NOSEDIVE
For those who believe in fairy tales, those who believe in real life, and for those who believe, in really special circumstances, the two can be the same thing.
If I were being honest with myself, I’d always been preparing for this moment. I’d always been running, as far back as I could remember. Even as an adult, I could never quite shake my constant need to move. I guess the question was now -- when would I stop?

I shouldered my backpack up higher, tightening the straps so they wouldn’t slip. I stopped at the peak of the next hill, tilting my face to the sunshine and taking in a deep breath. For the first time in a very long time, I felt free. The early morning dew still nestled in the tall blades of grass. Pink and orange skies bled over the horizon, a painting I could never replicate. The fresh breeze of dawn cut through the flannel of my shirt, but I knew in another hour or two I’d be sweating with exertion and peeling off as many layers as decency would allow.

The trailhead was deserted at this hour, most people in the area choosing to spend their vacation sleeping in before moseying along the high street to find the best brunch in the small village. But I wasn’t on vacation. I was...I wasn’t sure what I was anymore. I had no plan, no timetable to align my watch with. There was just me, my backpack, and the dirt path ahead of me.

I didn’t know what I was looking for. Something that felt right. I’d know when I saw it. But at that moment, I was content to wander. To run, as far as my legs would take me from the disaster I had left behind. On the trail that would take me from Point A to Point Z, it felt like I was the only person left on Earth, which truly wasn’t the worst feeling in the world. Silence had settled in like a long-lost friend, my wayward thoughts welcome companions on my journey to nowhere. I smiled, comfortable in my aloneness.

A shiver ran down my spine, the hairs on the back of my neck standing at attention. Years of training had honed razor sharp instincts, especially when I was alone. Something wasn’t right. I turned around, nostrils flaring, but I saw nothing. Just the small town down the hill from where I had begun this leg of my trek, and the sharp, rocky edges of the hill face up ahead. But my intuition hadn’t led me astray this far in life, and I wasn’t about to start to doubt it now.

Magic flared in the tips of my fingers, ready to defend myself at any cost. I wasn’t going back there. Ever. The price of my escape had been heavy. Blood stained both my
hands and my soul. I had suffered for my freedom, and I wasn’t afraid to make sacrifices to keep it. I took another look around the meadow, seeing nothing. That didn’t mean there was nothing – or nobody. I stood still, letting the energy of the earth flow through me, curling the tips of my toes in a familiar gesture. I closed my eyes, inhaling with the rhythm of the breeze. One beat. Two.

There.
I whirled around, ready to strike. But staring across from me was nothing more than the gentle soul of a doe, feeding on the new grass. “Dammit, Charlie, you’re starting to go soft in the head,” I muttered to myself, letting the magic flood back into the ground.

“Sorry, what was that?” The deep, husky timbre of a man’s voice rang out behind me, and I whipped back around. Startled by the tall, broad-shouldered man who stood in front of me, I stepped backwards. My shoe slipped on a rock, my ankle giving way, and before I had a moment to think I was falling down the steep rocky slope of the hill.

I was certain I hit every stone on the way down, the knees of my utilitarian cargo pants slicing open along with the elbows of my flannel. I grimaced as my shoulder landed hard on a large boulder, and I rolled less than gracefully to the bottom of the hill.

I groaned, not wanting to open my eyes and see the damage. I didn’t have a schedule, true, but I wanted to put as much distance between myself and there as possible. At least I had rolled far enough away that I wouldn’t have to try and hold a conversation with tall, dark, and handsome up on the trail.

“Are you okay, lass?”

I opened my eyes a sliver. Lo and behold, there stood the giant of a man who had snuck up behind me on the trail. Tall, with thickly muscled shoulders. A handsome face framed by chocolate curls, and bright green eyes. Eyes I felt like I had seen before, maybe in a dream. Or more likely, just in town prior to me starting my hike. Regardless, he was too good-looking to be trustworthy. My gaze narrowed. “I’m fine. How did you even get down here?”

The sides of the hills were steep, and truthfully the only way you were getting down them is if, like me, you fell.

He shrugged. “I walked. Seemed less painful than your way.”

Ha. Ha. Ha. My new friend was a jokester. And no ordinary human, judging from how fast he managed to descend. I was dealing with a supernatural here. He was handsome enough to be a siren, but we were too far away from the coast. Definitely not a vamp -- they wouldn’t be caught dead exercising. I sniffed the air discreetly. Shifter. Perfect. The last person I wanted to run into. Shifters had been taking advantage of our powers since the dawn of time. I needed to lose him, and fast.

I sat up, again grimacing as my bruised ribs tightened painfully. “Well, I’m fine, so please don’t let me hold you back.”

“Let me at least help you up, seeing as I was the one who scared you over a cliff.” A large hand waved in front of my face, and I shrank away from the touch. “I’m Cam, by the
way. Cameron MacIvers.”

Of course he had to be the helpful sort. I couldn’t figure out what kind of shifter he was, but I really didn’t need to know. Shifter was bad enough. “It wasn’t a cliff. And I’m good. Thanks for the offer.”

Cam didn’t look like he believed me. One dark eyebrow nearly met his hairline, and he crossed arms as thick as my leg across his hiking sweater.

“Seriously. Look.” I jumped to my feet, trying not to wince as my ankle wobbled underneath me. I just needed a moment to use my magic to heal myself, but I couldn’t do that while Helpful McHottie was watching me. One breath of magic, and it would all be over. They had spies in the area. I had no idea if this shifter was one of the ones out looking for me, or just an innocent passerby, but I couldn’t take any risks. I stepped around the small valley, hoping for Cam to be distracted for a moment so I could heal myself and not be hobbling around like an idiot. My stupid ankle, however, did not want to cooperate, and I lost my balance, cursing as I tumbled once again. Cam caught me before I faceplanted, righting me with one strong arm. I startled at the casual touch, and tried to ignore the electricity pulsing between us.

I didn’t like to be touched, and he made me nervous. That was all. Nothing more. Definitely nothing to do with his piercing green eyes staring into my soul. That was nonsense, and I had bigger problems to worry about.

Cam gave me a stern look. “Lass, you’re obviously in no shape to be hiking today. Let me just --”

I cut him off with a wave of my hands. “My friends are on their way. So you best be on yours.”

He creased his brows in confusion, looking around the silent hill. Not another soul in sight “Look, I know I’m a strange man, and you’re alone, but I promise I mean you no harm. I understand why --”

“You don’t understand anything!” I snapped, my patience worn thin with the nice guy routine. “And I’m fine. So you can leave me alone now.” With that, I turned on my heel, trying to maintain my dignity the best I could as I stormed away with my weak ankle. I heard Cam sigh and turn to walk away. Good riddance. I just needed to get back to the trailhead, and around the corner so I could zap my ankle back to normal. Then it was on to freedom once more. Despite my bravado, I tripped on the stones, falling to my knees again. My pants were completely ripped to shreds at this point, and my ankle was so messed up I knew it would take a lot more than a quick zap of magic. I turned my face to the sky. “Fuck’s sake. One fucking day, that’s all I’m fucking asking for. Does my life really need to be such a goddamn clusterfuck?”

“Has anyone ever told you that you could make a sailor blush?” Fucking hell. Helpful McHottie was back.

“Has anyone ever told you when someone tells you to leave them alone, they usually mean go the fuck away?” I sat down on my ass, opening my backpack to search for something to act as a bandage until I could find somewhere safe to use my magic. I examined Cam from beneath my lashes. He stood a safe distance away, concern written all over his chiseled face. He definitely didn’t look like the shifters back home. He looked
like he had just come from a day of surfing, his wavy locks brushed off of his forehead, and his golden skin screaming that he lived outdoors. He was cute, I’d give him that. But he’d be sorry if he thought I didn’t bite.

Cam rolled his lip between his teeth. “My mam would have my arse if she ever found out I left an injured woman out on the trail.”

I rolled my eyes, tugging out a travel towel. “Ah, yes, the old ‘mother’ excuse. Perfect. Very believable. I’ll give you an eight out of ten, because the accent really sells it.” Why was he still here? I ripped the towel between my teeth, tearing it into some semblance of a tensor bandage I could use temporarily. I slipped my foot out of my shoe, wincing as I saw my swollen ankle. Fuck. This was worse than I thought and would probably zap me of a day’s worth of magic.

My magic was limited since I left the coven, and would continue to be until I either returned, which would not be happening, or created my own coven, which would also not be happening for two reasons. One, it would signal my location to the others, and two, I wasn’t ready to declare war just yet. Maybe one day. I sighed and started to wrap my bandage. But my fingers were clumsy, unnerved by Cam’s close inspection, and the material kept slipping.

“Let me help,” Cam offered, stepping closer.

“I really don’t need your help, big guy. Run along now, home to your mam.” I shooed him off before turning back to my bandaging attempts. It didn’t need to be pretty. It just needed to get me back into town.

Calloused hands slipped over my own, and I recoiled with the sudden touch. Cam looked at me with confusion and apology, retreating with his hands held out. “I’m pretty much an expert in wrapping bandages. Award-winning, even. I can help, if you’ll let me.” It was clear he wasn’t leaving until he helped me, and I obviously was clueless when it came to tying a bandage. Downside of magic was that I never had a need for bandages or crutches. I glared at him, offering him the scrap of fabric. “Fine. But you tie it and you leave me alone.”

Cam chuckled softly, and he bent to wrap the torn fabric around my ankle, which looked more purple and grotesque as the minutes wore on. “Lone wolf, eh? I get it.”

I hedged. He didn’t need to know anything more about me than necessary. “In a sense. Are you going to make small talk, or are you going to help me wrap my ankle?” He paused with the wrap in his hand. “Can’t I do both?”

Was he flirting with me? Best to cut that off right at the source. “No.” His gaze met mine, his piercing eyes staring at me as if they could see something I couldn’t. He shook his head and turned his attention back to my ankle. “What’s your name, lass?”

I pressed my lips together. No names. It was safer that way.

Cam hummed quietly. “I won’t hurt you. You can trust me with your name.”

I looked away, pretending like the landscape was the most interesting thing I’d ever seen. Something inside of me was screaming to trust him, but I told that little voice to fuck off. I didn’t need help. I needed to be left alone.

He sighed, stood, and brushed off the knees of his pants. “All done. Let me help you
“I’ve got it.” I pressed my weight into the boulder behind me, but Cam grabbed my other arm, stabilizing me as I got to my feet. I snatched my arm away as soon as I could, the strange electricity racing through my veins again. “Um. Thanks. Enjoy your hike.” I turned, wobbling on my bad ankle as I made my way back into the small village.

A warm hand wrapped around my elbow, and I forced myself not to react. “I’m not going to leave you out here for the wolves to eat you alive. Do you have a place to stay? A sprain like this is going to keep you off your feet for a few days at least. You’ll need to ice it, and keep it elevated...” Cam continued to ramble on, unaware of the steely glare I was flashing his way.

“Cam.” He looked at me, waiting for me to continue. “I can find my way back just fine on my own.” I didn’t need him knowing where I was staying. Anonymity was my key to survival, and this shifter was fucking it all up.

He looked at me with disbelief. “And I’m the queen of England. Give it up, lass. I’m seeing you back to wherever you’re planning on staying. Unless you’d rather roll your way back to town. That ankle isn’t able to support any weight.”

He was right. I knew he was right. “Fine,” I huffed. “You help me get back to the inn. And then you leave.”

“Sure thing, lass.” Cam gave me a wink and a blinding smile, directing me around the largest of stones. I wasn’t happy to have a companion, and I didn’t trust this asshole further than I could throw him -- even if his smile was the most beautiful thing I had seen in ages. But I had to admit, I would’ve never made it back to town without him, and who the hell knows who would’ve found me before I had found the opportunity to heal myself? Fuck.

“Can we stop with the lass shit? I’m not your lassie,” I groaned.

“As soon as you tell me your name, I’d be happy to,” he retorted. Ah. There it was. Cam could play after all. Well that made things interesting.

The dew evaporated off the grass as the pink sky slowly shifting to the palest blue. It was going to be a beautiful day, not a cloud in sight. Maybe... maybe Helpful McHottie was actually just that. Helpful. Maybe I could trust him.

Probably not. But I could give him one thing.

“Charlie,” I murmured under my breath, hoping he wouldn’t hear me, and I could say I tried and failed.

He froze, his bulk tipping me off balance as we suddenly stopped. “What was that?”

“Charlie,” I announced, louder this time. You know what? Fuck them. Fuck everyone who had tried to take my name away from me, my power. My soul. One day they’d regret it. “My name is Charlie.”
Charlie. This spitfire of a lass had a name after all. Charlie. It suited her. To the point. Elegant, and a little bit rough around the edges. Was it short for something? Charlotte maybe. She didn’t seem like a Charlotte, though.

I hadn’t meant to scare the poor girl. I had watched her starting the trail alone, her hair as black as night, wrapped in a tight braid. Her curves were lush and full, even under the shapeless hiking clothes she wore.

From deep inside my chest my dragon had rumbled. “Mate,” it growled.

Impossible, I thought, in an attempt to silence it. But it clawed and strained as I got closer. I couldn’t deny that it wanted her -- that we wanted her. But a mate? No. Literally impossible. One shot was all dragons got. So mine needed to sit down and behave.

Because of all of this mate nonsense, our meeting hadn’t been the calm introduction I had planned on. Instead, I frightened her off and watched her tumble down a hill. I wasn’t supposed to shift outside of the territory, and I was still on probation from the incident. But I had to make a call. I didn’t shift entirely, just my wings. Enough to get me down the hill before she hit the bottom. Maybe I rustled up a gust of wind or two to keep her out of the way of the rocks that could’ve done some real damage.

Thankfully the lass, Charlie, hadn’t seen anything. Probably too preoccupied with her nasty sprained ankle, which did not look healthy. I smelled a supernatural in the area though, and she was the only person in sight. She definitely wasn’t a shifter. Instinct would’ve taken over on a fall like that. I had a suspicion my dragon was limiting my senses, desperate as he was to get to her. It wasn’t often I couldn’t pinpoint an exact Supe species. Whatever she was, she was playing it close to the chest. I wouldn’t pry. We all had our secrets. The only difference between myself and little miss stubborn limping next to me was that I had learned to freely give up some information. If you made it look like you had nothing to hide, people usually believed the act.

But I didn’t miss the way she had pulled away from me when I tried to help her up, or when I attempted to wrap her ankle. She didn’t like to be touched, although she let me touch her as she rested her body weight into my side as we hobbled back to the village. Thank fuck for that, because guilt would’ve eaten me alive if I had just left her there. I’d wanted to, the way she’d snapped at me, the glares she’d thought I hadn’t noticed.
Charlie was not the subtle kind. Not that she’d ever blend in. There was no getting around it -- she was stunning. I honestly wasn’t sure how she had managed to fly under the radar so long. Her accent was American, and usually word travelled fast in the supernatural communities around here when newcomers arrived. Especially if they were beautiful.

Although, I also hadn’t been up to date on the latest shifter gossip. Kind of like Charlie, I preferred to run solo. In the beginning it wasn’t my choice. Now... not so much. I was keeping my distance from home, only returning when necessary. I wasn’t sure what the long-term plan was. But, Charlie was a damn good distraction. I snuck a glance at her, her brow creased in pain, a light sheen of sweat coating her forehead. Goddammit. She needed to rest, and I had been too caught up in my own thoughts to notice. Why hadn’t she mentioned anything?

“Hey.” I nudged her, but she didn’t look at me. “Let’s sit for a minute.”

“I’m good,” she replied, breathing heavily, and putting more weight on my arm than she realized.

“Well, I need a break, so I’m going to sit. And seeing as you can’t walk five feet without killing yourself, you’re coming with me.” I directed us over to one of the larger boulders, Charlie shooting me daggers the entire time. I couldn’t figure out if she wanted to punch me, or to run away, but she’d realize soon enough that neither were reasonable options. I sat down on the flat top of the rock, patting the space next to me. Charlie continued to glare at me with the bluest eyes I had ever seen, like ice was attempting to pierce my heart. Unfortunately for her, I ran hot. It’d take a lot more than a few cold looks to scare me away from what I wanted. And what I wanted was Charlie. She shifted her weight awkwardly. It was making me uncomfortable, and again, I patted the space next to me. “I promise I don’t bite.”

Unless you ask me to.

“I’d rather keep going.” Charlie’s gaze shifted over her shoulder, darting from side to side.

I sat up straight. “Lass, did someone bother you in town?” Something primal inside of me was aching to protect this icy beauty, even though I knew she could probably handle herself tenfold. But if someone had laid hands on her without her permission -- if that was why she was so skittish towards touch – I needed to know who, let’s just say it won’t end well for them. There was a reason I was on probation, and it wasn’t for having the best control of my temper.

She narrowed her eyes at me, as if she were offended I had even asked. “No.”

I paused for a minute. “Did you bother someone in town?” Her mouth dropped open, full lips framing a perfect set of teeth. I wondered if I would ever be able to make her smile. I held my hands up in surrender. “I had to ask!”

“No, you really didn’t.” Charlie muttered something under her breath, low enough I couldn’t catch it before it was lost to the wind.

“What did you say?” God, couldn’t she just accept I was trying to do something nice? Charlie met my gaze with a challenge. “It was nothing. Can we go now?”

She was still breathing heavily, perspiring slightly harder than moments before. She needed to rest, whether she liked it or not. “In a minute. Come sit with me.”
Charlie pulled her lip up in a sneer of disgust. "Nice. Great hit for my self esteem. She wasn’t going to make this easy. "Look. Sit down for two minutes. I promise I’ll keep my hands to myself. But those two minutes don’t start until the second your fine arse sits down on this rock." Fuck. The part about her arse had just slipped out. "Your arse isn’t fine. I mean, it is, but I didn’t mean to tell you. Fuck." I was making a fool out of myself. Charlie stood there, unmoving. "Just sit down, please. Then I’ll take you wherever you’re staying."

She was quiet for a minute, tugging on her thick braid. Then she turned and sat down next to me, making sure there were a solid six inches between us. "Are you always this awkward around girls, or does this act actually work for the lasses around here?"

Another attack on the ego. Perfect. This girl was something else. "I wouldn’t know. I’m not from around here."

I watched out of the corner of my eye as Charlie processed this news. "You’re not?"

"Nope. Just passing through." An open book. Give them a taste, and they won’t ask for more. Sure enough, Charlie nodded, turning away from me. She bobbed her good ankle up and down, tapping her fingers against her thigh. She didn’t like staying still. Another small puzzle piece to add to the mystery that was Charlie. I hopped to my feet. "All right, your two minutes are up. Where to?"

She pressed her lips together. Jesus. Getting information out of this girl was like drawing blood from a stone. "Hillside Guest House."

I grinned at her, offering her my arm once more. "Fancy that, lass. I’m staying there, too." I wasn’t sure if that was a bad thing or a good thing. I needed to avoid connections, although I couldn’t deny my attraction to this woman. One night couldn’t hurt, could it?

Charlie groaned, reluctantly taking my arm. But I counted it as a win, her touching me willingly, without too much convincing. "You’ve got to be fucking kidding me."

"Would I lie to you?" I smirked at the dark-haired beauty. She just glared back. "Are you serious right now?"

I manipulated my face into a grave mask. "Dead serious." I couldn’t hold the expression for too long without bursting into laughter at Charlie’s look of utter disdain. I bumped her lightly with my shoulder. "Admit it, lass. I’m growing on you."

She narrowed her eyes. "In your dreams."

In all honesty, Charlie would probably haunt my dreams, her midnight black hair draping over her face as she leant over me, her icy blue eyes darkening ever so slightly with desire. Yeah. That would be a good dream. I shook myself out of my stupor. "Anyways. Seeing as you’re lonely, and I’m --"

Charlie cut me off with a cough. "What makes you think I’m lonely?"

"Would you be hiking out here by yourself if you weren’t? In my experience, people only hike on their own for two reasons. They’re running away, or they’ve got a broken heart."

"Which is it for you?"

Damn it, Cam. I needed to remember the rules. Open book, but not too open. And this was definitely verging into the "too open" territory. My family didn’t have the best reputation around here. Probably why they preferred to keep to the shadows, pulling so
far into themselves they practically disappeared. Focus. “A little of both, I suppose.” I shrugged my shoulders, trying to act more casual than I felt. “What about you?”

She was quiet for a moment, and I prepared to fill in the space her silence left around me. It made me uncomfortable in a way I couldn’t put my finger on. I wanted to see Charlie smile, laugh, make a joke. The coldness she exuded just didn’t seem to fit, like a shirt a size too small. “I guess a little of both, too.”

Huh. How about that? “So lass, seeing as we’re both staying at the lovely Hillside Guest House, what would you say to sharing a pint with me? Probably the best medicine for you.” Something in my chest twisted awkwardly, and I realized I was nervous for her to respond. What if she said no? Would I honestly let her walk away, or in her case, stumble away?

Charlie looked me over, judgement in her steely blue gaze as a gust of wind nearly knocked me off my feet. I sensed something else in the air. Something almost human in the way it wrapped around us, whispering as it blew past. It was the most surreal feeling I’d ever had. Charlie continued to weigh me up, nodding abruptly, decision made. Better or worse. Richer or poorer. Fuck me. She was going to say no, and there was nothing I could do about it.

And then her perfect pink lips parted, speaking words I didn’t expect to hear. “One drink. You’re buying.”
It had been stupid of me to use my magic out in the open like I had. But I needed to know if Helpful McHottie -- Cam -- was someone I could trust. The wind wouldn’t steer me wrong, and the amount of energy it took to summon it wouldn’t leave any more of a trace than any other supernaturals’ in the area. This shifter wasn’t stupid. He knew I was a Supe. He just didn’t know what kind, and I intended to leave it that way.

So I had loosed the magic of the air, letting it blow around us, through us. Letting it whisper the secrets of his soul to me.

Unlike most, the wind never lied. So when the tendrils of air had brushed against my hand, I invited them. He’s pure of heart, they whispered. But darkness lurks.

Doesn’t it always?

Pure of heart or not, I needed to stay far away from any Supes, and shifters in general. But I also knew that getting rid of Cam would be more hassle than it was worth if I didn’t at least have one drink with him. One drink, and then I’d be gone. I would leave the heavy ornate room key and a few of my dwindling pound notes under the door before slipping out into the night.

After I fixed my fucking ankle. Which meant I was going to need a few minutes away from Cam where he wouldn’t be able to scent my magic trace.

I stole a sideways glance at him, peeking at his strong features. Darkness lurks, the wind had warned. And the wind never lied. But where was the darkness in his bright green gaze, or the easy one-sided conversation he carried on as we walked? I really was getting soft, making excuses for the truth the air spoke.

I took a deep breath. “Isn’t it too early to get a pint?” Maybe if I could get us to separate rooms, I could fix my ankle, and then just fake the injury until he was too drunk to notice.

Cam smirked, an expression I had never found as sexy as when it was dripping off of this man. “Lass, you do realize you’re in Scotland, right? You can get a pint at any time of day if you know where to look.”

Damn. Since my first plan was a failure, I went back to scaring him off. I sneered, raising a brow of my own in turn. “Drinking wasn’t exactly at the top of my to-do list.”

Cam opened his mouth to say something, and then closed it, shaking his head. He
tugged at his lip between his teeth.

I rolled my eyes. “You might as well say what you were going to say before you burst.” This shifter was going to be annoying as fuck until I could shake him. Good looks could only carry someone so far.

“I wasn’t going to say anything.”

Fucking shifters. I was silent, my annoyance speaking everything I needed it to.

“Fine.” Cam stopped suddenly, and with my lack of balance on my wobbly ankle, I nearly toppled over once more. “I was going to make a joke, but you don’t exactly seem like the kind to take a joke so I shut my mouth.”

I righted myself, taking a step back and crossing my arms. “I can take a joke.”

He snorted, raising a dark brow once more. “You’re right. You seem to be a regular comedian.”

I glared at Cam, waiting impatiently until the shifter sighed, tipping his face towards the sky like he was regretting every life decision that had led him to this point. “The ice queen says she can take a joke,” he muttered, still not looking my way. Ice queen? What the fuck? Did this guy know who he was fucking talking to? My anger tightly coiled inside me until it leeched into the ground, the long grasses reaching for Cam’s legs. I’d show him a fucking ice queen.

And then I remembered myself. Where I was. Why I was here. And my hatred for there. I couldn’t be found out. I quickly called my fury back into me, chaining it tightly down before Cam was ever the wiser. His face still tipped towards the sky, murmuring to himself about “stubborn lasses”, and “regretting being a gentleman”. Thick, chocolate locks curled down his neck, the slightest hint of a day-old sunburn still lingering. I never wanted to be an ice queen. I wanted to run my fingers through his hair, until I lost every memory of myself under Cam’s thick, calloused hands. But distractions were dangerous, and a night of passion wouldn’t be worth it if it landed me back where I started.

No. I had to stay the course. My decision was made. Cam finally stopped talking to himself, glaring at me through his bright green eyes, daring me. A challenge was being laid, a gauntlet being thrown. I realized Cam had fury buried deep inside too. Too bad I wasn’t going to stick around long enough to see how deep it ran. “Say it again, lass,” he demanded, his rich brogue making me doubt all of the decisions I had just made.

“Say what again? I can take a joke?”

He shook his head. “No. The part about drinking.”

I narrowed my eyes, unsure where this conversation was going. “Drinking wasn’t exactly at the top of my to-do list?”

The dare in his gaze didn’t change, but a smirk pulled across his full lips. “Can I be at the top of your to-do list instead?”

This asshole was seeing if I could actually take a joke. Two could play at this game. I kept my mask of emotions still, years of training making my face the perfect blank canvas. I thought back to the old Charlie. The one who could laugh, and make jokes. The one who smiled. Something about this shifter was digging at me, wanting me to be that person again, despite the dangers that it would mean for me. I gave him a light shrug, turning away from his burning scrutiny. “Depends on if you think you could keep up with
I had caught him off guard, and his laugh surprised me in return. It was loud, and full of life. I was jealous. When was the last time I had laughed like that? I shot a glance over my shoulder, making sure no one was nearby. Cam was going to draw attention to us if he didn’t shut up, and I did not need any attention my way. “Touché, lass, touché.”

He offered me his arm once more, and every cell in my body was screaming at me to run, to hide, to get away. But I took it, and we began our trek back to town once more. We walked in silence, the town growing closer and closer. It was picturesque, something out of a painting, the old buildings just beginning to wake up with the sunrise. I couldn’t decide if the silence was comfortable or awkward. I really needed to fix my ankle -- it was fucking killing me.

“So, you’re saying if I prove myself worthy of keeping up with a self-proclaimed ice queen, then I have a shot?” Cam broke the silence, shooting me an easy grin.

I looked away. “Don’t push your luck. Also, you called me an ice queen. It’s not self proclaimed.”

He shrugged, and the muscles in his thick arm tensed with the movement. “I just call them like I see them.”

I scowled. I tried to guess how many minutes we had left on our walk to town, but my sense of time was skewed as I limped along using Cam as a crutch. The small downtown was coming into view, the steep single lane road snaking through the few shops, pubs and inns that littered the streets. Quaint. This part of Scotland was mostly tourists and farmers. People didn’t question people stopping through, which was exactly the way I liked it. Cam led me to the tiny bed and breakfast we both somehow managed to be staying at, insisting on walking me right up to my room, much to the interest of the ancient human woman who ran the place. A strange man helping a hobbling girl to her room was probably the most entertainment she’d seen in weeks. Too bad it drew more attention to me than I would’ve liked. Supes lived in peace with humans, but mostly because we hid our true selves when not around other Supes. I kept my head down, glaring at anyone who came too close.

Distance was my friend. Keeping people at arm’s length kept me safe. So what was I doing leaning into the embrace of this overly large shifter? He smelled like a fire at Christmas, warm and cozy. Like home, or how home used to be. He smelled dangerous. He stopped in front of my room, thankfully on the main floor. I shook out my pockets, grateful I had the foresight to clip my key to my pants before I had left in the morning.

“I’m uh… I’m upstairs.” Cam shoved his hands in his pockets.

I blinked at him. “Okay, and?” Why was he still standing here? If his room was upstairs, I might have enough time to fix my ankle before he noticed the magic trace.

He grinned at me, slouching against the wall opposite my door. “And, you said you’d get a drink with me, remember? So should I come pick you up from your room in twenty minutes or will you meet me there?”

Christ. He never gave up, did he? I turned around, shoving my shoulder into the stiff wood of the door. “I’ll meet you there.” I wouldn’t get out of this drink with him. But if I agreed to meet him there...that would give me enough time to fix my ankle and pack my
shit to get the hell out of here.
I didn’t look back, but I could practically feel his smile in the narrow hallway. “I’ll see you at The Black Swan. Twenty minutes. Don’t be late, Charlie. Otherwise I’ll have to hunt you down.”

I closed the door behind me, pressing my back against the smooth wood as I slid down to the floor. For whatever reason, Cam threatening to hunt me down didn’t feel terrifying. Rather, it felt like a challenge I’d like to live up to. I smiled, shaking my head of dangerous thoughts. Right now, I needed to focus on fixing my ankle. An injury like this was going to require a lot of magic, and with Cam nearby, I would have to repair the muscle as slowly as possible to not call attention to myself.

I allowed my eyes to drift shut, calling to the elements in the room. But it wasn’t the thrum of the energy that powered my magic, binding the cells back together. The only thing in my brain I could focus on were Cam’s chocolate curls, and his smile.

Christ.
I paced my room after I dropped Charlie off. Back and forth, back and forth. I was
certain there was going to be a path worn in the carpet by the time I checked out of
the bed and breakfast. What the hell was I thinking? I enjoyed solitude, running on
my own. Charlie would only slow me down. And God, she was frigid. Every time I thought
I had broken through her wall, she threw another one up in its place. So why was I still
trying to push something with her? Why couldn’t I get her lush, thick thighs out of my
head? I’d kill to have them wrapped around me as I thrust wildly into her. I would tangle
my hand in her soft, black hair, tugging it gently until she submitted to me. Submitted to
the dragon that lay within.

I would do none of this if I couldn’t even get the lass to meet me at the pub. Leaving
her at her room had been a mistake, because she could up and leave at any time she
wanted and I’d have no idea. But she told me she’d be there, and so I had to hope for the
best and trust my instincts. The ice queen would be there. She couldn’t resist, as much as
she told herself otherwise. As much as she wanted to believe otherwise.

I was usually a loner, so why was I so desperate to see her again? There was only
one conclusion I was left with. I was obviously insane. That’s all there was to it. I was
crazy. Dammit, I couldn’t get the image of Charlie out of my head. I wanted to make her
smile -- I needed to make her smile. I knew I should run, turn around and head out to the
next town and leave Charlie behind. She wouldn’t mind. But I couldn’t. So instead I left
my room and walked downstairs, waiting for the girl with the hair as black as night and a
smile that just needed a little coaxing.

I couldn’t pace in the communal living room, not with the little old lady who ran the
inn watching me. I offered her a smile, and she grinned back at me. What time was it
even? I checked my watch. Twenty-one minutes since I had left her at her door. Would
she show? Or was she already gone, walking as fast as her injured ankle would allow her?
Had I already missed her as I was pacing holes in the worn carpet upstairs? Shite.

My dragon growled in my chest, desperate to get out, to chase down the dark-haired
beauty who had captivated both of us. But I couldn’t let him surface, not now. Not when
she was so close to trusting me. If I had to hunt her down, it was going to be as a
human, on foot. Not to mention, I was pissed he wasn’t letting my senses work to their
full ability. I wanted to know what she was. I checked my watch again. Twenty-three
minutes. I sighed, turning to go back upstairs and grab my backpack. I just wanted one
night with Charlie. A few moments to figure out what made her tick.

Just as my foot hit the first step, a door closed down the hallway. Charlie? I whirled
around, trying to act casual, like I wasn’t about to head upstairs. Sure enough, from
around the corner strode Charlie, a cool look of disdain on her face as she attempted to
distance herself from her surroundings. I knew what she was thinking, that remaining
aloof would mean people would stay away from her. Instead, it did the opposite. It drew
attention towards the tall girl who looked like she was above it all. I knew differently, just
from the walk back to town. The way she had drawn away from me the first time I
touched her, and the way she had clung to me when she stumbled without realizing it.
Shit. I forgot about her ankle when I told her I would meet her at The Black Swan.
Charlie would need help to get there. I hurried to her side.

She looked up in surprise, her mouth a perfect “o” before I mirrored her expression.
She wasn’t expecting to see me here, and I hadn’t expected to see her walking with no
limp. Charlie narrowed her eyes. “Cam,” was her cool greeting.

“Charlie.” I winked at her, my attempt to disarm her defense. “Your ankle… it’s better.
Were you faking it this whole time? Hoping to get closer to me?”

Please say yes…

Charlie wrinkled her nose, shaking her head. “Uh, no. I just iced it. It must not have
been as bad as either of us thought.” But she was jumpy, her gaze darting from side to
side and I knew she was keeping something from me. Could it all have been a ruse? No.
Impossible. Maybe it’d been wishful thinking and nothing more. The fact of the matter
remained that Charlie’s ankle was healed, and she was keeping something from me. I’d
chip away at her, bit by bit. I had a feeling whatever laid underneath the ice was worth it.

“I thought you were meeting me at the pub?” she asked.

I shrugged. “Didn’t want you getting lost.” Or running away. Especially not now her
ankle seemed miraculously healed. I offered her my arm, which she took with only the
briefest of suspicious glares. I’d topple her ice wall if it was the last thing I did. Sure
enough, as soon as her hand touched me, even on top of the layers of clothing I still wore
anticipating a hike, electricity sparked through my entire body. I was certain I was
burning. How could I not be? The ice queen had set me on fire. I shook off the feelings. I
had been on my own for too long, and my mind was beginning to play tricks on me.
Witches didn’t come here, and Charlie was not my mate.

The small road was quiet, even for the middle of the day. I supposed that was normal
for the middle of nowhere, Scotland. I wasn’t trying to get myself lost. It had just
happened. And once I started, I realized that not having a destination was actually kind
of nice. No deadlines. No clan with unrealistic demands. One day I’d have to stop, but not
today. Today I was going to peel back each layer of Charlie.

We entered the small pub -- only twenty paces or so from the inn. It was small and
dark, the high tables looking like they had seen better days. I wasn’t sure the barstools
would hold my weight, let alone the weight of the decrepit bartender who looked like he
would blow over with a strong enough wind. Guess this wasn’t the kind of pub where they
expected fights. In my hometown, only the biggest of guys were the bartenders -- better
to keep the short-tempered dragons in line.

Charlie dropped my arm, making a beeline for the table in the darkest, smallest corner. Of course she would. Hiding herself away in the dark. I had known the girl for less than twenty-four hours and already I could pinpoint where she would want to sit. Her ankle wasn’t giving her any trouble whatsoever, and I wondered what the hell she could’ve done to fix it. Could she be part fae? She was definitely tall enough, but the fae were usually willowy and slender. Charlie was curvy, muscles framing her arms and legs. Not to mention the lack of pointed ears. No. Fae was out. She might have stashed a witch’s healing powder in her bag before she came here, but there were no witches for hundreds of miles. At least not any free witches. The clan had taken away their freedom a long time ago. I was going to kill my dragon for stunting my senses.

I followed behind her, watching her balance with ease on a barstool far too wobbly for my liking. “I’m going to go get us a couple pints, okay?” The lass was here, and she was sitting down, but I still didn’t trust her not to take off at the first available opportunity. Charlie merely looked up at me and nodded, immediately directing her attention elsewhere.

One day. One day I’d get her to focus her attention on me and only me. I wasn’t sure when or how, but it was going to happen. I sighed to myself, shaking my head. Those were dangerous thoughts. Being solo was safer. Especially with me not knowing what kind of Supe Charlie was. If I were found, and she were with me...fuck, I couldn’t even stand to think about it. Regardless of her current status as an ice queen or not (warming towards me, I hoped) she didn’t deserve the loss of her freedom. The pack was dangerous for outside Supes and I would never forgive myself for putting anyone through a forced life in the clan. I waited for the barkeep to notice me, ordered the near overflowing pints, and made my way back to Charlie. Charlie. I needed to work on calling her by the name she had trusted me with, and not lass all the time. But lass just rolled off my tongue so nicely, and I had to admit I enjoyed the way she squirmed when I said it. I had a feeling Charlie wasn’t used to feeling uncomfortable.

Thankfully she was still sitting where I left her. “Here we go. Two of Scotland’s finest.” I slid one of the glasses over to her, and she caught it effortlessly. Quick reflexes then. Maybe a shifter after all?

Charlie raised a dark brow. “I thought Scotland’s finest was scotch.”

I nearly choked on my sip of beer. Guess the ice queen had a sense of humour. “Yeah, well Scotland’s finest isn’t on a backpacker’s budget.”

“Are you saying this is a cheap date?” Her lips twisted into a smirk, and I found myself grinning back at her. I liked this version of Charlie. Free.

I winked at her. “Are you saying this is a date?”

She froze, and I realized I had pushed too far. Shite. An apology sprang to my lips, but before I could vocalize it she was already laughing -- a real laugh, filled with life and humour. That’s what had been missing before, when I met her on that hilltop. This whole side of her that was warm, laughed and made jokes. Charlie took a long sip of her beer, and then levelled me with a serious look. “This isn’t a date, Cam.”

“No, it isn’t,” I agreed. Even if I wanted it to be. Because it really shouldn’t be. But we
could have this drink, couldn’t we? I took another sip, sifting through my thoughts. “Can I ask you something?”

Charlie turned away from me, drumming her fingers on the edge of the sticky table. “Depends.”

I fought my irritation with her vagueness. I didn’t want to slip up, but her moods were as temperamental as the ocean, a different wave bringing another emotion each time. “Why are you here, lass?”

“You asked me to have a drink with you, and considering you didn’t abandon me on the trail, it felt like the least I could do.” Another sip, this one leaving her full lips wet. I wanted to run my tongue over the pink seam of her mouth, tasting the remnants of the beer lingering there.

“Why are you in Scotland? You said a little of both earlier. So what have you been running from?”

She shrugged a lean shoulder. “I’m not sure you would get it. You probably have the picture-perfect family waiting for you back home.”

“I don’t.” Charlie tipped her head at me, and I met her curious stare. “My family is far from flawless.”

“But you spoke about your mom on the hike. You said she would have your arse if you left me.”

“Aye. My mam is the most incredible woman.” I really wasn’t the son she deserved. And I really needed to make it home to see her again, even if it meant dealing with them. “But that doesn’t mean my family is the ideal you’re thinking they are.”

She nodded, staring down into her beer once more. So she was running from her family. That was a start. My free hand inched towards hers, until it brushed up against her pinky. Her skin was soft, and I expected her to pull away from my touch, but instead she pushed into it – subconsciously, I was sure. Could she feel the electricity burning where our skin touched too, or was it only my imagination?

“Charlie,” I murmured. I wanted her to look at me, to pierce me once more with her gaze, and she immediately jerked her head in my direction. I held out my beer towards her. “A toast.”

She eyed me warily. What was she? I had no idea, but she was driving my dragon absolutely crazy. “What are we toasting to?”

I smiled. “To families that aren’t picture perfect. To the families that leave you to learn to fly on your own.”

Charlie gave me a small smile back. “To the families that force you to carve out your own place in the world.”

“To the family that made you, you.” I sucked in a quick breath through my teeth, hoping she wouldn’t take offense.

Her eyes pierced through my soul as brightly as a diamond, and it was all I could do to remember to breathe. “To you, Cam,” she whispered, clinking her glass against mine.

We drank deeply. And before I knew it, our glasses were empty. I expected Charlie to get up and leave -- her obligation was over. But instead she stood, placing a soft hand on my shoulder. “I’ll get us another round.” Where she touched me, I could’ve sworn I was
aflame, burning through my coat and scorching my skin.

“Mate,” my dragon demanded.

No, I argued. My dragon was irritating me, and I needed to keep my temper under wraps. Charlie didn’t need to see it flare up. Not now. My temper had gotten me into too many problems before, and I thought I was getting better.

