

REBECCA RATHE

FRACTURED  
BONDS

THE BINDING SERIES  
BOOK 2

# FRACTURED BONDS

Rebecca Rathe

# Fractured Bonds

*The Binding Book Two*

Rebecca Rathe

Copyright © 2023 Rebecca Rathe LLC

All rights reserved

The characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

No part of this book may be reproduced, or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without express written permission of the publisher.

Cover design by: Artscandre  
Editing and Proofreading by: Book Witch Author Services

*"Whatever it is, whatever comes, we'll figure it out together."*

# Recap from The Binding Book One

Calista Batts is a 33-year-old woman who lived a sheltered life until the day her doctor, George Bodin, kidnaps her and uses her in a botched sacrificial ceremony meant to drain her of a power she didn't know she had. Until that day, she believed herself to be medically fragile, and suffered from seizures that would cause her to hallucinate. The truth was that Calista is a witch, and her powers were spellbound by her mother at an early age to keep her safe. The falsely diagnosed epilepsy she suffered with her entire life was actually her powers trying to manifest, and the hallucinations were very real visions.

The magic in the world is near depleted, and very few are born with magical abilities anymore. But Calista was born with incredible power, so great that it put her in danger of men like George Bodin and the members of a secret, fanatical anti-magic group called The Sanctum Society who use religion to justify their actions.

When a misguided family member places an ancient and powerful grimoire in George Bodin's hands, he felt certain he had what he needed to complete a barbaric ceremony that would drain Calista of her dormant powers and transfer them to the members of The Sanctum Society. As they didn't possess the skills and knowledge to complete the spell properly, it failed and nearly killed Calista in the process, but not before it unlocked the power hidden deep within her. Her magic called three very different and very powerful men to her side, and they attempted the impossible to save her. They each bound themselves to her.

Draven, a blood mage, also called a shade, helped to get her heart beating again and linked their minds through a blood bond.

Seth, a light mage, known as a bright, saved her soul by repairing it with part of his own. A feat that has never been attempted, much less accomplished, before.

Hawthorne, a mortal earth mage, bound her physically, tying her body to his

in order to help her withstand the force of the magic that was unlocked within her.

With their binding, they each have a special connection with Calista. Draven can speak to her through their minds and see her thoughts without even trying. Seth can feel her emotions and help calm her through the turmoil she feels when she wakes up from her ordeal. And Hawthorne can feel everything she can feel, from a splinter in her thigh, to the constant arousal that the bonds have coursing through her.

And so Calista learned of an entire hidden world and continues to struggle to find her place in it. While learning how to control her unruly powers, she also has to contend with the overwhelming effects of her new bonds and all the feelings they thrust upon her. Unfortunately, Hawthorne could not bear to forgive himself for the actions he had to take to bind her, and he pushed away from the closeness that the bonds demand.

When the newly forced family learned that women were going missing, they worked together to put together the pieces of a dangerous puzzle that all led back to the same group of zealots that hurt Calista. During a confrontation between the bonded mates and The Sanctum Society, Hawthorne over expended his magic, and fell into a coma where his own guilt over the past and his actions held him hostage. Stuck in his own suffering, Hawthorne was forced to relive the worst days of his life, when his wife and two young children were slaughtered.

As Seth and Draven helped her make a plan to bring Hawthorne out of his coma, Calista figured out what she believed would set Hawthorne free from the bond he was so resentful of. But since she truly loves him, her resolve and intentions went astray, and she ended up fracturing the bonds between them rather than severing them completely.

Newly weakened due to the incomplete severing of the bonds, they were called away on a mission to where they found the missing women and tried to help them escape. In the process, Hawthorne was captured by The Sanctum Society. One of the images he saw before he was drugged was a woman that looked exactly like his daughter that died so long ago, all grown up.

# Glossary of Characters

***Blood mage, aka shade:*** a magical being with supernatural abilities such as increased speed and strength. Rare skills include mind abilities, such as telepathy and compulsion. Known for their need to drink blood for survival and maintaining their magical stores, humans often refer to them as “vampires” and consider them to be frightening and dangerous.

***Light mage, aka bright:*** a magical being with supernatural abilities such as flight, travel by light, and emotional manipulation. Known for their ability to lighten the suffering from the human race during times of trouble, they are the watchers of the sky. Invisible to mortal eyes, although sightings have occurred and lore regarding winged creatures called “angels” is prevalent among humans.

***Earth mage or witch:*** a mortal with magical abilities that are passed down through blood lines, most commonly through maternal lines. Powers and abilities have a vast range, but most commonly they have powers that are connected to the earth, both giving and receiving of magical energy from plants, the moon, and the sun.

***The Sanctum Society:*** a group of mortals who believe that magic is an abomination to their religious beliefs, who seek to rid the world of witches. Although The Sanctum Society has been around for at least two hundred years, they have mostly been considered a fringe group of fanatics and have gone under the radar as they built up knowledge and resources.



***The Council of Witches:*** a group of the most powerful witches and mages that help govern the mortal magical community. They also serve to help keep the magical world hidden from humans.

***The Bright Elders:*** a group of the eldest light mages. They take on the responsibility of organizing the brights to most effectively spread their talents to help the humans on earth, while also recording history and preserving magical texts and artifacts.

# Chapter 1 - Calista

Nausea churns in my stomach, although whether it is from fear and anger or from Draven's quick movement through the twists and turns, I can't be sure. "Where are Seth and Hawthorne? We need to go back!" Angry tears cloud my vision as Draven manhandles me through the dark labyrinth of tunnels, back towards the gap we blasted into the side of the cave. "Draven, put me down!"

The persistent pain in my chest flares, the remnants of my fractured bond pulsing like the frayed edges of a lit fuse, protesting every step we take that pulls us further away from the man I tried to release from the bond. It saps my energy more than my struggle against Draven's hold on my body.

"I'll put you down, but you have to listen to me," Draven grunts as I beat against his chest, his hard body unmoving no matter how hard I kick and wriggle. "Hawthorne can take care of himself, and Seth is with him." He sets me down as soon as we're through the small cave opening, but doesn't release me, gripping my shoulders tightly enough that I know it would be difficult to extricate myself. Not impossible, though. "Remember what we're here for." His words calm me enough to focus.

*Blood.* I project to him. *I'm here for blood.*

Screams echo in the caves behind us.

*You wanted to save them.* He reminds me gently, his voice echoing in my head.

"We'll get our vengeance, beauty," he says out loud. "But first there are a shit ton of people coming up behind us that need a way out." He kisses my forehead and wipes away an errant tear in a gentle gesture that takes me by surprise. "Open the portal. When they come out, lead the first people through and the rest will follow. I'll keep watch on this end and nip at their heels to

get them to move faster." It's enough to make me crack a smile, although he's probably not even kidding.

With a deep, steadying breath, I nod and move across the clearing towards the tree line, away from the cave entrance so there's enough room for everyone to congregate as they climb out of the rocky hole we blasted into the side of the mountain. My power isn't as readily available as it has been the past few days, like it's a sentient thing that knows what I've done. I betrayed my bond by trying to sever it, betraying my bond to Hawthorne in the process.

The physical pain of the fractured bond has me nearly doubled over as the memory of the look on his face when he figured out what I'd done flashes through my mind. Sucking in deep breaths, I dig deep, grasping a tendril of the power inside me, begging it to obey.

Focusing through the pain, I'm able to open a portal. It leads to the hospital I visited after my car accident, the first place I can think of to send the dozens of people that are starting towards me. They clearly need medical attention, and many of them will need real psychiatric care, although I can't imagine how they'll ever trust another doctor. I'm not sure I ever will.

I'm surrounded by a group of women, all of them watching me with fearful, pleading expressions, as if they don't quite trust that this isn't some kind of trick. After my own encounter with The Sanctum Society, I can only imagine what these poor people have gone through after spending so much time imprisoned by them. It's obvious that many of them have been in those cells for quite a while. Some of them are pale enough to suggest it's been months since they've last seen the sun, their cheeks gaunt with malnourishment. Their clothes are in tatters and filthy, and as they draw nearer, the stench of their mistreatment and neglect fills my nostrils.

As much as I want to focus on my—no, he's not mine—on *Hawthorne*, these helpless and terrified souls need to be our top priority.

"It's okay, you're safe. I'm taking you to a hospital," I say, beckoning them closer to me.

The first people to reach me hesitate, looking at the rippling air with undisguised fear. I don't want to leave this clearing, but Draven is right. They're going to need me to lead them, to show them the portal is safe. I can very much empathize with the shock that some of them must be feeling. It would shock me if even one of them truly knew anything about witches and magic.

A little girl stands away from the rest of the crowd, her auburn pigtails matted to the sides of her filthy face. There are burn spots on the sides of her temples, and I clench my jaw to hold back the hot tears that are threatening to spill. *They will suffer for this.*

Reaching my hand to the little girl, I grasp her small fingers and bend down to look her in her dark green eyes. "It's okay," I tell her, my voice faltering a bit as emotion clogs my throat. "Follow me."

She looks at me warily for a moment, but then her eyes steel into an expression of determination. This small child has been through so much, and yet she still finds it in her to be brave.

I step through to the other side of the portal, pulling the young girl behind me. When we step into an alleyway across the street from the hospital, her mouth freezes open in a gasp. My hand reaches back through the portal, showing the next people that we're safe. Someone grasps my hand, and I gently pull them through the ripple. Behind them, another person emerges, and then another. I applaud every one of them for the bravery it takes them to step into the unknown, especially after everything they've already gone through.

I continue to reassure them as they walk through the portal. "It's okay. You're safe." I say the words, but they feel false. I honestly don't know what will become of them. How will a small town human hospital handle dozens of traumatized captives telling their story of how they'd been captured and abused? Stories of how they'd been used in occult ceremonies meant to drain them of powers they likely didn't even possess, much less know anything about; how they'd been ushered through a rippling wall that magically transported them to a random alley in a city hours away. If it were just one of them, it might be brushed off as hallucinations. But this many people?

I don't know the stories of how they came to be in that cave, or if they have any understanding of what The Sanctum Society was using them for. There's no guessing what explanation they'll give the hospital and police. Hopefully Seth can contact someone from The Council to intervene and help advocate for these people. These are the least of my concerns right now. My limbs are growing heavier by the moment, and a cold sweat has broken out over my forehead.

I can't keep this portal open for much longer. The pain of my severed bond threatens to overtake and my strength is rapidly failing me. I need to get myself back to the other side of the portal before my power fails me and I'm stuck here, unable to help Draven, Seth, and Hawthorne.

Screams echo from the other side of the portal and my breath catches.

One woman stands out among the rest, looking a little stronger, or maybe just slightly less afraid than the rest. Or at least she's one of the few people that doesn't seem to be panicking. I pull her from the crowd and instruct her to lead everyone across the street to the hospital for treatment.

"Wait until the portal closes, and then go together to get help. Make sure the children have someone with them at all times," I remind her.

The woman nods at me with wide, fearful eyes, but grasps the hand of the little girl I led through first, and starts talking to the people around her. Trusting that they can take care of themselves from here, I step through to the other side, still straining to keep the portal open. There are more people than this. I know there are. It seems like most of the children were ushered through first, which is good, but where is everyone else?

As I step back into the clearing, it's chaos. Loud screams, a thick fog of acrid smoke, flashing lights, gunshots, and what sounds like the deep barking of dogs accosts me from every angle.

A few women are still climbing through the cave opening, staggering into the clearing. I watch as two, then three, of them fall in quick succession, propelled forward by the blasts of gunfire that take them out. Another few scream as a pack of dogs nip at their heels, savagely mauling them when they

fall to the ground.

My heart pounds violently, blood rushing loudly in my ears. Dark spots appear before my eyes and my vision wavers as I sway a little. The portal flickers.

A small group of women, dragging a couple of wounded with them, makes it to where I'm flagging people into the portal.

"Get through, now, it's about to close!" I hold the portal open as long as I can manage, and the women make it through just before my energy fails me and winks out when a flash of pain shoots through me.

*Hawthorne needs me.*

With my focus off the portal, I'm able to concentrate my remaining energy and assess the scene around me. It's a war-zone. Innocent people are crying out or laying dead in the clearing. Most of the remaining survivors are being picked off by guns and dogs. The sound and smells of death threaten to overwhelm me, but the anger I feel at the atrocities committed here seeps through my pores and overpowers my exhaustion.

My veins heat and I hone in on my remaining bonds. Both Seth and Draven are still tethered securely, so I know they're okay. Seth was with Hawthorne in the cave, so I'm going to assume he's safe as well. The light pouring out of the mouth of the cave entrance makes me think they're on their way, but not quickly enough to stop all these people from dying.

My senses pick up on Draven, running through the smoke in a blur, taking out some of the gunmen. A jolt runs through the bond, and I know he's been shot. The pain of the injury flares on the left side of my stomach. Despite knowing he's still alive and continuing his attack on the guards, fear and agitation overtake me.

*This has to stop.*

Letting my eyelids fall shut, I take a deep breath of smoke-laced air, and let it out slowly. I spread my consciousness out around me like snakes, climbing

over the blood-soaked ground. Latching onto bodies, crawling up the side of the mountain and seeking every being with a beating heart. I know I can't use my power to hurt my bonded mates, but I still silently pray to myself that my power can distinguish between innocent and evil as it swallows everyone else outside the cave.

I picture the tendrils of my magic trickling down the throats of my enemies. There's a moment of hesitation, but I push away my worry. Something has to be done or all these people will die. Either I can shield the innocent from the death I'm about to release, or at the very least give them a quick death, which is more humane than anything they could expect from The Sanctum Society.

My pulse pounds harshly in my temples, muffling out every other sound. I raise my hands in front of me, and pull on the invisible reins of my magic. Reflecting on what Hawthorne taught me, about magic needing to take in order to give, I think of what these monsters are trying to take from all these innocent people, and I imagine a siphon, pulling the breath of life from the wicked. My raised hands form fists as I drag it up from the depths of their wretched corpses. Then I throw my hands out, sending their life-forces into the bodies of the wounded, dying innocents that litter the ground around me.

I use every last drop of what energy I have left until blackness invades my vision as the world spins around me. My legs give out and the ground rises up to meet me. The last thing I feel is my forehead cracking against a rock.

## Chapter 2 - Draven

*Where are they all coming from?*

Another two dozen guards with guns run around the side of the mountain and into the clearing, shooting indiscriminately. Tainted smoke, the same kind they used on us at Calista's aunt's house, pours out of pipes around the base of the mountain.

They were ready for an attack, but they didn't know who'd they be contending with. They're pulling out all the stops to keep us from ruining whatever operation they have running here.

The thick scent of blood is more overpowering than the sounds of death—the gunshots and screaming and vicious dogs tearing into the bodies of innocent people. It fills my sinuses, and for once, the taint of death does nothing to excite me. It just pisses me off.

From the top of the hill, I take out three more gunmen with sniper rifles before everything around me freezes. I look down over the edge and see every guard, dog, and escaped prisoner stopped in their tracks. A light emanates from the mouth of the cave opening and I race down, meeting a troubled-looking Seth as he pulls himself from the hole we made when we arrived.

"Hawthorne?" I ask.

He shakes his head tersely, looking pale. "He was supposed to be behind me."

My heart clenches, knowing how heartbroken Calista will be if anything happens to Hawthorne, especially after her botched attempt to set him free.

Seth looks around, his eyes wide with terror and worry. "Where is she?" His hoarse voice croaks with emotion.



"She was leading people through a portal, but it closed."

Both of our gazes search the clearing, the portal no longer anywhere to be seen. I have a fleeting hope that she's on the other side of wherever she directed all those people, but I also know there's no way in hell she'd leave us to do the dirty work.

"I can still feel her close by," he says, confirming my thoughts.

We take a few steps towards the tree line, staring at the people that seem to be suspended in time. As we walk through a line of guards that are frozen to the spot, they begin to choke, harsh gurgling noises rising from their throats, their eyes wide with panic. Whatever is happening doesn't seem to affect anyone but the guards. The innocent women that were at the tail end of the mass escape are whimpering through their forced immobility, but don't seem to be experiencing whatever the guards are struggling with.

"Look," Seth rasps, pointing to the other side of the clearing.

Calista is standing at the edge of the forest, her feet planted firmly and arms raised out in front of her. Her eyes are closed in concentration, and I can both feel and see the vibration of power radiating around her. Her hands close into tight fists just as the bodies of the guards around us jerk and fall limply to the ground, dead where they stood not moments ago. Calista's clenched fists hover above her head before she throws them down and out, releasing whatever power she just pulled from the guards.

A shockwave pulses outward from where she's standing that makes the ground rumble and shake. Some of the women that were laying on the bloody ground, presumably dead, gasp and cry out.

"Fucking hell," I mutter in disbelief. I don't take the time to wonder about the impossible feat that just occurred right in front of my face, because the bond that tethers me to the miracle herself tightens painfully. I look up to see Calista reel back before her body slackens, and she falls to the ground.

Everything around me is a blur as I race to her, getting there even before Seth blinks into existence on her other side. We aren't fast enough to reach her

before she hits the ground though, and I watch, helplessly, as she falls and hits her head on a rock, her forehead bleeding instantly. The smell of her blood instantly steels my veins, rage rippling through my body.

"We have to get her out of here," I say, lifting her into my arms.

"What about—" Seth gestures around us, to the women left in the clearing. Some of them huddle together, crying, while others help each other up, and some simply stare around themselves in shock.

"I don't really give a fuck," I admit.

It's the truth. Not one person here matters as much as she does. Hell, every person on earth could be on fire and I'd still choose her first. Let them all burn. I couldn't care less.

Seth grimaces, and it's clear that he is struggling with his convictions. I know he wants to go back and check on Hawthorne, and there are at least a dozen women out here that need assistance finding their way to safety. But I have my only concern in my arms.

"I've got her. Do what you have to do," I tell him, not unkindly, but also not waiting. I put on a burst of speed to get her as far away from here as quickly as possible.



It's been two days. Two days of Calista not talking to us. Two days of her refusing to let us help with the pain she's suffering.

I've been pacing so much, I'm surprised I haven't worn a hole into the wood floors. I'm antsy and on edge. The walls are closing in on me.

After she'd woken up from her overexertion the other night, she was frantic and pissed that we'd left Hawthorne behind. But it's not like we had a choice. My main priority—one that Hawthorne wholeheartedly agreed with—was getting her to safety. Seth stayed behind to help the rest of the survivors. He said he tried to get back into the caves to check on Hawthorne, but it was already crawling with far more guards than he could handle on his own at once.

Seth is off begging for help from his elders, or trying to get into The Archives so we can get in touch with The Council. We couldn't find any evidence of how Hawthorne was going to contact them, and since neither Seth nor I even know the names of the people we're looking for, we're grasping at straws.

We were wrong to think that we could just march in and save the day, laying waste to the bad guys, and walk out without a scratch. It's a far bigger operation than we expected, nothing like whatever Bodin was managing when he was alive. Which means whoever is in charge now is smarter and far more dangerous.

We're going to need help to take them down. Especially now that we've mistakenly handed them two weapons. They now have Hawthorne, the strongest mage I've ever seen or heard of in my lifetime, and they know Calista is alive and that she's more powerful than any of us thought. They'll never stop coming after her now that they know what she's capable of. What she accomplished that night should have been impossible. She literally ripped the life force from those guards and gave it over to their victims. Women came back from the dead that night, with no idea that they'd been reborn.

The cost was too high, though. Calista could have died herself. She was barely alive when I finally made it home to heal her, force feeding her my blood through the night until she finally sat up on her own accord and started demanding to know where Hawthorne was. She's been holed up in his room ever since, only emerging to get more books or herbs for various spells she's trying. I'm not sure what she's trying to accomplish, but the only thing she should be focused on is recuperating fully.

All the blood I gave her has healed her body, but she's in a kind of pain that I can't touch or fix. Her body is bowed with the force of it, betraying how badly the consequences of breaking the bond with Hawthorne are affecting her. It's hurting her enough that she's lost focus; her walls are down enough to let me feel and hear the anguish in her mind.

"You're not going to do any good until you allow yourself time to rest and regenerate."

"Do you think that's what Hawthorne is doing right now?" she snaps at me.

She blames herself for us losing Hawthorne. *He wasn't strong enough to fight because of me.*

"You don't know that," I say softly, responding to her unspoken statement.

Her head snaps up, tears pouring out of her exhausted eyes as she scowls at me and slams her walls back up, blocking me from her mind. She's blocked us both out. Seth said that we can soothe her pain, although it'll never go away completely. She's kept us far away from her ever since, purposefully making herself suffer. She thinks she's punishing herself, but it's punishing all of us.

It makes me irrationally angry, to the point that I can barely contain my violent impulses. I walk over to where she's standing and swipe everything on one long shelf to the ground. A heavy sphere falls on my foot and crushes my toe. I'm so weak from thirst that I have to endure the pain of the bones in my foot knitting back together, and I take my anger out on her.

Crowding her until she's backed against the shelves, I take a deep huff of her scent and I hiss at her before I'm able to pull myself back. She smells... *different*. I can't place it, but it's making my head spin. Unafraid, she looks up at me defiantly, tears and power streaming out of her in waves.

Shaking myself out of my strange headspace, I'm able to calm myself enough to use words, but they come out harshly through gritted teeth. "You made a mistake. Fucking own it and move on."

I don't know why I'm so worked up. I was worried about her—really, really worried about her—and I didn't like it. I don't like being so fucking attached to one person that I don't know where they begin and I end. I can't tell my own thirst from her pain, or differentiate her anger from mine. The heaviness of it is oppressive.

"I hurt him, Draven," she says, a tone of defeat undermining her defiance.

"You hurt yourself," I respond, my voice softening even though my heart is pounding in my ears.

*I deserve the pain,* she whispers in my mind.

"That's ridiculous. He wouldn't want you to suffer like this," I force out.

Inside, I'm reeling. I want to rage and shout at her—why the fuck should she care what he feels? He didn't want her! If he didn't want the bond to be broken, maybe he should have thought about that before he stomped around here like an asshole. I was an asshole, sure, but she understood why. *He* made her feel unwanted. If he hadn't shut her out, maybe this wouldn't have happened.

*Kind of like the way you're shutting her out right now.*

"You don't know that," she retorts.

"Well, hiding away and refusing to eat or sleep isn't going to help him, is it?"

Truthfully, I'm not one to speak. I haven't fed in days, and I bled myself near dry attempting to save her from herself. I was probably going overboard, but I wasn't about to take any chances. Not with her. Never with her.

She sighs. She knows I'm right.

*Since when am I the reasonable one here?*

"You need to get some actual rest, and I need to get some space before I say something I regret."

She flinches, but I'm holding back a flood of unreasonable fury. I am aware enough to know that something is happening, something bigger than my normal bloodlust. I don't know if it's because of the thirst that's burning my throat from the inside out, or if it's the scent of blood that hasn't left my nostrils since we left the caves. I've gone much longer without feeding before, and never felt like this. I've been weaker and still able to control my bloodlust.

It's just... *her*. She makes me delirious, and I'm hovering on the edge.

"Draven—"

"Get some sleep, beauty. Seth will be back soon."

I speed off before I make things worse for her. I don't like leaving her alone, but right now, I feel like she's safer without me there. I'm too close to completely snapping, to losing control. Who knows what kind of damage I could do to my surroundings—to *her*?

After following my footsteps through the miles of forest I carried her through, I find myself walking around the same foothills we were in the other night. If I hadn't been here myself, I would never have known of the devastating battle that happened here only two nights ago. There isn't a trace of disturbance. Not even a drop of blood can be scented on the ground or in the wind. In fact, I smell...*nothing*.

For whatever reason, this area is being masked. Which means they are likely pulling back, getting ready to move their operation if they haven't already. We helped a lot of their livestock escape, but only managed to save half of the number of people I could sense in those caverns. Are they going to move them, too, or choose the quicker way to destroy evidence before hightailing it out of here? If they have Hawthorne, they have enough of a power source to experiment on that they wouldn't need all those people with mere traces of magic in their blood.

If they move him, how would we ever find him again? I could live without him, but I'm not sure she could.

The rock opening we'd made has been sealed, and even here, where I know for sure we've been, there is no scent at all. There's something going on here and they very specifically don't want *us* knowing about it. Which means it's even more imperative that we find another way in. I search around the base of the entire mountain, making note of every imperfect edge of rock. There's a way in here somewhere...

I've just found the mouth of a huge, dark cave in an adjacent mountain when I feel a disturbance that stops me in my tracks. Something pulls at my chest, just like the night we found her, before we all bound ourselves to save her.

*Calista.*

I put on a burst of speed that gets me back to the clearing in moments. Birdie, the large raven, is squawking beside a dark mound on the ground. It takes my brain a few seconds to process that it's Calista. She's pulled a dark maroon duvet over herself and is laying on the cold ground in a fetal position, moaning and breathing erratically, clearly having some sort of nightmare.

The raven stands guard near her head, and squawks at me as if in warning as I approach.

"Back off, bird. I'm not going to hurt her." *I don't think.*

I was feeling almost clear-headed once I got away from her, but now that she's back in my presence, I can feel that something is...off. She smells strange, and it's doing something to my brain.

What the fuck is she even doing out here?

A deep growl emanates from my chest as I crouch over her sleeping form. My fangs are throbbing, my mouth full of saliva. A wet stream of venom drips from my pointed teeth and lands on her cheek.

She gasps as her eyes open wide, her pupils dilating with fear and confusion.

"Don't. Move."

## Chapter 3 - Seth

"I need to contact The Council," I demand again, my voice rising, cutting off the Elder in front of me.

I've never spoken to a bright Elder in such a way, never so much as raised my voice in the presence of one of my kind at all. But the blatant disregard of the problems I've been presenting to him for the past two hours has moved past troubling and is now flat out concerning.

"I told you, young Barrett, the bright Elder no longer commune with the witches. They continuously ignore our prophecies and disregard our warnings, and therefore put themselves in the peril they face. That is why their people are suffering and going missing."

"It's not witches that are going missing," I interrupt again. The older man's face reddens with my impertinence. He's likely never had someone talk back to him in such a manner, but I'm becoming more enraged than I've ever felt before. "I can't tell if you aren't understanding what I've told you, or if you're being purposefully obtuse. I only need The Council so they will intervene with The Sanctum Society and prevent them from taking more innocent human lives. Protecting humans is our entire purpose, is it not? I need The Council's help, not the other way around. The Elders need not have anything to do with it, other than to tell me where to find them."

"I cannot help you."

"Cannot, or will not?" I snap back at him.

He doesn't answer.

"So you will forsake the suffering of innocent people?"

"Of course not," he says, his voice haughty and offended.



"Then how can you let this happen?!"

The Elder softens his eyes and his voice, which shuts me up more than if he'd screamed in my face. "We were there, Seth. Two of us were assigned to those poor souls, and we witnessed the escape."

No. I would have seen them, or felt them at the very least. A bright's presence isn't something that can be ignored when you know what you're looking for. There's no way I could have missed two of my own kind, no matter how chaotic it was.

"That's impossible."

"You broke the bars and freed those people," he says flatly. I don't get the impression he's trying to prove he was there, lying is beneath a bright and is rarely, if ever, a consideration. The tone of his voice suggests disapproval. "Which, in its own way, was admirable. However, did you ever consider that it goes against the nature of a bright to intervene in such a way? We are meant to lessen the suffering of people, to bring them hope when there is none so they can fight their own battles. Our purpose isn't to meddle and create solutions for them, that's not how it works."

My mind spins. I somehow completely missed the presence of my own kind lurking in a corner, and now I'm being berated for saving lives?

"The best way to help their suffering was to release them." They can't expect me to not use my corporeal form now that I have one.

"Your mortal soulmate tampered with fate that night, Seth Barrett." My head jerks up at the mention of Calista. "You were cautioned the last time you sought The Archives, not to meddle in the affairs of humans."

"I don't believe she meant to tamper with fate, only to save as many innocent people as possible."

"It is not for her or anyone else to decide who lives and who dies, to steal lives from people who haven't yet reached their time, or to steal death from fate."

"Were the people in charge of that operation not stealing the suffering and death from innocents? You cannot pretend that what she accomplished wasn't anything short of a miracle. It should have been impossible, it—"

"It was an abomination."

"It was a display of the raw power that she has inside her, more than even I realized she was capable of. Power the world hasn't seen in generations, since brights walked the earth alongside mortals and every kind of being as equals—when we were all just mages, made differently but working together for the common good. Before we were separated and set against each other." I sigh deeply. "What if instead of doom, she could bring the world a new beginning?"

He ignores my impassioned speech entirely, turning his milky white eyes on me. "You've been warned that your connection with the world you belong to would fade the more you connected yourself to the mortal plane. Your relationship with the witch is leeching you from the celestial world, and your inability to see us that night is proof. Your soul merging with the witch puts you at risk of losing your purpose, as well as your incorporeal form and connection to the celestial world."

I don't mention that I'm already having trouble controlling my incorporeal form. I'd wanted to ask about the flickering of my form when I make love to her, but I no longer think I'll find answers here.

"I used to believe that the bright Elders were all-understanding, or at least all-loving. That you could see inside the souls of every being and seek out the good, bringing it towards the surface so they could make the world a better place. I believed we took away pain to help people thrive and find their way. I strived to be like you, to be as holy as the humans think we are." Taking a deep breath, I let it out, my sigh of disappointment crumbling the last vestiges of hope that we would find help with my kind. "But I see now that our kind have lost our purpose, just as much as the witches or any other being. You look down on the witches for wasting their resources, on the shades for their indulgence, on every other being for what you perceive as weaknesses. But you are allowing your own complacency, your selfishness over the perceived hierarchy of our beings, to prevent you from truly making a difference."

"You are blind to the dangers in front of you, young light."

"And you are blind to the possibilities in front of you," I retort.

"You will lose everything. Your wings."

"Whatever the sacrifice, she is worth it."



My mind reels during my trip home. I fly instead of traveling by light, wondering if I'll truly lose my wings, and what that means exactly. Will I lose the ability to fly, or to travel by light? Will my connection to the emotions of the people around me be severed? I can't imagine being anything other than who I've always been, but I know I'm changing.

In the cave that night, I wasn't able to cast a shield over Hawthorne. He'd been incapacitated by what I now realize was a void, a witch who can create a sort of bubble where no powers can be used. It's why he couldn't cast a portal for us to escape, though he tried, despite the risk of overexerting himself. It seemed unlikely that a mortal witch could affect my powers, and I assumed that Hawthorne's fractured bond might have caused a barrier in my ability to shield him. It was all my frazzled mind could come up with in the moment.

I now realize that it was my own fucking kind that was holding me back, under some misplaced notion that we aren't supposed to interfere in the lives

of mortals. Content to sit back and witness needless suffering. *That's the true abomination.*

I've seen some terrible things, and not been able to do more than absorb some of the pain and anguish that mortals suffered. I always accepted that it was my lot in life to take on that pain, but not to do more—not because I didn't want to, but because I couldn't. It's not as if I don't believe in the impact that I had on those people; I've seen the difference my help made. But now I can touch and be touched, and I am capable of so much more. Now I have *her*.

There is zero doubt in my mind that she is meant for something so much more than skimming pain from suffering souls. She is meant to change everything. And I am meant to help and support her to the best of my ability. I know it in my soul.

Even if it means sacrificing everything I've held dear for centuries.

The cabin is dark and quiet when I land in the clearing. I can't sense anyone here, and my anxiety piques.

"Calista? Draven?" I call out, walking into the cabin.

There are books and debris strewn around the study area of Hawthorne's living room, as if there were a struggle. But there's no one here.

## Chapter 4 - Calista

*You called for them, my mother's hoarse voice whispers. Her emaciated face flashes through my mind.*

*Fire breaks out all around me, and my blood boils in my veins. My chest cracks open, a torrent of deep red blood pouring from the wound.*

*Pain. So much pain.*

*I'm standing in a dark, empty cave. All my newfound power leaks out with the blood that pools around me. My bare feet slosh through the warm liquid, and I slip and fall to my hands and knees. I look down into the deep pool of my blood, staring at my reflection on the still surface. A hand bursts out of the deep pool, wrapping around my throat and pulling me under. I rise on the other side in a pile of naked, writhing bodies. Hands touch me everywhere, some gentle and caressing, others rough and punishing. Draven and Seth are on either side of me, touching me as they kiss each other, blood pouring from their mouths and dripping onto me. The large, hard body beneath me grips my hips and pushes his large erection against my ass. I turn in his hold, a moment of elation shivering through me when I look down at Hawthorne's face. The same face he made when he woke up and made love to me.*

*Hands slither around my body from behind me, digging into my skin. Hawthorne's face morphs into one of pain and betrayal, and my heart bursts from my wounded chest. Suddenly I'm standing in the dark cave again, alone, holding my still beating heart in my hands.*

*A familiar looking woman with stringy hair and glowing eyes appears in front of me. "That is no longer yours," she says in a cold, creepy voice. I stumble back.*

*Wake up, a voice whispers. Wake up...*

I startle awake and gasp, drawing the blanket tighter around me. Draven looks down at me, growling and drooling like an animal. His face is contorted strangely. His eyes are completely black, the usual writhing black veins spreading out around his eyes, signifying his bloodlust. There's something more in his expression, a feral quality I haven't seen before, a twisted pained rage that morphs his beautiful features into something almost grotesque.

"Don't. Move."

He grits the words out through clenched teeth, and for once in my life, I obey. Aside from a trembling in my limbs that I can't seem to stop, I don't move a muscle.

I hold my breath as Draven crouches down and sniffs me. Not just sniffs, he inhales deeply against my hair, and then the skin of my throat. With slow, almost robotic movements, he pulls the blanket off my body. My exposed skin prickles in the chilly night air, my only covering an overly large t-shirt that I stole from Hawthorne's room and a pair of floral cotton panties. Draven's head continues to move down my body, pulling my t-shirt up and dipping lower, inhaling me. His descent is slow until he reaches the exposed skin just above the waistband of my panties. He freezes, and his jaw ticks.

"Draven?" I whisper. He doesn't respond. His eyes are locked on my skin as the growl that rumbles in his chest grows louder. His fangs elongate and liquid drips from the tips. I swallow as he caresses his nose over the fabric of my panties and rakes the tips of his sharp teeth over my skin.

A snarl rips from his throat as his body jerks, and he pushes his face between my legs. My thighs part on instinct, and he holds them open almost painfully wide, claws growing out of the tips of his fingers and digging into the backs of my thighs. His nose and mouth are pressed roughly against the crotch of my panties, the fabric soaked with the saliva dripping from his snarling mouth. I can feel his growls through my core, and despite being more frightened than I ever thought possible in the presence of one of my bonded, my pussy clenches at the vibrations running through me.

"Draven?" I repeat his name, little more than a whisper this time. "Are you okay?"

He blinks once, then twice, barely registering my voice. After a few moments, he pulls back, but still holds me in that position. He closes his eyes, and I get the impression that he's holding himself back from tearing me limb from limb.

As my heart calms, my surroundings come into focus. We're in the middle of a field, next to the base of a small mountain. I think it's the same clearing we fought in the other night, but there are no signs of the destruction that occurred here.

I look around in confusion. *How did I get here?*

"What are you doing here?"

Draven's voice startles me. His tone is low and clipped, like it's difficult to force words out. *Is he angry to find me here?* He's not looking at my face, still staring down at the wet crotch of my underwear like my vag might grow teeth and bite him back. I almost wish it would.

"I—I don't know, I—"

"It's incredibly dangerous for you to be out here, of all places—"

"I didn't show up here on purpose, Draven!" I spit back at him. "I woke up here like this. What is wrong with you?"

"I said I needed space."

"I didn't mean to follow you. I don't even know how I got here."

He growls again and I'm acutely aware of how firmly he's still holding me down. I try to squirm out of his grip, but it just tightens.

"Don't. Fucking. Move."

I recoil at his attitude. "Don't tell me what to do. What, are you taking Hawthorne's place as resident dick?"

"Someone has to. Why? Are you going to break our bond, too?" he deadpans,

still staring down at my body and not truly acknowledging me.

The ire in his tone sends a renewed shock of pain through my heart.

"Fuck you," I spit, and kick out against him. I'm aware enough to know that the only reason I can budge an inch is because I took him by surprise, and he's obviously trying to hold himself back. Even so, I barely do more than flip myself over and attempt to crawl away when he launches himself on me, pinning my front to the ground.

"I told you not to move," he rasps, and I can hear the struggle in his voice.

"What's wrong with you?!" I yell, getting grass and dirt in my mouth as it muffles my protests.

"Stop. Fucking. Moving!" He roars, and my limbs freeze.

The warning in his voice is more than just his own angst, it's a threat of true violence. I don't think he *thinks* he *might* hurt me. I think he *knows* that he almost certainly will.

The frantic pounding of my heart muffles my ears as I suck in deep breaths, trying to force oxygen into my lungs. The dirt is hard and cold beneath my nails as I dig my fingers in, grounding myself as I reach for my magic. Even though I haven't moved my body at all, I can feel Draven's body trembling uncontrollably. His grip around the back of my neck, pressing my face into the ground, gives me pause, and I try one last thing before using my magic. Because I know if I do that, he'll resort to hiding himself away from me again.

"This remind you of anything?" I ask, more calmly than I feel.

He grunts and shifts his hips, his erection pushing against my ass. The action helps me let go of some of my fear. *He's still in there.*

"Have you fed?" I ask gently. He doesn't respond. "You're mad at me," I say, because it isn't a question.

"Yes." At least it's an answer.



"Because I screwed everything up?"

No response. I keep talking, hoping it'll bring him back to me.

"I didn't mean to hurt him. To hurt you, or Seth. I thought I could..."

"That's not it," he forces out. "There's something...different. I can't—It's making me—"

"It's okay."

"It's not okay."

"You won't hurt me."

"You keep saying that, but I fucking will. *I want to*. I always want to."

My patience snaps. "Then do it!" I yell. "I want you to!"

A sob bursts from my throat with the admission. But it's the truth. I want him to hurt me. The moment he laid his hands on me, the pain in my chest lessened so much it felt like he lifted a thousand-pound weight off my sternum. And I don't deserve it.

I don't deserve the reprieve, especially when my fuck up put us all in danger. Hawthorne could be dead, and I wouldn't even know. I can't help him, and he's weaker, because I fucked it all up. I fucked everything up.

*It's all my fault.*

Draven hasn't responded, so once again, I take fate into my own hands and make the choice for myself. It seems to be what I'm good at.

I call upon my magic, but not to defend myself. Instead, I bring forth a barbed vine. The plant pushes itself up through the dirt and snakes its way up the front of my throat, creeping around the back, pushing under Draven's hand. He pulls back, the rumbling in his chest starting up again as he notices the vine circling my neck.

In one quick movement, he pulls me back away from the ground so I'm on my knees. With his free hand, he tears the thorny bramble necklace away from me, but not before the sharp edges penetrate deep into my skin, drawing blood. When I know the scent of my blood is hitting his nostrils, I open my mind to him, goading him and encouraging him to take from me. To punish me.

*Feed.*

*Make me bleed.*

*Fuck me.*

*Hurt me.*

He strikes quickly and without mercy, his fangs sinking into the side of my neck. His arms snake around my body, holding me flush against him, bending my head to the side so he can drink deeply.

Each pull of my blood is a symphony of pain and pleasure, pure ecstasy shivering down my body. The hand pressing against my abdomen tightens, the sharp tips of his claws digging into my soft flesh.

Draven drinks until I feel delirious. My arms are pressed against my sides, and I try to pull them behind me so I can get a hand on his bulging erection pressing into my spine.

He finally pulls his fangs out of my neck, resting his head against my back. His breaths are heavy and rough, panting through his continuous growling.

My panties are torn from my body and I'm forced forward, face back in the dirt with my ass in the air. Draven shoves his face between my legs from behind and strikes again, his teeth plunging into the apex of my thighs.

Pain and euphoria war over my body.

He's really hurting me. The odd angle my body is bent, the deep gouges in my hips where his claws are digging into my skin, his fangs buried deep inside the vein near my most sensitive parts. As much as it hurts, the pain

keeps fading away to become intense pleasure, an orgasm building until I shift myself, trying to avoid the release. *I need the pain. Deserve the pain.*

There is no suffering that could compare to the pressure that has taken up residence in my chest since breaking my bond with Hawthorne. Seth said it was only fractured, not broken, but we aren't sure if it can be repaired, and I can't feel my bond with him at all.

Hawthorne might not want it to be repaired, anyway.

I'll suffer the pain if it means he can be free. I don't regret trying to sever the bond. My only regret is that I screwed it up, that I was too weak in my resolve to follow through, that I hurt Hawthorne and caused him to be too weak to fight back when it was the most important.

*He'll never forgive me.*

I push back on Draven, needing more from him. Needing the pain, both to punish myself and to drive away the memories of Hawthorne's face when he realized what I'd done.

I deserve it all. The anguish. Their anger.

He releases his bite and clamps down again on the meat of my ass. An orgasm crashes through me without warning, heat and pleasure spreading through my body with furious intensity. My scream of pleasure dissolves into sobs. Draven flinches and pulls out, flipping me around so I'm on my back, looking up at him. He bends over me, breath coming out in huffs. His head cocks to one side, his animalistic nature still showing, but the feral sneer is fading away.

"Don't," I say, my voice cracking with emotion that I'm failing to hold back.

His eyes clear, the opposite of what I wanted. "W-what?" he asks incredulously, blinking down at me.

"Take me, Draven. I can handle whatever you do to me."

Confused, he moves to back away as I lay back down and spread my legs for

him, beckoning him in the most brazen way I know how. His nostrils flare, and then his eyes flicker. His head moves in strange, jerky movements.

I let go of my pain and anger and desire to make Draven punish me. Worry for my shade mate overtakes everything else. There's something wrong with him. He's fighting to stay present, but something else is driving him to near maddening ferality. It's worse than I've ever seen him before, worse even than anything his memories have shown me.

Is my fractured bond with Hawthorne causing this?

## Chapter 5 - Draven

*I can handle whatever you do to me.*

What is happening?

What am I doing?

*I'm...hurting her. But I can't...I can't stop.*

"Tell me to stop," I croak out, my teeth elongating further. The painful throb of my canines pulse in time to the ache in my head. I need her to tell me—to order me—to stop, otherwise whatever is building up inside me may take over. She's the only one my animal nature seems capable of listening to.

I'm leaning over her, the force of our heavy breaths pushing our chests together. My nose falls along the column of her throat, and I lick up the side, tasting her blood, sweat, and...tears? My entire body vibrates with the effort to pull myself back from the poisonous hysteria threatening to overwhelm my senses.

My hips thrust forward on their own volition, pressing my aching erection into her naked core. Blood from the wound between her legs, and cum from her orgasm soak through the front of my jeans. The skin on my cock prickles with the need to be coated in her.

My teeth rake against her throat, and she wraps her legs around my waist. Her scent, like floral herbs and the air after a storm, invades my nose, but there's something more—something else, something powerful and dangerous that is making everything inside me short circuit.

My brain flashes between images of blood, gore, death, and sex, like it doesn't know the difference. My claws are extended, hands flexing against her pliable body. Growls and snarls emit from my chest involuntarily, as if

warning away anything that might try to take her from me.

She's offering herself willingly to me, and she's mine, mine, *mine...*

*What if I can't stop?*

I cease breathing, trying to clear my head of whatever intoxicating influence she's having on me. There's no way to explain to her how I feel, because I'm not sure I understand it myself. There's something driving me to the edge of my sanity, and I don't think I can fight it. I don't dare to consider if she could protect herself from me, because the idea of her running and fighting me off only excites me more.

"Tell me to stop," I repeat. My voice is low and dripping with the danger that settles in my veins.

"I don't want you to stop," she whispers against my ear, and I shudder.

"I'm not in control." I'm holding on to the last vestiges of my awareness, and it's taking everything.

"Hurt me," she begs.

I freeze. Swallow. Refuse to take a breath. Her words are bouncing off the inside of my head, tantalizing and erotic red flags. Another tear trickles down her face. My eyes trace its path down her temple and past her ear.

*I can't trust myself.*

"No!" I roar, tearing myself away.

"Draven!" she gasps.

"Go home!"

I can't trust myself, so I run. As fast and far as I can, away from her, until I outrun even the scent of her on my skin.

Leaving her half naked in the middle of a field, way too close to our enemies,

is terrifying. But somehow, I know that she'll be safer than she is with me.

*What is happening to me?*

## Chapter 6-Seth

*Where is everyone?*

I pace through each small room in the house repeatedly. By the looks of things, Calista hasn't stopped spending most of her time in Hawthorne's room, studying every book she can get her hands on. There's a small impression on one pillow where it looks like she might have been sleeping, but the blanket is missing. Along with her.

Although I can't hear any disturbances, I go outside, walking through the clearing and around the house and barn. A light trickle of rain is falling, and my breaths come out in puffs, but I don't feel the cold.

My body dissolves into the light, and I flash up to our cave. There aren't any signs that anyone's been here at all, so I fly back to the cabin, watching the ground below me for any signs of movement. The ground beneath the canopy is so dark it's near impossible to see anything, but I can make out small woodland animals scurrying about, looking to build up their winter stores. It's warmer than usual for this time of year. It's warmer every year with the way the climate is changing, but there's definitely a chill in the air, especially this far up in the mountains.

If they'd been taken or hurt, it'd be more obvious. Right?

*Where are they?*

My heart is pounding in my chest, and I'm tearing my hair out, pacing and overthinking. I shouldn't have left. Calista wasn't in a good place, and Draven was acting strange. Neither of them are exactly known for making well thought out, rational decisions all the time. Nor are they particularly adept at discussing potentially dangerous plans and asking for fucking help. Who the fuck knows what they could be up to?



They could have left me a fucking note, or something. *Stubborn assholes.*

"Fuck!" I yell out, my voice echoing in the clearing.

I'm contemplating whether I should stick close to home and wait for them, or if I should go back to the cave system that Hawthorne got left behind in. Maybe they thought they'd do some reconnaissance or check on the survivors. Yeah, they probably went to check on the people at the hospital. I hope they're staying out of sight, though. They could be putting themselves in danger—

My stream of anxious thoughts stops short when Birdie, Calista's raven familiar, pops into the living room, followed by a ripple in the air.

Calista steps through the portal. Before I can question or reprimand them, I notice she's alone. Half-naked. Soaked and shivering. Covered in dirt and blood, which isn't too unusual. She's also crying, which I know she's been doing a lot of these last two days, but she always hides it from us. Right now though, she's hurting bad enough that she doesn't bother trying to hide her pain. Instead, she collapses the moment she's through the portal, wrapping her arms around her middle like she's trying to hold the pieces of herself together. Pain, anguish, and hopelessness radiate off her in waves.

"What happened?" I startle at her intake of breath when I pull her to my chest, almost choking up when I realize it's not because I've hurt her, but because my proximity is helping relieve the physical pain of her fractured bond. My body struggles to maintain a solid form as it absorbs the sheer weight of her emotions.

"I chased Draven away again," she says, her bottom lip wobbling. "I think whatever I did to fuck up the spell with Hawthorne is affecting him, too. And maybe it's why you keep flickering."

I flinch, knowing that while her failed spell to sever her bond with Hawthorne isn't fully to blame, it does have something to do with her. It isn't her fault, but in her current state, she won't see it that way. Knowing she needs the outlet more than she needs my words right now, I let her sob into my chest until her shivering becomes more concerning.

"Let's get you warmed up, and then we can talk, okay?"

She doesn't respond, but stands and lets me lead her to the bathroom where I start the shower. I lift her shirt over her arms and guide her under the water before stripping off my own clothes so I can stay with her. Whether her guilt will allow her to accept it or not, she needs one of us near to alleviate the pain of Hawthorne's absence.

Her body relaxes a little under the spray of hot water. I wash her hair and scrub away the evidence of Draven's bites, which are already healed, only slightly pink marks against her perfect pale skin.

"Just when we were making such good progress," she mumbles quietly.

I know she's talking about Draven, how we'd only recently gotten him to trust himself. He struggles with his attraction to her as his bonded mate and his attraction to her blood. We aren't sure if it's because of the bond itself, or something specific to Calista, that makes her blood all the more enticing to him. He told me it was addictive, that the more he held himself back from her, the more crazed he felt.

All he needed was to loosen up. The more he was with her, the more he could handle the bloodlust, and the more comfortable he became as an "inside dog," as he so eloquently described it. It seemed to me it was the simple act of holding back that was making it worse. So, why hold back?

Then again, I certainly benefited from Draven not holding back.

My already hard cock, which I was diligently ignoring while I cared for my beautiful bonded love, jumps at the thought of just how comfortable the three of us had become in the past week. I try not to show it any attention, shifting my body so I'm not jabbing Calista in the ass with it.

"It might feel like we're at square one again, but we'll get back to where we were. Everything's happened so fast, and there's been so much going on, it's easy to forget the lessons we've already learned."

"Hmm?" She hums her question faintly, leaning her head back as I massage

conditioner into her dark hair.

Turning her body around so the water can rinse the conditioner from her hair, I answer her while looking deep into her eyes, because she needs to understand. "That we're better together."

Her eyes fill with tears, and I pull her into my chest again as I feel her emotional pain intensifying. I hadn't intended to make her more upset or point out the obvious mistakes that were made.

"Oh, angel...we're going to get him back. We can fix this, but we're going to need each other to do it. You need to let yourself relax. Let us take away your pain so you can think clearly."

Calista shakes her head. "I don't deserve—"

"You're not the only one that needs our connection," I say bluntly. I'll never be able to convince her that she doesn't need to punish herself, but I can force her to accept our help by pointing out that we need her just as much as she needs us. "Draven isn't going to get out of his own head until he trusts the bond, and you won't be able to gather the strength and fortitude it's going to take to fight the next battle without yours. You might have lost one—" she lets out a sob, "*temporarily*, but you have two more to lean on. Let us help."

