



CROWNED by BLOOD

DAUGHTER OF CAIN

MARIE MISTRY

3



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Crowned By Blood (Daughter of Cain Book 3)

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Crowned by Blood is a Paranormal Reverse Harem novel containing sexual scenes featuring multiple consenting partners over the age of 18. This series is written in British English and contains foul language, dark themes, descriptions of **torture, suicide, alcohol, sexual abuse, rough sex, knotting, rimming, teratophilia, primal play, BDSM, violence, and death**. There is also reference to **infertility** and the past suicide of a background character, and the story will explore characters' ongoing grief relating to that. For a detailed list of warnings please see my website: www.mariemistry.com/triggers

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*For everyone who dreams of being chased through the woods by the big
bad (sexy) wolf (pack). I got you, babe.*

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CHAPTER ONE



SILAS

“TURN AROUND!” FINN DEMANDS, CLAWING AT MY ARM. “DAMN IT, Silas. We have to go back!”

My hands are white on the steering wheel as I floor the hover van through the winding roads of the Old Country. We lost our pursuers a while ago, but I’m not stopping until we make it to the rendezvous point.

“She’s scared and in pain,” Finn beseeches. “I know Gid was with her, but I’m telling you, something’s gone wrong.”

He could be right. Unfortunately, I have my orders, and they’re to protect him. No matter how much I want to go back, the command of my alpha and my own instinct to keep Finn safe override everything else.

Not that it matters to Finn.

No. He’s going crazy because the pack is in danger. Normally, he’s able to keep a level head at times like this, but—

A figure appears in the middle of the road, and I slam on the brakes. The van’s engine judders, and the seat belt digs painfully into my collarbone as we jolt to a stop.

“Fuck,” I curse, but I’m grinning.

There, in the headlights, is Vane.

Bleeding and limping, but *alive*. Thank God.

I open the window and stick my head out. “You just scared the shit out of me!”

He doesn’t waste time replying, instead he strides around to the side of the van and opens up the side door.

“Bring him,” he growls over his shoulder at the treeline.

Both Finn and I crane our necks, struggling to see who he’s talking to.

I know for a fact it’s not Evie. The thrall bond tells me she’s still far away—and getting farther by the second.

Frost appears, hauling an unconscious figure over his shoulder as he runs for the open door. When he drops Gideon onto the floor and reaches down to lift his legs inside after him, I gasp, and Finn lets out a pained moan.

The alpha’s shirt has been torn away, exposing four long foaming gouges across his chest. That’s not the worst of it. His throat is a bloodied

white and red mess, and his heart is nearly silent. A bare murmur instead of a true beat.

I know what a ghoulish victim looks like. We all do.

But all the ghouls were supposed to be under Frost's control. How the fuck did this happen?

Finn lets out a low whine of unhappiness, his eyes wide and watery at the sight of our alpha so broken and hopeless. Tugging him to me, I wrap him in my arms as Frost leaps into the van, followed quickly by my brother, who slams the door behind them.

"Drive," Frost orders as Vane lurches for the fridge. "Get us to the rendezvous as fast as you can."

"What about Evie...?" I protest, grimacing as her pain flares bright in our partial bond for an instant before it mutes again.

I can only imagine what Vane, Draven, and Finn are going through right now.

"She's alive." Frost's eyes go hard. "Gideon might not be if we don't get him stable."

"Stable?" I demand. "Frost, that's a *ghoul* bite." A death sentence. "How did this happen? You said you had them under control!"

"I thought I *did*!" Frost retorts. "Fuck, I'm sorry. You have to believe me: I never felt any of those ghouls until it was too late. It was like they weren't even there."

"Imogen." Vane growls, chucking blood out of his way as he continues his search. "We found her half turned. I bet this was her doing."

"Imogen screwed us all over," Finn mumbles, rubbing at his chest.

My brother finishes rummaging through the fridge, withdrawing a small vial of red liquid.

"You want to turn him?" Finn squeaks, incredulous.

"If we don't, he dies," Frost retorts.

"Turning him *requires* killing him," Finn counters.

"He's not human," I point out. "If he lives..."

What will he become? A ghoulish-vampire hybrid was unheard of when Frost was turned... hell, even a vampire-lycan is rare. To be a mixture of all three...

"We've talked about this," Vane retorts, unstopping the vial and holding it over the gurgling mess that is Gid's throat. "We're willing to take the risk. If you two have objections, speak now."

I stare at the seizing body of our alpha. I'm not sure this is what he would want. He already hated the loss of rational control that his hyperfixation caused, and being a hybrid would mean struggling with a whole lot of instinct.

But would he feel more positively about it if the other option was true death?

"What about the fifty-fifty rule?" I splutter.

Half of all hybrids have the strength of both species, while the other half have all of their weaknesses. But if Gideon is turned, he'll be an amalgamation of all three. If he ended up being one of the 'failures,' he might be warped beyond recognition. After all, ordinary ghouls can't even speak...

"Even if that happens, he'd still be alive," Vane growls. "Gid's overcome worse, and we're not like Cain. We won't kill him for it."

I bite my lip and turn to Finn. "What do you think?"

"We don't have time to argue," the omega says, dazed. "It's selfish, but I *can't* lose him. I say do it. We'll deal with whatever happens."

Gritting my teeth, I give Vane a nod. "Like he said."

Without hesitation, he pours the contents into the open mess of flesh that is Gideon's throat.

It's done. All we can do now is hold our breath.

The healing element of Evie's blood gets to work immediately. Smooth pink skin blooms into being across his throat, and then seals over the wounds on his chest. That's where the good news stops. A second later, his arms and limbs start flailing wildly, and Vane is forced to pin him down.

Now comes the worst part.

Frost summons his claws and punches his fist straight into Gideon's just-healed chest. His fingers clench within the cavity, crushing the alpha's heart.

There are only three ways to kill a lycan—four if you count ghouls—wolfsbane, decapitation, and destroying our hearts.

Gideon was already weak. It barely takes a fraction of Frost's strength to end him. As I feel the pack bonds tremble, then snap, I flash back to an equally awful time when Draven did the same thing to my brother to save him. Gid may not be blood, but I've never lived in a world without him.

Until now.

My instincts are howling, mourning the loss of the head of the pack, and an itch begins under my skin.

It's an itch that will turn to madness without a strong alpha, and the reason rogue lycans are so volatile.

Finn lets out another whine, his instincts too strong for him to ignore. He undoes his belt and crawls into the back, snuggling close to Gid's cooling corpse.

All of us wait, keeping a silent vigil as Evie's pain screams at us down the bonds.

Of course. We lost an alpha, but she's lost a thrall. I can't even feel half of it—my bond with her is frustratingly incomplete—but Finn and Vane are both white as a sheet.

It's not permanent, I remind myself. Gid will come back from this. He has to.

The catalyst for turning vampires and ghouls is death. We just have to hope he has enough of Evie's blood in him to bring him back. Their bond can be reformed. We just have to get our girl back.

"Silas, drive," Frost orders, wiping Gid's blood from his hand. "We don't know who might've followed us."

Tearing my eyes away from our alpha is one of the most difficult things I've ever done. Focusing on the road with Finn's whimpers of pain coming from behind me is almost impossible.

With every moment that passes, our pack grows quieter and quieter. They've moved Gideon to the back of the van, so my small glances behind don't reveal anything. My gut clenches, but I can't bring myself to ask the question that haunts my mind.

Is he coming back?

"We're here," I mutter, pulling up to the monastery and grimacing when a casual scan of the area fails to reveal any sign of our resident vampire psychopath.

Draven is the only one missing from our group. If he's not here...

I put thoughts of the vampire's fate from my mind and turn fully to look into the back.

Gideon is still laid out on the floor, but he's clearly no longer dead. In the absence of the engine's noise, his rattling shallow breaths have become the sole noise. Finn remains curled up beside him, his hand on our alpha's once-again healed chest.

He made it.

Now we just have to find out what that means for Gideon.

The omega looks like he's asleep, but there's too much tension in the lines of his body for that to be the case. Frost and Vane are both watching the pair closely, waiting to drag Finn out of the way the second that anything happens.

If Gideon's got the strengths of all three immortal races, do we have much of a chance of keeping him contained?

We can only hope the two hybrids in the back are enough...

"He's out cold," I observe.

"I slept for hours during my transition," Frost notes. "Maybe this is a good sign."

A knock on the door startles all of us, and I draw the gun strapped to my thigh and hold it to the door before I recognise the robes.

The monks have come to investigate.

Frost sighs and moves to open the door. When he speaks, it's in fluent Romanian. Not one of my strongest languages, but I know enough to understand that Frost is letting them know who we are and why we're here.

The monk looks around, then starts speaking again—too fast for me to follow this time. He waves us towards the small geometric building with both hands. Holy figures are painted in archways across the walls, illuminated by tiny spot lights buried in the ground. It gives the church an eerie, foreboding look, made worse by the lack of lights within.

Vane notices the blank look I'm giving the monk and sighs. "He's telling us to bring Gid inside," he murmurs. "They have a hidden cellar which is reinforced, and the caches the resistance has left here are untouched."

Frost frowns as he considers it, but the second he opens his mouth to answer, the whirring of a rotorcraft fills the air.

"Shit. We were followed." I throw the van into gear.

Frost shoos the monk back towards the monastery and slams the door shut.

"Hold on, we're going off road." I flick the switch on the dash, grinning as the hover drive roars to life beneath me.

I know it's a life-or-death situation, and our circumstances couldn't really be worse, but I fucking love this part.

The van narrowly misses a tree as I jerk the wheel left and plunge us into the forest.

“Jesus, Silas!” Vane growls, dragging himself into the seat next to me. “Tree!”

I don’t need the warning. Even though the headlights are off, my immortal vision has no issue picking up on the dense vegetation that’s clogging up the mountainside. Ferns and branches slap against the sides of the van as we pass, and I let out a whoop as we narrowly scrape over a fallen tree.

“You’re enjoying this way too much,” my big brother grouches.

“Lighten up,” I retort. “We’re only fleeing for our lives, after all. We’ve done this so many times, we’re basically pros.”

Vane just sighs and rubs at his eyes.

The lighthearted moment is broken when a much louder thump echoes from above us.

“What was that?” Finn asks.

I glance back to check on him, but Frost is already moving towards the door, knife raised and ready. Driving steals my focus away in the next instant, but the door swishes open,

“I missed you too,” Draven snarls.

“Thank fuck,” Frost replies. “Is the chopper your doing?”

“They’ve been on my tail for almost an hour,” the vampire confirms. “We need to lose them before we meet up with Evie, and—”

He cuts off. I glance back again, only to find him clasping a huge battered tome to his chest while staring at Gideon’s unconscious body with fury painted across his features.

“Wake him up,” the vampire demands. “He swore *nothing* would touch her.”

“He’s healing,” Finn protests. “He was attacked by ghouls.”

“We’re going to find Eve,” Frost promises. “Cain won’t get away with her—”

“He already has! Can’t you feel how he’s torturing her? You don’t understand, she’s the only person alive who can—”

“Not the time!” Vane growls. “Let’s focus on living for the next hour!”

A blast strikes the mountain close to us, and I curse, yanking the wheel hard to the left and sending everyone not strapped in flying.

“Sorry!” I call, stomping on the accelerator and grinning as our downhill dash becomes positively deadly. “I’ll lose them...”

It takes me almost an hour, but eventually I make good on the promise. The noise of the rotor blades fades into the distance as I slow our engines and turn back on myself, heading south.

“Where to?” I ask.

“New York,” Draven says, before Frost can get a word in.

“Gideon is turning,” Finn says. “That’s why she’s hurting so badly. Their bond... it might’ve been partial, but...”

But it’s killing her slowly, having it severed, and Gideon won’t be much better, if Frost’s experience is anything to go by.

“He needs to be secured,” Vane agrees.

“So?” Draven’s dismissive tone is clearly grating on my brother, who growls under his breath. “We’ve got the grimoire that the village peasants were hiding, but Evie is the *only* person who can read it. She has what she needs to kill Cain, and he lost her!”

As if on cue, Gideon lets out a low groan. I turn, just in time to see the blur of Vane pushing through the gap in the seats and barrelling down to the other end of the van.

I hit the brakes right as the snarling starts.

“He needs blood,” Frost growls.

Vane—currently pinning Gid to the floor by his throat—agrees, “Hurry! He’s strong!”

Finn snatches three bags from the fridge and hands them to Draven, who grabs them with one hand. He’s using the other to help Vane and Frost restrain the writhing, hissing alpha between them.

A bag is thrust beneath Gid’s brand new set of double fangs, but it’s only once he’s drained two more that he starts to settle. Drinking consumes all of his attention, and when the blood runs dry, a new bag is quickly supplied.

It’s a good job the van has an emergency stockpile, because Gideon gets through another eight bags before his drinking starts to slow and a sliver of rationality returns to his eyes.

“Evelyn,” he mutters, fangs still stuck into the blood bag.

Frost and Vane share a look.

“How are you feeling?” My brother asks.

“Thirsty?” Gid mutters, but his eyes are glazing over.

Before he can blink, Frost has another bag wedged inside his mouth.

“He’ll be useless until the initial thirst wears off,” Draven complains. “We’ll be lucky if he doesn’t drain the omega to death before the week’s end.”

“Gideon, I need you to tell me what happened,” Frost continues, ignoring him. “We found Immy’s body.”

“She turned herself,” Gideon mutters, confirming Vane’s theory. “Then she...” His hands touch his chest, then his eyes meet Frost’s, a slow horror dawning in his expression. “Ghoul?”

Frost looks away. “And vampire,” he confirms, passing Gid yet *another* bag. “We had no choice.”

The noise that escapes his throat as he drains the bag dry is one of pure and utter misery.

CHAPTER TWO



EVELYN

THE BLOOD THEY'RE FORCING INTO MY MOUTH TASTES LIKE DIRT. IT comes back up as soon as it goes down, painting the people feeding me in red. It doesn't matter what type: lycan, vampire, mortal... Nothing will stay in my gut for more than a few moments before my body rejects it.

My mind is heavy with the fog of silver. I can barely think past the painful gash in my chest where Gideon's bond has been ripped away.

"Sire, she's not responding to the blood."

"She's going into stasis."

"The silver has weakened her. The death of her thrall on top of that might've been too much for her to handle."

I know my skin is burning. I'm aware that I'm back in the coffin and far away from my other thralls. But it all seems so distant.

I'm drifting. Cut loose by the loss of a bond which was only recently completed.

The pain is familiar, yet a thousand times worse than ever before. When I lost Frost, he was a human. The bond that snapped into place between Gideon and me in his final moments was the truest of thrall bonds, meant to last an immortal lifetime.

Not mere minutes.

"Your blood isn't working, sire—"

"Then drain her. If she thinks this defiance will save her friends, she is sadly mistaken!"

Their voices are urgent. Angry. They're also getting dimmer. Slowly but surely, I'm slipping away, carving out a place in the recesses of my mind where the pain can't hurt me. The bleakness is peaceful. Safe.

CHAPTER THREE



FINLEY

GIDEON IS BACK, EXCEPT HE'S NOT.

The controlled, stoic alpha I love is gone, replaced by an unpredictable and violent stranger. I'm under strict orders to stay away. So now, I'm on the other side of the plane, pretending to work as I sneak glances at him.

He's slumped in his seat, nursing a blood bag with about seven more piled high beside him—just in case. Turning requires an increased blood intake for at least the first week while the body adapts to the changes—I know that. But the facts don't make the reality any less alarming.

Every few minutes, he lunges for a new bag—or one of us, whichever is closest. So far, he's managed to catch both Silas and Frost unaware. Both are now healing chunks of missing skin, because Gid isn't just a vampire—he's a flesh-eating ghoul. Thank God his venom hasn't come in yet, or Silas would be turning, and we don't have any of Evie's blood left.

My instincts are still reeling from the loss of him. His death severed the pack bond, and although I want to bare my neck to his bite and drag him back into the pack more than I want to take my next breath. I can't do that if I can't get close to him.

Of course, Gideon's pack bond isn't the only thing which was severed.

His death shattered his thrall bond to Evie; a tether far stronger and more intimate than the one we shared as a pack. Ever since then, she's been in so much pain I can barely think past it. Yet, in the last hour, that has started to abate, slowly replaced with something worse.

Nothingness.

Now, as our plane starts its final descent back to New York, my own thrall bond with her is shutting down.

"Stasis," I mutter, looking up from the records I've been searching. "It's got to be."

"Stasis only happens when vampires have received a near fatal wound and have no blood to heal," Frost counters. "This has to be Cain's doing."

I don't argue, but my silent disagreement hangs heavy in the air as the plane judders and shakes, then hits the tarmac and rapidly begins to decelerate.

The landing is all the distraction I need to sneak another glance at Gideon. I don't need a thrall bond to know that he's just as broken as Evie is. When he's not consumed by thirst and hunger, his face is so blank it's painful. His lips are pursed, and his eyes are bloodshot.

I've seen ruined men before, but this is *my* alpha, so it's a thousand times harder to take in.

"She's numb," Vane mutters, echoing my discomfort. "It's not right."

Frost unbuckles himself and strides over to the door, throwing it open before the plane has even rolled to a stop. The tiny private airstrip we've chosen is so remote that the forest has begun to creep in around it, but there are two black cars waiting for us with their doors open and the keys in the ignition.

I type out a quick thanks to the leader of the resistance cell responsible, then start the process of packing up my gear. A red-eyed and tired Draven grumbles as he grabs a heavy black coat with a deep hood to protect himself from the sun's rays, then sprints across the gap at speed, still carrying that ancient book.

"Gid, you should..."

I look over my shoulder to see what's going on just in time to see Gideon ignore the coat Silas is offering and stride casually out into the sun.

A cry of alarm freezes in my throat and escapes as a half-squeak of protest. I'm not the only one. Silas has his arms outstretched, ready to tug our alpha back inside at a moment's notice.

But he doesn't burst into flames.

"That was reckless," Vane scolds.

Gid turns, his golden skin glowing in the sunlight, and rolls his eyes. "If you'd seen what became of Imogen, you'd know exactly how easy it is to tell a failed ghoulish hybrid from a real one. The fact that I can think rationally —" He pauses, ripping into the blood bag in his hand with a grimace. "How long does this last?" he asks Frost, his words mangled by the mouthful of plastic.

"The urge to drain everyone you meet?" Frost shrugs. "A few weeks. Maybe less for you. You're already more coherent than I was."

"No. This... the thrall bond..." His eyes close as he says the words, and the corners of his mouth turn down in a grimace as he grinds the heel of his hand into his breastbone.

Frost snorts. “Oh. The agonising deadness in your chest? That doesn’t go away. Ever. I lived with it until she made me her thrall a second time.”

My heart pangs with sympathy for the ghoul. This second-hand experience of how badly Gid’s broken bond is hurting Evie is painful enough. If Frost lived for centuries with even a sliver of the emptiness she’s feeling, then he was truly suffering a living hell.

Gideon might even feel worse, given he’s lost his pack ties as well. His lycan side must be going mad.

“We’ll get her back,” I swear. “You’ll be part of the pack and her thrall again before you know it.”

“I’m glad you’re all enjoying the sun,” Draven shouts from within the car, clearly fed up with waiting. “But don’t you think you should get your asses moving if we plan on saving her?”

Taking his point, I resume winding my cables back into the trunk. A second later, Silas joins me and starts carrying the equipment out piece by piece. The two of us work in tandem, picking up the extra jobs that Vane and Frost can’t do because they’re too busy keeping watch on Gideon.

“Where are we going?” I ask, as I finally climb into the car with Silas.

Draven is asleep in the corner, and I’m surprised he managed to wake up at all, given that it’s almost noon. The other two have taken Gideon in the second car, and once again, they weren’t even subtle about keeping him as far from me as possible.

I may be an omega, but I’m not completely defenceless.

Although... if Gideon’s bite feels as good as Evie’s...

Shaking myself, I put all thoughts of fangs and biting from my mind and nudge Silas, who seems to have spaced instead of answering me.

“Huh? Oh, where are we going?” he shrugs. “I’m following Frost.” He leans over and flicks on the receiver. “Where are we going, guys?”

“Echo Lake,” Vane growls. “They have agreed to supply us with a reinforced room—”

“Let’s call a cell a cell,” Gideon interjects, and I bite my lip.

“You’re not stable,” Vane retorts. “We can’t focus on finding Evie if we have to worry about you getting hangry and slaughtering everyone around you.”

The dark silence that echoes from the other car is so oppressive that I reach across and flick the receiver off. Then, with a sigh of resignation, I slouch in my seat and let my head fall against the tinted window.

“What the fuck are we going to do?” I whisper, more to my own reflection than anything.

“Keep going,” Silas replies, determination steeling his tone. “Gid’s fucking strong. This won’t keep him down. Evie will be back with us before we know it—”

“We have no way to get her out,” I retort. “All of our inside people are gone. Morwenna and Mia have gone to ground, and our agents say Cain isn’t letting any lycans near Evie. He barely seems to trust his own vampires around her.”

“We’ll find a way.”

I wish I had his faith.

“We have all the pieces,” Silas continues. “All we need is her, that book, and some time, then Cain is finished. Evie won’t let him keep her locked up. If we don’t find a way in, she’ll find a way out.”

I shake my head, but he’s too busy focusing on the road to notice. He’s lucky. Like Frost, his bond with Evie is still limited enough that he can’t feel what’s going on with our girl. Evie’s not fighting her way out of anywhere.

She’s not fighting at all.

I keep reaching for her, sending reassurance, but she recoils from each touch. The more she does that, the worse my instinct takes it. Emotional rejection... she can’t understand what it does to me.

She’s not to blame. I know she’s mourning the loss of a thrall. Evie has no way of knowing Gideon is alive.

But the instinct isn’t a creature of reason. It wants to crawl down the bond and bare our neck to her until she accepts the comfort we’re trying to provide.

A barely audible whine escapes me, the sound reedy and thin, but Silas goes rigid just the same.

“Finn,” he begins, trailing off. “Believe me, omega. This will all be fine.”

Breathing in his scent, I nod once.

Evie has escaped Cain twice before. Three times is nothing.

The journey is long, and the road gets worse as we get closer to the pack territory. I’m not surprised, but at the same time, I can’t help but think this looks worse than it did when we were here a few months ago.

When a lycan streaks alongside the car in a blur of brown fur and grizzled features, my hand clenches on the door handle.

"It's just a patrol," Silas murmurs, sensing my unease.

"They didn't use to patrol this far out," I reply.

Vane pulls in ahead of us, leaving a respectful distance between our cars and the pack houses, and I watch as Frost exits the vehicle, shutting the other two inside.

Two lycans in shifted form lope out of the forest to meet him before shifting back, revealing Alpha Echo and one of his betas. I strain to read their lips as they converse for a second, and I almost debate lowering the window for a second before I remember what a bad idea that is.

If the tension between the two packs is already high, then adding myself into the mix will just make my pack more defensive. When Vane exits the car a second later, followed closely by Gideon, I stiffen.

"What's going on?" I whisper.

Silas, for once apparently more patient than I am, murmurs, "Wait."

Gideon says a few words, then pulls the corner of his mouth back, exposing a new set of double fangs that he didn't possess before he was turned.

Are they telling Echo everything? That's a huge leap of trust.

I grimace as Gid's nostrils flare, and Vane stiffens, clutching our alpha's arm in warning. Gid shrugs him off and takes a blood bag out of his pocket. When he sinks his fangs into it, everyone relaxes.

"I hate being left out like this," I grumble.

Fortunately, Frost wraps the discussion up pretty quickly after that. I watch with curiosity as the rest of my pack gets back into their car and our convoy resumes, following Echo and his beta down the road.

I almost expect us to return to the same guest cabin we were in last time, but we don't. Instead, Echo leads us past his pack's namesake lake, and up to the main pack house built overlooking the bank. The giant log cabin blends seamlessly into the towering forest of pines around it, and people mill around.

Why are we being brought into the heart of the pack's territory?

Vane pulls up, and Silas comes alongside their car, but we still don't leave until Frost gets out and gives the signal. The second he gestures us out, I shove the door open and make my way around to where Gideon is standing.

The moment I'm within touching distance, he takes a step back. At the same time, I catch a hint of the scent of another omega. It's old, and faint, but still there.

There's a reason omegas are the heart of the pack, and that we typically refuse to share our packs with other omegas. We're a possessive bunch. Just thinking about my unclaimed alpha walking into a building with another omega sets my teeth on edge.

God, this shouldn't be a thing. That other omega is probably a wonderful person, yet my instinct has already decided that they're the enemy and out to claim my pack for their own.

My next low-pitched whine escapes and causes everyone within earshot to stiffen.

"Sorry," I mutter, rubbing the back of my neck.

Gid's hands fist by his sides, and he almost shakes.

"Finn," he mutters, tone haunted. "This won't last."

"I need you back in the pack," I whisper. "I can't... I can't function."

Caught between Evie's pain and my own crippling, irrational sense of loss, I can barely think straight. I'm a mess of instinct and nerves, and I hate it.

Perhaps that's why I fall to my knees in front of him and bare my neck.

"Please, alpha," I beg, shamelessly. "Please."

"Finley," Gideon's voice is clipped as he jerks back. "I'm not... safe."

"I don't care. I'm Evie's thrall. I can't be drained to death. Please. Gid."

I don't actually know if being Evie's thrall protects me from being drained to death by other vampires, but I'll take my chances.

"We've got him," Vane says, but his voice barely penetrates the fog of rejection slowly taking over my brain.

Gid takes another step back and something inside my chest breaks. Does he not want the pack bond back?

My neck is starting to ache, and my eyes burn behind my glasses. I shut them, using my eyelids to hold back the flood threatening to escape.

The slightest brush against my collarbone makes me stiffen. A second later, I look beyond my own misery and discover Gid's scent surrounding me. It's different, but the underlying notes of him—of alpha—are still there underneath the new darker overtones of death.

He doesn't bite down. Doesn't claim the submission I'm offering, and I bite the insides of my cheeks to hold back a second whine.

Then it's there; the pain I'm expecting is so sweet it's almost freeing. Our pack bond snaps back into place, calming my instinct with all the warmth and comfort of a weighted blanket. I have an alpha once more. My pack is complete again.

But then something I'm not expecting hits me.

Gideon's venom.

"Shit," I moan as the first drops hit my system.

Suddenly my jeans are too tight. My dick is trapped, uncomfortably so. My skin prickles with awareness at the same time that my body relaxes in welcome. Gid releases a rough growl, but he's ripped away before he can take more, leaving me cold and aching.

Snarls fill the space around me, but I couldn't care less, because for the first time since Gideon's death, my instinct has quietened to manageable levels. When I look up, Gid is being held back by Vane and Silas, and my blood is still dripping from his mouth. His eyes are wide, pupils blown, and I'd have to be blind to ignore the erection tenting his grey sweatpants.

He's a hot, feral mess. Not that I care. With the venom still blistering my veins, I'm two seconds away from turning around and begging him to fuck me.

"Don't use either of your venoms on him until you understand the difference between them!" Frost rants. "We're not like vampires. You want to accidentally turn him, too?"

To his credit, when Gideon finally calms, he immediately looks away in shame. "Got carried away."

"Difference?" I echo, confused.

Frost rubs his temples. "I'll explain later."

I want to get closer to Gid and make sure my scent is thoroughly embedded in his before we go into the pack house. Unfortunately, that's not going to happen. I strip off my jacket instead and throw it at him.

"Wear this," I order, my omega bossiness on full display.

He shrugs it on, rolling the too-long sleeves up his arms as Draven pokes his head out of the car.

"What did I miss?"

Silas breaks away from our alpha and tackles Draven back into the car before he can finish talking.

"It's not dusk yet, you idiot! You woke up too early."

"Aww, wolfie, I didn't know you cared," Draven retorts.

“Don’t get too sentimental,” Silas says. “I’m always in charge of cleaning the cars and nothing stinks worse than chargrilled vamp.” He pauses. “Why the hell are you up so early, anyway?”

Draven is silent, and I wonder if that’s because he doesn’t know. Usually young vampires can sleep through a bomb detonating beside them. The sun rising sends them straight to sleep, and then when it sets, they wake.

“Must be jet lag or something,” Silas finally grumbles.

“If you two have quite finished flirting,” Frost growls. “We’re here for a reason.”

Draven reemerges, hood up and carrying the heavy tome he brought back from the Old Country. He shoves past all of us, followed by Silas. The two of them move to flank Gid and Frost, leaving me and Vane to follow.

“Why are we at the main house?” I ask.

Vane grunts. “Because apparently that’s where they keep their silver-lined cell.”

CHAPTER FOUR



CALLISTA

IF THINGS WERE BAD FOR ME AFTER BELLA DIED, THE TWO DAYS SINCE Cain's return from the Old Country have been worse.

He's never been gentle, but last night made it clear that what little consideration he once spared for my welfare is gone. I woke alone, covered in my own blood, with no memory of what happened after he tackled me to the floor.

Just knowing I've been unconscious—vulnerable—around him, makes me feel sick.

When I made it back to my room, I dared to look in a mirror for the first time in weeks. The bruises have mostly healed, and the scars are already fading, but my skin is sallow and my eyes are hollow, and no amount of makeup or jewels can fix it.

I'm worn down physically and emotionally. I'm not allowed to leave Triumph Island, and I have nothing to do but service him. Given how little he appreciates my presence, I spend most of my hours alone, vacillating between terror and resignation.

All I have left to give is my body and my blood. Both of those things are easily replaceable—there's no shortage of blood or beauty in his court—which means, by extension, that *I* am easily replaceable.

It's only a matter of time before my usefulness reaches an end, and when that happens, I'll end up like Bella and Immy.

My sisters' deaths are a warning I'd be stupid to ignore. Cain is purging us like he purged our brothers, and I need to find a way out before he stakes me to the bed. That's why I'm sneaking down to the basement of the manor in the late hours of the night.

I'm here to find the one person who has a chance of ending him.

I've forgone perfume and shoes, so as to be noiseless and hopefully undetectable. As an added precaution, I've stolen one of Cain's shirts, muting my natural scent with his own.

I don't want to be caught, but it looks like I might've worried over nothing. No one is down here. The staff still haven't returned, and Ivan is probably skulking around or howling at the moon. I checked before I came,

and Cain is holed up in his study. So when I turn a corner, I'm not surprised to find his 'secret' lab completely deserted except for her.

Evie has been left on a steel table in the centre of the lab. Silver chains around her wrists keep her in place, and there's a reinforced cell against the far wall, but all of those precautions are unnecessary.

From what I've gleaned from Cain and Ivan's conversations, she's been little more than an unresponsive corpse since her return.

"Stasis," I mutter.

A protective state, intended to preserve us when we're starving or injured.

I've seen a few weaker vampires succumb to it before. Yet, the whole manor heard his ranting when he tried feeding Evie his blood and her body rejected it. She's not starved. She's not even wounded—if you ignore the burns from the cuffs.

Still, her body is emaciated and already starting to shrivel.

What on earth has he done to her?

A single tube extends from her arm, syphoning her blood into a slowly filling bag beneath.

He's draining her? What for? Is that what's causing the stasis?

Shit. Of all of us, Evie has the best chance at stopping our sire. I reach out and test her pulse. Barely there. How is she so weak?

Footsteps echo down the hall. I hesitate for half a second before I abandon my sister's chained body and dive for the small janitor's cupboard set into one wall. Mercifully, the door unlocks without a sound and closes just as quietly.

It shuts, sealing me in the darkness, and I press my ear up against it. Who's coming to visit her, and why?

"My lord, if she continues to fall deeper into stasis, we won't be able to harvest more of her blood. She's rejected all transfusions." The voice is high and nasally, not one I recognise.

"Try harder." Cain's voice is silky smooth in the way it always is when he's at his most dangerous.

"We've tried everything."

Oh dear. Whoever this is apparently isn't aware that telling Cain no is never an option. They learn their lesson, though. A second after they finish speaking, their air supply is loudly interrupted, and the sounds of choking fill the room.

“I need her blood to create more hybrids and control the ghouls. I am a patient man, doctor, but I’ve provided you with everything you asked for. I’ve even handed you vials of my own blood to revive her *and* looked the other way when one went missing. Yet you *dare* to repay my generosity with failure?”

“My lord—”

“Consider this the termination of our agreement.”

I am old enough to recognise the sound of a beheading. The scent of the doctor’s blood floods my tiny hiding space seconds later.

“Dispose of that, Ivan.”

“As you wish.”

“And find a new expert. In the meantime, we’ll use what blood we have managed to collect to turn Callista.”

Cain wants to turn me? Fear blooms, then swiftly sours into rage. How dare he? Has he not taken enough from me? Now he’ll force me to transition into a monster as well? Am I not even worth a clean death, like Bella?

Ivan pipes up. “Are we certain that turning Miss Callista is wise? After all, Miss Imogen didn’t survive the transition. If Callista were to wind up the same way, you would be without any malleable children.”

Immy *what?* I knew she was dead, but not that she died trying to become one of Cain’s ridiculous hybrids.

I press my head harder against the door, barely daring to breathe.

“I’m aware of that,” Cain snaps. “However, the best thing about children is that I can always make more. I’ll be more selective about the next lot. My daughters have, perhaps, turned out even more disappointing than all of my sons combined. Callista is useful because she is the most biddable, but she is just as expendable as the rest.”

Fear has been my constant companion ever since Bella died—longer, really—but it still manages to catch me off guard and steal my breath. My anger evaporates, leaving me nothing to use as a shield as my limbs start to tremble and my breathing turns shallow.

He’s decided to do it. Immy and Bella are both dead, and I’m next. Whether he succeeds in making me a hybrid like Frost or not won’t matter. Morwen might survive a little longer, but he’ll still hunt her down like the rabid dog she is.

Evie is the only one who's safe... and even that will only last as long as her usefulness does.

"Stupid girl, allowing the death of one thrall to weaken her to this level," Cain growls. "I've amended my orders to have the others captured alive. We can't afford to lose her until I have the ghoul situation thoroughly under control." He pauses. "It may not even be prudent to end her then. I was hasty in ending Morana's line."

I blink, confused.

"The witches were a threat," Ivan replies, his tone even. "Exterminating them was the only option available to us. Perhaps we should stake her and finish the job. With a truly united army of lycans and vampires, exterminating the ghouls is just a matter of time."

This is the first time I've ever heard Ivan speaking so openly to Cain, and it makes me frown. For over two thousand years, he's played the part of meek servant meticulously. Now, his usual obeisance is gone, replaced with a cold, cunning calculation.

And Cain isn't striking him down for it.

The shocking change in dynamic between them distracts me before I can realise what he's said. Evie is a witch.

Great. Of course, Little Miss Perfect would be 'special' as well. I roll my eyes even as my fists clench.

"Evelyn is unlikely to ever reach the level where she becomes an issue. There are no others left to teach her. Besides, with her remaining thralls as leverage, she'll be more obedient." He sighs. "A shame. She was my greatest creation..."

"Morana's bloodline would never have fallen into line. They all share her original weakness."

"We're not yet certain that she's descended from Morana. There were other witch families."

Ivan scoffs. "You can't tell me you haven't noticed the similarities. They could be twins. Or has your affection for her blinded you?"

This conversation is leaving me with more questions than answers, and I screw my eyes closed. I need them to leave. The longer they sit there discussing Evie's fate, the more likely I am to give myself away. As it is, I'm lucky that the hums and bleeps of machinery are disguising my heartbeat and breaths from immortal ears.

“My affection?” Cain snorts. “Don’t be foolish, Ivan. Besides, I’ve all but forgotten what Morana looked like.”

A long silence follows his objection, and I find myself wishing I could see through the door and read their faces.

“Enough,” Cain finally says, ending their silent standoff. “Take what blood we have harvested and take it to the Court. The soldiers should’ve finished rounding up enough ghouls. Tomorrow we’ll turn Callista and three of the most loyal generals. Statistically, at least one of them should survive the change, and that will be enough to get started while we try to deal with this...”

“Of course, Sire.”

The sound of footsteps fade, but I don’t move. I don’t know if it’s some sixth sense, or perhaps just fear freezing me in place. Either way, it saves my skin, because a second later, a loud exhale echoes from the room beyond.

“Evelyn, you could’ve been so much greater.” The disappointment in his tone cuts like a knife.

He’s never sounded disappointed in me, and for the first time I realise that’s because Cain never had any expectations of me to begin with.

“This is twice now you’ve allowed love to blind you to what really matters. The first time was forgivable, given your youth. I will not permit a third.”

This time, his footsteps are barely audible as he leaves. Still, I don’t leave the cupboard for several more long minutes.

When I do, Evie is just as I left her, a new bag hooked up to the line in her arm. By the door, a headless corpse has been abandoned and left to cool, coating the room in the scent of blood.

I check every single piece of jewellery I’m wearing piece by piece. Methodically touching each ring, piercing and necklace until I’ve counted all of them. It works to calm my racing heart, if only slightly.

What do I do with this new knowledge?

If I do nothing, I’m done for. I don’t want to live life as an abomination—*if* I survive the change. A large part of me is just screaming that I should get out. Run. I have a few hours before Cain turns me into a freak like Frost—in an experiment that apparently already killed Immy.

My heart sinks at the idea of running. It’s futile, and the very idea of being chased by Cain’s agents—and probably Frost’s too—brings the

fatigue that's been dogging my steps ever since Bella's death out in full force.

I could beg my sire to reconsider, or try to plead my way out of this, but nothing I've ever said has ever made any difference before.

Throwing my lot in with Frost and his merry band of outcasts isn't an option, either. Even if I were to offer my talents and proclaim my undying loyalty to his resistance, Draven will stake me in my sleep.

I'm under no delusions about how well I burned that bridge. It won't matter to any of them that his torture was done under Cain's orders. I still pushed his human family into the cell with him and watched as he drained them.

Morally wrong? Maybe. But it was the right move at the time... Besides, they were humans. Barely more than animals.

Ugh, that kind of thinking is why I'm definitely not going to be welcomed with open arms. The resistance values the stupid mortals.

I don't see a way out, but I can't just sit here and meekly accept life as a ghoul abomination. Death would be kinder... I sigh. If I'm honest, death feels less and less terrifying by the day.

Twisting Bella's bangles on my wrists, I stare thoughtfully at Evie's unmoving body.

She's useless. Cain said so himself. She's half witch but has no way to learn how to do magic. Still, she's the lynchpin that Cain needs to create an army of ghoul-vampire hybrids. If I'm going to run, I have to assume I'll be caught, and when that happens, if Cain still has her, he'll turn me as a punishment.

But if I take her with me, then her thralls will come for her. My only choice will be to offer her up as an olive branch and hope that they're too distracted by Cain to come after me themselves.

This is just about the craziest, riskiest plan I've ever had. If I go through with it, Cain will surely find me and lock me in a silver coffin for the rest of my unnaturally long life.

But if there's anyone on earth with half a chance of beating him—of *killing* him—it's still Evie.

The idea of Cain dying—of finally being rid of him—seems too good to be true. For a second, rage pierces the hollow fog inside me, shocking me out of my stillness, though it shouldn't. This asshole has dictated my whole life, broken my body in every conceivable way for his own selfish desires,

and killed everyone who mattered to me. Now he wants to use me one last time before he throws me away. Why shouldn't I desire vengeance?

I want Cain dead. I don't care what it costs me.

The only one with a fraction of a chance of delivering that is Evie. Ivan said it himself—Cain considers witches a threat.

Decision made, I bend and pat down the dead doctor's body. Three pockets in, I get lucky. He's got a key to Evie's manacles.

They pop open surprisingly easily, and I hiss as the silver burns my fingers when I drag them off her. Once it's gone, I yank out the bloody needle from her arm and heft her waiflike, shrivelled body over my shoulder. She weighs less than nothing, but she's gross, and I wrinkle my nose.

"You're shedding on Prada," I inform her grumpily, though in truth, I've not found the energy to care about such things for weeks now. "You better fucking be worth this, bitch."

Casting my gaze around for the blood they've taken yields no results, but I don't linger to search for it. It might not even be here, and Ivan will be back to clean up the body before too long. Luckily, I've been everywhere in this mansion, including the secret escape tunnels Cain thinks no one else knows about. The main tunnel leads to the hangar on the north side of the island, and I thank my sire's paranoia when we reach it and find the silent speedboat is still docked and ready.

I may be willing to do whatever it takes, but swimming is the world's most ghastly form of exercise.

True to form, the keys are in the ignition, ready and waiting for the day that Cain decides he needs to flee from his enemies. So I have no trouble starting her up and cruising quietly out into the night.

"Bet you never thought I'd be doing this," I mutter to Evie's shrivelled body, which is reclining on the back seat. "You better repay the favour."

CHAPTER FIVE



FROST

I'M WELL AWARE THAT FINN DISLIKES OUR CURRENT SITUATION. I can't really say I'm fond of it myself, but the rest of us have to sleep. That means Gideon has to remain locked behind silver bars in Echo's basement cell until we're sure he won't get loose and drain someone while we're unconscious.

Unwilling to leave him, the rest of the pack has taken up residence in the basement as well. Our stuff is spread out, and Echo's pack has kindly moved in a futon for us to take turns sleeping on. It's not ideal, but it's the best we can do to stop Finn bristling with the discomfort of having the pack in another omega's territory.

"We need a plan," Vane mutters.

"We *have* a plan," Draven says, running his fingers over the worn cover of the book. "Get Evie back. Kill anyone who tries to stop us."

"Simple, and entirely unhelpful," Silas retorts. "Obviously, we're getting Evie back, but how? With Gid like this..." He waves a hand at the man who's currently staring blankly at the wall in front of him.

He's been like that since he was put in there.

It would be easy to think he was mentally checked out, but I've noticed the way he's been deliberately increasing the time between blood bags.

Of course, the alpha who thrives on control would despise being at the mercy of the thirst. I'm surprised he hasn't got a spreadsheet to track blood intake and set goals.

Then again, perhaps that level of higher cognition is still beyond him. When my own bond to Eve broke, I could barely think past the pain for months. My mind was consumed by a grief that made every other loss I'd experienced pale in comparison.

"Without Evie, we can't read this. Without Evie, we can't kill Cain," Draven continues, poking angrily at the tome. "She's at the hands of a sadistic monster who probably plans to shove her back into a silver coffin and let her drop off the face of the map for centuries and we're just *sitting* here."

"He's not going to do that," Finn objects. "We can find her now. We're her thralls. Even if he buries her in Antarctica..."

Draven's scoff tells me that's not the answer he wanted, and I get it. I want nothing more than to storm in there and rescue Eve. Unfortunately, our best strategist is currently undergoing a huge life adjustment. I have many strengths, but I'm not too proud to admit I'm better suited to being the guy who comes up with ideas on the fly than the strategist who makes a plan.

Unfortunately, the tactician of our pack... I glance at Gid again.

"We need to do reconnaissance." That's the sort of thing he always insists on, right? "And coordinate with whoever we have left in New York."

"Morwen and Mia have gone dark to keep out of Cain's reach," Vane grumbles, clearly uncomfortable with the idea of his sister being in any kind of danger. "But if we can reach them, they may have lycan connections still in the city who have heard something."

"We could go in ourselves," Silas says.

"That would be suicidal," his brother retorts. "We're no good to her dead, and the city will be locked down tighter than Fort Knox."

"We'll find a way," I promise, turning to Finn. "Can you reach out to Mia?"

The omega tears his eyes away from his alpha just long enough to give me a nod. "I will."

"Echo will want to know the plan," I continue. "I told him we had a lead on a way to kill Cain."

It was the only way to convince him to let us stay. The packs have been under increased pressure lately, and living so close to the city has left them in more danger than most.

Fortunately, their position makes this the perfect place to plan our girl's rescue.

Vane jerks, head snapping around to face the bare wall on our left.

"What?" I ask, frustrated.

Finn answers for him. "She's moving."

Shit.

"Closer or farther away?" I demand.

"East," Draven retorts, already on his feet. "I'm going after her."

His confrontational posture makes it clear that he expects me to argue. Fat chance.

"I made sure that our bikes were dropped off here before we landed," Finn says as Silas starts to follow Draven. Vane stands as well. "They

should be in the pack garage.”

I sigh, standing as well. Perhaps we *should* have a plan, but I’m not willing to squander an opportunity to get Eve back.

“Wait, who’s going to guard Finn?” Vane hesitates at the door. “And someone needs to keep an eye on Gid as well.”

“I’ll keep an eye on him, and I’ll guard myself.” Finn folds his arms over his chest defiantly. “I’m perfectly safe here. Evie isn’t. Go and get her!”

I grin and wink at him. “If you have any trouble…”

“Go for the balls.” He nods sagely.

Gideon’s head snaps up, a hint of life returning to his eyes. “You can’t really be thinking about leaving him—”

“Keep the book safe!” I instruct, grabbing my jacket and closing the door behind me.

Because, contrary to Gideon’s opinion, I happen to know our omega has a pretty mean left hook. I also trust Echo’s pack. They’ve been part of the resistance since the beginning.

What I don’t trust is the fact that Cain is moving Eve so soon. This is probably a trap.

“We’re going to need some firepower,” I grumble as I follow the rest of the pack through the cabin towards the enormous garage.

Draven is already there, furiously inspecting his bike. “I vote for grenades,” he suggests, picking at imaginary dirt on the handlebars.

“We don’t want to catch Eve in the crossfire,” I remind him.

The corners of his mouth turn down, and he swings up onto the machine. “Fine. Fangs it is. I suppose I haven’t done a good up close and personal killing in a while.”

He tears out of the garage before I can say another word. Sighing, I check the gun in the holster beneath my arm and the blades at my hips before following his lead.

“Come on,” I growl at the betas, swinging a leg over my own bike and flicking the ignition to life. The sleek machine thrums to life, rising a foot off the ground beneath me. “Before he does something stupid, like try to take them on alone.”

“What do you think this means?” Silas asks as we peel out onto the road, side by side. “Why would he move her out of his stronghold like this?”

“I don’t know, but it can’t be good.”

“Could be a trap,” Vane says, repeating my earlier thoughts. “One we’re walking right into.”

“Let Cain fucking try it,” I snarl. “He’s failed hundreds of times before.” I just have to hope my luck holds.

I put my focus into searching out the ghouls nearby. I can feel Gideon, and that gives me pause. He’s not like the others. I can feel his emotions, but not influence them. It’s the strangest thing.

I shrug it off. Eventually, I’ll have to teach him how to sense the others, and how to control them. I also need to teach him the difference between vampire venom and ghoul toxin, before he bites someone and accidentally ends up turning them. It’s pure luck he didn’t turn Finn earlier. I’ve never had to teach another of my kind before, and I’m not sure I’m the right man to be teaching ‘How to Ghoul 101.’ Most of what I know, I discovered out of necessity across years of imprisonment.

Leaving the issue of Gideon for another day, I draw out the nearby ghouls. There aren’t many here—Echo’s pack has exterminated any that came into their territory—but there are more ahead, and soon they’re loping along beside us as we race to catch up with Draven.

If this is a trap, I’m bringing the numbers.

We cross state lines, Silas and I letting the other two take the lead as they allow their thrall bonds to guide them in Eve’s direction. At first, I think we’re heading for Boston—another Cain stronghold—but then the two of them start to veer north after about an hour.

When Draven stops, I almost crash into him.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, lifting up my visor.

The other vampire hasn’t bothered wearing a helmet, so I can see the way his nostrils flare as he takes in the forest around us.

“Callista.” He says her name like a curse. “I can smell her.”

“You think Cain has sent her to guard Evie?” Silas asks, tugging off his own helmet.

“I don’t know.”

“She’s headed this way,” Draven mutters.

I take a deep inhale, breathing in the notes of old perfume others would miss, along with the faintest brush of Evie’s scent. “They’re alone.” I breathe in again. “And close.”

No one questions me. They all know my nose is a thousand times stronger than theirs. All of us pull our bikes to the side of the road. We're deep in the mountains now, and I draw the ghouls closer.

If we're facing off against Callista, then we'll need all the help we can get. Even if she *is* alone, she's thousands of years older than us.

"They're on foot," Vane adds, looking at the ground. "Look. Only one set of prints, though."

"Quiet," I warn. "We might be heading for an ambush, remember?"

Three tense nods answer me. Silas draws a box out of his pocket, flicking it open to reveal the earpieces inside.

"You with us, Finn?" I ask as soon as mine is hooked over my ear.

"*Wouldn't miss it,*" the omega replies. "*I've got your locations. Gid is sleeping, I think.*"

I know for a fact Gid isn't sleeping, but I don't correct him. I lost count of the days I sat in silence with my eyes closed, unable to do more than just feel the broken bond in my chest. I couldn't sleep. Instinct was the only reason I ate at all.

Gid is probably the same, but his suffering will end a lot sooner than mine did.

I'll make sure of it.

The four of us streak up the mountainside in the darkness. The terrain is rugged, making it difficult to navigate—even for immortals.

The ghouls scramble past on all fours, calling to one another in screeches and yowls that fracture the still night. They've caught the scent of prey, and they're hungry. Every living thing in our vicinity seems to hush, hoping to hide from the predators playing a deadly game of cat and mouse in their midst.

I feel their victory before I can act on it. Then, as suddenly as it comes, two of their scents cut off, replaced instead by the scent of death.

Not far now.

"If your ghouls attack me, I'll kill her!"

Callie's voice is just as haughty as ever, but as we haul ourselves over the rocky outcrop and come face to face with her, it's clear that Cain's glamourpuss princess has been through hell. She has no shoes, and her dress is torn and dirty. Her hair is a mess, swept into a nest of knots by the wind, and her eyes are wide with fear as she clutches the one thing in the world that's keeping her alive.

She has a silver blade pressed up against Eve's back. It's clearly visible, because Eve herself has almost mummified.

"What the fuck did you do to her?" I demand, as the lycans beside me growl.

Draven is silent, looking at his former sire with an expression of pure malice.

"I did nothing," Callie hisses, digging the blade in deeper. "She did this to herself when she lost one of you pathetic dogs. Probably won't last long now, but you can have what's left of her before she joins Bella in the afterlife."

Bella's dead? I file that knowledge away for later, but my focus is still on Eve as I stretch my arms out, ready to take her.

Callie clicks her tongue in disappointment. "Not so fast. First, I want a guarantee you'll not kill me the second you have her."

"Not a chance," Draven hisses. "I've been dreaming of this for centuries."

Callie bares her fangs at him, every inch the cornered animal. "Is your revenge worth the life of the one person who can stop Cain?"

"Give us Eve, and we'll let you run," I reply, cutting off Draven. "You'll live until sunrise. After that, I make no promises."

"Frost." Draven's fury is contained in that single word, but he knows I'm right.

"You can hunt her to the ground as soon as the sun rises," I reply, evenly.

He won't. He'll be too busy keeping Eve safe. I know it. He knows it. Unfortunately, so does Callie. Her lips have turned up in a fraction of a sad smile.

"Catch," she says.

In a move that shocks us all, she lifts Eve's waifish form and hurls it at Draven. All four of us dive for her, and in the second that we take our focus away from the dishevelled blonde, she's gone.

Fortunately, she lands in Draven's arms without incident. The rest of us crowd her, touching her.

"Blood," I whisper. "She needs blood."

Silas is already there, tearing open his wrist and holding it to her face. The remaining ghouls surge forwards at the smell, and I fist my hands as I struggle to hold them back.

She's not drinking.

"Come on, Eve," I mutter. "Come on."

"*Is she drinking?*" Finn demands from the earpieces. "*Someone tell me what's happening.*"

"She's not swallowing," Silas informs him.

The blood is running freely out of her mouth. Her body isn't even making an effort to swallow.

"Gideon's blood," Vane growls. "Maybe reforming the bond between them will be enough to shock her out of stasis."

It's as good a plan as any.

The dash back to the bikes feels more like a funeral procession than anything else. Draven refuses to hand Eve over to anyone else, and progress is slower because none of us is willing to cause her any more harm. Mercifully, we don't encounter any more surprises on the way down, and the ghouls remain alert for danger.

"I don't like this," Vane mutters, as our bikes come into view. "Why would Callista, of *all* people, rescue Evie?"

"We can figure that out later," I reply, shoving my helmet back over my head. "Right now, all that matters is getting her whole again."

CHAPTER SIX



EVELYN

FAMILIAR SCENTS SURROUND ME, BUT I IGNORE THEM. GENTLE HANDS, coaxing voices, and the promise of safety linger on the edge of the darkness I've chosen to hide in.

It doesn't matter.

But when the familiar chant begins, I fight it.

How dare they! I've just lost a thrall, and they think the solution is to replace him? I fight against the bond with all my might and then—

He's there.

Alpha.

Gideon.

My eyes snap open, and my throat swallows convulsively as I meet a familiar, deep set pair of brown eyes. Our full thrall bond bursts into being, as if it were never gone to begin with, and I see the second it hits him too, because a single tear breaks free of his left eye.

He's not dead?

My mind is sluggish with the aftereffects of stasis, but that question bursts through the fog.

His blood fills my mouth, answering all of my questions at once. Because it's not just lycan anymore. There are traces of ghoul, and even... vampire.

His fangs are biting into his own lip, and his pupils are blown wide, swallowing up his iris altogether—both tell-tale signs of a newly turned vampire who's scented blood. It doesn't matter that it's his own life-force perfuming the air around us.

It takes me another three pulls at his wrist to put it together. My blood. They must have used the remaining sample I gave Finn to turn him.

His wrist is wrenched away from my mouth, quickly replaced with another. Gideon snarls, but my focus has been broken by the scent of another familiar man.

I bite down sharply, and Silas's familiar moan fills the air. "Take everything you need, beautiful."

So I do.

I'm dimly aware of the snarls coming from beyond the secure barrier of his arms, but I can't focus on anything except my thrall's sugary-sweet blood as it slides down my throat.

I can't have spent long in stasis, because coming back to myself is much faster than it was before. Still, part of me worries about how much time has passed.

"Only a few days," Finn promises, helping me to sit up as I continue to drain Silas. "We got you back."

But... how?

The question must show on my face, because he flicks his eyes across to Frost.

"Just rest for now, Eve," the ghoul mumbles. "We'll explain everything, but right now..."

"Let me out," Gideon rasps. "Just for a few minutes. I just... I have to hold her."

Let him...? My head snaps up, and my eyes instantly focus on the silver bars I didn't notice before. He's kneeling on the stone with his arms reaching through, carefully avoiding the metal. There are healing burns on his normally flawless honey-coloured skin that tell me he's brushed against them more than once already.

"He's only just turned," Frost explains before he turns to Gideon, his lips down turned with sympathy. "You know why we're doing this."

Because newborn vampires are famously incapable of controlling their thirst or their instincts. Ghouls can't be much better.

"I've been better controlled than any other new vampire," Gideon retorts evenly. "I'm not a threat."

"You want to risk her?" Vane asks. "When your fangs are out and you've been shoving blood bags between your teeth every few minutes since we left the Old Country? We had to drag you off Frost, and then we had to do the same with Finn."

"I'm not a threat," Gid repeats. "Fuck, if you had any idea..."

I expect Frost to argue, but he just shakes his head. "I believe him." He stands and heads for the door. "Once you've felt what it's like to lose Eve, you'll do anything to prevent it from happening again."

"I'm still part lycan," Gid adds. "They're my omegas—" He cuts off and looks away, cheeks flushing pink. "I mean, this is still my pack. That instinct won't let me hurt any of you."

Finn grins and elbows me gently, giving me a knowing look as the cell door opens.

“Just for a couple of minutes,” Frost adds. “Echo has an omega to protect as well, you know. He won’t be pleased to find out I’ve put his pack at risk like this.”

But Gideon isn’t listening. He leaves the cell at immortal speed and snatches me from Silas’s arms. I’m carried to a sofa before I realise what’s happening, and then he’s there, hands running over every part of me like he has to reassure himself that this is real.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper. “If I had run when you said...”

“Cain was so close it wouldn’t have mattered,” he replies. “Besides, we were both intent on making sure the pack was okay.”

His pupils flick towards Finn, and I smile softly at the betraying glance.

“You were both stupid,” Vane interrupts, clenching his jaw. “You should’ve run the moment you heard Cain was coming and trusted us to get out safely. You put yourselves in danger.”

Gid nods, accepting the criticism without argument.

“How are you feeling?” I ask him, trailing a hand over his collarbone to distract him from the bout of self-loathing that echoes from the thrall bond.

Since he doesn’t look anything like Immy after her transformation, it’s obvious that he’s been lucky enough to inherit the strengths of all three races. Even though that’s the best outcome we could’ve hoped for, it’ll still have its challenges.

The corner of his lips quirks up. “If I say thirsty, they’re going to shove me back in the cell.”

Delving into the bond, I grimace at the burning dryness I find there. For a second, that’s all I can feel, and I swallow as my throat turns rougher than sandpaper. Alongside the thirst, there’s a huge pile of relief—an emotion echoing from all of my thralls—along with a heap of doubt and tension. Gideon doesn’t know what this new life is going to mean for him any more than I do.

No one has ever seen a hybrid of all three races before. Frost is the only living hybrid ghoul, and he seems well adjusted now, but who knows how rough the transition was on him? Gideon was already struggling with his lycanthropy when that was the only thing he had to deal with. Now...

“I’ll be okay,” he mutters. “Worry more about yourself. You’re still drained.”

His nostrils flare, and I feel a flash of his thirst down the bond before he's gone, slamming himself back in the cell. I land in Draven's lap this time—my vampire thrall having caught me before I can hit the floor.

Frost gives a disappointed sigh, but at Gideon's pointed look, he dutifully turns the key in the lock, sealing the alpha behind the bars once more.

"You need to leave," Gideon says, stuffing a blood bag against his mouth as soon as the door is secure. "This pack is too close to New York, and Callista isn't the type to have put thought into hiding her tracks. The farther away you can get, the better."

"*We*," Silas insists. "We're not leaving you behind."

Gideon shakes his head, grimacing. "I'm a liability."

"You're our alpha," Finn objects. "We won't leave you behind."

"If we separate and one of us is captured, Cain has far too much leverage," I agree. "All he'd have to do is threaten you, and..."

I trail off, unwilling to admit that glaring weakness aloud. Losing Gideon's thrall bond has solidified the knowledge that I *can't* endure that loss. If any of my thralls are killed, there's a very real chance that my sire will win.

Cain has no such weakness. He considers everyone around him expendable, and that gives him an even greater advantage.

Draven squeezes me tighter in response to my maudlin thoughts.

"We have the grimoire, doll," he reminds me. "We haven't lost yet."

"So, where are we going?" I ask.

"We'll think of something," Frost answers, before anyone else can.

"Gid, I know you're hesitant, but with plenty of preparation and the five of us, I don't think containing you is going to be much of an issue."

He grimaces. "This is a mistake. You don't need my issues getting in the way of the mission."

Everyone ignores him.

"Before we do anything," Finn begins. "I think Evie deserves a bath and some clean clothes that actually fit her."

His words draw my attention to the fact that I'm currently only wearing a shirt—which must be Vane's if the size and smell is any indication. I'm also sticky and gross, something that didn't occur to me while my mind was focused on the relief of having Gideon's bond back, but is now all too evident.

“Agreed,” I mumble.

My eyes catch on the grimoire on the desk beside us, but I can’t face the pressure that it represents, so I quickly look away again.

It looks like the pack has taken to sleeping in this room, and there are blankets, futons, sofas, and even workstations crammed into this small space. Half of the room is taken up with Gideon’s cell, and there are no windows beyond the small one near the ceiling that’s almost overgrown with grass. The sky beyond is dark, but it’s easy enough to figure out that we must be in a basement of some kind.

Silas offers me a hand, and Draven reluctantly releases me.

“Don’t take too long,” the vampire grumbles.

