s desk. What kind of shifter was she? “So how long have you worked here?”

“Over a decade. I live in London now, much to my parent’s disgust.”

“Where are you from?”

“Mont de Leucoy...I work for monsieur Vecker.” She lowered her voice. “The palace is very fussy.”

The hairs on the back of his neck lifted. She was from Mont de Leucoy...but she’d been vetted by the palace. She wasn’t the mole. Couldn’t be.

“Marwood?” The woman behind the counter called his name.

“Thank you,” he said as he collected the coffees.

Andrea was waiting for him when he turned. “I may as well walk up with you.”

“Sure.” But he’d been hoping to get away. She didn’t usually set him on edge. Maybe he was freaking out because of all the magic he’d done today. Maybe it was the café and being surrounded by more magic that was doing it.

He probably shouldn’t be drinking coffee if he was already jittery.

They stepped out onto the street, and Andrea bumped into him. “Sorry—new boots. The heels are a bit too high.”

“Yeah.” He took a step away from her, and as he did, his ears began to ring.

He glanced at her. His magic now yelling at him to run, but he couldn’t make his feet move. He wasn’t overreacting. “It’s you.”

“I knew you were going to be trouble. That your magic would ruin things,” she hissed.

He threw the coffee at her and lurched toward the non-descript door that was the entrance to the Coven. A man grabbed him. “Have you been drinking?”

He was about to answer when he realized that the man didn’t care. He was being grabbed the way so many of the shifters he found over the years had been.

Where was the panic now?

Gone.

His skin went clammy, and his gut churned. He reached for Dalmon through the bond. He needed his heat, his strength, his fire. No. He pulled back. The Shadow Board couldn’t know they were mates. That would put Dalmon in danger.

A car pulled up, and the man pushed him toward it.

Lucian twisted and turned, trying to get free. His stomach gave up trying to hold in brunch, and he vomited on Andrea's new boots.

She swore.

A man in the car shouted, "I can't hold this illusion forever. Get him in."

The longer they took to get him in the car, the more likely it was that Dalmon would realize something was wrong. His vision started to darken, and all his resistance was becoming desperate flailing.

The man and Andrea lifted him into the van.

"You're going to help us find the Coven agent," the man whispered near his ear.

Like fuck.

He was going to find a way out. With his eyes closed as if he'd passed out, he sent his magic to find a means of escape.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

PAIN LANCED through Dalmon's eye like a sword was being driven through his head. He pressed his palm over his eye, not that it helped. Images flooded his mind via the bond.

"It's Andrea—she's the mole," he said. "And she's got Lucian." The words hurt to say, and his chest hurt. Before he even realized what he was doing, he was moving toward the door. He needed to get to the café to help his mate.

Kaine stepped in front of him. "Monsieur, arrêtez. As chief of security, and as your brother, I cannot let you leave this office. It is not safe."

"Lucian is not safe, and nor am I, if she knows he's my mate."

"I'll go," Carver said.

He was out the door before Dalmon could do anything. He snarled at Kaine, even though he was right. As head of the Coven, he needed to be here. He couldn't go tearing after Lucian. Carver would do everything he could. He ran his fingers through his hair. He'd been betrayed by his own bloody PA. "Lock Andrea out of every bloody system here and in Mont de Leucoy."

"I will. You assemble agents to be ready to act if Carver doesn't get him. Maybe start by calling downstairs to the café. How the fuck did they let an abduction happen?" Kaine was already logging in to Dalmon's computer to block Andrea's access.

Dalmon called the café. “There’s an abduction happening right outside. Do something.”

“On it,” the woman said and immediately hung up.

Dalmon paced and flexed his fingers, fire dancing across his knuckles. He’d only just found Lucian. They’d barely had any time together. Why didn’t they get more than a few moments?

He thought this time, he’d be able to make it work.

Kaine glanced up. “Security is going to her parent’s place to see if there’s anything to find. She’s locked out of all systems, so if she logs in, she’ll know she’s been made.”

“I don’t think she cares.”

“They might have taken him for his magic, not because he’s your mate. A finder is a valuable thing.”

He glared at his brother. “You’re not helping.”

But if something happened to Lucian, he needed to make sure his affairs were in order and that his book was updated. He’d have a couple of weeks to get it done, but it was a grim thought.

Dalmon’s phone rang. Carver’s name appeared on the screen. “Well?”

“They used magic, and they were prepared. I doubt you’ll get anything useful from your cameras.”

“There’s nothing to see.” Kaine scowled. “I’m guessing illusion magic caused them to go static. That would’ve also stopped people on the street from seeing anything. There are traffic cameras at each end of the block. I know they pick up the outside of the building, so there might be enough there to get a plate.”

“I’ve got a scent if that helps,” Carver said.

Dalmon closed his eyes and held onto the finest thread of control. “It might, thank you. Come back up; I will assemble a team.” What they were going to do, Dalmon didn’t know, yet

he didn't want to fuck up Everest's mission. They'd worked too hard to get to this point.

His phone rang again. This time, it was Andrea.

He clenched his hand. The next time he saw her, he was going to kill her after every drop of intel had been ripped from her mind.

"It's her," he said to Kaine.

"Do you want me to answer?"

"She'll be expecting me, and I want to talk to Lucian." He drew in a breath that did nothing to calm him and answered his phone. "Hello."

"I'm sure you're aware by now that I have your special agent. Or is he just a fling? Maybe a hired killer?"

"What do you want with Lucian?"

"I want his magic," she said.

She didn't know they were mates. He exhaled, refusing to let her hear how much Lucian meant to him. "Why?"

"That doesn't matter. What matters is that you don't send your agents to the Shadow Board event."

Dalmon closed his eyes. She knew about the operation, but she didn't know who was on it. She didn't know the team. She couldn't—he'd been so careful. "Or what?"

You've already got him. His heart thudded against his ribs, but he managed to keep the fire only on the hand that wasn't holding the phone.

"Lucian will be there, and he will find any agent you send in, and if they are a shifter, they will be bound. If they are witch, they will be killed, and their blood will be on your hands."

"It will be on yours, Andrea. You are a shifter. Why are you aiding the shadow board?"

"I want more than being your PA. Your family of witches runs a country of paranormal, but you do nothing for them.

The Shadow Board wants to bring us out of the shadows so we can have real power. So my family can have power again.”

