

RAVEN KENNEDY & CORALEE JUNE

A REVERSE HAREM BULLY ROMANCE



Lies

I WAS BORN OF THE VOID, BUT I'LL DIE FROM THE POWER.

VOID

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Created with Vellum

To anyone who has felt a void inside. You are enough.

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Chapter 1

IT WAS such shit that I couldn't get high.

No matter how many times I wrapped my candy red lips around the joint settled between my thumb and index finger, it did nothing. I was sitting in a cloud of skunky smoke, sucking it in like a bad blowjob, but that weightless buzz humans liked to brag about just refused to hit my brain. I could add it to the list of curses that my abilities gave me. I had my own foul smoke that polluted me from the inside out.

The room was dark despite the twinkling lights strung around the ceiling, blanketing us in a hazy glow as I watched my best friend. "I want to take my clothes off," Reed said in a dreamy voice while leaning back in a rusted lawn chair. His red hair was curled at the tips of his ears, and his thin lips parted on an exhale of smoke, highlighting the dimple on his left cheek. "I should go streaking."

I chuckled. He should definitely *not* go streaking. Reed had one too many strikes against him, and I wasn't about to lose my only friend in this damn place. "It's more comfortable here. I don't want to move," I whined, trying to emulate that hazy tone while really wishing that I could go outside and hop the fence to escape for a joy ride on my motorcycle. Poor Betty hadn't had a good thrill in a couple of weeks. The night guards at Mrs. Coxcomb's School for Troubled Girls were cracking down on patrol thanks to my last little escape attempt. It wasn't my fault the chem lab had caught fire. I just wanted a little distraction, not ten demerits.

"Do you ever wonder why people cover their dicks when they're caught naked?" Reed asked while closing his eyes. "What they really should hide is their face." His laughter filled the room, and I tried to get high on his joy. Reed was the only reason I bribed another student for a bag of grow. It did

nothing for me, but I enjoyed watching his face light up and the stupid expectations that always weighed down his shoulders fade away. Shit had been obnoxiously bad lately. During the day, this prejudiced-as-fuck school liked to make him wear skirts and go by the name his parents gave him—Molly. But here? In our secret cove, an attic space above the cafeteria, he was himself. My best friend. My only friend. Reed.

Determining that he was sufficiently high, I lay back onto my makeshift pallet made of old blankets and pillows we'd found over the years and stared at the wooden beams covering the ceiling. Spiders ran across the shadows, and I lifted my hands up to imitate their movements with my fingers.

We had three weeks until graduation. Three weeks until Reed was finally free from his rich, controlling parents. He had plans to ditch this fucked up boarding school in Iceland and move to Los Angeles where his sister lived. I knew he'd be happier there. He'd finally take on his true identity and shed the girl his parents wanted him to be. We'd talked about it for years, both of us dreaming about getting out of here and living the dream. I convinced him that I'd be going with him despite knowing it wasn't in the cards for me. I'd never be free.

I got a letter in the mail from my mother two weeks ago, informing me that there was a remote cabin three hours away waiting for me. Away from humans and supernaturals, it was meant to be my safe-haven, but I knew better. It was just another cage. I was too dangerous to other supernaturals. She didn't want me running into any of my kind. I had a long life of loneliness ahead of me. At least I was able to take online college courses. Although, I was lying to myself if I thought I was ever going to be able to use those skills in the world.

"When we move to LA, I'm going to shave my head," Reed declared with a broad smile as he twisted to face me.

I rather liked his shaggy red hair; it suited his green eyes and pink lips. But I always supported whatever decisions he made about his body. I understood what it was like to be trapped in something that didn't feel like yourself.

"We should get matching tattoos, too."

I smiled at the thought of ink peppering his freckled skin. It hurt me to lie to him, but my entire life felt like an act ever since I'd been exiled to live with humans. Reed knew me better than most, but it still only scratched the surface of my existence. I wanted nothing more than to go with him to LA

and live a human life. I wanted to explore life outside of my mother's grasp with my best friend, away from the hate and fear of the supernaturals, but that fate wasn't meant for me. I was a Void. A girl could dream though.

"My first tattoo is going to be Betty on my arm with a heart around her," I joked while brushing the dust off my black sweats that were too tight to be considered loungewear. I couldn't actually get tattoos either. My body rejected them. My body rejected most everything. Drugs, alcohol, and people.

There was only one thing my body wanted. Power.

I looked down at my creamy skin as if I could see the dark magic trapped beneath. I was out of uniform, my crop top riding up so high it nearly showed off a good portion of underboob. I was so sick of the oversized uniforms that I promised myself that the moment I moved to the cabin, I'd go buck naked for a week straight, cold weather be damned.

Reed and I had busted ass to graduate a semester early. We'd stayed up late studying most nights, forgoing the forbidden parties in the dorm rooms, to piss off our controlling parents and grumpy headmaster by getting the hell out of this damn school. Both of us turned eighteen this year, which meant that the only thing holding us here was a diploma. We tested out of the easy courses and aced final exams. Even though I knew nothing awaited me after this, I still wanted Reed to get out of this hellhole where he was bullied daily and criticized for who he was at his core.

I guess, in many ways, we connected because we were both hated and ostracized for who we were, and we bonded because of our desire to get the fuck away.

"My first tattoo is going to be *Molly* in script over my heart. I wanna always remember where I came from. That poor girl survived a lot," Reed replied while staring at the joint in his hand, rolling it between his fingers as smoke circled his wrist.

I smiled with understanding. Reed wasn't the sort to shy away from the shit that bothered him. He wore it proudly on his chest, like armor.

I brushed my fingers over my amber amulet adorned in a silver cage. Closing my eyes, I tried to picture the future Reed painted while remembering why it wasn't possible for me to escape. I was a Void. I was deadly to supernaturals and hated for it. My necklace was a reminder of everything I was capable of but also the only thing keeping me safe.

"I think that'll be great. But you might have to explain it to future girlfriends. Girls get jealous when they think their boyfriend is holding a

torch for an ex.”

Reed snorted and took another slow drag of his joint, holding it in his chest for as long as he could before coughing it out. I looked around the safety of our attic space. We’d hidden here so many times over the years. I’d been shipped off here when I was ten, and Reed came just a year later. I’d had zero friends. The girls had made fun of me when I woke up one night after a nightmare and started talking about magic. Reed had been instantly ostracized too for having a “boy” haircut and walking to his own beat. This attic space was our sanctuary from all the judgmental bullshit, and I’d be sad to see it go, but more importantly, I was sad to see Reed go. I took in the dust covering the floor and the tacked posters on the wall. I’d miss this—hanging out, just the two of us. Reed might not know anything about the existence of supernaturals, but he knew me without just seeing *the Void*, and that meant more to me than anything.

“I hope any girlfriends I have would know about Molly long before seeing the tattoo,” he replied.

I always liked how he referred to his alternate ego like she was a separate entity, similar to how I felt about my power—the Void. It was a part of me but still autonomous from me. It was deadly and dangerous. I’d always considered myself a pacifist, but the supernatural community saw differently.

I leaned forward and kicked his boot before snatching the joint from his hands. “To Molly,” I said with a half grin before taking another worthless drag. The smoke filled my lungs and then disappeared up against rafters.

Handing it back, Reed replied with enthusiasm before inhaling. “To Molly!”

The trap door opened as we laughed, and brunette hair appeared, ruining the camaraderie of the moment. A frowning face popped up, and I watched in amusement as Poppy Rhodes’ nose wrinkled in disgust at the smell. Reed scowled the moment Poppy situated herself on the platform near the stairs. She was in uniform—she was *always* in uniform. The white button up top was fastened all the way to her chin, and the pleated, plaid skirt hit her knee. I bet she slept in the damn school’s attire, all the way down to our standardized knee highs.

“Headmistress is looking for you, Devicka,” she said while looking at me and avoiding Reed’s gaze. It was awkward, to say the least. They’d had a hot moment in the girl’s bathroom three months ago and had been avoiding each other ever since. Poppy was controlled by...well, control. She didn’t like

outlying variables. She liked everything just so. She liked following a plan. And being attracted to Reed was something she wasn't quite sure how to cope with.

"When *isn't* she looking for me?" I replied coolly, though a sense of anxiety gathered in my gut.

With graduation just around the corner, I wasn't in the mood for any last minute demerits or lectures. I'd barely survived as it was. It was hard juggling the need to take risks with my desire to finish school and get out of here. Knowing her, she'd fail me on an easy subject just to keep me under her thumb for another semester. My mother would probably tip her for it, maybe buy the school a new wing.

Poppy shook her head, her eyes oddly lit up with excitement that I wasn't used to seeing from her. "You don't get it. There's some hot guy here saying he's friends with your mother. Everyone is talking about it," Poppy rushed out with a smirk, and I had a feeling the only reason she was here was to report back on who this mystery guy was. Being at an all-girls school made my classmates dick-crazed. I was sure everyone was snapping photos and drawing hearts around the poor guy's name.

A hot guy? My mother? That could only mean one thing. I cringed.

I stood up and fluffed out my blonde hair that flowed down to the middle of my back before tightening the drawstrings on my sweats. "Thanks for letting me know."

"I'll come with," Reed said before a thump sounded behind me.

I turned around to look at Reed and laughed when I saw him sprawled out on the floor, his tongue flopped out. He was trying to lick his lips but kept hitting his chin. "That's okay. You should probably stay here. You're high as fuck." I snickered, though the sound felt forced. I was glad we decided to let loose tonight; otherwise, he would've insisted on coming with me. He always had my back, and I had his.

"You're probably right," he replied before rolling his neck and stretching out onto the floor. He jutted out his hips before spreading his thighs apart to rest his hand between them. Poppy stared at him, licking her lips before shaking her head. Yeah, she had it bad.

"Okay," I said, bending down to peck a kiss on his forehead. "See you later."

"See ya," he said, breathing out another puff before waving me away.

I bumped Poppy's shoulder on my way over, motioning for her to

descend the stairs. She eagerly placed her Mary Janes on the steps and scaled down, and I followed after her, closing the trap door behind me.

I was so preoccupied with getting to the ground that I didn't notice scraping my palm against a rough patch of wood until blood started trickling down my arm. I winced at the pain. "Dammit."

"You okay?" Poppy asked once my feet were firmly planted on the ground. She gave me a cool once-over as I cradled my hand against my chest, accidentally smearing more blood against my shirt and skin.

"Just a little cut," I gritted out. If I took off my necklace and let my Void out, I knew it would heal. But I would rather stay another semester at Coxcomb's than risk Mother or one of her associates catching me without it on. The council would have a hissy fit.

"You gonna go change before seeing the Headmistress? It'll be a demerit if she sees you strutting around like that," Poppy said, nodding at my outfit.

I looked down at my clothes and shrugged. "It's nearly lights out. I can say she caught me mid-sleep, and these are my pajamas. I'm not getting changed for a late night summoning."

Poppy rolled her eyes. That was the problem with her; she followed the rules a little too closely. I saw the desire to be *more* in her eyes though. "Okay, I'll uh...see you around," she said before spinning on her polished heel and heading toward the dorms, her skirt billowing up with a swish on each step.

I stared at her retreating back for a moment before turning in the opposite direction and heading down the dim hallway toward the front office. My flip flops slapped against the cold tile as I walked, making the noise echo around me. Class portraits were framed and lining the walls, each photo filled with fake smiles and gloomy skies. When I finally made it to the front, Headmistress Coxcomb—or Mistress Cock, as Reed and I liked to call her behind her back—was pacing the floor in front of her office. The moment her blue eyes landed on my casual strut, she frowned.

"Where have you been? I summoned you an hour ago," she hissed as spit collected on her wrinkled lips.

Mistress Cock was elderly and chronically traditional. She always wore a black business suit and one-inch pumps. She kept her long, gray hair in a coiled updo pinned as tight as her rigid rules. I knew the moment she realized I wasn't prim and proper because her scowl deepened. "What are you *wearing*?" Her eyes roamed over me, and I pulled my hand behind my back

to hide the bleeding, praying that it was dark enough to cover the crimson stain on my shirt. Knowing her, she'd make me scrub the laundry for the next week.

"My pajamas. I was sleeping."

"Don't lie to me, Miss Cainson. You weren't in your room!" she sneered while crossing her arms over her chest.

"Maybe you weren't looking hard enough."

We had a silent standoff, each of us straightening our postures to see who would break first. Humans had a sixth sense about supernaturals. They knew in their blood when they were the prey. I think that's why she gave me so much hell over the years. She knew that I was a threat, but couldn't explain her fear of me without looking weak. She liked the power she held over her students too much. She liked putting people under her thumb and pressing until they bled. I'm sure it was why Mother picked this school in the first place.

"We don't have time for this. Someone apparently *important* is here to see you. Some kind of diplomat from America. If you want to look like a foolish girl while meeting him, that's on you."

A diplomat? That's what they were gonna call it? I wanted to roll my eyes. Instead, I bit my tongue.

I knew what they wanted. I was being summoned. My amulet started to vibrate against my skin as if in preparation to work overtime to keep my powers at bay. I hadn't been near a supe in six months. Every time I was around one after a long hiatus, my power came back with a starving vengeance. I dreaded it.

Trying to hide my dismay, I nodded once. Mistress Cock seemed to enjoy the way my face had drained of blood, because her expression turned cocky. "Are you in some sort of trouble, Miss Cainson? Maybe I should sit in on this meeting." She was practically glowing at the opportunity to finally put me in my place.

"That won't be necessary," a cool voice said.

I hadn't even noticed her office door crack open. My amulet buzzed even harder, and I started to tremble as it worked overtime to hold the cravings back. My mouth went dry. My entire body suddenly felt starved. I drew my brown eyes to the man standing in the threshold who was full of delicious, dark power, and I wanted nothing more than to drain him dry.

I dropped my eyes to the ground, trying to force the cravings at bay. If he

saw the hunger there, he'd see my weakness. I had to get myself under control. I wanted to run in the other direction, but what good would that do with a supernatural who had super-speed? I should've stayed in the attic with Reed. Shuffling my feet, I followed him into Mistress Cock's office and flinched when the door slammed shut behind us.

I took a steadying breath and clenched my teeth, trying to get my intense cravings under control. He tsked under his tongue like he found me lacking. "You don't seem nearly as impressive as everyone claims. Are you shaking?" the smooth voice asked with a chuckle, making me snap my eyes back to his. He regarded my face with a hum before his nose picked up my scent. "You're bleeding," he said with a scowl, not giving me a chance to even take in his appearance. He flashed forward toward me, quicker than I could blink, invading my space with his cinnamon smell. His nose was on my neck in an instant, sniffing me as my pulse thudded.

What the fuck was my mother doing sending a godsdamn *vampire*?

I finally lifted my head. "Looking for this?" I asked while holding my hand up. The blood was still freshly flowing from my palm, coating my skin with sticky warmth. This was a risk, testing his ability to hold back despite the treat I offered. There weren't many vampires that could restrain themselves. It would make any vampire instantly hungry. I understood hunger all too well. I was constantly starving. But unlike vampires, it wasn't blood that my immortality craved. It was power.

"You like tempting vampires?" he asked while eyeing my hand. I recognized his disgust at his own cravings, had even felt the guilty hatred within myself more times than I could count. I didn't like that my hunger took over my better judgment. I craved control, and the darkness was something uncontrollable. "Too bad you're just a dirty Void," he sneered before grabbing my wrist and flicking his tongue out to lick the wound. Vampires had healing properties in their saliva. It allowed them to drink from humans without leaving a mark. Their venom had other abilities...like the ability to induce mind-numbing lust and pleasure.

"Can't handle the temptation?" I grimaced as his tongue traveled over my skin.

"You don't tempt me," he replied, as I watched the puncture in my palm seal shut. He quickly pulled away and wiped his mouth with his hand, like he wanted to erase the taste from his lips. I'd never been tasted by a vampire before. Even though he hadn't used any venom on me, the sight of him

licking my palm had been almost sensual.

I swiped my hand on my sweats, trying to act nonplussed. He made his way across the room to the roaring fireplace which was crackling with warmth. He wanted more, I could tell. But to him and every other supe, I was like a disease. He wanted nothing to do with me. He fought his basic instinct to sink his fangs into me and drink more of my blood because of what I was—deadly.

My eyes moved to take in his appearance, and I looked at his angular face. He was about my age, maybe a bit older, with a sharp nose and steely eyes filled with loathing. Thick eyelashes cast shadows along his hard cheeks and dark scruff covered his jaw. He was taller than I was. The cloak he wore hid his body, but I sensed he was just as chiseled as every other vampire in existence. They were always painfully strong. A perk of their power. The man was hot and dangerous. I could feel his power in the room like a heavy blanket over my shoulders.

“Who are you?” I asked, reaching up to grab my amulet.

“Render Tillson, Vampire Paragon for the council and now, your babysitter,” he said with a frown while looking me over. He ran a hand through his dark hair before casting his gaze on the amulet perched between my breasts.

My blonde brows shot up in surprise. There are only four paragons in all of America, chosen by the council leaders, one of each: vampire, shifter, elemental, and necromancer. The four most powerful supernatural breeds. As a paragon, he was being groomed at Thibault Academy to one day take over as a council member and lead the other vampires. The fact that he was even here was a big deal, and dread filled me like a boiling pot of water.

Now that the temptation of blood was gone, he was taking me in. Hot brown eyes lingered on my bare stomach and fluttered up to my chest where dried blood sat on my cleavage. For a moment, he looked like he wanted to come back over and lick that too, and that image set fire in my body. My desire for power wasn’t limited to the Void apparently. My libido craved it too.

“Why are you here?” I asked.

“Your particular skills are required. There’s a vampire in my community that got cursed with bloodlust. She killed forty people. The council has ordered for you to take her vampirism away.”

I frowned while clutching the necklace around my neck even tighter.

Render eyed the large piece of jewelry with disdain and distrust, his grayish eyes growing dark at the spelled orange gem nestled in an ornate silver design. My father found it the year after my Void powers came out. It kept away my urge to feed, but every time I took it off, the hunger came back with a vengeance. Last time, the pain of it had nearly knocked me out. Suppressing my shadowed powers had consequences, but not wearing the necklace was worse. I was a danger to any supe I came across. One brush of my skin and I could ruin them, suck them dry of their powers and leave them as empty husks. Last time I just had to stand near my victim. My powers were growing more difficult to contain, and I didn't like to test its boundaries.

"You heard what happened the last time, right? I stripped a shifter of his feral wolf and nearly killed him. What you're asking could potentially kill her too."

"I don't like it any more than you do. I don't want to let you anywhere near my people, but she's important to the council, and they don't want to put her down."

I rolled my eyes. "*Important to the council*" probably meant she was fucking someone important.

"And what if I refuse?" I asked before crossing my arms over my chest.

Render surged forward with his super-speed and wrapped his hands around my neck, shoving me against the wall. My eyes widened in surprise at the contact, my head smarting where I'd hit. His muscular body pressed against mine, and I shivered as his hot air feathered down my neck. Being told I was the most powerful supernatural in existence didn't eradicate my fears. Unless I ripped off my necklace and drained him dry—which I did *not* want to do—I was helpless against him.

"You don't get to refuse. You'll help me, or it'll be *you* in supernatural prison."

My eyes widened as his whispered words sunk deep into my bones. His threat wasn't something to take lightly. Supernatural prison was worse than death. Once you went there, you usually didn't come back out. And if he really was a paragon, then he had the power to send me there.

I turned my head to face him, straining against his grip. My lips accidentally brushed his jaw when I moved, and I felt him stiffen against me. Loosening his tight hold, he allowed me to speak while still holding me in place.

"Fine," I hissed. "Now get off of me."

He held me for a moment longer, pushing his knee against my thigh and positioning his forearm between my breasts, the tension of the threat settled between us, hatred zinging back and forth between us. This close, I couldn't help but notice how ridiculously good looking he was. There was nothing worse than having to be stuck in the proximity of an attractive supernatural who hated my guts.

"We leave in an hour. Get changed and go pack," he said in a raspy voice before pulling away, releasing his hold on me.

I sunk back against the wall, trying to catch my breath. "Why do we have to leave so soon?"

"Why is your mouth moving when it's your feet that should be doing the job?" he shot back.

"You're a real asshole, you know that?"

He blinked at me, visibly taken aback. I guess most people didn't call mister hotshot vampire on his shitty attitude. I smirked, counting his silence as a win, and turned the handle to the door, letting myself out. Mistress Cock was nowhere to be seen in the hallway, so at least I didn't have to deal with a lecture from her tonight. I turned and headed toward the dorms, my feet carrying me down the long, dim corridors. The bottom half of the walls were wooden paneling and above that was blue and gold wallpaper that reeked of pretentiousness. I made my way up the stairs, taking my sweet ass time as I went. I might have no say about my summoning, but I could make the asshole wait.

At the top of the stairs, I veered off to the right and passed the first few doors. I opened it, the darkness in the room matching my insides. I looked over at the perfectly clean desk to my right and then to the messy one on my left.

One of the things this school boasted was that the "troubled" girls who attended would be taught to socialize as proper ladies—i.e., we were forced to share a room. My roommate was a London socialite who was sent here after her father remarried and her evil stepmother shipped her off. She was an anal perfectionist and had no time for me. She was working hard to win back daddy's love. I usually made her eye twitch every time I left clothes on the floor or toothpaste on our shared sink. Her bedroom door was closed tight for the night as usual. She followed the lights-out rule to the minute. She and Poppy were best friends.

I walked into my bedroom, flipped on the light, and nearly screamed at

the shadow sprawled out over my bed.

“What the fuck?”

I had one hand over my heart and the other reaching out like I’d been planning on grabbing the lacrosse stick propped against my bed frame to attack my intruder with it.

The vampire looked at me cockily from my bed, his arms propped under his head and his ankles crossed. “Do you always walk that slow, or was it a talent reserved for me?” Render asked.

Fucking vampiric speed. He must’ve gone around to the other staircase. How he knew which bedroom was mine, I had no idea.

I dropped my hands and replaced the shock on my face with irritation. “Get off my bed and get out of my room,” I hissed. I didn’t like having him in my personal space.

He sat up, swinging his legs over the side of the bed, and to my horror, I noticed the journal he had clasped in his hands. He flipped open the leather-bound book and started thumbing through the handwritten entries. My hands curled into fists.

He cleared his throat and started reading one. “June sixteenth: My mother wrote to me after the first time in eight months. She asked fuck-all about my life and instead informed me that she didn’t approve of the minus that I earned beside my A. She said that if I didn’t get that mark up, she’d be cutting my clothing allowance for new uniforms. She’s real maternal, that one. She even signed her letter as *Council Liaison*. Thank fuck I don’t have to suffer through Christmases or birthdays with her. Even though she stopped the pretenses of actually visiting me back when I was twelve. At least I have Dad. He doesn’t visit as often as I’d like, but at least he doesn’t hate me.”

My chest burned. My teeth grinded. I saw furious red awash with devastating blue. “Give that to me. You have no right to read that,” I snapped, moving forward.

Render’s smirk turned into a full-sized grin like he relished in yanking out my personal turmoil. Everything in there was deeply personal. Every time I had raged or grieved, I’d written it down in that book. It was my way to get it all out since I couldn’t tell Reed about the supernatural aspects of my life. It might be stupid and juvenile, but it was mine, and it was utterly private.

Render flipped a few more pages, and I rushed forward to yank my journal away from him, but it was laughable how easily he dodged me. He was across the room and leaning against the wall before I’d even made it a

single step.

“October fourth: Mistress Cock caught me out of my dorm after lights out, but only because she was in the kitchen feeling up the janitor. That pretentious bitch always goes on and on about the importance of purity. Guess she liked to get her own *purity* scrubbed down by Mr. Longhorn. I’d just wanted to sneak some pumpkin pie, dammit. Now I’ll have that image of them all tangled up together burned into my retinas forever. Oh, and I didn’t even get the damn pie. I got two demerits and bathroom duty instead. And to make it all worse? Katie Jones started a rumor that I’m bulimic, and that’s why my head has been in a toilet bowl all week. I keep getting old food shoved into my bag and crushed into my assigned seats for class,” he read, a smirk on his pale, horribly beautiful face.

I hated him so much.

I hated his smooth, deep voice, and the way he read my personal words like they were amusing to him. “Render. Put it down, or I’ll scream and wake up the entire wing.”

He just laughed at me. “Go ahead. Scream, Void,” he said with a twisted curl of his lip. “It wouldn’t be the first time I had a woman screaming in the bedroom.”

“You’re disgusting.”

He cast a critical look up and down my body. “Believe me, Void, you’re the last person I’d ever take to bed,” he said, making embarrassing heat stain my cheeks. “And the longer you stand there, the more entries I’m going to read. So I suggest you hurry.”

Turning on my heel, I marched into my closet and threw open the door, grabbing my duffel.

“December twenty-sixth,” Render’s voice rang out, making red haze fall over my eyesight and my mouth fill with bitterness. “My mother sent me a pair of socks for Christmas and a note that she’s extended my stay here for another year. Looks like I’m not getting out of this prison when I’m sixteen like my father offered. She called him and ripped him a new one for even suggesting it. Merry fucking Christmas to me.”

I packed as fast as I could. Every entry he read was worse than the last. My father missed one of the school’s family dinners. My mother wrote to tell me she was disappointed in my grades. Again. Reed was bullied. I snuck out for a date with a human guy, but he’d stood me up. The girls at the school picked on me. I complained about how I was unwanted. Unloved. Hated.

Feared. One after the other, the blows kept coming until my eyes were burning, and I was so humiliated that my hands shook.

Render followed me to the bathroom, still reading, and I simply pulled out my drawer and dumped everything inside the duffel. "There. Done," I said, my hand outstretched. "Now hand it over."

"What a sad, lonely little life you've lived, Void. It seems no one likes you at all."

I knew he was purposely being a dick because of what I was. He didn't really know me. At least, that was what I kept telling myself.

I said nothing, my eyes refusing to blink in case a tear fell down. After a long moment of him watching me, he finally closed the journal and slapped it down onto my open palm. I shoved it into my duffel and zipped it shut.

"Let's go."

Reed turned on his heel and walked out, and I was forced to follow behind him. I looked back at my bedroom, feeling slightly forlorn. He was right. I did have a sad, lonely little life. But at least within the walls of my bedroom, I was somewhat shielded. At least living here with humans had allowed me to hide away from the hateful looks and wishes for my death. It was exactly why I didn't put up a fight when Mother stayed away. There was nothing out there in the super world for me except for a controlling council who liked to use me when they needed and then shove me away in a drawer when they were done with me.

"Let me just say goodbye to my friend," I asked, though I didn't know why I even bothered.

Render sneered at me. "That's funny, I seem to be feeling a bit thirsty. Maybe saying goodbye to your friend isn't such a bad idea," he said, the threat obvious.

"Never mind," I mumbled. I hoped I'd be back before Reed even knew I was gone.

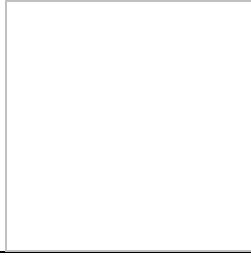
"Smart choice," Render replied, flashing his fangs. "Now, we're taking a portal to the vamp community in LA. I hope your little amulet is prepared to work overtime," he called over his shoulder with a smirk.

My heart drummed. Portals were powerful magic that made it hard to hold back the Void. I didn't just crave supes, anything with power had me salivating.

"I got it under control," I gritted.

"For your sake, I hope you do."

Chapter 2



I'D NEVER BEEN to a vampire community.

They didn't always play well with elementals, and my mother had been an elemental before... Nope. I refused to think about that.

I'd only heard stories about the tall, black skyscrapers in the hidden city with blood banks on every corner. The whole place was spelled to repel humans, and even other supernaturals had to have permission to visit it. I was probably one of the few non-vampires to see it. Vamps were notoriously reclusive, and they rarely interacted with the other communities. But that was true for most of the supernatural races. They didn't play well with each other.

"Close your mouth. You look like an idiot," Render snapped while brushing stray magic off his suit.

I didn't pay him any mind, openly gawking at the city before us. I'd managed to travel through the portal without passing out, but I'd nearly gnawed a hole through my lip from the nothingness pushing to be let out.

"Where are we going?" I asked while struggling to keep up with his long strides on the stone streets.

I was busy taking everything in. I'd been in the human world for so long that it was jarring to be in the presence of other supernaturals again. All this power...it was intoxicating. My amulet was working overtime so that I wouldn't drain everyone dry.

I looked up at the grayish, dusty hue of the sky. The city was spelled to block the sun, so only the bright lights of the billboards and skyscrapers lit up the streets. It was a modern-looking city, designed with sleek, contemporary elements. Everything looked pristine and polished, from the black steel and mirrored glass of the buildings to the expensive cars and unblemished sidewalks.

“Everything looks so expensive here,” I mused as we passed by a store window that was digitized to advertise what they sold inside. Based on the photos of beautiful men and women with prominent veins, I thought it was a safe bet that it was one of the notorious blood banks.

“My people are advanced and meticulous. Most of our kind has been a spearhead for technological advances. Why not flaunt it? We enjoy the fruits of our wealth.”

I snorted. “*The fruits of your wealth?* Geez, listen to you. You sound like you’re already sitting on the council.”

His face turned stony. “I’m a paragon. What did you expect?”

I shrugged as we walked, looking up at a place called Bend and Blood. The storefront sign had flashing lights around an exotic dancer with a bloody neck. Classy.

“I expected you to still act your age. You’re attending the academy, right? So that puts you at nineteen, not a hundred.”

Render pressed his lips into a thin line while I continued to enjoy the scenery. I’d probably never be back here, so I wanted to soak it all in. For the most part, you couldn’t really tell that the people walking by us weren’t human, except that they were all oddly beautiful and moved with graceful fluidity that came from years of immortality. They were pale, but most of them didn’t walk around with their fangs out, so it just seemed like this city had been blessed with extra beauty chromosomes. Their trends in wardrobe might’ve made some humans pause, but honestly, they made capes look good.

“Why did we come here anyway?” I asked, ducking past an older male vampire who seemed to sniff the air as I went by.

“Headquarters. Since this is a vampire issue, the council agreed to meet here. It was safer than transporting the female. If she got out in her state...” Render’s words trailed off. I observed him for a moment, noting the anguish in his frowning lips and the way he kept brushing his hands through his dark hair in a nervous tic.

He didn’t need to explain further. Vampires cursed with bloodlust could take out entire cities if left unchecked. They went mindless with thirst, losing all sense of themselves in the process. It was a terrible sickness that their kind caught, and although it was rare, it still happened. Usually, they had to be put down.

“You don’t seem happy that the council is meeting here,” I pointed out.

“I just hate these council meetings,” he replied in a moment of honesty. Maybe the Vampire Paragon wasn’t so bad after all. “I also don’t want to be seen with you. It’s bad for my reputation,” he added.

Nope. The guy was a total asshole.

Vampires strolled past us as we made our way down the busy city sidewalk, many of them stopping to talk to Render or smiling at him when they saw his face. He looked a bit embarrassed by the attention, which surprised me. He seemed like the type of arrogant male who would enjoy this kind of fanfare, but I guess not. Whether he liked it or not, Render was someone important to them. Even being as young as he was, he seemed to have mastered the politically polite smile.

“Render, I didn’t hear that you were back!” A woman walked up, greeting him with a bright smile. She had sharp teeth and a toddler on her hip who was busy shaking a rattle shaped like bones. Her long, floral dress clung to her beautiful curves, and she had a slight accent that I couldn’t place.

Render stopped to talk to her, and they exchanged polite pleasantries while I stood on the sidelines like a lost puppy. I was gawking at the electric cars as they passed by and men in suits who drank blood-infused coffee and walked to work using everything from hoverboards to town cars, and even flashed by with their super-speed.

“You’re almost done at the academy,” the woman was saying.

Render plastered on a smile. “I’ll be glad to graduate and take my seat on the council. Will you be attending the council ball that we’re hosting this year?” he asked in a warm voice.

“Of course! Wouldn’t miss it,” she replied before bouncing the child on her hip. She was beautiful like most vampires. With bright blue eyes and a calming voice, I found myself feeling envious of the adoring way she stared at her baby. Had my mother ever been that way with me? I squeezed my eyes shut at the question, but the memory of that one night—the night it all went wrong—came crashing to the forefront of my mind.

“Goodnight, Devicka,” Mom’s sweet voice said as she leaned over to kiss my forehead. She’d done this every night since I was born. Her soft lips landed on my skin, but just as she did, I felt my skin buzz at the contact. Black, thick smoke started to fill the room, and I jerked back in surprise.

“Mom?” I called out, suddenly scared.

She pulled away and grinned. “Oh, honey! You must be getting your powers! It’s finally time!” She gripped my hands, holding me steady as her

eyes filled with moisture. More smoke covered our skin, licking me with an unfamiliar hunger as it flowed like waves over her.

"Mom? Something doesn't feel right," I gritted while trying to jerk my hands back, but she kept her grip firm.

"Give in to your powers, Devicka. Let them come out." Her eyes twinkled with joy, but the buzzing intensified. A dark, churning hunger rose up inside of me, and my teeth chattered, jarring my skull. I tried to pull away again, but she was latched on so tightly, looking around the smoke with wide eyes. "It must be fire element. That's what the smoke is," she said. "Unless...unless you're inheriting your father's demon powers." I could tell that thought didn't please her based on the way her lips turned down in a frown.

"I'm hungry, Mom," I whispered, but my voice didn't feel like mine. It seemed darker somehow. Aged and needy. I didn't quite feel like myself.

"Devicka..."

Mom's face began to pale, and her grip on my arms suddenly went limp. More and more black smoke surrounded her, filling up my entire room. She fell then, like a crumpled tissue tossed to the floor, and my eyes widened in horror.

"Mom? Mom!" I screamed while shaking her shoulders, smoke curling into my hair as I tried to wake her up.

She began convulsing as my smoke ate her up, wrapping around her like a snake. I couldn't see. Couldn't hear. The only thing I sensed was a glow within me, absorbing nourishment with a steady gulp as I fed my newfound hunger. A hunger I'd live with for the rest of my life.

Somehow, in my panicked, innocent mind, I'd put together enough thought to realize that I was the one hurting her. I ran away from her then, taking my smoke with me. By the time my bare feet pounded down the pavement of the street, and the moon's watchful eye followed me, it was too late. I'd already drained her of her elemental power, and her love went with it.

"I'm thankful to be representing the community as a paragon," Render suddenly said, drawing me out of my painful memories. I snapped my attention back to him, blinking away my dark thoughts. I told myself a long time ago not to revisit that night. There was nothing I could do to change the outcome now. Mom was powerless, and it was all my fault.

"Little Luca is getting big," Render added. He was looking at the child with a softness that I didn't expect. After how rude he'd been, I wondered if

he had to force himself to be kind or if this was his norm, and his cruelty was only reserved for me. I was pretty sure it was the latter.

He went to ruffle the toddler's hair, but the kid bit his finger, nipping Render's skin on contact. Render and the mother both laughed like it was adorable for this fanged baby to draw blood.

When I grimaced at the sight, the mother's eyes flicked over to me. "You brought a pet to our city, Render?"

Render chuckled. "No, ma'am. I don't keep pets. Especially not her kind." My face heated in embarrassment while the woman laughed. "We're just here on council business."

The woman wrinkled her nose. "I can't place her scent. What is she?" she asked curiously, talking about me as if I weren't standing right there.

"She's late is what she is. We'd better go. It was good to see you, Ivy."

"Of course. Tell your mother I'll stop by and see her."

"I will."

They did those cheesy cheek kisses that I'd only seen in movies, before she went on her way, talking to her toddler as she headed to a blood bank shop that advertised exotic animal blood. The further we walked, the busier the streets became, and the more looks were cast my way. It was disconcerting, the way everyone looked at me.

"Isn't there a less populated way to get there?" I asked through gritted teeth.

Render rolled his eyes. "No."

It was clear that humans weren't usually in the city unless inside a blood bank, and although I wasn't a human, they knew I wasn't one of them. The sneers and leers that I kept getting were enough to make me step closer to Render, although I had no idea why. It wasn't like he'd do anything to protect me.

"Scared?" he asked with a smirk when I bounced against his arm.

Yes. "No."

"Don't worry, Void. We don't eat on the streets like common rats."

Everyone on the street came to a sudden, silent halt. Vampires everywhere turned to look at me.

Void. Void. Void.

The whispers spread out like shaking out a sheet, the air catching it and ripping it all the way down.

"Why did you do that?" I whispered frantically. This time when I sidled

up to Render, I didn't step away again even when our arms touched. I was on a darkened street with hundreds of vampires—predators of the fiercest, most ruthless variety, and now that they knew what I was, they looked at me like they were getting ready to grab the pitchforks and run me out of the city.

"What is the Void doing here?" one person called out, their voice high-pitched with worry.

"Oh gods, she's going to steal our powers!"

Vampires started flashing away, too quick for my eyes to follow.

"Get her away!"

"My baby! Charles? Charles, get away from her!"

"Kill her before she can destroy us!"

Yeah. This is pretty much how it always went.

"Godsdammit," Render muttered under his breath. "We should've hurried."

He started moving us away from the wide-eyed crowd. I knew it was only a matter of seconds before someone made a move against me. Fear made people do violent things.

"You're the one stopping to kiss babies and rub elbows," I hissed. "You should've flashed ahead and let me get there on my own instead of calling me a Void in the middle of the damn street and freaking out a city full of lethal vampires!"

More were talking louder now, creeping closer to us despite me using Render as a full-body shield.

He jerked his head to look at me with a wide, menacing look on his face. "You want me to flash? Fine."

Before I could even blink, he was picking me up and pressing me against his hard chest with a firm hold. I didn't even have time to protest before he was flashing down the street, laughing with his bright, sharp teeth bared at the look of terror on my face.

The city was a blur as he darted through the crowd, and I felt my amulet vibrate against my chest. I wasn't used to being touched, and I definitely wasn't used to being flashed at super high vampire speeds. I screamed against his chest, feeling like the wind was going to squeeze the life out of me, my chest too weighed down for me to take a breath.

I screamed when I felt him jump, and then we landed with a hard thud that jostled the teeth in my skull. The sudden stop had me reeling, and Render set me down on a marble platform outside of a building that I was too damn

dizzy to see properly. “You weren’t supposed to flash *me!*” I snapped while cradling my head in my hands. My blonde hair had unraveled from my messy bun and was a mass of waves around my face. My stomach roiled. The world spun. Flashing fucking sucked.

“Yep, I’m gonna puke,” I said before dry heaving at his feet.

“Disgusting.” He flashed out of the way, though nothing escaped my mouth. “Can’t even handle a little flashing.” He tsked before straightening his tie.

I straightened up while using the back of my hand to wipe the spit off my lips. When I looked up, he was standing smugly in front of the sleek black doors, smirking at me, like watching me wretch was getting him off.

“You’re an asshole,” I said before lunging forward, fists clenched like I was actually capable of punching him.

Vampires were stronger, faster, and more predatory than all the supernaturals, but I wanted to hit him so badly in that moment. Of course, my badass effect was dulled because I wavered on my feet from the nauseating speeds we’d just traveled. I might have been the daughter of a risk demon and an ex-elemental, plus a powerful Void in my own right who could suck the powers out of supernaturals, but apparently, I wasn’t capable of flashing with a damn vampire, because I nearly fell on my ass.

Two arms wrapped around me from behind before I could collapse. “Careful,” a warm voice said at my ear. I knew exactly who it was before even turning around. His voice would’ve sounded nice if it had been spoken by anyone except for him.

Quade fucking Sandwood.

Quade Sandwood was tall, dark, and handsome. It annoyed the shit out of me.

With dusky skin and a square face, he had a deceptive look to him that made it seem like he always carried a secret. I shrugged out of his grasp and turned around to scowl at him. As soon as he saw that it was me that he’d touched, his friendly face churned with anger, and he backed away. My eyes skated down his toned body, and I was disappointed to see just how beautiful he’d become with a bright smile and buzzed haircut that enhanced his shadowed jaw. It had been years since I’d last seen him.

Quade was a poster boy for supernatural breeding. He’d been named the Elemental Paragon as soon as he entered the academy at fifteen years old, and he would eventually fill the council seat. The council seat that had been

meant for *me*.

My mother had been grooming me to take over her position when I was younger. That is, until the night my Void powers came out and I'd sucked out all of her elemental magic. She'd lost her council seat, and she'd hated me ever since. She was still respected in the community, so the council gave her some unofficial bullshit position, and then she'd turned around and started grooming Quade instead. It still made me grind my teeth.

Feeling steadier on my feet, I crossed my arms in front of me, as if that could block off Quade's own perusal of my body. I felt vulnerable under his stare. There was a time that his parents and my mother had encouraged us into a friendship, hoping that it would grow from there. Before the Void took over, we were considered a perfect match. Descended from long and powerful bloodlines, our parents had dreams that we would one day unite our families and rule on the council together. But of course, all that changed the night my powers came out, and it was revealed that I was a Void instead of an elemental. His parents had pulled him out of my life faster than a dentist yanked out a rotten tooth. One day, we'd been friends playing in the yard, and the next, he'd sneered at me and said that everyone hated me, including him.

"Devicka," Quade said with a nod as he shifted his weight between his long, muscular legs.

My skin still burned where he'd grabbed me. I felt a sick sense of unease at the contact. Supes knew better than to touch me since my powers worked best through skin-to-skin contact. And yet, both Render and Quade had done it in the last five minutes. My Void was going crazy. They were lucky my amulet worked so damn well. I might have to call my dad to give it some more juice after this. Although the amulet was spelled to keep my power inside of me, he infused it with his own demon power to bolster it every so often.

Forcing myself to stand up straight, I looked up at Quade. "What are you doing here, Quade?"

The question burst from my mouth before I could stop it, because *of course* he was here. All the paragons would be here on official council business. He was going to watch me suck the powers out of a crazed vampire, who I'd probably kill in the process. As if he didn't hate me enough, now he was going to see my destructive powers in person. Goody.

Even with Render and Quade not touching me anymore, I still felt an

intense prickling feeling from where they'd touched me, like tiny needles were being pressed into my skin. I looked down and noticed that my amulet was glowing too. I'd never felt anything like it before. My hunger must be at a new high. If I weren't so damn prideful, I'd increase the distance between us even more. But if I backed away, they'd see it as some sort of power shift, like I was afraid of them, and I wasn't going to give them the satisfaction.

When my eyes met Quade's again, a mean smirk had formed on his plush lips. He obviously liked knowing that I was struggling to compose myself. Our childhood was spent with him one-upping everything I did, and it seemed that hadn't changed even after I was exiled from my community and my home. He'd already taken my mother and my position, but I guess it wasn't enough. He wanted to take away my pride, too.

"You two know each other?" Render drawled at my back.

His voice made me jump, and the movement caused Quade's attention to flick over my shoulder to him. Quade's eyes briefly took in Render's scowl, but he didn't greet the broody vampire. "I'm the Elemental Paragon, Devicka," he explained in a condescending voice to me, answering my earlier question. "We're required to attend things like this. It's supposed to help prepare us for when we take our seat on the council. I'm nearly graduated from Thibault Academy now, did your mother tell you?"

I barely stopped myself from rolling my eyes. I wondered if he realized what an ass he sounded like when he bragged about himself in normal conversation. Was he saying it to boost his own ego, or did he just like letting me know that he was living the life designed for me? I had *always* wanted to attend Thibault Academy, and he knew it. When I was little, Mother used to tell me all about when she'd attended. The instructors, the grounds, the magic she learned, and the friends she'd made. The campus was gorgeous too, and it was every supernatural's dream to attend, but of course, I was stuck living with humans at Mrs. Coxcomb's School for Troubled Girls instead.

Oh well. At least I had Reed.

"Congratulations. I'm sure it's easier for you to kiss my mother's ass now that you're working together officially."

Quade's little smile slipped, and Render chuckled behind me. I flicked my attention to the vampire, and his laughter ceased the moment I did. He didn't want to side with me, even though it was obvious that he wasn't a fan of Quade's. No surprise there. Usually, members of the council barely tolerated each other. The supernatural prejudice ran too deep.

“I’m surprised you’re here on time, Render,” Quade said, finally acknowledging the vampire. He stepped forward so that the two men were toe-to-toe, sizing each other up. I had a feeling if we weren’t at vamp headquarters, they would’ve whipped out their dicks to start measuring them. There was something about supernaturals with enormous power and influence that made them get competitive. They were always getting into pissing contests, talking the big talk about who could kill the other one in a more efficient or gruesome way. “Last I heard, you were wanting to step down from the position,” Quade said. “What’s the matter, your councilman making you suck his cold, undead dick?”

“The only deadass dick around here is *you*,” Render replied smoothly, with cold steel in his eyes.

Quade’s eyes narrowed, and I felt his power pulsate. Unlike most elementals, Quade could conjure all of the elements—air, water, fire, and earth. Beads of water collected on his fingers, dripping onto the floor.

Render’s gray eyes flicked down to the floor at the forming puddle and smirked. “Leaking?” He tsked. “What a terrible choice the elementals made. A paragon who can’t even control his own power. That’s just sad.”

“Better than a race who go mad with bloodlust and then have to be put down like rabid dogs.”

I shook my head at the jibes lobbing back and forth between the two. The animosity between them was so thick I could have bound it with rope and dragged it behind me. Every time they threw another verbal punch, their powers fluctuated, slamming into me with wave after wave of painful hunger. I knew they had to be powerful—they wouldn’t have been chosen as paragons otherwise—but this was more power than I’d ever felt before. It assaulted me, and their anger only made it worse. My Void was beating at me with fists, wanting to come out and drink them both up.

“That female is *not* a rabid dog. She’s sick. Not that you’d fucking care,” Render snarled. “You elementals don’t give two shits about my people. You shouldn’t even be at this meeting. It should’ve been handled by vamps only.”

Quade rolled his eyes, undeterred. “Every council verdict has to be overseen by the *entire* council, fang fuck. So *suck* it up.”

Unable to take it anymore, I threw my hands up. “Can you guys stop? You’re *both* leaking power, and it’s driving me crazy.”

My outburst drew the attention of both men.

“What’s wrong? Your inner monster wants out of her cage?” Quade

mocked.

My eyes narrowed. He'd called me a monster when I was a little girl, too, and the term got under my skin. "I'm *not* a monster."

Ignoring me, Quade gave me a slow once over. The way he dragged over my body made my skin hum, and I hated that. I didn't want to respond to him, but I couldn't stop it. No amount of torture and jealousy could change the fact that I found him attractive. "You look good, Devicka, all things considered."

What a prick.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I snapped. I didn't like the backhanded compliment.

Quade stepped closer, and I felt Render shift beside me on my right. Neither of them was touching me, but we were still too close. He leaned in, his lips mere inches from mine. I sucked in a breath and held it, too terrified to let it out. His eyes were so dark brown that they were nearly black. His thick lashes fanned across his lids. He had the tiniest freckle on the side of his nose. He was so close that I could feel his breath against my lips. My brain noted all of these things while my heart beat wildly in my chest.

My eyes were wide and wary, my whole body tensed. I had no idea what he was going to do, and it freaked me the fuck out. I was used to being avoided at all costs by supers, so his nearness made my heartbeat skyrocket. I didn't know how to handle his close proximity. My amulet was vibrating, trying to hold back my hunger. But it wasn't just hunger from the Void that I felt. Nope, for some idiotic reason, my stomach fluttered like I was a nerdy schoolgirl with a crush on the playground bully. I couldn't stop myself from thinking about what it would be like if he closed the gap between us and pressed his lips against mine.

"It means," he whispered so low that only I could hear, "that you'd be pretty...if you weren't a pariah. Such a shame. We could have had fun."

He immediately backed away again, his expression smug as a puff of air left my mouth.

His words cut through me like a knife as he continued to smirk at me like the asshole he was. I had half a mind to take off my amulet and show him just how much fun we could *really* have, but a cold voice that caused my hair to stand on end made me stop in my tracks.

"Devicka?"

I turned at the sound of my mother's voice, wincing at her chiding tone.

She was getting out of a sleek, black town car pulled up at the curb beside us. The driver held the door open for her as she slid out onto the sidewalk, looking perfectly prim and proper in her gray dress suit. Her blonde hair that matched mine was swept up in a low bun. She brushed imaginary lint from her shoulders and smoothed the wrinkles from her skirt. Mother always had to look perfect.

I swiped the sweat that had gathered on my brow with the back of my hand before looking down at my own tattered outfit. Render hadn't given me much time before crossing into the portal, so I was wearing black skinny jeans, a white V-neck, and my combat boots. One sweep of her eyes told me how much she disapproved, and I was stuck somewhere between craving her approval and not caring anymore.

"Mother." Our greetings were always strained, always short.

She eyed the small spaces between myself and the other two men on either side of me, and her mouth turned down. "Keep your distance from the paragons, Devicka," she ordered before clenching her bright teeth in displeasure. Her eyes skimmed my outfit again, and a full-on snarl kissed her lips, spelled with permanent, blood-red lipstick. She could never look disheveled, never look like she didn't have her shit together.

I bristled instantly, hating the way she looked at me—like I was a disease she didn't want to spread. "I have my amulet on," I said defensively, though it sounded lame even to my own ears. I knew the risks. I *always* knew the risks. It was something she reminded me of every damn chance she got.

"And what if that amulet should fail? Or become overloaded? Or fall off?" she challenged in rapid-fire succession, making me slump my shoulders in shame. "You know the rules. You are not to endanger the lives of supers. *Especially* not the paragons of their races. These are the future leaders of our world and should be treated attentively and with respect," she said, coming up to stand next to Quade.

"I know," I mumbled, looking at my shoes. I hated how small she always made me feel.

Satisfied, she looked away from me and gave Quade an affectionate smile before greeting him with a hug that she'd *never* give me.

Not once did it ever cross her mind that it was *their* damn fault. They were the ones crowding *me*—not the other way around. They obviously found the entire exchange amusing too, because they both had irritating smirks on their faces and refused to move an inch, continuing to bookend me

on either side.

Swallowing down all the angry retorts I wanted to say, I backed further away, leaving them in front of me. As soon as my mother deemed that I was far enough away from everyone, she disregarded me completely and started to visit with Quade and Render.

“Quade, you did wonderful work on that elemental presentation for the council. Everyone is still talking about it,” she said.

“I had an excellent teacher,” Quade replied with an easy, bright smile before adjusting the gray tie that complimented his perfectly tailored suit on his perfectly elemental body.

My mother beamed. She fucking *beamed* at him like he was the best thing to ever come into existence. Like she wished that *he* was her child instead of me. There was a painfully obvious parental pride in her eyes that I would never be able to unsee.

I shouldn’t care, I kept telling myself. I shouldn’t care anymore. It had been almost ten years since she’d started despising me, so this was nothing new. Except no matter how many times I tried to convince myself not to care, there was still a rotten seed in my gut that sprouted with more tangled envy and thorned spite every time I was denied what every child had a right to—a mother’s love.

“Are we still on for lunch tomorrow?” my mother asked him. “We should go over that meeting and get those responses sent to the newspapers.”

Quade nodded. “Of course. I look forward to it.”

What a suck up.

My mother turned her attention on Render with noticeably less warmth. “Mr. Tillson,” she greeted with false politeness. “I trust you had no difficulties in escorting my daughter?”

“Of course not,” he replied, expressionless.

My mother nodded. She knew the importance of working with the other supers on the council, but there was still prejudice between the races. Just because they willingly worked together didn’t mean they had to like it. The council was meant to bring the different supernaturals together, but it usually just turned wars into political games.

“Thank you for collecting her.” She gave him a half smile, and it made me sink into a deeper sense of self-loathing. She sent someone she didn’t even like—let alone trust—to pick me up. What did that say about how she felt about me?

“Of course, Mrs. Cainson. I find the primitive human communities amusing. Besides, we’re meant to work together. Or at least that’s what they keep telling us at Thibault,” Render replied slyly. “The trip had its entertaining moments,” he added, casting a glance at me. I bet he was reciting my diary in his mind, associating all the private grievances I had about my mother while sneering at me. There wasn’t an ounce of pity in his gaze.

“Yes, well. We do what we must. Shall we go in?” my mother asked while turning away, not even giving him an opportunity to answer. She did that in every aspect of her life now. She bulldozed through decisions in order to give herself back a semblance of the control and power that I’d taken away from her.

The guys nodded and followed after her up the steps to the building. She walked with her shoulders rolled back, eyes directly ahead, overcompensating for her powerless state with a rigid stance and confident gait. I’d never once seen her falter in her heels or let her hair down—metaphorically or literally. She had to work twice as hard to earn the respect of her peers instead of being cast out into the human world, and it was all my fault.

My mother stepped aside, allowing Quade to open the glass door for her. Of course, the door-holding was only reserved for her, because he went in right after. Render swung the door open for himself and....then the door promptly shut in my face.

Fucking vampires with their sexy smirks, deadly flashing, and piss-poor manners.

I yanked open the door and took in the shiny, dark walls as I passed through inside. Solid round columns lined the entrance where two burly security guards stood in black suits with dark shades on, hiding the direction of their gazes. They were both vampires, based on their chiseled beauty and clear skin.

The security man closest to me snorted under his breath at my near face plant with the door, and my cheeks burned with embarrassment. “Vampires have terrible manners,” I grumbled as I hurried past.

I was immediately confronted with Render’s mischievous grin. The asshole wanted me to say something to him, but I refused to give him the satisfaction, so instead, I simply brushed by him, my amulet brightening at the slight touch. I didn’t like my powers, but sometimes, people needed a polite reminder that I was dangerous.

My feet echoed on the marble steps in the vast building as I looked around. Unlike the rest of the city, this had more of a historical design. The ceilings were tall and arched in a dome-like shape, with murals of naked renaissance models with bloodied veins.

“Devicka. Check in first.”

My mother’s words hit my back and made my shoulders tense up. As if I didn’t know the protocol. As if she hadn’t reminded me, embarrassingly so, *every* single time I’d been summoned. Aside from actually using my powers, this was always my least favorite part.

My mother and Quade were already moving on, talking about whatever other elemental business they had and making their way to the private elevators while I made my way to the large, marble check-in desk.

I stepped up to it, my head barely reaching over the top. The woman manning the desk was young and pretty with dark hair and round cheeks. She wore a headset and was directing phone calls in rapid-fire procession with a smile plastered on her friendly face.

“Hello, how may I help you?” she asked in a cheery voice while tilting her head to the side like some kind of robot. I had a feeling her smile would be wiped clear from her face the moment she realized who—or more importantly what—I was.

“Umm, hi. I was summoned to the council meeting,” I replied clumsily.

She nodded briskly and started typing on her computer. “Name?”

I cleared my throat so that I could speak as quietly as possible. I didn’t want all the other people nearby to hear me. “Devicka Cainson.”

My quiet voice might as well have been a scream. Everyone stopped what they were doing. The other staff at the desk looked over at me, gaping. Supes in the room stopped in their tracks to openly gawk at me. Somewhere, a baby even cried and the phones stopped ringing. I felt fire heat my cheeks as the girl continued to stare at me; her customer service face had completely disappeared, and now all I saw was fear. Second time in less than ten minutes. Unfortunately, it wasn’t even a record.

“Can you just put out the announcement already?” I hissed between my teeth while looking side to side. I pulled at the collar of my shirt as sweat dripped down my spine from the nerves.

She blinked rapidly, all traces of her smile gone. Her face slipped into a horrified expression, and I watched as even her lips seemed to pale. With wide eyes and shaking fingers, she typed on the computer and pressed the

buttons on her phone. Within seconds, a voice came over the speakers. "Attention: The Void is present. Please stay in your designated areas. If you wish to depart, please let the nearest security personnel know, and they can escort you. Do not engage with the Void and please keep calm."

The voice rang in my ears and bounced off the walls. Everyone stared at me, but when I turned to look, they scurried away like their feet were on fire. There were no friendly smiles or even bored disinterest. These people were terrified of me.

Four security guards came forward to flank me. *Four* huge, burly men that towered over me and trapped me between them. Each of them wore full, black body suits and armor. With masks covering their features, all I could see was the steely determination in their eyes as they grunted for me to move. They were careful not to touch me as I was herded away toward the elevators, and the rest of the people in the main hallway continued to stare. I hated it. I wished I could've turn invisible and disappeared.

When we reached the elevator, I was shocked to see Render there, waiting. "I can escort her," he said, his voice stern but calm. Despite everyone else shaking in their fucking vampire boots at the idea of being close to me, he wasn't bothered. Still, I kind of preferred the weapon-wielding guards over the asshole vamp.

The guards gave each other questioning looks, but they didn't argue with him. I wasn't sure if it was because he had a lot of sway here, or if they wanted any excuse to get the fuck away from me. I *also* wasn't sure which scenario was better.

"Come along, Void. People are waiting," he said with a mean grin, flashing me his fangs as he spun around into the elevator. I got in behind him, and the guards watched through the clear glass as we ascended several stories. When we got out, Render wasted no time walking out and heading toward a large, ornate door at the end of a polished hallway. He seemed calm, but his damn hand was running through his dark hair again, giving his unease away.

"Aren't you worried I'll steal your powers?" I asked him.

Render paused at the door to look at me. His smirk had broken out into a full-grown grin now. I stopped a few feet away, my mother's warning still fresh in my mind. "No," he began, turning around to come back to where I stood. "I think you've got the world right where you want it. You've convinced everyone that you're this terrifying thing that could steal powers at

a moment's notice, but I think that's bullshit. I think you're a weak girl who can't control her own form of bloodlust," he said, leaning in close to intimidate me. "Maybe it's *you* who needs to be put down," he said, making me swallow down a dose of fear. "I know the truth, Void," he added quietly, watching my every reaction, from the way I gnawed on my lip to how fast I blinked.

I tilted my chin to stare him in the eye, forcing the Void down, even though bile was rising in my throat. "And what is the truth, vamp?" I asked, feeling daring as I met his stare head-on. I didn't like the intimidation game he played. I'd spent my entire life being feared and avoided, and it was jarring to be around Render and Quade, who kept pushing the boundaries.

"The truth is," Render began, "*you're* more afraid of you than anyone else is."

He then spun on his heel and yanked open the heavy door, guiding me inside the large courtroom while acid churned in my stomach. The sad thing was, he was absolutely right. No one was more scared of what I was capable of than I.

Chapter 3



JUDGE BRAXTON WAS A WILLOWY MAN. His sleek black hair looked spelled to appear thicker, and his thin frame was swallowed up by the large golden chair he was sitting in. The high collar on his shirt covered his short neck, and his sunken in eyes were emotionless as he took me in.

Looking around, I could sense the magic in the air. The arena—I mean *courtroom*—was obviously spelled to block spectators from my Void. I could see the sheen of a shield all around the room, separating the stadium-style bench seats above from the lower area where I stood. The council members sat behind Judge Braxton in their own box seats, looking down at me with clear distaste, while the people in the audience had the wide eyes of fear.

Render still stood by my side, staring around at all the terrified supes in amusement, like their fear wasn't warranted. He'd obviously never seen me in action. He adjusted the collar on his black shirt before checking the time on his Rolex like he didn't have a care in the world. *Just you wait, vamp. I'll show you how terrifying I can be.* He'd think twice before flashing me again.

I looked off to the left where Mother and Quade were in the council box, chit-chatting like a couple of women at Saturday brunch. All they needed was champagne and gossip.

"Void, so glad you could finally make it," Judge Braxton said in a nasal voice, clearly displeased at having been kept waiting.

"Sorry," I drawled. "Next time, you should call my secretary. Maybe then I can fit these fun little executions into my schedule," I retorted while adjusting my white Vneck, which was now sticking to my skin from the sweltering beads of nervous sweat dripping down my spine.

I kept my voice calm and collected, but on the inside, I wanted to squirm and make a break for it. I could feel everyone's disapproving eyes on my

back, like a heavy weight pressing me down into the floor. In the human community, I was used to people ignoring me, but here, all I got was outright hostility. Shifting in my combat boots, I tried not to think about what was about to happen. Maybe if I could keep my cool, I'd survive this—maybe I could make sure the feral vamp could survive this.

"This is *not* an execution," Judge Braxton said, leaning forward in his seat with his yellowed teeth bared. His arms were like toothpicks as they rested on his thighs, and his oversized button up shirt nearly drowned him.

"You remember what happened last time you called me here to use my Void powers? That shifter nearly died," I replied.

To my right, a man with shoulder-length blond hair stood up and stormed out of the courtroom. It seemed I wasn't the only one disturbed by how close of a call that had been.

"We don't take kindly to threats, Void." Judge Braxton replied.

Render stiffened beside me, and I could've sworn he was rolling his eyes at Judge Braxton, but I couldn't be sure from my vantage point.

I shook my head. "I'm not threatening you; I'm warning you that I don't have control over this. The longer I go without feeding, the more volatile my Void is. It's been six months since you've summoned me, and I'm not sure I'll be able to just take her vampirism away," I admitted honestly.

Murmurs erupted around me as men and women started to get up and leave the courtroom. More than half of the audience cleared out within seconds. Despite the spelled barrier, they didn't want to risk getting caught in the Void, and I didn't blame them. Supernaturals built their lives around their powers. It was so closely wrapped up in their identity. Taking their powers from them was viewed as a fate worse than death.

Judge Braxton continued to stare at me in that cold, expressionless way of his. His tapping finger against the armrest of his chair was his only indication that I was irritating him. I wasn't purposely trying to be difficult. I was trying to save this poor woman's life. I held my ground on the bottom platform, my feet planted firmly on the dark marble.

"We don't have any other options. This was the verdict decided by the council. For your sake, I hope you control yourself, Miss Cainson. Murdering another supe is punishable by death."

I clenched my teeth together. It wouldn't be my fault if my Void went out of control, but I knew that didn't matter. Braxton had been looking for an excuse to throw me in prison for years. He wanted me to be contained, to take

away what small freedoms I had so that he could use me as needed and then put me away again.

As much as prison terrified me, I refused to look weak. If he thought threatening me with a death sentence could stop the Void, he was dead wrong. I couldn't stop it. The Void was uncontrollable. It was volatile and deadly. It was a part of me but separate at the same time.

The last time I took off my amulet and let the beast free, it was like every bad thought came flooding out of me. Its toxic need wrapped around the neck of the shifter, forcing him to be severed from his wolf. My Void *squeezed* it out of him like a vice, drank him as dry as a newly made vampire sucks out the blood of his victims.

I always felt helpless to the gaping hunger of nothingness. The second my Void got a taste of the power it needed to feed on, it just wanted more and more and more. My emotions dulled when the Void took over, and I was put in the passenger seat of my own life. My humanity was shoved into a tiny box where rational thought and feelings couldn't reach me. The Void was all my rage bottled up into a deadly black hole.

I didn't want to be a killer though. I'd never wanted that. I'd never wanted to be a Void who stole powers from people. If I ended this woman's life today on accident, I'd be so distraught that I'd probably welcome prison and my own death sentence. I didn't want blood on my hands. Especially from a vampire who'd simply gotten sick.

"You will do the job that we have summoned you here to do," Judge Braxton commanded.

"Of course, *sir*," I replied dryly, letting my disapproval show on my face.

Most people kissed Judge Braxton's ass, but being in the human community made me feel less bound to his influence and laws. Behind him, the council members frowned with disapproval. My eyes flicked over the four representatives from each community: elementals, vampires, necromancers, and shifters. There were others in the council box too, some assistants, the council secretary, the treasurer, liaisons from other countries, and my mother.

Judge Braxton had been overseeing the council for decades. His position was meant to be the deciding vote in the event of a tie when council members voted on a decision. I wasn't really in the know when it came to the inner workings of the council, but I'd heard a rumor that Judge Braxton got into power by blackmailing influential people. I wouldn't put it past him. He was

a snake.

“Careful, Void. You are only here by my permission. If I decide that you seem like an agitator, I may need to rethink your current exile. Perhaps you’ve gotten too close to those humans you’ve been living with. Have you forgotten how to treat your council with respect?”

I curled my fingers into my palms, letting my nails dig into my skin. “No, sir.”

He looked down at me smugly. “Good. See that you keep your attitude in check.”

Gods, I hated him.

“Let’s begin,” he said, turning his attention to the council members behind him. “Bring out the vampire.”

Double doors at the other end of the room drew my attention when they suddenly opened, and a screeching sound filled the courthouse. Two men, likely shifters based on their tall stature, started dragging a female vampire out onto the platform. She was thrashing around in chains, arching her back and yanking on her own arms like she’d rip them out of their sockets in an attempt to get away, all while screaming in protest. She looked like she was in her mid-thirties and she was beautiful in a feral sort of way. She had long, black hair that was tangled and matted to her forehead. Her pale, plump lips were framed into a snarl and her blue eyes were looking around wildly at all the people staring down at her. I took a step back, already feeling the urge to flee, but there was a hand on my back, forcing me to keep still.

“Nowhere to run, Void,” Render said in my ear, his menacing voice flashing down my spine as fear made my skin prickle. “I’ll drag you back here screaming if I have to. Do your fucking job.”

Swallowing, I held still, and Render backed away as the shifters continued to drag the vampire forward. Her fangs were bared as she hissed at the shifters holding her firmly in place. They’d drawn their weapons, pressing blades against her throat to try to get her to heel.

“There’s no need to pull weapons on her,” Render seethed.

The guards ignored him, dragging her the rest of the way in and then securing her to the bolted hooks in the ground. When one of the shifters yanked her arm back painfully rough, Render flashed forward and shoved him out of the way. Taking the woman’s arm gently, he finished attaching her chains to the floor, his mouth moving with quiet words of comfort.

I couldn’t hear what he was saying, but it seemed to calm her down some.