"I broke everything. What's happening to Draven...it's different than it was before."

"Whatever it is, whatever comes, we'll figure it out together."

Finally, she looks up at me, and I open my shields to let her feel the full weight of my emotions, my love for her, my hope for our future. Even my honest fear over what's to come. She doesn't need to know all the details of *what* I'm afraid of, of all the things I'm second guessing. She just needs to know that she's not alone and that I'm here for her.

Nodding, she pushes herself up to press a kiss to my lips.

As hard as I am, I didn't plan to get into the shower with her to start anything.

I know she needs physical contact to ease the pain of her damaged bond, and I only wanted to comfort and care for her when she was cold and scared. But when she licks against the seam of my lips and deepens the kiss, I can't help but fall into the spell of her tongue against mine.

Before I know it, I have her lifted against me, her legs wrapped around my waist, and I'm stepping out of the tub. I carry her, bare-naked and dripping wet, to her bedroom. She hasn't slept here since her aunt was staying with us, but I've already cleaned the room and I figure it's better than going back into the room that will remind her most of what happened with Hawthorne.

Holding her to me, I crawl up from the bottom of the bed, not taking my lips off hers until we're settled. Only then do I leave her mouth to kiss a path down her neck to her breasts, making sure there isn't a single moment where my hands, mouth, or body aren't touching her. She needs a reprieve from this pain, to remember the strength of her remaining bonds, the tenacity of the power within her.

Despite all my ministrations in the shower, she's still wound tightly. Our bond surges with our emotions—our love, my anxiety, her guilt. It all pours into every kiss and caress. My hand wanders between us, finding her slick with desire. The guilt in her heart flares, but she's not being fair to herself. The bonds demand attention, demand touch, and the most intimate connection. She can't help that, nor should she.

"Relax," I whisper against her mouth. "Let me love you."

Tears fall, but she kisses me more insistently as my fingers strum against her clit. She tries to deny the orgasm I build her up to, her body tensing against it. Moving to hover over her, I press just the tip of my cock at her entrance while my fingers keep moving against her clit, until her hips are pushing against me, silently begging to be filled. Only when she finally shatters, succumbing to her climax, do I finally push myself inside her. Her walls pulse around my cock as I slowly slide home.

It's only been days, but my body shudders with the pleasure of having her wrapped tightly around me. I want to live buried so deep inside of her I become a physical part of her. No part of me wants to break from our

connection, so instead of pulling out and thrusting, I rock myself against her, trying to push myself deeper inside her body. I'm sweating with the effort to keep my body solid, and manage to only flicker a little, but I think the sensation of my cock disappearing and reappearing deep inside her body actually works to our advantage. Her waning orgasm builds again, and our bond glows brightly, lighting up the dark room.

"Open your eyes," I tell her, when I know I'm about to break. I want her to see the evidence of our bond. "Let yourself go."

Her pussy clamps down around me as she detonates with a sob, and we come together. I cry out, my forehead pressed against hers as I slowly move inside her, drawing out her pleasure as long as I can. Tears fill my eyes at the force of the emotions flowing through her.

When I go to pull out, she tightens her legs around me, so I roll us so she's laying over top of me. She falls asleep like that, clutching me against her, my half-softened cock still inside her. I grow hard again within minutes, but remain still, relishing the feel of just being inside her.

## Chapter 7 - Calista

We're still no closer to helping Hawthorne. I asked Birdie to go find and look after him, so she's gone too. I tell myself that if she's still gone, it's a good sign that Hawthorne is alive. And at least now he isn't alone.

Draven still hasn't come back to me after I chased him away yesterday. I'm trying to trust the bonds like Seth keeps telling me to. He's the first one that, at least openly, accepted and trusted the bonds. Maybe because he's the one that seems to know the most about them.

Seth told me some of what happened when he went to The Archives. The Elder that was there said he couldn't help us find The Council, though Seth thinks there's something more going on that he intends to find out. Meanwhile, I still feel like Seth is holding something back from me. He's always been so completely wide open to me that the difference in his demeanor is noticeable.

Then again, our whole situation is pretty fucked. I'm terrified that I've hurt my bonds with Seth and Draven. It would make sense of the way Draven is acting, and how Seth can't quite keep a hold on his form.

"Can you heat this up for us?" Seth asks, holding up a teapot.

He seems to think doing simple tasks will help me calm my mind, and I have to admit, begrudgingly, it's working. I spent all morning doing farm chores and reinforcing our wards, and the activity definitely helped me settle some. Seth stayed close by, pretending to bump into me accidentally, or brushing light touches over my hands, face, or exposed neck. I know what he's doing, and I appreciate it. Though I think I'm going to have to get used to the pain, eventually. I can't stay glued to him all the time, especially once we have a plan to confront The Sanctum Society and save Hawthorne.

For now, though, we have a lot to talk about. I had my first decent night's

sleep in a while, and Seth let me focus my mind on menial tasks all morning so I could relax and gather my energy for something he wants me to try. He needs to know exactly what I did to sever my bond with Hawthorne so he can figure out if there's a way to either complete the break or fix it—either would be better than the limbo we're currently in.

I've had a sore stomach this morning, and Seth thought tea would be a nice way to relax. After I heat the pot with just a touch, Seth pours us each a cup of one of Hawthorne's herbal blends and sits back against the couch, pulling me into his side. Not only do I get more relief from the pain in my chest, but I don't have to look at him while I talk. Instead, I can center myself with the sight of the first brown leaves on the apple tree floating to the ground.

After a while of waiting for me to speak, Seth breaks the silence. "There's a new moon in two days. I thought it might be a good opportunity to retry one of the tracking spells you've been attempting, or maybe you can try your hand at scrying."

"What's scrying?"

"Using your Sight to find someone in the present, instead of the future. You use a mirror, or a crystal ball."

"A crystal ball?" It's still hard for me to take some of this magic stuff seriously, when so much of it is silly nonsense in my world. Well, my old world, before I found out that I have magic in my blood.

My brow furrows, and I'm struck by a memory of the night before. Something heavy and round had fallen on Draven's foot.

"Yup. The materials that make up a real crystal ball can help strengthen and hone the ability, and using a reflective surface can allow the people around you to see as well. It's different from the visions you get naturally. Those just happen to you, and you have no control. This is a vision you ask for, and can control the spell to display it on the surface."

"Hawthorne has a crystal ball. It fell off the shelves last night."

"I know, I found it. That's actually what gave me the idea."

"And you think the new moon will help?" I ask, another thought bouncing around my mind.

The new moon means my period should start, which could be the cause of my stomach discomfort. Though it normally doesn't start until the day of, like clockwork. Maybe Hawthorne's birth control tea is affecting my cycle, or I suppose stress could be part of it. My stomach cramps as if it agrees with my assessment.

"The phases of the moon can affect a lot of magic. Typically, a full moon would be more potent, and a lunar event like a blood moon, which is what Bodin was attempting to take advantage of, would have even more power. But a new moon has its own special qualities that can boost your power as well."

Like it's been summoned, I feel a telltale trickle of warmth between my legs. *Ugh*. I have questions, but no matter how much I have lost my inhibitions with these men, there are still some things that are uncomfortable to talk about. It's one of those moments when I wish I had my mother to talk to.

Seth looks at me knowingly, likely having felt my embarrassment or annoyance through my emotions. "What are you thinking about?"

"Your talk about the moon cycles made me think about it. I'm not sure how to ask. It might sound like a weird question."

"Hit me."

"Just remember I've been through some weird shit growing up with my aunt and Bodin..."

"Angel. Whatever you have questions about or want to know, there's no reason to ever be embarrassed around me, of all people."

"Do menstrual cycles have anything to do with magic?"



## Chapter 8-Draven

When I finally calm down enough to check back, Calista has left the clearing. There are no signs of any sort of struggle, and I can sense her magic in the air, so I'm assuming she portaled herself back home. I intend to head back to be sure, but there's a sudden disturbance along the base of the mountain behind me. The ground shakes almost imperceptibly, and where the smell of people had been completely masked, I can now pick up on something.

Staying out of sight, I quietly follow the sounds and smells to where three Humvees are driving out of a low cave, the same one I'd been interested in earlier before I was distracted by Calista's appearance. Initially, the cave seemed strangely small for such a wide opening, but I can now see that there's a false wall towards the back of the cave. The wall closes behind the third vehicle, and I have to make a split second decision whether to follow the Humvees, or get inside the cave before the wall closes completely.

If Hawthorne is still inside, he'll likely still be there after I check out the caravan. If he's in those vehicles, however, I could lose him if I don't follow.

Mind made up, I follow the line of trucks along the tree line. When they pull out onto a highway, I make sure to stay in the shadows, far enough away that no one can see me, but close enough that I don't miss when they exit. They drive down a familiar path, ending at the asylum building known as The Sanctuary. The name is disturbing. The man that ran this so-called mental hospital was none other than George Bodin, the sham doctor that spent years grooming Calista to be sacrificed in a ritual meant to drain her of magic that he kept hidden from her. This place is anything but a refuge. It's nothing more than a cover operation for torture disguised as religious reprogramming and questionable treatment practices.

Now that George Bodin and several of his creepy colleagues are dead, I

wondered what happened to this place. A quick run around the property and I can see it's been abandoned. Even in the short time since Bodin's death, weeds have taken over the lawn and there's a particularly foul odor coming from inside. It doesn't smell like corpses, more like rotten garbage and human waste.

I'm assuming The Sanctum Society took everyone from this facility and just left, but what are they doing back now? Surely, they know that local and federal law enforcement are looking into the disappearances of so many people. We haven't heard a peep about the people we saved, but that has to be getting this place some notice if many of the captives came from here. Why return to the scene of a crime?

My questions are answered when a handful of men dressed in fatigues and black masks jump out of one of the Humvees. They're each carrying something and filing in and out of the building. After them, over a dozen are led into the building. They're all wearing dirty, tattered hospital gowns and most of them look disoriented and confused. Many of them have to be wheeled or carried in by more uniformed men.

The building has been abandoned, there is no electricity, and no staff. What are they doing bringing these people here?

Before I can move closer to see what they could be up to, I smell the unmistakable fumes of gasoline. I barely process what's happening before the crackle of a fire starts towards the back of the building, just as the uniformed men close and bar the door behind them.

*Those motherfuckers.*

I move to go after the caravan, but the screams coming from the building make me hesitate. It's a testament to just how much of a shit person I am that I take a moment to struggle over what I should do. I war with myself over not following the caravan. But if I just leave these people there to burn, I'm no better than they are. *What would Calista think?*

*Fuck.*

Breaking a window, I speed inside, following the smells of burning and the sounds of coughing and screaming. I'm able to break into the small chapel, where they'd locked everyone inside. The people trapped in here seem all but dead already, most of them unaware of their surroundings or unable to move. I'm not sure if they've been drugged, or if their minds are just broken, or both. Not one of them can help me get people moving, and more than half of them seem unable to move themselves. They just sit in the pews or lie on the floor and scream while the fire closes in on them. One young woman simply stares at the flames, inches from catching her dingy socks on fire, as if it's a mystery she's trying to figure out.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me," I grunt as I throw her over my shoulder, grabbing the arm of a wandering older woman on our way through the chapel doors.

Since I'd posed as an orderly at The Sanctuary before, I have some idea of the layout. I know the front door was barred pretty well, but to my knowledge, no one went around the back of the building. After smashing through the back kitchen door, I deposit the two women in the grass outside, hoping that they have enough sense to stay put.

"I should have gone after the fucking caravan," I say out loud as I'm carrying out the last of the doomed prisoners, a girl of maybe ten years old. Sadly, this one is already gone. By the state of her, she's been dead for at least twelve hours. This fire was their way of covering up fifteen disappearances, with fifteen horrible deaths. How fitting that these religious fanatics would lock them in the chapel to do it.

Burning suspected witches. *How fucking original.*

By the time I've laid her body in the soft grass and closed her glassy eyes, the fire has overtaken most of The Sanctuary Asylum. Small explosions send the flames up each floor of the building, and the joints groan and start to sag as the fire eats through the supports. I watch the building burn and consider what to do with the survivors.

"Before there can be a new beginning, we will walk a path of fire and blood. The world will burn before the rebirth."

I look to my left and find the dazed woman that had been mesmerized by the fire has stepped up next to me. Amidst the heat of the blaze and the chaos around us, I can't decide if she's told me something prophetic, or if her brain is broken from the trauma she's experienced. The flickering inferno reflects in her unblinking eyes.

Sirens sound in the distance, solving my issue of what to do about these people.

"Uh, good luck," I tell the woman before I bolt. Her cackles follow me all the way down the lane and echo in the back of my head while I push myself to run faster to catch up with the caravan. I lose the trail, but my guess is that they're either going back to the torture caves, or making more destructive drop-offs.

Either way, I'm going to have to abandon it for now. I need to tell the others what I've witnessed, and I've been away from Calista too long. Being back at The Sanctuary and seeing those women has reminded me of what she's suffered. The bond pulls urgently at me, and I all but fly through the dark night, the moon barely a sliver to light my way home to her.



It takes me a few hours to make it home, and another few hours to get close enough to see anything.

The moment I'm able to scent her, my mind goes somewhere else. I feel like the Earth is spinning too quickly, like all the oxygen is being siphoned from my lungs. My face itches with the tightening of my skin around my eyes and down my cheeks. My gums are numb, teeth descending. Rather than seeing her, I sense her like an infrared scanner, and my hackles raise. She is not alone. Another male is with her, has his hand on her.

Mine. Mine. *Mine!*

*My mate. My blood.*

The door splinters with the force of me smashing through it. Seth and Calista jump off the couch, and I round on Seth, snarls erupting from my chest.

Logically, I know who this is, and why he's touching my mate. There is some part of my brain that registers that. But the madness that has overtaken my mind and body is in control right now, and it's all I can do to hold back from ripping Seth's head off and bathing my mate in his blood.

I have a tiny sliver of consciousness that registers how Calista would react if I did that to one of her mates—*because he is one of her mates*. She's mine, but he's hers. And she's his, too.

*Breathe.* That makes it worse, more of that tantalizing smell coming off her in waves.

With excruciating effort, I'm able to stop myself from snarling and hissing, but I'm still breathing heavily and can't take my eyes off of Calista's wide, light blue eyes. She's not even looking at me as if she's afraid, she's just... concerned. That sobers me even more. And then Seth takes a step forward, approaching me as if taming a wild beast.

*How fucking stupid and brave they both are.*

I hiss at Seth, warning him back, but he barely flinches.

"Let's go outside. You can clear your head and we can talk about what's going on here," Seth says to me, his calm and placating voice grating on my

nerves. "Calista, why don't you have a bath? See if we can dilute the scent a little."

*What is he talking about?*

His eyes don't leave mine as he talks to Calista, and he doesn't look back to see if she follows his instruction, but I keep my eyes focused on her as we both back out of the living room. Once we're outside, Seth extends his wings and forces fresh air towards where I'm standing. It helps to clear some of the bloodlust from my head. I'm still acutely aware that Calista is inside the house, and I'm very much aware that something is very, very wrong.

"I shouldn't have come back. I don't know what's happening to me," I admit out loud.

"It's okay, brother."

I scoff. "Do you know how close I came to killing you both just now? I wanted to rip your head off your body and fuck her in the pool of blood. And by fuck her, I mean brutally, and probably to death. There's nothing okay about this. I need to go."

"Draven—"

"I wanted to fill you in on what I saw tonight, but you're going to have to meet me at the cave or somewhere far from here—"

"Draven!" Seth shouts. "Sit. Down."

The forcefulness of his voice, paired with the large gust of wind he sends, has me on my ass on the front steps of the cabin. I stay there under what feels like a compulsion, although I know that I could break through it easily if I wanted to, unlike the time Calista froze me and Hawthorne in place during a fight. That Seth is using any kind of forcefulness at all, and is using his power to do it, gives me enough pause to hear him out.

"She has her period."

"Her *what?*"

"She's menstruating."

My jaw snaps shut, overthinking the implications.

"You know what a—"

"Yes, I know what a period is, asshole," I shoot back at him. "Shut the fuck up and wipe that grin off your face."

"I don't know what you're talking about," he says, trying to hide his sarcastic grin, but failing. I don't really think he's trying all that hard.

"So, what, I come back in a week and see how we feel?" I suggest, trying to think of a solution. It's obvious to me that I can't stay here while this is happening. I thought I'd reined in my control, that her blood, however tempting, wouldn't make me fly off the handle. But with it just seeping out of her the way it is, it's too much.

*It's different. Smells different; makes me feel different.*

"You can't leave. We need you. She needs you."

"I keep hurting her. I can't control myself."

"There'll be a learning curve, but I think you can handle it." His nonchalance makes me want to scream. He's not understanding. How can I make him understand?

"Seth, I feel...out of control. Feral. I've never scented anything like it before." Can he not see the effort it's taking me to hold back even now? My whole body feels like it's vibrating.

"It's because your mate is fertile."

I sputter. "*What?!*"

"Deep down, we're all just animals on some level. Your base nature is closer to your animal side." I scowl at him, and he holds his hands up. "It's not a bad

thing, it's just the truth. In ancient days, some blood mages could even shift into the animals that ruled their nature. It's part of your ancestry."

"So my 'base animal's nature' thinks it wants to breed her like some kind of common broodmare?" Even as I say it, my entire being leans forward, intent on doing exactly that. My nostrils flare, my veins tremble, and my cock is engorged beyond its normal size.

Seth gives me a knowing smirk.

Okay, so he's probably right. Every part of me really, *really* likes the idea of filling her so full of my cum that she's fat and ripening with my—*wait*.

"Can shades even breed with humans?"

"No idea. But Hawthorne has teas for that."

"That's your solution? Tea? First of all, that you'd let a literal monster go into that house and try to breed your mate—aggressively, mind you—because I don't think I could control myself if I got that close. And you think some hippie lumberjack's tea stash would be enough to make sure I don't fill her full of fucking monster babies?"

I groan as soon as the words leave my mouth.

Fucking hell, even arguing about it makes my cock twitch. As much as the reality of it horrifies me, the idea of it is really fucking hot and I very, very much want to do exactly that. *Fuck the teas. I'll find them all and set them on fire. They can't stop me from—Fuck. No. Stop.*

*Surely, she wouldn't want that. Would she? I mean, definitely not now. We just met. But in the future? Maybe? Would I let her? Would she let me?*

I shake the thoughts from my head. It can't happen. We don't even know if it's possible and I don't know if that would be healthy for her human body. *Why am I even thinking about this?*

*I'm losing my mind.*



*I can't do this. I need to run. I need to—*

"You done yet?" Seth asks me, blankly.

"Overthinking this? Absolutely not."

"Go talk to her."

"I can't."

"Draven. Go talk to her."

## Chapter 9 - Calista

Seth and Draven have been outside for a while now. The persistent ache in my chest has steadily grown to an almost intolerable level. I wrap my arms around my knees, hugging them tightly against my body as if I could keep my heart from breaking. I've been relying on Seth too much, allowing him to soothe the debilitating wound that I inflicted on myself.

I try to focus on something other than my mortification that it's my period that's causing Draven to act so wildly. Seth talked about it like it was the most normal and natural thing in the world. Deep down, I know he's right, but it feels odd to talk so candidly about my bodily functions that my aunt and Bodin had always treated as something dirty. Granted, they treated everything to do with my body as shameful.

If there's anything I've learned since being bonded to these three men, it's that there's a lot more to my body than I ever considered, and I refuse to believe that something that feels so heavenly could be dirty or shameful.

Well, maybe some of the ways Draven has had me in are pretty dirty. But I liked it, and I'm working on not being ashamed of who I am or what my body wants.

The water grows tepid as I strain my ears to listen for any signs of violence outside. The water is cloudy with blood, and my flow seems to have gotten heavier since Draven arrived. I lean forward in the huge clawfoot tub and pull the stopper to the drain. I'm trying to decide if I should refill the tub and continue to soak, or if I should get out and go check to see if they've killed each other. Seth promised to go get me some supplies. Maybe he left already. Draven probably ran away again. Will he ever be able to be comfortable around me, or will it always be this hard? Will he eventually tire of the bond and resent me the same way Hawthorne did?

The last of the water drains out of the tub, and I decide just to get out. I stand,

slowly, because I'm feeling a bit faint. My own heartbeat echoes in my ears. I almost slip and fall back into the tub, startled when I notice Draven standing before me, half hidden in shadow.

With my hand to my chest, I reach for a towel, but stop short when I hear his strained, husky voice.

"Stay. But don't move. Please." I don't try to step out of the tub, instead I stubbornly pull the towel down in front of me. This man has seen me from just about every angle and has had his tongue, fingers, and cock in and on just about every part of my body, but this feels different. Like I might need the comfort of a shield.

"I wanted to apologize, but I'm struggling," he admits. "Your blood—*this* blood—it's different. It makes me feel like nothing I've ever experienced before."

Incapable of finding the right words to explain his struggles to me, he drops the mental barrier he's been using for days. Visions of the depth of his ferality flash before my eyes. Blood. Pain. Brutality. Reckless violence and pure lust. Desperation to breed me, to build a nest and do nothing but fuck and feed. His desire to not just kill anyone that comes near me, but to absolutely annihilate their bodies in the most terrifying, feral, bloodthirsty ways possible. I can feel the dryness of his throat as he shows me how he wants to drink me like a parched traveler in a desert.

My eyes blink rapidly at the invasion of his unfiltered, savage thoughts. He drops my gaze. He's either fighting to compose himself, or he's ashamed of his animal nature. But it's part of who he is and, as uncomfortable as it always is to step outside my comfort zone at first, I trust him.

I follow his gaze down my body and we both watch as a drop of blood trickles down the inside of my thigh and lands on the white ceramic at my feet. The tiny splash sounds magnified, and echoes through the room. The blood swirling in the vestiges of my long bath that did nothing to cleanse me of my scent it seems.

"Don't. Move."

He's back to growling again. I can hear the tremble in his voice. He takes a slow step towards the door, but I look directly at him, dropping the towel beside the tub. Keeping my eyes firmly locked on his, I slowly move to sit on the side of the tub.

Insanity, macabre fascination, or perhaps a death wish makes me lean back slightly and open my legs. His eyes zero in on my pussy, the inky black depths wide and completely enamored with the display before him.

There's a tense moment where we both stay frozen to our spots, and I watch him all but vibrate with the effort to stay in place. He fails, and in a blur, he's in the tub on his knees in front of me.

His claw tipped fingers dig into my thighs as he holds me open, cocking his head to one side and looking at the blood trickling out of me. Inhaling deeply, he squeezes his eyes shut while the black veins of his bloodlust ripple over his skin, transforming his otherwise too pretty face.

Slowly, he leans forward and swipes his tongue over my pussy, reverently licking me with the flat of his tongue from bottom to top. He closes his mouth and a deep, rumbling groan emanates from his chest as his black eyes roll back. I watch him with wild fascination as he savors the taste of my blood, my fertility. My inner muscles clench as a wave of desire washes over me, a throbbing need to give into his nature. Regardless of what my brain says is right or wrong, my body desperately wants every part of the fucked-up visions he showed me.

A tremor takes over him, and maybe it's a trick of the light, but his entire body seems to expand somehow. His hands tighten on my thighs and I hiss out as his claws draw blood. However far he thinks he's lost to his bloodlust, he's at least somewhat present, because he draws back his claws before pushing two fingers inside me. I watch with horrified fascination as he licks the blood from his fingers, moaning before diving back between my legs.

Draven licks, sucks, and thrusts inside me with his elongated tongue. In moments, I'm feeding him my orgasm as well as my blood. He doesn't stop, relentlessly drinking from me like a starving man. He wrenches another intense climax from me before we are interrupted.

Somewhere in the house, a door closes. Draven's head snaps up with the awareness that someone is near. His eyes dart towards the door. He looks truly feral with my blood smeared over his face. There's a soft knock, and Seth's voice calmly lets us know that he's brought the supplies I asked for, plus a few extras. Draven growls.

Seth chuckles, unphased by Draven's animalistic possessiveness. "I'm going to do a little recon, give you some space. I'll be back in the morning."

Draven's eyes close, and I can see the desperate attempt to control himself in his tense features. The growling doesn't stop, but it lowers in intensity.

"And Draven?" Seth says, catching his attention. Draven's eyes open and then narrow as he bares his fangs. "We trust you."

The warning is just as clear as the affirmation. Draven hisses, and I can hear Seth chuckle again as he moves away from the door.

Once it's clear that Seth is gone, Draven scoops me into his arms and, in a nauseating blur, speeds us into my room. Or at least what used to be my room. The bed frame is gone, and instead, two mattresses topped with dark red satin sheets are pressed together in the middle of the room. The windows are covered in some kind of dark red film, and extra blankets and pillows are piled up around the mattresses. My mind flashes to the visions of a small, dark room covered in blood that Draven's insinuated was for either murdering or breeding his mate. His thoughts didn't seem entirely certain of what might happen there. Maybe both.

I should probably be more worried, but Seth knows more about these bonds than all of us, and he trusts it. My body certainly trusts whatever is happening.

"He made you a nest?" I chuckle at the thought. Seth really is the best of us, and his trust in the bonds has been the only thing keeping me going this last week since the showdown with Bodin. This little gesture of love for Draven is a very Seth-like mix of humorous and sweet. "The red was a nice touch," I say, somewhat sarcastically.

Draven grunts. "He made *us* a nest," he amends, his voice gruff in a way that reminds me of Hawthorne. Like he can't decide if he loves or hates it, if it pleases him or pisses him off. My heart pangs even with Draven's arms still cradling me.

Draven's voice drops lower. "I don't know how he thinks he's going to tear me off you when he gets back, but I hope he's ready for a fight."

There is a case of water and a box of energy bars next to the door, and my brow creases. *Exactly what are they expecting is going to happen in here?* Obviously, Draven needs to fuck this bloodlust out of his system, and I am more than here for it. My entire body is a live wire, buzzing with anticipation. But in what world does sex, even sex with Draven, require all of this?

My mind isn't exactly locked down right now, so Draven hears my confused thoughts as I assess our surroundings with a more critical eye.

He chuckles darkly as he lowers me to the bed, crawling over me with a menacing glint in his eye. "I'm not just going to fuck you, beauty. I'm going to lock you in this nest and fuck you senseless. Repeatedly. Even as you sleep, I'll be fucking you, filling you with my cum and getting this human body primed to breed for me."

*Wait. What?*

He's truly lost to his madness if he thinks he's going to breed me. Is that even possible? Also, what if I don't want to be bred? Even as my mind spins, overthinking every part of the words I know he means in the moment, but might regret later, my body heats up in anticipation.

Flashes of my stomach swollen, breasts full and dripping milk imprint inside my brain. My heart beats furiously and I'm honestly not sure if the images are coming from my imagination or his. My mouth suddenly feels parched and my thighs quiver as they fall open for the monster making quick work of removing his clothes.

Settling between my legs, he pushes his fingers inside me, gathering my menstrual blood before fisting his cock. He moans as he spreads the deep red

blood over his engorged length before rubbing the length of himself through my folds. My eyes are wide with a mix of fear and anticipation.

"I'm going to wreck this pussy until it can't take any more, until we're both covered in your blood. Then I'm going to heal you while I drink from you insatiably and start all over again. I'm going to paint your insides with my seed until your body has no choice but to breed for me."

His dangerous growl and low whispers have me more slicked up than a slip and slide. I'm ready for anything. My body detonates, soaking his cock before he even enters me. Then he thrusts inside me in one swift movement, my body stretching to accommodate his enlarged shaft.

Oh. *Fuck.*

## Chapter 10 - Seth

It's been nearly two days since I haphazardly threw together a horror story love nest and pushed them into it. I want to respect their space, but I'm feeling fidgety. And not just because my mate is holed up in a room away from my touch, being forcibly bred by a creature that is the antithesis of my people. Being away from her is certainly uncomfortable, but I truly do trust, even love, my bond brother. Although he has spent almost two days breaking her body over and over again, just to keep healing her and doing it again, I know he won't actually hurt her. I'd be lying if I said I haven't spent a fair amount of time on the brink of almost painful arousal listening to the way he has been making her moan and cry and scream.

I stayed true to my word and gave them space, though, only sneaking in the house to leave more food and water outside the bedroom door. It's a hard balance being part of a mate bond with a creature whose brain is wired to be a fearsome animal.

I'm also nervous because tonight is the new moon, and hopefully we'll be able to determine if Hawthorne is alive and well. The cave facility, if you can call it that, is locked up tightly. No more of the vehicles Draven saw came or left while I was looking around, and if I hadn't seen it for myself, I wouldn't ever know that anything abnormal was here. I can't sense Hawthorne's presence at all, and that worries me.

A very naked and disheveled Calista catches me leaving a bowl of cut fruit and a note outside the door. Her eyes are tired and rimmed in red with dark circles beneath them, her skin is even paler than usual, and her hair is knotted and wild. Reaching for my hand, she pulls me into the room and presses the door closed behind her before I have much time to assess the state of her.

I don't move to hug or touch her until I know it's safe. As happy as I am to see her alive and mostly unbroken, and as fucking sexy as hell as I've found



listening to them fuck like feral animals, I'm not sure I'm ready to be part of this den situation—either as a victim or a participant.

"Perfect timing," she whispers.

It takes my eyes a while to adjust to the darkness. The smells of blood and sex are thick in the room, and it's easily over ten degrees warmer in here than it is in the rest of the house. A deep growl comes from the shadowy corner. The sound is entirely inhuman. If I didn't know it was Draven back there, I'd think it was a very large dog or some kind of beast.

"You can't keep me locked away in here for the entire week," Calista chastises him.

"The hell I can't," he bites back. Clearly, I've interrupted a tense argument.

To get some light and air in the stifling room, I open the door back up. Draven hisses and ducks farther under a mountain of disheveled blankets.

"Down boy," I say, trying to bring some levity into the heavy presence of sex and danger. Whether the admonishment is directed at Draven or my suddenly pulsing cock is anyone's guess.

"I'm going to go to the bathroom," Calista says, and the blanket mountain begins to move. "Alone this time!" she yells.

A blur of movement almost knocks me off my feet, and suddenly Draven is inches from me, pushing Calista against the wall. His head ducks down, sniffing and licking at her throat. She moans, and it's either a testament to the power of the bonds or his orgasmic prowess that she could even take any more, much less still be interested. But it's clear she is by the arousal and excitement that flow through her emotions, her hardening nipples, and the way she tilts her hips toward his cock.

"Dude, what the fuck is wrong with your dick?" I say in horror when I get a look at the thing.

Draven definitely forgot I was here, which is actually a good sign, because it

means his possessiveness has calmed down a little. Both of them flinch at my shrill voice and look down at the appendage in question.

"That's not my blood," he says simply, as if that's a completely normal thing to say about one's dick.

"Not that, although—are you okay?" I say, looking Calista up and down for good measure. I'm mostly kidding. I know she's okay, but it doesn't hurt to check in.

She's looking perfectly healthy, her breasts and lower stomach just slightly swollen, which I know is a symptom of her period and not from the breeding fest that has taken place here, but I have to admit it looks good on her.

Draven snarls, and I blink, remembering my horror at the state of his fuck stick. "Are *you* okay?" I ask him pointedly, my eyes cutting down to his enlarged, almost grotesquely swollen, erect cock.

"I'm fine," he growls.

"Yeah, man," I say, nodding slowly. "That's probably totally normal."

"You want to find out?"

"You gonna breed me too?" I snark back. I one hundred percent mean it as a joke, but as soon as I say it, my entire body flushes with heat and I back away. "Don't you fucking dare," I say as he advances on me with a wicked gleam in his eye.

Calista giggles and slips through the open door. "Thanks for distracting him for a bit!" she calls over her shoulder as she escapes into the bathroom.

Draven groans and looks at the empty space she left behind with trepidation and irritation. "You let her get away."

"You were going to have to give her a break at some point."

"So she says," he retorts, but doesn't look happy about it.

"You're doing well," I say cautiously. At the confused furrow of his brow, I explain. "You let me in the room, for one. And she's still alive and well. That's definitely a point in your favor."

He shakes his head, rolling his eyes at me. "I do feel more...settled. I've grown more lucid as long as I can keep licking her blood and fucking her constantly. Not sure how long of a break I can manage to keep myself sane." He dips his head down, whispering almost conspiratorially. "I can't stop. I can't even get it to go down. I've been hard for days, and it's been like this," he gestures to the monstrous state of his cock, "since I smelled it on her when I barged in yesterday."

"Day before yesterday," I correct.

"What?"

"Yeah. It's been like thirty-six hours."

"Fucking hell," he murmurs, sounding a lot more like himself. He's staring down at his swollen dick.

"I know it's hard," I say, and I can't help but snicker. "But we need to let her rest to be ready for tonight."

"Tonight?"

"It's a new moon. We're going to try some spells to locate Hawthorne and, hopefully, get some visuals on his condition."

Draven takes a deep breath and nods. "Don't touch anything in here, or open any windows, or clean anything. I'm going to head to the cave—"

"I don't think that's a good idea," I say, cutting him off. "You need to stay close. This drive you have, it's affecting her too, and she'll be restless if you leave in the middle of whatever this nesting business is," I say, gesturing at the mess I helped create. "Plus, if you leave and come back, you're just going to go nuts all over again. You're doing really well with this, Draven. Stay in the nest, but control yourself. Let her get some rest, then you can lick her

clean before the ritual so she's nice and relaxed."

He groans and we both stare at his cock. Mine jerks in my pants.

"I might be able to get my mouth around it, if it helps."

"Considering I can't get your mouth pregnant, I'm not sure it'll appeal to whatever beast is currently residing inside me."

"Don't know until you try," I joke.

He rolls his eyes, and then it's silent for a few minutes while we listen to the sound of the toilet flushing across the hall.

"Did you find out if—"

"There's no record of it, at least in any of the obtainable records. The Archives are still hidden, and only The Elders can access them."

"How fucking old do you have to be to be considered an Elder? And how hard would it be to pin one of them down and brain fuck them into giving up the information we need?"

"Really fucking old. Thousands of years. And I have no idea if it's possible, but I've been considering the same thing. They're holding something back, won't even tell me how to find The Council. They think Calista is an abomination for what she did to save those people."

Draven cusses angrily, and I nod in agreement.

There's more silence as we hear the shower cut off.

"I made some of Hawthorne's tea." The snarl that rips out of him actually makes me jump. "It's her choice, Draven. Always her choice."

## Chapter 11 - Calista

The soft knock at the door stirs us both. Draven answers and murmurs to Seth through a crack in the door, taking a bundle and a mug that Seth passes him before closing the door again.

Draven kneels down on the mattress and hands me the steaming mug when I manage to shuffle to a sitting position, propped up on a ridiculous pile of blankets and pillows that almost seems like it was blocking me from the rest of the room. Was he using the nest to shield me from him?

"Seth made dinner. And tea," he says pointedly. "If you want it." It seems to pain him to say those last words, and I realize what tea he means.

My heart does a little flip at how hard he's working to show me that he cares about my choice in the matter, despite all the hard work he's put into impregnating me.

"Maybe it's for the best? Until we figure things out?" I say noncommittally, not wanting him to think that I'm rejecting him.

Even though he has managed to put on clothes and has been able to refrain from putting his cock or fangs inside me for a few hours, it's still pretty obvious that he's hovering on the edge of whatever beastly nature my period has brought out of him. *Will it be like this every month?*

"Will you be upset if it's not possible?" I can't help but ask. "If someday, when we're ready, you're not able to get me pregnant?" He cocks his head in thought. "Seth said this is happening because shade females are most fertile during their bleed, but it's actually quite different for humans. We're more fertile between, and the actual blood is my body's sign that I'm *not* pregnant."

I'm not really sure how I feel about the matter, if I'm being entirely honest. Is it just the haze of lust and pheromones that has me salivating over the idea?

"I don't really know," he says honestly, and I'm impressed that his voice is so calm. Maybe too calm. It's almost as creepy as watching him try to walk at a normal speed. "I've never been around a fertile female shade before. They aren't common, so I can't say that I'm actually very familiar with the process." He takes a breath. "I'm only here trying to be a reasonable person because of Seth. I think we both know that."

"He brings out the best in you."

"You bring out the worst."

I smile, knowing he doesn't mean it unkindly. Quite the opposite, for Draven, that's a compliment. A flirtatious one, at that. My thighs squeeze together, and Draven immediately picks up on the movement. His eyes narrow on the shape of my legs beneath the sheet, and I hold my breath to avoid squirming. I'm not sure it's a good idea to poke this particular bear at this particular moment. Plus, we have work to do.

Tonight is the night we find Hawthorne. I feel rested and strong. As much as I still want to punish myself, letting them take the pain away was the right thing to do, so I can be strong enough to save him. Once he's home, we can both punish me to our heart's content. My thighs clench again as my mind spirals into the gutter again, but it's short-lived. Hawthorne only ever touched me when he had to, because our bond drove him to. I should probably try not to think of our relationship in those terms. The entire point of breaking the bond was to respect his wishes.

Draven is still staring at my crotch through the sheet, as if he has x-ray vision and can see the mix of arousal and blood dripping into the mattress beneath me. I hope there are some heavy-duty waterproof mattress covers on these things, because we're going to have to throw them out. I have bled, cum, squirted, sweat, drooled, and cried over every inch of these mattresses. They are saturated with the evidence of our frenzied lovemaking.

Of course, Draven can hear every one of my thoughts. I see him processing my introspections about Hawthorne, and his jaw ticks with the effort to control himself when my mind filters through memories of all we've done to ruin the bedding. It seems like it should be impossible that I could still want

more after the constant bloody sex, but I suppose I have had the added benefit of quick healing.

I take the last sip of my tea and sit up entirely, letting the sheet fall around my waist and then my thighs as I pull myself up to my knees.

Draven swallows. "I wasn't going to touch you again until after we're done with the spells to find Hawthorne. Because I'm afraid once we get started again, I won't be able to stop myself."

"Okay," I whisper back, refusing to be disappointed. "Later," I say, like I'm making him promise.

He smirks. "Try to keep me away for long. I'll tear this house to the fucking ground."

After helping me up off the bed, he opens the door and closes it behind us quickly and forcefully as we step into the hall. My eyebrow quirks quizzically.

"It has to stay exactly as it is," he explains, displaying some of the still present mania.

I nod and walk into the bathroom. Draven follows me like a puppy, his eyes locked on the smear of blood between my thighs.

"Seth got you some—I don't know what stuff. For the bleeding. Might help block some of the scent."

My face warms. I'm not sure how I could find talking about tampons embarrassing when I have been bent into every position and configuration possible, and literally had the blood licked and slurped from my pussy like a delicacy. It's dumb, and I blame my ignorant upbringing. Swallowing down my self-consciousness, I look through the bag. I hesitate a little, and pull out a tiny instruction sheet from inside one of the boxes.

"What's wrong?" Draven asks. I don't answer, but he drags it out of me. "You've never used any of this?"

I shake my head and shrug. "Saying I was sheltered is an oversimplification. My aunt thought using anything but giant maxi pads was sinful. God forbid I put anything inside me." We both laugh, because that seems exceptionally ridiculous now. I've had all manners of cocks, fingers, toys, and tongues inside me—a tampon will seem like nothing. "I'm not afraid or intimidated to use one, though. I just need to read the instructions first."

Draven digs through the bags and pulls out various colorful wrappings. "Did you want pumpkin spice or lemon flavor?" he jokes flatly before opening a different box and reading through the instructions. "This one says it has 'easy glide technology', whatever the fuck that means." He throws it to the side and opens another package, pulling out a squishy rubber cup.

"What is that?" It's definitely not a tampon.

He reads the package. "It collects the blood instead of absorbing it, and then you just pour—This one. Use this one," he says decidedly, staring me dead in my eyes, daring me to judge him. Considering how well he's doing with the urges that I know are still running rampant through his mind and body, I decide to let it go. It seems the most reasonable thing to do.

"It seems complicated," is all I say, eyeballing the diagram.

Draven looks from the instructions to me, or more specifically, my crotch. He seems to be contemplating something, but then his eyes darken as his gaze locks on a tiny trickle of blood that makes its way between my thighs. A vein in his forehead bulges.

"Seth!" he bellows through his clenched jaw.

The bright comes running into the bathroom in a flash, eyes wide like he's expecting danger. "I'm here! What's wrong? What happened?"

I groan in embarrassment as I drag my hand over my face. *Don't mind me, just standing here, butt-naked, free-bleeding onto the floor while my two boyfriends discuss what menstrual products I'm going to use. I'm fine. This is fine. Not embarrassing at all.*



"Calista needs help," he says, flinging the rubber cup at me. "I'll be outside," he says, letting us know he's not running away, just getting space to control himself.

Seth watches him leave and then looks at me questioningly. He reaches out instinctively to touch my arm, relieving the building pressure in my chest.

"I'm fine," I tell him, turning from him and starting the shower. "Draven was just getting a little overzealous about all the choices you brought."

"The cup?" He asks. He nods as if he knew, which he probably did. He probably chose it for him. "So...did you need help?"

"No. I'm okay, I promise."

"Do you want me to hold up the diagram?"

"No!"

"Can I watch?"

*Oh, my gods.* "Please leave."



When I finally make it outside, the sky is completely pitch black. Stars shine

in the sky above us, twinkling brightly, giving me hope for the trials ahead.

Draven and Seth are both outside, bustling around the space near where they've lit a fire. They've pulled the chairs farther out from the fire pit, and there are tons of candles flickering in the small clearing. They both pause to watch me step into my red rain boots and walk down the stairs. I've showered again, which was necessary after the learning curve of inserting the menstrual cup. I've braided my hair back, and it rests over my left shoulder, and I'm wearing one of Hawthorne's warm flannel shirts and a pair of leggings. Pretty plain, if you ask me, but both of them are watching me with an odd expression.

"What?" I ask, stepping into the clearing and moving between them. The tearing sensation behind my sternum calms and I take a breath of relief.

"You're glowing," Seth says, looking down at me. He notices me look away, blushing at the compliment. "I'm serious, Calista. Your power is literally showing through your skin."

"He's right," Draven says, his hands coming around my back to encircle my waist. His nose runs up the column of my throat and my eyes flicker shut. Instinctively, I lean my head to the side, baring my neck.

"Don't start," Seth murmurs, but I can see the heat in his eyes. He flicks his gaze up to Draven. "Okay?"

I feel Draven nod over my head. I don't want to start another conversation about my period, or the little collection cup inside me, that I can tell Draven is thinking intently about. Instead, I clap my hands together and force myself to put some space between us.

"Alright. What's first?"

"We're almost finished setting up. We just need to make a circle." Seth hands me a container of salt from the kitchen. "It's easier than using chalk on all the leaves and dirt," he explains.

While I complete the circle, Draven and Seth both scatter protective herbs

around the clearing, and Seth directs me to sit near the fire, where a large, opaque white ball is resting on a footstool. Sitting down cross-legged, I examine it. No one seems to object to me touching or moving it, so I pick it up and feel its weight. It's about the size of a child's soccer ball, perfectly round and smooth, though it's much heavier than it looks. The opaque white that I thought was the surface color of the ball actually swirls around when I roll the ball in my hands. Once I set it back on the stand, I look up at Seth. We read the spells and instructions together, so I have the general idea of what I'm supposed to do, but Seth has more experience with this than I do. I don't want to make any mistakes by missing something important.

After giving the ball a quick wipe down, Seth sits across from me, while Draven settles himself near my back, one hand gently laying over my knee. I appreciate that they obviously considered my comfort during the spell work, and made sure one of them would have physical contact with me, so I'm not at all distracted by pain.

"Close your eyes," Seth says quietly, and I do. "Relax your body, let go of your tension, and just focus on your breaths. Let each breath relax your body in phases—first your calves, then your knees, your thi—Draven, stop it, you're not helping."

Draven's hand quickly returns to my knee from where it had slid up my thigh. "My bad."

I press my lips together to avoid laughing. Seth mutters something under his breath that starts with, "Fucking seriously," but shakes out his shoulders and closes his eyes again. I notice him opening one eye to check on Draven before I'm able to close my eyes and get serious again. Seth walks me through a meditation to clear my mind and relax my body, while Draven manages to keep his hands and thoughts to himself. After a few minutes of this sleepy Zen state, Seth instructs me to place my hand on the ball and focus on my intent.

"Feel the fragment of bond that you have left. Focus on every little thing you can remember about Hawthorne. The way he looks, the way he smells, the way he feels—"

His voice drifts off as I conjure images of Hawthorne. The open-mouthed shock he wasn't quick enough to disguise when I made an apple tree blow up on his front porch. The way his hands felt on me the night he bent me over the kitchen sink and brought me to orgasm just so we could get some sleep. The undecipherable way he looked down at me when he woke up from his coma and made love to me. His pain and anguish shining in his deep, honey brown eyes at my betrayal. I imagine his big, strong arms around me, the tickle of his short beard against my face. The shirt I'm wearing surrounds me in his woodsy scent, and I breathe him in.

"Hold on to that focus, and flood your intent into the ball. Let it be a conduit for your magic and let it pour through your hands."

My hands grow warm as I focus on Hawthorne and my desperation to know if he's okay.

"Open your eyes, Calista."

In front of me, the white crystal ball is pulsing. When I pull back my hands, it becomes more apparent that there's lightning crackling across the surface. My eyes unfocus a bit, and I can't tell if the vision is in the ball or happening behind my eyes.

Hooded men. An overgrown clearing at the base of a hill. A nest of brambles soaked with blood. A massive black wolf with red tinged white foam dripping from its huge maw.

More lightning. Screams. More blood. Visceral fear.

An unfamiliar young woman's face.

*Hawthorne.*

## Chapter 12 - Hawthorne

My head snaps up, a loud crack of lightning flashing behind my eyes and startling me from my restless nap. I'm sitting on the damp floor with my back against the stone wall, facing towards the entrance. It's completely dark, not a speck of light. I must have been having a dream, or another hallucination. Like the one I had before I'd been knocked out, when I saw a young woman who looked exactly as I imagined my Ada would have all grown up. Exactly like her mother, but with my eyes. I shake off the impossible thought.

A familiar pressure tugs at my chest, and my hand flattens against my sternum. I can almost feel that pulse of our connection. The awareness I have of her I pretended to loathe, but was desperate to have back the moment it was gone. The first few times I'd woken up in here, it was with a jolt, thinking that maybe, somehow, I'd felt her again. But I quickly got used to remembering that there's nothing there anymore. Nothing but another dream about the woman who broke me, whose betrayal hurt me more than my first wife. So I brush off those initial sparks of phantom awareness, and I don't dare hope for fear of losing my sanity in this place.

I'm not sure how long I've been in this small cell. It's definitely in a cave of some sort, but it's not the same place they'd knocked me out in. No one has come to question or assault me, nor has anyone come to feed me. Well, not any captors. I've been living—if you can call it that—on the trickle of water that flows down one side of the cell wall, and the random berries and snacks that a certain bird has been smuggling in. Yesterday she managed to find a stash of energy bars, and I still have one saved in the cargo pocket of my pant leg.

I hear a familiar flutter of wings and look up in the darkness, angling my head towards the sound. She lands beside me, but doesn't seem to have anything with her aside from her company. That's okay though, her presence is perhaps more important.

Cautiously lifting my hand, I wait until I feel the pressure of her head pressing into my palm. I don't get the impression that she typically likes a lot of affection, but maybe she senses that I'm at the end of my rope.

"Does she send you here?" I ask quietly. Even a whisper seems loud when there's been nothing but silence echoing back at me for however long I've been here. It's impossible to say.

As if my voice beckoned more noise, from out of the gloom, footsteps echo down an unseen corridor. Not wanting to be caught unawares, I stand with my back against the wall.

A bright flashlight rounds a corner, the light blinding me. I can't see whoever is holding the light in front of them.

I want to rage and yell; demand my freedom. But I know there's no point. I'm better off remaining calm and not giving away what little strength I have left. It's likely that they've been starving me, hoping to weaken me. If I can feign weakness and get out of this cell, maybe I can take them unaware.

With that plan in mind, I only lift my arm to shield my eyes from the blinding light they're pointing at me.

The jingle of keys gets my attention, and then a loud, rusty creaking as the door opens.

"I'm here to get you out of here. But we have to move fast." A woman's voice, low and raspy, beckons me forward.

Still reeling from the bright light, I hesitate. This is probably some kind of trick.

She sighs exasperatedly. It's as if she isn't surprised that I'm not coming easily, but was maybe hoping I would. "Listen, what's your name?"

"Who's asking?" I answer, my voice gravelly with lack of use.

"Look, we can do this the easy way or the hard way. I need to get you out of here, and we have a very short window of escape."

"Sure we do," I say, conjuring a ball of light. As hard as it's been to remain in the dark here, I've been conserving every bit of my energy. The only times I've used it were when I woke up the first time, and when Birdie first showed up.

Suddenly, my light flicks out. I snap my fingers, trying to conjure it again, but there's nothing. I feel a slightly oppressive buzz in the air—the presence of someone else's power. It's recognizable from the caves the night it all went to shit. She's the void.

"Why would you help them?"

"It's complicated, but the long and short of it is so I can help you."

"So you're like a double agent?" I scoff. I know this witch was at Calista's aunt's house and is responsible for me being in my present position. She's not fooling me.

"Something like that. Look, we don't have time for this. The Grand Master of The Sanctum Society just landed in a private airfield less than an hour from here. He's supposedly got some big wig with him that studies magic and knows what he's doing. All the important players have gone to kiss his ass and escort him back here, where they plan to strap you to a table and try to recreate your girlfriend's botched ceremony to drain your powers. Aside from her, you're the first person with any actual power they've captured. And if they show up, we're both dead, because I took out the guards that were supposed to be watching you. So either you come with me, or you die, because we can't risk letting them get their hands on your magic."

"Why are you doing this?"

"Because it's my job. And because they'll use you to get to her."