She took her hand away to walk around me, and I wanted to ask her to bring it back. I wanted to run my hands across her entire body, inch by inch. But she came back with drinks, and I stuffed those thoughts deep inside myself so as to not scare her away.

Somehow, someway we had struck a truce. Not quite a friendship, but something where she felt safe enough to stay. A quiet acceptance of each other. Another round was in front of us. And then another. Sometimes she snapped at me. Sometimes she answered my questions. I’d take it either way.

And then we were stumbling out the doors back to the inn, the evening air sobering us. We had been in the pub for far longer than either of us had realized, the day giving way to evening. Charlie froze just outside the door. “Shit.”

“What’s wrong?”

She closed her eyes. “Not that it’s really any of your concern, but I forgot my backpack when we stopped to rest.”

Well, shite. “We can go back to get it tomorrow.”

She shot me a quick look of disbelief. Guess we were back there then, our uneasy truce broken outside of the energy of the bar. “I’ll deal with it. Don’t worry. I’m not your responsibility anymore.”

She swung open the door, darting down the hall to her room.

Charlie froze just outside of her room, turning around to look at me. “What?” She tapped her foot, eager to get away.

“You don’t have your bag.”

The tapping stopped. “Yes. We covered this already.”

I sighed. “What are you going to sleep in? You can’t sleep in that.” I gestured towards her still ripped pants and the rough wool shirt she wore. Hiking clothes.

“I’ll figure something out. Don’t worry about me.” Charlie’s voice was tired, but she didn’t sound quite as desperate to get away from me now. It’s not me, I thought. She didn’t want to get away from me specifically; she was scared of something.

“But I will. I can’t help it, lass, it’s in my genes.” I smirked when she frowned at the term of endearment. “Seriously though, promise me you’ll stay right here. I’ll be back in a flash.”

“Um, okay.” She looked from side to side, nodding at me when she was satisfied with the empty hallway.

I smiled, running up the stairs and racing to my room. I dropped my key a half dozen times before I managed to get it in the knob, and flinging open the door. Surely there was
something in here that wouldn't swallow her whole. Charlie was tall and curvy, but she was still just a wee thing compared to myself. I dug through my bag until I came across a semi clean T-shirt -- one of my favourites. It would do. I jogged back down the stairs, partially surprised to see Charlie still standing in front of her door. I held the shirt out in front of me like a peace offering. “Here. You don’t even have to wear it. Just take it so I at least feel better.”

Charlie gave me a quiet look, and then took my shirt with a soft smile. The ice queen was slowly thawing. Would she let me stick around long enough to see her melt completely? “You mean so your mom won’t kick your ass.”

I shrugged. “If it ever comes up in conversation, I did my due diligence as a perfect gentleman.”

She turned to go into her room. My eyes trained so hard on her perfect ass, I almost didn’t hear her say, “Somehow I don’t think you’re a perfect gentleman.”

“What was that?”

But Charlie was already closing the door, separating us into two different spaces. “Thanks, Cam,” she whispered.

Fuck. She was going to fucking run, and I needed to make her stay. I stuffed my hands into my pockets, scuffing my toes along the faded carpet as I walked the halls.

“Mate,” whispered my dragon, growling the further away I got from Charlie.

Shut up, I thought. But this time, my response was a little less sure.
I looked down at the T-shirt in my hand, soft, worn, faintly smelling of Cam. This felt too intimate, sleeping in an article of his clothing. I liked the security blanket of my distance, the ice I had carefully laced through my veins to keep people at bay. I had been too relaxed when we were drinking. I let my guard down too much. Said too much. I wouldn’t get that sloppy again. Cam was too friendly, drawing me closer and closer with his laugh and his aura that made me feel like we had known each other for a lifetime. Christ.

No. I had to stick to the plan. Unfortunately, this part of the plan meant I had to sleep in his shirt until I could sober up and get back to my bag -- if it were still even there. The room was cold and damp, and I really didn’t feel like sleeping naked. Cam’s shirt wasn’t the worst idea. Okay. First sleep, then my backpack, then off to wherever the fuck wasn’t here. Away from Cam and his green eyes, and his chocolate curls, and the way his smile made me melt into a puddle at his feet.

I sighed. When had life become this complicated? One day it was hopes and dreams, and the next day life had tugged the carpet out from underneath me, leaving me cold and wondering where to go next. It wasn’t safe for me to go home, but I also wasn’t sure it was safe for me to find a new home. Not yet. I shrugged out of my plaid shirt, pulling off my ripped long sleeve. I slipped Cam’s shirt on, stepping out of the shredded remains of my cargo pants. His height meant the shirt was fairly long on me, but my hips pulled the shirt up further than made me comfortable. Whatever. Not like anyone was seeing me. Cam’s scent wrapped around me, warm and relaxing. Easy, just like him.

Darkness lingers.

I couldn’t ignore the warning the wind had given me. His emerald eyes had hinted at it when I pushed him too far. When I was too cold, too closed off. It bothered him for reasons I’d never know, because I had already spent too much time with the shifter. The spinning room around me reminded me just how much time was too much -- way too many pints.

A knock at the door startled me from my thoughts, and I peeked through the peephole to see Cam standing on the other side. I whipped open the door without a second thought, riding high on beer and a freedom of fear for one night. “You again?” I snapped.
He was here in front of me, after being so friendly, and looking so handsome, and I wanted to push him until he snapped and left me the fuck alone. Either that or kissed me, pressing my back hard against the wall, letting his tongue slip into my mouth his hand crept up my skin.

No. I narrowed my eyes at him, gesturing for him to say what he wanted. “Well?”

A grin tugged at the corner of his lips, but danger flashed across his face again. His eyes tightened minutely, and something burned brightly within them. “Always a pleasure, ice queen. I just thought you might be lacking a toothbrush, especially after all that drinking.”

I was caught off guard. “Oh. Thanks. I guess.” I took a step closer to him, snatching the proffered toothbrush out of his hand. I went to close the door, but Cam leaned his muscled body against the door frame. I glared at him. “Anything else? Or can I go now?”

He rolled his lip between his teeth, running a slow gaze down my body. I suddenly felt very underdressed, tugging down at the T-shirt with my free hand. “What?”

Cam shrugged. “The shirt looks good on you. Keep it.”

I raised a brow. Any other time I would’ve slammed the door, various body parts being in the way or not. But the beer made me bold, and Cam made me feel something. I looked down at the faded shirt, promoting a band I had never heard of. “Better than nothing I guess.”

Cam took a step closer into my personal space. Too close. Not close enough. Darkness lurked, but would it be as cold as my own? The wind had said I could trust him. But he was closer than anyone had been in months, and my heart was beating hard enough to burn a hole through my chest. “Are you really going to deny that you didn’t feel anything in the pub between us, lass?”

I shook my head. “I felt drunk, if that’s what you’re asking.” I knew what he was referencing. The fire that burned my skin when he had brushed against my hand. The ocean of emotions that rolled in my stomach, weighing heavy on my mind.

Another step closer. Something was flooding my veins, and my skin felt too small for my soul. Cam dropped his voice an octave, the sound purring against my senses. “I know you don’t trust me, Charlie. But I’m just asking for one night. You can leave me later, run to your heart’s content. But let me give you one night.”

Fuck. I wanted him. I wanted to run. I didn’t know what I wanted. “You don’t know anything, so don’t bother pretending,” I hissed, trying to mask my warring emotions.

He was so close I could see the flecks of gold sparkling in his green eyes, the freckles lightly dotting his nose. “I know you’re playing with fire, ice queen.”

I sucked in a deep breath, filling my chest with the air of indecision. “One night?”

Cam’s eyes brightened, leaning forward so that his lips brushed against mine. Giving me the opportunity to run away, to turn and slam the door in his face. “One night.”

I stood up on my tiptoes, pressing my lips against his in a quick move that left both of us stunned. There was no doubt in my mind I would regret this in the morning. But right now, with Cam’s warm body so close to my own, and his lips moving against mine, pleasure was the only thing that mattered. Cam groaned beneath my kiss, bringing his hands up as if to touch me, but then left them hanging in the air between us.
He broke the kiss, resting his forehead against mine, both of us breathing heavily. “I want to touch you, Charlie. Please.”

My body ached to tremble and to sprint away, but I refused to be a coward. Not right now. So I ignored those thoughts screaming at me in the back of my head, and stepped backwards into my room, tugging Cam’s hand to follow me. His grin turned me on in a way I hadn’t been in ages, and when the heavy door closed behind him, I knew there was no turning back.

This was happening. My confidence was failing me, the alcohol falling flat in my system.

Cam dragged his hand up my thigh, toying with the edge of the T-shirt. “I wasn’t lying. My shirt looks good on you.” I shuddered as he pressed his lips against my ear, his breath warm against my skin. “Bet it looks even better off of you.”

“You’re so fucking cheesy.” I leaned up to tangle my fingers in his thick curls, tugging his face back down to mine.

“You like it though.” He took a step forward, forcing me to step back towards the bed. “Otherwise you wouldn’t have invited me in.”

I feathered my fingers down his chest, his muscles rippling beneath my touch. “I remember you inviting yourself in.” I pulled at his shirt, and he obliged, lifting it over his head and exposing an impressive body hidden beneath, all hard edges and tanned skin.

“Semantics. You were just too shy to tell me you wanted me.” He brought his hand under my jaw, forcing my head up to kiss him once more. I slipped my tongue between his lips, enjoying the moan that reverberated between us.

“Semantics,” I echoed. “I don’t want you, just your body.”

A low growl tore from Cam’s chest, a taste of the shifter lurking beneath the surface. I needed to be careful. “Watch yourself, ice queen. One might think you actually need something if you start talking like that.”

I was sick of talking. I stepped back again, my legs hitting the bed, and dropped so that I sat at waist height to Cam. I started to unbuckle his belt, but he brought his hands down, stopping me. I glanced up at him, his jeans slung low on his hips, abs on display. Was this a mistake? What had this shifter done to me?

“Take the shirt off.” I couldn’t identify the notes in Cam’s voice. Was he trying to command me like I was a shifter? Because that wasn’t going to work.

I tipped my head. “Come take it off yourself.”

He was on his knees between my legs before I could blink. Shifter. Right. Cam pulled at the shirt, tugging it up and over my body so that I lay bare before him. I wanted to pull the worn blanket over my body, cover up the excess skin that hadn’t been on display in far too long. But Cam ran an admiring gaze down my body. “Fucking beautiful,” he breathed. My underwear was gone, torn off in a swift move. He unbuckled his belt, forcing his pants over his hips. Something had taken over Cam, possessing him, moving his body under a spell of desire and need, and fuck if it wasn’t a turn on.

He hadn’t been this primal before. Now, he wanted me. He needed me. And it was just one night. Right?

“I want to taste you, Charlie. But I need to bury myself inside you first, feel you clench
around me as you scream my name. Is that okay with you?”

Cam was still fucking asking if it was okay, even as I was naked beneath him, his thick erection throbbing between his legs. How he had the self control to even pause to ask, I wasn’t sure. I gulped, meeting his lust filled gaze, and nodding. He might have had the self control to stop and ask, but I sure didn’t.

One night.

Cam crawled over me, running his finger between my legs and the wetness there. “Fuck. Ice queen. You could’ve just fucking asked me if you were in this much need.”

I rolled my eyes, forcing my hips up to meet his touch. “Shut up and fuck me.”

His control snapped, and he slammed his dick inside me, filling me in the most delicious way possible. I moaned, revelling in the feeling of pleasure. Cam groaned, rolling his hips against me. “Move with me.” He gripped my waist tightly, his fingertips bruising the soft skin there as I moved my hips to meet his, thrust for thrust.

Pleasure was rushing hotly through my veins, warming over the ice I had so carefully let linger there, taking over every part of my body as we moved together. His thrusts were deeper, harder, his green eyes locked onto mine. Something was shattering inside of him, some wall he had carefully laid -- just like me. But here, naked, on this old rickety bed as our bodies pushed each other over the edge... something broke down those things we had kept hidden so deep inside.

His cock was stretching me, making me feel impossible things as he pistoned his hips. The pressure was building deep within my core, commanding my release, but it felt too goddamn good to give in now. Was this what sex was supposed to feel like? Like you couldn’t focus on anything other than your own pleasure, spiraling out of control?

He ground his fingertips into me once again. “Come with me.” Cam angled his hips, and I cried out as my body shook around him. He roared out his own release, his eyes flashing black for a single moment before he trembled and fell to my side.

I rolled away from him, but Cam snaked out his hand, dragging me to rest against his body as we breathed together. “I’ve already fucked you, ice queen. I think we can lie together for a minute or two before you run away.”

I let my body relax into his touch, trying not to shy away, and letting the pleasure soak in for a moment. He was right. Eventually I would have to get dressed and sneak out the door as soon as he was out cold. I couldn’t stop thinking about how his eyes turned black as he came, all his walls shattering in the moment.

Beside us, the old lamp was flickering. Somehow, I had lost control over my magic and tapped into the ancient wires of the inn. I shot a glance over to Cam, but he didn’t seem to have noticed anything strange. I leaned over and turned the light off, leaving both of us in the shadows.

Darkness lingers.
I woke up sober, moonlight streaming in through the still open curtains. I blinked a few times, trying to get my bearings. I sniffed the air. Something was off. The room didn’t smell right.

Because I wasn’t in my room. I was in Charlie’s. Memories of the night came flooding back, her cautious smile in the bar -- so brittle, like the gentlest touch would shatter it into a million pieces. Charlie wearing my shirt, her lush thighs stretching the worn cotton in the most delicious way. The way she cried out as she climaxed around me, letting me see a vulnerability I doubted anyone had seen in a long time. Maybe I shouldn’t have pushed her so far -- okay, I definitely shouldn’t have pushed her so far. As soon as I had seen her in my shirt, looking devilishly sexy, I should have run far, far away. But the way she had leaned into my touch. Jesus, if I wasn’t already whipped.

I rolled over, hard and ready for round two. Or three. I had forgotten at this point. Charlie. But her side of the bed was empty, and she was long gone to the night. A scrap of paper torn from a notebook rested in the indent from her body, a simple “thanks” scrawled across it, messily, as if she didn’t know what else to say.

Fucking hell. I was irrationally upset. After all, I had told her to leave. I told her to give me one night, and then she could run like she wanted to. I could see it in the way her body trembled around me, and the way she was constantly looking over her shoulder. But I hadn’t actually expected her to leave.

I hadn’t expected the loss of her to leave me aching in a way I couldn’t explain. Without her coolness my body ran too hot, a feeling I hadn’t noticed before. I groaned, running my hand over my face. I was screwed.

I didn’t make a conscious decision. I was out of bed, tossing clothes on, and tying my shoes before I realized what I was doing. Charlie wanted to run, and she could run. But I would chase her to the ends of the earth. The ice queen had zero idea who she was toying with. Maybe not zero. I had seen the way she watched me as I lost control. She saw me. The real me I kept buried deep inside. Maybe it was dangerous for both of us, but that was something we could deal with after she was back in my arms. The lass was definitely running from something, and she was obviously able to keep herself safe, but the animal inside of me was clawing to escape and make sure she was okay. I could
already imagine the fight she would put up when I found her, but I’d make her see it my way eventually. Supe life was safer in groups. Especially with people like the rest of my clan on the prowl.

I made a pitstop at my room to snag my backpack, quickly loading up the few things I had unpacked, before hauling ass out the front door. Charlie couldn’t have gotten that far, even on her healed ankle. Fuck if I knew how she had healed herself. If she were a shifter, surely I would’ve smelled her by now. But I smelled nothing other than her gentle, earthy scent. No wolf, no bear...nothing. Witches hadn’t come to this area in years, mostly because of the clan, so that was out of the question. I had no idea what she was. Charlie was a complete and utter enigma. But I knew one thing for certain; her body fit perfectly against mine.

I stepped out into the still night, cursing the direction of the wind. It was going to be a hell of a lot harder to track down my ice queen if I couldn’t smell her. I groaned in irritation, fighting my body’s need to shift and to find her now. As soon as the thought entered my mind, the wind changed direction in a sudden gust, rushing through my hair and lifting up the corner of my T-shirt with its strength. What the fuck? I didn’t have time to think too hard on it, because there was Charlie’s scent, clear as day. She had headed back up the trail, likely to look for her backpack which probably wasn’t there anymore. But thank God she had only made it as far as the hill before I woke up, otherwise finding her would’ve been impossible.

I followed my nose, my feet moving quicker than my brain. I needed to find her, and that was the end game. Everything else could wait, even Charlie’s anger towards me once I eventually caught up to her. I told her only one night, and then I would let her go. Had I known even then that it was a lie?

“Mate,” my dragon urged.

She’s not our fucking mate. Sometimes my dragon thought too much with his dick and not enough with his other brain. Mara had been our mate, and everyone knew how that ended. Charlie was... Charlie was different. I was attracted to Charlie because I wanted to be, not because I had to be. And that tiny distinction meant everything to me.

The wind blew in the direction of the trail again, and I knew Charlie was still up there somewhere. I straightened the straps of my backpack and picked up my pace. If I had learned anything during our short time at the inn, it was that Charlie was fast, and if I eased up even slightly, she’d be gone before I reached her.

Of course, I’d still track her. I might be an hour behind, or a day, but something about her screamed that she didn’t want to be alone, even as her words said otherwise.

The moon was bright in the sky, a full moon imminent in forty-eight hours. I’d have to make sure I was somewhere inside -- Charlie too, if she was with me. The werewolves around these parts were pretty good guys, but I didn’t trust any of them further than I could throw them on a full moon. For right now though, it lit up the dirt trail I hiked, brightly illuminating my path. No clouds dimmed it, and the sunrise tomorrow was bound to be beautiful. I’d bet even Charlie would love it.

I was making good time. The rock where she left her pack lay just up the hill. Except there was no sign of Charlie -- or her backpack. I jogged the last few steps, just to
confirm but there was no mistaking it. No Charlie. No backpack. She’d already been here, and I had no idea which way she would’ve gone. The wind had completely died. Shite.

“Charlie!” I cupped my hands to my mouth and yelled as loudly as I could. “Lass, it’s just me! Let me just walk with you until it’s light out! Charlie!”

Nothing. Just the echo of my own voice returning to me. I sounded drawn, desperate. I didn’t think I liked that. My dragon was clawing inside me, demanding its release but I couldn’t let him out. Not now. Who knew where Charlie was, and I couldn’t afford to lose control.

The wind shifted once more, and I caught Charlie’s scent again -- honey and something I couldn’t place. Cloves? Nay. The wind thing was fucking weird, but it was in my favour so I wasn’t about to complain. There was an urgency to my steps as I began to trail the smell that was so uniquely Charlie. Maybe she was hiding from me, not wanting to be found. Not like it mattered. She could say it to my face and I still wouldn’t believe her.

“Charlie!”

And just up ahead, around the edge of the hill she had fallen over just this morning, I glimpsed the reflective side of her backpack, shining in the bright moonlight. She paused, merely a smudge of a person at this distance. But she didn’t move, crossing her arms over her chest as I ran to catch up to her. With only a few feet between us, I could make out the peeved expression on her face. “You just can’t take a hint, can you?” she muttered.

I smirked, too happy to have caught up to her to take notice of her annoyance. She didn’t run from me, which meant she was running from something else. I’d count that as a small win. I reached into my pocket, pulling out her crumpled note and brandishing it towards her. “Thanks? That’s all I get?”

She shrugged, pulling her plaid tighter around her body. “I didn’t think there was anything else to say.”

“How about ‘thanks for rocking my world, let’s do it again sometime’?” I didn’t look away, and eventually she met my gaze, dimly lit in the bright moonlight.

Charlie raised a dark brow. “What happened to ‘just one night, I’m begging you, and then you can run’?”

One of us had to look away first. But it wasn’t going to be me. “I changed my mind. I think I need one more night, just to be sure.”

“In your dreams,” she snapped, rolling her eyes.

“Yes,” I agreed. Because it wasn’t a lie. Even with Charlie sleeping right next to me, my dreams had been filled with memories of how her curves felt under my hands, and the cries she made as I was thrusting into her. I started walking further up the trail, passing Charlie who stood with her hands on her hips.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

I paused, turning around to look at my stunning ice queen -- all sharp edges and fire.

“I’m hiking the trail. What does it look like I’m doing?”

She pressed her full lips together in a frown. “I’m hiking that way.”

“What a coincidence! Guess we can hike together then.” I smiled. I knew she would
never let me hike with her if I claimed danger or wanted to help her, but she couldn’t say anything if I was already walking this way. She could have, but it wouldn’t make a difference. Like hell if I was letting her loose in the highlands in the dark. I wasn’t sure what kind of a Supe she was, but all of them were in danger if my pack was hunting. And they were always hunting.

I turned around and kept walking, knowing she would eventually follow me. Sure enough, from behind me came a long sigh and then the sound of footsteps.

We walked in silence for a few minutes, until Charlie caught up to me. The trail was narrow, but just wide enough for us to walk next to each other. Sunrise was still a little ways off, but the moon was bright enough to see where we were going. I hoped she would watch the sunrise with me, but it was hard to tell where I stood with Charlie.

Eventually she spoke up from beside me. “You know, you could’ve just asked me if you could hike with me instead of going all caveman.”

“No, I couldn’t have. You would not have let me.” I grinned, staring at her. She regarded me warily, her dark lashes framing her inquisitive eyes. I dropped my voice an octave, leaning closer towards her. “Besides, when I go ‘all caveman’ you’ll know.”

I didn’t miss the shiver that raced down her spine when I spoke into the shell of her ear. I also didn’t miss the way her body tensed. No. Miss Ice Queen could pretend all she wanted I didn’t affect her, but I had seen her melt last night, and I wasn’t about to let that be the last time.
FUCK CAM AND HIS SMUG FACE. HOW DID HE EVEN KNOW WHERE TO FIND ME? I KNEW THE
FIRST PLACE HE WOULD LOOK WOULD BE WHERE I LEFT MY BACKPACK, SO I PURPOSEFULLY LEFT A
FALSE TRAIL GOING THE OPPOSITE WAY OUTSIDE OF THE INN. HE SHOULD BE HOURS BEHIND ME --
AT LEAST. AND HOW DARE HE LOOK THAT GOOD EVEN ROLLING OUT OF BED BEFORE IT WAS LIGHT OUT?
HIS CURLS WERE PUSHED OFF HIS FOREHEAD CASUALLY, AND YET THEY LAY PERFECTLY AGAINST HIS
SKIN. HE SMILED AT ME GENUINELY, EVEN AS HE WAS TOSSEND MY HALF-ASSED NOTE BACK IN MY
FACE. FUCK HIM.

ACTUALLY, WHILE I WAS ON THE TOPIC OF FUCKING, MY FEELINGS COULD FUCK OFF AS WELL. I WAS
PROMISED ONE NIGHT, AND NOW HERE WAS HELPFUL MCHOTTIE WALKING NEXT TO ME, AND MY
TRAITOROUS BODY BASICALLY TREMBLING FROM HIS PROXIMITY. ONE NIGHT, MY ASS.

I SIGHED, CAM TOSSEND ME A WORRIED GLANCE. THIS WAS FINE. I COULD MAKE THIS WORK. WE
WOULD WALK TOGETHER UNTIL THE NEXT CAMP OR TOWN -- WHICHEVER CAME FIRST -- AND THEN I
WOULD LEAVE. MUCH EARLIER THIS TIME. HOPULLY THE SHIFTER WOULD PASS OUT AND I WOULD BE
HOURS AWAY BEFORE HE NOTICED.

THE WIND SWIRLED AROUND ME, BLOWING LOOSE TENDRILS OF HAIR INTO MY FACE. HE MEANS
WELL, IT WHISPERED.

I STOPPED, FROWNING. I WAS SURE I HAD LAID A FALSE TRAIL OUTSIDE OF THE INN, AND STILL CAM
HAD FOUND ME NO PROBLEM. THE SHIFTER WAS SUCH A HEAVY SLEEPER HE HADN’T EVEN STIRRED
WHEN I HAD JUMPED IN THE SHOWER, TRYING TO SCRUB OFF THE EVIDENCE OF OUR FLING. I FIGURED I
WOULD HAVE HAD A FEW HOURS ON HIM AT LEAST. HAD THE WIND BETRAYED ME? I HAD TO BE
CAREFUL ABOUT THE AMOUNT OF MAGIC I WAS USING, ESPECIALLY AFTER HEALING MY ANKLE
YESTERDAY, BUT I STILL MADE SURE THAT THE WIND KNEW OF MY DISPLEASURE.

DARKNESS LINGERS, IT REMINDED ME.

YEAH, I KNOW. NOW IF ONLY IT WOULD BE KIND ENOUGH TO EXPLAIN IN DETAIL WHAT KIND OF
DARKNESS IT MEANT, WE WOULD BE ALL SET. BUT I HAD BEEN IN TUNE WITH THE WIND FOR LONG
ENOUGH TO KNOW THAT WASN’T HOW IT WORKED. IT WOULD POINT ME IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION,
NARROW DOWN DANGERS AND FOES, BUT THE ACTUAL DECIPHERING OF ANYTHING WAS UP TO ME.

"EVERYTHING OKAY, LASS?" CAM WAS AHEAD OF ME, AND I SCRAMBELED TO CATCH UP WITH HIM
ONCE MORE, CATCHING MY TOE ON A LOOSE ROCK AND STOPPING MYSELF RIGHT BEFORE I
FACEPLANTED -- AGAIN.
“Everything’s fine.” I brushed the knees of my pants, examining Cam while he waited for me. He certainly didn’t look dark from his general appearance. I wasn’t a hundred percent sure what kind of shifter he was, but he was definitely a predator and not prey. The bulk usually gave the predatory shifters away, of which he had plenty. Not that I should’ve been focused on his bulk. Any of it.

Cam tipped his head back to the slowly brightening sky, signs of dawn just beginning to show. “Well, hurry up then. I don’t want to miss it.” He offered me his hand, and I forced myself not to flinch as he reached out.

Flinching was a weakness, and it was one I was working on. He liked it when I was weak. I wasn’t weak, and I refused to act like I was. I took Cam’s firm hand, meeting his gaze as I did so. I could try to be friendlier, until the evening at least. It couldn’t hurt, right? “Thanks,” I murmured. “But what are we going to miss?”

“You’ll see,” he chirped. “Now, come on!” He tugged my hand, pulling me behind as we walked at a breakneck speed.

“Cam, your legs are like twice as long as mine. Give me a break!” I complained, trying to tug my hand out of his grasp, but he just clung tighter.

“Not quite, ice queen. Besides, I’ve seen you run. You should have no problem keeping up.” Cam gave me a sideways grin, and then pointed up to the small moss-covered ridge just ahead of us. “That’s our destination. Not too far. But we have to hurry.” He basically shoved me in front of him, and I turned around to glare at him. But I didn’t protest.

I hurried to the rock, clambering on top of it easily and turning with my hands on my hips to look at the big man climbing over the ridge after me. “Now what?”

He got to his feet with a grace I admired, and then gave me a brilliant smile. “That.” He pointed behind me.

I turned around and found myself at a loss for words for one of the very few times in my life. Cam had been rushing me to the small ridge so we could see the sun rise across the valley below, watching it dance across the meadow. He sat down, swinging his legs over the side of the edge. He patted the space next to him. “Come on. I won’t let you fall.”

I hesitated. Edges made me nervous. I wasn’t afraid of heights. I was afraid of falling. The feeling of freefall, of being out of control. But I wasn’t about to confess, so I sat. The sun was cutting out the night, inch by inch, illuminating the heavy fog that was settled in the valleys below us. I wasn’t sure if I was still breathing or not, captivated by the scene unfolding in front of me. I had seen countless sunrises since I had left there, but I couldn’t remember the last time I had actually taken a moment to experience it in all of its beauty. It was a battle between light and dark, watching the light slowly overpower the shadows.

“I try and never miss a sunrise. Sometimes I forget and sleep in though.” Cam’s voice was low and quiet in my ear, as if he were afraid to disturb the moment.

But this was the difference between Cam and myself. He was the kind of person who watched the sunrise every morning with a smile on his face, probably setting his alarm so he didn’t miss a second. The sunrise to me had always been nothing more than a
reminder that it was more difficult to hide in the daylight. Except for this morning, with Cam sitting next to me, watching the fog melt into what was sure to be a beautiful morning. He was so close I could smell the soap he had used, and it was doing crazy things to my hormones. All I could think about was last night -- one night -- and the way he had lost control right before he broke. He was definitely a man used to being in control of himself, and seeing him vulnerable as he moved inside of me was... delicious.

“What’s on your mind, ice queen?” Cam murmured.

I looked down into the valley below us to avoid having to look at him, because I was certain he would be able to see right through me. Something about Cam made me feel as transparent as a flimsy curtain. It wasn’t a feeling I was comfortable with. “Just admiring the sunrise.”

“It’s a beauty today. But surely you’ve seen a lot of them. The town before the inn was at least a two day hike, so you would’ve been camping I would think.”

I chewed my lip, weighing my answer. Answers always cost something, and I liked to be sure about the amount before I paid. “I was camping, yeah. I guess I just never took the time. Too busy getting the day started.” There. A complete response, but still giving away nothing. Not terribly hard.

Yet.

A quiet gasp escaped me as Cam’s finger dragged along my chin, pulling my face up and towards him. His fiery gaze locked onto mine, and I couldn’t look away. Transparent. That was how I felt when Cam looked at me this way. But I wasn’t sure he would like what was hidden behind the veil. I squirmed, stripped bare by his stare. “It’s a nice attempt, lass. But I don’t think you were thinking about the sunrise.”

I definitely wasn’t breathing now, aware of every inch of Cam’s body touching mine. It was as if my soul were climbing out of my body, desperate to be close to his. “I wasn’t?” I choked out. Traitorous body. Traitorous voice.

Around us the wind swirled, brushing the softest blades of grass against my ankles. I tried to centre myself to the earth, to the feeling of the air, but all that was pulsing through my veins was Cam. “Nay,” he said, inching his face closer. His eyes didn’t stray from mine, and if he touched me now I thought I might shatter. His tone fell, the way it did before he was about to say something I didn’t want to hear. “I think you were thinking about last night, and the way I made you feel.”

I wanted to look away. Needed to look away. “I was?”

“You can admit it, you know. There’s nothing wrong with admitting how good I made you feel.” His lips were pressed against mine, not in a kiss but just enough that I could feel the vibrations of his words throughout my core. I squeezed my legs together. “There’s no shame in taking pleasure, lass.”

“I know,” I whispered, and his lips curled into a smile against me.

He released my chin, stroking his finger down my neck, dipping it into the collar of my shirt. “Good, because I thoroughly enjoyed the way you clawed at my back when I was inside of you. Did you like that? When I was breaking you apart? Piece...by...piece.”

“Yes.” This time, my voice wasn’t even a whisper and I was wholly focused on Cam’s finger dancing circles across my collarbone. I wanted to drag his face to mine and force him to kiss me. I wanted him to strip me and take me here on this hilltop, like the
savages we both probably were underneath the pleasantries and clothing. Wasn’t
everyone a savage when they were stripped bare?

“You know, I never got to taste you last night. I bet you’d like that too, wouldn’t you?
Watching my head between your legs.” He darted his tongue out, sliding it along the
seam of my mouth. I nearly moaned from the contact alone. “I bet you taste as sweet as
honey, ice queen.”

I arched my body against his, desperate for his touch -- for release. I breathed out.
“Why don’t you go ahead and taste me so you know for sure?”

His finger froze, and his breath caught. “Don’t tempt me, Charlie girl. I’ll have you
begging me to let you come before you can think twice.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

Cam groaned, and I pulled his hands away from my neck, down to the waistband of
my pants. He slipped my shirt up, sweeping his finger along the exposed skin of my
stomach. “I wasn’t sure you’d let me touch you again,” he whispered, almost too quietly
for me to hear.

I hadn’t been sure either. But he was tugging my pants down, over my hips, the cool
air biting against my flesh in the most delicious way. I was surprised by how much I
wanted this -- wanted him. But the way he had worked my body last night, understanding
more about my desires and cravings than even I did... it was something that deserved a
repeat. Even if it would leave me with even more of an ache when I left tonight. I focused
on the now. On Cam, biting and kissing the inside of my thighs as I stroked my hands
through his tangled curls.

Cam dragged his tongue along my leg, tugging my panties down to join my cargos. He
was quiet for a moment, not moving or kissing. And then he groaned, a sound that turned
me on more than it should’ve. “You are the most delicious slice of temptation I think I’ve
ever seen.” His tongue slid over my swollen clit, and my hips bucked against his face.
“I’m not letting you go. Ever.”

I didn’t have a second to process what he meant by that, because his mouth was
closing on my clit, sucking hard. I cried out. Fuck. Why hadn’t he done this last night? I
still would’ve run, but it would’ve made my decision a hell of a lot harder.

Cam worked his fingers between my legs, sliding them through my slick folds. I parted
my legs for him, desperate for his touch. He lifted his mouth from me for a moment, to
stare deep into my soul and murmur, “Sweeter than honey, Charlie girl.”

And then his mouth was back, and his fingers were pumping and the sensations were
driving me crazy. I was going to come -- hard. I moaned, twisting my hands further into
his hair.

He lifted his mouth once more, immediately replacing it with his tongue, taunting me.
“Scream my name. I want this whole mountain to know who’s making you come.”

Christ. I didn’t care who was about to hear me scream. I was so close.

“Sorry, are we interrupting something?” A voice pierced through my haze of pleasure,
not sounding sorry at all.

Fuck. Maybe I did care who heard.
I recognized the voice immediately. I didn’t want it to be who I thought it was, but I knew it was. How could I not recognize the voice of my oldest friend? Fuck. I lifted my head from between Charlie’s legs -- a monumental effort on my part -- and locked eyes with her. I needed her to keep quiet, and let me lead in this situation. As I got up to my feet, I shrugged out of my jacket, dropping it to cover Charlie before anyone saw anything they didn’t need to.

I sighed, dropping a nod to the three dragon shifters watching us. “Finn. Long time no see.” I assumed why they were here, but I was hoping like hell my assumption was wrong. Besides Finn, I didn’t recognize the other two.

Finn tipped his scraggly head of black hair sideways. “Cam. I have to say I’m surprised to see you here. Not shocked to see you hiking, because your mam told us you’d taken off again -- broke her poor heart, ach.” A small jab, one I let roll off my back. My oldest friend, yes. But we hadn’t been friends for some time. Finn continued, a small smirk growing on his face. “However, I am surprised to see you between the legs of such a pretty thing after what happened with M--”

The growl escaped me before I had a chance to stop it, and the voice that followed was more dragon than human. “Do not speak her name.”

Finn raised his hands, his smirk even wider. He knew he had hit his mark, and I had shown a weakness I really couldn’t afford. From behind me, I could hear Charlie hurrying to pull her pants up under the scratchy wool of my jacket. Shite. Charlie. What would she think, hearing my roar? “My apologies.”

I widened my stance in front of Charlie, making my position clear. If they had thought she was easy picking, they were mistaken. I rubbed my fingertip along my temple, already feeling a migraine growing from Finn’s needling. “Why are you here?” I asked.

Finn looked from side to side at either companion and shrugged. “Alpha said there was a fairly strong Supe source from out this way, and we were to come investigate it. If it was a female, we were to bring it back. Lack of natural resources and all that.” He grinned, a slimy, smarmy smile I wanted to wipe off his face with a solid left hook. He had always hated my left hooks. “From the moans we could hear halfway down the mountain, we determined it was obviously a female and, well, the rest is history.”
It. The way he spoke about other Supes -- other female Supes -- made me sick to my stomach. The situation with my dragon pack and the other Supes was a major factor in the divide between myself and the pack. That, and Mara. But there wouldn’t have been an issue with Mara if the pack hadn’t intervened.

Charlie scrambled to her feet, pressing into my side. I knew it was more defensive than anything, but still my heart cracked just a bit wider to see this vulnerable side to her. “It?” she snapped. Oh, fuck. I should’ve known Charlie was going to be problematic. “It has a fucking name.”

Finn turned his smile onto Charlie, who I didn’t even have to look at to know was shooting absolute daggers his way. I had been on the receiving end of those daggers already, and I didn’t envy him. But in the same breath, he deserved it. Asshole. “Aye, lass? Give us your name then.”

Don’t, I thought. They don’t deserve your name. “I’m not your fucking lass either.” Her body tensed next to me, and I could practically feel the mix of fear and anger running through her veins.

“You can’t have her,” I muttered, glaring at Finn. Daring him to look at me, to read the seriousness in my eyes. Charlie was not going with them, not to be offered up like some sacrificial lamb. I had only just started to see life flowing back through her, ever so slightly. For them to just take it away? No.

Finn shrugged. “You don’t exactly have a say anymore, Cam. You made that pretty damn clear last time you left. I’m sure you’ve felt how powerful she is. She’ll be a valuable addition.”

Charlie huffed. “Valuable addition to what?”

Fuck. I was going to have to explain everything to her sooner rather than later. I just needed Finn and his new friends to leave first.

Finn ignored Charlie, continuing to speak to me. “She’s coming with us, whether you like it or not. But I’m next in line to claim, and I don’t think I want this one to get away. Do you think she’ll cry out like she did for you when she’s in my bed? Or do you think I’ll be able to make her forget all about you?”

“I’m. Right. Fucking. Here.” Charlie waved her hands, and I squeezed her arm. Her talking would only make this worse.

I shook my head at Finn, attempting to stay calm even as I wanted to rip his head off for making me picture Charlie in his bed. “You’ve got the wrong girl, Finn. I haven’t felt anything while I’ve been with her. We just met at the inn last night, and decided to hike together.” I gave Charlie’s arm another quick squeeze, warning her to play along.

Instead, she stomped on my foot.

Pain radiated through my toes, but I probably deserved it. Because Finn was right -- I had felt how powerful Charlie was. I just hadn’t quite figured out what kind of Supe she was, but I definitely didn’t want the pack figuring it out for me.

Finn stalked closer, the grin slipping off his face with each step. When he was within an arm’s length of me, he leaned forward. “You’re lying.”

I closed my eyes, trying to think. Finn on his own I could deal with. But I wasn’t sure the skill level these other dragons possessed, and I couldn’t afford to put Charlie in any
further risk. I was going to have to think of some other way out of this.

Finn turned to the two men who had travelled with him. “I’ll deal with Cam. You two
secure the girl and make her ready for travel. We need to be quick if we want to get
home before dinner. And I, for one, could really use a fucking drink.”

His cronies laughed, stalking towards Charlie who had dropped into a crouch, fists
raised. “I’m not fucking going anywhere with you.”

Around us, the wind had shifted, blowing at our backs and into the faces of my former
packmates. They grimaced, but didn’t stop. Finn rolled his eyes, finally acknowledging
Charlie once again. “You don’t have a choice, darling. Besides, it’s a full moon tonight.
Would you rather I threw you to the literal wolves so they could have their way with
you?”

Before Charlie could make a smartass response I spoke up. “You can’t have her.” My
voice was stronger than I felt. Fuck. Was I really about to do this? She would never
fucking forgive me, but in the same breath, it was my only option to protect her at this
point.

“What do you mean I can’t have her? What possible reason could you have for me not
taking this delicious Supe home?” Finn’s voice was laced with humour, and I couldn’t
pretend I wasn’t the slightest bit excited to watch it disappear from his face. But Charlie
was about to become furious with me.

Forgive me, I thought. “You can’t have her, because I’ve already claimed her. I intend
to mate this woman as soon as we return home.” Beside me, Charlie had gone stiff but I
didn’t dare look in her direction. It’s for you.

“Excuse me?” Finn screeched. “What the actual fuck did you say?” Okay, yeah, so
watching him process that I’d already had her felt a little good.

I took a deep breath, steadying my voice. “I intend to mate Charlie. I have laid my
claim on her.”

“You can’t do that,” Finn stuttered. “You’ve already had a mate. This one is mine.”