I knew that some of the more powerful vampires had the gift of influence and that they could lead their people with short bursts of hypnosis. It never lasted long, but it was good for calming down other vamps. I wished that it had long-term effects because then I wouldn't be forced to strip this poor woman of her powers. It wasn't her fault that she was cursed with bloodlust. It was a nasty disease, claiming a vampire's mind with the overwhelming need to feed, making her forget everything else. I wondered if she had a family, friends, a job...but then I had to push all of that out of my mind. If I let myself think about all of that, I wouldn't be able to get through this.

As soon as the guards and Render stepped away from her, she slumped on the ground. The calming effect Render had put on her wore off in seconds, and she started kicking and screaming, yanking on the chains so hard I was sure she would rip her limbs clean off.

Falling to the floor, she screeched wildly, snapping her teeth and salivating at the scent of warm-blooded supers in the air. She tried to claw at the tile, drag herself past the chains, but it was no use. Whatever magic those chains were infused with was strong.

When she tried to flash forward, the chains stopped her in her tracks, sending her flying back, smacking her head on the floor. Render moved to help her up, but she scratched at his face, drawing blood along his cheek. I flinched at the sheer power in her movements and wondered how I'd possibly get close enough to touch her. Render's lips turned down in unhappiness as he watched her, and the woman started licking at his blood that she'd collected beneath her fingernails. Her tongue was like a serpent, lashing out to get every last drop.

I'd always been fascinated by the way vampires fed. Maybe because it reminded me of my own hunger. They craved blood the way I craved power. Humans believed that vampires were created, but they were actually born. They aged up until about forty and then settled into their immortality. That was another thing I was taking away from her today. Even if she didn't die today, which was a very real possibility, once I took her powers, it meant she'd lose her immortality. She would age like a human and be vulnerable like a human. One day, she would die as a human, too. Just like my mother.

Render took another step back before looking over his shoulder at me. He nodded once before following the shifter guards as they walked off the platform, joining the council members behind the wall of glowing magic. Elementals stood on the north and south ends of the oval-shaped room with

their hands raised up, and in seconds the shield was bolstered with a second layer of magic. They'd learned with past Voids that by combining all the elements, they could effectively repel a Void's magic, but only for short amounts of time. The power block took a massive amount of magic from at least a dozen highly skilled elementals.

"The female vampire has been hereby charged with mass murder as a result of her uncontrollable bloodlust," Judge Braxton intoned, his voice echoing around the room. "She is hereby found guilty, and the council has voted that her vampirism be taken away by force of Void."

By force of Void.

Those words spin in my head until I grew dizzy with it. That was all I was. A punishment.

Everyone was watching me, and I hated that I had an audience. I wished no one was here to witness this poor woman in such a vulnerable state. I wish no one was about to see me feed, proving to them that I was the monster that they thought I was.

The female vampire looked around the room, her screams cutting off the judge's words. Maybe a small part of her knew what was about to happen to her, despite the wild look in her eyes. She scratched at her face, dragging her long nails down her cheeks with a vengeance as her hair stuck to beads of sweat on her forehead. I glanced up at Judge Braxton, but he just looked down at her dispassionately, as one might watch a flailing rat.

Prick.

Once everyone was behind the shield, I took a breath and walked closer to the woman. The closer I got, the more my Void hummed against my amulet. I wanted to make this as painless and as quick as possible. Even though I had a personal rule for not getting to know my victims, I still thought it was important to look her in the eye as I did what I had to do. Guilt had a funny way of creating a routine. I always apologized to my victims. For what I was, for what I'd be stripping from them.

People feared me because their identity was wrapped up in their abilities. From day one, we were made to feel special for being born a supernatural being. We congregated in the groups of our breeds, listened to the histories of our people. Vampirism wasn't just her ability, it was part of her soul. People would rather die than be stripped of what made them who they were. She'd be ostracized, she'd feel confused. Depressed. She wouldn't exist the same way after this. She'd be no more than a human, and she'd hate it.

I knew all of this because I had to watch my mother endure the same fate.

Stopping, I kept far enough away that she couldn't reach me, but as soon as I stopped in front of her, she locked her deadly feral eyes on me, and her fangs started dripping with saliva. "Blood," she moaned while grasping at the air in an attempt to get to me. "Blood."

I swallowed, feeling that sinking sensation in my stomach. "I'm so sorry," I whispered, but I wasn't sure she could hear me over her groans. "I'm so, so sorry," I said, this time louder, making sure everyone in the arena could hear, my voice a booming declaration. Maybe if they saw that I didn't want to do this, they wouldn't hate me so much.

I reached my hands up to the clasp of my necklace and slowly unhooked the chain keeping my power at bay. The amulet fell to the ground and bounced on the tile. As soon as it was off, excruciating hunger barreled through me like lightning striking out of a cloud. I bent over to clutch my stomach, feeling the angry hornet's nest buzzing in my gut. I felt heavy and light all at once. Dizzy and aware. It was like finally feeling free, only to give in to the shackles of the Void. I became an instrument of hunger, a sharp weapon with tunnel vision on my prey.

I couldn't hold it back. The Void burst out of me, filling the entire platform with black smoke. It rushed against the shield, bouncing off of it with a hiss. Then it turned, focusing on the feral vampire at my feet. I took careful steps closer and placed a finger on her cheek. It was a light touch, even though I wanted to mold her body to mine completely, to touch every inch of available skin so that I could feed that much more.

My black clouds swirled around her, and her screeches for blood turned to screams of fear. It started gnawing on her power the second it touched her skin. The female tried to get away, only to crash back down on her knees. Her arms thrust out in the shape of a cross. It seemed fitting—a sacrilegious sacrifice on stage for the world to see.

A single word escaped her lips as the bloodlust fled her body and awareness started to sink in. "No," she cried.

I fleetingly wondered if I could turn off the Void now, if I had taken enough of her power and managed to just steal the bloodlust, without taking her vampirism with it. I dropped my finger and tried to pull the Void back, but I wasn't strong enough to control it now that it had latched on. My amulet lay feet behind me, and I couldn't move.

My mind screamed apologies at her, but my lips wouldn't move. I was

too hungry. My Void kept drinking from her, the cloud pulsing with every swallow. I began to shake with the adrenaline and struggle, every muscle in my body tensing. I didn't want to like it, but *gods*, it felt so good to feed. It was like finally taking a gulp of air after holding my breath for years.

The woman stared up at me, her large eyes wide with terror and pain. It hurt when I took powers. It made them weak as I drained them. More and more of my black smoke surrounded us until that was all I could see. It filled her mouth. It covered her skin. It wrapped around her limbs and neck. It breezed through the strands of her hair. It was mesmerizing, beautiful, *deadly*.

I was so wrapped up in the Void, that I didn't notice the figure moving behind me. But my Void sure as shit did.

It scented the delicious power approaching at my back, and its attention split, wanting to claim that, too. Hands wrapped around my throat, and my body was suddenly yanked back and tackled to the ground. The breath was knocked out of my lungs, and I tried to get away, but the super holding me was too strong. I felt myself grow numb to the violence and pain. The Void was taking over completely, protecting its capsule from the person trying to stop it. I was helpless to hold back the angry smoke that wanted to claim every last drop of power available to it. Like a whip, my smoke lashed out, and I looked up at the shifter straddling me, his hands wrapped around my neck with incredible strength. He probably would've snapped it by now if it weren't for my Void that had wrapped around his arms. I could already feel it sucking in his incredible strength.

I drank deeply, my eyes rolling back in ecstasy as I felt his hands drop from my throat. He collapsed on top of me, and I felt myself smiling at him with famished menace and ravenous greed. The Void was in the driver's seat now.

I watched him through a haze as his snarl faltered and his animalistic eyes dulled. But he was strong, and even as my power drained him, he managed to knock me away when I tried to reach out and touch him. The movement made my head smack against the floor with a hard crack on the back of my skull, and pain lanced through me like knives in my blood. My Void grew even angrier, and it began to pulse faster.

I heard shouting, but the voices were too far away, and a deeper, darker part of me knew that no one would intervene. There was no hope. I'd ruin him.

The male's claws retracted, even as he swiped them across my chest from where he was still pinning me down. In retaliation, my Void rushed at his face. He screamed and grabbed his head in sudden agony as my Void flooded into his mouth, polluting him with my consuming power. It coated his gnashing teeth and poisoned his tongue. It filled every vein, every cell, absorbing his powers. It was *delicious*.

But before my Void could finish, I felt cold fingers wrap around my wrist. I turned my head and saw the vampire woman grabbing me, trying to drag herself forward and pull me away from the shifter. I attempted to shake her off, but the shifter was too heavy, still snarling despite becoming more and more human by the second. I reached up to knock him away, my hand grazing his neck.

And then, something shuffled inside of me at the double contact.

My black smoke was suddenly saturated with blue hues. The all-consuming hunger changed to a sensation that I'd never felt before. It wasn't devouring their powers anymore—this was something else.

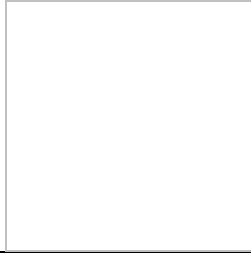
The Void rushed out of me like a shout, so loud that it was all I could hear. My skin lit up like lightning where the three of us touched, and my smoke crackled with electricity. I opened my mouth in a soundless scream, mirroring the faces of the shifter and vampire. Agony coursed through me, so sharp that I was sure I was about to die. There was no way I could survive pain like this, and I knew that they were feeling the same things.

Right before I blacked out, everything stopped. The pain. The sound. The Void's consuming smoke and light. It was just gone.

All three of our bodies slumped against the ground, so still that I wasn't sure any of us were even breathing. My eyes stared straight up, unable to blink. All I could see was the dark stone ceiling above me, the remnants of my smoke curling around the windows as it evaporated into thin air. The darkness in my mind was too seductive, too demanding. I gave in, letting the world go black.

The Void was hungry, so I guess it consumed me, too.

Chapter 4



"I WANT every scholar here *now*. No exceptions. Bring in Doctor Adams, too. I want a full report on my desk. No one leaves here until I say so. I want to make sure everyone in that room keeps quiet. We can't let this get out," Judge Braxton said, his booming voice drawing me out of my sleep. It felt like each syllable was a jackknife against my skull.

"It's too late for that; people are already talking. The elementals have petitioned a claim for her and want her on their compound," an unfamiliar voice replied to my left.

I was on a stiff cushion, but I couldn't bring myself to open my eyes yet. Every bone in my body ached. Every tendon felt stretched thin like a rubber band about to snap.

"Send in another healer!" Judge Braxton ordered, and I heard feet scurrying.

"You've already lost three healers to the Void, trying to revive her," my mother replied. *She was here?* "The Void just sucks up their abilities. She probably just needs rest."

I nuzzled deeper into the pillow with a moan, and all the commotion around me went silent. "Dev?" I felt my mother's cold hand on my forehead. My clammy skin stuck to hers. "Dev, are you awake?"

I peeled open my eyes and winced at the bright light. "Mother?" I asked, my voice cracking.

"Get her water, and turn off the lights," Judge Braxton boomed as I tried to lick my lips with a sandpaper tongue. Why was he so determined to make sure I was okay? Wasn't he the one threatening me with a death sentence just a little while ago?

A cool glass was pressed to my lips, and I greedily sucked up the water,

wincing when it hit my dry throat. Memories slammed into me in an instant. The vampire woman. The shifter. The black smoke that suddenly turned blue. The pain. I winced at the memory, my body feeling oddly tender.

“Is the vampire okay?” I asked while trying to sit up. A strong hand landed on my shoulder, pushing me back down to a lying position. “Oh gods, did I kill her?” Hot tears began flowing down my cheeks as bile filled my mouth. I turned to face my mother. “I didn’t mean to. I warned you this would happen.”

A calm voice beside me broke through the chaos. “She’s alive. Better than ever, actually.” I turned to look at who was speaking, my mouth opened in shock at Render. His lips were parted in awe as he stared at me.

Awe? What the fuck was happening?

“What?” My voice was gravelly with a tender rawness in my throat that made me wince.

“Your Void power. You—”

“Enough,” Judge Braxton cut him off.

Render’s expression darkened as his eyes snapped over to the judge.

I looked around at the room I was in. It looked like the judge’s chambers, with a desk, bookshelves, and a guard at the back. I was lying on a stiff couch that smelled like upholstery cleaner and tobacco. When I tried to sit up again, my mother helped me by stuffing a pillow behind my back. The motion took me by such surprise that all I could do was gape at her. A strained smile touched her pale pink lips, but it was the most pleasant expression she’d given me in *years*.

“What’s going on?” I asked warily.

I pressed a palm to my pounding temple, thankful that they’d turned the lights off. I could still smell the acrid, sharp scent of my Void smoke, but it was thankfully contained again. Judge Braxton, my mother, and Render were crowded around me, watching me with indecipherable expressions.

“You successfully cured the female vampire of her bloodlust,” Judge Braxton told me.

A relieved sigh blew out of me as I looked between the three of them. I was missing something, something huge, but I had no idea what it was. “...Okay. That’s good, right?”

“Very good,” the judge nodded.

“Oh for fuck’s sake, tell her,” Render snapped.

“Mind your place, vampire,” Judge Braxton snapped. “You may be your

people's paragon, but you are still under my authority."

"He's right, Edwin. She has to know," my mother said, surprising me.

"Know *what*?" I tried to stand, but I fell right back on my ass, and my dizziness returned.

Judge Braxton shot a look over his shoulder at the guard. "Get out."

The guard didn't hesitate. He swept out of the room, leaving the four of us alone. When the door shut, the judge looked back at me. "Your Void powers didn't take the powers from the vampire and the shifter."

I blinked at him, not understanding. "What do you mean? You just told me I cured her of bloodlust."

"You did," he nodded. "Because she's not a vampire anymore. But she's not a human, either."

My blonde brows pulled together. He wasn't making any sense. I'd fed from her. I'd fed from them both, there was no doubt about that. "Then what..."

"She's a shifter now. And the male shifter who attacked you? He's now a vampire."

I heard his words, but it was like they wouldn't register. I had to go over them again and again in my head. I shot to my feet, despite my dizziness and positioned myself behind the lounge, suddenly needing space to think. "You're saying...you're saying that I..."

Judge Braxton nodded with a hungry gleam in his eye. "Yes, Miss Cainson. Your Void ability switched their powers."

I breathed out a puff of air, forcing my pale, blonde hair to swirl around my face as I tried to steady myself. *I switched their powers?* "Does this mean the shifter now has bloodlust?" I asked while looking around the room. Everyone's expression remained neutral.

"It's hard to say. It's like he's a new vampire. We won't know until he's properly fed if it's just normal newborn hunger or bloodlust. Same with the vampire, she's struggling to control her wolf," Judge Braxton explained with a disapproving frown.

Another searing pain rocked through my skull, and I grabbed my head to try and dull the ache. "Fuck, why does everything hurt?" I groaned.

Another glass of water was put in front of my face, and I looked up at Render in shock. He was helping me. *Me*. The Void who wasn't good enough for the dirt beneath his shoe.

"If that's holy water you're trying to poison me with, I'm sorry to inform

you that I'm not affected by it," I said dryly while eyeing him with suspicion. It was like I'd woken up in an alternate universe where people actually cared about me.

"Drink the damn water, Void. Using your powers drained you, and you need to hydrate," he sneered. Ah, there was the asshole I knew and hated.

I grabbed it from his outstretched hand, sloshing water over the rim and onto my clothes. I took a long sip before turning my attention back to my—*doting?*—mother. "So what now?"

Everyone looked at one another as if daring someone to speak first. "Devicka, this *changes* things," Mother said, looking at me with a strange expression on her face. "Now that you're able to transfer powers, Judge Braxton wants to learn more about your abilities. This is really good for our family—for you."

I looked at Judge Braxton and suddenly saw a multitude of scenarios flooding his expression. I was a shiny new toy that he wanted to play with. As if it weren't bad enough before, now he saw the chance that I could take powers away and give them to someone else. He was already scheming—I could see it in his beady eyes.

Fuck. That.

I shook my head. "I have no idea what I did in there. No idea how to control it. The Void has a mind of its own; I'm just a vessel. That should've proved it to you," I argued.

"Which is why we'll train you."

"How?" I gaped. The council had *never* been open to allowing me any sort of training when it came to my power. They always said it was too dangerous for me to use it at all, unless under their strict supervision and direction.

"We'll send you to Thibault Academy," Judge Braxton said simply.

My mouth dropped open in shock. I couldn't believe this. He wanted to send me to the academy? My brain couldn't wrap around it. I shook my head. "Why was that shifter even intervening in the first place? Why did he cross through the barrier?"

"He was involved romantically with the vampire," Judge Braxton answered. "He intervened because he was hoping you could just take the bloodlust from her, not all of her powers. He also was not...prepared to deal with the level of pain it would cause her. He had impersonated one of our real guards and snuck in."

“Oh.” The fact that it had been her lover defending her made me feel like such a...villain. He’d only been trying to protect the person he loved from a monster.

I looked down at my chest where the shifter had sliced my skin, noting the three long lines there, covered with dried blood and partially sliced through my t-shirt. Why was I always the villain, when all I ever tried to be was the hero?

“We need to research your abilities, see what you’re fully capable of. Then the council can decide what to do with you. Until then, I want you to stay here.”

I was about to open my mouth in protest when the door to his office suddenly slammed open. I flinched at the loud noise and gaped over at the man rushing into the room. He had shoulder-length blond hair like a mane and vibrant green eyes that were shrouded in fury.

“Void!” he roared, surging forward.

Hair prickled along his arms, his shifter animal trying to come out. I tried to scramble away from him, but I was too slow. Within seconds, he had me by the neck and was lifting me off the ground.

I thrashed frantically, trying to get him to let me go, but his hold on me was too firm. His claws dug into my skin, and my windpipe was being crushed with his hold.

“You fucking *ruined* him!” he screamed in my face.

My feet were clear off the floor, so I tried to kick him, but his hips trapped mine before I could connect with his groin or shins. At his level of fury, it probably wouldn’t have mattered anyway. Shifters were strong, but this guy? I could feel the power rolling off of him like water rushing out of a broken dam.

Guards came spilling in the room, but I was losing consciousness fast, black dots littering my vision.

Three guards tried to grab him from behind, but he simply reached back with one hugely muscled arm and knocked them back, sending them flying backward. His strength was above and beyond any shifter I’ve ever heard of. He was massive, and his muscles were rippling, threatening to shift into whatever animal was kept beneath his skin. My amulet lay heavy around my neck, pulsing with his power. My Void was already hungry again—starving even—and this shifter’s power was like smelling freshly baked bread. Totally mouthwatering.

“You turned him into a vampire! Give him back his animal!” he snarled at me, while I struggled to remain conscious.

A blur rushed near me, and then the angry shifter was tossed aside, letting go of me in the process. I fell to my knees hard, my bones slamming against the tile and making me cry out in pain. I hacked and coughed, my breath coming down my throat in painful pulls.

Mother reached down and tugged me up, keeping an arm wrapped around my arms so I wouldn’t fall again. Although it was shocking to have her touch me after years of no affection, I was too busy staring at the angry face-off happening between the shifter and vampire. Render had his fangs bared and was holding the shifter down by his throat, snarling at the powerful shifter like he wanted to rip out his throat.

“Enough!” Judge Braxton shouted, but it did nothing to tame the feral men. The shifter knocked away Render’s hold and then lunged at him, punching him in the jaw before trying to get around him and back to me. It was obvious that this standoff wasn’t going to end well. I quickly unclasped my necklace, letting my amulet fall to the floor. Smoke immediately started to fill the room, and I held my hands up, causing everyone to freeze.

“Stop fighting!” I yelled, though my voice was hoarse and painful. When the shifter turned toward me again, I panicked. “Stay back!”

My smoke billowed out more, and the shifter froze, his green eyes flicking down to the way my hands were shaking. The Void wasn’t as powerful as before, but it could always eat, and it wanted a piece of him. “I don’t want to use this, but I suggest you calm the fuck down,” I ordered. “If you try to come at me, I *will* take your power.”

The shifter straightened up, forcing his shift down like he wanted to tuck away his power where I couldn’t find it. Too bad it didn’t work like that. Like an idiotic asshole, he snarled, stepping toward me despite the smoke that was inching closer to him.

“Change him back, or I’ll kill you,” he snarled.

“I can’t!”

“Wrong answer.”

He lunged for me again, but my Void was faster.

It barreled out of me, and then the Void was curling around his limbs, sucking his power and tempting me to take more. It spread from the shifter to Render, and then all the guards were fleeing the room with panicked shouts, and Braxton was backing up into the corner, staring with wide-eyed fear.

“Put the damn amulet back on,” Render said, grimacing when my smoke started licking up his legs.

“No. Not until I know no one is going to attack anyone else,” I said shakily.

The shifter’s eyes pulsed with pure, wild hate as he watched me. Render was frozen, staring down at the Void’s smoke with revulsion. My smoke traveled around their feet, slipping up their legs and chests, testing the power they gave off. The shifter was just as impressive as Render and Quade.

Judge Braxton was nothing to my Void—not with Render and the shifter present. Braxton’s power was like a hunk of raw, soggy cabbage in comparison to a five-star meal of the others. My mother wasn’t in any danger since she had no power that I hadn’t already devoured. When it curled itself away from her, she flinched, like a painful reminder that I’d already taken everything away from her.

My Void continued to drink from them, and I gritted my teeth. Was this stubborn asshole actually going to let me drain him dry because he was too prideful to back off?

My resolve was wavering, and I was just about to back off when he *finally* relented. “Fine,” he gritted out, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

I scrambled to my knees, my hands skimming over the floor, trying to see through the smoke where I’d dropped my necklace. When my hand finally brushed up against it, I snatched it up and pulled the chain over my head. The smoke immediately evaporated into me, and I gasped at the influx.

Everyone stared at me as I tried in vain to catch my breath, their eyes in varying expressions. Hate. Wariness. Fear.

“Gritt, explain yourself,” Judge Braxton demanded, coming forward to stand in front of the blond shifter.

Gritt was eyeing my amulet like it was a loaded gun. “She has to answer for her crimes, according to shifter law. She stripped my brother of his wolf,” he said, and my stomach dropped.

His *brother*? No wonder he’d attacked me.

“I didn’t mean to,” I told him, crossing my arms and resisting the urge to touch my sore neck. “He attacked me. What does shifter law say about defending yourself? He crossed over the barrier. He should be thankful to be alive.”

I felt Mother drop her hand on my shoulder, gripping tightly as if to wordlessly warn me to rein in my temper.

“He was defending his mate,” Gritt...well, gritted. He was an embodiment of his namesake. Rough and rugged. Determined and strong.

“You and I both know that he should be tried for interfering in council proceedings,” Judge Braxton intervened. “I suggest you leave this room before I strip you of your paragon status at Thibault Academy.”

“And what about my brother?” Gritt demanded. “What will you do for him? He lost his animal! To a shifter, that’s worse than death. Our animals are a part of us.”

“I was developing a plan before you stormed in here,” Judge Braxton fired back. “We’re working on understanding her new powers. We will try to get your brother’s animal back, but in the meantime, *try* not to piss off the vampire community. You have to work alongside each other,” he said, looking between him and Render.

Gritt put his eyes back on me, flicking down once only to give my amulet another passing glance. Then he turned on his heel, shoving past Render, and stormed out of the room. I slumped slightly as soon as he was gone, letting my hand trail over the spot on my neck where his claws had cut into me.

I didn’t even get to catch a breath for longer than a moment, because Judge Braxton was already barking for the guards to get back inside, issuing orders to them. “Get a car. I want her at a portal to take her to the academy within the hour. And get the headmaster on the phone. We’ll need to bring in Selik on this,” he said, casting me a cursory glance.

“Banner Selik?” my mother shook her head. “The headmaster would never allow it.”

“Headmaster Torne has no choice,” the judge snapped before looking back to one of his guards. “Make the call.”

“Yes, Judge.”

The guard walked out, and I blew out a puff of breath. Everything was happening too fast, but it was all out of my control. Once again, other people were determining my life because of my powers. I forced myself to drop my hand from the punctures Gritt had left behind, rubbing the wet blood against my fingertips. Render’s eyes zeroed in on the movement, and I watched his throat bob.

“I’ll escort her there,” Render said to the judge, without looking away from me. I had a feeling he wanted me to stick around for more than just the blood dripping from my neck.

“I will too.”

We both turned as Quade strode into the room, looking annoyingly pompous.

"I'm not going anywhere with either of you," I said, shaking my head. "If you're so worried about others learning about me, why not send me back to Coxcomb's while you figure it out?"

Judge Braxton tugged at the hairs on his chin, shaking his head. "Out of the question. We need to harness this new power of yours and get you trained immediately. That can't be done hiding away with *humans*." He said the last word like it was something dirty. "You two are due to return to the academy anyway," he said, looking at Render and Quade. "You'll both escort Miss Cainson."

"But—"

My words were cut off when my mother and the judge turned away and began talking quietly amongst themselves as if I wasn't even there anymore. I swallowed my argument, and Quade raised his arm, motioning toward the door. "Pretty sure that was your dismissal," he said.

My shoulders slumped. There was no use trying to say anything. That rare attention that my mother had given me wasn't really for *me*. It was for this newfound edge to my power. I walked out the door and into the hallway, feeling both Render and Quade following a step behind me. My life suddenly felt derailed, the train traveling way too fast and due to wreck any second.

"Cheer up, Devicka," Quade said smoothly. "You've always wanted to go to Thibault. Now you are." His bright teeth looked menacing, despite his cheeky grin.

Not like this, I wanted to say. I didn't want to be accepted into Thibault like this—as another pull of a puppet string.

I hadn't even been given the time to sort through the shock of what I'd done, and they were already shipping me off. I didn't even know if I could do it again, because I didn't understand how I'd done it in the first place.

"I don't need you to babysit me," I said to them over my shoulder. I was feeling weak, and now my neck hurt like a bitch. Blood was still dribbling from the shifter's punctures on my neck, even though the Void was healing me. I lifted my hand up again, trying to staunch the bleeding, but I managed to pull the skin, making it worse.

Render cursed behind me. "*Fuck*."

Just as I was about to turn the corner in the hall, strong hands grabbed hold of my arms, and Render shoved me against the wall. No sooner had my

already sore head smacked against it than Render's mouth was at my neck, lapping up the droplets of blood on my neck. His tongue was hot and wet, and when he closed his lips over the wound and sucked, something happened to my body. Sparks of pleasure went down my limbs and settled in my core, and a moan slipped from my mouth, unbidden. If he heard it, he didn't say anything. His teeth scratched at the puncture, heightening the entire experience. I felt a hot desire pool between my legs, and I wrapped my hands around his back before digging my nails into him.

Fuck. Why did this feel so damn good?

I snapped open my eyes, horrified that I'd just stood there, moaning and melting against him like some human blood tramp. I shoved at his chest, my cheeks flaming with arousal and embarrassment.

His mouth pulled back, but instead of moving away, his soft tongue danced along my skin, his teeth scratching my sensitive neck as he moved. I could feel him *everywhere*, and it made my entire body buzz with need. Each flick of his tongue along my pulse had me whimpering for more, and he smiled against my neck like he enjoyed making me into this puddle of lust.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I tried to keep my embarrassingly erratic breathing under control, but I knew he could hear it anyway. The wound sealed closed within a matter seconds from his healing saliva, and then he pulled away, licking his lips to get the last remnants of my blood.

His steely eyes were locked on me, and it was then that I realized I was still clutching his back. We were so close. So *dangerously* close. But he was a vampire. He hated me. And I had no business liking anything about what he'd just done. So why did I want him to do it again?

Each hurried breath I took had my breasts pushing against his chest, my pebbled nipples seeking friction from the movement. Unraveling myself, I dropped my hold from his back and pressed my fingers onto the tender spot of my neck. My fingers came away wet with his saliva, and for some reason, even that seemed erotic.

But then I saw Quade's judgmental eyes behind Render, and red flushed into my cheeks. I needed to get a fucking grip.

I put my hands up and shoved at Render's chest, making him take a step back. "Don't touch me again without my permission," I rasped, though the demand came out more huskily than I intended.

The hungry look hadn't left his expression, but I saw him try to rein it in with a nonchalant shrug. "You were bleeding. Did you really want to walk

around, passing gods knows how many vampires? You could've had a dozen of my kind latched onto you within minutes."

"Or maybe that's just your excuse for your own lack of restraint," I retorted. "Maybe you actually *want* my Void blood."

"The only thing I want is answers," he replied, his face growing stony. "You and I are still enemies, Void. And you know what they say about enemies, don't you?"

I swallowed deeply, fear coursing through my veins at his imposing stance.

"I can help with this one, vamp," Quade interrupted with a sly smile as he stepped closer, sandwiching me between them. "Keep your friends close," he said, leaning in to whisper in my ear, "and your enemies *closer*."

Chapter 5



THE PORTAL TOOK us to Thibault Academy, spitting us out into the lawn at the front of the old building. It was late morning by now, and my eyes burned from having been awake for so damn long. I was completely depleted. Letting my Void out twice had taken a lot out of me, and this new twist to my powers had drained me even more. Aside from that, I'd been without sleep or food for way too long, especially after such an emotionally stressful ordeal. All I wanted was a bed and to be alone, but I rarely got what I wanted.

"Classes will have already begun for the day," Quade said, running a hand over his short dark buzzcut. "I'll bring you to the headmaster so that he can get you a room."

"We will bring her to the headmaster," Render cut in. "Come on, Void. We don't have all day."

I had no choice but to follow them across the perfectly manicured lawn and up the brick steps of the academy. The crest was displayed proudly above the huge double doors, carved in wood and painted to represent the four main supernatural races: fangs for vamps, pawprints for shifters, fire for elementals, and a skull and crossbones for necromancers. Some other supers attended too, like healers, but the smaller breeds weren't as common. Only the most promising supers were accepted at Thibault, and everyone who graduated from here was almost sure to either work as political leaders or another auspicious branch of power in our world.

The doors opened, and we walked inside without fanfare. For a normal enrollment in the fall, there would've been instructors here to meet the new students. There would've been a welcome banquet and rosters drawn up. There would've been a new student breakfast with the headmaster on the

lawn. The older students would have put on a demonstration to display their skills.

I knew all of this because, when I was little, I'd had all of Thibault's brochures stuffed under my mattress. I used to look at them with excitement, knowing that when I turned fifteen, I'd be enrolled, and I'd follow in my mother's footsteps.

I was three years late and missing the right powers, but I was finally here.

"Hurry up, Void," Render said again.

"She was always slow," Quade put in.

I was here—and surrounded by assholes.

They strode ahead of me, past the impressive foyer. I felt like I had every detail of the school memorized, but seeing it in real life was incredible. The maroon drapes, the portrait of the academy building painted on the entrance, expensive paneling, and marble floors. "Come on, Void. You can gawk later." Quade said, walking backward while staring at me. He'd conjured a fireball and was tossing it between his hands and bouncing it off his foot like it was a damn hacky sack. He was always such a fucking show off.

My feet dragged, and I gritted through the exhaustion as they led me to a large set of stairs at least three floors high. I stood at the bottom step and grimaced.

"You look like you're about to pass out," Quade observed from a few steps up, and if I weren't currently questioning my sanity, I'd say he had a look of concern on his handsome face. Clearly, I was delusional.

"Yeah, well, you try unleashing powers you aren't ever allowed to use and then doing the impossible on an empty stomach with little to no sleep," I bit back before wavering, my words slightly slurred. "Then try using powers you didn't even know you *had* in a roomful of people who *hate* you. And then get attacked for doing said job. You do all of that, and let's see how *you* feel." I didn't want to look weak, but these damn spiral stairs just might be the straw that breaks my back.

I took the first step, my whole body feeling heavy and sore. It might as well have been a damn mountain I was scaling.

Render sighed. "Do I have to do everything?" he moaned before flashing beside me and picking me up. I didn't even argue. Just clutched his broad shoulders like a damn damsel in distress and let him carry me up. I could go back to thinking he was a scary asshole tomorrow *after* I had the chance to recover. For now, I was just grateful that I didn't have to take the stairs

myself, even if flashing did make me want to vomit all over Render's polished dress shoes.

Much to my chagrin, Render flashed me in front of a door clearly marked "Headmaster" on a plaque to the side. It was quieter up here, and there was a carpeted runner that trailed along the long hallway in the school colors of red and gold.

I just wanted a fucking nap first, was that too much to ask?

My body swayed slightly when he set me down, and my stomach coiled inside of me like it wanted to strike out and spray me with venom. I hated flashing, but right now, I was pretty sure I would've hated those stairs more. "I'm not sure if you made things better or worse," I gasped while we waited for Quade to catch up.

Render rolled his eyes. "I'm not trying to make things better, Void. I'm just impatient for how damn slow you were moving."

I made sure I was steady on my feet before reaching up to wipe away the sweat that had gathered on the back of my neck. I was nervous, sick, and exhausted. And now I had to meet the headmaster of the most prestigious school for supernaturals in the entire country. Quade jogged up to us and gave me a quick once over, lifting his flaming fingers up to inspect my pale face.

"You look like hell, Void," he said with a dark chuckle.

"Right back at you, asswipe," I replied. Lie. He looked so good I was tempted to puke on *his* shoes instead, just to lower him a notch.

"You and I both know that's not true," Quade retorted.

Ignoring him, I took a deep breath and tried to settle my nerves for my meeting with the headmaster. But before I was ready, Render raised his knuckles and rapped against the door. I shot him a look. "I wasn't ready," I said between my teeth.

He shrugged and shoved his hands in his pockets. "Don't care. I have things to do."

Before I could open my mouth to tell him off, the door swung open and Headmaster Torne stood there in all his imposing stature. Sleek gray hair, dark eyes, and dressed in an all-black suit, he radiated so much power that my amulet started to buzz again. I sucked in a surprised breath, nervous about seeing one of my idols in the flesh. Some girls had posters of boy bands tacked to their wall, but I'd had a portrait of Headmaster Torne framed on my nightstand. He was a legend. One of the strongest elementals in existence. He

would've easily been voted on as the council judge since he was so well liked in the community, but he preferred to run the school.

"Miss Cainson, come in and have a seat," he said while looking down his pointed nose at me. The distaste on his face was immediate and thorough.

Another supe that hated me. Surprise, surprise. It hurt a hundred times worse since I'd always idolized him.

"Thank you," I said before walking inside his office and slumping down in a red, plush accent chair. Quade and Render flanked me on either side, standing in a wide stance with their hands folded in front of them like some kind of antagonistic bodyguards.

Headmaster Torne settled behind his desk and entwined his fingers together, looking across at me with displeasure. "I've been informed of the new *development* regarding your power." He leveled me with a look. "I'll be honest with you, Miss Cainson. I don't want you here. You're dangerous. You have no idea how to use your power. The last thing we need is an incompetent Void unleashed in a school full of our top young prodigies. But it seems I've been overruled." I swallowed hard at his harsh words, and he got back to his feet and walked over to his bar, which was set up with all sorts of different vials and jars of potions.

I watched as he grabbed a cup and started mixing liquids together. He threw in some sort of moss to top it off, and then conjured some ice in his palm, plopping it into the drink before walking back over. "Here. This should help restore some of your strength."

I took the offered drink, surprised.

Sensing my confusion, he went on. "I've studied the Void phenomenon. The weaker you are, the more the Void tries to replenish you. I don't want that in my school. You're already volatile enough as it is."

I looked down at the cold, black liquid, hesitating.

"If I wanted to poison you, I wouldn't have wasted flame moss on you. It costs a hefty price, you know."

Call me crazy, but his words didn't exactly fill me with comfort.

Lifting the glass to my lips, I took a tentative sip and then moaned when the cool, earthy liquid touched my tongue. It smelled like death, but it tasted like heaven. The more I drank, the more it bolstered me. By the time I finished the last drop, my eyes no longer burned with exhaustion. My limbs no longer felt weighed down. Even the dizziness had lessened. "Thanks," I said gratefully, setting the cup back down on his desk.

“Miss Cainson, I think we both know that your presence here won’t be readily welcomed.”

I shifted in my seat. “No one has to know,” I offered quietly. “People know *of* me, but I’ve been living in the human communities for so long that I’m not recognizable. You could just say I’m a transfer student, or—”

“Absolutely not,” he said, cutting me off. “Thibault Academy operates on high standards. I do not lie to my students. These are the people who will one day be leading our supernatural community.”

“But you said it yourself. They’ll hate me on principle,” I argued. “I have my amulet. No one needs to know I’m a Void.”

I knew I was pleading to deaf ears, but panic had clawed its way into my bones. I knew exactly what was going to happen if he announced my presence here. It would be like it was everywhere else, but worse. These were my peers. People my own age. Thibault was for the best of the best. They were going to chew me up and spit me out.

“Yes, I’ve heard all about your magicked amulet,” the headmaster scoffed, eyeing my necklace with a sneer. “Made by demons, was it not?”

I held it protectively against my chest. “My father gave it to me.”

“I’m not going to debate this with you, Miss Cainson. I called you here before letting you get settled in because I want to make a few things *perfectly* clear.” He leaned forward, bracing his hands on his walnut desk, the glow of his lamp casting yellow light across his harsh expression. “I don’t want you here. I don’t care what abilities you accidentally stumbled upon, you’re a liability—a risk I’m not willing to take. If I could kick you off the premises, I would. The second you mess up or put one of my students at risk, I’ll have your head on the chopping block, Judge Braxton be damned.”

My mouth went dry. This sort of prejudice and cruelty wasn’t new to me, but it was devastating to hear it from a man that I’d admired as a kid, a man I’d wanted to grow up to *be*. Beside me, Quade visibly stiffened, like he was surprised.

“I understand, sir,” I mumbled, though the respect felt hollow.

“Good. You may be just as immortal as the rest of us, but we all have our Achilles heel. Every other Void who’s ever lived? Their Achilles heel was *themselves*. If you’re not careful, you’ll follow the same fate as them, and I don’t want you self-destructing and losing control in my school. Which is why I’m having a paragon accompany you everywhere you go. If you so much as sneeze the wrong way, I’ll know about it. You won’t be sleeping in

the dorms, either. I've arranged for you to stay in a small cabin off the property so that my students will be safer. I will allow you to take classes to learn about magic and some semblance of control, but I am not deluded into thinking that you will be able to accomplish anything but the destruction that you usually bring. You are to keep that amulet on at all times, Miss Cainson. For all our sakes."

Tears welled up in my eyes at his dark words, but I refused to let them fall. There was so much that I was still processing that I hadn't even fully realized that the paragons were assigned to babysit me until I was nodding my head and excusing myself, feeling like a kicked puppy.

Once we were outside Headmaster Torne's office, Quade turned to me. "You're staying in the feral cabin," he said with a chuckle. "Damn, that sucks."

"I don't need your commentary," I replied.

"But you *do* need an escort," Quade retorted. "So unless you want to be stuck in your cabin for twenty-four hours a day, I suggest you change your attitude, or we might just leave you there to rot. I don't think Headmaster Torne will care, do you?"

Nope. He wouldn't. "Just tell me where I'm staying. Then you two can leave me the fuck alone."

Render tsked at me. "Headmaster Torne won't approve of that language at all."

I shot a look at the closed doors of his office. "Headmaster Torne won't approve of me no matter what I do, so it doesn't really matter, does it?"

Render looked thoroughly bored now and glanced down at his phone. "You take her to the cabin. I have stuff to do."

Quade rolled his eyes but said nothing as Render turned and strode away. I watched him go, feeling slightly apprehensive, though I really shouldn't. It wasn't like the vampire was any better than Quade.

"Come on, Devicka. You have to keep up on your own. I don't flash like a damn bloodsucker, and even if I did, I wouldn't carry you."

"I wouldn't want you to even if you could," I shot back, though my voice felt tired, despite the potion Torne had given me. We took the long, curved staircase down three levels before we hit the bottom east wing. We passed a few students there, and every single one of them gave some sort of greeting to Quade. He offered them a winning smile in return, so put-on that I wanted to gag. The students were all dressed in their fancy uniforms, the crest

embroidered on their black lapels, but it was a step up from the shin-length skirts that I'd been forced to wear at Mrs. Coxcomb's School.

Quade stopped when a girl came up to him, trailing her hand down his arm and giggling at him about some damn thing I was too tired to listen to. He put on the charm thick and then grew a damn daisy right out of his palm, roots and all. He plucked it from his fingers and passed it to her, making her practically purr. I nearly gagged at the gesture before slinking through the crowd to get out of there. For now, people barely gave me a passing glance. The only distinguishing thing about me was that I was out of uniform and following a paragon around. I wondered how long it would be before everyone knew what I was. I wasn't looking forward to it.

Despite that, I couldn't deny that Thibault was a beautiful school. It had both antique furnishings and modern elements. The classrooms were an open concept with bright, tinted windows allowing lots of sunlight through, but still offering protection from the sun for any weaker vampires. Only the more powerful ones could withstand its rays. A guy bumped into me as I walked, sending my amulet into a frenzy of buzzing need. Rubbing my shoulder where he hit, I kept my head down, even as he apologized, and quickly kept going. There was no way I'd survive this without draining someone. I was nervous about testing the strength of my amulet, and even more nervous about Headmaster Torne's threat.

Quade caught up, shooting me an irritated look, and then opened the back door that led to the outside. Of course, the asshole didn't bother to keep it open for me. I shoved a hand against it before it could close in my face, walking out behind him. Outside, tall trees towered over us and spots of sunlight kissed the grass through breaks in the branches. There was a worn path where footsteps had flattened the plush grass. Quade led me down it, and now that I was out of the crowded halls, it felt like I could breathe again.

"I'm assuming they'll want you to start classes tomorrow," Quade called over his shoulder. "Although I'm not sure where they'll even put you. It's not like you can actually sit in class with the other students." He chuckled like this amused him and kept walking, the school disappearing behind us in the distance.

Just how far away was this "feral cabin" anyways?

"The cabin Torne put you in is meant for shifters that lose control of their animals. Not the best accommodations, but you've been living with humans so you're used to squalor," he droned on.

“Humans aren’t squalor,” I snapped. “And you didn’t used to think so when we were kids. That’s your parents talking.”

Quade’s shoulders tensed, and to my surprise, he nodded tersely. “You’re right.”

I was so shocked, a freaking twig could’ve knocked me over.

As we got further away from the school, the grass turned unkempt, and the path started curving around trees.

I tried my best not to watch Quade as he walked in front of me, but no matter how much I inwardly chastised myself, my eyes kept rising up. His arms swung easily at his sides, and I could see impressive muscles in his back with every step. He’d been a cute kid, those dark brown eyes and dark skin always striking, but now that he’d grown into himself, cute was the very last word I’d ever associate him with. He was an ideal specimen of masculinity and charm. He was the perfect boyfriend that you wanted to bring home to mom and dad. The one who had the accomplished career and would dote on his lover with practiced charisma. But behind all of that perfection was something darker inside of him, and I had a feeling I was one of the only people who’d ever seen it.

When we were little, I’d had the biggest crush on him. It wasn’t a surprise, really. His parents and my mother were always pushing us together, even back then. But despite how much I idolized him, he’d always tried to best me, and that still hadn’t changed. We were still competing, even though I’d thrown in the towel years ago. And he was going to win, no doubt about it. I just wished he didn’t have to look so damn good while he trampled me.

“Are you going to walk behind me and stare at my ass the entire time?” he asked over his shoulder. I could have kicked myself for being so damn transparent and getting caught.

“Are you going to start walking backward?” I quipped before speeding up to get closer to him. I didn’t want to be tempted any more than he wanted to be out here with me.

“Ha. Ha. Ha. You always were the clever one,” he replied in a bored tone before brushing his hands along the bark of a tree, causing the moss to light up.

I nearly toppled over from the compliment. “Clever? Yeah, right. Mother always compared me to *you*. I never measured up, never will.”

I wasn’t expecting to be so honest about a disappointment I’d been harboring, but the words just spilled from my lips like acid. Quade stopped

mid-stride and spun around to face me, making my steps stop short. “You sound jealous, Dev,” he said, a certain surprise to his voice.

I rolled my eyes, deciding not to give in to the bait and admit that yeah, I *was* jealous. I craved the relationship he had with my own flesh and blood. “You wish,” I lied.

Quade cocked a black brow but then turned and started walking again, this time matching his stride with mine. We walked side by side, and his knuckles brushed across mine, causing a spike of electricity and hunger to travel up my spine. My amulet started glowing, and I quickly crossed my arms over my chest to stop from bumping into him again.

Quade’s eyes flashed down at my necklace. “Maybe instead of wasting all that energy on being jealous, you should actually try to control your power.”

I gaped at him. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me. Maybe you wouldn’t have to be exiled away with the humans if you’d put a little effort into your abilities. You probably could have learned about this new side to your power if you’d have put the work in. Honestly, Dev, it’s a little sad that you just gave up the way you did.”

Anger started simmering inside of me as his words soaked in. I couldn’t believe he, of all people, would say that to me.

I stepped in front of him, blocking his way and forcing him to stop walking. “I did *not* give up. I was thrown away by my own mother!” I said heatedly. “All because she came in and kissed me before bed like she’d done every single night of my life. My Void came out on its own, without my control. I couldn’t stop it, no matter how hard I tried.”

My voice was strained, my throat fighting to not close up.

“You don’t have to like it,” he said back, his face looking angry.

I was flabbergasted. What the hell was he talking about?

“You think I wanted to be this?” I demanded, my anger now coming to a steaming, churning boil. “You think I wanted my life to be stripped away from me, to be hated by our own people? I didn’t ask for any of that, Quade. I was ten years old. I had my mother and my best friend taken away from me just like that.” I snapped my fingers, emphasizing my point.

He watched me warily like he hadn’t expected me to actually say my side. Well, fuck that. I was sick of swallowing my words. I wanted to scream my truth until my throat was raw.

“I cared about you, and you just abandoned me. I got shoved into a life

with humans and was told that I would never be accepted by my own people. The council forbade me from practicing my powers at all. So before you give me your pretentious bullshit about fucking *trying*, maybe you should look in the mirror and ask yourself why *you* never bothered to try and fight for *me*,” I seethed. “I thought that we were best friends, but as soon as my Void manifested, that was done. You hated me, and I had to learn to hate you right back. So go on and keep hating me, but for fuck’s sake, don’t pretend that any of this is my fault.”

My chest rose and fell with quick breath, my entire body tense with hurt and anger. I never expected to say all of that to him. Hell, I’d never expected to say anything at all. But once I started, it all came pouring out.

My truth was long and painful, and words like this were usually only ever spoken inside the journal I wrote in. But he was here, and he felt so godsdamned familiar, yet totally foreign at the same time. He was my childhood and my estranged future all wrapped up into one package, and I couldn’t stand to hear his arrogant words for a single second longer.

He stared at me like he was possibly seeing me for the first time. Something indecipherable crossing over his features before it vanished again, but in that split second, the air around us shifted. He took a step forward, so small in movement that I wasn’t even sure at first if he’d actually done it. My breath caught, his throat bobbed, and my skin started tingling with something that had nothing to do with my Void’s hunger.

After all these years, I still missed him.

Another step forward, and he was just inches away, his steady breath mingling with mine. He lifted his hand, brought it close to my face, and I could feel the heat coming off of his skin even though he wasn’t even touching me.

And I wanted so badly to be touched. Aside from humans, it never happened. Supers left a wide berth around me, and I didn’t blame them. But even after having sensory overload from the past day, this was different. This wasn’t hostile or meant to intimidate or about a vampire craving blood. This was charged with attraction and want.

Quade’s eyes softened as they ran over my face. But *just* before his knuckles made contact with my cheek, he suddenly pulled away, like he was shocked that he’d been about to touch me with any sort of tenderness.

His nearly black eyes flickered down to my amulet before lifting up again, like it reminded him of why I should always be kept at a distance. As

soon as his gaze met mine, I saw his expression harden once more into the arrogant, aloof bastard that he was. Whatever had been building between us was snapped apart, pieces of hope splintering at my feet.

“I don’t expect you to understand, Dev. But you’re still wrong.”

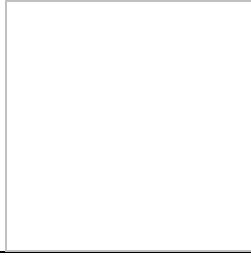
“About which part?”

“That, you’ll have to figure out for yourself,” he answered smoothly.

He turned and started walking away again, but this time, he was heading in the direction we’d just come from. “The feral cabin is a hundred feet that way,” he said, pointing through the thick trees. “Stay there until one of us draws the short straw and comes to escort you to breakfast tomorrow morning. Until then, I suggest you grow thicker skin. You’re gonna need it.”

He disappeared down the path, leaving me behind like he couldn’t wait to get away from me. It shouldn’t have hurt—not after all this time. But it did.

Chapter 6



THE FERAL CABIN was more like a shack. It had a squeaky twin bed with an impossibly thin, stained mattress. Chains attached to a metal wall were the only decor, and the bathroom only ran cold water, much to my dismay. I slept alright though. It wasn't terrible, and if I was being honest, I was thankful to not have to share a room with someone that would ultimately fear and hate me.

My sleep schedule was completely off thanks to the draining experience, the time difference from being back in the US, and an overwhelming anxiousness that had settled in my gut. Unfortunately, I woke up totally disoriented and in a sheen of slick, cool sweat. And after tossing and turning for a couple of hours, I realized I wouldn't get any more sleep until I ran off some of the energy building up within me. I was my father's daughter, after all, and risk demons were notorious for having to blow off steam.

I'd always been like this. A product of my father's demon bloodline. When I got anxious, the only thing that helped was getting an adrenaline rush. I was always climbing the tallest buildings, taking the largest leap. I couldn't help it any more than my father could help feeding off the humans that he tempted. Taking risks was in my blood.

Giving up on sleep, I got out of bed and pulled on a pair of old sweatpants and sweatshirt from the bottom of my bag. The moment I went outside, it felt like I could breathe more easily in the cool night air. Energy coursed through me, and the urge to take a risk was almost as demanding as the Void. I was stuck between the two natures of myself, both competing for my attention. I spotted a tall tree, jogged over to it, and gripped a low hanging branch before pulling my body up to perch on it.

I grabbed the next branch and pulled myself up that one, too. Higher and

higher I went, as dying leaves fell from the branches. Each movement jostled the decay. It was fall in Washington, where the school was located. Everything was in a state of transition. The grounds, the trees...me.

I hadn't climbed in a while, so my arms shook with the strain as I kept going higher. Good. It added to the risk.

I pulled up the next branch, but it snapped the moment my hand grabbed hold of it. The weight of my body shifted at the lack of support, and I had to grab hold of the large trunk to stop myself from falling. "Shit," I panted under my breath, but I plastered a smile on my face.

When I was a little girl, my mother used to catch me climbing trees in the middle of the night. She didn't understand my need to test the limits. It wasn't until Dad explained to her that it was his risk blood running through my veins that she stopped punishing me for it.

I missed my father. It had been a few months since I'd seen him, and I wondered what he would say about me being at Thibault Academy. He never much liked my mother's way of doing things. He was never parental, but he loved me in his own way. Out of everyone, he cared about me the most, despite being mainly absentee.

Everyone else always wanted something from me. Reed wanted me in LA with him. My mother wanted me to give her back what I'd taken. The supers wanted me gone. Judge Braxton wanted me here. I was always told what to do and how to live. So sneaking away and taking crazy risks was one of the only ways I ever got to feel a sense of freedom.

I reached out and grabbed another branch, wrapping my soft hands around the wood before pulling myself back up. My hands cracked and bled from the rough climb, but I relished in it. Another step. Another pull. Splinters dug into my palms. The scrapes burned and pulled.

And still, I kept climbing.

This, I could control. Here, I was in charge of myself.

The risk was freeing. The pain was grounding. I felt alive when my lungs expanded with the cool, fresh air and real as I left hot prints of blood on the bark as I climbed. Pretty soon, I was standing on the top of the world, watching the grounds below, the full moon casting its white light and black shadows. I breathed in deeply, a small smile playing on my lips, letting the breeze push my light blonde hair around my face. My heart had the steadying *thump thump thump* of the physical push and delicious risk as I stood on a thin branch, overlooking the world.

I was considering climbing back down and finding a new tree to climb when a sudden movement to my right made me go still. I crouched down on the branch, eyeing the shadows on the ground below. From up here, voices traveled up to me, the sound carrying in the night.

"I can't believe Judge Braxton is doing this," a sinister voice growled. I'd heard that voice before.

"I can. Her power is curious. I think it's smart to learn how it works so that we can effectively defend ourselves," Quade responded in a pompous tone that made me want to jump down from this tree and beat his ass.

My hands curled around the trunk of the tree. They were obviously talking about me.

Someone scoffed. "Defend ourselves? Haven't you noticed? She's a nobody. She's weak," Render's voice broke through, and I watched as four shadows stepped into the clearing below me.

"Weakness can be strength in the right light," a singsong voice added before crouching low in the grass to poke at something. I squinted, trying to see who it was, my ears straining to catch every word.

"Weakness can also get you killed. She's a liability. You know what her kind has done to shifters in the past. She's already stolen powers from two, my brother included! And I've read that Voids get hungry. Feral, even. It's not safe to have her on school grounds," that familiar, gruff voice replied.

With a shock, I realized that it was Gritt, the angry shifter who had attacked me in the judge's chambers. I cursed inwardly. This must be all four paragons. *Of course* he would be one of them. I should've known based on his age and level of power.

"We can't do anything about it, Gritt. Judge Braxton wants her here, and Headmaster Torne said she can stay unless she becomes a threat to other students."

"Then why not make her a threat?" that singsong voice asked before standing back up. "I have to go. There's a necromancer in Philly that keeps bringing hookers back to life. Have to step in before he pimps them out to the humans. Sometimes being a paragon sucks corpses' dry balls."

"Gross," someone said.

"Don't think you're getting out of babysitting duty, necromancer!" Render called at his back as the figure walked away. "Fucking necros," he continued, this time in a lower voice. "They're all a bunch of lazy fuckers."

"You're one to talk, vamp," Gritt growled.

I frowned. Seemed the only thing these paragons had in common was their hatred of me.

“So what are we going to do?” Quade asked, bringing the conversation back to the problem at hand—me.

“I don’t like to agree with the necromancer, but he has a point. We should just *make* her a problem,” Render replied speculatively. “It shouldn’t be hard. We can just get her worked up. Make her life here a living hell. She’ll crack eventually, and then the headmaster will have cause to kick her ass out. Problem solved.”

A bat suddenly flew right past my face, making me flinch back. I swallowed the scream on my tongue so that I didn’t alert the guys to my presence.

“Sounds easy enough. I still want to figure out her powers though. We need to get my brother switched back,” Gritt replied.

“Then you better work fast,” Quade said before stepping away from the group and moving to head back toward the academy. “Because with what I have planned for her, she won’t last a fucking day.”

I gulped at the surety in Quade’s tone. Part of me felt terrified, and the other part of me wanted to prove him wrong. “Headmaster Torne would be proud,” Render said before following after Quade. “We’re actually working together.”

“Yeah, don’t get used to it,” Gritt grumbled before walking off in the opposite direction, toward *my* cabin.

If that asshole was planning on peeping through my windows at night, I was going to lose my shit.

I stayed on my branch for a good ten minutes longer, until my legs and back were sore from the awkward angle. Keeping my ears perked for any sound, I didn’t descend the tall tree until I was sure that no one was still hanging around. The need for risk in my soul had disappeared, leaving me exhausted. Now, all I wanted to do was to go back to bed, but that lingering worry that Gritt was still nearby had me anxious.

I carefully descended the tree, landing on the balls of my feet with a spring. Then I slowly started back toward the feral cabin, smiling in relief when I saw the front porch with the broken door and busted wood paneling. “Home sweet home,” I whispered to myself before taking another step toward it.

“I wouldn’t get too comfortable there if I were you,” a deep voice

resonated from behind me as a hand clamped down around my mouth. A scream lodged in my throat, but I couldn't get it past the barrier of his hand. "Why were you hiding in the trees, Void? You like to gossip with the fucking birds?" Gritt asked, his rough stubble scratching against my ear as he spoke.

I tried to shove his hand away, but when he didn't let go, I tilted my shoulders back, arching my spine and flailing around to try to get out of his hold. My movements didn't work though. He was too strong. All I was doing was rubbing my ass against his hardening dick.

"Stop that," he grunted.

I went impossibly still, my amulet shaking with need. Opening my mouth, I bit down hard on his fingers, but he didn't even budge. "Feisty, aren't you?" he asked. "I could smell you up there, you know. Did you think you could actually spy on us and get away with it? I bet it got you hot, thinking you were so fucking smart."

His free hand wrapped around my waist, and it felt like concrete was holding me in place. Fear-filled bubbles floated in my stomach, bursting against my gut. "I wanted you to hear how much you're not wanted, Void. I want you to know that we'll do anything to break you," he said, his voice a gruff whisper against my ear. "You're going to figure out how to switch those powers back, and then you're going to crawl back into whatever fucking hole you came from. Think about that when you sleep tonight."

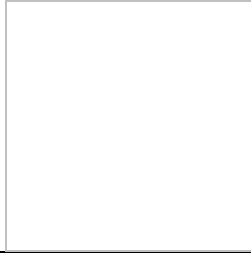
He suddenly let go of me, and I spun around to face him, molten anger and anxiousness coursing through my veins. The Void was whispering to me. *Take off your necklace. Show him how strong we are.* I reached my hand up to touch the clasp, feeling like I was holding my index finger over the trigger of a gun. "I'm not scared of you," I stuttered, feeling lame for sounding so weak.

"That makes two of us," the shifter replied before spinning around, giving me his back as he walked away.

I stood there seething, my necklace crushed in my hand as I rolled his cruel words around in my head. I felt disgusted with myself for even considering giving into the Void's hunger. I wouldn't be the monster that they painted me as. I refused to fail.

I didn't want to be here, but I was. And I had every damn intention of proving those asshole paragons wrong. I was going to learn how to control my powers if it was the last thing I did, even if just to wipe the smug fucking looks off their faces.

Chapter 7



I WOKE up sore but well rested, and I sat there waiting like a good little puppy until Render came to collect me. If they wanted to bully me into leaving, they would have to fight for it. I resolved to do everything they said—to be the epitome of perfection while keeping my head above water. I was here for a purpose, and even if I wasn't wanted, I was going to take advantage of that. I craved to know more about my abilities—more about this world I'd been exiled from. So I was going to learn as much as I could. Besides, I'd been tormented before. I could handle this.

At least, that's what I kept telling myself.

The dining hall was so different from any other cafeteria I'd ever been in that it was laughable. It was nothing like my human school with buffet tables and plastic trays. And Mrs. Coxcomb's was a rich prep school, so it wasn't like it had been that bad to begin with. Still, Thibault's was way above and beyond.

A full waitstaff worked the long tables, serving five-star dishes to a student body that, for the most part, had separated themselves by breed. I could tell as soon as I walked inside for breakfast the next morning, with Render at my side, that they all stuck with their own kind.

The vampires were the easiest to spot because they were the most perfect looking. Smooth, pale skin and movements that were either too slow or way too fast. They had an ancient air about them, even though none of them were older than twenty. They spoke quieter because they could hear better, and every once in a while, I caught a glimpse of their fangs when they spoke or raised a glass to their lips. But the dead giveaway? It was the fact that their tables were completely empty of food. All they had before them were crystal pitchers of thick, red blood.

The shifters were on the opposite end, and if vampires exuded a deathlike stillness, then the shifters embodied the opposite. They were loud, rambunctious, and had so much food piled around them that I was shocked the table could hold all the weight. Most of them had long hair, even the males, but unless they shifted partially to reveal canines and claws, they looked mostly human. Except for their eyes. If you caught them in the right light, they flashed luminescent, like a cat in the dark.

The elementals had their own tables, all full, with way more people than the other two combined. Elemental magic was common but strong. Most could control a single element, like water, while some of the more powerful ones could call on two. Except for Quade Fucking Sandwood, who could control all four.

It was clear that the school was mostly run by elementals, just based on the sheer numbers. I could see it in the way they sat on top of the tables, lounged on their backs on the floor, and tossed around balls of fire or water like the dining hall was their own personal playground. None of the professors who sat before the huge stained glass windows gave the elementals a single glare. It was clear that this was the norm, and they were allowed to do pretty much whatever they wanted.

But what caught my eye the most was the necromancer table. *Table*, as in, only one. Necromancers were rare. Not nearly as rare as Voids, but for every hundred elementals, there might be thirty vamps, twenty shifters, but only one necro. For that reason alone, I felt a strange sense of camaraderie toward them, even though that was stupid. They definitely didn't feel camaraderie toward *me*. That became brutally clear when the group sneered at me as I passed by.

The necros looked human except for one glaringly obvious difference. They were all marked with the sign of death. Like a birthmark, necros developed a symbol on their necks when their powers manifested. It was as dark as a freshly inked tattoo, a single X left to mark their skin.

I was thankful as hell that my Void powers didn't outwardly mark me like that. At least I'd stayed under the radar so far. Mostly. Students just shot me curious but uncaring looks, a few glares too, but nothing I couldn't handle.

As soon as we got inside the cafeteria, Render had dumped me here to eat alone while he went to sit with the other vamps. Quade stayed away from me, too. And though I'd cast a few looks over to where he sat, not once had I seen him look back. But why would he? I was just the Void, sitting at a tiny table

in the corner, and our moment near the cabin had meant nothing at all. Gritt, on the other hand, had no problem shooting me dark, loath-filled glares. I avoided his table completely.

It was clear that all three of them revelled in their paragon status at the school. They stayed at the heads of their sections, surrounded by supers that acted more like adoring fans. I couldn't tell who the necro paragon was yet, but I remembered his voice from last night. Smooth. Nearly lyrical when he'd suggested that they sabotage me.

Still, I had to take this one day at a time. For now, the food was good, even if the company was nonexistent. I'd been mostly ignored throughout breakfast, which was fine by me. If I could, I'd try to stay under the radar until graduation. Of course, Headmaster Torne had other ideas.

"Attention students."

His voice rang out like a clap, echoing off the walls. Hundreds of heads swiveled to attention, their voices dying down immediately. The headmaster stood at the teachers' table, still in his suit, and cast a look over the hall. "It is my duty as your headmaster to inform you that we have a new student who has joined us today."

"Of course you're gonna fucking do this right now," I mumbled into my cup, my heartbeat ratcheting up.

Despite his simple words, Headmaster Torne's voice was already filled with contempt, and every single person here could hear it. Curious whispers broke out, and faces turned to look at me, the sore thumb who sat alone.

Headmaster Torne raised his hand and motioned toward me. "Devicka Cainson, the Void, has been assigned to Thibault Academy."

The whispers instantly gave way to shouts. Shocked eyes zeroed in on me. Questions and arguments broke out. One girl a few feet away from me started to cry dramatically and moved to a table further away. They didn't need any further explanation. My name was like a curse word in the super community. Everyone knew who I was.

I dug my fingers into my legs and pinched them as hard as I could as humiliation crashed over me.

"Quiet down," Headmaster Torne called out. "As much as I disagree with the decision, the Void is here to stay. Precautions will be made to ensure your safety, but if at any point you feel threatened by Miss Cainson, you may alert your paragon or professor, and they will handle the problem immediately."

Handle the problem.

That was all I was to them, and that was all I'd ever be. A problem that needed to be handled. I could already see the writing on the wall with the sneers shot my way. They were going to use the headmaster's decree against me at every opportunity. I was going to be eaten alive.

The headmaster took his seat again, and students started getting up and leaving. Everyone made sure to go around my table, staying as far away from me as possible, but plenty of them openly stared. A couple of vampires flashed by me, tossing trash my direction and leaving me zero time to react before I felt plates full of old food fall into my lap. Laughter followed, and I kept my eyes trained down onto the sloppy mess of pancakes and syrup, watching as it soaked into my clothes.

Quade laughed with his other elemental friends as they went by, and Render kept a smirk on his face, even as he worked to ignore me completely. Their complete dismissal was more humiliating than the breakfast plastered onto my plaid skirt.

"No one wants you here, Void," a shifter snarled at me as he rounded my table.

"Well, your mother didn't want *you* either, so I guess we all get stuck with unwanted things every once in a while," I shot back.

The shifter growled, and I turned my body, just begging him to come at me. I'd rip my amulet off so fast, my Void would consume him before he could even extend his claws.

"Keep walking. She wants an excuse to take your powers. That's what she does. She's a fucking thief."

My eyes snapped over to Gritt's voice. The paragon walked up beside the other shifter, giving him a knowing look.

The shifter looked me up and down. "You're right. She's not worth it," he said, sneering at me one last time before stalking away with his group of friends.

Gritt stood at the end of my table, staring down at me with such fiery hate that I was surprised his ears weren't smoking. But the rest of him was plenty hot. His shoulder-length hair was a bit wild, but it fit him. He looked entirely wolf-like the way he watched me with his predatory green eyes. He had muscles on muscles, and probably stood at a good six and a half feet. I bet if he actually stopped glaring long enough to smile, he'd be even more handsome. Why did all of these paragons have to be so damn hot? It wasn't fucking fair.

Unlike everyone else, who made sure to stay at least twenty feet away from me, he stalked right over and crowded my space. "Let's go."

I clenched my teeth, reminding myself not to give him an excuse to get me kicked out of school. The last thing I wanted was to be escorted by him right now, especially while I was dressed in an ill-fitting, second-hand uniform, covered in syrup.

I never thought I'd miss Mrs. Coxcomb's School for Troubled Girls, but right now, I'd give anything to be back there. At least there, I was relatively ignored rather than openly hated.

