



DARK FATE

KAT SILVER

FLAME BORN
S E R I E S
BOOK TWO



DARK FATE



FLAME BORN
SERIES

KAT SILVER

Dark Fate
Flame-Born #2

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*** Trigger Warning for attempted rape and dubious consent.

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Cover Art by bookflydesign.com

Interior Design by Stephanie Anderson at alt19creative.com

ASIN: B09H4WTQ26

Published by:



Dedication

For my wonderful critique group.
Thank you for being with me through the angst,
the hair pulling, but also the joy.
I couldn't have done this without you.

Acknowledgments

A special thank you to my friends Lee Colgin, Sebastian Black, and Rebecca. I feel like we've been on a journey through story together. Thank you to my Facebook reader group for all your encouraging support. And thank you to the Kendal writers' group for patiently correcting my terrible grammar.

Links to Kat Silver

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Contents

[Dedication](#)
[Acknowledgments](#)
[Links to Kat Silver](#)

[Chapter 1](#)
[Chapter 2](#)
[Chapter 3](#)
[Chapter 4](#)
[Chapter 5](#)
[Chapter 6](#)
[Chapter 7](#)
[Chapter 8](#)
[Chapter 9](#)
[Chapter 10](#)
[Chapter 11](#)
[Chapter 12](#)
[Chapter 13](#)
[Chapter 14](#)
[Chapter 15](#)
[Chapter 16](#)
[Chapter 17](#)
[Chapter 18](#)
[Chapter 19](#)
[Chapter 20](#)
[Chapter 21](#)
[Chapter 22](#)
[Chapter 23](#)
[Chapter 24](#)
[Chapter 25](#)
[Chapter 26](#)
[Chapter 27](#)
[Chapter 28](#)
[Chapter 29](#)
[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Come and Meet Me](#)



CHAPTER

1

*G*rip the edge of the sink, knuckles white, and glare at the contents of the glass vial lying beside the tap. The viscous liquid, the color of a fine bottled wine, looks so innocuous. Innocent. A random sample of blood.

There's nothing innocent about this vial's contents.

Every time I see it, my mouth salivates with the need for a taste. Whenever I take the vial from my pocket to caress the cool glass in my hand, a clamoring monster of desire rips through me like a fire.

Not this time.

I swipe up the tube, twist out the cork, and prepare to pour the blood away. Metal clanks against ceramic, echoing through the small bathroom, as the chain between my wrist manacles knocks against the sink. A heady smell of cocoa and figs hits my nostrils. My hand falters. God, that scent.

His scent.

Fuck.

The urge to inhale the smell deep into my lungs, to press the glass to my lips and lick the rim, almost takes control.

Alexei. That devious bastard. He knew exactly what he was doing when he left me with this. His blood constantly tugs at me like an unfinished song. Like a broken tooth my tongue won't leave alone.

I could wash away the temptation. Watch clear water turn burgundy as the vile substance flows into the drain.

I won't.

I've faced this trial for ten days, and the result never changes.

I've tried to show the vial to Flanagan. Tried to hand it over so he could smash the glass and destroy the contents. Somehow, it always returns to my hiding places. A dirty secret.

After ramming the cork back, I return the thing to its spot beside the tap, and push a hand into my open fly. This is the ritual. Every day. I take the vial from my pocket, grasp my hard cock, and jack myself while staring at its contents. If I can't satisfy my yearning to drink the blood, then I can at least try to relieve the other driving force dominating my life: the never-ending demand for release.

My body curls into the aggressive stimulation, my breath turning hot and needy. Black eyes and pouty lips flicker through my mind as I pant, but silver soon commands my vision—silver eyes that glint like diamonds. Dominating kisses, a fist gripping my hair, earth and heat and strength. Those fingers, thick and insistent, filling me, fucking me hard while he sucks my brain out through my cock. God, that man can suck cock. He forces orgasms from me I didn't know were possible.

Gabriel. I pound my shaft with fury, my chains clinking, my face a tense grimace. Tingling pleasure rises along my spine. My balls tense. Heat surges.

“Whisperer!”

Shit. Release snaps inward. I shudder and grab my sack as hot pain ricochets through my center. Fuck. “Here!”

Grabbing the vial with a shaky hand, I stuff it through the hole I made at the back of the cupboard, behind bottles of cleaning fluid to mask the smell. One of the many places I keep it. The constant risk of Flanagan catching a whiff keeps me inventive with the hidey-holes. Thankfully, my two guards are human.

“Zahir's ready for you!” Lockdale shouts through the bathroom door. “He says you have time to finish.”

I groan and let go of my balls. A Channeler's increased need for constant orgasms is an integrated part of Blackriver culture. Of supernatural culture, it seems to me. But everyone knowing I'm locked in the bathroom to rub out a quick one is still bloody embarrassing.

“I'm ready now.”

I tuck my still-hard dick aside to button my fly, then wash my hands, straighten my crumpled gray student shirt, and attempt to tidy sweat-soaked hair while avoiding a face full of iron chain. My dark, overgrown mess frames a pale, gaunt face with freaky green eyes. I'm eating like a heavyweight and training in the gym two hours a day on top of the six-hour Channeler practice, but the constant pressure in my head and spine, the incessant sex drive, the relentless orgasms, all take their toll.

The metal collar intended to keep my Flame suppressed doesn't help. The manacles on my wrists add a *Prisoner of Azkaban* look. Red welts have formed on the skin beneath, and I'm sure the iron is the source of my persistent nausea. The High Council wanted me in ankle cuffs and a waist chain, too, but Flanagan refused. I just want to stay at Blackriver, maybe get a chance at acceptance into the Guardians, so for now I'm putting up with their shit without complaint.

When I open the door, my two guards, Jenson and Lockdale, take in my disheveled appearance with knowing expressions. They both glance at the bulge. Ugh.

“Do you need Grounding, Michael?” Jenson asks. “Should I get the commander?”

I plaster a smile on my face. Skinny little Jenson's okay. He's the only soldier who actually uses my name. “No. I'm fine. Just needed a moment, you know?”

The young Guardian titters. The bigger guy remains skeptical. He straightens, puffing out his chest. “The commander told us to fetch him whenever the Whisperer shows signs of too much Flame.”

Annoyance tingles across my skin. The Whisperer. For fuck's sake. “I said I'm fine.”

Lockdale isn't finished. “If you need privacy, you should use one of the Grounding rooms.”

“I prefer the bathroom,” I say through gritted teeth. The special side rooms set up for privacy are all very well, but most of them don't have a window I can open. Plus, I can see the Border Woods

from this bathroom, and as creepy as those twisted trees are, their presence calms me.

I glare down at Lockdale until he flinches and looks away—freaky vampire eyes are good for some things—then gesture to Jenson. “Lead the way.”

Major Zahir waits in one of the upgraded training rooms that’s built to handle fire. Stone floor, stone walls, and fire-retardant window frames. My lessons have resulted in a lot of accidental combustion, and Zahir doesn’t take any chances.

Hard to believe the lion shifter still wants to be my mentor. The image of him writhing on the mansion steps as my ability ripped Flame out of his body is burned into my mind, but he seems unfazed.

The giant man greets me with one of his bright grins, dreadlocks framing his head like a mane. “Are you ready?”

I take a deep breath and blow it out, eyeing the cluster of student spectators that always gather by the door during my lessons. Zahir tolerates their curiosity as long as they stay back. “Yeah, of course.”

He gives me a once-over, copper brow creasing with concern. “Do you need a longer break? We can request the commander’s presence.”

My hand whips up. “No, no. I don’t need Flanagan.” I hate it when they drag him down to the training halls just for me. The man’s got enough on his plate. A ruined mansion, a handful of exhausted soldiers trying to fill the shoes of many, and desperate families banging on his door, wanting to know where their children are. He can do without the extra weight of a needy Whisperer.

I’ve got to handle the Flame on my own. Show the Guardians I’m an asset, not a danger. It’s a struggle. My body absorbs Flame like a hungry sponge, forcing me to ignite daily just to stave off a Haze, even with Flanagan Grounding me every night. It scares them, the soldiers. They fear “the Whisperer,” the half breed who can down an entire company of soldiers, then come back from the dead.

Zahir studies my face with his golden eyes, my sunken demeanor. “I won’t call the commander now, but promise me you’ll visit his office during your lunch break.”

I shrug and nod, avoiding his crisp gaze. “Yeah. Sure.”

The big man slaps a meaty hand on my shoulder. “You understand the importance of regular release with a Grounder? Burning off excess is a handy trick, but it won’t help you increase your capacity. Sharing—”

“I know. I know. Sharing helps deepen the body’s acceptance of the energy. I read the book you gave me.” When Channelers *Share*—that’s the term for passing Flame between pairs—it improves their natural capacity and strengthens their ability to contain the energy in their glands and nervous system. Until then, they’re a slave to constant Hazes and unable to use electronics. No phone, no TV, no Xbox. No riding a Ducati down the motorway at 160 miles per hour. Which I might have done once or twice.

“I’ll go see him after this. I promise.” I won’t ask him for help, though. Not if the drawn expression he’s worn for the last ten days greets me at his office door.

Zahir’s frown remains. “You’re nervous about the meeting?”

My stomach does a flip. “You could say that.” I’m a damn sight more than nervous. I’m bloody

shitting myself. Gloria Belanger has filed an official complaint. She wants “the vampire mongrel who compelled her grandson to sexually assault him” locked down at Headquarters. The High Council’s president and the Guardian general are visiting Blackriver this afternoon to make that decision. Should they train me here or transfer me to London, where I can be “contained”?

Zahir leans closer. “You’re not alone with this, Michael. We want you here. The commander is the only Grounder who can safely handle your Flame. That’s a compelling argument.” He squeezes my shoulder. “And once Laasya finds a solution to the Blood Call, even Councilor Belanger will have no reason to incarcerate you.”

My throat constricts. I avoid his eyes. He means well, and Flanagan’s doing everything he can to keep me with him, but they don’t know the whole truth. Only Councilor Quinton knows I’m from an outlawed bloodline, a descendent of the monster who nearly broke the supernatural world. A Sabel descendant must be killed on sight. No exceptions. Their mixed blood, enhanced by magical waters, is too corrupted. Too dangerous.

Everyone thinks the bloodline is extinct.

But here I am.

I offer Zahir a tight smile.

He pulls a keyring from his pocket and gestures to my collar and manacles. “Let’s get these off, shall we?”

As soon as the cold metal band releases, I give the skin of my neck a good rub. He passes the collar to Jenson, and I offer up the wrist manacles. As Zahir unlocks the metal cuffs and slides them off, I hiss with pain.

“When did these come up?” He clasps my hands and examines the angry red rings on my skin.

“My skin’s been red for a while, but I only noticed the blisters when I woke today.”

“Does the commander know?”

“Yeah. He wasn’t happy. He’s hoping General Nenge will let me keep them off.”

Zahir stares at the blisters for a long time, then gives me an odd look. “Hopefully, we’ll get your DNA results through soon. Did the commander tell you your blood sample went missing again?”

“Yeah, he mentioned that.” Nausea bubbles. Do I want to know the results? What the hell else will I turn out to be? Fairy? Ogre? Frog?

“I’m sorry,” Zahir says. “I’m sure you would like to know your full heritage. Longreach is still recovering from Alexei’s attack. That may be why the blood samples have been misplaced.”

“I can wait.” I tug my wrists back and shake them out. I think it’s suspicious that three of my samples have gone missing in the space of ten days. But what do I know? I’m not going to mention it if nobody else does.

The door opens, and Laasya wanders into the room, her gaze riveted to the pages of a thick book. Without a word to anyone, she strolls through the gathered students and over to one of the side benches. Besides Laasya’s many other responsibilities, she’s assigned herself as my lunch buddy and study partner. Every day she turns up to my last morning class, ready to escort me to the dining room, and while we eat, she answers all my questions about the supernatural world. I’ve read more books in the last ten days than all the other years of my life, but there’s always more to know.

I don’t bother waving. When Laasya has her head in a book, she’s oblivious to the world.

Zahir orders the guards to a safe distance. “Right, let’s go again from the top. And remember what we covered earlier. Without firm control of the Flame, the Wielder has little power. You must bring the Flame under your will if we’re to progress in your lessons.”

Spreading my feet, I squat deep into a stance and focus to shut out distraction—the nausea, the worry, the drum of raindrops pelting the windows, the curious stares.

Firm control. Firm control.

Centering myself, I sway through the moves that draw Flame from its reservoir in my lower abdomen, spreading my arms in slowly widening circles.

The warm, tingling energy wakes and gathers. I encourage it to rise from my navel up to my shoulders and then ignite my arms. Silver-white flames lick over pale skin and skitter across my face to dance in my hair like a playful mistress. The fire leaps from one arm to the other, creating electric arcs of light.

“That’s good,” Zahir praises. “Now stay relaxed and guide it toward your hands.”

This part of the exercise goes well. Lighting the Flame comes easy, and even the stylized gestures feel natural now. But my instincts always scream at me to let it go. The Flame doesn’t seem to want the tight control. She wants to ignite and fill the room with white fire. She’s a bloody pyromaniac as well as a sex fiend. It takes all my concentration just to prevent that from happening, never mind making small Flame balls.

Determination tightening my jaw, I rotate my hands and imagine the fire traveling down both arms to gather into a circular swirl of light between my palms. Agitated and skittish, the flames run over my face instead, tousling my hair and tickling my ears.

“For fuck’s sake,” I snap. “Behave.”

Zahir chuckles. “The Flame follows your will, Michael. Imagine a ball and shape it between your palms.”

A heavy sigh gusts through my lips. Zahir makes Flame-Wielding look easy. Even the greenest Wielder can form a small Flame above their palm. I can set my whole blasted body on fire, but try as I might, forming the tiniest ball defeats me.

Come on, Flame. Give me a ball. Give me something.

I form a clearer image this time, an orb of silvery fire. The flames gather around my hands and flare into an arc. Spinning my palms, I manage a circle of light.

Zahir grins. “Good. That’s good.”

Then it happens. The same as always. The light splutters, then explodes into a blazing fire wider than my outstretched arms. For a moment, Flame surrounds me.

Until the wall of swirling light implodes.

I grit my teeth as white fire blazes down my sides and blasts across the tile floor. The students shriek.

“Stay calm!” Zahir shouts.

Don’t think about heat, Blakeley. Don’t think about heat.

Ah shit.

Silver white bursts into red orange and spills across the floor toward the walls.

Zahir steps from its path. “Extinguishers, please!”

The guards dash off in opposite directions.

I stamp at the dancing flames—the heat never burns me. They scatter, playful. Some skip out of reach; others shoot back up my legs, only to disappear when they reach my hips. “Behave.”

A shot of freezing gas erupts in my face and engulfs me in white smoke. I cough and peer at Jenson. He’s pointing an extinguisher my way, eyes wide but determined.

The soldiers put out the fire. Lines of soot darken the stone. Laasya hasn’t even looked up from her book.

Zahir grins at me, and his deep belly laugh bounces off the walls.

I shake my head, managing a twitch of a smile. “Shit, man. I’m so sorry. I thought I had it this time.”

Lockdale grunts while Jenson still has his extinguisher aimed at my face.

Zahir waves them both away. “You’re not the first Channeler to cause a fire, and you won’t be the last. Why do you think we keep so many extinguishers around? You clearly imagined an enclosed ball of Flame between your palms?”

“Yes.” I throw up my hands. “Clear as day. I know the Flame’s supposed to follow the Channeler’s will, but she doesn’t follow mine. Honestly, it’s like she’s messing with me.”

Lockdale huffs and scowls. Shifters don’t approve of me referring to the Flame as female. Even though their species depend on the Flame—they’re all natural Channelers and can’t shift without it—they don’t accept her as a goddess. They prefer scientific explanations instead. The Anlu’kyr and fae relate to the energy as a feminine deity. I know the mysterious force is female. Her voice answers me when I call.

Zahir turns to Lockdale. “Go tell the commander his Whisperer needs him when he has time.”

“No, don’t,” I say. “I’ve burnt the excess off now. I can go again.” I really don’t need Flanagan seeing my screw-up in person.

“He’ll want the morning report anyway. Go to lunch, Michael. I’ll tell him you’re in the dining hall.”

He smiles at my hang-dog expression and leaves the training room, shooing the students out with him.

Laasya wanders over, eyes still half on her open book. She stops at the soot marks across the ground and examines them, head tilted. “What a pretty pattern.”

The ring of black lines spreads out in a star shape from where I’m standing. I shake my head. Only Laasya would notice such a thing. “Pretty isn’t the first word that comes to mind,” I grumble. “The High Council is going to lock my out-of-control ass in a lead box and sink it in the Atlantic.”

“Pfft.” She gives a dismissive wave. “Don’t worry about a few burn marks. Wielders have set whole buildings on fire. Anyway, none of that matters because I’m about to make your day.”

“Yeah?” I can’t imagine how. “Go on.”

“I’ve found it.” She jiggles her book at me. “A solution to the Blood Call. I’ve finally found it.” She straightens her glasses and beams a smile.

“Serious?” That really would make my day. But the stretch of her smile...I narrow my eyes. “There’s a catch, isn’t there?”

She grimaces. “There might be a tiny one, yes.”

I raise a skeptical brow.

“A medium one,” she corrects.

“You mean a mountain-sized bastard of a catch.”

“Okay, maybe a medium mountain. I’ve definitely found the answer. It’s just that it’s currently owned by an ancient vampire witch.”

“A friendly vampire witch?” I ask with little hope.

She winces. “He’s Alexei’s uncle.”

Alexei’s uncle, huh? Yeah, that might be a catch.



CHAPTER 2

I extend my neck so Jenson can fit my collar. The stocky, blond soldier always wears a satisfied smugness when locking the Whisperer in irons. I spear him with a look, and he averts his eyes, busying himself with the key.

“So what is this anti-Blood Call McGuffin thingy?” I ask Laasya.

“A spelled sapphire. A thirteenth-century witch made it to protect his vampire lover from the king’s influence. And I think Vadim Vasiliev has been hiding it, using it to protect him from his brother’s Call. And now his nephew’s.”

“Vadim is Alexei’s uncle? So also a royal?” I raise my wrists for Lockdale to refasten the manacles.

“Yes, he’s a royal, but he’s still affected by the Call.” Laasya opens her book, a leather-bound minitome with fancy script and gold-embossed edges. She’s been scouring grimoires in search of a solution to the Blood Call—Alexei’s ability to compel any vampire to come to him, including me. The Guardians didn’t need a solution before me; it’s not like vamps line up at the door to join their ranks.

“I’ve followed the stone’s trail through sightings and rumors,” she says. “Which all points to Vadim. But this diary entry here, by a witch who attended one of the royal parties in 1950, mentions the glint of a deep-blue stone from beneath his shirt. He wore...” She grasps my hand. “When did those blisters come up?”

“It’s fine.”

“You’re always *fine*,” she scolds. Ignoring Lockdale’s scowl, she pulls at my arm and examines it more closely. “You must be reacting to the...” She casts a wary glance at the soldiers. “You can go to lunch. I’m with Michael now.”

Lockdale’s lip curls, but he hands her the keys, not meeting her eyes, then stalks away. Jenson waves as they both leave the room. I think Lockdale is afraid of Laasya. I’ve noticed a few of the guards give her a wide berth.

When the door closes, she whispers, “Don’t let the Council see that reaction to the iron.”

“Why not?” I ask, said iron clanking as I drop my hands. “The council should see the mess their medieval torture toys make.”

She shakes her head. “Just trust me. Once we have an answer to the Call, they’ll be coming off anyway. Did you have one of your nightmares last night?”

I blink at the sudden change of subject. “What makes you ask that?”

“You’re always paler the next day.”

“Am I? I’m pale all the time these days.” I need a holiday in the sun. Somewhere with a warm sea and cold beer and no Belangers anywhere. Maybe a certain giant Viking beside me, preferably naked. “I had a bit of a bad dream, that’s all.”

She tilts her head, troubled expression firmly in place. “The one about the small dark room? Or the one about the blood servant you killed?”

“I didn’t just kill him, Laasya. I shredded his face while screaming like a banshee. There’s a difference.”

Laasya lifts one of her slim shoulders. “Ferocity is a bonus when fighting Blood Servants.”

Nausea rolls through my stomach at the memory of blood and gristle. “Going mental all over your enemy isn’t a bonus. It’s a meltdown.” Not to mention the fact that I killed a guy. Something Laasya doesn’t seem to consider an issue. Anything goes against an enemy trying to kill you, as far as my battle-witch friend is concerned. With a shudder, I force the image away. I’ve been trying my best not to think about the moment I turned psycho and relished stripping a man of his throat.

I gesture to the book. “Just tell me how we get this sapphire. Where does this Vadim—”

She stops me with a raised hand. “Oh no. No, no. I need some acknowledgment I’m a research genius before I answer more questions.”

I chuckle and execute an exaggerated bow. “You are indeed a research genius, almighty one. What can I ever do to repay you?”

She purses her lips. “Brownies. With raspberries. And maybe cream.”

Nobody would need money to bribe Laasya, only a well-made muffin: she’s a cake-aholic. “Sounds good. Let’s make this an official brownie day. All the brownies.”

“Perfect. Let’s go to lunch.”

We leave the training room and plunge into Blackriver’s web of corridors, heading for the dining hall, passing students and soldiers also on their way to the midday break. I stare longingly out the windows at the rain-soaked sky. A yearning to fly beyond the walls lingers. The grounds may be huge, but apart from Alexei’s abduction, I’ve been stuck behind a high wall for nearly a month, most of that in chains. I want to see some normal. A street, a bar, a shopping mall, a harassed commuter, anything outside Supernatural Soldier Mansion.

“So not all the vamp royals have the Blood Call power, then?” I ask Laasya, opening one of the many double doors for her.

“No, only one vampire ever carries the Call. It’s a natural mechanism unique to the Anlu’kyr. When the king weakens or dies, the ability automatically passes to the next strongest, and they take the throne.”

“Why isn’t Alexei king, then?”

“He should be, but his father didn’t step down. Maybe Illarion still hopes the Call will pass back

to him when he recovers. We don't know. Apparently, everyone was shocked when the Call skipped to Alexei thirty years ago. The old vampire families and the High Council assumed Vadim would be next. He's over a thousand years old, crazy powerful, and Alexei is so much younger, not even a witch."

Alexei's eight hundred years old. Not that young. "So the young whippersnapper stole the big seat from his witchy uncle. I bet they're the best of friends."

"Oh, the very best of friends. They hate each other."

"And Alexei's okay with the potential usurper wearing protection from his Call?"

"He doesn't have a choice," she says as if that's obvious. "If he faced off with his uncle one-on-one, his uncle could win. And they represent a deep schism in the royal family. A clash between them would split the Anlu'kyr. Plus"—she holds open the next double doors for me—"Vadim pays a lot of money to the Anlu'kyr Crown. He's mega-rich. His front is private clubs and hotels, but his real money comes from his other businesses."

"Other businesses?" I say, knowing damn well she's alluding to something shady. Because, you know, vampires.

She leans in as though we're surrounded by a crowd rather than an empty hallway. "Most of the rich vampires have *other* businesses. Weapons, drugs, jewels. Vadim is an art broker."

"Stolen art?"

She shrugs. "Probably. He's actually one of our informants. The High Council granted him cooperation in return for information from the supernatural underground. He employs his Channelers, you see. Instead of enslaving them. So the Guardians tolerate him."

"A vampire who doesn't keep slaves. And a dodgy art broker, no less." I shake my head in wonder. I had a tall dude with fangs and a billowing cloak in my mind. Now I've got fangs in a mafia-style business suit, smoking a cigar. "What about Alexei? How does he make his millions?"

"He doesn't need a business. He's stinking rich. He owns a few specialist clubs that offer wealthy Neutrals every kind of fantasy, but they're really there to provide a safe source of blood for vampires. The Guardians have attempted to shut him down many times and failed. It's a sore point with the Council."

No surprises there.

Past the next set of double doors, we enter Blackriver's central hallway. The chattering students is an ear-splitting cacophony after the quiet corridor. We cross the bustling space to the dining room, and the noise dims as people turn and take a gander at the scary half-breed Whisperer. I'm at least a head taller than most and broad in the shoulders. That, and my green-beacon eyes, make it impossible to blend into the crowd and pass unnoticed. The soldiers straighten and glare. The students stare and whisper. Some of the younger women cast me coy glances.

I always return the more flirtatious looks with a friendly smile. I can't help myself. I'm still attracted to women. I've decided I must be bisexual. Maybe always have been. Flanagan did tell me the Flame can't change a Channeler's preference, just release any repressed desires. But where full breasts and soft, curvaceous bodies would normally set me alight, I can't raise the interest. Women still catch my eye, but not my need. Probably because a certain man's hard muscles, confident hands, and firm lips that take what they want now dominate my world.

Through an open archway, we enter Blackriver's dining space, a vast room scattered with sturdy oak tables and lined with bookshelves for the students to browse while they eat. I only get to come here because Zahir persuaded Flanagan that I need a "normal" experience of Blackriver. Flanagan only agreed when Laasya offered to be my escort.

We've been assigned our own table too, with service, so we don't have to join the other diners at the counter. A two-seater, some distance from the crowd but beside a window.

I plunk myself onto the wooden chair opposite Laasya, rest my manacled hands in my lap, and scan the rainy view outside. Since the battle, the flower beds remain a trampled mess, churned scars across the once pristine lawn like visible wounds. I can't look at Blackriver's garden without a wince. Not to mention a twinge in the weighty guilt that's taken permanent residence in my gut these days.

I turn back to Laasya. She's scrutinizing the menu. I don't know why. She orders the same thing every day. Vegetables with vegetables and more vegetables, then cake.

"If Vadim has the underground lowdown," I ask her, "wouldn't he be able to tell us where the students are?" A funny feeling pulses into my abdomen. A certainty, like a signal flashing yes.

Laasya snorts. "Gosh, no. Even if he knew, he wouldn't tell us. It's one thing to block Alexei's Call. It's quite another to betray him. But if we ask him really nicely, he might let us see the sapphire. We only need a copy of the spell. We can apply it to another stone."

The yes still pulses in my belly. I feel so sure we must ask him about the students. "So how do we get him to show it to us?"

She glances around, then leans over the table and whispers from behind the menu as though we're discussing state secrets. "We visit his London club and ask him. That's where he stays most of the time."

I copy her gesture with my hand. "Why are we whispering?" Her brown skin flushes a deep rose color when Laasya's embarrassed. It's cute.

She twists her nose with mock disgruntlement and checks again for stray ears. "It's a sex club," she hisses.

I groan. Of course, it's a bloody sex club. Vampires, sheesh. Dialing up the conspiratorial tone a bit, I say, "So what? Instead of leather uniforms, the Guardians turn up in glossy PVC?"

She giggles her snorty laugh and slaps my arm with the menu. "No. We wear our usual clothes, and I glamour them to fit the environment."

"Sounds good. But what are we going to offer a man who has everything to make him show us his jewel?"

"I'm not sure, but we'll have to offer something. Vadim does nothing for free. We'll ask Councilor Quinton after the meeting. He might know."

She'll need luck pinning Quinton down for five minutes. I've been wanting to ask him about my parents. He obviously knows something, given that he's aware I'm a Sabel, but I haven't seen him since he Gated off to Headquarters the day after I woke in the infirmary. He left me a sheet of mind exercises—basically sitting still and staring at the back of my eyelids until boredom ruins my sanity—then told me he'd return soon and left. The witch is as slippery as a vampire.

Speaking of mind exercises. "How did your psychic exam go yesterday?" I ask Laasya.

She facepalms, shoulders drooping. “Terrible. It was just...awful. The council will never promote me. I’ll be stuck at second degree forever.”

“Really? It can’t have been that bad.”

“I failed, Michael. It was so humiliating. I’m letting my entire family down. Every witch ever born into the Shakti line is psychic. My grandma was a Seer. My mother can read anyone she touches. I can barely wall off my thoughts. I’m a failure.”

I can’t believe how hard Laasya can be on herself. She’s a descendant of two of the strongest Indian bloodlines, can move any object with her mind, heal wounds on the battlefield, and her intuition is off the charts. But apparently, a witch has to read minds to rise in the ranks.

“Listen, you’re a battle witch, a warrior. If the High Council can’t see how amazing you are, show them. Won’t locating this famous lost sapphire help?”

Laasya chews her nail, and shrugs. “It might make me more visible, but it won’t get me my own unit.”

“Right, but it’s a start, yeah? Something to put Laasya Shakti on the map. Right under the Council’s noses.”

She grants me a reluctant smile, her big brown eyes warming again. “We need to find a way of persuading the commander to let you come with us to meet with Vadim.”

“I’m not sure that can happen, Laasya. No way would he allow me outside Blackriver walls.”

“Vadim will respond to a Channeler he considers a youngling far more favorably than a Guardian. That’s an argument worth taking to the general. She might even—”

“Oy, half breed!”

We both turn. Mason is storming between the tables, heading straight for me. Fury twists his crimson face.

“Oh, no,” Laasya says.

“You told him?”

“I told Seonu. I’m so sorry. I had to.”

After the battle, Mason realized his little sister was missing. The eighteen-year-old Grounder was captured with the other eleven Channelers that day. But only yesterday, when Laasya described Ember to me and mentioned the mole on her upper lip, did I realize the fair-haired girl swiped from the roof by Radomir was Mason’s sister. I planned to tell Mason today. Looks like I don’t need to. So much for lunch.

The sergeant charges toward me like an enraged bull. All eyes turn to watch the drama. I stand to meet him, bracing myself for violence.

“Why the fuck didn’t you tell me? Huh? You fucking half-breed piece of filth!”

“I didn’t know it was her.”

He rams me backward, and my head knocks into a bookshelf. Pain bursts through my skull. The metal collar bites into my throat as Mason braces his forearm across my neck.

“Sergeant Mason!” Laasya shouts. “Back away!”

“It’s okay. Leave it.” I can take the sergeant in a fight, even with the restriction of chains. He’s shorter than me, and though brawny, he’s only human, not a shifter or a half breed. But I don’t want to fight him. Lead-heavy guilt stays my hand.

“So somehow that bastard just took her,” he spits. “Right under your fucking nose.”

“I thought I had her. Shit.”

Mason increases the pressure, crushing my spine against the hard wood. Books spill from the shelves and thud to the floor. My fists clench, but I’m determined to take whatever he wants to give me. I owe him that.

He bares his teeth, spittle flying from his mouth. “Did you give her to him, you fucking traitor? Is that why they left because you handed the bloodsucker a Class 7 Grounder?”

“I’m warning you, Sergeant,” tries Laasya. She could flatten him to the ceiling with one thought, but he ignores her and continues to glare at me as though he might spear my skull with anger alone.

Keeping my voice steady, I say, “I’m sorry, man. I’m sorry.” A hot lump forms in my throat with the memory of Ember’s pleading blue eyes. She begged me to help her, and I let that slimy vampire take her right in front of me.

Chairs scrape, and students gasp when Mason raises his fist. The murderous desire to smash my face glints from the same sky-blue eyes as his sister. I meet his blistering gaze, muscles tense, ready for the hit.

From the corner of my eye, I catch sight of Flanagan’s colossal form rounding the corner. My racing heart gives an extra thud.

“Sergeant Mason.” The commander’s resonant baritone ricochets through the dining hall, causing a collective flinch from the onlookers. His tired face is a stony mask. “Desist. Now!”

Mason’s fury crumbles under the demand of his superior. His arm slips from my throat as he steps away, both of us breathing hard. I rub at the skin of my neck, muscles still tight. Mason’s shoulders sag, but he still glowers at me.

The diners fall silent, lunches forgotten, as everyone turns to Blackriver’s commander. Even the servers stop moving, spoons in midair.

My stomach plunges. Somehow, I’m the cause of Flanagan’s latest headache again.

Wonderful.



CHAPTER

3

“This piece of shit let Radomir take Ember,” Mason grates through gritted teeth.

“That’s enough.” Flanagan stares down at his sergeant until Mason drops his gaze and steps back. Then the commander gentles his tone. “Michael did what he could. He is not at fault for the actions of the Anlu’kyr.”

Whispers cascade between the diners. Judging by the accusatory stares in my direction, Flanagan’s argument hasn’t landed with most of them. Mason’s scowl remains.

“Return to your lunches,” Flanagan orders. “Now.” His Finnish accent clips his words; anger always seems to strengthen it. “Sergeant Mason, report to your captain. We will speak of this after the meeting.”

Mason doesn’t argue. He offers his commander a stiff nod of salute and marches away, fists still tight.

Flanagan turns to Laasya. “Thank you. You can go to lunch now.”

“Yes, sir.” She squeezes my fingers, then scurries across the room to the serving counter.

When the crowd has fully dispersed and the diners have returned to their lunches, Flanagan silently inspects me from head to toe with his mouth turned down at the corners. He takes in my scruffy hair, the pale, feverish skin, the disheveled clothing.

I grimace. Yeah, I look like hell. My dick swells under his scrutiny, though—a Pavlov’s dog response to his attention. I can’t help it. Flanagan’s stern intensity turns me the fuck on. The Flame sizzles through my groin, stirred by his nearness.

His silver gaze softens, lingering briefly on the bulge in my crotch, then returning to my face. “Follow me to the Grounding suite.”

“I’m okay. I can go longer.” I hate that I haven’t got enough control to give the man a break from yet another responsibility. Flanagan hasn’t smiled since the battle. Not really. Apart from when he’s fingers deep in me, the grim scowl, the somber eyes, the ticking jaw have become a permanent fixture.

“You need Grounding, Michael. We’ll use the suite next to Zahir’s office.”

Shoulders stiff, I nod my assent. I won’t pretend I’m not relieved. Just the thought of Flanagan’s

hands on me has me fully hard. If only I could hold off my body's demand for Grounding until the evening when we're in his room together. Then his attention can be more pleasure than duty.

We walk to the suite in silence, Flanagan's purposeful strides eating the distance. The flame spins in my belly, twitchy and aroused. She loves her True Grounder. Her excitement in his presence is always palpable.

When we reach the Grounding suite, Flanagan opens the door for me, and I step inside, still unable to meet his eyes. Mason was out of order, but I can't help feeling his behavior was somehow my fault. I slink across the floor and lean back against a tall set of drawers. My chain clinks loudly in the silence.

The Grounding rooms are all the same: subdued lighting, a bed, a leather couch, and a sink. A cupboard holds fresh white linen and towels while the drawers are full of condoms and lube. Most of the rooms are so small it takes only a few steps from one wall to the other, but this one's massive, with two double beds and curtain-covered windows.

Flanagan locks the door, remaining silent, then steps close to me again. A whisper of his wilder side glints from his eyes. His wolf has been showing through a lot these last few days, but he seems calm enough.

My hackles rise with the strained silence. I straighten to my full height of six feet, pulling my shoulders back. Still, the top of my head only comes to his neck. I'm a hundred and eighty pounds of muscle, but Flanagan's height and breadth often leave me feeling short and weightless. "If you're going to give me heat about something, then fucking get on with it."

He meets my eyes. I can't decipher his expression. "Open your fly and take your shirt off."

I mutter under my breath but do as he says, unbuttoning my shirt and suedes. He unclips the chain from the manacles so I can shrug the shirt off my arms.

Flanagan peels back my fly, exposing the swollen head of my hard dick. His eyes rake over me slowly, but he doesn't touch me. He examines my chest and abs, then the rings of inflamed skin around my wrists. What is he looking for? My muscles are more defined than when I first arrived at Blackriver nearly a month ago, but I pack away enough meat to feed a family of lions.

He tilts my chin with a finger and studies my face. I glower, but his worried expression subdues my fire.

"How many times have you stroked yourself to release today?" he asks, his voice quiet.

"A few. Why? That's normal, isn't it?"

"How many?"

My mind catalogs today's wanking sessions. "Two. Three maybe."

He runs his thumb over my jaw, and a tightness takes my throat. "Why didn't you come to me?"

"I can handle it. I'm fine."

Flanagan regards me, his lips a flat line. "You're exhausted. You must take responsibility for your training, Michael."

Anger flares. I nudge his hand away, the manacle knocking his wrist. "How can you say that? I'm training my fucking arse off. I barely have time to breathe."

The fizzle in his eyes matches mine. "You're not training. You're punishing yourself. Blaming yourself for the missing students. A Channeler needs rest and regular Grounding."

I throw my hands up. “I need control of my Flame. I’ve got a fucking noose over my head. And anyway, my Grounder happens to be Blackriver’s commander, for crying out loud. A busy man. I can’t knock on his office door every time I want my dick pumped.”

His brow dips. “Why not?”

“Seriously? I’d have to camp under your desk with my shlong hanging out. You wouldn’t catch a minute’s peace. And at this rate, I’m going to end up with nothing but a stub.”

A brief smile twitches his lips, and a tiny spark of his twinkle lights up his eyes. God, it’s good to see him smile.

He wrenches back my fly more and tugs my trousers down enough for my cock to bounce free, but he still doesn’t touch me. He leans in and takes my lips with a slow, tender kiss and presses his palm against my belly. A current of fiery Flame streams through my abdomen, out into his fingers. The building pressure diminishes. My lips break from his as relief drops my head to his shoulder. “Oh, fuck, that’s good.”

Flanagan presses a kiss to my hair. “Take your trousers off. I want you naked.”

I can’t strip fast enough. After kicking my boots to the side, I shove my suedes down my legs and rip them from my feet.

He pulls me closer, sliding me onto his thigh and pressing my straining cock against his hip. Resting a palm at the base of my spine, he wraps my nape just above the metal collar with his other. I shudder as hot Flame filters through me to meet his touch.

I unbuckle his belt and open his fly. He’s always wary of me touching him, conscious of his wolf—the beast, as he calls it—but there’s no way he’s keeping his goods hidden when I’m this close.

I cast him a “let me in or I’ll rip your trousers off” look, and with a curling smile, he adjusts to let my hand slip inside. When my searching fingers find his hard length, he shudders. I draw the monster up from against his thigh to gain a better hold, and he jerks into the pressure, hand flexing on my neck. With his thick heat filling my palm, I rest my head on his shoulder again and tuck my nose in his neck. The hairs of his clipped beard tease my lips while scents of leather and midnight forests tickle my nose. Delicious. A long groan of relief leaves my throat. I’d like his skin against me, but Flanagan stays dressed. He gets off on having me naked whenever we’re alone together.

Flattening my hand to roll his foreskin, I rock my hips, shoving my shaft against his suedes like a randy dog. Fuck, that’s nice. I want my hot cum all over his clean leather.

“Keep still.”

“Need to come.”

“You need Grounding.”

I have to grit my teeth to stop my hips from moving. He’s asking a lot. Frustration flares, but I breathe it back down.

Leaving a hand on my neck, he slides the other downward and slips a finger into the crack of my cheeks. Then he massages my sphincter with slow, deliberate pressure while his digit draws tingling Flame from my body. I match his rhythm with my palm squashed against his shaft, moaning and squirming, wanting him inside. The man’s turning me into a finger slut—something I never imagined would happen in all the months of Sundays.

He kisses my temple. “Stimulation alone will satisfy the Flame.”

“You’ve told me that before, but Zahir says orgasms increase my tolerance.”

“It’s true. But Zahir, though an excellent trainer, is used to working under traditional Guardian discipline. There are other ways. Other techniques.”

“Yeah? Like what?”

He falls silent. Tightening the hand around my neck to hold my head down, he pushes a finger inside me. The tight burn draws a hiss from my lips. My arse clenches down on the intrusion, making it feel twice the size. Flanagan loves to push in dry, to watch me grimace and pant, to swallow my moans with his mouth. I love it too. The shared intensity. The dominating pressure. He slides his wide middle digit as far as it will go, then, eyes on my face, drags it out, only to push in again with excruciating slowness.

My body trembles. “Fuck, Flanagan.”

“Too much?”

“No.”

He fucks me gently while I relax, and when I’m ready, he slowly adds another finger. I bite his shirt and grip his shaft as he stretches me, pushing in as far as he can and pumping with a steady rhythm. His fingers pull prickling Flame straight from the walls of my arse. This is new. Lightning pleasure ricochets through my insides. I squeeze his dick and pant into his neck. Shudders rack my body.

Fuckfuckfuck.

The wake of impending orgasm surges through me, through my balls to the tip of my cock, and my hips move of their own accord, thrusting against his thigh to chase the building release.

“Keep still.”

“Ugh. Can’t. Why the hell haven’t you Shared like this before? Feels amazing.” Flanagan likes to fill me with his fingers every evening, fucking me with four at once, but he’s never drawn Flame from my arse before.

“It’s not standard practice.” Tucking me close, he shoves the two fingers in hard and deep and fucks my hole with quick jabs. My cock rubs his thigh until panting moans escape my open mouth pressed to his skin. Flanagan’s a master at turning me into mush.

“Good boy,” he whispers, a catch in his voice. “Keep those hips still.”

Fuck.

Once I’m a rag on his shoulder, he slows his movements to an excruciating pace again and speaks against my ear. “I want you to refrain from release unless you’re with me in the evening.”

That jerks me out of my stupor. “What?” I try to raise my head, but he forces me still with the hand on my nape.

“You’re becoming addicted, Michael. You need rest. Low-grade stimulation, I’ll allow. But if the pressure becomes too much, you come to me.”

“You mean you’re going to edge me like you do in the evening, only all day long?” When we’re alone in his room, he likes me naked and hard and keeps me on the edge of an orgasm while he takes care of the day’s documents. Sometimes that takes hours. Hours of me moaning and desperate. Until he’s ready to finish me with his mouth. Then he makes me blow like a mother. I love it. Look forward to it all day. But can I handle a twenty-four-hour extension?

“It’s not edging, Michael. It’s training. If you stimulate gently, you’ll remain calm.”

Remain calm? Yeah, right? “I’m not sure I like this technique. Where’s it from if it’s not a Guardian thing?”

A long pause. “It doesn’t matter.”

“So I can touch myself, but not to jack off. And when it gets too much—which is every hour, by the way—I find you, and you’ll make me come?”

“Sometimes.”

“Sometimes? I don’t think—”

“Shhh. Trust me.” He strokes the back of my neck. “You’re overwhelmed. The Flame is ruling you. I’ve never known a Channeler who absorbs the amount of energy you do. You have nowhere near the capacity to handle the pressure, and it’s making you ill.”

Is the Flame making me ill? The strain seems to come more from that blasted vial of blood. I open my mouth to tell him. To admit that I look rough because I’m craving an illicit substance, but the words I say don’t match my intentions.

“Will Zahir be okay with this technique?” Why can’t I tell him about the blasted blood?

“I’ll speak with Zahir.”

Flanagan pushes his fingers deeper and, without warning, increases the tempo back to fast thrusts.

My fingers reflexively grasp his cock, and he pushes into my fist, covering my mouth with his lips, swallowing my groans of pleasure-pain. I gladly lose myself in the intensity, meet his tongue with my own, and let him fuck my tight hole until I’m humping his leg and pant-moaning.

As quickly as he started, he stops, holding me tight against him to prevent my continued thrusts. “What’s your answer?” he asks in my ear.

I hiss and squirm, pushing back onto his fingers to make them work again. What the fuck? Answer? Oh yeah, his proposal.

“Okay. Fine. I’ll do it. I’ll stay out of my bathroom.” What is it about Flanagan that I let him do this weird, kinky shit to me? “But I can touch myself, yeah?”

He kisses me again. “Yes, I want you to. But gentle strokes. If you need more, you come to me.”

“Okay, got it. Now fuck me with them fingers.”

He doesn’t. He slides them out, and I groan a loud complaint. The Flame snaps back into my middle like an internal punch.

“Shit, Flanagan, why’d you stop?”

“Shh, rest. It’s enough, and I have to go.” He steps away, and I’m left flopping back against the drawers while he washes his hands in the sink. Cool air draws goose bumps across my chest. I blink in the light, relaxed to the point of drunkenness and stunned by how fresh I feel. Though I yearn for the disrupted orgasm, the pressure that constantly burns my spine like acid has subsided. The throb at the base of my skull has diminished.

As he walks back to me, appreciation heats his eyes. His gaze roams my body from the metal collar to my exposed cock, standing proud and hopeful. I go to touch myself, and he bats my hand away. He cups the back of my head and palms my shaft as he covers my lips with his mouth again in one of his dominating, dirty kisses. I open and meet his intrusive tongue, find his hard heat again to return the favor.

His shaft pulses in my hand as he fucks me with his tongue, but he won’t let himself come. He’s a

lover who gets off on giving pleasure, but he's also careful with his orgasms. As if they're dangerous. As if he contains a monster he's unwilling to release. And he does. I've seen it; his wolf is scary as hell. And seriously hot. I sense his desperation to fuck me, but he strokes himself instead, often covering my face or cock with his cum. He's marking me with his scent. It's kind of weird but okay. I get it; I'm bedding a werewolf. Though it does make this...whatever this is—I'm not sure I can stomach the word boyfriend yet—one-sided.

I wish he'd trust I can handle him and let himself go. Every time we're together, an urgent desire to know him inside me rises. I don't know where the hell it comes from. This is a new world for me, but it's like a longing for us to merge.

He grasps my shaft with water-cooled fingers and speaks against my lips. "I need this too. Hmm? You naked against me every day. Ready for me in my bed. Grounding my Whisperer, being inside you, keeps me sane."

"Yeah?" I know he only relaxes when he's with me, but I'm also another of his many burdens.

"Yes," he says with added emphasis. He slides his hand down to my balls and rolls them in his fingers. "Promise me you won't come without my permission."

When I pause—because it's a ruddy great beast of an ask, and I'm still doubtful—he squeezes my balls till I yelp.

"Aaah. Yeah. Bring it on, Viking."

His broad smile briefly lights up the ever-present grimness. "You remember I'm not actually a Viking?"

"You're my Viking." I repeat our ritual with a wink. "A hot, sexy Finnish motherfucker with a monster dick."

He grins. The humor finally reaches his eyes, lighting the silver. Warmth flutters in my chest.

Releasing my gonads, he wipes a drop of moisture from my tip and sucks it off his thumb while I watch, mesmerized. My dick twitches in appreciation.

"You really have to go?" I ask.

He straightens his shirt. "I have to prepare for an afternoon of meetings."

My stomach hits my feet, all warmth extinguished. The looming presence of the impending face-off crashes back into my chest. Fuck.

Flanagan steps close and cups my jaw. "We'll all be with you, Michael. Including Councilor Quinton. He has a lot of influence in the Council, and he doesn't want you incarcerated any more than we do."

I swallow hard, the nausea returning. "Yeah, yeah, sure. It'll be fine." I avoid his eyes and move his hand. "What are the other meetings?"

"General Nenge will want to see me. Then Seonu and Mason will be giving me their report."

"You mean their report about the students? I thought that was tomorrow. Can I come to that? Just to listen."

"You have enough to deal with."

Annoyance flares. "It's me who decides how much I can deal with. I just want to help somehow."

His brow clamps tight. "You are not to blame, Michael. Why can you not hear that?"

I pinch the bridge of my nose and take a moment to cool my burst of irritation. The subject of

whether I'm to blame for the deaths and the missing students and the ruined Keep has been the primary source of contention between us for the last ten days.

"I know, okay. I fu—" I look up into Flanagan's fierce eyes, softened by sincerity. "I know. I just need to..." To prove to you I'm not a monster. To prove I'm worthy. Worthy of you. "...help." I'm such a fucking coward.

He takes a long, steadying breath. "I respect your insistence, but you cannot help. The Anlu'kyr may fear you, but you mustn't leave Blackriver while vulnerable to your own blood. Not until Quinton and Laasya find protection for you from the Call."

I know he's right. Unprotected, I'm more of a hindrance than an asset, but determination still burns through my veins. Alexei took those students because of me, and there's no way I'm letting him keep them.

"Let us just concentrate on this next meeting for now," he says. "I think it's enough." He slides his "commander" mask back into place, stern and in control, but his tight brow and the lines around his eyes betray the worry I saw when he woke this morning.

I gust out a sigh, working hard to let my angst go. The pressure to do something scratches at my insides every day, but I don't want to add to Flanagan's stress either. "Yeah, yeah, alright."

"You better dress. President Howard and General Nenge are already here. And Councilor Belanger is with them. She's demanding your immediate transfer to lockdown."

An extra twist strikes my gut—fury and revulsion. Those fucking Belangers. So much for hope.



CHAPTER

4

We visit Flanagan's office, and he changes into his official Guardian smarts: deep-blue suedes and a matching jacket that buttons at the shoulder and down the left-hand side. The silver Guardian symbol with its howling wolf, growling panther, and eagle wings glitters on the right. Six shiny metal dots dress his lapel to signify his rank. He looks off-the-charts hot. The uniform makes me want to bend him over his desk and fuck him until I get that rumbling growl he does when he comes.

A man can dream.

He takes me to the basement kitchen for something to eat, making the dignitaries wait even longer. And with a full belly, I trudge behind him up the stairs to the conference room, feeling like a dead man walking.

Seonu and Mason meet us on the third floor. They greet their commander with sharp nods of salute. I get scowls.

"They're all in there, sir." Seonu's expression is even more sour than usual. Not that the Japanese raven shifter cracks a smile often. Not around me anyway. Apparently, she hasn't smiled since her Compatible died last year—a casualty of one of Alexei's sneaky attacks. She seems to have decided that was my fault.

"Councilor Belanger's itching for a fight, sir." Mason glances at my manacles. "She asked about Michael's chains."

Flanagan only nods at this news. "Where's Laasya?"

Mason grins. "Attempting to charm them with coffee and homemade biscuits."

All three soldiers suddenly snap into a salute. A tall, black woman in an official uniform like Flanagan's approaches.

"At ease," she says with a West African accent. General Nenge. Has to be. If the seven silver dots on her lapel hadn't alerted me, her ramrod posture and striking presence would.

She steps close, just shy of personal space, and assesses me from head to toe. The metal collar, the manacles. "And you are Michael," she tells me.

I almost want to salute her myself. “Yes, ma’am.” Flanagan instructed me to call her ma’am.

Hands clasped behind her back, she stares at me for some time as though examining my insides. I meet her cool, all-seeing gaze. She’s almost my height, and though gray peppers her tight afro, her physique suggests a fighter.

“You want to be a soldier, Michael?”

Is this a test? “I want to stay at Blackriver, ma’am.”

She narrows her eyes at my deflection. “The Guardians can offer you a good life. You would have everything you need, a purpose, a team beside you.”

I cast a sideways glance at Flanagan. He’s keeping his eyes on his general, but his attention on me. “I want to protect Channelers. To, I don’t know, fight for what’s right, I suppose. It’s just hard to get in the spirit while in chains. I’m still not sure if I’m a recruit or a prisoner.” I didn’t mean that as a dig, but it’s the truth. I want to join the Guardians, fight beside Flanagan. But they have to want me too.

She nods sagely, lips pursed. “Mm. I understand. Let’s see what this meeting brings. Major Zahir speaks highly of you, your persistence and commitment to training.”

Zahir is the only decent guy I’ve met at Blackriver, apart from Flanagan. No surprise they’re such good friends. “Thanks. Yeah, he’s a solid mentor.”

She lifts my wrists and inspects the red welts beneath the irons, then shares a worried expression with Flanagan. “We still don’t have a full DNA result?”

Why does everyone mention DNA when they see my sore wrists?

“No, ma’am. The last sample also went missing en route to Longreach.”

“Did it now?” After another pensive stare, she looks back in the direction of the conference room, then turns her headlight gaze on Flanagan. “Keep your wits about you in there.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Flanagan’s hand wanders to my lower back.

Nenge glances between us, straightens her jacket, then marches away. And all my breath leaves me at once. I feel like I’ve been lasered.

“Fuck,” I say out loud.

Seonu and Mason both wear expressions of pride. They obviously think highly of their general.

Flanagan gives my waist a gentle squeeze. “General Nenge is a Guardian through and through. You can trust her.”

She’s a soldier who wants the “weapon” under Guardian control, is what she is. I get it, and I think her offer is genuine, but that’s not a woman I relish going up against when she discovers I’m the Warlock’s descendent. She’d execute the “dangerous monster” without a second thought.

When we reach the Oak Office—a large, mostly empty room set aside for Council hearings—three dour faces wait for us behind a long wooden table. At one end sits Quinton in a wine-colored version of his three-piece tweeds. Councilor Belanger—a nightmare in crimson—sits at the other, her gray hair pulled back so tightly into a bun it’s giving her a facelift. In the middle, a blond professor-type shuffles papers. He wears similar tweeds to Quinton, only in brown and not as stylish. The Council president, I presume.

As I enter, Belanger’s sharp gray eyes land on mine like two cleavers ready to gut me. Same lead-gray color as the bastard grandson who tried to rape me, but a damn sight more intelligent. She breaks the staring match first, and I look for an open window or a second door. No escape. The floor-to-

ceiling windows are all closed.

I squash a reflex to slink to the nearest chair, stalking in with my back straight. Not cocky, but not fucking cowed either. I'm extra aware of the large iron links dangling from my wrists, though, their tinkling clank. The metal collar banding my neck.

A chair waits in the center of the empty space, clearly there for "the accused." Ignoring the rising nausea and the buzzing hornets in my gut, I head straight for it. The wood creaks loudly as I settle my weight. Echoes of a long-ago meeting return to me. The local authority deciding what to do with an angry ten-year-old on his second suspension from school and his third foster family rejection in the space of a year. That meeting had a table too. The strangers sat behind it, eyeing me like I was irritating garbage they didn't know where to throw. John took me in the next week, and my life turned around. I'm not confident this lot won't just throw me away.

Flanagan strides over to the table. I assume he's going to join the general beside Quinton, but he lifts a chair and brings it over to sit next to me instead.

President Howard peers at him over the top of his horn-rimmed glasses. The man looks to be in his fifties, but so does Quinton, and he's a hundred and twenty-two; age is anybody's guess in this world. "It would be preferable if you sit on this side of the table, Commander."

"I'm fine here, thank you, President Howard." Flanagan rests his hands in his lap and sits back.

Another chair scrapes, and Laasya joins us, settling on my other side. "Permission to sit here, Commander."

He gives her a nod. She offers me a reassuring smile before her serious face takes over.

My two friends flank me like guards, and a fuzzy warmth blooms in my chest. The rampant wasps in my belly calm a touch.

Councilor Belanger makes a loud tutting sound and shakes her head.

Howard sighs. "Very well."

I catch Quinton's shadowed eyes. He's sitting in the posture of a kingpin: chin high, one hand resting on the dark stone at the top of his silver cane. He doffs his fedora to me.

Where've you been? I say to him in my head.

Protecting you, my boy. He smiles as though we're not speaking. *Answer questions only. Leave persuasion to me.*

President Howard opens his mouth to say something, but Belanger fires across him. "I think it's only appropriate that we begin by addressing this creature's lack of security. One chain is hardly enough for the monster who brought Blackriver to its knees and destroyed the health of my Gregory."

I curl my fists to bury the instant retort that shoots to my tongue.

Howard cuts her a look with a tight smile. "Yes, thank you, Gloria." He shuffles his papers again. He has the same prep-school handsomeness as Quinton—a face shaped by money and privilege, but dark bags hang beneath his eyes, and he seems a twitchy sort. An odd ring on his left hand catches the afternoon light: an embellished black metal mounted with a black stone that clashes with his middle-class tweeds.

"Good afternoon, Michael. I'm President Howard. It's good to meet you at last." He doesn't look at me. He gestures to Belanger. "You've met Councilor Belanger, our vice president. To my left, as you know, is our chief interrogator, Councilor Quinton."

Howard waits for my return greeting, still not raising his eyes. I'm not saying it's nice to meet them all because it isn't. I jerk my chin. "Sup." I'm being an asshole. Can't help it.

Howard offers a brittle smile. "Yes. So the first item on the agenda is the matter of security. The High Council made it clear we wanted the Whisperer suitably contained." He squints over his glasses at Flanagan. "Can you explain your decision not to abide by our request, Commander?"

Flanagan takes a long breath. "As I explained in the report, you cannot contain Michael's ability. Iron may prevent him from using Flame, but a Whisperer can *call* the Flame, regardless of iron manacles. And when under the influence of the Blood Call, he is strong enough to break his chains. Michael is here of his own free will. These 'precautions'—he gestures to the length of rust-colored links in my lap—"are merely a reassurance to the residents of Blackriver. And an attempt to honor the Council's request."

Belanger huffs a feigned laugh. "Well, I think you may have won my assertion before we even begin, Commander. If this is the case, then the creature should be relocated immediately to Headquarters for lockdown. What is there to prevent it from repeating the carnage of ten days ago?"

Creature. It. I grit my teeth.

Quinton clears his throat. "We have already discussed this, Gloria. Michael did not give consent to be a weapon for the prince's stratagems, and a man cannot change his heritage. When he had an opportunity to leave with the Anlu'kyr, he returned to Blackriver. Which is the reason most of our precious students are now safe. He does not deserve to be kept like an animal in chains. And certainly not in lockdown."

"And if its prince should call again?" Councilor Belanger counters, scorn in her tone. "You're happy to let this vampire servant skip away with more of our students?"

"I'm not a vamp—" A sudden constriction at the back of my throat cuts my words short. Quinton throws me a warning glare. Did he just literally stop me from speaking?

"Michael does not belong to the prince," Quinton shoots down the table, his face flushing with surprising passion.

Belanger puffs with disbelief. "It is a vampire half breed and therefore subject to the prince's demands. And heaven only knows what else the creature is. Has a blood sample made it to Longreach for testing yet? Or have they 'gone missing' *again*?"

Laasya shuffles in her seat. She glances sideways at me, then away. Does she know something about the mislaid blood samples?

Flanagan's quiet baritone fills the room. "Longreach is still rebuilding after the attack, which adequately explains their repeated failure to receive and test Michael's blood. And yes, Michael *is* vulnerable to Alexei's Blood Call. But we can handle this risk here at Blackriver. And now that we have successfully replaced the Wards, Michael cannot leave the compound, even if Called."

Councilor Belanger rolls her eyes with dramatic exaggeration. "By your own account, Commander, the creature need not leave the compound to cause extensive harm. This is a school, not a prison facility, and the young Channelers here are extremely vulnerable. I shouldn't have to remind Blackriver's commander of this."

The fingers of Flanagan's right hand tighten in his lap, but his face remains unreadable. "And may I remind you, Councilor? The Guardians were founded on the principle of compassion for all Flame-

born, regardless of their heritage. With this in mind, they built Blackriver to cope with any strength of Channeler. That required compassionate attitude is detailed in section 3.1 of the Guardian code if you wish to revise your knowledge.”

Councilor Belanger’s lips zip into a tight pout. Her steaming glare turns hot enough to fry onions. She opens her mouth to fire something back, but Quinton interrupts.

“I can stay at Blackriver to train Michael in the art of psychic protection.” He leans forward to address the table. “I assure you, Gloria, I can perfectly subdue a Whisperer with one thought. Even when he is under the influence of a Blood Call.”

Well, that makes me fucking shiver.

“And yet you were present when the Whisperer stole Flame from fifty soldiers,” Belanger retorts.

Quinton’s upper lip curls. “The witch Alyona is a formidable adversary. It took the whole of my attention to protect the Blackriver coven from her attack, but she is not present now.”

Belanger ignores his answer. “Lockdown at Headquarters would be a far more effective containment. Underground and surrounded by lead walls, the creature would cause an all but insignificant risk.”

My breath catches. *Underground. Lead walls.* Heart thudding in my chest, I check the door and windows again, even though I know they’re closed.

Laasya squeezes my forearm to reassure me, but it doesn’t calm the tingles in my fingers. For fuck’s sake, Blakeley, not the time for a panic attack.

“Councilor Belanger does have a salient point, Councilor Quinton,” Howard says. “You could train the half breed while he is interned at Headquarters.” He peers down the table at Nenge. “Would this not be the more prudent option, General? Until we have a solution to the Blood Call. We have many strong Grounders in London. They could surely cope with the Whisperer’s Flame in the absence of his Compatible.”

“It may be the safer option, Councilor.” Nenge’s expression is even more inscrutable than Flanagan’s. “But I trust my commander’s view on this. He believes the young man to be an asset to the Guardians. I agree. Prince Alexei has recently intensified the conflict with his attacks on our laboratories, and the Whisperer’s presence on any battlefield would give us an immediate advantage against the prince and his Blood Guard. We should intend to win Michael’s trust, not risk his enmity.” She levels me with a look. *Note that I am defending you,* it says. Noted.

“And Michael will never trust an organization prepared to lock him in an underground vault when he’s severely claustrophobic,” Flanagan adds, a growl seeping into his words.

Belanger’s gaze lands on Flanagan like a mallet. “The vampire mongrel has clearly impaired your judgment if you will place your students in danger so that we don’t *upset* it. And where are your students, Commander? Hmm? You told us you would ensure their return or give up your post. After ten days, I see only the promise of your resignation.”

Give up his post? He never told me that. I flick him a sideways glance, but he’s stoically staring forward. So Councilor Belanger’s using this mess to go after Flanagan. I should have thought of that. The Belangers hate Flanagan because he doesn’t kowtow to their bullying. Apparently, they’ve been trying to undermine him ever since his promotion to Blackriver’s commander.

“Um, yes, Commander.” Howard tries to wrest back control of the proceedings. “Any word on our

students?”

“Captain Seonu has been leading the operation, President Howard.” Flanagan turns his head to Seonu, who stands behind us. “Captain, if you would, please.”

“Yes, sir.” Seonu strolls forward and salutes. She stands straight, hands clasped behind her back, not a hair on her shiny black bob out of place—the model soldier. “I’m very sorry to inform the High Council that we have no word of the students. We’ve searched all the shipping lines and underground slave auctions. The headquarter team has scoured the whole of London. None of our informants have caught a whiff of the Channelers’ whereabouts.” She lets out a harsh sigh. “I will admit, I don’t understand why. We usually get at least a hint to follow. It’s as if they’ve disappeared.”

“Could the students have already been moved abroad?” Howard asks. “Shipped through the Faelands, perhaps?”

She shakes her head. “We have Guardians in every European port and farther, prioritizing the search. The witches scan daily for Gating currents. And though Alexei has persuaded the fae queen his actions against Blackriver were justified, she’s standing by the treaty. She alerts us when Anlu’kyr move slaves through her land.”

Belanger looks pleased with this result. “You say you trust your Commander, General Nenge, and yet we wouldn’t be conducting this futile search if the commander had remained at his post instead of chasing his new *sweetheart*”—she spits the word—“halfway across the Faelands. If the students don’t return within the month, can I expect the Council to accept the commander’s offer of resignation?”

Fuck, she’s really gunning for him. I’d never forgive myself if Flanagan lost his post because of me.

“The commander’s position is a separate issue, Gloria,” Howard says. “One that we can discuss at the disciplinary hearing.”

Disciplinary hearing? He’s never mentioned that. I turn to Flanagan with a “why the fuck didn’t you tell me” expression, but he won’t look at me.

No fucking way. I shuffle back in my seat to sit straight. “I’ll find you the students.”

My voice echoes like a siren through the large room.

Silence descends. Every head turns to me as if it’s the chair that’s spoken, not the person sitting in it. Yes, that’s right, the *creature* can speak.

Quinton frowns. *What are you doing, Michael?*

I ignore him and clear my throat. “If you’ll let me leave Blackriver for one night, I think I can get you a lead on where the students are. If I don’t, you can lock me in your prison.”



CHAPTER

5

Laasya sits upright and straightens her glasses, probably guessing my plan. Flanagan reaches for my hand. “Michael,” he warns. I jerk away, pissed he didn’t tell me his job was on the line. “I know what I’m doing,” I hiss. Okay, I have no friggin’ clue what I’m doing, but if one of us is going down for this, it’s going to be me.

“Um, how exactly would you acquire a ‘lead’ to the students’ whereabouts, young man?” Howard asks, looking at me for the first time.

I pull back my shoulders and try to seem less monster and more Guardian recruit. “If you let me speak to Alexei’s uncle, I think I can get us a solution to the Blood Call and maybe persuade him to give us at least something on the students.”

Every face but Nenge’s wears a frown. She’s watching me with a speculative raise of her brow.

“What makes you think Lord Vadim has an answer to the Blood Call?” Quinton asks.

Laasya speaks before me. “He has the Sapphire of Ashur, Councilor.”

Quinton sits back, eyes widening. “Does he indeed? How sure are you?”

“I’m sure. It’s detailed in Calvin’s journal.”

“Well, well, that is good news,” Quinton says. “Well done, Laasya.”

Laasya beams, her cheeks darkening.

“Why is this good news?” Belanger snaps. “Even if Vadim Vasiliev has the sapphire, which I sincerely doubt as it’s been missing for hundreds of years”—she throws a disgruntled look at Laasya—“he’s hardly about to hand it to the Guardians.”

“Um, we don’t actually need the sapphire itself, Councilor,” Laasya says. “Just a copy of the spell it carries. Lord Vadim only has to agree to show it to us.”

“Yes,” Quinton agrees. “With a copy of the spell’s matrix, our own witches could reconstruct it using another stone. Do you not think so, Councilor Howard?”

So Howard’s a witch, then.

The president strokes his chin. “One would assume so. Though it may take a while. Ashur was a

genius. His spells are renowned for their complexity.”

Gloria Belanger taps her pen on the table and fires a killing glare my way. Of course, she won’t be happy there’s a potential answer to the Blood Call. “Well, we certainly don’t need this creature’s help. Lord Vadim is my son’s primary informant. Commander Belanger could visit Vadim’s London house tonight and acquire the spell.”

I mirror her death stare. “Vadim won’t show it to a Guardian.” I’m feeling pretty confident about that. He may not even show it to me, but I have something he wants.

“The boy is quite right, Gloria,” Quinton says. “Lord Vadim would never expose such a treasure to the Guardians unless it’s to his advantage. He will simply deny the sapphire’s existence.” He gestures to me. “But what makes you think he will show the jewel to you, Michael?”

All eyes turn my way again. Flanagan’s as tense as a steel cable beside me, but I ignore his “what the fuck are you doing” vibes and speak directly to Nenge. “As I understand it, Vadim is Alexei’s main competition for the throne. If he doesn’t keep Channelers as slaves, then surely he’s the better candidate. And if he wants the throne, he’ll want allies.” I ignore the twist in my gut at the thought of betraying my... the prince. “I can offer myself as an ally.”

“Oh, Lord Vadim certainly wants the throne.” Quinton chortles.

“You want to offer the vampires a weapon of mass destruction.” Belanger huffs. “But of course you do. A worthy Guardian indeed.”

I ignore her and address the general. She seems to be listening intently, but I’m not getting a clear reaction. “We agree I’m never going to be any use to the Guardians if I’m at risk from Alexei’s Call. And I can be straight with Vadim that I’m only offering my help against Alexei. If he becomes king one day, I get to wear protection from his Call.”

“Vadim is more likely to show it to Michael than any of us,” Laasya says. “Because he’s, you know, partly one of them.” She mouths a sorry to me, then rallies. “Which is a tremendous advantage to us, of course. And if Councilor Quinton were to come with us”—she glances his way through her lashes—“Michael wouldn’t be a risk at all. And he’d be safe while we visit Vadim’s establishment.”

Quinton rubs his chin in thought. “Yes, yes. This could work. If Michael allows me inside his mind, I could block the Blood Call entirely and put him to sleep if anything should happen. I would need to stay beside him at all times, of course.”

Quinton inside my mind again? That almost sounds worse than the Blood Call.

“And the students?” Belanger addresses me directly for the first time. “Lord Vadim isn’t stupid enough to betray the prince openly. So what will you do to retrieve our Channelers? Walk straight into Dvamira Castle and ask your prince to return them?”

“If I have to, yeah, I will.” I’m about to fire more at the bitch, but Flanagan and Laasya squeeze my forearms so hard I jump.

Howard looks down the table at Nenge. “Your thoughts on this, General? Surely the risk is too high. Not moments ago, we were discussing full lockdown. Now we’re considering allowing the Whisperer to enter a densely populated area.”

Nenge stares in my direction with a thoughtful expression. She asks Quinton, “You’re sure that if we can make a copy of this spell, it will provide Michael with complete protection from the Blood Call?”

