

FEL FERN

A muscular man with dark hair and a beard is the central figure. He is shirtless, showing a well-defined physique with prominent abdominal muscles. He has large, dark, feathered wings extending from his back. He is wearing dark blue jeans. The background is a forest with trees and a path covered in fallen leaves, suggesting an autumn setting. The lighting is dramatic, with a warm, golden glow behind the man, highlighting his form against the darker forest.

RAVEN  
SAVED

# RAVEN SAVED

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MOON BURROW RAVENS

BOOK 3

FEL FERN

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# BLURB

## **An unlikely killer and a heartbroken warrior...**

Elliot Fry has one mission. To save his brother, Elliot must breach enemy territory and kill the leader of the Moon Burrow Ravens. It's a tall order, but failure is not an option. Elliot can't allow himself to be distracted by a certain dark-haired, overly protective but unexpectedly kind alpha. Simon hits all of his buttons, but Elliot knows getting close to Simon might only result in tragedy.

Simon Sims is sick of always coming in second. He's heartbroken after losing his crush to another. When Simon finds a half-dead omega on the roadside, he knows fate has made him wait for a reason. The mysterious Elliot is evasive about answering any personal questions. Simon wishes he has all the time in the world to get to know Elliot, but there's a traitor in the flock. Someone wants his lead alpha dead, and it's up to Simon to weed out the killer. When the assassin turns out to be the one he loves, Simon's loyalty is tested. Who will he choose, Elliot or his adopted family?

*Raven Saved is an m/m paranormal romance that features mpreg, suspense, a reluctant assassin, and his raven warrior.*

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## ELLIOT

“Do you comprehend the task I’m entrusting to you, Elliot?” Duane Dixon inquired.

Duane had his back turned towards me, seemingly underestimating me as a potential threat.

This was a common stance among the alphas in the Salt Stone Flock. They often underestimated my capabilities.

Someday, I would prove them wrong about my abilities. At least, that’s what I constantly reminded myself to feel more confident.

Given that Duane held all the cards, I remained where I stood, clenching my fists by my side.

I bit the inside of my cheek until it bled. All I desired was to leap onto Duane’s back, grip his throat, and choke him.

I cut short the murderous fantasy playing in my mind as Duane turned, flashing me one of his terrible smiles.

It was as if he knew precisely what I was contemplating. While many single paranormals residing in Salt Stone found Duane handsome due to his golden hair, blue eyes, and charismatic personality, I saw beyond that façade.

Beneath his attractive exterior lay a monstrous capacity for cruelty.

“Answer the lead alpha’s question, omega,” urged Ray, Duane’s second-in-command.

Ray uttered the word “omega” as if it left a bitter taste in his mouth.

Most shifter groups respected and valued their omegas, as they balanced out the aggressive energies within the group.

However, the alphas in our flock regarded us with disdain, treating us as insignificant pests.

“I understand, but before Ray and I leave, I want to see my brother,” I insisted, recalling the importance of setting boundaries, a lesson taught by my brother Ethan.

Ray made a displeased expression and then gripped my left upper arm so tightly that it was bound to leave bruises.

“Do you dare to make demands?” Ray’s face reddened as he posed the question.

His unwavering devotion to Duane had always puzzled me. Duane wasn’t a competent leader; he favored the strong within the pack, granting them the liberty to mistreat the weaker members.

Fortunately, Ethan had always supported me, until recently. I understood why Duane chose me for this nearly suicidal mission.

He exploited my one vulnerability, knowing that Ethan was my sole family, and that we’d do anything for each other, even commit murder.

“Release him, Ray. Violence is unnecessary. For now,” Duane said, revealing his unnaturally white teeth. “Ray, take him to see Ethan. Then, escort him to Moon Burrow.”

“Lucky bastard,” Ray hissed in my ear, still gripping my arm.

He practically dragged me out of Duane’s private office. Just as I was stepping out of the doorway, Duane uttered one final warning.

“Remember, Elliot, fail in your task, and you know the consequences,” Duane cautioned.

I freed myself from Ray’s grip. He scowled, doing little else. Ray signaled for me to follow him with a crooked finger.



We traversed several empty rooms before descending the staircase leading to the first floor and eventually to the basement.

When Ethan and I initially arrived at Duane's personal invitation, we were awe-struck by the Salt Stone Flock House, a Mediterranean-style mansion situated on a 4,000-square-foot private estate.

Having grown up in a trailer park, we were easily impressed and manipulated.

Although we had joined Duane's flock merely six months ago, it felt like an eternity of remorse.

Heated arguments reached our ears as we advanced. I spotted Al and Stewart, a newly mated couple—supposedly a match made in heaven, as Duane described it, though the reality was quite the opposite.

I didn't know Stewart, the omega half of the couple, very well, but each time I glimpsed him, he seemed miserable and desperate.

All omegas in the flock appeared the same, as if awaiting their inevitable demise. Soon enough, I would likely be no different from them.

Ethan recognized this as well, which prompted our escape plan. Unfortunately, Duane got wind of our intentions.

It turned out that in Duane's view, all flock members were his possessions. He provided us with sustenance, shelter, and a sense of belonging, but the cost was exorbitant.

Had Ethan and I comprehended the true price of joining Duane's twisted group—relinquishing our freedom—we would have rejected his offer outright.

Duane had confined my brother in one of the cells in the basement, a section reserved for interrogating prisoners. In exchange for Ethan's release, he had assigned me a task.

"Keep your mate in check," Ray hissed at Al.

I sought Stewart's gaze, but he continued to fixate on the floor, his fingers absently rubbing the old bruise on his cheek. Ray

set off at a brisk pace, forcing me to hasten my steps to keep up.

We descended into the windowless basement—a space characterized by darkness, coldness, and dampness.

Most of the raven shifters within the flock dreaded the prospect of being sent to this place. Yet, here I was, walking directly into the clutches of a prison.

We passed vacant cells before coming to a halt at the last one at the far end of the corridor.

I clasped the bars, disregarding the sting of the cold, silver-laden metal against my skin, and peered at my brother.

Ethan's condition was even worse than I had imagined.

Unable to contain myself, I emitted a hoarse cry of alarm, rousing him instantly.

Ethan opened his one unbruised eye, the intensity in his expression assuring me that Duane and his cohorts hadn't completely broken him.

My brother was a fighter, and he had imparted that resilience to me.

“Elliot?” Ethan whispered, his initial defiance replaced by a raw fear. “No. You agreed to Duane's demands?”

“I had no other choice,” I whispered back. “It's our only remaining option, Ethan. Leave this to me. I'll come back for you soon.”

Witnessing Ethan struggle toward me, hindered by restraints on his wrists and ankles, angered me.

“Don't go through with this, brother. You won't survive Moon Burrow. It's a haven for monsters,” Ethan pleaded, his voice carrying desperation. “I'll find a way to earn Duane's forgiveness.”

“You've always watched out for me, Ethan,” I reassured him. “This is my opportunity to repay that care. Hold tight and stay alive.”

Turning away from Ethan was one of the most agonizing decisions I'd ever made, yet I knew that giving in to my emotions would only lead to tears.

Ray would be observing me with his ever-present sneer, and weakness was something I couldn't afford at this moment.

"Let's go," I informed Ray, my voice steady.

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"USE THIS," RAY INSTRUCTED DURING OUR SIX-HOUR DRIVE. We were in his car, but another alpha was at the wheel.

I didn't recognize the driver; the stone-faced alpha seemed to be a recent addition to the flock. Duane was constantly recruiting to replace lost members.

Ray handed me a sheathed blade. Without hesitation, I drew the weapon. It wasn't a particularly large knife, boasting a dark mahogany handle.

The 100-mm blade resembled the type used for camping. A touch to its tip made me cry out as a cut appeared on my thumb.

Blood welled up, and the wound didn't close immediately. This indicated the blade contained silver, which was deadly to us shifters.

Silver weapons didn't come cheap, and this one appeared brand new, likely unused.

I assumed no one had handled it before. Duane wouldn't want any trace of this job leading back to him.

I was expendable, a fact I had already accepted.

"Sheath that before you accidentally stab yourself in the eye," Ray quipped.

"Are you concerned I might turn it on you?" The words slipped out without thought.

Ray clenched one fist, and I was sure he'd strike me, but he refrained.

“You’re fortunate. Duane forbade me from laying hands on you until the job is done. Though I doubt you’ll succeed,” Ray scoffed.

“I’ve already killed one alpha,” I reminded him.

Ray grimaced. “Luck was on your side. You caught Boris at his most vulnerable before driving the knife into his neck.”

“Boris had to be stopped. He had already taken the life of one omega and was moving onto another victim,” I retorted.

“Allegedly. I never understood why Duane kept you and your ugly brother around,” Ray shrugged. “But Ethan is right about one thing. Moon Burrow is a realm of monsters. The grizzly shifters there show no mercy to outsiders.”

“My task doesn’t involve the bears,” I asserted. “And I excel at staying invisible.”

Ray snorted, displaying his lack of regard for me and the mission. His opinion held little weight for me either way.

To distract myself, I sheathed the blade, securing it in the inside pocket of my denim jacket, and glanced out the windows.

Acting tough in Ray’s presence was one thing; executing this mission was entirely different.

Would I emerge from this ordeal alive? I had made a promise to Ethan that I intended to keep.

Soon, it became evident that we were in a remote area. Vast wheat fields transitioned into a densely wooded region.

Salt Stone was a half-hour drive from the city, and I had struggled to locate Moon Burrow on my phone’s map app.

“We’re almost there,” Ray announced. “I’ll drop you off on the outskirts of their territory.”

“And then what?” I probed.

Ray hadn’t been forthcoming about the finer details of the job. I had a suspicion he was withholding information out of spite.

We had never seen eye to eye. Except for Ethan, I held no affection for any of the alphas in the Salt Stone Flock.

“Hopefully, a helpful Moon Burrow raven scout will find you,” Ray dismissed.

“And afterward? Should I pretend to be a lost tourist or something?”

“Use your imagination,” Ray snapped.

As we passed a sign reading ‘Welcome to Moon Burrow’, featuring a large bear and a small raven painted on it, a surge of dread enveloped me.

I wiped my sweaty palms on my jeans, expecting Ray to wear a smug grin.

To my surprise, he didn’t. Ray’s body tensed as he peered out his window.

I hadn’t imagined seeing fear in Duane’s second-in-command. Once, I might have relished witnessing Ray in such a state; after all, he relished inflicting pain more than Duane.

Yet, right now, he was vulnerable.

My anxiety heightened. I finally grasped that Duane’s reluctance to visit Moon Burrow in person might stem from his own fear.

“What’s Duane’s issue with my target?” I finally inquired.

Ray’s attention returned to me. “That’s none of your concern.”

“In fact, it is. My life is on the line for this mission,” I insisted.

“Your target is an old adversary of Duane’s,” Ray divulged. “Now comes the interesting part.”

Ray rubbed his hands together, an unsettling gleam in his eyes.

“What are you talking about?” I demanded.

“We need to make the accident believable,” Ray simply stated.

“Carl, unlock the car door.”

Carl complied, though alarm bells rang in my head as Ray reached across me and swung open my car door.

We were still moving at a considerable speed, and my heart raced.

“I’ve always wanted to do this,” Ray remarked.

I didn’t see the blow coming; his speed was astonishing. Stars burst in my vision as pain seared through my skull.

Before I could react, let alone process what was happening, Ray propelled me out of the moving vehicle.

My life flashed before me. I saw Ethan holding my scrawny shoulders, gazing into our omega father’s coffin.

My brother, worn out from juggling two or three jobs every night just to keep us afloat.

Ethan’s radiant smile when he informed me that the lead alpha of a raven flock had accepted us, offering us a home and respite from hardship.

If I could turn back time, I would tell him that joining the Salt Stone Flock had been a terrible mistake.

Panic surged a fraction of a second later. Ray intended to kill me before I even embarked on my mission!

That realization hit me just before my body collided with unforgiving gravel and stone.

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## SIMON

A terrible migraine pulsed at the back of my head. I shifted onto my side, hoping it would dissipate, but no such luck.

Groaning, I attempted to recall the events of the previous night. Judging by my throbbing headache, it probably hadn't been a pleasant affair.

In the background, someone was singing off-key, further heightening my irritation.

Slowly, I opened my eyes, half-expecting to see my younger brother Corey.

However, it quickly dawned on me that Corey wouldn't simply stroll into my room by accident. And then, I spotted the red-haired, green-eyed man standing at the foot of my bed.

He winked at me.

"Morning, sunshine," he greeted.

Then his name clicked in my mind—Fred. He was a recent addition to the Moon Burrow Raven Flock.

Fred wasn't seeking a serious relationship. We were on the same wavelength and had begun a casual arrangement two weeks ago.

The physical aspect wasn't particularly memorable; we were merely using each other to quell our loneliness.

I recognized how pitiful that must sound, but witnessing raven shifters around me finding their fated mates while losing

someone I was interested in to another had dealt a blow to my ego.

I began to feel inadequate, perpetually questioning what I lacked. Was I genuinely unfit for a mate?

As one of the alphas in the flock, my time was devoted to safeguarding our territory alongside the bear shifters of the Grizzly Reapers MC.

I would go to great lengths for my flock mates and for my brother Corey. He once told me that my personality overwhelmed others.

Fred, however, wasn't concerned about that side of me. But then again, Fred was Fred, a laid-back individual who generally went with the flow.

"I take it you're not thrilled to see me," Fred remarked. He was fully dressed by now. "Don't worry, I'll be out of your feathers soon."

"How much did we drink last night?" I inquired.

"We polished off your secret stash, so quite a bit," Fred pointed out.

At his words, I propped myself up and cast the comforter aside. Fred let out a low whistle.

Ignoring his reaction, my mind struggled to form a coherent sentence. My gaze landed on the now-empty liquor cabinet beside my bed.

"Seems like we had a blast, huh?" I muttered.

"For me? Not so much. You kept asking what was wrong with you and why you're still alone. Quite the mood killer. Just so you know, I'm not your therapist," Fred reminded me.

Fred took a deep breath before continuing, "It was fun for a little while, Simon, but it's time for both of us to move on."

I blinked, attempting to process his words. "What? You're breaking up with me?"

Fred approached, and my muscles tensed, unsure of his next move. He merely patted my head.



Scowling, I swatted his hand away. I wasn't a child in need of consolation; I was a grown adult man—albeit one who apparently didn't handle rejection well.

“Honey, hate to break it to you, but we weren't even dating,” Fred informed me. “Dating involves flowers, candlelit dinners, and feeling at ease in each other's company, even in sweats.”

“You've got high standards,” I muttered.

Fred chuckled carelessly. The omega was right; I wasn't truly heartbroken over Fred ending our arrangement. If anything, I might have been angry at myself for my shortcomings in dating and relationships.

“Once you're in a better mood, and if we're both still single, come find me again,” Fred said, giving my arm a friendly pat.

With that, he sauntered out of my room like a whirlwind. I stared at the open door for a moment before dragging myself to the shared bathroom.

After brushing my teeth and enduring a cold shower, I began to feel somewhat improved. Lured by the aroma of freshly prepared pancakes, I made my way to the kitchen.

Corey sat at the table, sipping his coffee, an unfinished plate of food before him. I noticed he had prepared two additional plates as well.

“Fred left,” I reported monotonously.

“I noticed. You can eat his share since you're always famished when you're hungover,” my brother curtly replied.

Taking a seat beside him, I began devouring the food he had cooked. Corey was an exceptional cook. Ever since our parents died in a car accident, leaving just the two of us, he had taken on the responsibility of preparing our meals. I, on the other hand, struggled to even fry an egg. Unfortunately, at the moment, I could barely taste the delicious pancakes and bacon.

Corey, however, wasn't eating at all. He was staring at me with an intense expression.

“What's with you today?” I finally inquired.

“I should be asking you the same thing,” Corey responded, narrowing his gaze. “Simon, you don’t even like Fred, not really. I’m worried about you.”

“You’ll be pleased to know we’ve called it quits,” I said.

“Were you two even dating?” Corey asked, sounding perplexed.

I grunted. After emptying my plate, I reached for the second one.

“Well, it’s over now, so you don’t need to worry about me anymore,” I stated.

“I always worry about you,” Corey replied softly. “You’ve sacrificed so much for me. We’re in a better place now, thanks to you.”

Pushing away the empty plates, I stared at Corey. When we were part of another flock before coming to Moon Burrow, things had been dire. One of the alphas there had persistently pursued Corey. We left not because I couldn’t handle him in a one-on-one confrontation—I could have taken him down. In fact, I had been tempted to, but he happened to be the brother of the lead alpha. Eliminating him would only have placed Corey and me at the top of our former leader’s enemies list.

“Corey, we both chose to join Zack’s flock,” I reminded him.

Our current lead alpha was a significant improvement over our previous one. Zack knew how to lead and genuinely cared for every raven shifter in his care. He was the first Raven King to form an alliance with another shifter group in living memory, solidifying our place in Moon Burrow and making us an indispensable asset.

Without us, the bear shifters of the Grizzly Reapers MC would lack spies and surveillance from above.

“You haven’t been the same since Christian paired up with Ford,” my brother said.

Christian was the recently Changed raven omega I had been crushing on since Zack brought him home.

“I’ll be right as rain,” I told my brother, using my most reassuring voice.

Corey frowned at me, clearly not buying it.

“Anyway, thanks for breakfast. I’m late for morning patrol,” I blurted.

Since Corey did the cooking, it was my job to wash the dishes. After placing the used ones in the dishwasher, I bid Corey goodbye.

Corey was not on patrol duty today, so he’d been working at the bookstore. We both worked at the store owned by Adam, our boss. Adam was also mated to a member of the Grizzly Reapers MC.

While Corey loved books and enjoyed working for Adam, I never thought I would take to the job initially, but it was fun interacting with customers and showing them around the store.

Since I was the only alpha there, security also fell on me on the rare occasion a customer turned rowdy. Since I had morning patrol duty, I told Adam that I would take the afternoon shift today.

I stepped onto the cabin porch, breathing in the morning air. This early in the day, other raven shifters were emerging from their own homes, ready to tackle the day.

Some would head to their respective day jobs while others would patrol the territory like me.

“Morning, Simon,” Christian greeted from next door.

I gave him a somewhat awkward wave. Christian’s little girl held his hand, and she flashed me a gap-tooth grin that made my heart ache a little.

That was supposed to be my little girl. I’d always wanted children. A loving mate. The whole white picket fence deal. Maybe my expectations were too high.

Corey once told me that I was never in love with Christian, just the idea of us and a happy family because our own family had always felt incomplete. Broken in some ways, especially after our parents died, leaving us to fend for ourselves.

Grudgingly, I had to admit Corey was right. I tore my gaze from Christian, his daughter, and his half-fae mate Ford and focused on my duties for today.

I stripped down in a hurry. The morning breeze felt wonderful against my skin. The effects of last night's excessive drinking with Fred started to fade away. A shifter was immune to most poisons, after all.

Closing my eyes, I focused on the change. Black feathers appeared across my chest and shoulders. I shrank in size. Bones broke and organs shifted.

Changing form always hurt, but once I had wings, I soon forgot about the pain. Once my transformation was complete, I zoomed upwards, tucking my wings close to my body.

I was one of the fastest fliers in the flock. Only Corey came in a close second. Flying past familiar treetops, I noticed a bear shifter in animal form below and gave him a croak of greeting.

He answered me with a familiar roar of greeting. If I wasn't mistaken, it was Crash on duty today. I zipped past Crash's zone and flew to the outskirts of the Moon Burrow Woods.

We usually had a massive territory to cover. The bears and ravens didn't just look after the forest, but we also paid attention to whatever was happening in our town.

I flew northward. Zipping through the clear blue skies made me forget my horrible conversation with Fred.

Sometimes, I preferred being in this form as opposed to my human. All the raven cared about was freedom and finding his next meal. He didn't need to worry about the complications of dating.

After making my rounds, I settled on a thick branch of a sturdy and ancient oak tree.

I began preening my feathers, which had gotten a little ruffled during my flight, when I heard a noise. An unmistakable groan of pain.

Had I imagined the sound? It came again, and the next thing I knew, I was airborne once again.

I quickly scanned the terrain, following the source of the distressed calls. Five minutes passed, and I spotted my quarry.

A bloodied lump lay on the edge of the road leading into town. At first, I thought it was a corpse, but then it moved.

The figure crawled, leaving a trail of blood behind him.

He, for the figure was a man, somehow moved himself away from the center of the road and to the side, where no vehicles could accidentally run him over.

I positioned myself on the nearest tree branch, not engaging my target immediately. For all I knew, it could be some sort of trap, or perhaps this poor individual was nothing more than an unfortunate victim.

Something inside me stirred. Something primal and possessive wrapped around my entire body the moment the smell of blood hit my nose.

My inner raven pushed me to investigate, so I did. I landed a few feet from the mystery guy, quite aware of how foolish my action had been.

Avian shifters weren't fighters, at least not in this form. My nose identified this man as a fellow raven shifter, but he wasn't one of ours.

He was also an omega. I relaxed. This injured man was not a threat to me. Tired green eyes met mine looked out from a bruised face and a mop of curly black hair.

My heart beat painfully against my chest. He pushed one bloody, mangled arm towards me, and I found myself discarding my animal form.

The change took a few precious minutes, but I finally kneeled in front of him, completely human.

He gasped softly, staring up at me, his mouth slightly parted. Terror filled those brilliant green eyes.

"I'm not here to hurt you, I'm here to help you," I blurted. "I'm taking you back to my flock. We have a healer."

He gasped as I gingerly picked him up. The mystery stranger with those amazing eyes didn't struggle. He simply lay limp in my arms.

"What's your name?" the omega asked just when I thought he'd fallen unconscious.

I didn't realize I was making my way back to the woods, barefoot and naked, but nothing bothered me, not the branches that whipped at my face or the rough ground underneath.

A sense of urgency filled me. I needed to save this mystery omega, no matter what happened.

"Simon Sims," I told him. I had no clue why I gave him my full name. It seemed important that he knew. "You're safe now."

"Simon, it's nice to meet you. I'm Elliot Beck," Elliot whispered before fainting.

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## ELLIOT

**A**t first, I saw nothing but hazy gray shapes. I had to blink several times before my vision cleared.

Gingerly, I slowly sat up and found myself lying in an unknown bed. I stared at the wooden ceilings and walls uncomprehendingly for a few seconds.

My surroundings reminded me more of an interior of a large cabin than an actual house.

On my left were privacy curtains and another bed. Was I in some kind of clinic then?

Before I could puzzle out where I was, my memory returned to me—Ray’s triumphant smile as he shoved me out of the car and me tumbling out onto the road.

I had a pretty rough landing. Part of me even wondered if the fall would kill me. Who would save Ethan then?

By some miracle, I still lived. I was guessing some kind soul had seen my mangled body on the ground and brought me here, wherever here was.

I curled my hands into fists and let out a frustrated scream. Nothing was going as planned.

Screw Ray for spitefully tossing me out of his car like garbage.

“Do you feel better?” asked a deep, masculine voice.

I had been so preoccupied with my own thoughts, I didn’t even notice someone was in the room.

Following the source of the sound, I looked to my right. Seated on an uncomfortable-looking folding chair was a dark-haired and dark-eyed alpha.

A raven shifter, my nose identified. He had rough but handsome features, certainly not unpleasant, and a warrior's build.

I wouldn't be surprised if he lifted weights in his spare time, boxed, or practiced some kind of martial arts.

I met his gaze, and a strange, needy moan slipped out of my throat. Why had I made that embarrassing sound?

Something about this alpha both unsettled me and fascinated me at the same time.

My inner raven unfurled its wings inside me, curious as a bee. It was a strange reaction.

After my negative experiences with the alphas in Duane's flock, I never wanted to go near one ever again.

My heart started beating erratically as the puzzle pieces fell into place. Fragments of memory came back to me.

I remembered seeing a large raven landing in front of me, then a gorgeous man picking me up carefully, as if I were a fragile treasure he didn't want to break.

"You're safe now," the stranger had whispered in my ear.

Peace filled me after hearing those three words before I lost consciousness. He asked me what my name was and told me his.

"Simon," I whispered.

"Glad you remembered me," Simon said, rising to his feet.

Standing, he looked enormous. His black shirt was stretched tight across his muscular chest. I stilled, suddenly incapable of words.

It occurred to me I was alone with this strange alpha in enemy territory.



Where else could Simon have taken me but the stronghold of the Moon Burrow Ravens?

I wondered what Simon would do next, but he only remained where he was—silently gauging my response.

Did he sense my initial distress and was giving me space? That couldn't be. No alpha was that thoughtful.

“Where did you come from, Elliot?” Simon asked.

Somehow, my name on his lips sounded... nice. I had no other word for it.

Duane and Ray often uttered my name out of irritation or anger, but Simon sounded curious, thoughtful, even.

Oh no, why was I reacting this way to some strange raven I'd never met before? Was I experiencing attraction?

Ethan and I spent our teenage and early adult years moving from place to place.

Neither of us had time for dating or romance. I needed all my wits with me. Simon expected an answer, I reminded myself.

“I don't know. Can't remember,” I answered, lowering my gaze.

I was hoping Simon would buy my performance. Realizing I was wearing a fresh shirt and jeans, I looked around.

On a small table next to the bed, I saw my denim jacket alongside my phone and wallet. I expelled a sigh of relief.

The knife, I thought with some panic. Did they somehow see the knife, or perhaps confiscate it?

Look for it later, I reminded myself, once Simon was gone.

“You must've hit your head pretty hard,” Simon said. “Can you recall how you came to be in that state I found you?”

“Someone threw me out of a moving car,” I blurted, unthinkingly.

Simon approached the bed and sat on the edge, his expression intense and admittedly a little frightening.

“There’s no need to be scared of me, Elliot. I’ll never hurt you,” Simon said.

He hesitated, then reached for my hand. I didn’t know what made me reach out for it. Tiny scratches lined my fingers, my entire arm.

I silently gauged the state of my body, surprised all I had were superficial wounds.

Then I remembered Simon mentioning his flock had a healer, which was incredibly rare.

Why would Simon and his flock patch up an outsider like me?

“Because you needed help,” Simon simply answered, and I realized I had uttered that question out loud.

I flushed, tentatively pulling my fingers from his. Simon didn’t reach for me again. A pity.

Wait. I was enjoying the comfort offered by a stranger far too much. This alpha was dangerous, I thought dully.

Sure, Simon was physically imposing, but it wasn’t his strength I feared. It was the way I reacted when I was in the same room with him.

“Were you serious earlier? Someone really pushed you out of a car? Micah said you had older bruises on your body...” Simon trailed off.

Anger poured off him in waves. His aura should’ve scared me, but it didn’t. With this kind of strength, Simon could be the leader of his own flock.

Was there a reason why he’d follow someone else’s orders? So many questions assailed me. Did Simon have a family? A boyfriend? What were his likes and dislikes?