I met his angry stare head on. “And yet I did. You know the rules. You want her?
You’ll have to fight me for her. But not before you announce your intentions to the
Alpha.”

“Again. I’m right fucking here,” Charlie hissed. She was livid, and I couldn’t say I
blamed the lass.

“I’ll explain everything as soon as I can.” I spoke under my breath, trying to squeeze
her hand, but she wrenched her arm away from me, putting distance between us.

Finn was absolutely fuming, but he knew I was right. There was nothing he could do
without being thrown out of the pack. This was a situation for the Alpha, and the Alpha
alone. “Fine. You want to do this the hard way? We’ll do this the hard way. Let’s go boys,
we’re going home. Let Cam worry about making sure his whore of a girlfriend gets there
in one piece.”

I growled deep in my chest, but Finn was already stalking around the corner of the
trail, presumably to the field on the other side where there was more room to shift for the
journey back home. I snatched Charlie’s hand up, refusing to let her tug out of my grasp
this time. I was bringing her into the lion’s den, but fuck if I wasn’t going to keep her
safe. I pulled her behind me, joining Finn and the other two in the field.

“I don’t even know what kind of shifters you are, and now you’re dragging me to your home? To be fucking claimed like a piece of meat?” Even though I could feel her anger, her voice just sounded disappointed. Disappointed in me.

Finn perked his head up, in the process of stripping off his clean white button-down. His mouth pulled to the side in a crooked grin, never one to let his anger stop him from a moment to show off. “Didn’t your boyfriend tell you before he shoved his head between those gorgeous legs of yours? We’re dragons, darling.”

He dropped his pants and shifted into his large grey dragon I knew so well. The other two also shifted, into smaller bronze dragons. Soldier dragons. Charlie didn’t say a word -- whether in fear or surprise I wasn’t sure. They stood, waiting for me.

I locked gazes with Charlie briefly as I took a step forward, giving her a small smile. Forgive me.

I took another step forward and shifted.
Well, shit. Not only had I managed to find the one guy in the whole fucking world I couldn’t scare off, but I had somehow walked right into a literal nest of dragons. Shifters took advantage of us, but dragon shifters were the worst. Power hungry, and collectors by nature, our abilities were just too tempting to pass up.

This was not what I fucking needed. Not right now. Not ever. I knew I should’ve just run in the other direction when Cam slid down that hill after me -- broken ankle or not.

And now, here I was, looking at an ugly fucker of a grey dragon, two smaller, uglier fuckers of brown dragons that I couldn’t tell apart, and Cam. Except it wasn’t Cam. Not Cam as I had known him over the last day. No. In front of me, was an absolutely massive black dragon. His scales shone in the sunlight, one blending into the next like silk, even though I knew if I touched them they would be as tough as iron. If a dragon could be beautiful, Cam was breathtaking. But I couldn’t be here. I took a step backwards. And then another. But before I could take another step in the opposite direction of the dragons, Cam’s black head was in front of me. The eyes were still Cam’s. And I knew they were telling me not to run. Hell, even I knew running wouldn’t end well for me. But I still couldn’t stop the need to get away from here.

I sighed. Was I really about to put my trust in a man -- a dragon? Christ. I was, because the only way I could outrun four fully grown dragons would be to use my magic, and I couldn’t do that without telling the entire world where I was. I was going to have to trust that Cam wouldn’t hurt me, and then make a run for it when they were distracted. But all four sets of eyes were on me currently and I would be burnt toast before I even made it around the corner. Around their necks swung nearly identical bags – to hold their clothes until we landed, I assumed.

And what exactly was all this bullshit about laying claim to me? Were all dragons this fucking backwards, thinking they thought they could just “claim” a woman and we’d just accept it? I would just fall into their arms, swooning over their accents?

I didn’t give a fuck how handsome Cam was, or exactly how close I had been to orgasm when these...friends of his interrupted us. Definitely didn’t care to think about the ache that still throbbed between my legs. Cam definitely knew what he was doing, and his tongue was damn near magical. But again, that was a later problem. Top of the
pyramid problem. At the bottom of the pyramid? Survival. Which meant I had to get the hell away from these dragons.

I narrowed my eyes towards Cam. This was probably the stupidest idea I had ever had. When Cam made a noise that sounded like a cross between a snort and a laugh, I realized I had spoken aloud. “Shut up,” I muttered. “How does this work anyways? Are you going to carry me in your mouth or what?” Please be or what. I didn’t want to get anywhere close to his massive set of teeth.

Cam turned around, lowering one large shoulder towards the ground, and I realized he wanted me to climb onto his back. One of the other dragons made a sound of displeasure, and Cam swung his head back as if to tell me to hurry up. Okay, so my options were to ride on the back of a massive dragon, or to be burnt to a crisp as I attempted to run away. I sighed, rolling my eyes. Flying on a dragon it was. I just hoped we would stop somewhere that would make running away slightly easier when the time came.

I held my hands out in front of me, making my way over to Cam’s huge front arm. His arm alone was double my height, but his size wasn’t enough to intimidate me. Dragons being mortal enemies of witches? Yeah, that was intimidation enough. I slid my hand along his forearm, his scales gliding smoothly beneath my touch. A low growl came from Cam, and I couldn’t tell if it was in annoyance, or in pleasure. I guessed I could use the spines on the ridges of his scales to climb my way up to his back. I would just have to be careful to not slice my hand open -- who knew the next time I’d have a chance to heal myself? One hand and one foot on his arm, and I felt pretty sturdy. Maybe this wasn’t so bad. I pulled myself up his body hand over foot until I knelt fairly comfortably on his back. Large black spikes stuck out around his neck, and I grabbed onto one of them for support just as the grey dragon launched into the sky. Christ. He was high. Had I mentioned to Cam that I was mildly afraid of falling? Probably not, because that would be a fucking weakness, and I couldn’t afford weaknesses -- definitely not around strangers.

How was I supposed to let Cam know I was ready? I twisted my neck so that I was leaning towards where I assumed his ear would be. This really should’ve been a topic of conversation before he shifted, but what the hell did I know? “Hey. I’m ready whenever you are.”

Beside us, the smaller dragons had taken to the sky as well. They were nothing more than small blurs of bronze against the morning sky, and my heart began to beat quickly in my chest. Cam wouldn’t let me fall. Hopefully. A low rumble shook through his body, and I clung tighter to his spike -- a seatbelt this was not. And then his wings were moving, flapping, and the ground was growing further and further away. I closed my eyes, not wanting to see the ground this far away from my feet. I liked my control, and flying on the back of a dragon in the middle of the air was the furthest from control that I could possibly be. My stomach sank lower and lower as we got higher and higher, and I attempted to convince myself I was not about to be sick.

When I opened my eyes briefly, the dragons were flying just below the cloud cover in a diamond-like formation. For whatever reason, the other dragons weren’t concerned about Cam running off. Probably because three on one was a bit of an unfair advantage.
Or because Cam knew that more dragons would only follow. He had to have his reasons. However, I was curious about them flying below the clouds. Did they use a similar kind of magic as the coven? The coven had long used a simple spell that diverted attention elsewhere. Our homes could be in plain sight, and a human would just feel the need to look the other way. It was handy, and the only possible reason I could think of for four full grown dragons to not be afraid of flying openly in the daytime. That, or it was rural Scotland and there wasn’t anyone around to see them anyways. Either or.

My stomach began to settle as we flew, but my brain was still nowhere near okay with being this far off the ground. Blood was pumping furiously, and it was all I could hear. Not even the wind was louder than my skyrocketing blood pressure. Cam flew smoothly through the air -- more like gliding than actual flying -- but I still kept a white knuckled grip on the spike in front of me. My legs were shaking from stiffness and being too afraid to move. But even through the fear there was something else coursing through my veins…desire? I wanted to chalk it up to being left on the edge from earlier, but deep down I knew it was something more. Dragons were always something to fear, to run away from. But here I was, riding on top of one, and the man beneath the sleek dragon skin wanted me desperately. It was a heady feeling, and I felt it pulse straight to my clit. Keep it together, Charlie.

I couldn’t tell how long we had been flying, because I closed my eyes soon after and kept a steady count of 10 in my head. To me it felt like years. The next time I got on the back of a dragon wouldn’t be far enough in the future for me. But soon I felt Cam dropping, and all of my internal organs dropping with him. I snuck a peek out of my nearly shut eyes, only to be happily surprised that the ground was only a mere ten feet away. Unfortunately, the lower we got to the ground, the more my stomach started to churn. Christ, don’t be sick now. When we were only a couple feet off the field the dragons had obviously deemed as our landing spot, I leapt off Cam’s back, falling heavily to my knees. Now I looked weak. I straightened the straps on my backpack, and took off for the nearest bunch of brush -- hoping I was far enough away to hide the noise.

Behind me, the noises of bones cracking told me one or more of the dragons were shifting back, but I was solely focused on throwing up the remains of my stomach into the half dead bush in front of me. Dragons, and motion sickness. This was making for an absolutely wonderful day. What would be next? Would my grandmother show up to tell me how much of a disappointment I was? That idea made me snort, and I knelt, wiping my mouth on the back of my hands. I would’ve killed for the toothbrush Cam had offered last night.

“Why didn’t you tell me you had a fear of heights, lass?” Cam’s angry voice snapped behind me.

“I don’t,” I muttered. He couldn’t possibly know I did. Could he?

“So your death grip on my spine was just to make me feel good then? I’m honoured, but you didn’t need to go quite that far.” Was he…making fun of me?

“I didn’t know you could feel that,” I murmured.

“Aye, I could feel that alright. I could feel everything.” His voice dropped, and I had no idea how to take his admission. There was no way. No. Fucking. Way. He could feel my
desire I didn’t even want to feel myself. I was quiet, resting my hands on my knees as I collected myself. “So are we done flying then?”

“We walk from here.” Cam rested his hand on my back, rubbing gently. I wanted to push him away, but couldn’t bring myself to. My skin burned with his touch, even through my layers of clothing. “Here, drink something.” In front of my face a water bottle appeared. I thanked him and I took it.

I swished the water around in my mouth, composing myself. Surely at some point on this next walk, they would get distracted and I could make my break for it. As long as they were all in human form. I took stock of my surroundings, but I had absolutely zero idea of where we were. Brush, scrubby fields, and a few steep hills surrounded us -- we could be literally anywhere in Scotland. Added to the fact that I had no idea how fast the dragons flew, and I was basically screwed. And not in a good way. I spat the water out, and handed the bottle back to Cam. I had been in worse situations, right? I could figure my way out of this one.

“Let’s go!” Finn called from somewhere behind us, sounding annoyed. “I don’t have time to faff about in meadows with girls who can’t handle flying.”

“We’ll be right there, Finn. Cool it,” Cam snapped. I turned to face him, and he gave me a serious look. “Don’t say anything you don’t have to. Keep quiet. I’m going to do my best to get us both out of here as quickly as possible.”

Both? He tugged my hand. We fell into step next to each other on a well-worn path that cut through the field and led over a steep hill. Ahead of us, Finn led the way. Behind him, his lackeys trailed. Christ. I had to come up with a plan fast. Hopefully we’d be stopping and I’d be able to find a moment then. “Both of us?” I whispered to Cam out of the corner of my mouth.

He pressed his lips into a tight line and shook his head. “We can’t talk here. It isn’t safe. I’ll explain everything later. I promise.” He was still holding my hand and he squeezed it gently. I subconsciously shivered against his touch, and it brought a small smile to his face. “We’ll deal with that too, ice queen.”

Did he really think it would be so easy for me to fall back into his arms? We had almost reached the bottom of the hill, and I tugged my hand away to better balance myself on the climb. “I don’t know about that,” I seethed. “Seems we still have a matter of a claim to discuss.”

Cam frowned again, passing me to offer a hand on a loose bit of rock. I climbed past without acknowledging him. “I’ll explain everything.”

If I gave him the chance. With any luck, I’d be long gone. I looked up, towards where Finn stood on the top of the steep incline watching us carefully as we climbed. “Where are we going anyways?”

I reached the top of the hill and gasped when I saw what lay on the other side, hidden behind the steep inclines where we had landed. Nestled into a rocky outcrop of a valley was a massive castle, carved into the rock. On one side, the castle dropped off into nothing but air -- a sheer drop forming one wall. A mountain formed the backside. To the front was a lake so deep, it appeared black. No, this wasn't a castle. This was a fortress.
And if I went inside, I wasn’t sure I’d ever be able to leave.

Cam joined me at the top of the hill. The tension radiated off him in waves, and the wind whispered warnings through the fields of limp grass. “Home, lass. I’m bringing you home.”
I wasn’t stupid. I knew Charlie meant to run at her earliest possible opportunity. I also knew what her taut body language meant. She knew that once inside, she’d be trapped. I knew this feeling well, because I had felt it enough growing up. Even now, staring at the grey foreboding walls, I felt like once I stepped foot inside that would be it for me. No more chances, goodbye freedom.

But it couldn’t be. Because at the very least, I had promised to get Charlie out, and my word meant something — regardless of whether or not the ice queen chose to believe me. I just needed to figure out the safest way for us to leave without an angry swarm of dragons following us. I couldn’t imagine Charlie would be thrilled with the idea, and the pack didn’t take kindly to potential mates “running away.” No. Leaving in plain sight might be better -- if I could swing it.

Charlie was quiet as we walked towards the castle, Tweedledee and Tweedledum maintaining a steady banter behind us. Finn didn’t offer us a single look back as the massive gates opened. I will leave here, I thought. We will both leave here.

“We’ll go right to see the Alpha. He’ll sort this whole mess out,” Finn announced, finally deigning to face us.

Charlie shot me a wide-eyed look of uncertainty, and I quickly grabbed her hand, grateful when she didn’t pull away. I shook my head. Don’t show fear. Besides, even throughout all of my... issues, the Alpha had always seemed to have taken a liking to me. I wasn’t concerned about playing this off the right way, as long as Charlie could play along. Finn’s cronies walked in the opposite direction, thank fuck, as we began the trek down the cool stone hallway to the Alpha’s office.

I had been gone for months, but nothing here had changed. The cracked, dark stone still framed the halls. The wooden shutters still hung crookedly, and the dirty panes of glass still needed a good washing. But none of that mattered, because the only thing these dragons seemed to be focused on was forcing unwilling women to mate with them. I needed a moment to talk to Charlie before we got dragged into the Alpha’s office.

My feet remembered the direction, even if my head was off in space. I focused on Charlie’s hand clasped in mine, and the fact that we would leave here. Soon, we stood outside the Alpha’s office. A dark wood, nondescript door was all that separated us from
our fate, and I had never wanted to burn something down as badly as I did that door. “You two will stay right here. There are guards at every staircase, so don’t think you’d be able to sneak past. I’ll talk to the Alpha first, and see if I can straighten this mess out.” Finn sniffed, but I was caught by the mention of guards. That was new. Why so much security?

I rolled my eyes. “We’re not going anywhere.” Finn growled, and I glared back. He had always tried to out-alpha me and had always failed -- this time was no different. Eventually he turned and walked inside, slamming the heavy door shut behind him.

“Charlie,” I hissed, pulling her around to look at her face. Her blue eyes were bright and curious, and I know she missed nothing of our walk into the castle. “Charlie, we only have a minute for me to explain.”

She nodded. “Okay. I’m pretty sure you’ll need more than a minute, but let’s see how this goes.”

For fuck’s sake. “Look, lass, you aren’t safe here. I don’t know what kind of Supe you are, but you’re powerful. Anyone can tell. My pack... these dragons...” I trailed off, not wanting to lump myself in with the rest of them. “They aren’t good people. They kidnap other Supes and force them to mate with dragons to enhance their powers.”

“Excuse me?” Charlie snapped. “And you brought me here?”

I ran my hand through my messy hair and groaned. “I didn’t exactly have a fucking choice. That’s why I had to claim you when I saw Finn.”

Her eyes were no longer curious. They were pure ice, drilling into my heart and soul. “So you could mate with me before anyone else got a chance?”

“Yes! No! Fuck.” I grabbed her shoulders, and she tensed but I didn’t let go. “Look. I won’t force you to mate with me. But if other people think that I’m going to, you’re safe. So for your own friggen safety, please. Just go along with whatever I say in there. Okay?”

Charlie just continued to glare at me, her lips pressed into a tight line.

I shook her gently. “Okay? You can be as pissed as you want at me. But just trust me to get us out of here.”

She pushed my hands off her shoulders and slumped against the wall. “Okay.”

I sighed heavily. God, she was stubborn. At that moment, Finn opened the door, smirking as he looked back and forth between Charlie and myself. “The Alpha wants to see you both.”

I reached for Charlie’s hand and she froze. With a slight shake of my head she finally took my hand, and we entered the room together.

“Cam! I had no idea you were coming back home,” the Alpha greeted me loudly, and I forced a smile on my face.

“Alpha,” I responded, tipping my head in respect. “I had no idea I was coming home until I ran into Finn.”

The Alpha was older, but with the slow aging process of Supes he looked no more than forty. A bright smile hid the decay lurking underneath his skin. The pack hadn’t forced matings until he took power, and now it seemed like they had never known any different. Change would be hard to bring around. His smile now didn’t drop. “Yes, Finn mentioned running into you and an unknown Supe we had been tracking. I didn’t realize
the two of you would be together.”

I rubbed Charlie’s hand with my thumb. “This is Charlie, sir. We met while we were hiking. I claimed her with the intent to mate.”

Finn growled once more behind us, but the Alpha raised his hand, demanding silence. “Cam, you know how unusual this situation is. Typically we don’t allow our dragons to take a second mate after the... loss of a first. But you also seem to be quite infatuated with the girl.”

I dropped my voice, sounding more dragon than human. “She is mine. We will not forfeit her to another.”

Charlie gasped, and I wasn’t sure what was the truth and what was an act anymore.

The Alpha frowned briefly. “Well, I don’t want to push anyone to violence.” A lie. “So if you feel this strongly towards the young lady, then I think it’s only right we see what she wants.”

Fuck. Play along, Charlie. Please. For both of our sakes.

The Alpha turned towards Charlie. “What do you want, Charlie? We can offer you protection with another dragon of your choosing.” Another lie. “Or you can choose to accept Cam’s claim to mate you?”

The seconds felt like hours as we all waited for Charlie’s response. I had no idea what she would say. Then she took a deep breath in. “I’ve fallen in love with Cam, sir. I have no intention of being mated to anyone else.”

Was it possible for my heart to swell as much as it was with Charlie’s words? I knew they were false, all a part of the ruse I was forcing her to play, but it still felt right.

Mate, my dragon roared. I didn’t bother correcting it this time.

The Alpha clapped his hands together. “Oh, how wonderful. I do so love true love, however unusual it may be.”

I smiled, my jaws hurting with the effort. “Me too. Are we free to leave now?”

“Of course, dear boy, of course. Go and revel in that wonderful new love feeling.”

I pulled Charlie towards the door, but the Alpha’s voice stopped me from leaving. “You arrived on a most opportune night, Cam. We have a feast tonight, and I know everyone would love to see you and Charlie attend. Shall I seat you at my table?”

Fuck. Charlie was not going to go for this, but I knew the best thing we could do would be to hide in plain sight. My one saving grace was that my mam loathed feasts, and would be hiding away in the kitchen all evening. One less awkward explanation.

Hoping my smile looked genuine and not like a grimace, I turned back to address the Alpha. “Of course. We would be honoured to sit with you.” Charlie’s nails were tiny daggers digging into my palm and I was surprised blood wasn’t dripping to the floor.

“Wonderful. Finn, I’ll see you there too, my boy.” Finn, beside me, nodded and smiled.

The three of us left the room, Finn shutting the door behind us with an echo in the hollow hallway. He sneered at me. “You know you won’t be able to run before the feast.”

“I have no intentions of running,” I said. Charlie’s hands were still digging into me, and I needed to get us somewhere private. “Are my rooms still available?”

“Your mother wouldn’t let us change them.” He stepped closer, invading both of our personal spaces. “You won’t win this one, Cam. I will have her.”
“Over my dead body,” Charlie snapped. This time it was her pulling me down the hallway, away from Finn.

Once his footsteps faded away, I stopped us, Charlie still tugging. “My rooms are the other way, Charlie.”

“Oh.” She was quiet again, and I wished I could see what was happening inside her mind. I wished I could understand all of the intricate parts that made her the beautiful woman she was.

I unlocked the door to my bedroom. Finn was right. Nothing about it had changed. Heavy grey curtains still covered the faded window, and the blue bedspread was still in desperate need of an iron. To be honest, I was surprised my mam hadn’t ironed it while I had been gone. I just never saw the purpose in those things.

“Uhhhh…” I turned to Charlie, suddenly nervous. “So, uh, this is my room. You can have the bed, and I’ll take the couch. You’ll be safe here, I promise.” I wanted her to feel safe around me, in my space. I was desperate for it. She wasn’t looking at me, but was examining every part of my childhood sanctuary.

“Have you always lived here?” she asked, stepping away from me to drag her finger down the top of my dresser. I wished I had known I was going to bring a girl back here. I would’ve cleaned. Gotten a new bedspread. No, I wouldn’t have.

“Aye,” I said. “Some of the dragons live in the surrounding woods, but my mam’s a cook. We’ve lived here for as long as I can remember.”

Charlie took off her backpack, sitting on the bed to undo her hiking boots. I pointed through the partially opened door across from the bed. “That’s the bathroom, if you’d like to shower. Feasts usually begin at seven, so we have some time.”

Her head snapped up, blue eyes blazing. “Why did you tell him we would attend the dinner? I thought you wanted to leave as badly as I did.”

I sighed, drumming my fingers on the still open door. “It’s easier to hide in plain sight, Charlie. Give me this one night, and then we’ll run. But if we attend tonight, it’ll seem less suspicious.”

She was digging through her rucksack, not looking at me. “You seem to ask for one night a lot.”

She had me there. “I know. And I’m sorry. I’ll make this right, I promise.” I wanted to cross the room, and take her into my arms. I wanted her to melt with my touch. I wanted her to trust me. But I had things to do if we were going to leave tonight.

Charlie stood, grabbed her small bag and walked into the bathroom without a look back. I wanted her to look at me, and to burn me with her icy blue stare. I wanted her to singe a hole in my heart that would never be repaired. But she needed space and time, and I really needed to go. “I have a few errands to run. Keep the door locked, and don’t open it for anyone. I have a key.” I turned to step out into the hallway.

“Cam.”

I stopped. “Yeah?”

“What did the Alpha mean about losing your mate?”


She nodded, and closed herself inside the bathroom. I walked out into the hallway.
locking the door behind me. I hadn’t lied to her. Hiding in plain sight was always better than just running. But it hadn’t been the whole truth. I needed the entire evening to prepare Charlie, because when she ran, I had every intention of following her.
I had never been so grateful for a hot shower. The steaming water gave me a minute to come undone, and to let my weaknesses come out to play. I was a witch, in a literal castle filled with dragons, and I had to pretend to be in love with one of them. How had this happened? Fat lot of good being a witch did me now.

I let loose a small amount of my magic, not enough to be sensed, just enough to make sure I didn’t lose complete control. The water responded to my call, swirling around me in a rapid tornado as I silently screamed. From one jail to another. How fucking appropriate.

And Cam. If I hadn’t let my attraction for him control me just a bit too much I would’ve never been in this situation. But no, my desire to come just had to outweigh my safety at that moment. And to make matters worse, I hadn’t even gotten to finish before Finn and his dweeb friends had shown up. So what did I get out of this whole situation? Sharing a room with Helpful McHottie? Because that had gotten me so far before. Images of the previous night flashed through my mind, the wild way he had looked at me as he was thrusting, demanding my complete attention and compliance. Damn. A flush of desire zapped through me. The shifter knew how to screw -- I’d give him that much.

No. I couldn’t lose focus again. I twisted the tap to cold, letting the ice water calm my mind before I stepped out of the shower. The bathroom was clean, even if it was minimal, and finding a towel wasn’t an issue. Finding something to wear tonight was going to be a bigger problem though — my rucksack consisted mostly of wool and plaid, and I didn’t think that was going to fly at a feast.

I walked back into Cam’s bedroom, feeling oddly invasive of his privacy, but he was still gone. I spun around, taking stock of his room. There was a surprising lack of photos displayed, no friends or family on the wall. Who was this guy? Was he just as ready to run as I was? The bland comforter gave away no hint of personality. Nothing adorned the walls with the exception of bookshelves. The monotonous room made me feel a bit better about using Cam for my own needs.

I noticed a flash of colour out of the corner of my eye. A striking green dress hung on the wardrobe, but what caught my eye was the surprising lack of fabric. Seriously? Whoever was told to summon a dress for me obviously had no idea of my height and my
hips -- both of which were going to be more on display than normal. I just wanted to get through this stupid dinner, alive, and then be on my merry way.

And right now, I couldn’t tell if Cam was on the same page as I was, or in a completely different chapter.

We stood outside the heavy wooden doors that led into the hall. I shifted uncomfortably in the green dress. It draped over my shoulders and hips in a rich shade of forest green, but left the entirety of my back bared. It went against everything I had ever known to have my back exposed -- in more ways than one.

Cam leaned over to bring his mouth to my ear. “You look beautiful.” He was dressed in an expensive looking jacket atop a shirt and a kilt. His kilt matched everyone else’s in the hall, so I assumed it was the pack’s signature tartan. He looked stunning, but I was pissed at him for not getting us out of here when we had the chance. I would’ve told him as much, if he hadn’t shown up back in his bedroom hours later without a word about where he’d been, and then announced we’d need to leave in five minutes. Some warning would’ve been appreciated.

“Shut up,” I muttered. “It’s your fault I’m wearing this ridiculous getup in the first place.”

He put his hand against my back, and my skin burned where he trailed his fingertips. I wanted to punch him out for laying a land on me. I also wanted to demand he drag his hands lower, slipping them beneath the silk of my dress.

I was fucked, is what I was. Absolutely, positively fucked in the head. Was it possible to develop Stockholm syndrome this soon?

Cam sighed. “I promise I’ll get us both out of here as quickly as I can, Charlie girl. But it was easier not to fight them on this.”

“Whatever,” I huffed. I just needed to get through the evening. One night. I found myself saying that more and more often, and I really needed to follow through.

He grabbed my hand, and held it tight. I glared at him -- more furious at my traitorous body for responding to his touch than I was at him holding my hand. “You’re claimed, lass. We’re about to be on display in front of the entire pack. We can’t afford to let the ruse slip.”

I chewed on the inside of my cheek, nodding. I knew he was right. Getting out of here alive was more important than my pride right now. “We won’t.”

“Good.” He grinned crookedly at me. “You really do look beautiful in that dress. I’m glad I chose it.”

Excuse me? My mouth dropped open, but I had no time to question him before he was opening the door and leading us into the hall filled with every kind of Supe imaginable.

My senses kicked into overdrive as I recognized shifters and vamps, angels, and even a siren or two. Now what Cam said about the mates made sense. Some looked happier than others to be here, and their keepers were less than enthused. I forced myself to plaster a smile on my face -- perfected over the years in the coven. Cam greeted people
as they milled about or sat at tables covered with heavy cloths. I don't know what I had been expecting when I imagined a hall full of dragons, but it wasn't this. We had been raised to see the dragons as heathens, raising their young in dirty backwoods cabins. Not sipping wine in fancy clothing, quietly talking with their peers.

Cam led us to a table up near the front. The round table already held the Alpha, a bored looking woman, another couple I didn't recognize, and Finn. He was nuzzling into the neck of a shifter, so obviously his ego hadn't been hit too hard. As Cam pulled out a chair for me, Finn looked up with a venomous glare. Maybe not.

"Charlie. You look positively radiant," the Alpha greeted me, a cool smile on his face. He turned to the woman sitting next to him. "Doesn't she, Iris?"

I sat down, and Iris gave me a half glance. "Yes. She is rather pretty. I understand why Cam was so desperate to lay claim to her."

Finn sneered as Cam sat down next to me, and the Alpha laughed. "From what I've heard, they're pretty infatuated with each other. That's why I allowed Cam to take a second mate so readily. Can't be one to interfere with true love, can we?"

I took a drink of water, and nearly choked at his words. Cam snaked out his hand, squeezing my thigh tightly and I knew he was telling me to keep it together. I swallowed my water without coughing, and gave the Alpha a polite smile. "Well, I'm glad of it."

Underneath the tablecloth, Cam released my thigh, but didn't move his hand. I froze as he pushed the high slit to one side, his hand finding the bare skin of my leg. He stroked circles with his thumb, and I cursed the goosebumps already rising from his touch.

I smiled blandly at the table, before hiding my face behind my hair. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" I hissed.

He slipped his hand higher, digging his fingertips into my soft flesh. "We're madly in love, aren't we?"

Fuck. He was right. And I had told him I wouldn't let the ruse slip. But I wasn't expecting him to use my desire against me. I turned away, attempting to ignore his teasing fingers when I heard Iris call my name. "So Charlie, what brought you to our side of the world?"

Cam's mouth was still resting in the crook of my neck, and I was distracted by his proximity. His smell. Him. His hand was drifting higher under my dress, and I tried to squeeze my legs together to offer some relief. He smiled against my skin, and I knew I was screwed. "She asked you a question, Charlie girl," he whispered.

"I'm sorry. I'm not sure where my head is at right now," I apologized.

The Alpha laughed again. "Oh, I'm sure I know."

No. I'm really not sure you do.

I turned my attention back to Iris. "I had some vacation time saved up from work, and I really needed a break. Scotland seemed... quiet."

Iris nodded appeased, and I shot a quick glance towards Cam. "Stop it," I muttered.

"Your mouth is saying one thing, ice queen, but your body is saying another," Cam rasped in my ear. He pushed aside the flimsy panties I wore, stroking his finger between my legs and hissing at the wetness he found there. "You're really going to make me take
care of this in public?"

“There’s nothing to take care of.” I turned away from him. The Alpha excused himself and Iris, getting up to greet more arrivals.

“So you want me to leave you like this? Aching and needy for me all night long?” He stroked again, his finger toying with my damp folds. My eyes fluttered closed against the onslaught of his words.

“How long have you been craving my cock, Charlie?” My eyes flew open and I sat up straight.

“People are watching!” I looked around from side to side. But Finn was occupied with his new floozy, and the other couple was engaged in what seemed to be a heated argument.

“That’s the point, mate,” he murmured. He slid a long finger inside me, and I pressed my mouth shut so as to not moan. “So, do you want me to take care of this now?” A second finger joined the first, and I bit down hard on my lip. “Or later?”

“Fuck,” I groaned softly. I darted my eyes around but no one seemed to have taken any notice. He was curling his fingers inside of me, and heat was curling deep in my belly. This was so wrong.

“What was that? Do you want me to stop?” He pulled back slightly, grinning as he slipped his fingers out of me. The ache was immediate, my body craving his touch.

“No!” I protested, too quickly. Christ. Cam’s smile grew predatory. "No?"

“Please.” It was all for show, right? For my safety. For our safety. Turning him away wouldn’t do. It had absolutely nothing to do with my pulsing clit, desperate for release. It was for safety. That’s what I would tell myself anyways.

His hand was still draped on my naked thigh, and I widened my legs ever so slightly — an invitation I didn’t anticipate offering but also couldn’t help. He dipped his fingers back towards my pussy, teasing. Taunting. My breath was coming out in soft pants, and I was so ready for his fingers to enter me again. For all of him to enter me again.

“Cam! I had no idea you had returned. And what’s this I hear you intend to claim a mate?” I twisted my neck to see an older dragon shifter coming our way, and Cam’s hand froze, still hidden by the tablecloth.

Cam slipped his hand down, resting it on a more appropriate piece of my body as he turned to address the man. I sighed, wondering if this was a blessing in disguise, helping me to not make the same mistake I had last night. My mind was strong, but the flesh was weak and no matter how much I knew I shouldn’t want Cam, my body refused to listen. It would be safer for both of us once I was far away from him.

I listened in with one ear on Cam’s quiet conversation, idle gossip about what he had missed. Grabbing my water glass, I took a sip. I wasn’t sure how long we had to be in attendance at this event before we could make a break for it. Although the dragons seemed curious about me, most refused to meet my eyes. But across the room, an elegant sandy-haired woman met my gaze, giving me a smile. Her grin seemed to convey more than happiness, as she raised her glass in a quiet toast in my direction.

Suddenly, Finn was leaning over my shoulder, interrupting the moment. “You don’t
fool me. This whole lovesick puppies charade you have going on doesn't fool me one bit. You'll slip up, and then you'll be all mine to claim.”

My glass shook as I slammed it down with a bit too much force. I turned around to look him right in his wretched face, matching it with as much fury as I could manage. “In your fucking dreams.”

“I know what you are, Charlie,” he whispered, and my blood froze. “A witch. Cam can pretend he doesn’t know all he wants, but I smelled it the second I saw you on that mountain with his head between your legs.”

I had been so careful. He had to be bluffing. “Why haven’t you said anything yet?” I kept my voice cool. Collected. As if my body wasn’t boiling, urging me to run as fast as my feet would carry me.

Finn smiled. “It doesn’t serve my purpose right now. Why would I spread such a juicy secret just to have more competition to mate you? No. I think that little tidbit will best serve me after we’re mated.”

Cam must have felt me tense because I heard him say goodbye to the man, and turn his attention to us. “What are you doing here?” he snapped.

Finn rolled his eyes. “Just telling your date how bewitching she looks tonight.”

Fuck. Finn took his seat, his date immediately snaking her arms around his neck again, but I could feel his eyes on me the entire time.

“Cam, I need to tell you something.” I didn’t want to tell him. Didn’t want to let my secret loose. But Finn knew, and Cam needed to understand the urgency of us getting out of here tonight.

“What is it?” He grabbed my hand, and for once the touch felt reassuring instead of assuming. Like maybe, just maybe, I wasn’t alone. I wished the wind was here to tell me one way or another.

But the Alpha was sitting down, and the words that were on the tip of my tongue caught in my throat. I’m a witch. I don’t belong here. It isn’t safe for me. “Dinner is served!” he announced.

Please. Help me. But the words didn’t come, so I shook my head and turned my attention to the plate of steaming food in front of me. I didn’t miss the look of disappointment Cam shot me, but the moment had passed.

One night. I just needed to survive one night in a den of dragons.
Charlie had been about to open up to me. I had seen it -- just a flash of emotion behind her carefully guarded eyes. What had she been about to say? Dammit. If dinner hadn’t been served at that precise moment, what secrets would she have gifted me? My dragon prowled and paced, clawing in desperation to know this mysterious woman sat next to me. He wanted to claim her. I wanted her to choose me. But still, I didn’t want to subject her to my darkness.

The secret she had been so close to sharing was driving me crazy. Instead I sat next to her, picking away at a perfectly cooked piece of chicken, pretending like I wasn’t rock hard underneath my fucking kilt. She was the sexiest thing I had ever seen, and she let me touch her. Was going to share her secrets with me.

I needed to get her alone again. My dragon celebrated, happy we were working towards the same goal. I had an opportunity earlier, in my room. After I brought the dress back, I heard her stepping out of the shower. I could imagine her, naked beneath my dull grey towels -- not that it would dampen her shine even one iota. Water would be dripping down the ivory skin of her back, towards the curve of her hips, and that lush flesh that lay between her legs. Shite. I knew she hadn’t brought any clothes into the bathroom, and if I so much as glimpsed her wet flesh, even obscured by the ugly towel, I’d be a goner. So I had to leave. To maintain what little control I had over my body. Which was foolish, because my dragon was already getting harder to contain.

I groaned, subtly rearranging my cock, but my attire didn’t exactly afford much privacy. Charlie, long finished eating, shot me a curious look out of the corner of her eye. Fuck. That didn’t help the situation at all. I needed to get away from this table, and clear my head. I wouldn’t be any use to either of us if all I could focus on was getting my dick wet.

I stood from the table abruptly, everyone looking towards me as I jostled plates and glasses. “I.. uh. I think I ate too much.” I backed away before anyone could notice my predicament.

But Charlie stood as well. “I’ll come with you,” she announced quietly.

Well that definitely wouldn’t fucking help things. “No, no, it’s fine. You stay and enjoy dessert.”
She narrowed her eyes, leaving no room for argument. “I’m coming with you.”

“Fine,” I huffed.

Finn raised a brow. “Are you sure you want your mate to miss dessert? Sounds terribly selfish to me.”

But the Alpha waved, cutting him off. “Nonsense. I remember what it was like to be young and in love. Let them run off.” He winked at me, and suddenly the sickness I was faking didn’t seem that far away from the truth. Next to him, Iris sat with a completely glazed look on her face.

I grabbed Charlie’s hand with more force than necessary, and stormed out of the hall without another word -- before I could change my mind. I pulled her behind me, down the dimly lit winding halls.

“What’s your problem?” she hissed, stopping behind me.

I hadn’t realized how fast I was forcing her to walk, and in seconds we’d arrived in an empty wing of the castle, far from the feast. “What do you mean?”

She sighed, crossing her arms across her chest. I was pretty sure my pretty little ice queen was going to set me on fire with that look in her eyes. “I mean one second you’re fine, eating your dinner and the next you’re growling and saying you need to leave.”

“I am fine. And you didn’t need to come.” I leaned against the cool stone, letting the damp ease the blazing inferno of emotions swirling inside of me. She really shouldn’t have come. I wanted to help her escape, help her run, but my dragon was going crazy and I wasn’t sure how much longer I could hold him back. I rubbed my temples, trying to prevent the headache I knew was inevitable.

Charlie tipped her head, and I had never wanted to sink my teeth into such perfect flesh as badly as I did at this moment. The tender skin under her neck would bear my mark so beautifully... but no. Fuck. That was my dragon talking, not me. Gods. “Gee, and stay back with everyone who wants to force me to mate with them? Sounds like an absolute blast. No thanks, I’d rather take my chances in a dark hallway with you.”

“Fuck, Charlie, you can’t say shit like that.” If I didn’t have my cock inside her in the next five seconds, I was sure I was going to die. But I wanted -- no, I needed -- her to admit she wanted me too. I knew she did. She had said as much with her body. She just wouldn’t let the words leave those perfect lips.

She turned her chin up at me, glaring. “Why not?” Behind her, the lights in the hallway flickered and dimmed, leaving us in the faintest of lights.

I met her gaze dead on, fire and ice clashing at last. “Because a dragon who wants to fuck you as badly as I do is the last person you should be in a dark hallway with.”

A challenge had been laid, but would she rise to it? I knew she would be needy -- I could feel just how much at dinner when I slipped my fingers between those legs. I could practically smell her arousal from here. I needed her to admit she wanted me.

“Charlie,” I purred. “How long are you going to deny yourself? It’s just one night.”

She smirked. “You said that last night.”

“I still mean it. One night.” I licked my lips, my hand reaching out for her on its own volition. I stroked her hip through the soft silk, the dress I knew would look absolutely stunning on her. She curved her body into my touch, and I smiled. Did she know I was a
poisonous flower? Seducing her with beautiful words, and a gentle touch, only to poison her with my venom? She had to.

“How can you be so sure I want you?” she murmured.

“I felt how wet you were for me at dinner. Your body craves mine, same as mine craves yours. Is it the wisest choice? Probably not. Doesn’t mean it’s not right. Doesn’t mean I’m not desperate for another taste of that fucking pussy.” I took a step closer, pressing my body against her. She didn’t pull away.

I slipped the strap of her dress over her shoulder, kissing the skin I so badly wanted to bite. I wanted to go slow, to worship every inch of her skin, but she was so goddamn intoxicating. I couldn’t. I growled. My dragon rumbled so close to the surface, he delighted when I swung her around, pressed her against the stone. I caged her in with my arms.

I could feel her heart beating, could hear the wild rush of her breath, but it wasn’t out of fear this time. It was out of need. I pulled up her dress, exposing her thick, muscular thighs. I should’ve chosen a short dress. Something ripped but I didn’t care. I wasn’t sure my cock had ever been so hard. I rubbed my fingers over her panties, swirling my thumb around her clit. She gasped. I pushed aside her panties, sliding my fingers through her wetness with a groan. “Fuck, Cam,” she moaned. I pumped my fingers into her, slowly. Curling them, listening to her quiet cries. Biting her nipples through the dress, I knew I had her where I wanted her.