Quinton nods, emphatic. “As President Howard says, Ashur was unmatched in his ability with protection spells, so replication may take months of hard work. But I do believe that sapphire is our best hope, General.”

Months? Shit. Will I last that long?

“Then I believe the risk to be justified, Councilor Howard. Michael can offer Lord Vadim a specific deal that maintains our advantage. Once he is free of the Call, not only does Alexei lose his hold on a Whisperer, but the Guardians also gain a valuable asset.” She gives me one of her laser gazes, the tacit deal she’s making with me clear in her hazel eyes. Looks like I’m joining the Guardians. “I would appreciate an opinion on this, Commander,” she asks the silent Flanagan.

Quiet fury rises off the big guy like smoke off burning coals. I’ll be getting a tongue-lashing once we leave this room. “You’re certain you can provide Michael with the protection he needs, Councilor Quinton?”

“Quite certain. As long as Michael consents to my presence in his mind, he will be fully protected.”

“And if the prince should be visiting this sex club?” Belanger questions, firing the words *sex club* my way, as though all vampire deviance is my fault. “With his witch, you need ‘all your attention’ to overcome?”

“Alexei is unlikely to be visiting his nemesis, Gloria,” Quinton answers. “And even if he is, an Anlu’kyr house is neutral ground. Even the prince would not risk challenging his own people’s ancient laws. We will be quite safe.”

They all look at Nenge again. “The decision rests with my commander.”

Flanagan’s tension is a palpable aura. His jaw ticks beneath his beard. But even with the risk, he’ll not pass up an opportunity to solve Alexei’s influence over me. I’m sure of it. After making everyone wait for what feels like minutes, he sighs. “Very well. We’ll go tonight.”



CHAPTER

6

After excusing himself from the meeting on the basis of making immediate arrangements for tonight's mission, Flanagan marches me from the room. He drives me down the corridor with his big paw firmly on the back of my neck, nostrils flared, face a hard mask. Once we're far enough away from the Oak Office, he spins me to face him.

"What the hell do you think you're doing, Michael?" he hisses.

"What the hell does it look like? Getting the students back."

"And offering yourself to Vadim, a vampire as ruthless and ambitious as Alexei? You didn't consider telling me your grand plan *before* we went into the meeting?"

"I didn't have a grand plan *before* we went into the meeting." I jut my chin. "You didn't consider telling me your fucking job was on the line?"

He stands straight and expels a breath. "That's not your concern. Your safety and the safety of those around you is."

"How is it not my concern when it's because of me?"

"It's not..." Flanagan takes a withering breath, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Michael, whatever circumstances Blackriver faces, I'm solely responsible for the decisions I make. If I lose my position, that will be on me."

My stomach constricts with even the mention of Flanagan losing something so important to him. Keeping Channelers safe and training them is his whole life. "If I wasn't here, those *circumstances* wouldn't have happened."

Flanagan wipes a hand down his face. I expect a frustrated comeback, but his gaze softens as he meets my determined expression. "Michael," he whispers. His face displays sadness, which does weird things to my belly. He rests his hands on my shoulders and leans in. "Can't you understand? I don't wish to even imagine you not being here. But I do wish you would stop blaming yourself for what happened. And I wish you would allow me to be your friend."

"What do you mean? You are." I clasp his wrist. Flanagan's already closer to me than anyone, apart from John, my adoptive dad.

He sighs, briefly closing his eyes. “If we were friends, you wouldn’t share just my bed. You would share your thoughts and worries with me. There are things you want to tell me but refrain for fear of my response.” He gives me a meaningful look.

Shit. Is he hinting about the vial? He can’t mean the Sabel thing, can he? I always forget how perceptive Flanagan is. He may not be a witch, but three hundred and fifty-nine years of life seems to have given him X-ray vision. I swallow, looking away from him. He squeezes my shoulder until I glance up again.

I open my mouth to speak, dreading the lie about to leave my lips, but close it again when the lemon-sucking features of Councilor Belanger approach from behind Flanagan.

“Well, isn’t this cozy,” she declares. “Or is there trouble in paradise?”

“There is now,” I bite before I can stop myself.

Flanagan’s fingers tighten on my shoulder. With a brief stroke of his thumb against my jaw, he steps away. “Is there something I can help you with, Councilor?” he asks with monotone inflection.

“Of course not. I only wished to inform you that my grandson will be leaving with me today. No need to arrange transport.” She drifts her gaze to me, feigning indifference, and yet her eyes are ablaze with triumphant malice.

Flanagan winces.

“What’s she talking about?” I ask him.

“The decision wasn’t mine, Michael. And it wasn’t final. I was going to tell you when I was sure.”

“So the men who tried to rape me are basically walking free without consequence?”

Belanger’s sneering smile stings me as she revels in the effect of her well-placed grenade. “Gregory and his friends are innocent of all charges, as you well know. They will be staying with me at the family house in London, in the comforts they deserve until this sham of a trial can be nullified.”

I’d never hit an old woman, it’s not in my makeup, but right now, I dearly want to make an exception for this spiteful bitch.

“He *will* be tried,” Flanagan says through a tight jaw, keeping his back to Belanger. “But the Council have agreed to home arrest until the date is set.”

Quinton arrives from the conference room, his nasal tone cutting over whatever Belanger was about to say. “And I will be the one interrogating Gregory, this time with a room full of witnesses.” He gives a dramatic flourish of his hand. “I assure you whatever happened to Michael in that cage will be made perfectly clear.”

Belanger’s sneer becomes a snarl, the hint of sharp canines showing through her raised lip. “That remains to be seen.”

Quinton seems unperturbed by this show of shifter aggression. “I’m sure I just caught the sight of soldiers escorting Sergeant Belanger to the gate. Surely you should hurry to be with him before they transport him in the prison van instead of your Bentley.”

Before Quinton has even finished speaking, Gloria Belanger marches away down the hall, rushing through the door to the stairs without a glance back.

Quinton smiles, pleased with himself. Flanagan follows her exit with a killing glint in his eyes.

I’m left feeling like I’ve been sucker-punched, which was clearly the effect she wanted.

“The trial will go ahead, Michael,” Flanagan says, resolute. “General Nenge has assured me

herself.”

“Either way, Gregory Belanger’s career in the Guardians is over.” Quinton looks to Flanagan. “I did ask if I could meet with Michael alone, Gabriel.”

“You can meet with him now. I’ll send his guard up to wait outside your office. They can escort him to Zahir as soon as you’re finished.” He turns back to me, his face wearing his commander mask again, and pulls a set of keys from his pocket. “While you’re with Councilor Quinton, I think we can lose these.” He unfastens my wrist manacles.

“You sure?” I rub my sore skin.

“I’m sure.” He flicks a fiery glance to the door where Belanger just left. “You need to prepare for tonight. Zahir will brief you on field basics and fit you with a recruit uniform. Then we need to prep you for your first experience of Gating.” He releases the collar and slides it off, and I gush with relief, scratching my skin.

“Aah, yes.” Quinton waves the top of his cane toward me. “The terrifying first transition through spacetime. An initiation I am quite sure you will enjoy.”

All I hear is *terrifying* and *spacetime*. Yeah, sounds wonderful.

Flanagan leaves to find Seonu and Mason, and Quinton leads me along the corridor to his office. Without the heavy manacles, my background nausea has fallen away, and my footsteps are light, as if I’m floating. Rage bubbles in my gut over Gloria Belanger and her fucking grandson. My heart twists and twitches, bewildered after that conversation with Flanagan.

I fucking hate keeping secrets from him like a coward, but what choice do I have? If I tell him I’m a Sabel, he either has to report me and watch the Council execute me or lie to his general. And if I admit I’ve been hiding a vial of Alexei’s blood he’d... He’d take it from me and smash it, and for some reason I wish I understood, that’s just not an option.

As we enter Quinton’s dusty office and he shuts the door, I drag my mind from the latest drama and focus on why I wanted to see him. Questions are burning a hole in my head, and I’m determined the shifty witch is going to answer them.

Before all that, I have another matter to tackle. “I need to know I’m safe from you, Quinton.” I turn to him, try to meet those shadowed eyes. “That you’re not going to steal shit from my head again.” His tingling power fills the room—a prickle over the skin. The witch could probably turn me into a croaking frog if he wanted to, but I’ll be damned if I’m letting him inside my brain again without at least some reassurances.

He has the decency to look contrite. “I am ashamed I acted so rashly, Michael. When I removed the name Sabel from your mind, I was worried for your safety. I thought your presence might come to light someday, but your arrival here took me by surprise. Please take a seat.” He gestures to a chair beside his oak desk.

“I’ll stand, thanks. If you knew my real name, you knew who I was when I arrived at Blackriver. How?”

His eyes flick to the door. He raises a finger to his lips. *We must be careful. Walls have ears when witches are abroad.*

I want to know what you know, Quinton. Who were my parents? Information about where I come from, my parents, and their killer was the reason I came to Blackriver in the first place.

And I will tell you what I know, but we must speak your real name in thought only. You simply do not understand the danger you are in. The High Council will not hesitate to execute a Sabel. Nobody would. Many who faced the Warlock in battle still live and fear his return. The supernatural community considers the Sabel bloodline to be an aberrance, a monstrous distortion that must be wiped off the face of the earth. His lip curls with a sneer.

“Wait,” I say out loud. “What do you mean they fear the Warlock’s return? Isn’t the guy dead?”

Quinton saunters over to the sink and rests his silver cane against the wall, then daintily turns the tap on. He rinses his fingers beneath the water as if the liquid might taint him rather than clean him. “They couldn’t kill Valentin Sabel. He was god-blessed. So they spelled him into a deep slumber and interned his body behind wards of impenetrable blood magic. He sleeps in the Cave of Souls beside the Jade Lake, and only his own blood can open his prison from the outside. A paradox meant to keep him there forever.”

His words cause body-wide goose bumps. I’ve been to a cave beside a green lake. Or, at least, I dreamed I had. I heard a male voice too. *“Free me.”*

Quinton jerks his head around. “You’ve been to the cave?”

“I’m not sure. Sort of.”

“What did you hear, Michael?” He quickly dries his hands on a towel and strides across the room. “Did you enter the cave?”

“Well, yeah, but I’m not sure how real it was.”

He grasps my shoulders and peers at me as though examining my brain. “Let me see. Let me see.”

I recall my weird visit to the fluorescent green lake. The black sand, the twisted trees of the Border Woods, the cave.

“Aah, yes,” Quinton says. The shadow has slipped from his eyes, exposing their true green color. “You arrived on the beach and heard him call to you. You entered the mouth of the cave, then—” He jerks back so fast he almost slips on the wooden floor. “You saw *her*.”

“I saw a woman made of Flame. She stopped me from going deeper into the cave and told me I wasn’t ready. Whatever that meant. Who is she?”

He readjusts his tweeds and tilts his fedora back to an angle. “Elwyn. Servant of the Flame goddess.” He tells me this as if he can’t quite cope with the words in his mouth.

The High Priestess of the Flame Temple. She’s the woman who helped Flanagan when he sought the blessing. A woman he thinks of as a friend. “She told me you serve another.”

Quinton narrows his eyes, the shadow returning like a cloud across the moon to mask their color again. He smiles. “Of course I serve another. I serve the High Council. I am dedicated to protecting the supernatural community. Have been for the last century.”

I scrub both hands over my face. I wish I understood all this. My brain feels as if it’s melting with this crazy shit. I haven’t recovered from finding out I’m related to a genocidal maniac yet. Now I discover he’s still alive, and I nearly woke the fucker. In a dream. While I was dead.

“It was not a dream, Michael.”

“Stop reading my bloody mind, Quinton.”

“I cannot help it. Your thoughts are as loud as a car horn. You Flame walked to the cave. A fae skill. A useful one if you ever train your mind.”

A fae skill? I shake my head and rub my temples. “You’ve got to tell me what’s going on. Are all these abilities from my bloodline? From Valentin? Did my parents know they...” I catch myself and swap to mind talk. “...were Sabels? How did they stay protected?”

Quinton sighs and looks away, adjusting some papers on the desk. *I never knew your parents. I’m sorry. But I suppose I can tell you what happened when you were a baby. The Dra’ka Tul are common knowledge, after all.*

“The Dracky what?”

“The Draa Kaa Tul,” he repeats slowly. “It means ‘followers of the shadow.’ A clandestine organization of witches dedicated to waking the Warlock.”

“Why would anyone want to wake a psychopathic witch? And what the fuck have they got to do with me?”

When I was director of Blackriver before Commander Flanagan, I received an urgent message from Headquarters, asking me to investigate an occurrence involving the use of Flame in Cranbourne Woods. A man and woman had been killed. Their throats slashed. He gives me a heavy look. They were carrying a baby in a lead-lined casket.

My parents carried me in a lead box? *And you think that baby was me?*

Yes, I’m quite sure. By the time I arrived, the officers involved had clearly had their minds altered to forget certain details, and the baby and casket were long gone. But some remembered the baby had unusual eyes, and there’s only one bloodline that would trigger the kind of caution that requires a lead casket. I didn’t know if you had survived at all. And then, twenty-five years later, you arrived at Blackriver. As soon as Gabriel mentioned they had found an excessively strong Wielder with unusual green eyes, I guessed you were the same child. I was both elated and concerned for your safety.

He smiles at me as if this should be good news, but a painful tightness clutches my chest. “So you don’t know who killed my parents?”

Quinton’s delighted expression turns blank.

“The couple that died in the woods,” I prompt gruffly.

He gives me an odd look and rubs the stone at the top of his cane. *Well, I think it is likely to be the Temple priestesses. They are tasked with protecting the world from the Warlock after all. Trained from a young age to kill. And ardent enemies of the Dra’ka Tul.*

“So my parents died protecting me?” I say with wonder. Do I finally have a serious lead on finding out who they were? I need to find these crazy Warlock worshippers.

“Come. Let me show you something.” Quinton grabs his silver cane and, beckoning, disappears around the corner. I follow his peculiar walk to the room’s farthest bookshelf.

He reaches into a gap between two tomes, and after a click, the whole bookshelf glides open like a door and reveals another room. Trust Quinton to have a secret hideaway.

He slips inside and waves to me. “Come. We can speak freely in here.”

Mind clogged with a horde of questions, I step over stray books into the new room. The modest space is windowless and half the size of the office. At the center sits a smaller oak desk, littered with pens and papers. Stacks of leather-bound books clutter most of the floor. A thick layer of dust shrouds everything. It’s the walls that draw my attention, though.

A brightly colored mural covers every inch of space, including the high ceiling. Mouth ajar, I swivel my head and take it all in. Intricate battle scenes rage across emerald hills. Silver fire and bolts of lightning arc over armies of different species. At one end is a clear depiction of the Border Woods with its twisted trees, beside it the illuminated Jade Lake, and the cave mouth draped with vines. The white dome of the Flame Temple shines on one wall, and exactly opposite on the other, figures in red cloaks circle a dark shadow.

And right in the center of the far wall, dominating the room with his tall stature, a life-size image of the Warlock sits on a throne at the base of a giant white oak tree. Black leather armor wraps his muscular frame, a skull mask with tall antlers hides his face, and dark flames curl around his outstretched arms. The bones that make up the chair he sits on rise high behind him like a macabre sun-bleached halo. Giant black birds circle the tree, spiraling into a cloud-bruised sky. Ravens.

A shudder racks my body. It's like the ancient madman is sitting in the room.

And the two eyes staring back at me from within their bony frame are green.

Jade green. The same color as mine.



CHAPTER 7

“Why the hell have you got a painting of the Warlock in a secret room, Quinton?”

“I had this room prepared so that I could speak privately when needed. A friend painted the mural.” Quinton flourishes his hand. “A shared admiration, you might say.”

I give the witch a dubious stare. Admiration or adoration? Whatever, it’s fucking creepy. “His eyes are the same color as mine.” The same color as Quinton’s, come to think of it.

“The eyes of every Sabel slave were jade green. Colored by the lake waters they were fed as babies to grant them unique abilities. The ones that survived. Many died in childhood. The waters are fatal to most.”

I peer sideways at the shadow that always prevents me from meeting Quinton’s gaze. “Then why are yours green?”

He frowns as if perplexed by the question. “My eyes are not green, Michael. They’re hazel. Like my mother’s.” The shadow clears, and two hazel eyes appear. And I realize they’ve always been hazel. I just hadn’t noticed. Or had I?

Before I can chase the thought, he flicks his hand as if gesturing to the mural, and I look away, losing whatever I was thinking about. What was it again? Something to do with...

It couldn’t have been important. I study the figure on the bone chair again. “How come they always paint him with black flames on his arms instead of silver?”

“Valentin Sabel was a very special Channeler, able to wield both flames.” Quinton sounds delighted with the question. “The Shadow Flame, as well as Silver Flame.”

“There’s two types?”

“Of course. Everything has its balance, even the goddess. You will never hear this from the Guardians or the Council, though. They prefer to ignore the existence of the Shadow Flame and the god that rules it. They prefer to ignore the existence of the god realm altogether.” His upper lip twitches with that sneer again. “They would rather bow to the altar of science and commerce than respect the old lore. But Malukel, the shadow god, is very real and rules half of the Faeland’s supernatural species. Including werewolves, I might add.”

A shadow god rules Flanagan's wolf. He never said. He only talks about Velnushka, the Flame goddess who marked him with her silvery tattoo.

On an antique table close to the image of the white oak, looking like a stray prop from a cult horror movie, rests a version of the Warlock's mask. Empty eye sockets, branching horns flaring upward. I lift it from the table and stroke my fingers over the rough bone. It's heavy. Ugly. Unsettling.

I feel Quinton observing my reaction as a tingle on the side of my neck. "Yes. That is the very same headdress." His whispered words sound reverential.

No way. I study the bony visage with horrified awe, unable to believe I'm holding something the Warlock touched. Something my five-hundred-year-old ancestor wore on his head.

"Try it," Quinton says. "You will find it remarkably comfortable."

He can't be serious, but his intense expression is kind of... feverish. I return the mask to its table with a loud clunk and wipe my hands on my suededes as though it might infect me with megalomania. "Yeah, I'll pass."

"Your heritage is a gift, Michael. Worthy of respect, not fear."

"It's a pain in my arse, is what it is," I retort, scowling. "Is this why you're protecting me? You want me to wear a spooky mask and prance around with horns pretending to rule shit?"

"Don't be ridiculous. I only want you to respect your magnificent heritage. The Sabels were the strongest creatures to ever walk the earth. That strength alone gave them the right to rule the supernatural world, and yet they were treated like pariahs."

I grant Quinton a withering frown. "They were the fucked-up result of a sick breeding program. Valentin was an Anlu'kyr weapon that got out of their control. Are you sure you're not in this Dracky Tul?"

"Dra'ka Tul," Quinton corrects. "I understand Valentin gave in to the Sabel madness, like most of his bloodline, which is a side effect of the Jade water. But I still admire him. He was created to be nothing more than a weapon and raised as a slave by his own people, and was consistently abused by the Vasilievs. But he overcame this terrible cruelty and survived to win that throne." He points to the chair of bones at the base of the white oak tree. "That deserves some respect, regardless of his later choices."

"Later choices?" I say, amazed at his tunnel vision. I didn't miss his reference to "Sabel madness." Yet another family trait to worry about. "He thought all humans should be enslaved to protect the supernatural world, all Channelers should be bound to his control, and everyone should accept him as king. And when, not surprisingly, the supernatural world disagreed with him, he raised an army of the dead to force his opinion. He killed thousands. Fucked up doesn't even come close." I gesture toward the tall figure in his bone mask and horns. "That amount of power isn't healthy, Quinton. It's simple. The guy couldn't hack it and cracked up. Thankfully, he's now sleeping like a baby in some damp cave. Why the fuck some shady idiots want to wake him defies logic."

"Valentin Sabel was a god-blessed servant of Malukel, whom they revere. They are understandably dedicated to freeing that servant from his incarceration."

I rub my temples. Heaven save us from wacko cults. But what's all that got to do with me? Why were my parents a part of it? "Look, my suspect heritage may be important to you, but it's another mind fuck to me. I'm not interested in following in the footsteps of an egotistical screwball. All I

want to know is who my parents were and who killed them. If they were in this Dicky Tools group—”
“Dra’ka Tul.”

“Whatever. Where can I find them?”

Quinton sighs. “You can’t. They are extremely adept at remaining hidden. So much so that the Guardians consider them a myth lost to history.”

That’s disappointing. I have a lot more than I did before this conversation, though. I rub my head again, trying to ease the brewing headache. It’s all too much. Shadowy gods and shifty followers. I need a stiff drink.

Quinton checks his watch. “Heavens, how time passes. Forgive me. I have an urgent matter in London I must attend to this afternoon, and you must prepare for your adventure.” He gestures to his mural. “We will speak of this again, and I will answer your questions. But for now, your guards will no doubt be waiting.”

My stomach clenches at the mention of my “adventure.” I’m stoked to be leaving Blackriver for a few hours, but anything could happen outside these protective walls.

With one more sweep of the mural and a final glance at the horned figure with his dark flames, green eyes, and throne of leg bones, I nod my thanks.

When I turn to leave, Quinton clamps my wrist with his bony fingers. His expression transforms from pleasant to fervent. “Remember, Michael. I am your only ally. You may think you can trust your lover, but Gabriel Flanagan places duty above all else.” His hand tremors slightly as he speaks. “If he ever discovers what you are, he will not protect you. He will report you to his superiors, transport you to London himself. Sweet Laasya will respond the same way.”

I jerk my wrist from his hold. “He wouldn’t do that.”

“He would have no choice. Every species agreed to ban the Sabel experiments and exterminate Valentin’s offspring. The law states clearly that every citizen should report even the hint of such a creature or kill it on sight. It would be Gabriel’s duty and the duty of everyone at Blackriver to ensure your demise. We must plan for your escape from here and find a refuge where you can stay in safety. The sooner, the better.”

Quinton’s words strike my insides like icy jabs, echoing my own doubts. I don’t trust the man, but he’s right. As hard as I’m trying to make Blackriver a home, I’ll never be able to trust anyone under its roof. If they found out who I am, the soldiers would hang me, Laasya would be compelled to report me, and Flanagan will always do the right thing. And yet I still have hope Nenge’s offer is real and I can make a life here. A life in the Guardians. A life with Flanagan.

Quinton reaches for me again, but I step away. “I need to go.”

“Just consider what I’ve told you, my boy. There’s no reason for you to suffer for the High Council’s prejudice. You should be proud of who you are.” He gestures to the door. “Go. Prepare yourself. Tonight you will enjoy your first experience of Gating as well as your first taste of Anlu’kyr culture.”



CHAPTER

8

Blinding light hurtles toward me from every direction. Overwhelming pressure clamps hold of my insides. My breath stalls. Deafening silence.

Then reality folds inward and takes me with it.

Where the hell's my body gone? Which way is up? Thought shatters. I'm sucked through what feels like the eye of a needle. Light explodes, and my insides return like a car crash.

Bloody hell!

I'm spat out into color and shadow and collapse onto a wooden floor.

Someone groans. A tidal wave of nausea washes through my stomach. I stay on all fours and stare at a pair of red Oxford brogues. No way am I keeping that chicken dinner down.

A gentle hand rests on my back, followed by a giggle. "The first time you Gate is always a shock," Laasya says. "You'll get used to it."

Get used to having my stomach sucked out through my eyeballs? I don't think so. "That was bloody awful."

Laasya laughs again and gives my back a jovial slap.

"Try standing, my boy." Quinton's voice.

I grab a stair rail and struggle to my feet. My stomach roils a complaint, but I swallow it back. We're in a generous hallway, all dark wood, with sweeping stairs, colorful Turkish rugs, and faded paintings. The Guardians must have money with all these big houses they own.

Quinton stands with his feet apart, pointing the black stone at the top of his cane toward a slash of light. The shimmering Gate hovers above a brass pentagram inlaid into the shiny wooden floor. Beads of sweat dapple his forehead.

Flanagan steps out of the light and into the hallway as cool as though vacating a parked car. His eyes seek mine. I nod to let him know I'm still in one piece and not scattered across the universe. Seonu and Mason follow, hands on weapons, eyes flitting around the room. Neither look the worse for being sucked through spacetime.

"Can all witches do that?" I ask Laasya, who still stands at my shoulder with her hand on my back.

“Gosh no. Very few. Only Councilor Quinton and maybe three others. They’re in high demand, and all of them need to use a pentagram, unfortunately. Which is why we’ve landed here and not closer to central London.” She adds with an irritated mumble, “Alyona can, of course, Gate from where she stands, but what can’t that witch do?”

The door of light snaps shut and blinks out as if it were never there. Quinton leans against the stairs, dramatically dabbing his forehead with a handkerchief.

“Welcome, Commander,” a curt voice says from behind me—an older, gray-haired Guardian, flanked by four others. He nods toward Quinton, then Seonu. “Councilor. Captain.”

“Is everything prepared, Sergeant Stanford?” Flanagan asks.

“Yes, sir. The van’s outside, the unit ready to go. It’s been confirmed that Lord Vadim is currently residing at his Mayfair members’ club.”

“Thank you.” Flanagan gestures to the four soldiers I don’t recognize. A line of muscle and seasoned faces. “Stanford’s team will be backup tonight. I don’t want this turning into a major operation.” He looks pointedly at Seonu and Mason. “We’re not here to inspect the club or make arrests. Our intention is to speak with Vadim and leave.”

Stanford clears his throat.

“Go ahead, Sergeant.”

“What if the prince’s lieutenant is at the club, sir? He is Vadim’s son after all. If he’s there, shouldn’t we at least interrogate him about the students?”

Radomir is Vadim’s son? Well, well, that’s news. Whose side is he really on, his father’s or his prince’s? I hope he’s at the club. I want to ask him myself where the students are. He won’t tell me, but I might get to kick him in the balls.

Flanagan shakes his head. “We won’t be engaging the enemy in any capacity on this visit, Sergeant.”

“And do not forget,” Quinton says. “The High Council has an agreement with Lord Vadim to respect the Anlu’kyr’s ancient law of nonviolence on home ground. He is a valuable ally. We cannot afford to lose his goodwill.”

Stanford lowers his head, lips pressed tight. He’s not happy.

“Is Michael’s mind guard in place?” Flanagan asks Quinton.

The witch inclines his head. “Of course.”

Really? I search inside my head for some kind of difference. Sure enough, a heaviness hovers like a shadow at the edge of my mind. An odd sensation.

“Are you able to scan for information while protecting Michael?” Flanagan asks.

“Vadim’s cohorts will be warded, but I will scan the clients for any hint of our students’ whereabouts.”

Flanagan nods. “Good. Okay, we leave now.”

Everyone files through the hallway and out of the heavy-oak front door. I take deep breaths to settle the last dregs of nausea.

Before I leave, Flanagan steps closer and hooks my chin with his fingers. His eyes dance with a wild light—the leashed power that sometimes peers at me from behind the silver. “Are you well?”

I clasp his wrist and tug his hand away, burying my irritation. Flanagan has a habit of treating me

like a delicate flower. I know he can't help it. He's a three-hundred-year-old granite mountain, and everyone else must seem like tissue paper in comparison, but I'm a grown-ass man. "I'm good. Feel as if I've been turned inside out and shat through a gnat's butt, but hey ho."

His lips quirk, but his face remains tight. "The consequences will lessen."

"Right," I say, totally not convinced.

Cupping the back of my head with his hand, he leans closer. I grip the bulging muscles of his arms.

"Stay by my side tonight," he says with a slight rumble to his whisper. "Promise me."

I open my mouth to agree, then pause. Shit. I can't. I still have that feeling in my belly, flashing at me to ask Vadim where the students are. If seeing the vampire alone will get me some much-needed info, I'm saying yes. And if Radomir's there...

Flanagan's fingers tighten on my neck. "Michael?"

"I'll make sure I don't go far." I try to sound reassuring without making a promise. "You okay?"

He stares down at my neck, jaw muscles ticking. His wolf's riding him hard.

I grip his upper arms, digging into the rock-hard tension with my thumbs. "Hey, it's okay. I'll be fine. We're going in and straight out again. Come back to me."

A shudder passes through him, and he blinks, shaking something off. He reflexively runs fingers over his braids, a habit he has whenever the creature leashed inside him challenges his control. "I'm sorry. I—I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize," I whisper, squeezing his biceps. "It's okay."

Blowing air out, he wipes a hand over his face. "I know you're strong, Michael, and a fighter, but in the supernatural world, not all the threats are visible or physical."

"You're right. I don't know this world. But I've got you, Quinton, and Laasya with me. I couldn't feel safer."

He manages the grim shadow of a smile. "We better go."

Outside the safe house, night has turned the sky an inky black, speckled with silver dots. As I take my first steps in nearly a month onto city pavement, my super-hearing meets a cacophony of urban sounds: voices, traffic, wailing sirens, a ridiculous amount of screaming car alarms. Petrol fumes, cooking smells, and honeysuckle hit my nose.

Twenty-four-hour London. Richmond, to be exact. A sprawling, leafy suburb known for its affluence and expansive royal park. I used to live close to here with my ex-girlfriend, Louisa. Not in this posh part, obviously, but over on the west side in Twickenham, where you can still rent a room for a week's wage.

That was only last year. Hard to believe. Louisa broke my heart when she left, and yet my memories of her are distant whispers. Another lifetime.

The soldiers pile into the van, a twelve-seater Mercedes with darkened windows. The others wait to scan the street. A full moon casts the oddball group in eerie shadows. The streetlights don't seem to be working.

Wait. A full moon. Flanagan.

So that's why his wolf is so close to the surface?

He catches my questioning gaze but turns away, checking the street. I follow him onto the grass verge, intending to poke the man's inscrutable visor, but I have to stop and cover my ears. Those

alarms are loud. When I turn, everybody in the group is staring at me, Seonu with her usual glare.

“What have I done now?”

She rolls her eyes.

I peer up and down the road at the flashing cars and darkened lights. Is that me? I don't feel that charged. The Flame doesn't tingle in the air here like it does at Blackriver. My heart sinks as hopes of a normal-ish life slip further away.

Curtains twitch. Curiosity draws neighbors to their windows. Way to attract attention, Blakeley.

“Laasya?” Seonu asks.

“I've got it, Captain. They'll see a wedding leaving the church.”

I glance around the street. “What church?”

Laasya points at the safe house. When all I do is gawk, she asks, “You don't see that? We mask it with a church.”

“I see a detached townhouse. Three stories of red brick. Looks Victorian.” With iron slats fastened across every wall. A defense against vamps scaling the brick, no doubt. The Flame doesn't work around iron.

Laasya cocks her head with a frown. “But you see the suit you're wearing?”

“No.” I peer down at the dark suede trousers and sleeveless leather jerkin. A tough leather but soft compared to the armored version the trained Guardians wear. “I'm in a recruit uniform.”

Quinton chuckles and pats me on the back. “I do believe our young Whisperer is glamour blind.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means you cannot be fooled by a glamour, my boy.”

“Yeah? Sounds good.”

Flanagan glances at me with an odd expression, then turns away. “Okay, in the van,” he shouts.

After taking a deep breath, I hop into the Merc, and Flanagan guides me to the back, squeezing his long, wide body in beside me. He rests his broad hand on my thigh to Ground my Flame. His touch causes a rush of tingles through my groin and an instant hard-on. A moan escapes me. Our eyes meet, and the smoldering heat between us makes me want to tear his clothes off and go at it right here in front of his soldiers.

Fuck, my man's hot.

I take a deep breath and blow it out slowly, pushing down the wild urge to rip open my fly and jerk off while he watches. He smirks in amusement, and I grin. Memories pop into my head. Of the fateful day we traveled to the steelworks in a similar van and my bewilderment at the crazy erotic charge between us. I can't imagine life without it now.

A swinging motion jerks me back to the present. We've already set off, and the van is heading down the tree-lined road toward central London. Laasya's sitting opposite us on the single seat, humming to herself, lost in thought. Quinton's at the front beside the driver, chatting away about the history of Richmond Park.

I look out into the evening light at the passing houses, the ordinary people going about their ordinary lives. Dog walkers, families, revelers. I've only been away from normal for a month, and yet the sight seems foreign. Familiar but strange at the same time. An odd sort of envy twinges. I'll never know that life again. One where I get to go where I want, when I want, and my only concern is which

pub to drink my beer in.

That everyday sort of freedom is closed to me now. All I can hope for is a life without chains. A place to call home where people accept me for who... what I am.

A familiar tug draws my attention away from the boggy feelings I was wading into. The Border Woods are close.

As I scan outside to find them, Laasya says, "Guess who lives there?" She points to a passing high wall of orange brick, hiding what can only be one of Richmond's many mansions.

"No idea," I say. It must be some rich vampire.

"The Belangers. That's Riverview House. Ten bedrooms and five acres of garden—in the suburbs of London."

"Blimey, that's money." I whistle, wondering how difficult it would be to shove a bomb through the letterbox?

"Mm-hmm. Old money. Some of the older shifter families are nearly as rich as the Anlu'kyr."

"The Belangers own property all over London," Flanagan says. "They donated the safe house we just left."

While the Merc waits at a traffic light, I twist in my seat to get a better look, thinking about Gregory Belanger with his feet up in some fancy lounge, his doting grandmother fussing over him. I can see the tall chimneys of a massive red-stone Tudor house, but trees hide the rest. "What's the shiny glass building about?" I nod at the gleaming modern structure peeking up behind a distant part of the wall. It looks out of place on the same grounds as what is clearly a historic house.

"What glass building?" Laasya asks.

I point, but as we move away from the lights, it disappears behind a row of poplar trees. "Never mind."

As we head into central London, the streets change. Leafy suburbs give way to night-lit shops and dual carriageways. The quiet evening traffic allows us an easy run into Kensington and through to Mayfair. The driver pulls up in a small private car park in sight of Hyde Park.

We pour out of the van, Laasya already chanting whatever glamour she's applying to our strange group and its clanking weapons. The moment our feet touch pavement, Flanagan says, "Let's walk."

He rests his hand on the back of my neck, prickling Flame rising to meet his touch, and we all march up the road into Mayfair. The posh district. The wealthiest borough of London. Home to exclusive hotels, gourmet restaurants, and Saville Row. A place lords and ladies come to party without the riffraff.

Leaving the main street with its upmarket shops and finely dressed pedestrians, we turn a corner, then another, and enter a quieter side street. Eighteenth-century Georgian townhouses tower on either side, four stories of pristine elegance with dainty iron railings and retro street lamps. Pretty sure these rich folks would move out in a day if they knew a vampire sex club shared the neighborhood.

I don't even need to ask which one is Vadim's. As we approach the wide blue door, a rush of tingles surge through my blood, and the hairs at the back of my neck stand on end.

Flanagan stops and turns to Laasya. "How many?"

She closes her eyes. "A lot. Mostly Anlu'kyr and Channelers. Some Neutrals. The top floor is completely blocked to me. I sense no tension or violence, only... you know." Her light-brown cheeks

flush rose.

“Good. Good.” Flanagan nods to Seonu. On her order, five soldiers scatter down the street and take up positions against lampposts and in shadowed porches.

Flanagan presses the intercom at the side of the door.

“Good evening,” a scratchy voice says.

“This is Commander Gabriel Flanagan of Blackriver. I’m here to speak with Lord Vadim.”

The person at the other end utters a quiet expletive. A long pause follows. Then a posher voice takes over. “I’m very sorry, Commander. Lord Vadim isn’t here tonight. You’ll need to make an appointment.”

Flanagan glances at Stanford.

“He’s here,” the sergeant says with dry certainty.

Pressing the button again, Flanagan hardens his tone. “Tell Lord Vadim this is not an inspection, and I *will* be speaking with him tonight.”

More expletives, another long pause while we all stare around the street. Then the door opens, and a tall man dressed in classic doorman garb—shiny buttoned coat and top hat—peeks his head around to view us. His gaze sweeps over the group, eyes widening when they fall on Quinton.

“Oh, good evening, Councilor.” He opens the door wider and dips his head. “Welcome to The Grove. I didn’t realize you were here too. Lord Vadim wishes me to escort you to his office. Only you and the Lycan are welcome inside. The rest can wait here.”

“The rest come with us,” Flanagan answers flatly and, pushing past him, steps inside.

The doorman frowns, tries a complaint, but one of Flanagan’s eyeball-frying scowls derails his words.

He swallows. “Of course. Please follow me.”

We enter a wide marble hallway with a black-and-white-tiled floor, ambient music filtering through from somewhere inside. Warm light dances over classic art pieces and tasteful sculptures, all depicting versions of abstract—and not so abstract—nudity. Beneath the musky perfumes and polish, my heightened senses catch the whiff of sex. And blood. The Flame stirs in my groin.

We follow the doorman through an archway into a long, open lounge, a dimly lit, sumptuous room with plum couches and candlelit tables, mirrors lining the walls and an ornate bar down one side. Tall plants provide privacy between alcoves and clusters of seats. Groups and couples occupy the shadows. Naked men and women, collared and in some cases chained, kneel at their feet. Two lithe men on a raised plinth slide skin to oiled skin with the ambient beats for the entertainment of the room. On the other side, two naked women do the same.

Quiet moans fill the air, and the atmosphere crackles with Flame. As the burning energy in my abdomen writhes, I clench my fists, and my cock swells against my suedes. Why the fuck did I agree to Flanagan’s no-jacking-off regime? Not a good idea, Blakeley.

My veins hum with the nearness of vampires. When curious eyes turn toward me from the dark, I catch the telltale glow. The same hazy luminescence looks back at me from one of the many mirrors on the walls. My irises shine electric green in the dark. There’s no denying I’m not completely human. Not when I look like I’ve drunk radioactive Mountain Dew.

Another feeling filters into my awareness. A thrumming excitement that vibrates through my veins

and ratchets my heart to a faster beat. Not from this room, from somewhere else inside the building.

I glance at Laasya. She's studying the sky-mural painted across the ceiling. Quinton's eyes are on the art pieces. Seonu and Mason stare firmly at nothing in particular. Flanagan also looks ahead, but I feel the weight of his attention.

As we pass through to another hallway, I fall behind, captured like a gawking idiot by the sensual sights. My delay bumps me into a tall man in a tailored charcoal suit, coming out from a side door. I look up into a pale face with startling turquoise eyes. A rush of prickling energy surges through my blood. The Flame in my belly goes haywire. This has to be Lord Vadim.

He jolts to a stop, eyes springing wide, and sucks in a whispered breath. "Valentin?"



CHAPTER 9

The vampire narrows his pale-turquoise eyes, identical to those of his son, Radomir, and takes in the details of my clothing, maybe peering beyond Laasya's glamour. Realization dawns on his aristocratic face.

"So it's true," he says, barely a whisper.

Flanagan strides back down the hall, grabs my collar, and jerks me into his chest. The others are close at his heel.

Vadim smiles, showing a flash of pearly whites with sharp incisors. He graciously dips his head into a shallow bow. His thick black ponytail falls low enough to reach his chest. "Commander Flanagan," he croons with a slow, rusty tenor. "Councilor Quinton. Welcome to The Grove. To what do we owe the pleasure of this visit?"

"Who did you think Michael was?" Seonu demands.

The tall vampire waves a hand dismissively. "Aah. For a moment I was taken in by the rather clever glamour and thought him a distant cousin. I am, alas, old and sometimes slow, my dear Captain."

She scowls as if she's not convinced. Flanagan tugs me closer.

So this is Alexei's uncle. The family resemblance is obvious in the almond eyes, arching brows, and aristocratic bone structure, but even though he cuts a handsome and imposing figure, he doesn't share his nephew's breathtaking beauty.

He clearly recognizes me as a Sabel.

"Thank you for your welcome, Lord Vadim," Quinton says with a brittle version of his suave smile. "We are not here to inspect your premises. We simply wish a moment of your time to speak in private."

Vadim's gaze flicks toward the stairs, then gives each member of the group the once-over. He studies me again and offers me a warm curve of his thin lips. "A youngling is always welcome in my company. Do come to my office."

He leads us across a hexagonal hallway surrounded by open archways toward the back of the

house, his posture that of a king in his realm. Flanagan leaves his hand on my neck, his body Grounding me as he keeps me close.

The doorless archways display more lounges, dark and opulent. Moans drown out the soft music. The smell of cum mixed with blood does strange things to my insides.

Each room displays naked men and women, some suspended like living sculptures in intricate patterns of rope. Others are fastened to wooden benches with limbs splayed, ready for anybody's use. Ball gags fill their mouths, masks cover their eyes, and jeweled plugs stuff their arseholes. Patrons reach out to touch and stroke them as they chat and laugh together.

A blond male vampire brushes past us, leading a naked man and woman by chains attached to jeweled collars. Only nipple clamps and piercings dress the two young Channelers. They both offer friendly smiles, eyes bright and curious. They don't seem at all Hazed.

"Will any Channelers here be Hazed?" I whisper to Laasya, who's intently studying the ceiling decor as if she might be tested on its design.

Vadim's gravelly voice fills the hallway. "As you're probably aware, young one, the Haze is an inevitable condition for any Channeler, and all my employees consent to the Haze as part of their role. But I consider the tradition of forced Hazing to be a form of slavery and inappropriate for the modern world. It is therefore banned from my establishments. I assure you, nobody would dare flout my rules."

"Sounds good," I say. "But you do keep Blood Servants?" The doorman stank of blood, even though he was clearly not a vampire. And he had the slightly wild look in his eyes that vampire blood seems to give its human drinkers.

Vadim stops at one of the corridor's shiny wooden doors and grants me an indulgent smile. "Of course. Blood Servants give their service gladly and are a vital part of Anlu'kyr culture. My own have been with me for many generations. I consider them family. These are all things you will come to understand, young one."

Will I? Not sure about that.

We enter an enormous office, all dark wood with warm accents, lined with books on every wall up into the surrounding balcony. Bespoke furniture complements sensual sculptures and tastefully opulent textiles. Traditional yet chic, like its owner.

Vadim gestures to the leather armchairs in front of his vast desk. "Please take a seat." His Flame-lit gaze sweeps over me again, examining my features as if he can't believe I exist.

Quinton adjusts his tweeds and takes a seat close to the desk, cane propped in front of him, his posture stiffer than usual. Flanagan guides me to the chair beside the councilor and sits on my other side. I expect the others to stay outside the room, but Flanagan nods them in. He clearly doesn't want us facing Vadim without numbers, but I thought the whole point was me seeing Alexei's uncle alone, or at least alone with Quinton's protection.

Laasya finds a couch against the wall. Mason and Seonu stand at either side of our chairs like grumpy gargoyles, arms folded.

Vadim glides around to his mahogany winged-back chair. I can't believe the dude's over a thousand years old. He looks no more than forty, but he moves with unusual ease, poised and graceful, as if he has a spare century just to reach his desk. There's no hint of a blue jewel glinting beneath his shirt, but

he does wear a pendant—a large black stone glittering inside a black metal surround.

He sits, leans back, and steeples his hands. “Do tell me. What brings the commander of Blackriver and the Council’s lead interrogator to my door?”

“I want to know where my Channelers are.” Flanagan gets straight to the point.

A line creases the vampire’s brow. “I don’t doubt it. Though I’m surprised you came to me. If this is the reason for your visit, your time has been wasted. I’m always happy to assist the Guardians, but even if I had any information to offer, I would never betray the prince. I think you know that.”

“You depend on Council favor to run these establishments,” Mason grates through his teeth. “Headquarters may have inspected this club, we hav—”

His words end abruptly under Flanagan’s steel glare.

Vadim’s smile twitches. He waves a hand to the office door. “As you like, Sergeant. Inspect my establishment. Your students are not here.” He meets Mason’s murderous glower without effort.

Quinton takes over. “Emotions run high, Lord Vadim. Though we are quite certain the Channelers are not in your care, the High Council would be grateful for any information that may guide us in their direction. We are all aware your relationship with the prince is somewhat... estranged. A confidential hint would stay confidential.”

The vampire’s eyes flicker to the door and back. “My nephew and I are on friendly terms, Councilor. We completed an amicable arrangement only the other day. The Anlu’kyr are loyal to their king and his son.”

Mason puffs a disbelieving breath.

Disappointment sinks my shoulders. Why was I so sure Vadim would be a lead to the students? I massage my temples to relieve the ballooning pressure. My heart still pounds as if I’ve downed a keg of amphetamines, wanting something I can’t put my finger on. Quinton’s shadow remains at the edge of my mind like a heavy drape. But this thrumming sensation in my veins comes from somewhere else. Is it the high concentration of vampires in the building? The Flame? The need to fuck something?

“Are you well, youngling?” Vadim asks.

I look up and meet concerned eyes. My blood tingles under his gaze. “I’m here to offer you a deal.”

Something flashes across the turquoise, hot and wanting. Then it’s gone. The tension in the room thickens. Flanagan’s fingers tighten on my armrest, his face hard and impassive.

“What kind of deal?” The vampire leans forward on his elbows, his heavy ponytail draping the desk, and fixes his unwavering attention on me.

Sweat trickles down my cheek. I wipe over my face and sit straight. “You know what I am? What I can do?”

“Of course. We’ve all heard of the Whisperer residing at Blackriver.” Our locked gazes intensify. He knows I’m Valentin’s descendant. And he knows what I’m here to offer him.

“Would you like to speak with me in private?” he asks.

“Yes.”

“No.” Flanagan grips my thigh.

“That won’t be necessary,” Quinton cuts in. “Everyone here is privy to Michael’s offer. I trust this room is safe?”

Vadim hasn’t moved his gaze from me. “This room is safe. Go ahead, Michael.”

I take a deep breath. “You have Ashur’s sapphire. I want the same protection.”

Vadim laughs, a gritty resonant sound. “Whatever gives you the idea I own such a precious artifact? The sapphire has been lost for six hundred years.” He gestures to Quinton. “The councilor surely knows this.”

“Cut the crap,” I blurt, the growing internal pressure forcing my impatience. “You have the sapphire, and you know where the students are. Admit it, and you’ll gain an ally.” I let my stern regard finish my words. *I can be a friend or an enemy, Vadim. You choose.*

He smiles, showing teeth. He heard. “I’m delighted you came to me, precious one. I sympathize with your desire for freedom from the Blood Call, but if I accept your allegiance and help you, I risk the wrath of a greater threat.” His gaze bounces to the door again, and comprehension dawns.

The humming in my veins. The pull in my chest. Why the fuck didn’t I realize? “He’s here, isn’t he?”

Vadim pauses, lips pursing. Then he sits back and takes a long breath. “The prince rests in a private lounge with my son and his Blood Guard.”

Mason curses.

Seonu barks at Laasya, “Bring the soldiers inside the club. Now.”

“Yes, Captain.” Laasya dashes from the room in a flurry of linen.

Flanagan growls—an inhuman rumble. “Why the hell didn’t you tell us, Vadim?”

The vampire opens his hands in a gesture of helplessness. “Privacy and discretion are the bedrock of my establishments.”

My stomach clenches. My punching heartbeat rises into my throat. Alexei. The crafty bastard. Did he know I was coming? How? That flashing pulse switches on in my abdomen. I need to speak with the prince.

“I want to see him,” I say, standing.

“For what reason?” Flanagan rises and goes to grab my jerkin, but I step from his reach.

“To ask him where the students are. To his face.”

“The prince will tell us nothing, Michael,” Quinton says. “And why would you risk yourself?”

“The youngling isn’t at risk,” Vadim offers casually as he walks to the door and opens it. “Michael is under my protection here. And my nephew isn’t above Anlu’kyr law. He wouldn’t cause controversy on family grounds. But, Michael, I must concur. He won’t tell you where the students are.”

“I’ve got to ask him. If I go on my own, he might at least let something slip.” Plus, the bastard used me, and now he fucking owes me. I stride out of the room before Flanagan can make another grab.

“Michael,” he growls, following.

“What the hell are you doing, Channeler?” Seonu, behind him, looks ready to blow.

“Getting that lead to the students.” I have to. I can’t go back to Blackriver without it. Super-bitch Belanger will laugh in my face as she locks me up. Then she’ll go after Flanagan.

I head to the stairs. I don’t need anyone to tell me where Alexei is in the building. Now that I know he’s here, his presence draws me like a beacon.

Catching up to me on the top step, Flanagan pushes me back against a wall with a hand on my chest. “Michael, you’re not yourself. This is his influence.”

I grip his wrist, vaguely aware of naked patrons looking on as they pass the drama. “This isn’t the Call.”

“This may not be the Call.” Quinton joins us from the stairs, face flushed. “But your sudden need to go to him can only be because of your blood, Michael.”

“You said you could protect him,” Flanagan accuses the witch.

“I cannot protect him from his own desire.”

A rumble forms in Flanagan’s chest.

I clasp his arms and look him in the eyes. The silver burns like a fire, the wolf barely leashed. “I have to do this. If I get anything at all from him, it’ll be worth it. Like Vadim says, I’m safe here.”

“You are never safe with Alexei Vasiliev,” Flanagan hisses through his teeth.

Vadim joins us, cool as a cucumber. “There is no need for this level of concern, Gabriel. Not here.”

Flanagan ignores him and spins on his heel. “We’re leaving.”

I use the change in position to dip out of his hold and shoot up the next set of stairs.

“Michael!” Flanagan charges up the steps behind me at a frightening speed but rams into an invisible wall at the top. I turn and watch with wide eyes as he batters his hand against solid air. “Lower this ward!” he thunders at Vadim.

The vampire calmly pushes past him and walks through the barrier. “I cannot. Only those with Anlu’kyr blood may pass this point.”

I take a deep breath and rub my neck, suddenly more relaxed, as if a weight has dropped from my whole being.

“Better?” Vadim whispers beside me.

Yeah, much better.

Quinton arrives next to Flanagan, frantic. “Michael, I’ve lost the connection. Vadim, I demand you allow me access beyond the Ward.”

Vadim inclines his head, all graciousness. “Forgive me, Councilor, but that’s not possible.” He looks directly at Flanagan. “I promise you, Gabriel, Michael will return to you unharmed.”

I step backward away from the stairs. Away from Flanagan and Quinton. My mind clearer without Quinton’s straight jacket. The yes burns even brighter in my gut. I don’t understand why, but I know I have to see Alexei if we want the students back. Plus, this is my only chance to speak with Vadim alone.

I swallow and meet Flanagan’s desperate expression. “Trust me.”

He crashes his fist against the barrier, then deflates. “Michael.” The plea in his voice twists my heart, but I’ve got to do this.

The steely gaze he turns on Vadim could burn down the mansion. “I’m holding you to your promise, vampire.”

Vadim tips his head sagely. “I accept.” He rests a hand on my shoulder and guides me away.



CHAPTER 10

As soon as we're beyond earshot, Vadim leads me into another office. This one is smaller than the last, with the same dark woods, but more functional than stylish. The lights of London twinkle through the two windows at the far end.

Once the door closes, I preempt his words. "I know you've got the sapphire, Vadim. Are you interested in a deal or not?"

He steps close and squeezes my shoulder, a scent like licorice wafting into my nose. "Michael, you must leave Blackriver at once. When they discover your bloodline, the Guardians will show you no mercy. Even the Lycan. Come to me. I can protect you."

All these dodgy characters offering "protection." Not one of them feels safe. Not safer than Flanagan.

"I'll bear it in mind." I shift aside to give myself room from his intent focus. "Right now, I need that spelled jewel. I can't go in there without it." I may have played the "Vadim will keep me safe" card to get this far, but if I see the prince without real protection, the only thing that's going to happen is him making me his bitch. I might return "safe," but that would be with no lead to the students and probably no clothes.

Vadim strolls over to his desk with that gliding poise and sits back in the leather chair, crosses his legs and smooths a hand down his long ponytail. All with an economy of movement a master swordsman might employ. He steeple his fingers to his lips and regards me.

I fold my arms over my chest and wait with one brow cocked, pretending not to squirm in those shrewd turquoise headlights. I feel as naked as one of his many sculptures under the heavy ancient scrutiny, but I've got nothing to hide.

He seems to decide something and lowers his hands to his lap. "I have Ashur's sapphire. What exactly are you offering?"

So Laasya was right. Of course. I get straight to the point. "Basically, if you two royals go up against each other for the throne, I won't interfere. But I need to borrow the stone while I go interview your crafty nephew. And I want a lead to the students." That wasn't what Nenge told me to

say. The Council wants Vadim on the throne and Alexei in an unmarked grave somewhere, and they're willing to lend *me* out as their hired weapon to accomplish it.

Vadim arches a brow, humor in his eyes. "And that's the Council's offer, is it?"

"Not exactly. Their deal is we help you win your hot seat if you agree to live under their laws. But you're not going to say yes to that, and I have no interest in fighting someone else's war. I just want the sapphire. So all I've got is the promise not to go up against you—for the Council or Alexei. I think you know exactly how valuable a promise that is."

His closed-lip smile reminds me of his son's calculated expressions. "Oh, I do, Michael. I do. And what about for yourself?"

"What do you mean?"

He studies my expression with penetrating calm as if searching for cracks in my face. "You know, it's uncanny how much you resemble my Valentin. But you don't share his consuming hunger or his guileful nature, it would seem. I accept your offer. I'll give you protection from the Blood Call, and in return, you will stay out of any Vasiliev conflict. Do we have an accord?"

"Sounds good. And the taken Channelers? You have to know something."

"Forgive me, but I cannot give you information on the students' whereabouts."

"But you know where they are?"

The old vampire is silent for so long the ticking of the wall clock begins to sound like a hammer above the distant drone of traffic. "I give you this in friendship, young one. Take care in your search for the students. Retrieving them will require stepping into a game you are not yet ready for. That is all I have. Now do we or do we not have an agreement?"

A game? What game? I want to push for more, but I don't think pressing will help with this dude. He's too old and calculating. Too careful.

We stare at each other. I'll have to mull over his words later when I make it out of the next meeting in one piece. "Okay. We have a deal."

Something flashes across his gaze, like triumph or maybe hunger, but it's buried before I can get a handle on it. He stands with that careful ease and walks over to one of the room's many paintings—the image of a silk-covered woman lounging on a velvet couch, tasteful, apart from the precise detail between her splayed legs—slides it aside and reveals a hidden safe. I wait with tapping fingers while he spins the lock and retrieves something wrapped in a cloth from inside.

"Ashur was a genius," he whispers as he saunters back to me. "His spells were designed as fractals. Every shard of the original stone maintains the full matrix. Even the smallest piece remains effective."

He takes my left hand and fastens a dark leather cuff around my wrist. Flame sparks from his touch, tingling my skin. Embedded through the double layers of the cuff and secured with intricate copper wiring shines a fragment of glittering sapphire. The cold hardness of its underside presses against my skin.

"You will still feel the Call while wearing this," he says, "but you'll have the choice to ignore it. And the sapphire is glamoured, so only the cuff itself is visible." When he's fastened the buckle, he clasps my wrist and meets my eyes. "The stone's spell will only work while touching your skin. And it won't protect you from my nephew's fae influence. If you look directly into his eyes, he will still be

able to compel you.”

“Yeah, Laasya said the same.” Which is why I’m never looking into that vampire’s black eyes ever again. I take my arm back and examine the shard of blue, which glimmers like a tiny piece of twilight sky trapped within a copper cage. “So that’s how you hide the sapphire? By wearing a smaller piece behind a glamour. I’m still amazed Alexei lets you. He has to know.”

Vadim shrugs, a slow, controlled movement. “Anlu’kyr politics are... delicate.”

“You mean, you pretend you haven’t got the stone, and Alexei pretends he doesn’t know you have so you can both avoid a potentially disastrous face-off.”

Vadim’s quick smile flashes sharp incisors. “You catch on quickly, young one.” He rests his hand on my shoulder again and captures me with his Flame-lit eyes—ancient eyes, glittering with secrets. They’re not exactly like his son’s, though. The turquoise has flecks of green around the iris.

The urge to open my fly and expose myself hits me. I even lower my hand, fingers about to undo a button, then ball a fist to prevent it.

The pull of Vadim’s lips suggests delight. “You’re yet unfamiliar with your culture, but you feel it. The Anlu’kyr share Flame to finalize any agreement.”

I narrow my eyes. “Are you telling me vampires shag each other to seal a deal?”

He chuckles, the sound like the rumble of velvet-covered stones. “We are creatures of the Flame, Michael. Sensuality is our nature. Fucking is simply the way we communicate, bond, strengthen our alliances. But I understand this is new to you. Another time perhaps.”

I stare at him, speechless. I should have known there would be some kind of sex catch. Bloody vampires.

His gaze wanders over my lips. Then he glances at the door. “We must go. Alexei will know you’re here. He’ll expect me to make sure he meets with you.”

My heart rate rockets with his words. I step away, pull in a deep breath, and blow it out, shaking my arms and legs as if preparing for a boxing match. “Okay. Yeah. Let’s do this.”

As Vadim opens the door, I stop him. “Wait. I need to find the Warlock cult. Any idea where I should start?”

The vampire’s expression turns wary, his eyes flicking around the room as though to check the corners. His hand goes to the black stone resting against his waistcoat. “I assume you mean the Dra’ka Tul? Why ever would you seek them?”

“They knew my parents.”

Vadim studies me, brow still knotted. “You don’t find the Dra’ka Tul, young one. They find you.”

“They haven’t found me yet.”

“I wouldn’t be too sure about that,” he says cryptically. “But I’ll endeavor to find you a route to one of the shadow followers. When you return to Share Flame with me, I will give it to you.” He lifts an eyebrow, waiting for an answer to his little proposal.

“Get me the lead, and we’ll see.” Best to leave him on a maybe note, even if I have no intention of “Sharing Flame” with him.

He grins, showing those vampire sharpies again. “I look forward to it. Meanwhile, I’ll give you a tip for free. Your prince has enough fae blood in his veins that he cannot speak an untruth.” When I gape at him, he says, “Have no doubt. My nephew is a master of manipulation, but this is something to

bear in mind.”

Well, well. That is something to bear in mind.

With a hand on my shoulder again, Vadim leads me out of the room and down another long corridor. And I head toward that thrumming presence and—hopefully—toward some answers.



CHAPTER

11

*B*y the time we reach the double set of doors at the end of the corridor, my pulse roars in my ears like a jet engine. Sweat prickles my brow.

As Vadim grasps the brass handle, he whispers, “The prince is at the far side in the curtained alcove. I’ll wait for you in my office. And, Michael”—he grips my arm—“you must never submit to him. With you by his side, his hunger for power would have no bounds. He could rule the world.”

I nod and pull my arm from his fingers. That’s no problem at all, because I’ll die before I ever willingly submit to Alexei.

With clenched fists, I enter a room so dimly lit I’d be blind if I didn’t have night vision. Sensuous lounge music, soft moans, and chatter fill the dark. The air sizzles, thick with electric Flame. If I get out of this club without losing my shit to a Haze, it’ll be a bloody miracle.

The rich copper scent of blood is so strong it draws water into my mouth, forcing me to swallow. When my eyes adjust, I find a large space cluttered with couches, food-laden coffee tables, and *a lot* of naked flesh.

Vampires recline in clusters, half-dressed and draped over couches. Some rest with glasses of wine in hand, plucking morsels from plates of food. Others indulge in various forms of sensual pleasure with what I assume are Channelers—naked humans in nothing but sparkling collars and delicate chains.

So this is the Blood Guard at rest.

Glowing eyes turn to inspect the newcomer. I ignore their curious stares.

A lazy ambiance pervades the room, more akin to an opium den than a sex club. The Channelers smile, eyes lustful but sober, not Hazed, just content. Vadim’s rules must extend even inside this room.

Beloved. The velvet whisper slides into my mind like a lover’s breath.

In answer, a wave of need crashes through my body, nearly taking me to my knees. I grit my teeth and every muscle. Holy shit, I’d forgotten how strong his pull is.

I’m here, I say flatly, knowing he can hear me.

A deep relief that's not my own floods through my chest. *Come to me.*

I wind my way through the tables and couches, attention fixed on the curtained alcove ahead, determination driving every stride. The closer I get, the more intensely the building Flame squirms inside my abdomen—a trapped creature clawing for release. When I reach the curtains, I pause, fisting the layers of silk and breathing deep to settle jangling nerves.

This is crazy. Beyond crazy. I'm already panting to be close to him, my dick like a hard and desperate antenna, chafing against its tight enclosure to reach the elegant hand it craves. I'm exposed, every one of my thoughts and feelings on display to his watchful mind. What the hell was I thinking?

You have no reason to fear me, youngling.

Well, that's bollocks.

Come. Let me look upon you.

Getting a grip, I push the curtain aside and step into the alcove a half-circle space bordered by a velvet couch. Tasteful shades of plum and gray dress every surface, including the candlelit walls.

Three vampires occupy the space, and I'm vaguely aware of Channelers, but the dominating presence in the middle draws all my attention.

Swallowing hard, fingers tightly coiled, I avoid the weighty gaze. The oil-black eyes that can compel me with one look. My heart thuds in my chest.

"Michael," purrs the voice from my dreams.

Master. Fuck.

Seductive lips curl into a smile. *Yesss.*

He's leaning back, sunk into the velvet like a man satiated, an arm slung along the headrest, the other limp in his lap. Power exudes from him in heavy waves, breaking across my skin as prickles. Where the hell do his giant wings go when he isn't using them? His open black shirt shows pale skin and the lean muscles of his chest. Silken strands of dark hair caress his smooth brow and spill past fae ears. And that face, that beautiful, arrogant face, with its ludicrous cheekbones and moonlight skin, takes my breath away.

The need to kneel before him and rest my head in his lap overwhelms me. My legs almost give way. I clench my fingers until the nails dig skin.

"It's custom to kneel, youngling," a smooth voice says from beside the prince. A voice I recognize all too well. "And you should always uncover in front of your master."

Radomir, the prince's slippery shit of a lieutenant, is slumped deep into the couch, blond head against the cushioned back. He has one hand draped over the prince's thigh, and with the other, he strokes the curly, dark hair of a naked man kneeling between his legs. The man's head lies on Radomir's thigh, his hand covering the vampire's open fly. The slow, mocking curve of Radomir's lips grates across my skin. Fury breaks me from Alexei's spell.

"Where the fuck are the students you stole, Radomir?"

His taunting smile stretches wider, showing white teeth. "Not in here, young one."

Rage churns my gut. God, I want to strangle the fucker, watch those turquoise eyes bug out of his head while I rip open his throat. Without thought, my arms burst into Flame.

Gasps erupt from the room behind me. The vampire on Alexei's left hisses, but Radomir and the prince don't even flinch. Radomir slides his gaze down my torso and over my bulging crotch and

winks at me as though we're flirting. Fucking wanker.

"We intend to give you the Channelers," Alexei says.

That curveball derails my anger. My Flame puffs out. I whip my gaze back to the prince, scrunching my brow as I study his expression. His lips still tug with a private smile. But if the half fae can't lie...

What's he up to?

"Come." He pats his thigh. "Spend time with me, and we'll speak."

I tense my leg muscles and hold my breath to prevent my feet from moving. Don't look in his eyes, Blakeley. Don't look in his eyes. "I'll stand, thanks."

He chuckles—the sound of liquid seduction. *Come to me.*

The wrench on my body with those three words nearly floors me, but the sapphire's power tingles against my wrist, and I keep my ground.

"I'm fine here," I state with emphasis, grateful for Ashur's reported genius.

Alexei's playful smile widens as if we're playing some game.

Radomir says, "It is offensive to stand in your prince's presence, youngling. If you want the Channelers, respect the ways of your kin."

"Fuck you, Radomir."

Alexei pats the seat beside him, but I push the bowl of fruit aside and park my ass on the table in front of them. If sitting gets me the information I want, fine. Though I'm far too close now, my knees almost entwined with Alexei's, millimeters from Radomir's outstretched thigh. My heart thumps so hard they must surely hear it.

I grip the table edge and swallow.

Radomir dismisses his Channeler with a word, and the man, who's not as young as I thought, maybe late twenties, throws me a shy smile, then scurries away. The vampire's fly remains open, showing a hint of semihard flesh, but he makes no move to cover himself, just grins at my attention. I glare and look away.

Alexei sinks back and sighs. *I miss you, beloved.*

"You're a fucking liar. You wanted us apart. You wanted me at Blackriver." Why do I sound like a jilted lover? But fae or not, he can't be speaking the truth.

His smooth brow ripples with a frown. "I wanted you with me."

"You planted a vial of your blood in my pocket. You knew I'd go back."

"It's wise to plan for every eventuality, my love." His gaze sweeps my body and lands on the red welts, yet unhealed, around my wrists. His expression darkens. "I see they've used iron. Ignorant dogs. But you are, thankfully, still safe."

"Not from you."

"I'd never harm you. You are far more precious to me than you realize."

"I died."

"And are you? Dead?"

"No, no thanks to you." I almost meet his eyes but bounce my gaze down and fix on the pale nipple peeking out from his black shirt. My mouth waters.

"You are Anlu'kyr." His smooth singsong voice caresses my skin. "All but immortal. And I'd never risk your life."

“I’m not immortal. I’m part human. You couldn’t have known how much that amount of Flame would affect me. My fucking heart stopped.”

In a blur of motion, Alexei leans forward and grips my chin to raise my face. Flame tingles from his skin. I try to pull out, but his grasp is too strong. I clasp his wrist, and my eyes strain as I determinedly stare away from his.

“I know exactly what you’re capable of,” he says, a spike of steel beneath the suave tones. “What this body is capable of. I know your every strength and weakness.”

“How?”

The gasp of a woman yanks my gaze to his left. I blink with surprise. I’d forgotten there were others present. A redhead perches in a vampire’s lap at the far end of the couch, naked but for the glittering collar banding her neck and the gold clamps pinching both nipples. She faces outward, lying back over his chest, legs stretched wide to expose her to the alcove. The vampire holds her in place with one hand grasping a generous breast and the other lost between her legs. Moans leave her open mouth as he moves his fingers inside her. A thin pool of crimson gathers in the milky-white cup of her clavicle. I jolt. He has his teeth buried in her neck.

Arousal thumps through my groin, and I salivate. I suppress an unexpected moan of need, but my hand strays down to my crotch.

Alexei draws my face back to him. I fix my gaze on the playful smile to avoid his eyes. “I see the Lycan is keeping you needy. My royal trainer hasn’t forgotten his tricks entirely, then.”

Royal trainer?

“Did you keep my gift?” he asks before I can focus on that thought.

“I chucked it down the toilet.”

He throws his head back with laughter. “I think not.”

“It’s two weeks old,” I grizzle. “It’s probably useless by now. Red snot in a glass vial.”

He chuckles and glides his thumb across my bottom lip. Flame sizzles from his touch. I realize I’m on my knees between his legs. Wait? When did...?

“My blood will retain its freshness for as long as you need it. And you need it, Michael. Your skin is far too pale. Your body hungers for sustenance.”

I lick my lips, gripping the tops of his thighs. I’m inches from his face, but I just don’t want to pull away. Why does he have this effect on me? “That’s never gonna happen,” I say through gritted teeth. “The Channelers?”

He smiles again, slow and seductive, and draws me even closer. I try not to respond to the pleasure his thumb stroking my cheekbone elicits. “I collected the Channelers to pay a debt. I’ve paid that debt. They’re now with another, and I’m happy to point you in their direction.”

I narrow my eyes. It can’t be this easy. “Then where—”

“Shh, youngling. Look.” Alexei turns my head back to the redhead, whose moans have turned into the building cries of an orgasm. My gaze lands on the vampire’s wet fingers moving through her folds, working her with fast precision. I’m mesmerized and openly stare as she trembles and pants and thrusts for more. Then she blows, arching in the vampire’s arms and screaming her pleasure through the room.

A pinch on my left nipple pulls my attention back to Alexei, who has somehow undone the leather

ties of my jerkin and slipped his hand inside. My own hand has pushed behind my belt to grasp my straining erection. Shit, what are they doing to me?

I rear up onto the lounge and kneel over Alexei's lap to pin his arms. "Stop. Just... Fuck."

Unperturbed, Alexei snakes his tongue out and slowly licks moisture across his pouty bottom lip.

My mouth crashes onto his. Whether to kiss him or eat him, I'm not sure. I've just got to have those lips. I've got to fuck that mouth with something. My tongue, my cock. Not fussy.