Her family had been nobles, chased out of France during the revolution. Like many, they’d lost everything. The majority had made new lives in Mont de Leucoy.

“Do you think coming out is going to be safe?” Many would die as humans resisted and sought to destroy all paranormals.

“It’s better than hiding in fear. You’re going to learn what that’s like.”

He was already afraid, not for himself, but for Lucian. “The Shadow Board is only seeking to enrich themselves and enslave shifters.”

“They offer shifter families a chance at power, and all they ask is for a volunteer.”

Kaine made a signal for him to keep her talking.

“Are you willing to sacrifice your life, be bound to a witch to boost their magic?”

“Not everyone in your family agrees with hiding. Some want progress.” She sounded far too smug.

“What do you mean by that?” he asked, even though he knew. She was referring to Everest. Did she really think he was a power-hungry witch? Dalmon smiled. Everest must’ve played his role well.

“Just remember: no Coven agents at tonight’s event.”

“Will you let him go after that?” He hoped he didn’t sound desperate.

The line went dead.

Probably not. The Shadow Board would want Lucian’s finder magic. If they were anything like Hastings, they’d have him finding phoenix eggs in no time. A topic Dalmon hadn’t raised with him yet.

He exhaled and glared at Kaine. “Well? Did you get anything?”

“Nothing from her phone. But I have the registration plate of the van and the direction it was heading courtesy of the traffic cameras.”

“Is there anything you can’t hack into?”

“I haven’t found anything yet. What are you going to do when you get your mate back?”

“Go home for a holiday, read my book on our life together, find the missing painting, and pray he decides to keep his magic.” After this, he was pretty sure Lucian would be done with all things magic. Including him.

Another soul bruise that would take lifetimes to heal.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

IT WAS several hours before the vehicle came to a stop. Lucian had kept his eyes closed as if he were out of it for most of the ride. In part so he could reel in a bit more of the magic he had sent out unwittingly, or had never cleaned up, but also so he could concentrate on finding a way to escape. He didn't know what that was going to look like or when it would come, but he planned on being ready, and while he couldn't shut off the bond completely, he also made sure Dalmon knew he was alive.

If he died, Dalmon died, which was exactly what happened last time. He couldn't let that happen again, and it was why he didn't want his magic. He didn't want to kill Dalmon. He wanted a chance with him.

“Get up,” Andrea hissed.

The man who'd grabbed him off the street hauled him up and out of the van. The other man, who'd cast the illusion and who'd also been the driver, also got out.

Lucian blinked and looked around. He wished he was able to communicate with Dalmon without touching him and that they had worked on the bond enough that they could do more of the things he'd read about. He knew Dalmon was supposedly able to track him through the bond, but only in the vague sense of knowing if he was going in the right direction.

Lucian didn't know which of his thoughts Dalmon would receive, if anything. Maybe if he opened the bond a bit more, he'd get visuals of the house and the van and the people who'd

grabbed him, but he didn't want to risk it in case someone sensed they were mates. He had to be able to act. He had to trust himself.

The house was one of those large rural ones, the kind of place he'd seen on TV. Where one might stay to take the country air two hundred years ago or hunt some foxes or something. This is where the witches were holding their party.

"Move it." The man gave him a shove, and Lucian stumbled before finding his balance.

His wrists were bound with cable ties, and he really didn't want to trip and risk breaking something. An injury would make escaping so much harder. "I don't know where I'm moving to. Where would you like me to go?"

"Don't be smart." The man clipped him over the back of the head as if he was five.

He was given another shove and directed toward the main house. He doubted he was going to be a guest of honor.

The two men were both witches, but he didn't know their powers. If it was mind-reading, he was already well and truly fucked, so he doubted either of them had that. It wouldn't take much for him to find out...he sensed his magic starting to roll out and quickly drew in back. Escape was what he needed to focus on.

That and working out why Andrea was helping the Shadow Board.

She'd been Dalmon's PA for ten years. His family trusted hers.

What had the Shadow Board promised her?

Money? Power? They didn't care about shifters. Whatever they promised her, they wouldn't deliver. Unless...

He remembered Hank talking about bringing witches and shifters into the public, with witches claiming superiority over shifters and making shifters seem like little more than feral animals who could only be controlled by witches. Humans would need witches to feel safe. And if shifters resisted this

new world order and fought back, they would look like the wild animals witches proclaimed them to be. Had they promised Andrea and her family protection or that they would be some of the privileged shifters?

What about witches who didn't want to be part of this uprising? Like him.

"I really don't know why I'm here." Which was a lie. In the van, he'd heard Andrea talking to Dalmon. He was not going to identify any coven agent for these assholes, and he doubted they would've grabbed him only for that.

The man gave him another little push as if he wasn't walking fast enough. "You are going to use your magic to find the Coven Agents spying on us."

He wanted to tell them that his magic didn't work instantly, that it took time, but that was probably a good way to get himself killed. "Do you really think they'll be agents here tonight?"

"I know they will be," Andrea said. "I just don't know who they are. He kept that information close to his chest. Did he share it with you, or were you too busy fucking in his office?"

Lucian's cheeks burned. "He didn't share that kind of information with me."

"What were you doing for him, aside from sucking his dick?" the other man said.

"Writing a full account of Hank's crimes for the Coven records. That was part of my deal." And not entirely a lie. He had made a deal, and he had given a full account of Hank's deeds.

"Where is Hank?" the man behind him asked.

They didn't know Hank was dead. Or that Coven agents had killed him. "I thought you didn't like Hank because he was American. He said you wouldn't let him join the Board."

"Of course we wouldn't. You need to be of noble blood to join the Board, and he was not," the man who kept shoving him said.

“Tonight, we have a very important guest. Someone of royal blood who will open the doors to Europe for us.” Andrea smiled as if she were part of the witches’ inner circle, not a wolf who would easily be bound and bled dry of magic.

He walked up the steps and into the house. There were caterers and people setting up everywhere. Oh God, he really hoped he wasn’t going to be on display somewhere. It was the kind of thing Hank liked to do when he held events.

An older man dressed in grey slacks, a shirt, and a sweater crossed his arms and looked at Lucian as if he were deeply disappointed. “So you’re Hank Hastings’ protégé. His finder. It’s not a magic I’ve come across before.” The man walked closer. His eyes were hard and cold. “I imagine it’s quite useful when one is hunting shifters.”

