

Siren Publishing

Ménage Àmour

The book cover features a dramatic scene with three shirtless men in the foreground, their muscular bodies partially visible. In the background, a large, full, reddish moon (Bloodmoon) is set against a dark, cloudy sky. A small dragon is perched on the moon. The title 'DRAGON'S BLOODMOON' is written in large, white, serif capital letters across the middle of the image.

DRAGON'S BLOODMOON

Deadly Mates 4

Scarlet Hyacinth

Deadly Mates 4

Dragon's Bloodmoon

For two years, Jared waited in vain for his dragon mate to return. As he struggles to forget, a new man appears in his life. Only he isn't a man. He is a vampire, and his task is to kill Jared.

Tomas has been entrusted with the important mission of retrieving the powerful amulet, Gaia's Spirit--and killing its keepers. When he meets Jared Grayson, he finds that he cannot do as asked. He kidnaps Jared, hoping to keep the young werewolf safe.

Sentenced by the dragon elders to forced hibernation, Zongxian awakens only to find out his mate has vanished. Desperate, he goes in search of Jared, and in his quest, he meets a handsome vampire who takes his breath away.

Together, Tomas and Zongxian have to fight impossible odds to save Jared. Can the three-way bond survive the ruthless power of the vampire nation?

Genre: Alternative (M/M or F/F), Ménage a Trois/Quatre, Paranormal

Length: 38,208 words

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Letter from Scarlet Hyacinth

Regarding E-book Piracy

Dear Readers,

Your support and opinion always mean a lot to me. I was a reader before I was writer, and as such, knowing that people enjoy my stories gives me tremendous happiness and satisfaction. Some of you may know that I originally started writing on FictionPress and AdultFanFiction. It was because of the many friends I made there and through their constant support that I persevered in writing.

However, I have to point out that, unlike stories on FictionPress and AdultFanFiction, my published books are intellectual property and are not free. The amount of time and effort authors, editors, and cover artists put into each and every one of these books is astonishing. I spent one month polishing *Enraptured* for my readers to offer them the best experience when reading my work. It hurts me, emotionally and financially, that before I could earn anything from my book, it was pirated and distributed illegally.

I sometimes can't help but wonder if all the effort is worth it. Writing is my passion, but writing for publishing is very different than posting free stories online. As much as I hate to admit it, taking into account all the work I put into these books and the poor financial profit, it somehow seems I'm wasting my time.

Maybe many of you think that being a writer instantly translates into thousands of dollars. Well, it doesn't. Many authors cannot support themselves with their writing, especially in the e-publishing industry. They have to hold day jobs while they write in the evenings and on weekends. For my part, I started writing as a student, sneaking in writing between studying for exams and trips to the library. It wasn't easy then, and it isn't easy now.

Please do not pirate my books. If you have downloaded this copy illegally, know that every reader is important and your support would mean the world to me.

I hope you enjoy the story. Please e-mail me your thoughts and comments at scarlet.hyacinth@gmail.com.

With love,
Scarlet Hyacinth

DEDICATION

For Rachel. Thanks for bearing with my penchant for weird names 😊.

DRAGON'S BLOODMOON

Deadly Mates 4

SCARLET HYACINTH

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Chapter One

It was maybe seven in the morning and far too early for receiving life-altering shocks. Or so Jared thought. He stood there, frozen, disbelief flowing through him. Dozens of dragons surrounded him, attacking his friends and family. Somewhere to his left, his sister, Maya, and his brother, Flame, fought back together, while Jared's other brother, Loren, stood close to his two mates, Tavon and Yoshi. Jared wanted to help out, but he couldn't have moved if his life depended on it. On second thought, it probably did. Right then and there, it didn't seem all that important.

Just a few moments before, they'd been having a fascinating, if irrational, debate on something along the line of "the age of the deadly mates." Jared thought it was all bullshit. Xiao Shen Long, the young dragon who'd suddenly come to their aid, seemed to have gained everyone's trust, but Jared didn't think they should be so easily swayed. Not that it mattered now. Xiao Shen's family—his very, very extended family, and probably some of his close friends, too—were attacking the cavern where Jared and his siblings had taken refuge.

Of course, that wasn't the reason for Jared's shock. They'd more or less expected an attack from the dragons, and Jared had never shied

away from battle. He'd mentally prepared himself for anything that could happen, knowing nothing could scare him after the night of his capture. It would seem that he was mistaken.

Amidst all the dragon soldiers, one man stood out. Tall and handsome, he irradiated power. Dark hair flowed down his shoulders, and the dim light coming from the crack in the cavern top revealed shades of bloodred. He moved with predatory intent, his every step smooth and elegant.

Jared knew the man led their attackers, and that he could very well be the one to kill them all. At the same time, though, Jared could also feel a bond with the dragon, the connection that only two mates could share.

Jared almost laughed. Somehow, it made sense that he would be punished for his skepticism. It seemed that, in spite of Jared's distrust, Xiao Shen had been correct on this one. Well, fuck that. Mate or no mate, Jared would protect his loved ones, no matter what.

Shifting, Jared lunged forward. He dodged the attacks of several dragons, his claws and fangs unerringly hitting flesh as they attempted to catch him. His fur protected him from most of their efforts and he was smaller and faster than them. Besides, he had no intention to bother with the underlings. He knew where he needed to go.

Jared reached the dragon just as the other man moved to attack Tavon once again. Due to the small space in the cavern, he'd changed into human form, but that didn't make him any less powerful. "Beg for your life, creature," the dragon said to the lion shifter. "I want to hear you scream."

Stepping between the two of them, Jared bared his fangs and growled. He shifted as well and glared at the dragon. "He will not die. I won't let you."

The dragon's expression changed from visible anger to confusion. "You...What?"

"I won't let you hurt my family," Jared growled. "I will kill you if I have to, even if you are my mate."

It hurt him inside to even say those words, but he refused to be deterred. Tavon was Loren's mate, and through extension, another brother for Jared. As much as he loathed the entire situation, he had no other choice.

He didn't lie to himself. The dragon could defeat him with ease. He'd seen the magic the other man could wield. Jared was just a werewolf, and a young one at that. But that didn't mean he wouldn't stand his ground to protect the people he loved.

Thankfully, the dragon seemed to feel their connection as well. Or so Jared thought. He saw something change in the other man's eyes, like a veil being lifted. He could almost feel the struggle in the dragon's heart, and he understood that; his mate had been under some sort of spell.

His mate fought the magic's hold, and the other dragons must have felt it as well. They stopped their attack, their stances tense. The leader took a look around, eyes wide, whispering something in a low voice. Jared couldn't understand the words, but the sentiment was more than clear. Shock. Pain. Guilt.

Xiao Shen made his way to the dragon leader's side, hugging the other man with enthusiasm. In spite of everything, Jared couldn't help but feel a twinge of jealousy at the sight of the two of them together. It made no sense, more so if he took into account Xiao Shen's young age. Jared squashed it viciously, knowing there must be a good explanation for it. Besides, there were other issues that needed to be dealt with.

"We need to check on the injured," Tavon finally said, drawing the dragon's attention to him.

Jared waited for a reaction and held his breath, not daring to hope the whole thing could have been solved so easily. His mate showed no intention of becoming aggressive once again, but Jared's skepticism still proved to be justified.

Before they could follow Tavon's suggestion, a whirlpool of magic started to form in the middle of the cavern. Jared gaped as he

realized another magic portal was appearing. As the energy doors started to materialize, Tavon tried to pull him away. “We have to get out of here,” he said. “Come on.”

Jared knew Tavon had a point, but he couldn’t make himself abandon his newly found mate. “I can’t just leave,” he whispered. He heard his brother try to convince him to come, but he shook his head. “Go on ahead without me.”

As much as he hated the thought of endangering his family, leaving his dragon behind didn’t count as an actual option. Their time ran out before they could find a satisfactory solution. The black portal doors opened, and a dark-haired man came out, followed by a group of assassins. “What’s going on here?” he said. “I thought I told you to bring the fox back. We can’t afford a delay.”

Jared’s dragon mate turned toward the man, spine straight, dignity irradiating from every pore. “What are you doing here, Tynan? We can handle this.”

“I decided to join the party,” the stranger—Tynan, apparently—replied with a berating snort. “After all, I do have a little quarrel with the handsome shifters of Rook Valley.”

As the two talked, Tavon leaned against Jared and whispered, “Hey. Doesn’t he look a bit familiar to you?”

Jared knew exactly what Tavon meant. He’d seen the same eerie gold eyes many times in the past months, after his Alpha had mated snake shifter and former assassin Kaiden Hearne. “Fuck. He looks like Kaiden.” In that moment, Jared made the connection. The man was Kaiden’s father, Tynan Hearne.

“I thought he’d died,” Yoshi said. Jared had thought the same thing. His Alpha had told them that he’d been killed by his own people. Could Kaiden have deceived them all? No, the snake shifter genuinely loved Viktor. Then what the fuck was going on?”

“I am not so easily eliminated, Mr. Kurosawa,” Tynan told Yoshi. “My son was an idiot for thinking that. Then again, he never had

much inclination for the family business. I don't know how I could've spawned such a weakling."

Jared wanted to defend Kaiden. He wanted to figure out a solution for them to escape, to reach out to his mate and just tell him that he was there. But Tavon pulled him away and started for the passage that led into the valley at the other side of the mountain. At first, Jared protested, but a glare from Tavon stopped him. "We don't have time for this."

Jared resigned himself to the inevitable. In the end, what could he do? He realized now that he wouldn't be of any help here. He'd held his loved ones back for nothing. He'd gladly stay to die at his mate's side, but his siblings had their own lives. God, why did this have to be so hard?

The snake stopped them before they could make their escape, though. He pointed the amulet at them and, immediately, Tavon froze. Then Tynan did the same with the dragons, and Jared watched as the magnificent beings fell under the power of the amulet. He wanted to run to his mate's side, but his body refused to obey the commands of his mind. Under his terrified eyes, the assassin aimed the amulet at Tavon. Tavon's body melted into his leonine form and Jared wanted to scream when he saw Tavon lunge toward his own fox mate. He didn't know the two men well, but they were his brother's lovers. Even from the few hours he'd spent in their company, he'd seen the genuine love and the deep bond between the three of them. Somehow, the assassin must have taken control of Tavon's body. Damn him.

Tavon seemed to be fighting the magic's hold, and he stopped his attack on Yoshi. But the amulet's power could not be undone, and as the assassin fixed Tavon with a glare, Jared felt certain he'd see the lion shifter die.

Miraculously, it was another snake shifter who saved them all. A large, russet snake fell on top of the assassin leader and he dropped the amulet. Jared immediately felt the magic fade and his body began

to obey him once again. After directing one hasty look to his siblings and their respective mates, Jared rushed toward his dragon.

Much to his dismay, he didn't manage to reach his mate in time. There was a rush of confusion as everyone started to recover, and then the battle began once again, this time between the snake shifters and everyone else. Jared somehow made his way to Flame and Maya before he shifted and lost himself in the flurry of violence.

And then, as quickly as it had begun, it all stopped. Time seemed to slow, and Jared felt a sense of calm wash over him. He saw Yoshi holding the amulet in his hand, commanding the snakes, and he knew they were saved.

* * * *

Once the injured had been healed and the assassins dealt with, Yoshi had destroyed the amulet. It had broken into four pieces, one of which was currently in Jared's possession. But Jared didn't think he could deal with that right now. There was another matter that most pressed on his heart. His mate. What would he say to the other man? Would the dragon want to claim him?

Similar thoughts must have passed through the dragon's mind. The man approached, his stance proud, and his eyes warm and clear. Now that the battle was over, Jared could actually stop and admire the magnificence of his mate without feeling remorseful. His first impression had been quite correct. Everything about the dragon felt magical, from his exotic, Asian eyes, to the reddish tint in his hair. Courtesy of his shift from animal form, the man was naked, so Jared could see every bit of delicious skin, from his handsome, sculpted face, to his powerful thighs, and everything in between. Jared's mouth watered, and more than anything, he wanted to step forward, to touch his mate's body.

He reminded himself that the circumstances weren't exactly conducive to a sexual development between the two of them. Besides,

Jared had threatened to kill the other man mere minutes before. They needed to talk more than they needed to fuck.

As he reached Jared, the dragon gave him an awkward look. "Hello," he said, as he extended his hand. "I'm Zongxian Long."

Jared stared a few seconds at the extended hand before he took it. "Jared Grayson."

The warmth of the other man's hand made him shudder and he closed his eyes, willing himself to calm down. He counted to ten, and when he felt satisfied he wouldn't embarrass himself, he opened them. Zongxian scrutinized him with unreadable dark eyes, and Jared felt himself flush as he realized he hadn't let go of the other man's hand.

Swiftly remedying the problem, Jared took a step back, hoping the space would strengthen his resolve. "I suppose we have a discussion pending," Zongxian said.

"Indeed," Jared replied. He felt uncomfortable, since they were in public, naked, and having a very personal conversation. Just seeing his mate gave him a hard-on, making him wonder what it would be like to have those beautiful strong hands touch him, that large cock thrusting inside of him. But his brothers and sister were right there, along with dozens of strangers. Even if Jared didn't have complexes or inhibitions, this wasn't his idea of his first meeting with a mate.

Obviously guessing Jared's embarrassment and frustration, Zongxian gestured them to the corner of the cavern, further away from the group of people. As if of common accord, everyone else gave them space. Tavon and Yoshi shepherded the still-dizzy dragons to the other side of the cave. With his family taking care of the organization issue, Jared focused on his mate. What did one say in such a situation?

Thankfully, Zongxian began speaking, breaking the awkward silence. "First of all, I want to apologize for what happened here today. I assure you that had I been in my full faculties, I would have never allowed this to happen." Zongxian sighed. "Of course, I cannot

expect such an excuse to make you forgive me, but it is, nevertheless, true.”

“I understand,” Jared replied. Strangely, he did. The apprehension that should have been there vanished as the sad tone in Zongxian’s voice reached out to him. “It wasn’t your fault.”

Zongxian shook his head. “It was my responsibility to take care of my men. Many could have died today if not for the gods’ mercy. I’ve disgraced my people through my weakness and I’ve sinned against you, my mate.”

Jared opened his mouth to answer, but nothing came out. “It’s all right,” Zongxian said softly. He stepped closer, and Jared found himself engulfed in a soft, yet powerful, embrace. “Don’t be afraid. I’ll fix this, somehow.”

“What do you mean?” Jared asked, unable to stop the trembling of his voice.

“I have to go back to China to explain this to my people,” Zongxian said. “But I will return, and we will be together then. We’ll get to know each other, do things right. If you want, of course. I wouldn’t blame you if you didn’t.”

Zongxian’s voice sounded hesitant and uncertain. Jared’s heart hurt at the knowledge of their imminent separation, but he held back his sorrow. He broke away from his mate’s embrace and offered the other man a smile. “I’d love to get to know you,” he said. He pressed a hand against Zongxian’s naked chest and did his best to silently convey all the emotions that swirled inside him. “I’ll be waiting,” he said.

It seemed strange that Jared should say such a thing. After all, he’d just met the dragon. The mate bond was an important thing for werewolves, but often not enough to build a real relationship on. And yet, something about Zongxian called out to him, a deep warmth beyond the instinctual, powerful arousal. He could already see the deeply ingrained principles in the other man’s heart, the genuine

loyalty and caring. He only hoped that one day Zongxian's duties wouldn't be in conflict with their relationship.

With another tremulous smile, Jared let his mate go. He watched, entranced, as his dragon closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Another portal appeared, summoned by Zongxian's magic. It was beautiful, and Jared wanted nothing else but to enter it and go with Zongxian.

It wasn't meant to be. As the dragons gathered around the portal and slowly started disappearing inside, Zongxian turned toward Jared once again. "I'm sorry," he said. "So sorry."

With that final apology, Zongxian entered the portal and disappeared. The red doors closed behind him with frightening finality.

* * * *

Zongxian exited the portal in the familiar cavernous room of the Long Dynasty palace. The dragon soldiers were already gathering all around him, giving him looks of confusion and dismay.

Zongxian offered them a smile he did not feel. "It will be all right," he told them. "The snake shifters are gone. We will rebuild what is gone."

His men looked a bit better, even if the uncertain looks didn't completely vanish. "Retreat to your quarters and take some time to spend with your families," he told them. They probably needed more reassurance, but right then and there, Zongxian couldn't give them that, not if he wanted to be honest. There was another urgent task to deal with.

As his men nodded and disbanded, Zongxian headed toward the door. Xiao Shen fell into step by his side. "Are you all right, uncle?" Xiao Shen asked.

Zongxian stopped and ruffled his nephew's hair. He'd always felt close to Xiao Shen, and he'd tried to protect him a little from the

difficult life at the dragon court. He hated to think how much he'd neglected his nephew in the months he'd spent under the snake's spell. "Fine, Xiao Shen. I'm fine now."

Only he wasn't. Because of what had happened, his duty told him to awaken the elders and submit to their judgment. Zongxian had been entrusted with the safety of their people, and he'd failed in his task.

The elders had watched over all of dragonkind for centuries, no, millennia. But occasionally, even the wisest and most powerful needed to rest. Due to their long lifespans, dragons went into hibernation at regular periods, and for the past decade or so, the elders had slept, leaving dragonkind in Zongxian's care. He'd dealt with everything just as he'd been taught, with strength, efficiency, and fairness. At least, until the snakes had shown up. From then on, it all became a blur. Zongxian wasn't sure how many mistakes he'd made or how many of his people had suffered because of it.

"You're berating yourself too much over this, uncle," Xiao Shen said. "It wasn't your fault."

"That is not for you or me to decide," Zongxian replied. "You should go to your room as well."

Xiao Shen shook his head. "I won't leave you alone. I may look like a child, but I'm a man. You know that, uncle."

Zongxian couldn't help a small, sad smile. Yes, he knew that. Xiao Shen's delay in achieving maturity wasn't all that uncommon, and Zongxian had been looking forward to the day when his nephew would at last become one of his dragon warriors. Where would he be when that day came? He didn't know. "Very well," he told Xiao Shen. "Come. We have preparations to make."

Xiao Shen looked like he wanted to protest again, but in the end, he remained silent. Of course, even a youth like Xiao Shen knew how things worked at the dragons' court. When such issues occurred, the presence of the elders was required. Unfortunately, that also implied the person left in charge hadn't been competent enough to deal with

the problem on his own. In Zongxian's case, he'd be lucky if he got away with a simple reprimand.

Zongxian took Xiao Shen's hand and headed toward The Chamber of Elders. Hidden deep in the bowels of the castle, The Chamber was actually a large mausoleum that led into a labyrinthine, cavernous structure. There, beneath the actual palace, the resting places of the dragons lay—some permanent, some temporary.

A deep feeling of humbleness filled Zongxian as he entered The Chamber. Whenever he came here, he realized just how small he was in the grand scheme of things, how foolish in comparison to all the great rulers before him. Once, he'd hoped to lead his people in a manner that would honor the elders. Now, he would be forced to bother them from their slumber.

A special ritual had been designed for this particular purpose. Even if it was used once every few hundred years, the items needed remained there, perfectly preserved in their magical protective shell. The large stone table in the middle of The Chamber held a circular depression in the middle, continuously filled with drops of clear water from the stone above. The stream that flowed around the palace, giving the dragons the comfort of running water, seemed to hold some sort of magic itself. Somehow, the water that fell into The Chamber was never dirty, never gathering impurities, and the cavity itself never overflowed. What was logical impossibility for some was reality for Zongxian. He'd long ago learned that the ways of dragonkind held mystery even for the wisest and most ancient.

As he retrieved the primeval runes necessary for the ritual, Zongxian thought back to his mate. He'd been hasty to promise Jared a swift return. It would have been much fairer to explain the situation and to tell Jared to find someone new in his absence. But the very notion of Jared belonging to someone else hurt him inside, and he'd been too selfish to offer Jared this chance. The only thing that gave him hope at this point was Jared's voice, sounding in his mind, speaking those sweet words, "I'll be waiting."

Faster than Zongxian would have liked, the preparations for the awakening ritual were complete. With the runes placed in a pentagram around the cavity and the symbols of the dragon elements drawn across the table, there was just one thing left to be done.

Zongxian gestured Xiao Shen to stay back, pushing him out of The Chamber. "Wait here. This I must do alone."

Xiao Shen obeyed, and the door to The Chamber closed behind him. Zongxian took a deep breath and turned toward the stone table once again. Closing his eyes, he began to mutter the age-old incantation inherited from generation to generation.

He lost his sense of self in the flow of magic, pouring his energy over the runes. When he finished the spell and opened his eyes, he realized The Chamber was shaking. Loud rumbles sounded somewhere beneath him before everything went deathly still.

Zongxian held his breath as he waited for the elders to appear. Finally, four people emerged from four different corridors, some in the superior part of the mausoleum, others from below. Zongxian recognized them at once. Kailì, a Water Dragon, Jùnrén, a Fire Dragon, Mei Lien, an Earth Dragon and Yao Niang, a Metal Dragon, were the four surviving elders who had founded the Long Dynasty.

He fell to his knees and bowed his head in sign of respect. "My Lords, My Ladies, I offer you my greetings upon your awakening."

"No need to get into formalities, Zongxian," Yao Niang said, her beautiful voice as sharp as a knife. "Why exactly have you disturbed our slumber?" The metal dragon sounded pissed, and it didn't surprise Zongxian in the least.

"You have my apologies, Lady Yao Niang. I assure you, my actions were completely justified."

To Zongxian's shock and dismay, Kailì knelt next to him. "Brother, what has happened?"

Zongxian almost winced at his older sibling's words. Kailì had always trusted him, and as the eldest of their kind, his word was law. Even if the difference between their ages was staggering, Zongxian

still felt the bond between them. More than the abstract notion of duty toward his people, he had the duty toward his brother.

But how could he explain?