He takes everything. No matter how aggressive my kiss becomes, how tight my fingers dig into his arms, he meets my fervor with yielding compliance. His long, muscular body rises to meet mine with serpentine grace. The room falls away, and I drop into an ocean of euphoric pleasure. The Flame gushes warmth through my body. And all I know is a chocolate-scented world, a deep satisfaction blooming in my chest, easing a tension I've carried since the cliffside.

When strong fingers circle my shaft, a tremor runs through me. I pull away from the kiss. Somehow he's unbuttoned my fly. His other hand fists the hair at the back of my head. How the hell...?

I try to tug away.

Shhh, Alexei croons as if calming a skittish horse. *Look at me, Michael.*

His voice washes through my mind like a warm kiss, and before I can stop myself, I look straight into his eyes.

And fall into an endless black night.

That soul-deep recognition hits me like a punch to the chest. Longing clashes with self-preservation and wins. I sink deeper into the presence I've missed every single day since we met. And my body stills in his hold.

"Alexei," I whisper.

"Beloved," he breathes, drawing me lower to kiss the edge of my lips. Letting go of my hair, he leans back, his gaze traveling down my torso. "Now bare yourself to me."

Without thought, I shrug the leather jerkin from my shoulders until it drops to the floor, then kneel up and unfasten my belt. As I slide my sueded down as far as they'll go, exposing myself to his appreciative gaze, relief surges through me.

Lips parted, eyelids heavy, he traces the length of my erection with the back of his finger while his gaze explores my body. He smiles when I shudder at his touch.

"Lovely," he whispers. "Is he not lovely, Radomir?"

"He surely is a beauty, Your Highness," the vampire says, his lazy gaze drifting down my torso.

He shifts, resting his shoulder against his prince's for a closer view, and they slowly explore my cock as though judging an art piece. Alexei with his fingers and Radomir with his eyes.

Alexei caresses the tight shaft, taloned nails gliding over tender skin. He lowers his hand and cups my balls, weighing them in his palm, then gently fingers my taint. With his other hand, he pulls back my foreskin, fully exposing my swollen head. His *hmm* sounds as if he likes what he finds. Radomir seems to agree.

I clench my fists but can't move otherwise, caught like a fly in honey, trembling in the sweetness but unable to escape. So acutely aroused, I struggle to breathe. I feel exposed, annoyed, vulnerable, and yet strangely safe at the same time. Though I try desperately not to show them how much I'm enjoying this, they both smile when my tip dribbles with need.

An attentive silence falls between us, the room and its other occupants seeming to disappear. Alexei's teasing caresses turn into long, light strokes, rolling the foreskin to stimulate but not satisfy, and they both watch the result. Watch as I gasp and grimace, shuddering with lust.

"Beautiful," Radomir murmurs.

"Alexei," I hiss, not sure if I'm asking him to stop or grasp me more firmly.

"I know, my love," he croons. He glances up through thick lashes. A band of gold has bloomed around his irises. "You feel at home when you're with us, wish to release for our eyes, yet this instinct confuses you. I'd dearly love to receive your offering, but I'm afraid I must leave you frustrated. I want my royal trainer to care for your needs tonight." He stops his hand and glides his thumb over my wet glans, enjoying my tremor.

Then gold-lit eyes on mine, he slowly slides a talon into my tight slit.

"Fuck!" My body curls into him to escape the sharp jolt of pain. I grasp his shirt at the sides. "What the fuck, Alexei?"

He grips my hair to keep me in place and whispers, "I know what you've offered my uncle. I know what he's given you. You play well, beloved, but beware the old witch. My uncle is far more dangerous than he lets you see. And you're far more vulnerable than you understand."

He pushes the nail farther until I'm gasping and clenching skin, and rests his lips over mine to absorb my moans of pain. *Mikhail*, he breathes into my mind. *Nushka. How I have longed for you.*

"Alexei," I whisper back, so caught in his strange magnetic power I'm rocking myself into his painful touch to give him what he wants.

"Radomir has left you a gift." He slides his lips over mine. "At the Coach House Villa off Sudbrook Lane, the west side of Richmond Park. Only you will be able to find what he's left you. Be careful of Blood Servants and wards. Climb the tree to avoid the wards, follow your instincts to escape the Servants. The gift will help you find the other Channelers." He kisses me and rubs over the place where his nail was with the tip of his thumb. "We will play again, but for now, there are great matters that must be addressed. Guide Gabriel to his students. You're the only one who can. And if the Council tries to separate you from him, you must call to me."

My drunken mind falls over itself, trying to understand his words. Why would he want Flanagan to find the Channelers?

He squeezes the head of my cock. "Michael."

I gasp again. "Yeah, I'll call you." What the hell did I say that for? Like fuck, I'll call him.

He removes his hand, and I slump with relief, immediately feeling the loss and grasping my dick like a sex-starved maniac. Alexei nips the pad of his thumb and wipes crimson warmth over my lips.

I jerk away, but he keeps me in place with my hair, pushes in deeper, and strokes the bleeding digit over my gums. "Be still, youngling. This won't affect you as it did the first time. This is a nourishment you need now. My blood will give you strength, help you give Gabriel what *he* needs."

He holds me to him, kissing my forehead while copper tang bursts across my tongue. Unable to help myself, I suck on his thumb, and they both watch me jack my cock while swallowing drop after drop of his chocolate-rich blood.

"A satisfying sight." Radomir sighs.

"Hmm," Alexei says. "Satisfying indeed."

Fire burns down my throat. Scorching warmth explodes into my stomach and fizzes outward through my body, charging veins and strengthening muscles.

A wave of clarity pings through my mind.

I bounce from Alexei's hold and the couch, blinking. A cacophony of color and sound returns to my eyes and ears. The moans of the alcove's other occupants, ambient music, voices from beyond the curtain. Where the hell have I been?

I tug up my trousers, button my fly, sweep my jerkin off the floor, and pull it back on. Rampant need still surges through me, but so does an incredible vibrancy.

Alexei returns to his previous posture, arm over the backrest behind Radomir, one leg extended. The gold has gone from his eyes, leaving two mysterious black orbs again. Radomir's hand returns to the prince's thigh, forearm almost brushing the large tent beneath his trouser buttons. Are they lovers? But they're cousins, aren't they? The woman on the right moans louder, squirming through another orgasm. The vampire licks her neck as his fingers work her with circling pressure. I rip my eyes away, clutching my crotch again. Bloody vampires.

Radomir smirks at my response, turquoise eyes teasing, and cups his crotch.

Alexei gives a soft chuckle. "We are your kin, Michael. One day you'll understand your response to us and our response to you. But beware. While you wear that sapphire, I won't be able to find you or see with your eyes. And when you leave this room, I cannot speak with you either. You will be alone. Stay with your Compatible."

Desperate to leave, I pivot and stumble toward the door, sick of the sights around me. Anger rushes to the surface again. I came here to force Alexei's hand, and he just wiped the floor with me. What the fuck gave me the notion I could make the perilous vampire do anything he didn't want to? And why the hell did he just volunteer the information I sought?

With one last look at the creature who consumes me whenever I'm in his presence, I flee to the door.

Come home to me soon, precious one. And give the Lycan my regards. Tell him he's welcome.



CHAPTER 12

I exit the room like a man expelled from hell, crashing my shoulder against the nearest wall to remain upright. I grasp my painful dick through my trousers, sucking in gulps of oxygen to steady my trembling. Fuck, I need to come.

I'm stupid. So fucking stupid. I've just willingly walked into a nest of vipers. And Alexei is the king fucking cobra. Why did I feel such an urgency to see the one man I have no power to resist?

Or is that the answer?

His tangy metallic taste lingers on my tongue. My need to scrub the blood away clashes with a desire for more. My body craves a deeper mouthful. It pisses me off that I sucked down his blood like a man starved. But electric strength buzzes through my limbs. The Flame circulates with wild excitement, requiring stimulus, demanding I come for her right here in the corridor.

A writhing knot of questions chokes my chest.

Why the hell would Alexei want us to find the Channelers? Want Flanagan to find them? Why would that wanker Radomir leave me a "gift"? Is this more manipulation? A game? A way for Alexei to mess with his enemies? Or do I now have a solid lead to the students' whereabouts?

And why does he trust me with Flanagan?

I remember Alexei on the cliffside, lying motionless and sure of his safety, as Flanagan's long incisors came close enough to rip the vampire's neck. The rage Alexei drew from Flanagan when he mentioned a man they both knew. Who was that man? What exactly is the beef between those two? It's definitely about more than Alexei stealing Flanagan's daughters.

A door opens, and Vadim all but glides down the corridor. "Michael?" He takes in my disheveled appearance, my open jerkin, my hand on my crotch. "Are you hurt?"

Inhaling a long breath, I shake my head, then blow the air out. "I'm alright." The tingle of playful fingers and two sets of eyes linger on my shaft. I should feel used, invaded, but I only hunger for more.

"Come, let us go to the office." Vadim guides me into the same room as before and gestures to a chair. I slump against a wall, not the least bit self-conscious as I palm my dick through my sueded. My

body still trembles. Flame tingles like fire through my nerves. I must surely be sliding into a Haze. My arousal is almost consuming.

Vadim watches me a moment. "I see by the width of your pupils he fed you."

I swallow back disgust. And thirst. "A few drops." Possibly more.

He shakes his head and tuts. "I assumed he would feed you properly. You're clearly in need of sustenance."

That stills me. I straighten and narrow my eyes. "What?"

His expression turns grave. "You're a youngling. You need fresh blood. Regular amounts or you'll sicken and die. I assume Alexei held back to prevent you from losing your mind to lust."

"I can't drink blood, for fuck's sake," I snap. "I'll become a..." Like the man I'm talking to. "No offense, but I have no desire to be a bloodsucker."

A look of confusion crosses his face. Then he sighs. "Is that what the Guardians told you? Michael, you're not a Channeler about to turn. You're already Anlu'kyr. And you will mature as such. Transformation is inevitable for you. Fangs and thirst will come whether you drink the blood or not."

All the new strength I was feeling drops into my boots. "Seriously?"

"Of course."

"But... I'm part human."

The touch of a sneer lifts his lips. "And unfortunately, you always will be. But you're also Anlu'kyr, and your body has needs Neutrals will never share."

My insides fold over. No, no, no. That can't be true. I rub my teeth, searching for sharpness.

Vadim gives a gravelly chuckle. "Younglings require feeding until their fangs mature. The Guardians have never known a mixed breed. Gabriel must be assuming your needs are the same as a changing Channeler." He gently clasps the side of my jaw and raises my head. "You must tell him, Michael. He knows how to feed you."

An image of clamping my mouth on Flanagan's neck and drinking in his blood scorches my mind. I groan, pressing my hand harder against my shaft. I want to feel disgust, but thirst surges into my throat. Vadim smiles as he observes my reaction.

I push his hand off my face. "No. Never. My body will have to deal. I'm never drinking blood from someone. It's fucking disgusting. And you can't know if I'll grow fangs."

His expression takes on a wistful sadness. "I do know, Michael. I knew your ancestor well. We were... close. He was also cursed with human DNA, though his father was long since turned. Valentin had no desire for blood until his first taste. Thankfully, those few drops woke his true nature, and he matured into what he truly was. So will you. You cannot avoid what you are."

"Yeah, I know about your sick experiments. Creating mongrels and monsters."

"We bred differing species, using magic to concentrate power. To engineer weapons for a war we were losing. Eventually, we perfected the art and created the ultimate weapon."

"Yeah, and that 'ultimate weapon' nearly destroyed you. And the world."

An odd look passes across his face, something of a haunted quality. He squashes it quickly. He rests his palm over his pendant. "Valentin was unique by any standard. We could never have anticipated such a creature. But he was Anlu'kyr and precious to us. So are you. Your true nature will soon be dominant, and you'll be compelled to hunt if blood isn't given to you."

I scrub my face as though I can clean away my glowing eyes and the thirst that proves the truth of his words. Fucking bastard, fuck. My life is shitballs. There's no way I'm telling Flanagan I need blood. He'd disown me.

Vadim watches my struggle with sympathy in his eyes. "You will embrace your true nature with time. And you're always welcome to come to me for what you need." His gaze wanders down to where I'm blatantly rubbing my hard-on through my pants, and his eyes soften.

"The Flame is a demanding mistress," he says with empathy, taking my vest ties and refastening them. "Her creatures exist to satisfy her desires, and she desires union above all else. However"—he cups my hand to stop its movement—"I have a Lycanthrope downstairs about to tear my club apart, and I think it best that you don't return to your werewolf lover smelling of ejaculate."

My gut twists. The thought of letting Flanagan down and coming without his permission when I've just been with Alexei makes my balls clench. I'm already in for an ass-whooping. I reluctantly move my hand, grimacing with the painful need.

Vadim gives my hard bulge a friendly pat. "I'm quite sure Gabriel will take care of you."

God, I hope so.

With one last glance to the double door at the end of the hall, I follow Vadim downstairs, my muscles tightening with every step closer to Flanagan.

He waits at the base of the stairs, pacing. Seonu and Mason stand behind him, crossbows drawn. Guardian soldiers crowd the hall. Quinton sits on the only chair. I wince at the fist-sized holes spotting the wall.

Flanagan's eyes are wild, cut glass. When they meet mine, the intensity of emotion steals my breath—fury, fear, desperation. He greets me on the steps in a rush, gripping my collar and jerking me toward him. After shooting Vadim a livid glare, he holds me by my shoulders and inspects me from head to toe. The others gather round.

"Your lover is unharmed, Gabriel," Vadim says, calm as ever. "As promised."

"I'm alright." I tolerate Flanagan's gruff search. "Let's go, yeah? I got an address, and"—I show him the cuff—"I got what we came for."

They all peer down at my wrist with tight brows. "All I see is a leather cuff," Seonu says.

"A glamour covers the jewel," Vadim explains.

They all squint at my wrist again.

"Yes." Quinton nods sagely. "There is a glamour, covering an active spell." He glances up at Vadim, an unusual hardness in his expression. "So you did have the sapphire."

Vadim only shrugs, not meeting his eyes.

Without a word, Flanagan turns and hustles me toward the front door. Quinton and the soldiers hurry to follow.

"It's been a pleasure, Councilor. Commander," Vadim says artfully. "The Guardians are always welcome at my door. We'll meet again, Michael."

I offer a brief nod. I've no idea when that will be. Given Flanagan's anger, he'll likely cage me again when we get back to Blackriver.

Laasya meets us on the street, greeting me with a smile that quickly slides off her face when she sees her commander's expression.

The soldiers have to jog to match Flanagan's marching pace, all puffing as we head down the road to the car park. Car alarms wail as I pass, headlights flashing. Streetlamps flicker and die. Laasya's chant sounds like a furious prayer as she runs to keep up.

My skin buzzes with Alexei's blood, sensitive to every breeze and touch. My senses absorb the world around me with crystalline clarity. A shimmer glows over the buildings and the soldiers. I can feel the night, the moon, the living pulse of the people around me. The dark shadow of Flanagan's inner werewolf pushing me down the street.

When the van is in sight, Flanagan barks, "Quinton?"

"There are no Blood Servants following and no surreptitious spells," the witch answers, understanding the implied question.

Flanagan nods. On his order, we pile into the van. Stanford drives, and we head through London back to Richmond in tense silence. Flanagan does his stoic Thor impression, a barely contained dam of fury. Sharp points prick my skin through the suede where his hand grips my thigh. I spend the whole journey trying not to wank off or moan out loud. The feel of taloned fingers gliding down my hard cock is on replay in my head. I'd be as Haze-drunk as a bawdy sailor if Alexei's blood wasn't keeping me alert.

When we reach the safe house and exit the van, Flanagan says, "Sergeant Stanford, I want a watch on the house at all times. Seonu and Mason, you're with me."

The moment we enter the hallway, he grabs my arm, and everyone gathers around to see the cuff.

"Is the jewel obvious to you, Michael?" Quinton asks.

"Yeah, it's right there." I point to the shard of sapphire—a glinting blue flame within plaits of copper wire.

They all lean in closer.

"I can see the glamour," Laasya says, head cocked. "And feel the spell, but it looks like a plain band of leather to me."

Seonu tuts. "It could be anything. How do we know it's protection and not subterfuge?"

"Because I cannot penetrate Michael's mind." Quinton feels across the smooth leather with his fingers. "Hmm. Yes. Interesting. An intricate spell, and very old." His cheek twitches. "It activates as soon as I attempt to read your thoughts. And the signature is similar to the suppressing collar. I do believe Michael now wears a piece of Ashur's sapphire."

"So he's free from Alexei's Blood Call?" Mason asks.

"Free from the Call and, apparently, anyone else who attempts to compel him." Well thank fuck for that. Shame it doesn't protect me from endlessly black fae eyes too.

"That's wonderful," Laasya says, face bright. "I knew Vadim had the sapphire."

I glance up at Flanagan, hoping for at least a minor crack in his granite mask. He's searching my face, a vein jumping in his taut neck.

"You said you have an address?" he asks.

"Yeah." My chest tightens. What Alexei's words are going to sound like coming out of my mouth, I have no idea. "Alexei told me he gave the Channelers away to pay some debt and doesn't care if we find them. In fact, it was almost like he wanted us to find them."

Seonu snorts.

“Interesting,” Quinton says. “Because I also have an address, plucked from the mind of the Anlu’kyr who passed us in the corridor. I’m not sure who he was, possibly a manservant of the prince or maybe one of Vadim’s. But I saw a clear image of young men and women sleeping under blankets in a basement.”

“Really?” Relief washes over me that we’re not reliant on Alexei’s info. “Were they in an old coach house on the west side of Richmond? Off somewhere called Sudbrook Lane?”

He shakes his head. “Not a coach house. The image panned out to a gatehouse in the center of Hampstead Heath.”

“Another park?”

“Faeland crossover places, my boy. London is riddled with them. Half realms are where supernaturals hide their secrets from the prying eyes of Neutrals.”

I know about Crossovers and the half realm that borders the Faelands, but I didn’t think they would be all over a crowded city like London.

Seonu scowls, her ice-blue eyes hard. “Vadim owns Richmond. He owns most of this area. Twickenham, Kingston. Alexei’s purposely planted something in Vadim’s patch. He’s up to something.”

“Yeah,” Mason agrees. “You’re right. The bastard’s probably left some incriminating evidence in one of Vadim’s houses. He’ll be setting him up for the High Council’s doghouse.”

“And Hampstead is in Alexei’s patch,” Laasya says. “He owns land in that whole area. The Crossover there will be his.”

“I bet money that’s where the students will be,” Mason says.

Flanagan remains silent, his fierce gaze still on me.

“Hmm.” Quinton leans on his cane. “Possibly. Did the prince tell you anything else, Michael?”

I take a deep breath, dreading the response to my next words. “He said Radomir left something there for me to collect. Something only I can find. And whatever it is, it’ll lead us to the students.”

“Sly bastard,” Mason scoffs. “Of course, only Michael can find it. Bet there’s a unit of Alexei’s Blood Servants there too, waiting to snap his precious Whisperer away.”

Seonu mumbles agreement. Even Laasya nods, offering me an awkward smile.

I bristle at Mason’s tone, but he could be right. Alexei isn’t giving up the Channelers unless it involves some strategic benefit. He couldn’t take me from the club without risking war within his family, so this could be his play. Or a plot to undermine his competition for the throne. Or both. Either way, I’ve been had. That fucking vampire.

“But how could Alexei have known Michael was going to The Grove?” Laasya asks.

“He didn’t need to,” Seonu answers. “He just struck lucky, thanks to the Whisperer’s big plan. If we hadn’t come to the club, Alexei would have made sure the information reached us some other way.”

I’m not telling them Alexei knew our plans because he’s been “looking through my eyes.” I don’t need more incriminating facts shuffling me closer to a jail sentence. I’ve basically been his spy at Blackriver since I got there. He could have seen everything: my training, my failures, every conversation with Flanagan, the whole meeting with the Council. Never mind what else the sneaky vampire has been snooping in on. The thought makes me cringe.

An urge to go check out the address still lights my gut, though. As if I know that finding the Channelers depends on me collecting whatever's there.

Flanagan finally speaks, his deep voice hard and gruff. "There may be students at the address. Bait. Seonu, contact Blackriver. Tell Nelson I want her to check that coach house with a full unit, ASAP. Tell her to take two witches and look for glamours." He wipes perspiration from his face. "We'll have to wait till dawn before facing the Crossover at Hampstead. Otherwise we'll have more than vampires to deal with." His severe gaze settles back on me, his jaw jumping under his beard.

"I do apologize," Quinton says into the tension. "I must report our successful venture to Headquarters. The sapphire shard is an unprecedented find and must be registered immediately with the Artifact library. Now that Michael wears its protection, he will be perfectly safe while I'm gone."

"Of course, Councilor," Flanagan answers. "Seonu, Mason, go get some sleep."

With stinging glances my way, the two soldiers disappear to do his bidding. Laasya hangs back, waiting by the wall.

"While we're gone, you'll wait here with Stanford's men," Flanagan says to me. "Inside the safe house wards and away from trouble."

That urgent light in my gut twists and dims as if smothered by a heavy shadow. An ominous feeling settles over my shoulders. "You have to take me with you," I blurt.

Flanagan folds his arms over his pecs and lowers his voice to a dangerous timbre. "Why? Hmm? Why would we take a recruit who puts himself in danger with reckless impulse?"

I grimace at his words but persist. "I don't know. I just... I've got a bad feeling about it. What if something happens? You might... need me." I glance at Laasya, hoping she might somehow understand. She looks back with sympathy, but stays quiet.

"We don't need an untrained recruit," Flanagan growls. "We need seasoned soldiers who understand the importance of discipline."

Irritation bubbles. Raising the cuff, I meet his scolding anger. "I got the fucking sapphire, didn't I? I got an address too. A manipulative fuck-up it might be, but if it leads to the students, who cares?"

"We care, Michael," he says, his accent clipping his words. "We care about following orders and protecting our fellow soldiers with teamwork. What do you care about?"

"What the fuck's that supposed to mean?" Irritation ignites to fury. "I care about finding the students. I care about not being a vampire's fucking lap dog. I care about yo—" I clamp my lips to stop the last word from coming out.

Flanagan just stares at me. I can barely meet the silver fire in his eyes. "Go to the top floor," he grates. "Last bedroom on the right. Wait for me there."

The Flame surges. My dick twitches with hope, but I ignore it. "I want a conversation, Flanagan. I have questions."

"We will have a conversation. Go to the bedroom. I'll follow in a few minutes."

I'm about to argue further, but Laasya hurries forward and grabs my arm. "I'll go with you. Show you where it is." She all but drags me toward the stairs. "When he's like this, it's really best if you do as he says," she hisses from the side of her mouth.

She's probably right. Poking the bear is never the best tactic. And I'm not going to pretend I don't want to be alone in a bedroom with Flanagan right now, even if he is furious with me.

As we turn up the next set of stairs, I steal a last look at my werewolf lover.
His diamond gaze watches me leave like a predator watching its next meal.



CHAPTER 13

In hurried silence, Laasya leads me up three flights of wooden stairs, the clomp of her boots echoing through the wide halls. My boots sound like feather slippers. The ground hums to me, almost a presence through the soles of my feet. I can place my foot in perfect sync with the oak as if I'm walking on a thin cushion of air. My whole environment glimmers with light. No wonder vampire blood is addictive.

The rooms we pass are silent. We must be the only ones staying in the house.

Laasya stops me from opening the bedroom door, raising her chin to give me one of her looks. "Please don't annoy the commander anymore. It's a full moon. He may have control, but this night is hard on him."

"Yeah, I kinda got that. I'll do my best."

"And, Michael."

"What?"

"When you get a feeling. Here"—she taps my belly—"good or bad. Take it seriously." And before I can think of an answer, she scurries away back to the stairs.

I shake my head. I'm not sure how wise it is to take vague woo-woo feelings seriously, but I'll bear her advice in mind.

The bedroom Flanagan sent me to is a modest size, elegant in a last-century way, but more appropriate for a duke than a Guardian soldier. Antique furniture, thick red carpet, heavy cream curtains lining a high four-poster bed. The two windows look over rooftops and the dark canopy of Richmond Park. Peeking from behind wisps of cloud, the full moon seems to wink at me.

Not bothering to flick on the light—I can see perfectly well with my vampy night vision—I relieve myself in the en suite and down a glass of water. My senses are so heightened the taste of chlorine almost makes me gag, but I'm too thirsty to care.

As I reenter the bedroom, I all but crash into Flanagan. He's arrived without a sound. He unfastens his hard leather armor, lifts it over his head, and throws it onto a chair.

"Hey," I say, ready for my tongue-lashing.

But without a word, he crowds me back against the wall, his expression fierce, clasps his hand beneath my jaw and tilts my face to kiss me. I get a full plunge of his tongue, a thorough reclaiming of my mouth that leaves me sunk into the wall. He doesn't stop until I'm all out of breath. Then he lowers his forehead to mine and stays there, silent, breath ragged. Flame tingles from my skin into his touch.

I squeeze his biceps. His heady scent—earth and moonlight—makes my mouth salivate. “I’m alright.”

“He could have taken you.” Flanagan’s baritone vibrates through my chest. “Compelled you to leave with him. Hazed all sense from you. Why did you feel such a need to see him?”

“I had to get us that lead and the sapphire. We’re both dog meat without them.”

He examines the leather cuff again, a deep frown turning down the edges of his lips. “I can’t protect you if you’re not with me.”

“It turned out alright. I’m unharm—”

My words die as his fingers tighten on my throat. I grip his wrist with both hands and raise my eyes to meet his silver fire, and a shiver skitters up my spine. I’m looking straight into the feral gaze of a wolf. No, not a wolf, something else.

“Unharm? You drank his blood.” Flanagan presses his nose to my mouth to take deep breaths. “How much?”

My skin prickles with unease. I should have known he’d smell that. He probably tasted it with his kiss. “Only a few drops.”

His fingers tighten even more. “Your blown pupils and flushed skin say otherwise. How much?”

A burst of annoyance sizzles. A strange instinct takes hold to protect the blood and my need for it. “A few fucking drops, okay?”

He doesn’t answer. His exploration of scents takes him down my jaw and neck, the same line Alexei’s stroking fingers took to my nipple. I bet that crafty vampire scented me on purpose, goading his nemesis.

“Did you come?”

“No.” Thank God.

With another low rumble, Flanagan pulls the ties of my jerkin and yanks it open. Pushing the leather off my shoulder, he sniffles straight across my pecs to the place Alexei’s fingers teased my hard bud. Shit.

“But you let him touch you.”

“He—” Flanagan cuts off my answer with a warning growl. It wasn’t a question.

He unfastens my fly, pulls my pants down my thighs, and follows the line of scent from my chest and over my abs to my crotch.

Crap. Alexei’s chocolate smell is all over my dick. Why didn’t I jump into the shower when I had a chance? “Hey, maybe I should wash up first. We could shower together?”

Nope. Flanagan intently sniffs me from balls to swollen head, and I’m caught between the instinct to make a run for it and the urge to shove my aching length into his mouth. I fist my fingers and wait.

The next sound he makes borders on a roar. He rises and unbuttons his pants, tugs out his hard cock and strokes it as he fastens me to the wall by the throat again. “You want to fuck him?”

“No... I—I don’t know.” Shit.

He holds me still and jacks off against my exposed erection. His hand speeds, the *shlick shlick* of his foreskin accompanying his heavy breaths. He leans closer and speaks against my lips. “I saw hunger for him in your eyes, Michael.”

“The bastard just fucks with my head. It’s you I want.”

I grip his wrist, ready to take his scenting, rocking my hips to find friction. My nerves are on fire, Alexei’s blood still lighting my senses. Everything seems more alive, closer, touching me on the inside. I hear the rising thump of Flanagan’s heart, feel his trembling intensity, his turbulent emotions. Feel the menacing shadow of his wolf bleeding through his fury.

He takes my mouth in a rough kiss, and I grip his knot of hair to return the ferocity. With his tongue deep, he growls and shudders, and his hot cum coats my cock. He spreads the thick fluid all over my junk, brings some up to plaster the offending nipple. And replaces the tongue in my mouth with two of his cum-covered fingers.

“Suck,” he orders.

I look him in the eyes as I suckle his salty taste and swallow. His silver irises glitter with an inhuman quality—diamond shards veined with light.

When he’s satisfied my mouth is scented, he says, “Strip.”

I undress without a word, throwing my clothes at the nearest chair, and he flips me around to face the wall. Pressing my face to the wallpaper, he slicks my hole with warm cum from my coated balls. “Did he touch you here?”

I’m not sure what the hell to answer. The memory of Alexei’s fingers teasing my taint crashes into my brain. I know the truth will drive Flanagan’s wolf crazy, but for some reason I want to goad it into action. “He stroked my taint with his fingers.”

What are you doing, Blakeley?

Flanagan plunges a digit straight through my sphincter and deep inside, driving me into the wall.

“Ah, fuck.” I grit my teeth against the sharp burn, but the pain bursts into pleasure and pulses through my shaft. I nearly blow my load over the wallpaper. I’m soon pushing back for more. I want Flanagan to fill me, to fuck away all traces of those bastard vampires.

“More, Flanagan. I need more.”

With his hot breath against my ear, he forces in another finger. “He doesn’t get to touch you here,” he grates, the inner wolf talking with Flanagan’s voice. “This is mine.”

“Then prove it, Wolfman. Fuck me.”

The low rumble he makes in answer seems to rise from the lower floor. He adds another finger, squeezing three inside me. I groan and pant through the stretch, amazed how well my body’s taking the merciless intrusion. The response is weird. Any pain registers as pleasure, and my muscles are relaxing around whatever he gives me. I just want more. Maybe it’s all the Flame I absorbed at the club?

Or is this the effect of Alexei’s blood?

“This will help you give Gabriel what he needs.”

The memory of the prince’s caressing fingers on my cock sears through me like lava.

“More,” I gasp, determined to blot out Alexei and his curving smile with everything Flanagan.

Circling the base of my shaft with his hand, he presses deeper, scraping his incisors down the side of my neck. “You want more?”

I push back. “Much more. Fuck me.”

He kicks my legs apart and buries his fingers deeper. “You want him or me, Michael?” His voice is barely recognizable.

“You.” My backed-up orgasm lifts me into a strange euphoric space full of stars and need. “All of you. Inside me.”

I expect a growl or a no or a harder jab of his fingers, but he releases my shaft and falls still against me. Silent. His head rests on mine. His breath ghosts my neck. I wait in his hold, unsure.

Is he trembling?

“Flanagan?”

When I turn my head, I jolt. His features have grown wolf-like, his brow a protruding ripple over his eyes, his cheekbones high as if carved from oak. The sharp, extended teeth, top and bottom, are unmistakably canine, and his hair falls in a tangle of dark gold over his shoulders. It’s a scary sight. Wild and unsettling. But the raw, wounded longing in his eyes when he finally looks up punches me in the heart.

He slides his fingers free, and I twist around to face him. “Talk to me.”

His whispered answer sounds broken. “I ache for you, Michael. Every day. I ache to be with you, inside you.”

I gently draw his head down with a hand around his nape and press my forehead to his. “I feel the same. Every fucking day. I want you so bad it kills me. I’ve never felt like this before.”

“If I... If I bit you...” He raises a hand to his braids, and I pull it down to replace it with my own, stroking over the three plaits woven into his thick hair—the link to his family. The link to his humanity. I kiss his brow, press my lips to the wolf, gently lick his lips and his long canines. He leans into the touch, a rumbling purr in his chest.

“I can handle this, Gabriel.” I make him meet my gaze. “I can handle you. I’m not afraid of your monster. Or your fury. You can do what you want to me. I’m yours. And I trust you more than anyone else alive.”

A strangled, desperate growl leaves his throat, half human, half animal. “Michael.”

“Tell me what you want. What *you* want.”

He cups my face, presses closer, and noses my hair as if to pull in my scent. A long pause ensues before he finally speaks. “To kiss you while I’m deep inside you.”

I slip out from the wall and step over to the four-poster bed, crawl onto the quilt-covered mattress and lie on my back. While meeting his wild, watchful eyes, I touch myself, purposely sliding my finger underneath to stroke my hole.

“Then come and fuck me, Wolfy.”

I expect more hesitation, but he arrives in a blur. Somehow losing his pants on the way, he climbs the bed, prowling over me. The wolf has changed his body too. His pecs are larger, broader. His muscles ripple with power, sinewy and defined.

“You’re sure?” he asks.

“I’ve never been more sure.”

He reaches over to the side drawers and returns with a lube jar—I've gotta say I've never been more relieved to see the stuff—and kneels between my legs to slick his long, magnificent cock with the clear gel while watching me fondle my hole. When he's done, he removes my hand and replaces it with his own, intently slicking me inside and out with cold lube.

Tipping my hips up onto his bent knees, he aligns himself and, with a quick glance up to catch my eyes, presses into the sphincter without pause.

The hard, bulbous head of his cock feels like a fist. Even after two weeks of prep with his thick fingers, it's a shocking pressure. I remember his instructions when he filled me with the dildo during my Haze, and bear down as he forces himself through the tight muscles. I fist the quilt, grimacing and panting as fire and fullness push inside me.

Flanagan growls. "I want you to watch, Michael."

Realizing I've squeezed my eyes closed, I rise on my elbows to look down. My gaze lands on twelve inches of slicked meat slowly disappearing.

"Shitshitshit." The sight is fucking hot, but it feels like he's shoving his forearm into my arse. I blow out air, panting through the megastretch, determined to take all of him and let him fuck me the way I know he needs. But the bruising fullness is way more than I expected. My thighs tremble. Sweat beads my forehead.

Pushing me down, he braces himself with a hand on either side of my shoulders. "Look at me." When I raise my eyes to his fierce gaze, he says, "Relax. Let me fill you."

I take a deep, ragged breath, soften my insides, and release the tightness in my jaw. My blood warms and prickles in response. Something changes. The painful burn and the strain morph. As he pushes deeper with quick, sliding thrusts, lightning pleasure shoots through my body. The Flame dances over my skin, bursting like stardust through my head as if delighted. She tingles where his cock pulls against my insides, causing a pleasure so strong my eyes roll.

"Shit," I gasp. "That's—that's amazing."

With a rumble and a long sliding shove, he buries himself balls deep and stays there, looking down. His expression has softened, though his features remain wolf. His long teeth look so fucking sexy against his full lips. His sweat-damp hair drapes over his broad shoulders in a thick mess of curls.

I reach up and stroke his braids again, running my fingers over the plaited ribs. "Kiss me."

He takes my lips with one of his slow, tender kisses, undulating his hips to feel himself inside me. His teeth snag soft flesh. I taste blood, but he licks it away.

"Michael," he whispers.

I groan. I'm filled with Flanagan. His huge body over me, his big cock buried deep in my arse. And it feels so fucking right.

He pushes my knees apart, forcing me open, and watches his glistening cock gliding in and out. I moan with the strange pleasure it gives me.

"Touch yourself," he purrs with a soft growl.

I wrap firm fingers around my painfully tight shaft and gladly jack off beneath his intense gaze. It's not long before the scorching combination hurtles me toward release. "Oh, fuck, I'm gonna come."

Burning bliss zaps through my cock and ricochets through my body. My chest arches. Ropes of hot fluid shoot over my abs and chest. "Gabriel."

“Good boy,” Flanagan praises as I shudder through aftershocks, then he pumps harder into my sensitized hole.

I grip his wrists and cry out with the alien pleasure he’s forcing through me, like forked lightning striking my insides.

“I want cum on your neck,” he grates, sounding almost entirely wolf. Two glittering diamonds look down at me, Flanagan’s incisors fully extended as he eyes my neck.

Fear washes through me—a primal response to something I should be running from, but I don’t hesitate to follow his instruction. Wiping warm cum from my abs, I stretch my neck and paint my skin with it. A tremor shakes his body. His growl rumbles up from some deep, dark inner cave where the Lycan resides.

Staring at the cum-wet skin, he plants a hand across my throat to hold me down, pushes up my knee to open me wider, and thrusts. Long pumping jerks, his balls slamming against my arse cheeks.

I grit my teeth and grasp his arms as his tempo rises, faster, harder. Soon he’s pounding me with bruising jabs. His explosive hip action like a wild horse let out of a stable. My body shoves against the bed. My back rubs over the mattress. My arse feels like it’s being nailed by a battering ram. If I didn’t have vamp blood in my system, I wouldn’t be able to take this fury.

Fireworks burst through me with every pummeling thrust. His massive cock forces an unnamable pleasure to build. His pelvis jacks my shaft with a tight, furious pressure.

He repeats my name over and over, jumbled with Finnish words I don’t understand.

Then he strikes, his incisors fastening to my cum-covered neck. A bolt of pure fear breaks through my body as sharp fire lights my skin. But he doesn’t break flesh. He covers me, presses me to the bed with his weight, and wraps me tight in his huge arms, holding me still like prey, and jackhammers my arse into the mattress. I hold on tight to take the battering, eyes rolling with delirium again as Alexei’s blood turns every painfully violent thump of Flanagan’s cock into a thunderclap of pleasure.

As a second orgasm rips through me, tearing a cry of agonized ecstasy from my throat, Flanagan lets go of my neck and roars out his release. Heat bursts into my insides.

We cling to each other through the high, shuddering with shared tremors as release sweeps bliss through us both.

Flanagan croons to me in Finnish, whispering into my ear. “*Minun liekkini. Sieluni.*” He kisses my face, and I kiss him back, trembling with emotion as our bodies settle. I haven’t got a clue what he said, but warmth fills my chest. All that matters is how relieved and happy he is. His wolf has completely receded. His lips are soft, his face relaxed and human.

“Did I hurt you?”

“No, I’m good,” I whisper, stroking his back. I’m more than good. I feel amazing. Battered but amazing.

He presses his head to mine. “My beautiful boy,” he says, still breathless.

“I’ve got you, big guy. I’ve got you.” I want to say that I told him I could take it, but that’s not true. That powerhouse fucking from a superhung werewolf would have ripped me in two if I hadn’t gotten vampire fire injected into my veins.

Alexei knew exactly what was going to go down tonight, and for some reason he wanted to prepare me for it. I don’t know whether to be grateful or furious. I’ll stick with furious. That sly, manipulative

bastard.



CHAPTER

14

I wake to the high-pitched whirring sound of a distant police siren and shiver in the cool air. Seeking warm muscle, I tap the bed behind me, but find only empty quilt.

Flanagan stands at the window, arms folded over his chest, a tall silhouette washed in moonlight. He must have showered because he's back in full gear, his pale suedes and leather armor. Leather twine ties his long hair into a messy knot. The swirling goddess mark on his left shoulder shines in the darkness like silver fire.

He seems a lot more relaxed than he was last night, but tension still radiates off the big guy's shoulders. If I know the man at all, I'd say that it's probably worry for his missing students. The same worry he's been carrying for two weeks. His heart drums with the usual steady thump, akin to the hammer and anvil of some giant blacksmith.

I shuffle to the edge of the mattress, wincing from the soreness in my arse, but my groin feels fresh. Checking my shaft and balls for stickiness, I find none. Flanagan must have cleaned me while I slept. One of his habits. He likes to attend to me himself to ensure I'm left with his scent.

"You okay?" I rub my eyes awake. "What time is it?"

"Dawn will be here within the half hour." His low voice doesn't rumble with quite the same menace. His wolf has relinquished control, then.

I stand and patter over to him, swiping up my suedes on the way.

"Don't dress," he says when I lift them to slide a leg in.

I toss them over a chair and stand in front of him. "You okay? You seem... tense."

His silver eyes, like sparkling jewels in the moonlight, sweep down my form. He circles my waist and pulls me closer.

I cup his hips, and he wraps my soft shaft with his hand to stroke me. Flame tingles from my balls to find his touch. I instantly swell in his fist.

"Good boy," he whispers, praising my erection. He likes me hard when I'm alone with him, and I fucking love it, the kinky bastard.

"Are you sore?" He reaches behind and slips a finger between my butt cheeks, then gently glides it

over my tender pucker, frowning when I grimace.

My arse feels thoroughly used, but the soreness is a lot less than I would have expected. The healing effect of Alexei's blood, no doubt. "Yeah, a bit."

He massages the tight muscle, and I push back for more. I couldn't take another fucking, but I'll accept his fingers if he wants to make me come again.

"Was it too much?" he asks. "Did I hurt you?"

I lean in and kiss his lips, his beard prickling my skin, then look him in the eyes. "Yeah, it hurt, and I liked it. Best fuck I've ever had."

His mouth twitches with the barest smile. It's the only fuck I've ever had from a guy, and he knows it. I stand by what I said though. Man or woman, he's the most satisfying lover I could ever ask for.

He takes my lips and tightens his hand on my shaft, jacking me slowly until I'm moaning into his mouth, rocking between his fist and finger. When he's satisfied I'm hot and needy, he transfers his hand to my balls, only giving me a light caress.

"Fuck." I shudder. I'd complain about the lack of stimulation, but there's no point. He likes me on that edge. He's a master at driving me crazy with pleasure, and it turns out I'm a sucker for his special brand of torture. I let him do what he wants. Seeing the effect that has on him gives me a deep satisfaction I can't explain. The only time this man truly relaxes is when I'm tied to his bed, naked, hard, and leaking for him.

After kissing me again, he rests his head against mine. "Thank you," he whispers.

"What for?"

"Everything."

My heart melts. Flanagan's convinced his beast makes him too dangerous for his lovers, especially humans. I'm chuffed that I took everything he's got and showed him only enjoyment.

"You're welcome," I say.

He draws back and strokes my face, running his thumb over my brow and down my jaw. "You look so well."

"I've been thoroughly fucked by werewolf Donkey Kong," I joke, trying to distract him from what I know he's seeing. There's only one reason my skin, so pale and feverish for the last two weeks, is now flushed with color.

"Have you had any cravings for blood?"

I jerk back. "No. No, of course not."

"But you thirst for something you can't name?"

"No!" I don't dare meet his piercing gaze. Yeah, I thirst, alright. But it's only ever been for one thing—the contents of that blasted vial. I pull away from his hold. "I don't feel an urge to stick a straw in people's necks and drink them like fucking grape juice if that's what you mean."

"Look at me."

I grab my trousers and lift a leg to tug them on. I can't face this conversation naked. He plucks them from my hands and chucks them back onto the chair. I search for my jerkin.

"Michael!"

"What!" I shout, swallowing as I turn to him. The harsh glint of his wolf still lingers in his eyes, but it's my stoic lover who examines my guarded expression.

“Talk to me.”

“I’m not craving blood. Not... not really.” Not yet.

“But you crave Alexei’s blood?”

I grimace and rub my chest. Rub at the ache, the need for Alexei that lives like a squirming beast behind my ribs. I go for deflection. “I hate the fucker. I think that’s obvious.” Not quite what he asked, but true.

Flanagan’s gaze sweeps over the hand pressed to my sternum. “And yet you run to him.”

“I wasn’t running to— For fuck’s sake. I just want the students back. I want that Belanger bitch off our asses.”

He steps toward me, but I back away.

“You say you trust me more than anyone, and yet you fear telling me the truth.”

Annoyance flares. I throw my hand out. “Trust works both ways, Flanagan. You don’t tell me your shit either. You never told me the Council was putting you through a disciplinary hearing. And your history with Alexei is a damn sight more checkered than mine. When were you going to tell me you trained slaves for him?”

He blinks, jerking his head back. “That’s distant history. And irrelevant.”

“It’s not irrelevant to Alexei. It’s like the fucker trusts you. He told me to call him if the Council separates us. I thought you two were supposed to be enemies?”

He rubs his eyes and sighs. “He doesn’t trust me, Michael. He knows me. He’s manipulating you with his words.”

“Yeah, he knows you. The same way you know him. What was all that about on the cliffside? Who was that guy Alexei mentioned?”

Something in Flanagan’s face shuts down, like a metal guard banging closed. He turns away to the window. “Jasper... has nothing to do with this conversation.”

Jasper? He speaks that name as if it’s something sacred and delicate, something precious that I don’t have the right to mention. A rush of hot jealousy lances my gut. I want to ask him who the fuck that is. Why, on the cliffside, did Alexei say *we* lost him? *We*. As though they fucking shared the guy or something. But I clamp my lips shut. Jasper is clearly an old flame and none of my business unless Flanagan chooses to tell me about him.

I sit on one of the leather chairs and lean back, drumming my fingers on the armrests. “You had a chance to kill Alexei on that cliff. His neck was inches from your fangs. You could have ripped his throat out and ended it then. You didn’t. And he knew you wouldn’t. Why don’t you tell me that fucking truth?”

Flanagan puffs out a harsh breath. “There are far worse candidates for the Anlu’kyr throne than Alexei.”

“You’re telling me you didn’t kill him because of some strategy? There’s more to it than that. I know there is.” A hell of a lot more than politics was going on when he and Alexei fought like street cats.

Flanagan wipes over his beard with a hand. “If Alexei dies, the Blood Call isn’t guaranteed to pass to a vampire the Council supports. There’s a chance it could pass to another Anlu’kyr from the older generation. One of the aristocracy who still desires vengeance on the fae. Who believes shifters are

their rightful pets. Alexei may be ruthless and conniving, but he only fights us over human Channelers. Until he attacked the labs, he'd shown no interest in an all-out war with the Guardians. And he certainly wouldn't fight his own grandmother."

Vadim hinted that Alexei hungers for the world. That would involve war with everyone. Or was the old vampire exaggerating for effect? Alexei seems arrogant enough to want world domination, but maybe not dumb enough.

"The Council doesn't seem to have a problem replacing the prince," I say.

He turns away from me. "The High Council doesn't know the Anlu'kyr as I do."

And there it is again. The history I'm not allowed to know about. A history that includes a love of Flanagan's life I'm not good enough to name.

A charged silence gathers between us, my tapping fingers the only sound in the room. "You had no intention of letting me help Vadim against Alexei, did you?"

"You are not a weapon, Michael, and I will not tolerate anyone using you as such."

"Including Nenge?"

Flanagan falls silent again, staring out at the slither of dawn breaking over the distant canopy of trees. I can't see his expression well enough to read it.

I pace toward him. "I am a weapon, Flanagan. Alexei knows it. Vadim knows it. So does Nenge." I tap a finger on the place my collar usually sits. "You know it too. You know the question is who ends up with me. You want to make sure it's the Guardians."

He whips his head round, eyes sparking. "I want you with me."

"And if I'm a dangerous monster, like the Council believes I am? Will you still want me with you then?"

He steps closer and cups the back of my head so I can't pull away. His expression turns emphatic. "Why are you asking me this? You are not a monster. You're a Whisperer. You've been gifted. Honored. Who you serve with that gift is up to you."

I clasp his biceps, but my eyes bounce away from his intensity. Honored? Yeah, right. Thoughts of fangs and bloodthirst, dark flames, and bone masks with antlers crowd my mind. Flanagan has no idea what I am. What I'll become if the "Sabel madness" sets in. He thinks I'm just a Channeler with some inconvenient vampire blood in my system. And like a fucking coward, I'm terrified of changing that assumption. Of losing the misplaced belief he has in me. The pride and warm affection in his eyes whenever he looks my way. I'm terrified of losing *him*. He's the best thing that's ever happened to me.

Flanagan's watching me. He pulls me closer. "What is this? This struggle. It's pained you for days. Why do you hide it from me?"

I shake my head, looking down. "It's nothing. It's just..."

He lifts my face again. "I know you fear that I'll abandon you if you share your truth with me."

"Because you will." The words burst out of me. Fuck. Where did that come from?

Flanagan's face crumples. I hate seeing the hurt in his eyes, but I still return my gaze to the floor.

He tries to make me look at him. "Don't you realize you have my heart? Can you not trust that?"

My chest constricts. I open my mouth to speak, the words crowding into my throat, but when I raise my eyes to his soft regard, they won't come out. "I do trust you," is all I manage.

“Michael.” He sighs and rests his palm over the tightness in my chest, over my heart. “You don’t trust me with *this*.”

“That’s not true. I…” Is it true?

Flanagan drops his hands. He looks crestfallen. Hurt and weary. He glances at the dawn light, now splitting the dark sky with an orange glow. “I have to go.”

My stomach twists with guilt and shame. Why does this have to be so fucking hard? Why can’t I just be the ordinary Channeler he thinks I am?

As he strides to the door, that inner warning flashes, dark with menace. “You have to take me with you,” I blurt.

He shakes his head. “I cannot. You’re not ready for the field. I think that much is obvious.” When he reaches the door, he looks back. “Please stay here until I return. Whatever happens.”

“I thought the house was warded.”

“The house is warded, but I know how determined you can be. Promise me, Michael.”

The twinges in my belly turn painful. Dread radiates through my nerves. I can’t promise. What if I get some sense Flanagan is in danger? I’d batter my way through the walls to get out.

When I don’t answer, his shoulders slump. He looks away and shakes his head.

“Flanagan, listen.” I cross the room, but the door slams behind him as he leaves.

“Fuuuck!” I shout, punching the wall in frustration. My fist goes straight through the plaster, splitting the wood behind as if this were a dollhouse. Crumbling bits of plaster drop to the carpet. I tug my hand out of the hole, then check my dusty knuckles. Not a single scrape mars my skin.

Superman’s nut sack! I must remember how strong I am with Alexei’s blood in my veins. I could hurt someone.

I stare at the closed door.

“*Don’t you know you have my heart?*”

Fuck. Fucking fuckity bastard fuck. I kick the skirting board with my bare foot, and it splinters. A deep exhaustion floods my chest, and I rest my head on the door, sighing against the wood. “You have my heart too.”

Why couldn’t I just tell him that?



CHAPTER 15

S tomach tight, I swipe my jerkin from the floor and shrug it on, then tug on my trousers and boots. Tying the laces at the windows, I check for a way out, a weakness in the iron bars. They're solid and no doubt warded. My gaze flicks to the door. Creeping past Stanford and his men isn't an option.

That leaves the roof. I look up. Would they ward the roof?

In the far corner of the ceiling is an entry for the attic. If I crawl into the loft space, I could...

Shit. I stop midthought. What the hell's gotten into me? I haven't even considered following Flanagan's orders to stay in the safe house. No wonder he's frustrated with me.

I lean against the window frame, looking out at the smudge of growing light behind the trees of Richmond Park. The feeling he's in trouble is so strong I struggle to ignore it. But Flanagan can look after himself. He's got Laasya and Seonu with him. And Hampstead's twenty miles away. I've got no car. Couldn't use one, even if I had.

I've got to stay here. Trust Nelson's team can search Alexei's address without me. That's what Flanagan asked me to do. I need to start proving I can take an order.

A firm knock at the door yanks me from my thoughts. I march across the room and crack the door open enough to see who's there.

"Hey," I say to Stanford. Two guards are stationed on either side of the door. Flanagan isn't relying on me to stay put then. Not that I blame him.

With a curt greeting, the sergeant pushes his way into the bedroom.

"Whisperer, the commander asked me to bring you some breakfast." He strides straight past me and plonks the tray down on the side table.

"Thanks, mate. Appreciate it." I open the door wider, ready for him to leave.

"There's not much in the kitchen. This'll have to do you." He casts me a look. The kind of look I get from all the Guardian soldiers: suspicion mixed with latent animosity. His gaze lands on my booted feet, then flickers to the windows and back to me again. His weathered face creases with a frown. "The commander said you'd be sleeping in here till he gets back."

“That’s right.” I look straight into his suspicious eyes.

“The safe house is warded.”

“I’m aware.”

Silence passes between us. His eyes bounce from me to the windows again while he seems to think something through. Then he drops his shoulders—a feigned acceptance. “Well, that’s alright, then.” He doesn’t believe me, and it’s clear he doesn’t trust me any more than the Blackriver soldiers. I don’t doubt those guards will be staying outside my room, but he nods as though everything’s peachy. Wouldn’t want to upset the dangerous half breed. “I best be off and let you eat.”

“Thanks again for the breakfast.” Cornflakes and tea. “Looks good.” I hold open the door.

As he walks past me, he says, “By the way, that address you got off the prince turned out to be nothing.”

When I lift my eyebrow, his expression turns mocking. “Yeah. It was just one of Vadim’s many houses. His Blood Servants let Tulsy and Petre inspect every corner. Nada. No glamours anywhere. The prince must have been sending you on a merry dance.” The other two Guardians cough and snicker.

“You’re probably right.” My smile is tight.

The soldier winks. “Never mind. I’m sure the councilor’s address will turn up something. Enjoy your breakfast.”

Fucking asshole. I only just manage not to slam the door. My mind crowds with questions. Why would Alexei send me to an address with fuck all there? He’s not going to incriminate Vadim if there’s no evidence for the Guardians to find.

“Radomir has left a gift for you to collect... Only you will be able to find it.”

Why would I be able to see something two experienced witches can’t find? I’m glamour blind, sure, but they can detect any glamour. Or spell. And anyway...

I freeze as a more unsettling thought occurs to me. What if the “gift” was a student? What if a teenager is hidden somewhere, alone and afraid, waiting for me to find them? Maybe more than one.

“Fuck!”

I’ve moved a chair, stuck it under the attic entrance, and climbed it before I even realize I’ve acted. Because if there’s even a chance that’s true, and I’m the only one who can find them, I have to go check just in case. Surely even Flanagan would agree with that.

I carefully slide the wood aside and grip the edge of the entrance to hoist myself up. My eyes are met with gritty floorboards, dust motes, and blanket-covered junk. There’s a small sash window beneath the arch of the far wall, dirty and cobwebbed from disuse. No iron bars.

Would that be warded?

Trying my best not to make a sound, I pull myself into the space and tiptoe over to test it out. I don’t have to bend; the rafters are tall enough to take my full height.

When I reach the window, I finger the glass. No effect, so I slide the sash open wide enough to stick my hand out.

And jerk my fingers back with a stifled cry. Aaah, feck, that hurts. Burns like a bitch. Where my hand slipped through the ward, my skin flushes red as though it’s been scolded. Nasty.

Okay, I won’t be going that way. How the hell am I getting out of this place?

I rub my hand, grimacing, and scan the attic. About three feet to my right, I find a rectangle of plywood nailed against the wall. Another window?

It takes all of my suped-up strength to rip the wood away. I cringe as the grating sound echoes through the loft space. Stanford's men will surely hear this and come to check the noise.

My trouble is rewarded when the loosened board reveals dawn sky and a gaping hole. The roar of traffic and the bustle of a waking London burst into the silent loft. The rectangle-shaped opening in the red brick, probably a second window at some point, looks out onto a lawn and the backs of neighboring houses. Taking a deep breath and squeezing my eyes shut, I thrust my hand into the morning air. Not even a tingle. Nice one.

Now all I've got to do is find a way off the building. I can't do my Spider-Man impression; iron slats protect the walls, and the Flame doesn't do iron.

Shouts and swearing filter up from inside the house. Bollocks. I'm not surprised. They have to have heard my redecorating.

I stick my head out into fresh air and tap the walls on either side with a hand to check for more burning. It's all clear, and the nearest drainpipe is made of metal rather than plastic. Looks like I'm getting off this building the old-fashioned route. Let's hope the pipe's not too eroded. It's a long way down. Remembering my fall from Blackriver, I check the brackets. Crusted rust speckles the black paint. I'm going to have to trust the Flame catches me again if I take a sudden trip southside.

"Search the loft!" Stanford's gruff shout floats up from the bedroom.

Standing on the window ledge, I turn and reach for the pipe and grasp one of the rusty brackets. I swing sideways, thudding a booted foot between brick and metal to stay upright. The pipe groans as it takes my weight but seems sturdy enough, so I skitter downward and head for the ground.

Stanford pokes his head through the open gap. "You bloody shit."

I can't help a grin and a wink.

He shouts at his men. "Get down to the back of the house. Now!"

Palms scraped and arms aching, I make it past three floors to the stone terrace. With shouts coming from the side of the house, I jump the palisade and bomb it across the lawn.

"There he is!" one of the soldiers exclaims.

They've got no chance of catching me. With Alexei's turbo fuel in my system, I'm over the nearest fence, through the neighbor's garden, and across the street like a race car jacked on nitrous oxide. A dog barks, men shout, but I'm gone down the nearest road, over a railing, and into the cover of Richmond Park.

Only the thought of Flanagan's disappointment raises any guilt in me. Stanford and his snickering soldiers can go jump off a cliff.

I race down the path and through the trees. Richmond Park is four square miles of open deer park. As the crow flies, I'm probably two miles from the west gate. It's too early for commuters, but a few joggers and dog walkers litter the paths. With my leather recruit jerkin laced at the shoulders, dark suede pants, and knee-high boots, I must look like a mad reveler on my way home from some forgotten century. Not to mention my freaky eyes. But all that doesn't matter in London. No one gives a shit. They'll just assume I'm some random weirdo wearing fancy contact lenses.

Once I'm at least a mile from the safe house, I lean on my knees and suck in the fresh morning air.

My body buzzes with the freedom of open space and flowered grasses. A twilight blue has taken over dawns splashes of pink light. The birds' chorus has settled from raucous celebration to morning business.

The feeling in my belly switches on, pushing me west as if impatient. An urgent need to check out Alexei's address as soon as possible seeps into my legs. What the hell is that sensation? Some new addition to my Whisperer abilities? Should I even be paying attention to it?

"If you get a feeling, here, good or bad, pay attention to it." Laasya.

Matter settled, I run west, past Sidmouth Woods, and hit the road beyond. When the same tingle insists I travel the road south, I follow it. Why not?

Streetlights flicker as I pass. Horns blare as my Flame trips car alarms, but there's barely anyone around, and I hurtle down the street unseen, past gated houses and expensive rides. Until a more familiar sensation stops me in my tracks. A body-wide awareness I live with every day at Blackriver. The Faelands. They're close.

I hurry toward the nearby Crossover and come upon a cul-de-sac bordered by a high wall. Coach House Villa says a sign on the tall metal gate. I pull myself up and peer over into the garden. Beyond the surrounding bushes stands a modest, red brick two-story mini-mansion, the old archway from its previous life as a coach house, converted into a giant window. Behind the house, where the border of the park should be, rise the twisted trees of the Border Woods. I've found the address.

Two men in black khakis, both tall and wide with weapon belts, stand guard on the grounds. The Blood Servants. There may be more at the back. They don't wear the same uniform as Alexei's Servants, more like special ops than biker vampires, but they look just as hardass. And I bet those crossbows hanging from their belts are just as nasty.

This whole place will be warded. This wall will probably burn my ass off if I try to climb over it. How the hell am I getting into the place? Into the house? Those Servants won't let some random Guardian recruit wander in and check every corner.

Climb the tree to avoid the wards, Alexei told me. I take another peek into the garden and follow the line of the bordering wall. On the left-hand side, the trees of Richmond Park crowd the stone. Branches from one of the giant oaks reach over and through the invisible wards. If I climb it, I can jump across and straight onto the lawn. Is that what he meant?

Only one way to find out.

After grabbing a discarded beer bottle from the sidewalk, I scurry along the wall and turn the corner into the park. When I find the giant oak tree, I scramble its height to the long, thick branch that extends into the garden, and roll the bottle along its length. Nothing happens. No sparks, no magicky lights. The empty brown bottle doesn't turn into a frog.

Carefully walking the branch, ready to back up fast if I feel any tingles, I soon find myself over the wall and above the lawn. Why would they leave themselves open? Or did Alexei prepare this somehow?

Not a question I can answer right now. I settle on the thick branch and peer through the foliage to study the back of the house. Two more Blood Servants in black khakis pace the stone terrace. What does Vadim keep in there that needs this much protection? Not the students; Nelson's unit would have surely found them. In fact, if two witches have gone over this house top to bottom, there's no point to

me searching inside at all. They'd have noticed any glamour.

I scan the garden. Fancy topiary, rose beds, a fountain with a sculpture of two fish spewing water. The lawn beyond stretches down a slight gradient alongside Richmond Park. On the far side, shadowed by the giant old trees of the Border Woods, stands a rickety old shed, which looks out of place in such a well-maintained garden. The flashy yes feeling tickles my gut. A tugging sensation starts.

“You want me to check out a broken shed?” I whisper.

No answer, obviously.

I drop onto the grass as gently as I can, knowing full well I won't make it across the expanse of garden without being seen, but planning for at least a head start. While the two Servants exchange words, I duck down and, grabbing the fallen bottle, scoot to the nearest hedge. Alexei's blood still fires my limbs, and my vampire-powered feet fall fast and silent. I blur to the next hiding place, then the next, feeling like James Bond on a mission.

I dart across open lawn to the fountain.

“Who the fuck are you?” one of the Blood Servants shouts.

Crap.



CHAPTER

16

I hold the beer bottle loosely between my fingers and wobble over the grass toward the shed, looking around as if searching for something.

“Eh, lads.” I raise my bottle in salute as they approach. “I was told there’s a party goin’ on about here. Fancy dress. Know anything about it?”

They pause, scanning the garden for more intruders. “How the fuck did you get in here?”

I wave in the direction I came and snort as if they’re joking with me. “Over the wall. Obviously. Now where’s this party at?”

The dark-haired guy on the right taps his colleague. “Look at his eyes. He’s a supe.”

“Who sent you?” he demands. He’s tall and bulky, with a red scar running the length of his face. “If you’re with Captain Nelson’s lot, they’ve been and gone.”

“Aah, shit,” I slur. “Well, I’ll just have to go find them, then. Here, catch.” I chuck the bottle at his head and burst away across the grass.

“For fuck’s sake,” someone shouts behind me. “Get him.”

With both men in hot pursuit, I vault over bushes and rose beds and make a beeline for the shed. Why the fuck my gut thinks a disheveled shed is where I need to be, I have no idea, but Alexei told me to use my instincts to escape the Servants, and that intensifying urgency is raw instinct.

I’m halfway across the open lawn when Scarface shouts, “Put one in his leg before he hits the trees.”

Oh shit. I don’t bother looking back but pick up speed. A *click*, followed by a *clunk*. Then something thuds into the back of my right thigh. Lightning fire shoots up my leg, and my knee buckles. With a yelp, I collapse into a tumbled heap onto the grass. But before Scarface reaches me, I manage to roll, push back up, and limp onward.

Fuck, that hurts, like a hot poker is buried in my muscle.

Swearing with every step, legs shaky with pain, I all but crash against the tiny wooden hut. When I check behind me, I find the Blood Servants standing stock still, scanning the garden as if they’ve lost sight of me.

“Where’d he go?” Scarface asks the guy beside him.

I’m standing not three yards away from them, and they can’t see me. This shed must be glamoured. Why wouldn’t they know it was here? How do they not bump into the thing?

His colleagues come running over the lawn from the front of the house, angry faces ready for a fight. They all skid to a halt, searching the area. Their eyes glide right over me.

“Where the fuck did he go?” a tall, ginger bloke asks.

“He vanished,” Scarface says. “Just before he reached the wall.”

“He must be a witch,” the redhead says. “We need to tell the boss. You four stay here. I’ll go inform Lord Vadim the Guardians are trying something.”

I take a deep, shuddering breath. Well, that turned out okay. Apart from the bolt buried in my leg, of course.

When I try the shed door, it opens with ease. But once I’m inside and my eyes adjust to the dark, I find an empty space. Nothing else. No shelves, no tools, no garden mower. No frightened student huddled in the corner. Only bare walls and a scruffy brown square of carpet on a dirty wooden floor.

What the fuck am I doing in here? What did my belly feels think I was going to find?

I go to sit but instead collapse with a cry and an ungraceful thud onto the filthy floor. Man, that hurts, as if my leg is on fire. I’ve never felt anything like it before. With trembling fingers, I explore the bolt, the place where wood protrudes from tight flesh. Fucking surreal. My fingers come away wet with blood.

I can’t believe the bastard shot me. So much for Vadim-Guardian relations.

Wrapping my fingers around the shaft, I grit my teeth and say a prayer to any god who might listen. Then I pull. The arrow tears through my flesh. Gunshot pain rips through my leg, my whole body.

“Aaahh, ya bastaaard!” My roaring cry must be heard across the garden.

After chucking the arrow, I grip my bleeding thigh with both hands, puffing air, rolling with the agony. Hopefully, I still have enough of Alexei’s blood in my system to heal the wound, but how long will it take? I really don’t want to end my days bleeding to death in a grimy shed.

I’ve left you a gift, he said.

Follow your instincts, he said.

Bloody little talon-fingered, black-eyed, motherfucking fairy. He’s—

A silver glint from beneath the scrap of moldy carpet halts my tirade. A round metal handle. Trap door?

Fingers pressed to my wound, I throw the dirty rug aside and twist the handle, then awkwardly lift the heavy metal flap and fling it back. It lands with a dull thud onto the floor and reveals a set of stairs heading down into a basement. The stink of dust and dampness rise from the dark, along with the stench of bitter metal and stale disinfectant.

The pulsing orders from my belly go haywire, urging me to descend the steps. But just the thought of stepping into that enveloping black makes my breath catch.

A basement? It had to be a bloody basement.

I hang my head down into shadows. At the base of the steps is a tiled floor and what seems a large space extending back beneath the garden. Other smells drift up with the stale air, smells that don’t belong in a disused basement. The scents of fear and sweat and female musk.

I've gotta check that out.

I examine my thigh with blood-sticky fingers. The fiery agony has subsided to a background burn. The bleeding has stopped, and a gummy scab has formed over the ripped skin. Alexei's healing power is still good then? Gritting my teeth, I push to a stand, then limp around the trapdoor to test walking. Every step triggers a sharp, needling pain, but it's bearable.

As I peer back down into the dark hole, my chest tightens.

You've got this, Blakeley. It's, you know, a big basement. Really big. You'll be fine.

With tight fists and long breaths, I hobble down the wooden steps. My eyes slowly adjust, the Flame-generated vamp vision taking over. Hard metal edges and a cluttered mess emerge from the darkness.

Ignoring the trembles and the threatening prickles of panic, I slowly creep inside. Glass and stone crunch under my boots. The place is massive, stretching back as far as my night vision can see. Papers, glass tubes, and wires clutter black-and-white floor tiles. Shiny metal sideboards run the length of two walls, with metal cupboards and fume vents hanging above. It looks like an abandoned lab.

Four giant glass cylinders, tall enough to fit my whole body, are built into one of the walls. On their left sit two gurneys, dusty and unused, surrounded by metal tables and drip stands. The gurneys have leather straps attached as if to hold someone down. On shiny trays lie rows of surgical knives and kidney dishes. Equipment you might find in a hospital surgery. The whole place stinks of formaldehyde.

What the hell?

Through the dark, sniffles come to me. The flutter of a frightened heartbeat. All fear of the low ceiling and windowless walls falls away. I follow the sounds through plastic sheeting and two more labs and locate the woman's heartbeat in a larger room. This one's filled with rows of gurneys draped in cotton sheets and blankets. Candy wrappers and discarded plates cover one of them, with half-eaten chocolate bars and fruit that hasn't yet given in to rot. There were people here not long ago.

The female scent takes me straight to a cupboard in the far wall. These vamp senses are seriously handy.

"Hello," I say. "Is somebody here?"

A stifled sob answers my question.

"Hey, it's okay. I'm here to help."

The cupboard's locked, but a firm tug on the handles breaks the doors open.

A flash of blonde hair and gray clothing charges at me. Determined hands slap my face and punch my chest.

"Let me go, you fucking vampire filth," a woman cries, and she kicks me in the shin.

"Aah, shit." My bad leg gives, dropping my knee to the floor.

Worried she'll run straight out and into the arms of the Blood Servants, I scoop her by the waist. "I'm here to help."

She squirms and fights like an alley cat, scratching my face. I have to rise and pin her shoulders to the wall. "Hey, hey. I'm not here to harm you. I'm with the Guardians."

She stills and looks up at me with wary eyes, swollen and stained with tears.

I recognize her instantly. The mole on her upper lip is unmistakable. She's the fair-haired woman Radomir stole from the roof. Mason's sister.

"Ember? Ember Mason?" I let go of her shoulders and step away.

She squints at my face through the dark and gasps. "The Whisperer! From the roof. You came. Like he said you would."

"Who?"