It's enough to give me pause, but I'm still not buying her story. "These assholes are a joke—"

"They used to be, you're right," she says, cutting me off. "But these guys are

smarter and stronger than George Bodin. He actually believed all the religious bullshit they used to control people. And he went rogue because he wanted to prove himself, elevate his position within the church."

"You saw what happened to him," I say calmly, not bothering to veil the threat.

"I did. And I don't want a man like Salazar Hopkins to get his hands on power like that."

"Who are you?"

"It doesn't matter who I am. We can talk on the way."

She moves the flashlight, gesturing to me with it to move it along. The beam angles down and I'm frozen where I stand when I see her face.

"What kind of cruel joke is this?" I demand, and I'm sure I'm gaping like an idiot.

Is there a kind of magic that can make your nightmares come to life to torment you? Though I suppose I've never seen such a vivid dream of my daughter, all grown up.

*This isn't possible. Ada is dead. I saw her, I—*

"What is going on?" I croak out, and I feel the hot trickle of tears on my cheeks.

The woman—*my daughter?*—pauses and huffs out a heavy breath.

"I hoped we could do this the easy way," she says, before the light cuts out. I hear Birdie squawk and I swear I hear a distant scream as something hits me across the temple.



## Chapter 13 - Calista

Screams echo in my mind, but it takes too long to realize that the screaming is coming from me. I thrash and struggle to suck in breaths, as if I've been held under water. Everything is spinning, and there's a loud whooshing in my ears. My head aches as if I were the one that was just knocked out cold with the butt of a heavy flashlight. And my heart... It's like my rib cage has burst. There's an intense pulling sensation that burns like a fiery rope has been wrapped around my heart.

The pain is intense and I can't catch my breath. It takes me a moment to realize I'm the one screaming.

Seth and Draven are both on the ground with me, each of them with an arm around me, desperately trying to calm me.

"He's alive," Seth says, his voice a mixture of anguish and relief. I try to pull back the brunt of my emotions. I don't want him to feel this pain, too. "Don't," he whispers, pressing a hard kiss against my temple. "Let me help."

"It's too much," I cry.

"Not for all of us," Draven murmurs, bending low to kiss away some of the tears that are pouring out of me in a torrent of pain. He licks the salty wetness from his lips.

"Trust your bonds," Seth says, like he always does.

It's a mantra that I'll continue to learn the hard way, because I don't want to hurt them. I'll take on every ounce of pain and torment just to keep them from feeling anything. If I was strong enough to close myself off, to shield them from even knowing the extent of my pain, I would. But it poured out of me before I knew it would explode, and I wasn't managing my shields well enough through the shock of seeing Hawthorne. My emotions seeped out

before I realized it. I'm holding onto what control I have, but I can't quite shut them out.

"Who was that woman?" I say, trying to redirect their attention. *He's alive.* Or he was. The vision cut out when he fell unconscious. I'm too afraid to hope.

Seth gives Draven a strange look. "Drop the shields first."

"It's—"

"It's not too much, beauty," Draven says, his hold tightening as if he's afraid I'll try to get away.

Seth tips my chin so I have to look up at him. "I've taken on the pain of thousands of soldiers in battle, absorbed the sadness of millions of people mourning the deaths of their loved ones. This has been my job for hundreds of years, angel."

"It's not that I don't think you're strong enough," I say, and he gives me a pointed look. I'm sure he can feel the guilt pouring off me in waves. I don't feel like I deserve to have this weight lifted, like taking comfort in my remaining bonds is a betrayal to the man I put in a dangerous position. Causing any of them more pain is the last thing I want to do.

"I can handle it," Seth insists.

Still, when I slowly drop my shields and release the floodgate, I hear his intake of breath. I look up with worried eyes, but he avoids my gaze by pulling me into a tight embrace. Draven tenses, but doesn't say or do anything. He really is putting all his effort into controlling himself.

"The woman seems familiar," he says, breaking the awkward silence.

"What?!" Both Seth and I say, spinning around to look at him.

"That woman from the vision, I think it could be his daughter. She looks exactly like his wife, but also like him. And his reaction to seeing her..." he trails off, his eyes glazed as he opens his mind to me, filtering back through his memories. "When I was stuck in his dreamscape, it replayed the deaths of

his children, over and over."

I flinch at the vision he conjures for me, of Hawthorne's two children laying in a pool of blood on the ground, brutally murdered by an evil man.

"It kept bothering me," Draven says. "His son, Rowan, was drained to a husk. But the little girl, there was something off. And she wasn't drained the way the wife and son were. What if she didn't die that night?"

Recoiling from the vision, I focus my eyes on Draven's face. "How could that be possible?"

"I don't know. But either it's her, or someone is playing a really cruel trick on Hawthorne."

"Why would they do that, though? How would The Sanctum Society even know about Hawthorne or his family?" Seth muses.

"Exactly, it doesn't add up. Which means it could be her. It seemed like she was working undercover. Maybe for The Council?" Draven says.

"Hawthorne would just love that," Seth exclaims. "I haven't had any luck tracking them down yet." He pauses, biting his lip before admitting to me, "The Elders are being less than helpful."

"Why?" I ask, and my voice sounds whiny even to my own ears.

Seth sighs, frustration and wariness show in his handsome features. The absence of his usual sarcastic grin rearranges his face, and while he's still as gorgeous as ever, his seriousness highlights the severity of the issue at hand.

"The Elders are not exactly very trusting of our situation at the moment," he admits. "They are currently shunning the witches as a whole, for reasons they won't disclose to me, but it's more than that. They're taking a negative view of what happened the night you saved those people. The Elder I spoke to suggested that the power you have, the way you transferred the life-force of the guards into the wounded survivors, was dangerous. *Unnatural* is what he called it." He seems pained to admit these parts of the conversation to me,

and I wonder if there's more to it.

My eyes fall to the fire, watching the light of the flickering flames reflect off the crystal ball. I'm left with nothing to say. Maybe it's my own naïveté and the very human concept of "angels" clouding my understanding, but I've put the brights on a bit of a pedestal. I thought they were above petty feuds, and always willing to do what needs to be done to help the greater good. The very nature of the work they do, absorbing the pain and torment of suffering humans, corroborated that in my mind.

Their refusal to help us seems to go against the character I've set my expectations for, and I'm hurt that the people I considered the "good guys" think I'm dangerous. Bad. *Unnatural*.

I've spent most of my life believing there was something wrong with me, something odd or *other* about me that my aunt and Bodin tried to stifle. Only since learning about my magic and training with Hawthorne, Seth, and Draven have I truly felt comfortable with myself. Making things grow, helping people—those things made me feel good about the power inside me that sets me apart from the world. It made me feel like *I'm* good.

Is what I did to those guards wrong, even if it was to save innocent lives?

"They think I'm evil?"

"No, I don't think they think you're evil," he says unconvincingly. "They've just not seen the kind of power you have in their considerably long lifetimes. You think I'm old," he jokes, and my shoulders relax seeing the humor return to his features. "They think the four of us and our bond is...misguided. But honestly, I think they're the ones that are misguided. They don't understand."

"So we make them understand," Draven interjects.

"What?" I ask, looking back at where he's settled himself on the footstool, holding the crystal ball in his hands. I know he's trying to keep his hands and mind busy so he's not obsessing over me so much. He's intently fighting his animal instinct to drag me back to his nest and keep me there.

Draven looks at Seth. "Is it safe to bring Calista to meet them?"

The scowl on his face makes it very obvious how much he doesn't like the idea. I don't need to be able to see into his mind to know he hates the idea of leaving the cabin at all, much less to go bow down to a bunch of old guys with sticks up their asses. I'm not sure why he's even bringing it up.

Seth considers it for a moment. "The Elders are behaving in ways I don't understand, going against what I believed was our purpose on Earth, but truly I don't believe they'd pose a threat to her."

"If they think what I've done is wrong, why would they want to meet me?"

"I'm not sure they do, honestly," Seth says gently.

"I don't really care if they want to meet you, or if they like you at all. They can hate your fucking guts and wish you dead for all I care," Draven says bluntly. "But they need to see what we're dealing with here."

"I'm sorry, what?" Draven might not be one to sugarcoat things, but I don't really understand what he's getting at.

"They'll see how special you are, and they won't be able to deny you," Draven says, shrugging. "Though they'll be intimidated as hell by you, which could put you in danger. We'll need to tread lightly. Is there a masking spell or anything we can use to dampen her power?" Draven asks, looking back at Seth.

"Not one that would be very effective. They're very perceptive, and the power surge she's experiencing is significant. But we can't afford to wait until your cycle is over," Seth answers, looking at me. He turns his gaze to Draven. "It might be best for you to stay outside the pyramid. They'll sense your struggle and might interpret it as dangerous."

Draven's jaw ticks, but after a tense moment, he nods curtly.

Apprehension and uncertainty cloud my thoughts. The idea of meeting ancient, powerful leaders that can read me like a book the way Seth does is

terrifying.

"What if my presence makes things worse?" I ask. "What if they see something in me that I'm not aware of?"

What if, deep down, there *is* something bad inside me? I have all this magic inside me that I didn't know existed. A lineage of powerful witches, including quite a few that practiced a much darker craft than what my parents did. Some of those spells, while they scared me, also grabbed my attention more than what is probably healthy. Hell, I used blood magic to reverse my bond with Hawthorne.

A shudder passes through me. What if some of that dark, tainted magic is in my veins?

What if they're right about me? My aunt, Bodin, the bright Elders...

"No." Draven and Seth say in unison.

I scowl. Obviously Draven can hear my thoughts, although I'd rather he stay out of my private moments sometimes. I'm regretting my promise to not shut him out during my cycle. He lifts an eyebrow about that thought, but, true to the asshole he is, his eyes hold no shame. Seth must have guessed how my thoughts were spiraling based on my mood.

Seth pulls me into his arms and hugs me tightly. "Stop overthinking this, Calista. If a bunch of old coots can't see the light in you, it's because they're being willfully ignorant. I suspect they sense change is coming, and they like the order of things as it is."

"Change?"

"Big change. My girl is going to change the world," he says, swooping down to press a gentle kiss against my lips. He pulls back too quickly, and I press myself against him, deepening the kiss and demanding more. Seth obliges, sliding his tongue into my mouth, and the kiss moves from sweet to heated.

I flinch when Draven's mind goes blank, and I know he's trying to respect my

relationship with Seth, despite how much he's struggling. Feeling guilty about his distress, I pull back, but Seth shakes his head.

"I miss your touch," he whispers softly. His hand moves from my back to my ass, pressing my body against his.

I immediately feel the tension behind me, but Seth doesn't pay Draven any mind.

*Just what does he think he's doing?*

Draven reaches his limit, hissing as he pushes himself between us, blocking me from Seth's view.

"Draven!" I shout, ready to talk him down, but I doubt he can hear me over his snarling.

"It's okay," Seth says, holding a hand out. He's trying to reassure me, but I'm worried Draven is about to snap his arm clean off his body just for touching me.

Heat is rolling off Draven in waves, and his body is vibrating. I was never too afraid when faced with Draven like this, but having it aimed at someone I love is a different story. Would I be able to forgive him if he hurt Seth?

The tension between them grows to an uncomfortable peak, and I'm waiting for something terrible to happen. Visions of blood and turmoil spin through my head, and my panic is rising. What if this is the beginning of whatever battles I have ahead of me? I've already lost one of my bonded. In my own stupidity, I weakened us all. What if my other bonds are heading to destruction as well? What if the two that got along the best won't be able to make it because of my dumb mistakes and my dumb period and my dumb—

In the blink of an eye, the battle between Draven and Seth begins. But it isn't the battle I imagined and feared.

Seth, in a moment of brave stupidity that I can relate to, surges forward and grips Draven's face in his hands. I move a couple of steps to the side, ready to

intervene if things get violent. Initially, I think Seth might try yelling at Draven to try to get through to him, but instead he *kisses him*. The kiss is rough and awkward, and Draven is frozen in shock.

Draven loves Seth, too. I know he does, even if he'd never admit it out loud. And Seth knows it. He's trying to help him remember. It's a genius move, really. Fighting would only pump more adrenaline into his blood and make it harder for him to come back. He's doing the opposite to shock him out of his haze.

A drop of blood from where Seth's lips scraped over Draven's fangs rolls down Seth's chin, and Draven's tongue lashes out to lick it. The kiss becomes hot and heavy, and I'm struck with the most intense wave of arousal watching them. I can't decide if I want to insert myself in the middle, or sit back and watch the show.

Seth pulls away from the kiss and presses his forehead against Draven's. "I know I'm not what you need right now, but I'm also not a threat."

Draven is still for several moments, but then he nods, almost imperceptibly. Seth presses a kiss to his forehead, and they both reach for me. Seth's lips turn up in a smirk at their synchronicity.

They pull me between them, and I feel somewhat like a doll they're using to experiment with. Not that I mind. Having both of their hands on me in any capacity not only frees me from the persistent ache of loss, but it exhilarates me and drives me to new heights every single time. I don't mind being their science experiment, especially if it helps Draven.

I'm facing Draven, with Seth behind me. I watch his black eyes as they trace Seth's movements when he bends down to kiss my neck, right over the spot that Draven has bitten me so many times that it's become one of my strongest erogenous zones. My breath catches as Seth runs his tongue over the spot where my neck meets my shoulder, and up to the bottom of my jaw. Draven's tongue darts out to lick his lips as he follows the path of Seth's tongue with his eyes.

Fitting his hands between mine and Draven's body, Seth unbuttons my



flannel shirt from the bottom to the top before cupping my bare breasts. He rolls my nipples and bites down on my neck, firmly, but not breaking the skin. A rumbling starts in Draven's chest, yet he doesn't make a move to stop Seth, only grips my waist harder. His erection pushes against my stomach through our clothes.

Seth holds one of my breasts as if in offering, and Draven leans down, not taking his eyes off Seth while his mouth suctions to my breast. His tongue flicks against the hard peak before he plunges his fangs into me. I cry out, the bite of pain almost immediately overshadowed by a wave of pleasure. Every pull of my blood brings me closer to climax. When Seth glides his hand down my leggings, it only takes one light touch of his fingers against my clit for me to come. He keeps flicking my clit, even as Draven lifts one of my legs to wrap around his waist, grinding against me. I moan as they rev me up even more.

Releasing my breast, Draven kneels and rips my leggings and underwear off my legs as if they are offending him. He dips his head between my legs, and Seth uses his fingers to spread my pussy lips, exposing my throbbing clit to Draven's tongue. Using his supernatural speed, Draven flicks his tongue hard against the swollen bud, and I detonate into another orgasm almost immediately. I cry out and arch into Seth's hold, his free hand tweaking my nipples. He swallows my cries, plunging his tongue into my open mouth and kissing me hungrily. Draven's relentless tongue keeps flicking, driving my orgasm higher until I lose control and a rush of fluid pours out of me.

*Fuck, I love it when you squirt all over my face,* he whispers in my mind while he licks and sucks my release. He pushes a finger inside me and prods at the rubber cup that is keeping my blood from him.

"I want this out," he grunts against my skin.

I freeze, and Seth pulls back from our kiss, looking me in the eye. "Are you okay with that?" he asks. We both know Draven can hear us, but Seth and I don't have the benefit of a telepathic connection.

To his credit, Draven doesn't react negatively.

*I can handle this*, Draven says in my head. *I think*.

"He can handle it," I answer Seth, trusting that Draven knows his limits.

His usual reaction is to shut down or run away, so if he's comfortable pushing himself, I'm comfortable letting him. Admittedly, I'm also desperate for his cock. The pheromones or hormones or whatever it is that has him acting the way he is have definitely been affecting me, too. I can't get enough of him. The drive to fuck, to be filled up and bled out, is running rampant through my body.

Despite that drive, I'm also very aware of my other bonded. I want him. I know he's missed me these last few days, and his patience and understanding continue to astound me. I don't want to leave him out, but I also don't want him to feel like he has to engage in anything he isn't comfortable with.

"Are you okay with it?" Just because Draven is the opposite of put-off by my menstrual blood, doesn't mean that Seth is into it.

"I think he'll be fine," Seth murmurs against my skin, kissing a path behind my ear.

"No, I mean, are *you* okay with it? Because I'm..."

This is ridiculous. I've been stuck in a bloody fuck nest for the past two days, getting licked, bitten, and fucked by a vampire that is obsessed with my menstrual blood. Seth was the one that went and bought me two bags full of tampons and other supplies. He tried to get me to let him put the menstrual cup inside me, for fuck's sake. All of that, and I still can't find it in myself to be mature enough to even discuss it?

Seth wraps my braid around his hand, tugging it back softly. I drop my head on his shoulder, looking up at him, a blush darkening my cheeks.

"There is no part of you or your body that I don't find natural and incredibly beautiful. I've had your blood on me before, sweetheart." I know he's right. Technically, he's been covered in both mine and Draven's blood—it's kind of a prerequisite to being with Draven.

"This is a little different," I say.

"Don't overthink it," he answers before looking down at Draven, still on his knees and looking comically annoyed by the amount of patience he's having to exercise. Seth nods at him. "The instructions said to pinch the base of the cup to release the seal," he says, almost clinically, letting Draven know how to remove the cup.

"I read the fucking instructions," Draven mumbles. His hand shakes almost imperceptibly as he slides it up the inside of my thigh.

"Okay, but I can take it out myself—"

Before I can finish my protest, Draven inserts his long fingers inside me. My mouth opens in mortification.

Is this really happening? *Draven! You could let me do this myself, you know.*

He looks up to make eye contact with me, a devilish smirk on his face. He likes getting under my skin. A little quirk of his eyebrow helps me remember snippets of a conversation we had a few hours into our blood-fuck breeding fest, when Draven was finally calm enough to have a coherent conversation, even if he needed to be inside me to do it.

*"I understand from your thoughts and memories that you were conditioned to think of your bleeding as unsanitary or offensive, but you're going to have to get over that. Because I have never, in my entire life, felt so fucking ravenous for another person. I feel lured to you more strongly than ever before, and I can't resist the pull, beauty. You're going to have to get real comfortable with me being up in your business every time your blood comes."*

*"This," he said, holding up his fingers that were coated in my blood, "belongs to me. No one else can touch it."*

He'd said it as a warning. One he meant, at least in the moment.

*Are you okay sharing this with Seth?* I ask him, keeping the conversation between us.

His eyes flick up to Seth and then back at me just as I feel the slight suction release inside me. His eyes fill, turning into inky pools, and his nostrils flare.

*Maybe. Maybe not,* he answers truthfully, as he pulls the little cup out of my body. He clears his throat, moving to set the cup inside my empty tea mug next to the crystal ball.

Walking back to us with his unnaturally slow steps, he wraps an arm around my waist and pulls me in close. He kisses me deeply while Seth guides the flannel shirt down my arms. I'm so worked up, flushed with a mixture of lust and embarrassment, that I can barely feel the chill in the air. Still, Draven swoops my legs out from under me, carrying me the few steps towards the blanket that's laid out over the ground near the fire. Seth moves the makeshift table before Draven lays me down.

Although I know his mind is consumed by his need to be inside me, Draven doesn't immediately strip and start fucking me the way I expect him to. Instead, he surprises me by slowly circling Seth. I watch appreciatively as Seth shivers. I know how it feels to be caught in that web of seduction, knowing you're the prey the predator is about to consume. The awareness that you're about to be a meal, for good or for bad, is exhilarating in all the ways that make my skin prickle with anticipation.

## Chapter 14 - Draven

Knowing I can't handle the idea of anyone else in our nest, I lay Calista on the blanket near the fire and level my attention on Seth, wanting to make sure he knows what he's getting into right now. Despite what I said in the thick heat of the moment, when I was less than clear-headed, I know that there has to be *some* level of sharing if this complicated mate bond is going to work.

I'm honestly not sure how to handle Hawthorne if he ever comes back. His alpha personality will no doubt clash with these animalistic urges that have taken over me. But Seth is a different person entirely, and I feel like we have a good bond between us, even if Calista is obviously the focus of everything we are.

Trying this with Seth, before the possibility of having a third male in the mating circle, is safer than waiting until another cycle when I might be more level-headed. Seth, at least, seems to understand what's happening to me. Hell, he's the one that figured it out. So he'll be the best test of whether or not I can handle myself. Right?

Seth stops my slow pacing and pulls me closer to him. "Undress me," he whispers, but his low tone tells me it's more of a diversion than an instruction.

I lift his shirt and pull it over his head, lightly scraping my fangs over his chest. He reaches forward to undo the buttons on my shirt and leans into my neck. In between heated kisses, he whispers, so low that I know only my ears could pick up on it.

"I'm going to touch her, but I don't have to be inside her," he says.

I can only imagine how much it must pain him to make these considerations for me. All of us were lonely before she came into our lives, but he'd been

without physical touch for longer than I've even been alive. Before the night we lost Hawthorne, he struggled to let a minute go by without having his hands on her in some way.

I know he has to be suffering without her comfort. I should be ashamed of my behavior, but I truly can't help myself. It's taking every bit of self-control just to get through each moment without carrying her off to ravage her, snapping the neck of anyone that tries to stop me.

Doing this during the first two days would have been impossible. It was only after her flow lightened some that I could really think straight.

Nodding slowly, I inhale deeply, forcing more of her scent into my lungs. He's right that I'm going to struggle, but I think as long as he's not inside her pussy, I can manage.

"Her mouth," I whisper back. "I think that'd be okay. Or—" I send him a devilish wink.

Seth laughs loudly, his shoulders relaxing considerably when he realizes that I'm okay with this. We can make this work. *I think.*

"What are you two over there giggling about?" Calista asks. She's propped up on her elbows, watching us with a puzzled expression.

The firelight dances across her pale skin, and flickers off her lust glazed eyes. Fucking hell, she's fucking glorious. Perfection personified, and laying out in all her glory for us to feast upon.

"We were just talking about taking your ass tonight, beauty," I say with a smirk.

Her eyes flash wide and a flush crawls down her neck, but her nipples pebble. "I—I—" she stutters, but I descend on her before she can think anything else of it.

My face darts right for her pussy. There's a drop of blood that has just barely begun trickling out, and it was starting to become very distracting. I lap it up.

Calista squirms, her body already over sensitized. This isn't for her though, not yet. This is purely me giving into my base animal need. If I thought her blood was sweet before, then I don't know what this is. The taste of her fertility is like nectar from the gods that inhabited this world far before any of us did. My tongue elongates and thrusts inside her, drawing out every precious drop of ambrosia.

Calista moans and bucks her hips, grinding her pussy into my face.

"Yes, beauty, give it to me," I groan, licking and tongue fucking her sweet blood from her pussy. I don't stop until she's flooding my mouth with her cum. There's a tug behind me, and Seth pulls my dark jeans off my legs while I'm sprawled out and drinking from our mate.

He's a good man, but I need to be inside her. *Now*. Covering her body with mine, I don't waste any time, thrusting all the way to the hilt. Burying my face in her neck, I fuck her with wild abandon. Relief floods my veins. It's all easier to control now, but the need to be fucking her constantly is still driving me, and nothing can soothe the madness like being inside her. Much like my disappointment watching her drink that tea, I know it's unreasonable, but my body and instincts want to give in to the mating drive fully.

Turning our bodies so she's on top of me, I position her so she's riding me with her ass up in the air. Gripping her cheeks, I spread them open while spearing her pussy from below, presenting her to Seth like some kind of kinky gift. She doesn't protest, although her eyes widen in apprehension when she hears Seth's zipper. He steps out of his pants and kneels down beside us.

Making hard eye contact with me, either to check in or to challenge me, I'm not sure, Seth tilts Calista's face to the side and kisses her. The sight of their tongues rolling and massaging each other sends a confused shiver of possessiveness and arousal down my spine, and I thrust up harder. The movement makes Calista's breasts sway, and I repeat the movement until she's rhythmically jerking up and down on my cock. Watching her tits bounce is a good distraction until I notice Seth snake a hand between us. I grit my teeth, knowing he's going to touch her clit, which normally I wouldn't mind and would welcome. Is he going to touch her blood, though? I force myself to relax and let it happen, but Seth surprises me. He touches Calista's pussy,

pulling a strangled gasp out of her, but he also snakes his other hand around the back of her and grabs my balls.

He gives them a light tug and rolls them around in his hand. "So heavy and full. Is this all for our girl? Are you going to fill her up with your cum until you plant a little demon spawn deep in her womb?"

Fucking hell if that doesn't make my balls clench tighter, ready to paint her insides and do just exactly that.

"Maybe a whole litter of little Slim Shadys filling up this delectable body."

"Whoa now," Calista says breathlessly, diverted from our pleasure. "I'm not a dog to be bred."

"Shhh, look how much he likes it though," he admonishes her before lowering himself down to murmur against the shell of my ear. "Imagine how swollen and round her stomach will be, how big these perfect fucking tits will get." Even as they bounce above me, I imagine them engorged and heavy with milk.

*Fuck.*

"Mine!" I growl, exploding inside her. The force of my orgasm is so intense, I imagine my cock like a fire hose inside her.

Calista grinds down on me as my cock pulses inside her. I feel fingers touch the base of my cock where we are connected, and then Calista falls forward on my chest with a gasp. "Seth!" she cries out, and a snarl tears out of me, but it gets lost in her cries as her pussy clenches down around my length as she comes. I don't like hearing anyone else's name but mine while I'm filling her with my cum. I suppose I'll have to forgive him this time, because damn, she's clamped tight, milking me for every last drop as I continue to empty myself into her.

"Fuck, you might be right, brother," he says. His arm is flexing with movement, Calista continuing to rock on top of me. "Angel, tell Draven how much you like your ass filled up with my fingers while you're riding his



cock."

She squeezes her eyes closed and moans, her walls continue fluttering around my cock. I'm still rock hard and I wonder if I'm going to be like this for an entire week. It feels amazing, so it's not like I can complain too much, but we're going to have to leave the cabin tomorrow. And at some point, she might tire of me chasing her around.

*As if she could get away from me.*

"Fuck her ass," I order him, going so far as to push some of my shade influence on him.

It's not a skill I've ever used much, I honestly find it abhorrent, but my lust filled breeding haze doesn't care. My brain has decided that the best way to breed my woman is to make sure she's filled to the brim in every hole, and that my brother is going to help. My inner animal is slowly accepting Seth as part of the nest.

Before he can move far, I cut my palm over a tooth. My hand fills up with blood, and I grab Seth's dick. I pump him hard and fast, spreading my blood over his cock. Now he has no choice but to put his dick in something right now, so even if my little bit of compulsion doesn't work, it's going to be hard to resist her ass, wide open and waiting. Plus, he's going to need lube, and however sneaky and wrong it is, if his cock is coated in my blood, then I'm getting my fluids inside her ass first. It also guarantees that she's going to enjoy it. The two of us are going to rearrange her guts in the filthiest ways possible, and she's going to love every second of it. We'll have her screaming our names and drenching us in her cum in no time.

A flash of memory threatens to pull me out of my good mood. Of my hand wrapped around Hawthorne's cock, drenching him in my blood so he'd be able to do what needed to be done. Despite my cavalier attitude towards him, I respected him for the way he wrestled with the choice. It was easy for me to say that I'd do what needed to be done, easy to feign indifference. Although turning her wasn't my initial intention, I only had a split second of indecision before I made the change. Turning her into a universally feared and hated creature with an insatiable appetite for blood and sex might seem like a

bigger deal than what he had to do, but the intimate and dishonorable connotations of rape are far more unsettling than biting someone to keep them alive. Thankfully, she didn't consider it that way, but I can understand why he found it impossible to come to terms with what he did. If I'm being honest, I have my own troublesome feelings about my role in it. Hawthorne hated himself because part of him found pleasure in what he had to do, and I mocked him for it. The truth is that it was my fault, too. It was what my blood did to him that drove him mad with lust and made it feel so good.

It's a benefit and a curse for being what I am.

"Draven," Seth croaks, looking pained.

"Fuck, I'm sorry," I mutter so low he might not have heard me, releasing the iron grip I have on his dick. My head cocks to the side as he starts to move behind Calista. "You look good coated in my blood," I tell him, aiming my heated gaze at him. Calista moans. She loves the way we flirt and fuck. Maybe later she can watch me fuck him with her blood coating my cock.

"Are you ready, baby?" Seth asks, running his hand down Calista's back.

She stills, her inner walls clenched. I pull her chest against mine and nip my way up her neck to her ear.

"Relax," I whisper. My eyes meet Seth's and I give him a signal.

He slides home right when I bite down on her neck. She screams and her pussy clamps down. Hot fluid pours into my mouth and over my cock.

Fuck, I never want to stop sucking and fucking this woman. She's so fucking perfect, so fucking delicious. So fucking *mine*.

"Shit," Seth grunts out. "Fuck, angel. You're so fucking tight. It's like a fucking vice around the base of my dick."

His body seems to fade, the edges of him becoming fuzzy. He looks troubled by it, but it feels pretty interesting. The pressure of his cock inside her pulses as he flickers in and out of his corporeal form. It obviously feels pretty good

from Calista's point of view, because she's gasping and mewling, writhing against me as the pressure of Seth's body comes and goes.

*Fucking hell.* I knew this would be good, but *fuck*. Holding onto her thighs, I move again, and her cries get louder. Seth gets a handle on his form by letting his wings out. The sight before me is one I want to take a mental picture of and save forever: Calista, with her hair wild and coming out of its braid, eyes heavy-lidded and mouth open in pleasure, riding my cock like it's what she was born to do. And Seth behind her, his fingers gripping her hips, pounding into her ass with his wings fully extended, his head thrown back in ecstasy.

We find a rhythm and fuck Calista within an edge of consciousness, dragging orgasm after orgasm out of her until she's nothing but a limp fucktoy. Seth climaxes, but my blood keeps him hard and coming again and again. We fill her so full of our cum that it's trickling out of her in continuous rivulets. Finally we relent, only because we know she'll need her rest before we go to meet The Elders.

Seth and I work together to get Calista cleaned up, and I carry her towards the room. After opening the door, Seth starts to back away, but I call him back.

"Don't you want to stay in here with us?" I ask him.

His eyebrows jolt to his hairline. "Are you sure you want me in your nest?"

"You helped build it," I say simply, shrugging like inviting him in here is a completely normal, nonchalant thing to do.

## Chapter 15 - Calista

Traveling great distances by light is far worse than the little jumps we've taken to the cave or through the forest. It's like what I imagine astronauts feel when they get in their spinning machine for training. I'm flattened against Seth's body, and by the time we land, I'm holding back significant nausea.

Seth rubs my back while I bend at the waist, bracing myself on my knees. The air is dry and overly warm for my current state. I wish there were a breeze to help take the edge off. The sun is beating down and reflecting off the golden sand, which I'd normally find beautiful, but I'm feeling too sick to enjoy the sights.

I'm in fucking Egypt, standing a hundred yards from an actual pyramid that I've read about in travel books and only dreamed of seeing in real life. But all I can do is breathe in through my nose, and out through my mouth, as Seth tries to talk me through not hurling.

"I'm okay," I insist, my mouth filling with saliva as I force back vomit.

"Let me help," says Draven, cutting open his wrist and offering it to me.

"I don't think that's a good idea, " I say, even as I crave relief from my spinning head.

He already made me feed from him this morning to make sure I had enough energy, and we ended up leaving an hour later than we planned because the sight and feel of me sucking his blood set him off. I ended up with yet more torn clothes and we broke the coffee table. I don't think getting fucked on the side of a sacred pyramid is going to endear me to the bright Elders.

An irritated growl leaves Draven's throat as he rips into his wrist. Wrapping my ponytail around his hand, he forces my head still while he brings his wrist to my mouth.

"Drink, beauty. I won't take no for an answer." He tsks when I only drink enough to take the edge off my nausea, pressing his wrist more firmly against my mouth. He gives a satisfied grunt when I latch on and pull deeply from his veins. My dizziness and nausea recede immediately, and I feel strength trickle through my veins.

His voice echoes in my head as he leans forward and licks a drop of blood from my bottom lip. *Don't worry, I'll keep my dick to myself. For now.* "Don't be long," he says out loud, moving his gaze from me to Seth. His body is a blur as he takes off around the pyramid.

Draven's job is to watch the perimeter for any signs of trouble while snooping around to see if there's anything the brights are hiding. His speed and stealth are perfect for the mission, but it also keeps him away from the Elders, who might not take kindly to his presence. It rubs Seth the wrong way to worry that the brights might be so openly prejudiced, but we all know Draven isn't exactly suited to diplomacy. He said himself it would take less than five seconds for him to offend the brights to the point where "their old asses would return to the grave."

Beside me, Seth takes a steadying breath. He's usually so laid back and confident that his hesitance is troubling.

"Are you okay?" I ask him, reaching for his hand.

He looks down, running this thumb over my knuckles. After a moment of silence, spent staring at our clasped hands with an almost reverent look in his eyes, his lips turn up in a genuine smile.

"Everything is perfect," he says. "Well, once we get our Mage Daddy back, it will be."

Chuckling at his continued use of the hated nickname, I walk with Seth around to the shaded side of the pyramid. He stops and faces me, shaking out his arms and stretching his neck like he's gearing up for a sporting event.

"You never said how we're getting in," I say, realizing that there don't seem to be any obvious entrances back here. My eyes search the limestone surface

of the world wonder in front of me. Maybe there's a hidden door somewhere?

"That's because I'm not exactly sure."

"What?"

"I mean, I have an idea. I'm just not positive it's going to be successful," Seth says, a little too casually considering the circumstances.

He pulls me in to lightly kiss my cheek before we begin rising off the ground. Seth's wings push through the air until we are hovering halfway up the pyramid. Still holding on to me, he moves closer to the stone wall, as if walking up to a door in midair. Then he just dissolves as he walks through the solid stone. I try not to panic as I watch him disappear, pulling me along behind him. His entire body fades through the wall, then his shoulder, then his elbow, until all that's left is his hand holding mine. I'm suspended in midair, as though standing on an invisible walkway, being pulled into a solid wall.

Audibly releasing a breath when my hand starts to pass through the barrier, I relax into the odd sensation. My skin tingles all over, as if my limbs have fallen asleep. I can feel the material of the wall as I pass through, and I know for sure that it's me that changed to fit through the wall and not the other way around. The wall is as solid as ever, and I can almost feel the stone scraping against my skin as I step through the wall and out onto the other side.

Once I've passed through completely, Seth beams down at me with a relieved grin.

"Not going to lie, I wasn't sure if that would work."

"And if it didn't?" I ask incredulously.

He shrugs. "I figured I'd be able to jump out and catch you in time. And Draven was close by, just in case."

I huff out a breath, half disbelieving and half amused. "Well, thank fuck for small favors," I whisper to myself. Seth chuckles.

It's dark. Dark enough that even after my eyes have adjusted, I have to rely on Seth's natural glow to see where we're walking as he pulls me through the passageways. He stops before a flat stone wall and I eye him curiously. He lets go of my hand and waggles his eyebrows before stepping through the wall. I go to follow him, but find resistance. Seth's hand pops out of the solid wall and grabs my wrist. The moment he makes contact, I'm able to pass through the wall again.

"Interesting," he says to himself. "I was curious," he explains in a quiet murmur. Deciding it's best not to voice my thoughts about experimenting in this setting, I stay silent. I'm probably too nervous for my own good. I imagine this would be what it's like on your way to meet a queen or emperor, or perhaps someone even more important.

The chamber we step into is lit with a bright bluish-white light that emanates from an ancient-looking man standing before a doorway. He's wearing robes, and his feet are bare. His grey hair slicked back as if just out of the shower, and his eyes are milky white with what I'm assuming are cataracts. Much like Seth, he's glowing like there's a light inside his skin, perhaps even more brightly.

There are carved statues and unlit sconces on either side of him. The small space gives off the feeling of age and I wonder when the last time a human stepped foot in here was, if ever. I was under the impression that the pyramids were solid at the top.

"Elder Peter, it's good to see you again," Seth says respectfully. He reaches for the ancient man's hand, bowing his head reverently and pressing his forehead to it. The Elder's eyes graze over Seth, and I get the feeling he doesn't much approve of Seth's appearance. Unlike the glowing white robes the older man is wearing, Seth is in his usual jeans and t-shirt. The man's chin lifts, and he seems to look down his nose at Seth. That is, until he notices me standing behind him.

The older man sputters and gapes open-mouthed. "How dare you bring her here?" The man whisper-yells. "The audacity, the disrespect, the—"

Seth holds his hand out to me, probably sensing my desire to speak some

sense into the man who is treating me like I'm unwelcome and my presence is offensive. Like I'm a bomb walking around their delicate gilded bird cage. Like I'm dangerous.

Maybe I am.

"I promise no disrespect was meant," Seth says, attempting to placate the older man, who scowls at Seth's interruption. "It's imperative that the Elders meet this young woman. I believe many are in danger and she could be the solution."

I blink, processing his words. Does he really believe I'm some kind of savior, or is this an act to get me in front of the powers that be?

Seth continues. "Look at her, Peter," he implores. "Look at her soul and tell me you've ever seen someone so pure of heart."

The man huffs impatiently before staring at me for a moment. His demeanor softens, and he blinks at me for a few moments before he turns and pushes open a door behind him. He disappears through the doorway, returning less than a minute later with a blank look on his face.

"Very well," he says. "The Elders will afford you but a moment of their time. See that you do not waste it," he says in an impatient tone that seems forced, stepping out of our way and ushering us into another chamber.

Seth rolls his lips as if he's trying not to smile at the older man's change in countenance.

The moment we step foot into the chamber, a chill breaks out over my skin. It's cold in here, but it's more than that. It's like my cells know that there is something, or someone, of importance here. I can sense answers, or destiny, in the musty air.

The chamber seems to make up the entire top portion of the inside of the pyramid. There are shelves carved out of the stone walls, on which sit an expansive collection of artifacts, statues, other relics, and books. Countless leatherback books adorn the walls of the room from top to bottom, each



protected by a faint glowing barrier. Whatever these tomes contain, they are painstakingly protected, both from decay and meddling eyes. I can sense strong wards, hundreds of times stronger than the ones Hawthorne put around his home, protecting the ancient texts. My mind spins with interest and excitement. I can only imagine the kind of fascinating histories and information that could be found in books so old and well-protected. Up in the stacks, I can see a faint glow from one of the books. It calls to me, demanding my attention, and curiosity pulses within me, but I redirect my attention to the people in the room.

Four more men sit around a carved table, set high on a dais to look down at us and pass judgment, as if they are an unfriendly embodiment of Saint Peter, guarding the gates of heaven from those they might deem unworthy. Which is funny, seeing as the guy guarding the room is actually named Peter. Seth and Hawthorne have explained to me that much of human religion and myth have been derived from small bits of truth, but it's amusing how on the nose some of it really is.

I'm here to be judged, and I'm not sure how well I'll come out in their judgment. By the looks on their faces, we aren't off to a good start. There's a tiny spark of rebellion in the pit of my stomach, and it soothes the realization that they'll never find me worthy.

*Fuck 'em, Draven answers in my mind. Because of course he's listening in. The guy on the far left looks like he smelled a bad fart.*

Unable to control the snort that escapes me, I cough to cover up my blunder. Draven's laughter echoes in my mind so loudly, I almost expect Seth or the people around me to look up. Instead, Seth seems to be trying to avoid eye contact, as if he knows that I'll start laughing harder if he so much as looks at me. As my nervous laughter threatens to dissolve into hysterics, I also can't bear to look up at the four men staring down their noses at me, not yet able to keep my composure.

"Thank you for seeing us," Seth begins. "I present to you my bonded soulmate, Calista Batts." He gives a little bow and gestures to the wizened men before us. "Calista, these are the bright Elders, the oldest and wisest of our kind. They are sometimes known as the guardians of the light. You met

Peter in the hall. He guards the door to this sacred chamber." I nearly snort again, realizing just how squarely I'd hit the nail on the head, but I manage to keep it together. "Then we have James," he gestures to the man with the scrunched face to the far left, whom I avoid looking at for obvious reasons. "Next to him is Philip, Matthew, and finally Samuel."

Their names are familiar, all biblical characters. I rack my brain, trying to remember the stories. Most of them share their names with apostles, I believe. Except Samuel, him I'm not sure about. A prophet, maybe? Not that it really matters how humans interpreted the unseen world of brights.

Like Peter, all four are wearing light grey linen robes. I'm somewhat surprised to see their wings. Seth's are only visible when he's about to take flight, unless he wills them to be. Unlike Seth's blazing white wings, theirs seem dull and almost dingy. His are also always moving in some way, while theirs are still and unmoving like they're made of stone.

I give the Elders a reverent bow of my head. "Thank you for seeing me," I say, as if I'd asked and been invited. Maybe if I kiss their asses and pretend like they had a choice in the matter, they'll warm to me a bit. "It's an honor to meet you all."

A few awkward moments pass before Seth grows impatient with their silence. He clearly thought they'd be better than the silent treatment. "We need to reach The Council of Witches, but they seem to have gone into hiding. There are atrocities happening in the Appalachian region of the Americas, and I suspect they're likely happening elsewhere. The Sanctum So —"

"We are aware of what is going on with the mortals, Mr. Barrett," one of the men says in a booming voice, interrupting Seth's plea for help. My head snaps up at the tone of his voice, just in time to see Matthew's hand wave dismissively.

"What we want to know," Philip chimes in, "is why you presumed to bring your mortal mate to this sacred place?" He spits out the words as if they're dirty.

"Clearly, she's not entirely mortal if she was able to enter," James says. I no longer find his scrunched up nose humorous after listening to these men talk as if I weren't in the room.

"What are you, exactly, Calista Batts?" Matthew finally directs his attention at me, looking down with interest and thinly veiled disapproval.

"I'm trying to figure that out myself," I answer honestly, swallowing my pride and using the most polite tone I can muster. If it takes me kissing their asses to get them to help us, I'll do what needs to be done. "I know very little of my lineage or the world I've been thrust into."

"You come from a powerful line of witches, Ms. Batts. That much we know. And you certainly hold more power than we've seen in a very long while," James surmises, his nose twitching. He seems to at least find me somewhat interesting, like a puzzle he's trying to solve. Hopefully, if I can keep his interest, I can open up a line of reason.

"Yes, but this binding has created something...*other*." The Elder sitting at the center left, Philip, says, his voice laced with detest.

"Our kind do not breed with others," Matthew, whom I'm assuming is the leader, says to Seth.

"Our kind don't breed at all, that I know of," Seth answers coolly. I can feel the way Draven perks up at the mention of breeding, and I silently beg him to stay hidden.

*No wonder they're so miserable and stuck up. They need to get laid*, he says in my head. My lips quirk, but I roll them to prevent a smile from showing on my face.

"It's an abomination," Matthew retorts, scowling at me as if he can tell the direction of my thoughts.

"The very meaning of the word belies the possibility. I can find no rules against it, nor can anyone tell me that a love this pure could be wrong," Seth says softly to me, running his thumb over my knuckles.

"It shouldn't be possible anyhow," surmises James, his eyes boring into me. "There must be something different about you for you to have even survived such a mating."

"While I do honestly want to know more about my lineage and what I am, and would welcome your input on researching it," I add, because I know from listening to Seth that researching and recording history is a huge part of the bright's interest, "there are more urgent matters that we've come here to seek your help with."

"We no longer commune with the witches," Matthew says in a bored and dismissive tone.

"I don't care about the witches," I snap, my tone bordering on rude. "I may be one of them by blood, but I don't know their world. I probably wouldn't even be able to tell a witch apart from a normal human." I take a deep, calming breath. "What I care about are the dozens, potentially hundreds, of people who are being kidnapped and tortured by a band of highly dangerous zealots. They need our help."

"The Council has the most connections in the mortal world, and since it is their kind that is being sought out for these atrocities, it makes sense that we bring the issue to them," Seth adds. "But we can't seem to locate them, and our only connection to them has fallen to the mercy of The Sanctum Society."

"Do you really think they could have missed what is happening in their very own territory?" Philip asks.

"If they know what's happening and are doing nothing, then that's another problem," Seth answers. "But they're our first plan. We have to start somewhere, and it's their people who are being hunted."

"History repeats itself," the man on the far right, who has so far been silent, rasps. "I think his name was Samuel?"

"Only this time they have technology and centuries of planning at their disposal," Seth says, nodding towards the quiet Elder before turning his attention to the group. "The Sanctum Society poses a never-ending challenge

when it comes to prejudice and mass murder. They have for centuries, but I'm afraid that they are becoming a much more formidable problem."

The room is so silent that for a few moments I think I can hear the cogs in their brains turning.

"This is not a battle we wish to be part of."

"While I disagree, I also understand. We aren't asking for you to step in. All we're asking for is that you help get us in contact with the brights," Seth says respectfully.

"You disagree with your Elders?" Matthew asks, as if the very idea is unheard of.

"People are suffering!" I blurt, immediately regretting my outburst when they all turn their attention to me. Their gazes burn into me, and Samuel's eyes glow brighter as he stares at me.

Seth lowers his voice reverently, reaching for my hand and giving it a reassuring squeeze. "Elder Samuel, when I came to you looking for information, you prophesied troubling times ahead. You were the one that said the witches were the gatekeepers to our safe existence on this plane. We must do what we can to right the balance in the world, to save them so we can save ourselves and every other magical being on this earth. I believe Calista could be the key to saving our world, and could even be the catalyst to bring back the dwindling magic we all rely on."

I gasp and stare incredulously at Seth. I'd never expect him to lie or even stretch the truth too far. His respect for the Elders of his kind runs too deep. But does he really believe what he's saying?

Even as his faith in me bolsters my confidence, the weight of his expectations sits heavily on my shoulders. Helping stop The Sanctum Society, saving innocent people from being kidnapped and tortured, is one thing—but how am I supposed to bring back the magic that has been steadily weakening for years, or even generations, before I was even born?

Not wanting the bright Elders to see me shrinking from the responsibility Seth has just laid at my feet, I straighten my shoulders and lift my chin.

"Will you help us?" I ask, proud that my voice comes out strong and steady.

Samuel's eyes continue to glow, his gaze never leaving me even as the others confer amongst themselves.

"We shall put it to a vote," James insists, and I see Matthew balk at the very idea of it. "Call Peter in."

Seth bends low and whispers to me. "A disagreement between the Elders is unprecedented. Which means things here are worse than I thought."

"What do you mean?" I whisper back.

"What is right and wrong has always been very black and white, and therefore has never required much discussion. They usually just know what the right answer is. Their assistance or judgment has always been passed down, as if from one entity. Our problem seems pretty black and white to me, yet they are discussing it as if there were a grey area that we aren't aware of. Or, somehow, even the brights have become as corrupt as the rest of the magical races." His face betrays how much it hurts him to think this. "I always believed us to be infallible," he admits. "But obviously my pride has clouded my vision."

Seth turns toward the Elder. "And what are we voting for, exactly? Is it whether you will help us contact The Council of Witches, or if you'll support our efforts to stop The Fall?"

"They are one and the same, my son," answers Peter as he steps up next to the rest of his colleagues.

"And will your bias of our bond sway your judgment?" Seth asks, and I squeeze his hand. Not just because I'm worried his open hostility will affect their decision, but also because I know how hard it is for him to openly defy them.

Matthew speaks up, talking more to his fellow Elders than to us, perhaps hoping to use their uncertainty of me to sway their votes. "Your relationship with the mortal is an abomination, as is the power she wields over life and death. She upsets the balance. To agree to help her is to sanction her actions."

"And who says that it's an abomination?" Seth challenges.

"It's unnatural," the Elder says, standing to loom above us menacingly.

Seth turns his attention away from Matthew. "Elder Peter, before you allowed Calista into this sacred chamber, did you not look within her to assess her intentions and purity of heart?"

"I did, and I judged her to be as good and loving as any in this chamber," he says, his eyes twinkling at me as he sends a wave of warm comfort that envelops my body. With that simple action, I know that we have his full support. "I can see the bond between you is pure."

"In that case, how could the actions she took in the heat of battle—actions that saved the lives of many innocent and suffering people—be unnatural? How could a love this pure be considered an abomination? I understand her powers upset the balance that we've become accustomed to, but what we've become accustomed to is merely absorbing the pain of a dying world. If you ask me, an upset is exactly what we need to break us out of the complacency we've fallen into."

"She cannot decide who lives and dies!" Matthew's voice booms through the chamber, and the ancient stone the room is carved from loosens and falls. They all stare at the dust like it's something they've never seen before, and I wonder if it's because the room is so pristine, or if they've never been so rattled to have caused this kind of disorder.

There's silence for a few moments while we all absorb the quiet chaos.

"I implore you to look at the woman standing next to me, really look at her. The woman who Fate saw fit to bond to three worlds. You call it an abomination, but I think it's a sign of things to come. Her power is unfathomable, but I know her heart intimately. I believe she could bring us all

together, so we can fix the world instead of standing by and idly watching it die."

Seth takes a breath and continues in a softer voice. "I've always believed that we brights were simply above the indiscretions of the mortals. I believed we were the antithesis of the shades, who we perceive as being vicious and wicked. But the light cannot survive without the dark, and this world is nothing without its mortal caretakers. These three parts of this world are meant to work in tandem, to balance each other in order to thrive. The Fall of magic isn't because of the mistakes of one kind, it's because we all made mistakes and pointed fingers instead of coming together to fix things. If a bright, a shade, and a mage can all be bound and fall in love with the same woman, I think it's a sign that we can all come together to love the Earth and heal it. We can bring the magic back."

"I vote we help them," Peter says with a grandfatherly smile at Seth. "I vote that we take our rightful places as defenders of the light, to do our part to save the magic before we face extinction."

"Thank you," I mouth, my eyes already filled with tears from Seth's emotional plea. All I came here for was a way to contact the witches. Now we have the chance to bring the brights, the witches, and perhaps even the shades, together with a common goal. It starts with saving the mortals, but I realize it's so much more than that.