Lucian knew in his gut that now was the time to start pretending he resented the Coven for upending his life. “I didn’t need Hank anymore, and I knew he was going to kill me and steal my magic. Getting arrested by the Coven was an inconvenience.”

“You didn’t see them coming?” the older man asked.

Lucian smiled. “I’m a finder, not a clairvoyant.”

“I wouldn’t trust him. He’s been fucking the head of the Coven,” Andrea said. It was interesting that she didn’t out Dalmon as a prince.

Lucian shrugged. “I do what it takes to survive the same as you, Andrea. That he took an interest in my magic made my life easy. I got out of the cell they were keeping me in, and all I had to do was sit in his office and detail everything Hank and I have done for the last five years, or at least give them enough that I felt like it was a full account.”

Of course, if the photos of them being all loved up over brunch this morning were released today, that might throw a spanner in his plan to appear uncaring.

The man with the hard eyes considered him. “I don’t trust him. He doesn’t need to see anyone’s faces. I doubt he’d

recognize the agents anyway, but I want him nice and close so that he can find them.”

“What if no agents show up? I can’t find what isn’t here.”

“Well, you would’ve served your purpose.” The man’s lips pressed together in a small, cruel smile.

What the fuck did that mean? Were they going to kill him? His shock must have shown on his face.

The older man’s eyes narrowed. “Though I could be persuaded to keep you around for your magic if you can prove yourself to be useful.”

He did not want to be the scout for another serial killer witch, but he’d play that role for the moment because he needed to stay alive. “And how do I prove my use?”

“By finding the agents here tonight.” The older man turned to his captors. “Lock him up until the guests start to arrive. I’ll find a place for him to sit and work. And make sure he’s well secured. I don’t want him to *find* himself in any trouble.”

Damn, did the man suspect his magic could be used that way, or was he guessing? Hopefully, it was the latter.

Lucian was led through the house and out the back to the storage shed by the witch who seemed to enjoy shoving him around and his more silent friend. It was better than the basement where Hank used to keep his shifters for the simple reason it wasn’t connected to the house. Or at least that was what he was telling himself.

The storage shed was full of wood, chopped and ready for the fire. At first glance, it looked completely innocent. At second glance, he noticed rather sturdy metal loops on the floor. He had a really bad feeling about what they were used for. His gaze flicked over the concrete floor, searching for the brownish stains that blood left. He wasn’t disappointed.

This is where they kept the shifters who would die during their parties.

His stomach bucked.

The man reached toward him to put a collar around his neck. He stepped back and lifted his hands as though ready to fight. The other man grabbed his hair and held him still as the collar was locked in place and the end of the chain was padlocked to the loop in the floor.

“Enjoy your stay,” the man who’d been shoving him around said.

The men left, shutting and locking the door, leaving him alone in the dark, sitting on a pile of wood. While he had no memories of his last life with Dalmon, this felt eerily similar. The only good news was that he was still immune to fire.

The bad news was he didn’t know how to create it, and he was pretty sure he couldn’t make it hot enough to melt metal to get free. He really should’ve asked how hot the flames could get, but it wasn’t the kind of thing that came up in casual conversation.

His stomach rumbled, and he ran his tongue over his teeth. He really should’ve asked for a drink.

While he wouldn’t identify the agents for the Shadow Board, he did want to find them. He put out a tentative strand of magic to start searching. Then he closed his eyes and concentrated on finding a way out.

It was only when he finally gave in to the need to pee that he pulled himself out of the magic. He wasn’t sure he’d achieved anything aside from giving himself a headache and increasing the complaints from his stomach. He stood, took a few steps away, and stepped on something. Not a coincidence, not with his magic. He carefully bent down and retrieved the object from beneath his foot. A large nail. He ran his fingers over it as he held it. It was old and rusty, and he wasn’t sure what use it would be, only that he hadn’t found it by accident.

He slipped the nail into his pocket and pissed as far away from where he was sitting as he could manage.

He checked his other pockets but had no idea what had happened to his phone. The one he had only just been given and that was heavily monitored by the Coven. By Kaine.

Would he be given another one?

He smiled already. He was already assuming he was getting out of there.

His magic was hunting an escape, and Dalmon was also hunting for him.

And he was damn sure the agents attending tonight would also be searching for him, which meant all he needed to do was put himself in a place to be found. Hiding in the woodshed wouldn't cut it.

But burning it down would be a little obvious.

Not only that, but he knew Dalmon wanted the agent to get in with the Shadow Board. If he fucked that up, he was going to be unpopular. With nothing else to do, he opened up the bond a little. Dalmon's worry flowed through him. He tried to reassure him that, for the moment, he was fine but didn't know if he was successful.

He thought of the house and the older man. Then, the woodshed and the river he could hear running nearby. He was giving Dalmon as much as he could, and that had to be enough. He touched his pocket to be sure the nail was still there. And then he settled in to wait until he was summoned to perform.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

IF LUCIAN HADN'T BEEN TAKEN, Dalmon would've been content to wait in his office for the updates from the various missions that were in progress. Instead, he paced, feeling impotent. There was nothing he could do without making the situation worse. Everest and his team had been told that Lucian had been taken, and privately, he'd told Everest they were mates. He did not need to detail all the reasons why Lucian's capture was a devastating blow, but he'd also given Everest strict instructions not to assist Lucian and blow his cover. If they didn't get everything they needed tonight, which they probably wouldn't, Everest would need to stay in play as a Board member.

“Could you please sit still? You're really not helping,” Kaine said.

If he sat still, all he could do was worry. Had he worried last time, or had he been so angry he hadn't cared? Had he expected to die? He'd spoken to Gerrit about the situation and the worst possible outcome. If that came to pass, he would hand the Coven to Kaine and return home in preparation. He needed to update his book, and he did not want his egg getting lost or, worse, being confiscated by customs.

He walked over to the window and stared out over the city. He couldn't see any stars because of the light pollution, but he was damn sure that if he shifted and flew towards Lucian, everyone would bloody well see him.

But that was all he wanted to do.

Kaine had already gone through his PA's laptop and had remotely accessed her phone. She had never been trained as an agent, and she wasn't too careful with the searches and things she did on either. She had accessed something on the dark web that seemed to be where the Shadow Board communicated. Though he doubted she was allowed very deep, in much same way, she didn't have access beyond the average paranormal civilian to Coven information. She also had access to his diary and royal duties, and now he was going to have to find another bloody PA and train them. He'd gone through two before her.