She narrows her blue eyes. "Your irises glow like theirs. You're not with them, are you? The vampires?"

"I'm with Flanagan. He's not here, but he's out looking for you."

Tears glitter in her eyes. She swallows a sob. "I thought... I thought I'd never be found. The others. They left and... were they rescued?"

"No, I'm sorry. They're still missing. Who said I'd come?"

"The witch who locked me in this cupboard. I think he might be one of Radomir's spies. He told me the Whisperer would come and take me home." She covers her mouth and stifles another whimper. "I assumed the others had been rescued. I thought I'd been left here to die."

"Why did you think they'd been rescued?"

"Because of the men in black."

"Blood servants?"

She shakes her head. "No. Their clothes were Guardian uniforms. The kind the Headquarter Elites wear. The witch—" She swallows back another sob.

"Hey, it's okay." I reach out my hand to give her some reassurance, but she tumbles forward and buries her face in my chest, clutching me as she gives in to racking tears. I hug her close until her shaking stills, ignoring the press of the ceiling, the warning tingles in my fingers. "It's alright. I've got you."

I can't believe Radomir had a teenage girl locked in a cupboard and left in this hell hole all on her own. Coldhearted wanker.

When her breathing settles, she pulls away and wipes her nose with her sleeve. "The witch said Radomir thought me too precious to be wasted and was gifting me to the youngling to make sure I stayed safe." She looks me in the eye. "What does that mean? You're taking me home, aren't you?"

"I'm taking you back to Blackriver, to Mason. I promise. Did the witch know where the others were going?"

Her shoulders drop with relief at the mention of her brother. "No. I asked, but he said he'd need top-level clearance to know."

My mind whirs. What does that mean, top-level clearance? It sounds like Guardian language, but if the Channelers had been rescued, wouldn't we know already? And why did Radomir think Ember would be "wasted" if she'd gone with the others? Where the hell were they being taken?

Anxious to get back to the stairs and out of this enclosing basement, I try my leg. The wound still weakens my stance a touch, but it's almost healed. "You ready to go?"

"Heavens, yes. Where are we? I don't even know."

"We're in Richmond, beneath the garden of one of Vadim's houses. But I have no idea what this place is. It looks like an abandoned lab."

“I assumed I was somewhere on the prince’s land. Why would Alexei give us to Vadim? They’re enemies.”

“Good question. It’s possible Vadim doesn’t know you’re here. Seonu thinks Alexei planted you on his uncle’s property to throw bad light on his competition for the throne. But if that’s the case, who were those guys in black?”

We head to the exit, and I carefully guide Ember through the dark. “Listen,” I say as we reach the stairs. “I can deal with the Servants. I need you to run as fast as you can to the far side of the garden. There’s an oak tree with branches that extend over the wall. That’s your way out. Don’t wait for me. Bomb it over the park to the safe house. You know where that is, yeah?”

“Richmond safe house. Course.” Ember examines my clothes in the light flooding us both from the open stairwell. “You’re a recruit now?”

“Well, sort of. I—Aaahhh!” Agony sears through my body, fierce and overwhelming. I collapse to my knees, gasping through the sudden fire consuming my lungs. Spasms rack my joints and limbs, threatening to dislocate bone from bone. I have to clamp my jaw and muscles against the immense pain.

“Michael!” Ember screams, fluttering her hands as if she’s not sure whether to touch me or not. “What—what’s happening?”

I shake my head, unable to speak, barely able to stay conscious.

Save him, Michael. Save the True Grounder.

The same voice as the woman from the cave. Elwyn, the High Priestess.

An image of dirt walls, round like a well, flashes through my mind. A strange smell fills my nose, metallic and musty. A wailing howl of pain cuts through my chest from inside the well.

Save him.

Flanagan. He’s in trouble. This pain is his. Or it will be.

The moment that thought ends so does the burning agony, and I flop onto the stairs, sucking in lungfuls of stale air as my awareness returns to the basement.

“Michael?” Ember’s voice trembles. She grabs my forearm and helps pull me up.

“I’m alright.” I stumble to my feet, dusting off shards of glass and dirt. “It’s Flanagan. He’s in danger. I need to get to Hampstead Heath.”

“I didn’t know you were a witch,” she says, eyes wide.

“Huh? I’m not. I’m just... I hear shit sometimes.”

She searches my expression as if she doesn’t quite believe me. “What kind of danger?”

“I don’t know, but it’s not good. That pain was off the charts. I felt like my whole body was trying to turn itself inside out and my lungs were full of acid. I don’t think it’s happening yet, though. Felt more like it was going to happen. Soon.” I kick the step, desperate frustration burning my insides. “Damn it! I knew he was walking into danger. He’s twenty fucking miles away now. Even if I could run at top speed, it would take too long.”

“We need a car,” Ember says. “Maybe we can steal one from Vadim.”

I shake my head. “I can’t do electrics. My Flame. I can’t control it yet.”

She throws her hand out. “I’m a Grounder. I’ll Ground you.”

“Yeah? You’re, you know, strong enough?”

“I’m Class 7. Even the vamps struggled to Haze me. I can handle a Whisperer. I think.”

“Okay. Well, if you’re sure, then we could maybe boost a bike. I saw a Yamaha R6 down the road.”

She pauses, searching my face again. “You know how to do that?”

I grin at her wary awe. “I’m not an ex-con or anything. I know bikes, been dismantling and rebuilding them since I was sixteen.” I swipe a paper clip from the lab’s tiles and brandish it like a set of keys. “Give me a few minutes alone with that R6, and we’ll be heading down the road to Hampstead in no time.”

She smiles, her first real smile since the cupboard.

I grab a length of metal piping from the floor and hand it to her. “Here. Just in case.” She accepts it with enthusiasm, tapping it against her palm.

“Aren’t you going to take their Flame away? Like you did at Blackriver?”

“I can’t. If I charge myself up like that, you’ll not be able to Ground me enough. We’re hidden behind a glamour until we walk away from this shed. I’ll go first and keep them busy. You run to the oak.” I gesture which direction that is, then point behind me. “Don’t run that way. The Border Woods line the whole far edge of the garden.” Laasya told me Channelers could accidentally enter the Faeland’s protective border without realizing. None come back.

Ember scrunches her brow. “You can see the Border Woods? I thought you said you’re not a witch?”

“I’m not. I—never mind. Are you ready?”

Her tear-stained face lights up with determination. “I’m totally ready. Let’s go kick some Servant butt.”



CHAPTER 17

When I open the rickety shed door, four Blood Servants pace the lawn while two others search the bushes.

Once my eyes have adjusted to the morning brightness, I step outside the glamour and wave my hands. “Oi! Dickheads. Where the fuck’s that party?”

Six pissed-off faces turn my way, and I take off in the opposite direction from the oak.

“Get him!” Scarface bellows.

I look back. Ember is dashing across the grass, fast as a rabbit, blonde curls streaming in the air.

“There are two of them!” one of the Servants shouts, charging over the lawn to catch her. Raising a Flame-lit hand, he fires a gush of silvery light straight into her back. The burst of fire sinks into her body, but she keeps on running.

I head toward the Border Woods and, as they gain on me, cut right toward the house. My leg aches, but it’s coping. Injecting every ounce of vamp speed I can into my limbs, I dart between the Blood Servants, dodge their outstretched hands, and keep changing direction. Bolts whiz past my head. A line of pain sears my arm. The Servants are fast, clearly charged on vampire blood, but not as fast as a half breed. As one of them nearly grabs my jerkin, I take a sharp left out of his reach, flashing a grin over my shoulder for good measure.

“For fuck’s sake,” Scarface complains, breathless. “Get around him. Haze the bastard.”

As Flame hits me from multiple angles, sparking blue white in the air, tingling warmth thumps my back and sides. Fizzing heat cascades through my limbs. It softens my muscles, reducing my charging pace, but it’s nowhere near enough to Haze or burn me.

Leaping over hedges and scrambling through flower beds, I dodge and weave until the three Servants are puffing and panting to keep up, slipping on the grass and smashing into each other like clowns to catch a grip on my clothes. I glance over to Ember, hoping she’s made it to the wall, but she’s on the ground battering the Servant above her with the metal pipe.

Shit. I head straight there.

“Barry!” the guy behind me roars. “He’s coming your way.”

Barry, a tall bruiser with a crew cut, looks up from his attempt to quell the furious Ember just in time to meet the heel of my flying sidekick. His head wrenches backward, blood spraying the air. His body follows.

“Run!” I scream at Ember as I land and roll.

She scrambles to her feet and legs it across the lawn, her pipe left on the grass. I follow hot on her heels, staying behind to guard her back. We make it to the tree, but she’s too short to reach the branch. I have to clasp her hips and lift her. Once she’s got a hold, she climbs like a pro and crawls along the thick branch.

As I grip bark, three Servants barrel into me, knocking me to the ground. Two land on my torso, punching the wind from my lungs. The other jumps on my legs to pin me.

“Keep his hands down. He’s a Wielder,” Scarface shouts, running up behind them. Of course they have no idea I can’t form a Flame ball for toffee.

I can set myself on fire, though.

With only a thought, silvery Flame engulfs me, billowing over the two men attempting to flatten me to the ground. They jerk and leap back so fast they fall on their asses.

“What the fuck!” Scarface exclaims.

“It’s the Whisperer,” the other says, eyes bugging out of his head. “It’s the fucking Whisperer from Blackriver.”

I jump to my feet, dust off, and grab the branch to pull myself up, concentrating hard to keep my Flame alight while they’re watching me.

“Thanks, lads,” I say as I walk the tree, making the most of their shocked inaction. “That was fun. We’ll have to do it again sometime.”

Scarface looks ready to strangle me, but the others still stare with wary caution.

I jump off the tree back into Richmond Park, letting the flames sputter out. Ember waits for me, crouched behind a bush.

“I thought we agreed you’d run for it?” I say. Her recognizable scent and rapid heartbeat gave her away. I understand now why prey can’t hide from a vampire.

“I didn’t want to leave you.” She glances behind me at the oak.

“I don’t think they’ll follow just yet. Gave them a bit of a shock. Better move on sharpish, though.”

We jog down the street to where I caught sight of the Yamaha on my way to the coach house. Richmond has fully woken. Traffic bustles down the road. Commuters in suits hurry past, probably heading to the nearest Underground station. The bike I saw was stored on a gravel sidetrack running parallel to the park, hidden between two trees. Hopefully, I can get it started without raising too much suspicion.

When I spot the red gleam of metal, I hesitate. “Ember, you better do your Grounding magic because if I get any closer, I could short-circuit the thing.”

“Oh, yes.” Without pause, she slips her fingers under my leathers at the back and lays her warm hand against my spine. Flame floods to her touch. Not with the heated gush Flanagan’s hands elicit but a liquid warmth that tickles my insides. Nice.

“Don’t get any ideas, Channeler,” Ember quips when I lean back into her touch, lids falling closed. “You’re not my type. Wrong equipment.”

Oh! She gives me a wry smile.

“Got it.” Not that I’d be interested anyway. She’s too young for me, and I’m major league taken.

She lifts my hem and examines my back. “I’ve never felt Flame as strong as this. It’s like electric fire running up my arm. Does it hurt you?”

“Sometimes. You sure you can handle it?” I scan her face for any signs of a Haze. “I don’t want you overloading. I know what that’s like. It’s not fun.”

The proud puff of her chest and twist of her lips remind me of her brother. “I can handle it. Let’s go steal a bike.”

With Ember standing behind me, hands stuffed beneath my jerkin to continue drawing Flame, I lean over the Yamaha and tug out the ignition system from beneath the handlebars. I pull open the socket and stuff the two ends of my bent paperclip into the exposed connections to create an artificial contact. People pass by on the path, but nobody glances our way. We probably look like two lovers bent over our own ride.

“A green light just came on,” Ember says.

“Perfect.” I press the ignition button, and the bike kicks into life. The sweet sound of a Yamaha R6 engine rolls over us, and a twinge of guilt stirs. This is someone’s precious baby, and I’m about to steal it. I should find a way to bring it back when we’re done. Relief fills my chest as well, though. We can be in Hampstead within twenty minutes on this, even through the congested streets of London.

Hold on, big guy. I’m on my way.

I dump the lone helmet on Ember’s head. It’s far too large, but I tighten the chin strap enough to stop it from wobbling. Then I help her onto the cowl seat and settle in front. She slides her hands under my jerkin and rests them beneath my pecs. Her touch all but sucks the Flame from the pool in my abdomen, and the energy sizzles through my flesh. I hope I don’t overload the girl. If I return her to Mason randy and barely conscious, he’ll skin me alive.

“Do you know where we’re going?” she asks, voice muffled by the helmet.

“Hampstead Heath. That’s all I’ve got.”

“But it’s huge?”

“I’ll find him,” I say with certainty. “I have to.”

Rolling out to the road, I check the traffic, intending to head north, then east around the park, but given the queue of cars, that’s going to add precious minutes to my journey.

“Hold on,” I shout, turning the bike and driving into the trees.

I cut down a path, then avoid dog walkers and joggers by driving straight over the central meadow. I dodge trees and gawking strangers, startle deer and rabbits, kick up dirt as I accelerate across the open grass. People stop and stare as we fly past. Some gesture wildly toward the road as if I’ve lost my way.

Ember clutches me tight, helmet pressed to my back. The wind whips past us, cold and biting, even though the summer sun now shines above the trees.

Soon, I leave the cover of trees and hit the busy roads, weaving in and out of the heavy traffic all the way through Richmond, straight through Putney, and down the Fulham road to Notting Hill. I break every speed limit. Crash every red light. Almost run over a cyclist and a man leaving his parked van, but my reflexes are as sharp as glass. My vampy senses allow for an incredible stream of instant

responses that keep me out of trouble.

It's not until we reach the edges of South Hampstead that the wailing sirens and the flashing blue of police cars are following us. Shit a brick.

The moment I see the green of Hampstead Heath, the belly feels flash with a painfully dragging pulse that draws me straight through the nearest park gate and over the grass.

As we motor through the trees and past the viaduct, the tug of the Faelands gets stronger, and I skid the bike to a screeching halt a few feet from the shimmering Crossover—a wall of watery air. The half realm lies behind it. This one is an old forest of giant pine that looks like it belongs in the Hobbit movies.

Holy fucking Tinkerbell. I've been to the Heath loads of times, used to come here with Louisa, but I've never seen a gate to fairyland where the Meadows should be. Of course that was before the Flame woke.

The shriek of police sirens fills the park as I roll up the bike beside a beech tree. Flashing blue lights head toward us over the grass.

I quickly help Ember off. "Time to run."

When her feet hit the ground, her knees collapse.

"Ember?" Holding her up with an arm around her waist, I unfasten her helmet.

Her pretty smile greets me as I take it off. "Yesss, yess. Good," she slurs, giving me a thumbs-up. "Les go."

Bugger, I've Hazed the woman. "Hold on. Nearly there." I throw her arm over my shoulder, keeping her upright, and march us both to the Crossover.

Stepping through the shimmer into the half realm, I look back at the approaching panda cars. Bye bye, Officers. The police will probably see us both disappear. There's no chance of them finding us. They'll find the Yamaha, though. Hopefully, they'll return it to the owner.

"Oh!" Ember says when we cross onto a stony horse track flanked by ancient cedars. "This must be the half realm. How did you know it was here?"

"Call it a hunch."

I follow the track as it snakes through the tall trees, the certainty in my gut leading the way. As it swings deeper into the forest, we find a tall hedge cutting through a glade. Behind it hides an overgrown garden carved out of the wilds.

Save him, Michael. Save the True Grounder.

Just as Elwyn's urgent voice shouts into my head again, a mighty wail of pain cuts through the forest—the sound of a giant wolf caught in a trap. The same cry I heard in the basement lab.

My stomach turns over. My heart clenches tight.

Flanagan.



CHAPTER 18

I pick up the pace, glancing around the forest for any signs of Servants or other trouble. There are no vamps present. If they were here, I'd feel that hum in my blood. Ember scurries alongside me.

We pass through a gap in the hedge into the overgrown garden and find a ramshackle two-story wooden house with broken windows and a moss-peppered roof. One of its chimneys has collapsed. Sky-blue paint peels from its shabby walls.

We both halt, mouths open. A shimmering fence, about six feet high and weaved from strings of light, circles the house. Extending up from its top, a dome of swirling silver stretches over the roof to cover the entire building.

"Is that a witch web?" I ask Ember. It resembles the net of light that captured Flanagan at the cliffside.

She shakes her head, shoulders straight as she hurries to keep up. Her drunkenness is wearing off already. No wonder the vamps had trouble Hazing her. "I think it's a Flame wall, but I've never seen one extended into a dome before." She gestures to the derelict building. "This is the gatehouse for the Crossover, but it's clearly been abandoned. Maybe this road into the Faelands has been blocked for some reason."

"What's a Flame wall?" I scan the strange glowing lines of entwined light for a gap or hole as I head closer.

"It's a weaved vine—fae technology. The plant can hold enormous amounts of Flame. The vamps would use it in the old days to contain shifters. If we try to walk through it, the Flame will knock us out. Or kill us."

"Flanagan's in there." Dread and fear creep over me like black tar. "I know he's in that house. I'll have to go through it." I set off at a brisk jog, but Ember follows and grabs my forearm.

"You can't. Wielders are particularly susceptible. You'll overload."

I pull away from her grip. "I have to. You heard that sound. He needs help."

"If it's set to kill, even you could die. At the very least, you could end up a gibbering wreck. Then

what would we do? You can't go through it. I'm sorry."

"Fuck. Fuck!" I blast at the trees. She's right. I don't care if it harms me, but I can't take the risk of ending up useless. Or worse.

"We'll find a way," Ember reassures, resting a hand on my back. "Commander Flanagan is the strongest supe I know. He'll survive whatever danger he's in, I'm sure of it."

Flanagan's as strong as a fucking Marvel superhero, but he's not invulnerable. He can be killed like anyone else.

"What's that?" Ember points to a black lump sprawled in the tall grass of what I assume was once a manicured lawn.

We carefully approach, but the lump doesn't move. It's a Blood Servant with a knife in his chest. One of Alexei's, given the biker style of uniform. Beside him lies another with a gash to the head. And another. Six in total. All dead.

"Looks like the team was attacked," Ember says.

I reach for her hand. "Stay close to me and keep your eyes open."

Nearer to the Flame wall, another prone body dressed in Guardian leathers, silky black hair spilling out, lies on the ground.

"That's Seonu!" Ember exclaims.

We run down the hill, and I skid to my knees beside the prostrate figure. She's pale, and her heart beats slower than it should, but she's alive. "Seonu. Seonu!" I shake her shoulders. "Captain, wake up!" Nothing. I tap her face, then pinch her ear. Her eyelids don't even flicker.

Ember stands beside me, staring down with her fists at her mouth. "Is she... Is she dead?"

"She's just unconscious."

"Oh, thank the heavens." She looks up at the tall fence of plaited light strings. "Well, that explains the dead Blood Servants. Maybe the captain tried to follow the commander through the Flame wall. It wouldn't affect a True Grounder, but it could harm a Class 7 if set to kill."

"Yeah? Possibly."

"Or she's been spelled. A witch could—" She gasps, wide eyes fixing on something nearby. "Jay!"

She runs to her brother, drops down beside his stocky form, and grasps his shoulders. "Jay! Oh, no. No."

"He's alive." I come up behind her, surprised at Mason's first name. "I can hear his heart."

She rests her head on his chest to listen for herself.

Beside Mason are three more Guardian soldiers. All unconscious, bodies sprawled as if they fell where they stood. Closer to the fence, a set of brown limbs thread between the grasses.

"Laasya!"

I rush over and kneel beside her, a gust of relief hitting me when I hear her heart's steady beat. She's just unconscious like the others, lids closed to the world behind tilted glasses, petite face softened by sleep.

I shake her shoulders. "Laasya. Wake up. I need you." No response.

A flicker of red catches my eye, at the far side of the house, between the trees. A hooded figure hurries away through the forest, blood-red cloak billowing with their long strides.

"Oi!" I shout.

The figure freezes and turns back, but their face remains hidden by the low cowl. They raise their hand and draw fast shapes in the air with a finger.

I turn to tell Ember to stay put while I go after them, but she's slumped over her brother. "Ember!" No, no, no.

In three big strides, I'm next to her. I lift her off Mason and check her face. "Ember."

Her eyes are rolling. Her face has paled like the others. "I'm sorry," she slurs. "I'm just... I'm just so tired."

Holding her against me, I tap her cheek. "Ember, come on. Fight it. You've got to stay awake. I can't..." A heaviness creeps into my limbs, a weight tugging me downward. My eyelids feel like stone shutters I don't have the strength to keep open. If I could just... if I could just lie down...

No way. No fucking way. I gently lay Ember in the grass, then rub my eyes and shake my head, slapping my cheeks till they sting. I need to go after that bloody witch. It has to be Alyona. If the dead Blood Servants are the prince's, then surely that's his witch.

I scramble to my feet, but I've barely taken a step when my knees buckle. I thump to all fours. A dark blanket descends over my mind. A draining weakness steals my strength. I rapid-blink and slap myself again. If I could just... if I could just lie down...

Another howl rips through the forest from the house, a wailing cry of such agony it strikes me to the bone.

Gabriel.

The sound wakes something inside me, a resounding *no*, deep in my chest. Power and determination surge through my body, like a geyser released. I push against the weight driving me to the ground.

I'm not. Fucking. Sleeping. Today.

I crawl closer to the twisted strings of light weaved around the house and bellow at them, "Flame! Leave the fucking vines!"

Yes, Whisperer.

In multiple arcs of electric light, Flame bursts from the weaved lines, firing out into the garden in every direction. Ground and bush burst into silver fire. The dome discharges a halo of burning light into the sky.

A thought occurs to me. I point at the figure in red, who's still frantically drawing sigils in the air. "Flame! Hit that fucking witch."

The white fire narrows to a beam of electric light and shoots into the trees. There's a yelp, but the Flame hits some kind of barrier and deflects upward.

It's enough. Like a tight fist springing open, the spell snaps. A shock wave bends the air as it ricochets away. The heaviness leaves my body, and I leap to my feet, gasping lungfuls of air.

I'm coming, Flanagan.

I bolt over the grass toward the house at the speed of a charging bull. "Get out of my way," I order the clusters of dulling strings.

One by one, the lines of light pull aside, snapping and twirling back to form a hole large enough for me to bend under. I check for the witch. A line of light cuts down through the shadow of the woods. The red cloak flaps in the air as it disappears into the light. A Gate. At least I know she's gone.

I slip through the hole in the fence, through a wave of prickling energy still strong enough to take my breath, and head straight for the house steps.

A woken Ember follows. The spell must have lifted from her too, although the others still seem asleep. She slips through the same gap and runs up behind me as I reach the rickety wooden door. “I’m going in with you.”

I’m relieved she’s awake, but I pause, torn between leaving her alone in the garden and leading her into potentially worse danger.

“He’s my commander too. I can help.”

She’s as stubborn as her brother.

“Okay. But stay behind me. We don’t know what’s in here.”

A push on the creaking door reveals a dim, littered hallway. As our eyes adjust to the shadows, Ember gasps, her hand flying to her mouth.

Blood splatters the walls and the broken wooden stairs. Across the rotting floor lie broken bodies in contorted shapes, like smashed dolls. Heads missing from every one of them. More dead Blood Servants.

“Well, I think we can safely say the commander has been through here,” Ember says with wide eyes.

“You sure you don’t want to wait outside?”

“I can handle it.” Face pale, she swallows, pushes past me, and steps inside.

We weave our way between the sprawled bodies, both attempting to avoid the blood, tentative as we look around. On the left, an archway leads to what must have been a lounge at some point in this house’s life but is now a graveyard of rotting chintz furniture. At the back, the remnants of an old-fashioned kitchen can still be seen.

Grunting moans come from somewhere in the house. Flanagan’s distinctive scent reaches my nose from underneath the moldy damp and copper blood.

“This way.” I point to the doorway beneath the stairs.

The door creaks open to a set of stairs that descend into the darkness of a basement. I’m about to place my foot on the first step when the walls close in, and my breath leaves me in a gust.

“What’s wrong?” Ember whispers, bumping into my frozen back.

“Nothing.” I grip the wooden rail. The deathly claws of panic hook into my chest. The enclosing blackness at the bottom of the stairs seems to stare back at me.

Why a basement? Why is it always a bloody basement?

“What are we waiting for?” Ember hisses.

“Nothing. I just—” I swallow.

Deep rumbling groans filter up from beneath. Cracking sounds and the pant of excruciating pain.

“Flanagan?” The panic clears, and I half run, half tumble down the stairs, Ember on my heels.

“We’re here, Commander!” she shouts.

Once the Flame has adjusted my eyes to the dark, I grab her hand and lead her through the jumble of junk and rags and piles of wooden planks. Flanagan’s pounding heartbeat and gasping moans become clearer with each step.

At the far side of the basement, we come upon a cleared area of floor. Clothes and laid-out

blankets litter the dirty wooden slats, similar to the scene I found at the disused lab. Sweat and fear are heavy in the air. Flanagan will have smelled it too and assumed his students were down here.

In the center of the wooden floor, beneath ruptured planks, a black hole descends into the ground.

“Wait here,” I say to Ember. She’s all but blind in this darkness.

She clings to a shelf of paint cans, eyes blinking as she stares into the void. “What do you see?”

“There’s a hole in the floor.”

I peer over the edge into the darkness, heart hammering as the moans of Flanagan’s pain burst into a litany of desperate Finnish words.

When the Flame helps my eyes adjust, I gasp. “Flanagan. What the hell have they done to you?”



CHAPTER 19

At the bottom of a deep well-like hole, Flanagan's writhing and arching on the ground, his face a grimace of agony. The crack of bone echoes off the round wall as his joints and limbs contort and snap between human and wolf. Dark fur covers his hands and feet, and black lines on his skin extend from beneath his clothes, webbing down his arms and creeping along his neck to his face.

My heart wrenches at the sight. The hardest man I know, in that much pain. Panic surges through me.

"What's happening?" Ember asks. "What do you see?"

"It's Flanagan. His body seems to be trying to change, but it can't. He's got black lines on his face."

"That's silver poisoning. It's fatal to Lycanthropes. Actually, it's toxic to shifters and vampires too, though not deadly. You need to be careful, Michael."

"Toxic or not, I've got to get him out of there." I look behind me at the basement clutter. "I need rope. I'm sure we passed some." Sure enough, in the corner lie scattered coils of hemp, damp and rotting, but they'll have to do. I grab the lot and drag them past Ember to the pit.

"What are you going to tie it to?" she asks. "Everything's rotten."

"Me." Thanks to vampire DNA, I'm strong enough to pull him out, but whether he can handle the move is another matter.

First I tie lengths together to make a piece long enough. Next, I wrap one end around my waist and knot it, then push the rest over the side of the pit. There's more than enough. Turning to descend backward, I take a deep breath and squeeze my eyes closed. My fingers are tingling and trembling. I can't quite catch my breath.

Please don't have a panic attack, Blakeley.

I plunge downward. Half Flame-climbing, half scraping down the smooth dirt walls. After what must be thirty feet, I land with a thud next to Flanagan's contorting body and crouch beside him. His eyes are wild, rolling in his head as his back arches. Sweat drenches his deathly pale skin. Both sets of fangs are fully extended, and his jaw keeps changing, extending into its wolf-like form, only to

retract again with a grating click. His knees pop as his legs snap forward into an unnatural shape, then return. His arms are doing the same, the sound of his breaking bones like gunfire ricocheting through the well.

Tears sting my eyes as I grip his shoulder. If I ever meet the person who did this, I'm going to rip out their insides and shove them down their throat.

"Gabriel. Hold on. I'm getting you out."

"Michael." The word is barely audible, but I catch the surprise.

"Yeah. It's me. Long story, big guy." I blink to clear my eyes and cup his neck. "Don't you be going anywhere, alright? I need you. I need my grumpy Viking."

He touches my knee with his hand. "Silver." The distorted word hisses from his throat. "Vampire."

"I can't feel a thing," I lie, coughing even as I say that. A fine layer of pale, glittering dust sprinkles the whole shaft. It feels like prickling nettles in my lungs. Trust Flanagan to think of me when he's the one in desperate need.

Determinedly ignoring the oppressive walls around me, I carefully roll him to thread the rope under his back. Once I've wrapped his jerking body—not easy in this confined space or with shaking hands—I tie a triple knot at the back of his shoulders. Hopefully, tight enough and balanced enough to lift him up the well headfirst without strangling him. Then I drag him to a sitting position against the wall. As his body bends, he bellows with pain, the sound ripping through my chest.

"Shit, I'm sorry. Hold on."

Connecting the Flame in my hands to the answering warmth in the packed dirt, I use the energy's suction to scramble the sheer walls. There's no way I could climb out without it. The weirdly smooth sides offer no handholds at all. The deep pit would have been a death trap.

I make it over the lip and collapse onto the wooden floor, hacking up silver dust from my lungs. Ember grabs my arm and helps me to my feet.

"How bad is it?" she asks. "Will he be okay?"

"I don't know."

I wrap the rope around my forearm, grip the bristly fiber, and pull. My feet slip on the damp slats, almost forcing me into a sitting position.

Ember grasps my jerkin to help keep me steady. Flanagan's body shifts, then bumps the wall. Sweat beads my forehead. I grit my teeth as his heavy body lifts from the floor, increasing the strain tenfold. The harsh rope burns a path across my palms. With a groaning cry, I inch backward. But as the tension takes all of Flanagan's weight and he begins to hang, a wail of agony echoes from the pit.

"It's too much for him!" Ember exclaims.

"We've got to get him out."

With a growling cry, I tug hand over hand until Flanagan slides all the way to the lip. Holding tight to keep him in place, I grasp the knot at the back of his shoulders and yank him onto the wood, then haul him as far away from the well as I can get before piles of junk prevent me from going farther. The howl he gives off as he slides over the hard wood saws a line straight through my heart. He's drenched in sweat, his skin the color of sickly paper. Even away from the silver dust, his joints still crack and snap in wrenching jerks. His face is a mask of pain, only the whites of his eyes visible.

I kneel beside him and stroke damp strands of hair from his face. "I've got you. I've got you. Shit."

He groans. His rolling eyes briefly flicker with awareness. The black veins have webbed across both his cheeks and temples.

Ember drops to his other side, her blonde curls falling forward as she leans over. She gently presses her hand to his skin. “He’s burning up. How do we get him back to the safe house? He needs the Sisters of Mercy.”

The Sisters of Mercy are the nurses who helped me when my heart stopped after the battle. An order of Channelers and specialized witches who dedicate themselves to nursing supernaturals.

“I don’t know.” Panic crowds my brain. I grasp his shoulder joints in a pathetic attempt to stop them from breaking and causing him pain. “I’ll carry him. I have to. I just... I thought his body would settle when I got him out of the hole.”

“What if I—”

The clomp and scrape of booted feet interrupt her words. A distinctive Japanese accent drifts down from the house, followed by Mason’s gruff timbre. I expel a breath.

“Oh, thank the Heavens,” Ember says.

“Seonu!” I yell. “Down here.” I never thought I’d be relieved to hear those two arrive.

The footsteps clatter down the basement stairs.

“Whisperer?” Seonu shouts. “How are you here? Is that the commander?”

“Yeah. Over here.”

“Captain, please be careful,” Ember calls. “There’s silver down here.”

“Em!” Mason trips over junk as he charges across the dark room. “Is that you?”

“Yes, I’m fine. Michael rescued me. We need to help the commander. We’ve got to get him to the Sisters.”

“Michael?” A gentle shout from the stairs. The blue glow of witchlight washes through the basement. Laasya. Man, it’s good to hear her voice. Tears prickle my eyes again.

“In here. Quick. Flanagan’s in trouble.”

Mason pulls his sister into a death hug. “Em. I can’t believe you’re here.”

Seonu strides across the room with Laasya. I let go of Flanagan’s hand to give Laasya room to kneel beside him.

“How bad is it?” Seonu asks her.

Laasya leaves the ball of witchlight in the air and explores Flanagan’s face and limbs with her hands. The peculiar light casts a blue-white glow over the faces looking down at Flanagan. “It’s bad, Captain. Really bad. His body’s caught on the edge of a change. The silver must be deep in his system.”

Mason curses. “They must have used powder. Or gas.”

Laasya settles into a cross-legged position beside Flanagan and lays her hands on his stomach and chest. “I can’t do much here, but I can help with the pain and settle his body for a while.”

A soft glowing pulse lights her hands and passes into Flanagan’s body. Slowly but surely, his limb’s contorted efforts to change become jerks and twitches instead of snapping breaks. The fur recedes, leaving only the black webbed lines across his face. As his eyes stop rolling and the tight grimace relaxes, relief surges through me. He’s still sickly pale, though. His breaths still short and tight.

“I’m so glad you’re here, Laasya,” Ember says.

Mason pulls Ember in for another hug. “How are *you* here? Where were you?”

She grips him back, wrapping her arms around his neck. “Oh, Jay, it was awful. But I’m fine now. Thanks to Michael. He found me at one of Vadim’s houses.” She pulls away. “Are the others safe yet? Have the Headquarter elite got them?”

“There’s been no sign, Em. What makes you think the Squad has them?”

“Oh, nothing. I just—never mind.”

Mason turns to me. “You found Ember at the other address, then?”

“Yeah, she was hidden in this weird lab under the garden.”

For a moment, he looks like he’s attempting to chew a wasp, then says, “Thanks. Thanks for finding her.”

“You’re welcome.”

“I can smell humans.” Seonu lifts one of the woolen blankets. “The scents are maybe two days old.”

“We weren’t here,” Ember says. “They couldn’t keep me under for more than an hour at a time. I’d have seen this place if we had been here.”

Seonu examines the hole in the floor. Shifter eyes can see in dim light almost as well as vampires. Coughing as silver catches in her throat, she crouches to study the broken slats and runs her hand over the smooth sides of the opening. “This well was hollowed out with magic.” She rubs sparkly dust between her fingers. “And the silver powder is top grade, almost pure. The wooden slats placed over the top were purposely too weak to take a heavy weight. This seems like a trap laid specifically for the commander.”

“What will the poison do to him?” I ask Laasya.

“The silver forces a change—the body trying to heal itself. He’s fighting it. That’s why his limbs keep snapping back like that.” She looks over at Seonu. “He’s exhausted, Captain. He won’t be able to fight it much longer.”

“I’ll fly to the van and contact Headquarters,” Seonu says. “They’ll have to send a witch to transport him. Can you prepare a pentagram?”

“Yes, Captain. I’ll settle the commander first, then chalk one in the lounge upstairs where there’s more room.”

My stomach feels like I’ve swallowed rocks. “Fuck. I—fuck!”

Ember reaches for my hand. “You did everything you could, Michael.”

“I should have got here sooner.” I should have listened to that feeling of doom I had back at the safe house. I knew he was in danger. “If it’ll help him heal, why can’t he just let the change happen?” I ask Laasya.

“Because he wouldn’t have control, and a wild werewolf is a blood bath waiting to happen. With enough poison in his blood, if he turns, he’ll stay that way. And”—her eyes find mine—“the Guardians would have to put him down.”

All my blood drains to the floor. My heart stutters as if it’s choking.

Flanagan groans. His hand flops toward me, reaching. I take it in a firm grip. “You keep fighting, big guy. We need you, yeah. Please just... fuck. Just survive.” My eyes prickle again. If only I could

take on the poison for him.

“Mason, stay with Ember,” Seonu orders. “There could be more Blood Servants around. Delaware and Richards can check the surrounding forest.”

“Be careful!” I shout after her as she heads for the stairs. “There was a witch in the trees. Red cloak. They cast that sleeping spell. I think they left through a Gate.”

“A red cloak?” Laasya looks up with surprise.

“Yeah, blood red.”

Her brow creases, but she turns back to Flanagan. She pulls a vial and a cloth from one of the many bags attached to her belt, dabs the cloth with herby-smelling liquid from the vial, and hands it to Ember. “Dab his head with this. It will help calm him.”

Ember seems relieved to be given something to do. Once she’s settled behind Flanagan’s head, wiping over his twitching face, Laasya rests her hands back on his chest and abdomen and begins a steady chant. Her warm, tingling energy passes to my hand, which still holds Flanagan’s.

“That’s amazing.” Ember must feel it too.

“It’s field healing 101,” Laasya says, humble as ever. “Direct witchcraft doesn’t work on the commander because he’s been granted protection, so my repertoire is restricted. But techniques specific to healing seem to be allowed. I’m just reducing his pain so he can use his strength to prevent the change.”

Mason looks up at me. “How are you here if you were twenty miles away in Richmond? More importantly, how the hell did you get through the Flame Wall? Is that gap in the fence yours?”

Ember answers before I can. “You should have seen it. He blasted the Flame from the wall, then just ordered the strings to get out of his way, and well, they did, didn’t they, Michael?”

Mason narrows his eyes.

Laasya clears her throat. “The wall is made of Flame, so it’s likely a Whisperer has the ability to command it.” Her eyes flicker to me, then away.

“Who do you think that witch was?” Ember asks Laasya. “Was it Alyona?”

“I’m not sure. They were strong. I’m not easily put to sleep. One second I was throwing the last Blood Servant into a tree. The next, I was waking in the grass.”

“It could have been Alyona,” I say, “but I didn’t see a face.”

“Of course it was the witch bitch,” Mason spits. “Alexei’s fucking hellcat. We should have killed the Prince of Filth at the club when we had the chance. Fuck their vampire laws.”

“I don’t know,” I say, bracing myself for the backlash my spoken doubt will bring. “Something’s off about this. I’m not convinced this trap is Alexei’s.”

Mason sneers. “Dead Servants are decorating the fucking hallway upstairs. Alexei’s Servants. The address came from his manservant’s head. This is his gatehouse.”

“I know they look like his Servants. It’s just... Alexei’s words at the club sounded more like he needed Flanagan for something. And Quinton wasn’t sure if that manservant was Alexei’s or Vadim’s.”

Mason jabs a finger toward the black hole in the floor. “That sly trap is exactly Alexei’s dirty work. He wants the commander out of action without risking the Temple’s wrath by killing him himself. He’s forcing the kill onto us. That’s fucking poetry to a bastard like him.” He turns his finger

on me. “He manipulated you. Made sure you were elsewhere. You keep falling for his shit.”

I open my mouth to fire back an answer, but the words die on my lips. My doubts sputter under the weight of Mason’s accusation, my stomach turning sour. Is he right? Have I just played the good little puppet yet again and done exactly what Alexei wanted me to? Stayed out of the way so he could successfully bring down his nemesis?

Flanagan’s hand tightens in mine. I squeeze back to let him know I’m still with him, but my heart feels like a stone.

“There’s no need to be cruel,” Ember bites at her brother. “I’d still be alone in a stinking cupboard if it wasn’t for Michael.”

“I know that.” He pulls her into a side hug. “And I’m grateful. I don’t mean to be an arse. I’m just pissed. This has to be Alexei. He likes nothing better than to mess with us. It’s his favorite pastime.”

Laasya takes her hands from Flanagan’s chest and stands. His body still twitches, but his breathing has settled, and his eyes are closed. “I need to go and prepare the pentagram. The commander will be okay for at least an hour. It’s time enough to get him to the Sisters.”

“Then what?” I dread the answer.

“Then we wait. The Sisters will remove as much of the poison as they can, but because it’s powder, they won’t be able to get it all.” She looks down at Flanagan and bites her lip. “Either the commander will get through this and survive, or he changes and... and we’ll have to... to—”

“Kill him,” Mason finishes.

I shake my head, chest like a vise. This can’t be happening.



CHAPTER 20

Once the witch from Headquarters arrives—a snooty thin guy with a pinched face and expensive steel-gray suit—Flanagan is transported through a Gate to Blackriver’s infirmary and the care of the Sisters.

We’re all thoroughly examined. Eyes checked, blood taken and sent off. When it’s done, Seonu, Laasya, and I wait in tense silence outside the private room at the far end of the infirmary, which is bustling with activity. The wounded from the battle two weeks ago still occupy many of the beds. Sisters in crisp white uniforms flutter back and forth, intent and tireless as they see to their patients’ needs.

Mason stays with Ember while a Sister gives her a more thorough examination. Apparently, she could have been planted with a rogue spell or memory bomb. Either device potentially able to spy and collect data or cause a sudden, lethal change in her personality.

I scuff at the shiny floor with a boot. Worry weighs me down. Mainly about the possibility I’ve let Alexei manipulate me again. I’m glad we’ve got Ember back, but did I help the prince nearly kill Flanagan? I wish I could stomp round to Dvamira Castle and ask the fucker if he set that trap. Not that he’d give me a straight answer—there’s nothing straight about that vampire—but I’d get to see the truth in his eyes.

Seonu has made her mind up that Alexei’s intention is a full-on war with the Guardians. The vampires have never accepted the Council’s authority over the supernatural world and resent their Guardian soldiers policing them. She thinks Alexei means to destroy the Council to please the older vampire families and prove his fitness to rule them. She’s certain that taking Flanagan—the only individual strong enough to face him one on one—out of the picture and destabilizing Blackriver to get to the students is part of that plan. Mason agrees with her; of course he does. I’m not sure if Laasya is persuaded by her argument.

Seonu may be right about the war part. I don’t doubt Alexei would rejoice in an end to the High Council. But as I’ve repeated to no effect, something doesn’t add up. Why did he give us back a Class 7 Grounder—a prize worthy of a vampire king, according to Zahir. Even if he did plant a memory

bomb in Ember's head, he could have achieved the same result with a Class 1. The witch who left Ember in the cupboard said she was too precious to waste, that it was best she didn't go with the other students. So where were they going? And who the hell were the men who took them? The ones in black who looked like Guardians?

"Blood Servants," Seonu repeats through her teeth when I point that out for the third time. She rests a hand on her sword hilt, fingers twitching as if she's desperate to use her blade on somebody's neck. Possibly mine. She's been giving me an even more intense version of her evils since we left the gatehouse. "Alexei's plan is obvious. He planted the kidnapped students on Vadim's land to undermine his uncle's position with the Council. He implicated the Council's involvement by having his Servants dress up as Guardians. Had his spy tell Ember exactly what he wanted her to hear. And he kept *you* out of the way, so he could set a trap and force the commander's own soldiers to euthanize him." She looks away, pain and fury in her blue eyes.

I glance at Laasya, hoping for help, but she's chewing on her lip while examining her boots.

I'd argue more, but what the hell argument do I have? What Seonu says sounds right and typical of Alexei's clever scheming. His confusing words to me in the club could have been pure manipulation.

I'm about to say that, but the side room door opens, and an older sister steps out, shutting it behind her. The Sisters of Mercy look like nurses from the 1950s. Below-knee dresses, full-length aprons, and white caps over tightly secured hair.

"How is he, Matron Hadlee?" Seonu asks.

The nurse joins us, hands clasped against her apron, her upright posture as stiff and neat as her starched collar. She nods a respectful greeting to Laasya but addresses Seonu. "I'm relieved to tell you the commander was saved from his predicament just in time." She flicks an appreciative glance my way, then returns her severe gaze to the captain. "Though our repertoire with the commander is somewhat limited, we do have the effects of the poison under control. But we won't understand the extent of any permanent damage until he wakes."

I breathe a small sigh of relief, but the word damage clangs through my head.

"Are you expecting a full recovery?" Laasya asks.

"I believe the commander will survive this poisoning. But this is his third in so many decades. Even a Lycanthrope as strong as Commander Flanagan cannot continue to carry so much latent silver and remain unchanged."

"What are you saying?" I earn a stinging glare from Seonu for speaking up without permission.

"I'm saying, Michael, that the commander risks a full and permanent change or death if he's poisoned again in the next few months. Even a small amount could tip the balance."

My heart thuds painfully. It's hard to believe anything could kill Flanagan.

"Oh, dear," Laasya whispers.

"Yes," the matron agrees. "I think it best if Commander Flanagan refrain from field duty for the foreseeable future until we're sure his body has cleared enough of the poison."

Seonu nods, taking in a long breath and blowing it out again. "He won't like that."

She's right. He'll hate it. He's likely to just ignore the advice.

"Can we go in?" I step toward the door before she answers.

"I can allow you a few minutes to see him," the matron offers. "Then I must insist you leave so that

we can continue his treatments.”

“Thank you,” Seonu says.

“Yes, thank you so much for all your care,” Laasya adds.

I give the nurse a nod and open the side room door. The sight that greets me steals my breath. Flanagan lies on his back in bed, a white sheet tight over his broad chest and tucked beneath his arms. His long blond hair lies in a gathered twist down one side of his chest. His skin is deathly pale, black veins still web his neck and face, and sweat glistens on his forehead as if he’s laboring under the sun. His earthy scent is still distinct beneath the hospital sting of alcohol and bleach.

My heart clamors with a wild rhythm as images of John lying still and lifeless in a white coffin flicker through my mind. The yellow tinge to his pale death mask. The eyelids not quite closed, exposing cloudy sightless eyes.

We file around the bed. Seonu swears. Laasya kneels at the far side and squeezes Flanagan’s fingers. I want to touch my man, take his hand, shake his shoulders, but I stand there with my thumbs hooked in my pockets like an idiot, unable to move.

“We’re here, Commander,” Laasya says to him. “Michael’s here. We’re all okay. You just need to get better.”

“And you’re sure he’ll recover?” Seonu asks Matron, who lingers at the door. “He looks...”

“Gray,” I finish.

“The commander is a Lycanthrope,” Matron says. “Once we clear enough poison, he will simply spring back into life.”

“It’s true,” Laasya agrees, looking at me. “My mother treated the commander last time. Once the silver has gone, he’ll recover in minutes.”

I push out a sigh. Unable to hold back any longer, I step closer and take his hand. His sweat-slick skin feels hot to the touch. Flanagan’s skin always feels hotter than a human’s, but now it burns like a furnace. His colorless lips make his blond beard seem far darker than usual. Flanagan so... ill, so vulnerable, ignites a fiery anger inside me, an urge to see someone’s guts spill to the ground.

Flanagan’s finger twitches against my palm. I check his eyes, a slight flutter.

That’s it. Keep fighting, big guy. You can do this. Just come back to me.

“I have to give my report to Major Zahir,” Seonu says to Laasya. “I’d like you to stay with the Whisperer until his escort returns. They should be here soon.” The Whisperer. Will the woman ever use my name?

“Yes, Captain,” Laasya answers.

“What the hell do I need an escort for?” I hiss. “The prince can’t Call me, remember? That’s the whole point of this sapphire.” I raise my wrist with the leather cuff and its deep blue stone neither of them can see. I’m sick to the back teeth of fucking attitude and escorts. And gods help the next soldier who tries to put chains on me. I need to be available for Flanagan. I can’t do that under escort restrictions.

Seonu meets my glare with her resting bitch face. “Only the commander can make that decision. Until then, you’ll accept a soldier escort or lockdown.”

“The fuck I will.” I look her straight in the eye. This may not be the moment to challenge the Guardians and their fear of the vampire half breed, but at some point, the shifters are going to have to

accept I'm on their fucking side.

Laasya breaks the standoff. "No need for soldiers, Captain. I'm happy to stay with Michael. We can go back to the commander's room and collect some things for him. Can't we, Michael?"

I glance her way, and she gives me one of her pointed stares.

"Okay." I sense there's more to her suggestion than her words.

"Very well," Seonu says to her. "Get something to eat and some rest. Vadim has questions to answer, and I'd like to see him before the day ends."

Yeah, Vadim, the other player in this complex fuckery. How much does the old vampire know? And why the hell was there a disused lab underneath the garden of one of his houses?

"You won't be going, recruit," Seonu says before I can ask her exactly that. "I don't need any more of the prince's manipulations to deal with."

Manipulations. Something in her tone trips an alarm switch in my head. "You think this was my fault?" So that's why I've been getting a nuclear version of her death glare.

"Michael," Laasya warns.

Seonu looks at Flanagan's silent form, and a dark cloud takes over her expression. "I think it's interesting that the prince, who never visits Vadim's clubs, was there waiting for us the very night we visited. Waiting to give *you* his orders. To set his trap." She turns her eyes on me, the pale-blue like fiery ice.

Heated fury fills my throat, but the weight of guilt and the fear she's right steals the sting from my words. "You don't seriously still think I'm in league with Alexei?"

"Captain," Laasya tries.

Seonu lowers her voice to a hiss. "I think it's clear you're his. I think you've always been his. You're a half breed, and you'll always be a half breed. That means your blood will always sing to his tune, whether you're aware of it or not." She gestures to my cuff. "Sapphire or no sapphire, we'll never be able to trust you."

Un-fucking-believable. This is the real face of the Guardian shifters. I could save all the students and a thousand soldiers, wear the strongest spell ever made, but unless I manage some miracle DNA transplant, I'll continue to be nothing more than a vampire in their eyes. With or without fangs.

But what's far worse is that she's right. I now know Alexei was watching Blackriver's every move through my eyes before I donned this spelled stone. It was me who insisted on seeing him at the club. If he was the one who set that trap, then I fucking helped him all the way.

I take my hand from Flanagan's and stuff it back into my pocket, guilt finally winning the battle for supremacy in my aching chest. My heart feels like roadkill. They can't trust me. Flanagan can't trust me. I'm a fucking vampire monster, destined to be a bloodsucker. A Sabel mongrel fuck-up that could turn into a psycho at any moment. And I bring nothing but trouble to the one man who's given me more than any other since John. I don't deserve him.

Seonu opens her mouth, about to say more, shove her knife deeper, but Laasya holds up her hand. "That's quite enough, Captain," she snaps, gaining shocked looks from both of us. "I think we all need rest and food and time to think. Michael, we should go. The Sisters will want to repeat the commander's treatments." She pushes up from the bed, spins on her heel, and marches to the door.

With one last look at Flanagan, I follow her from the room in a daze, ignoring Seonu's glower. All

my fury has collapsed into a tight ball at the center of my chest. The adrenaline that fueled the last twenty-four hours has seeped away to leave a crushing exhaustion.

As we walk down the central aisle of the ward, past the soldiers still recovering from the last time I let Alexei use me like his favorite puppet, I trudge like I'm dragging my shoulders over the tiles. I did this to them. The bandages and the blood are my fault. I flick a glance through the windows to the distant Border Woods. I should leave Blackriver. Run the fuck away and take my chances in the wild. It's clear the place would be better off without me, that Flanagan would be better off without me. If I could just get past the wards...

"Don't," Laasya clips as we leave the infirmary and head down the corridor.

"Don't what?"

"Think this is all your fault and Blackriver would be better off without you."

"I thought you said you weren't psychic?"

She pulls me out of the way of two soldiers and into an alcove under the stairs. "I don't need to be psychic to read that glum look on your face. Seonu's lashing out. She feels the same as you do."

"Which is?"

"Angry and guilty. If it wasn't for you, the commander would now be a wolf on death row, and Ember would still be stuck in a cupboard. Seonu knows that, but this happened on her watch. She's blaming herself. She needs time to settle and think. Then I'll be able to have a sensible conversation with her." She straightens her glasses and blows a stray lock of dark hair from her mouth. "Having said that, when she does, I'm still not sure she'll let go of her blind-hate conclusions. We need to work out what Alexei's really up to."

That last sentence finally breaks through my mush of self-pity. "Really up to? You don't agree he set the trap?" A strange hope blooms in my chest. For some reason, I need it not to be Alexei who tried to kill Flanagan.

"Alexei's plan may very well involve war with the Guardians, but I don't think he set the trap. I think the Blood Servants in the gatehouse may not have been his. The witch certainly wasn't."

I narrow my eyes. "How do you know?"

She glances up and down the corridor for stray ears, then leans in and whispers, "Because of the blood-red cloak."



CHAPTER 21

Laasya doesn't want to say more where anyone can hear, so she marches us through the mansion toward Flanagan's room. Blackriver is a lot quieter than usual. Students scurry in the corridors, passing soldiers nod their greeting—to me as well as Laasya, which is new. But a heavy lull lingers over the place. It's clear everyone has heard their commander is lying in the infirmary, fighting for his life.

Laasya produces a bunch of keys and unlocks the door to Flanagan's apartment. As I step inside, I wince. His earthy forest smell permeates the room, and his absence echoes from the neatly made bed, the silent desk, and empty leather couches.

"Let's order some food," Laasya says after glancing at my expression. She tugs on the bell that calls Eva, Flanagan's maid.

I open the garden doors, leaving them wide, and suck in a few lungfuls of fresh afternoon air. Dark clouds clog the sky, casting a shadowed light over the lawn and flower beds. A dampness in the air promises rain. I try to rub some life into my tired eyes, but the image of Flanagan's gray face sits just behind my eyelids.

At the door, the older woman asks after the commander. Laasya requests coffee for me, tea for her, and sandwiches for both of us, then scuttles across the room to me.

She straightens her brown cardigan, tugging down the sleeves, and peers up at me with her big brown eyes. "You okay?"

I hook my hands in my pockets. "Fine."

"Right. Course you are. Well, tell me everything that happened. From the beginning."

"At the gatehouse?"

"No, the club. What happened with the prince? We need to work out what he's up to."

My mind flips back to caressing fingers. Two sets of eyes assessing me like a prized stallion. Sharp talons scraping over tender skin. My dick twitches. The Flame tingles through my groin. I want to feel revulsion, but I only feel arousal, a confusing desire for more. The ache to come while they both watch lingers even now. What the hell did he do to me?

Laasya snaps her fingers, pulling me back from my distant stare. “Michael?”

“Huh? Yeah, sorry. He, um, he...”

“You looked in his eyes, didn’t you?” She sighs, her expression falling somewhere between admonishment and sympathy. “Oh, Michael. I told you. Never look in the prince’s eyes.”

I wipe my face and push a hand through my hair. “I tried, Laasya. I really fucking tried, but he just —” Those eyes, those endless eyes, like dark oblivion. “Yeah, I looked. Then he did what the fuck he wanted, and I just let him.”

Silence falls between us as she takes that in. She can probably guess how it went.

She rests a gentle hand on my arm. “Don’t feel bad. You’re not the first to fall prey to the prince’s fatal gaze. You know the soldiers call him the Black Death?”

I huff a bitter laugh. “It suits him.”

“Yes, it does, because with one look of those black eyes, he can make his enemy slit their own throats right in the middle of the battlefield. Apart from the witches, Commander Flanagan is the only Guardian who can face him without being affected. One of the many reasons he’s so valuable.”

“Shit. That’s wild.” No wonder the Guardians talk about Alexei in hushed whispers.

She tugs on my hem and gestures to the couch. I stalk over and perch on the leather, too edgy to relax.

Laasya sits beside me, pulls up her skinny legs, and folds them beneath her. “Just tell me what happened.”

I take a deep breath, then give her the whole sorry story, excluding the moment I knelt almost naked over Alexei’s lap. Laasya doesn’t need that image in her life. And I go through my conversation with Vadim. My offer to him. His tacit admittance that he does have designs on the throne. I leave out his explanation of my burgeoning life as a future bloodsucker.

It feels good to share the club disaster with her, like a burden half-lifted, but the parts I’ve had to leave out stay inside me like acid indigestion.

I move on to my escape from the safe house and finding Ember, and as I’m finishing, Eva comes in with the drinks and food, her slippered feet silent on the wooden floor. As she places a tray on the coffee table, her long white plait slips forward. The older Finnish woman, soft round body always dressed in a long linen smock and apron, has a gentle, dependable presence. She seems dedicated to Flanagan. Apparently, he saved her grandparents from vampire slavery, and the family has insisted on serving him ever since.

She offers me a warm smile. “I’ve given you lamb, Michael. I know how much you like your red meat. And vegetarian for you, of course, Laasya.”

We both thank her, and she leaves as quietly as she arrived.

Laasya sits in thought, chewing on her salad sandwich while she stares at the sheepskin rug. I pour a black coffee and sip it while she thinks. I can’t even consider food.

“So,” she says around a mouthful of sandwich. “Ember is basically the prince’s clue to where the other Channelers are. He sold them on to someone, and that someone left them in a disused lab under Vadim’s garden for these men in black to collect. Alexei has a spy with these men, but the spy doesn’t have the clearance to know where the students are being taken. So Radomir instructs him to separate Ember from the others and leave her there for you to find. And you think Alexei expects you to use her

information to find out where the others are.”

“Exactly.” I rest back on the couch so I can see her better. “Because I’m the only one who can. Don’t ask me why. And wherever the other Channelers are, it’s bad. Bad enough to warrant Radomir saving the best of the crop from going there.”

She swallows, frowning. “I wonder what that disused lab was for.”

“I think it might be part of the clue. It was seriously creepy, like Frankenstein’s lair. Stank of formaldehyde. There were giant vats tall enough to hold a grown man, as well as gurneys and mean-looking surgical equipment.”

“Oh, dear. That doesn’t sound good.”

“And Ember is sure it was Guardians who took the others away. The type that look after prisoners. Like that elite crew who came for me after the battle.”

She shakes her head. “If the Squad had the students, they’d have told us. Don’t forget that witch could make Ember see whatever he wanted her to. Alexei could be setting up Vadim *and* the Council. He would benefit from both out of his way.”

“Fair point. But Vadim must know about that old lab under his garden, and it’s obvious he was the one Alexei sold the Channelers to. Vadim mentioned their recent ‘friendly’ transaction to us. So what exactly is Alexei pointing us toward? Could Vadim have revived the experiments with Jade Water?”

She sighs. “Jade Water isn’t available anymore. The lake has been warded by the Temple. It would take a clever witch indeed to outsmart the High Priestess.”

“Vadim is a thousand-year-old witch. A clever thousand-year-old witch.”

“Well, yes. That’s true. I’ll be there when we interview him, anyway. Maybe I should ask him, just to see his response to the question.”

“Has Vadim got a reason to want Flanagan dead?” My fingers tighten around my mug.

She lifts a shoulder. “Like what?”

“I don’t know, but that vampire at the club Quinton got the address from could have been Vadim’s.”

“I don’t think so. Vadim depends on Council favor to run his many clubs and hotels. Why would he put that at risk to kill a commander who has nothing to do with him?”

“Okay, so you don’t think it was Vadim. But you don’t think it was Alexei either?”

“It can’t be.”

“You said that before, but what’s the figure in red got to do with it?”

She glances around the room, then out at the garden for any hint of intrusion, even though we’re alone, and lowers her voice. “A witch would never wear red.”

“Why?” I join her whisper.

“Because we all know that’s what the Warlock’s followers wore—blood red. It’s just not done. You’d be ostracized for bad taste. Or tried for treason. It would be like”—She puts a finger on her lip—“a Neutral dressing up as a Nazi soldier to go to the office.”

“So that figure I saw might be a Warlock follower?” My scalp prickles, alarm bells ringing.

“Not necessarily. I’m just saying Alexei would never tolerate using a red cloak for any reason, even to disguise his witches.” When I scrunch my brow, she puts her tea down. “You know how Alexei was the one who defeated the Warlock?”

“No.”

She rolls her eyes. “I thought you’d read Councilor Quinton’s books.”

“I didn’t get that far. I’m at the part where Alexei hasn’t joined the war. He’s living with the fae and refusing to fight Valentin. Quinton doesn’t explain why.”

“Yes, that’s right. He wouldn’t fight for a long time. Apparently, he and Valentin were close friends. But after King Illarion was injured and Valentin started raising the dead, he intervened. He needed help. The Warlock was crazy powerful by that point and god-protected, but the prince is basically the reason that he sleeps in a cave and isn’t ruling the supernatural world.”

Well, well. From Quinton’s book, I had the image of a spoiled prince eating grapes with the fae while everyone else faced the nightmare. I’m kind of relieved to hear he played his part.

“But what’s that got to do with the red-cloaked dude?” I ask.

“Alexei hates the Dra’ka Tul. That’s the name the Warlock followers call themselves. It means Followers of the Shadow. They’re Malukel worshipers. The Warlock is his blessed servant, so they consider him their master. Alexei hates them. And I mean, hates. He kills anyone wearing the red cloak on sight. A few hundred years ago, the Dra’ka Tul became active again. Encouraging the shadow god religion. Positioning themselves in high places and trying to pull the strings of power. When Alexei realized, he went on a killing spree. He personally assassinated every follower he could lay his hands on and anyone he suspected. He would never, ever tolerate one of his witches in red.”

“So that witch can’t have been Alexei’s.” Why is that such a relief? “Which means the dead Blood Servants weren’t his. Which means someone else is trying to take Flanagan off the table and wants the Guardians to think it’s Alexei. But who? The Dracky Tul guys?”

“Well, possibly. They are Alexei’s enemy. But they haven’t been active since he massacred them. That was a few hundred years ago. And why on earth would they choose the commander to kill? He is goddess blessed, I suppose, and she’s their natural enemy, but it doesn’t make sense.”

My blood trickles downward, the hairs at the back of my neck rising. The attempt on Flanagan’s life has got something to do with me. With the Sabel thing. Of course it has. Are the shadow followers trying to protect me? From Flanagan? From some perceived threat, the way they did when I was a baby? Does that mean Flanagan’s in danger if I stay at Blackriver?

“Are you okay? You’ve gone pale.”

“Huh? I-I’m fine.”

She peers at me, then lays a hand over my forehead. “Well, you haven’t got a temperature, but your skin is glistening as if you have. And it has that sickly pallor again. You looked amazing when you came out from seeing Alexei. I can probably guess why, but it’s worn off.” She gives me a meaningful look.

“I’m fine.”

“You know, if you do start needing blood—”

“I don’t need blood.”

“I’m just saying—”

“I’m fine, Laasya.”

“I’m sure we could sort something out—”

“I’m fine, Laasya!”

She flinches, snapping her mouth shut. Her brown cheeks flush darker, and I immediately regret my raised voice. I take her hand. “Shit. That was out of order. I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologize.” She squeezes my fingers. “It’s scary. I understand that. I just want you to know I’m okay with it. With you. The way you are. All of you.”

I swallow a lump, and my eyes prickle. “Yeah. Thanks,” I mumble.

Laasya swipes a lamb sandwich from the plate and holds it to my face. “Here. I’ll forgive you if you eat something.”

I’d bring the thing back up again if I tried to eat it, but I take it from her hand. “To get back to the problem. Could that blond vampire at the club, the one Quinton got the address from, be a Dracky Tul dude?”

Laasya straightens her glasses and puffs out a breath. “Well, there are plenty of Anlu’kyr who worship the shadow god, so it’s not impossible. It’s just hard to believe the Dra’ka Tul would be so active again. Malukel worshippers are always around, secret and hidden, but what’s brought them out of the shadows, so to speak?”

“But if they’re raising trouble again, if Flanagan is at risk from them for whatever reason, how do we find them?” How do *I* find them? Because if they are the reason Flanagan nearly died, I’ll be following Alexei’s example and killing every last one. After they give me any info they can on my parents. I haven’t forgotten my biological mum and dad may have been shadow followers themselves.

“It’s impossible.” Laasya flops her hands against her knees. “They’re very good at hiding. They’ve had to be because of Alexei. Their High Priest never shows himself. Even the followers don’t know what he, or gosh, even she, looks like because the followers are only ever directed through psychic communication. They all wear a ring with a spelled crystal that helps with that. The High Priest must wear the mother stone.”

She gives the uneaten sandwich perched on my knee a pointed glare.

I nibble at the lamb. If Alexei found these shadow followers, then I can too. I need to talk to Quinton. “So to spot a follower, we look for their magic rings? What do the crystals look like?”

“They’re cleverly glamoured. Only another follower can see them. It’s sort of like an affiliate badge. Obviously, *you* might be able to see their rings, but they’ve had a long time to develop their deceptions. If they’re at fault for the commander’s poisoning, finding them won’t be easy.”

I sink back, too tired to even think, never mind contemplate chasing the members of a crazy cult.

Laasya watches me with a concerned expression. “He’s going to be okay, you know?”

My stomach twists. I swallow the dry lump in my throat. “Matron made it sound as if he’s at risk of permanent damage.”

“He’s blessed, Michael. And the goddess will have chosen him for a reason. She’s not going to waste her servant. And don’t forget he’s three hundred and sixty years old. He’s probably been through much worse in his long lifetime.”

I stare at the garden, my body heavy with a ten-ton weight. I appreciate Laasya’s attempts to reassure me, but I can’t let go of the worry wedged in my chest. I’m already a risk to Flanagan’s livelihood, his position at Blackriver, and now my presence could literally be putting his life in danger. Even if he recovers from this attempt to end him, what about the next one?

Laasya takes hold of my hand. “You need rest. You’ve been through a lot these last twenty-four

hours. If you promise me you'll stay here in the commander's rooms until tomorrow morning, I'll leave you to it. I can take some things back to the infirmary for him."

"Won't Seonu be pissed at you for leaving the dangerous half breed unattended?"

"I'll face the captain. Get a hot shower, then sleep."

"Sleep does sound bloody good."

Laasya purses her lips in thought, still holding my hand. Her thumb absently strokes mine. Her skin looks darker set against my pale fingers. Her touch feels tingly and warm. I never feel erotic tension with Laasya, only an easy comfort. It's restful.

"Tomorrow we can try and work out why the prince would sell the students just to make us find them," she says after a while. "He's definitely up to something, and he's always ten steps ahead, so we need to figure out what it is."

"We need to find the students *and* the Dicky Tel." My voice slurs with tiredness.

"The Dra'ka Tul." She giggles.

"Whatever."



CHAPTER 22

I wake with a start in Flanagan's bed, a dream filled with shadows and red cloaks shattering against the morning light. A layer of sweat drenches my body, the furs tangling around my legs like a nest of boa constrictors. I feel as if I've been at war all night with some monstrous foe. Wiping my face with a hand, I sit up and push the covers off, then peer around the empty room to get my bearings.

Rain patters against the windows. The smell of freshly dampened grass wafts in through the open door. A hint of sunlight flashes through the heavy clouds at the far edge of the trees. Wait. That's the south side. It's midday when the sun reaches that side of the grounds. How can it be midday? Have I slept all morning?

Shit. Flanagan.

I scramble to the edge of the bed, my limbs trembling. My muscles ache. My joints crack as if with disuse. What the hell's wrong with me? I feel like an old man. When I try to stand, a wash of dizziness thumps me back to the mattress. I grasp my forehead to steady the drunken slosh of my brain.

It's not the Flame. She tingles through my veins as always, her heated presence warming my gut and spine and keeping my morning wood alert. I'll need Grounding at some point soon; burning off the excess myself only works so many times. Resisting my usual wank in the shower will take some willpower, but I don't feel at all Hazed.

It must be the lack of food. I haven't eaten since before we left Blackriver to go to the safe house. My body needs meat and greens and maybe fluids.

I rise, but a pain in my chest stills me. A throbbing ache nestled beneath my sternum pulses like a broken tooth. I press the heel of my hand against my heart. What's that about? Feels like I've lost something vital. It's not unlike the grief I experienced after John died—that relentless pain that can't be fixed by analgesics. My body's grieving something, an absence.

Has something happened to Flanagan? I need to get to the infirmary. I jump to my feet and head for the bathroom, ignoring dizziness and creaking joints, but the ache in my chest stops me again. I lean against the bathroom doorframe and rub at my sternum.

It's not about Flanagan. It's something else. Something... Two black eyes, the color of melted onyx, float through my mind. The smooth curve of an elegant cheekbone. Skin so pale, so ethereal, it resembles living porcelain. A sharp pain zaps through my chest. Fuck, that hurts. I raise my wrist and examine the leather cuff and its glittering blue stone. The realization thumps me with the force of a swinging kick bag. I'm missing Alexei, our connection. I didn't even realize we had one, but now this sapphire has disrupted the link, it's like I've got a ruddy hole in my chest where his presence should be.

What the fuck?

Is that a vampire DNA thing? Or something else? What the hell did the prince do to me the first time we met?

Anger trumping pain, I head across the bathroom for the shower. Fine. If I have to live with a hole in my chest the size of a canyon, so be it. I'd rather have that than a constant connection with that fucking vampire.

I pass the cupboard where I've hidden Alexei's vial of blood behind the cleaning fluid to mask its smell.

I stop in my tracks.

Crap.