Zongxian lifted his head and looked into Kaili's dark eyes, so much like his own. Their eyes and facial features were about the only things similar about their physical appearance. Kaili had inherited a lot more from his mother than from his and Zongxian's father. Even his temperament and magic tended to be gentle, soothing. Zongxian knew his failure would affect Kaili, as his brother would be forced to enact punishment on him.

Sighing, Zongxian started to explain. "I lost The Eye and The Breath."

The two jewels had been in the keeping of dragonkind for a few centuries. They were a part of a powerful amulet, The Spirit of Gaia, an artifact that held sway over every shifter race. When completed, it could even destroy the world.

Therefore, he was not surprised when he heard Mei Lien's shocked gasp and Jùn rén's curse. "What do you mean you lost them?" Yao Niang growled at him. "You incompetent fool! Do you have any idea what you've done?"

Kaili didn't say anything, but his silence hurt more than any insult Yao Niang could have spouted. He got up from where he'd knelt and when he spoke, his voice sounded as calm and collected as ever. "Tell me everything, Zongxian. Where are the jewels now? What about the amulet?"

"A snake shifter named Tynan Hearne broke into the palace. Somehow, he'd acquired control of The Spirit. He stole the two jewels and, through them, managed to control me and the people. I became little more than his slave and worked for him to retrieve the final pieces of the amulet."

"Gods..." Mei Lien whispered.

"Thankfully, we were stopped by a number of courageous bloodline heirs." Zongxian paused, unsure if he should mention Jared.

“Zongxian,” Kailì prodded, now sounding stern. “Everything.”

Zongxian nodded. “I...I met my mate there and he broke the spell.”

“I see,” Kailì said. “Continue.”

“Yes. Yoshi Kurosawa, the heir of the Teumessian Fox, destroyed The Spirit. One of the remaining pieces is currently in Xiao Shen’s possession.”

“Xiao Shen,” Yao Niang said. “Why Xiao Shen?”

“The Spirit chose him as one of its keepers,” Zongxian replied, even if he knew that wasn’t what she wanted to hear. He didn’t want to explain Xiao Shen’s presence at the site of the battle. Xiao Shen didn’t deserve to be punished for his courage.

Kailì must have understood the reason for his evasion. “I will discuss this issue with Xiao Shen separately,” he said. “Rise, Zongxian. Rise and look at me.”

Zongxian obeyed. As he got up, he saw the elders’ expressions and suppressed a wince. He fixed his gaze on Kailì and waited.

“Your mate,” Kailì began. “What is his name?”

Zongxian’s blood froze in his veins. What did Kailì intend with this line of questioning? “Jared Grayson, My Lord.”

“Is he a bloodline heir?” Kailì continued.

Zongxian shook his head. “He is the sibling of one of them.” When Kailì gave him an inquisitive look, he continued, “Jared is brother to Loren Grayson, Orthrus’s heir.” For that much, Zongxian felt thankful. He didn’t want Jared to be haunted by the spirits of ancient hellhounds.

“A werewolf, then,” Kailì mused. “Did you claim him?”

“No,” Zongxian answered. “I came back here after the battle to reorganize the people and awaken you.”

“Good,” Kailì said. After a few seconds, Kailì took a deep breath, as if preparing himself for something. Zongxian knew his sibling well enough to realize that didn’t bode well.

“Zongxian Long, for your transgression against the elders and the Long Dynasty of the China Dragons, I hereby sentence you to forced hibernation for an indeterminate period of time. You will be awakened the day of your mate’s death. This is your punishment.”

Zongxian couldn’t believe his ears. He opened his mouth, but nothing came out. He’d expected a harsh punishment, but nothing like this. The mere thought of what his sentence implied tore him apart. Of course, he’d realized the extent of his failure, but this seemed far too cruel, crueler even than the death reserved for rogue dragons alone.

Kaili’s gaze softened, and Zongxian could see the tortured pain in his brother’s heart. “I am sorry for this, brother,” Kaili said, “but you must understand, your offense could have led to the destruction of us all. I trusted you to protect our people and you failed. I cannot accept this, especially not from one of my blood.”

“I–I understand,” he managed to stammer. Jared’s words passed through his mind. He remembered Jared’s expectant smile, his warm, but sad eyes. Kaili would not be deterred. His brother was fair, but harsh when punishments were concerned. He would leave Zongxian in forced hibernation until the day of Jared’s death. Yes, Zongxian deserved it. He knew the laws, and he understood the consequences of failure. And yet, he still found himself protesting, “My Lord, at least allow me to send a message, so he will know.”

“No,” Jùnrén said. “You will not have contact with him, ever again, in any way. He will forget about you, in time.”

Kaili didn’t comment on the other elder’s words, and just like that, Zongxian knew the decision had been made. He’d be separated from Jared before he could even get the chance to know him, to love him. And Jared wouldn’t even know the reason. He’d think Zongxian had broken his promise and that he’d lied. Jared would hate him. He would be stuck loathing his own mate, the person who was supposed to be the other half of his soul.

“The punishment will start now,” Kaili said. “Stand in front of the altar to receive it.”

Even if he acknowledged Kaili's decision as fair, Zongxian couldn't bring himself to accept it. "No," he replied.

"What?" Jùnrén asked. "What did you say?"

"I refuse," Zongxian replied, head spinning. A part of him couldn't believe what he was doing, but his soul rebelled against the thought of leaving Jared behind, always wondering, alone. "I admit my mistake, but Jared shouldn't suffer for it."

A short female growl sounded before a terrible pain engulfed Zongxian's body. He tried to resist the metal dragon's attack, and he succeeded better than expected.

As he fought to compose himself, he heard the elders argue in the background. "Please, Yao Niang, don't hurt him," Mei Lien said. "He doesn't want to abandon his mate. It's normal." She had always been the kind one of the elders, kinder even than Kaili. The fact that she hadn't protested before confirmed the fairness of Kaili's decision.

"Stop it, Mei Lien," the other elder shot back. "Kaili is right. Zongxian's reaction to it only proves it further."

"Maybe," Mei Lien tried again, "but surely, a message isn't so much to ask."

"No," Jùnrén and Yao Niang said at the same time. "It is at it should be. No mercy."

Zongxian knew he didn't have a chance to sway them, but the beast inside him awoke. He felt his bones shift, turn, break away from the hold of Yao Niang's magic. Wings emerged from his shoulders and scales appeared all over his body. He saw Mei Lien's eyes widen in surprise and Jùnrén glared at him in fury. "Insolent whelp! You will die for your arrogance."

That may well be, Zongxian thought, but I will at least get to speak to my mate one more time. He wasn't foolish enough to think he could escape his punishment. He just wanted to send one message, one little note to free Jared from his promise.

He extended his wings and launched himself in the air. He knew The Chamber had several openings toward the ceiling, leading to

hallways that extended toward the resting places of other flying dragons. Jùnrén and Kailì slept there themselves. If he could get through the tombs, he should be able to find a way out of the palace grounds.

He didn't get the chance to even reach the mouths of the corridors. A familiar, gentle power leashed his wings, and he fell back to the ground. He heard footsteps approach, and he identified the source of the sound as Kailì. "I am sorry, my brother," Kailì said again, his dark eyes sad and teary. "You have no idea how much."

That was the last thing Zongxian heard before he felt the numbness of hibernation start to set in. He let out a roar, trying to protest, to plead for mercy. There was none, just like the elders had said, and Zongxian fell into the dark, dreamless sleep, Jared's name still a litany in his mind.

Chapter Two

Two years later

Jared looked at the whiteboard in front of him, not really registering any of the information written down. He knew he should be focusing on his classes—after all, Flame paid a significant tuition fee for them—but recently, he'd been very distracted. He didn't even know why. No, that wasn't it. He knew why. He just wished he would get over it already.

After two years, it had become perfectly clear that Zongxian Long had no intention of returning to claim Jared. Every effort Jared had made to contact the dragons—mostly through Loren and Loren's two mates—had been rebuked. Even Xiao Shen, the young dragon who'd come to warn them of the assassins' threat, was nowhere to be found.

Sometimes, Jared wondered if he'd dreamed the entire thing, if he'd just imagined his mate's soft, kind voice and warm eyes. Perhaps he even wished it, to a certain extent. If it wasn't real, Jared could return to his own life and forget about illusions of fated love.

A powerful poke snapped him out of his trance. Jared turned to see his friend, Brian, give him a reproachful look. "The teacher's staring at you, Jared. If you're not paying attention, at least pretend."

Jared nodded in acquiescence and did his best to focus on the information. After all, becoming an engineer took time and effort. Jared didn't want to disappoint his siblings. If nothing else, he still had his studies.

The teacher did, indeed, give Jared the evil eye, and Jared hoped he wouldn't get in trouble for his continuous daydreaming. MIT

prided itself on having the best education in the field of engineering and mechanics, and Jared counted himself lucky to be here. God, if he screwed things up because of a broken heart that would not mend...Fuck Zongxian. He had other priorities now, and he'd stop neglecting them.

Decision made, Jared pushed all thought of his absent mate from his mind. The lecture continued and Jared found himself enjoying the flow of information, the mathematical logic of it all, the purpose and precision. This was what he wanted, what he was good at. He'd always loved the field, and he'd been fascinated with everything from cars to chemistry. Environmental engineering had been his natural choice in studies. He dreamed to find a new way to fuel cars, something that wouldn't mean an increase in pollution and subsequent destruction of the environment.

The lecture ended and the students started gathering their things. As Jared prepared to leave, the teacher gestured him to the desk. Brian gave him a concerned look and whispered, "Good luck, my friend. I'll wait outside."

Jared nodded, mentally going over possible ways to apologize. He knew excuses were out of the question, since nothing could justify not paying attention to class.

"Mr. Grayson, I've noticed you've been distracted during the past few lectures," the teacher, Mrs. Phillips, began. She was a stern lady who always dressed fashionably and demanded respect through her sheer presence. Even if she'd most likely passed the age of fifty, she somehow still managed to be attractive and beautiful. Jared felt terrible for disappointing her. "Is anything wrong?" she asked, arching a brow.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I love your class, I do. I can only say I'll try harder in the future."

Mrs. Phillips narrowed her eyes and she paused as she stared at him, obviously testing him for any sign of deception. Jared

suppressed the urge to squirm. He was being truthful, so he had no reason to be worried. Or so he hoped.

Thankfully, Mrs. Phillips smiled and nodded. “Good. I would hate to see one of my best students lose track of his goals.”

Jared flushed at the praise and rushed to find a reply. He did try his best, and most of the time, he succeeded. Even if his mate’s abandonment still hurt, his studies had, in a way, saved Jared. “I won’t,” he told his teacher. “I promise.”

“Go on,” Mrs. Phillips said. “Off to your next class.”

Jared thanked her and left the amphitheatre. Outside, Brian immediately started the predictable interrogation. “Well? What did she say? Are you in trouble?”

Jared shook his head. “No. She just pointed out that I hadn’t paid attention. She was nice, in the end, but I have to be careful from now on.”

Brian nodded. “You wouldn’t want to waste your second chance.” Silence fell between them for a few seconds before Brian spoke again. “Hey, have you heard? We have a new teacher in Ecology.”

Jared smiled at the enthusiasm in Brian’s voice. “Really? A he or a she?”

“I hear it’s a man, and a very hot one at that.” Brian wiggled his eyebrows. “I’m sure you’ll be able to pay attention, at least to the teacher, if not the class.”

This time, Jared laughed. He couldn’t believe how lucky he’d been in having Brian as a roommate. Not only did Brian feel comfortable with Jared’s sexuality, but he also understood Jared’s ideas and emotions. Brian was a fae, and he shared Jared’s concerns in every way. The increasing industrialization of the world directly threatened Brian’s people with every tree that fell. Many of the fae who’d once lived in forests had been forced to live in cities, trapped within the confines of human appearances. Their magic, bound to mother nature, also suffered. So, like Jared, Brian had taken it upon himself to try and find a solution.

Sometimes, Jared wished Brian had been his mate. Like most fae, Brian was bisexual. Jared and he were perfect together. Then again, perfect friends did not make perfect lovers. Perhaps they were better off like this. Besides, even if Brian was very attractive, Jared's heart still lingered on one incredible-looking dragon.

"Earth to Jared! Earth to Jared! Come in, Jared."

Jared cursed when he realized he'd broken his resolution so easily. Brian offered him a small, understanding smile. "We're here, my friend. Let's wrap the day up. Then we'll go get drunk and you can cry your heart out on my shoulder. Okay?"

Jared grinned. "That sounds great." It would take a lot of alcohol to get him drunk, spiced with a little extra something, but hell, they could afford it from time to time.

Together, Jared and Brian walked inside the class and sat down. The teacher had not arrived yet, so they just wasted some time, chatting about nothing in particular.

As the minutes passed, though, a sudden feeling of anticipation flowed through Jared. He rubbed his suddenly sweaty palms against the material of his jeans and tried to push the strange sensation back. The last thing he needed was to make a bad first impression.

"What is it?" Brian asked. "Jared, what's wrong?"

Jared would have very much liked to know that, but he couldn't find an explanation to save his life. Before his friend could ask anything else, the reason came by itself, in the person of a man entering the room.

Jared's eyes widened as he took in the sight of the new arrival. The man was sex incarnate. He wore a professional-looking suit, but the way it hugged his body in all the right places made even the appropriate garment erotic. His white shirt contrasted with his olive complexion, and his perfectly tailored jacket did nothing to hide his wide, strong shoulders. Dark green eyes shone like sharp diamonds, spearing Jared with their intensity, sending a bolt of arousal through

his body. He was obviously the new Ecology teacher, and also Jared's mate. Fuck.

The entire room filled with whispers and excited giggles coming from the girls, and maybe even some boys. The man walked to the teacher's desk and cleared his throat. Somehow, even in all the ruckus, Jared still heard it, like his ears immediately focused on the one sound that had come from the teacher. He guessed the other students must have felt the same, as the noise vanished at once.

"Hello, students," the man said in a soft, accented voice. "I am Tomas Medina y Hernandez, and I will be your Ecology teacher from now on." As the teacher wrote the name of the class on the whiteboard, the jacket lifted a bit and Jared's eyes went to Mr. Medina's ass. God, was the man perfect everywhere?

When Mr. Medina turned once again, his full lips twisted into a smile and his green gaze fixed on Jared. "But you can call me Tomas," he purred.

Jared had the impression that the other man addressed him directly, but he couldn't know for sure. His fellow students seemed entranced with Tomas, and Jared frowned as he realized even Brian looked hypnotized.

"We will now start the lesson," Tomas said, sounding all-business, but still heavenly sexy. Jared had only once experienced this sensation, with Zongxian, and he'd learned his lesson. Even if Tomas made him want to throw off his clothes and beg to be fucked, Jared still felt wary. Something was off.

He'd have thought that Tomas could be one of the famous bloodline heirs he'd heard so much about. That would, in a way, explain the sudden spell the man's presence put on everyone. But unless all the students in his Ecology class were somehow shifters, such a thing didn't make any sense. Besides, Jared seemed to maintain his rational abilities, unlike his colleagues.

Tomas snapped his fingers and even the air in the room seemed to freeze. "Well, well, Mr. Grayson. How interesting. It looks like you're immune to my charms."

Hardly, Jared almost said, but he bit his tongue and glared at the other man. "What's going on? What did you do to them?"

Tomas's seductive manner turned predatory. "Nothing much. Just ensured they wouldn't interfere, and you wouldn't put up too much of a fight."

Jared shot to his feet and gaped at the other man. "What? You're insane. What do you want with me?"

Tomas moved so fast Jared didn't even see him coming. Somehow, before he could even try to come up with a plan, Jared found himself pinned against the desk, face front, held down by Tomas's waist. Next to him, neither Brian nor the other students gave any sign of seeing anything unusual. In fact, they didn't seem to be seeing anything at all.

"I don't want to play around," Tomas growled in Jared's ear. "I want you to give me the amulet, or else."

Jared almost laughed. Why did his mates always want The Spirit of Gaia, and have no need of Jared?

As it turned out, he was proven wrong in the next two seconds. Jared froze as he felt a hard cock press against his ass. "God, you smell good," Tomas muttered under his breath. "What the fuck are you trying to do to me?"

Jared couldn't help but rub his ass against the other man's crotch. His entire body begged for Tomas's touch. Everything inside him wanted Tomas to take him, and to fuck him. But then, Jared realized he didn't know this person. Beyond the instinctual need to mate, he couldn't even be sure if the man's name was really Tomas. Even if they were drawn to each other, in the end, the so-called Tomas just wanted the power of The Spirit.

That knowledge gave Jared strength. Taking advantage of Tomas's distraction, he head-butted the other man. Taken by surprise,

Tomas cursed, and his hold on Jared weakened. Jared didn't delay in making his escape. If nothing else, he needed to let his family know that someone—maybe the snakes—wanted The Spirit again.

Giving Brian a regretful look, Jared lunged for the door and retrieved his cell phone from his pocket. As he dialed, he vowed to return for his friend as soon as he warned his sister of the danger.

"Hey, Jared," Maya greeted him. "What's up? I thought you were at class."

"Maya, they've come after The Spirit again." He ran through the corridors as he spoke, wondering why the hell the university seemed so abandoned. Where were all the people?

"What?" Maya asked, sounding concerned. "Who? Where are you, Jared?"

"MIT. A man came, claiming to be a teacher. I don't know who or what he is, but he wants the amulet. He said his name is—"

Before he could tell his sister the name he'd been given, a heavy body hit him from behind and the phone flew from his hand. "That wasn't very nice, *corazon*," Tomas said.

Immobilizing Jared in an iron-vise hold, Tomas rubbed his still erect cock against Jared. He shifted Jared against the floor until they were facing each other. "Not nice at all."

A brief flash of fangs registered in Jared's mind before he felt a sharp, delicious pain sweep through him. He realized somehow that Tomas was biting him, greedily sucking on his neck. Everything started to make sense as the man's nature revealed itself. Vampire. Tomas was a vampire.

A seductive voice whispered something in Jared's mind, lulling him to sleep. As Jared's consciousness started to fade, his thoughts turned into a peculiar jumble of regret. How sad. One mate had left him, the other would kill him.

* * * *

As Jared succumbed to the induced sleep, Tomas released his hold on the werewolf. He cleansed the wound with his tongue and immediately it sealed. As Tomas licked his lips, he groaned at the amazing taste of the blood in his mouth. He knew he should just drain the werewolf dry and leave it at that, but he couldn't make himself do so. He couldn't make himself extinguish the fire of Jared's life. *Control yourself, Tomas. Control yourself. There has to be an explanation for this.*

Ever since ancient times, vampires had steered clear of mingling with shifters. Their worlds were as different as night was from day. Some even preferred humans to were-beings. But not even the vampires could disregard one particular issue linked to the shifters—The Spirit of Gaia.

These days, very few knew that vampires had once been the guardians of The Spirit. In time, that honor had passed to the descendents of each bloodline—a bad choice, since petty squabbles had ended up in the misplacing of The Spirit and the gems. As a precautionary measure, though, vampires still kept contact with the heirs of Kronos, and occasionally received reports on the situation on the shifter front.

It was very unfortunate, and probably not a coincidence, that a war between vampire clans had started just as Tynan Hearne had gained control of The Spirit. By the time they'd managed to create a measure of order within their ranks, two years had passed, and the amulet had fallen in the hands of the Grayson family and their friends.

Now, Tomas's orders were clear—eliminate the current owners of the amulet, retrieve its pieces, and return them to the vampire clans. He'd hated it, knowing that he would be forced to kill the brave souls who'd saved the world from destruction. Still, he'd taken the job, hoping to at least give the shifters a dignified death.

It would have been so easy, at least in Jared Grayson's case. He was so very young, inexperienced, and even if his werewolf abilities

allowed him to fight back, he couldn't have escaped Tomas. And yet, fate had decreed differently.

Even now, Tomas could feel the taste of Jared's blood in his mouth, tempting him, reaching out to a part of him he thought was missing. He didn't understand it, and he didn't know what to do. His superiors would be expecting a progress report the next day at the latest, and Tomas had no idea what he'd tell them. He did know one thing; he couldn't kill Jared.

If he didn't fulfill his task, though, others would come, and they wouldn't have his scruples. Nodding to himself, Tomas took Jared's unconscious form in his arms and started walking away. As he moved, he realized Jared's phone survived the fall. Over the connection, a female voice repeated Jared's name over and over in a panicky tone. Tomas picked the phone up, taking a wild guess that the woman was Jared's sister. "I assume this is Maya Grayson."

For a few seconds, the woman didn't speak. "Yes," she finally said. "Who is this?"

"That is of no consequence. I just wanted you to know that your brother is still alive. I will contact you later."

"Wait. You can't just—"

Tomas snapped the phone shut before she could finish the phrase. He checked the contacts list and hastily memorized her number and that of her older brother, Flame. If needed, he could find them easily enough, but better safe than sorry.

His task done, Tomas wiped the phone clean, and then dropped it on the floor. Vampires didn't leave fingerprints the same way humans did, but one never knew what kind of technology the shifters could have discovered. With a kick from Tomas's foot, the device went flying and hit the wall twenty feet from Tomas's position. Pieces of the phone scattered all over the place. *Good luck with getting any evidence out of that.*

Tomas checked his watch and knew he needed to hurry. He'd set the cameras watching this area of the campus on a loop, but the error

would automatically vanish soon to erase any traces of meddling. His thrall on the students wouldn't hold much longer, and the real teacher would soon be released as well. Not to mention, Jared had some sort of shifter watching over him. Tomas suspected Jared didn't even know about it, but it probably had some sort of connection to Jared's ownership of the amulet piece. Tomas had incapacitated the strange man as well, but he didn't know how long that would last. He had maybe five minutes to get out of the MIT without being seen.

Keeping a close eye on his surroundings, Tomas left the university, carrying Jared Grayson. Much to his annoyance, the sun shone brightly up above, mocking him from the cloudless sky. Tomas was, to a certain extent, immune to the harm the sun rays could inflict on vampires. His age and experience gave him an edge not only in battle, but also in blending in with humans. Unfortunately, it didn't help him to understand Jared's effect on him. It occurred to him as he ran that there was only one place where he could get some sort of answer, one man who could offer him some insight on this peculiar situation.