Silas smirks. “You’re welcome to help us. Making sure Evie is squeaky clean from top to bottom is a group effort.” He looks at Finn. “You coming?”

Finn shakes his head. “Have fun.”

Draven stands, silently accepting Silas’s offer, but Vane surprises me by standing as well. The elder beta rummages in a suitcase in the corner for a second before pulling out a bunch of clothes. He ushers the three of us out, and I bite my lip as I realise there’s a dangerous kind of heat in his eyes.

When I reach down his bond, I’m not surprised to find a whole lot of need flaring back.

Maybe I should be taking time to rest after what I’ve been through, but after being so lost, I desperately need to feel real—to feel them—and if I happen to get clean in the process, that’s definitely a bonus.

Vane leans forwards until his stubble brushes against my ear, his voice husky as he says, “You broke the rules, princess.”

“The rules?” Why am I suddenly breathless?

He hums in agreement. “You just admitted to putting yourself in danger. I told you what would happen if you did that.”

‘I’ll have one of the others restrain you, then I’ll spank you until you get the point.’ His words from the plane echo back at me, and heat blooms across my cheeks.

My eyes dart up, finding Silas and Draven grinning.

I don’t have a chance to wonder whether the both of them are in on whatever Vane has planned, because we arrive at a small bathroom. Vane locks the three of us in, takes one look at the shower and rolls his eyes.

“Barely room for two,” he mumbles. “Vamp, you’re up.”

“So generous,” Draven grunts, stripping off his shirt and leaning into the stall to flick on the water. Then, meeting my gaze, he hooks his thumbs under his waistband and shoves his jeans down in one clean move.

Fully nude, he steps back under the spray. I start to follow, but an arm snags around my waist, holding me back.

“I love your eagerness,” Silas says. “But aren’t you forgetting something?” His fingers play at the hem of the shirt I’m wearing.

I nod, not looking away from Draven and the water cascading through his dark hair as he watches me from beneath the spray. I reach for the hem, only for another pair of hands to stop me.

“Did I tell you to strip?” Vane asks, his tone deeper.

“No... Vane.” I tack on his name at the last second, scrambling to remember his rules.

He tsks under his breath, and Silas lets out a startled laugh.

“Has he started teaching you all of his rules, beautiful?” he asks.

My head snaps up. *How does he know about his brother’s rules?*

Silas grins at the question that must be written across my face. “We’ve shared before,” he admits.

“Decades ago...” Vane adds.

I don’t have to ask to know that he’s speaking about a time before Finn joined the pack. I know for a fact that Silas is fully committed to our omega—and to me.

“Are you trying to say you’ve gone vanilla in that time?” Silas teases, raising a brow.

A slippery hand reaches out and yanks me under the spray—shirt and all.

“You two are taking too long,” Draven complains, dragging the already-soaked shirt over my head and chucking it at Vane’s chest.

That quickly, I’m completely naked, and two very masculine growls echo from beyond the glass screen.

“You’re derailing the plan, vamp,” Vane grumbles.

“If you don’t share the plan, how am I supposed to follow it?” Draven retorts, grabbing a bottle of soap from a shelf. “There’s no teamwork without communication— isn’t that what you always tell me?”

He starts at my shoulders, lathering up my skin and spreading the foam up my neck and down my arms. Being Draven, he doesn’t shy away from moving on to my breasts next. His hands cup both of them and squeeze,

applying just the right amount of pressure to make my head fall back. His touch is rough, and his callouses rasp over the sensitive tips of my nipples as he takes his time cleaning them.

Then his hands trace across my navel and around to grip my ass in an almost punishing grip. My face turns scarlet when he spreads my ass cheeks and washes between, rubbing at my back entrance and stimulating nerve endings which haven't been played with in too many centuries to count.

Of course, I realise a few seconds in that he's also displaying that part of my body to both brothers beyond the glass. I glance over my shoulder at both of them, then smile with satisfaction as I notice the erections straining against the fronts of their sweatpants and the dark possessive looks both of them are levelling at me.

When Vane licks his lips, I almost combust.

"Hurry up," Silas groans. "I want to play with Evie too."

Draven grins, but it's a cold smile. I'm not fooled. His thrall bond is pulsing with heat. With desire.

"You should've thought about that when you filled my tent with portraits of Cain."

With a suave flick of his wrist, he turns me until my back is pressed against his front, the glass screen giving Vane and Silas a good view of me as his body scorches mine from behind. His hands return to my breasts—though the soap is well and truly gone now—and he lifts them up, presenting them to the lycans as water cascades down on both of us.

Then, ever so slowly, his lips begin to graze a path down my neck.

I arch my throat, trying to entice him further.

"Want me to bite you, doll?"

"Don't," Vane snaps. "If you bite her, she'll come, and she has to earn it."

Grinning, because I know that Vane likes it when I disobey, I reach up and use a claw to slice a shallow cut at the junction between my neck and shoulder, just below where Draven is currently nuzzling.

The fire in Vane's eyes burns a little darker as Draven's breath catches on an inhale. His tongue swipes out, tasting what I'm offering, and his answering groan tickles my throat. Against my ass, his cock jumps, branding me, and my sex clenches in response.

"You're digging an even deeper hole for yourself," the hybrid warns, before turning to Draven. "If she comes, I'll make sure you don't."

The scrape of Draven's fangs sends a shiver running down my spine. My thighs rub together, but he slips his between them, forcing them open just as he applies the lightest pressure to my throat. Still not piercing, just threatening.

"Do it," I dare, reaching behind me to palm his cock.

He surprises me by drawing away. "I'm going to love watching how he punishes you for that," he murmurs.

Then he steps out of the shower entirely, leaving me alone and horny beneath the spray as he wraps a towel around his hips.

"Traitor." I pout.

"What can I say, doll?" the vampire replies. "I really want to fuck your throat while I watch whatever he's got planned for you."

"Done." The eldest beta crosses his arms over his chest and turns to me. "Going to beg forgiveness?"

I shake my head, grinning, and instead lower my hands to my own sex. I'm so turned on by Draven's care that, if I'm lucky, I might be able to tip myself over the edge before Vane can do anything about it.

Let the games begin.

CHAPTER SEVEN



VANE

EVIE'S HANDS HEAD SOUTH, AND SOMETHING DEEP INSIDE ME ROARS IN delight. The scent of her arousal—which has been blanketing the steamy room since she stepped inside—deepens as she slides two fingers between those dark curls and starts to stroke.

Silas grins, looking to me for confirmation before stripping off his own shirt.

My brother loves restraining his lovers, and he waits until she's right on the edge before he climbs into the shower, switches off the water, and tugs Evie's hands away from her sex. Her groan of disappointment echoes off the tile.

"Aww, poor doll," Draven murmurs, as I reach into the shower to free the lip she's biting from beneath her fangs. "Did he interrupt you?"

Silas takes her hands and presses them up against the glass, then kicks her legs wide. It's only then that I turn to the pile of clothes I brought and withdraw the toy I hid amongst them.

Evie's eyes widen, and I allow the smallest grin to surface.

"I'm going to spank your ass," I promise. "And then I'm going to fuck it while it's still pink from my hand. Because I'm feeling generous, you get to decide if I plug it before your spanking, or after."

Before will give her more time to adjust, but she'll feel it with each blow—and she won't be allowed to come. After will make the spanking less intense, but I have a feeling she's not going to choose that option.

"Before," she mumbles.

"Before..." I trail off. "Come on, princess. You know how to ask nicely."

The reluctance in her eyes as she replies, "Before please, Vane," makes the victory twice as sweet.

"Do you remember our safe words?" I ask, ripping open a sachet of lube and coating the plug in it.

I should really use my fingers to stretch her a little first, but she's been a brat. I'll work it in slow, and the burn will remind her exactly who she's dealing with.

"Yes, Vane," she whispers.

“Good.”

Stepping into the shower with both her and Silas there takes some work, but I make it happen. Then I crouch down until I’m level with the most gorgeous ass to ever grace a woman and take advantage of her spread legs to dip my head between for a taste.

I trace my tongue up the trail of slick slowly weeping down her inner thighs, following the happy path all the way back to the source, revelling in the taste of her.

“Delicious,” I whisper, letting my breath fan over her pussy and grinning when she shivers.

I’ll let Silas spoil her pretty cunt later. Right now, my focus is on training her ass to take me.

I lick her once more, savouring her flavour and the slightest taste of soap, before I let my tongue trace backwards to stimulate other, less played with, nerve endings.

“Vane!” she screeches in shock.

Her legs try to close, but my shoulders are too wide for her to seal off my access. I wait a few seconds to see if she’ll use her safe word. She doesn’t, so I return to my task, grinning against her as her legs start to tremble less than a second later. I flare my tongue in long licks, then alternate with short thrusts to play with that tight ring of muscle. Teasing myself with what I know will strangle my cock when the time comes.

“Has he hit a good spot, beautiful?” Silas asks.

“You’re perverts,” Evie groans instead.

“You’re the one enjoying it,” Silas counters.

Sure enough, when I draw back and glance up, her head has fallen back, resting on his shoulder. Her head snaps up again as I press the cold tip of the lubed up silicone to the hole I was just tonguing.

“Open up,” I order, keeping my tone sharp. “If you try to force it out, I’ll spank your pussy as well.”

Evie moans but does as I ask. I work the plug in slowly, making sure to play with it as it reaches its widest point. The sight of it disappearing into her ass is downright hypnotic, and I can’t resist twisting it. Teasing her before I settle the flared base into place. This one has a gem on the end, and I can’t wait to see the light twinkle off it when I spank her.

I straighten, snatching a towel and wrapping it around her as I announce, “Time to dry you off.”

Silas releases her hands and lifts her into his arms before lifting her carefully out of the shower and placing her on her feet, facing the counter.

We dry her off between us until Draven gets the hint and jumps up so he's sat on top and facing her.

Abandoning the fluffy towel to the floor, I take her small hands and settle them on his thighs, forcing her to bend over with her face in his crotch and her ass out. As soon as I trust she's not about to leave the position, I stroke my palm down her spine to caress her butt, admiring how smooth her skin is. When I squeeze the muscle, she gasps, and her fingers flare on Draven's thighs.

"If you move your hands, none of us will fuck you," I promise.

Evie stares back at me with blue eyes, wide with disbelief, and I chuckle. "Now, you can use Draven to brace yourself while you suck him off."

Without giving her any further warning, I release my grip on her ass and spank her.

She cries out as a bright red handprint blooms nicely across her creamy skin, but her hands don't move. Draven uses the opportunity to sweep her hair back with one hand and guide his cock to her lips with the other.

I wait for her to suck him into her mouth before I let my hand fall again, this time decorating her other cheek with a matching print.

"Vane!" Evie gasps around his cock, and the plug in her ass twitches adorably.

"Have something to say, princess?" I ask.

"No, her mouth is busy," Draven replies, shoving her back down onto his cock.

I have a split second's worry that I haven't given her a non-verbal safe-word, but then her lust hits me down the thrall bond.

"If you want to stop and you can't speak, tap Draven's leg three times," I tell her. "Otherwise, you're going to let him fuck your face and drink every drop of what he gives you."

The thrall bond pulses with arousal and a glance between her legs shows she's literally dripping. Before I can spank her again, Silas reaches over and runs his fingers through her slippery folds. When he draws them back, they're shiny with her wetness, and he raises them to his mouth and licks.

"Delicious," he says.

“You can eat her out *after*,” I growl, playfully shoving him out of the way and delivering another slap to Evie’s exposed ass.

I take it slow at first, savouring every tiny gasp and whimper she manages to make around Draven’s cock. I keep going until every piece of skin between her upper thighs and the small of her back is glowing warm and my hand stings.

Tears are falling from her eyes as she deep throats him and gags, but she doesn’t use her safe word.

God, this woman can’t get any more perfect.

Draven groans, then stiffens, and I don’t need to see to know that he’s just jetted his load down Evie’s throat. She swallows—good girl—and I reward her by dipping my hand between her legs and finally stroking her clit.

“Clean me up, doll,” Draven orders, and Evie moans and obediently starts lapping at his softening cock.

When he’s clean, he gently removes her hands, grinning at the sight of her claw marks in his thighs, before making her lick those too.

Judging by the way she’s coating my hand, her own release can’t be far off, and I’m proved right a second later when I press just a little harder and her legs give out.

Draven watches her face go slack in ecstasy, before slipping out from beneath her with a parting kiss, and passing her to Silas.

My brother claims her mouth as the vampire grabs his clothes and pulls them back on before taking a spot leaning against the door, apparently content to watch.

“Standing?” Silas asks me, cradling her close as she clings to him.

“Yes.” Anything else will be too difficult, given the limited space in the bathroom. “Next time we’ll use a bed.”

I would’ve taken her downstairs and fucked her on the futon, but I’m still not sure where she stands with Frost, and whether she’d take kindly to him watching us.

“How are you doing, beautiful?” he asks. “Too tired to take us?”

Evie shakes her head. “Never.”

Then, without waiting for us, she reaches between them and slides down in one smooth motion, impaling herself on Silas’s cock.

He curses, and I get to enjoy the sight of her slick heat enveloping him before I remember my part in all of this.

His hands on her thighs leave her ass nice and exposed, and my first tug of the plug makes her squirm. If Silas's answering groan is anything to go by, she's strangling his dick.

I pull and twist the toy for a second, allowing her to get used to the sensation of both of her holes being played with.

I'm no idiot. Evie's probably done this before, but I fully intend to make it so good for her that she can't remember any other men when we're done with her.

Our pack will never get the honour of being her first, but now that we have her, I'll do whatever it takes to make sure we're her last.

"Hurry up," Silas complains. "I'm not going to last if you keep doing that."

Deciding I might as well take pity on him, I pull the plug free and discard it in the sink. Then, grabbing another packet of lube, I coat my own cock and step into place behind her.

"Breathe out for me, princess," I murmur against her ear. "Good girl. Let me in."

I keep pressing, forging past the muscles of her ass until I'm fully seated. She's so warm, and with Silas stuffing her pussy, there's precious little room for me.

When I finally bottom out, my thighs pressing against the warm, reddened skin of her butt, she hisses out a shocked breath.

"Yup, you're going to feel your punishment with every thrust," Silas grins.

"Poor doll," Draven croons, all fake pity and coldness. "Maybe if you ask me nicely, I'll bite you and make it all better."

"Shut up and fuck me," Evie retorts.

Silas pulls out so just the tip of his dick is resting inside her before I can tell him not to, and I groan.

How am I supposed to tame this little brat if he just gives in to her every demand?

"You realise you just earned another punishment next time?" I ask her as Silas starts to push back in.

I can feel his movements through the thin barrier that separates us, and I groan.

"Don't care," she mutters, her head falling back. "God. Vane. Silas. Harder."

I raise my eyebrows, but before I can tell her no, the little minx grabs Silas's shoulders and lifts herself up before allowing gravity to drop her back down.

She screams as both of our cocks enter at the same time, fighting for space in her body. The move has the intended effect, shattering my brother's control. He roars and picks up his pace, pressing Evie against my chest and fucking her into me without mercy.

Our little vampire whimpers, then cries out, caught between two cocks with nowhere to go. She's so wet she's soaking my thighs, and I grin as she comes with a shout, triggering Silas's orgasm. Her ass clamps down on my cock, threatening to suck my cum from my balls, but I reach down and squeeze the base, refusing to join in.

I have a punishment to deliver.

Silas slumps, then draws free of her body with a guilty—but unrepentant—grin. I take over holding her up, but let her legs fall down until she's standing with my cock still up her ass.

"I bet you think you're clever," I mutter in Evie's ear.

Now that my hands are free to roam her body, I stroke them up her ribs, briefly cupping her breasts before my right hand comes up to collar her throat. My left falls down to her pussy, which is still clenching under the power of her last orgasm and now full of my brother's cum. I sink two fingers inside, pressing against her clit with the heel of my hand.

"You want to come so much?" I say, bracing myself. "Then enjoy coming until you beg me to stop."

Using my new grip on her body to pin her in place, I begin to fuck her ass like a man possessed. At the same time, I sink my fangs into her throat, pumping so much venom into her veins that her scream echoes off the tiles. Each slap of my thighs against her buttocks makes her clench, the sensitive skin there creating the finest cocktail of pleasure and pain.

"Vane!"

She spasms around my fingers and dick, her whole body trembling as I force my venom and my cock in and out of her body over, and over, and over again.

By the time I'm done with her, she won't ever think of stealing orgasms like that when I'm in the room.

It only takes two more before she's crying, writhing on my cock.

“God. Please! Vane. Please. I’m sorry! Please.” Her begging turns incoherent, and I grin.

I force her over the edge again. Then again. Evie’s poor abused body is shaking like a leaf, but I still wait until her frenzied cries have turned to soft moans and gasps before I release the stranglehold I have on my own release and jet my cum into her ass. As a final trick, I funnel my pleasure down the thrall bond, making her feel my orgasm as if it were her own.

She doesn’t have much energy left, but it still sends her over one last time with a half-sob. When I pull out, she’s little more than a shuddering, whimpering mess, but her body still clings to me, trying to draw me back in.

Insatiable princess.

“How are you feeling?” I check in softly, sinking to my haunches, pulling her into my lap.

I know immortal bodies can take a lot, but I don’t ever want to be too rough with her, or cross the line into something she doesn’t enjoy. Her thrall bond is telling me she’s sated and content, but feeling and thinking aren’t the same.

“Good,” she mumbles, nuzzling into my collarbone.

“Give her to me,” Silas offers. “She needs another shower now.”

My brother washes her reverently, taking extra care as she dozes against him, before wrapping her into a towel and handing her over to Draven so he can wash himself. The vampire dresses her, then with a last nod at both of us, slips from the room.

I head for the sink and start cleaning the plug while I wait for my brother to finish.

“Still no bond,” Silas mumbles, so quietly I’m not sure I’m meant to hear it over the falling water. “What do I have to do to get her to trust me?”

I pause, wondering if I should say what I’ve been thinking.

“What?” he demands. “You know something? Can you feel why she’s holding back down the bond? C’mon, Vane. It’s driving me crazy; you have to tell me.”

I turn off the faucet and slowly face him.

“Evie trusts you completely,” I confide in him. “Which means the only person holding you back from having a full bond with her is you.”

He freezes, dropping the towel he just grabbed in shock.

“What? No. I want it!” he protests, bending and grabbing the fallen cloth before wrapping it around his hips. “I want it more than anything...”

I shake my head, shoving past him to claim my turn under the warm spray. “I never said you didn’t.”

“Then what *are* you saying, brother?” Silas pins me with his blue-eyed stare—the twin of our mother’s.

“I’m saying you’re quick to like people, but it takes you a hell of a lot longer to let them in. How long did it take you to believe Finn wasn’t about to leave you? Even after he claimed us all as his pack, you were hesitant to really let yourself get comfortable with him. It took you two years to stop fidgeting and fussing whenever he was in the room. Evie is no different.”

Silas turns to stone, and I use the silence to focus on washing myself.

Perhaps telling him wasn’t the smartest move. The last thing I want is him pushing himself to be ready before he really is, and I firmly believe he and Evie will form the full bond organically. It’s just going to take some time.

Still, he asked, and I answered. Now all I can do is wait and see what he does with the information.

CHAPTER EIGHT



GIDEON

BARELY FIFTEEN MINUTES AFTER EVIE DISAPPEARS UP THE STAIRS WITH Silas, Draven and Vane, it starts.

I've been managing quite well at compartmentalising the scents which have threatened to overwhelm me since I was turned. I've turned it into a game to try to distract myself from the sandpaper feel at the back of my throat. Guessing the scent, placing how far away it is, and then waiting to be proven right or wrong.

I can smell every single lycan in this pack house. I can tell which brands of cologne Echo favours, and who has slept with who recently based on the way their scents mingle together.

Weirder still, I can practically taste the emotions of ghouls on the edge of the pack's territory.

For the first time in my life, I find myself wondering how the hell Frost hasn't gone mad.

Then the scent of her arousal drifts to me.

Before I know it, I'm pressed against the silver bars. I'm so caught up in it that it's only a few seconds later, when Finn's cry of alarm and the burning of my own flesh register, that I realise what I've done and take a step back.

"What the hell was that?" Finn demands.

Frost shoots me a knowing half-grin. "Sucks, doesn't it?"

I flip him off and pace to the back of my cell, trying my hardest not to breathe through my nose—not that it makes much difference. My instinct—apparently not buried under the new vampiric and ghoulish ones—rears its head, demanding we help satisfy our omega. My dick throbs, already hard for her, and I curse.

Evie. Is. Not. An. Omega.

No matter how hard I try to drill the thought into my head, it doesn't matter. The lycan side of me remembers too clearly how good it felt having her come apart over my knot.

"What sucks?" Finn demands. "Don't leave me out of the loop."

"He can smell Eve," Frost explains. "You think your nose is sensitive? We can smell the lube they're using to play with."

“Not helping,” I grunt, collapsing onto the makeshift camp bed and burying my head into my pillow.

Even if she was right here, fucking all of them, I am not in the running. I won’t be until I’m under control and I know for certain that I won’t try to *eat* her.

“Consider it motivation to work on mastering your instincts,” Frost teases. “Ever wondered what our pack’s cum smells like? Because you’re about to find out.”

“Great.” The word is mangled by the stupid, ineffective pillow.

“It gets better,” Frost promises. “Eventually, you can train yourself to think past it.”

When she finally returns, almost an hour later, smelling faintly of soap and lingering arousal, I let out a sigh of relief, but I don’t get up. I can still smell the room they were in, and unless someone bleaches it from top to bottom, that won’t change soon.

“Is he sleeping?” she asks.

Frost snorts, and I look up to glare at him. Only instead of Frost, my eyes go straight to Evie, standing right against the bars. Winding that torturous scent around me. She takes a step back when she sees my expression, and I grimace.

“Struggling with the transition,” I grunt, in place of answering her. “Don’t worry about it.”

Then I let my head fall back down and resume taking a mental inventory of the pack’s expenses since Evie joined us. Usually, finances—and remembering how expensive it is to run an underground resistance—are the quickest way to deflate an erection. Unfortunately, it seems this latest boner is doomed to last until everyone else is asleep and I can rub it out.

Slowly, the rest of the pack starts to trickle back into the room. The sounds of them bedding down for the day are soothing. Familiar. Eventually, it calms my lycan instinct down enough that I can move without worrying about everyone getting an eyeful.

Unfortunately, it can’t do anything about the thirst... and worse... the hunger. It only gets worse as a new smell—one raw and metallic—tickles my nostrils.

The hushed slide of plastic over stone makes me look up. Everyone else is asleep, except for Frost, who’s standing at the bars of my cell with his hands in his pockets.

“I figured you’d want this,” he mutters, keeping his voice quiet so as not to wake the others. He nods towards the plate on the floor. “We’ll wean you onto raw beef eventually, but it takes practice to keep it down.”

His words make me want to vomit, even as I eye the plate of bloody meat, disturbed by my own suddenly ravenous need to eat.

I’ve been a lycan for three hundred years, hunted, killed and eaten plenty of prey animals. But never anything sentient.

“Who?” I ask, stalling for time as I try to hide the flare of my nostrils and the sweat which has started to bead on my brow.

“A traitor,” Frost answers. “Echo caught him about to run off and hand Cain news of our whereabouts. He was ripped to pieces by the rest of the pack, but I managed to get you some liver and a bit of leg.”

The matter-of-fact, calm manner in which he delivers the information makes my knees feel weak with gratitude.

What must it have been like for him, I wonder, to wake up and hunt with no control? How many people did he accidentally kill when he couldn’t control his ghoulish instincts?

I know that’s what is coming if I don’t eat this. The urge is there. The hunger is subtler, and slower to form, but no less present than the thirst.

With shaking hands, I reach down and grab the plate, bringing it to my chest height as my mind screams a protest, yet my mouth waters and my stomach rumbles.

I don’t remember what happens next. I suppose I should be grateful for that. When I come back to myself, I’m pressed against the bars, silver burning my face as I reach beyond the bars towards...

My pack.

I launch myself backwards until I’m pressed against the stone wall.

“Yeah. That happens the first few times.” There’s zero judgement in Frost’s tone, even though my heart is racing and I’m pretty sure I’ve drooled on my now blood-stained shirt. “Everything is heightened for the first few weeks—including the hunger. You’ll settle into the transition soon enough.”

I don’t *want* to. My eyes burn, and I turn away.

“Do you think...”

Frost sighs and shakes his head. “Even I still have to eat it, occasionally. I can go almost a year between feedings now, but I know when it’s getting too close. It’s either that or risk the people closest to me.” His eyes fall

closed. “Luckily, the world doesn’t have a shortage of scumbags no one will miss.”

Does that make eating them an act of service?

I slowly relax enough to dare a step away from the wall.

“This is...” I struggle to put it into words. “Not what I thought it would be like.”

I saw Frost, knew about his sense of smell, yet experiencing this for myself is a whole different bag of worms.

“You’ll beat this,” Frost replies evenly. “You’re Gideon-fucking-Lancaster.”

Perhaps I will, but I have no idea what I’ll become in the process. What if I try to take another bite out of one of them, and accidentally turn them at the same time?

The thought of making Finn go through this threatens to make the flesh I just ate come back up.

“Get some sleep,” Frost adds. “I know you’re fine with the daylight, but it’s got to be tiring just the same.”

Do I dare sleep knowing Echo probably has more traitors in his pack? I can’t even protect the others from inside this cell.

“I know we said we’d rest for a few days,” I begin. “But I think we should get on the move before dawn.”

Frost nods, and his shoulders sag slightly. “Good to have your planning brain back online.”

“I don’t think we should stay on the move, either,” I continue. “There’s far too great a potential for accidents that way. I know a place.”

Somewhere I haven’t been for a long time, but which Cain knows nothing about.

I glance at the brothers, wondering how they’ll react to the news that we’re going home after so long away. They’re asleep on a futon on the far side of the room, Silas having claimed one side of Finn, while Evie has the other. Draven has taken Evie’s other free side, leaving Vane to stretch out along the end of the bed.

I want to be in that group. Part of me rails at the unfairness of it all. Finn and I were just taking steps to fix our relationship, and now this new obstacle is screwing me over on my attempts to win him back.

Evie’s head pops up from the pillows and she pins me with a tired stare.

“Stop thinking so hard,” she complains, sleep slurring her words. “He still loves you. Everything else will work out.”

Her reassurance buoys my resolve a little, but her head drops down a second later, and I wonder if she was even truly awake.

“Get some sleep,” Frost says, after a few minutes of silently waiting to see if she’ll wake again. “I’ll tell Echo we’re moving out in the evening. He’ll probably be relieved.”

I don’t blame him, given what happened to Samuel’s people when Cain discovered they were harbouring us. There will be no mercy for our allies now, which will scare many of them. We may have resources, but the list of people we can truly count on was already thin after decades of Cain’s ruthless persecution.

Which is why my decision to take us back northwest is the right one. I just hope the others see it as such.

CHAPTER NINE



EVELYN

WHEN I WAKE UP, I'M CURLED AROUND FINN'S BODY LIKE IVY, AND the others are moving around us on quiet feet... packing? The omega is stroking my hair softly, and I want to purr at the soft indulgent sensation.

"Hey, you're awake," Finn notices. "Fancy a spot of breakfast before we head out?"

He shifts his head to one side, exposing his throat as an offering, and I nuzzle the spot lightly, savouring the scent of him before I bite down.

Now doesn't seem like the time to pump him full of my venom, but I release a tiny amount, anyway. Just enough to tease.

Finn lets out a half-groan, and shifts restlessly beneath me before I pull back and lick the wounds closed. His sweet taste lingers on the back of my tongue as I stretch and look around.

Silas reaches the two of us and presses a soft kiss to both our lips before handing over two piles of clothes.

"We've packed almost everything we need," he says. "But I snagged some clothes for you both before Draven took the cases away."

"Where are we going?" I ask.

"Echo caught a traitor trying to leave the pack last night," Vane informs us as he strides past, carrying an armful of wires. "Gid and Frost want to move out, just in case. I can't say I disagree either."

I don't miss the fact that he answered why we were going rather than the actual question, and I shoot Finn a confused look.

"It's a difficult subject," he mumbles against my ear. "It's northwest. Over the border."

From his explanation, I gather that he also has no idea exactly where we're going. Still, I let the matter drop and turn my attention to dressing and then helping to load up the cars in the soft evening darkness.

"We're not taking everything," Finn explains, as I look at the curiously sparse vehicles. "Most of our stuff is going to be airdropped."

Airdropped? Just how remote is this place we're going to?

I won't complain. The farther we are from others, the safer we are from Cain. It's not a foolproof tactic, but he's lost his best tracker now that Morwen has defected, which improves our odds.

Finn tugs me into the backseat, pressing me against him, and Silas closes the door behind us before climbing into the driver's seat.

I frown as he starts the ignition. "Are we not waiting for the others?"

"The others will stay in the car with Gideon," Silas says. "He refuses to put you and Finn at risk."

Men! "Does he realise I'm back at full strength and older than every last one of you?"

Finn snorts. "Welcome to the world of cherished omegas. It doesn't matter how strong you are, Gideon's instinct—and to a lesser extent the betas too—will always try to wrap you in cotton wool."

"I'm not an omega," I point out, and Finn and Silas exchange a look in the mirror. "What?" I demand. "I'm not."

"I don't want the details," Silas begins. "But when you and Gid... was there anything unusual about his..."

"His dick," Finn finishes helpfully. "Did it swell at the base?"

My cheeks heat, and my pussy clenches at the reminder. "Yes. We were locked together for a while."

"You *took* it?" Silas jerks behind the wheel, almost running us into a tree before he corrects the error.

"Fuck, that sounds hot," Finn groans. "Can I watch next time? I mean, I know it feels amazing to me—wait, you did enjoy it, right?"

I nod, and both of them exchange another glance. "He explained that it shouldn't have happened."

"It's alpha physiology reacting to an omega submitting," Finn explains. "Obviously, the original purpose was to ensure the best chances of procreation, but the two of us get the benefits without the issue of children."

A pang of sadness hits me, and Finn's head snaps around.

"Evie?" he mumbles, surprised. "You... you don't want..."

"Of course not. It would be foolish," I reply, shaking my head. "I knew what I was getting into when I was turned, and besides, children aren't safe in our world."

But my thrall knows. God, there's no keeping it from him and the sudden pity in his eyes makes me look away sharply.

"It's an old hurt," I whisper, my hand fluttering to my stomach before I force it away. "I am accustomed to it."

The silence that falls over the car is heavy, filled with the weight of two thousand years of regret. It makes it hard to breathe.

“You were telling me why you believe Gideon thinks of me as an omega,” I prompt when I can’t stand it anymore.

Finn nods. “His reaction when he smelled what you four were up to last night was a good clue. I could see his knot swelling through his pants.”

“He could smell us... all that way?” I look at Silas for confirmation, but the beta just shrugs.

“Frost can smell a ghoul twenty miles away if the wind is good,” he admits. “But I didn’t know...” He shrugs again. “Regardless, we’ll be travelling separately until we reach the airport. After that, you can ask him for yourself.”

I stare at the back window of the car in front, trying to understand what Gideon really thinks. Our bond isn’t much help. I’m learning that the alpha’s default mood is one of determined stoicism, laced with jagged edges of self-judgement. His transition has tempered those emotions with hunger and thirst, and his own self-loathing has grown.

He never wanted to be a vampire or a ghoul. Sometimes, it seems like he never wanted to be a lycan either. No. That’s not quite right.

Gideon is fine with his lycanthropy. He just wishes he wasn’t an alpha.

My memory flicks back to his discussion with Frost last night. I was half-asleep, but the thrall bond was practically writhing with the sticky black tar of his emotions.

I just can’t see what any of us can do to fix that. All I can do is hope that eventually he sees himself as the rest of the pack does.

Finn follows the direction of my gaze, then gives a little sigh.

* * *

“HOW DID YOU FIND ME?” I ask hours later.

I’m reclining in Vane’s lap, watching the moon out of the plane window, so I feel the subtle tensing of his muscles beneath me. Though, that could just be him reacting to the turbulence.

This plane is the smallest yet, with none of the luxuries of our previous flights. There are only ten seats, and our stuff is crammed into four of them, while Finn has set up a small workstation using the rickety folding trays of another two. We’ve been in the air for a while, and most of the pack has

found some way to occupy themselves. Existing comfortably in the same space, but each focused on their own task.

“Cain must have had me locked down...” I’ve been trying to figure it out, and my guesses have ranged from another huge ghoulish attack—which is unlikely, given that I was only gone for four days—to snatching me mid-transport.

“Callista.” Draven says her name like a curse.

My spine cracks from the speed at which I whirl to face him. He’s sitting at the back beside Gideon, who’s currently sucking on yet another bag of blood.

“What?” I demand, certain I’ve misheard him.

Draven’s face is etched with storm clouds, his fury plain to see.

Frost answers. “She stole you from Cain and headed off into the wilderness with you. I have no idea why, but she mentioned Bella was dead.”

My heart falls into the pit of my stomach. “Bella is *dead*?”

That’s not possible. She was the backbone of Cain’s empire. One of his generals. I didn’t see her often in the month I lived at Court, but whenever I did, it was obvious the place she held in his esteem.

Vane’s hands soothe down my shoulders to rub at my upper arms.

“I’ve verified it,” Finn mutters, his screen reflected in his large round glasses. “There are no reports about why, but our sources say her personal effects were removed from Triumph Island shortly after Armin’s death.”

Punishment. Bella’s progeny had failed Cain, and in the worst way. Confirmation of Samuel’s being alive—Samuel, who *knew* that Cain could be killed by witchcraft—would’ve been a shock to Cain’s system.

Fear would’ve made him lash out.

And Callie... Callie, who thought herself safe by his side, must’ve had a rude awakening. She knew, as well as all of us, what the first death would mean: the start of a purge.

Immy’s death must have confirmed it and convinced her to run while she still could.

Self-preservation must’ve guided my sister’s hand, but still I have an odd pulse of regret.

I owe her my life—no matter why she did it. Did I underestimate her? Yes. Have I judged her too harshly? Perhaps.

Draven is studying me intently. Wariness floats down our bond, fracturing the icy rage. Is he waiting for me to absolve her of her many sins? How can I when she forced him to murder his family and then tormented and abused him for years?

“What happened to her?” I finally ask, voice shaken.

“Frost let her go,” he hisses.

“I told her she had until dawn to run. After that, we’d kill her if we found her.” Frost’s tone is firm. “Eve was our priority. Not the resistance. Not vengeance—though I have almost as much right to demand it as you do. Or have you forgotten that Callista helped Cain torture me for almost a decade?” He crosses his arm and fixes Draven with a level stare. “We will find her again, I swear. But Eve is more important.”

When it happens, it’s not a subtle thing. No. It’s a crack in my soul, tearing open the raw edges of a wound which has bled and festered for centuries. Frost’s thrall bond carves its way back into my body, and my hand springs to my chest as I attempt to staunch the outpouring of grief, hurt, and pain that accompanies it.

“Eve?”

I didn’t realise I’d closed my eyes, but when I open them again, Frost is on his knees in the aisle, clutching his chest. He’s crying openly, and I can feel his incandescent joy and disbelief as if they were my own.

“You put me first,” I whisper.

My logical mind knows that his decision might’ve been mostly influenced by his belief that I’m the one person who can kill Cain, but it doesn’t seem to have mattered to the wounded, betrayed woman inside of me.

“I always did,” he swears. “Even back then.”

I believe him. How can I not, when the truth is shining right there between us? The thrall bond practically vibrates with the truth.

I’ve always mattered to him more than Cain. More than the resistance.

“I hate to break up the moment,” Silas mumbles. “But this plane isn’t big enough for you two to start... rekindling anything right now, and even if it was, we’re about to land and the runway is short enough that I’m going to have to advise we actually bother with seat belts.”

“Should’ve let me fly,” Gideon mutters as the beta disappears back into the cockpit and Frost obediently retakes his seat.

“We would’ve crashed six times by now as you tried to get to the nearest blood source.” Draven looks pointedly at the small pile of discarded bags by their feet.

“If Cain is purging his children again,” I mutter, ignoring their byplay. “Then Callie might think she’ll live the longest, by virtue of the fact that she’s smart enough to bunker down and just hide, but she’s mistaken.”

“Why?” Finn asks. “Cain is distracted. It’s as good a strategy as any other.”

I don’t bother hiding the scepticism from my tone. “So distracted that he’ll forget that she *betrayed* him?”

No. Cain despises traitors. Callie hasn’t run to safety like she thinks she has. Instead, she’s painted a huge target on her back. Unlike Morwen and I, she’s never bothered developing the skills to survive outside of her cushy world of the court. Sure, she can fight when the mood suits her, but she’s a contented palace pet. Even if she uses her brain and manages to survive for more than a week, the outside world will be a harsh pill for her to swallow.

The plane squeaks and jolts on the tarmac, and I lean back against Vane’s shoulder once more, silently wondering whether Callie will live long enough to collect on my debt.

If she does, do I have it in me to ask Draven to forget about retribution? Or should I give up my sister—who has been a part of my life for millennia—to face his icy judgement?

CHAPTER TEN



EVELYN

I THOUGHT THAT THE PLANE RIDE WOULD MARK THE END OF OUR travels, but I was wrong. We land in a richly forested area by the ocean, and the next part of our journey requires us to take a boat inland, along a river.

We convinced an older man in the bay to part with this old fishing boat, although he haggled for more cash than I suspect it's really worth. It has a decent engine, but no seats beyond the stool by the centre console and no technology except for an old-fashioned radio. As such, the pack has been forced to bunk down on a deck that's well worn and smells faintly of salt and fish.

Since the sun rose while we were flying, Draven's sleeping body has been wrapped in tarp to protect him—something he'll complain bitterly about when he wakes.

I don't mean to fall into a light doze, but when I wake, I've been transferred from Silas's lap to Frost's. The ghoul hasn't brought up the bond that's thrumming between us since it snapped back to wholeness on the plane, but it still pulses lightly with his incredulity with each reverent stroke of his fingers through my hair.

"Stay there," Silas mutters, elbowing the wriggling Draven-tarp-burrito beside him. "The sun is still up, so quit complaining."

"If this is another of your damned pranks..." Draven's threat is muffled, but still audible.

Vane—at the wheel—turns to growl over his shoulder, "It's still afternoon, and you two need to shut up. I haven't been back here for centuries and everything has changed. I don't know what I'm looking for."

"It's around the next bend," Gideon mumbles. "The meadow is still there. It's all largely unchanged from when we left."

Silas and Vane both look up sharply at his answer, and I glance between the three of them.

We take the final meandering corner of the wide river, and across the water, a familiar golden field with an unmistakable lone willow in the centre emerges. It's been so long that it takes me a while to place it, but when I do, I understand why my lycans are all on edge.

This is the place that Gideon keeps a photograph of in his room. That Silas and Vane also know about it means that this must be where their old pack lived. The one run by Gideon's father before he killed their sister.

I have no idea what circumstances led to that mess, but I can see why they've chosen to return now.

There are no roads. No houses. No signs of civilisation. Nothing.

Not even a plane in the sky.

Beyond the rippling grass of the meadow is a thick swathe of towering trees and rolling hills which stretch to the horizon in every direction. I don't think I've ever been anywhere so remote, and the true wilderness of the place brings with it a sense of safety.

Cain will have to work hard to find us here.

Vane steers the boat towards the shore, where a small rotten dock juts out into the river. I don't trust the liling structure to secure the boat—and apparently neither does the beta, because he drops the anchor as a precaution while Silas busies himself mooring us into place.

The first step Silas takes onto the jetty causes his foot to go through the plank, and he grimaces. The scent of his blood hits the air in the next second, and a twinge of sudden thirst in the back of my mind makes me whirl and lunge for Gideon.

So does everyone else.

The alpha barely has a chance for his nostrils to flare before he's buried under a pile of us.

It takes another five minutes to contain the snarling, raging Gideon. In the end, Vane and Frost hold him back while I force a blood bag between his extended double fangs. It takes three more bags for the bloodlust to subside, and by that time, Silas is on the bank, surveying his torn skin with annoyance. It's already healing, but I keep my body between him and Gideon, hiding the temptation from sight.

"Better not to use the dock until we can repair it," Frost surmises.

"We can jump the distance," Finn says. "But getting the equipment across might be tricky."

"What am I supposed to do?" Draven growls from beneath his tarp. "Wait here until sundown?"

Silas's grin lights up. "Do you want me to toss you to safety?"

"Fuck. You."

"If you insist," Silas quips, drawing a snarl from the vampire.

“I will carry Draven across,” Frost snaps, ending their banter. “How far is the nearest safe spot?”

“The houses are just beyond the northern treeline,” Gideon mutters. “Most of what was here is run down and gone, but I’ve had a new log house built on the eastern side as a safe house. A specialist comes along to deep clean it twice a year, so it should be habitable. They send me updates.”

“This isn’t listed in the records,” Finn replies.

The alpha won’t look at anyone as he replies. “I never meant it as a safe house for the resistance. I did it with my own funds. I figured the pack should have somewhere to go if the worst happened...”

“No paper trail?” Finn checks.

“It’s still registered in the name of a pack which no longer exists,” Gideon replies, evenly, jumping from the deck of the boat across to the bank, quickly followed by Vane. “And the company is paid through one of the shell companies. Don’t worry. I covered my tracks well.”

Apparently reassured, Finn begins to throw our belongings across the distance as Frost hauls the tarp-wrapped vampire over his shoulder and makes the leap.

Only he misjudges, landing both of them in the river.

Draven curses, and Frost’s glee hits me right at the same time.

“The boat moved!” Frost lies.

Silas’s laughter isn’t helping matters, and I can’t help the small smile which twitches at the corners of my own lips as the tarp on Frost’s shoulder jerks roughly.

“Ouch, mind your bony elbows!”

“You’re lucky the big bad wolf is on a hairpin trigger or I’d have stabbed you for that,” Draven retorts.

Finn waves me off the boat next, and I place my leap a little better than Frost. However, I misjudge how wet the soil is, and my foot slides.

Before I can do more than backpedal, Gid is there, his arm scalding my waist as he tugs me back to land.

Just as fast, he’s gone, yanked back by Vane.

“He wasn’t going to bite me,” I protest. “I have a full bond with him. I’d know.”

Heads snap around at that announcement, and my cheeks burn. I thought Gideon had told them, but I suppose it must’ve slipped his mind. Both Gid and I dismiss their questioning looks as we grab random bags and

head towards the trees, following Frost and Draven away from the glimmering meadow.

Part of me yearns to ask if he's okay. The thrall bond tells me some things, but without his thoughts to temper the mass of instincts and emotions, it's hard to put a label on what's going on inside his head. Nostalgia and pain echo from both him and Vane... and if I really try, I get much of the same from Silas.

Yes, this is the perfect hiding place from Cain, but at what cost?

The first house we come across is a wreck. It's been taken over by nature in all ways. Half of its roof is missing and only one window is still intact. A broken shutter hangs down, wrapped with moss, ivy, and lichen.

The remnants of a road are visible—though that too is being slowly reclaimed by the forest. It can't have been more than a dirt track when it was first made, but there's an abandoned wagon which suggests it must once have been grander.

More houses follow, each of them just as badly worn as the first. A few are marked only by their crumbling stone chimneys.

Perhaps that's why the imposing log house, with its tall, sloping roofs and wide, wrap-around porch, stands out so much. It's a beautiful rustic building, with carvings of wolves peeking out unexpectedly from around the doorways and along the railings of the porch.

"You demolished the old pack house," Vane grunts, but his attention is fixed on the ruins of a different building, slightly to the left.

"It wasn't a pack house," Gideon replies evenly. "Though... when I had this built, there weren't seven of us." He glances at me apologetically. "So there are only six bedrooms."

"Evie can bed-hop," Finn announces. "As long as that's okay with her."

"It would be better if someone were to share with Gid," Draven mutters, shoving away the tarp as Frost sets him down under the shady protection of the wide porch.

"We can take turns," I reply.

"I don't need a babysitter," Gideon retorts.

"Ordinarily, I'd agree," Vane says. "But you'll hate yourself if you accidentally bite Evie or Finn."

"It's only for a few weeks," Frost adds.

Gideon's shoulders slump as he taps a code into the door. "The passcode is Finn's birthday."

He says it offhandedly, but Finn's bond practically melts in my chest.

The pack files in, and Vane switches on the lights. We're greeted by an enormous living area with a kitchen set up against the back wall. The rustic theme continues inside, but it's tempered by modern amenities. The open plan space is split in two by an enormous island and dominated by the bulky grey stone fireplace that takes up the left wall.

"Bedrooms are upstairs," Gideon mutters, striding over and flicking switches, bringing the kitchen to life with the soft hum of appliances. "There's a weapons room in the basement, but I haven't had it stocked. Hopefully, the supply drop will bring us a few things. Escape tunnel is under the hearth..."

He stops by the fireplace next and presses a hidden switch that sends holographic flames springing up from a grate.

The house is cold and a little musty, but it's clean. There's not much dust, either, which is a relief. After all the time we've spent travelling, the last thing I want to do is spend time cleaning.

"Office is through here," Gideon adds, swinging open a door opposite,

Finn is already heading for it, hauling his case full of computers with him.

"Come and help me pick out my room," Silas says, taking my free hand in his and tugging me lightly towards the staircase that runs up the right-hand wall.

I don't resist, though I cast a last lingering look at Gideon, Frost, and Vane before they're out of view.

Silas pokes his head into multiple doors before he finds a room that suits him.

"Have to leave the biggest for Finn," he mutters at my questioning look. "Then the two second largest for Frost and Gideon. Draven can have the smallest, since he's just going to bitch anyway—"

"I can hear you!" Draven's voice echoes through the walls.

Evidently the wooden architecture doesn't provide much in the way of soundproofing, and I blush as I think of the issues that might cause.

To distract myself, I explore the plainly furnished room. The mattress is so new that it's still wrapped in plastic, and the bedding is the same. I busy myself unwrapping it as Silas shoves both of our bags into the cupboard.

I watch curiously as he heads to the large window and cracks it open, sticking his head outside.

“This is where you used to live,” I guess.

He lets out a soft half-chuckle. “This is where I was born. In that house down there, if you must know.”

But it’s also where they lost a sister, and their parents.

“Can’t say I’m glad to be back,” he mutters, echoing my thoughts as he strides over and lifts the mattress so I can sweep the sheet into place.

Bed made, he steps towards the door. “You should rest. I have a feeling that Gid is going to insist we all start work as soon as the sun sets.”

I open my mouth to ask him to stay with me, but he’s already gone.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



EVELYN

SILAS'S PREDICTION COMES TRUE THREE HOURS LATER. I'VE BARELY entered the—now sparkling clean—kitchen when a loud thump startles me. My head whips around so fast that my neck cracks, and I grimace as I see Gideon standing over the grimoire, laid flat against the marble island worktop.

"You need to start reading this," he grumbles, then turns to Frost, who's become his shadow. "And I need to start learning about this." He waves a hand at himself. "We might have a small reprieve here, but we can't assume it will last."

"Cain's found us every other time," Finn agrees, his voice carrying from the office. "There's every possibility that he'll do it again."

"He'll struggle without Morwen," I remind them. "And unlike in Egypt, there's no one for miles to tip him off to our whereabouts."

Darkness brushes over their expressions at the reminder of Noha, Samuel's wife, who betrayed our location to Cain—almost costing us everything in the process.

Nowhere is truly safe, but this is close.

Without meaning to, my eyes fall back to the book. Is it silly to be nervous about opening it? Vane looks up from his seat in the living room, sensing my hesitation.

"No harm ever came of reading a book," he quips.

"Your age is showing," Finn retorts dryly. "Try quoting something from this century."

Vane just rolls his eyes and goes back to staring at the fire.

I take the opportunity to reach forwards and take the book, it feels heavier than before, though I know that's likely my imagination.

There's no way to read this normally—the spine has disintegrated—so I settle on one of the stools as I slowly unbuckle the two worn belts which are holding the pages pinned between the heavy, embossed leather covers. When the belts are gone, I put them to one side, take a deep breath and lift away the thick front cover.

The first page is written in glyphs I don't understand. Diagrams are carefully annotated in pages of script that are faded in places, but the

handwriting is beautifully neat.

“I don’t understand this language,” I mutter.

Strange. I could’ve sworn I saw pages written in Romanian when I was first given the book.

Concerned, I flick through the stack, then pause.

About an inch into the book, the paper changes, and so does the language. The handwriting goes from careful and precise to thin and spidery. The alphabet switches to Phoenician—which was almost extinct when I was nothing more than a girl—then to Greek, and finally Cyrillic after a few more pages, though the dialects are so old I have to think hard to remember them.

An inch or so later, it switches again to the more familiar Latin.

There must be entries from all over the world.

“It’s not just one witch’s grimoire,” I mumble, leafing through the pages. “It’s several.” Spanning thousands of years.

“It is weird as fuck watching you read a blank page,” Frost mutters.

“I can’t read the first entries,” I mumble, ignoring him. “Really, it will be hard to make out the first few, given that I haven’t read some of these languages in over a thousand years. I have no idea how this book is still so well preserved...”

It must be magic. There’s no other way to explain why the papyrus isn’t crumbling to dust beneath my fingers.

“Draw some of the symbols,” Finn encourages, appearing in the doorway with his tablet in hand. “Maybe I can find a way to translate it.”

I oblige him, taking the tablet, then writing out the first symbol.

Except...

“That’s not what I drew,” I protest, looking between the messy character on the screen and the one on the page.

I try again, copying the next, only for the same thing to happen. It’s like someone has severed the connection between my eye and my hand, and whatever I draw comes out warped.

“Some kind of protective mechanism?” Finn guesses. “Perhaps intended to stop any of the book’s secrets being disclosed to the wrong people.”

He’s fascinated, but I can’t help grinding my teeth in frustration. If the secret to killing Cain is written in one of those early entries, I’ll have to learn an extinct language.

I stop at the earliest Latin entry and begin to read.

“This is a recipe for curing warts,” I mutter, turning the page. “This one is to stop rampant diarrhoea.”

“Well, if you want to practise that one, we can ask Silas to cook another chilli,” Finn jokes.

“Fuck off, that was *one time!*” The beta’s voice echoes from upstairs, proving he’s listening, even though he’s not down here with the rest of us.

“Or another cheese potato and onion pie,” Gideon mutters.

“Are you lot really sitting around ragging on my cooking while I’m up here trying to get our stuff unpacked?” Silas demands, appearing at the top of the stairs. “How is Evie supposed to concentrate on reading with an audience? Shouldn’t you go patrol the area or something?”

Finn sighs, retreating back to the office, and Vane shoves out of his seat, heading for the door.

“They should be dropping in our supplies soon, right?”

“Right,” Draven confirms. “Though the coordinates Gid gave them are a few miles west.”

“I’ll go with you,” Gideon offers. “Frost and I will run the outer territories while we’re at it. Silas can show Draven the route on the next patrol.”

I block out their conversation as I turn back to the book of disappointing herbal remedies. There has to be something here that could be useful. Surely, we didn’t do all of that work for nothing.

I’m left alone by everyone, but it doesn’t help.

The more I read, the worse my mood becomes. Blemish removal cream. Step-by-step instructions on collecting moon water. Cures for kidney stones. Eight pages of meditations to clear the mind—which apparently are meant to be done daily.

All of this is so disappointingly mortal. Not a single thing to do with vampires, lycans, or even ghouls.

This is just what I feared. I’m somehow the last witch in existence—and apparently the only thing Cain has ever feared is a group of people whose sum contribution to the world is curing humans of their various maladies. There’s even a recipe for barley soup.

A warm pair of arms wrap around me, and I’m tugged swiftly against a hard abdomen. I breathe in Finn’s comforting scent, even as I look to check the room is deserted before I speak.

“It’s useless,” I whisper into his shirt. “I thought there would be something here, but there’s *nothing*.”

“This is just a small setback,” he begins. “It’s still going to be okay, I promise.”

“How can it?” I ask, drawing back to stare up into his eyes. “Our one hope for killing Cain turned out to be a book of old wives’ tales.”

I pick the papers up and shape them back into a neat pile before picking up the cover and dropping it unceremoniously on top.

“You need a break,” Finn cajoles. “Come on, take a walk with me.”

I shake my head. “I’d rather... I’d rather just sit outside.”

“Okay,” he agrees easily, pulling me up from the stool and holding my hand as we leave the log house.

We make our way along the porch until we reach a slightly rusty bench swing, and I hop up onto it before he can lift me.

“What do I tell them?” I ask, looking forlornly into the forest. “They’re hoping that the answer to all of our problems is inside that book.”

“It still might be,” Finn replies. “Think about it; when Cain started hunting them, the witches must’ve found safety hidden amongst the humans. I can only imagine focusing on appearing to be benevolent healers helped to ensure the loyalty of those around them. Those cures might have been a necessary part of blending in.”

“You think the older pages will hold clues?” I guess, though I don’t believe it myself.

Why would you keep powerful magic alongside such drivel?

“I think you should take the day,” Finn answers carefully. “Then tomorrow night, I’ll bring up a list of extinct languages and we can try to find one which matches. Translating one page should tell us enough about whether the whole thing was a bust or not.”

He’s right, but a deep hollow feeling has taken up residence in my chest, stealing away whatever hope I try to summon. Deep down, some part of me has always known that this would be fruitless. That trying to kill Cain was a fool’s errand.

“Oh, sweetheart,” he mumbles, pulling my slumped body against his once more and pressing a hard kiss to my hair. “I know this isn’t what we’d hoped, but please, please try not to let it beat you.”

I swallow thickly and try my best to do as he says. The fresh spruce and pine scented wind blows around us, bringing the warm August air to play

with the front strands of my hair as I cuddle the omega.

Through the trees, I can catch glimpses of the golden meadow beyond—though moonlight has painted the grass in shades of silver.

“It’s a beautiful place,” I admit, softly.

“I had no idea,” Finn admits. “They almost never talk about their life in Gideon’s pack before...”

That’s hard to believe. Finn’s been with them for decades, and in a relationship with Silas and Gideon for many of those.

“They never told you?”

He shakes his head. “I know the basics, and I’ve seen the portrait of Isla that Gid carries around.”

The final photo. I assumed it was an old lover, but it’s actually the brothers’ dead sister?

My curiosity eats at me, but I don’t want to ask.

“We should’ve brought it up more,” Silas admits, startling both of us.

He’s leaning against a pillar, arms crossed tightly over his chest as he watches the two of us drift to and fro on the swing.

“But it’s really Gideon’s story to tell. I wasn’t all there for a lot of what happened... Once Isla died, it seemed like I was on autopilot for a long time, and everything else became a sort of fuzz. Vane probably remembers more than I do.”

And as Vane never speaks of it, it was never brought to light.

“It’s not healthy to have a hole this big in the middle of a pack,” Finn admonishes quietly. “An entire abandoned village? When were you going to bring that up?”

“You know what Gid’s like,” Silas objects. “I’ve seen rocks better at expressing their emotions.”

“Don’t spare my feelings.”

All three of us freeze. There, at the bottom of the steps, are the other four, carrying between them two huge pallets wrapped securely in green fabric.

Vane and Frost put their burden down first, and Draven and the alpha follow swiftly behind. Silas—whose ears have turned red—hops down from the porch to help unstrap the securely packed supplies.

The alpha climbs the steps slowly, eyes fixed on the two of us.

“No luck?” he asks softly.

I shake my head, my disappointment rearing its ugly head once more at the reminder. “We’ll try something new tomorrow.”

Gideon’s eyes meet Finn’s next, and he bows his head slightly. “I have my first appointment in three hours.”

I glance between them, not understanding why Finn’s jaw slackens and he blinks silently for several seconds.

“Good. That’s... good.”

Gideon nods once—though his grimace suggests he doesn’t think good is the word to describe whatever’s going on at all—and shoves through the door and into the empty house.

CHAPTER TWELVE



EVELYN

THE REST OF THE EVENING IS SPENT UNPACKING THE VARIOUS PIECES OF equipment that have been dropped on our doorstep. The others go back, retrieving yet more pallets, loaded with everything from food to weapons, clothes and computers. They've even managed to drop off the pack's bikes—although Draven spent the better part of an hour checking his for damage and hissing over the tiniest of scratches in the paintwork before the sun forced him upstairs to bed.

With all of us working together, the empty log house fills up quickly, and by the time we stop, it's beginning to feel like more of a base. I'm grateful for the distraction that helping unpack brings, but as the pack starts to settle down for the day, I can't help but wonder what's going to happen to me.

Despite Draven's earlier suggestion, Gideon isn't sharing with anyone. He's been shut upstairs in his room for most of the early morning for his mysterious appointment. I'd be worried that something was wrong, but the hopeful smiling glances that Finn has been shooting towards his door whenever we pass make it clear this is nothing to worry about.

Whatever Gideon's doing, it seems to have brought a spark to the omega's smile.

Finn went to bed wearing the same, almost dreamy expression, and Silas and Vane followed quickly after him.

Which leaves me alone with Frost. He's been staring pensively into the flames of the hearth for a while now, and I'm about to leave when he finally speaks.

"Are you afraid to be alone with me?"

I frown, confused by the question. "Should I be?"

"You've been nervous ever since Vane went upstairs."

"You always did like keeping a close eye on me down the bond."

Before, it was limited. Now, there's nothing stopping him from keeping tabs on me every second of the day.

"I might have an eensy bit of an obsession," he admits. "Can you blame me?"

Not really. Now that the bond is there—shattering any misconceptions—it's easy to see that to Frost, keeping an eye on me provides him a sense of relief, of comfort, that he rarely seems to experience otherwise.

He enjoys reassuring himself that I'm still here.

"I'm nervous because I don't know where I'm sleeping tonight," I admit.

Of course, the bond goes both ways, which means Frost understands what I'm not brave enough to say.

Will you let me stay with you tonight?

There are too many heavy emotions between us for this to be anything simple or uncomplicated. By comparison, every other sexual relationship I have with my thralls is *easy*.

Sometimes, I think, watching as he gets to his feet, you just have to take that leap.

Or, in my case, accept the hand he offers to me.

My hand feels cold in comparison to his, and his fingers clasp mine, offering their warmth easily. Then, I catch a stray feeling from his end of the bond.

Nerves.

"I've never known you to be nervous," I murmur, stepping into his chest.

His arms wrap around me instinctively. "I haven't kissed anyone in two centuries, Eve. I might be a little rusty."

Shock and delight make my head fall back, and I blink at him.

"You waited for me?"

I would've understood had he not; it was a long time to wait for anyone, and I certainly haven't been a nun since I left my coffin.

His cheeks heat, and his grey eyes smoulder. "There was never anyone else for me but you."

That confession steals my breath, but his lips find mine in the next instant, and I decide I don't need oxygen.

His lips are hard, firmer than they were before. The old Frost was a cocky youth, one whose excitement was palpable in every tentative touch. This new man possesses a determination forged from the ashes of regret and loss, and his kiss is a claiming brand.

Without speaking, he makes it clear that I'm his—will always be his—and nothing and no one will stand in his way.

Faced with such brutal certainty, what can I do but surrender?

My lips part, and his tongue sweeps inside, tasting me with a soft groan of pleasure.

“Fuck. Eve.” He tears away, and the warm room feels cold without him pressed against me. “Don’t take this the wrong way—because you definitely deserve the comfort of a bed—but I think we should take this outside.”

“Outside?”

“Don’t want to send Gideon into a frenzy,” he mutters.

My heart squeezes at his thoughtfulness, and I offer him a small smile. “It’s not like our first time was in a bed, either.”

Hiding our relationship from Cain had meant most of our meet ups were outside. Once or twice, we risked using an inn, but the rest of the time...