"I cannot support the atrocities she is capable of," Matthew declares, refusing to look at me.

"I'm rather curious what she's capable of," James says, turning his scrunched nose towards his colleague. He pauses and looks down at us thoughtfully. "If we're to choose between inaction and a chance to truly make a difference in this world, I vote we take the chance."

Matthew scoffs and looks to Philip and Samuel.

"It is true then, that you are mated to not only one of our own kind, but to a bloodthirsty shade, as well as another witch?" Philip asks, and I don't get a good feeling from it, especially the way he describes my bond with Draven.



Seth had mentioned that they have a prejudiced view of the shades, believing themselves to be the light that balances the shade's evil natures.

I nod to confirm the truth of my bonds, choosing not to complicate the conversation with the full truth of the status of my bond with Hawthorne or point out his bigoted assumptions about my shade mate.

"Young Seth seeks to use you as an example of balance, and yet it seems there are two witches in this scenario, giving them the upper hand."

"It's not a competition, Elder Philip, and I don't seek to give you the impression that I understand the intricacies of the bonds we made. But I can tell you that Calista, through her bonds, has changed from the mortal she was. I would consider her more of a neutral hybrid of the three of us, especially considering she had no knowledge of the magical world before events that led to the binding."

"That explains how she could enter this chamber," James points out.

Philip seems annoyed that his evidence against us is being threatened, but presses on. "So you're saying that she has taken on qualities from all three of her bonds? Doesn't that suggest that she could succumb to the rage and bloodlust of a blood mage? If I hadn't already made my decision, that would cinch it for me, and it should change some votes here if we know what's best. Her power, paired with the weaknesses of the darkness? I think not."

I blanch at his insinuations. "You speak of the shades as if they are evil," I say, unable to hold my tongue any longer. "I'll not stand here and listen to you discriminate against an entire race, no matter how sanctioned it has been by your kind. You are wrong about the shades."

"Shades are known for murder and bloodshed," Philip says bluntly.

"And you are known for standing idly by while atrocities are committed in your name." The Elders look appalled, but I'm past caring about their feelings. "You are very well aware that the humans who worship you carry out heinous acts in the name of religion, and yet you do nothing about it. If you ask me, genocide isn't any better than the crimes committed by

generations of blood mages. All creatures, mortal and magic, have made mistakes and carry their own darkness. You are no better."

"She's right," Peter says gravely. "We cannot judge others fairly without giving ourselves the same considerations. We are not infallible," he says, looking down at Seth with sad, apologetic eyes.

Samuel stands up, and everyone in the room turns to him. Not only is he the last vote, making him the tiebreaker, but the crackle of power around him commands attention. His glowing eyes are still boring into me.

"Elder Samuel is a powerful Seer," Seth whispers to me in explanation.

We collectively hold our breaths as the white-eyed bright speaks.

"The branches of the future are like capillaries. There is blood flowing in all directions, branches of it woven throughout all eventualities. While bloodshed cannot be avoided, our involvement in the upcoming battle is imminent." His eyes dim, and his gaze locks on mine. "Our assistance to your current predicament is vital; however, it is too soon to say what level of involvement is appropriate. Therefore, I vote we give you the resources you request, and vow not to impede on your path. It remains to be seen what our part in the inevitable war to come will be." The Elder tears his eyes away from me and steadies a knowing look on Seth. "You have made your choice, and your sacrifice will both cost you and be rewarded. You will keep your wings young bright, but your immortality is now knotted in an intricate web of the family you have chosen. Tread carefully."

My brow furrows, not quite understanding what the Elder is talking about. Instead of answering my questioning gaze, Seth bows his head reverently.

"Thank you."

## Chapter 16 - Seth

"Thank you," I say, bowing my head reverently and pulling Calista out of the chamber.

"Why are we leaving? We need—"

"I have everything we need for now." Without a word, or any further argument from the Elders, the knowledge I needed to locate The Council was there as soon as the final vote was cast. Almost as if I'd always known, like a word at the tip of your tongue that you can't quite spit out until it just comes to you again.

Calista looks bewildered, and I can understand why. All of this must be so confusing to her.

It's my fault, really. I knew that if we came here, it would become more than just a small request for information. Draven was right that it would take them meeting her to spur them into action, but I had a feeling that it could backfire. I'm thankful that Peter and Samuel's special abilities have worked in our favor. I knew that Peter would be able to see the light in her, even if he'd denied me before, based on his preconceived notions about my bond. I had no doubt that once he could sense the goodness in her, he'd be on our side, even though he was deeply afraid of the abilities she'd demonstrated the night we broke the prisoners out of the caves, and felt very strongly that what she'd done was unnatural.

Samuel, on the other hand, could have gone either way. His premonitions could have worked for or against us, and technically, he didn't give us his full support the way Peter did. He agreed that we should have access to resources, which is really all we needed for now.

I'd also hoped against hope that James' curiosity would work in our favor, and it did. He's a scientist at heart, always experimenting with different causes

and effects. On more than one occasion, the fates of millions have been decided based on his attention to the right person. It always seemed callous for him to play with people's lives and peace of mind that way, but I also knew he always had the greater good at heart. If he could save millions by changing the emotions, and therefore the actions, of one man, it was worth the extra meddling. Matthew often disagreed with his methods, but considering he'd ended wars and worse, no one could rightfully stop him.

I knew Matthew would be harder to persuade. He honestly isn't a bad person. He's too stuck in traditions that no longer serve a changing world. I can't make any excuses for Philip. I know he probably means well, but his ideals have been tarnished by his gross bigotry. The idea that brights are good and shades are evil is antiquated, and more than misguided—it's immoral and flat-out false.

The brights and the shades are two sides of a coin, meant to balance each other. If you ask me, a blood mage that has fallen to his cravings isn't any worse than a light mage that has fallen to his pride. Forsaking someone because of who they are or how they are born is the true evil that will bring us down. Deeds are easier to unlearn than systematic hate, and none of them get a pass for being ignorant or too much of a coward to stand up for what is right.

"I wonder if Peter can see the fear in Matthew's heart," Calista says once we've made it outside, echoing my thoughts. "I think he wants to do the right thing, but is terrified of breaking away from what he considers right and... safe. He's wrong though, and there's no excuse for their backwards way of thinking."

"I'm starting to question if we do ourselves a disservice by having the oldest amongst us making the biggest decisions. Maybe we should mix it up a bit, meld new ideas with the experience of the Elders," I say with a sigh. I'm not sure it's my place to step in and demand change, but surely I can't be the only one that sees the downward spiral our kind is on. "With no new brights born in centuries, and so many having aged to the point where they have ascended into the light, we're at risk of becoming extinct," I tell her. "Obviously change must happen, but it'll be tough for a people so stuck in their traditions."

"What do you mean by ascended into the light?" She asks as I link our hands and start walking around the back of the pyramid, hoping Draven will join us soon.

"Well, when a bright has lived for many, many years—I'm talking millennia, although I've seen it happen to younger brights that have absorbed more than their fair share of suffering—they eventually dissolve into the light. It's thought that willingly surrendering the last vestiges of mortality to become part of the light helps keep the balance in the world.

"Where do they go?"

I shrug. "Nowhere that we know of. For all we know and can expect, you just cease to be."

"That doesn't scare you?"

"Honestly? It didn't used to. It was just a fact of life, something that will happen in the very distant future. And something that I always expected to be completely at peace with." Pulling her into my body, I kiss her softly. "I admit that now I have a little more trepidation about it, if I choose to think on it too hard." Her head cocks to the side, eyes bright and curious. "Brights live solitary lives, Calista. I didn't even know what loneliness was until I met you and realized all I'd been missing. Now that there's the potential I'd have to leave you behind, the idea of ascending doesn't seem as peaceful."

Her arms band around me tightly. "I love you, Seth," she says, burrowing her face into my chest.

"I love you too. And Draven. And our Mage Daddy. I'm looking forward to having the whole family back together."

A gagging sound comes from around the corner before Draven steps into our line of sight. "Gross," he says. "But also, good luck getting Hawthorne to join your little love fest."

Calista flinches beside me. Draven looks at her, almost apologetically. "Not because of you, beauty. Because of me."

I shake my head. "Nah, I think Hawthorne was coming around."

"Seth is right," Calista says to Draven. "You two worked well together, and I think Hawthorne was beginning to see that he was wrong about you."

"Except he *wasn't* wrong about me."

"Well, he saw how hard you were trying to change it," I point out soothingly. "That, and he hasn't had his dick sucked by you yet."

"Or her," Draven says, pointing at Calista.

I huff out a snicker and agree wholeheartedly. "Damn straight. Do you think he'll be gentle, or will he go full throttle with that monster?"

"Depends on how much we work him up first, I think. He's got a lot of pent up—"

"Seriously?" Calista interrupts. "Hawthorne is in a fucking cell, in grave danger of being killed or much, much worse. And you two are discussing what it would be like to give him a blow job?"

"That makes it sound like it would be something we're doing to him, and not the other way around," I say pointedly. "Because you know he'd be the one to grab you by the hair and—"

"You're incorrigible!"

"Wanna find out how incorrigible I can be?" Draven says, sliding behind her and nuzzling the side of her neck.

"I've been locked in a bloody fuck nest with you for the past forty-eight hours. I'm well aware of how incorrigible you can be. I'm impressed you've been able to manage long enough to let me walk outside."

Draven makes a sound, something between a purr and a growl, and I break them up before we cause a scene.

"There's only one way we'll be able to settle this," I say, holding my hands up

between them. "Let's go talk to The Council and get him back. Then we can have a little challenge to see who can get face fucked by Hawthorne's magic tree trunk first."

Calista snorts. Draven lifts an eyebrow.

"You think you have the advantage," he says.

"Don't I?" Despite her bravado, I know she's feeling particularly uncertain when it comes to Hawthorne.

If I couldn't see just how hard he'd fallen for her, and how much he was hurting when the bond was fractured, I might worry, too. But I have little doubt he'll still want Calista, bond or no. He might take a little cajoling, of course. We are still talking about Hawthorne.

Draven flashes some fang. "I'm not afraid to use my resources."

Calista lifts her shirt, flashing both me and Seth. "Neither am I."



"What if Philip was right?" Calista asks as we start up a wide polished wood staircase.

We're standing in front of what looks like some kind of resort spa, deep in the forest in Vermont, at the northern end of the Appalachian Mountains. The building is old, but polished and well maintained. The walls are grey stone, with polished river rock around the outside façade. It blends in perfectly with the surroundings, and even the stone steps that lead up the mountain look like they'd been forged there by time and not tools.

"If they know about the kidnapping and ritual slaughtering of innocent people

and are doing nothing about it? We'll unleash the dog."

Draven growls and gives a little bark behind me, which makes Calista laugh, albeit nervously.

"I can feel the magic in the air here," she says. "It's as thick as the fog we walked through to get here. Layers upon layers of spells and enchantments, layers of time and talent and effort. I've never felt anything like it."

It occurs to me that she's never actually met any of her kind before, aside from Hawthorne. Her nerves are apparent in the way she slows her steps the closer we get, intermittently clinging to us and biting her bottom lip. It's probably why she insisted on us walking up here, rather than being carried by either of us and getting here much faster. I pull her to my side and kiss her hair, sending some calming vibes her way. They absorb into her skin and her chest expands with a deep, cleansing breath of the fresh mountain air.

Not that I'll say it out loud, but I'm a bit nervous myself. Binding myself to Calista made it possible for me to hold a solid form; before that I'd never communed with anyone outside of my kind. I was invisible to everyone, a mass of energy absorbing what I could to lighten the load of the people walking the earth. I was a people watcher, not a participant.

I'm not sure what to expect from The Council. I know Hawthorne didn't trust them, which has us all on edge. I have worries about them recognizing Calista's strength and conspiring against her, or that their kind could take to Philip's way of thinking. The bright Elders knew about our binding beforehand, though, and these people do not. Their powers aren't like brights or even shades. They are mortals with magic abilities, none of which are likely to match Calista's power. Together, we'll be unmatched. *At least I hope we are.*

We pause in front of a set of large, dark wood double doors. There is no knocker or sign, nothing to show that someone is here, other than the power signatures that might go unnoticed by a human.

Calista lets out a breath and lifts her hand to knock, while Draven and I take our places behind her. Before her knuckles so much as touch the wood, the



door swings open into an empty foyer. With a tentative glimpse at us over her shoulder, she steps through the doorway.

Both Draven and I smack into an invisible force-field when we attempt to follow her, and it throws us back off the porch and to the bottom of the stairs. We both return to the porch within a fraction of a second, standing on the other side of the doorway. My heart beats furiously, panicked that we could be separated. Of course they have wards to protect against others. It's not surprising, but I don't like the idea of being blocked from her. I know my light is stronger than these wards, and that the only reason they were effective at all was because I wasn't expecting them. They're stronger because of the layers of spells that have been infused over hundreds of years, otherwise I'd have walked right through them without a thought. Despite wanting to rip through the barrier and get back to her side, I pause to see what she does.

Calista runs her hand through the air, twisting the invisible barrier through her fingers. "Wards," she says quietly. "Hmm."

The moment she steps back through the doorway where we can reach her, I relax. Both of us reach out to wrap our hands around her arms, and I consider pulling her back.

"Hold on to me," she says, and turns to face the doorway again.

*As if I'd ever let go.*

With each of us gripping a shoulder, she steps through the wards again. This time, we are able to step through, and I'm actually impressed by how difficult it is. The wards pull at my skin, and I feel a force trying to repel me. It's like walking through a pool full of honey, there's a thick viscous resistance to my progress. Once we make it through to the other side, I have the urge to wipe my face and body, even though I know there's nothing truly there. Draven makes a face and I give him a look of agreement.

"Just like the pyramid," Calista marvels under her breath. I chuckle that she just used my own experiment against me.

Keeping our hands on her for safe measure, we follow Calista as she steps

through an arched entryway and into a grand room with a huge staircase in the center. Everything inside is crafted from stone and intricately carved wood that gleams as though it gets polished daily. It's all very extravagant, while still maintaining a rustic appearance. This place could easily pass for an expensive resort.

"How did you get in here?" A voice demands from the top of the stairs.

A tall woman with long, straight, silver-grey hair and thick-rimmed glasses looks down at us as she starts her descent. Her flowy skirt billows out behind her, and her hair blows off her shoulders. As she moves closer, I can see she's rimmed her blue eyes with heavy eyeliner. Though her hair color and glasses initially suggested age, her tan skin is smooth and unwrinkled aside from some slight lines on the corners of her mouth and the outside of her eyes. This woman smiles a lot, and that puts me at ease.

Calista and Draven relax as I do, and I introduce us.

"Hi, I'm sorry to intrude. My name is Seth, this is Calista and Draven, and we're here to seek The Council's assistance."

The woman doesn't answer, only turns her bright blue eyes on Calista with curiosity. She walks a few steps closer, but pauses when she notices the protective man with the dark expression take a step closer to Calista's side. She stares at Calista for a few moments before repeating her earlier question, more softly this time.

"How did you get in here? And forgive me for being so blunt, but *what* are you exactly?" Her voice is no longer demanding, her tone suggesting curiosity, perhaps even wonder at the woman in front of her.

"I just...walked in, I suppose. Forgive me. I'm Calista Batts, and I'm a witch, although I didn't know it until I was kidnapped a few weeks ago."

"You got away?" The woman's eyes widen behind her glasses and she reaches for Calista's elbow, pausing as if asking for permission. With a quick look at each other, Draven and I both release Calista's shoulders, knowing it'll be best for her to handle this. "Please, come in and sit down. I need to hear

everything."

She leads us into a luxurious living room with brown leather couches and overstuffed chairs set around a fireplace. The woman makes a slight flicking motion with her hand and the fire roars to life, casting an inviting light and warmth over the room. There are colorful framed paintings, mostly of forest and mountain landscapes, hanging on the walls. Candles are set on the mantle and coffee table, which the woman lights as well before offering us all tea. I'm impressed that she extends her hospitality to both Draven and me, especially since I feel certain she must have her suspicions about what Draven is.

Once we're all settled, insisting that we don't need anything to eat or drink, the woman settles herself in a chair across from Calista, who sits in the center of one of the plush sofas. I sit next to Calista, holding her hand in my lap and running my fingers over her knuckles in soothing circles. Draven stands like a menacing sentry behind us. He's not being overtly threatening, but he's also letting the woman, and anyone else who might enter and join us, know that he's alert and ready.

"I should start. My name is Heather Mecoa, and I'm one of five members of The Council of Witches. I'm sure you must have many questions for me, and if you are comfortable with it, I'd like to call the rest of The Council here to join us. But I really must ask how you found this place."

Calista's eyes flick up to mine, and I give her a reassuring nod. "We've been trying to reach you for some time, but we finally tracked you down with help from the bright Elders."

Heather's eyes widen, and her gaze moves from Calista to Draven, and then finally land on me. "I couldn't identify you at first, you couldn't be..." Her voice trails off, not quite able to put words to her disbelief. If I'm what she thinks I am, I should be invisible, or glowing, or have massive wings after all.

Deciding to make it a little easier on her, I allow my wings to be seen, opening them and, perhaps, not entirely accidentally smacking Draven in the face with some of my feathers. He makes a sound like he might sneeze, and I have to hold back a chuckle. Calista told me that when I fade into my

incorporeal form, my wings, and my body feel somewhat tingly. Imagining that's the feeling I just shoved at Draven's nose is hilarious, even if his glare promises retaliation. I wink back at him before letting a wide smile encompass my face. My known presence will either make this woman more comfortable, or it'll freak her out.

After a few moments of slowly blinking, Heather takes off her glasses and shakes her head like she's trying to loosen something in her brain.

"My apologies. I just never thought I'd see a bright in person. I wasn't even entirely sure they truly existed."

"In the flesh. I'm Seth Barrett," I say, offering her my hand. She reaches out tentatively before moving in to grasp my hand, only for it to pass right through my skin. I can't help but laugh heartily at her surprise.

She chuckles uncomfortably, opening and closing her hand at the odd sensation. but relaxes a bit. Then she turns her gaze to Draven. "You're a vampire."

"Shade," he corrects. "Or blood mage. But yes, that's the gist of it."

She's quiet, moving her eyes over Draven's features, settling on his mouth.

"Did you need a demonstration from me, too?"

Heather flushes. "Oh, gods, no. Sorry. I was just thinking how young you look."

Calista chuckles. "I'm a full on cougar."

"Oh! So you are..." Heather's eyes flit back and forth from Calista to Draven, and then down to where I'm holding her hand. "None of my business," she says under her breath, looking so awkward I feel bad about getting a sick enjoyment out of her discomfort. "I'm sorry, again."

"It's a long story," Calista says kindly. "That starts with me being kidnapped by The Sanctum Society."

Heather straightens up, back to business. She listens intently as Calista tells her all the pertinent details of her personal run in with The Sanctum Society, the caves we rescued dozens of people from, and finally, Hawthorne.

"Rowan Hawthorne?" The woman asks incredulously.

"You know him?" Calista asks.

"I know *of* him. You're saying The Sanctum Society has him now?" She curses under her breath. "We have been aware of the disappearances, especially as they've increased dramatically. The Council has been relatively inactive over the past decade, but it caught our attention when most of the missing women were gifted, and then there were mass disappearances from the mental hospitals. We started convening as soon as it became apparent that something was happening, although we couldn't figure out what was happening or why. Then there was an influx of people at a hospital outside of Roanoke saying they'd been kidnapped and tortured, and that angels had saved them. We covered it up, but we've been struggling to put together the pieces of what happened. Three members of The Council are in Virginia right now, looking for anything. We used locator spells to pinpoint where everything happened, but there's nothing there.

"They're using a void to cloak the operation," Draven chimes in.

"A void?" Heather looks relieved and holds her hand over her heart, letting out an audible breath.

Finally, she notices us looking at her curiously. Heather sighs and rubs her temples. "Around five years ago, we sent spies to infiltrate The Sanctum Society. At that point, the organization was on our radar, but hadn't posed any real threat in generations. There was a doctor who had written some concerning papers about witchcraft in the twenty-first century, but most considered him to be a quack and ignored him. When he started to amass a following, and was practicing some questionable treatments for ailments that he attributed to witchcraft, or the devil, stuff like that."

"Let me guess," I interrupt with a flat voice.

"George Bodin?" Calista finishes for me.

"Yes. How did you know?"

"Because he was the leader of the group that kidnapped me."

"Oh gods. You were the one—We'd heard they actually found someone with real magic, but that she got away somehow. Left behind a lot of bodies. I'm so sorry you went through that."

"It's okay. He's dead now," Calista says bluntly. Her delivery almost comes across as a warning of what she's capable of.

"Good," Heather answers sternly. "I hope he suffered for the things he did to you, and to others in his care."

"He did."

Heather gives a curt nod of approval and continues. "So you're telling me it was The Sanctum Society that kidnapped and tortured all of those people, but for what? Even if any of them had a modicum of magic in their veins, it's unlikely they could use it. The Sanctum Society is anti-magic, but none of the people that escaped that facility had any measurable power."

Heather shakes her head. "It's bad enough that they put the pieces together and figured out that there's a correlation between being gifted and having magic in your ancestry, but what are they after?"

"They are trying to siphon magic by unlocking hidden powers inside people who show any signs of having it so they can take their magic for themselves," Calista tells her.

Heather looks horrified. "Why the hell would they think that would work?"

"Because it worked on me, technically. I was spellbound as a child, but there were signs of the magic trying to come out. Bodin was my family doctor until a few weeks ago, when he kidnapped me and tried to use me in a botched sacrificial ritual of some sort. The magic that was locked inside me came out, so it was successful in that way, but I don't know whether his technique to

siphon it would have worked. All I know is it nearly killed me. I'm only alive today because Seth, Draven, and Hawthorne bound me to them."

The councilwoman gasps. "I didn't know that was possible."

"It shouldn't be, honestly," I tell her. "Calista is...special." It's the understatement of the year, but I don't want to show all our cards just yet. Heather seems trustworthy enough, but we haven't met the other Council members yet.

"Bodin is dead now, but before he died, he had possession of a very old and powerful grimoire. And once he had proof magic was real and could be unlocked, that's when The Sanctum Society started kidnapping gifted women. They're hoping to find someone with power so they can try to siphon it."

Heather's hand covers her mouth. "And they have Rowan Hawthorne."

## Chapter 17 - Calista

Hot tears sting my eyes, but I work to hold them back.

"He's alive, as far as I'm aware. I was able to scry him and overheard a conversation. You said that you had a spy in The Sanctum Society?"

"We did, but we lost contact. We thought they may have been found out."

"A woman, blonde, about my age? Void powers?"

Heather nods, looking hopeful.

"She's been trying to get in touch, or so she told Hawthorne."

Heather's pretty face contorts into a frown. "We moved base a few years ago, but she still should have been able to get in contact."

Who knows if the woman from my vision was telling the truth. But at least there's hope, or at least that's what I keep telling myself. It's good to know that The Council isn't ignoring the problem, at least from what Heather is telling us. It makes sense why the mass influx of survivors never made the news.

"You said you had people in Virginia looking for the caves. Do you have any way of knowing if they're safe?" I ask, just as I hear the front door unlock.

"I do, and they should be back any time now. They went to search for the caves, but while they were searching, some of the missing people turned up at an abandoned asylum called The Sanctuary. Miraculously, most everyone made it out safe." She eyes us curiously. "It seems another angel helped them escape before the place was torched."

I can't help but grin up at Draven, who is still standing behind me. He looks



down at me and shrugs, as if he has no idea what anyone is talking about. The suggestion that anyone thought of him as an angel seems to render him uncomfortable.

"Actually, the only person captured that we believe had any magic at all was among the survivors of the arson attempt meant to kill them."

Draven arches a brow at the mention of the people he saved from The Sanctuary before it burned down, but says nothing more about it.

The front door opens and then slams shut, catching me off guard, and I jump in my seat.

"Heather!" a man's voice yells out, and she stands, worried. She runs out to the foyer, where we can hear a lot of shuffling and footsteps.

The voices of whoever is here sound worried, though they aren't loud enough for me to make out their words. I look at Draven, whose eyes focus on the wall as he listens in to their conversation.

He shakes his head. "They found someone, or someone is back? Everyone's kind of talking over each other, but they're going to go pick whoever it is up and they need the whole Council to make a portal."

After making eye contact with both of us, he says quietly, "I don't think we should let on the extent of your powers until we know it's safe."

We nod our agreement as Heather walks back in, followed by three more people. They're all wearing black, much like the clothes we wore on our infiltration mission, and they look stressed and tired.

"Calista, this is Rayne, Brenna, and Marcus. They're all part of The Council. The spy I told you about? She was able to make contact and needs to be extracted. We need to go meet with her now. Would you mind waiting here? You can feel free to make yourselves comfortable."

One of them, a stocky man with an olive complexion and black hair pulled back in a bun, eyes us like Draven might jump out and bite him before we

steal everything they own. "I don't like it," he says darkly. "We don't know these people."

"You're going to have to trust my judgment, Marcus. We need to go. We don't exactly have time for accommodations."

"They can wait outside, then."

"It's fucking freezing out, Marcus."

"I don't give a damn. Do you even know what you invited into our headquarters? That's a—"

"We could just go with you," I interrupt, not willing to let them delay with a fight about Marcus's clear prejudices. I can only imagine how much the exhaustion of other people's enmity must grate on Draven. I've only experienced it for a day, and I want to cause pain on his behalf.

*Diplomacy is hard when you want to gouge everyone's eyeballs out.*

"It's not safe," the woman with a long, ginger braid and green eyes says, not unkindly. She's also eyeing us warily, but doesn't seem upset by our presence the way Marcus does.

"We can handle ourselves, and I promise we won't get in your way," Seth says, standing.

The three newcomers all gasp as Seth casually stretches out his wings.

"Show off," Draven mutters under his breath. Seth grins widely.

"They're fine. I can vouch for them either way," Heather says. "But we need to go, now."

"I suppose I'd rather them stay here than put us at further risk in the field," Marcus seethes. His grouchy, untrusting demeanor reminds me a bit of Hawthorne, which softens me to his attitude some.

"We'll wait here, and we'll stay outside if it makes you more comfortable," I

state, letting Seth pull me up.

We make our way into the hallway, Marcus following close behind. I wonder how Draven feels about that. He's not a fan of being cornered or closed in, and I don't want him getting into a fight with the people that I hope could be our allies.

*Please behave yourself*, I silently plead.

*Oh, please. I've been a perfect gentleman.*

*You have. But don't let that asshole push your buttons.*

*I plan on pushing your buttons the moment they're gone.*

I roll my eyes, knowing full well he can't see me.

The group runs around the side of the house to a small clearing with a large stone fire pit. I watch as the four of them work together to cast the spell that will open a portal, and a big part of me wants to help, but Draven holds me back near the edge of the clearing. It's a little painful watching them struggle to do something that I can manage almost effortlessly.

Entering the portal last, Heather looks back at me apologetically before she walks through. I make a show of starting a fire and getting comfortable in a large Adirondack chair and wave her off.

The literal moment the portal closes, Draven descends on me like the predator he is. Lifting me and throwing me over his shoulder, he looks around the back of the property before he stalks into the backyard. Seth disappears into a flash of light. Luckily he reappears just as Draven unceremoniously drops me, catching me and helping me steady myself.

"Strip," Draven commands.

"Excuse me? We're outside, at a stranger's house, and—"

"I have kept my shit together for much longer than anyone expected, and I'm done waiting. We're not sure how long of a reprieve we have before those

assholes come back. So strip for me, beauty. Now." His tone leaves no room for argument, and his darkening eyes and protruding fangs only serve as a warning at just how serious he is. My eyes move to Seth, who is all but drooling.

"I think we better obey, angel. Wouldn't want him to go all feral on us again," Seth says with a glint in his eyes.

Neither of us can say we mind feral Draven all that much, however inconvenient the timing has been. There's something about knowing that he physically cannot keep his hands off you, that something primal is driving an overwhelming craving to taste you, suck you, fuck you. A shiver runs down my spine as Seth peels my shirt off me.

Seth is either stupid, or he truly can't help himself, and enjoys making Draven crazy. But as he pulls my leggings down, he buries his face in my ass. He groans before he's ripped away from me.

Ignoring them for the most part, I finish stepping out of my leggings while the two of them grapple, and notice that Draven dropped us next to an in-ground jacuzzi. The jacuzzi isn't on, so the water is cold. I sit at the edge and focus on the water, heating it with my magic before dipping my feet in to watch the show.

Their wrestling quickly turns to a somewhat violent make-out session. They fight for dominance, flipping each other over until eventually Draven's speed and ruthlessness put him firmly on top, pressing Seth's face into the ground. Seth is laughing too hard to catch his breath until Draven digs his teeth into the back of his neck while simultaneously yanking Seth's jeans down over his ass and pushing himself inside in one punishing thrust. Seth lets out a half-choked cry, a scream of pain that quickly recedes into what I know from experience is blinding pleasure.

"Fuck," Seth pants, as Draven holds him down and savagely fucks him into the ground.

"You want to play with me, cherub? I'll fucking show you feral," Draven grits out, gripping Seth's hair tightly and pounding into him harder and faster. The

sounds of skin slapping against skin echo off the back of the house as Seth grunts and groans with each thrust of Draven's cock.

My nipples are hard, and heat creeps over my body from my core, warming me even more than the jacuzzi that my feet are currently floating in. My arousal is so intense, it almost overpowers the persistent ache in my chest from being left alone.

I focus on the sight of Draven's muscular ass flexing as he thrusts into Seth, the sounds of their fucking echoing through the yard, the tickle of the little bead of sweat that falls between my breasts and trickles down to my stomach. I swipe at it with my hand before running my fingers over my feverish skin. With my eyes locked on them, my clit begs to be touched.

"Touch yourself," Draven instructs me harshly.

He doesn't stop the movement of his hips against Seth's ass as he watches my hand brush lightly over my breasts, down my stomach, and between my legs. His eyes grow darker when I open my legs and run my fingers through my soaked pussy. My fingertips find the sensitive ball of nerves at the top of my sex, and I rub myself in short, slow circles, careful not to drive myself too high at first. But my chest aches, and my eyelids flutter shut as I increase the pressure and focus on the sounds of Draven fucking Seth. Eventually, not even my pleasure can drown out the ache.

"Come here," Seth says, and my eyes shoot up to find that they've paused to watch me. Draven has released his hold on Seth's neck so he can crane to look up at me.

The air is colder the further away I move from the hot water of the jacuzzi, and goosebumps prickle against my skin. Seth and Draven reposition themselves as I walk closer.

"Take it out," Draven says, reaching for me. It takes a moment to process what he's asking, I'm distracted by his dick still firmly planted in Seth's ass. Seth is laying on his back with his legs spread wide open, his cock dripping all over his toned stomach. My mouth is dry when I try to lick my lips. "The cup," he says impatiently. "Give it to me."

Awkwardly, I remove the cup and hand it to him. I don't pay much attention to what he does with it after he tells me to sit on Seth's cock.

"You want me to—"

"I want you to straddle Seth and ride him while I drink your blood and make you cum all over his hard, dripping cock," he tells me pointedly before looking down at Seth. "And you're not allowed to cum," he growls.

"Dude, I don't know that I can promise that," Seth says, raising himself up on his elbows.

"You're going to lay there and take your punishment like the dirty angel you are, and you are not going to cum until I say," Draven commands with a thrust, shoving Seth back to the ground and eliciting another full body shiver from me that has nothing to do with the cold. My mouth might be dry, but I'll be damned if my pussy isn't fucking dripping from his words alone. Draven turns his commanding attention to me, the tendrils of black starting to spider out from his eyes. He licks his lips. "Now sit on his fucking cock and let me drink you."

On shaky legs, I maneuver myself to straddle Seth. The position is a little awkward, but I groan as I sink down on Seth's cock. We're both so slippery that I slide right down, seating myself as Draven starts to move again. He grips my hips and moves me with him, and we find a rhythm. The moment he latches onto my neck, my pussy clamps down on Seth's cock, and I ride out what feels like a never-ending orgasm as Draven drinks from me.

Seth's hands come up to grip my ass, trying to steady my movements, but that just spurs Draven to snap his hips more forcefully. Seth grunts and whines, protesting the delicious abuse he's being forced to endure. Draven laughs and releases my neck before grabbing one of my breasts and bending down to take it into his mouth. I groan at the sensation of his hot, wet tongue laving over my sensitive nipple. Seth cries out louder than I do when Draven bites into my breast, drawing out another orgasm, but when a dizzying third orgasm crests almost as soon as the last one fades away, he doesn't hesitate to slip his finger into my ass.

I scream out into the night as the climax tears through me, and Seth pants as he fingers my ass and Draven moves my hips in time with his thrusts.

"Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck," Seth grunts. "Bad idea, bad idea, oh fuck."

Draven growls as he releases my breast, and blood drips down on his cock as it drives in and out of Seth in a punishing rhythm. His release comes hard and fast when I bite into his shoulder, and he yells expletives as he pumps all of that pent up cum into Seth's ass. Part of me wants to be jealous, but I know from experience there's more where that came from.

"I can't," Seth whines.

Without being told, I abruptly stand and move out of the way. Seth gasps as the cold air hits his soaking wet dick, dripping with my cum and a trace of my blood. Draven pulls out and flattens his body, taking Seth's cock in his mouth. He licks and slurps and sucks until Seth is almost in tears when he can no longer hold back. His abs contract as he reaches his limit, spilling down Draven's throat, who drinks him down as greedily as he drank my blood.

Once we all catch our breaths, Draven suggests we clean ourselves off and relax in the jacuzzi. But it only takes minutes before I'm sandwiched between them, and water is sloshing everywhere as Draven fills my greedy pussy while Seth is firmly planted in my ass. We've barely finished and had time to get dressed when a portal sparks into existence and Heather appears, followed by the woman with a beanie pulled over her mousy brown hair, Rayne, I think it was.

The woman I saw in my vision climbs through last, looking tired and uncertain as she eyes the three of us warily. The portal closes, and I realize they're two people short. Marcus and the redheaded woman aren't with them.

I have so many questions. I want to know who the woman is and if Draven is right about who she might be.

I want to know where the other two members of The Council are, and why these three look like they've done something wrong.

But one thing overshadows everything else, and I refuse to wait even a second before pouncing on them.

"Where the hell is Hawthorne?"



## Chapter 18 - Hawthorne

The sharp pain of my head slamming into a hard surface jolts me awake. It takes a moment to get my bearings and I realize that I'm in the trunk of a car. The jerking motion that flung me into another body must have been the vehicle coming to a stop.

"Hey," I say, nudging the guy next to me with my knee. "Turn over. We can untie each other."

My hands are bound behind my back by what feels like a zip tie. It'll be difficult, but not impossible, to free each other's hands. It's unlikely we'll have time to get the restraints off our ankles before whoever comes back here to retrieve us, but having our hands free is better than nothing. The man doesn't rouse.

"Wake up," I say, nudging him again. But he still doesn't move.

I pay closer attention and quiet my own laborious breaths, realizing he's not sleeping because he's not actually breathing. I've been shoved in the trunk with a dead guy. That doesn't bode well.

Clenching my eyes shut, I calm my breaths, and strain my ears to listen for footsteps coming near. The moment my eyes close, my mind reels over everything I can remember.

Was that truly Ada? That's the second time I've seen that face, and I recognized her right away. Her mother's features, my eyes. It's unmistakable, but it must be a mistake, or someone's idea of a cruel joke. Even as I try to think of any other explanation for what should be impossible, I know in my bones it's her.

*My little girl is alive.*

There is the minor detail that she seems to be working for the enemy and has knocked me out twice now. Not to mention that I'm currently locked inside this trunk with a fucking dead body.

Does she know who I am to her? She didn't show any signs of recognition beyond disbelief when I said her name the first time I saw her.

There's a crunch of boots on gravel, and I steel myself. It only seems to be one set of footsteps. If I can kick whoever it is away long enough to take advantage of the extra space, I might gain some ground. It's too small of a trunk and I'm too large of a guy to maneuver myself around in here. But with the trunk open, I can move to get my arms under my legs. If I can get my hands in front of my body, I can break the zip tie. I wait, primed for action, but the footsteps falter and back away. Then I hear voices.

"Took you long enough," a woman murmurs. "Where the fuck have you been?"

"It's a long story, but we thought you were dead," another woman answers. "We were here on a different mission and got your SOS. I'm so glad to see you alive." Her voice is choked with emotion.

"As nice as this little reunion is, we need to get a move on. Your ride here is a liability. Why didn't you ditch it before meeting us?" A deeper male voice admonishes.

"I have some baggage," the first woman, who must be Ada, says.

The footsteps move closer as I try to assess the situation. Three people maybe, which I could probably handle. Although I thought I heard more movement than that, so there could be others. My best bet is to remain calm and see how this plays out.

Even though I try to brace myself for anything, the light they shine down on me is blinding. After so long in the dark, I recoil away from the light, ending up pressing myself into the dead guy.

"Fuck," I mutter.

"Oh good, you're awake. I was worried I was going to have to try to figure out carrying your heavy ass again."

My eyes adjust and make out five people looking down at me.

"Wanna point that thing somewhere else?" I gruff out irritably.

"Who the fuck is that?" The male voice asks.

"A mage. A big one. With actual power," Ada answers. "I couldn't let The Society get their hands on him."

"So you abandoned your post to save one guy?"

"I didn't abandon my post. *You* all abandoned *me*. I haven't been able to get ahold of anyone for fucking months. While all hell was breaking loose, I did the best I could to protect The Council's interests, and I made the best decision I could."

My brow furrows. "You're working for The Council?" They all look down at me curiously, and I decide to shut up for now.

*She's working for The Council? How can that fucking be?*

"What's your name, big guy?" A shorter woman in a beanie asks. I ignore her.

The first guy just keeps choosing violence by opening his mouth. "You should have just shot him. This could undermine the entire operation."

Birdie chooses that moment to announce her presence, perched on a branch just within sight of where I'm lying in the trunk. It's a good reminder to keep my mouth shut and bide my time. My lips curl up, knowing I'm this many steps closer to home. *To her.*

"What don't you fucking understand? The mission I was sent on, overfive fucking years ago, went to fucking hell. This man could be an asset, so yes, I risked my cover to save his ass. And you should be fucking thanking me." She looks around and throws her hands up. "Where is fucking Sloan?!"

A woman with grey hair shakes her head. "We haven't heard from him in months either."

"We need to get moving," the woman with the beanie says. "We'll work on opening the portal if you can get him through it. We can interrogate him back home."

"Is it safe to take him to HQ?" a woman with a long braid asks. "We don't know who he is or what he's capable of."

"She has a good point. We have guests that could be important. I don't want to scare them off just yet," the woman with grey hair says. "Although I have my suspicions about who this might be. We need to ask you some questions," she says directly to me, as if it's completely reasonable to submit myself to interrogation because she asks nicely.

The pissy guy mutters something under his breath that sounds like "motherfucking blood suckers" and my attention perks up. I almost ask what kind of guests they have, but then Ada looks down at me.

"I think he's capable of a lot more than any of us are, honestly. But I don't think he's a threat."

*Only because I know who you are, and you don't know who I am.* If these people are from The Council, they'll recognize my name from the top of their most wanted list.

Do any of them even know that Ada is my daughter? If I tell her who I am, will she know? If I let them take me quietly, will I get a chance to speak to her in private again? Because I can't let these people know who I am, but she deserves to know the truth.

But now isn't the time or place. I press my lips together and shimmy away from the dead guy so I can sit up.

"Well, let's get him out of the trunk. There's a safe house about twenty clicks from here. We can interrogate him there." I narrow my eyes at the stocky asshole. He has a douchey haircut and a fucking earring. I hope I get the

chance to rip it out before this is all said and done with.

"We can't manage that many portals if we split up. We're going to have to take our chances taking him back to HQ." The grey-haired woman muses. "If we can get him to the basement without anyone seeing, we won't have to answer too many questions and can interrogate him in peace."

"You really think it's going to be that easy?" I can't help but open my mouth as the douchebag helps Ada guide my bound legs out of the trunk and direct me to sit up.

I situate myself so that I'm mostly standing, leaning back against the trunk of the car. Even though I'm practically swaying with weakness and exhaustion, I'm determined to stay upright. I move my wrists behind my back, twisting them to loosen the zip ties without being too obvious. "I have nothing to say to you."

"Who's the other poor bastard?" Douchebag asks, ignoring my retort.

"A guard that asked too many questions," Ada shrugs.

I both love and hate that exchange. She can clearly take care of herself, but it's hard for my brain not to picture her as the three-year-old little girl that still haunts my nightmares. That she's become such a hardened woman hurts a little.

"Listen," the woman who seems in charge says to me, "you're not a prisoner or anything like that. But we need to ask you some questions, and I need to keep my people safe."

I understand, but I'm also not about to put myself at the mercy of anyone, much less anyone that works for The Council. I'm just glad Sloan isn't here, because he'd recognize me on sight. He was on The Council back when everything happened with my family. He was one of the people who'd been responsible for sending the shade as an envoy, for keeping me locked up, and then led the manhunt when I dropped off the grid.

If he were here, he'd be the one getting interrogated. Because I'm going to

find out how it is that my daughter not only lived, but somehow ended up working for them.

I nod to the woman, who gives me a tight smile before pulling her hair over her shoulder and starting to prepare a spell. The others pull out various ingredients, salt and herbs. I'm confused at first, but then realize they're working together to open a portal.

It's easy to forget that portals are actually very advanced magic. They just so happen to be a special skill of mine. It's on the tip of my tongue to offer to open the portal for them, but I'm not showing them any of my abilities. I can't afford to expend that much energy either. I'm better off using it to take this chance to get the fuck out of here, if I can even muster one up in the first place.

"Heather," Ada calls, pouring gasoline in and all over the car. "Can you take care of his legs so he can walk?"

It really is my lucky fucking day, because the grey-haired woman, Heather, bends down to cut the zip ties around my ankles, freeing my legs and feet. I'm going to make a run for it while I have the chance. As much as I want to stick around and learn more about Ada, I have to get back to Calista. Who knows how much she's been suffering with the effects of the broken bond. With any luck, the guys have figured out how to mitigate the worst of it. Later, we can work together to come up with a plan to contact Ada, and maybe feed The Council some information they need to take down The Sanctum Society's operation.

I choose the best moment I can to make my escape. Ada tosses a match at the car just as the four others begin making progress on the portal. Once they're all distracted, I slip my arms behind my legs and under my feet. Ada notices and shoots me a tired "please don't do this" look.

"I'm sorry," I tell her. "But I promise I'll be in touch. You and I have some catching up to do."

She looks confused as she calls out for help, and all hell breaks loose.

Twisting my wrists in, I lift my hands behind my head and then throw them down like I'm going to hit myself in the stomach. My muscles flex as my arms come down, breaking the zip tie. I take a swing at the douchebag guy, who lunges at me first. The red-headed woman sends a spark of electricity at me, which stings but doesn't stop me. She's going to have to do better than that if she wants to take down a bear like me. In retaliation, I flick a spark back at her, which is maybe twice as powerful as the one she sent at me, but still nothing compared to what I'm capable of. It hits her in the stomach and she grunts, looking up at me with wide eyes. After a well-aimed kick at the woman in the beanie, I end up pushing Ada down as I trample into the forest. I look back once to make sure she's okay before disappearing into the dark.

Two people chase me. They're fast enough that I couldn't stop and open a portal even if I had the energy reserves to do it. Instead, I run through the woods, keeping the fastest pace I can muster in my weakened state. I follow Birdie's shadow, hoping she's leading me to safety, back home. To her.

## Chapter 19 - Calista

"Where is he?!" I shout.

The moment I saw that woman step out of the portal, I just *knew* that he would be following. It was her in that vision. I'm positive of it. Which means she was the last person to see him alive, and I want answers. *Now*.

If she hurt him, I'll rip her to shreds.

*I'll hold her down*, Draven replies to my thoughts.

Her eyes are wide and wary as she takes the three of us in.

"Calista?" My name comes out of her mouth on a huff of air. "What are you doing here?"

*How does she even know me?* "I'm asking the questions right now. Where is Hawthorne?"

Her brow furrows. "Hawthorne?"

"Rowan fucking Hawthorne," Draven snaps. "You had him. Where is he?" His impatience echoes mine, but while I'm trying to keep my shit together until I have more information, Draven has no such designs.

Seth steps beside Draven, both of them less than a foot behind me, flanking me. I hope we look as formidable as I know we are. The three of us are capable of anything, especially if one of our own is in danger.

Ada and the two present members of The Council exchange pained looks.

"I was worried that might be him," Heather murmurs to Ada, who shrugs.



"He never gave me his name. I only knew he was powerful, and bonded to her," Ada says, jerking her chin towards me.

"What do you mean *was*?" I grit out between clenched teeth.

Wind whips through the trees, and lightning crackles. The ground trembles beneath my feet. The fire pit surges and flares, knocking the woman in the beanie to her ass in her haste to jump back. Heather looks dumbstruck and the three of them stare at me with wide, frightened eyes.

"Where. Is. My. Mate." I grit out, my tone animalistic.

I'm staking my claim and letting them know how serious I am, how deep my love runs. A flash of lightning cracks through the air, striking a nearby tree in a deafening boom. No one looks back to see the destruction or where the tree will fall; well aware I am the bigger threat.

I might have fucked up our bond in a misguided attempt to help him, but that's only because I love him so much. I thought I only felt that way because the bond was so overwhelming, but now that the tether that connects him to my heart is broken, I know that it's more than that. My heart called him, called all of them. They are mine and I am theirs, and I will go to the ends of this earth to protect them. I don't care if he doesn't love me back, he'll always have my love and protection.

If this bitch has hurt Hawthorne, I will tear her limb from limb until I force her to tell me, in graphic detail, everything that happened to him. Then I'll let Draven drain her within an inch of her life before Seth pulls her soul from her body so she can watch it crumble into dust before I send her back to hell where she belongs.

"Damn, she's terrifying," Seth whispers.

"Yeah, she is," Draven agrees, adjusting himself.

"Oh good, I'm not the only one with a fear boner, then."

Ignoring them both, I take a step towards Ada, letting the wind whip through

my hair.

"He's alive!" Ada yells, holding her hands up in front of her like she's warding off an attack.

"He was with us," Heather yells out, pulling out a two-way radio and repeating the words, "Stand down, I repeat, stand down. Let me know your location, and we'll set up a portal." Her eyes never leave mine as she gives the orders, and the radio crackles with silence as she waits for a reply. When none comes, she tries to explain herself. "He escaped and ran right before we walked through the portal. Marcus and Brenna went after him."

"If they hurt him, every single one of you will die. Painfully," I promise them.

"He was weakened, but still strong enough to overpower us and get away. I have a feeling Marcus and Brenna are the ones in danger," Ada counters.

My eyes focus on the honey brown of her eyes, flickering in the firelight. Draven is right; she is very familiar. I can see the resemblance to Hawthorne, but how could that be possible?

"Who are you?" I ask, wanting to get to the bottom of this.

"Why don't we take this inside? I need to tend to Rayne's burns," Heather says, gesturing to the house.

"Fine, but I need some supplies to check in on Hawthorne. And you," I point at Ada. "You have some explaining to do."

Seth and Draven stay close to me, but the wards allow them through when we walk through the doorway. I look up at Heather in surprise.

"I want you to know that you're in no danger here. We're on your side."

"That remains to be seen," I reply coolly.

It's in her best interest to know that they are absolutely in danger from me, but I don't think it's necessary to say it out loud. Their posture and the way

they're keeping their distance tell me they are very well aware.

Ada sits directly across from me and looks like she's preparing herself for a story, but doesn't know where to start.

"You said he escaped," I start for her. "Was he meant to be a prisoner?"

"No," she answers. "Not originally, at least."

"What does that mean, exactly?"

"I knew he was powerful, and I knew he was connected to you. Those are the two reasons that I helped him escape rather than just killing him." I lift my eyebrow but allow her to keep talking. "I didn't know who he was until just now when we got back. I had him in restraints to protect myself, and we would have debriefed him before letting him go. We would have asked him questions about the extent of his powers, and likely would have offered whatever incentives we could manage for his help to take down The Sanctum Society." She smiles gratefully at Heather when a mug of tea is placed in front of her. Three more steaming mugs are set in front of me, but they sit there, untouched.

"Once we realized we had Rowan Hawthorne in our possession, that plan most likely would have changed," Heather admits, moving to a small table where Rayne is holding a bundle of bandages and other supplies in her lap. "We have a large cellar with everything you could need for spell-casting. There's a set of stairs off the kitchen. You're welcome to rummage around, or I can help you find anything you need as soon as I'm done here."

"Thank you," Seth says to Heather before kissing me on the cheek and walking off in the direction of the kitchen.

"Make a left at the end of the hallway," Heather calls out.

"Why would it matter who he is?" I ask, redirecting everyone's attention to the conversation at hand.

"Rowan Hawthorne is considered to be extremely dangerous. The Council

has been after him for longer than I've been alive."

"Not quite that long. Maybe three and a half years after you were born," Draven says, mostly to himself.

"I'm sorry?" Ada asks, looking up at Draven in confusion.

He shrugs but doesn't repeat himself. I eye him curiously, but return my attention back to the two women.

"We know about what happened all those years ago, and Hawthorne knew The Council was looking for him. That's probably why he ran. But why didn't you tell him I was here?"

"I didn't know who he was to you," Heather answers, her focus staying on Rayne's arm where she's spreading a salve.

"I didn't get a chance. I was torching the getaway car, and then everything happened so fast. He was really weak, practically swaying on his feet. I didn't consider he would try to run, because I didn't realize who he was."

"We have to get to him before he gets hurt or does something stupid," I say, just as Seth comes back into the room. He has everything we need stacked on top of a large oval mirror.