The mere thought of that ruby liquid yanks a maelstrom of desire into my throat, and I have to grip the sink edge. Swallow the burst of saliva that fills my sleep-dry mouth. With every ounce of strength left to me, knuckles white, I ride an overwhelming wave of thirst. It's almost more than I can handle. I've never wanted something more in my entire life. This must be how alcoholics feel when they're challenged by the seductive sparkle of wine.

I huff out air as if I'm running a marathon, bury the squirming beast of desire behind an iron-hard shutter. I'm not drinking his fucking blood. I'll die before I drink from Alexei again. If my body ever needs blood to survive, then I'll take it from a pig.

The clamor slowly subsides. My breathing changes to a soft pant. I'm going to go see the man who actually matters to me. Alexei and his blood and his games and his smirking lieutenant can go fuck themselves.

Ten minutes later, dressed in Guardian-issue suedes and one of the gray student shirts, I open the apartment door. Jenson and Lockdale stand to attention on either side.

"Lads," I say by way of greeting, walking straight past them and up the long corridor.

"Wait," Lockdale shouts, marching to keep up with me. "The Whisperer has been ordered to stay in the commander's rooms today."

"Is that right?" I don't bother slowing down.

Jenson rushes up beside me with his tentative but friendly smile. "It's true, Michael. Captain Seonu was very clear you weren't to be allowed out."

I make a beeline for the stairwell that will take me downstairs to the infirmary. "Well, I'm out. The captain can come drag me back herself if she has a problem with that."

In the hallway, students mingle in thick clumps, and I have to dodge through them to reach the stairs. The shouts of trainers in the field outside break over the yammering voices. Doors open and bang closed. A bell chimes to signal the lunchtime migration toward the dining hall. I ignore the wide-eyed

stares and whispers as I pass and hurry down the steps to the lower floor. Jenson and Lockdale scurry behind me.

“Captain Seonu will cage you for this,” Lockdale grunts at me.

“She can try.” I stride along the corridor that leads to the infirmary. And come eye to eye with two more Guardian soldiers blocking the way, arms folded, gruff faces watching my approach. They adjust their stance, readying themselves to bar my entry.

We take each other in, assessing size and weight. They’re both a similar height to me, though not quite as broad, but they’re trained soldiers, and I’ve seen how well Guardians fight. They have a lethal, neatly delivered combat style, not unlike the moves Special Forces use.

The one on the right with short dark hair raises a hand. “I’m sorry, Whisperer. Captain’s orders. You’re not to be allowed entry to the infirmary.” He can’t quite meet my glare and looks as if he’s embarrassed by his own words. The guard next to him coughs and glances away.

Fury bubbles. My fingers tingle with the threat of Flame. I close my eyes and take a steadying breath. I’m going in that infirmary, Seonu’s paranoia be damned, but I can’t afford to make a scene.

The taller blond Guardian on the right juts his chin to me. “Is it true you rescued Sergeant Mason’s sister and saved the commander’s life?”

Before I can answer, Jenson pipes up from beside me. “It’s true. Sergeant Mason told me the commander might have died if Michael hadn’t gotten there on time.” He earns a betrayed glower from Lockdale.

After a brief pause, the blond-haired soldier glances at his colleague, then steps aside. “I didn’t see the Whisperer come through. Did you, Miller?”

Miller shakes his head and moves the other way, freeing up the door. “I don’t think he’s been here, Jones. Can’t stop him if we don’t see him.”

“I’m seeing him,” Lockdale huffs.

“Shut it, Lockdale,” Miller fires at him. He nods for me to go through. “Give the commander our regards.”

“Thanks. Yeah, I will.” If he’s awake. My stomach twists. I swallow the fear and push through the door.

Lockdale and Jenson try to follow, but Miller blocks their way, and I’m left to walk the long ward alone. I keep my head low, hands firmly in my pockets, as I trundle my way to the side room. Tension grips my shoulders by the time I reach the white door. I’m not looking forward to the sight of Flanagan’s pale form laid out like the dead. My legs tremble, whether that’s with nerves or weakness, I’m not sure.

Opening the door freezes me midstep. My heart thuds to a stop.

The bed is empty. Sheets smooth and neatly made, tucked beneath the mattress. Where’s...? Surely the matron would have sent word if...

A tall figure, long wet hair loose around his shoulders, a white towel wrapped around giant thighs, enters from the shower room at the far side of the bed.

“Michael,” Flanagan says, his quiet baritone sending a rush of warmth through my chest.

“Flanagan. You’re—you’re...” His towering stature fills the room the way it always does, bulging pecs and arms as broad as ever. His silver eyes twinkle with their usual diamond light as he takes me

in. Familiar sun-browed gold has replaced the sickly white skin, but a string of black lines still webs the side of his neck, disappearing into his beard.

With a few strides of his long legs, he meets me in the center of the room, and we crash into a fierce embrace. Awkward self-consciousness forgotten, I throw my arms around him and pull him in tight, reveling in his familiar smell and his hot skin against me. Flame sparks between us. I grip a fist of his wet hair, and he gathers my face into his neck and sucks in a deep breath of my scent.

“Michael, Michael.”

“Fuck, it’s good to see you,” I mumble into his damp warmth. “I thought... How are you?” I lean back, eyeing the black lines. “When did you come round?”

“I’m well enough,” he says, answering the concern in my expression. “I woke about an hour ago. The sisters worked on me all night. I owe them a debt.” He lifts my chin. “And you. I owe you a debt too.”

“You don’t owe me anything. I should have gotten to you sooner.”

He squeezes my shoulders. “You saved my life, Michael. I would certainly have died if you hadn’t reached me when you did. How did you know? How did you get to Hampstead from the...” He pauses, taking in my appearance. “Are you well?”

“I’m fine.” I rub my chest, knowing damn well I look like shit. Pale and tired and sweaty. My legs quiver with weakness. I’m finding it difficult to focus.

His perceptive eyes assess me, absorbing my awkward stance and my trembling hands. I shove them into my pockets and back farther away.

“Did the sisters examine you?” he asks. “Have they checked you for silver poisoning?”

“The silver didn’t affect me much. I’m alright. Tired, that’s all. I just need to eat. Stop worrying about me. It’s you who nearly...” I can’t finish that sentence. “Are you coming back to your room? Do you want me to ask Eva for something so it’s ready?”

“I’ll need to take a full report first and see Major Zahir. Then I’ll ring the general and catch her up with events.”

My gaze strays back to the dark web of lines. “Shouldn’t you be, like, resting? Can’t the reports and stuff wait till tomorrow?”

“I’m well enough,” he repeats. “My body has regenerated most of the damaged tissue. This isn’t my first poisoning. I just need to be cautious around silver for a few months.”

Before I can ask him more about that, the door opens. The scent of bird shifter hits my nostrils. “Recruit, what are you— Oh, Commander, I—”

“Captain Seonu, good to see you.”

“Good to see you too, sir.” Her usually sharp tone tremors with a touch of quickly suppressed emotion. “Matron Hadlee hadn’t informed me you were awake.”

“I know. My choice. I needed a moment. If you could give me a few minutes with Michael, then I’ll hear a full report.”

“Yes, sir. Of course, sir.”

“And ask Matron in, please. I’d like to see her.”

I don’t bother glancing behind me. I don’t need to see the glower to know it’s there.

Flanagan grabs the dark suedes on the chair and slides them onto his legs. His movements are as

smooth and graceful as they ever were, that perfect balance that makes his actions appear grounded and effortless.

“Is everything okay with Seonu?” he asks.

“She’s convinced it was the prince who poisoned you and that I somehow helped him. I don’t think she wants me near you in case Alexei has turned me into one of his secret assassins.”

“You don’t believe Alexei set the trap?” He shrugs on the cream linen shirt and fastens the buttons.

“It may not have been him. You need to talk to Laasya. She understands why.”

“I will, but I’m interested in your opinion.”

Alexei’s words at the club, the figure in the red cloak, Laasya’s story about the prince’s killing rampage all cluster in my head as a tangled mess. Where to start? I can’t think straight. I’m still reeling from the fact that Flanagan is standing in front of me not dead and healthy. Well, apart from those black lines—the hint that poison still lingers in his body. Threatening to take him from me.

A knock at the door interrupts my first attempt to form a sentence.

“Come in,” Flanagan shouts.

“You wanted to see me, Commander?” Matron Hadlee steps up beside me.

“Yes, Matron. Thank you. I’d like you to examine Michael, please. Full blood works and a check for toxins.”

“Flanagan, I’m alright. They’ve done all that. I just need to eat.”

“Then they need to do it again,” he says curtly, tucking his shirt into his trousers. “You look as if you’re about to collapse.”

The nurse clasps her hands against her starched white apron, face stern. “We can examine Michael again if this will reassure you, Commander, but it isn’t necessary.”

“Matron, he’s clearly unwell. There could have been other poisons at the gatehouse. I’d like him checked over, please.”

She purses her lips and gives him an odd look, then turns to me. “Michael, you need to go to the kitchens and order steak. Ask them to cook it rare. Eat as much of it as you can. You’ll need to do this daily. Any red meat will do, but it must be rare or even raw if you can stomach it. I think you know why.” Her severe eyes fix on Flanagan for a meaningful second. Then she walks from the room, leaving that bomb in the silence between us.

I slowly raise my head to meet Flanagan’s heavy gaze and swallow.

“Michael?” He moves toward me, but I back away to the door.

“I told you I’m alright. There’s... There’s some shit we need to talk about, that’s all.”

Shit, like, Flanagan, I’m a full-blown bloodsucker in waiting. And oh, by the way, I’m also the descendent of an outlawed bloodline, but hey ho.

“Has something happened?” The worry and fear in his eyes are hard to look at. He knows damn well what’s wrong with me. We both do. He doesn’t want to see it, and neither do I. I get the impression Flanagan dreads the thought of me turning, becoming blood dependent, becoming what they all hate. Maybe it repulses him to think of me needing regular doses of blood.

“Nothing’s happened. I-I better get to the kitchen for that steak, eh?” I turn, heart like concrete. I’ve just got Flanagan back, and I want to spend time with my man. Let him do whatever he wants to me. But that pending conversation will ruin all that. I’m likely to lose him again. Maybe for good.

“Michael?” I keep my attention fixed on the door handle, and he sighs. “Go back to my rooms. Eva will bring you the steak. Eat and rest. I’ll be with you as soon as I can, and we’ll talk. Hmm?”

“Yeah, yeah. Sure. We’ll talk.”



CHAPTER 23

After I've chomped down the biggest stack of beef steaks I've ever seen on one plate, enough to feed a pack of hungry dogs and then some, I slump into the couch to recover. I didn't manage all of it—Flanagan may have gone overboard with his instructions to Eva—but I started feeling better before I even reached the second steak. A rising sense of alertness and energy replaced the trembling weakness. But though I've scarfed down as much as my stomach can handle, a background emptiness remains. A nagging desire.

The tug of Alexei's blood waiting in its glass vial like liquid heroin scratches at my veins, calling me to the bathroom for what I really crave. The tension of refusing the persistent urge keeps my fingers curled into fists and my foot tapping the rug. The Flame streams through my limbs, its ever-present tingle in my groin strengthened along with my energy. The impulse to give her the stimulation she wants almost has me opening my fly, but if I do that, I'll come for sure, and I'm determined to wait for Flanagan.

Leaning a shoulder on the patio doorframe, I stare out at the light drizzle, trying to focus on my conversation with Laasya, on the lab and the students, and Alexei's clue. But my mind keeps snapping back to the image of Flanagan in the hospital bed, face as pale as the sheets. If those cult wackos are responsible for that, I'll hunt every one of those nutters down and wring their necks. Whether my parents were fellow followers or not. Starting with that witch in the red cloak.

Why the hell would they want to kill Flanagan? Why now? It has to be something to do with me. With the Sabel thing. But what? What's Flanagan got to do with it? He doesn't even know about my ancestry.

My stomach clenches. I rub my eyes. Yeah, that's right. He doesn't know. Doesn't know I'm a deepwater charge waiting beneath his life to one day explode and ruin everything. Lose him his position, his reputation, maybe even his life if those shadow followers try again.

Don't you know you have my heart?

Shit, Gabriel. Why did you have to go and be the most important person I've ever met in my life?

How can I stay and settle with him, knowing his trust in me is based on a lie? How can I tell him if

the result is the end of everything he's built for himself here?

But if I leave... If I leave to protect him, to protect myself, I might as well throw myself off a cliff. Because a life without Gabriel, my grumpy werewolf, my sexy Viking, is an empty fucking hole that doesn't bear thinking about. If I'm honest, the only reason I want to be in the Guardians is to be with Flanagan.

Basically, I'm fucked if I stay, and I'm fucked if I go.

Feeling dog tired again, I slump onto the couch. With barely a thought, I pull open my fly and absently stroke my erection to keep the Flame satisfied while I watch the shifting sky. Clouds pass. The same thoughts continue to swirl. My mind drifts.

"Michael." The soft resonant voice echoes through my confused dream. I jerk awake. Flanagan's tall presence is looming over me. How the hell?

He's changed into his T-shirt and trousers, the ones he wears when he's relaxing at the end of his day. He must have been here a while. I never heard a thing. My half-eaten plate of meat has gone. A late afternoon shadow has crept across the lawn. How long was I asleep?

Jumping to my feet, I rub grit from my eyes. "I didn't realize you were here."

"I know. I was reluctant to disturb you." His gaze takes in my disheveled hair and clothes, my open fly, my softy poking out. I go to fasten up, but he circles my waist and pulls me to him.

"How do you feel?" he asks.

"Better. You?" Dark lines still web the left side of his neck.

"I'm good." He leans down and kisses me, hand to my jaw. A long, soft, savoring of my lips and mouth. I revel in his taste, his warmth, the prickle of his beard. Feels good. Feels so fucking right. He raises my chin and takes a closer look, absorbing the features of my face as if it's been weeks, not hours, since he saw me.

"Hey," I say.

His eyes crinkle with his smile. "Hey," he echoes.

"You scared me there, big guy. That was a bit too close. I thought..."

"I should have been more cautious. I'm sorry you had to go through that."

"It's alright. It wasn't your fault. Just don't do it again, yeah?" I manage a half smile.

He sighs and tucks my hips in closer. "You knew I was in danger. I should have listened. I assumed you were just—"

"Being a pushy dick," I say with feeling.

"Hmm. I'm sorry. But next time please tell me specifically that it's intuition. You're a supernatural, Michael. I'll pay attention."

"I didn't know what the fuck it was. Some kind of Whisperer woo-woo or something. Maybe the goddess hinting at me."

He regards me for a moment, an odd look in his eyes, then only *hmms*.

"I don't think it was Alexei who set the trap, though," I say. "What did Seonu tell you?"

"Captain Seonu is convinced the prince attempted to assassinate me. Part of a larger plan. Nelson and Zahir agree with her. So does the general."

"And you?"

He purses his lips, giving that slow nod he does when he's having weighty thoughts. "I think I ought

to reserve judgment, but I don't believe it was Alexei. The Anlu'kyr know their goddess is real and vengeful and would never risk taking the life of her marked servant. Not to mention Alexei has had two hundred years to kill me. But if it wasn't him, someone would very much like us to think it was."

Guilt creeps upward, filling my throat. Tension stiffens my arms around his waist. The desire to tell him about the shadow cult sits on my tongue, but now isn't the time to open that can of worms. Just after Flanagan has recovered from near death isn't the moment to blow his life apart.

"Let's discuss this later." He draws back. "You said you had something to tell me. I want to hear it." He smooths his thumb over my cheek. "Your skin is still pale. You look—"

"I'm alright." I pull out of his hold. "I feel better after that steak."

"Talk to me. Tell me what's happening."

"Nothing's happening. I'm just—"

"Michael." A tired disquiet bleeds from beneath his tenderness. "I'm too old to be lied to. I need to know what's going on."

I release a heavy sigh, stepping farther away. "There's something I need to tell you. To show you. I was going to wait, but..." Buttoning my fly, I stalk to the bathroom to retrieve the offending object from its hidey-hole behind the cold-water pipe. When I return, tension tightening my breath, Flanagan waits by the open doors to the garden, hands on his hips.

I plant myself in front of him and, drawing on some extra ball juice, offer what's in my closed fist. "Don't... don't freak out, alright?"

He opens his hand, and with a huge effort of will, I let the vial go, dropping it onto his palm. I step back, thumbs hooked in my pockets, ignoring the jangling discomfort of seeing the vial in another's hand. My chest clenches.

At first, he frowns as if he doesn't quite understand what he's holding. When he brings it to his nose and sniffs, he jerks it away from him, sucking in a sharp breath and swearing in Finnish. He swallows, and a slight tremor passes through his body. Then his eyes rise to meet mine. Hard. Fierce.

"He gave you this at the club?"

I take a long deep breath and plunge forward into the conversation I should have had with Flanagan over two weeks ago. "He left it in my pocket at the cliffside. In the Faelands. I found it when I got back."

Flanagan studies my face, a slash to his brow. I look down.

"You've kept it all that time. And hid it. In the bathroom." Not questions. Conclusions.

"Yeah. I don't know why. I don't... I'm sorry. I—"

"Have you been drinking his blood, Michael? Is this what you're telling me? Is this why you're turning?"

"I'm not turn— Fuck. I didn't open it. I just... kept it."

"Your hands tremble like an addict's. Your skin is pale as if you lack a vital nutrient, even after a plate of raw meat. Your eyes are glassy. Your body is clearly craving blood. How else would this have happened?" He's waving the vial, using it to gesture. I have to clench my fists to stop myself from snatching it away from him.

Irritation intensifies my glare. "I haven't been drinking blood, okay? No more than the drops Alexei gave me. I'm not turning, Flanagan. Not the way you think anyway."

He narrows his eyes. Betrayal and fear crowd bewilderment. He doesn't know whether I'm deluded or lying. It kills me to see how much that hurts him.

I glance out to the garden to gather strength, then meet the uncertainty in his gaze. I keep my voice soft. "I'm not a Channeler whose transformation can be kept at bay. I'm sorry. I'm really fucking sorry. I know that's what you'd prefer, but I was born this way. Alexei's blood woke what I already am. Yeah, I think it might be I need blood, I don't know. It's all so fucking new. But I'm not turning because of the blood. I'm maturing because I'm already one of them. I'm already a... already a... fuck." I look out of the doors again, unable to finish the sentence. The reality is too freaking wild.

Flanagan steps closer, turning my face to look at him. "Vadim told you this?"

"Yeah. And I know he's right. I can feel it happening." I cautiously meet his eyes. "I'm so sorry. I know you hate the fuckers. I know you don't want this and—"

"Shh, please. Stop." He pulls me to him, resting my head in his neck.

I grasp his shirt at the back, but I'm too stiff to give in to his embrace. "I was afraid to tell you. I know you hate them. Hate the blood thing."

"Michael. Please. Stop now." He holds me tight, squeezing me against him until I settle. I drop my shoulders and sink into his strength, but I still can't quite relax. I'm dreading his next words.

He kisses my face, his breathing heavy against my skin. "Maturing," he says, his voice tinged with wonder. "I assumed... I knew your DNA was changing you, but I just hoped you were like the many Channelers I've known who slowly turned over decades. I thought if you kept away from the blood, maybe... I hoped you had a chance to—"

"Stay human," I mumble into his neck.

He sighs. "Forgive me. My willful ignorance has left you vulnerable, left you starving for what you clearly need. You have no reason to apologize. Not for what you are. You're a youngling, and you need feeding until your fangs mature. No wonder you're so pale and tired. I'm ashamed Matron had to inform me with a not-so-subtle hint."

Another apology sits on the edge of my tongue—the thought of them having to sort out blood for me making me cringe—but I manage to leave it there. He's right. I don't have to apologize for what I am. I can't fucking help it. I just can't bear the thought of Flanagan being disappointed with me. Disgusted even.

"I don't hate the Anlu'kyr," he whispers against my lips, then draws back. "I don't blame them for their need for blood. The gods themselves saw fit to make them that way. I only hate the slavery. The Hazing of Channelers without their consent." He rests his head on mine. "I'm more the monster than any of them. I could never hate you for simply being what you are."

Flanagan's the least monstrous person I've ever met, and I've met a few. But I know he can't hear it. I've tried. So I don't bother correcting him. "I'll need blood every day, will I? Is that how this works?"

His mouth twitches with a suppressed tension. "Every day. From the vein, or you will weaken and eventually..."

"From the vein? I was thinking I could drink a glass of pig's blood or something."

He lays his hand on my shoulder, strokes my neck with his thumb. My eyes clock the vial still held in his other hand. "Pigs blood will do nothing more than slow your death. The Anlu'kyr require fresh

blood from a living vein to survive. Humans and shifters are their natural prey. Animal blood cannot sustain them long term.”

“How the hell am I going to do that? I can’t drink from someone’s vein.” And who the hell would ever volunteer for such a thing?

He quirks a smile, as if amused at my response.

“I’ll drink pig’s blood. It might be different for me. Maybe animal blood will be enough for a part human.”

“That’s unlikely. I’m sorry. And I assure you, you won’t resist once your body has tasted satisfaction.” He lifts the vial, the crimson liquid catching the light from the wall lamp, and my gaze fastens to it like it’s my own precious ruby he holds in his hand. All the words I was about to say regarding blood and my questionable need for it fall away.

“You can give me that back now,” I say almost dazedly, rubbing at my sternum.

“We need to destroy this. You do understand that?”

His words punch me like a fist. “What? No, that’s... No.” I reach to take it from his fingers, and he jerks it back. He narrows his eyes.

“Their blood has power. Especially his. It’s how the head of a house bonds loyalty to them. And he’s the royal prince. If you drank this—”

“I’m not going to drink it, alright, but it’s mine.” I lift my hand again. He snatches his away.

Something wild and dark thumps to the front of my mind, spreading through me like venomous gas and taking over, filling me with an iron certainty. I look him in the eyes and hold out my hand. I don’t recognize the deep, menacing voice that resonates from my gut. “Give me the vial, Gabriel.”

He stills and blinks. “Michael?”

“It’s mine. Place it in my palm.” Some distant part of me is aware of how out of character this is, how weird my cavernous voice sounds. But that blood is mine. Mine in the way my eyes are mine or my hands are mine, and it’s been away from me long enough.

Flanagan stares at me, his shock and confusion plain as he takes in this stranger before him. “You’ve already bonded with him,” he whispers. “That has to be what this is.”

“Give me the blood. I’ll not ask again.”

“And I will not tolerate the prince controlling you.” He raises the vial, folds it into his palm, and crushes it. Glass splinters, and so does something inside me. The precious crimson liquid drips from his closed fist and splashes to the floor. Wasted. Lost. My heart crashes. A red rage, like a rushing storm, encloses my mind. The room goes black.



CHAPTER 24

“Michael? Michael! Come back to me.”

I twist and turn, struggling beneath a heavy weight. Strong fingers clamp my wrists to a hard floor. I’m almost breaking the hold. If I could just...

Snarls reach my ears. Color and vision return. A maelstrom of silver fire burns across my sight, flowing over and all but consuming the worried face coalescing above me. Flanagan leans over me, straddling my hips, his hair a wild mess. He’s panting as if from exertion. His face bleeds from three deep scratches marring his right cheek, and a rip in his shirt over his chest resembles the slash of sharp claws.

“What the hell, Flanagan? What’s happening?”

“It’s okay.” He exhales. “Everything’s okay. Stay calm.”

The Flame extinguishes, gusting out as if never there. I glance around the room and find chaos. The coffee table’s overturned, its glass smashed across the rug along with the fruit bowl. One of the couches lies on its back. Claw marks scar the walls. And jagged shards have replaced glass in the patio doors.

“What happened?” I ask again. “Did I do this?”

“Just breathe.”

The door to his room bangs open, and soldiers burst into the suite. Seonu and Mason stride toward us, swords drawn. Laasya runs in behind them.

“Eva called us, sir,” Seonu says. “She thought she heard a vampire scream and... shit.” Her shocked face takes in the mess.

“What the fuck?” Mason exclaims. He points to the claw marks down the wall, his eyes wide.

Laasya skids to a halt. She glances between me and the smashed furniture, then shares a look with Flanagan. *Oh*, she mouths.

“I knew it,” Seonu says. “Alexei got to him in the club.” Her sharp eyes fix on Flanagan’s claw-ripped shirt and bleeding cheek. “Is this another assassination attempt?”

“Should I bring the chains, sir?” Mason asks. “Major Zahir has the collar.”

“That won’t be necessary, Sergeant Mason, thank you,” Flanagan answers. “Put your swords away, please.”

After a short pause, they share wary looks but do as he says and sheath their weapons. Seonu gestures to the soldiers by the door with her chin, and they tramp out.

Flanagan’s fierce gaze returns to me. “How do you feel?”

“Huh? Okay. I think.” Not a hundred percent, though. My body trembles as if in shock. A black mist still clogs my mind. I peer at the scratches on his face. What the hell did I just do? Why can’t I remember?

Checking my face one last time, he releases my wrists and stands, then offers a hand to help me up. Seonu and Mason grip sword hilts as I stumble to my feet.

“I can smell vamp blood.” Seonu glances around and stops at the dark drops soaked into the floor.

I look down at the remains of Alexei’s blood. Nothing but splattered droplets on the wooden slats. My sight swims. A tremor runs through my body. Flanagan catches me with an arm around my waist and guides me away to the other couch, the one that survived. Glass crunches under our boots.

“Sit down,” he says. “Take deep breaths.”

I slump onto the edge of the leather and cover my face. My hands shake. My chest aches, deep and painful. I swallow back sobs. What the fuck’s going on?

Flanagan stands close enough for his leg to touch my knee and rests his hand on the back of my neck. A reassuring touch, but I know he’s preparing to use a Flame Hold should he need it. The True Grounder ability could give him power over my mind if he connects with my Flame before I kick off again.

Laasya sits beside me and strokes my back with a warm hand. “It’s okay, Michael.”

Seonu and Mason watch me in alert silence.

Flanagan lifts my wrist and examines the leather cuff. “Can you tell if this is still working?” he asks Laasya.

She glides her thumb over the leather, finding the embedded shard of sapphire, even though she can’t see it. “The spell is currently inactive. It stays inactive until it’s triggered, but I can feel its latent power. I’m certain it’s still working, sir.”

Flanagan nods and drops my wrist. “I needed to be sure.” He looks up at the soldiers. “Everything is under control, thank you. You’re dismissed.”

Seonu places a hand on a hip, her mouth all but falling open. “With respect, sir. I’m not leaving you with Alexei’s assassin. We should place him in the cage until Councilor Quinton can assess the extent of the memory impingement.”

“Michael’s memory hasn’t been tampered with, and I’m not in danger. This was... something else. I think I know how to fix it. I’ll explain later.”

The soldiers still don’t move.

“At least let us put a guard on the door, sir,” Mason requests.

Flanagan sighs, heavy. “Very well. But instruct them not to come in unless I specifically call for their aid.”

“Yes, sir,” Seonu says, sharing a concerned look with Mason.

“I’m taking tomorrow as a rest day. I don’t wish to be disturbed for any reason. Is that clear?”

“Yes, sir,” they say in unison, but they’re not happy. I get their reluctance. They’re worried about leaving their commander, who’s just woken from a near-death poisoning, with the psycho who smashed his room. I wouldn’t want to leave him either.

“We’ll speak tomorrow,” Laasya whispers in my ear. “And don’t worry.” She squeezes my waist, then stands.

With final wary checks, the soldiers reluctantly follow her out of the room.

When the door closes, Flanagan lifts my face to him. “Come to the bed.” His voice sounds steady, patient, but tension tightens his face. Blood still glistens from the cuts on his cheek, even though they’ve already closed—three gashes of red that shouldn’t be there.

“You need to tell me what happened. Did I do that to your face?” Flanagan’s skin may feel soft, but it’s as tough as worn oak. Glass and steel can’t cut him. Apart from silver, only vampire claws and fangs can penetrate his skin.

“It’s nothing.”

“It’s not nothing. I don’t remember any of it.”

“I know. We’ll talk. Come.”

I let him pull me to my feet. I’m still dazed, almost dreamy, as if this is all happening far away. The more I see the damage, the shattered glass, the broken chair, the claw marks, the more horror swells inside me.

Flanagan guides me to the bed, his arm around my waist. “Take your clothes off. You need skin to skin.”

“I need to understand what the hell’s going on. I trashed your room, and you don’t even seem to care.” I turn to him and the four long slits in his linen shirt. “I ripped your shirt.” I finger the jagged material. Inside the holes, four red lines slash across the center of his chest, right across his pecs. “Are they... Are they claw marks?”

“Michael.” He rests his hands on my shoulders. “My shirt, my furniture, these cuts are of no concern to me. You are my concern. Let me help you. Then we’ll talk.”

“Help me how?” I examine my fingers while he undoes my buttons. My nails look normal, short with dull edges, but the skin beneath the nail beds throbs, and telltale flecks of red are caught underneath. I check my teeth. Flat. Normal. Thank fuck. But my gums ache. Just above my incisors.

I look up. Flanagan’s gaze has softened, a gentle understanding in his eyes.

“What’s happening?” I ask. As if I need to.

“You’re changing, Michael.”

I stare at the broken window, trying to process that while he takes off my shirt and undoes my trousers. I know I’m changing, becoming something I don’t understand. But now it’s real and in my face. And the fear that this is more, that this is the beginning of something much worse than being a vampire, crowds my ability to think. That menacing voice. Could this be the first signs of Sabel madness? Am I turning into some kind of Jade Water monster? Something the Guardians would be right to put down?

“I blacked out and went ballistic. You’re saying that’s a normal part of the change?”

Flanagan doesn’t answer straight away. He patiently strips me, folds my clothes, and places them on a chair. Tremors run through me every so often, as if excess energy still fires through my nervous

system. When I'm naked, he shrugs off his own shirt, then envelops me in his arms and pulls me into his warmth. I circle his waist and bury my face in his neck, a long sigh leaving my chest as my body settles against his. I close my eyes to stop myself from seeking the stain on the floor through his hair.

"I'll not pretend I understand what just happened," he says quietly. "Your transformation is... unusual. This show of unconscious power happened the first time Alexei fed you. I think he's bonding you somehow. He must be, though it should take him months to achieve that connection. Please never drink from him again."

He's right. Even now, the ache of Alexei's absence thumps like an empty heartbeat in my chest. He consumes me, thwarts my will with ease whenever I'm near him and even when I'm not. And drinking his blood seals that effect every time.

"I'm sorry I went to see him in the club," I mumble into Flanagan's neck. "I realize now how fucking mental that was."

"And I was hard on you. Yet if you hadn't insisted on seeing him, we may not have the sapphire, and we definitely wouldn't have Ember back. You took a chance. The chance had consequences." He raises my face. "You're impulsive and headstrong with a short fuse, Michael. Your grasp on authority structures is minimal. But you're bold and brave and instinctive, and I wouldn't be alive if you weren't so irritatingly stubborn. We have the sapphire. You're now free from Alexei's Blood Call. You have the chance to choose your own life. I know how to free you from the blood cravings. Let's put this behind us and move on."

I've only ever craved Alexei's blood. Does he realize that? "Blood cravings? I know I look like shit, but I don't actually crave blood."

"You crave *his* blood. You yearn for his taste. That's why you kept the vial."

I can't quite meet his silver intensity. I don't want to confirm that, even though he's unsettlingly bang on. "And you can free me from that? How?"

"By feeding you *my* blood."

I laugh, a shocked expulsion of breath, stepping back to see his face better, but the gravity in his expression makes me swallow. Emotions pass through me from repulsion to hunger and back again. "I can't drink your blood. It's-it's... Fuck." This can't be happening. Drinking Alexei's blood—under influence—is one thing. Drinking someone else's, even Flanagan's, totally sober, takes this shit to a whole other level. "Won't drinking your blood turn me into a werewolf?"

I know it won't. He's explained how the Lycanthrope virus passes to another, but my panicking mind is grabbing at straws.

"Only my bite transfers the virus," he answers calmly. "Come and lie down." He guides me onto the bed, discards his trousers, then joins me.

I lie back on the furs and turn into his stalking approach. "We're not like, gonna do this now, are we?"

"Lie back." He gently pushes me flat with a hand on my chest and reaches to the drawers beside the bed. He returns with a familiar jar, and I watch with distracted wonder as he prepares his long cock with lube. It's not a problem Flanagan's preparing to fuck me, but he's usually so wary about the whole thing.

After wiping some of the cold gel between my butt cheeks, he settles himself over me. Then leaning

on his elbows on either side of my face, he brushes stray hair from my eyes and explores my features with his fingers as if seeing them for the first time.

His deep voice is a quiet rumble against my chest. “You think I don’t know what it is to change without control? Into something you neither want nor understand? Into something that belongs in your nightmares? I know that confusion well. The loneliness. The terrible fear.”

I swallow, tension seeping in again. My eyes flicker over the three glistening cuts on his cheek, the slashes I carved into his chest with the claws I didn’t even know I had. “I hurt you. I wasn’t there to stop it from happening.”

He cups my head with a firm grip and makes me look at him. “I can handle this, Michael. I can handle you. I’m not afraid of your monster. Or your fury.”

My quoted words from the safe house spill warmth through my chest, even as I internally flinch from the word monster.

“You are what you are,” he says. “You need what you need. It is neither your fault nor proof of some fundamental wrongness. And I’m here with you. All the way.”

He raises his wrist to his mouth, and after a click of his teeth, the smell of fresh blood assaults my nostrils. I instantly salivate.

“Shit. Flanagan. I don’t—”

“Drink,” he orders, twisting his wrist and placing it over my mouth.

I turn my face away, but he grips my jaw with his other hand and purposely brushes my lips with his blood. An intense hit of Flanagan’s unique scent engulfs my nose—moonlit forest washed with winter rain. Images of fangs and fur and darkness filter through my mind.

A reflex buried inside my nervous system clamps my mouth to his wrist, and I tongue the rich fluid as if he’s offering wine.

“Good boy,” Flanagan whispers, pushing apart my knees with his and lining his cockhead against my hole.

Flavors of earthy foods like truffle oil and roast lamb coat my tongue and throat as I swallow. A deep satisfaction takes hold, and I gulp without effort, some coiled inner fist releasing its painful hold. The droplets land in my stomach like energy bombs, the explosion through my system akin to a hit of fiery adrenaline.

When I look up and meet Flanagan’s diamond eyes, a window opens into a moonlit world. A land of eternal night and shadow. An enclosing darkness suffused with grief and fury and a sorrow so deep it’s an endless cavernous want. Dark forest fills my mind. A biting rain stings my face. The gut-wrenching howl I’m running from breaks through the night, and a naked terror possesses my chest. Flanagan’s terror. He knew what followed him that night. He knew there was no escape from the creature that made him what he is.

Flanagan sees it too, follows the flow of this sudden, visceral exchange as we gaze at each other. A memory shared through his essence.

“It was a long time ago, Michael.”

He pushes his thick cock through my sphincter as I drink and rocks his hardness deeper to open me. The stretch of his entry should be agony, but his size satisfies an unfurling need within my belly.

“I’ve got you,” he whispers as I whimper and squirm, impatient for him to be inside me. He tugs

his arm from my hold. “That’s enough. You’ll only be able to handle small amounts at first.”

I grasp his wrist to force it back, desperate for more of the earthy goodness. He clamps his hand beneath my jaw and fastens my head down, easily able to quell my twisting struggle.

Forcing open my legs to bury his cock all the way, he kisses my blood-soaked lips. “I know you thirst,” he says against my mouth, “but it’s enough. The needs of a youngling can overwhelm them. Your yearning for blood can quickly escalate, and the more you feed, the more you’ll beg to be fucked hard. Hard enough to hurt.”

“Fuck me then,” I hiss, not recognizing the feral snarl in my voice. Soaring power and energy rush through my veins. My expanded mind flies and dances as if high. I’m lost in swirling silver, in dark shadows and orange moons. In Flanagan. And I fucking love it. But the need in me for more of something, anything, is like a pressure about to break me open.

“Please.” I dig into his arms with my fingers, pushing myself onto his cock. “Please, Flanagan.”

He pulls out and, before I can complain, flips me over onto my front. Closing my legs, he slides his wide girth back into me but pushes my butt cheeks together to tighten my hole, then uses jabbing thrusts to force himself deeper. I fist the furs and almost cry out with the pain, but a crazy pleasure as his blood in my system transforms the agony to ecstasy rolls through me. Once he’s balls deep, he presses me to the bed with his weight and, keeping my legs together with his, fucks fast and deep into my clenched channel.

And man, is it satisfying. It’s like he’s directly answering the wild, clamoring need inside me. Fucking the squirming beast into submission by overwhelming it with sensation. And it’s working. I writhe and sob and beg for more, demanding he fuck me harder, even though he’s slamming me into the mattress. An orgasm hurtles up from his stretching thrusts like a raging river broken through its banks.

His teeth graze my neck, the sharp tips of his incisors dragging over the skin, and his possessive growl rumbles through my chest. *Mine*, it says.

I explode, hot fluid heating my abs as it squirts from my trapped cock.

He follows, pushing his girth deep to empty himself. Heat fills my insides.

“*Rakkaani*,” he murmurs over and over as the aftershocks leave us twitching together in a crumpled heap.

He holds me to him while we recover, kissing my face and neck. “I love you, Michael. I love you. Whatever happens, that won’t change. Can you hear that?”

His words ripple through me like the warmth of the sun. A burst of feeling rises and nearly makes it to my lips. But my suffocating guilt smothers the “I love you” before it’s spoken. I love him. I know it’s love. I’ve never felt this way before. This certainty. But the thought I could lose him is like a hot knife waiting to gut me.

When I don’t speak, he holds my head to his, pressing a kiss to my hair. “I’m not going to leave you,” he says softly. “Is that what you fear? You’re stuck with me. With this old, gnarly wolf. I’m yours.”

Still tongue-tied, I avoid his eyes. I believe him. But I don’t deserve what he’s offering. Because all I have to offer him in return is pain.



CHAPTER 25

I wake hungry. And not for my usual breakfast staple. This hunger doesn't reside in the stomach; it lives in the veins. It's a twitchy empty feeling that something is off and needs solving pronto.

Before I can voice the growing want, Flanagan's already lubed and ready, nudging that massive cock of his into me from behind as he gives me his punctured wrist. I clamp on and open my legs, wanting what he's offering so bad, I'm squirming and whimpering. Something he clearly gets off on, judging by his wolfy rumble and the canines pinching my shoulder.

I feel no fear he's going to bite. That constant inner battle Flanagan lives with seems to settle when his beast gets to fuck me and feed me at the same time. He pummels me into the mattress with complete abandon, and because his blood roars through my veins, I can take his pounding fire and return it.

With my hunger satiated, I'm in a warm, floppy state, and Flanagan carries my drunken ass to his huge corner bath for a long soak. After he joins me in the water, he thoroughly washes me with his lemon-scented soap, then pulls me back against his chest. He seems in his element, soft and content, more relaxed than I've seen him for weeks. Maybe ever. The black lines still web his neck, as distinct as they were when he first woke from his coma, but they don't appear to be affecting his strength or mood.

When wrinkles start setting in, we reluctantly give up the bath and return to the bedroom, finding it swept of broken glass. The patio door has no window, but the morning is dry and bright, and it's warm enough. I can almost pretend I didn't go vampire-nut-job and trash his room. Almost.

We stuff ourselves with breakfast and gallons of coffee and settle back on the bed for a lazy morning, falling into easy conversation and swapping stories from our past. Flanagan tells me about his Irish father, who was also called Gabriel Flanagan. A mercenary in some Finnish war who stayed to marry a local lass. Then his mother, who he speaks about with an almost reverential tone. A weaver's daughter from northern Finland and a bloodline of exceptional Grounders.

I answer his questions about my life, about the foster families and the orphanage I spent time in, but I quickly change the subject back to Flanagan. I just don't talk about my shit if I can help it, and he's

been places and done things I can barely get my head around. He's from a time before streetlights and jet engines, when world travel meant wooden ships and horses. I want to know everything.

"So the husband sent the assassin after *you*?" I ask. We're in Istanbul 1869.

"No, the husband sent the assassin after his estranged wife. He just didn't expect me to be in his wife's bed. And the assassin didn't expect a man with claws and fangs."

"Whoa. He must have shit himself. Did you kill him?"

"I sent him back with a message, a very clear message. The husband didn't bother her again."

He smooths his hand over my butt cheeks, seeming to enjoy the pert flesh beneath his palms. I'm lying between his legs, flopped on his chest, head resting against his shoulder. I kiss his neck, and he hums, a satisfied rumble under my ear.

"This was after you lived in Italy?" I ask.

"Yes, I traveled the Middle East after that."

"And how old were you? How long was this after you were with the Anlu'kyr?"

His hand stroking over my butt stills. Shit. He's just so relaxed and chatty. The question spilled out.

"Sorry. I didn't—"

"It's okay. You're right to ask." His sigh ghosts my ear. "It's time I shared that part of my life with you." He circles my back, gently wrapping me against him, and breathes in my scent again, something he does a lot. "I don't visit my time with the Anlu'kyr often. A Lycanthrope cannot forget. The virus constantly renews the brain, keeping the memories as sharp and fresh as the day they were created. Same for the Anlu'kyr. It's why we can grieve for centuries. But I want you to know me, Michael. Ask me what you want. I'll try to answer."

That grief is what I want to ask him about. His explanation solves the mystery of why it's so raw, even after hundreds of years, but I want to know who he mourns.

Unable to hold back my burning question, I jump straight in. "Is the memory of your daughters the reason you don't want to think about those years? You never told me if they were still alive or not." He told me they were gone, but I wasn't sure what he meant. Gone from his life or gone as in died?

His breath stutters, and he tenses beneath me.

Dammit, too much, Blakeley. "Sorry, I—"

"No, it's fine. It's just not something I talk about." He takes another long breath. "Not every Channeler survives the change. Many die, their bodies unable to convert to digesting sustenance from blood. Enka and Silja lived seventy-one years. Young, vibrant... happy. But apparently, they were never meant to be Anlu'kyr. The goddess chose to take them home to the Flame instead."

"Shit. I'm so sorry. That's..." Fuck. What can I say in the face of such loss? I can't even imagine what that must have been like. "Did you say they were happy?"

"Alexei kept his word. He told me if I stayed and served him, he would ensure they were well cared for. And he did. He bought them for an extortionate price from the vampire who took them, and placed them with his aunt Katerina. An Anlu'kyr unlike any other. She only accepts fully consenting Blood Servants and has no slaves in her care. She treats her Channelers with kindness, like family. No chains. No collars. She gives them everything they need in exchange for their service. My daughters loved her."

"That... that sounds okay." And almost like Alexei doing the right thing for a change, though he did

use them to force Flanagan's compliance. "So they were addicted to the blood, but they were okay with it?"

"Far too dependent to be freed. We have the technology to help Channelers now, but in those days, after drinking for so long, both Blood Servants and slaves would die without their regular doses." He plays with my hair and stares through the window. "I wanted a different life for my daughters. A simple life in Finland, with husbands and children. I struggle, even now, to let go of my guilt that I took that from them. But they were content. They both fell in love. They lived a life they wanted with the people they wanted."

That's a different picture than the one I imagined. I had a life of servitude and misery in mind. A forced slavery with no way out. I pull back and look at him. Buried strain creases the edges of his eyes. "And what about you? Were you satisfied?"

The rigidity returns. His fingers tighten on my back.

"You don't have to talk about it if you don't want," I say quickly. He's shared more about himself in one morning than the whole of the previous month.

"I want to." He presses me down to lie against him again, but he's quiet a long time. "After I agreed to stay, I was... angry. For many years. The Anlu'kyr were my enemy, and I resented serving their whims. Especially Alexei's. I fought the constraints of slavery. I couldn't help myself. Even though werewolves are affected by vampire blood, they're immune to the addiction, so I never lost my defiance. I was collared, chained, flogged when I disobeyed. I fought him for years. Until I was tired to the bone. Tired of fighting. Tired of fighting myself."

He falls silent, his gaze lost in distant memories playing out on the far wall. What does he mean by fighting himself? But I manage not to ask. "And what happened?"

"I fell in love. And I forgot to fight. I forgot I wanted to leave. I accepted Alexei's offer of a position as his royal trainer. It gave me access to the Channelers, let me help them cope with the life they'd found themselves in. And I stayed. Even after my daughters had died in my arms, I stayed."

A heavy guilt laces his tone, the sound of an old, weary wound. Was the man he fell in love with Jasper? A hot twinge of jealousy raises its ugly head, but I quash it down. I pull back again and lean my forearms on his chest to see his face. "Are you okay with that? That you stayed when you didn't have to?"

The pain in his eyes gives them a jaded color, like a rainy gray sky. "I don't regret my choices. I regret the trust I gave."

"Why did you eventually leave? How?"

"I lost the reason I had for staying. I lost the love."

"You mean Jasper?"

Something in his gaze withdraws. He looks away at the open doors, and I suspect the conversation is over, but he speaks, quiet, slow. "Jasper was a feisty, sweet-natured half fae. A Seer. So strong a Wielder, he could almost call the Flame. A prize to the Anlu'kyr. He was treated well, but he always dreamed of more. Of becoming a warrior. He adored Velnushka and wanted to be her champion. To fight Alexei's enemies by his side. Alexei stoked that dream. Radomir trained him. He survived a number of expeditions to expunge the members of a cult called the Dra'ka Tul. They're shadow god worshipers who deify the Warlock, deft in unusual witch skills. Alexei considers them a personal

enemy. A Seer's ability can root out the hidden, and the shadow followers are very good at hiding. Jasper did well. He had a few fae skills under his belt, and he was accomplished at hand-to-hand combat. But the last time he left..."

Hiding my shock at another mention of the Warlock followers, I wait as the distance in his eyes grows deeper. When minutes pass, I risk a poke for more. "He didn't come back?"

A drained exhalation leaves his lips. He scrubs his face with a hand. "Alexei brought Jasper back. Burned and damaged by witch fire. He died the next day."

"I'm so sorry."

He swallows, following the line of my cheekbone with his thumb. "I fell into a moon rage, shifting to wolf and staying that way. Alexei let me go. He had to. I... killed many. The fae captured me and delivered me to the Flame Temple, and it was Elwyn, the High Priestess, who slowly guided me back to my humanity."

So the Flame Temple priestesses are okay people, then. They just don't like anything to do with the Warlock. "And you blame Alexei? For Jasper's death?"

Anger sweeps across Flanagan's face. "He uses people, Michael. I was nothing but his weapon, his guarantee of strength. A way for him to charm the ancient families if the Call should pass from his father. The Anlu'kyr respond to power, and in the absence of their Sabel weapons, a goddess-blessed Lycan is the next best thing. And Jasper was... Jasper was just another tool for Alexei's personal mission." The way he says Jasper's name does something to my insides. It almost hurts to hear such reverence. His feisty half fae.

Flanagan disappears into himself, staring past my shoulder, pain and anger tightening his jaw. He was so relaxed when we woke, and now his shoulders are solid again, neck muscles twitching. I want to say I'm sorry. Sorry for his loss. For the death of his daughters. For being used and seduced into a life he didn't want. But there are only so many times you can repeat the same thing, and it's a bloody meaningless thing to say anyway.

Instead, I stretch my neck and press my lips to his, gently licking over his mouth. He opens to let me inside, cupping my head and drawing me closer, and we tumble into a deeper kiss. Gentler and more sensual than our usual eager hunger. We slide our lips together and explore, a stirring swell of emotion passing between us as the kiss intensifies.

I break off and brace myself with my hands on either side of his shoulders. Looking him in the eyes, I rock against him, a poignant pressure blooming in my chest.

"*Rakkaani*," he says softly, gripping my hips. I don't know what that means, but it seems to echo through my heart.

His softened cock soon greets my stimulus, hardening enough for him to roll the wedge of its length against my pelvis. I lean down and bite into the soft skin beneath his ear as our shafts slide together, and his breath changes to a rising pant.

"I want to make love to you," I whisper, the words spilling out from that press in my throat.

I swallow sudden nerves and draw back to look in his eyes, finding light dancing in the silver. He pulls me down by the nape and kisses me, then whispers back, "I'd like that very much."

A bolt of lust pulses the length of my cock. Apprehension washes through me too, but nowhere near strong enough to dull my instant fire. I grab the tub of lube from the side drawers. When I unscrew the

top, he takes it from my hands, scoops out a palmful, and applies it to my erection himself.

I kneel up and lean my hips forward, enjoying the sight of my hard cock so close to his face. He takes his time, working me with his lubed fist until my mouth slackens.

“Turn over,” I say, a rasp in my voice.

He looks predatory as he meets my eyes, the wolf’s glint like shards of diamond fury behind the silver warmth.

Presented with his broad, muscular back and the tight round cheeks of his arse—an arse I’ve been ogling for weeks—I know a moment of ravenous desire, so acute, it leaves me dizzy. I swipe out some lube from the tub and settle on his thighs, watching the twitch of those long, sinewy back muscles as I lather his ring of muscle. His hips rise to meet my finger, and I slip it into his tight heat.

Fuuuck.

Unable to wait, I add a second finger and, when he pushes back for more, a third.

“Michael,” he growls, a warning to get on with it.

With a trembling hand, I rest the head of my cock against his puckered ring and pull those muscular globes apart to stretch him open as I push inside.

The suction of his butt clamping on my dick as I nudge deeper almost makes me spill. I’ve never entered a channel so fucking tight. Mesmerized, I watch my shaft disappear into him.

“Flanagan,” I breathe with wonder.

“Michael,” he groans.

I lean over him and sweep his long hair aside, resting my mouth over his cheek so my ragged breath puffs in his ear as I nudge deeper. With one last thrust to seat my cock, I’m enclosed in his gloriously hot clench. And I can’t fucking believe how good it feels. I want to pump my hips so bad. Just fuck him hard until he screams and growls and comes on my cock, but I hold back.

“That okay?” My voice shakes with need and nerves.

“Very.” He turns his head and finds my lips.

I lay my weight over him and clasp his hands, then raise them over his head to hold them there. I gently rock my hips, kissing the side of his face as I slide in and out of my man. He moans, and so do I. As I thrust, a blinding, unexpected pleasure hits me as my cock is jerked off by the tightest fist imaginable.

“I can’t believe I’m inside you,” I say by his ear. “It feels so good. So fucking good.”

He groans again, his mouth parted on panting breaths. His canines have extended, the sharp ends denting the soft flesh of his lip.

I lift up to watch my lube-wet shaft plunging up and down between those curved globes. I almost come with the sight. Fucking wondrous.

Flanagan reaches to his shoulder. I’m unsure what he’s doing until a claw flicks, and wine-colored blood seeps out onto his sun-gold skin.

“Drink,” he orders.

I latch on before thought has a chance to stop me, tonguing the earthy nectar and sucking as I thrust. His groaning shudder of pleasure stirs something feral in my abdomen. My gums ache with the need to bite down, to take more, to find deeper gulps.

I fist his hair to hold him still while I suck as much sustenance as possible from the small wound.

My pumping thrusts turn aggressive as his blood lands in my stomach and explodes through my system. And his groans go deeper, becoming a wolfish rumble through his chest.

Fucking him harder, I chase a blinding crest of eye-rolling bliss. With a hand on my head, he fastens my mouth to his neck and humps the bed, pushing back as hard and fast as I'm giving it.

As my balls clench tight, ready to blow, I break away from my feast. "I'm gonna come. Fuck! I'm gonna come, Gabriel." The orgasm rips through me, stealing my mind and throwing it through a flash of warm light, then dropping me into oblivion.

I return from a near blackout to find Flanagan shifting me off him. My cock slips free as he flops me onto my back. He's wolfed out, his teeth long, his beard darkened, his eyes like feral stars ready to swallow me.

He bends my knees up and pushes into me all the way with one long slide. Then he fucks my ass with furious abandon, chasing his climax. With his blood in my veins, I take his beating easily, opening wide and lifting my hips so he can thoroughly hammer my hole. The pain of his aggressive thrusts pulses through me as an agony of pleasure.

As he explodes inside me, he looks into my eyes with such warm, possessive intensity it takes my breath away. Satiated, he buckles onto my chest and into my arms. I hold him tight against me as he tremors, enfolding him with my legs.

"Be mine," he whispers. "Stay with me."

My heart squeezes. My throat tightens with emotion. "I'm here. I'm right here, Gabriel. I'm not going anywhere. I'm yours. I'm so fucking yours."

But even as I say that, pale features and oil-black eyes flicker behind my eyelids. And that signal in my gut twists with a flash of warning.

That's not a promise you can make, it seems to say.



CHAPTER

26

After a day and a night of fucking, feeding, showering, then fucking again—sometimes all at once—the time comes for us to reenter the world outside Flanagan’s bedroom. He has to meet with General Nenge, and I want to see Quinton, so we reluctantly part ways.

As I stride through the corridors of Blackriver, I’m mired in a tangle of conflicted emotions. The deepest, warmest feelings I’ve ever experienced glow like giddy sunshine in my chest. Overwhelming sensations I never thought were possible. But a knot of doubt squirms beneath, like a jittery ball of twisted wire wedged in my gut. Mostly a fear that staying here with Flanagan is just a dream. But the belly feels also give me a warning, the hint of a coming storm. Something’s about to happen. I can almost taste it in the air. And whatever it is, it means I won’t be keeping my promise.

A hand lands on my arm, and I startle out of my thoughts.

“There you are,” Laasya says. “Councilor Quinton’s back. He wants to see you.”

“I was just on my way to see him.”

She dismisses my two beleaguered guards with a wave—Seonu still hasn’t let go of “Michael the assassin”—and drags me down a side corridor. After checking either end like an overly dramatic actor in a spy movie, she hustles me into a closet.

“Well, you look better,” she says, shutting the door and clicking on a dim light.

I shift aside a mop handle poking into my shoulder and frown at my eccentric friend. “Why are we in a cupboard, Laasya?”

She stretches up on her tiptoes and hisses through closed teeth, “Did oo thrink vlood?”

I whisper in her ear, “I don’t think it matters if the mop bucket hears you.”

She thumps my arm. “Answer the question.”

“Yes. I thrinked vlood. It was... weird.” Weirdly normal. Even now, the memory of copper earthiness makes my mouth water. “Why are we in a closet?”

“So nobody hears our conversation.” She scrutinizes my face. “Well, you obviously needed it. And don’t forget werewolves have a bloodthirst too, so the commander is your perfect donor because he understands.”

“They do?”

She gives a vigorous nod. “Mm-hmm. They don’t *need* blood. They just... you know, want it.”

“I didn’t know that.” Flanagan never mentioned that to me, but then he wouldn’t. He’ll have that part of him buried in the basement, along with his beast.

“And what about the other?” she asks. “You know, when you—”

“When I turned psycho and trashed Flanagan’s room?”

“When you reacted unexpectedly to a trigger.”

“I feel alright. Thanks to Flanagan.”

She taps my arm reassuringly. “You have me too. I’ll just fasten you to a wall if you lose it again. How’s that?”

I huff a laugh. “Sounds good. I think. How come you’re so laid back about it?”

Her lips twist with a wry smile. “I’ve been there. When I reached teenagedom, I became moonsick, a state some witches can experience at that age.” She rolls her eyes. “Hormones. My abilities went haywire. I collapsed a house, broke Mr. Blentfort’s leg—that’s the baker—and nearly killed the mayor. The Council ordered me into containment, sent the Squad to collect me, but my father refused them entry. Thankfully, Councilor Quinton offered to place me in a mind hold until I stabilized. It took two years.” She shudders. “I dread to think what would have happened without the councilor. Some witches never settle. They’re locked down for the rest of their lives.”

“Man, that’s heavy. I had no idea.” No wonder Laasya’s so loyal to Quinton.

“So I know what it’s like to be ‘dangerous.’ Out of control. For everyone—even friends—to look at you like you’re a monster.” She rests her hand on my arm. “I’m here for you. And so is the commander because he knows what it’s like too.”

A bloom of gratitude briefly softens the ever-present tightness in my chest, but with it also comes wonder. Out of everyone here at Blackriver, including men and soldiers, it’s a messy-haired, skinny little witch who’s never watched TV and doesn’t even know who Superman is that I feel closest to. Apart from Flanagan, of course.

“Thanks,” I gruff, then clear my throat. “Did you see Vadim last night? What did he say?” The bleach smell in the cupboard reminds me of the disused lab in his garden.

She drops her hand. “We got ready to go, but Commander Belanger rang and told us to back off.”

“Why?”

“Vadim’s his informant. Headquarters have jurisdiction, so they get to ask the questions.”

“You’re kidding?” Bloody politics. That’s Gloria Belanger’s son too. Figures. “Will they interview Vadim, or is Belanger protecting him?”

“Oh, I’m sure they’ll ask him about the lab. They’ll certainly root out that spy, but everyone is convinced Alexei left the Channelers there, so there’s no real motivation.”

“You didn’t convince Seonu about the red cloak and what it might mean?”

Voices drift in from outside the closet. Laasya stills, eyes on the door, and waits while whoever is on the other side pass. “Seonu’s certain the cloak was Alexei’s clever ruse. She’s on the warpath. And no one will listen to me because they all think the Dra’ka Tul are long dead. Captain Nelson believes Alexei’s intention may be to assassinate key figures in the Guardians to weaken us. Even Major Zahir thinks it’s time we leaned on the prince. I have no doubt the general will agree.”

“What do you mean by *lean* on the prince?”

“They’re planning a campaign, starting with a shakedown of Alexei’s businesses. Under Act 21 of the First Agreement, after direct aggression, the Council can take any action it deems necessary. And Alexei won’t tolerate intrusion from the Council. This could turn into an all-out war. But the attempt on the commander’s life is the fourth strike as far as they’re concerned. I mean, first Alexei attacked the labs at Longreach.” She counts on her fingers. “Then the labs at Headquarters. Then he attacks Blackriver and steals Channelers... And then...”

She looks up at me, and we stare at each other, realization dawning.

“He attacked the labs,” I say.

“And you found Ember *in* a disused lab. As a clue.”

Whirring thoughts all but crackle between us.

“So what? He’s looking for a lab?” I venture.

“Or maybe something that’s in one.”

The intuition in my gut goes haywire, so strong I could almost run out of Blackriver right now and go searching. Anger rises. “That fucking vampire. He’s using innocent teenagers as bait so he can find something.” An image of Ember, vulnerable, unconscious, and strapped to one of those gurneys, jabs into my mind, and I flinch from it. “We have to find them.”

“Yes, but unfortunately, that means helping Alexei find whatever it is he’s after.”

I blow out a breath, frustration coiling in my stomach, and I curl my fingers into fists. The desire to storm into Alexei’s castle and demand he help me find the students he purposely lost claws at my insides. “Did you ask Headquarters about that elite lot that collected them from Vadim’s garden? The Guardians in black?”

“It wasn’t them. Most of the Squad have been abroad on training for three days. The rest were in barracks. They can’t have been at Hampstead.”

“You have proof of that, do you?”

She tuts, impatient. “I don’t need proof, Michael. They’re Guardians, sworn to protect Channelers. If they were involved, Headquarters would be, and that’s impossible.”

“Hmm.” I’m not so sure about that. I don’t have the same faith in an organization that’s happy to lock away teenage witches and exterminate a man without due trial just because of his bloodline. “Look, if Alexei attacked Guardian labs to find whatever it is he’s looking for and those men Ember saw wore Guardian uniforms, it doesn’t take a genius to work out the connection.”

Laasya bites her lip, a slew of expressions chasing across her face. She determinedly shakes her head. “No. Alexei can’t be trusted. This could all be his ruse to set us up for something. You need to ask Councilor Quinton. He’ll know what to do.” Before I can answer, she grabs my sleeve, opens the door, and pulls me down the corridor.

As we part at the stairs, she leans in and says in a hushed voice, “Make sure you mention everything to the councilor. I’ll meet you at lunch so you can tell me what he said.”

I copy her conspiratorial posture. “Why are we whispering?”

She wrinkles her nose at me, then scurries away down the corridor. I tramp up the multiple flights to the top floor. When I get to Quinton’s office, the door is wide open, and he’s at the sink, washing his hands.

“There you are, my boy,” he says without looking up. “Come in, come in.”

The whiff of chlorine tickles my nose, and his familiar tingle of power breaks across my skin.

“We need to talk,” I say as I shut the door.

“Indeed, we do.” Turning, he raises a finger to his lips, circles it in the air to indicate listening ears, then points at the far bookshelf. The one that hides his secret room. We can’t communicate mind to mind because of the sapphire.

I nod and follow him.

Clicking the switch so the shelf swings open, he scans his office, checking the other shelves as if witches might pop out from behind one of the grimoires.

Once we’re inside, my gaze flickers over the mural, landing on the imposing image of my masked ancestor sitting on his throne of bones. The white dome of the Flame Temple gleams on his right. Figures in blood-red cloaks circle a shadow to his left.

I turn to ask Quinton a question, but he grips my arm, his expression fervent. “You understand now why you must leave?”

“What do you mean?” That ball of knotted wire shifts in my gut.

Quinton’s whole demeanor has morphed; the amiable professor replaced with a mad scientist look. “Captain Seonu informed me of your unconscious rage. This is just the beginning, Michael. If they—”

“It’s okay.” I step out of his bony hold. “I just had a freak-out over... some blood. Flanagan’s helping me with it.”

He drops his hands, pursing his lips as if he can’t believe what he’s hearing. “Commander Flanagan cannot help you with this. You are transforming. You are—”

“I know. I’m vamping out. We’ve got it.”

He clasps my arm again, his expression intent. “You are not *vamping out*. You are a Sabel child. Your DNA has been transfigured by the waters of the Jade Lake. What you will become, what powers you will soon display, are impossible to guess.” He shakes me. “How long do you think we have until a sample of your blood makes it to Longreach and they discover this? Hmm? They need not sequence your DNA to find out what you are. The effects of Jade Water can be seen through a microscope.”

“Can they? Shit. That’s—shit.” So it really is only a matter of time before the Guardians catch on to my ancestry. Before they lock me away forever. Or kill me. My heart twists enough for me to press the heel of my hand to my chest.

Gabriel.

“We cannot continue to misplace your blood samples. Every new Channeler must be tested. The lack of available data about your bloodline will eventually be flagged.”

“We? Who else is involved?”

“Laasya spelled the vials. Made sure they never made it near the laboratory for testing.”

“She knows?”

“Of course not. She believes she protects an anomaly. You are not just a half breed. If the Council discovered only this, they would send you to The Ring. Mixed blood is already a danger. Multiple mixes lead to uncontrollable outcomes.”

Laasya hid my blood vials. No wonder she looked guilty when they were mentioned at the meeting. Warmth flushes through me that she was protecting me. Would she still want to if she knew the whole

truth?

Quinton's staring at me, his hazel eyes expectant.

"I can't leave." My heart clenches again.

"You must. They will execute you. Is that what you want?"

His words steal my breath, but I shake my head. "I can't. I said I'd stay. I... said I'd stay with him."

He throws his arms out. "You would prefer to put not only yourself but also your lover in danger?"

That jerks my head round. "What do you mean?"

He lowers his voice. "Do you not realize it was the Dra'ka Tul who set that trap for the commander?"

All my blood drops into my feet. "Laasya thought it might be. We weren't sure, though. How certain are you?"

"Who else would make an attempt on his life? Not Alexei. The Anlu'kyr would never harm the goddess-blessed. Don't you see? You are the Warlock's descendant. The Dra'ka Tul consider Gabriel your jailer." He wags the top of his cane at me. "And I assure you, they will not desist until they are certain you are free of him."

A tremor runs through me. I study his face, his emphatic expression. "They'll try again."

"Of course. And they will succeed."

Fuck. So Flanagan is in danger while I stay here. It's my fault he was poisoned. I've got to tell him. Give him a heads-up. I can't keep this to myself if his life really is at risk.

I step toward the exit, but Quinton grabs my shirt. "Where are you going?"

"To tell Flanagan. He needs to know the Shadow Idiots have a target on his back."

"Don't be ridiculous. Of course you can't tell Gabriel. How will you explain the reason without mentioning your bloodline?"

"His life's at stake, Quinton. He nearly died."

"He would be compelled to report you to his general. She will report you to the Council. Do you want to spend years in an underground facility with lead walls and no windows?"

I shudder, my stomach turning at the thought. But I won't let cowardice be the reason I put Flanagan in danger. "I'll take my chances. He needs to know." I reach out to pull the lever that opens the door, but my back thumps the adjacent wall as Quinton pushes me against it, wide-eyed and frantic. The witch is a lot faster and stronger than he looks.

"You can't tell him," he says, desperate. "At the very least, the Belangers will have him arrested for harboring a Sabel Whisperer. If you truly want to protect Gabriel, the best thing you can do is leave him. I think you know that."

I kick the skirting board with my heel and shove him away. Fuck. Fucking bollocks fuck. He backs off, but he positions himself between me and the way out.

I hate him right now. I know he's right, but I fucking hate him for it. Flanagan's in danger because of me. The Belangers have a way to bring him down because of me. Flanagan wants me to stay, but he doesn't understand. He doesn't realize my presence here could destroy him.

Slumping into the chair, I feel as if the walls are pressing in on my shoulders. My head hurts like it's caught in a vise. And my chest aches so fucking much.

Stay with me.

Damn. Damn my life and my blood and every one of those bastard shadow worshippers. I've just realized what Flanagan means to me, and now I have to tear myself away from him. I can't even tell him why. He'll think I don't care and my words were a lie.

Quinton looms over me, watching me intently, calculation whirring in his gaze. He gentles his tone. "Let me help you. I have a place in Scotland where you can go through the change without any fear of harm to yourself or others. Blood, I can secure without issue. I need only a few hours to set everything in order."

I don't answer him, only rub my chest and stare at the floor

"You must decide, Michael. Come with me and be free or risk losing everything you care for."

A maelstrom of frustrated fury tears through me with those words. Before I know I've moved, I've sprung from the chair and rammed him against the wall with a hand on his chest. I fix him with a steely glare. "What's in this for you, huh? Why the fuck are you helping me and not the high and mighty Council you're supposed to be loyal to? How the fuck do I know I can even trust you?"

He seems untroubled by my fury. He doesn't even attempt to push me off. "My boy, I have studied the Sabel bloodline my whole life. I do not—"

He stops when I slip my hand around his throat. "I don't want more of your crap, witch. You give me the truth, or I walk out of here and tell Flanagan everything, including your involvement."

He grasps my wrist, his upper lip curling back into a snarl. "I will always prioritize you above the needs of the Council. And if I have to, I will kill every last one of them to protect you. I, my boy, am the *only one* you can trust."

I drop my hand, bemused by his vehemence. "Why?"

He meets my gaze, and his face changes as if a translucent cloud evaporates. The nose straighter, the cheekbones higher. His lips plump to a wider, fuller shape.

And his hazel eyes turn green.

Jade-green. The same color as my own, the same color as those peering through the Warlock's bony mask.

I jerk back, blinking. Am I seeing what I think I am? He kind of looks like me. "You're—you're a Sabel. How..." I knew that already, and yet my memory of his eye color is hazel. I point my finger at him. "You messed with my fucking head again."

He straightens his tweeds and steps away from the wall. "You will need to forgive me. I had no choice. I have lived beneath the shadow of execution far longer than you. And I have only survived through vigilant caution."

My brain chokes with a thousand questions. I don't even know where to start. But one stands out above the rest. "Are we... Does this mean we're related?"

His expression softens. He cups my biceps, and I let him, studying his new face with wonder. "Of course we're related, Michael. I am your father."



CHAPTER 27

Sucker-punched into silence, all I can do is stare at him, vibrating with shock. I've got images of Luke Skywalker flickering through my mind, for fuck's sake. *"I am your father, Luke."*

Quinton waits, unflinching, as I scrutinize his features while my heart pounds. Do I believe him? I mean, with the changes, he does sort of look like me. But he's not a Channeler; he's a witch. And he's not part vamp either as far as I can tell.

This would explain his obsession with Valentin, though. And his protectiveness toward me.

"How did you do that?" I gesture at his face. "I'm glamour blind. Shouldn't I be able to see you? The real you?"