In a move that’s heartrendingly familiar, Frost opens his arms.

I don’t waste any time jumping into them. My legs wrap back around his waist, and he supports me effortlessly with one arm as he snags a throw blanket from the sofa with his free hand. Then, taking my lips in a second, searing kiss, he shoves open the front door and leads both of us out into the sun.

I have no idea where we’re going, and I can’t bring myself to ask. Instead, I busy myself with taunting Frost. It was my favourite pastime once, and I’m delighted to discover that making him groan hasn’t lost its appeal.

Tracing my fangs up one side of his throat, I bite down lightly, barely piercing his skin. His moan as I let beads of my venom flow into his bloodstream makes me grin against his skin. Then I lick the mark to seal it, and repeat the process.

Beneath me, I can feel his dick pressing against the fabric that separates us, pulsing with the need I’m shamelessly stoking. I shiver.

“Eve,” he warns. “I know I promised to wreck you, but crashing into a tree wasn’t what I meant.”

His words from back in the desert tease my imagination. “You also said you’d grown another two inches,” I remind him. “Care to recant before you’re proven a liar?”

His dark chuckle wraps around me like a drug. “You’ll just have to wait and see.”

We break out of the treeline into the meadow from before, and his pace slows slightly. Now that there are fewer hazards in the way, I decide to up the ante and start messing with him in earnest.

I lean back and grasp the hem of my sweatshirt, pulling it over my head and discarding it without thinking about finding it later. The weak morning sunlight cascades over my bare skin, and I reach back to flick open my bra next. It joins my top in the grass, leaving me bare from the waist up.

Frost stumbles, then rights us both. “Impatient.”

“Eager,” I retort.

We reach the large willow in the centre of the meadow, and Frost ducks beneath the long, cascading branches, revealing a cosy hidden space beneath where the grass is shorter.

Frost puts me down, and I use the time to remove my leggings as he spreads out the blanket on the floor. When he looks back at me, I’m completely nude, and the fire that spreads from his eyes makes me feel more powerful for it.

“You’re overdressed,” I point out, grabbing the hem of his shirt.

“Eve, you have to...”

I smile and pull his shirt over his head instead of answering.

Then I freeze. There are lines on his body I haven’t seen before. Marks that give me pause. Hundreds of crescent moon shaped scars.

“Frost...”

Guilt flashes through me as I realise this is what he was trying to warn me about. He shrugs his shirt the last few inches over his head and lets it fall to his side.

The marks are clustered over his abs and chest—typical ghoulish behaviour; they go straight for the warm nutrients found in the organs—but there are a few on his arms, and I’m willing to bet more will decorate his thighs.

“I’m not ashamed of them,” he mutters. “But I would’ve warned you. The ghouls did a number on me before I turned.”

I trace one with my fingertip, hating the way my eyes start to burn. I may be the more naked of the two of us right now, but he’s undoubtedly the most vulnerable. It’s hard to know what to say, so I simply lean into him and kiss the scar nearest his heart.

Cain did this. Tortured both of us, and yet Frost will carry the physical reminders of that for the rest of his life.

“I wouldn’t change a single one,” he adds, filling the silence. “They brought us back together.” His hands cup my face, thumbs reaching up to brush away the tears escaping them. “Don’t cry, Eve. I’m supposed to be seducing you.”

My answering laugh is a little forced, but he swoops in to swallow it with another kiss, anyway. The warmth of him chases away the chill that’s taken over my body. The taste of him is so familiar, yet not, and the nostalgia hits me.

My hands find their way to his shoulders, and I let myself fall into the tangling of our tongues completely. He sucks my lower lip between his and nips at it. The tiny sting travels straight to my breasts, triggering an ache that echoes through my body.

My nipples pebble, brushing lightly against the small smattering of hair decorating his chest and causing me to gasp. My desperate inhale breaks our kiss, and Frost uses the distraction to lift me by my thighs and kneel, laying me down on the blanket.

The ground is a little lumpy, but I pay it no attention. My focus is consumed by him as he leans down and presses soft kisses across my face and down my throat.

“Fucking dreamed of this,” he murmured. “Every night for hundreds of years. Just the memory of your taste drove me insane.”

His tongue swipes out, licking the column of my neck, and I arch my neck, giving him better access. But he doesn’t bite.

My disappointment must echo down the bond, because he smirks.

“I don’t need venom to make you go insane,” he promises.

Beneath the confident words, there’s an undertone of determination, and because we’re linked, I understand.

He doesn’t want too much of the intoxicant clouding this.

I thread my fingers into his hair and draw him back up until we’re face to face, and then kiss the living daylights out of him. This time, he breaks the kiss, returning to the path of licks and nibbling kisses he was forging.

Those rough palms, calloused and familiar, work their way down to my ribcage, then stroke upwards, leaving tingles in their wake until he’s cupping my heavy breasts in his hands. He tests the weight of them, eyes darkening as he runs his thumbs over the hard points of my nipples until my spine arcs, pressing them into his palms.

Begging silently for a firmer touch. For more.

His mouth seals around the first with breathtaking, and frustrating, gentleness. Every flick of his tongue is reverent, like he's worshipping my body.

"Frost," I breathe.

He releases me, leaving one shiny, wet nipple to chill in the morning air.

"Problem, Eve?"

"Harder."

He knows how impatient I am.

"Not yet." His mouth quirks in a soft smirk. "I've been planning this for decades. Let me?"

How can I refuse when he looks at me like that? His big grey eyes are pleading with me.

Sensing my surrender, he ducks back down and proceeds to give my other breast the same treatment.

His slow, thorough attention has me squirming by the time he draws away.

"How flexible is the plan?" I pant.

"Why?"

Without warning, I snap my legs around his waist and twist until he's underneath me. I only manage it because he's taken completely by surprise, but he frowns at the new position.

"Eve..."

But I'm still moving, rotating my body until I'm facing his feet.

Grasping the plan, he grips my hips and lifts my lower body until my knees are on either side of his head, then pulls them down until my pussy is directly over his face.

"Suck me," he orders. "If you stop, I'll stop. Whoever lasts the longest gets to pick the position."

I laugh out loud at the memory he conjures. This was an old game we used to play, one that I'd all but forgotten.

He reaches up to close the last few inches between his lips and my clit just as I realise my handicap.

"Hey, this isn't fair," I begin, only to trail off on a moan as he licks up and down my seam in one long swipe of his tongue.

Frost is still wearing his jeans.

I battle with the button, but my coordination is severely hampered by the pleasure coursing through my veins. Eventually, I give up on the buttons

and settle on using my strength to shred the fabric instead.

Now free, Frost's cock bobs happily in the golden dappled light. A bead of moisture is already forming at the tip, and I'm forced to consider that he might have been right.

I'm almost certain he wasn't this long before.

Forgetting the matter for now, I waste no time in capturing the tiny bead of pre-cum on my tongue before twirling around the head and down the vein on the underside. Retracing my steps, I press an open-mouthed kiss to the slit at the top before engulfing as much of him as I can in one dive.

"Fuck." He releases my clit with a curse, only to return to work with even more enthusiasm.

I have every intention of winning. Unfortunately, Frost's tongue is doing unbelievable things between my folds, gathering the liquid from my entrance with a happy groan of very masculine satisfaction, and then spreading it upwards to lick and flick at the sensitive nub at the apex of my thighs,

I start to tremble, and then my arms give out as my orgasm washes over me.

"That's it," he encourages, in between licks. "Come all over my face." Slurp. "Fuck yes. I want to taste you all day." Lick. "So fucking sweet." Swipe. "Keep coming. Drench me. That's it."

I'm helpless to resist, but he doesn't seem to mind. He licks me until every bone in my body is jelly and I don't have the strength to shake anymore.

"I want a rematch," I say, giving his cock one last defeated lick before he grips my hips and turns us once more. The move puts me sitting astride him, my weeping core inches from his cock.

"Later," he promises. "Now, I want to watch you work yourself onto my cock."

He reaches down between us and holds it up at the right angle, teasing my opening with the head. "Come on, Eve. Take me."

Rising on shaking knees, I let him fit himself against my entrance and then slowly start to work myself down on his warm shaft.

He hisses out a curse with the first inch, removing his hands and linking them behind his head as every muscle in his body tenses. He's straining, fighting against his own instincts to thrust up and just claim me in one

brutal sweep. He's letting me take this at my own pace, and I'm grateful, because it gives me the chance to watch the emotions play across his face.

Torment, lust, wonder, and even love.

He's so open about the latter that it shocks me, and I freeze with him halfway inside.

"Eve," he breathes. "Please."

His hips give a subtle half-thrust before he can prevent it, and I gasp as the motion drags directly against my G-spot. I rear back a little, then drive forward, chasing the pleasure he's wringing from me.

When our hips finally meet, he lets out a relieved breath, hands finally returning to my hips.

"Look at me," he begs, and my eyes meet his before I can stop myself. "I want to watch your face as I do this."

That's as much warning as he gives before he pulls almost all the way out and slams back home. He uses his grip on my hips to move me like a rag doll, slamming me down as he thrusts up from below, hitting so deep inside that it almost *hurts*. Yet, at the same time, the pleasure is so great that the dull ache within only enhances it.

All I can do is hold on as he fucks me through one orgasm into the next. My pussy spasms and clenches against him, trying to push him over with me, but Frost just keeps going, unleashing years of pent up sexual frustration on my body. Making me take it.

Wrecking me. Just like he promised.

Sweat beads between us, making his skin shine in the sunlight. I can taste the salt of it on his mouth as I fall forward, claiming his lips in a desperate kiss.

"You're mine," he promises, pulling away but keeping our eyes locked together.

"Yours," I agree.

His hands tighten on my ass as he pulls me onto him one last time and holds me there, grinding his pelvis into my clit as he finally, blessedly, loses control. He comes in a hot wave, scorching me from the inside out in what seems like never-ending jets. Within me, his dick jerks, sending me over a final cliff that steals my breath from my lungs.

I slump bonelessly against him, pressing soft kisses to his shoulder as we both come down from the sexual high.

When his fingers relax, allowing blood to return to my ass, I moan. He doesn't release me fully, keeping me wrapped up against him, and I'm grateful. His body is like a small furnace, keeping me warm.

For the longest while, we just stay like that; the sound of our harsh breaths evening out our only companion.

"I'm glad that you found them," I whisper against his chest some time later, stroking a scar through the downy hair that decorates his pectorals. "I'm glad you weren't alone."

It must be close to midday by now, but neither of us has made any move to leave.

"I thought I'd regret sharing you," he admits, quietly. "But I don't. After what happened, I'll be grateful for any part of you."

"You think you love me," I say quietly.

"I know I do."

The silence between us that follows isn't uncomfortable, but I'm unsure how to break it.

"You're not used to being loved," Frost acknowledges. "But I can't deny how I feel. I know you feel something for me. You don't have to label it if that makes you uncomfortable."

"I do," I reply. "If I don't, he's won."

Cain wanted me to never love again. He was furious when I fell for Frost the first time. Now I realise that was because he felt threatened.

My sire wanted to be the only person that any of us had any true connection to, beyond each other. Even Callie's many lovers were warm bodies and sycophants. She never bonded with them. Frost's presence in my life didn't fit with that plan.

That was what made my crime so great.

"I love you," I murmur, trying to ignore how strange the words feel in my mouth and the way my heart beats a little faster. "I may not say it enough, but I do."

If I'm truly honest, I love them all. Even prickly Gideon and ice cold Draven. The only thrall I've admitted it to is Finn, though that wasn't intentional. The omega's thoughtful, gentle nature meant that the confession just slipped out. With the others, it's harder. I can't imagine how Draven will take the news.

Frost's arms tighten around me, hugging me closer as he drops another lingering kiss on my forehead.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



DRAVEN

I'M UP EARLY, WHICH MEANS I HAVE TO WAIT IMPATIENTLY FOR DUSK before I can dress and strap on the weapons I'll need. After a moment's consideration, I fill a rucksack with blood from the fridge in the kitchen, keeping my steps silent as I prepare.

Frost let Callista go. I stayed long enough to secure Evie's safety, but now I have to right that wrong.

She's alone, and she's on the run. Her strengths lie in subterfuge, barbed words, and careful flattery, not in evading a determined predator. I won't allow Cain to steal my vengeance.

The door to the garage opens with a bare whisper of sound, and I secure the bag to the back of my hover bike with quick, careful movements.

I'll start where she handed over Evie. It's unlikely she will have bothered to cover her tracks, and if I'm lucky, I'll figure out which direction she's headed.

The automatic door rolls up, revealing the just-dark sky. Not a trace of sun in sight as I carry my bike out onto the cracked road.

I won't start it until I'm far enough away that the noise won't wake anyone.

"You're not even going to tell her goodbye?"

I freeze, grimacing as I turn back and see Silas standing there, pants slung low on his hips and his hair a mess.

What gave me away? Was it the door?

"I gotta say," he continues, striding out after me, uncaring of his bare feet on the cold earth. "I thought you had more guts than that."

"Mind yourself, pup," I retort. "This is none of your business."

"I think you'll find that breaking Evie's heart is very much a pack issue."

His hand lands on the handlebars, and I hiss. A blade is in my hand before he can blink, pressing hard against his forefinger.

"Move it or lose it."

He doesn't budge, so I follow through on the warning.

"What the fuck?!" He finally removes his hand, and I glare at the smear of blood left behind.

Reaching back, I grab a rag from my bag and throw it at him. “Clean it up.”

“Are you staying?” he demands, stepping in front of my bike, clasping his bleeding hand firmly in the rag as he attempts to staunch the flow.

He was supposed to use it to clean my bike. Not as a bandage.

“I’ll be back.” That’s all I can promise.

“Draven.”

“For once in your life, shut the fuck up and get out of my way.”

I don’t mean to snap. Yelling is ineffective and better suited to weaker men who can’t funnel their anger into something more productive, like torture.

But the Beta isn’t cowed. “No. If you’re doing this, you can explain to Evie why you’re leaving her behind to chase after her pathetic wretch of a sister.”

“I’m owed justice, and I’ll be damned if I allow Cain to steal it from me.”

“Evie needs you more than you need to go chasing after Callie.”

I snarl at him. “You have no idea what you’re asking me to give up.”

The lycan meets my stare levelly. “I’m asking you to choose a future with the pack. You promised us no more going lone wolf. You promised her.”

I open my mouth to respond, but before I can get any more words out, his eyes snap to the garage behind us.

“What’s going on?”

Her voice cuts through the argument like a silken blade, and my hands clench on the hard rubber of my handlebars.

“Nothing,” Silas lies, shocking me. “Draven’s just getting bitchy about his scratched bike again, that’s all.”

I don’t turn around. I can’t face her.

I’m not accustomed to feeling guilty, but the emotion is unmistakable. Evie doesn’t comment on it, but I presume that’s because her focus is on the scent of her beta’s blood that’s colouring the air.

“You’re bleeding.” The accusation in her tone is unmistakable.

The lycan offers her an easy, charming smile and finally gets out of my way. “It’s hardly the worst punishment he’s doled out for touching his precious bike. Want to kiss it better?”

Evie frowns at the two of us, but says nothing. Those luminous doll-blue eyes see too much as she takes in my bike.

She's not stupid, but she doesn't mention it as she turns around.

"I'll fix you up in the kitchen," she murmurs.

That's it? No objection? Not even a goodbye?

"I'm going to find Callie," I tell her. "And I'm going to put a stake through her heart."

She freezes, but her back is to me so I can't read her face.

The thrall bond trills a soft note of resignation before it falls silent in my chest.

Then she takes her first step away, retreating into the house.

I follow her before I even notice my feet moving.

"That's it?" I demand. "Not going to fight to protect your sister?"

She doesn't answer, and I reach out, snagging her arm to stop her.

"If this is what you're determined to do, I won't stop you." Her voice is calm. Too calm. "You know the risks, and you also know that we need you here. I can't tell you anything you don't already know, and I'm not your keeper to demand that you stay."

The corners of my mouth turn up in a grin.

"Trying to use reverse psychology on me, doll?"

She huffs out an irate sigh and tugs her arm from my grip. "Don't you have somewhere to be off to?"

I do, don't I?

But once again, Evie is breaking down the best laid plans with her mere presence.

"Make me want to stay."

That turns her glare frosty. "I'm not sleeping with you to dissuade you of your half-baked notions of vengeance."

"No?"

"No." She turns to Silas, who's standing behind me, and grabs him, pulling him over to stand at the counter.

When he's under the light, she carefully peels back the blood-soaked rag and rolls her eyes before scoring her own wrist and offering it to him wordlessly.

If the lycan finds it strange to drink from her vein, he doesn't show it. My own fangs ache at the scent of her elder blood, and I can't help drawing closer.

Silas releases her and turns to the sink to clean his completely regenerated finger. Before Evie can raise her still-bleeding wound to her mouth to seal it, I grab her wrist and bring it to my own lips.

I give her plenty of time to pull away as I slowly sink my fangs into her veins. My venom trickles into her bloodstream before I pull back and lick closed the cut, but she's too old to fall for such a trick.

"Decide, one way or another," she demands.

"My son died horribly," I tell her, the ice I usually keep shored up around the memories cracking, then splitting under the weight of her stare. "I tried so hard to resist, but she played with him before she dropped his bleeding body into my cell. I killed my wife. I thought it was kinder, but she'd been a prisoner for days by then. I'm not sure I spared her much. Then there was my brother, his wife, my nieces. Even my mother."

Sometimes I'm surprised Callie didn't dig up my father's long-dead body to taunt me with that as well. The lucky bastard had died three years prior to my ill-fated mission to free Frost.

Evie doesn't cry, but the thrall bond pulses with her pity.

I don't want it.

The ice wall that was holding my emotions back shatters like glass, and the fragments tear into my insides with every ragged inhale.

"I would've given anything to walk into the sun in those early years," I confess. "Would've sold my soul if it meant being reunited with Nikolai and Ivica. They wouldn't let me. Now you want me to let those murderers roam free?"

My fingers scrub up my face to fist in my hair, and I yank on it. Evie grabs my wrists, ending the small torment as quickly as it's begun.

"Cain will die," she vows. "You know as much. And Callie..."

"You'd have me spare her."

"I'd have you focus on the bigger issue," she counters. "We need a functional Gideon and a safe refuge more than we need her dead. My sister no longer has any part to play in all of this. It would be prudent to wait until the threat is over and the dust has settled to hunt her down."

"She could be anywhere by then."

"And you'll have all the time in the world without my sire breathing down your neck."

Her words are softly spoken and heavy with rationality. Not a refusal. Just a request for patience.

I've been patient for years, I silently object. Decades spent pretending to be a sleeper agent in Frost's ranks, then longer trying to convince Cain to unearth the woman before me.

Evie's understanding expression makes me want to storm out of here in fury, but my feet are still rooted to the floor.

"I've waited long enough," I hiss.

"Then what's a few more months?"

Nothing in the grand scheme of things.

A hand clasps my shoulder, reminding me too late that Silas never left. I whirl, expecting some joke or sassy remark, but his face is solemn.

"When the time comes, I'll be right there with you."

"We all will," Evie adds. "That's what pack does."

I'm mentally scrambling, trying to figure out what to do in this situation.

"I'm going to unpack," I announce stiffly.

Without thinking, I chuck my bike's keys at the lycan and head for the stairs. "Not one scratch." I call over my shoulder.

It's not until I close the door to my room and fall against it that I realise I've just given the damned prankster the keys to my bike. Even then, with most of my attention consumed on trying to shove all of these pesky feelings back into their icy cages, I don't treat the thought with the amount of concern it should really warrant.

That's when the yelling starts.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



GIDEON

THUMP-THUMP. MY THROAT IS ON FIRE. EVERY BREATH BURNS, AND I take a deep inhale to soothe the rawness. It doesn't work. Nothing does. *Thump-thump.* That damned drumming is making everything worse. A comforting scent winds around me, promising salvation. Groaning against his skin, I nuzzle deep into the source.

Thump-thump-thump-thump-thump. I feel the pulse in my fangs, and my jaw clenches.

Relief—pure and sweet—floods my throat with the taste of home. I swallow eagerly, drawing as hard as I can. My hunger, already excruciating, becomes near-painful as my prey struggles and fights to be free beneath me. Each movement only encourages me to dig my teeth in deeper, pinning him. I swallow, relishing the feeling of finally being satisfied, then bite down again.

Two pairs of hands band around my arms and wrench me away. Blood arcs into the room—wasted. My eyesight has narrowed to pinpricks, my hearing is focused solely on the sluggish heartbeat that provides nourishment.

Someone splashes water over my face, and the liquid drips into my mouth, diluting the iron taste and the mouthwatering scent.

My vision slowly turns scarlet, then I blink and it's back to normal.

I wish it wasn't.

My omega is splayed across the floor like a rag doll. His neck has been savaged so badly that the white of his spine is visible. Blood is everywhere, and so are chunks of... him.

Evelyn is kneeling by his side, pressing her wrist to his face as she strokes his forehead and tries to get him to drink her healing blood. She, in turn, is drinking heavily from the wrist of a stunned Silas.

Every muscle in my body stiffens, and I glance around at the astonished, angry faces around me.

Vane and Frost are holding me back, and Draven is nowhere to be found.

"How the fuck did this happen?" Frost demands. "Silas, you were supposed to be watching Gideon's door!"

The beta has gone ashen with horror. His eyes are glued to where Finn's flesh is slowly knitting itself back together, and he shakes his head dumbly.

Evelyn pulls away from her thrall, mouth painted red with blood, as she continues to focus on Finn.

"We had a situation with Draven."

"Situation?" Vane growls.

"He was leaving to go after Callie," she says, brushing him off. "Silas was trying to stop him. By the time we returned from sorting that mess out, Gideon had left his room."

"Of course he left his room! What newly turned vampire or ghoul wakes up without immediately seeking out food?!" Frost growls, reaching forward to swipe his fingers across my fangs before sticking the digits into his own mouth. "No venom, thank fuck. We could've been turning Finn into the world's second tribrid by now."

The rest of his rant becomes static in my ears as I watch Evie pull back her wrist and reopen the healing wound there. To my shame, my fangs ache at the scent of her powerful blood, and I claw at Vane's hold, hating myself even though I'm powerless to stop.

How could I do this? How could I brutalise the man I love this way, and then still be hungry for her as well?

Shame and self loathing burn my lungs with every undeserved breath, and my next attack isn't the two holding me.

I need an outlet, but I can't see any way to dull the emotional pain except with the physical. I lean forwards with my toxic claws, intending to rake them into my chest—

"You selfish prick!" Vane hurls me against a wall and takes both my hands in one of his. "You want to help Finn? Give Evie some more blood to work with. Don't set about making her heal you on top of everything else."

"Don't bother healing me," I retort. "I deserve to feel every second of it!"

"You need to man up and—"

"ENOUGH!"

I've never heard Evie yell like this before. Her voice is shrill and her face wild as she stares the whole pack down. The lycan in me surges to the forefront, producing a soft, rumbling apology intended to soothe a stressed omega.

Evie doesn't react—of course she doesn't—but Finn's body slouches the slightest increment, and his Adam's apple bobs as he swallows. Another mouthful later, and the fibres of muscle begin to heal over.

So I'm good for that, at least. Small comfort.

"Take Gideon to his room and get him cleaned up," Evie continues, calmer now. "All of this blood will only make him worse. Silas." The shifter stiffens, waiting to be scolded, but her tone is gentle as she continues. "Help me do the same for Finn. We'll clean the room once he's settled in bed." Her eyes pin me to the spot. "This is not the disaster you think it is. Look. He's healing well, and some slip ups are to be expected." She pauses and looks at Frost. "You need to teach Gid about the different venoms tonight. No waiting. I'm willing to bet his alpha instincts are what protected Finn this time, but the rest of us might not be so lucky if it happens again."

There's a pause where everyone barely breathes, and she snaps her fingers. "What are you all waiting for?"

The pack springs into action like puppets waiting for her command. I don't fight Frost and Vane as they frog march me down the hall and back to my own room, shoving me into the shower stall.

My hands mechanically go through the motions of pulling off my soaked and stained boxers and washing my body with my usual brand of almost-scentless soap. Frost disappears, mumbling something about cleaning Finn's room before he wakes up, leaving me alone with my beta.

"You can't keep doing this," Vane growls.

I look up, morosely. "I didn't even know I was doing it."

"Not slipping up to bloodlust," he retorts, thrusting a hand through his hair. "You're going to do that occasionally for the next few weeks. We all know that. I mean hating yourself every time something goes the slightest bit wrong."

I know as much. The therapist I talked to earlier already gently explained that my refusal to see any kind of good in myself is just as harmful to my loved ones as my occasional fuck ups.

But I don't know any other way to be. "What am I supposed to do? Just apologise and move on? I tore his throat out and *ate* it, Vane!"

"I did the same thing to Frost when I was first turned," he replies. "Getting forgiveness from him was a lot easier than giving it to myself."

I wave a hand. "That wasn't the same thing."

“How? Because I’m not fucking him? I doubt it.”

“I’ve already hurt Finn too much! And I keep doing it!”

“My point,” he continues, “Is that I understand what it’s like to be at the mercy of multiple natures. This transition period won’t last forever. You need to accept that while it happens, there will be accidents. Use that guilt you’re feeling to motivate you to do better next time.”

I don’t want there to be more accidents.

I tip my face up to the spray and turn the temperature down ten degrees. The icy water sluices across my eyelids and down my body in a punishing cascade, but it does nothing to banish the memory of Finn splayed out on the carpet.

A long while later, when Vane’s grumpy stare becomes too much for me to ignore, I go through the motions of getting dressed and preparing for the day. I spend the entire trip down the stairs praying not to run into anyone, and for once, Fate smiles on me. Finn’s and Evie’s voices are echoing from the office, and Silas is standing guard at the door, staring sullenly at the floor.

I know I owe Finn a ton of grovelling, but I’ll save my lame apologies for tonight. Right now, the whole event is too raw. Hell, my hands are still shaking as I lace up my boots.

Frost is waiting for us at the end of what used to be Main Street, an area currently coated with the distastefully bland scent of animal blood. At his feet, a magnificent buck is heaving out its final shallow breaths, fogging the air in front of its face. Blood pools rapidly beneath it from a wound in its neck, staining its soft fur brown.

“Your hunger is subtler than the thirst,” Frost begins. “Ghouls can go months between feedings, unlike vampires, who have to feed more regularly. You need to pay closer attention to the hunger and learn how long your body can go without feeding, otherwise it will catch you off guard.”

That’s something I *can* do. My shoulders slump in relief. Years of tracking shifts and sticking to schedules to avoid falling into hyperfocus have inadvertently prepared me for that part of being a ghoul.

Still, that doesn’t explain the deer...

If I was shifted, I’d be taking the kill in a heartbeat. But I’m not, and my new vampire side is turning its nose up at the weak animal blood.

“You’re not going to enjoy this,” Frost warns. “Bite the deer.”

The corners of my mouth wrinkle in disgust, but I'm not stupid enough to argue. It's either the deer now, or someone I care about later. Dropping to one knee beside the animal makes the scent of it harder to ignore, and that sickening hunger from earlier springs up with a vengeance.

Apparently, my ghoulish side isn't as much of a picky eater as the others. It may not prefer animals, but it won't turn down a free meal.

I sink my mouth into the warm flesh, feeling my fangs descend—

Then I'm hauled back before I can do anything. I snarl at Vane, but it's easier to clear my head when the prey is an animal.

"What does your mouth taste like?" Frost demands.

What kind of question is that? "Blood?"

"Beyond that. Lick your fangs."

I do as he asks and grimace at the sharp, sweet, acidic taste. A hundred times stronger than lemonade.

"That's your venom. That's what will turn anyone you bite into a ghoul." Frost nods at Vane, and I'm released. "We're going to practise bringing it forth over and over, and then keeping it back. We'll keep working until you can do both in your sleep. After that, we'll move onto vampire venom, until you learn the difference between the two."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



EVELYN

“YOU’RE COPING REMARKABLY WELL, ALL THINGS CONSIDERED,” I remark, several hours after Finn wakes.

We’ve been sheltering in the office since he woke, trying to busy ourselves by researching dead languages. Currently, we’re taking a break; he’s nursing a warm mug of coffee, and I’m sipping slowly at a glass of Silas’s blood as I try my best to examine the omega covertly.

Finn’s physical wounds were gone by the time he remembered what happened. I’m not so sure about the emotional ones.

The omega shoots me a sad half-smile. “I’m not unused to having my throat torn out by alphas.”

Silas’s low curse sounds from outside of the door, letting both of us know he’s listening, but Finn ignores him and continues.

“Being born an omega in one of Cain’s packs is almost worse than a death sentence. I was a teenager when I presented, and our pack alpha already had two others. Still, I was something different. A shiny new toy.”

Between us, a dull memory of a hurt, of fear, echoes down our bond.

“Finn?”

“In a healthy pack, a new omega is trained, selects their pack, and goes out into the world to stake claim to a new territory. It creates strong bonds of family between packs. My alpha had no interest in creating packs that weren’t under his control, so he had little use for the ‘leftovers’ beyond fucking us to contain his rages.”

A teenager. Jesus.

“He was careful with me until I stopped ageing. Couldn’t damage me in any way that was irreparable. After that, he didn’t care how he hurt us. We’d heal.”

“You got out.”

He takes his glasses off, cleaning both lenses with the hem of his shirt. “I was always good with computers. I’d been using my hacking to disable the pack’s enemies since I was young. Cutting off their assets. Stealing from them to fund our pack. Then my alpha would lead an attack when they were so impoverished that they were barely a threat. Until... I refused.”

“Refused?”

“The pack he wanted me to steal from was one that my parents had fled to after it was clear I couldn’t be saved.”

“They left you?” *Their own son?*

“It was that or die,” Finn shrugs. “I didn’t blame them. Still don’t. Anyway, Alpha beat me until I submitted and did what he wanted. After that, I knew I couldn’t keep it up. I knew when he was planning to attack that pack, so I stole the spare key to my room while no one was looking. I knew the majority of the betas and alphas would be out fighting, and I took the chance to run. Made it three weeks before I crashed into Gideon’s pack.”

His expression softens slightly at the mention of his alpha’s name.

“Just because you suffered in the past, doesn’t mean you can’t be affected by what happened.”

Finn shrugs. “I never said I wasn’t. But I find comfort in knowing I have survived worse. Gid didn’t start feeding on me because he was trying to hurt me; he did it because he’s newly turned with no way to control his instincts. The intent matters.”

“Still, you should demand an apology.”

Finn laughs, glancing back at the screen. “You think I’ll need to demand anything? He’s going to look so pathetic when he trudges back in here, and the first thing he’ll do when we’re alone is apologise. He’ll do it until his tongue turns blue if I let him.”

True. Gideon is only too happy to take the blame for his mistakes. That’s not their issue.

The front door opens, and several heavy sets of footsteps trudge inside. Finn doesn’t even stiffen as we listen to the four of them head upstairs. Showers switch on. Drawers open and close. The more ambient noise that surrounds us, the more relaxed he seems to become. I feel it too, to a lesser extent.

There’s an infectious peace to knowing you’re surrounded by your people. By pack.

So when Gideon appears in the doorway, flanked by Frost, the two of us are relaxed and ready for them.

The alpha looks over his shoulder at his companion and hesitates. “Evie should be able to protect him from me.”

Frost nods at the unspoken request for privacy and retreats, closing the door behind him.

It's incredible how awkward Gideon looks, and for the first time, I realise why Finn isn't afraid.

It's so clear who holds the power here, and it isn't the alpha.

All of the self assurance Gid normally holds himself with is absent as he leans against the closed door and stares down at us. He's keeping as much distance from Finn as possible, clutching a blood bag in one hand like a lifeline.

He looks *tired*—not surprising, since they've been out there all night working on his ghoulish venom—and his exhaustion laces his movements.

"You look... better," he finally says.

"I'm fine, Gid." Finn doesn't expect to be believed, and exasperation colours his words.

"Good. That's good." Gid pauses, and his shoulders slump. "I need to apologise."

"I know it was an accident," Finn replies. "You were relying on Silas to keep it from happening. Draven distracted him, and things just didn't work out like they should."

Gideon's face darkens. "You're being far too lenient with me."

"Would you rather I tore into you? Yelled?" Finn shrugs. "How was therapy?"

The horror on Gideon's face would've made me laugh if it wasn't so damn sad.

"Like pulling teeth," he finally answers. "I have another appointment today." He pauses. "She's... not as bad as I thought she would be."

From his tone, it's clear he expected his therapist to be an axe-wielding monster with three heads and laser beams for eyes.

"You get along with her? This won't work if you don't trust each other."

Gideon nods. "I know. She stared me down for the first fifteen minutes of the session. We're good."

Finn smirks, then abandons his mug in favour of standing.

"Hug?" he asks.

You'd have to be deaf to miss the glaring vulnerability in his tone. Gideon freezes in place, clearly torn. His eyes meet mine, and I see the request there.

"I've got you," I promise.

It isn't until they embrace that I remember Finn is the taller of the two. The omega is lean and leggy, giving him a height advantage of at least six

inches, if not more. It helps, because Gideon's face isn't anywhere near his neck when they embrace.

It's a long minute before they pull apart, and I can't help checking on both of them through the bond. It's amazing how the contact helps Finn, soothing any remaining jagged edges from his agitation. Gideon in turn, is holding his breath, trying not to move. Mostly because he doesn't trust himself, but also because he dreads the moment Finn will pull away.

They're both reluctant to let go, and it makes me smile.

"I wanted to talk to you," Finn says, pulling the alpha towards the sofa that's been crushed into one corner to make room for all the equipment in here.

"About?"

"The full moon." Finn glances at me. "And our agreement."

Gideon's eyes widen. "It's more than two weeks away."

"Exactly. Before it happens, I want us to fuck."

His crude words fire something of the old Gideon back up. A light dances in his eyes, one that's heated, excited, and commanding all at once. "You don't get to make that decision alone, omega."

"It's doubly important that Evie's there with us now," Finn adds, turning to me as he speaks. "Are you still okay with that?"

I nod. "Of course." I'm actually relieved. If I'm there and Gideon loses control, there are two of us to keep him from hurting anyone.

"Whatever happens," Finn continues. "We need to know, so that when we shift..."

"Evelyn won't be there then," Gideon objects. "And Silas and Vane might not be able to keep you safe. It's better if I spend this moon chained in my room."

Finn shakes his head. "You haven't even asked her if she'd consider it."

Gideon turns his incredulous eyes on me. "You wouldn't. We'd be shifted. You remember what that looks like, right? We're not pretty to look at. And all four of us would be on you like beasts."

All four of my lycans fucking me?

"Non-stop for hours until the sun rises," Finn confirms.

If his smirk is anything to go by, he's accurately guessed the direction of my thoughts.

That is *not* the deterrent the alpha believes it is. My lower half tightens, and I have to swallow the gasp that threatens to escape.

I know I've failed to conceal my reaction when his nostrils flare and he smashes the blood bag into his mouth like a lifeline. His eyes are bulging out of his skull.

"I don't *hate* the idea," I admit, quietly. "*If* it would be safe."

I can't shake the mental image of the lycans in the compound, chained and mindless under the full moon. They'd savage anything, and *not* in a sexy way.

The pack has reassured me that they're nothing like that. Still, I've never seen any evidence to the contrary—they locked me in a cabin last time this was an issue.

"You wouldn't be harmed," Finn says, and his certainty rings between us. "You might not be able to walk straight afterwards, but that's another matter."

I bite my lip. "I'll consider it. We'll see how everything else goes."

There's still a lot to get through between now and then. Namely, making sure Gideon is capable of sex in human form without ripping his partner's throat out.

It was hard enough to tamp down my thirst during my first time as a vampire, and I only had the thirst to worry about. When the mind is so focused on sensation, it gives instinct more of a chance to break through.

As long as Gideon has learned to control his venom, he shouldn't be able to drain Finn. But if he starts feeling hungry at the same time...

I have no choice but to trust that Frost knows what he's doing. He would say something if he felt Finn was in danger.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



EVELYN

THE NEXT WEEK IS A BLUR. FINN AND I FINALLY DECIPHER ONE OF THE early languages from the book, but translating it is slow going. Frost and Gideon are out all night every night. Draven often accompanies the two of them, or takes a patrol with Vane. All four of them are trying to give me space to figure this witchcraft stuff out, but it isn't helping much.

Silas has become our shadow, more protective than ever after his earlier mistake. He's good company, if incredibly distracting.

More than one research session has devolved into a round of frantic lovemaking because of his boredom. Not that I'll ever complain about being sandwiched between the beta and the omega, listening to Silas's dirty words.

It's just after one such session, when we're all piled on the floor in the living room, that the front door slams open with a boom. Silas jumps up, ready to defend us, then, just as swiftly, dives for a cushion to cover himself.

"I told you they'd be there." Mia's voice shatters the peaceful silence. "Silas! Oh, God. I'm scarred for life."

"Then stop *looking!*" Silas retorts.

"Is it too much to ask for you to put some *clothes* on? I never want to see your pasty ass again!"

Morwen's crazy grin grows even brighter as she notices Finn and I are still on the floor. The omega's hands have gone down to cover himself, and I just groan and let my head fall back.

"Give us five minutes?" I propose. "I'm glad you're both safe."

Mia nods, then ducks back out of the door, mumbling under her breath about 'damn nudists' and 'inconsiderate siblings.'

Once they're gone, the three of us look at each other, then burst out laughing.

"I thought lycans were fine with nudity," I giggle.

"Yup. But that doesn't mean anyone wants to walk in on their sibling enjoying their post-orgasmic glow," Finn retorts.

When Mia and Morwen return, the rest of the pack is with them. Thankfully, by then Finn, Silas, and I have all managed to find our clothes

and are sitting around the kitchen island. Morwen and Mia take two of the remaining stools, but the rest of my men seem too wired to sit. Draven takes his usual place, leaning against a wall with a good view of all the exits, while Vane takes a spot resting against the counter, and flicks on the coffee machine.

Frost and Gideon take a position at the head of the island, both of them wearing matching expressions of concern.

"We're all here," Gideon growls. "Now, tell us what you learned from the Greek witches."

"You found them?" I breathe.

Mia grimaces. "Found is *one* word for it..."

"They're fucking nutters," Morwen finishes for her. "Tried sacrificing us. And they would've gotten away with it too, if we hadn't managed to sow a bit of discord amongst them."

"We might have caused a coven civil war," Mia admits, looking up at the two alphas with guilt-flushed cheeks. "In our defence, it was either that or be vivisected. Apparently, lycan guts are great for haruspicy."

Vane growls at Morwen. "You put her in danger?"

"Haru-what?" Silas frowns.

"Haruspicy," Finn helpfully interjects. "The practice of divination through studying entrails."

Eugh.

"One of their other captives—a human—escaped with us," Mia says. "She was very grateful to be freed, and she told us what she'd picked up from them."

"We also managed to get some idea of how the magic works by studying the coven who captured us. We wrote down what we could."

She pulls a handful of folded papers from her pocket. They're creased and full to the margins with her scratchy handwriting.

"We could go back," Vane suggests, half-heartedly. "See if they'll speak to Evie."

Morwen coughs. "Unlikely. They *really* didn't like outsiders."

I glance up from her notes. "Where did you even find them?"

"An 'uninhabited' island west of Kasos," Morwen says. "The locals were so afraid of the place they wouldn't even drop us off. We had to swim, and it was the eeriest fucking slice of paradise I've ever been to."

“They had these bone charms hanging off every cliff.” Mia tugs the papers apart and searches until she finds a squiggled diagram. “There were so many of them, we thought they must be some kind of protective charm.”

She pushes the image towards me, and I frown at it.

It’s almost an eye, with the pupil formed from what looks like a tangled messy ball of bones in the centre.

“Are those...” Vane trails off, clearly unwilling to finish.

“Not all human!” Mia claps gleefully. “Although, there’s a good chance the femurs around the frame probably were.”

“This is a far cry from your recipes for curing genital warts,” Finn mutters, glancing at me uneasily.

“It’s entirely possible that one group of witches tried to survive by blending and another did the opposite,” Silas suggests. “Blending obviously didn’t save the others, but maybe forming a creepy, potentially cannibalistic, cult on a mysterious island was more successful.”

I grimace, shuffling the papers around, scanning them.

“It’s like two totally different systems,” I mumble, turning to Silas. “Would you get me the grimoire?”

There has to be something that these two groups of witches share.

What if there isn’t?

What if there are different types of witches with different magical abilities? Panic grips my throat and squeezes as I consider that whatever kind of witch I am isn’t capable of using the magic needed to kill Cain.

“Evie, breathe,” Finn reminds me gently, as Silas returns and the grimoire thuds onto the island with a dull thump.

Unbuckling the belts and moving aside the weighty cover is oddly familiar to me now. It’s gotten thicker over the last few days, because I’ve been adding pages of my own translations in. I search the diagrams, comparing notes as the table devolves into separate conversations.

Morwen holds her own against Vane as he interrogates her over Mia’s welfare, and the alphas are busy ensuring the two of them weren’t followed.

“How did you find us in the first place?” Frost demands. “We told no one where we were going.”

I glance up just in time to catch Mia rolling her eyes. “Yes, because someone like Gideon is sooo hard to find.”

Gideon freezes. “What do you mean?”

“You’re an alpha.” When none of us immediately get it, Mia sighs. “What’s the first thing an alpha does when threatened?”

Morwen grins. “Returns to familiar territory.”

“And I *do* happen to remember the place where I was born and raised. Even if you did do everything possible to wipe it off the map after you broke the pack apart and fucked off into the sunset with my dunderheaded brothers.”

“That is *not* what happened,” Gideon growls.

“Mia, drop it,” Vane advises.

She purses her lips, and for a second I wonder if she’s going to disobey.

“Look,” Finn says, distracting everyone as he picks up one of our translations and lays it beside Morwen’s notes. “These two are similar. Evie’s grimoire uses palm fronds, but it’s the same shape.”

The tension bleeds away, and everyone crowds the omega, trying to see what he’s talking about.

“Is that Phoenician?” Morwen wolf-whistles. “It’s been a *long* time since I had to read that.”

“Tell me about it,” I groan. “Immy was always better with languages.”

“What happened to her?” Mia pipes up. “Did she run off?”

“More like stabbed us in the back, again.” Gideon’s jaw clenches. “She stole some of Evie’s blood and tried to turn herself into a hybrid ghoul to impress her sire.”

Morwen sighs and looks heavenward. “We should’ve offed the leech when we had the chance. Once an asskisser, always an asskisser.”

“I thought she was reformed,” I protest, and it sounds weak to my own ears. “Believe me, I regret it now.”

My mistake is directly responsible for Gideon’s transition.

“Bella is dead by Cain’s hand,” I add. “And Callie is on the run. She stole me—either as self-preservation or a bargaining chip—then took off.”

“Are you honestly surprised she took off the second it looked like she was in danger?” Morwen asks. “Callie has only ever cared about one person: Callie.”

“She won’t last long,” Finn mumbles. “There are sightings of her all over the western side of the continent.”

“Laying a false trail,” Morwen says, and I nod my agreement. “She’s smart enough that she’ll spread ‘sightings’ everywhere for a few months and leave Cain chasing them all down.”

“Maybe we’ll get lucky and he’ll waste his time looking for her,” Frost suggests. “He has no way of knowing she doesn’t still have Eve.”

“It’ll become pretty obvious fast,” Vane says. “Especially if she’s flashing herself at every camera on the Pacific coast and there’s no Evie.”

I turn my attention back to the diagrams, drowning them out.

There’s no denying they’re the same shape, and that gives me hope this wasn’t all a bust. Unfortunately, Morwen didn’t know what the purpose of the contraption was, and my book is vague.

“To promote clear sight? Eyesight? Insight? Some kind of vision? Is this something to do with all the meditations?”

“They were always breathing in incense and going into freaky trances,” Mia pipes up. “But I’m like sixty-percent sure that was just to get high.”

“Great,” Finn mutters. “Drug-addled cannibal witches. You don’t think they’re coming for us too, now, do you? Somehow, they sound creepier than Cain.”

Thus begins another argument about whether witches can possibly be worse than Cain.

My head falls into my hands, and I groan under my breath.

Finn draws me in for a sympathetic hug. “Come on. It’s getting light outside. We can look at all of this in the morning.”

“All right,” I mumble, sparing the pile of papers one last glance. “Help me tidy this lot away.”

The others, sensing that no more will be achieved today, drift over to the living area, leaving Vane and me to sort through the papers.

“There,” he remarks, lifting the grimoire’s cover and plopping it gently on top of the pile where it lands with a dull thump. “Not sure why they had to find such an ugly cover for a book, but I suppose we should be grateful it’s not made of human skin or something.”

“I’m glad my ancestors weren’t into human sacrifice,” I agree. “Although, they might’ve survived if they had been.”

Vane shrugs. “Who knows, but at least this is a solid lead. If one coven has survived Cain, then there could be others. We can follow up some of Samuel’s other leads when we’ve finished translating the grimoire and Gideon is comfortable travelling.”

I nod and hum noncommittally under my breath, silently wondering if we’re better off not investigating them, given Morwen and Mia’s experience.

“I’ll try making one of these charms next,” I decide. “In the morning. If they’re still using them, then they have to be good for something, right?”

Vane shrugs. “I don’t know, princess.”

He takes my hand and leads me towards the fire where Mia is currently doing a complete reenactment of their capture, much to Morwen’s amusement. There aren’t enough seats, so he takes the lone remaining one and pulls me onto his lap.

Then, to my delight, he starts threading his hands through my hair, playing with the strands in a soothing way until I melt against him. Eventually, his hands wind up massaging my scalp, easing tension I didn’t know I had with a calm, methodical gentleness.

I’m so blissed out that I barely hear Silas announcing he’ll give up his room to the new members of our party. He heads up the stairs, and Morwen and Mia follow closely behind. When Vane’s movements trail to a stop, I mourn the loss of the feeling.

“Thank you,” I mumble, half asleep.

“Sleep with me tonight?” he requests. “Finn’s been hogging you.”

“I resent that accusation,” Finn calls from the other side of the coffee table. “It’s not my fault none of you seized the opportunity.”

It’s not the whole truth. As much as I love cuddling the omega and his large en suite tub, I’ve been favouring his room because when I do, it helps Gideon relax. Neither of them wants a repeat of the night when he sleep-attacked Finn. Although Silas, Frost, and Vane are all taking turns to guard Gideon’s door, and there have been no more incidents, the memory lingers.

“Silas will keep you too busy to miss me,” I promise the omega. “After all, he’s lost his room.”

Finn’s grin glows in the low firelight. “This will be so much fun.”

Vane’s chest rumbles with something that sounds suspiciously like ‘not as much as I will,’ and my cheeks warm.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



EVELYN

THE ENTIRE HOUSE STINKS.

It's so bad that the pack has evacuated. I can't even blame them. The mess in the saucepan is...

Well, I've smelled more appealing ghouls.

After days of study, meditation, and translations, I finally gave in and attempted to make something from the grimoire. I picked the simplest recipe. An aphrodisiac. According to my instructions, it should make whoever takes it so horny that they'll fuck for seven full days without breaks. Supposedly, in mortals, it induces so much lust that they forget about eating and drinking. With higher doses, they've even been known to expire from dehydration.

Why on *earth* anyone would want to create such a thing is still a mystery to me, and I can't help but ponder how the witch would've discovered such a thing in the first place. The mystery of it entertains me as I stir my third attempt.

At least this one looks drinkable. The first one fizzled like acid, and the second evaporated completely midway through simmering—leaving a foul-smelling residue in the bottom.

That we've managed to find the right ingredients is a testament to the luxuries of modern living. Want Saffron? Once upon a time it was worth more than its weight in gold. Now, it's conveniently stored in tiny glass pots. Peppercorns, a spice once used to pay taxes and ransoms, now come in ready to use grinders, as well as pre-ground, and we have *both*.

The hardest things to find were a cat's milk teeth and a slice of dried sheep's spleen. Finn managed to locate both using the internet, and have them couriered to the local town the next day.

"Unbelievable," I mutter.

"That's one way to describe the smell," Silas agrees.

I whirl to find him standing in the doorway with his shirt raised over his nose.

"It's not ready yet." I tut, giving the rapidly bubbling grey gloop a half-hearted stir with the somewhat melted spatula handle.

I would've used the spatula the correct way up, but unfortunately potion-attempt-number-one dissolved it.

"I know," he says. "I was just looking for that acid one you made earlier..."

My eyes narrow, suspiciously. "Why?"

It's been over three days since his last prank, and I have a sneaking suspicion I know exactly what Silas has planned for the acidic mix.

"Imagine how much chaos it would cause if it found its way into Draven's clothes," Silas grins, confirming my fears. "Come on, Evie. I need you to be my partner in crime. Bonnie to my Clyde."

I raise an eyebrow. "You realise I have no idea who those people are?"

"I'll explain later. Now... where'd you put the freaky acid of mass destruction?"

I sigh. "I can't help you."

The puppy dog eyes and the pout he levels at me are unfair.

"It melted through the pan, and then through the floor," I admit, abandoning the saucepan and approaching the small duffle bag that's sitting innocuously on the tiles below the sink.

When I kick the bag away, revealing the still-smouldering edges of the pan-shaped hole, Silas breaks down into laughter.

"Oh, don't make me breathe this hard," he complains. "Eugh, this room stinks, but no wonder—"

"I'm trying!" I snap, tension seeping into my muscles as I head to the window and shove it open, hopefully allowing some of the reek to dissipate. "It's my first potion. There are bound to be some hiccups. I bet your first shifts weren't pretty either!"

His hands fall on my rigid shoulders a second later, and he forces me to turn before pulling me into a hug. It takes all of three seconds for me to soften against him, soaking up the warmth of his chest.

"I wasn't criticising, beautiful," he mumbles against my cheek. "You're absolutely right. No one expects you to be a natural at something you've never done before. It'd be nice..." I lean back and glare, but he's still grinning. "But we're not stupid. You're reading a book that's hundreds of years—Wait. Is that smoke?"

"Fuck!"

I shove out of his arms and turn to confront the flaming mess that is the stove. My horrid creation is spitting oily flames across the kitchen. Already

the tea towel has caught light. As I watch, frozen with shock, another miniature fireball leaps from the stupid pan and lands directly onto the pages of the grimoire beside the stove.

“Silas the *book!*”

I snatch the flaming pages away from the inferno as Silas grabs a baking sheet and slams it over the pan.

I drop the book to the floor and stamp on the flames with my slippers, trying to put them out.

Oh God. Why aren't they going out?

By the time I've managed to stop the blaze, they're charred and blackened.

“No. No, no, no, no.” I drop to my knees beside the book and sift through the crumbling pages, hoping at least some of them are legible.

It's no use. The ancient paper was fragile to begin with. Only the two leather covers are unharmed—in fact, they're pristine—as if the fire couldn't touch them.

But two covers are no use when the pages which held all of the information—and our translations—are charred beyond belief.

I stare blankly at the ruined mass as my heartbeat thumps hollowly in my chest.

“Shit,” Silas curses, having finally put out the rest of the fires caused by my disastrous potion. “Evie.”

The door slams open and Draven drags me up from the floor.

“Are you hurt?” he demands.

“Eve!” Frost's yell reaches my ears a second before he bursts through the door, Gideon and Vane on his heels.

Finn's right behind them. “What happened?”

“We felt you through the bond, and—” Gideon cuts off mid-sentence, shock freezing him in place.

The whole pack takes in the ruined stove, the smoke, and me standing over the charred remains of the one thing that was supposed to save us with wide disbelieving stares.

“Is that...?” Frost hesitates.

“The grimoire,” Silas confirms dully, stealing me from Draven and crushing me tightly against his chest.

“Oh Evie.” Finn finds my other side and pulls the two of us into a hug. “This is just a setback, I promise. We still have copies of Morwen's notes.”

The notes which are little more than observations based on a coven of feral witches whose sole purpose in life was getting high? My breath hitches.

Damn it. I won't cry over a burnt book. Tears aren't going to make this

A stronger pair of arms snatches me from between Finn and Silas, and before I know it, I'm squished against Vane's chest.

"You cry if you want to, princess." His voice is rough, but gentle.

And because it's him, my big strong beta who will always catch me, his words are the permission my body has been waiting for. My shuddering breaths devolve into body-wracking sobs, and I press my face into his shirt to try to staunch the flood.

"I'm a failure of a witch," I hiccough. "I couldn't even make one potion and now the *book* is gone. How on earth are we supposed to do anything to stop Cain now?"

Vane doesn't answer me, and nor does anyone else.

"I'll clean this up," Gideon offers. "Finn, take Evie upstairs, get her cleaned up and her hands healed."

Hands?

I draw back and unclench my fists, then grimace at the burns. They must have happened when I was too focused on getting the book away from the fire to care. They're so bad that I can't feel them, but the flesh of my palms is blistered and bleeding, and I glance up at Gideon.

His fangs have dropped, and he's deliberately not looking at my wounds, but he hasn't fallen on me in a fit of bloodlust. Incredible progress for a vampire so young.

Vane relinquishes me and Finn takes his place, gently guiding me around the burned mess towards the stairs.

We're almost to the top when I hear Frost mutter, "What the fuck? Why is there a hole in the floor?"

I smile, then feel worse for it and hiccough again. I shouldn't be amused when our best hope is now little more than a heap of ashes.

"Come on," Finn mumbles, pulling me towards his room. "Let's get you healed up."

My burns are dealt with after a few mouthfuls of his warm blood. Despite allowing a little bit of my venom to escape into him, he doesn't push for more than a feed. Instead, I'm treated to a warm bath and another

of his face masks. Soaking in the warm water does a little to soften the shock of what just happened, but it can't take away the reality.

"I suppose I wasn't doing too well at being a witch, anyway," I mumble.

"It was your first real day," the omega soothes. "And how long has it been since you cooked anything? Let alone a magic potion, which has to be more complex than instant ramen..."

Talking about it is making me feel worse, so I tune his comforting spiel out and focus entirely on the bubbles. I keep seeing the two covers, pristine and untouched, surrounded by ashes. Useless. Why make only the wrappings of a book fire-proof when the contents are the most valuable part?

I freeze.

"Evie?" Finn looks up sharply.

"The covers weren't burnt."

"Yes?"

"The covers were protected. It was like the fire couldn't touch them."

Would they have? No. I can't believe it. It's a stupid idea. A long shot at best.

"Why would you only protect the cover of a book, and not the pages?" the lycan asks.

"Because... because the important information wasn't in the pages." I leap out of the tub, splashing water everywhere as I snag a towel and head for the door. "Finn. I think what we're looking for is *inside* the cover!"

He trails behind me as I streak down the stairs and back to the kitchen. The pack looks up in alarm, and more than a little confusion, as I stride through the mess and shake the thick leather-wrapped board free of what remains of the pages.

"Eve?" Frost asks, taking in my towel-wrapped, muddy-faced appearance with a cautious stare.

"Draven, give me a knife. I have an idea."

To his credit, he doesn't question me. Just flicks one into his hand and offers it to me, handle first.

I flip the cover over and find the seam where it's glued to the wooden board. Slipping the blade into the crease, I gently peel it back.

"Evie..." Gideon's tone holds enough caution that I waste a second shooting him a shut-up glare.

I can tell he's about to tell me it's a stupid idea.

There's no way to explain it, but I just have this feeling.

When I finally manage to separate the two, I hesitate for half a second before tugging the board away.

"I'll be damned," Vane whispers.

There, nestled between leather and wood, are pieces of paper so whisper thin they're almost see through. The writing is so crammed onto the page that it's hard to read, even with immortal eyes.

"Those aren't really blank, right?" Frost asks, squinting at them. "It's just more witch magic?"

I nod mutely.

We're saved. The fire wasn't a total disaster.

Relief makes my knees go weak, and I clutch the counter for support.

"Open the back," I mutter, passing the blade back to Draven. "There may be more."

There are. All in all, there are twelve pages.

"What language are these ones in?" Finn asks.

"Latin," I confirm. "Thank God."

My eyes catch on a familiar name in the first paragraph, and I freeze. I trace the line with my finger, then compulsively switch to the next. Every word makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end, and I flick through to the next page before I realise what I'm doing.

"Evie?" Finn prods.

I look up to find all of them staring at me, their faces tight with barely restrained hope.

"This is the story of how Cain was made." I murmur. "It's *everything*. All of his secrets. And Ivan's."

"Ivan?" Morwen snaps. "Cain's boot-kissing butler? What's he got to do with anything?"

I swallow, looking down at the pages once more to double check that the words haven't changed. "According to this, he's the first lycan."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



FROST

EVE IS PALE AS THE MOON AS SHE FLICKS THROUGH THE PAGES IN A daze. She looks like a mad woman scanning blank sheets of paper for answers—though I know that’s not the case. Her eyes blur as she skims through lines of text none of us can see.

After dropping the Ivan-is-the-first-lycan bombshell on us, she hushed us and went back to reading. The rest of the pack is barely breathing as we wait for her to finish, but midway through, she flicks back to the first page and starts all over again. The thrall bond isn’t helping; she’s too shocked for me to decipher any deeper emotions.

Then, somewhere along the line, the shock gives way to sadness.

Just as suddenly, her emotions cut off completely. A blank slate. I would call it numbness, but it’s too intentional.

When she finally pushes it away and steps back, she rubs at her temples for a second before looking up at us.

“We can kill him.” The firm conviction in her voice sends a thrill down my spine. “Cain was made by a witch, and he can be killed by a witch. But it won’t be easy.”

Draven cracks his knuckles and grins. “Nothing fun ever is.”

She sighs. “No. I mean it. We have to trap him.”

“Trap him?” I ask. “But you said that was impossible.”

“It is,” Morwen growls. “Silver fails every time. He just bends the bars and walks out. One of his traitorous generals even made a white oak crate once—it might as well have been made of paper for all the good it did.”

“I assume you have a plan?” Gideon asks.

Eve nods. “It’s going to require some work. Once we have him in one place, I think I can kill him.”

Silas whoops, grinning and shoving away from the table to drag Finn into a hug. Draven relaxes, and even Gideon cracks a rare smile.

Mia plants a huge kiss on Morwen’s mouth and says. “Told you so.”

They all start chattering animatedly, but my eyes stray towards Vane. He isn’t smiling either. In fact, his eyes are trained on Eve with a laser focus that tells me he’s thinking the same thing I am.

Something is wrong.

“Wait,” Finn says, breaking the raucous chatter. “The trap doesn’t involve you anywhere near a stove, does it?”

Eve cracks a smile and shakes her head. Her fingers leaf through the pages, and she pauses once or twice. “No. I don’t think it does. And, for the record, I’m pretty sure all of those pages were decoys.”

“You mean the house reeks for no goddamned reason?” I groan. “I’m going to smell those nightmare creations of yours for months.”

Even now, they’re coating the back of my tongue. Gideon makes a face, showing I’m not the only one affected.

“Maybe we can cover it up with Febreze,” Silas mutters, and I watch Eve’s cheeks flush pink.

“So where are we setting our trap?” Mia pipes up. “Here?”

“How do we set it?” Silas asks. “I mean, he turned up to grab Evie the last time he knew where she was, but there’s no guarantee he’ll do the same thing again. Not when he knows she’s a witch. He’d have to be insane to chance it.”

“It’s more likely that he’ll hole up in his city,” Eve mumbles. “But he’ll do his best to stop us from getting any stronger. Without Morwen, he’s lost his best tracker, but there are others who will be searching for us.” She sighs. “If we want to get to him, we’re going to have to go to him.”

I share a look with Gid. “New York is locked down, and has been since you left,” I admit. “Our spies are dead, or in hiding.” I glance at Morwen. “Unless you have eyes and ears in there I don’t know about.”