People watched and whispered as I stood up, soggy pancakes falling to the floor with a slap at my feet. With as much dignity as I could muster, I made my way over to him, trying to ignore as people scuttled out of the way.

Gritt pointed forward. "Walk."

Clenching my teeth, I walked ahead of him, fully aware of his menacing presence at my back. But before I could even leave the hall, another voice stopped us.

"Miss Cainson, one moment."

I turned around to see a smartly dressed brunette woman who was probably an elemental. Since supers aged slower, I had no idea how old she really was. She could be anywhere from thirty to a hundred. She strode forward but stopped beside Gritt like that was as close as she was willing to come.

She held out a piece of paper to me, her fingers barely grasping the corner. I took it, my eyes skimming over the list. "That's your schedule, although the headmaster wished me to inform you that it's liable to change," she told me. "He also wished me to let you know that, should you be disruptive to the classes, you will be expelled."

"Thanks," I said dryly.

She pursed her lips and walked away, and I folded up the paper and held it in my fist, turning my attention back to a scowling Gritt. "The hospitality here is just incredible," I said sarcastically while watching the secretary slink away, pressing her back to the wall and crab walking along it, like she was scared I'd do a sneak attack.

"Let's go," Gritt said before stomping out and leading me toward what I assumed was my first class.

"Are you going to be with me all day?" I asked while walking down the hallways beside him. Unlike yesterday, when the school was bursting with

life and power, today everyone seemed scarce. “And where is everyone?” I asked while adjusting the too-tight uniform top I was given. It had stains on it like it was a lost and found reject they’d tossed on my doorstep. I only got one too. I looked like a slutty schoolgirl, which normally I wouldn’t give two fucks about, but it didn’t exactly help me fly under the radar.

“We each have agreed to take you to one class. Your schedule was picked based on classes Judge Braxton thinks will help you learn more about your powers. It’s a joke, really, considering you’ve been in human school your entire life. You’ll be so behind, you’ll just slow everyone else down.”

I looked down at the schedule again. I was supposed to take A History of Power with Professor Nero right now.

“Okay...Are you going to tell me where I’m supposed to go, or would you rather prolong this whole nightmare?”

He leveled me with a look. “Left.”

I rolled my eyes and turned down the left corridor, seeing some of the other students disappearing behind doors. I didn’t want to ask Gritt a damn thing again, so I carefully read every plaque beside the doors until I finally found the one with Professor Nero’s name on it.

I opened the door, but to my surprise, Gritt followed me in. I frowned at him. “What are you doing?”

“I already told you. The four of us have to take you to one class each.”

“You don’t have to stay in here with me,” I argued. The last thing I wanted was for him or any of the others to sit next to me during every damn class and watch me suck at super life.

Gritt looked at the empty classroom. “Yeah, I *do* have to stay here with you. I wasn’t there when you took my brother Juda’s wolf and gave it to that *bloodsucker*. But I’m here now. Every fucking move you make, I’ll be watching you.”

“You know I didn’t mean to do that, right? I’ve seen firsthand when a shifter is ripped from their animal. It’s heartbreaking. I wouldn’t wish that on anyone.” I felt lame, but I wasn’t heartless. I realized that what I’d done had major consequences, even if I hadn’t meant to do it.

Gritt stared at me for a moment longer, taking me in. I couldn’t tell if he believed me or not. His eyes softened some, but I wasn’t foolish enough to view it as empathy for me. “The only reason I’m going along with this, is because I want you to figure out your powers and switch them back,” he finally said. “I failed my people before, but I won’t now. Get *real* used to me,

Void. I'll be pushing you as far as you can go. Consider me your personal tutor."

I dropped my mouth open in surprise. Mr. Asshole Shifter Dude wanted to personally tutor me? That just sounded like a recipe for disaster. He'd eventually end up killing me. Or I'd end up killing him. Neither of those really sounded like good options. "I don't know if I *can* switch them back. It might have been a fluke," I said quietly, hating that I didn't understand my own damn powers.

He growled a little, hair and claws peeking out over his skin as he cracked his knuckles and did an angry little hair flip that looked sexy. "For your sake, I hope you can."

We heard a noise and both turned our attention to the door beside the electronic board at the front of the large room where a man had just entered. He was wearing a gray suit and pink tie. He had red, side swept hair and thick, bushy eyebrows like a caterpillar. "You must be the Void?" he guessed in a clipped tone before walking over to the teacher's desk and grabbing his messenger bag, slinging it over his shoulder.

"Yes?" I called before sitting in the front of the room. I would have sat in the back, but I figured that everyone would want to keep an eye on me. At least this way they wouldn't have to twist in their seats to stare.

"Well, class is canceled. Indefinitely." He picked up a heavy textbook and dropped it down on the desk, the loud bang reverberating through the large lecture hall.

I frowned at him "Canceled? Why?"

He gave me a pointed stare. "I refuse to put my students in danger, Miss Cainson. I do not agree with your presence here, and I will not subject this class to your disruptions."

"Disruptions? I haven't even done anything!"

"Your mere presence would be a distraction," he replied levelly. "I teach supernatural history, which is vital information for my students to learn if they wish to one day help run our society. I will not have you here, disturbing their learning process, nor will I stand by while students are fearful that you will strip them of their powers."

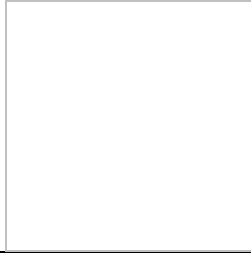
I clenched my jaw, but what was there to say? That I wouldn't be distracting? We both knew that wasn't true. As much as I could've tried to stay quiet in my own little corner, there would be whispers and glances wherever I went. And I couldn't argue that my Void powers wouldn't come

out either. My amulet could fail or fall off or maybe just by being around so many powerful supers, it would stop working altogether.

Gritt stalked forward and grabbed the textbook off Professor Nero's desk while rolling his eyes. "I've seen her in action, Professor. Surprised you're scared of something so weak." Gritt was baiting him, but I didn't know why. Was he...in his own weird way, trying to get this man to agree to teach me? Or was he just naturally demeaning?

"I've been to enough council trials to know just how powerful she is, Mr. Boltwright," Professor Nero hissed before adjusting the strap of his leather messenger bag. The professor gave me one last withering glare before nodding to Gritt and sweeping out of the room. The door slammed shut behind him with a deafening echo.

Chapter 8



MY EYES BURNED, but I refused to cry in front of Gritt.

“Can you please take me back to the cabin?” I sniffled, hating myself for sounding so weak.

Gritt rolled his eyes. “Pathetic. Not even the teachers want you here.” He turned to the door and yanked it open, but when I followed him out, he turned in the opposite direction of the exit.

“Where are you going? My cabin is that way.”

“I already told you, the only reason I’ve agreed to babysitting you is to make sure you learn your shit. You can’t do that by hiding in your fucking cabin. We’re going to see the headmaster.”

I groaned. The headmaster hated me more than that history teacher did. I followed Gritt all the way to the other end of the building and up the long, spiral staircase. But when we got to the headmaster’s corridor, we found people standing around arguing.

Judge Braxton, Headmaster Torne, and a man I’d never seen before all stood there, and it was clear how much they all disliked one another just by their glares and halting body language.

“Doesn’t matter. This is completely unnecessary, and you don’t have my permission, Braxton,” the headmaster snapped.

“I don’t need your permission,” the judge replied. “This is how it’s going to be. Selik is the only person suitable for the job.” He turned to the third man. “Banner?”

Before Banner could answer, all three of their heads swiveled around to look at Gritt and me, our movement having caught their attention.

Headmaster Torne’s face turned red with anger. “What are you doing here, Void? You should be in class.”

I opened my mouth to explain, but to my surprise, Gritt did it for me. “Nero is refusing to teach with her in the class. He canceled history lessons.”

For some reason, this made Judge Braxton smile. “See? Exactly as I said. You need Selik.”

“The only thing I need with Selik is for him to leave. This school is still my jurisdiction, Braxton,” Headmaster Torne growled.

I could tell the judge did *not* like hearing that. “The school may be under your direction, but don’t forget that your position is appointed by members of the council, and the council is under supervision by *me*.”

I saw the headmaster’s jaw tic. It looked like the two men were seconds from pummeling each other. I wasn’t sure who I preferred to win since I detested them both.

“And this is what your *supervision* entails? Bringing in not one but two dangerous supers to my school?”

“My decision is final,” Braxton said with a sharp nod. “Now, the academy is still set to host the ball tonight, is it not?”

The headmaster’s jaw ticked. “Of course.”

“Good. I hope all the arrangements have been made according to my specifications.”

The two of them started going back and forth about things like music and linens—of all fucking things.

The man, Banner Selik, ignored the both of them as they continued to argue, and came walking toward me. He had jet black hair, and was a bit older than me, probably in his late twenties. He had pale skin with dark, nearly black eyes. He was just as tall as Gritt, but had a tapered silhouette with broad shoulders and naturally red lips. He was handsome, in an unconventional sort of way. He stopped in front of me, his body towering over my height. He stuffed his hands in his pockets and looked over me calculatingly. A strange cooling sensation fluttered over my skin at his proximity. I’d been burning hot with hunger from the Void so long that it felt like balm over my soul.

“Selik?” Judge Braxton pressed, but the man didn’t acknowledge the demanding judge. Selik kept staring, kept *searching* for something that I didn’t understand.

My eyes darted over to the judge before going back to Selik again. His eyes had shut, but it still felt like he was assessing me, still searching my powers, and I didn’t understand it. Was he some sort of elemental? Why

wasn't he scared of me like everyone else? I looked down at my amulet, which had been glowing since the moment I arrived at this damn school, and was shocked to find that it was dull and still, no glow to it at all.

After another intense moment of scrutiny, Selik opened his eyes and nodded. "Okay. I'll teach the girl."

Judge Braxton sighed in relief and started walking away, despite the pissed off headmaster. "He stays out of my academy when he's not teaching! I won't house him!" Headmaster Torne yelled at the judge's back.

Braxton ignored him. "You'll find other arrangements, won't you?" he asked Selik.

Selik simply nodded. I had a feeling that the headmaster's dislike of him was something he was very used to.

Braxton clapped him on the shoulder as he passed by. "Perfect. Your pay from the council will be pending weekly updates. Good luck."

With that, the judge breezed past us and down the stairs, disappearing from view. For all his concern about my abilities, it sure bothered me that he didn't so much as nod in my direction. No sooner had the judge left than Headmaster Torne was at our sides. He gave us both a scathing look. I couldn't even be sure who he hated more, Selik or me.

"You are to stay in a secluded classroom for your lessons," he ordered, staring hard at Selik. "The moment you aren't having a lesson, I want you off school grounds; is that understood?"

Selik looked at him with a bored expression. The two of them couldn't be more different. Where the headmaster was rotund and angry, Selik was thin and blasé. "Sure thing, Torne," he said with a cool wave of his hand.

The headmaster's jaw ticked, but before he could say anything else, Selik looked back at me. "Looks like I'm your new teacher. Shall we get started?"

"Umm, sure."

Anything to get me away from this awkward situation. I was dying to know the history between the two men, but more than anything, I just wanted to get away from the headmaster's furious glare.

Selik's dark eyes swept over Gritt. "Ah. Your paragon chaperone. And you are?"

"Gritt Boltright."

Selik nodded. "Shifter Paragon. I've heard you're quite powerful. Four animals, is it?"

Gritt just stared at him instead of answering, but my eyebrows shot up in

surprise. “You can shift into *four* different animals?” I asked. That was completely unheard of. The most powerful shifters in our super world could only shift into two, three at the very most.

Gritt didn’t answer me either, and I wondered if he always kept that close to his vest. It was smart. The less other people knew about you, the more advantage you had. “I prefer to keep all four of my animals, if you don’t mind. Hopefully you can get this *Void* under control,” he replied in a gruff tone, his head tilting in my direction.

“That’s the plan, Mr. Boltright. I trust you have a secluded place in mind where I can help teach Miss Cainson?”

Gritt didn’t even have to stop to think about it. “I know where we can go.”

Selik nodded and turned back to the headmaster. “As always, it was a pleasure, Torne.” He bowed, but it was an overexaggerated move that lacked respect. It felt more theatrical than anything.

The headmaster turned and stalked back to his office, slamming the door behind him. As soon as we were alone, Selik looked down at me with a smirk. “The council offered me an absurd amount of money to teach you,” he admitted before leaning in closer to me. “But between you and me, I would’ve done it for free just to irritate that fucker.”

A laugh bubbled out of me. “He doesn’t like me much, either.”

Selik straightened. “Of course he doesn’t. You’re a threat to power, and that’s what he detests above all else. I should know. It’s why he hates me, too.”

My mouth dropped open, and my heart skipped a beat. “You...You’re a Void? I didn’t think any other Voids existed except for me.”

He shook his head. “No, I’m afraid you’re still alone on that front. I’m not a Void. But I am something that is nearly as threatening to people’s powers.”

I frowned, confused. “What?”

“I’m a neutralizer.”

My mind whirled, pieces clicking into place. “That’s why Judge Braxton brought you in to teach me. You can neutralize my power.”

Selik nodded. “Yes.”

Excitement spread through my chest. Around him, I wouldn’t have to feel so anxious and nervous about hurting someone. With Selik, I wouldn’t have to worry about accidentally letting my Void take over and run rampant.

Maybe I'd even get a break from the awful hunger that always hounded me.

"Huh," he said, looking at me curiously.

"What?"

He shook his head slowly. "Nothing. I've just never seen that look on a super's face before when they realized what I was."

"What look?"

"Hopeful."

I swallowed heavily at his words, because I understood completely. When people looked at me, it was with fear and hate, never something good. I guess we had that in common.

Selik echoed my thoughts. "Usually, all I get is the look that says, *get the hell away from me.*" As if to prove his point, he cocked his head over to Gritt, who, sometime during our conversation, had backed away from us. "See that? I get that *a lot*," he said with an amused chuckle.

Gritt scowled, obviously not pleased at having been caught inching away from the neutralizer.

Selik clapped his hands. "Let's go and get started."

Gritt led us down the hallway and back down the winding staircase to the front of the building. Classes had just switched, and supes were crowding the hallways, making my breath catch. I watched as they openly stared at me, and I tried not to notice the way my amulet was prickling my skin at the bombardment of powers all around me. When Selik's hand suddenly came down and clasped mine, the gnawing hunger vanished.

Letting out an exhale, I turned to look up at him with a thankful grin.

"Better?" he asked.

"Much. Thank you."

"I'm pretty sure teachers aren't allowed to hold students' hands," Gritt snapped.

"Good thing I'm not a real teacher then," Selik replied cheerfully, shooting me a wink that made my insides flutter.

Gritt scowled behind us like a grumpy fucker.

We passed a group of elementals in the hall, and when one of them spotted me, she smirked and lifted her hand up, a ball of fire in her grasp. She cocked her hand back, getting ready to launch it at me. I didn't even have time to duck before Banner was snapping his fingers, making her power evaporate into a cloud of smoke. The girl screeched in surprise, and frenzied murmurs spread throughout the halls. Whispers of "the neutralizer" started

spreading, and people looked at the pair of us like we were their worst nightmare. There was nothing supers feared more than feeling like a human.

"I never understood bullies," he murmured as Gritt took us outside.

The Washington sunshine beat down on my back, and I let go of Banner's hand to remove my blazer, forgetting how small the damn button up shirt was that they'd given me. The spaces between each button were gaping, showing off the pale pink lace bra I wore underneath. Oh well, maybe it would encourage the headmaster to send me something that actually fit, especially now that the skirt was ruined by the one-sided food fight I'd been in this morning at breakfast.

There was a gazebo with blooming flowers in the distance, secluded from the others. Gritt led us over and plopped down on the bench, sitting there with his legs stretched out in front of him, an angry smirk on his face as he observed me.

"The first thing I want to do is see how strong your Void power is. It's activated by touch, right?" Banner asked while circling me.

"Unless it's extra...hungry. Then it doesn't necessarily need touch," I replied while swallowing.

He stopped at my back and ran his fingers along my shoulders and used one hand to lift up my pale blonde hair. Again, I found myself feeling embarrassed by how responsive to touch I was. He was my pseudo-professor, and I was over here panting over a simple brushing of skin. I needed to get in control of this soon, or I was going to be embarrassing myself left and right.

"Let's see how hungry you are then, hmm?" he asked before tracing the clasp of my necklace with his thumb and undoing it.

I reached my hand up to catch my amulet before it could fall. "I'm not sure that's a good idea," I said quickly. "How do we know that your power will win against mine? Maybe my Void will swallow yours whole."

"It could," Banner conceded. "But I don't think it will. Either way, we're going to try."

I wrung my hands together. I was terrified of this. What if I let my Void out and it immediately drained his power? I would be devastated, and there was selfishness in that fear, too. I wouldn't just feel guilty. I'd hate it because that would mean he couldn't neutralize me after all, and I was so desperately hoping he could. "But..."

Banner interrupted my worries. "Did you know I wasn't allowed to come here as a student either," he said offhandedly, his eyes scanning over the

academy building in the distance. “But unlike you, what I do isn’t permanent. I’m really more of a shield. I can block powers from working, but I don’t take them away like you do. Still, no one wanted to teach me. Supers don’t want to risk being without their powers, even for a little while, and I don’t blame them for that. But it meant that I was forced to teach myself. It was difficult, and it took years for me to master it, but I put in the work, because I made it my mission that I would rule my powers; my powers would *not* rule me.”

My heart slammed against my chest. That was what I wanted more than anything in life.

“So, I learned how to walk through a room without unintentionally shielding powers left and right. I learned to do it with precision and purpose. And that’s exactly what I’m going to help you learn to do, too,” he said, looking at me steadily, like a rock unwilling to be pushed away by the current. “That amulet has been your crutch, Miss Cainson. But if your level of power is any indication, then you don’t need it, because you’re strong on your own. You can master this, and you *will*.”

His words wrapped around me, bolstering my timid hope. Slowly, I nodded. “Okay. I’ll try.”

He smiled, and I think it was the first genuine smile anyone had given me besides my human best friend, Reed. That handsome smile lit me up inside, thawing pieces that I didn’t think could ever feel warm again.

“Good girl,” he said, looking around the wide-open space. “Now, no one else is around except for us. When I say so, I want you to drop your amulet. Your Void will probably rush out because it’s starved, but I want you to imagine yourself tossing reins over it and controlling its movements. You direct where it goes. You control whether it retreats or advances. And only with your direction can it feed.”

I swallowed hard, trying to hide my shaking hands in my skirt before eyeing Gritt. He was leaned over on the bench, resting his forearms on his thighs, eyeing us with curiosity. “What if it goes for Gritt, and I can’t stop it?” I asked. I watched Gritt’s mouth part in shock, like he was surprised that I didn’t instinctually *want* to steal his powers.

“I’ll be here to stop you, don’t worry. I won’t let Torne’s prized shifter go powerless,” he replied easily while circling back to face me.

“You mean if I don’t suck *you* dry first.”

A mischievous smile curved across his lips, and my face heated when I realized what I’d said. When he noticed my mortification, he chuckled. “Not

to worry, Miss Cainson,” he murmured, my name sounding like a sinful treat. “I’m not afraid to be *sucked dry* by a pretty girl. But maybe we should save that for behind closed doors, yes?”

The heat from my face immediately dropped like a lead weight, going straight to my core. A supernatural man was flirting with me. Me! The Void. I was so shocked that I could have been knocked over with a feather.

Gritt grumbled something under his breath that I couldn’t catch.

“But,” Banner continued, raising his voice and returning his tone to his usual cheer, “if you feel like your Void is coming for me, you will simply put your amulet back on. Agreed?”

“Agreed.”

“Good. Now let’s see you in action.” Banner held his hand out to me, his fingers brushing my stomach slightly and causing another shiver to travel up my spine. Biting my lip, I let the amulet drop into his palm, and he snatched it up with finesse, pocketing it with a grin as my smoke started to spill out around me.

Black tendrils of the Void started to surround Banner, but instead of latching around him like usual, it stopped up against an invisible barrier. I breathed out a breath, a smile surfacing. Thank the gods.

Banner smiled too, and I saw the hint of relief that crossed over his features. For all of his outward confidence that he’d been trying to reassure me with, he’d been nervous, too. “Perfect,” he purred. “Now, how are you feeling?” he asked me while tipping his head to the side, observing me with his dark eyes and beautiful smile. Hunger like a harsh punch was hitting me over and over again, making every inch of me coil up with acidic pain.

“It’s hungry. It hurts,” I replied through clenched teeth. “It hurts a fucking lot.”

“Probably because you chain it up like a rabid animal all the time. But you *are* holding it back.”

He was right. I was holding it back. Sweat broke out over my brow and back, and my entire body was shaking with restraint, but I was actually holding it back. I’d always had my necklace, and the only times I’d ever removed it were for trials at the council, so I’d never even known I *could* hold it back. As exhausting as it was, I also felt a new sense of empowerment.

“Good,” Banner commended, circling around me. My smoke hit his own barrier everywhere he stepped. “You’ll have to accept your Void so you can

learn to work in-tandem with it,” he said calmly, watching my smoke with interest. “But you’re stronger than you think. Look at the amount of control you’re already showing.”

I would have beamed if it wasn’t taking every ounce of willpower and concentration I had to keep the Void from lashing out.

“You’re doing wonderfully,” he said, coming to stop at my side. “Now I want you to turn its attention to Gritt. Let’s see if you can feed the Void without letting it drain someone completely.”

I let out a shaky breath, and Gritt launched to his feet, eyes wide. “No fucking way.”

“Relax, shifter,” Banner said. “I won’t let her take your powers. But I have a theory.”

“Well, I’m all fucking ears,” Gritt snapped.

Banner regarded his displeasure with amusement before turning back to me. “My theory is that you need to feed your Void. Stop starving it. It exists for a purpose, and I think we all realize, since what happened at the trial, that it’s more than just voiding out powers. Perhaps the Void is always draining people completely simply because you’ve been starving it all along. Let’s see what happens when we try to feed the beast.”

It sounded so simple, but I knew it was anything but. I wrung my hands together. “I don’t know...”

“I’ll be right here to intervene if it comes to that,” Banner assured me quietly.

My eyes flicked over to Gritt, whose hands were in fists. “You’re not using your fucking powers on me.”

“Fine, then leave,” Banner said before I could even open my mouth. “And get us someone with bigger balls than you.”

My eyes widened at Banner’s words, and the two men stared each other down. Gritt was seething. If there was one thing that you didn’t insult a shifter on, it was their fearlessness. But I had a feeling that was why Banner did it in the first place.

After letting out a low growl, Gritt shot me a dark look. “Don’t you dare take anything that doesn’t belong to you,” he said with a curse while crossing his arms across his chest.

Another wave of agony coursed through me as I continued to hold back my power. The Void was pissed off. The smoke looked like jaundiced tar and was churning with want and fury. Sweat rolled down my temple and gathered

in the crook of my neck. I raised my hand to better control it, and then slowly, I started to loosen the reins.

My smoke shot out like a bullet toward Gritt, and he flinched back. The black Void wrapped around him, sucking his power out in a rush. I started to panic, my shaky hold faltering, but Banner was immediately there, standing in front of Gritt and shoving the Void back.

My eyes were wide with alarm, but Banner held his hands up in a soothing manner. "It's alright. Take a deep breath, Miss Cainson. I want you to rein it back in."

"I can't," I shuddered, nearly in tears. It hurt so much. I couldn't hold it back for much longer. It was taking over me, pummeling me with a thousand punches that I felt in my blood and bones.

Banner stepped in front of me, his hands clasping my arms. My Void instantly receded, and I took a huge, gasping breath. Sweat was soaking my shirt now, and my limbs hung loosely, feeling bruised all over. "Breathe, Devicka," he said, my name sounding like a prayer on his lips.

I mimicked his inhales until my breathing evened out, my eyes locked on his. "Good girl," he praised. "I'm going to let go now."

"No," I pleaded, my bottom lip quivering.

"Shh, it's alright. I'm not leaving. But you are going to try again, and this time, you aren't going to let it lash out. Remember—you are the master of your power; it is not the master of you. Show it who's boss."

He carefully released his hold on me and stepped away again. I gritted my teeth, but this time, when it tried to shoot out toward Gritt, I snapped on the reins, both hands outstretched, and I forced it to go slow.

"Good. Now let it slowly feed. Just a bit."

My hands shook with the effort, and I was sure that I was going to collapse after this, but a few wispy tendrils went forward at my direction, twirling around Gritt's legs. It trailed up his muscular thighs, dancing across his hips, his abs, and lastly his face. I poured all my focus into reining it in. I felt like I was playing tug of war with my soul, yanking backwards as it stretched me thin.

"Go touch him," Banner ordered, and I snapped my gaze back to him, my hair floating around me as I spoke.

"No," I whispered. "I'm barely containing it as it is." I knew that the moment I touched his skin, I'd be swallowed up with need. I wouldn't be able to stop.

A smack of hunger coursed through me. It was the Void's distaste of my refusal. It wanted me to put one foot in front of the other and tackle the Shifter Paragon and consume him whole.

"Do it. I won't let any harm come to either of you," Banner promised as he swatted at a tendril of smoke trying to graze across his chin.

"If you fuck up, I'll tear you to shreds, neutralizer," Gritt promised as he looked warily at the smoke that hovered all around him.

My feet reluctantly pounded on the wood planks of the platformed gazebo to move toward him. My smoke was hanging in the air like a weight, greedy in nature, eager for me to make the last connection.

Banner moved behind me, keeping a close distance as I positioned myself in front of Gritt. The Void's hunger was bitter and kept grinding me down, withering me away into nothing but the all-encompassing Void. Lifting my fingers up, I gently pressed them to the edge of Gritt's jaw, keeping as little surface area between us as possible, but still closing the distance between us.

It felt *divine*. But with the neutralizer at my back, I was able to discern that it felt *wrong*, too. Gritt went weak, his eyes rolling back in his head with just a tentative touch. I watched him for a moment, lost in the Void and lost in myself. Then I felt jerked by an unfamiliar pain, a sadness building deep in my gut. I didn't *want* to hurt him.

"Enough," I said, snapping the Void back. To my relief and pride, it retreated immediately.

I half expected the broody shifter to cuss me out for nibbling on his power, but instead, Gritt's eyes widened in a blended expression of awe and need. He lifted his hand up to touch me, like the Void was too seductive to resist. I took a step back and crashed into Banner's chest, who remained solid and infallible behind me. His cheek brushed along mine for half a second as he leaned forward to watch Gritt's response to the Void.

"Interesting," Banner murmured.

"What?" I asked, frowning at Gritt's expression. "Gritt? Are you okay?"

He looked drunk. High. Not himself at all. Maybe I'd taken too much after all, maybe he was hurt, or maybe I—

"Look at his reaction," Banner said, cutting off my train of thought. "It's like he...enjoyed it. Like he wants more."

As if he weren't hearing our words at all, Gritt reached out and splayed his hand over my chest, his fingers dipping just under the collar of my shirt and warming the skin there. It felt erotic and wrong, but the connection

immediately made my Void come surging back. It created a livewire of smoke to flutter like ghosts between us. His expression had gone dark and hungry, his eyes nearly black. Tawny hair started covering his arm, and his teeth bared with predatory presence.

Gritt was leaning forward, licking his lips and staring at me with hunger, and my smoke continued to swirl around us, feeding in gentle sips that I never knew it was capable of. It felt *amazing*. Like drinking warm tea after a cold day. It wasn't devouring in the all-encompassing and terrifying way like usual. It wasn't uncontrollable. This was different. This felt *right*. As if I'd always meant to feed my Void this way, and by the look on Gritt's face, he was feeling a similar sense of pleasure that I was. That...that was weird. My Void powers always hurt other supers. But Gritt was enjoying it. It didn't make any sense.

"What's happening?" I asked as a glow started to cover his skin. I watched, transfixed, as the glow started spreading to my chest where he was still touching me.

"Oh, shit," Banner whispered, but I barely heard him. I was too lost in Gritt's stare and the warmth of his palm. Too caught up in the Void's pleasure and the smoke that curled around our glowing bodies.

I felt a hand creep around to my stomach from behind and delve under my shirt, as Banner's palm connected with my skin. He pushed his cooling, neutralizing powers into me, and just like that, the connection was cut off. My smoke disappeared and Gritt's whole body shuddered as his hand dropped, and he staggered back. He shook his head and looked at me like he was struggling to clear a haze. I was panting, my heart racing way too fast, utterly exhausted but oddly...invigorated, too.

After blinking a few times, Gritt's expression flitted from shock to anger. "What the fuck just happened?"

Banner dragged his hand along my stomach, resting it against my hip. "You were about to mark Devicka as your mate."

Gritt's eyes zeroed in on Banner's hand, and a growl escaped his lips. When he realized what he'd done, Gritt immediately cut off the growl and scowled at us. "Impossible. There's *no* way any of my animals would want to mate with the fucking *Void*!" he spat.

I was too stunned to speak. Shifter mate bonds were usually uncontrollable. It was based on compatible powers, and once the bond was complete, they were shared for life. Bonds were rare and random, but

completely indescribable. Anyone would be lucky to earn the devotion of a shifter. Of course, it would be my luck to get saddled with one that hated me.

“Well, you were about two seconds from marking her, so I suggest we not use you as target practice anymore. Her Void is obviously too tempting for you.”

“Bullshit,” Gritt replied.

Banner shrugged. “I’ve seen shifters mark their mates before. The fact that you don’t remember it just proves that one, or possibly *all*, of your animals have accepted her as an acceptable mate despite your ridiculous prejudice. They were in the driver’s seat. So if you don’t want this to happen, I suggest you keep your distance. I barely stopped it in time.” Banner shot me a grin. “I’ll happily train her without you.”

Gritt’s eyes flashed with that catlike reflection, but there was an indiscernible look on his face. “No way. You’re wrong. I’d *never* mate with a Void, especially one that hurt my own damn brother.”

I shouldn’t feel disappointment, but I did. The fact that Gritt was so eager to dismiss me made my heart drop into my stomach and settle into the acid churning there. But I learned long ago to roll with the punches, and the refusal of a mate bond was one punch I’d expertly dodge.

I cleared my throat. “I’m sure it was a fluke,” I said, my voice shaky. “The Void is...tricky. No need to risk it though. I’ll just work with Banner from now on.”

His canines elongated. “The fuck you will,” he snapped, but he immediately caught himself, shock crossing over his features. My own brows shot up in surprise too. *Was that possessiveness in his tone?*

He swallowed hard and fisted his hands at his sides. “My purpose as paragon of the shifters is to be primed to become leader of my people one day. That means that I don’t back down, and I sure as shit don’t send in another shifter in my place for you to attack.”

My lips thinned. “I’m not attacki—”

“Let the other paragons deal with you for the rest of the day,” he said, cutting me off. “As of right now, my turn is done.”

He turned on his heel and jumped over the handrail of the gazebo, landing nimbly on his feet. He stormed off, looking over his shoulder at me once before increasing his speed and disappearing from view.

“His loss,” Banner said quietly before withdrawing his hand. A blanket of smoke filled the area at the loss of his neutralizing powers. “Now let’s keep

practicing.”

Chapter 9



I LAY down on the ground to try to catch my breath. Everything hurt. *Everything.*

A thick sheen of sweat covered my body, and it was taking everything I had not to roll over and vomit up my entire breakfast.

“I think we’re done for the day,” Banner said while brushing off his hands on his pants and eyeing me. “Do you need help?” he asked.

“I need a shower. And some food. And about fourteen days of sleep,” I groaned while stroking the amulet now firmly clasped around my neck.

“I can take you up to your dorm room,” Banner offered before sitting down next to me, crossing his legs at the ankles.

“I’m not staying in the dorms. Headmaster Torne put me in the feral cabin,” I said, running the back of my hand across my forehead to wipe off the sweat that had gathered there.

I was a disgusting, soggy mess, but I was too exhausted to care. Banner had me practice all day. Mostly he had me hold the Void back for long periods of time, but he also had me practice letting it out and *then* pulling it back in again, which was harder. I’d done that over and over and over again until my body shook so hard I looked like I was seizing, and the pain and effort had caused black dots to appear in my vision. My shirt was lifted up slightly from my position on the ground, and if Banner weren’t here, I would’ve stripped off my sweat-drenched clothes and let my fevered skin rest against the cool grass.

“They’re making you stay in the feral cabin?” Banner asked incredulously.

“Mm-hmm. I don’t want to brag, but it’s like a five-star resort,” I replied sarcastically before squeezing my eyes shut.

“Come on then, Miss Cainson. Let’s get you there before you melt on the ground,” he said, rising to his feet.

Taking a breath, I rolled over onto my side before pushing myself up. I had to stop at my kneeled position with my hands on my knees and my feet tucked beneath me before I could find the strength to stand. As soon as I did, I swayed on my feet.

Banner’s arms caught me immediately, his grip firm around my waist. “Steady,” he said, his mouth against my ear.

His nearness made my breath catch, but I tried to push him away. “I’m gross with sweat.”

“I’d never use the term *gross* to describe you.”

Our eyes met, and his dropped down to my lips before rising again. I didn’t know how to do this. I didn’t know how to react to attention like this. The only times I’d ever been with a guy were when Reed and I had snuck out of Mrs. Coxcomb’s School to hook up with humans. This was different. Banner knew what I really was. He knew my power. It was strange to have such an immediate connection with someone, but he was the only person who shared the same ostracizing experiences as me.

“Come on,” he said, clearing his throat. “Let’s get you there so that you can rest.”

I faced forward again, happy that I actually had someone to lean on. I’d been so starved of touch and common decency from supernaturals, that I melted against him. I couldn’t help it. I wanted to soak up the affection while I could.

My whole life, I’d been an eraser. I erased my mother’s love. Hell, I’d erased my whole damn life. Just by walking in the room, I erased people’s smiles and sense of safety. And whenever the council made me, I erased people’s powers, too, and that meant I took away their entire identity. I obliterated everything in my wake, sometimes in devastating ways. But for once, right now, I didn’t feel like I was erasing anything. I didn’t feel like a *Void*—a word that was usually spat out like a curse. Right now, I just felt like a girl. A girl being held by a guy who wasn’t an oblivious human or hate-filled super.

As we made our way down the path that led to the feral cabin, Banner’s fingers on my waist dipped under the hem of my shirt, his fingertips brushing along my skin, causing goosebumps to rise up.

“You did good today. You were focused. Strong.”

I laughed at that. Right now, I felt anything *but* strong. “Look at me. I’m about a minute away from collapsing. I’m not strong.”

“You are,” he insisted. “Stronger than you think.”

A shy smile curved my lips. “I never would’ve thought I could do any of that stuff if you hadn’t helped me.”

“Sometimes, we just need one good person in our corner, and then we can do anything.”

Maybe it was my exhausted state, but I felt the words slip out of my mouth before my brain could stop them. “Are you planning on staying in my corner?”

We stopped, and I realized we’d made it to the front of my cabin. He turned so that we were facing each other, and he tucked some of my tangled blonde hair behind my ear. My eyes roved over his face, and I itched to reach up and brush my fingertips over his jaw. I wanted to run my hands through his thick black hair. I wanted to know what it would feel like if I pressed my lips against his. I wanted to know the weight of his body over mine. I wanted to know what it would feel like to kiss a super without the taste of enmity on his tongue.

Slowly, he brought his hands up to cup my face, and I shivered at the way his cool hands circled my jaw. My chest pressed against him and my nipples pebbled, making my already strained shirt feel even smaller. Keeping his eyes locked on mine, he leaned forward and gently placed a kiss against the corners of my eyes. It was soft and reverent, his lips cooling my burning eyes. “I think I’m going to like your corner, Miss Cainson. I might be in it for a while.”

My eyes fluttered open at his low, husky words, and I swallowed hard. “Good.”

His lips tilted up, his eyes crinkling with pleasure. Then he dropped his hands and stepped away, and I immediately felt the loss of his cool, comforting presence. “Rest,” he said as he started to back away. “I’ll see you for lessons tomorrow.”

I nodded, only going into the cabin once he turned and walked away. I knew as soon as I was inside and had my forehead pressed against the closed door that I was in big trouble.

There was a new hunger inside of me, and it had nothing to do with the Void.

I WOKE up to a fist pounding on my door. I sat up in bed, clutching my chest, trying to remember where the hell I was. Wooden walls, floor, and ceiling. Bed covered with a drab gray blanket. A little wood stove across from me, a small kitchenette at the other end, a desk in the corner, and a tiny bathroom I could see from here. Oh, and claw marks everywhere.

The feral cabin.

I ran a hand down my exhausted face. After Banner had dropped me off at the cabin, I'd dragged my sweaty self into the bathroom, took an ice-cold shower, and then I'd collapsed in bed.

When the knocking on my door started up again, I got to my feet, my entire body feeling sore from controlling the Void all day.

I yanked open the door with a scowl, only to come face-to-face with a guy I didn't recognize. "What?" I snapped.

When I blinked some of the sleepy bleariness away, I realized that he was uniquely *gorgeous*. Tanned skin, white hair, captivating silver eyes, and a face that could be in a magazine. He was wearing a perfectly tailored suit with a bright orange tie, an odd color choice in contrast to what he usually wore, the black academy uniform.

He cocked a brow at my tone before his eyes flicked down my body. Immediately, I looked down and realized that I was only wearing a thin tank top and a pair of panties. Mortified, I quickly backed into my cabin and hid behind the door. "Who are you?"

His lips quirked a little, and he did a little bow, keeping his eyes on me as he lowered. "Hyde Marr, at your service. Necromancer Paragon. Sex god. Zombie king. I have about seventeen other titles, but those are the most important ones," he said with a sly smile before straightening. "If I had known you were this pretty, I would have cut council business short. All the others made it seem like you were awful, but I'm starting to feel lucky that I drew the short straw today."

I glanced at his neck where the necromancer mark sat proudly. He'd added his own adornments too, a tattooed rose circled the X, as well as some Roman numerals. "You're late for the ball, Cinderella, and Judge Braxton is asking for you. Although, Headmaster Torne told me to advise that you stay here. What a predicament, hmm?" he added before walking inside of my cabin, brushing past my shoulders in the process. I prepared for the Void to lash out against its cage, but it didn't. My amulet was still and dark. The training with Banner had *worked*. I hadn't felt hungry since I fed from Gritt.

I watched Hyde, taking in his broad back and long legs. He moved in a lyrical way, light on his feet, a bright energy surrounding him that felt odd considering he had such a dark power. He lifted his nose up and sniffed the air.

“What ball?” I was worn out from practicing with Banner and couldn’t imagine dealing with angry supes and navigating the formal politics of our community tonight.

“The ball is something Judge Braxton hosts for the paragons. It’s supposed to encourage *community* and let the networking supers rub elbows with the paragons and council members. Lots of people from all over come. But really, it’s just a good reason for the powerful to get their long, hard, *throbbing* egos stroked in public and to meet all the impressionable young minds of the academy,” Hyde replied with a grin before continuing his search around the room. “Did you know you’ve got a dead animal in here?”

I inhaled, sniffing the stagnant, musty air with a grimace. “It was the least of my worries. I’m more upset about the lack of hot water and the rusted springs in the mattress.” I quickly moved to the pile of clothes resting on a worn dresser and got dressed in jeans and a baggy long-sleeved shirt as he observed the room. I put on my combat boots and brushed my hands along my shirt. It was my only option since the other uniform outfit was so disgusting. If I was going to stand out, I might as well dress the part.

Hyde ran his fingers along the wood walls and crouched low in the corner where there was a gnawed hole, likely put there by rodents. Using his long fingers, he dug around for a moment and pulled out something and cupped it in his palm.

“What are you doing?” I asked as he stood and glided over to me, a twinkle in his eyes.

“Showing off,” he replied with a wicked grin, revealing his bright teeth. “I hear that’s all paragons are good for these days. I’ve got to make a good first impression, right?” He had a quirky way of speaking, a dreaminess to his tone.

He moved to stand right in front of me, opening his hands so I could see what he was cupping. Ivory white bones in a haphazard array were splayed along his palm, along with dirt and unrecognizable grime. “A rat. Harmless. They live short, meaningless lives. Such a shame, really,” he murmured while stroking the bones with his thumb. His eyes flashed up to mine.

“Is this the part where you compare me to a rat?” I asked while staring at

the sad collection of bones in his hand. I was so used to emotional torture and hatred that I could see where this conversation was headed a mile away.

“If that’s how you choose to see it, then sure. But even rats can be extraordinary with a little effort.”

He lifted up his hands and started blowing on the bones, his breath a red hue of misty, sparkling magic. I’d never seen a necromancer in action. I knew that the weaker ones could bring small animals back to life, only momentarily. Some stronger ones could bring back humans, but they were just a shell of the body, a zombie of sorts. They didn’t have memories of their former lives, and they only lived to serve their necromancer. But the strongest necromancers could bring bodies back to life with their consciousness *and* memories intact. And it was that level of power that allowed a necro to turn bones into flesh, too. It took a ridiculous amount of power, and it was rare. But here Hyde was, doing it right in front of my eyes.

I watched in awe as the bones rearranged themselves accordingly. Blood vessels and muscle appeared. Then fur. It was the color of snow, highlighting his red nose and pink feet. Then the rodent started moving slowly, the long nails on his palms twitching. His snout began sniffing the air, and I watched as his lungs started expanding, gasping for air as his body started to work. Lastly, his eyes opened, the beady red bulbs taking in the world around him before nuzzling in Hyde’s palm.

“Wow,” I said, leaning closer. Hyde lowered the rat and smiled at him, stroking his head with his index finger before stretching out his hands and offering the rat to me.

“Figured you could use a friend,” he said before tilting his head to the side and openly staring at me. His silver eyes flashed with mirth and amusement as they trailed up and down my body.

Lifting my hands up, I created a platform and touched the tips of my fingers to his, amazed that once again, the Void didn’t seek out his powers or rattle the cage of my amulet. The rat immediately ran from his hands to settle in my palm, cuddling up to me the moment he was steady. “He’ll serve you well,” Hyde replied with pride.

“Thanks. He’s cute, in an undead sort of way,” I observed while taking in his white fur and the X proudly marked on his neck, marking him as a resurrected. Running my thumb over his snout, he sniffed me before getting cozy. I smiled, feeling silly for being so excited about a pet rat.

“It’s the least I could do, considering I’m about to feed you to the

wolves,” Hyde replied in a dark tone before placing his hands in his pockets. “Let me know if you want me to resurrect more little forest animals for you. You could sing as they clean this shitty shack.”

I laughed. It was a genuine sound, and so foreign that I surprised even myself by letting it out. “I think I’m fine with just Cheddar here,” I replied before setting the rat down on my bed. The little thing curled up into a ball and let out a relaxed breath, snuggling his whiskered nose into the blankets.

The curious necromancer clapped his hands loudly and twisted them up with flair before snapping. “Well, come on, Void. Time to face the ball music.”

He spun on his boots and headed out the door, impersonating a guitar solo as he went.

I quickly followed after him, shutting the door to my cabin. “I can’t go like this!” I called out breathlessly as I jogged to catch up with him. What was with all these paragons moving so quickly? “Can’t you just say that you couldn’t find me?” I pleaded.

He looked over at me as we walked, and once again, his eyes roamed my body. Licking every exposed inch of skin, he took in my lips, my shoulders, and even the little sliver of skin that my shirt didn’t cover. “Don’t worry, you look better than most the girls there. Besides, dressing the part won’t help you. If you’re going to have all eyes on you, then why not give them something to talk about?”

“I don’t want to be talked about. I get enough of that as it is. I’d rather be invisible,” I grumbled. I had to remember that even though I found myself liking the necromancer, this was the guy in the secret paragon meeting who had suggested that the others sabotage me. I couldn’t let my guard down. No matter how quirky and handsome he was.

Hyde turned and stopped, making my steps falter. He invaded my space, keeping his eyes locked on mine as he slithered forward like a snake, waiting for the perfect moment to strike. “But if you were invisible, I wouldn’t see you now,” he said quietly, making my heart skip. “And I’ve always wanted to see a Void up close.” ...And my dumb, skipping heart just face-planted on the asphalt.

I buried all of my emotions and stupid hope in the deepest hole I could find inside of myself. I needed to stop letting myself get trampled when it came to these damn paragons. “Maybe I should stay. You said yourself that the headmaster doesn’t want me to come. If the judge wants me, he can come

see me. Besides, no one wants me to crash their big, fancy ball. I'm dangerous, remember?"

"Dangerous, yes. But aren't all supers?"

I paused. "Well, technically, yes. But it's different."

He tilted his head. "Is it? I guess so," he said with a shrug. "You're a Void. I recognize death when I see it. You take, I bring back to life. I wouldn't exist if there weren't predators like you. Nature always has a balance. It's no different with supers." He laughed brightly, lips parting to let the chuckle escape. "There's always got to be balance, Void," he added while tapping his temple in a manic gesture before whirling around and continuing on his way. "Come on. I think you're going to make this ball memorable."

I followed after him, not sure if Hyde was an ally or an enemy, and something told me I wouldn't be finding out any time soon.

Chapter 10



IT WAS OFFICIAL. I hated balls.

I was standing in the shadowed corner, wishing I could just hug the wall and bury myself behind the wood paneling. No such luck.

The students of Thibault Academy were all dressed like movie stars on the red carpet. We were in the huge ballroom I hadn't even known existed until about fifteen minutes ago when Hyde escorted me in. He'd gotten distracted by a dead moth on the windowsill and then wandered outside to the gardens, where he found a pile of dead lightning bugs that he then decided to revive. Needless to say, I was on my own.

I'd stayed in the corner, wishing my power was to turn invisible, and for the most part, it had worked so far. The students were too busy brown-nosing the council members or grinding on each other on the dance floor to notice me.

When a waitress breezed by, I snatched up two glasses of champagne. The waitress turned to me, startled, as if she hadn't noticed that I was there. I forced a smile before guzzling them both down, one after the other. Of course, my Void didn't allow for the alcohol to actually affect me, but it was worth a shot.

"Oh. I'm sorry," she said with a short nod of her blonde head. Obviously, she had no idea who I was.

"No worries," I told her.

Her eyes took in my jeans and tee, and she grimaced on my behalf. "No time to get a dress?"

"Considering I just found out about this ball seventeen minutes ago...no."

She nodded and looked around before setting her tray down on the grand piano. "I might be able to help. Come this way."

I opened my mouth to tell her not to bother, but she was already walking briskly away, her black pumps tapping on the parquet floor. She led me out into the hall and then pulled open a coat closet. Inside, she strode straight past all the coats hanging up, heading for an armoire at the back. “The staff kept some extra dresses in case we could get off early tonight and join in,” she explained, throwing the doors open.

“Here,” she said pulling out a light pink dress and thrusting it in my direction. “This was mine, but I won’t be able to wear it. I got scheduled until midnight.”

I shook my head and backed away. “Oh, no. I can’t take your dress.”

She smiled at me, revealing just how pretty she was. She was understated but had that adorable girl-next-door look to her. All friendly eyes and kind words, probably late twenties. I wondered what would happen when she figured out who I was.

“Really, I’m fine,” I insisted. “I probably won’t stay long.”

“Trust me, you *aren’t* fine,” she laughed lightly. “Just take it, will you? This dress might as well get some attention tonight. Let me live vicariously through you.”

Grudgingly, I took the dress from her and fiddled at the thin straps. “Are you sure?”

“Positive. Just leave it here when you’re done. I’ve got to get back. Have fun!”

With that, she hurried out, leaving me alone. I stared at the dress, my mouth still twisted into a grimace. I didn’t want to go back out there, but at least if I had this on, I could blend in better. With a sigh, I yanked off my clothes and tugged the dress over my head. I struggled a bit to zip it up, but with some tricky maneuvers, I finally managed it without throwing my arms out of their sockets.

I looked at myself in the mirror and wrinkled my nose. Pink. I was wearing nice, blushing, rose pink. I never wore pink. My wardrobe usually matched the smoke of my Void. It was easier to hide in the shadows that way. With this thing, I was going to be like a damn pink beacon. It looked particularly unique with my black combat boots.

Oh, well. As Reed would say, get your shit together and stop hiding in the corner. At thoughts of him, a rolling wave of sadness rocked through me. I missed him and knew he was probably worried sick. I needed to get a cell phone, fast. If he were here, he’d walk through the room with me on his arm,

snarling at anyone that gave me a dirty look. I had a feeling that even vamps and shifters wouldn't intimidate him. He was fearlessly loyal, and I felt bad that I hadn't even reached out to him since coming here. First thing tomorrow I was making finding a cell phone a priority.

I walked out of the coat closet, making my way back into the ballroom. I kept my head down, hoping to blend in. I still hadn't spotted Judge Braxton or the headmaster, so if I played my cards right, maybe I could "accidentally" miss them for the rest of the night.

"You look different," a warm voice said from behind me, and I wanted nothing more than to run the opposite direction. But against my better judgement, I turned around and came face-to-face with Render. His comment wasn't necessarily a compliment, but the way his eyes took in every curve of my body, I knew he appreciated what he saw.

"Pink's not really my color," I replied while brushing my hands along the soft material of the dress.

"You'd look better in red," he replied before flashing me his teeth.

He looked handsome in his gray suit, a crimson boutonniere perched on his chest. His hair was styled back, and he had trimmed his scruff some, the sharp lines of hair on his face making his striking jaw look like it could cut iron.

"I prefer black," I replied before looking around the room at the schmoozing council members and fawning students.

Render suddenly reached up to cup my jaw, making me freeze in surprise. He dragged his thumb along my bottom lip with a manic, cruel smile, making me feel like the prey he viewed me as. I was shaking at his touch, melting at his knowing stare.

His touch felt good, but I didn't want it to. "Stop touching me," I said quietly.

I could feel eyes on us now. I bolstered myself, preparing for the inevitable crash and burn, the cruel words, the angry prejudice and bullying. This was all a game, and he liked using my reaction to him against me.

"Why can't I stop thinking about your blood?" he whispered. "Why was one tiny taste not enough?" The way he spoke sounded like he was talking more to himself than to me.

I furrowed my brow in confusion, and my mind flashed back to the first time we'd met, when he'd licked my palm. "Maybe you like dirty blood after all," I replied, trying to sound nonchalant but failing miserably.

“I don’t like it,” he replied before leaning closer, his teeth hovering just above the thudding pulse in my neck. “I don’t like it one bit.”

“Yeah? Well, that makes two of us. Now let go. People are looking.”

He didn’t even hear me. “I don’t fucking get it. I’ve tried ignoring it, but every time you’re in the damn room, I swear, I can taste your blood again. I can’t stop craving it, which is fucking *crazy*. I don’t do this. I don’t get hooked.” He glared down at me like he resented the fact that he was even talking to me, let alone touching me. Even though *he* was the one who chose to come over here in the first place.

“Render? There you are.”

I turned to see a beautiful vampire sidle up beside Render, her fingers curling around his bicep. My eyes flicked from her bright red polish to her model-worthy face. Her makeup was perfection, her dark hair curled and swept up on top of her head, and a dangling necklace accompanied the cleavage she was showing off in her matching red dress. She was wearing fuck-me heels that I wouldn’t be able to stand in, let alone walk, and she looked down at my unlaced boots with disdain.

“Blaire,” Render said, finally letting me go. “I got held up.”

I snorted. I was the only one who’d been *held* up.

Blaire looked me up and down, her nose wrinkling in distaste. “Is this whole thing supposed to be some grunge rock look?” she asked, circling her finger around my wardrobe. “Because you look like a dumpster diving ex-princess.”

“Are you a messy eater? Because I think you have a bloodstain on your dress.”

She immediately looked down at her dress, and I smirked. When her head lifted back up again and she noticed my expression, her eyes flashed with anger. She stepped forward into my space, all lethal intent, but I refused to back up. I didn’t want to give her the satisfaction, even if she could rip out my throat in less than a second. Render watched lazily with one hand in his pocket.

“No one wants you here, *Void*,” she spat. “I can’t believe the headmaster would even allow you to be present at this ball. Look around. Everyone hates you.”

My eyes darted around the room, seeing that everyone was now staring at me, thanks to Blaire’s loud confrontation. There went me being an invisible wallflower. Whispers started spreading throughout the room, making cold

sweat break out along the back of my neck.

“I think it’s pathetic that the paragons have to babysit you,” she went on, drawing my attention back to her. “Render is going to lead our people one day. He shouldn’t have to lower himself to your presence.”

A bitter laugh escaped me. “I think he’s used to lowering himself if he hangs out with you. Besides, I do have murderous tendencies,” I teased in a dark tone. “But I agree. Right now I do wish Render was somewhere else. Then I could show you just how toxic my Void is.”

She tucked herself under his arm before giving me a scowl. “Did you hear that, Render? She just threatened me. We should tell the headmaster.”

“Maybe you’re right,” he replied, looking thoughtful.

I looked up at the ceiling in annoyance before dragging my gaze back to her. Seeing them together made me feel strange. They looked perfect, his flower matching her dress. They looked like a poster-perfect couple. And for some reason, it made me angry.

“We don’t need to waste time on her. She’s nothing, Blaire,” he said before stroking her hip. I zeroed in on the movement, and his smile brightened, like he could see the toxic jealousy in my eyes. I didn’t understand why I felt this way. My Void was aching to reach out and yank him out of her grip, and I hated myself for it. I barely knew him, and what little I did know was that he was cruel and liked to remind me of my place in this damn world.

But then, I remembered what he’d said. I remembered how he craved my blood. How he craved *me*. What I wanted to do was reckless and desperate, but it was like the smoke of my Void was urging me to press forward, test the boundaries, prove he wanted me, and wipe the smirk right off of this Blaire bitch’s face.

I pulled my bottom lip in and sunk my teeth into it. I dug in, plunging my sharp points into the plump flesh until a coppery liquid pooled in my mouth. The moment the scent of my blood filled the air, Render’s eyes widened into black depths, and his lips parted. I watched in awe as his chest heaved up and down, a ravishing hunger taking over his body.

“Disgusting,” Blaire said with a frown. “No one here is going to be tempted by your dirty blood. You’re so desperate,” she said with a flick of her hair, oblivious to the firecrackers sizzling between Render and me.

I was too busy watching Render to reply to her. His fangs descended. His face flushed. He was salivating, and I smirked, knowing I’d won.

“That’s what I thought,” I murmured smugly.

I turned to leave, but Render flashed in front of me and gripped my face in his hands. I gasped, but that was all I had time for. Because as soon as my lips parted, he was suddenly *devouring* me. My broken lip was between his teeth, his hot tongue running over the blood as his fang sunk in to split the bite apart and take more. I hissed in pain but only for a second, because then his venom filled my mouth, turning everything he did to pure *bliss*.

His hands dominated the angle of my face, tilting it exactly the way he wanted so that his tongue could thrust deeper into my mouth, mixing my blood with every swipe. He pressed forward so that my breasts were squishing against his chest, and I arched farther into him, my hands coming up to hold him by the collar of his dress shirt. He kept pushing, and my spine arched back even farther, like he wanted to tip me right over and pin me to the floor, right here in the middle of the ballroom. And I would’ve let him.

This kiss was carnal and bloody and so *fucking good*. When he shoved a knee to the juncture of my thighs, all I wanted was to rip the skirt of my dress up around my waist and ride his leg to build the friction that he’d made me crave.

But before it could go any further, hands were suddenly between us, pushing the two of us apart. Render snarled at the intervention, his fangs dripping with saliva and blood, his eyes fully dilated, swallowing his eyes whole.

“Whoa, dude, it’s me,” another vampire student said, watching Render warily as he held him back. “What are you doing with the Void? Did she fucking put you under some sick spell or some shit?” he asked, darting a look at me.

My lips were swollen and bloody, my breathing erratic, and I was still on fire all over with lust, but at seeing everyone staring at us, the ballroom awkwardly shocked, a cold dose of *snap the fuck out of it* washed over me.

I couldn’t believe what we’d just done. What *he’d* done in front of all his peers. And based on the look on his face, as it went from pissed off to horror-stricken, I guess that he couldn’t believe it either.

Someone shoved me from behind *hard*, and the next thing I knew, I was landing on the floor, my knees banging painfully upon impact, and my wrists snapping back as my hands tried to break my fall. When I looked up, I was surrounded by a circle of vampires with Blaire in the center.

“How dare you kiss him!” she screeched, her fangs hovering over her

bottom lip.

“He kissed *me*.”

“You provoked him!”

My eyes flicked to Render, but he was still panting, staring down at me with an inscrutable expression on his face.

“If my blood was so damn dirty, then he wouldn’t have been provoked,” I snapped, getting to my feet in the middle of their intimidating circle. I wasn’t going to lie down on the floor and take it. I’d stand and face them.

“He’s mine,” Blaire said, stepping into my face.

No. He’s mine.

I shook my head. Where had *that* thought come from?

I wiped the blood from my lips and winced when I saw droplets on the pale pink dress I’d borrowed. I needed to get the stain out. “Whatever. I’m out of here,” I said before pushing past the circle of vamps and out of the room. Luckily, they all let me.

I glanced over my shoulder once before heading into the hall, and I caught Judge Braxton staring at me from across the room. Taking a sip from his drink, he smirked at me, like the whole thing had amused him.

Ignoring him, I pushed through the doors and made my way to the bathroom. I slammed the door shut behind me, thankful that no other girls were inside, and stripped out of my borrowed dress. I held it up to the sink to wash the blood off, scrubbing it with cold water and hand soap.

The door to the girl’s bathroom suddenly opened, and I turned to face it, holding the soapy, wet dress up to my body to hide from whoever was entering. When my eyes caught sight of Quade’s dark gaze and frowning lips, I let out an exasperated sigh.

“What do you want?” I asked before turning back to the sink. I wasn’t ashamed of my body, and I didn’t really give two shits if seeing me in my underwear made him uncomfortable.

“What just happened out there? It was like Render couldn’t keep his hands off you,” he said. There was a sharp edge to his tone that made me pause.

“I cut my lip, and he attacked me with a kiss. Maybe the almighty Vamp Paragon is weaker than you think,” I replied coolly before scrubbing the material some more. I felt like such an ass, ruining the waitress’s dress. She’d been nice enough to lend it to me, and now it was wrinkled, bloody, and sopping wet.

Quade watched me in speculative silence, adjusting his black tie as I worked. I could feel his gaze on my panties and bra strap, his gaze crawling up the backs of my bare legs and back. He was wearing an all black suit that complimented his dark skin tone, his black hair swept back, but I didn't want to think about how beautiful he looked. I didn't want to get sucked into his charm and be so damn attracted to him. I hated that I couldn't shut off my body's responses to him. Render, Quade, Gritt, Hyde. They all did something to me inside, and I needed to learn to shut it off. Those paragons were dangerous for me.

Once the stain was finally gone, I moved over to the hand dryers, prepared to hold the dress there for the next hour to get it dry, and then get the fuck out of here. The girl who let me borrow the dress was the first person to show kindness to me here, and I didn't want to make her regret helping me by ruining a dress that she probably saved up her hard-earned money to buy.

"Here, let me," Quade said before stepping forward.

I eyed him warily as he took the dress in his hands. With a flick of his hand, he used his elemental magic to draw the moisture out of the material, and then he called on the air to dry it. Elementals could usually only control one, maybe two, of the elements, but since he could use all four, he was an elemental prodigy. When we were kids, he'd had a hard time controlling all of them. There had been more than one instance when he'd accidentally filled bathtubs with soil and the garden with fire. But now, he was all man, and I could sense the control in him.

Within seconds, he'd used his ability to take every last drop of moisture out until the dress was completely dry and he was handing it back to me. His dark eyes held me in a trance as he watched me step back into it. When I struggled to zip it all the way up, I felt him step up to my back, and then his warm hands clasped over the zipper, slowly dragging it up my skin. I shivered.

"Why are you here?" I asked in a small voice before turning around and combing my fingers through my pale blonde hair.

"Headmaster Torne wanted me to make sure you didn't...bother...any other students. I think you've made enough enemies for the night, yeah? I'll walk you back after you return that dress to whoever gave it to you."

"How'd you know this wasn't mine?" I asked.

He gave me another once over before shaking his head, like he didn't like the thought he'd just had.

“I saw you walk in. Besides, you never liked pink.”

My chest panged, but I had to tell myself that him remembering little details about me didn't mean shit. Quade still didn't like me. He didn't even really know me anymore. “A lot has changed over the years. I happen to like pink now,” I lied with a smirk, hating how his face didn't even react. He didn't believe me one bit.

“Liar,” he replied before heading toward the door, not giving me a backwards glance, just assuming I'd follow him. And I did, only because the alternative was staying at this damn ball that I had no business attending. I was worn out and needed to recover from the hunger that my Void now held over me, and the confusing kiss I'd shared with Render. I had a feeling that Blaire was going to be my new best enemy.

We headed down the halls in uncomfortable silence, back toward the coat check so that I could change clothes and give the dress back. We were almost there when a high-pitched, shrill voice startled us. “Quade, darling! I almost missed you!” I cringed at the sound as I turned my head to look at the source of the voice. When I saw who it was, I forced a grin on my face as Mr. and Mrs. Sandwood, Quade's parents, walked up. Behind them, my mother shifted into view, too. So she was here. Of course she hadn't bothered to stop and see me.

Quade's shoulders tensed slightly before he recovered, putting on his mask of friendly warmth. His broad grin was a bit too bright to feel authentic though. He started walking toward them, and I followed dutifully behind. I'd never liked them much, even when I was little. They'd always been overly controlling, keeping their son to a strict schedule and not giving him much time to be a kid.

Mrs. Sandwood was wearing a teal gown that accentuated her spelled breasts, putting them on full, perky display. Her pale pink lips curled up into a snarl the moment she noticed me. Mr. Sandwood was wearing a tux, and unlike his wife, he started rubbing his hands together in a greedy, excited gesture when he spotted me. It nearly made me stumble at the sight of their conflicting motives. Mother kept her expression neutral. I guess the maternal nature from inside Judge Braxton's office had disappeared again.

“Devicka, I'm surprised they let you attend,” Mrs. Sandwood said while looking me up and down, her eyes zeroing in on my combat boots in disdain. Like my mother, she was all about image.

“Yeah, well, Quade is being a good babysitter, making sure I don't

accidentally drain any of the students,” I replied with a fake smile before wrapping my hand around his bicep. I wasn’t sure why I did it, but her reaction at seeing me so comfortably touching her son had me grinning.

Of course, Mother had to ruin the moment. “Devicka, you shouldn’t joke like that,” she said, crossing her arms over her chest. Mother was wearing an all-black, conservative ensemble that covered her from elbows to ankles. The satin material looked thick and bulky, and her blonde hair was swept up in a tight bun. It was so effortlessly her that I had to smile. She looked elegant but modest.

“Banner Selik has been very helpful at helping me control my powers. I’ve made a lot of progress,” I bragged, and for some reason, it caught me off guard. Even now, after everything, I still found myself craving my mother’s approval, and it made me sick. Maybe that’s why Quade was always quick to brag about his accomplishments. He and I suffered the same desire to please our overbearing, unimpressed parents.

“Is that so?” Mr. Sandwood asked, running his large hand down his suit coat. His eyes were dark and wrinkled at the corners as he looked to his son for confirmation.

“I haven’t had the pleasure of seeing her in action, but the reports have been good in our paragon meetings. She was able to stop feeding and even control the Void without her necklace,” Quade replied in a cool voice. I wasn’t sure what bothered me more, the fact that he was bragging about me, or the fact that the paragons were having meetings to discuss my progress.

“And how soon do you think before you’re able to reverse the powers of the shifter and vamp from the trial?” my mother jumped in to ask, her prim voice bleeding with hope and optimism, making my shoulders slump even more. I knew what she was really asking: How long before I could give *her* powers?

“I’m not sure. It’s still new. I have a lot to learn,” I replied with a frown, shame filling me at disappointing her once more. Just once, I wanted to feel her pride in me. Just once, I wanted to be a daughter she wasn’t ashamed of.

“Well, hopefully you’ll figure it out soon then, hmm?” she said. I knew that if we didn’t have an audience of council officials, she would’ve kept talking about it. Quade’s father had taken over her position after I’d stolen her powers. It was a sore subject, and she always treaded carefully around him now, straddling the line of forced respect and bitter envy. If we’d been alone, she would’ve demanded that I work myself to the bone and figure out

how to put powers back into her. I was surprised she hadn't checked up on me sooner, to be honest.

"That's the goal," I replied.

Quade subtly moved out of my grip, and it was then that I realized I'd still been holding onto his arm. Looking down, I realized that my amulet was flashing in warning at me.

"I better get her back to her cabin," Quade offered before leaning forward to kiss his mother on the cheek. When he pulled away, I noticed caked-on makeup was stuck to his lips. Extending his arm, he shook his father's hand before giving my mother a polite nod and guiding me away. I didn't bother to say goodbye to Mother. We all knew there was no need for that level of forced pleasantries between us.

Once we were out of earshot, I turned to face him. "I knew your mom didn't like me anymore, but it was weird seeing the woman who taught me how to make brownies practically snarl at me," I said in a soft voice before looking over my shoulder at her once more. Sure enough, she was still sneering in my direction, whispering to her husband.

"Can you blame them?" Quade asked. He didn't look me in the eye when he said it, but pain still radiated through me.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I asked, turning to face him. We stood chest-to-chest, my amulet burning with anger and need. His dark eyes flicked down to where it hung, suspended over my cleavage.

He let out a sigh. "Look, we were close as kids. Hell, you were my best friend. But things changed when you got the Void. *You* changed. You stole your mother's powers, for gods' sake," he said, as if I needed the fucking reminder. "I've been groomed to help my people my entire life, but your nature is to ruin them. It just...wasn't meant to be, Devicka."