When Tomas reached his car, he'd already made his decision. He buckled Jared up in the passenger's seat, arranging him so that he appeared to be sleeping, and then got behind the wheel. As he drove away, he wondered how much time he had until the clan sent another vampire to hunt him.

Thankfully, he had someone to turn to. Reese Winters, the one shifter Tomas liked, and one of the few men Tomas considered a friend. As luck would have it, Reese owned a club in town, the center of paranormal life here in Cambridge. Many youths were drawn to the area due to the presence of its two famous universities, and Reese's bar catered to the needs of the paranormals amongst them.

He reached Reese's club, Sharp, in maybe twenty minutes. After parking the car, he made sure Jared still slept peacefully. He hated the thought of leaving Jared alone even for a moment, but he couldn't

walk into Reese's place with an unconscious man draped over his shoulder.

With a sigh, Tomas left the vehicle, locked it, and headed toward *Sharp*. He nodded at the bouncer, who let him pass without a word.

As soon as he entered the club, a slender, familiar body pounced on him. "Tomas! You're back!"

Tomas mentally groaned as realization struck. With all the Jared mess, he'd forgotten about Casey. Casey Meyers, one of the club employees, was notoriously affectionate to "dark, brooding types" as he himself put it.

Casey was practically attached at the hip to Reese, and he always acted excited when Tomas came to visit. Tomas wondered how Reese put up with that sort of behavior, but he'd never understood his friend.

"Hi, Casey," he greeted the younger man. "Is Reese around?"

"Sure," Casey replied, looking completely oblivious to Tomas's discomfort and annoyance. "Reese!" he called out. "Tomas is here."

"I heard, I heard," a voice said from the back. "Hold your horses."

Casey let out a small laugh and left Tomas's side, intercepting Reese as the man appeared from a door behind the bar. "Oh, I'll hold them all right," he purred in Reese's ear. Tomas was torn between pity and envy at the sight of Casey sticking his tongue in Reese's ear. Would Tomas ever get something like that from Jared? And why in the world did he even want that?

Reese groaned and somehow managed to push Casey away. "Babe, we've got company."

"Right. Sorry," Casey replied, not sounding very repentant. He sat down at the bar and fixed Tomas with an expectant look.

"Ignore him," Reese said with a sigh. "Come on in and tell me what's the matter."

Tomas followed Reese and sat down next to Casey. "Remember the mission I mentioned a few days back?"

Reese looked uncomfortable when he nodded. Tomas couldn't blame him. After all, Reese often kept him informed of important

things in the shifter world. Knowing how Tomas would use this information had displeased his friend.

"I went to pay Jared Grayson a visit." He paused, not knowing how to explain. "He was immune to my thrall," he finally said. "And..."

"And?" Reese prodded.

"I couldn't hurt him," Tomas breathed out. "He...I wanted him. He tasted so amazing. God, Reese, I don't know what to do."

Reese made a thoughtful sound. "So you're aroused, you like the taste of his blood, and can't finish the mission because of it?"

"Something like that," Tomas replied. There was more to it than that, but Tomas didn't know how to explain it. "Any clue on what's going on?"

"Well, that's an easy enough question," Casey answered in Reese's stead. "You're his mate."

"Mate?" Tomas repeated.

Casey nodded, offering him a bright smile. "Jared Grayson is a werewolf, right?" The question was obviously rhetorical, as he didn't wait for a reply. "How did he act in your presence?"

Tomas remembered the scene from the university, and his dick hardened at the memory.

"I see," Casey said, chuckling. "Is he here with you? Maybe I can help out. You know, provide a shoulder to cry on, that sort of thing."

"Why would you do that?" Tomas asked, feeling confused. Casey seemed to know a lot about this sort of thing.

"Casey is a werewolf, too," Reese said with a deep sigh.

Casey nodded and clung to Reese's neck. "And Reese is my dear, dear stallion mate. Go on, bring him inside."

Feeling more out of his depth than ever, Tomas turned his back on the couple and headed toward the car. Could Casey be telling the truth? And if so, what did that mean for Tomas? God, what a mess.

Chapter Three

When Jared opened his eyes, the first thing he thought was, *What the hell did Brian buy last night?* He couldn't remember a thing, and even his room looked strange and unfamiliar.

As the fog of confusion started to clear, he realized the reason behind the peculiarity of his room's appearance. This place most definitely did not belong in a student dorm on the MIT campus. How had he gotten here?

Flashes of memory struck him as the events of the day slide-showed through his mind—the classes at MIT, being reprimanded by Mrs. Phillips, then the new Ecology teacher, Tomas. The weird man had put some spell on Brian and the others, demanding Jared's piece of The Spirit of Gaia. Jared had been drawn to him like a moth to the flame, aching for the other man—his mate's touch. Still, Jared had tried to get away, but he'd been captured and rendered unconscious by...by the vampire.

"God, a vampire," he murmured. "What have I gotten myself into?"

"A good question, *corazon*," a familiar voice purred.

Jared jumped, startled by the words. He lifted his head, only now realizing that he lay on a soft bed, naked. "You!" he snarled, glaring at Tomas. "Who are you? Where have you taken me?"

The man arched a brow. "You know who I am. I told you my name back at MIT."

Jared snorted. "As if you'd be truthful about it."

"Why would I lie?" the vampire replied with an infuriating smile. "The other students won't remember anything. I'm in no danger whatsoever."

Jared took a deep breath and fought to calm down. It wasn't easy to keep a level head, not in the other man's presence. Already, Jared's body responded to Tomas's proximity. His dick hardened, aching for the vampire's touch. More than their argument in the classroom, he could remember how Tomas's warmth felt against him, the vampire's erection nestled between Jared's ass cheeks. God, if he continued on that trail of thought, he had no chance of ever getting to the bottom of things.

Doing his best to cover himself, he glared at Tomas. "Even if I believe that, it still doesn't answer my question. What do you want with me? What business does a vampire have with The Spirit of Gaia?"

For a few moments, Tomas seemed to consider his words. Or perhaps he was just observing Jared. His gaze stayed fixed on Jared's groin as he licked his lips. Jared's dick throbbed, his body feeling warmer and warmer. Finally, Tomas ripped his gaze away from Jared's genitals and said, "I shouldn't be telling you this, but the thing is we were once its protectors. The duty passed on to others with the ages, but because of recent events, the vampire clans have decided to take hold of it once again. Leaving it in the hands of the shifters is too risky."

Jared's arousal started to melt as he felt anger flow through him. "And where were you when we stood against an army of assassins? Do you have any idea what my brother and friends went through?"

Tomas fixed him with a level stare. "I do know of your bravery, Jared, but the head of my clan has different priorities. I was sent to gather the pieces of The Spirit and bring it back. In the process, I have to kill the previous owners."

"I won't tell you where my piece is," Jared said, his heart thundering at the knowledge of everything he could lose.

“Don’t be silly,” Tomas said with a chuckle. “I know exactly where it is.” His gaze went to Jared’s abdomen and Jared barely managed to suppress a gasp. How could he know? How could Tomas have found the hiding spot?

“I saw it in your mind when I drank your blood,” Tomas replied to Jared’s unspoken question.

Jared was speechless. Together with Yoshi and Viktor, he’d decided that the best place to safeguard their pieces of the amulet was their own bodies. After much debate, they’d decided on placing it under the stomach, in the small bowel area. It had been a bad time for all three of them. They’d gotten sick often, with strong abdominal pains and indigestion. At first, they’d even experienced trouble shifting. Eventually, though, their bodies had adapted to the presence of the foreign object. Yoshi used to tell him that Gaia’s magic helped them, supporting their decision. If that was true, Jared felt very thankful for her intervention.

It would seem, though, that their precautions had been in vain. Tomas could easily kill Jared and take the amulet piece in one single action, killing two birds with one stone. “Why am I even still alive?”

Tomas stepped closer to the bed and brushed Jared’s hair out of his eyes. “I don’t know,” he whispered. “You tell me.”

Jared looked up at Tomas and was astounded at the emotion he could see in the other man’s gaze. His arousal returned with a vengeance, the mate bond requesting consummation. And then, Tomas leaned over Jared and pressed his mouth to Jared’s.

Pleasure shot through Jared’s veins. His lips parted, allowing the vampire entry. As Tomas invaded his mouth, Jared moaned, his entire body sizzling with pleasure. The sensation reminded him of another man, the man whose scent and warmth he hadn’t yet managed to forget. As the memory of Zongxian’s sad gaze swept over him, Jared managed to push Tomas away. “Do you want to sleep with me and then kill me?” Jared cried out. He could not accept this, not even from

his mate. He was sick and tired of being used and lied to. "Stop fucking around."

Tomas took a deep breath and stepped back. "I have no plans to kill you, Jared. At this point, I'm probably an outlaw for my kind, and if not, I will be in the near future."

Jared stared at the other man, panting, well aware of Tomas's arousal and his own. "Where do we go from here then?"

"You are going nowhere," Tomas replied.

"But I need to warn my family of the danger," Jared protested.

"I'll deal with that," Tomas shot back, unfazed. "You're staying here where it's safe. I asked a friend of mine to put you up and he agreed."

As if on cue, a knock sounded on the door. "Come on in," Tomas said. "He's awake."

The door cracked open and a slender young man slipped inside. His hair was dark blue, obviously not his natural color, but the shade matched his eyes, so it somehow fit. He smiled at Jared and waved cutely. "Hi. I'm Casey."

This was Tomas's friend? Somehow, Jared didn't imagine his vampire mate hanging out with a shy, young man like Casey. "I live here with my mate, Reese," Casey explained, and Jared felt himself flush as he realized he'd been very obvious in his thoughts.

"Sorry," he mumbled. "I was just surprised. It's nice to meet you, Casey. I'm Jared."

"I'm a werewolf, too," Casey said, "so Reese and Tomas thought I'd be able to keep you company."

"That would be fun," Jared offered. Casey seemed okay, and maybe Jared could convince the young man to help him escape.

Casey's sweet smile turned into a wide grin. With no warning, he pounced on the bed and on Jared. "We're going to be the best of friends," he declared.

Jared's eyes widened at the sudden attack, but he didn't push Casey away. He was used to having siblings pile up over him, and it wasn't that uncommon for young werewolves to act like this.

"All right," Tomas said. "Keep out of trouble, kids. I'll be back soon."

Jared looked up at his mate. Tomas smiled fondly, and Jared couldn't help but grin back. "Come back safe," he whispered.

Tomas blew him a kiss and winked. "Will do. After all, I haven't made you mine yet."

Jared felt his body respond at Tomas's words, and he pushed Casey out of his arms. "Right. Whatever. Just don't get hurt."

He didn't know why he felt the need to say that, but he'd been through something similar two years back. He didn't want to see anything like that happen again.

Tomas didn't reply, but his eyes twinkled with an emotion Jared was afraid to identify. As Tomas left the room, Jared couldn't help but wonder why mating could never be easy.

* * * *

A few days later

"Tomas, I expected more of you. This refusal to comply with our wishes is unacceptable."

Tomas gritted his teeth in frustration as his clan leader, Augusto Alvarez y Soto, spoke. "I understand, sir," he replied, hating himself for his servility. "Like I said before, I have eliminated Jared Grayson, but returning to Spain is out of the question now. His family is already overcautious and if I leave now, I will not be able to find the other pieces."

"That's your problem," Augusto answered coolly. "You've had more than enough time to deal with this. Come back to the clan with

Grayson's piece and I will send others for Viktor Petrovic and the rest of them."

Tomas knew that by this point, protesting was useless. "Understood. I will return in a few days."

"We'll be waiting," Augusto said ominously and killed the connection before Tomas could find another reply.

Tomas snapped the phone closed and hurled it at the wall. It was useless now, anyway. He had no intention of returning to his clan.

Taking a deep breath, Tomas went back to the kitchen and to his abandoned coffee. He'd been in the middle of preparing it when he'd received the dreaded phone call. It was obviously ready now, and as he retrieved it from the coffee maker, he considered his options.

He'd managed to contact the Grayson family and convince them to meet in a public location, but it had taken him longer than he'd have liked. The Graysons were understandably wary, not that Tomas could blame them. Still, time was running out and their reluctance to cooperate just made things worse.

Perhaps he'd made a mistake, too, when he'd foolishly asked the other bearers of the amulet to come to the meeting. But he was a warrior, not a diplomat, and he didn't know how to deal with negotiations.

It didn't help that Jared remained just as suspicious, and for some reason, kept trying to escape Tomas's hold. Why couldn't Jared understand Tomas just wanted to protect him? With all the risks Tomas had taken, he'd have appreciated a little more consideration.

He knew the only solution was to ignore Augusto and discuss the issue with the so-called upper echelons of the vampire world. But that would take time—time Tomas didn't have. He just had a vague clue on how to find the vampire prince since he'd never actually spoken to the man before. So before he left, he needed to ensure Jared was safe and Jared's family understood what they were up against.

Tomas sighed and put down the coffee cup that no longer held any appeal. He took a look at the clock on the wall. Casey and Reese were

due to arrive any minute now to watch over Jared while Tomas left for his meeting with the Graysons. Tomas needed to talk to Jared once again before that happened.

Nodding to himself, Tomas headed toward Jared's room and entered without knocking. He found Jared staring out the barred window. He was naked, and he didn't even bother to turn when Tomas stepped inside.

"Jared, I need a word," Tomas began.

"So talk," Jared said absently. "Who's stopping you?"

Tomas let out an irritated groan and stalked to the window. "You're acting like a spoiled brat," Tomas said, grabbing Jared's arm and forcing him to turn. "I want you to stop sulking and realize the seriousness of the situation already."

Jared snatched his arm away from Tomas's hold. "I didn't ask for your help, Tomas," he snarled. "The only thing I want is to go home."

"And I would free you if I knew you wouldn't get yourself killed in the process. You are aware that your family is in danger as well, right? Your presence at their side would just make a bad situation worse."

Jared shook his head. "We'd protect each other. We've done it before. We held our own against the snakes. We can do the same thing against the vampires."

Tomas didn't doubt that, but he still knew who would win in such a confrontation. "As strong as you are, you can't go against the vampire nation on your own."

"So what do you suggest?"

Tomas swept an agitated hand through his hair. "Look, I'm leaving to talk to your siblings today. If I can trust them to lay low and not to do anything stupid, I will try to speak with the vampire prince on your behalf."

Jared just stared at him. "I have no idea what you're trying to pull, but it won't work."

Tomas threw his hands up in exasperation. "Why are you so bent on hating me?"

"I don't hate you," Jared muttered. In an apparently unconscious gesture, he licked his lips as he swept his eyes over Tomas's body.

Tomas couldn't take it anymore. Jared claimed Tomas played with him, when in fact Jared was the one going hot and cold, over and over.

For the last few days, they'd butted heads over every issue, and no matter what Tomas tried to do to make his mate more comfortable, Jared reacted with suspicion. To make matters worse, the attraction between them kept growing, but Jared kept sending mixed signals. Tomas had tried to be patient, knowing he hadn't exactly presented himself to Jared in the best way, but it was too much.

Growling in frustration, Tomas grabbed Jared once more and threw him back on the bed.

Jared landed on the mattress with a satisfying "oomph" and gave Tomas a wide-eyed look. "Tomas? What the hell do you think you're doing?"

In a few efficient motions, Tomas tore his clothes off and stalked to the bed. "Taking what's mine," he growled as he pounced on Jared.

At first, Jared fought him, but his efforts were feeble at best. From the moment Tomas's lips pressed against Jared's, Jared surrendered, his arms going around Tomas's neck, pulling them closer together. Their tongues tangled, and Tomas took possession of his werewolf's mouth, reveling in Jared's submission.

They rubbed their naked bodies against each other, the friction delicious and maddening at the same time. "God, Jared, I want to fuck you so badly," Tomas murmured as they broke the kiss.

Jared nodded, his eyes feverish with obvious lust. "Do it. Take me."

Tomas tried to gather his bearings to figure out something they could use for lubricant. In the end, he decided to take things one step at a time. He kissed down his lover's chest, lingering over Jared's

nipples to torture them with his tongue. Jared arched against him and buried his hands in Tomas's hair. "God, yes. Touch me. I need you."

Grinning to himself, Tomas teased the little nubs with his fangs, loving the inarticulate sounds that escaped Jared's lips. Jared tried to thrust up against him, but Tomas held him down, longing to make the moment last. The feel of Jared's silky skin under his fingertips and the taste of his lover's sweat in his mouth drove him wild. Soon, he wanted more. He wanted to feast on Jared's essence, on his blood.

As he abandoned the now-swollen nipples, he licked down Jared's taut abdomen, stopping for a few seconds to swirl his tongue around his lover's bellybutton.

Jared writhed against the sheets, moaning Tomas's name. "Yes. Suck me. Suck me now."

Smiling, Tomas went for the gold. For a brief instant, he took in the magnificent sight of his lover's dick in awe. Then, he forced himself to snap out of it and lowered his mouth over Jared's dick.

Jared tasted sweet, addicting, just like Tomas knew he would, and Tomas couldn't help a moan. He greedily lapped at the tip, loving t2(p a)-1()5((-1(1(gi)-3.7()-2(f,

He went slow, growling around Jared's cock at the tightness that enveloped his finger. Jared fucked his face and alternatively thrust against the invading digit, begging and pleading. At Jared's response, Tomas got more daring, and he thrust the finger inside, unerringly finding Jared's prostate. Mercilessly, he rubbed the tiny gland, knowing how much pleasure it would bring for Jared.

And then suddenly, it stopped. Jared pushed him away with surprising strength and, taken by surprise, Tomas didn't resist. "I'm sorry. I can't do this." His body trembled and his cock seemed to beg for Tomas's touch, as hard as ever, but he sounded as decided as Tomas had ever heard him.

"Why the hell not?" Tomas growled. He'd seriously thought Jared wanted it. Hell, he'd had Jared writhing under his touch. What the fuck? "I'm your mate, right?"

Jared gaped at him. "How do you know that?"

"Casey told me," Tomas replied. When Jared looked disappointed, he elaborated on the explanation, "I could feel something between us, so I asked them about it."

"Oh," Jared said, biting his kiss-swollen lips. "I...It's true. We are mates. But there's something you should know."

"What?" Tomas asked. He had a sinking feeling he wouldn't like the reply to his question.

"I have another mate," Jared said. He didn't look ashamed, but he did seem repentant.

"You're kidding, right? This is some sort of joke. Even I know shifters and paranormal creatures, in general, mate in pairs." He let out a bitter laugh. "So much for Casey's wisdom on werewolves. Let's just stop dancing around each other. I get it. You don't need to lie."

"I'm not lying," Jared cried out. "It's true. I met him two years ago."

Tomas couldn't hear this anymore. He'd thought he'd found someone special in Jared. Obviously, he'd been mistaken.

As Jared spoke, Tomas remembered something about Jared's family. His brother, Loren, had apparently chosen two mates, not just one. Tomas thought it to be an error of sorts, but maybe it had been true. Obviously, Jared wanted to achieve what his brother had. It would have to be with someone else. Tomas didn't share well, and he had no intention to be the third wheel in any relationship.

"Whatever," he sneered, voice dripping with disdain. "I pity him, though. After all, his mate is spreading his legs, whoring himself for others."

He didn't know what made him say that. It wasn't true, and not at all what he felt about Jared. But the words had been said, and they couldn't be taken back.

As Jared sat there, eyes wide in shock, Tomas grabbed his clothes and left the room. He should have never become emotionally involved in this. He'd do the right thing and save Jared, but after that, he'd leave the werewolf be. They'd go their separate ways. In the end, shifters and vampires didn't mix, and Jared's reaction was only proof of that. Tomas would find a way to forget about Jared. Somehow.

Chapter Four

Zongxian felt the magic pull him from the deep slumber of hibernation. At first, his body resisted, as if knowing something was wrong. Then Zongxian's human mind began to work, and his sentence came back to him. Could it be? Could it be the day of Jared's death had come?

Half of him wanted to lose himself in unconsciousness, the pain too acute to bear. The other half, though, couldn't help but hope. Clinging to the magic, he pushed away the remnants of the induced sleep and cracked his eyes open.

At first, it felt strange to move, his muscles unused to activity after a long period of repose. Still, he managed to gather his bearings quite easily, and mere seconds, he shifted to his human form. It left him a bit dizzy and lightheaded, but it was nothing like it should have been. Deep hibernation usually had greater effects on the body. What was going on?

A voice called out to him from somewhere in the distance. "Uncle? Are you there?"

Zongxian tensed. Even if dragons didn't hear all that well, he recognized the address. The tone and sway of the words sounded like his nephew, yet at the same time felt different somehow. "Xiao Shen? Is that you?"

He scrambled to his feet, following his nephew's voice for guidance. "Uncle, this way. Hurry."

Soon Zongxian saw light ahead and realized that, ironically, he was in one of the tunnels he'd intended to use to escape. He reached

the corridor ending and jumped off the ledge, landing on his feet right next to the stone altar in The Chamber of Elders.

A tall, athletic young man stood in front of the table, watching him with a gleeful gaze. "Uncle," he cried out. "Thank the gods."

The young man jumped toward Zongxian and wrapped him in a strong embrace. All doubt disappeared from Zongxian's mind as he hugged his nephew back. In his absence, Xiao Shen must have finally passed into adulthood. "Xiao Shen, you're all grown up."

The young man nodded and broke away, wiping at his eyes discretely. "I finally went into maturing hibernation shortly after we returned from the United States." He paused and lowered his head. "I didn't have time to send word to your mate about what had happened."

Zongxian felt awed by the risks Xiao Shen was willing to take on his behalf. He wanted to berate his nephew for it, but first he needed to know how much time had passed and how Jared was doing. "Now tell me. What year is it, and what's going on? How is Jared?"