“The lycans in the Compound,” she confirms. “I’ll put feelers out, but I can only count on the loyalty of at least half of them.”

“We have a decent number of resistance cells we can call in,” I add. “But Cain’s still going to have better numbers than us.”

Finn’s head jerks up. “Why does it sound like you’re planning a war?”

Because we are.

“It was never going to be easy,” Gideon mutters. “His empire is too well established.”

“Here’s as good a place as any to establish a base,” Vane mutters. “We can start calling in the favours we’re owed. It’s a two hour flight direct to New York, and Echo might let us use his pack lands as a staging ground.”

“It’s too big a risk. He’ll never go for it,” Gideon objects. “He has a pack to protect.”

I grimace, knowing Gid is probably right there. “But if we make it clear that this is *it*. This is how Cain dies...”

The alpha has to work hard to unclench his jaw. He pinches the bridge of his nose as he thinks it through.

“Maybe.”

Turning back to Eve, I expect her to be there, ready to offer her input—she was a general after all—but her head is buried back in the pages, her lips turned down in a soft frown.

“Will this work?” I ask her. “I know, traditionally, you lay a trap and wait for them to come to you, but...”

Cain isn’t going to leave his fortress.

Eve chews on her lower lip as she thinks it through.

“If we can get into the city and make our arrival public,” she begins. “His desire for showmanship will force him to face us. He loves a spectacle, and he won’t want to be seen as a coward.”

“So we get in, set the trap, and wait for him to spring it?” Finn says.

“Exactly,” Morwen agrees. “It’s going to be a challenge, though.”

“And setting the trap won’t take you too long?” Gideon checks.

Eve nods. “I’ll practise here. This makes it seem pretty simple, but I thought that about the potion...”

We all grimace at the reminder of how that turned out.

“How exactly *was* he made?” Silas asks, peering at her. “Don’t tell me he’s a witch too?”

Eve shakes her head. “This”—she gestures at the pages—“claims he was one of three men who were my ancestor’s lovers.”

Finn sits down, leaning forward with his head propped up on both hands, already invested in the story.

“The account is old, and probably missing a few bits,” Eve continues. “But it says that Cain, Ivan, and another man named Grigoriy asked their witch to make them immortal. They had designs on living forever. The coven and their children warned against it, but they wouldn’t be swayed, so they were exiled.”

“So they did it, anyway?” I guess.

“It seems so.” Eve shuffles the papers together and stands. “It doesn’t go into much detail, but it’s fairly obvious that the three men were turned into different immortals. Grigoriy became the first ghoul, Ivan the first lycan, and Cain... Well, we all know how that went.”

“And the witch?” Vane asks.

“Was a woman in the middle of three just-turned immortals,” Eve says. “What do you think happened to her?”

She was probably torn to pieces and drained, or eaten, or both.

I have to wonder what kind of woman would fall in love with Cain, and Eve’s story makes me curious about the third man: Grigoriy.

What happened to the first ghoul?

If he’s like the other two—truly immortal—then I suppose he must be out there somewhere.

Does Cain know where he is? Or is he just another ghoul out of many?

“It seems they used a silver dagger to perform the ritual,” Eve continues, “Which might be why it remains the weakness of the three races today. It also mentions an oak fire, wolfsbane, and a full moon.”

“Fascinating,” Finn breathes. “So the original elements of the spell are responsible for our weaknesses?”

“More importantly,” Silas grins. “The original lycan was a beta! That makes the rest of you designations mutants.”

“It makes you a descendant of Cain’s loyal lapdog,” Draven mutters darkly.

“Better the lapdog than the man himself,” Silas retorts.

“How do you feel about a nice, long swim?” Draven asks casually. “I could tie you to an anchor, and we’ll see how many times you drown before ___”

“Enough.” Gideon’s tone brokers no argument. “We need to prepare. If this is going to be our base, we’ll need to start working on logistics so that Cain doesn’t grow suspicious about the amount of activity in the area.”

“If we can contact Samuel, perhaps he could get word to some of his vampires. They were well trained, and they might be willing to aid us,” Morwen muses.

“After we were responsible for the destruction of their little oasis?” Silas shakes his head. “I won’t be surprised if they’d rather never hear from us again.”

“I think you should recall the pack,” Mia says.

Gideon goes rigid, and his jaw clenches so hard I swear he’s about to break his teeth.

“No.”

“They were over three hundred strong when you disbanded them!” Mia argues. “They could help.”

“They’re long gone,” Gideon snaps, fangs dropping. “Probably joined other packs by now. We don’t do well as lone wolves, Mia. Or have you forgotten?”

“Low blow,” I grumble.

At the same time, Vane lets out an almost sub-vocal growl, a warning.

Far from being pleased at her big brother’s interference, Mia levels her scowl at him next.

“The pack stays out of it,” Gideon says, his tone making it clear that his word is final. “We have plenty of other allies to call on, ones we can trust.”

Mia’s stony posture radiates her discontent, but she wisely decides to drop the issue for now.

Gideon scrubs a hand across his face, only to pause when he realises his fangs are out. Shoulders slumping in defeat, he crosses the ruined kitchen and grabs yet another blood bag from the supply.

He drains it slowly, testing himself by stopping multiple times rather than downing it as most newly turned do. Despite his worries, he still has the most self-control of anyone I know.

Finn and Mia move their stools together and start compiling a list of allies while Eve continues her reading, and I use the quiet moment to sneak around the island to where Gideon is watching it all unfold.

“You know,” I begin quietly, “I think you should be fine to drink from the vein now.”

Gideon grimaces around the plastic, slurping the last few mouthfuls of blood before tossing it behind him to land perfectly in the bin.

“My control of the venom—”

“Is perfect,” I reply. “You haven’t slipped up once in the past three days.”

“People are different from animals. All I’ve learned could go out of the window...”

“Then try on me,” I suggest. “You don’t need to worry about turning me.”

His eyes widen for a fraction of a second before he nods.

“No time like the present,” I continue. “Outside?”

If he does fuck up, he’s proud enough that he wouldn’t want the pack to see.

His Adam's apple bobs, and he turns on his heel, leading the way toward the door instead of answering. I let him walk far enough into the forest to give the illusion of privacy before I snag his arm and force him to stop.

"Here?" he asks, looking around.

"Don't think too much," I advise, offering out my wrist. "And... don't get too happy with the vampire venom. I don't want to come out of this with a boner."

He barks out a half laugh but doesn't move, so I decide to give him a bit of a push.

Using my own claws, I dig into the skin below my thumb, letting my blood perfume the air.

Gideon freezes, fangs dropping, but makes no move to bite.

Idiot. How can he think he can't control himself?

"Still worried?" I taunt.

He glares at me before he strikes, and I swear the asshole bites down hard just to punish me.

I wait without daring to breathe. Despite my earlier confidence, some part of me still expects to be hit with a dry bite or worse, a shot of ghoulish venom.

While the awful stuff can't do much to me, it still burns like a bitch.

Thankfully, there's none of that. Only a slight tingle that accompanies the barest hint of vampire toxin. Not enough to trigger true pleasure, but it cancels out the pain just the same.

Gideon's face warps for a second. His eyes widen and his nostrils flare, giving me a glimpse of the true hunger I'm all too familiar with. When he doesn't immediately shrug it off, I debate ripping him away before I'm too weak, but something stays my hand.

My instinct is proved right a moment later when Gideon rips himself away and staggers several feet to cling to the nearest tree.

He swipes his sleeve across his mouth and squeezes his eyes shut.

"Seal it." His hoarse voice orders. "Please."

I bring my wrist to my face and lick the wound closed, grimacing at the bland taste of my own blood mixed with the sweetness of venom.

As soon as the fresh blood scent is gone, he manages to straighten.

"That went well," I begin.

“On you,” Gideon grumbles. “In a calm environment where I can focus. But if it were Finn, or Evie? What if we were fucking and—”

I snort. “Well, I’m not fucking you so you can practise keeping your head in the moment.”

He waves away my words with an impatient hand and a scowl.

“Look, Gid, you can plan and prep and practise all you like. At the end of the day, the only way you’re going to find out is by doing.”

“And if I accidentally turn someone? Eat them?”

I shrug. “We deal with it if it happens. We have enough hybrids in the pack. It’s not like we can’t deal with one more.”

He scrubs an impatient hand down his face. “Your irresponsibility is the bane of my existence.”

The familiar words make me grin. “Your obsession with caution is worse.” I clasp his shoulder and turn both of us back towards the house. “Whatever happens, we’ll manage. That’s how life works.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN



EVELYN

I STARE AT THE PAGES LONG AFTER MOST OF THE PACK HAS GONE TO bed. The fire has died down, and the morning chill has started to fade, replaced with the sticky oppressive heat of the day.

Still I can't get the words out of my head.

"Morana's willing sacrifice of life, blood, and flesh made them immortal. Only the same sacrifice can undo it."

My mind has run through every single possibility: from tracking down and kidnapping the Greek witches to cutting off a limb and leaving it in the trap.

How much blood? How much flesh? Does the sacrifice have to be a witch? The witch who cast the spell? Would any random death suffice?

With no concrete answers, and the very real possibility that there won't be a second shot at this, I'm going to have to assume the worst-case scenario.

Which means working with the idea that killing Cain could kill me, too.

I would be okay with that, if I didn't know for a fact that my guys would do their best to follow me into the afterlife. After what happened with Gideon, I'm done underestimating the power of a broken thrall bond.

"Can't sleep?"

Morwen's voice echoes from the darkness, and I slam my arm over the papers to cover them, only to remember at the last second that she can't read them.

If the action didn't betray my guilt, the grimace on my face will.

"There's a lot to take in," I hedge.

"I'll bet," she replies, slipping onto the stool beside me. "So, now that the dunderheaded males are gone, want to explain to me exactly how this little spell of yours is going to work?"

I glance around the kitchen.

If I need an ally to execute this, Morwen would be the ideal candidate. Except for one thing.

The mad dog who answered only to herself that I remember is gone. Her allegiance is to Mia now, and if she were to tell the beta, news would reach the others shortly afterward.

“I need to practise setting the trap,” I murmur, and that much is true. “It looks like it will require my blood”—something that was conspicuously absent from the other fake spells, but seems to be involved in every single one of these ones—“among other ingredients which will be tricky to gather.”

“White oak,” Morwen guesses, correctly. “Silver. Wolfsbane.”

“We only need wolfsbane if we want to kill Ivan as well,” I correct. “Cain is a great evil, but Ivan...”

“Given half the chance, he would stab you in the back for Cain. They’ve been allies for thousands of years.”

“Can you imagine it?” I ask, curious. “Cain *sharing* a woman?”

The mere idea of Cain sharing anything is anathema to me. He’s always been a selfish, paranoid, compulsive creature.

Or perhaps those are simply the result of living so long. How many people have tried to kill him since he was turned? How lonely must it have been, knowing that only one other person would ever live as long as you. Well, technically two others, but in all my years, I’ve never heard so much as a whisper of the name Grigoriy.

Then again, Cain managed to erase Immy and I in under two-hundred years.

“I can’t imagine it,” Morwen confirms. “I don’t want to. Personally, I would find it easier to believe he manipulated the witch into giving him what he wanted and killed her to stop his immortality being taken away.”

It would make sense, and that does sound like Cain.

“We could use more witches,” I murmur.

“Well, I hate to break it to you, but the Greek ones aren’t exactly socialites.” She shoves off her stool and heads toward the stairs. “Like it or not, oh special one, you’re our only hope.”

Her parting words leave a bitter taste in my mouth, and I have to swallow my resentment.

I’d give anything to be in her shoes. Uncomplicated. Unburdened.

I give the text one last look before noting down the ‘basic’ exercise the text recommends for beginner witches—because apparently my ancestors had the forethought to include those in their grimoire too—and shuffling to my feet.

I could go and cuddle with Silas and Finn, but my emotions are still off, and they’ll be on to me in a heartbeat. Vane is also too perceptive; he’ll see

right through me. Frost is keeping watch over Gideon's door, so I could steal his empty room, but I selfishly don't want to be alone.

Draven opens one eye as I slip beneath his covers, then tugs me against his chest without waiting for me to lie down of my own accord.

"What time is it?" he yawns.

"Early," I reply, kissing the bottom of his jaw. "Go back to sleep."

He groans, his erection pressing through the thin fabric of the shirt I've stolen to sleep in. "I can think of better things we could do."

Perfect.

"Make me forget how to think," I challenge.

His sleepy, sexy smile is more reassuring than all the comforting words in the world. Ducking his head, he runs his lips across the sensitive shell of my ear and then down to nibble at the lobe.

One hand wraps around my waist, pinning me in place as the other dips lower. His fingers play in my folds for a second, before sliding back and shoving inside me without warning.

I buck against him, moaning at the sudden, rough invasion.

"Oh, doll." He chuckles under his breath. "I'm going to make you forget your name."

His fangs sink into my neck with a lazy ease. I can't help my gasp as his venom slides into my system, sending bubbles of ecstasy fizzing through my body. His fingers, already inside me, begin to thrust, curling up to rub against my G-spot as I fall limp and pliant under his spell. God, if he doesn't take his fangs out of me, I'm going to come.

My nerves are singing, and my body physically aches with need by the time he lifts my leg, lines himself up, and drives into my body in one long thrust.

His fangs leave my throat for a second. "Play with your clit," he orders. "You don't stop coming until I do, understand?"

My hand falls down to play in my curls, wondering what he means, only for a scream to escape my lips as Draven bites back down again. This time, he holds nothing back. I thought he was using his venom before, but it turns out he must have been holding back. My orgasm rips through me as soon as my fingers brush my clit. My body convulses, and Draven chooses that moment to start moving.

It's hard, fast fucking. Every bit as brutal and cold as Draven himself, but perfect for what I need right now. His hand on my thigh is almost

bruising with the force he uses to hammer into me. It's a sharp contrast to the gentle circles I'm drawing over my clit, but with his venom in my veins, that tiny contact is more than enough to send me over again. It's overwhelming, lighting me up from within until my wrung-out body finally tips him over the edge. He comes with a muffled roar against my throat, pressing a kiss to the skin as he withdraws his fangs.

"Mmm, that's how to wake up," he mumbles, lowering my leg and dragging me against him.

I nod, smiling when he yawns. The snuggling is nice, and unusual for him, but it doesn't take long for the sun to drag him back to sleep. I lie there, pleasantly sated and wrapped around his warm body, for almost ten minutes before my unwelcome thoughts begin to intrude once more.

Every single trick in the book fails to trick my mind into slumber. I toss, turn, and shift, slowly coming to the realisation that this isn't working.

Sighing, because I recognise a sleepless day when I see one, I carefully extract myself from the vampire before tip-toeing around the room.

A day without sleep won't kill me. There's no use waiting around and wasting time.

After cleaning up, I head downstairs and reread my notes twice. The beginner exercise is a charm to summon rain.

Gathering the ingredients is easy—apparently real magic doesn't require fancy saffron or cat teeth—just water in a bowl and a blade.

The hardest part is figuring out which bowl is the most practical, and I settle for a plain metal mixing bowl.

Notes in hand—protected by a plastic wallet because I learned my lesson after the last attempt—I set about clearing a patch of earth in the meadow, just beyond the tree-line.

"Blank mind, blank mind, blank mind," I mutter to myself as I work.

How on earth they expect anyone to keep a completely blank mind for the amount of time it takes to clear a workable space is beyond me, but I do my best.

Then comes the real work. Drawing the dagger from its customary sheath at my belt, I dig the metal deep into my wrist.

Blood wells, coating the blade, and I waste no time shoving the silver into the ground, carving a ring around myself.

I almost lose focus when bright red flames leap up behind the trail of blood left by the blade. Inside my skull, my brain feels as if it's physically

expanding. Pushing against the limits of the bone. Deep within my chest, something... *old* stirs, stretching to wakefulness with a watchful groan.

Afraid to acknowledge it, I ignore it in favour of following the next step.

Once the circle is drawn, and flames lick up around me, I take a deep shuddering breath, and run the blade through my hand a second time before sheathing it. The fresh blood wells up and falls eagerly into the bowl of water on the ground. There's barely enough to tint it pink, but the red flames have silenced my lingering doubts.

There are no words. No chants or complex invocations, unlike a few of the other pages I almost picked. Just intention.

So as I pick the bowl up and pour the water out onto the earth, I close my eyes and picture the biggest, darkest thunderclouds I've ever seen.

When I open my eyes, the fire is so high it's above my waist. The ground has turned muddy, but the sky above is still just as clear and bright as any other August day.

Not a cloud to be seen.

I turn the bowl over and over in my hands, wondering if I did something wrong.

It all seemed to be going so well—

Splat.

A huge, fat raindrop lands down the back of my neck and rolls down my spine, making me shiver.

Dropping the bowl, I look back up, staring in amazement—and more than a little fear—at the ominous grey clouds which are swelling in the sky. Moments later, they break, unleashing a cold downpour.

The flames around me die under the onslaught, leaving me standing in a charred circle, with no protection from the storm.

Not that I can even think about getting dry at the moment.

I did this.

All of this time, part of me resisted the idea of being a witch. Every failed potion was evidence that it was all hearsay. Now...

I collapse to my knees as the implications of this hit me.

This is real.

I'm a witch.

I have the power to end my sire.

And I just managed to make it rain with only my blood and a bowl of water.

It's all true. The grimoire is real. Someone has to die.

I don't know how long I kneel in the dirt, the bowl abandoned beside me. The rain doesn't let up, and before I know it, I'm soaked to the bone.

Through it all, that presence inside my chest is still there. Watching. Waiting.

Whatever it is, I've woken it up, and it doesn't appear eager to return to dormancy.

"Evie?"

I recognise Vane's voice, and I turn to face him. He's standing at the tree line, holding an umbrella, his eyes wide with shock. My own stark vulnerability hangs in the air between us for a second before his long legs eat up the distance between us.

Instead of swooping down to pick me up, like I expect him to, he pauses at the burnt circle.

"Can I..."

I nod, silently.

That's all the permission he needs to cross it. His black umbrella stops the constant pounding of rain against my skin, and without it, the chill somehow feels colder. A full body shiver travels the length of my spine, and I clutch my chest to try to stop it.

Vane's coat surrounds me a second later, warm and smelling faintly of him.

"I made it rain," I mumble. "I actually did it."

His soulful hazel eyes soften, and he crouches beside me. "You did, but perhaps it's time to come inside now?"

I nod, and the action triggers another full-body shiver. Vane wastes no time in scooping me up into his arms, and his long strides carry us back to the house.

"I didn't want it to be real," I whisper.

He doesn't falter. "I know, princess."

CHAPTER TWENTY



FINLEY

GIDEON HAS BEEN MORE AND MORE AFFECTIONATE RECENTLY, AND I'M loving it. I was hesitant at first, since I didn't know how much control he had, but since an incident a few days ago in which Draven 'accidentally' stabbed Silas and Gid barely reacted, the pack has dropped our guard around the alpha.

Well, that's not entirely true. Vane is still a little on edge, but I suspect that's because Gideon himself has asked him to keep an eye on him.

The beta's attention is split, anyway.

Since Evie began truly practising her magic, he's been too busy ensuring she has someone with her at all times. We've all seen why.

Whenever she uses that power of hers—which she has almost daily for the last week—she experiences a strange mood drop. Sometimes that means crying, sometimes it means she just stares into space for a long while. It clears up after a few hours, but it's still disconcerting.

Perhaps it's blood loss, or some unexplained side effect of magic, but I get the feeling it's more than that.

Evie's holding something back.

Right now, Gid and I are alone together for the first time in forever. I'm snuggled up with my back to his side, enjoying the soft absent strokes of his hand over my shoulder as I tap away on the keyboard of my laptop.

"Supplies are coming a few days after the full moon," I mumble. "I know that's a week away, but it's the best they could do, given the sudden request and the need for subtlety. The other teams should start arriving after that, but there are a lot of security concerns, given the situation..."

The resistance hasn't gathered in one place for decades. Before Frost made the call to split into mostly independent cells, they were picked off en masse.

Gid stiffens, hand pausing momentarily before he resumes petting me. "We'll make it work." Another brief hesitation. "We should talk about the full moon... about your idea." He plays with the final word in his mouth.

I look up, a stone settling in my gut. Is he about to turn me down? I thought over the last week we'd been getting closer, and he was getting

more comfortable with the idea. I'd even hoped—with the full moon just days away—that he'd be considering a test run soon.

Was I wrong?

"I've been practising, and... Frost believes I'm ready."

Frost's opinion has weight, but I'd still rather have Gideon's own thoughts on the matter. "Do you?"

"I think... I think it's a massive risk I'd rather never have to take. My therapist seems to believe..."

He sighs, flopping back, and I wait, impatiently tapping my fingers against the bottom of the all-but-forgotten laptop.

"She thinks we require more communication before and during sex," he admits. "I'm not—I haven't been the best at listening to your wants and needs."

"What I need," I grumble, shoving the laptop to the floor and turning so I'm facing him. "Is for you to fuck me exactly how you normally do. Or better yet, fuck me while I fuck Evie, until we're one big sweaty mess and your knot is wedged so far up my ass I can *taste* it. *Then* I need you to stick around for cuddles, and maybe even round two. Bonus points if you both drink from me at the same time."

I crawl closer to him as I speak, dropping my eye contact and baring my neck the slightest fraction instinctively.

"Use me, alpha," I beg, shamelessly. "That's what I want. What I've always wanted."

His body is rigid beneath me, control seconds from snapping. Every single cell of him is riddled with sexual tension.

"You make a persuasive argument," he grinds out. "But we're missing a person."

I reach inside myself and search for the bond to Evie. I have no idea if this will work, but I try my best to tug at it while sending all of my pent up desire across the distance between us.

She's been outside vacillating between frustration and determination all night while working on her new witchy abilities. When her emotions suddenly collapse into a pile of relief and excitement, I know I've gotten through to her.

"She'll come." I arch my neck a little further, my instinct demanding I be as submissive as possible given that I'm currently on top.

Gideon doesn't snap at the news, but he does relax the slightest increment. His head finds the gap between my head and shoulder, scenting me, and the hot puff of his breath tickles against my throat, making me shudder.

The sound of the door opening makes me glance up, and when I catch sight of her, I grin.

"Do you have time to join us?" I tease.

She nods, and Gid hardens further beneath me.

"Upstairs," he mutters. "We're going to need a bed... and privacy."

I grimace at the unwelcome reminder that Morwen and Mia could walk in on us, and make a mental note to order enough supplies to build them their own place.

Call me selfish, but I'd like to be fucked in front of this giant fireplace at least twice more in my life without fear of them interrupting.

I lift away from Gid and make a dash for Evie, scooping her up into my arms and heading for the stairs at speed. Gid's alpha instincts will love the challenge of chasing us, and I'm rewarded for my efforts with a warning growl.

Lycans live for the thrill of the hunt, after all.

"Try not to wind him up too much this first time," Evie murmurs softly against my ear, aware of what I'm doing. "I know you love to play, but go easy on him."

Go easy on Gid? Ha!

We only make it to my bedroom door because he allows us to. The second we're across the threshold, his hand wraps around my throat, stilling me.

"Put her down."

I do as he orders, letting Evie get to her feet.

"Do you both remember your safe words?" His grip on my throat tightens, and I relax into the grip with a needy whine.

I nod as much as his grip will allow, and Evie gives a surprisingly demure, "Yes, Alpha."

"Good. Clothes off before I rip them off."

Evie doesn't hesitate. Stripping her top over her head, she drags her leggings down those long legs, revealing inch after inch of her glorious skin.

Gid's hand prevents me from doing the same, so I'm forced to battle clumsily with my shirt until a very naked Evie takes over the task.

"Take his jeans off," Gid orders, a snarl edging his words with barely leashed violence. "Then get on your knees and get him nice and wet."

Her fingers—so sure and steady on my buttons—tremble as she works the fly of my jeans and tugs the heavy fabric down my legs. She falls gracefully to her knees when she's finished, her face so close to my cock that I can feel her breath whispering over the sensitive skin.

"Not wearing underwear?" Gideon grumbles, and I jump at his voice so close to my ear. "Why am I not surprised?"

I dutifully step out of my jeans and groan as Evie's lips press a soft kiss to the head of my dick, then another.

Finally, her tongue flicks out to taste me.

"I said suck, not tease."

Heeding Gideon's warning tone, Evie stretches her lips wide and engulfs as much of me as she can in one go. I hiss out a breath at the warm silk of her throat engulfing me.

"Wetter," Gideon demands as she pulls back. "Stick those fingers in your cunt while you do it. Get yourself ready for him."

I know he's trying to make it good for her. He won't be able to hold back once he gets involved and his instincts come into play. He may think he turns into an unfeeling brute when he gets like this, but he's not.

"Gods, your scent," he says, voice so quiet that I only hear because he's pressed up against me like this.

Evie does as he orders without hesitating, running her fingers along her glistening slit while she swallows around my shaft.

I don't get to enjoy the show, because Gid's fingers are at my back, stealing my focus as he spreads his spit down towards his unmistakable goal. My eyes slide closed as the sensations become too much.

The first digit slips in easily enough, unerringly seeking out my prostate. He caresses me as Evie pulls back and swirls her tongue under the glans of my dick, gleefully lapping up the pre-cum leaking freely from the tip.

So good. Too good.

Gid's second finger joins the first, bringing that familiar stretching burn into play just as Evie bobs down again and brings her spare hand up to fondle my balls.

“Fuck!” I curse, locking my knees against the lightning bolt that slams through my groin.

I can’t keep my hands from fisting in her hair, or my hips from bucking my length a little farther down her throat until she gags.

Both fingers withdraw, and Gideon growls. “Release her. You don’t act without my permission, omega.”

I whine and release Evie’s long locks, baring my neck in apology.

“Evelyn, get on the bed.” Gideon’s voice is full beast now. “Spread your legs and hold your thighs open.”

Her eyes glaze over a little as she draws back and visibly swallows before doing as he asks. She reclines on the bed like a goddess, all creamy limbs and flushed cheeks. Her little nipples are hard and begging for a mouth to suck them.

And when she parts her legs to display her glistening pussy...

I moan, and Gideon growls. The alpha releases his grip on my neck and pushes me forward.

“Eat her out,” he says. “You’ve got two minutes before you’d better be inside of her if you want your fantasy to come true.”

Two minutes is nowhere near enough time to worship her, but I fall to my knees in front of the bed, anyway, eager and willing to take what I can get. The first taste of her makes me groan. I lap up the sweetness pooling at her entrance, then lick upwards, tracing her folds until I find the nub at the top of her sex.

Evie’s gasps morph into a low moan, her breathing hitching as her head falls back. Her fingers on her thighs have turned white, and I move my own hands to cover them before she can hurt herself. Prying her grip free, I take over the task of keeping her spread wide. I wish I had those legs wrapped around my head instead, but I’m also keen to put on a show for our alpha.

Gideon’s growling has become a constant rumble which undercuts everything. The hair on the back of my neck stands on end, reminding me that there’s a predator at my back.

I flick my tongue faster, wondering if I can get Evie off before he pounces on me. I want to use my fingers, but he didn’t give permission, so I don’t push my luck.

This is Gid’s playground. We’re just his puppets. His toys.

I love it.

EVELYN

Finn's clever tongue strums at my clit without mercy. He's using the thrall bond to gauge my pleasure and adjust accordingly. His end of the connection vibrates with his determination. He's trying to force me over the edge before Gideon's mental timer runs out.

The result? I need my release more than I need air. I was so close when I was sucking him off, but Gideon put a stop to our antics just before I could come.

The alpha's eyes of dark fire stare greedily at the two of us. His hands are curled into tight fists by his sides. His hair is a mess, and his double fangs are digging into his lower lip, as I knew they'd be.

Sex heightens the desire for blood, after all.

Finn swirls his tongue, and I tumble closer to the edge. My pussy flutters in anticipation. It's right there, so close I can taste it.

"Stop."

Finn freezes, and I cry out, fisting the sheets as the pleasure darkens then ebbs, taking on barbs of frustration at being denied a second time.

"Stuff her with your cock, but don't fuck her."

Thank God. I don't care that he can't fuck me; I just need *something* to take away the aching emptiness.

Finn doesn't need to be told twice. Grasping his cock in one hand, he lines himself up with my opening and plunges deep on the first thrust. He pulls back slightly, then rocks in again, this time not stopping until he's all the way in.

"Finn," I gasp his name, pussy clenching as his pelvis grinds against my clit.

I writhe and thrash beneath the omega like a woman possessed. The knowledge of how much this matters to Gideon keeps me from trying to buck and force Finn to thrust.

I'm stuffed full of him, just as Gideon ordered.

The alpha needs control, and I'll willingly give it to him, just as I promised.

Snick. Squirt. It takes me a second to realise that the sounds I'm hearing are Gideon preparing Finn's ass.

Every time his fingers pass over a certain spot, Finn's cock jerks inside me, making me shiver.

A glance at Gid's face shows his expression has been consumed with a kind of predatory focus. His eyes are empty of everything except hunger. The man has fallen away, replaced by a creature of instinct.

Which ones are at the forefront remains to be seen. Our bond is a mess of cravings and lust, and I can't sort between them while I'm like this.

"Please, Alpha," Finn begs, baring his neck at an unnatural angle. "I'm going to come. Please."

Gideon can't do more than snarl, but he must understand what Finn is saying, because he backs off.

I feel when he shoves home, because Finn's whole body relaxes above me. All of the tension bleeds from his muscles, and he whines as the alpha finally bends down to sniff and nip lightly at his neck.

Gid starts to pound into Finn's ass in brutal, sharp thrusts. Every snap of his hips drives Finn deeper into me, making both of us groan. Wet slapping sounds emanate from between our joined bodies as he sets a punishing pace.

Snarls and growls and whines fill the room, but I can't tell which are mine and which come from the lycans. My orgasm is barrelling towards me like a freight train, and my fangs drop in preparation for a bite I want more than anything.

Gideon's hands fist in Finn's short curly hair, holding his head and throat still in offering. He can't talk, but the meaning is clear.

I take Finn's left side as Gideon takes the right, both of us sinking our fangs into his throat at the same time.

I have just enough self-control to ensure I only take a sip before Finn's cock jerks and he moans. His orgasm triggers my own, sending me over the edge on a scream.

Gideon's roar around Finn's neck is so animalistic, I'm surprised no one else in the house comes to investigate. He stills, coming inside Finn, as the omega whines and begs so sweetly I can't help but fall over the edge a second time.

The three of us are trembling, panting, shaking as we come down from the orgasmic high. As soon as I regain coherent thought, I seal the tiny punctures I made on Finn's neck and check on Gideon.

The alpha is still drinking, taking big greedy pulls.

“Alpha,” I whisper. “Gideon. Enough.”

He snarls, digging deeper into Finn’s neck. The omega just moans, clearly high on vampire venom.

I have no leverage in my position, crushed by the two of them, so I reach for the thrall bond and give it a harsh tug.

“Gideon. Stop.” I imbue my tone with as much urgency as I can.

Hard to do when Finn’s dick is still inside me.

As a last ditch effort, I reach around and slap the alpha on the ass. *Hard.*

He rears back in shock; the pain distracting him momentarily. He’s still sealed inside Finn thanks to his knot, so the omega is dragged with him.

I wince as Finn’s dick makes a swifter-than-expected departure from my still-clenching pussy, but I can’t focus on myself right now.

He blinks, then a second later, blinks again. Each time a little more of himself comes back.

“Gideon, you’ve taken enough.” I gentle my tone this time.

He draws back, licking the wound on Finn’s neck before he rolls the two of them onto their sides.

Down our bond, the animalistic need to claim is replaced first with worry, then terror, and finally self-loathing.

“Snap out of it,” I say, pushing to my knees on the bed. “Communicate, remember?”

I press a swift kiss to Finn’s lips, enjoying the slightly high smile he gives me back, before moving over and giving the alpha the same treatment.

“I enjoyed myself, and I can feel that Finn did too. When he comes down, he’ll probably tell you the same himself.”

The strong emotions inside him don’t dissipate instantly—and I don’t expect them to. Nothing is ever that easy.

Gideon’s knot goes down slowly, giving him plenty of time to think over what happened. When it’s gone, he wastes no time in rushing to the bathroom, returning with warm cloths to clean the two of us up. I can feel his need to care for us buzzing along the bond, so I don’t protest as he fusses. Doing this soothes his instinct and Finn’s, and the aftercare is welcome.

Once the sticky mess between my thighs is gone, Finn tugs both of us down into the blankets for snuggles. The contentment echoing off him could power a light bulb, and Gideon’s horror has melted to a kind of

shocked disbelief—almost awe. Like he can't quite believe that the omega is happy and cuddling him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



EVELYN

“SILAS!”

Draven’s roar makes me shoot up in bed, heart racing. Two deep breaths later, after realising that Silas’s hysterical laughter is trickling to me down our bond, I fly to the door with a secret smile on my lips.

Silas has been getting more and more creative with his pranks since we arrived, and I’m actually beginning to find his antics amusing.

This week alone, he’s filled Draven’s shower head with gravy granules, stolen his phone and filled it with dick pics, and put all of the vampire’s boxers into the freezer.

When I make it to the bottom of the stairs, I find both Vane and Gideon struggling to pin the vampire against the wall. Silas is in the newly repaired kitchen, his cheeks almost splitting as he struggles to contain his grin.

“I’m going to kill him,” Draven swears. “I’ll wring his dog neck!”

“What’s going on?” I ask, alarmed.

Actual death threats are rare from the vampire. Usually he settles for promising to remove body parts.

Whatever prank Silas has pulled this time must have been truly something.

“Go outside and look,” Finn chortles. “You might have to look up...”

The omega is reclining on the sofa with a cup of coffee, watching the drama unfold over the top of his round spectacles. At his urging, I aim for the front door, which has been broken from its hinges—presumably in Draven’s rage.

Once outside, it takes me a while to figure out what’s wrong. I survey the roof of the house, and find nothing, then I turn my attention to the trees.

Eventually, I spot it swaying in the breeze. Draven’s beloved bike is stuck in the uppermost branches of a fir tree. It must be a good thirty feet above the ground.

“How the devil did he get it up there?”

“That’s not all.” Vane follows Draven as the vampire storms outside behind me and heads for the wide trunk. “A few days ago, Silas added cress seeds to every tiny nook and cranny on the bike.”

“The little shit has turned my bike into a salad!” Draven uses his strength to launch himself up the tree, claws digging into the bark as he hauls himself higher and higher into the moon-lit canopy.

The culprit himself dares to walk out onto the porch, keeping me between him and the enraged vampire.

“I was being thoughtful!” the soon-to-be-dead beta calls. “What if you got peckish on the ride?”

“I am going to torch your balls and feed them to you when you’re too moon-addled to notice what they are!” Draven retorts, almost at his bike now. “Filling my boots with jelly wasn’t enough for one night?”

I turn to the unrepentant lycan. “Must you tease him so?”

Silas ropes an arm around my shoulder. “How else am I supposed to make sure he feels like one of the pack? I don’t know if you’ve noticed, beautiful, but he doesn’t exactly like it when I start hugging him and singing ‘Kumbaya.’ Besides, he’s having fun, aren’t you, D?”

He calls the last towards the top of the tree where Draven is attacking the plant life in an attempt to free his prized possession.

“So much fun,” the vampire snarls. “I’m going to bring you up here and shove this pointy fucking tree up your ass!”

“Enough!” Frost’s roar from inside the house catches the rest of us off guard. “Get in here. All of you. We have more important problems right now.”

My gut sinks as we all bump into each other as we try to get back through the front door. Frost has the remote in his hands and he flicks the TV on as soon as Draven—bringing up the rear—closes the door behind us.

Silas wisely stays glued to my side, steering the two of us onto the sofa farthest from the surly vampire.

Frost flicks to the news channel, and there, staring grimly out of the screen at us, is Cain himself.

“My daughters have colluded with the dangerous criminal, Frost, in an attempt to destroy our society by unleashing more ruthless vampire-ghoul hybrids across the globe. As such, they are all now fugitives, and must be found and eliminated.”

His face disappears, replaced by an ordinary-looking suburb. *“This was the peaceful town of Ivyville. The carnage caused by just two of these abominations has rendered it unrecognisable.”*

The picture swirls, transforming to show buildings wrecked, dead ghouls littering the street, and vampires in modern armour swarming the area. Someone has crashed their minivan through the side of one of the houses, and the alarm is blaring in the background. Smoke has turned the entire scene grey, which contrasts with the bright lights of the emergency vehicles littered everywhere.

An ashen-faced news anchor steps into the frame,

"This is the fate that awaits everyone if Frost and his so-called-resistance are allowed to continue this new reign of terror. After what happened in New York, we should all be vigilant for any ghoulish sightings. If anyone recognises any of the faces appearing on the screen, do not approach them, but immediately call our hotline number."

A steady barrage of the pack's faces flicks up onto the screen, followed by Mia, then Morwen, and finally...

"Callie," I mutter. "So he's targeting her, too."

"More importantly," Frost growls. "He has somehow found a way to make more hybrids."

Vane glowers at the screen, which has switched back to displaying footage of the damage. "Which means either he found another witch—"

"That might not even work," Finn interjects. "We have no proof that it's witch blood and not just Evie's blood that has the ability to make a ghoulish hybrid."

"So they stole my blood," I mutter. "I'm not surprised."

"How much blood is the question," Mia says. "If he has enough to make a small army, we're going to have a hell of a fight on our hands."

We're going to have that, anyway, but I keep that snarky thought to myself.

"If I was in stasis when you found me, there's a good chance it messed with his plans," I reply, crossing my arms over my chest. "And if we take into account that half of those turned will be useless to him..."

"Not useless," Morwen counters, gesturing to the TV which is now showing grainy, blown-up stills of the ghouls. "He's found a purpose for them—sowing terror."

"Terror he wants to blame on us." Frost is seething. "This isn't the first time he's set the media on us, but it's the first time he's shown up to launch the accusations himself. That will scare people."

“Perhaps they should be scared,” Vane mutters. “Fear is a useful survival instinct, especially where Cain is concerned.”

“We can dispatch teams to take out the malformed ghouls,” Finn suggests. “I have a location on the two he’s mentioned.”

I run a hand through my hair in exasperation. “That leaves at least two non-failed hybrids to work against us.”

“We can’t know that for certain,” Silas soothes. “And they’re young yet.”

“Without me, they’ll have to figure everything out for themselves,” Frost agrees. “It was no picnic learning to control ghouls. It took years. A lot of it I learned because I had no other choice.”

“But Cain knows a lot of what you can do, so he won’t offer those hybrids any other choice either,” Morwen counters. “They’re probably being forced to train their asses off, which means we should be doing that, too.”

“We will.” Gideon finally steps away from the wall where he’s been watching everything with an uncharacteristic silence. “Cain has several advantages. Chiefly, he’s got an empire of soldiers and machines ready for this. We haven’t, but we don’t need them. We have enough cells to form strategic strike forces that can create enough chaos to achieve what needs to be done.”

“It’s like an ant taking on a boot,” Morwen scoffs.

“No, it’s a scalpel versus a club,” Gideon retorts. “And we’re going to win.”

“You don’t think the universe would’ve given us the witch, the grimoire, and the dream team to kill Cain, only to watch us fail, do you?” Silas pipes up, cheerfully.

“I don’t like putting my faith in coincidence and the vague notion that anything as vast as the universe has a mind of its own and half a shit to spare about what happens to us,” Morwen growls. “Knives and guns are much more reliable and have been proven to work, and Cain *still* has more of them than we do.”

“Regardless,” I say, breaking the argument before it can devolve further. “We do need more training. Gideon and Frost are our best defence against these new hybrids, so Gid’s lessons take priority. The rest of us...”

“The rest of *us* will train hard,” Vane corrects, gently. “But you need to work on your magic. What you’ve accomplished so far from the grimoire is

impressive, but you need to start practising that trap.”

“And maybe clue us in to how you plan to actually kill him so we can help.” Silas means the words to be helpful, but they might as well be a knife to my heart.

“I’m working on it,” I mumble.

Once again, I silently thank Immy for giving me the skills to conceal my true feelings on the matter from my over-eager thrall bond. If not for centuries of practice, they’d know something was wrong by now.

As it is, I have a feeling that Vane suspects.

But I still have no plan.

Well. I have one, but it’s a long shot.

Find Grigoriy.

The ghoul is the only person who was there at the moment of my ancestor’s death. The only person who might know what the words in the grimoire mean.

I look across the sofa at Morwen as the rest of the pack devolves into planning, biting my lip.

She’s my best chance at finding him, but it would mean confessing my fears about the sacrifice to everyone. I promised not to go off and do things without my pack, but what if they call it all off? What if they’d rather not kill Cain if they discover there’s a risk to my life? What if this is the straw that breaks their resolve?

Only one way to find out.

Taking a deep breath, I steel my spine. The pack, perhaps sensing my determination and fear down the thrall bond, quiets and turns to face me.

“There’s a chance that killing Cain might kill me,” I admit.

“Fuck no.” Frost doesn’t hesitate.

Finn grabs me and pulls me into him, hugging me tight. “I’m with him on this one.”

“What?” Silas stares at me.

Draven says nothing, his face is a blank mask, but his icy thrall bond cracks, then bleeds inky black darkness and denial.

“Explain,” Gideon orders.

“How long have you been sitting on this, princess?” Vane asks, a dangerous glint in his eye. “And just when were you going to tell us?”

Morwen groans, running her fingers through her curls to shove them roughly out of her face. “I’m sure she’ll explain when you all shut up.”

The whole room falls silent.

I dig my fingers into Finn's sweater as I think it through. "The inscription reads 'Morana's willing sacrifice of life, blood, and flesh made them immortal. Only the same sacrifice can undo it.'"

I take a deep breath, but Mia finishes for me. "You think the spell will require you to sacrifice yourself."

"Worst-case scenario, yes. There's a chance it might," I confirm. "It definitely needs a sacrifice. I just can't figure out if it has to be me, or a witch, or..."

The room falls silent.

"How. Long?" Vane growls. "How long have you been sitting on this information?"

I sigh. "Only a few days."

"Give me a number, princess."

I have no idea why he's so particular about this, but I answer just to humour him. "Ten."

He nods grimly. "That's exactly how many stripes you're going to have painted across your ass tomorrow."

My jaw drops. "How can you even think about sex right now?"

"What's the plan?" Gid cuts in. "I presume you have something you want to suggest?"

I nod. "I want to find Grigoriy." I glance at my sister. "Well, really..."

"You want me to track him down," she guesses. "We don't even have a starting point."

"We can assume he won't have made it across the Atlantic, given that he's a ghou," I mumble. "He'd stand out on a plane or ship."

"If he's even sane enough to get a plane." Frost runs a hand through his messy hair. "Evie, if he's a ghou, he's not going to have the faculties to sit down and give you a magical history lecture."

"Cain is stronger than every other vampire on this Earth," I reply. "Grigoriy might not be as—"

Maddened. Mindless. Terrifying. Creepy.

"Ivan is nothing special," Mia points out. "So that theory is half-baked at best."

"It's all I've got." I fall back against Finn. "Grigoriy must have been involved with the creation of the spell. Short of asking Ivan or Cain, he's my best bet."

“So where do you suggest we look?” Morwen asks.

I... don’t know.

Thankfully, Finn saves me. “Ghoul activity is monitored better than the damned weather. We can look at the historical data...”

“That’s how Cain was trying to track Frost,” Gideon explains. “Ghouls follow him—us.” His face darkens momentarily. “It stands to reason that *if* Grigoriy was somehow powerful like Cain was, he’d surely face the same issue.”

“Some ghoule patterns are fairly regular,” Frost mumbles, stroking his chin. “They tend to stick close to settlements.”

Finn almost falls from the sofa in his haste to grab his tablet from the coffee table. With a careful flick of his fingers, he pulls up a map and starts typing faster than I can see.

Red clouds appear across the globe, connected by thin lines.

Mia uncurls herself from Morwen and heads over to kneel beside him. “Remember to eliminate the natural increase around regional holiday destinations,” she mutters.

Finn nods, but doesn’t reply. The map is reflected perfectly in his glasses, making it hard to read his expression. A minute or two later, more than half of the red is gone.

“Take out Frost’s movements...” the omega mumbles to himself.

More of the red flicks to grey.

What remains is a random—albeit smaller—pattern that spans the entire globe.

“Remove the places far from any known cave systems,” Frost suggests. “Ghouls love the underground; we can assume he’s the same.”

It keeps going, until only a handful of red clusters litter the map.

Morwen looks at all of them, then cracks her neck from side to side. “How long do I have?”

“Until the end of the month,” Gideon replies. “That’s as long as we think we’ll last before Cain picks up the extra activity and we’re forced to move.”

My sister grins, and I recognise the feral anticipation of the hunt as it takes over her body.

This is what Morwen lives for. Her favourite challenge.

“We’ll be back with your ghoul by then,” she promises. “If he’s still around, anyway.”

“Cain would’ve had to find another witch to kill him,” I reply. “Which seems unlikely.”

“It’s more likely that he’s on Cain’s side,” Draven growls. “Bringing in another ancient immortal at this point seems risky. We have no idea what his motives will be.”

I bite my lip. “If he’s not allied with Cain, we can assume that he’s against him.”

“Or not willing to antagonise him, like a smart person,” Morwen grumbles. “Either way, he’ll return with us. What happens after that is your problem.”

My sister turns to Mia and offers her a smile. “Ready for another road trip?”

“Hell yes. I’m packing this time!”

Both Vane and Silas bristle at the idea of Mia going into danger, but if Morwen got her out safely from an island full of witches, then I think she’s perfectly capable of doing the same here.

“Do you want some of my blood?” I offer. “Just in case...”

They are going up against ghouls, after all. They may be mindless with hunger, but one wrong scratch from those claws will kill either of them, and it won’t be painless.

Mia grimaces. “I’ll get back to you on that one.”

“Two vials,” Morwen mutters. “But we won’t need them.”

“Don’t lose them either,” Finn cautions. “The last thing we need is more of Cain’s hybrids causing chaos.”

That earns him an eye roll from both of them.

“We’ll smash them if it comes to that.” Morwen promises. “Try not to lose Evie again, and we won’t have to worry about any more ghoul hybrids.”

“Never again,” Frost vows.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



EVELYN

LEAVES CRUNCH BENEATH OUR FEET AS WE STEP OUT INTO THE FOREST, moving slowly away from the main house. The light of the sun is fading fast behind us, and we don't have long until the full moon will be heavy in the sky.

"Are you sure about this?" Vane asks.

It's only the third time he's asked since he learned what Gideon and Finn planned for tonight, and I smile.

"Absolutely sure," I promise.

Silas is grinning like a lunatic on my other side. The three of us are bringing up the rear while the alpha and omega walk hand in hand in front.

"This is going to be so much fun," Silas says.

"Evie." Vane snags my attention again. "If you change your mind halfway through, it's going to be up to you to get back to the house and slam that door in our faces. We *will* give chase. We won't be able to help ourselves."

"Prey drive." Silas shrugs. "Literally can't turn it off on a full moon, but that's probably because omegas are just so fun to chase..."

"Evelyn is more than capable of taking us out if she needs to escape," Gideon growls from up ahead. "Now, if you two are done talking her out of it—"

"Which Gid has already tried to do thirty times today." Finn grins.

Gideon growls. "You really want to sass me tonight, Finley?"

The omega just grins back. "Of course I do. Loosen up, all of you. This is going to be fun. Besides, we usually hunt first before we get to the fucking."

"I was trying to say," the alpha continues. "We've gone far enough."

That's all he needs to say for Silas to start ripping his shirt over his head. He moves onto his sweatpants straight after, and his eagerness makes me smile.

He's not the only one stripping off, either, and I can't help the shiver of anticipation which runs down my spine. I'm not stripping, but on Finn's advice, I only wore a thin wraparound dress and a sturdy pair of wrap around sandals that I'm happy to run in.

“I brought something to make the hunt interesting,” Vane says, completely unashamed of his nudity as he bends to retrieve something from his pocket.

When he opens his palm, there are four tiny bells with bright red ribbons attached sitting in the middle of it.

Silas whistles, his grin turning up a notch. “I like the way you think.”

“I want accessories next time.” Finn pouts at him.

“You make enough noise as it is,” Gideon replies, tugging him in for a kiss. “Evie has vampire sneakiness on her side.”

“And she deserves the handicap, given that she kept her little secret from us for almost two weeks,” Vane replies. “Give me your wrist, princess.”

“What are they for?” I ask, hesitating.

Vane’s smile turns savage, and he reaches out to take the hand I’m holding back. He tugs me forward and promptly spans my ass through my clothing.

“When I give you an order, you obey,” he reminds me.

Recognising the tone of his voice and what it means, I lower my eyes and whisper, “Yes, Vane.”

He takes one of the bells and loops it around my wrist, tying the ribbon in a secure knot.

“When we say we hunt on the full moon,” Gideon begins as Vane takes my other wrist and repeats the procedure.

“We hunt sassy little omegas who taunt us,” Silas continues.

“And when they catch us—which they always do...” Finn is also grinning as Vane kneels and secures the remaining two bells to my sandals.

“They get fucked.” The beta looks up from below me, eyes lingering between my thighs for a second—taking in my lack of underwear—before he reaches up and snaps the tiny string that holds my dress together. “Last chance, princess.”

I shake my head resolutely and shrug the fabric from my shoulders. The dress flutters away from my body just as the first ripple of fur brushes across Vane’s shoulders.

The moon is out.

“Run.”

Finn’s hand grabs mine, and he drags me away from the three other lycans. The bells on my arms and legs jingle merrily every time I move,

giving away our position.

The omega starts to shift as he runs beside me. Wiry black fur engulfs his larger frame, and he seems to hunch in on himself as his nose elongates. The full moon must be up in the sky, but I can't see it for the hundreds of trees surrounding us as we race together through their thick trunks.

This feels... Powerful. Ritualistic. I can't explain it, but the hairs across my own body rise, and the air in my lungs seems wilder somehow. My nipples harden—though the air is warm—and warmth begins to pool in my core, as if sensing what's to come.

I glance at Finn, only to find him looking at me with the same barely suppressed need hidden in his now lupine features. His lips curl back, and he throws up a howl into the air before turning left and forcing me to speed up to follow him.

The sound might as well be a starting gun.

All around us, other howls fill the air, breaking the eerie silence of the night with the thunder of a primal language I can't understand.

I don't need to. The meaning is clear. They're coming for us.

My bells tinkle softly as he leads us deeper into the forest, and before long, I pick out the sound of water. It's a small stream—barely a brook—but Finn strides into it and proceeds to follow it upstream.

Hiding our scent.

My sandals quickly grow wet and slippery, thanks to the cool water, but the temperature does nothing to cool the strange heat beneath my skin. I want to get caught, but at the same time, I understand that's not how the game is played.

I gasp when I hear another howl, closer this time, and Finn picks up our pace.

My heart is pounding louder than the bells, filling my ears as we dash over rocks and pebbles, leaving the babbling stream and heading uphill.

It might be smarter to separate, but I don't want to.

The howls of the pack are growing closer and closer, until I swear I can hear them growling and snarling from every direction. Finn, however, takes no notice, doggedly running on through the bush.

A growl in my ear makes me squeak, and I swear a claw-tipped hand grabs my ass roughly before Finn tugs me away. I stumble for a second, struggling to regain my balance.

The message is clear. We're not finished. The hunt is still on.

We veer left. The next howl is so close that a visceral thrill runs down my spine. I can hear Silas's enthusiasm in the sound, feel it down our bond, and the knowledge that he's so close—

Finn disappears. His clawed hand surrounds mine one second, and the next, he's gone. A flash of grey fur on my left makes me spin on my heel and head right. A second later, I see another flash of movement up ahead, and I draw up short. For half an instant, the bells fall silent.

I have just enough time to realise that they're herding me before a slap to my ass makes me take off once more.

This time, I push myself harder. Faster. Without having to pay attention to Finn's whereabouts, I take to the treetops, using my smaller form to navigate the branches.

It doesn't stop them.

I leap to a new trunk, only to come face to face with Vane's shifted form. His lips are drawn back in a snarl, displaying a full mouthful of fangs as he uses his claws to cling to the tree directly opposite. For the first time, I focus on the glistening appendage hanging between his muscular thighs.

Holy shit.

They get bigger?

I mean, it makes sense, given that a shifted lycan is bigger than their human form... but still? True fear slices through me for a moment, and I honestly debate trying to make it to the house before I'm trapped in between all of those cocks.

Curiosity—that bitch with no self-preservation—stops me. I'm not sure if it's the weird energy of the moon, or simply the need to answer that age old question: will it fit?

Vane snarls again, and I blush as I meet his golden gaze. The message in them is clear. The trees are off limits.

Dropping back to the needle-strewn floor, I head in the opposite direction.

Gideon is there before I can take three paces, snatching me out of the bushes and turning me roughly in his arms until I'm facing a new direction. His clawed hands fall to my hips, snout brushing against my neck, eliciting a small gasp from me.

His fur tickles my ass and shoulders, reminding me of the difference between this version of Gideon and the one I'm used to. Against my back,

his erection jumps, leaving a splat of cold wetness against my skin before he shoves me forward and disappears.

My knees are weak. My own slick has started to leak down my thighs, and I'm acutely aware of how slippery my skin is as I resume running. It's a necessary defence mechanism if the pack plans on putting those enormous cocks of theirs anywhere near my pussy.

They keep herding me. Cutting me off at every turn.

Then it's over.

I burst through the trees into a moonlit meadow, and immediately the sounds of my bells are drowned out by animalistic whines and the slick slapping of rough, primal sex.

Finn is already here, braced on his elbows and knees with his ass raised high in the air as another lycan—Silas—pounds into him from behind.

I actually feel my wetness drip from my lower lips and splatter against the ground a second before I become aware of the enormous presence behind me.

Snouts—two of them—investigate my body while I stand there shivering. A long tongue swipes a line from my ear to my collarbone, tasting me.

The same instinct that made me run has me falling to my knees. Primal. This feels like a ritual.

Snarls of approval echo all around as I reach behind myself and spread my ass, exposing the dripping source of my arousal to their gaze.

I'm so turned on it hurts. My clit, already sensitised from a long chase, is now exposed to the cool late-summer air, and I can't help the way my body clenches.

Warm breath bathes me a second before one of those long tongues traces the trail of moisture up one thigh, then the other, following it back to the source. Long laps make me whimper, and I press my forehead into the dirt, breathing in deeply as my whole body shakes and the bells on my body start to chime once more.

A second tongue joins the first, those long snouts making it easier for them both to taste me. One fucks straight into my pussy, and I don't need the bond to tell me that's Gideon—lapping up as much of my taste as he can. The other makes a circular assault on my clit. Between the two, I'm caught and trembling, stroked through my first orgasm and straight into a

second until I'm oversensitive and crying out. Surely my body can't take much more of this, but I don't dare try to move away.

Something inside me tells me that if I do that, I need to be very sure that I want this to end, and right now, the only thing I want is someone to ease the *ache* that's slowly driving me mad.

"Please," I beg. "Gideon. Vane. I need..."

They stop what they're doing, pulling away. I whine needily, regretting my outburst. There's a heavy pause. Shuffling, snarling... The scent of blood fills the air, telling me someone has gotten rougher than they should.

Then it's there, pushing at my entrance.

The thrall bond tells me it's Gideon, and I'm not surprised. Of course, the alpha would demand first dibs. He'll unleash his pent up need on me while Silas gets Finn ready for him.

Thinking of them makes me risk a glance up. The omega has been flipped onto his back in the grass, pinned in place by Silas's jaws around his throat. The beta is stroking in and out of Finn's body like a man possessed. The savage beauty of the scene is quickly burned into my mind.

The sight loosens something inside of me, and Gideon's ridiculously large dick takes advantage, pressing forward. Stretching my body to the point of pain.

"God." I can barely choke out one word.

That's just the head.

A giant clawed hand collars my throat, holding me in place as his cock forces its way farther into my body, making room where I thought there was none.

Shit. If he knots me, there's a very real possibility I could break.

Far from scaring me, the thought seems to urge me on. I push back against him.

Growls. The hand around my throat tightens.

Another warning.

I'm not in charge.

I force myself to relax, and Gideon rewards me by pulling back slightly. When he surges forward again, he does so more easily.

My spine arches, trying to take him deeper, and he follows. It takes three more thrusts before his fur tickles the backs of my thighs, and I groan in relief.

So *full*.

His breath fans over my face as his hips draw back, then snap forward. To his credit, I can feel him in the back of the bond trying to hold back, but there's no restraining the feral instinct that's taken over both of us. Gideon's cock withdraws, leaving me gaping and empty, only to surge back inside in a mighty thrust that sends my toes curling and my bells jingling.

My eyes slide closed, and a long moan escapes my parted lips, only to cut off as he draws back and repeats it. He thrusts into my body like he's on a mission to rearrange my insides, and I glory in the power of it. Every single hard dig of his cock is accompanied by his heavy balls slapping against my clit, creating a maelstrom of pleasure I can't outrun.

After my earlier orgasms, I shouldn't have the energy to come again, but it's happening whether I want it to or not. My lips open on a scream just as claws dig into my hair and wrench my head up from the ground.

Vane is kneeling in front of me, dick bobbing directly in my face. With one hand, he directs the head into my mouth, muffling my keening cry.

My hands brace against his fur-covered thighs as he fucks my face with no consideration for the orgasm ripping me apart from the inside. I have to breathe through my nose as he takes my throat, ignoring the snarls and growls happening above me.

They use me. There's no other word for it. I'm a toy caught between them as they chase their own pleasure. Normally, that's the last thing in the world that would turn me on, but right now, knowing this is my pack at their most primal, I can't help but love it. The very fact that Vane is losing control like this is sexy as hell.

Soon, I begin to relax, trying my best to rock between them as I lap eagerly at the underside of Vane's dick.

It's all going fine until Gideon's cock jerks, spraying my insides with his release.

Then the swelling starts.

Panic makes me claw at Vane's thighs, struggling between them for half a second. Both of them snarl. Before I can process anything, Gideon's body lowers to cover mine completely. A sharp pain at my shoulder makes me choke on Vane's dick for a second before pleasure erupts in my veins.

His venom, I realise. Gideon's filling me with so much venom that I literally can't feel my own panic.

His quick thinking saves me from hurting myself. My body relaxes, submitting totally to the knot ballooning inside me. Instead of the tearing

pain I was braced for, the pressure combines with Gideon's bite and triggers another, less powerful orgasm. I moan around Vane's dick.

A second later, the beta follows the two of us over the edge, filling my mouth with more cum. There's so much of it that it spills from my mouth before I have the chance to swallow it.

Gideon sits back on his haunches, pulling me with him. He's still drinking from me. Keeping me in a venom-induced haze. My eyes drop down to our legs, my pale thighs spread crudely around his. Unfortunately, the angle isn't right for me to see his knot splitting me open, but I can appreciate the difference between his firm, muscular thighs and my creamy human ones.

A set of large clawed hands takes my wrists and draws them back until I'm holding Gideon's neck, arching my breasts up and out in offering. Vane's jaws go slack at the sight, but he's quickly jolted out of the way by Finn and Silas.

The two have finished their own fun and now they've come to join us. Without hesitation, Finn crawls up Gideon's thighs and begins to lick at the seam of my pussy. His long, rough tongue traces the place where we're joined, massaging the knot through the thin tissue, then laps upward to run delicately over my sensitive clit.

Gid stiffens beneath me, letting out a husky growl of satisfaction against my neck.

The betas, apparently happy with his reaction, sneak forward as well, taking a breast each.

Here I am, caught between four lycans, being worshipped as I sit on Gideon's knot like it's my own personal throne. The alpha finally releases my vein, licking the wound closed, before nuzzling the area soothingly.