"Any word on Andrea's family?" He turned to Kaine.

"They've all been brought in for questioning. The only one we haven't been able to locate is her brother."

"You don't suppose he's mixed up in the Shadow Board?"

"He was meant to be having a gap year between school and university. His parents haven't heard from him for six months. Around the same time, Andrea opened a new bank account and received money."

"Why didn't you pick that up on your initial searches?"

"Because I didn't know about the bank account, I found it on her phone. Today. And she was never high on my list of suspects."

"Do you really think she could sell out her brother?" She seemed to love her family.

Kaine shrugged. "The family still resents losing their land and titles in the revolution."

That was centuries ago, and they were mortal. They shouldn't be holding onto old grudges the way he did. "They kept their heads. That should be enough."

"But we never made them nobles. We never gave them land and titles. It is us her family resents."

"Because we don't do that unless they have done the country a great service."

"They helped with the search for Olier, according to Gerrit. They thought that should've been enough."

“And if they’d found him, it would’ve been.” He sighed. “I was hoping Lucian would help Templeton and Farrell, but he still wants to be rid of his magic. This will not change his mind.”

Kaine rested his elbows on the table. He was sitting at Dalmon’s desk as if it were his own. Dalmon didn’t need it; all he needed was his phone and some regular updates—of which he’d received none.

“When a witch’s magic is taken, it can be wrapped into an object. That’s what Hastings was doing. It’s what Landstrom did in the US.”

Dalmon frowned. “That was a couple of years ago. Is there a connection between Landstrom and Hastings?”

“I don’t know, given that Hastings’ name only popped up recently. It’s entirely possible they were in contact, but where Landstrom took witch magic, Hastings took shifters. I’m not telling you this to remind you of Landstrom. I’m telling you this because Lucian can give up his magic and break the bond but still have access to the magic if he chooses. Carver’s husband gave up his magic.”

“I know, to save their marriage.” And it had worked. He really hoped he hadn’t sent Carver into a situation he couldn’t deal with. While he’d passed his last psych evaluation, it had been borderline. And he’d volunteered.

“I didn’t know that, but I was aware that he could still use his magic. There was a write-up on it, which I found interesting. Also, some of his magic was put aside in case a gravity witch was needed for an operation. Finder magic isn’t something we should let disappear.”

Dalmon nodded. Kaine was right. It was the kind of thing that should be kept by the Coven. “It’s up to Lucian what we do with it. If he says no, we can’t store it.”

Kaine shook his head. “I have to disagree with you on that one. It’s an essential magic that Jacob will be able to use to find Olier and possibly others. As chief security officer of both a Coven and kingdom, I override you on that matter, brother.”

Dalmon snarled.

“If Lucian knows why they want the magic, I doubt he’ll refuse.”

“I haven’t told him about Olier because he shouldn’t be guilted into his decision.” He ran his fingers through his hair and sat in Lucian’s chair. They hadn’t been together that long, yet it felt as though they had always been together even though, once again, they were being ripped apart too soon. “I don’t want to lose him.”

“I’m sorry I can’t do more.”

Gerrit had said much the same thing. It didn’t matter that Dalmon would be reborn when he wasn’t ready to die. This wasn’t healing the soul bruise; this was ripping open the wound and making it worse.

He closed his eyes and sent Lucian some strength, some heat, but most of all love so that he understood how much he meant. If it went to hell, he didn’t want Lucian, thinking he was unloved and unwanted. He vowed that he would find a way back to him and that he make this right.

Dalmon’s phone buzzed. He checked the message. Everest’s team was going in. He hoped he’d made the right call and that he didn’t lose his brother, as well as his mate.

Chapter Forty

THE THICK BLACK bag over Lucian's head made it hard to breathe and hear and impossible to see. But he could sense all the people around him, which meant he was sitting there with a bag over his head and his hands tied together while everyone else partied. No one seemed to give a shit that he was there, which meant they were used to seeing people tied up, which was more than a little disturbing.

And because he couldn't see, it meant if he saw a Coven agent he recognized, he couldn't point at someone else. Now, all he had was magic, and they were expecting him to point at someone.

Given that everyone was here by invitation, and even the catering staff must have been vetted, he wasn't sure how an agent was supposed to slip in. Unless they seriously thought one of their Board members had been turned by the Coven.

He knew nothing about being an agent, but his magic did, and as soon as the three of them walked in, it lit up.

More confusingly, one felt extremely familiar.

His energy was that of a witch, even though Lucian's magic saw him as a shifter. A phoenix, to be exact. He was accompanied by another witch and the bear shifter he'd checked out earlier in the day.

Oh, shit. Now he knew why Dalmon had wanted him to check out the shifter. Everest was the important guest. The one Andrea had said was looking to the future. And they all thought he was a fire witch. What was going on?

Everest shouldn't be there unless he was a Coven agent. He couldn't be there because he wanted to be part of the Shadow Board, could he?

No matter why he was there, he couldn't finger Everest or either of his bodyguards. Especially not the bear, who was a Coven agent. But he was going to have to do something.

Heat bloomed in his chest, and for a moment, it was as if Dalmon was with him. He smiled and sent back a similar warm feeling, hoping that he understood that it was all okay so far.

"And what is this?" The man's voice was accented with French, much like Kaine's.

"An extra security measure, that's all. He can detect spies." That was the older man.

"Is that right? Are you expecting some? I thought this place was secure. That you had done everything to ensure my safety. I do not want word to escape that I was here. You do understand the problems that would cause for me, yes?" Everest continued as though he didn't care that the older man was running the show.

"Of course, your Royal Highness." The older man sounded annoyed that he was being questioned by the young prince.

"Does it only find spies, or can he do other tricks? Do you trust him? Maybe not with the bag and bonds...perhaps he is the spy, and you have welcomed him into our midst?" Everest continued.

That one was crafty, saving his own skin and tossing around doubt at the same time. Lucian was impressed, even though it was his ass that was going to get burned.

"He used to work for Hank Hastings. You met him, correct?"

"I did. He was only interested in meeting my uncle, not me, so rude. What did this one do for Hank?"

While Lucian couldn't see the prince, he could imagine him standing there assessing him and the situation. Did he

know that he was Dalmon's mate and the danger that posed? Or did he not care?