Stop it, I reminded myself.

I didn’t answer him right away, and an awkward silence stretched between us. My inner raven told me to tell Simon the truth.

He seemed to believe Simon would understand, but I silenced him. Right now, I had to keep my cards close to my chest.

I wasn't here to make friends. If Simon found out I was assigned to put a knife in his lead alpha's chest, then it was game over.

"Simon, is our guest finally awake?" someone asked.

Another male alpha entered the room. Simon abruptly rose to his feet, looking a little tense. I studied the newcomer.

He had black hair and blue eyes. The alpha wasn't as muscular as Simon. He had a leaner build. My heart hammered.

I had a feeling about who this was. Duane didn't just give me a description of Zackary Jones, but also showed me a picture of him from five years ago.

Lady Luck must be on my side because I had finally come face to face with my intended target.

Unlike Simon's earlier angry outburst, Zack's energy was subtle in comparison. I had trouble reading him at all, and that gave me pause.

Duane used force to remind the other weaker members of his flock why he was the king.

Zack appeared to be a different type of leader. Zack studied me thoughtfully, and I looked away first.

"His name is Elliot," Simon answered.

He'd taken a more deferential tone with Zack. I studied Simon, wondering what Zack had done to merit such respect from Simon.

"We were just started talking," Simon added. "His memory is a little foggy."

"I don't need a stranger who I just met to speak on my behalf, thank you," I said rather curtly.

Simon looked at me for a moment. He grunted, looking embarrassed. It was almost endearing. My anger quickly evaporated.

"It won't happen again," Simon said. "Sorry."

Stunned that an alpha had apologized, I was at a loss for words yet again.

“Well, aren’t you two cute,” Zack remarked.

“Have you told Venom about Elliot’s situation?” Simon asked.

“Yes, for now, we agreed he could stay here as our guest until he’s fully recovered,” Zack answered.

Venom was the monstrous leader of the Grizzly Reapers MC. Avoid him at all costs. I remembered Duane telling me that.

I shuddered unthinkingly and saw Simon flash me a concerned look.

He must have misinterpreted my reaction because Simon said, “Whoever’s after you won’t find you here, Elliot. No one and nothing can harm you while you’re under our protection.”

“So you’ll take personal responsibility for Elliot?” Zack asked Simon.

“Leave him to me,” Simon said.

Zack then addressed me. “No offense, but I don’t know you or your situation. It’s my job to look after my ravens.”

“I understand,” I said.

Simon bristled at Zack’s words but didn’t comment on it.

I asked, “What does guest status imply?”

“Simon will answer any questions you might have. I’m late for a meeting. It’s nice to meet you, Elliot. Perhaps once I’m less busy, we can talk more,” Zack said.

“I’d like that,” I blurted.

Zack gave me a nod before exiting the room. I looked at Simon, and I noticed flecks of gold appeared in his dark brown eyes, a sign his inner raven was peeking out.

He had curved his lips downwards at Zack’s departure and I wondered what I had missed.

“So what does it mean to be your guest?” I gently prodded.

“You are free to explore, but certain places in the compound are forbidden to you, unless you have an escort,” Simon said.

He told me about the structures in the compound, about the log house where the ravens ate and had meetings.

They even had fields where they grew their food. This was too easy, I thought in desperation.

Simon should have more common sense than this.

“A self-sustaining community?” I asked, suitably impressed.

Simon nodded.

“Our situation is unique because we live alongside a clan of bear shifters,” Simon explained. “This is Zack’s second flock. Corey and I are newer recruits. Corey’s my younger brother.”

“What happened to his first flock?” I asked, curious.

“Rogue wolves murdered half of his people,” Simon answered grimly.

“Is it safe to be telling me all this information?” I joked and cursed myself for asking such a suspicious question.

Simon shrugged, as if it didn’t bother him.

“It’s common knowledge and besides, my raven senses you’re trustworthy,” Simon pointed out.

He sees me as a victim, I thought sourly. I had been placed in an advantageous situation. I ought to be pleased, but I wasn’t.

It felt wrong to be taking advantage of Simon’s trust and his flock’s generosity.

“I can show you around once you’re feeling better,” Simon suggested.

“I might take you up on that offer,” I answered.

“So the stray is awake,” said a grumpy voice.

A slender, golden-haired and brown-eyed man in his mid-twenties appeared.

He came from upstairs. I thought I heard footsteps. So this clinic had a second floor.

“Move aside, you big lug, I need to check on his injuries,” the gruff man said. Simon didn’t argue. He stepped away.

“That’s Micah, our healer. This is his clinic, by the way. Everyone here does their best not to piss him off,” Simon told me in a lighthearted voice.

Micah lifted my shirt without ceremony, and I batted his hands. Micah shot me a look of warning and I stilled, remembering he was just doing his job.

Micah’s examination was impersonal. He asked me a few curt questions regarding my health and injuries, but that was it.

He didn’t bother with intrusive questions. Maybe that was Simon’s job.

“Babe, what’s taking you?” came another voice.

Boy, did I have a surprising number of visitors today. At this rate, I wouldn’t be able to keep up remembering everyone’s names.

I froze when I saw the huge and inked shifter walking towards us. Grizzly shifter, I thought with some alarm.

“That’s just Greed, Micah’s mate. They live in the apartment upstairs,” Simon told me. “Greed, you’re scaring Elliot. Go away.”

The bear shifter gave me a disinterested look, then shrugged.

To Micah, he said, “I’ll be waiting upstairs then.”

“You do that,” Micah said, shooing him, but I didn’t miss the note of affection in his voice.

The bear shifter left and I could breathe a little easier again. Trying anything here in Micah’s clinic was definitely foolish.

I needed to find a way to get Zack alone in a room. To do that, I needed Simon.

Why did the thought of getting close to him just to fulfill my assignment fill me with such awful self-loathing and dread?

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## SIMON

“I heard about the stray you found,” Corey remarked to me at work the following day.

By the time I came home from my shift yesterday, my brother had already been asleep. Currently, we were both having lunch in the employee break room.

Since we both wanted to save money, we started bringing our own lunch to work.

Corey made us both BLT sandwiches today. They were better than ones from a nearby sandwich store, anyway.

“Stray? You’ve been talking to Micah, I’m guessing?” I asked.

“Micah thinks there’s something off about him,” Corey admitted. “And he also mentioned you might be a little obsessed with our guest.”

“Micah’s always been suspicious of anyone new. Remember how cold he’d been initially to Fred?” I asked with a scoff. “Obsessed is a strong word, and I can take care of myself.”

“What’s he like?” Corey asked.

I wolfed down my lunch in a few bites and told him what little I knew about Elliot.

“So basically, you don’t know a lot about him,” Corey concluded.

“I’m showing Elliot around the compound after work. A walk in the woods could also do him some good. Maybe he’d loosen up by then,” I told Corey.

Corey bit on his lower lip, then finally told me what was on his mind.

“Just be careful, Simon. I know how you get when you feel responsible for something or someone. Remember that baby hawk you nursed back to health when we were kids?”

“I do,” I said, wondering why Corey brought that memory up all of a sudden.

“In the end, that hawk’s mother found you and left you with scratches on your face and arms,” Corey reminded me unhelpfully.

“What does that old story have to do with Elliot?” I demanded.

“I just don’t want you to grow too attached to a complete stranger you just met. We don’t know his story or who’s after him,” Corey said.

My brother was being overprotective, as usual. I grunted in annoyance and opened a bag of chips we were supposed to share.

Since Corey was being unreasonable, I ate it all. A childish move, but I was an adult capable of making my own choices and deciding who to trust.

Corey wasn’t there when I found Elliot, half dead and covered in blood, extending his hand towards me like I was his only source of salvation.

It felt good to be needed, even for a little while. Maybe that was loneliness talking, but I didn’t care.

I was drawn to Elliot—the stray, as Micah and Corey called him, in ways I didn’t quite understand yet.

Fate must’ve dropped Elliot in my path for a good reason.

“You’re wrong about Elliot,” I eventually told my brother.

Checking my wristwatch, I was glad to see our lunch break was almost over. Just a few more hours and I could head home and see Elliot again.

Dang, but I couldn’t remember the last time I’d been this excited. After my brief visit yesterday, Micah had disallowed



anyone else from seeing Elliot.

He insisted the patient needed to rest. I supposed Micah had a point, but I was still impatient.

“Simon, I just want what’s best for you. I don’t want to see you get hurt,” Corey said.

“I don’t hurt easily,” I told my brother.

Corey raised one eyebrow. “For all your toughness and bravado, I know you better than you think, big brother. You can be really sensitive sometimes.”

Stung by that remark, I ignored Corey for the rest of our shift, only speaking to him unless it was work-related.

Since we didn’t have a lot of customers, I approached Adam during closing time. Our regular cashier had called in sick today, so Adam filled in.

“Adam, do you mind if I leave early today?” I asked my boss.

“Sure, go ahead. Corey and I can lock up.” Adam finally looked up from his computer. “Let me guess, you have a date?”

“Nothing like that,” I said quickly.

Despite my conversation with Corey during lunch, I suspected my brother had nothing to worry about.

I might have developed some strange attachment to Elliot, but he might not feel the same way.

I’d seen the way Elliot had looked at Zack when my lead alpha was leaving the clinic.

The hungry and desperate expression on his face looked a little unnatural. But who was I to judge who liked who?

Leaving the bookstore in Adam and Corey’s very capable hands, I drove back home. Elliot occupied my thoughts the entire time.

I thought of my old crush. If I pursued Christian more intently, would he have chosen me instead of Ford?

“That would never happen,” I muttered under my breath.

I'd seen the way those two lovebirds looked at each other. The moment Christian laid eyes on his half-fae mate, he was lost to me forever.

What if I lost Elliot to another? The thought made my raven angsty, even a little angry.

Besides, Zack wasn't available. Elliot had to know that.

Forty minutes thanks to a little traffic on the main road, I finally arrived at the compound. I got out and suddenly wondered if I should've gotten Elliot something.

Flowers, maybe some food? If there was one thing I was ill-prepared for, it was navigating the dating waters.

I spent the last five years doing my best to shield my brother from the unwanted attention of the alphas in our old flock.

Romance had never been on my agenda. Now that Corey and I had finally put down roots in Moon Burrow, I could focus on the other aspects of my personal life.

Was Elliot part of my future? I could only wait and see. Screwing up was not an option and that reminder only ramped up the pressure.

I bumped into Fred on my way to Micah's clinic.

"Hey, Simon, did you just come back from your shift? Want to have dinner together?" Fred asked.

I peered over his shoulder. The door to the clinic was only a few feet away.

"I'm free this evening," Fred added, and I focused on his face.

"Sorry, Fred. I have other plans and didn't you just break up with me?" I asked.

Fred placed a hand on my chest. "I've changed my mind. You seem different today. Less moody."

"Stop touching him."

I spotted Elliot standing by the front door. He had uttered those words, I thought with some surprise.

Had Elliot been waiting for me? Was he eavesdropping on my conversation with Fred?

Micah or my brother probably loaned him some clothes, because he was wearing jeans, sneakers, and a long-sleeved red shirt that fit him better.

Those three were around the same build and height. Elliot was out of breath when he planted himself by my side.

Fred eyed him curiously and said, "You're the stray Simon picked up."

"Why does everyone keep calling me that?" Elliot demanded. "Who are you? Simon, is he your boyfriend?"

Elliot looked stricken, then embarrassed by his question. His cheeks and neck turned an endearing shade of pink. I hadn't known Elliot long, but shyness wasn't a word to describe him.

Fred looked thoughtful. "No, Simon's single and available," Fred said. He gave me a wink. "I'll be on my way."

Fred whistled under his breath as he walked away.

"I don't understand," Elliot said slowly. "What made me say those embarrassing words? Why did I get jealous when I saw the two of you talking?"

"You say what's on your mind, do you?" I asked.

"My brother always said I was blunt," Elliot said. He mentioned a brother.

Finally, the first actual truth out of him. We were getting somewhere, I thought.

"I like it," I told him.

Elliot pretended to cough and quickly looked elsewhere.

"Elliot," came Micah's annoyed voice.

The healer emerged from the clinic, looking mad as a hornet.

Micah continued, "I haven't cleared you. Come back here. I need to do another check-up before you can leave with Simon. It won't take long."

Elliot flashed me an apologetic look, then returned inside. I followed him in. True to Micah's word, he was done in five minutes.

"No vigorous activities and rest when you feel a little dizzy or tired." Micah directed those words to me.

"Understood," I told Micah. "I'll make sure he won't overexert himself."

"Now shoo. I'm closing the clinic early. It's date night," Micah explained.

"Well, have fun," I said.

Inwardly, I grimaced. Micah and Greed could be a little loud upstairs, especially when it was date night.

Once we were outside again, I showed Elliot around the compound. There wasn't much ground to cover.

I led him to the residential area, then the planting fields. Finally, we ended up at the log house and eating hall to get some grub.

Raven shifters were curious by nature, so it didn't surprise me when a couple of my flock mates made their way to our table and introduced themselves.

I studied Elliot's reaction. He seemed overwhelmed by all the attention.

"If you need someone to show you around town, you can call me. Wait, let me give you my number," Julian was saying.

Elliot and he exchanged numbers.

"If Elliot needs to do some shopping in town, I'll take him," I said firmly.

Axel, Julian's bear shifter mate, was standing next to him and had overheard me talking. Axel whistled.

"Looks like Simon's got that covered, Julian," Axel told his mate.

I gave him a thankful nod. Axel gently steered his mate back to their own table, where another couple was keeping an eye

on their rowdy son.

“Is it always like this?” Elliot asked softly.

He looked around the noisy and crowded eating hall.

“You mean noisy? Yeah, most of the time,” I answered.

“I see. This is what a real functioning flock should look like.”

At Elliot’s odd comment, I frowned.

“I take it you didn’t have the best experience with your own flock?” I asked.

He shook his head, and I thought he’d close up again. Elliot had been a little evasive during dinner, always deflecting when I asked him a personal question.

Maybe meeting my other flock mates had convinced Elliot that he was safe. That no one here intended to harm him.

“The alphas in my flock are bullies. They prey on the weak, because they think it’s their right,” Elliot said furiously.

He stabbed his fork into his baked potato, then took a big bite. The tight and angry lines on his face hadn’t disappeared.

His mouth was a firm line, and I was tempted to lean over, to kiss him just to see how he tasted.

Immediately, I cut that line of thought. Elliot just confessed something private to me. Something he held close to his heart.

I didn’t dare break his trust, not now when it was so fragile to begin with. Romancing him could wait.

Right now, what Elliot needed was a friend, or at the very least, a good listener. I could be that for him.

“Corey and I were in a flock like that,” I said.

If I opened up a little to Elliot, maybe he would do the same.

“Right,” Elliot answered, blinking. He no longer looked intense. “You mentioned you and your brother were recent additions to the Moon Burrow Flock.”

“That’s right. We already broke off from our old flock when we met up with Zack,” I explained.

“Speaking of Zack, where is he?” Elliot said. He looked around the dining hall. The abrupt change in topic made me blink. Elliot added, “I haven’t seen him.”

The obvious interest in his voice dampened my mood.

“Zack won’t be back until tomorrow. He met up with some potential new recruits for the flock,” I explained. “If you’re finished with your plate, let’s head to the woods for a walk. I feel full. How about you?”

“Yeah, I’m stuffed. I haven’t eaten this well in what feels like forever.” Elliot rubbed his stomach in appreciation.

I noticed every morsel on his plate was gone. Not for the first time, I wondered how awful it had been for him in his flock.

Were they starving him? Raw rage spiked through me without warning.

His flock treated him like crap. No wonder Elliot was so defensive, so tightly wound up, that he was afraid to trust anyone.

Unthinkingly, I reached for his hand across the table, despite deciding earlier that it was probably better to keep my distance.

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ELLIOT

Normally, another alpha's touch would repulse me, but Simon's hand was big and warm, lined with rough calluses from hard work. I let out a long exhale.

A look of hesitation crossed Simon's handsome face, as if he immediately regretted his bold decision.

He pulled his hand back, and I was too cowardly to ask him to touch me again.

"Let's go for that walk," I hastily said, rising to my feet.

Mild dizziness swamped me. I had to hold on to the table for balance. Simon placed a firm hand on my shoulder.

Two raven shifters seated at a nearby table gave me concerned looks. I focused on the dining hall exit, unused to people fussing over me.

In Duane's flock, it was every raven for himself or herself. I didn't belong here. Simon's flock mates had been nothing but welcoming and friendly to me.

They didn't know my real purpose. I couldn't linger in this warm-lit hall full of laughter and genuine smiles a second longer.

These ravens shouldn't trust me in the first place. They didn't know what it felt like, living every single second of their lives in perpetual fear.

Then I remembered Simon telling me that rogue wolves had massacred the original members of the flock.

Guilt curled in my insides. What would happen to these folks if I completed my mission?

Without a capable lead alpha at the head, the flock would break apart and scatter.

I would be responsible for leaving everyone there homeless or lost. Nausea hit me.

My dizziness took a turn for the worse. My chest constricted, making it hard to draw air into my lungs.

I took a deep breath and tried to calm down. You're doing this for Ethan, I reminded myself.

"Elliot, if you're not feeling well, let me take you back to the clinic," Simon suggested.

His hand was still on my shoulder, steadying me. Simon would catch me if I fell, I knew that inwardly.

Simon searched my eyes, and I couldn't give him an answer.

How could this alpha be so impossibly sweet to me, when he hardly knew me? I considered Simon's words.

If we returned to the clinic, I would make no progress in my mission. No thanks.

I made a face and Simon flashed me a small smile.

"Okay, we'll walk a little, but if you've reached your limit, that's it for the night," Simon said.

"Fine," I answered.

We left the eating hall, much to my relief. Once outdoors, I shut my eyes, enjoying the cool night breeze on my face.

"Thanks. I know I'm being selfish," I murmured to Simon.

I opened my eyes again, only to find Simon gazing at me intently, his expression hard to decipher.

Was Simon starting to get a little suspicious of me? My heart beat a little faster.

Panic made me reach for his hand. Simon blinked, losing some of the initial intensity on his face.



He softened, and I had a feeling this alpha seldom showed this softer side of himself to just anyone. That thought filled my inner raven with pleasure.

It didn't last long. We can't get too attached to him, I reminded my animal. The raven fell silent, not bothering to give me a response.

Hand-in-hand, Simon led me out of the compound and into the woods beyond. I kept looking down, not wanting to trip on my feet.

Simon matched his pace to mine. A sweet thing to do, I decided. All around me, the forest came alive.

The smell of oak and evergreen tickled my nose. An owl hooted nearby. I thought I spied a family of foxes taking refuge in a small cave for the night.

I craned my head and looked upwards, marveling at the pale crescent moon blanketed by a net of silver stars in the sky.

It was a little chilly tonight. My fingers would've gotten cold, but thankfully, holding Simon's hand provided me with the warmth I needed.

"So beautiful," I said without thinking. "Where I'm from, the night sky is never this clear."

"Where you're from?" Simon prodded.

He'd been patient with me since yesterday, I thought. Simon never pushed me or pressured me to tell him about my circumstances.

Despite the fact I hardly knew him, my raven seemed to trust him without reserve. A strange feeling, but my raven had never led me astray before.

You're just using him to get to Zack, said an ugly voice in my head. I winced, then recalled Simon's question.

"A town close to the city," I answered, intentionally being vague.

"Follow me. I'll take you to a better spot," Simon said.

Simon was suddenly filled with an urgency I didn't understand. He picked up the pace but still hadn't let go of my hand.

Simon guided me carefully past upraised tree roots and rocky paths. We started to climb, but Simon made sure I took mini breaks in between.

I had never been an outdoorsy kind of person. Exercise involved a quick jog or walk around the garden paths of the Salt Stone Flock House.

By the time we arrived at the summit, I was panting. I released Simon's hand so I could catch my breath.

I was about to ask him if coming here was really worth all that effort, but my retort died when I looked up and saw the view.

Simon had taken me to a small hill overlooking the forest. I leaned on Simon a little as I took in the forest beneath us.

"Those bright lights in the distance. That's the town?" I asked him.

"That's right," Simon said. "You know that Zack has a mate, right?"

"What?" I asked, blinking at him a few times.

Duane had neglected to tell me that very important detail.

"That shocked expression on your face..." Simon trailed off, suddenly looking closed-off. "You really have a thing for him, huh?"

"Zack? Not at all," I blurted.

Simon stood in front of me, momentarily blocking the splendid view. I was aware of him, all six-foot-four of him. Like this, the differences in our height and build grew apparent.

Simon was built like a brick wall, whereas a strong wind could easily blow away my scrawny figure.

Simon's presence didn't fill me with fear. My reaction to him differed from the alpha bullies in Duane's flock.

“Elliot, you don’t have to lie to me. I’ve seen the way you’ve looked at my lead alpha, even if it was just for a moment. You’ve asked me about Zack a few times as well,” Simon pointed.

Simon was more observant than I gave him credit for.

“I’m not interested in Zack that way,” I blurted.

I suddenly forgot why I was planted in Moon Burrow. All that mattered was trying to convince Simon it was all a misunderstanding.

“I get why you’d been interested in Zack,” Simon continued, as if he didn’t believe me at all. “Some of the newer flock members have a crush on him. Zack’s always level-headed and —”

I cut him off by placing a finger to his lips. Simon’s gold-flecked eyes drank me down, and I swallowed, aware both his animal half and his human half were present.

He was silently daring me to make the first move.

“I don’t care about Zack,” I whispered.

My heart galloped in my chest, and my mouth suddenly felt dry. Gripping both of Simon’s shoulders, I stood on tiptoe and kissed him.

I had only kissed one guy in my entire life. I had given a chaste kiss to my nervous prom date at the end of an awkward evening.

Lance Miller later told me it was like kissing a frog. I’d taken offense and punched him in the face. We never spoke to each other after that.

At first, I was concerned Simon would think me a clumsy and inexperienced kisser, but I didn’t need to worry at all.

Simon speared his fingers through my hair and kissed me back. My eyes widened. Simon didn’t hold back at all.

He kissed me, all roughness and bite. I liked it far too much. It seemed to go on forever, but I didn’t mind one bit.

Kissing under the moonlit sky on a private little hill with a splendid view, how romantic could this get?

Then I remembered I wasn't here to fall in love. Simon must've sensed my hesitation because he pulled away.

"No good?" Simon asked me.

"Better than fine," I whispered. "But if this continues, I'm scared of where it will lead."

Simon nodded. He pulled away, respecting my decision. A growl came from the nearby bushes and I jumped.

When a large and furry brown shape emerged, Simon planted himself in front of me automatically, like some chivalrous white knight.

The tension in his shoulders soon disappeared. Did he know the very large and very intimidating grizzly standing a few paces from us?

"Crash, it's just you," Simon said, visibly relaxing.

The grizzly shifter plopped on the ground and started licking his left paw. It was clear he wasn't leaving. Simon sighed, then tugged at my hand.

"We're leaving?" I asked him.

"Yeah, Crash probably wants to brood. This spot's not exactly a secret," Simon said.

"Brood?" I asked.

The snarl Crash made sounded more like an irritated whine than a warning. I let out a long breath.

Since Simon considered this grizzly shifter a friend, he was no threat to us.

The hike downhill proved to be more tiring than the climb uphill. Halfway through, I wheezed, bent over.

Simon put his hands on my waist and, without warning, hefted me in his arms like I didn't weigh a thing.

"Hey, what are you doing?" I demanded.

I struggled for only a moment. Simon's firm hands on my body told me he wouldn't drop me.

"That's enough exercise for the night," Simon said. A guilty expression crossed his face. "I shouldn't have taken you up here."

"Are you kidding? I loved it," I exclaimed. "Wait until I tell Ethan I actually hiked a mountain. He'd be so surprised."

"A hill and a small one at that," Simon corrected. He frowned. "Who's Ethan?"

"My brother," I answered.

I buried my face into Simon's muscled chest, waiting for his next question, but it never came.

With me hitching a ride in Simon's arms, the walk back to the compound took half the time.

The next thing I knew, Simon was setting me down. We were standing right outside Micah's clinic.

The lights were out on the first floor, but I bet there was plenty of noise and activity from upstairs.

I didn't want Simon to leave, but that was a selfish thought.

"Once Zack returns, I'll tell him you want to talk to him," Simon said.

"Do you think I can be a good fit for your flock?" I asked.

I immediately hated myself for uttering those words.

Simon let out a breath. "So that's the reason you want a meeting with Zack? You want to join our flock?"

I hung my head in shame and nodded. For some reason, I couldn't bear to look Simon in the eyes after I outright lied to him.

Remember Ethan, I kept telling myself. Repeating the mantra silently in my head only made me feel a thousand times worse.

"I know I'm not worthy," I said quickly. "You guys hardly know me and—"

Simon silenced me with another kiss. This one was slow and tender. Butterflies fluttered in my stomach.

Unthinkingly, I fisted his shirt. I didn't want Simon to break away from me anytime soon.

"Thank you," I finally said after what felt like a beautiful eternity later. "For agreeing to speak to Zack on my behalf."

"There's also something in it for me," Simon said.

I blinked at him rather cluelessly.

"If you join our flock, then that would be a win," Simon said.

He touched my cheek, and I leaned into his hand, sighing like a needy kitten.

Realizing what I was doing, I drew back, appalled. Why was it when Simon was nearby, I had a tendency to drop all my shields?

"Have a good evening, Elliot," Simon said, smiling. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Sweet dreams, Simon," I whispered.

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## ELLIOT/ SIMON

### E LLIOT

I WOKE UP AND FOUND DROOL ON MY PILLOW AND THE morning sun on my face. Someone cleared their throat. Embarrassed, I wiped my mouth with my shirtsleeve.

Micah was puttering around the clinic, so it wasn't him who made that sound. Finally, I focused on the tall, slender omega who shared a physical resemblance to my Simon.

My Simon? Since when have I started calling him that? Simon wasn't my anything. The sooner I finished this gruesome task, the better.

I'd finally be able to free Ethan. Nothing else mattered.

"I haven't had the chance to introduce myself because I've been pulling double shifts lately. I'm Corey, Simon's younger brother," Corey introduced.

He approached the bed. I sat up, not completely awake. When Corey extended his hand, I stared at it cluelessly for a few seconds, then remembered my manners.

I shook it. Corey's handshake was firm. He gave me an assessing look, and I felt like was on display or something.

"Did I wake you? I didn't mean to," Corey said, releasing my hand.

“I was dreaming of Simon,” I muttered unthinkingly. I flushed, wishing I could take back my words.

Corey’s expression hardened, but it was only for a fraction of a second. I thought I had imagined it. Corey has every right to be protective of his older brother, I reminded myself.

“My brother’s a good guy,” Corey stated. “He’s grown attached to you since he found you, and that scares me a little.”

“There’s nothing between us,” I muttered. An obvious lie, and even Corey didn’t seem to buy it.