It feels a lot like praise, and I never want it to end.

Of course, Gideon's knot has to deflate eventually. The alpha lifts me off his cock, cum flooding out of me as soon as he's not there to hold it inside, but leaves me splayed across his lap. His clawed hand comes down and forces Finn's head back between my legs.

The omega happily takes on the task of cleaning up our combined fluids with his mouth, opening his snout wide and thrusting his tongue as deep into me as he can. The slurping, happy moans he makes between my legs almost have me ready to go again... almost.

Unfortunately for me, lycans during the full moon seem to have infinite stamina.

Gideon is already hardening beneath my ass, but I'm winded and more than a little exhausted. My poor pussy is swollen and over-sensitised, and the tongues at my breasts are quickly becoming too much.

Finn must sense I'm done, because he turns his attention fully to Gideon's cock, sucking him off from between our splayed thighs.

When Vane lifts his head, putting his jugular within reach, my own instinct rears its head.

I sink my fangs into his throat, ignoring the mouthful of fur in favour of the strong blood that bursts through my system like liquified energy. In two gulps, the soreness in my pussy has faded, the raw edges of my nerves are soothed, and I'm ready for more.

The beta drags me away from Gideon, but the alpha is too distracted by Finn's mouth to care. I'm spread out in the grass like an offering, and the second I release my bite, Vane leans back to survey me.

A frantic, strangled noise beside me makes me glance over. The alpha has tugged Finn away from his cock and laid him out beside me. Now Gideon's snout is pressed against the omega's cock, licking up the trails of happy white cum dribbling from it. I lean over and press a kiss to Finn's snout, loving the pleasure glazed look in his animal eyes.

Like this, I can finally see the differences between Silas and Finn and the two hybrids. The pure lycans' snouts are longer, their builds leaner—or perhaps that's just them—and their fur is thicker. Vane has a longer set of fangs at the front of his snout—reminding me eerily of a sabre-toothed wolf—while Gideon's fangs are somehow more numerous and thinner.

Those were in my throat seconds ago, draining me.

I should be terrified.

Instead, I'm just horny.

I'm going to blame the moon.

Gideon stops lapping up Finn's orgasm and crawls over him, caging his body in. I watch carefully for any sign that the omega is unhappy, but I needn't have worried.

Finn lifts his hips, driving the alpha to snarl and pin him. I'm convinced he likes the rougher treatment he knows his bratty behaviour will earn him.

I'm distracted for a second by the weight of Vane settling against me. His dick sinks into me at the same time Gideon's cock breaches Finn's ass.

The two of us let out matching whines, locking eyes with one another as the two bigger males start fucking us in earnest. My bells start ringing all over again, adding to the wet, slapping sounds of good sex and harsh breathing.

It's too intimate, and eventually I can't stop myself from leaning over and kissing Finn. It's strange, but not unpleasant. He tastes of me, of Gideon, and even a little like Silas, and his tongue makes up for the flexibility his lips lack in this form.

When we break apart, the final beta is kneeling between our heads, stroking his cock in one huge palm. Finn doesn't need encouragement to move his mouth over and begin licking the seam of his sack.

I go to help, but Vane interrupts before I can. His clawed hands wrap beneath my back and lift me until we're vertical. My arms wrap around his shoulders automatically, and my fingers run through the coarse fur there as he lifts and drops me rhythmically over his dick.

Every thrust makes my breasts and ass bounce, and he only gets faster and faster. One of his hands presses my head into the crook of his neck, and I realise why a second later when his fangs sink into me.

We feed from each other as he pounds into me from below.

The venom in our veins stops this from lasting as long as it could, and the two of us topple over the edge a second later. He barely spends time sealing the wound before he passes me over to Silas.

I know it's impossible for a shifted lycan to smile, but I can swear he grins as he lays me out on my side, lifts my left leg, and drives himself home in one long sweep.

It doesn't matter that I'm full of two other men's cum already. I'm desperate for him. My foot rests on his shoulder as he uses the new angle to get deeper than Vane could, hitting my cervix with almost punishing accuracy on each thrust.

I drop my hand to my sex, using my fingers to strum my clit, trying to find the edge again. At the same time, my spare hand finds Finn beside me. I take his cock in my hand, stroking him as I do the same to myself.

Silas takes one look at the sight of Finn and I laid out, side by side, me pleasuring us both, and throws his head back and howls.

The haunting sound turns quickly into a growl as my cunt clenches on him. His full attention returns to rutting me, his grip on my leg tightening as he jackhammers into me.

Finn's orgasm coats my hand a second later. Feeling wicked, I raise my fingers to my lips and lick the evidence away while meeting Silas's eyes.

The beta growls, coming inside me in a rush before collapsing on top of me. Gideon does the same thing a second later, and I hear Finn's renewed keening and whining as he's impaled fully on the alpha's knot.

For the longest while, the five of us lie in a mess of tangled limbs and harsh breaths. Then, as if by some unknown signal, they start to get up again. Instead of resuming our sexy activities, however, they stare expectantly at Finn and me.

I don't need to be a genius to understand that the hunt is back on.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



VANE

AFTER THE FULL MOON, I CRASH HARD. THREE DAYS OF CONSTANT fucking and running always exhaust me in a way few other things have the power to. When I wake, it's almost dawn, and the sound of construction work is the first thing that registers in my mind.

Ah. The resistance has begun work on demolishing what remains of the town. It takes my tired mind a few minutes to process what that means. When it does, I sigh and slip from my bed, doing my best not to wake the raven-haired beauty still unconscious amongst the warm quilts.

I was worried that the full moon might be too much for her. I fully expected her to refuse to come out on the second night. She didn't.

Instead, our little princess took us time and time again, without flinching. If the pack wasn't in love with her already, the last three nights have sealed it.

I draw the curtains to help muffle the noise from outside, slip on a pair of loose joggers, and make my way downstairs. The blood in the pot is still warm, so I help myself to a mug before I head out.

Silas stiffens as I join him on the porch, watching the groups of lycans working together to tear down the rotten remains of the old houses. We'll salvage what we can, but there's very little left. It won't be long before this is cleared and then the new cabins can go up.

Gideon and Echo made an agreement to keep the majority of our forces closer to New York, but a lot of the commanders will be gathering here. They need somewhere to stay. With so many people flying in and the resources ready and waiting, the main structures will probably be up by tomorrow.

"It won't take long," my brother mutters, echoing my thoughts.

"Soon none of it will be left."

"Are they getting rid of our home too?"

A stone sinks in my gut to hear him refer to the old house as home. Our nomadic lifestyle—and a willingness to leave those memories behind—has made me more than happy to refer to wherever the pack is as home. I should've known better. Silas is more sentimental than I am, and I made sure he never had any bad memories of the old house.

“Yes,” I admit. “Gideon did ask me. I told him to go ahead and tear it down.” I pause, taking a long sip of my blood. “Did you want me to tell him I’ve changed my mind?”

Silas looks around, trying to evade the question. His silence goes on for so long that I decide to try again.

“Silas, I can tell him no.” It’s not a big deal, and Gideon would understand.

“It feels wrong to keep it, after Isla and Ma died there,” he finally mumbles. “They’d be happy to know that we’re using this place to bring the bastard down.”

The door opens again, and both of us turn to see the alpha himself standing there with Finn tucked under one arm. The omega is cradling a cup of coffee in both hands, looking blearily around at the world.

“Good. They’ve started.” Gideon presses a soft kiss to Finley’s head and hands him over to Silas.

The omega’s soothing effect is immediate. Silas goes from tense with his hands clenching the railing to relaxed and cuddly in seconds.

“Should be done by tomorrow—with the outer shells, at least,” I add.

The alpha nods, leaning against the rails. “Finn managed to leave word for Samuel’s people that we have a plan,” he adds. “That was over a week ago, and we’ve had no response. I have no idea if they’ve even seen it.”

It takes me a second to remember who Samuel is, and when I do, I grimace. That guy’s gift is powerful. I can’t even recall what he looks like.

“Evie will be happy to see her brother again,” I say.

Gideon nods. “How is she?”

A soft smile plays at my lips as I remember her curled up against my pillows. “Good. Tired.”

“I want to tell her,” Silas butts in.

Blinking as I try to keep up with the change of subject, I frown at him. “Tell her what?”

“How it all happened. Why the pack fell apart. Everything...” He glances away, eyes scanning the workers for a half minute. “You said the reason my thrall bond with her isn’t working is because I’m holding back. This is the only thing I have to hold back about, and I do it because neither of you”—he looks between me and Gideon—“ever talks about them either. Even Finn only really knows the bare bones.”

I scrub a hand down my face and take another long sip of my blood. “That isn’t what I meant. But if Gid has no problem with Evie knowing, I don’t either.”

Ma and Isla died a long time ago. In that time, I’ve learned to live with the memories and be grateful for what they left behind. It’s Gideon who’s the issue. His own shame is so bound up in what happened to our family that I’m not sure he’ll be keen on the whole thing coming out.

The alpha sighs, rubbing his eyes. “I’m supposed to be opening up and allowing myself to be vulnerable,” he grunts. “Might as well start with the big things.”

“I’m not sure your therapist meant for you to treat it like ripping off a Band-Aid,” Finn teases. “Most people would start with why they like the colour blue before they move on to past trauma.”

Silas’s arm tightens around the omega. “You don’t think it’s a good idea?”

Finn goes quiet, lips pursing as he thinks. “I don’t think it’s a bad idea... I’m just not certain it’s going to magically trigger your thrall bond into being.”

The omega and I are on the same wavelength. Unfortunately, Silas isn’t.

“We’re so close,” he objects. “I just need to figure out that final step.”

I bite my lip, but decide not to interfere. Silas and Evie’s bond will happen, eventually. Like Finn, I doubt this will breach that final gap, but I understand my brother’s worry. Everyone else is fully bonded to her, and Silas is anxious about what that means for him.

I already told him my thoughts on the subject, but he chose to focus on the wrong part. Interfering any further probably won’t do much good.

“I’m going to get my stuff, and then I’ll go help with construction,” I say, breaking the awkward silence. “I assume we’re waiting until evening to have our little heart to heart?”

If Silas thinks he’s going to wake her up early after how much energy the last three nights must have taken from her, he’s got another think coming.

Gideon nods. “When everyone else is gone.”

I grunt my agreement and stride back into the house. A day of hard physical labour sounds just about perfect after days of being too exhausted to do more than sleep and wait for the next round of glorious fucking.

I'm grimy and sweaty when Draven finds me, shortly after nightfall. Most of the lycans have flown back to the nearest town, and have been replaced by the few vampires working for us, so progress has slowed.

"Family marshmallow toasting time has started," the vampire drawls from behind me as I lift a beam into place. "Apparently attendance is mandatory."

I nod once to show I heard, then go back to work. This roof needs to go up before the thunderstorm on the horizon hits us.

We manage, but it's raining by the time I make it to where the rest of the pack is huddled together around the fireplace. The mud cakes my boots, making the laces slippery, and I briefly consider just cutting through them before I think better of it.

"Going to change," I mutter, stomping upstairs before anyone can object.

I know I'm avoiding the talk, but I've had a long day. Exhaustion isn't going to make this any easier. A few seconds under a hot spray, a bag of blood, and a clean set of clothes are all necessary before I face the ghosts that this conversation is going to summon.

When I get back, they're toasting marshmallows. The scent of burnt sugar is heavy in the room, and I help myself to Silas's skewer without shame.

"Hey," he protests.

"You've already had at least three," I guess, biting into gooey goodness as rain pelts the window behind me.

If he was mortal, his sweet tooth would be the death of him.

"How did you know?" he demands, spearing another marshmallow on a new stick.

I shrug and glance toward the sofa where Evie is snuggled against Draven. It's a small miracle she's managed to persuade the vampire to leave his customary spot against the wall, and he looks downright uncomfortable on the soft fabric seats with her nestled against him.

Frost is on her other side, staring blankly into the flames. His eyes are ringed with dark circles, and I wonder how much of the full moon he spent working.

The stress of being so close to achieving Cain's demise is weighing on us all. Instead of elation at having the answers within our grasp, it almost feels as though the task has gotten heavier.

“We’re all here,” I say. “Who wants to start?”

The awkwardness that follows is so thick that it presses against my skin. Gideon and Silas might’ve decided that they’re happy to do this, but I’m willing to bet neither of them has thought through how to broach the subject. They’d happily dance around the subject for hours if left alone.

“Start?” Evie’s confusion is plain down the bond.

Typical. They haven’t even told her why we’re all here.

“This was my idea,” Silas admits, sitting back on his haunches and shooting an aggravated glance at me. “Vane said that our thrall bond isn’t complete because I’m holding back.”

Her blue eyes flick to me, and the corner of my lips turn down, letting her know without words that’s not what I meant.

I wish he hadn’t brought me into this.

“Silas thinks you need to know the story of how the original pack broke,” I grunt. “As Finn doesn’t know either, this seems like as good a time as any to air the skeletons in the closet.”

Then we can never speak of it again.

I’m surprised at my own reticence, but I suppose Gideon and Silas weren’t the only two who kept this quiet. I’ve had countless chances to bring this up over the decades, but I haven’t. Perhaps I wasn’t as healed as I thought.

“We were all born into the Boreal Pack under Gid’s father,” Silas continues. “Our parents were betas, and our eldest sister, Isla, was an omega. Our father died in a pack skirmish shortly after Mia’s birth, which left our mother with a lot of hard choices to make in a short amount of time.”

“My father was an asshole.” Gideon takes over, testing his own marshmallow with his fingers before putting it back to the flames. “He was one of the first alphas poisoned by Cain—though we didn’t know that at the time. He was a rough bastard, treated omegas like shit, and grew increasingly paranoid about threats to his rule and his legacy. He made an agreement with their mother when I was a kid. If Isla agreed to mate me and cement my place as alpha of a new pack, he’d take care of their family. Isla and I were friends, but nothing more.”

My throat tightens as I remember what came next.

“For years, we kept up a charade of interest. We didn’t date others to appease my father, but we both acknowledged that we didn’t want each

other. But we were teenagers...”

Open to exploring when they thought adults weren’t looking. Eager to take risks for the thrill of it.

Gideon doesn’t look like he can continue, and Silas is staring at the corner of the room, lost to his thoughts.

“Isla had a girlfriend in secret,” I finish for them. “I knew a little about it, though I was busy with my role as pack school-master back then. The 1700s were a more innocent time. Any and all time females spent with each other was assumed to be just friendship, so they didn’t raise any concerns. Until the night when Isla decided to kiss her lover goodnight on the doorstep, right as Alpha Ryland walked past.”

It was a stupid move. The kind of thing only a teenager caught up in love would do.

I’ve always hoped that Isla didn’t see death coming for her. That she died only thinking of her lover’s lips on hers.

Unrealistic, given the state of her body, but we all choose to accept the version of reality we can deal with.

“He tore her to pieces,” Silas recalls, dully. “I was out drinking, and when I came home, she was just gone... a coffin in her room, and the doorstep was already clean.”

I did that. To stop him and Mia from seeing the blood. To protect them from what I’d already seen.

“Our mother was too broken to do more than sleep and stare at a wall.” Silas hangs his head, the firelight casting shadows across his face. “The death of an omega is shattering to the pack. Vane and I were ready to challenge our alpha, to demand blood. We would’ve died, and we didn’t care.”

“They were my best friends,” Gideon mutters, pulling a perfectly charred marshmallow from the fire and handing it to Finn. “I couldn’t let them go to their deaths. Not when Mia was still so young. Not when I should’ve broken off the sham engagement long before it got to that point.”

“You were only twenty,” I retort. “I was older.”

“He was my sin to bear.”

My teeth grind together. Those are the same words he used to repeat whenever we caught him with bruises on his face as a kid.

“Gid killed his father,” Silas says, cutting off the blame game before it can continue. “Won a challenge against a man three centuries older with

little more than luck and a wicked right hook.”

“It was a hideous fight.” For months after, all I could see before I went to sleep was my hands helping him force his own guts back into his abdomen.

Silas rolls his eyes at the interruption. “When he won, his mother—the pack omega—declared him alpha. The very next second, he disbanded the entire pack.”

“It was too toxic to save,” Gideon grumbles. “Most of the alphas and betas had started to buy into Ryland’s rhetoric of alphas first, everyone else last.”

“We stayed with our mother and Mia for a week,” Silas says. “And Vane took us out sledding to distract us.”

In reality, I’d taken them outside because I’d spent the last five minutes yelling at our mother and I needed to cool off. She’d turned to drink soon after Isla’s death, and her lack of interest in being a parent to Silas and Mia had grated on me. Her words became cruel when liquor loosened her tongue, and she held nothing back in the row.

It was either leave or say something I would regret. For a while, I regretted making that choice. I blamed myself. But if it hadn’t been that day, it would have been the next, or the next.

Our Ma died with Isla. Her physical body just perished a little later.

“When we came home, Vane walked in the door, then turned around and shoved us back to stop us from going inside.”

Silas’s eyes meet mine, and I wonder dimly if he resents me for stealing a final memory of our mother from him. Sure, it was her corpse hanging from a bannister, but still, for him, he’ll never have the closure of seeing her death.

Just like with Isla, as far as my teen brother was concerned, he left the house, and when he returned, there was a pine box and mourning cloths.

“She hung herself.” Gideon finds the strength to finish the tale for us, and I’m grateful. My own mouth seems to have been glued shut.

“The loss of Isla was too much,” Silas agreed.

“Selfish bitch,” Finn growls. “One child isn’t worth fucking up the lives of the other three—omega or not.”

The corners of my mouth turn down.

Once I might’ve agreed with him. As an angry young lycan thrust into guardianship of his siblings, it was easier to blame Ma. But after several

lifetimes of studying the human psyche in my spare time, I've come to realise that depression is a very real monster. It consumes every thought of its host if given the chance.

Packless, isolated, without a mate, and grieving the loss of her daughter, she never stood a chance.

I protected my siblings from the deaths of both Ma and Isla, but I couldn't control the events that led to that.

"We sent Mia to live with our mother's birth pack, in Paris," I mutter. "Our uncle swore to look after her, and I sent him a small fortune every year for her care."

Which reminds me, he never mentioned her leaving. Has the bastard been pocketing the money all this time? I make a mental note to deal with him when I get a chance.

"We couldn't have taken her with us, but we weren't going to leave Gid to go lone wolf," Silas agrees.

He's staring so earnestly at Evie. I can practically see him begging the thrall bond to solidify.

To his mind, he's emptied the skeletons in his closet, and that should be enough.

The slump of his shoulders telegraphs his disappointment a minute later.

"Wait," Evie mumbles. "If that's how you all met, how did Vane become a hybrid?"

I snort. "That's a much more recent development."

"The idiot got wolfsbane poisoning when we were tracking down a bunch of traitors for Cain." Draven strokes a hand along her throat. "Fucking pup begged me to turn him so he wouldn't die."

My jaw clenches, and I have to work to calm myself.

That wasn't Silas's call to make.

I don't blame him for not wanting to lose another sibling—I might've done the same in his place—but being a hybrid is a special kind of hell. Being a hybrid under Cain's thumb was even worse.

"Cain wasn't pleased," Gideon grumbles. "Took a literal pound of flesh from all of us for it, but we completed the mission, and Vane stayed out of sight while he came to grips with his bloodlust."

"So he let you live." Evie chews her bottom lip thoughtfully. "That's a rarity, but if he's always suspected you were working for Frost, then perhaps he did it to continue the charade."

Silas shrugs. “I didn’t give a shit what he thought. I couldn’t lose my fucking brother.”

With that, he stands up and strides from the room, slamming the front door behind him. A howl eclipses the drumming of the rain outside, but it grows fainter as Silas gets farther away, retreating into the storm.

“He’s upset that his idea didn’t work,” Evie announces gloomily. “I’ll go—”

“No.” I cut her off, deliberately unclenching my jaw. “This is my fault. When he’s cooled off, I’ll speak to him.”

“Did you really think this would work?” Finn asks.

I shake my head. “Silas heard what he wanted to hear. You two will form your bond when you’re both ready. Not when he’s trying to force it.”

I hand my skewer to Finn, suddenly not hungry, and slump into the spare arm chair.

A rustle of clothing makes me look up just in time for Evie’s frame to fill my vision. Wordlessly, she climbs onto my lap, offering comfort. I let her.

The scent of her soothes me more than anything else could, and I start to doubt my decision not to let her go after Silas.

“What do you think is holding him back?” she murmurs, the sound for my ears alone.

I sigh, then reply in the same quiet tone. “Silas has seen two of the most important women in his life just disappear without warning. It had more of an effect on him than he’d like to admit.”

And because this is Evie—with her brilliant, smart mind—she gets it. “He’s waiting for me to do the same thing. The thrall bond won’t form until he’s certain I’m not going anywhere.”

Bingo.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



SILAS

WHY DIDN'T IT WORK? DAYS LATER AND I STILL CAN'T FIGURE IT OUT. If I was holding anything back from Evie, that was it. There are no secrets now, unless the thrall bond wants me to recount every single second of my three hundred years on this earth.

It can't? Right?

Vane's usually right with his observations about me. I blame it on him being the nosy, interfering big brother. So did he somehow get this wrong?

I run faster, punishing my body for whatever is wrong with me as I cover as much ground as possible. I've taken the outer perimeter every night for the last few days. The camp is coming together, and with the increased activity, we've had to triple our guard.

More people means more people to let slip our location to Cain, and the pack is stressed. If the people don't tip him off, the fact that our remote part of Canada has had almost ten times the expected amount of rainfall for September—thanks to Evie's training—might raise a few brows.

At least she's moved on from weather magic in the last few days. The air is cool and dry against my skin, though the soil remains soft underfoot.

Both she and Vane have tried to talk to me since my disastrous attempt at baring my soul to her. I've shot all of their attempts down, and for the most part, they've given me space.

Even Finn has the good sense to leave me alone.

I can't be the only thrall who never has a full bond with her. It just doesn't make sense. Did I mess up the bond somehow? Get the incantation wrong?

I pass another sentry and nod in acknowledgement. Then I pass a second and groan. That's my replacement. Have I really been out here so long already?

Reluctantly, I turn back for the river. Maybe a swim will clear my head before I go back to the pack house.

I strip off on the bank and dive headfirst into the moonlit water. It's icy cold, despite the time of year, and I come up gasping as my lungs protest the sudden shock. Swimming against the current makes my muscles protest,

but I embrace the burn and the blissful absence of thought that comes with pushing my body to the limit.

Until I hear her voice.

I can't make out her words, but it's definitely her.

I've swum farther than I thought, and when I look across the bank, she's there, ankle deep in the water, holding one of those pages in one hand, and her bleeding hand in the air before her. Her jeans are rolled up to her knees, her shoes abandoned on the grass.

I tread water, watching as she frowns and lowers her hand, cursing, before double checking the grimoire page again.

So damned gorgeous, even when she's frustrated. When she squashes the page beneath one arm and uses the blade at her hip to slice a new line in her hand, I expect blood to flow.

Instead, red fire drips from the wound, falling onto the water and forming fiery serpents that race outwards from her.

The hairs on the back of my neck rise as ribbons of flame dance around her. Every instinct in my body screams at me that this is unnatural. Wrong.

The fire doesn't even smoke.

My lycan side wants to run away, but my human side appreciates the beauty and power of what she's doing.

A slight nip on my ass breaks the spell, and I sink, swallowing dark river water before I come back up spluttering. A glowing red snake twines its way up my body, then hisses directly into my face before retreating back to Evie.

She's looking at me, dark elegant brows raised in challenge.

"That's what you get for ignoring me and then spying on me," she says.

I cough in answer, swimming closer now that I'm caught. I emerge from the river freezing cold but stiffen when the fire snakes head right for me.

"Relax," Evie says. "They'll dry you off."

I press a hand over my heart in mock offence, trying my hardest not to react as the fire snakes slither up my torso. "You don't like the view?"

Her eyes dip down, then back up as her magical beasts trail warmth over my body. Actually, this feels kind of nice. If I could shut my instincts up, I might even enjoy it.

Soon, every part of me not touching the water is dry.

"You're good at this," I observe, watching the slight furrow in her brow as she works.

It's the only outward sign that she's concentrating.

Instead of glowing under the praise, she simply shrugs. "When you've lived as long as I have, you learn how to master new things quickly or die."

Is that a result of living so long, or of being raised by a vampire who demanded perfection?

Silence falls between us, the awkwardness of days ago reaching through time to cut off any further conversation. Awkwardness *I've* created.

"I didn't mean to ignore you," I mumble. "And I wasn't spying. I was swimming to clear my head."

She offers me a soft smile. "I figured as much."

That's it? Nothing else? She's not going to bring it up?

The fire snakes slither silently around us, cresting the shallow waves around us drawing silent mandala patterns around the two of us.

I follow their movements with my eyes, trying not to shift my weight from foot to foot as I try to figure out what to say next.

Evie takes the decision out of my hands. Her soft laugh fills the night a second before her lips capture mine. I suck in a breath, but I can't help kissing her back even as I try to figure out what this means. Is it a forgiveness kiss? Is it—

She pulls back. "I can feel you overthinking, Silas. I'm not angry that you needed space."

A glance below shows that her little fire snakes have dissipated, and I curse the lack of a distraction.

"I just thought..." I trail off and give in to the urge to tug her close. "I *hoped* it would form the bond. I just don't know what I'm doing wrong."

There's a strange kind of fierceness in her gaze as she leans back and beholds me. "You're doing nothing wrong," she promises. "We have all the time in the world for a full bond to form, and if I'm honest..."

"What?"

"I need time to get used to having so many of them. I'm glad they've formed at different paces, it gives me room to breathe. Sometimes..."

She trails off, and a lost expression eclipses her face.

"Sometimes?" I prompt.

"Sometimes it feels like there are too many emotions in my chest. I can't tell what's me and what belongs to everyone else."

My gut sinks. "Do you need to break them?"

Her eyes widen in alarm. “No! Never. I don’t want that. We’re a pack, and the bonds give me that connection to all of you. I just have to work on compartmentalising a bit better.”

When she puts it like that, it sounds almost like she’s glad for the lack of a bond between us. Maybe Vane was wrong. Maybe Evie *is* the one holding our bond back, but she’s doing it because she’s struggling, rather than because I’m not as worthy as the others.

That thought comforts me, and I wrap an arm around her waist. “Are you almost done practising? This water is cold.”

The tip of one fang peeks out from between her lips to nibble at the lower one. “No, but there is one spell I want to try that requires a helper, if you’re interested.”

Help with the creepy blood magic?

“Sure.” I shrug off the discomfort that the idea brings. “What do you want me to do?”

She takes my hand in answer and leads me out of the water and onto the bank. The rest of her grimoire pages are in a binder on the ground, safely nestled inside protective plastic wallets. She slips the paper she was using back inside and plucks out a new one, then rummages in the bag beside it, drawing out a plastic bag full of dried crushed leaves and petals... Strange. The bag is muffling the scent, but I could swear there are hints of...

I hiss and take back a step.

“Wolfsbane?” I can’t keep the accusation from my tone.

“I’m not going to let it touch you,” she promises. “I need it for this, but I’m keeping it safely away from everyone in the pack.”

Logically, I know touching it for a second is no worse than touching silver, but if that stuff gets inside my body, my blood or my lungs...

Death.

Agonising. Painful. Death.

I remember Vane going pale, then throwing up blood and convulsing before I could convince Draven to turn him.

A shiver runs up my spine as she pops open the bag and carefully extracts a handful of the dried leaves before resealing it and putting it back. Crouching, she sprinkles a line of wolfsbane on the sandy riverbank between us before drawing her dagger once more and drenching the line with more of her blood. All the while, she chants in a strange language. I

can't even make out the syllables. It's like my ears can't quite translate the sounds to my brain.

She cuts her hand again, drawing more blood, and I can't help but grimace at how much she's using.

Then she digs the dagger into the dirt and wrenches it through the ground, following the line of scarlet-flecked wolfsbane.

Ruby red smokeless flames appear again, flaring briefly between us before settling into nothingness.

Did it not work?

Evie bites at her lower lip before licking the wound on her hand closed.

"Try to hug me?"

I frown, wondering what she means by 'try' as I step closer.

I slam head first into a brick wall. A red glow bathes me for a second, radiating out from where I hit only to dissipate a second later.

"What the hell?" I demand, rubbing my forehead, which took the brunt of the damage.

I put my hand out, feeling for the barrier I can't see, but I certainly felt.

There it is. Strange. When I try to touch it, it feels like pressing my hand into a sheet of melted toffee. Sticky and warm. When I pull my hand away, I can still feel tendrils of whatever it is lingering on my skin.

Confused, I give it an experimental kick, only to curse as the barrier becomes rock solid.

Shit. I think I broke a toe.

Evie offers me a small smile. "So... it worked?"

"Yeah. Is this...?"

"This one is just for lycans, but when the white oak arrives with tomorrow's supply drop, I should be able to make one that works on vampires as well. It should keep Cain and Ivan in one place." She pauses, thoughtfully. "The problem is, I have no idea if it's strong enough. They might be able to force their way through it, especially if they've seen this kind of magic before."

"If he's been hunting witches for thousands of years, he probably has," I agree, pressing my hand back to the barrier and testing it again.

Still no give. I walk to the side of the line, relieved to find that I can still step around the thing, and pull Evie into a hug.

"Take it down?" I suggest. "We can head back to the house and take the rest of the night off. You've worked hard and used a lot of blood on this."

I'm sure you're probably hungry."

Please be hungry. I'm painfully aware of how naked I am and my cock, as always, is broadcasting my hopeful intentions like a damned flagpole.

"Sounds good," she says, and that hand of hers brushes lightly over the skin of my shaft as she draws away and gathers her stuff.

Tease.

I come up behind her, gripping her hips and fitting myself against her ass with a grin. She straightens, and I brush a kiss against her throat.

Then I take off, running towards the pack house with a shouted, "Last one there has to sleep in the wet spot!"

Her muffled curse makes me laugh, and I grin as she uses her vampire speed and quickly overtakes me. I'll let her cheat... this time.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



EVELYN

THE NEXT EVENING, I WAKE UP AND HEAD DOWNSTAIRS TO FIND FINN and Gideon lounging on the sofa together. Both of them are tapping away at their tablets—clearly already working despite the time—but there are casual touches between them that make it clear they’re viscerally aware of each other at every moment. A brush of an arm here, a casual affectionate nudge there.

Their relationship is sewing itself back together. The full moon went perfectly, and it seems like they’re only getting closer.

With my own happiness for them, comes the soft sad realisation that they don’t need me anymore. Gideon and I made the agreement to last until he had a stable relationship with Finn.

Now he does.

Finn looks up from his tablet with a concerned frown. “What are you thinking about that has you so...?”

“Sad,” Gideon finishes for him.

I hesitate at the bottom of the stairs. “I think we need to have a talk.”

Gideon stiffens, and his anticipation and dread leak down the bond. Finn, on the other hand, is just confused.

“Sure?” He says it like a question, and I take that as my cue to move to the sofa opposite.

“Our agreement was that I’d help you both until you were comfortable together,” I begin. “Talking with that therapist has really helped Gid make progress, and you’re both...” Fucking like rabbits. “Comfortable.”

Gideon’s fangs are down, but given his emotions, I can’t tell if the reaction is aggressive or defensive. Maybe it’s both. I don’t think he’s even noticed.

Either way, his control may be good, but given how recently he was turned—something I keep forgetting—I watch my own response carefully. I don’t want him to throw away weeks of progress over a biological reaction to anything I do, and vampires can be territorial about blood.

Both of us are feeding from Finn, even though, by rights, I have the only claim to his blood. Technically, I have twice the claim to Gideon’s

because he's my thrall and I'm his sire, but as Finn isn't a blood drinker, that won't be an issue.

"Do you want it to end?" he asks.

"You didn't want me to start with," I reason, keeping my own reaction tightly under control. "If you'd prefer to move to a platonic—"

"Oh, for fuck's sake! You two are dancing around this like—" Finn cuts off, at a loss for words. "Gid, would you say the situation has changed since you made the original agreement?"

He hesitates, fangs receding slightly. "Yes."

"How?" The omega challenges.

Gideon looks away, running a hand through his hair. Down the thrall bond, his natural reticence is creeping in, fuelled in part by... embarrassment?

His head falls back, and he lets out a huff. "Because I've developed... feelings." He says the last word like it's cursed. "My instinct still thinks of you as an omega, and even if it didn't, you're a remarkable woman worthy of my pack. We have amazing sex, and you fit perfectly between Finn and me when—" He cuts off with a groan. "I know I am not an easy man to love—or like, even—but I'm supposed to be working on my own self-worth. So as much as I know I *should* tell you to end this to spare yourself... please don't."

The corners of my mouth creep up without meaning to. *Gideon wants me to keep him.*

"That was the most awful proposal I've ever heard," I muse, messing with him because I can.

His shoulders actually slump before he uses his common sense and checks the bond between us.

"You're happy," he marvels. "You... you didn't want to end it?"

I shake my head.

It would be so easy to brush the moment off, to claim I simply enjoyed his knot, or the sex, but Gideon is still healing. He deserves the unvarnished truth.

"You're a good man, and you care deeply for your pack." I pause. "And, for the record, I don't think you're difficult to love at all."

Beside him, Finn's grin has been slowly growing since I started talking, creasing his cheeks and lighting his eyes. He gives his alpha a playful I-told-you-so nudge, and Gideon almost falls out of his seat.

“We should re-establish the ground rules,” he mutters. “Make sure everyone—”

“The ground rules are the same,” Finn cuts him off. “Everyone fucks whoever they like—so long as they’re pack and both parties are consenting. If we have issues, we can call on the rest of the pack to moderate them and help us through. That’s what family is for. The only difference is that Evie isn’t our buffer anymore. She has her own relationships with both of us, separate from the one we have with each other. Now, go kiss her like you fucking want to.”

The omega all but shoves his alpha from his seat and across the space between us. Gideon’s mouth descends on mine as his arms drag me into his body. His kiss is accompanied by a wave of disbelief and hesitance down the thrall bond, but the desperate motion of his lips claiming mine reveals none of it. His hands cling to me, branding me with his warmth.

A shiver runs down my spine, and I’m ready to suggest we start something right here on the sofa, regardless of who might come in, when an alarm sounds from somewhere outside.

Gideon draws back with a curse, glaring at the door just in time for Vane to burst through it.

“Reports of vampires on the eastern border,” he snaps, dumping cold water over our ardour.

My heart jumps into my throat.

Cain found us? So soon?

Gideon goes from concerned, vulnerable man to hardened leader in a flash. “How many?”

“Reports say only scouts so far.” Vane crosses the room and grabs a short, brutally sharp sword from one of the stashes around the house.

The beta chucks his alpha a weapon as Finn sighs and heads for the office.

“I’ll be in the safe room keeping watch on all of you,” he says, pressing a soft kiss to Gideon’s cheek before rummaging in another drawer and holding out a black case of familiar devices. “Don’t forget your earpieces.”

Gideon and Vane grab the tiny black dots from him, and Finn hands me mine. I brush a kiss over his lips as I press it into my ear. His task done, the omega quickly retreats to the office, and the heavy bolts thunk into place, ensuring his safety.

The other two give me a passing glance. They may not say anything, but their thrall bonds scream that they'd rather I was also stashed away in the safe room.

Fat chance.

My sword and dagger are propped up by the door, and I grab both as I lead the way out of the house. Finn's drones soar overhead as we take our first steps out into the rain.

"This way," Vane growls, taking point.

"Where are the others?" I ask.

"Silas and Frost were on patrol," Gideon replies. "They're probably already there. Draven was still trying to get cress out of his bike, but Finn will text him the location."

Our run through the forest is tense. Even Finn is uncharacteristically quiet. His habitual hums of concentration are notably absent.

Soon, the sound of swords clashing reaches us, and my fangs descend in readiness. If this is Cain's scouts, then—

We burst into a clearing, and I stop dead. The scene that greets me is nothing like what I had anticipated.

A loose semicircle of gathered vampires I don't recognise are watching Frost get his idiot ass beaten by my brother. Silas is unconscious in the mud beside them, alongside another of our lycans.

"Samuel!" I call, dropping my sword in surprise.

My call distracts both men, and their eyes widen as they take me in.

"Eve?"

"Evelyn," Gideon grumbles, bending to pick up my sword. "Who is this guy?"

"Evonna." Samuel's face crinkles in relief. "If you could? It appears my gift worked a little faster than I anticipated." He looks sheepish as he gestures to Frost and the unconscious lycan lying in the mud. "I did as little damage as I could."

"Stand down. It's Samuel, remember? We met him in Egypt. His gift is being forgettable."

"Oh shit," Frost's eyes widen, and he takes a step back. "I... kind of remember you?"

Samuel chuckles. "I get that a lot. Don't worry. Sigurd once went three years without seeing me, and upon his return to our sire's court tried to murder me, convinced I was some new upstart vamppling."

I smile, because I remember that. “You wiped the floor with him.”

Samuel inclines his head. “I received the message your packmate left and gathered what few of my kin I could who are willing to fight. We’ve come to join you.”

All of the tension that filled my body at Vane’s interruption leaves, and I can’t fight the impulse to run up to him. In two bounds, I’ve wrapped him in a hug. He freezes for a second, then chuckles.

“I am glad to see you too, little sister.”

“We should get out of the rain,” Vane growls, hefting an unconscious Silas over one shoulder with a grunt of annoyance. “Then we can bring you up to speed.”

“I’m issuing commands to stand down,” Finn mumbles. “Is it weird I can’t even remember leaving him a message? It feels weird. His gift is trippy.”

Perhaps it’s because I’m older, or merely an effect of having spent so much time with him over centuries, but I haven’t forgotten him in the short time it’s been since we parted.

It doesn’t take long for us to get his vampires settled. Samuel chooses to bunk with his men but follows us to the pack house after dumping his small bag of stuff beside a bunk. He sits quietly as we get him up to speed and nods solemnly at the news of Immy’s final betrayal.

His eyes sharpen as I reveal the truth of how Cain came to be, but the news of Ivan and Grigoriy sets him to pacing.

“You’ve sent Morwenna to search for this ghoul?”

Frost nods, rubbing at the almost healed scab across the bridge of his nose. I let him take a sip of my blood, but I gave the majority to Silas, who was suffering a broken leg and a concussion. He almost attacked Samuel a second time before we could explain what had happened. Now he’s snuggled against Finn on the love seat, surveying the elder vampire with a frown.

He’s lucky Samuel didn’t want him dead. My brother is old. Powerful. We’re fortunate he’s on our side.

“They’ve not sent word in several days,” Finn adds. “They were looking into a cave system in Vietnam, so it’s possible that they’ve lost signal.”

“I must say, I am surprised to learn of Ivan’s true age,” Samuel strokes his chin thoughtfully. “I’ve never seen him speak to Cain with anything other than true obeisance. He was already a fixture in court when I was

turned. It makes sense now that he was always so close to our sire.” He pauses. “How powerful is he, really? If he’s been hiding his age, then it’s possible he’s been making himself appear weaker as well.”

“Unlikely,” I reply. “Cain would never allow someone more powerful to remain so close to him. If Ivan is stronger than he appears, it’s still nothing compared to Cain.”

“He’s a beta,” Vane grunts. “Our strength is in protecting. We can take damage and keep going. Alphas are stronger by nature, and that strength isn’t dependent on how many generations we are removed from the first lycan. I’m willing to bet Gideon could put Ivan down with one hand.”

Samuel dips his head to acknowledge both of our points. “At least *he* is a known entity. Grigoriy is not. Do you hope to find an ally in him?”

His eyes pierce me, and I can’t help fidgeting. “In all honesty, I’m just hoping he’s sane enough to talk to me,” I admit. “I need to know going into this whether this spell will kill me.”

Frost’s head snaps up, fangs peeking out from beneath his upper lip. “And if it will, she won’t be doing it.”

“Agreed,” Gid mutters, and the rest of the pack joins in.

I nod my acquiescence. “I’m not keen on dying. I won’t argue with you, but it limits us. We don’t know of another way... or another witch.”

“Force one of the Greek witches into it,” Finn suggests. “Train someone else. There’s got to be dormant witch blood in *someone*.”

Samuel says nothing, but I can feel his grim disapproval. I agree, the idea of training another witch like a lamb to the slaughter doesn’t sit well with me, either.

“You are not a child, Evonnia. You know your options are few, and now that you have taken this stand against Cain...”

Backing out isn’t on the cards. I nod once to show I understand.

If it comes down to it, I’ll do it. I’ve lived through so much that my own death no longer terrifies me as it once did. But the idea of giving up a future with my thralls fills me with an unfathomable grief.

“A lifetime of hiding would’ve been nice,” I mutter.

“We would’ve gotten bored,” Finn retorts. “Silas can barely manage one week without tempting Draven to murder. Years without so much as a peep at Cain? Would never happen.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



EVELYN

THE WALL OF RED FIRE SPRINGS UP BETWEEN FROST AND ME A SECOND before his blade would've taken my head. His sword bounces harmlessly off, and Vane, who was trying to spring a surprise attack from behind me, is flung away as well.

"Good," Gideon calls. "You're getting faster."

I straighten from my crouch in the middle of the dirt ring and grimace.

Good isn't fast enough. Two hybrids are as close as we can come to mimicking Cain's speed and strength, but there was barely a fraction of an instant between the barrier going up and the sword striking it.

Cain would've killed me before I managed to defend myself. Still, I suppose it's good enough to use against other, less powerful opponents.

The strategist in me isn't impressed. This power comes with limits, chief amongst them the pouches of herbs I have strapped to my belt. Once those run out, I'm restricted to basic magic. It also relies heavily on my blood, which is fine when all of my thralls are here and ready to replenish me, but in the heat of the battle, draining them isn't practical.

It's been a month since I started learning, and while the others see great progress, I see a huge weakness. Even if I had years to master this—which I don't—witchcraft simply isn't cut out for use in vampire battles. If I'm going to use it against Cain, I need to control the battleground.

That's not going to happen, because he's never going to leave New York while he holds the tactical advantage.

"It is impressive," Samuel adds, breaking me out of my grim musings. "Though I doubt our sire fears the craft simply for the ability to create shields. Have you made any progress with the ritual to unmake him?"

I bite my lip and nod. "Yes, but..."

"But what?" he asks.

"I'll need time to set up the trap to keep him and Ivan in place long enough for the spell to work." I sheathe my weapons, done for the day.

Samuel and Gideon have been watching us spar from the sidelines, and I make my way over to them slowly. Draven is with them, recovering from the last match where he lost most of his toes to the barrier when it sprung up while he wasn't looking.

“We’ve planned for that,” my vampire reminds me. “We already agreed to sneak into New York ahead of the army, remember?”

He waves his hand at the huge camp that’s grown in the last few weeks. The cabins have been extended time and time again, and some of the resistance are currently living in tents while we try to find places to put them. This isn’t even the whole force. The Echo Lake pack are allowing us to use their pack lands to house the other half of our army.

I worry that it still isn’t enough.

“We need to lure Cain to us when the time is right,” I add. “And a way to trick him into the trap.”

Considering he’s obviously well enough acquainted with witchcraft to recognise it, I’m almost certain he won’t fall for our plan, unless we use a bait he can’t resist.

Frost snarls, sensing my thoughts. “We agreed, no.”

I sigh. “I know we did, but we have to remain open to the fact that he wants me. That makes me an effective bait, if it comes to it.”

Draven hisses a soft denial and drags me against his body.

Vane steps in, holding his hands out in a diplomatic gesture. “We—”

“They’ve found him!” Finn erupts from the main house behind us, glasses askew as he searches for us. Silas trails behind him, looking torn. “Grigoriy’s in Vietnam! Morwen and Mia tracked him down to a cave system, but he’s stuck behind a barrier...” The omega trails off, glancing up with wide eyes. “They say it looks like witchcraft.”

“So a witch sealed him away?” Samuel asks. “That doesn’t bode well for us.”

“Did they say anything else?” Gideon says, cautiously. “Anything about what his mental state is like...”

Finn shakes his head. “It was a short message, left on one of our old channels. I’m guessing if they’re underground, they must not have much signal. Some of the caves on that side of the world take days to traverse.”

“They said nothing else?” Vane growls, starting to pace. “Nothing about how Mia is doing?”

Gideon rolls his eyes but says nothing. Finn mutters something that sounds like ‘overprotective brother issues,’ and I just sigh.

“We have to go,” I decide. “If that barrier is made by witches, maybe I can bring it down.” I turn to Frost. “It won’t be a long trip.”

The ghoul cants his head to one side, thinking, before turning to Samuel. "Will you manage things here until our return?"

"Of course," he replies. "I'm no stranger to running an organised military, after all."

Frost and Gideon share a look and a nod, silently communicating between themselves.

"We'll take a chopper to Alaska," Gideon finally says. "Then a jet across the Pacific. Everyone, get your shit together. We leave in an hour."

The rest of the pack departs, but Draven keeps me pinned in place. "Want to help me heal my toe before we leave, doll?"

I gasp, tilting my head to one side in silent agreement. Draven doesn't hesitate.

His fangs sink into my neck faster than a striking cobra, pinning me in place with bruising force as he delivers a shot of venom strong enough to make my knees weak. If not for him holding me up, I might've fallen under the bolt of desire that rockets through me from his bite straight to my pussy.

"Your venom is getting stronger," I comment breathlessly, as I try desperately to keep my wits.

As much as I want to jump his bones, I know Gideon wasn't kidding about us having to get ready in one hour, and I need to pack as much as I can, because I have no idea what it will take to break this barrier.

Draven withdraws with a slow, teasing lick. "Maybe it's a perk of drinking your blood."

Perhaps. It certainly can't hurt. Most vampires don't have someone as old and powerful as me to drink from regularly, so perhaps it has influenced his development. Or maybe it's simply something unique to him. He is only second generation himself, a single step down the ladder from my sisters and me.

I turn in his arms and press a soft kiss to his jaw before pulling away. "Maybe. We should get our stuff."

He traps me. "In such a hurry to chase down a ghoul, doll?"

I raise one brow. "You know why this matters."

"What if he can't help you? What will you do then?"

Why is he asking me this? Is he testing my resolve? "I'll do what I need to."

The corners of his mouth turn down, and down the thrall bond, his ever-present ice creaks and cracks. Draven will do anything to see Callie and

Cain dead for what they did to him and his family, but no part of him wants to see me sacrifice myself in the process.

“If Grigoriy has been trapped behind a barrier for this long, we could do the same for Cain while we try to figure things out.”

Even as I offer the words, I know it wouldn't work. Cain is too dangerous to keep locked up like that. Any one of his allies might attempt to free him, knowing the rewards he'd heap upon them. Also... I don't yet know my magic well enough to trust it to last against such a powerful foe.

Draven nods once, releasing me. “Go. We'll figure everything else out when we've tracked down the damn wolves' baby sister.”

I smother a grin. “I know you like them really,” I retort. “You find Silas amusing. Admit it.”

The bond ices over, and he strides into the house with a cold smirk. “I'd rather have my nails torn off.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



EVELYN

WE TOUCH DOWN IN DONG HOI A LITTLE AFTER SUNDOWN, BUT I barely have time to take in the beauty of the white beaches. Frost and Gideon are on high alert. The whole pack dislikes how exposed we are in the city. We leave the bustling streets as quickly as possible, heading into the countryside, where we trade a small fortune in credits to a resistance sympathiser for an all terrain vehicle to take us deep into the rainforest.

In the hour or so since we started driving, we've crossed two rivers and one rickety bridge that looked five seconds away from snapping. On the dashboard, the little red dot showing the coordinates Mia sent us blinks closer and closer, but there's no sign that anyone else has touched this place. Not even a footpath.

"How the fuck did your sister find this cave?" Frost demands, as we hit a particularly deep dip and the car jerks.

I grit my teeth against the jarring impact before I reply, "Morwen just follows her gut."

"All the way out here?" Silas looks incredulous.

I don't like it, but not for the same reason.

Why did Grigoriy come this far east? The journey would've been difficult in the past, even for an immortal. Was he running from Cain? How did he become trapped by witchcraft? This ghoulish has presented me with more questions than answers, and I need to know how he fits in with all of this.

"This must be the entrance," Gideon says, dragging me out of my thoughts.

The alpha brakes sharply. The river we've been following rushes downwards into the yawning mouth of a vast sinkhole that stretches into a cave. The rain forest has followed the path of the water, almost completely obscuring the dark entrance below. A chill shivers up my spine as I look around. Perhaps it's simply the poor light, but this place is creepy.

"Their coordinates stop here," Finn adds, jumping out of the car, tablet in hand. "But the cave system could go on for miles. There's no telling where the two of them are."

"Or," Silas interrupts. "We could just follow those."

He points at the cave wall, where a single piece of bright reflective fabric has been pinned to the wall with a heavy duty nail. Now that I'm looking, I can see another beyond it.

"They left us a trail," Frost says. "Brilliant."

"Gather everything we might need," Gideon orders. "Vane, get the ATV out of sight. We don't want anyone stumbling across it."

"There are lots of ghouls around, so stick close," Frost adds, as the pack starts unloading the vehicle.

I'm not surprised by that—it's how we narrowed down Grigoriy's location, after all—but it does put me on my guard. Centuries of experience have honed my wariness of the creatures, even if two of the pack can control them. Going down there, into what might be a huge nest of the foul, rotten undead, is the last thing on earth I want to be doing.

Still, I say nothing as we descend the slippery, rocky incline into the darkness. Frost leads the way, followed by Silas and Vane. Draven and Gideon bring up the rear, and Finn and I are safely sandwiched in the middle of the group.

I'm not ignorant of the fact that they've put me in the well defended centre with the omega, but I'm not going to fight it this time. Not when my unease is so strong.

The roar of the river is the only sound besides our harsh breathing, and I grimace as I realise that the constant sound of animals, birds, and insects has stopped.

Even nature avoids this place.

The sharp beam of Frost's headlamp cuts through the gloom. It's not necessary, given our eyesight, but I'd be lying if I said it wasn't welcome. Finn digs his own out of his pack and hands me one as well. Soon seven starbursts of light illuminate our path, bouncing off the dark water and the dripping walls.

We barely speak as we trek deeper. I can see the ghouls in the shadows. Their putrid scent is heavy down here, and they move sluggishly, kept docile by Frost and Gideon's combined efforts.

"If Morwen and Mia are still down here, I hope they've found a way to protect themselves from the ghouls," I mumble after almost an hour of walking.

Silas slips in the ankle-deep water, and the ghoul we just passed hisses, as if to punctuate the statement.

“They can handle themselves,” Finn says reassuringly, as he holds a hand out to help me step around a gnarled looking stalactite. “They obviously managed to get in and out to contact us.”

“If it helps,” Frost adds. “None of these ghouls feel like they’ve eaten in a long time.”

Vane grunts, but it’s still not a happy sound.

“How much farther?” Silas asks.

“If I wanted to hide an immortal, I’d do it as far underground as inhumanly possible,” Draven retorts. “Now quit your howling.”

“Make me.”

“Come closer, and I will.”

“Enough.” Frost’s tone brokers no argument, and the two of them drop their banter.

I can’t help the secret smile that ghosts across my lips. Draven threatens to kill Silas on a daily basis, but the thrall bond reassures me he’d never actually do it. Some light maiming... maybe. But the psycho actually enjoys their little games—even if he’ll never admit it.

The next section of the cave is impossibly narrow. We split away from the main river, following a tiny branching stream with a low ceiling that requires us to almost crawl in places. Soon, even that’s gone, and all that remains are the slimy walls which shine under the light and the steady *plop, plop, plop* of some unseen echoing drip.

My unease from earlier has bloomed into a heart-clenching panic. While I wasn’t paying attention, claustrophobia has crept in, tightening around my chest and buzzing in my limbs until I’m hyper aware of every single sound we make. The pack can feel it, too. Every so often, Finn will glance back at me, shooting comfort at me along our bond. Silas will hum softly under his breath, distracting me.

I may be underground again, but this time I’m not sealed in a coffin. I can leave any time I choose. I keep repeating that mantra, breathing in the scents of my thralls to try to steady myself as I focus on putting one foot in front of the other.

Then Frost stops, bringing our progress to a halt.

“Gid...” he whispers. “Can you feel that?”

As one, the rest of us turn to face the alpha. Bathed in the light of our headlamps, he looks almost green. The thrall bond flashes with nausea and disgust.

“Yes,” he mutters. “And it’s getting stronger.”

I turn back to find Frost is physically sweating. “What is it?” I ask.

“I don’t know,” he admits. “But it’s *hungry*.”

With those ominous words, he turns back around and continues—slower this time.

His words echo in my mind as I scramble to catch up.

Finally, the tight crevice opens out, becoming a huge cavern whose ceiling has given way, allowing light in from above. A tiny splattering of grass and other small plants have sprung up in the centre of the limestone cavern, taking advantage of the sun. The pack naturally filters out, taking in the pale sky and looming forest above with grim expressions.

Draven sticks to the edge of the space, warily regarding the circle of weak light cast by the rising sun.

What seemed like a mere hour must have been longer if dawn is already threatening the horizon. Being underground must have warped my perception of time.

Branching off from this large cavern are several other smaller tunnels, none of them obviously marked, and I wander over to the closest, frowning.

“Which way now?” I wonder.

“That one,” Gid and Frost say at the same time, pointing.

I follow their outstretched arms and grimace.

The cave they’re pointing at is little more than a tall, thin crack in the wall. If possible, it’s even tighter than the one we just crawled out of.

My hesitation must show, because Finn reaches out and hooks an arm around me, squeezing.

“I want a rest before we go any farther,” he says. “I’m starving.”

Leaning over, I press a soft kiss to his lips. “Good idea.”

I just need a second to catch my breath. A moment to collect myself.

The rest of the pack doesn’t look so sure.

“Draven, Vane, and I will scout ahead,” Frost mutters. “This whole place smells of death and old blood. I’m concerned that we haven’t seen Morwen and Mia yet, but Grigoriy...”

“He’s close,” Gideon finishes, pinching his nose. “God. This is...”

“What’s happening?” Finn asks, brows creasing in concern. “Is it the pheromones?”

“Must be,” Frost answers. “I made sure we ate recently, but I could swear I’m starving.”

Gideon nods, his whole body stiff. That's when I put it together. Ate, as in, ate human flesh. It's so easy to forget that's a part of their daily life. Frost has lived with these cravings for centuries, but Gideon isn't so practised.

"Is this going to be a problem?" I ask, voicing the concern I feel from everyone.

"No." Frost moves towards the crevice. "If it gets too bad, we'll drink. Sometimes sating the thirst confuses the hunger for a while."

Gideon nods, though he doesn't look entirely convinced. I haven't missed the distance he's purposely keeping between himself and the rest of the pack, either. Not much, but enough to be noticeable.

Frost heads for the crack in the wall, followed by Draven and Vane. The beta shoots one last glance at the rest of us before he disappears, his eyes lingering on me.

I settle in for a long wait, using my pack as a seat to protect me from the soggy ground. I needn't have bothered. Less than five minutes later, the beta reappears at the crack.

"Come on," he urges, not even bothering to leave the crack completely as he beckons us towards him. "We've found it—him."

Without waiting for us, he disappears back into the darkness.

I stand, but before I can grab my pack, Gideon's taken it from me. He gestures for me to get going with a thrust of his chin, and I nod, sending my gratitude back along the bond. The cave we're about to enter is tight, but without my stuff strapped to my back, it will hopefully be more manageable.

Still, I take a deep breath before I squeeze my body into the space. Mercifully, it doesn't last long before the cave widens, becoming easier to deal with. The ceiling remains low, and the crunch of our steps across the sandy floor echoes loudly. Vane is visible in the distance, waiting by a particularly low-hanging section of the cave.

Ducking under, I straighten, then freeze.

Directly in front of me is a black barrier that looks like it's made of smoke. It cuts the cave in half, making it impossible to see farther than a few feet on the other side. On the floor before it, hundreds of bones are piled up, along with fresher, decaying corpses.

"Someone is trying to bring him food," Frost prods at the corpse of an older man with the toe of his boot. "Given the bite marks and the scratches,

I'd say it's the other ghouls."

Some of the corpses seem to have made it through the thick, swirling fog. The barrier—however old it is—remains strong, but apparently it allows dead and inanimate objects to cross. There are lots of seemingly random items just beyond it as well. I can make out a globe, an old television, and even a bundle of newspapers, bound together with string.

Have the ghouls been bringing him these things as tributes?

To test my theory, I kick a bone through the mist. It passes through effortlessly, but my own foot is stopped. I gnaw at my lip, wondering how the witch achieved this. My own barriers are solid to everything.

Whatever magic this is, it's beyond me to replicate it. I don't even know if I have the skill or the strength to bring it down.

I drop my bag in one corner and move closer. A chill runs down my spine, and the unease returns. Is that some effect of this magic? I originally put it down to my own fear of confinement, but perhaps there's something here, too. Something to keep the casual explorers away.

"They've painted the walls," Finn says, breaking the silence. "Look."

Sure enough, the cave wall is covered in dark brown markings, but I leave them to the omega, concentrating on the magic. I press one hand into the barrier, grimacing at how *sticky* it feels beneath my palm.

A clicking, scraping noise makes my muscles tense. Beyond the barrier, I can feel something stirring. Watching.

Surely, after all of this time, there's no way...

A skeletal face bursts out of the smoke, slamming against the barrier with a snarl. I jump back instinctively, snatching my hand away.

Whoever banged on the other side disappears back into the shadows, scuttling away as quickly as he appeared.

"He's still alive." I half expected he'd have fallen into a kind of stasis.

"Makes sense," Draven replies. "He's been fed. Imprisonment hasn't done much for his people skills, though."

Is that imprisonment, or simply a sign that he's no more sane than any other ghoul? Only one way to find out, I suppose...

"Grigoriy?" I venture, then stop.

I'm not even sure how to communicate with him. What language would he recognise? Latin? Or something older? Greek? Mandarin? Sanskrit?

I really should've thought this through earlier. A pang of sadness hits me as I realise Immy would have a better chance at this than me. I've

learned close to two dozen languages in my lifetime—to varying degrees of success—but she knew almost a hundred. It’s wrong to miss her, after the betrayal, but it doesn’t stop my stupid heart from sinking a little lower in my chest.

The clicking and scraping draws closer again, and I glimpse the silhouette of him in the back of the cave, barely visible in the gloom, even with my headlamp shining.

He’s hunched over, and when he moves, he lowers to all fours in a spider-like manner that reminds me of how Frost crawled over the walls of the sewers in Egypt. Then, as I watch, he leaps into the air, scuttling onto the ceiling in a seamless transition.

Grigoriy crawls closer to us with his head cocked at a curious angle.

I try his name again, followed by a string of words in Latin. He doesn’t even respond to the name. Okay...

“I don’t think he understands,” Silas mutters, unhelpfully.

“I got that much,” I retort, pacing.

The ghoul has stopped about a metre from the barricade. Just far enough that it’s difficult to make out his main features.

“I’ve never met a ghoul who understood language,” Frost begins, softly. “It’s entirely possible he’s the same.”

I step back with a groan, pressing the heels of my palms into my eyes. “Now what?” It seems this was a giant waste of time. “Wait.” I freeze, looking up. “If this is Grigoriy, where are Morwen and Mia?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



EVELYN

“THEIR STUFF ISN’T HERE,” VANE REALISES, CURSING.

“They must be here,” Gideon objects. “We followed their markers. They sent that message telling us to come.”

Frost looks around, nostrils flaring. “It’s been a few days, but their scents are here—a bit faint, but...” He trails off with a shrug.

“Do you think we somehow passed them and didn’t know?” I ask, confused.