But I pulled my hand away. She glared at me. “What the fuck?”

“We’re playing by different rules this time.” I brought the fingers I had just sunk into her pussy to my mouth, licking them clean and never once breaking eye contact. “I need you to tell me how much you want me, Charlie girl. How much you want my cock inside you.”

She was panting again, and I wasn’t even touching her. Her taste in my mouth was pushing me to sanity’s edge. I needed her to cave soon. I was a wild man, desperate for her touch. “Tell me how much you need me to stretch you. How much you want me to make you scream. Tell me how desperate you are to lose control.”

I was captivated by the rise and fall of her chest with her heavy breaths, and I couldn’t help but stroke my heavy cock under my kilt. Her eyes followed me, watching my ministrations as she licked her lips. “You’re so fucking dirty, ice queen. Just tell me how much you want me, and I’ll give you what you need.”

Charlie closed her eyes, taking a deep breath. When she opened them, she stared right through me. “I want you, Cam. More than I should.”

Fuck. I growled, pushing her against the wall and shoving my tongue in her mouth, swallowing all of the small cries she made. I couldn’t give a fuck who heard her though. Let them hear. Fuck it all. I pulled back, pushing her dress up over her hips. I tugged her panties down and over her legs, and Charlie kicked them off the rest of the way. Pushing my kilt to one side, I steadied myself at her entrance. “Hold on to my shoulders, lass. I can’t promise gentle.” My voice was gruff, almost unrecognizable.

I was expecting a nod, or an acknowledgement. I wasn’t expecting a smile. Charlie grinned, wrapping her legs around my back and holding onto my shoulders, sinking down
onto my cock as she did so.

I thrust the rest of my length deep into her, pushing her back against the wall as we both moaned. When would it be enough? When would I have my fill? Charlie was sinking her nails into my back, and I began to piston my hips into her, enjoying her cries of pleasure. Her hand sank in between us, toying with her clit and that small motion entranced me. The fact that she was so bold, and had no qualms about taking her own pleasure... fuck, I was going to come as quick as a virgin.

“You’re going to do that for me one day. I’m going to sit back and watch you fuck yourself to your own release. Watch you take every. Little. Bit.” Her back had to hurt with the force of my thrusts, but she didn’t say anything. She just took my cock, driving her hand faster. I felt her pussy slowly clench around me. She was close, and I wasn’t going to be far behind.

I pressed closer to her, driving deeper, my mouth against her ear. I wanted to sink my canines into her neck and declare her as mine, but I wouldn’t. Not yet. “Fucking come.”

She did, screaming my name for everyone and their mothers to hear. The lights dimmed again, but I was too focused on my own release to question it. Fuck. I roared, pumping furiously as I came inside her.

I pressed my head against her chest, listening to her heartbeat and letting my breathing come back down. Charlie tangled her fingers in my hair. “You’re a lot angrier when you have sex,” she whispered.

I laughed, burying my face into Charlie’s scent. Something inside her was breaking apart and splintering, and hell if I didn’t want to be a part of that. I didn’t want this moment between us to end. I wanted her to admit all of her deepest, darkest secrets, and for her to listen to my own list of confessions. I wanted to confess my sins with every thrust inside her, each transgression earning me a moan of pleasure from her lips.

I brought my face up to kiss her again, desperate to have her skin against mine before she pushed me away. Because she would, I knew she would. She knew she would. It wasn’t a matter of if; it was a matter of when. She kissed me back, moving her lips against mine without urgency. It was slow, filled with all the silent words that separated us.

A slow clap broke us apart, and we both turned to look. Behind us, Finn applauded, a sneer scrawled across his face. Shite. I pulled up the straps of Charlie’s dress, making sure she was decently covered before I stepped away. There was no way I was letting Finn see what was mine. I tucked my still hard cock beneath my kilt. We were both a mess, and there was no way to clean up with Finn watching. I couldn’t deny the idea of my release dripping down her thighs was fucking hot though. She would smell like me when we returned to the feast. I had marked her without marking her, and my dragon was pleased.

“What do you want, Finn?” I snarled. Seriously. This end of the hallway was always fairly empty, so how had he even found us?

He rolled his eyes, stepping closer. “I just came to tell you that the Alpha announced your mating ceremony for tomorrow. We’re all so looking forward to it.”

“Why would he announce it if I wasn’t there?” That was not a part of the plan. A
mating ceremony meant increased security for the pair, and would make an escape nearly impossible tonight. I kept my face impassive so Charlie wouldn’t see my concern.

Finn shrugged. “Probably precisely because you weren’t there. I may or may not have let it slip that you had been down in the kitchen scrounging enough provisions for two. It may or may not have forced his hand. But really, who’s to say?”

“You’re a fucking asshole.” How could we ever have been friends? If I weren’t sure I’d be caught, I’d wring his neck. “How did you even find us?”

Charlie was frozen beside me, and I rubbed her arm to reassure her. I’d get us out of this mess. Extra security or not.

“I’m surprised you haven’t worked out how powerful your mate is yet. I followed her trace all the way here, the same as I did on the mountain. As much as I’m excited about the prospect of having her for myself, I have to admit you two put on a wonderful show. I can’t wait to see it all play out tomorrow.” Finn walked backwards, disappearing into the dark hallway. I cursed under my breath.

“Charlie, I’ll get us out of this. I promise,” I whispered, still rubbing her arm. But she didn’t speak, only nodded. The shattering of icy walls I had felt only minutes ago were rebuilding, closing me out. What did Finn mean about following her trace? I hadn’t picked up on anything of the sort. Power, yes. But nothing that would differentiate her from one Supe to the next. I had a feeling my dragon was masking her true scent in their desperation to claim Charlie.

I led her back down the hall to my room, past the cracked stones and the flickering lights. Past the extra guards stationed at the stairwells and the doorways. Past everything that kept us trapped inside this prison made of stone. I had promised her freedom, and I wouldn’t turn my back on her now. But it didn’t stop the small part of me from being grateful for just a little bit of extra time with Charlie.

The only question now was if she felt the same way.
I wasn’t just fucked in the head. I was an idiot. An idiot with zero control over her body when it came to one Scottish dragon shifter and the absolutely dirty words he whispered oh-so sweetly. I needed to figure out a way to stay the hell away from him, which was basically impossible since he was my only way out of this place.

He led me down the hall, gently like I would shatter in his touch -- as if he didn’t have my back up against the stone two minutes earlier. The halls of the castle crisscrossed like a maze, but the markings helped me to figure out my surroundings. It was a skill my parents had taught me when I was young, before everything went to shit, and it was one I never lost. Always know your exits. Always have a backup. Always have a plan c. The cracked stones at the base of the main stairs could be a trip hazard if I had to flee quickly. The guards stationed at every entrance wouldn’t be a problem if I could use my magic, but considering how quickly Finn had found us when I was trying to hide my source, I really shouldn’t be using it at all. That left me with either hand to hand combat, or sneaking around them. Considering they were dragon shifters, sneaking out would be better, but it depended on how easily I could get out the window in Cam’s room. And that would depend on if Cam was willing to let me go -- which seemed less and less likely. I could only hope he fell asleep quickly.

If. If. If. All of these ifs were going to be the end of me. I liked things that were simple, clean. I liked to know what was going to happen in every single one of my plans. But all of these variables made that difficult to know for sure. I was just going to have to go for it, and hope like hell everything fell into place. Because one thing was for certain. I was not about to stay here, in a castle filled with fucking dragons, and be mated to one in the morning. No matter how much my body was already craving his touch again.

I pulled away from Cam’s grip as we found ourselves back in the hallway where his bedroom was. I recognized it because of the faded Turkish rug that was splayed out crookedly under the archway -- another trip hazard, if I were to run. “You aren’t actually going to make me mate you, are you?”

His quiet laugh surprised me. “Come on, lass. Would it really be that bad?”

“Being forced to mate someone I met only a few days ago? Let me think about it.” I tapped my finger on my chin, walking away from Cam. “Yeah. Pretty sure it would be
bad."

“I didn’t hear you complaining a few minutes ago. In fact, I remember hearing you tell me just how badly you wanted me.” He stopped in front of his bedroom door. There were five doors between his room and the set of stairs, now guarded by two dragon shifters. No guards had been stationed there this morning.

“I remember you forcing me into saying it.” I pushed past him, walking into the room. Two windows, both opened towards the outside. There was another window in the bathroom, but it would involve climbing up onto the sink -- more variables I didn’t want to deal with. I sat down on the bed, undoing the strappy heels that had been laid out with the dress. I looked up at Cam.

He frowned, locking the door behind him. “Did you actually feel like I forced you into saying you wanted me?” His voice was quiet, and there was a note of… uncertainty? It made me want to tell him the truth.

“No,” I murmured. I took off the other heel, pushing them both under the bed. Out of the way for later. “That wasn’t a lie.”

Cam nodded, unbuttoning his shirt. I looked away. My raging emotions didn’t need to see Helpful McHottie stripping in front of me. “I’m not your mate, Cam.”

I wasn’t sure what he was expecting. Did he think I felt something that wasn’t there? Maybe he thought we were actually mates and everything would work out for the best. But as much as I felt attracted to him, I didn’t feel that. No sign from above was telling me this was my one true destined mate. And the only thing the wind would tell me was he was trustworthy, and darkness lingers.

Suddenly, Cam was standing in front of me, shirt entirely unbuttoned under his jacket, both hands on my face to drag my gaze up to his. “I know,” he whispered.

I paused, staring up into his eyes. He looked down at me so clearly, like I could read every emotion that passed through him. “You know?” I repeated.

He nodded. “I know you aren’t my mate because I’ve already had a mate.”

Oh. Was I disappointed? Surely not. Because I already knew this, from Finn’s earlier remarks. I knew he had a mate previously. But hearing the words from his lips were different. It changed things between us, and I wasn’t sure how the evening would play out. “I know. Finn and the Alpha both mentioned her.”

Cam sighed, shrugging out of his jacket and shirt and sitting on the bed next to me. I wanted to run my hands over the carved muscle of his stomach, trailing them down his thick arms. But I didn’t think now was the appropriate time -- or ever. “Her name was Mara.”

“Mara.” I rolled my tongue, tasting her name. “What happened to her?”

“Nothing that matters anymore.” His voice was final, but his shoulders sagged. “She’s dead.”

Well. That explained a lot.

I tapped my fingers on my silk covered thigh. I wasn’t sure if I should even bother asking him, or if I should just attempt to sneak out without him knowing. “Cam?”

“Yeah?”

This was my chance to ask him if he was still going to help me. Would he help me
escape the prison he had brought me to? Or would he try to stop me, citing the mating ceremony and one night. I closed my eyes, decision made. “I’m sorry.”

He shrugged, bumping his shoulder into me. “It was a long time ago. There’s no need to apologize.”

Five doors, and the crooked carpet. The cracked step, and two guards. No magic. I could do this. I knew myself, and I knew my weaknesses. Cam was a weakness, and involving him in my plan would only introduce cracks into the foundation. I couldn’t take the risks. I wasn’t going back there, and I wasn’t staying here to be a slave either.

I faked a yawn, heading to the bathroom with my backpack in tow. “It’s been a long day. We should both get some sleep, yeah?”

Cam looked surprised, but nodded. “Of course. Do you need to borrow something to sleep in again?” He almost sounded hopeful.

I smiled and held my bag up. “I’m covered. Thanks.”

I shut the door behind me, taking my time in getting changed and brushing my teeth, hoping Cam would be asleep when I finally emerged. I wasn’t sure I could handle any more half conversations, or keeping secrets from a man who looked at me like I hung the moon. But when I opened the door, Cam was still awake, the lights in the room dimmed low. He was lying on the couch, still shirtless, and I couldn’t help but wonder if he had pajama bottoms on or if he slept completely in the nude. He had pulled a fuzzy blanket from somewhere, and tucked one of the pillows under his head. He definitely didn’t look like he fit on the couch.

I crawled into the large bed, pulling the covers up around me. He didn’t question my choice of sleeping attire, or maybe he just hadn’t noticed in the dim light. “The bed is big enough for us to share, you know,” I offered. I immediately wanted to kick myself. If he was in the bed, it would make sneaking out ten times harder.

He turned the light off the rest of the way, laughing. “I don’t think that’s the wisest choice, Charlie girl.”

I turned over in bed. For the first time in my life it felt like there was too much space for myself. “Most of what we’ve done hasn’t been the wisest choice.”

Cam didn’t respond. I was exhausted and his bed was comfortable, warm and smelling like Cam. But I forced myself to stay awake, listening to Cam’s breath even out, slowing down. And then I waited longer. Outside the window, past the still-open curtains, the night was still. The moon was full, and the sky was cloudless. It would be cold, but at least I wouldn’t be stumbling around in the pitch black.

I counted to 200, and then back down to zero. Cam didn’t move, so I snuck out of bed, praying nothing would creak as I did so. Thankfully, Cam’s bed frame held firm, and my sock-clad feet didn’t slip. There was still no movement from the couch. I grabbed my backpack, and slung it over my shoulder. From the end of the bed I snatched my boots. I’d put them on in the hallway, outside of Cam’s earshot.

I unlocked the door, sliding out, and closed it silently behind me. Looking from side to side, I was relieved to see no one else in the nearly dark hallway. The crooked rug. Five doors. The cracked step. And the guards. I pulled my boots on, lacing them up tightly, and grabbed a sweater from the top of my backpack. Listening at the door for a minute
longer, I was satisfied that no sounds were coming from Cam’s room and so I began to
tiptoe down the hall.

Door one. Easy.
Door two. Easy still.

Door three, I would have to be more careful about. I needed to stick to the edges of
the wall so the guards didn’t see me take the corner, but that also meant staying close to
the door. I didn’t need to wake up any drunken dragon shifters. I stuck my back to the
wall, inching my way along. I could barely make out a quiet conversation between the
two guards. It seemed like one wanted to sneak off to the kitchen and find a snack, and
the other one was too tired to argue. I couldn’t say I blamed them -- I wasn’t exactly a
night owl myself. And besides, it would make my own escape easier if I only needed to
outmaneuver one guard instead of two.

Something grabbed my hand, yanking me backwards, but still out of the guards’ line
of sight. I whirled around, ready to punch the living daylights out of my attacker when I
realized I was looking right into Cam’s angry face.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing, lass?” he snarled. His eyes were black and
furious, and his vice-like grip on my hand was cutting off my circulation. Was this the
lingering
darkness
beneath the perfect exterior the wind had warned me about? The snap
of control, and a sharp temper? The fury at being betrayed? Because if so, it beckoned to
my own shadows deep within me.

“I’m leaving. What the fuck does it look like I’m doing?” I hissed. “You seemed pretty
content to stay back, so I figured I’d spare you the trouble.”

The guards had gone quiet, and Cam pressed a finger to his lips, tugging me down a
small dead-end hallway across from where we stood. Smaller doors lined this hall -- linen
closets most likely. “You’re not exactly doing a great job of being stealthy.”

I huffed. “When I left, you were snoring.”

His grip tightened on my wrist. “I was faking it. I knew you would run, but I tried to
tell myself it wasn’t true. Tried to convince myself that you trusted me enough to tell me
before you left. Hell, maybe even let me help you. What was your plan on sneaking past
the guards at the stairway?”

“One was going down to the kitchens. I figured one guard wouldn’t be difficult to
distract.” Cam was irritating me, and I tried to pull my wrist away but he wouldn’t allow
me to move. “Why are there even so many guards on duty? They weren’t there this
morning.”

He was quiet for a moment. “I told you my pack took other Supes against their will.
Mating ceremonies are important, and the Alpha likes to make sure that the chosen
mates don’t run before the ceremony.”

Well, fuck. “You mean exactly like we planned on doing?”

“Aye.” He finally released my wrist, running his hand through his curls. He was still
shirtless, soft sweatpants swung around his waist, his feet bare. “That’s why my intention
was to wait until the preparations began tomorrow morning and sneak away in the
chaos.”

“Why didn’t you tell me this?” I crossed my arms. Was this another excuse?
He glared at me, the darkness back. “Because I didn't think you'd be stupid enough to run on your own. Obviously, I was wrong.” I tried to speak up, but he cut me off. “Let’s say you got past the guard. What was your plan at the door then? The gates?”

I was quiet.

“Did you even have a fucking plan? Or was your plan just to run so fast away from me that you ran into the arms of someone else? Someone like Finn?” His words were sharp, cutting through me. This wasn't just anger fueling his tirade, but fear. Maybe even a bit of jealousy. He was genuinely afraid of what would have happened to me if I had been caught. “Do you know what they do to runaway mates?”

I wasn't sure I wanted to know. I glared back at him, until finally he sighed. “Fine. We’ll do it your way. I’ll get us out of here tonight, but then you owe me one.”

“Us?” I ran my gaze down his barely clothed body. He wasn’t wearing a shirt, and his feet were shoeless. “You don’t exactly look ready to run.”

Cam scoffed. “I’m a dragon, lass. I’ll make do. Think you’ll be able to keep up?”

“I’ll try not to fall behind.” If he thought he was coming with me, I’d let him -- especially if it meant he would help me escape this goddamn place. “What’s the plan?”

“I’ll distract the guard at the stairs, while you sneak past him. When we get to the gates, I’ll tell them I’m having cold feet, need to stretch my wings before the big day. As long as you stick to the shadows, you should be able to get out no problem. Typically, there aren’t any guards past the gate, so we should be free. By the time they realize I’m not coming back, we’ll be long gone. We’ll head west, okay?” Cam was surprisingly good at planning escapes, and I wondered what else I had misjudged him on.

I nodded. “Got it.” Except once I got out, I wasn’t going to go west. I was going to head east towards the woods that rimmed the castle. Hopefully I’d lose Cam in the thick of it.

Cam stepped out into the light while I clung to the shadows. I could overhear his quiet conversation with the guard, and waited until the tall dragon shifter had his back turned before I snuck up the stairs, praying my boots wouldn’t squeak. I hid in the dark hall, waiting for Cam to catch up.

“Thanks for not mentioning this, mate.” Cam clapped the guard on the shoulder, offering him a friendly smile.

“Of course,” the guard replied. “You wouldn’t believe how nervous I was before my mating ceremony. I hadn’t even met the lass. I only knew she was a wolf shifter, and that had me shitting my pants.”

Another forced mate, I thought. How could they all think this was normal? If I could, I’d free them all. But I couldn’t do that without putting my life in jeopardy, and I had worked too fucking hard to stay alive at this point.

Cam didn’t acknowledge me as he passed, but I knew he had seen me. I followed him in the dark to the front gates that had opened so readily for us early in the day. He gave the same spiel about having cold feet to this guard, and no one was more surprised than I was when the guard readily agreed to open the gates. How was he able to get around all of the supposed rules so easily? My freedom had been hard-won, carved out bit by bit, and cloaked in secrecy. Cam just offered a smile, and bam! The gates were opened wide.
“You just have to be back before dawn so I don’t get reamed out,” the guard requested.
Cam tipped his head, making a joke I didn’t catch, and they both laughed. I crouched low, sneaking closer to the heavy gate. The guard started to turn the crank, the door inching open. Could the damn thing be any slower?
Finally it was open enough for me to see the moonlit field, and I waited for Cam to distract the guard again. Once his back was turned, I slipped past, taking a deep breath of the fresh air I had missed. The wind greeted me, tickling my ankles. Freedom. It tasted so fucking good.
I took stock of my surroundings, and then took off at a quick jog, keeping in the shadows of the tall stone walls. Right. Towards the forest that was even darker than the gloom of the castle. If I was lucky, I could make it there before Cam spotted me.
The forest was twenty yards away. Then ten. Five. I couldn’t hear Cam, but the wind was growing frantic, trying to figure out what I was doing. I didn’t have time for it. Finally I stepped inside the blissful darkness of the forest.
“Charlie?” Cam’s voice was a harsh whisper. Too loud in the still night. Christ. At least I had just made it before he realized my plan. I ignored him, heading deeper into the forest.
“Charlie!” Cam’s voice was sharper this time. “You shouldn’t be in the forest right now.”
And he shouldn’t be telling me what to do. Prick. I picked up my pace, cautious to not give away my location by stepping on a branch.
And then I heard it. A wolf’s howl. And another. I looked up through the trees at the sky, even though I already remembered what the moon would look like before I saw it. A full moon, and I was out in a forest filled with wolves.
The lass had a knack for throwing herself into precarious situations, I’d give her that much. But I’d been pretty damn clear when I told her to go west, not east, and you didn’t survive backpacking in the highlands alone without knowing your directions. So when I had left the guard at the gates and looked west to see absolutely nothing, I knew Charlie had gone east. Towards the forest, where the werewolves liked to hunt on the full moon -- taking out their fury on anyone they could get their hands on as retribution for the dragons snatching their women. And Charlie had just wandered into their lair, cool as could be.

I had honestly thought we were past the running. I had thought that the moment we shared in the hallway meant something. It sure as hell meant something to me. I felt her give me a part of her body and soul, felt a bit more of her icy walls caving to me. I was a patient man. I’d wait until she surrendered completely. And from the way she had cried my name earlier, I couldn’t imagine it would be long. She wanted me. Something within her craved me, even if her mind didn’t want to admit it. I couldn’t even bear to sleep in the bed next to her because I would’ve been desperate to make her come again, to demand she admit she was mine -- wholly and completely. But I didn’t want to force her. I wanted her to want to stay with me. And I thought she was beginning to want that as well.

I watched her meticulously get her things ready. She pulled her boots out far enough she could reach them, but not far enough she would trip. Charlie was always watching, making sense of her surroundings. But she was so busy watching, she forgot I could watch her back. I knew she was going to run as soon as I fell asleep. And I also knew how futile her mission was. She’d get caught, thrown in the dungeon, and forced to have a very public mating ceremony. Charlie wouldn’t like a minute of it.

So I followed her, pissed. And she was angry I followed. As I expected. What wasn’t expected? My body’s response to her fury. I wanted to push her up against the wall, and make her curse my name while my cock drove deep inside her. Definitely not a healthy reaction, but I wasn’t about to complain.

And because she had chosen not to listen to my sage advice, I now stood in the forest I had no desire to be in on a full moon. Hell, I tended to avoid this forest most of the
month unless really necessary -- full moon or not.

“Charlie!” I hissed. For fuck’s sake. I knew she didn’t want to be a prisoner, but I was honestly just trying to keep her alive and safe. I closed my eyes, letting my dragon senses take over. There wasn’t enough room to shift entirely in the forest, which was probably why she had chosen to come this way, but I could at least use my heightened senses to hear where the stubborn lass was. I told her she owed me one when I helped her escape the castle, and now she was really going to owe me one when I saved her ungrateful arse from the wolves.

The dragon senses were unnecessary, because the wolf howl that pierced the night sky was clear as anything. But they did help me narrow in on Charlie’s rapid heartbeat -- hopefully she realized the deep shite she was in now.

“Charlie!” I snapped, louder this time. I don’t know why I was worried about the dragons overhearing me. That was the least of our worries in this forest. “We need to leave. Now.” I couldn’t help the slip of alpha tone in my voice. Not like she would listen to it anyway.

“Cam?” For the first time, Charlie responded, her voice and heartbeat leading me right to her. I really didn’t want to go deeper into the forest than necessary, but Charlie sounded unsure, which was so different from her normal bravado.

“Stay where you are,” I commanded. Twigs crunched under my footsteps as I got closer and closer to Charlie. I couldn’t understand why I was so concerned about one woman’s wellbeing, even as she seemed so determined to not be near me. But I wasn’t about to let her get lost in the forest when I had the opportunity to help. Just as long as the wolves stayed far enough away for us to get out. One wolf? No problem. Two, even three? I could take them without an issue. But an entire pack of full moon wolves? Fuck that shit.

I held up my hands, walking over to stand at Charlie’s side. “Come on boys, let’s be reasonable. The woman didn’t know what she was walking into when she wandered into the woods. If you’ll be so kind as to let us be on our way, we’ll be out of your hair.” I had no idea why I was trying to reason with them, but an attempt had to be made.

The eyes in the bushes didn’t move. I bent my head closer to Charlie. “What were you thinking running into a fucking forest on a full moon?”

She scoffed. “How was I supposed to know about the wolves?”

“Maybe common fucking sense?” I groaned. In front of us, footsteps crunched closer. If more wolves joined we would have to make a run for it. “When I say run, listen for once in your life and run.”

Charlie made a noise of displeasure, but I ignored her. She could either listen to me and attempt to survive the mess she had gotten herself into, or stay here with the
wolves. I knew which one was more appealing.

A hand brushed aside the trees ahead of us, and a very naked man stepped into the clearing. I fought back a groan. Fucking wolves. Nudity was an inescapable part of being a shifter, and most of us got used to it when we were quite young. But the wolves... the wolves were a different kind of being all together. They loved to show off their naked bodies to the world. Prick.

I tipped my head at the newcomer. “Ross.”

“Dragon.” The prick knew my name, that I stood against everything my pack did, but in his mind it didn’t matter. I was still just a dragon, no better than the rest. “Dangerous night for you to be out in the woods. Especially with such a pretty companion.” Ross smiled, his canines proudly on display.

“She was unaware wolves lived in these woods. She’s simply a traveller, passing through.” The only sound I was aware of was my heartbeat, pounding rapidly.

Ross raised an eyebrow, looking up to the full moon. “You seem awfully protective of a ... traveller.” Behind him, the wolves growled. “My men are not themselves tonight, dragon. And you’ve brought them a gift. They’ve been waiting for an appropriate mate, seeing as your kind has stolen all of theirs.”

Charlie coughed on a gasp, and I forced myself to not lose eye contact. “You know I have nothing to do with the forced matings. I left the pack.” I stepped in front of Charlie, blocking her from the wolves’ sight. Her fury blasted into me, uncontrolled, and I knew she wanted to protect herself. But if she had wanted that, she should have run west.

“And yet, still you find yourself back here. Curious that. And such a pretty prize is surely being fought over in the castle. Would be a shame for us to take that away from them, and claim her for the wolves.” Ross shrugged, his eyes gleaming in the light.

I couldn’t control the growl escaping my chest at the idea of anyone else claiming Charlie. “She’s mine,” I snapped. “And unless you feel like having your fucking head ripped off, you’ll not fight me on that.”

Charlie’s hand was on my back, gentle, and I sank into her touch. The fact she was willingly touching me didn’t escape me. Unfortunately, it wasn’t the right time to focus on it.

Ross smiled again. “Seems like the dragon is ready to play after all.” He dragged his hand through his hair. “I’ll tell you what. If you two can make it to the edge of the forest before my men catch you, I’ll let you have your little mate. If we catch her, I can’t guarantee her safety -- or that she won’t enjoy it.”

Savages. For the first time I wondered if their women were better off with us, in the safety of the castle walls. But I knew it was merely a spiteful thought. I grinned back at Ross. “You really think I’ll let you lay a hand on her?”

Ross stretched, stepping back into the darkness of the woods. His body was already beginning to shift, hair growing from skin, and limbs elongating. “What I think is that it’s a full moon, and you’re on our territory.” Just before he dropped down onto all fours he leered at me, his body strangely contorted. “Let’s see how fast you are with no wings, dragon.”

“Charlie, fucking run,” I yelled, no longer caring about dragons or wolves hearing. The
only thing on my mind was getting both of us out of this forest alive. I pushed her in front of me, but Charlie didn’t need to be told twice, sprinting ahead of me. She was more graceful than I was as we ran, dodging branches and trees. I wasn’t used to having to run on two legs. If we made it out of this alive, I was going to have to work on my cardio.

Charlie spared me a quick glance over her shoulder, and whatever she saw there made her eyes widen. “Faster!”

I couldn’t look back, but I could hear them. Their paws tore through the underbrush as they ran, and a continuous growl carried after us. They could’ve caught up to us no problem as we trampled through the woods -- at least me. But they were holding back, toying with us. They wanted us to fear them, to relish in the idea that the big bad dragon might be afraid of the wolves in the woods.

I had to get Charlie out of here safely. I was holding her back. I realized she would probably be a hell of a lot faster if she didn’t have to worry about me, and maybe I could even hold them off. Buy her some time. “I can’t shift in here!” I called.

“No shit.” Came her snarky response over her shoulder. Any other time I would’ve laughed. But not now.

“I’m slowing you down. Keep running okay? West.”

Charlie tossed me a look over her shoulder, and in the slivers of moonlight that beamed down through the trees I watched her eyes flicker with a decision. She stopped suddenly, and I nearly toppled right into her.

The wolves paused in the bushes around us, snarling. Probably wondering what the hell was going on. As was I. “What the fuck?” I hissed.

Charlie closed her eyes, shaking her head. “You said I owed you one. Now we’re even.”

“We don’t have time for this. You need to run!” I screamed. Goddamn this woman was absolutely infuriating. The wolves paced closer, and my heart was thundering out of my chest. “Charlie!”

She opened one eye. “Would you do me a favour and shut up for a minute? Thanks.” She squeezed her eyes shut again, and I saw red.

What. The. Fuck. I stalked closer, intending on throwing her over my shoulder and getting her out of this forest one way or another. These wolves weren’t going to lay a hand on her. No one was. And then the still air picked up in a gust of wind, swirling around us. The trees creaked and moaned, reaching out in an oddly humanesque way towards the wolves hidden in their shadow. The wolves growled uncomfortably, the leaves and dirt gaining more speed and spinning around us in a tight spiral. We wouldn’t be able to get out, but the wolves wouldn’t be able to get in either. I froze looking over at Charlie, who stood with her feet firmly planted in the ground and her arms outstretched. She didn’t look afraid. She wasn’t terrified. No, if anything, she was at peace. The calmest I had seen her yet.

“Charlie…” I was at a loss for words, watching her body connect to nature in a way I had thought had long been lost in my home. Somehow, my dragon had hid her true nature from me. “Charlie, you’re a goddamn witch.”
I opened my eyes to stare at Cam, my body tense with caution. This could go very badly, or he could just accept it for what it was. “I’m a witch,” I confirmed. “And the wind will distract the wolves long enough for us to get the hell out of the woods but we need to be ready.”

Questions were swimming in Cam’s eyes, but to his credit, he just nodded. “Okay. When?”

“Now.” I slammed my hands down, and the ground shuddered beneath our feet. “Keep up this time.”

I took off sprinting, Cam close behind me. The wolves were momentarily stunned, but they started off again, their howls growing angry and desperate as we ran. I knew the wind would slow them down, but I only had so much control and we needed to get out of here as soon as we could.

“Don’t you think... being a witch is... something you should’ve told me about sooner?” Cam huffed, breathing heavily as he tried to keep up on two feet. His bulk was not designed to be light footed, and I knew that as soon as he tried to stop. I also knew I couldn’t let him go down for me.

I snorted. “I tried. You told me... to shut up.” I could just make out the edges of the woods up ahead -- a small pinprick of moonlight against a wall of trees.

“I would never... tell you to... shut up.”

I kept my sights focused on the opening up ahead, growing larger with each footstep. The wolves behind us were growing frustrated, the wind keeping them at bay with large gusts that avoided Cam and myself. “Are you really... going to argue semantics with me... when there’s a pack of... angry wolves after us?”

“Maybe,” he muttered. But he was silent after that, the only noises were our quick footsteps, the wolves, and the wind.

I felt the breeze fade ten yards out from the edge of the woods. We were so close, we couldn’t falter now. “We’re on our own!” I yelled, pushing myself to sprint the last few feet. My legs threatened to give out and my heart was exploding through my chest but I wasn’t going to let these wolves own me. No one owned me.

“I’m right behind you,” he called. He sounded tired, but at least he’d kept up. Thank
Christ. I'd evaluate why I had used my magic to save him and why I was so desperate to keep him safe some other time. Right now I just considered it returning the favour.

I burst through the treeline, the moonlight shining down on me like an old friend. I didn't stop running, the yelps and howls of the wolves fading as I escaped into the shadows of the castle wall.

“Charlie! Stop!” Cam yelled after me. I paused, my back to the stone wall of the castle for protection. Cam ran up to me, and stopped, hands on his knees to catch his breath. “They won’t come outside the forest. They made me a deal, and the one thing the wolves are good for is their word.”

I was silent, pressing my back harder against the stone and sinking down until I was sitting on the cool ground.

Cam’s breathing was returning to normal. He pulled himself up to his full height and glared at me. “Now can you tell me what the fuck you were thinking running into the forest? I told you to go west.”

I was silent, pressing my back harder against the stone and sinking down until I was sitting on the cool ground.

“I had it handled,” I muttered.

Cam ignored me, brushing off anything I said and hauling me to my feet by my elbows. His gaze was aflame, burning me inside out. “And it’s definitely not what it looked like earlier tonight during the feast, when you were moaning my name. Think you would’ve been able to handle that one without help?”

“Yes,” I whispered, but my voice caught. I wasn’t sure anything would ever feel as good as Cam’s hands on my body -- regardless if I wanted to admit it or not.

He smirked, pulling me close enough that I could feel every inch where our bodies touched. He didn't believe me, and I couldn’t blame him. I wouldn’t fucking believe myself either. “I doubt that, ice queen. I’m sure you could handle your own pleasure. But could you really make yourself come the way I made you? Do you cry your own name while
your fingers are inside yourself?” He pressed his face against my neck, trailing his tongue along my sensitive skin. “Show me how you use your powers,” he murmured.

“I can’t,” I gasped, his hands running down my back, cupping the swell of my ass. “I can’t.”

“You can’t?” He bit my earlobe, tugging on it gently. “Or you won’t?”

I moaned, quietly, under my breath, hoping he wouldn’t hear but I knew it was useless. I knew fighting my body’s attraction to Cam was a lost cause, even though the logical part of me was screaming how dumb I was being. And I was. I was being an utter idiot, once again focused on a good screw to be worried about my own safety. “I can’t. It’s too dangerous.”

“But you just did in the woods,” he argued. He trailed his fingers up my back once more, sneaking them under the sweater I wore, pressing his fingertips into my bare skin. “To… to protect you,” I stuttered. “I didn’t want you to die for me.”

Cam briefly pulled back, raising an eyebrow, and some unspoken emotion flared in his eyes. I couldn’t place it. And then he was back, pressing his face into my skin once more, pushing me backwards until I caved to the pressure and lay back on the cool grass with Cam propped up on his elbows above me. “But you used your powers in the hall. The lights,” he whispered. He tugged my shirt up, baring more of my flesh to the night sky. Was this what freedom really felt like?

I shook my head, tangling my fingers in his curls, tugging his face towards mine. I pressed my lips against him, kissing him, caving to the primal desires my body was demanding. “I lost control in the hallway,” I corrected quietly, pulling away. I didn’t like admitting my loss of control. That Cam made me lose control. It was like offering up a hidden piece of myself -- something best kept private.

Cam grinned, more dragon than human, snaking his hand under my bra. His fingers brushed over my nipple, and I arched into his touch.

Fuck. Yep. I was definitely a grade A idiot. He ripped my shirt and bra over my head, bending his mouth to the nipple he had just been teasing. I sucked in a quiet breath when his tongue touched skin. He looked up at me. “I’ll just have to make you lose control again then.”

“I thought you were pissed at me.” I tried to focus on my breathing. In and out. In. Out. Cam was sucking on my nipple, toying with the other between his fingers, and I tried to focus on where we were. On an escape. We were just outside the castle after all. Was this even safe? I laughed at the thought. I was here with a dragon on top of me, sliding his hand into the curve of my waist, and I was concerned about my safety? The reality of being safe was long gone.

Cam released my nipple with a quiet pop of his lips. “I am pissed at you.” He blew cold air across my wet skin, and I shivered. “I’m just dealing with my anger the only way I know how.”

“You only know how to deal with your anger through sex?” I asked, a laugh escaping me before I could stop it.

He rolled my nipple between his thumb and finger. I moaned. “Fuck, Charlie. I want to bottle the noises you make. My own personal elixir of how goddamn sexy you are.”

“You didn’t answer the question,” I mumbled. His hand was sliding lower, sneaking
past the waistband of my pants.

Cam shrugged. “Sex or fighting.”

I closed my eyes, willing his fingers to move quicker, to give me what I needed. I didn’t want to ask, didn’t want him to know quite how desperate for his touch I was. In the distance, a lone wolf howled. I hoped Cam was right and they wouldn’t come after us. “Sounds healthy.”

His hand dropped down, stroking against the fabric of my panties. His thumb pressed into my swollen clit. I gasped, pushing my body into his touch. “I don’t hear you complaining.” He circled his thumb around my clit again, and I moved my body in time with his touch. “I want to see you lose control, Charlie girl. I want to see how deep those powers run.”

I paused for a moment, caught off guard. “Do you want to see them so you can use them against me?” I whispered. Vulnerable. I sounded vulnerable and I hated it.

Cam pulled back, staring hard at me. “No. I want to see those powers again because that was the hottest thing I’ve ever seen. I’ve been hard as a rock since I watched you pull a tornado out of thin air.”

He wasn’t lying. His erection was heavy against my body and I wanted it inside me. As if it felt my hesitation, the wind appeared unbidden. It whispered in my hair. Honest. Still, darkness lingers.

“Relax. I won’t let anything happen to you. I just want to see my ice queen melt in my hands,” he murmured. My. My ice queen. I couldn’t comment on it, because his fingers were back, desperately pushing my panties aside. God. I wanted his touch. “These need to come off. Now.” He was tearing my pants over my legs, the cool air whipping around my body, but I didn’t feel cold. All I felt was the heat of Cam’s desire as he ran a longing look over me. He glanced up, looking for confirmation or acceptance, I couldn’t be sure. His body was humming with an anxious energy, thrumming into me by proxy. He needed this. His dragon needed this. I gave him a small nod, and he tore my panties from my body -- the ripping sound loud in the still night. He sighed appreciatively, immediately running a finger between my wet folds.

“I really liked that pair,” I complained, trying to focus on anything besides my beating heart.

Cam smirked, never stopping his hands. “I’ll get you another pair when we find a town.” He sank a finger into my wet heat. I moaned, clenching around the digit. He curled his finger. Once. Twice. Enough to make me crave more. “Or maybe I won’t. Maybe I’ll just let you walk around with the reminder of how good I make you feel.” He pulsed his finger a little bit faster, and my body coiled in anticipation. “Do I make you feel good, Charlie?”

I clutched the grass to balance myself against his slow, torturous attack, which pushed me ever closer to madness. I needed something to ground me to the present. “Yes.”

He sank another finger into my pussy, his thumb coming to circle my clit once more. Now we both groaned. “That was a rather quick admission for you, ice queen. You couldn’t possibly need something, could you? Do you crave something you shouldn’t?” His fingers were thrusting with force now, still slow. Still driving me crazy. But I knew how he
liked to play the game. Cam wanted to know I needed this as badly as he did.

I closed my eyes. “Maybe,” I murmured.

“Maybe what?” His thumb was picking up speed, swirling around my clit in a rhythm sure to throw me off the deep end -- if he let me.

Maybe I crave what I shouldn’t, was what I was thinking of. But instead what came out of my mouth was, “Maybe I want something other than your fingers.” Idiot.

He paused his thrusting, and a slow smile crept onto his face. He withdrew his fingers out of me, putting them thoughtfully in his mouth and sucking. His eyes never left my face, and watching him enjoy my taste had me panting in a way I didn’t expect. “Why didn’t you say so?”

Cam pushed his sweatpants off, kicking them away, leaving himself nude. He ran his tongue over his lips while he gave his heavy cock a slow pull with his hand. Was I weak if my mouth watered? Probably. He pushed my legs wider, settling himself between them, the head of his cock nudging my entrance. He looked at me and our gazes locked. Neither of us looked away. One moment. Two. Three. Something flashed in his eyes -- darkness lingers -- and he thrust inside me.