"I hope you don't mind. I borrowed this from the bathroom down the hall," Seth says, and I notice bits of plaster flaking off the back of the mirror. "This will work similar to the ball, but you might have to focus a little harder."

He must have ripped it straight off the wall. I can't be bothered to care, though. I'm ready to find Hawthorne and bring him back to me. Knowing he's no longer in the clutches of The Sanctum Society is a relief, but I won't be satisfied until I can see him in front of me, touch him, hold him.

*Assuming he even wants you to.*

I shake my head of my intrusive thoughts, focusing on setting the herbs and supplies around the mirror while Seth draws a chalk circle around me on the living room floor. I take off my shoes and get as comfortable as I can. Draven

and Seth stand on the outside of the circle, and I know they're guarding me against anyone or anything that might try to interrupt me.

I'm able to find my center and focus on my tattered bond much easier than I was last time. Maybe it's because I've done it before and I know I'm capable, but it's still a surprise. Maybe it's the urgency of the situation. Whatever it is, it's mere minutes before the flat surface of the mirror ripples and Hawthorne comes into focus. He's standing with his back against a tree, catching his breath and listening for any signs of his assailants. He wavers on his feet.

"Hawthorne," I whisper, and the man himself jerks his head up, looking around as if he'd heard my voice.

"Can he hear me?" I ask, not really listening for an answer, especially since no matter how many times I call his name, he doesn't look up again.

Someone, or something, crashes through the trees and tackles him, knocking him to the ground. My heart stutters and I cry out for him.

Then everything spins.

I'm not sure how it happens. One moment, I'm kneeling on the ground in the living room of The Council headquarters. The next, I'm standing in the dark, the underbrush of a dense forest scraping my bare feet.

Mere feet away from me, two men are tussling with each other. The larger of the two unsurprisingly gets the upper hand pretty quickly, but he's breathing heavily with the effort. A loud caw comes from the trees, and Hawthorne pulls back. Marcus untangles himself and stands, the two men circling each other. A stick or something snaps behind me and I whip around just in time to see Brenna, the redhead from The Council, looming behind me. When she notices it's me, her eyes widen, and she steps back, but not before I use a gust of wind to push her away from me and into Marcus. In the same movement, I open a portal and send them both flying through it. It winks out of existence and then it's nothing but darkness and heavy breathing.

"Calista?" Hawthorne's voice is rough. He sounds confused, or maybe disbelieving.

"Hawthorne!" I say, and without thinking twice, throw myself on my knees in front of him. It's too dark to really see his face to know if he has any wounds or to determine what he looks like, but I use my hands to check him out. My fingertips skim over his cheeks and his rugged scruff, down his chest and arms, and then back up to rake through his hair.

My heart gets ahead of my brain, and I pull him to my chest, crushing him against me to feel his heartbeat against my chest. The frazzled tether of our bond thrums when our mouths meet, and I kiss him with every ounce of longing, fear, and love I have for him. Our kisses grow more frantic as the salty wetness from my tears drips between our lips. Hawthorne pulls me tighter against him, and I feel his need for me pressing against my core as I scramble over his lap.

Rough hands caress up my shirt, and the touch of his skin against mine is hot and heady. I grind against him, desperate to feel every part of him. I don't care that we're in the middle of a cold, dark forest, or that Hawthorne smells like he's been in a prison cell for a week, or that I'm terrified he hates me and will regret every kiss. For now, all I want is to be as close to him as possible.

My attempt to lift his shirt so we can be skin to skin becomes a frantic scurry to strip each other bare before I remember—

"I'm, uh, bleeding."

"Where? Are you okay?" His gruff voice is worried, and his hands roam over my body in a different way.

"No, I'm not hurt, I'm—"

"I don't give a damn. I need you. Right now."

Draven will just have to forgive me. I make quick work of ridding myself of every barrier before pulling Hawthorne against me. Every inch of my flesh that is pressed against his practically sings with relief, happiness, and need. I wrap my legs around Hawthorne's waist and pull him into me. His cock slides inside me, stretching me to capacity, and I cry frantic tears when he's settled against me.

Hawthorne kisses my tears, my jaw, my neck, my breasts. No part of my body goes untouched by his lips or gentle fingers as he makes love to me. My relief and the gentleness of his touch overwhelm my senses, and I wail out my orgasm. The rhythmic clenching of my inner walls pulls a sob from Hawthorne. Hot tears fall from his face to mine as a rush of heat fills me.

He doesn't stop moving until the last aftershocks wane, and then he remains inside me for a long time after, kissing and touching and murmuring against my skin.

"I love you, Calista. I'm sorry I didn't tell you soon enough. This never would have happened if—"

The press of my mouth against his stifles his words. I can't form the words I know I need to say. That I'm sorry, that I put us all in danger, that I can't bear to be apart from him. I thought I could be strong and weather our broken connection for his sake, but it's killing me slowly. I close my eyes and focus all of my power on the two of us and my intent, until it feels like we're briefly falling through space, only to land back home in Hawthorne's bed. His stunned look makes me giggle.

I lay next to him for what could be minutes, or hours, just watching him as he succumbs to the sleep his body so desperately needs. I say a silent prayer that he won't have any issues waking up this time, but he briefly opens his eyes. It's like he's checking to make sure I'm still here. Eventually, I drift off next to him, my heart filled with hope. Because no matter what we have coming for us, no matter what battles we have ahead—we're together now. And that's all that matters.

## Chapter 20 - Draven

I stalk around the circle, my eyes flitting back and forth to the three people in the room that have yet to prove themselves trustworthy. If even one of them so much as blinks towards her, I'll rip their fucking heads off.

Calista gasps Hawthorne's name, and then leans over the mirror, calling to him as if he could hear her. From my vantage point, I can't see what's happening, and I don't want to take my eyes off the threats that surround her. So when she disappears into thin air, I'm frantic with rage and worry.

"Where the fuck did she go?!" I roar, breaking the circle and standing where she just was, not a second ago.

"I didn't see a portal," Seth says, his voice low. We need to figure out what just happened, but we're still not in the position to give away her secrets without putting her further at risk.

"What just happened?" asks Rayne as the burned woman scoots her chair back against the wall. Smart, considering the last time Calista blew her top, she got a singed arm as a token of her appreciation.

"Did she just—"

Ada's question gets interrupted when two people all but drop into the room. This time I can see the telltale remnants of a portal snapping shut before I can even think of diving through it.

Marcus, the grouchy asshole from before, lands with a grunt, smashing the mirror. The woman with the ginger braid knocks into Seth, who uses his wings to right them both before they crash to the ground.

Marcus and Brenna scramble back, staring at Seth with wide, fearful eyes.



"Told you they were important guests," Heather says, trying to break the tension in the room.

"What happened?" I ask. "Where's Calista?"

"So that was her?" Brenna asks, looking at Marcus.

"Don't look at him, look at me," I hiss. "Where is she? What did you do to her?"

"We didn't do anything to her," Marcus grunts. "She's the one that appeared out of nowhere and threw us into that portal."

"How did she do that?" Brenna asks. "I've never met anyone with that kind of power."

Ada nods. "That's just the tip of the iceberg. I saw her burn a man alive from the inside out."

My eyes narrow at Ada, and she notices my glare.

"I was there, at her aunt's house. I was undercover, and I was supposed to be shielding Bodin." A malicious grin spreads across her face. "I might have accidentally dropped it, though. Although, honestly, she's powerful enough and could have easily overpowered me with how angry she was."

"You're the void," I say.

Ada nods. "Yes, and before you say anything, don't think for a second that I enjoyed any part of helping them. I had a part to play for the greater good. That's why I broke cover to get Hawthorne out. I didn't know who he was, but I knew he was hers, and that The Sanctum Society couldn't get their hands on his power. I hoped that if I saved him rather than killing him, Calista might agree to help us." She sighs. "We need your help."

Marcus sputters, "He's a fucking wanted man, Ada."

"I think what's happening here and now is more important than whatever he did to offend The Council thirty fucking years ago. He's got a fucking bright

by his side. If that's not proof enough that he's worthy, I don't know what is."

"To be fair, I'm with her—"

I interrupt Seth's attempt to keep the peace in this room. I don't particularly care if they kill each other, I only care about one thing. "Where were they?"

Marcus refuses to meet my eyes, but Brenna pulls out a map and brings it to me.

"This general area is where we were," she says. "I can't mark the exact spot. But we started here," she points to one spot, "and then we ran in this general direction for nearly an hour. That's the best I can give you. I'm sorry."

"Thanks," I say with a nod, and I mean it. I can tell she isn't comfortable being this close to me. She's a witch, so no matter how human I look on the outside, she can sense otherwise. Seth has that neat ability where he can make the people around him feel calmer, more comfortable with his *otherness*, but my kind tends to have the opposite effect. Brenna knows exactly what I am, and she's doing her best not to show her discomfort, which I can respect.

I look up at Seth, who peers down at the map. "Let's start here," I say, pointing to where Brenna said they started. "We can follow a trail to get their exact position."

"Sounds like a plan, brother. Welp," Seth says, popping the p and looking around awkwardly. All five of the council members are staring at us, waiting to see what we do next. "It's been real, but we've got things to do, people to find."

With a ridiculous waggle of fingers, Seth touches his hand to my shoulder and suddenly I'm being ripped through time and space. I get that he probably did it for show, and that traveling by light is much faster than even I can run, but I am not a fan of suddenly having my asshole wrenched through my belly button. I can understand why Calista's poor, mortal body suffers terrible vertigo and nausea every time we have to travel this way.

"Did you have to do that?" I ask when we land. Before he can answer, our

attention is quickly diverted to the smoking shell of a vehicle. *What happened there?* My nose scrunches at the overwhelming scent of gasoline and burned flesh. "There was a person in there," I say.

"Ew," is Seth's response. "Let's keep moving."

He got us this far, but tracking is my thing. We're quickly on Hawthorne's trail, and it's easy to follow where he lumbered through the forest like a damn bear.

"You don't need to be a tracker to follow this trail," Seth comments, and I grunt in agreement.

"He's hurt, or very weak. You can tell by his gait, but he was still moving pretty fast for an old guy."

Seth snorts at my joke, and we continue to follow the trail, marking where it looks like he stopped for a quick rest or where there might have been a tussle. A while into our walk, I notice a familiar large black raven following us.

"Where the fuck have you been?" I say, looking up at Birdie, perched in a low-hanging branch.

Seth laughs and reaches to pet the bird. I want to tell him that the raven isn't a godsdamned pet, but the way she ducks her head and pushes into his hand certainly seems otherwise.

"Are they out here?" Seth asks, and I know he's talking to the bird. We all talk to her occasionally, and most of the time, it really seems like she understands.

Finally, we come upon a clearing where there was definitely more than a tussle. My nostrils flare and I try to suppress a trembling in my limbs.

Seth's hand comes down on my shoulder. He doesn't mention the obvious. We're both trying to ignore my base animal nature and pretend that I can be reasonable. Like maybe if I ignore it, the idea of someone else filling my mate with cum during her breeding time won't send me over the edge. It's

Hawthorne, I remind myself. He's been missing. She probably needed the comfort. And did I really expect her to push him off her and tell him not to cum?

*Yes.*

Godsdamnit. A fang pierces the plump part of my bottom lip. Seth notices and leans over to lick the bead of blood. He's too close while I'm trying to suppress the animal inside me, but the sight of my blood on his tongue as it disappears into his mouth is distracting enough. Especially when I notice his eyes dilate as soon as it enters his system, like a fast-acting drug that I know is going right to his dick.

*Fuck.* "We don't have time for this," I warn, fighting against my nature.

"We have a little time..." Seth says breathily. "They're safe," he says, gesturing at the ground. They've scattered their clothes all over and Calista's nearly empty cup lays empty on the ground. The scent of cum and blood is strong in the small clearing. "And they might appreciate a little more time before we come barging in on their reunion."

He's right. If they stopped to fuck and then just disappeared without any signs of further distress, they probably used a portal, or whatever fucking disappearing trick Calista magically picked up, to get home.

"Can you check?" I ask the bird. "Come back if they haven't made it home?"

Birdie squawks and disappears, much in the same way Calista did back at The Council's house.

"Now... How about we relieve a little of this tension before we head home to confront our boneheaded Mage Daddy and errant witch?" Seth says as he unbuttons his jeans and pulls out his cock, which is already hard and dripping with pre-cum.

"Only if you promise to make it hurt," I say, licking my lips.

## Chapter 21 - Calista

A disturbance rouses me from sleep, and I blink into the dark room. A gentle wind is blowing through the window, which I am positive was closed before. Not wanting to wake Hawthorne, I flick my wrist and light one of the candles I know is sitting on the dresser. It's enough to see what I needed to know.

"Birdie," I breathe out with a grateful smile. "I'm happy to see you."

She ruffles her feathers from her perch on the chair next to the bed. The intelligent bird doesn't squawk back at me or click her beak, keeping a silent vigil over our sleeping mage.

"Thank you for watching over him," I whisper, my eyes welling up with gratitude that my mage is safe.

In the dim light of the flickering candle, I trace my eyes over Hawthorne. He's lost a little weight, though not enough to take away from the sheer beefiness of the man laid out before me. He's in pretty desperate need of a shower, but that can wait until he wakes up. I don't care how covered with grime he is, I cuddle myself into his side, smiling when he rolls to his side and pulls me into him. I feel safe and protected in his arms, and the relief I feel about having him back is palpable. The fact that he isn't pushing me away, that he seems to want me just as much, is a balm on my tormented heart.

I'm sure the other two will figure out where we are, and I really don't expect either of them to have any trouble with The Council. Honestly, I'd been surprised and rather dismayed at how little power any of them seem to have. I could sense the most magic coming from Ada, though to my knowledge, she isn't part of the actual Council. Heather had some power, including some impressive talent controlling the wards around their headquarters. I feel pretty sure that they would be enough to keep The Sanctum Society out at the very least.

I'm hoping we can arrange another meeting if Hawthorne agrees to it, so we can discuss what to do about The Sanctum Society. Now that Hawthorne is safe, and we have gotten most of the prisoners out, I'm pretty tempted to go back and burn it all to the ground. But I have a feeling that The Society runs deeper than just this one group of assholes. In the vision I had of Ada and Hawthorne, she mentioned a man named Salazar flying in, which means they probably have another base of operations. We need to know what Ada knows, and put together a plan to shut them down completely.

I'm dozing off again when the door creaks and my other two bonds tiptoe in. They run their eyes over the state of me and Hawthorne. Seth grins widely. Draven swallows and looks tense.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, but he shakes his head.

"You shouldn't be sorry. He's your mate, too," he says, and my heart melts a little. "I'll find a way to get over this, and you're bleeding less, so it's helping me think through the fog." His eyes narrow. "Don't look at me like that."

"But I'm so proud of you," I say, holding back my laughter and tears.

"Stop it," Draven says, before wrinkling his nose. "Dude, you stink."

Hawthorne groans, but underneath his annoyance, I can sense his contentment.

"Sorry we woke you," I whisper to him, rolling over to face him. His eyes are still closed, but he opens one eye and grins down at me.

"It's okay," he says, his voice gruff with sleep. He sits up, not bothering to cover his nakedness. "He's right. I need a shower, and probably new sheets."

"I'll handle the sheets. You handle the shower?" Seth says, looking over at me before he pulls Hawthorne into a hug. "Glad to have you home, brother."

"Glad to be home, and thanks."

Hawthorne looks at Draven as he moves closer to the door. Draven's gaze drops to Hawthorne's cock, hanging heavy between his muscular thighs. His

throat bobs with a deep swallow.

*What's wrong?*

Instead of answering my thoughts with words, he shoots me an image of Hawthorne's half-hard cock, which has the slightest amount of my blood dried around the crown.

It's hard to discern exactly what he's feeling about it. Is he angry? Or does he want to lick it off?

The way my body reacts to that thought has all three men looking up at me. Hawthorne lightly presses a hand against his chest, as if feeling the ghost of our old bond, and his eyes darken. Draven licks his lips. Seth smirks.

"What are you thinking about, little witch?"

"You really don't want to know," I answer Hawthorne, and push him towards the bathroom.

I can't ask him to let Draven suck my blood from his cock, but I can give Draven something. As soon as we step under the hot spray of the shower, I lower myself to my knees. Hawthorne's cock reacts immediately, and I can see little specks of my blood in the creases of the skin as it grows.

"Let me get clean first," Hawthorne says.

"I can't let you do that," I say with a giggle, gripping him around the base and flicking my tongue over the tip of his cock.

"I'm disgusting, and covered in—"

"My dried blood," I finish for him, intending to explain Draven's weird behavior.

"Yeah, that too. I promise that doesn't bother me, though. Does it bother you?"

I almost erupt into a fit of giggles. "You have missed too much," I say, and

my giggles turn to sadness.

Hawthorne lifts me up and hugs me against his body. "Don't do that, *a chuisle*. I'm here now. We're together. It's all going to be okay now."

"I broke us," I sob out.

"We'll fix it," he says, not disputing the truth of what I did. "And no matter what, you are still my pulse, Calista."

My tears only increase, pouring down my face as my chest threatens to cave in with the force of my shame for ever thinking to sever the magic connection between us.

"You must have really been hurting," he says quietly, kissing the tears from my cheeks.

I nod, because I can't deny the unimaginable pain. There aren't words to describe it.

"I hope you let them help," he says, and I pull back to meet his gaze, surprised. He sighs sadly. "I spent a lot of time in that cell thinking about how much I fucked up—" He presses his fingers to my lips before I can protest. "We both fucked up, Calista. But you wouldn't have fucked up if I hadn't so royally screwed everything up in the first place. I should have been more open with you. I should have told you how normal your feelings were instead of shaming you for them. The bond can't be denied. It's supposed to be that way. But I let you think there was something wrong with you."

"Your past—"

"—is no reason to be such a massive asshole. You are not Della, and Draven is not Silas. I know that, and I knew it then. Even through my prejudice, I can see that Draven is different, that he loves you in his own strange way. It's proof of my own bigotry that it didn't bother me as much when Seth touched you, although while we're being honest, I was jealous of him too. Which, of course, he knew and took full advantage of," Hawthorne says, with a roll of his eyes that makes me laugh again.



"I was afraid," Hawthorne admits, looking deep into my eyes. "My bond with you is different from the marriage bond I had with Della, more intense. I couldn't feel her the way I feel you, perhaps because I had to give up so much of myself to forge the bond. But I also never felt for her as strongly as I do you, and I think that made me feel guilty on top of it all. After all that I've done, all the mistakes of my past, I didn't believe that I deserved a second chance."

"You deserve everything," I say, my emotions turning fierce, my tears hot and angry.

"I'm not sure about that," Hawthorne says softly. He stoops down so his lips are hovering just above mine, the water sluicing off his broad shoulders and pouring over us. "But I will spend every day of the rest of our lives striving to earn it. To earn your love, this bond, this family you've given me."

My breath catches in my chest, buried in so many emotions that I might swoon for the sheer fact that I can't get enough oxygen. Hawthorne lifts me up and presses his mouth against mine. His kiss is gentle, drawing out the depth of our emotions, all the pain and anguish, the love and yearning, and all the deep, unrelenting need that pulses through our bond. As frayed and broken as it is, I can still feel it thrum to life, and if I looked down, I feel certain that I could see it flickering.

If only love were enough to fix everything we've broken in each other.

My legs instinctively wrap around Hawthorne's waist, and I reach for the soap. I massage it through his hair and his beard, over his face, and down his shoulders. He has to let me down so I can scrub his chest and stomach, back, over his muscular ass, and down his legs. Once I made it all the way down the back of his legs and then up the front, I give a little laugh.

"Oh, well, that's too bad," I say, seeing that the soapy water has washed away all signs of our earlier lovemaking. My hands explore the weight of his balls and the girth of his shaft as I wash his cock, too.

He leans against the wall with one arm and groans. "Why's that?" he asks absentmindedly.

I giggle. "Oh nothing really, just that Draven might have wanted to lick my blood off your cock." I try to remain serious, but I can't help but laugh at his expression when his hooded eyes all but bulge in their sockets.

"I'm sorry, what?" he says, tipping his head back to let the water run over his face, like it could wash away the mental image I just gave him.

"Draven has a...*thing* about my period. Apparently, it's a breeding thing for shades."

Hawthorne's eyes zero in on me as his entire body tenses. He is blatantly working hard to temper his reaction. He swallows before asking, in a very slow and measured tone, "Can he, uh—"

"We don't know. But I've been drinking your tea just in case, because I don't think that any of us are ready for all that just yet."

His eyes close, and his body visibly relaxes. "Sorry, that caught me off guard."

"You're doing far better than I did at first. Although, the pull of the bond mixed with whatever breeding pheromones he was putting off..."

"That had to have been intense," he says with a chuckle, the twinkle returning to his eyes.

I'm glad the idea of me being with the others doesn't seem to bother him as much anymore, aside from the idea of Draven impregnating me.

"You have no idea. It wasn't exactly clear if he was going to fuck me or murder me. Or both. He almost attacked Seth."

"That man is a godsdamned saint if there ever was one."

I nod in agreement. "He just took everything in stride. He even made us a nest. Draven was really struggling."

"I'm impressed with how well he's handling all of this, considering," Hawthorne says, and it's heartwarming to hear him give Draven some credit

for his restraint.

Wait. "Considering what?"

His lips drop to my ear, and he murmurs low, sending shivers down my spine. "Considering I'm about to make you scream my name so loudly, he'll hear you even if he's hiding up in his cave."

Hawthorne flips me around so I'm facing the wall and then positions one of my legs up on the edge of the tub. His fingers delve between my folds, spreading my slick arousal and circling my clit. He teases me, barely brushing over the spot that I need him the most before he finally presses against my clit. My head falls back on his shoulder when his cock nudges me from behind. He teases me with that, too, barely entering me in a tantalizing game of "just the tip" that has me wild with need. I whimper and whine and try to press back against him, but he holds me steady, bringing me to the edge of orgasm and holding me there.

His low voice tickles against the side of my neck. "What else did the three of you get up to, other than trying to breed my little witch without me?" I panic for half a second, worried that he feels left out, but the tone of his voice and the way he's touching me let me know his dirty talk is sincere. "How many times did they make you cum?"

"H-huh?"

"I need to know how many times they made you cum, because I plan on making up for every single one I missed." As those words are pressed against my neck, he presses harder on my clit and thrusts a few inches inside me. It's enough to have me tumbling over the edge, and I cry out as my orgasm pulses through me in waves. My ass pushes back, begging for more of his cock, so I have something to grip onto when my next orgasm comes, because I know there will be another one. He's promising it with his slow, teasing words and actions.

He revs me up again, priming my body to accept his girth, and I shatter as he thrusts fully inside me. He rolls his hips, each thrust a slow, sensual undulating of his hips as his fingers flutter over my sensitive clit.

I give a full body shudder when his free hand caresses down the crack of my ass.

"And what about this?" He asks salaciously, pressing the tip of his index finger into my ass, eliciting a full body shiver from me.

"Oh yeah," he says, as my body tightens and pushes back on his hand. "They've been taking this ass, too, haven't they? I hope they're getting you good and primed, because I plan on taking you here one day, and you won't be able to sit for a week."

*Fuck.* His words alone could send me tumbling into another climax, but with one finger teasing my ass, while his other hand plays my pussy like an instrument, and his slow, rolling thrusts, I'm done for. My head falls forward onto the cool tile, and I moan like an animal in heat as pleasure spreads over my body.

When my body stops pulsing, Hawthorne all but lifts me up, holding me on his cock as he steps out of the shower.

"Hold on, baby, this one is for me," he says. I fall forward, my hands and elbows flat on the bathroom counter, as he holds onto my hips and starts to piston into me. The bathroom walls reverberate with the sounds of my mewls and cries as he fucks me mercilessly. My feet don't even touch the ground, he just holds me up, bent over as I am, and uses me. "Come for me, my little witch. I want to feel you squeeze the cum from my cock, until it's coating your insides and competing with who's going to knock you up first."

"Oh, gods!" I yell as my body spasms.

Draven bursts into the room just as Hawthorne erupts, pumping his hot cum inside me with a satisfied grunt. In the foggy mirror, I see the mischievous glint in his eyes. He winks before he pulls out of me, and I can feel the stream of cum that pours down my thighs. I hang my head for a moment, catching my breath and worrying that these two are about to brawl again.

Draven stands eerily still except for the harsh force of his breathing.

Hawthorne leans casually against the counter, looking from his softening cock to Draven. *What is he up to?*

Draven, to his credit, is doing what he can to hold back, but I can see the tremble in his limbs. He looks at Hawthorne, and then back at me, trying and failing not to look at the blood streaked cum trickling down the inside of my thigh.

"I didn't mean to interrupt," he says, backing away. *I lost control for a minute, but I've got it. I'm sorry.*

I shake my head, getting ready to ease his worries, but Hawthorne speaks first. "Actually, you're here just in time. I was hoping you'd help me out."

"Uh, what?" Draven and I ask at the same time.

"Seems I'm a little messy."

My mouth gapes open as Draven's gaze drops to Hawthorne's cock. It glistens with our release, and there's fresh blood around the crown and head.

Draven's eyes cloud with bloodlust and he steps toward Hawthorne, almost hypnotically. My mouth dries up.

"I don't want you to suck my cock," Hawthorne clarifies. "But we could use some help getting cleaned up."

*Holy. Fuck.*

I thought watching Seth and Draven together was erotic. But this is something else entirely. Draven getting on his knees, rather than making a crude display of dominance, is strangely heartwarming. And the unsure, but almost trusting, look in Hawthorne's face as he feeds Draven his cock is equally endearing. It's definitely not anything I ever thought I'd see in this lifetime.

"Is it weird that this is both the hottest and the sweetest thing I've ever seen?" Seth mutters next to me, and I jump. I'd been so enthralled by the action in front of me, I hadn't seen him come in.

"I was just thinking the same thing."

"Is it wrong that I hope he scrapes a tooth or something? I kind of want to see Hawthorne angry fuck Draven's face."

I roll my eyes at my dirty light mage, but then my mind flashes with images of what that would look like. I clench so hard I end up pushing some of Hawthorne's cum out of me. It trickles down my leg.

Draven finishes cleaning Hawthorne and turns to me, cocking his head like an animal as his eyes fill with the inky blackness that I know means delicious trouble.

"Bend over," he commands me. "We're going to take turns fucking you until you're so full of cum your stomach hurts. We're going to breed you so hard, that fucking tea won't be able to do shit."

## Chapter 22 - Seth

It's nice having Hawthorne back.

I feel like Draven and Calista are waiting for the other shoe to drop, but I'm enjoying these perfect days of the four of us playing house while we wait for the world to end.

Calista's period is over, and our days of "free use" have passed. It became an unspoken agreement that while she was bleeding, and Draven was in breeding mode, we could do whatever we wanted, whenever we wanted. Paired with Hawthorne missing out on so much time with her, I'm surprised she can walk right. Not that she had much chance to walk anywhere. Seemed like every other minute she was being bent over a piece of furniture, a bed, a fence, or even just thrown on the ground. And usually, if one of us walked in on someone fucking her, we either joined in or got in line. It became a game to see who could cum inside her more times a day.

My favorite part was taking her in the middle of the night and watching my cum light her up like a beacon. I liked them knowing I was there.

It's a marvel that she didn't lock us all out of Hawthorne's room, which is where we've all been sleeping together. Well, sort of. Draven doesn't really sleep, so he just kind of lurks in a corner and watches everyone like a creeper. Hawthorne is so big, there's not a lot of extra room. And it's not like a lot of sleep was to be had.

In between the marathon fucking, we talked. A lot. Hawthorne gave us a rundown of what he went through, mostly being locked inside a dark cave with no idea how much time had passed, with only Birdie as company. We laughed when we found out she'd been stealing Calista's nest snacks to bring to him.

Eventually, he opened up a little more about how much his solitary

confinement truly affected him. He talked about how much he thought of us—all of us. How it surprised him to find himself thinking of us as a unit. A family even.

Calista won't let him apologize for how he acted before she broke their bond, and neither of them has really said out loud how much it's hurting both of them. It's an unspoken understanding. Being together again seems to soothe it, but the severed connection is still affecting both of them. It's becoming more obvious now that the lust haze has faded some.

She's still sleeping now, despite it being much later in the morning than when she usually wakes. Then again, it's the first night we've given her any peace. My cock doesn't seem to understand that the game is over, and every time she shifts in bed, I get hard again. I leave the cup of tea I made her on the bedside table. I've been mixing it with apple cider instead of just plain water, and she seems to like it a lot more. It's less bitter. I wasn't sure what kind of effect the herbs might have on anyone else, but I figured they couldn't hurt me so I've been testing it. As much as I like the breeding play, I don't have any hope that *I* could impregnate her.

Hawthorne is waiting for me in the living room when I sneak out and pull the bedroom door shut behind me.

"She still sleeping?"

"Yeah, you know she's going to be mad you didn't wake her up for 'farm chores'."

He laughs. "Probably, but I made Draven help, and we got on just fine."

"Where is Draven?" I ask, following Hawthorne outside.

"Milking a goat."

"I thought all the goats were male?"

Hawthorne's face splits into a wide grin as he snorts out a loud, booming laugh. Knowing how pissed off Draven is going to be just makes it funnier,



and we're practically rolling on the ground before we can compose ourselves.

"I need your help with a little surprise for Calista."

"I'm not jerking off any chickens."

He laughs again and leads me to the barn, where there's a huge pile of lumber.

"What's all this?"

"The room is about fourteen feet across. I'm thinking we can fit two king beds pushed together across the back wall, but we're going to need a sturdy frame."

"Alright, I'm picking up what you're putting down. I like it, man," I say, thumping him on the back of the shoulder.

See? *Life is fucking perfect.*

"Hawthorne?! I'm going to kill you!"



About an hour into it, we hear Calista open the front door. Draven was tasked with distracting her so we could try to knock this out by early evening. He

was going to take her into town to a little day spa, but Hawthorne said that place is shitty and recommended a picnic and a hike to some hot springs he knows of. The reminder of our hot tub session has my cock hardening all over again. I'm sure Draven will be sure to remind her.

She'd tell him if she was tired, or sore. Right? Would she say no to us, even if she wanted to? It's something that I've worried about over the last three days, but she's always been willing and enthusiastic every time one of us would pounce on her. And you can't fake that vice grip her pussy does when she comes. *Godsdamn.*

"I don't have to be Draven to know what you're thinking about," Hawthorne says. He tries for an eye waggle, which makes it even funnier.

I swear, we're all just loved up and giddy with happiness. I really, really, don't want to burst this bubble, especially with Hawthorne. But maybe discussing the important stuff while we're all in a good mood is the best tactic.

We work in silence for a while before Hawthorne calls me out. "I can tell you've got something on your mind."

"The Council," I say. "And The Society. I wonder what they're up to."

"I've been thinking about it, too," Hawthorne admits. "I've been enjoying our little bubble a bit too much, I think. What started as a day of rest..."

"Turned into a three-day fuck fest?"

"Yeah. *Damn.* How is she still walking?"

"Right?! I thought that this morning, but then, in thinking about it, I started thinking about why I was thinking about it. And then I had to back out of the room before I violated the free use boundaries."

"I can't believe she agreed to that."

"I can. That woman is insatiable. She's fucking perfect for us."

"Ain't that the truth," Hawthorne says, handing me a glass of iced tea. It's pretty cool outside, but we're working up a sweat in this barn, even with the doors open.

We rest against the barn doors, looking out at the trees towards the area where our meadow and cave are.

"I bet they're fucking right now. And if she gets too sore, Draven can just heal her, and start all over again."

Hawthorne groans and adjusts himself. "Stop. Please. I'm going to start chafing."

"He'll heal you, too, and you know it," I say, flaunting my much more practiced eye waggle.

He laughs. "Yeah, I do. But that doesn't help me backing off Calista. That shit makes me crazy."

"Like a fucking drug, right?" I pause for a second, but then, fuck it. He's in a good mood, I can say it. "You know, you could take some of that out on the rest of us, too. Draven and I have been—"

"I noticed," he says, without judgment. "It's never been my thing, although I have to admit I didn't mind Draven cleaning me off with his mouth."

"Dude," I groan. "That man can suck a fucking dick."

"Makes sense," Hawthorne says, chuckling. And then we're back to laughing our asses off.

"You know, I'd swear someone's spiking our tea with fucking happy drugs. Like, I know we have shit to talk about and figure out, but everything seems so—"

"Floaty?"

I nod. That's a good word for it. "Like none of it is real."

"I keep thinking that maybe I'm stuck in the dreamscape again, only this time I get to live out my happiest wishes rather than my worst memories." He shudders a little.

"Draven said it was pretty rough. I didn't get the chance to tell you how sorry I am about what you went through. Then, and having to relive it like that."

"Draven?"

"Yeah. Draven went into your dreamscape to get you out. He almost got stuck in there with you. That's how he figured out that Ada was your daughter."

Over dinner the other night, Hawthorne explained he was fairly positive Ada was *his* Ada, but there are no signs that she is aware of it. She didn't recognize him at all, and didn't even seem to know that "*the* Rowan Hawthorne—wanted fugitive" is related to her.

"I didn't realize he knew."

"Honestly, I think he was really glad you mentioned it first. He was worried that, if he was wrong, he'd upset someone or make things worse. He doesn't always seem like it, but he's actually pretty aware of other people's feelings. And I think he wants your approval. I swear to god if you repeat that, I'll make sure you choke on something big and painful."

"I'm coming around. He's got some...*oddties* about him, but I don't think he's evil or anything anymore."

I nod, because that's really all we can hope for. "We're all so very different. I think we're going to butt heads sometimes, but if we do our best to give each other the benefit of the doubt and a little patience when we can spare it—I know that's hard for you grouchy fuckers—I think we'll be just fine. More importantly, we'll make her happy. Because no matter how different we are, or how much we piss each other off sometimes, she's our common ground."

"Who knew you were so deep?" Hawthorne jokes.

"Walt Whitman knew," I say, because I know that Whitman is one of Hawthorne's all-time favorite writers. He annotated *Leaves of Grass* and everything.

"Shut the fuck up."

"He had a heavy soul."



Tonight, we ate a cozy meal of homemade tomato soup and grilled cheese sandwiches, and then found ourselves huddled around the fire outside, drinking spiked hot apple cider. We laughed and shared stories about our lives, and skirted around anything heavy or sad, only choosing the good stuff and reveling in our happiness. Then we carried our dishes in and waited patiently while Calista insisted on washing the bowls instead of leaving them for tomorrow. Draven eventually got so impatient that he sped-washed the rest and threw her over his shoulder when she tried to reach for the towel to dry them.

"That's what a fucking drying rack is for," he growled when she tried to protest, which put her into a fit of giggles.

Her laughter promptly stopped when Draven deposited her in the room, and Hawthorne lit the candles. All at once, the redesigned room illuminated in a soft glow, making it look way more romantic than I thought we could pull

off.

We painted the walls a bluish grey that lightens up the room with all the dark furniture. There are two comfortable chairs and a loveseat at one end of the room, and we moved the dresser into the closet to make a little more space. There's still a chest of drawers on one side of the room near the door, and end tables at either side of the bed, which takes up one entire end of the room. Beneath the largest window is the bed we built, stained dark like the rest of the furniture, and it's piled with tons of pillows and blankets, almost enough to rival Draven's nest, which we have left intact. We figured we'd need it next month, and we even talked about giving him a day or two to adjust before we join in on the breeding fun. Neither of us expect to actually get her pregnant, but I have to admit that Draven's pheromones and drive to breed Calista definitely get to me and put me in a rutting mood.

We left the rest pretty bare, because Hawthorne thought Calista and Draven should have the opportunity to add to the decor, since this is 'our' room now.

"You like it?"

She's quiet, but I can feel how completely overwhelmed with emotion she is. She's happy—happier than she's ever been before. And so in love. With them. With me. *With us.*

"I love it," she says, her eyes brimming with tears.

I know it's more than the pretty, comfortable new room that has her so emotional. This is proof that Hawthorne has accepted all of this. He's all in, and he wanted to show her. He confided in me that he's trying to find a way to mend the bond, so he can feel her again. For now, though, he'll feel her in other ways.

I step behind Calista and wrap my arms around her. Nuzzling my nose in her hair, I lower my mouth to the shell of her ear.

"Do you want to try it out?" I ask her.

She nods.

"Are you sore?"

She shakes her head no this time.

"Are you sure? Because we can be gentle."

Draven scoffs behind me, which gets a grin out of Calista.

"He'll be gentle if I have to hold him down," Hawthorne says in a warning tone, although I know he's joking.

"Oh, Daddy, don't tease us like that," I say.

"If you keep calling me Daddy, I'll make you my bitch."

A shiver runs down my spine, and Calista's arms break out in gooseflesh.

"Look at that, Hawthorne, you're getting her all worked up."

"Behave."

"Yes, Daddy."

Hawthorne stares at me for a beat. First, I think he might punch me. Then it looks like he's doing math. His gaze shifts away from me, and I relax, unaware of how tense I'd become. He looks at Calista instead, his eyes taking in her hard nipples as I pull her sweater over her head.

"You like that?" he asks her seriously.

"I like everything," she says, her voice raspy with arousal. "But yes, I like it when you boss us around and dominate us."

Hawthorne's demeanor shifts. He points one thick finger at me and barks, "You!" in a commanding tone. Then he points his finger to the bed. "Strip and bend over. Hands on the bed. No talking."

*Fuck.*

I have to roll my lips in to stop myself from making any snarky comments. I spare a quick glance at Calista, taking in the shocked way her pupils dilate, before Hawthorne smacks my ass and sends me across the room to obey him.

I've never stripped so fast in my life. As soon as my clothes are off, I bend over at the bottom edge of the bed, hands on the mattress. I try to glance behind me, but I can't quite see what's happening. My heart is beating so hard I can't hear what they're doing, either. It's a little too quiet.

The door opens and then closes, then opens again in quick succession. Draven must have left to get something. Is it lube? Please let it be lube. I am terrified of taking that tree trunk Hawthorne calls a dick without at least a little prep work. I'm honestly not entirely sure I can take it either way. Maybe with Draven's help.

The longer no one talks to me, the more on edge I get, so when Calista steps up beside me and runs her fingers down my spine, I flinch. She giggles at my nerves.

"Sit on the bed in front of him," Hawthorne tells her. She crawls onto the bed, sitting cross-legged in front of me. I crane my neck a bit and am rewarded with a soft kiss that ends with a swipe of her tongue. My cock jerks. After a few days of instant gratification, this teasing game is harder than I'd expected.

"Spread your legs, little witch. Show your dirty angel that perfect pussy."

Calista bites her lip and complies, laying back on her elbows and spreading her thighs. *Fuck, it really is perfect.*

I don't wait for further instruction. I dip my head and lick her from ass to clit. Then I dive in, licking and sucking every bit of flesh I can reach without taking my hands off the bed. My ass is pushed up even higher than it was, and I'm acutely aware of the two dangerous ones behind me.

A hand hits my ass, hard, and my entire left cheek is hot with the impact. He repeats it on the other side, before smacking me right on the back of my balls. Heat spreads over me and I lurch forward, moaning into Calista's pussy.



Hawthorne bends over the bed, dropping a kiss on Calista's flushed forehead before giving his next instructions. "Hold on to his hair and fuck yourself on his face while Draven takes his ass. Seth, I hear you're good at controlling yourself. So no coming until you're told. Understood?"

I lift my face an inch above Calista's dark pink flesh. "Yes, Daddy."

There's another smack on my ass before something drips down my crack and Draven's cock thrusts home. FUCK. At least he used lube, but—

Wait. That's not lube. That telltale tingle runs up my spine and takes hold of my cock in an impossibly tight grip of pleasure. Two seconds in and I'm already desperate to come.

"That's cheating," I say in an expel of air, as Draven pulls out and thrusts into me again.

"That mouth should be busy," Hawthorne warns before he stalks over to me, grabs the back of my neck, and pushes it into Calista's pussy. He doesn't let go until her hand is tangled in my hair and her hips are rocking against my face.

"More, beauty. Fucking drown him." Draven says from behind me, panting as he fucks me into her.

Her grip tightens, and with every thrust of Draven's cock, I'm propelled forward. My groans are muffled in Calista's pussy, and I spear her with my tongue, thrusting into her as he thrusts into me. As her moans get higher, her grip gets tighter, until she's fucking herself against my tongue. She comes apart, loosening her hold on my head as she trembles. I latch on to her clit and suck until she screams and she floods my face with a jet of hot cum.

Simultaneously, as if they'd planned it, Draven pulls me away from Calista and over to the side. He lays me on my back while Hawthorne positions Calista on her hands and knees, her pussy hovering over my face.

"Hold these," Draven tells her, and she steadies herself by pressing my knees on either side of my chest. From my vantage point, I can see Hawthorne's

huge cock push into her dripping wet pussy, spreading her apart. A drop of wetness lands on my face and my hips buck, desperate for relief.

"You can't come until she's on number three," Hawthorne says, pulling out and pushing back in.

I watch, transfixed, as his cock moves in and out of her, slowly at first, and then faster. Every time his pelvis slaps against her ass, I get closer to the point of no return. And then Draven returns his cock to my ass, and we're all a mass of writhing, sweaty bodies. I'm holding my breath with the effort of holding back my orgasm, but Draven's cock keeps hitting that spot inside me and I'm starting to see stars.

When Calista climaxes the second time, I have a closeup view of her juices spraying out around Hawthorne's thick cock.

"Fuck. I can't." This is torture, and I cannot physically hold back any longer. My cock is leaking in rivulets that pool up on my stomach.

Draven reaches forward and grabs Calista by the back of her neck, lowering her head down to my lap.

"Oh, fuck yes," I say, and then realize. "Oh, fuck no. No no no. Fuuuuuuccckkkkkkkk."

The rest of my cursing is unintelligible. Calista's mouth wraps around my cock, her tongue twirling through the mess that is leaking from the tip. Then she takes me deep, and the moment my cock hits the back of her throat, it's over for me.

I cum, hard, and I lean up and lick the space where Calista and Hawthorne are joined together. Calista screams, choking on the cum shooting into her throat. Hawthorne grunts. Draven roars and speeds up his thrusts.

There's cum fucking everywhere. And blood, because apparently Draven bit her while she was sucking my cock and now he's coming like a firehose, so when he pulls out, it's leaking out of me like a river. My cum is coating my stomach, mixed with blood from Calista's shoulder. Her cum, mixed with

Hawthorne's, is dripping onto my face. When Hawthorne pulls out of her, I pull her ass down so she's sitting on my face, and slurp every last bit of their cum out of her sweet pussy until she's shattering all over my face once more.

Hawthorne has to physically lift her off me when we're finally done, as boneless as she is.

"It wouldn't have been a bad way to go."

## Chapter 23 - Calista

Seth brings us breakfast in bed, and after Hawthorne and Draven do the farm chores, they come back to bed and we all lounge until late morning. Birdie even joins us when we open the window, and she perches on the sill eating a little bowl of dry cereal.

It's wonderful, and I never want life to be any more than exactly this. But it's time to address the elephant in the room.

"What are we thinking about Ada and The Council?"

I know Hawthorne is feeling guilty about her not knowing who she is to him. None of us are sure what the best way would be to address it, but we can't just ignore it, and we need to do something about The Sanctum Society. Originally, I'd thought that once we got in touch with The Council, they would be the ones to take over and fix things. But now that I've seen them in action, I'm thinking it's more the other way around.

"They won't be able to stop them without our help," Draven says, agreeing with my thoughts.

Hawthorne sighs.

Seth speaks up. "We should meet with them on neutral ground, sit down and talk it all out. This isn't the same Council that was in place when shit went down—"

"Except for Sloan," Hawthorne corrects.

"Right, except for him. But the rest of them seemed okay."

I nod in agreement. Heather and Ada seemed like they were fairly reasonable. Brenna too, probably. I didn't get a great read on Rayne. "Marcus could be a

problem," I point out. Hawthorne grunts, and I can almost guess what he's thinking. Marcus is a lot like him. But he came around, so it's not impossible. "It could be a matter of simply opening up and having a conversation."

"At the very least, I think we have three out of six for sure that we can work with. It's worth a try," Seth says. I smile at him. Our diplomat.

"Maybe you should be an Elder," I tell him. His mouth quirks.

"How do we even get a message to them?" Draven asks.

"We can use a spell," Hawthorne says. "It's a cross between a locator spell and scrying, but you can send a message that will appear on anything you add your intent to. The message could show up on a wall or mirror, or a piece of paper if you know for sure it's there."

"How can we guarantee they saw it?" Seth asks.

Hawthorne shrugs. "Ask them to call us? I doubt they're powerful enough to send the message back."

Birdie squawks, and I grin.

"I have a better idea."



"What is this place again?"

"It's one of their safe houses," Hawthorne answers, smirking a little. "It's my way of keeping our spaces safe, and letting them know that there's nowhere they'll be safe if they fuck us over."

"Fair enough," I say, sitting down on the small sofa. We moved all the dining room chairs in here so everyone will have a place to sit. Their safe house isn't very large, just a small one bedroom cabin with a questionable shed out back that Draven said smelled like old blood.

We sent the message yesterday as soon as we decided to move forward. We've wasted too much time recovering and enjoying each other's company. But the reminders of what The Sanctum Society did to both me and Hawthorne, plus who knows how many others, are still too strong in our minds to give it a rest for long. We've been paying attention to the news, and Seth checked some internet forums in a local library, and there don't seem to be any more kidnappings or odd mass hospital breakouts. That there hasn't been any unusual activity doesn't mean they aren't up to something, though, and in fact, it scares me more. There's always a calm before a storm.

Birdie returned to us with a note from Heather, who said she would meet us today at the coordinates we gave her. They should be here any minute.

Restless, I get up and pace the room. There's very little in the way of decoration, but I notice a small framed photograph on the mantle. I pick it up to wipe the dust from it, and the room spins. I suddenly feel like I'm falling backwards, and everything around me shifts.

*A little girl, with blonde hair and brown eyes, crying. A tall, thin man telling her he's her father now.*

*"You obey me, now."*

*A flash forward to the same girl, a little older, getting her ass kicked by a familiar face—Marcus. He helps her off the floor and gives her instructions, telling her to guard her face and look for an opening. The thin man stands behind them, tells Marcus he's too easy on the girl.*

*Another lesson, and the thin man is sending fireballs at the girl, who is maybe ten years old now. She no longer looks sad or lost, but blank faced and determined.*

*Everything he throws at her, she endures. She never falters, never argues, never fights back. Like a little robot with blonde curls and deep, honey brown eyes.*

*The timeline speeds up, and I see her attending a brutal operative training camp, where she comes home abused and traumatized. He calls her weak when she fails to kill someone during a training exercise. The next time, she doesn't hesitate, and the girl becomes a murderer.*

*She falls in love, but the thin man that calls himself her father doesn't approve. "She's not one of us," he spits at her. So she drops the girlfriend without a single protest, although the heartbreak is apparent.*

*The girl becomes a woman, lonely and jaded and completely dedicated to the cause, because it's all she has. She listens to her so-called father without question, and puts herself in danger.*

*The last memory is him showing up here, at this house, and giving her the assignment to join The Sanctum Society. She's worried about being found out, but he tells her he wants her to expose herself, let them use her for her powers. She doesn't argue, only nods and starts packing, knowing without a doubt that her so-called father doesn't give a damn about whether she lives or dies. All he cares about is that she helps The Sanctum Society find "the answer" before they take them down.*

*The last vision isn't in this house at all, but somewhere outside. There are tall trees encircling a small clearing. Ada is being held against the tree, choking, some invisible force crushing her throat.*

*"You failed. Everything I invested in you was a waste."*

*The tall, thin man sneers up at her, his eyes glowing red, as he closes his fist.*

*I drop to the ground, clutching my burning throat as I force ragged breaths to*

inflate my lungs. Coughing, sputtering, and crying, it takes a moment for the black spots that mar my vision to clear and my breath to return. Hawthorne holds me against his chest, stroking my hair.

Draven and Seth burst into the small house, frantically looking around until their eyes settle on me.

They both speak at once, huddling in and each getting a hand on me. I hold up a hand, not wanting them to worry despite not having the ability to speak, but I feel immensely better once all three of them are touching me.

They all talk at once.

"What happened?"

"Who did this?"

"What did you see?" asks Hawthorne after a beat. He's the only one that saw me collapse, so he's the only one that knows I'm not in any danger.

"I saw Ada," I say, feeling a little awkward. "I saw her life. Her childhood. She lived in this house." I hand him the picture, a small wallet sized framed photo with a high school graduation photo.

The girl in the picture, who became the fierce woman that somehow overpowered my beast of a lumberjack mage, looks small and dejected in the photo. There's a smile on her face, but it doesn't meet her eyes.

Hawthorne's eyes water. As sad as I am for that woman, I can only imagine what it feels like knowing that not only did you miss your child's entire life, but that their childhood was terrible.

I clear my sore throat. "I saw her death," I tell him, my eyes burning with tears. I don't need to say that I didn't just see her death, I felt it. I felt the force of that evil man's magic crush her throat.

Hawthorne looks like he might be sick.

"Then we'll do everything in our power to prevent it," Seth says firmly.



Draven's head turns, listening to something only his ears can pick up.

"They're here."

Hawthorne pockets the photo, and we all stand. I straighten my clothes and pull back my sweaty hair. This isn't a meeting I want to go into looking weak.

We stand on the front porch and watch them approach the clearing. Hawthorne put up wards, and they're forced to stand at the edge of their own property until he lets them down. It's not until Ada, who was standing at the back of the small group, moves forward that he lets them enter.

Seth meets them halfway, and from the outside we must look like enemies ready to face off.

"We'll all do well to remember that we're here just to talk. To help each other." He looks at the five people staring warily at Hawthorne and me. "Not to be immodest, but in this exchange, I feel like we have more to offer, and also more to lose. I would like your word that your intentions towards my family are good, and I'd also like to warn you we will not react positively if you lie to us."