He makes a dismissive noise in his throat. "I would never use such inelegant magic to hide my true face. My spellwork is invisible to all but the most adept of witches. There are very few of that caliber left. And I assure you, none of them would ever betray me."

I step back, my hands trembling as I fold them against my chest. Confused anger eats at the edges of my shock. "Then how do I know you're telling me the truth?"

"I am your blood, Michael. You are not the orphan you thought you were."

"But the couple in the woods?"

"Were not your parents. I'm sorry. They were friends of mine, helping me rescue you from the Temple. Unfortunately, the priestesses got to them first."

"So you lied to me?"

"I adjusted the truth to protect us both. Nothing more."

"But you're not a Whisperer? Or a vampire?"

Something intense flashes across his eyes. His cheek twitches with suppressed emotion. "Not all Sabel children were born Channelers. And only Valentin was Anlu'kyr. An attempt by his makers to compound the bloodline evermore."

I swallow, the next question squeezing itself through a tight throat. "And my mother?"

He offers a taut smile, then steps forward and grasps my shoulders. "My boy, I know you have

many questions. And if you come with me, I will answer them all. I will tell you about your mother, your bloodline. Everything. But for now—”

“Is she alive, Quinton?”

He stills, his mouth working silently as though searching for the right words. Then he sighs. “No. I’m sorry. She died giving birth to you.”

Of course she did. The disappointment lands on me like a crushing weight, the tendrils of hope curling away as if stung by the light. What did I expect? That she was waiting for me somewhere, waiting to embrace me and call me son?

Quinton gives my shoulders a gentle shake. “Michael, you must decide. Let me protect you. Take you to safety.”

I throw his hands off. “It’s not about my safety. It’s about Flanagan’s. Yes, I’ll come with you.”

A pleasure akin to triumph flashes across his face. “Excellent. Then we must plan your departure from Blackriver.”

Lead rocks drop into my stomach. I try to get hold of what I just said yes to. Leaving. Leaving Flanagan. When I said I would stay. Without telling him. Without explaining. My mind spins like it’s imploding. A chaos of doubt hogtied in shock.

I rub my temples, but the tension stays. “Why the fuck was I in the foster system, Quinton? When you were here swanning around in the bloody Guardians?”

He expels a frustrated breath. “I didn’t know if you were alive. I looked. Believe me, I looked for you. To no avail. I’m shocked the Temple allowed you to live, but they certainly kept your trail hidden. I assumed the worst.”

I dazedly stare at him as if I can glean all the answers I want from his suddenly familiar features.

“Concentrate,” he says softly. “I will answer all your questions once you are safe. We can talk for days if that’s what you need. But for now, I need to make preparations, and you must go about your day as if none of this has happened.”

“Preparations? Aren’t you just going to, like, Gate me to Scotland or wherever?”

“I cannot Gate you from inside Blackriver. Petre or Laasya will feel the Gating current, and they can tell how many are stepping through. We cannot afford questions. I must find a way to get you outside the Grounds.”

“Don’t you need a pentagram thingy to Gate?”

He gives a dismissive snort. “I can Gate you from anywhere. We just need to make sure we’re not seen. Come.” He all but drags me through to the office, closing the bookshelf behind him. His face has returned to the Quinton I’m used to: the handsome Oxford gentleman with a slight crook in his nose and thin lips. The shadow covers his eyes again, making it impossible for me to focus on them.

“Remember.” He raises my wrist with the leather cuff. “Do not take this off under any circumstances. Not even to shower.”

“It’s alright. I don’t. I’d glue it to my bloody wrist if I could. Which reminds me, we need to talk about Alexei.”

He blinks as if taken aback. “Whatever for?”

I rub my temples again, struggling to connect with the subject I was supposed to discuss with him. “We have a theory, Laasya and I, about what he’s up to. Laasya wants to know what you think.”

Shaking his head, he guides me by the shoulder toward the door. “Later. Go to lunch. I have people I need to ring. Arrangements to make.”

I thump my palm on his chest to stop him from pushing me out of the room. “Just hold the fuck up a minute. Shouldn’t you tell the Council Alexei didn’t set that trap? They’re about to go to war over it, and it wasn’t even him.”

He sighs heavily. “My attempts to relieve the prince of blame will not result in a reduction of hostilities. The two sides have wanted this conflict for years. I’m afraid war is inevitable.”

“But you said—”

He grips my hand in both of his. “Go. Spend the day with your lover. You may not see Gabriel for some time.”

Something inside me wrenches. Fuck, those words hurt.

Quinton lowers his voice. “And remember, act your usual bright self. Both of our lives are at stake if anyone finds out who we are. We are now very much in this together. Prepare yourself. We leave Blackriver tomorrow.”

He leans out and checks both ends of the corridor, then pushes me out of the room. With a last nod, he shuts the door.

I don’t go to lunch. My stomach couldn’t handle a lettuce leaf right now, and Laasya will want to know what Quinton said about Alexei’s find-the-students-trail—the pressing issue that I didn’t even mention to him. And honestly, I’m not sure I can look my friend in the eyes and not blurt out the biggest news I’ve had since birth.

“I am your father.”

Fuck.

Not to mention the fact that I’m about to leave Blackriver and betray her trust. Letting cowardice win, I trudge along the top floor to Flanagan’s office instead.

It may not be wise to go see my man either, but I’m drawn to him, regardless of common sense. It’s like I have an elastic band clipped to my insides that keeps us connected no matter how far I stray. Fuck knows what that’s going to feel like tomorrow when I’m at the other end of the country.

Flanagan’s door stands open. He’s talking on his cell phone, staring out of the floor-to-ceiling window behind his pine desk, massaging his temples as if his conversation is a tense one.

The moment I stop in the doorway, he turns his head, his eyes finding mine. A thud of electric awareness passes between us. Meeting Flanagan’s eyes always was intense, but with his blood in my veins, it’s like a supercharged bullet hitting my chest. My body hums with his nearness as if attuned, but guilt twists the pleasure into shame. I break the gaze.

I can’t enter the room as my Flame will blow the cell phone, so I stay by the door, enjoying the view while I wait. Black striations still web the side of his neck: a reminder of why I have to leave tomorrow. His clipped words, delivered in fluent German, are hissed down the phone. He’s clearly riled. His thumb strays to his braids and rubs at the place where they meet the hairline.

The conversation ends, and Flanagan shoves the phone into its Flame-proof cage, swearing in Finnish. “Come in, Michael. Close the door.”

He strides across to me, meeting my tentative approach halfway, and covers the question I’m about to ask with his mouth. He slides his hands down, grips my butt, and squeezes me against him. I get the

full kiss. The one that tells me in no uncertain terms what he wants to do to me, and our tongues clash as I say the same thing back. My body zings with instant interest. Our dicks harden against each other's thighs.

I expect him to back me up to the wall, but he draws away and checks my face. "What's wrong?"
"Nothing. I just... nothing."

"Michael, you're rigid with tension. And you seem... dazed. Has something happened?"

I avoid his laser-like scrutiny, try to pull out of his hold, but he tightens the hands on my waist. "I'm alright," I tell him. "What was that phone call about? Seemed tense."

Flanagan narrows his eyes at my blatant deflection. He lifts my chin to search me for the truth he knows I'm hiding. "You look like you've had some kind of shock. Did Councilor Quinton say something to you?" I flinch from the mention of... my father.

Fuck, Flanagan's astute. Why the hell did I come and see him? The man's X-ray vision is sharper than a witch's.

Tugging my chin from his fingers, I clear my throat and grab for another subject, any subject. "Are the Council still planning their move on Alexei?" It doesn't take a genius to guess that's what his phone call was about.

Flanagan's lips turn down, but he answers my question. "That was Councilor Schneider. Usually a rational man, but I was unable to dissuade him from the current course."

"Current course? As in, war?"

He nods, weariness creasing his face. "They're calling it an offensive operation at this point, but we all know what that means. I worry our knee-jerk reaction is blindly dancing to Alexei's tune."

"It's dancing to someone's tune," I mumble. "I don't know if it's Alexei's."

His fingers loosen on my waist. "What do you mean?"

Shit. Shit. Don't mention the shadow guys, Blakeley. "I mean, you know, because it probably wasn't Alexei who tried to kill you, so it was... um... someone else, and maybe they wanted this result."

The furrow in his brow deepens. "And you have an idea who that might be?"

I drop my gaze to the black lines webbing Flanagan's neck, like poisonous snakes slithering through his veins. Like little rivers of death. The trap, the dark basement, the stinging bite of silver in my lungs crowd my mind. A blood-red cloak flutters past my eyelids as if disappearing into a shadow. And a pressure caves in on me. Invisible walls pressing in on all sides. I can't breathe.

I push away from him, sucking in air. He lets me go but follows.

"Michael? You're as white as a sheet. Something's happened. Why won't you tell me?"

Stumbling away, I clutch at furniture to stay upright, gasping for oxygen that won't come. I try to say I'm fine, but it leaves my clenching throat as a garbled choke. My heartbeat pounds in my ears, pummels my chest. My neck tingles with warning. What the fuck?

Flanagan clasps my shoulders to walk me back and lean me against a wall. "Just breathe, Michael. Deep breaths. Look at me."

"I... can't. I—can't breathe..." I grip his biceps, fingers digging into the muscle. My head's turning dizzy, making the room ripple around me.

"This is a panic attack," he whispers. "Look at me." He cups my face and tilts it, and I meet his

worried eyes. Soft silver eyes. Glittering oceans of warmth. Filled with a depth of emotion I can barely handle. And focused entirely on me.

And I know that emotion. That burning, overwhelming affection. A fullness so big you fear it might burst from you. I know it because I feel it too.

What the hell made me think I could ever walk away from him? Leave him without explanation. Without good-bye. Without any consideration for the impact that would have on him when he's just told me that his grief lasts forever. I can't do that. I love him. I love Gabriel Flanagan.

"I need to tell you something," I blurt. The moment those words leave my mouth, the pressure that was closing in on me releases. The invisible walls disappear as if never there. The tingles in my hands subside. I'm left sucking in shuddery breaths, my fingers squeezing his arms. "I—I think you might be—"

"Shh, breathe." He strokes my cheekbone with his thumb, leans in to kiss my face. "There's time to calm first. Whatever it is, we'll work it out together."

I glance away from him to get a hold of myself. Pull it together, Blakeley, for fuck's sake. "No, I... Damn. Look, this changes everything. You're about to regret you ever met me."

He smiles, a quick tug of his lips. "I will never regret I met you, Michael."

I swallow and take a deeper breath. "I think you're in danger. And it's because of me."

He nods slowly, the way he does when he's digesting something weighty. He brushes hair from my eyes. "Okay. How so?"

"You know that figure at the gatehouse? The one in—"

A rapping knock on the door halts my words. "Commander! Commander!" It's Laasya. She sounds panicked.

Flanagan's brow furrows. He looks down at me. The shared knowledge that our conversation is basically over for now passes between us.

He nods and steps away. "Come in!"

The door flies open, and Laasya rushes in, a flurry of boots and brown linen and messy dark hair. She spots me and frowns. "There you are."

"What is it?" Flanagan asks.

"Commander, the Squad is here. They just came through a Gate over the East Pentagram. Apparently, Councilor Belanger sent them."

My heart thunks into my feet. All my blood drains down to meet it. Intuition pulses a warning through my gut. Yeah, no shit.

"They've come for Michael, sir. Something to do with a blood sample. They want to take him for immediate lockdown in The Ring."



CHAPTER 28

“Okay, stay calm,” Flanagan says to Laasya. “We knew this was coming. Where are they now?”

“I told the Squad Michael was at the far training field. That should take them a while.”

“Well done.” He turns to me. He has his army face on—the commander-in-battle look. “We follow protocol. That means we need to—”

“Lock me down. I know.” I ignore the shiver that passes through me.

“Blackriver is equipped to handle dangerous anomalies. If we do everything by the book, they will have no reason to transfer you to another facility.”

Actually, they might. I nod my consent anyway, determined not to make the shitstorm about to go down any worse.

“I need to call the general,” he says. “She can’t have agreed to this. She would have informed me. Laasya, take—”

“I’m here, Michael!” Quinton’s flustered arrival interrupts Flanagan’s instructions. The councilor scurries into the room, cane in hand, hat askew, and all but skids to a standstill beside me. He huffs a breath, then adjusts his tweeds and addresses Laasya. “If you could excuse us, my dear. I must speak with the commander and Michael alone.”

“Um, of course, Councilor Quinton.” She checks with Flanagan.

He nods. “Stay outside, please. I want you with Michael.”

Quinton waits until she closes the door. Then he grabs my wrist, turning a frantic expression on Flanagan. “Let me take him, Gabriel. I have a secure location where the Squad will never find him. I can Gate him there immediately.”

Flanagan’s brow lowers enough to almost cover his eyes. “If Michael runs, they’ll hunt him and kill him. We follow protocol. He’s a recruit now. Headquarters have no jurisdiction to take him without the general’s consent.”

Quinton shakes his head, his bony hand still clamped to my wrist as if afraid to let me go. “Michael is far more than just an unusual aberrance. He is in terrible danger. Let me take him to safety before it’s too late. He’s agreed to leave with me. Haven’t you, Michael? If we go now—”

“What do you mean, he’s agreed?” Flanagan blinks, then looks at me, confusion disrupting his stern expression. “You were leaving?”

Oh shit. “I—I was... It’s not...” Fuck. My brain short-circuits. Yeah, I was leaving. Without a word. I tug my wrist from Quinton’s grip, but when I step toward Flanagan, he backs away.

“When were you leaving?”

“This is quite irrelevant,” Quinton barks. “You need to make a decision. Michael is in more danger than you realize.”

Flanagan doesn’t seem to hear him. His attention is all on me. His demeanor shrinking as if I’ve just shot him with a silver bolt.

I open my mouth to say something, anything, but no words come out, and my pause drops between us like a boulder. “It’s not what you think,” I manage. “I was leaving for you. You’re in—”

“Without telling me?” The bewildered pain in his eyes, as if he can’t believe what he’s hearing. As if he suddenly doesn’t know who I am. “I thought... I thought we’d agreed... You still don’t trust me with your safety?”

“It’s not about *my* safety!” I snap. Balling my fists, I step toward him again, but a rapid banging on the door stops me. Before Flanagan can answer, the door flies open, and Seonu and Mason stride in. Laasya follows them.

“I’m sorry, Commander,” Seonu says, “but more soldiers have arrived from Headquarters, and Councilor Belanger’s with them.” She spears a suspicious glare at me.

“Twelve are headed this way.” Laasya tilts her head as if to listen. “Why are they coming up here? They can’t know where Michael is.”

“That’s another unit,” Mason says. “What the fuck is she up to?”

Flanagan seems to still be recovering from the previous moment. He wipes his face and grants me one last injured glance. Then the hardened shutters slam down over his face. “Take Michael to lockdown,” he orders. “Full protocol for dangerous anomalies. Iron chains, silver cage. Do not release him for any reason and on anyone else’s order but mine or the general’s. Is that clear?”

“Yes, sir,” they answer in unison. I swallow back nausea.

Quinton speaks up again. “Gabriel, you must listen.”

“That’s enough, Councilor.” Flanagan swings all his anger on the witch. “If you really want to help Michael, then Gate to Headquarters and bring the general back because she’s the only one who can stop this.” He waits for Quinton’s answer with a glare, fury spilling down to his clenched fists.

Quinton raises his chin. “I refuse to leave Michael.”

“But, Councilor,” Laasya says, always the voice of sense. “She has a Pentagonagram in her office. You could be there and back within minutes.”

Quinton’s gaze flickers between the watching faces. He can’t say any more while they’re listening, and as far as they’re concerned, he’s just a Councilor. Not my father. He opens his mouth and closes it again, caught by his own ruse. “Very well. I will head directly to General Nenge’s office via my own Pentagonagram. If you could call her, Gabriel, and ensure she’s waiting for me.” He turns to me. “I will return as soon as I can. I will not let harm come to you.”

When he’s gone, Flanagan pushes me toward the door with his hand on the back of my neck. I try to catch his attention. I need him to know I changed my mind, that I wasn’t leaving him, that I couldn’t do

it—and why—but he won't even look at me.

“Flanagan, wait.”

“Not now, Michael,” he clips.

Seonu and Mason take over, gripping an arm each and marching me down the corridor.

Before he shuts the office door, Flanagan says to Laasya, “Don't leave him.”

“I won't, sir.”

I turn to catch his eyes, but he averts them.

“Flanagan, wait, for fuck's sake. Let me tell you—”

He shuts the door on me.

Shit. Fucking, bastard, shit. If the Squad take me, I'll never get to explain.

“Come on,” Laasya says. “We need to run.”

As we hurry along Blackriver's corridors, passing alert soldiers and scurrying students, memories of us doing this only weeks ago to escape Alexei come to mind. I glance down at the cuff.

“If the Council separates you from Gabriel, call to me.” Alexei's words at the club.

Yeah, right. If I'm not burned to a crisp in the pan, I can always call to the fire. Not fucking likely.

The lockdown isn't in the Old Keep anymore. The former prison facility is still a burned-out wreck after the battle. The Guardians had to move the cages to an outbuilding on the west side, so we have to cut across the open lawn to get there. When we reach the door to the outside, a unit of Seonu's soldiers meets us with manacles and chains.

I falter, almost tripping over my feet. The reality of my situation slushes over me like icy water. Once I'm in that cage, I'll be there forever. I glance toward the boundary wall, my brain firing off judgments of its height and scalability. Wards block my escape. The kind that can cripple a man, according to Laasya. But not around the Border Woods. I'd have a clear run into that darkness. I'd be free.

Yeah, free to die a lonely death, Blakeley. Once you enter those woods, there's no coming out.

The soldiers are watching me with bated breath. Seonu has subtly lowered into a stance, hand on her sword hilt. They know they can't stop me if I make a run for it. I can strip Flame from every one of them, kill them all, and escape. But I have no stomach for that kind of harm. And where would I go? Somewhere without Flanagan? Hunted, hated, always looking over my shoulder for the next iron bolt?

Stay with me.

Gabriel.

His cold expression as he shut the door in my face sears me like a hot brand.

I hold out my hands. “Go on.” My insides turn to a sickly liquid as Mason shackles my wrists, iron encasing my leather cuff. He leaves my ankles free so I can run with them to the lockdown. I almost jerk away when it comes to the collar; the cold, strangling presence of metal around my neck seems to be sealing my fate.

With twenty soldiers surrounding us, we cross the garden to the outbuildings. Fear pulses the veins in my temples, my rapid heartbeat sounding like an overtaxed engine in my ears.

We almost make it to the lockdown.

A familiar voice cuts across the garden, shrill and arrogant, a razor slash to my taut nerves. “Halt

where you are. That's far enough."

Gloria Belanger, a menace in wine red, strides over the grass, twelve burly Guardians in black behind her. A tall, thin woman with blonde dreadlocks follows: the witch responsible for the Gate, I assume. The soldiers lug chains large enough to tie an elephant and roll a Hannibal Lecter dolly with leather straps. All faith this might work out okay crashes.

A wall of agitated Flame hits me as the twelve Channelers near. The Squad. Headquarters' elite prison guards who specialize in the collection of dangerous creatures. I recognize the scarred face of their captain, Trenton. This is the team that came for me in the infirmary. The team Ember thought she recognized at the lab. I want to ask Trenton where the fucking students are. It has to be them who collected the Channelers from Vadim's garden.

"Where are the others?" Seonu asks Laasya from the side of her mouth. "The other unit?"

Laasya stills and tilts her head. "They're now on the top floor, Captain. I'm fairly sure they're with the commander."

Seonu curses and shares a worried expression with Mason.

"What?" I ask. "What does that mean?" Nobody answers.

"Stand aside," Belanger says to the Blackriver soldiers who have formed a protective circle. "This creature is now under Headquarter jurisdiction."

The Blackriver Guardians look back at their captain, unsure, confused in the face of the higher authority. Some shuffle aside.

Seonu's snapped command freezes their movements. "Our orders are to keep Michael in our lockdown until General Nenge arrives," she says to Belanger with dry calm.

"I'm afraid this matter is far beyond General Nenge's authority. And it is certainly beyond yours."

"How can this be beyond the general?" Laasya steps in front of me, chin raised. "Michael's now a Guardian recruit. That was agreed by the High Council."

Belanger peers down her nose at Laasya as if she's nothing more than flint on her tailored suit. Her overpainted lips twist with a smile that's not really a smile. "This half-breed monster you are so fervently protecting, Miss Shakti, has Jade Water changes in its blood. It is not the innocent Whisperer it portrays but an Anlu'kyr weapon. It has been sectioned under Clause 8 of the Dangerous Creatures Act, and I am here to ensure this order is carried out. Now stand aside before I have you all arrested for obstruction."

The Blackriver soldiers have all fallen silent, staring at me with suspicion, hands drifting over their sword hilts. A few crossbows turn my way. Seonu and Mason study me with narrowed eyes.

Well, that cat's out of the bag.

"That's ridiculous," Laasya says. "The Anlu'kyr haven't used Jade Water for centuries. They can't. The lake has been warded. Those sort of changes in Michael's blood would mean he's a Sab..." She spins around to me, and her brown eyes scan my features as if for the first time. "Oh. *Oh*."

I return her gaze, desperate to read her reaction. Judgment? Anger? Shock? But I only find surprise and something like pity. "Laasya?"

"Oh, Michael," she says.

"Yeah, his fucking eyes are green," Mason says, verbalizing what everyone in the group is now staring at as if they weren't obvious before. "Jade green. Just like the lake."

“Take him,” Belanger orders.

This time when Trenton’s men move forward, none of the Blackriver soldiers try to stop them, and Seonu says nothing.

“No!” Laasya raises her hands to do her soldier-throwing trick, but Seonu clasps her wrist.

“This is beyond Blackriver now.”

Laasya drops her arms, defeated. There’s nothing she can do anyway. Nothing that won’t land her in extreme levels of shit. Her eyes sweep the mansion, and I know she’s hoping for Flanagan or Quinton to show. So am I. Where the hell are they?

Trenton barks an order, and four of the guards approach, tentative, chains clinking. One of them holds a leather hood in his hand. A bloody leather hood. No way. No fucking way.

The blonde witch begins a chant, palms facing upward. Purple lights appear in the air. Metal clatters as they roll the dolly closer. I eye the leather straps, backing away when they push Laasya aside to take my arms. Panic rises, stealing my breath and the strength in my knees. I search the garden with desperate hope for Flanagan. Where is he? Was he really so hurt he’s just going to abandon me?

“You don’t need all this shit,” I say to Trenton. “I’ll come with you.”

“Believe me, it will be a lot safer if you let him walk to the Gate,” Laasya tells the chanting witch.

“You have your orders,” Belanger shouts. “Restrain the thing. Trenton, I want it strapped and chained. The hood as well.”

Four guards grip my arms while the other two prepare the dolly. One of them positions behind me to prevent my escape. I struggle anyway, digging my heels into the dirt and tugging backward. They drag and push me, force me toward what feels like oncoming death. Tingling numbness takes over my limbs. Nausea rises. My heart hammers my rib cage as sweat drips into my wild eyes.

A pressure descends, those twinkling witchlights falling on my skin. My arms fasten to my sides as if forced there; my wrists snap together, the manacles clanking. Shit. Shit. A constriction forms around me like body-wide shrink wrap. No, no, no.

“Stop,” Laasya yells. “It’s too much. He’ll blow. You’re putting us all in danger.”

It’s the first icy touch of the elephant chains that triggers the true panic. The torrent of shaking, sweating, and gasping that steals all thought and all sense. My eyes roll. I choke as the promise of certain death plummets onto me like a suffocating blanket. “Please.” My knees buckle. “Please. I can’t breathe.”

“Stop,” Laasya begs. “This is too much.”

“Stand back, Miss Shakti,” Belanger commands. “Or I will have you arrested for obstruction.”

Laasya steps back, worried fury on her face, eyes wet with tears. She holds out her arms and gestures for Seonu and Mason and the other Blackriver soldiers to stand behind her. The air distorts as she creates some kind of protective wall in front of them. “I warned you,” she says to Belanger.

Trenton takes a step forward, hood in hand. “I’ve had enough of this. Hold him still.” The dark leather doesn’t have any eye holes, just two slits for a nose, and a buckle where it fastens around the neck.

It doesn’t make it to my head.

Furious darkness ignites inside me, exploding upward from the depths to engulf my mind. A cold and endless power expands out from a deep well, filling me, swallowing my panic. And for a moment

I blink in the sudden calm, the certainty of its cool embrace. The knowing. The total control.
Then the world goes black.



CHAPTER 29

I'm on my knees, sunlight twinkling on the grass beneath my gaze. The last tendrils of a dark shadow slink away from my sight, folding back into the depths of my mind like black smoke.

Whispered words penetrate the fog in my head.

"He's coming round," a woman says from my left, her voice trembling. "I think he's back."

A streak of crimson catches my eye, splatters of glistening scarlet across the green. I follow the line and find a burned, dismembered arm, then a head. Broken, bloody corpses, limbs splayed at unnatural angles, necks ripped open to expose veins and gristle, trailing innards strewn over churned ground. Amid the gory scene, demolished metal protrudes from the grass, mangled and melted. My brain can't quite process what it is. What it was.

A woman with blonde dreadlocks lies still, eyes closed, a burn mark across her face. Beside her, an old woman in a wine-colored suit lies in the grass, blood oozing from a gash on her head.

"Michael?" The shaky female voice again.

I look up, blinking away the black mist over my vision. Laasya's standing back, close to the outbuilding, with a hand over her mouth. Seonu and Mason and a few of the soldiers stand behind her, behind a distortion in the air that appears like a glass wall. They're all pressed against the stone, stiff as boards, eyes wide with shock and fear.

"What happened?" I ask, though the truth is knitting together in my brain with horrific clarity. "Did... did I do this?"

"Oh, Michael." Laasya's words catch in her throat, almost a sob.

I stumble to my feet, flinching back as I take in more of the burned bodies, the torn throats, and pools of seeping blood. It's like a rabid bear has ripped through the soldiers. A bear with fiery paws who can melt metal. The iron shackles have gone from my wrists. The cold weight of the collar has also disappeared. The Flame burns in my spine, hot and acidic, the way she gets when riled about something. What the hell happened?

Seonu draws her knives, the other soldiers following. Mason clicks open his crossbow and trains it

on me.

Laasya stands frozen, staring at me as if she doesn't know what she's looking at anymore. "It's my fault," she whispers. She gestures at the mutilated bodies. "This is my fault. I should have stopped them."

"Madiot, go get the Sisters," Seonu orders. "Smith, find the commander." When nobody moves, she shouts, "Now!" and signals to a female soldier. "Peyton, see to Councilor Belanger. Crayley, Wilson, check the others."

Mason and the remaining soldiers are creeping closer to me. I'm backing away.

"Circle slowly," Seonu says to them. "Michael, I want you to kneel on the grass. We're not going to restrain you."

Who's she talking to? The name doesn't seem to fit for some reason. I'm numb, outside my body, disassociated from everything. I stare at the gore, the mangled bodies, the blood, but my mind keeps sliding away from the truth, refusing to get hold of any meaning.

"I don't remember what happened," I say out loud. "I... that can't have been me. I don't know how to do that. I don't..."

A tremor racks my body. Ice slides through my veins. My mind wrestles with the scene around me, but a terrible knowing sinks into my chest like an iron weight.

I'm a monster.

I stumble backward, wanting distance, wanting to get away.

A soldier steps sideways to block my path, but Seonu hisses at him. "No sudden moves. Michael, there's no need to run. We're not going to harm you. Laasya," she calls.

Laasya's still frozen by the wall, a hand over her mouth, sad, fearful eyes bouncing over the bloody scene. A tear rolls down her cheek.

"Laasya," I say, but she won't look at me. She shakes her head.

A posh Oxford accent shouts across the garden. "Everyone stay calm." Quinton races over the grass, cane in hand, holding on to his hat as he runs.

Collective relief washes over everyone present, including me.

When he arrives, breathless, he scans the bloody massacre without a flinch as if it's a collection of discarded stones, not dead people. His eyes flicker briefly over the figure of Gloria Belanger, but he makes no comment and walks straight up to me. "Michael, forgive me. I was waylaid by another drama taking place inside the mansion. I'm here now. Stay calm."

Seonu keeps her knives trained on me. "Councilor Quinton, this creature requires immediate extermination under Clause 9 of the Dangerous Creatures Act."

What? Is she talking about me? So much for *we won't harm you*. I take another step back, but Quinton catches my trembling wrist and stops me. "That won't be necessary, Captain," he says calmly. "I can take care of everything. Laasya, come here, my dear."

Seonu shares a look with Mason. "Councilor, we all witnessed what happened. He's... it's... I don't even know what the fuck it is."

"The whites of his eyes turned fluorescent green," Mason adds with a wild grimace. "All green. You know, the way they say the fucking Warlock's used to."

"Yes, yes. That's quite all right, Sergeant." Quinton sweeps his hand in the air, a semicircle that

takes in all the watching faces. “Go into the mansion. Major Zahir needs your assistance. You do not remember what happened here. You were all knocked out by something you never saw. Go now. You too,” he says to the soldiers checking the bodies.

They all blink, eyes glazing over. Seonu sheaths her knives. Mason folds his crossbow away. “We’ll go into the mansion,” Seonu says, her voice oddly droning. “Zahir needs our assistance.”

Without another word, all the soldiers turn and walk away toward the house, not even glancing at the bodies around them.

Fuck, that’s some trick.

“Um, Councilor?” Laasya asks, confusion all over her face.

Quinton rests his hand on her shoulder. “I haven’t harmed them. I simply want to give Michael a chance. You don’t want him executed, do you, my dear?”

“Well, no, but I... he’s a Sabel, isn’t he?”

“I think you know the answer to that. But does he deserve to die?”

Laasya looks at me, a tentative slide of her eyes as if she doesn’t want to see me, as if she fears what she’ll find. “Of course not. But how is it possible?”

The terror in her expression crushes my chest. “Laasya.” I reach out, but she jerks her hand away and shakes her head again, and my heart pounds like it’s imploding.

Quinton turns her to face him. “Let me help your friend. Like I helped you. You do remember that? That I helped you when they wanted to lock you away.”

She glances at the bodies again and shudders. “You can help him?”

“I can train his abilities. Teach him control.” He draws a slash in the air with the top of his cane, head to toe, and a line of light appears. Laasya’s eyes widen into plates. “I just need to Gate him away from here, from the pressures and the stress. Then—”

Shouts split the air. Guardian soldiers flood into the garden from multiple doors. Sisters from the infirmary rush out and head straight for the fallen, their pristine white uniforms a stark contrast to the blood and gore.

“No,” Quinton hisses through gritted teeth, the crack of light disappearing. “I need more time.”

General Nenge is with the soldiers, her deep-blue uniform and ram-rod posture easy to spot amid the sea of milling brown leather. I search for a blond knot of hair, for broad shoulders and silver eyes, for sanity, but he’s not here.

Flanagan.

Why isn’t he here? Why has he left me?

“Councilor,” Nenge shouts across the garden, her wide-eyed gaze taking in the carnage and what it means. “Keep Michael there.” She bellows an order to the soldiers, and they spread out into two lines and form a semicircle. “Michael, stay calm.” She raises her palms as she approaches. “We’re not going to hurt you. We’re here to help.”

My heart thuds. The trembling in my body escalates to shaking jerks. I can’t do this again. They’re not going to help. They’re going to lock me down. Exterminate me. I can’t risk them trying to chain me again. If I blow, I’ll kill even more of them. Nenge herself.

With one more desperate scan for Flanagan, my heart knowing the search is futile—he’s given up on me—I tug my wrist from Quinton’s hold and step back over the grass. I can’t stay here.

Quinton reaches out. "I can handle this. I can get you to safety."

I shake my head, my gaze fixing again on the brutal gore as I back away. What am I? What the hell am I?

Then I'm running, running away, running in the only direction I have. The soldiers spring into action to cut off my path. Arrows whizz past me and thud into the grass. The twisted trees of the Border Woods loom higher as I pick up speed and race toward them.

"No! Michael!" Nenge calls.

"Not the woods!" Quinton screams. "I cannot follow you there."

The soldiers' shouts drift away. They're not fast enough. I'm soon rushing headlong into the trees. Claw-like branches scrape my skin as I stumble between the black giants and into the cool embrace of darkness, a darkness that has called to me, tugged on me since I arrived at Blackriver.

The wood means certain death. I won't be able to leave once I'm inside these sickly trees. But what choice do I have? Where else can I go?

Maybe this is where something as fucked up as me belongs.



CHAPTER 30

*M*y foot catches a root, and I tumble with a squelch into the black slime that coats the gnarly ground. The muddy *plop* echoes through the eerie silence. For fuck's sake. Wiping the thick, snotty tar-like substance from my face and arms—again—is useless. The rotten-corpse stink covers my boots, my suedes, my torn gray shirt, my hair. I wretch when it splatters my lips. The stuff tastes how it smells. Foul. Rotten. Dead.

I keep my eyes down as I push to my feet for the hundredth time. Don't look at the trees, Blakeley. Don't look.

There's something very, very wrong with the trees here. They leer and gurn and reach, mouths gaping wide to gobble and swallow. Or at least, that's what I see when I peer through the dark at their scarred trunks. They're aware. They stare right back at me when I dare to look, watching, judging. Conscious, like the trees of the main Faeland forest they protect, only they don't show any sense of playfulness or cheek, no colored lights, no guidance. These trees glare with a sullen fury, an animosity that hits me like an icy heat. It sinks into my skin, seeps into my bones, crushes all hope from my heart.

And their roots move, I'm sure of it, slinking and stretching through the slime to trip me and send me crashing into their bony fingers. Branches shift and grasp to block my way but still when I turn to check. I'm convinced they're forcing me to walk in circles, but I can't bloody tell. I've got fuck all sense of direction.

I've been trudging for hours. At least, I think it's hours. It could be days. Fuck, it could be years. There's no sky, no light, no break in the heavy darkness that smothers all sight and distinction. No air. No difference between one decrepit tree and the next. No life except the dark swampy vines that curl through the sludge and around every trunk. And no warmth. No fucking warmth. The forest steals it from me, sucking it from my organs. The Flame would normally warm me, but she's diminished to nothing more than a pilot light in my lower spine, not completely gone, but not available either. I'm so numb with cold my fingers and toes are lost to me. The bruises and scrapes are no more than a dull ache, distant and irrelevant on my frigid skin.

A root rises and blocks my way. I stumble and thump to the ground, but this time I stay where I landed, head resting on a cold stone, legs in a sloppy pool of slime.

What's the point? Where the fuck am I going? I had some vague notion of finding a way out, finding some place where the trees end and the sky begins. But it's hopeless. It's all just hopeless. I've got nowhere to go. Nowhere I wouldn't stand out like a freak. I've got no money, no home, no friends. I can't use a phone or a card machine or a car. I can't enter a house without crashing its electrics. I need Grounding. I need... blood.

It's pointless. I'm pointless.

And I'm... dangerous. There's something very fucking wrong with me too. I ripped those soldiers apart, tore their insides out. It's still hard to accept it was me. But Laasya's doe-brown eyes... frightened and sickened. At me. At the monster.

What am I?

I sink deeper into the cold sludge. Despair sits like a lead stone on my chest, paralyzing my limbs. Gabriel.

I'm sorry. I'm so fucking sorry. I messed up. I looked you in the eyes and told you I'd stay. And now you think I'm full of shit. That my words, my feelings, were worthless bullshit.

He wouldn't speak to me, wouldn't even look at me. He shut the door in my face. Left me to the Squad. To that woman. To be strapped to a dolly on wheels like a serial killer. Left me to kill them in a fit of... whatever that was. Rage? Fear? Madness? And it's my fault. I didn't have the balls to tell him the truth. To trust him. To love him.

The slinking touch of a vine over my ankle cuts off my pathetic drivel. I kick it away, and it splashes back into the swampy pool. I knew those fucking things could move.

I go to rise, but my limbs are too heavy. When I give up and slump back, the ground seems to suck me down, embrace me in its cold refuge. Offering the grave I know I deserve. I'll die here in this darkness, in this dead-body stink. And not one person will give a fuck. Flanagan will be free of my shit. Safe. Laasya won't have to deal with the monster that made her shiver with disgust and fear. Made her cry.

Will Quinton miss his son? Or will he only be sore for losing his pet project? The man with similar abilities to his precious Warlock.

And Alexei, the sly bastard of a bloodsucker. Will he miss me? Or will he move on to a new toy, a new weapon, another entertainment?

I peer down at the leather cuff around my wrist. The blue sapphire appears black beneath the smears of mud. If I took it off and called, he would come. He's fae. He could fly straight in here and carry me out. My chest aches with the thought of seeing him, with the image of his pale beauty and his irritatingly radiant smile. The longing tugs at me to undo the ties. A tiny spark of hope flickers beneath the bleakness.

Alexei.

Yeah, he'd come. I don't have any doubt about that. Then he'd collar me, chain me, and make me his fucking slave.

A sudden tightness on my shin jerks me out of my stupor. The creeper has snaked its way around my lower leg. Kicking at it with my slicked boot, I try to dislodge the grip, but the vine clamps like a

bony fist and pulls. I skim across the ground, hard roots jarring my back—aargh, bastard, that hurts—until I sink down into a puddle of slime.

And I'm swallowed to my waist.

Horror clenches my breath. Despair explodes into combat as survival instinct slams home. I scramble for a root, for a branch, kicking beneath the pool at the snakelike hold crushing my ankle. My fingers grasp in vain. Slime greases everything, and I'm sure the trees are pulling away, shifting aside so I don't have anything to grab. Slurping noises and splatters echo through the silence as the vine jerks me deeper and gray mucous reaches my neck.

Shit. Shit. I don't want to drown in slime. I don't want to drown in slime.

"Help! Help!" I scream the words, but they echo away into the dark. Into an empty silence. There's no one else here.

The vine gives one last almighty tug, and with a final sloppy glug, the goo covers me whole.

With wild panic, I grapple for a hold on the sludgy sides of the pool. It's useless. It's fucking useless. I slide downward, down and down. So deep. So fucking deep. My lungs strain, desperate for air. The burning pressure rises like a fire to my throat. My eyes fly open on an endless blackness. I can't hold it off. I'm going to breathe. I'm going to drown.

Gabriel.

I love you. I love you.

Why didn't I just tell you that?

A rush of images flicker through my mind. Strikingly clear. As fast as a newsreel.

This is it. My life flashing before my eyes. I'm done. I'm fucking done...

The sweep of a blood-red cape swishes behind my eyelids. The huge vats in that grotty lab.

Then I'm in the bar where it all started. Flanagan's silver eyes and curve of a smile. Alexei at the steelworks. His beauty, his wings, his sly words.

"Draw him close, youngling."

I'm stripping Flame from fifty soldiers. Then standing on a cliffside beneath a whirlwind of tooth and wing and claw. Then I'm in the lab again. With a smiling Vadim. With Ember and her tearful blue eyes.

"They wore Guardian uniforms. They looked like the Squad."

Belanger's Squad. A shiny glass building, a building Laasya couldn't see.

"Guide the Lycan to his students... This will help you give him what he needs."

All the connecting threads snap into a clear line. So obvious. Why didn't I see it before?

And now I'm standing beside a luminescent lake—lapping waves of liquid jade. Black sand spreads beneath my toes. A dark cave rises above me, half hidden beneath a tangle of draping vines.

Free me, an echoing voice says, deep and cold and distant.

No. No, I can't be here. The last time I came here, I'd died. The Sisters of Mercy had to revive me.

I can't die. I can't. I have to tell Gabriel I love him.

Gabriel!

The fire in my lungs tears me back to alertness. Back to blindness, to the black suffocating slime.

I scramble for purchase, and this time I grasp something hard and gnarly—a root. With renewed strength, I haul myself upward, ignore my lungs screaming demand for air. I kick at the vine clenching

my ankle and force myself into exertion I have no oxygen for.

Body stretched to the max, one leg caught and held, I reach as far as I can.

Just when I'm sure it's useless, when I'm certain of my coming death, a light bursts through the dark. A blinding, flashing star striking into the black.

The vine jerks and slithers away. Warmth fills my limbs with new strength.

I wrench harder to pull up and out, and finally my face breaches the surface. Sucking in air and coughing up goo, I splatter onto the ground, then push myself with exhausted limbs through the mud and slump against a tree. My body trembles with effort and fear. The assaulted leg and its hip joint throbs beneath the biting numbness of cold. Gasping hard, I wait for my thudding heart to slow.

Fuck, that was close. Way too close.

When my breathing settles and I've calmed enough not to have a heart attack, I glance around for the source of the light that helped save my ass from drowning. There must be something, someone.

With a jolt of shock, my gaze lands on a man. No, not a man. Not a human man.

Crouched in the crook of a branch, watching me with a birdlike tilt to his head, one white brow arched above strange black eyes, sits a creature that looks like he's grown out of the tree itself. Pure white hair in twig-tangled braids and knots curls upward and over to spill down a long, lean frame. His clothes are wraps of worn leather, not unlike the Warlock's armor, only brown instead of black, and woven with mossy strands and leaves.

"Um, hey," I say, my eyes fixing on his ears. They sweep back into long points—really long points—and nestle against his hair. The man's... creature's delicate features shine like moonlight. "Was that you? The light? Thanks for that. You saved my life."

The black eyes—completely black, no whites at all—glitter with humor. "I am gladdened you chose to live, Michael Sabel. Your queen sends her regards."

I flinch from my name, blood and gore flickering through my mind. *Your* queen? "How do you know who I am?"

"We know you. The Whisperer. Vessel of the twin Flames. The child born without a true father, from a womb but not of it. You were created to take our freedom or give it back to us, child of the Jade Lake." His voice dances over me like music, smooth and soft, and I'm sure I can hear tinkling bells?

Born without a true father? What the hell does that mean? "I have a father. He's a witch. His name's Quinton." I'm not quite as sure about that as I'm making out, but no father is impossible. "And a mother. Well, had. She died giving birth to me." Apparently.

He tilts his head again as he studies my face, the tiniest wrinkle in his brow. "You were most certainly born from magic. This much is clear."

I rub my goo-covered head, my exhausted brain simply unable to cope with this fresh assault on my already fucked-up sense of who... what I am. A gloriously simple time, long, long ago, I was an ordinary bloke. An orphan, a loser, a fighter from the wrong side of town, but ordinary. Just fucking normal. A human trying to make his way through life. Now I'm the son of witches, the descendent of a psychopath, and a terrifying monster waiting to happen—

I jerk away so fast I slide off the trunk and thump my head on a root. "Ouch, fuck!" The man/creature/thing now crouches beside me, so close the fragrance of flowers and spring tickles my

nostrils. “How did you...?”

He smiles, a glowing smile, with a row of sharp pointy teeth, and offers me a cloth. After a pause for doubt, I pluck it from his long fingers. The cloth is made of something soft—like chamois leather.

“Thanks.” While I wipe my face, I give him a side-eyed once-over. He doesn’t look real, and yet he’s more real than anything I’ve laid eyes on. His moonlight glow, which reminds me of Alexei, suggests he’s an illusion. The fanciful creation of a desperate mind. But his presence has a tactile quality, like a soft warmth in my bones, and though his mane of white dreadlocks and crazy long ears look alien, they also look ultranatural somehow. Wild and feral, like they belong in this wood, and it’s my lack of them that’s out of place.

“So you’re one of the fae?” I say, asking the obvious. I wonder how old he is. They live for thousands of years.

“That I am.”

“Well, um, thanks again. I thought I was a goner for sure.”

“No. Thank you, Michael Sabel. Thank you for choosing life. For choosing your goddess. The supernatural world will not survive the coming storm without you.” He tugs out another cloth from somewhere in his clothing, though I see no pockets, and I use it to wipe my neck.

What does he mean by the coming storm? “By goddess, you mean the Flame? Velnushka?”

“Our silver mistress. The fiery beloved. The living soul of the fae. And your creator.”

“Yeah, well, some of her fiery-beloved warmth would be just the ticket right about now, but she clearly can’t handle slime because she’s not here. I can barely feel her at all. I can’t even feel my lips.” I can’t feel my legs either or my arse. Or my face. I’m an icicle pop. A slimy one.

“The silver Flame has no power here,” he says with his musical inflection. “The Unmaking Shadow governs these ancient trees.”

“You mean the shadow god. What’s his name? Malukel. This is his place, is it?”

He nods, and I glance around at the endless stretch of silent, angry trees. “And how do I get out of it?”

“You decide where it is you wish to go. And may I suggest you do not wish for death again?”

That near drowning was my fault? “I can’t just, you know, wish to get out?”

He flashes those pointy teeth. His baby-smooth skin gives him a youthful appearance, but I know by the weight of his presence alone, he’s way older. “If you wish to arrive, you must decide on a destination.”

I flop my head back on the tree trunk, a sigh gusting through my lips. Decide on my destination. Yeah, right. “I don’t have one. I don’t...” A funny tightness clutches my throat. I swallow it down. “I don’t have anywhere to go. Anyone to go to.”

He studies my face with those unblinking black eyes. I can’t read them at all. “There are many who would gladly home a Whisperer.”

“Yeah. No joke and I can’t trust any of them. They’re all up to something. They all want something from me.” Even my own father. I shake my head and wave a hand out at the woods. “I don’t understand this world. How it works. How to navigate its craziness and all the scheming. It’s like standing at the center of a chessboard in a blindfold with my hands tied. And every piece on the board is heading my way with chains and collars. Or an iron bolt.”

His smile broadens, his face lighting up with boyish pleasure. “Do you play?”

“Chess? No. My adoptive dad loved it. He taught me how the pieces work, said chess would help me learn strategy and thinking ahead. But the game’s too bloody twisty for me. I always went straight for the king, and that got me in trouble every time. I lost every game unless he let me win.”

The fae man chuckles. “Then I suggest you learn. And quickly. Because you are indeed at the center of a chessboard, at the very center of a war for the heart of a world. And the pieces around you know exactly what they want. What is it Michael Sabel wants?”

“My bloody freedom,” I say without hesitation. A six-foot-seven Viking with blond braids. “A normal life. A... home, I suppose. Somewhere.” I blow out another breath, that lead weight pressing on my chest again. A renewed exhaustion steals my strength, leaving me limp and dog tired. “I know that’s bollocks. I’ll never have that now. I’m a monster.”

I’m ashamed to meet the fae’s eyes, but when I glance up, I only find a soft warmth.

“You have a home,” he says. “And a homeland. You will remember this when you accept what you are.” He takes my wrist in his delicate hand and wipes off the sludge from the sapphire with a slender thumb. Can he see it? “You have kin. And a loved one who will protect you with his life if you only ask.”

I frown at him. Does he mean Flanagan? Surely he can’t mean Alexei? “If I take off this cuff, the only home I’ll have is one in which I’m a lifelong slave.”

The fae man dips his head in seeming acquiescence. “It takes time to understand a people. To understand your place in the world.” He rises to a stand, all dignity and featherlight grace, and much taller than he seemed while crouching.

“Wait,” I blurt. “Are you going?”

He smiles again, a warm but alien grin. “Who is the strongest in a game of chess? Answer this question, and it’s truth will guide you.” Hands clasped behind his back, he walks away.

The cold closes in. Panic threatens. “Wait. I... Are you just going to leave me here?”

“You have everything you need.” He turns, his wild beauty like a star in this wretched gloom. “You already know your next move. And you must make a move, Vessel of the Twin Flame. Your gods need you.”

“Will I see you again?” I ask, not sure why.

“Of course. My name is Etalon. We are destined to be friends, Michael Sabel.” He walks through the trees, feet barely kissing the ground, and then he’s gone. One moment there, the next a scatter of twinkling lights that blink away in the gloom.

What an amazing man... creature... being.

I peer around the empty woods, at the warped trees, slimy ground, and total silence.

You already know your next move.

For fuck’s sake. How? What move? I don’t know who the strongest in a chess game is. Isn’t it the queen?

The flashing images that streamed through my mind as I died—again—come to mind. In that moment, everything made complete sense. Lucid clarity. The jumble of memories had a thread, an obvious conclusion. I know where the students are, and I know how they got there. I know what Alexei wants. What he really wants.

Yeah, Etalon's right. I know what I need to do next.

I look down at the cuff and its glittery blue passenger.

And with numbed fingers, stiff with cold and covered in slime, I work the buckle loose.

I have a move, and it starts by taking off my protection from the Blood Call.



CHAPTER

31

The moment the sapphire leaves my wrist, an avalanche of relief, quickly followed by fury, hits my mind. The Blood Call's demand thrums into my veins like raucous music, almost tugging me to my feet with its strength.

You can turn that off, I say with a scowl in my voice, knowing Alexei can hear me. *I'm in the Border Woods. Need your help.*

Don't move from where you are, he answers in his crisp accent.

The wait seems endless. Could be minutes or hours. There's no way to tell in this wretched world of sludge and stink and angry trees. All I know is a growing thirst, gnawing cold, and an emptiness where Flanagan's warmth should be.

Longing clamps my chest. I push it away, though I tremble at the thought of never seeing Flanagan again, never kissing him, never touching him. I shove it down, along with the pain. If I want to survive these woods, I can't dwell on that right now.

He washed his hands of you, and it's your fault. Just deal with it, Blakeley.

Sleep creeps in, threatening to drag me into darkness. My exhausted body yearns to switch off and recoup. I shake my head, pinch my skin, force myself to stay awake. No way am I losing it here. I'll drown in slime again.

As I'm blinking away another tug toward slumber, I feel Alexei's closeness—an awakening hum in my blood. I scramble to refasten the cuff, my numb fingers fumbling at the buckle. I've only just succeeded when a gust of black wings haloed in silver Flame tussles my hair, and Alexei's tall, slender form lands in the woods. His footsteps fall like Etalon's, barely touching the ground, soundless as he saunters toward me. His face glows with the same fae light. His immaculate black suit—single-button jacket and modern cut—looks at odds with the Grimm fairy-tale setting. The trees shudder and creak as if greeting his arrival.

As usual, I'm unable to tear my bleary gaze away from him. His ethereal yet sensual beauty steals all the fighting talk I prepared while I waited. I was going to threaten him, insist on a deal. Now that he's here, all that's left is traitorous relief.

Giant wings aloft behind him like walls of leathery shadow, he sinks into an effortless crouch. Chocolatey scents envelop my world, masking the surrounding stench of death. His dark gaze wanders over my ripped, slime-covered clothes, the red welts around my ankle. “What have they done to you, my love?”

He glides the back of his fingers down my grimy cheek, and I jerk away from his touch, my instant hunger for more pissing me off. “I know where the students are.”

He doesn’t remove his fingers, just strokes my jaw instead. “How sure are you?”

“Very.”

“Good. And were my instructions not clear?” His tone holds an edge. “Do not leave your Compatible. If they take you from him, call me. I would have come for you. I would have brought an army if you’d only asked.”

My voice tightens on a fizzle of anger. “I didn’t leave him. He left me. What can I say? The shit hit the fan. Here I am.” I push away his hand.

Alexei rests the hand on my thigh instead. He tilts his head and studies me, cat-like. I have to tense my muscles not to squirm beneath that all-seeing scrutiny.

“Can you walk, or should I carry you?” he says eventually.

“I can walk.” I’m not sure if that’s true. “Why? Where are we going?”

“Somewhere I can take care of you.” He stands, and with a crisp *snap*, he folds his wings. Then a gust of silvery Flame swallows them away.

“Where the hell do your wings go when they’re not there?” I’m amazed all over again that something so huge can just disappear.

His withering look suggests I’m an imbecile. “Your so-called ‘laws’ of physics do not apply to the Flame, Michael.”

I roll my eyes. Well, of course they don’t. Why would something as straightforward as physics apply to this crackpot reality? The perfectly ordered sanity would be an insult.

Pushing myself to a stand against the trunk, I grimace as stiffened limbs complain. The cold has stolen my feet and hands. All I have are clumsy stumps where fingers used to be. I manage two steps. Then my knees buckle. Alexei smoothly catches me with an arm around my waist before I hit the slime.

“Legs don’t work,” I inform him.

He chuckles, that warm velvet sound that strokes my insides. “I’ve got you.”

That’s not a flush of pleasure surging through me. Nope.

I’ve barely flopped my arm over his shoulders when his forward motion turns the trees into passing ghosts. The world is flying past us in a Flame-lit blur as we swallow up the distance, even though Alexei’s floaty steps remain effortless. I grasp his suit as best I can and stumble alongside him on jellied feet, completely disorientated, unsure if the solidity beneath my boots is real or not.

“How the hell are we moving so fast?” I ask with awe.

“You must stop thinking of yourself as a child of clay and iron. You are Flame-born, and the living fire that lights this realm answers to your will. You travel through the Faelands with your mind, not your feet.”

Well, that made absolutely no fucking sense at all. How are we not banging into stuff? I don’t

bother asking. It's not as if my tired brain has a chance of understanding what he's on about.

Darkness changes to a streaming tunnel of green with riotous color bleeding through. The pain of sudden brightness forces my eyes closed, even as it fills me with giddy ease that we've left the Border Woods. If I never see those moping, slime-covered trees ever again, it will be far too soon.

Without warning, the movement stops. When I've recovered from the dizziness attack, I open my eyes. We stand on wild woodland in a sunlit glade. The scent of summer flowers and warm soil fills my nostrils, and my mouth drops open. I swivel my head and take in what my mind can barely process. Giant trees arc over a soft sea of grass and flowers. The crystal clear water of a stream dances and chuckles over pale rocks, collecting in a turquoise pool at the center of the glade. Tiny colored lights twirl in the air, glinting in the golden rays striking through the spring-green canopy.

"Fuck, it's... it's amazing," I say like a lovestruck idiot. It's magical. A mini corner of heaven or something. I can hardly cope with the beauty, especially after a night in cold, rotten ugliness.

I'm still gripping a fistful of Alexei's suit, clinging on to him as if we're still traveling through a speeding blur. He's circled my waist, watching my reaction to the glade with a smug smile tugging at his pouty lips.

I release him and step away, not wanting him to get any ideas, not wanting to accidentally look into his eyes. My knees buckle, and I collapse, thumping into the grass.

"Bollocks." I give in to the warm ground and flop onto my back. My limbs feel like bags of sand. They've decided they don't want to belong to me anymore. And the warmth. Oh, the warmth.

Alexei leans against the tree trunk beside him, hands in his pockets, looking for all the world like we've just landed in his own bedroom. A weight I didn't realize he carried seems to have lifted from his elegant shoulders. "Sleep, my love. We have nowhere to be until you've recovered."

I try to rise, try to push up to sitting. I haven't got time to hang around fairy glades. And I need a wash badly. "The students—"

"Will wait. Sleep. Let your homeland rejuvenate you."

Homeland? "No. I've got to..." But it's no good. My weight sucks me back to the ground. The stress and the fear, the guilt and the shame, the shock of survival, and the loss threatening to undo me are seeping from my body. Soaking away into the tall grass to leave me floating on an ocean of sunlight. As slumber sucks me under, I slur the knowledge that now seems so obvious. "You want him, don't you? You want him back?"

"He's mine." Is the last thing I hear as I'm submerged in a warm, glorious darkness.



CHAPTER 32

Sunlight glimmering against my eyelids wakes me, and a tickle on my nose. I sweep the sensation away and try to orientate. Warmth against my face. The trickling burble of a stream. Tingling Flame on every inch of skin.

Memories slam home. The Faelands. Alexei.

The tickling returns, and I dust it off, only to have it return. When I slit an eye to investigate, I find a flower on my nose. A flower with eyes and a mouth. A petal cocks its head and cracks a tiny smile, displaying a row of pin-sharp teeth. Not a flower but a minicreature.

Whoa! I rush to a sit, and she flitters away, joining a swarm of multi-colored wings glittering in the sunlight. I'm in the tall grass beside the turquoise pool. Naked, apart from the leather cuff. Clean of sludge and slime. I feel amazing. Reborn. The Flame's back, her sizzling presence in my lower spine like the return of an old friend. And it's as if my muscles have somehow soaked in the golden sunlight and the brightness has become my strength.

"Better?" a smooth voice asks. Alexei lounges against the tree trunk, jacket off, black shirt open, arm draped across a bent knee. He's lazily eating a peach, looking like a gigolo on a picnic in the country.

"Where the fuck are my clothes, Alexei?"

"I couldn't wash you with them on, my love." He slowly wipes juice from his mouth, and my eyes follow his finger across his plump lips.

I glance away and check out my clean skin. How did he wash all that sludge off without waking me? I must have been out cold. "Okay, fine, but I'll have them back now."

He just chuckles, his grin showing off the sharp points of his incisors, and purposely drops his gaze to my treasonous boner. "Admit your preference to be without them, and I might allow you clothes."

My preference... the little shit. Okay, not so little, but definitely a shit. I feel completely comfortable when naked with Alexei. And he fucking knows it. For some unfathomable reason, I like my dick on display for him. In fact, it's taking every ounce of willpower not to wank off just so he can watch me come.

I tighten my lips against useless denial. “Fuck off.”

He chuckles again, a smooth burble, like the dancing water beside him. “I give you permission to share your release if you wish.” His playful grin is like liquid sin.

My hand actually lands on my dick, the fucking traitor. Nope. No way. I’d rather my balls explode than give in to Alexei’s infuriating smugness.

“You left the cuff on, then?” I say instead. He could have taken it off and thrown it away while I slept. Why didn’t he?

“It may prove useful.”

“Oh, it’s useful, alright. To keep you out of my head.” To lessen my desire to jump your bones.

His eyelashes flutter, but he doesn’t comment, just throws two of the fruits my way. “Eat. You’ll need the strength.”

My reflexes snatch the fruit from the air without thought. “I’m not supposed to eat food from the Faelands.” I examine the giant velvet peaches. “Flanagan said—”

Alexei snickers as if finding my resistance funny. And I might know why. After taking a deep breath, I bite into the soft flesh. A burst of fruity heaven assaults my mouth. “Whoa. That’s... Wow!” It doesn’t quite taste of peach, not the peaches I’m used to anyway. This is more a cross between a peach, a mango, a pineapple, and a spritzer, all in one. And the suffusion of... what is that? Well-being? Happiness? It slides down my throat like swallowing summer sunshine.

I devour the first and start the second. I can’t handle a third, though, because they’re that satisfying. When I glance up from my feast, Alexei is watching me with soft, wistful eyes, but he quickly shutters them.

“Okay.” I wipe juice from my mouth and neck. “Let’s talk about Flanagan.”

“Yes, let’s.”

Huh, I expected him to avoid the subject. He must know I’m on to him.

He levels me with a more serious expression. “You believe he left you?”

My breath catches. That wasn’t what I wanted to talk about, but I’m caught nonetheless. “Yeah.” I swallow, wincing at the memory of shuttered coldness as Flanagan slammed the office door in my face. My crushing sense of betrayal when he left me to the Squad. “He’s washed his hands of me. I messed up. He... fuck.” I can’t meet Alexei’s eyes, even if I dared.

A long silence stretches between us while I stew in heavy guilt, and he watches me with that knowing gaze.

Eventually, he says, “To see clearly, young one. To discern a situation with lucidity, you must learn to view matters from beyond those orphan wounds.”

I whip my head up. “What fucking wounds? What are you talking about? He left me, Alexei. He stayed away while they tried to lock me down with a witch net and a set piece from the Hannibal Lecter movies. And I... I deserved it. I was...” I can’t say it, can’t admit I was so stupid. Agreeing to leave him without saying a word. Even if I did change my mind in the end.

Another extended silence ensues while we both gaze at crystal clear water spilling over rocks. Alexei doesn’t seem the type to rush a conversation, and I’m feeling too broody to speak.

“You’ve been with Gabriel long enough to know his ways, and yet you believe him the type to leave his loved one in their greatest moment of need for the sake of some petty hurt.”

“Well, no, of course not. I mean, he’s...” The most decent man I’ve ever met. I pluck a blade of grass and chuck it away as though it’s insulted me. The fact he wouldn’t normally leave a loved one in need surely makes the fact he did worse.

“Not everyone will abandon you. Though I know this is what you assume.”

Anger rises. “Will you stop fucking psychologizing me? I’m telling you he left me. He—” Quinton’s words come back to me. *“I was waylaid by another drama taking place inside the mansion.”* Laasya sensed twelve soldiers coming up the stairs to Flanagan’s office. I assumed that was for me, but like she said, they didn’t know I was there, so...

The penny drops with a clang. “Oh shit, they arrested him! They bloody arrested him.”

“Well done, my love.”

I jump to my feet, glancing around the glade as if I’ll find clothes and weapons amid the flowers. “Shit, he needs my help. Where would they take him? We need to go find him. Get me some fucking clothes.”

“Shh, rest. He’s not in danger. Or in need of our aid.” He looks up at me, expecting me to follow his instructions.

I pause in edgy indecision, hands fisting. Why didn’t I realize Flanagan was in trouble? Quinton told me Belanger would have Flanagan arrested if they found out who I am. An accusation of concealing a higher-class anomaly, especially a Sabel, plays perfectly into her schemes.

“Fuck!” I shout. A flurry of colored wings stir the air as the mini-fairies gust away from the sound.

“Sit down.”

My arse lands on the ground before I realize I’ve followed his quiet order like a loyal dog. I scowl at him but stay on the grass. “I’ve let him down,” I mumble. “Again.”

“What did I tell you about those wounds? Not every problem is your fault. Or even your responsibility. What could you have done? Gabriel has as many allies in the High Council as enemies. He will not remain inside a prison cell for long.”

He’s right. What could I have done? I had my hands full with my own emergency. But it’s hard to shake the blame. If I’d told him who I am? “You’re sure he’s okay? What if Belanger—”

“The Belangers will attempt to take him down yet again, and they will fail.” He meets my eyes, and the genuine sympathy in his oil-black gaze makes me forget to look away. “You were not abandoned, Michael.” Something about that statement makes a lump form in my throat. I have to swallow it down to ease the sting in my eyes.

“And he won’t thank you for your help if it puts you at risk. Though I’m sure he considered killing every one of those Headquarters’ soldiers, he would have refrained for your benefit. Killing his own wouldn’t have improved your predicament and would have robbed him of the influence to help you.”

“How do you know all this?” I cough to clear the frog in my throat. “It only happened yesterday.”

“It’s been three days since you ran into the woods. Time moves differently in the Faeland Border. And I make it my business to know what happens at Blackriver.”

Three days? I rub my face, my mind clogging with all this new information. Confused feelings congest my chest, all tight and twisty, not sure what to do with themselves.

“I looked for you,” Alexei says gently. “As soon as I found out what had happened, I came to the Woods, but the Border is an endless stretch of god magic and impossible to search. I had to return

home and wait. But I knew my grandmother would take care of her own.” His voice takes on a chiding tone. “If you’d taken off the sapphire, I would have found you within minutes.”

I swallow again. Why the fuck didn’t I do that? It seems so obvious now. But is that the Faeland’s calming influence causing my change of heart? Or this new, more tender side of Alexei I’m seeing for the first time?

I look up at him, not quite as afraid to meet those endless eyes. “You were lovers, weren’t you? You and Flanagan. Jasper was, what? Someone you shared?”

Alexei flinches and turns away, pursing his lips. He takes in a long breath. “Let us talk about the students. You say you know where they are? You found the laboratory?”

“No way.” I shake my head. “I want answers. You want Flanagan back. He’s the surest way to secure that bloody vampire throne. Draw him close, you said to me at the steelworks.” I tap my chest. “I’m your fucking honey trap, aren’t I? That’s why you wanted me at Blackriver. Not to invade the place. Not to steal students. Those were just convenient side benefits. You knew Flanagan wouldn’t be able to resist a Channeler as strong as himself. An equal. A Compatible. And once he was knee deep in honey, you only had to crook that Blood Call finger of yours, and my half-breed ass would come running. Flanagan attached. Huh? Admit it.”

Amusement lightens his expression. “You still believe yourself merely a half breed?”

I puff out an impatient breath at his deflection but take the bait. “No, actually. I don’t. Thanks to the last twenty-four hou—three days, that lightbulb is well and truly on. I’m a witch. Have to be. And it’s pretty sodding clear I’ve got fairy blood in my fucked-up parentage too. Etalon said, ‘*your* queen sends her regards.’ You called this my homeland. And I feel it.” I sweep a hand out at the glade, at the tinkling water and the fluttering fairies, and the strange golden light. “I feel like I belong here. Felt it the last time I was here too. And that flash of knowing I get in my gut—the tugging certainty? It’s intuition. Witchy fueled intuition.” Laasya knew that. It’s why she was protecting me. Why she was drawn to a friendship with me.

“Yeah, I really am a mongrel. The descendant of a fucked-up breeding program. The truth has landed. Now admit to me you want Flanagan. He’s the golden ticket, isn’t he? A Lycan blessed by the goddess, your Anlu’kyr aristocracy revere.” I jab a finger his way. “You want to break his faith in the Guardians, either through their treatment of me or whatever it is he’ll see when he finds those students. And then your hope is he’ll come running back to you. Back to his pretty fae prince. To the lover he blames for the death of his beloved Jasper.”

A flash of anger disturbs Alexei’s satin-faced beauty. “Gabriel Flanagan belongs to *me*. He pledged himself to me, and I intend to hold him to his vow. He’s had long enough to explore the world and play soldier. He needs to wake up and see the true enemy. Accept his responsibilities to the people he rejected. You were a way for me to remind him where he belongs.” His voice softens. “But you are also mine, Michael. And I knew you were safe in his hands.”

I squeeze my eyes shut, determined not to react to the whole ownership thing. He’s a vampire. I get it. Whatever. It doesn’t make it true. Neither does the way those words always land like a round peg in a round frigging hole whenever he says them. “The true enemy? You mean the shadow worshippers?”

Those words ignite a rage in Alexei, so fierce, I flinch. His black eyes flash with gold, and the raw

beauty in his furious expression steals my breath. “Yes. The Dra’ka Tul.” He all but snarls the name, incisors exposed beneath his curling lip. “Malukel’s legion. Those who believe the Anlu’kyr belong beneath their boots.”

I don’t blame him for his hatred. The shadow shifts have made an enemy of me too. “You know they tried to kill Flanagan.”

“They attempted to force his Guardians to exterminate him. I’m aware.”

“So it definitely wasn’t you, then?”

He lifts a brow. “You thought it was?”

“Only briefly. But those were your Blood Servants, weren’t they?”

He sighs. “They were. Stolen from a gatehouse in Germany.”

“By one of the shadow witches? Shit, they’re good. I thought I was up against Alyona.”

“The Dra’ka Tul coven has many adepts. Old, experienced witches.”

“Are they involved with this lab? Or is that about something else?”

He shrugs, a graceful lift of his shoulders. “I’m not certain, but I intend to find out. Their *modus operandi* is infiltration. Their High Priest—an all but invisible foe I have yet to kill—secretes his followers in positions of authority, places and projects with influence. So it would be no surprise to find them at the heart of a project dedicated to creating supersoldiers strong enough to overwhelm Anlu’kyr forces.”

“Supersoldiers? With Jade water?”

“Of course.”

“So that’s why you’re so intent on finding this lab. Even giving up Channelers to lay a trail. Because it’s a threat to your kind.”

“Our kind, Michael.”

“I want the students back. If I get to stick one to the Belangers while I’m at it, all the better.”

“The Belangers?” a new voice asks from behind me, making me jump. A voice I know far too well, considering I’ve only met the bastard twice.

Radomir steps past me and drops to one knee in front of his prince, the sword on his hip belt draping over the grass. “Your Highness.” He presses a kiss to the back of Alexei’s offered hand, his pale-blond hair spilling forward over his shoulders.

“Welcome, cousin. You brought clothes for our favorite youngling?”

“As you instructed, Your Highness. For you as well.” Radomir turns his disarmingly handsome smile in my direction. He’s in his official gear, the Blood-Guard uniform he wore at the battle that looks like it comes straight out of imperial Russia: a thigh-length, tunic-style coat, all black but for the silver embroidery around the high collar and hem. And fitted black trousers made of smooth leather. “A pleasure to see you again, Michael. Your safety gladdens me.”