“If you hurt Simon, you’ll have to deal with me,” Corey said.

I met his gaze unflinchingly. It was sweet. Corey reminded me a little of myself.

“Warning noted,” I answered. “And hurting him is the last thing I want to do.”

“That the first real honest sentence I’ve heard from you,” Corey said. “I’m glad we’re on the same page.”

“Simon and you are pretty close, huh?” I couldn’t help but remark.

“Before we joined the Moon Burrow Flock, it was just Simon and me. He always looked after me and he even sacrificed his personal happiness,” Corey explained.

“Simon sounds like my own brother. My omega dad single-handedly raised us, but after he died of cancer, Ethan had to step up,” I said.

I had no idea what came over me. Why would I reveal an important piece of personal information to someone who wasn’t Simon?

“So we’re more alike than I could ever imagine,” Corey said, sounding surprised.

Here was another guy who understood what Ethan and I had gone through. I felt a strange and unexplainable kinship with Corey.



If the circumstances were different, we could have been good friends. The thought felt like a dagger to my heart.

“Forget what I said just now,” I blurted.

“Where’s Ethan now?” Corey asked.

“It’s complicated and I don’t want to talk about it. Sorry,” I said. Corey nodded.

“I’m late for work. It’s nice to meet you, Elliot,” Corey said. “Let’s have coffee sometime. Get to know each other better.”

“Same here,” I grumbled. “Coffee sounds great.”

The last bit had been a lie. I would be long gone before our promised coffee date. I watched Corey’s retreating back for a few seconds, then excused myself.

Micah hardly paid me attention. He was at his desk, eyes glued to his laptop. I hurried to the clinic’s only bathroom.

After quickly locking the door behind me, I controlled my rapid breathing.

When I accepted this job, I thought it would be easy. Getting to know the raven shifters of Simon’s flock was an added complication I didn’t need.

In Duane’s Flock, a stink of permanent fear and oppression permeated the flock house. Here, it was the exact opposite.

By the time you’re done, everyone in the Moon Burrow Flock will hate your guts, I reminded myself.

Something vibrated in my left pocket of my jeans. It took me a second to realize it was my cellphone. I pulled it out and seeing it was an email from Duane, my stomach dropped.

Knowing I needed to sit for whatever this was, I pulled the toilet lid down and sat. With trembling fingers, I opened Duane’s email. The title simply said ‘Open Me’.

The email itself had no single line of text, just a short video attached.

I pressed play, quickly remembering to mute the video because I didn’t want anyone to overhear me, especially not

Micah.

The raven healer had been nothing but professional, albeit a little curt with me. I had a feeling he wanted me to get better so I could leave soon.

I might have succeeded in fooling some of Simon's flock mates into thinking I was a poor and unfortunate victim of an attack, but there were exceptions like Corey and Micah.

The video was dark and grainy. I instantly recognized the underground prison cell in the basement of the Salt Stone Flock House.

My insides twisted as the individual holding the shaky camera zoomed in on Ethan's bloodstained and bruised face.

My brother opened his mouth, revealing missing teeth. I could almost imagine the agonizing shriek he made and grimaced.

Then the camera zoomed back out, showing the rest of Ethan's broken body. The video abruptly ended.

I buried my hands in my tear-filled face. How much more torture could Ethan take before his body or his mind gave up on him?

It seemed unfair I was safe and well-taken care of by strangers in Moon Burrow while Ethan continually suffered.

"It has to happen soon," I whispered to myself.

Duane probably wanted an update, which was why he sent that video. I took a few minutes to compose myself, then dialed Duane's number.

"Elliot," Duane drawled. "Ray and I were beginning to wonder when we would hear from you."

"Ray pushed me out of a moving vehicle. I just woke up from a coma," I said flatly.

"What? Ray neglected to tell me that," Duane said. He sounded irritated.

"Spare me the fake concern, Duane," I said. "The plan worked. One of the Moon Burrow Ravens saw my half-dead body on the road and took me back to their territory."

Duane didn't need to know Simon's flock had a healer. I lied about my injuries to buy Ethan more time. It was the only thing I could do.

"Stop what you're doing to Ethan. I'll fulfill the end of our bargain," I said.

"Don't make promises you can't keep, Elliot. I need details. Are you a prisoner? But if they didn't confiscate your phone, then that means you're a guest of some sort?" Duane pressed.

"I told them I needed to call someone." More lies, but what did it matter now?

"Have you seen your target? Spoken to him?" Duane asked.

"I won't tell you anything until you promise to take it easy on Ethan. He needs medical attention," I pointed out. "If he dies, then no deal."

Duane let out a long-suffering sigh. "You're not in a position to bargain, Elliot."

"Am I not? I'm right where you want me. In fact, I'm scheduled to have a personal meeting with Zack any day now. He's currently out of town, but he'll be back soon," I said.

"You're doing better than I thought, considering the circumstances. Fine. I'll send for a doctor to look at Ethan. Meanwhile, I need constant updates," Duane said.

"I need more time. They don't trust me 100% yet," I told him.

"Fine, you have it, but if you're playing me in some way then the deal is off. Your brother's life is forfeit," Duane reminded me.

"Like I said, I'll do it. After the deed is done," I began, then swallowed. Duane was far away, but I didn't want him to hear any hesitation from my tone of voice. "How will I get out?"

"Ray will pick you up," Duane said.

"Okay, I need to end this call soon. Otherwise, they'll be suspicious. I'm in a bathroom right now," I said.

Silence on the other end. I looked at my screen. I was unsurprised Duane cut the call first. When a knock came on

the bathroom door, I jumped.

“Elliot? Are you done? I need to use the bathroom,” came Micah’s grumpy voice.

“Are you feeling alright, Elliot?” That was Simon.

After tucking my phone, I flushed the toilet, washed my hands, then opened the door. I took a deep breath, then faced the music.

I hated to be pushy, but now was a good time to remind Simon about that meeting he promised me.

\* \* \*

## **SIMON**

WHEN ELLIOT EMERGED FROM THE BATHROOM, HE LOOKED pale and shaky. Micah nudged his way past Elliot, and I automatically pressed a hand to Elliot’s forehead.

He quickly reached for my hand and set it down. I noticed he hadn’t let go of my fingers. Somehow, that pleased my inner raven.

We were on a good track, I thought to myself. Yesterday’s walk in the woods had changed something between us.

“What are you doing?” Elliot asked, finally releasing my fingers.

“Checking if you have a fever. You don’t look too well,” I said. “Do you want to lie back down?”

“I’m sick of lying down in bed,” Elliot said. “Why are you here? Shouldn’t you be working at the bookstore?”

“I took the afternoon shift. I thought I could play tour guide and show you around town,” I said.

Elliot bit his lower lip, looking undecided.

“Are you asking me out on a date?” Elliot asked. “Or are you just being friendly?”

Elliot genuinely seemed confused, so I rested my hands on his shoulders. He suddenly looked wary, as if he wasn't sure what I'd do next.

Elliot's been through a lot, I reminded myself. One of the unsavory alphas in his flock had been responsible for pushing him out of a car and leaving him as roadkill.

Anger surged through me at that reminder of how I found Elliot, then I forced myself to calm down.

Ever since I was a kid, I had trouble expressing myself. Elliot might read my emotions on my face and come to the wrong conclusion.

I wished I were more eloquent, like my brother, or suave, like Zack. Thad always wore a smile or laughed when Zack smiled at him or told him a lame joke only the two of them seemed to get.

That was the kind of relationship I wanted with Elliot. No two relationships are alike, I reminded myself.

Navigating the waters with Elliot wouldn't be easy. I knew that from the get-go, but couldn't fate give me a break every once in a while?

"You're angry," Elliot whispered.

"Just thinking about the jerk who hurt you before you came to us," I explained quickly.

I continued, "And just to clear things up between us, I'm interested in you, Elliot. Not as a friend, but as a prospective mate."

If possible, Elliot turned sheet-white at those words. I silently wished I had used another substitute word instead of mate.

Boyfriend or lover seemed like a safer option. This was what Corey meant about me coming on a little too strongly sometimes.

"I can't be your mate," Elliot blurted.

For a second, the old hurt returned. Then I realized Elliot had muttered those words more to himself than to me.

Elliot continued, "I have no right to be anyone's mate."

"How can you say that?" I demanded. "Who told you those words?"

"Simon, you've been nothing but good to me. Any omega would be lucky to be yours, but you know nothing about me or what I'm capable of," Elliot said.

I rested a hand against his cheek. Elliot painfully shut his eyes for a few moments and trembled slightly.

Perfect. I said the wrong words yet again.

Just when I thought I had this romance and dating thing in the bag, it occurred to me I didn't know what the heck I was doing.

The clinic door opened. Not now, I thought in annoyance. I had a feeling Micah was taking his time in the bathroom because he sensed Elliot and I were having an important conversation.

The last person I wanted to interrupt us appeared. Zack looked like he had just gotten back from his trip. He smelled like the road, greasy fast food, and his clothes looked well-traveled.

"I wanted to check on our guest," Zack began.

I let out a groan, and Zack flashed me a curious look. Zack added, "Maybe I should come back another time."

"Wait," Elliot began, then he looked at me expectantly.

Right. I promised him I'd guarantee him a meeting with Zack. I guess we will continue our conversation another time.

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## ELLIOT

The look of disappointment on Simon's face pierced me to the core. I recalled how Simon initially thought I had a crush on his lead alpha.

Not wanting the same misunderstanding to recur, I suddenly fisted Simon's shirt, forcing him to look at me.

"I only care about you," I whispered. "We'll finish this conversation later."

"Promise?" Simon asked.

At that moment, Simon reminded me of a vulnerable child, not the warrior he clearly was. It broke my heart to think we would never finish that important talk.

It's better this way, I reminded myself. Seeing that horrid video convinced me I needed to see this task through.

"Zack, I need a word with you," Simon began.

"Very well, we'll talk outside. Elliot, I see you're looking much better. That makes me glad." Zack flashed me a heartfelt smile.

Once again, I was struck by the differences between Duane and Simon's lead alpha.

If Ethan and I had joined the Moon Burrow Flock instead of the Salt Stone Flock, we would have been so much better off.

Ethan and I would be like Simon and Corey. Happy. Content with our places in the flock. Zack and Simon exited the clinic, leaving me standing there, lost in my thoughts.

“You might have fooled almost everyone, but not me,” said a voice.

Micah had finally emerged from the bathroom. He wiped his hands with a towel.

“What do you mean by that?” I asked a little testily.

Did Micah overhear bits and pieces of my conversation with Duane?

“I recognize the look of someone who’s running from someone or something,” Micah explained.

“You don’t know a single thing about me,” I retorted.

“That’s the problem, isn’t it? You haven’t exactly been forthcoming about your circumstances or why you ended up on our doorstep,” Micah pointed out.

I stiffened. Micah had asked me personal questions while I was here. I always found a way to either dodge or deflect them.

Lately, I was becoming great at telling lies and hated myself for it. I guessed Micah was the one person I hadn’t fooled.

“Are you and Corey in cahoots or something?” I muttered.

Micah scoffed. “Corey believes in second chances. I don’t.”

Something Micah had said earlier had irked me.

“What do you know about running for your life?” I demanded.

He had no idea what it felt like, not having control of one’s own destiny or living one’s life in constant fear.

Everyone treated Micah with respect in the Moon Burrow Flock. He didn’t know what it felt like to be constantly looked down upon.

“You have no right to make judgments about me,” I added.

“Perhaps you’re right,” Micah acknowledged.

Suddenly, his brown eyes seemed too ancient for his face, and I wondered if he did know a thing or two about fear.



Micah continued, “But I care about my flock. They took me in when no one else would. I would do anything in my power to protect my family.”

Micah meant every word. He called his flock his family. I wished Ethan and I had that luxury. I looked away from his gaze first, thankful Simon reappeared.

Simon’s smile faltered when he saw the expression on my face. It felt like Micah could see right through my lies. I knew without a doubt that I couldn’t stay here much longer.

“Elliot? Something wrong?” Simon looked from me to Micah, who returned to his laptop.

“Nothing, I’m good,” I lied.

“Listen, I’ve spoken to Zack. He agreed to see you in his office later this evening,” Simon said. “Meanwhile, let me show you around town unless you’re not feeling well?”

“I’d like that,” I said.

I didn’t want to be stuck in this stuffy clinic with the healer who saw far too much.

Spending my last day in Moon Burrow with the handsome raven alpha capable of making my heart skip a beat seemed like the best decision in the world.

Simon and I exited Micah’s clinic. From there, we walked to Simon and Corey’s cabin. He left his car parked in the driveway.

Simon opened the car door for me, just like a gentleman. Unable to help myself, I kissed him on the cheek.

The cocky grin he flashed me created tiny cracks in my heart. I couldn’t count the number of lies I had told this wonderful man.

I slipped inside his car and decided to ask Simon some questions about his personal life, his job, his favorite food, movies, and books.

Gathering intel hadn’t been my intention. I genuinely wanted to know more about him before I made my eventual farewell.

Half an hour later, we reached town. Simon parked his car next to a cafe. We walked around Main Street.

Simon played tour guide, and I easily forgot about my tense conversation with Micah earlier. I dropped my guard and started enjoying myself.

We emerged from an antique store run by an old witch, holding hands and smiling foolishly at each other like love-struck teenagers.

After that, we dropped by the bookstore where he and Corey worked. Simon introduced me to his friendly boss, Adam, and I ended up buying two mystery novels.

Corey, apparently, was on break, so we didn't see him, much to my relief. Afterward, Simon suggested we have a bite to eat.

"I'm famished," I told him. "What about the cafe I spotted next to the bookstore?"

Simon grimaced. "That cafe's run by the flock. Unless you don't mind the gossip later—"

"Say no more," I interrupted Simon. "Where then?"

"I know the perfect place," Simon said.

We returned to the cafe where Simon had parked his car just now. After checking my watch, I saw that three hours had passed without me realizing it.

Simon was easy to talk to. I felt completely at ease when we were together. I didn't feel the urge to hide my true self at all.

While you're having the time of your life, Ethan's suffering, I reminded myself.

My mood sobered as Simon took my hand and led me inside the cafe. He found us a pleasant spot, a table by the window. We had a view of the local park.

"What are you hungry for?" Simon asked me.

I studied the menu for a few moments. We ended up getting lattes, a chicken sandwich, and a chocolate cake to share.

We spent the next few minutes eating. Simon was right. The food and coffee here were great.

“Corey paid you a visit earlier?” Simon asked when I mentioned his brother. “I hope he didn’t say anything to upset you.”

“He was just being a protective younger brother,” I said. “He asked me out on a coffee date afterward.”

“Corey always had a thing or two to say about my love life,” Simon muttered.

“Being a busybody—isn’t that what younger brothers do?” I teased.

“Are you the same with your own brother?” Simon asked.

I didn’t hear any deceit in his voice. Nothing in his body language had changed. Simon asked me that question because he genuinely wanted to know the answer.

“Ethan’s always too busy to go on dates. At least that’s what he always tells me,” I answered. “I think deep down, he’s scared of trusting another person, or risking his heart.”

“What about you?” Simon asked.

Simon reached for my hands across the table. He started making small and comforting circles on the palm of my hand, as if he couldn’t stop touching me.

I didn’t discourage him. I felt like I owed Simon one truthful answer after all the lies.

“I didn’t believe in mates, but fate led me to you for a reason,” I answered.

“I feel the same way.” Simon leaned in and kissed me.

I closed my eyes, enjoying the feel of his lips against mine, and the familiar taste of him. It was easy to get drunk on him, to get lost in those soulful and intense dark eyes.

The cafe and the people in it fell away from my line of sight. Simon pulled away eventually, although I could sense his reluctance.

“Why did you stop?” I whispered.

“If I didn’t, I wouldn’t be able to control myself,” Simon answered. “You have that terrifying effect on me, Elliot. I know after everything you’ve been through, you need some space, time to process everything. I can give you that.”

Tears welled in my eyes, unbidden. I didn’t know what had gotten over me. Normally I wasn’t this emotional or sensitive, but dang it.

Why did Simon have to be so sweet and understanding? I wished destiny had chosen another time and place for us to meet. Why did it have to be now?

“Elliot, it wasn’t my intention to make you cry.” Simon started dabbing my face with a paper napkin.

“Sorry, I’m not sure what happened,” I blurted. “I’m not usually like this.”

“It’s okay, Elliot. Let it all out,” Simon said in a soothing voice. I sobbed even harder.

“Let’s head outside. Fresh air might be what you need,” Simon suggested.

I nodded, allowing Simon to lead me outside the cafe. He was right. The cool air and being outdoors did improve my spirits.

Simon offered me another napkin, and I accepted it. I wiped away the rest of my tears, then blew my nose.

“I must look terrible right now,” I joked, hoping to lighten the mood.

Instead of making fun of my momentary emotional breakdown, Simon looked at me with concern.

“Nah, you look perfect as always,” Simon said with a wink.

I’d always had the impression Simon was a serious sort of person, but today he showed me a different and playful side of him.

That made me realize there were so many things about him I still didn’t know. It seemed unfair that we had to say our goodbyes so soon.

I didn't want to leave Moon Burrow or Simon just yet. It felt like we were just getting started. Ethan needs you. It's not right to abandon him to chase some guy I just met.

Too bad Simon wasn't just some guy. He felt like the stranger I'd known all my life, the stranger I was destined to meet and surrender my heart to.

"Flatterer," I said.

We walked for a little, revisiting old shops and places. Moon Burrow was really such a small and quiet town.

Simon moved on to mundane topics, for which I was grateful. Soon enough, I almost felt like my normal self.

"You never got bored staying here?" I asked Simon during our drive.

"At first, I thought I would," Simon answered. "As you can tell, there's nothing much to see here in Moon Burrow. After spending more time here and getting to know my flock mates and some of the bears, I began seeing this place as home. I hope you would as well, Elliot."

Simon looked thoughtful. At a red traffic light, he looked at me and smiled.

"Maybe someday we can invite your brother for a visit?" Simon asked.

I wanted to cry again, but told myself to hold back my tears. Why did Simon have to be so generous? Did he truly believe that his lead alpha would offer me a place in their flock?

I had a feeling it wouldn't be easy to win Zackary Jones over. Would he be able to see past my mask and lies, just like Micah?

"Ethan and I haven't spoken to each other for a while now," I whispered, hating myself for my continual deception.

"I see. Well, you two will find a way to work out your differences somehow. Brothers are like that," Simon said.

"Did you and Corey ever have a huge argument before?" I asked. Simon and Corey seemed pretty close.

“Yeah. In fact, it was when we first joined the Moon Burrow Flock. Corey felt I was being a little overprotective of him. Maybe I was,” Simon admitted.

I remembered him mentioning that he and Corey had been in a flock similar to mine in the past. Curiosity made me prod and ask more questions.

Simon told me about one alpha in their old flock who developed an unhealthy obsession with Corey.

“What you did was noble,” I said, marveling at how their situation mirrored mine and Ethan’s a little.

Unfortunately, in our case, we never made it out of the flock. Our escape plan failed, and Ethan and I were both paying the price right now.

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## SIMON/ ELLIOT

### S IMON

“ARE YOU NERVOUS ABOUT YOUR MEETING WITH ZACK?” I asked Elliot.

He’d suddenly gone quiet after I told him about my past. Maybe I should have asked Corey first before spilling part of his life story to Elliot.

Then again, I trusted Elliot without reserve, even though we’d only known each other for a few days.

“Yes,” Elliot admitted. “I’m scared of what happens next.”

I reached for his fingers and gave them a squeeze.

“It will be fine. I could come in with you if you like,” I offered.

“No,” Elliot suddenly blurted, wrenching his hand from mine.

He looked at me, wide-eyed and a little crazy. I searched his eyes, unsure of what was going on.

I had a feeling Elliot wasn’t being completely honest with me. Something about the situation bugged me, but I couldn’t quite put my finger on it.

You’re probably just overthinking matters, I reminded myself.

“Sorry,” Elliot muttered, unable to meet my gaze. “I just needed to do this on my own.”

“I see,” I answered, although I didn’t really.

If I joined Elliot in Zack’s office, I could advocate for him in some way. Zack didn’t say it in so many words, but I sensed he didn’t quite trust Elliot completely.

Some of my flock mates might see Elliot as cagey and defensive, but that was only a byproduct of being in a flock where Elliot had to constantly watch his back.

It couldn’t have been easy fending for himself all this time. Elliot mentioned a brother, but he hinted they had an estranged relationship.

How could I convey to Elliot that he was no longer alone, that I would always be there for him?

Maybe Elliot wanted to stand on his own two feet. I shouldn’t interfere in his meeting with Zack.

Eventually, we walked back to my car, and I drove us back to the compound.

The workday had ended, so we encountered some traffic on the way back. Elliot kept his gaze glued out the window and said very little.

I chalked it off as nerves. It wasn’t guaranteed that Elliot had a place in the flock. Zack and Thad interviewed all potential recruits thoroughly to ensure they were the right fit for the group.

Corey and I had to go through two rounds of interviews. I wondered if I should mention that minor detail to Elliot, but that might only worsen his anxiety.

Finally, I parked my car in front of the cabin I shared with Corey. Elliot didn’t get out right away.

It was as if he was dreading this meeting.

“Today was really great, Simon,” Elliot whispered.

He looked so pale I wondered if he was feeling alright. I even debated asking Micah to give him a check-up.

“I’m glad you enjoyed yourself. There are plenty more dates to come,” I joked.



Elliot let out a breath, and he looked at me with a hungry kind of desperation that alarmed me a little.

What was wrong with this picture? Eventually, I convinced myself Elliot was just a little jittery.

“Here, a good luck kiss,” I said, leaning over the console.

Elliot bent his head to receive my kiss. When I released him, tears had gathered in Elliot’s eyes.

He hastily wiped them away and let out a shaky laugh.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me lately,” Elliot said.

“Maybe you should postpone this meeting. You don’t seem like yourself tonight,” I suggested.

“No, this has to happen now!” Elliot shouted. I raised both my hands in defeat.

“I was only making a suggestion,” I pointed out. “Elliot, I’m just a little worried about you. You’ve been acting odd today.”

“Can you blame me?” Elliot momentarily touched his lips, still swollen from our earlier kiss.

I wanted to kiss him again, sweep him off his feet, and carry him back to my bed.

Instead, I remained where I was, gripping the wheel so tightly until my knuckles turned white.

I needed something solid to hold on to, and it bothered me that Elliot wasn’t telling me what was bothering him.

“I’ll be okay, Simon.” Elliot flashed me a tight smile, then bolted out of my car like a runner.

I warily climbed out of the car. Should I go after Elliot or leave him be?

“Don’t follow me,” Elliot warned. “I don’t need an escort. Let me do this on my own.”

I remained where I was, a little befuddled by today’s events. Elliot said he enjoyed himself. T

hat counted for something, right? Maybe I had done something wrong that I wasn’t aware of?

After Elliot's meeting with Zack, I resolved to hunt him down so we could have a little talk.

I wanted to clear up any misunderstandings between us.

Finally, I broke away from my scattered train of thoughts and entered the cabin.

Corey was home early. He was lying down on the sofa and reading a romance novel when I entered.

"I heard from Adam. You and Elliot went out on another date?" Corey closed his book and sat up. "How did it go?"

"I just showed him around town," I admitted. "I'm not sure I'll count it as a date."

Corey scoffed, then made space for me on the sofa. I sat down, running a hand through my hair.

He didn't say anything. My brother probably knew I needed to get something off my chest.

"Today was weird," I admitted.

"Weird how?" Corey asked with a raise of his brows.

"At the end of our date, Elliot became a little distant." I told Corey about what happened earlier.

"That's all? Give the poor guy a break. Remember how agitated you were when we first met Zack?" Corey asked.

My brother just made an excellent point. I relaxed a little. Corey was right.

Elliot had this. All I needed to do was wait for his meeting with Zack to be over.

Even though we'd only parted from each other a few minutes ago, I had the sudden urge to see him again.

Maybe I could invite him for dinner, I thought.

"You have a silly look on your face. You're really into Elliot, aren't you?" Corey asked.

"Absolutely. He's the one, Corey. The one I've been searching for my entire life," I told my brother.

“I had a feeling it’s something like that,” Corey said, sounding a little sad.

“Hey, your turn will come eventually,” I reminded him.

“I hope you’re right.”

\* \* \*

## **ELLIOT**

I DIDN’T KNOW HOW MUCH TIME HAD PASSED. I STOOD RIGHT there, rigid as a stone, staring at the door to Zack’s office.

Just go in, I kept telling myself, but my feet remained glued to the wooden floor.

I slipped my hand inside my denim jacket, feeling for the handle of the knife.

After parting from Simon, I made a quick trip to the clinic to grab my jacket, phone, and wallet.

Micah wasn’t there to question what I was doing. Lady Luck really did seem to be on my side today.

“Zack’s not going to bite. Just knock and go right in,” someone remarked.

I jumped, pulling my hand away from my jacket. Finally, I noticed a handsome red-haired and green-eyed omega smiling at me.

He seemed familiar. I vaguely remembered seeing him at the dining hall.

“You must be Simon’s Elliot,” he said, offering me a hand, which I automatically shook. “I’m Fred.”

“I’m not Simon’s anything yet, although I wish I was,” I said under my breath.

Since Fred and I were both shifters, he probably heard the remark. I flushed, annoyed with myself.

I was so tightly wound up, all my defenses were down.

“He’s a good one, you know? Make sure he doesn’t get away,” Fred said.

To my horror, he raised his fist to the door and knocked on my behalf.

“Come in,” came a distracted voice from inside. Probably Zack.

“Thad will be right in,” Fred said.

“Thad?” I asked blankly.

“Zack’s mate. They usually interview new prospective flock members together,” Fred explained.

“Simon forgot to mention that,” I muttered.

Did Simon keep that information from me on purpose? Calm down, I reminded myself.

That didn’t sound like my Simon at all. In fact, Simon had been nothing but wonderful and forthcoming with me.

“Can you blame him?” Fred laughed. “Simon’s been a little obsessed with you. Anyway, good luck.”

Once Fred was gone, I took deep breaths, turned the knob, and let myself in. Zack’s office was exactly how I imagined it to look like.

Dark wood paneling decorated the walls and ceilings. Tall shelves crammed with books lined the walls. A dark mahogany desk was the centerpiece of the room.

Zack sat behind a computer. There were papers all over his desk, along with a coffee cup and a small plate full of crumbs.

In fact, he was wiping his mouth with a piece of tissue paper when I arrived. Like this, Zack didn’t look threatening at all.

It was easy to forget he was the lead alpha of the Moon Burrow Flock. Once more, I tried to get a feel for his aura, but felt absolutely nothing.

“Elliot, have a seat,” Zack said.

He nodded to the comfortable-looking armchair in front of his desk. Feeling more nervous than ever, I sat down, but I didn't quite relax.

I had a job to do, but at that moment, I realized I didn't know how I would accomplish my task.