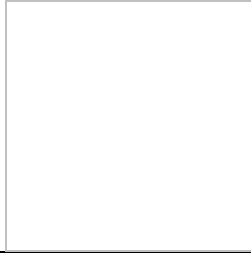
Something told me he was talking about something much more than friendship, and it made me twist up inside.

"You're wrong," I whispered as he turned and started walking again. His shoulder brushed against mine, and he paused at the contact before glancing at me out of the corner of his eye. I could smell the juniper on his skin, feel the corded muscles beneath the sleeve of his suit jacket. Warmth washed around me in waves, and I tried not to sink into the sensation. "I'm still *me* at the core of it all. You just never gave me the chance to prove it."

Quade stared for a moment longer before dropping the last bomb on our friendship. "I didn't care enough to give you that chance."

You'd think that, as a Void, I'd be used to the yawning emptiness inside of me by now. And yet, I'd never felt emptier than I did in that moment.

Chapter 11



A LOUD BANGING sound woke me up. *Again.*

I pulled myself out of bed and stumbled forward. I answered the door, noticing too late that I was in a tank top and underwear. I immediately sighed when I saw who was on the other side. I really needed to learn to sleep in more clothes, especially since people kept bothering me in the feral cabin any chance they got. What was the point in living secluded from everyone else if the paragons kept dropping by unannounced?

“Render, what a pleasant surprise,” I answered, my voice dripping with sarcasm.

He pushed past me, walking inside the cabin, running his fingers through his dark, floppy hair.

“Sure, come on in,” I said dryly, shutting the door again and watching as he paced around the cabin.

He looked like a caged animal, each step causing the floorboards to creak. He wasn’t in his suit from the ball or his academy uniform, and instead was wearing wrinkled jeans that looked like he’d grabbed it from the dirty laundry and a black band t-shirt boasting the popular vampire rock band, Let’s Suck. The red rims lining his eyes made me wonder if he got any sleep last night, and some darker part of me thought of the beautiful bitch, Blaire, draped over his arm. Maybe they’d been up all night and helped each other out of their formal clothes.

He finally stopped in his tracks, spinning around to look at me, his face intense and his eyes holding an edge of anger. “Why can’t I stop thinking about your blood?” he asked me, repeating his earlier question. “Really. Tell me the godsdamned truth, Void. Did you curse me with bloodlust or something?” he asked, picking at his arm like his veins were burning. He

looked like an addict dying for his next hit. It was jarring to realize that the hit he craved was...me.

I frowned at him. "Considering I don't have magical abilities, didn't sacrifice a Gremlin, and didn't steal a lock of your pubic hair for the incantation, no. No, I didn't."

Most of the time, bloodlust was just a nasty sickness, but it could be recreated with a powerful enough magic wielder. Magic wielders were few and far between though. Almost as rare as Voids.

He went deathly still. "If you didn't, then why the fuck do you know how to create the curse?" he demanded, his eyes wide in horror.

I chuckled at his ridiculousness. "You'd be surprised what I know. My father is a risk demon who loves to tell secrets, and my mother once led the elemental council," I replied with a proud grin. I enjoyed catching the paragons off guard.

Render flashed closer to me, making the laugh die in my throat. My breath caught when he wrapped his warm fingers around my throat, squeezing me in a manic way. His steely gray eyes were intent on the vein in my neck. "I just need another taste. I had dreams about you all fucking night," he said quietly, his voice carrying surprise and frustration, even as his gaze glittered with want at my pulse.

I swallowed hard, struggling to keep calm. He was too strong, gripping me a bit too tightly. Once again, my damn amulet was like a beacon, reminding me that he was dripping with power, and my Void always liked a good meal. Especially from the paragons. Ever since I'd had a taste from Gritt, it's like my Void knew what real power tasted like. In a way, I understood Render's craving.

His eyes flicked down to the glowing mass of orange coming from my amulet, before rising up again to meet my gaze. I felt hot all over, and when his thumb brushed lightly over my skin, I couldn't stop the shiver that travelled down my spine, landing deep in my gut.

"Seems you've got a taste for Void blood," I replied with a cough once he loosened his hold on my neck slightly. "Guess it's not dirty like you keep saying it is. Or maybe...you just like it a little dirty," I added with a smart ass smirk, because I obviously had a death wish.

Render's eyes narrowed, and then quicker than I could follow, he flashed across the room, lifted up my desk chair, and smashed it against the wall. I squealed in surprise, ducking as splinters of wood exploded behind me. Eyes

wide, I watched him, heart beating wildly at the chaos threatening to erupt out of him. Maybe he really *did* have bloodlust. If that was the case, I needed to get out of there *right now*.

I held my hands up placatingly as he started to pace around again, and all of the previous humor I'd felt was replaced with worry. "You need to calm down, Render," I said. "When was the last time you fed?"

"Last night," he spat, shoving his hands through his hair as he walked. "Blaire came to my room, and we fed and fucked and then fed some more."

My nose wrinkled in distaste. It shouldn't have affected me, but imagining him with his teeth in someone else's neck, with blood coating his perfect skin made a tide of jealous anger wash up into my stomach.

What the hell was wrong with me? Why was I so drawn to the men that were bad for me? I didn't want to be one of those girls—the type that were attracted to the bad boys for the sake of being bad. Or for the sake of thinking that they would be different for me. That they would soften for me. But there was something about these damn paragons that made it impossible not to want them. Maybe it was the Void at work. Maybe it recognized their massive power and made me attracted to them.

"Then you should be satisfied," I replied, trying to keep my voice steady.

His eyes flickered down my bare legs and the small slice of pale skin exposed by my tank top. Obviously, he'd just noticed what I was wearing. Rolling my eyes, I strutted over to my small dresser and pulled open the drawer to put on some more clothes. This was starting to feel like *deja vu*. All the paragons had no problem looking at me like I was a tasty treat, but they still treated me like I was no better than the dirt covering the floor of this damn cabin. Once I had jeans and a t-shirt on, I turned to face him again.

"That's the thing," he said, looking at me like he could still see my panties. "I *should* be full. Sated in every way." He stepped closer to me, and I took a step back, pressing against the dresser behind me. "Unlike you, I learned how to control my cravings a long time ago. I don't let them control me. So explain to me why, when I was dick-deep in perfect vampire pussy, all I could think about was the way *you* moaned into my mouth when I sucked the blood from your lips last night?"

His crude words made my stomach clench, and I shuffled my feet, pressing my thighs closer together. "Maybe you were hungrier than you thought?" I offered lamely with a casual shrug, though my voice came out breathy. I tried to show that I wasn't affected by him by turning around and

piling my hair on the top of my head and twisting it into a messy bun, but still, he approached me, his eyes hot and dark as he looked at my exposed neck.

“I don’t let my cravings get the best of me,” he insisted.

“I get it, so why do you keep saying that?” I asked with a huff. I hated how he could throw his control in my face like I wasn’t working hard enough to try to control my Void. I hadn’t even known that the Void *could* be tamed. I was the only of my kind, and everyone had always been too scared to let me practice using it. Their solution was exiling me away. My father at least gave me some freedom by finding me my amulet. The council would have kept me locked up otherwise.

“Because it’s important to me,” he finally said, stopping right in front of me, his voice tight with anger.

“Why?”

“Because people die when you aren’t in control,” he suddenly shouted, his voice so loud that it bounced off the cabin walls.

Power was seeping through his pores, and my mouth watered against my will. I swallowed it away, careful not to lose the very control he was talking about. I knew all too well the consequences of not being in control. It plagued me daily, knowing that I could easily lose control and wipe out every supernatural in my wake. The Void had no limit. It had no bottom. My fear was that one day, I would let my Void out, and it would consume everything. I would be nothing except hunger and darkness, devouring everything in my wake until there was nothing left.

I tried to step away from Render, but his body stopped me, his hips pushing against mine, and I felt the telltale evidence of his hard erection pressing against my hip. His eyes stayed on my neck as he started to speak, his steely gaze taking on a faraway look. “I lost control before. She was eight years old,” he began, his voice dropping down to a level barely above a whisper. The air around us tightened, time paused. Nothing else existed except for Render’s sudden vulnerability and the way our bodies molded together.

“Who was?” I whispered.

“I was visiting the human community with my father. He was a council member back then. He’d been a paragon like me, but he was forced to step down from his position when Judge Braxton came into power,” Render said, and it suddenly made sense why he seemed to dislike Braxton so much. “The

judge only likes cooperative supes on his council, and we've never been a cooperative bunch. The only reason I'm even here is because I'm more powerful than any other vampire. They had no choice but to elect me for this position, even though the judge tried to suggest other options. They were all jokes. I'm stronger, faster, my venom is more potent, my hypnosis is powerful, and my bloodline is pure. There was no one else that could compare."

I nodded, encouraging him to continue, while simultaneously entranced at the casual way he mentioned how strong he was. He wasn't even saying it to brag. Just stating it like a simple fact. I knew he was powerful, but knowing just *how* powerful made me nervous. I could sense he was deflecting from the meat of the story by explaining this, but for some reason, it was important to me to know how he lost control. It made me feel less...alone.

"What happened?"

"I was just a kid," he said, dropping his head in shame. "Fourteen and stronger than vampires centuries old. I was *always* hungry. She...the human was walking home from school. She fell and scraped her knee. I-I lost control, and she lost her life."

I inhaled sharply, trying not to show too much sadness at his story. Render seemed like the type to repel pity. He'd rather wrap himself up in cruel words and sarcasm than deal with the real issues in his life. Vampires usually only fed from other vamps, willing humans, or blood bags. Some of them, with more exotic tastes, drank from animals. It was rare that one killed a human anymore, since they secluded themselves in the vampire capital and had other options. But he'd just been a kid.

"You can't blame yourself for that," I said quietly, my hand coming up to touch his bicep. His skin jumped under my touch, but he didn't move away. I wasn't even sure why I was consoling him, but in this moment, he wasn't being an asshole. I didn't want the moment to end. The room seemed to grow cold at the sadness between us.

"Yes, I can," he replied, raising his head to look at me, showing me the tortured look in his eyes. "*I* lost control. *I'm* the reason she's dead. I don't even particularly like humans, but that doesn't mean I want to be a murderer."

I nodded, because I understood completely. I didn't particularly like supernaturals, but that didn't mean I wanted to drain them all of their powers or inadvertently take their life essence. "It was an accident, Render. You're

remorseful. That's what makes you better," I told him. "If draining my mother's elemental power taught me anything, it was that you can't live in the what-ifs. It'll drive you crazy if you do," I said quietly.

Render's lips pressed together before he reached up, trailing his hand up to cup my cheek. I could practically feel the heat in his gaze, and I knew that he was remembering the taste of my blood on his tongue. I realized with a jolt that I *wanted* him to bite me. I wanted to feel his teeth scrape into my skin. I wanted his venom to fill me with that indescribable *want*. Our kiss last night had been electric and all-consuming, and I wanted to feel that fiery chemistry again.

"The only thing driving me crazy right now is *you*," he whispered, dropping his hold on me suddenly. "But we're not the same, Void. I learned how to control myself. You're still flailing around like a fucking fish out of water."

Just like that, the moment popped. Asshole vamp was back.

"Come on, time for you to learn some godsdamned control."

"HOW WAS the ball last night? Have any cravings?" Banner asked me, circling around me while my smoke hugged my feet, swirling around the ground, waiting for me to loosen its leash.

Render was standing in the corner of the empty classroom, arms crossed and a scowl perched on his plush lips as he watched us.

Banner had started the day off with more lessons. He hadn't even greeted me, just told me to take off my amulet and feed from him. So long as he didn't activate his neutrality, my Void was able to touch him in order to feed. It wasn't like it had been with Gritt though. With Banner, it was still painful for him, and he *definitely* didn't enjoy it. But he told me to do it, so I did. I wondered if he could sense the hunger within me. I was still getting used to the fact that I had to feed regularly, appeasing the hunger just like you would your stomach. I wished that I could've told him about the weirdness with Render earlier and asked about why the vampire seemed to be hooked on my blood, but of course, the ass vamp refused to give us any privacy.

"It was fine. I felt hunger with all the powers around me, but not too bad. I was more in control than I think I've ever been," I replied before giving Render a smirk of triumph. It was the truth. Feeding gave me hope that maybe the Void was something I *could* handle—with more practice.

"Good. Don't get too complacent though. You need to always stay ahead

of your hunger. I want you to call me if your amulet is working overtime. The goal is to use it only as a last resort, not your constant cage.”

My eyes flickered to the pocket of Banner’s suit jacket, where I knew my amulet was currently sitting. For so long, it had been a safeguard against the Void. A muzzle of sorts to keep its deadly teeth at bay. Being without it still made me feel stripped bare and vulnerable, which was ironic since, in reality, having it off was what put everyone in jeopardy.

“Again,” Banner said, bracing himself.

Taking a steadying breath, I let my power push further out. I was practically frothing at the mouth with smoke, my hunger still not sated. For the second time this morning, I let streams of smoke wrap around his legs, creeping up around him. Except the moment my power touched the bare skin of his arms and neck, I watched a thick bead of sweat flow from his hairline and down his angular jaw, and then Banner’s knees buckled.

“Shit!” With a gasp, I immediately pulled the Void back.

I could sense that his power was fading. I’d nearly taken too much, even though I’d barely fed at all.

“Why’d you stop?” he panted, folding in on himself.

With Gritt, he seemed to enjoy it when I fed from him, but with anyone else, Banner included, it hurt them. I didn’t understand. Despite the brave face he was putting on, Banner looked about ready to blackout, and I’d barely taken anything from him. It put into perspective just how powerful the paragons really were.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” I said, kneeling down in front of him, struggling to keep my Void wrapped around me and not touch him.

Render scoffed at my words, like he didn’t believe that I genuinely didn’t want to hurt him. “What’s going on? The Neutralizer not strong enough for your tastes, Void?” he asked before propelling off the wall. For some reason, his question bothered me. I just wasn’t sure if it was because he was right or because I felt defensive about Banner. “Maybe you need the taste of a better supe.”

I clenched my fists, turning to look at him over my shoulder. “He’s more of a supe than you’ll ever be,” I lied. We both knew Render was stronger. “He tasted just fine,” I taunted.

Render walked around to me, his stride arrogant and sure. I rose to my feet, Banner still on the ground behind me.

“Why settle for *fine*, when we both know I’d taste better?”

I stepped forward, meeting him in the middle until we were toe-to-toe. “Is this the part where you say that you’ll feed me your dick instead?”

He grinned, looking so godsdamned arrogant and hot as sin that my nipples pebbled under my shirt. “That depends,” he breathed.

“On what?”

“On just how good at *sucking* you really are.”

I narrowed my eyes, even as my core tightened. I had a quip ready on my tongue, but Banner interrupted our heated banter. “Enough! We have to work on this,” he said, pulling himself shakily to his feet. I wanted to rush over to help him, but I stopped myself since my Void was still out and he had my amulet.

“The shifter and vamp that you switched at the council meeting are...struggling to adjust,” he explained. “They want their powers back as soon as possible, and the council wants proof that you can do it. We don’t have time for you to worry about whether or not I can handle this. Unless you’re actually offering, Mr. Tillson.”

Render didn’t look away from me. “Offering to let her Void smoke leech off my powers? Nope,” he said cheerfully. “Just wanted to point out that I’d actually be good enough to satisfy her.”

“You are such an asshole!” I yelled. He just laughed and walked back to his spot by the wall.

“Ignore him.” Banner came forward, placing his hands on my shoulders and peering deeply into my eyes. Over Banner’s shoulder, Render watched us like he’d swallowed a bad bag of blood.

“I appreciate you wanting to protect me, Devicka,” Banner said in a lower voice, this time quirking his mouth into a flirty smile that made butterflies fly around in my chest. “But I promise I can handle it.” He lifted his hand up to stroke my cheek before leaning even closer. Even with his touch on me, his neutral powers were waning. His lips hovered over my forehead, and I had to stop myself from lifting up on my tiptoes to close the distance between us. I craved contact so much that I didn’t care that we had an audience or that he was my teacher.

“Okay,” I whispered, and the moment those words left my lips, Banner nodded and dropped his hands. He moved away, twisting his mouth into a hard line, accentuating his strong jaw and determination. He moved over to the open textbook at the teacher’s desk and started frantically shifting through pages, ignoring me completely. The sudden change in his demeanor was

slightly jarring, but I understood. One second, Banner was sweet and encouraging, the next he was all business. But he was right. I had a job to do, and people's lives were at stake.

"Tell me how it felt when you switched powers at the council meeting," he said, his eyes still locked on the pages.

"Umm..." I closed my eyes and tried to remember the sensation. The hunger. The fight or flight war plaguing my body. "It felt like a different extension of me that I didn't know was there before. Like I flipped a different light switch," I answered. "They both touched me, and my smoke turned blue, like the Void did it all on its own."

Banner took a pen from his pocket and started scribbling down notes. "Do you think it was your hunger or fear that pushed you into switching their powers?" he asked.

It hadn't really been fear. More like the Void just had a mind of its own that I wasn't in charge of. But I didn't want to admit that, not in front of Render. "Something like that," I replied lamely.

Banner continued scribbling away before looking at his watch and sighing. "Dammit. I thought we had more time," he said, slamming the book shut. "I have to visit with Judge Braxton. We'll meet again tomorrow."

Without waiting for me to reply, he started walking toward the door. "Wait!" I yelled, making his hand pause over the door knob. He stood with his back facing me for a moment before letting out a hard sigh.

"My amulet," I said while walking forward and holding out my hand. Though what I really wanted to do was ask him to stay—to find out what was bothering him. We'd connected the first time I met him, but now he was acting strangely. Maybe he hadn't liked the way it felt when I fed from him.

"Of course, my mistake." He fished around in his pocket before tossing it over to me. I caught it and immediately put it on, securing the chain at my neck.

"See you tomorrow," I said, suddenly feeling young and immature.

"You too," he replied with a quick smile before disappearing out the classroom door.

Frowning at the closed door, I took a moment to steady myself, overanalyzing every interaction I'd had. Had he heard that Render had kissed me in the ballroom? Was that why he was acting so hot and cold? Maybe our flirty banter had pissed Banner off.

I heard a snort. "You look pathetic right now," Render said from the

opposite side of the room. Now that my Void smoke was contained by the amulet, he crossed the distance between us. “Pining over your teacher? No wonder he couldn’t wait to get out of here.”

Render’s dark chuckle made me fume. He ran his hand through his dark hair again, that nervous tic of his contradicting the cruel way he was speaking to me.

“What do you care?” I asked, turning around and crossing my arms over my chest.

“I don’t.”

“No? Then why bring it up?”

He shrugged carelessly. “Because I just wanted to remind you of your place. Even a neutralizer doesn’t want you.”

That was the heart of it, wasn’t it? Me not feeling worthy of connections or affection. I’d been alone for so long that I should be used to it by now, but still, I allowed myself to hope. Maybe Banner was just having a bad day. After all, the headmaster hated him being here, and the council was probably breathing down his neck to teach me. He was under a lot of pressure.

“Noted,” I replied coolly before walking over to my messenger bag that had my Void book inside. I hefted it over my shoulder before turning back to Render. “Are we done here?”

“We’re going to do something before I drop you off,” Render replied before flashing toward me and picking me up.

“Oh, *hell no*,” I said, trying to scramble out of his hold. It didn’t work.

He didn’t cradle me like he’d done at the vampire capital. He held me chest-to-chest, crushing me to his body while holding me several inches above the ground. I had to fight the impulse to wrap my legs around his waist.

“I don’t want to flash again!” I yelled, but it was too late. He was already turning, flashing me through the halls of Thibault, leading me to the vampire wing. Rolling waves of nausea hit me as the wind whipped my hair around in a frenzy, and I had to tuck my head into the crook of his neck to keep from getting whiplash.

He finally stopped, and I noticed we were in the wing of vampire dorms, made obvious by the fang sigil hanging up in the hall. At one of the doors, he set me down way too quickly. My body hadn’t had enough time to realize that it was no longer moving at rapid speeds. I inwardly cursed his damn powers and his damn presumptuous, controlling attitude while I struggled to

keep my empty stomach from collapsing in on itself.

“What the fuck was that for?” I seethed.

Instead of answering me, Render raised a fist and knocked on the door with a manic smile. I stood there, staring at him for a moment before a completely naked Blaire threw open her door, her perfectly rounded breasts and small pink nipples on display.

“Render!” she greeted in a sultry voice, leaning against the doorframe coyly. “Did you not get enough of me last night?” She smirked at him with heated eyes and ran her fingers down her cleavage. But her smoky demeanor crashed and burned the moment her blue eyes landed on me. “What the fuck is *she* doing here?” she demanded, her spine straightening.

“Just wanted to show her something,” Render replied before flashing forward and sinking his teeth into Blair’s neck.

I watched in part awe and horror as Blaire moaned in bliss, her mouth parting with a delighted sigh as she tipped her head back to accept his mouth on her vein. Blood dripped from Render’s lips, and he lifted his hand up to palm her breast, right there in front of me.

It pissed me the fuck off.

Not because I was angry at what they were doing, since I had no claim on him, but because I hated how it turned me on. I’d never thought of myself as a voyeur. But the way Render’s tongue darted over the blood dripping down her creamy skin, his strong hands kneading her flesh, his thigh shoved between her legs, his tempting power pulsing around me, and the way his eyes were locked on mine...it was erotic. I couldn’t look away, and his eyes held me captive.

“Oh gods,” Blaire breathed, moaning out an orgasm right there in the fucking doorway.

Vamps walked by and smiled, not even caring that he was getting her off in front of everyone. Vamps were sensual beings, known for orgies and voyeurism just as much as shifters were known for intense, dominant fucking.

Watching the way he moved, it was a safe bet that Render had a lot of experience in this department. He knew exactly how to touch a woman. His hand trailed a heated line down her stomach before plunging between her thighs. My mouth parted, my chest heaving in air as I pressed my own thighs together for some much needed friction. His venom must have been working overtime, because Blaire’s moans grew louder in tandem with his fingers.

That's when the jealousy came.

I was suddenly roiling with dark envy that he wasn't touching *me*. Jealous that I'd never have a supe's undivided attention like that. He might have kissed me last night, but it obviously meant nothing. Just a craving he had to satisfy. It was in his nature, after all.

I tore my eyes away from him and forced myself to walk away. He'd made his point. I was nothing special. Just because he craved me didn't mean that he would ever choose me. Every gulp he took of Blaire's neck proved that. Putting one foot in front of the other, I heard her orgasm again just as I turned the corner and headed down the stairs. Feeling twisted and rejected, I put distance between me and the confusing vampire.

I barely reached the last step of the stairs when a hard body slammed into my back, nearly toppling me over. "Did I say that you could walk away?" Render snarled before spinning me around to face him.

"I saw enough. I didn't want to watch anymore," I replied while staring at Blaire's blood on his lips. I bet if he cupped my cheeks, I'd be able to scent her arousal on his fingertips.

"Liar. I can smell how turned on you are."

Fine. If he wanted to do this, then I'd meet him hit for hit.

"Yeah, it was hot. But you made your point. You don't want my blood, right?" I said before biting hard into the tender spot on my lip again, causing rich red liquid to pool in my mouth. His eyes darted down, and his tongue dipped out in a hungry gesture.

"You don't want my power anywhere near you either," I went on, stepping closer to him. I brushed my breasts against his chest, causing the pebbled peaks to strain against my shirt. His hands came up to grip my waist, his fingers digging into my skin like they had a mind of their own.

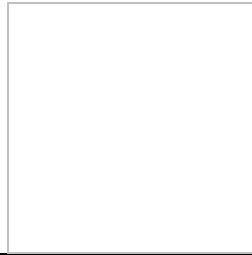
"And you don't want my body," I said, widening my stance and straddling his thigh. Oh gods, the friction was *right* there. All it would take was a little movement.

"Exactly. I don't want you," Render said with a hard swallow, sounding like he was trying to convince himself. I didn't know what was worse: him truly not wanting me or him hating who I was so much that he denied it.

"Good," I said, suddenly stepping away, making his arms fall to his sides. "Because I don't want you either, vamp."

The lie tasted like warm copper and repression.

Chapter 12



“WHY SO SAD, VOID?” Hyde asked before sitting next to me at the breakfast table the next day.

I’d purposefully kept my head down, focusing on the mushy food in front of me. No matter what I ordered from the waiters at the school, they always brought me the same damn thing: oatmeal. Everyone else got five-star fucking meals. I’d heard the chef was a fire elemental who’d seen me take away his wife’s cousin’s powers when I was thirteen. It obviously didn’t matter that I’d just been a kid, ordered to do it by the council. He hated me on principle. I played around with the mush with my spoon, not trusting that he hadn’t spit in it. It wouldn’t surprise me.

Hyde reached forward and shoved the bowl away, before sliding his own plate in front of me. It was overflowing with bacon and pancakes, smelling so godsdamned good that my mouth watered. I looked up at him before grabbing a piece of bacon and taking a bite. I had to suppress a groan at the salty warmth that flooded my mouth.

“Should I be worried that this is poisoned?” I asked with a smirk. I knew all about the paragons’ determination to get me out of the school. I didn’t think they were above food poisoning.

Hyde laughed while spinning a fork on the table. “The last thing we should be doing is making you even hungrier. I don’t want to see what happens when you’re hangry.”

I laughed under my breath before taking another bite. I hadn’t realized how truly hungry I was until that moment. I looked around the room, feeling everyone’s eyes on my back. Their stares were cruel, but the whispers that fluttered over to us were even crueler.

“Of course the *necromancer* goes to sit with her,” one shifter girl said to

her group of giggling friends. “He knows death when he sees it.”

“He’s probably going to see if he can resurrect her wardrobe. She looks like something my cat dragged in.” Snickers followed.

“It’s either her or zombies. He probably prefers the corpses.” More tittering, more whispers.

A vampire clique walked by, led by none other than Blaire. “Poor Render has to babysit *her*,” she said scathingly, and I carefully watched her out of the corner of my eye. “He told me last night that she keeps hitting on him. It’s pathetic. Did you see how she embarrassed herself at the ball? Pathetic. She practically slit her wrists and jumped him.” Her group of friends laughed, and I envisioned letting my Void out and really giving them something to laugh about.

Hyde continued to spin his fork, and it was the focal point of my stare as my ears burned. “I’m assuming it would be pointless to tell you not to worry about the opinions of others?” he asked.

I learned a long time ago that I’d be hated wherever I went. Humans didn’t understand their fear of me. My mother loathed me for taking away everything she cared about. And supers feared that I would drain them. I accepted that hatred. It was just a natural part of who I was. But just because I accepted that, it didn’t mean that it didn’t hurt. Maybe it was all my time in the human world that made me weak, but I absorbed their insults under my skin like poison. What I should be doing was using them to build up a brick wall around my soul. Never trust. Never open myself up. Alone was the only way to go.

“Why are you sitting with me?” I asked, flicking my eyes up at Hyde’s white, messy hair and silver eyes. I could watch him all day. The way he moved and spoke was different than anyone else I’d ever met. It didn’t hurt that he was painfully handsome. Even the necro mark, with its connected tattoos along his neck, was a huge turn on against his tanned skin. I wanted to lick it. I frowned at myself and dropped my eyes at that thought. What the hell was my problem? I didn’t just go around wanting to lick people. That wasn’t normal.

“I’m on duty, of course,” Hyde replied. His blunt response made me chew on the bacon even harder. I wanted to slap myself for hoping that he would say something consoling like he just wanted to come sit with me. Silly me. “Besides, you’re entertaining. No matter what we throw at you, you don’t budge. I could use a little bit of that steely resolve.”

My ears perked slightly at that. Entertaining was better than...every other attention I'd gotten so far. "Can we get out of here?" I asked before swiping a few more pieces of bacon and standing up. I was still hungry but didn't want to sit in the cafeteria and listen to everyone talk about me.

"I thought you'd never ask," Hyde replied before standing up too. My eyes took in the way his school uniform hugged his frame. He was pretty fit for a self-proclaimed zombie king. "We have about thirty minutes until class. Wanna go for a walk? I have an idea of something you might like to do. Something fun."

My risk demon blood sat up at attention. Something fun? I could use something fun.

"But it'll be breaking a few school rules," Hyde went on as I followed him out of the cafeteria. "If word gets out, I'll blame it all on you," he added, causing my demon risk side to practically yip in excitement. Rule breaking? *Count me in.*

"Deal," I replied as he started leading me through the winding school. I had no idea where we were going, but I didn't really care.

To my surprise, he brought me over to a classroom, walking right in like he owned the place. Unlike most of the other rooms, there were no windows inside, and it was kept noticeably cooler. I clasped my hands around my arms, trying to keep the chill away. "Geez, it's freaking cold in here." Good thing I'd worn one of my thicker bras, or my nipples would've been on full display behind my uniform dress shirt. I pulled the blazer tighter around me.

I eyed the wall of oversized, built-in, metal cabinets as Hyde walked over to them. When he snapped open the clasp and pulled it open, my mouth dropped open in shock. "Wait...Tell me that's not..."

I didn't even have to finish my sentence because, yep, that was *definitely* a drawerful of one *very* dead corpse. My eyes widened in horror as realization dawned. Every metal cabinet was probably filled with more corpses in this makeshift morgue.

"We're in a necromancer classroom, aren't we?"

Hyde brushed back his white hair. "Where else would I get a fresh corpse?"

"Right. How stupid of me," I said dryly.

Yanking open several more doors, he looked at me from over his shoulder. "Well, don't just stand there. Help roll out the cadavers."

I didn't care how hot the dude was, that was *not* something every girl

wanted to hear.

I took a deep breath and walked over, grabbed hold of the cold metal handle, and pulled. I kept my eyes averted, only glancing quickly down at the body bag before moving on to the next drawer. The next three were considerably smaller bags in varying arrangements, obviously animals of some kind.

As soon as we had all the drawers opened, Hyde put his hands up, and red magic flowed out of his palms. It poured out of him, sweeping straight to the dead bodies.

After a few minutes, he managed to resurrect every single body, and soon, zombies were unzipping their body bags from the inside, while the animals were using their claws or snouts to pop them open.

I blinked at the motley crew of undead as they gathered around us. A human granny wearing a paisley muumuu, an overweight dude with tobacco stains on his teeth, and a collection of animals, from an antlered reindeer and a bear cub to a chipmunk and a lounge of lizards. They were all completely zombified, all blank stares and jerky movements.

"I probably should've asked this before, but why did you just resurrect two dozen dead bodies?"

Hyde scoffed. "Like I'd ruin the surprise."

He patted the dead dude on the shoulder, making his collarbone pop through his skin. "Huh. He must've been deader than I realized," he said conversationally.

A snort escaped my throat before I could stop it. "Necro problems."

"Indeed," he agreed seriously. "Come on," he said, turning on his heel. "My magic won't last long with this many, and we have a ways to go."

"Umm, seriously, where are we going with all these...things? Someone is going to notice!"

"Stop trying to ruin the surprise."

He made his way across the classroom, holding the door open, and the zombies filed out in a perfect line. "Hold hands, children. We don't want to lose anyone!" He called over his shoulder at them before snaking his fingers through mine. I glanced back at them, and sure enough, they gingerly held hands, their vacant eyes staring straight ahead. They were very well behaved.

We passed the buzzing cafeteria, another hallway of shifter classrooms, and went all the way up two flights of stairs to Headmaster Torne's office. Once I realized where we were, I tried to tug my hand free of Hyde's, but his

grip stayed firm. "What are we doing here?" I hissed.

"Don't tell me you're afraid to get caught?" he replied in a louder voice than I was comfortable with. I snapped my head around to check and make sure there wasn't anyone nearby.

"You realize they're just looking for an excuse to kick me out, right?" I asked, though adrenaline flooded me from my risk demon cravings. "You're probably tricking me! You suggested to the other paragons to get me caught up in shit so that the headmaster could kick me out!" I whisper-yelled.

Hyde blinked. "I suggested that before I met you."

I scoffed. "So?"

"So...I don't want you to get kicked out anymore."

My mouth dropped open in shock. Hyde had never really been awful to me, but I didn't think he thought about me differently than the other paragons. "Wait...what?"

"Don't worry," he said. "Stay here with the corpses. I'm just going to grab something real quick." And with that, Hyde snuck into Headmaster Torne's office.

I breathed out a sigh of frustration. "Can you believe this guy?" I asked the zombies incredulously. They were all still holding hands, just staring at the wall. The dude beside me had a string of drool running down his lip. "Great. Now I'm talking to not-dead dead people," I grumbled. I wrinkled my nose. "You guys stink."

I heard rustling on the other side of the door and held my breath while Hyde did...well, whatever it was that Hyde was doing. I had half a mind to leave him there. I didn't want to be caught by the headmaster. Just as I'd gotten the sense to ditch this scene, the door opened and Hyde appeared with a...guitar? What the actual fuck?

"Did you know he plays?"

I stared at him with disbelief. "Plays what?"

"The guitar, silly," he answered before strolling past me and back toward the staircase where we just were. "And they call me unobservant, ha!"

Now I was really curious. "What are you doing with Headmaster Torne's guitar?" I asked while catching up. The zombies dutifully followed.

Hyde started tuning the strings by ear, adjusting the tone as he hummed along. Once we got to the bottom step, he answered me. "Well, we can't have a concert without an instrument," he answered before rolling his eyes.

"A concert?"

“Do you always ask a lot of questions?”

“Do you ever really answer them?”

“Touché, Void.”

He continued to lead his little parade until we were outside, the cool, Washington air brushed our skin as he started strumming a tune I recognized. It was catchy and upbeat. “Now the first rule of necromancy,” he began once we got to the gazebo where Banner and I had practiced unleashing my Void. “Never disrespect the dead. Making them live out your boyband fantasies is a definite no-no,” he instructed. He did some weird wrist flick, pouring out more red magic, and the zombies lined up and started synchronized dancing as he played the guitar. “But zombie river dancing is acceptable.”

“Oh. My. Gods.” My mouth dropped open in shock as the bulky zombie dude started to clap his hands in time to the music. Hyde’s voice sang the lyrics embarrassingly off-key. The zombies were slowed down and off beat, the movements sluggish and disjointed, and their river dancing was *terrible*. But it was fucking hysterical.

One of the zombies did a little spin before dropping into the splits, and I grimaced at the sound of breaking bones and tearing muscle. Once he crawled himself back up into a standing position, he started limping from side to side with the music, shaking his hips. Even the animals were dancing, twitching their tails, clapping their paws, bobbing their furry little heads. It was...well, it was weird as fuck. But it was fun, too.

Hyde started picking the strings while biting his lip, spreading his stance wide while he rotated his arm and nodded his head. “You gonna dance, Void? This is better than that damn ball they made us attend.”

Hyde set down his guitar and moved over to me, continuing to belt out whatever song he was singing. I was pretty sure it was something from the ghoulish band that was popular in the super world. As soon as he got in front of me, he grabbed my hands and spun me around. My ankles crossed, and I felt myself falling, but his arms wrapped around my waist to stop me, and then pulled me closer to him instead. “You’re terribly uncoordinated. This didn’t go nearly how I envisioned it.”

“Sorry to be a disappointment,” I joked while looking him in his silver eyes. Up close, I could see how his nose was slightly crooked and his teeth were straight. I watched, captivated, as his pink tongue flicked out to taste his bottom lip. I couldn’t stop thinking about how he said he didn’t want me gone. Had he been telling the truth?

“You’re crazy, necromancer,” I whispered just as the zombies dropped with a thud on the grass, making me jump at the dull sound. All life had fled their bodies. We were surrounded by dead-again corpses, Hyde was still humming and attempting to make me dance, and all I wanted to do was kiss his full lips.

“There’s that smile,” he said in a whisper. “I know the idiots of this school haven’t been welcoming, but I happen to like having you around for some reason.” I scrunched my nose up at his choice of words but didn’t comment on it. Was he like Render? Regretfully drawn to me for some inexplicable reason? “Don’t look so upset,” he added, like he could read my thoughts. “What I mean is, I don’t like anyone. The dead are much more fun to be around. Unlike the other paragons, I happen to think this school could be good for you.”

“Why aren’t you scared of me?” I asked.

“What’s there to be afraid of?”

I was starting to realize that Hyde liked to answer my questions with even more questions.

“Aren’t you worried I’ll take your powers?” I pushed. I needed to understand his motives; were the guys trying some good cop, bad cop routine?

“You can never really steal death from a person, Devicka. It’s an inevitable part of us all, regardless of immortality.”

His words made me pause. He had a different view of the world. “Okay.”

“I drop a philosophical bombshell in your lap, and you reply with *okay*? I’m pulling out all the stops here. A little swooning would be appreciated.” He chuckled before running a hand through his white hair.

In that moment, my heart swelled. Hyde wanted to make me swoon?

Before I could stop it, I found myself lifting up onto my tiptoes. Then I was leaning in, brushing my lips against his. I’d been with guys before, but this was different, I had the fear of rejection heavy on my back. When my lips touched his, he froze, not moving. Feeling embarrassed and awkward, I quickly pulled away.

“I-I’m sorry, I shouldn’t ha—”

My words were cut off when Hyde grabbed my cheeks and slammed his lips to mine. I was so shocked that I didn’t move for a second, but then I gasped in his mouth, my eyes fluttering closed, and he consumed me. His sweeping tongue tasted like the syrup from breakfast, a hint of orange juice

still on his lips. He let out a pleasant hum as we kissed, his chest vibrating as he threaded his hands through my hair and pressed his other hand lower down my back.

My heart beat faster and faster as we licked and sucked and tasted each other. I had never felt more *alive*. It was like all the destructive things I felt about myself were starting to fade away, leaving me with confidence and desire. I could feel how much he wanted me, and it reminded me of how Render had had that same thirst. Gritt, too, when I'd fed from him. These paragons...they left me a jumbled mess of emotions while my body thrived from every connection.

His teeth nipped my upper lip, and he tugged slightly before drifting his hand to find the curve of my ass. Squeezing with his long fingers, he yanked me even closer to his towering body. I could feel his hardness pressing against my stomach through the thickness of his uniform pants, and I lifted a leg up, wrapping my body even more around him.

The movement must have caught him off guard, because he pulled back, leaving us both panting. He stared down at me, looking almost surprised at how caught up we'd been. He leaned down, pressing his lips against my forehead before releasing me. "I've never been much of an exhibitionist, Devicka," he whispered over my skin, and I looked up at him in confusion.

"What?"

Pulling back, he smiled at me before gesturing over his shoulder where the corpses still were. "I mean, I'm down to try anything once, I just don't think I want the dead hearing you scream my name. And if we don't stop this now, that's *exactly* what will happen." I tilted my head back and laughed at his serious expression before lifting up to kiss his chin.

"So you'll make them dance to your terrible singing, but public orgasms are off the table?"

He laughed and then pulled away even further, adjusting his pants as he did. "Let's get them back before anyone notices, yes?"

"Just please don't make them dance again. They were awful at it. Your singing could use some work, too," I smirked.

Hyde clutched his chest in mock outrage. "You wound me, Void."

"You make me laugh, necromancer."

"Good. Told you I'd get you to have some fun. I knew you could use more of that in your life."

"You were right. I never knew hanging out with corpses would be so

awesome.”

He grinned. “Stick with me, babe, and you’ll learn.”

Chapter 13



"I NEED the feral cabin for the night," a stern voice called out from the shadows of my cabin the moment I opened the door to my shack. I jumped in surprise at the voice, but inwardly kicked myself at my transparent reaction.

I was exhausted. I'd spent all day dodging angry paragons and cruel students, trying to catch up in classes that made an example out of me, or I had to wait in the hall, listening from outside the door, since some of the teachers flat-out refused to allow me inside.

After a week of torture, I just wanted to rest and call Reed. I seriously needed a fucking cell phone. He must be worried sick. I even tried to ask someone if I could borrow theirs yesterday, I'd been so damn desperate. The dude had looked at me like I had three heads before scurrying away from me. I was about to break into one of the teacher's staff rooms and use one of their phones if I couldn't figure out something else.

But now, when all I wanted to do was talk to a real friend and relax in bed, I had a freaking intruder in my cabin.

I sighed and shut the door behind me. "Gritt. I'm exhausted and need to sleep. Can't we play your games another time?" I asked, walking over to my bed and sitting down.

Gritt straightened up from where he was perched on my desk. "This isn't a game, Void. One of my unbonded bobcat shifters is in heat. She needs to stay here, or she'll drive all the other shifters crazy." He looked around the cabin before kicking at the chains in the ground. A shifter in heat was a force to be reckoned with, it only happened every couple of years, but it was like one giant horny beacon screaming, "FUCK ME PLEASE!"

I could relate to the impulse, not that I was admitting that anytime soon.

"So where do you expect me to sleep? Out in the forest?" I asked,

crossing my arms. I stood up and started rolling up my blankets, already knowing the answer to that. I'd been camping in the past; maybe I could make a tent and stare at the stars all night. At least I could escape the smell of this moldy cabin. Cheddar jumped from his spot on my pillow and ran down the comforter to get out of my way, brushing my ankle in greeting before heading over to Gritt, who looked scared to death of the undead rat.

"What the fuck is *that*?" he asked, backing up a step. I had to stifle a laugh.

"My pet rat. His name is Cheddar. Is one of your animals an elephant? I've heard they're afraid of mice," I joked while grabbing a plastic sack to stuff my outfits in.

"I've never heard that. And I don't fear rats, Void," Gritt said on an exhale before cautiously stepping back to where he'd been. I laughed again, earning a glower from Gritt. "What are you doing?" he asked as I grabbed my things and headed toward the door.

"What does it look like? You're kicking me out of the cabin, so I'm going to find a place to sleep for the night," I answered. There was a slight bite to my tone as I spoke. If he wanted to make me leave, then I wasn't going to be pleasant about it.

"*Teacher Selik* isn't here right now," Gritt snapped, and I had to stop to gawk at him.

"I'm not running to Banner's room," I replied with an eye roll, deciding not to mention that we hadn't even spoken very much lately. "I'm just going to set up camp somewhere outside."

Gritt scoffed. "Over my dead fucking body," he said while standing up, making Cheddar run to the makeshift bed I'd made for him out of an old box I'd found. Smart rat.

I cocked a blonde brow. "Careful, Gritt, you're starting to sound like you care about me." I watched as he carefully maneuvered around Cheddar's home before storming toward me.

"Stop being a fucking martyr, it's unattractive. We wouldn't make you sleep outside."

"Really?" I asked, dropping my blankets and clothes and poking his chest with my index finger. "Because the kitchen staff won't give me real food. The students keep threatening me, and all my teachers keep kicking me out of class. So excuse me if I expect to get kicked to the curb and have to fend for myself. It's not like I had a real place to stay anyways. You *do* realize that

this cabin is barely habitable, right?”

Gritt had the decency to look a little ashamed, but the flash of pity on his face disappeared as soon as it came. “Maybe you should start fighting back,” he grumbled.

“And become what everyone accuses me of being? Give Headmaster Torne an excuse to kick me out?” I shook my head. “Nice try, asshole. You can’t get rid of me with mind games,” I said before turning to walk away.

“For fuck’s sake!” Gritt yelled, reaching out to stop me by grabbing both my hips, keeping me steady in his hands. “I’m not trying to...gods, you’re *infuriating*.” Gritt closed his eyes and started whispering to himself, something about a fucking mate bond and camping outside, exposed to the elements. “I’m just saying that you’re obviously resourceful and smart. Find ways around it all. Stand up for yourself.”

I looked down at his large, rough hands where they grabbed me. He was so masculine and fierce, and there was a possessive gleam in his eye that I wanted to wrap myself in. I knew that the mate bond was driving his protective instincts, but instead of fighting it, I wished that he would be okay with this bond. I wished that he would accept me.

“You’ve really got to figure out what you want, Gritt. One second you’re threatening me, and the next you’re acting like you care. This is all crazy.”

Gritt squeezed me harder. His hands had bunched up my t-shirt, and now all I could feel were his rough fingertips digging into my skin. “Don’t I know it,” Gritt whispered.

I stared at him for a moment before deciding to take his advice. “You want me to be resourceful? You want me not to be a martyr? Fine. Take me to your room,” I said with challenge.

I saw his throat bob, and I wanted to lift up on my tiptoes and lick the sexy Adam’s apple that bobbed below his blond scruff. “If you care so much, then I’ll sleep there tonight. And if you’re nice, I might even share the bed.”

I waited, seeing how he would respond. I expected Gritt to put up a fight, to argue and tell me that there was no way in hell that he’d let the nasty Void into his shifter dorms. I expected rejection. But instead, a slight purring made his chest vibrate as he stepped even closer. I gasped when I felt his hard erection press against me. “Okay.”

I blinked at him. “*Okay?*” I clarified, my earlier confidence fleeing my body.

“But no feeding. Last time...it was too much. My animals lost their

godsdamned minds,” Gritt said before putting distance between us once again. It was on the edge of my tongue to ask him what he meant by that. Last time we’d spoken, he’d denied that there was any pull between us. I knew what he was thinking—that he’d rather spend his life alone than accept a mate bond with the Void.

“No feeding,” I heard myself promise. My heart beat fast in my chest. Was I really doing this? Was I really going to spend the night with him? Gritt was...well, Gritt. He was wild and rough and hot and mean. Only, there was another side of him, too. He just tried not to let that side deal with me. But the softer, protective, and sweeter side was there. I just *knew* it. And I realized, with a jolt, that I wanted to get to know that side. I wanted him to lower his walls so that I could see him. All of him.

Maybe challenging him to spend the night with me was odd, considering that he’d once attacked me, but the pull between us couldn’t be ignored, and despite everything, when Gritt was around, I felt...*what the hell did I feel?* Better? Comforted? No, those weren’t quite right. I guess, when he was around, I felt more...connected. Like he was the other end of a shoelace, and we were supposed to be tangled up together.

“Come on, then. I told my shifter an hour ago that she could come down, so she’ll be here soon. We should get going.”

“Okay,” I said.

“But the damn rat stays here.”

“And let him get eaten by a feral shifter, no way!”

Gritt glowered at me, crossing his big muscular arms in front of him.

“*Fine*,” I said with a huff. I turned and scooped up Cheddar, little bed and all. “Come on, little cheese, you can sleep outside tonight.”

Once I got Cheddar settled near the base of a tree, certain he was plenty comfy with moss in his bed, I followed a grumbling Gritt back to the academy, chuckling at his “damn rat” talk.

It took us a little while to get all the way back to the shifter dorms since they were located in a separate building with specific amenities for the different types of shifter animals. At the lower level, there were massive, deep pools for oceanic animals, and the entire outside of the building was full of trees and plants, some of them even growing through the roofs and windows. It was like the dorms were built around the forest instead of bulldozing its way on top of it.

“This is beautiful,” I said before following him through the doors.

Naturally, shifters started to sneer and growl the moment we walked inside, some of them even baring their teeth at Gritt. He snapped back, letting his paragon power roll through the building with authority.

“My room is this way,” he said before leading me down a corridor filled with vines. Moss covered the doors and walls, and instead of room numbers, there were carved rocks on each door. He stopped at a door at the end of the hallway and opened it slowly, pausing in the threshold of the door to address me. “Don’t touch anything. Don’t mess with my stuff. I’m very...territorial.”

“You don’t say?” I teased, pushing past his bulky frame to go inside.

Gritt’s room was impressive. It had a traditional design with large windows looking out onto the field, making the room seem even bigger than it already was. The room was massive, with vaulted ceilings held up by solid wooden beams. It felt more like an upscale apartment than a shifter dorm room.

“Are all the rooms like this?” I asked in awe before walking over to a comfy chair near the fireplace.

“Being a paragon has its perks. But Thibault took great care to design the shifter dorms in accordance to particular animals’ needs. You don’t want to see the cat hallway. Balls of yarn *everywhere*.”

I chuckled at that. “But you have four animals,” I said thoughtfully, a hint of prying in my tone. I desperately wanted to know what kind of animals he had prowling under his skin.

“Mm-hmm.”

Nope. He wasn’t giving me anything.

My hand trailed over the back of the chair before I meandered over to the table, my eyes locking onto the book there that was titled *Mate Bonds: How They’re Formed & How They’re Terminated*.

Seeing what I was looking at, Gritt quickly walked over and slammed his hand down on the cover, but it was too late. “Light reading, huh?” I asked. I tried to sound flippant, like it didn’t bother me that he was reading a book about how you could terminate a mate bond. I’m not sure I pulled it off though, because Gritt just coughed and looked away.

“I can’t deny that my pull to you is...alarming,” he replied as he walked over to a pile of clothes and picked them up. He hurriedly tossed them into a hamper before straightening the bright blue comforter on his bed. He was...tidying up. I tried not to smile at the small form of courtesy he was showing me.

“Alarming? What did the book say?” I asked.

Gritt walked over to the large window and stared outside. I watched his back as he clenched and unclenched his fists at his side. “The book said that with a mate bond, there’s a pull. Like you want to be near them all the time. That’s the first step,” he explained, his voice low.

I walked over to him and positioned myself at his side. Another purr escaped his throat when our arms brushed, and he quickly increased the space between us once he realized what was happening.

“Then what?”

“Then...if the bond was settling, I’d be able to sense when my mate is in danger. Or hurting. Basically any intense emotions, I’d be able to feel it.”

I hummed. “Interesting.” I wondered if he felt when Render kissed me or when Hyde put on his little undead show and my desire had ratcheted up. “And then what?”

“Last, I’d get a mate mark on my skin. I’d know that my animals made their choice, and that super would be it for me,” he said. “It normally only happens between shifters, but my brother mated with a vamp. They kept it secret for a while to avoid prejudice between our breeds, but I guess the cat’s out of the bag now.”

At that revelation, we both went silent. His brother was a majority of the reason he hated me, but I couldn’t help the blooming of hope that sprung out of my chest. Maybe Gritt would be...okay with mating with the Void.

Part of me felt bad for him. We were virtual strangers, and the bond, though powerful and usually perfect, was a life sentence. Add the layer of my Void and his future with the council, and we were a recipe for disaster. Not to mention, I still felt drawn to Hyde, Render, and even Quade. Even if Gritt refused to accept the bond, would he be okay exploring other options? I wasn’t ignorant enough to hope for a future with men that didn’t want me, but I hoped one day to settle down with someone that could look past the Void and see me—the real me.

“So...how do you stop it? I’m assuming that’s why you’re reading that book. To find out how,” I finally said after a long, awkward silence. At my words, Gritt clutched his chest like the idea physically hurt him.

“Distance. Time. Sheer will power. I’ve read three research papers *and* that book from cover to cover. There’s only one instance of a shifter that successfully broke a mate bond, and it nearly killed him.”

My heart sank. I didn’t know how to feel about all of this, nor was I

mentally capable of it right now. “I should go,” I whispered before turning away from the window to grab my duffle bag. Bonds were revered across supernatural factions, but I didn’t want it like this. I didn’t want to make this even harder on him than it already was. He clearly wanted distance so that the bond could break. I should let him have it.

“No,” Gritt said quickly. “Please stay.” He coughed to hide the pleading in his voice, but I caught it. “I uh...I’m on duty tonight,” he added lamely. “We can’t have you stealing anyone’s powers.” His excuse lacked the usual bite he reserved for me, and I turned to face him, surprised.

“You sure? Because I can go. I can find Hyde or maybe Render...”

“No,” he said in a rush. “Stay.”

I regarded his tense face for a moment before nodding. “Okay, Gritt. You can keep an eye on me,” I replied. His entire expression relaxed, and he let out a relieved breath.

I walked over to the attached bathroom so that I could get ready for bed, hiding a smile between my teeth. Once I shut the door, I smiled at myself in the mirror before shaking it off again. Gritt wanted me to stay. I’d seen the truth of that in his green eyes. What that meant exactly, I wasn’t sure, but it was something.

Staring at the mirror, I took in the brown-eyed girl in front of me. She looked tired. Bright. Dim. Alive. Everything and nothing. I tried to see if, behind the Void, there was something worthy of a paragon’s bond. Maybe. Maybe. Maybe.

I quickly changed into my oversized sweats before brushing my teeth and hair. I was just finishing when Gritt yelled from the other side of the door. “You coming or what?”

I twisted the door handle and jumped when I saw him standing right on the other side, nostrils flaring and eyes hooded with heat.

“I’m going to shower now,” he said before walking past me. Our bodies brushed against one another, and I practically melted at the hard feel of his muscles pushed against mine. I quickly passed him before I did something ridiculous, like swoon on the spot or press my hands against his chest. “A *fucking cold shower*,” he added once he thought I was out of ear shot.

Another smile escaped me as he shut the door behind him. When the water turned on in the bathroom, I took advantage of the brief privacy and looked around his room, looking for clues to explain who Gritt was. I stopped at his nightstand and frowned at the framed photo there. I picked it up and

took a good look at the two men poised in the photo. It was of Gritt and his brother, I was sure of it. They looked similar; both wore broad smiles, both had that alpha look in their eyes. Gritt had his arm slung over his brother's shoulder, and I could tell they were close.

Despite everything, I felt guilty for what happened at the council center. Tearing a shifter away from his animal was an awful thing to do, and I hated knowing that I hurt someone close to Gritt. I was still looking at the photo when the bathroom door opened again a few minutes later. I quickly put the photo back down before spinning around to stare at Gritt. He was clutching a white towel around his waist as rivulets of water trailed down his tan six pack. I involuntarily licked my lips.

"Put your tongue back in your mouth, Void," he said with a satisfied smile before walking over to his dresser and dropping his towel. My mouth fell open as he spun around and gifted me with a generous view of his impressive ass.

Infuriatingly sexy shifter.

I was salivating for him as I watched him put on his tight boxer briefs before heading back over to where I was standing. "I thought I told you not to touch my stuff," he said before brushing past me to adjust the picture frame on his desk a millimeter from where I'd set it. His skin was cool where it touched mine, proving that he did, in fact, take a cold shower.

I wasn't sure what came over me, but the words spilled out before I could stop them. "I promise to return your brother's powers back to him."

Gritt's face went completely still, and I bit my tongue so hard that blood filled my mouth. I had no right to be making promises I wasn't sure I could keep. I didn't understand the Void, didn't understand what it was capable of or if it was even possible, but I wanted to try. I *had* to try.

"Let's go to bed, Void," Gritt said, emotion coating his voice.

I spotted a couch in the corner and started to make my way over to it, but Gritt grabbed my wrist and pulled me down to his California King sized mattress.

"Not a word," he whispered into my ear before guiding me down to the pillow and tucking me beneath his feather soft comforter. Shifting to the other side of the bed, he turned his back to me.

"Goodnight, Gritt," I whispered back, not sure if this meant we had a truce or not.

"Not a word, Void," he reminded me.

I smiled into the pillow.

Chapter 14



I HALF EXPECTED this class to have a cool name like *Defense Against the Dark Arts*, or *Mystical Training for the Magical*.

But no. The defense class's name was just as mundane as it was for humans: P.E.

Although, I had a feeling that Thibault's idea of physical education was different than the humans'.

"You're in the vamp's P.E. class, isn't that funny?" Gritt asked while circling me, his feet crossing over themselves as he directed me toward the gymnasiums. I'd woken up extra early so I could slink out of his room for my walk of shame back to the school. Except I wasn't ashamed one bit. Not even a tickle of shame passed off my skin as I walked out of his dorm room that morning with him in tow.

All night, we'd slept in the same bed, an invisible line separating us. I found myself rolling over a bunch of times last night, dying to touch him just once. Dying to close the distance. I was constantly craving him, burning hot with desire, and there was no way to put it out.

"Why is that funny?" I asked him, watching the weightless way he moved—fluid, like hovering smoke. Like the Void, almost.

"Because you both drain things dry," he laughed before coming to a dead stop, making me run into his toned back just outside a set of wooden double doors at the opposite end of the cafeteria. "Watch yourself in there," he added before spinning around and leaning down. His nose brushed against mine, making both of us smile, him because he seemed genuinely amused by the contact, and me because I wasn't sure what to make of this playful side of him. He'd woken up like this—all peppy and shit. It was freaking me out.

"Why are you in such a good mood?" I demanded, running a fingertip

over the tingly spot on my nose where we'd touched.

"I'm not," he answered quickly.

A smile broke out over my face. "Yeah, you are. You're totally happy."

"Psh," he scoffed, straightening up and trying to play it off. "I don't know what you're talking about. I'm grumpy like always."

"Mm-hmm," I said, unconvinced despite how hard he was trying to force a scowl.

"I am!" he insisted.

I shrugged. "I think it's nice to see this side of you. Whatever caused it, I like it."

Gritt's fake scowl dropped, and his green eyes ran over my face. We stood still in the silence for a second, just studying each other with half smiles on our faces. It wasn't just him. Despite the fact that I was about to be forced to train with vampires, I'd woken up beside Gritt this morning and had the advantage of seeing his sleepy face, his bed head, and his relaxed, gorgeous body sprawled out over the blankets. He'd looked so good and so peaceful that I hadn't been able to stop myself from reaching over and brushing a lock of his wild blond hair off his face and letting my fingers graze lightly over his scruff.

Just for a moment, while he was still asleep, I thought about pressing my lips to his. I'd wanted to so badly. But before I could muster the courage, his hot, huge hand had reached out and clamped over my waist. He'd tugged me into his body, our warmth pressing against each other. I'd gone rigid at the contact, wondering if he was about to wake up and shove me away, but he hadn't. We'd stayed like that for another ten minutes until I'd finally slipped out of bed. Maybe it was a bit pathetic, but I'd basked in the contact. I'd even snuggled in closer to his side. Maybe that was what had put us in such good moods. A girl could hope.

Gritt shrugged, shoving his hands into the pockets of his uniform slacks. I couldn't help but notice the bulge at the front of his pants that he was sporting this morning. "Need to chop some wood later?" I quipped.

He winced. "Don't say chop when you're talking about my dick."

I laughed, but Gritt just shook his head at me and adjusted the front of his pants. "Anyway, Render should be in this class to watch you. I'll just stay till he gets here, then I have my own class to get to."

I tried hard not to let the disappointment cross over my face at hearing that he was leaving.

“This class is probably gonna suck.”

I laughed again. “Is that a vampire joke? And for the record, *all* of my classes so far have sucked,” I pointed out.

“Yeah, but it seems like the vamps hate you even more. I think it’s because you’re like a mirror.”

My eyes squinted in confusion. “What do you mean?”

“You’re both takers,” he replied with a casual shrug like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

I blew out a breath. “Right,” I replied.

Maybe sensing my nervousness, Gritt suddenly reached down and laced his fingers through mine. I gasped at the contact, my eyes shooting up to look at him. He smirked down at me, noticing the blush of heat on my cheeks, and then turned and yanked open the door and strolled inside the gymnasium, tugging me behind him like a reluctant pet. I had every intention of keeping my gaze down, but I couldn’t help but observe the room full of strong vamps staring at us with gaping mouths and angry eyes.

Gritt stopped short and turned to me, cursing under his breath. “Oh, shit! I gotta go check up on my bobcat shifter.” He looked around but obviously didn’t see the vampire he was looking for. “Render should be here soon. I’ll come back to make sure he showed up,” he said quietly before leaning down and pressing his lips against my temple.

I stood there, shocked and frozen, gaping at him as he turned to leave. Partly because he just kissed me—*in front of everyone*—but also because...

“You can’t just leave me here!” I hissed at his retreating back.

But he’d already slipped out of the room, and the door closed with a heavy thud that echoed throughout the huge gym. I felt that shit in my godsdamned bones. “Fucking shifter,” I mumbled under my breath. I was seriously debating ditching this class until Gritt came back, but a voice stopped me before I could even try to make my escape.

“Void, you’re late.” I turned to face the teacher and the few dozen vampires sitting on the maroon bleachers. “The lesson was just getting started.” He was dressed like a typical gym instructor. He had windbreaker pants tied tightly around his waist, and an oversized gold athletic jacket with the school’s crest over his chest. I immediately didn’t trust him, mostly because I didn’t like gym teachers on principle. Anyone that forced me to run automatically made my shit list. But there was something about the sinister gleam in his gray eyes that had me wanting to run for the door.

“I’m Coach Willis. We were just going over vampire attack methods. Have a seat.”

I quickly crossed the gym and found a spot on the front row. I had to be careful when I chose seats. If I picked one of the top rows in the back, I’d risk someone tripping me on my way up. Plus, I’d have to endure everyone twisting in their seats to stare at me. I preferred to be off to one side, but I didn’t want everyone to think I was weak, so front and center was the best bet.

Of course, Blaire was sitting on that row, but I didn’t notice until I’d already sat down. Dammit.

Her legs were crossed to show off the short length of her uniform skirt. She’d have to be careful standing up, because one wrong move, and we’d all be seeing her vag. Although, maybe the entire student population had already seen it. Blaire kind of had that easy seductress vibe going on.

I’d barely gotten settled in my seat when the coach walked up to me. “Void. Can you tell me what happens to a victim when bitten by a vampire?”

My cheeks flooded in embarrassment and other vampires around me snickered. My memory flashed back to Render’s kiss at the ball, and the way he’d drawn me in at Vampire Headquarters and licked my wound. It had been...erotic. If I closed my eyes, I could still feel the pleasure coursing through my veins, making me wish I could wrap myself around his body and dry hump him into oblivion. I was embarrassed about giving in so easily to that pleasure, but the chemistry between us was too strong to ignore. Not that I was going to admit that right now to Coach Willis in front of everyone, so I decided that the safest bet was to play ignorant. I didn’t want rumors spreading that I was Render’s blood whore, despite knowing that everyone saw. Technically, Render had never initiated biting me. But when his teeth had dug into my tongue and lip, I’d learned the meaning of bliss. When a vampire bit you with their venom, it was said to be one of the best feelings in the world.

“I don’t know,” I lied.

Everyone laughed at my answer, a few scoffed. One girl with long brown hair and black lipstick gagged in disgust like the idea of drinking from me was revolting. “Yes, well, I assume living with humans your entire life wouldn’t allow for many opportunities.” Coach Willis’s voice was gruff and humorless.

My knee bounced, revealing my anxiety. I wished Render or Gritt would

get in here. Weird. When did I start thinking of them as allies?

Coach Willis whirled around, returning to the center of the gym. “Come up here, Void,” he ordered while pointing at the shiny floor beside him.

Dammit. I didn’t want to stand up. I wanted to sink into the bleacher seats and pretend I wasn’t really here.

“Why?” I asked warily.

I wasn’t sure why I asked. Probably because I had a death wish. Or maybe it was all my years of having an issue with authority figures. Mistress Cock could definitely attest to that. Coach Willis gave me a sneer, probably imagining the many ways he wanted to murder me. His fangs popped out slightly, letting me know that my guess wasn’t far off.

“I didn’t realize I had to give you a reason,” Coach Willis snapped. It was then that I realized he had an angry Southern accent, the type of drawl that he tried to hold back but couldn’t when his emotions were heightened. It was a deeply Southern twang, one you’d only hear in movies or in some backwoods town in Oklahoma. “How about you get your ass up here and do what I say? Otherwise I’ll have Headmaster Torne deal with you.”

I gritted my teeth. He knew damn well that by tattling on me to the headmaster, Torne would act like it was justification for expulsion. Maybe before, I’d just wanted to stay here so I could actually learn about my powers and have the chance to practice, but now, I had other reasons for wanting to stay. I wanted to figure out why I was so drawn to the paragons, to figure out why feeding from Gritt was different, plus our mate bond and Render’s craving for me. I didn’t want to leave yet.

“Look at her, too scared to go up,” Blaire whispered to a friend, making them all laugh.

I twisted in my seat to look behind me at the rows of vamps just waiting for an excuse to tear me down. Fuck that.

Standing up, I adjusted my skirt before tossing Blaire a wink and walking toward Coach Willis. Once I stood next to him, Coach Willis got a little gleam in his eye. He turned back toward the bleachers, scanning them. “Peaches, come here and help me demonstrate something, please?” he asked, gesturing toward a girl sitting up front.

I had to hold back a snort at her name. Peaches? Who the fuck named their *vampire* child Peaches?

“When bitten by a vampire, the experience can be very pleasant for the victim,” Coach explained while the Peaches chick made her way toward me.

She looked like the typical vamp. Porcelain skin that had probably never seen a blemish, blood-red lips, and eyes bright but terrifying. She stalked instead of walked, body moving in a predatory way that had every hair on my body standing up. "Peaches, I want you to demonstrate this effect on the Void," he said, holding his arm out to me like I was some sort of decadent treat.

My mouth dropped open in surprise. "Excuse me?" I asked before taking a step backward. I didn't like this one bit.

Peaches didn't seem bothered by the instruction, nor did she stop walking, despite my obvious discomfort. Instead, she smiled. "Sure thing, Coach." Then the bitch flashed forward and placed her lips at the thudding pulse on my neck, making me freeze in shock.

I didn't even have time to process what was happening before she sank her teeth into my skin, causing that pleasurable energy to flood me like fire. But unlike with Render, this felt *wrong*.

There was no attraction, no desire. It was like she was force-feeding me pleasure through a needle, and I was helpless to stop it. There was a toxic exhilaration transferring between us, and I hated it. "No," I said, making the entire class erupt in laughter.

"What's wrong, little Void? You don't like it when someone takes something from you?" Blaire sneered. "Guess you know what it feels like now."

Peaches laughed while her fangs continued to dig into my skin. I was helpless to stop the way my eyes rolled back and the heat pooled between my thighs. It was the worst kind of assault. It was taking my body and using it against me, and there was nothing I could do to stop it. "Look, she's gonna fucking come," one of the guy vampire's chuckled.

"Enough, Peaches," Coach Willis said. "We need the blood bag to be full for the rest of my demonstration."