“Or they left,” Silas hypothesises.

I stare at the ghoul on the ceiling, trying harder to pick out his features.

“Don’t you think it’s strange...” I begin, frowning. “That this ghoul’s clothing is so... modern?”

Draven comes up to stand beside me, squinting with me at the ghoul. “I wouldn’t call it modern, doll.”

What little remains of his ripped clothes are perhaps not modern, but they’re not old enough to be the ghoul we’re looking for.

“There are more.” Frost sinks his fingers into the gloopy barrier. “This is making it hard to feel them, but they’re back there.”

How did they get there?

“They must’ve died and turned after Grigoriy dragged them through to eat,” Gideon says, rubbing the bridge of his nose. “No way of knowing which of them is the ghoul we’re looking for.”

“You must forgive the welcome. I’m unused to having so much company.” To my relief, this new voice is speaking English, albeit halting and heavily accented. “First there were two, now there are seven...”

I can’t place him. He could be one of the shadowy ghouls, or he could be out of sight. Not being able to see him is discerning.

“Grigoriy, if that’s you, come out and face us.” I hope I sound bolder than I feel.

“I don’t think I shall. I’ve heard interesting things about you from the companions you sent to find me, Evelyn, daughter of Cain. If you want to talk, bring down the barrier.”

“Where are they?” Silas demands. “Did you do something to them?”

But Grigoriy keeps his word. No more answers come from beyond the shadowy veil that separates us from the ghouls beyond. I still can't tell which one is even him.

"If he's seen our people, that means they were here," Gideon assumes. "We should return to the main cavern, see—"

Frost holds up a hand for silence, and the entire cave freezes.

"Do you hear that?" he asks.

Vane nods. "Tiltrotor. Four bladed. Military spec."

"Fucking Cain," Gideon curses. "Got to be."

"This is a trap," I realise. "He knew we'd be here. How did he know?"

My gut clenches at the idea that we have yet another traitor on our hands. Only a handful of people knew where we were flying to. None of them have any motive—that I know of—to turn their backs on us.

"We might have been spotted on our way through Dong Hoi," Silas mutters. "Finn, you need to stay back and..."

"Let the pack protect me? Oh really? I had no idea that was the plan..." The omega's sarcastic reply is laced with bitterness. "I know I'm not a fighter, Silas, but I'd have to be an idiot not to realise we're fucking trapped right now."

"If Cain hasn't sent too many, we might be able to fight our way to an exit," I suggest, hand falling to my sword. "There have to be more ways out of here than just the way we came in."

Unfortunately, there's clearly only one way out of this particular cave. We'll have to go back into the cavern with the collapsed roof where Cain's troops are likely already dropping in.

The perfect ambush.

"We can't stay here," Frost adds. "We're fish in a barrel, and if they chuck in a couple of gas grenades, we'll be done for."

Gideon nods. "Drop the packs. Destroy what we can't leave. Be ready."

"There's another option," Grigoriy pipes up. "Let me out."

"Why on earth would we trust you?" Draven demands.

The ghoul on the other side of the barrier is silent, and I can't stop my hand from travelling down to the pouch on my belt. I prepared a mix of the herbs I thought I'd need to bring down another witch's barrier. All I need to do, in theory, is mix them with my blood and splatter the mixture over the shadows.

But I'd be pitching my barely tested magic, against a shield so powerful it's lasted for thousands of years. I have no idea if I'm strong enough to pull it off, and I don't even know if I should.

"Draven, did you bring any sunblock?" Silas asks, staring at the vampire with wide eyes.

"Forgive me for assuming a journey *underground* wouldn't pose much of a UV risk," the vampire snaps back.

None of us brought jackets with us either. This part of the world is warmer than most, and even in the cooler caves we run no risk of hypothermia, so the most anyone is wearing is a t-shirt and cargos.

Weapons are palmed as Finn crouches and starts dragging tech from his pack. A thin tablet, and three small chunks of plastic and wires. In less than a second, he has everything set up and the three miniature drones extend their tiny rotors, zoom high into the air and back down the tunnel we entered from.

They emerge into the cavern, and the first drone is shot down immediately. The second makes it a little longer, giving us a glimpse of the room filling with black armoured vampires and lycans, with more rappelling down from the hole in the ceiling by the minute. Then that drone is destroyed, too.

I don't hold out much hope for the third, but it manages to make it farther into the cavern before it's snatched from the air and brought up to a familiar face.

"Ivan," I hiss, surprised.

"Miss Evelyn, it would be in your best interests to surrender and return to your sire's Court."

The lycan is just as deferential as ever. His tone is so servile that he may as well be asking if I'd like two sugars in my tea. Behind him, a few vampires are dressed in full blackout gear to protect them from the sun, but the majority are obviously old enough to be immune to the light. That doesn't bode well. The older they are, the stronger they are.

"There are too many," Silas mutters, glancing back at Finn.

I know what he's thinking. We've brought the omega straight into the line of fire this time.

"You may have guessed," Ivan continues. "But Miss Morwenna and her accomplice are already on their way back to Manhattan, awaiting Lord Cain's justice."

Silas and Vane both snarl at the mention of Mia, but I can't process that. My mind and heart are both racing, trying to come up with a solution while picking out every detail of the troops waiting for us to emerge. Adrenaline courses through me as I try to see a way out of this.

"I could shield the entrance," I begin. "That would keep Finn safe, but he'd be trapped here without me."

All Ivan has to do is outlast us. We haven't got the food or blood to withstand a long-term siege, and if it came to that, Cain might simply order them to set explosives and bury us. The pack knows it too. The grim realisation is etched on their faces.

"What about the ghouls?" Vane asks. "We passed a lot of them."

Frost shakes his head, slowly. "I can feel them drawing closer," he murmurs. "But I can't seem to control them anymore."

My eyes fix on something a little behind Ivan. Two soldiers, standing ramrod straight, but clutching no weapons.

"Are those...?" I begin, squinting at the tiny pinpricks of white digging into their lower lips.

Gideon nods. "Ghoul hybrids."

"Cain must've succeeded in using some of your blood," Finn mutters, adjusting the zoom slightly.

Sure enough, they have double fangs, just like Frost and Gideon. Are they the reason Frost can't control the ghouls? Or is that Grigoriy's doing?

So we can't even count on the ghouls to be of use to us here? My heart sinks in my chest.

"We fight our way out," Frost concludes. "Keep Finn and Draven in the centre and make it back into the main cave system as fast as we can. We might be able to lose them there."

Unlikely, but it seems to be our only shot. I glance behind at the blackness, regret turning to ash on my tongue. If we leave, Cain will never let us get close to Grigoriy again. This is it.

Cain has Morwen. If Bella's execution is anything to go by, it won't be long until she meets the same fate.

"I must also inform you," Ivan adds. "That your little rebellion in Canada is being put down as we speak."

Whatever hope I have left flickers out as Gideon and Frost look at each other in alarm.

“Samuel will keep them safe,” I whisper, fervently wishing I could believe my own words. “Ignore him. He’s trying to break our morale. We need to focus on getting out of here.”

“I have a better option.” Grigoriy’s voice startles me, and I stiffen. “Set me free. I have an old debt to settle.”

I don’t need to look at Gideon to know the alpha’s opinion of adding yet another unknown entity to our already deadly situation.

“Not a chance.” His face is stoic, but I can feel the rage and horror swirling inside of him.

The others are much the same. Even Draven’s ice is splintered with veins of anger.

Of all of us, Finn is actually the calmest. His utter trust that we’ll get him out of this is like a soothing heartbeat inside of me.

“We can do this,” I whisper, hands already digging at the herbs on my belt, finding the right combinations. “I have a few tricks I can use to keep them at bay.”

I can tell none of them like it, but in the end, it doesn’t matter. They agree because we have no other choice. We move as a pack towards the crevice, ignoring Grigoriy’s hiss of displeasure.

He knows—as well as we do—that I’m probably the last shot at freedom he’ll see in a long time.

Before we reach the crack in the wall that will lead us into the cavern, I slash my wrist with my blade and throw a handful of herbs and blood into the space.

Billowing red smoke fills the air. It won’t last long, but I hope it will do something to protect Draven from the worst effects of the sunlight. Gideon and Frost go first, using their ghoulish abilities to scale the wall and exit from above. Hopefully, with the smoke, they’ll be able to slip in undetected and start clearing us a path.

I grab different herbs from my belt, clutching them in my still-bloody hand as I squeeze through next.

Chaos awaits me on the other side. The clash of fighting, the screeching of ghouls and the cursing of men reverberate off the rock walls. My red smoke makes it difficult to see, but it’s growing fainter by the second, so the second I’m through, I unleash my next trick.

The fire-serpents are larger now than they were in that innocent moment with Silas, fuelled in part by the deeper cut. My own healing is working

against me, but for now, I let the fire surge into the cavern. Fire won't kill most immortals, but burns still *hurt*.

The rest of the pack slips through behind me, with Finn and Draven bringing up the rear. I have just enough blood to keep the fire serpents between us and the troops until we're clear of the exit, but they fade as my wrist seals itself. Now I'm lower on herbs than I'd like, and a migraine is quickly taking up residence behind my eyes.

I guess that means it's back to the old-fashioned method.

I turn my focus to carving a path, flitting through forms with familiar ease. The pack sticks close to me, their thrall bonds humming with concentration as we make a beeline for the way out.

Ten paces into the cave, and the scale of the threat we're facing becomes painfully apparent.

A cut on my thigh makes me hiss, and the scent sends growls up all around me. A second later, Vane curses as he also falls victim to a lucky shot.

Our momentum slows, then stalls, as Ivan's men adjust their strategy to match ours. There are just too many of them.

Shit. We're not going to make it.

I check the distance to the exit, but it's still too far. I glance behind me to where Draven is studiously avoiding the patch of sunlight left by the fallen ceiling, and defending Finn as he does it. There are just as many vampires back there, cutting off any retreat. The omega has a dagger, and is guarding the vampire's back where he can, but he's not a fighter. He may be well trained, but he doesn't have the instincts that the rest of us possess.

There are too many for Draven alone, and he's limping. Silas notices and forces himself into the gap in Draven's guard, taking it upon himself to cover the vampire's weak spot.

A hand grabs my sword arm, and I claw blindly outwards at my attacker. But the brute strength holding me doesn't relent.

Ivan himself has joined the fray.

I've never fought Cain's butler before—why would I? He was always just a servant. His strength—far greater than my own—catches me off guard.

I twist, using my weight and the pain of my heel sinking into his instep to free my arm just in time to raise my sword to block another attack from a different vampire. Ivan frowns at the interruption, darkness marring his

typically bland expression for less than a second before he strikes back. This time, he uses his incredible speed to grab my hair.

I'm pulled from our tight-knit group like a dog, and dragged into the sunlight where those ropes are still hanging, ready to lift us into the air.

I sense the second the entire pack's priorities change from escape to my rescue. They give up heading for the exit and switch their attention to the vampires between them and me instead. The decision costs them. Soldiers quickly shore up the gaps in their ranks that might've allowed us to escape.

Frustration lends me strength as I struggle, and I manage to elbow Ivan in the nose. I get the momentary satisfaction of hearing a good snap before I feel cold metal encircle first one wrist, then the other.

Fucking silver.

Dammit, I am *through* with being kidnapped by Cain and his minions!

Doesn't stop me struggling, but Ivan's growl does.

"Enough!"

At first, I think he's talking to me, but he's not. All of Cain's forces freeze, stepping back to form a ring around the pack. My eyes meet theirs over the line of warriors between us, and I see the grim determination on their faces. They'll fight to the death for each other—for me—and I just... can't let them.

There's only one way out of this. A deal with the devil.

"Grigoriy!" I yell. "I accept your deal!"

He has to hear me. He's immortal, and I was loud enough to make Ivan wince.

I'm not sure what I expect to happen, but the silence that follows my outburst isn't it.

"Foolish child," Ivan spits, finally losing that pleasant facade. "Do you even know what you're dealing with?"

No. I don't. But I know Cain, and in times such as these, the enemy of my enemy...

I look at the pack to distract myself. Gideon is glowering, as predicted. Vane and Silas are edging closer to Finn, who's glancing around nervously. Frost and Draven have frozen in place, and the latter is warily eyeing the patch of sunlight creeping closer.

Another second passes, and nothing happens. Either Grigoriy isn't interested, or he didn't hear me. I feel Ivan's sigh of relief against my neck

a second before his grip in my hair relaxes. I try to take the opportunity to slip away, but his fingers wrap around my throat.

“If you gentlemen will kindly allow yourselves to be escorted to the tiltrotor, there will be no need for further violence.” Ivan’s bland tone is back, for all that his claws are digging into my throat, drawing blood in the process.

I stamp on his foot again, but he moves it before I can, and all my struggles accomplish is more damage to my throat. The sharp metallic scent grows stronger and there isn’t a vampire in the room able to control their fangs in the face of such powerful blood.

“I do not need to bring any of your thralls back alive,” Ivan says. “Though I believe my Lord Cain would be grateful for some leverage. If you want them to live, then behave.”

He has me there, and he knows it. But there’s just one problem.

“Draven can’t walk into the sunlight,” I object. “He’ll burn.”

Ivan shrugs, his indifference plain. “He’ll do it, or the rest of you will die. Lord Cain expressed a preference for returning you alive, but I’m certain he won’t mourn the loss of a practising witch.”

No. He won’t. In fact, the second he realises I have control over my powers, he’ll reassess the threat I pose and have me put down. He’s not let any other witch live, and I’m not stupid enough to believe I’m the exception.

I meet the pack’s eyes with my own and give them a minuscule shake of my head. In my chest I send my opinion clearly to all of them, making it as clear as I can that they should flee.

I’ve slipped out of Cain’s clutches more than once. I can do it again. They exchange a look, but Ivan interrupts before they can do more.

“I am a patient lycan, but my lord is not. Decide.”

A fresh ribbon of blood drips down to pool in the hollow of my collarbone.

Draven takes the first step forward, the toe of his boot crossing the edge of the pool of light.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



DRAVEN

EVIE IS BLEEDING, BUT GIVEN HER POOR SELF-PRESERVATION INSTINCTS, I doubt she's aware of quite how bad it is. Her throat is being torn to ribbons by the lycan's grip, and if he squeezes a little harder, it won't take much to rip her head from her shoulders.

It might not be enough to kill an immortal of her age, but there's no guarantee she'd come back from it.

I've watched the woman I loved die once. I won't do it again.

I glance back at Frost, trying to convey with my eyes that after I'm dead, I fully expect him to make Cain's death hurt, but he's too busy fucking struggling against the soldiers who have stepped up to restrain the others.

Ah, I guess Cain's flair for the dramatics has rubbed off on his butler. Ivan is probably recording all of this for Cain to jack off to later.

My next step feels heavier, but maybe that's just the audience. They're all silent as they watch me, but I don't particularly care.

Once this is over with, they'll have their chance to finish Cain. Shame about Callista—I can't see the pack tracking her down and giving the bitch the comeuppance she deserves—but I'll split my afterlife between haunting her and watching over Evie.

I take another step forward, grimacing at the warmth on my legs. They're covered with fabric, so it's not too painful yet. In some ways, I'm glad I didn't pack my sunscreen. That would've just dragged this out.

I lock eyes with Evie as I take another step, willing her face into my memory. If I'm to die like this, I want to be thinking of her in my final minutes.

Was the sun always this hot?

Smoke is curling around my limbs. The smell of it fills my nostrils as sunlight engulfs my body. My mouth is so dry, begging for blood to repair the damage that's already being done. The thirst burns almost as badly as the ultraviolet.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see a shadow dance, but I don't turn to look. I won't tear my gaze from Evie's. She's using the thrall bond to scream at me to run, to get away.

The ice that I've always used to surround me cracks, melting in the blaze that's starting to tickle my skin. If this is how I die, she should know...

I let it all go and fling the depths of my unhinged devotion back at her. Nothing is held back, and that surprises even me. Her big blue eyes blink, and that's all the permission her tears need to finally spill over.

Maybe now she understands. My obsession with Evie is a feral thing, stronger than any feelings I once held for my human wife. I'd walk into the sun a hundred times for her.

I lose my balance. One of my legs gives out. It takes a second for me to think past the thirst and realise that it's not just me. Everyone has been staggered. The tremor keeps going. The floor is shaking and trembling beneath us. Seismic activity isn't unheard of in this part of the world, but it's not common.

At this rate, the damned earthquake will bury Evie before the sun can finish burning me.

I'm not even on fire yet.

Come on, you flaming death ball. Finish this.

The longer this takes, the less likely Evie is to survive.

Another tremor hits, and this time, it sends me falling to my forearms. Ivan's hold on Evie's neck is forced to loosen, and her eyes harden.

Her shoulder lowers, using his distraction to shove him back. The move creates just enough space for her to wrench free of him. Blood sprays, but I can't pick up the scent of it over the smoke in my nostrils. Her wound is serious, but Evie ignores it in favour of dodging her way out of reach.

The second the two of them are separated, the ghouls strike.

They drop from the ceiling like rotting, man-sized spiders, landing on the heads of Ivan's men without warning, screeching their glee as they tear into their prey. A horde of them fly forwards, sacrificing themselves to the sun in an attempt to slow down Ivan.

Evie isn't even paying him any attention. She's staggering to me, while trying to hold her throat together. The instant she reaches me, she tackles me out of the sunlight, bringing her throat straight to my neck as she uses her body to shield me.

I'm so thirsty that I can't resist. I lick up the freely flowing liquid, gulping it down without even using my fangs. I barely manage a few

mouthfuls before she's scrambling to her feet, dragging me with her through the chaos and the carnage towards the crack we emerged from.

Towards Grigoriy.

I pull her to a halt. "You don't have to do this," I protest. "We can just run."

Her eyes tell me she knows that as well as I do, but then they flick back to Ivan, and I see her logic.

The lycan was freakishly strong for a beta, and he certainly had no trouble restraining her. It makes sense that she doesn't think we can handle him alone. I can also sense her underlying fear. She's just as aware as I am that Grigoriy could turn those ghouls on us if she reneges on their deal.

For better or worse, this is the path we're on now.

She shoves me through the crevice first, stubbornly ensuring I'm as far away from the sun as possible—even though she's the one with her hands bound in silver. I wait on the other side for her, unsurprised when the omega follows me through instead of Evie.

Finn is battered and bruised, despite our best efforts. His glasses are cracked, and his shirt torn, but he's still alive. In removing him from the danger, Evie has freed up the rest of the pack to fight alongside the ghouls without distractions. When she herself scrambles through the gap, she launches herself into my arms.

"Don't you *ever* do that again," she snarls into my chest. "You're lucky you're old enough that you weren't incinerated on the spot."

Her fury, fear, and relief blend together, forming a potent mix that slithers along our bond.

"He got a bad sunburn and a bit of smoke," Finn reassures her, rubbing her back soothingly. "He's still alive."

"You would've survived without me." I gently extract her from my body, trying to put distance between me and her mouthwatering blood. "Drink from your omega, doll. You're going to need all the blood you can get if you're going to break that barrier."

Evie stares into my eyes, and I stare impassively back at her. My projected apathy is a lie. My heartbeat is still racing in my chest, trying desperately to break free of my rib cage. I'm three seconds away from grabbing her and running as far away from this place as possible or drinking from her until the faint redness of my skin is healed completely.

Reluctantly, she accepts Finn's offered wrist and takes a few long draws from his vein. The wound on her neck seals, and I breathe a sigh of relief.

Ivan has been added to my list. I had no strong feelings about the butler before now, but he sealed his fate when he hurt Evie.

I eye her cuffs, then head for our discarded packs. The electric locks can be short circuited, I just need to find my gear.

Getting them off is easy enough, and I'm finished before she even notices. She gives Finn's vein one last lick, and the burns the metal left on her creamy skin disappear.

That sorted, the three of us turn back to Grigoriy's cave. The black fog is there, still obscuring the details of the creatures beyond, but Evie doesn't focus on them as she digs around in her little belt of herbs. Her sword was lost in the fight, but she pulls the dagger at her hip and uses it to slash open her palm, letting the scarlet liquid pool and mix with the dried plants until she's satisfied before smearing it across the barrier while she mumbles some spell I can't understand.

The black wall shudders, but doesn't budge. Evie snarls a curse and digs her hands into the herb pouches again, repeating the spell, louder this time. Another tremble.

The third time, she gives up smearing the herbs onto the sticky surface and punches her fist through it instead.

Black shards splinter outwards from the impact, flying in all directions. We duck, but they pass harmlessly through us like ghosts. A haunting, whispery scream ricochets off the walls, spreading chills down my spine, and the scent of rot fills my nose. Before I can seek out the source, Evie collapses.

I just manage to catch her before she hits the ground.

The ghouls who were trapped behind the barrier surge forward, and I brace for them to attack us, baring my fangs. They don't. We're ignored by the tide of gruesome undead as they rush for the crack in the wall, hissing and screaming.

"I didn't think you'd actually do it."

Grigoriy's voice is louder now. The hissing, slurring of his words clearer, though I still can't see the man himself.

The bone-strewn floor is devoid of life, but the barrier's destruction has revealed a clear circular space in the centre of the bones, with a sleeping bag, camping chair, and what looks to be the remains of a fire.

Clearly, some poor unfortunate hiker has been robbed by ghouls.

“Show yourself,” Finn demands. “We have questions, and you promised to answer them.”

“Actually, I promised to slaughter your enemies,” Grigoriy corrects, and I catch a shift in the shadows beyond, followed by an audible intake of breath. “But freedom has made me generous. I wish to walk in the fresh air. Then we shall speak.”

Evie struggles up in my arms, staring intently at the shadowy figure drawing nearer. Her caution seeps from the bond and into my bones, and I shift protectively in front of her.

Grigoriy walks like a ghoul; hunched and shuffling. Bones crunch under his feet as he moves. As he draws nearer, I catch a glimpse of pasty skin and dark, shaggy hair. His eyes are bloodshot, and his teeth... well, they explain his heavy lisp.

He’s better made than most ghouls, but that’s not saying much.

He holds up a hand of long, slender claws to halt me when I would’ve said something. “You need not fear the sun. I have taken care of it.”

I don’t know what he means by ‘taken care of it,’ but it’s clear that speaking is difficult for him so I don’t press. His teeth keep his jaw propped open, and his lips are red and raw from where they’re cut by the elongated fangs.

He’s clearly stolen some clothes from one of his victims, because the baggy jeans and oversized shirt he’s wearing are so ill-fitting, they could’ve fallen out of the 1990s. Under his arm, he’s carrying a small pile of... books?

He notices my questioning look and offers them out to me.

“Thousands of years of captivity become very dull without the words of others, no?”

I skim the spines, reading the titles. Everything from dictionaries to... romance novels? I suppose that explains his English. Shrugging it off—because I suppose if I were stuck in a cave, I wouldn’t be too picky about my entertainment—I wait for him to pass before following him towards the main cave. Part of me wants to be in front, but no way am I ever giving this guy my back.

Despite his poor clothing and dishevelled appearance, there’s an aura of power around him that makes the hair on the back of my neck stand on end.

Evie hovers close by my side, with Finn holding her other hand. The omega has reclaimed his tech-filled rucksack while we've been talking and has it slung casually over his shoulder. I don't bother retrieving the rest, because I know most of us only packed snacks and first aid equipment.

The cave beyond the crack is the same as we left it, except now the bodies of Cain's soldiers litter the floor, being feasted on by ghouls. Ivan is the only one still standing, and even that is relative. He's kneeling on the floor with silver cuffs on his ankles and wrists and Gideon's boot on his neck.

The moment Ivan spots Grigoriy, his eyes slide closed.

"You have no idea what you've done," he moans. "The plague you've unleashed."

"A lot can change in four thousand years, brother," Grigoriy replies, levelly.

A ghoul scuttles over to us, depositing a pile of clothes at our feet. They've clearly been taken from Cain's soldiers, but by some miracle, there isn't too much blood on them.

Grigoriy turns to me, waving his free hand at the pile. "For the sunlight."

I don't have to be told twice. I grab a jacket from the pile and shrug it on, buckling it tightly. Cain's vampires were well equipped, and there are balaclavas, gloves, sun-proof-over-trousers, and even sun-resistant goggles. The fabric is military tech, the kind of stuff even the resistance can't get its hands on.

At the end of it, I look like a goth on an arctic expedition, but I can wave my arm into the bright sunlight without burning.

Excellent.

I stride into the patch of light and kneel beside the captive wolf. Then, I let my claws puncture the gloves for just long enough to reach down and rip out his throat.

Tit for tat.

He hurt my doll. He deserves worse.

Grinning, I turn and deposit the bloody, fleshy lump at her feet. Silas grimaces, and the others groan, but Evie doesn't censure me. Her soft smile tells me she gets it.

The lycan says nothing—he can't without a windpipe—but his wound seals itself quickly. Too quickly for my liking. When I go to repeat the

punishment, Frost's hand on my shoulder stops me.

"There will be time for that later," he reminds me. "Right now, we need to get back to the base."

True. If Ivan's words about the attack on our home are true, we need to sort out the mess and counter the attack. The rest of the pack is ready, but Vane is missing.

"Vane's taken over the tiltrotor and is going to retrieve our things from the ATV before we head back," Frost explains, seeing my curious look. "There are probably bugs and trackers all over the thing, so we'll have to ditch it soon, but it'll be faster than chartering another flight."

Grigoriy has taken the second set of clothes for himself, though his claws puncture the gloves and boots. At Evie's questioning look, he shrugs.

"My kind never learned to walk in the sun, no matter how well we age."

He reclaims his small pile of books and gestures to the ropes still hanging from the ceiling. "Shall we?"

"Evelyn, if you allow him back into the world, you will be responsible for his plague," Ivan warns, voice scratchy and barely audible.

It obviously hurts him to talk, but he does it anyway.

"Rude of you to assume I haven't learned to control that aspect of my abilities in my isolation," Grigoriy retorts.

Finn takes a step forward, putting himself between Evie and the two older immortals. "The paintings on the cave wall said you were locked away to protect everyone."

"His very *breath* is contagious," Ivan wheezes. "He can't help turning everyone he comes across."

"And yet," Grigoriy retorts, "My rescuers appear to be fine, do they not?"

Ivan growls. "For now."

The whirring of blades fills my ears again, and I tense, but Evie's relaxed posture reassures me that it's just Vane.

"Come on," Gideon growls, passing Ivan over to Frost's tender care and taking the omega's rucksack in a chivalrous gesture. "I've had enough of this damned cave to last me a lifetime."

Grigoriy laughs, and the sound is slightly unhinged. "You have no idea."

I grab a rope and start to climb, then turn to help Silas haul Ivan up next. The first lycan struggles, so I rip his throat out again for good

measure. When this is over, I'll dry out his wind pipes and make a wind chime out of them.

He might be older and more powerful, but blood loss will weaken anyone. It keeps him just docile enough for us to get to the tiltrotor, which is idling a few metres to the left of the hole, with Vane waiting beside it. I freeze when I recognise a familiar silver coffin strapped to the landing skids.

They were going to force Evie back inside that fucking box. I share a thunderous look with the pack betas as we all realise it, then grin as an idea strikes me.

"Let's see how you like it," I snarl, forcing Ivan forward.

Between Silas, Vane, and me, we have him chained down and that god-awful gag forced into his mouth before the rest of the pack reaches us. I expect my doll to be upset, but she stares at the captured lycan with an icy indifference that makes me proud.

"Serves him right for watching as they forced me into it the first time," she mutters, before climbing into the aircraft.

Finn and Silas follow her, taking seats on either side. Briefly, I debate tearing the pup out of his spot and claiming it for myself, but I dismiss the idea. It's better I'm able to keep an eye on the threat. Not that Grigoriy looks like much of one. He's still staring, dumbstruck, at the outside world.

"The *air*," he mumbles, when he realises we're all waiting for him. "I had forgotten the feeling of the wind."

His claws stroke the fabric at the base of his balaclava, but he doesn't rip it off like he so clearly wants to. He's hesitant to climb into the tiltrotor, and I can see him doing the same thing Evie once did—observing everything, calculating how it all works. Relearning how to exist.

Clearly, his books couldn't teach him everything—though he's still clutching his small pile to his chest like a lifeline.

"Get in," Frost orders. "Cain might have already sent reinforcements."

The old ghoul stumbles a little, caught off guard by the strength of the air currents the twin rotor blades are creating before he can steady himself. When he clambers in, taking a seat on the bench opposite Evie, he fiddles with his harness for a long minute before he manages to clip it together. As soon as it clicks together, Vane wastes no time getting us all into the air.

CHAPTER THIRTY



EVELYN

IT'S HARD TO WATCH GRIGORIY TAKE IN THE WORLD AND NOT sympathise. While his captivity was easier because he had ghouls for company and access to books, it was no less isolating than mine, and far longer. From what I can tell, he went into that cave in a time when most humans were still building their homes out of sticks and mud.

Because of his obvious ghoulish features, we keep him well out of sight as we abandon Ivan's tiltrotor at the nearest airfield. He, Draven, and I remain with Ivan—still trapped in the coffin—while the rest of the pack tries to make contact with our allies and secure us a plane to go... somewhere.

I'm not sure it's wise to go back to the pack house, but I understand why they might want to. All our stuff was there, and a good third of our forces.

I can only hope that Cain remains oblivious to the resistance forces camped on the edges of his city with Alpha Echo's pack. If he gets to them, we're screwed. In recent weeks, we'd been moving our people there.

What worries me is that there's been no word from Samuel, or anyone. Finn and Silas were adamant that they could find a way to contact them, but if Cain's people have Mia and Morwen, a lot of our communications could well be compromised by now.

My sister is tough, but Cain is well versed in using loved ones against us. If he threatens or harms Mia, then Morwen will fall into line.

If they're even still alive.

The strategist in me knows we should strike now, while Cain expects us to be busy regrouping and healing from his strike. But we're not ready.

"I'm surprised you haven't bombarded me with questions yet," Grigoriy murmurs, turning the page in the book he's reading.

It's a well-worn novel with the spectral figure of a woman peeking out from behind a bookcase on the cover. What few words I've managed to gleam from stolen glances over his shoulder tell me it's a librarian romance.

Odd choice for an immortal. Even odder for a ghoul. Still, I'm not going to judge, it's not like he had a whole load of options, after all.

"I'm not sure which one I should ask first," I reply honestly.

He sighs, snapping the book closed and replacing it on top of the small pile he's brought with him. "Start with the most important one."

"How do we kill Cain?"

He scoffs. "You already know that, or you wouldn't be here. Only a witch can undo what made us immortal. You want to know if it will kill you."

I nod. "I have no plans to die."

"The spell that made us immortal was sealed with the giving of a life," Grigoriy mutters. "It stands to reason that undoing it would also require a life. Not necessarily your own, but one freely given."

So someone else has to die if I don't? My gut sinks, and my shoulders droop.

I'm not comfortable asking anyone to die for us. If I have to choose between sacrificing myself and Cain winning, I would reluctantly choose the former. Decades in the coffin have taught me that death is merciful compared to my sire.

Still, I selfishly want to live and enjoy a life with my pack, free from Cain's oppressive shadow.

Can I really ask someone else to die for that?

"You see now why it isn't so simple." Grigoriy paces. "Most people are not eager to be eaten alive, even when the prize is a world free of Cain."

Pushing the matter aside for now—because I'd rather get the opinions of the rest of the pack, and perhaps Samuel too—I focus on my next question.

"Will you fight with us?"

I know it's a lot to ask. This man has just regained his freedom, but he does owe me for freeing him, and I'm not above calling in that debt if it helps our chances. His control over the ghouls might even make up for the loss of so many fighters in Cain's ambush.

"I was never much of a fighter," Grigoriy admits. "But yes, I am owed my pound of flesh after Cain's betrayal. We were brothers once."

"You were all in love with the same witch," I venture. "Or at least, that's what the grimoire said."

"Yes," he admits.

"I still can't imagine Cain sharing anyone."

"He wasn't always so..." Grigoriy waves a hand in the air, clearly pained. "Don't get me wrong, he was always the leader among us, and Ivan

and I never begrudged him that, but Morana loved us all equally. Back then, that was enough for him. Or, at least, I thought it was.”

The ghoul sighs, but it comes out as more of a hiss.

“Cain was always fascinated by Morana’s magic. Always pushing her to go further. We made excuses, believing that was just who he was. But he was a user. He wanted her magic for his own means, putting up with the two of us because he knew witches were drawn to multiple partners.”

They... are? I think of how easily I’ve managed to fit in with my pack. Some part of me never even questioned a relationship with multiple men. I just took it in my stride. Is that a witch thing?

“When Morana said she thought she could make us all immortal—so we all lived as long as she would—it was like a dream come true for him. Ivan and I went along with it because we wanted forever with the woman we loved.”

“Instead you ate her,” Draven finishes, inadvertently revealing that he’s been paying attention all along.

“Have you known any newborn vampire, lycan, or ghoul with the level of control required to ignore a bleeding wound?” Grigoriy asks, though his expression has shuttered. “It took a lot of time, sitting alone in the dark, for me to forgive myself, vampire. I’m sure it took Cain far less. After we were turned, it quickly became clear that all he’d ever wanted from our triad was power, and by some twist of fate, he got more of it than the two of us.”

I glance questioningly at the coffin, wondering about Ivan in all of this, and the ghoul notices.

“He was no better. His instincts ripped into everyone, and he only calmed down when Cain forced the issue.” He sighs. “We were young. I was turning people without knowing what I was doing. My very breath was contagious, so you can imagine how isolated I became. Even before my brothers chased me across the world and forced a witch to bind me to that cave, I was alone. I’ve had plenty of time to mull over what I’ve done. It was much duller before the invention of the printing press. Ironically, these past few centuries, where books have been around, have been the most connected to other beings that I’ve ever felt.”

If I’d had access to books in my coffin, perhaps I’d have felt the same.

I spot the rest of the pack on the horizon, but I’m not done asking questions.

“So you know enough about witchcraft that you think you could teach someone?”

“From what the ghouls saw in that cave, you can handle yourself,” Grigoriy retorts.

“How do you know...?” I trail off.

His small smile is stretched, barely recognisable around his fangs. “I see through their eyes, hear what they hear, feel what they feel...” He pauses. “I can even do it with your two, though it takes more effort. I’m surprised you managed to create a hybrid. Every time Cain tried before, my venom won over his.”

“Evie has special blood,” Draven retorts. “Now, help me with this. Looks like the others have found us a plane.”

As if on cue, the coffin shakes, and a dent appears on one side.

It was clear Ivan was immune to silver when we put him in there and he didn’t burn, but this is the first time he’s tried to openly escape.

Draven sighs, unlocks the lid, opens it, and reaches in. The scent of blood hits me a second later, and I don’t have to be a genius to know that my vampire has ripped the lycan’s throat out for the twelfth time.

The silver lid slams closed, and Draven re-locks it, licking his fingers clean with a calmness that belies the rage he’s feeling.

“I will give one condition for my aid,” Grigoriy mumbles, eyeing the approaching pack. “I wish for you to kill me as well. I would offer myself as the sacrifice, but alas, it wouldn’t work.”

My eyes widen, and I shake my head. “What? You’ve only just been freed.”

“I was not meant to become this.” He gestures to his fangs and claws. “My years of self-reflection have taught me that I was meant to live a human life, and die a human death. Morana’s coven was right; what she made us into is unnatural. While there’s no way to undo all the damage we’ve done, or the scores of immortals we’ve unleashed on the world, without the three of us at the top of the chain, things could change. There could be a new beginning where lycans and vampires live side by side with humans.”

“We’ll do it,” Draven answers for me, even though my mouth is still hanging open in shock. “What’s one less ghoul in the world?”

“Plane’s this way,” Frost says, bursting in on the conversation and sparing me from having to find a reply to this old ghoul’s request.

I can't summon more than a nod in answer, and already, I can't help but feel a strange sense of loss. If Cain was my father figure growing up, I suppose it makes sense that his brothers would feel like family, and yet, I feel no sorrow at the thought of losing Ivan, only resignation.

Finn, sensing my discomfort, wraps his arm around my shoulder and tugs me into him as we walk. "I managed to get through to the resistance," he murmurs. "Gideon's pack territory has been razed. There's no point going back."

"They burned the whole forest," Silas murmurs, his face gaunt.

"Scorched earth was always one of Cain's favourite policies," I mutter sympathetically, as I brace myself to ask my next question. "What happened to Samuel?"

"He was wounded, but he survived," the omega confirms. "He's bringing the other survivors to Echo Lake to wait for us there, and he hinted that there was a surprise waiting for us."

My entire body sags in relief. I didn't expect Cain to let my brother slip through his fingers again, but I should've known better than to underestimate Samuel. He was a warrior and a general in his own time. He can look after himself.

I climb the short flight of stairs into the plane and grimace. This one is a far cry from the luxury jets we've taken in the past, and I realise now that I've been spoiled. There are only a handful of seats, and in one corner are a bunch of dirty, disused poultry cages.

"Sit up front with Gid," Finn encourages. "There's more room there. We'll make do here."

I don't argue. The events of the day are finally catching up to me, and a bone-deep weariness has settled into my cells. Gideon senses my tiredness and doesn't attempt to make conversation as he steers the rickety old plane onto the runway and up into the air. I'm grateful, because the quiet rattling of the engines and murmur of voices from the back are enough to soothe me to sleep.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



EVELYN

OUR JOURNEY BACK TO THE ECHO LAKE PACK IS QUIET. THE ENTIRE pack is on alert, and their tension bleeds down our bonds. Even the trees look more like dark skeletons in the moonlight than the soft, protective pines I've come to know.

"Come on," Gideon interrupts, face expressionless as he hoists himself out of the car. "The others are waiting on us."

He leads the pack as we trek up the drive and into the large lake house, not even bothering to knock. I stay close, slipping my hand into his when I feel the thrall bond quake a little.

The alpha is furious, but beneath that, I can feel his despondency. Even the faintest traces of... failure. Gideon may not have had many happy memories of their pack lands, but he still felt responsible for it.

"Let's just hurry up," Vane grunts from behind us. "Mia is still in that bastard's hands. There's no telling how long she's got left."

My heart falls as I turn and take in him and Silas, standing shoulder to shoulder with tension written into the lines of their faces. Losing their sister has been hard on them, but it's only on the journey here that they've had time to really process that she's gone. Their family—already fractured—might well become even smaller by the time we reach New York.

As far as my sire is concerned, Mia's only purpose lies in her usefulness as leverage over Morwen. If Cain is killing his daughters...

I won't ever speak my suspicions aloud, but I can't help but wonder if they're both already dead. I have hope... but my pragmatic side is quick to point out that hope means very little when dealing with my sire.

Other lycans nod at us as we pass, their sombre expressions haunting our steps as the pack moves in one tight-knit group towards the main room. Grigoriy gets looks of suspicion and outright disgust, but he doesn't seem too bothered by it. The ghoul trails behind us, taking in his surroundings without bothering to conceal his curiosity. He's been like this since he left the cave, and I grimace again as I remember his request.

How can someone be so fascinated with living, and yet so convinced that they should die? It just doesn't make sense.

Gideon shoves through the door to the pack meeting room, and we're greeted by a space packed full with people. Most of them are yelling at one another, which makes me groan. It's easy to forget how quickly things start to fall apart without someone in charge.

"SHUT IT!" Frost roars, quelling the noise in one shout.

Heads swivel as everyone in the room turns to look at us. Recognition dawns in their eyes, and for a second, it looks like they're about to start up again, but Gideon's glower cuts off any complaints before they can form.

"If you don't need to be here, get out," the alpha barks.

The words are blunt, but effective. People scurry out of our way, and soon the only few remaining in the room are Echo, Samuel and...

Callie.

She's dirty, soot-stained, and chained to a chair with silver cuffs around her wrists and ankles. A dirty gag has been wedged between her lips, forcing her to remain silent. Her blonde hair is limp and greasy, and her already large eyes become as wide as dinner plates as she takes in our pack. Every immortal in the room hears her heart kick with terror.

Draven hisses, and only my quick thinking spares my sister's life. I slam into him, arms wrapping around his torso as I claim his lips with mine.

It works. For an instant, he's too distracted by his body's reaction to me to focus on Callie. That's all I need. Just one second to get through to him, before anger and instinct take over.

"We need to know the situation first," I whisper against his lips.

"And after?" he challenges, cold fury in his pale gaze.

I'm not cowed. "We decide as a pack."

The stiffness doesn't leave his body, but he offers me a sharp nod of acquiescence. I decide to take that as a promise of restraint... for now. Turning back to Samuel, I arch one brow in question.

"She turned up in our territory about three hours before Cain did," my brother explains. "Something I found suspicious enough to warrant investigation."

"If she's a spy, she should never have been brought here," Echo protests. "You've put my entire pack in danger with her presence."

"Your people have checked her for bugs and trackers every hour since she arrived," Samuel replies calmly. "There's no way she can feed anything she learns back to our sire when I've not let her out of my sight."

“She’s a snake,” Echo retorts. “Cunning. She’ll be doing his bidding somehow, and we won’t know how until we’re all dead.”

The deep-seated frustration in his voice makes it clear they’ve been arguing this point for some time, and Gideon must realise as much because he holds a hand up for silence.

“What’s done is done,” he begins. “Though, given her nature, I’m sure she’s not here out of the kindness of her heart.”

“She claims it was for protection.” Echo scowls. “As if a vampire her age doesn’t have the skill and resources necessary to hide from Cain.”

If this were any other vampire, I’d agree, but Callie...

“She’s spent so long as my sire’s plaything...” I mumble under my breath. “I would be surprised if she could.”

“She’s more than capable of torturing and mutilating our people,” Frost argues. “She’s no defenceless lamb. Both Draven and I have been at her mercy.”

“Different skill set,” I reply, evenly. “Callie is a creature of luxury, one who only ever feels safe if she has a protector. I imagine being alone on the run was harder than she anticipated, so she’s had to fall back on what she knows: using others.”

I can’t help but stare at her. This might be the only time since we were children that I’ve seen her without her makeup on. It makes her look younger—more innocent—though we all know that impression is a lie.

“I still say we leave her in a room with Draven,” Frost growls, and the vampire still holding on to me like a lifeline nods his agreement.

“One day,” he says. “That’s all I need.”

“How did she find our base?” I ask. “Why now? There are questions to be answered before we mete out justice.”

“We don’t have time to interrogate her.” Vane’s anger is barely leashed. A subtle thing that pervades the room. “Our sister is in New York, and every second we waste on that piece of shit vampire is another second that Cain can use Mia as a pincushion.”

“He’s right.” Silas leans against the wall, arms crossed over his chest. “I say we kill her and get moving. We have a war to fight, and we can’t waste manpower keeping her under guard.”

“For once, the pup speaks sense,” Draven mutters.

I can feel his hand inching towards a concealed blade at his side, and I grimace as my sister starts actually trembling.

“I want to hear what she has to say,” I protest. “Ten minutes, that’s all I’m asking. Callie’s been glued to Cain’s side for millenia. She could know something that might help us.”

“You said she could persuade people into doing things for her,” Finn says, drawing my attention to where he’s standing, uncomfortably, in the corner of the room. “She might use that to get you to set her free.”

I shake my head immediately. “She won’t be able to with all of that silver, and even if she was, it only works on the feeble-minded and those who don’t know what they’re looking for.”

“It’s a witch power,” Grigoriy hisses, drawing our attention back to him.

A puzzle piece slots into place, and I grimace. “Empathy, locating objects, detecting lies...”

“All witch powers,” the ghoul confirms. “Cain’s first-borns always inherited a weakened version. It annoyed him no-end that he didn’t.”

“This is him, then?” Samuel asks. “The first ghoul?”

Grigoriy gives a half-bow. “At your service.”

“Five minutes,” Frost concedes. “Then she dies.”

“You can’t be serious!” Silas retorts. “She’ll just lie—”

I shake my head and pat the little pouch of herbs at my belt. “I can stop her from lying to me.”

It’s actually one of the easier spells I’ve encountered in the grimoire. Witchcraft wasn’t really made for battle. Its uses are more down to earth and practical. Truth spells, healing ointments, charms to ensure a fair harvest and protect the home... All these things were far more useful to my ancestors than magic for waging wars.

Gideon nods. “Five minutes, and Vane will stay with you in case she tries anything.”

Vane growls as he strides across the room, gripping Callie’s arm with bruising strength, and hauls her upright. “Let’s get this over with.”

The pack house is busy, but he navigates the corridors effortlessly, bringing us back to the dungeon we were in before. He dumps Callie in front of the bars and settles back against the door to watch as I pick herbs out of my pouches from memory, stirring them together in my palm hastily.

I have no doubt that Gideon and Frost mean exactly five minutes.

A drop of my blood, a few muttered words, and then I blow the concoction into Callie’s stunned face.

Watching the mixture sink into her skin like tiny glowing red embers is the weirdest thing. I give it three seconds to sink in before I sever her gag with one claw and stand back.

“Why did you come to find us?” I ask.

Callie looks at me. “No hello?” she asks, weakly.

Her voice is ragged and scratchy, making me grimace. It seems that the resistance’s soldiers have already exacted some kind of retribution.

Vane has no sympathy. “Answer the question.”

“I couldn’t take it anymore.” Callie’s voice drops slowly the more she speaks, becoming a dull, eerie monotone. Her eyes are glazing over, turning cloudy under the spell’s influence. “I was letting myself be spotted to distract Cain, to buy you some time. I figured if he was chasing me, he’d be too busy to chase you. But everywhere I went, they found me. I couldn’t sleep. Couldn’t hunt. Every time I killed one, I barely managed a day just to breathe before another of his bounty hunters caught up with me.”

Like I thought. She simply isn’t cut out for this kind of life. Her excuse about trying to distract Cain must be true, but it’s a very Callie plan. One rooted in her own self-importance.

Why on earth would Cain focus on her when she’s not the daughter who could kill him?

“How did you find Samuel?”

Callie has stopped blinking, the spell’s hold on her complete. “I disguised myself and tracked down a recruiter for the resistance. They weren’t that hard to find or convince. I was sent to the base to train for this war you’ve started.”

Plausible. The resistance has taken on a lot of new people, and Callie’s gift might’ve persuaded a weaker member to recruit her. Immortals have sensed the undercurrents of a war and have begun to choose sides. Unfortunately, because she’d spent so long trying to get Cain’s attention beforehand, I have no doubt she brought Cain right to our doorstep.

The irony is that if Cain had thought to ask her to do the same thing, he would’ve eradicated the resistance far sooner. But he’s only ever considered Callie as someone to feed from and fuck.

I take a deep breath and force myself to ask the hardest question. “What do you want?”

Moisture glistens over her eyes. “I want to fuck someone without wondering if he’ll kill me afterwards,” she admits. “I want people to love

me—and not just because they see me as a way to get Cain’s ear. I want to stop feeling so tired all the time. Every morning, I wake up afraid. I go to sleep, and I’m afraid. Even my dreams are terrifying, and it’s *exhausting*.”

Fat tears drop from her grey-brown eyes, and I’m shocked to find the corners of my own warming. Vane grunts, like he’s surprised to hear such a deep answer from someone so shallow. Yes, there were touches of her narcissism there, but her response has stunned me, and I forget to ask my next question.

“I saved you,” Callie presses. “Cain and Ivan were going to bleed you for every single drop of blood in your body in their quest to wipe out the resistance forever, and I risked my neck to get you away from Triumph Island and back to your band of merry men. You owe me. A life for a life... sister.”

Convenient how she remembers our filial bond when it suits her.

I shake my head. “It’s not up to me.”

“I’ll fight for my freedom,” Callie promises. “You’re going to war. I’ll help. I’ll fight against Cain if it finally removes him from our lives forever.”

Vane growls. “I don’t trust her one bit.”

Funnily enough, I do.

“She has nothing left.”

If we fail, Cain will kill her. She’s barely managed a month on her own before running to us for help. If we win, then she has a chance—a slim chance—to continue living the life she’s always enjoyed. With her gift, she’ll probably be able to persuade a few rich humans to give her everything she’s ever wanted and disappear. Not the high life, but a comfortable one.

“You’re not actually considering it,” Vane asks, aghast.

Too late, I’ve already decided.

“Another ancient vampire in the battle could turn the tide,” I answer. “She’s not lying. She has no other options.”

“And the second Cain promises to take her back...”

“I’m not stupid,” Callie retorts, a little of her earlier snark coming through. “He’s started to purge us. If he offers to take me back, it’s a lie.”

“Once he starts killing the siblings of one generation,” I explain for Vane’s benefit. “None survive. He did it with our brothers, and the brothers before them. Then he’ll start afresh with a new first generation of vampires, and we’ll become the cautionary tale for them.”

The ritual cycle used to fascinate me and fill me with horror at the same time. The moment Bella and Immy died, Callie knew as well as I did that she didn't have long left.

"It's death at his hands either way." Callie's head drops, her long tatty hair obscuring her face as she says. "This way... in the extremely unlikely event that you win—that you actually manage to kill him—I'll know he finally got what he deserved."

My lips purse as I consider her words. Vengeance is a strong motivator, but is it enough? What happens when Cain is dead and Callie remains?

Yes, she'll get to live, but I doubt she's fully considered what that life will be like. Cain might not be hunting for her... but I know the cold rage in Draven—and also in Frost. They're not the only two, either. Callie has done terrible things to many people, and they won't be content to forget that.

She looks up, the glazed look in her eyes gone. My truth spell has worn off for now. "How *is* the plan to kill our sire going? You've clearly spent some time honing your little magic tricks."

"We have a way to kill him," I hedge.

One blonde eyebrow rises. "If you're not boasting about it, you either haven't figured out how to do it, or you're reluctant."

She's fishing for information, and she won't get it from me. We still have to source a willing sacrifice for the ritual—and I don't imagine it'll be easy, despite how much everyone wants Cain dead. No matter what anyone says, most people simply aren't willing to give up their lives for the benefit of the world, and that's especially true for most immortals.

You'd think that with all of those years to come to terms with death, most of us would've done it. In fact, the opposite happens. We become so detached from death that we fear it above all others. The eldest are so used to living, that the alternative is anathema.

Callie is the perfect example. She's done absolutely everything she can to stay alive: betray our sire, flee the comforts she craves above all others, and run into the arms of her sworn enemies... all to escape her fate.

"The logistics of the plan are not your concern," I retort. "You should know, you made an error in coming here. Draven and Frost want your head—so do a lot of others—and there's little chance of that ever changing."

I don't say it unkindly, but her face falls anyway. Without the makeup and jewels to mask it, the exhaustion is plain in her face.

She was so caught up in trying to escape the certainty of death at Cain's hands, that she underestimated the threat that Draven represents.

Either that or she foolishly believed I have enough influence to stop him.

Regardless, she's run from one relentless predator straight into the path of another.

Her head falls back against the bars, and her eyes flutter closed on a near-silent, defeated exhale.

"Very well," she whispers.

One of her hands goes to her wrist, and she fiddles with a pair of dirt-crusted bangles there, seeking comfort in the familiar finery.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



CALLISTA

THE CLANGING OF METAL JARS ME OUT OF MURKY DREAMS AND INTO reality faster than I can process.

My body, still in survival mode, thrums with tension before I even manage to identify the man at the bars. Even when I do manage to put a name to the face, his gift combined with my own sleepiness means it takes me a second to remember why I know him.

“Samuel?” I ask, still not sure it’s him.

“Good evening, little sister,” he murmurs. “I’ve brought you breakfast, water to wash yourself, and a change of clothes.”

I shuffle to my knees, studying his face intently for any indication that this is a trick, or even a last supper.

Ever since Evie shut me in here yesterday, I’ve been waiting for the axe to fall. For Draven to come and wreak retribution for my part in his turning. In some ways, I’d welcome it. I doubt that Evie has the stomach to let him drag it out as he wants to. It will be a quicker, less public death at his hands. A quiet, fitting end to an insignificant life.

My hands are thankfully unencumbered by that blistering silver now that I’m shut away in this cell, but they still shake as I pick up the mug of blood.

He’s warmed it for me.

“Thank you,” I whisper, bringing it to my lips.

“You are welcome.” He bows his head. “Evonnia has spent the better part of the day arguing for your life. In the absence of a decision—and with more pressing matters for her to focus on—I’ve volunteered to remain as your companion.”

My jailer.

At least he’s a pleasant one. Even when I was considered a traitor, he remained decent towards me, preferring to reserve judgement when the rest of his camp had already decided my guilt.

I take my time with the blood, but the steaming water in the basin he’s brought me is too much of a luxury to resist. Samuel turns his back and allows me to wash in privacy. The clothes are too big and a little scratchy, and I wrinkle my nose at how far I’ve fallen.

There was a time when I boasted happily that the only things to touch my skin were gold, silk, and Chanel. I miss that, but I was no more significant in those expensive clothes at Cain's side than I am now in cheap rags behind bars.

I clear my throat, and Samuel turns around, smiling softly. "Much better. Shall we?"

He already has the key in the lock, and I frown. "I thought I was supposed to be waiting for my execution?"

He chuckles. "I expect that a good ninety percent of the resistance would prefer it if you were. Fortunately for you, Evie is keeping the dogs at bay for now. Your promise of aid in the coming battle has made an impression on her, and most of her pack is too focused on trying to find a way to rescue Morwenna and Mia to really argue with her."

He starts walking, expecting me to follow. With a sigh, I tug on the dismally practical walking boots I was forced to invest in while I was running for my life and trudge after him. I haven't seen much of the outside since we arrived, and the cool, fresh air is a welcome change from the musty basement.

Most people ignore us as we pass. They're all busy loading hover vans and finalising last minute drills.

"What's her plan?" I ask. "Hit New York with everyone you've got?"

"A surgical strike, aimed at Eden Park," Samuel corrects. "Luring Cain out into the open using Ivan and the chance to make a spectacle as bait. Once he's on the battlefield, her spell will strip him of his vampirism and render him mortal."

So it's true. Vampirism is the result of some witch's stupid spell. Typical. And *of course* Evie just happens to be one, because her being the 'chosen one' isn't getting old already.

How nice it must be to know that you're destined to make an indelible mark on the world. Even if she fails, I'm willing to bet Evie will get closer to killing Cain than anyone ever has. She's the world's greatest overachiever, and she doesn't even have to try.

"How come you got saddled with babysitting me?" I prod. "Shouldn't you be out there ordering the toy soldiers around?"

Samuel isn't offended. He just laughs. "No, there are quite enough men with fragile egos shouting orders already without adding me to the mix. I volunteered to shadow you because I could, quite frankly, use a break."

I scoff. Samuel has always been a warrior and a leader, just like Evie. Cain chose our brothers based on their skills in battles and duels.

“I can’t believe you’ve suddenly decided to give up the sword.”

He shakes his head. “No. But during my final days on this earth, I wish for some time to think.”

“If you want to be alone, you can just go,” I wave my hand at the forest. “And final days? Nice to know you have such high hopes for your success.”

A sudden crash from one of the vans nearby renders his long sigh almost inaudible, snarls echo all around us, and my shoulders draw in, my posture instinctively working to make me less of a target.

“I have every confidence in Evie’s plan, and your company is a welcome distraction,” Samuel continues, ignoring the ruckus. “Were I alone, I feel it would be too easy to lose myself to my darker, less pleasant thoughts.”

Ha, at least he has to be alone for that to happen.

I bite back the snarky comment, because despite his role, Samuel is trying his best to be nice. “So what should we do while I wait for Draven to sneak away from Evie and take my head?” I ask.

Samuel stares at me intently. “I was quite enjoying our walk; however, if you wanted to contribute by loading a van...”

I grimace. Manual labour? No, thank you.

“Walking is fine,” I reply, a little too quickly perhaps, because the corners of his lips turn up.

We lapse into silence, watching the controlled chaos that is an army preparing to go on the move. No one bothers us, and I wonder if that’s Samuel’s gift at work.

How perfect that the two people best at being forgotten and ignored are walking together, keeping out of the way. If we both die in this battle, no one will remember us. At least Samuel can blame his gift for that. I have no such excuse.

“Grigoriy,” Samuel calls, pulling me out of my head.

I freeze in place, an automatic reaction to seeing any ghoul. I’ve always hated the stinking, brainless, corpse eaters, and Evie seems to have somehow gathered all of them to her little crusade against Cain. It doesn’t matter that they’re sentient. I’ve seen Frost snap as a newborn. I know he’s just as venomous as the rest of his kind.

Grigoriy can only be more so. I don't trust his pleasant-old-man facade, not one bit. Today he's wearing a brown suit that totally looks like it's been dug out of some old grandpa's closet and someone has given him a haircut.

"How goes it?" Grigoriy asks. "I was just taking in the air. It's dryer in this part of the world. Have you noticed?"

Samuel smiles. "You should try Egypt."

Grigoriy grunts noncommittally. "In another life."

God, what a depressing bunch. I almost wish we were silent.

"You're still committed to it, then?" Samuel asks, and I get the sense he's being vague so as to protect Grigoriy's privacy.

The ghoul nods. "I should not exist. I am an abomination, and if Cain and Ivan are leaving this world, I have no desire to be the only one to remain."

Oh. The pieces click together in my mind slower than they should, but I don't comment. I don't know this ghoul well enough to say whether his death is a sad thing or a good one. Since he must have history with Cain, it's likely to be the latter.

"Have you found the person you suggested to Evie yet?" Grigoriy asks. "I know the sacrifice is weighing heavily on her mind."

I jerk at the mention of a sacrifice, but Samuel just nods. "I have."

"Is that what she's keeping me alive for?" I demand, my fear rising. "Just to kill me at the right fucking moment?"

Grigoriy flinches, and Samuel holds up both hands. "Peace, Callista. The sacrifice must be a willing one, and you most certainly are not. I told Evie that I knew someone who would be willing to give their life to see Cain dead, and I do. Rest assured, it is not you."

I deflate slightly, but I can't even feel relief. All that returns is that ever-present tiredness, weighing down my limbs. Is this what life will be like for me now? Always waiting for the axe to fall?

"Some idiot has to sacrifice themselves as part of her spell to kill Cain?" I ask.

"She has to poison their flesh and blood, and then Cain, Ivan, and I will consume the sacrifice alive," Grigoriy confirms. "It will not be an easy death."

"So who have you come up with?" I ask Samuel. "Which goody-two-shoes hero gets to die and live on in glory as the sacrifice who made it all happen?"

Because Evie won't take killing them lightly. The sacrifice will probably get statues in their honour. Hell, I wouldn't be surprised if Evie creates a new annual holiday.

Samuel's fang worries his dark lower lip for a second. "I plan to offer myself up. Don't tell your sister. She'll never go through with it if she knows."

I freeze. "No way."

He gives me a wry half smile. "Like Grigoriy, I have lived far longer than any man has a right to. Most of my life was spent either in service to Cain, or hiding in a cave like a coward."

"If you do this, everyone will just forget you again." It seems so unfair.

For any other man, this would be Samuel's chance to break out from the insignificance that has cursed us both, and yet, thanks to his gift...

"Exactly." Samuel nods. "Evie's grief will end quickly, and she will be able to get on with making a better world out of the chaos that will follow Cain's death. It's the most sensible solution."

"She'd have an easier time doing that with a powerful older vampire by her side," I argue, not even contesting his assumption that Evie will step into our sire's shoes.

"She has Morwenna," Samuel brushes my concerns aside. "And an entire pack that loves her. More than enough support, even if she weren't a formidable leader in her own right. The world will be in safe hands."

He doesn't mean for the words to cut, but they do. Grigoriy says something else, and Samuel answers, but my ears are full of fuzzy white noise.

When this is all over, providing Evie wins, she'll have everything I've ever wanted. Lovers to fawn over her. Power to command respect from even the oldest of vampires and lycans.