"Found shifters, rare ones."

"Are shifters so hard to find in this country that you need a witch to do it for you? Can you not just go out and hunt one?" He made a noise as though he were firing a gun.

"It depends on what you're looking for. I noticed you brought a bear. They're quite powerful. Do you think you'll be able to control it?"

"I guess we will find out when I bind him."

Lucian was very glad for the bag over his head because his jaw dropped. What the fuck was going on? Was he wrong in thinking the man was a phoenix? No...he was definitely a phoenix and Dalmon's brother. And the bear shifter was Agent Black from this morning, but nothing made sense.

Their voices grew quieter as they moved away, and then all he could make out was the general murmur of talking.

"Well, have you found anything yet?" It was the older man with the cold eyes. His voice was also cold and sharp and promised only pain.

The rusty nail was in his pants pocket, not something he could reach without being noticed, and he didn't know how well he was being watched. His magic had yet to return to him with a solution to his predicament.

"I haven't. Perhaps they are outside, not in here?"

The man grunted. "If they're outside, shouldn't you be able to find them?" Pain ripped Lucian's scalp as the man grabbed the bag and his hair. "Or perhaps you are hoping they will come and rescue you?"

Well, yeah. Of course that's what he was hoping.

The man leaned in close, his mouth next to Lucian's ear. "Find me the agent, and I will make sure that you are taken care of. Fail, and no one will ever find your body. You have half an hour."

Shit. He needed to tell him something. The words tumbled off his tongue. “Then I need to sit somewhere quiet. There’s too much noise for me to concentrate. My magic is weak. Hank always let me use a shifter to boost it.”

“Do you want to go back into the shed? Is that quiet enough for you?”

It would be, and then he could do something dumb like set fire to it.

The collar around his neck was tight as he swallowed. He didn’t want to seem too keen to go back out to the woodshed. “Anywhere where it’s a little quieter, or you could give me a little shifter boost.”

He really hoped the older man didn’t do that.

“I’m not wasting a shifter on you.” The man stalked away.

Thirty seconds later, Lucian was dragged off the chair, and he assumed he was being taken out the back. He smelled the drying wood before the woodshed door opened. Once again, the chain was clipped to the collar as if he were an animal. But this time, the witch didn’t leave. He shut the door and made himself comfortable in the darkness.

That was going to make things more difficult...although the witch did have the key to the chain. He pretended to be making himself comfortable as he dug the nail out of his pocket. A plan was forming. This was the only chance he’d get.

He gripped the nail and felt the rust-roughened edges dig into his palm. He didn’t know if it was big enough to do a fatal amount of damage, but he needed to make it work.

He sent his magic towards the guard, trusting that it would guide his hand.

“What are you doing?”

He hadn’t expected the witch to notice. Was there a light on? Was the witch watching him? “Well, now it’s nice and quiet. I’m sending magic out to find Coven agents like I was

asked. So if you could shut up and let me concentrate, that would be great.”

“Don’t talk to me that way.”

“Do you want me to find the agents?”

“I’m not sure you could find your own dick,” the witch grumbled.

Lucian didn’t respond to that one. Instead, he let his magic wash over the guard. All he needed was to find a way to kill him with a nail.

While his magic worked on that problem, he started drawing on the bond, calling for heat, and seeking it out. Dalmon responded by pushing more at him. He didn’t know if he could use it, but he was going to fucking try because the nail and fire were the only weapons he had. He wasn’t sure which order to try it in yet. Kill the guard and then try to start the fire? Or start the fire and then kill the guard? Probably the former because if he lit the fire, the guard might put it out and call for help.

He started to sweat as he let the heat build on his fingertips. The nail warmed in his palm until it began to feel as though it would burn him.

With his magic, he knew the guard was just out of reach because of the chain.

Lucian stood. “I’ve got something.”

And he did because there were two agents on the other side of the river. Sam Carver and someone else. He silently apologized that he was going to out them.

“Where?”

“On the other side of the river, there is a shifter.” He didn’t need to out both of them. Hopefully, they’d both be fine.

“How can you be sure it’s an agent?”

“Because that’s what my magic does. It finds things when I ask it to, and it’s returned saying the wolf on the other side of the river is an agent.”

Sam looked like the kind of guy who could handle himself, and from dinner, he'd handled his fair share of messes and made them all disappear.

Lucian wanted to disappear. The idea of hiding in Mont de Leucoy and never needing to deal with the rest of the world again held a certain appeal.

The witch got up and walked over. "It's time for us to take a little walk, isn't it? And if you're lying, you won't make that mistake again."

Oh, the witch wasn't there to guard him, the witch was there to kill the agent.

And then him.

The nail was hot and ready in his hand.

He gave a silent prayer to the Fates, asking them to let him survive and that he was grateful for finding Dalmon once again and that they somehow thought he was worthy of having a mate.

Then, in the dark, without knowing where he was aiming, he put all of his faith in his magic to find the target that would kill the guard.

He slammed the nail into flesh and dragged it down. Hot blood spurted out over his hand and clothes. He gasped, feeling the hood wet against his lips, and stumbled back. The concrete was already slick beneath his feet as the man gargled his last breath.

Lucian stood there with his pulse so loud, it was all he could hear.

He'd never actually killed someone.

There was blood all over him. In him. He spat but could still taste it in his mouth.

He needed to get his hands free and the collar off.

And he was going to need to go through the guard's pockets for the key to unlock the chain. For a moment, he hesitated. His magic urged him to go through the man's

pockets and unlock himself—now. He could worry about the cuffs once he was free.

Then, all he had to do was run to the wolf on the other side of the river.

He knelt and rolled the guard's body over, checking his pockets until he found the bunch of keys. His hands shook as he felt around for the padlock. Panic fluttered in his chest, and he nearly dropped the keys. He took a breath and used his magic so he could find the padlock and know which key to use.

One twist and the padlock unlocked.

He was free.

Except he was weighed down by the chain, which would make running slow. Not that he was much of a runner in the first place. Or a swimmer. Hopefully, that river wasn't too deep, and he could wade across.

He put the keys in his pocket because he didn't know if they might be useful, and he also took the man's phone. Again, because it might be useful.

It was only then he pulled the bag off his head. The shed was no lighter with it off, but he could breathe and hear better.

He cracked open the shed door and peered out into the night.