When she finally pulled away, I folded in on myself, pressing a hand against my neck.

"Void, describe to the class how that felt," the coach said as Peaches wiped my blood off her mouth and migrated back over to her seat, an extra pep in her step.

I swallowed the bile rising up in my throat, but I leveled him with a look despite the fact that I wanted to cry. "It felt like someone was forcing pleasure on me. It felt like rape," I replied, moving my eyes to look out at the vampire students. A few of the females had the decency to seem disturbed by

my analogy, but most of them kept an emotionless expression perched upon their perfect, porcelain faces. Blaire had the audacity to smirk like she was enjoying every second of this.

“That’s a bit of a dramatic explanation,” Coach Willis said “The venom in our fangs is meant to make the feeding an enjoyable experience for our victims. You’ll rarely hear of a human complaining.” He was making light of my mandatory participation. Acting like *I* was in the wrong here. He made me sick.

“Great. Well, you proved your lesson,” I said while moving to go back to my seat, feeling violated in ways I couldn’t describe. I just wanted to go back to the feral cabin. Hell, I just wanted to go home, wherever that was.

Coach Willis held up his hand. “I didn’t say you were done,” he said before clicking his tongue. “Raul, come here, please.”

A larger guy with dark, sweeping hair flashed forward, teeth bared at the smell of my blood dripping down my neck. I realized that I now had every vampire in the room hungry for a taste of me. Their prejudice only stemmed so far, I guess. They couldn’t deny their need to feed. Not with my blood running freely and the scent of it in the air. All of them had their fangs out now, even Blaire.

“Now, it *is* possible for a vampire to hold back their venom, in the instance of an attack,” the coach explained. “When defending yourself, you might not want your opponent to enjoy the experience. Sometimes you want them to feel pain.”

At his words, my heart started pounding, and the blood drained from my face. I took a step back, deciding that it was time I got the fuck out of here. I was prideful, yes. Determined to prove I was strong—hell, yes. But I didn’t have a death wish. Coach Willis looked over at me, and that gleam in his eye had only grown. I saw the monster behind his smirking expression, and I knew that I was in very real danger.

“Raul, test it out on the Void. Remember to hold back your venom. It takes practice.”

“No,” I said, shaking my head adamantly. “I don’t consent to this.” I held both of my hands up in front of me like that could ward them off.

Raul flashed closer to me, taking advantage of my outstretched hand to grab hold of my wrist and sink his teeth into my skin. I cried out, my eyes slamming shut from the tears that threatened to spill out. I couldn’t yank my arm back no matter how hard I tried; he was too strong, and it would only

tear the veins and tendons in my arms. So I stood helplessly as he drank while my mind raced and my panic peaked.

I knew that if I reached up with one hand and yanked off my amulet, this could all be over. I could destroy them without a thought. But there was a part of me that didn't want to prove them right. I didn't want to be the Void everyone feared. I just wanted to be treated with some humanity. I guess that was too much to ask of a roomful of supers.

At Raul's initial contact, that familiar pleasure shot through me, this time more aggressively. But upon the coach's reminder to hold back his venom, it faded away, and the reprieve ended. Raul cut off his venom, and then a searing, sharp pain came next. It was a tearing sensation like my skin was being pulled back with licks of fire.

I gritted my teeth, barely holding back a scream. I refused to give these vamps the satisfaction of hearing how much they were hurting me. Instead, I focused on the hollow of Raul's cheeks as he sucked from my wrist, and the crimson drops of life escaping the corners of his mouth.

"Next," Coach Willis commanded, but Raul took his time pulling away. He didn't even bother to clean the wound with his healing saliva either, just let me continue to bleed in pain as he turned and made his way back to his seat.

"This time don't let your venom out *at all*. Control the impulse. Remember that she's a disgusting Void. You don't want this to be enjoyable for her. She's a threat that you must get rid of," Coach Willis shouted, his Southern accent in full swing as he stalked around me, clearly enjoying his demonstration.

Oh my gods. He wants me dead. The realization left me stunned. How could everyone just sit there and let this happen?

Another vampire girl flashed on me in an instant. She sunk to her knees and cut into my skin with her fangs, dipping into my plush skin right along my inner thigh. She drank heartily, and I cried out, unable to stop myself. It felt like knives were shoving through the muscle. It fucking *hurt*. So badly that all I could do was stand there as my awareness started to sink.

"Well done, Misha. That's enough," Coach Willis called.

But the heady scent of my bleeding puncture wounds was too strong. Misha didn't disengage. Instead, her manicured hands curled around my calf, and she started drinking *more*.

And then, another vampire had flashed forward and sunk his fangs into

my arm. And then another one was tearing through the tendons on my back. Then I felt more pain on my right shin; just above my ankle was assaulted. Then my chest. My shoulder. My stomach. My clothes became torn and bloody, and my screams finally escaped my throat until the sound was echoing through the gymnasium, bouncing back to my ears and playing my pain on a loop.

I tried to push them back, tried to break away, but it was no use. I just grew weaker where I stood. I could feel my eyes freezing over like the puddle outside my childhood home in winter. I could feel my skin grow clammy. Sweat danced around each bite, mixing salty determination with my blood.

I tried to reach up and grab my necklace, ready to fucking end them, but a hand stopped me before I could. “Nope. You won’t be using your Void powers right now.” My watery eyes opened to see Blaire standing there among the writhing, greedy vampires as they drank from me. “Such a nice view, watching my kind suck you dry,” she said with a smile, her fangs poking into her bottom lip. “Now you know what it feels like.”

Tears tracked down my cheeks and landed on the pair of vampire heads below.

“Enough! Disengage, class! Disengage!” Coach Willis shouted, but it was no use. The feeding frenzy was too strong.

I wasn’t sure how many vampires were feeding on me when my knees hit the gym floor. I didn’t want to collapse, but my body had other ideas. I couldn’t see Coach Willis. I couldn’t see anything except for blood and predators. Their triumph in the air was heavy on my tongue, and I briefly wondered what I’d done wrong in my life to die like this.

“Enough!” a booming voice yelled through the gym, but this time, it wasn’t Coach Willis.

I knew that voice. It was the only thing I could remember in that moment besides pain.

Noises like fighting broke out. Black dots kept littering my vision, and I couldn’t lift my head, couldn’t be sure what was happening. Then several vampires were thrown away from me, and stone-like arms wrapped around me. I was lifted and held against a bare, warm chest. My amulet started to vibrate at the familiar power, rippling across my bloodied skin. The Void was hungry again, likely trying to replenish all that was taken from me.

“Headmaster Torne will be hearing about this,” another voice yelled.

“Good,” Coach Willis’s voice replied coolly. My vision started to go fully

black, but I could hear the vampire predator's final words before I lost consciousness. "I was doing him a favor. She doesn't belong here. Remember who the real enemy is, shifter."

That's the last I heard before my entire fucked up world went black.

And there was a small part of me—the part who hated who I was, the part who hated how *hated* I was—that hoped to never wake up. Or maybe I should wake up one last time just to destroy them all, be the Void they expected me to be.

Fate had planted destruction like a weed in my soul, and it was time to water it.

Chapter 15



"WHY WEREN'T YOU THERE? Why didn't you stop them?" an angry voice yelled to my right. Too loud for the headache I had.

I was lying on something comfortable. Plush, cool leather pressed against my bare skin. I was naked and swimming through darkness. *Where had my damn clothes gone?*

"Where was *I*? Where the fuck were *you*? That was your godsdamned class!" I heard Gritt yell. "I had to go check on the fucking bobcat. I couldn't get out of it. I'm the paragon."

"Yeah, well Devi almost fucking died because of your godsdamned paragon errand." That angry voice belonged to...*Render*? I'd be baffled if I weren't so groggy. "I texted you to say that I'd be late, but you obviously didn't get it."

"No, I didn't. And in her first ten minutes alone, she almost gets fucking killed by a bunch of your vamps!"

A hum broke through their vitriol. "Words and instructions are funny, aren't they? We were told to protect the other students from the Void. But who knew we'd also have to protect the Void from other students," a calm voice replied to my right. Hyde.

"I didn't think the professor would use her like a human blood bag," Gritt said, the anger evident in his voice.

"She's too weak. Can't you do anything, vamp?" another voice said. It sounded like it was coming from behind me. Was that Quade?

"I've sealed all of her wounds, but she's still too pale. They took way too much blood," Render replied. Then I felt his cool tongue trace over my thigh. I flinched at the sudden touch.

"If they're all sealed, then why are you still running your fucking tongue

all over her?” Gritt snapped.

“I’m making sure I got them all. How did you even know she was in danger?” Render countered, but Gritt didn’t respond. Instead, it was Hyde that interjected.

“Ohhh. Looks like our growly Shifter Paragon is more connected to Devicka than he’s admitted,” Hyde said with amusement. “Good. Maybe now he won’t be so intolerable,” he teased.

I tried to move, but a groan escaped my lips from the pain. The entire room went silent. It seemed like the only sound I could have made were grunts and moans.

“Maybe we should call Banner?” Render suggested quietly, though it sounded like he didn’t want to.

“No,” Gritt replied almost immediately.

I wished I were strong enough to tell them all to fuck off. It was confusing, having them give a fuck one moment and toss me to the wolves the next. I was suffering from paragonal whiplash.

“Methinks thou dost protest too much, Wolfy,” Hyde replied with a chuckle. If I hadn’t been so out of it, I would’ve laughed at the necromancer’s words.

“Yeah? Well, *me fuckin’ thinks* you’re about two seconds from having me tear out your godsdamn throat,” Gritt replied.

The combination of their angry powers had me suddenly salivating. The amulet on my chest started to vibrate, and I knew with the amount of barely-contained hunger running through my system that it was glowing. “She needs to feed. She practiced on me before. I can handle it.”

Panic thumped in my chest. I tried to protest, to sit up, to do *something*, but it was like all of my limbs were filled with cotton. I was a puppet without strings.

“Are you sure about this?” I heard Quade ask.

I had no idea how I’d gotten here, surrounded by all four paragons, but their power was too much when I was so weak. It was like smelling food cooking when you were starving. Even with the amulet, my Void was practically drooling, pushing against my skin from the inside out. It wanted to unleash and help my body cope with what had been done to me. Gritt was right; I needed to feed.

“I can handle it,” Gritt repeated.

I felt fingers on my neck, strong hands trembling slightly at the clasp of

my necklace.

“No...” I tried to protest, to warn him. I was way too weak to hold the Void back. If they took off my necklace, I was going to destroy him. Probably *all* of them.

“I hope you know what you’re doing,” Quade muttered right before Gritt finally got the clasp unhooked.

And then, my amulet was yanked away, and my Void expelled out of me.

It was like lying flat on my back on a sandy beach while the tide came. Water overtook me, submerging me entirely, dragging me back out to the depthless ocean.

When a hot hand pressed against my chest and collarbone, that smoky tide of my power washed up my body and into his hand. My eyes snapped open, and all I could see were Gritt’s vibrant green eyes and his mane of blond hair as my black smoke surrounded him. His expression was intense and full of anger, but I didn’t know if that anger was directed at me or something else.

My smoke latched onto him, and his body shuddered as my power drank from him. My Void was starved because my body was abused. The more I drank, the better I felt. His powers entered me in a constant stream, but it wasn’t painful. Just like the first time I’d fed off him, it filled me with a heady, almost erotic pleasure. My chest started to rise and fall in rapid breaths.

“Let...go...” I begged him.

He gritted his teeth and shook his head. “Not yet. You need more.”

I couldn’t ask him how he knew that, because my eyes rolled to the back of my head as I felt another powerful wave of his shifter power push into me. It felt so fucking good.

His hand dug into my skin, probably leaving marks, but I barely felt it. When I looked at him again, his expression had softened to something indescribable, and there was a definite heat in his gaze. One that promised to stoke the flames that had ignited in us both.

After another moment, I nodded at him. “It’s okay. That’s enough.”

With great effort, he pulled his hand away, but he didn’t back up. Instead, he leaned forward, bringing my smoke with him. But instead of latching onto his skin or polluting his eyes and ears and mouth, my Void was slowly caressing him, the vapor brushing against him almost with tenderness.

“It worked.”

It took me a moment for his words to sink in because I was so lost in the depths of his eyes. But he was right. It *had* worked. My Void had drunk from him without draining him. In fact, it had already pulled away, one last sip of his power to quench the last of my needs. But *I* hadn't done anything. My Void had done it all on its own. It's like it knew not to hurt Gritt—like it remembered how I'd taught it constraint the last time. My mind whirled with questions that I couldn't answer. I didn't know what this meant, but I knew it was important.

Slowly, he brought up my amulet, and his hand gently cupped the back of my head to lift it. He re-clasped the necklace around my neck once more, and I noticed that his canines had elongated, and his expression was slightly animalistic. The last of my smoke evaporated, and I breathed in a shaky breath.

"It seems our shifter likes when she takes a sip from him," I heard Hyde say.

I sat up, only feeling slightly dizzy at the movement. When I looked down at my body, I saw dozens of fang marks all over me, the telltale pink and red smears of my own blood dyeing my skin. But Render had obviously licked each bite, because they were all slowly closing up. Still, to see the evidence of my attack made me wince. I'd come very, very close to dying, and that fact was like having an ice-cold water dumped over me. I never expected for the level of hatred to come to that. I was wrong.

Gritt pulled a blanket off the back of a chair and wrapped it around me. I took it gratefully and looked around, but I didn't recognize the bedroom we were in. There was a deep red comforter over a four poster bed, and everything inside—the desk, the side tables, the bedframe, even the widows—were all made of matching dark wood that played off the stone flooring.

"Where am I?" I asked.

My hands smoothed over the leather chaise I was sitting on, and I looked over at the four paragons around me. Render was leaning against the wall with one ankle crossed over the other, his dark hair slightly disheveled. Quade was perched on the desk, a scowl in place. Hyde was...resurrecting a beetle by the looks of it, and Gritt was still sitting next to me, his relieved and heated stare licking up at my soul.

"My room," Render replied before propelling himself off the wall and sauntering over to me. "Tell me why you did it, Void."

I twisted up to look at him. "Excuse me? Please tell me you aren't

blaming me for what happened back there. It's not like I asked for all those vamps to bite me," I replied in a stormy tone. Now that I had my energy back, I was feeling bold. Angry. I had half a mind to set fire to this elitist school and never look back.

"No. I want to know why you just *took it*. You could have taken off your necklace, and it would have been done. It would have never gotten so far if you'd used your power." He was angry, his face shadowed by fury I didn't understand.

"What, and prove them—and you—right? Be the destructive Void everyone accuses me of being? I don't want to take people's powers, Render. I'd hoped you'd recognize that by now." Years of prejudiced anger was boiling me up from the inside out. Why was I still being judged for my powers? I'd shown them who I was as a person. They should damn well know better by now. "I caved when I realized that they wanted to kill me instead of just fuck me up, but Blaire stopped me," I said, shooting a look to Render, but the stoic vampire didn't show any reaction at all. "But...I didn't want to take off my amulet because I don't want to be hated or feared. I don't want to be the monster everyone thinks I am."

"Fuck what people think. You could have died," Quade interrupted. He strutted forward, and my heart skipped in tempo. I had nowhere to back up since I was still sitting, but he towered over me, looking so angry that my adrenaline spiked.

He leaned down, putting one hand on the backrest, his arm brushing against the sleeve of my shirt. With his face only inches from mine, I found I couldn't breathe.

"You're different than they said you were," he murmured, his dark eyes searching my face.

I frowned. "Who?"

"My parents."

I blinked at him, my mind whirling with everything that he wasn't saying. We'd been ten years old when my Void had come out, and I'd been told I couldn't play with him anymore—told I was too dangerous. But I'd never considered what *he'd* been told.

"What did they say?"

He didn't seem to hear me. Instead, his gaze had dropped to my mouth, and I sucked my bottom lip in, biting it gently.

"Why does my power keep tugging me toward you?"

His words threw me for a loop, and confusion washed over my expression.

"I feel it too," Gritt admitted, and I turned to look at him.

He and Quade were both so close, I could feel the heat of their breaths on my cheeks. I shifted where I sat, pressing my thighs together. They weren't the only ones who felt a tug. My Void was calm inside of me, content for the first time, but there was this inexplicable reaction that I always had when around these four—like their power called to me, buzzing under my skin and warming at their presence. Maybe it was because they were paragons. Maybe being the most powerful of their kind was the reason for it. Maybe my own magic responded to that. I wasn't sure, but I couldn't deny the pull.

"This is just a lot to process right now," I replied warily before tearing my gaze away from them and rubbing a hand down my face. I was avoiding the conversation. I didn't want to think about the implications of it. If I lured powerful supernaturals to me, then it would be another reason for them to distrust me.

"In case anyone is wondering, I feel the pull, too. Just throwing that out there," Hyde added with flourish before tossing the beetle up in the air, letting its metallic black wings flutter in the air. He tilted his head back and laughed as the excited bug took flight before turning his attention to me. "I felt it really strongly a couple days ago, too. Pulling, pulling, pulling. Pulling my hair, pulling my power, pulling my di—"

"Shut the fuck up before I kill you," Gritt interrupted, rubbing his temples.

Hyde didn't get the memo though, because he ended with, "I'd like to call dibs on touching her next."

I scrunched my eyebrows in confusion. "No," I replied as I stood up. My feet were unsteady, and I felt myself waver before a strong hand grabbed my upper arm to steady me. I looked up at Quade before jerking from his grasp. "No more touching me. No more testing the Void out on your powers. No more whatever the fuck this pull is, okay? I'll continue to work with Banner —"

"Oh, it's always fucking *Banner*, huh? You sure are getting comfortable," Gritt bit back, and I dropped my mouth open in shock. He was rippling with anger and jealousy.

"Who I get comfortable with is none of your godsdamn business. I'm the Void, remember? You don't want me as a mate, that's what you said. Unless

you've changed your mind?" I challenged, glowering at him. He didn't move an inch, just stared at me like I was some kind of dog treat he wanted to nibble on. When his eyes dropped to my chest, at the blanket I was still clutching around me, I realized that I'd let it gape too much. I quickly pulled it tighter around me, but the damage had already been done, because now my body was responding to the heat in his eyes.

"My, my. The sexual tension in this room could raise the dead!" Hyde quipped while clapping his hands together, the resounding smack echoing across the room.

Ignoring him, I turned back to look at Gritt. "You never should have taken my amulet off without Banner here."

Gritt stood up too, so that I had to crane my neck to look up at him. "You and him got something going on?" he growled.

I couldn't believe this. How dare he think that he had any right to even ask. I jabbed a finger against his chest. "Since I'm not your mate or your girlfriend, that's none of your business," I snapped. "And it has nothing to do with that, anyway. You could've gotten hurt. Unleashing my Void powers without a neutralizer present was dangerous. I could have wiped out your powers just like that," I said with a snap of my fingers. "Or worse."

"But you didn't," he pointed out smugly.

"But I could have," I argued back. "And you also had no right to do that while I was half unconscious. I wasn't even in control, Gritt."

"I was right, so why does it matter?"

"It matters because you can't take stupid risks. Not with the Void."

Gritt took a step forward, crowding my space completely, and shocked the hell out of me when his hand came up to grip the back of my neck. "My animals could feel your pain," he said quietly, his eyes searching mine. My mind flicked back to the damn book in his dorm room, and each impending step in the mate bond.

"Well, I apologize for the inconvenience."

Pain and worry flashed through his gaze. The way he was looking at me was so different from how our first introduction had gone. He'd been wild with feral fury before, touching me for the sole reason of attacking me. But now, he was holding me like he needed to reassure himself that I was okay. I didn't know how to process it. My emotions were going haywire.

"I need space," I whispered. I didn't want to believe that Gritt could actually care about me. Hope was a useless emotion, and allowing myself to

have hope in someone like Gritt would just get me burned. His reaction to me this morning, and the way he was being now—hell, the way all four paragons were acting...this was all too new, too strange; I needed space. I needed time to process and figure out what I was thinking and feeling.

“You need to rest,” Quade interrupted, cutting off my face-off with Gritt. “You’re still weak. Why don’t you sleep here for a little bit? Or you can come to my room.”

“She’s not staying in your fucking room, elemental,” Gritt snapped.

“Yeah, she could just stay here in mine,” Render spoke over him.

Gritt’s hold on my neck tightened.

“No need. I’ve been having some zombies fix up the feral shack since the bobcat shifter left this morning. Devi can just go back to the cabin,” Hyde said with glee before spinning around to catch the flying beetle in the room and crush it in his palm. Such a weirdo.

I shook my head, trying to sort through all the conflicting emotions, deciding to address Hyde’s remark first because it was the easiest to handle. “I thought I told you no resurrecting forest animals to clean my cabin?” I wasn’t actually angry about it, but it was better than confronting the jealous shifter, confusing elemental, and oddly protective vampire.

“I couldn’t help myself. They were just begging to recreate that *Snow White* scene. I even choreographed a musical number to really make it something special.”

“Of course you did,” I mumbled. “Okay. I’m going to my cabin. Alone.”

I took a step away, making Gritt’s hand drop, but Quade intercepted me. “I’m going with you. At least to make sure you get there safely.”

I didn’t have the energy to argue with him. The Void had replenished me some, and Render had helped to close all the puncture wounds, but I’d still lost a lot of blood. I wanted a shower to wash off the assault of the vampires in class, but surprisingly, the fact that Render’s saliva was coated over my skin didn’t bother me at all.

“Here,” Gritt said, whipping his coat and shirt off. Before I could protest, he’d shoved his dark button up dress shirt into my hands.

“Thanks,” I said quietly.

He grunted out some sort of unintelligible response and then held up the blanket so that I could slip his shirt on over my naked body without flashing everybody. I hadn’t even had time to process the fact that they’d all seen me naked while I was unconscious, but my cheeks burned at the thought. “What

happened to my clothes?" I asked as I buttoned up the shirt.

"They were shredded and bloody," Render answered. "They fell off you when I carried you up here."

"Oh."

The next time I saw Blaire, I wanted to punch her right in the tit and then suck power from her until she was drooling on the floor.

When I was done getting dressed in Gritt's shirt, he dropped the blanket, and his eyes swept over me with male satisfaction. I avoided his gaze as I thanked him once more.

Render walked over and opened the bedroom door for me. "I'll pick you up tomorrow morning."

"Okay."

I dreaded going to another class tomorrow, but I had no choice in the matter. Unless I ran away, which was feeling more and more appealing by the day.

When we exited Render's room, Quade led the way down the stairs. Good thing too, since I had no idea which way to go. Thibault Academy was huge, and I had barely scraped the surface of the different rooms and wings it housed. We were obviously in the wing for the vampire dorms, the fanged emblem hanging on the deep red walls.

"Who got me out of the gym?" I asked curiously.

"Gritt was tearing back like his ass was on fire. Guess he felt your pain or something," Quade said. "He ran into Render on the way, so the vamp flashed to you, and they both got you out. Hyde had some dead sparrow or some shit spying in through the window, so he got alerted that something was going down, and he called me. We all met at Render's since his room was the closest."

I nodded, trying to visualize what I'd remembered versus the gaps he was filling in for me. "Why would you show up?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean exactly that," I said. "Why would you care if the vampires attacked me?"

Anger settled over his features. "I don't *want* you to get hurt, Devi."

"You wouldn't have cared before," I pressed.

"That was before—" he cut himself off when we rounded a hallway and saw that it was full of students. As soon as they spotted me in a male's shirt and nothing else, covered in smears of blood and matted hair, the whispers

started.

Quade was quiet as we walked, ignoring everyone we passed despite how they pointed and snickered and muttered. My life at the human boarding school had been better than this. I missed Reed in that moment so much that tears filled my eyes. When the girls at Coxcomb's had been particularly awful, he'd always stood up for me and then planned for us to sneak out later. He knew what made me feel better.

When we finally reached the exit and pushed our way outside, I blew out a puff of breath. Just once, I wanted to walk down a hallway without being watched like a bug under a microscope. The door had barely shut behind us when Quade suddenly gripped my arm. He tugged me to the side of the building until my back was pressed against the wall between two tall shrubs.

I looked at him with wide eyes. "What are you doing?"

Just like in Render's room, his eyes dropped down to my mouth, but this time, he brought his hand up and traced a finger along my bottom lip. I stood, frozen, unsure what to do or what to think. Quade Sandwood was touching me. *Voluntarily*. He was looking at me like he missed me—almost a decade of longing was in his dark eyes. I didn't understand.

I pushed his hand away and crossed my arms, and I saw a flash of hurt cross his features before he dropped his hand and stuffed it into his pocket. "Sorry. I couldn't help it."

"You guys are giving me whiplash. What happened to hating me? To trying to get me kicked out of school?" His eyes widened at that little morsel. "You've hated me since we were kids, Quade," I reminded him angrily.

He ran a frustrated hand over his dark buzzed hair before looking away. "I know. Fuck, *I know*, Dev."

"Then what are you doing? Why are you all acting so differently all of a sudden?" I demanded. "And what did you mean when you said your parents had been wrong about me?"

He blew out a frustrated breath. "We're acting differently because...we realized we were fucking wrong, okay?"

I blinked at him, the words not registering. "Wrong?"

"About you."

My brain hurt from all the conflicting thoughts that started to lash into me.

"When I was little, my parents said that your Void had turned you feral. They told me that you admitted to wanting to steal my power."

“What?” My heart pounded behind my bones, scraping me raw. “I never —”

“I know,” he cut me off. “I know that now. I...fuck. I was young, you know? I just always believed them. I had no reason not to. And it wasn’t just that one time. They’d come home from days at the council and tell me things...”

I gritted my teeth. “What things?”

He shook his head and looked down at his feet. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Answer the question, Quade.”

He glanced back up at me. “They’d tell me every time you were summoned to the council. They told me how you would laugh. That you would drain the supers of their power like you got high off of it, and that you’d ask for more. That you’d mock them openly and threaten anyone who even looked your way. They made you out to be a monster who revelled in stealing powers.”

I was so angry that I turned red-hot, instantly slick with heat. “Why would they say that? And how could you believe that about me?”

It hurt. It hurt a lot. I know we’d stopped being friends when we were little, but he should’ve known that wasn’t me. That wasn’t who I was.

“They made it seem like the Void had taken over you. Changed you.”

“You should’ve talked to me.”

“They forbade me from speaking to you. They hadn’t even wanted me to be present during this last summoning, but they couldn’t stop it since all the paragons had to be present.”

“Why would they lie?”

He shook his head, at a loss. “I guess because they didn’t want me near you just in case...”

“In case I accidentally took your powers.”

He looked at me guiltily. “Yeah.”

“Well, I’m glad you were able to finally see things for yourself,” I gritted before shoving him away and walking past him. I couldn’t look him in the eye and see how much he distrusted me. I couldn’t stand to hear how he’d blindly believed that I was a fucking monster despite everything we’d been through.

“I wasn’t done talking!” he yelled at my back, but I just pushed faster. Pushed harder. I wanted to run from my problems, and it made me feel sick, too. Shouldn’t I want this? I’d been begging to be accepted from day one, but

this acceptance came at a cost. It was shaky and unnerving to know that one wrong move could send the shaky foundation I was finally starting to build crumbling to the fucking ground.

“Well, I’m done talking to you!” I screamed back over my shoulder.

But then I felt hands grip me, and I was spun around, my body a whirlwind, helpless to stop his lips from crashing down on mine. His lips were hard and unyielding like he wanted to hold me hostage in a kiss. My arms came up around his neck, and I wrapped a hand around him, scratching his skin with my nails. We were like cold water dumped on sizzling coals. All steam and hisses.

Quade poured every last regret upon my mouth, and I opened up to accept his guilt. I wanted to feel his pain as he seared his body to mine, the fire burning in my gut, mixing with the cool balm of his remorse.

“Stop kissing me,” I moaned against his lips as my hands roamed his muscular body.

“No,” he replied before threading his fingers through my hair and dipping me back to deepen the kiss. Tears streamed down my cheeks because this was all I’d ever wanted. All of a sudden, it felt like the Void wasn’t smoke or destruction—it was a wall that I’d built up around myself to protect me from rejection. But right now, Quade was inside those walls with me, and that scared the shit out of me.

“Stop” I said, pulling back. I half-heartedly shoved against his chest, but we both knew it was for show. Using his free hand, Quade grabbed my hips, bracing me against his hard body, holding me still so that I’d accept his apology.

“I’m so fucking sorry, Dev.”

His words burned up my eyes and choked up my throat.

He moved in to kiss my neck, when a rustling in the trees behind me caught his attention. We both looked over to check, and to my utter mortification, I saw my father, in all his demon glory, step out onto the path.

He took one look at where Quade’s hands still held my hips, and his entire face darkened. Fire burned in his eyes. Literally. Sparks shot from his fingertips, and he had to curl them into fists before he spread the flames of hell around the academy’s lawn. That was the problem with demons. They tended to be hot-headed.

“Get the fuck away from my daughter.”

Quade instantly dropped his hold on me and took a step back.

“Apologies, Mr. Cainson.”

My father sneered at him as he stalked toward us. “The name’s Mr. Risk. Devicka has her mother’s last name. The bitch wouldn’t even give me that much.”

Surprise flitted across Quade’s face, but I just scowled at him. “Dad, what are you doing here?”

His dark brown eyes slowly dragged away from Quade, but they instantly softened when they rested on my face. Until he realized I was only in a man’s dress shirt, and then that look grew angry again.

“It’s not his!” I said quickly...then instantly regretted that since it definitely didn’t help things.

“So you’re just in some other guy’s shirt?” he demanded.

“Uhh...”

He shook his head and sighed. “Fucking daughters,” he muttered.

I smiled and looked him over. He looked the same as always. Brown hair combed back, a handsome five o’clock shadow dusting his jaw. A dimple in his chin and a scar below his ear. He was tall and formidable, with the kind of presence that made people watch him warily out of the corner of their eyes. He tempted humans to take life-altering risks every day, and dabbled in the occasional hellfire fight. But to me, he was just Dad.

He placed a hand on my shoulder and squeezed lightly. Before the paragon, he was the only super who ever touched me willingly. “I heard from your mother that you’d gotten shipped off here. Came to check on you. How you doing, kid?”

“I’m...”

I trailed off, not knowing what to say. The truth was, I didn’t know how I was. So much had happened...so much was *still* happening. I needed time to think, but time was a luxury that I didn’t seem to have anymore. I still hadn’t even really processed what I’d done to the vampire and shifter back at the trial. Add that to the other students here at the school, Banner, Judge Braxton and the headmaster...the vampire attack that was started by a damn professor, the paragon’s sudden change...I was a wreck.

My father seemed to pick up on all of the things I wasn’t saying, because he nodded before dropping his hand. “Thought so.” He flicked his eyes back to Quade. “Why are you still here, elemental? Leave.”

“Dad,” I chastised. “Be nice.”

“Why? This is the little shit who stopped being your friend. Don’t think I

didn't recognize him."

I sighed, and Quade was stupid enough to pipe in. "You're right, and we were actually just talking about that."

"Was that before or after I heard my daughter tell you to stop, and you refused to get the fuck away from her?" he said, his tone deadly low.

I jumped in between them in case he decided to try and burn Quade alive. "Okay, take it easy, Dad. Quade was just leaving."

"Yeah, he sure as shit was."

Quade glanced down at me, but I nodded, urging him to go.

"See you tonight at dinner," he muttered before turning and walking away.

I grabbed my dad's arm and started tugging him down the path to my cabin. I might have been pissed at Quade, but I didn't want him to get in trouble for not escorting me all the way home. I should get inside before anyone noticed that I wasn't being escorted by one of my babysitters.

"Where are we going?"

"I'm staying in the feral cabin."

My dad's arm tensed under my grip, but he stayed silent. When we made it to the cabin, I stopped at the scene in front of me.

At my side, my dad cocked his head. "Why do you have ravens repairing your roof and a bear chopping wood?"

I watched, mouth gaping open, as rabbits hopped up every second, washing the interior windows with their cottontails while a deer looked like it was using its antlers to sand the splintered door.

I drew a hand down my tired face. "Damn necromancer."

My dad hummed. "Good corpse work. I've always liked necromancers," Dad replied.

I opened my mouth to try and shoo the animals away, but then I spotted Betty, my beloved Suzuki, parked off to the side, practically gleaming.

I let out a squeal, making my father clasp his hands over his ears. "Oh my gods! You brought her?" I asked.

Rushing over to the bike, I ran my hands along the chrome detailing, patting the leather seat for good measure before spinning around to face my dad again, a huge smile on my face. "Thank you."

Dad shrugged like it was no biggie, but we both knew it was. "I figured it was the least I could do. If you're stuck in this hell hole, might as well give you an easy escape," he said with a conspiring grin as he dug in his pant

pocket and tossed me the keys.

Appreciation flooded me, and I rushed forward and gave him a hug. "Escape sounds pretty good right about now."

"Yeah?" he asked, studying my face and no doubt seeing the stress I was holding in. "When was the last time you did some crazy dangerous shit?"

"Too long," I said, shaking my head.

He frowned. "Devicka..."

"I know, I know," I assured him. "I'll make sure to do dangerous shit soon," I promised.

He nodded, pleased.

Dad was a risk demon. He spent his life tempting humans with a deadly game of chance. Gambling. Skydiving. Speeding. Whatever got the blood pumping and the thrill of adrenaline lighting up their brains. Most times, the risk was never worth the reward, but I had inherited his love of adrenaline. I liked to test the boundaries. I liked to dance with the peril and menace of my birthright, and then land on my feet. Mother hated it. Maybe that was why I loved it so much.

He'd gotten me Betty on my sixteenth birthday, and we'd been inseparable ever since. I couldn't even count the time that I'd snuck out of Coxcomb's to ride her. Even though I hadn't been gone long, I was itching to ride.

"You know, I could have used an escape about eight years ago," I said, the bitter words coating my tongue. "Before Mother shipped me off. I begged you to take me, and you refused. That was pretty shitty."

Dad and I were close, or about as close as we could be. Unlike my mother, he didn't resent me. He just was like most of the demons out there. Selfish. Mother, on the other hand, had taken a one-night risk on him nine months before I was born, and then failed. She'd had me.

"Bitterness doesn't look good on you, kid." He then tsked. "Besides, I'm here now. Threatening your boyfriend and bribing you with gifts so that you'll like me more than your mother. Isn't that what all the human dads do?"

I smirked. "Are you hiding another gift in that terrible suit you're wearing?" I said teasingly, half joking. We both knew he never wore anything but Armani. Dad enjoyed human fashion.

"Yep. Now take back your comment about my suit, and I'll give it to you," he replied with a grin, and I found myself smiling back.

I'd always craved my father's affections. He was the only person that didn't see me as a weapon. We were bonded by our mutual love of the impossible probabilities of the world. Still, I'd always wished that he wanted me around more. That he wouldn't just pop in once in a while but actually take a more active role in my life. I was still trying to grow out of my hopeful optimism. It was a stubborn bitch.

"I take it back," I replied, albeit begrudgingly.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a brand new cellphone before tossing it to me. I grabbed it and hugged it to my chest like a lifeline, thankful to have a piece of technology. "You're amazing. They didn't even give me time to grab mine."

My dad nodded. "I figured, when I didn't have a million complaining texts from you, that you didn't have a phone."

"I need to call Reed; he's probably worried sick."

"I always liked Reed."

"He's a good one," I nodded. "One of the few people who doesn't hate me."

"Why do you care if anyone hates you? I never understood why you bother with the opinions of others. It's such a waste of time," he mused. "Must be from spending all your time with humans."

I didn't bother reminding him that the reason I had to spend all my time with humans was that dear old Mom had exiled me in the first place. And he'd let her.

"You're right. I should stop caring if people hate me," I replied before changing the subject. I didn't want to go into my chronic insecurities with my risk demon father. He'd probably just convince me to go streaking through campus or some crazy shit. Speaking of... "Shouldn't you be off persuading some poor sap to take a second mortgage out on his house for a poker bet or something?" I crossed my arms over my chest, pretending to be unamused by his job. Truth was I used to wish he'd steal me away and let me go with him.

"I wanted to check on my favorite daughter and see what all the fuss was about. I heard you put on quite the performance. Switching powers? Impressive." I looked down at the grass beneath my boots and frowned. It didn't feel like anything impressive. If anything, I was starting to question if it had even happened at all.

"How'd you hear about that? And why don't you sound surprised?" I asked while peering at him. He smiled at me; I always pleased him when I

questioned things.

“I always knew you’d be special, Devicka. I’ve had hundreds of children over the millennia, but you’re different.”

“Is that supposed to make me feel good to hear my father is a manwhore?”

Dad laughed, his booming chuckle echoing over the dark woods surrounding us. “I know you resent your mother for sending you to be with the humans, but she’s just a washed-up, bitter woman. Don’t waste your time on her. You have much bigger things to worry about.”

My brows wrinkled, and I took a step closer to him, smelling the burning sulfur on his skin. “What do you mean?”

“The Void is a powerful thing. You can’t escape who you are. I’m glad you’re finally embracing it.” He paused as if choosing his next words carefully. “But there are people that will want to use you up. You need to be careful. Learn what you came here to learn, but don’t plan on staying long. And trust no one.”

My brows raised at Dad’s melodramatic warning. “Am I in danger?”

“Most powerful people are, kid. Just keep diligent.”

Dad never warned me. Ever. So the fact that he was now, made me take him seriously. I nodded. “Okay.”

“Here, let me top-up the power in your amulet.” Dad walked over and picked up the amulet from my neck, cupping it in his palm. He closed his eyes and blew orange power into it, his demon abilities filling it to the brim with reinforcement. It felt like the iron bars I was always forced to be behind were slamming shut on my Void and cementing it with concrete. I’d always felt relieved when he filled up my amulet, but now...it felt more like a cage.

“That should do it,” he said before dropping it and giving me one final hug. “Call me if you need more. And if you need an escape, call me. I don’t like you being stuck in this hell hole.”

“Will do,” I promised.

And of course, because my father had a knack for theatrics, he snapped his fingers and disappeared. Just like he always did.

Chapter 16



"PLEASE DON'T HATE ME," I whispered at the phone as I dialed. Reed picked up on the third ring, and as soon as I said hello, he replied back with a slew of very colorful curses.

"Goddamn, Devi, you bitch! Where the hell have you been?" The sound of a slamming door reverberated on the other end of the receiver. "One minute, I'm high as fuck, pretending that life is all grand and colorful and shit, and then the next, I'm hearing that your cunt of a mother transferred you to some college in America?"

"I'm so sorry," I said while cradling my head in my hand as Cheddar crawled up my shoulder and nestled against my neck. I was perched on the bed with my back resting against the wall, my eyes running over all the shredded and splintered furniture. All that work that Hyde's zombie animals had done was ruined from that damn bobcat. He'd sent more animals to fix it up, and they were currently chopping wood outside, but it would take a couple days to have things back to normal. "I didn't even have time to grab Betty or my cell phone."

"No shit! Didn't even say goodbye to your best friend!" Reed was angry, and rightfully so. I felt bad for not finding a way to reach out to him sooner. The guy had abandonment issues in spades, thanks to his mother, and I'd just added to it.

"You know how my mother can be. Once she makes a decision, it's like a whirlwind. Believe me, this place is no picnic." I'd opened up about my mother's issues to Reed, dodging the topic of our powers, of course. Reed had a good enough idea about what I'd endured though, and I hoped he understood.

"Yeah, I understand. Still scared the shit out of me, though," Reed said,

blowing out a breath. “How can she make you attend more school, anyway? You’re eighteen! Just get on a flight and meet me in LA. I’ll be there in a week.”

It was tempting. Running away with him to LA sounded like the perfect way to escape the issues of Thibault Academy and the paragons who made me question everything. But despite always hiding away, I wasn’t a coward. I wasn’t going to run. Besides, no matter how far I went, they’d always search for me. The council wouldn’t let me go. So, it was either comply, or risk running away to Reed and having him get caught up in my mess. I wasn’t going to let that happen.

“It’s...complicated,” I finally answered. “I have to stay here.”

“That’s bullshit, and you know it,” Reed said, not even giving me time to explain. “You don’t have to do what your mother tells you to anymore. You can come with me, and we can start over,” he pleaded.

“That sounds really fucking nice,” I admitted with a small laugh. “The people here are cruel and the para—uh—guys are even worse.”

“Guys? What guys?” he asked, his voice pitching up like a singing canary. He loved gossip.

“There are four guys here that wanted me gone. But now they keep fucking with my head. I don’t know. I’m...drawn to them.”

Reed went silent on the other end of the line, and I wished I was a mind reader to know what he was thinking. Finally, he said, “Coxcomb’s all-girls school fucked with you. A life without easily accessible dick can make any girl go a little boy crazy. Look at Lyric. She got pregnant a month after graduation last year,” he reminded me. “It’ll pass. Just put that shit on lock down and remember that you can suck all the dicks you want in LA,” Reed offered with a smile in his voice. I imagined him perched on his bed, running a hand through his short, red hair while staring down at the stupid skirt they made him wear.

“I think it’s more than that...” I mumbled before standing up, a misty sheen of tears coating my eyes as I paced the room. “I can’t leave yet. I did something...and I need to make it right. I made a promise to one of them that I would.” I knew I was speaking vaguely, but there weren’t any other options. Pretty sure I couldn’t explain over the phone that I was a supernatural Void, capable of destroying others with my magical smoke. Plus, there were rules about that sort of thing. Never tell the humans. Never reveal who you were.

“What about the promise you made to *me*?”

His hurt-filled words were like a kick to the teeth. I couldn't speak, just watched as the metaphorical blood filled my mouth. "There's things you don't know about my family. Things I can't say over the phone..." I tried to explain.

A pause stretched between us. "Are you in danger, Devi?"

"Kind of," I admitted. "The kind of danger that could get you hurt if I tell you."

Reed went silent on the other end of the line once more, likely already coming up with some dumbass plan to rescue me. "I knew it. Your family is in the goddamn mafia and shit, aren't they?" he groaned. "I've been reading those mafia books lately. I know exactly what to do. Where are you? I'll get you out. I'll get one of the non-dirty cops on my payroll if I have to," he said, sounding completely serious.

"No!" I said a little too loudly. "Don't call the police, I'll be fine...as long as I cooperate."

He groaned again. "Dammit, that's exactly what you would say if you're stuck up in mob shit. Now I definitely have to come rescue you."

I gulped in a deep breath of air before responding. The truth was, I wasn't directly dangerous to Reed, but my father's words were still echoing in my head. Everything about this entire experience had just proved that I was a liability, and that powerful people were way too invested in my life. It was better for everyone if I just kept to myself. "Reed, you're my best friend. And once things settle back down, I'm going to find you and explain everything. I promise. But until then, I have to figure this out. I have to stay here and get my shit together."

"Fine. Don't tell me. But I'm not giving up on you. We didn't go through hell at Coxcomb's to give up now. You're all I have, okay?" he said quietly. "Can you call me again?"

"Yeah, I can," I said, relieved. Reed was the only person in my life I could count on, and I had every intention of finding him once the dust settled. I just had a few things to do first. "You can call me too. This is my new number."

"Good. Be safe, okay? I'll see you...soon. And don't let any douche dicks near you. Anyone that doesn't know you for the kickass girl you are doesn't deserve you."

I smiled at that. Reed was always trying to remind me of my worth. "Yeah, yeah okay. I gotta go now. Love you."

“Love you, too,” Reed answered before hanging up the phone.

I sat there alone in my cabin for what felt like hours after that, staring out my new window until the sun set. I was partly angry with myself. All this time I’d been focusing on the four paragons, and it wasn’t bringing me any closer to an understanding of my Void. Maybe Reed was right. Maybe I was just so starved for acceptance and annoyingly boy crazy that I let them get under my skin, despite their cruelty. It was time to buck up and take what was mine. Learn about the Void and establish a life for myself. I was no one’s puppet. I was no one’s emotional punching bag. I was here to figure shit out, and it was time I remembered that.

I finally got up and showered, noticing that all my wounds had healed. After I washed the blood away, I saw that there was nothing left to indicate that I’d been attacked in the first place. My skin was smooth and scar-free.

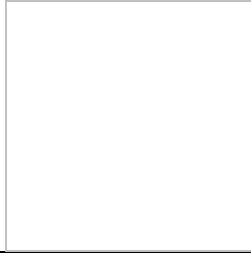
When I was clean and dressed, I went outside to check on Betty but paused when I saw a note on the leather seat, a red rose set down on top of it. I looked around, but there was no one around, so I walked over to it and picked it up, frowning down at the familiar handwriting. It was from Quade.

This isn’t over. I gave up on you once, but I won’t make that same mistake again. I’m a fast learner, remember?

I rolled the note over in my palm before crushing it in my fist. These were just words, worthless letters strung together in a way that was meant to reassure me. I decided right then and there that I was in control of my own actions. If I wanted to pursue something with these men, then it would be on my terms, not theirs.

“Hey, Betty,” I said, rubbing my fingers along her sleek chrome. “How about we go for a ride, girl?”

Chapter 17



I'D NEVER BEEN afraid of the darkness. I learned long ago to wrap myself up in it, to let the gloom coat my skin with its mystery. It seemed like everyone was busy wasting their entire lives trying to escape the dusk. They turned on night lights and hid from the shadows like they had the power to escape the monsters hiding there. But I learned long ago that I thrived in the dark. I learned to love myself there, in the bruised obscurity. And if darkness was my ally, then thrill was my bliss. It was the only way I could escape my tumultuous thoughts.

The engine of my bike purred between my thighs as I barreled down the curves of winding roads. It had been way too long since I'd been able to take her out. She'd been locked up and guarded at Mrs. Coxcomb's after they caught me sneaking her out one night. It was good to have her back, and I was thankful to my dad for bringing her.

As soon as I got on Betty, I'd gotten the hell off of Thibault Academy's grounds. As soon as I left the gravel drive and rolled onto pavement, the ominous building nothing but a shadow behind me, I'd smiled. Cool air filled my lungs as I rode further and further away, breathing in the scent of freedom.

I was going fast down the dark streets of the Washington town. My pale blonde hair slapped my cheeks as I switched gears, pushing the bike harder. All I wanted was to go even faster.

I felt free, wrapped up in night and danger, zipping through the questions of who I was and my purpose in this fucked up world, all while pushing further, faster, harder. A sharp turn came up on my right, and I leaned into it so hard that my ankle nearly scraped along the pavement. But it didn't. It never did. I was cursed with the luck of a demon and blessed with a desire to

test its boundaries. Taking risks was in my blood.

Maybe the paragons knew I was gone. Maybe someone had spotted me tearing off school grounds, but that only made my smile stretch wider. It made me feel good to picture Headmaster Torne with his thin lips perched in a scowl as he ordered the guys to search for me. I had to take joy in the little things.

Riding Betty off into the night was the only way I could start to sort through my racing thoughts. Hope was a foolish thing, and I was a foolish girl for thinking one miracle could change anything. So what if I swapped the powers of two supers? I was still a Void. Judge Braxton might have taken me out of exile, but I was still his tool to use. I just didn't know the rules anymore. If I couldn't figure out how to control my powers, the council was going to try to control *me* for the rest of my life.

I revved the engine and passed between two cars, straddling the painted highway lines. The lights from other cars and buildings flashed by as I drove. My instincts let me know every curve and pothole on the road. There was a stretch of straight nothingness ahead, and my latest visit with dad had me in the mood to take a risk. I turned off the headlight to my Suzuki GSX250r and let the night sky blanket me in darkness. I let my body relish in it, feeling like I could breathe again. Tossing my head back, I let out a thrilled scream, my voice ripping away into the dark air.

I was soaring. Flying. Falling.

I inhaled. Exhaled. Inhaled. Held. Held. Held.

I held the air in my lungs like my chest was a cage. Exhilarating tremors of fear and excitement gripped me. I relished in the control of my breath, holding it inside until it felt like my lungs might burst. I got off on knowing that at any moment, I could lose this game. The best games were the ones with the biggest risks. And the biggest risks usually held hands with the darkness that everyone loved to hide from.

The light was easy to love. It was easy to take a stroll through the autumn leaves and let the warm glow of a dawning sun wash over you. It was easy to bask in the summer and fall in love with light reflecting over the water. But that was all overrated in my opinion. I much rather preferred the veiled unknown of night. Some things of the darkness were just misunderstood.

I sensed that the end of the straight stretch was coming up, and I'd have to turn on my headlight soon, but I wanted to wait. I knew the exact moment I'd need to see again—it was the exact moment that the high of the danger

would wear off, and I'd have to go back to the school.

I finally inhaled again. Exhaled. Closed my eyes for the last ten seconds, enjoying the darkness for as long as I could until I couldn't hide inside it anymore. I opened my eyes and slowed down before turning on the headlight again, shrouding the road in a yellowish glow just before a right curve appeared. Just as I leaned into it, I felt a prickling sensation on my back. The awareness that someone was watching me.

I cursed under my breath, my palms instantly growing clammy even with the rushing wind. I knew they'd find me.

As the long curve came to an end, I saw him in the distance. Arms crossed, legs parted in arrogance, with a hint of amusement mixing in with his annoyance. He just stood there, in the middle of the road, glaring at me. Damn vampire.

I didn't slow down. Instead, I revved my bike faster, letting the wind whip across my face. It was a challenge—him facing me in the middle of the street, and me heading at him like a bullet shot from a gun. A game of chicken, to see who would cave first. I wanted to go until I saw the reds of his eyes and the gleam of his teeth.

He didn't even flinch despite being entirely in line with my bike. I kept going, daring him, but still, he didn't move. Fifty feet away. Forty. Twenty. Ten. *Five.*

It wasn't until the rubber of my tire was only inches away from his boot that Render flashed out of the way.

Cocky bastard vamp.

After he spit himself ahead, I gripped the handlebars and adjusted direction to where he'd flashed ahead of me. I raced for him, and once again, he flashed out of the way at the very last second. Again and again we did this risk-driven challenge. Me trying to clip him, and him throwing down the gauntlet that I couldn't.

By the fourth time, I'd nearly gotten him. My tire brushed against the fabric of his pants before he flashed to the right. I anticipated the move and already had my bike pointed at him, but he backtracked and disappeared again before I could get to him. I was panting, a huge smile spread across my face, my cheeks numb from the cold wind, and my eyes lit up in the moonlight. This was dangerous, crazy, and invigorating. It was *perfect*.

When he flashed right in front of my tire, making me squeal in surprise, I heard his laughter echo around me before he flashed out of the way again.

His vampire speed was impressive, but I'd had no doubt it would be. He was the paragon of his people, after all.

"That all you got, Dev?" I heard him yell at me from his strip of pavement across the way. We were in some sort of industrial part of town, with only lonely warehouse buildings and street lights to keep us company. My tire marks were branded all over the road from our little game.

"I'm going easy on you, vamp!" I called back. "I could easily catch you!"

He flashed right in front of me again, so fast that he whipped the hair back from my face as he leaned in close. "That so?"

I turned hard and took off again with a laugh, racing down the straightaway as excitement took over me. This right here—this was what I'd missed. Having fun, being wild, and taking risks that had nothing to do with the Void. I was riding high on the thrill of the chase, and I loved it.

"You can't outrun me, Void!"

I went faster. The buildings passing by me in a blur. It felt like *I* was flashing.

Render appeared in front of me again, but this time, instead of moving out of the way at the last second, he bent his knees and sprung straight up into the air. I slammed on the brakes, marking up the road with yet another black streak against the asphalt. I yanked off my helmet and whipped my head around, searching for him, my chest rising and falling with rushed breath.

There was a breeze at my back, and then my bike suddenly bounced with added weight. I felt arms wrap around me from behind, and I turned to look at him over my shoulder.

"I win," he breathed into my ear.

I couldn't stop the smile that spread across my lips. "Maybe I let you."

His dark, thick lashes were even more pronounced in the night, and his steely eyes were intense as he looked at me. His fangs were extended, probably because he'd been feeling the same adrenaline rush as I had. For some reason, the sight of his sharp teeth pressed into his full bottom lip had me leaning in closer. Render didn't pull away. Instead, his hands moved down to my hips, squeezing slightly.

"How did you find me?"

"Your power calls to mine. I can sense you."

His answer surprised me, but as the adrenaline began to drain out of me, I started remembering the whole reason I'd needed this escape in the first place. I think he must've seen the change in my face, because his gray-blue

eyes softened, turning more vulnerable than I ever thought possible. “Do you...fear me now? Because of what happened?”

I had to think for a second. *Did* I fear him? I’d just been assaulted by a classroom full of vampires. I’d had a dozen fangs sunk into my skin, with both excruciating pain and forced pleasure injected into me. My blood had been stolen, my dignity trampled on, and if the paragons hadn’t intervened, I could’ve been killed. And yet...

“No. I don’t fear you. You’d never do what they did.”

Call me crazy, but I truly believed that. Render might have been prejudiced against me when we’d first met, angry at the job I had to do on his fellow vampire at the council, but things were different now.

“How do you know?” he challenged. “Maybe I would’ve.”

I shook my head, more sure of myself by the second. “I just know.”

He swallowed hard and leaned in, making his chest press firmly against my back. “Well, you’re wrong, Void. I want nothing more right now than to sink my fangs into you and drink your sweet blood.”

My breath hitched at his words, and I couldn’t resist it anymore. I turned my neck as far as I could and leaned in, flicking my tongue gently over his fang. The sharp tip of it immediately cut open my tongue, but I moved away. Instead, I scraped it against his teeth, wanting to feel him—wanting to spread my lifeblood into his mouth and fill him with the taste of me. I was running on risk, feeling reckless and wild. I’d been letting this fucked up situation take control for too long. It was time to take my power back, metaphorically speaking, and this right here? Tempting Render? That made me feel more powerful than my Void ever had.

His own tongue darted out to meet mine, licking at the self-inflicted wound. As soon as he tasted my blood, he groaned, and then his hand was on my jaw, angling me just right so that he could devour my mouth.

The kiss was hurried and demanding. Every time my tongue moved away, his own would come back to claim it, his fangs nipping, cutting into me again and again. He sucked on my tongue to drink from me, and I felt the hard ridge of his cock press into my ass. Heat had gathered between my legs, and I shifted back, needing to get closer to him. Another groan escaped his throat, and then his other hand moved down from my hips to cup my sex.

“Is this what you like, Void? A vampire sucking you dry?” he asked into my mouth.

“You’re not like them,” I insisted.

“Our power demands that we take from others. I’m a monster, just like you.”

“We don’t have to be,” I replied.

He hummed against my mouth, nipping me one more time, his fang piercing my bottom lip this time. He sucked it into his mouth, his tongue running over the blood and making me shudder.

“I want you to take from me,” I admitted, my voice breathy.

I was still weak, but I didn’t care. I needed this.

He cursed under his breath, and then his fingers deftly unclasped the button of my jeans before pulling my zipper down. “Rev your bike,” he told me.

I turned around and focused on the handlebars, revving it like he said. The vibrations ran up my legs, settling into the very sensitive part between my thighs, and I let out a gasp. “You gonna get me off on my bike?” I asked with a tease.

“Drive back to the feral cabin,” he rasped in my ear. “And don’t crash.”

With a smile, I revved again, peeling across the pavement as I started to head back in the direction we’d come from. He dipped the tips of his fingers behind the band of my panties before sinking his teeth into my neck.

“*Oh gods.*”

I wanted to close my eyes as red-hot pleasure coursed through me. This was dangerous but I couldn’t stop.

The hunger was like a lock, and he twisted the key of his fangs, making me feel his pleasurable venom *everywhere*. Part of me knew this was wrong. I shouldn’t entertain taking pleasure from a vamp that possibly still hated me. It was just another thing they’d all eventually use against me. It was just another thing to regret later.

But I was selfish enough not to care. I wanted him. It had been way too long since I’d had release like this. The fumbled attempts with humans were always lackluster and left me dissatisfied. I knew all along that I’d needed a super to sate my needs.

Vibrations from my bike and bliss from Render coaxed my body into a state of euphoria while I scorched the road with my speeding tires, pushing faster and faster to get back to the academy. Adrenaline mixed with the pulsing of his fingers, driving me to a place where who I was didn’t matter anymore. What I was capable of didn’t mean shit. I was just a girl stealing a moment of life on a roaring bike, and Render was just an instrument of

pleasurable amnesia.

As I drove, his fingers continued to play with my clit, while his mouth staying on my neck. He wasn't pulling blood, just alternating between pricking me with the tips of his teeth and infusing me with his venom before sealing it shut again. It created peaks and lows of bliss, but I wanted more.

I pivoted my hips up, granting him deeper access to me as the sounds of my revving engine overpowered the sounds of my moans. I went faster, cursing when I saw a bend in the road. Tilting my bike to hug the wide berth, I hissed when his hands stopped working their magic and the vibrations dulled. At the end of the curve, I could see the side road leading to the back way to my cabin. I turned on it, gasping with the bumps of the road littered with uneven dirt and rocks.

Render pulled his lips from my neck to speak. "Pull over, Void," he ordered.

I did as he asked, only because I was *right there*. Right on the edge. After killing the bike, I hiked my leg over the seat and spun around. Render flashed off and was in my face in an instant, crushing his lips to mine as he guided me to a nearby tree, pressing my back against the hard bark. He went back to dipping his fingers into my slick heat while I writhed against his hand. It was filthy and wrong and yet somehow just right.

His hard cock rubbed against my taut stomach as his fingers toyed with me. I could feel its thickness through his pants and drug my hands down his chest and abs to get a better feel.

"Don't touch me," he growled into my mouth before sweeping his tongue along my bottom lip. I recoiled at his harsh words, surprised.

"Don't want a nasty Void to touch you?" I sneered, while trying to pull away.

His hands flashed up to my cheeks, holding me in place, peering into my eyes so I couldn't escape. I could smell myself on his fingertips. "That's not it. I just don't want to come in your palm...yet," he explained. "You have me so hard I'd last an embarrassingly short amount of time, and I have a reputation to maintain."

My face scrunched up. I didn't want to hear about his *reputation*. "Hmm," I said before shoving at his chest. He didn't budge.

"I'm going to get you off, Void. I think you could use the release. Have you ever come before?" he asked while tilting his head to the side, observing me with that cocky expression I was starting to find attractive. Damn asshole

vamp.

I remembered him reading my diary, all the dirty loneliness that followed me everywhere I went. I was inexperienced, yeah, but that didn't mean I wanted him to add it to his arsenal of reasons to bully me. So instead of feeling ashamed or embarrassed, I laughed. "I know how to come, vamp," I said before taking my hands and running them down my body. His eyes flickered away from my face to follow the heated trail my fingers left. "I'm not afraid to get myself off. I guess the better question is, do *you* know what *you're* doing? 'Cause I'm still standing here unsatisfied." His beautiful eyes flared with challenge.

He didn't even give me a second to gather myself. Within an instant, he was yanking down my shirt, exposing the tops of my breasts and the plump skin there. He sank his teeth into my cleavage making me cry out with delicious pricks of pain, smearing blood along my skin before pushing his hand back between my thighs. And then his fingers started...flashing. Vibrating with pointed speed against my clit. Yanking his mouth away from my breasts, he gleamed at my parted lips and rasping breath.

"I know you hate flashing, but it's not all bad, huh?" he teased, while stroking me even faster. It was better than my rabbit vibrator hidden under my mattress at Mrs. Coxcomb's School for Troubled Girls.

"Nope," I agreed on a hiss as he stroked me. "This flashing is freaking *awesome*," I panted. I had no idea he could do *this*. His fingers moved so quickly that I came embarrassingly fast. My orgasm tore through me, ripping up my spine and down between my thighs. As I arched my back, he sunk his teeth into me when he saw me start to come down, making it last even *longer*.

He pulled his mouth back first, after licking all the blood covering my breasts. Then he removed his hand with a satisfied smirk. "How was that?"

I could barely breathe. Couldn't even think. I wasn't about to tell Render, but that was probably the best orgasm I'd ever had. I decided my mouth couldn't be trusted, so I kept it shut. His orgasms were like truth serum, and I didn't want to say something embarrassing. The asshole had a big enough head as it was.

"Why?" I asked instead. It was something I'd been asking a lot lately.

Render's face softened for a moment then grew hard. "Don't read into it. I just didn't want you spending the rest of your life thinking vamps were only good for hurting. It's bad for my people if the Void has a prejudice based on the ignorance of few."

Anger flared up within me but then died on my exhale. That...was not what I'd wanted to hear. "Oh. Well...thanks for the demonstration," I replied with a small smile. My nonchalance must have caught Render off-guard, because his mouth dropped open in shock.

"Go back to the cabin," he ordered before nodding back toward my bike.

"Yes, sir," I replied while rolling my eyes. I'd gotten the risk out of my soul and an orgasm out of my body. I guess things could be worse. Slipping away from him, I buttoned my pants then headed toward Betty. "Do me a favor though, will you?" I asked while straddling my bike.

"What?" he asked.

"Be sure to pass Gritt's room so he can smell me on you. It'll drive the bastard crazy," I said with a wink.

He looked down at the ground and laughed before flashing away. Once I was sure he was gone, I let the cool disappointment sink into me before driving the rest of the way to the feral cabin.

But when I got there, someone was already waiting for me.

Banner was stretched out on the wooden porch, leaning against the dilapidated bannister. I parked my bike, kicking out the stand, and pulled off my helmet before walking over to him. He stood up to face me, and I regarded him curiously. Every time we'd been around each other lately, all he'd done was rush through lessons. We hadn't connected at all since that first day, and I wasn't sure why.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

He shrugged, his pale skin catching in the moonlight. "Wanted to make sure you were okay. I heard about the vampires."

"Yeah. I'm okay."

We stood awkwardly in front of each other, two feet of space between us that felt both too close and too far away. He regarded me with his dark eyes, and I wished so badly that I could figure out what he was thinking.

"You fed?"

I nodded slowly. "Gritt took off my necklace after the attack. I fed from him."

Banner's eyes raised in surprise. "You fed from him? Without me present?"

"I know, it was dangerous. I told him he shouldn't have."

"No, he shouldn't."

"It was okay, though," I said, feeling suddenly excited to tell him about

the control I'd had. "It was muscle memory or something. Like my Void knew not to hurt him. Gritt was pretty cocky about it," I said with a chuckle.

Instead of looking impressed or proud like I expected, Banner's frown only deepened. "You can't trust them, Devicka."

My humor fled my face. "What?"

"The paragons, the headmaster. You can't trust them. Maybe they're tricking you into a false sense of security, pretending to like you, but don't fall for it."

His words were like a slap to the face. My father had told me not to trust anyone either, but this was different. "Do you know something I should?" I asked carefully.

He didn't say yes, but he didn't deny it either. "Work on your power. Appease the council. That's what you need to focus on."

"I am focusing on that," I insisted, getting pissed.

"Good. Don't let other...things distract you."

I didn't like the implication of what he was saying. But instead of drilling him on it, I switched gears. "You've been weird lately. Distant."

He didn't even try to deny it. His head dropped, and he kicked at the bannister with his shoe, making the wood thunk. "I apologize, Miss Cainson."

The corner of my mouth tilted up. "Haven't we moved past *Miss Cainson* yet, *Mr. Selik*?" I asked teasingly, hoping we could slip back into our easy banter that we'd once shared.

His lips parted in a smile, and relief flooded into me. "Well, I *am* your teacher."

"Is that all you are?" I asked. I really wanted to know the answer to that question.

Instead of replying, he closed the distance between us and fingered the amulet hanging on my neck. His blood-red lips were pressed in a thin line. "You're doing very well in your lessons," he said quietly. "But the council will want more from you soon."

I deflated a bit. The last thing I wanted to deal with tonight was more talk of the council's expectations of me. "They always do," I replied.

Banner let my amulet drop and then brushed my light blonde hair off my shoulder. A shiver travelled up my spine when he let his finger pause against the edge of my neck, his touch skimming up and down. "I'm glad you're okay," he said quietly.

Gods, the way he said that made butterflies swarm through my insides.

“Thanks,” I said lamely, too caught up in the moment.

He swallowed hard, stepping away from me, taking his cooling balm with him. “I’d better get back.”

I nodded, and he turned and walked away, leaving me behind with more uncertainty than I’d had before. “Fucking men,” I grumbled to myself as I turned to the cabin. I just wanted this day to be over and for it to take all of the confusing males with it.

Chapter 18



LOUD BANGING on my door woke me up the next morning. *Afuckinggain.*

I slept well, thanks to my active night, and the cabin had even been cleaned up a bit while I was gone. I wondered if the quirky necromancer was responsible for my new chair and blankets. There was even a stack of new uniforms folded on the dresser, too. When I got dressed, I found that the clothes were actually in my size, instead of those ill-fitting second hand uniforms I'd been wearing. But looking down at my legs, it seemed like the skirt was significantly shorter than what was regulation for the school. Either way, it was better than what I'd had, especially considering it had gotten bloody and shredded from the attack.

I was also feeling good about my new outlook. I let Render get me off last night because I wanted it. I no longer cared if he thought I wasn't worthy of his odd cravings and attention. If he didn't want me, fine. But I'd take advantage of the fun while I could. I was also going to focus on my powers. Not for my mother, not for the council, not for Banner. For *me*.

I opened the door, wearing my new uniform that I'd hastily pulled on, and squinted at the moody shifter on my porch. "What took you so long?" he asked as I flung open the door.

"I was getting dressed," I mumbled, pulling at the hem of my skirt as I walked outside. The words were barely out of my mouth before Gritt was suddenly in front of me, blocking my path.

Startled, I looked up, and Gritt was staring down at me, nostrils flared, chest heaving, eyes flashing with reflective fury. "Did you touch yourself?"