"Well, I awoke from hibernation just yesterday. Immediately, I decided to try to appeal to the elders once again, to lift your punishment. I didn't expect them to actually hear me out, and they didn't, but they did tell me that Jared had disappeared a few days back."

"Disappeared?" Zongxian repeated. "Gods! Who could have done such a thing?"

"They didn't know, or they refused to tell me. Anyway, even in these circumstances, they denied my plea to awaken you."

Zongxian gaped at his nephew. "And you took it upon yourself to do it in spite of their decree? Oh, Xiao Shen...This is too risky. Your magic isn't stable enough for such a complex ritual and you're practically going against the law."

"It's okay, uncle," Xiao Shen replied. "I'll be fine. I had help."

As Xiao Shen spoke, Zongxian felt a new presence approach. He should have known. Kaili.

Mixed feelings swirled inside of him as he watched his brother walk inside The Chamber. Kailì seemed the same as ever, but Zongxian thought he could see tiny changes about him. His eyes were sadder, and a few strands of gray hair had started to pepper through his dark hair. Zongxian didn't know what to say or what to do. The last thing he remembered was Kailì's decision to separate him from his mate and then his brutal imprisonment.

In the end, habit and affection were more powerful than the resentment. Instead of kneeling, though, he bowed his head, well aware that Kailì's decision had separated him from Jared. "My Lord."

"Hello, brother," Kailì greeted. "Please, let's leave the formalities aside. We don't have time for that."

Zongxian looked up at Kailì, and his brother actually hesitated. He recovered swiftly enough and started speaking, "As Xiao Shen said, Jared has disappeared and the amulet piece is with him. We'd been keeping an eye on the situation, but we weren't careful enough. He went to his classes the day before yesterday and never returned. The man we had watching him doesn't remember him leaving and it is clear some sort of magic or mental control is involved."

Despair filled Zongxian's heart. "The day before yesterday? He could very well be dead by now."

Kailì sighed. "I suspect the vampires are involved. In the past, they have been keepers of The Spirit, and recent events may have spurred them to act. I have done my best to figure out a way to find him, but it has proven to be harder than I expected."

"I somehow find that difficult to believe," Zongxian said, unable to hold back his skepticism.

"The situation here in the palace is still unstable, Zongxian," Kailì replied. "Some were dissatisfied with your punishment, and even if there isn't outright dissent, the restlessness is enough for me to be concerned."

"What about the older elders?" Zongxian asked.

“Mei Lien still supports me, but Jùnrén and Yao Niang aren’t being very helpful. They refused to accept any compromise with shortening your sentence, so I ignored them and did it anyway.” Kailì’s mouth tightened with frustration. “Either way, I know that you are the only one who can find Jared. This is a sign from the gods. I made a mistake. I wanted to prove I was fair beyond all else, and I ended up doing an even greater injustice. I am now reaping what I sowed.”

Another time, Zongxian would have told Kailì not to berate himself for this entire thing. Now, though, Zongxian was too scared for Jared’s life to do so. If Kailì had allowed Zongxian to return to Jared’s side, this never would have happened. He decided to ignore the unusual admittance of guilt and focused on the essential part of the conversation. “Thank you for your help,” he said. “I will leave at once.”

“I have made arrangements. Xiao Shen will help you out of the palace and give you the items you need. You are clear to use human means of transportation, but you should leave China as soon as possible. Jùnrén and Yao Niang will not be happy once they realize what I’ve done.”

“Will you have trouble because of this, brother?” Zongxian asked. Even with the unforgettable abyss between them, he still felt concerned over his older sibling’s welfare.

Kailì arched a brow. “Of course. Just go on and find your mate. I will take care of things here.”

Zongxian nodded. Unable to help himself, he took a step forward and hugged Kailì. “See you soon, brother.”

“Sure. And I hope that by then, you’ll find it in your heart to forgive me.”

They broke away, and Zongxian left The Chamber of Elders without looking back. Xiao Shen followed behind him, whispering indications as they walked. All the while, Zongxian wondered if he’d find his mate alive and if his brother would survive this quest.

* * * *

Tomas tapped his foot against the tarmac impatiently. The Graysons were supposed to have arrived an hour ago, but there was still no sign of them. He felt unsettled that he'd left Jared on such bad terms and an ominous premonition loomed over his heart.

Picking up his phone, Tomas dialed Reese at the house. "Hey, Tomas," his friend greeted him. "I know what you're going to ask, but everything's just fine. Casey is with Jared and there's no sign of trouble."

Tomas released a breath he hadn't known he'd been holding. "Thanks, Reese. I'm just nervous for some reason."

"Yeah, I get that. No sign of the relatives?"

"Nothing yet." As Tomas spoke, the distinctive feel of a powerful presence tickled his senses. "Wait. I think they're here. I have to go."

"Sure, Tomas. Just be careful, all right?"

Tomas thanked his friend and terminated the connection. Good thing Reese hadn't annoyed him and he'd spared Tomas the expense of buying yet another phone. As he put it away, Tomas kept a close eye on the street, feigning nonchalance.

They were meeting in front of a little café in Cambridge, as Tomas had been reluctant to reveal more about Jared's location than strictly necessary. Reese's house was over the Charles River, closer to Boston than to Cambridge, safely enough away and hidden from view. Tomas hoped that would suffice until he could make other arrangements.

Finally, he saw a silver Lexus approach and park just a few feet away from Tomas's own car. Three men exited the vehicle—a slender, Asian man, a well-muscled African American, and a white-haired Caucasian. They crossed the street and made their way toward Tomas.

“Are you Tomas Medina y Hernandez?” the white-haired man asked. When Tomas silently nodded, he continued, “I am Viktor Petrovic.” Pointing at his two companions, he introduced them as well. “This is Yoshi Kurosawa and Flame Grayson.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Tomas said and extended his hand.

Unsurprisingly, none of them took it. “Where’s my brother?” Flame growled instead.

“Safe,” Tomas replied, “at least for now.”

“Is that a threat?” Flame snarled back. “I will kill you if you hurt him.”

“Good luck with that,” Tomas answered calmly. “Look, I don’t mean either of you any harm. My clan does, though. I need to ensure that Jared and your pieces of The Spirit are safe before leaving to deal with the issue.”

“You know who has The Spirit?” Yoshi asked in a neutral tone.

“Of course,” Tomas replied. “It’s not like I went hunting for Jared just because I had too much free time.”

No one laughed and Tomas abandoned all attempt for levity. “Look. It’s like this. My people want to retrieve The Spirit to safeguard it in our possession once again. Unfortunately, the clan leaders also decided to eliminate their current owners. I don’t want to do that, and I will try to solve the issue diplomatically. In the meantime, though, you need to lay low and hide.”

“Assuming I believe you,” Viktor said, “where is Jared now?”

“With a friend of mine. I assure you, he is very safe and comfortable.”

“Then take us to him,” Flame replied. “But if you’ve been dishonest in any way...”

Tomas just nodded. He had nothing to fear from them. At most, if they did try to attack him, he could retreat before they even figured out what was going on.

As he headed toward the car, the deep, unusual feeling returned, not ominous, but still peculiar. It reminded him of the day he’d met

Jared. He'd experienced a similar thing just before going to the Ecology class. Was Jared here now? Had he fled the house for some reason?

Tomas looked around, his heart beating faster by the second. And then his gaze fell on the tall silhouette of yet another Asian man. He seemed to have appeared out of nowhere, right in front of them. He looked nothing like Yoshi Kurosawa, though. His build rivaled Tomas's own, and he simply emanated raw power. His long, black hair was streaked with tints of red, and his dark eyes speared Tomas with their intense gaze. A magical being, Tomas knew, but that still didn't explain the weird feeling.

He hated it. He didn't want to feel anything else. It had caused him enough heartache and useless concern. He didn't want the complication of emotions, least of all now, when so much needed to be done.

"Tell me where Jared is," the man said.

* * * *

When Zongxian had arrived in the United States, he'd debated on whether to try to visit Rook Valley or to go to Cambridge directly. He'd decided against contacting his mate's family. By now, they probably hated him. Besides, it was possible that they weren't even in Rook Valley. Zongxian couldn't afford to waste any time, so he'd come to Cambridge instead.

The gods had watched over him. As he'd passed through town, he'd felt a peculiar pull, and he'd identified it as a mate bond. Jared was bound to be somewhere in the area.

He felt more than a little surprised when, upon following the abstract sensation, he'd seen Viktor Petrovic, Yoshi Kurosawa, and Flame Grayson talking to another man. Even from the distance, Zongxian could tell the stranger seemed very handsome. His olive complexion and dark hair hinted to a possible Spaniard heritage. In

his stance, Zongxian guessed power and arrogance. Shaking himself, he looked away from the mysterious stranger. Jared was nowhere to be seen, and yet, the pull didn't vanish.

In consequence, Zongxian concluded that the stranger must have something to do with Jared's disappearance and Zongxian felt Jared through him. The gods only knew why, but Zongxian didn't have any other explanation.

Immediately, Zongxian intercepted the four men and demanded to know Jared's location. At first, the stranger seemed surprised by his request. "Why should I do that?" he asked with a smirk.

Zongxian gritted his teeth at the man's impertinence. "I have the right to know."

"I don't agree," Flame snapped at him. "You promised to come back and you never did. You broke my brother's heart."

The stranger's eyes turned outright hostile. "So you're the famous mate then?"

The way the other man said those words sent Zongxian into a frenzy. "What did you do to him?" he snarled. Jared was an incredibly attractive young man and, judging by the stranger's expression, the man had learned this for himself.

"Nothing he didn't want me to," the man said, grinning.

A choked gasp briefly reminded Zongxian of the presence of Jared's family and friends. He ignored them and took another step toward the man. "You will die for this."

"Oh, yeah?" The stranger flashed his fangs at Zongxian. "Bring it on."

Jared's kidnapper was a vampire, then, just like Kaili suspected. "You'll be sorry for your actions, bloodsucker."

As fury flowed over him, Zongxian felt the beast inside him stir. The mere thought of this vampire forcing Jared into something so abominable made him see red. His bones shifted, and for the first time since his hibernation, he changed into his animal form.

It was risky to be in dragon form too long shortly after hibernation. The body could interpret the given signals in a wrong way, and Zongxian could accidentally fall asleep once again. But he knew there was no chance of it now, not with his desire to find his mate and to punish the one who'd hurt him.

Damn vampires. They'd always considered themselves superior to shifters. A long-lived being himself, Zongxian knew more about vampires than other races. They were not undead, not like human legends claimed, nor did they have any problem with religion. However, their powers were great and their society dangerous. It was said that the particularities of their diet strengthened their minds, giving them the power to control the will and actions of others. Their only weakness seemed to be their reaction to the sun rays, but older vampires could even work around that.

Zongxian guessed this creature must have somehow hypnotized Jared, maybe even Jared's friends and family. The pull Zongxian felt must be something similar, another thrall, maybe a side effect from the spell on Jared. If the man could walk so undisturbed in the middle of the day, he must be a powerful warrior. But Zongxian would avenge his mate's honor. He would make the vampire regret ever hearing the name of Jared Grayson.

His scaled tail aimed straight at the vampire, but the man dodged, moving with an almost unfathomable speed. The three other shifters scattered around them, cursing. Zongxian kept his attacks careful, not wanting Flame or any of the others to accidentally get hurt. His fight was with the bloodsucker, the creature who'd bewitched Jared and thought he could do the same thing with Zongxian as well.

The vampire zigzagged around him, trying to confuse Zongxian. In one particularly smart move, he lunged forward, clinging to Zongxian's tail as it swept past and embedding his fangs into it. At first, the scales resisted the attack, but the force and sharpness of the fangs managed to defeat that armor. Zongxian roared as he felt his blood and power being drained, and through his tail no less.

Furious, Zongxian spread his wings and flew up, closer and closer to the sun. He saw the man's eyes widen in realization. Before the vampire could let go of Zongxian's tail, Zongxian swept it through the air like a whip. The blow dislodged the vampire and sent him flying through the air. The man may have ended up in Boston, but Zongxian hadn't flown high enough, so he crashed into a nearby building instead.

Zongxian followed the sound of glass breaking and cursing until he reached the structure that had the misfortune of being temporarily invaded by a vampire. Through the broken windows, he saw the other man struggle to his feet under the eyes of a visibly frightened, crying human woman. He knew her presence should concern him, but he couldn't find it in himself to care.

The vampire seemed more levelheaded. "You haven't seen anything," he said. The woman stopped sobbing, got up, and left the room, completely oblivious to the fact that a dragon now soared outside her window.

Sighing, the vampire turned toward Zongxian. "Stop this. It doesn't help Jared, or any of us."

Zongxian had to admit the truth of that statement. If the stranger died, he wouldn't be able to tell them Jared's location. Never mind the fact that a part of Zongxian rebelled against the thought of hurting the vampire further. It was probably just the other man's thrall, trying to confuse him.

Nevertheless, Zongxian shifted and landed in the woman's apartment. He crossed his arms over his chest and waited for the other man to speak.

The vampire brushed his trousers of dust and shattered glass. "I didn't hurt Jared, you know," he said. "I wanted to ah...be with him, but he declined. He said he already had a mate."

His eyes looked sad and thoughtful, and a burst of emotion hit Zongxian, stronger than any thrall or magic he'd ever experienced. "Jared said that?"

The vampire nodded. "You won the match before I could even get a chance to play it. I guess I'm a sore loser."

He extended his hand in greeting, and after a moment's hesitation, Zongxian took it. "Tomas Medina y Hernandez," the vampire said, introducing himself.

Zongxian distantly thought the man's name was as classy as his entire looks. "Zongxian Long," he said in turn.

As their palms touched, Zongxian felt a current of electricity flow through him. Their gazes met once more, and for a second, time seemed to stand still. Zongxian felt thoroughly aware of his naked body, of the other man standing there, holding his hand. For some reason, it made flames of pleasure lick across his skin. What the hell?

Feeling guilty for this moment of weakness, Zongxian quickly retracted his hand. "Don't try your thrall on me again," he said levelly.

Tomas gave him a confused look. "What? I wasn't doing anything like that. Believe me, if I enthralled you, you wouldn't know it."

As much as Zongxian hated to accept it, that made sense. He chose to disregard the strangeness of the moment and tried to salvage what he could of the situation. "Let's go," he told the other man. "We probably need to do some damage control."

Tomas gave him an amused look. "Indeed. You do have quite a temper."

For some reason, the remark didn't bother Zongxian. Instead, he smiled at the other man. "That's true. Maybe you could help me fix that."

He felt disturbed upon realizing he'd somehow fallen into flirtation again. To get away from the chat, he jumped out the window and landed outside on the tarmac. Tomas followed his example, but remained silent.

Looking around, Zongxian analyzed the destruction he'd wrought with a critical eye. It summed up to a few destroyed vehicles and some damage to the road and the nearby buildings. Thankfully, there

seemed to be no casualties. Now that he could think straight, though, Zongxian cursed himself for losing it.

Fire dragons like Zongxian were notoriously short-tempered and often intolerant. With the passage of time, Zongxian had learned to tame that, to understand others, and to keep a cool head in difficult situations. Kaili had, in many ways, served as a model. Other fire dragons, like Jùnrén, didn't bother, but Zongxian considered it very important. And now, the first thing he did while on the most important mission of his life was lose his temper. The gods only knew how many people had seen him turn into a dragon. "Fuck."

"Indeed," a voice said behind him. Zongxian turned to see Viktor and Flame approach. Yoshi lay unconscious in Flame's arms, and Zongxian became alarmed. He didn't know much about the other man, but from what he remembered, Yoshi was the mate of Loren's brother.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Yoshi paid the price for your stupidity," Flame growled. "He was forced to cast an invisibility illusion on you so that the humans wouldn't bring out tanks and kill us all."

Zongxian distantly recalled that Yoshi had done something similar two years back when the dragons had still been under the Tynan Hearne's spell. An illusion of this magnitude must have been tremendously hard to sustain. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

Flame glared at him, but Viktor lifted a hand, stopping the other man from commenting. "We're wasting time. I thought you said getting to Jared was urgent. Right, Tomas?"

By Zongxian's side, Tomas nodded. Zongxian would have been surprised the other shifters hadn't commented on his sudden reconciliation with Tomas, but Viktor's tone alarmed him. "Why? What's the matter?"

"Come," Tomas replied. "I'll fill you in on the way."

Chapter Five

Two hours later, Tomas drove his very crowded car toward Reese's country home. Miraculously, the vehicle had survived Zongxian's rampage, unlike Flame's expensive Lexus. Tomas had been momentarily amused by Zongxian's expression upon realizing his not so little lapse.

He still didn't understand why Zongxian hadn't been with Jared in the first place. He wanted to ask, but with everyone crammed into his car, the atmosphere was already awkward enough without delving into personal topics. Perhaps he would try to do so later, and then maybe figure out how he fit into the picture.

The attraction he felt toward Zongxian hadn't faded; if anything, it kept growing with every second that passed. But as they continued to approach Reese's house, the ominous premonition from before returned with a vengeance. He found himself clutching the wheel tighter and tighter, and he thought he could detect a similar apprehension in Zongxian's tense posture.

The miles seemed to stretch out endlessly, and Tomas wanted to breathe a sigh of relief when he entered the country road that led to the house. But then, he saw something that turned his blood to ice. In the distance, right where Reese's house was, a thick column of smoke rose to the sky.

Immediately, Tomas started driving faster. On unpaved roads, it meant taking a chance, but his mind whirled with possibilities, and fear clutched at his insides. As they entered the so-called driveway, it seemed to Tomas that his entire world turned to fire and ash. The house was burning, and he could see no sign of Jared or their friends.

“No, no, no, no, no,” he murmured. “This isn’t happening.” Taking a deep breath, he left the car in a rush. “Jared! Reese! Casey!” he called out. “Where are you?”

Zongxian’s voice joined his, even louder and more desperate. They went two different paths, trying to cover more ground, the heat from the fire staggering. And then, the niggling, abstract feeling turned into a very distinct sense of familiarity. Tomas cursed and rushed to its source. “Jared,” he couldn’t help but shout again. “Jared, are you all right?”

There was no answer, not that Tomas expected one. Behind him, he heard Zongxian join him. The dragon must have caught the scent as well.

As they reached the outer courtyard of the house, Tomas felt Jared’s presence ahead, tainted with the feel of violence and bloodlust. Not even bothering to cloak himself, the clan leader stepped away from the burning building. He held a very pale-looking Jared in his arms, trapped in an unbreakable grip. “Stop yelling, Tomas. We heard you the first time. Didn’t we, Jared?”

Despite his obvious weakness, Jared somehow still managed to glare at his captor. “Fuck you,” he spat.

Agusto tsked. Tomas saw his clan leader’s muscles tense further, and Jared gasped as the other man’s hold tightened on him. “Stop, Augusto, please,” Tomas begged. “You’re hurting him.”

“When did I allow you to call me by my given name, Tomas?” Augusto replied coolly, obviously a rhetorical question since he didn’t even wait for an answer. “It is clear to me that, for some reason, you’ve lost your path.”

Jared started to struggle once again, but Augusto easily stopped his efforts. With a murmured word from the clan leader, his motions turned slow, until he went limp altogether. *Well, sleeping is better than being hurt*, Tomas surmised.

Tomas forced himself to think calmly and amended his tone. “My apologies, Sir. I assure you I had a good reason.”

Agusto gave him a disgusted look. "Right. The same reason you're fraternizing with the enemy." He threw a glance over Tomas's shoulder, at the four shifters. At some point, Viktor, Yoshi, and Flame had also joined Zongxian. "Betrayal," Agusto snarled, eyes glaring daggers at Tomas.

Tomas didn't even bother to try to talk his way out of it again. "It isn't right," he said. "They don't deserve to die; not for their courage."

"That's not your decision to make," Agusto bellowed. "You were told to do a specific mission, and your refusal amounts to treason."

Behind them, Viktor growled. Tomas felt the shift of power in the air and magic tingled across his senses. "Whatever you're doing," Agusto said pleasantly, "you better stop. Or else my hand might slip, and I'll crush his spine. A werewolf he may be, but some damage just can't be healed."

"If you have anything against me, Agusto, don't take it out on Jared," Tomas said. The man had never liked him. Given that Tomas purposely misinterpreted orders from time to time, he guessed Agusto's hostility wasn't so surprising.

Agusto frowned. "Why do you care so much anyway? Vampires and shifters don't mix. You know that." Tomas didn't answer at once, and the clan leader shook his head. "It doesn't matter. Tell me where the amulet is, and I just might let the worthless dog live."

Tomas barely managed to suppress his shock. Obviously, Jared suffered from some blood loss, so Tomas assumed Agusto must have bitten him. How had his clan leader missed the location of The Spirit piece in Jared's memories?

"Return him to us," he said cautiously, "and I will give you The Spirit piece."

Agusto laughed. "As if." He seemed to consider the situation for a moment and then said, "Tell you what. Gather all the amulet pieces. I'm sure you'll be able to do that, given the company you keep these days. Then call me and we'll establish a meeting."

Tomas opened his mouth to protest, but before he could say anything, more vampires started coming out of the shadows. They were surrounded. Of course, Augusto wouldn't have come alone.

To his horror, he saw one of the men, a vampire named Izandro, carried a small wolf. He easily identified the wolf as Casey, but Reese was nowhere to be seen then. "Where is Reese?" He directed the question at Izandro, hoping his clan brother would be a bit more compassionate. They'd known each other for centuries now and got along well enough.

But Izandro said nothing. "Ah, your kelpie friend," Augusto replied instead. "He was too large in shifted form, so we didn't bother taking him out of the house."

The small wolf let out a pitiful whimper, and Tomas threw a horrified look toward the burning building. Not even a shifter could resist such a powerful blaze, and more so a kelpie. Reese was, in all actuality, a water horse, and the fire would affect him greatly.