Lights spilled out of the house and onto the grass. The shed was far too close to the house than he would've liked, and the river seemed too far away.

With his hands still cuffed together, he scrabbled around the back of his neck, trying to find how to release the chain from the collar. When that failed, he tried to undo the collar. With his hands bound, he couldn't.

He cursed silently.

He was wasting time. He needed to run for the river and get to the agent.

And what about the dead body? The man's blood was sticky on his skin.

And then there was Everest, who was in the house, with people expecting him to bind the bear shifter agent. That wasn't going to work because they were both shifters. He stood there, unable to move even though the need to run was burning through him.

He needed to trust the Coven to sort this one out and that the agents inside knew what they were doing. He wasn't an agent.

He was barely a witch.

With his hands still bound, he gathered up the chain and slunk out of the woodshed and around the side into the shadows. It was only then he ran.

He felt Dalmon's power and strength rolling through him, pushing him faster. He drew on the bond, even though he didn't want to. He didn't want to hurt his mate, but he didn't want to die either because that would hurt Dalmon more.

Then, the river was right in front of him. He skidded to a stop, and every nightmare he'd ever had about drowning hit him. He couldn't breathe. He was already drowning, choking on the water and unable to kick to the surface. He was too weighed down.

On the other side of the bank, something moved. The wolf.

There was only about twenty feet of water between him and safety.

The wolf gave a low whine as if to reassure him.

Could Sam smell his fear and sense his panic?

It wasn't a big river. It didn't seem to be moving very fast. He could probably just walk across. It would be fine. He'd find a way.

He had to trust himself and his magic. He had gotten out of the shed, and he could complete the job of rescuing himself.

His skin heated, and for a moment, he thought he was about to burst into flames. Dying by spontaneous combustion because of accidental magic use was not on his list of things to do. That thought was enough to make him wade into the river.

The icy water wrapped around his calves and then his thighs. He had to let his magic guide his steps. He had to trust it, but he found himself walking downstream with the current instead of crossing it. The wolf on the other side kept pace.

It made another noise, and Lucian glanced over his shoulder at the house. Someone was walking towards the woodshed, and he was standing upright in the river. They would see him if they looked over.

He'd be caught.

Lucian crouched over and made his way toward the middle of the river. Moonlight bounced off the surface. Oh God, he was still too visible.

The current was stronger and trying to knock him off his feet. His foot slid and he went under, clutching the chain.

He kicked his legs.

His lungs burned.

He wasn't dying like this again.

Chapter Forty-One

SHARP TEETH CLOSED around his arm. Lucian struggled, but he was running out of air, and he was tired, and the chain was so heavy.

The teeth dug into the skin of his arm. He opened his mouth, and water flooded in.

It was too late. He was drowning.

He cried out for Dalmon through the bond, begging forgiveness for failing again.

His head broke the surface, but he was coughing too much to suck in any air. The chain slipped from his grasp.

The wolf growled and released him.

Lucian sunk straight away before being yanked up again, this time by the chain.

His lungs were burning, and his body was shaking as he tried to breathe between coughing. The wolf kept swimming as if dragging a drowning human weighed down by a chain didn't bother him at all.

Lucian didn't know how long they were in the water, only that when his legs scraped the bottom and he tried to stand, they were so numb he fell over.

The wolf was far bigger than he expected. He thought they were dog-sized. They were not. Sam, still in wolf form, helped him out of the river. In his mouth, he carried the chain that would've otherwise dragged.

Lucian coughed, sure he'd drunk half the river and whatever else was in it. For a moment, he thought he might be sick, but his body couldn't coordinate much more than shivering and coughing.

Sam dropped the chain and hunched over. His body shook as he shifted from wolf to human. Then, he was kneeling in the mud with the chain at his feet.

He shot Lucian a glare. "Next time, try not to struggle when you're being rescued. Did my teeth break the skin?"

Lucian was too cold to even feel his arm. When he didn't answer, Sam moved over and ran his hand over Lucian's upper arm. He whimpered. Something was damaged—his chest felt like someone had crushed all his ribs—but he was alive.

A man came running towards them.

Lucian flinched.

"Calm down, he's another agent. Vecker sent us to watch over you and possibly rescue you, depending on how things were going."

The other man reached them. "They're searching for him. We're not in the clear yet. But I've let Vecker know we've found the missing item."

Then the other agent examined the collar to take it off, and Sam pulled on clothes as if this was all very normal. He ate a chocolate bar and offered one to Lucian.

Lucian's teeth chattered, but he accepted. He'd used a lot of magic.

What he needed to do was get warm.

It took him several seconds before he realized he had a phoenix familiar, and all he needed to do was pull a little fire into himself.

So that's what he did, and at the same time, he fully opened the bond and tried to send Dalmon a hug and a thank you for sending two agents because, without them, he would've drowned again. At least no one had tried to burn him first. So that was a win.

Dalmon responded with a push of heat, which wrapped around him like the most comforting blanket he'd ever felt. He never wanted to come out from the cocoon.

He opened the chocolate bar. And took a couple of bites.

The witch released the collar.

And the chain dropped free.

“It had a spell on it to keep it closed. You're lucky that you got it free at the other end,” the other agent said.

He had been lucky.

Sam picked up the chain and collar and tossed them in the river. “Right, we need to haul some ass and get out of here. Get up.”

Even though he was tired, and his muscles ached, and his chest still hurt, Lucian got up. “Where are we going?”

“We've got a vehicle waiting about 5 km away.”

Lucian stared at Sam. “What's that in miles?”

“How the fuck should I know? We don't use imperial in Australia.”

Five kilometers. It couldn't be that far.

Chapter Forty-Two

DALMON WAITED in the car park beneath the Coven. Sam had given him an update that they were only five minutes away. Even if he hadn't, Dalmon could feel Lucian getting closer, which was a whole lot better than when the water had closed over his head and his panic had bled through the bond and torn at Dalmon's soul. Had he felt him drown last time? He never wanted to feel it again.

The car swung into the car park and pulled up in front of the elevator.

Lucian got out and flung himself at Dalmon, wrapping his arms around his neck. Dalmon held him tight. Never wanting to let him go.

He smelled of river water and the stale stench of clothes that had been in the back of the car for too long. Once again, Lucian was wearing a grey tracksuit in the wrong size.

It hung off him, and he was sure the pants were about to make an escape off his hips.