“Raddo,” I answer with a gruff cough, purposely cutting his name.

I should feel self-conscious. Overly aware of the fact that I’m stark bollock naked in front of these two dressed vampires, and my half-hard tackle is on display for them to ogle. I don’t. Not at all. In fact, some vampire part of my brain wants them to see me swell to their attention. As if it’s a sign of respect or something. A way of showing a lack of aggressive intent. Or submission.

His smile stretches, amusement in his sparkly turquoise eyes. He slides the leather satchel from his

back to the grass and unbuckles his sword belt. I ignore my flush of pleasure as his appreciative gaze wanders down my body, lingering slowly over my erection, then returning to my face. I try a defiant glare, but he just grins.

Alexei watches this exchange with a sigh of satisfaction. “Well, now that the family’s together. Let us talk about invading a certain laboratory. Michael, tell us everything you know, starting with the Belangers.”



CHAPTER 33

“*Y*ou believe the Belangers are involved?” Radomir lays the rapier-style sword on the grass. He strips off his tunic, revealing a loose-fitting white shirt—the baggy type I associate with medieval swordsmen. “We know Lord Vadim has an agreement with Commander Belanger, but we weren’t certain of their involvement with the laboratory.”

My mind hazily processes his question, noting that Radomir called his father by his title. But I can’t answer him for a moment, mesmerized by the tight pecs he’s exposing to the sunlight as he unbuttons his shirt. The hint of a tan nipple, the stretch of his long, leather-clad legs as he settles beside Alexei and leans back against the tree. Mr. Smirky must have been with Channelers all night if he can relax in this sun without ill effect.

And I’m obviously heading down the road to a Haze. Not surprising when sitting in this glade is like bathing in Flame.

I shake my head and rub my eyes. For fuck’s sake, pull it together, Blakeley.

They’re both quietly waiting for my answer, knowing smiles on their pretty vampire faces.

“Yeah,” I say, grasping onto the subject at hand like a life jacket. “I’m a hundred percent sure the Belangers are involved. You sold the students to Vadim. That was the ‘friendly’ deal he mentioned when we went to see him. He passed them on, black-market style, to his Council homie, Commander Belanger. And Belanger’s black uniform brigade took them to this lab we’re looking for, which I’m pretty sure is in the grounds of his Richmond mansion. There’s an ultramodern glass building there I think only I can see.”

“Is there now?” Alexei says. “Well, isn’t that a clever glamour?”

He’s dropped a hand to Radomir’s thigh and absently strokes the smooth leather with his fingers. My cock gives an interested jump. I’m sure he’s doing that on purpose, knowing the effect it’ll have on my Flame-frazzled gonads. What is it with their relationship? Surely they’re not lovers.

“A confident choice to build it in their garden,” Radomir comments.

“An arrogant one,” Alexei counters. “Our old enemy believe they’re untouchable.”

“How did you know to search for the lab in the first place?” I ask them.

Alexei gives the faintest nod, and Radomir speaks. “An Anlu’kyr family in Karatayka, northern Russia, was attacked, their Channelers stolen. Not unusual. But these soldiers were immune to Flame. And they all had dark hair and ‘empty’ green eyes.”

“Immune, like a True Grounder?”

“True Grounders aren’t immune to the Flame. They absorb the goddess’s life force the same as any other creature. Their bodies can handle colossal amounts, unlike lesser Grounders, who have limited capacity, but they still take it into themselves. The survivor said these soldiers were unaffected. As if their bodies simply couldn’t absorb the Flame at all. She found it terrifying. She called them *Sambes*. Our word for zombies.”

A shiver ripples through me. “So they really are doing sick experiments on Channelers?” A renewed rush of worry for those eleven students unsettles my gut. “I can’t believe you gave them fucking teenagers to play with, knowing they might be turned into zombies. I thought vampires were supposed to treasure Channelers.”

“We are not *vampires*,” Alexei bites with whiplash irritation. “We are not animated dead bodies obsessed with their hunger. We are Anlu’kyr. The people of the Blood. A species with as much right to this earth as your precious humans. More so.”

“You will do well to remember this before you come home, young one,” Radomir says in a more measured tone. “Your kin find that word offensive.”

I hold up my hands. “Alright, I’ve got it. Anlu’kyr, not vampires.” I mean, they’re still vampires in my head, with their fangs and need for blood and potential to blow up in sunlight, but okay.

I meet Alexei’s reprimanding glare. “I’m still pissed at you for using teenagers for your Frankenstein hunt. I don’t even want to imagine what they’re going through.”

And wait till Flanagan finds out. I can understand now why Alexei wants him to see it for himself.

Flanagan. The image of him in a jail cell lands in my mind. I’ve got to trust he’ll be okay. He’d want me to get his students back; I’m sure he would.

“It was our only option,” Alexei says, his expression softening again. “We tried to find the laboratory through our spies, to no avail. And we needed to identify those involved. Our urgency was amplified when my grandmother told me of her vision. A coming storm. A tumultuous cloud stretching over the land, turning everything into shadow. She believes the new Whisperer will play an important role in our survival.” He winks at me, and I roll my eyes, ignoring the way that gesture makes my cock twitch.

I can’t imagine what the queen thinks I’m going to do against storms and stretching shadows. “Do you think the High Council is involved in all this or just the Belangers?”

“The Council is involved,” Radomir answers with a dry tone. “They may not all be complicit, but at least one person on the Council knows about the laboratory and is helping to conceal it.”

“So how do we get into this place?” I dust off a fly from my shoulder, only to find one of those winged flower creatures fluttering away. She settles on my knee instead, her purple petal wings tickling my skin. I pull my eyes from their iridescent shimmer. “Obviously, the mansion grounds will be warded. Would numbers make any difference?”

“One man or a hundred will change nothing.” Radomir smiles at my tentative acceptance of the flower fairy. “Those wards would repel an army as easily as a stray thief. They’re renowned for their

effectiveness. If you attempt a magical solution, they cause an internal eruption within the practitioner's body."

"What? They explode you from the inside?"

He nods.

"Shit, that's brutal. Typical of the Belangers."

"Even Alyona refuses to face the Riverview wards. They must have been activated by an exceptional witch."

I puff a frustrated breath. "I'm getting those students back if I have to dig a tunnel under the mansion wall with my bare hands. Can we fly in?"

"Of course not," Alexei says. "They considered that. But there is a way. A passage into the back of the grounds, down by the river. You and I can use it with ease."

My brain flips through the possibilities. A way in that Alexei and I can use with... "Oh, no! No way. I'm never going in those Border Woods ever again. Not for all the effing tea in China."

"I thought you were prepared to dig with your bare hands?" Alexei teases. "When you learn to Flame walk, those menacing woods will become but a passing shadow. Riverview was built beside a Crossover, like most of these old mansions, its grounds extended by the half realm. And the Border Woods line every half realm. So you and I have a key."

"Isn't that like an oversight on their part?"

"The Belangers aren't in danger from the fae. And due to the fae-Council treaty, I would need a very good reason to use it if I didn't wish to incur my grandmother's wrath. So I'm sure it's an entry point they dismissed long ago. However, getting in is only half the problem. Getting the—"

"—students out will be impossible." I finish for him. "We can't take them over the wall. Can you Flame walk them through the woods?"

"Only two at a time. It would take far too long."

"So how do we rescue them?"

"Ever the hero, wanting to rush in and save the day," he says as if he's known me for years. "This first foray into Riverview will need to remain exploratory. Let us be sure of the laboratory's location first. Then we can decide further."

He's right. We don't even know if the lab is in that glass building yet. Impatience bites at me, though. Right now, those teenagers are at the mercy of crazy scientists, weirdo experimenters with sharp scalpels and buckets of Jade juice.

"We'll slip in through the Border Woods," Alexei says. "I'll create a distraction, and you'll explore the modern building for signs of a laboratory. Without getting caught"—he levels me with his serious face—"and without cowboy bravado."

"What's that supposed to mean? Yeah, in and out. Return with extra firepower. Got it."

"If we need *extra firepower*, I can walk Radomir and the Blood Guards in through the woods, though it would take some time. They can also escape that way and wait for me until I come for them."

"Sounds like a plan." I rub my face, grass and summer on my palm. My purple petal friend has flittered off to rejoin her crew.

I settle back on my hands and stare at the burbling stream while I try to ponder what we've talked

about. My body burns with Flame. My skin prickles with her presence, while my dick feels like a hungry wooden pole. I'll need to calm this growing Haze before I can go do a rescue-recon. An eight-inch boner and an overwhelming desire to lick a certain pretty fae-vampire from head to toe do not help a man concentrate.

A silent, tightening charge in the air draws me back from my thoughts. Two pairs of vampire eyes are boring into me from the tree. I look down. I've been absently masturbating, giving them a slutty sex show. I don't stop. It feels too good. In fact, I lean back on my elbow, get a better hold of my cock, and extend my strokes.

"Come closer, my love," Alexei says with a twinge of strain in his voice. "Let us touch you."

I squeeze my eyes shut and grimace. Fuck. I want to go over there so bad, but if I do, I'm a goner for sure. "I'll stay here. Thanks."

Radomir's disapproval burns hot behind my closed eyelids. "You must do as your prince commands, youngling."

Restraining the "fuck you, Radomir," I open my eyes and meet his and defiantly speed my hand, parting my lips with the pleasure he's not going to be sharing. The answering fire in his gaze sends sparks of arousal across my skin.

Alexei tries a different tactic. "Let me help you with your Flame. I can rebalance you." His tone turns velvet. "I can feed you, my love."

My veins twang with hunger. Saliva floods my mouth. Oh shit. How am I going to resist *that*? "You can Ground my Flame?"

A faint smile graces Alexei's full lips. He knows he's got me. "No. But I can Share with you. Help you find balance. And you need the healing strength my blood can lend you before we enter the lion's den."

I swallow and squeeze my eyes shut again.

Fuck.

I was a goner the moment I called him.

I spring up, crunch across the grass, and sink to a kneel over Alexei's thighs. I lean my hands against the trunk on either side of his head and lock his gaze. "I'll let you balance me. I'll even let you feed me for the sake of the Channelers. Because yeah, it'll up my game. But you do that controlling voodoo shit on me again, or you bond me and send me off the rails, and we're finished. *Comprende?*"

Alexei's brow ripples. Annoyance flitters across his face. "I have no need to bond you, Michael. You're already mine. And I told you at the cliffside. You, I cannot compel. Even the Blood Call only gives me a temporary hold over you."

Well, that's confusing. Flanagan was sure my sudden rages were the result of Alexei bonding me with his blood. And the sly little git compelled the clothes right off me in the club. He has to be lying. "When I look in your eyes, you do some woo-woo magic on me, and then I let you use me like a whore."

His delighted grin has a glint to it. He raises a hand and fondles my shaft. His clawed nails gently scrape the soft skin. "Oh, I will certainly be using you like a whore, Michael. But you took off your clothes for me because you wanted to. Because you're *my* whore."

The playful lift of his brow signals his teasing, but my pithy comeback is stolen by the scorching

lust his stroking fingers have induced. "I'm not yours," I manage, losing my breath.

"Oh, but you are, Michael. And you feel the truth of this in your blood. You feel it whenever you look into my eyes. One day you'll realize what that means. Unfortunately, I have to leave you to come upon that realization yourself."

Radomir slips sideways, leaning against Alexei's shoulder as if preparing for a show, and my hungry gaze soaks in his long, languid form, that tan nipple still peeking from beneath his shirt, the bulge against his thigh. He grins at my interest, and I flick my gaze away with a scowl, only to find the porcelain-pale curves of Alexei's muscled chest. The prince's starlight glow gives his body a pearlescent sheen. And his casual yet composed posture oozes sensuality. The tantalizing vampire is pure sex. I want to fuck him so bad.

Yep, I'm a goner.

Alexei sneaks a finger along my taint and, with his eyes on mine, slips it through my sphincter.

The sudden intrusion into my arsehole pulls a strangled moan from my throat. "Fuck." I subtly press down, though, and in response, he slides it deeper, gently brushing my gland. The Flame goes mental, sending internal fireworks skittering through my body. Before I know it, I'm rocking for more, moaning like a fucking slut. Why does that feel so good?

They both watch me, their lips parted, their eyes on my clenching abs and bobbing cock.

"He's a receiver," Radomir says, his glittering eyes hot with lust.

"For some," Alexei muses. "But this one also likes to do the fucking. And he likes it rough."

I frown down at him. How can he know that? "Stop talking about me as if I'm your fucking pet and make me come already."

They both chuckle, and I growl at them.

Alexei slips his finger out. A playful light glints in his eyes, which now have that ring of gold around the iris. "Radomir, go behind Michael and touch him for me, will you? You have my permission to enjoy him as you like."

Enjoy him as you like? If he thinks Radomir's about to fuck me, he can think again. Only one cock in this world gets to fuck my arse, and it isn't Radomir's.

With graceful ease, the lieutenant shifts to a kneeling position directly behind me, slides his hand around, and takes hold of my cock. Much more firmly than Alexei's teasing grip. He adjusts himself, then pulls me into his pelvis to nestle that hard bulge against my butt and wraps his other arm around my waist to keep me there. His breath at my ear raises the hairs across my neck.

"I have you," he whispers.

My balls clench, arousal tightening my abdomen. Fuck. I should throw him off and stamp on his head, but as usual, the Flame has my priorities upside down.

"Hmm. What a picture," Alexei purrs, resting back to get a better look.

Radomir strokes my erection with languid ease, more for show than pleasure. Flame prickles into my skin from his touch. Alexei's heavy-lidded eyes soak in the sight of us as if it's the answer to a hundred years of boredom. I moan and rock for more, but Radomir's pace leaves the tingling orgasm in my balls an unreachable promise.

Alexei slides his legs out from beneath me and rises to his knees, settling close enough to press his thighs to mine. He smiles, almost radiant, the gold in his eyes like gilded rings. His chocolate scent

and his heat envelop me in a heady, erotic cloud. He shifts his shirt aside and swipes a sharp claw over soft skin at the base of his throat. A single drop of wine-colored blood springs from the cut.

“Drink, my love. Let your family bond with you.”

Thirst engulfs me. I grasp his hips and draw him in and clamp my mouth to his neck. His glorious taste hits my throat like copper fire, and I’m soon sucking hard for more. Fuck, that’s good. Rich chocolatey copper. Aliveness rushes through my veins, my cells waking to the heavenly amphetamine.

He fists my hair, his breath gusting from him as I suck and lick with abandon. His other hand wanders down to thumb my cockhead while I drink. The Flame dances between us, tingling into his body from mine and returning through his hand. The connection seems to settle her into a purring lull.

Radomir presses closer, rocking himself against my cheeks as he strokes my needy shaft. And for a moment, I’m so satisfied I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else in the world.

Then the wild, blood-fueled arousal strikes, a wave of aggressive lust engulfing all thought and sense. The need to be filled, to be fucked senseless, overwhelms me. And the only man I want isn’t here. My heart seems to collapse inward. Fuck. Oh fuck. Panic rises. I break away from my drink. “Gabriel.”

“Shh,” Alexei croons. “We have you. Look at me.” I do as he says and sink into midnight eyes, into the warm embrace of an endless sky, and the raging lust falls away. A building climax still gathers in my groin, leaving my balls ready to burst.

Alexei presses his soft lips to mine. “Come for me, beloved,” he whispers.

My climax takes me like a summer storm. A rushing torrent of body-wide, molten heat. I cry out as fire shoots through my cock. An eruption of cum spills over Radomir’s fingers. And oh, the relief—a gushing tidal wave. That I’ve finally come for Alexei. It feels like I’m landing on the earth after voyaging in outer space.

Alexei catches my moans with his mouth. “Well done,” he praises.

“Welcome to your family,” Radomir says quietly, holding me against him as I shudder through my orgasm.

And I feel connected. To both of them. A vibrant awareness in my blood that seems to sing with their presence. A magical feeling, new and wonderful and right.

I meet Alexei’s gaze, and he gives me a warm smile. “No need to look so confused, my love.” He trails his finger down my cheek. His eyes are pools of melted obsidian ringed with gold. “You’re ready to be with your kin. And you’re ready to find me that laboratory so I can burn it to the ground.”



CHAPTER

34

The morning sunlight barely penetrates the edges of the Border Woods. The trees seem to gobble any rays that stray too close to their dark refuge, but they make a perfect cover for Alexei and me to view the Belanger mansion and its grounds. No one can see us or hear us. We're invisible until we step beyond the Woods' boundary.

The broad, slow-moving water of the River Thames flows to our right, beside acres of field and cultivated gardens that stretch up from boats and decking to a seventeenth-century mansion. Most of the grounds are in a half realm—the mysterious stretch of wild land between the two worlds. At least half a mile of grass flows between these Woods and the main garden. Hence the grounds' ridiculous size for a mansion in the suburbs of London.

The main building is large enough to house a king. Of course it is. A Belanger king. Three stories of orange stone with tall chimneys and a million windows. More buildings flank its sides: garages, stables, converted annexes. Places to keep an army if needed.

And spread around every door, bush, and path are soldiers. All in black uniforms similar to the ones worn by the Headquarters' elite guard.

Either they're somehow expecting us, or the Council thinks Gregory Belanger deserves over-the-top protection while he lounges in his fancy home. Yeah, I haven't forgotten that scumbag and his friends are waiting for their court date in millionaire luxury.

Where the Crossover shimmers—a wall of distorted air—a tall, sturdy fence runs its length. On the fae side rises the two-story glass building I saw on my way to Vadim's club. On the mansion side, a car park with multicolored rows of cars stretches to the ordinary boundary wall, with an electric gate to the road outside. The employees must drive in through the gate, somehow park their car in the glamoured car park, then follow that stone path into the half realm to go to work in the shiny building. Every time I look at those glass walls my intuition pulls on me to hurry inside. There's definitely something we need in there.

Guardians patrol that building too. How the hell I'll be able to explore it with so many around, I've no idea, but Alexei is certain he can draw them away.

“You’re sure you can’t see that new build?” I whisper to him again from my crouch behind a tree. “I mean, it’s not huge, and I wonder if a lab would even fit in there, but it’s tall enough to blot out those trees, and there’s a car park with cars.”

Alexei squints in the direction I’ve pointed, pursing his lips. He’s leaning a shoulder against one of the colossal trunks, hands in his pockets. Cool, composed, almost nonchalant. How he’s managing to keep his tailored black suit so pristine when surrounded by slime, stumps me. We’ve been here all of ten minutes, and I’ve somehow splashed the stuff all over the black leather pants and tight, sleeveless jerkin they’ve dressed me in. He brought us here within minutes from the glade, taking my hand to guide me through a blur of streaming color and Flame. He assured me I’ll be able to do that too one day. I can’t imagine it.

“I see only lawn and trees and the shimmering edge of the half realm,” he says after another search. “No modern building, no car park. There’s an odd glint to the sunlight, but that could be anything.”

I shake my head. It’s hard to swallow that something so obvious to me could be invisible to another. Especially Alexei, whose half vamp, half fae eyes miss nothing. “How do people not bump into the cars, then? I mean, the gardener or random Belanger relatives walking the grounds?”

“Deflection spell. One moment they’re walking toward the glamour. The next, they find themselves at the other side of the garden, unsure how they got there.”

“Won’t that work on me too?”

“The spell will be an extension of the glamour, and you, my love, can see through it.”

“Okay.” I pull my boots from the sucking slime and balance on a root instead. At least the dead-body stink of the Woods doesn’t bother me as much this time. “But how the hell are we going to get the students out if you can’t even see it? Radomir could bring your whole Blood Guard, but it won’t make any difference if they march away into the river.” I assume Radomir is preparing the Guard. Alexei just sent him off with “you know what to do,” which could mean anything.

“Patience. I have an idea how we might gain access, but we need to be sure this is the right place first.”

“You gonna share that idea?”

“Not yet.”

I also have a plan forming. A plan that would blow this whole hidden project open and bring the Guardian army themselves to rescue the Channelers. But it’s the kind of idea that would get me into major trouble with Flanagan if he was here. I can’t imagine even Alexei would be game. I’ll just keep it as a silent Plan B for now.

I study Alexei’s calm, unreadable face. “You know, when we finally rescue the Channelers you stole, we’re taking them straight back to Blackriver.”

A smile twitches his mouth, but he doesn’t look at me. “You’re mistaken. The Channelers are mine. We own what we win in battle.”

“They’re not your—Okay, fine. I’ll steal them in this battle. Then I’ll own them. They go back to Blackriver.”

He glances my way, eyes twinkling. “But you are also mine, Michael. Therefore, anything of yours is mine.”

I tighten my lips and draw in a breath. Don’t take the bait, Blakeley. I lean a hand against the tree,

then snatch it back again. Ick.

“You know,” I say, trying a different angle, “if you want Flanagan to be into you again, I don’t think stealing his students is the way to go about that. If you let me take them back, he might be more inclined to let bygones be bygones.”

His top lip briefly curls. “I don’t require Gabriel to be *into me*. I only need him beside me. And that is now guaranteed, whether he’s *into me* or not.”

He’s such a cocky bastard. So sure of his schemes. Yeah, because I’m still the bloody honey trap, and Alexei thinks that wherever I go, Flanagan will follow. I should have known Alexei’s desire for Flanagan wasn’t about unrequited love or soppy feelings. Alexei wants an undeniable right to the throne, and a goddess-blessed Lycan is his best option to secure that. I must remember everything is about advantage and utility with Alexei. He doesn’t do love; he does usefulness. “Look, vampire, you can’t even find this lab you want without *me*. The students are my price for letting you be here.”

He flashes a grin. “Oh, you’re *letting* me be here?”

“Yep. I’m getting the students back regardless. I only called you for backup.”

He laughs. And what a sound, like sex and fairy bells all in one. I hide a smile. I know my bluff is bollocks.

“Exactly,” he says. “You’ll find the laboratory anyway. But there is another price I’m willing to bargain. If you agree to it, I’ll give you the Channelers. I’ll even help you return them safely.”

I narrow my eyes. Bargaining with Alexei is like bargaining with a scorpion. No matter what you think you’ve agreed to, that tail is still going to sting you. “Go on,” I say carefully.

He turns, repositioning his lithe form against the trunk, and looks at me, hands still in his pockets. “When you come home, you let me train you. And in the matter of training, you do exactly what I ask of you. Without complaint or resistance. If you say yes, you can keep Gabriel’s precious students, though they’re worth a king’s ransom. And I will allow you freedom in all other areas of your life with us. But if you break the agreement at any point, refuse to obey my commands in the matter of training, I will have the right to punish you, and you will forfeit all the other freedoms. Including the freedom to wear that sapphire.”

Anger shoots through me, and I tighten my jaw. That sapphire stays on my wrist. He’ll have to cut my bloody arm off to take it. I draw in another deep breath. “By freedoms, you mean I don’t have to wear a collar and I get to walk around in public with clothes on?”

“If that’s what you want. But public or private, anything to do with martial arts or increasing your capacity for Flame will be governed by my preference. Whether you want it or not. That’s the deal.”

“This is assuming I come back to your castle with you.”

“Where else would you go, my love, but home with your family?”

I consider Quinton. He’s my *real* family. And a real option. If I can find him, he would whip me off to his Scottish hideout, and I’d be safe from both the hangman and vampire slavery. The witch, who is apparently my father, has answers I need about me, my mother, my ancestry. I’ve waited too long for those answers.

But then what? I hide in Scotland for the rest of my life?

Practically, I need somewhere safe to be while I change into a bloodsucker. Quinton said he can provide that, but can he? He can’t understand what a maturing vampire needs if he thinks I can drink

blood without an instant orgy on tap. And who would Ground me? Even burning off Flame doesn't keep me out of sex-obsessed la-la land.

He could handle my inner Sabel psychopath, though. If I took the sapphire off while I'm with him, he could guard my mind, put me to sleep whenever I went looney tunes.

But then, so could Alexei.

Why am I even having this conversation with myself? Because despite my father possibly being the more sensible option and the answer to a dream I've carried since childhood, I want to be with the Anlu'kyr. If I don't at least spend some time with them, I have no chance of understanding what I am.

But what about Flanagan? If he still wants me. He's the one I trust the most. Would he come to Dvamira Castle the way Alexei assumes he will? Would he give up everything, every friend, all he cares about, and run far away from them to be an outcast with me for the rest of his life? Do I have a right to ask that of him? No. No, I don't. And I never want him to have to make that choice. Even if it means I can't be with him.

I look back up at Alexei, who's watching me with a discerning interest. I have no doubt at all there's an Everest-sized catch to his deal. Implications I don't understand.

"Okay," I say. "I'll give you one month of total obedience on all matters of training, including increasing my capacity"—even though I know that means butt plugs, cock rings, nipple clamps, and goddess only knows what else—"but in all other matters, I do what the fuck I want. And while I'm with you, I can meet with who I like, inside or outside Dvamira grounds." Just because I'm living in a big-ass castle doesn't mean I can't see Quinton and get some answers from him. Maybe even get to know him.

Alexei eyes me cautiously. "You can meet who you like as long as Radomir is present, or I am. I'll not bend on this. Your safety is now my concern."

I make a tutting noise. For fuck's sake, will I ever know freedom again? Real freedom. "Okay, fine. But I get privacy with whoever I meet, and you don't listen in. *I'm* not bending on that."

He falls silent, pursing his lips. "I'll have a witch provide you with a privacy bubble, but Radomir or I will remain within sight. Deal?"

A witchy privacy bubble. Interesting. "Okay, deal."

"Now swear it to the goddess."

I search his face. He's really serious about this if he wants to involve Velnushka. Laasya explained exactly what can happen when one of her creatures betrays an oath made in her name. Consequences. Sometimes physical, sometimes mental, but the oathbreaker can earn permanent damage, depending on how much they've pissed her off.

I can keep anything up for one month, though. And I don't fear Velnushka. "Deal. I swear by the goddess that I'll follow the agreement." Tingles rush through me, taking my breath. She heard me, then.

Alexei's eyes flash with triumph. Why the hell is my obedience in training so important to him? "And I also swear by our goddess Velnushka that I will ensure the freed Channelers return to Blackriver. And as long as you abide by this oath, I will free you to leave Dvamira exactly one month from the time of your arrival. If, by then, this is still what you want."

"Oh, I'll be leaving."

“We’ll see.”

We lock gazes. And try as I might, I’m the first to look away. “So now that’s sorted, are we gonna check out this place or just stand in slime making deals?”

“I’ll go to the house and create a distraction. Wait until all the guards leave their posts, including the ones this side of the Crossover. Then head straight to the glamoured building and see what you can find.”

“How are you going to distract *all* the guards?”

He winks, the seductive drop of his heavy lashes that makes my cock twitch. “Leave that to me.” And off he goes, sauntering out into the field with his hands still in his pockets.

I crouch again, ignoring the tension in my body caused by his absence, and check the knife Radomir gave me. A small blade strapped to my shin beneath my trousers. I have no idea how to use it, except to stab someone, but having it makes me feel better. Which I think was Radomir’s aim. He carefully fastened it to my ankle, cautioning me to put my own safety before the students. “Your prince needs you,” he whispered to me. Always looking out for his boss. I’d love to know the story between those two.

As Alexei passes from the half realm into the main grounds, the air shimmers like parting water. He crosses the garden between two sets of patrolling Guardians as if on a country stroll, his tall, elegant form not at all out of place in the manicured surroundings. I smile. The poor soldiers practically have a heart attack when they spot him, then shout and bellow for help. Guardians come running from all sides. Alexei ignores the commotion and continues to walk along a path to the main house.

The soldiers draw crossbows and swords, falling into formation around the sauntering vampire. And just when I’m worrying the mission will be a bust before we even get started, he disappears. Well, not exactly. He’s still there, but he becomes a flickering shadow, ghosting over the steps toward the house.

The shadow. My shadow. The one that followed me for three months just before all this craziness started. An odd mix of fondness and nostalgia warms my chest.

Don’t get ahead of yourself, Blakeley. It’s still Alexei, Mr. Hidden Motives.

The Guardians descend into chaos, manically spinning this way and that with raised crossbows. Shouts echo across the grounds again. More soldiers come running. A captain sends half inside the mansion and orders the others to stand guard outside. The ones around the glamoured building still haven’t moved. Do I go anyway?

I wait but move closer to the edge of the Woods and stretch out my legs, ready for my run over the field. Ten-ish minutes later—I’m just at the point of thinking Alexei’s plan, whatever it was, has failed—when the Guardians swarm like angry bees. Cries, roars, screams. Every Guardian on the grounds leaves their post and heads toward the main house, including the ones inside the glamour.

What the fuck has Alexei just done?

No time to waste. I sprint off toward the glass building, keeping my head down and my eyes open for returning Guardians. Time to find this laboratory.



CHAPTER 35

The building's mirrored windows are obviously one-way glass, reflecting the sky and trees. But everyone in there will see the random guy in Blood Servant leathers attempting to sneak a peek inside. I skirt behind bushes and head to the back of the building, where one wall is all gray brick.

Unlike at the safe house, the wall holds no iron slats, nor—as a tentative test shows me—are the bricks mixed with iron fillings. An oversight for sure. But then, they probably assumed the building to be hidden enough not to bother.

As the Flame in my body meets the natural Flame in the brick, my hands warm. I have a plentiful supply burning away in my abdomen after visiting the glade, and yet I don't feel at all Hazed. It's as if the Faelands have filled me and increased my capacity at the same time. Not to mention Sharing with Alexei, which gave me an odd sense of equilibrium. The goddess certainly seems to enjoy his effect.

Palms snug against the brick, I pull myself up with the suction, adding my feet to scale the wall. I'll never lose the amazement I feel every time I climb a sheer face with the same ease I might crawl along the ground. It's crazy cool. Easily the best of a vampire's talents.

Ignoring the continued commotion over at the mansion, I hoist myself onto the flat roof. Through the Crossover veil, a muffled version of London's endless racket comes from beyond the boundary wall: revved engines, car horns, police sirens. After a quick search of the graveled roof for ways in, I find two rows of pyramid-shaped skylights with clear see-through glass. Just what I need. I edge closer with soft steps and take a careful peek over the rim into the room below.

Which appears to be an open office. I have an aerial view of heads at neat desks, fingers tapping on keyboards. The next skylight shows the same. Bollocks. If this is just an office, it can't be where the lab is kept. The ground floor on its own just isn't large enough. The lab under Vadim's garden was far more extensive. Multiple rooms with open space and equipment and rows of gurneys and...

All underground.

I look out to the half-realm land between the building and the Border Woods, and sure enough, the long grass conceals raised concrete vents. Well, look at that. I didn't see them as I crossed the field.

This place has a basement. Of course it does. There's always a bloody basement.

The whirring of the electric gate opening draws my attention to the side of the building. I scoot over and hide behind the rim of the roof. A van drives through the car park and pulls up close to the wall. Two of those Guardians in black exit the driver's cabin, walk around, and open the back doors.

From inside the van, they roll out a gurney with a person strapped to it. The figure, with a black cotton bag over their head and wearing ordinary clothes—T-shirt and jeans—squirms beneath the leather restraints across their chest and legs. My stomach roils. My fingers tingle in sympathy with their struggle. They are awake, but the slurring moans suggest they're drugged. I'm pretty sure that's a Channeler strapped down like a pig for slaughter.

The soldiers survey the car park, noticing the lack of fellow guards. After a whispered conversation, they wheel their captive down the path and through the shimmer that delineates the half realm from the normal world. They continue around to the front door, scanning the field and chatting away as if their cargo is nothing more than a delivery of inanimate boxes.

Anger clenches my fists. The desire to smash a skylight and storm straight in to demand they free the students is so strong I have to talk myself down. Not yet, Blakeley. It's not time for Plan B. Remember what Flanagan said. You don't rush in alone. You work with your team. Alexei's my team right now, and he's expecting a full report so we can plan our next move.

Alexei and I agreed to meet back at the Woods, and bottling my impatience, I scuttle to the wall. A vampire could easily jump from a height like this, but I have no clue how to do that without breaking my legs, so an awkward climb down it is. As my feet hit the concrete slabs, the baying of dogs echoes through the grounds. I flinch. Those aren't dogs. They're wolves. Huge fucking shifter wolves. Guardians in animal form to sniff out the intruders.

Bending low and wishing my black leathers were camouflage brown, I dash into the field to cut straight over to the Woods. My intuition pulses a warning through my gut.

"In the field!" A shout from the car park. "It's a fucking Blood Servant. Call the commander."

That was a bit bloody late, I complain to my new intuition friend. I burst into a run, full speed through the long grass toward the Border Woods.

A cacophony of sounds fills the air: loud whistles, voices bellowing orders, barks and growls. A gray body streaks toward me from the garden. I don't bother to look. I know what it is. Another one joins the first, then a third. The growls and snarls grow louder as they close in on me. I could easily outrun any of the soldiers. My vampire genetics give me that advantage. But double-sized wolves... Yeah, maybe not.

I check the distance across the field. I'm too far from the Woods. I'm not going to make it. The pulse in my gut turns frantic. "Yeah, yeah, I know."

I unbuckle the cuff, loosening it enough for the sapphire to leave my skin.

I thought you said you were never taking it off, comes a sarcastic voice.

I'm on the run. Plan B. I sound out of breath, even in my head.

Can you make it to the woods?

No. Too far. Listen. I'm going in.

I expect a "what on earth do you mean?" A refusal. Anger. An order to stay put until he flies in to get me. Instead, he simply says, *Are you sure? They'll want to hurt you, Michael.*

Yeah. I'm sure. It may be the only way. Did Alexei already know that? Call Nenge. Tell her exactly where I am. She'll bring her army to come capture me, and Belanger will have to let her in. Make sure she finds the lab.

I have a far better option.

A better option than Nenge?

I'm still yards from the branches of the twisted trees when pain strikes my right heel. Teeth clamp so hard they break skin. I cry out and hit the ground. With a tumbling roll, I turn and rise and hammer my fist into the wolf's jaw. The giant beast yelps, and when my Flame ignites, it recoils, letting go of my ankle. But I've barely scrambled to my feet before the others arrive and snap at my boots. I can't run and keep my Flame alight. As soon as the fire flickers out, a wolf leaps and fastens its jaw to my bare forearm. Teeth puncture skin. The creature twists and tugs to pull me down. I bellow in pain and grit my teeth against the agony to punch its face hard. I try to keep moving toward the Woods, try to drag it with me to give them the impression I'm determined to escape, but its colleagues clamp an ankle each, and I collapse to the ground again.

Soldiers shout. Hooves drum.

"Keep him there!" a posh voice says.

The snarling wolves fasten me to the ground, their teeth biting deep against my struggle.

A tall, thin man in the deep-blue commander's uniform slips off the horse and strides toward me. Soldiers in black circle me and cut off my route to the Border Woods. I could set myself alight. Call Flame from the shifters and soldiers. With my Whisperer tricks, there's a chance I could still get away. But the sight of that Channeler strapped to the gurney stays my hand.

"Stand down," the new arrival says. "Let me see him."

The wolves let go but stay close, growling and nipping, their hackles raised. Blood seeps from their bite marks. My right arm is a mess, but although I grimace, the pain is strangely bearable. The effect of Alexei's blood, no doubt.

As soon as I see his face, I recognize the commander. The reddish hair, the wolf shifter brow, those malice-filled gray eyes. The sneer. I'd know them anywhere. He looks more like his mother than his son, the same sharpness, the same inbred arrogance to his features. But that cruel twist to his lips and the sickly glint in his eyes is all Gregory.

"So this is Gabriel's little mongrel?" Commander Belanger says. "Was it you?" He spits the question, his face twisting with fury. "Are you the one who impaled my son on the flagpole above the door of his own house?"

Impaled Gregory on a flagpole? So that's what Alexei was up to. No wonder chaos erupted.

You killed his son? I say, not sure if Alexei can still hear me.

The young Belanger was dead the moment he laid a hand on you. I simply took the opportunity presented.

You didn't think it would be a good idea to tell me that was your plan?

"Well!" Belanger screams. He nods to a wolf, and the creature clamps its jaws to my leg. The knife strapped to my ankle protects me from the worst—thank you, Radomir—but it still fucking hurts, like a vise with ten-inch nails. "Aah! Fuuck! Yeah!" I shout, trying to jerk my legs out of reach and failing. "That was me. The bastard got what he deserved."

The soldiers gasp and swear.

Belanger's face pales to paper white. His next words come out bone-dry. "I'm going to enjoy every moment of your torture, you disgusting half breed."

What are you doing? Alexei hisses.

Pissing him off.

I'm not sure that's needed.

"Wrap and carry him," Belanger orders.

"Wait." I hold up a bleeding hand. "Just tie my wrists. You heard what happened at Blackriver. It's because they tried to fasten me down."

Belanger narrow his eyes, but he must know what I'm talking about because it was his team I shredded.

"Believe me," I say. "I don't want that to happen any more than you do." I really don't. If I go Sabel apeshit, I'll kill everyone present, and my plan will be ruined. "I'll come without a struggle. Just tie my wrists."

Belanger pinches his lips just the way his mother does when she's calculating her next move. His eyes drip with such unbridled hate I'm surprised they're not producing black smoke. "Cuff his wrists. Keep a knife at his throat. If he attempts to escape, slit it. And if you think your prince will save you, mongrel, you're mistaken," he grits through his teeth. "I know he's here. But he won't find you where I'm taking you."

Which is exactly what I wanted to hear.

We're in, I say to Alexei. I glance over at the mansion, where the silhouette of a figure with giant wings perches on its roof.

Be patient and brave, precious one, the shadow says. *He will come for you.*

He?



CHAPTER

36

The shiny glass building is as modern inside as out. All white walls, mirrors, and metal, without a single green plant to break the stark coldness. It's lucky my bite wounds have stopped bleeding, or I'd be making a sticky red mess on the pristine tiles.

A blonde woman dressed in the smart perfection of secretaries everywhere doesn't even look up from her desk as the soldiers march me past. Clearly, handcuffed prisoners surrounded by five, no make that six, guards are nothing out of the ordinary for her. The knife at my throat draws a paper-thin cut, and a warm rivulet of blood tickles the skin of my neck. The guy holding the blade is a Grounder. My Flame trickles toward his grip on my shoulder.

I check my leather cuff again. My gaze keeps straying to the stone as if I might catch Alexei looking back from its glittering depths. Belanger must have heard through the Guardian grapevine about the cuff and what it's for because he had his men refasten the buckle. The prince is now beyond contact. I can only trust he's off gathering help and will come get me when he's ready.

After accepting that if they force my ass into an elevator I'm likely to kill all of them, the soldiers hustle me down a back set of stairs to the next level. When we walk into the airy, well-lit basement below, even I don't feel uncomfortable underground—because it's fucking huge.

We exit the stairs into a corridor with windows running its length. Beyond the glass is a giant lab: gray and clinical with rows of spotless cupboards and metal benches cluttered with test tubes and glass beakers. People in lab coats doing mysterious shit with microscopes. The place stinks of bleach, formaldehyde, and some kind of bitter almond smell.

They've come a long way from the dumphole I found under Vadim's garden. If Belanger's "old money" is funding this, that's a lot of dough. How is he keeping it secret with all these people involved? Someone would surely blab.

As the guards push me past the lab, the ceiling lights flicker, and the technicians glance up from their work. But the lights don't go off. Hmm, what nifty trick are they using to keep the electrics on if their test subjects are all Channelers? Blackriver barely has any electrics at all. They rely on lanterns and candles.

As they parade me along the corridor, I take in as much detail as I can. Numbers of staff and guards, where the skylights are, fire exits. All the doors have face-recognition sensor panels, except the ones inside the lab that lead to other rooms. I need to find out what's in those rooms.

"Keep walking," the muscle man behind me orders, pressing the knife deeper for good measure. I swallow the desire to jab my elbow into his teeth.

The next room we pass looks like something that can be found in a hospital. One of those critical care units. Four prone figures attached to ventilators and holographic screens lie on specialist beds, their eyes closed, faces pale. What are they doing to them? Are some of these the Blackriver Channelers? I don't know them well enough to tell.

"Where to, Captain?" a soldier asks.

"He wants him in the small lab. Stripped and chained to the pulley."

Stripped and chained? My breath tightens. Fear spikes through me at the memory of helpless restraints. That's exactly what Gregory ordered his shifter cronies to do in the cage. Just before he... Fuck. What kind of revenge has his father got in mind?

Don't panic. All I've got to do is find the students and hold everyone off until Alexei comes with help. In a giant lab with sensor-locked doors, only one way out, and filled with an army of technicians and soldiers. Easy-peasy.

A guy in a blue Hazmat-looking onesie and elasticated cap crosses the corridor and enters the lab rooms. When he trips the sensor and opens the door, I take my chance. A simple push and duck, fast as a blur, relieves me of Mr. Muscles and his blade. I bulldoze the two men in my way to scoot across to the opening door, shove past the technician, then cross the lab at a run before the soldiers can scramble up and follow.

The staff jumps back from the sudden intrusion, eyes wide. Glass smashes on the ground. Lights and screens flicker. With one hard tug, I break the thin chain between my handcuffs, pass the sleeping figures in their "critical care" beds, and hurry through the next set of doors.

And come to a skidding halt.

Fuck me.

Four giant vats stand in a row, naked men and women floating upright inside them. Eyes closed, hair feathering around their heads, the youthful figures have tubes coming out of every orifice. They're suspended in a translucent, jade-tinged liquid. The same fluorescent jade as the waters of the lake beside the Warlock's cave.

What. The. Fuck?

Free them, Whisperer, the goddess says in my mind. A lot harder than her normally whispered tones. *Free them.*

I'll do my best.

Whatever they're trying to do here, it can't be good if they're pissing off a goddess. She's never spoken to me directly before.

Three technicians, all in the blue onesies and caps, have frozen in place, waiting on tenterhooks to see what I'll do.

"Stay back. He's dangerous." A soldier barrels through the door—a tall guy with dark hair and graying temples. The captain, I think. Two more join him, and we all eye each other.

“There’s no escape from here,” the captain says as his men sneak around me. “The next room is locked, even to staff. Just come quietly, and I’ll make this as painless as possible.”

Yeah, right?

I glance across the lab between the vats. He might be telling the truth about my escape. The next room has mirrored windows I can’t see through and a facial recognition screen beside a metal door. Damn.

I quickly assess my options. Obviously, I could call the men’s Flame. At least some of them are Channelers. But as usual, I risk a Haze if I do that, and I haven’t been Grounded since I left Blackriver. I could always—

Free them. The goddess’s voice sounds urgent, almost desperate. *Free them, Whisperer. She prickles her fire through my limbs.*

Shh, I’m on it. I’m here to get them all out. And I really don’t need extra pressure right now.

Ignoring the soldiers edging closer, I step over to the nearest of the giant vats and take hold of the black cable dangling from its top. The thick, rubber-covered tube of wires runs into a board with a touch screen. Holographic blue data floats above it. State-of-the-art tech. Others must have pumped some sick levels of money into this project. It can’t all be from the Belanger pot.

“Come near me, and I’ll blow the lot,” I say to the captain. I have no idea if I can, but it’s worth a try.

The six soldiers ready their stances. Two pull knives. A third levels his loaded crossbow on me.

“Everyone stay calm.” The captain gestures with his hands. He flicks a questioning glance at the female technician.

The thin-faced woman, clipboard clasped to her chest, looks at me with defiance in her eyes. “The electrics are all insulated. No amount of Flame will affect them.”

Well, fuck.

I drive my fist into the touch-screen glass beside me until it shatters. The lines of holographic data blink out. Shoving my bleeding hand into the exposed cluster of wires, I turn back to the technician with a cocked brow.

“Shit,” she says beneath her breath.

“How do I get these Channelers out of the vats?” I demand.

Her eyes shoot wide. “You don’t.”

“They’re not staying in the fucking vats, lady. Will it hurt them if I shut everything down?”

“Of course. We’d have to take them out.”

Okay, good answer.

She flickers a panicked glance at the captain as she realizes what she’s just given me. He opens his mouth to speak.

“You fucking come near me,” I fire at him, “I’ll strip your Flame and tear your men to pieces. So stay the fuck back.”

A ripple of tension runs through the soldiers. And the techs. The captain curls his lip, hatred flashing through his eyes, but he keeps his face hostage-negotiation neutral. He doesn’t need to know my threat is bullshit. If I steal their Flame, I risk becoming a drunken idiot, and unless I go Sabel cray cray, ripping anyone to shreds is off the list.

“Tell me where the students from Blackriver are,” I demand from the woman.

Her brow pinches. “Blackriver?” She looks genuinely clueless. Clearly they don’t tell their scientists where the Channelers come from.

“Our subjects are kept in the cells until they’re ready for processing.” The short guy beside her offers. His hands are raised as if to stop me from pulling a trigger.

A rush of fury surges through me. “Your *subjects* are teenagers, you sick fuck. With families. And lives. Where are the cells?”

“We’ll take you there,” the captain says, speaking with an exaggeratedly calm tone that grates on my nerves. “No need for any of this. You play ball. We will too. Just slowly place your hands behind your back and—fuck!”

Sparks crackle and fly as I ignite my hand. The lights in the vats go off. The ceiling lights flicker. Then the room plunges into darkness.

Chaos. Gasps and scrambling. Technicians running to the dying screens.

“Call for backup!” the captain shouts. “Find me a fucking witch!”

I lift one of the metal trolleys, spin, and smash it against the vat. My Flame splutters out. I wish to fuck I could keep it lit while I’m moving. The metal bounces off the thick glass, but a chip appears.

“No!” the woman shouts at me. “Don’t!”

I dance away from the soldiers crowding me back and have another go, thrusting the metal edge as hard as I can. A crack snakes down the vat’s length.

Crossbow bolts whizz past my head, deflecting off the glass and skittering over the floor. A punch lands in my side, pushing me back. Another in my gut knocks the wind from me. The soldiers are a damn sight stronger and faster than they should be. They don’t have the look of shifters, so I assumed they were human, but maybe they’re not.

Adding extra *oomph*, I strike a knee with my boot and whack my attacker with the metal trolley until he stumbles back into his colleague with the crossbow, taking him down as he falls. I use the metal edge to bat an incoming knife aside. And before any others close in, I spin and, with an almighty sidekick, ram my heel into the crack I made in the vat.

The glass shatters. Gallons of fluorescent liquid gush into the room, soaking my legs and the groaning soldier on the floor. I shoot a thanks to Alexei. No way could I do any of this superhero shit without his blood in my system.

The young woman inside slumps to the base, skin glistening, brown hair clinging to her face. She’s still unconscious, but they’ll have to get her out now. The overhead lights flicker back on, dimmer than before. The other three vats power up again, engines whirring. Bollocks. A backup generator. Ignoring the incoming soldiers, I twist and smash metal into the nearest screen and thrust my hand inside to light my Flame. White sparks spit and fizzle. The soldiers jump back.

Flame. Light the whole fucking lot. Travel the wiring. Take out the power.

Nothing happens. I have time to wonder if I’m asking too much.

Then she ignites. My whole body goes up in raging silver fire. Gasps fill the air. Swearing, the soldiers back off. Flames spill into the open wiring, gush across the floor, over equipment, down the cables, and into the vats’ machinery. The new lighting shorts out; engines clunk to a halt. And even the light spilling in from the other room blinks out.

Well done, I say to her.

Satisfied that the vats are finished and that I've probably wreaked enough havoc to keep everyone occupied for now, I splash through the wet and shove one of the panicking technicians up against his equipment.

"The cells?" I shout into his face as my Flame goes out again.

"End of the m-main corridor," he stammers, eyes wild with fear. He points to a hidden corner of the room. "Th-that way. It's locked."

Not for long.

Turns out the captain was lying; there are two other doors out. One to the room behind mirrored windows and the other to the main corridor. Both secured with sensor technology, now completely shorted by the sudden electric fault.

A soldier grabs me as I force open the sliding panels, so I turn and slam my fist into his face. Then I scarp down the dark corridor.

Through the windows at the end, stretches a hallway lined on both sides with metal doors. They have to be the cells.

Another sensor screen bars my way, but a push at the doors reveals it to be useless as well. I rush down the hall and peek through the windows into the cells. Every one of the tiny rooms has a young man or woman inside. The stink of fear and sweat fills the air.

Sniffling reaches my ears. I stride over to the door it's coming from and peer through the open slot, which I assume the guards feed meals through. A young man sits on the edge of a bed in a stark gray room. He's hugging himself and crying.

"Hey," I whisper. "You okay? Are you from Blackriver?"

He lifts his head and blinks his swollen, red eyes. "W-what?"

"Are you one of the students taken from Blackriver?"

Wiping his face, he stands and steps to the door, tentative. "Yes. My name's Thomas."

"Great. Nice to meet you, Thomas. I'm Michael. I'm here to get you home."

Thomas opens and closes his mouth as he processes my words. I check the corridor. Technicians in blue, some in white, dash through the dark, looking stricken. Soldiers are streaming out of the lab doors and heading this way.

"You're really here to help us?" Thomas asks with a small voice.

"I am. Are the others from Blackriver in these cells too?" I'll be taking every Channeler with me. I don't give a fuck where they're from, but my priority is getting Flanagan his students back.

Tears spring to Thomas's eyes again. "Some are in the cells. I don't know where the others are. They've kept us separate." He sees my black leather clothes. "Are you... are you a Blood Servant?"

"I'm, um, I'm in disguise. Listen, I'm gonna get you out of here." The soldiers come striding through the doors, faces hard and determined. "But that, er, might not happen just yet. Someone's coming to get you out, though, okay?"

Thomas nods, a crease in his brow.

I turn... straight into a fist that strikes the side of my face.

Fuck, that hurt. I drag the bastard responsible closer and knee him in the gut. When he doubles over, I cut a sharp elbow to the back of his neck. Pushing him into the next soldier, I shoulder the one

crowding my side. A boot slams into my kidneys, and I stumble against the wall. I back-kick that guy in the knee, push off the wall, scoot between two of the men, and dart to the door. I'm dragged back by my jerkin.

Another flurry of kicks and punches has me coming out on top. They may be fast, but I've got Alexei's blood in my veins. But as I lunge for the door, a ping sounds, and a rust-colored fog shoots into the space from vents in the ceiling.

Now what?

The soldiers whip out face masks that cover their noses and mouths. They all visibly drop tension too.

A careful victory smile tugs at the captain's mouth. "Gotcha now, half breed," he sneers, then applies his face cover.

Whatever the gas is, it's metallic. The moment I breathe it in, I'm coughing and spluttering against the fire in my lungs. I stagger backward, too weakened to defend myself when the soldiers press in from all sides.

A piped voice crackles into the hall from hidden speakers. No prize for guessing who the snotty tone belongs to. "Silver and iron," Commander Belanger informs me. "A poison to pathetic creatures like you. Captain Peterson, I think that's quite enough damage to my facility for one day. My orders were clear. Now strip the thing and hang it where I asked. Usual position."

Usual position? How often does he do this?

I try to fight them. Punch, kick, shove, but my limbs have no strength, and my vision has blurred. My knees fold, thumping me to the concrete floor. A soldier forces my hands behind my back. Another clips fresh cuffs to my wrists. And I can't stop them. I can barely see.

I'm in trouble.

Where the hell is Alexei?



CHAPTER

37

A throbbing ache in my shoulders brings me back from dreamy darkness. That metallic smell still fills my nostrils, plus a stench of formaldehyde. A quick body assessment tells me I'm strung up in a half-star shape. Arms stretched above my head. Each foot manacled to keep my legs apart. And judging by the cool air on my butt cheeks, I'm as naked as Belanger wanted.

This isn't gonna be good.

"Wakey wakey, half breed."

A heavy thump to my gut steals my breath and causes a flurry of hacking coughs as my lungs expel toxic gas. Clenching my jaw against the burning pain, I blink my eyes open. Captain Peterson's face is inches from mine. When I try to focus, my vision blurs, but the guy's pleased-with-himself smile comes through all too clearly. His amber eyes have a wild glint. His men circle me, excited agitation sparking off their eager postures.

I glance around. Two windows in front of me look out onto the lab with the vats, which are all empty now. The techs in blue scuttle around, clearing the aftermath, a boatload of soldiers in black helping them. I can't hear their movements at all. This room must be soundproofed. And the windows are probably one-way glass.

I'm in a small lab room with workbenches and gurneys. More vats line the walls. Smaller than the ones outside and filled with... are they dead bodies? I catch floating dark hair and dead green eyes before Peterson yanks my face back to him. A vague idea of lighting my Flame occurs to my addled mind, but her tingle has gone from my spine. Did I burn off too much?

"Hey," I slur instead. My lip hurts when I speak, but I give the captain my best grin. "That all you got?"

"Oh, there's plenty more where that came from." He punches me again, pulling an *oomph* and another spate of coughing from me, but I bury my pain behind tight lips.

"Fuck you," I spit when my breath finally returns.

He stands aside, and the tall, thin figure of Commander Belanger comes into view. His pointy face is distorted with repulsion, as if he's looking at a rotting carcass. His gray eyes take me in, head to

toe, with venomous hatred.

I give him the same look back. “You don’t deserve that Guardian uniform,” I tell him. “You’re a fucking traitor.”

He slaps my face, hard enough my head jerks aside. Then he grips my cheeks with tight fingers. “How dare you? It was *my* family who created the High Council. The Belanger legacy is the reason the Guardians even exist, you ignorant filth. I wear this uniform with a pride a monster like you could never comprehend.” He speaks the words through gritted teeth, his shifter canines showing from beneath his sneer. The black ring on his finger digs into the edge of my lip.

Black ring. Something about that tries to break through the mush in my brain.

“Subdue it,” he orders, stepping back.

Without pause, the men begin a round of punches to my abs and kidneys, taking turns to bury their fists as deep as their strength allows. I clench my teeth, hear my voice grunting, swearing, crying out, but it’s like I’m watching it all happen from some vague cotton wool place inside my head. Belanger’s wide gray eyes drink in the scene with sick pleasure. I try to connect with the Flame again, but she’s just not there. Where’s she gone?

“Enough,” Belanger snaps. The soldiers part. He comes closer again, in his eyes, his son’s sadistic hunger, his mother’s malice, and a new, vengeful malevolence. He stops inches from my face. “Wondering where your Flame is?” he asks over my groaning. “This is a special room. Designed to study subjects without their Flame. And perfect for controlling *you*. The mighty Whisperer.” The disgust returns to his face. “The Sabel spawn.”

So he got the memo, then.

He waits with dramatic effect for my response. When all I offer is a purposely blank stare, his satisfied smile morphs into a tight grimace. “I know what my son wanted from you,” he hisses quietly. “Unlike my mother—who’s recovering from your evil attack, by the way—I was well aware of his more... unusual tastes. What do I care if he wished to befoul the likes of you? I would have let him finish what he started. Then taken great pleasure impaling you on the same flagpole he died on.”

He pauses and looks away, covering his mouth with a curled fist as he swallows a gulp of air. Was that a sob? His voice takes on a trembling, vicious quality. “But he’s gone. My brave boy. Taken in his prime by monsters!” He all but screams the last word, his spittle hitting my face. “Monsters I will one day wipe from the face of this earth.” When I scrunch my brow, he nods with a twisted smile. “Oh yes, that’s what this project is dedicated to. Finishing the work of my honorable ancestor, the great General Belanger. Cleaning the earth of vampire filth. Your death will be one of many. Even your precious prince won’t be able to prevent what we have in mind for his vermin kind.”

He walks away and, moving a chair directly in front of me, settles himself as if taking a front-row seat. “Captain, my orders are to use this thing. Violate him as you like. I expect every one of you to take a turn. If you refuse, you can consider yourselves terminated from your employment. And you know what that means for you and your families.” And with that, he crosses his legs and leans back to watch, hands neatly resting in his lap. The black stone in the ring on his finger glints, jabbing at a memory.

They all wear a ring with a spelled crystal. Laasya’s words.

Is Belanger with the Dra’ka Tul? No. No way. His family helped to fight the Warlock.

The men eye each other and their captain. Apprehension tightens the air. Discomfort rises off their shoulders like a foul smell. Bastards that they are, I get the impression this isn't something they'd do under usual circumstances. Not everyone shares the Belanger's twisted tastes.

"You heard the commander," the captain says, fists balled. "Get ready. Linden, you first."

"Yes, sir." Linden, the largest of the group, clears his throat and unzips his fly. He positions himself behind me, gingerly angling my hips.

Fear curls up from my gut, tightening my breath. Not fear, terror. I thrash against the chains, metal cutting into skin, but there's no getting away. I can't believe this is happening again. I reach for the Flame, but not even warmth answers me. Where's the blasted Sabel madness when I need it?

Linden's cock nudges my arse cheeks, and I clench as tight as my weakened muscles will allow. But just as he's attempting to pry me apart so he can gain access, a side door opens. In walks a tall, dark-haired figure in a tailored charcoal suit, wide shoulders, long, thick ponytail, dominating the space with a menacing shadow.

"Leave," Vadim says, his coffee-ground baritone dangerously quiet.

Belanger springs to his feet. "You have no right to interrupt this interview. This mongrel is *my* prisoner."

"Leave," Vadim repeats to the soldiers, his voice even deeper than before.

To my surprise, the men don't hesitate. An air of relief washes through the room as they all but scurry to the door. The captain hands over the keys, and Vadim closes his fist around them, his turquoise gaze taking in my bruised and battered nakedness.

A furious Belanger strides across the room and juts his face at the vampire. "I captured this monster. I have the right to extract his intel."

With the barest movement, Vadim strikes and takes him by the throat. Belanger's eyes bug out as he grips the vampire's wrist and struggles to breathe.

"You have no rights over an Anlu'kyr youngling," Vadim says coldly. "Especially this one. If you'd gone any further, you would have forfeited your life to me. And the lives of your soldiers. Now get out. Prepare for a strike. Thanks to my nephew's deceptions and your stupidity, we will soon be under attack." He drops him, and Belanger stumbles back, gasping for breath.

"This thing impaled my son on a flagpole," he splutters.

"You've lost your sense to grief, Shifter. My nephew killed your son. And I suggest you take great care, as you are likely to be next on his list."

Belanger's eyes widen with alarm.

"Go," Vadim orders. "Follow the protocol. Shut down the mansion wards and let no one in. Not even your own general. Evacuate everything here to the Russian lab. Secure the subjects first."

Another lab?

With a glare at me that could strip stone, Belanger tidies his uniform. "This isn't the end," he hisses as he leaves the room.

The door snicks shut again, and I eye my rescuer. Is this an actual rescue or more a frying-pan-into-burning-cauldron sort of deal? Slithers of warning trickle down my spine. "Not that I'm ungrateful, but what the fuck are *you* doing here?"

Vadim straightens his three-piece suit and readjusts the red silk handkerchief poking stylishly from

his chest pocket. He walks over to a touchscreen panel and presses a button. The windows grow dark, shutting out the tense activity. The electricians still work here, then. He glides back to me, seeming in no rush, given his last command.

I wince as he silently examines my wounds, the bruises already yellowing across my ribs and abs. The wolf bites are all closed and healing. “How dare they touch you this way? Forgive me, Michael. I should have come sooner. Belanger didn’t admit to me it was you who had breached the glamour.”

“Why’re you here? They’re making super soldiers to kill vampires, for fuck’s sake.” And why would Belanger work with “vampire filth”?

“Shh. Tut tut,” he croons. “You don’t use that despicable word with your own. We are Anlu’kyr. *You* are Anlu’kyr.” He steps back, and his glittery eyes roam down my body the way he might admire one of his sculptures. A sort of professional interest in his gaze. He shakes his head. “The bloodline kept its beauty,” he whispers.

Annoyance fizzles. “You’re welcome to let me down, you know. Any time. This position is fucking uncomfortable.”

He smiles the charming, toothy grin I met at his club. “And yet it displays you so perfectly. You can handle a little pain, youngling. Your body will heal. And I have another deal for you.”

Handle a little pain? That steaming cauldron’s looking more likely. “What deal? You haven’t answered my question. Why the fuck are you involved with Belanger?”

He meets my eyes. “I am not involved with Commander Belanger, Michael. He is involved with *me*. This is my project. He thinks he’s using me for his little dream, and I allow him that delusion.”

I glance over at the line of vats against the far wall. The half-formed, bloated creatures inside are barely discernible in the hazy liquid, but I can make out dark hair, a pair of pointy ears, and a jade-green empty stare. “What the fuck are you up to? Trying to make another bloodline of weapons?”

He gives me a tight-lipped smile, gliding his fingers over the curve of my pec as if I’m a delicate art piece. I catch the scent of blood and licorice. “I have my reasons for attempting to recreate the Sabel’s exceptional... qualities, but alas, that caliber is unrepeatable. An army immune to the goddess’s fire, however. That, I can do.”

“What the hell for? You know you’re pissing off the goddess with your fucked-up experiments.”

Vadim plays with my nipples, giving them light pinches until they harden for him, then glides his hands down my sides to my hips. And that weird acceptance that tells me his touch is allowed relaxes my tension. My limp cock twitches with interest.

For fuck’s sake. Not now.

“The goddess’s response to my work is of no interest to me.” He tilts his head to view me better. “I have no fear of the fiery beloved. My work is in worship to another.”

Another?

Vadim’s finger brushes my dick as he smooths his hands down my inner thighs. When I lean toward him for more, he notices my confusion. “You’re wondering why my touch is acceptable to you? You perceive me as an ally, Michael. Your body will always respond to your allies this way. You will feel repulsion from those you consider an enemy. The Anlu’kyr are predominantly sensual creatures. Sex is our language.”

He crouches and studies a mark on my groin—a tiny mole I’ve had all my life—and stares at it

with a frown. “Fascinating,” he whispers. His glittery pendant swings with his long hair as he straightens. A black stone. The same type of crystal as Belanger’s ring but much bigger.

Vadim’s watching me when I jerk my head up.

“You’re a fucking shadow worshipper. Is that... is that the mother stone? Are you the High Priest? If you ordered the hit on Flanagan, I’ll fucking kill you.” I struggle against my shackles, desperate to strangle the bastard.

“Shh, calm yourself.” But this time, when he touches me, I flinch away.

“Get your fucking hands off me.”

“Now, now, that won’t do.” He reaches up to loosen the buckle of my cuff, smiling at my expectant surprise. “Oh, you can’t communicate with Alexei from in here. The walls are lead-coated iron.”

Shit. This situation is looking more hot cauldron by the second.

Once he’s loosened the sapphire from my skin, he raises my chin to make me look at him. I try to pull away, but warmth washes through my mind. “You will find deep pleasure in whatever I do to you, Michael.”

“No, I fukk... Shit, that’s... Fff...”

He’s gently cupped me, cock and balls, and plays with them. The tension leaves my body. Against my will, I moan, blissful pleasure filling me.

“Much better,” he praises. “Relax. I would never hurt you. You’re the descendant of my greatest achievement. My Magnum opus. I wouldn’t damage you any more than I would Michelangelo’s David.”

Valentin was Vadim’s creation? In Quinton’s books, the Sabel breeding program was the brainchild of Illarion, the vampire king.

“I’ve been loyal to Malukel for many years.” He massages my shaft with his palm. “He is my god, young one. I serve him willingly. And the reason your Compatible is in so much danger is that until somebody wins your submission, we will fight over you, killing anyone in our way.”

Did he just admit it was him who ordered the hit on Flanagan? Is he the High Priest, or isn’t he? I can’t think straight with his hand working my dick. It just feels so fucking good. “Submission?”

He smiles when I lean toward him, rocking myself into his hand. “You’re a Sabel. The oath of submission is magically wired into your blood. How do you think we controlled creatures stronger than ourselves? Once you say yes and mean it, only the blessing of a god will be able to free you from your bondage. Unfortunately, the submission cannot be forced.”

“*Submit to me, precious one.*” That’s what Alexei asked me at the steelworks. Is that what the prince wants? My total bondage to him? Is the new, *nicer* version of him just his latest approach to achieving that?

When I’m fully erect, precum wetting my tip, Vadim steps back. He purses his lips as he studies me like a museum piece. “Hmm, wonderful. I would dearly love to have you painted like this. One day, perhaps.”

I growl at him. “What the fuck is it you want, Vadim?”

He grins at my frustration, flashing white fangs. “I want everything. But I’m a patient man, and today I’ll settle for a small taste of your blood.”

I try to work that out with my hazy brain. “You just... you want to feed off me?”

His lip curves, eyes glittering with secrets. “A taste and I will unfasten those manacles. That’s my deal.”

Why can’t he just do his witchy thing and take it? Take me. Then he could drink as much blood as he wants.

The distant whir of an emergency siren floats through into the room.

Vadim seems unmoved, but a new urgency clenches my insides, waking me from this weird stupor I’m in.

“Fuck, Vadim. Just do it. Take the blood, then let me go.”

“Exactly what I needed to hear.” His fangs drop, breaching his lips. Stepping in, he bends to my neck and clasps my shaft as he licks my skin. I hate myself for the moan that escapes my throat, for the way my body responds to him as if I want him. I push into his hand, a frustrated orgasm tightening my balls. Anger rises, but without resistance, I stretch up my jaw to give him better access.

An almighty roar explodes, loud enough to blast through the soundproof walls. Vadim freezes, his teeth a millimeter from breaking my skin. And my heart skips a beat, then soars. Only one creature could make that invincible sound.

Flanagan. I don’t know how, but Flanagan’s here.

“Seems I’m out of time.” Vadim fists my hair, yanks my head back, and strikes.

Twin streaks of fiery pain shoot into my neck. I cry out. Then a punch of pleasure turns my cries into groans as he sucks my life force through the wound. I push against his mouth, rock into his tight grip, readying for the orgasm rushing to swallow me.

He pulls out before it hits, sucking in a shuddering breath. “Oh, Michael. You taste just like him. Like honeyed apples.”

“Fuck you.” I’m still floating, scrambling to claw back sense.

He licks over the wound, then gracefully crouches and unlocks my feet.

“You’re letting me go?” I didn’t actually believe him.

“A deal is a deal.”

When my feet are freed, my jellied legs won’t hold my weight, and I dangle more than stand. He unlocks the top chain and circles my waist to catch my collapse. “Your strength will return soon.” Holding me against him, he lifts my chin. The tiny green flecks in his turquoise eyes glow with fluorescent light. “Forgive me, youngling. I must do this.”

“No way.” I struggle against his hold, force my eyes aside. I know exactly what he’s planning. “I’ll remember. I’ll fucking remember you were here.”

“You won’t. I’m sorry.” That warmth floods my mind again. “You will not remember I was here. You will not remember my involvement with the Dra’ka Tul. Or my loyalty to Malukel.” I try to block him, try to imagine fire and walls and concrete, but burning pain slices through my mind. The images of Vadim I just gained filter away like trickles of colored water, leaving empty darkness in their place.

“And the next time you see me”—he runs his thumb over my bottom lip—“you will still consider me an ally. You will let me touch you as I please. Do you understand? Say it.”

“Yes.” The word drops from my mouth.

“Very good.” He half carries me to a chair and gently sits me down, then waves his hand over me

as if removing something invisible. “This was a delight, Michael. I look forward to our next time together.” After making sure I’m settled, he sweeps away, a disappearing shadow.

I’m left blinking, wondering where Belanger went and why I’m gripping the seat of this chair in an empty room.



CHAPTER 38

With a foggy brain, I stare at my manacle-free wrists and try to piece together what the hell just happened. Weren't Belanger's men about to take turns on my ass? Did that happen? It can't have. I'd be... well, sore. So where the hell did they go? Why did they take me down and leave me in a chair?

My leather cuff is loose, the sapphire's cold touch missing from my skin. I remember Belanger's men tightening it. So how is the buckle loose? I leave it that way. I can't sense Alexei from here, but I want him to find me. That's if he's coming back.

A distant howl cuts into the room from outside. A keening wail of stricken grief that hits me in the chest. My heart almost bursts through my ribs, wanting to fly toward it.

Flanagan. I stumble to the window and rap my fist on the dark glass. "Flanagan! Here!" But my shout doesn't have the impact of his howl. There's no chance of it penetrating the soundproof walls.

Weren't these windows see-through before? I check the touchscreen display panel beside them and stab at random icons. Eventually, I find one that opens window controls.