His rhythm, hard and fast, was entirely different to the leisurely strokes of his fingers only a minute before. My moans caught in my throat, his punishing pace driving me towards a place of pleasure I could only imagine. I closed my eyes, raising my hips to meet his thrusts and he made a sound that could’ve been my name. “Let go,” he demanded. His cock was pounding a desperate rhythm my body was doing its best to keep up with. “Let go of it all. Let go, and watch the beautiful magic we can create together.”

I was sure to be damned, but I did. I let go, allowing the pleasure take over my body, and feeling my magic seep into the ground beneath us. Faintly I heard Cam growling through his own orgasm. Here, now, the grass grew taller, covering us, winding through my hair. The wind whispered, sighing a light breeze into my ear. I gave into my release, and when I came back down, Cam was staring at me with a look of wonder.

“That was something else. You’re incredible.” I blushed, looking away but Cam pulled my chin back with a finger. He pushed the top half of his body away but he didn’t pull out of me -- not yet. He brushed a stray lock of hair away from my face, watching me closely. “Fuck, Charlie girl. If I could stay buried balls deep inside you for the rest of my life I’d die a happy man.”

I laughed, batting his hand away. I would have to worry about all the magic I had used when we were safely away from the castle. I wouldn’t think one night would make that much of a difference, but I had been so cautious to not draw attention to my magic. I couldn’t afford to be caught. “I don’t think that’s quite the romantic sentiment you were aiming for.”

Cam shrugged, easing out of me with a small groan. “No one ever said I was romantic.” He pulled his pants back on, tossing me my pants and my shirt, and stuffed the remains of my panties into his pocket. “We should get a move on though, unless we want to get caught. The next town is a fair walk away.”

I nodded, getting dressed. I knew he was right. Because darkness lingered, but the
sunrise always brought something to be outrun.
CHAPTER SIXTEEN
CAM

Was there anything half as stunning as watching Charlie come apart in my hands? Watching her create pure magic with nothing more than her thoughts was probably a close second. Now that I knew about her, I couldn’t stop thinking back to all the times before. The lights flickering uncontrollably, the way the wind had shifted unexplainably when I set off from the inn -- everything made sense. And it only made Charlie even more spectacular in my mind. But the way she had looked at me before I entered her, her blue gaze ready to shatter. That kind of vulnerability was unlike her.

“Will you use this against me?” Was that what happened before? Was that why she was so closed off? I would never think to harness something so raw and primal for my own devices, regardless of what my pack seemed to think about forcing mates. The magic that lay within Charlie was pure, and deserved to be free. I wished she wouldn’t hide it.

“Why don’t you use your magic?” I asked as we adjusted clothes in the quiet darkness. Charlie pushed a sheath of dark hair over her shoulder as she chewed on her lip. “It’s not safe.”

I cocked my head, waiting -- hoping -- for an explanation.

“Look.” She sighed. “I don’t want to get into the whole thing. All you need to know is that my magic is limited outside of the coven, and actually using my magic is like a beacon to my location.” She shouldered her worn backpack again, and we began walking -- west, towards the town. Towards freedom for both of us.

“And you don’t want to be found.” Not a hard leap to make, after I had seen her behaviour the last few days. She had told me she was on the run, but it was more than that. Charlie was hiding. The fact she was even opening up to me this small amount was...something. Something I didn’t want to take for granted.

“No. I don’t,” she agreed. “So I try and not use a lot of it unless it’s absolutely necessary, and a pack of angry wolves seemed necessary.”

“Your ankle!” Charlie didn’t stop walking, but glanced over and answered my outburst with a raised eyebrow. “That’s how you fixed your ankle. I’m an idiot for not seeing it before.”

“Yeah. A functioning ankle is kind of essential too. I thought for sure that would’ve
given me away.” We began to climb the first hill that ridged the castle grounds.
I shrugged. “I was preoccupied.”
Charlie laughed -- loudly -- and I wanted nothing more than to make her laugh for the rest of my life. “Clearly.”
Mate, my dragon grumbled.
No, I corrected. Not my mate. Just Charlie, which wasn’t the worst thing in the world. Far from it, in fact.
“You’re really not bothered that I’m a witch? I thought dragons either wanted to mate witches or kill them. There’s no real in between.” Charlie cursed quietly. “There’s something else.”
I looked over at her, but her face was turned away. “What is it?”
“Finn knows,” she whispered. “He cornered me at dinner. He thought he could trick you out of mating me so he could have me for himself. I tried to tell you in the hallway and then...” She trailed off, but I knew exactly what she meant. And then we had fucked and everything else had gone out the window like it seemed to do when the two of us were alone together.
“Fuck.” I shook my head. “It’s fine. I mean, obviously it’s not great. The pack hasn’t added a witch in years, so you’re obviously a hot commodity--”
“Gee, thanks.”
“But, as long as we get far enough away by daybreak, Finn can suck my dick.”
A sharp voice cut between us. “I didn’t realize I meant that little to you.”
Beside me, Charlie froze. I reached out and gave her hand a quick squeeze before turning around to face Finn. He was fully dressed and wide awake, looking like he hadn’t yet gone to sleep. Like he’d been waiting for this moment, which he probably had been.
“Finn,” I acknowledged.
A sneer marred his face. “Did you really think you’d get away sneaking off with such a prize, Cam? I’ve had some of my men keeping watch on the west side of the castle, waiting to see if you’d be stupid enough to leave. And of course, you were. But it’s no matter. It works out in my favour. Because when I take you back to the Alpha now, he’ll have to see that I’m the more appropriate mate for a witch. You couldn’t even handle a dragon.” Finn scoffed, and I had never wanted to throttle him more. Anger was burning my skin, disgusted with the idea he would even bring up Mara, let alone the idea of Charlie mating with him. He might know she was a witch, but he would never be able to embrace the full beauty of her power. To see her for what she really was. To him, she was nothing more than a means to an end, and I couldn’t let her be subjected to that.
“You need to shut the fuck up about things you don’t understand,” I growled. I shoved Charlie behind me, crouching and allowing my bones to begin the shift into my dragon. I knew Charlie wouldn’t -- couldn’t -- use any more of her magic tonight, but I would protect us both.
“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” Finn hummed. I paused, giving him only a moment to explain. He hooked a thumb over his shoulder towards the castle. “My men are up there, armed and waiting to take you down the second they see so much as a hint of tail or wing. Don’t tempt me, Cam. I’d love nothing more than to see you fall.”
I narrowed my eyes, looking back to the castle. We were a fair distance away, but I couldn’t be certain which men he had at the window. If he had archers up there, I was fucked. I couldn’t risk being shot down and leaving Charlie to fend for herself. Even if she could handle herself, I didn’t want her to have to. I darted my gaze to Charlie, wondering if I could distract the archers and Finn for long enough for her to get away.

“Don’t even try to run, witch,” Finn hissed as if he knew what I was thinking. “I’ll take you down in half a heartbeat as well. I only need certain parts of you functioning to complete our mating anyways.”

The growl that escaped my chest was explosive and even Finn took a step back. “You...you’ve already had a mate,” he stammered.

“Not. My. Mate!” I roared, even as my dragon contradicted me inside my brain. “But you will not lay a finger on her.”

I couldn’t control the shift, the scales bursting from skin, my bones lengthening. I was going to get shot down, but if it meant Finn stayed the fuck away from Charlie it would be worth it. Until I felt Charlie lay a hand on my arm -- more dragon than human at this point. Her hand didn’t recoil with the juxtaposition of flesh. “We will come with you willingly,” she announced. My head snapped around to stare at her, but her eyes never left Finn. “But we will see the Alpha together. I want a chance to explain my side of the story.”

Finn sucked his teeth, weighing his options. I allowed Charlie’s touch to soothe me, my scales shifting back to skin, but still the anger bubbled. I knew what Charlie had offered Finn was too good to be true, but I wanted to be inside her head and see exactly what she had planned. Finally he nodded. “Fine. Let’s go.” He turned on his heel and began the short walk to the castle doors without looking back at us twice.

“What the fuck were you thinking?” I snarled. “I could’ve gotten you out of here.”

“No, you couldn’t have,” she snapped. “You would’ve just gotten us both killed, or worse. Sorry, but my life plan doesn’t exactly include mating the Lord of the Flies up there.”

“I assumed your life plans didn’t include mating anyone.”

“They don’t.” Charlie tossed her hair over her shoulder, and I had a sudden urge to wrap the silky strands around my hand and pull it taut -- exposing every inch of her smooth, milky skin. I bet she’d like it when I bit her. She’d moan and arch her back into my touch, and I’d...

My daydream cut short when I noticed Charlie frowning at me, and I realized I might have been moaning myself, imagining her luscious body underneath me once more. I shook my head. “Well I hope you know what you’re doing, ice queen. Because walking back into that castle means you might end up mated one way or another.”

Finn had still yet to turn around, and we were approaching the front gates. The guard inside was already raising them, anticipating our arrival. I wouldn’t be surprised to know all of the guards that had let us escape had been in Finn’s pockets the entire time, playing along with our schemes of running.

Charlie stopped, looking me into my eyes. “I’m going to trust you far enough to think that if we mate, you’ll use our enhanced abilities to help me escape.” Her voice was
deadly serious, letting me know there was only one acceptable answer to her assumption.

I nodded, keeping my voice just as serious. “Of course. I will get you out of here if it’s the last thing I do.” But that was a lie. Because while I’d help Charlie escape this place, I sure as hell wasn’t letting her go without me. The lass was stuck with me now, and she might as well make peace with the fact. The other part of me was shocked she accepted being mated to me. Maybe... maybe she actually wanted to be? My cock was hard just thinking Charlie might want me like that.

We followed Finn through the hallways we had trekked just hours before, stopping in front of the Alpha’s office which to no one’s surprise was open and lit -- the Alpha also obviously awaiting our arrival. Finn gestured for us to enter, and Charlie walked inside.

“I’ve brought them back, sir. They had only made it as far as the west boundaries before I caught up to them.” Finn stood proudly, arms behind his back as if he had made the catch of the year -- not two sex exhausted Supes who had returned willingly.

“Thank you, Finn. You can go back to bed now. I’m sure you’re knackered.” The Alpha leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest.

Finn tipped his head. “If it’s okay with you, sir, I’d like to stay for the conversation.”

The Alpha frowned. “I’m really not sure what else you have to contribute to this conversation.” My dragon laughed, a deep chuckle. I couldn’t say I minded Finn getting put in his place either. The prick deserved it.

“Sir, I think it’s apparent Cam is not a good match for this Supe. He can’t even keep her contained within the castle walls for a single evening. I would like to put myself forward as a suitable mate for Charlie.” Finn shot me a glance out of the corner of his eye. He honestly thought he was going to get away with this.

Over my dead fucking body.

The Alpha tipped back further in his chair, stacking his feet on the desk. He was a big man, and had always been comfortable in his power within the clan. “Why would you think Cam cannot handle a witch?”

My mouth dropped open, and Finn and Charlie both gasped. “You knew?” she asked.

The Alpha grinned. “Aye, I knew. I suspected the moment you stepped foot in my office, but my suspicions were confirmed after dinner. You weren’t exactly subtle with your powers, wee witch.”

Charlie cursed under her breath. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

He shrugged. “I’ll be blunt with you. A witch mating, no matter with whom, is great for my clan to have. You seemed to have aligned yourself with Cam, and that’s fine with me. As long as you remain in my clan, I couldn’t care less who you fuck.”

How dare he reduce her to nothing more than a fuck? I growled, and the Alpha’s eyes snapped to me, blazing a warning. I backed off, but shifted so I was in front of Charlie.

“She will not mate Finn.”

“Like I said, the witch can mate whoever she wants, so long as she remains within the clan. She’s ours now. I will not let her go quite as easily next time.”

“Why did you even let me try to escape this time?” Charlie whispered.

A cruel smirk twisted across the Alpha’s lips. “What’s life without a chase or two? I’m
an old man, Charlie. I enjoy a bit of excitement now and again.” He turned to address Finn. “Charlie shall mate Cam. Tomorrow. Guards will lead them back to their chambers and be stationed outside all of their doors and windows until the ceremony.” He directed his attention to his papers once more, dismissing the three of us.

We filed out the door, where a guard was waiting to lead us back to our respective chambers. I was suddenly bone tired, exhausted to the point of dropping. Had I failed Charlie? Failed myself? I couldn’t deny that my body was alight at the idea of mating my ice queen – regardless of if she was my true “mate” or not. But it wasn’t her first choice. Her first choice was freedom, same as mine.

“Charlie,” the Alpha called, just before we were out the door. We turned back to see what he had to say, but he didn’t raise his head. “I meant what I said. I will not let you go as easily next time. The punishment, should you try to escape again, will not be one you enjoy. Because you, wee witch, will be mine.”

My dragon stirred, itching for retribution at such a bold statement, and beside me fury was rolling off Charlie in waves. If I touched her skin at this moment, I was certain my ice queen would burn me. None of us replied, closing the door quietly behind our exit.

The walk back to my rooms was silent. The guard said nothing, and Finn didn’t even offer a sneer before he turned down the hallway towards his chambers. Just like the Alpha had promised, two men stood watch outside my door. “There are two more outside each of your windows,” the guard said, finally addressing us. “I wouldn’t try anything else.”

“Gee, thanks,” Charlie snapped. I unlocked the door, and after we stepped inside, she slammed it shut in the guard’s face before he could say anything else. She rested her head against the closed door. “Okay, so that might not have gone according to the plan in my head.”

I laughed. “How did you see it going?”

“A battle of epic proportions where I fought my way out of the castle single-handedly.” She opened one eye, offering me a crooked smile. “Did you mean what you said about getting me out of here?”

“With my dying breath.” I crossed my heart solemnly.

She sighed, a mournful sound. “Then I guess we’re going to be mated tomorrow.”

“Is it really so bad? Being mated to me I mean.”

Charlie was quiet. I sat on the bed, patting the space next to me. “Come sit,” I offered. “I won’t bite.” Much.

She chewed on her lip, and then walked over, sitting down and beginning to remove her hiking boots. “I don’t belong to anyone.”

“I know,” I murmured. “I would never ask you to be my property.”

“But the Alpha would expect it,” she argued. “I never wanted that. I wanted to be my own person.”

I tried to turn her face towards me, but she pulled away. “Fuck the Alpha. Fuck anyone else except for the two of us. I’ll keep you safe. I’ll get you out of here.”

Charlie nodded, and I knew what needed to come next. In the quiet of the night, before her soul was fused to mine. Before we made either the greatest decision or the
biggest mistake. Before my soul was weighed down too heavily to be repaired.

“Charlie girl,” I began. I was suddenly nervous. She had to mate me regardless, I knew this, but what if this disgusted her? What if she tried to run after she heard what I had to say? The Alpha didn’t exaggerate, and Charlie wouldn’t like the punishment if she tried to run again. “There’s something you need to know about me, before tomorrow.”

She tipped her face towards me, moonlight streaking her hair with beams of white. “I already know about your first mate, Cam.”

I nodded. “There’s more to the story. Charlie, I...” Charlie was quiet. My tongue was tied. My breath was ragged. Fuck. I was a mess. “I killed her.”
Darkness lingers. The thought echoed in my head louder than the rushing blood that flooded my heart. Darkness lingers. Darkness lingers. Looking into Cam’s eyes I saw the darkness the wind had warned me about, the same murky depths I had seen flash the first night we had fucked.

Darkness. Lingers. Except it wasn’t the darkness I had expected. I didn’t see the pitch black of the shadows I had seen in his eyes before. The blackest of nights when not a hint of the moon slipped through. This was the muddy darkness of guilt. Of silt and shame, surrender and hopelessness. This was the gloom that weighed on your soul, clouding every decision you made from there on out.

I would know. It coated my soul, too.

Darkness lingers, the wind had whispered. And yet it hadn’t warned me against Cam. Was it because the air had seen how similar we were, underneath it all? Witch, dragon, outgoing, reserved. We were two completely different beings, designed from the same blueprint. But still I couldn’t let myself get too close. The mating was an unfortunate complication, but I’d make the most of it until I was free. Even if Cam was trustworthy. Even if the wind had pushed us together. I couldn’t be with someone who would mirror the same flaws I tried so hard to hide.

“Say something,” Cam begged. I realized I hadn’t said anything since he had confessed his sins, too caught up in my own thoughts.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. It was the first thing that came to mind. Because I could see the torment beneath his solid exterior, the cracks woven beneath. Whatever he thought he had done, it hadn’t been his fault. Not really. I knew it without him saying another word.

He shook his head, tossing his shaggy curls out of his face. “No. I don’t deserve your sympathy. I killed her, Charlie.”

“Why?” I asked. My instinct was to shift closer to him, to run my hands through his hair. But doing so would make us more than what we were – a convenience.

Cam scoffed. “You’re seriously going to ask why and not how?” His eyes flashed down at me. “Don’t you want to know if I strangled her with my bare hands? If I suffocated her with the pillow from the bed we shared?”
I just stared back at him. "Why?" I repeated.

His shoulders sagged with the weight of the guilt he must have been feeling. "I didn’t mean to," he whispered.

Cam was quiet, sunk into himself. He needed to get it off his shoulders, whatever it was. I couldn’t give him all of me, but maybe I could give him enough.

I cleared my throat. I had never spoken the words aloud, but in the quiet dark of Cam’s bedroom I felt almost... safe. “My parents were killed because of me.” I wasn’t sure if he could hear me, I had spoken so quietly. But my voice couldn’t say it any louder, because that would make it true. And even though it had happened years ago, I tried my best to pretend it wasn’t reality.

He glanced back at me, unsure. Probably surprised I was willingly sharing anything about myself, but I could give him this. One night. One night of honesty. “Why?”

I sighed. “It’s a long story, and it’s better if you don’t know all of it...in case. My coven used to be small, but influential. We were in a good location to be the intermediaries for other covens. My mother was the leader of the coven, my father her second in command. I was set to take over for them. But...” I paused. The words felt like they were stuck in my chest, mired in the smog of guilt. Cam was quiet, waiting for me to continue. He didn’t urge me, just sat and waited.

I swallowed. “Another coven moved into our territory, and wanted to merge. Make one big coven. My parents were against it, and so were their people. They had some... unusual practices. The other leader offered his son up for marriage to tie the covens together. If I had just accepted, maybe my parents could’ve quietly escaped. But I was stubborn and refused. I made a scene. My parents were slaughtered in their bed the very same evening, and I was to be held hostage until I gave in and married the new leader’s son.” I took a deep breath. I felt lighter, now that it was out in the air, now that I wasn’t the only one holding on to my tale.

“But you escaped,” Cam murmured.

I nodded. “It took time. A lot of time. And patience. Most of the coven is still loyal to my parents, but Dorian leads with fear, and fear can be a powerful persuader. Eventually I got out, and I’m never going back.” I stared at him, making sure he understood how serious I was. I would die before I went back to the coven who murdered my family.

“I won’t let that happen.” Cam’s voice was quiet, but fierce. “I’ll protect you. Always.”

“I don’t need always. I just need help getting the hell out of here.” I jerked my thumb over my shoulder to the windows where I knew the guards would be waiting. I wasn’t going back there. Not now. Not ever. I chewed on my lip. “I can’t help but think if I had just kept my goddamn mouth shut, maybe my parents would still be alive. Maybe I wouldn’t have to be running all the time. If I had just...”

Cam turned into me. “You can’t think like that Charlie. Nothing you did would have made any difference. That other coven was going to take power one way or another, and you did what you thought was best. That’s all. But it’s not your fault they took things too far.”

I shrugged. “Why are you so insistent that Mara’s death was your fault then?”

His grip tightened. “That’s a different story entirely.”
“Are you sure?” I was pushing and I wasn’t sure I should be. I didn’t really know what Cam’s limits were, and what if – darkness lingers – his darkness ran deeper than I thought it did?

“Charlie,” Cam warned. An echo of dragon thrummed through his voice.

“I just don’t see how the two situations are different.”

“Because you made a judgement call. I made a fucking mistake when I should’ve known better.” His skin was shifting as I watched, the shine of his scales rolling through like waves. They didn’t stay though – Cam must have been trying to stay in control.

I didn’t move. “Everyone makes mistakes, Cam.”

“I don’t,” he growled. “And I don’t make stupid mistakes because I let my temper get the best of me. I don’t make stupid mistakes where people die. I have no one to blame for her death except myself.”

“What happened?” I wasn’t sure I wanted to know, but I was almost certain that Cam needed to tell someone – and that someone happened to be me.

Nails – no, claws, were digging into my skin, leaving their imprint. His dragon was edging out, inch by inch. But I had seen worse than a man like Cam lose his temper. Much worse. So what if he left me with a mark or two? Maybe I wanted something to remember him by when it was all said and done. Something to remind me this had actually happened. I had actually bared my darkest secrets to someone, in hopes they would do the same. “Why are you doing this?” Cam sounded gutted, a completely different man to the one I had grown used to. “Why are you pretending like you care?”

I swallowed. “Does it matter? I’m here, and I don’t see anyone else offering to listen.”

Cam frowned, his full lips pulling down. “I’m not sure.” He pulled back, and the anger surrounding him evaporated, leaving nothing but the guilt stagnant between us. Sighing, he looked at me, but he wasn’t actually seeing me. He was seeing through me. Seeing someone who wasn’t there, a memory of a time long past. Instinctively, I wanted to smooth out the wrinkle between his brows. “It was a training exercise. We were in the woods, the same woods we were in tonight. We were practicing evasive maneuvers without shifting. Because, there’s no space there...”

I nodded, giving him the time to process. He had mentioned not being able to shift in the woods, and there had been a note of fear in his voice, but I had chalked it up to the situation. I didn’t realize his previous fears had been returning to prey on his mind. And yet he still ran in there after me. Ungrateful, runaway me. I’d taken the first opportunity I could to run away from him, and instead of throwing me to the literal wolves he had followed me into a place full of dark memories.

“There’s no space to shift,” Cam repeated, staring at me. “Finn...fucking Finn. He made an off-colour joke about Mara. About how we didn’t have a kid yet. Mara was sensitive to it, but she ignored him. But he kept fucking pushing. And I was running next to them, watching Mara’s face grow more solemn by the minute. And I just snapped.”

The room was silent. Even the wind outside the window had stopped its whispers, as if it knew how important of a moment this was.

“I snapped,” he whispered. He closed his eyes, breathing deep. “When I came to, they were gathered around her body. I had accidentally thrown her against a tree when I
sadness, and she had broken her neck. She was gone by the time I reached her.”

Sadness was palpable, tangible in the space between us. I sucked in a quick breath through my teeth, and rested my hand on top of Cam’s clenched fist. “It was still just an accident, Cam.”

“That’s what everyone said. It happens, you know, in dragons. More often than we’d like. We snap, and we can’t control the outcome of our shift.” He opened his eyes as he sadly smiled at me. “But I knew better. I should’ve kept a handle on my temper, and not let that fucking prick get to me.”

I shook my head. “No. You can’t control what happens when you shift unexpectedly.”

“That was the first time I left. Probation, they said. Time for me to get my head on straight. And then when I came back, I just didn’t fit in. So I kept leaving.” He was quiet. “When I think back on it now, I feel like Finn knew what he was doing. He knew he was provoking me. He wanted a violent outcome. Was he expecting her death? Probably not. But he wanted to fuck things up. He had always been jealous of Mara and me. Real mates like that…they’re rare.” Cam drifted, his mind taking him somewhere else again.

If I had feelings for Cam, I might’ve been jealous of the way he remembered Mara. The way thoughts of her transported him somewhere else, somewhere where he felt at peace. I’d bet she was stunning. Blonde and delicate, with a sweet temperament who laughed at all of Cam’s jokes. Not like me – all curves and sharp tongue, my own darkness leaching from my edges. But the whole thing about Finn…it honestly didn’t surprise me. And it made a lot of sense as to why he was so desperate to mate me. Finn had probably always wanted what Cam had. Wouldn’t everyone? Even with – darkness – life seemed to come naturally to him. He had a grace and an ease that made people stop and stare.

But now, his perpetually cheerful face was marred with grief. He released a sigh, patting my knee and getting to his feet. “I think that’s enough soul searching for tonight, Charlie girl. You didn’t need to listen to the entirety of my pity party.”

“I didn’t mind.” And surprisingly, I didn’t. Cam smiled, turning and walking over to the too short couch, pulling the worn blanket off the back of it. He really should have been sleeping in the bed, not cramped on the small couch while I sprawled out on his mattress – an uninvited interloper. I suddenly felt shy, even after what we had just shared. After we had thoroughly explored each other’s bodies. “You don’t have to sleep on the couch, you know. After all, we are going to be mated tomorrow.” I rolled my eyes, patting the empty space next to me. Besides, we had shared pieces of our soul tonight. Would I get that piece back when the sun rose, or would it be gone for good?

Cam paused, shifting his weight between his feet. “Are you sure?”

I nodded. “That couch can’t be comfortable. And I trust you not to attack me for one night. Besides, I think we’ve both had enough excitement.”

“You’re too trusting, ice queen.” But he walked over to the bed once again and sat next to me.

I laughed. “First time I’ve heard that one. Regardless, we’re surrounded by guards who are forcing us to be mated tomorrow. Does that really set the mood for you?”

His eyes flashed dark. Darkness lingers. “Maybe I want them to hear you scream my
Heat rushed through me, uncontrollable desire. We couldn’t. Not now, with so much at stake. I pressed my legs together, trying to ignore the need I had to have Cam drag his hands down my body. I flopped back on the bed, staring up at the ancient stone ceiling. “So what do we do now?”

Cam lay back next to me, resting his head against mine. He sighed. “I guess we get mated.”

I closed my eyes, the darkness more comfortable when I was the one creating it. Hopefully, this time my plan would actually work out. Hopefully, this time my heart wouldn’t lead me astray.
I was scared to let my heart get the better of me. She didn’t run. Far from it, in fact. I had confessed my sins, laid them all out on the table for her to plainly see. In return, she had looked a monster in the eyes, and had held its hand. Maybe she didn’t realize what I was confessing to. Maybe she didn’t understand that I had killed my mate. Maybe she couldn’t comprehend that I had stained my soul because of a momentary lapse in judgement, a slip of my temper. But even as the logical side of me was trying to make sense of what had just happened between us, my heart was beating a frantic rhythm.


Mate, my dragon purred, pleased with the turn of events, and Charlie’s proximity as we shared the bed.


Next to me in the dark, Charlie breathed quietly. After our talk, she had slipped off to the shower, leaving me alone with my thoughts. When she returned, she curled up against my side, as if it was the most natural thing in the world. Her breaths had evened out a few minutes ago, and I knew she had drifted to sleep. I wasn’t surprised. It had been a hell of a night. Fuck, it had been a hell of a few days. If someone had told me this was what lay ahead of me when I saw the dark-haired beauty up on the hill, I would’ve laughed. And yet here we were, lying in the same bed. Confessing transgressions and hopes, as if it were something we did every day. Tomorrow we’d be mated.

A traditional mating – as far as things went. Charlie wasn’t my soulmate. Not like Mara had been, only for me to throw it all away with a stupid mistake. But maybe... maybe she wasn’t dreading it as much as she seemed to be. Potentially I had a chance to make her mine. I stopped a growl from escaping my lips, imagining Finn – or any other man for that matter – attempting to take her from me. Make no mistake. Witch or no witch, Charlie belonged to me.

Sleep was impossible. I don’t know who I was kidding even attempting to close my eyes. All I could see as soon as they were shut was Charlie. Charlie, holding my hand as I cracked and told her about Mara. Charlie, spinning a tornado out of thin air. Charlie, rolling her hips underneath me, a look of pure passion cracking her expression.
Shite. Now I was hard as a rock again, aching to bury my cock within her once more. But she needed the sleep more than I needed to fuck her, so I would let her sleep. Tonight, at least. I rolled out of bed, making sure not to disturb her, but she still slept soundly. I hadn’t showered when we arrived, too concerned with making plans for us to leave, and if I couldn’t sleep, I might as well be clean.

The hot water ran over my shoulders, easing the stiff muscles of my back. Charlie. I should’ve been more torn up about how I felt for her, given the fact Mara had been my mate. But Mara was gone, and I had grieved – was still grieving. Charlie hadn’t taken her place. She was something entirely different. Something good amongst the depression that clouded my vision when the night grew dark, and the rooms got quiet. I had a feeling Mara would’ve approved.

She didn’t run. My cock pulsed, throbbing with need for her. Charlie, the witch who had been unexpectedly thrown into my life. With her hair the deepest black, and her curves that filled my hands in the most delicious way. Charlie, who refused to give an inch, but confessed her desire for me. I groaned, fistimg my erection in my hand. I couldn’t wake her up, but I could deal with this myself. Hell, I needed to deal with this myself. When I closed my eyes, it was Charlie I imagined kneeling in front of me, her hand wrapped around my cock and a sexy smile on her face. Fuck. Yes.

She chewed on her full bottom lip, running her thumb over the head and smearing the pre-cum beaded there. I moaned when she licked her lips. God, she was the sexiest thing I had ever seen. Dream Charlie circled her hand around me, sliding her fingers down my length. Yes, I thought, right there.

I braced a hand against the slick wall of the shower, and Charlie’s hand began pumping slowly. I cursed under my breath, pleasure beginning to grow as her hand picked up speed. Her grip tightened, enough to drag a moan from my mouth, and I slammed my hand against the tile. I had no control where Charlie was involved, and to be honest, I didn’t fucking care. My balls tightened, and her firm grip was dragging me over the edge.

Shite. I couldn’t hold back. I was there. “Charlie,” I groaned, coming back to reality and pumping myself through my orgasm. My hot release spilled all over the shower walls as I panted, trying to contain myself. When was the last time I had made myself come this hard?

A quiet moan startled me, because it wasn’t my own. My eyes flew open, and I spun around to catch a glimpse of dark hair running away from the door. Charlie. How long had she been watching? Longer than she’d ever admit, most likely. I smiled, not bothering to chase after her yet. I’d let her sweat it out a bit, trying to think of an excuse why she had been watching me in the mirror as I jerked myself off to a dream of her. It would give her a bit of time to figure out an excuse for why she had moaned. Charlie could lie to herself all she wanted, but the scent of her desire was thick in the bathroom, and I planned to capitalize on that. I turned the shower off, stepped out and towled myself off. My pajama pants were still where I had tossed them on the floor, and I tugged them back on. I wasn’t sure I was any cleaner than when I had first stepped in the bathroom, but I sure felt a hell of a lot better.
The bedroom was dark, Charlie turned on her side pretending she was asleep. I wasn’t fooled. I got into bed on the other side of her, staring at the dark ceiling I couldn’t see. We both knew I had seen her. She had been caught red-handed.

“Did you like what you saw?” I murmured. I didn’t need her to answer to know she did. I could smell her arousal from the shower. “Did you like watching me pleasure myself with the idea of you? Did you like watching me come?”

Charlie twisted in bed, and in the darkness I couldn’t read her expression. But her body pressed close to mine, and the heat burning from it was scorching me. She liked it. Charlie was a dirty ice queen – my dirty ice queen – and I loved discovering all the new things that turned her on.

“Tell me, Charlie girl. Do your fingers get you off as well as my cock?” God, the idea of her fucking herself with her fingers watching me in the shower…shite.

“You flatter yourself,” she whispered over her shoulder. “I didn’t see anything.”

“Don’t lie, ice queen.” I smiled to myself, settling my head in my pillow. “It doesn’t suit you.” I closed my eyes, and before I knew it, visions of Charlie lulled me into an easy sleep.

Something in my dream was banging. I needed it to stop, because I had just fallen asleep thirty seconds ago. My own damn fault, but still. Was it so much to ask for a peaceful dream full of beaches and oceans, maybe Charlie stretched out in a bikini? Dammit. I rolled over, praying for a quieter dream.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

My eyes flew open. The banging was at the door, not in my dream. Fucking hell, I didn’t know who was on the other side, but I was going to strangle them with my bare hands if they woke Charlie up. I glanced over at the lump beside me, but she was still out cold. I got out of bed, stormed over to the door and threw it open. “What the actual fuck?” I hissed.

“Is that any way to greet your mother?”

Sure enough, there stood my normally cheerful mother, with a massive frown on her face.

“Mam,” I breathed. “I’m sorry. I thought you were someone else.”

My mother, Grace, was a woman full of life and smiles. She was also a woman with high expectations, who ruled both her kitchen and me with an iron fist. “I would hope you wouldn’t greet your mother like that. And why did I have to hear from Finn of all people that you were home? You couldn’t come see your mother yourself after being gone for who knows how long? I thought I raised you right. And then he tells me you’re to be mated today! Would’ve been nice to hear from my only child.”

Fucking Finn. Of course he was stirring the pot. “I was going to come find you this morning and tell you everything,” I quickly explained, attempting to close the door behind me so my mother’s tirade wouldn’t wake Charlie up. “I haven’t been home for long. Things have just been a bit out of control.”
“I’d say!” she snapped. I was used to my mother’s rants. I had been on the other end of them since I was a child. Eventually she’d burn herself out, and then she’d be full of hugs and snacks, telling me how much she missed me. “To hear from Finn of all people!” She rolled her eyes. Then she shoved past me, pushing the door open, ignoring my protests.

“Mam, this really isn’t a good time,” I complained.

She stopped walking for a moment, focused on whatever words she was about to say. “You’ve been gone for months. I’m going to sit in my son’s room and you’re going to tell me exactly what you’ve been up to.” As was our tradition, but Charlie still slept on the other side of the door, snoring softly. In the end, my attempts were futile, because my petite mother barrelled her way into my room, still talking, and then froze. Her mouth dropped open. “Is that her?”

“Yes,” I murmured. “Her name is Charlie. And she’s still sleeping, so keep your voice down.”

My mother nodded, and we tiptoed to the corner where a couple of overstuffed chairs sat. Once she settled across from me, she turned to me with wide eyes. “Well, I guess I don’t need to ask you what you’ve been up to after all.”

I shrugged. We had always enjoyed a very open relationship – it had just been the two of us for as long as I could remember. When she wasn’t ranting my ear off, she was my best friend. “I actually only met her a few days ago. But Finn and his lovely new lackeys caught up to us, and well…” I sighed. “I had to claim her to keep her safe. What else was I supposed to do?”

She turned, looking at Charlie lying in bed. Only her head was visible, her dark hair streaked against the pale pillowcase. “You could change the situation, you know.”

“Don’t start this again,” I warned. My mother knew better.

She met my glare with a sharp stare of her own. “I’m just saying. It’s your right.”

“And I’m just saying to drop it.”

“Fine.” She huffed, turning back to Charlie. “She sure is beautiful though, Cam.”

I followed her glance. “Aye, she is. She’s also been through a lot. She’s…” I sighed. “Not that she needs it, but I promised I would protect her.”

The room was quiet, Charlie dreaming softly, and my mother and I lost in our own thoughts. My mother spoke, more to herself than anything. “Maybe she’s just what you needed.”

“She’s a witch,” I whispered. I couldn’t tell how my mother would react to such a statement.

“Good. She’ll need to be strong to keep up with you.”

“She’s not my mate.”

My mother cocked her head, giving me a discerning look. “Does it matter?”

“No.” I shook my head, looking out the window to avoid meeting her wise gaze any more than I had to. “No, it doesn’t. But to her, this mating is one of convenience. I told her I would help her escape after.”

“Then you help her escape,” she murmured. Her lips twisted into a wry smile. “And you make her realize that you are just what she needs.”
I scoffed, shaking my head. “Sometimes I think you spend far too much time playing matchmaking in your kitchen.”

“Maybe if my son came home more than twice a year to see his poor old mother I wouldn’t have to keep myself entertained.”

I rolled my eyes. But I smiled at her, and she smiled back. She began to fill me in on all the castle gossip since I had left, but my thoughts drifted to the girl in the bed. The strong, powerful, broken witch who had captivated me the first time I had seen her. Maybe my mam was right. Maybe even though we weren’t what each other wanted, we were what we needed.
Quiet conversation woke me up from what had been far too little sleep. Of course, it had been my own damn fault. But I truly thought I could escape on my own. And then when we got back, and the bed called my name I should’ve just slept. Unlike most, I knew sleeping wasn’t a weakness. It was important for me to be well rested so I was always prepared to run. But when the sound of the shower pulled me from my dreams, I struggled to get comfortable again.

I shouldn’t have watched. I didn’t mean to watch for as long as I had. But the groans had drawn me out of bed, like I was possessed. Cam was fully visible through the open shower door, reflected in the mirror that took up most of the wall opposite. His muscled arm propped himself against the shower, the water pouring over his chiseled body. And gripped in his fist was his thick cock. He was beautiful, his hips shuddering as he pushed his body to release.

I couldn’t stop my hand from wandering underneath the oversized shirt I wore – Cam’s still, his scent wrapping around me as I slept. My clit pulsed, aching for relief as I swirled my fingers around it. My name slipped from his lips, just as his hot cum splashed against the shower wall. A moan escaped my own lips in response. I had turned and run back to bed, but not before his eyes flashed, pinning me with a victorious look.

I hadn’t admitted it. Couldn’t admit it. Confessing I needed him to fuck me was one thing. Owning up to the fact I had just watched him in the shower was another. That wasn’t a carnal need driving me to do what I needed to do, to get what I wanted. That was just plain pleasure for the sake of pleasure.

I groaned from the embarrassment, remembering what I’d done last night. Rolling over, I opened my eyes. The room was too bright, but I could see Cam sitting in a chair across from the bed. Next to him, a small woman with dark hair cut to her shoulders was smiling at me.

What the fuck? I sat straight up, clutching the bedspread to my chest even though I was fully covered. “Umm... hi.”

She beamed at me. “Good morning, Charlie.” Who was this woman and why did she know my name?

I looked frantically towards Cam. Why was he so calm? He grinned at me. “Charlie,
meet my mam, Grace. Mam, meet Charlie.”

For fuck’s sake. The first (only) time I met Cam’s mom and I was half dressed in his bed, beet red with embarrassment over watching him jerk off in the shower. Grace didn’t seem perturbed in the slightest, as if she often had conversations with random women she found in Cam’s bed. “Charlie, I am so thrilled to meet you. I heard you two are going to be mated today. Awfully quick, but successful matches have been made on far less, aye?” She was spirited, still chattering away about dragons she knew who had been mated only knowing each other an hour. I met Cam’s eyes, but he just smiled. Asshole. Some warning would’ve been nice.

Grace was staring at me, waiting for a response to a question I must have missed. “I’m sorry, Grace, I was somewhere else. What did you say?”

She grinned. “Never fear, I know that look all too well. I asked if you had a dress for the ceremony! Obviously this was very last minute, so I can’t imagine you were prepared.”

“Erm, no. I don’t.” I needed a dress for this thing? I assumed I’d just show up, say a few words, and be done with it. A dress?

“No matter. Louise who works with the goats has a daughter about your size, I bet she has something we can rig up. You’ll look beautiful no matter what, that hair of yours is a showstopper. If we hurry, we can catch her before she goes to breakfast.” Grace was already standing up, looking at me expectantly. Cam’s mom was a force to be reckoned with.

“Umm…” Did she expect me to get dressed with her in the room? Was this a dragon thing?

Thankfully Cam noticed my face. “Mam, leave Charlie alone before you talk her ear off. I’m sure she would love to come with you, if the guards allow it, but you’ll have to give her a minute to get changed.”

Grace scoffed. “Those guards are nothing but bairns. They don’t scare me.” I believed her. I didn’t think much would scare Grace.

“Mam!” Cam scolded. “Privacy! Please!”

“Oh, right, right.” She moved towards the door. “I’ll be right outside.” I could hear her berating the guards outside the door, and I couldn’t help the smile on my face.

“Sorry,” Cam ran a hand through his haphazard curls. “She can be a lot.”

“She’s wonderful.” I paused. “Are you coming with us?”

He shook his head. “No. I’m not supposed to see the dress before the big reveal. Dragons are very big on tradition. Besides, I need to shower.”

I frowned. Grace was lovely, but I wasn’t sure about being alone with his mom for that long. What if I stuck my foot in my mouth? “Didn’t you shower last night?”