"What does that mean?" Marcus asks, and I'm secretly pleased to see that his right eye is bruised and swollen from his tussle with Hawthorne.

"Don't fuck with us, or I'll pull your hearts from your chest and eat them," Draven says calmly, nonchalantly blowing on the sharp, black claws that he let out. His smile could be almost friendly if not for the glint of his fangs.

Hawthorne chuckles. "Down, boy. I'm sure everyone is ready for a nice, friendly chat."

Draven shrugs and moves inside. Hawthorne follows him, and Seth brings up the rear of The Council.

I smile apologetically at Heather as they walk up onto the porch, letting her kiss me on both cheeks, but scowl at Marcus. I level him with a hard gaze.

"If you fuck with my mate, I won't need the shade to pull out your heart and crush it. I won't even need my hands."

He swallows and looks at Heather.

"No funny business," she says. "We all swear it."

I give them my brightest smile. "Well, alright then. I hope you don't mind. I moved some furniture around so we could all sit comfortably. And I made tea."

The atmosphere is tense and awkward as we take our seats. I don't miss that the four of us sit on one side, the five of them facing us. They're all staring at Hawthorne, except Marcus, who is staring daggers at Draven. This feels too much like a clash of enemies when we're supposed to be working together.

"I'd like to start by apologizing," I say. "I realize that infiltrating your safe house, the wards, and the threats probably don't come across as friendly as we mean to be. We honestly believe we can help each other achieve a common goal."

Heather smiles warmly. "You've all been through a lot, and we handled our first meeting poorly. I'm afraid to say it might have been worse if we knew who you were," she admits to Hawthorne.

"I don't have the best reputation with The Council. I don't know what you've heard, but I'm sure most of it is true."

I roll my eyes at him and mouth, *not helping!*

"Can you tell us what happened?" Heather asks. Apparently, she's going to be the voice of the group, which is okay with me. She definitely seems the most levelheaded of them. "The Council has been mostly dissolved for many years. Other than Sloan, none of us were here back then. All we really know is that you brutally killed a council member, then went into hiding."

"All true," Hawthorne says.

Draven stares at him incredulously. "Seriously?"

Hawthorne shrugs.

I sigh loudly. "What you don't know is *why* he did what he did." I hold up my hand when Hawthorne tries to protest. "If we expect them to trust us, they need to know the truth. Please."

He finally nods, and I turn back to The Council knowing he needs me to be the one to tell the story.

"The Council spent a very long time trying to recruit Hawthorne, and at one point they sent a council member to convince him to join them. Hawthorne, despite his reservations, allowed the council member to stay with them, to live in their house, until it became clear the man wasn't trustworthy." I pause for a moment, unsure how to proceed with such a sensitive subject.

"The Council member was a shade. He slaughtered Hawthorne's entire family when he felt like Hawthorne disrespected him," Draven says bluntly.

The current council members look appalled, except for maybe Marcus. He just looks uncomfortable. Heather and Rayne both gasp. Brenna swallows, looking horrified. I notice Hawthorne staring at Ada, which is probably making her uncomfortable.

"Tell her," I whisper.

"Tell me what?" Ada asks, returning Hawthorne's stare.

Hawthorne looks back at me. After everything we've been through, I've never seen true fear in his eyes. The frayed edges of our bond flare with our combined heartache.

Seth places a hand on Hawthorne's shoulder, and I can feel his calm comfort radiating through the room. Hawthorne's shoulders drop, relaxing a fraction before he finally turns to confront Ada.

## Chapter 24 - Hawthorne

Seth offers me a wave of support, and I absorb it greedily. Some of the tension releases from my shoulders and neck, and I'm able to take a breath.

"My family that was murdered—it was my wife, Della. My son Rowan. And my three-year-old little girl, named Ada."

Everyone is so silent, it's like all the oxygen has been sucked out of the room. Ada's brow furrowed when I mentioned my little girl's name, but I know that's not enough to explain. It's not exactly an uncommon name.

Calista squeezes my hand, giving me the strength to continue. "I did not have the chance to bury my family. I...I lost myself. I was so consumed with pain and rage, I couldn't see anything except my vengeance for the one that took my family from me. I didn't just get my revenge. I destroyed that man, that monster."

My eyes briefly flick up to Draven, but he's avoiding my gaze. I think, I hope, he knows I don't consider him to be of the same ilk as the shade that massacred my family.

"The Council came after me, and I believed—I still believe—that they expected me to answer for the crime of killing one of their own and use it against me. "

"That's unfair. Anyone in your circumstances would have sought revenge, and rightfully so. I don't understand why The Council would seek to punish you," Heather says.

"They'd been trying to get me, or rather my magic, on The Council since I came of age, and by that point, it seemed they weren't beyond any type of coercion. I know they searched for me, tried to contact me, for many years. I only recently learned what they planned on using against me next."

"And what is that?" Heather asks, her face wary, unsure if she wants to know the answer. Ada looks ill, looking down at her lap and picking at her fingernails as if she senses something big coming, but I know she still has no idea.

"As it turns out, my daughter survived."

My eyes bore into Ada's face, long and hard enough that she tips her head up to look at me. Her brown eyes, so like my own, stare back with confusion. With trembling hands, I pull a wallet out of my back pocket. Tucked in the back, folded and weathered with age, is a photo. It had been taken only a few months before the murderous monster came into our lives. There was a town festival, and we're all dressed in coordinating blue plaid for the family photos that Della had insisted on. She'd wanted to do more formal pictures, but I hate all that stuffy crap, so we compromised. She looks beautiful in her long sleeve, knee length black dress with the plaid peeking out of the neckline and hem. Rowan and I are both wearing dark jeans and matching button shirts in the same plaid as Della's dress. And on my knee is little Ada, wearing a tiny copy of her mother's outfit, except she'd insisted on wearing her bright neon green rain boots.

Looking at the picture with Ada sitting right in front of me, comparing her face to Della's, there is truly no question. So when I lay the picture on the coffee table and slide it over, I'm not surprised by Heather's sharp intake of breath.

Brenna, Marcus, and Rayne push off their seats to lean over the coffee table to see what I've shared.

"Is that?" Rayne starts.

"That's not possible," Ada interrupts. "Sloan Benoit is my father."

I can't help but scoff, which definitely doesn't help the tension in the room.

Calista scoots forward a little, looking at Ada with knowing sympathy. "Sloan raised you and called himself your father. But Hawthorne and Della were your true parents."

"Why would he lie?" Ada challenges, and it's clear that she doesn't want to believe what she's seeing. She hasn't tried to touch the photo, only stares at it warily.

"He never did like me much," I say, which is putting it lightly. Sloan Benoit, a mage from southern Louisiana, loathed me. He always seemed threatened by my magic, and I got the feeling he enjoyed being the only male on The Council. Since there were so few of us with any real power, he was all but venerated. The other members wanting to recruit me must have felt like a challenge to a man that always seemed so full of himself.

In our few face-to-face interactions, he acted as though my wanting to live a simple life made *me* simple, and yet took offense to me not wanting anything to do with The Council. My continued dismissal of their offers escalated his anger, and he accused me of thinking I was better than them, when really I just wanted to live in peace. I also didn't agree with many of The Council's actions, and their aggressive recruitment tactics just repelled me even more.

"What happened to the rest of The Council members?" Draven asks suddenly. Everyone turns their head to him, curious about his sudden outburst. "Heather mentioned that, except for Sloan, none of you were on The Council back then. Where are the rest of The Council members that were in place back before all hell broke loose?"

"I don't remember there being any record of a shade being on The Council. It's always been strictly witches. I don't even know of any recordings of there being more than one male on The Council until recently. That would have stood out as well," Heather muses. "Sloan has been in charge for as long as I've been part of The Council. I was the first replacement to the members that died before I came on."

"I thought there were always five sitting members." I say, trying to recall the women that sat on The Council with Sloan. "What happened to Annaleigh and Mattea? The shade, his name was Silas Romero. He took the place that was opened by a witch named Renee, who was so ancient I assumed she died of natural causes."

"They died from an unknown infectious illness they caught while on a

mission. Mattea Albright was a pretty powerful healer, but not strong enough to save herself or anyone else in the small town that was overtaken by the outbreak of some nasty plague. It was one of the last all magic settlements on the East Coast. Hell, one of only a handful left on the continent."

"What town?" I ask, my fists clenching.

"Somewhere in the Outer Banks?"

*Shit.*

"Both women succumbed to the illness. Nearly the whole town was wiped out. Sloan had to go into quarantine and almost died himself, if I remember correctly."

"Forgive me for asking," Seth interrupts. "I know that looks can be deceiving, but you don't seem old enough to have been around to remember something that happened thirty years ago."

Heather laughs lightly. "I wasn't. None of us were, actually. I'm kind of the historian of the group."

"Me too," he says, smiling kindly. "So how long have you all been on The Council with Sloan, then?"

"Brenna and I were recruited around the same time, less than a year apart, twelve years ago, was it?" Brenna nods. "Rayne came on a couple of years after that. And Marcus has only been with us for two." At the mention of Marcus, I notice Ada stiffen.

"Who recruited you?" I ask, although I feel like I already know.

"Sloan. He's been on a mission to rebuild The Council to its former glory. He's a history buff, too, I guess. Talks a lot about restoring us to the power The Council held a century or more ago."

"Where is he now?" Draven asks.

"No one has heard from him in months, and any locator spells we've tried

have been blocked. I believe he's alive, but unreachable. I worry that he might have been captured like you were," Brenna admits.

Ada shakes her head. "I would have heard about it if they had another powerful mage. The Society was in a tizzy over getting their hands on Hawthorne. The Grand Master was even flying in on a private plane, with an expert of some sort. It's what gave me the window to get us out."

"Thanks for that, by the way," I say, hoping she'll look me in the eye. She finally looks up at me, if only briefly. "You look so much like your mother," I say, my voice almost cracking with the emotion I feel being in the same room as her.

She moves her eyes away from me and back to the picture. Slowly, she reaches a hand out and slides it closer to her. Her voice comes out softer than I've heard it before. "I do look like her."

"You have Hawthorne's eyes," Calista adds softly. Ada doesn't reply, and there are a few moments of silence before Calista moves on. "I know this must be such a shock—"

"How is it that you're so sure?" Ada interrupts, before shaking her head. "I'm sorry. I just don't see how this is possible."

Calista looks at me, unsure, and I give her a sharp nod. I don't like any part of this, but Ada needs to know what Calista saw. Especially after what I just heard about the gaps in their records and the other council members dying. It seems that Sloan managed to take over The Council, and how convenient it is that the rest of the council women died of a mysterious plague that wiped out my hometown after I escaped them.

"I'm a Seer," Calista says. "And I had a vision when we got here. Most of it looked to be snippets of your upbringing, your training. I know you lived in this safe house, and were alone most of the time. I know about Daria." Ada's shoulders and face stiffen, like the mere mention of the name is a sore spot. Or like she's trying to deny she has feelings regarding the matter. "I also saw some of what I think could be the future."



Ada's forehead creases, breaking her mask of indifference. She looks equal part curious, worried, and like she doesn't quite believe what Calista is telling her.

"I think I should show you," Calista says gently. "I feel it might be the only way you'll believe me. But also, you should know that this isn't pleasant. No part of this is pleasant."

"I can handle pain," Ada says, lifting her chin.

"I know you can. I've seen it." Calista gives her a sad smile. "But the heartbreak of knowing that the one person who is supposed to care for you most has betrayed you and put you in danger is a different kind of pain."

"You say that like you've been there."

Calista turns her pale eyes on me. They're cloudy with tears. "On both sides, unfortunately." My hand strokes her shoulder, wordlessly reminding her that I've already forgiven her.

Ada nods and stands. She walks around the coffee table and sits on the edge, right in front of Calista.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," says Marcus, shooting to his feet. "Hold on there, I don't like this. How do we know this is safe?"

"I trust her," Heather says. "Them," she amends, realizing that she left the rest of us out. It's nice to know it wasn't intentional. I feel like Heather is probably the most useful and trustworthy person in the group right now.

"Then you're an idiot," Marcus says snidely. "She could fry her brain."

"I could fry all of your brains without lifting a finger," Calista says, and I hold back a laugh at her bravado.

"It's true," Ada says. "I've seen it."

Marcus sputters. "Sloan wouldn't—"

"Sloan isn't here. And from the pieces of what we learned today, we might be better off," Heather interrupts in a clipped tone. *Yep, I knew I liked her.*

"I'm basically incapable of lying," Seth says. "Admittedly, I'm pretty good at beating around the bush and finding a way around explicit untruths." I roll my eyes at the hole Seth digs for himself. He's lucky he's so damn likable. It's a useful power. "But I can tell you without any doubt that Calista has no intentions of hurting anyone here that doesn't explicitly want to be hurt." He smirks at Draven for good measure.

One of the other women makes an odd, surprised choking sound and we all look at her.

"Sorry. I just... You're really with them all?" Rayne asks timidly. "I'm sorry if that's too personal. I was just curious and I shouldn't have even opened my mouth." The mousy woman turns almost the color of Brenna's hair.

Seth, Draven, and I all burst out laughing. Calista smiles and shrugs.

"Told you so," Ada chirps.

"First of all, you should be ashamed of yourself, sitting there looking proud that you open your legs for a bunch of monsters," Marcus spits, pointing down at Calista.

The three of us stop laughing immediately, each of us standing to our full heights. Seth is closest to Marcus, and despite him being a pretty happy-go-lucky guy, he's intimidating as fuck when he's looking down at someone like he's about to suck out their soul through their eyeballs. Draven moves in a blur, standing close behind the idiot mage. He doesn't say a word, but I can see Marcus's skin break out in goosebumps from here. I don't move from Calista's side, but stare at Marcus like I could set his insides on fire the way Calista can.

Despite looking like he might piss himself, Marcus keeps on. "Your entire relationship goes against nature and protocol. We keep the mage lines separate for a reason. It's dangerous and unnatural."

Draven growls, and Marcus flinches away, nearly bumping into Seth. Instead of bumping into him, though, he goes right through him and lands face first on the floor, almost at Calista and Ada's feet where he fucking belongs.

"Get out," Ada tells him, standing up to push him away with her boot.

"I don't answer to you, I answer to your father. And he's not going to like this one bit. There's a reason Rowan Hawthorne is at the top of our most wanted list, and that's because he's dangerous. Buddying up to his...consort," he spits, "won't win you any favors."

"Well then, why don't you slither off and find him? Let him know we have some questions for him," Brenna says, standing with her arms crossed in front of her. Heather stands next to her in a similar pose. Rayne doesn't look as fierce or convinced, but the look she gives Marcus suggests she'd rather swallow nails than side with him. She stands behind the other women.

Never mind Seth, Draven, and me. This asshole is surrounded by five angry witches, two of whom definitely have some power at their disposal. And one who could best us all.

"Get. Out." Ada repeats, and the door slams open as all the women of The Council point towards the exit.

Marcus shuffles to his feet and goes to leave, but turns back. "I can't even get back to headquarters without you all," he says indignantly.

Calista makes a show of rolling her eyes and huffing before waving a hand. A portal opens behind Marcus, which he gapes at for a few seconds, until Heather blows, sending a gust of wind enough to knock him back into the ripple of space. The portal snaps shut immediately behind him. Calista giggles, and I look down at her curiously.

"I sent him to the base of the mountain. You'll all probably make it back before he hikes his way up there."

All the women laugh and relax considerably now that douchebag is gone.

"I take it we don't like that guy?" Seth asks, as if he's here to gossip with his girlfriends.

"He's kind of a skeeve," Rayne says.

"And he's always had an issue with Ada. Probably because of his insecurities about his pathetic magical abilities."

"And yet Sloan put *him* on The Council," Ada says, clearly angered by it.

"After all you've done for The Council and all that training," Calista says incredulously.

Ada snaps her head back to look at Calista. I guess in the excitement, she'd forgotten what she was over here for.

She nods curtly. "Let's do this."

## Chapter 25 - Calista

"I need to touch you in some way."

"What, like a mind meld?" Ada asks with a lifted eyebrow.

Hawthorne chuckles next to me. "It's from a television show," he explains at my curious look. "It's about space travelers. One of the species of people have telepathic abilities, and they have to touch the other person's forehead with theirs to join their minds together."

"That's a pretty simplistic explanation, but I suppose it's good enough," Ada answers, earning a lopsided grin from Hawthorne.

"Oh wow, who would've guessed Mage Daddy is a nerd," Seth jokes.

"Geek," Ada corrects. "There's a difference."

Hawthorne looks like his face might split in half.

"That's just unnatural," Draven mutters, looking at Hawthorne's smile with a shudder.

"Alright, alright," I say, breaking up the love fest, even though it's kind of precious. "We need to get this over with," I tell Ada seriously, pleading with my eyes not to hate me when this is over.

Ada nods and rolls her shoulders, holding her hands out. "I'm ready."

I reach out and take her hands in mine. Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath and focus on the memories that I want to share with her.

More quickly than I thought, her hands tighten on mine as my head feels like it's reeling backwards.

Before I can quite get a hold of my focus to send Ada the images I mean to share with her, I'm spun into a different memory. The vision pulls me down like quicksand.

*A dark room. It smells of blood and death. A shadowy form hovering above her, forcing his wrist against her mouth. It tastes bad and the little girl fights and chokes, but the more blood fills her mouth, the more her little body tingles and fills with life again.*

*"You're lucky I was already on my way," a woman's voice says. "Much longer and not even I could bring her back, even by turning her."*

*"If you'd gotten here faster, you could have helped take down Rowan Hawthorne and had your fun instead."*

*There's more conversation, but I can't make out anything but the rumble of their voices. Ada closes her eyes and submits to the exhaustion of her tiny body healing itself.*

*The little girl with blonde hair and big brown eyes wakes up in a strange room. It's cold, empty, and sterile. The walls are a pale grey cinder block with no decorations or adornments. There is only a hospital bed, and some medical equipment around her head. There are no windows, and the dark blue metal door sounds heavy when it's pushed open.*

*The tall man that I now know as Sloan Benoit walks into the room, assessing the tiny girl with cold eyes.*

*"I feel all better now," she says in a small voice. "Can I go home to my mommy and daddy?"*

*"I've already explained to you why that can't happen. Your mother is dead, and your father abandoned you. You will stay here with The Council."*

*"But, my dadd—"*

*"I am your father now, Ada." Something heavy settles in the air, the influence of a compulsive power filling the room.*

"Y-you?"

*"Yes. I am your father, and you will obey me."*

*The little girl's eyes fill with frightened tears, but her tiny pupils constrict and she nods as if in a trance.*

*I'm sucked through a barrage of clips from her life, some of which were in my vision from earlier. I see them in a different light, noticing this time how all of his instructions are laced with power, until she's older. By then, she was trained to shield her mind, but was already all but brainwashed, conditioned to agree and obey.*

Finally, we reach the vision I had of her death, and my hands grip hers, wanting to both hold her in place and comfort her. She's not alone, and we'll do everything in our power to help her. But she needs to see.

I do my best to absorb the physical effects of the vision, but Ada is still left gasping and in tears when I finally release her. I push Hawthorne to her while I allow Seth to comfort me. I'm not as panicked the second time, since I knew what to expect, but the pain still takes far too long to recede and it's hard to catch my breath. Seth's warm waves of comfort soothe me while he runs his fingers through my hair and over my face and neck, as if looking for any physical evidence of my injuries.

"I'm okay," I rasp, pulling myself together as best I can so I can focus on Ada.

She's holding an arm out, forcing Hawthorne to keep his distance. The tracks on her face are evidence of the tears that have already fallen, but she's steeled herself. Her eyes are focused on the floor, moving and blinking rapidly as she tries to process everything that just happened.

Brenna places a hand on Hawthorne's arm, which threatens to distract me from the more important issue at hand.

"The first vision of you in the hospital. I didn't mean to go there without permission. The vision just pulled me that way. I'm not very practiced," I

admit, tearing my eyes away from where the woman is touching my mage.

"All of that was real," Ada says, her voice rough with tears that she won't allow to fall. Her shoulders straighten as she takes me in. "I don't remember that day in the hospital. I was too young. I could almost believe you fabricated those visions, except all those flashes of my life, of growing up. I remember all of that. I didn't realize he'd been compelling me the entire time."

"Sloan doesn't have compulsion abilities," Brenna says, pulling her hand back when she notices me staring. "Or at least I didn't think he did."

"I think there's a lot we don't know about Sloan," Heather says, sitting back in her chair.

Draven is standing by the living room window, looking out into the woods as if deep in thought. "Compulsion is usually a blood mage trait. I've only ever met shades with this ability, and real compulsion is uncommon even then."

"Do you mind if I share some of what I saw with Draven?" I ask Ada, who furrows her brow. "Specifically, the first part of the vision, of when you were being healed?"

Ada nods, and I expect she understands why I want to share with Draven. The only people who can heal with blood magic are shades. I wish I could get in deeper to hear the rest of their conversation, but it's miraculous that Ada's subconscious held on to even that snippet.

"So he was working with more than one shade," Draven says after I show him what I saw and we explain the vision to the rest of the room. "What's even more odd is that he seemed to have influence over them, or spoke as if he were their superior. Shades rarely adhere to any sort of organized hierarchy," he explains. "Unlike the witches or the brights, there isn't a council or group of elders helping to make decisions. Whoever is the oldest, strongest, richest, and usually the cruelest shade in the room is the only one that can give orders. And we typically take deep offense to being told what to do, even by our betters."



"That checks," Hawthorne mutters, and I kick him in the shin. "What?"

Draven pulls a middle finger out of the front of his pants and Seth snorts, giving me a knowing look. We're both thankful those two are getting along well enough that they can joke at each other's expense without starting a brawl.

"I've always wondered why the witches would allow a shade to be on The Council," Hawthorne says, returning to the topic at hand.

"What you really should have been concerned with is why a shade would want to be on The Council at all," Draven finishes for him. "And after what I've just seen, why they would agree to be talked down to by a sniveling asshole like Sloan? Silas was one of the most powerful shades I've ever met."

"You knew him?" Hawthorne asks.

"Unfortunately," Draven answers. "I recognized him in your dreamscape. He was the one that turned me."

I gasp, knowing what kind of evil that man was capable of, the torture that Draven lived through in his early years. Hawthorne and Seth both stare at Draven with a mixture of pity and incredulity.

"We've had a lot going on. It didn't seem like pertinent information." Draven shrugs, and I marvel at the change in him. Him feeling the need to explain why he didn't bring it up before shows he's really trying to be part of this team.

Seth steps over to Draven and wraps an arm around his shoulders, pulling him in for a hug. Draven rolls his eyes and pushes him away. "Why?"

"I dunno," Seth answers with a shrug. "I think I'd need a hug if I had to see or hear about someone that literally kept you captive to use and abuse you for decades."

"I'm fine," Draven drawls. Then he looks over at Hawthorne. "I suppose I owe you one, though. And at least I got to watch his head removed from his

body in glorious fashion." Draven's eyes cut over to Ada and then back to Hawthorne, his voice taking on a more somber tone. "But I'm sorry that I didn't manage to do it myself before he did that to your family."

"If it wasn't him, it might have been someone else. It sounds like Sloan sent him on purpose."

Ada hasn't said much. She's still looking at the ground, deep in thought. I can't imagine how much she has to process.

"Even just talking about all of this, laying it out the way we have—something's not right. And it all traces back to Sloan," Heather says, mostly to herself.

Hawthorne holds his arms up in a gesture of smug irritation. "Finally, you people see it too." Oh, my surly mage.

Of course *now* they see the obvious trajectory that their precious council has taken since Sloan somehow seized control. How could they not? When you lay all the facts out on the table, like Heather said, it all links up a little too obviously.

"If it's alright with you," Seth says to Heather, Brenna, and Rayne, "I'd like access to whatever records you have. We might be able to use them to establish a more conclusive timeline and get some answers."

The women look at each other and nod, each confirming their agreement.

"If The Council is to maintain any semblance of integrity, we need to confirm and expel any threats. We need to figure out what Sloan is up to, and if he is responsible for the deaths of council members in an attempt to take over, he needs to answer for those crimes."

"I have a feeling he has a lot more than just their deaths to answer for," Hawthorne says quietly.

## Chapter 26 - Draven

"How much of an issue do you think Marcus is going to be?" I ask as we all step through Hawthorne's portal outside the wards of The Council headquarters.

"I'm not really sure," Brenna admits. She seems to be the one that is most comfortable with my presence, although none of the other women are being obvious about their trepidations. Everyone's being awfully polite with each other for the time being, especially now that we've agreed to work with each other. They're all being welcoming and friendly, but keeping their distance as we walk up the steps to enter the house.

I perk up in surprise when I walk through the wards without issue. My gaze jerks to Heather, who dips her chin respectfully in my direction. I can't say that I've ever had anyone not just treat me kindly after knowing what I am, but actually show me overt respect. I'm afraid my attitude towards her gesture is disappointing, because although I recognize how big the gesture is, I'm honestly not sure how to react to it.

Heather doesn't seem put off by my subdued reaction though, and returns to discussing what kind of wards she uses with Hawthorne. He seems impressed, which strikes me as a bit arrogant, but honestly, as a whole, The Council is pretty underwhelming. From what I always understood, The Council were the people that had the most power. I realize that magic is in severe decline, but I would have thought that they'd be able to pull together a little more than this ragtag group.

Then again, if Sloan killed off the actual power and manipulated some lower-level witches into doing his dirty work, that would certainly benefit whatever his power-hungry agenda is.

"Why aren't you on The Council?" I ask bluntly, jarring Ada out of her quiet introspection. She hasn't spoken much since the revelations made back at

their safe house.

"Because Sloan didn't want me there," she says. "I was more effective on the ground where he could control me." Her voice is flat and devoid of emotion, but I know from experience that she's probably feeling the opposite on the inside.

"Well, he sounds like a real asshole to me," I say, and leave her to her thoughts. I think I hear her mutter "understatement" under her breath as I walk away.

I join Calista in the kitchen, where she is helping herself to a glass of water. Her eyes are locked on Hawthorne, Rayne, and Brenna while they congregate around the dining table. Heather and Seth went to the library, where all their records are kept in spelled safes. They return carrying a few stacks of old, leather-bound books with loose pages sticking out. Heather seems to set hers down a little too heavily, which gets everyone's attention.

"I've been advocating for a better records system since I arrived, but Sloan has kept me pretty busy with other tasks. I have a feeling that might have been purposeful, because I was noticing gaps in the records," Heather says as Seth and Hawthorne get to work looking through the records.

Brenna volunteers to patrol the grounds, since we're all waiting to see how Marcus reacts to us being back here and working together. Her hand lingers on Hawthorne's shoulder while she tells everyone where she's going, as if he specifically might be interested to know where she'll be.

"I'll follow you out for a minute. We should discuss the wards," Heather says.

"I'll walk the perimeter with you," Rayne calls. "Just going to start some coffee."

"Good idea," Heather says, pushing a disappointed looking Brenna out the front door.

"You okay?" I ask Calista in a whisper, keeping our conversation just to ourselves.

"I'm worried about Ada," she answers. But I know it's more than that.

"Hawthorne isn't interested in her."

Her eyes flash to mine. *Stay out of my head.*

*If you put your shields up, I'll bend you over and fuck you in front of everyone until you drop them again.* I warn her, responding to her telepathic command.

She rolls her eyes exasperatedly. I lift an eyebrow, daring her to challenge me. I have no sense of propriety. She knows I'll fucking do it.

*He's not bound to me anymore. And I have all three of you. What right do I have to expect him to not be interested in other women?*

*He's not,* I assure her. *But if he was, I'd rip his dick off for you.*

Calista sputters out a laugh, which makes everyone look up. I look away, feigning innocence, which has Seth cracking up and Hawthorne sending questioning looks to Calista.

"Don't mind Brenna," Rayne whispers lowly to Calista. "There's a shortage of mages with actual power. The biological clocks start ticking very loudly when a man with tangible power is within sniffing distance."

"What?!" Calista whisper-shouts, nearly dropping her glass.

"Some people think that breeding with the most powerful male will help produce more magical children. And I don't know that any of us have ever met a male with as much power as your lumberjack over there," she admits, cutting her eyes over to Hawthorne.

"Some people, but not you?" I ask, picking up on what I think she's not saying.

Rayne blushes and her eyes flick towards the living room, where I know Ada happens to be. "He's not my type."

"But he's theirs, and they think they can repopulate the earth with him?!"

Calista whispers aggressively, nearly growling. She needs a break.

"I'm just going to borrow this for a moment," I say, ignoring everyone's confused expressions as I throw Calista over my shoulder and speed out of the house. Her squeals of protest drown out most of the reactions, but I hear Hawthorne mutter, "You get used to it," as we reach the doorway.

We blur past Brenna, who is actually in the middle of discussing how virile Hawthorne might be. To her credit, it sounds like Heather is telling the redhead to stand down.

I take us to a spot I remember from the trail. Calista didn't think we should use our powers too closely to the property on our first meeting, so we'd had a long walk to enjoy the scenery. It's an overlook set in a steep cliff, and I don't think that it can be seen from the house. Not that I give a fuck, but Calista might.

When I finally set her down, Calista rounds on me like I knew she would.

"Draven! Take me back! You can't just pick me up and carry me off like a caveman every time you need your dick sucked!"

I smirk down at her. "You're cute when you're angry."

"Seriously?" she deadpans, but I can sense the slight wobble in her lips.

"Yes, seriously. I also especially appreciate how flushed your face is. Your blood is rushing for me."

"My blood is rushing because my equilibrium has been disturbed. *Again*," she adds with narrowed eyes.

"Your nipples are hard."

"It's cold out here."

"Your pussy is wet."

Her eyes narrow. She doesn't want to admit I'm right, but she can't lie to me. I

can fucking smell her arousal.

I take a step forward, putting myself within her breathing space. My eyes wander over her body. Her faded skinny jeans and thin grey sweater aren't enough to keep her warm in this weather, especially with the way the wind is whipping around. I take off my jacket and move around behind her to place it over her shoulders, but once I do, my hand dives into the waistband of her jeans. She gasps when my cold fingers meet her wet heat.

"Mmmm, I was right," I say, pulling my fingers out of her pants and sucking them into my mouth. "Fucking soaked."

She lets out a shaky sigh as my hand caresses over her breasts and down her stomach, cupping her pussy. "I thought I'd help you get out of your head by giving *you* some head, but it's too cold for your weak little mortal body," I tease her. "So I guess I'll just have to settle for finger fucking you until I hear my name echo across the clearing." Her thighs tighten and I press my palm against her, biting my lip as she pushes back against me.

My fingers deftly unbutton her jeans and drag down the zipper to give me a little more room. She moans and her head falls back on my chest as I push my hand beneath the cotton of her panties and return my fingers to her slick heat.

"Wanna know how I know Hawthorne isn't interested in those witches?"

"Because you can read his mind?" She pants.

"Well, no, his shields are too good. But I don't need to read his mind to know."

"Hmmm," she moans as I bend down and scrape my teeth over her neck.

"What's that?" I tease, moving my fingers in slow circles over her clit.

"Don't stop," she whispers hoarsely.

"I wouldn't dare."

I increase the speed and pressure of my fingers, quickly bringing her to climax. She cries out, and I push two fingers inside her, pressing my palm to her clit. Her inner walls contract around my fingers, rhythmically squeezing.

"That's it, beauty. Ride my hand. Get it all out."

She all but sobs, falling back limply when her orgasm wanes. She takes a shuddering breath when I pull my fingers from her dripping pussy and bring her arousal to her lips. I rub it all over her lips before spinning her to face me and licking every drop from my fingers and hand.

"I know Hawthorne isn't interested, because they're not you," I tell her, bending down to swipe my tongue over her lips, glossy with her own cum. "You're perfect. You're delicious," I say, licking her again. "And you're ours." I take her lips, sucking and licking off the last of her cum, and deepen the kiss. Calista presses against me, reaching between us to rub her hand over my growing erection that strains in my jeans.

I'm about to say fuck it and hope friction is enough to keep her warm, but I hear a disturbance. I freeze and turn my head to the right, and Calista steps back, trying to strain her ears to hear what my more sensitive ears are picking up.

"Shit," I say. "We need to go back." I pick her back up and speed back to the house as fast as possible.

I stop when we reach the trees just outside the property, wanting to be able to creep up from behind and assess the situation. Dropping Calista to her feet, I gesture for her to fix her clothes and slowly creep through the trees. Marcus is standing outside the house in a yelling match with Rayne and Brenna.

"Sloan will hear about this!" Marcus roars at the two women.

"Marcus, listen," Brenna says, stepping closer. "I'm sure she didn't mean to send you so far down the mountain," she lies, laying a friendly hand on his arm. "But you've got to cool off before you come inside."

"Why? Because they're in there? The power hungry slut and her monsters?"



*Uh, excuse me?* The only reason I'm staying put is Calista's hand on my arm.

I glance down at her and she shakes her head. *Not worth it.*

The guy is clearly unhinged. He's pissed about being cast out of the meeting and having to hike his way back up, only to find his colleagues working with whom he perceives as the enemy. But it's more than that, there's something off about him.

"Yes, they are," Rayne snaps at him. "And you should really hear them out."

"You're dumber than I thought you were if you think Rowan Hawthorne is one of the good guys."

"You heard what happened to him," Brenna says. "And the more we dig, the more questions we have about Sloan."

"Questions you should discuss with him in person, not going behind his back with a known murderer and his family of dangerous freaks."

"I think you're wrong about them," Brenna says gently. "If you just calm down, we can show you what we've found so far."

"Don't tell me to calm down. I won't stand here and watch you all turn against your master." He looks up at Heather, Hawthorne, and Seth, who have stepped off the porch to intervene. Brenna holds her hand out to them, a gesture that she's handling it.

"That's just it," Brenna says. "Sloan *isn't* our master. The Council is supposed to be a group of equals working together for the greater good of all witches, to protect the earth and humankind. We don't work *for* him, we're supposed to be working *with* him. And you might have noticed, he isn't here. He's probably out doing something sketchy to undermine the very sanctity of what this council is supposed to be."

"HOW DARE YOU SPEAK OF YOUR MASTER THAT WAY!" Marcus bellows, spittle flying everywhere.

Brenna steps back, but she's not fast enough. He raises his hand against her

chest and pushes back.

I speed forward, throwing Marcus sideways and into a tree. His head hits the trunk with a sickening thud as I lunge to catch the redheaded witch. I already know it's too late before I land on the ground with her cradled in my arms. Her heart has stopped.

I shake my head as everyone runs towards us. Heather screams and falls to her knees beside Brenna's body, wailing.

"What did he do?" Rayne asks through her sobs.

"It's a killing curse," Hawthorne says, patting Heather's shoulder as she sobs into his chest. "I didn't think he'd be capable of that type of magic."

"It's why Sloan chose him," Ada says from behind the group of us huddled around Brenna's body. "It's about the extent of what he can do, but it was useful to Sloan. Everyone was chosen because they have a particular talent. And before all of you were chosen, there were others who didn't make the cut."

"And what happened to them?" whispers Calista from behind me.

Ada cuts her eyes at Brenna. "Marcus has been Sloan's hired assassin for as long as I can remember."

"Did she feel any pain?" Heather asks, reaching for Brenna's limp hand.

"No," I say. "It was immediate."

A groan sounds behind me and I look up at Ada. "A little help?" I ask her.

"Gladly," she agrees, and holds up her hands. "I'm sorry, this will affect most everyone to some extent."

Her familiar power, that low hum I remember from Calista's aunt's house and the caves, vibrates through the air. We walk over to where Marcus is lying, slumped against a tree, touching the bleeding gash on the side of his head. His blood smells tainted. My nose wrinkles as I lift him by his collar and drag

him past the others.

"I'll take the trash to the cellar," I say. "I have some questions for him."

"Fuck you," spits Marcus groggily.

"I'm sorry, I'm only interested in power hungry sluts that aren't stupid enough to be brainwashed by lying, corrupt assholes."

The man starts to struggle, and I know I'm right. He's been conditioned or compelled to protect Sloan's interests, even if it means murdering anyone he thinks is working against him. Even now, as blood gushes from his head, his strength is failing him, and his magic has been voided by Ada, he's still trying to defend his master.

"Down here," Ada says, opening the cellar door and leading the way inside. She looks at Marcus with disgust. "There's a cell down the hallway."

"How convenient."

Marcus continues to struggle as I sit him down, but he's no match for my strength. Problem is, that while I'm definitely stronger, I can't hold all of his limbs down at once and the squirrely fucker won't stop thrashing about. Just as Ada bends down to help me with the cuffs, Marcus freezes, and the restraints wrap themselves around his body and lock into place. Calista stands in the doorway, looking delicious. I mean deadly.

"How did you do that?" Ada asks, dropping her power, as it's obviously unnecessary at this point.

Calista shrugs and looks Marcus dead in his eye. "Tell me why you killed her."

Marcus makes a choking sound. Now that his brain has been rattled, he's not able to hold back.

"Spit it out," she demands.

"Sloan," the man whines. "Protect. Master," he chokes.

Calista's face contorts with disgust. "You'll pay for what you did. But before you do, my monsters are going to have some fun with you. And you're going to tell them everything. Is that understood?"

Her power is so thick in the room, it sucks out all the air. Even I have trouble taking shallow breaths, and I worry a little for Ada. But I'm sure even super-pissed Calista would make sure the people she cares about are safe. *I think.*

## Chapter 27 - Calista

My power sizzles in my veins, and I have an overwhelming urge to simply stop his heart where he sits. I don't even know if that's a talent I possess, but my instincts seem to think so.

I stare at his eyes, bulging with fright, and call my power to me, imagining tendrils of it creeping up his body and into his mouth. They shove past his tongue, swollen from where he apparently bit through part of it, and down his throat. My magic flows through his body, seeking the rapidly beating organ and wrapping around it.

"So fragile," I muse.

My head cocks to one side as I give his heart a little squeeze. Nothing too much, just a little warning. Only enough to stop it beating for a mere second.

The smell of piss permeates the room as a wet spot grows in the crotch of his jeans.

"Pathetic."

I pull my magic back and walk away before I end this man.



Outside, Hawthorne has used his connection with the earth to dig a deep grave. Heather and Rayne suggest situating her so she's looking over the

mountain at the stunning view, so she'll never miss a sunrise. Seth carefully lowers her into the ground, and everyone except Draven, who is still downstairs with Marcus, throws a handful of dirt and says some words of peace to send her off. After Hawthorne fills in the grave and covers her body, we leave Heather and Rayne to mourn and go inside.

I start some tea and rummage through the cabinets, trying to find something to feed them. Hawthorne helps me make soup with a large butternut squash, and I leave it to simmer before we walk down to join Draven and Seth in the cellar.

Draven's low drawl echoes into the corridor before we enter the room. "I am harder than a goddamn—"

"Is this really appropriate?" Hawthorne asks, cutting his eyes to the prisoner.

Draven shrugs. "He doesn't mind. He's unconscious."

"Did you get anything out of him?" I ask.

"Not much yet. He's been passed out most of the time y'all have been gone. Whatever you did to him really fucked him up."

All eyes turn to me and I give a nervous chuckle. "Nothing terrible. I just... gave him a little hug."

"A hug?" Hawthorne's eyebrow raises.

"Yeah, a hug. With my magic. Around his heart."

"Hard enough that she stopped it from beating for a good ten seconds."

"Jesus," Hawthorne mutters.

"Fear boner?" Seth asks.

"You know it," Draven answers.

I roll my eyes. "You're all ridiculous."

"I didn't say a word," Hawthorne says.

"And yet, you still have a boner," Seth says, pointing at Hawthorne's crotch.

"Will you all fucking behave yourselves?" I admonish, hearing the women enter the house upstairs.

"This is your fault," Seth says, as if he were explaining consequences to a young child. "You can't just walk around here threatening people and doing scary shit when you look like that."

"Like what?" I look down at myself. My jeans are dirty, and I'm wearing a plain grey sweater. My socks are mismatched, and I have zero doubts that my eyes are puffy from crying and my hair is half out of my ponytail.

"Like you," Hawthorne whispers against my earlobe.

I push him away and swat my hand at them, shooing them all away from me. "No. We're not doing this right now. It smells like piss and death in here, we have three grieving women upstairs, one that's probably checking her ovulation chart in case Hawthorne might be interested, and the three of you need to keep it in your pants until we get home for fuck's sake."

Draven groans.

Seth grins widely. "We love it when you're angry."



Dinner is an almost silent affair. We eat the butternut squash soup that Hawthorne and I made together, along with some crusty whole grain bread that Heather pulled out of the pantry. When everyone has eaten, Draven goes back downstairs to check on Marcus, and Seth and Hawthorne collect the dishes. I don't miss how Heather's eyes roam over Hawthorne's backside as he walks away, nor how she continues to cut her eyes at him as he stands at the sink washing dishes.

I like Heather. I respect her. And part of me can even understand that there's a lack of magically available men out there, and this one probably seems down to swing since I have two other men with me.

Swallowing, I breathe normally in through my nose and out my mouth, keeping my cool. It doesn't matter if she's into Hawthorne, if he's not into her.

Maybe he should be into her, my intrusive thoughts start up their bullshit again. She's beautiful, and likes wards, and wants to have lots of magical babies with him. Maybe he deserves that. And I'm being selfish because I have three boyfriends and don't want to share. They're mine.

The seat of the chair cracks a little as I grip the wood beneath me.

"Can we get some things out in the open?" Ada says, unintentionally redirecting everyone's attention from my silent tantrum.

We all turn to her, and the guys return with steaming mugs of coffee. Hawthorne sits on my left, resting his arm against the back of my chair and absentmindedly caressing my shoulder. Seth pulls the chair to my right out and spins it around to sit backwards, one hand on my thigh. It must have just become a habit for them to always be touching me so I'm not in any pain.

*Or they just like touching you,* Draven says in my mind as he comes back into the kitchen. "Funniest thing, he was awake when I walked in the room, and then five minutes later he was passed out again," he says, surreptitiously wiping a droplet of blood off his chin.

"Gross," Seth says.



"I didn't swallow!"

*I'm sorry, what?*

"I'm siphoning out whatever is in his system and hopefully eliminating the effects of the compulsion spell. I can't fix brainwash, but draining him a few times until he's weak enough to calm the fuck down should get some answers out of him. He tastes nasty as fuck, so I'm spitting it into a bowl and washing it down the utility sink." He looks at me and gives me a wink. "You're the only toxin I want to swallow, beauty."

"You are all incredibly, disgustingly sweet," Rayne says. I have a feeling she says it as much for Heather's benefit as for mine.

"Yeah, can we get back to business?" Ada says, scrunching her nose.

"Get used to it, baby girl," Seth laughs. "You've got three daddies now."

"Too soon, Barrett," Hawthorne barks, mortified. "I'm so—"

Ada snorts loudly and starts laughing. Her giggles set me off, and then before long, the entire table is cracking up. It takes a solid few minutes for us all to calm down.

"Don't ever call yourself that again," Ada deadpans.

"Yes, ma'am."

Draven snorts, and Hawthorne sends him a warning look.

"What did you want to get out in the open?" I ask.

She takes a breath and thinks for a moment. "Just how powerful are you?"

You could hear a pin drop.

"I'm not sure how to answer that question."

"If we're going to work together, and especially if we're going to be some

kind of family—dysfunctional though it will certainly be," she says, raising an eyebrow at Seth and Draven and looking so much like her father they both start laughing again. I shrug my shoulders in a sort of amused apology. She quirks a grin but continues. "I need you to be honest with me."

"I am being honest. I only learned about the magical world when Bodin kidnapped me, had no idea any of it existed. I don't know what I'm doing. I just kind of rely on instinct, but it can go a bit haywire," I say candidly.

"Oh, that reminds me. Do you like apples?"

"Seth, shut up," Hawthorne reprimands. He turns back to Ada. "We're pretty sure that Calista has the potential to be the most powerful witch in generations. She's done things that none of us have ever seen or even heard of before. But it's been a learning process for us all, and trying to reign in that much power has been challenging."

"I blew up his garden," I tell her.

"I mean, I saw you burn a man from the inside out, and my power doesn't seem to work against you."

"It normally does. It did back at the caves, at least, but I was weak. I think I overpower myself a bit when I get upset."

Ada nods, satisfied with my answer. She turns her gaze on Hawthorne. "Are you going to kill Sloan?"

"Yes," he answers softly.

She takes a deep breath. "Good."

"I think I expected you to ask me not to."

"Sloan was not a good father to me. He almost succeeded in turning me into a mindless soldier like Marcus. He wasn't kind or loving or supportive. Didn't let me go to college or live my own life outside of the jobs he asked me to do. I'm pretty sure he killed my first girlfriend."

I know I shouldn't be surprised by the depths of that man's depravity, but I still gasp. "That's terrible."

Ada looks to Heather and Rayne, who are huddled together on a bench seat on the other side of the table. "We spoke a bit while we were outside, and I know that you originally came to approach The Council for help. But I think it's us that needs your help. We'd like to form a new council, and we'd like you to be on it." She shifts her eyes to Draven. "All of you."

"Respectfully, I think you might have a hard time getting people to follow you if there's a blood mage on your council. You can see how well that went before." Draven says honestly.

"That was different and you know it," I tell him pointedly.

"We don't want this to be a strictly witches council. I realize we will have a majority, but hopefully we can balance that in the future. We'd like to create something that benefits all types of mages." Ada continues, undeterred by Draven's doubt.

"To bring back the balance," Seth says.

"Exactly," Heather says, her voice breaking a little. "Sloan was so convinced that we needed to be separate, to prove ourselves stronger, better. He'd said the brights came to him with a prophecy of some sort, to warn him of dangers ahead. He brushed them off and now they won't have anything to do with us. For a while I wondered if he'd made it up to make himself seem more important—I knew something was off about him."

"You know," Hawthorne says. "We thought the prophecy was about The Sanctum Society. Maybe it was about Sloan. He was single-handedly upsetting the balance of magic, killing witches, and magical beings."

"Can we prove that?" Rayne asks. "It's not that I doubt he is capable of evil, not after everything we've put together so far. But how can we prove it to the people we're expecting to follow us? Because otherwise we're just a bunch of random people going against the establishment and it'll be our word against his."

"Not if he's dead." Draven looks around at all of our blinking faces. "What? I know I wasn't the only one thinking it."

"Trust Draven to say it out loud," Hawthorne says with an eye roll. "But he's not wrong."

"I agree he needs to be stopped. But I also agree that we need to have all the information at hand so we can do it properly. Otherwise, we're just as bad as him. The Sanctum Society must be dealt with as well. If anything, they are top priority. We can't leave innocent people to be picked off," I say.

"Not to mention that the humans are going to catch on at some point, I don't think there's much more we can do to cover up another mass disappearance or dozens of people showing up at a hospital out of nowhere," Heather says.

"Does that mean you'll do it?" Ada asks hopefully.

I look at Hawthorne and then Seth. I don't need to look back at Draven, who is leaning against the kitchen island behind us, because he whispers in my head that he'll follow me no matter what I decide. Seth looks keen, but I can't quite get a read on Hawthorne.

"I make no promises about this new council idea. We'll consider it, maybe. But we'll definitely help with the rest."

Ada dips her head. "I'll take it."

"So, what are our next steps?" I say. With all of these problems in the air, I feel like we need to organize.

"Draven and I will continue to interrogate Marcus," Ada offers.

"I'd like to copy some of the records we looked at today and take them to The Archives, if that's okay," Seth asks, aiming his attention at Heather.

"The Celestial Archives?" She asks, pure wonder on her face.

"The very ones," he affirms. "The main thing I want to check are the causes of death for the council women and the people of that town." Seth looks up at

Hawthorne with a sad expression. "It's a little too timely to be a coincidence, if you ask me."

"I have no doubts that it was staged," Hawthorne says, his voice rough.

"I'll continue to look through the meager records we have here for anything that might help us or be of interest," Heather says.

"If everyone else is free, I could use some help with spell-casting. I know you've already tried locator spells, but I'd like to try. And I might attempt to scry Sloan as well."

Rayne nods almost enthusiastically. "I am not a spellcaster, unfortunately. But I will help however I can."

"Even just helping us find the supplies is great, but I sense more in you that you're not giving yourself credit for," Hawthorne says kindly.

"Rayne actually has a very unique talent," Ada remarks. "She's basically a living battery. She can generate impressive amounts of energy."

Rayne blushes beet red and reaches for the leftover bread on the table, as if eating to cover her embarrassment over Ada's praise.

"That's perfect," I tell her, and look up at the clock. "It's getting pretty late, but I'd like to try the spells tonight, if that's alright with everyone."

"I don't think I could sleep any time soon, anyway," Heather says.

"I'm good," Rayne says with a smile. She definitely looks full of plenty of energy.

Hawthorne kisses my cheek before standing up to go get supplies. "Inside or outside, *a chuisle?*"

"Outside I think. I can draw from nature, and I'm less likely to wreck their house." Everyone chuckles, some of them a little nervously. "I'm mostly kidding," I say.

"Yeah, she can totally wreck the house from out there, no problem," Seth says before darting off his chair so I can't smack him.

Draven makes up for my slow reflexes, though, and hooks Seth across his waist, throwing him into Hawthorne's big chest. I slowly stand and turn to face him as Hawthorne holds him still.

"Uh-oh," Seth says. "Fear boner."

He ends up getting loose when everyone starts laughing and pulls me into a kiss. Before anyone can pin him down again, though, he disappears into a flash of light.

## Chapter 28 - Seth

I land in the chamber of The Archives, expecting one of the Elders to be stationed in front of the door like always. Instead, there is no one, and surprisingly, the door opens for me. I walk right in without being questioned or patted down or anything. It's strange and I'm not sure I trust it.

They'd said that I could have access to resources to help our cause, but I didn't expect that I'd have free rein here.