"And on that note, we're off. Call me when you gather The Spirit pieces. But don't take too long. For a shifter, Jared really tastes delicious."

"Stop," Zongxian said. "I won't let you take him."

Augusto just gave him an amused look. "I'm afraid you can't do anything to stop me, whoever you are."

Tomas placed a hand on Zongxian's arm and shook his head. Augusto had the upper hand here. Even if they all attacked as a group, Augusto could still make his escape with Jared. They would lose their one chance of getting Jared back unscathed. For now, they had a tiny advantage. Augusto didn't know Jared carried The Spirit piece inside him or that Zongxian was a dragon. He could work with that.

Still, watching his clan leader walk away with Jared filled Tomas with a choking feeling of impotence, challenging his resolve. He nearly sped after them, but stopped himself just in time. He knew his clan brethren. They were just as powerful and experienced as Tomas himself, and there was strength in numbers. He didn't have a chance.

Izandro put Casey down on the ground. He threw Tomas a visibly regretful look and mouthed, "In the kitchen."

Agusto didn't comment. "Come on. This heat is irritating. You have two days, Tomas."

Tomas nodded numbly. As the vampires left, Zongxian fell to his knees. "Jared!" he roared. "Jared." His scream echoed in the distance, breaking the now eerie silence.

Zongxian's pain called out to Tomas's heart, but he refused to give up. Agusto was a bastard, but also a vampire of his word. He wouldn't harm Jared, not for two days, at least. Kneeling next to Zongxian, he squeezed the other man's shoulder. "It'll be all right. Come on. We need to get Reese out," he said.

"Reese?" Flame howled. "What about Jared? Those guys took him and it's all your fault."

Tomas didn't protest Flame's assessment. His mind told him Flame was wrong, but he still wished, deep inside, that he could have done something more. He couldn't take it back now.

"No," Zongxian said, much to Tomas's surprise. "This is my fault. If I hadn't gone berserk in Cambridge, we'd have managed to reach the house in time."

"Pointing fingers at each other is useless now," Yoshi said. "Tomas is right. We need to get his friend out. I called the fire department, but it'll take a while for them to get here."

"He is in the kitchen," Tomas mused, trying to figure out a solution, "at the other side of the building." The house was burning erratically, the porch toward the outer courtyard already being consumed, but the kitchens, built out of solid brick, would be all right for a few minutes. "We have to detour to enter through the other door."

Zongxian got up, his eyes shining with renewed decision. "Never mind that. I'm not a dragon for nothing."

Before Tomas could say anything, Zongxian headed toward the burning building and sped right into the flames.

“Wait!” Tomas called out. It was too late. Under Tomas’s terrified eyes, the fire swallowed Zongxian. Tomas nearly collapsed on the ground at the sight. God, if he lost Zongxian, too...What would he do?

* * * *

Zongxian sped through the fiery building, moving as quickly as he could. Because of his fire dragon nature, high temperature didn’t hurt him, and his lungs were smoke-resistant, so he didn’t have any trouble. Still, Tomas’s friend was probably not so lucky, so Zongxian needed to hurry.

He didn’t know what the famous Reese looked like, but the damn Augusto had said something about him being a kelpie. How hard could it be to find him?

Following Tomas’s indications proved to be easier than expected. The house didn’t seem to be that large and the kitchen wasn’t hard to identify. It helped that he immediately heard the powerful neighing of a frightened horse.

As he reached his destination, Zongxian was treated with the sight of a wild-eyed, carnivorous horse. Excellent. The horse huffed at him, angry and vicious, the terror of being trapped in a burning building obviously encroaching on his reason. Zongxian couldn’t blame him. After all, kelpies were by nature water creatures.

“It’s all right,” Zongxian murmured. “I can get you out.”

The horse reared, his powerful hooves clashing against the floor. Obviously, he didn’t trust strange people just like that. Zongxian tried a different tactic. “I can take you to your mate, Casey. Casey is outside. Do you understand?”

Upon hearing the name, the horse settled down, as if trying to shake himself. To Zongxian’s relief, the animal form started to blur until the horse became a naked man. “Casey?” Reese said in a choked voice. “Where is he?”

Zongxian had no idea. He guessed the tiny wolf was Casey, so he hoped Tomas had taken care of him. "Outside," he replied vaguely. "Come on."

Reese nodded and did his best to get up. Zongxian didn't have time for that. He picked Reese up and called out to his magic. He wished he could have used it to save Jared, but it had been too risky. At least he'd be able to get Tomas's friend out.

With his target secured, Zongxian left the kitchens. "Door. Which way?" he asked Reese.

Reese gestured in a general right direction. He seemed very weak and still suffering because of the fire, but he compensated through a very powerful motivation. Zongxian felt grateful for that. Not even a dragon could carry a horse through a burning building and escape in time. Even if his magic could shield Reese from the fire, the smoke would still kill him.

Thankfully, he found the exit with ease and burst outside just as Tomas and the others appeared from the other side of the house. As soon as Zongxian put Reese down, the man turned into his horse form yet again. Viktor carried the small wolf and gently placed it next to the horse.

Immediately, Zongxian returned to the house. As a fire dragon, he had power over this element. Taming it took time and effort, as fire was destructive, wild, and uncooperative at best. Zongxian needed to try. Perhaps he could save at least a little of the house.

As he stood in the middle of the living room, he concentrated his energies, focusing on his inner beast. The dragon stirred, but didn't wake. Instead, it felt Zongxian's need. Pooling the raw energy into his body, Zongxian turned his entire being into a conduit of magic. And then, when his every nerve sang with the overflow of power, he sent it out, swamping the house with it, calling the blaze to him. At first, the fire resisted, but in the end, it bent to Zongxian's will. Ever so slowly, it extinguished by itself, its energy rushing into Zongxian's body instead.

For a few moments, moving seemed to require too much effort. He thought that if he even tried to do so, he would burst into flames. After a few seconds, though, his body started to assimilate everything, shifting it, and replacing the energy he'd lost during the spell.

Zongxian walked out of the house on slightly shaky legs. Outside, Tomas and the others gave him shocked looks. "I didn't know dragons could do that," Tomas said. He sounded out of breath, maybe even relieved.

"Worried you for a second there?" Zongxian asked.

Tomas didn't reply, but his silence confirmed Zongxian's suspicion. He didn't know what was growing between the two of them. Clearly, they both wanted Jared, but at the same time, they seemed to want each other as well. Zongxian resolved to discuss this a different time, when the situation wasn't so fucked up.

Deciding to focus on the matter at hand, he stole a look at the shifters still lying still on the grass. "How are the two of them feeling?"

"They are both very hurt," Yoshi said. "We need to take them to a medic."

"Who will take care of a carnivorous horse and his wolf mate?" Zongxian asked, frustrated. He'd exchanged maybe a few words with Reese, and he hadn't even seen Casey, other than his wolf form. Even so, the two obviously loved each other. It bothered him to think that they would be separated or hurt because of their kindness toward Jared.

"Can't you do it?" Viktor asked. "You have magic."

"Magic doesn't work that way," Yoshi replied. "We all have our specificities and limitations. We can mold our energies only to specific patterns."

Zongxian nodded glumly. His abilities were either destructive or of shielding, designed for a warrior's life. He knew Yoshi's skill lay with illusions. Neither of them was suited for this sort of thing.

"I know!" Flame said. "Jared has a friend at MIT, someone named Brian. He mentioned the kid several times. According to Jared, Brian is fae. Could he help?"

"Definitely," Zongxian replied. "Fae are healers by nature. But how do we get him to come? We can't carry them there. They're too hurt, and anyway, it would be too suspicious."

"I know Brian," Tomas offered. "I'll go get him."

Zongxian sighed. "Make haste. They need help soon, and we still have to come up with a plan to get Jared out."

"I'll get Maya to meet you there," Flame offered. "She's already met Brian."

Tomas nodded. "I'll leave at once. Be careful everyone."

Tomas turned and sped toward the car so fast that Zongxian almost didn't see him. Zongxian remained alone with Jared's family and friends. They would probably demand an explanation to his two-year absence and sudden reappearance.

Much to his surprise, no such thing happened. "Well, until Tomas shows up, we'll do our best to keep them alive," Yoshi said. "Do you think there's anything useful left in the house?"

"Could be," Zongxian replied. "A portion of it wasn't very affected."

"All right then," Viktor said. "You two deal with that and call the humans. Flame and I will see which way the vampires took before the tracks fade."

As they scattered around to their respective tasks, Zongxian's thoughts went to Jared. Would they reach his mate in time? He didn't know, but perhaps, with Tomas's help, they had a chance.

* * * *

For some reason, when Jared recovered consciousness, it was to the clear realization that he'd been imprisoned once more. He groaned

at the feeling of déjà-vu. He was getting sick of being attacked by vampires, having his blood sucked and being forced into sleep.

Then again, the situation had turned even worse, out of the frying pan and into the fire, so to speak. At least with Tomas, he'd been safe. The man didn't want to hurt him, not physically. Jared winced as he remembered their last conversation. That had hurt since it hit dangerously close to home.

Tomas had a right to be angry. Jared had begged and pleaded to be touched, and then suddenly announced he had another mate. Could he have been any more tactless? He didn't blame Tomas for his reaction. But Jared couldn't help it. He wanted them both—Zongxian, with his quiet fire, and Tomas, with his pure, carnal passion.

His eyes widened as he recalled the scene in front of Reese's house. Tomas had been there, but another man had joined him, a man Jared still dreamed about. Zongxian Long. When had Zongxian come back, and why had he been with Tomas?

"Oh, you're awake," a voice said suddenly, drawing him out of his musings.

Jared looked toward the speaker and saw a man lounging on a comfortable-looking armchair, a book in his lap. "Who are you?" Jared asked. "What do you want with me?"

"I'm Izador," the man replied. "And I don't want anything with you. I'm just guarding you."

Jared had a feeling there was more to it than that. "Right." A brief memory flashed through his mind, the image of the same man bursting inside Reese's house. "You were there. You were with the kidnappers."

Izador nodded, his dark bangs covering his eyes. "It's my job."

Jared didn't continue the conversation. People who had no minds of their own irritated him. He tried to get up, but found that he was tied to the bed. Unsurprisingly, when he attempted to shift the cuffs to reach the clasp, he realized that doing so just moved the padding around. Without it, his bare skin came into contact with the silver of

the bindings. He hissed in pain, knowing that in his already weakened state he had little chances of escaping silver cuffs. What to do now?

The minutes passed as Jared tried to come up with a plan. He must have been taken to the vampires' base. They kept him alive to draw his family into a trap. Had they already removed his piece of The Spirit from his body? He didn't feel any different, but that didn't give him any guarantees.

In an effort to distract himself, Jared found himself analyzing Izador. The man didn't pay him any heed, but Jared didn't expect him to. Perhaps he could get the vampire to help him out.

"Why are you keeping me here?" he asked.

"Agusto is," Izador replied, "not me."

Jared remembered Agusto was the leader of the vampires, the one who had nearly broken his spine and choked the life out of him. "Ah, yes. The very polite and pleasant Agusto. My mistake. So why doesn't he stay here?"

"He has other duties," Izador replied simply.

"Because he is your leader?" Jared asked.

"Yes."

The conversation dwindled into prodding questions and monosyllabic, bland replies. Jared wanted to find a crack, some sort of weakness or desire to exploit, but that wasn't the way of the werewolves, so he didn't know how.

Finally, he sighed and gave up. "I just want to know if I'm going to die or not," he said. "Is that so much to ask?"

"No one knows the future," Izador replied. After a pause, he continued, "If it helps, Agusto wants The Spirit more than he wants your life. If Tomas manages to gather all the pieces, you'll be fine."

Gather all the pieces? Did that mean they hadn't discovered the amulet piece inside Jared? But that didn't make any sense. Not wanting to let the vampire see his confusion, he tried another approach. "You know Tomas?"

“Of course,” Izador replied matter-of-factly. “We are clan brothers. We’ve known each other for centuries.”

Jared couldn’t help a small feeling of jealousy. “Oh,” he said, hating the disappointed sound of his own voice.

Izador laughed. He actually laughed. “Not like that,” he said as his amusement turned into light chuckles. “Just clan brothers.”

Jared felt himself flush. How could he be so transparent? It was being imprisoned all the time, waiting to be rescued like a stupid damsel in distress. A werewolf was supposed to be strong, to help his mate and support the pack. So far, he’d just been useless and weak.

As he cursed to himself, the door opened and the famous Augusto walked inside. Izador got up and bowed his head, and Augusto offered him a nod of acknowledgement. He then turned to Jared. “Hello there, Mr. Grayson,” he greeted. He directed a cursory glance at Izador, grinning. “I see you’re making friends. Don’t deceive yourself by thinking that will get you out, though.”

“I’m not,” Jared replied, even if that was exactly what he’d been trying to do. “How long do you plan to keep me here?”

“Here in this bed or here in my compound?”

What kind of ridiculous question was that? Did he plan on extending Jared’s stay indefinitely? Did he want to toy with him or what?

Augusto laughed. “You will, of course, be allowed to the bathroom, and fed, but only in the company of guards. As to how long I plan on keeping you prisoner...Two days.” He glanced at the clock and then added, “Well, one day and twenty-two hours now.”

That wasn’t so long. “And after that you will release me?” Jared asked suspiciously. There had to be a catch.

“If Tomas succeeds in bringing the four pieces of The Spirit back to me, yes. If not, well, I’d rather not say.”

Judging by the man’s tone, Jared knew what his fate would be. His guess had been confirmed. Augusto hadn’t read his memories. This sucked. Even if Tomas convinced Yoshi and Viktor, he’d have to

contact Xiao Shen, too. Nothing guaranteed that the dragons would agree to it. Besides, Tomas didn't have a chance to gather all the pieces, simply because one of them was inside Jared.

Agusto stepped closer to the bed and swept his finger over Jared's cheek. "It's a pity, really. You are a very handsome and delicious young man. And you intrigue me."

Jared wanted to bite that finger off, but he just waited. "Tell me," Agusto said, "how did you manage to block my thrall? Why can't I read you?"

His eyes fixed Jared's with an unblinking stare, hypnotizing, and his hand continued to caress Jared's face. As he sat down on the bed, he whispered softly, "Tell me."

Jared couldn't take it anymore. His fangs lowered and he shot up, biting into Agusto's arm viciously. He wished he could have reached the man's neck, but the cuffs held him back, burning him. Agusto cursed and pushed Jared off of him. "Damn dog. You'll pay for that."

He lifted his hand, obviously meaning to hit Jared, but Izador held him back. "Sir, if I may, you promised not to hurt him until the deadline expires."

Jared didn't think that would sway Agusto, but surprisingly, it worked. Agusto took a step back from the bed and nodded at Izador. "You're right." With another glance toward Jared, he said, "You'd better hope Tomas does find the amulet or you'll find yourself in quite a bind."

"I am in a bind," Jared pointed out, wiggling his cuffs. "See?"

He spat out the vampire's blood with contempt and Agusto gave him a disgusted look. Turning his back on Jared, he left the room without another word.

"Charming, isn't he?"

Izador didn't reply and Jared knew that his little progress had been undone by Agusto's arrival. Oh, well. Back to the drawing board.

Chapter Six

When Tomas reached the MIT campus, his mind still whirled with the events of the past hour. Even now, the only thing keeping him composed was the two-day deadline. The stark terror of seeing Jared in Augusto's hold and the fear he'd felt upon watching Zongxian enter the burning building overwhelmed him. Why were the two emotions comparable?

He got out of the car and looked around the gates. If Flame was to be believed, his sister, Maya, should be waiting for him. She also lived in Cambridge, studying medicine at Harvard.

Tomas had spent a few days preparing everything for his mission, identifying his target. For that reason, he knew both Maya and Brian. He knew them to be happy-go-lucky people, always smiling, always trying to cheer Jared up. Back when he'd been just a voyeur to their relationship, they'd made him feel guilty for what he was about to do.

He knew he wouldn't receive a warm welcome, but the first sight of Maya and Brian still made him falter. Flame had looked angry and hurt. Zongxian had been furious, but Tomas had been able to deal with that. When they turned to look at him, Maya and Brian simply seemed exhausted, dark circles under their eyes and their faces lined with heavy pain.

They were both so young, and Maya looked so much like Jared that for a few seconds, Tomas felt he couldn't breathe. He'd done his best in the circumstances, but what if it wasn't enough? What if Jared died?

He didn't know how he managed to keep his calm when he walked up to them. "Hello. I'm Tomas Medina y Hernandez."

"Brian Sheehan," the boy said in a small voice. "And this is Maya Grayson."

"He knows, I'm sure," Maya said in a faux-pleasant tone. Without further ado, she slapped him across the face. "That's for kidnapping my brother. Who do you think you are?"

Tomas didn't reply. He rubbed his cheek, idly noting she packed quite a punch for someone so small. It must come with being a werewolf. "Well, now that we have that out of the way," he said, "we should go. My friends need your help."

Maya glared at him, but nodded. "Lead the way," she said between gritted teeth. "I guess nobody deserves to die for their choice in company."

Tomas could now see she carried a large medkit. He guessed it could help, even if they were shifters, but he still wondered about her choice in profession.

In the end, Tomas refrained from asking any questions. Neither Brian nor Maya seemed to be very forthcoming with information. At least they were cooperative enough and didn't further pursue the fight.

When they got into the car, though, Brian tilted his head at him and said, "You look a bit familiar. I've seen you before, right? When you came to take Jared."

Tomas wordlessly nodded as he got behind the wheel. The two students sat in the back and Brian asked again, "Is he all right? What did you do to him?"

"I didn't do anything to him," Tomas answered. "I just wanted to keep him safe. It didn't work out like I planned."

Maya snorted. "Keep him safe? From his own family?"

"No," Tomas replied, "from mine." Or the closest thing he had to a family.

Tomas sighed as he started the car. "Just drop it, all right? You can hate me all you like, but for now, we all have the same goal."

He didn't know what Flame had told them, but they must have known something. Thankfully, they didn't ask anything else, and

Tomas drove all the way to Reese's house in heavy, but blessed, silence.

By the time they reached their destination, Tomas felt nervous again, the sensation of déjà-vu creeping upon him like a specter. What if Augusto had returned? What if Zongxian was gone as well, and Reese, Casey, and the others were dead? *God, Tomas, get a grip. Focus.* He needed a clear head if he wanted to find Jared.

He parked the car in the same place where he'd left it just a few hours back. As he stopped and exited the vehicle, he examined the area for any signs of disturbance. Everything seemed just like he'd left it. Thank God. Nothing had happened in his absence.

"This way," he told Maya and Brian.

He led them to the house with quick, decided strides. Even if he'd been ready for the sight of the burnt building, it still surprised him. Thankfully, Zongxian came out the door before Tomas could say or do anything embarrassing.

"Ah, you're here. Great."

"How are they?" Brian asked. "Is it very serious?"

"Casey, the werewolf, seems to have recovered, but the kelpie isn't doing so well. He inhaled a lot of smoke and he's still hostile. He recovered consciousness and immediately started rearing and neighing, hurting himself. We were forced to bring Casey back out next to him."

"Reese is still in horse form?" Tomas asked.

Zongxian nodded. "Unfortunately, yes. I think the panic of being trapped in the burning building got to him more than the actual injuries. We couldn't move him from the previous location, so we just improvised a corral of sorts."

He pointed ahead where, indeed, a corral could be seen, and inside, a black horse rested. A small man Tomas identified as Casey lay next to it and Yoshi was by his side.

Sighing, Tomas gestured the healers forward. "Please. Save them."

Brian nodded and headed toward the corral. Maya gave Tomas a curious look and then followed behind the fae. He watched as they exchanged a few words with Yoshi and then turned to Casey. Tomas wished he could help, but he'd just get in the way if he went there.

Yoshi nodded to something Brian said and then started walking toward them. "Brian and Maya are taking care of it. I told Maya where she could find everything. In the meantime, we're to convene and make a decision over the Jared situation."

Viktor chose that moment to appear from the house. "I contacted Kai and the others. They should be here soon."

"Where are they now?" Tomas asked, curious.

"We rented a few rooms at a bed and breakfast. I'd have asked him to meet you at MIT, but we need some extra supplies he hasn't yet managed to acquire."

"I can't wait any longer," Zongxian said. "If we're to gather all the pieces of The Spirit, I need to go back to my people and talk to Xiao Shen."

Tomas gave Zongxian a curious look. "Wait. All the pieces? You mean they haven't told you?"

"Tell me what?" Zongxian asked.

"There's no way we can find every piece, simply because one is with Jared still. Within him."

Zongxian gaped. "Within him?" he repeated.

Viktor and Yoshi nodded. Viktor placed a hand over his abdomen. "Here."

"Gods...And your clan leader, he doesn't know about this?" Zongxian asked Tomas.

"Thankfully, no. Either way, I'm not sure how we can fulfill his demands."

"We could gather the three pieces, give them to him in exchange for Jared, and say he will receive the final piece later, after the meeting," Yoshi suggested.

Tomas considered the idea. It could work if Augusto wasn't too pissed at Tomas to accept it. "We can try, but I'm not sure he'll agree."

"Zongxian, do you think Xiao Shen will give you his piece?" Yoshi asked.

Zongxian didn't say anything at first. "Things aren't so good with my people now. You need to know that, technically speaking, when I left, I broke the law. There's always the chance that they won't allow me to take it or to even get out of the palace once again. But I will try anyway."

"What happened, Zongxian?" Flame asked. "You never said." His voice sounded low and threatening, as if saying that no explanation Zongxian could come up with would possibly suffice.

Zongxian sighed. "I was punished for the snake fiasco and sent into forced hibernation. The original sentence was supposed to last until the day of Jared's death, but my brother woke me up ahead of time."

Tomas felt horror swell inside him. He could only guess how much Zongxian had suffered, thinking he would never see Jared again. The ironic thing was that he understood the logic behind the punishment. Also an ancient race, vampires had similar justice practices. When someone committed a crime, they made an example out of that person to avoid anything similar from occurring in the future. For a smooth functioning of their society, it probably worked, but that didn't change the fact that it came with many sacrifices—too many for Tomas's taste. He'd always hated it, and he hated it even more now.