And I... I will be on the run again, waiting for the reaper to catch me.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



EVELYN

IT'S LATE MORNING, AND I STILL HAVEN'T LEFT THE WAR ROOM. ON the table, the holographic model of Manhattan glares at me, overlaid with troop movements and blinking black dots that represent Cain's forces. The network of sewers and maintenance ducts beneath are painstakingly mapped, and I trace the maze with my eyes.

Grigoriy, Frost, and Gideon have already left, along with a small group dedicated to clearing the sewers of Cain's men. Hopefully, they'll be able to draw enough ghouls to them to make a difference in the battle.

Someone has set up a hologram to display their locations. Their coloured dots—blue for Frost, red for Gideon—are carefully escorting Grigoriy's green signal through the tunnels.

Our separation has put me on edge. Logically, I know they're the only two who can help Grigoriy with this. Still, it seems that, every time I'm split from my thralls, something bad happens. My gut is screaming at me that it's only a matter of time before they're dead, captured, or worse.

The rest of our troops are ready to drop in from the sky, and we have a couple of armoured tanks—although God only knows where the resistance managed to source those.

"Evie?" Finn's voice draws me out of my brooding thoughts, and I glance up from the table to find him leaning against the doorjamb. "You're so wound up I can't sleep."

His admission is soft, but I can feel his concern down the thrall bond. I've been so focused on Frost and Gid that I haven't even stopped to think about the others. A brief check tells me Draven is sound asleep, but Silas and Vane are both concentrating on something.

Has Finn been alone all morning?

"Sorry," I apologise, crossing the room and tugging him into a hug. "I just..."

I can't explain it, but luckily I don't have to.

"I've got their trackers up on my tablet," Finn says. "Come to bed. We can watch over them from there."

He pulls lightly at my arm. "Come on. Sleep will help you think more clearly tomorrow."

Once again, he's right, and I let him lead me up to the bedroom the pack has settled in.

When we open the door, both of us freeze.

Silas and Vane are dressed in full tactical gear, rummaging through their cases for... something, while Draven snoozes on, oblivious, on a mattress by the door.

"What are you two doing?" I demand.

The sleeping vampire opens a lazy eye and grins, answering before either of the shamefaced brothers can. "They're trying to sneak out to rescue Mia, of course."

Both lycans glare at him, but the vampire shoves away the covers, revealing that he's already dressed and armed as well.

"How long have you been awake?" Silas asks.

"Long enough to know you were going to draw a moustache on me in permanent marker before you left," Draven retorts, standing and quirking a single brow at him. "Be thankful you didn't succeed."

Vane ignores the two of them and focuses on me. "She's our little sister."

His eyes plead with me to understand.

I nod, slowly. "I know. Morwen is my sister too."

"Can I just point out the hypocrisy here?" Draven says, "You all got mad at *me* for sneaking away to murder Callista, and yet... here we are."

Silas's ears turn red, and he mutters something under his breath.

"There's a difference between a half-cocked quest for vengeance and rescuing your loved ones," Vane counters. "We won't let it mess up the mission. We already agreed that, if we can't find her by the time the army arrives, we'll give up and focus on Cain."

So they have a plan then. That's good. I pinch the bridge of my nose, trying to make this feel like a good idea, and failing.

Their jaws are clenched, shoulders stiff as they wait for me to condemn this whole idea.

I should. I really should. Yet the thrall bonds are tugging in my chest, filled with worry so strong that it twists my guts into knots.

Crossing the room, I grab a change of clothes and my own sword, and start changing with quick, efficient motions.

"What are you doing?" Silas asks.

“Going with you.” *Wasn’t it obvious?* “Your odds of success are slim, but they’ll be better with a bigger team. My blood will be useful in case things backfire, and we’ll have enough people that someone can be a lookout should we need to do any breaking and entering.” I pause. “Besides, you’ll be useless in battle if you’re worrying about your sister the entire time.”

And should something happen to Mia, concern for them will distract me. I can’t let myself lose focus around my sire. It would be deadly for all of us.

“Someone needs to stay here and guard Finn,” Silas objects.

“Not if he comes with us,” I retort. “We’ll need backup.”

“Gid and Frost are going to kill me,” Vane grumbles, scrubbing a hand down his face.

“Only if we all live through this,” Draven adds.

“How are we getting to New York?” I ask, opening a drawer and strapping yet more knives to my thighs.

As a precaution, I grab the belt strung with my herb sachets, and the paper where I’ve written down my notes on the spell to kill Cain. I have no idea if we’re coming back, and if we don’t, I need to be prepared.

To be extra safe, I tuck the rarest ingredients—my wolfsbane and the splinters of white oak—into a waterproof pouch as well. If I lose those, getting more into the city on such short notice would be impossible.

Finn finally moves from the doorway, heading straight for his workstation and packing down the things he’s going to take with swift, quiet efficiency. His pleasure at being included hums along our bond, and I realise some of the dread I was feeling earlier was actually his at the thought of being left behind while we all went into battle.

Don’t get me wrong, I want the omega as far from danger as possible, but I also know that would drive him crazy. He did well enough on our mission to free Grigoriy, and his technical expertise is invaluable.

Plus, I’m counting on his presence to keep Vane and Silas calm should anything have happened to Mia.

“We’ve still got the spycraft we used to infiltrate the gala,” Silas admits slowly. “I’m not sure all of us should—”

I pin him in place with a glare. “We go as a pack or not at all. Frost and Gideon are already there. Samuel and Echo are more than capable of

leading the main forces, and we can meet up with them when we know our people are safe.”

I doubt, knowing Cain, that either Morwen or Mia will be in a state to help us during the battle. The logical side of me is roaring that this is a bad idea. We should leave them and rescue them after the battle, as we agreed.

But I also know Cain will do whatever he needs to to win, including using loved ones against us. I’ve seen him execute his enemies’ families in front of them at the start of battle to demoralise them. If that were to happen, I have no doubt that Vane and Silas would lose their focus. Rage is the easiest way to make your opponent make mistakes, and that could cost them their lives.

Silas surprises me by crossing the space between us and claiming my lips in a fierce kiss.

“I love you,” he murmurs.

I grin against his lips. “I love you too. Now, are we sneaking out or what?”

We end up simply walking out of the pack house. Everyone still awake is too busy to bother with us, but Draven’s hiss halts me no more than three steps beyond the door.

He’s wearing a huge hoodie, and most of his body is still in the shade, but he’s taken one of his protective gloves off, and is holding his hand out in the sunlight.

“Put your glove on!” I growl.

“It’s not catching fire,” he observes, ignoring me. “Hurts like a bitch... and there’s some smoke, but no flames.”

It clicks, then, what he’s trying to say.

“You’re not old enough to become a daywalker,” Vane observes.

“No, but he’s been sleeping less recently, and his circadian rhythm is fucked,” Finn adds.

The omega is right. Ordinarily, a vampire Draven’s age wouldn’t be able to stay awake at this time, with the sun directly above us. Let alone walk and talk coherently. I originally put his survival in the caves down to luck, but now that I think about it, he should’ve become a living torch after only a few seconds in the sun.

“You’re transitioning early,” I murmur. “Why?”

“You have to ask?” Silas says, smirking. “He’s drinking your ancient witchy blood on a daily basis. It’s bound to have some effect on him.”

Vane nods. “Makes sense. Your blood is the strongest I’ve ever tasted.”

“Too much sunlight will still kill you,” I warn.

“Put your hand away, before you get sunburn,” Vane growls. “We have a mission, remember?”

Draven doesn’t argue, and the five of us hurry into the trees. There are a few lycans out working on the vehicles, but they don’t pay us any attention.

We’re halfway to the clearing where Vane has left the spycraft when a pointed cough fills the air.

Callie is leaning against a tree lazily, but her windswept hair belies the casual impression. She must have come after us at speed. Her eyes are bloodshot, and I can smell the alcohol mixed with the coppery tang of blood on her breath.

“Who the fuck left you unguarded?” Silas growls.

“Samuel and Grigoriy decided to reminisce about eras past and drink themselves into oblivion to celebrate their last day on earth,” Callie retorts. “I was bored, and then I happened upon Evelyn and her band of merry freaks, sneaking away before the battle starts...” She raises both brows suggestively. “Running away?”

Silas snarls at her. “We’re not running anywhere.”

“Shut your mouth, before I forget my promise,” Draven threatens.

I say nothing, frowning at her. Callie has no reason to lie, but I can’t see Samuel getting drunk on the eve of battle.

“You’re so happy to have everyone die, as long as it helps you defeat Cain,” Callie continues. “Pathetic. I thought the hero was supposed to sacrifice themselves, not their friends and family.”

All of my guys snarl at that—even Finn—and I have to hold a hand out to stop them from ripping into her.

“You’re drunk, Callie. You have no idea what you’re talking about. Go back to the house.”

“You wanted my help,” she accuses. “I’ll help rescue Morwen and her dog, as long as it gets me out of this depressing house.”

“We don’t need a drunk narcissist screwing up the mission,” Vane snaps. “Get back inside and stop sneaking around unless you want Draven to rip out your throat.”

I’m tempted to let him. Callie sneaking away from Samuel is a deliberate provocation. She’s testing our boundaries. It’s possible she’s thinking of running again.

Cain would've already killed her for the slight, but something is still holding me back.

"Fine, run off to get more glory," she pouts. "It doesn't matter how many people die in the process, does it? All for the greater good." Her disdain darkens her eyes as she turns on her heel and heads away.

I grab her arm before I'm aware of what I'm doing, and she wheels back, only to go rigid at whatever she sees on my face.

"Do you think any of this has been easy?" I demand. "Do you think I enjoy knowing how many will die tomorrow? I have news for you, sister. This is war. People die. I've seen it a hundred times, and it's about time you did too. Maybe then you'll be less critical and understand I've got to make the least bad decision I can and pray that I can live with the outcome."

Callie's face pales, but her lips thin and she drags her arm away. I'm under no delusions about my rant having an effect on her—Callie is a creature of luxury who's never seen war. She can never understand those horrors. But it seems she's finally realised that she's crossed a line.

"See you on the battlefield," she spits. "For the record—not that you asked my opinion—Cain's probably keeping her holed up on Triumph Island. If you want to get in, your best bet is to find the secret hangar on the north side."

Without pausing to give me a second to digest the information, she disappears.

My whole body sags, as if the anger I had was the only thing keeping me upright. See her on the battlefield? I doubt it.

I keep my scepticism to myself. I'm more convinced than ever after her little display that Callie means to run, but that's a problem for after the battle.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



SILAS

THE SPYCRAFT LOOKS MUCH THE SAME AS I REMEMBER, LIGHT AND barebones, but there are a few scorch marks on the hull that weren't there before.

Evie traces them with one hand, following the echo of the explosion that nearly took out one engine. It means so much to me that she decided to come with us rather than scolding us for abandoning the pack. Vane and I would've done it alone. Our beta instincts have been screaming at us since Mia was first captured. Evie was right; going into battle without knowing what's happened to our sister would've left both of us distracted and useless.

Our girl turns and looks at me, brow raised in question, as she jerks her thumb at the charring on our right wing.

"I forgot you missed our spectacular exit from New York after the gala," I say, pulling her into my side for a quick hug. "Finn took down six missiles with his drones, but some of them did get a bit close for comfort."

"That was too close," Finn grumbles. "I've added extra precautions this time. If I'd have known how hairy our exit would be, I would never have come along for the ride."

"It might be worse today," Vane warns.

I can tell my brother is less happy than I am about having company. He said at the start that he'd rather have gone alone, but he needs me in case Mia is in no state to walk out of the dungeons herself. A one man rescue attempt was a suicide mission—and the two of us together had marginally better odds of coming back.

Now the whole pack is going, and I'm willing to bet he's *this close* to bursting a vein imagining how Gid is going to react.

"Almost definitely," Draven agrees.

The vampire has been shooting me warning looks ever since he woke up, and when I catch him staring at his reflection in the metal—checking for ink—I smirk.

One day I'm going to give him a handlebar moustache and the mother of all monobrows, but I'll wait until his guard is down again.

The omega nods. “Which is why I’ve installed some lightweight laser systems to interrupt any future missile attacks.”

“You better not have messed with the engine,” Draven grumbles.

The omega offers his most innocent smile as he clicks a button and the door opens, allowing us to see the inside. “Of course not, oh great one.”

The jet is just as much of an empty shell as it was the last time, but none of us remark on it. I take my spot beside my brother at the helm and start the process of booting up the cloaking generator while he switches on the engines and guides us through the canopy and into the cloud-covered sky.

“What’s the plan?” Evie asks, once the towering glass columns of New York appear on the horizon.

“We were assuming that Mia is being held in the Court dungeons,” I begin. “We’ve not heard anything back from any of the feelers we put out...”

Callista’s words echo in my mind. What if Mia *is* on Triumph Island?

“That doesn’t mean anything,” Finn interrupts. “The whole city is on lockdown. There’s very little information coming in or out.”

I can only hope that no news is good news. Surely news of Morwen and Mia’s deaths would’ve been published like Bella’s?

The omega continues, “I’m assuming that they have some kind of signal jammer in place, so I’ve already contacted Samuel and told him to continue with the plan, even in our absence. We just have to grab our girls and make sure we reach Eden Park at the same time he does.”

I scratch the back of my neck as my instinct howls in my chest. It’s been like this since she was taken. Mia is our baby sister; that makes her ours to protect—no matter how competent she is at protecting herself.

“Do you have any idea how you’re going to break in?” Draven asks.

“No,” I admit, reluctantly. “But we’ve all been into the dungeons before, when we were undercover. We know the route...”

We’re going in blind. The admission draws a sigh from Evie, whose fangs drop down to worry her lower lip as she starts fiddling with the herbs on her belt.

“The objective is get Mia out, by any means necessary,” Vane insists, though I can see the blush on his cheeks as well.

The vampire shakes his head. “You two are useless without an alpha. Any plans, doll?”

Evie is quiet, methodically checking her blades with a furrow between her brows as she thinks. “They’re expecting an army, not a strike team,” she mutters under her breath. “Cain’s still not at Court?” She directs the question at Finn.

He shrugs. “The last reliable intel was that he was holed up on Triumph Island, but that was over a week ago.”

“Then that’s where Morwen will be.” Evie crosses her arms over her chest. “He won’t want her far from him; plus, it’s where he kept me.”

Vane grunts in acknowledgement, but he’s clearly unhappy to hear that Callista was right. “How—?”

A shrill alarm pierces the cockpit a second before something smashes into our left side.

Air rushes into the jet. The blue sky is suddenly visible through a *hole* in our side as the spycraft spirals. Warning lights blare red across the dash, and Vane yanks viciously at the controls.

My head turns, seeking out Evie and Finn. The latter is clutching the arms of his seat, glasses hanging awkwardly from his face and his warm complexion pale with terror.

Evie is rummaging through her belt, grabbing things with blurring speed. She’s bleeding profusely from a cut on her scalp, but she uses that too. Her hand swipes through the mess, coating her herbs with her blood as she mumbles something inaudible over the alarms.

“Fuck!” Vane curses, drawing my attention back to the cockpit window and the rapidly approaching ground.

Just before impact, Evie screams out a word.

Everything goes dark.

When I can open my eyes again, we’re surrounded by smoke and wreckage. A flickering red protective bubble surrounds our seats—but the rest of the plane has been wrecked. Evie saved us, I realise. This red magic can only be her doing. A second later, the bubble dissipates, and my heart skips a beat.

I slash at the seat belt with my claws, tumbling forwards before I can catch my balance. When I do, I turn straight to Finn. He’s the youngest of us—not even ninety—and if any of the debris caught him...

He’s not in his seat. All the blood leaves my face as I stare at the empty harness. Did his belt fail? Are we going to find his body splattered across the street?

“Silas, she needs blood.”

Finn’s voice snaps me out of my panic, and I whirl to find him crouching beside Evie. His wrist is held up to her face, and she’s drinking from his vein in huge gulps. The omega appears mercifully unharmed, but Evie is bleeding from her nostrils and ears. All around her, the contents of her herb pouches are scattered, their strong scents mixing with the smoke and blood.

Whatever she did to protect us, it seems to have cost her dearly, and if those are all of her supplies, we now have a serious problem.

“No time,” Vane growls, shoving past me and slicing Evie out of her seat. “We need to get out of here and out of sight.”

But his move reveals another complication. A sharp piece of shrapnel running through the backrest of her seat. Moving her pulls it free, sending a river of blood spurting from her lower spine to the floor.

Shit shit shit.

She moans, and Finn hisses as she draws heavily on his vein.

Thank the gods she’s an elder. Severing the spinal cord could’ve killed a young vampire.

We don’t have time for her to heal fully. I can already hear people outside.

Vane growls, eyes flashing as he tugs her into his arms. Finn moves with them both, heading for the door, just as shouts and sirens fill the air. I turn to Draven, but the vampire is already out of his seat, our omega’s bag in one hand and his sword in the other.

“Head for the river,” he suggests. “It’ll make it harder for them to follow her scent.”

Evie’s powerful blood is now everywhere. The smell of it might as well be a beacon that will make us easy to follow. Shit.

Gideon is going to tear us all a new one for this *if* we survive.

Vane is already moving, tearing away from the wreckage with a frustrated noise caught in the back of his throat.

I let Finn and Draven pass before following at a sprint. The vampire draws his hood up high over his face to protect him from the afternoon sun.

This was not how this mission was supposed to go.

“How the fuck did they down us?” I ask as we run through the back alleys of the city.

Our spycraft has crashed near the docks. The area is surrounded by warehouses and bustling with activity. The humans nearby give us a wide berth as we flee the scene. Years of living under Cain has given them the wisdom to stay out of anything to do with immortals, and doors slam as they hurry to get away.

Once we're out of sight, and we're certain we weren't followed, Vane uses his shoulder to force his way into a derelict building. Dodging warning signs and old, dusty factory equipment, he leads us through what might once have been a dark, dingy office and into a grimy, yellow-tiled employee bathroom. There's no power, but a tiny window set high in the wall casts a weak stream of daylight into the room.

Draven hisses and steps out of the light. "I'll stand guard outside."

I nod. "I'll feed her while you clean her up," I suggest to my brother.

His mouth sets in a grim line, and he rests Evie against the wall. I can read the hesitation in his posture, and I know how he feels. This place is filthy. I don't want our girl touching anything in here, but we need to get the blood off her and head out of this area fast.

Once Cain's troops find that jet, they're going to start a witch hunt. How could the plan have gone downhill so quickly?

"Finn, we need to contact the others and let them know what's happened."

"Already working on it," our omega mutters, dragging various pieces of tech from the bag that Draven brought.

Rolling up my sleeve, I slash at my wrist and press the wound against Evie's already bloodstained lips. Her mouth twitches, eyes rolling for a second, before she latches on and starts to drink in earnest.

"Come on," I whisper, voice suddenly catching in my throat.

This doesn't bode well. The attack is tonight, and our girl is in no state to do anything. While she drinks, I check the pouches of herbs at her belt, annoyed to find that several of them are empty.

"Shit." I curse again.

She must have opened them while she was casting that bubble to save us, but now the contents are missing.

Vane returns holding a strip of his shirt soaked in water, and shoots me a questioning glance.

"Her herbs." I gesture to the empty packets.

His eyes tighten and his jaw clenches. “This was a stupid fucking idea,” he gripes, daubing away the blood on her face with gentle strokes. “We should’ve known better.”

My eyes go wide. “We can’t abandon Mia.” Our sister is our responsibility.

He shakes his head and glances at Finn, then back at our girl. “But we should never have brought them with us. The risks were too great, and we fucked up.”

Finn starts murmuring on the other side of the room, and I wonder who he’s talking to: Samuel? Or Frost and Gideon?

“Gid’s going to tear us a new asshole,” I groan. “Wait. I think she just moved.”

We both hold our breath, and a second later we’re rewarded as Evie’s hands come up to cradle my wrist.

“Hey, beautiful,” I coo, “I’d really love to see those pretty eyes if you can manage it.”

Her lids twitch, and a second later, two blood-shot blue eyes stare back at me. I swear, it’s the most beautiful sight I’ve ever seen.

“Drink more,” I encourage. “You need to get your strength back.”

But she pulls back, blinking away the redness with a groan. “I’ll be fine,” she promises, giving my arm a swift lick to seal the wound. “Draining you won’t solve any of our problems.”

“Can you clean yourself up?” Vane asks.

I know he doesn’t want to leave her, but snarls have started to echo from Finn’s direction, and the omega doesn’t deserve any of whatever fallout he’s receiving.

Evie nods, taking the ripped and bloodstained shirt from him and shoving to her feet. She wobbles a little and, mercifully, accepts my hand as I help her to the sink.

She cleans up as best she can, but her clothes are so bloodstained that the scent is going to stick unless we can find her a new shirt, and we don’t have time to raid a Target. Then she lifts the fabric and twists to mop at the scabbed-over piercing wound to her lower back, and I hiss out a breath.

Damn, this is all our fucking fault. Vane was right. We should never have given in and brought them. If I’d used logic rather than letting my instinct control me—convince me that keeping our pack together was better

than keeping them safe—she wouldn't be in this mess, and neither would Finn.

"I understand that," Vane growls, bringing my attention away from Evie's barely sealed wounds. "You can take it out of our hides later, but right now, we're trapped in Cain's territory with wounded, and we need somewhere to go."

Evie speaks up before Frost—and it's definitely the ghoul on the other side of the phone—can answer.

"The lycan compound."

"You want to go into the heart of Cain's territory and hand ourselves over to his army?" *How hard did she hit her head?*

Evie winces. "They're not Cain's army. They're Morwen's."

Draven pokes his head around the door. "She's got a point. The dogs worshipped her sister. They might fight for us."

"Even if they do, it's still far too likely we'll get caught on the way," I retort.

"You need to get to the sewers," Frost orders. "I don't care how you do it. Once you're there, Grigoriy and I can make sure you're protected. Jesus-H-Christ, I can't fucking believe you brought Finn with you as well. Gideon is going to have a fit."

Evie's chin tilts up, and stubbornness settles into her shoulders. "We've lost a lot of my herbs," she says, the corners of her mouth turning down. "I know where we can get more, and it's not in the sewers."

Frost's growl echoes through the tablet, his displeasure plain in the sound. "Eve."

"Frost." She's not backing down.

For a tense second, I wonder if this is going to escalate. I know whose side I'm on—I have no desire to drag Evie and Finn any deeper into this mess—but for once in my life, common sense keeps my mouth shut.

Frost sighs. "Eve... you realise you're on your own, right? I can't help you and work on rounding up the ghouls."

Evie is unflinching. "We'll be fine."

I can almost see our ghoul alpha shaking his head. "I know you will, but... be careful. I'd say listen to Vane, but it seems like he's taken leave of his senses."

My brother growls quietly but doesn't refute the assessment. "I'll keep them safe," he vows.

“You fucking better.” Frost’s tone is whip sharp. “Eve, try to remember that you’re wandering around with my heart in your hands, okay?”

Her expression, so resolute, melts. Blue eyes turn soft as she regards the slim glass device. “I’ll be careful, I promise.”

“Good.” He lets out a long breath. “I’ll see you on the battlefield.”

“Don’t be late,” she whispers.

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

The line clicks dead.

All of us look at one another, and then at Evie. It’s easy to see that she has a plan. It’s written in the determined—albeit pain-lanced—set of her shoulders.

“Immy showed me some communal gardens along the waterfront,” she begins. “That’s where we’ll find the herbs I need to replace the ones I’ve lost. Then we head for the Lycan Compound. Morwen lived with them for years, and they respected the fuck out of her. I have a gut feeling that they’ll take our side... if we can make it worth it.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE



EVELYN

WE MOVE OUT AS SOON AS WE'VE RECEIVED FROST'S RELUCTANT blessing. Our group weaves through the streets with our hoods pulled over our faces. The scent of my blood is much less noticeable now that I've cleaned most of it away, but my head and spine continue to throb, despite how much I've drunk.

I don't mention anything, but I know Finn is attuned to the pain because he looks back every time I feel a particularly sharp twinge. Thankfully, the heavy clouds from earlier have broken into a fierce torrent of rain, covering my scent and helping us blend with the hundreds of other hooded New Yorkers hurrying away from the downpour.

Vampires dressed in strict military uniforms are dotted on every single corner. Small packs of them travel the streets, making our journey twice as difficult and even more nerve-wracking. Thankfully, Vane seems to have a second sense for where they are. He leads us down alleyways and back streets and through the quieter human neighbourhoods.

Our crash has put Cain on edge. He might not know I'm involved, but he will know that a group of resistance members survived and are in the city.

I really, really hope that the garden has the herbs I need. Thankfully, I still have my wolfsbane and white oak—which I sealed inside a zipped up pocket to prevent it from harming any of my pack. The rest of the herbs *should* be here... if not... well, I can't think about that.

We didn't come all this way to be thwarted by a lack of plant material.

The raised beds are mostly abandoned when we reach them. A few humans have braved the rain to gather food, but they're easy enough to avoid. I pick through the plants quietly, trusting the others to have my back as I successfully search out the ones I need. I'm wary that it must look like I'm taking more than I should, but I don't have the luxury of allowing myself to run short. Not when everyone is relying on me to kill Cain.

Pouches stuffed, I turn back to the guys. "I'm done."

Vane rubs his stubble-kissed chin thoughtfully. "We should get out of sight. Are you sure you want to risk the Compound? It'd be simpler to head for the sewers and wait for Frost and Gideon to give us the all clear."

There's a hint of pleading in his voice, but we came here to get Morwen and Mia out. I'm not about to give up on that now.

I glance at Finn, about to offer him an out, but the dishevelled omega is just as resolute as I am. His jaw takes on a stubborn cast as he stares me down with surprising boldness, daring me to say it.

"We're a pack," he insists. "We go together or not at all."

Silas shakes his head. "You do realise you're both going to be lucky if Gideon doesn't lock you up in his bedroom and throw away the key after this?"

Finn and I exchange wry, tired grins.

"Oh, I'm counting on it," he says.

So am I, because if Gideon has time to lock me up in a bedroom for days, that means we're no longer living under the threat of my sire. In fact, if we win this, I'm going to make spending a full week in bed with my pack my top priority.

"Down!" Vane growls, and I obey without question.

All of us duck behind the raised beds, on our knees in the rain. I don't think Finn is even daring to breathe. The reason for the urgency in Vane's voice becomes clear a second later as footsteps splash closer to us, uniform and layered—like they're marching.

A device beeps to life beside us—too close—and I stiffen.

"No sign of anything in this district," the soldier reports. "Scents are still hard to follow thanks to the fucking rain."

Whoever is on the other side makes a noise of frustration. "Understood. Continue as you are."

Boots crunch across gravel, getting closer. I glance at the rest of the pack, all of us are pressed hard against the sleek metal of the planting beds. The rain is falling in huge sheets now, and it makes it hard to read their expressions. Only Vane is close enough for me to make out, and he shakes his head, warning me not to move, then peeks over the top.

When he drops back down, he meets my gaze again. The lines around his mouth have eased, and my breath whooshes out in relief.

A second later, the soldier's footfall begins to fade, and the tension in my shoulders dissipates. He's leaving. Soon, I can't hear him over the weather, but I still wait for the hybrid to give the all clear before I move.

"That was too close," Silas mutters as soon as he's gone.

“Security is only going to get tighter close to the Compound,” Draven notes, brushing off his clothes. “If you can’t handle it...”

Silas growls under his breath. “Worry about handling yourself, vamp.”

Vane ignores them both, turning his attention to me instead. “You sure about this? We don’t have long to convince them if we’re going to find Morwen and Mia as well before the troops arrive.”

It’s hard to ignore the way my heart is still pounding in my chest, or the sinking feeling in my stomach, but I nod anyway. “It’s not far, and I’ll make it quick.” I *hope*.

He grumbles something under his breath but starts moving, anyway.

Draven is right. The security patrols become more frequent the closer we get to the Compound, but luckily I have a plan for that.

* * *

“YOU WANT to jump onto the roof?” Draven raises a brow. “Well, why didn’t you say so? Finally, this is getting interesting.”

“Morwen showed me how to access the roof from inside,” I continue, huddling against the alley wall beside the fire escape I’ve selected. “There are no cameras or recording devices up there. It’s the perfect way in, and it avoids the main doors, which are heavily guarded.”

Vane and Finn are looking at me like I’ve gone insane, Silas is grinning like a lunatic, and Draven... well, the ice has given way to amusement down our bond.

“It’s not a large jump,” I argue, leaping up to the fire escape. “You’re welcome to stay here, and I’ll go alone.”

“Fat chance!” Silas retorts, following my lead. “I’ve always wanted to leap across a street to near certain death at the hands of my own kind!”

“Really?” Finn drawls. “I’m glad you’ve put so much thought into this.”

I bite the inside of my cheek, grimacing. The omega’s sarcasm usually comes out when he’s nervous or angry, but I can’t coddle him right now. Vane is right; we have no time.

Unlike the brutal architecture of the Compound, the building beside it is the same typical glass and steel as the rest of the city, and the roof—like many others in the district—has been carefully cultivated into a garden, complete with sunny, hand-painted sheds and bee hives.

Fortunately, it's flat, and there's a long, straight path down the centre to give us a run up.

"There must be a back door," Finn protests, as he makes it up behind us, staring grimly at the ledge I'm currently leaning over, examining the street below.

"We can't afford to argue about this," I repeat. "Honestly, Finn, you don't have to follow if you're not comfortable. Vane will stay with you."

I take several large steps back and blow a stray wisp of hair out of my eyes before glancing back at Silas.

"See you on the other side."

My wounds ache as I force every ounce of vampiric strength into my legs, taking three flying leaps before...

Weightlessness.

Time seems to stand still as my body hurtles over the bustling street below. I catch a glimpse of the sunset over the river before the roof rushes up to meet me. Rolling doesn't make the landing any less hard on my spine, and for a second I lie on my back, unable to do more than struggle for breath.

"Shit." I push myself up, ignoring the scrapes from the coarse roof and turning back to look at the others, still waiting across the street.

I give them a wave, wincing as I do, and their relief hits me in a tidal wave from the thrall bond.

Draven is next. His jump lands better than mine, but his arms cartwheel until he manages to catch his balance. His hood falls down mid-leap, and he quickly tugs it back over his head despite the clouds and the weak late afternoon sun.

Old habits die hard.

Silas makes the entire thing look easy, and Finn—despite his nerves—clears the distance easily with his long limbs.

Vane is the last to leap, and for a long second my heart is in my throat as I track his jump. *Is he going to make it?* His toes scrape the edge of the building, and I reach out—

But it's Silas's hand that fists the fabric of his shirt and yanks him to safety. Vane shakes himself as soon as he's safe, then claps his brother on the back in gratitude.

All of us breathe a sigh of relief as we huddle together on the roof, and Finn casually brushes some of the gravel dust from my clothes as they wait

for me to divulge the next part of the plan.

Except there isn't one. I'm winging this.

"The door is this way," I mumble, leading them to it.

"Wait... we're just waltzing in?" Finn groans. "Evie, why not get it over with and present our guts on a platter?"

"At least there are no other omegas to worry about," Silas points out, slinging his arm around his shoulders.

"I'm going to make for the courtyard," I announce. "I don't think they'll attack—not straight away. They'll be curious about why I'm here."

When in doubt, the boldest action is often the safest.

"We'll follow your lead," Vane grunts. "But if you're wrong, we head back to the riverfront. We'll lose them near the water."

"Agreed," Draven says.

Steeling my shoulders, I nod once, then throw open the door.

The lycans are predators, so I don't let an inch of my hesitation show as I stride through the corridors of the place Morwen used to call home. Weakness makes you prey, and I need to show strength if I'm to have any hope of convincing these predators to listen to me.

The first lycan we pass takes a huge sniff of air as he stares at me with narrowed eyes. The second cocks his head in confusion. They know who I am, they even know Silas, Vane, and Draven, but as I predicted, my confidence and sudden appearance in their midst has given me the upper hand.

For how long?

I stop in the middle of the courtyard, in the exact spot I first caught Mia feeding my sister all those weeks ago. The few lycans who were playing basketball on the far side of the space stop as they notice their comrades filing in, then their nostrils flare, and they too turn to face me.

Even above us, windows open, curious wolves sticking their heads out. The anticipation is so thick that it makes it hard to breathe, but I cross my arms and settle in to wait a little longer.

"I'm here to make a bargain," I begin, once there are so many of them crammed into the space that—if I wanted to—I could reach out and touch one. "Who answers for you in my sister's absence?"

There are grumbles at that, but I can't tell if the lycans are unhappy or just shocked that I've clued into the identity of their true alpha.

“I do.” A lithe alpha, dressed in basketball gear and covered in a thin sheen of sweat, steps forward, dark eyes pinning me to the spot.

“My sister has been taken captive by Cain,” I inform him, keeping my words loud enough for the rest to hear. “I intend to free her, and then I intend to kill our sire.”

He spits at my feet. “It cannot be done.”

I don’t blink. “I know how to do it, but I didn’t come here to argue that with you.” I take a deep breath. “Before the sun rises, Cain will be dead, and I will be stepping into his place.” My gut tightens, and I feel the surprise echo down my thrall bonds.

I didn’t want this, but I know in my heart Samuel was right. Someone needs to step into Cain’s place, or the hierarchy of the vampires will fall apart. If that happens, the streets will run red with human blood.

Samuel won’t lead, Callie is too shallow to lead well, and Morwen would rather amputate all her limbs repeatedly than deal with the others. Besides us, the oldest and strongest vampires are Cain’s generals, and I wouldn’t trust them to be any less bloodthirsty than him.

Which leaves me.

Grim acceptance washes over me as I continue. “I have no wish to continue demanding lycans leave their packs to serve vampires. You’ll be free to return home, without punishment. No more full moons chained to a wall like dogs. No more serving the vampires.”

“And what do you want in return?” the alpha demands, eyes narrow with suspicion and disbelief.

“A riot.” I roll my shoulders. “Distract Cain while I rescue my sister. I won’t even ask you to join in the battle that’s coming. Do that for me, and I’ll demolish this compound and all that it stands for by the end of the week.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX



EVELYN

“THINK THEY’LL KEEP THEIR WORD?” FINN ASKS, AS WE JOG ALONG the waterfront.

The sun has well and truly set, and a thick fog has rolled over the river on the heels of the earlier rain. It obscures almost everything, leaving only pinpricks of ghostly light to identify distant buildings.

“They have no reason to,” Draven replies. “I wouldn’t count on the help of a handful of packless dogs, anyway.”

Silas gives a half-hearted growl in response to the insult, but his slouched shoulders tell me he half-agrees with the vampire.

“They were loyal to Morwen, but they’ve all been at Cain’s beck and call for a long time.” The fog makes Vane’s deep voice echo softly. “The fact that they let us leave, however, speaks volumes.”

Something moves in the mist. A stone clatters in the alley to our left, and I raise a hand, drawing the group to a stop.

The hairs on my neck stand on end a second before a hand wraps around my wrist and yanks me against a solid chest.

“Evie!” Finn gasps.

“Shit,” Silas groans.

His alarm reaches me at the same time that Frost’s and Gideon’s anger does. When I look up again, it’s to find the two pack alphas standing in front of our group. I’m cradled against Frost, his hands on my hips as Gideon faces down the rest of our group.

“Now fancy seeing you here,” Frost says, his tone deceptively calm as he places a kiss on my lips.

“Indeed,” Gideon growls, fangs distended. “Especially when you’re all supposed to be with Samuel and the rest of our forces, rather than neck deep in enemy territory!” His voice rises as he speaks, until he’s almost yelling, and Frost levels him with a look.

“They’ve gone undetected this far,” he says. “Let’s not out them now.”

Gideon growls under his breath and stalks away, visibly focusing on his breathing as he paces. “We agreed to the plan, as a pack. What possessed you lot to—”

“It was my fault,” Silas admits. “I convinced Vane into it, and the others wouldn’t let us go alone. It’s just... it’s *Mia*, Gid.”

The alpha’s eyes soften, albeit so incrementally I doubt any of the others notice. “This was still irresponsible.” His bond pulses with sympathy, softening out the edges of his rage.

“Not to mention you crashed a spy plane directly into the heart of Cain’s territory and now he *knows* something is up,” Frost adds.

“That was out of our control,” Vane grumbles. “I have no idea how they detected us, or why the anti-missile lasers didn’t kick in.”

“Because Cain’s upgraded his security,” Gideon growls, dragging his shirt up to display two neat, barely healed lines that cross his abdomen. “Something we expected, but because we’ve had no contact with anyone inside the city...”

“We had no idea what he was up to,” I finish.

“Yeah, the sewers were a death trap,” Frost finishes. “He’s got every street level access point wired with UV lighting, which meant we had to clear those out on top of gathering ghouls to us.”

“And the grates were all wired to cut anyone who opened them in half,” Gideon grunts. “This city isn’t safe for any of us. *Especially* Finn and Evelyn.”

“Where’s Grigoriy?” I ask, searching the mist for him.

“He’s still gathering more ghouls,” Frost admits. “He didn’t really need our help, and once Gideon learned what you were up to...”

“There was no way I was letting you wander around the city with my omegas—” Gideon cuts himself off at my raised eyebrow and grimaces his apology. “Omega. Let alone sail to Cain’s private island.”

“Cain used to begin battles by killing prisoners of war,” I murmur. “It threw his enemies off their game.” *If Silas and Vane see that happen to Mia, it’ll destroy them, and they’ll quickly become liabilities.*

I let my eyes convey that final thought to the alpha, and he grunts. “Fine. We’ll just swim across this heavily patrolled river, right up to the front door of the manor and—”

“Callie told us about a secret way in,” I interrupt. “There’s an underground hangar on the north side. We’re going to head for that. There might still be guards, but I’m betting there won’t be. Cain doesn’t know she’s joined us, and he’ll want to keep his escape route secret.”

“And we weren’t going to swim,” Finn adds. “There’s a boat registered to one of our resistance aliases moored down at the next dock. It’s low tech, but quiet, and the fog should cover our approach.”

Footsteps echo ahead of us, and we all freeze. In the next breath, Frost drags me to one side, into the alley we just left, pressing us both against the stone as the others join us.

“Fog is getting worse,” a man grunts.

“Good for us,” his companion—a woman—retorts. “Now hurry up. The sooner we get out of here, the better. That assassin is right on our tail.”

I can just make out the shadow of a curvy human woman with long hair. Her tall heels clack on the concrete as she strides ahead of her male counterpart.

Interesting. So we’re not the only people taking advantage of the weather to sneak around New York tonight.

As they pass, I could swear I hear the woman mutter, “I hate this blasted realm.”

They disappear from earshot, but we hesitate in the alley for a long minute before leaving.

“Come on,” I mutter. “The docks are this way, and we can’t afford to waste time.”

The pack is silent as we make our way along the riverfront and then hop the gate to the private dock. Gid’s and Frost’s anger is still palpable, and our group’s tension has only increased since our near-miss with the humans earlier.

“It’s this one,” Finn announces, his words echoing over the water as he stops beside a small, unobtrusive river cruiser. “Come on. The file says the keys are kept underneath one of the seats.”

The boat purrs to life with a whisper of sound, and Draven takes her wheel, steering her out of the marina and onto the Hudson. I have no idea how he knows where he’s going. The fog is so thick that I can barely make out the shape of the city behind us.

“We’ll be there in twenty minutes tops,” Vane murmurs, pulling me down onto his lap.

“Have any of you been to Triumph Island before?” I ask.

All of them shake their heads... except Draven.

“I’ve been once,” he mumbles. “There’s a dungeon beneath the foundations of the old Star Fort, which Cain’s manor was built on top of.”

“A manor on top of a fortress. How very like him,” I mumble.

“We’re getting close, and sound travels farther over water,” Frost warns.

My lips seal shut, and I have to remind myself to breathe as I catch sight of the dark blur in the distance.

According to the files I read during my research, there was once a huge copper statue in place of the manor, but Cain had it destroyed and the entire island altered until it was a fortress in its own right. The statue was replaced with a traditional, imposing gothic building, which is half mansion, half castle. Now the lights of that building shine over the misty water like candle flames in the night.

Draven cuts the engines and pulls us alongside the island, clinging close to the fortified wall as he skilfully dodges the search lights beaming over the water.

I scan the area, but there’s no opening that might be the hangar Callie spoke of. Only enormous grey granite bricks. Frost must be thinking the same thing, because he curses under his breath.

“That lying bitch.”

Inwardly, I agree with him, but I keep my mouth shut and my eyes focused on the wall.

“There.” I point, but Draven’s already seen it and is urging the boat towards the spot.

Cain’s secret hangar is devoid of life. The dark, damp stone walls are unlit and dingy. Cain has obviously replaced or recovered the boat Callie stole, because a new model is bobbing on the water. Draven and Frost work together to moor our boat to it while the rest of us check out the space beyond the water.

There’s a single door, and Finn heads for it, running his tablet across the surface.

“I’m not reading any alarms,” he mumbles. “But it’s metal, so it’s better to be—”

Frost kicks it wide without preamble, and the omega just sighs. “Or we could go balls to the wall and let everyone know we’re here.”

The pack files past, and I offer him a sympathetic look as we trail behind the others until we reach a dead end.

“Well, this is good,” Gideon mutters, pressing against the stone wall before us with all of his might.

“If you brutes would give me three seconds,” Finn grumbles, pushing past the rest of the pack to reach the front. “There’s a circuit embedded in this wall. It must open electronically, which means there’s a device connected to the local server, which if I configure...”

Sighing, because I have no idea what he’s on about and likely never will, I watch as he taps furiously on the glass before the wall to my left gives a slight hiss and pops outward. Gideon, realising he was shoving at the wrong wall, grumbles under his breath and steps through.

“Are these the dungeons?” Silas asks, looking around suspiciously. “It looks more like a... lab.”

True, the corridor we’ve emerged onto is painted white, and along the wall, various pieces of medical equipment have been stacked. IV stands with empty blood bags and gurneys with thick silver manacles attached are everywhere.

“I smell... Evie’s blood,” Vane murmurs, fangs dropping.

“And others,” Gideon confirms, mouth twisting down on a grimace. “This way. Finn, stay behind me.”

The omega grumbles his agreement, sliding his tablet back into his bag as he falls into line. Vane takes up a position behind him, but Silas stays by my side, apprehension slithering through his bond.

Taking his hand, I squeeze it softly in reassurance. He squeezes back, his posture softening incrementally.

Then the snarling breaks out.

“*Mia.*” Vane growls, lifting his nose slightly to catch her scent.

He and Silas take off before we can stop them. Despite knowing the danger of rushing in, I’m more concerned about what will happen if we split up, so I keep close at their heels.

We turn a corner, and a bright, sterile laboratory comes into view. Morwen catches my eye first. She’s been strapped to the table in the centre of the room with enough chains to hold down a bear. All of the silver has blistered her skin almost beyond recognition, but that doesn’t stop her bucking and snarling like a rabid animal. A vampire in a white lab coat is looming over her with his back to the door.

Mia is bloody and bruised as she reaches towards the pair through the silver bars of her cell against the opposite wall. Someone has shorn her long hair short, and the jagged, uneven lengths stick up everywhere, exacerbating the wild caged-animal look in her eyes.

I do a quick check for anyone else, but it's only the three of them here.

"Cain wishes for a hybrid daughter," the scientist mutters. "And a hybrid daughter he shall—"

His nasally voice cuts off with a gurgle. The vampire never saw Vane coming, and now his balding head pays the price of his preoccupation. It bounces as it falls from his neck, turning to ash as his body slumps to the ground before doing the same. The tube of blood he was holding smashes against the ground—and I can tell by the scent that it's mine. Cain must've stolen it from me before Callie rescued me.

Thank God that scientist was the only other person in here. Silas is already at Mia's side, shoving her back from the bars before she can burn herself further.

"Secure the room," Gideon growls, taking charge immediately. "Finn, see if there's anything useful on that computer. Vane, Silas, get these two ready to move out."

Finn jumps at the command, heading straight for the small workstation in the corner I missed on my first sweep of the room. I move towards the door, but despite his calm, take-charge manner, I can't help but think he's being optimistic.

Morwen is going to need a ton of blood to come back from that, and Mia...

Mia doesn't smell right.

That fact hits me a second before Silas manages to unlock her cell.

"No, wait!" I hiss, spinning.

Too late.

Mia launches at her brother, sinking her fangs into his chest with little finesse. The reason for the wildness in her eyes—which I'd put down to fear, earlier—becomes painfully clear as she downs mouthful after mouthful of her brother's blood.

Silas lets out a hiss of pain, but he's saved from being drained dry by Draven.

The vampire wraps an arm around the diminutive woman's neck and drags her back. Mia's claws dig into the flesh of his forearm, but the psycho doesn't let up, keeping her restrained as he backs her towards the cell.

"Dude," Silas growls, unhappy with how his sister is being manhandled.

Vane, too, has stopped working on freeing Morwen as his brows crease with concern.

“Silas, Vane, stop.” Gideon’s words are like a whip. “Evelyn, do you have anything that can sedate her?”

I fumble at the pouches on my belt, grimacing as I try to remember the correct combination and words. The mix of dry and fresh leaves crunches in my grip as I take a deep breath, forcing myself to recall the non-lethal spells.

At the time, I didn’t pay them too much attention. I had to prioritise learning what I thought was most helpful—and putting people to sleep was less useful than mastering a shield that could protect us if things got dire.

“I think so,” I murmur, stepping up to the struggling duo with my handful of herbs. I meet Draven’s eyes levelly, and warn him, “Hold your breath.”

Then I pierce my palm with my own claws and blow the resulting mix of blood and herbs into Mia’s face.

For a second, her pupils explode as the scent of my old, powerful blood hits her. Then she wilts, becoming boneless. Draven’s hold quickly adjusts, changing from restraining to supportive as he drops with her, stopping her head from hitting the floor. Oops, that might’ve been a bit stronger than I anticipated... Ah, well, given that we still need to get out of here, I’d rather she was deeply asleep than in a light doze.

“He fucking turned her into a hybrid?” Silas hisses, glaring at the ashes of the vampire doctor as he steals his sister back from Draven and cradles her in his arms.

Morwen doesn’t answer, but a glance back reveals a single tear sliding down the side of her face. Vane, apparently satisfied that Mia is being taken care of, goes back to unlocking the chains covering my sister.

As soon as she’s free, Morwen rolls from the table, landing hard on the tiled floor below. She grunts, but takes the hit, exposing her bare, burned back.

“Blood,” she mumbles. “Top drawer, left cabinet.”

Finn follows the instructions, grabbing multiple bags and chucking them to Vane.

“Take them all,” Gid orders. “Mia’s going to need them.”

I glance sharply at him, wondering where his thoughts have gone. We can’t possibly leave the two wounded women here, but they’re in no shape to fight Cain.

Morwen sinks her fangs into the bag, draining it in seconds before she abandons it and half-staggers, half-crawls along the floor to get to Mia's side. Her hands, still scabbed and healing, stroke the air around her lover, as if afraid to so much as touch her.

"She's just sleeping," I promise. "It seems like the spell hit her harder than I anticipated..."

Morwen nods, then finally her hands make contact, pulling lightly at Mia's arm. Silas resists for half a second but reluctantly releases his sister. The thrall bond between us is wide open with the force of his rage and hurt, a sentiment echoed by the rest of the pack. Quickly, the emotions begin to feel overwhelming, and I find myself reaching for Draven's bond instinctively, craving his icy calm.

He glances at me and nods, letting me use him to keep my sanity as the pack watches a naked and beaten Morwen cradling Mia on the floor. The two of them are covered in blood, and Morwen is actually shaking.

Then, for the first time in our incredibly long lifetimes, I watch as my sister dissolves into body-wracking sobs.

Her scarlet-covered hands stroke what remains of Mia's once long hair.

"She'll learn to control it," Vane rasps. "She's strong."

Morwen looks up at him, her eyes wide with sorrow. "She wasn't one of the lucky ones."

Her head drops, and she buries her face against Mia's body, rocking both of them.

Vane lets out a noise of half-suppressed anguish that tears at my soul, and Silas... Silas is silent with shock.

A fist finds my heart and squeezes, but I can't let the emotions overwhelm me right now. We're in the middle of Cain's territory, and we came here for a reason.

Dropping into a crouch, I shift closer, but don't dare to touch my sister. She's never been one for physical affection, and right now she'll probably take any sort of kindness as a threat.

"Morwen, this isn't the time." I keep my tone firm and devoid of the sympathy I want to display. "Right now, you need to pull it together and focus on getting her out of here. She's alive, but none of us are going to stay that way if we can't escape before an alarm gets triggered."

Morwen says nothing, but her shaking subsides somewhat.

I slice a line in my palm and offer it to her. She doesn't drink, but her tongue darts out, taking enough of my powerful blood to heal the rest of her injuries. Good. At least now she's healed, she can defend herself.

"Come on," I continue. "On your feet."

Like a mechanical doll, she does as I say, taking Mia with her, despite how wounded she is. I don't dare to suggest that she passes the unconscious new-born hybrid to Silas or Vane. Right now, my sister is fragile like a bomb waiting to detonate.

Sorrow is less familiar to her than rage, and it's only a matter of time before she switches tracks. When that happens, we need to be far, far away.

"Draven, Evelyn, take point," Gideon decides. "Silas, Vane, stick close to Finn and Mia. Frost and I will bring up our rear. I want us out of here. Now."

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN



EVELYN

THE ALARM GOES OFF THE SECOND WE STEP OUT OF THE LAB, screaming shrilly through the tight underground corridors.

“Shit,” I curse, resisting the urge to cover my ears.

“To the boats. Go,” Frost snarls.

“This was a fucking trap,” Gideon growls.

Of course it was. It was way too easy to sneak into the manor, and I was relieved enough not to question it. Now I curse myself as the corridor practically vibrates with the force of the heavy footsteps heading straight for us.

Our pack draws swords, rushing for the hidden corridor.

They don’t expect us to know about the secret hangar, which is the only thing that gives me hope as we rush towards it.

We make it through the fake wall without issue, but it doesn’t take long for the first clash of metal to break through. I make the mistake of looking back, only to see Gideon and Frost struggling to fight more uniformed soldiers in the confined space.

Finn grabs my arm, and I allow him to drag me on only because both of the alphas are handling themselves okay. Yes, they’re retreating, but only because they’re trying to stay with the group.

We reach the hangar, but instead of hopping onto the boats with the others, I pause at the doorway. Frost and Gideon are still a little way behind and in no position to make the decisions that need to be made. Vane and Silas are alert, but compromised. It’s up to me, then.

“Finn, I need you to take our boat and get Mia and Morwen to safety,” I say. “Silas, Vane, we’re going to take Cain’s, so be ready for them to follow us.”

There’s no way Cain’s sleek looking speedboat doesn’t have a tracker in it. I’m also counting on the fog to help keep the other boat hidden while we make ourselves a very visible target.

I turn to Morwen, who’s staring vacantly at Mia, and take the risk of grabbing her shoulders. Her eyes snap to mine, alert, but still empty.

“You need to keep them both safe,” I growl. “I don’t care how you do it, but get them both out of the hot zone and into a safehouse. Finn will find

one.”

The omega knows all of the resistance’s bolt holes.

Morwen nods, a sliver of purpose straightening her back as she stares past me towards the chaos unfolding in the corridor.

“Have you considered that maybe I don’t want to run and cower?” Finn protests.

I shake my head. “You won’t be. Once you’re at the safe house, we’ll still need you as part of the support team, just like we planned before this...” I wave my hand at the crazy. “Keeping us safe from afar, remember?”

Finn’s answer is a deep, desperate kiss before I force him back onto the boat.

“Go.” I turn back to the alphas.

They—and the growing group of soldiers facing off against them—are getting closer. There’s no way for them to disengage and make it back to the boats without risking someone pressing the advantage and attacking them while their backs are turned.

I take a step towards the broken door Frost kicked in on our arrival and start desperately sprinkling herbs along the threshold, only this time I make the line thin, broken in places and easy to break. To make it weaker, I almost completely neglect one corner and then splatter the thinnest line of blood over the top.

The engines of the two boats roar to life simultaneously, just as Frost and Gideon step closer.

Two metres more, and they’ll cross the line. I take a deep breath, readying myself.

The second they’re within reach, I leap forward, grabbing both men by their collars and pulling them out of the fight.

The incantation flies from my lips, creating a thin—practically transparent pink barrier between the hangar and the corridor.

It brings the soldiers to a stop, and a murmur runs through them.

“Into the boat,” I order, dragging Frost and Gideon with me. “Come on.”

“How very disappointing, Evelyn.” Cain’s mocking tone freezes me in place.

All of my instincts start screaming at me to run, but I force myself to turn and face him.

He's standing behind the barrier in his customary suit, one foot tapping the floor. Every inch of him looks the disappointed paternal figure.

Cain's weaknesses are his paranoia, his pride, and his overconfidence.

"How so, Sire?" I return evenly, taking a step back.

"Resorting to cheap tricks to best me," he presses a finger against my barrier. "Not even strong magic... Pity. I'd hoped you'd at least be more of a challenge than the rest of your deceitful kind."

Tilting my chin up, I force the fear down into my gut and meet his steely gaze. "The way I see it, *Sire*, I hold all the cards. You have no leverage over me now, and I have your butler, or should I call him your brother?"

Cain's eyes light with fury. I can see his mind working. He's wondering how much I know. How dangerous does that knowledge make me?

I take another step back, and Gideon tugs me down into the boat just as my sire decides to take action.

Cain's fist thumps hard against the barrier. Blood red cracks splinter out from the impact.

"If you want him back, he'll be waiting for you in Eden Park," I call over the roar of the boats' engines. "Don't take too long."

A second hit splinters the barrier, just like I knew it would, but by that point we're already gone, speeding out onto the Hudson like devils in the fog.

He won't swim—he'd never debase himself like that—but I don't make the mistake of believing that makes our escape a given.

"Turn every light this boat has on full blast," I say, almost falling as we hit a particularly vicious wave. "We need them to forget about the second boat."

The fog from earlier is still there, but it's lighter than it was. The wind has picked up, blowing what remains of it out to sea.

The water reflects the sound of the boats speeding across it, until the engine noise is all I can hear. They're following, but which boat? Us? Or Finn?

A burst of gunfire rocks the night, and I curse.

"That wasn't directed at us," Vane realises, staring wide-eyed at the expanse of fog to our left, where Finn's boat should be.

That quickly, I begin to doubt my own plan of sending our omega away. I assumed that Cain would send his soldiers after the greater threat—me.

But then again, when has the first vampire ever missed an opportunity for slaughter?

Another burst of fire rings out, and this time it's closer. I look back, but even my superior vision is only just good enough to make out the blur of a dark shape across the water behind us.

"Faster," Gideon growls.

Draven rolls his eyes. "I assumed we were trying to make ourselves a more appealing target than the other boat."

The alpha grumbles, but visibly deflates. "Preferably without taking silver bullets to the ass."

More gunfire, but this time farther away. I can feel Finn's fear and pain pulling sharply at my chest, urging me to go to him.

He's hurt, although I can't tell how badly. I turn to face the rest of the pack, ready to take back my plan and suggest we go after Finn's boat—

BOOM.

The flash of light is visible even through the fog, searing the water with the force of the flames. Along our bond, Finn's pain level spikes.

"No." I fall back into our boat, forgetting the gunfire and the enemies chasing us as I stare at the burning boat.

I reach for the bond numbly, terrified I'll find it weakened, fading...

Finn's still there. Still hurting—still afraid—but not dead, and definitely not dying.

"Morwen, you'd better keep them both safe," I growl across the water as more bullets rain down on us, and I'm forced to duck and focus on my own survival.

Spray sloshes over the side of the boat, slapping me in the face as Draven continues to expertly out-manoeuvre our pursuers.

"There are no guns on this thing," Frost growls, and I turn to find he's torn most of the boat apart in his search for them. "We need to get away from them. We're fucking defenceless."

Another boat zooms across our path, forcing Draven to bank hard to the left, and the sudden movement yanks my legs out from under me. Only Silas's grip on my arm keeps me from tumbling out of the boat completely.

The sound of blades whirring through the air breaks the pause in gunfire, and I look up to see the shadow of a tiltrotor looming overhead.

They've got air support. Shit. That's going to be a lot harder to lose.

The rest of the pack must be thinking the same thing I am, because Frost and Gideon go silent, communicating between themselves with little more than a raised eyebrow and a jerk of their heads.

“We ditch the boat,” Gideon announces, as the next round of bullets fails to miss, tearing through the fibreglass hull like paper.

“And do what?” Draven demands. “Swim?”

Frost grins. “What’s wrong? Can’t hold your breath?”

“It’s the best option,” Gideon growls. “We head for Manhattan. Keep together. Rendezvous at the park if we get separated.”

Draven snarls as he yanks the boat right again. “Fine.”

Silas seems less convinced. “For the record, I hate this plan—”

His words are cut off as Gideon grabs him by the collar and throws him overboard. Vane gives his alpha a look—daring him to repeat the move on him—then slings a leg over and gestures for me to join him.

“Come here, princess,” he orders.

I don’t bother arguing—there’s no time—and part of me is happy to not be jumping into the darkened waters alone.

One of Vane’s huge arms wraps around my waist, and he pulls both of us down into the cold river. The sudden change in temperature is almost enough to steal my breath, but I hold stubbornly onto it, refusing to be the reason we have to surface for air.

I feel, rather than see, Silas swimming down beside us, and a second later, the world beneath the waves blooms gold as the boat above us explodes. Flames lick above the surface, but Vane tugs me down to the murky riverbed, following Gideon and Frost with unerring accuracy.

My lungs begin to burn less than a minute in, but I console myself with the knowledge that we’re swimming far faster than any mortal ever could.

Above us, they’re still searching. Blades of light cut through the water, and the roar of engines and shouts of men are audible even beneath the choppy waves. The pack doesn’t let it deter them, and soon enough we reach the smooth stone wall of the waterfront.

I haul myself out of the water a second before a searchlight passes over the street above us. Once the glow has passed, Silas helps me up, and I shiver from the cold as I follow him across the street into the shadowy protection of a grimy alleyway to where Frost and Draven are already waiting.

“Attention all citizens, please return to your homes. A citywide curfew is now in effect.” I can’t see the speakers, but they blare the same announcement on repeat, filling the air with the sound of static in between.

“Samuel and Echo should’ve begun their attack from the north by now,” Gideon gasps as he reaches us. “With any luck, they’ll be over the Harlem River before Cain realises they’re there. We need to get to Eden Park before —”

He cuts off as a full contingent of soldiers jogs past in perfect formation. A tiltrotor buzzes overhead, its search beam slicing through the night.

Cain is dispatching all of his forces.

“It’s now or never,” I agree. “We need to go.”

We pause as yet another group runs past, and this time I definitely hear the words ‘Lycans’ and ‘revolting.’

Evidently, my efforts to convince the lycans at the Compound to join us weren’t wasted, but I can’t take joy in that realisation. All of my attention is focused on dodging the patrols, taking back alleys where possible, and keeping quiet as we make our way towards our final stand.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT



EVELYN

WHEN WE FINALLY REACH THE PARK, I REALISE THERE'S A FATAL ERROR with my plan. In goading Cain, I inadvertently turned Eden Park into a target. It's better guarded than the manor, and twice as risky. There's no secret way in, and we barely make it over the fence before more soldiers round the corner.

Without speaking, we begin to creep in the direction of our troops. The sound of screaming and hoarsely yelled commands reach me first. Then there's a flash of something that looks a lot like ultraviolet light, which is promptly cut off.

"It's already begun," Frost notes, grimly. "We need to get in there and establish a safe zone for Eve to lay the trap. Once we manage that, we fall back on the previous plan. As soon as everything is in place, Gideon will give the order to fall back and lure Cain forward."