Fred mentioned Zack's mate would be joining us soon. My chances of success would dwindle if another raven shifter joined us.

Two shifters versus one clumsy wannabe omega assassin didn't seem like good odds.

"Simon tells me you're interested in joining our group," Zack said patiently.

I realized I hadn't uttered a single word since I entered his office. Sweat dripped down my brow.

Zack seemed to sense my apprehension because he got up from his chair. He positioned himself in front of me and leaned against his desk casually.

Start talking, I silently yelled at myself. My mouth opened, and words came out, although I wasn't really aware of what I was saying.

"So, Simon's the main reason you want to be part of our group?" Zack asked a little too gently.

I buried my face in my hands, suddenly feeling overwhelmed and lost. Nothing was going the way I pictured.

This should have been a simple task. Enter enemy territory. Find a way to earn Zack's trust and put a knife to his heart.

Meeting Simon and getting to know the other raven shifters of this flock made everything so convoluted. My messy emotions were getting in the way.

Once again, I embarrassed myself when hot and silent tears slipped down my cheeks.

The next thing I knew, Zack was kneeling in front of me. He brushed the strands of hair that had fallen across my face.

Zack didn't ask me to explain myself or why I was suddenly in tears.

"Why is everyone here so darn nice, so perfect?" I whispered vehemently.

"You'll soon find out that we're just like everyone else," Zack said.

He pulled out a handkerchief and started dabbing my face with it. There was nothing romantic about the gesture.

Zack was just being a gentleman.

"You're the weirdest lead alpha I've ever met," I grumbled.

"Well, you're the weirdest applicant I've ever interviewed. I've never reduced anyone to tears before," Zack said, sounding thoughtful.

The knife, I thought in desperation. The moment was now, if this was going to happen at all.

Before Zack could rise to his feet, I reached for the weapon hidden in my jacket.

I thought I would screw up all of a sudden, that the blade would somehow get entangled in the fabric of my clothes, but nothing like that happened.

I sprung the blade out of the sheath in a smooth and perfect draw. Zack's eyes widened slightly, but it was too late.

The blade met its mark. For such a small thing, the silver knife tore through cloth, then flesh so easily, like butter.

A terrible howl of rage followed. I risked looking over my shoulder and terror filled me as the door practically flew off its hinges.

A tall and pale creature with unnatural beauty rushed me. In a fraction of a second, that monster sent me flying across the room.

Agony raced down my spine. Long icy fingers, colder than death, wrapped around my throat and started choking me.

Helpless, I could only stare into the white face of the vampire.  
An actual vampire, and he was inhumanly strong!

Knowing it was all over and that I had failed gave me a  
strange measure of relief.

I didn't have to act anymore, to continue deceiving the  
wonderful people who'd shown me nothing but kindness and  
acceptance during my stay here.

"Thad, don't kill him." Zack's voice sounded so far away.

I finally blacked out.

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## SIMON

“**W**here’s Elliot?” I demanded, a little out of breath.

After hearing the ridiculous news that Elliot was an assassin, I rushed out of the cabin and hurried to the log house.

Corey wasn’t far behind me. Hands stopped me from reaching Zack. John, an older alpha, gripped my shoulder, his expression uncharacteristically hard and unreadable.

Most of my flock mates had gathered in the eating hall. Zack was arguing with Micah.

I peered over John’s shoulder and expelled a breath. Zack was sitting down. Zack’s shirt was also torn and bloody.

Micah was healing a stab wound in the center of his chest. Thad loomed nearby, eyes narrowed, hissing at everyone who dared approach his injured mate.

No wonder most of the raven shifters, save Micah, kept a respectable distance from our lead alpha.

Most of the time, people easily dismissed Thad as harmless. The owner of Crimson Delights, the town’s most popular bakery, had perfected the art of looking ordinary.

Thad was the exact opposite. He was, in fact, a centuries-old retired assassin. I knew he’d do anything for Zack.

Dread filled me, so did anger. Did Elliot really try to kill Zack?



Was he alive, or had Thad taken care of him? My heart sank as the implications finally sank in.

“I don’t know why you asked me to heal that killer,” Micah said angrily.

“I agree with Micah. You offered that traitorous raven hospitality, and this is how he repays you? He must die,” Thad said flatly.

“No!” I shouted unthinkingly. “Killing Elliot is out of the question.”

John released my shoulder. The crowd parted for me as I practically ran to Zack.

I would have fallen on my knees and begged for Elliot’s life if need be. Despite the hard evidence before my very eyes, I still wanted to believe my Elliot was innocent.

He hadn’t wanted to kill Zack. Not really. Was this why Elliot was jumpy and on edge today?

There must be a reason why he agreed to commit such a foul deed. Elliot didn’t strike me as a simple bloodthirsty killer.

I needed to hear Elliot’s side of the story, to find out the actual intentions behind his actions.

To do that, I had to somehow persuade Zack to allow me to see Elliot.

If I could only talk to him, maybe I could clear this misunderstanding up before it devolved into something worse.

“Did you know about Elliot’s intentions, Simon?” Thad asked.

Zack reached for Thad’s hand, squeezing it. Thad quieted, but the rage in his eyes hadn’t disappeared.

One wrong word could set the vampire off, I knew.

“Simon couldn’t have known. Elliot fooled him as much as all of us,” Micah said.

“I can speak for myself,” I told Micah. Micah sighed, rising to his feet after he finished bandaging Zack’s chest.

To the other raven shifters, Micah continued, “As you can all see, our esteemed leader will be fine. Give him some breathing room. Go back to your homes.”

“What if Elliot succeeded?” Paige asked Julian in a furious whisper. “We’d be so lost without Zack.”

“He didn’t seem like a killer,” Julian told her.

“He sure fooled everyone,” remarked Peter, John’s husband.

“I’m alive,” Zack said firmly. “Everyone, stop fussing over me.”

He tried standing, but I didn’t miss his wince. Thad automatically offered Zack his arm, which Zack took. Zack flashed his mate a grateful look. That seemed to loosen the tense vampire just a little.

“I’m heading back to my room to rest. Simon, will you accompany Thad and me?” Zack asked.

I nodded, a little relieved. The ache in my heart still lingered. Elliot’s actions today felt like a slap in the face.

How much of what Elliot told me had been the truth? Had Elliot been lying to me the entire time?

Once the three of us left the eating hall and once we were out of earshot of everyone else, I asked Zack the question that had been bugging me all this time.

“So Elliot is alive?” I asked. “What exactly happened?”

Thad gave me an unfriendly look, like he wanted to drain all the blood from my body. Zack pressed a kiss to his mate’s cheek.

Thad softened and didn’t interrupt Zack as he told him what had occurred in his office just moments before.

“Elliot was crying?” I asked.

Zack grimaced as we started up the flight of stairs that would lead to his and Thad’s private bedroom.

Apart from Zack and Thad, three other couples lived in the log house. Zack once offered Corey and me rooms here, but we

both declined, preferring the privacy of a cabin instead.

“Your stray’s an excellent actor,” Thad commented drily.

“It’s not that,” Zack said.

Zack looked winded as we reached the top of the stairs. Worry nagged at me.

During all my time in the Moon Burrow Flock, I had never seen Zack this injured.

“What then?” I pressed, eager for answers.

Zack, Thad, and I eventually made it to his bedroom, but it took a long time.

Thad finally convinced Zack to lie down. Zack glanced at his worried mate, then complied.

“I’ll head to the kitchen and get you something to eat and drink,” Thad mumbled.

“Thank you, Thad,” Zack said, reaching for Thad’s hand and placing a kiss on it.

The vampire looked somewhat appeased. Finally, it was just Zack and me in the room.

My head was still spinning a little from tonight’s events. I took a seat in the armchair next to the bed.

Part of me wished this was all a terrible nightmare, one I could wake up from.

Only hours before, I was showing Elliot around Moon Burrow. We had gotten to know each other better, and I was even starting to imagine a future with Elliot in it.

I had pictured waking up next to Elliot’s smile every morning. Elliot cuddling close to me at the end of the night and whispering ‘Goodnight, Simon’ in my ear.

“I didn’t know anything,” I finally said.

Should I apologize on Elliot’s behalf? That didn’t feel right, either.

“Simon, what’s done is done,” Zack said. He sounded and looked tired.

“Where’s Elliot right now?” No one had answered my question earlier.

“In one of the spare guest rooms we use for raven shifters who are unable to control their shifts. We don’t exactly have a room to hold prisoners. Venom once told me needed one,” Zack said. “Maybe he’s right.”

I was about to argue Elliot couldn’t be our prisoner. The flock didn’t keep prisoners.

Then I remembered nothing like this had ever happened before. Zack also mentioned Venom.

A cold sweat broke out over my entire body. The reminder that the flock didn’t operate independently, that we worked alongside another shifter group in Moon Burrow, made me fear for Elliot’s life even more.

Unlike Zack, who believed in second chances, Venom would’ve ordered Elliot killed right away. I swallowed.

The room Elliot had been placed in would have a bed, an adjoining bathroom. All the basic necessities he might need would be there.

The windows also had bars too narrow for a raven shifter to escape and a reinforced door.

We called it our ‘time out’ room. Elliot was safe... for tonight, at least.

“Thad was ready to end his life, but I told him to stop,” Zack said.

“Why did you?” I asked, grateful for Zack’s intervention.

“Because before he brandished that knife, Elliot looked so miserable. He just told me he wanted to join the flock to get to know you better,” Zack said.

“Elliot was just sprouting lies to get close to you.” I couldn’t believe those callous words came out of my own mouth.

Then again, I was in an awful place right now. It was hard to separate the truth from the lies.

“I believe the exact opposite. Elliot was being refreshingly honest for a change. Micah informed me about his suspicions about Elliot. When I first met him, I thought he was hiding something as well,” Zack said.

“What’s going to happen to Elliot?” I asked. Dread clutched my insides. “Will you tell Venom about this incident?”

“Yes, because by trying to kill me, Elliot threatened the security of the flock and, by extension, our alliance with the bears,” Zack explained.

There was something I was missing here, I thought. I searched Zack’s pale face and realized he didn’t want to get rid of Elliot.

Maybe Zack also wanted to understand Elliot’s actions. I could still salvage this situation somehow.

An idea suddenly occurred to me, one I had to share with Zack.

“Give me three days to question Elliot. I’ll find out who sent him here and what made him agree to this task,” I said.

“You believe someone is pulling Elliot’s strings?” Zack asked.

“I want, no, I need to believe that not everything Elliot told me was lies,” I whispered. “That during the short time we’ve been together, there was a genuine spark, a real connection between us.”

“Very well, Simon. I’ll give you three days,” Zack said.

Thad returned carrying a tray with a plate of pasta and a tall glass of water.

“Zack needs his rest,” Thad told me. “You’re lucky he has a soft spot for that stray.”

I wanted to tell Thad that in three days, I’ll return with proof of Elliot’s innocence, but using that word to describe Elliot was wrong.

Whatever reason pushed him to do such an unthinkable act, Elliot still agreed to it. Elliot was an adult who made his own decisions.

Paige's words held some truth in them. Zack was the heart of the Moon Burrow Flock, and he held us together.

Without him, I couldn't imagine the flock being able to function. That chilly realization made me leave Zack's room without a retort for Thad.

I knew the right decision was to head back home. Corey was probably worried about me, but my feet took me to the third floor, to where the guest bedrooms and where Elliot was being held.

Spencer, Zack's brother, and the flock beta guarded the door, along with Mike, Paige's husband. Both gave me unfriendly looks when they spotted me.

"Turn around and walk away," Spencer warned. I didn't stop. Spencer continued, "We know how close you'd gotten to the prisoner. You're a liability."

Prisoner. I hated Spencer used that word despite the fact it was appropriate for this situation.

"I just want to talk to him," I said. "Give me five minutes. That's all I'm asking."

"Are you kidding?" Mike demanded.

"Five minutes," Spencer said. "Mike and I won't be far behind."

Mike grumbled under his breath, but the two men eventually moved towards the stairs.

They would still be able to hear whatever I said to Elliot, but at that moment, I didn't care.

I pressed my back towards the reinforced door and found myself sliding to the floor. Then I rested my head against the wood and closed my eyes.

"Simon? Is that you?" Elliot asked a moment later.

I could almost picture Elliot. Only a thick piece of wood separated the two of us.

All I wanted to do was touch Elliot, to look into his eyes for an explanation, but I did the prudent thing and remained where I

was.

“At first, I didn’t want to believe what happened,” I began. “But all of it is true, isn’t it?”

Elliot didn’t answer me right away. I had asked a question everyone knew the answer to.

“Why?” I finally asked.

“It’s complicated,” Elliot answered. “C-can’t we talk properly? I want to see you.”

“They won’t allow me to be in the same room with you, at least for tonight,” I answered honestly.

“Elliot, I need to know. How much of what you’ve told me is a lie?”

“Not everything was a lie,” Elliot whispered. “I never wanted to hurt you.”

Those words felt like daggers to my heart because I finally understood what the others didn’t say outright to my face.

Elliot didn’t just lie to me. He’d also used me to get to Zack. Was I only fodder?

That truth hurt more than I could imagine. Elliot said a few more things, but I wasn’t listening.

Spencer and Mike reappeared, and Spencer tapped his wristwatch. My five minutes were up.

To be honest, I was a little relieved because if they didn’t return to their post, I might end up saying something to Elliot that I might regret forever.

“Simon, are you still there?” Elliot asked, but I didn’t answer him.

I kept walking, anguished and torn by my conversation with my so-called fated mate.





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## ELLIOT/ SIMON

### E LLIOT

THE ROOM LOOKED MORE LIKE A MOTEL ROOM THAN A CELL. I explored the space, even though there wasn't much to go on.

I needed something to do. Otherwise, I'd go mad with guilt.

There was a narrow bed in one corner, a wardrobe, and a desk. It even had a small bathroom, complete with a shower and sink.

Of course, one couldn't ignore the bars on the window. Dragging the chair to the nearest window, I used it as a stool to stand on.

I tested the bars. The moment I touched the cold metal, I hissed as pain radiated from the tips of my fingers and spread to the rest of my arm.

I withdrew and returned to pacing the length of the small room. Of course, the metal bars would be made of silver.

This room discouraged escape, but what was its true purpose?

I didn't miss the old scratches on the walls and floor. Every flock has its share of secrets, I thought numbly.

Worn out, I sat on the bed and thought of Simon. It had been hours since we spoke through the door.

I couldn't even imagine what he was feeling now. Certainly hurt and betrayed.

I was the sole cause of his pain and my raven didn't like that. I dragged my nails across my skin, which suddenly itched with discomfort.

I opened my mouth, and a little scream of frustration tore out of my throat. Phantom talons raked at my insides.

My raven wanted to come out, but I knew he would feel trapped within these four walls.

What I truly wanted was to soar the clear blue skies with Simon by my side.

"Too late. You've finally shown Simon and everyone your true colors," I whispered to myself.

Except that desperate and sorry creature who stabbed Zack, who lied and deceived everyone—that wasn't the real me.

I used to care about people a great deal. I was different before Ethan and I joined Duane's flock.

I collapsed on the bed, annoyed by the lumpy mattress. No matter how many times I turned and rolled the entire night, sleep wouldn't come to me.

Serves you right, I thought to myself. Simon probably wouldn't be able to have a wink of sleep, either.

By the time the night sky had given way to the sunrise, I was still lying in bed, feeling sorry for myself. Hearing a click, I bolted awake.

I had a visitor, and I sure hoped it was Simon. Corey appeared, holding a tray containing breakfast.

Disappointment hit me, but I didn't allow it to show on my face.

"Be careful," said one of the alphas guarding the door.

"Elliot doesn't have any weapons on him. There aren't any sharp objects in the room he could use either," Corey said.

"Fine, but yell if the prisoner tries something," the alpha said.

Corey shut the door behind him using his foot. We stared at each other for a few moments.

“You look terrible, by the way. Good,” Corey said.

He set the tray on the desk. My stomach grumbled as I spotted the plate filled with scrambled eggs, ham, and two buttery croissants.

The tray also came with a liter of bottled water. At least they weren't starving me. I made my way to the desk.

After pulling the chair out, I sat and picked at my food.

“How's Simon?” I asked.

“How's Zack is the better question, isn't it?” Corey asked.

I immediately felt like a fool and pushed my plate away. After a few bites, I realized I was no longer hungry.

“Yes,” I admitted. “Is Zack—”

I trailed off, frightened at hearing the answer. Recalling how Zack's terrifying vampire mate flew at me like an enraged beast sent shivers down my spine.

We didn't have vampires in Salt Stone, but even Duane was downright terrified of them.

“Zack's alive thanks to Micah,” Corey said. “I overheard Zack telling Micah that it was a clumsy thrust. You missed his heart completely. Elliot. You've never done anything of this sort before, have you?”

Staring down at my plate, I decided not to answer Corey.

“I'm glad Zack's okay. Even I could tell he's a good leader. I never really wanted him gone,” I whispered.

I hesitated, then decided to beg, because what other option did I have?

The Moon Burrow Flock might've decided to spare my life, but they could change their minds at a moment's notice.

“Is there any chance I could talk to Simon? I need him to understand,” I said.

“Understand what?” Corey pressed. “And I don't think my brother wants to speak to you right now. You make him weak. His words, not mine.”

I cringed, surprised by how much those words stung.

“Is that why Simon didn’t want to speak to me face-to-face last night?” I asked.

“What did you expect to happen, Elliot? You used him to get to Zack.”

Unable to look Corey in the eyes, because I knew I would only find accusation there, I buried my face in my hands.

Hot tears gathered in my eyelids and this time, Simon wouldn’t be there to wipe them away.

When had I become so weak? If Ethan saw me now, what would he think?

Right at that moment, my brother, Duane, and the rest of the horrid Salt Stone Flock felt so far away. I was utterly alone in this mess I created.

“So you won’t even deny it,” Corey said. “Answer me this. Did you feel anything for Simon, or was it all just an act?”

“I love him, damn it,” I whispered furiously.

Love, not loved. No, what I felt for Simon would never go away.

I continued, “I’ve never felt that way about anyone before. Every time I had to lie to him, it felt like my entire chest was on fire.”

“I know next to nothing about relationships, but this isn’t what love looks like, Elliot. You don’t betray the person you care most deeply about,” Corey argued.

“Don’t you think I know that? I had no choice,” I said bitterly.

Corey said a few more things, but I hardly paid him any attention.

Eventually, he seemed to lose interest in our conversation. Corey finally left me alone with my misery.

\* \* \*

## SIMON

“YOU DID WHAT?” I DEMANDED WHEN COREY RETURNED TO our cabin.

Since I couldn't get any sleep, I volunteered for extra patrol duty. Flying all night exhausted me, but it helped keep my mind distracted by Elliot's betrayal.

Now that I was back in my human form, anger and doubt returned to me.

My conversation with Elliot kept replaying in my head, along with my promise to Zack.

I had promised my lead alpha that I'd get genuine answers out of Elliot in 72 hours. Well, it was fewer now.

How was I going to accomplish that when the thought of seeing Elliot in the flesh filled me with indignation and dread?

“I brought Elliot breakfast,” Corey answered with a shrug, as if his actions weren't my concern.

“Corey, he's dangerous,” I said. “What if he ended up attacking you?”

“You make it sound like Elliot's a rabid dog. He's not. After he failed, it's like all the fight's left his body,” Corey said. I had nothing to say to that.

“I see. You needed to convince yourself he's dangerous to make yourself feel better?” Corey asked.

“Don't try to psychoanalyze me,” I growled.

Corey didn't look the least bit intimidated. He crossed his arms and looked me in the eyes.

“You were all Elliot asked about,” Corey said. My brother bit his lower lip. “Simon, I think you need to hear him out. Zack's right. There's more to Elliot's story than we suspect.”

“Wait. When did you speak to Zack?” I asked.

“Earlier this morning. Zack and Thad were in the kitchen. Thad was making croissants,” Corey said.

“Zack shouldn’t be walking around yet,” I pointed out.

Thad usually left early to open his bakery. After last night, I guessed he decided to stay with his injured mate.

“That’s what Thad told Zack. Anyway, Zack asked me to bring Elliot breakfast,” Corey said.

“Did you find out anything useful?” I asked.

“No, but Elliot says he’ll talk to you. It has to be you, Simon. I doubt he’ll confess to anyone else,” Corey pointed out. Corey looked out the nearest window, and his expression softened. “I feel sorry for him, Simon.”

“What brought about this sudden change of heart?” I asked, curious about what Elliot and my brother talked about.

“I don’t know how to explain it, but when we spoke, Elliot looked lost, completely defeated. He didn’t justify his actions or beg for his life. It’s like he’ll completely accept whatever we do to him.”

Corey’s observation triggered my need to see Elliot again. Avoiding him wouldn’t do anyone any good. Elliot had used my feelings for him to get to Zack.

It was my turn to turn the tables on him. My stomach turned at the vile thought. I knew right away that I couldn’t do such a thing to him.

Corey and Zack trusted me to get to the bottom of this mess. I would do just that.

I might not have forgiven Elliot, perhaps I never would, but I needed to face the music eventually.

“I’ll bring Elliot his lunch. We’ll talk then,” I decided.

Hearing the rumble of a motorcycle engine outside, both Corey and I traded concerned looks.

I was the first to run out of the front door. I arrived just in time to see a large, heavily inked bear alpha dismount from his Harley.

It wasn’t Venom, but his second-in-command, Mayhem. The lesser of the two evils. Mayhem could be reasoned with,

unlike Venom.

I breathed a sigh of relief, but it quickly vanished. If Mayhem was here, then word probably got out to the bear shifters about last night's incident.

One of my flock mates had talked, because Greed and Axel weren't present last night.

Those two bear alphas had gone to a meeting at the MC clubhouse, so which of my flock mates had ratted Elliot out?

I pushed my irritation away and focused on the problem right in front of me.

"Hey, Simon. Is Zack awake?" Mayhem asked, walking up to me. "I heard there was some trouble up here last night."

"Zack's awake," I confirmed. "How did you find out?"

"Well, we're neighbors. It's hard to keep a secret from each other."

Mayhem's hand landed on my shoulder, and it took me a second to realize he was offering me some form of consolation.

Mayhem wore a sympathetic look on his face.

"I'm sorry to hear about what happened," Mayhem said.

I didn't want his pity, so I brushed his hand away. He didn't comment.

"What did you hear?" I asked.

"A stray raven shifter your flock offered guest rights to tried to kill Zack," Mayhem said.

He let out a tired sigh, as if he wanted to deal with this problem right away. "Just out of curiosity, why is he still alive?"

"We don't know the entire story," I said, feeling protective of Elliot.

Without realizing it, I had automatically planted myself in front of Mayhem, essentially blocking his path to the log house.

I didn't want this bear shifter going anywhere near my mate.





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## SIMON

“Zack, call off your attack dog before he does something he regrets,” Mayhem said.

I nearly lunged at the arrogant bear shifter, but Zack suddenly got between us.

My lead alpha grunted in obvious pain. What was wrong with me? I usually had more sense than this.

Before Elliot entered my life and complicated it, I would have never considered charging after Venom’s second like some mad bull.

Mayhem frowned at Zack, worry evident in his eyes. Part of me understood why Mayhem wanted Elliot dead.

The bear shifters also understood that without Zack, our flock would crumble.

“As you can see, Mayhem, this is a delicate matter, but this is our problem,” Zack said, leaning against me for support.

All my initial fury ebbed away. Concern replaced it. Micah’s healing abilities did not produce instantaneous results.

Zack’s injury simply looked weeks old instead of a day old.

“Venom’s not going to be happy about this,” Mayhem said, stroking his beard. Then he sighed. “But I’ll leave this matter to you.”

Once Mayhem left, I turned to my lead alpha.

“I’m surprised Thad let you out of his sight,” I commented.

Zack grimaced. “Thad won’t be too happy about this, but I had to prevent Mayhem and you from fighting over a simple misunderstanding,” Zack explained.

“I’ll help you back to the house,” I offered.

Other alphas would stubbornly insist they could walk on their own. I certainly would, but Zack accepted my arm for balance.

Thad was fuming when Zack and I returned to the log house.

“Back to bed with you,” Thad told his mate.

Thad wore sunglasses and a black hoodie to obscure his features from the sun. All the nearby curtains had been drawn close as well.

The vampire was usually asleep at this time of the day, but he probably couldn’t rest until he was certain his mate was safe.

I supposed if Elliot was hurt and wasn’t being a good patient, I’d be angry as a hornet.

Elliot. Just thinking about him made my heart ache.

Corey was right. We needed to talk, and this time, I couldn’t allow my emotions to get in the way.

Who was I kidding? My control was shaky whenever Elliot and I were in the same room.

“Fine. Simon, remember you made me a promise,” Zack reminded me unhelpfully.

In the end, I didn’t go see Elliot that day or the next. The third day, I could no longer stay away.

Zack graciously extended my deadline by another 24 hours. It was now or never.

I intercepted Julian in the kitchen. He was assigned to bring Elliot his meals today.

“I’ll take that tray,” I said.

Not waiting for an answer, I grabbed the tray of food from the kitchen counter.

Today’s breakfast was a bowl of oatmeal, some fresh fruits, a bottle of water, and orange juice.

“About time,” Julian grumbled under his breath.

“What was that?” I asked a little testily.

I wasn’t in the best of moods since I hadn’t been getting enough sleep for the past two days.

“Well, a couple of us were betting on when you’d start talking to Elliot again,” Julian told me frankly.

I gave the omega a puzzled look. “Aren’t you angry at Elliot for what he did?” I asked.

“I suppose part of me is,” Julian acknowledged. “But I and everyone, at least those who bring him his meals, can see that he’s miserable, and he regrets his actions. Everyone makes mistakes, Simon.”

“Some of our flock mates don’t believe Elliot can ever be forgiven,” I said.

“Axel says Venom thinks we should have killed him,” Julian said softly. My heart raced at those words.

“Not possible. I won’t let them,” I said, a growl accompanying my words.

At that moment, I felt like a hypocrite.

Elliot must be in a terrible mental state right now, worrying about his fate, about whether I would ever forgive him, but I needed time to reflect on us, on our current situation.

I was done making my mate wait. Even though Elliot tried to kill Zack, there was no denying the cold hard facts.

Elliot was born to be mine, no matter what happened next.

“Good. Fix what you broke, Simon,” Julian patted my shoulder.

“I didn’t break anything. Elliot betrayed our, no, my trust,” I reminded Julian.

Acknowledging the truth still hurt me deeply, but I needed to move forward.

“Yeah, but you giving him the silent treatment isn’t helping anyone,” Julian said.

“I get it,” I grumbled.

I carried the tray to Elliot’s room. Spencer was once again on watch duty. I guessed Zack ultimately decided Elliot only needed one guard instead of two.

“I was expecting you two days ago,” Spencer said. “Finally made up your mind?”

“It’s complicated,” I muttered, but provided little else.