On impulse, he took Zongxian's hand, offering silent comfort and understanding. Zongxian entwined his fingers with Tomas's and offered him a small smile. "Anyway, that doesn't matter now. They won't trap me again. Not now." He squeezed Tomas's hand in an almost painful grip.

The other men stared at them for a few seconds, as if not understanding what was going on. As the silence threatened to turn awkward, Yoshi finally spoke out, "All right," he said. "We'll take care of the other two pieces while you go speak with Xiao Shen."

"Maybe I should go with you," Tomas said. He felt reluctant to let Zongxian go alone in a dangerous situation. He'd already made that mistake once with Jared. He refused to do the same thing again.

He almost thought Zongxian would refuse, but in the end, the man nodded. "Okay. We go together then."

Tomas's heart fluttered as the word "together" slipped into his consciousness. Perhaps he couldn't yet figure out why this was happening, but after living so long, he knew better than to question his instincts and his heart.

He turned toward the other shifters, knowing how important their task was, as well as how much the vampires' involvement in their lives hurt them. "Be careful. Jared wouldn't want any of you to get hurt."

Flame nodded, for once not looking hostile. "You too," he said.

Zongxian let go of Tomas's hand and he started murmuring an incantation in Mandarin under his breath. Energy started accumulating in front of them, molding into two red doors. As the doors opened, Zongxian took Tomas's hand once again. "Here we go," he said. He pulled Tomas toward the portal. Trusting Zongxian to lead the way, Tomas followed.

* * * *

The portal left them in front of Xiao Shen's room in the Long Dynasty palace. Zongxian scanned the hallway for guards. He couldn't see any immediate threat. Good. He had a few minutes to talk to his nephew.

Tomas looked a little green, but that wasn't uncommon when people weren't used to traveling through portals. "It's been a while since I've done this," Tomas said, confirming Zongxian's guess.

Zongxian suppressed a smile, feeling grateful that Tomas had offered to join him. "Come. My nephew should be here."

He rapped his knuckles against the wood of the door. Two seconds later, a wide-eyed Xiao Shen opened it. "Uncle, what are you doing here?" he asked in a shocked voice. "Come in, hurry."

Zongxian stepped inside, gesturing for Tomas to follow. "This is Tomas," he told Xiao. "He is helping me with Jared's rescue."

"You found him then?" Xiao Shen asked.

"Yes, but the vampires refuse to return him if we don't give them all the pieces of The Spirit."

"That's why you're here," Xiao Shen said, "because you need my piece."

Zongxian nodded. He knew he was asking a lot of his nephew, but he had to try.

"Isn't there another option?" Xiao Shen asked.

"Not really," Tomas replied. "If the clan leader doesn't get what he wants, he'll kill Jared. We could try to bust him out, but they'd find us eventually. Vampires have a well-developed information system. We can find out pretty much anything we like."

Xiao arched a brow. "We? You're a vampire?"

Tomas nodded. "I am, but Jared is more important to me than that."

Xiao made an "ah" sound. He glanced from Tomas to Zongxian, his expression thoughtful.

Zongxian knew what his nephew was thinking. In the time Tomas had been gone, he'd had a little time to consider things, to rationalize what he knew and what he felt. When Viktor had called Kaiden and the others, Zongxian remembered that Jared's brother, Loren, had two mates. He'd then recalled the prophecy written in one of the Dynasty's ancient tomes, a prophecy that spoke of the age of deadly

mates when three souls could be united as one. Zongxian had never thought it possible. He'd always considered himself strictly monogamous, but now that he knew Tomas and Jared, that had changed.

Xiao Shen sighed and undid the first few buttons of his shirt. The Spirit piece hung at his neck by a golden thread, bound into a solid encasing. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes, holding onto the amulet part tightly.

"What is he doing?" Tomas whispered.

"I think he's trying to figure out what's the right thing to do," Zongxian replied. In a sense, he understood Xiao Shen. Being the guardian of The Spirit meant both a great honor and a great responsibility. Xiao Shen couldn't let himself be swayed by personal emotions, not in such issues.

Unfortunately, before Xiao could give them a reply, the door burst open. Jùnrén and Yao Niang walked inside, followed by maybe a dozen guards. "Hold it right there," Jùnrén said.

Zongxian cursed to himself. They must have felt the magic faster than Zongxian had expected. He pushed Tomas behind himself and bowed his head ever so slightly in front of Jùnrén. "Greetings, My Lord, My Lady."

"Spare me the polite platitudes, Zongxian," Jùnrén growled. "You've disappointed your people and fled your punishment. You can't possibly think you're welcome here."

"He came to get the amulet piece," Yao Niang said coolly. "He's a coward and a traitor."

"Zongxian is neither of those things," Tomas shot back, surprising Zongxian. "He is a very brave, caring person."

Yao Niang arched a perfectly defined dark brow. "Oh? How do you know him so well? Who are you anyway?"

Tomas mockingly bowed. "Tomas Medina y Hernandez, at your service."

Zongxian wondered if Tomas's aggressiveness just made things worse, but he simply couldn't hold it against him. If anything, it made him happy that Tomas wanted to defend him. Zongxian was by no means a weakling, but he'd learned from birth to respect the elders. He didn't know what he'd do now, when faced with their obvious hostility toward him.

"Why did you bring an outsider here, Zongxian?" Jùnrén asked. "Wasn't your previous misdeed enough?"

"It's not the same. Tomas is trustworthy, My Lord," Zongxian replied. "He would not betray me."

"That doesn't answer my question. Is it true that you two came to get the amulet piece?"

Zongxian could have denied it, but it would obviously be a lie. Xiao Shen stood right there, still holding the magical artifact tightly. Besides, why else would Zongxian have returned to the palace just a day after fleeing?

"It's necessary," he replied, hoping he wasn't dooming them all. "We need it to—"

Yao Niang waved a regal hand at him, stopping him from finishing the phrase. "I've heard enough. Take them away. They need to be judged and punished, once and for all."

As the guards surrounded them, Zongxian willed Tomas not to fight it. They didn't have a chance here, not with two elders waiting for them to attempt an escape, watching them slyly. Perhaps later, when they were in the dungeons, Zongxian could try to create another portal.

As the guards cuffed them both using special, enchanted binds, Jùnrén gave Zongxian a knowing look. "Don't worry," Jùnrén said, "we'll be swift. We will hear you out at once. To the throne room."

Zongxian almost gaped at the elder fire dragon. Jùnrén must have guessed Zongxian's intentions. Or perhaps there was more to it than that. Zongxian had yet to see Kailì or Mei Lien. He suspected his

brother and Mei Lien had been somehow delayed just so that Jùnrén and Yao Niang could get their hands on Zongxian. Fuck.

The trip to the rarely-used throne room was short. Trials were generally held within The Justice Assembly with all the court watching, and they weren't that numerous in the first place. Serious crimes were unusual, and other punishments tended to be handed in on the spot, once the issue in question was discovered. The dungeons existed mostly for dragons who'd gone rogue, an uncommon occurrence. Perhaps Zongxian would be judged by the Rogue Laws. Damn it.

As Yao Niang and Jùnrén occupied two out of the four thrones, Tomas and Zongxian were forced to kneel. "Zongxian Long and Tomas Medina y Hernandez," Yao Niang began, "do you know why you have been summoned here?"

Zongxian didn't nod or reply. The last thing he wanted was to give her more ammunition to use against him. "Well?" she prodded.

"We're here to request help in the name of my mate," Zongxian said.

"A noble sentiment," Jùnrén said. "What does your request imply, exactly?"

Zongxian considered a way to phrase his need for the amulet that they couldn't misinterpret for their own advantage. Before he could come up with one, the throne room door opened and Kailì stalked inside, his gait unusually furious. Behind him, the gentle Mei Lien walked, looking quite put out as well.

"What is this, Jùnrén?" Kailì growled. "Why weren't Mei Lien and I notified?"

Jùnrén frowned at the other elder. "You are too soft, Kailì. Zongxian needs to be taught his place, but you refuse to do it. So we will do it in your stead."

Kailì glared at Jùnrén. "That is not your decision to make."

"He wanted to take The Spirit piece," Yao Niang screeched. "He will betray us all."

“Zongxian, is this true?” Kaili asked, his voice soft.

Zongxian nodded. “It is the only way. Otherwise, the vampires will kill Jared.”

“It is a sacrifice we have to make,” Yao Niang said. “We cannot risk having the same disaster happening all over again.”

“Jared doesn’t deserve to pay for that,” Tomas snarled. “He and his family saved us all.”

“That may well be,” Jùnrén replied, “but it doesn’t change anything.”

“Please, can I have a word?” Mei Lien said softly.

At once, the chaos vanished. Mei Lien rarely engaged in heated debates, but when she did, her input and ideas were priceless. “The Spirit piece is not ours,” she said. “It is in Xiao Shen’s keeping. He is the one who has to decide, not us.”

Everyone stared at her in awe, the idea having obviously never occurred to them. “That’s true,” Jùnrén said, “but Xiao Shen is Zongxian’s nephew. He’ll be biased.”

“I trust Xiao Shen to make the right decision,” Kaili said.

“And I,” Mei Lien added.

Jùnrén gave Yao Liang a look. “Mei Lien is right,” Yao Liang said. “The boy is The Spirit’s guardian.”

“It’s three against one then,” Jùnrén said with a sigh. “Bring him.”

A few moments later, Xiao Shen’s steps echoed down the marble of the throne room halls. He bowed lowly in front of the elders. “My Lords, My Ladies, thank you for this honor,” he said.

“Xiao Shen Long, you know what we’re going to ask,” Jùnrén said. “Will you give your amulet piece to your uncle?”

“Yes,” Xiao Shen replied decidedly.

“Are you certain, Xiao Shen?” Yao Niang insisted.

Xiao Shen nodded. “The Spirit must go to him. I can feel it. I can hear it.”

Zongxian understood Xiao Shen’s words and sent a mental thanks to the gods. Gaia must like Jared and his family a lot.

"Very well," Kaili said. "It will be done." With a wave of his hand, the cuffs tying Zongxian's hands fell. Zongxian suppressed the urge to rub his wrists and gave his brother a thankful look.

"Not so fast," Yao Liang said. "There is still the issue of Zongxian's previous sentence."

"Oh, Yao Liang," Mei Lien answered in a reproachful tone. "Have they not been separated enough? Has our cruelty not caused enough damage?"

"Zongxian Long, rise," Kaili said. "I hereby officially absolve you of your previous sentence. You are free to return here anytime you so desire."

Zongxian got up and went to kiss his brother's hand. "None of that," Kaili whispered. He pulled Zongxian in a strong embrace, hugging him tightly. "Go find your mate. Or should I say, your other mate?"

Zongxian broke away from Kaili's grip and turned to see Tomas watching him with warm eyes. "I suppose you should say that," he murmured to his brother. Louder, he addressed the four elders, "Thank you for your kindness. I hope the next time we meet, this issue will be resolved."

Xiao Shen removed the amulet piece from around his neck and handed it to Zongxian. "Don't forget this, uncle."

Zongxian pocketed the priceless item with care and smiled at his nephew. "Thank you, Xiao Shen. I owe you one."

Xiao Shen shook his head. "Just be careful and bring Jared back safely."

Zongxian nodded. As he turned away from Xiao, he summoned his power and started chanting the familiar spell. Now that he knew the location where he wanted to go, he could use dimensional transporting without a problem.

The red doors appeared in the middle of the throne room. With a final look toward his people, Zongxian took Tomas's hand and stepped inside.

* * * *

The journey back was thankfully less heavy on Tomas's stomach. He stepped out of the portal in front of the house and distantly wondered how long they'd been away.

"That was fast," Viktor said, as if guessing Tomas's thoughts. He sat on the grass, a lit cigarette dangling from his fingertips. "Did you get it?"

Zongxian nodded. "They proved to be more understanding than I expected. What about you guys? Have you managed to get the other pieces?"

"Not yet," Viktor replied. "Still waiting for the drugs to knock us out."

Tomas recalled Viktor's earlier mentioning of supplies and felt astounded at how far the man was willing to go for Jared. Right, the shifters needed to extract The Spirit pieces from their own bodies. "Damn, if I'd known, I would have done it before leaving," Tomas said, trying for a light tone, but failing. Viktor just arched his brow, so Tomas sighed and asked, "So, what's the plan?"

"Basically, Maya is supposed to cut us up and take the amulet parts out of us."

Tomas couldn't suppress a wince. This entire thing was the vampires' fault, and therefore, partially his own. He saw no need for these people to suffer, to be hurt or killed, when they'd done nothing wrong.

"So you can enthrall us or something instead?" Viktor asked. He grimaced even as he said the words, obviously not happy with the idea.

"I can induce sleep," Tomas said, "and wake you when the proverbial deed is done."

"Very well then," Viktor answered. "Yoshi," he called out. "The guys are back. Tomas says he can make us sleep."

“Cool,” Yoshi replied as he exited the house. “Keep your voice down. Reese and Casey are still resting.”

“How did that go?” Zongxian asked. “Are they going to be all right?”

Another voice replied from behind them. “The injuries themselves are no longer very serious. If they can get over Reese’s emotional trauma, they’ll be just fine.”

Tomas turned to see Brian approach. He held a thick bunch of plants against his chest, some of which Tomas recognized as useful for the healing process. “What about you?” Tomas asked Brian. “Are you up to another healing now? Scratch that, two healings.”

Brian nodded and regaled him with a little grin. “I’m not as weak as you think.”

Viktor clapped his hands together and said, “Okay then. Get Maya and let’s do this.”

A few hours later

Tomas leaned over Viktor, pressing his palm over the werewolf’s forehead. Softly, he whispered in the other man’s mind, “Wake.”

Viktor’s eyes slowly cracked open. “How did it go?”

“Fine,” Tomas replied. “Our very own medical crew tells me you should be back to your normal wolfy self in no time.”

Viktor gave a disgruntled look. “Yoshi?”

“Here,” the kitsune said with a soft moan. He seemed to have taken the operation harder than Viktor. According to Yoshi, he needed Loren and Tavon by his side to fuel his magic. Tomas had forgotten how important spirit feeding was for kitsunes.

“Is he okay?” Viktor mouthed at Tomas.

Tomas nodded. “Just a bit weak. Once Tavon and Loren get here, he’ll be fine.”

At his reply, Viktor’s gaze turned impatient. “They’re not here yet? What’s taking them so long?”

Tomas knew it wasn't Tavon and Loren that Viktor wanted. He hoped Viktor's lover, Kaiden, and Yoshi's two mates would arrive soon. The two shifters definitely deserved a moment of happiness after the difficult surgery. Granted, they'd been sleeping the whole time, but it had still been a risk, more so since the amulet parts were located in a delicate place inside their bodies. If Maya had accidentally nicked their bowels while removing it, they could've suffered from unpleasant consequences.

A loud knock sounded at the door, making it creak alarmingly. They'd managed to clear and sanitize one of the rooms in the house for the procedure, but a large portion of it remained fragile, threatening to collapse. Tomas rushed to open the door before something worse happened.

Outside, a handsome redhead stood, fixing Tomas with an eerie golden gaze. Snake eyes, Tomas thought, and he identified the new arrival as Kaiden Hearne. More voices sounded from the direction of the living room. Tomas opened the door wide. "I'm Tomas. Go right inside. He's awake and waiting for you."

As Kaiden entered the room to be reunited with Viktor, Tomas left them be. Two more men rushed past him, one bearing a significant resemblance to Jared. It startled him, making his heart ache with a nameless fear. "It's hard, isn't it?" a voice said behind him.

Tomas nodded at Zongxian. "Hard and unfair." Why did everything good in this world have to come at a price? Why were vampires so arrogant and selfish? These people had a family together, a messed-up one, for sure. After all, who'd have thought werewolves, harpies, and snake shifters could get along so well? But they did, and they'd built something beautiful together. Why did the world have to ruin it?

As it was, the Graysons hated him for complying with an order he'd hated in the first place. Did he even deserve to be by Jared's

side? “We’re outsiders here, Zongxian,” he told the dragon. “How can we help them?”

“We’ll find our place,” Zongxian said. “I know what you’re asking yourself. *Am I good enough for Jared?* Maybe you aren’t. Maybe I’m not either. But together, we can be.”

Tomas stared at Zongxian, unsure of what to say. Truth be told, if someone had said that a few days back, he’d have laughed at the overwhelming corniness. Maybe Zongxian had a point, though. “Perhaps,” he replied with a smile. “We’ll have to see once we get Jared out.”

His hand itched to retrieve his cell phone right that moment and call Augusto, but he resisted. He needed Viktor and Yoshi back to their normal selves for their meeting. If something didn’t work out, he’d need to count on their backup.

“Come on. Let’s see where the others are. We have to make the final arrangements and then call Augusto.”

Zongxian nodded and followed him to the kitchen. Maya and Brian sat cross-legged on the floor, while Flame and his mate, Lysander, leaned against the now decrepit-looking counter. “So we have the three pieces,” Flame began. “When is this famous meeting?”

“I’m supposed to call Augusto, but I wanted to give Viktor and Yoshi a moment to rest.”

“You don’t trust your clan leader?” Zongxian asked.

“Normally, Augusto is a man of his word, but he doesn’t like me. Also, we don’t have all The Spirit parts, so we might find ourselves in trouble because of it. We have to be ready just in case he refuses to free Jared.” He’d already started to make contingency plans, and he intended to let everyone know once Yoshi and Viktor joined them.

“What do we do if that happens?” Maya asked.

“We take him back the hard way,” Zongxian replied.

Maya nodded. “Well until then, maybe you should grab a bite or something. I don’t know if you’ll have the time later.”

Tomas gave Maya a look of disbelief. “Grab a bite?” he repeated in disbelief. “Did you actually make a joke, or am I dreaming?”

Maya flushed as everyone stared at her. “I just meant you should all eat something,” she muttered.

“She’s right,” Tomas replied. “Go ahead and eat.”

“What about you?” Brian asked. His eyes widened as realization struck. “Oh.”

The atmosphere in the kitchen suddenly grew heavy and uncomfortable, and in that moment, Tomas felt very aware of the difference between him and the others. “I can eat food,” he offered, trying to break the silence, “but it wouldn’t be very useful for nutritional purposes. We’re better off saving it for later.”

“A word?” Zongxian whispered.

Tomas nodded and they stepped out of the kitchen. “How long has it been since you’ve fed?” Zongxian asked without preamble.

“A few days,” Tomas replied, guessing where Zongxian was headed with this. “Look, I’m fine. I can go without blood for more than that with no problem.”

Zongxian glared at him, strangely reminding Tomas of the moment they’d met. “You know as well as I do you can’t go into a dangerous situation like this. We can’t afford having you weak.”

“Gee, thanks. And here I thought you were worried about me,” he shot back. He couldn’t help but feel irritated by Zongxian’s words. Here he thought the dragon actually cared about him when he was obviously just a means to an end.

Zongxian’s eyes flashed with irritation and he pushed Tomas against the wall. “Shut up,” he whispered. “Just shut the fuck up.”

He crushed his lips to Tomas’s, taking possession of his mouth with the undeniable strength of his dragon kin. Tomas couldn’t make himself resist. He felt so fucking tired, and he simply wanted to lean against someone, to find some sort of comfort in another person’s embrace, even if that man didn’t want him.

Even as these thoughts passed through Tomas's mind, Zongxian broke the kiss, letting Tomas up for air. "I don't get you. Why must you always think the worst of people?"

"I could say the same thing," Tomas replied.

"I'm not the one who's misunderstanding this whole thing." Sighing in what sounded like exasperation, he pressed his body closer to Tomas's. Tomas groaned as he felt the distinctive sensation of an erection rubbing against his own hard cock. "I want to fuck you, Tomas. I want to tear off your clothes right here and mark you, make everyone see you're mine," Zongxian whispered in his ear.

Tomas groaned as the erotic images started flashing through his mind's eye. He could almost see himself impaled on Zongxian's hard cock, submitting to the other man's domination. He could feel Zongxian's hand on Tomas's own erection, jacking him, making the pleasure escalate. He could sense Zongxian's fire burning him inside out, like the fire of the sun had once done.

"You're imagining it, aren't you?" Zongxian asked. "That's it. Feel it. Feel how good we'd be together. I'd fuck you so hard you couldn't see straight. You for you, not just for Jared." He broke away from Tomas, giving him a heated look. "But not now."

He pulled Tomas toward the main door, or rather, to where the main door had been. Tomas allowed himself to be manhandled, irritated by the man's highhandedness, but at the same time, excited. His body burned with arousal, the images the other man's words had awakened in his mind refusing to go away. He secretly liked Zongxian's forceful side, and the thought that he could bring out the dragon's fiery temper pleased him for some reason.

They hid under the tall trees, away from prying eyes. "Will you feed from me, Tomas?" Zongxian purred as they stopped.

"I can't ask you to do that," Tomas somehow managed to reply. "We've only known each other one day."

Tomas hated the vulnerability in his own voice. Feeding from a blood bag, or even a random donor, was nothing like feeding from a

lover. The pleasure the act could provide often took sex to unfathomable heights. Tomas already knew that whatever carnal pursuit he may attempt with Zongxian would be incredible, but now was not the time for that. In truth, Tomas feared what he'd be able to see into Zongxian's mind if he bit the other man.

"Tomas, I would be honored if you'd allow me to provide sustenance for you. But if you feel uncomfortable, I understand."

The soft, gentle tone combined with the hidden aggression Zongxian had earlier displayed broke the last line of Tomas's defenses. "All right," he said. "I'll do it."

"Only if you want to," Zongxian said, now sounding uncertain.

This time, Tomas laughed. "I want to."

Feeling playful, Tomas tripped Zongxian with a smart kick to his knee. Zongxian went down, falling to the grass. He looked surprised, pleasantly so, and he allowed Tomas to climb on him.