I blinked at him in shock, my mouth dropped open. "*What?*"

He honest-to-demons *growled* at me, a noise so predatory that it made the

hairs on my arms rise. He took a step forward, crowding my space. “I said, did you *fucking touch yourself*? Did you use your hands to rub your pussy until you creamed all over your fingers?” His voice was low, his breath hot on my face. He was every bit a dangerous predator. That, coupled with his dirty words, had my heart racing. “Because I could smell you all over the damn school. In the dorm corridors. In the dining hall. In the fucking library, which I’ve never even been to until today. Shit, I even smelled you in the godsdamned men’s bathroom, and you sure as fuck better not have been in there. So you need to tell me that you just like to get yourself off in public places, because if you’re fucking Selik all over the damn school, we’re going to have a problem.”

Outrage spurred to life inside of me, and I brought both hands up to shove him back. “How *dare* you. You don’t get to ask me questions like that, and you sure as shit don’t get to threaten me. Who the fuck do you think you are?”

He opened his mouth to answer, only to shut it again and let out another growl. He was obviously shocked by my new take-no-shit attitude, and it bolstered me.

“That’s what I thought,” I snapped. “We’re right back to where we started, because you can’t admit otherwise. So you have no right to talk to me like that. And for the record, I *do* like getting off in public places. But it was Render that had the pleasure of dipping his fingers inside of me, not Banner.”

I spun on my heel and started storming away, cursing the academy building for being so far.

“That fucking bloodsucker,” Gritt cursed before running to catch up with me. “When did this happen? Before or after you were nearly killed by his people yesterday?”

Leaves crunched beneath my feet as I continued to stomp away. I could feel him right at my back, furiously breathing his hot air down my neck. “After. It happened last night when I went for a joy ride on Betty.”

“Who the fuck is Betty?” he roared, and I turned around to see him dragging his hands along his face. I decided right then to torment him even more.

“Oh, she’s the best I’ve ever ridden,” I teased. “Practically purrs between my thighs.”

Gritt pushed ahead of me and stopped in the middle of the path. He braced both hands on my shoulders, forcing me to stop. “Do you have *any*

idea how difficult this is for me? I have no control over the bond. The least you could do is not flaunt yourself with other males all over the fucking school.”

I seethed. “So *now* you’re going to admit there’s a bond? How convenient for you. You just whip it out when you get jealous and tuck it back in your pants when you remember I’m the Void and you don’t want me. Fuck that.”

“No. Yes. Fuck, I don’t know!” he yelled, throwing his arms up in frustration. “Maybe. Every fucking second I’m around you, all of my animals are pushing at me to claim you.”

“And what about you?”

“Me?”

“Yes. You. Not your animals, not some fucking bond you have no control over. What do *you* want?”

He narrowed his eyes. “I want to not have to smell your arousal all over the godsdamn school!”

“Sorry to burst your bubble, but I won’t be hiding away like a virginal nun until this bond is out of your system. Have you figured out what you’re going to do about this?”

“I’m still researching,” he said with a curse before taking a step back, as if reminding himself that he was supposed to be keeping his distance from me.

“Right. Well, while you figure out how to make your animals agree with your head, I suggest you stop acting like a jealous boyfriend.”

I made a mental note to thank Render for fucking with Gritt. Knowing him, he had probably been running laps around the school at all hours of the night. It was pretty savage.

We headed toward the school, Gritt growling and talking to himself most of the way. I only caught bits and pieces of his grumblings, but I had a feeling Render would be getting his ass kicked pretty soon. Gritt bypassed the cafeteria doors and led me down another deserted hallway toward a secluded classroom at the end of the school. I was hungry as hell, but I was grateful for the opportunity to miss out on seeing the vamps that tormented me yesterday. Luckily, I caught sight of a basket sitting on the teacher’s desk.

“Did you pack me breakfast?” I asked. “How thoughtful of you.”

“No?” Gritt replied. I noticed a card on top and picked it up to read the pristine script inside:

DEVICKA,

I was called away on council business. I left Gritt instructions on what to go over. Give him hell and see you soon.

Always in your corner,

Banner

I OPENED the basket and grinned at the various fruits and breakfast items. Maybe my little talk with Banner last night had been good after all.

“What is it?” Gritt asked.

I passed over the instructions Banner had left for him. “A gift from Banner. He won’t be here today,” I replied. Despite everything, I didn’t actually want to torment Gritt with our failed bond. I couldn’t blame him for hating to be stuck with me. He was a paragon after all, destined to do great shit that I wanted no part of.

“Of course he packed you breakfast,” Gritt muttered while reading the slip of paper. He dropped it as soon as he finished reading, and then started digging through his backpack. He pulled out a large textbook and sat down at a desk, motioning for me to sit next to him. “He left us a shit load of stuff to read.”

Gritt opened the textbook and grabbed a pencil from his pocket, nodding at the chair beside him before putting his shaggy blond hair up in a bun on top of his head. I settled into my seat, my uniform riding up my thighs as I twisted to look at the book in front of Gritt. It was almost amusing to have him as a study buddy. He didn’t exactly scream studious. With his huge muscles, tanned skin, and handsome face, he was much more the cocky jock.

“What’s on the lesson plan, Nitty Gritty?” I asked before tapping my pencil on the edge of the desk. I was still mad at him, but I was also mad at myself. I wish I didn’t let him get under my skin so easily. I wish I didn’t feel this pull toward him.

Gritt rolled his eyes. “The origin of Voids. You’ve got an entire chapter dedicated to your kind.” My mouth dropped open in shock, and I scooted my chair over to get a better look. My entire life, I’d been curious about my abilities, and Banner had found a book about my kind. I didn’t know where he’d gotten it, but I was grateful.

My fingers greedily inched toward the textbook. Gritt flipped through the pages, and once he got where he wanted, he shoved it toward me. “Read.”

He might as well have been a caveman for all of his single word grunts he

tossed my way, but I didn't care. I was too engrossed by the picture on the page in front of me. A man surrounded by black smoke looked back at me, right alongside a chapter-long list of warnings.

"The first recorded Void was all the way back in the thirteen hundreds," I said, more to myself than anything.

Gritt grunted but made no other noise as he picked at his claws.

"Capable of draining immense power, all Voids have explained their ability in similar ways, describing it as an endless hunger. There have been testimonies of a Void consuming hundreds of powers at once, and it still being capable of draining more. There is no known limit to the amount of power that they can pilfer."

My words died in my throat as I stared. I knew that my power was extreme, but I had no idea that it was limitless. Just how many people could I steal powers from until I had to stop? Would the Void ever be satiated? According to this, I had a lifetime of starvation to look forward to. That thought didn't sit so well.

"Who was he?" I heard myself asking, my eyes still trained on the page.

In my peripheral, I saw Gritt look up from his claws. "Theodore Rhodes," he replied in a bored tone. "Last known Void to exist. There used to be more thousands of years ago, but they were gradually killed off, as well as information surrounding them. He died about a hundred years before you were born. Leveled an entire shifter compound. A horde of vamps took him down."

I swallowed thickly. No wonder Gritt had so much animosity toward me. Voids had a deadly history of killing his people. "He grew up in a human orphanage, but when he came into his powers, they moved him to a super city. He had a fancy amulet, just like yours. But it failed. The temptation was too much for him. And the more power he ate, the more he *craved*. He didn't just take their powers, he took their lives, too."

My heart thudded in my chest. This right here, this was my biggest fear.

"I don't want to ever get to that point," I whispered, drawing Gritt's attention to my fearful expression. I stared him in the eye, wordlessly telling him everything I was feeling.

"You wouldn't," he said with certainty.

"But if I did...just, promise me you won't let me ever do that. You and the other paragons—you're strong enough. If I ever lose control like that, promise me you'll stop me. Whatever the cost. I don't want to be a mass

murderer.” Tears filled my eyes, dread filling me, given what I was capable of. I’d always known it, but now that I’d actually seen evidence of it, it sobered me with stark cold terror.

He studied me intently, and I ignored the buzzing need in my amulet just to stare back at him. “I won’t let you get to that point,” he said quietly, and there was an unexpected tenderness in his tone that made my breath catch.

I breathed out a shaky sigh of relief. My biggest fear had always been to lose total control. To become a mindless Void and forget all about Devicka. “Good,” I said with a nod.

I resumed flicking through the pages. Aside from the warnings, there wasn’t much information in here. Just a lot of awful accounts of what Voids had done to supers in the past. It wasn’t a pretty picture. Gritt coughed and started tapping his pencil on the desk, observing me as I thumbed through the pages.

“None of this talks about any Void transferring powers or even being able to do partial feedings,” I observed. “In fact, most of these pages just talk about...putting Voids down as soon as their powers came out, or locking them up.”

My Void churned inside of me, feeling hungry and uneasy. Hundreds of children killed, all because black smoke came out of them one day. It was fucking awful. If I’d been born a few hundred years earlier, that would’ve been me. Murdered at ten years old for no fault of my own.

My amulet started buzzing harder, and I looked down at it with a wince. The skin where it sat had turned red like the amulet was burning me. “Fuck. Can you take me back to the cabin? The Void is hungry again, and since Banner is gone today...I don’t want to risk losing control,” I admitted. I made a move to stand, and Gritt jerked his hand out to stop me.

“You’re hungry,” he said, his green eyes locked on my face.

“Yes,” I replied, feeling suddenly nervous under his intense expression.

“I can feel it.”

I frowned. “You can feel my hunger?”

He nodded slowly, and I noticed that his pupils had dilated. Was he...aroused? The bond wasn’t breaking. If anything, it seemed to be growing stronger.

He stood up and grabbed both my wrists, pulling me up to stand. “We’ve already done this twice. We’ve proven we can handle it.”

His hot breath feathered down my skin, trailing lines of heat along my

face as my lips parted. Up close, I could see the stubble on his chin, the slight dimple on his right cheek. My tongue darted out to lick my lips, and his eyes followed the movement in rapt attention. "I-I don't think that's a good idea," I stumbled before taking a step back.

"Are you sure?" he asked with a pout. I wasn't sure what to make of his sickly sweet, tempting voice.

"Positive," I choked out, even though my necklace was buzzing, my heart thudding, and every damn cell in my body was demanding that I take off the necklace and mold my body to his, eat him up like the decadent treat he was.

His flirty expression faltered and a smirk replaced his pout. "What if I said I *wanted* you to feed from me?" he asked while stalking even closer.

My forehead was just a kiss away from his chin. I tilted my head up, hating him for tempting me if he was just going to change his mind again, but also curious about what he meant. He was acting like happy Gritt again. Like the Gritt I'd woken up beside.

"You don't want this," I reminded him.

"Maybe I do."

I sighed angrily at him. "Well, maybe I don't," I snapped. "Maybe I want to give *you* emotional whiplash."

He wasn't deterred. "You mean, you don't want me to do this?" Gritt challenged in a low, husky voice as he took another step forward and placed his hot hand around my neck.

Yes. "Definitely not," I sputtered, backing away again, only to be blocked by the desk behind me.

"And you don't want me to do this either?" He took the necklace in his hand and slowly started to unclasp it.

My Void knocked against my skin, begging to be let out. *Yes, Yes, Yes.* "Nope."

His smirk widened, like he could hear the truth beneath the lie, but after he had the clasp undone, he kept the amulet pressed against my chest. He leaned in, and I was sure he must be able to hear how fast my heart was racing. "Admit that you want to feed from me."

"No," I said on a breathy sigh, my eyes fluttering closed.

His other arm wrapped around my middle, letting his large hand press against the small of my back. I automatically arched into him. His scruffy beard scraped against my skin as he ran his cheek against mine. "Liar."

I couldn't resist him for a single second longer. I didn't want to. My new

mantra was to take what I wanted, and I was starving for him. My lips crashed to his, so fast and aggressive that it caught him off guard. But he only paused for a second before he met me—lips to lips, tongue to tongue, teeth to teeth.

“Say it,” he growled against my mouth.

“You first.”

He trailed the amulet down my skin, until it was pressing between my breasts. At the same time, he moved his mouth down my neck, making chills erupt from the sensitive spots that he started to lick and nibble. The amulet was almost vibrating now, which only made my body even more aware of all the sensations that Gritt was wrenching from me.

He was right. I wanted him. I wanted *this*.

I reached down between us and let my hand rub against his hardness. He groaned and bit into my skin.

“I want to fuck you,” he admitted. “I want you to feed from me. I need both of those things like I need to fucking breathe. I can’t lie anymore. I can’t fucking hold back.”

Hearing him say it out loud made my need for him soar even higher.

“Then do it,” I told him, my eyes finding his.

His throat bobbed, the muscle in his jaws clenching. “You want me to fuck you, Void? Right here in the classroom?”

I whimpered in response and started stroking him more, but the hand at my back moved around so that he could grip my wrist, stopping me. “Then say it.”

I looked up at him. “I want you.”

“What do you want?” he pressed. I clenched my teeth. The asshole wanted me to say *everything*.

“I want to feed from you...and I want you to fuck me, right here in the classroom.”

He hummed in approval. “That’s right. And that’s what I fucking want too. Because you’re my godsdamned mate.”

His hand over the amulet released, and my Void shot out of my skin, coalescing from my pores. The smoke wrapped around us until all I could see was my body pressed against Gritt’s. He deftly lifted me up until I was sitting on the teacher’s desk, and he shoved my legs open to step between them.

My Void wrapped around his limbs in thin wisps, feeding gently. His eyes rolled to the back of his head as he moaned. “*Fuck.*”

I would have mirrored his response, but I was too high off the mixture of feeding while being completely lost to lust.

“This damn schoolgirl skirt fucking kills me every day,” he said, looking down at where the fabric was hiked up against my thigh. “I swear, it’s shorter today.”

“I’m pretty sure the necro made some mice hem it four inches shorter,” I breathed, reaching down to unclasp his pants. I popped them open and shoved them down hurriedly, earning a smirk from Gritt.

“In a hurry?” he teased.

“Yes! Just get inside me.”

His eyes flashed, and I swear, I was suddenly looking back at an animal in his place. “Fucking *gladly*.”

He pushed down his boxers, revealing his large, hard erection. I stared down at it in equal parts excitement and lust. “I *really* hope you know how to use that thing.”

He scoffed and flipped my skirt up, baring my cotton panties. He brought a curled finger down my slit, feeling the wetness there. “I know how to use it, Devi. Are you sure you can take it?”

In response, I reached down and gripped his cock in my hand, stroking him back and forth. He threw his head back with a hiss before looking back at me, tugging at his bottom lip with his teeth. He started palming my breasts before ripping the fabric of my shirt at the buttons, popping it open to grant him better access.

“Why is this pull so strong?” I asked breathlessly while stroking him. My mind was at war with the Void which was at war with his body. I stopped stroking him to thumb the precum that had gathered at the tip. “Whenever I’m near you...”

“You want to fuck?” he finished for me with a cocky smile before kissing my collarbone. His lips were soft but the roughness of his beard made the sensation a blend of harsh and tender.

“I was going to say dick punch you, but...” Gritt grabbed my hand and pulled it away from him before binding my wrists together with his grip. The Void smoke danced between us even more.

“I’m not sure why my animals picked you, but this feels too good to stop. I’m not going to resist it anymore,” he said before lacing his lips with mine. I tried to pull away, enjoying the push and pull of his hold on me. “So stop talking and bend over.”

I gasped at his hot words, feeling dirty and wanted. It might not be the most romantic thing a girl could hear, but it was so real and so *Gritt*. I loved it.

He took advantage of my open mouth to swipe his tongue against mine, and I moaned on the sweet taste. Power was flowing between us freely now. I felt filled to the brim, but I still wanted more. My Void drank in small tastes, but instead of weakening him, Gritt seemed invigorated.

Using the hold on my wrists, he spun me around and pushed me against the desk. I braced myself against the edge as he lifted the back of my skirt up and pulled my panties down.

“Gods, you have a fantastic ass,” he said while rubbing his palm along the heated curve. It was a tender touch, kneading and warm. Then a smack sounded and stinging pain seared through my skin before being quickly soothed by a rubbing sensation. “Looks even better all marked up and red from my hand.”

He spanked me again before dragging the tip of his cock along my asshole. I went rigid before looking over my shoulder to glare at him. “Don’t you dare,” I said while giving him an angry look.

“I won’t...today. But one day, I plan to claim every fucking part of you, Devicka.” My name sounded like a promise on his lips. I liked hearing it a hell of a lot more than Void.

“How about we start by not wanting to kill each other first,” I said before dipping lower and arching my back. My breasts touched the cool wood of the desk. “Now fuck me.”

“With pleasure,” he growled before using his boot to kick my right foot out and widen my stance. He then threaded his hands through my hair and yanked hard, forcing me to look back at him over my shoulder. “Next time,” he began before pressing at my entrance. “I’ll make you look me in the eye as I fuck you.” And then he slammed into me with a single, punishing thrust. My breath hitched at how full I was, the shocking entrance stretching me completely. He paused as I directed my gaze forward, the smoky Void mixed in with the sweat on my skin. I could taste the power, the desire, the *connection*. It was heady and consuming.

Gritt pulled all the way out then slammed back into me. Then he did it again and again until the rhythm of his thrusts matched my heartbeat. The Void filled the room completely, stroking the space with power, and for once, I was able to see it and not feel destructive. His power fed into me in

languorous gulps while his cock hit that delicious part inside of me. Feeding and fucking at the same time was the best combination in the world. It was utter and total perfection.

The sounds we made were obscene in the big, empty classroom. Skin hitting skin, the wetness between my legs making a squelching noise as he moved in and out, the moans that slipped from my throat.

Gritt released the hold on my hair to cover my mouth. “Unless you want the entire school to hear me fucking you, you need to keep it down.”

I opened my mouth wider and bit down on his hand, but instead of flinching away, he chuckled. “No biting. Your mouth can do much better things than that,” he said, and then he moved his hand, forcing my lips apart. When I opened my mouth, he slipped a finger inside. “Suck.”

I trailed my tongue along the underside of his roughened finger and then sucked, making him groan. He reached down with his other hand and lifted one of my legs, placing my bent knee on the desk so that he could go even deeper. He was big, bigger than I’d had before, so the new angle was somewhat painful, but it felt good to be stretched by him. It felt *right* to have him inside of me.

“I love watching your smoke wrap around my cock as I fuck you,” he said huskily, taking his finger out of my mouth.

His words sent more heat to my core, weeping for release. “I need to come,” I begged.

“Not until you’re done feeding.”

“Please,” I whimpered.

He stroked his wet finger down my back, until he was rimming it around my ass. I tensed when he probed my hole. “I’ll make you come, Devicka. Just as soon as your Void isn’t hungry anymore.”

Frustration whined out of me, but he wasn’t wrong—my Void was still hungry. It was drinking from him slowly, adding to the pleasure building up inside of me. I pushed my power out, urging it to go faster, and the clouds thickened. Somehow, I knew it wouldn’t hurt him. That this is exactly what I was supposed to be doing.

He laughed. “Impatient?”

My Void was nearly satisfied, and I was shaking all over, climbing to my peak. I reached down and started rubbing my clit, my fingers dancing over the swollen part of me.

“Yeah, keep doing that, greedy girl. That’s insanely fucking hot,” he said,

gripping my hips as he started to fuck me harder. With every thrust, I nearly toppled over, but his hold on me kept me in place.

My Void drank, my body buzzed, and then Gritt's hands started to glow where they touched me. The shifter bond pulsed to life, and this time, there was no stopping it. And right then and there, I didn't want it to stop.

"Keep going," I begged. "I'm so close."

"I'm going to cum so much inside of you that I'll be dripping down your legs all fucking day."

I exploded around his cock at his dirty words. His dick was so far inside of me that I was sure he was hitting my cervix. I felt my pussy constrict around his hard length, and then he was roaring out his own release, and I could feel hot ropes of cum spurting inside of me.

My chest collapsed against the top of the teacher's desk, utterly exhausted but totally satiated. My Void had dispersed with my release, and the constant arousal and hunger I'd felt since the vampire attack was finally gone.

But we didn't have time for post-coital bliss or even awkward detaching. Because suddenly, we heard a mass of footsteps heading our way—dozens of student voices filling the hall.

"Shit!"

Gritt straightened, slipping out of me, making his seed drip down my thighs. He yanked his boxers and pants up, and then grabbed my arm to help me stand. But when I stumbled on shaky legs, he gave up on letting me stand on my own and picked me up. He snatched up my bag and ran for the exit on the other side of the room. We barely got the door open and slipped out before we heard the professor and students enter in at the other side.

"Who the hell was having sex in my damn classroom?" the professor yelled, sounding annoyed. Clearly, he was a shifter or vampire to be able to smell it.

I had to slap a hand over my mouth to keep from laughing as Gritt rushed us down the hall. He smirked down at me. "Think that's funny?"

I nodded, beaming. "Yep."

"You won't think it's funny when I take you up against the wall while my cum is still inside of you."

My face flamed with heat. "We...we're fully bonded now, aren't we?"

He slowed his steps to a stop, and then set me down on my feet. My skirt was askew, so I twisted it and pulled it down, noticing that my panties were completely missing. There was no way in hell I was going back in the

classroom to get them.

“We *are* bonded,” Gritt finally answered, seeming unsure how he should feel about that.

All of the previous lightheartedness was gone, replaced with tricklings of dread. His expression...the way he wouldn’t quite look at me, it made the fullness of my Void churn with nausea.

“I gotta go,” he said abruptly, pushing away from the wall and walking away.

I frowned. “But—”

He rounded a corner, disappearing from view before I could even get a whole sentence out. I stared in shock at the space he’d been, my mind running a million miles an hour.

I could feel the bond in my fingertips, like little warm pinpricks. I wasn’t sure how I knew what it was, but I did. The intense pull—the attraction, it had been unstoppable. I think my Void would have lashed out with or without me if I hadn’t given in and fed from Gritt eventually, and my body would’ve snapped from its need for him. It was ludicrous, but that’s how it had felt. Like I’d *needed* him in every possible way. I didn’t understand any of this. My life was turned upside down.

Did I have a new shifter mate who regretted me? I thought he’d decided he was past all of that, but maybe not. We’d obviously both been driven to each other from powers outside of our control, and our lust had been off the charts, but fuck. For once, I thought I’d actually been wanted. Chosen. And now, I was left behind again.

Chapter 19



"DID YOU GET MY NOTE?" Quade asked before sitting beside me. His tray was stacked high with food, and he started lifting up forkfuls of spaghetti and distributing it on my plate, which only had—surprise, surprise—oatmeal.

"The ominous *I'm coming for you* stalker letter you left on Betty? Yeah, I got it. Also got a restraining order, too."

Quade twisted to look at me and frowned. "Yeah, okay. I deserved that. I'm sorry for the kiss. I wanted to talk, but then your Dad showed up and—"

"And you had to run away like your ass was on fire?" I supplied helpfully.

"You know he could have literally set my ass on fire, right? Your Dad is one scary motherfucker," Quade replied while stuffing noodles into his mouth. "You forget, I saw what he did to that door-to-door salesman in third grade when he'd stopped by to visit you."

"Oh gods, the one selling vacuums?" I snorted before tipping my head back in laughter.

"Your father set every damn vacuum he had on fire and then convinced him to join in on a risky business venture," Quade added, making my laughter kick up a notch.

I nodded. "The guy ended up being a millionaire. Owns sex toy shops across the country."

We both spoke at the same time, "The Fiery Suck and Blow!" We both broke out into a fit of laughter.

Quade's muscular shoulders shook as he chuckled, and I had to use a napkin to wipe the tears escaping the corners of my eyes. This was nice, joking with an old friend. It almost felt so normal that it caught me off guard. I didn't even care that everyone was staring at us or that the elementals

looked particularly pissed off at Quade giving me nice attention. I wasn't going to let them spoil this moment.

"Are we actually having a pleasant conversation?" I asked before picking up my fork and digging into the pile of spaghetti on my plate.

Quade calmed his laughter and gave me a warm once over, his eyes traveling over my bare shoulders, thanks to the tank top I was wearing. I hated the school uniforms, and the moment the last class for the day let out, I ran back to the cabin and changed. "I think we are," he replied in a husky voice.

A commotion at the front of the cafeteria caught my attention, and my eyes were drawn to Gritt, who was standing in front of the shifter table, clutching his silverware so tightly that it bent. "He's a jealous one," Quade observed before waving over at the angry shifter with twinkling fingers.

"Yeah, that's probably going to be a problem." I turned my attention back to my food and started chewing. I didn't want to think about my newly bonded shifter who'd abandoned me in the hallway with his cum still dripping down my legs.

Quade and I didn't speak again until most of our plates had been cleared, and I took a sip of his drink, surprised to find that it was wine in his glass and not juice. Gritt got up from his table and stormed out of the cafeteria, making me roll my eyes.

"Why is he so melodramatic? If he wanted to sit by you, he could've come over here." Quade's words made a resonating anger billow up in my chest.

"You're one to talk. Why are you over here, anyway?" I asked while looking over at the elemental table. They all were staring at us in confusion, shocked that their fearless leader would stoop so low as to sit with me. "Did you tell them you had to come babysit me? Or did you admit that we were once friends? That we *are* friends again now?"

"I didn't tell them shit," he said heatedly. "Maybe I'm tired of letting prejudice get in the way of me being with you. Maybe I'm tired of always having to answer to someone."

My mouth dropped open in shock at his words. "Is this you talking or whatever weird pull you feel?" I asked carefully. "Because I don't want this to turn into something you'll resent me for."

"I won't," he answered adamantly, and I melted a little at the fierce way his dark eyes locked on mine.

“But I don’t understand what’s happening with my Void. It’s like we’re all...”

“Bonded? Yeah, I know. But that only happens with shifters. Maybe your Void attracts the powers it wants, somehow. Lures them in.”

“You think I’m trying to lure you?” My voice was incredulous, and I shoved my plate away before standing.

“Shit, that’s not what I meant, Devi,” Quade replied before standing and giving a cautious look around the cafeteria. Around us, everyone was staring, mouths gaping open and full of food as I seethed with anger. My eyes glanced down, and sure enough, my amulet was glowing.

“Then why don’t you explain to me what exactly you mean,” I replied before crossing my arms over my chest. I didn’t care if we had an audience, didn’t care if everyone saw the blow up between us. If he *really* wanted to be my friend, then he shouldn’t care about admitting it in front of everyone. I wasn’t going to be anyone’s dirty little secret.

“I just mean that there are things we don’t understand about the Void. Things that aren’t in textbooks. I might be drawn to you for reasons I don’t understand right now, but this isn’t new. I’ve always...” He looked around before taking a step closer and lowering his voice. “I’ve always *loved* you, Devi. When my parents said the Void took you over, it felt like my best friend had died. I hated you because, in my mind, you were something toxic using the girl I fell for as a shell.”

Girls at the elemental table gasped in shock. I saw out of my peripherals that one even got up and stormed out of the dining hall, but I kept my eyes on Quade. “You should have fought for me,” I whispered. “You should have tried to see me.”

“I was just a stupid kid. It’s why I stayed close to your mom. It was a way for me to check in on you without having to see what you’d become,” he whispered before cupping my cheek and shocking me by his outward display of affection. “I don’t know what this means, or why I feel the way I do, but I’m not going to fight it.”

“And what about your image?” I challenged. “You’re the Paragon Poster Boy. Aren’t you worried what your people will say? Your parents wouldn’t even accept a friendship between us,” I argued, though it felt like gravity was pulling us together. “What are you going to do when everyone finds out that we’re more? They’ll talk, Quade.”

“Let them,” he whispered over my lips before pulling me in for a kiss. If I

had any doubt before that he was going to try to keep me a secret, that was swept away the moment his mouth pressed to mine right there in the middle of the dining hall.

It wasn't like our frantic kiss before. There was no push or pull. It was like both of us were finally giving in, a reunion filled with pain and recovery swirling around our tongues as I moaned into his mouth. It felt like an exhale, like I had been holding my breath for so long, grieving a friendship that I hadn't realized I'd missed. It just seemed perfect. It seemed...right. Just like it had with Gritt.

Resting my hand on his chest, I smiled against his mouth. That pulling sensation was like a rope being snagged, yanking us together. I didn't understand it, but it didn't matter just then. Sinking his fingers into my hair, he groaned against my lips as I dug my nails into his shirt, bunching it up in my grip.

"Gods, I've wanted this for so long," he spoke against my mouth before wrapping both his arms around me.

I was just about to tell him that I wanted it too, when a hard body slammed into Quade from the side, knocking him away from me and making him fall to the tile floor. I gasped up at Gritt.

"You fucking elemental!" he roared while struggling to hold back a shift. Claws appeared where his fingers should be, and he took a swipe at Quade's face, but a blast of water knocked him back before he could make contact.

I watched in horror as Gritt sailed across the room, hard pressurized water pelting his chest as he slammed into the wall.

"I'm sorry, what was that?" Quade replied smugly as he got to his feet, a wall of other elementals lined at his back as they supported their paragon. I was certain they didn't understand why two of the most powerful supes were fighting over a nasty *Void*, but I just wanted to figure out how to get them to stop.

Another shifter turned into a jaguar and lunged for Quade, but a fire elemental intercepted him, blasting the shifter with so much power I was worried he'd burn him alive.

"Stop!" I screamed, though no one heard me.

Another shifter slammed into Quade from the left side, distracting him enough to stop the powerful water from assaulting Gritt. The split-second of relief was all that the Shifter Paragon needed. Within an instant, Gritt turned into a massive lion and lunged for Quade, tackling him to the ground. Large,

rounded muscles covered his frame, and I screamed when he pinned Quade's head between his two sets of teeth. Other fights broke out all throughout the room, elementals and shifters going at it like a back-alley brawl. There were no professors, no staff. And the vampires and necromancers were just sitting around watching, not even bothering to intervene. Only Render was trying to break things up, but that just meant he had to start defending himself from both sides.

Not knowing what else to do, I reached behind my neck to the clasp of my necklace and removed my amulet, letting it drop to the floor. My Void billowed around me in warning, and I raised my hands up to direct it. "I said *stop!*" I screamed as loud as I could.

Gradually, people stopped fighting and turned to stare at me with wide, fearful eyes. I knew I must've looked terrifying, with smoke coating my skin and pouring from my pores. It wrapped around the shifter nearest to me, making him fall to his knees. I didn't drink a lot though. Beads of sweat dripped down my cheeks as I stared at the dining hall, trying to maintain control.

It was a hunger I had never felt before. Here, in this contained space, it was like a banquet for my Void. I wanted to lash out and absorb every last drop of every supernatural here. It would be so easy. All I had to do was let go. It was taking everything I had to hold back, and I wasn't sure how long I could keep the hunger at bay.

"She's going to drain us all!" Blaire screamed to my right. In my peripheral, I caught her clutching her mouth, her long nails digging into her cheeks as she let out a screech of fear. I took a step closer to Quade and Gritt.

"I don't want to do this," I said, noting that my voice had already started to take on that dark ethereal quality of the Void. It was just a matter of time before I lost myself. "I can't take you hurting each other," I admitted, feeling the pain of that deep in my gut. "Tell me you'll stop...don't make me do this," I pleaded. I didn't want to see them hurt one another. I *couldn't*. That strange pulling sensation had turned into a protectiveness so fierce that I couldn't hold back. My entire body was trembling with restraint.

Gritt transformed back into his human form immediately, his naked body backing away from my Elemental Paragon with his hands raised in front of him. "Put your amulet back on, Devicka. We won't fight," Gritt promised in a soft, soothing voice. My Void immediately reached out to stroke his cheek, my smoke dancing along his skin.

“Are you both okay?” I asked, my tone was barely hanging on a thread, and so was my sanity.

“Yes, we’re fine,” Quade promised. “You can put your amulet back on now, Devi.”

I stared at them for a second longer, taking in their appearance before dropping to my knees and searching for where I’d dropped the necklace on the floor. When I couldn’t find it, I began to panic, but then a hand was outstretched in front of me, and when I snapped my head up, I saw Hyde holding it out to me. “Here,” he said gently, not even flinching when my smoke curled around his face and started drinking from his lips. I took my amulet with shaky hands, and the moment I clutched the amber stone in my fist, my smoke disappeared.

The entire dining hall let out a collective exhale before that relief slowly started to change to anger and outrage. The whispers and glares and threats immediately started up, spreading around like the small fires that were now burning around the cafeteria from the elemental magic. This lot sure were brave once my Void was back in its cage.

Gritt and Quade started making their way over to me, but before they could reach me, a booming voice stopped them. “Devicka Cainson! My office, NOW!”

I turned with a grimace to stare at Headmaster Torne and a line of other teachers, all of them giving me various looks of fury and shock from the front of the dining hall. I closed my eyes before flashing a look at Quade and Gritt, who looked oddly guilty. And then, realization sunk in my gut. Was this...had this been their plan all along?

My mouth dropped open and my fists clenched at my sides. I was so *fucking stupid*. I’d overheard them that night. They’d planned to push me so that the headmaster would have cause to kick me out. And I’d just given them that on a smoky fucking platter. How could I be so stupid? How could I have fallen for it when I’d known this all along? This had all been an elaborate plan to get me to turn on the students, to be a monster in front of everyone. Well, they got what they wanted. After this, I’d be expelled and possibly even imprisoned.

But as I walked behind Headmaster Torne with my head hung low, tears slipping out of the corners of my eyes, I knew that wasn’t why I was crying. No, my heart hurt because of the betrayal of the four paragons left staring in my wake.

Chapter 20



“WHAT WERE YOU THINKING?!” Headmaster Torne screamed at me, the veins in his head bulging against his pale skin as he stalked from one side of his office to the other. Power was bleeding from his fingertips, dripping flames eating at his nail bits as he stared at me. To say he was furious would be an understatement.

“I was just trying to stop the fight,” I whispered before looking down at my feet and kicking the bottom of my chair. I wanted to scream about how unfair this all was or storm out of there, but old habits die hard, and there was still a part of me that respected him.

“A fight *you* started!” he yelled again, and this time, water started pouring from his mouth as his elemental power leaked out of him uncontrollably. Choking on the liquid, he was forced to pick up his waste bin to let it pour from his throat in hacking sputters while I watched with wide, shocked eyes. Torne was the epitome of control, and seeing his elements go berserk had me on edge.

“I didn’t start it,” I promised, though I knew my words wouldn’t matter.

“Blair Lawrence informed me that she saw you arguing with Quade Sandwood when Gritt Boltwright intercepted you. I’ve heard rumors that you’ve started a mate bond with my Shifter Paragon, and I know that these things aren’t preventable, but as you can imagine, I’m *not* pleased,” he said, gripping the edge of his desk so hard that his knuckles turned white from the pressure.

After he took a few steadying breaths, his fire and water elements finally calmed down and my amulet stopped flashing. Letting my power out earlier had only made me want more. I’d denied it a banquet, and now it wanted to feed.

“That’s not what happened,” I told him.

“Then enlighten me!” Torne ordered, slamming down in his leather chair and crossing his arms over his chest.

How could I possibly explain to the man that was once my idol that I’d been kissing one super while my bonded shifter was watching? “I was...kissing Quade. And Gritt saw. He got jealous...” My voice trailed off at the end, and I realized that in some ways, I *did* cause the fight. Shifters were notoriously territorial, and I was doing nothing to help that. But really, why should I? He ditched me after sealing the bond. He made his choices.

“But I didn’t know,” I rushed out. “Gritt has been acting like he doesn’t want me, and Quade and I have history, but then Render seems to be attracted to my blood, and Hyde—well—is just Hyde.”

Headmaster Torne’s eyes widened as I spilled my love problems at his feet. I felt like a teenaged idiot. How come, in the moment, it had all felt so inevitable and right, but saying it out loud made me feel dirty?

“So you’re saying that you’re involved romantically with all my paragons, Miss Cainson? That’s what you’re telling me?” Headmaster Torne asked. He didn’t seem angry though. Mostly curious.

“I wouldn’t say that,” I said, remembering the look of their guilty expressions in the dining hall. “But there’s a pull I don’t understand. It’s been driving all of us a little crazy.”

“Hmm.” Headmaster Torne stood up and circled his desk before stopping in front of me. He leaned against the wood, crossing his arms over his chest and staring speculatively at me. “Take off your amulet,” he ordered, and my eyes widened in shock.

“What? No, I can’t. It’s already feral from being in the dining hall. I could hurt you,” I replied, clutching the armrests at my seat.

“I want to test something. Perhaps your Void has a trapping quality. Maybe it entices powerful supers to you so that you have the opportunity to feed. I want to make sure this isn’t something that will harm my students.”

“I don’t think that’s happening,” I said lamely, although I really had no idea.

“There’s one way to test it. I’m the most powerful elemental in existence apart from Quade Sandwood. If my hypothesis is correct, then I’ll feel the same pull when your power comes out.”

I scrunched my nose up in disgust. The idea of Headmaster Torne feeling attracted to me the way the other guys were...that did not sit well with me.

What if he was right, and then I was attracted to him too? I swallowed hard. “Are you sure this is a good idea?” I asked warily.

“Yes. We need to know if Voids have the ability to put out some sort of mate calling to lure powerful supers in. This is the easiest way to determine that,” Torne replied while rolling his neck.

My father’s and Banner’s warnings rang through my head. *Don’t trust anyone, don’t trust anyone, don’t trust anyone.*

At my hesitancy, Torne shook his head at me. “If you’re refusing to test the theory, then I’ll have no choice but to expel you right this instant. I can’t have you collecting my students with some siren song against their wills.”

I heard what he was saying, but that’s not what it had felt like. It hadn’t felt like a compulsion we couldn’t resist. Just something we shouldn’t.

“Decide, Miss Cainson.”

“Fine,” I relented.

With shaky fingers, I reached up and unclasped my necklace. I was worried as hell that the pull would appear between us. Immediately, my smoke flooded the room, escaping my nose and ears, flooding out of me with a vengeance and stopping at Headmaster Torne’s feet. His knees buckled on impact, and I watched with rapt attention as it started to feed.

“How does it feel?” I asked him. “Does it feel...good?” I winced at the question, hoping like hell that he said no.

He opened his mouth to answer, but then started coughing up water again. As soon as I saw the flicker of pain cross his features, I yanked back my power into me and slammed my internal walls shut.

He coughed and tried to right himself as I put my amulet back on. The moment the smoke dissipated, he let out a hiss of air and slowly stumbled over to his cart of potions. He mixed something quickly and then downed the creamy, white liquid in one go.

“Did you feel a pull?” I asked again. I hadn’t felt anything but hunger, and he didn’t taste nearly as good as Gritt always did, but I had to be sure. I didn’t want to be luring anyone. The connection with my paragons was just...different. It wasn’t malicious or for the sole purpose of feeding. I just knew it. I wish those assholes knew that too.

Wait. When did I start thinking of them as *my* paragons? I needed to get my thoughts under control.

“It was painful. I could feel you draining me,” he said before wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “You must not be luring in every powerful

super. It must be something different.” He looked over at me, studying me like I was a new book. “I don’t believe you’re doing anything with virulent intent,” he admitted, shocking me.

“It’s definitely not something I would’ve chosen for myself,” I replied, though I knew it was a lie. I liked them despite the cruelty and the animosity. I liked Gritt’s fearless devotion to his brother. I appreciated Quade’s intelligence and charisma. I was drawn to Render’s challenging stare and found myself feeling comfortable with Hyde. I wished things had been different and that all of my progress with them had been genuine. I was such a fucking fool.

“Tell me how you felt when you let your Void out in the dining room,” he offered before sitting down at his desk. He was staring at me now, and I wasn’t sure what to make of his expression. It didn’t necessarily feel overwhelming or vicious. It was like he genuinely wanted to know. “I felt...protective? Like my Void wanted to eliminate any threat to my paragon. I was hungry, of course, but it was manageable.” *For the most part*, I wanted to add, feeling shame at how my power had threatened to take over. Remembering that the paragon had probably planned for me to lose control so that I’d get kicked out of the school sent my stomach into a tailspin of acidic bile and burning heartache. The betrayal was too sharp to focus on yet.

“Interesting, very interesting,” he said, tapping a finger against his lips. “And does Gritt have a mate mark?” His eyes flashed back up to me.

I blinked at him in surprise. “A mate mark? I don’t know. To be honest, I didn’t even remember that shifters got that. I haven’t seen Gritt since we...uh...” My cheeks flamed with a bright, devastating blush. “Since we became bonded?” It sounded like a question.

“Ah, yes. I can imagine Mr. Boltright doesn’t know how to handle this predicament. His shifters are territorial and loyal to a fault, but they might not accept this union. Shifters can be skittish at the oddest things,” Headmaster Torne chuckled, and I gaped, wondering if I had slipped somehow into an entirely different dimension.

“He’s afraid of my undead pet mouse,” I added with a cautious chuckle, not sure where the lines were.

“Undead mouse?”

“Hyde,” I supplied.

“Ah,” he said, as if no further explanation was needed. “Speaking of, please tell him next time he wants to borrow my guitar not to leave bones in

my office afterward.”

My eyes widened at the small smile that played over his lips. I would have laughed that Hyde was busted, but I was too busy waiting for the scales to tip, for the bomb to drop in my lap and remind me that I was a dirty Void, a blemish on society, not worth the gum under Headmaster Torne’s shoe. But for some reason...something seemed to have changed.

“I’m sorry, are you going to send me to Council Prison now?” I asked, confused as to what we were doing. “If you are, can I just make a phone call first?” I asked before kicking myself for giving him the idea in the first place. I should have started with expulsion.

His steady eyes watched me. “No. I think your abilities are interesting. I’d like to take a more active role in your studies, Miss Cainson. It seems even I could use a little more educating.”

My dry mouth dropped open in shock. This couldn’t be real, could it? “Y-you do?” I stuttered before leaning forward. If it wouldn’t have been too obvious, I would have pinched myself to make sure I wasn’t sleeping.

“I think we could learn a lot from this. You’re obviously showing signs of bonding, similar to shifters, but your hunger mimics that of a vampire. You have control over the Void now and seem to direct it like an elemental would, and yet there is something deadly about it, too. This doesn’t mean I won’t be holding you to any lesser of a standard, Miss Cainson. But I won’t deny that I am curious about these new developments. I think it’s in everyone’s best interest if we give you a fair shot and try to figure this out. Especially if it makes you a more formidable threat.”

At the word *threat*, my heart plummeted into my stomach. I didn’t want to keep being just a threat. I thought, just now, he and I’d had a pivotal breakthrough.

“Of course,” I choked out.

“Don’t look downtrodden, Miss Cainson,” Headmaster Torne said, this time in a softer voice. “If it’s any consolation, I hope to find that your powers can be used for good. I’ll admit that I didn’t want you here. I didn’t agree with the danger that it was putting my students in. And even though most won’t agree with me, and I’ll admit, my initial shock at seeing you unleash in my dining hall wasn’t welcome...you stopped the fighting. Things could very well have escalated, but you stopped it in its tracks. And despite what happened today, you’ve shown great restraint. I believe you that you aren’t the kind of Void everyone seems to think you are. I believe that you might

actually be different because you *try* to be different. And maybe it's time that we applaud that instead of doubt it."

A bud of hope popped out of my rubbled foundation.

"I'll be organizing something soon to test your limits, so be prepared. Now go. And get those damn paragons under control. Any more incidents, and my hands will be tied."

Considering the fact that the paragons probably set me up, that was unlikely. Not that I was going to say that to him. "Yes, Headmaster Torne," I nodded before quickly standing up. I was afraid if I stayed any longer, he'd change his mind.

I DIDN'T KNOW what to feel by the time I got back to my cabin. Hope at the idea of Headmaster Torne giving me a chance. Depressed because of what had happened with the paragons in the cafeteria. I couldn't stop seeing the gnashing teeth and elemental power displayed between Quade and Gritt as they fought. It had been terrifying, and seeing them be at odds made me feel incredibly unsettled.

Then of course, I was bothered by the whole thing with Quade. I was kicking myself for wanting to hope that it was real, that the thing between us meant something. I'd known him my entire life, had compared myself to him, missed him, hated him.

Loved him.

He'd said his declaration with such truth that I'd felt it in my soul, or at least whatever soul I had left. I wanted to go to him, but I didn't know what to say. I wanted to talk to all of them. To make them look me in the eye and tell me *why*.

And then there was Banner. He was an entirely different clusterfuck all on its own. His hot and cold nature gravitated around intense disinterest and then flirtatious compassion, which had me feeling like I was on a tightrope, not knowing which side I would fall onto.

I turned the handle to my cabin and let myself inside, flicking on the light as I went. As soon as I had the door shut behind me, I unbuttoned my shirt and started pushing down my skirt.

"I wasn't expecting a strip tease when I got here, but please don't stop," a charming, husky voice said from the corner, making me jump.

Quade was sitting in my chair, his tie loosened and the top buttons of his shirt undone, as his eyes dragged up and down my body. I crossed my arms

in front of my chest. “What are you doing here?” I asked, my eyes landing on the cut on his lip. “Come to gloat?”

He frowned with confusion. “What?”

“Don’t be dumb. That’s what my role was, right? Be the dumb girl who falls for your shit. Trick the Void into thinking you all care, and then make her snap in front of the entire school? That was your plan all along, to get me kicked out.”

Shock crossed his dark features, and he got to his feet. “Devi, you’ve got this all wrong.”

Only the honest look on his face and the conviction in his voice made me pause. I knew Quade. I knew what he sounded like when he lied. I knew the way his eyes tightened when he was putting on fake charm. “You guys...didn’t do that on purpose? It wasn’t some elaborate plan to get me kicked out?”

“Fuck, no!” he said in a rush. “Yeah, we wanted to screw with you in the beginning and get you to leave, but that changed, I swear.”

I blinked at him, feeling the sudden appearance of relieved tears coat my irises. “Oh.”

Quade shook his head. “Gods, Devi. Everything I told you, I meant. I want to do this. We *are* doing this. And I can’t speak for the other guys, but based on Gritt’s fucking temper tantrum earlier, I’m guessing he wants to do this with you, too.”

“I swear to gods, Quade, if you’re lying...” My voice choked up, unable to finish.

He was across the room in a second, pulling me against his chest. “No lies. No elaborate plans. I’m on your side, Devi. I don’t want you to leave.”

I’d never felt such relief as I did right then. A couple of tears fell out of the corner of my eyes, landing on his shirt.

“Are you okay?” I asked quietly. “From the fight?”

Quade grunted like he was irritated about the whole thing. “Yeah, I’m fine. We’re all fine. Gritt is such a jealous prick sometimes. It’s a shifter thing. I’m surprised he hasn’t tried to piss on you yet to mark his territory.”

I chuckled and lifted my head, wiping my wet cheeks with my hands. I was all too aware that I was standing with him in my underwear, but I was too comfortable with him to care.

“I’m glad you’re okay.”

“Are *you*? What did Torne say?”

“I get another chance,” I said simply, because I suddenly didn’t want to talk about the headmaster. I just wanted to be here, in this moment with Quade, and relish in the fact that my paragons hadn’t actually betrayed me. I lightly touched his jaw before trailing a finger down his chest, stopping at the fastened button on his shirt.

“Good,” Quade said, his voice low as he watched my every movement. “If anything, we all were responsible. We should’ve stopped things before you had to step in.”

“Yeah, but you were too busy blasting Gritt with water.” I tsked before unbuttoning the rest of the buttons on his shirt. He tilted his head down to watch my nimble fingers work to remove the crisp, white shirt from his body. Once he shrugged it off his arms, I tossed it across the room.

“He started it,” Quade grumbled before I pushed him onto the chair. He went down easily, and I sat on his lap, straddling his thighs.

“I ended it,” I whispered, feeling equal parts empowered and terrified that I’d taken such a risk. What scared me most, though, was that I realized I’d do it a million times over if it meant I could stop them from getting hurt.

“You did good. You were in control. I’m proud of you,” he said, his hands gripping my bare thighs. “We can work around his bond. I’ve heard of shifters breaking it before. I won’t let anything get in the way of us anymore,” Quade said in his self-assured voice before moving his hands up to wrap around my rib cage, his thumbs grazing my bra.

I pulled away slightly. “I’m not sure I *want* to break my bond with him. He’s an asshole, yes, but there’s something about him I’m drawn to. Render and Hyde, too. I feel the same pull with them as I do with you,” I admitted. I wasn’t going to lie to him.

“Oh,” he said, somewhat deflated. But then he seemed to bolster himself with his own thoughts as he sent me a sexy smirk. “Guess I’ll just have to work extra hard to win your full attention then, won’t I?” He stood up suddenly, picking me up with him. I wrapped my legs around his waist with a gasp and leaned forward to kiss him but stopped when a toxic thought assaulted me, filling me with doubt.

“If we do this, you can’t go back to hating me again,” I said while cupping his cheeks. I forced him to look me right in the eye. “You have to promise, okay? I can’t handle any more emotional whiplash. I refuse to be a train track and let you steamroll over me.”

He stared back at me for a moment, determination in his dark eyes.

“Devi, I’m not going anywhere. Never again,” he promised before slamming me down on the mattress. I bounced up a bit, but his body was there to push me back down. Prying my thighs open, he used his teeth to pull my black thong down, and the only assistance I gave him was to lift up my hips. After tossing the scrap of fabric across the room, he looked me in the eye as I lifted my head up to meet him head on.

“You want this?” he asked.

“Yes,” I breathed. “So much.”

He buried his head right against my cunt and hummed in satisfaction when he found me already wet and wanting. He breathed me in with a steady inhale before flicking his tongue out to greet my core. My entire body jolted at the touch, and he braced his hands on my thighs to keep me still. “No moving, Devi,” he ordered before lining his hot, wet tongue along my slit and drawing a line up to the bundle of nerves that were seeking his undivided attention.

“Oh, fuck,” I moaned, as his tongue started moving frantically, going so fast that I had to grip the mattress to keep still. My eyes widened in shock and surprise when I felt his finger enter me, and it was ice cold. I lifted my head up to stare at him, and sure enough, he’d used his elemental magic to coat his finger with icy slick. He pumped the cold digit into me, all while his hot tongue continued its laps. But then that tongue grew hotter, and hotter and fucking hotter.

“Oh my gods!”

Icy finger, fiery tongue. The duality of both sensations sent me over the edge. I convulsed on the bed as he worked his magic—literally—until I was caught up in hot and cold passion that met in perfect harmony.

“I thought I told you to stop moving?” Quade teased as I writhed and squirmed on the bed.

“It’s too intense, I can’t help...” More words escaped me as he wrapped his lips around my nub and sucked, alternating the motion with blazing strokes. I was so wet, so hot, so turned on that another orgasm came over me like a punch, hard and fast with a reverberating presence that I felt even after it was over.

Quade smiled against me before sitting up, and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

“Gods, Quade. I don’t know where you learned that or how, but that was hot.”

“And cold,” he quipped.

I smiled and nodded at him where he kneeled before me with a satisfied smirk.

“Why do you still have pants on?” I asked, while cocking my head to the side and biting my lip. “Seems very unfair, Quade.”

“You’re absolutely correct,” he answered before smacking his palm on his forehead in an exaggerated move that made me grin. “You know I’m all about fairness.”

He shimmied off the bed and dropped his pants, revealing that he wasn’t wearing boxers underneath. His thick cock sprang to life and bobbed before me. He was...huge. Thick veins wrapped around the shaft, and the head was dripping with slick precum. “Holy shit, Quade.” I said before sitting up and crawling across the mattress on my knees toward him. I reached out and grabbed him, tenderly stroking him with my fingers. He let out a hiss of appreciation and nearly buckled over when I trailed my thumb along his head.

“You on the brew?” he asked while stepping forward. Humans took birth control monthly, but magic users had developed a potion that took care of birth control and STDs for supers, and we only had to take it once every year.

“Of course I am. You honestly think my mother would allow *me* to procreate?” I said with an incredulous laugh. “It’s bad enough having one Void running around, she’d for sure lose it if there were two.”

I’d meant the comment to be funny, but something I said made Quade falter. “Devi,” he whispered before joining me on the mattress and wrapping me up in a side hug. I slunk back beside him, his cock nestled against my ass with his face buried in my neck as he let out an exhale.

“Did I ruin the moment?” I asked.

“No,” he grunted before jerking his hips forward, reminding me that this was far from over. “I just hate that you’ve lived such a lonely life and that I had a part in that,” he whispered before rolling me back over and settling on top of me. He cupped my cheek while holding himself up with his other forearm. “You’re one of a kind, Devi, and the world has not been kind to you.”

My eyes grew misty from the raw emotion in his voice. It was odd feeling so treasured but distrusting at the same time. It would take more than sweet words and making love for me to jump in fully with whatever was blooming between us, but it was still reaffirming. I’d mourned the loss of our friendship

so long that it felt good to finally feel seen by him.

He stroked my cheek while slowly pressing into me, stretching me with his hardness as I gnawed a hole in my lip through the pulsing pain laced with pleasure. “Right here, Devi. Look at me,” he whispered. I hadn’t even realized that my eyes were closed. It felt like all of me was opening up. My cunt with his cock. My mouth with a moan. My heart with him.

He rocked into me, slowly and steadily, wanting to last as long as he could with each long and sensual thrust. I hit my head against the wooden headboard, and he stopped to shift our bodies, pulling me backwards and setting my head on a plush pillow so I’d be more comfortable. He wanted everything about this to be about me, and that made my heart swell.

“Come for me, Devi,” he whispered. So I did.

With his slow thrusts, I soaked up pleasure. With every motion, he rocked into me, he built up my bliss more and more. We both came like fireworks, bursts of power bleeding from his skin as wild wind whipped around my face. His entire body went rigid as wave after crashing wave wrecked me. And then we both came down from our high, and he went back to stroking my cheek, wetting my skin with the water seeping from the tips of his finger.

“I’m here for you now,” he whispered. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Good,” I said back, nestled into his body. “Don’t let me down again.”

Chapter 21



THE NEXT MORNING, Quade walked me to the cafeteria. We held hands and talked about our childhood in an oddly normal conversation. Our arms swung where they were connected, and I couldn't help but smile up at his charming face and the quick way we'd found this new normal. I almost worried it happened too soon. As soon as we walked inside the dining hall, everyone turned to look at me. This time, there were no sneers. No taunts. It was morbidly quiet. All eyes locked on me as we made our way forward. Clearly, I'd freaked everyone out at my little display yesterday, because wary eyes followed me. Quade, much to my surprise and joy, didn't falter. He just kept leading me forward, meeting any stare head-on.

I felt the roomful of supernaturals like I could feel the wind. Their powers wrapped around me, brushing against my skin and making my amulet pulse with need. *Shit*. I was hungry again. *Really* fucking hungry.

I stopped short of the table Quade was leading me to and tugged on his hand to make him stop. His dark eyes turned to me with question.

"I...uh..." Gods, this was awkward.

"What's wrong?" he asked before taking a step closer to me and gripping my hips. I loved the open way he touched me, and I saw how other supers tracked the movement. It was still early, so the cafeteria wasn't very full, but there were enough people inside that I knew this would be all over the school by first class.

"I'm hungry," I whispered in a soft voice.

He smiled and gestured around. "Uh, I know, Devi. That's why we're in the cafeteria."

I shook my head. "No, I mean...I'm *hungry*."

Realization dawned on him, and the smile dropped from his face. "Oh.

Right.”

“Do you think I could...feed from you?” I didn’t know how else to broach the subject, and I hated that I had to ask, but if Quade couldn’t accept this part of me, then this would never work.

Uneasiness crossed his features. “I thought you could control it?” he asked before dropping his hands from me.

I hated the loss of his touch. “I can, as long as I regularly feed,” I explained before wrapping my arms around myself, bracing for rejection.

“Oh,” Quade replied before taking another step back. I narrowed my eyes at his feet and felt my face fall. As soon as he realized what he’d done, Quade quickly recovered, stepping up to me again with a half smile before touching my hips again. “Fuck, I’m sorry. I’m just not...comfortable with letting you feed from me. At least not yet. I just...need some time. But I want to help you, okay? Tell me what you need, and I’ll get it for you.”

That was the thing. I’d just told him what I needed. But I could give him time. I wasn’t going to push him, and as long as he didn’t abandon me again, I could be patient while he learned how to navigate my power. After all, he’d been taught to fear me and detest my power. That kind of ingrained brainwashing wasn’t just going to change overnight.

The longer I stood there in the cafeteria, the hungrier I became. My amulet was buzzing more than usual, the glow brighter than what I was used to. Dad had just topped it off, but it seemed like being around so many powers all the time was weakening it much faster.

“Okay...I think I should go back to my cabin, then,” I said quietly, not wanting the other students to overhear. “I don’t want to lose control, and I don’t know where Banner is. Besides, the rest of the school clearly isn’t too fond of me right now, and the last thing I want is to accidentally snap. Torne won’t be lenient again. I’d ask you to find Gritt, but he’s probably still pissed, and I haven’t spoken to him since...well. I’m just not going to beg to feed from him right now. He’s avoiding me. So I’ll just go back and try to get myself under control,” I said with a shaky smile.

I’d gone years between feedings before, but that was always because I didn’t know any better, and I did what the council said. But now that I’d learned to take small sips, I needed to keep it up regularly to feel normal and keep control. Plus, something about feeding from Gritt had made other powers just not satisfy me at all. I craved him more and more, but I wasn’t going to grovel to the stubborn ass shifter.

I turned around to head back to the cabin, but a figure flashed in front of me before I could even take a step. My hand flew up over my chest to slow my startled heart. “Dammit, Render! Don’t do that.”

The vampire smiled, his dark stubble across his pale jaw looking positively lickable. “Little Void, I’m so happy you weren’t expelled. When you went all smoky on everyone yesterday, it got me a little hot,” he said with a salacious grin before leaning forward and sniffing at my neck. After getting a deep inhale, he turned to scowl at Quade. “Why do you smell like the damn elemental?” he asked before rolling his eyes. “Actually, don’t answer that,” he said, cutting me off before I could begin to answer. “I don’t want to imagine poster boy over there grunting into you.”

Laughing, I rolled my eyes, suddenly feeling lighter from the sting of Quade’s refusal. “What are you doing here?” I asked as he wrapped his arm around my back and started pulling me out of the dining hall.

“I woke up craving you again,” he answered as he led me out the door and into the empty hall. “Then I heard you talking to *Earth, Wind & Fire* over here,” he said, nodding his head over his shoulder to indicate Quade. “I heard the bit about your appetite and no willing participants. So I thought...I’m hungry, you’re hungry...maybe we could help each other out?” he offered with a shrug.

I zeroed in on the first part of his speech. “You were craving me again?” I asked.

“Yep. It’s turning into quite the nasty little habit,” he said before moving his hand down and grabbing my ass. I pulled away with a cough, not wanting to start another jealous match between paragons. But when I turned around, Quade was just rolling his eyes at the handsy vampire.

“Well, I *do* need to feed,” I said, sheepishly.

“Perfect,” Render said, continuing to tug me forward. “Besides, Gritt goes on and on about it all the damn time. I figure it’s time I see if it hurts like a bitch like everyone else says it does, or if it feels good like Gritt says.”

“Maybe Gritt’s just a kinky masochist,” I joked.

Render grinned. “Guess I’ll find out.”

My heart was racing as he pulled me into a deserted hallway that only housed supply closets. Backing me up so that we leaned against the wall, he let his gray eyes flick over to Quade’s rigid form as he unclasped my necklace. As soon as the amulet dropped into his palm, he stuffed it into his pocket and then placed his lips on my neck, hovering over my thudding

pulse. My smoke trickled out like steam, rising up and wrapping around him, but I held it back, wanting to wait until his fangs had pierced me.

I expected him to plunge his sharp teeth into me immediately, but instead, he licked the spot on my neck, making me shiver, and then lifted his mouth to address Quade. "You don't mind, do you?" he asked with a mocking tone.

"Just get it over with. I need to take her to class," Quade said through clenched teeth.

At that, Render grinned again and then sunk his teeth in my neck, unleashing his venom, and I cried out. The venom shot into me in powerful waves, nearly making me come right then and there. It was too much, too soon. My nipples pebbled, my back arched on a loud sigh, and my hands took on lives of their own as they ran down my body. I let my smoke begin to drink from him, my eyes locked on Render's face to gauge his reaction. As soon as I started to sip from his power, his gray eyes rolled to the back of his head in a pleasure-filled groan.

And fuck, I matched his reaction, because his power was *delicious*. Like red wine and dark chocolate. It was rich and heady. The stuff that cravings were made from. I was so damn relieved that he was having the same reaction as Gritt, that my lips parted on a little sigh. I was worried it would hurt him again, like it had at the council, but I could tell from his face that he was feeling no pain.

I kneaded my breasts, plucking my own nipples, my body needing touch from the powerful venom he'd injected me with. He continued to pull blood from me like a kiss, groaning with each mouthful before lifting his hand up to knock my hand away so that he could fondle my breasts instead. My eyes closed at the touch, and when I opened them again, I saw that Quade was staring at us with hungry eyes, his hands thrust deep in his pockets. I wondered if he was touching himself, and found that the thought made me hotter.

His dark eyes flicked from where Render was touching me, to my face, and then he made a very deliberate step forward. Once. Twice. Three times. And then Quade stepped into the embrace of my smoke, his body suddenly so close to mine that I could feel the heat of his elemental power searing across his skin. It didn't even phase Render. Instead, the vampire shifted slightly so that I could stand between both men. Like he was...sharing me. I liked it.

My smoke danced around the three of us, gently sipping from both of them. Just like Gritt and Render had done, Quade tilted his head back in bliss,

and I moaned as I drank him up. He was different from the way Render's tasted, but just as addicting. Quade was like the air. Hot like summertime, rays baking onto smooth sand. Cold like winter, ice cooling the pit of my soul. He tasted like comfort and grounded me back to the earth.

Render stopped drinking and licked at the bloody spot on my neck as his arms wrapped around me. "Fuck, is this why Gritt gets all crazy when you feed from him?" Render asked, my power teasing over his pale skin. "Why the fuck does this feel so good? It didn't last time in the judge's room," he groaned as I dragged my fingers down his torso. I was so turned on that I wanted to tug down his pants and ride him.

"Gods, I was an idiot for saying no," Quade groaned, his muscles rippling as he tensed, his body pressing up against my side. I was in a supernatural sandwich, and I was so hot from the teasing touches that I was ready to take things to the next level. My power was fully sated, drunk almost on their power, so I dug into Render's pocket for my amulet, brushing against his cock in the process.

He hissed out a curse. "A little more to the left, Dev," he said with a smirk.

A teasing smile spread across my face as I lifted my necklace out and began to pull my smoke back in. "No, no, no, don't stop," Quade pleaded, digging his fingers into my waist.

"If we keep doing this, I'm going to jump you both right here in the hallway," I warned, slipping the amulet back over my head, taking the last of my smoke with it. The guys groused at the loss.

"That's fucking fine by me," Render said, bringing his hand back up to flick over my nipples.

"Yeah, let's go with that option," Quade agreed, shocking the hell out of me.

I opened my mouth to reply—or maybe to tell them to drop their pants—when a fuming shifter suddenly rounded the corner of our deserted hallway. All three of our heads turned in his direction as Gritt stalked toward us, with a much more relaxed Hyde following behind him.

"Why the hell have I felt your pleasure not once but *twice* in the last twelve godsdamned hours?" Gritt demanded, stopping in front of me.

"You could feel that?" I sputtered, feeling a blush cover my cheeks.

"Wolfy is the only person I know that would be pissed off about getting off via osmosis," Hyde chuckled before walking up to me. Without

hesitation, he leaned forward past Gritt and seared his lips to mine. It took me totally by surprise, and I blinked at him as he pulled away with a grin.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake!” Gritt huffed before dragging his claws through his hair. “Does no one respect a fucking mate bond anymore?”

“You’re one to talk, shifter. You can’t expect her to wait for you to figure your shit out,” Render replied while rolling his eyes and taking the spot beside me so he could prop up against the wall. I must have still been bleeding, because his head dipped down to lick a trail up my neck before sealing the puncture with his healing saliva.

“Yeah, you can’t just keep throwing fucking fits. Unless you want me to kick your ass again?” Quade asked, almost hopeful.

Gritt scoffed. “You couldn’t kick my ass if you were a steel-toed boot propped up on a donkey.”

“Yeah? Let’s go for round two, then,” Quade said, straightening up with a fireball in his palm.

“Oh my gods, can you guys stop arguing? It’s driving me nuts!” I yelled.

All four guys looked at me, no doubt noting my slightly disheveled and flushed appearance.

Hyde hummed. “Note to self, don’t make the pretty Void angry,” Hyde sang while turning to Gritt and patting him on the shoulder. “It’ll be okay, Wolfy. Eventually you’ll pull your head out of your ass.” He then turned to Render while pulling a handkerchief from his pocket to hand it to him. “Why are vampires such messy eaters? You don’t see humans letting ice cream go to waste like that. Sheesh.” The quirky necromancer wrinkled his nose. Hyde turned to Quade last, a broad grin stretching across his face. “I like you, elemental,” he said with a wink before coming full circle back to me. Lacing his fingers through mine, he gave me one more kiss, this time on the cheek.

“Is this a fucking thing?” Gritt demanded, gesturing between Hyde and I. “Are *all three* of you guys a fucking thing with *my* godsdamned mate?”

“Yep,” they all answered simultaneously. My mouth popped open in surprise before a grin took its place.

Gritt closed his eyes in frustration and rubbed his temples like he had a headache, grumbling something I couldn’t catch.

“So,” Hyde began, ignoring the shifter. “I’ve called you all here—”

“You didn’t call us here,” Render interrupted, wiping my blood from his face.

“Ahem. I’ve called you all here because Headmaster Torne needs us.

Something about testing Dev's Void powers on prisoners. Should be fun!"