I wasn’t in a particularly sharing mood today.

“Love always is,” Spencer said.

“How is Elliot?” I asked.

Why was I delaying this task on purpose? Maybe it was because this meeting filled me with trepidation.

One wrong word from Elliot could set me off. I was still a long way from forgiving him.

All I needed to do was listen to him, I reminded myself.

“Quiet,” Spencer answered. “I don’t think he’s doing so well, Simon. Captivity doesn’t agree with him, with any raven shifter, really. He skipped dinner last night as well.”

Spencer unlocked the door, and I entered a dark room. Elliot had drawn all the curtains close.

Good thing our kind had excellent eyesight. I spotted Elliot curled on the bed, his back facing me.

After placing the tray down on a nearby table, I turned the light on. Elliot groaned.

“Go away,” he whispered. “Wait, that scent’s familiar. Am I dreaming, or is that you, Simon?”

“It’s me,” I answered.

Elliot still didn’t move from his position. Concerned, I walked around the bed to peer down at him.

Elliot looked like he hadn’t been sleeping either. Under his messy hair, his face looked much too pale for my liking. There were also dark circles under his eyes.

He was probably starving as well. I kneeled so we could look at each other face-to-face. I avoided cringing as Elliot reached out and touched my unshaven cheek.

It was a painfully tender gesture. Then he poked a finger into my nose, and I relaxed, gripping his fingers.

I set his hand back on the bed, not letting go.

I thought I wouldn't survive this encounter. That statement sounded dramatic, but it was true.

Dread nearly paralyzed me each time I thought of this moment, but now that I was here, it wasn't as bad as I thought.

"You're actually real?" Elliot phrased that as a question more than a statement.

His breathing turned a little ragged, and he clutched my fingers tightly. There was a hungry desperation in his eyes that alarmed me a little.

"Despite everything I've done, you came back," he whispered.

"I can't stay away from my mate," I said.

At those words, Elliot released my hands. He buried his face into the pillow and started to sob.

"Elliot, don't cry," I said, reaching out to comb my fingers through his tangled hair.

Neither of us spoke for the next few minutes. Elliot needed to let out his grief, his anger out, so I let him.

Finally, he stopped and looked at me. I thumbed away the tears on his cheeks.

"I'm sorry it took me a while to figure things out, but I'm here now. I'm here to listen to your side of the story," I said.

"I need water," Elliot whispered.

"Sure. You should eat something as well. Spencer mentioned you refused to eat dinner," I said, bringing the tray over.

Elliot slowly sat up, then flung the sheets aside. He ended up sitting on the floor, cross-legged.

I regarded him for a moment before joining him.

“I’m sick of lying in bed,” Elliot explained.

I set the tray on the floor and gave him the bottle of water, which he drank in one gulp.

Elliot hacked and coughed, probably from drinking too fast, so I had to thump him lightly on the back.

“Food next,” I pointed out.

“So bossy,” Elliot murmured. “Still, I prefer you being bossy as opposed to not talking to me at all.”

I handed Elliot the bowl of oats and a spoon. Elliot took it and began to eat.

He took small bites, glancing at me occasionally, as if he wanted to make sure I was still there.

“Not going anywhere,” I reminded him.

“Part of me still wonders if you’re a figment of my imagination,” Elliot said.

He returned his spoon and his half-eaten bowl back on the tray. I tipped his chin using two fingers and kissed him, slow and gentle.

Elliot gripped my shoulder and returned my kiss with equal passion. He shut his eyes.

I similarly enjoyed the moment, even though at the back of my mind, I knew Zack tasked me with finding answers. Venom was growing impatient.

The bears wanted a quick resolution to this mess, but screw them. Elliot and I were just getting started.

“I was so mad at you,” I finally said when we both pulled away from each other.

“I know, and I deserve your hate,” Elliot said.

“I don’t hate you,” I said firmly. “I don’t think I ever will.”

“You’re too good for me, Simon. I always knew that,” he began.

Elliot looked away from my gaze. He drew his knees to his chest and stared at the tray.

Elliot continued, "You're perfect, and I'm... well, I'm a screw-up."

"Don't say that. I'm far from perfect. As a friend recently reminded me, we all make mistakes," I said.

"I lied," Elliot admitted.

About what? I wanted to ask but decided to watch my tongue. Elliot had finally decided to open up to me.

Right now, the trust between us was fragile, but it was there.

"Ethan and I aren't estranged," Elliot said. "He's being held captive by my lead alpha, Duane."

Elliot shuddered. He seemed cold, so I took my jacket off and placed it around his thin shoulders.

Then I drew him close. All the tension in Elliot's body ebbed away. He rested his head on my shoulder.

"Tell me more," I urged. "Why does Duane have your brother?"

"Ethan and I made plans to leave the flock without telling Duane, but someone ratted us out," Elliot said.

"Start at the beginning," I suggested, because nothing Elliot had said made any sense yet.

Still, knowing Elliot didn't have a choice, that someone else was indeed pulling his strings, gave me a measure of relief.

Elliot told me everything, how Ethan and he came to be in Duane's flock, how Duane treated his flock members like playthings.

Hearing the way the alphas in his flock operated made me sick to the stomach.

"Elliot, I hate to ask you this, but can I bring Zack over here? He needs to hear this," I said.

Elliot bit his lower lip, looking unsure.

I continued, "Elliot, you can trust him. I trust Zack with my life. If he knows the truth, you won't have to stay locked up in



here forever. I'll convince him and the flock that I'll watch you. You can stay with Corey and me."

"I can stay with you?" Elliot asked, hope in his voice. "See you every day?"

"Not only that," I confirmed. "With Zack on our side, we might also be able to do something about your brother's situation. You're not alone in this, Elliot. I'm here, and I won't leave your side ever again."

"You have a big heart, Simon," Elliot finally said. He stubbornly shook his head. "I can't let you take on my problems. That's not fair, but you're right. The person I tried to kill deserves an explanation."

Elliot ran his fingers down my arm, looking thoughtful.

"It's strange, but I feel so much stronger when I'm with you. When I was alone, I felt like I was spiraling into depression and hopelessness," Elliot said.

I kissed the top of his head. "Will you forgive me for taking this long to speak to you?"

Elliot shook his head. Determination flared in his eyes.

"There's nothing to forgive. I don't deserve your kindness, Simon, but give me a chance to redeem myself. Let me prove to you I deserve to be your mate," Elliot said, a plea in his voice.



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## ELLIOT

“A lright, but you need to learn to forgive yourself first,”  
Simon said.

Simon kissed me on the cheek again, and I wanted so much more. I couldn't get enough of his tender touches, of his sweet kisses.

Feeling bold, I embraced him. Simon simply held me. Cocooned in his warmth, I realized how lucky I was to have this wonderful man by my side.

Even now, I knew I didn't deserve him, but Simon was mine, and he said he was planning on sticking right by my side.

For the first time since Duane caught Ethan and me leaving the flock house, hope burned inside me like a bright flame.

“I'll call Zack over,” Simon said.

He pressed a gentle kiss to my mouth before leaving, as if he knew I needed the extra reassurance.

With nothing else to do but wait, I paced the length of the small room.

Five minutes later, Simon returned with Zack. Thankfully, Zack's scary vampire mate was nowhere in sight.

For someone who'd been stabbed three days ago, Zack looked better than I imagined.

He could walk on his own for one, and his face certainly had more color.

“Elliot,” Zack said, inclining his head. He had chosen to sit on the wooden chair next to the desk. “Simon told me you have something important to tell us?”

“First of all, I wanted to apologize for everything,” I began. After taking a deep breath, I continued, “For lying to Simon, you, and the rest of your flock. For trying to take your life.” I grimaced at my last three words. A less understanding lead alpha would have ordered me killed for my actions.

Simon sat on the edge of the bed. Simon patted the space next to him. Relieved, I joined him.

The bed was so narrow that our shoulders and legs were touching. Simon’s presence next to me gave me comfort and the courage to tell his lead alpha the truth.

So I repeated what I told Simon earlier.

“The leader of the Salt Stone Flock, you mentioned his name was Duane?” Zack asked, furrowing his brows.

“Duane Dixon,” I confirmed.

“Zack, do you know him?” Simon asked. “Why does Duane want you dead in the first place?”

“I’ve asked his second, Ray, about that. Ray simply told me to mind my own business,” I said.

“Big, blond, blue-eyed, and comes with a horrible personality?” Zack asked.

I nodded in confirmation. Initially, I was worried about this meeting, but now, curiosity got the better of me.

I wondered what Duane’s connection to Zack was because the two men were exact opposites.

“How do you know Duane?” I asked.

“Duane used to be a member of my first flock,” Zack confirmed, looking deeply troubled. “He was ambitious and wanted to become one of our enforcers. I knew he wasn’t a good fit from the start.”

“What did he do?” Simon asked.

“Nearly killed another alpha outside of the challenge circle. Duane also received complaints from three omegas. They said he was too pushy. If I didn’t look into his behavior, more ravens would have gotten hurt,” Zack said.

I silently processed his words. Zack continued. “I eventually had to kick him out of the group. I didn’t realize Duane had formed his own flock.”

Zack gave me a grave look. Both Zack and I seemed to come to a silent understanding.

A monster like Duane had no right to be the leader of any group.

“From what Ethan and I heard, Duane managed to inherit a huge chunk of cash from his uncle. He used that money to purchase the Salt Stone Mansion and established his flock there,” I said.

It still made me angry every time I thought of how naïve Ethan and I had been, how hungry we were to belong to a group.

I took a deep breath before continuing, “Duane lures strays like Ethan and me to his place, promising us protection and a place to call home. In the end, we’re just toys to him.”

Simon heard the bitterness in my voice and slipped one arm across my shoulders, pulling me close.

I rested my head against his chest, wishing I could turn back time. If I had a do-over, I would tell Simon right away that Duane sent me here for less-than-noble reasons.

Together, the two of us would have found a solution.

“I never meant to hurt anyone,” I whispered those words more to myself than to Zack or Simon.

Neither Simon nor Zack said anything. I continued, “I just wanted to save Ethan. In the end, I messed everything up. You guys have been nothing but kind to me, and I betrayed you all.”

I buried my face in Simon’s shoulder, feeling raw and vulnerable. Simon reached out, stroking my hair until I calmed down.

I trailed my fingers down his muscled arm. His skin was feverishly hot, and I could sense his raven coiled and waiting to strike.

I looked into his eyes, which had bled to gold. My Simon was pissed off for my sake, and I wasn't sure what to do. Reassure him I'm fine, when I really wasn't?

Duane still had Ethan, and I was still a prisoner of the Moon Burrow Ravens.

"I believe you," Zack eventually said.

Simon's overwhelming aura had captured most of my attention. I'd conveniently forgotten Zack was in the same room.

"Zack, Elliot regrets his actions deeply, and he deserves a second chance," Simon began.

"Do you speak for your mate, Simon?" Zack asked mildly.

I lifted my head and gave Zack a defiant stare.

"I can speak for myself," I said, finding my voice. "If you give me another chance, I won't waste it. I'll find a way to redeem myself. Promise."

"I will need to speak to the rest of the flock," Zack said. "I'm not sure how the Salt Stone Flock operates, but here, everyone has a say."

Another difference between Duane's flock and Zack's, I thought numbly. Of course, redemption wouldn't be that easy.

"We'll have a meeting about Elliot's fate tonight. Simon, you'll be responsible for ensuring our prisoner behaves himself," Zack said.

I swallowed. Everything happened so quickly, my head was still spinning.

Zack rose to leave, but he lingered in the doorway. He looked at me, and for the first time since I met him, his eyes turned bright gold.

I sucked in a breath as Zack showed me a brief glimpse of his inner raven, of his true strength. His aura flared out, bright and

hot like the scorching sun.

It felt like a punch in the gut. Even though I was sitting down, I had to grip Simon for support.

Then Zack toned it down, and his eyes were back to normal again. My heart thumped like a jackrabbit's. For that brief moment, Zack showed me why he was Moon Burrow's Raven King.

If Zack had his guards up the night I tried to kill him, I never would have stood a chance against him.

"I don't like what Duane's been doing either, but Elliot, Salt Stone is far from my territory," Zack said. "Tonight, we shall see if you stay or go."

Then he closed the door behind him.

"Elliot, this is good," Simon said. "Things are going exactly as planned."

"How is any of this good? What if your flock mates ultimately decide I'm a threat that needs to be eliminated?" I asked.

"Then it's simple. I'll pack my bags, and we'll leave Moon Burrow together. The next thing we'll do is rescue your brother," Simon simply said.

I stared at him, wondering if he was pulling my leg, but Simon's expression remained intense, completely serious.

There and then, I realized that Simon had accepted that I was his mate, that wherever destiny sent me, he wasn't far behind.

Butterflies fluttered in my stomach.

"Simon, Moon Burrow is your home. What about Corey? You'll leave him behind?" I asked, trying to reason with my bull-headed alpha.

Still, a selfish part of me was relieved by his answer. Whatever happened from this point onward, I would always have Simon. I was no longer on my own.

"Corey will understand. Sure, I'd miss being here, and I'd even miss some of my flock mates, but you're my mate, Elliot."

Simon grinned at me, and without warning, kissed me on the mouth. I was too stunned by his bravado to respond.

“I go where you go,” Simon stated.

“You’re clingy,” I teased. Some of the tension in my body disappeared.

“Well, you like me clingy,” Simon said.

I hesitated. “Do you have to leave me now?”

Simon nodded. “I need to have a talk with a few of my flock mates and convince them to take our side.”

I liked that Simon used the word ‘our’ instead of ‘my’. It made it seem like we were a pair, even though I’d done nothing so far to prove I was worthy of him.

That would soon change, I reminded myself. From this point onwards, there was no reason for me to lie anymore.

Tonight, at the flock gathering, I would do my best to convince Simon’s flock mates I wasn’t a liability to them.





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## SIMON

“I was sent here by my lead alpha, Duane Dixon, to kill Zack in exchange for my brother’s safety,” Elliot finished.

Despite looking on the verge of breaking down earlier, I was proud of my mate for bravely speaking in a crowded room.

Elliot stood his ground and hadn’t wavered the entire time. He didn’t paint himself as a victim either; he simply told everyone the hard and painful truth.

I looked at everyone in the face and could tell half of my flock mates wanted Elliot gone while the other half remained unsure about him.

Despite spending the rest of the afternoon trying to convince my new family about Elliot’s innocence, some of them were on the fence about allowing him to stay.

I understood the root of their uncertainty.

Older members of Zack’s original flock, like Spencer, Paige, and Mike, had already gone through plenty of ordeals before Zack relocated the group to Moon Burrow.

They didn’t want additional tension in the flock. The newer and more insecure members would probably side with the majority.

“He’s lucky to be alive. The bears clearly want him gone. I feel the same way,” someone remarked.

I glared at Tucker, the speaker. Tucker was a new alpha in our flock, who joined at the same time as Fred.

I didn't know him well, although we'd gone on some patrols together.

"Tuck, you and I haven't even been here long, so let the older members talk," Fred said. "As for me, I'll take Elliot's side. I like him."

"You like him? That's it?" Mike asked, shaking his head and looking annoyed. "My wife is about to give birth soon and I'm concerned about her and our baby's safety. So no, Elliot has to go."

Fair point, I thought. If I were in Mike's shoes, would I feel the same way about an outsider in our flock? Perhaps.

Elliot remained where he was, standing stiffly in the center of the room.

Now that he'd finished saying his bit, I felt it was fine to join him. I stood next to him and reached for his hand. My mate flashed me a grateful smile.

I searched his eyes and knew self-doubt still lingered inside him. Tonight's outcome changed nothing.

No matter what, we'd be together.

From a human's perspective, it would seem crazy. I would follow Elliot no matter where he went.

We hadn't known each other long after all, but I knew Elliot would turn a new leaf.

Shifters were built in pairs and I had finally found the mate I had been looking for my entire life.

Sure, it would hurt to sever ties with the Moon Burrow Ravens, but I'd survive somehow.

I'd already told Corey about our plans before this meeting. He didn't seem too happy about it, but he still wished us luck.

Even if I was no longer a member of the flock, Corey and I would remain in touch. We were blood after all.

"It's clear as day that Elliot is Simon's mate. They come as a pair. If we send Elliot away, we'll also lose Simon, a valued

member of our flock and one of our best fighters,” Spencer said.

The fact that our beta chose to side with me surprised and warmed me at the same time.

Maybe while Spencer was guarding Elliot, he’d grown to know my mate a little better. Spencer gave me a nod.

“Simon, is that true? You’ll leave with Elliot?” John asked me, frowning.

“It’s true. I won’t allow Elliot to face his enemies alone,” I said.

Elliot shot me a concerned look, then bit his lower lip. I knew Elliot thought me leaving the flock wasn’t the best idea in the world.

Elliot probably believed he was better off fighting his own battles and didn’t want to get me hurt on his account.

If he brought that issue up again, I would simply remind him that I was a grown adult man, capable of making my own decisions.

Sure, when I discovered Elliot by the roadside, it felt like my entire life underwent a massive upheaval, but I didn’t consider that a bad thing.

“I don’t trust Elliot after what he did, but we can’t lose Simon,” John said with a sigh.

He looked at his husband and teenage son. They gave him twin nods of encouragement.

“Elliot has my family’s vote to stay,” John said.

“Look, I’m not expecting anyone to change their opinion of my mate at the drop of a hat,” I said. “If he’s allowed to stay, Elliot would be under my care, and I’ll make sure he doesn’t get into trouble.”

The other raven shifters murmured among themselves after my outburst.

They understood that by taking Elliot under my wing, I would be responsible for him and his actions.

“I want to show everyone I’m capable of change, of redemption,” Elliot said firmly at my side. I quietly admired Elliot’s quiet strength.

“We’ll do this the old-fashioned way,” Zack said. “Everyone will write on a piece of paper whether they want Elliot to stay or go.”

Pieces of paper and pens were distributed. Afterwards, Thad went around collecting everyone’s responses in a glass jar.

After tallying everyone’s votes, Zack announced the results.

My heart beat in trepidation, and I held Elliot’s hand the entire time. He must be more nervous than me, than anyone else in this room.

“Elliot may stay, but he’ll be under Simon’s watchful eye. Corey, do you mind if he bunks in with you and Simon?” Zack asked my younger brother.

Corey glanced at me and Elliot for a moment, then shook his head.

“I trust Simon, and I know him better than anyone. He’ll keep his word,” Corey said.

The meeting wasn’t over. There were other matters the flock needed to discuss, but since Elliot wasn’t officially part of our group yet, we exited the meeting hall.

Part of me wondered how Zack would break the news to the bears. Venom would certainly not be happy, but I would let Zack deal with Venom.

“Don’t you need to be in there? I can wait in the guest room,” Elliot offered as we exited the log house.

“It’s fine. Corey will update me later,” I assured him.

We walked quietly to the cabin. Every step I took seemed a little lighter. It felt like an immense weight had been lifted off my shoulders.

Back in that crowded meeting room, I was already thinking about the worst-case scenario.

I even made a list in my head about what we'd need to take with us if Elliot and I had to leave the compound right away.

We were safe for now, but we still had problems to deal with. Duane still held Ethan captive, and he didn't strike me as a patient man.

Duane probably expected to hear from Elliot soon. What were we going to do about Ethan?

Asking my flock mates for help with rescuing Ethan didn't seem like the best idea in the world. Right now, my adopted family barely tolerated Elliot's presence.

Elliot and I were alone in this matter, but perhaps it was enough. Ethan was important to Elliot, so I'd do my best to help him out.

"Thank you, Simon," Elliot murmured.

"For what?" I asked.

I broke away from my current train of thoughts and decided to leave Elliot's personal problems for later.

Right now, it seemed Elliot wanted to have a heart-to-heart talk.

"For convincing your flock mates to take my side. It couldn't have been easy," Elliot said.

"I'll do anything for you," I said without hesitation.

Deep in my heart, I knew I was telling Elliot the truth.

I would travel to the ends of the earth just to be with my mate, and I had no doubt Elliot would do the same.

"I know. That's what scares me the most," he whispered. "Simon, fate granted me a fresh start. I promise you I'll never lie to you ever again. I'll always be true to you."

"Same here. My heart is yours, Elliot. Now and forever," I said, reaching for his hands.

Tonight, it felt like Elliot and I had reached a new level of understanding.

We stood on the cabin porch, facing each other. Since everyone else was still back at the log house, it was quiet out here, and we had the place to ourselves.

I didn't need to worry that some nosy neighbor was spying on us. I cupped Elliot's cheek and leaned in to kiss him, taking my time.

He responded, gripping my left shoulder for support.

Wanting more of my mate, I slipped my hands under his shirt, touching his heated flesh.

Elliot let out a muffled groan as we parted from the kiss. Elliot had to only utter one word.

"Inside," he whispered against my ear, and I lost all sense of control.

I pulled him close for another kiss as we stumbled inside the cabin. Not bothering with lights, I led Elliot to my bedroom.

Once we were inside, I kicked the door shut. I backed Elliot onto my bed and reached for the hem of his shirt.

He lifted his hands, allowing me to peel it off. The sight of him half-naked nearly drove me insane with lust.

Elliot reached for the hem of my shirt next.

Feeling impatient, I took it off myself. Elliot licked his lips, and his eyes were bright with desire. Elliot fumbled with my belt buckle.

"Why is this so hard to take off?" Elliot grumbled.

I couldn't help it; I laughed, only for Elliot to glare at me.

"Allow me," I offered.

Elliot stepped back and took off his pants and underwear. I did the same, and finally, both of us were completely naked.

"How do you want me?" Elliot asked, suddenly looking a little shy and unlike himself.

"Elliot, tell me if we're going too fast," I told him. "I don't want to rush anything."

“Simon, I want you right here and now. Is that plain enough?” Elliot demanded.

“Get on the bed. Lie on your back,” I growled out.

Elliot did as I asked. I took a few seconds to admire my gorgeous mate before climbing on top of him.

He rested his hands on my shoulders. I leaned down and plundered Elliot’s mouth. This time, I kissed him roughly and without mercy.

I left more kisses down his neck, collarbones, his chest, and abdomen.

Elliot sighed above me as I curled my fingers around his shaft and started working him.

“Simon.” When Elliot whispered my name, I was nearly tempted to flip him over and claim him in the most intimate way possible, but I wasn’t a beast.

I wanted to take my time with foreplay, to see Elliot’s entire body relax and to see his face filled with ecstasy.

I must’ve done a good job because pleas started spilling from his lips.

“Please what?” I asked, in a teasing mood.

“Take me, Simon. Make me yours,” Elliot whispered.

Taking that as a sign that tonight was meant to be, I quickly opened the drawer next to the bed and retrieved a bottle of lube.

I hefted his legs over my shoulders. It didn’t escape me that his cock was already long and hard for me.

My own dick felt close to bursting, and we hadn’t even begun yet.

I slid one, then two fingers inside Elliot’s ass. He groaned when I applied a generous amount of lubricant inside him.

Once I finished prepping him for access, I discarded the lube and positioned my cock at his entrance.



I entered him, slow and easy. Elliot gripped my arms, his nails leaving small half-crescent marks on my skin, which I didn't mind one bit.

Finally, I was buried to the hilt inside him.

"You okay?" I had to ask him.

"Yes, but please move," he whispered.

I started with a slow rhythm, then picked up the pace when moans of pleasure started spilling out from Elliot's lips.

Sealing my mouth against his, I rode him until sweat coated our bodies. My balls tightened against my body. I groaned but told myself to last a little longer.

Each time our bodies joined, it felt like a piece of my inner raven, my soul, floated outwards to touch Elliot's.

Before Elliot, sex had always been transactional, nothing special. With Elliot, it felt mind-blowing and magical.

It didn't take long for Elliot to reach climax. After I kept aiming for his sweet spot, Elliot came, screaming out my name.

I wasn't far behind. One last push and I emptied my balls. Afterwards, I collapsed next to him, feeling completely sated.

Elliot wore a languid expression on his face, telling me I'd done a good job. He snuggled close to me, and I wrapped my arms and legs around him.

"I love you, Simon," he whispered. "Before I met you, I never believed in fated mates, but here we are."

"Here we are," I repeated. "Love you back."

Maybe Elliot and I said those three powerful words in the heat of the moment, but I didn't care.

It meant the world to me that Elliot was trying so hard to redeem himself in the eyes of my flock.

At the same time, Elliot was also worrying constantly about Ethan.

We lay there, not speaking for a few moments, content in each other's arms.

"What happens now?" Elliot whispered.

"When will Duane contact you again?" I asked him.

"Duane probably expected me to contact him two days ago," Elliot said with a broken laugh.

I reached for his fingers, and he calmed down.

"Don't worry, Simon. I'll come up with a believable excuse," he told me.

"Let's brainstorm together," I told him.

Elliot's face softened as he released my fingers to touch my cheek.

"You're really so sweet and thoughtful. Has anyone told you that?" Elliot asked.

"I'm only sweet with you," I said with a scoff. "Most of my flock mates think I'm too serious and boring."

"You're none of those things," Elliot said. "Who said that to you? I'll kill them."

Elliot then closed his mouth, looking worried all of a sudden.

"Elliot, I can tell when you're telling a joke," I told him.

"I'm sorry. It wasn't an appropriate thing to say," Elliot said.

"When we're alone, you can say whatever you want to me," I told him firmly. "I won't tattle on my mate."

Elliot relaxed, looking relieved by my words.

"That's good to hear. You know what? Let's relax for tonight. I just want to cuddle with you and maybe watch some TV," Elliot suggested.

"Sounds like a good idea," I agreed.

We both ended up taking a long and luxurious shower together. Once we slipped under the sheets, Elliot promptly fell asleep even before we could pick a movie.

He must be exhausted, I thought, turning on the TV but muting the sound. I finished watching the B-rate action movie, with Elliot curled up next to me.

I wasn't feeling sleepy at all. The movie had sparked an intriguing idea that I wanted to discuss with Zack and Elliot tomorrow.



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## ELLIOT

“It could work,” Zack finally said after Simon explained his idea.

I stared at Zack, shocked by his response. I had been so sure he would completely shut it down.

“I’m not so sure about this. Simon, if possible, I don’t want to get Zack involved in this,” I told my mate.

I had already tried to kill his lead alpha, after all. Asking Zack for such a huge favor was out of the question.

“There is something in it for me as well,” Zack told me.

The three of us agreed to have this meeting on the porch. Simon and I chose the porch swing while Zack sat in an old rocking chair.

Corey had stopped by earlier, with a plate of freshly baked brownies and iced tea for the three of us.

The situation felt surreal and normal, considering I had been a prisoner just last night.

It was a beautiful morning. Dappled sunlight shone through the lush oak and ash trees surrounding the compound, and the sky was a clear blue.

I wished my brother could be here as well. Ethan would be free soon, I reminded myself. For now, I needed to be mentally present in this important conversation.

“What do you mean?” I asked Zack.