To his shame, Tomas's hand trembled slightly as he unbuttoned and removed Zongxian's tight shirt. His mouth watered as he revealed Zongxian's chest, and he swept his hands over the dragon's warm skin. He'd have thought Zongxian would be cool to the touch. After all, he was a reptile shifter. Instead, his body felt hot—burning almost—as if Zongxian's inner fire tried to reach for Tomas. How would Zongxian's life essence taste?

Suddenly, Tomas felt bloodlust swell inside him. He didn't need to feed, not from a strictly physical point of view, but with Zongxian beneath him, at his mercy, he couldn't help but surrender to his instincts.

Still, he didn't want to rush this. Anything could happen and he wanted to make the most of the time they did have. He held Zongxian down with one hand, and with the other, he unzipped the dragon shifter's jeans. Zongxian groaned as Tomas's fist closed around his hard cock. "Fuck, Tomas."

Tomas briefly paused to take off his own shirt and throw it in the grass. Zongxian let out a moan of protest, and Tomas went back to

torturing his dragon. He jacked Zongxian's dick slowly, all the while peppering the dragon's chest with butterfly-light kisses. "Shh...If we do this, we do it right."

Unsurprisingly, Zongxian didn't protest. He lifted his hips, allowing Tomas to push his jeans lower down. Tomas smirked as he freed his lover's thick cock from its confines. Like Tomas, Zongxian was uncircumcised, and Tomas found that he loved to play with the other man's foreskin. As he toyed with Zongxian's flesh, making the foreskin glide over the wet head of Zongxian's dick, Tomas stared straight into Zongxian's eyes. "I want you, too," he murmured. He ached to say something more, but the knowledge of Jared's predicament held him back.

He wished he could reach his lover's lips, to share another kiss, but the position didn't allow it. Instead, he chose to speed up his strokes on Zongxian's dick, making the other man pant and moan. As he felt his lover's cock throb in his hand, Tomas struck. Still straddling Zongxian, he buried his fangs in his dragon's neck. Warm, intoxicating blood filled his mouth. He felt Zongxian's cock throb and pulse in his hand as the other man came, and jets of cum splashed across Tomas's chest. Tomas felt thunderstruck, the sensations that filled his body too much for him to bear. Through Zongxian's blood, he felt the dragon's fiery magic swirling erratically, the sheer carnal pleasure and Zongxian's happiness at offering his lifemate a part of his own body. Memories and wishes flashed through Tomas's mind, humbling and overwhelming. Pain, desire, longing, fear and anger, pleasure and passion, everything turned into a cocktail of emotions that pushed Tomas over the edge. Moaning against his lover's neck, he found his peak as well.

Tomas released Zongxian's neck and licked the wound to seal it. A few moments passed while both of them panted harshly, trying to recover from their respective orgasms. Tomas would have liked to remain a little longer like that, in the safety of Zongxian's embrace,

but reality returned. “Uh, guys,” Brian’s voice called out from the house. “Viktor and Yoshi are up.”

“Coming,” Tomas replied. He probably should’ve felt embarrassed, but he didn’t. He could sense a bond forming between him and Zongxian, the same bond he had with Jared. They were meant to be together, and Tomas would do everything in his power to make it happen.

They didn’t move at once, but when they did, Zongxian was the first to take the initiative. He pushed Tomas down and licked Tomas’s chest, cleaning him of his own cum. “Getting rid of the evidence,” he said, giving Tomas a heated look.

Tomas groaned as his shaft hardened yet again. They didn’t have time for this, not now. He took his shirt and wiped both himself and Zongxian off, then abandoned it in the grass. They’d still smell like sex, but that couldn’t be helped.

He got up and extended his hand to Zongxian. “Come on.”

Zongxian took it, still holding Tomas’s gaze as he pulled himself up. As they returned to the house, Tomas retrieved his cell phone from his pocket. The gathering of shifters watched him as he dialed Augusto’s number.

Agusto answered the third ring. “Ah, Tomas. What a pleasant surprise. Do you have any news for me?”

“We’re done,” Tomas told Agusto. “We want to meet as soon as possible to make the exchange.”

“Very well,” Agusto replied. “Two hours, in Boston. At the coven.”

The man must have stayed in the United States then. Thank God for small mercies. At least they wouldn’t have to fly all the way to Spain. Still, he was reluctant to go to Agusto’s turf. Even if it wasn’t Agusto’s actual homeland, the man could still use his influence in any vampire compound. “No,” he said. “On neutral ground.”

“You’re not in any position to make demands,” Agusto said calmly. “At the coven or not at all.”

What could Tomas say? He couldn't risk Jared being hurt. He agreed.

Chapter Seven

Jared sat, tied down to the bolted chair, musing over his new predicament. He'd been allowed to move around and visit the facilities but had been promptly immobilized once again when he'd tried to escape. At least he'd done some damage in the process. God, he hated the vampires' arrogance. Who gave them the right to keeping him prisoner like this?

Still, Jared was starting to wonder whether he should just be accepting of this treatment and wait it out. So far, he'd just managed to get Augusto furious to the point that the man had actually hit him. Nothing too damaging, but it had hurt nevertheless. Jared didn't care much about that, but he worried that his temper would get the entire process of negotiations compromised.

Izador had been a tremendous help, though. He'd tempered Augusto a bit until the vampire had thankfully received a call and left the room. Now, Izador watched Jared with a reproachful frown. "You shouldn't have done that," he said in a whisper. The other vampire guards in the room paid them no heed.

Righteous indignation rose inside Jared, even if he'd been thinking a similar thing just seconds ago. It wasn't like he could just sit there and let Augusto fondle him. He'd been waiting for Zongxian for the last two years and even pushed Tomas back because of his confusion. He wanted to be with them, and he wouldn't let this man take it away. "I have my dignity, Izador, and people I love. I can't allow him to taint that, or this body that belongs to my mates."

He found in surprise that he did indeed consider both Zongxian and Tomas as his mates. If he got out of this mess safe and sound, he

vowed to tell them both that, to fix the rift between them. He'd clear up all the misunderstandings and leave all the anger behind. Whatever the reasons for his two mates' actions, they clearly cared for him.

Izador didn't get a chance to reply, as Augusto returned to the room. His cheek boasted three already healing scratches, proof of Jared's angry attack. "Good news, my dear Mr. Grayson. It would seem Tomas has somehow managed to find all the pieces of The Spirit. We are to make the exchange in two hours."

Thankfully, Jared had been expecting the announcement, so he didn't show his surprise. He didn't know what his mates had planned, but it definitely involved some sort of ruse. After all, Jared's piece of the amulet still lay hidden inside his body.

"Great," he said neutrally. "I'm sure you'll be happy to have me out of your hair."

Agusto didn't answer, and the man's silence unsettled Jared. Agusto turned toward Izador and finally said, "Remember, I don't want any surprises."

As Izador nodded, Agusto approached Jared. "You can't enthrall me," Jared said.

"No, I can't," Agusto answered. "But I can make you sleep."

Before Jared could utter any other protest, Agusto pressed his hand to his forehead and muttered, "Sleep." Jared's eyelids grew heavy, the sensation of sleep-induced paralysis already starting to take over his limbs. He mentally cursed Agusto even as he lost consciousness.

He didn't know how much time passed when a ghostly whisper of "Wake" slipped inside his mind. Jared cracked his eyes open, only to realize he'd at some point been moved to a cavernous hall. His limbs felt heavy and numb, a remnant of the induced sleep. "Ah, Sleeping Beauty wakes once more." Agusto chuckled and brushed a kiss against Jared's unresisting lips. It cast away any lingering dizziness, more efficient than a bucket of ice-cold water.

Immediately, Jared started struggling. “Let me go, you lecherous bastard. You have no right to do this.”

Agusto held him tightly, threatening to squeeze the breath out of Jared’s lungs. As the man tightened his grip, Jared was reminded that he had a solid, stone object inside him and against his bowels. Too much pressure in that area could damage his internal organs. His body would recover, but he couldn’t afford to be wounded, not in this situation.

Gritting his teeth, Jared stopped fighting. “Good boy,” Agusto said with a smirk. “Do not worry. Tomas should be here any minute now.”

Jared felt concern swell inside him at the vampire’s tone. He noticed that guards filled the entire room, and he somehow doubted this exchange would go as planned.

Finally, the doors opened and Tomas walked inside, followed by Zongxian, Kaiden, Viktor, and Flame. His heart started beating faster at the sight of his mates together and he couldn’t help but be surprised that his Alpha and Kaiden had also come. It touched him that they were all willing to give up so much and risk such an important thing just for Jared.

Agusto didn’t seem too pleased about the presence of the other three men. “What do you think you’re doing, Tomas? How dare you bring shifters into the covenant?”

“You never said I couldn’t bring others,” Tomas replied calmly. “And meeting here was your idea.”

Agusto took a deep breath, as if trying to calm down. “Very well. Let’s just get this over with.”

“Not so fast,” Flame piped in. “We will give you three of the amulet parts in exchange for Jared. Then, once we’re safely out of here, we’ll send you the fourth one.”

“That wasn’t what we agreed upon,” Agusto snarled, the vitriol in his voice so intense it took Jared aback.

"It stands to reason that we'd want to take some precautions," Viktor replied.

Agusto's body tensed and Jared knew the man would never agree to his friends' terms. "You are trying to fool me, and I don't appreciate it."

Tomas's calm expression faltered. "Like Flame said, we will send it to you once we're all out. You have my word."

Agusto barked out a laugh. "As if I'd believe you. Enough of this. The four pieces now, or Jared dies."

Tomas hesitated. Zongxian opened his mouth to say something, but he didn't get the chance. Jared felt the incipient attack, and knew he could not count on diplomatic intervention anymore.

At the last moment, Jared kicked out at Agusto, putting every bit of his strength into the attack. The vampire's hold on him faltered, and Jared broke free. He saw Zongxian and Tomas run toward him, but before he could get to them, Agusto trapped him once more. Pain exploded throughout his body as the vampire dug his fangs into his throat. It was nothing like Tomas's bite and worse even than Agusto's own first bite.

He didn't know how long Agusto held onto him, draining him. He felt the vampire's glee, and through it, he knew Zongxian and Tomas could not get Agusto off him without tearing Jared's throat out.

And then, a burst of fiery magic seemed to engulf them. It didn't harm Jared, but Agusto let out a scream of agonizing pain. He let go of Jared's neck, and Jared fell, tired and limp. Thankfully, Zongxian's strong arms were there to catch him. "You're here," he somehow managed to mutter. "You came."

"Of course we did," Zongxian replied. "Of course we did."

"Hurry," Tomas said. "We need to get out of here."

Jared had no idea how they planned to do that. He thought he heard a loud howl and a powerful hissing noise, but his senses seemed to deceive him, as if the whole world was wrapped in a thick layer of cotton. A caress landed on his cheek, and Jared clung onto that

sensation like an anchor. “Hang on, Jared,” Tomas whispered. “We’ll get you help.”

Help? For what? He had his two mates with him. He didn’t need anything else. Oh wait...Agusto had bitten him. Was he dying? He didn’t want to die, not now, not with so many things unsaid.

Jared struggled to speak, to tell his two mates how much they meant to him, but the words wouldn’t come out. If anything, forcing himself pushed a different feeling to the forefront of his mind, a powerful, throbbing pain that irradiated from his neck and into his body. He felt himself shift into his animal form as weakness inundated his entire being. Jared sent a mental apology to his mates as the world went black.

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Terror swirled through Zongxian as he dodged the vampires’ attacks, holding Jared close. There was so much blood, gods, so much blood. Even if he’d removed Agusto off Jared as soon as possible, the vampire had still done significant damage. Zongxian hoped it hadn’t caused any damage to Jared’s internal organs. With the amulet piece inside of him, even a small injury could be lethal. And now, Jared had turned into his wolf form and lost consciousness. Not good.

In shifted form, Flame, Viktor, and Kaiden made their way toward him, keeping the attacking vampires at bay. They’d decided on taking Viktor and Kaiden with them because of the great power at the two shifters’ command. It had been a calculated risk, given Agusto’s dislike of shifters and the delicate nature of the situation. Still, Zongxian had hoped that power wouldn’t have to be used. He felt uncomfortable seeing the Hydra’s strength manifest inside Kaiden, and Cerberus through Viktor. Even if the two hadn’t completely shifted into their mythological counterparts, they had taken monstrous sizes. Zongxian had to hurry before they lost control of their abilities.

He allowed the rage and pain to build up, and then summoned his element toward him. His fire obeyed, and Zongxian unleashed it on the unsuspecting vampires. Obediently, the blaze avoided his allies.

With the vampires distracted, Zongxian focused on his next task. "Watch my back," he told Tomas.

Tomas nodded and Zongxian took a deep breath, calling his energies to him once again. In front of him, a portal started to appear. As the red doors opened, Zongxian ushered everyone inside and rushed through, closing it behind him.

They emerged at their headquarters, Brian's house in Boston. Brian had told them the Sheehan family had residences all over the world, including one on Beacon Street. Zongxian would have liked to choose a more inconspicuous place, but there hadn't been enough time to choose a secure location.

Brian and Maya rushed toward Zongxian at once. "Oh, my God," Maya gasped. "What happened?"

"They refused our terms," Viktor bit out. He lay on the floor, next to his mate, both of them obviously exhausted, but otherwise fine.

"Where should I take him?" Zongxian asked.

"I prepared a room, just in case," Brian said. "This way."

Brian led him through the house and into a large guestroom. It seemed to have been, indeed, recently cleaned. Everywhere Zongxian looked, he could see supplies—plants, bowls of water, bandages, syringes and many other items, some of them typical to fae medicine, others to the human one.

"On the bed," Brian indicated.

Zongxian obeyed and placed his unconscious mate on the soft mattress. He caressed Jared's soft fur, swallowing around the knot in his throat. "Will he be all right?" he asked Brian.

Brian didn't answer, and before Zongxian could ask again, Maya rushed inside. She sat next to the bed and told Zongxian, "Please, wait outside."

Zongxian wanted to protest, but decided against it. Brian and Maya knew what they were doing. He'd have to trust them and wait.

As he left the room, he saw Tomas and the others already standing there. "Did they say anything?" he asked.

Zongxian shook his head. "I suppose it's too early."

"It will be all right," Yoshi interceded. "I'm sure of it."

Zongxian leaned against the wall, absently staring at nothing in particular. He didn't know what to say. He felt too conscious of Jared's blood drying on his skin, the sight of Augusto attacking his mate replaying in his mind over and over.

Tomas joined him and took his hand. "Come on. You need a shower."

Zongxian glanced at Tomas in surprise. Was the man a mind-reader or what? "We can't leave. What if Jared wakes and we're not here."

"It's just a shower," Loren offered. "It'll take you what? Fifteen minutes? I don't think Brian will be done by then."

Loren's words just emphasized the severity of Jared's injury, and Zongxian found himself squeezing on Tomas's hand. Tomas understood. Flame and the others loved Jared, but only Tomas could know what went on inside Zongxian's heart.

"Come," Tomas coaxed. "It'll be fine. Jared is a strong man. He won't let something like this beat him. It'll be fine."

Zongxian nodded. He remembered the first moment he'd seen Jared, when the young werewolf had threatened to kill him to save his loved ones. Tomas was right. Jared wanted to live too much to lose this battle.

He followed Tomas to the room they'd been given. For some reason, Brian had wordlessly assigned for them a room with a queen-sized bed. Zongxian felt thankful that everyone seemed to be taking things in stride.

He tore off his dirty clothes and watched as Tomas did the same thing. His lover also had blood all over him, less than Zongxian, but

still enough to be troubling. Besides, Tomas was a vampire, and he must be feeling Jared's blood much more acutely than them all, Zongxian included.

Of common accord, Tomas and Zongxian slipped into the shower together. Even the slightest sexual endeavor was out of the question, but the sensation of Tomas's hands running over his skin felt comforting. It made him mildly ill to see the water turned pink with blood, but Tomas's presence strengthened him and gave him the power to believe Jared would pull through. Damn it, his mate was a werewolf, strong in his own right. No vampire would get the better of Jared. Well, maybe Tomas, but he didn't count.

Feeling a bit better, Zongxian turned off the tap and smiled at Tomas. "Thanks," he said.

"Don't mention it," Tomas replied. After brushing a chaste kiss against Zongxian's lips, the vampire stepped out of the shower. "Come on. Our mate is waiting."

Nodding, Zongxian followed Tomas into their bedroom. He could only hope that their mate was, indeed, waiting for them, awake and well.

* * * *

An hour later

The sound of voices woke Jared from his deep slumber. "Why is it taking him so long to come to?" a man asked. Jared's mind provided him with the identity of the speaker. Tomas.

"The blood loss significantly weakened his body, sabotaging his ability to heal," another person said with a tired sigh. "There was also an injury to his bowel that gave us trouble. Thankfully, we managed to close it and drain the residues of feces that could poison him, but it took us time and we'll need to watch him for signs of infection. It's

hard to work around a magical pendant. I've told you this before. Anyway, he's shifted into human form so he should be waking soon."

Jared could swear the answer had come from his friend, Brian. What had happened? Why were Brian and Tomas together?

A moan filled Jared's ears, and he realized it was his own voice uttering it. Instantly, the conversation stopped. Warm hands gripped his own, and a familiar voice said, "Jared. Jared, can you hear me?"

Jared opened his eyes and blinked, fighting back the slight nausea and dizziness. "Brian?" he asked. His voice came out ragged, weird. "What?"

"You gave us quite a scare, my friend," Brian said, and Jared could swear his friend was crying.

Brian took a step back, as two other men moved next to the bed. Zongxian and Tomas sat next to him, one on Jared's right, the other on his left. "Hey," Tomas whispered. "How are you feeling?"

Jared glanced at the two men who'd inhabited his thoughts for so long. "Fine. My voice is weird."

"Your vocal chords may have suffered a bit of damage, but you should be back to normal in no time," Brian offered.

Jared nodded. He recalled Augusto biting him and unwillingly shuddered. What had happened after that? "The others?" he asked.

"They're okay," Tomas replied. "We're making preparations to leave as soon as you get better."

"Leave?" Jared repeated.

"Don't worry about that," Zongxian said. "We'll take care of everything."

Jared would have liked to prod further, but he decided to trust his mates and go with it. He felt too happy to have both his men by his side to really care. He then heard the door open and close, and then footsteps approach. "Jared?" Maya said.

Jared leaned against Tomas and started to get up. "Don't strain yourself," Zongxian protested. He propped pillows behind Jared's neck, obviously concerned.

"I'm fine," Jared answered. He looked at Maya, Loren, and Flame, who stood there waiting. "I'm fine," he said again.

Maya burst into tears and then rushed to hug him. "Thank God. We were so worried."

Jared allowed her to hold him, knowing that she needed the tactile confirmation that he really was alive and well. "It's okay, princess. I'm not going anywhere."

Loren and Flame joined them, creating a circle of people around the bed. "Glad to see you up, little bro," Flame said, patting Jared's leg.

Loren squeezed his way past Zongxian and pressed his hand against Jared's shoulder. "Welcome back."

Jared smiled at his siblings. "Thank you. Thank you all."

"All right," Brian said. "Give him some space now. He still needs to rest. Everyone out."

As Maya got up and wiped her eyes, Jared said, "No. I want Tomas and Zongxian here."

Brian arched a brow, but nodded. "All right." His eyes twinkled with a knowing spark. "But don't do anything too straining."

"Don't worry," Tomas said. "We wouldn't risk him for the world."

"A little get-together with his mates would do him well," Brian suggested, wiggling his eyebrows. "It would give the wolf more strength."

With that, Brian ushered Jared's siblings out and closed the door behind him. Once they were alone, Jared leaned against the headboard and turned his attention toward his two mates. He still ached a bit, but he was recovering rapidly. He could feel his body starting to mend the remnants of his injury. Until then, he wanted to say what he'd never managed to. "I'm not sure what to do," he began. "I... You're both my mates. I'm not sure how to make this work."

"It's okay," Tomas said. "Zongxian and I have grown quite close. If you're comfortable with this, we'd like to, ah..." He paused, as if trying to find words.

"What Tomas means is that we love you, and we love each other as well," Zongxian said bluntly.

Jared felt almost certain this was all a dream. Could it be that his mates wanted the same thing he did? A life together, the three of them? "Really?" he asked.

"I'd never lie to you, *bao bei*," Zongxian said. "Never."

Jared hesitated. "Is it possible to love someone so quickly?" he asked. "The three of us? Can we make it?"

"We can," Tomas said. "I'm sure of it."

Tomas leaned over Jared to press a kiss to his cheek. On impulse, Jared turned and the kiss landed on his lips. Tomas let out a sound of surprise and tried to pull away, but Jared held him close. "You said you wanted this. I want it, too. Why hold back?"

"You're still hurt," Tomas replied. "You heard Brian. We can't risk it."

"Stop coddling me. You heard what Brian said. I'll be fine." He winked at Tomas. "Besides, you can do all the work."

Tomas scanned his face, obviously trying to find any trace of deception. "I think he means it," Zongxian said. Jared gasped as Zongxian's hand sneaked under the covers and closed in on his dick. "Look how hard he is from just a kiss."

Of course I'm hard, Jared wanted to say. Just the thought of his mates together, touching him, owning him, drove shocks of pleasure through his body.

"I suppose we have to fix that," Tomas said with a mock sigh.

"Such hardship," Jared replied playfully.

Laughing, Zongxian threw the covers off Jared's body. Tomas started removing his clothes, but stopped just before taking his pants off. "You sure about this, Jared? If you're not up to it or if you don't want to be with both of us..."

Jared let out an exasperated snort. If anything, the arousal and pleasure just helped his body mend, giving his wolf the energy to heal possible remaining injuries. "Just come here, you two."