Cam smirked, raising a brow at me. Fuck. I shouldn’t have mentioned it. “You could join me, you know. It’s even better when you’re not just watching.”

I leapt out of bed, ignoring the heat racing through my body. “Nope, sorry I’m all clean.” I pulled on my pants, Cam’s gaze piercing through my back the entire time. Swapping the oversized shirt for my sweater, I paused. “What if I say something I shouldn’t?”
He strode over to me, resting his big hands on my shoulders. “She knows you’re a witch. And she knows about our plans for after the ceremony. You won’t say anything she doesn’t already know.”

I sucked in a breath through my teeth. “Is that safe?”

“Aye. You’ll be in no safer hands than with Grace.” He cocked his head to the side, pointing at the door. Sure enough, Grace was still scolding the men outside.

I nodded. “Okay. One day, right? One day, one night. And then we can leave.”

“And then we can leave.” He leaned forward, pressing a kiss to my forehead in a move that surprised us both.

“Um. Okay. Guess I’ll be going. See you later?” I was suddenly nervous. How was this day going to play out?

He smiled ruefully. “Not like I could miss it.”

True. Cam walked into the bathroom and I turned to meet Grace in the hallway. She was wagging a finger at the younger of the two guards, muttering something about treating young women with respect. When I closed the door behind me, she beamed, linking my elbow with hers.

“She really isn’t supposed to go anywhere…” the older dragon began, but Grace cut him off with a stern glare.

“Charlie is coming with me to find a suitable outfit for her mating this afternoon. I will be with her the entire time. If the Alpha has any problems with it, he can speak to me directly.” The guard lowered his eyes, nodding. She patted my arm, pulling me down the hallway with a surprising amount of strength. “Now, Charlie. Tell me about yourself.”

I was quiet. What did she want to know? That I had run from my coven, after killing my parents? That Cam and I had known each other only days before we were thrown into this situation? That as hard as I tried, I couldn’t convince myself that I didn’t want her son? None of this seemed like an appropriate conversation to have with your future mother-in-law. Grace was petite where Cam was large, barely coming up to my shoulder, but they both carried themselves with pride and strength, and had the wonderful talent of being able to control a room. “I’m an only child,” I finally said. “From the states. I’ve been travelling.”

She nodded, leading me down a set of well lit stairs. “I figured. You definitely have the aura of an only child. Cam’s got it too.” Grace shook her head. “He loves me to death that boy, but I can’t control him. He’s always done what he wants. Soul of a wanderer, for sure.”

Totally sounded like Cam. Funny, how we could start to understand someone better than we knew ourselves after so little time. The behaviors, so easy to explain away, painted a better picture than we could ever imagine. “I guess we both are.”

We had stopped in front of a door on the first floor, and Grace gave it a couple sharp raps. “Louise! It’s Grace. I have a favour to ask you.”

I was nervous. Since I had come to the castle, I hadn’t really interacted with anyone else besides Finn and the Alpha. I wasn’t sure what they would think of me. Would they look down on me for being another forced mate? Think I was nothing better than a whore? But the door swung open before I could run away, and there stood a woman who
was only an inch taller than Grace.

“Grace!” Louise greeted her friend warmly, pulling her in for a hug. She took a step back, looking me over with a shrewd eye. “And this must be Charlie. I’ve heard so much about you.”

“Hi. It’s so nice to meet you.” I shuffled awkwardly from foot to foot. I didn’t like the idea of so many people knowing about me before I had the chance to introduce myself.

Grace gave me a brief smile and then turned to Louise. “We came to ask if we could borrow a dress for Charlie’s mating today. The poor thing has nothing suitable to wear. I thought maybe one of Emily’s old dresses might fit her.”

Louise narrowed her eyes, turning me around and pulling at my sweater. I felt on display in a way I hadn’t felt in a long time, and I had to assure myself that these women had nothing but my best interests at heart. “Aye, I think you might be right. Come in, come in! I think I still have a few of her gowns from the gathering a few years back.”

There was no other option except to follow her in. Louise’s rooms were larger than Cam’s, with a small sitting room opening up to a hallway of doors – for her daughters, I’d assumed. She directed me to stand in front of a wooden wardrobe, while the two of them dug for dresses. I had been overwhelmed with one mother-figure. Now there were two, tugging my sweater over my head, discussing the merits of different colours against my skin, slipping a dress over my head, and pulling in laces to tighten places that had never been tightened before. Finally they both stood back to admire their work.

“She’s stunning,” Louise sighed.

“Aye, she is,” Grace smiled at me proudly, and I could’ve sworn a tear was building in her eye. She brushed it away, turning all business once more. “Now, for her hair, I’m thinking we pull it away from her face but leave most of it down.”

“Oh! I have just the thing. Give me a moment,” Louise bustled away, opening one of the many doors and disappearing inside.

Grace pulled on my hand. “Come, dear. Come and see how beautiful you look.” She led me towards the wardrobe, opening the door to reveal a full-length mirror inside. She stepped away, and my reflection made me gasp.

I hadn’t taken the time to truly look at myself in the mirror in ages. And seeing myself like this was a shock to my system. The women had decided on a deep, blood red gown that cinched at the waist, skimming the curves of my hips in a rich, silky fabric. The sweetheart neckline was strapless, my chest pushed up in a way that seemed to defy gravity. I wasn’t me. I was...

“Beautiful,” Grace whispered, brushing my hair away from my face. “Cam won’t know what to do with himself when he sees you.”

I could picture Cam’s expression now, his eyes flashing dark with desire and desperation, a need to whisk me out of the room as soon as he saw my body in this dress. I shook my head and smiled sadly at his mom’s reflection. “Grace, this mating...it’s just...it’s not...”

She smiled back at me. “Aye, I know what you both are telling yourself this mating is. And don’t get me wrong, I wish it weren’t being forced upon you this way. But I haven’t seen my son look at someone the way he looks at you in a long time. And the way you
look at him reminds me of someone else I knew, who was madly in love with a man she should’ve been.”

“Who?” She was wrong about Cam and me. This was a mating of convenience for both of us. Even if it had been my name on his lips in the shower last night. Even if it had been the image of him in my dreams this morning. Convenience. Nothing more.

Her smile grew. “Me. I was so in love with Cam’s father. Nothing else mattered. Logic flew out the window the first night I saw him.” She wandered over to the chair across from the wardrobe. “It’s a shame about the forced matings. A true shame. I see those women come here, no more than girls. Forced into loveless marriages for the sake of making the dragon line more powerful.” She frowned. “Don’t get me wrong. Some of the men truly care for those women. Some even find love. But the ones who are in it just for the power… the ones like...”

“Finn,” I finished.

She nodded. “Like Finn. I wish Cam would come home, and claim his right. He could make a big difference. But he refuses. He doesn’t want to stir up the past, and doesn’t feel like the rest of the clan will go along with it. I tried to tell him how foolish that is, but he just won’t listen. Maybe he’d listen to you.”

I raised my hands to stop her. “I’m sorry. I’m so confused. What could Cam possibly do change the clan?”

Grace’s eyebrows flew into her bangs. “Why, lass, I thought he’d have told you. Cam’s father was the previous Alpha.”
I stepped out of the shower – actually clean this time. Sending Charlie off with my mam was either going to be a great decision, or a huge mistake. I’d have to wait and see if Charlie came back tearing her hair out or not. At least she’d be safe with her. My mother wouldn’t let anyone close to her, of that I was certain.

I threw on a T-shirt and some sweatpants, attempting to tidy up the room. We’d left it in a bit of a state between our comings and goings, and if I was going to try to convince Charlie we needed to escape together, a clean room could only help my case – right? Fuck. It had been so long since I’d had to “woo” a girl, and Charlie definitely wasn’t your average girl. One wrong move and she’d have the wind knock me on my ass. Although, the idea was pretty damn hot. Had a woman ever been able to put me in my place before? God, I just wanted her to admit she wanted to be with me.

She didn’t need me to protect her, but I would. She didn’t need me to make her life full, but I’d do my best. She didn’t need me, but I’d make damn sure I earned my keep. We were a team, Charlie and me, a damn good team. She just needed some convincing that sometimes solo wasn’t the best way to fly.

I had just finished making the bed when my door flew open, crashing into the bookshelf against the wall. “What the hell?” I growled. And then I stood straight, an apology on my lips in case it was Charlie and my mother back sooner than expected.

Finn strode into my room, unbothered by the mess he had created. “Looks like you’ve got some books to clean up.” He sneered.

“No shit, Finn. What do you want?” I bent, collecting the books that he’d displaced. “Are you going to clean up your damn mess?”

He completely ignored the second part. “I just came to say congratulations to my oldest friend on his second mating day.” The smile he gave me didn’t meet his eyes.

What had I ever seen in him? We had grown up in the castle together, kids roaming the halls, left to create our own adventures. But somewhere along the way, Finn had discovered darker joys. Manipulation. Cruelty. Power. Maybe if I had stayed with him, he might have come out the other side of such a stage. But I was young, and his new habits disgusted me. So eventually, when I ran the first time – after Mara – I didn’t look back. And when I had come back with Mara, Finn had changed for the worse. To add to it, he
never got over his jealousy that I had found my soulmate, while he was left scrambling for the scraps of the elders in the pack.

“Why are you really here?” I turned around, books safely put away in their respective homes.

He shrugged. “I can’t congratulate you? There has to be an ulterior motive?”

“With you? Yes.” I crossed my arms, waiting for the bomb to drop.

Finn pursed his lips. “Honestly, Cam, I don’t think you give me enough credit. I just hope you and your new witchy bride know exactly what you’re getting into on such a blessed day.”

I rolled my eyes. “Charlie knows everything about Mara, so don’t bother stirring that pot. But while we’re on the topic, thanks for telling my mother I was home. I was going to go see her this morning.”

“She deserved to know. Doesn’t everyone deserve the truth?” I didn’t like the way Finn was talking. I didn’t like the way he sounded like he knew something I didn’t.

“You can leave now.” I held open the door, gesturing Finn out into the hallway. God, he made my skin crawl.

“Fine. I’m leaving. Just remember what I said.” He smiled at me, full of venom and spite. “Make sure you both know what you’re getting into before you commit.”

I slammed the door behind him, all the books I had carefully shelved falling to the floor again. I had no idea what Finn’s visit had really been about. Charlie and I had been completely honest with each other last night. Hadn’t we?

Charlie and my mam were gone for longer than I expected. Long enough for the dragons standing guard on the other side of my bedroom to bang on my door. They told me I had half an hour before I was led to my mating ceremony. Fuck. Guess the next time I saw Charlie, she’d be at one end of the hall and I’d be at the other. I hoped we were ready for whatever came next. Finn’s odd warning circled in my head, but I shook it off. He was just trying to spook me, get me to run so he could claim Charlie all for himself. Not going to happen.

I pulled out the kilt I had worn the evening before, shrugging into a clean dress shirt and suit coat. What kind of dress would Charlie find for the ceremony? Not that it mattered. The woman could wear a garbage bag and still be the most stunning person in any room. She just needed some confidence to come back to herself. I’d bet Charlie before her parents died was something else. She glowed now, but she probably absolutely shone then. Shoes on, I was ready to meet my fate – whatever that ended up being. I locked the door behind me, and the guards walked ahead of me down the corridor.

The hall was already packed with people. Mating ceremonies were big deals, and no one in the clan missed one if it could be helped. I smiled at people I knew as I passed the aisles of wooden chairs, hoping my expression hid my fears brewing inside. What if she
tried to run again? The front row sat the Alpha and his family, who gave me a brief nod, and behind him sat Finn, his perma-sneer sketched onto his face. Dick. But when the guards left and it was just me, standing at the front of the hall with the elder who had been performing mating ceremonies since I was a child. Like always, he was decked out in his finest regalia. I turned to face the hall filled with my clan – my people – and surprisingly felt nothing. This room was full of those who had been here for Mara, and sent me away to find myself afterwards, who had seen me grow up and skin my knees and fall in love…and yet none of them meant anything without Charlie by my side. My dragon purred happily, eager for the moment they got to claim Charlie, but still my fear bubbled. If she ran, they’d make her mate Finn. If she ran, I wouldn’t be able to get her out. If she ran...

And then the door flew open. Charlie and my mother stood arm in arm. My mam gave me a quick smile, and scurried to a seat in the back. Then it was just me and the most beautiful woman I had ever laid eyes on. Her form fitting dress, sketched and accentuated the outline of her curves. Her hair was pulled back from her face with a jewelled clip, and her skin was sheer perfection against the red of the gown. Fuck. I watched her walk towards me, and I was pretty sure my heart stopped beating.

Her eyes darted from side to side, looking at all the people gathered. I should’ve warned her, but I didn’t want her to have yet another reason to run. Because so many of our matings were forced, including this one I supposed, the clan liked their pomp and circumstance. Make the mating legal in front of as many witnesses as possible, and who could possibly argue? The fine dress and the party all just added to the legitimacy. Would the Supe really be held against their will if they were celebrating with the entire clan? It was all a façade, building a story that was nothing more than smoke and mirrors.

I shook my head when her nervous gaze met mine. Eyes up here, Charlie girl, I thought. Focus on me. The differences in her demeanour were so slight that anyone else would’ve missed them. But not me. I had spent enough time poring over every inch of Charlie’s body, I was attuned to every minute change she made. Her eyes locked on me, her shoulders straightened. Her walk was focused, determined. She didn’t give another glance to the curious dragons that lined the hall, craning their necks to see who my second mate was.

Good girl.

Suddenly, she was standing next to me, her perfect face unsure. She still didn’t trust me fully. I knew that. She couldn’t put her full faith into the idea that I wouldn’t betray her, wouldn’t use her powers against her. But if Charlie was going to learn anything about me, it was going to be that when I made a promise, I kept my word.

The elder turned and greeted the hall of dragons, and I grabbed Charlie’s hand. As my clan recited the opening statement, I turned towards Charlie. “Are you okay?” I whispered.

She raised a brow, pursing her lips. “Could be better, not going to lie.”

I smothered my laugh, turning it into a cough and only garnering a quick look of admonishment from the elder. Keeping my face solemn, I tried to follow along with what the elder was saying – something about second chances. I didn’t know if he meant me or the clan. I didn’t care. All I cared about was the ice queen standing next to me.
“Cam,” she hissed. The elder glared at her, not stopping his speech. Charlie only rolled her eyes, but she had my attention. “Why didn’t you tell me?” she asked under her breath.

“Why didn’t I tell you what?” About the hall? About the ceremony? My brain ran through a thousand scenarios.

“About your dad. About how you’re supposed to be Alpha.” Fuck. She sounded pissed.

I groaned internally. I should’ve known my mother would say something. She’d been hounding me for years, and the chance she could get someone else to hound me would’ve been too good an opportunity to pass up. Fuck. “Charlie, listen…”

The elder in front of us cleared his throat. “I understand a mating is an exciting time, but if you two have a conversation that is so important it needs to happen now, maybe you could enlighten the rest of the clan.”

Did I want to tell a bunch of blood thirsty dragons about potential treason? Absolutely not. “Um, no, sir. Just mating day jitters.”

He glared at both of us, and settled back into his speech. A few scattered giggles rang out behind me. “I’ll explain everything later.” I spoke so quietly I wasn’t sure she would hear me, but she pressed her lips into a tight line, and it told me everything I needed to know. Finn’s warning rolled through my mind once more, and I silenced it completely. No.

Because how was I supposed to explain something that was never meant to happen? How did one convey with words how much they felt like they weren’t cut out to lead? The elder droned on, a ceremony I had heard for years and had never cared much for. Charlie was livid, rightfully so, but I had never expected her to find out. In my mind, it wasn’t an issue that needed to be raised. And when the elder was done with his never-ending speech, we’d be mated in the eyes of dragon law. How was I supposed to convince her to stay with me when her anger was radiating off her in thick waves?

“Charlie, I,” I began, but Charlie turned her head away from me, pretending like she was enthralled with the elder’s speech. Except he was now speaking in Latin, and I was pretty sure Charlie didn’t understand Latin. This was a fucking mess.

The elder gestured for us to turn and face each other, clasping our hands together. “Under the eye of the gods and goddesses before us, I proclaim these two souls as mated. May they go forth and live for the pack. May they be blessed with many offspring, uniting their souls now and forever.”

Charlie didn’t smile. Her eyes were ice, glass ready to shatter. Cheers and applause filled the air beside us, but I didn’t smile either. This didn’t feel like a celebration.

The Alpha and his family stood, filing out of the hall. The elder stepped around us, walking behind the family. He gestured for us to follow. I grabbed Charlie’s hand, but it was limp in my grasp. “Charlie, it wasn’t something I thought was important. It’s not something that’s a reality – now or ever.”

“Cam, it’s fine.” She sighed. “Look, we both knew this was just for show, right? It gives us a bit of space to get the hell out of here. You don’t owe me anything.”

Dragons began to file into line behind us, all of us heading for the grounds where tents and food would be set up for everyone to toast the new couple. The air was filled with excitement and anticipation. Everyone’s except for mine and Charlie’s. My mind was
reeling. I could never fill the Alpha’s shoes. I wasn’t wise enough, old enough...I had killed my own fucking mate. I wasn’t enough. I was terrified if I looked into Charlie’s eyes, if she truly knew how uncapable I was, maybe she’d know I wasn’t enough for her either.
In all honesty, I had no right to be upset. I still had secrets held close to my chest that I hoped Cam would never find out. We didn’t owe each other anything. We were just a convenience. Right?

My brain was accepting this explanation, but my heart was less easily swayed. As much as I tried to stay walled off and separated from the situation, I had thought our heart-to-heart last night had meant something. I thought I knew everything important I needed to know about the man who promised me freedom so readily. But now I was in a castle filled with dragons, holding hands with a man I wasn’t sure I really knew at all. What if his next move was to lock me in a dungeon, only appearing long enough for me to produce an heir? What if that was his plan all along? Force a witch into a mating to make himself more powerful so he could claim back the throne. It wasn’t unheard of. Cam seemed genuine, a truly kind man. But masks were easy to wear, and even easier to take off. No. From now on, I needed to accept I was on my own.

We were mated in terms of dragon law, but the mating process for dragons seemed to be the same as most Supe communities. The formal ceremony solidified the legal aspect of things (and appeased most humans who asked too many questions). The less...dignified part was sex. Sex was always involved in the connecting of souls – and powers. Cam was a shifter, so I’d assume his rituals also involved some kind of marking – a bite maybe. Not that it mattered, because I was going to leave this experience at the formal side of things, and hopefully find my chance to escape while everyone drank themselves into a stupor.

Why didn’t he tell me? The only logical explanation was he had darker reasons for keeping me here. After all, darkness lingered didn’t it? God, I was such a fucking idiot. Cam was still trying to talk to me, but I was tuning him out, focused on the best way to get the hell out of here as soon as possible. It looked like we were headed outside, but I’d need to go back inside to grab my stuff. This dress wasn’t exactly designed for hiking – or running. So I’d have to wait a few hours at least. It seemed like the entire clan had turned out for the mating, kids included, so I’d wait until they went to bed and sneak out with them. Hopefully by then, most of the men would be intoxicated enough to not notice the bride was missing. Escape would’ve been a hell of a lot easier with Cam on my team,
but I couldn’t afford to think like that. No. It was me, and me alone.

Walking out the front doors, I saw a massive tent erected in the garden. Obviously this was standard practice for their mating ceremonies, because everyone except for me seemed to know where to go. The tent was filled with buffet tables of food lining the walls, with a bar at the opposite end. Cam was pulled off in one direction, offering me a regretful smile, but I just looked away. I stood awkwardly against the fabric wall of the tent, watching the interactions of the dragons. So normal. So human. Someone ran up to me, and offered me a glass of what seemed to be champagne.

I smiled and thanked them before they ran off. As soon as they could no longer see me, I tipped the glass of champagne in front of me into the grass. It wouldn’t hurt my plan if everyone thought I was drunk, but I needed to be completely sober to get out of here alive.

“Smart,” a quiet voice remarked. “I wish I had had that foresight on my mating day. Might have made the evening a bit more…memorable.”

I turned to the side. A beautiful woman stood next to me, a rueful smile on her face. “I’m sorry, have we met?”

She shook her head, her sandy blonde hair swishing from side to side. “No. I’m Simone.” Simone held out a hand, and I shook it. “This was me last year.”

Oh. Pieces fell into place. “So you’re one of the…”


I tried to hide a smirk. “I met your pack a couple nights ago.”

“On the full moon.” She whistled low. “I’m surprised to see you made it out alive.”

I laughed, pointing to myself. “Witch.”

She nodded, looking around the tent. “That explains a lot. Majority of the men have been antsy since you arrived. You being a witch...I suppose they’re scared to lose you. It’s been a while since they had a witch in their grasp.”

“So I’ve heard.” At that moment, I wished I hadn’t tossed my drink over. A couple of sips would have helped to calm my nerves.

“At least you got stuck with Cam. He’s been gone for a while, but I’ve only ever heard good things about him. And he’s not bad to look at.”

She wasn’t wrong there. Even now, Cam stood at the bar with several other men, tossing his head back as he laughed. He was beautiful. As if he felt me looking at him, he opened his eyes, locking his gaze onto mine. I couldn’t stop the shiver running through my body at the heat lacing his stare.

No. “Uh… who’s your mate?” I asked awkwardly, hoping Cam would look somewhere else.

Simone waved her wine glass around. “Oh, he’s around here somewhere.” She met my curious stare with a soft smile. “Don’t feel sorry for me. Please. I’m one of the lucky ones. Ian truly cares for me, and I for him. If you had asked me on my mating day if I had thought such a thing would happen, I would’ve laughed in your face. But here we are.”

“Oh,” I murmured. I didn’t think such a thing could ever be possible. But Simone didn’t look like she was lying. She looked...content. I had forgotten such an emotion existed.

“Not everyone was so lucky, mind you.” She sighed, and tipped her head in the direction of a redhead sitting alone, her foot shackled to the table leg. “Kiera’s mate only
finds her bed once a month. Keeps her locked up the rest of the time. She’s a phoenix, with one too many escape attempts.” A gesture of the wine glass towards a thin blonde at the buffet table. “Lilah’s fae. Her husband tortured her until she turned submissive.”

Her voice trailed on, quietly telling me about woman after woman. So many, taken from their homes and forced to mate with dragons, to produce a line of heirs more powerful than the last. Some stories had happy endings. Some didn’t. With each one my heart sunk. I needed to leave. I needed to run. But it was going to be more difficult knowing I was leaving these stories – these women – behind me. In the same breath, I wasn’t sure what I could do to help them.

Goddammit. What had Cam dragged me into? Over at the bar, the men still stood laughing, joking. Probably finding all of their forced mates humourous. Laughing at their masculinity, their ability to corrupt such delicate beings.

I turned back to Simone, fury blazing in my eyes. “Why?”

“Why not?” she responded sadly. “Power is addictive. I remember the old Alpha. He was good. Kind. And then he died, and the new Alpha took control and everything changed. The dragons were no longer allies. They were our enemies. But how do you fight absolute control?”

I burned, furious. Because I knew how to fight absolute control, and it involved one curly haired dragon shifter at the bar who seemed to want nothing to do with it. The only conclusion I could draw was that the forced mates benefitted Cam somehow, and he didn’t want the responsibility on his shoulders. Hell, it had brought me to him. Simone clucked, taking a sip of her drink. “I know that look, Charlie. Don’t. Don’t fight it. Make the best of it. You’ll only get yourself killed, or worse.” Her glance towards Lilah was remorseful. Simone was afraid, and I couldn’t be upset with her for her feelings. They were valid. But I also didn’t need to stay and accept things as they were.

Fuck all of this. Fuck dragons. Fuck men who thought they could take what they wanted without consequence. Fuck Cam. I had no idea what I was going to do, but I was going to do something, even if it killed me. I was sick of being a bystander, running at the first sign of danger. These women...they were me. They were me without help. They were me without luck. And I needed to do what I could to save them.

“Cover for me,” I muttered to Simone. “I’m sneaking out of here. If anyone asks, I got sick on champagne. Bridal nerves. I don’t know.”

“Charlie, what are you doing?” She looked around nervously, but I was already figuring out the best way to escape.

Through the front door. Duh. “It’s okay. I just need you to distract the guards. I’ll be right back. I promise.” If I could get to my bag, I had something that might be able to help. Both of the dragon guards watched the well-dressed women in the tent, distracted even without Simone’s help. It shouldn’t be a problem for her.

Simone bit her lip and nodded. “I hope you know what you’re doing.”

I smiled. “Witch, remember? I’m not letting this happen to another woman. Ever again.”

She walked over to the guards, still looking nervous but started to act drunker than I knew her to be. The guards immediately directed all of their attention to the attractive
wolf shifter. A quick glance around told me everyone else was preoccupied with the festivities, so I picked up my skirts and slipped out behind the entranced guards. The wind whispered against my ankles as I ran, reassuring me I was doing the right thing.

Everyone in the castle was at the party, so I should be safe. Everyone, that is, except for Grace who was carrying a massive platter of meats and cheeses she nearly dropped when she saw me inside the castle. “Charlie? What are you doing, love?” Cam’s mom narrowed her eyes, looking concerned. To be fair, if I had seen my son’s new mate running away from the celebration tent, I might be a fair bit worried as well.

I gave her a tight smile. “Grace. I need you to trust me.”

Her face fell. “Are you running, lass? I thought you were waiting for Cam.”

“I’m not running.” I shook my head firmly. “I’m not running. I’m going to put a stop to the madness out in the tent. All of those poor women, their choices and freedom taken away from them…” My voice caught. Did I look like them before? Weary and drawn, a zombie going through the day-to-day motions.

Grace put the tray down on a side table, and grasped my hands in hers. “Be safe, Charlie. Those girls need a hero more than they know. I hoped it would be you.”

Every instinct I possessed told me she could be trusted. I squeezed her hands, and she shooed me away. “Go. I’ll cover for you in the tent.”

Picking up my skirts again, I started to run for Cam’s room. “I owe you one, Grace!”

Thankfully I saw no one else while I sprinted through the halls on my bare feet, finally arriving back at Cam’s room. The night before I had watched him slip a key behind the sconce lamp on the wall, and I stood on my tiptoes to feel behind the shade. Bingo. A moment later I was in the room, racing for my bag. I knelt in front of the worn backpack, digging through the mess to find what I needed.

Please be here. Please be here. Except it wasn’t fucking there. I needed my crystals to amplify my magic, but they weren’t in my fucking bag. What the fuck was I going to do?

“I guess I shouldn’t be surprised to see you running again, ice queen.”

I froze with my hands still in my bag. Fuck. I should’ve known he would’ve seen me. Or someone had tattled on me. Had Grace? Maybe Simone? How dare he storm in here, accusing me of something that couldn’t be further from the truth, especially when I was cleaning up messes that he should be cleaning. “You don’t know what you’re talking about, Cam.”

Cam slammed the door closed behind him, and books fell from the shelves as he crossed his arms. “Why don’t you explain it to me then?”

I pulled my hands out of the bag, and rose to my feet. “Why should I? You seem perfectly happy to follow this Alpha while more and more women are captured. Forced to mate men they barely know. Tortured. Beaten.”

His eyes tightened, and scales shimmered under his skin. Obviously I had touched a nerve. “You don’t understand.”

I threw my hands up in the air. “What I understand is that you could be Alpha. You could make a difference. But instead, you run away like the chicken shit you are. Too afraid to do anything of substance.”

Cam was in front of me before I could blink, tossing me onto the bed. His hand circled
my throat, pressing. Not enough to do damage, but enough to make me submit. But I
wouldn’t submit. “You don’t understand,” he hissed, and his eyes flashed dark with his
dragon.
I glared, shoving his hand away from my neck. “Then make me understand.” As I
fought Cam, something shifted inside me. Maybe all of this wasn’t for nothing. Maybe the
wind hadn’t led me to Cam just to be captured again. Darkness lingered, sure, but maybe
there was also something inherently good within him. Something that when combined
with my magic could help free these women. If I was being honest with myself, my quartz
alone wouldn’t make me strong enough.
Maybe I had been wrong all along. But could we work together?
He shifted his hand to rest on the other side of my head, but his face still hovered
inches above mine, furious. “You think those dragons out there will follow me just
because of who my father was? My mother is a cook, Charlie. I killed my mate. So even if
I tried, there would be a rebellion. I might end up dead, and there would be an even
worse situation. The clan won’t listen to me just because I tell them to.”
“So make them listen,” I argued. “Make them believe you. Make them follow you. How
can you just sit back and watch your clan crumble into corruption like this? Or do you run
just so you don’t have to see it?”
Cam’s eyes narrowed with a warning. “Kind of like you do?”
“That’s different.” I tried to push him off of me, but he was too heavy. I could use my
magic, but if I wanted to help the women outside I would need every ounce I had left. I
couldn’t waste it on a man too dense to see the reality in front of him.
“Oh, really?” His face dropped, his nose touching mine so that all I could see was
Cam. “Then tell me what makes you so different, Charlie.”
“I wasn’t running,” I snapped. “I was coming up here to get something to save those
women. To make the change you refuse to. I wasn’t going to leave here knowing there
were other women in the same predicament I was in back with my coven. Trapped. I was
going to free them.”
“Prove it,” Cam snarled. His canines elongated, growing sharp in his mouth. He had
little control over his dragon, and I realized there might be a single solution to both of our
problems. The only issue was I wasn’t sure Cam would see things the same way.
His nails were digging into the bed, so I did the only thing I could think of. I leaned up
and pressed my lips against him, kissing him hard.
CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

CAM

What the hell was Charlie doing? I groaned, using every ounce of willpower I had to push her back with a glare. “What the fuck is happening here?”

She smirked, licking her full lips. “What does it look like? I’m kissing you.”

“No shit. How the hell does that prove you weren’t about to run out on me? Again.”

Charlie chewed on her lip. “Why haven’t you tried to take over the clan?”

“I already told you.” I growled. If she didn’t stop pressing buttons, I was going to shift in this goddamn room. “The clan won’t listen to me. In their eyes, I’m just a kid. Most of them don’t even remember my father.”

“What if...” she paused, taking a deep breath. “What if you had witch magic? Would they listen to you then?”

My dragon nearly leapt out of my skin. Surely she couldn’t mean... “What exactly are you proposing here, ice queen?”

“Mate me,” she whispered. “Mate me. Mark me. Take my powers and give me yours.”

God, I wanted to give in. I wanted to sink my teeth into her neck at the same time I made her scream with my cock. But something wasn’t adding up, so I shook my head. “Why?”

“Does it matter?” Charlie tipped her head. “I’m offering. So take it. Take me.”

“Goddammit, Charlie!” I sat straight up, pushing myself away from her. “It fucking matters to me. I take this shit seriously, and I’m not going to mate you to play some game.”

“It’s not a game,” she murmured, her face hidden by a sheet of dark hair. “I need your powers as much as you need mine. I can’t find my crystals, and I don’t have enough power on my own. I can’t save them without you, Cam.”

My heart cracked. “As touched as I am, I’m not mating you.”

“Why not?” Charlie sat up, running her hands through her tangles of hair. She glared at me. I knew she would fight for what she wanted – needed – but this was one fight I wouldn’t back down on.

“Because I love you, Charlie!” I slammed my hands down on the bed, feathers exploding into the air around us. “Are you happy? Satisfied? Because I’m not fucking mating you unless you can look me in the eyes and admit you love me too.” I met her
fierce stare and she looked away, but not before I caught a hint of something pure in her eyes. I lowered my voice. "I know you have feelings for me. I know they scare you. But they don’t have to be scary. I’m not like them.”

Charlie kept her eyes trained on the wall. She pursed her lips, but I saw the flush spreading across her cheeks. This conversation made her uncomfortable. Nervous. Good. I was suddenly desperate to hear the words leave her lips.

I leant over her, caging her in with my arms and forcing her to lie back down. "Why won’t you cave to me, Charlie girl?" I murmured, dragging my fingertip across her cheek. I trailed it down her neck, dipping it into the neckline of the deep red dress she still wore, enjoying the way goosebumps followed my touch. "Why won’t you give in?"

Finally, she met my gaze again, her eyes bluer than any sky I had been lucky enough to see. "Because feelings don’t last, Cam. I’m offering an alliance that will help us both. I didn’t realize love needed to be a condition of that."

I was livid. My dragon paced inside of me, eager to be released. They couldn’t understand what all the fuss was about. Mark her, they demanded. Mark her now. But I couldn’t.

"Let me get this straight. I’m good enough for you to fuck, but not for you to have feelings for?" I scoffed, unable to keep the scorn from my voice. "Keep telling yourself that, ice queen. Keep pushing me away. Maybe one day all the lies you tell yourself will be true. Or maybe you’ll just end up alone."

Charlie tried to shove me away, but I refused to move, keeping our bodies pressed together. "Don’t fucking push me, Cam."

I smirked. "You gonna use your magic against me?"

"Why don’t you try me again and find out?" she snapped. Good. I hoped she was pissed. I hoped she felt something.

"Let’s see what you’ve got," I challenged.

I had barely finished the sentence before I flew across the room, my back thrown into the wall across from the bed. The stone wall did nothing to cradle the impact. Shite, that hurt.

Charlie sprang from the bed, her eyes shooting daggers. "I told you not to push me. I’m leaving. I’m going to help those girls with or without you."

Righting myself, I threw my arm across the door to the hallway before Charlie could leave. "You’re not going anywhere."

She licked her lips, and I couldn’t help feeling like I wanted to trace that same path with my own tongue. "Are you going to mark me then?"

"If you admit you love me."

Charlie scoffed, but it was missing her usual fire. I was getting somewhere. I strode towards her, forcing her to walk backwards until the backs of her knees hit the bed. Catching herself before she fell, she took a seat. "I’m not your mate, Cam."

"Does it look like I care?" I was done with the excuses.

But Charlie tried again, furrowing her brow. "I’m a witch. You won’t be safe with me."

My restraint snapped. "I don’t care that you’re a witch, Charlie. I don’t care that you’re not a dragon. I don’t care that you’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen, or that
you aren’t my mate. I don’t give a shite about any of these things. It doesn’t matter. Because you make my heart beat in a way I never thought was possible, and you put a smile on my face just by walking into a bloody room. You fight with me when others back down and above all else? I choose you, Charlie. I don’t love you because someone is telling me I’m supposed to love you. I love you because I want to. Because I choose to love you, every goddamn day.” My chest was heaving with the exertion of my confession, and Charlie was silent beneath me, eyes wide. Maybe she’d believe me now.

My body was partially shifting without my control. My teeth were growing larger, dark scales flashing beneath my skin. This thing between us had come to a head and needed resolution one way or another before I imploded. I ran my teeth across the soft skin of her neck, right where her body pulsed with life, enjoying the way she shivered with my touch. Using one of my claws, I ripped the beautiful red dress right down the middle, exposing Charlie’s beautiful body to my eyes alone. I tossed aside the ruined fabric, running my eyes down her milky skin, her lush curves. Above me, her breath was shallow. “You are the single most stunning creature I have ever laid my eyes on. I fucking love you. I shouldn’t, but I do.”

I tweaked one of Charlie’s rosy nipples between my fingers, quickly replacing it with my mouth to ease the ache. She moaned quietly, probably thinking I was too dragon to be worried about making her admit her feelings to me. I continued to suck, teasing her nipple with my tongue, while I ran my other hand down her body. She arched her back, desperate for more of my touch. And then I drew back. “Tell me you love me,” I demanded.

“I can’t,” she whispered, and a series of mixed emotions flashed across her icy blue eyes. “Cam, I…I don’t know what love feels like.”

The day I met this dark-haired beauty, she’d stolen a piece of my heart. Not knowing how to love, is this all my ice queen was worried about? I smiled, running one finger lightly over her face. “I can fix that.”

Charlie looked wary, and I crawled over her body, kissing her deeply until her tongue pressed back. I pulled away and stared at her. “Love is using your magic in a forest filled with wolves to save my ass.” I rose to my knees above her. I tore my shirt over my head, ripping my kilt off and tossing it to the side so we were both bared to each other. “You love me.”

I propped myself up on my elbows, dragging my tongue down her body, watching her squirm and writhe beneath me. “Cam,” she breathed.

I feathered my fingertips across her body, playing a light rhythm until I circled her swollen clit with my thumb. She cursed under her breath, her hips jerking to meet my touch. “Love is willing going to a castle full of dragons because you wanted to protect me.” I pushed myself down, my tongue taking over for my thumb. Gods, she tasted so fucking good. I paused for a moment to look up at her. She still had her gaze locked onto mine, her eyelids hooded. “You love me.”

I gently sucked her clit between my lips, gently. The scent of her arousal was sweet, and clouded my judgement. But I needed this. We needed this. My fingers found their way between her legs, stroking her soaking pussy. “You’re drenched, ice queen. You
didn’t tell me fighting turned you on.”

I slipped a finger inside her, curving until she cried out above me. Then I added another finger to join the first. I began to find a rhythm, pulsing my fingers and watching her body respond. “Love is using an opportunity you had to run away to help me instead. To help me and my people.” Charlie was twisting underneath me, cursing my hard pace. Her body was building to release, but I couldn’t let that happen. Not yet. “You love me,” I whispered. “Tell me you love me, Charlie girl. Tell me you love me, and I’ll make all the hurt go away.”

“I love you.”

My head snapped up. I was stunned. “I’m sorry?”

Charlie’s lips were pressed together, but her eyes were brighter than I had ever seen. “I love you, you dumb dragon. I shouldn’t, but I do.” I smiled at the echo of my own admission to her. “I love you. Now fuck me and mark me before I lose my goddamn mind.”

“As my ice queen commands.” I pulled myself up, looking into her eyes. “You know how the mating works right?” My cock was heavy, pulsing with need between her legs. I edged it into her soaked entrance, and waited. My dragon was uncontrollable, so desperate for this moment.

“I know how it works for me. So you worry about you, and I’ll worry about me.” She smiled shyly, an expression I was unused to seeing on her bold face. “I love you.”

Both of us cried out as I sank into her. All the way in. “You feel so goddamn good.”

“Make me come, Cam,” she murmured. “I’ve been desperate since I saw you in the shower.”

I grinned. “I knew you watched me, you dirty little thing.” I pushed my hips deeper, and began to fuck her. Slowly. Watching every minute expression on her face with every slow stroke. I needed to come, but I needed this moment more.

I dragged my cock out of her, pushing it back inch by inch. “Do you like the way I make you feel, ice queen?” My body was tense, edging closer to release. I wouldn’t be able to maintain this pace much longer. “Do you like knowing I’m going to make you come?”

“Harder,” she begged.

If she wished. I slammed into her, harder. Faster. Pushing both of us towards ecstasy. But something else needed to happen first. Charlie’s pussy was tightening around me, and I knew we were both almost there. “Now, Charlie. Do it now.”

Charlie opened her eyes, looking at me. Into me. Through me. She nodded. I kept my desperate pace, until I felt something hit my chest. Charlie’s magic. She was transferring her magic through the touch of her hand, burning where it pressed against my heart. That pure and good energy which used to be hers and hers alone would now be ours. Shared. The magic hit my veins heavily, and my hips shuddered. “Come now, Charlie!” I commanded, and her body obeyed. Her eyelids fluttered closed, her hand still glowing on my chest. I was about to come as well, but I needed to finish my half of the mating first. I pressed my body against hers and dug my teeth into her neck. I bit. Hard. And when the
first taste of Charlie’s blood mixed with the taste of her magic rushing through my veins, I roared out my own release.

I rolled over, pulling Charlie on top of me and together we lay, still joined. New, and yet old. The same, and yet somehow changed. I felt it, so I was sure Charlie did as well. I was myself, but I was also something else. Maybe I was someone who could make a difference, like my mate, who smiled as she rested on top of me. I could’ve sworn she looked content. At peace.

Mate, my dragon hummed happily.

Yeah, okay, I thought. I could let them win this time.
Had that...really just happened? I wasn’t sure what I should be more surprised about – the fact I had admitted feelings I wasn’t sure I had acknowledged myself to Cam? Or the fact we had just mated?