My stomach plummeted. "I think our ideas of fun are very different, Hyde," I said before biting on my lip. Headmaster Torne warned me that he was going to take a more active role in my studies, but I wasn't prepared for it to be this soon.

"Wait, what? Does this mean she's ready to switch back my brother's animal?" Gritt asked, hope dripping from every syllable.

"I don't think I'm ready for that," I stuttered, and Quade reached out and squeezed my hand.

"Headmaster Torne will have more information for you. Right now we need to get to the portal. We were supposed to be there fifteen minutes ago."

"Hyde! Why didn't you say anything?" I asked before playfully slapping his arm.

"And miss this sexual tension? No, thank you. Now come on," he said while dancing toward the exit and tugging me behind him. The other three paragons looked around at one another with a mix of expressions before falling into step behind us.

"Keep up, would you? You three are slower than most corpses I've resurrected," Hyde called back to them.

"Damn necromancer," Gritt grumbled. I just laughed. At least they were fighting with each other and not with me.

I GUESS when you had to practice sucking powers from one supernatural to another, you did it during a council cocktail party.

We were in a large, open room, separated by a wall of blue magic and social classes. On the side I was on, I stood in front of four supernatural prisoners wearing bright yellow jumpsuits and fearful expressions. There were three males and one female. Two elementals, a vamp, and a shifter.

On the other side of the magical wall stood the council members and Headmaster Torne, all of them sipping on potion-infused cocktails and popping finger foods into their mouths as they mingled. *Mingled*. Like they were getting ready for the godsdamned curtain call and me to put on a show. They were even dressed up like they'd anticipated a night out at the theater. I wanted to throw up. At least my paragons had the decency to look nervous for me, keeping to themselves off to the side.

"Y-You're the Void," the female shifter said, drawing my attention to our side of the room. Her brown hair was wild and so tangled that it was one

huge matted mess, and she had scratch marks all up and down her arms.

"I am," I nodded, my eyes flicking over the chains that held her down.

All four of the prisoners were in identical metal chairs, magicked chains secured around their wrists and ankles. They looked hollowed and haunted, too pale to be healthy, and their eyes darted around the room like rodents searching for an escape.

"What are you going to do to us?" the male vampire asked, his fangs huge, making him look more like a saber-toothed tiger than a man. They must be keeping him starving in that prison. His fangs dripped with drool and unused venom, looking painfully swollen.

I picked at my clothes, pulling on a loose thread at my thigh. "I'm, uhh, going to try to switch your powers."

"*What?*" one of the elemental males snapped. "What do you mean you're going to try to switch our fucking powers?"

My mouth went dry at the animosity I saw in his weathered and scarred face. He had burn marks all over his hands and arms, like his fire element had gotten out of control. I wondered if that had something to do with why he'd been imprisoned.

"I—"

Judge Braxton clapped on the other side of the room, cutting me off. Everyone's eyes swiveled over to him, and his troupe of tittering council members lowered their glasses and stopped talking long enough to listen. "Alright, let's get started." He nodded at a thin, gangly looking man in a suit, and at the signal, the man stepped forward and cleared his throat, pulling out a tablet in his hand and swiping away. "I, Secretary Grannon, call this council meeting to a start. Judge Braxton overseeing, and all council members present, say aye." At his droning words, all the council members spoke. "Aye."

The secretary went on. "We are gathered today to witness the progress of the Void, Devicka Cainson, to do a preliminary trial of switching powers between four supernaturals. Prisoners to be tested on were selected from the Ashtomb Supernatural Prison. One female puma shifter. One male vampire. One fire elemental. And one air elemental. Practice trial will begin now."

I scanned the room with my eyes, taking in everyone's expression before pausing when my eyes landed on my mother. She had her head tilted back in amusement, red fingernails clutching her glass as she stood there and whispered to another elemental. I wanted to close the distance between us, a

deeper part of me aching for her to even look my way. I felt like a circus animal on display for bored spectators. My eyes flickered back to the secretary just as he stopped talking his robotic spiel. His beady eyes rose up to regard me, lifting the tablet with him, and I realized with a jolt that he was recording me. My tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth, totally dried up, while my palms were slick with sweat.

My paragons watched from the other side of the barrier, their expressions solemn, and the headmaster stood with them, his face betraying his keen interest. Banner was also there, and as soon as the judge gave the order for me to begin, the neutralizer slipped over the magical line, coming onto my side of the room. He stepped in front of me, taking my hands in his. Immediately, his cool magic washed over me, calming my frayed Void that was punching me from the inside, wanting to destroy whatever was causing me this anxiety.

“You can do this, Miss Cainson,” he told me quietly, his tone sure and steady. I looked into his dark eyes, trying to ground myself. “You’ve learned control. Remember what I said. *You control your power.*”

“My power doesn’t control me,” I finished the mantra, my voice barely above a murmur. I heard a low growl, and my eyes distractedly flickered over to Gritt, who was being held back by Render and Quade. Territorial asshole.

Banner nodded and stepped back, drawing me back to him. Our hands dropped, and I started anxiously massaging my wrists. “You can do this,” he assured me, his eyes lingering on my twitchy movements. His words didn’t make me feel any more sure of myself.

Turning back to face the prisoners, I gave them an apologetic look as my hand came up to my amulet. “I’m so sorry.”

The fire elemental strained against his chains. “Wait a fucking minute—”

I dropped my amulet to the ground, and smoke streamed out of me. I controlled it, ignoring the shouts and the curses and the threats that were thrown my way. I couldn’t look at the female shifter’s wide, frightened eyes. I couldn’t listen to the elemental threatening to kill me. All I could do was focus on my smoke and direct it toward them by staying in control.

When I had it wrapped around the fire and water elemental, I stepped closer toward the two males. The air elemental was older, with gray hair and sallow cheeks. He watched it all silently, his arms straining against the cuffs and chains. My smoke enveloped him like a churning storm cloud while it did the same thing to the fire elemental. I stepped between them and pressed

my fingers against their hands to have better control. Both of them jumped at the contact, but my black smoke blocked their view of me.

“What are you doing? Don’t fucking touch me, Void!” the fire elemental screamed.

I clenched my jaw and kept my focus, pushing his yells out of my mind. I felt my Void feeding, sucking their powers into me. It was painful, and entered me like shards of sharp ice instead of smooth, sweet honey like when I fed from my paragons. My Void didn’t like it. It didn’t *want* to feed. But I had no choice.

As I kept taking in their powers, I felt them growing weak, and I knew that I had to figure out how to recreate the switching that I’d done before. Closing my eyes, I focused on the endless pit of my power, trying to remember how it had felt with the shifter and the vampire from the council. When my power stumbled slightly, my eyes flew open, and I saw the black smoke flickering with the shades of blue like before.

It was working!

My heart leapt, and I tried to push. Tried to pull. Tried to take one in and then filter it back out. I tried and tried and fucking *tried*. My hands shook. Sweat rivulets ran down my temples and soaked my shirt at the back. Black dots filtered in my vision.

But the blue smoke flickered some more, and then I felt it—felt myself failing.

The sensation slipped away, but I scrambled for purchase on my power, trying to redirect it. *I controlled my power*, I reminded myself. I pushed it out once more, grabbing hold of the elemental powers again. It felt like trying to peel an old sticker off; it was stubborn and stuck, not wanting to separate. I ripped through the power with force, and pain racked through my entire body.

Black dots appeared in my vision, blocking out the blue, misty smoke around me. With my whole body shaking, I funnelled the powers through me and fed it back into the prisoners I touched. It was like fire blazing through dry land, consuming, burning, *hurting*. Their screams filled my ears, joining with my own. We were a trio of pain and screams inside the blue darkness until I couldn’t hold it anymore.

I fell the rest of the way down, breaking contact with the elementals. A vacuum of nullity grabbed me by the neck and pulled me down, forcing me into bleak unconsciousness. The last thought I had as my head hit the hard

floor was *this fucking sucks*.

Chapter 22



"SHE'S NOT WAKING UP!" a voice growled to my right. I wanted to open my eyes, but it felt like I was stuck behind a wall, clawing at brick and getting nowhere.

"Strip her down, she needs skin-on-skin contact, *now*," another voice rang out. It sounded urgent, like knives against my soul. My awareness was like a rock dropped in water, sinking with no end in sight. I tried to move just a millimeter, focusing on my pinky finger, but I couldn't even feel that. It was like I didn't even have a body. I knew my heavy limbs were shaking and flailing as my clothes were stripped from my body, but it was an out-of-body sensation. "Get the fuck out of here before I snap your neck, neutralizer. She needs to feed."

"I don't think it's safe in her conditi—" a door slammed shut like thunder, cutting off Banner's voice.

I moaned, and all the commotion in the room went stagnant. I was surprised the sound even escaped my cage of a chest.

"Devicka?" Gritt's voice asked.

I could almost feel his lips against the bridge of my ear, but the Void was like a cape around my body, blocking sensations, keeping me buried in the nothingness. I'd never slipped this far before, never lost myself to the hunger. The world tilted as I moved. I hovered somewhere between feeling two warm bodies on either side of me, and questioning my sanity.

"Her amulet is gone, but nothing is happening. Where is her fucking Void?" an echo of a voice asked. It hit me like a feverish slash of syllables.

"She used too much power switching those elementals," someone said.

A hot tongue lapped at my neck. "Come on, baby," that voice pleaded. "Start feeding." I wanted to feed. I could feel that need building within me,

but it was like my power didn't trust me anymore. It knew what it wanted, and it definitely didn't want those criminals the council was force-feeding me.

The next instant, I felt teeth sink into my thigh, and venom flooded me, the first real feeling I'd sensed since sinking under.

"What the fuck are you doing? Now is not the time to feed!" someone screamed beside me, a charming voice, warm like honey.

I wanted to argue, to say that I wanted him to keep feeding, but all I could muster was a moan filled with pleasure. The sound escaped lips that didn't feel like mine. The pulling sensation of blood immediately stopped, and I wanted to whimper at the loss of sensation. *No. No, I want more.*

"Did you see that?" a voice asked. I loved that voice.

"Some smoke came out of her mouth when she moaned. Do that again."

Teeth plunged into my plush skin again. I felt a slow, rolling pleasure wash over me. It was blunted and dull, but I focused on it, coaxing the pleasant feeling to come closer.

"It's working!" an excited voice clipped.

Lips landed on mine, hot moisture breaking apart my mouth and snaking inside, the kiss granting more mobility as I responded. Once again, I found myself wanting to beg for more, to beg for it *all*. But there was a vast blankness separating me from my motor skills. It took a few moments of pulsing venom to fill my veins before my powers flickered like a dying candle. The venom coaxed it to life until it became a blazing, sizzling ember.

My thighs were pressed open by two strong hands, and a growl met me at my core, vibrating me with a fever I wanted to build up. "Don't stop," I pleaded into the mouth still kissing mine, not sure if I said it out loud or if I was still screaming with silence.

If they stopped, I'd slip back into oblivion, and I was terrified of that. All I had was them, and I knew, in that instant, that they were the only ones who could pull me back out of the darkness. So long as they kept making me feel, then I wouldn't disappear.

When a hand brushed against my breast, I felt it like a rake over a fire, and my body tried to press into the touch. "Look. She's reacting to it," a voice said. "Keep touching her."

More hands skated across my skin, and only where they touched could I feel again. "Her smoke is coming out."

"Her feeding always feels good for me and for her," I heard the gruff

shifter say.

“So the Void responds to pleasure,” another replied.

“Then let’s make her feel more.”

Hands wrapped around my throat, holding me in place as my body jerked. A tongue flicked across my clit. A hand palmed my breast. A grunt hit my ears. *Yes. More.* I needed more. And they gave it to me.

I could feel it all now. Every brush of a hand or lick of a tongue. Every hot mouth skimming over me. “It’s working.”

I could sense that I was feeding, drawing on powers and raw sex, sensations hitting me wave after wave until finally, slowly, my eyes fully opened. I looked up and realized it was Hyde kissing me. His silver eyes met mine, and he sighed before sucking on my bottom lip and teasing the edge of my tongue. I felt needed in a way I’d never felt before. My eyes rolled back as another swipe of a skilled tongue moved up against my sex. Smoke was everywhere, and I was feeding from all four paragons, life and awareness pumping back into me.

Hyde went to kiss my throat, and I looked down to see Quade’s tongue flicking across my pointed peak. When he saw me looking, he wrapped his mouth around my nipple as my smoke enveloped him, caressing his tanned skin. The feel of cool ice hit me with a shocking, powerful, blast. He moaned from the Void pull, his powers heightening his touch with the icy sensations on my breast. When I shivered, he smiled and blew heat against me next, thawing me with a sweltering blow of his breath.

Fangs sunk into my thigh, and I looked down to see both Gritt and Render between my legs. The rapture was hitting me full force now. I could feel *everything*. Gritt was stroking my clit with his tongue as Render pulled blood from the artery in my inner thigh, flooding me with his venom. Their tongues were so close they could have touched. I almost wanted them to.

“Fuck,” I croaked while writhing. This was the most raw, erotic, instinctual thing I’d ever experienced.

All four paragons were working to pull at the Void, and I started to feed like a starving woman. It was like nothing I’d ever felt before. The smoke caressed their skin, brushed along lips, dipped lower to stroke their throbbing cocks. Render sat up after sealing the wound on my thigh and lightly shoved Gritt away.

“If I don’t get inside of her right now, I’m going to fucking burst,” he moaned before aligning his pelvis with mine, pressing against my core before

looking me in the eye, wordlessly asking my permission.

“Please,” I pleaded with a throaty gasp.

It was all he needed. Within an instant, he was thrusting inside of me with one harsh, slicing movement. My eyes widened, and my mouth opened in a soundless whimper. He was so big I felt like I’d break in half. I winced at first, but then found a steady rhythm as he began to move inside of me, building that perfect friction.

Out of my peripheral, I watched smoke caress Gritt’s cock, like it was my hand gripping him, stroking him up and down. Quade was kissing all of my skin, pausing to hiss as I pulled at his power with steady gulps. It looked like he was about to come. Twisting my head to the other side, I was greeted with Hyde’s cock staring right at me. He’d moved for me to taste him, and I licked my lips greedily.

“Fuck my mouth, Hyde,” I ordered, while lifting up slightly to drag my tongue across his head, tasting the salty precum that had collected there.

He pushed past my teeth and bumped the back of my throat with a moan while stroking my hair. “Gods, so fucking good, Devi,” Hyde grunted. The Void poured from my mouth as he pumped into me, coating his skin with teasing embraces.

“So fucking tight,” Render said while throwing his head back in bliss.

I was so close, my feeding frenzy was slowly fading away, leaving me full with the rise of an impending orgasm. Render had started moving harder, gripping my hips with his nails as he pounded my cunt, jolting my body as I gagged on Hyde’s cock. Quade kept kissing me all over, his hand pumping up and down over his shaft. My smoke was still wrapped around Gritt’s dick, moving in a steady, torturous tug, making my shifter growl and groan. I could feel all of them, a bright connection that blinded me, and it was like something inside of me snapped into place.

Quade whispered in my ear while holding my neck up for Hyde. “You’re so fucking beautiful. I’m gonna come all over you, Devi. Feed from me. Feed from *us*. Take whatever you need.”

I let out one final burst of the Void, draining the last bit I could from them all. Gritt bent over with a satisfied hiss, cum coating his palm in ropes as my smoke drained him. Quade tightened his hold on my neck slightly as he stroked himself with his free hand, coming onto my stomach in hot spurts.

I gagged as Hyde bumped the back of my throat again. “I’m so close,” he rasped. I wrapped my hand around him and held him still. I felt his muscles

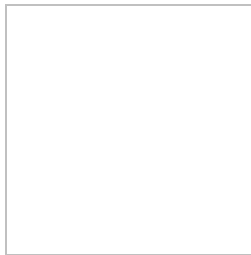
tense beneath my grip as I bobbed my head around him until he was coming down my throat, and I was drinking every last drop. He tasted so fucking good.

Render waited until Hyde popped out of my mouth before really pounding into me, using his thumb to flash circles around my clit as he pumped. “Oh gods!” I screamed. “Yes, yes, yes!” Each punishing thrust had my Void slinking back inside of me until the only thing I could feel was Render.

My orgasm came like a crash, tearing through my body with a vengeance as I screamed out, loud enough for the entire damn building to hear. Each tipping wave made my body jolt with satisfaction until all that was left of me was a panting aftershock of blissed-out tremors.

Exhaustion kissed my body as I sagged back. The calm settled deep in my bones, and I felt my powers coaxing me back to sleep. I had so many questions, but I needed to rest. I closed my eyes, knowing my paragons were protecting me, and the nothingness wouldn’t smother me. I fell asleep feeling loved for the first time since I was a little girl tucked safely in her bed.

Chapter 23



WHEN I WOKE UP, I was pressed between two buck ass naked bodies. I was covered in warmth, so hot that a sheen of sweat coated my body. My body...which was *also* buck ass naked.

Smoke was everywhere, and it took me a moment to realize that the Void was freely released. I wasn't even conscious enough yet to reign it in.

Long, dirty blond hair tickled my cheeks, and a large hand was wrapped around my waist, fingers splayed out to touch as much skin as possible. A nose was digging into my neck, lips brushing against my collarbone as hot air flowed down my chest. Something very distinct and hard was digging into my back as the two men surrounding me snored peacefully.

It only took me a moment to realize that it was Render and Gritt, and we were in Render's bedroom.

When I moved slightly, Render opened his gray eyes. "You're awake," he whispered into my ear, warm lips brushing against my lobe.

I took a few moments to steady myself before calling the Void back. Although I didn't get the sensation that I was draining anyone of power, I didn't want to risk it. Slowly, the smoke retreated inside of me until I could see more clearly.

"How did I get here?" I asked.

"We brought you here when you collapsed at Council Headquarters after you switched the powers of those elementals... Do you remember last night at all?"

I tried to move my legs, but Gritt had settled his thigh on top of me, and damn, it was heavy. Flashes of skin and tongues assaulted my memory, and I felt my cheeks blush in embarrassment. "Yeah, a bit," I choked out in response.

“We spent the night feeding you power. We were worried you wouldn’t make it.”

Gritt groaned, coming awake. I could feel his eyelashes flutter against my skin. Pulling away, he stared at me with a fearful expression before cupping my cheek. “I thought I lost you before I even got you,” he murmured in a sleepy voice.

I smiled a bit, not sure what to make of this tender side of him.

“That’s just the bond talking,” I said with a small smile.

He shrugged, like it didn’t matter to him one bit. “Maybe. But you’re still fucking mine.”

To emphasize his point, Gritt moved his hand down to my right thigh. “What are you doing?” I asked, panting as the roughened pad of his finger touched me. A shiver rolled down my skin.

His green eyes were locked on mine, a flicker of male pride evident on his face. “Looking for your mate mark,” he replied.

I stared at his face for a moment, and Gritt held up his hand to show off the faint vines circling his ring finger. It looked like petals woven together in a wreath, and my eyes widened. “That’s a mate mark?” I asked.

He nodded. “It just showed up last night,” he explained.

Speaking of last night...

“Umm, so we all, umm...”

Render grinned at my embarrassed, stuttered words. “Yep.”

I didn’t know it was possible to blush as much as I did, but I felt my cheeks burn hotter than fire. “And then you guys just...lay next to me all night...naked...and fed my Void?” I asked, but what I really wanted to know was why all four of them had joined together last night to bring me back from the brink. I wanted to know where they all stood with me and each other, because until I knew that, I didn’t know how to process it all. Last night had been frantic and beautiful and intense. But in the light of day, I didn’t know how to feel about it yet.

Gritt shrugged. “Had to.”

I frowned. “You had to?”

“Yes.”

My eyes darted down to where Render’s hand suddenly curved over my very bare waist. The paleness of our skin matched, making Gritt’s darker tone stand out even more.

When Render started circling my belly button, Gritt growled and smacked

his hand away. “Hands off. She doesn’t need skin-to-skin to feed anymore.”

“I don’t hear her complaining,” Render said, placing his finger over my rib cage and slowly moving it up. “And *you* certainly weren’t complaining last night, Wolfy.”

“Yeah, well she’s *my* fucking mate,” Gritt ground out.

Render’s hand kept moving up, over to my left breast. My entire body started to heat up, with Gritt’s hand so close to my core and Render’s cupping my heavy globe. “I’m glad you brought that up,” Render said pleasantly. “Because it seems that she’s my mate now, too. And I’d very much like to know why that is.”

My head whipped around to look at Render, my eyes wide. Gritt sat up, showing off his abs and *very* prominent erection, but he wasn’t paying his dick any mind. He was too busy staring murderously at the vampire.

“What the fuck do you mean she’s your mate too?” he demanded.

Render lifted his left hand, and there on his ring finger, was a mate mark identical to the one that Gritt had.

Gritt was out of bed and on his feet in a second, his green eyes flashing. “What the fuck? When did you get that?”

I sat up, looking around for my clothes, because I had a feeling this wasn’t going to go down well.

Render pushed off the bed and picked up his black slacks from the floor, yanking them on. Gritt did the same with a pair of worn jeans, choosing to go without boxers. Meanwhile, I was still searching frantically all over for *my* clothes, except I couldn’t see them anywhere.

“Last night,” Render answered with a menacing smirk. “You might remember, yeah? You were eating her out, our tongues brushed a couple times during the exchange. Then I fucked her hard while her smoke got you off. I’d be happy to recreate the moment if you need a reminder.”

Gritt looked *pissed*. I half expected smoke to pour from his red ears.

“Look,” Render began. “I know you’re a territorial barbarian that likes to beat his chest and scream *mine* every chance he gets, but you’re going to have to get over this.”

“You’re a filthy blood sucker. You know nothing about shifter bonds and what it does to us. It’s fucking *feral*. I can’t control it any more than you can control the urge to feed,” Gritt tried to explain while dragging his hands across his face. He was vibrating with anger now, each tremor coursing through his muscles.

“Well, it’s a good thing I like to fight, *mutt*,” Render replied while shrugging a shirt on. I could tell by the gleam in his gray eyes that riling Gritt up amused him. “And as *our* mate found out last night, I also like to fuck,” he added, making Gritt growl. “I’m bonded to her now too, but I’m not going to be an idiot like you. Which means I won’t be throwing feral hissy fits every five seconds. While you chase your tail in circles, I’m going to *keep on* fucking Devicka. Guess you’re just going to have to get used to it.”

In a flash, Gritt launched himself at him, shifting mid-leap. He was now a massive lion going for the vampire’s jugular, and I stood there in shock as a full-blown vampire-shifter brawl started right there in the middle of the bedroom.

“Are you serious right now?” I screeched.

Gritt nearly tackled Render to the floor, but the vampire flashed out of the way at the last second.

“Stop it!”

Neither of them listened, of course.

I rushed over to the closet and frantically looked through clothes, but it was like the damn vampire only wore his uniform, suits, or Dracula capes. I could hear grunts and growls and something breaking, so I quickly snagged a blood-red dress shirt and a black cape off the hangers. Grumbling, I pulled the shirt on, buttoning it all the way up before rolling the sleeves so that my hands could reach through. I tied the cape, knowing that I looked like a damn Halloween secretary dressing up for my skeezy vampire boss.

Grumbling, I stepped back into the room, only to see feathers floating in the air from the torn mattress and pillows. The bed was now lacking its four posters, the chandelier had shattered on the floor, and the vampire and lion were still going at it.

“Knock knock!” I heard from the other side of the bedroom door. Hyde breezed inside the room, not even batting a silver eye at the scene in front of him. He was holding coffee in one hand and a brown sack in the other. When he spotted me over by the closet, he walked over, stepping over pieces of plaster after Render was thrown into the wall. “Brought you breakfast, sweetie,” Hyde sung while handing everything over to me. I wanted to take a moment to sink into his thoughtfulness, but I didn’t get to enjoy the nice gesture, because the fighting paragons had me distracted.

When Gritt tried to swipe his giant paw at Render, he hit the armoire instead, making the top half of it splinter off and go flying in our direction. I

screamed and ducked, but Hyde caught the large chunk of wood before it could hit me in the face. He set it on the ground and sat down on the velvet cushion to watch the guys fighting like this was the best entertainment he'd had in weeks.

I looked down at him incredulously as he laced his fingers behind his head and rested against the wall, one ankle crossed over the other and a smile on his face.

"What are you doing? Help me stop them!"

He looked up at me. "Why would I do that? You might as well get used to this. Shifters are territorial as fuck."

I pinched the bridge of my nose. "This is not my life."

"What's going on?"

I looked up to see Quade saunter in next, looking cool and collected in khaki slacks and a gray-blue shirt. He looked like he hadn't shaved in a couple of days, but the stubble looked damn good on him. When Render flashed over to slam Gritt against the wall where Quade was standing, the elemental threw up his hand, making a massive wall of ice appear in front of him. The fighting supers crashed into it, but it didn't slow them down at all. They were up and across the room, fighting again in a second. I couldn't even see Render move, he kept flashing so fast. Gritt suddenly shifted again, changing from his lion animal to a Peregrine Falcon. His bird started dive bombing the vampire with ridiculously impossible speeds. At least now I knew what animal number two was.

Quade strolled over to Hyde and me, snapping his fingers to make a chair of plushy snow appear beside where Hyde was sitting. He yanked a rug over the snow pile and then sat down, spreading his legs out in front of him.

I blinked down at them. "Are you guys for real right now?"

Quade looked at me nonplussed. "What?"

Huffing out a sigh, I turned my attention back to the shifter and vampire who were successfully destroying the bedroom. "Stop fighting right now!" I screeched. I hated when they fought. It was like I was right back in the cafeteria, and it made me uneasy. When they fought, anxiety churned inside of me, making me buckle with nervous panic.

The knowledge that they could get hurt was almost paralyzing to me. I had to stop them, but they weren't listening. No one *ever* fucking listened to me. I was feared, hated, ignored. No one ever asked if I wanted to be a Void. No one ever asked if I'd meant to take away my mother's powers. No one

asked if I wanted to be exiled, or if I wanted to be the council's tool. No one asked if I wanted to come to this academy and be mocked and despised by my peers. And fate didn't fucking ask if I wanted to be mated to paragon assholes who hadn't even wanted me around in the beginning.

I felt something bubbling up within me. Anger. Uncertainty. Fear. Panic. I was so godsdamned sick of my life being decided for me. Of everyone acting around me without any care or thought about how *I* felt. They were my mates, and they weren't hearing me. And every time they took a swipe at each other, it was like they were landing the blows on *me*.

The Void became a tangle of turmoil inside of me. Smoke started to pour from my mouth. Enough was enough. The darker parts of my mind whispered in a seductive tone. Take control. Take it now. Make them *stop*.

Uncontrollable, my power shot out of me, my smoke filling the room entirely and wrapping around all four paragons. Some people saw red when they got out of control. Me? I saw black. Black smoke clouded my vision, and all I could think was *make them stop, make them stop, make them stop*.

"Shit!" Quade yelled as my smoke surrounded the room.

Gritt and Render immediately stopped fighting to turn and look at me and the mass of stormy power I'd unleashed. I felt every ounce of power bleeding from me, and it wasn't until Gritt shifted back into his human form that I tried to painstakingly tug the Void back.

"Can I have my amulet, please?" I asked through clenched teeth, beads of sweat rolling down my skin.

Hyde hurriedly stood up and fished it out of his pocket before tossing it to me. My fingers shook with the barely contained rage bubbling from within as I clasped it firmly around my neck. Something felt *off*. The Void had never raged this hard, had never fought me with such heat and destruction, had never taken over like that so quickly. My memories of last night flickered through my mind. It was like the Void had sucked me inside of it. My body wasn't mine anymore, and it had something to do with these paragon bonds.

"Why were you fighting?" Quade asked while brushing snow, feathers, and splintered wood from his pants. He was apparently taking on the role of mediator now, and I was more than willing to let him. I didn't trust myself not to lash out again.

"She's *my* mate. He has a fucking mate mark, too!" Gritt yelled, but it sounded more like a lion's roar.

"What, you mean this?" Quade asked, with a smug smile before holding

up his hand. “It was on me too when I woke up.”

“I have one too!” Hyde exclaimed excitedly before putting his hands behind his back. “But it’s wrapped around my cock; care to inspect it, Sweets?” he asked me with a wink before jerking his hips forward suggestively.

Gritt seethed. “I’m going to fucking kill all of yo—”

“No one is killing anyone!” I screamed.

This was too much to take in, too much to process. It felt like I was in a fist fight, blow after blow hitting me in the gut with no time to recover. I knew there was a pull between all of us, but now they were all marked, and I didn’t know what that meant exactly. There was also a terrifying darkness sitting inside of me, brooding and demanding to be let out. I didn’t trust it, didn’t trust that I wouldn’t hurt them.

“I-I need to go,” I stuttered before wrapping the cloak around me tighter.

“What? No. Stay,” Quade pleaded while reaching for me, but I pulled out of reach. I took a step toward the door while keeping my eyes on all four of them. “Gritt will calm down. He’s always hot headed, but he’ll figure his shit out. Stay. We need to figure this out, Devi.”

“No. *I* need to figure this out. None of you gave a damn about me a couple of weeks ago. Hell, some of you were willing to torture me to get me to leave. I don’t understand any of this, and last night”—my voice trailed off as I tried to think of how to word what was worrying me—“the Void is changing. It’s becoming something I’ve never had to deal with before, and it scares me. Switching powers *hurts*, and everything is so damn confusing. Everything started flaring up when I met you four. I need time to process. I need time to figure out what the fuck is happening to me.”

Gritt took a pained step toward me, but I held my hands up to stop him. I had to figure out what the Void was doing, and hopefully stop this before I lost myself to it. “I’m going to the cabin now. I’m just really freaked out, okay? Please just...give me space.”

I spun around and fled, the pulling sensation protesting like a swarm of hornets in my gut. I didn’t want to leave them, not really. But something was off, and I couldn’t risk staying.

I couldn’t risk *them*.

Chapter 24



BEADS OF SWEAT rolled down my skin as I let the Void out in bursts. My entire cabin shook from the power. With no one here, I felt like it was safer to unleash the smoke plaguing my soul. Ever since the Void-induced orgy and the subsequent fight, I'd been practicing alone in my room. I didn't have anyone to feed on, but it felt good reaching for that darkness within me and letting it out. It wasn't enough though. I'd need to feed again soon, but I wasn't ready to see my paragons yet. Maybe unleashing my powers was a bad idea. I'd been coping before, chaining it up like the monster it was. Now that I'd had a taste, I always needed more. It was like an addiction—a staunch craving that never went away.

I was in shock that I'd successfully switched the elementals of their powers. I'd blacked out and nearly died in the process, but...I'd done it. I was one step closer to being able to fulfill the promise I made to Gritt.

After pulling the smoke to wrap around my body again, I reached for a glass of water on the nightstand. My fingers wrapped around the cool glass, slipping on the condensation before I greedily brought it to my lips. The moment the cool water touched my throat, I hummed in appreciation.

The door to my cabin suddenly sprung open without warning, and in walked Hyde. "Hello, Devicka," he said with a grin before spinning around to take a look at the cabin. "Good, the corpses finished fixing it up again after the bobcat clawed it all up," he said with a satisfied nod before running his hands along the walls and new curtains. I'm pretty sure the fabric was made from school uniforms since it was the same plaid design as my skirts, but hey, it was better than the tattered mess the bobcat had left me with.

I shook my head in annoyance while continuing to take large gulps of the water, feeling so dehydrated, I wasn't sure one full glass would be enough.

Hyde observed me while biting his lip before producing a small notepad and pen from his pocket.

“Needs water after extraneous Void usage,” his voice mumbled. I glared at him, frowning when I realized he was writing about *me*. His eyes were mischievous as he clicked the top of his pen and pocketed it.

“Are you studying me?” I asked with narrowed eyes before setting the cool glass down and wiping my mouth with the back of my hand. I quickly picked up my amulet and slipped it over my head, making my power taper out.

“I’m keeping note of the things I know so that the others can know what I know, and if *they* know something, I make sure that I get to know it too. It’s all to help you, you know?”

“I have no idea what you just said, Hyde,” I said before cradling my head in my hands. I heard the popping of his pen and snapped my head back up to stare at him as he scribbled.

“Is delirious after Void usage. Does not comprehend normal speech patterns. Proceed with caution.”

“I’m not delirious!” I yelled, making him sigh and tilt his head to the side while scribbling more notes. “If you’re writing that I’m cranky, I’m going to rip up your notebook,” I seethed. Hyde simply shrugged and clicked the top of his pen, pocketing it again.

He observed me for a moment before speaking. “I know you want to figure out your Void, so I’m here to help. We’re both used to doing things on our own; I figured we could be alone together.”

His words caught me off guard, and I found myself swallowing a strange emotion climbing up my throat. I should have told him to leave, but I found that I didn’t want to. So instead, I changed the subject.

“Thank you for fixing up the cabin. Again.” Cheddar scurried up my leg and settled on my lap. “Why’d you do it in the first place?” Hyde was quirky and unusual, but surprisingly kind. He went out of his way to turn the feral cabin into a home, even when I barely knew him.

He walked around the room for a moment before stopping at my bed. Sitting down, he twisted to face me, a wry smile planted on his face. “Homes are curious things, don’t you think? I spent most of my life without one.”

My heart panged for him in that moment. “You were homeless?” I asked, feeling brash for wording it that way.

“I had a case of too many houses not enough homes. I grew up in the

foster system. Some of the places I stayed were much like this feral cabin. Ironical the zombie king has dead parents.”

I reached out and grabbed his hand as Cheddar climbed up my comforter to settle in Hyde’s lap instead. “I’m sorry,” I whispered, not really knowing what else to say. Even though my mother wanted nothing to do with me, Coxcomb’s was still a nice enough place.

“Sorrays are just things uncomfortable people say when they have nothing else to say, don’t you think? I’m sorry for what you’ve been through. I’m sorry we rushed a bond none of us were ready for. I’m sorry this is new and scary. But I’m not sorry for knowing you, Devi, nor am I sorry for being bonded to you—whatever that means.”

I opened my mouth and closed it again, not really sure what to say. My insecurities were scratching at my surface. “You’re really not sorry? You’re really okay with being bonded to me—to the *Void*?”

Hyde patted my leg while answering my question with a smile. “I’ve always been different. Not really social, not really *normal*. I’ve always been in my own head, doing my own thing. Marching to my own beat, even if the beat was off.” He did an awkward little dance move to emphasize his point. “I never really cared enough about anyone living until you came along.” He stood up and held his hand out to me. Grabbing it, I let him pull me up. “I’m excited to be bonded to you. I want to help you. I want to figure this out with you.”

“I’ve been figuring things out on my own for so long, I’m afraid I wouldn’t know what to do with one mate, let alone four,” I replied honestly.

“Well, when in doubt, we can always fuck. The five of us seem to have perfected that,” he said cheekily before stroking my cheek.

I tilted my head back and laughed. “You’re odd, Hyde Marr.”

“The best people are.” Hyde then pulled away and started dancing again, moving his feet around the room as he gathered my boots and a sweater on the floor. “Now come on. I have a dangerous surprise for you, but I think it might help. We’ll be breaking about four hundred rules, so we can fuel your little inner risk vixen, too.”

How did he know about that? I must have had a questioning look on my face, because he quickly added, “The forest animals are a gossipy bunch, and your motorcycle is badass. Mind if we take Betty? We have a little bit of a trip ahead of us.”

I grabbed my leather jacket and put it on before tucking Cheddar safely in

bed. I was morbidly attached to the rodent. “Where are we going?” I asked as we left the cabin and headed toward Betty, who looked like she’d just gotten a bath. I wondered what dead forest animal washed her last night.

“It’s more fun when you don’t know the destination,” Hyde said before rubbing his sleeve along the chrome of my bike.

“How can I drive if I don’t know where I’m going?” I countered. Talking with Hyde was like one gigantic riddle that I couldn’t quite solve.

“I was hoping I could drive. Motorcycles are exhilarating creatures, don’t you think? Like dragons.” My eyebrows shot up. There was no way in hell I was letting him drive my bike.

“Nope,” I replied before crossing my arms over my chest, inadvertently pushing my breasts up. Hyde’s silver eyes traveled the curves of my cleavage before fluttering up to meet my gaze. I felt a flash of arousal travel down my spine.

“I never got to see your mate mark. Did the shifter find it on you?” he asked, flipping the script.

“No.”

“Care for me to check you over? For research purposes, of course.”

“Uh...”

I lifted my hands, searching for the vine-like mate mark that the guys had. I’d completely forgotten about it. I squealed in shock when I saw something on my pinky finger, only to realize it was just a bit of dirt.

“Hmm. It must be hiding. Let’s see,” Hyde said, walking behind me.

I leaned over to look at my bare legs, but I couldn’t see anything there, either. Just as I was about to go inside so I could inspect myself in a mirror, I felt Hyde lift the back of my shirt, cool air hitting my skin. I straightened and spun around, tugging my shirt back down. “What are you doing?”

Hyde blinked his silver eyes at me. “I’m checking for you. Unless you have eyes on the back of your head as well?”

“Of course not,” I snapped.

“Then what’s the problem?”

I opened my mouth only to shut it again. I sighed. “Fine. But no funny business. I don’t want to do anything until we figure out how this works. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“I detest funny business,” Hyde cracked, lightening my somber statement. I laughed and shook my head at him. “Mm-hmm.”

Turning around again, I gave him my back, and Hyde wasted no time

lifting my shirt. I felt it go higher and higher, and then his warm finger was tracing along the edge of my hip, up my waist, then dragging along the edge of my bra strap. My breath hitched, and I bit my lip as heat gathered deep in my belly. I felt Hyde step closer to me, his body radiating warmth.

When his fingers dipped into the waistband of my uniform skirt, my mouth went completely dry, and my Void started pulsing, as well as every other damn vein in my body. “Hyde, I said no funny business,” I said breathlessly.

“Believe me, Devicka. I’m taking this *very* seriously.”

Tugging at my waist, he spun me around to face him and dragged his fingers along my stomach, making goosebumps pebble along my skin. “Find anything?” I asked. My voice sounded foreign and heady.

“Nope,” Hyde replied with a pop on the last syllable before dropping to his knees before me. *Oh fuck.*

Using both hands he guided my skirt up, staring at my thighs and everything between. I was thudding with arousal and hunger, could practically feel the necromancer bringing me to life with every teasing touch.

“Ah, there it is,” he said, looking right at my core. I clenched my legs together, seeking friction while feeling embarrassed, but he didn’t let me pull away. Wrapping his large hands around my right thigh, he leaned up and licked a spot right at my panty line, and I nearly toppled over at the sensation.

“I think I need to inspect more, hmm?” he rasped.

I could feel the Void practically dancing within me, aching to reach out and feed. Wet heat painted my thighs as his fingers pulled my thong to the side. He leaned in close to breathe me in, and I nearly collapsed.

“Hyde, we shouldn’t,” I whispered, but my words held no punch. That was the problem. I wanted this. Hell, I *craved* this. Our connection was strong and inevitable, no matter how much it frightened me.

He leaned in closer to kiss me *there*. It was a soft, gentle caress of his lips that had my legs parting, begging for more. “We aren’t on a time crunch. I think I should do a more thorough search,” he whispered before standing up. My shaky legs were then swept up from beneath me in the span of seconds, and Hyde carried me back inside the cabin.

“Hyde,” I half-heartedly pleaded, knowing that it was no use. We were always meant to collide. All of us.

Using his foot, he kicked the door open, knocking it off its hinges with the force of his kick.

“Remind me to tell the bears to fix that,” he muttered as he carried me to my bed and laid me down.

We both stripped out of our clothes in record time, the frantic need to be closer driving our movements. Once I was left in nothing but my amulet, we stared at each other. Hyde’s rippled abs were flexed as he heaved in hungry breaths. He looked at the slope of my breasts, the way my pale hair fell along my shoulders. He stared at the apex between my thighs before dragging his eyes back up to the amulet.

“Take it off,” he ordered, his voice lacking his usual playfulness.

“I-I can’t,” I whispered.

Hyde stalked closer and grabbed my hair, wrapping it around his wrist before tugging. “Take it off, Devicka,” he whispered into my ear, his words a clipped caress as he tugged.

“I’m scared,” I whined. That was the core of it, wasn’t it? Render once told me that there was no one that feared the Void as much as me, and he was right. I feared what it could do, I feared what it had already done.

“I’m not. You won’t hurt me. Take it off, and I’ll reward you,” he replied with a smile. “There are perks to my power not many know about.”

That had me curious. I battled with myself for a moment, staring at his heady eyes before finally giving in. Reaching up, I unclasped my amulet and let it fall, releasing a stream of smoke the moment it left my skin. I cringed for a moment at the deadly spike in my power. It rushed at Hyde, claiming his skin like a long-lost lover, but he was right. It didn’t hurt him. I watched his eyes roll back, his head tipping up as I fed.

“Gods, you have no idea how good that feels,” he moaned. I sipped from him, not letting the full force of my hunger out. I watched him for a moment, content to just stare at his parted lips and blissed out expression.

“You promised to show me the perks of your power,” I reminded him as I settled my thighs open a little wider.

Hyde turned his gaze back on me, his eyes hooded with hunger and want. I licked my lips. “That I did,” he replied before falling to his knees and crawling closer to me. “You know how I bring things to life? Well, I can bring the living to new heights, too. I can bring every sense,” he paused, blowing his red mist at my core. At first I couldn’t feel it, but then my core went wild with sensitivity. “Every nerve,” he said between breaths. I was pulsing, ready for his touch, but his magic brought it to an entirely new level. “Every *fucking touch* to life,” he finished before moving his index finger up

my slit, dragging it across me. I wasn't expecting to be so wired, so turned on. Just a brush of his fingers had an orgasm tearing through me. I moaned as he smiled at me. Oh gods, he made me sensitive as *fuck*.

He pulled himself up on the bed and hovered over me. Wrapping my arms around his neck, I pulled him to me, greedy for more. "I need you inside me right now," I breathed out before searing my lips to his. And oh, even the plush skin at my mouth could feel everything. It was like tingling electrodes were hooked up to my body, pumping fresh blood to every nerve ending I had. His tongue probed mine, and I felt it in my breasts. His hand grabbed my rib cage, and I felt it down my legs.

And when he slid inside of me? My entire body went haywire. Just a tiny movement caused another orgasm to ripple through me. He thrust back and forth, digging his fingers into my skin as he grunted. Wave after blissful wave kept me riding him. It was like I never came down from the first high because it was just one continuous cycle of budding pleasure barreling through me.

"I can't take anymore," I whimpered as yet another brush of our bodies caused me to jump off a peak that felt never-ending. I was too sensitive, too responsive to every touch.

Hyde smiled down at me, obviously enjoying the show of my writhing body as I clenched and unclenched. It wasn't until his thrusts turned hard and punishing that I thought I'd lose it.

"So close," he rasped as my body coiled and spasmed, his heated words like strokes against my lips.

I felt like I was going to black out. I'd never come for this long, this much, this fucking *intensely*. My entire body felt like an instrument Hyde played. When he finally came, little aftershocks, the only thing my body could give, rang between us as his entire body tensed, and he called out my name with his release.

It wasn't until our breathing had calmed down that I spoke, almost afraid that the rumbling would cause another wave of pleasure to float over me. "Hyde. What the hell..."

He smirked while pulling out of me, my attuned body crying out at the loss of contact as he rolled over beside me. "Necro perk," he said while folding his hands behind his head, a satisfied smirk on his face.

"Some fucking perk," I gasped before pulling my thighs together, crying out at a splash of pleasure at the friction. "Uh, when will this wear off?"

‘Cause I don’t want to have orgasms every time I move,” I joked, though now my mind was flashing with ideas.

“A few more minutes, give or take,” Hyde replied before grazing his finger over my thighs. “Found your mate mark, by the way.” He poked a sensitive spot on my skin, right above where my panty line would be—if I were wearing any clothes.

I looked down as he pulled away and, sure enough, there was the mark, a circle made of vines right on my inner thigh. It was small, but definitely new. “Fuck, so it’s official then, isn’t it?” I asked while running my index finger along the ornate markings. Although, it didn’t feel as scary as it did before. I almost felt content to see the evidence of a bond I hadn’t been sure about.

“It means you’re bonded,” Hyde replied in simplistic awe before sitting up on the mattress to look at me. He grabbed my chin and peered into my eyes while licking his lips. “And I’m going to take you somewhere that can hopefully help explain your powers and...our cravings.”

DRIVING with Hyde behind me made me just as crazy as I’d been when it had been the temperamental vampire on the back of my bike. Every time I leaned into a turn, Hyde leaned with me, his strong thighs clenching around me. Thank gods the orgasms had stopped. I think I was pretty close to suffering from O-face overload or passing out from too much pleasure.

He gave me directions as I went, tapping me on my left thigh when he wanted me to turn left, and on my right thigh for turning right. Every time he gave me another tap, it sent flutters into my stomach, like my body was waiting for his magic to come back out. I was getting greedier and greedier when it came to these paragons.

By the time Hyde had me pulling off the highway and onto a side street, I was a mess. I hoped he’d been telling the truth about bringing me somewhere that would help give me answers, because I felt like I was losing my grip. I was constantly being pulled in different directions.

When Hyde signalled for me to slow down, I pulled Betty to a stop in front of a quintessential cemetery. There were wrought iron gates, stone fences, grass, and old oak trees throwing everything into shade.

I lifted myself off the bike and pulled off my helmet, then hung it on the handlebar. “Really? The necromancer takes me to a cemetery?”

“You don’t approve?” Hyde asked, mussing up his already wind-whipped white hair.

“It’s a bit cliché.”

He scoffed. “This isn’t cliché,” he replied before holding his hand out to me.

“No? Prove it,” I replied with a smirk, letting him pull me past the gates and onto the manicured lawns that were littered with headstones and dead flowers.

“Necromancers actually avoid graves. The dead call to us. Some stronger spirits tug at our powers, begging to come back. You won’t see many of my kind hanging out around tombstones, Devicka.”

I paused and put my hand up to his chest. “Then why are we here?”

“To figure you out, of course,” he replied, like it was the most obvious answer in the world.

I nodded dubiously. “Okay.”

We started walking along the cemetery in silence, and occasionally Hyde would pause and shake his head, like he was trying to evade intrusive thoughts. When we passed one grave, he gripped my hand tighter and clenched his teeth. “Hurry, her crypt is in the back,” he said with a hiss of pain before walking faster.

“Who’s crypt?” I asked.

“Ben Dover’s.”

I frowned. “Who’s that?”

A shadow cast along the gravestones, giving the cemetery an even creepier feel.

“He was a very prominent fixture in society. Right alongside Dixie Normus.”

I furrowed my brow. “I’ve never heard of Dix...oh my gods, you perv.” I smacked him playfully on the arm, and he tipped his head back and laughed.

“I thought you said you didn’t like funny business?”

He shot me a devious wink. “That would be incredibly boring.”

“You could never be boring, Hyde Marr.”

He grinned over at me, flashing his bright teeth that seemed even whiter against his tanned skin. “Come on, it’s just up here.”

I looked ahead as we rounded the path and saw a stone crypt. When Hyde pushed open the small door, I stopped in my tracks. “Uhh, I’m not going in there.”

Hyde laughed. “I’m a necromancer. I’m basically an insurance policy in a cemetery. The dead won’t hurt you as long as I’m around.”

I blew out a breath, incredulous that I was about to willingly walk into a crypt. This place gave me the heebie jeebies. “If this is all some elaborate bully prank to get me locked inside, I swear to gods, I will murder you in your undead sleep.”

“Threat received,” he answered with a nod as if he wasn’t surprised at all. Then he leaned in close, barely letting his lips brush against the curve of my ear. “But for the record, I enjoy being inside of you way too much you lock you anywhere except inside my bedroom.”

I gulped. “Oh. Good then.” I breezed past him into the crypt, pretending like my heart wasn’t trying to jumpstart my libido.

It was just as damp and cool inside as I expected. There was a musty smell that made me gag the moment it hit my nose. Whoever was laid to rest here had obviously died a long time ago, but the smell of death was still in the air. On the ground was a concrete coffin. It wasn’t particularly ornate or beautiful. Simple in nature, this crypt looked more like a cage than something to honor whoever was buried here.

“Help me, will you?” Hyde asked before bracing his hands on the lid. I swallowed fearful bile that kept rising up my throat, questioning if this was a good idea. “Oh, come on. Don’t tell me you’re scared. The dead are harmless...mostly. And this is just a pile of bones...for now.”

That statement did not make me feel better.

Not one to be called a coward, I moved over to him and placed my hands on the lid and pushed, helping him slide it half way open. A foul scent hit my nose the moment the airlocked tomb was opened, and I had to hold my arm over my mouth to stop the vomit rising up in my throat.

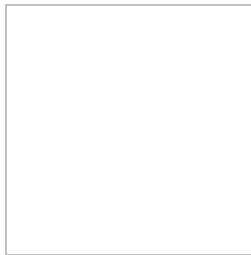
Inside the coffin was a skeleton. Mold, grime, and powdery remnants of decayed flesh clung to its bones, and it was in a white lace dress, frayed from the years. “Yikes. I think she’s too dead, even for you, necro.”

He scoffed. “Haven’t you learned by now how badass I am?” Hyde asked. “Now admittedly, I haven’t actually done what I’m about to try to do with someone so...well, *dead*. Anyone over a century old typically drains the life right out of me. Pun intended. But the real tricky part is bringing back their consciousness. Not many of my kind can do anything except raise mindless zombies. But I’ve been practicing,” he said with a wink before nudging me with his elbow. “Fair warning, at best, you’ll have about ten minutes before she’s gone again.”

“Before *who*’s gone?” I insisted.

Hyde looked over at me with an eager glint in his silver eye. “Emilia Dupree. The last female Void before you.”

Chapter 25



MY MOUTH WAS STILL open in shock when Hyde stretched out his hands and held them over the skeleton. I didn't even have time to tell him no. Instead, I watched with trepidation as the red magic poured from his fingertips and wrapped around the disintegrating bones.

His necromancer power made it rise in the air, rotating slightly before us. I took an unconscious step back, watching as the bones started to reattach, and the skin began to regrow. Hyde's hands started shaking as he poured more magic out, and within seconds, the bones were gone from view completely, all of them covered with stringy muscles and sallow, stretched skin that was the color of old milk. Feet, calves, hips, stomach, chest, arms, head, the woman slowly filled out from a scaffolding of cartilage to a porcelain zombie.

She continued to hang in the air, her lace dress barely connected with a mixture of dangling threads and spider webs. It was a haunting display that was equally beautiful and terrifying. I was so busy watching her that I hadn't noticed how much Hyde started wavering or his skin growing impossibly pale. I turned to look at him the moment Emilia took her first breath, and I watched in horror as his cheeks hollowed and his eyes rolled back.

"Hyde!" I screamed, rushing to his side. I tried to catch him, but I was too slow. His head hit the stone floor and blood oozed out from the gash. "Oh, shit," I cursed. I reached down and yanked my combat boot off before ripping the sock from my foot and pressing it to the wound to stop the bleeding. "What did you do, you crazy necro?" I chastised him, shaking him slightly, but he didn't wake up.

"Oh, that's quite a lot of blood, isn't it?" a voice asked, sounding like rusted metal blowing in the wind. I snapped my head over to the coffin and

swallowed a scream at the woman sitting there. Her clothes were so worn I could see her body through the holes in them. Her bright blue eyes were the color of the ocean, and her nose was tiny.

“Emilia?” I asked warily before standing. I didn’t know what this undead chick was capable of or what she might do. I took a couple of steps back until I was pressed against the concrete wall.

“I’m assuming you’re a Void?” she asked. “Can’t think of any other reason you’d have a necromancer wake me up. That’s a strong one, you’ve got. Most zombies have no consciousness, but I feel almost like no time has passed at all.” She held her hands up and stared at them in awe, twisting her fingers and bending them at the knuckles.

“Y-Yeah, I am a Void,” I answered quietly, still watching her to see if she would be some crazed monster.

She made a clicking noise with her dry tongue. “Get a backbone, girl. Speak like you mean it. The world will crush you if you’re weak,” Emilia said before twisting her neck, a series of popping sounds erupting at the movement. “Is he one of your bonded?” she asked.

I frowned. “I...think so?” I replied lamely. “Wait, is that normal?”

She tilted her head to the side—*way too fucking far*—making more bones crack and snap. “You don’t know what you are, do you?”

“I just told you, I’m a Void.” I couldn’t believe I was standing here in a crypt talking to a reanimated corpse.

She waved a thin hand in the air. “Oh, that’s what they call us, sure. But we’re more than that. Has no Void elder ever taught you?”

“There’s no such thing as a Void elder.”

She looked sad for a moment, her cracked lips turning down at the corners. “Then I am sorry for you, youngling. In the beginning, we had elders in place to help us. I saw the change in tides before my murder, and it saddens me to know what I predicted has come to fruition. Weaker people have always feared us. Our kind has been hunted and killed throughout the millennia. I will try to tell you as much as I can for as long as his power can sustain me, but you will have to replenish him when I’m done, and seek out your bonded to then replenish yourself.”

My head was swimming with her words like loose puzzle pieces I couldn’t fit together.

“Who do you feed from?” she asked, testing her own weight as she got to her feet and began to walk out through the crypt door. I didn’t want to leave

Hyde behind on the floor, but I had no choice except to follow her out. As soon as the sun touched her skin, she let out a blissful sigh. Her fingers traced along the crypt walls before she kneeled down, running her hands over the grass and stray dandelions growing.

“Before, I didn’t feed from anyone. But I’ve met some paragons, and it’s like my Void craves them and only them,” I explained in a rush. I wasn’t sure how much time we had and wanted to absorb as much information as possible.

I could see her skeletal body through her deteriorated dress as she moved, and stringy, white hair was stuck in clumps to her head, “Then it seems your Void sought out your perfect matches. You’ll bond to them, and you’ll feed from them. If you feed on anyone else—on anyone’s power that is not strong enough for you, then you can drain them of power completely, but I’m sure you know this,” she explained, her attention still focused on the flower.

“Yeah, I mean, I’ve taken powers from people under the council’s orders.” It felt wrong to admit this to someone so...ethereal. It made the dirty guilt buried deep in my gut rise to the surface.

She cursed under her breath and stood back up, heading for the nearest tree. “A barbaric punishment for supers,” she said over her shoulder. “One I’d hoped would one day be outlawed, but I suppose that was wishful thinking.”

“You keep saying my bonded,” I pressed, aware of my time dwindling. “Can you explain that more? A mate mark just appeared on my skin, and I feel a pull to them like nothing I’ve ever experienced before.”

Reaching the tree, she started to circle around it, her spindly fingers running along the bark. “They’re your mates. Your partners. Your life. It’s similar to a shifter’s mating ritual, but so much more potent—and important. They are the people that will keep the Void settled. We are gifted with incredible responsibilities, but burdened by the complex needs of our gift. You are the highest form of elemental magic. Some control fire, wind, earth, or water. You control power.”

My eyebrows dipped in confusion. “I’m a *power* elemental?” I asked, trying to clarify.

“Yes, youngling. You can take, give, mold, and mend. You wield the abilities gifted to us by the gods. It is your divine and sacred duty.” She turned to look at me, her skin practically see-through in the sunlight. “Child, you bring all the supers *together*. Your entire existence is meant to bring

balance to the world. In my time, the Void and their bonded led the world.”

I put a hand on my chest and could feel the thudding of my heart. “How do I control it?” I asked. Her bright blue eyes had started to dim, and her limbs started to crack and shake with the effort of holding her up. She was fading.

“I don’t have the time to explain that all to you. You must rely on your bonded and use your instincts,” she answered, her voice less vibrant than before. I watched in horror as the skin on her chest dissolved, showing the bloody muscle beneath.

“*How* do I rely on my bonded?” I asked in a panic. I wasn’t ready for her to disappear just yet. I still had so many questions.

“You must learn from their powers. Each bonded serves a purpose for teaching you to control.”

“I don’t understand...”

“An elemental, to restore you. Your ability to control powers is similar to theirs. Watch how they weave the elements. It is most similar to yours. They take their power from the earth. Eventually, your bonded will be able to siphon it to you to keep your stores replenished. Always feed the Void, child.” My mind immediately flashed to Quade.

“Okay,” I replied in a hurry.

Emilia started to walk back into the crypt, her skin flaking off with every step, turning to dust in her wake. I followed after her, wishing I had Hyde’s damn notebook to write some of this down. “You will need a necromancer, as I see you already have one. Well, unless you don’t revive him soon. We must make this quick, he’s draining fast.”

My eyes widened in panic as I followed her inside. She turned to look at Hyde, and her right eyeball fell out. I flinched as it bounced off her chest and rolled onto the floor. “The Void can consume you if you aren’t careful. I’ve seen many Voids lose themselves to it. I’m sure you’ve experienced it yourself. It’s like another person, another entity. The necromancer’s magic will always bring you back.”

I turned to look at Hyde, relieved to see the steady rise and fall of his chest.

“You will also be bonded to a vampire, the one who will understand your need to feed. Your blood will give him more than any other, and after one taste, he will crave you.”

My mind flashed to Render, how he’d licked up my wounds and bitten

me.

“And lastly, a shifter. A bond as natural as animals rutting in the wild. He will satisfy your animalistic desires. After all, shifters understand the drive to mate and claim more than any supernatural, and they revere mating bonds above all else.”

Four supernatural mates, and in such a short amount of time, I’d found each one. It explained so much. Our connection to each other and the inexplicable draw that was always present. How my power always buzzed when any of them were around, even before I knew any of this. “I’m...scared that I’ll hurt them,” I whispered, saying out loud the worries that had been plaguing me.

“When a Void is settled in her bonds, she can feed freely, as she was meant to, and then use that power to sustain her mates. There is a safeguard in the bond; you can never hurt them, never take too much. You will feel a fierce protectiveness for them like none other.”

She started to climb back into her coffin, and the bones of her foot fell off at the last step, but she didn’t seem to mind at all. She lifted the leg over the edge of her coffin and settled into it like one might get into bed. When she turned to look at me again, her lips had peeled back. Her skin had flaked away in chunks, leaving her face with just bones and a few strips of cartilage and stray muscles. I could see her tongue working behind her jaw and teeth.

My time was almost over, and I still didn’t know what the hell this all meant.

“What does it all mean?” I asked, stopping her before she could lie down. “What am I supposed to do?”

Her head tilted too far again, and the bones on her shoulders started to sag and fall. “You are the balance of power. You can give and take away. You can even switch powers from one to another. I’ll tell you what my elder once told me.” Her other eye rolled away, leaving me to stare blankly at the unseeing, disintegrating woman. “You are more than just your Void. Perhaps it’s time for you to start living that way.”

I stared at her in shock. No one had ever said anything even remotely like that to me before. The Void was all I was. At least, that’s what I’d been taught.

“You will be drawn to the mates that fate chose for you, and they will be drawn to you. The leaders of your world will want to use you as a weapon, but you’re so much more than that. Your Void will reject them. You’re meant

to bring balance, as nature intended. Hurry now, save your bonded. He's expelled too much power. He'll need you, and I'm so very tired."

I squeezed my eyes shut as the information assaulted me. It was all too much. "Wait!" I yelled. "How do I help him?" I asked. His lips had turned pale, and I wasn't sure if I was capable of siphoning power back into him.

Her voice was a lingering whisper in my ear, cold and present. "Instead of feeding, give. Like an exhale," she said, her voice choppy as her tongue began to wrinkle and pucker. "And now, I...must lay me...down to *restttttt*." The last word was like an exhale, like a breeze slipping through a pane of a window.

She laid back the rest of the way, folding her splintered forearms over her chest. "Emilia?"

When I walked over to look inside, all that was left was her skeleton, and a pair of tiny dandelions held inside her bony hand. She was gone.

I took one steadying breath before turning around and dropping to my knees beside Hyde. With one hand, I unclasped my amulet and let it fall to the ground. My Void barely reacted. It was like there was no power around to tempt it. "Shit!" I cursed before putting my hands on his cold body. I closed my eyes and imagined the smoky Void. "Why did you use so much damn magic?"

I put my hands on his arm, willing him to wake up. My smoke wisped around me, and I forced it to trail over his body. "Come on," I urged. "Give like a damn exhale!" I yelled at my stubborn Void. "*Give, give, give, dammit!*" I screamed while forcing the smoke to touch his skin, but it barely reacted.

I replayed her words in my mind. I was an elemental of *power*. She said it was like an exhale. I opened my eyes again and steadied my heart. I went deep inside the Void with my mind, that smoky dark place that took over when I fed. It scared me, but I sunk into the darkness and sucked in a deep breath, and then let out a shaky exhale. I was terrified that my Void would take more from him in such a vulnerable position. If I did this wrong, I could drain him of power completely or even kill him.

My hands shook as I touched my hands to his chest. I had to stop thinking of my Void as just something that *took*. I believed the woman, which meant that giving back should come just as easily as feeding.

Blowing out another breath, I moved my hands up to cup Hyde's cold, pale face. He was breathing, but it was like my Void could sense how

depleted he was. I pushed my power at him, urging it to meet his needs. If the woman was right, then he was meant to be my mate. I could help him. I could do this.

With my hands on his cheeks, I brought my head down until our foreheads pressed together. Concentrating as hard as I could, I focused on pushing power into him rather than pulling anything away. Like a light switch that had suddenly turned on, my black smoke turned to billowing white, like fluffy clouds hanging in the sky. My heart skipped a beat, and I quickly pushed again, elated when I saw the smoke wrap around his body and finally sink into his skin. I pushed and pushed and pushed some more. I gave him everything I had. I felt my own strength waning, but still, I gave more.

Seconds passed that felt like hours, but then all at once, my Void dispersed, and Hyde's silver eyes popped open.

His hands came up to cup my face, mirroring my hold on him, and we stayed like that for a moment, just staring.

"You know, for a zombie king, you really do have the prettiest eyes," I whispered before blinking a few times. I felt so damn tired.

Hyde shot up and clutched his gut. His color looked better, but his eyes were wide with panic. "You did too much. I can feel you, you're weak," he said, but his words sounded far away.

Wavering, I felt myself grow dizzier. Each muscle in my body relaxed, like it was too much effort to sit, to *breathe*.

"Oh no, no, no. Hey, Dev! Keep your eyes open. Tell me how pretty I am," Hyde instructed, his hands tapping my cheeks, trying to keep me awake. I couldn't do it. Couldn't speak. The words were there, but it was like my brain was empty. And then there was a shift in the air, a dark presence that fell over us. Hyde's head snapped up, but it was a moment too late. Because the shadow cracked Hyde over the head with a long pole, making my necromancer pass out immediately and crumple to the ground.

I gasped, but the breath stuck itself in my chest. I tried to focus my eyes, but I didn't understand when I saw the figure who perched beside my body. My lips worked to sound out my confusion and horror, but once again I was too weak, too disconnected from myself to work out the name I just knew was at the tip of my tongue.

"Hello there, Miss Cainson," a low grumble whispered to me as the pale blonde strands of my hair were pushed away, giving my barely open eyes a clear view of his face. I wanted to glower at him, but it felt like I couldn't. I

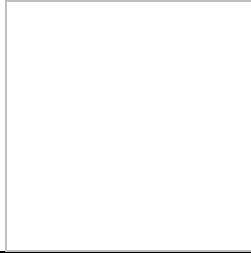
couldn't breathe, couldn't stop to think. A thousand questions were fluttering through my mind, and I just couldn't choke them out.

Why? Why? *Why?*

His fingers dug around the floor of the crypt until they landed on what he was searching for, and with a broad smile, he pulled it up and clutched it in his fist. "Time to put your powers to good use," he growled, and it wasn't until my eyes were nearly completely closed that I could force myself to choke out the confusion plaguing me.

"B-Banner?"

Chapter 26



THERE WERE PEOPLE LAUGHING.

Great bursts of amusement broke through their chests and crawled up their throats. It was like chimes that wouldn't stop blowing in the wind. I squinted, looking all around me, confused as hell.

Where was I?

I realized I was looking down at my lap. My lap that was no longer wearing my clothes I recognized. Instead, I was in a white dress that I'd never seen before, and my hair was loose over my shoulders. My right hand was picking at the red velvet armrest of the chair I was sitting on, my nail bent backwards, indicating that I must have been scratching at it for a long time without even realizing it.

My body felt heavy, yet my head felt light—like I'd been floating in a dark tide for days.

I blinked slowly, and it took great effort to lift up my head. I looked around me at the long, polished table I was sitting at. People were all around me, talking, eating, drinking, *laughing*. The sounds grated on my nerves, but I had no clue why.

When I felt a hand come down to touch my arm, my eyes swung over to see Banner sitting beside me in the middle of the fancy dinner party I had no memory of attending. My eyes slid around to the somewhat familiar faces, and I realized that most of them were council members.

"The complacent concoction finally wore off. I was wondering how long it would take. I had to use a lot," Banner said with a bright smile before gripping my thigh and squeezing *hard*. I felt his neutralizing abilities around me like it was a swarm of bees. It didn't feel like the calming balm of before, this time it was like an iron cage slamming down on my chest, pressing and

punishing. He was keeping my power from me—leashed me like a dog.

“Where am I? What is this?” I asked before twisting my head to take in the faces around me. I still felt dizzy, and all of their vibrant expressions kept blurring into one another.

“A dinner celebrating you!” a familiar voice from the head of the table said. I blinked a couple of times until I could see the scrawny figure in front of me.

“Judge Braxton?” I asked, frowning. “Tell me what’s happening, right fucking now,” I groaned before nausea bubbled up in my throat. Suddenly I remembered Hyde and how Banner had knocked him out. “Tell me where Hyde is!” I screamed. The last thing I’d seen was his weightless body crashing to the ground after a pipe had hit him—a pipe wielded by Banner. *What the fuck?*

“Lower your voice. That’s not polite, Devicka,” a soft voice said to my right. I turned and gaped at the woman sitting there. My mother was dressed in a red evening gown with sequins that littered it with reflected light.