“Duane needs to be stopped. I feel partially responsible for letting him loose in the world,” Zack said.

You can’t control any of Duane’s actions, I wanted to say to Zack. Eventually, I decided to keep my thoughts to myself, just in case Zack changed his mind.

“So you don’t mind being a prop in Elliot’s plans?” Simon asked.

“Not at all,” Zack said. “If this works, then we’ll be able to kill two birds with one stone. You two can rescue Ethan and take care of Duane at the same time. Simon, ask the others if anyone would be willing to volunteer for the mission.”

“We can’t do that,” I blurted. “Involving you is one thing, but the other Moon Burrow Ravens? That’s asking for too much.”

“Elliot, you need to be realistic. The two of you can’t take on Duane’s entire flock by yourselves,” Zack reminded me gently. I was aware he was right. He continued, “I’m sorry I can’t come with the two of you.”

“That’s okay. The fact that you agreed to our plan at all is amazing,” I told him.

Besides, Zack was already playing a crucial role, and he had his hands full running his own flock.

Zack nodded. “So, when do we do this?”

“This afternoon, if that’s okay. Time’s running short for Ethan,” Simon answered for both of us.

“This afternoon is fine. Once the two of you have set everything up, call me,” Zack said.

He finished his brownie and then left us. Feeling buzzed from the meeting, I finished my iced tea, then remembered I had to contact Duane.

I really wasn’t looking forward to this part.

“I can’t believe this is really happening,” I whispered to Simon.

When Simon pitched his idea to me earlier this morning, I thought the plan was too crazy. I told him it all depended on

Zack's answer.

Never in my wildest imagination did I expect Simon's lead alpha to cooperate. With shaking fingers, I pulled out my cellphone.

"Should I call or text him?" I asked Simon.

"Text him. Make the message curt, like you can't afford to make a call," Simon said.

That made sense. I was glad Simon was right next to me to provide feedback because I was so nervous about this part.

What if Duane sensed something was up? What were the chances he had already killed Ethan?

Stop it, I silently yelled at myself. Pushing my doubts aside, I typed out a message on my phone and showed it to Simon before sending it out.

"Delete the part where you apologize to him for the delay. Everything else looks good," Simon commented.

**ELLIOT: I SECURED A PRIVATE MEETING WITH ZACK TODAY. Don't send Ray. I'll find a way to return on my own.**

**It didn't take long for Duane to call. I glanced at Simon, who shook his head. I quickly sent Duane another text.**

**Elliot: Can't take calls now. I'm being closely watched. Will contact you later.**

**Duane: This better not be a prank, Elliot. My patience has run out.**

**Elliot: Zack dies today. I'll show you proof.**

**Duane: You better.**

DUANE DIDN'T CONTACT ME AGAIN. I LET OUT A SIGH OF relief and glanced at Simon.

"I'm glad that's done, but we still have plenty to do," I said.

“You gather everything we need. I’ll be in charge of recruitment,” Simon said.

He sounded so confident, but I wasn’t too sure anyone would want to help us out. After all, I hadn’t given any valid reason for these raven shifters to trust me.

They trust Simon, I reminded myself. For now, that had to be enough.

“What if no one wants to volunteer?” I asked in a small voice.

Simon edged closer to me, sliding his arm over my shoulders. I rested my head against his chest. My heart beat in trepidation.

This was it, I thought, nerves frayed. If Duane didn’t buy our little act, then everything would be game over. Ethan would die.

The stakes were high, but this might also be my only chance to save my brother.

“They will,” Simon reassured me. “I can be pretty convincing if I have to be.”

“I never wanted to get Zack or your other flock mates involved in my mess, but Zack’s right. We’ll need all the extra help we can get,” I admitted. “I just feel so selfish right now, undeserving of anyone’s help.”

“You’ll return the favor someday,” Simon told me.

“If we manage to come out of this alive,” I reminded him.

Lifting my head, I stared at Simon for a few moments. My heart was a tangled mess of emotions. I had just met my wonderful mate. What if I ended up losing him as well?

“I think our odds are pretty good,” Simon said.

“You sound so confident,” I said warily.

“Of course. One of us had to be.”

Simon placed a gentle kiss on my mouth, restoring some of my confidence.



When he pulled away, Simon said, “Come on, we have work to do.”

\* \* \*

IN THE END, I DECIDED TO HELP SIMON WITH RECRUITMENT. IT felt wrong, making my mate fight my battles for me. Besides, I felt like I needed to speak to Simon’s flock mates face-to-face.

I wanted to show them I was sincere. Also, I wanted to reassure them personally that I would never forget the kindness they’d shown me during my brief stay in Moon Burrow.

Simon was right. I simply had to make it up to him and all the raven shifters in his flock someday.

If we managed to pull this off, then Ethan and I might have spots in Zack’s flock.

The possibility of that future seemed so far away, so I decided to put all my energies into my current task.

In the end, Simon and I managed to find four willing volunteers— John, Spencer, Tucker, and Corey.

I hadn’t been too sure about Corey, but Simon reassured me his brother was one of the best fliers in the flock, so I reluctantly agreed.

With that task done, Simon and I drove to the outskirts of the Moon Burrow Woods to find the perfect area to stage our little drama.

The area we ended up choosing was a narrow and winding road that few people used.

“Even the locals usually use the larger and more straightforward road leading to town,” Simon had explained.

We’d been there for an hour, arranging everything and making sure our little set was perfect. We hadn’t seen any vehicles pass by either. So far, so good.

“This place is perfect,” I told him.

Simon picked up one of the bottles containing the fluid we had recently made, and I hesitantly did the same. He volunteered his car for the staging.

I looked at his pristine leather seats, then the bottle in my hand, which contained a mix of corn syrup, dishwashing liquid, and some food coloring.

Simon had found the recipe on the internet. After a few experiments, we found the perfect concoction for fake blood.

We even tested it on our skin to ensure it looked realistic.

“I’m so sorry about this. I’ll pay for the dry cleaning,” I told him.

Simon laughed it off, like it didn’t matter. By the time Zack arrived, the car looked like the unfortunate victim of a road accident.

Dirt and mud streaked the vehicle’s wheels and body. Fake blood covered the seats. Zack whistled, looking suitably impressed.

Simon finally popped the trunk open. We left a trail of fake blood on the lid as well, to make it appear there was some sort of struggle with that part of the car.

Zack picked up the metal chain inside the trunk and nodded in satisfaction.

I glanced upwards at the blazing midday sun and cloudless blue sky. The natural lighting was perfect.

“Alright, let’s do this,” Zack said.

“I’m sorry,” I murmured, picking up another bottle. Grimacing, I splashed it over Zack’s white shirt. I added, “I’ll do your laundry.”

Zack only looked amused. I took a step back, and Simon and I studied my work.

“How do I look?” Zack asked.

“Like the survivor of a zombie apocalypse? Maybe I splashed too much on you,” I muttered.

“Good thing I brought a spare shirt,” Simon said.

“Thank you,” I mouthed to my mate.

Simon only winked at me. He handed a fresh shirt to Zack, which Zack changed into without any complaints.

My second attempt was much better. Zack stood still as Simon tied his hands behind his back. Then he climbed inside the trunk. Simon also restrained his legs.

“Okay,” Simon finally said, turning to me. “This is it. Are you ready?”

I rubbed my sweaty palms on my jeans and nodded. The staging had been the easiest part of the plan.

Now it fell to me to convince Duane I had somehow managed to injure Zack gravely and stow him in the back of my stolen car.

I studied our little setup again. Something wasn't quite right and everything needed to be perfect.

“Something's missing. I look too tidy,” I told Simon.

“You're right,” he said. “Mess your hair a little and rumple your clothes.”

I did as Simon suggested. He walked to the edge of the road, grabbed a fistful of dirt, and returned to me.

After he smeared some of the dirt and applied more fake blood over my shirt and pants, I opened my phone to see how I looked.

Meanwhile, Zack remained in the open trunk, cool as a cucumber.

“Perfect,” Simon told me, kissing me on the mouth.

“What was that for?” I asked.

“Luck,” he said. “Okay, I'll go hide in the bushes now.”

“Zack, are you doing okay in there?” I asked, approaching the trunk.

“A little uncomfortable, but fine,” he answered.

Zack closed his eyes and stilled his entire body. I had to admit, Zack looked great, playing the part of an unconscious man.

After taking a deep breath, I called Duane. He picked up right away. I guess he was expecting my call.

“Elliot,” he growled out my name, like the sound of it displeased him.

“It’s done. I have Zack,” I said in a rush, like I was in a hurry to leave. Momentary silence on the other end.

“Duane, are you still there?” I demanded. “Because I don’t have much time.”

“Show me his corpse,” Duane demanded.

We had expected this. I turned on the video function on my phone. It showed me, looking like I had come out of a cat fight.

I cursed, pretended to fumble with my phone.

After reversing the camera, I showed Duane Zack, lying in the trunk, and silently prayed that he believed that Zack was truly incapacitated.

“He’s still breathing. I can see the rise and fall of his chest,” Duane said.

“He’s not dead, but he will be soon. It took a few tries, but I got his heart with the knife,” I told Duane. “In a matter of minutes, he’ll bleed out.”

“You did all this on your own?” Duane asked, sounding doubtful.

“Of course not,” I said with a scoff.

Simon and I had gone through all the potential ways my conversation with Duane could go.

We both agreed it wouldn’t be believable if I had managed to incapacitate the lead alpha of the Moon Burrow Ravens and somehow found a way to escape on my own.

“I enlisted the help of another alpha, someone who wants Zack dead as much as you,” I said. “He helped me arrange a private

meeting with Zack. That's why it took so long. I had to earn his trust."

"Where's this alpha now?" Duane demanded.

"Distracting the rest of the flock. He's pretty ambitious, you see. He wants to take Zack's place, so I know he'll fulfill his end of the bargain," I said.

Duane was silent for a long time. I was terrified he didn't buy our act one bit, but then he started laughing and he couldn't seem to stop.

There and then, I knew our ploy had worked. Stage one was completed. It was time for stage two.



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## ELLIOT

“Duane? I can’t linger here any longer,” I said, slamming the trunk shut. Then I switched back to a voice call. I continued, “I’m returning to Salt Stone with Zack’s body. I expect to find Ethan waiting for me.”

“Of course, Elliot. You’ll have your brother. I still can’t believe you actually did it,” Duane said, sounding extremely pleased with himself. “We’ll see you soon.”

Duane finally ended the call. All the tension in my body eased. Simon left his hiding place.

He helped Zack out of his restraints before returning to my side.

“We actually did it,” I told Simon and Zack. “I didn’t think it would work.”

“I wish you both success, especially in the second phase of your operation,” Zack told me. To Simon, he said, “Call the others. Time is of the essence.”

Simon nodded. Twenty minutes later, John, Tucker, and Corey were crammed in the back seat of Simon’s car.

I would’ve offered to drive, except my nerves got in the way. Anxiety radiated from the pit of my stomach and spread to the rest of me.

This was too easy. What if Duane only pretended to buy our little drama?

Simon and I had considered that possibility, I reminded myself. We were prepared for anything.

“How are the three of you doing back there?” I asked the other raven shifters.

“Cramped,” grumbled Tucker.

“We’re good,” Corey said good-naturedly.

I highly doubted that, given Corey sat between two large alphas. He acted like a buffer, since I noticed John and Tucker didn’t get along and sometimes sniped at each other.

“Thank you for coming, everyone,” I said.

“I owe Simon a couple of favors. This is my way of repaying him,” John said.

“Someone needs to watch my brother’s back,” Corey pointed out.

“And you, Tucker? Why did you volunteer?” Simon asked. “You were against Elliot staying at the meeting.”

“I’m bored and wanted to see some action,” Tucker responded. He shrugged. “I have to admit, I initially didn’t trust you, Elliot. After Simon and you came up with this interesting plan, I changed my mind.”

“I just wanted to remind everything about the danger we’re up against. If anyone changes their minds, Simon and I won’t hold it against you,” I reminded the three raven shifters.

I didn’t bother trying to dissuade Simon. My stubborn mate would stick by my side no matter what happened.

When no one contradicted me, I let out a sigh of relief.

It was a long drive to Salt Stone. Halfway through the journey, we stopped by a roadside diner to eat. The next three hours passed by in a daze.

As we neared the town welcome sign, Simon stopped the car by the side of the road. Everyone needed to get into position.

John, Tucker, and Corey got out of the car first. They quickly undressed, tucked their clothes in the trunk, and shifted forms.

Simon lingered a little longer. He touched my trembling cheek, then leaned in to kiss me on the mouth.



“You got this, Elliot,” Simon told me, his tone fierce.

The reminder Simon believed in me so much restored my wilting confidence.

“Take deep breaths,” Simon instructed.

I breathed in, then out. After doing it a few times, I felt a lot better.

“I’m good,” I told Simon. “Thanks for being here. I’m not sure I could have done this without you.”

“I believe in you,” Simon said. “For now, I have to say goodbye, but remember the plan.”

I nodded. “I will.”

Then it was Simon’s turn to undress and change forms. I picked up his fallen clothes and folded them into a neat pile.

After tucking Simon’s clothes with the rest, I gazed at the four fully shifted raven shifters perched on top of Simon’s car.

“It will be uncomfortable and tight inside, but I’ll make sure to drive smoothly,” I promised them.

One by one, the raven shifters flew inside the truck. Simon and John entered first, followed by Tucker and Corey. Four black-eyed ravens stared up at me.

“Let’s do this,” I said.

They gave me squawks of agreement, then I gently closed the trunk and hopped over to the driver’s seat.

The plan was simple. Duane would be expecting to see Zack’s dying or dead body in the trunk.

The last thing Duane would anticipate was four raven shifters, my allies, lying in wait for him.

Simon and the others were a distraction. Their role was to cause chaos while I dove right into the basement to free Ethan, assuming he was still there.

I didn’t trust Duane’s word that he gave Ethan any medical attention or stopped the torture.

Corey would fly back to the car first. He was our designated driver. Duane's flock outnumbered us three to one, but we didn't plan on taking on his entire group.

Once Simon finished off Duane, the rest of the flock would scatter. At least that was our plan in theory. The actual execution was a different matter.

Sweat covered my entire back, and my heart thumped painfully as I drove into town. Salt Stone was much larger than Moon Burrow.

Moon Burrow only had one of everything—pub, diner, grocery store.

Salt Stone had everything in spades and was practically the size of a mini-city, but never once did it feel like home.

Although Duane called this town and the surrounding area his territory, not all of it belonged to him.

Duane shared it with two other supernatural groups, a wolf pack, and a witch coven.

If we somehow managed to get rid of Duane, then the wolves and the witches would simply occupy whatever power vacuum Duane left behind.

Ten minutes later, I approached the gates of the Salt Stone Mansion. A bored-looking alpha spotted me, then waved me in.

He didn't even bother doing a security check. I let out a breath I didn't realize I was holding.

I stopped the car at the entrance to the mansion, unsurprised to see an impatient-looking Ray and another alpha whose name I didn't know, waiting for me.

Disappointment hit me in the chest. Part of me hoped Duane would also be present.

That would have made everything too easy, I reminded myself. I finally got out of the car.

"I can't believe you're still alive," Ray muttered.

“Considering you pushed me out of a moving car? Yeah, I’m not planning on dying anytime soon,” I said with a scoff.

Ray’s gaze darkened. “We’ll see about that.”

Those words certainly sounded ominous.

“Where’s Duane and my brother?” I demanded. “Is Ethan still in the dungeon?”

“They’re in Duane’s office, but let’s see Zack first,” Ray said. Ray cracked his knuckles. “Is he still alive? Duane can’t wait to have a little fun.”

“Last I checked, he wasn’t breathing,” I replied, casually walking to the trunk.

I took my sweet time, making sure Ray and the other alpha followed me closely.

“What a pity. Duane’s been looking forward to their reunion,” Ray said.

“Before I knifed him, Zack told me Duane used to be a member of his first flock. He booted Duane out because he’d caused the flock some problems,” I said.

“Some problems? From what Duane tells me, he was just kicked out for unfair reasons. Duane was just being his usual self,” Ray said. “Enough talking. Open it up.”

I popped the trunk open. For a moment, I feared the cramped drive would leave my mate and new allies a little disoriented and slow, but the four raven shifters flew out, straight as arrows.

John and Simon, the larger birds, aimed right for their eyes. John took on the other alpha while Simon plucked off Ray’s left eye.

Ray and the other alpha let out screams of torment.

I didn’t linger to watch. I ran inside the gigantic mansion. Two alphas ran in my direction, but Corey and Tucker flew past me. I knew they’d handle them, so I kept going.

The way Simon and his flock mates swiftly moved in a coordinated group was terrifying. I was glad they were on my

side.

The alphas working for Duane had all gotten fat and complacent. They hardly put up a fight.

At the first sign of real trouble, they wouldn't stick around to fight for Duane, either.

Loyalty didn't mean a thing in the Salt Stone Flock, and we were banking on that.

Ray mentioned Duane was waiting for me in his office, and he had Ethan with him. I hoped that jerk hadn't lied to me.

I raced past two surprised-looking omegas in the hallway. They looked confused and downright terrified as sounds of fighting reached this part of the house.

"Elliot, what's happening?" Stewart called out.

"An attack," I yelled over my shoulder. "Take all the omegas and hide in one room. Lock the door and don't let any of the alphas in."

Stewart gave me a nod, his expression hard-eyed. He recognized an opportunity when he saw one.

Trusting Stewart would do the right thing, I continued up the grand staircase to reach Duane's office.

There was more yelling downstairs, but I could also hear car engines outside. Some of Duane's alphas had chosen to flee rather than fight.

I shook my head in amusement, then focused on the task ahead.

I thought I would encounter more alphas on this floor, but it seemed everyone was downstairs. Finally, I reached Duane's office.

The door had been left open, and I forced myself to slow down. I reached for the revolver in my jacket.

Simon had loaned me the gun. I also had a knife tucked in my belt in case I lost my firearm. While I knew how to use the gun, I wasn't the best shot in the world.

Simon would join me as soon as he could, I reminded myself. Simon had keen ears.

He'd also heard Ray mention where Duane was, so he knew where to look for me.

Holding the gun with both hands, I entered Duane's office, half terrified to find an empty room, but Duane was indeed there.

Duane's back was turned to me, and I was momentarily transported back in time.

It felt like an eternity ago I was standing in this exact spot, waiting for Duane to give me instructions on how to kill Zack.

When Duane turned, I saw he held something black and sleek in his large hand. Ethan, in raven form.

I sucked in a breath and nearly dropped the gun. Ethan wasn't moving, and he looked more like a stuffed animal than a living being.

Then I saw his small chest heaving. He was alive.

"You anticipated this?" I asked Duane, hating how my voice sounded so shaky.

"Half of me wanted to believe you'd succeeded, but the other half of me distrusted your words. You were always a sneaky little rat, Elliot," Duane said.

His face twisted in rage and he tightened his grip on my brother.

"Drop the gun or I'll squeeze all the life out of your pathetic brother," Duane ordered.

I had no other choice. With a sinking heart, I dropped Simon's gun.

"Kick it towards me. That's a good boy," Duane said.

He pulled out a drawer and picked up his own gun. I didn't have to be a mind reader to know that weapon probably contained silver bullets.

“You two have been a pain in my ass for too long,” Duane said.

My heart nearly stopped as he pointed the gun right at my head. I didn’t think I would survive a head injury like that, and Micah was too far away to heal me.

Was Simon nearby? What if he arrived too late? After all our planning, would I just end up getting everyone killed?

Duane didn’t pull the trigger right away. He kept talking, and that gave me a flutter of hope.

“Your coup wouldn’t last long. We outnumber your little group. I just need to ask, how did you convince Zack’s ravens to help you out?” Duane asked.

“You’ve always underestimated me,” I answered.

I refused to go down like a coward, so I glared at him defiantly. From the corner of my eye, I noticed Ethan was awake.

My brother gave me a wink, and I knew he was still with me. Certainly filled me.

We would get out of this alive. Every single one of us.



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## SIMON

“Get off me!” screamed the alpha.

Not a surprising reaction, given I’d left scratches on his face with my talons. He threw a punch at me, but I swiftly flew away.

After glaring at me with his remaining good eye, the alpha reached for some kind of weapon from inside his coat.

I caught a glimpse of metal — a gun. I dove at him again, this time aiming for his carotid artery.

He fumbled with the safety of his revolver just as I dug my talons deep into the side of his neck.

Blood splattered me, but I didn’t let go of him until he collapsed on the ground.

I dislodged my talons and shifted. I decided I would be able to cause more damage in my human form.

One glance at my partner showed me John had quickly dispatched the second alpha as well. I quickly grabbed my jeans from the trunk.

I picked up the dead alpha’s gun. I checked the magazine and was pleased to see it was loaded with silver bullets.

These didn’t come cheap, but they’d certainly come in handy.

Further ahead in the house, I heard yells, followed by shrill croaking noises. Fearing for Corey or Elliot’s life, I ran inside.

An unknown alpha ran past me, avoiding eye contact. Elliot had told us beforehand that some of the alphas serving Duane



were cowards.

I believed my mate, but refused to let my guard down. One wrong move could land me and the other Moon Burrow Ravens dead.

It was better to be prepared for anything. Hearing screams, I raced in that direction only to witness Corey and Tucker dispatching their enemies.

I gave them a nod of approval before running deeper inside the mansion.

Elliot had warned us the place was huge, but I still found myself getting lost in a maze of corridors and hallways.

The alpha I killed mentioned to Elliot that Duane and Ethan were at Duane's office. Now all I needed to do was find out where that was.

I wouldn't be having this problem if I had officially mated Elliot, I thought to myself.

Mated pairs could always find each other, within a certain radius, of course.

After this mission, I would remedy that error, I told myself. Once we rescued Ethan, there was no longer any obstacle standing between Elliot and me.

I'd move out of the cabin I shared with Corey. Elliot and I would need our own place, of course.

There were a few empty cabins we could occupy and transform into our cozy little home.

Elliot and I never had the opportunity to discuss the future, but I could see us creating our own little family.

I always pictured myself spoiling an adorable daughter rotten or teaching my son to be a good protector.

"It's too early to celebrate," I reminded myself.

I was getting too far ahead in thoughts, like always.

"Let me go!" someone yelled.

I caught sight of a slender omega, trying to free himself from the grip of a persistent and thick-necked alpha.

“Where did you hide the other omegas, Stewart? Donny saw you gathering all of them. Speak up or I’ll break your arm,” demanded the alpha.

“I’m not telling you anything, Al!” Stewart answered defiantly.

I hesitated for a fraction of a second. Elliot was waiting for me and gut instinct told me there was a high chance my mate was in trouble.

Still, it wasn’t in my nature to walk away from someone who needed my help. I would never forget what Elliot told me before.

I woke up every day in that house full of fear and uncertainty, like a caged bird with nowhere to go. The other omegas probably felt the same way.

Intervening meant wasting time, but Elliot liked me precisely because I was the exact opposite of the alphas in the Salt Stone Flock.

Elliot could hold his own for a little while longer, I decided.

“Release him,” I said, announcing myself.

I pointed the gun at Al. The alpha automatically released the omega, but he shot me an annoyed look. I kept my gun trained on the center of his chest.

“That’s Ray’s gun. What did you do to our second-in-command? Who are you people?” Al demanded.

Ignoring him completely, I looked at Stewart. The omega regarded me intently, as if he was still deciding what to make of me.

“Before you go, can you tell me one thing?” I asked.

“You’re with Elliot?” Stewart asked.

I nodded, relieved. Elliot must have spoken to Stewart earlier. It wouldn’t surprise me if Elliot had instructed Stewart to keep the other omegas safe.

“Elliot? So you’re with that traitor,” Al said with a hiss. “Why am I not surprised?”

“Where’s Duane’s office?” I asked Stewart.

“Second floor, head to the end of this corridor and turn right. Take the stairs from there,” Stewart said.

“Don’t tell him anything,” Al yelled.

He seemed to forget I had a gun trained on him, because he lunged for Stewart. I shot Al in the leg. He went down, howling in pain.

Stewart flashed me a grateful look before leaving us. Al, who continued writhing on the ground, hollered threats at me.

“You’ll regret this. You and that traitorous omega. Duane, me, and the other surviving alphas, we’ll never forget this. We’ll go after you and yours,” Al said under his breath.

His eyes were filled with nothing but deep hatred. I looked at him for a moment, then ended his misery.

It only took one shot to the heart for him to stop blabbering.

Leaving the dead alpha, I followed Stewart’s instructions and found myself in a quiet hallway. The stairs he mentioned were to my left.

Sensing something wasn’t quite right, that Elliot needed me somehow, I jogged up the stairs. I could hear voices from a nearby room.

Recognizing Elliot’s rising voice, followed by a second man’s voice, I forced myself to slow down.

Announcing my presence right away would give away any element of surprise.

The door had been left open, and I spotted Elliot’s familiar silhouette.

All the initial tension left my body, but my relief proved momentary as I spotted the muscular blond-haired alpha a few feet from Elliot.

This could only be Duane.

Duane clutched an object I couldn't make out in one hand and a gun in another. Rage filled my vision as I realized he pointed the gun right at Elliot.

I tackled Elliot from behind just as Duane pulled the trigger. Elliot and I went down hard. Duane let out a hiss, and I risked a glance at him.

The object in his hand turned out to be a raven shifter. Ethan, I was guessing. Ethan hadn't been moving earlier, but he apparently still had some fight left in him.

Ethan used his talons to rake at Duane's fingers, forcing Duane to drop him.

"Ethan!" Elliot yelled.

Elliot crawled from under me and was just in time to catch Ethan in his arms. Duane scrambled to his feet, the gun trained on the back of Elliot's skull.

Unthinkingly, I shot at Duane. He howled as my bullet hit him in the shoulder.

Duane dropped his gun and looked at me with nothing but venom in his eyes.

"Who the hell are you?" Duane demanded.

"Simon. I'm Elliot's mate. I'm here to make sure you pay for all your sins," I said calmly.

Duane lunged for the gun on the ground, but I moved quicker. I shot him and missed.

Before I could pull off another shot, Duane suddenly shrank in size.

It was hard to aim at a smaller target, and I didn't want to risk shooting Elliot or Ethan. In moments, a large raven emerged from Duane's tangle of clothes.

Duane, in raven form, hopped on the window ledge, then he spread his wings and made his escape.

"Simon, it's okay. Ethan's safe. We've won," Elliot was saying.

I didn't listen because hell would freeze over before I allowed Elliot's tormentor to go free. Scum like Duane never knew when to give up.

Duane would find a way to rebuild his flock. He'd start recruiting lost raven shifters again and offer them a place in his new group.

Those unsuspecting shifters would never know that they were under the care of a monster until it was too late.

Duane had done it before and he would do it again.

Even though I had already shifted forms that day, I reached for my raven again.

Changing forms consumed massive amounts of energy. I knew my body would pay for it later, but right now, I didn't care.