We had just mated. Fucking hell. This went against literally everything I had ever hoped to achieve when I ran from there. From him. But I couldn’t find it in my heart to be upset or irritated. I only felt content. I rested on Cam’s chest, his heartbeat drumming a steady rhythm beneath my ear, repeating all the things he had whispered to me afterwards. Safety. Love. Protection. I could feel his shifter energy swirling through my veins, mixing with my own magic. I felt powerful. In control, like no one would ever be able to touch me again. No one except Cam.

Obviously I had never seen a dragon mate with a witch before. But I had met a witch with a wolf shifter mate. She didn’t turn into a wolf, because the transfer didn’t work like that. It only amplified the pair’s individual strength. I would have access to powers that had been limited while separated from my coven, and Cam would be able to shift quicker. His reflexes would be more agile, his strength more powerful. Would it be enough?

“We need to help those women,” I murmured. His arms wrapped around me, holding me tightly. I found myself sinking into his touch. Is this what love felt like?

“Aye.” He sighed. “Do you think it’ll be enough? For the clan to listen to me?”

“I’m fully expecting a fight.” I drummed my fingers across Cam’s solid chest. “But between the two of us, I think we can make a difference. Those women...they don’t deserve a life like that. They deserve freedom. Choice.”

Cam sat up, pulling me with him so I sat on his lap. He narrowed his eyes, examining me with his piercing green gaze. “You deserve those things too, Charlie girl.” His bare chest was on display, and I couldn’t help myself from running a quick glance over his toned body. God, he was a sight to behold.

I smiled. “I know. And I made my choice.”

“Did you mean it?” His voice dropped to nothing more than a low rumble that echoed in my soul. “Did you mean it when you said you loved me?”

I nodded. “It makes zero sense to me, and it’s probably the worst choice I’ve ever made in my life...”
“Hey!” Cam wrinkled his nose. “And you think about sex far too much.”

“Can ye blame me?” He bent his head, running his tongue across the fresh bite mark on my skin. I shivered, trying to push him away but he just continued to run kisses down my neck. “I have a goddess in my bed. You’re lucky I ever let you leave the room.”

I smiled and squirmed, trying to get away but he just held me tighter. “Back to what I was saying. Despite all of your flaws, I love you.”

“Say it again,” he rasped. “I love you.”

“Gods, you’re perfect.” Cam kissed me deeply, his tongue begging for entrance that I willingly gave. His hands ran down the sides of my body, as if he already couldn’t get enough. Not that I could blame him – I was just as eager to feel his touch.

But we had important things to take care of. Important things on a fairly tight schedule. I pushed Cam away. He growled. “Won’t they be looking for us?” I whispered, holding him at bay. “I don’t want to fuck up our element of surprise.”

He shook his head. “Nay. We’re newly mated. The general expectation is that I lock you in here for a week and have my way with you.”

Cam merely shrugged when I raised my brow. “Okay. Not going to get into your backwoods dragon ways. I’m thinking we should wait a few more minutes until everyone is well and truly smashed and then make our grand entrance.”

Cam dragged his fingers through my hair. “I have a few ideas of what we could do while we wait.”

I could only imagine the things he had planned, and I was certain all of them would leave us with no concept of time. “Unless they’re planning, plotting, or practicing, they’re off the table.”

“But I didn’t even get to show you what I could do with my tail,” he murmured, sucking on the soft skin beneath my ear.

I moaned without thinking, then frowned and shook my head. “Your tail, Cam? Really? That thing is fucking massive.”

His voice dropped an octave, rubbing his nose in my fresh mark. “You’d still let me though. I know you would. You’d let me do all sorts of dirty things to you with it.”

Probably. One look into his warm green eyes and I was a goner. I’d let him tie me to his bed and do whatever he wanted with his goddamn tail. “After. I need to have my head on straight for this, and I have a feeling whatever you have planned would not leave me in the right headspace.”

Cam flashed me a crooked grin. “You really think you’re going to be in a good headspace thinking about me fucking you with my massive cock and my massive tai—”

I slapped my hand over his mouth. “And we’re done with this conversation. Get dressed. We need to see exactly what our capabilities are before we wreak havoc at our own celebration.”

He pouted, but got out of bed. Thank fuck. I don’t know how much longer I could’ve kept him at bay. I knew Cam could shift parts of himself without turning full dragon – hence the dragon claws, teeth, and sometimes the scales that shimmered beneath his
skin. But his tail? I couldn’t deny I was curious.

Nope. Head on straight, Charlie. I had a whole clan of women to save, and I had no idea where to begin. Cam and I would be more powerful, but what exactly would that mean? Cam was still pouting, but pulling on more practical pants and a sweater. I got out of bed and followed suit. I didn’t have a dress to put back on because it lay in tatters next to the bed. Hopefully Louise would understand. I grabbed my hiking gear that was still stuffed in my backpack, and began to dress.

I snagged my trusty boots out from under the bed and began to lace them up, going over potential issues in my mind. “It’s been a while since I used the amount of magic this will probably take. I might be a bit rusty.”

Cam ran a hand through his tousled curls. Even dressed in casual clothes similar to the first time I met him, I wanted to tear the fitted pants off his legs just to see if he would toss me back on the bed. “Won’t it be dangerous for you? Using your magic, I mean.”

“Yes and no.” I shrugged. “We just mated, Cam. We just blasted a pretty big energy signal to blast out into the world. If they didn’t know where I was, they do now. But I’ll probably have at least a day or two on them, so we can figure out a plan to deal with them then. If they even decide I’m still worth it.”

He chewed on his lip. “All right. I can’t say I’m entirely comfortable with the idea, but all right.”

I grinned, and got to my feet. “Perfect. Now let’s see what you’ve got, big boy.”

“Is that a reference to my stature, my cock, or my tai–”

I held up my hand. “Don’t even go there.”

“I know you’re interested, Charlie girl. You want to know how it’d feel. You’re curious to be completely under my control, submissive. Stretched, tail and cock moving in perfect synchrony.” Cam’s eyes grew dark, a few scales flashing on the side of his neck.

Fuck. I needed to keep him in control.

I gulped, trying to ignore the desire creeping between my legs, soaking my panties. “Uh. Okay. So.” What was I going to say again? “The first thing I think we should test is your reflexes. Think you can dodge my magic?”

He smirked. “Why don’t we make this practice a bit more interesting?”

“Because attempting a coup at our own mating celebration isn’t interesting enough? Besides, we’re running out of time.” In truth, I had no idea what time it was or how long it had been. I could only focus on Cam’s searingly hot gaze burning into me.

“They’ll be partying until the early morning. And I’ve waited a good number of years, I can wait a few more minutes. Especially for this.” Cam waved off my concerns, locking his eyes with me. “If you take me down first, I’ll give you the orgasm you’ve been waiting for.”

“Okay.” I didn’t like where this was going, but I also knew better than to try and derail Cam when he was on a tangent. And if it got him to practice, then I’d count it as a win. “And if you take me down first?”

“I want to feel your lush little mouth wrapped around my cock... and then my tail.”

Oh. “Does it even work like that? Would you even be able to feel...?”

He raised his brow and his eyes grew even darker. “Oh yes, Charlie girl. Remember
when you were riding on my back? My scales can feel everything. And you sucking on my thick tail will give you a taste of what you’re in for when this is all over, and you let me have my way with you.”

I shook my head, ignoring the zaps of electricity driving straight to my core. “Fine. If it’ll mean you’ll actually test out what you can do, I agree to your ridiculous bet.”

“We’ll see how ridiculous it is when you’re moaning around my tail.” I blasted him with a gust of air, rocketing him back against the wall. “What the hell, Charlie?” he growled. “I wasn’t ready!”

“Because you were too busy thinking about your tail. Dodge the magic, Cam. The dragons down there are going to need something to fear, and your tail won’t scare them.” I had to admit I was impressed with the ease I could pull at the wind. I hadn’t been able to control the elements like that before, even when I was still a part of the coven. I couldn’t imagine the control and power I’d have if I ever decided to form my own coven.

Cam got to his feet, pissed. “Fine. Let’s do this.”

“Fine,” I snapped. I whipped my wrist back, pulling at the air in the room once more. When we were outside I’d have more control over the other elements, but here in the room, air was safest to not alert anyone to what we were doing. But before I could release the sharp gust towards Cam, he was gone. The wind flew harmlessly into the wall. But something was lifting me off my feet, throwing me backwards into the opposite wall.

Cam pinned me against the wall and grinned down into my face. “Damn, lass, you weren’t lying. I really am fast. Are you ready to cave?”

“Nice try.” I pulled the wind slowly, wrapping it around his legs softly so he wouldn’t notice, and then I tugged, sliding down the wall as the air dragged Cam away. He cursed, trying to get out of the grasp of the force he couldn’t see but it was useless. I smiled. “Don’t let your guard down. Especially with magic.”

I let the magic ease away, and watched Cam rub his legs. “I’ll call that a trial run. Best two out of three?”

He grinned. “You’ll regret offering me an out.”

“You’ve gotta learn. Something else to keep in mind. In here, I’m just using air. Out there, I’ll have access to other elements.”

“Is that a warning for me, or for the rest of the dragons?” Cam paced while he watched me acclimate to the room once more. “Because I gotta admit, you threatening me is kind of hot.”

I rolled my eyes. “Are you serious right now?”

“Dead.” I blinked, and Cam pressed me against the door, kissing me. I couldn’t control my urges, desperately trying to deepen the kiss he had begun. His hands were digging through my hair, brushing against my cheeks…wrapping around my neck. “And you would be too, if I wanted to kill you. Don’t let your guard down. Especially around your mate.”

I shoved him off with a grunt, pissed he had gotten the better of me. “Asshole. Whatever. Winner takes all. Next one to take the other down.”

Cam shrugged easily, his smile still plastered on his face. “Okay. This will be fun.”

I snapped my wind out, pushing Cam off his feet and knocking the wind out of him.
“It’s not supposed to be fun, Cam. It’s supposed to be teaching you so you’re better prepared when you attempt to take over your entire clan.”

He was breathing heavily, the smile gone. “Fine. You want to play like that? We can play like that.”

Cam lumbered to his feet, and I pushed gusts of air towards him as he stalked towards me. He easily dodged each one, his body quick and agile. With a frown, I began to pelt him with more force. Still he ducked and leapt, missing every one of my attacks. What the hell?

Focused, I gathered my attention to the wind, intent on knocking Cam on his ass once and for all. Probably harder than necessary, just because he had been a giant dick this entire time. But before I could lash out, he was gone.

In a flash my back was on the bed, and I couldn’t breathe. You had to be fucking kidding me.

I looked up at Cam, who smiled, his forearm pressing into my neck. I couldn’t get enough air to focus and connect with my magic. Fuck. The asshole knew it too, easing his arm further against my windpipe. He knew his limits – and mine – and wouldn’t do any real damage, but he wanted me to cave. I closed my eyes, pissed at myself for not being prepared. I could go another moment before I needed to draw a breath, maybe two. I finally gave up, tapping my hand against his arm, and he immediately released me. I gasped, air flooding my lungs once more. “Fuck, Cam. I didn’t even see you that time.”

“I know.” I didn’t need to open my eyes to know he was gloating, lording his victory over me. Asshole. If I hadn’t made it two out of three, he would’ve been my bitch.

The weight lifted off me, and I opened my eyes to see Cam walking across the room, stretching with his back to me. “Do you at least feel ready? More aware of what your body can do.”

Cam turned around with a leering smirk. “Definitely.” Scales glittered and shifted along his neck, and he began to unbuckle his pants. His thick cock sprang free, already hard. He kicked his pants to the side.

“Cam, what the hell are you doing?” I asked, even as I was trying not to drool. I couldn’t believe how tempted I was at the sight of him.

“I’m claiming my reward.” He pumped his hand around his cock a few times, while he studied me. His body was shifting, still human, but his slick black tail appeared behind him.

I chewed my lip, trying not to think about the promises he had made while we were fighting. My panties were destroyed, and the way he was looking at me wasn’t helping. “Right now?” I whispered.

“Right now, Charlie.” His tail wrapped around his legs, glittery and smooth. One hand still on his cock, the other commanded me closer. “Get on your knees.”
Charlie wanted to fight. I could see it flash in her eyes. She wanted to protest, to complain. But just as much, maybe even more, she wanted to sink to her knees in front of me. I knew it now, just as I had known it when I caught her watching me in the shower. Besides, it wasn’t like I’d leave my little witch aching for me. I’d return the favour tenfold. We both knew that.

So we stood there at a standoff. My hand fisted around my heavy cock, desperate to sink it into one of Charlie’s hot, wet holes. Charlie stood with her arms crossed, chewing on the inside of her cheek. My tail curled around me, pulsing with the need of my entire body. I hadn’t anticipated offering up my tail. Dragon tails were sensitive, laced with nerves that held all kinds of sensations. And while I had used my tail with other dragons before, I had never used it with a different kind of Supe. But when Charlie’s eyes had lit up with curiosity, I knew she would be the first. Would she like it? I knew I would, but how would her body adjust to my smooth scales, to that much pressure building inside of her? Fuck, if I wasn’t going to enjoy finding out.


She nodded, and walked over to me, and sank to her knees. She was the most delicious thing, and she was on her knees in front of me. Charlie reached her hand up to replace mine. She stroked my cock. Her mouth...oh gods, her sweet mouth took over, taking the tip of my erection into her mouth and swirling her tongue down the rest of the length. “Fuck. Yes,” I breathed. My tail reached out for her of its own accord, brushing up the side of her body, stroking her face as she bobbed and sucked around me. With a soft moan, Charlie took more of my dick in her mouth, leaning into the touch of my tail. Fuck. So she did like the feeling of my dragon pressed against her. I knew I wasn’t imagining things when she was on my back while we flew. God, to feel her sweet pussy wrapped around my tail, while my cock was occupied with other parts of her...

My hips trembled, driving my cock deeper into her throat. Charlie didn’t stop, flattening her hands against my thighs, her fiery blue eyes boring into mine with a fire. My tail tightened around her throat, enjoying the feeling of her pulsing blood. My body
was a stick of dynamite, ready to explode, and I wanted Charlie to take every drop of my release. But I had a better idea. “Fuck, Charlie. Stop.” I grabbed a fistful of her hair in my hand, and she paused. Charlie pulled away from my cock, and wiped the drool from her mouth with a small grin.

“What, you didn’t like it?” She got to her feet, standing in front of me.

I brushed the hair back from her face, taking in her beauty. “I loved it. But I’m about to like something else even better.” I took a step back, and sat down in the chair behind me. Leaning forward, I tugged Charlie’s pants down over her hips, trailing kisses along every inch of skin I bared. Charlie took my lead, pulling her shirt over her head, and kicking her heavy boots off to one side. When she was fully nude in front of me, she cocked her head to the side. “I want you to ride me. You’re going to fuck yourself silly on my cock, and then we’re going to see how much you like playing with my tail.”

Her breath caught, I knew exactly how much she liked the idea of that — whether or not she wanted to admit it. “Do you really think we have time for that?” Charlie whispered, but she was already moving towards me, wrapping her arms around my neck as she straddled me. Yeah, this had been a damn good idea. As she rolled her hips into me, she gasped.

“We have time. Like I said, they’ll be partying until the early morning. And do you really want to go into a fight all wound up like this?” I ran my hand down her body, cupping her full breast in my hands and rolling her nipple between my fingers. “Ride me, ice queen. Show me how much you want this. I want to see you control your pleasure.”

Her body was clay in my hands, each curve fitting into a scar on my palm. She was utter perfection, and she was mine. Charlie met my gaze, and held her hips above me. Tangling her hands into my hair, she sank down onto my cock, inch by fucking delicious inch. Utter perfection. My dragon stirred, demanding we force her on all fours and show her exactly who was in charge, but I was captivated. Still for a moment, but never breaking eye contact, she began to rock back and forth. Charlie rolled her head from side to side as she watched me, gasps replacing normal breaths as her moves became more frantic. “Just like that, Charlie girl,” I groaned. “Fuck yourself just. Like. That.” My own pleasure was building but I was desperate to hold it off, to watch this beautiful creature fall to pieces first.

Her pussy was drenched and hot wrapped around me. It was addictive. I never wanted to leave this moment, watching her ride me, her fingers digging divots into my shoulders. I rested my hands on her full hips, dragging her back and forth on my cock. “God, Cam!” she cried. “I’m going to… I’m going to…” She chanted her words, her nails digging deeper, and her hips driving harder.

“Let go.” I bent my head forward to suck one of her nipples deeply into my mouth as she began to curse above me. I moved upwards dragging my teeth across her mark. The mark I had left. “Come for me. Come for me, and then we can really play.”

Her hands dug into my shoulders, I grimaced, sure her nails were drawing blood. Not that I cared. She could draw all the blood she wanted, mark me up, destroy me – I was hers to do with as she pleased. Charlie screamed out my name, her pussy pulsing around me as she shook. “Just like that,” I whispered, rocking her through her orgasm, glad I had
She rested her head on my shoulder, grinning up at me. “Thank you,” she whispered. A moment passed between us, raw and unflinching.

I smiled back down at her. “Don’t thank me yet.” I picked up her hips again, pulling down her sensitive core onto my still hard cock. “We have more games to play. Practicing our skills, if you will.”

Charlie moaned, her body still trembling with her release. But she arched her body against me, tossing her hair back over her shoulders. “Using my own words against me, Cam? Really?”

“Don’t tell me you’re surprised.” I thrust my hips upwards at the same time I pushed her down, and we both groaned in pleasure. My tail snaked out from behind me, swirling around Charlie’s smooth skin. “Now be a good girl and open your mouth for me, Charlie.”

I rocked my hips up against her, and like my dirty ice queen I knew her to be, Charlie obediently opened her mouth. But then she closed it with a small frown. “What do I do?”

My dark tail was snaking around her neck, looking like a silk scarf. If only my intentions were that innocent. Charlie’s question amused me, but I knew for her to ask was a vulnerability for her. She wanted to do well – for me. “You suck it, Charlie girl. Same as you did with my cock.” I groaned, the image of her full red mouth wrapped around my black tail making me harder than imaginable.

With a nod, she sank deeper onto me, rotating her hips with a quick twist. “Fuck, Charlie. You’re going to make me come before we even get to play.”

Charlie gave me a devilish smile, continuing to ride me. “Guess you better get to it then.”

Slipping around her chin, my tail stroked at the corner of Charlie’s mouth, begging for entrance. My little witch eagerly opened, and the tip of my tail immediately filled the wet, pink space. Shite. Shite. Shite. She wasn’t even moving and the feeling of her lips around my tail was exquisite. I wouldn’t push her too far – this time. Even though I wanted to. I let her adjust to the unique feeling of what was in her mouth, continuing to piston my hips upwards into her. She didn’t back away, and allowed her tongue to explore the silky smoothness. And then, when I thought she was ready, I drove both my cock and the tip of my tail into her deeper.

Charlie cried out as much as she was able, and her pussy clenched around me at the same time she began to suck. The lights in the room flickered – a sign I had begun to associate with my mate losing control. Oh yes. Charlie definitely liked this.

She clung to my shoulders once more as my hips picked up speed. She moved one hand to twist around my tail as she began to suck and tease. Fuck. I was no better than a teenage boy in a linen closet, but the sensations were everywhere. The nerves on my tail were pulsing, unable to keep up with Charlie’s slick tongue, and my cock was ready to explode. But the image of my dark-haired beauty rocking on my cock, her mouth filled with my tail…

Gods. I grabbed her hips with force, pulling her down harder. “Come with me, Charlie.”

I didn’t need to ask twice. This time, we came together, my tail muffling her cries of pleasure. She shattered around me, and I pumped my release deep inside her, cursing
the entire time. I couldn’t see straight. I couldn’t think straight. The only thought I could keep in my mind was Charlie.

Let them come for her, I thought. Let the entire fucking coven come for her. I’d pick them off one by one.

Eventually Charlie lifted her head off my chest. “We actually should make a move now. If you want this to work.”

I scoffed. “Of course I want this to work. I was just about to ask you if you were ready to move your lazy ass.”

“Lazy!” Charlie screeched, sliding off of me. “You’re one to talk about being lazy. Do you even have a plan?”

I shot to my feet, getting dressed once more in my dark clothing. “I’m supposed to have a plan? You kind of just sprung this one on me.”

“Yes, you’re supposed to have a fucking plan. Did you think you were just going to waltz in there and take over the place?” Charlie was getting dressed across from me, lacing up her boots as she watched me.

I shrugged. “More or less.” With Charlie’s sharp glare I raised my hands in defense. “I’m kidding! Regardless of how we do it, I’ll have to challenge the Alpha for his position. Surprise definitely makes it easier to challenge him, because if anyone suspects what I’m going to do, their instinct will be to protect.”

“So…Finn is who we need to watch out for.”

“Basically,” I agreed, and opened the door, waiting for Charlie to leave the room.

She nodded, passing me. “I’ll watch out for Finn. You get to the Alpha. I’ll try and find your mom too, see if she can move the women somewhere safe. They don’t need to be there for whatever happens. I don’t want to see them being used as pawns. Any more than they already are.” I caught up to her, and she shot me a curious glance. “Your mom was oddly supportive of my idea to help the women.”

The laugh that escaped me was loud. “I’m not surprised. Who do you think told me you were up in my room?”

“Grace.” Charlie smirked. “I should’ve known she was the traitor the moment you stepped in the room.”

The halls were silent, everyone still outside celebrating. The festivities of our mating, that we were about to turn on its head. It gave us a moment to collect ourselves before anything happened. My soul was at peace, regardless of whatever came next. I shrugged, squeezing Charlie’s hand tightly in mine before we rounded the last corner. “My mother has been trying to convince me to challenge the Alpha for years. She came from a clan where forced matings weren’t a thing, and she also remembers my father’s rule well. She would’ve left years ago, but she wanted her son raised near his father’s legacy. By the time the corruption had well and truly sunk in, it was too late for us to leave.” I pressed a kiss to Charlie’s forehead. “You gave me the chance I never thought I had, and I’ll never know how to repay you.”

“Easy,” she whispered, and her blue eyes blazed with a passion I was sure echoed my own. “Free those women.”

I smiled, my heart tightening with more love than I thought possible for this feisty
woman. “I’ll do my best, lass. A challenge for Alpha is to the death, so there’s no room for failure. If I lose…” I trailed off, wanting to tell her to run if I died, but unable to speak the words allowed.

Charlie shook her head. “You won’t lose. We can’t afford to lose. Either of us.”

I took a deep breath in. “You ready?”

“Let me test something.” Charlie took a few steps back from me, and I watched as the lights around us flicked briefly, and a torrent of air flew past us down the hallway. “Oh yeah. I’m ready.”

Charlie walked into the tent first, hopefully to distract Finn and anyone else that might have questioned where we were, or what our intentions were. I waited a few minutes and then followed her in. Narrowing my eyes, I scoped out the inside of the party. Like I had assumed, the celebrations were still in full swing. Charlie was sitting at a table with my mother and a woman I didn’t recognize. Thankfully, no one seemed to find her change of apparel odd.

Dragons. Cavemen through and through. The Alpha still stood at the bar, holding court with a group of elder dragons. He expected nothing.


And then I made eye contact with Finn. For fuck’s sake. He glared at me, as if seeing exactly what my plans were. Finn jumped out of his chair, running right for me, but not before Charlie caught him with a quick breath of air, looping around his arms and chest. He tugged, confused, and then glared, realizing what had happened as Charlie came up beside me.

“Let me go, witch,” he hissed.

“Not a chance,” Charlie snapped. Finn’s arms were squeezed tighter around his body, the band of invisible air pulling. I knew what that felt like. Finn wouldn’t be able to get out of that until Charlie decided.

“You’ll fucking pay for this, bitch.” Finn turned his head, facing the direction of the Alpha. “Alpha!”

The Alpha turned towards us, curious, but before Finn could say anything and a group of angry dragons could attack me, I screamed out, “I challenge you for the position of Alpha!”

The tent went silent, everyone stopping what they were doing to stare at me. Behind me, I heard Finn relax as Charlie released him. The words were out. It was too late for him to stop me from challenging the Alpha. With a stroke of her hand on my back, Charlie slipped into the shadows, hopefully to find the women. I could feel my dragon in my chest, and magic pumping through my veins. Absolutely fine.

Finally the Alpha turned from the bar to face me, swirling his drink in his hand. “That’s a dangerous challenge, Cam. For you. I’ll eat you alive. Chew you up and spit you out.”

“Are you sure about that?” Prowling towards the group of men at the bar, I could hear quiet conversations spark at the tables. People probably placing bets on who would win such a challenge. It had been years since the last challenge. The current Alpha had won against everyone who laid claim, picking them off one by one. He was so sure he would win this one, but he didn’t truly understand what was at stake. An hour ago, I hadn’t been
sure if I wanted the title, but I knew with every fiber of my being I couldn’t allow this predator to control the clan any longer. So if it meant me becoming Alpha to fix that, I’d rise to the challenge.

“I’ve watched for years as you take advantage of innocent women. Standing by because I had no choice. But now I do. I’m sick of the manipulation and the corruption. I’m tired of watching this pack disintegrate before my very eyes.”

The Alpha scoffed, his eyes cold. “You understand nothing. The matings are bringing us power we didn’t have before. Power and strength. You’re nothing more than a fledgling. I’ve destroyed greater men than you. What makes you think you can do anything about my rule now?”

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught my mother leading a group of women out the back of the tent, Charlie following behind. Her gaze locked onto mine for a moment, and it solidified everything I was fighting for. Everything we were fighting for.

“You wanted me to mate a witch, Alpha. I mated the witch. Are you still feeling sure about yourself?” I stalked closer, the crowd behind me silent. The mocking tone to my voice was impossible to miss. Now that the challenge was out there, there wasn’t anyone who could do anything about it. Unless I verbally withdrew my claim, we were to battle to the death – the winner declared the new Alpha in front of the entire clan. “I mated the witch, and I think you forget that Alpha blood runs through my veins – probably more so than yours. Are you still feeling tough?”

“You’ve forgotten your place, boy. I’d be happy to see you put back there. I accept your challenge,” the Alpha snarled, his dragon easily heard echoing through his voice. I responded with a growl of my own. I had Charlie backing me up. She believed in me. That was enough reassurance for me.

A crash and a scream had us both turning to face the crowd. The tent itself seemed fine, but a thick black smoke billowed into the open entrance. “The women!” a dragon from the back cried. “Where are the women?”

“What have you fucking done?” the Alpha screamed.

“Something you should’ve done a long time ago,” I responded, and then turned on my heel and jogged out of the tent, wondering what the hell was happening with Charlie and the women. Outside, Charlie, my mother, and a group of women were standing frozen, squinting through the smoke that was beginning to clear. Charlie gasped, and I forced my way through the crowd, pushing her behind me. On the other side of the smoke stood a group of women and men, dressed all in black, adjusting their clothing. At the front a self-important blond man took charge. A prick through and through. Whoever he was, he was interrupting something he shouldn’t be.

“Who the fuck are you?” I snapped, already feeling my body shifting in my fury.

The blond-haired man grinned, but there was no humour in it. His eyes glinted. “I should ask you the same thing, considering you seemed to have mated my fiancée and all. Shame, really, but not irreparable.” He shook his head, pushing a stray lock out of his eyes. He held out his hand, past me. “Come, Charlie. It’s time for you to come home.”
You had to be fucking kidding me.

I was supposed to have time. Days, at least. Maybe a week. I knew the coven could travel vast distances quickly, if they merged their powers together, but I never thought they would do so for me. This was not supposed to be an issue. Not now, when Grace and I were moving the forced mates to safety. Not when Cam’s roar had shaken me to my core, crying out his challenge for the position of Alpha.

Not now.

The bravado flooding my system since I had left Simone – hell, since I had stepped foot in the castle – left me in a rush of fear. I wasn’t going back there. I couldn’t. “How are you here, Dorian?”

“Dorian,” Cam muttered in front of me. “A prick name for a fucking prick.”

“Cam,” I breathed, and placed a hand on his arm to still him. We were mated, and our powers would be intensified, but Dorian was still dangerously strong. We didn’t need to piss him off any more than necessary. I raised my voice, asking my (ex) fiancé the same question again. “How are you here?”

Dorian grinned, his awful, sleazy smile I had always hated. “Well your little mating certainly made it easy to pinpoint. But we had some help, thanks to a very noble dragon who has my endless gratitude.” He nodded, giving a small clap to someone behind me.

I turned around to see Finn grinning. “I told you you’d regret fucking me over, witch. It wasn’t too hard to figure out who you were so scared of, especially once I started asking around. Imagine my surprise Cam’s little witch was already engaged to be married.”

Cam’s growl was low and dangerous. “You’re fucking dead.” I didn’t need to see his face to know that Cam meant what he said. Finn was as good as dead just as soon as Cam sunk his claws into him.

“We’re not engaged, Dorian. And we never truly were.” I gritted my teeth, waves of fury pouring off Cam’s body next to me. Would he believe me?

Dorian clucked his tongue. “Now, Charlie, there’s no need for all this nonsense. Look at you. You’re an absolute mess. Once we get you home, it’ll be like none of this terrible situation ever happened. I’m willing to forgive everything.”

Cam finally spoke up, his voice firm. “Charlie...is he telling the truth?”
“No.” I shook my head, finally turning to meet Cam’s heavy stare. Anger and worry fought for control amongst his blackening gaze. He was confused, and had no idea what to think, but power still brewed under his skin, waiting to be released. “We are not engaged. I promise you.”

“Ahh, but we are, my darling. Just as soon as we do away with the pesky bond you’ve formed with a… dragon.” Dorian’s mask dropped, showing his true look of disgust, before it shifted back. “And then our coven will be so powerful no one will ever challenge us again. Imagine, me, the leader of the coven with one of the most powerful witches of our generation at our side. We will be unstoppable.”

I sneered, my stomach churning with fear and revulsion. “And where do all of your sacrifices fit into our wonderful life?”

“Sacrifices?” Cam spoke up beside me, turning to look between myself and Dorian. “Do not speak of them,” Dorian hissed, his face thunderous with rage. “They are sacred. Willing.”

I was pushing him, but I didn’t care. People needed to know what was happening. What was really happening. Why I had refused to marry Dorian in the first place. Why I had fought. Why I had run. I met Dorian’s furious gaze with a steady stare. “Yes. Sacrifices. My coven used to be one of communing with nature. An equal balance of giving and taking. But when Dorian’s family joined the coven, they brought with them old world practices. Cauldrons. Curses. Sacrifices.” A storm was brewing around Dorian, but I couldn’t stop myself. We were told never to speak of the sacred acts, but fuck it. I was no longer running, and it was time for everyone to know the horrific acts my coven had done. “Once every quarter, a young girl was selected. A virgin. She would lie with Dorian, as the head of the coven, to provide magic that only a virgin was thought to have, and then she would be sacrificed publicly.”

Dorian roared. “You betray our coven. You betray your own kind!” His face was purple as he screamed, storm clouds covering the stars in the night sky. The virgins had never made the clan more powerful, but whatever treaty Dorian had with the dark magic he was performing made him terrifying. I had never stood up to him before. Until now, emboldened by my freedom, and by Cam’s steady body next to me.

“What did those sacrifices bring to you, Dorian? Did they bring you power and glory? Did they bring you me?”

Dorian paced, crossing his arms behind his back. “They brought me true strength. Something you will never understand, tying your magic as you do to the ground. So fickle, the elements. You never know when they’ll leave you.”

I shook my head. “You don’t understand true magic. You never have.”

Dorian paused, opening his mouth to retort something, but an angry roar filled the air behind us.

“What I don’t understand is why there are witches on my territory.” Everyone turned to see the Alpha stalking out of the tent. “Why would witches think it’s okay to interrupt a celebration such as this? Why would they think they can stalk onto our land any time they please?”

This wasn’t good. At all. Witches, sure. Dragons, okay. But how could Cam and I
control both Supes at once – when they were fighting each other? I shot Cam a glance out of the corner of my eye, and he nodded, cutting through the crowd and making his way over to the Alpha. “I believe we have unsettled business to deal with first, Alpha.”

A quiet murmur was spreading through the crowd. A frenzy, fueled by alcohol and a leader who was desperate for more. It wouldn’t take more than a word for the dragons to rise to action, and this would turn dangerous very quickly. Across the field, I caught Grace quietly leading the women we had taken from the tent into the castle, and relief flushed across my chest. At least they would be safe. For now.

Cam had reached the Alpha, who scoffed. “We can deal with both at the same time, boy. I’m not worried about putting you in your place.” He turned to his clan, to his power hungry and drunken dragons. “Kill the witches. Take the mates. Maybe we can still bring something good out of our uninvited visitors.”

In the space of a single inhale, a blink – all hell broke loose. Dragons spread out, shifting and shredding their finery as they took to the skies, roaring their fury as they flew. The witches began to summon their different forms of magic, and what was once a celebration turned into a battlefield.

I needed to get to Cam. He needed to make sure he took control of the clan, no matter what. I darted through the smoke and fire, letting the wind carry me towards Cam – towards my mate. Just on the other side of a battling pair he was there, staring at the Alpha with an expression I had never seen on his face before. “Cam!” I screamed. He needed to understand what was truly at stake here.

He turned his head, and just as he met my gaze, someone grabbed my arm, and the battlefield disappeared. Gone in a blink of an eye.

I had always underestimated Dorian’s abilities. Apparently, it was still my downfall. But in the same breath, he had always underestimated me. We reappeared in front of a derelict house, uninhabited for quite some time. The area around me still looked familiar, so I had to assume we were still in Scotland. His powers wouldn’t allow him to transport both of us very far, quickly or not. He had limits, after all. Limits I meant to exploit. The amount of energy it would’ve taken to transport the coven from the States would’ve severely weakened his reserves.

Dorian dragged me by my arm, not giving me an inch to move. The wind whistled and howled as we walked. Be careful, Charlie. Darkness lingers. Darkness lingers. Darkness lingers... But Dorian’s grip on my arm was firm, and whatever he was doing through his touch left me unable to draw power from the elements around me. He kicked open the aged wooden door, pulling me in behind him. The house was dark, shutters drawn tightly and the little furniture that remained was covered in sheets that looked like ghosts.

I tried to sink my feet in, tried to make my body like cement, unable to be moved. But Dorian merely grunted and tugged harder. Cam was right. Dorian was a fucking prick. As soon as I had my magic back I was going to make him pay for every single moment of joy he had stolen from me. He would pay, and I would rejoice. And then not only would I free those poor forced mates, I would free my own people as well. Until I did so, I wouldn’t be truly free.

And Cam. What was he doing? What was he thinking? I had been standing next to him
one moment, gone the next. Fuck. I tried to pull at the air, tried to convey a message
through the gusts to Cam. Be strong. Hold steady. I’m alive.

Dorian forced me up the stairs, each wooden beam creaking under my feet. “What are
you planning on doing to me? You can’t mate me. Not while I’m mated to another.” Small
miracles.

“I’m well aware of how matings work, Charlie.” Dorian was filled with a quiet fury, and
it brought me back to there, him and I in a dirty basement where he tried to force me to
break. But I hadn’t broken then, and I refused to break now. We got to the landing, and
he pushed me in one of the doors ahead of him. The room was barren, only a worn bed,
a single dirty window, and a set of chains adorned it. “You will remain here for a
fortnight. I have been told that’s how long it takes to break a mating bond as new as
yours. A fortnight without him, a simple spell, and then you will mate me in that bed,
before you can even think of running again.”

“You can’t seriously think this room will hold me.” Dorian was even more delusional
than I had originally thought if he planned on me staying here of my own free will. I
couldn’t fight him, not one on one. It was too risky, and I couldn’t be certain of the
outcome. I needed to stay alive for Cam.

“This room won’t,” Dorian agreed, his awful grin spreading across his face once more.
“But these chains will.” I hadn’t even realized he had picked the chains up before he
snapped the silver cuff around one wrist, and then the other. I tugged at them, but they
were attached to the wooden wall behind me. No matter. The wall was flimsy, and I
could easily pull away from it once I was alone.

“I know what you’re thinking, Charlie, and your plan won’t work.” He tapped his nail
on one of the heavy cuffs. “These cuffs are spelled so you can’t connect with your
precious elements. With them on you’re essentially human.”

I tried to focus on the air around me, but sure enough he was right. “What the fuck?” I
tried again and again, but I couldn’t communicate with anything.

“Isn’t it wonderful? Shame really. If you had decided to link your magic with those
elements you deemed unsavoury, this wouldn’t be an issue. My powers never leave me.
They are me.” I wanted to punch the slimy grin off his face. He understood nothing about
magic. “One fortnight, and then you’ll be mine.” Dorian turned on his heel and walked out
the door without another word, leaving me alone with the bed, the dirty window, and
these godforsaken chains.

Momentarily defeated, I slipped to the floor, banging my head against the flimsy wall
that was still enough to hold me – for now. This was an awful mess. A fucking disaster
really. And yet, I couldn’t stop the grin from slipping onto my face. I was trapped, and
Dorian thought he had me. But these chains and the painstaking lengths Dorian had
taken to secure me only reinforced one thing.

Dorian was fucking terrified of me. So I was going to use his fear to my advantage.
Charlie was gone. Poof. Vanished. Into thin air. One moment I was staring into her eyes, those bright blue eyes filled with passion, and the next that prick Dorian was grabbing her and she was just gone.

Fuck. My dragon was pissed, clawing and tearing at my skin. Save her. She’s ours. Believe me. I knew. I turned my attention back to the Alpha, who still stood watching me. Eying me for any weaknesses, I was sure. He would find none, except for the fact my mate had just been stolen away by her (ex?) fiancé. But even without her here, Charlie’s magic laced through my blood, and I knew we were one. The Alpha didn’t stand a fucking chance.

But that wasn’t important right now. We needed to find Charlie. “This doesn’t fucking matter,” I growled, shaking my head. Around us, the battle between witches and dragons rolled on. Fire fought with water. Air fought with smoke. The contradictions were not unlike Charlie and myself with one key difference. At our core, we were the same soul, split into two.

“What did you say?” The Alpha rolled his shoulders, the scales of his deep green dragon already clear under the surface of his skin.

“I said, this doesn’t fucking matter. This, between us. It doesn’t fucking matter. What matters is Charlie. We need to save her. If we leave now, I’ll still be able to track her magic source. We can save her.” He had to see where I was coming from. Nothing was more important in a dragon clan than a mated pair. And I knew the Alpha wanted his witch.

But the Alpha only sneered. “You wanted to challenge me, boy. So let’s fight. Let’s see if you really have what it takes to be the leader of this clan. Your father obviously didn’t.”

My dragon roared, insulted. Anger twisted my body, forcing my shift before I was ready. “Do not speak of my father. He died protecting this clan. And you were so desperate to keep Charlie in the clan, and now you’ll just let her go?”

“One witch means nothing to me when I have a whole coven to choose from. Hell, maybe I’ll even choose one for myself. Your little mate was only worth something when she was the only one.” He shrugged.

I leapt forward with a cry of rage. He would not disrespect Charlie, not when she had
been through so much. Not when she had fought for her freedom. Not when she had persevered, broken down her wall, looked up at me with her broken blue gaze as I made her come apart again and again. She was worth more. She was worth everything. I tackled the Alpha to the ground, throwing my fists into his head and face with an anger I had only felt when Mara had died. He called me a boy. But I would protect Charlie like a man.

With a powerful kick the Alpha threw me off of him. I landed on my feet a few yards away, breathing heavily as he glared at me, his face bloodied. “If you want to challenge me for Alpha, then you’ll challenge me like all others have. In the sky, with our wings.”

“Are you that afraid I’ll win in hand-to-hand combat that you need to hide amongst the clouds?” I scoffed, pushing my hair out of my face. “Charlie is not a possession you can throw aside when you’re done. You’ve insulted her, and for that it doesn’t matter where I fight you. You’re as good as dead, Alpha.” I spat at his feet.