The glass clears to panicked chaos beyond. Staff running everywhere, soldiers waving their arms and bellowing instructions. In the room's corner, a line of shimmering light hovers over a chalked pentagram, signifying an open Gate. Techs in blue with armfuls of equipment are practically throwing themselves through it. Black-clad soldiers have formed a barrier in front of the broken door to protect their escape.

And beyond, in the far lab, soldiers in Guardian brown are flooding into the basement and clashing with Belanger's elite.

Yes!

Where are the students, though? Have they already been taken through the Gate? I need to find my clothes and get out of here.

I search the room but don't see them, try the sliding doors, but they're shut fast, and there's no sensor unit beside them to smash. I march back to the touchscreen and punch every icon, but none of them seem to control the door. For fuck's sake.

Through the windows, soldiers are rolling gurneys with unconscious occupants toward the Gate.

I bang on the window again. “In here! This lab!” I shout at the distant Guardians. But they can’t blasted well hear me, and by the looks of it, Belanger’s men are successfully keeping them at bay.

Then I see a sight that melts me. A young woman with Indian features—looking like nothing more than a waif in boring brown clothes—strides from the melee toward the soldier barricade, an expression of busy annoyance on her face.

Seemingly oblivious to the weapons and muscled posturing, Laasya parts the blockage with a flick of her hand, tossing two men aside to make a gap, and walks straight through.

With a shocked glance at the empty giant vats, she makes a beeline for the soldiers pushing trolleys. They pause in their response. An understandable doubt that this skinny little witch is a genuine threat. They soon change their minds.

With sweeping gestures, she throws men twice her size across the room. She raises a hand to block an incoming streak of Flame as she pushes the soldiers into walls and each other.

I’ve never been happier to see anyone in my life.

Worry steals my joy as more of Belanger’s men pour into the lab from the side door. At least twenty of them. Where are they all coming from? He must have barracks on the grounds. Even for Laasya, this is too many. She might be a badass, but she hasn’t got eyes in the back of her head. Guardians make it through to help her. Mason’s there, screaming orders and wielding his crossbow. They disrupt the escape, but it’s tight, and all Belanger’s men have to do is keep them occupied long enough for their colleagues to escape with the Channelers.

A booming roar vibrates through the lab, so loud it pulses through my feet. A colossal figure wearing only Guardian sueded and a terrifying fury stalks into the room. The soldiers in black look ready to shit themselves. With frightening speed, wild silver eyes, and crazy blond hair whipping around his head, Flanagan goes through Belanger’s men like a scythe through wilting corn. A slashing, spinning mountain of grace and death.

With practiced familiarity, Flanagan’s crew stand aside to let him do his thing, mopping up any panicked strays trying to flee. And within minutes, the battle’s over.

Flanagan arches his body into a yowling cry. Even through these walls, the haunting undertone tears at me, demanding. *Where are you?*

“Flanagan!” I scream. “Flanagan!” He turns his head, then frowns as if unable to tell where the noise is coming from. He angrily gestures to the side door, firing out orders. Guardians hurry away to comply.

Flanagan’s about to follow them when Laasya stops him with a hand on his arm. She points to this room and says something.

Yes! That’s it, you total beauty. Laasya’s mighty intuition. Thank you.

Flanagan storms across the lab and pounds his fist straight into the side panel. The door shudders but doesn’t open. His claws show through the central divide as he grips the edges to force them apart. I add my strength, gripping metal and pushing with weakened limbs.

When a gap finally opens, his diamond eyes land on me like twin stars. “Michael.”

“Flanagan.”

Heaving the two doors apart, he rushes in and sweeps me into one of his bear holds. “Thank the

goddess,” he breathes. “Thank the goddess.” He presses his face to mine and squishes me close.

I grip him back as tightly as I can, eyes stinging, heart ready to burst. His muscled power and familiar smell envelop me like I’m stepping into my home.

“Oh!” Laasya says from beside us. “I’ll, um, I’ll look for clothes, Michael.” I want to speak to her, but I don’t want to let go of my man.

Flanagan presses kisses to my temple. “*Rakkaani*,” he whispers. I really need to ask him what his Finnish words mean. He draws back enough to inspect me. His brow is thick and fierce, the wolf coming through, his upper canines, extended points. His blond hair hangs in wild strings around his shoulders, the usually neat braids coming loose. But a tired strain has deepened the creases around his eyes, and his golden skin seems paler, older. Those black lines are still webbing his neck.

A growl rumbles through his chest as he takes in my bruises. “Did they hurt you?”

“No. Well, I mean, yeah. But it’s okay. I can handle it.” My kidneys ache from the battering. My stiff muscles tremble. The side of my neck throbs for some reason, but I’ll live. “I’m better now.”

His lips tug with a smile as our eyes meet, mirroring a shared relief, and our mouths crash together. A fraught, messy kiss ensues, filled with angst and need. I press into his warmth, his welcome solidity, and he holds me and kisses me as if I might float away.

When we run out of breath, we just gaze at each other with awkward half grins. The sounds of shouted orders and busy Guardians in the lab outside seem a million miles away.

“You’re safe for now,” he says quietly. “The Blackriver soldiers still follow my command. And until we’ve secured the Channelers, Nenge will concentrate her forces on keeping the Belanger grounds clear.” His brow draws down as he examines my skin again, a dark cloud crossing his face. “Why did you attack the lab alone? You should have waited for me. You could have been truly hurt this time. I thought you’d understood the dangers of rushing in without a team.”

Waited for him? “I’m not alone. Not completely. I mean...” Shit. He’s right. I have done exactly what I always do. Follow impulse first, think later. But what choice did I have? I change the subject. “How are you here? I thought they arrested you?”

“They did. I was held at Headquarters for four days. I’d still be there if it wasn’t for your message.”

“Message?”

He frowns. “Yes. It was passed on by a guard. You told me you were here at the Belanger mansion in a glamoured building within the grounds. That the students were here, and you were going in to get them. That wasn’t you?”

That’s why he said I should have waited for him. “It wasn’t me. I—” It must have been Alexei. “How did you get out?”

“I broke through the walls,” he says, matter-of-factly. “When I got here, Nenge and the Blackriver Guardians were already at the gate. They’d also received a message. Nenge has a code for the Belanger’s wards, but it took every witch she brought to crack the glamour.”

So my Plan B worked, then? I take a deep breath, then drop the next bomb. “Listen, it was Alexei who sent those messages. He must have sent them in my name so you didn’t assume it was some kind of trap.”

A fierceness sparks across Flanagan’s face. We stare at each other.

“I can explain. I mean, it—it was okay. I—fuck.” I stop my fumbling words and start again. “Look, I had to call him. It was—”

“Shh. Michael.” He pulls me in again, kissing my head as he folds me in his arms. “I knew you would call him. I hoped you would, though the prospect disturbed me.”

“You did?” I try to draw back, but he keeps me tucked in his neck. Anger seeps into his words.

“Councilor Finnick told me they had you, that you were safe but in lockdown. To subdue me, I think. I knew it to be a lie. You’d escaped into the Border Woods, and there was only one way out for you.” He swallows, his Adam’s apple bobbing against my face. His fingers dig skin as he clasps me closer. “The desire to follow you, search for you, almost undid me. But I would have died for my foolishness. The only hope I had while I waited inside those gray walls was that Alexei had found you.”

He pulls away and studies my face. The exhaustion in his features, the haunted anguish in his gaze, kills me. As if he’s been in agony but even now doesn’t know if the pain has ended or just begun. Guilt clamps my heart with a cold fist.

“I have to tell you what happened. When I was with him, we went to this glade in the Faelands, and the Flame—”

He stops me with a finger over my mouth. “Michael, you’re a Channeler and a youngling. I’m well aware of what that means.”

“But I... Look, Radomir was there.” Fuck. How the hell do I even describe what we did?

His upper lip twitches, animosity ghosting through his eyes at the mention of Radomir. He takes a slow breath and rests his hands on my shoulders. “You needed help, and they helped you.” His voice is stiff and he swallows. “I don’t need you to consider me if you require Grounding while I’m not with you. I’m not a teenager, easily threatened and jealous. I’m old. Old enough to understand. I don’t need you to be chaste. I need you to be safe.”

I’m not sure his wolf would agree with that, but my heart pulses as I take in what he’s saying. He means he cares more about my needs than his feelings. And I can’t believe he’s mine. “I wasn’t going to leave you,” I blurt. “I mean, at Blackriver. What Quinton said. I was, but I—”

“Shh.” He thumbs my lips. “That doesn’t matter now.”

“It does matter. I need you to know. I agreed to leave—for you—then couldn’t do it.”

“Councilor Quinton explained it to me.”

I still and check his expression. It’s hardened slightly. “He did?”

“Hmm. Under duress. He told me the Dra’ka Tul are attempting to remove me for better access to you. And you didn’t tell me because it would have meant admitting your bloodline.”

I let out a breath I think I’ve been holding for weeks. “So you know?”

He nods, and the hurt returns. “Why didn’t you tell me? Do you trust me so little? You think I care what bloodline you’re from?”

“It wasn’t that—” I stop before I pour out a babbling pile of crap. “Yeah, okay. It was. I was shit scared to tell you. I thought you’d find the Sabel thing one fucked-up gene too many. I worried I’d cause you so much trouble you’d regret ever meeting me. But I wanted to tell you. I just knew you’d have to inform Nenge. And I knew the Belangers would have a field day when they found out.”

He narrows his eyes. “I don’t fear the Belangers.”

“But you would have told Nenge?”

He hesitates but nods. “I would have considered it. I trust her. She’s the reason the Council finally accepted a Lycanthrope in charge of Blackriver. But the Sabel law is beyond her control. Only the Council can change it. So no, I wouldn’t have involved her.” He tightens his fingers on my shoulders, his expression turning somber. “She’s upstairs, with half a battalion and an entire coven of witches. Her orders are unconditional. The Council will only accept extermination. It was brave of you to do this, to risk your life this way. Reckless but brave. I admit we may never have found this place without you. But getting you out of here alive will be challenging.”

My heartbeat skitters and thumps. I celebrated my Plan B too soon. A whole coven of witches. Shit a brick. How am I getting out of the Belanger estate without killing Guardians, without dying? And where the hell has Alexei got to?

Flanagan cups my jaw and raises my face. “I won’t let them hurt you. Not while there’s breath in my body. If that means the Guardians choose to become my enemy, then so be it.”

I shake my head, eyeing the black marks on his neck. A new pressure threatens to break my ribs. “But you’ll lose everything. They’ll hunt you. They could kill you. I can’t let you do that.”

He kisses me again. “Michael, you’re my Compatible. My duty is to you. And when the goddess blessed me, she gave me one instruction—to protect her Whisperer. As much as I believe in the work of the Guardians, my covenant with Velnushka carries far greater weight.”

The silver tattoo on his left shoulder seems to shine brighter. The curling flames shimmer as they cascade down his upper arm, as if the goddess is winking at me. I can’t quite believe what he’s saying, though. “That was the deal you made with her? But that was over three hundred years ago?”

“She’s a goddess, able to see things we can’t. And this request was the only thing she ever asked of me, so I’m not about to let her down.”

Tears threaten again. Did the Velnushka really send this incredible man to protect me before I was even born? “And you’d give up everything for her? For me?”

He kisses me again, gentler. “I’m not giving up everything. Everything is what she’s given me.”

Someone clears their throat at the door. The world comes crashing back in. The busy activity in the lab, the shouts and clunking, the reality of what’s waiting for me outside this room.

Flanagan shields my body as he turns to the soldier. “Yes, Sergeant.”

It’s Mason. “We have the students, sir. Some of them are in pretty bad shape, but they’re all accounted for.”

I let out a breath. Thank fuck. I think of Thomas, the boy I found crying alone in his cell, and relief gushes through me. He’s safe now and going home to his family.

“Good, good,” Flanagan says. “I’ll come and see them now. I don’t want them going to Longreach. Make sure they’re Gated straight back to Blackriver. Are the field medics with them?”

“Yes, sir.” Mason’s eyes seek mine, his expression wary. “Councilor Quinton’s here. He’s opened a Gate on the lawn.”

Quinton. Fuck me, that’s a whole other kettle of “what the hell” feelings I’ve yet to process.

Laasya bustles past Mason. “Sorry I took so long. I had to work on one of the Channelers. Goddess only knows what they’ve done to them.”

Flanagan kisses me again and squeezes my hand. “Don’t leave this room. Please. I won’t be long. I

just need to see the students before..." He swallows. "Stay with him," he says to Laasya as he leaves.

When he's gone, Laasya's staring at the ceiling as if her eyes have been strung upward with wire. I'd forgotten I was standing here in the buff. She thrusts black leather clothes at me. "I found these by the cells. Are they yours?"

"Yeah, those are mine." Belanger's men must have stripped me right there in the corridor. Laasya and I exchange a strained glance as I take them from her, a deeper discomfort in the air between us.

When I'm fully dressed, she lowers her eyes and clasps her hands in front of her, fingers twisting. "I-I want to hug you, but... I know I don't deserve it." Tears wet her remorseful eyes. "I abandoned you when you needed me most, and—"

"Come here." I pull her into a hug and hold her tight against my chest, breathing in her wild rose scent—a balm to my soul. "It's so good to see you, Laasya."

She circles my waist and sinks her face into my chest. "Oh, Michael, I'm so sorry. You must have been terrified. When you ran into the woods, I thought we'd killed you. I thought... oh, goddess, I thought the worst." She peers up, her big brown eyes so round they look like pools of chocolate behind her glasses. "I was just... shocked. I've-I've never seen anything like that before."

"It's okay. I get it. It was a lot." I sigh, a weariness settling into my bones, the bottled fear of what I am threatening to steal the last of my strength. "I'm just sorry you had to see it."

"I'm a battle witch. We get training. I should be able to handle scenes like that. I know werewolf massacres can be that... gory, but I've never seen one, you see, so I just wasn't prepared." Her shoulders seem to collapse. "I'm so glad you're okay."

"It's alright. Believe me, I wasn't prepared either."

She plonks her hands on her hips. "I don't care that you're a Sabel. I think the law is barbaric. I know you. You're kind and brave and care about people. You'll never become like the Warlock. I don't believe that for a second."

Kind? Jeez, I've never been called that before.

"But you should have told me." She thumps my chest. "Why didn't you? I thought we trusted each other."

Her scolding brings a cheerfulness to my heart. I love her. My little witch friend. It pained me to think I'd lost her. "I do trust you, but I—" I stop and sigh, wiping over my face. That's a lie. I didn't trust Laasya or Flanagan. I didn't take a chance and tell them my truth, and when the shit hit the fan, I was prepared to leave both of them. Stuffing my hands into my pockets, I look down at my feet. "Actually, I've never really trusted anyone. John, yeah. But beyond that, absolutely no one. You and Flanagan are the closest I've got." I meet her sincere gaze. "But you're Guardians first. You have a duty you both take seriously. And yeah, I didn't expect to stand a chance against that. Plus, I wasn't about to sink you both with my shit."

She throws her arms out. "You honestly thought we'd give you up, knowing what would happen to you?"

"Well, yeah. You'd have had to."

She chews on her lip as she thinks about that. "I suppose I would have told Commander Flanagan. Okay, Councilor Quinton too. But that's because I know they care about you. I wouldn't have told anyone else. Not even Captain Seonu because she'd have immediately informed the general and..."

She falls silent, and we stare at each other. Nenge's waiting army creeps in between our gazes.

"What are you going to do?" she asks.

I open my mouth to answer, not even sure what I'll say, but Flanagan strides back into the room.

"Are you ready?" He's wearing a soft leather version of the Guardian jerkin, hair tied up in a loose knot. His eyes take in my black leathers—my *Blood Servant* black leathers. But I can't read his response. His inscrutable commander mask has shut down his face.

"What are we going to do, sir?" Laasya asks, fear tightening her voice. "The general has two companies with her and a coven of witches."

Flanagan doesn't answer her. He sweeps up my wrist and peers at the cuff. "Is this working?"

I glance up. What on earth does he have in mind? Judging by Laasya's wary expression, she's wondering the same.

"It's loose, so I should be able to feel him, but I can't. This room blocks the connection, even with the door open."

"What was the plan? Is he here?" Flanagan asks.

"I honestly don't know. It was me that last minute decided to be caught so I could get inside. I told him to tell Nenge I was here, and that was the last I heard from him. But I'm sure he sent Radomir off to ready the Blood Guard."

Gasps and shouts draw our attention to the lab outside. The unit of Blackriver Guardians have all taken battle stances, crossbows aimed, swords ready. A wild sort of fear widens the soldiers' eyes.

Hands in his trouser pockets, nonchalant smirk in place, Prince Alexei strolls through the lab toward us with feline swagger as if he's arrived for an evening dinner date.



CHAPTER

39

“How...” whispers Laasya, as dumbstruck as I am. “How did he get past everyone?”

“I walked.” Alexei saunters into the room, undaunted by the many weapons trained on his back, the razor-taut atmosphere around him. “Clearly, the Guardians can’t get the staff these days.”

“You took your time.” Flanagan doesn’t appear to be as taken aback by Alexei’s audacious entry, though his greeting glare could cleave a mountain in two.

Alexei ignores him. His black eyes sweep the room, the workbenches, the pulley I was hung from, the vats with their floating creatures. He takes in a rapid inventory of my current state. My heart pounds as I fight to hold on to my irritation. I’m pissed at him for not coming sooner, but my body’s responding the way it always does, demanding I kneel and strip and be as close to him as possible.

“Are you well, my love?” he asks softly.

“I’ll live.”

He reaches to my face but stills with his fingers inches from my cheek when Flanagan’s rumble rises to a growl. “I’m checking his memory, *Lycan*. He has a look of shock in his eyes.”

“Of course he does, *vampire*,” Flanagan grizzles. “He was left in here alone, naked and bruised. Where were you?”

Alexei cups my face and examines my eyes. “Preparing for his escape. You noticed your general waits with most of the Guardian army to ensure his demise?”

Flanagan only growls again. He nods to the fear-frozen soldiers outside for them to carry on. They release their white-knuckled hold on their weapons but don’t put them away. Some stay close, ready if Flanagan needs them.

Alexei pulls me closer, and a tingling light sighs through my mind, caressing every corner of my thoughts. *You did well*, Alexei whispers. *I’m proud of you*.

And don’t I just flush with pride, my neck warming. *Fuck off*.

His lips curve. He juts his chin as though angling to peer closer at something, and his face darkens.

“What?” Flanagan towers over Alexei’s shoulder, intent on his every move.

“His memory has been shorn.”

Has it? Shit. When? How? Was that why I came round on the chair and didn't remember how I got there?

"Shorn how!" Flanagan demands. "Vampire or witch?"

Alexei peers into my eyes again. "It's a clean cut. And delicate work. I'd say a witch. An adept." He draws me closer and breathes in my scent, following a line down my neck to my shoulder. I ignore my shiver as his warm breath ghosts my skin. When he draws back, a quiet fury burns in his eyes.

"Well?" Flanagan asks.

"There's no particular scent," Alexei says with a monotone inflection. "It could have been removed."

Flanagan's fisted knuckles crack. "You've noticed something. Say it."

"I would need to be sure first."

The sudden speed with which Flanagan has Alexei pressed back over the nearest workbench by the throat has Laasya and me jerking away with twin gasps. Test tubes scatter and smash across the floor.

"You left him!" Flanagan bellows into his face. "You used him for your schemes, then abandoned him when he needed you."

"Flanagan!" I step closer and lay a hand on his shoulder. "It was *my* idea. I wanted to do this."

Laasya creeps away to the other side of the room, experienced enough to know just how violent this could become. Soldiers peer in the door with worried faces.

Mason bustles through and aims his crossbow at the prince, ready to fire. "Just say the word, sir!"

Flanagan's oblivious. All his attention is leveled on Alexei's coolly defiant face. The vampire rests his hands on the bench top to steady himself and looks straight into his fury. He purses his plump lips with an expression of weary patience, one long, manicured brow arched with indignation. "Loosen the hand," he croaks.

Flanagan briefly closes his eyes. He looks like he wants nothing more than to break the vampire's neck. He drops his arm but doesn't relax his threatening posture.

Alexei adjusts his black silk tie while they glare at each other. "Michael chose his own course of action. You'll find he's capable if you look past your overprotective paranoia. Meanwhile, I had to bring the Blood Guard here via the Border Woods. That took time. You'll thank me when we go upstairs to face what awaits us."

"He was ASSAULTED!" Flanagan's hand whips back to Alexei's throat, this time forcing the vampire to raise his jaw for air. The big guy's long fangs have snapped free, and his brow has rippled into wolf, turning his face into the picture of ferocity. "If something happened to him..." he has to pause for breath, too furious to speak, "something he can't even remember because it was taken from him, so help me I'll—"

"You'll what?" Alexei shoves Flanagan away. And to my renewed amazement at the vampire's strength, the bigger man stumbles backward, then rights himself with a rumble. "You'll kill me? We've been there. Many times. You can't."

"Not *yet*." Flanagan hisses through his teeth.

Alexei snarls, showing his fangs.

I don't exist to either of them right now, though it's apparently me they're fighting over. Or is it? Given Flanagan's story, this is an old wound.

“For fuck’s sake,” I snap at them. “We’ve got an army to face. At least keep your rival shit zipped till we clear this place alive.”

They continue to glower at each other.

“Sir.” Seonu stands at the door. She takes in the situation with a steely blue scowl, eyes narrowing with pure hate as they land on Alexei. “The Channelers have all been secured. Transported via a Gate to the infirmary at Blackriver. Um.” She clears her throat. “General Nenge wants to know if you’ll be joining her or if she needs to send a team down to... assist you.”

And now it starts.

The atmosphere in the room shifts. The two men snap out of their face-off. Their antagonism drops away like water off wax. As if it were merely a lovers’ tiff. Alexei straightens his suit. Flanagan walks to his team, his shoulders losing their tension.

“Thank you, Seonu,” he says, then falls silent. They all gaze at each other, the soldiers’ faces unsure and doleful.

“We’re with you if you need us,” Laasya says with a small but determined voice.

Flanagan shakes his head. “Forgive me for what I’m about to do. For forcing you to stand against me.”

“But we’re with you, sir,” Seonu says. The woman who thinks I should be exterminated under section whatever the fuck of the dangerous animal act. She raises her chin, her silky black bob as neat as always, and cuts her laser glare my way. “If you want to be sure Michael’s taken in alive, we’ll help you.” Yeah, because she’d be happy with me locked away in an underground prison.

“I think we both know ‘taken in alive’ isn’t on offer,” Flanagan says. “The High Council’s only goal is extermination, and that’s not something I’m willing to tolerate.” He takes a deep breath and blows it out, hands resting on his hips.

Alexei leans back against the workbench, ankles crossed, hands back in his pockets, remaining surprisingly quiet. I settle next to him, fastening my cuff.

He stays my hand with his. “Not yet,” he mouths.

He’s right. We need to be in contact for this, as much as that pains me. I nod and drop my hand.

The other Blackriver Guardians have gathered around the door.

Flanagan addresses them all. “My last orders are for you to go upstairs and stand with Nenge. She’s your general. You do as she asks.”

The soldiers shuffle and share glances, eyes flicking toward Alexei and me. Mason lowers his crossbow, his face pale. It’s clear from the expression on all their faces the reality of what’s happening has landed. Their beloved commander is leaving them. He’s stepping down and siding against the Guardians.

“I won’t help them.” Laasya has tears in her eyes as she looks over to me. “The law is cruel and centuries out of date. I’ll follow your orders, sir, but I won’t help them kill Michael.”

Judging by the stinging glares, I’m not sure the others feel the same. I’m the monster that butchered twelve of their colleagues, and I’m stealing their commander from them.

“Thank you, Laasya.” Flanagan bobs his head. “That’s your choice. But I will not blame anyone for choosing differently.” He raises his hand to Seonu, and she grips his wrist, her usually cold eyes glistening.

“It’s been an honor, Captain Seonu.”

“The honor was mine, sir.”

Flanagan offers the same to Mason, and the stocky bruiser can barely get the same words out through his tight throat.

Laasya sniffles when it’s her turn.

“Go now. Join the others.” Flanagan shoos them away. “I want it clear that you’re not siding with me when I leave the building with Michael.”

When they hesitate, still sharing uncomfortable expressions, Seonu takes over, Japanese accent clipping her orders. “You heard the commander. Everyone out!” She pushes Mason, who’s still hesitating.

Laasya runs over to me, and we share a shrink-wrap hug. “I love you,” she snivels into my chest.

“I love you too,” I say with ease. “I’ll see you again. Somehow.”

“You better.” She peers up with one of her scolding Laasya looks, blinking away tears.

Alexei is studying her with interest, and I step into his line of sight as she scurries from the room.

With last woeful glimpses at Flanagan, they all file away, leaving an empty lab and an eerie quiet.

“Well, wasn’t that touching,” Alexei quips.

Flanagan snarls at him. “We follow my command.”

“It’s my Blood Guard. We follow *my* command.”

I roll my eyes. “Guys, for fuck’s sake. Flanagan, you need to face off with Nenge. She’s your friend as well as your general. Maybe she’ll listen to reason. And you”—I elbow Alexei—“need to prepare the Blood Guard for when she tells us we’re not leaving without a fight.”

The two opponents regard each other. “We do this with as few casualties as possible,” Flanagan says with a flat, don’t-fuck-with-me tone. “Guardian deaths will shut down all hope of negotiation once Michael is free. His only chance of survival is a change in the law. And for that, the Council have to accept that he’s not a direct threat.”

Alexei huffs. “Michael’s only chance of survival is with his own. The law is irrelevant. They fear him because he’s a Sabel. Because they don’t want a Sabel weapon in Anlu’kyr hands. The only options they will consider are containment, study, or destruction. And you know that.”

Flanagan’s tight-lipped lack of a comeback is telling.

“I don’t want to hurt any of them,” I say to him. “But they’re not gonna let us just walk out of here either.”

He nods stiffly. The gleam in his gaze betrays sadness. Tension from his jaw travels down the sinews of his neck.

“You don’t have to do this.” I lay my hand on his arm. “I won’t blame you if you change your mind.” I know how much he loves the Guardians. How deeply he believes in the work they do. Giving it all up for a guy he met little more than a month ago is a big ask.

“It is what it is, Michael. They will make their choice, and I have made mine.” When our eyes meet, the swell of emotion in his makes me swallow. And fear rears its ugly head. Fear that even if we get through this, he’ll regret the loss, resent it so much he’ll hate me.

“Well, that’s settled then,” Alexei says. “We kill who we kill to get you and Michael to the Border Woods as quickly as possible. And I Flame walk you through to the Faelands. Once we’re clear, I can

fly you one by one to Dvamira.”

“He’s not going to Dvamira.” Menace bleeds into Flanagan’s tone. “I have a place in northern Finland, on the edge of Lemmenjoki. No one knows it’s mine. We’ll stay there until the Council is prepared to negotiate.”

“A return to your beloved Finland will have to wait.” Alexei answers his burning gaze with ease. “He’s under goddess oath to come home.”

“Only for a month,” I say quickly as Flanagan shoots a shocked gaze to me. “I agreed to make sure the Channelers went back to Blackriver, but he has to let me go when it’s over.”

He flattens his lips. “So he manipulated you. Again.”

“He didn’t. I…” I don’t think. I side-eye Alexei with a frown. Did he manipulate that deal? Let me think it was needed?

Alexei waves his hand dismissively. “The oath has been made.”

Flanagan gazes at me, his expression hard to read. I grit my jaw to stop myself from blurting more explanation. I made the deal because I thought I had to.

He takes a long breath in and out, staring at the floor. I don’t doubt he realizes this is all going exactly the way Alexei wants it to. “In that case, fly Michael to the woods at the first opportunity. We just need the Guardians distracted enough.”

“That’s no good,” I say to him. “How would *you* get out?”

“That’s not important.”

“Of course it is. No way am I leaving you. Alexei can fly himself out.”

Alexei stands and straightens his cuffs as if preparing for that dinner date. “The goal is the woods. If that’s not possible for the three of us, I fly Michael out. Now shall we leave this wretched place before the dogs creep down to attempt an ambush?”

Heavy with a twisting, gut-level unease, I follow them through the shattered remains of the laboratory to the exit. There’s not a soul around. Our footsteps echo through the empty rooms, boots crunching glass. As I leave the metal-clad lab, the Flame returns to my body with a hot gust, sizzling along my spine and buzzing through my limbs. She’s agitated, swirling and fizzing as if ready to set me alight.

Hey, girl. Glad you’re with me.

She tickles the nape of my neck and warms my chest as if to answer my greeting.

When we reach the foyer, we come to an abrupt stop. Even though a night sky now cloaks the half realm, the Guardian army is visible through the windows. More than a hundred of them. Leather-clad figures with weapons drawn, waiting in concentric circles around the building, filling the field, and blocking our planned escape route, which rises behind them like a leering mass of dark giants.

The soldiers’ expressions are stern and determined but edged with apprehension. The front row crouches, crossbows ready. The row behind stands with bows and arrows pulled taut to shoot. General Nenge, looking like a stately goddess in uniform, hands behind her back, waits at their head, ten or so yards from the building. Officers in commander blue wait with her.

And standing right beside her in green tweeds, leaning on his cane, fedora set at a roguish angle, is my father. Councilor Quinton. Who the hell’s side is *he* on? Is he just keeping up appearances, or actually set against me now?

I can't see Laasya or any of the Blackriver team. They've no doubt been assigned to the back. They're probably considered unreliable, given the circumstances.

An icy warning tingles down my spine. There are way more soldiers than I expected. How the hell are we getting out of this?

Flanagan turns and, cupping my face, presses his lips to mine. I grip his nape and pull him in deeper. He draws back and roams my features as if he's committing every inch to memory.

"Just let me go with them." My words rush out. "I'll make them a deal. Alexei can fly you straight to the woods from the roof. I'll tell them if they fire on you, the deal is off."

He smiles, a wistful curve of his lips. "I have no desire to survive without you."

I swallow back a lump in my throat. I feel the same. Though I may have only known this giant man with his fierce gaze, stern face, and colossal heart for a month, a world without him isn't a world I want to live in.

With a final slow press to my temple, Flanagan steps back. "We try talking first," he says to Alexei, who's watching us with what I can only describe as a crafty smile.

He sighs. "If we must."

Flanagan scans the line outside. He probably recognizes most of the faces. "I'll go out and parley. Michael, you stay in here. Where is the Blood Guard?"

"On the roof. Alyona and Fentis have them hidden."

Alyona and Fentis. I can't believe I'm now on the same side as the two witches who attacked Blackriver with Alexei. "Why can't Alyona just Gate us to Dvamira?" I ask.

"Because a whole coven of witches is here to stop her. She'll be occupied simply keeping our heads on our shoulders. You know," he says to Flanagan, "while you're wasting your time chatting, we could cause a distraction and be halfway to the woods."

"And break the rules of parley?"

Alexei raises a mocking brow. "They're not my rules, Lycan."

Flanagan seems to bury a retort before gathering himself. "Our best chance is persuading Nenge that letting us go will cause the least deaths. And the Guardians deserve that option."

"They deserve nothing from me." Alexei's tone carries a sting.

They stare at each other. Eventually, Flanagan says, "Just give me enough time to persuade her. If the parley fails, we do what we must to get Michael away."

I squeeze my lips shut. I'm not going to argue, but I'll not be leaving without Flanagan.

"If all else fails, I fly him to the Faelands and return for you." Alexei tilts his head. That and the blink of his black eyes remind me of Etalon.

Flanagan's gaze flicks to his, and they share a look I can't quite decipher.

Alexei gestures to the door. "Now that's settled, shall we dance?"



CHAPTER 40

With a glance at me, Flanagan opens the door and strides straight through. He doesn't even raise his hands in a gesture of harmlessness as he stalks across the path and over the moonlit grass toward Nenge. The lines spring to attention, crossbows zoning in on the threat. Nenge motions for calm. Flanagan's probably the only reason she hasn't bombed the lab with us in it.

My stomach does somersaults as I watch from behind the door, the Flame adjusting my sight to see details through the dark. That intuitive sense has turned on, its warning pulse like claws trying to draw my attention.

I know. I know. We're in trouble. I get it.

Alexei opens the door, and a slim blur ghosts into the foyer.

"Highness." The vampire comes to a smooth stop. One of the Blood Guard, long dark hair and amber eyes, imperial Russian tunic with its raised collar and silver filigree. He's carrying a black canvas bag over his shoulder. "Whisperer," he says with a nod to me.

I give a stiff nod back. "What's the bag about?"

"You know what to do," Alexei says to him, ignoring my question.

"Yes, my prince." With the same blurring speed, he disappears into the lab.

"Alexei, what the hell are you up to?"

He winks at me. "Contingency, my love." He opens the door, but I grab his hand.

"When the shit hits the fan, Flanagan will want you to fly me straight out. Take him first. You can't lie. I want a promise."

The gentle look he lays on me has all of his eight centuries in its endless depths. He takes my hand and presses a kiss to my fingers. "My sweet love, he's only just found you again. What would it do to him if he lost you, do you think? Be strong. I promise you will be home soon and safe." No more than a flickering shadow, he leaves the building and disappears around the corner.

With a sigh, I go back to watching Flanagan through the door, my muscles like knotted roots. He's stopped halfway, and Nenge's walking toward him. Quinton follows her, a few steps behind, cane

clutched in his hand. What's he up to?

When the general reaches Flanagan, they nod a respectful greeting.

They've known each other for forty years, those two. Fought together in a specialized unit for catching dangerous supernaturals. Flanagan's recommendation was the reason Nenge got promoted to general when he turned it down. And Nenge is the reason Flanagan was finally given Blackriver, the position he'd coveted from the moment he made commander. Now they're facing each other from opposite sides of a battlefield. That can't be comfortable.

Nenge speaks, and Flanagan shakes his head. She says something else, but I can't hear her. I should be able to catch something, but the air surrounding them shimmers. Is that one of those privacy bubbles Alexei mentioned? Quinton's spell, obviously. He's looking over here at the building as if attempting to peer inside.

Michael. Are you there? His words pop up in my head.

I'm here.

Oh, my boy. He sounds genuinely relieved. *Are you hurt? Where is the sapphire?*

I'm fine. It's with me. I'm just keeping it loose for now.

I was so worried. You were brave to come here for the students. I'm proud of you. But you took a terrible risk. I've Gated them all to Blackriver. I thought you would want that.

I squint at his face. He's leaning on his cane, a blank expression masking our conversation. The other two continue to talk, both maintaining their cool.

Thanks, that means a lot. I gust out a breath. Knowing the Channelers are finally home feels like dropping dumbbells I've been carrying for weeks. *Are you helping Nenge now?*

Not against you, Michael. Never against you. But it is in our best interest that I keep up my place as Councilor. The position gives me a better chance of protecting you. I suppose you're with... Alexei? He says the name as if it might infect him.

I'm with Flanagan. Alexei's helping. We'll be staying at Dvamira for a month, though. I made a goddess oath. Don't ask. It was needed. I can't get out of it till it's done.

He stays silent. I can't read his expression. He's purposely keeping it neutral. *That's... unfortunate.* Said in a peevish tone. *And will this oath allow us to meet?*

Yeah. I made sure. You have questions to answer.

I feel his sigh. *That's good news. Very well. We will have to be patient. But beware. The prince is cunning. He will do everything in his power to keep you with him.*

Believe me, I know.

I can help protect you while you escape. They won't know it's me aiding you. If you succeed, send me word as soon as you are safe. Please.

I'll do that. And thanks. I'm sorry we didn't make it to Scotland.

We've found each other, my boy. That's all that matters.

The sting in my eyes as he says that takes me by surprise. I haven't had time to process what it means that I've met my father. Or at least I think I have. Do I believe it, believe him? The real possibility he didn't die when I was a baby, that he's here—alive—that I have a chance to know him is almost more than I can handle.

I shake it off. Swallow the sappy feelings down. Concentrate, Blakeley. We've got shit to do.

What are those two saying? I ask him.

Nenge will never agree to let you go. The Council's orders were uncompromising. She has no authority to change them.

Fuck. I squint through the dark at Nenge, trying to lip-read. All I catch is "I'm sorry" and the severe expression on her face. My heart sinks. Alexei was right. Of course, Nenge's not going to let us just walk. If she plays her cards right, she could kill the Sabel, arrest the traitor, and at least injure the vampire prince, all in one messy but effective battle.

More people are going to die today. Flanagan's attempt to protect the lives of Guardians from unnecessary madness will be ignored.

I survey the rows of soldiers, lines of tension in brown leather. People with families and hopes. This is shit.

I'm through the door and marching toward Flanagan before caution can stop me. The pulse from my intuition intensifies. A ripple passes through the primed soldiers. All the crossbows shift to point my way.

I feel Alexei's mind sigh into mine, questioning. Such a weird, exposing sensation, but I know he sees everything without me having to tell him.

Not the best move, my love. At least you will be beside Gabriel when the mood changes.

As I approach, Flanagan turns. The instant worry in his expression darkens to reprimand.

"I asked you to stay inside," he says when I step through the shimmering bubble to stand beside him.

Quinton also gives me a pointed look.

"I have something to say," I tell them.

Nenge studies me with narrowed eyes. Dubious, but not unfriendly.

"We've just saved twelve Channelers," I say to her, "and now you're about to waste dozens more in a battle we don't need. I'm not your enemy, General Nenge. Let me go, and I'll guarantee you never see me again."

"And yet you stand with your prince," she answers in that deliberate way of speaking she has.

"He's not my... I'm not with the Anlu'kyr. Not against the Guardians. I have no interest in your war. I just want my freedom." Flanagan's hand gently closes around my wrist, a warning to keep it calm.

"We cannot allow a Sabel Whisperer to fall into enemy hands. The consequences could be catastrophic. The most I can offer is incarceration while we assess the danger."

I search her inscrutable expression. Is she lying? Or going against her orders? It doesn't matter. Assess the danger means study me like a rat and throw away the key so I'll never see daylight again. "Then at least let Flanagan go. Alexei can fly him straight out. Surely you don't think he's your enemy?"

Flanagan tightens his fingers on my wrist, but he stays quiet. He's obviously said his piece to no avail.

Nenge glances behind me at the building, searching for signs of the vampires through the dark, no doubt. I look too. The Blood Guard lines the roof, twelve tall figures watching the action from the high vantage point. Some are holding bows, the arrows trained on the parley. Alyona and Fentis stand

behind them, holding hands, heads down, doing whatever it is witches do when they connect like that.

At the corner of the building crouches the prince, watching intently, looking like a suited gargoyle with his giant wings spread, ready to fly.

Nenge can't see them, of course. They're all glamoured, but I can tell by the lethal look in her eyes she knows they're there. "Forgive me, Michael." She turns back. "Letting Gabriel go is not an option I'm able to offer." Her tone carries a wistful note, and she glances at Flanagan with sadness in her dark eyes.

For fuck's sake. After fifty years of dedicated service, just like that, Flanagan's life is no more valuable than their enemy's. Something in my chest hardens, darkens.

I meet her stern gaze, letting any warmth I was trying for drop away. "Then it looks like we're done."

As if to punctuate my point, an ear-shattering boom cuts over my last word. The ground tilts, tipping us sideways. An eruption from beneath the Guardian army catapults dirt and soldiers skyward, a plume of dust and gravel blasting our faces as we all stumble in the shock wave. Screams fill the air. Leather-clad bodies thrown across the field thump into their colleagues, knocking them aside like bowling pins.

As I clasp my ears, pain ricocheting through my brain, Alexei's last wink flickers through my mind.

Where's Laasya? Was she caught in the blast?

"Hold the line!" Nenge bellows, her dark skin paled by a spray of dust.

I catch Flanagan and Nenge sharing a millisecond glance. A knowing.

Then everything happens at once.

Quinton disappears. Literally blinks the fuck out.

The ground comes toward my face as Flanagan flattens me to the grass, covering me with his weight.

And Nenge roars, "Fire!"

No!

A ripple of clicks, then the buzz of zipping bees. Thuds batter my numbed ears as bolt after bolt hits the grass around my head. Terror clutches my throat, steals my breath.

"Flanagan." I shuffle to turn.

"I'm fine, Michael." He yanks me to my feet by my collar. "We're shielded."

By who? Quinton? Alyona?

Silhouettes climb down from the roof, surrounding us as Flanagan all but drags me toward the building. Radomir appears beside me, sword raised, eyes fixed on the enemy lines. His platinum-blond hair glints like white gold in the moonlight.

"Incoming!" he roars.

A dark mass of dots descends on us. These are deflected and scattered. I assume, by Alyona and Fentis. The two witches remain on the roof, hands clasped, mouths moving.

Still deaf and disorientated, I flinch when a giant shadow blots out the stars. Alexei descends like a vulture.

"To the woods!" he shouts as he lands.

Flanagan pushes me toward him. "Take Michael now. While we cover."

“That’s not the agreement, Lycan.”

Flanagan growls at him. “We didn’t agree to the grenade either.”

The vampire only shrugs.

I tug myself out of Flanagan’s hold. My brain is finally returning to some semblance of focus.

“We’re all getting out. Let’s go.”

“Charge!” Nenge’s high-pitched order slices through the night. Guardians stampede toward us, swords glinting like deadly fallen stars in the moonlight. Their battle screams roar into the sky as they crowd the Blood Guard. Behind them, orange fire lights the dark as the lab beneath us burns.

“Straight ahead,” Alexei says. His outstretched wings protect our back as we hustle over the grass.

Steel clashes with steel. The Blood Guards spin and volley, dancing with shadowlike grace, and clash with multiple attackers at once. Night flashes day as Flame sparks and sizzles through the air, the vampires attempting to Haze their opponents. Flanagan deftly knocks together the heads of two soldiers who make it through the line, and I slam another in the face with my fist. More fall into our path. Before long, we’re as occupied as the Blood Guards, punching and kicking, only managing to inch our way across the field to get to the woods.

Something feels wrong. My intuition is still screaming at me, trying to warn me of a problem I can’t understand. I can taste doom.

“What are the witches doing?” I shout at Alexei. “Can’t they just put a wall around us or something while we make a run for it?”

“They’re busy.” Alexei grabs the soldier clashing with Radomir and drags him inside our circle. Looking him in the eyes, he says, “Kill Guardians.”

The soldier’s face slackens. His eyes glaze over. Without a word, he turns, raises his sword, and throws himself against his comrades, cutting into them with crazed enthusiasm.

Shit, that’s cold. No wonder the soldiers call Alexei the Black Death.

I kick and thump another stray Guardian, stepping over his body as I face the next. But they’re coming thick and fast now, breaking through the line. I’ve barely got time to recover between clashes.

Nenge’s using sheer volume to overwhelm us. She’s concentrating her resources between here and the woods, knowing damn well that’s where we’re going. And though a good third of her Guardians must still be dealing with the aftermath of Alexei’s bomb, she’s managing to bury our escape.

“It’s time to Call the Flame, Michael,” Alexei says as he grabs another soldier to compel.

“No!” Flanagan punches a Guardian out cold, then turns to him. The big guy’s fighting with a huge amount of restraint. He’s knocking Guardians out with ease, left, right and center, but he’s not killing them. He’s not ripping heads off in this battle. “Michael’s heart stopped, Alexei. This time he doesn’t have the Sisters to bring him back.”

“He’s Anlu’kyr,” the prince scolds. “His body regenerates.”

I ignore their argument and pull my attention inward. Alexei’s right. Calling Flame may be our best chance. If I overdo it, they’ll just have to carry me out. *Flame, come to me. From the nearest soldiers.*

I don’t get the answer I expected. *They’re here, Whisperer.*

Who?

Even as I ask that, another boom blasts through the half realm. Vampire and Guardian alike flinch

and fling up an arm. This time, the ground doesn't shake. A rolling, swirling sea of violet fire whips across the battlefield, swallowing the soldiers in its tide. It flashes over our group and through my mind.

Not Flame. Magic. Its tingle raises the hairs on my head.

And in front of the woods, displayed in the flash of light like harbingers of doom, stand a row of figures in blood-red cloaks.



CHAPTER 41

As the violet fire dissipates, sucking back to its origin the way a tide returns to the ocean, chaos erupts in its wake.

Soldiers and vampires devolve into a flailing madness, swords thrashing recklessly. Fighting themselves, the air, each other. Their faces wild with horror.

They're fighting monsters.

A squirming, seething horde of them. Gray and slimy and fucking ugly. With rotting flesh, dripping yellow spikes for teeth, and spindly, razor-sharp claws. Their rattling shrieks fill the night as they descend on the battlefield as if emerging from the deepest part of hell.

Terror grips me as they overwhelm the circle of vampires. A strangling, crippling fear that hinders my limbs as I strike out. Like a maniac, I punch blubbery flesh, kick hooved feet, and scream. Scrambling for survival within a living nightmare.

"Michael. Michael!" My name comes to me from a vague distance, as if I'm drowning and hearing it through deep water. I can't respond. I have to fight the monsters. They're everywhere. The teeth. The purple eyes. A giant mouth, dripping blood, opens to swallow me, and I hear myself scream again.

Someone shakes me by the shoulders. "It's not real, Michael!"

A hand clasps my nape, and fiery warmth surges along my spine to meet a familiar touch. Sharp eyes break through the shadows. Flanagan's worried face appears. "It's not real. Come back to me."

The surrounding chaos crashes back into focus. Raucous sounds assault my ears—crying, screeching, shouting. Flanagan holds me to him as we're buffeted by soldiers and vampires desperately fighting thin air.

Not monsters.

An illusion. A bloody magic trick.

"Shit." I pant out breaths as that strangely engulfing fear subsides.

The Blood Call strikes. A deep command I feel to the bone, and I'm yanked back to full alertness. "I'm here, my prince," I say without thought, turning to him. Flanagan drops his hand from my neck but

keeps hold of my arm.

The Blood Guards turn too, their eyes wide and blinking as they come around to themselves and find only emptiness where hellish beasts had been.

The prince wears a look of naked fury on his face.

“The Dra’ka Tul are here,” I tell him in case I only saw them because I’m glamour blind.

“I’m aware,” he hisses. He cups my neck to make me meet his eyes. His irises are almost completely golden, and the raw concern in them rocks me. “Do not leave my side, Michael. Not for any reason.”

“Renew the line!” Radomir shouts at the Blood Guard, shaking his head and wiping over his face as if to throw off the last dregs of craziness. They reform their circle around us, battering deranged soldiers away.

Alyona and her colleague join us, diving into the protective circle, both gasping as though recovering from a private battle.

We all look out onto a field of undiluted mayhem. Guardians hurtle into each other as they run screaming this way and that from an invisible foe. Swords flash, bolts are fired, people punch the air, the ground, each other. Others have fallen, curled into the mud in a fetal position, arms covering their heads.

“Shouldn’t the Guardian witches be blocking this?” I ask.

“They were too busy fighting us,” Flanagan answers. A look of desperation shades his face as he watches the soldiers. His fingers are tight where he’s still clasping my arm.

Laasya is out there somewhere. My breath hitches at the thought. Will she be okay?

Quinton? I ask in my mind. *Quinton?*

No answer. Shit.

“We must leave,” Alexei snaps. “Before they attack us directly.”

“He won’t let us leave, Your Highness,” Alyona says in her sultry Russian accent. “Not until he’s achieved his goal.” She turns a pointed look at me, her deep-blue eyes and the sneer lifting her pouty lips visible beneath her hood.

“Who’s *he*?” I ask her.

“Malukel’s Priest,” she spits as if I’m stupid.

“So what’s his goal? It can’t be me. That magic attacked me too.”

“He only ever has one goal,” she croons cryptically.

“Regardless, we push to the woods,” Alexei says. “Lycan?”

Flanagan’s attention lingers on the Guardians. Jaw tight, eyes fierce, he looks like it’s taking everything he has not to run out and aid the men he’s considered comrades for the last fifty years.

I’m about to suggest we try helping them when Alyona speaks up again. “You cannot help your Guardians, Lycan. You would need to kill the witch responsible for the spell. If they let you find them.”

Flanagan growls, a snarling rumble. “We walk.” He waves his hand. “To the woods.”

The Blood Guards throw and kick demented soldiers aside. Alyona and her cohort chant whatever the fuck witches chant. And we cut a hasty retreat across the half realm to the woods. With the Guardians otherwise occupied, we make good progress. The tangled mass of giant trees, even more

menacing beneath a night sky, loom closer and closer from the distance.

It looks like we'll make it.

Then a tingle of power breaks across my skin, almost as if someone just tapped my shoulder. I glance back at the chaos. And I see her. Laasya.

Amid the scattered rubble of the bombed ground, her thin frame held up by the hair like an unwanted doll, my friend hangs from a bony fist. Her eyes are closed, her body droops, and her face is too pale. And the witch purposely presenting her to me wears a blood-red cloak, a cruel smile on her wrinkled face.

I will kill her unless you come to me, Whisperer. The words come clear into my mind—the caricature of a witch's voice.

Laasya.

“Michael!” Flanagan bellows as I push straight through the Blood Guard and past fighting soldiers to get to her.

“Michael! No!” Alexei shouts. The Blood Call strikes. Gritting my teeth against his pull, I fasten the leather cuff tight against my skin until it ceases.

“I have to go to her!” I ram soldiers aside to make space.

A piercing scream bursts through the night—a dog whistle on steroids—so loud, we all shudder to a halt and cover our ears. The moment the noise stops, the whole of the Guardian army swings toward the circle of vampires.

Oh, crap.

“Incoming!” Radomir yells. “Protect the prince!”

They attack en masse. A seething scrum of crazed soldiers with rabid eyes falling over each other to maim and kill.

But they stream around me. Pass me like a boiling river to reach the Blood Guard. The vampires become flickering silhouettes against the night as they use superhuman speed to clear the attack. Flanagan goes into overdrive, knocking and throwing Guardians aside to force his way through to me.

“Michael!” Alexei barks, his pale face desperate as he literally climbs shoulders and heads to get to me. His wings gust free in a tower of Flame. “You're in danger, my love!”

I stumble away and accelerate into the fastest run my legs will allow through the opening space before either of them can stop me. I know I'm in danger. This is a setup. The shadow witches are keeping Flanagan and Alexei occupied while they draw me out. But no fucking way am I leaving Laasya in the hands of that bitch.

I charge between the raging soldiers, soon feeling Flanagan and Alexei hot on my heels.

Flame! Come to me from that witch! I scream at her.

Forgive me, Whisperer.

What does that mean?

The witch cackles in my head. Literally cackles, like a fucking hag from a movie. *The goddess has no rights over me, boy.*

I check the cuff. It's still tight, the sapphire pressed to my skin. How is she...?

And that little trinket you wear is useless against the true god.

Well fuck.

I'm still yards away when other figures flicker into view beside her. Another six shadow witches, blood-red cloaks draping their frames, faces hidden beneath their cowls. Their hands dance in the air, creating invisible sigils. One of them holds a bow, arrow cocked and ready. The arrow's shiny length flashes in the moonlight—a silver bolt.

And they're pointing it straight at me. Is this their goal? To kill me?

Awaken to us, Sabel child. The old woman hisses in my mind. She lets go of Laasya, my friend's frail brown limbs lifeless as she drops to the ground. Her face hits dirt, sunken and bloodless. She's already dead.

No.

I'm still running toward her, toward the arrow, when Flanagan calls my name from behind me. My eyes rise back to the glinting silver tip. And the realization comes too late.

This trap wasn't for me.

In what feels like super slow motion, I skid through the mud to a halt just as the arrow snaps from the bow—a streak of silver death coming toward me through the night. I turn, screaming Flanagan's name as he crashes into me. Covering his body with my own, I clench my eyes shut for the coming pain.

But he's faster than me, his reflexes beyond the speed of perception, and grasping me tight, he turns us.

I feel the impact. The dull thud, the shudder. The expelled breath as the bolt penetrates my man's body. "Michael." The word sighs past my ear.

"No!"

His arms slacken, losing the strength to hold on. I turn into him and grasp him as he slips to his knees. His silver eyes fix on my face. There's blood on his lips.

"No, no. Please." I drop with him, clutching him as if my touch alone can make this go away. Desperate panic tangles my ability to think straight. I don't know what to do. "Flanagan."

A giant black shadow lands behind him, wings aloft. "Gabriel," Alexei says as he snaps the silver bolt like a twig. He pushes the remaining shaft straight into Flanagan's body. Flanagan's roar of pain fills the night as blooded metal comes at me from the center of his chest.

"What are you doing?"

"Getting the arrow out! Pull the shaft!"

I grip the emerging arrow, fingers slipping on blood, and slide it from his body. It comes away easily, but the head of the arrow has eroded, crumbled. Alexei lets out an expletive when he sees it. I stare at it with fury. The bastards have done that on purpose. Made sure silver stays in his body to poison him.

"I love you," Flanagan whispers. His eyes glaze, his legs giving out.

"No, no, no. Gabriel, please." I catch him as he slides to the ground, laying him on his back.

It's seeing his eyes close that trips the switch. His diamond strength suddenly shut away. Blinding rage engulfs me. And in answer, a rushing storm of darkness rises from within, swallowing body and mind. A yawning chasm opens somewhere inside, flooding my spine and limbs with a new, icy heat.

My body ignites. Liquid flames shoot into the sky, then settle and dance across my skin. Not silver flames. These are black.

Black as ink. Black as night. Black as death.

My gaze lands on the seven witches. They're waiting. Watching. Blood-red sentinels against the dark sky.

"No!" Alexei shouts at me as I rise and stride toward them. "This is what they want!"

"Get that silver out of his body," I order in a deep, echoing voice I don't recognize.

The witches try to run. Try to blink away, using their clever spells. They have no idea who I am.

I narrow my sights on the one with the bow. Walk the dark Flame as a blur in the night, stalking his attempts to flee. I follow his bright trail of magic to the other side of the field. The confusion on his face as he realizes I'm still behind him is nectar on my tongue.

"I sacrifice for the Ki'athul!" he cries as I close in with a hissing snarl.

I rip the bow from his fingers, smash it against his face. Then I bury my fist inside his chest, in through his skin, through bone and tissue, until I feel his beating heart inside my clenched hand. I watch his face as I squeeze. Watch his features age and crumble as my flame steals his life force to fuel itself. As the light leaves his eyes, I wrench his organ free and show it to him as he dies.

The body slumps to the ground, wrinkled and ruined, a gaping hole in the chest. Tossing his dead heart aside, I search for the next kill.

The Guardian soldiers are coming round, the spell that tortured them broken. They blink, eyes wide as they return to themselves. They scramble away, fleeing with renewed panic when they see me—a dark torch striding past them.

They're just an enemy in my way. I send out my Flame and call their life force to me, claiming their minds as my own. The field soon fills with black fire, streaming from my hands to lick over living and dead alike. I'll claim them and use them. They can help me destroy.

The old witch stands at the far side, where Flanagan fell, only yards from the woods we were so desperate to reach. She's waiting for me. Goading me. A cruel smile on her wrinkled mouth. Though her cowl is pushed back, I can't see her eyes; they're covered by a shadow.

Your pretty prince is next, she says. His death will be the most painful.

Fresh rage erupts. I send my Flame out farther, let it surge from the chasm within, and gust out over the battlefield as I tear toward her. I call the soldiers, alive or dead, to rise, to join me.

Yesss, she says with an eager hiss. Release your strength. Come to his service. You are so much more.

"Michael. You're killing them." A female voice. "You have to stop."

A wind buffets me, a force against my chest to hold me back. I try batting it aside, but it's strong. I suck in a deeper flow of life force from the bodies around me and send out more flame. I have to reach that witch in red. I have to kill her. She took my friend. She's the reason Flanagan's dying. If everyone on this field has to die too, so be it.

"Michael. Please," the voice shouts.

"I've got him." Hands grab my shoulders. A beautiful face made of pale starlight fills my vision, eyes like wet onyx stone ringed with gold. I'm mesmerized. "I won't ever let this happen, Michael. They won't take you from me as well." The cuff on my wrist tugs away, and he covers my heart with his hand. Warmth floods me, flowing down to my feet and fingers. Then it clenches like a fist, taking my breath and my strength. "As your prince, I command you. Desist."

My mind yanks back from a dark tunnel. The black flames fizzle out. The icy cold that claimed my insides melts away. A familiar, comforting sizzle returns in its place. I blink. Alexei is holding my face in his hands, his usual composure somewhat frayed at the edges.

“I’m here, my prince.” I clutch his wrists. I glance over his shoulder at the mound where that witch waited, but there’s only empty grass.

“My love.” Alexei sighs his relief. “Forgive me. They did everything to keep me from you.” He strokes my hair. “Gabriel lives. The Shakti witch is with him.”

Shakti witch? Laasya? But she’s...

I look to the side, to where Flanagan lies on his back in the dirt. My heart twists with fear and grief as I see his handsome face, now ashen and waxy, his braids fallen open and undone. His eyelids flicker, though. He’s alive.

And sitting beside him, legs folded beneath her, delicate hands resting on his chest, is my friend.



CHAPTER

42

“*I* saw Laasya die.” The shock of seeing her lifeless corpse is still a devastating presence in my mind.

“A deception,” Alexei explains. “Illusion is their favored trick. You cannot trust anything you see except their red cloaks. They wear those with pride.”

I stumble to Flanagan and drop beside Laasya. I’m aware of movement in the surrounding field. Groans and shouts as the Guardians pull themselves back together. But my attention is centered on only two people.

I awkwardly take Flanagan’s hand, his chafing calluses a familiar comfort. “I’m here, Gabriel.” His skin burns in my palm, and his fingers twitch with latent pain. Drying blood covers his chest, the edges of his closing wound still wet. Toxic black lines have webbed his neck and splintered across his face.

I blink, not able to connect with the immensity of him lying before me, possibly dying. Again. Tendrils of the icy cold that took me over linger. Still stealing my warmth, my emotion.

His eyes flutter as though he’s trying to open them, but he sighs out a breath, and they fall closed again.

“I’m keeping him under,” Laasya says. “I’ve calmed the pain. The wound’s healing. And I’ve persuaded his body not to change for now. But I don’t know how long that will last. He really needs the Sisters. They’re his only chance.”

I look at her kind face. The one I saw sunken and pallid. Her brown eyes are red from crying, the plastic of her glasses cracked on one side.

“I saw you die,” I say with an almost vacant detachment in my voice.

“Oh, Michael.” She clutches my hand. Her fingers tingle against my skin. “I’m so sorry. That was so cruel of them. I was fine. Councilor Quinton protected me. I put all my efforts into helping the Headquarters’ coven.” She shakes her head. “The spell hit them hard. They were so busy fighting Alyona that they didn’t see it coming.” She searches my face, a hint of unease in her eyes. “Are you okay? Do you remember anything from... you know, when you...”

“Flipped again. I remember. Something... something took me over. After seeing you... After Flanagan...”

She squeezes my hand to stop my stammering attempt to explain, and I shudder at the images I can't quite face. The violent, laser-focused rage I experienced still broils inside me. Ready to surge upward. Ready to open the black hole again if I call.

“Where's Quinton now?” I change the subject. The man said he'd help me escape the Guardians, then promptly disappeared.

“I'm not sure. We only spoke mind to mind. He was helping the general and commanders, I think. He's probably been asked to Gate out the injured.”

Alexei sinks into a crouch on the other side of Flanagan, his wings folded, their clawed height like silent guards above each shoulder. His Blood Guard stand behind him, watchful and ready, swords still drawn. “We must leave, my love. The enemy yet surrounds us, and they're recovering.”

“Commander Flanagan can't go with you,” Laasya tells him, gulping as she meets the prince's black gaze. She raises her chin in defiance. “He needs the Sisters. They're the only ones with the expertise to help him.”

Alexei tilts his head. “I agree, Miss Shakti. And the Sisters of Mercy are the only ones I would trust him with. Can you guarantee he reaches their care?”

Laasya blinks with shock at his use of her name. Or his unexpected trust, maybe. “Well, I—”

“Where Flanagan goes, I go,” I cut in with flat certainty. “I'm not leaving him with the Guardians.”

“You cannot go with him, Michael,” Alexei says, keeping his tone soft.

“I'm going with him.”

“Leave me here,” a rumbling baritone says from the ground. Laasya and I jolt. “More troops will come.” His eyes flicker open, revealing a mercury gray beneath as he looks at me. My heart stutters. He's still handsome, even with ashen skin and exhausted eyes.

“Gabriel?” Emotions finally punch through the blanketing numbness. The pleasure from hearing his voice is quickly swallowed by dread and heartache. “I'm not leaving you.” The words come out strangled. “No way.”

Laasya squeezes my forearm. “How do you feel, Commander?” She uses his title as if she can't help herself.

“I feel the silver's burn,” he whispers. “Near the heart.”

Alexei snarls.

“Oh, dear.” Laasya moves both her hands to Flanagan's chest.

Fear climbs up my throat. “What does that mean?”

She hesitates to speak, so Alexei says it for her. “If the silver touches his heart, he won't just change, he'll die.”

I clench my fists against the swell of emotion, the wild rage threatening to release that icy madness again. I'm going to gut every single member of that cult. I'm going to burn their priest, their temple, and their god.

“I can make sure the Sisters see to him,” Laasya answers Alexei's earlier question. “I'll remind the Council they can't let a goddess-blessed die in their care. They may not respect Velnushka, but they fear the Flame Temple's revenge.”

Alexei's lips twitch with a smile. He looks at Laasya like a cat might view a new toy. "Then I'm glad he's in your capable hands," he says, as charming as ever. "We're leaving, Michael."

I'm about to refuse again—Flanagan may have asked me to go, but I just don't think I can physically do it—when General Nenge's military yell cuts across the half realm. I look out for the first time, my tired gaze taking in a field of carnage, a straggling mess of broken soldiers strewn across churned ground. Some lie still amid rubble, some carry comrades, while some limp among the fallen. They all have pale faces, stunned with weariness. But behind the recovering companies, a line of fresh uniforms gather, joined by those still able to wield a weapon. New troops. More stream in through the shimmering Crossover from the grounds of Belanger's mansion. It looks like the whole of the Guardian army has come to take us down.

Their witches are there, forming a standing circle to the side.

And at the front is Nenge, her uniform scuffed and ripped, her forehead shiny with blood, but her posture as upright and robust as ever. She's pulling fatigued soldiers from their shock with her insistent tones, shaping her troops into formation, readying the new companies. She's preparing to attack.

The rage churns upward, nudging for its freedom, ignited by the fear this will get in the way of help reaching Flanagan in time. Letting go of his hand, I uncurl to a stand, my arms lighting silver as I rise. "If they attack, I'll kill them all," I say with a cold, robotic monotone.

"Michael," Flanagan hisses out. "Please."

Radomir slips in beside his prince, the Blood Guard flowing around us to take the front. "We must move to the woods, Your Highness." Apart from messy hair and ripped tunics, the vampires don't look that worse for wear, considering what they've just been through. Alyona and Fentis stand with them, Alyona's determined posture suggesting she's happy to take on the whole army herself.

Alexei stands, his wings rasping as he shakes them out. "I do not give permission for this fight, youngling. Our battle is over for now. It's time to go home."

"Fly Flanagan to safety," I say through gritted teeth, ignoring his words. My glare remains fixed to the forming lines of brown leather. "I'll keep them back with the Blood Guard."

"I cannot, my love. His condition is too unstable. I *will* force my will on you if you do not comply."

Laasya comes up beside me, not afraid of the fire licking over my arms and shoulders. The Flame seems to shift from her touch. Her gentle fingers clasping mine calms some of the growing wrath. "You must go, Michael. Another battle will only delay help as well as put the commander in danger from more silver. They won't hurt him. They can't. And they will fear his death. So the moment you leave, the Sisters will be called. Please."

Her words cause an odd reaction. A pressure threatens to burst my chest. My throat constricts. My eyes flood with sudden tears. The growing anger and hatred splutter out with my Flame, and a crushing exhaustion takes their place. I cover my eyes with the heels of my hands.

Flanagan's better off without me. Again. I bring him nothing but pain.

Exhausted and overwhelmed, I turn away from the oncoming tide of Guardians and sink beside my man and all but collapse onto him. I cup his face, resting my forehead against his. His skin burns with a dry fever. Nothing else matters. Not the Guardians, not the vampires, not my shifty father, not even imminent death. Only this man matters. This blond Finnish grumpy giant I've come to call home. "I

can't leave you. I can't do it."

"Leave for me," he says barely audible, stroking my hair. "I need you safe."

"I'm sorry. I'm so fucking sorry." I draw back to look at his face, but I can barely see his features through my tears. Guilt crowds the flooding anguish. "This is all my fault."

He pulls me to him again, weakness in the grip on my nape. His words are slow and raspy. "None of this is your fault. I regret not a single moment. Not a moment." He presses my face to his. "You brought me love again, Michael. My heart breathes because of you."

That pressure in my chest becomes painful, threatening to rupture. I kiss his face. "I love you, Gabriel. I love you so fucking much. More than I can explain. I should have told you. Please don't leave me." I feel pathetic in my weeping state, but I've never felt this way before. This soul-wrenching connection with someone. This overwhelming sorrow at even the thought of a world without them.

"I know," he whispers, pressing my face to his. "I've always known. My beautiful boy."

"I'll come for you." I'm finding it hard to speak through my tight throat. "I promise. Just get better. Please, get better."

With tear-wet lips, I kiss his mouth, and he holds me there against his warmth.

Bellowing war cries crash over us like sudden thunder. The Guardians begin their approach. No. I need more time.

"Vampire!" Flanagan demands of Alexei, his deep rumble finding strength.

"I have him, Lycan." A strong arm clenches my waist and tugs me away, lifting me from Flanagan. "No!" My heart wrenches as if yanked from my chest. I struggle against the pull, even though I know it's inevitable.

Alexei speaks gently against my ear. "It's time to go." Then he says something in the language of the Anlu'kyr, and whatever it was, Flanagan looks at him anew, his brow creased with surprise. Or confusion.

"Until we meet again," Alexei finishes. He barks out a string of orders at his Blood Guard and the witches.

Laasya rushes forward and plants a tearful kiss on my cheek. Her eyes are swollen from crying. "I'll make sure he's okay. I promise. I love you." She hugs me, brief and fierce, then steps away.

"I love you too," I answer, my gaze returning to Flanagan. Alexei's enormous wings dig at the air, and my soul seems to tear from its anchor as we lift from the dirt. "Gabriel!"

"It's okay, Michael." Flanagan's hand moves across the grass as if to reach me.

"I'll come for you," I tell him. "I'll find you."

His eyes never leave mine as Alexei's powerful gusts lift us skyward, cold air buffeting my face. A dark cloud of arrows rises from the Guardian lines, swarming toward us like angry wasps. They don't reach us. With a sweep of their arms, Alyona and Fentis send them sideways, clattering to the mud in harmless sprays.

Once we're clear, the world shrinking beneath us, too high for their arrows, the Blood Guards ghost away from the oncoming charge, disappearing into the Border Woods with the two witches.

Laasya stays with Flanagan, a lone figure beside her charge, as Nenge and her soldiers swirl around her.

The sight throws me into a blind panic. I struggle in Alexei's arms. "Take me back. We need to go back. They'll hurt him."

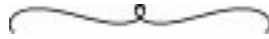
Alexei clasps me closer, calming my struggle with a gentler version of the Blood Call, like soothing music through my nerves.

Against my will, my body softens in his hold. I give up my fight, but tears stream down my face. I can't stop them. "I've left him."

Alexei presses his face to my hair. "We have not abandoned him. Gabriel will be guarded closely. I will keep him safe until he returns to you. I promise you this."

"I need him," I say, not sure where the words are spilling from.

"I know, my love. I know you do. He's your soulmate."



Come and Meet Me

*H*i, Fellow Readers. Really hope you enjoyed Book 2 of the Flame Born series. I was so excited to share it with you. Please consider giving the book a review. Reviews help an author so much. Thank you.

If you don't want to miss word on the next book in series, you can come join my reader group on Facebook. A friendly space in which to discuss anything from the world of the Flame born, ask questions, or just hang out. It's the first place I post teasers and cover reveals, so don't miss out.

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Thank you so much for reading.

Peace and hugs.

Kat