Dalmon kissed him, not caring what others thought or if it wasn't appropriate for someone in his position. For the first time in his life didn't give a shit. This was what he wanted. Needed.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Yeah. I, um, left a body in the woodshed."

"It's being taken care of."

"What about the team in the house?"

“They are all fine.” He smiled.

With the distraction of the escaped witch, the party had ended pretty quickly. Everest had expressed his disgust at the organization of the event. Suggesting that Lucian had been the spy all along.

The teams raiding the Shadow Board member’s houses had been successful in gathering evidence. Once the Coven had gone through it and assembled it in a manner suitable for human eyes, it would be turned over to police and lawyers, and they would start the long process of unpicking the Board and the powerful members.

Starting with Lumin Senior and his media empire.

The biggest danger was that the Board would act and reveal witches and shifters out of retaliation when their members started being arrested. That was something they would need to deal with if it eventuated.

For the moment, Kaine could deal with the Coven while he returned home and had a long overdue holiday with his mate.

He kissed Lucian again. “Let’s go home.”

“I love you,” Lucian whispered against Dalmon’s lips. “I thought I was going to lose you. I thought I was going to kill you again. I don’t want to live like that, but I also don’t think I can breathe without you.”

Dalmon had been expecting that this would cement Lucian’s decision to give up his magic. But it was a punch to the throat that he was going to lose this connection before it had a chance to form. Again. “The bond is a burden and blessing. There is a bond breaker at home.” He forced the words out, not sure how he was keeping his voice so level. Was it the years of diplomatic practice? “I can take you if that’s what you really want. Just give it, give us, a little time.”

“I’ve given it four hundred years. It’s come between us for that long. I think it’s time to let it go.”

Dalmon closed his eyes as if he could already feel the pain of Lucian losing his magic and the loss of the bond between them.

Behind Lucian, Sam cleared his throat. “Mark can talk to him about the process and how it feels.”

Lucian gave him a weak smile. “That’s a good idea. I don’t want to be responsible for killing you, and I don’t want you to have that burden either.”

Dalmon sighed but didn’t release him. He glanced at Sam and the other agent. “Thank you for returning him. You have no idea what this means to me.”

Sam gave a single nod. “Pretty sure I do, and I agree with Lucian. The bond doesn’t work for everyone. And it won’t work if only one of you wants it; it will breed resentment, which you really don’t want.”

No, he didn’t. If they didn’t have the bond, at least they’d still have each other. And maybe that was all they needed this time.

Chapter Forty-Three

LUCIAN PRESSED AGAINST DALMON, reveling in his warmth. He wasn't going to let Dalmon slink out of bed this morning. Ever since the bond breaker had visited, Dalmon had been treating him as though he was made of glass.

The loss of magic had hurt at the time and for a few days after, as Mark had warned him. It had also left him weakened for about a week, and he'd shuffled around Dalmon's rooms like a wraith. But the loss of the bond hurt more. There was a hollowness where Dalmon had been.

He needed him.

He kissed the back of Dalmon's neck as his hand slid over his hip. Dalmon made a little noise.

Lucian's fingers brushed the hardening length of Dalmon's dick. "If the next words out of your mouth are 'you're too weak,' or 'you need to recover,' or something like that, I will..." He had no idea what he'd do. "I will bite you." It was the first thing that popped into his mind. He pressed his teeth into Dalmon's shoulder to show he was serious.

Dalmon laughed and rolled onto his stomach. "I wasn't going to refuse. I've been waiting for you to come to me." He turned his head. "I don't know what you're thinking anymore. You need to tell me. I didn't want to push."

And at first, losing the bond had created a distance between them as they worked out who they were without the bond, as individuals and as a couple. But never once had he

thought they were going to break up. Dalmon cared. He actually wanted him. And he wanted Dalmon.

“I’m fine.” Yesterday was the first time he’d felt mostly like himself. He moved over him, dropping his knee between Dalmon’s legs and forcing them open.

Dalmon reached out and opened the bedside table, grabbing the lube. “Like this?”

“Yes? Unless you want—”

“I want you to fuck me.” Dalmon had no problems saying what he wanted.

Lucian took the lube off him and slicked his fingers before finding Dalmon’s hole and teasing it with light circles. “Are you really going to lie there?”

Dalmon grabbed a pillow and shoved it under his hips. “You seem to like thinking you’re in control.” He glanced over his shoulder. “And maybe sometimes I like it too.”

“Like one percent of the time?” He pressed one finger into his mate. They didn’t have the bond, but Dalmon was his.

“That’s a bit generous. Half.” He lifted his hips as though eager for more.

Before the breaking of the bond, Lucian had discovered how strong Dalmon was and that any hint that Lucian was in control was only because he allowed it. He was a prince, a phoenix, the head of the Coven, and he was used to being obeyed. But he also put everyone else ahead of himself. Even Lucian.

He pressed the head of his cock against the tight pucker, then slowly sank in, enjoying Dalmon’s groan of pleasure. For a moment, it rippled through him as though he could once again feel his lust as if it were his own. It only took two strokes before he was fully buried in his mate’s ass. He paused, loving the feel of him, the way he moved as if he wanted more than stillness. Lucian leaned forward and kissed him.

He didn't need the bond to know what Dalmon liked or needed. He could tell from the way he moved and the noises he made. Not having the bond had made them both more aware of each other instead of relying on the magic.

They moved as if they had all the time in the world. Today, they did. In a few more days, they'd be leaving the castle and the country to return to London. He'd agreed to be Dalmon's PA.

As well as his public consort. He'd spent too many hours learning basic etiquette, and there would be more to come as things progressed. As well as the French lessons.

The skin on Dalmon's back heated, and Lucian rocked back, dragging Dalmon's hips with him. "You look so good spread beneath me."

He ran his hand up Dalmon's spine, watching as he arched his back and met each thrust. It had been too long for him to take all day. He reached beneath Dalmon and wrapped his fingers around his cock. "If you wait, I'll suck you off."

"As much as I like the sound of that..." Dalmon thrust into Lucian's hand. "It's not going to happen." He pushed up a little higher, and flames raced up his spine.

Lucian gasped with delight as Dalmon's fiery wings spread out between them. As much as he wanted to touch them, he didn't. Dalmon groaned as he came, his ass tightening around Lucian and dragging him over the edge. His breath caught, and he came with a shudder, entranced by the flames. "You did that deliberately."