The look he gave me was one of sheer wrath. “You have no respect for your clan, or your elders. And that is why you will not win.” A fighting witch tumbled into his side, and he shoved her off with a disgusted look. With one last disapproving gaze my way, he shifted, his body morphing into his sleek dragon. I took one last breath and did the same, letting my dragon loose.

The fury I felt over losing Charlie was nothing compared to my dragon’s agony over losing their mate. My body split, scales replacing skin, fangs replacing teeth. But still my anger rolled. I would watch the Alpha fall for what he did, and what he said.

I shook out my wings, and shot off into the sky. The whistling behind me told me the Alpha had done the same. Up into the clouds I flew, letting the night sky conceal my dark scales.

The Alpha was close behind, his fire singing the end of my tail. If he thought he was going to take me down with heat alone, he had another thing coming. I dove into his side with a wild shriek, my dragon extending their claws and digging them into the soft skin behind the Alpha’s shoulders. My dragon’s claws cut into the delicate skin of his wing, slicing a gash right through it. I admired my work with a grim satisfaction, as the Alpha cried out in pain. It wouldn’t be enough to finish him, but it would definitely slow him down.

He was pissed, roaring and whipping his tail around my body. The Alpha’s tail wasn’t like mine. Where mine was sleek and smooth, building me for speed, the Alpha was built for brutality, his tail studded with sharp spikes. It was how he had managed to take down every challenger so far. I had to stay focused if I wanted to make it back to Charlie.

One of his spikes caught me in the belly, and I cursed, my dragon spitting out a flume of fire as pain sparked through me. Fuck. I had to ignore the pain, push through it. The women were counting on me. Charlie was counting on me. I charged him again, our dragons tangling with claws and tails. We were so high up in the air there was no chance of us hitting the ground, but our bodies fought for dominance. If one of us could get on top of the other, it would certainly mean a victory, but the Alpha and I seemed to be evenly matched in strength and ability.

I pushed away, giving myself space before I dove back towards the sleek dragon to
headbutt him on the same side as his injured wing. The Alpha shrieked, and wrapped his arm around me to dig his claw into my side. I couldn’t let him get on top of me. He had weight, while I had speed. I snapped my tail out, twisting it up to attack his weak wing, and he immediately released me.

We broke apart, the only sound the flapping of our wings. A stand-off, as we eyed each other, figuring out who would make the first move. I needed to catch him off guard, but I wasn’t sure the best way to accomplish that.

Luckily, the Alpha made my decision for me. He sped towards me, trying to get on top once more, but before he could reach me, I leaned back. His thick dragon was too slow to change direction before his face collided with my feet. My claw sank into something, and when the Alpha pulled away from me in fury, I could see one of his eyes was completely bloodied. In my mind, this was the end. How could he come back from injuries like this?

But the Alpha tackled me without warning, his tail twisting until it dug into the wound it had left in my belly. My dragon cried out, the pain intense. Even as a dragon the Alpha had a smirk, and he wore it now, right before he latched his mouth around my neck, his teeth digging into the tender skin absent of scales. He was pushing me down, forcing his body on top, his tail twisting tighter into the gash. The stars rushed by me as we fell, the ground looming closer by the second. Even the screams of the witches and dragons silenced as we tumbled, my body aimed to be the first to hit the ground. I fell, all of my dreams about becoming Alpha, about being enough for Charlie destroyed before they ever had a chance to really live.

I’m sorry, I thought. I failed you.

And then the wind whipped around me, brushing past my scales, whispering to me as it blew. Be strong. Hold steady. I’m alive. The breeze cushioned my fall, slowing me down. More than that, I could hear the faith in those words. In her words.

Charlie. I thought. Because I wasn’t alone. I hadn’t failed. I was a dragon, with Alpha blood running through my veins, and a cause worth dying for, and Charlie’s magic alive in my veins.

No, I thought. And then louder, my dissent coming out as my dragon’s bellow. No!

I pushed him off with my back legs, like he had done while we were on the ground, using a strength I wasn’t even aware I had. Before we hit the ground, we separated, blood pouring from my neck and my belly, but I was alive, and I was going to win. Because the Alpha had only himself, while Charlie and I were bonded, our strength together greater than anything he had ever seen. The Alpha growled, narrowing his yellow eyes, but before he could attack again I pushed into the night sky once more.

I climbed higher and higher, letting my speed I had worked on with Charlie propel me. Once I was high enough, I turned, aligning my body to nosedive back to the earth. The Alpha never saw me coming, and with an injured wing and only one good eye he never stood a chance. I collided into him with all the force, all the power Charlie and I possessed, pulling myself away just before he crumpled to the ground, the earth caving way around his body. His neck lay at a funny angle, and he wasn’t moving. Now that I was close enough to the ground, I could see the rest of the dragons and the witches, all gathering around the Alpha’s body.
I shifted, aware but unbothered by my nudity in front of the clan. I dropped over the Alpha, who was still breathing, but barely. His body shifted back to his human form, bloodied and broken as he gasped for air. His position wasn’t unlike Mara’s when I had found her, and the irony wasn’t lost on me. Because this time, I meant it. This time, I knew she’d be watching, proud of the man I had become. The Alpha met my gaze with his one good eye. “I bet... you love... seeing me... like this,” he spat out.

“I don’t wish pain upon anyone.” I tipped my head to the side. “But I can’t lie and say this isn’t fitting. You lying here, your body at someone else’s mercy? Well suited to a man who kidnapped so many women and forced them into marriages.”

Blood was beginning to spill from his mouth, but he still tried to speak. “Put me... out of... my misery.”

I shook my head. “I think you need the last few minutes you have to think about what a shite person you were.”

He glared at me through his eye, but I could see the defeat that lay there. The acceptance he had lost. I didn’t break eye contact as his breaths grew shallower, and the fury began to fade from his eyes. Until the body sprawled in front of me was just that – a body.

“He’s dead!” someone cried. “Cam won the challenge!”

I won. I had done what I had pushed from my mind for so long. The thing I thought I wasn’t powerful enough for. Wasn’t strong enough for. Wasn't enough for, plain and simple. And yet, the victory was tasteless knowing Charlie wasn’t on the ground watching the Alpha fall. In the end, he was just a man, who had made mistakes and was seduced by the idea of power. Not so unlike Dorian.

Fuck. Dorian. I had to get to Charlie. Now.

I turned towards the clan. My clan. Some of the coven remained as well, too shocked by the battle in the sky to leave. The only one I couldn’t see was Finn, but I would find him. He would pay for the destruction he had caused. I turned towards all of them, dragons and witches alike. The start of a new day. Maybe a new era.

“The former Alpha is dead. I am your Alpha now.” My voice echoed with that of my dragon’s, and the clan tipped their heads in respect. I wanted to tell them not to, that this relationship would be one forged of trust. But I also knew this was in our blood, and some things you couldn’t ever outrun.

A calm voice from the back called forward. “Do you wish for us to kill the remaining witches, Alpha?”

I looked at the witches in the crowd. Charlie’s people. What would she do? She had said they followed Dorian out of fear, not loyalty. Maybe this was their chance for freedom, the same as it was my clan’s. A breeze whipped against my legs, the same sensation as the air that cushioned my fall.

They are good. The words were clear as anything in my head. They are good. I nodded, my mind made up.

“Nay,” I said. “This is a new clan. And today, we treat our guests with respect and civility. We offer them friendship and kindness, if they are willing to denounce Dorian and all he stood for. Our bond will be built upon respect, not fear.” I would confirm with
Charlie if she returned that the remaining witches could be trusted. When she returned. And together, we’d lead our new clan. One where witches and dragons could work together, instead of using each other to get ahead.

A clap resounded from somewhere in the crowd, and I easily picked out my mother. She was tired and worn, but I had never seen her look so proud as she clapped her hands together. How long had she been waiting for this moment?

Another dragon joined in, and another. And then a witch began to clap, unsure at first. And soon enough, the entire crowd was clapping. An era of fear was gone, replaced by hope and freedom. Was this what Charlie had felt when she ran? Because fuck, I understood the lass now. Charlie. She deserved to be here. To be next to me, seeing this happen. As my gaze ran over the crowd, an idea occurred to me.

I walked into the crowd, emotions spiraling through me as they applauded. And when I reached the back, where the guards once loyal to the Alpha stood, they kneeled. The captain looked up at me with a quiet tip of his head. “Alpha. You have our respect and our allegiance.”

A small group of witches gathered near the dragons, bowing their heads toward me as well. “You have ours as well.”

“Good,” I murmured. “Because I need you to do something for me. Something of the utmost importance.”

They met my stare. “Anything, Alpha,” the captain murmured.

“We need to find my mate.”
CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

CHARLIE

Hours bled into days. I couldn’t be sure how much time had passed because the dirty window only gave me so much idea into how dark or light it was outside. And Dorian wasn’t exactly regular on his care. Occasionally he would offer me a bowl of soapy water and rag to clean myself. Sometimes he would empty the bucket he left next to my chains, sometimes he wouldn’t. Sometimes he would slide bread and water across the floor without bothering to look at me. Sometimes he would prepare a full meal for both of us and sit – me in chains, and Dorian on the bed. He would talk to me, trying to get me to willingly give up my mate bond with Cam, telling me all we could have together. He would try and seduce me, wanting me to voluntarily climb into that bed with him. I would eat in silence, waiting for him to leave.

This meal was one of those meals. Dorian patted at his lips with a napkin, sighing. “You know, Charlie. This whole nasty mess could be over if you would just realize how good we would be together. Your powers with the elements are incredible. Imagine how powerful you would be if you connected the power to your soul.”

I chewed on a roll, not caring crumbs were spilling everywhere. Good. The less attractive I looked, the better. I spoke before I swallowed, enjoying the grimace on Dorian’s face. For a man who loved human sacrifices, he sure was particular about his manners. “I don’t want power,” I muttered.

Dorian’s eyes brightened, excited I had even spoken. “But there must be something you want. I can give you whatever that is. Nothing is too far out of reach for me.”

I put my half-eaten roll back on my plate, crossing my arms across my chest as much as the chains would allow. “I want Cam.”

As if I had summoned something, a banging began to shake the front door.

BANG. BANG. BANG. Every echo shook the entire house. “Someone’s at the door,” I commented. Dorian couldn’t meet my eyes, nervously looking away. “Not expecting a visitor?”

I couldn’t let myself get my hopes up. It was too much. If it wasn’t him, I’d be broken. And I couldn’t be broken if I wanted to escape.

But then his voice rang out through the door. Cam. “I know you have her in there, Dorian. Give her up now, and I might go easy on you.”
Cam. My heart pounded, and I was pleased to see Dorian look sick. “You afraid or something?”

“Shut the fuck up,” he hissed.

“Cam!” I screamed, grinning at Dorian. “Cam, I’m here!” Below us, I could hear the front door being torn off its hinges.

Dorian leapt off the bed, slapping one hand over my mouth and the other across my throat. “I told you to shut the fuck up.”

But it was too late, because heavy footsteps were already racing up the stairs. The wooden door to the small bedroom shattered before our eyes, splinters of wood shooting out in every direction. And behind the destruction stood my mate, chest heaving and eyes blazing. “Get the fuck away from her,” he said in a growl that vibrated throughout my entire body.

Dorian took one look at Cam’s rapidly changing body and his hand dropped from my mouth. He disappeared, in front of us one minute, gone the next. I couldn’t say I blamed him. What I saw on Cam’s face would’ve terrified me too, if I were anyone else. Anyone other than the mate he was desperate to protect. Dorian’s dark magic wouldn’t have stood a chance against Cam’s pure rage. And Dorian always had been a coward when no one else had been around to witness his fear.

What I wasn’t expecting was for Cam’s expression to shift into one of concern, and for him to immediately fall to his knees in front of me. “Are you okay?” he murmured, examining the heavy cuffs that circled my wrists with a gentle touch. “I’m sorry I took so long. He covered his magic well.”

I was completely baffled. “I’m fine. Especially now that you’re here. But shouldn’t you go after him? I can wait.” The last thing we needed was Dorian getting away, only to recoup his forces and launch another attack.

Cam just shook his shaggy hair out of his face with a grin. “I’ve got an entire clan of dragons circling this place, and several witches tracking his magic source. He won’t get far. And they know where to hold him until we get back.”

The relief that flooded my body was immediate and nearly made me want to cry. He wasn’t getting away. Not now. He wouldn’t be chasing me, ever again. Was I truly free? My mind couldn’t grasp such a concept. I had been captive for so long, the idea of freedom was insane to me. But if the entire clan was waiting, didn’t that mean... “You took over the clan? Wait, witches?”

“Aye.” Cam’s grin spread. “The old man never stood a chance with my mate’s wicked magic. And it turns out most of the clan didn’t approve of his ways. But that’s a conversation for a different time. Is there a key for these godforsaken things?” He nodded his head towards the cuffs.

“I think Dorian put them up on the bookshelf. I would’ve grabbed them myself but...” I lifted my wrists weakly, ashamed of the position I had found myself in. Fuck Dorian.

But Cam said nothing, only frowning. He left me for only a moment, to find the keys and return to my side. As soon as the cuffs fell to the ground, I filled my lungs with air. The taste of freedom. I grounded my feet to the floor, my power returning to me. And then I looked up at Cam, unable to convey all of the words I needed to say. “Thank you,”
I choked out. “Thank you for not giving up on me.”

“Oh, my Charlie girl,” Cam whispered. He lifted me into his arms, embracing me until all I could feel was him and us and everything that was meant to be. There was no darkness lingering around the corner, or sunrise to be outrun. There was just this moment. “I would never give up on you. Not in a million fucking years.”

I wrapped my legs around him, and tangled my fingers in his hair. The touch of him grounded me nearly as much as the wind. “I was so worried, Cam. I didn’t want to be. But I was absolutely terrified I wouldn’t find my way back to you.” I took a deep breath, steadying myself. “He wanted to destroy our mating.”

Cam rested his forehead against mine, pressing his lips against me. “What’s absolute can’t be destroyed, lass. I’m here. I’m here now, and I’m here forever.”

“Fuck, I missed you.” I pressed my lips against him in a feverish kiss, desperate to feel him everywhere. I needed to be filled with Cam. He kissed me back just as fiercely, and swiped his tongue along my lips until I opened my mouth. It wasn’t enough. I pulled back. “Cam,” I gasped. “I need you. I need you everywhere.”

His eyes were serious, but I could see the flicker of desire pooling. He needed it too. “I’ve got you.”

Cam brought me to the bed in the corner of the room – the one I had been greedily eyeing the last few days, confined by my chains to the wooden floor. Dorian liked to play mind games. Cam laid me on the bed, pushing my tangled hair away from my face. He kissed me briefly. “Are you sure?”

I nodded. “Certain. I need this.”

His dragon was crawling beneath the surface of his skin, and as I watched his skin flashed from tanned to the black gloss of his scales and back to normal again. Cam looked embarrassed for a moment, apologizing quietly. “I’m sorry, seeing you again was just too much. I’m not really in control.”

I looked down, and realized he had partially shifted with his tail once more. I laid my hand on his forearm, and shook my head. “No, Cam. I want all of you.”

Cam paused, looking me dead in the eyes. Whatever he was looking for there – reassurance, confirmation, acceptance – he found. “I have no idea what I’ve done to deserve you, but fuck, I’ll take it.” He bent his head, scraping his teeth along the still raw mark he had left on my neck. “But you have to tell me where you want me, Charlie. Cock, and tail.”

I shivered, both from his touch and his words. “Fuck, Cam. I don’t care. I just want you to fill me.”

“I want you to choose. I want to hear exactly where you want me,” he breathed, dragging his finger up my shirt – the same one I had worn the evening of the ceremony, now dirty and stained.

“Fuck,” I whispered. Cam pulled my shirt over my head, and pushed my pants down, leaving me bare to him on the bed. “I want your cock in my pussy. Please.”

“And my tail?” he growled. His tail twirled around my leg, soft against my skin. “Unless you just want me to choke you with it again?”

I did. But not right now. Right now I needed Cam to block out everything that had
happened the last few days. “My ass, Cam. I don’t want there to be room for anything else except you.”

“Shit,” he hissed. “If you insist.” His clothes were gone, and then he was crawling over me, pushing my legs apart with his knee. Sliding his hand down my body, he slipped his fingers between my already wet folds – craving his touch. I wanted to only remember what it felt like to have Cam touch me. I arched my hips up into his hand, and he pushed two fingers inside me.

God. It was nowhere near enough. “Cam, please,” I begged.
He was warring with himself, battling the dragon inside. But I already knew who would win this battle – there was no competition. Eventually a growl tore from his lips, and a third finger joined the other two, pumping inside of me with a fury. “I was trying to go slow.”

“I don’t fucking want slow. I want you.” My chest was tight with need, and my clit was throbbing with desire. I didn’t think I had ever needed someone so much in my life.

“Fine!” he snapped. He withdrew his fingers, and immediately his cock was there, pushing its way into my pussy. Yes. This was what I had been craving. Cam, stretching me and filling me with his cock. He didn’t give me any time to adjust before he was pistoning his hips, hard. Harder. There was no release from his rhythm, only pleasure mixed with pain. “Is this what you want Charlie? You want it rough?”

“Yes,” I breathed. I wanted him to mark me. To use me up, until there was nothing left for anyone else because he had taken it all for himself.

Cam pushed my knees up to my chest, driving himself deeper. My body was building to the edge of release, and I couldn’t help the moans I was making. Cam was groaning, staring into my eyes with a combination of desire and desperation. The green was dark, edging on black, telling me exactly who was in charge right now.

“Open your mouth,” he demanded. I did as he asked with a quiet cry, his hips grinding against my clit with every thrust. He pushed two of his fingers into my mouth. “Suck.”

I wrapped my lips around his fingers, sucking and licking. Fuck. It reminded me of my mouth being filled with his tail, and that was just...

His eyes lit up, knowing exactly what I was thinking. His hips never stopped thrusting, pushing me so close, and then slowing before I could collapse over the edge. “I knew you liked that, dirty girl. Make them nice and wet so you can take my tail.”

This other side of Cam, the one who wanted to do filthy things to me with his tail, and told me I was dirty, and gave me that look... it was a side I hadn’t expected of the guy who had helped me when I tripped. But fuck, it was hot. He pulled his fingers from my mouth, and when I protested quietly he gave me a sly smile. Cam still didn’t stop filling me, but he slowed down, pressing his wet fingers between us. He pushed his finger against my ass, demanding my complete compliance.

I met his gaze with a nod. “I want it, Cam. I want you.”

Cam gave me a brief nod in return, giving himself over to his dragon once more. His already wet finger mixed with the slick wetness between us, so when he pushed his fingers inside my ass, there was little resistance. God. I had forgotten what it felt like, when he started thrusting his hips and his fingers in time – how would I take his fucking
“You relax,” he whispered. I glanced up at him again, watching him watch me as we fucked. “You relax, and you let me take control. Complete control over every fucking inch of your body.”

“Please,” I murmured. “Please. Take it all.”

He slipped his fingers out, and then I could feel the slick heat of the rounded tip of his tail pressing in its place. “Relax.” His voice was a sharp command, as if he could sense my hesitation. There was little green left in his eyes, onyx shining brightly in its place. “Give yourself to me.”

I forced myself to focus on the motions of his hips, and the pleasure building within my core. Relax, I thought. And then his tail was there, pushing past the tight ring of muscle, filling every last inch of me. Cam groaned, sighing my name as his hips stilled momentarily.

He lifted up an inch or so, propping himself up with his arms as I clung to his back, digging my nails in to keep me centered. I was sure if I wasn’t grounded I was going to fly off the planet entirely. And then he was thrusting, forcing a hard rhythm with his tail and his cock. “You’re mine, Charlie girl. You can run to the ends of the earth, but you’re mine, and I’ll follow you. Every. Single. Time. Never forget that.”

My heart was keeping time with his rhythm, and I couldn’t look away from his searing gaze – seeing all of me at once. The darkness I hid from, and hid within. The light I shied away from. He was forcing it all out of me, moment by moment with each stroke of his cock and his tail.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. I was too full, and he was too much, and Cam was everywhere. Every sense was overwhelmed with Cam. It was almost too much to hold back and I was going to...

“Christ, Cam!” I screamed. My body was shaking and trembling with the onset of my orgasm, and my vision was blurred as my release rolled over me.

“Let go, Charlie.” Cam’s voice was a harsh whisper in my ear, grounding me as I came. “Let it happen. Come for me.”

I let go, and allowed the sensations of Cam’s tail and cock filling me take over. I let him cradle me in his arms like a delicate treasure, even as he thrust inside me with a fury only a dragon could possess. And as I shattered around him, Cam roared out his own release, pumping into me as he came. I couldn’t breathe, but when Cam collapsed onto my chest, I couldn’t find the energy to want to move. I wanted to stay like this forever – filled with Cam.

We lay like that for a minute, tangled up in each other. Breathing each other in. A mix of Supe and human, dragon and witch. Us. “Are you sure you’re ready for this? For everything that comes along with being with me?” I whispered.

Cam pulled me up his chest until we were looking each other in the eyes. I tried to turn away, but he held me there with a finger under the chin. “What do you mean? We’re mated. I’m the Alpha. People will accept what I tell them. Even if I wasn’t, I think people can see the depth of emotions we have for each other. That this mating isn’t just for convenience’s sake.”
I shook my head. “People will accept it, but that doesn’t mean they’ll understand it. I’m a witch, and you’re a dragon. Our people have been enemies for decades. Your people will judge me for simply being a witch. My people will judge you for simply being a dragon. Are you sure you’re ready for that?” I was certain he could hear my heartbeat thundering in my chest, anxious for what his response would be.

Cam’s gaze didn’t sway from me, and his fingers tightened where they rested on my skin. “The only opinion that will ever matter to me is yours.” There was no room for argument in his voice, only certainty.

I pressed a soft kiss to his lips, and curled back up in his embrace. Eventually we’d have to leave and deal with the aftermath of what we had begun. But for now, I could embrace the quiet certainty of us.
CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

CAM

Charlie was quiet, but I couldn’t say I was surprised. She had been through a lot the last few days. But it was over now. She was mine, and I was never letting anything come between us ever again. Not now that I knew what we could accomplish together.

I had told her once I would never corrupt her powers, and I meant it. But I had also bore witness to the beauty that our joint powers could possess. A beauty so goddamn special it deserved to be shared with the world.

I held her hand as we walked out of the house together. It had taken us longer than I had hoped to find Charlie. Days instead of hours. But it would have taken us even longer if the witches who were staying at the castle hadn’t stepped up to help. Turns out, most of them were still loyal to Charlie’s parents, but had lived in fear of Dorian. A lot of them had young daughters of their own, and had hoped by playing into his favour, their daughters might be spared. With someone willing to stand up against Dorian, they felt able to speak freely. I didn’t want to tell her now, not with everything else going on, but many of her coven hoped Charlie would come back and lead. I wasn’t sure how she would feel about that. She had been running for so long.

But once the coven had started to talk, they didn’t stop. The horrors they had faced under Dorian’s family didn’t end with the sacrifices. Ancient practices, ones that most Supes had left behind decades ago. Public whippings and disfigurement, punishment for stepping out of line. Neighbours turned on neighbours, and children were taken from homes of “unfit” parents, given to coven members who were more loyal to Dorian’s family. And Charlie. Fuck. My heart still hurt to think of it.

I would never bring it up to her, not unless she wanted to talk about it. But the idea of Charlie living in his basement, blaming herself for the loss of her parents...fuck. No one deserved that. No wonder she ran. No wonder she ran from me. It wasn’t my sin to atone for; but I knew I’d spend a lifetime making it up to her — showing her just how valued she truly was.

It was dark, the night sky streaked with stars. We were the only two left on the hilltop outside of Dorian’s hideaway — only a few miles away from the castle, but far enough away for him to be hidden. The dragons were all gone, either off to find Dorian, or taking
him back to the castle. I wasn't worried. They'd find him, wherever he was, and they'd bring him home. As much as I wanted to rip him to pieces limb by limb, I would give Charlie the option. She deserved the chance to bring him to justice.

I turned to Charlie, brushing a stray lock of hair away from her face. “We’re not far from the castle, but it’ll be quicker if we fly. I just want to get you home safe, in bed. Where you belong. You feel up to flying?”

She nodded. “Absolutely. Just get me home, Cam.”

It’s funny how we both referred to the castle as home now. I had spent so long avoiding it, running away from bad memories, referring to it as home again seemed strange. But I knew it was because of Charlie. My home was wherever she was, and I’d follow her to the ends of the world.

I stripped quickly, and Charlie grabbed my clothes. I let my dragon out, still close to edge of the surface from having Charlie in my arms only moments ago. After I stretched out my wings, she climbed on my back and we took to the sky. The evening was clear, every star visible without a cloud in sight. And unlike the last time, when all I could feel from Charlie was fear and lust, now there was only the steady thrum of love. My little ice queen loved me. As much as she wanted to fight it, and run away from it, she loved me. I wouldn’t let her down.

Soon enough the castle was loomed ahead, warm lights brightening the windows. I shifted back, taking my clothes from Charlie and then scooping her into my arms. I had missed this. Touching her, having her near. We didn’t pass many people on the way to my rooms, and I wasn’t surprised that by the time I unlocked my door, Charlie had fallen asleep in my arms. I was grateful she felt safe enough to slumber.

I laid her in bed, pulling the covers up, just watching her for a moment. She was stunning, her black hair strewn around the pillow, curling into my bed. But I couldn’t stay for long, because I had to check in with my guards. I wouldn’t be able to sleep until I knew we had Dorian in our grasp, and if they hadn’t managed to find him, I would search every hill and valley until I brought him to justice.

Leaving Charlie asleep in my bed, I double checked my door was locked. Sure she was safe, I made my way down to the cells. My guards greeted me at the door. “Where is he?” I asked.

“Right through here, Alpha. One of the witches caught him right before the border. He was trying to sneak the rest of the way on foot.” He led me towards the first cell, where Dorian was slumped over in the corner, unconscious. “We had to uh, knock him out. He was pretty aggressive.”

I waved my hand. “No matter. Can you get one of the witches down here? Dorian kept Charlie from her powers with chains, we need to do something similar.”

“We didn’t just find Dorian, Alpha. We also found him sneaking out the back with a bag of silverware. Thought you might like to handle it yourself.” The guard nodded towards the cell next to Dorian’s. I walked over to it, already knowing who was inside.

“Finn,” I greeted.

Finn sneered. “I won’t call you my Alpha.”

“Fine. You don’t have to call me anything. But you do need to explain to me why you
did what you did. Why would you turn on me? On Charlie?” I couldn’t understand it, the
anger he must have felt to do something so disgusting. I could never, not even for
someone as slimy as Finn.

Finn strode towards the bars, grasping them tightly as he glared at me. “Do you really
not get it, Cam? Do you really not see how you’ve thrown everything away? You always
have, ever since we were children. Perfect Cam, so smart and talented. Always friendly,
the girls always wanted to sit next to him. But did you want to do anything with that
power? No.” He shook his head in disgust. “We could’ve done so much with power like
that. Instead you wasted it. Wasted Mara. And then in comes Charlie, and I knew you
would waste her too.”

I bared my teeth, bringing my face close to the bars. “I didn’t waste anything, Finn. I
didn’t want the power. I just wanted to be happy and live my life. I guess it’s hard for
someone as miserable as you to understand the simple pleasures.”

He pulled away, spitting at his feet. “It’s a goddamn waste, is what it is. If you’re
going to hang me, do it now. I don’t want to live another moment in this cell.”

“I’m not going to hang you.” Finn paused, confused. I turned and crossed the room,
grabbing the key for his cell, and unlocked it, sliding open the cell door. “Go.”

“What kind of fucking trick is this?”
I shrugged. “It’s no trick. We used to be friends. I have no wish to kill you, although I
should.”

“Your weakness will get you killed,” he hissed.
I crossed my arms. “Maybe it will, maybe it won’t. But I made sure to let some new
friends in the forest know when you’d be released. Turns out, I’m not the only one you
fucked over.” I smirked at the fear growing in Finn’s gaze. “Ross can’t
wait to see you
again. And I can’t wait to see how fast you can run.”

Finn narrowed his eyes, but darted past me. Before he could sprint up the stairs I
grabbed the back of his shirt leaning close to his ear. “But if you survive, and I ever, ever,
catch you on my land or terrorizing another woman again, I will tear you limb from limb
myself.”

He stiffened, and I didn’t miss the shiver that traced his spine. Good. He should be
afraid. Of me, and what awaited him outside the castle walls. Finn shook out of my grip,
and nearly knocked into the guard leading a witch into the cells. The guard looked
shocked but I shook my head. “Let him go. He won’t bother us anymore.” If Finn was
good at one thing, it was surviving. He wouldn’t come back to the castle again in my
lifetime.

I nodded to the guard and the witch, who was spelling a set of chains in Dorian’s cell.
I was suddenly bone tired, and wanted nothing more than to lie next to Charlie and hold
her close – just knowing she was there.

The morning came quickly, sunlight streaming in through the windows. A beautiful day,
marred only by one thing. Today, we needed to deal with Dorian. And it needed to be
public, so everyone would know he was well and truly gone.

I nudged Charlie, still fast asleep next to me. “Lass, wake up. It’s time to get up.”

Charlie moaned something indecipherable and pulled the blanket over her head. I smiled and pulled it off. “Sorry, Charlie girl, but it’s important. As soon as this is over, you can sleep for a week. I promise.”

She peeked one blue eye open. “What is it?”

I sighed, pulling her into my chest. “We caught Dorian, and we need to deal with him. I need to know if you want to, or if you’d rather I did.”

“By dealing with him you mean…”

“Yeah.”

Both eyes opened, decision made. “I need to do it.”

“If you aren’t up for it, I can do it. I don’t mind.” I was still worried about Charlie’s health after her few days being kidnapped, but a good night’s sleep seemed to have done her well.

Charlie shook her head. “No. It has to be me.”

I nodded, knowing her decision was final and this was something she needed to do. I wish I could’ve spared her the heartache of such an act, but I knew she needed this. Call it what you wanted – revenge, vindication, validation – the name didn’t matter.

We got dressed quietly and walked downstairs. Outside, where only days before there had been a celebration, and then destruction, stood a makeshift stage some of the dragons had erected the day before. Still in his chains kneeling in the centre was Dorian, and next to him was a large sword. Charlie cursed. “That’s his sacrificial sword. How did it get here?”

I shrugged. “I think one of the witches brought it. They thought it was fitting. Would you rather me find something else?”

Charlie threw her shoulders back, tossing her hair. “No. It is fitting. His punishment should fit his crime.”

Gods, she was stronger than I could’ve ever imagined, and as she climbed the stairs, never moving her eyes off her captor, I realized I must have done something right, somewhere along the way. Something to deserve this. To deserve her.

I walked to the side, not wanting to get in the way of what Charlie needed to do. She took her place in front of Dorian, lifting the sword easily in her arms.

“You really think you can kill me, Charlie?” he murmured. “You think you can take my life with that sword? You’re nothing without me.”

Charlie looked down at him, the man who had tormented her for years. “That’s where you’re wrong.”

Dorian glared up at Charlie, and I immediately knew the magic cuffs had been the right call. They weren’t perfect because of the source of his magic, but they limited his power enough to make him harmless against Charlie. I trusted my mate to be able to take care of herself, but I still felt better knowing his powers were limited. “How could you do this to me? You could’ve had it all, standing at my side. You could’ve been queen.”

Charlie met my gaze across the stage, gifting me a tiny smile. “I am a queen,” she murmured. I knew those words were just for me.
And then with a look of righteousness to the crowd filled with her people and mine – our people – she let the sword fall on Dorian’s neck.

A hush spread through the group, all mutterings and murmurs immediately stopped, as if Charlie had silenced more than just Dorian. She looked up at everyone, tucking her black hair behind her ear. “I have no intention of using this sword ever again.” Her voice was loud and clear, and the inner strength I had seen her use again and again shone. She chucked the sword to the corner of the stage with a clatter, letting it lie there like little more than garbage. “That sword will be burned in dragon fire. Our people survived on the magic of the elements before, and we will go back to what we know. Magic is not something to manipulate or extort. Magic is an exchange, and one we return with gratitude.”

The silent crowd began to swell and grow, a solemn chant beginning all around. At once I realized they were cheering Charlie’s name – witches and dragons alike. The women and men she had freed, even those who didn’t realize they had been under another’s control. I looked towards my baffled mate, as strikingly beautiful as the first time I had seen her on the cliff’s edge, and offered her my hand.

She took it gratefully, looking towards the cheering people, all kinds of Supes celebrating together. “What do we do now?” she whispered.

I grinned. “Anything we want, Charlie girl. But I think this is a pretty good place to start.” I tipped her in my arms, pressing my lips against hers in a frenzied kiss. Her tongue darted into my mouth, and it wasn’t until the crowd started hollering that I realized I might have been taking things too far in public. I released Charlie, grinning sheepishly.

Things weren’t perfect. Not yet. We had a long way to go, and a lot of apologies to make. Bridges had to be rebuilt, friendships restored. But it was a start. And with Charlie’s hand in mine, and her smiling up at me like anything was possible, I knew it was a damn good start.
CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

CHARLIE

I
t was still dark when I woke up, the bed warm from Cam’s softly snoring body next to me. A strange emotion laced my chest, as I ran my hand down the soft skin of his back. In his sleep, he rolled over, cradling me in one strong arm. Keeping me safe, even while he was dreaming.

Peace, I thought. That’s what the unknown feeling was. I was at peace. I wasn’t on the run. I wasn’t fleeing. I wasn’t pretending to be someone or something I wasn’t. I was home at last. And that was a feeling I never wanted to lose.

Cam curled around me, pulling me tight against his body. There was no way I wasn’t going to notice his erection pressing into my ass.

“Cam,” I whispered. Only silence responded, because Cam was still fast asleep, even as he ground his cock against me. I rolled my eyes with a smile. He was insatiable. It was okay though, because I was too.

I turned in his arms, draping my leg over his hip, and a quiet moan slipped out of his mouth. Immediately I turned my head, consuming his moan with my lips as I kissed him. It only took a moment before he responded, even with his eyes closed.

“Do you want something, lass?” I gasped as he punctuated his question with a thrust of his hips, his hard cock hitting my clit. Fuck. If I didn’t want something before, I definitely did now.

“I’m pretty sure you’re the one who started this by grinding something into my ass.”

“Mmm...” He barely opened one eye. “I do love your ass.”

I laughed, unable to control any of my emotions around this man. Fear, pain, excitement, love, lust... they all showed on my face clear as day. “I love you.”

“And I love you.” His finger slipped between my legs, dragging through the wetness already pooling there. “And I love how fucking wet you are for me before the sun has even risen.”

He pumped his finger in and out of me slowly as I followed with my hips, twisting my clit onto his hand. “Fuck me,” I murmured, desperate to feel him inside me, reaching places I didn’t realize had been his all along.

“I’m not going to fuck you, Charlie girl.”

“You’re not?” I tried to push back to see what kind of game he was playing, but he
curled his finger inside my pussy, and I clung tighter to him instead.

A small smile ghosted his lips, barely visible in the light of dawn. “Nay. I’m going to make love to you.”

“I don’t care what you call it, as long as you make me come.” A second finger joined the first, and I cried out. He picked up his pace, his fingers curling inside me. “Fuck, Cam. Make me come. Please.”

I pushed his hand away, sliding the waistband of his pants down to free his cock. But Cam stilled my hands with one of his own. “Let me enjoy this. I want to savour you.”

He lifted my shirt over my head, trailing kisses up the length of my body. God. I didn’t think there was anything better than the feeling of Cam’s lips on me. “I love every fucking inch of you,” Cam breathed.

“Every.” He traced my nipple with his tongue.

“Fucking.” A kiss as soft as butterfly wings replaced his tongue.

“Inch.” He pulled my nipple into his mouth, and I arched into him. He slipped his hand under my back, propping me up, as his other hand ran down my side, tracing lazy circles around my now aching clit.

His slow perusal of my body was driving me crazy, leaving me alternating between cursing and mewling as he licked and tongue-fucked my body to the edge of ecstasy. And then he stopped, pushing back with a sleepy grin. Cam propped me up in the pillows, and pushed his pants the rest of the way off. “Is taking my time really that bad?” he whispered. “Do you really hate it that much?” He pushed my legs further apart with his knee, his cock was pushing against me.

“Fuck,” I hissed. Cam was still holding back, slowly easing his way inside me. He had to be dying, his dragon desperate to break free and claim what was theirs. And then Cam’s chest was pressed against mine, his cock filling me once more. This. This mattered.

His pace was slow, unhurried. Each thrust drove deeper, pushing me further, and I clawed his back, desperate to be closer. For more. Of him. Of us. Of this.

Fuck. Cam groaned, sucking on the mark he had left on my neck – healed, but still raised. A constant reminder of what we were. Absolute. “I love you, Charlie.” His voice vibrated against my tender skin, my mating mark still tingling. “And I love watching you melt.” His hand pushed between us, circling my clit with a rhythm my body couldn’t keep up with.

With a cry of his name, I fell apart around him. Just behind my orgasm, Cam roared out his own, shuddering inside of me with his release. “I love you,” I responded. But I wasn’t sure if he heard me, or if I was simply speaking to the night.

Cam immediately fell back asleep, sated. The ability men had to do that had always astounded me. But I was awake. Even with the peace I felt, something was tugging me out of bed, pulling me out of the room barefoot in nothing more than Cam’s shirt. The dimly lit halls were empty of the guards who had been there the first time I had arrived at the castle. Cam had done away with the interior watch, deciding his people didn’t need to be monitored in their day to day lives. The exterior watch still remained, just in case any Supes in the region hadn’t heard about the change in power, but so far it hadn’t been
necessary. I waved to the early morning guards as they opened the gates for me, moving wherever the pull would take me. The wind brushed against my ankles, tickling me with the long blades of grass.

Here, it whispered. I was on the top of a grassy knoll, a low valley beneath me. Cresting the edge of the next ridge over, I could just make out the beginning of the sunrise. A sunrise. Because I could now. I could take the time to admire the way night gave way to day, the colours bleeding together as one overtook the other. I could simply be. I sat down on the still damp grass, stretching my legs out in front of me. It would only be another few minutes before the sun was fully up, warming my skin and drying out the ground around me, but for now I enjoyed the embrace of everything.

“I don’t know why you keep running away, ice queen. You know I’ll always find you.” I turned my head, smiling at Cam’s tousled bed head. He was bare chested, looking like that same pull had dragged him out of a dream before he was ready. “Or should I say fire queen now? You’re mated to an Alpha dragon after all.”

I rolled my eyes, patting the grass next to me. “Stop making bad jokes and sit next to me. You’re going to miss it.”

Cam brushed a kiss to my forehead, settling next to me as we watched the streaks of pink and purple paint across the sky. It was going to be a beautiful day. I leaned into Cam’s arm, resting my head on his shoulder. Home. It wasn’t what I had expected it to be. A person, rather than a place. A feeling, rather than something tangible. But now I had found it I was never letting go.

The sun began to edge out the darkness in the valley below, leaving us in a pool of shadows as the sun rose. Behind me, the wind rushed past, whipping through my hair, saying hello. I smiled, raising my hand and letting it play and blow around me – a welcome friend.

As the sunlight blotted out the last of the early morning gloom, the wind called my name. Charlie, it whispered. Charlie, step into the light.

I stepped out of the shadows, letting the warm light of dawn beam down on my face. For the first time in what felt like an eternity, I basked fearlessly in the sunlight. Life could throw whatever it wanted at me. I’d rise from the ashes, every single time.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Torri Heat has always loved control. Her mind was blown when she discovered she could control entire worlds through story writing. Throw some steamy romance in there, and it was pretty close to perfection. Torri loves dark heroes who ride off into the sunset on their motorcycles, fierce heroines who can fend for themselves, and a sprinkle of the paranormal to keep things interesting. When she's not creating alternate realities, you can find her managing her three-ring circus of kids and animals.

Find all of Torri's books and sign up for her newsletter at her website ww.torriheat.com, or follow her on social media @torriheat!
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