Silently, I admit we might not need to fall back to tempt Cain anywhere. He's never been afraid of the battlefield, and is likely to head straight for me, thanks to my taunting.

"Fast and hard," Gideon growls, drawing his sword. "Stick together. Go."

I've sprinted across many battlefields in my life, but this is somehow a hundred times worse. I know the reason why—because I never had my pack around me before. All of them are risking their lives alongside me, and their presence drives the stakes impossibly higher.

All Cain has to do is go for them, and this could all fall apart.

At least Finn is far away, I console myself as I duck and weave around immortals locked in combat. A gleam in the darkness catches my eye. Ivan's coffin.

Frost has seen it as well, and he leads our group in that direction. Samuel's men have left Ivan imprisoned on the far edge of the enormous meadow, and I can see an enormous lycan who can only be Echo, clawing savagely into everyone who dares approach it.

Callie is sticking close to him, evidently having decided that the safest place for her is by the side of the meanest looking lycan. To her credit, she

is watching his back in return, and her white leather jacket—really, Callie?—is splattered with the gore of her own kills.

But where is Samuel?

Panic flutters in my stomach as I search. He's supposed to have found the sacrifice. If he's not here...

"Evie, focus," Gideon demands, slashing aside a vampire who gets too close.

Cursing myself, I do as he says, helping to cut our path through the violence around us.

As soon as we reach Echo, he shifts back and growls. "What the fuck happened?"

Frost shakes his head. "The plan is the same. Try to give Eve as much space as you can to work. We've pissed Cain off, so he's likely to show up soon."

I tune out their conversation and draw my dagger, getting to work carving a circle in the earth around Ivan's coffin. It's got to be large enough to hold four people—Ivan, Grigoriy, and Cain, plus the sacrifice. I sprinkle blood and herbs into the dirt ring as my guys keep me safe.

I can hear them fighting, fending off anyone who gets close, but I can't focus on that and keep a clear mind. I just have to trust them to have my back.

"Shit." Silas's curse distracts me, and I turn my head to check on him.

He's fine, but his eyes are fixed on a point farther out into the battlefield.

Cain's powerful presence makes him easy to spot. He's got a small army of reinforcements with him. Tiltrotors are looming in from above, painting the cloudy sky black and filling the air with the whir of their blades.

"From above!" Samuel's cry rings out across the battlefield, and those who aren't currently fighting for their lives follow his command, adjusting their guard to face the armed warbirds with grim determination.

Instead of following them, I search for my brother. I thought his voice came from my left, but there's still no sign of him. Cain's men are raining down from the sky and pouring in from all sides.

"Where the fuck is Grigoriy?" Vane demands, beheading another vampire who comes too close to the circle.

"I don't know," Frost yells back. "We agreed he'd come as soon as—"

In the skies above us, a tiltrotor suddenly veers left, crashing into another. The two spiral, crashing into the ground in a screaming pile of twisted metal and flame, filling the battlefield with the harsh scent of fuel and heated steel. Immortals everywhere scatter, doing their best to avoid the burning missile, but a few are still caught off guard and crushed.

“What the—?” I cut myself off as Finn’s sudden flash of triumph hits me like a ton of bricks. “Finn?”

“He must have taken over their autopilot systems,” Silas whoops. “Fuck yes!”

Our omega isn’t done yet. Another tiltrotor banks suddenly, heading straight for another. Those two spin together, crashing deeper into the park, and filling the air with the heavy, choking smoke. They keep dropping, thudding like meteors into the earth around us.

It’s not enough to even the odds—not even close—but it is enough for the corners of Cain’s mouth to turn down.

He’s not advancing, just letting his men wear us out. I’ve seen him do this before. I quickly return to finishing off the circle, because when he does decide to make his move, it will be swift and deadly.

Once the ring of blood and herbs is complete, I double check it, determined not to leave any weaknesses for him to exploit. Red flames caress the soil briefly, then fade down into the earth, letting me know that it’s worked.

The trap is ready.

Immortals should be able to cross the threshold, but not get out.

That done, I turn to find the battlefield has only grown more chaotic in the minutes I was distracted. Samuel has finally fought his way closer to us, armed with a long silver spear which acts as an extension of his arm. His grace and fluidity is born of thousands of years of practice, and I can’t help but admire how quickly he dispatches anyone who comes near him.

He’s lethal, but unfortunately, he’s also drawn a lot of attention—namely, Cain’s.

My sire spots him, and the frown on his face morphs into a truly malicious expression. One that promises pain.

Then he turns, beckons behind him, and my heart freezes.

Noha steps onto the battlefield with timid steps, her pretty bronze face painted with fear. The diminutive woman is visibly shaking, her wrists chained in front of her.

Samuel parted ways with his wife after she betrayed us all to Cain, but the way his body goes rigid at the sight of her tells me he still never expected to see her here, of all places. Neither did I. After she lost her son and left the desert, I assumed she'd go underground. I was content to leave her like that. I understood her reasons, even if the betrayal did cost us dearly.

Evidently, she never made it to a safe house.

I know what comes next. I've seen it happen a hundred times. So when Cain gently motions her to stand in front of him, I do her the respect of not turning away. My sire fists one hand in her bushy curls and pulls her head to one side.

With a savage strike of his fangs, he rips her head from her shoulders. Then, for good measure, he digs his claws into her chest and rips out her heart, chucking it casually in Samuel's direction.

My brother takes a deep, visible breath. Shoulders shaking with the effort it's taking to keep himself in place. He knows as well as I do what this is. A provocation meant to knock him off his game, or make him act rashly.

He may have split from Noha, but they had centuries of love-filled years together before that happened.

Her body shrivels, slowly withering to ash, and Cain steps through her remains like they mean nothing.

Samuel is still frozen in place. I can't make out his expression, but I don't want to. This moment feels too private—too fraught—to happen on a battlefield, and yet it belongs amidst the death and the pain and the carnage.

Still, if my brother does nothing, he's going to die. It's sheer luck that no one else has taken advantage of his distraction.

I have my sword in my hand before I know what I'm doing. Samuel may be good, but he's no match for Cain. None of us are. Two of his children may have a chance...

Silas's hands hold me back a second before I would've rushed forwards. "Evie, no."

"We're not engaging him," Vane reminds me. "He has to come to us, or we're all toast."

"He's headed right for my brother," I hiss.

"Samuel knows what he's doing," Gideon retorts. "Look, he's making his way closer to us. He's drawing Cain into the trap."

He's right. My brother has finally shaken off the shock and is making his way to us. But it's not going to work. Samuel is fending off his own attackers. Although he's quick to end them, Cain is quicker. The vampire lord is advancing faster than my brother can retreat.

"He needs help," I plead, as another boom of a crashing tiltrotor fills the battlefield. "Where's Grigoriy?"

The ghoul is nowhere to be found, and I feel his absence like a knife in the back. Either he's betrayed us, or he's been waylaid by Cain's men. Given how easily he took care of Ivan's group in the caves, I sincerely doubt it's the latter.

Samuel is still a good few yards away by the time Cain reaches him. I yank uselessly against Silas's grip, but it's not just him holding me back now. Vane has taken my other arm.

"Think, Evie," he murmurs, urgently. "You're the key to killing him, but only when he's inside *this* circle. If you go over there, you'll get yourself killed and doom the rest of us."

He's right. My strategist brain knows he is. That doesn't make it easier to watch as my brother gives up trying to reach us and turns to give our sire his full attention.

For the first few seconds, I'm hopeful. The two of them are both ancient vampires, and Samuel manages to parry Cain's first attacks, using his spear to his full advantage.

Cain says something, but the sounds of battle absorb the words before I can make them out. Fortunately, Samuel isn't some green warrior to allow taunts to distract him. He takes the words in his stride, managing a deep thrust of his spear that catches Cain off guard, but still barely manages to make contact.

Regardless of how small the wound is, the rich, powerful notes of the first vampire's blood are still strong enough that my fangs start to ache—even from this distance.

Cain's smile shatters my fragile hope for Samuel as soon as it can form. He allowed the blow, I realise, though I can't fathom what his reasoning was right now.

My sire's speed—already intense by any standard—kicks up a notch, becoming a blur even to vampire eyes. Samuel has no chance, even with the advantage of distance that his spear provides.

Cain takes his wrist first, rendering the two-handed weapon unusable. I barely see the strike, but my heart crumples in my chest.

It's to be a slow death then. To punish Samuel for his defiance, no doubt. Another of Cain's little puppet shows, and this one is set in an arena of twisted metal, fire, and dirt.

Samuel must realise it too, because when he draws his dagger from his belt, he does so with the kind of slow resignation that's a hallmark of the condemned.

"Let me go," I whisper, tugging at their grip.

My betas hold me fast, and I contradict my own request as Cain's next blow makes me unconsciously shiver closer to them.

Samuel loses his other arm. Then a foot. The other foot.

Left to crawl on the dirt like a worm, and there's nothing I can do.

Most soldiers—no matter how grand they are—piss themselves at the knowledge that death has finally come for them. Not Samuel. He just keeps fighting. My brother struggles his way closer to the trap and the perceived safety of his allies. None of us move a muscle. We all know it would be pointless.

My face is wet as I meet his desperate eyes. His lips part.

"I'm sorr—"

Cain sinks his sword into Samuel's spine, pinning him to the earth like a bug. My brother's final apology cuts off, his face contorting with agony as Cain pulls the blade out, then sinks it in again. Blood splatters my sire's suit, but he keeps stabbing, three times, four... until I lose count.

Samuel's age means he stays alive for all of it. His eyes slide closed, but he's not dead. Cain will have to behead him and stake his heart with silver for that.

I have no doubt that's coming. Cain just wants him to suffer first.

"Thank fuck," Frost breathes.

My attention snaps to him, and I frown as I fail to see what he's on about. We're losing. Finn may have taken the tiltrotors out, but more of Cain's men are still pouring onto the battlefield. Still, both Frost and Gideon are grinning like loons.

Their shrieks blend in with the cries of the dying for a moment before I manage to separate the two. By that time, I see them.

Ghouls, in numbers I've never seen before, crawl out onto the battlefield and start tearing into everyone, living or dead.

“Sorry I’m late,” Grigoriy mutters, appearing beside us on the edge of my circle. “I got a bit lost in the subway... the tracks were a lot closer together than the map said...”

He was late because he got lost? My mind wheels at the impossibility of it.

If he’d been here—I cut off the thought. Such ‘what if’s’ don’t belong on the battlefield.

Silas groans. “Subway maps are never geographically accurate.”

He glances at Frost and Gideon, undoubtedly thinking that had the two of them not left Grigoriy, this never would have happened. Fortunately, he has the sense not to say that aloud.

I look back at Cain. But my sire’s full attention has been consumed by the new arrival.

Incandescent fury eclipses his smug smile. He kicks Samuel over, and stabs his sword through his neck, severing the spinal cord with brutal efficiency. I don’t even see him pull the stake from his pocket. As far as I’m concerned, it simply appears, sticking out of my brother’s chest.

Cain abandons the lifeless, disintegrating corpse of his son in favour of advancing on the first ghoul.

In answer, Grigoriy calmly steps into my circle, leaning against the silver coffin. He flicks the latch, and Ivan topples out. He’s not been burned, but his neck is red raw from the rough healing that his body has been forced to do over and over again since he was captured. His body has shrunk, becoming sickly thin with undernourishment, and he barely retains the strength to crawl to his feet.

“Fancy seeing you again, brothers.” Grigoriy offers Cain a congenial smile. “All three of us, together at last.”

“You foolish girl,” Cain curses. “You’ve unleashed your worst nightmare.”

Grigoriy grabs Ivan by the collar of his shirt and hauls him to his feet. “You’re missing your lapdog.”

Cain takes another step forward, but he hesitates at the edge of the circle.

Until a blonde blur leaps from the shadows behind him, knocking him forwards.

“That’s for Bella, you conceited, tiny-dicked prick!” Callie screeches as Cain turns his murderous gaze on her. He takes a step forward, and she

flinches, but Cain's progress is stopped as soon as he tries to cross the circle, where he's instantly rebuffed by red flames.

That shove was just what we needed to get him inside.

Callie's eyes meet mine, and I offer her the smallest perceptible nod of thanks. It's not enough, not really, but it's all we have time for.

Cain snarls like a trapped animal, fangs finally dropping in the first uncontrolled display of temper I've seen in decades. This is Cain at his most dangerous, and my body reacts instinctively by freezing my breath in my lungs.

My pack moves in, surrounding me in a protective semi-circle as I face down the monster who made me. Our allies form a wall, protecting us from the battle still raging.

"Bravo, Evelyn," Cain says, his voice a hiss. "Though, I must say, your magic is nothing compared to most of your treacherous kind. That barrier you left in my mansion couldn't contain a fly. And you, Callista, I wasn't going to waste my time by making your death hurt, but perhaps I can reconsider."

It's my turn to smirk, though I hardly feel like it.

Instead, I do the unthinkable; I turn my back on my sire.

"We have no sacrifice," I mumble. "Does anyone know who Samuel had in mind?"

"Himself, predictably," Callie says, interrupting us with her typical brusqueness. "Unfortunately, I'm pretty sure his corpse isn't cut out to be sacrificing anything, so I suppose you'll have to make do with me."

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE



EVELYN

EVEN AFTER CALLIE DROPS HER BOMBSHELL, SHE ACTS AS IF NOTHING has happened. She carefully traces a long, escaped strand of blonde hair back behind her ear and uses her pinky finger to delicately separate her long, mascara covered lashes.

I'm so thrown by the fact that she wore a full face of makeup to a *battle* that it takes me a second to process.

Draven isn't as slow, and he steps between us faster than lightning. "You, sacrifice yourself? You don't know the meaning of the word."

Callie shakes her head and uses a single finger to push him to one side. "Honestly, Draven, now isn't the time for melodramatics. I've made this decision, so move out of the way and let dear, perfect Evie cast whatever magic she needs to so we can get this whole sordid affair over with."

I grab her arm. "If this is some trick..."

She rolls her eyes. "I'm flattered you think so highly of me, but let's be real here. I die here, a hero, and you build statues in my honour. Or I die later, when either you or he"—she jerks her head back at Cain—"decides to hunt me down like a dog for my crimes."

Shaking my head isn't dispelling the rigid outline of her from in front of me. If this were anyone else, I could believe it. But this is *Callie*.

Sure, she's probably the only person who could've knocked Cain into the circle, the only one he never saw as a threat. Yes, I know she wants vengeance, but her MO has never been sacrificing herself to get it.

She shakes her long blonde hair back and growls. "I'm sick and fucking tired of all this. I signed up for a quick death, not the inquisition, so—"

"Even if you're not trying to pull something," I interrupt. "You realise this is *not* an easy death, right? The spell will make you irresistible, and those three will literally eat you alive until there's nothing left."

She hits me with a look. "You mean to tell me that the great, bleeding-heart Evelyn didn't add something to numb it?"

I shake my head. "I didn't have the time or the knowledge. If you're lucky, the white oak will reach your heart quickly."

It won't kill her, but it might knock her out.

Maybe one day I'll have the ability to craft my own spells, or alter old ones, but it just wasn't possible in a few weeks.

Cain is following the conversation with his eyes narrowed. He can't figure out Callie's game either.

Looking into my sister's grey-brown eyes, my mind flashes back to her words back in the pack house, and I realise she means it. Callie doesn't see another way out and—perhaps selfishly—neither do I.

"I wouldn't advise trusting Callista with anything more important than spreading her legs," Cain comments dryly. "And even then, she's woefully disappointing at that."

A single tear drips from my sister's right eye, but her face is angled so that our sire can't see.

"This isn't the only way," I whisper to her.

She shakes her head. "Of course it is. The alternative would be what? Me grovelling for your rabid dog's forgiveness and trying to pretend I feel even the smallest inkling of guilt for murdering his pathetic family? Please. We both know I didn't, and I won't debase myself pretending otherwise. Mortals are less than animals."

Her words are cruel, and they have the intended effect. Draven snarls and lunges, and Cain laughs.

"Oh, this is precious. A final, lasting bid for attention from the most disappointing of all my daughters."

Callie's hands fist by her sides, and her shoulders stiffen before she forces herself to relax and begins to twist the bracelets on her wrists over and over in a soothing motion.

"Get on with it," she growls. "We don't have long."

A savage growl fills the air, and a second later, Cain attacks my barrier with all his strength. It holds, but he goes for it again. Then again. Even knowing the barrier is as strong as I can possibly make it, I tense, waiting for it to shatter.

Grigoriy grabs his arm before he can level another punch, and plants a vicious uppercut on the vampire's jaw.

He's distracted, but not for long. I unclasp the satchel at my belt, tipping the herbs into my palm carefully.

I cast an evaluating look at Callie. "Last chance to back out. Once this goes in your bloodstream..."

She rolls her eyes, then snatches the fistful of herbs from me and slashes her own wrist.

Shit.

Without thinking, I slash my own palm and slam it over the bloody mess of her arm. Each word of the incantation feels like a peal of a heavy bell inside my chest, ripping free until my hand burns. Callie muffles a little gasp.

Inside me, that ancient presence I've come to associate with magic groans, stretching its claws.

The heads of all three original immortals snap up, no doubt scenting her enchanted blood on the wind.

When it's done, I step back, unsure what to do. Should I hug her? She's my sister, in all ways that matter, despite how much we've done. Now, I'm sending her to her death... should I...

Draven takes the matter out of my hands.

"I hope it hurts," he growls.

"Why?" she quips back. "Hoping my screams will drown out the memory of your son's?"

Then, with her typical, sashaying walk, she crosses the threshold.

Cain tries to hold back, but his fangs are already extended past his chin. When Callie reaches up and rips her own throat wide open...

He doesn't stand a chance.

The three men fall on her like starving dogs, ripping her apart with the force of their hunger. One of her pale hands goes flying, the bangle slipping free and rolling away in the dirt.

Their demise happens slowly. Their frenzy ebbs first, and when Callie is little more than a bloodstain on the ground, the three men sit around with a dazed expression on their faces.

"Morana?" Grigoriy whispers, as he slumps to one side. "Is that you, my love?"

He's gone in the next instant, his clothes falling away as his form dissolves into ash. His coat thumps to the ground, the distinct rectangular outline of a book visible beneath the fabric.

Ivan is next. The butler's eyes are fixed on Cain, though they're slowly becoming glassier with each shuddering breath. Then suddenly, he just stops. In the next instant, his ashes join Grigoriy's.

“You know, Evelyn,” Cain mutters, meeting my eyes as he rasps his last words. “An empire is nothing... without a legacy.”

And I could swear those cold, grey eyes gleam with sickening pride a second before he joins his brothers.

It's over.

Callie is dead.

Samuel is dead.

Noha, Grigoriy... and countless others.

All in the pursuit of this.

And now, I'm just numb.

CHAPTER FORTY



FROST

THE ANNOUNCEMENT IS MADE AT SIX IN THE EVENING ON THE following Tuesday. Holographic signs broadcast the message on every channel in the world, translated into a thousand different languages. Within the span of seconds, the whole planet knows.

The news anchor they chose to read it aloud isn't the usual prim vampire Cain regularly chose to deliver his edicts. The leaders of the resistance agreed that it would be too similar to the announcements Eve's sire made. Instead, they choose an older human woman, with soulful blue eyes and soft white hair. She beams as she talks, radiating relief and calm in the way most grandmothers do.

"Last Saturday morning, Cain was killed after a long and bloody battle with the resistance," she begins, glowing. "He was finally defeated for good, thanks to the united efforts of all the races. His daughter, Lady Evelyn, has ascended to his place as leader of vampirekind."

The vampire in question shuffles against my side, curled up under the covers of our new bed, and I tug her closer as I continue to watch the projection on the wall opposite.

"Her first acts in power were to abolish the mandatory lycan resettlement program—best known for requiring first-born alphas and betas to join the armed forces—and to begin the process of enacting fair and democratic elections for a cross-species council of advisers. These, we're told, are just the start of her reforms to the autocracy her sire single-handedly created. Trials are being set up to judge those who were members of Cain's court, and blood donation programs worldwide have been scrapped or made voluntary."

Eve groans, and I press a soft kiss to her forehead.

"Can't sleep?" I ask. "Want me to turn it off?"

She nods against my side.

"Video off," I call, and the projection disappears, taking the sound with it. "Want some breakfast?"

She's been drinking more than usual since Cain died, and it hasn't escaped my notice that her own blood is becoming more powerful, too.

Whether that's due to her witchcraft, or simply the result of being the oldest living vampire—besides Morwen—I can't say. Maybe it's just Eve.

None of us has tried to initiate anything beyond feeding her since the battle ended. She may not show it, but she lost two siblings, and almost lost a third, and that's bound to leave a mark.

Eve nestles her face against my neck, sinking her fangs in slowly, and I can't help the groan that slips free. Is it my imagination, or is her venom getting stronger, too? I swear I can feel each draw on my vein directly in my dick.

God, it feels so fucking good, I'm already on the verge of orgasm. Damn it, I'm supposed to be giving her space.

"Eve," I murmur. "Do you want to maybe hold back on the venom? You're killing me here."

In answer, she digs her fangs in harder, pumping more venom into my veins. My hips move of their own accord, thrusting against the covers for the slightest bit of relief.

I'm not going to last. I'm—

"Fuck." I grimace as I erupt into my boxers, my cum trapped against my skin by the fabric.

Eve seals the wound slowly with a provocative lick, then relaxes against me.

"What brought that on?" I ask, wrapping an arm around her shoulders and dropping a kiss to her lips.

She shrugs. "I missed you."

I squeeze her a little tighter, even though I know she doesn't mean it that way—I've barely left her side since Cain's death. She's talking about the lack of intimacy we've shared since we returned from freeing Grigoriy.

"You were stressed," I answer. "I wasn't going to pressure you into sex while you were dealing with so much."

"Is she saying we're neglecting her?" Silas asks, pushing through the bedroom door without even trying to pretend he's not eavesdropping.

He's fully dressed, and it doesn't take a genius to realise he's been to check on Mia and Morwen. He and Vane have been popping down to their apartment just below the penthouse every second they can, helping their sister adjust.

No one is certain what will happen with Mia. Her status as a failed hybrid would once have been a death sentence, seeing as such creatures

were rarely allowed to live long in Cain's perfect world. Mia herself is hopeful that she'll gain immunity to sunlight and control of her bloodlust in time, as most vampires do with age, but we have no frames of reference.

Fortunately, vampires have developed every conceivable technology to keep their newly turned alive since the Triumph. And with Morwen fully devoted to her protection, I don't think the beta could be in better hands.

"Don't worry," she murmurs, pushing up to her elbows, looking adorably sleep-rumpled. "I still have that recording Finn made if I need a little help taking care of myself."

Silas's grin is blinding. "Hey, Vane," he calls behind him. "I think Evie's been feeling neglected."

His brother's heavy footsteps precede him into the room.

"Feeling bratty this evening, princess?" he asks.

Evie just blinks her sleepy blue eyes at him innocently.

"She said she missed us, and then she said she was using that recording Finn made to take care of herself."

Vane prowls across the room, eyes fixed on Evie. "Princess, you have six thralls. You don't ever need to take care of anything by yourself."

In a flash, the covers are gone, and I grimace as the dark stain on my shorts is exposed to the light. Vane doesn't comment beyond a raised eyebrow, but Silas's chuckle makes me roll my eyes. Yes, it wasn't my finest moment, but her venom is something else.

"Eve, I think Silas just offered himself up to be next," I murmur, pressing a last kiss against her neck before Vane comes to whisk her away. "Take it easy on them, love."

EVELYN

Frost heads for the bathroom to clean himself up, leaving me at the mercy of the two grinning brothers.

“So...” I ask, returning their smiles. “Anyone else fancy breakfast?”

Silas grins. “Oh, we’ll feed you, sweetheart, but I think you’re a little bit too dangerous to be allowed free rein.”

“What are you thinking?” Vane asks, curiously.

“How pretty she’d look tied to the couch with a dick in her ass,” Silas answers, honestly.

“I’m not sure I can be asked to wait for you to finish trussing her up like a turkey, pup.” Draven’s voice makes my head snap around.

He’s waiting in the doorway, leaning against it in a casual way that belies the heat in his eyes.

“If we’re tying her up,” Finn adds, peeking over his shoulder. “Can I be tied to her?”

Silas grins. “Sorry, apparently it would take too long. God knows what Draven will do when he figures out how long Vane likes to take with her.”

His brother lets out a grunt of agreement. “Edging her makes her appreciate the climax more.”

“This is where you’re all going wrong,” Draven retorts. “Hard and fast wins over blue balls every single time.”

“There’s a lot of talking going on,” I complain, “but not very much fucking.”

My fingers find the soft hem of my shirt and tug it over my head, swiftly exposing my bare body to the room.

“How about the first one to catch me gets to decide how this goes?” I ask.

Before they can compute what I’ve said, I dash from the room, weaving between Draven and Finn and picking up speed before—

Smack!

I have no idea how he’s managed it. One second I was running and now

—

Smack!

“Ahh.” Gideon’s shoulder digs into my stomach as he carries me back towards the bedroom, using his free hand to liberally swat at my ass as we go.

“Trying to set me off, omega?” he demands. “You know what happens when you taunt me to chase you. Or was the last full moon not enough for you?”

I barely know how to answer him. Part of me wants to bite the bare muscles of his back, sink my fangs in and punish him for cutting my fun short. The rest of me—the part that knows my alpha needs submission—settles for whimpering under the strike of his hand.

“See what you’ve done now?” Silas demands of Draven. “Now you have to wait until his knot deflates—which will take longer than my shibari would’ve.”

I twist my neck, just in time to see Draven’s mouth twist in a rebellious smirk. “Not if I take her ass.”

Gideon drops me on the bed before I can say another word. My naked body is splayed out over the messy covers like an offering as Frost rejoins the gang and all of my thralls surround me, staring unrepentantly at me.

“Finley,” Gideon begins, taking charge as easily as breathing. “Eat our girl out until she comes. I want her nice and wet for my dick. Silas, prep our omega. You can have his ass. Vane, Draven...” Gideon grins. “Pin her down.”

The alpha watches my face carefully as they rush to obey his orders. He’s in the thrall bond, monitoring me, making sure I’m okay with everything that’s happening.

“Our safe word is silver,” Gideon announces. “If anyone gets uncomfortable, say that and this all stops.”

A round of affirmative nods answers him, and I gasp as the first warm male hands smooth over my skin, banishing the chill of the room with their touch.

Instant goosebumps. I’ll never get tired of how their calluses feel gliding across my body.

Finn is closest, and his hands massage my calves, soothing and relaxing in counterpoint to the rough treatment Draven’s giving my left breast. Frost hangs back, content to leave the others to it, but I sense his arousal down the bond. I get the feeling he’s biding his time, waiting to have me all to himself, but not wanting to miss out.

Vane grabs both of my hands, pinning them above my head in one of his while the other cups my other breast. His thumb strokes lazily along the underside of my nipple, tracing my areola.

The three different touches are so perfect, so complementary, that I gasp.

My tongue flicks out to wet my lips, and Gideon must take that as a sign of how badly I want someone to kiss me. The alpha circles the bed, claiming my lips as his hand comes up to collar my throat. Not squeezing, but applying just enough pressure to make me aware of exactly who's in charge.

Draven releases my breast, then spanks it, the unexpected pain makes me gasp into Gideon's mouth, but the vampire sucks my nipple into his mouth before I can come to terms with the sensation. Mixing pleasure and a bite of pain. Vane, not to be outdone, dives down and nips lightly at the exposed bud he's caressed into a diamond-hard point.

Through it all, Finn's thumbs keep rubbing tiny circles at the top of my thighs, refusing to travel that final distance and ease the liquid ache that's growing stronger in my core. Gid's hand at my throat stops me looking down, but his omega's breath fans over my pussy in warm, teasing waves. The anticipation has me arching my hips, pleading silently with my body.

Draven's fangs score the skin of my breast, and I moan against Gideon's mouth.

So many hands and tongues, all of them everywhere at once. Then, finally, Finn dives in and takes a long, wicked lick from ass to clit.

I cry out, but Gideon steals the sound before I can make it. The alpha draws back, his eyes flashing with his beast, fangs peeking out.

"Do you like that?" he asks, voice touched by the hint of a sub-vocal growl. "Our omega is good at eating pussy, isn't he?"

I nod fervently, tipping my head to one side, exposing my neck.

Once upon a time, I would've thought the ease with which I submit to these men was ridiculous, but the thrall bonds are there, pushing their own arousal until it mingles with mine and fogs my senses. I'm nothing beyond the yearning, aching desire to come, and Finn's only licked me once.

"Eat her, Omega," Silas commands.

Gideon hums in agreement. "Don't stop—don't even breathe—until she's ready for your cock and mine."

Everything south of my navel clenches. His cock and Gideon's, as in...? Finn dives in once more, licking long trails along the folds of my sex, each one carefully avoiding the place that could send me over.

I hear the squirt of a bottle, and Finn's tongue falters for a second before he resumes his task with more desperation than before. A finger slides easily through my wetness, testing my entrance before sinking all the way inside. He pumps once, then twice, before the digit withdraws, returning lower, more insistent, at my back entrance, coated in cold lube.

His first finger slides in easily, but the second brings a slight burning stretch.

Gideon finally releases me, sliding his hand from around my throat and switching it to my hair instead. He fists it tightly, pulling my head up so I can see the mouths sucking on my tits, and Finn's face shoved tight against my pussy, eating me he stretches my ass with his fingers.

Silas is playing with Finn, and I wish I could get a better view. He does something—I can't see what—and Finn moans against my clit. The vibration travels up my spine and out to my extremities, but I can't jerk away when I'm being pinned so securely between them.

Gideon lets my head fall down, claiming my mouth again as Finn strokes a finger from his other hand into my pussy and curves it. Stroking the flames as my body yields to his dual invasion. The alpha swallows my cries as his omega unerringly caresses my G-spot while his tongue retreats to flick against my clit. Spreading lightning with each touch before soothing it away with the warmth of his lips.

Then, almost like they're reading each other's minds, Draven and Vane sink their fangs into my breasts at the same time.

I come, shattering around Finn's fingers. A writhing, shaking, heaving mass of feeling. My consciousness leaves my body as their own waves of masculine satisfaction crash over me. I *feel* how much they love watching me lost to my own pleasure.

Gideon draws back, leaving my lips with a final feral kiss to growl, "Lift her."

It takes some manoeuvring, but eventually Gideon manages to lie on his back on the bed.

"Sit on my cock," he orders.

Shivers coast through me, and I wonder if he'll even fit. There's a reason I've not tried anal with him yet, but Finn is there, his hands

supporting me, helping me lower myself. His hands stroke more lube onto Gideon's cock, holding it upright as I sink down.

The head burns as it pops through the tight ring of muscle. My body screams in protest as gravity forces me down slowly.

"Relax," Finn encourages, capturing my whimper with his own kiss.

"How on earth do you do this?" I ask back. "Oh, God."

Gideon chuckles, "God's not the one with his cock in your ass."

I shiver.

The stretch is unbelievable, even as Finn lifts me slightly, giving me a slight reprieve before helping me to lower myself farther onto him.

"Take it slow," the omega coaches.

"Not too slow," Gideon growls, his claws digging into my hips. "Or I'll explode before I get to fuck her."

Draven brushes my hair away from my neck, then nips lightly at the skin with his fangs. Traces of venom give me the final nudge I need, loosening my tense muscles just enough for my ass to finally meet Gideon's hips.

"Lie back," the alpha orders.

Vane and Draven support me, helping me to lie so my back is pressed against the alpha's chest as his cock pumps shallowly into my body. The alpha's knees shift to part my own, spreading my legs wide and opening my pussy up in offering.

"Inside her," Silas groans the order against Finn's ear, pressing a kiss to the omega's jaw. "Now."

Finn doesn't have to be told twice. He lines himself up with me, hands still wet with my own release, rubbing small circles against my inner thighs as he presses me open and forges forward into me.

"Finn!" I cry, overwhelmed by the sensation of being so thoroughly filled.

With Gideon in my ass, there's precious little room left in my body. My pussy clenches, trying to object to the sudden invasion. Vane, sensing my predicament, spans my breast. The sharp sting travels directly to my clit, and I gasp.

"Relax," he orders. "Let them do all the work."

Finn stiffens, and I glance at him, only to see Silas slowly pressing himself closer to the omega. The beta is fucking Finn, as Finn and Gideon fuck me. The omega and I are sandwiched firmly in the middle.

Silas waits two seconds to allow Finn to adjust, then starts taking his ass in hard, sharp thrusts which force Finn in and out of my pussy.

“Ohh, fuck,” Finn moans.

What comes out of my mouth is even less intelligible, because Gideon has taken that as his cue to move as well. Draven, apparently satisfied that I no longer require any more of his venom, draws back, leaving me trapped as my body is pounded into from both sides.

Each stroke lights me up from within, driving me closer and closer to my peak.

“I’m going to come,” Finn announces.

“Not before Evie does,” Silas retorts.

Finn moans, physically shaking with his own need for release as he fumbles for my clit with one hand.

One touch, two, that’s all it takes.

I explode, limbs trembling as every single nerve ending fires at once. Finn’s groan of relief follows me over the cliff, his cock jerking inside me as he collapses.

In a show of immortal strength, Silas lifts the omega away, bending him over the bed beside me and upping the force of his thrusts until the bed is shaking from them. Gideon grunts, grabbing beneath my thighs and doing the same from underneath me.

My ass burns from the friction, and my pussy clenches, empty and aching. It doesn’t stay that way for long. Vane’s shadow falls over me, and he rubs his dick along my weeping slit.

“Fuck me,” I beg. “Please, Vane, Gid…”

Gideon answers my begging by stopping altogether, and I sob out my denial.

“Shh,” he whispers, hand returning to my throat to keep me still. “Let Vane get inside you.”

But Vane seems determined to tease me first. His cockhead slides over my clit again and again, triggering tiny aftershocks from my earlier orgasm until I almost can’t stand it anymore. The sound of Finn’s groans and the wet slap of flesh on flesh coming from beside me just make it worse, until

“Please, please, please.” Some part of me—the proud warrior—is shaking her head at how far I’ve fallen, but the rest of me doesn’t care.

These men see both sides, the warrior and the wanton, and they love both.

Finally, Vane presses in, his body lowering to cover mine as he takes my mouth in a scorching hot kiss.

“Brace yourself, princess,” he warns a second before he explodes.

He matches the feral pace Silas is setting beside us, fucking my already used cunt with hard snaps of his hips until I scream. I try to escape, try to turn away from the onslaught of pleasure, but Gideon’s damned hand around my throat keeps me in place.

Ecstasy pours through my veins, sending me over again. My poor, overwrought body gives out, falling limp against Gideon’s chest.

This time, I take both of them with me.

I barely have time to come down from my high before I feel Gideon’s knot swelling, locking me onto him from behind.

“Ohhhhh,” I scream as the alpha’s hand leaves my throat, replaced quickly by his fangs.

Venom, sharp and sweet, relaxes me when I would’ve panicked. Sparkling bubbles of arousal caress my nerves, soothing me as my body continues to shudder from the aftermath of my last orgasm.

“You can take it,” Vane promises, pulling carefully from my pussy and stepping back to admire the sight of his alpha’s knot forcing my ass wide. “Good girl, relax. Feel Gid’s venom. Fuck, that’s hot.”

He moves around the bed, claiming my mouth in a softer, calmer kiss. Beside us, Silas stills, groaning his release into Finn’s back, before pressing his lips lightly to the omega’s spine and withdrawing.

I whimper as Vane reaches forward to stroke my clit, but it’s a gentle pressure. The brothers pull away, heading for the bathroom as Gid licks my neck, sealing the puncture marks his fangs have made before nuzzling the spot.

The alpha lets slip a small, contented rumble as he turns us so we’re lying on our sides, facing Finn.

“I was rough with you,” he murmurs, and I feel his knot slowly start to soften.

“I liked it,” I promise.

“Drink from Finn for me, just in case,” he cajoles. “Besides, you’ll need your strength. You still have two thralls left.”

I almost melt at the reminder, but Finn captures my mouth before I can say anything in response. My omega kisses me deeply, still tasting faintly of me from earlier. When his tongue dips into my mouth in an uncharacteristically bold move, I let him.

I don't realise his plan until his tongue caresses my fangs, drawing blood. I moan as the first taste hits me. Finn has always tasted of sweetness and home, and his flavour settles me, even as the blood revitalises me, settling the rawness I hadn't even noticed.

The wound seals, and he reopens it, but I draw back before he can do it again. I've taken enough, and by the time Gideon's knot has eased, I'm on the verge of sleep. Soft hands pull me out of my warm nest I've made between my alpha and my omega. I would complain, but when I open my eyes and look back at the bed, Gideon is snuggling Finn, pulling him close for a soft, sleepy kiss that melts my heart.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE



EVELYN

“FROST RAN YOU A BATH,” DRAVEN MURMURS IN MY EAR. “WHEN HE’S finished pampering you, you’re mine.”

I shiver against the warmth of his bare chest as he carries me into the bathroom and the scent of sweat and sex is replaced with the bland hotel soap and bubble bath.

“I can’t wait until we can settle in somewhere,” I murmur sleepily. “I want to pick my own soap.”

Frost laughs, standing up from where he was testing the temperature of the water. “It’s weird to hear you thinking about something so... domestic.”

“Let her,” Draven grunts. “Otherwise Finn and Silas will take over, and we’ll all smell of girly shit.”

Bold of him to assume *I* won’t pick something girly.

My vampire carefully deposits me into the steaming water, and I sigh in relief as the warmth seeps slowly into my bones.

“Thank you,” I whisper, choking back the unexpected emotion clogging my throat. “I...”

There aren’t words to describe what’s going on in my head right now. The realisation that this is all real should’ve sunk in somewhere during the time we were taking over control from Cain, but it hasn’t. It’s only now—thinking about something as mundane as soap, of all things—that reality comes crashing in.

Cain is dead. All but one of my sisters and brothers are dead. And I have a future with my pack where I can worry about things like how to furnish and supply our home.

“What’s going on in that head of yours, Eve?” Frost asks, stroking a hand down my arm soothingly.

“I never thought this would really happen,” I admit. “I mean, I knew the probability of our success was slim, but now that it has...”

He tugs my head towards his chest, cuddling me. “It’s okay to be overwhelmed. I’d be more worried if you weren’t.”

“Cain is dead.” The words sound hollow, scandalous to my own ears. “He’s been dead for *days*.”

“Long live Lady Evelyn,” Draven drawls, leaning against the counter. “And may that fucker rot in hell.”

Frost rolls his eyes and hisses, “Not the time,” under his breath.

“She’s already taken the throne,” Draven insists. “She’s Evelyn, for fuck’s sake. Greatest general her sire ever trained. She can take the truth. Quit babying her.”

“You’re shit at this,” Frost grumbles, stepping into the bath without waiting for me to move over.

Water sloshes everywhere as the ghoul deftly rearranges us until I’m lying against his chest. “What he’s trying to say is that you’re an incredibly strong person, but it’s okay to feel a bit out of your depth. You have your whole pack to help you figure out who you are when you’re not defining yourself by your sire, and we’re not going anywhere.”

And because it’s Frost—the man who knew me before I went into the coffin—he’s managed to cut straight to the heart of the issue.

Because who am I when I’m not my father’s general, or his worst enemy? For so long, being a daughter of Cain was a core pillar of my identity. Even when I had to rebuild my sense of self when I emerged from the coffin, it was still his fault. Now I’m a ruler in my own right.

“I know who I am,” I whisper, more to myself than him. “I’m Evelyn. I’m a vampire, a warrior, and a witch. Consort to six wonderful thralls, and... ruler of a fractured world.”

Frost presses a solemn kiss to my throat.

“I’m going to fix what my sire did,” I continue. “Undo the injustices. Maybe try to do some good with all of this power...”

Power I never wanted, but Samuel was right. Vampires are bloodthirsty by nature. Without someone as old and strong as me in a visible position of power, they’d run rampant. Many of my kind—especially the very old or the very young—only truly understand one kind of justice: the brutal, swift kind that can only be delivered by a strict hierarchy.

I’ve seen firsthand the many hundreds of vampires who tried to prove differently. Cain didn’t even bother to correct their self-described democracies, he knew they would implode within years at the most.

I’m their best hope. Given the changes I’ve noticed in my own strength since my sire’s death, I think whatever magic lingers in our race acknowledges that. I haven’t asked Morwen if she’s experiencing the same phenomena, but I will.

Even if she is, she's too busy helping Mia adjust to her new life right now.

"You'll do well," Frost promises, drawing me out of my melancholy musing. "It won't be easy, but you've got us."

I meet Draven's eyes, and he nods. "I'll kill anyone who gets in your way, doll."

"So romantic." I smirk.

Draven scoffs. "You have the wolves for that."

He's right. I don't need Draven to be romantic. I need him just as he is, to be my icy shield. My sanity when I'm holding onto my own rationality by a thread. I need the others too. Silas for his levity, Vane for his ability to challenge me, Finn for his huge heart, Gideon for taking control and making the hard decisions, and Frost for the familiar comfort he brings.

I look over my shoulder, smiling softly at the look of adoration he's regarding me with.

"I don't want to think right now," I plead.

"I can do that," he promises, hands rising obediently to cup my breasts.

Those calloused thumbs are rough against my soft flesh, nails scraping lightly against my nipples as he deftly works to reawaken the passion of earlier. Sighing, I let my head fall back, content to let him have his way beneath the water.

"Next time, no bubbles," Draven grouches, frustrated by the cheery little suds obstructing his view.

Frost chuckles under his breath, obligingly sweeping aside the worst of the bubbles. His hand skates down my ribcage and lower, to play in the curls at my apex.

My clit, already sensitive from before, responds to his gentle caress like it's electric, and I arch out of the water.

"I don't want foreplay," I complain. "Fuck me, Frost."

He nips lightly at my ear, repeating his caress. "Up."

Draven wraps me in a towel, lifting me out of the bath, but neither Frost nor I pay any attention to drying ourselves. Our mouths fuse together. The soft fluffy cloths drop carelessly to the floor, abandoned.

Frost's hands grip my waist and lift me so I'm poised directly over his cock. My legs wrap around his waist, and I dig my heels into his back, spurring him on as he finally thrusts home.

“Eve,” he groans into my hair, breath whispering over my neck. “God. I love you.”

“I love you too,” I say. “Now move!”

He takes two steps forward, pressing me against the smooth tiles of the bathroom wall. I weave my hands into his hair, bracing myself as he starts to grind into me.

There’s a reverence to the way he moves. His fingers stroke the damp skin of my waist, and his forehead drops to mine as the wet, carnal sound of our fucking reverberates off the walls. Each harsh exhale and grunt he makes blends with my moans when he manages to hit that perfect spot.

“Come for me, Eve,” he murmurs. “Come all over my cock. I need to feel it.”

He keeps talking, but my mind is focused on the effervescent bubbling of pleasure building along my spine.

Frost’s next thrust grinds his pelvis against my clit, and the stimulation is just right. I explode with a shout, nails clawing hard into his shoulders as I kiss him desperately.

“That’s it, baby,” he encourages, between kisses. “Just like that. Fuck.”

He pumps once more, twice, then stills. His release rips from him with a groan, and he breaks our kiss to take a heaving breath.

“You’re incredible,” he says, letting me slide down until I’m resting on my unsteady feet.

“She’s not done,” Draven retorts, reaching between us and stealing me.

Without so much as a kiss, he bends me over the sink and plunges inside.

“Draven!” I shout, completely unprepared.

His bruising hold on my hips holds me up and in place as he takes over completely, hammering into my body without even giving me a second to catch my breath.

“Play with yourself,” he orders, without breaking his rhythm. “Make yourself come again.”

I’m not sure I can, but my hand flies to my clit anyway, strumming against it. Draven helps, cracking our bond open and funnelling his own lust down it until I’m squirming again faster than I thought possible.

When I reach the threshold, my body stubbornly refuses to fall over. My orgasm dangles just out of reach until Draven leans over and sinks his fangs into my shoulder, pumping me full of venom and cum at the same time.

My final orgasm rips my soul from my body. I'm convinced I might actually pass out for a second. If not for the vampire holding me up, I'd have collapsed. I'm barely coherent as he withdraws his fangs and presses a lingering kiss to the still healing wound.

I don't know how I got from his arms to Silas's. I'm too busy floating on a cloud of bliss to focus much on what's going on around me. My beta cleans me for the second time and slips into bed with me nestled between him and Finn. With Gideon in the bed as well, it's more than a tight fit.

"We need a new bed," I mumble.

But I fall into a contented sleep before any of them can reply.

EPILOGUE



EVELYN

TEN YEARS LATER...

ECHO LAKE IS GLEAMING in the sunshine as we cruise down the smooth, newly installed road. Between my thighs, Draven's bike purrs, and the man in front of me may well be doing the same, given the excitement radiating down our bond. He stopped wearing his helmet to ride the second he finally became a day walker, and his short dark hair ripples in the wind as he slows us down.

We reach the beach, but instead of stopping like a normal person, he pulls a stoppie, braking with the front of the bike so that the back lifts up into the air. The move jolts me forward, and I feel his triumph and amusement vibrate along our thrall bond as I cling to him for dear life.

"If you wanted a hug," I begin, swinging my leg over the bike as soon as it levels out again. "You could've just said so."

"Where's the fun in that?" he replies, the corners of his lips quirking up. I roll my eyes.

After a decade in a world without Cain, he's mellowed slightly, but not enough to smile as easily as the others do. His burning desire for vengeance has slowly been replaced with something less angry but twice as reckless, and he's just as bloodthirsty as ever.

"What did you do to that thing to make it so fast?" Silas demands, pulling to a stop beside us.

Draven snorts. "It's a secret."

Finn climbs off the back of Silas's hover bike as it lowers to the ground, bringing the picnic basket with him.

"I'll get set up," he says, pressing a kiss first to Silas's lips, and then to mine. "Gideon and Frost will finish their meeting with Echo soon, and I'm betting Gid will be hangry."

"I don't think feeding him will stop him spending the entire trip complaining about the sand," Silas adds, already ripping off his shirt. "Last one in the water doesn't get to fuck Evie for a week."

Draven growls, ripping his top and jeans off, exposing his sunny yellow swimming shorts. Silas is responsible for the colour. He purchased everything for this trip when Finn and I suggested it as a way to escape the endless preparations for the Freedom Day Parade.

Now, the solemn celebrations marking ten years since the end of Cain's reign have ended, and I plan to spend the rest of the day basking in the sunshine.

Farther down the beach, plenty of Echo's pack are doing the same. I watch them frolicking in the water as I pull off my own sundress, exposing the red and black frills of the bikini Silas picked for me.

"These things are radioactive," Draven growls as he sprints to the edge of the lake, dragging Silas back by the waist of his dark green trunks, so he wins the competition. "Ha, I won. Now, who's not fucking Evie for a week?"

Silas grins, wading in beside him until they're both up to their waists in the water. "I assume either Gideon or Frost, whoever gets here last."

"You little—" Draven cuts off, and a strange expression passes over his face. "Silas." The dark warning is back.

The beta has the good sense to retreat, but he's grinning from ear to ear without a hint of shame. He also doesn't look particularly worried as he dances back towards the shore, despite the murder slowly growing in Draven's eyes.

I'm so used to Silas's pranks now that I shouldn't bat an eye at this, and yet I'm curious about what the lycan has managed to pull off that has Draven so adorably embarrassed.

It's not an emotion I'm used to feeling from my vampire mate. Yet as he looks to our left, where a family of lycans from Echo's pack is squealing and laughing, just out of earshot, the tips of his ears redden.

Silas wraps an arm around my waist, his thrall bond practically rolling with his own laughter.

"Dissolving swim shorts," he cackles. "The second he hit the water, they started disintegrating."

I can't contain my smile. His laughter is infectious, and the bond isn't helping.

Our thrall bond built slowly but steadily over months. Every evening after defeating Cain, I woke up and it was a little stronger. Then, we had our first full row—a blistering argument over something I can't even remember

now—and the next morning, when we'd cooled off and made up, the bond snapped into being.

Silas really was waiting for me to leave, but when even his worst attitude couldn't make it happen, he finally allowed himself to believe that what we have is permanent.

Vane's smugness about being right lasted for weeks.

"I'm not getting in that lake," Vane grumbles under his breath, regarding his own trunks with suspicion.

"What if I told you I did the same to Evie's bikini?" Silas asks, before lifting me and tossing me towards the water.

I shriek in surprise as I hit the cool water, and come up spluttering. "Silas!" I growl. "I'm going to—"

Vane catches me, hauling me against his chest, then he freezes, and both of us feel the fabric of his own trunks peel away, dissolving just like Silas said.

"Just kidding," Silas calls. "I wouldn't do that to Evie. But my brother..." He shrugs.

Draven snarls, standing awkwardly beside Vane. "I'm going to stab him. Don't try to stop me."

"Go ahead," I retort, smirking as I feel Vane's erection bobbing just beneath the water.

"You have to catch me first," Silas taunts.

His brother groans. "How many centuries will it take for him to grow up?"

"Obviously at least four," I respond, pressing a kiss against his jaw before pushing out of his arms and paddling out into the water.

It's a lot easier to relax now that the fear of my skimpy bikini dissolving has passed.

"You weren't supposed to start without us," Frost complains, making his way down the beach towards us.

Behind him, Gideon is rubbing at his temples, likely anticipating the headache Silas has caused in his absence. Their bikes have been abandoned beside the others and they start stripping as well, revealing more shirtless skin.

"You might want to check your shorts aren't rigged," Vane warns dryly. "And while you're at it, chuck us both something to cover up with."

The alpha freezes, takes in the way the two of them are standing awkwardly far apart in the water, half-crouched to hide the obvious from the other lake goers. He half smiles and slowly shakes his head at Silas's prank before heading back towards the bikes.

It's taken time, but the alpha has slowly mellowed. His hyperfixation waned without Cain as an ever present threat.

"Mia is going to die of laughter when she sees these photos," Silas announces, grinning.

"*Photos?*" Vane demands.

Silas points up at the drone circling overhead. Normally, I don't pay them any mind, assuming they're one of Finn's projects. The omega is constantly tinkering with new tech and bringing it with us wherever we go. This time, however, it's obvious Silas has hijacked one for his own use.

"You'd better delete those before she arrives tonight," Vane growls. "Or I'll tell Morwen you bought a set for her."

"Setting our big, scary sister-in-law on me is mean, brother," Silas retorts, as Gideon turns around and starts his journey back, a handful of dark fabric clutched in his grip. "Ooops, that's my cue to run."

The moment his two victims are clothed, they dash through the water, splashing water everywhere as they race to catch our pack's resident prankster. I follow them out of the lake and head for the picnic blanket, ignoring the beers that have been laid out in favour of the bottle of synthetic pina colada blood that Finn brought with us.

"I've got black coffee for Morwen as well," Finn murmurs, more to himself as he sorts out the cool bag. "And a mojito for Mia."

I grimace at the reminder. Mia is adjusting to her failed transition well. Thanks to Morwen's constant vigilance, her life is rarely too different from any other newly turned vampire. Her control of her thirst is still a little flaky, but Morwen surprised us all when she offered her blood up and became Mia's thrall. Now, during the full moon and other times of stress, Mia will ignore other blood sources in favour of Morwen's. Daylight is still an issue, but they manage that the same way any other new vampire does.

Overall, they're happy despite the circumstances. They work together, tracking down the few remaining Cain loyalists wherever they pop up. It's rare to see them take time off, so I'm glad they decided to spend the first few days of our vacation with us.

A huge *oompf* resounds across the surface of the lake, and from the snarls that follow, I gather Silas has finally been caught. Mercifully, he doesn't look too worse for wear as he returns to the blanket five minutes later.

"Only one black eye," Frost remarks. "Losing your touch, Draven?"

The vampire shakes his head, snagging a plain bottle of blood. "My knives were in my other shorts... the pup can fish them out of the lake for me later."

He doesn't waste time in picking me up and depositing me on his lap.

They're all here. I bite my lip, trying to force down the butterflies in my stomach.

"I... I have something to tell you," I begin... trailing off.

Six concerned pairs of eyes snap to me, their undivided attention heightening my nerves.

"Remember how I said I was going to look for a way to reverse my infertility?" I mumble, blushing.

"Years ago," Frost replies, voice careful.

"We told you," Finn cuts in, stealing a kiss from his position on Draven's left. "You're enough, Evie. We don't need anything else."

Affirmative grunts all around, and my hand flutters downward, only to stop halfway when I catch myself doing it.

"I made a few charms," I hedge, rubbing the simple string of wooden beads wrapped around my ankle subconsciously. "I was trying them out. Seeing if they'd work. I don't think it would've if I wasn't half witch, but we can offer the chance to others..."

My control over my magic has grown, and without the pressure of war, I've been able to look further into different branches of the craft.

"Princess," Vane growls. "What's wrong?"

This time I can't stop it. My hand touches Draven's arms where they're wrapped around my abdomen, and all of their eyes track the movement.

"One of them worked," I admit, keeping my eyes on the sandy blanket. "I'm about ten weeks, according to the labs. They said it was hard to tell, given that there's never been a vampire—"

"You're carrying our kid." Vane has total awe written all over his face, then, slowly, he turns to face his brother, eyes like thunder. "YOU JUST THREW OUR PREGNANT WIFE INTO THE LAKE?"

Silas's face has drained of colour, and his eyes are wide with horror. "Shit. Are you okay? Is... is the baby okay?"

I shake my head at him. "Given that he's going to be at least part vampire, I'm sure he's tough enough to take it.

"He?" Silas asks.

Biting my lip, I nod. "The lab said he's a boy."

Slowly but surely, the grin returns to his face. But Vane isn't so easily distracted.

"You chucked the mother of our unborn *son* into a lake!" Vane's nostrils flare, and a second later Silas leaps off the blanket, pressing a joyful kiss to my cheek as he flees from his brother for a second time in ten minutes.

"I'm gonna be a dad!" he yells, startling the other lake goers as he sprints across the sand. "We're having a boy!" His whoops echo across the water, and I can't help my smile.

Draven is still immobile beneath me, and I look up, worried about his reaction. His expression gives nothing away, and I press a soft kiss to the underside of his jaw.

"I know this is a lot," I whisper.

Part of me worries Draven will react badly, given the tragic end his last child suffered at the hands of Cain and Callie. Our bond is locked down, not telling me anything.

"Give me a minute, doll," he requests. "I need... God, I need to upgrade the house's security. Children are a huge target, and they're always running around doing stupid shit. Then someone is going to have to teach him about knives..."

I chuckle, a small part of me swooning as I realise how committed he already is to our baby's protection. Draven won't take any chances with our boy's safety, and I have a feeling the poor kid is at risk of either growing up smothered or turning out more mischievous than Silas.

"He won't be a teenager for more than a decade," I remind him.

"We're having a son." Gideon is staring at me like he's seen a ghost, and beside him Frost... Frost is beaming like it's Christmas morning.

"Gid's happy," Frost insists, elbowing the other alpha. "Just a bit slow."

"This wasn't—what if he's part ghoul?" Gideon chokes out. "Evie, if we'd planned this, we could've ensured he wasn't... What if he decides to *eat* his way out of you?"

His horror makes me shake my head. “You’re being ridiculous. He’s a baby, and I’m a vampire. Any damage he does, I can heal, but I’m guessing this will be just like any normal pregnancy.”

“Guessing...” The alpha stands and starts pacing.

I glance at Finn, hoping for some backup, but the omega is on his phone.

My disappointment is fast and hard, and he looks up at the sudden change. “I’m searching for nursery ideas,” he explains, showing me the glass screen. “Blue is overdone, but what do you think of olive green?”

He’s planning a nursery?

“For a baby?” I choke, relief swamping me. “You’re going to age him before his time.”

“Kids like bright colours,” Gideon mumbles, still in shock. “Pick yellow or something.”

Draven sighs and opens his arms. “Go comfort him, doll. He’s having a meltdown.”

I stand, waving away Draven’s offered hand because I’m not suddenly incapable of standing by myself, and make my way over to Gideon. His panic radiates across our bond. Those lycan instincts are riding him hard, his fierce protectiveness a close second to the terror he’s experiencing.

Having me in his arms seems to help him focus.

“Female omegas often go into seclusion when they’re with child,” Finn comments. “I’ve always suspected it was more for their alpha’s peace of mind than anything else.”

Gideon’s hands soothe up my back.

“Don’t even think about it,” I warn. “The council would collapse without me there to keep order.”

My new fledgling organisation works well enough, and I’ve gathered members from all three species who are willing to collaborate, but it’s a delicate balance. Without a strong vampire to keep our species in line, it would all fall apart, and the humans—who are wary enough of us as it is—would be the casualties.

“You need to take some kind of leave,” Gideon protests. “Working can’t be good for the baby.”

“We’ll talk about what’s reasonable later,” I promise. “But I need to know you’re happy about this.”

“Of course I’m happy.” He groans, dropping his head into my hair. “Terrified and still in shock, but I’ll treasure him... just...”

“Just?” I prompt.

His voice is so quiet I can barely hear it. “If I’m a shit dad, promise you’ll call me out on it?”

My heart breaks, following his train of thought back to his memories of his own father without difficulty.

“You are going to be a brilliant dad,” I promise. “All of you are.”

“I’m not sure we can say that about the pup,” Draven grumbles, just as Silas races past a second time, this time stopping to claim an even longer kiss before speeding off again.

Or he would’ve, if Draven hadn’t caught his ankle, tripping him so he lands face-down in the dirt.

“Stop running around in circles. You’ll make us all dizzy,” he complains.

Silas mutters something unintelligible, but I have a distinct feeling it might be some variation of: ‘I’m gonna be a dad!’

Vane drops back down beside Gideon and strokes my hair out of my face. “Should you be drinking that synthetic crap in your state?” he asks, eyeing the abandoned bottle of cocktail blood warily. “Are you thirsty?”

His voice has dropped, taking on a dominant tone I’m used to hearing in the bedroom, but I doubt he’s even aware of it.

“The baby is immortal,” I remind him softly. “He’s tough, and so am I. Now, can we all please relax? This is supposed to be a holiday.”

Frost laughs, winking at me. “I bet you the kid has Silas’s sense of humour. Draven’s not going to survive two of them.”

They start bantering back and forth, trading guesses about what our baby will be like. I leave them to it, smiling into Gideon’s chest.

“I love you,” the alpha whispers, and the last knot of worry in my chest evaporates.

“I love all of you,” I return, snuggling closer. “And you’re all going to be excellent fathers.”

Just the thought of them cradling a tiny baby—*our* tiny baby—makes my chest hurt a little. However our child turns out, I know he’ll be wonderful, because he has these men to teach him and love him.

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Ahhhhh I can't believe this whole journey is over! Crowned by Blood marks the end of two years of Evie and her guys, and I'm so grateful to you for reading, reviewing and keeping up with the world. Your comments and messages mean the world to me, and I love each and every one of you. Make sure you [follow me](#) for updates on future books, especially if you're interested in a bonus epilogue with Evie, her guys, and their children (coming soon to my Facebook reader group).

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Finally, a big hug to the four men in my life who keep the house running while I type. Readers, don't get excited on my behalf. I'm related to two of them and one is a dog.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marie Mistry lives in rainy Britain but spends most of her time escaping into imaginary worlds, whether that is in books or video games. She writes paranormal romance but has written books in other genres in the past. She has a mild obsession with happily ever after and true love which she blames on a childhood full of Disney goodness. She loves interacting with fans in her [reader group](#), and feel free to stalk her on any of her social media or via her [newsletter](#).