Human skin gave way to feathers. Talons and a beak emerged as I shrank in size. It was the fastest shift I ever attempted.

Both my raven half and human half understood that we couldn't allow Duane to live.

"Be careful!" Elliot yelled at me as I flew out the window.

I flew higher, past the house, and quickly scanned the sky. A black blur caught my eye. I pumped my wings furiously, trying to catch up to Duane.

He vanished behind a cloud. Frustration welled inside me. Too slow, I reprimanded myself. Was Elliot right? Should I give up?

Out of nowhere, Duane came at my blind side. I didn't notice him until pain radiated from my back.

Knowing I didn't have time to second-guess my actions, I dropped downward, forcing Duane to release me.

He came at me again, and I dove away from his sharp talons, screeching at him.

My movements felt much slower, thanks to my back injury, but I had to make do.

Duane decided to fight me instead of running away. I didn't expect that. I had to finish this fast. If Duane decided to wait it out until I got too slow or tired, I might end up dead.

Tucking my wings close to my body, I flew toward him, talons outstretched for a kill. Duane took the bait.

He let out an angry squawk. We collided, a furious whirlwind of feathers, beaks, and talons.

Duane left scratches all over me, but I also left my own share. He dug his talons deep into my body, and I refused to let go of him as well.

We hovered momentarily mid-air before dropping speed.

Both of us started plummeting to the ground. I refused to look at our surroundings. I kept my focus solely trained on Duane and what he'd do next.

This was it, I knew. Our aerial battle was fast coming to a close, and only one of us would survive.

I thought of Elliot, back at the mansion, probably worried sick.

I had a mate and my flock to return to. That reminder provided extra fuel to my exhausted body.

With all my remaining strength, I aimed at Duane's feathery throat with my beak and struck gold.

Duane didn't move away in time. His blood gushed out like a river. I tried to disentangle myself from him, but Duane refused to let go.

Panic surged inside my entire body. Duane's triumphant black gaze told me he intended to take me down with him.

The sudden burst of adrenaline that sang in my veins earlier was fast depleting. Duane and I sailed to our doom.

"Simon! Don't give up!" came Elliot's voice.

He sounded so far away, but his encouragement gave me a second surge of strength. Duane's glassy eyes looked at me.

Death had finally claimed him.

I pushed myself away from Duane's corpse and spread my wings wide. I hovered in the air and watched his body drop to the ground like a stone.

"Simon, over here," Elliot called.

I spotted his tiny figure on the ground. He was standing right outside the mansion, where we parked the car.

Corey had kept the engine running, just like we planned, I noticed, but there was no need to make a hasty exit.

As I descended like a drunk bumblebee toward Elliot, I strained to hear if there were other noises or movement from the mansion.

Nothing, I thought, feeling triumphant. We had won somehow, and Duane was dead.

The other alphas linked to Duane would probably flee rather than fight.

It was hard to believe we'd finally accomplished our goal. The last thing I remembered was Elliot holding his hands towards me and Elliot cradling my injured body against his chest.

After that, I lost consciousness.





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## ELLIOT

Corey had spread a warm blanket out in the backseat of Simon's car. I stared at Simon and Ethan in their raven forms.

Both alphas lay frighteningly still on the soft fabric.

My heart was still racing after watching the intense aerial battle between Simon and Duane. It had been a narrow victory.

For a nerve-racking moment, I thought Simon would lose.

Duane didn't possess a single shred of honor and he had plenty of dirty tricks up his sleeve. In the end, my mate had prevailed.

I expelled a breath. It was genuinely hard to believe it was finally over. Duane was truly dead. He couldn't use me against Ethan anymore.

The remaining alphas in the Salt Stone Flock had probably felt the moment Duane died when the flock bonds shattered.

It didn't surprise me that all of them quickly abandoned ship. There was no use staying when the bully calling the shots was no longer around.

Someone touched my shoulder, and I jumped. Seeing Corey, I relaxed a little. Corey peered into the backseat and sighed.

"I've already called Zack and updated him about the situation. Micah will be expecting us back home," Corey told me.

"Home," I whispered.

Was Moon Burrow home? Would Simon's flock mates ever forgive me for trying to kill Zack?

Simon and you saved Ethan, I reminded myself. For now, that would be enough.

“I’ll call John and Tucker. Then we’ll hit the road,” Corey was saying. “It’ll be a tight fit in Simon’s car, but if Simon and Ethan remain in their raven forms, we should be fine.”

“Wait, I have more work to do,” I told Corey.

Corey furrowed his brows after I told him about Stewart and the remaining omegas.

“Do you want me to come with you?” Corey asked.

I looked at the desolate house and shook my head.

“I’ll be okay. This won’t take long.” I hesitated, then asked, “Corey, do you think Zack would allow a few more strays to stay at the compound?”

“Why don’t you ask him yourself?” Corey pulled out his cellphone, dialed Zack’s number, and handed it to me.

I swallowed, accepting his phone. While I waited for Zack to pick up, I entered the eerily quiet house again. Zack answered on the second ring.

“Corey? Did something else happen?” Zack asked.

“Zack, it’s Elliot. We have another situation,” I said, then explained everything to him.

“I see.” Zack fell silent for a few moments.

Sweat trickled down my brow. I had no right to make demands of him. If Zack refused, then I’d help Stewart and the others find temporary accommodations somehow.

“These omegas don’t have anywhere else to go,” I said, cringing at the desperation in my voice.

It didn’t matter. My pride could take a fall. In the past, Ethan and I only looked out for our own necks because we had no other choice.

This time, I had been given the opportunity to save more lives, and I would take it if I could.

“I have my brother, but these omegas don’t have anyone,” I said. “Please don’t let my actions cloud your judgment. I can vouch for all of them.”

“They can stay for the moment,” Zack finally said.

“Thank you, Zack. You won’t regret this,” I whispered.

We ended the call. Remembering Simon and Ethan lying unconscious in the backseat of the car, I decided to hurry.

Simon and Ethan needed medical attention as soon as possible. I didn’t need to search far.

Tucker and John stood outside a locked door, deep in conversation.

John spotted me and waved me over. I had a feeling Stewart and the other omegas had barricaded themselves in that room.

“Let me guess. The omegas are in there?” I asked.

“Maybe they’d listen to you,” John said.

“We told them they won’t come to harm, but they refuse to open the door,” Tucker explained.

“Can you guys give me some space?” I asked.

John and Tucker stepped back, and I knocked on the door.

“Go away,” came a muffled voice, one I recognized.

“Stewart? It’s Elliot. These alphas are with me and my mate,” I said. “You can come out now.”

“What if it’s a trap?” whispered a second, frightened voice.

“It’s Elliot, and I trust him,” came Stewart’s firm voice.

The door finally opened, revealing four omegas huddled together in the center of the room.

All of them looked gaunt and bruised, as if they’d been dragged through hell. Did I look like them when Simon found me on the road?

Tucker looked at them and seemed to be unhappy about the state we found them in, because he growled.

I threw him a glare over my shoulder. John gently steered Tucker away and gave me a curt nod.

Once the alphas were gone, Stewart tentatively approached me.

“We felt the flock bonds break. Is it true? Duane’s dead?” Stewart asked, searching my eyes.

“It’s true,” I confirmed. “Simon, my mate, killed him in a fair fight.”

I decided not to tell Stewart that Duane had been trying to escape when Simon chased him down.

Right now, everyone’s emotions were all over the place. It was best to keep explanations simple.

“Then, is Simon the new lead alpha of the Salt Stone Flock?” asked Rico with a frown.

“The Salt Stone Flock is no more,” I answered firmly. “But the Moon Burrow Flock is offering all of us temporary sanctuary until we can get back on our feet.”

“You trust them? I’ve seen one of their alphas at work. He was brutal and efficient,” Rico said.

Rico shivered. I wondered if he was referring to John or Tucker. Stewart gave him a quick hug.

“I spoke with Elliot’s mate briefly. Simon’s a decent guy. I trust Elliot, and I’ll go with him,” Stewart said. “You guys decide if you want to stay or go.”

There was a bit of discussion and grumbling. Eventually, the other omegas agreed to go with us.

“We’ll need another ride,” I said.

“Al left his truck. I heard him leaving on his motorcycle earlier. We can take that,” Stewart said, a gleam in his eyes.

I laughed, relieved everything worked out. “Then let’s leave this place of nightmares behind.”

\* \* \*

“HOW IS SIMON? HE GOT REALLY BATTERED FROM HIS FIGHT with Duane,” I told Micah.

I trailed behind the no-nonsense healer, constantly wringing my hands and staring at my injured mate.

Simon still hadn't regained consciousness since we returned to Moon Burrow.

Ethan lay on the next cot. My brother was in his human form. Since Micah considered Ethan's injuries more critical, he healed Ethan first.

“I can't work if you're constantly hovering,” Micah complained.

Corey placed his hands on my tense shoulders.

“Elliot, let's not disturb Micah. Why don't we join Stewart and the others at the dining hall? Get something to eat?” Corey suggested.

“I can't grab a snack when Simon's life hangs by a thread!” I blurted.

Corey flashed me a hurt look. I then reminded myself that I wasn't the only one worried about Simon.

“I'm sorry. I didn't mean to shout at you,” I told Corey.

“Simon's not about to die anytime soon. Don't worry,” Micah said. He rested his palms over the large scratches across Simon's chest. “He probably fainted from exhaustion.”

“Simon did shift twice today,” I said, feeling a little better. “He'll really be okay?”

Micah must've seen something on my face because he softened a little.

“Yes, and he'll recover faster if you let me do my job,” Micah said.

“I think I could use a cup of coffee,” I told Corey.

Corey nodded, looking relieved. The two of us made our way to the log house. Zack and Tucker were there.

I noticed Tucker fussing over an annoyed-looking Rico.

I guessed Rico had finally gotten over his initial fear of Tucker, because when we left Salt Stone, he couldn't even look at Tucker in the eyes.

"I'll grab us coffee. Zack probably wants to have a word with you," Corey said, giving me a nudge on the shoulder.

Zack broke away from his conversation with Stewart and the other two omegas when I approached him.

I noticed Zack spoke to Stewart and the others in a calm and thoughtful way.

Zack and I sat at a nearby unoccupied table. Corey soon returned with our drinks. He also handed Zack a mug before joining Stewart and the others.

The omegas from my former pack seemed more comfortable speaking to Corey and the other omegas as opposed to the alphas, which was understandable after the trauma they'd been through.

"How's Simon and Ethan?" Zack asked me.

I was relieved Zack spoke first because I didn't know where to start.

"Micah tended to Ethan first. He said my brother was in worse shape than Simon. Ethan's going to be fine, but Simon hasn't woken up. Micah said it's probably from exhaustion because Simon shifted twice, but—" I faltered.

Tears gathered in my eyes, and I hastily rubbed them away.

Zack reached over and gave me a somewhat awkward hug, which I actually appreciated.

I burrowed my face into his shoulder and let out an ugly sob.

I had held everything together so far, but now I felt like I was breaking apart.

Zack patted my back, and that made me relax. Hours had passed since we left Salt Stone, but reality sank in only now.

We were truly safe, all of us. The alpha I tried to kill was kind enough to comfort me.

Maybe Zack sensed I needed it, that I felt alone with Ethan and Simon in the clinic.

“Simon got hurt because of me,” I whispered. “When Duane tried to escape, Simon gave chase. I told him not to, but he did it anyway.”

“Simon made that choice to keep you safe,” Zack reminded me gently.

I lifted my head from his shoulder, appalled I left tears and snot on his shirt.

“Sorry,” I mumbled, grabbing a bunch of tissues from the box on the table.

I tried to clean the mess I made, but Zack only placed his hand over mine, stopping me. The gesture wasn't intimate. Zack was just trying to be a friend to me.

“Elliot, it will be alright,” Zack told me. “Simon's strong. He'll be up and about first thing tomorrow.”

“You can't promise that,” I mumbled.

A flicker of hesitation crossed Zack's face.

“I wanted to discuss what Ethan and your plans are after this, but let's leave that conversation for another day,” Zack said.

“Are you asking Ethan and me to leave?” I dared to ask.

Zack was right. I wasn't in the best state of mind right now. What I needed was a good night's sleep, but I doubted I could do that with Simon in the clinic.

Simon wouldn't mind if I crawled next to him in bed. That sounded like a good plan.

“No one's asking Ethan or you to leave right this instant,” Zack told me. “I was going to suggest we start over. I'll treat Ethan and you like new recruits during a trial period.”

I stared at Zack for a few seconds, stunned by his generosity. Finally, I opened my mouth to speak.

“Why would you do that after I tried to take your life?” I asked.

Zack was crazy. That had to be the only explanation. I figured Zack would allow Ethan and me to stay until we were strong enough to get back on our feet. Zack was kind that way.

Simon, Ethan, and I would then need to find a new place to begin our lives all over again.

My heart had hurt just thinking about how hard that would be for my mate.

I figured it would be alright, since we were together, but if Zack was willing to give me another shot at redemption, then I would gladly take it.

“You didn’t have a choice back then. I know what that’s like.” Zack looked thoughtful.

He went on, “Of course, Venom and I would probably need to have a little chat about your situation. He’s not a fan of yours, unfortunately, but you’re also Simon’s mate. I can’t lose Simon. He’s one of the good ones.”

“He is,” I said, smiling to myself. “I won’t be here if it wasn’t for Simon. He’s my guardian angel.”

Zack finished his coffee and stood, giving me another pat on the shoulder.

“Get some rest, Elliot. It’s been a long day,” Zack said.

“Do you think Micah will mind if I slipped into Simon’s bed at the clinic?” I asked.

Zack checked his watch and chuckled. “Micah’s probably upstairs by now. Go on. He won’t notice.”





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## SIMON/ ELLIOT

### S IMON

“ZACK SAYS WE COULD STAY. HE AGREED TO A DO-OVER. CAN you believe that?”

I woke up to the sound of an excited voice. Well, one excited voice. I could immediately tell it was my mate talking.

The muffled reply must have been from Ethan. So, Elliot’s brother was finally awake?

I tried sitting up, but the effort taxed me. A groan slipped from my lips, and Elliot hurried to my bed.

“Simon?” Elliot appeared by my side.

He placed a hand on my forehead, making me laugh. Elliot scowled at me.

“I don’t have a fever,” I told him.

“How do you feel?” Elliot asked, sounding worried.

I made space for him in bed and liked how Elliot simply slipped next to me and hugged me. I winced as some of my old aches and bruises flared up.

“Much better now that you’re next to me,” I told him.

“I can’t believe you’re flirting with me at a time like this,” Elliot mumbled.

“What else can I do? I’m bored,” I said, touching his cheek.

Elliot leaned in to receive my kiss. The feel of his lips was so much better than the bitter pills Micah forced down my throat.

Hearing a mattress creaking, I pulled away from Elliot, who looked a little disappointed. Ethan limped his way toward us.

Elliot's brother still looked banged up, and I doubted he should be walking on his own, but I expected us to have this conversation sooner or later.

Ethan raised his eyebrows at the sight of his younger brother tucked in bed next to me but didn't comment on our closeness. Ethan offered me his hand.

"We haven't met officially. I'm Ethan. You must be Simon. Elliot can't stop talking about you," Ethan said.

I shook his offered hand without hesitation.

"It's finally nice to meet you, Ethan," I answered.

Ethan pulled his hand away and had to lean on the nearest wall for support.

Elliot got out of bed and helped him to a nearby chair. Ethan sighed in relief and thanked Elliot for his assistance.

"Elliot tells me we owe you our lives," Ethan told me. I blinked at that.

"No, the rescue was a group effort," I told him.

"Elliot mentioned you were humble. Still, if you didn't accompany Elliot to Salt Stone, then neither Elliot nor I would be alive today," Ethan said.

"Elliot's my mate. Of course, I'll go where he goes," I plainly said.

We eyed each other warily. Two alphas assessing each other's strengths and intentions.

"Take good care of him," Ethan finally croaked out.

He looked paler than I liked and knew he had to be escorted back to his bed soon.

"I will," I answered him, using my most solemn voice. "Elliot's my treasure, and I won't let anything happen to him."

Elliot flushed at those words. “Simon, that’s embarrassing,” he grumbled, but Ethan and I both ignored him.

This was an important moment for me. Ethan had looked after his younger brother his entire life.

It can’t be easy handing over the reins of protector to another alpha, a stranger he didn’t know that well yet.

“Be careful. He’s a handful,” Ethan said, his words immediately lightening the mood in the room.

“Hey, I resent that,” Elliot complained. He looked at me, and his expression softened. “I’m really glad you regained consciousness, Simon. You’ve been asleep for three days.”

“Three days?” I exclaimed, surprised by the news.

Elliot nodded. “Micah’s probably annoyed because I kept bugging him the last three days.”

“That’s true,” added Micah’s voice. He threw Ethan a withering look. The other alpha only gave him a sheepish look. “Ethan, you should be in bed.”

“I’ll help him,” Elliot offered.

In the end, both Elliot and Micah ushered Ethan back to bed. After Micah gave Ethan a lecture along with some pain pills, I soon heard snores.

Ethan must’ve fallen asleep. Elliot returned to me. After pulling the privacy curtains shut, he climbed back into bed. I heard Micah excusing himself.

“I’m taking an afternoon nap,” Micah announced.

The healer’s footsteps faded. Elliot smiled up at me, lifting the blanket over our bodies. He traced the faint stubble on my cheeks and jaw with his fingers.

I took his hand and gave each digit a kiss, which seemed to appease him. It was hard to believe I was out of commission for 72 hours.

Elliot must’ve been worried sick.

“Missed me that badly, huh?” I teased.

“Very much,” he admitted. “Simon, I was terrified you’d never wake up.”

“Of course, I would’ve. I have you and a promising future to look forward to,” I said.

I tipped Elliot’s chin using two fingers and was about to lean in and kiss him when the clinic door banged open.

“You can talk to Elliot once he’s in a better mental state. Right now, he’s worried about his unconscious mate.”

That was definitely Zack’s voice. A heavy pair of footsteps neared my section of the clinic. Someone yanked the privacy curtains open.

Elliot let out a frightened squeak as a tall, scarred, and muscular bear shifter loomed at the foot of my bed.

Venom looked from me to Elliot, his permanently gold eyes assessing both of us.

I pulled a trembling Elliot close to me and growled at Venom in warning.

“You scared my mate,” I told him.

I held his gaze, knowing this might be one fight I would definitely lose. Zack appeared next to Venom, his expression neutral as always.

Zack would step in if a fight broke out, but this wasn’t his battle.

When Zack didn’t say anything else, I realized my lead alpha was waiting to see how this particular scenario would play out.

Since Zack wouldn’t put any of his ravens under direct danger, I knew Venom had no intentions of harming my Elliot after all.

Maybe Venom was just curious to see what the fuss was all about. I forced myself to relax.

“You’re the omega who tried to kill Zack,” Venom directed those words at Elliot.

“I did it to save my brother, but that’s all in the past,” Elliot answered.

He sounded a little shaky, but his words were clear as day.

Elliot continued, “Zack gave me a second chance, and I won’t waste it. My loyalties lie with Simon and with the Moon Burrow Flock from this point onwards.”

Elliot tried to hold Venom’s stare for as long as he could, but he eventually dropped his gaze. I gave my mate’s arm a reassuring squeeze.

“Satisfied?” Zack asked Venom.

“Yup.” That was all Venom said.

He exited the clinic. Zack gave me and Elliot a nod before going after his friend.

“That was scary as heck,” Elliot whispered to me. “Will everything be fine?”

“It will be,” I said, giving my mate a reassuring kiss. “You just passed Venom’s test. Welcome to Moon Burrow, Elliot.”

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## **ELLIOT**

“COREY, ARE YOU REALLY FINE WITH ETHAN BEING YOUR NEW roommate?” I asked for the third time that day.

Corey looked up from reading his book, another paranormal romance, and then rolled his eyes.

I plopped myself on the armchair next to the couch where he’d been reclining.

A number of single raven shifters had offered Ethan a place to stay. Fred was notably one of them, although I didn’t miss the hungry way he looked at my brother.

A month had passed since Ethan’s rescue. My brother was growing stronger with each passing day.

After weeks of healthy eating and constant exercise, my brother was back to his usual weight class. Once Ethan was

physically able, he started volunteering for patrol duty.

Ethan and I also found jobs in town. Ethan signed up as a physical trainer at a local gym, while I started working at Cool Beans, the cafe run by the flock.

Both of us had quickly acclimated to our new lives. Most of the ravens in our new flock had shaken off their earlier distrust of me.

Some have even started to accept me as one of their own. It was a good feeling.

“Sure. I don’t like living alone, and having a new roommate would be fun, especially after Simon moved out,” Corey finally answered.

“Ethan’s an alpha,” I reminded him.

Corey rolled his eyes. He set his book down and looked at me.

“I can see that. Did Simon tell you I have a phobia of alphas?” Corey demanded.

“Well,” I trailed off and decided to shut up.

Saying anything more might compromise Simon. I knew about Corey’s past. Simon also mentioned that Corey still had nightmares of the alpha who stalked him.

Most of Ethan’s injuries had healed by now, but I knew better than most that some scars would never heal.

When I told Simon that romance was the last thing on Ethan’s mind, Simon quickly agreed to my proposal about Ethan and Corey being roommates.

I was worried about Ethan living on his own, and Simon felt the same way about Corey.

We hoped those two might end up being friends somehow. Corey and Ethan were two of the most important people in our lives, after all.

Corey scoffed. “Simon thinks I’m fragile, but I’m not,” Corey pointed out.

“Simon’s just looking out for you,” I reminded him.

Our conversation quickly came to a close as Simon and Ethan entered the cabin.

Both alphas carried boxes containing my brother's meager possessions. Ethan and I drove back to the Salt Stone Mansion one last time to retrieve our belongings.

We also offered to bring back stuff that belonged to Stewart and the other rescued omegas.

In the end, two of the omegas had returned to their hometowns, but Stewart and Rico remained.

As a result, the Moon Burrow Flock had gained four new members.

Ethan set his box on the floor and joined us in the living room. Corey suddenly got up and started coughing.

Ethan hesitated, but I didn't. I approached Corey and patted him on the back.

"You okay?" I asked.

"Swallowed a bee or something," Corey muttered.

Simon laughed at that. I flashed my mate a glare, and Simon wisely kept his private joke to himself.

Was Corey nervous around Ethan? That certainly piqued my interest.

"Corey, thank you for letting me move in. I look forward to being roommates," Ethan said.

He held out a hand. Corey stared at it for a few moments before shaking it.

"What's with all the strange formality?" I asked Ethan.

My brother shrugged, and I noticed he quickly released Corey's hand.

"I felt it was appropriate," Ethan said.

"Come on, I'll show you to your new room," Simon told Ethan.

The two alphas carried their boxes to Simon's old bedroom. Ethan's bedroom now.



My brother had been temporarily living with Simon and me, but it was a little awkward having him in the same cabin.

Simon and I were like a pair of horny lovebirds. We couldn't have enough of each other.

When I told Ethan that Corey was looking for a roommate, he immediately jumped at the chance.

"I don't remember Ethan being so big," Corey mumbled.

"Corey, if his presence makes you uncomfortable—" I began, but Corey shushed me.

"It's fine. He's better off with me. Did you hear? Fred apparently has his sights on your brother." Corey let out a shudder.

While I was aware Simon and Fred used to have a fling, I wasn't worried at all because the only raven Simon wanted in his bed was me.

"Oh hey, when did you and Simon take the next step?" Corey suddenly asked.

He neared me, then tugged the collar of my shirt, exposing Simon's mate mark on the left side of my neck.

I blushed, unable to help myself. "This morning, actually."

"Where did you leave your mark on him? I can't see it. Wait, don't tell me," Corey said quickly. "I don't want to know, but congrats. It's been a long time coming."

"We felt it was the right time," I said.

Not missing the sadness and note of longing in Corey's voice, I pulled him into a brotherly hug.

"Your turn will come, Corey. Promise. I'm sure your fated mate is out there looking for you," I told him.

"I hope you're right," Corey answered.



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## ELLIOT

**F**eeling the familiar press of Simon's warm mouth against mine, I opened my eyes.

I wasn't fully awake yet, but I could appreciate Simon's handsome face close to mine.

I sniffed, luxuriating in his scent. Simon always smelled so good.

He pulled away, smiling. It took me a second to realize he was dressed and not lying naked right next to me.

What a pity. I enjoyed waking up to the sight of my gloriously nude mate. It was one of the things I looked forward to every morning.

For a second, I debated begging Simon to stay with me in bed all afternoon.

Forget all our responsibilities for one day. It didn't hurt to take a break every now and then.

Then I remembered Simon was accompanying Zack, along with two other alphas, to meet another raven flock several towns over.

"Do you really need to go?" I asked.

Simon reached for my hand and looked deep in thought. I silently berated myself for being so needy.

Simon had an important job to do, and my emotions seemed to be all over the place today.

"I could ask Tucker to take my place," Simon suggested.

“Kidding,” I said. “Just being dramatic. Go, I’ll see you at dinner?”

“Dinner,” Simon confirmed, kissing me on the cheek.

“I’ll whip us something nice,” I told him.

A worried look crossed his features, and I was pretty sure he was thinking about the time I nearly burned our kitchen down while trying to follow a simple cake recipe.

“Don’t worry. Our cabin will be intact when you return,” I told him in my most reassuring voice.

Simon didn’t look completely convinced.

“There’s freshly brewed coffee in the kitchen and some of the leftover banana bread Corey made,” Simon told me.

Nice, I thought. Breakfast was settled. Eventually, Simon had to go, or he’d be late. The cabin seemed quiet without him. I rolled in our bed for a little longer, not wanting to get up.

Today was my day off, so I didn’t need to report early to work. Initially, I thought working at Cool Beans—the cafe run by the flock—would be odd.

Friction might spark between me and some of the raven shifters who weren’t still sure of me.

In the end, everything worked out, and I got to know my other flock mates a lot better.

My phone beeped. I fumbled for the device under my pillow. I expected a text from Simon, telling me he was missing me already.

It was from Ethan, asking me if we had spare milk because apparently, Corey and he ran out.

I decided to bring the jug of milk over, because it felt ages since I spoke to Ethan.

Well, technically, it was just a week. Ethan and I had been busy with our new jobs and roles in the flock.

We hadn’t had the opportunity to have a heart-to-heart chat.

Of course, it didn't hurt I spent most of my free time with Simon. Ethan understood, of course, but I bet he still felt a little lonely.

Sure, Corey and he seemed to be getting along, but I wouldn't call them good friends or anything.

I took a quick shower and dressed in a comfy sweatshirt and jogging pants.

The sweatshirt belonged to Simon, so it looked oversized on me. I sniffed at it, feeling content.

Then my stomach clenched, and I felt queasy all of a sudden.

I ended up throwing up twice. This wasn't good news. I heard a stomach flu was going around lately.