“*Mom?*” I asked before shaking my head. This felt so wrong, so godsdamned chaotic and confusing, but ultimately there was a steady believability to this odd situation that cut me like a knife. I’d been drugged and kidnapped. And my mother was a part of it.

“You’ve done so well, Devicka. I’m so proud of you,” she cooed before placing her hand on my shoulder. I flinched at the contact.

“Where am I?” I asked again. Council members beamed at me like I was a trophy on their shelf.

“A ceremony of sorts. You’ve made some impressive strides. We think you’re ready, Devicka,” Banner said with a grin.

“Ready for what?” I asked as a waiter put steak on my gold plate and poured water in my wine glass. I was starving, and I realized that I couldn’t remember the last time I’d eaten. As my mouth watered in front of me, I reminded my empty stomach that Banner liked to drug people, and that I shouldn’t trust the delicious smelling food in front of me.

“Eat, Devicka, you’ll need your strength,” Mother ordered before handing me a fork, and I half wondered if she would force feed me. This was so strange, I couldn’t connect the dots. Did I miss something?

Another rolling surge of nausea crept up my throat, and I had to swallow the rush of saliva that flooded my mouth.

“Need my strength for what? Please tell me where Hyde is...he’s my

bonded,” I tried to explain. I had fleeting hopes that there was a part of the woman I once loved still in there.

I frowned when a fork was held in front of my face, my mother holding it for me expectantly. I turned my head away, only to see Banner shake his head. “Now, now. Your mother already asked you not to be rude.” The threat was clear in his face and in the way his hand tightened around me. I didn’t understand. How could Banner, who I thought was on my side, be in on this? I knew he’d been acting weird, but I didn’t expect this.

When it was clear I had no way out of this, I dutifully opened my mouth, and my mother shoved the forkful in. The food was cold and hardened, like it had been sitting uneaten for an hour. I chewed it, moving it around with my tongue, tasting nothing. She fed me bite after bite, like I was a little girl again, too young to feed myself.

“There,” she said, beaming. “That should help, dear.”

“Help what?” I asked.

If I’d had the strength, I would have thrown back my chair and made a run for it, but my body still felt weighed down, and Banner kept pumping his power into me, depriving me of my only defense.

“You’ll be giving us power, of course.”

“What? I-I can’t. Last time I did it, I almost *died*. The power has to come from somewhere,” I explained pleadingly. “I spoke to someone, and she explained what I really am. I’m an elemental of Power. What you’re saying isn’t good for me. It’s not what my power is for, I said, trying to get out my explanation as quickly as I could. If I could just get her to understand...”

Judge Braxton stood up on the other side of the room and slammed his palm on the edge of the table, but his physical weakness dulled the effect, it was more like a puny slap. He popped his neck before running his hand through his thinning hair before walking over to me, an angry pep in his step. He was wearing baggy clothes again. It was so odd, seeing someone so weak with so much power over everyone.

“Thanks to Banner, we know all about your visit with Emilia Dupree. Although I think less drastic measures could have been more effective, we appreciate this developing news about your power. With the exhilarating display you showed last time when you successfully switched the elemental powers, we feel it’s time to use your abilities to set things right.”

I blinked in surprise. “Set things right? You mean...I’m just here to switch back the powers of that vamp and shifter?” I asked hopefully.

Judge Braxton laughed. “Why would we waste your power on *them*?” he scoffed, and everyone at the table joined him in his obnoxious guffaw. “The council wants you to replenish your mother and give your power stores to ranking officials that have earned it,” Judge Braxton went on to explain. I gaped at all of them.

“You want me to give you all more power?” I asked for clarity.

“I want you to give back the power you stole from me,” my mother amended, looking pissy with her pursed lips. “It’s only fair, Devicka.”

I turned to Banner and scowled at him. “What about you, were you in on this right from the start?” I demanded, feeling pissed that I’d ever been attracted to this asshole.

He had the decency to look slightly ashamed, but the expression faded as quickly as it came. Judge Braxton answered my question for him though. “Banner was very instrumental in helping you learn your powers. I plan to reward him handsomely for his hard work.” Of course he did.

“So all of that *I understand you* crap was just bullshit, huh?” I shook my head, furious with myself. I looked back at the council members. “This is wrong. What you’re asking for...it’s not natural. My Void is supposed to be about balance. But what you want me to do...this goes against nature,” I said, my voice getting louder with every word. Everyone gave me an incredulous stare, like they couldn’t understand my outrage. “I can’t just make powers magically appear. They have to come from somewhere,” I explained. “Who do you plan on stealing from?”

“From the supes that don’t deserve it. And some who will add extra incentive for you, of course,” Braxton explained, like it was the most obvious solution in the world. I gasped at his insinuation. “Come, dinner is over. Let’s move on to the main event.”

Chairs scraped against polished marble flooring as everyone stood and started walking, following Braxton out of the room. I looked around wildly, my heart thumping in my chest. My chair was pulled out, and I was hauled to my feet by Banner, his grip firm on my arm.

My mother didn’t wait for me, she’d already gone ahead with the judge, talking excitedly. Since we were out of earshot from the others, I rounded on Banner, nearly tripping in the process, my hands clinging to him. “Please, Banner. Don’t do this.”

“It’s already done, Miss Cainson.”

I shook my head in denial. “No. It doesn’t have to happen. Stop

neutralizing me. Help me get away.”

“I can’t,” he said through gritted teeth. “And you should know better. We will never be anything but dogs to them. They tell us to heel, we rush to their feet with our tails tucked between our legs. They are our masters. Get used to it.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. How had he played me so effectively? “You’re a coward,” I bit out before dropping my hands and looking away from him.

He didn’t reply, but I saw the tic in his jaw as he started hauling me forward again. As soon as we passed through the doorway, we found ourselves in Judge Braxton’s massive living room. I knew it was his, because there was a huge family portrait hanging on the wall above the fireplace. The decor was made up of harsh angled furniture, monochromatic hues, and about a dozen unconscious supers tied to chairs that lined the far wall.

“Oh my gods.”

My hand flew to my mouth as I took them all in. They ranged in age, some males, some females. But my eyes widened in horror at the four figures slumped at the very end.

The paragons. *My* paragons.

I would’ve run to them if it weren’t for Banner holding me back. Gritt’s lip was bloodied, Render had a black eye, Quade looked like he was about to pass out, and Hyde was smiling. *Smiling*. Crazy necro. He was the only one awake, and I was so glad to see those silver eyes of his. But my relief at seeing Hyde okay was short lived because it was immediately replaced with dread for what was to come. The sight of them hurt and held against their will made fury rise up from my gut. I needed to go to them.

“Let me go!” I hissed at Banner.

“If you don’t want to see them die tonight, then just do what you’re told,” he said flatly, his eyes steady with resignation.

Well, he might have given up, but I sure as shit hadn’t.

The council members were milling around, running their hands over the tied up and unconscious supers like they were looking over merchandise.

“Alright,” Judge Braxton announced with a clap of his hands as he commanded the room in his suit and superiority complex. “Let’s get started.” He turned to look over at me expectantly. “Bring the Void over.”

Like the dutiful dog he was, Banner tugged me forward until I was standing beside Braxton and his drooling disciples.

“You will take the powers from these supers and transfer it to us,” Braxton explained, motioning from the unconscious supers to the council members.

“Fuck you. I won’t do it,” I spat.

He didn’t look the least bit surprised at my refusal, and instead, nodded toward one of the council members at the end of the room. A door was opened, and then two vampires came in dragging a person between them. My heart stumbled. *Reed.*

He was bleeding at the neck and being dragged like a sack of dirt. Fury like I’ve never felt before raged inside of me. Smoke started to seep out of my mouth, despite Banner’s hold.

“Let. Him. Go.”

Judge Braxton was a fool. He had no idea the danger he was putting himself in. I would ruin them all. I’d *kill* them all. He couldn’t take my paragons or kidnap my best friend. I wouldn’t let him get away with this.

“I’ll let your human friend go *after* you do as you’re told,” Braxton told me. “And don’t forget. I have the paragons here, too. From what Banner tells me, you’ve made quite an impression on the four of them. Shame that they won’t be able to lead their people one day like they thought. But then again, they’re too powerful to pass up. Besides, paragons can be easily replaced.”

More smoke coated my tongue. It dripped out of the corner of my eyes. Ran down from my ears. It was leaking out of me, and Banner faltered, his hands shaking where they touched me. We came to the realization at the same exact moment. For whatever reason, Banner’s neutralization power wasn’t stronger than mine. Not anymore.

“Something’s wrong,” he muttered, but the judge didn’t pay him any mind.

“You can start with me,” Braxton went on. “Then your mother. I want the Shifter Paragon’s power. You can bestow your mother with Quade’s elemental power,” he instructed.

“No!” I screamed, and my pleas mixed in with Reed’s who’d been bent to the side as a vampire hovered his fangs at his neck. I pulled against Banner to get to him, but couldn’t get away. His grip on me was too strong.

“You do what I say, or your friend dies now. You don’t have any other options here, Miss Cainson. You should be grateful,” Judge Braxton seethed before motioning around the room. “I’m giving you an opportunity to finally be accepted. To be welcomed by the council, to be respected. All it requires

is for you to do as you're told."

Do as I'm told.

I was always doing as I was fucking told.

I already saw the writing on the wall. The council would force me to take and take and take, to steal until it killed me, until hundreds, maybe thousands of supers were drained, and the council was amassed with terrifying power. I couldn't let that happen.

Down the line, the supers held hostage began to stir awake. Gritt's head snapped up, his vibrant green eyes locking onto me. His whole body shook as a snarl ripped out of him, his body straining against the chains he was bound in. I could tell he was straining to shift, but he couldn't. Something was stopping his power from working.

Turning to my mother, I addressed her first. "Is this what you really want? To steal power from Quade? You've always treated him like a son, and he's always respected you," I said incredulously. I knew she wanted her powers back. I'd always known that. But this...to get it back at the expense of Quade...I hadn't expected that she could be capable of that.

"Honey, I can take my seat on the council again," she said, hope bleeding from her eyes. "You can come home. We can be a family again." Her words hit me just like she wanted them to.

On the inside, my heart broke. On the outside, I reinforced my walls.

"And you'd be happy?" I asked. "If I did this for you, you'd forgive me?"

She nodded quickly, a piece of her pale blonde hair falling out of its updo. "Yes, of course. All will be as it was, and we can go back to the way things used to be."

The thing was, I couldn't ever be who I used to be, because I'd changed. Grown. And part of the reason for that was the four paragons behind me.

I took a shaky breath. "Okay," I whispered, but what I really meant was *goodbye*.

"Good," Braxton said, stepping between my mother and me. When I noticed his hand come down to her waist, my lip curled in disgust. I should've known.

"I'm glad you've come around, Miss Cainson," Judge Braxton said. "But remember, you so much as breathe wrong, Banner will neutralize you, and your human friend will be without a throat."

My dark eyes rose up to meet his. "I don't need the added threats. I know what's at stake."

Braxton studied me for a moment before looking over my shoulder to Banner. He nodded, and the neutralizer let go of his hold that was on my arm. Since he'd taken my amulet, my Void immediately started slinking off my skin like darkened steam. It was sluggish at first, from whatever magical drug had been in my system, but soon, I had a better handle on it. The other council members in the room were practically buzzing with excitement. Greed for power was like an opiate in the room, and they were all getting high off each other's hopeful fumes.

My eyes fluttered back to Reed and the vampires holding him. His face was pale and terrified, his reddish hair matted to his forehead with sweat. He pleaded with me silently, and I gave him a small nod to reassure him.

I cleared my throat and looked back at Judge Braxton. "If you want me to do this, I need to touch you both. I have more control that way," I said. I'd gained so much control that touching wasn't even necessary, but I wanted to be closer to my paragons, and this was the only way. If my plan failed, then this would be the last time I'd see them, because Braxton would either kill me or imprison me.

The judge adjusted his tie. "Fine. Let's go," he said before holding out his hand to me. I took it with a wince, paling at the feel of his bony hands and tight, cold grip.

We made our way to the paragons, and I felt my eyes mist over with unshed tears at the sight of them. Quade and Render were still passed out, but Hyde was watching us, that crazed smile still on his face, except he wasn't looking at me. He was watching Banner. The maniacal, murderous look on his face was only for the neutralizer.

When we stopped in front of Gritt, I forced my gaze up to meet him in the eye. It took everything in me not to react to the expression on his face. "Don't do this, Dev. Don't take my animals from me."

I winced at the plea in his gruff tone, my eyes tracing over his handsome, feral face and the split lip where someone had hit him. I wanted to reach up and trace my finger over the hard line of his jaw, but I was all too aware of the eyes watching me. "I'm so sorry."

"Dev..."

"You hurt me," I choked out as tears filled my red-lined eyes. I didn't have to fake the emotion. I was heartbroken and terrified, and I knew that no matter how this played out, none of us would ever be the same. My powers curled up within me, churning with my inner turmoil. "You didn't want me,

remember? You didn't care."

I watched Gritt's eyes widen as he stared at me. The last time we saw each other, I'd asked for space. I said I couldn't handle all four paragons being suddenly mated to me. But I wished now that I'd stayed. "Please understand, Gritt. I might have a chance at a normal life if I do what they say," I whispered softly, forcing believability into my tone.

For a moment, I wondered if he saw through me. I wondered if he knew the protectiveness I felt for the men in front of me, the fierce, determined need to rip the chains from their bodies and save them. I hoped Gritt sensed that through our bond. I hoped that he recognized my true intention and played along. We stared at one another for a good few seconds, an impatient Judge Braxton at my side.

Finally, Gritt spat at my feet. "You're an unworthy mate," he sneered before licking his bloodied lip in disdain. My heart dropped. He wasn't acting. He didn't sense my truth. He thought I really would strip him of his animals, just like I'd done to his brother.

I knew how it looked to him. I knew that he saw me as the enemy, the person doing exactly what I swore to never do. I tried to tell him with my eyes that I was on his side, but I couldn't, because he wouldn't even look at me.

"You're a fool for bonding with a Void," Judge Braxton cut in with a roll of his eyes before turning his attention back to me. "Do it. I want all of his animals."

"Fine," I said, my tone lifeless and even.

The judge beamed, not doubting for even a moment. Why would he fear a bite from a dog who'd always eaten out of his hand?

"You might feel weak for a moment." I lied to the scrawny judge.

"Just do it. I'm ready."

Raising my hands, I pressed a finger to his wrist, while cupping my hand around Gritt's arm. Then I lashed my Void out like a whip, and a crack rang through the air. Council members made little noises of surprise, but I ignored every single one of them. With the most control I'd ever had in my life, I directed my Void like a conductor directs his symphony. We were completely in tune with each other, our will in perfect harmony.

Smoke wrapped around Judge Braxton and brushed up against Gritt. As soon as I had it where I wanted it, I focused on my intent. Emilia had been right. It was just like breathing. It had taken me nearly a decade, but I'd

finally stopped fearing my own power. Because Emilia had been right about that too—I wasn't just a Void. And it was time they all learned that.

I watched as Gritt's eyes widened in confusion while my smoke billowed with black. I'd fed from him enough times that he knew exactly what it felt like, and this was not it. But what he didn't know was that, as my mate, I *couldn't* hurt him—couldn't drain him. It was physically impossible. He was my fated match, meant to sustain me and understand a piece of me that only he could—that wild, snarling part of me that wanted to tear apart my enemies.

"It's happening! I can feel the Void!" Judge Braxton exclaimed. My eyes moved over him, noting his excited face and clenched teeth. My power sucked in his necromancer abilities embarrassingly quickly. He thought he was powerful, but he was nothing to my paragons. My paragons, who were all awake now and staring at me with wide eyes. When Gritt realized that I wasn't taking power from him at all, his lip tilted up.

Render flashed his fangs and strained against the chains holding him in place. Gritt hunched over, mimicking the pain that Braxton was experiencing for our captivated audience, then he roared and jerked against his bindings. Little by little, I took all of Judge Braxton's powers while slowly creeping my smoke out to Banner.

When he saw my smoke coming for him, he threw up his neutralizing shield. "Her smoke should be blue, remember?" he yelled in panic.

But he was too late to warn Braxton. The judge's knees gave out, and he fell against the ground with a hard thud. Council members started shouting, and I shoved my power out, filling the entire room with swirling, seething clouds, trapping them in my darkness.

At the same time, my smoke finally sucked the last of the magical curse that was bound to the chains that held Gritt before moving on to the others. Council members were panicked, trying to get to the exits, but I made sure that there was so much smoke that they were blinded by it. Shouts bounced off the walls, and some of them tried to use their powers, but I was already drinking from them, weakening every single one.

Behind me, Judge Braxton tried to stand up, but before he could get back to his feet, Gritt finally broke free of his chains with a roar and shifted into his lion. In the blink of an eye, he launched himself at the judge, mauling him with his bared teeth. I winced as blood splattered across my cheek, but I didn't have time to stop. My mother was screaming at the vampires holding

Reed to do something. But my Void lashed out and fed from them, draining them dry with one punishing gulp. They collapsed in a heap, sending Reed toppling onto the ground beside them.

“Run!” I screamed at my best friend before turning and starting to suck the power from the chains that held the rest of my paragons. I pushed out power to Render at the same time, funneling it into my vampire mate. With my power to bolster his, and the weakened chains, he immediately broke free.

My Void was a mass of destruction, and soon, the shouts of the other council members started to grow fainter as they succumbed. My legs began to tremble, and sweat poured down my face and back. It was too much. I was expending way more energy and power than ever before, but I knew I wasn’t done yet. My smoke fed on them like a plague of locusts.

Quade and Hyde had just gotten free from their chains too when I saw Banner coming for me out of the smoke. Hands raised, his power crashed against mine, trying to neutralize me, snuff me out like a blanket over a flame. But before he could, Hyde was suddenly on him.

Red magic rushed out of Hyde’s palms and slammed into Banner’s body. I watched as it drained him of life. Right before my eyes, Hyde’s magic aged Banner, turning him from a twenty-something super to an emaciated, wrinkled husk, until his body fell to the floor, crumbling in a pile of weakened bones and dried out flesh. Without ever laying a finger on Banner, Hyde had turned him into a corpse.

I moved toward Hyde, but I got cut off by shards of ice shooting in front of me, thrown from a council elemental. Hyde nodded and turned into the smoke, and I looked around, finding Quade breaking the chains off the other kidnapped supernaturals.

Gritt had already finished with Judge Braxton and was attacking another council member who’d tried to throw fireballs at him. Render flashed toward the necro councilman who’d bent over Braxton and was trying to resurrect him, taking care of him by tearing out his throat.

Despite how strong they were, I could feel them all weakening, so I fed all four of my paragons the last bit of strength I had, knowing that they needed it in order to clean out the magic they’d been drugged with and keep the upper hand.

Everything was chaos and darkness, and I just drained and drained and drained from the council members in the room. But the more power I took in, the more I felt myself slipping into the darkness. The hunger was angry and

volatile. It didn't want to stop until they were all dead. I was slowly losing hold of myself, and in its place, the Void was taking over.

"Devicka!" My mother screamed, her voice hoarse as she threw her hands up to block Render. He'd surged forward and was holding her by her neck, but I didn't care. I wanted her to pay. I wanted them all to pay.

I was filled to the brim. One by one, the council members dropped, and the sound of their screams tapered off. I left behind empty shells of humanity in my wake. I wanted more. Needed more. Craved it all.

I fell to my knees, unable to stay upright anymore, but I didn't even feel the impact.

"Devicka, you have to stop. You have to come back," Hyde said in a calm voice before reaching out to grab my wrist. Smoke started circling around his body, but it didn't drain him. My Void would never hurt its mate.

"I can't come back. I knew I wouldn't," I replied in a grave tone, my blonde hair whipping around me at the force of my power. The more I took, the more I lost myself. I was dying, and I didn't even care. The Void was all that mattered. The safety of my mates and Reed had been my only objective.

"Devicka," Quade shouted. But I didn't feel like Devicka anymore. Devicka had been weak for too long. Unloved. Unwanted. She'd let me *starve*. No, being the Void was better. The Void could take care of everyone and break the chains of emotions.

"Don't say that name," a dark voice rose from my chest. It felt warm. It felt *right*.

"Devicka, baby, please stop. Please come back to us," Quade whispered in my ear as Hyde started blowing red mist all over me. I knew that the threat was gone. There was no one left. But still, my smoke searched. It reached. It rose out of me like a cloud from an atom bomb.

"What's wrong with her?" a timid voice said from behind me. I recognized that, it was a soft reminder of who I wanted to be. No. No, I didn't want that. "Dev? It's Reed. I'm safe now," he said again. "You can stop...whatever this is."

I turned around, and Quade touched my arm. I flinched at the touch before throwing him back with a hand to his chest. I didn't even react when his back slammed into the wall and his body crumbled to the ground in a heap of limbs and defeat. Reed gave me a terrified once-over as more red mist filled my vision, coaxing me back.

"Devicka is gone," I whispered, though it didn't feel as authentic this

time.

“Why aren’t your powers working?” Render asked Hyde, whose face was twisted in pain. “You should be bringing her back.”

“She’s too strong,” Hyde gritted. “She’s too far lost to the Void.”

I took another step toward Reed, the unfamiliar friendship pulling at something deeper within me. Gritt’s lion pounced between us to protect him, making my Void lash out in anger. I was too powerful. I *was* power. We were one and the same.

My Void wrapped around the lion like a whip and tossed him away as I marched closer to my best friend. “Reed?” I asked in a small voice, not quite sure why I felt so dizzy or angry or...full.

“Devicka, you saved me. Stop...whatever it is you’re doing, just stop,” he pleaded. I closed my eyes, feeling the overwhelming sense of power. It didn’t feel like nothing anymore, it felt like toxic turmoil boiling me up from the inside out, changing me. I only had a few moments of clarity, but that was all I needed. My eyes widened in horror. A tear fell down my cheek.

Whirling around, I stretched my palms out, looking at my mates. Then I took all the power inside of me and fed it into my bonded. One last gift. They told me I’d always take, but this time I’d give. This time I’d give it *all*.

I poured out every drop. My body coiled in pain, each muscle tensing on painful exhales. I gave them every last ounce of power from the council members, the neutralizer, and lastly...myself. I poured into them until I wasn’t even a cup anymore.

I poured until I wasn’t *the Void* anymore. I funneled the last of myself until the world was black and the Void was dead.

Chapter 27



I WAS MOVING. I knew that much. Every muscle, every nerve in my body had a hollow achiness to it that was making me feel sick. People were talking, but I couldn't make out what they were saying. I wanted to fall back into oblivion, but the jarring movement wouldn't let me.

When I opened my eyes, I saw a tear-stricken Reed shaking my shoulders, screaming at me to wake up. It took me a moment to orient myself. I didn't feel...like myself. I didn't feel whole. Something was wrong. Reed's sobs sounded as if they were traveling down a tunnel, echoing off the walls and bouncing against my ears.

"What's happening?" I finally croaked out as Reed wiped snot from his nose. I'd noticed that we were in a moving car, night shadows passing by in the window.

"Fuck, I'm so glad you're awake!" he sobbed before wrapping his shaking arms around me. Reed smelled like blood and wine.

I looked at him, but I felt...empty. Something wasn't right. I patted myself down, touching the soft material of the dress someone had put me in with a wince. It was like a part of me was missing. Where was I? What happened?

I looked up to see who was driving while Reed cried against my neck, surprised to see that it was Render weaving through the traffic at frantic speeds. "What's going on?" I asked him. He looked at me through the rearview mirror with sad eyes as I clutched the leather seats.

"The vamp is taking us away. You...you drained them all," Reed whispered in answer while pulling away from me.

I blinked, trying to clear the webs in my head. "What?"

And then the pieces fell into place, and my memory started knitting together. I remembered the dinner party, the unconscious supers. My

paragons. I remembered Banner's betrayal and my mother's greed. I remembered what I did. I still felt the residual need buzzing under my skin. I took them all. I took all their powers. And I'd do it again.

"So, you know now?" I asked Reed tentatively while keeping my eyes on Render. He honked the horn at a car in his way before driving on the shoulder of the road to get around it.

"The details are fuzzy, but I get the gist. Right now, we're headed to a private airport to get the hell out of here while your harem of hotties smooths things over."

Smooths things over? *Oh shit.*

I looked back at Render again. Why couldn't I feel the pull to him? It was like nothing was there anymore. "Render?" I asked in a small voice. I needed to hear him talk. Needed to know he was okay. A headlight flashed through the windshield, and I noticed that he was gripping the steering wheel so tightly it looked like it would break. "Render, what's going on?" I asked again.

My voice was unsure as I stared at him from the backseat of whatever car we were in. I had so many questions, but most of all I had doubts. The council finally turned me into the monster I was afraid of. They'd wanted to use me to make them stronger, and in the end, they were left with nothing. And for some reason, it felt like I was left with nothing, too. Did my paragons hate me now? Did they hate me for what I was capable of?

"What about my mom?" I asked, not sure I wanted to hear the answer.

"She's fine. Bitching about you. God, Devi, I had no idea how awful she was," Reed said, patting my knee. I squeezed my eyes shut and tried to chase away the hurt. My own mother sold me out and had been willing to steal from Quade to get powers again. She'd been willing to use me, to endanger me, her own daughter.

"We're almost there," Render said in a solemn tone, speaking for the first time. He turned right off the shadowed street we were on. The moment his tires went from gravel to pavement, I felt my heart plummet to my stomach. "Where are we going?" I asked.

Once again, he didn't answer me directly. I felt like I was going to be sick. It wasn't until he parked and opened the driver's side door that I realized there was finality in the air. I got out of the car and took quick steps over to him. He hadn't said much of anything during the drive, and his silence had anxiety coiling up in me like a snake.

“Render?” I called out.

He started pulling bags out of the trunk, his grip strong on the handle and his forearm flexed. He didn’t even look my way when I called his name, so I touched his arm to try and get his attention. The contact was like a zap of electricity. The moment our skin connected, smoke started to pour from his mouth and fingertips. His skin buzzed, and his fangs elongated. I snapped my hand back in shock.

“What the fuck?” I asked as the remnants of the wispy smoke disappeared. “Was that—”

“You transferred the Void to us,” Render explained in a dark voice without looking me in the eye. “I don’t know how you did it, but I can feel it inside of me.” He patted his chest to emphasize the point, and pain like shards of metal pierced my skin.

Oh gods. No.

I reached up for my chest, noting that my amulet was gone.

And I didn’t feel hungry.

I felt...nothing.

I reached out to touch him again, but he pulled out of my reach. I felt sick to my stomach, grief over my loss of identity battled with my guilt for what I’d done.

My entire life, I’d hated my powers. I’d cursed who I was and longed for a way out, hoped for an opportunity to feel normal and experience life with Reed. But now that it was gone, regret bloomed in my chest. How could I miss something I’d always hated?

Looking at Render, I knew how. The paragons had changed the course of my life, and it led me to finally accepting what I was. I’d learned not to fear it but respect it. But just when I’d come to terms with it all, it was gone.

My eyes moved across the pavement, and I saw we were on a tarmac. A flight crew was getting a small jet plane ready in the distance. Reed gave me a sad smile before walking over to it, giving us a bit of privacy as I processed the tumultuous feelings within me.

“I’m so sorry. I never meant to do this to you,” I whispered to Render as cool tears trailed down my cheeks. He hated me for cursing him with the Void, and my heart broke inside my chest. “It has to be reversible, right?”

Maybe Hyde could wake up Emilia again. Maybe she could teach me how to fix this. I’d never forgive myself if I couldn’t.

Render blew out a breath. “We don’t have time to figure it out. Right

now, I need to get you on that plane and out of here before every supernatural in the fucking world finds you and tries to kill you. The entire council wants retribution, Devicka. The others stayed behind to try to get a handle on the situation, but...you can't stay."

More tears filled my eyes, and I shook my head, hating that this was my new reality. "No, no, no. This can't be happening," I cried while wrapping my arms around myself. How had things gone south so quickly? My entire body folded in on itself. *This can't be happening.* I'd drained myself of my own power, and I'd given it to the ones who would never forgive me.

"Your dad arranged for you and Reed to stay on one of his private islands," Render explained before adjusting the handle on a suitcase.

My dad knew about this?

"I had to do it," I pleaded. "They wanted me to give them too much power. I couldn't let that happen. And I couldn't hurt any of you. I was just trying to keep you safe. Why won't you just look at me?" I demanded, my voice sharp with panic.

Render finally turned to face me, a devastated look on his face. I felt his pain and his anger. I'd ruined him.

"Render, I'm so sorry. You have to understand. I never meant for this to happen. I swear to you, I'll figure out how to take it back. I can't eve—"

He ground his teeth together. "You think I fucking care?" he yelled as more smoke escaped him in angry waves. He looked terrifying. Was that how I'd looked? "You think I give two fucks about this?" he repeated, and I flinched, reeling from the anger in his voice. I knew the bond had been fragile, but now it was gone completely, emptied out of me right alongside my power. I felt a sadness deep in my bones that wouldn't quit. All this time, fighting the inevitable led me to wanting him—wanting *them*. And just like everything else in my life, the Void was going to rip it away.

"I know, I know," I said, looking down at my feet. "I was just trying to make you strong. I didn't mean to transfer the Void to you, but I was barely in control. I fucked up, and I'm so damn sorry. I didn't mean for it to happen." I guess I was lucky he'd even been willing to get me out of there before the council members got their hands on me. "I understand you hate me for making you a Void," I said in a small voice. "I'll go."

I turned to walk away, heading for the plane. Every step hurt. Every inch I went further away from him had pieces of my heart falling and shattering to the ground. But before I could even make it three steps, Render grabbed me

and spun me around.

And then his lips crashed down on mine.

It was a short, searing kiss that tasted like ash. There was no pulling pleasure from our bond. No dynamite attraction fueled by magic and unexplainable tension. It was raw. It was haunting. It was *devastating*.

He pulled back the moment my knees started to go weak. His Void was pulling at my life force, a sensation I didn't even know was possible, considering I was human now.

He looked down at me with that intense way of his. "Devicka Cainson, I'd take the Void a thousand times over to keep you safe. I'd burn down the whole fucking council, too. But I won't let you leave thinking I hate you. Because right now, the person I might possibly be falling in love with is about to get on a plane to the middle of nowhere, and I don't know when I'll see her again," he whispered while touching his forehead to mine and clutching my cheeks. Soft tears gathered in his gray-blue eyes, his stern expression catching them as they fell.

"Render, I..." I didn't know what to say. His declaration had been liberating but also felt like a delayed kick to the gut. How cruel was fate to give them to me just to take them away when we finally got past the hate and distrust?

"COME WITH ME," I pleaded, my hands curled over his arms.

"I can't. I want to, but I can't. We'll come for you. When it's safe."

"But—"

"Get on the plane, Devicka. Before I do something stupid like kiss you again and say fuck the rest of the world. I'm a selfish bastard, but not when it comes to this. I'd rather know you're safe than know you're mine."

Without warning, he shoved the suitcase into my hands, making me stumble slightly, and walked back toward the front of the car, slipping into the driver's seat like he hadn't just broken and filled my heart at the same time.

I walked over to his rolled down window. "Can you tell the others that I'm sorry? Tell them..." I wanted to declare how I was feeling, spill my heart out on the airport runway like a loser, but no words could really measure up.

"They know," he said quietly, his eyes on the tarmac ahead. "We will come get you once it's safe. Go, Devicka."

I took one last lingering look at him. I memorized the angular shape of his

face. His sharp jaw. The haunted look in his eyes. Then I turned and walked away. And I left my heart behind.

Chapter 28



TWO MONTHS LATER.

MY FINGERS DUG into the hard rock, gripping the grooves as my feet landed on another shelf of the mountain. Sweat poured down my face as the wind whipped my pale blonde hair around me. I'd been climbing every day since arriving on this damn island. It was the only thing that made my restless soul feel at ease.

I reached for the next groove while situating my feet. I didn't have a harness. I knew it was reckless, but I couldn't stand the thing. I just wanted to feel free. I was still half risk demon, after all.

Clouds overhead cast shadows on the side of the mountain, and I could hear the waves of the ocean down below. One slip could send me plummeting to its depths. Normally, a risk like this would send my entire body into bliss. But not anymore. It was a dull exhilaration.

Since arriving on the island, Dad had worked overtime to get me to feel again. It was the most time we'd spent together in the last decade. Bike races through the curved road circling the island. Cliff diving off into stormy waves. Reed didn't understand my need to feel the adrenaline, and had to purposely clamp a hand over his mouth every time I took on a new risk.

Two months.

Two damn months of waiting without word.

Two damn months without my bonded— Well, they weren't my bonded anymore. Without my Void, the magic binding us together had disappeared too. The doubts inside of me kept piling up. What if as time went by, they realized that they didn't want me anymore now that my power was gone?

Maybe the only thing that had been pulling them to me was my magic and nothing else. Now that I was powerless, maybe the attraction had disappeared for them. They might have moved on, agreed to leave me behind on this island for the rest of my life.

My hope that I'd see them soon had dissolved into a sadness I couldn't cope with. I missed them. I still wanted them. The connection *I* felt toward them wasn't just based on power. Somehow, I'd come to care for them apart from that. But it was too fucking late, and they didn't feel the same.

My foot slipped at the next step, but I dug my toes in, keeping my weight balanced on the lip of the rock and braced my palms on the nearest handheld. The wind froze the tips of my ears and nose. My nails were all jagged, my fingers calloused. It was fitting, considering that was how my heart felt.

By the time I reached the top of the mountain and hauled myself over, my lungs were working overtime to get me much needed air. I laid back on the hard, rocky peak, letting my eyes squint up at the dying light.

"This is the fifth time this week," a sudden voice said. I would've flinched if I hadn't gotten used to my dad always popping up lately wherever I was.

I sat up, dragging my jellied legs under me. "I might not have supernatural powers anymore, but I'm still your kid," I told him, yanking out my hair tie and brushing out the tangles with my fingers before tying it back again.

My dad looked completely out of place up here on the mountaintop with his Armani suit and slicked back hair. But to my surprise, he sat down on a rock next to me, even if he did look at the dust with a bit of distaste.

"This isn't because of your risk blood, daughter," he said, his eyes scanning the view. We were so high up that I'd passed some clouds along the way.

"I don't know, I'd say this was a pretty big risk," I said dryly as I pulled the water bottle from my pack and drank from it generously.

He looked at me out of the corner of his eye. "Aren't you going to ask me?"

I swallowed hard, but the water turned to rocks in my throat. "Tell me," I said, my voice barely loud enough over the wind.

"The transition went well. Better than I expected, but the paragons planned for everything, it seems. They knew where they needed to gain loyalty, and they did it. Their smear campaign against the old council

members worked. The four of them took their final positions today.”

I felt a mix of pride and despair at hearing that. Since I’d been here, my dad had kept me up-to-date on what they’d been doing. Two months was all it had taken to calm down the masses and get them on their side. The paragons had revealed what Judge Braxton and the council members had planned to do with amassing power. Nobody took kindly to that. Supers didn’t like hearing that their leaders were planning on draining the powers of others to take for themselves. Now, the paragons weren’t paragons anymore; they were the council members. Judge Braxton was dead, the ex-council members had been exiled to a human life, and I was still here, clinging to a rocky reality.

“That’s...good,” I choked out, though it sounded more like a question.

That just confirmed the doubts I’d been having. Because if everything was settled, that meant that they really had left me here. They didn’t plan to come back at all. And why would they? Without the bond of our powers, they’d have no desire to come for me.

“Don’t look so sad, Devi,” he chided. He knew I was devastated by the broken bond, but talking guy problems with my dad wasn’t necessarily something I wanted to do, no matter how free-spirited he was.

“I like being here,” I quickly amended. “I wish...I wish I could have grown up with you like this.”

He didn’t say anything to that. “Your mother called. Again.” Dad slapped at a bug buzzing by his face with disdain, likely envisioning my mother’s face where his palm connected. “She begged me to have you call her.”

“I want nothing to do with that woman,” I seethed. Mother had willingly given me up. She used my desire for love as a way to manipulate me. If I never saw her again, it would be too soon.

“Your Uncle Wrath would be so proud,” Dad beamed.

We stared out over the ocean for a few more moments in contemplative silence. In many ways, I now had everything that I had always wanted. My father was spending a lot of time with me. I was on a beautiful island with all the freedom I’d always wanted. And my best friend was with me, even if he still didn’t quite understand my nature.

But it still felt wrong. I still felt this hollow loss of my identity and a blistering sense of grief. I missed the paragons. And the most surprising reality of it all was that I missed my Void, too.

“Devi, I’m...I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you,” Dad suddenly choked out

with a wince, sounding like the apology physically hurt him. Demons struggled with empathy and remorse, and hearing a genuine apology stream from his pursed lips surprised me.

“It wasn’t your fault. I just...I miss them, you know? I wish...things had gone down differently.”

Dad nodded in understanding before quickly standing back up. “Go back down to the main house. Let’s maybe try to call them?”

I shook my head. “Maybe another time.” I didn’t want to be the girl that chased after things that didn’t want her anymore. I’d spent my entire life chasing my mother’s love. Society’s acceptance. Control of my power. All of it had led to heartbreak.

“We still meeting up later? I want to see you wrestle that alligator by the lagoon,” I joked, trying to push back my sadness.

Dad chuckled. “Sounds like fun. Maybe Reed could record it. I’ve been wanting to explore this YouTube thing more. Could be good for business,” he added. “Anyway, I’ll be back later. There’s a poker run going on and I want to see how many humans I can get to bet their cars.”

I laughed, even though the amusement felt empty. With a flash, Dad disappeared, and I walked over to the edge to start making my way back down. I free climbed down the same way I’d gone up—with my fingers slipping into every crevice I could grab as I struggled to hold on. It was a lot like my life.

When I was about halfway down, a bird passed overhead, its shadow catching my eye. I looked up as it landed on a spot right above me, its yellow talons digging into the craggy shelf. It cocked its head at me, its curved beak snapping slightly at the air. “Don’t judge me,” I told it as I looked down to choose where to land my next step. “I don’t have wings like you.”

With one foot extended on the cleft, I slowly lowered my other foot down. But as soon as it made contact, the rock chipped away from my weight. I scrambled to keep purchase, but more of the rock gave way beneath my other foot as well. My hands suddenly held all the weight of me, my feet kicking and scraping against the rock, trying to find a new ledge, but it was no use.

I fell with a scream in my throat and my breath in the wind. And people were full of shit, because my life didn’t flash before my eyes as I plummeted to my death. The only thing my mind was full of was *oh shit, oh shit, oh fucking shit!*

The bird leapt off the mountainside and dive bombed me like I was a treat someone had thrown in the air. But as it passed directly overhead, it morphed—into a small, pony-sized, motherfucking dragon.

One second, I was screaming and staring wide-eyed at the bird-dragon above me, and the next, the dragon had sped down, and I was landing on its hard, scaly back.

My body nearly rolled off, but I managed to right myself and wrap my arms around its neck, holding on for dear life. It was like riding an awkward, miniature horse with wings. And it was so bright pink that it practically glowed.

I couldn't stop my terrified screaming until we landed on the ground, and the dragon obviously had a hard time carrying my weight, because it wasn't a pretty landing. I went flying off its back, landing on the grass with the breath knocked out of me.

Stunned, it took me a few seconds before I could pull myself up, and when I did, I watched the pretty little dragon morph into none other than a buck ass naked Gritt Boltwright.

“Your third animal is a pink miniature dragon?”

The wild, blond-haired shifter stalked over to me, naked as the day he was born. I tried not to look at his dick, but it was swinging so effectively between his legs, I couldn't help it.

“It's salmon-colored. Not *pink*,” he scowled.

This whole thing was so bizarre I couldn't help but laugh. “Dude, it was cotton candy, neon nail polish, hand me a rose hot pink.”

He stopped just a foot away from me, his height towering over me and his muscles bunched with a layer of sheen over the tanned skin. “And nothing about me is *miniature*,” he said, cocking a thick eyebrow.

My smile widened as my eyes darted down to the space between his legs again. He was right about that. “I think it's cute you're a little pink dragon.”

He growled, but the effect was lost when I saw the corner of his lips twitch. “If you tell the others, I'll spank your ass.”

I think that was the best threat I'd ever received.

The joy I felt at seeing him after so long faded slowly, my smile falling as I regarded his handsome face. He was here. He'd just saved my dumbass life. And he was looking at me not with hate or frustration but with longing.

“Wh-what are you doing here?” I asked with a small half smile, not sure what to make of all of this.

Naturally, Gritt didn't just answer me, he picked me up in one fell swoop, and I had to wrap my legs around his waist to keep steady, his bobbing cock pressing against my yoga pants. "I'm here for what's *mine*," he grunted before slamming his lips against me.

I immediately threaded my hands through his long hair and responded to his touch with an enthusiastic moan. The moment my mouth parted, he snaked his tongue along mine while gripping my back with his strong hands. I had so many questions, so many doubts. I couldn't believe he was here. All I wanted was to feel Gritt against my body, clutching me tight, and never let go again.

"Devicka," he said my name softly with reverence. A tingling sensation started to kiss at my skin. I opened my eyes as his hands traveled to cup my ass, squeezing me tightly. And then I saw it. Smoke. White smoke was *everywhere*.

"Gritt, what's happening?" I asked. I tried to pull away, but his firm grip on me stopped me in my tracks.

He trailed his tongue along my neck then nibbled on my ear. It felt like I was growing full, with pleasure so intense that my blood pressure skyrocketed as I felt the Void rush into me. "Oh *fuck*," I whimpered.

Was this what it was like when I'd fed from him? It felt so fucking *good*, like every vein in my body was pumping with blood. I was soaked with heat, my eyes rolling back as my entire body went wild with something far better than any orgasm.

Gritt sucked in a breath and then quickly moved to sit down as the smoke disappeared, carrying me with him as he crouched low and landed on the dirt. "What just happened?" I asked, my chest rising and falling quickly. I could feel a pulsing energy within me. It wasn't nearly as strong as before, but it was there.

Gritt coughed before stroking my cheek, his green eyes taking in my full appearance. There was a tether there between us, a connection that I hadn't felt since the night with the council members. "I had a piece of you," he said before removing his hand from my cheek to pat his chest. "I carried you with me. I felt how...pure you are. Sensed the struggles you've carried alone your entire life. I could feel your pain. Your hunger. Your love."

My eyes watered at the reverent way he spoke to me, and I had to wipe away the moisture collecting there. "Gritt, I thought you didn't want me anymore because of the broken bond."

His shook his head. "It's not broken, Dev. Even without your magic, we still feel it."

I was too afraid to believe him. "But the Void—"

"Was the best gift anyone has ever given me," he interrupted. "It helped me realize what I already knew. You, Devicka Cainson, are a very worthy, beautiful, smart, compassionate mate. And I would be a damn fool to give that up."

My tears were fully flowing now because this was Gritt, and he didn't use words lightly. I knew that if he'd willingly said them, then he'd meant them. I wrapped my arms around him for a hug, squeezing him tight as I cried quietly against his neck. I'd never felt more treasured or loved. "Gritt," I began. "I don't know what to say." I shifted my hips a little, forgetting that he was still very naked beneath me. He let out a groan.

"It...physically pains me to do this," he said through clenched teeth. "I want nothing more than to fuck you right here and now, drive my dick so far into you, you never have to doubt me again. But..."

"But what?" I asked when he didn't continue.

"But the others are waiting, and we had a long talk about sharing. None of us are allowed to fuck you until we're all together and you've gotten all of your Void back." I smiled at him, twirling my finger in his hair. My heart leapt at knowing that I was going to have all my pieces back. My paragon and my Void.

"But what about what *I* want?" I asked with a coy smile.

He made a pained noise. "You're killing me, babe. Legitimately killing me." Gritt stood up, gently guiding me off him before taking three steps back. He looked like a spooked horse about to flee. "You should go before I break my promise. Gods, you look so good." My eyes raked up and down his cock, which was fully hard and throbbing with need.

"Are you sure? I think we have time..."

Before the suggestion even left my lips, he fled, calling at me over his shoulder as he went. "Hurry up and find the others, Devicka. The second you have your Void back, you're *mine*."

Chapter 29



I HAD a necromancer in my bed and an undead mouse eating my chocolate.

I paused in my doorway, letting my eyes run over the tan, white-haired zombie king where he was spread out over my blankets. He had on bright green skinny jeans and a skull t-shirt, and his silver eyes were doing their own perusal of me with appreciation, despite the fact that I probably looked like a wind-whipped mess in only yoga pants and a sports bra.

“You’re really here,” I said from my spot in the middle of the threshold.

I half wondered as I ran back to this little cabin on the beach if I’d actually fallen off the mountain and had just hallucinated the whole Gritt-saving-me-as-a-pink-dragon thing.

I pinched my arm just to be sure, but there Hyde was, looking perfectly beautiful, his mouth tipped up in a smirk.

“Here is such a relative term,” Hyde mused, his hands perched behind his head. “Here could mean lots of things. Like here in this world, or here in this space in time or—”

“Here in my bedroom.”

His lips quirked up at my interruption, and he slowly sat up, his body moving like a gentle wave of water. “Or here in your bedroom,” he agreed with a nod.

I slowly padded forward. “Why are you here in my bedroom?” I asked quietly.

“Because we finally could be.”

I turned around at the sudden voice and gasped to find Render *right* behind me. His chest pressed against my back, and his plush lips hooked over the curve of my ear as his tongue darted out to lick it. I shivered, my eyes

fluttering closed, and when I blinked them open again, Quade was standing right in front of me, Hyde had gotten off the bed and stood at my side, and I was in the middle of a three-man sandwich.

My eyes filled with more tears, but I didn't bother to try to hold them back. "Don't cry," Quade whispered, raising his hand to cup my cheek.

"I don't understand why you're suddenly all here. I haven't heard anything from you. I thought...I thought you changed your minds."

The guys exchanged a look, and then Gritt joined us in the room, his hair sopping wet, but wearing a new pair of pants. He looked like he'd taken a dive into the ocean water to cool himself down.

"We had to keep you safe. We had to handle things at home, but we weren't even sure if we'd ever be able to come for you. If things went badly... Well, we couldn't risk being in contact with you or coming to see you and having someone track us to you. We weren't sure how the public was going to react. We had to prepare for every possibility," Render explained. "We've been in contact with your father the whole time."

This news shocked me, and I watched him with disbelieving eyes.

Quade picked up on Render's explanation. "But we had press conferences. Told everyone what happened. They finally named us as the council leaders, and we've made sure the public doesn't blame you for what happened. Headmaster Torne agreed to become the interim council judge until we can find someone else who we trust for the position. We finally have all the pieces together so you can come home."

The word "home" made my stomach flutter. "And my mother?" I asked him, curious to see how he'd taken her betrayal.

His jaw clenched. "Gone. Exiled with the rest."

I had to stop myself from snorting. I'm sure she *loved* that.

"We handled everything, and today when we took our positions, we told them that the only reason they still had their powers and weren't being lorded over by Judge Braxton was because of you."

My eyes widened. "What?"

Render nodded. "It was just a matter of time. Judge Braxton planned to use you to suck hundreds of supers dry. Other supers who'd worked for him came forward and corroborated our story."

I shook my head, unable to believe what they were telling me.

"Some assholes still don't like you, but a hell of a lot of them are grateful," Gritt said. "So it's finally safe for you to come back."

“And, after tracking down some more Void corpses, which are ridiculously difficult to find, by the way,” Hyde interjected. “I managed to learn that by giving us your Void, we could give it back. And our mate bonds will return with it.”

“I already gave mine back,” Gritt said smugly.

Render sighed in exasperation. “We were supposed to do it together.”

Gritt rolled his eyes. “You shitheads want to do *everything* together. I got to save her ass from falling off a mountain, so I decided to give her a piece of the Void back early without you assholes. Get over it.”

Render muttered something, but Quade cocked a dark brow at me. “You fell off a mountain?”

I shrugged sheepishly. “I slipped.”

Quade’s hands reached out to grip my hips and drag me against his body. “No more doing dangerous shit until you’re immortal again, okay?”

“Yeah, let’s take care of that right now before she decides to go swimming with the sharks,” Hyde put in. I didn’t feel like it was the appropriate time to tell him that I already did that last week.

“Are you sure this will work?”

“Yep,” they all answered cockily.

I bounced on the balls of my feet, looking around at everyone with a smirk. “So, uh, how do you want to do this thang?” I asked before awkwardly flipping them finger guns.

Finger. Fucking. *Guns*.

I wanted to die of embarrassment.

Luckily, no one commented on my idiocy, because Hyde spun around in a ridiculous dance move, putting the attention back on him. “Beauty before brutes, and I’m way fucking prettier than these guys,” he said with a wink before wrapping his arms around me and tugging me close.

He licked my collar bone, and a shiver of pleasure pulsed out of me as he nibbled on my skin. He traced patterns of swirls along my neck before trailing up to my lips. I leaned forward to kiss him, wrapping my arms around his neck as I did. Unlike with Gritt, the Void came out of Hyde like a soft caress, tickling my skin as he licked my bottom lip. The smoke turned white, and he poured power into me like a decadent, savory treat. He moved slowly, forcing me to pace myself with the pull growing between us. Once the last bit of smoke entered my mouth, I shivered with delight, once again feeling like a piece of myself had returned.

“I missed you,” he whispered against my lips.

“I missed you, too.”

A strong arm turned me around, but Hyde stayed at my back, his lips brushing along my neck as Render pulled me in next. “You going to bite me, vamp?” I teased, the meaningful moment from our tearful goodbye ringing in my memory.

Rolling his eyes, Render leaned in close, hovering his lips over mine with teasing intent. There was just a millimeter of space between us, both hovering between a kiss I knew would solidify our bond. “You going to kiss me, Void?” he asked in a husky voice. It was all the permission I needed.

Leaning up to close the distance, I threaded our lips together in a blinding twist of passion while Hyde rubbed his hands up and down my arms. This time, power lashed out at me with a snap, more white smoke flooding my body so fiercely I had to hold onto Render to keep steady. It was so fast I didn’t have time to orient myself.

“Fuck, I’m so happy to be rid of that. One crippling sense of hunger was enough,” Render replied. I smiled against him, expecting him to hand me over to Quade for the last bit of my gifts. I was feeling almost myself. The vast nothingness settled in my bones with a resounding sigh.

But instead of pulling away, Render cupped my neck with his large hand and pulled me close. I watched in awe as his long fangs descended, and he sank his teeth into the plush skin above my cleavage.

Pleasure like a tidal wave soared through me as his venom entered my bloodstream. I was right on the edge, ready to melt between him and Hyde. And then, just as quickly as he’d fed me back my powers, he groaned as he swallowed a mouthful of me and then pulled away. He licked the wound, sealing it shut with a chuckle as I whimpered at the loss of contact.

“I’ve been craving you for two godsdamned months,” he admitted, his tone now husky with a different kind of hunger.

I swallowed hard, my face flushed and my breathing quick. I turned to Quade next, my eyes hooded with the new influx of my powers. I was turned on, and I felt that familiar buzzing and pull between the five of us that I’d been missing.

“Devicka,” Quade murmured before yanking me out of Hyde and Render’s reach. I fell forward, crashing into his chest. “Once this is done, you realize I’m never letting you go again, right?” he asked while lifting his hands up my sides, pushing my shirt up as he grazed my rib cage.

“I sure hope not,” I whispered.

His kiss was like shutting a door. It was final. Determined. Delicate but forceful all at once. His lips moved like a promise, sealing our bond together with trust and desire. The Void flowed into me like a long-lost lover, burrowing itself into my soul, like it was happy to be home. And for the first time in my life, I was thankful for my power. I was thankful that it brought me to them.

The last of the Void fed back into me, and I breathed it in, welcoming it like an old friend. I felt complete. I felt like *me*. The Void wasn't my weakness. It was my strength. It just took me awhile to realize it.

All four guys closed in on me with hunger and pleasure in their expressions. Green eyes, silver, blue-gray, brown. They surrounded me like I was the center of their universe, and they couldn't resist the way I brought them into my gravity.

I don't know who touched me first. One second, the sexual tension and need held us in a thick pause, and the next, that pause snapped like a string, and they were on me. I was lifted up in the air by Gritt, and Quade tugged my pants and panties down in one swoop, taking my shoes and socks with it. Like a choreographed dance, Gritt turned and lowered me, and then Render was ripping my sports bra clear down the middle at the back. I gasped as my breasts were bared, and then I was totally nude at their center, and I couldn't wait a single second longer to be touched.

“I need you. All of you.”

I loved knowing that I was the reason they were hard and wanting. That I had put that hunger in their expressions. Just like that, I felt their bonds inside of me again, and my heart soared, adding to the feeling of rightness.

“Fuck yes,” Render said, and then his fangs were on me again, right at that sweet spot on my neck, making my head loll to the side in a grip of pleasure and snap of pain.

I was lifted up again, this time by Quade, and I felt his scratchy jaw rub against my cheek. “We're going to worship you, Devi,” he whispered hungrily in my ear.

I couldn't reply because Hyde had stripped down completely and was kneeling in front of me. Quade lifted my thighs, and with Render's help, my bent legs were propped over Hyde's shoulders so that his face was right at my core.

“Hyde,” I begged. I was so damn wet, and when Quade started fondling

my breasts, I thought I was going to combust if I wasn't touched where I needed it most.

But instead of moving to where I wanted him, Hyde just continued to look at my swollen cunt, his silver eyes lit up with excitement. "I believe this is the best view I've seen all my life. And that's saying something, considering I once watched a two-mouthed hooker pucker up for an ex-rocker zombie. The things she could do..."

I yanked on his white hair and shoved his face toward my needy center. "Stop talking about zombies getting blowjobs and make me come."

He chuckled and leaned in, allowing me to feel the vibrations of his amusement right on my clit as his hands gripped my thighs. "Our mate knows what she wants."

Then he finally leaned in and blew a breath of red magic right at my core.

I came on the spot.

My head was thrown back against Quade, and my orgasm tore through me before Hyde even touched me. His tongue flicked over my clit, prolonging my pleasure, more of his red, nerve-awakening magic soaking into me. It was one of those perfect orgasms that just seemed to go on and on and on.

"Share. You got your orgasm already," Gritt said gruffly, and then I was spun around by Quade, and it was my naked shifter who apparently wanted a turn. He was gorgeous. Rough, masculine, muscular, and tanned. The sight of him made my mouth water.

I wasn't even down from my peak yet when Gritt tugged on my hips and lined me up with his huge, needy erection. His eyes flashed with animal intent. "If I don't get inside of you now, I'm going to shift and tear apart this whole damn house."

"Then get inside me."

That was all the encouragement he needed. With Quade's help, I was lifted to the perfect height, and then Gritt was slamming into me.

I cried out at the sudden fullness as he stretched me out, my eyes closed tight. "No," he said, his hand coming up to pinch my chin and bring my face back down. "Look. I want you to see my cock stretching you out. I want you to see me claiming this pussy."

I swallowed at his dirty words and looked down at the place we were joined. Satisfied that he had my full attention, he pulled out all the way, leaving me empty, and then slammed all the way back in again. "Oh gods," I

cried, my voice rising to a new pitch.

“Fucking beautiful.”

At the sound of Render’s voice, I looked over and saw that he and Hyde were both naked now too, stroking themselves on either side of me. Render was pale with a line of dark hair trailing from below his belly button down to his crotch. Hyde’s skin was dark and smooth, and both of them had lean, toned bodies with abs that I wanted to lick.

I reached my hands out to grasp their cocks in each hand, earning guttural groans in return. They were thick and hot, and Render was leaking precum that I used to rub over his head.

Quade was still working his magic on my breasts and helping to support me as Gritt continued to move in and out, and I realized that his left hand was ice cold, while his right was fiery hot. The duality of the temperatures had me writhing and arching against him, my breasts a shock of hot and cold, my nipples pebbling painfully and seeking more.

Render was all too happy to step in. His mouth closed around my nipple, and his fangs joined in. More of his blissful venom pumped into me, right there on my breast where my nerves were already alight with sensation.

And then Gritt was coming with a roar, and I felt hot spurts of cum coat inside of me like a balm of erotic intent. “Now your body remembers that it’s mine,” he said before slipping out of me. His seed dripped down my thighs as Quade set me down, but I was so godsdamned horny that the sight only excited me more. I didn’t wait for any of my mates to move me next. I took control and twirled around, shoving Quade onto the bed. He fell back with ease. “Take off your clothes.”

He smirked. “I like it when you’re bossy, Dev.”

He kicked off his shoes and reached down to pull his shirt off, revealing his chiseled chest with a V that pointed down to his long, thick length. I yanked off his pants like a madwoman, and as soon as he was naked, I climbed on the bed with him and sat down on his dick. His head tipped back on the mattress, and his hands dug into the blankets. “Fuck, Dev.”

Hands gripped my hips, and then someone was pressing down on my back. I lowered my head and turned to the side, and Hyde was there to meet me. I opened my mouth to him, taking his cock into my mouth. I sucked and licked, taking him down as far as I could, the head hitting the back of my throat as I bobbed.

“Godsdammit, that’s the spot.”

I chuckled around his cock, earning me a groan.

“You’re the most gorgeous thing I’ve ever seen,” Render said reverently from behind me. I popped off Hyde to see him running his pale hands over my curves, and then his wet, thick digit was pressing into my ass. “Relax, babe. I won’t hurt you.”

I knew he wouldn’t. None of them would. “I trust you.”

I relaxed, and then Render was kneeling down and biting me right below the curve of my ass, spilling more venom into me. His finger started flashing in and out of my ass so fast that I cried out. I got so wet that I started making obscene noises as Quade pistoned in and out of me, his hands directing my body up and down over his cock.

I was pressed further down, my breasts pinned against Quade’s chest, and then Render’s finger was removed, and the head of his cock was entering me from behind.

“Oh gods, it’s too much. It’s too big, I can’t,” I whined.

“You can take it,” Gritt said, and I looked over to see that he was hard again and stroking himself, watching with ravenous eyes.

“You were made for us,” Render crooned in my ear, his fangs scraping over the sensitive skin. “And we were made for you. Our bodies are fated to join in every possible way.”

Like his words opened me up, he slipped in even more, and slowly, slowly, with the help of his venom and Quade’s hot and cold fingers rubbing over my clit, he finally bottomed out.

“*Fanged fuck*, that feels good,” Render groaned at my back.

And it did. When I couldn’t stand for them to be still any more, I started rocking my hips, a noise like a whine escaping my throat.

“I think she likes it,” Hyde chuckled.

I leaned over and took him into my mouth again, so that three of my mates were inside of me. Not one to be left out, my hand was lifted and then put around Gritt’s girth, his hand directing how hard I squeezed and how fast I stroked him. The four of them moved me together in perfect harmony, and I’d never been so full before in my life. I was stretched to capacity physically but also in my heart. I could feel their devotion through the bond. I could sense their own pleasure mingling with mine.

“Come again for us, Devi,” Quade whispered in my ear.

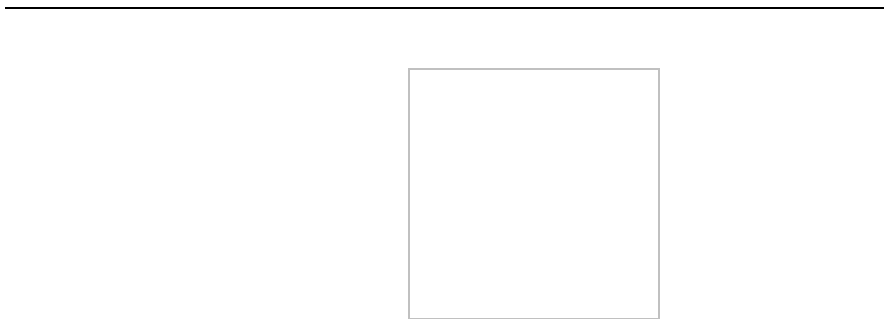
Their magic coursed through me as I panted, climbing the peak right alongside them. My Void smoke surrounded us, sipping off of them slowly,

and making it look like our five writhing, naked bodies were the only thing that existed.

Quade's hot and cold touch grounded me. Hyde's life-giving magic heightened my every feeling. Gritt pumped me full of animalistic need, meeting my hunger with his own. And when Render leaned down and bit me again, flooding my system with more venom, I shattered into a million pieces. And they shattered with me.

One by one, we came, and then we were just a heap of bodies and slick sweat and seed, lying next to each other in a pile of limbs where I was their magnet, their center, their sun.

I was the Void again, and I had my mates back. And suddenly, everything in the world was right.



Epilogue

"HURRY UP, will you? My brother doesn't care how you look, he just wants his powers back," Gritt grumbled from outside the bathroom door. It had taken a full year to get the hang of my powers again, and I was so excited to finally fulfill the promise I'd made when we first met.

I was taking my time, applying my lipstick with care just to piss him off. Damn shifter liked to be an hour early to *everything*. Which often times clashed with my carefree necromancer, defiant vampire, and overly social elemental.

I opened the door and gave him a cheeky smile. "I'll hurry if you let me ride your dragon again."

It was the perfect risk, flying high in the sky with nothing to hold onto but his back. He refused to go out when anyone was awake, too ashamed of his animal to let anyone see. I think that was partly why his animal picked me, he was tired of being held back. In the last few months, I'd gotten to meet all four of his animals. His falcon was greedy, his lion fiercely protective. His scrappy bobcat made me laugh. But all in all, his dragon was my favorite, not that I'd ever tell any of them that.

"Fine. But for gods' sake, get a move on," he relented while dragging his hands down his grumpy face in exasperation.

"Are you rushing perfection again, Gritt?" Hyde asked while strolling into the bedroom. He was wearing a graphic t-shirt that said Necromancers Do It Better and tight denim jeans.

Pushing past Gritt, he landed a sloppy kiss on my mouth, effectively smearing my bright red lipstick. "Oops," he said while pulling away, not bothering to wipe the evidence of our kiss from his lips. "Guess you'll have to start over."

I laughed before grabbing a tissue and wiping the smeared mess from my face. I could tell from Gritt's twitching eye that he was about ten seconds away from going all feral on me, when Quade walked through the door. "You did it!!" he yelled, holding a sheet of paper as he rushed through the door. "You aced your finals!"

I ran out of the bathroom and collided with him, laughing as he spun me around. We both cheered while Hyde danced, and Gritt rolled his eyes. "We all knew she would," he grumbled.

It had been hard, staying behind at Thibault Academy while they took up their duties as council members. Luckily, they made sure to visit often. The school had never had so many officials on campus.

"Where the hell is Render?" Gritt asked. And in true vampire fashion, he flashed into the room.

"Miss me, Shifty?" he mocked as he walked over to me, eyeing my outfit appreciatively.

"You wish," Gritt grumbled. They loved each other, their brotherhood something beautiful to watch, despite the playful bickering they threw at one another all the time. There was a certain camaraderie between them that seemed to bring the entire community together. Even in classes, I'd noticed a huge change. Breeds weren't separated anymore. Elementals sitting with shifters, necros dating vamps. We'd started a shift in perceptions, and I was proud to be a part of something that brought everyone closer.

"Hey," Render said before kissing me, lightly grazing my lip with the sharp points of his teeth before sealing it shut with a swipe of his tongue.

"Hey, yourself," I replied with a shiver. "Did you talk to Reed?" I asked. Reed moved to LA and was going to film school. He was feeling particularly inspired, thanks to knowing about all the things that went bump in the night. I missed him, but having council members with unlimited access to portals as my bonded made visiting easier.

"Yes, I did. I told him I'd help with his little movie. Should save him heaps on special effects."

"Thank you," I sang before pecking him on the cheek.

"Can we please go now?" Gritt asked. He looked miserable and anxious to get going.

His timeliness was driving me crazy. After a year together, I'd been acquainted with all their unique quirks, and every new layer had me falling more and more in love with them. Like how Render liked to read to school

children once a week, his own penance for the life he'd taken as a child. Hyde visited his parents' graves once a month and left them dead rabbit corpses instead of flowers because it was their favorite undead animal. Quade wrote his parents letters about us, telling them all about the girl he loved, his own way of reminding them how wrong they were for keeping us apart. Gritt was timely, a leader that was always herding us to the best versions of ourselves.

"She's not going like this, is she? Every supe in the room will be salivating at the sight of her," Render said while dragging his fingers up my spine.

"Oh stop," I joked before playfully shoving him away.

"He *does* have a point," Quade murmured before placing his fist under his chin in speculation. I looked down at my crimson dress that hugged every curve. I picked it because it was Render's favorite color and showed off my long legs, something I knew Hyde appreciated.

"We should strip it off of her, hmm?" Hyde asked in a sultry tone before walking over, a devilish smirk on his face.

"We only have an hour and a half until we're supposed to be there!" Gritt reminded us all, but there was a smoky tone to his words, and from the corner of my eye, I saw his tented pants.

"Sounds like plenty of time to me," Render rasped.

My breath hitched as I looked around the room at my men—my bonded. It seemed like there would never be enough time. I wanted them for eternity. "Better make it quick," I replied before reaching up to unclasp where my dress was fastened behind my neck. The moment the soft fabric fell to the floor, they each took a collective gasp. Their awe and devotion still made me emotional, even a year later. It was hard to believe that I went from the girl cursed with the nothingness of the Void to the girl who had it all.

Thank You For Reading

Thank you so much for reading! We hope you enjoyed this story, and we would love if you could take a moment to leave a review.

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