I do find Elder Peter inside the chamber, hovering halfway up the towering shelves with an open book in his hands. His presence makes me feel a little more comfortable. I'm glad it's not Matthew.

"Ah, Mr. Barrett, I was wondering how soon we'd see you," Peter greets me with a gentle bow of his head.

"Elder Peter, thank you. It's nice to see you, too."

"I wouldn't go that far," Peter says, not unkindly, and I can't help but chuckle.

"Fair enough."

"What can I help you find?" he asks me, gesturing to the cavernous chamber.

"Some death records," I say, holding out the pages Heather gave me from The Council's records. "We believe that a mage on the witches' council is up to something, and I want to confirm if these deaths were, in fact, natural."

"Hmm," Peter says, and his eyes emit a slight glow as he looks up at the shelves. "There," he says, pointing. He disappears and reappears in a fraction of a second, holding a rather large ledger. We bring it down to the desk and Peter opens it to the exact page I need.

"That's a useful trick," I say, bending over the huge book.

"We all have our talents, our roles to play," he says.

"Oh, wow." Seeing the names listed out this way breaks my heart. "So many," I say, looking to the sadly expansive list.

"Six hundred and fifteen souls, taken from the earth before their time," Peter says, sorrow etched in his face.

"Do you mean their deaths weren't of natural causes?"

"Not exactly. Most of the townspeople died from a particularly gruesome infection of plague, so their deaths were listed as natural on a technicality. You can note the asterisks here," Peter says, pointing to the notations on the page. "However, the plague that killed them was anything but. The strain of infection that wiped out an entire town in less than a day was not at all natural. It was bio-engineered to be much deadlier than any infection seen before."

"How does an entire town of people dying of a treatable illness go unnoticed by the human media?"

"Your Council of Witches is resourceful. It was reported as a mass suicide event. Some of the last magical bloodlines on earth, reduced to being explained away as a cult."

"Were we there?" I ask, needing to know if any of my kind were present to help shoulder the burden of these people.

"We were, but their suffering was still great. It was a brutal way to die, and there was no consideration taken for the young."

"Can we trace where the infection came from, or prove who did it?"

"Not exactly, but we do have the names of the people who were present and survived unscathed. That could be a good start."

Under the details of the horrific deaths, only four survivors are listed. Ada



Hawthorne is one of them, although there is mention of her near-death struggle. Sloan Benoit, Lana Delaney, and a third name, Salazar Bell-Hopkins, are also on the register.

"Interesting." The ledger lists the names and races of each listing. Lana Delaney is listed as a blood mage, and Bell-Hopkins as a human.

Seeing the names brings up so many more questions. Isn't Salazar the name Ada mentioned as the leader of The Sanctum Society? Is that a coincidence? Could these be the people that Sloan was working with, and is he still working with them? What did he stand to gain by working with a shade and a non-magical human?

"Do we have somewhere we can track them down, too? Find out if they are alive?"

"The ledger would notate if they were no longer living, with a reference to find the record of death. These people are still alive. We can almost certainly find their records." Peter flies off to find the record books, and I flip back the ledger until I find the records of Hawthorne's wife and son, and the shade that killed them. It lists Ada and Hawthorne as surviving family members, and I wonder how things would have been different if my friend, my brother, had known that his daughter wasn't quite dead when he found her. Would he have gone after Silas? Would he have still gone into hiding?

"There's no point in living in the what-if's, Mr. Barrett," Peter says, appearing next to me with two more large record books.

"Is mind reading another talent of yours?" I ask.

"Like your other consort, the blood mage Draven Reese?" He asks perceptively. His tone is not at all judgmental or unkind, which I am thankful for, though sadly surprised about.

"Yes, like him," I say, proudly claiming him as one of mine, even if it's really that we're all hers.

"No, I do not read minds. I'm just perceptive. And very, very old, which

obviously makes me very, very wise."

"Obviously," I say, my lips quirking up in an amused grin.

Peter lays the books out and does his neat trick again, finding the pages we need.

"Salazar Bell-Hopkins is a human, born in rural West Virginia some ninety-five years ago. Still living. His current residence is listed as the Southeastern United States, although it doesn't specify where, which could mean that he isn't settled in a specific town, but rather moves from place to place."

"Ninety-five, and still moving from place to place? That seems unusual."

"The human mages have long sought immortality. There have been a few that have come close to finding the answers to at least a much, much longer life," Peter says cryptically, leading me to believe that Sloan might be helping the older human avoid the effects of his advancing age with magic.

"Sloan must be exceptionally powerful," I muse, wondering if they are still working together. The two of them together could spell a hell of a lot of trouble. "What about the shade?" I ask, moving on to the second alleged partner in crime.

"Lana Delaney, born blood mage. Nearly four hundred years old. Whereabouts unknown."

"Don't these books just sort of magically record facts?" I ask.

"That's not exactly how it works, but we'll go with it."

"So, how can their whereabouts be unknown?"

"The decline of the magic on this plane does not just affect the earth and its mortal inhabitants. As the earth mages lose the magic in their blood, so do the blood mages lose their ability to sire or breed more of their own kind. Our numbers dwindle rapidly as well, and there aren't enough light mages spread out over the earth to absorb the suffering of all, or to record what's happening around us. It's the magic of the brights that creates these records, the

absorption of information in the form of emotions that manifests the ledgers. It's the very reason the rest of the Elders are not here to pester you. There's been a shift, and they are out aiding the cause, so the balance doesn't shift further."

"So if this shade is moving fast enough, she could simply be staying out of sight, and therefore avoiding detection."

"There is the potential that the shade could be tracked by any deaths she causes, but unless those deaths are concentrated to a specific region, it could take years to trace. Years that I might have, but it couldn't be done quickly enough to help your cause."

Peter's face lights up with an idea, and he blinks out of existence momentarily as my attention perks at the use of "I" and not "we". When he returns, holding yet another, even larger book, I stare at him expectantly. Surely he's not going to drop a hint like that and leave it hanging in the air. A bright like Peter does not say things accidentally—those words have meaning.

"I do find a mystery to be quite diverting," he says conspiratorially as he turns the pages, his eyes glowing softly. "This ledger is of more recent deaths," he says absentmindedly, ignoring my questioning gaze. "Ah ha!" he exclaims, pointing at the page. "It seems Mr. Benoit, Lana Delaney, and Salazar Bell-Hopkins are all mentioned in multiple deaths surrounding those recent disappearances." He closes the book with a heavy thud. "It seems you certainly have your lead," he says excitedly. I almost want to invite him to come back with me so he can enjoy the rest of the puzzle we have to put together. He'd be a useful addition to the team, if not for his cryptic way of helping you find the right answers.

"Are you going to tell me?" I ask, and I know he understands what I'm referring to without spelling it out.

"I warned that your connection with the celestial world was not guaranteed, and that it would have an effect on your immortality. The future is not set, and I would not say how many years you have ahead of you, even if I knew the exact number. What I will say, though, is that your soul bond is strong,

and every moment, however many or few you have, and however difficult the road ahead, will be worth it. The other Elders would cast me out for saying this, but I think you made the right decision."

"It was never a conscious decision."

"True love never is. But I do have a warning for you, one that I suggest you heed this time, because I'm unlikely to be wrong again." His gaze grows serious, his eyes clouding a milky white.

"What's that?" I ask warily, because I know that what I'm about to receive is a gift from a Seer, not simply a warning about what the future may hold.

"Your purpose in this world has changed. The mortal you shared your soul with will suffer many burdens, and it will be your duty to help her shoulder the pain she will endure in order to fulfill her destiny."

I bow my head reverently. "Of course. It is a role I take on willingly, Elder Peter. I will not fail her."

Peter's eyes soften. "We all fail sometimes. Light can be suppressed so easily. Be sure to share the burdens with the others that fate has brought you. Lean on each other in times of uncertainty, build each other up. You will do great things together, I think."

My chest glows with the affection I feel for our bond, and my wings extend with pride. I feel the truth in those words, that we will do great things. And maybe this new council business is how we start.

Peter pushes two more books towards me, both with marked pages. "A little light reading to help you on your path," he says with a wink before he leaves me alone in the chamber. Surprisingly, the room doesn't dim too much without his presence. I'm practically a beacon at the moment, and I wonder if Calista can feel the intensity of my emotions through our bond, even on the other side of the world.

I turn my attention to the books Peter left for me. The larger one seems to be an ancestry of the Batts family, which goes back more generations than I can

count. I spend hours flipping through the pages, fascinated by the amazing and sometimes terrifying chain of power in Calista's lineage. Like all magical family lines, the magic in the Batts' line has faded generation by generation. The power Calista's mother had was impressive by present standards, but was greatly diminished compared to the generations before her. I find it interesting that the Batts name, and power, have been passed down to a single daughter, generation by generation. There are no mentions of siblings or male heirs anywhere in her family line, as far as I look back.

The book is thorough, giving a description of the life and deeds of each witch. More than one, actually most, of the women in Calista's bloodline practiced extremely powerful, and sometimes dark, magic.

A passage in the book, the page highlighted by the faint glow of Peter's magic, grabs my attention. Approximately eight generations back, one of Calista's ancestors had an altercation with a family with a familiar surname. The record states that Calista's ancestor, Kate Batts, had a blood feud with a local farmer by the name of John Bell, and that Kate was implicated in his death and accused of harassing the remaining family using her considerable magical talents. There is, curiously, no official record of Kate Batts having any children, which would have ended her line. The ledger, however, doesn't just show official records. And so I have in front of me the proof of a child born between Kate Batts and the very man she was feuding with, John Bell.

*Interesting.*

I look up at the books in the chamber. The Bell family, being non-magical humans, are not likely to have records here, but a trip to a human library or an ancestry website might help. I add some pertinent information to the pages of notes that I've taken in the hours since I've been here. It can't be a coincidence that the human Sloan was working with, this Salazar Bell-Hopkins, has the same surname as the man Calista's ancestor not only feuded with, but apparently sired a child with. Peter wouldn't have drawn attention to this passage if it wasn't important.

Finishing up my notes so I can continue to research the connections, I turn to the second, smaller book that Peter left for me. There are no highlighted pages, but I find a note attached to the front cover.

*Please consider this an early binding ceremony gift. I believe it will serve you well.*

Binding ceremony?

I shake my head at the older bright's odd foreshadowing and look at the journal in my hand. It's small and weathered, with a dark leather cover, and bound with a leather cord, wrapped around a bronze charm. The symbol on the charm is three intertwined curved arcs, with a circle in the center binding of all of them. I've seen the symbol before. It's a Triquetra, or an infinity knot. There have been many meanings attributed to the symbol, usually relating to life, death, and rebirth, but it dates back to when there were gods that ruled over humans. The same gods that sired the lines of mages to look over the earth and her inhabitants for eternity.

My mouth drops when I unwind the leather cord and open the book. The pages are brittle and worn to the point that they are almost illegible, but the pictures, which look similar to hieroglyphs, are clear enough to make out the important points of the story. It's a record of a binding between four gods before the original fall, a story I've heard before but always believed to be mostly made up, like a fairy tale you tell children. A god of shadow, a god of light, and one of nature, all bound to one woman—a goddess of fate and life itself. When they bonded with her, they shared their own lives and powers with her, creating the most powerful being on earth. *The Great Mother*.

Together, they sired the three races of mages to watch over the earth, leaving their children behind when the goddess sacrificed herself to save the dying earth. Her magic soaked into the very ground, air, and oceans that inhabit this planet, making her a part of all living beings. Her three bonded loves, unable to live without her, followed her into the abyss, sacrificing their lives to be with her for eternity.

Their binding is the lore behind traditional binding ceremonies, but the scenes I see here look more violent than the simple ceremonies performed by humans on earth. This one looks bloody, painful, intense.

Like *our* binding.

## Chapter 29 - Calista

"Okay, I think that's everything," Rayne says. "I'm going to carb load real quick while you get comfortable, and then I'll be ready. It'll just take me, like, three minutes to shove some granola bars down my throat."

"Take whatever time you need. I want you to be safe and comfortable," I tell the younger woman, who looks surprised. Her reaction gives me pause.

"Rayne," I call out to her before she's halfway across the yard. "You know you don't have to do this, right?"

I've learned a lot about the thin woman with mousy brown hair in the past hour. I pretty much interrogated her while we were gathering supplies, and even stopped to sit down and talk about some of what she'd been through under Sloan's control. He'd abused her ability in the worst ways, almost killing her twice, for spells that she wasn't allowed to know the details of. He'd put her into a trance so she wouldn't remember anything, only using her physical presence and leaving behind barely a shell. Worst of all, she confided that, after learning of some of Sloan's misdeeds, she actually feels guilty for aiding him.

Her ability to transfer energy to other people is connected to her physical body. So when she uses her power, it not only drains her of energy, but it actually affects her body weight. It's why she's so skinny and constantly eating to replenish the fat stores that her energy burns so quickly.

Rayne stops and turns around, her eyes filling with grateful tears. "I do know, but thank you for saying it. I want to help."

"You also know that you are not responsible for righting someone else's wrongs, right? I don't want you to feel obligated because of misplaced guilt about how Sloan used you. You shouldn't let anyone just use you that way, even me. So if we're going to do this, you need to promise that you'll pay

attention to your limits and step back if you need or even just want to. I've already told you I don't have the best control over my powers. I need to know that you'll stop me if I don't realize I'm taking too much. I'm not Sloan, and I would never forgive myself if I hurt you unintentionally."

"I promise," she says, and runs into the house.

"You could never be like him," Hawthorne says gently as I sit down inside the circle we made.

The fire pit and multitude of candles cast the yard in flickering light, and the wind has already made a mess of the bed of herbs and crystals in the center of the circle, surrounding a large reflective garden ball. The mirror I used the last time I was here was smashed when I threw Marcus and Brenna through the portal. Hawthorne was going to use a portal to get the crystal ball, but I saw this odd choice of yard decor and figured it would work so he can save his energy. A silver platter with a mound of dry rice sits to the right of the garden ball.

"Promise me you'll keep an eye on her?" I ask.

I'm going to be in the thick of the spell, trying to connect with Sloan on a spiritual level. It will hopefully accomplish multiple goals, including narrowing down, if not pinpointing, his location. If he's on this side of the world, he could be sleeping, which will give me easier access to his thoughts and plans. The hard part will be accomplishing such a high-level spell. It's one I've never done before or even knew was possible, and I'm trying to do it without being detected. Hawthorne is helping me with a cloaking spell, covering me so I can focus on accomplishing the advanced magic.

"I promise. And I'll pull you back if I feel I have to," he warns.

"Not unless it's absolutely necessary. We can't miss an opportunity."

Hawthorne kneels next to me, pulling my chin up to look at him. "I won't let anything happen to you," he says in a quiet voice, before cutting off my protestations with a kiss. He deepens the kiss, licking into my mouth as I sigh into him. The intensity of his kiss is a promise of things to come, and, if



nothing else, encourages me to shake off my fear and get to work so we can get home.

"Maybe he's dead," Rayne suggests casually, coming out to join us in the circle with a large jar of peanut butter and a spoon.

"We could only hope to be so lucky," Hawthorne deadpans, dropping one last kiss on my lips before pulling back.

"Alright," I say with a deep breath and shaking out my arms. "Let's do this."

Hawthorne and Rayne sit on either side of me. Hawthorne holds my hand and Rayne places her hand on my right shoulder. I decided it would be best not to hold hands with Rayne, in case I accidentally drain her too fast. This way, it'll be easy for her to drop her hand away from me if the spell goes haywire. Everyone closes their eyes and begins chanting the words of the spell, whispering our intentions into nature. We breathe deeply in unison, deep breaths in; long, slow breaths out, until I feel fuzzy and lightheaded.

I release Hawthorne's hand, which he drops to my lap, a comforting weight on my thigh to remind me he's here. An odd heavy tingle starts from where his hand is touching my leg, over my entire body. His cloaking spell feels like having honey poured over my body, bees buzzing close to the surface of my skin to protect their precious gold nectar.

My left hand lifts to the tarnished silver orb, and it heats with my touch. The surface becomes transparent, letting me know that the scrying spell is working. My right hand falls into the rice, pushing the grains to spread them over the platter.

Reaching out with my mind, I call to the elements to aid my magic. They respond in kind, the wind whipping a little more urgently. The fire surges in the fire pit, the nearby jacuzzi splashing everywhere as the water churns, and the trees creaking with the effort to lean towards us. With their encouragement, I layer on the shadow walking spell, connecting myself with Sloan's spirit.

The energy surrounding the reflective ball becomes a whirlpool, and I'm

pulled inside, into a swirling vortex of light and color. Once it stops, I'm spat out, my surroundings dark and unfamiliar.

The cavernous space around me is foreboding. Dark, cold, and dry. My lips, swollen from Hawthorne's kisses, chap as the moisture saps out of them. When I get to my feet, each step echoes despite my light steps and bare feet. I walk through the empty void until shapes begin to form around me. It takes a while to process what I'm seeing. Moments from Sloan's life, suspended in slow motion. I only recognize him once I come to the moment he loomed over a young Ada, compelling her to believe he was her father, to obey him without question. His life is full of the pain and anguish he bestowed upon others, all in the name of greed and jealousy.

Inside his mind, the motivation for his deeds is clear . A deep-seated hate that started with an abusive and controlling father who taught his son to undermine and hate the power that women have in their society. He grew to crave and covet the power that his mother had, but could not, or would not, wield to protect herself against the abuse she suffered at the hands of his powerless father in the name of love. Sloan thought she was weak for allowing his father to hurt her when he knew she could have fought back. Just like his father, he seemed to think it qualified as permission to take advantage of her powers. She was little more than a servant in their household, and his jealousy over the power passed down by women even made him change his name. In magic families, it was customary to keep the name of the power line, which meant that families almost always used the woman's last name. Sloan's resentment made him decide to change to his father's last name, Benoit, as an act of defiance against the system that he felt was unfair. Even when he came into his powers, which were uncommonly strong for a male, he felt a zealous envy of the power he would have, if he'd only been born female.

His dedication to his cause only grew stronger as he rose through the ranks of witches. He reveled in being the only male member of The Council, and he was treated as a king. He was cruel to the women he took as lovers, adopting a violent, dominating sexual appetite that resulted in the deaths of at least half a dozen women until he found one lover that could satiate his bloody appetites—a shade named Lana. Sloan had originally gotten close to the

shade out of curiosity, wanting to know more about her powers after he'd witnessed her compel someone to let her feed from them.

A dangerous notion grew into an obsession. Sloan spent months cultivating a powerful spell, infusing his blood with a chemical compound that could alter a shade's mental capacities. In all effectiveness, Sloan poisoned the shade with a love spell, and used her as a weapon. He was already a very charming individual that could get away with most everything, coercing even the sternest of his colleagues. Only one, an ancient witch named Renee Ellison, saw through him. He overheard her talking amongst the rest of The Council. They'd called a meeting without him, a meeting he only found out about because he happened upon the chamber they were in, talking in low voices. Renee was concerned about the plans that Sloan had pushed into motion, namely a partnership with a very old and very strong blood mage that she found troubling.

Sloan wanted to utilize and exploit the talents of the shades and employ them to advance the power of The Council. In his mind, if the power was fading from this world, then the witches needed to do everything in their power to harness every bit of it they could. But after he got control of a powerful being such as Lana, he felt more power hungry than ever. He became obsessed with not just harvesting power from the earth, but from people, much in the same way a shade harvests nourishment and power from siphoning the blood from their victims.

When Renee openly opposed the new direction that Sloan wanted to follow, and suggested yet another attempt to summon fucking Rowan Hawthorne to take his position, Sloan used a variety of experimental spells in an attempt to recreate a shade's ability to compel others. He used it to experiment on the witch, who was the unspoken leader of The Council, but her mental shields were too strong despite her advanced age. He killed her in the end, by siphoning the air in the room out bit by bit, until she slowly suffocated. And once her influence was eliminated, he put one of Lana's sires, a strong and especially bloodthirsty shade, in her place. And since The Council had already reached out to Hawthorne, and he decided to put an end to the competition. He knew Hawthorne had more, and stronger, magic than he did. But he wasn't about to step down for someone he considered to be an over

muscled meathead that thought he was better than him. He wasn't willing to give up his position as the most coveted member of The Council.

All of this information floods my brain, terrifying me with the realization that Sloan is perhaps even more of a zealot than George Bodin was. And on top of his dangerous ideals, he has the power to actually put some of his plans in motion.

Focus, Calista, *focus*. You're supposed to be finding out where he is. Look around you.

I turn in a circle, but all the shadowy forms that made up the story of Sloan's life have dissipated, leaving me in the dark again. Dark, all except for the light emanating from directly above me. It looks like a regular spotlight, but this isn't a room. Focusing on the light, I surge upward and get sucked through another tunnel. I land in another room, an actual room this time. There's a massive four-poster bed with deep red covers, ornate furniture, and a plush red rug under my feet. My toes sink into the lush fibers, further solidifying that I am physically present—wherever I am, that is. I can still feel Hawthorne's heavy cloaking spell, but I still freeze when I hear movement in the room.

My eyes adjust to the dim light, and I realize that the movement is coming from the bed. Sloan's tall, thin figure is curled around a pale-skinned woman with black hair as he takes her from behind. A loud slap echoes across the room, blood spraying as a barbed flogger comes down on the woman's back. Her cries are muffled by a ball gag, but the pain is still apparent in the strangled screams that issue from her scarred throat. I take a step forward, unable to quell the desire to reach out and help the suffering woman, but the inky black depths of her eyes make me pause. The woman is almost unrecognizable from the shade Sloan wooed and eventually spelled under his influence, but it's definitely Lana. She's incredibly thin, thinner even than Rayne.

*Rayne.*

Right. I shouldn't idle here. Even if this woman wants to be helped, I can't do it in this form without risking us all.

I tiptoe silently, backing away from the bed as Sloan's movements become more frantic, the flogger slapping more frequently as he grows closer to an impending climax. I take advantage of his distraction, opening the room and slipping out. My feet carry me through a small but luxurious penthouse. I wouldn't recognize the city below me if not for the glowing neon star atop a distant hill. We're in, or very near, to Roanoke, Virginia.

"Enjoying the view, Ms. Batts?"

## Chapter 30 - Hawthorne

"She's been out for a while," Rayne says, shoving another spoonful of peanut butter into her mouth. She's near the end of the jar, and her color is coming back.

Calista was right. I'd had to order Rayne to back off when I noticed her cheeks hollowing out. She agreed to take a break and refuel, but I won't let her expend anymore energy unless it becomes apparent that Calista has a dire need of energy. She's been in a trance for nearly an hour, but she seems strong. Intermittently, she'll furrow her brow, or mutter under her breath, like she's talking in her sleep. Her fingers moved, shaping the rice into a five-pointed star, but I don't understand it. Was the spell not strong enough to spell out the coordinates?

It scared me when she first connected with her spell, the way she almost slumped forward, but I had an idea of what to expect. I've never seen this type of magic performed before, but I read a lot. It took every ounce of self control not to make a fervent case against her trying to layer advanced spells on top of each other, but I held my tongue. She's incredibly powerful and has accomplished things even Seth has never seen before. He told me everything about what she'd done the night I was taken, and it's apparent how strong she's become within the last couple weeks.

She can do this. I just wish we could get some kind of signal that she's alright.

The universe must be in a mood, because the moment I'm asking for a sign, her head drops back and her mouth opens wide in a silent scream as her eyes turn cloudy.

Is this a vision, or is she in trouble? What do we do?

"Calista!" I yell, but she gives no sign of hearing my voice.

Her body starts to jerk, growing into full on convulsions. I lay her back and move the pillow she was sitting on to cushion her head.

Rayne surges forward, placing both hands on Calista's body. She makes a choking sound before she passes out, her limp body still covering Calista's.

Shit.

Lunging forward, I step quickly over their prone bodies and lift Rayne away just as Calista sits up, gasping and wheezing in breaths. I lay Rayne down gently before wrapping my arms around Calista. "You're okay, you're okay, I've got you *a chuisle*."

Calista sputters and looks around at her surroundings, confused at first, but then her eyes meet mine and her relief is evident. Her entire body relaxes, and she leans into me, catching her breath.

"Is she okay?" Calista asks, noticing Rayne's still form.

I reach over and feel her pulse, noting the steady rhythm. "She'll be okay. She was already pretty depleted, so I had her take a break. But then you started convulsing, and she just threw herself at you.

Calista groans. "I told her not to—"

"I know."

"I would have been—"

"I know. Take a breath, break the circle. We'll talk inside about what you saw. Can you walk?" It's cold out here, even with the fire, and I don't want either of them catching a chill after the ordeal they've gone through.

"Yes, I'm fine, honestly. A little tired." She's clearly more than a little tired, but I don't want her to think I doubt her strength. I stay close to her in case she needs support, but I scoop Rayne up and escort them both back to the house. Calista leans on me to take the few steps up on the porch and then opens the door for me.

"Oh stars, what happened?" Heather cries, running towards us as we make our way past the open entrance to the kitchen and dining room, where she currently has more than a dozen books and journals spread over the table.

"She's okay, just overdid it."

Heather sighs. "She always does. It's mostly conditioning, but she also cares deeply about helping people."

"She could have been a bright in another life," Calista says, her voice sounding sleepy.

Draven pushes open the doorway, making eye contact with Calista first. Satisfied that she's at least physically okay, his eyes roam over the rest of us. "Everyone's okay?"

"Yeah, the spell just got...exciting," I answer, still holding Rayne's sleeping body. It's not a chore really, she's as light as a bird.

"Rayne!" Ada gasps.

"Her heart rate is steady," Draven says. "She's just passed out."

"I'll take her to her room," Ada says, trying to reach her from my arms.

"I can carry her for you," I insist.

"I said I'll take her," she repeats firmly, and I lower the young woman into her arms. Rayne is so light she has no trouble carrying her. Before she heads up the stairs, she turns to Calista. "I'd like to hear what you saw. I'll be down in just a moment, if you don't mind waiting."

"Of course," Calista says, leaning heavily into my chest, where I pulled her the moment my arms were free. We all watch as they disappear up the steps. Draven heads back downstairs, muttering about cleaning up more piss.

"I'll make some tea," Heather offers, patting me on the arm as she walks past.

The gesture seems odd to me, and I frown after her. When I look back at



Calista to see if she'd like to lie back on the couch, she's watching Heather leave with a venomous look in her eyes.

"What's wrong?" I ask her.

"I like Heather," she tells me pointedly. "I respect her."

I narrow my eyes. "I feel like there's a 'but' coming." I've felt like we could trust Heather, but if Calista feels differently, I need to know.

"But I'm uncomfortable with how much attention she shows you," she mutters, looking down at the floor. Her embarrassment makes me chuckle.

"Jealous, little witch?" I purr in her ear.

"Yes," she admits on a breathy exhale, sighing exasperatedly. I have a feeling she wouldn't be admitting to any of this if she weren't as mentally fatigued as she is.

"You have nothing to be jealous over, *a chuisle*. I didn't even notice her attention, but I'll be sure to make it clear that I'm not interested."

"It feels unfair for me to force you to only be with me when I have three of you."

"I don't feel that way," I assure her. Maybe I did at first. Initially, I resented the bond, especially for being so strong, and I was jealous of the others for their ability to jump right in. I was jealous every time I felt the heat rise in her cheeks, or the arousal pool low in her core. I assumed she was only thinking of them. Then that night that I broke my composure, she'd yelled out that it was me she was fantasizing about. I'm not sure I even believed her, but it shocked me to my core and made me realize how much I wanted her to want me.

If only I'd taken my head out of my ass and loved her the way I should have from the start.

"What does 'akushla' mean?" Ada says, coming back down the stairs.

My lips quirk.

"I wasn't eavesdropping, I just overheard," Ada says quickly.

"It's okay," I assure her. "It means pulse."

"What language is that?"

"Probably a bastardized version of Gaelic," I tell her with a chuckle. "A lot of the Appalachian people are descendants of Scots-Irish immigrants, so there are some parts or versions of the old language that are still thrown about." It occurs to me she might not care about the history of the endearment that came naturally to me, but I like sharing with her while I have the chance. "From the moment I saw Calista, I knew we were connected. And then when we were bonded, I felt her as tangibly as my own pulse. And that is what she became."

Calista's mouth quirks into a sad grin. "I'll be in the living room," she says, and I let her have a moment alone even though I know that by pulling away from me for even a moment, especially if none of the other guys are near, she'll feel the pain of our broken connection.

"I'll get my pulse back," I mutter under my breath.

"What's that?" Ada looks at me, confused after watching Calista walk away so sadly.

"Hmm? Nothing. I'm going to go see if Heather needs help with the tea."

"Careful, or you'll end up with your own harem," Ada says jokingly.

"I couldn't handle more than Calista, honestly," I laugh back. "But duly noted."

If my woman and my daughter both notice something I didn't, then I believe them. But even if I didn't, there's no way to deny it when I walk into the kitchen.

"I thought I'd see if I can help you carry the tray," I tell Heather.

She places her hand on my shoulder again. "You're too sweet," she says, earnestly but also definitely flirting. Her eyes meet mine and she sighs. "Can I ask you a question?"

I'm a little afraid of what she might have to say, but I nod all the same.

"Your relationship with Calista and the others...is it...?" She seems to lose the grasp of the words she wants to say.

"It's not an open relationship. The four of us are bonded to Calista only."

Heather nods and looks at the floor. "I understand. If you ever—"

"I won't," I tell her. "It'll always be her and only her."

She clears her throat. "I was going to make an awkward joke about surrogate children, but I'll back off. I owe you an apology for my forwardness. It's been a long time since there was a male around I could relate to, and well, you're..."

I let her trail off, not wanting to know whatever she was about to say. I've entertained this conversation for long enough and I'm ready to run far from it now that she understands the way of things. Picking up the tea tray, I do just that.

When I enter the living room with Heather behind me, I shoot Calista what I hope is a reassuring wink. Heather keeps a professional distance, and lets me make my own tea, instead opting to help Calista with her cup. I notice her whispering, but whatever she says, Calista nods understandingly.

I choose a seat in the middle of the couch Calista is lounging on, pulling her legs across my lap.

"Draven's on his way up," Calista says. "He said he was telling Marcus a bedtime story."

"No offense, but that dude is twisted," Ada tells her.

Calista rolls her lips in as Draven speeds into the room, no longer bothering

to hold back his supernatural abilities. "Thank you," he says proudly, as if Ada had complimented him, before kissing Calista on the brow and perching himself on the side of the couch. He brushes her hair back as she talks, and I marvel for a moment about how this former bloodthirsty monster is kissing and petting the woman between us. Well, former might be a stretch, but he's clearly trying.

I squeeze her calf comfortingly as she smiles up at Draven. I know she's stressed, and she's clearly exhausted. Whatever happened during her spellcasting clearly rattled her.

"Alright, let's get on with it," I grouse, drawing a laugh from her. "What?"

"I just really missed your surly, asshole self," she says.

I look at Draven, "What'd I say?"

"You're asking the wrong brother-husband," he says with a straight face.

"What did you just call me?"

"I don't know. That's what Seth called us, and it kind of made sense, so I just went with it." He shrugs, then looks over at Heather and Ada, who are just about in tears. A quick glance at Calista shows that she has muffled her face with a throw pillow, laughing so hard the sofa is shaking. "Why are they laughing?"

"Fuck if I know, but I'm willing to bet there's an inside joke that only these youngin's know about."

"Then how would Seth know about it? He's older than all of us!" Draven exclaims, throwing his hands up.

"He's the cool grandpa," Ada says with a snort.

"Alright, settle down, girls. Don't make me use my Daddy voice."

"Oh god, please do," Seth says, appearing in the doorway of the living room. Heather almost screams at his sudden appearance, which starts another round

of giggles between the ladies. And Seth, of course.

As the laughter dies down, Seth strides across the room to kiss Calista. "I have so much to tell you."

"Same," she says. "I'm glad you're here. A lot has happened."

"You start," he says, settling into the sofa next to me.

Calista walks us through everything she saw. I've never shadow walked before. It's not an ability of mine, nor do I possess enough power, but the way she describes it makes it sound eerie. "Like being in two places at once, I was completely aware of my body here in the circle. I could feel Hawthorne next to me, smell the herbs, hear the crackle of the fire. But I was also fully present in another place and time. I was walking around his damn bedroom, seeing things I really didn't need to see."

Calista meets Draven's gaze when she tells us about the woman that was with Sloan, the abuse she witnessed. "I'm ninety-nine percent sure she was a shade. Her eyes were inked out, and she had fangs, but it was like she was in a trance or something. She didn't seem to be enjoying herself, but she wasn't fighting back."

Draven stiffens, and I'm pretty sure she's letting him see the memory of what she saw. I find myself shifting uncomfortably, averting my gaze. Seth catches my eye and gives me an understanding nod, which, instead of comforting me, just pisses me off. If there's anything I dislike more than feeling jealous, it's someone else knowing I'm feeling it. I don't want to be jealous of Draven or Seth, but I miss *my* connection with Calista. I yearn to feel her like a second skin again, to share the burden of her aches and pains, to feel her desire and pleasure echo in my bones.

Seth swings his foot and catches my ankle, jarring me from my officially inappropriate thoughts. He tries to mouth something at me, but I look away, focusing on only Calista.

"He knew I was there. He could see me," Calista says as she finishes telling us everything that happened while she was zoned out in the spell. "But then

something even stranger happened. I got pulled into a vision, but it was like I could see it from two different perspectives. I was both inside Sloan's head, in what I think was a memory, and also watching it from the outside. He was walking down a tunnel. I think it was under a bridge. He was meeting Bodin."

"George Bodin?" Ada asks, almost choking on her tea.

"Yes. Bodin handed him a folder with what looked like photo copies, but Sloan barely looked at them before they started arguing. He wanted something from him, something Bodin refused to give him. He said he needed leverage."

"I'd bet everything it was the book," Ada says.

I nod. "That makes the most sense. There's a lot of power in that book a man like Sloan would love to get his hands on."

"Not just Sloan," Calista says. "There was another man. He wasn't there, but he had greasy hair and bloodshot eyes. I think the part of the vision with Bodin and Sloan was a memory, but this part of the vision was different, more abstract, like a dream. I could feel his hate; it was like oil coating my skin. He was spewing his hatred from a pulpit while people in strange white outfits sat in the pews of a church, but they weren't moving or talking and I couldn't see their faces. He reached out for me, but then his face flashed back to Sloan, who was reaching for me in real life. That's when I was jolted back to my body."

Calista looks at Heather and Ada. "I'm terribly sorry for what happened to Rayne, and I'd like to offer whatever assistance we can in helping her recover. I didn't mean for that to happen, but I think she might have saved my life."

A confused mixture of anger and relief crashes through me with the force of a truck. My heart lurches hard enough that Calista snaps her gaze to mine, a hand coming up to rest on her chest. She felt that? *Good.*

"Don't you ever put yourself in danger like that again," I all but growl. "As soon as you thought you'd been noticed, you should have gotten out."

"I know, and I'm sorry," Calista says, sitting up to reach for my hands that have moved from her legs. "I don't have any control when a vision takes me, and it happened so fast." This close, I can see how dark the circles under her eyes are, and I feel guilty for my surge of anger.

I want to tell her that I don't know what I'd do if I lost her for good. That the pieces of her I've lost already are slowly breaking me down. Instead, I pull her into my arms. Seth moves so I can lean back until Calista is effectively laid over me.

"Tell us about what you found," Calista says to Seth sleepily as he settles on the floor next to us. I choose not to point out that there are three open chairs and a loveseat that is currently unoccupied. I know the compulsion to be close to her is strong. And for Seth, even more so. Not only does he have his whole touch-starved thing going on, but he's made sure to keep near constant physical contact with her to help take away the pain of our broken bond. Having me nearby seems to help her some, but I know it still hurts her when one of us isn't close. She never complains or shows it, but I know it's there. It'll always be there until I figure out how to fix this.

## Chapter 31 - Calista

Despite how exhausted I am, I want to know everything about what Seth found at The Archives. Hawthorne has me pulled down to lie over his chest, but I'm a little too comfortable. I'm desperate to let sleep pull me under, warm in Hawthorne's strong embrace.

I reach down and grasp Seth's hand. "Tell me," I prod again.

"Fair warning, it's a lot. Prepare yourselves for an info-dump."

Seth tells us about the death records, and how Sloan and two others were the only survivors listed from that night aside from Ada. Rage fills my veins when he describes the deaths those poor people suffered. He's holding back on a lot of the details, trying to save us all the torment of knowing exactly how brutal their deaths were, but the more he holds back, the worse I know it was. Before I know it, I'm up off the couch and pacing, my fury sustaining the adrenaline I need to get through this conversation.

"That must be part of why the brights wouldn't help the witches anymore," I surmise. "If they thought what I did outside the caves was unnatural, they couldn't have been happy about that many lives snuffed out at once."

"It was definitely part of it," Seth agrees.

"And this is your—our—hometown?" Ada asks Hawthorne.

Hawthorne nods absentmindedly. "Yes, but what I don't understand is that all of this carnage took place the night I left town. Which means they were hiding Ada right under my nose for almost a month. Why didn't they use the leverage they had?" he muses, meeting her eyes with a saddened expression. "I would have done anything."

Ada's eyes fill with pain and uncertainty, but she gives Hawthorne a curt nod.



She's surly, just like her father.

"I don't think The Council knew. Remember, Calista said that Sloan manipulated everyone into giving Silas a spot on The Council after murdering Renee and they were among the dead, too. I think the massacre was planned and executed by Sloan to cover up his bloody coup. The other two survivors were a shade named Lana Delaney, and a human by the name of Salazar Bell-Hopkins."

Ada snaps to attention. "Did you say Salazar Hopkins?"

"Bell-Hopkins is what the records show."

"It's too much of a coincidence to be anyone else. Salazar Hopkins is the grand master of The Sanctum Society. He was the one that I was worried about getting his hands on your power. He's a deranged madman that makes zero apologies about his mission to steal the witches' powers. George Bodin was bad enough, he believed that taking their powers would help to fight against witchcraft. Which was backwards, but at least he had some kind of hairbrained excuse. Salazar has no such notions, he's simply power hungry. His mission is to elevate the status of certain individuals—namely, white males over a certain income threshold—and basically employ a system of serfdom. He thinks women should be seen and not heard. The idea of women holding any power at all is abhorrent to him. He's completely unhinged."

*That sounds familiar.* "Well, we know what brought those two together, then. And I'm willing to bet money that the shade is the same woman he put the spell on." I look at Ada. "She might be the one that revived you as well."

"So...wait. Are we thinking that Sloan, the current leader of The Council of Witches, is working with a known anti-magic fanatic that plans to drain witches of their powers to use for himself?" Heather asks incredulously. But once she's voiced it, she leans back in her seat to really think about it. "Jesus," she mutters on an exhale. "What have we gotten ourselves into?"

Puzzle pieces start shifting together with each bit of new information. "I think Sloan is using Salazar to do his dirty work. Think about it, The Sanctum Society has grown almost overnight from a powerless group of fringe lunatics

to an organization strong enough to kidnap and torture dozens, if not hundreds, of people. Where else would they have gotten the information to look through medical records for indications of neurodivergence?"

"Sloan is responsible for all of it," Ada says, gritting her teeth. "Salazar is a known dangerous fanatic, but Sloan has given him the information and power needed to cause true destruction. Unhindered, they could actually achieve their goals."

"It's still advanced magic that none of them are really capable of performing," Hawthorne says. "Compulsion and strong friends will only get you so far."

"Why do you think they didn't shoot Calista on sight?" Ada says bluntly. "They were banking on her coming to save you, using you against each other to gain access to your magic."

I frown. "They were shooting at me."

"Not to kill, only to maim. Same reason they didn't kill you," she says, looking at Hawthorne. "Why else would they throw you in a cell and let you rot until Salazar got there? Aside from the fact that they were afraid of you."

The side of Hawthorne's mouth quirks up like that little snippet of information pleases him. "Good. I hope they piss their pants when they see us coming."

"Oh, speaking of piss—Marcus is dead," Draven says, as if he'd forgotten something as mundane as a grocery list.

"What?" Heather asks, looking upset before she schools her features. "Did he say anything?"

"Only that his master Sloan was going to take the power back from all the power hungry whores and restore men to their rightful places. Some nonsense like that," he drawls. "To be fair, though, I didn't actually even touch him."

"No, you just fed him his own nightmares until his heart stopped," Seth says, rolling his eyes as if that were a normal, albeit exasperating, occurrence.

"Lovely," I say, huffing out a breath as I plop back down on the couch. The last dregs of my adrenaline have been exhausted, and I am fading fast.

"Calista?" Ada asks as I lean against Hawthorne's broad shoulder and close my eyes.

"Hmm?"

"Did you see where he was?"

"Oh, yes. He was in Roanoke," I say groggily. "I saw the star."

My three bonds surround me without prompting. Seth sits at my feet, pressed between my legs and facing outward, talking to Heather about genealogy research. Hawthorne is next to me, his arm banded over my lap. I'm leaning on his thick arm as Draven runs his fingers through my hair.

As I'm lulled to sleep, I hear Seth telling Hawthorne he has a gift for him. I try to open my eyes to see what it is, but I can't lift them.

I fall into a restless sleep, plagued by strange nightmares. In one moment, I'm standing in the field where we helped the prisoners escape, holding my bloody, still-beating heart in my hands. The blood slips through my fingers and soaks into the ground, which teems with life. Thorns and brambles rise from the ground, wrapping around my bare feet and pouring more of my blood into the soil. Tendrils of magic, gold and green and red, wrap around me like a cocoon and suffocate me. Then I'm standing next to an old abandoned farm with a silo, covered head to toe in blood that I intrinsically know is the blood of innocents. I hold my bloody organ out as if in offering, and a large black dog takes it in its maw and crushes it.

"Are you okay?" Draven asks, and I turn my head to make eye contact with him from the far side of our bed. He's reading in the dim light of the rising sun. It's almost dawn. Hawthorne must have opened a portal to bring us all back home after I fell asleep.

"Yeah. Just a strange dream."

"Sleep, beauty. We're all safe for now."

"The others—what if—"

"Hawthorne brought them all back here in case Sloan decides to make a visit."

"Okay, good." I say, closing my eyes and drifting back to sleep.

## Chapter 32 - Draven

I watch Calista sleep for a long time, thinking about the events of the day. Not so much the torturing Marcus part, that was pretty standard. I drained his tainted blood and spit it into a bowl to wash down the sink. Even after whatever "tonic" he was given had been drained away, he was still a brainwashed lunatic who seemed to truly believe the bullshit Sloan had been feeding him. Turns out he'd been by his side since he was very young, and had been groomed to follow Sloan without question. Ada had a similar upbringing, but she was stronger and better able to overcome the manipulation. It could be because her magic was more powerful than Sloan's, or she just had a stronger mental fortitude, even if she wasn't aware of it.

Surprisingly, Hawthorne's daughter had opened up a bit to me yesterday while we were questioning Marcus. A lot of what she told me was stuff I already knew based on what Calista saw, but I got to see how she felt about it. Not that she really talked about her feelings, only commiserated with some of Marcus's memories. She seemed mostly exhausted by it all. Like she'd given too much of herself to hoping her so-called father wasn't as bad as she thought he was. And we'd even talked about Hawthorne a bit. She's wary of him, in part because of growing up believing he was basically the bogeyman.

"He's not a knight in shining armor. Honestly, he's kind of an asshole. But he's a good guy overall," I had to admit to her.

"You two don't get along?"

"We're getting there. And actually we've been working well together. Being mated to the same person is a good motivator."

"How does that even work?" She asked, looking unsure if she really wanted the answer.

"Well, sometimes I take her mouth—"

"UGH! No! That's not what I meant!" Ada cringed in horror, looking like she might be sick. "I meant how does the bond work? I didn't think people did those anymore."

"Not real ones. These days it's just a ceremony, a bunch of asinine empty promises. What we did was deeper. We each gave her something of ourselves and took something in turn. We bound ourselves eternally, and none of us, save your father, can live without her. If she dies, we die."

She screwed up her face. "Why the hell would you do that? And how did you know it would work?"

I shrugged. "It was instinct, mostly. I just...knew."

"What happened to my father's bond?" she asked. The way she says father is slow and experimental, as if rolling it around in her mouth to see what it tasted like.

I wasn't sure how much information to give away, so I kept it pretty simple. "Your dad is a surly bastard and acted like he wasn't interested, so she found a way to release him from his bond. It was only possible because she's ridiculously strong, smart as fuck, and insanely stubborn. She suffers all the pain on her own because she didn't want him to be tied down to her if he didn't want it. Imagine her disbelief when it turned out she was wrong. He wanted her all along. It weakened us all because he wasn't strong or smart enough to put his bullshit behind him," I said, as if I didn't have my own mountain of bullshit that my bonded family have had to deal with. "Not that I'm perfect or anything," I amended honestly. "I pretty much tried to murder everyone."

"That tracks," Ada said, looking up at the ceiling as if looking through it, lost in thought.

Thinking over that conversation, I have to give Hawthorne credit where credit is due. He's still a stoic, grouchy asshole with a superiority complex. But he's putting in the work, doing what he can to make up for all the lost time and let her know he's fully in. I have no doubts that he'll find a way to mend their bond, and I know he'll do it first and foremost to put a stop to her suffering,

his own feelings coming second to her wellbeing. Whatever is in that journal Seth brought him back from The Archives might hold the key, and Hawthorne stayed up well into the early hours of the morning, pouring over it with a flashlight to try to see the faded script. I looked over it some, and my advanced eyesight picked up on a few faded pieces of text, but we'll have to translate the hieroglyphics to get most of the story.

And while he's working on fixing their bond, I'm going to do my part to keep our family safe.

They'll be mad, but I have to do this part alone. Walking into a nest of vipers isn't safe, even for me. A bright would attract even more unwanted attention. That much light would be a beacon in the dark where my kind congregates. And two mortal witches? They'd be drained within an inch of their lives in moments.

Most of the hidden world fears blood mages, and much of that is the natural consequence of our nature. We're animals in our DNA. Long ago, generations before I was sired, blood mages could even shift into beastly forms. Blood and lust and the chase fuel us. It would be easy to say that the prejudice of others relegated us to the shadows and deemed us "shades" compared to the light mage's exalted "bright" status. But in truth, my kind embraced and relished in it, taking advantage of the fear our kind inspires and perpetuating the stereotypes that allowed us to mostly do as we please. It was our kind that pulled out of the unspoken pact that was left behind by the gods that supposedly first sired us. But it only added fuel to a fire of fear and prejudice that already existed. We'd never truly been welcomed at the table.

*But what if we could be?*

Before I found myself in this bond, and unwittingly made part of a family, I would have said that having a seat at the table of beings that govern the hidden world was fucking stupid. Why bother? I'd do what I want, and they could try to stop me, try to make rules and shake their fingers at me, but I'd just bite them off and move on. I might not have known the meaning of true happiness, but I was content doing my own thing with little to no consequences for a long time.

Now though, I think that our kind could benefit from stepping out of the shadows. And more than that, if Sloan has found a way to manipulate shades and use their magic for his own purposes, he can't be allowed to get away with it. He needs to be struck down before the masses even find out it's possible, or at the very least, we need to come together to show that we will not stand for it. There are too many people out there that will turn a blind eye, and even more who will believe we deserve it and advocate to control us. We're not a cuddly bunch, but I'll not let my people become leashed pets to be used to further someone else's agenda.

Morning comes, and Seth and Hawthorne leave Calista in bed to sleep. She's not recovering from her last vision as quickly as she normally does, and she needs the extra rest.

"Are you just going to sit over there and stare at me?" she says groggily, her eyes still closed. "I can feel your eyes on me."

"If I stare much longer, you're going to feel something else on you."

She smiles and reaches a hand out to me. I take it and allow her to pull me down next to her. She curls into my side.

"You should feed," she says, opening her eyes and gazing up at me. Her pale blue eyes almost glow in the stream of sunlight pouring in, stark against her red-rimmed eyes.

"I can't pull from you in this condition."

"My power is strong. I'm just physically exhausted. You can give me some back and help wake me up," she says, lifting her leg over my thigh.

I'm instantly hard, and she doesn't give me time to try to be a better person. Her hand slips under the waistband of my sweatpants and wraps around my cock. I moan and roll my hips, pushing harder into her hand. Before I know it, she's sliding down my body and her hot mouth engulfs the head of my cock. I moan as her tongue swirls around the crown and pushes into the slit, drawing out beads of pre-cum. Then she sinks down, taking me all the way into the back of her throat, humming as she looks up at me through her



lashes. I buck my hips, thrusting myself deeper, until I'm hitting the back of her throat hard enough to make her gag. The sound sends a tremor right through my balls, and I have to pull her off me before I end this well before I'm ready to. I throw her down on the mattress and, using my strength and speed, strip us both of the pajamas that are impeding my access to her naked body.

My teeth plunge into the crux of her thigh while I push two fingers inside her sopping wet pussy. She immediately clamps down around my fingers as a guttural scream pours from her throat. I take generous swallows from her femoral artery, feeling her quake beneath me as each pull of her blood heightens her orgasm and makes my cock twitch. Before the aftershocks have abated, I pull my fingers from her and lick the cum dripping from her as I push her knees up to her chest.

"So. Fucking. Delicious," I moan, getting to my knees. I hold her, wide open and exposed for me, as I tease my cock through her folds, spreading her arousal over my length. She pants as I nudge the head of my cock into her pussy, still pulsing with tiny tremors of her abating orgasm. I stoke the flame back to life, giving her just a few inches at a time and rubbing her clit with my thumb.

The moans she lets out are animalistic, reminding me of our breeding nest. I'd had to begrudgingly give it up for our guests so Ada and Rayne could sleep in the back room, but I plan on turning this entire fucking house into a breeding nest. Even when she's not emitting those daze-inducing fertile pheromones, I'm hard for her all the fucking time. If I could live inside her, I would.