Maybe I caught it from one of the customers from the cafe? None of my fellow flock mates were ill as far as I knew.

A knock sounded. Someone was banging at the front door just as I finished brushing my teeth.

"Coming," I grumbled.

I made my way to the door and found Ethan standing there, looking mildly annoyed.

My brother looked like he just woke up. His hair was sticking up, and he had dark circles under his eyes.

Then I remembered I promised him I'd come over with the milk. Ethan always took his coffee with milk, and he was a terrible grump if he didn't have his first coffee of the day.

"Sorry, I sort of forgot about the milk. I threw up twice," I told my brother.

I stepped aside so he could come in. Ethan now wore a frown on his face. Then he pressed a hand over my forehead.

"You're not feeling well? Does Simon know?" My fussy brother asked.

"I was feeling fine when Simon left with the others this morning," I said in my mate's defense. "I suspect I have a stomach flu or something."

Once we were in the kitchen, I took out two cups and plates. After pouring Ethan some coffee, I handed it to him.

He poured plenty of milk into his mug. Then I fished out two plates and gave Ethan a slice of Corey's banana bread.

"You made this?" Ethan asked, sounding surprised.

He wolfed down his first slice, then devoured two more. Ethan sipped his coffee, considering my question.

"No, probably not you. Corey then?" he asked.

"Yeah, Corey loves to bake," I said. "And he's good at it. I asked him to teach me a few times, but the results are always tragic."

"I know," my brother grumbled. "It smells like a bakery in our cabin all the time. I don't mind being his taste tester, but how do I politely tell him I'll get fat if he keeps feeding me?"

I gave my brother a curious look. Ethan gobbled another slice of cake.

"Are you and Corey getting along, then?" I asked.

"We're cordial to each other, although there's a little—I don't know how to describe it. A sort of awkwardness between us," Ethan said. "Anyway, let's return to you. Do you have any medicine?"

"I need to drive to town to get some," I mumbled.

"I'll come with you," Ethan said a little too eagerly.

"Don't you have work?" I asked him.

"I have two clients in the evening, but that's it," Ethan answered.

I knew he was a popular trainer at the gym. My brother always attracted cute guys to him without breaking a sweat.

Too bad Ethan genuinely didn't seem to be interested in anyone.

Fred had tried asking him out twice and spectacularly failed. Simon wouldn't mind if we borrowed his car. Ethan was still saving up to buy a second-hand truck.

Half an hour later, we rolled into town. I asked my brother more questions about his personal life. Ethan gave me one-word answers.

“How are you really?” I asked while we were in the pharmacy.

Ethan examined the shelves, looking distracted. I thought he would avoid answering my question completely, but he finally met my gaze.

“I’m really doing good, Elliot. I have good days and bad ones, just like everyone,” Ethan told me earnestly.

“Not everyone was tortured recently,” I mumbled under my breath.

Ethan ignored me and moved to another shelf. Okay, I thought. Ethan made it clear he wanted to move on to another topic.

I was about to call him out on it when my stomach seized.

Feeling nauseous, I asked an employee if they had a bathroom. He pointed to the end of the room.

I raced past a concerned Ethan. Thankful the restroom was unoccupied, I locked myself inside and emptied the contents of my stomach.

I washed my mouth at the sink and stared at my pale reflection. I gripped the edges of the sink and wondered if this wasn’t the stomach flu at all.

Simon and I had been particularly amorous with each other lately.

What if I was pregnant? Simon wanted kids and so did I, but I always figured we’d have them later on. One year or two years later, perhaps.

Someone knocked on the door, interrupting my train of thoughts.

“Elliot, it’s me,” came Ethan’s muffled voice. “I’m worried about you. Let’s head to the clinic or hospital.”

I finally opened the door, because I needed someone I could talk things out. My brother caught my expression and asked, “Elliot? What happened?”

“Ethan, I don’t think I have a stomach flu.” I took a deep breath before continuing, “there’s a small possibility I’m pregnant.”

Ethan stared at me in disbelief for a few seconds.

“I’ll kill him,” Ethan muttered under his breath.

He turned on his heel, then I grabbed his arm.

“Ethan, Simon and I both want kids,” I firmly told him.

My brother froze and returned his attention back to me. For a moment there, Ethan seemed to have forgotten I was happily mated to Simon.

When Ethan muttered those words, was he thinking we were both still in the Salt Stone Flock?

That some random alpha had gotten me pregnant instead of Simon?

My brother might be good at pretending everything was peachy, but clearly, he was far from fine.

“Sorry,” Ethan finally said.

His neck turned slightly pink with embarrassment.

“It’s okay. I know your first instinct is to protect me,” I said in understanding.

“Sometimes I forget we’re in a better place right now,” Ethan told me. He took a deep breath. “Let’s get you a pregnancy test and find out right now if you’re really expecting.”

“Right now?” I asked.

It made complete sense, but I felt a little anxious. How would Simon react when he returned home later that evening, completely wiped out after a full day of traveling?

Then I’d pounce on him and announce I was pregnant?

Who was I kidding? My mate would be elated.

“Let’s do it,” I told Ethan.



\* \* \*

I NERVOUSLY GLANCED AT THE SPREAD I'D LAID OUT ON THE dining table. There were BBQ ribs on a platter, potato salad, along with apple pie and beef tacos.

These were all Simon's favorites, and I didn't make any of them. I decided to buy the food from Simon's favorite places instead.

A small rectangular chocolate cake with two simple words written on it sat in the middle of the table.

"I'm expecting," I whispered.

The cake had been a last-minute addition. After I took the pregnancy test, Ethan drove me to the nearby shifter clinic just to make sure.

When the result returned positive as well, I decided to throw an unplanned mini-celebration for Simon and me.

Ethan helped me with the cake while I went around town to get the rest of the food.

Now I anxiously paced the dining room, constantly checking the time. My phone pinged, and I pulled it out of the pocket of my jeans with sweaty fingers.

It was a text from Simon, telling me he was just ten minutes away. We texted a few times throughout the day, but I didn't want to give him the news over the phone.

This sort of news had to be said in person.

The front door creaked opened, and I knew Simon was home. Those ten minutes sure passed by quickly.

"Elliot?" Simon called out. "Something smells good."

"In the dining room," I said.

Simon soon came into my line of sight. He looked a little worn out, but seeing the spread before him, he brightened.

"What's all this?" Simon asked.

In three steps, Simon reached me and pulled me into a warm embrace.

I leaned against him, but before I could allow myself to melt against him and forget everything, I had an announcement to make.

“Did you read the message on the cake?” I asked.

Simon drifted away from me, and I started fidgeting with the hem of my shirt. Simon took one look at the cake, then he widened his eyes.

He looked back at me for confirmation.

“Elliot, I have no words,” Simon blurted.

Then he closed the distance between us and pulled me into a tight hug. Simon buried his face in the side of my neck.

He repeatedly kissed the mate mark there. It flared to life, pulsing with heat and passion.

“I love you so much,” Simon whispered in my ear. “And I can’t wait to have a baby with you.”

All the tension gathered in my body left at those words. I felt the same way.

“I love you so much, Simon,” I told him.



---

## SIMON/ ELLIOT

### S IMON

“COOKIES AND CREAM, ARE YOU SURE ABOUT THAT?” I ASKED Elliot.

I cradled my cellphone against my ear as I browsed the grocery store freezers.

The last time I made an emergency grocery run for my cranky and very pregnant mate, Elliot changed his mind about which ice cream flavor he wanted at the very last second.

In the end, I had to make two grocery runs.

“Cookies and cream sounds fine. I’m sure about this one, Simon,” Elliot said.

Then he suddenly gasped, and I clutched the phone tighter against my ear.

Omega shifter pregnancies lasted only three months. According to Micah, Elliot could give birth any time now.

Initially, I’d been reluctant to leave Elliot on his own. Ethan’s with him, I reminded myself.

“Elliot? You there?” I asked, concerned.

“Fine, the baby kicked. That’s all,” Elliot said dismissively.

“That’s all?” I demanded.

I debated leaving my grocery basket and running back to my car. Dang it, I knew I shouldn't have left his side.

I wanted to be with Elliot in our living room, pressing my head against his belly so I could hear our little one's heartbeat.

Elliot, however, wanted ice cream in the middle of the night and whatever my pregnant mate wanted, he could have.

Elliot was doing all the heavy lifting, and I was just the baby's daddy.

At first, I'd been downright terrified after hearing Elliot was expecting. I'd never been a dad, after all.

Sure, Elliot and I talked about babies before, and I didn't expect to knock Elliot up this soon.

After the initial fear came fierce pride, then overwhelming happiness. I promised my mate we'd be the best parents in the world for our kid.

Elliot and I wanted to keep the baby's gender a surprise, so we came up with a list of both boys' and girls' names.

Elliot let out a scream, and the feral sound woke me up. Someone snatched the phone from Elliot.

Ethan spoke next, "Simon, it's happening. Elliot just broke his water."

I ditched the grocery basket, quickly dumping the ice cream tub in the freezing.

"I'm on my way," I said, making a break for the grocery store exit. "Dang it, Ethan. I should've never left home."

"Don't worry. I got this. Drive safely back, Simon." Ethan ended the call.

I trusted Elliot's brother to look after him while I wasn't there. I rushed home, earning myself a speeding ticket on the way.

It didn't matter, I thought. As long as I got to see my mate giving birth, then the ticket was worth it.

Thankfully, there wasn't much traffic at this time of the night. I arrived at the compound exactly 25 minutes later.

The lights in our cabin were still on. I reached for my mate bond with Elliot and nearly panicked when my mate wasn't there.

"Calm down," I told myself.

"Hey, Simon. There you are. Ethan took Elliot to Micah's clinic a few minutes ago," called out Christian. He was taking a midnight stroll with Ford.

"Thanks, Christian," I called back.

I hurried to Micah's clinic. A small group had gathered out front, which included Corey, Ethan, Zack, and Thad.

"Interesting crowd," I mumbled under my breath. Not wishing to speak to anyone but my mate, I pushed past everyone to get to the clinic.

Someone was screaming, and it didn't take me long to discover it was Elliot.

"What's wrong?" I asked, making my way to Elliot's right. Ethan had positioned himself to the left, and he grimaced when Elliot squeezed his hand.

"Ethan, you can go now that Simon's here," Micah said in his no-nonsense voice.

I had a feeling Micah was responsible for making everyone wait out front.

Ethan let go of Elliot's hand and flashed me a grateful look before slipping away.

"Simon, you're here," Elliot said, slightly out of breath.

I grasped his fingers and kissed his forehead.

"Sorry I'm late," I told him.

"Did you get my ice cream?" Elliot asked.

I shook my head. Another contraction hit, and Elliot let out a muffled groan.

"Just a little more, Elliot. Push," Micah said.

It took ten hours, but Elliot finally gave birth to our brawling baby daughter.

Micah wrapped her in a pink blanket before handing her over to Elliot.

I looked down upon the face of my baby girl, and adoration filled me. She had inherited Elliot's brilliant green eyes, my dark brown hair, and my alpha genes.

She stopped crying when Elliot kissed her tiny nose.

"Welcome to the world, Jeannie," Elliot whispered.

"Jeannie," I repeated.

"You don't think she's a Jeannie?" Elliot asked me.

"It's perfect," I said, kissing my daughter's cheek.

That made her cry again, and I figured the rough stubble on my jaw must've irritated her.

"Want to hold her?" Elliot asked.

"What if she doesn't stop crying?" I asked, a little worried she didn't like me.

It was a foolish thought, of course, but at that moment, I felt a little overwhelmed.

Just hours ago, I was at the grocery store, teasing my mate on the phone because he couldn't pick an ice cream flavor. Now, I was a bona fide dad.

"Don't be silly," Elliot said.

Elliot handed Jeannie over and my daughter gazed at me for a few moments, then let out an adorable coo.

I immediately fell in love with her and knew I wouldn't have anything happen to Elliot and her.

Someone must've delivered the news, because Corey, Ethan, and Zack entered the room to wish us congratulations.

It didn't end there. We received plenty of visitors, but after two hours I drew the line and politely told everyone to get out.

"Elliot needs his rest," I said.

Micah assisted me in ushering everyone out of the clinic. Micah announced he was taking a nap.

I couldn't blame him. Our resident healer had been up all night, after all.

Once Micah retired upstairs, it was just the three of us. Elliot made space for me in bed.

I was holding Jeannie and trying to rock her to sleep when Elliot's soft snores filled the room. Smiling, I kissed Elliot on the cheek.

"Good job, babe," I told my mate, then returned my attention to our beautiful daughter.

\* \* \*

## **ELLIOT**

I FINISHED THE LAST OF MY MUFFIN AND TOOK A CUP OF MY iced latte. Then I looked at Corey and Stewart.

"I'm done," I announced.

Both omegas looked at me warily. Then I noticed their half-eaten desserts. Both Corey and Stewart had only taken a few sips of their drinks, as well.

Irritation briefly flared inside me, then I told myself to relax.

"Elliot, the point of spending the Sunday afternoon with your friends is to relax and chit-chat," Stewart pointed out.

I couldn't help but notice that Stewart was looking better these days. The mate mark Al forced on him was also fast fading.

It was hardly noticeable on his neck. Stewart noticed my stare and consciously lifted the collar of his shirt.

"Look what you did, you embarrassed Stewart," Corey chided.

He was right. Both of us knew how much Stewart hated looking at the reminder of his former tormentor.

I was happy to report that both Stewart and Rico were fitting well in the Moon Burrow Flock.



A month had passed since Jeannie was born. This was the first time I'd left the compound to chill with friends.

I'd never been away from Jeannie this long, and I was already missing her terribly.

That was why I quickly devoured my muffin and finished my drink. Now I looked at Corey and Stewart, feeling a little guilty.

Corey softened and touched my arm.

"Elliot, Simon has this. He'll make sure nothing happens to Jeannie," Corey said.

Of course, nothing would happen to my daughter. First of all, the compound was situated in the middle of the Moon Burrow Woods.

The forest was protected by my flock and our ferocious grizzly allies.

"Sorry for ruining the mood," I mumbled. "I know Simon and Jeannie are fine. It's just, I haven't been outside for a month. It feels odd."

"You haven't ruined everything," Stewart reassured me.

"Let's finish our cake and coffee, then get to that movie," Corey said, giving me a wink.

In the end, I did enjoy watching the horror flick Stewart picked, although Corey looked a little shaken afterwards. I guess he wasn't a fan of the genre.

Six hours later, we were driving back home. I almost ran back to our cabin.

Fumbling with my keys, it took me three times to open the door. Once inside, I called out Simon and Jeannie's names.

I wasn't worried something happened to them. I dearly missed my mate and daughter. That was it.

In the living room, I found them. I'd started getting a little worried why Simon hadn't responded to my call.

Seeing Simon seated on the armchair with Jeannie tucked against his chest, I relaxed.

As quietly as I could, I pulled out my phone and took a picture of them. Simon wore a peaceful look on his face.

Even asleep, he perfectly balanced Jeannie against his broad chest.

Jeannie let out an adorable snuffle in her sleep, and I bent down to kiss her cheek. She didn't wake, thank God.

Simon and I quickly found out right after her birth that it was a herculean task trying to get our little girl to fall asleep.

The two of them must've fallen asleep watching cartoons, I mused. I turned the TV off and the lack of sound woke up my mate.

Simon startled, then spotted me. I placed a finger to my lips, and he nodded.

Simon remained where he was as I picked Jeannie up, then placed her in the day cot in the living room.

After tucking her under a blanket, I returned to my mate. A big grin spread across Simon's face when I decided to sit on his lap.

Simon automatically banded one muscled arm around my waist. Then he fisted my shirt and kissed me.

I kissed him back fiercely and enjoyed the scent and taste of him. Simon smelled like home and of mine.

I didn't even mind his two-day stubble, which tickled my cheek. Finally, he pulled away.

"How was your movie date?" Simon asked me.

"It started out rough," I admitted. "I nearly spoiled our date when I scarfed down my food and finished my drink too quickly. I guessed I missed you and Jeannie too much."

"You didn't enjoy yourself at all?" Simon asked, furrowing his brows.

Next week, it would be Simon's turn to have some fun with the boys.

The boys included the single members of the flock, so that meant Ethan, Tucker, and Spencer.

I wondered if Simon would miss Jeannie and me in the first half hour of their group outing. Probably.

"I learned to relax, eventually. The movie was fun. We got popcorn and Corey clutched at me during the scary bits," I said.

"Corey could never handle those movies," Simon said.

"Ethan's his exact opposite. He's a horror movie fan," I said.

"Do you think there's something between those two?" Simon asked, thoughtfully scratching his cheek.

"Corey mentioned he was happy to get away from the cabin. Apparently, Ethan and Fred have been hooking up, so no. I don't think there's any spark between them," I pointed out.

"So Fred finally got his hooks into Ethan, huh?" Simon looked thoughtful. "I genuinely thought Corey and Ethan might be suitable for each other."

"Forget about other people for a change. I want you to focus on me," I told Simon. Both of us were still whispering. We didn't want to wake Jeannie.

"Easily done," Simon said, yanking me close for another mind-blowing kiss.

When Simon pulled away, I panted, needy for him. I got off his lap and took his fingers.

Lust and affection burned in Simon's gold eyes. I led him back to our bedroom and showed him how much I missed him.

**THE END**

**Want more Moon Burrow Bears? Turn the page to read a preview of Crash.**

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## A PREVIEW OF CRASH

### **JARED**

The intense headache hit me in the middle of my afternoon shift. One moment, I'd been flipping burgers at the fast-food joint where I'd been working for six months.

The next moment, my stomach heaved, and it felt like someone had stuck needles in both my eyes.

I dropped the metal spatula, took a few steps away from the grill, and rested my head in my hands.

Massaging my temples didn't work. The sharp pain in the back of my head persisted, and instinct told me this wasn't normal.

It had something to do with waking up in bed this morning, my entire body covered in sweat.

My throat felt raw from too much screaming the night before. Something bad was going to happen. I knew it in my bones.

My twin brother, Jace, and I came from a long line of seers. Jace and I felt an immediate sense of wrongness on the day our dad Reid took his own life.

Ten years ago, Jace had barged into my bedroom one foggy morning, ashen-faced and unable to speak.

Words weren't needed. Deep down, Jace and I knew the inevitable had come to pass.

The same dread coiled in my insides in the present.

Both our dads were gone. Ken died of lung cancer. Unable to cope with his death, Reid took his own life.

Jace was all I had, but Jace was living thousands of miles away from Fair Creek, our hometown.

I had chosen to stay and live in the house where we grew up. The moment Jace turned 20, he left Fair Creek, our haunted home, and never looked back.

I resented him a little for leaving me behind. No, that wasn't true at all. I didn't want to leave back then and now.

The familiar comforted me. Sudden change unnerved me, but I had a feeling change was about to visit me no matter what I wanted.

"Jared, you alright?" Ronda, my manager, asked.

Ronda looked at me with concern. I realized I'd wrapped my arms around my skinny frame.

I stared at the burning meat on the grill. Ronda followed my line of sight and calmly took over.

Finally, I remembered how to use my words.

"I'm not feeling so good, Ronda. Must be the flu that's been going around," I said, lying effortlessly.

Lying had been part of Jace's and my skill set ever since we were kids.

There were places in the world where paranormals and humans openly coexisted, but not in Fair Creek.

We had our share of supernatural residents, but they mostly kept to themselves.

The human denizens treated them with open fear and suspicion. They did not spare my family.

My family were outliers and didn't belong on the side of the humans or the supernaturals.

Jace and I spent our miserable high school years being treated like pariahs. While we never openly declared what we were, rumors traveled fast in small towns.

Visitors frequented our house during my childhood, seeking Ken to read their fortunes.

In the present, some of the older locals still appeared on my doorstep, begging for my aid.

Jace would have refused immediately, but I never had the heart to turn them away.

“Take the rest of the day off, Jared,” Ronda suggested.

I blinked at her, momentarily confused. For a moment there, I’d allowed myself to meander down memory lane.

“Thanks, Ronda,” I told her.

“Take all the time you need. You have my number. Get some medicine for that flu,” she called over my shoulder.

I made my way to the employee break room and grabbed the rest of my belongings.

Not bothering to change out of my uniform, I left the store. The moment my feet touched the pavement, I breathed in some fresh air.

The pounding in my head subsided a little, but the uneasy feeling in my gut lingered.

I tried calling Jace right after I slid behind the wheel of my battered blue Honda. No response.

The last time I heard from Jace was two weeks ago. He seemed happy, working an office job for a hot boss. Those were Jace’s exact words.

Jace drifted from one job to the next, before finally settling on this one a year ago.

He’d sent me pictures of his desk, of his fancy new apartment. Jace seemed happy. So what went wrong?

After texting him to call me back, I drove back home. Spotting the latest graffiti artwork sprayed on my porch steps, I sighed.

Cleaning that mess up would take hours and I wasn’t in the mood, so I left it for now.

I entered my quiet little home. Buster, my playful 5-year-old gray Ragdoll, immediately ran up to me to greet me.

Buster twirled around my legs, and I knew he wouldn't stop until I picked him up. He was such an adorable baby that way.

I hefted him in my arms and let out a dramatic groan.

“Did you gain some extra weight again?” I asked him.

Buster meowed in my arms. I carried him upstairs to my bedroom. Once again, I ignored the two empty bedrooms across the hall.

A co-worker once asked me if I ever got lonely, living in such a big house on my own. I told him I was fine because I had Buster with me.

That was another lie. There were nights when I came home, feeling completely wiped out from work, wishing I had someone to come home to.

Someone who would greet me with a warm smile and a teasing kiss. He'd make me dinner and ask me how my day was.

Maybe the mystery man I'd been dreaming of ever since I was a kid.

Jace always teased me every single time I brought him up. My Prince Charming had dark gold hair and vivid blue eyes that sometimes turned amber in certain situations.

He wasn't traditionally handsome but had a rough, rakish look to him. When he smiled, my heart completely melted.

When Jace told me to grow up and find a real man, I stopped mentioning my imaginary prince to him completely.

I never told my brother this, but some childish part of me still believed he was real.

My prince was out there, looking for me. Someday, our paths would cross, but until then, I'd continue dreaming of him.

Wanting to get the smell of greasy burgers off me, I took a quick shower.

After making myself a quick dinner, I checked my phone, but there was still no reply from Jace.



I hugged Buster close to my chest. He stilled, allowing me to use him as a fluffy pillow. It was as if Buster knew I needed the extra comfort.

“Jace, what happened to you?” I whispered to the empty kitchen.

\* \* \*

I woke up crying. Buster licked my cheek, and I realized I’d fallen asleep on my lumpy living room sofa again.

The more I tried to recall the dream, the more it slipped away from my grasp.

I had dreamed of him again, my golden prince with the eyes that never remained the same. My prince with the hungry smile.

In that dream, I saw him clear as day, leaning against a black monstrous machine—a Harley.

Once he spotted me, he’d crooked a finger at me. I could still remember the words I said to him in the dream.

“You’re my past, present, and future, Crash,” I had said.

Crash. Was that his name? I’d always thought of my prince as nameless. Where did that even come from? What kind of name was Crash?

My phone buzzed, and it took me a few precious seconds to find it tucked under one pillow.

Jace’s name flashed across the screen, and I answered his call immediately.

“Jace, thank God you called me back. I was worried about you all day,” I blurted.

A quick look at the clock on my kitchen wall told me it was midnight. I arrived home at 3 pm.

Plenty of time had passed. Buster jumped on my lap, and I stroked him to calm my nerves.

“Jace, are you there?” I asked anxiously.

“There’s no time,” Jace said, sounding a little out of breath.

I pressed my phone closer to my ear and could hear shouting in the background, followed by a distinctive sound I’d only heard in movies or shows.

A gunshot? Was someone shooting at my brother? My heart thumped painfully, and I gripped the phone tightly in my hand.

“Jace, talk to me. What do you mean, there’s no time?” I demanded.

“I made a terrible mistake,” Jace said. Each word sounded strained. He panted heavily.

Jace continued, “I have so many things I wanted to tell you, Jared.” “Stop running and let’s talk this out like adults, Jace.” I heard someone saying.

Unlike my brother, who seemed to have trouble drawing air into his lungs, this speaker had a calm, velvety voice that made the hairs on my arms stand.

“Who are you calling?” asked that same voice.

“Run,” Jace whispered to me. “Get out of town. Do it right now or you’ll die in three days.”

Three days? Was Jace for real?

“Out of Fair Creek? Why? Jace, you’re not making any sense. Where would I even go?” I demanded.

“To your Motorcycle Prince. He’s real. I’m sorry I made fun of you all those years ago. Go to him. He’ll keep you safe,” Jace said. “I love you, Jared. I really wish we had more time.” Jace abruptly cut the call, and I stared at my phone for the next few seconds, stunned.

What just happened?

Jace told me to leave town, and I knew he wouldn’t just give me that advice without a reason.

Jace’s gift of foresight had always been stronger than mine. Did he see my death? I was about to call him again when my

hands started to shake.

The cellphone slipped from my fingers. Invisible pressure constricted my chest, making it hard to breathe.

My heart felt like it would burst from my chest. I knew in that instant that Jared was about to die, and there was nothing I could do to save him.

Terrible agony gripped my head. I squeezed my eyes shut, knowing I was receiving a vision. A late vision, but something was better than nothing.

My head spun, and the world seemed upside down. Cold swept over my clothes, my trembling body.

I heard the crash of waves, and the smell of brine permeated my nose. I was on some sort of dock or marina.

Large and pale fingers circled my fragile neck, and a terrible face loomed above me, beautiful yet unnatural.

A croak slipped from my throat, but I wouldn't beg for forgiveness or mercy. That wasn't my style. It took me a moment to realize I was looking out of Jace's eyes and hearing his thoughts.

These were his last moments on this earth.

Despair filled me as the creature in front of me continued strangling me. My body, or rather Jace's body, started to grow limp.

"Tell me, Jace. Who did you call?" asked my brother's killer in that same eerie and calm voice.

Jace managed to blurt out two words. An impolite curse. His killer wore a disgusted look on his face.

Cold red eyes bore into mine. Jace's murderer wasn't the least bit human. Why wasn't I surprised?

"If you hadn't snooped around, then things would have still been peachy between us. I really enjoyed you in my life, in my bed, Jace. Here I was, thinking we were partners."

I detected a hint of sadness in the monster's voice, but it was gone the next moment. "Too bad I need to replace you."

The monster squeezed one more time until the fragile bones in my brother's neck broke.

My mind pulled me back to reality. I gasped, clawing at the fabric of my sofa. Sweat beaded my brow, and my heart galloped.

What was the point of having this gift, when I could only see my brother during his dying moments?

“This isn't a gift. It's a bloody curse,” I whispered to myself.

I burrowed my face into my hands. Hot tears filled my eyes. With Jace gone, I was the only member of the Church family left alive.

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Felicia loves writing sizzling MM romances with hot alphas and happily-ever-afters.

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Lucas