"I did because you like it."

Lucian smiled and watched as the flames receded. When they had, he smoothed his hand over Dalmon's shoulder blades. No matter how many times he watched him shift, it was amazing. Just once, he'd flown with him. He was sure it was Dalmon's unspoken way of trying to convince him to keep his magic.

"Thank you." He leaned over and kissed his spine.

Dalmon flopped onto the bed, and Lucian lay next to him. “I think I’m ready to try.”

“Are you sure?” Dalmon rolled over to face him. “We will be back in a few months. We can look for the painting then.”

Lucian shook his head. He’d tried to find it at Dalmon’s estate, which is where they’d spent the first three weeks, but it wasn’t there. They’d come to the castle for the bond breaking, and he hadn’t done any magic since then. Today felt like a good day to try.

When his magic had been taken, Dalmon had put it into three rings. One for him, and one for Jacob, one of the official egg hunters, to use to find Dalmon’s missing brother and possibly other phoenixes, and then one for the Coven to use in case they needed that specific magic. He was glad his magic was being used for good.

“I’m sure.”

“Then I’d better give you the ring.” Dalmon sat up and rummaged around his bedside table before turning back to him, holding a black ring box. “Do not freak out.”

“Why would I freak out?” Now he was expecting to freak out.

“Because I wasn’t sure if you’d want to wear it all the time, so I had a different ring re-sized. One you can wear all the time.”

Lucian frowned, not sure why he’d need to wear a ring all the time. “Are you...”

“I’m asking you to marry me.” He opened the box. Inside were two rings. The gold and ruby one that contained his magic and another ruby ring that he had seen in the gallery of exes. Between two bands of gold was a river of rubies. Dalmon lifted the heirloom out of the box.

“Did I wear it last time?”

“No. I don’t know what happened to that ring. Would you prefer something new? Or is it the marrying part that’s freaking you out?”

Lucian glanced up from the ring to Dalmon. "I'm not freaking out." Only a little bit. "I wasn't expecting it."

"You were worried that without the bond, I'd lose interest. That's never going to happen. You are my fated mate, no matter what. And this is me showing you in the best way I can. Of course, it will need to be announced and such..." Dalmon's eyebrows drew together. "Are you trying to find a way to say no?"

Lucian leaned in and kissed him. "Of course it's a yes."

"I was actually worried for a moment." He slid the engagement ring onto Lucian's finger. "Do you want the other one too?"

"If I'm going to find the painting, I'm going to need it."

Dalmon slid that one onto his finger, so they sat side by side as if they had been made that way.

Lucian closed his eyes as the magic swelled around him. It wasn't in him the way it had been, but it was there, ready to be sent out searching.

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yeah. Are you sure the painting is in the palace and not destroyed?"

"I don't think I would've done that, and if I did, I would've written it in the book."

Dalmon had read the book which held the life where they'd met. He'd then gone for a very long walk by himself before returning to tell Lucian about it.

There was no reason for him to doubt what Dalmon told him because they'd still had the bond, and he'd felt the turmoil and the disgust and the horror.

Lucian had been in the library to find proof that the ruling family was lying.

Apparently, he hadn't wanted to do it, but his father had threatened Dalmon if he didn't, so in a twisted way, he'd been trying to protect Dalmon. But instead, he'd damned them both

instead of trusting Dalmon to sort it out. He didn't want to know where the library was. He wasn't ready for that.

He rubbed his thumb over the ruby that held the magic, and then he reached out and grabbed Dalmon's hand.

Dalmon frowned. "I can't help boost your magic."

Lucian grinned. "Since you were the one who pulled the painting down, I thought it might be easier for my magic to find where you put it. I'm guessing, but that's what my gut says." And even though he didn't have magic, he was learning to trust his gut. "You know, I bet it's in your rooms."

"I looked while you were recovering."

"Yeah, you had a shifter look, not a witch look." Lucian grinned as he sent the strand of magic out to locate the painting.

"I lose one cufflink, and you're not going to let me live that down?"

"Not yet. Shall we shower before scandalizing people with our rapid engagement?"

"My brothers are not going to be scandalized." He kissed Lucian, pressing him back into the bed. "Your magic takes a while, so we have time."

They did, and Lucian was hoping that even though he didn't have magic, he'd find Dalmon in his next life.

Chapter Forty-Four

Epilogue

DALMON HUNG the painting in the place that had been empty for too many centuries. The gallery of exes... His gaze skimmed over the painting. He never changed, though the skill and style of the artist did.

“I don’t even look like that,” Lucian said.

“Of course not. It’s only your magic that is the same.”

“So I could be any of these people too.” He walked toward the earlier paintings. Some dated back to when the castle was built, and the kingdom created. There were far older things, jewelry and such that seemed to be from the times of the Roman Empire. It was a collection that museums would love to get their hands on. If people knew about witches and shifters, experts in dead languages would be able to decipher the books—a thrilling and terrifying proposition as he had no idea how personal some of the entries were. From the ones he could read, there had been a mix of the deeply personal and the mundane.

“If you are, I didn’t realize last time, and it’s something I would’ve mentioned.”

Lucian nodded, but kept studying the paintings. “You do change a little.”

Dalmon took Lucian’s hand and led him toward the more recent paintings...and photos. “It’s easier to see in the photographs.”

Which was going to become more of an issue as time went on. It would only take one human to call them out as vampire,

or some other incorrect human myth and then things would get messy.

Lucian gasped. “You can’t hang that there. When did you get that printed and framed? Or do you have gold frames lying around?”

Dalmon grinned. He liked the photo; they were both smiling for a start, unlike the rest of the very serious paintings. “I couldn’t wait until an official portrait is done.”

“But that’s a selfie, and we’d just...”

They had coats on and not much else. Not that anyone looking at the photo would be able to tell. “It was your first time in the snow.”

Lucian blushed and tried to scowl at him.

Dalmon pulled him close and kissed him, his lips lingering to make the most of the moment. If there was one thing his past had taught him, it was to make the most of the little moments as they were how the future was built.

This time, they were building it together.



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About the Author

TJ Nichols is the author of the Studies in Demonology and Familiar Mates series. They write mostly gay fantasy and paranormal romance, but sometimes gay action/horror as Toby J. Nichols.

After traveling all over the world and Australia, TJ now lives in Perth, Western Australia.

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