"Gods, you're fucking perfect," I growl, sliding in to the hilt just as her orgasm hits. "Fuck!" I shout, as her pussy clamps down around me and she screams. I fuck her through her orgasm, slamming into her in quick, rough thrusts that have her breasts bouncing and her moans coming in choppy gusts of breath. Just before I'm about to come, I wrap my arms around her waist and lift her to wrap her legs around me. Her teeth pierce my neck and my cock spasms. My cum fills her pussy as my blood fills her mouth, and we ride out our orgasms in a sweaty, bloody, frenzied grind.

Calista collapses against me, and I lay her back down on the pillows, kissing

and sucking at her neck, her breasts, and every bit of exposed skin as I crawl off her body. Grabbing a washcloth from the small bathroom and wetting it with warm water, I return to gently wipe away the blood and cum from between her legs. She's half asleep again, and I lay next to her, tucking her into my body, until her breaths even out and she's asleep again. Some of the color has returned to her cheeks. I tune in to the sound of her breaths, the way her heart beats steadily, the push of blood through her veins. Everything sounds in order, but something is off.

When I sneak out a few minutes later, Seth is waiting in the kitchen with a knowing smirk.

"I need you to take over," I tell him. "I have an errand to run. Where is everyone?" I ask.

"Oh, Hawthorne took them outside to help him with chores he needed to catch up on. But they could still hear you, so he took them on a little hike."

"Whoops," I say flatly, because I don't really give a fuck.

Seth snorts, but then his expression sobers. "Is she okay?"

"I was going to ask you the same question. She seems okay physically, or at least I can't detect anything wrong. But something is definitely off."

"I think it's the bond. Her magic is going to suffer if we don't fix it."

"She said her magic felt strong," I say, but then roll my eyes at my own idiocy. "Of course she would say that." I should have noticed that she was covering so we wouldn't worry about her, but once again, my attention was on getting my dick as deep inside her as possible. "What are we going to do?" I ask, although I have no idea what I could offer to help. It's not like Hawthorne needs a boost to get his own dick deep inside her anymore.

"The journal Peter gave me is giving us some ideas, and Hawthorne is working on it."

"Good." I tip my head in the direction of the bedroom. "Probably shouldn't

leave her alone too long. I don't want her to be hurting. I should be back by nightfall."

"Where are you going?"

After studying him for a few moments, I decide to tell him the truth. "I'm going to visit Jasper Scarborough in Atlanta. He's the most powerful shades in the Southeast since Silas' death. He needs to know what's being done to Lana, especially seeing as I'm pretty sure Jasper is her sire. Bringing anyone with me would be dangerous, so I haven't said where I'm going to anyone else."

"Understood," Seth says as he holds out his hand. I go to shake it, but he pulls me in and whispers low in my ear. "Don't go getting yourself killed, Draven. We're waiting for you."



I get to the Scarborough mansion in moments, thanks to Seth talking me into getting Hawthorne to open a portal for me. He agreed to do it with very little information, stating that if he needed to know, I'd tell him. I feel like it was a significant moment between us. It was like he acknowledged that I was going to do whatever was best for our mate, and he knew that whatever I had to do was important. I'm thankful for his trust, and also the amount of energy I was able to conserve. I'd have to pick up a few juice boxes from a local hospital before I presented myself to Jasper. As strong as I am, even I wouldn't walk into a monster's den without making sure I was in top form. And with Calista's blood in my system, I'm stronger than ever. The only downside is the half-chub I'm still sporting. Even after I've walked all the way through town and up the winding road that leads to the mansion, it's still filling out

my jeans a bit too much in the front. I discreetly try to adjust myself when I come into viewing distance of the windows. Shades are a notoriously horny bunch, and partiers like Jasper and his nest aren't going to understand what it means to not want to indiscriminately fuck anything that moves. If someone notices a boner, they're likely to just pull it out and start going to town, and when I have to fight them off, it'll cause more of a scene than me showing up here already does.

I haven't been part of shade society in decades. I retreated from the lifestyle right around the time that Calista cast that conjuring spell as a little girl. It might just be a convenient coincidence, but I'm starting to not believe in those anymore. The idea of fate and destiny playing a role in the decisions I make is growing on me after the experiences I've had in the last month.

Whatever my reasons were, it will not go unnoticed that I've been gone for a while. After all, it was Jasper's party that I fled from.

The doors open before I even make it up the stone steps to the mansion. Standing in the middle of the doorway is none other than Jasper Scarborough himself, looking like the rake he is in a form fitting pinstripe suit and blood red silk shirt, unbuttoned to show off his deeply tanned skin and black curls of chest hair. Jasper Scarborough looks like a cross between a mafia gangster and a rockstar, and that's exactly what he is. His sired family runs a massively successful drug empire, and I've heard rumors of him being in the skin trade, although he never admitted as much to me. Considering he knew something of my background and helped me evade Silas' cronies more than once, that was probably his version of being a good friend not to bring it up. But what I saw in his house that day I woke up from a bender will stick with me forever.

"Where the fuck have you been?" he demands, opening his arms wide to receive me. I approach him like I have nothing to be afraid of, never showing even a sliver of fear. The man hugs me and kisses both my cheeks before escorting me inside. Two scantily clad humans with bite marks and dazed expressions close the doors behind us.

I fight a wave of nausea as we walk through familiar halls. The smell of the blood of innocent people—fucking *children*—still permeates the air.

"Can I offer you anything? Vodka? Whiskey? O-positive?" I balk at the offer, not because his hospitality offends me, but because he correctly guessed Calista's blood type based on the smell of my last meal simmering in my veins. Which means he can also probably smell her power.

"Full up, I'm afraid," I say with a casual smirk.

"I see that. You look good," Jasper says, raking his eyes over my dark wash jeans and black button-down shirt. "Strong."

"I feel strong," I say honestly. I know he's sizing me up, but I can't let on how aware of the threat I am. It's all a carefully choreographed dance.

"I heard a rumor about you," he says. "Funny that you show up right in the midst of all the juicy gossip."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, something about you shacking up with a witch? Now, that part I can believe and even get on board with, but they're also saying you're involved with a fucking bright?"

I don't let even one beat of my heart betray me, keeping my voice as casual as possible. Shrugging, I say, "He's a good fuck."

Jasper's booming laugh echoes in the cavernous hallways as we enter the great room, where at least a dozen shades are lounging around in various states of undress. Some are even openly fucking, including two male shades taking full advantage of all the holes one of Jasper's servants has to offer. Her eyes are completely blank, and I recognize the defeated expression as she allows the men to do whatever they want with her body. If I ever needed confirmation of Jasper's involvement in the skin trade, there it is, because I have no doubt that woman isn't here willingly. She's either been compelled, drugged, or conditioned to just let it happen.

"Feel free," Jasper says, gesturing to the display.

"Not what I'm here for," I say, my posture stiff. If that was a test, I failed it,

but he knew I would.

"Then what are you here for?" A woman's voice calls out, and I turn to find Lana from Calista's vision sitting on the enormous white leather sectional, bent over a pile of white powder. She snorts a hefty dose of the drug before daintily patting her nostrils.

"Actually, I came to talk about you," I say honestly. "I'm pretty surprised to see you here."

She stands from the couch, her movements jerky and unlike that of a shade who is four centuries old. How can they not see that there's something wrong with her?

"How interesting," Jasper says, his eyes gleaming with excitement. "Lana was passing through town and was just sharing some news about you." These old blood mages have lived so long, they're all dying for some danger and drama to liven up their overlong lives.

Lana walks around me, circling me like a predator, trying to intimidate me. "I smell her on you," she hisses. "The witch."

"She smells a hell of a lot better than the jumped up excuse for a sociopath that has you collared like a dog," I bite back.

Lana hisses and lunges at me, but she's so drugged up and brain fucked, I easily step out of her way and she flies across the room, crashing into a couple of shades who are choosing their next meal from a selection of three human servants. Her interruption nearly starts a brawl, and as fucked up as she is, she gets distracted from her fight with me to hiss and spit at the shades who told her off.

"Can you not see that there's something wrong with her?" I ask Jasper. "You're her sire, right? That's why I came to you."

"What is it that you think is happening?" Jasper doesn't look convinced, but it'll be hard to convince any shade that they can be controlled. If I hadn't seen it for myself through Calista's eyes, I might not believe it. "She's just high."

"She's not just high. Look at the way she moves, how her mind is all over the place. Or was she always so easily distracted and graceful?"

Lana hisses and stalks back, hunching her shoulders and looking feral.

"Tell them about Sloan," I challenge her. "Tell them about the leash he's keeping on you, getting you and your children to do his dirty work. Tell him how Silas died."

Jasper's head snaps up. From what I remember, he was fond of Silas. "You said hunters got him," he says, narrowing his eyes at her. "Isn't that how he died?"

"That's what I said, so that's what happened," she says, but her lie isn't convincing. She's too fucking blitzed to keep her gaze steady, and her pupils keep bouncing from me to Jasper.

"Who is Sloan?" Jasper asks, a dangerous calm deepening his voice.

I watch her wrestle with whether to admit anything. "He's just a lover," she says casually, much in the same way I made light of my relationship with Seth. She's smart to not outright deny knowing him, but I've had the benefit of breaking down another one of Sloan's victims.

"Oh, he's not just any lover. He's the leader of the Council of Witches. Isn't that right, Lana? Honestly, I'm surprised you'd admit to willingly letting that pencil-dicked idiot fuck you," I say, smirking as her jaw ticks. I take a step closer to her. "I bet he takes you like a dog, considering that's all you are to him."

"You're wrong!" she spits out. "Mma-Sloan loves me." Her eyes widen as she realizes her mistake.

I cut my eyes at Jasper. The L-word on Lana's tongue is enough to get his attention, and he puts himself between us, getting right up in her face. "The fuck is wrong with you, Delaney?!"

"Nothing! This witch fucker is just trying to stir up shit."

"I recall you arriving to stir shit up first," I say, not denying it. She grits her teeth, nervously trying to look away from Jasper.

"Don't lie to me, Lana. I am your sire. Your master—"

"SLOAN IS MY MASTER!" She shouts, spitting with the force of her outburst.

"Ah, there it is," I say, looking at Jasper with a knowing expression. "I recently had the pleasure of interrogating another one of Sloan's puppets. They really don't like it when you talk shit about their master." I lower my voice, although there's really no point, considering the hearing abilities of everyone in the room. "We can't let this get out. Whatever he's done to her, he could teach others, and then hunters aren't the biggest problem we will have."

"And how do you propose we do anything about it?" he asks, looking genuinely concerned and interested in my answer. Jasper is a lot of things, but he's one of the oldest of our kind, and as such, has the most control. Hell, probably half of the shades in the country have either been sired by him or by one of his sires. That I'm here challenging him, however politely, is a big deal, considering he's responsible for my own line.

"First, we're going to have to put her down," I say, not relishing the idea. The part of my humanity that has woken up over the past month truly feels bad for everything Lana has gone through. But I'll do what needs to be done. "And then, I'd like to talk to you about the future of our kind."



## Chapter 33 - Calista

"Where is Draven?" I ask, as Hawthorne ladles a large serving of stew into my bowl. Rayne, who hasn't stopped eating since she woke up, is sitting to my left, with Ada next to her. Seth and Heather are on the right, and Hawthorne is at the opposite end of the table from me.

"He had to go visit an old friend," Seth says cryptically, but I don't like the sounds of that.

"What friend? Draven doesn't have friends."

"We're his friends," Seth exclaims, gesturing around the table, earning a raised eyebrow from Hawthorne. "Deny it all you want, Mage Daddy, but he's growing on you."

"Like a fungus," Hawthorne huffs.

Everyone around the table chuckles. Except me—I'm still staring daggers at Seth.

"Did you know about this?" I ask Hawthorne, but I don't need a verbal answer from the way he shoves a huge bite of potato into his mouth.

Seth gives me a gentle, but pointed, look. "Feel your bond. What does it tell you?"

With a frustrated sigh, I let my eyes flutter closed, focusing on the tether that ties my life to Draven's. It's thrumming, as strong as ever. I take a breath and begrudgingly nod my head. "He's okay," I admit. "But I don't like that he isn't here and you won't tell me where he's gone."

"I told you, he had to go visit an old friend."

"There's more to it than that."

"Yes, but I don't know all the details, so you'll have to ask him when he gets back. Which should be soon," he says, looking out the window. I don't miss the slight furrow in his brow as he assesses the view of the yard, where twilight is rapidly darkening the shadows of the property.

I'm too tired to argue. Even after sleeping most of the day away, I feel like I could fall asleep right now.

We eat in silence for a while, and then Ada and Rayne clear the table. Heather is serving us a dessert with the abundance of apples we have from the large tree growing out of the front porch. I wonder if Seth or Hawthorne told her the story of how the tree got there. I'm about to bring it up so we can break up some of this tension, but Seth jumps up and runs into the bedroom. He returns with my grimoire and a folder.

"What's this?" Hawthorne asks, picking up the folder that Seth places on the table. I get up and move to his other side, so we're all at the same end.

"This is a little genealogy research I've been doing, which I think you're going to find quite interesting. Some of this I learned at The Archives, but I had to look up the rest on the internet and human archives, which is why I didn't tell you right away," Seth explains, and my attention piques. "It doesn't really change anything, but it's super fucking interesting and explains a few things."

Hawthorne opens the folder and lays some of the papers out. The first thing I reach for are some handwritten notes. Seth's handwriting is more graceful than I expected.

"Who are these people?" I ask, following the tree of names down until I see my mother's name. I perk up a little. "Is this—"

"Your family tree. The Batts' ancestry." Seth answers excitedly. Then he hands me the grimoire, which has several bookmarks in the pages. "This is the part that took the longest. I matched up the names with the timing on some entries in the grimoire. It's such an enormous book, it'll probably take

you ages to read every page, but I marked some pages that might be the most interesting. You had some fascinating ancestors, angel. Some of which were frankly terrifying, if I'm being honest. But none more than this woman right here." His finger moves down the tree to a name eight branches above my own.

"Kate Batts?"

"Wait a second," Hawthorne says. "That name sounds familiar."

"As well it should," Heather says, passing out bowls of hot apple cobbler. The smell alone is enough to salivate over, and I lose myself in the notes of cinnamon and nutmeg for a moment. "Have you ever heard the legend of the Bell Witch?"

"Yeah, that's it. It's an old ghost story, right?"

"It's a bit more than that," Heather says, taking my previous seat. "It was back in the eighteen hundreds, well after the witch trials had run their course, although they never really ended, if you ask me. Kate Batts was an eccentric woman that lived in Tennessee, not terribly far from here, actually. The stories they tell around those parts mostly focus on John Bell as being a fine and upstanding member of society, a prominent farmer, and how the evil witch haunted and tormented him, and that her ghost eventually murdered John Bell."

"Why would she do that?" I ask, feeling like there has to be a lot more to the story.

"Good question, and not one that gets asked enough. Most people just hear the word witch and assume evil, I suppose. Others say they had a difference of opinion on religion and politics that Kate took too far. Some reports say it was a dispute over land. Others just say she was obsessed with the farmer and his family. The story has been passed down and twisted so much over the generations that it's become a tourist attraction and ghost story, but Kate Batts actually outlived John Bell."

"So it's all bullshit."

"Not necessarily all of it," says Seth, opening the grimoire to a section he has marked. "Look here."

I skim over the pages; many of the words faded and barely legible. But right there, in Kate's own handwriting, are multiple notes and spells that she made up, along with numerous rants about John Bell.

"No one else that added to this grimoire wrote any kind of entries other than spells or recipes, that sort of thing. But Kate Batts definitely had an agenda against John Bell, and she dedicated her life, and death, to taking him down. She wrote journal entries about it," Seth says. "Their original dispute was over property. But when Kate went to confront him about it, she saw some concerning activity on his property."

"Oh my god," I exclaim, opening one such page. "She was accusing John of kidnapping and abusing young women, including his own wife and child?"

"Yeah, and get this," Hawthorne says, moving in closer to read further along the page. "He said he was testing them...for signs of witchcraft."

"And the local constable was letting it happen, because they were members of the same local chapter of a respected religious organization..." I read on, trailing off because this is just too unreal.

"Let me guess," says Ada.

"Yup," answers Seth. "The Sanctum Society."

Hawthorne curses. "After everything we've seen, everything we've gone through...this connection can't be a coincidence."

"I don't believe in coincidences anymore," I agree.

"I never did," Seth says.

I drag my eyes away from Kate's pages of the grimoire, which, Seth is right, I could probably spend forever reading and still find more. Layer after layer of spells, recipes, antidotes, and random tidbits of each woman's life. Generations of my ancestors, who wrote in this book with their own hands,

put pieces of themselves into the pages to pass down to me. And I'll hopefully have the chance to pass it down to my child or children someday, if I have them.

"I never appreciated this book for what it is until just now," I admit, running my hand over the cover as I close it, for now. "What's the rest of this?"

"This stack here is the Bell family genealogy, which proves Salazar's relation to John Bell. And there are some other records about his education and employment history. Some of his information was harder to track down, because he started using his father's surname and dropped the Bell hyphenate entirely." Seth passes over a stack of photos. "And these are some old pictures of the properties. The pictures from her time period are mostly sketches from the property dispute, and there are newer photographs. Some of that property is a tourist attraction now."

"I don't understand how a tragic story like this makes for a tourist attraction," I say.

"Only because you're too close to it. You're acutely aware that Kate Batts was a real person who was unfairly accused, while the real villain was getting away with murder and worse the whole time," Heather says. "But people love spooky, macabre entertainment. I imagine a lot of what we all find entertaining bothers someone, somewhere," she points out.

Some of the pictures catch my eye, and I'm flipping through page after page of a familiar sight. The clearing and the rusted silo are exactly like the one in my dreams. I know it's the same place. I feel it in my bones.

"I've seen this before. I've dreamt of it, multiple times. There were other weird abstract things, and stuff I can't quite remember, but there's no mistaking this spot right here. There's something on the ground in this clearing."

"What if it's her grave?" Heather asked. "She has a cemetery marker next to her family, but there's a legend that says her bones were hidden somewhere on the property, and that she haunts the area. There have been sightings of her ghost in The Bell Cave. I'm sure that most of it is bullshit, but what if

there are some truths hidden in the stories as well?"

"I'd like to go see it," I say excitedly. "I just know it's something important."

"I'll take you," Hawthorne promises. "How about tomorrow morning? If we go early enough, we can watch the sunrise."

My heart warms at the hopefulness in his eyes. To think I almost missed out on sweet, loving, gentle, giving Hawthorne. Not that I mind my surly, grouchy Mage Daddy. I love him any way I can get him.

## Chapter 34 - Seth

"Do they always make googly eyes at each other like that?" Ada mutters as I bring our dessert dishes into the kitchen.

"If you can believe it, a couple of weeks ago they were yelling and throwing stuff at each other. The tension was *thick*," I answer, waggling my eyebrows.

"Gross."

"Almost as thick as you and Rayne barely talking to each other, but always watching when they think the other isn't looking." She looks up at me and narrows her eyes. I stop her before she can deny it. "I read emotions. You can't hide it from me."

"How about you mind your business and dry this," she hisses through her teeth, pushing a wet plate into my chest.

"You should talk to her," I sing-song as I wipe a dish towel around the plate.

"And you should mind your fucking business," she sings back, before throwing a sponge at me and stalking out of the room, only to have Birdie pop in out of nowhere with a loud *squawk!* and knock her back on her ass.

"Where the fuck did she come from?!" Ada says, ducking on the ground.

"She does that," Calista says, extending an arm to pull Ada up.

"Draven must be ready to come home," I say, looking at Hawthorne, who is already muttering words to open a portal in the middle of our living room.

Draven steps through, looking much worse for wear than he did when he left.

"Don't worry, it's not my blood," he says, too casually.

Ada, Rayne, and Heather gawk at him, looking terrified.

"He does that," Calista says exasperatedly, closing her eyes and pressing her fingers over the bridge of her nose. Finally she looks up, looking weary. "You're okay?"

"I'm fine," he promises, stepping closer to her.

She holds up a hand. "Shower first. Please."

Draven's lips quirk. "What if it was my blood?"

"Then I wouldn't be as nice," she says, reaching to wipe off his lips before giving him a quick, chaste kiss. "If everyone's okay, I'm going to head to bed. Goodnight everyone."

"I'll tuck you in," Hawthorne murmurs, and they disappear through the bedroom door.

"Is she always this tired?" Heather asks. "It's early, and she slept late."

"And had a nap," Rayne points out.

"Her visions sometimes take a lot out of her, and this last one was more intense. I don't know if it was because of the shadow walking, but she's not recovering as quickly as usual. I'm sure she'll be fine after a couple days," I assure them, not wanting anyone to worry.

I shoot Draven a look, and he returns my stare knowingly. Neither of us thinks it's because of the visions. It's her bond, but hopefully, by this time tomorrow, it'll be fixed. Hawthorne has a plan, and Calista handed us a perfect opportunity.

"We have a problem," Draven admits once we can hear some telltale moans coming from the bedroom.

Trying to keep a straight face, and failing, I usher us to the front yard. Heather starts the fire in the fire pit, and we all take a seat to hear what Draven has to say.



"Lana got to Scarborough before I did. She was there. It was clear that she was under some kind of mind spell or influence, and she was strung out. I did just what we did with Marcus, and drew it out of her by talking shit about him, and she outed herself by calling him her master."

Draven runs a hand through his dark, curly hair. "I thought we were good, thought we could talk it out and get the shades on our side, you know, to take down these fuckers once and for all. There's a reason Sloan wants to use them. They're fearless and powerful. Only he's going about it the wrong way. I just wanted to get them on our side."

"So what happened?" I ask.

"I might have suggested we put her down."

"And he didn't like that?"

"Not one bit. But that's not like Jasper. He's cutthroat. I've seen him kill his own children for stepping out of line. I think—and this is just a guess—I think he might have drank from Lana before I got there. They were definitely partying, so it's entirely possible."

"And if her blood is spelled..."

"It might be affecting him, and anyone else that drinks from her," he says, confirming my worst fears.

"Shit," Ada exclaims.

"It gets worse," he says, and I don't think I've ever seen him as worried as he is now. I've seen him feral with bloodlust, out of his mind with rage, and caught up in a breeding frenzy that turned him into a monster. But I've never seen him scared.

After a few breaths, he finally spits it out. "Silas was my sire. Lana was his sire. Jasper was hers. We're all connected. If Sloan knows that, he can use it. To track me, or try to compel me."

"I feel certain that the bond would protect you from hurting any of us," I tell

him firmly. "And because of the bond, you're stronger than they are, even if they don't realize it yet."

"They might have an inkling," Draven says, dropping his head. "I killed almost everyone in that room when they all came at me at once. The only ones that got away were Jasper and Lana. They took advantage of the chaos to run like cowards. But that means there are at least two shades that Sloan has some level of control over. I tried tracking them for a while, but it was getting late and I didn't want to take any chances. So I headed back to my drop off point and sent Birdie."

"It's going to be alright, brother. Once we fix the bond, we're going to be unstoppable," I assure him.

"We need a plan. Now. We have to eliminate Sloan and the little shade army he's building before they become a bigger issue."

"There is a plan, and it starts tomorrow. Come with me so I can walk you through it."

## Chapter 35 - Calista

Other than Hawthorne's cabin and little farm, this might be one of the prettiest places I've ever been. It's nothing more than rolling hills and farmland all around us, and everything is so colorful. The sky is a vibrant orange that fades into pink as the sun rises over the horizon, casting an ethereal glow over the sparkly, frost covered ground. The trees are a mix of lush green with the vibrant reds and oranges of the autumn change.

Beneath me is a plush blanket that I'm pretty sure I recognize from Draven's fuck nest, and next to me is the most beautiful mage. His cheeks above his neat beard are red with the chilled air as he tips his head up to smile at the dazzling display the sun puts on for us. I'm not sure I've ever seen him so relaxed, so completely at ease. He's awfully dressed up for sitting on a picnic blanket to watch a sunrise before hiking around potentially haunted property, but who am I to judge? His dark green button-down shirt fits over his muscles like a second skin, and the sleeves are rolled halfway up his corded forearms. He's got his arm around me, pulling me in close to keep me warm. I'm not cold, but I'd never admit to it, not if it keeps me in his arms for a moment longer, just soaking in this perfect morning.

Leaning into his strong chest, I sigh deeply as the sun rises higher in the sky, and the pink melts into a vivid light blue.

I feel Hawthorne's eyes on me and look up to meet his gaze. "Almost just as good," he says.

"What is?"

"That blue, right over those clouds," he says, pointing. "Is almost the same color as your eyes, just not quite as bright."

I roll my eyes dramatically, and his gaze darkens. "I know you're not rolling your eyes at me, little witch," he growls playfully.

"I'm not afraid of you, Mage Daddy," I say, using Seth's favorite endearment for him.

"Hmmm, you should be," he says, pressing me down on the blanket and crawling over me. His big cock strains in his black jeans, and he rubs into me, sending a delicious shiver of need through my body. "If you're not careful, I'll bend you over and spank you."

Jesus, that should not be sexy. But with that voice, I'm pretty sure he could read the back of a cereal box and I'd get wet.

"Promise?" I whisper in his ear before closing my teeth around the lobe. He groans and presses into me.

"You're in so much trouble, little witch. You just don't even know what I have in store for you."

I arch my back and press my chest into him, practically rubbing myself on him like a cat in heat. Shifting, he settles himself next to me, steadying himself on his elbow as he reaches over and picks a fluffy white dandelion from the ground next to us. He trails the soft end of it over the bridge of my nose and across my jaw, down my neck, and over my chest. He rests the flower on my stomach, but his hand continues to caress downwards as his lips take mine in a slow, sensual kiss. His fingers deftly pop open the button and push beneath the waistband of my jeans and panties, finding me wet and willing, as always. He deepens the kiss when my mouth opens in a soft gasp, his tongue licking against mine as his fingers trace a line from my entrance to my clit. Slowly, he alternates dipping two fingers inside me and rubbing my clit, bringing me to the edge twice before starting over again, until I'm pressing my hips into him and begging him between kisses.

"Please, Hawthorne."

"I should be the one begging," he says, as his fingers continue to work their magic.

He brings me to the edge again, and hovers there, touching me so lightly I wouldn't have known his big, rough hands could be capable of it. His mouth

trails along my jaw to my ear, and just as he tips me over the edge, he whispers, "Be mine again, *a chuisle*. I want to feel you with every heartbeat. I want your pain, and I want your pleasure."

Tears fall over my temples as my back bows off the ground, waves of pleasure pulsing through me as his big fingers pump inside me, giving me something to grip on to while I ride my orgasm out. "Hawthorne!" I cry out.

"That's it, baby. Squeeze my fingers. Let me feel it. Tell me you'll be mine again. Marry me. Bind yourself to me again."

"Yes!" I gasp, both from the orgasm and my answer. I know we may never have the same bond we used to, but I want him in every capacity. I want him to know he is mine and I am his and nothing will ever come between us again. I broke the sacred bond between us, but with this commitment, I will dedicate my life to fixing it.

"Yes?" Hawthorne exclaims, as if I'd have given him any other answer.

"Yes. I'll do the bonding ceremony with you. And I promise, I will find a way to fix what I broke, to make us strong again."

Hawthorne beams down at me and kisses me deeply again. His hand pulls from my pants and wraps around my thigh, pulling me against him. "Gods, I want to be inside you right now," he mutters against my lips.

"There's no one here. Take me, Hawthorne. Make me yours."

"Oh, I plan to, *a chuisle*. Just you fucking wait."

But why wait?

Releasing my thigh, Hawthorne lifts the dandelion from my stomach and looks down at me. Without a thought, I lean forward and blow, just as he does the same. Together, we send a tiny cloud of wishes into the world. Our own little spell of hope scattered into the wind. Bringing the stem down, he wraps it around the ring finger of my left hand. When it's wrapped around entirely, he closes his big hand over mine, and I feel his warm magic wrap

around my finger. When he releases my hand, the stem has formed and petrified into a solid ring.

"That's amazing," I whisper, touching the simple band. I can feel his magic thrumming around my finger, reminiscent of the way our shared bond felt. However miniscule, feeling that tiny thrum of his magic is meaningful, and it comforts a part of me that I worried I'd never again reach.

"Come on," he says, pushing himself up and pulling us both to our feet. "We have a surprise for you."

"We?"

Hawthorne doesn't answer me, taking my hand and leading me away, not even giving me time to fix my pants. He all but runs over the top of the hill, pulling me behind him as I struggle to keep up. If I thought my heart was racing by the time we made it to the top of the hill, I was wrong. Because on the other side of the hill, in a valley of flowers that absolutely do not grow here naturally, are Draven and Seth. There's a large wooden arch, and Heather is standing beneath it, wearing a purple shawl that looks like a robe. Ada and Rayne stand off to the side, but hustle over to me as we approach, and Hawthorne breaks away with a kiss on my cheek to stand next to the other guys.

"Take off your shoes," Rayne says, bending low to help me out of my boots and socks while I steady myself against Ada. Despite the cold, I feel measurably more stable once I am standing directly on the ground. Rooted. Strong.

"What is happening?" I whisper-yell as the two women fuss over my hair and clothes. Rayne pulls a bouquet out of nowhere, white grass of parnassus that grows around the trails of the forest at home, blue forget-me-nots, and blood-red roses, thorns still on. Woven into the bouquet are bright yellow and fluffy white dandelions, along with sprigs of lavender, sage, and other herbs, all tied together with a deep purple ribbon. It takes a few moments of staring to realize that they're all the herbs I used in my childhood spell, the one that eventually conjured the three of them. Ada leans forward and fastens a small veil to my ponytail and I can't help but giggle at how silly it is.

But when I turn around, the giggles die off as I take a deep, shuddering breath. Because my three loves are just steps from me, looking at me with such emotion that I almost stagger backwards. I walk forward as if pulled by a magnet, needing to be closer.

"Watch the salt," Ada whispers, and I make sure to step over it as I enter the circle and make my way closer to my guys.

Seth steps forward first, his trademark grin lighting up his handsome face. His blond hair is tidy and pulled back, and he's wearing a white button-down shirt with dark jeans. His wings are almost blinding in the sun, reflecting the happiness in his soul. Our bond thrums happily as he takes my hands.

"Will you choose to be mine forever, Calista Batts?"

I let out a breathy sound, part chuckle, part sob. "Yes, I will."

Seth beams and places a kiss on my cheek before sliding a delicate white ring over my finger to settle against Hawthorne's. "It's made from one of my feathers," he says as I examine it. He kisses me again before stepping back to let Draven take his place.

My dark mage is as beautiful as ever. His pale skin is almost as luminescent as Seth in this light, and it highlights his dark hair, pouty lips, and deep-set, dark eyes.

"Will you choose to be mine forever, beauty?" he asks, but the way he asks it is almost a challenge.

"Do I really have a choice?" I ask, biting my lip to hold back a smile.

"No, not really," he says with a smirk, his eyes zeroing in on my lip between my teeth.

"Well, I suppose... Yes, Draven, I'll be yours," I say, because I feel like he needs to hear it.

The persistent shadows around his eyes lighten momentarily with the sheer brilliance of the smile that lights up Draven's face. If I thought he was

beautiful before, then nothing in this world could touch the way he looks right now. I even hear Seth whisper, "wow," behind us.

Taking my hand, Draven produces a ring that looks like it's made of a small tangle of barbs. Before he slides it on my finger with the others, he brings it up to his mouth and licks the thorns. His blood turns the ring red, and I'm assuming his venom blunts the edges of the thorns and creates a sort of lacquer over the blood, because it dries and looks glossy. Then he takes my hand and slides the ring up my finger, pressing it against Seth's feather ring. He bends down and presses his mouth to mine, and I taste a drop of blood lingering on his lips. It sends a buzz through my entire body, like bees have taken residence in my veins. His pouty lips pull into a knowing smirk as he pulls back and offers me his arm.

The three men surround me, Hawthorne at my back, Draven and Seth at either side, and we walk to where Heather is standing beneath the wooden arch. Ada and Rayne follow behind.

"Hi," I whisper awkwardly, a little overwhelmed by the emotions that are spinning in my head, and the drug that is Draven's blood lighting my nerve endings on fire.

"Hi," she says back, folding me into a friendly hug.

"Welcome to this sacred circle, where we are coming together to celebrate the union of these four beloved souls. Before us, the elements bear witness, and the spirits of our ancestors and the land beneath our feet join us in our joyous binding of love. Your hands please," Heather says, and moves about, rearranging and joining our hands in a somewhat complicated knot before pulling a length of braided vines and interwoven ribbons of green, blue, red, and purple from around her shoulders. As she winds the cord around our hands, weaving it through our wrists and tying us all together in a symbolic show of binding, she begins a blessing.

"Calista, Hawthorne, Draven, Seth. You have come together with love and with hearts full of intention. As your hands are joined, so too are your lives and spirits united."



Ada and Rayne step to either side of Heather, both holding small trays with various bowls and objects.

Heather reaches into a bowl that Rayne holds and sprinkles salt over our joined hands. "We call upon the power of Earth. This salt is a symbol of stability and grounding, so your bond may be firm and your love unwavering."

Next, she dips her fingers into one of the bowls on Ada's tray. "We call upon the element of Water. Like the rivers that fork through this land, so shall your love flow and sustain. Let the water from this ancestral land be a source of strength and compassion," she says, carefully dripping the water over our hands so that it trickles between our joined palms and intertwined fingers.

Heather next picks up a bundle of fragrant sage and lavender. The end of the smudge stick smolders, a fine trickle of smoke floating and dissipating into the air. "We call upon the element of Air. As the wind carries your dreams and desires, may your spirits always soar together in freedom and in harmony." She wafts the smoke around, above, and beneath our joined hands.

She sets the smudge stick down and picks up an unlit candle. "We call upon the element of Fire." The candle sparks to life. "To symbolize the flame of passion. May the spark of your love burn eternally and light your way through all the days and nights to come." She brings the flame to our hands, and the flame engulfs, but does not burn our skin.

The flames die away, and Heather places a hand at the top and bottom of our joined hands.

"This cord that binds you represents the ties that connect your hearts and souls. It is not a binding of restraint, but a symbol of your commitment to each other. To take care of each other in sickness and in health. To love each other on your worst days. To strive to strengthen your bonds with each other every day, but also to let each other breathe when it is needed."

Heather pulls a small knife from a sheath on her belt, and carefully cuts the cord. She doesn't remove it, but lets it lie lightly over our clasped hands. "This loose binding is just as symbolic of the tightly wound cord. Because

just as your hands are lightly bound now, so shall your spirits remain free. You are choosing to walk this path together, in love and in trust."

She clears her throat as emotion clogs her voice, smiling as she rolls her eyes up to the sky to prevent tears from falling. "Calista, Hawthorne, Draven, Seth. Do you promise to honor and cherish each other, to love and support one another, in times of joy and hardship, for as long as your hearts beat in this lifetime and beyond?"

I look around me at the three faces that have been part of my life before we even met. At the three men that have become everything to me, more important even than the air I need to breathe. I can't go on without them and I never want to be apart.

"I do," I rasp, my voice rough with emotion.

"We do," they say in unison.

"By the power granted to us by the elements and the spirit of this land, we now pronounce you bound, for this life and whatever comes after. May your love continue to grow, joined in spirit and love and trust."

Ada and Rayne clap lightly, and then they both produce small bouquets of dandelions and blow them over our heads as each of my new spouses lift me into their arms to hug and kiss me. They each hug each other, and Draven and Seth even share a small, not quite chaste, kiss before we wrap our arms together in a group hug of tangled limbs and happy tears.

They eventually let me go, and I thank each of the women who helped make this such a special ceremony.

"I don't know how quickly Seth roped you into this, but—"

"It wasn't Seth," Heather insists. "It was actually Hawthorne. I think the other two might have crashed his party. And we weren't roped into it. We overheard some of the plans and wanted to help. Plus, since I'm actually ordained, it's a bit more official than the three of them putting a ring on your finger and then ravaging you in the mud," she laughs.

"The ceremony isn't over yet!" Seth calls, and three women laugh as I shake my head at him.

"No, seriously, little witch, we aren't done with you yet."

"Look, I'm just as ready to consummate this union as the three of you are, but we are not doing that with those three here," I chide in a low whisper.

"Get your head out of the gutter, angel," Seth says with a laugh.

"Actually, she's right. You don't need us here for this part," Heather says with a kind smile. She kisses each of us on our cheeks, and Rayne and Ada add their congratulations before Hawthorne opens a portal for them.

Once the portal is closed, Hawthorne steps up to me and places his hand on my chest, right where it aches when he isn't near. Right where our bond lies, fractured and frayed. A constant reminder of how I didn't trust the bond that made us strong and put us at risk. And now we're on the brink of battle with this vulnerability hovering between us, where a glowing, thrumming, strengthening tether should be.

"I told you I would fix this," he says, and my eyes fill with tears.

"I promise you, I will find a way," I say, blinking to clear my vision.

"You're not listening, *a chuisle*." Hawthorne pulls me into an embrace, his low, rumbling voice soothing. I rest my cheek on his arm and let some of my tears fall.

He's telling me something, and pulls back to press something into my hand, but I'm distracted. To the left of our circle, less than a hundred yards away, a scene from my vision catches my eye. I can see a presence. Like the outline of a woman with dark hair, but when I wipe my teary eyes and refocus, the image is gone.

My vision comes to life as I step away from the wedding party, breaking the salt circle as I walk towards the clearing. Birdie swoops low, a warning, but I keep moving forward, unable to stop if I wanted to. But I don't want to.

Everything in me says to follow the irresistible pull to the edge of the field, to where I can see the silo from just the right perspective. A tangle of thick brush covers the area, and the brambles cut my bare feet as I trudge through them. Blood trickles from the scratches and small wounds, and the ground sucks it up greedily.

*Blood. I need to feed the ground.*

Without making a conscious decision, my thoughts compel me to let my fingertips form claws like Draven's, and I scratch them up the length of both arms. I hear screaming behind me, and I turn in a circle, dripping blood as I face them. My three loves, my light, my shadow, and my strength, look on in horror as the blood streams and drips from my fingertips.

*I'm okay, I want to say to them. This is what I was always meant for. This is my destiny.*

*Except, no. My destiny is with them. I don't want to leave them.*

*I can't leave them.*

"N-N-No!" I say, struggling to force the words out.

"My sweet child, you've finally come," I hear, and I turn to face the voice speaking behind me.

The woman looks a lot like me, only pale and gaunt. Her hair is stringy, hanging over her eyes that are so pale they are almost white. Her thin body is bowed, and she has the look of someone who used to be larger, broader in the shoulders, but has lost their muscle tone. She reaches towards the ground, moving her hand in a gesture that doesn't make sense until the brambles around my feet climb up my legs and hold me in place. The thorns dig into my skin, siphoning drops of blood into their vines.

"What are you doing?" I ask her. Her hands raise and roam over the form of my body, seeking but not touching. They come to a stop right at the center of my chest, and my thundering heart threatens to leap out of my rib cage. Pain like a hot knife slices through my chest, worse even than the night I let

Hawthorne go.

Why would my own ancestor hurt me like this?

"I have waited generations for the one strong enough to be my weapon," she says as she rushes forward.

There's a flash of white. And then nothing.

## Epilogue - Hawthorne

The moment she steps away from me, I know something is very wrong. Her footsteps are jerky, her gaze too focused on the same spot, and she doesn't respond to us. It's like she's being physically pulled by an invisible force, lured away from us to a specific goal.

I try to step forward, to run to her and pull her back, but I can't move beyond the place where I'm standing. Panic sparks up my planted legs and fills the cavity of my chest as I watch Birdie frantically swoop down. She dives at Calista and uses her talons to pull at her clothes and hair. Anything to divert her path, even hitting her a few times, but it's like Calista doesn't notice.

Dread like I've never known before takes hold of me when Calista stops and rakes her sharp nails down her arms. She watches the wounds bleed excitedly, draining copious amounts of blood into the soil.

I know exactly what kind of magic this is. The dark kind. The kind that suggests the caster is up to no good, and our woman is in danger. But who? My eyes dart back and forth, frantically trying to see who is capable of such magic.

Draven loses it, turning almost purple with the effort to release himself from the magical barrier. His eyes aren't just black, they're glowing, and the tendrils of veins that are typical for his bloodlust throb and contort his face in a terrifying fashion. His entire body seems to expand, muscles bulging and rippling beneath his clothes that start to stretch and tear to make room for his distorted posture as his spine protrudes before straightening back into places. Snarls and deep growls rip from this throat. His lips pull back to reveal grossly elongated fangs that drip with what I'm sure is venom. He's out of control.

Sweat pours down Seth's face as he screams at Calista until his voice is hoarse. She doesn't seem to hear us, or doesn't care. He closes his eyes,

whispering what sounds like frantic prayers as tears fall down his face. His wings twitch violently, trying to unfold, but locked against his body. Most wards and magic don't work against brights. A chill of terror runs through my body that whatever magic is holding us is strong enough, smart enough, to stop light itself.

My attention turns back to Calista. She looks over at us curiously for a moment, as if wondering why we're over here and not over there, helping her fertilize the soil with our blood like it's the most reasonable thing to do. But we're trapped in our own bodies, barely even able to move our heads. It happened the moment the salt circle broke.

There's a presence in the air, something inhuman and eerie. My skin breaks out in gooseflesh, and an oppressive shiver makes a home in my spine. It's like the entity could sense that we were her protectors, that it couldn't come close with us nearby. That we would do everything in our power to save her. So it locked us in place and lured its victim, and we were powerless. *Are* powerless. Nausea bubbles in my gut.

Calista turns around curiously, looking behind her. It seems like she's talking to someone, but there's no one there. Her posture stiffens in such a way that I have hope for one fleeting moment that she's returned to her senses.

"Run Calista! Shield yourself!"

But she still doesn't hear me. She stares at something invisible to my eye and looks down at her chest with a pained expression.

All the breath is forced from my body as she lurches in an unnatural way, like she's been hit in the chest with a forceful gust of air. Her body folds in on itself and then is tossed up into the air, her limbs straightening and splayed wide as her spine curves backwards. She hovers there for what is probably a fraction of a second but feels like an eternity with the amount of fear coursing through my body, before her feet finally touch the ground.

The woman that straightens and looks around looks like our Calista. She has the same hair and features and impossibly light blue eyes as Calista. But there is no part of me that doubts that, while that might be my new wife's body,

that is *not* her. Her movements are not her own, her expression stony and cold. The woman, the entity, whatever it is, cocks her head to the side and stretches her neck and limbs. Her hands run down the front of her body, assessing it, and seeming satisfied. When she looks up at us, running her malevolent eyes over each one of us, her mouth twists into a satisfied grin.

The magic that holds us back is suddenly released, and we're all forced to the ground. Draven takes off like a shot, a blur of movement darting towards the woman, and in that moment I panic. This woman or thing has stolen our mate from us, just before we were to have our permanent bond resealed. If we hurt her, do we lose any chance of getting Calista back? Is she still...

Draven is thrown through the air with a flick of the woman's wrist, his body crashing through the wooden wedding arch and into a large boulder. He drops to the ground, unmoving, a deep sunken wound on the side of his head.

"She's in there," Seth breathes. "I can feel her. She's...she's scared."

"Calista!" I call out, rising to my knees. "Calista, fight it!"

"She cannot fight me," the strange woman who wears our mate's skin says.

Her voice takes on an eerie quality that sounds like multiple voices overlapped.

"She was made to be our vessel."





# Acknowledgement

I cannot say how truly grateful I am for each and every one of you that pick up my books and read them. To every one of you that comes into [Rathe's Ratchet Readers](#) and shares your thoughts and love for these characters, for every tag and share in bookish groups and social media...

It blows my mind that this is my life, that I'm accomplishing my dream of being a *real* author.

*And it's all because of you.*

# The Binding

**The Binding**

**Fractured Bonds**

**Eternal Bonds**

# Books By This Author

## Revelations

Amazon Best Seller in Paranormal Romance!

Diya Steele, born of violence and condemned to the prejudice of heaven and hell alike, wanders the earth consumed by fear. Fear of the realms determined to kill her, and fear she will hurt innocents if she ever loses control.

The Dzhavo, a fearsome team of elite demons, are ordered to capture Diya and bring her in to face the Legion. Instead, they keep her for themselves, determined to get answers from her by any means necessary. Fighting through their lust with brutality, they discover nothing is as it seems.

With Earth caught in the crosshairs of a war between realms, Diya and the Dzhavo must find a way to work together to save the world.

How far will Diya go to save the worlds that branded her as an abomination? Will the Dzhavo be able to overcome the lies they've been told and trust the one person that might save them all?

Is a relationship built on fear and desire strong enough to keep them fighting for each other, or will their prejudices keep them from stopping the evil that threatens the world as they know it?

Revelations is a DARK paranormal MMMFM romance where five main characters, including monsters and demons, find love together. The path from enemies to lovers is a torturous one, and the story contains sensitive content. Please visit the author's bio to find a link to necessary content guidance.

# Books By This Author

## Progeny

I don't know who I am or what happened to me.

I know that I've been running, but from what I don't know. And I know that the five men surrounding my hospital bed are important, possibly even precious to me, but they all swear they haven't met me before.

They say they feel it too, this familiarity, this connection.

So when danger comes looking, these five strangers take it upon themselves to hide me away while we put together the pieces of my past. What we find instead is darker. A twisted conspiracy that ties all six of us together in an unexpected and terrifying web of danger.

Progeny is a multi-POV contemporary MMFMMM romance with a sci-fi twist.

## Retribution

I came to warn them, but instead I put them in the line of fire.

Now one piece of my heart is missing, while the other pieces are forced to leave behind everything they've ever known to protect me.

The truth about who I am and where I came from weighs on me. Is anything real?

All I know for sure is that the people responsible for bringing me into the world are the very ones putting the only family I have ever known in danger. But I will stop at nothing to keep them safe. I will use everything they gave me against them and risk everything to take them down.

Little do they know, a reckoning is coming.

Retribution is the follow up novel to Progeny. The action and the spice in this sci-fi/ contemporary MMMFMM novel are turned up as Six and her men face the unknown.

## **Spark (Progeny Prequel)**

Progeny series prequel novella. MM only.

They couldn't be more opposite of each other, the captain of the football team and the biggest nerd in school. It's almost cliché.

Yet somehow they work well together.

As Micah and Lukas explore a relationship that's almost too good to be true, they have more than just their self-doubts to overcome. Will their love be enough to survive societal and family pressures along with the looming threat of splitting up to go to college?

Or will it all be too much, popping the bubble they've created together?

Spark is an MM prequel novella that can be read either before or after The Progeny Duet, and does not contain any spoilers for the main story. This is a steamy romance story that includes mention of homophobia and death of family members.

## **Ignite (Companion Novella)**

Progeny series side novella. MMF

Mara Wilson may look quiet and unassuming, but blending in is just one of her skills. She's lethal, taking down corrupt individuals and organizations that victimize innocent people, from the inside out. Sure that BioCere, Inc, one of the most powerful corporations in the world, is corrupting government officials, she finds proof of so much worse. They've not only got their claws in government officials, but they're doing medical experimentations and committing horrific human rights violations that are enough to turn anyone's

stomach.

Determined to enact her own brand of vigilante justice, she pulls together a team of the best hackers from the Dark Web. Tony Bartlett is already interested in taking down BioCere, Inc. To hook this infamous hacker, she has to draw him out by doing the impossible- hacking him. Rutherford Quinn, a programmer and expert document forger with a bleeding heart, is a little easier to convince when he sets eyes on his new partners.

The three of them make up the best of the best, and they'll set the world on fire in more ways than one. Their mission is to take down BioCere, Inc and expose their evils to the world, while also helping to save Tony's friends. Along the way, they find a burning attraction to each other as well as justice.

Ignite is a contemporary MMF ménage romance that contains dark themes and mentions of abuse, human imprisonment, and medical torture. This novella is a standalone accompaniment to The Progeny Duet. You do not have to read Progeny or Retribution to enjoy this story, however it does contain spoilers if you choose to read them in the future.

## Books By This Author

### [Always Magnolia](#)

A story about survival and second chances...

After years of suffering at the hands of her abusive husband, Magnolia Crawford escapes in the dead of night with her young daughter and finds herself back in the last place she remembers feeling safe.

A lifetime ago, she stood on this very property, in the shade of a magnolia tree behind her childhood home. Here, she made promises to the three boys that have held her heart since she was five years old. Circumstances beyond her control made her break those promises, but she never forgot Matty, Ryan, and Darius.

And they never forgot her.

Now that she's back, the guys are ready to do whatever it takes to help Magnolia find herself again and protect her from the darkness that threatens to break her. Can Noli find the strength to weather the oncoming storm and forgive herself? Or will the scars of their past destroy their second chance at love?

Always Magnolia is a contemporary MMFM (whychoose) second chance romance. Some material maybe be considered sensitive to some readers, as the main character lives through abuse both as a child and an adult.



## Books By This Author

### [Head In The Game](#)

Bryant Nicks is the head football coach for the Groveton College Jackals, determined to do anything to push his team toward a championship season. When scouting out new players, Nicks comes across a rookie running back that impresses him both on and off the field. His attraction to his student runs deep, but Nicks knows better. Instead, he finds himself pushing the young player to the ends of his abilities, curious how much it will take to break him.

All playboy Jack Perry has ever been good at is playing football. So when he gets an opportunity to play at a top school with a full scholarship, he jumps on it. But it's more than just the opportunity that reels him in. The heat and intensity he feels when he's around his new coach is visceral. He'll do anything to make his coach proud.

Head In The Game is part of the collaborative Groveton College shared world project, but you do not have to read any of the other books in the shared world series to enjoy this book. It is a standalone with an HEA.