His two mates obeyed. Moving faster than the eye could see, they got rid of their clothing and climbed over Jared. The queen-sized bed didn't quite fit three grown men, more so given Tomas and Zongxian's size, but Jared didn't mind. He found himself pleasantly sandwiched between two hard bodies. Zongxian's erection prodded him from behind, while Tomas's rubbed against his own hard cock. "God, I want you. I want this so bad," he said.

Two pairs of hands caressed him, gently exploring every inch of skin. Zongxian's fingers enclosed around Jared's nipples, tweaking them and rubbing them with measured strength. Tomas pressed his lips against Jared's, coaxing them open. His tongue pushed forward, exploring Jared's mouth, lazily massaging and tasting. Jared gasped against the other man's lips, the slow torture driving him mad. He needed more. He'd waited so long for this. He'd thought he'd never get the chance to have it. Now, he couldn't get enough.

"I want inside you," Zongxian whispered in Jared's ear.

Jared nodded in excitement. He wanted to be filled, taken, to feel his mates in every fiber of his being.

Tomas broke the kiss and allowed Zongxian to shift them around the bed. As they moved, Tomas stole a kiss from Zongxian's lips, and Jared groaned at how beautiful his two mates looked together.

"Touch each other," he whispered. "I want to see it."

Tomas grinned at him and pushed Zongxian down, forcibly straddling the other man. Zongxian readily accepted Tomas's domination and allowed Tomas to take possession of his mouth. It seemed apparent to Jared that they must've done this before. He didn't mind. In fact, seeing his mates kiss made him so hot he could come on the spot.

Jared leaned against the headboard and jacked his dick as he watched the beauty of his two men together. Zongxian and Tomas

broke away, panting hard, and gave Jared twin looks of lust. “Come here, you,” Tomas growled.

Jared obeyed, secretly satisfied when he ended up between his two mates once more. Tomas knelt in front of Jared, his hard cock demanding attention. Zongxian positioned Jared on all fours, gently massaging Jared’s ass. He spread Jared’s cheeks and whispered, “So beautiful.” His dry thumb went to tease at Jared’s entrance, rubbing the tiny hole, giving Jared a hint of what would soon happen.

Jared moaned, embarrassment and desire swirling inside him. Sure, he’d had lovers before, but no one had touched him there. He hadn’t dared to pursue his sexual interests too far while Sasha Petrovic had led the pack, and after that, there simply hadn’t been time. His life had been, in many ways, consumed by his family. For once, he’d allow his mates to consume him, and enjoy every minute of it.

He saw Tomas toss something to Zongxian and a few seconds later, heard the distinctive sound of a tube opening. Cool liquid hit Jared’s skin as Zongxian liberally coated his hole with the lubricant. He gasped and spread his legs wide. “P-please. Now.”

“You’re so beautiful when you beg, *corazon*,” Tomas purred. “Come now. Open your pretty mouth for me.”

Jared obeyed and Tomas’s cock nudged at his lips, seeking entrance. Jared accepted the invasion, groaning as the flavor of Tomas’s precum hit his taste buds. Tomas gasped, the vibrations obviously causing great pleasure.

Tomas didn’t move, allowing Jared to take his time, to do what he wanted. Jared gladly took what his mate offered, mapping Tomas’s dick with his tongue, toying with his mate’s foreskin. He sucked lightly on the glistening head, doing his best to give Tomas as much pleasure as he could.

And then Zongxian thrust a finger inside Jared’s ass, and Jared cried out, losing his focus. Tomas caressed his hair, soothing him,

whispering sweet words. He didn't even seem to mind that Jared had lost his grip on his cock.

Jared regretted that transgression, but Zongxian's finger distracted him, and more so when it hit a certain spot inside him that made stars burst in front of his eyes. Another digit penetrated him and Jared found himself pushing back against them, begging for more. By the time a third one joined the first two, Jared was almost incoherent, his entire being aching to be filled, branded by his mates.

Thankfully, his two lovers guessed his thoughts. Zongxian removed his fingers, and before Jared could even feel the lack, the head of the dragon's dick prodded against his hole. Jared gasped as Zongxian pushed inside. Blindly reaching out in front of him, he embedded his now-clawed fingers into Tomas's thighs.

Grunting, Tomas gave Jared what he wanted. He held Jared's mouth open and fed Jared his dick. As Zongxian thrust inside his channel and Tomas took his mouth, Jared felt bliss flow over his body. He'd become one with his two mates, bound together in the most intimate way possible.

They established a slow, almost excruciating rhythm that did nothing to quench Jared's desire. He moaned, clenching his ass around Zongxian's cock. He felt both his mates lose their focus, but they soon recovered, still in control of themselves. "Slowly, *bao bei*," Zongxian whispered raggedly. "No need to rush it. We have all the time in the world."

Jared would have liked for them to lose it, to surrender to the passion, to be taken with it the same way he was. "It's okay, *corazon*," Tomas murmured. "Don't overthink it. We'll take care of you."

Jared couldn't make himself be irritated with his mates. Instead, he closed his eyes and allowed his body to take over. He surrendered to his mates, allowing them to do as they pleased. Between Tomas's cock in his mouth and Zongxian's in his ass, he became a creature of sheer sensation.

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Zongxian gritted his teeth as he struggled to keep his instincts in check. It wasn't easy. Jared's ass squeezed his cock so deliciously, enveloping him in tight velvet heat. Jared's entire body begged to be touched, worshipped, and Zongxian intended to do just that.

He watched his dick leave Jared's ass and then thrust back in again, and groaned at the sight. Everything about Jared tempted him—the perfect globes of his ass, the beautiful curve of his buttocks, the way his sweaty hair curled against the nape of his neck. Thin hairs of light grey fur began to sprout all over Jared's body, yet another evidence of Jared's passion. Zongxian wished he could see those sweet lips take Tomas's cock, but that would have to wait for another time. Guessing by Tomas's pained expression, going slow was as hard for the vampire as for Zongxian.

Over Jared's body, Zongxian met Tomas's gaze. Energy crackled between them, and the dam holding his passion at bay broke. He held onto Jared's hips with more strength than he would've liked, knuckles whitening and claws emerging. His element burned inside him, hotter, brighter, and Zongxian turned it all into raw magic. Snarling, he started thrusting hard in Jared's channel, aiming for his lover's sweet spot.

At the same time, Tomas began fucking Jared's face in earnest, holding their mate still as he took his pleasure. Jared didn't seem to mind. His moans increased in volume, beautiful, passionate, made even more erotic by Tomas's cock muffling them. Zongxian allowed his magic to flow from him over his mates, finding the connection he knew was there. He'd felt it many times before, but now, when they were finally together, he could even see it in his mind, the golden thread binding their destinies.

As the magic sizzled over them, Zongxian saw Tomas's eyes widen. With a cry, his vampire arched his back and came, and Jared

spluttered a bit as he tried to swallow Tomas's offering. Tomas grinned as he removed his dick from Jared's mouth. "Easy, *corazon*. You don't have to take it all now," he soothed, voice husky.

Jared just whimpered, and Zongxian stopped mid-thrust as he swept his eyes over Tomas once again. His mate was still hard, and Zongxian grinned as he saw the desire in Tomas's eyes.

With a regretful groan, Zongxian retreated from Jared's body. Jared let out a disgruntled gasp, but any other possible protests vanished when Tomas swiftly left the front of the bed. With no preamble, he positioned himself at Jared's hole and thrust inside.

Zongxian watched his vampire mate fuck Jared and licked his lips. He reached for the tube of lotion on the bed and opened it once again. Maya would have a fit if she knew the ointment she'd brought along as a medical treatment ended up used as lube. When it worked, it worked, and he didn't have the patience or incentive to go looking for something else.

Squirting some of the lotion on his fingers, he slapped Tomas's ass, letting the other man know what he wanted. Tomas complied with his silent request, thrusting deep inside Jared, then remaining still for a moment. Hastily, Zongxian spread his mate's ass cheeks and pressed two fingers inside Tomas's hole. "Fuck, *mi amor*," Tomas gasped, "hurry."

Zongxian pumped his fingers inside Tomas's body a few times, doing his best to stretch the tight passage. "It's okay," Tomas said. "Do it. Don't worry about me. I want it."

Zongxian would have liked to give Tomas the same courtesy as Jared had received, but his head spun with the overflow of pleasure. He couldn't hold back anymore. He retracted his fingers and in one single, powerful thrust, pushed his dick inside Tomas.

Everything turned into a fast, raw, primal rhythm, and Zongxian lost track of time, knew nothing besides his mates. He sensed a new desire, a new need come from Tomas, entwining with his own.

"Do it," Jared cried. "I want it. Bite me, Tomas."

Yet again, Zongxian felt humbled. Jared allowed Tomas to feed from him just hours after another vampire had nearly torn his neck out.

For a few seconds, Tomas hesitated. Then, he lowered his head over Jared and bit down with tender care. As Tomas did so, Zongxian allowed his fire to emerge from him, bursting over them like a rain of fireworks. Tomas's ass tightened around Zongxian's dick, and Zongxian felt his two mates' climax rush through his own body, bringing him to completion. He buried himself one last time inside Tomas's channel and filled his vampire with his seed. As he collapsed on top of Tomas, a couple of sparks landed on each of their bodies. Three identical tattoos started forming on their flesh, a dragon wrapping his tail around a blood-red moon.

With his magic entwining his life with those of his men, Zongxian finally felt complete. Memories flashed through his mind, not his own, but now belonging to him as well. He rolled off Tomas, smiling. For a few minutes, they could allow themselves to just be, and just love.

Chapter Eight

“So what do we do now?” Jared asked.

They lay spooned against each other, recovering from the mind-blowing sex, just reveling in the proximity of their naked bodies. Tomas sighed. He wished he could just remain like this forever, but reality wouldn't allow them. He knew Augusto had survived the battle. A vampire his age wouldn't die just because of a few burns. He'd have to suffer through an extensive feeding and healing session, but he'd recover soon. The amulet pieces were still in the possession of the Graysons, but their value as a bargaining chip seemed scarce at best. He didn't know why Augusto had agreed to the deal in the first place. After all, he could have easily found another way to locate the amulet parts.

As it were, Augusto would probably try to find them soon. Now that Jared was better, they needed to leave and find shelter somewhere, at least until Tomas managed to find the location of the prince's headquarters. He still believed their only chance lay there. “Let's see if the others are up.”

They climbed out of the bed and took a quick shower. Jared insisted on showering separately, pointing out that they'd never get to solving the Augusto issue if they started having sex again. But even as they started dressing, they brushed against each other, seemingly by accident. Tomas knew better, of course. He wanted to feel his mates against him at all times. Perhaps one day, he'd manage to get his wish.

As they left the room, Zongxian and Tomas flanked Jared, ready to protect him should the need arise. “We'll have to pack and find an

unobtrusive place to hide,” Tomas told Jared. “I need to discuss this with our prince. Maybe he’ll be able to get Augusto off our backs.”

“That’s what you intended to do before, right?” Jared said. “Yeah,” Tomas answered. “I never did manage to find his exact location.”

“We’re going to have to sneak back inside the vampire base,” Zongxian said. “It’s the only way we can find out more information.”

“That’s too dangerous,” Jared said, shaking his head furiously. “There has to be another way.”

“There isn’t. The only one who has power over clan leaders is the prince.”

Jared’s shoulders slumped. “I’m sorry. This is all my fault.”

Tomas went to wrap his arms around Jared. “*Corazon*, what are you talking about? How can this possibly be your fault?”

Jared broke out of his hold, glaring. “If I’d been just a little more compliant, if I hadn’t made him angry, maybe he wouldn’t have reacted like that.”

“Compliant? What do you mean?” Zongxian asked, his tone dark.

Jared didn’t answer and Tomas immediately understood. “That snake!” he growled. How dare he try to touch Jared?

“Did I hear somebody mention snakes?” a mellow, cool voice said to their right. Tomas turned to see Kaiden Hearne approach.

“Hello, Kaiden,” Zongxian greeted. “Glad to see you’ve recovered.”

Kaiden nodded toward Zongxian. “It was nothing. Now, what or who were you talking about?”

Together with the snake shifter, they made their way through the hallway. “Agusto,” Tomas replied. “I meant no offense, of course.”

Kaiden let out a snort. “Of course. So I take it you’re expecting trouble?”

Tomas nodded. “I want to go through with the original plan and talk things out with my prince. But first we need to find a safe

location for everyone. Since this house is Brian's, Augusto might make the connection and find us."

When Tomas and his mates reached the living room, Viktor and Flame were already there, talking in low voices. Viktor looked up and his eyes seemed to shine as soon as he saw Kaiden. Tomas understood how the werewolf felt. He was pretty sure he had the same dopey smile on when he looked at Jared or Zongxian.

Flame cleared his throat, giving Jared a scrutinizing look. "Should you be up? How are you feeling?"

"Fine," Jared said in an exasperated tone. "Werewolf, remember?"

"Where is everyone?" Zongxian asked. Indeed, other than Flame and Viktor, the area seemed to be empty.

"Packing everything up. We guessed it wouldn't be safe to stay here for much longer."

"Good thinking," Tomas said. He admired Viktor for guessing what Tomas had in mind. "Any idea where we could go to hole up for safety?"

"Well, we could try the former Assassins' Guild buildings," Kaiden suggested.

Jared gaped at him. "Are you kidding? The Assassins' Guild?"

Kaiden shrugged. "I've been keeping an eye on things in the past few years. They've moved out from most of their bases in America."

"They have one here, in Boston?" Tomas asked. If so, it could be exactly what they needed. Augusto would never think they'd stayed in Boston, right under his nose, let alone chosen the Assassins' Guild as a shelter.

Kaiden nodded. "All right, then," Zongxian said. "We'll try that. Let's hope it works."

* * * *

A few hours later

Zongxian looked around the large building, wondering how something so innocuous could have once housed one of the most deadly races on the planet. The snakes had left nothing behind when they'd gone. Now, the warehouse was just that, a warehouse, with nothing special or ominous about it. The ownership had gone to a human corporation, erasing the tracks of the Guild. According to Kaiden, though, the structure was rarely used since the man's business had gone under due to the recession.

Now, the former Assassins' Guild base lay abandoned. The occasional homeless man found shelter around it, but the doors and gates remained sturdy, as they'd been built by the shifters. It was a good place to lay low for a while.

They'd brought a couple of mattresses and blankets with them. The upper level of the warehouse held rooms that had once housed assassins, but they'd long ago been stripped of their furniture. Thankfully, the electricity still worked, although the heating had at some point broken down. Kaiden would suffer most from the temperature. Even if he was technically cold-blooded as well, Zongxian had the element of fire at his disposal and he could regulate his body temperature according to his needs.

After they set a provisional base up, Zongxian began to ready his bags for his and Tomas's journey. He refused to let Tomas go alone to see the vampire prince. Tomas just arched a brow at him, but didn't protest, obviously knowing better than to attempt to change Zongxian's mind. Besides, without Zongxian's ability to transport them in and out of unreachable locations, they had no hope of succeeding in their quest.

While the others busied themselves with various other preparations, Zongxian finished his task. As they left their room, they ran into the other shifters, gathered around a makeshift table created out of two empty crates. "So what's the plan?" Brian asked. "Where do we go next?"

"You're going nowhere," Tomas replied. "You're staying here, where it's safe. Zongxian and I will try to find my prince and convince him that our lives are worth something."

"And if that fails?" Jared cried. "What if you don't manage to get through to him?"

"I'm sure it'll work out, *bao bei*," Zongxian replied. "Trust us."

"Are you taking the amulet pieces with you?" Viktor asked.

Tomas shook his head. "Once we talk to the prince, we can see what we should do about that."

Suddenly, a feeling of power swept over Zongxian. He shot to his feet at the same time Yoshi said, "Something's wrong."

"Impossible," Kaiden said. "How did they find us here, and so fast?"

"I don't know how, but they did," Zongxian replied.

Tomas cursed under his breath and Zongxian prepared himself to defend his mates. The incoming enemies didn't even bother to mask their approach. They'd probably done so before, though, and Zongxian suspected the entire area was surrounded.

The powerful presence approached more and more, until, finally, it reached them. With an eerie crunch, the gates were torn apart as a terrible force pushed its way in. A large, rectangular door formed into the solid metal, and a blond young man walked inside. A few dozen vampires followed behind him, with Izador heading the group. "Well, well. What have we here? Our little runaway vampire and his shifter friends. Well done, Izador."

Izador bowed lowly. "As always, I am yours to command, Your Highness."

Zongxian gaped at the exchange. This was the vampire prince? He looked younger than Jared. Then again, appearances were hardly relevant in the world of the vampires.

As the prince turned to Zongxian and his mates, he scrutinized them with an amused look. "Greetings, Jared Grayson, one of The

Spirit guardians. And this must be the famous Zongxian Long. I have to say, I can't blame Tomas for choosing you two over his people."

His expression sobered in an instant. "Step forward, Tomas Medina y Hernandez. Come to me."

Zongxian held his breath as Tomas obeyed and knelt in front of the prince. "Do you know who I am?" the man asked.

"You are my prince, Sire," Tomas replied.

"That's right. Prince Sheridan of the House of Amaranth. It seems that the clans have, yet again, begun to mess things up and I am forced to take things into my own hands."

He pressed his hand over Tomas's head and Tomas gasped, a sound of surprised pain that tore at Zongxian's heart. Sheridan looked at him and Jared as he maintained his hold over Tomas. "Don't even think about it," he said.

Zongxian dug his fingers into his palms in impotent fury. He could do nothing to stop the prince from hurting Tomas. He could feel Sheridan's power, and he knew this time, even with the shifters' abilities, they could not win.

A drop of Tomas's blood hit the floor, and just like that, Zongxian snapped. "Get away from him," he growled. He summoned his fire toward him, and his element gladly obeyed. If he poured his energy into one blast, he could do significant damage to any being, except those immune to fire. It wasn't the case with vampires, so Zongxian could at least try to hold his own.

Sheridan actually smiled. "No need for that, Mr. Long." He lifted Tomas's head and swept his finger over Tomas's lips. As Sheridan brought his bloody digit to his lips, Tomas fell back, released from the trance.

"Thank you, Sire," he said.

Sheridan waved a regal hand, disregarding Tomas's words. "Rise."

For a few moments, Zongxian didn't understand why Tomas thanked his prince. Then it hit him. Sheridan wanted to see Tomas's

memories, but he respected the mating bond by not feeding from Tomas directly.

Tomas took a deep breath and got up. "You received a mission, yet refused to comply to Our demands. You felt it was not fair to the shifters and then fell in love with not one, but two. You purposely deceived a fellow vampire and attacked a vampire coven for your lovers' benefit. What do you have to say for yourself?"

"Nothing," Tomas replied. "My Lord knows my heart and my emotions. Nothing I could say can convey my reasons better than that."

Sheridan nodded. He paused, as if considering something. Time seemed to slow as Zongxian waited for the vampire prince to decide whether they lived or died. "This Spirit issue has become a great embarrassment to the paranormal community as a whole. As such, I will summon a meeting of all the races to discuss the future of the amulet. Until then, I will allow you to keep them and continue guarding them as you have done so far." He swept his gaze over the room, watching them all with sharp green eyes. "But I will require some insurance that you will not try to unite and use the pieces of the amulet."

"We've not done it so far," Kaiden replied. "Why would we do it now?"

"Irrelevant," Sheridan answered. "I cannot rely simply on circumstantial issues. One of you has to come with me, as my guest."

Silence fell over the warehouse. Zongxian stared at the prince in disbelief. Surely, the man couldn't be serious.

"Choose now," the vampire continued, completely ignoring their shock. "I don't have the time to linger here further."

"I will go," Viktor offered. "It is my responsibility to defend my pack and my family."

"No, Alpha," Maya answered. "You have a mate who loves you. You can't leave Kaiden. I will go."

“No, Maya,” Brian said softly. “It will be me. I’m the best choice. Isn’t that right, Prince Sheridan?”

“Ah, yes, Bréanainn of the O’Siodhachain. You will do quite well.”

Zongxian’s eyes widened at the vampire’s reply. The O’Siodhachain family was one of the twelve noble families that formed the main ruling body of the fae. Zongxian had never made the connection, but now it made sense. Brian would be quite a valuable capture, indeed.

“Wait,” Jared said. “You can’t do this. You can’t sacrifice yourself for us.”

Sheridan gave Jared an amused look. “Stop being so dramatic. It’s not like I’m going to bleed him dry or anything like that. He will be perfectly safe and comfortable.”

Jared looked like he wanted to protest, but Brian made his way to his friend. “Don’t worry,” he whispered in Jared’s ear. “I’ll be fine. The prince wouldn’t risk hurting me. It would make all the fae very angry.”

“So you’re important for them, huh?” Jared said, wiping his eyes.

Brian shrugged. “My family is. Me, not so much. But I’m still one of them, so they’ll protect me.” He gave Jared an apologetic look. “I’m sorry for lying about my name. I’d promised my father I wouldn’t say anything.”

“It’s okay,” Jared replied. “I understand.”

Before Jared could say anything else, Sheridan’s voice interjected, “Come along, Bréanainn. We’re done here.”

After hugging Jared one more time, Brian walked to the vampire prince, head held high, displaying no fear. “We’ll be in touch,” Sheridan said. Holding Brian close, he turned on his heel, and disappeared out the gap in the gate, his guards trickling out after him.

“I can’t believe this,” Jared murmured as the vampire prince left. “I can’t believe they took Brian.”

Zongxian wrapped his arms around his mate, holding Jared tight. “Go on, *bao bei*. Cry. Let it out.”

As Jared buried his face in Zongxian's shirt and wept, Zongxian hoped nothing would happen to Brian. For them all, and for Jared especially, he sent a mental prayer to the gods to protect the young fae through the trials he would face.

Epilogue

Jared stared at the email he'd just received with wide eyes. The topic read *In need of your assistance*, and the sender was Brian.

Two months had passed from the fateful day that had separated him from his friend. Life had more or less returned to normal. Tomas had purchased a small home for them in Cambridge, where the three of them lived while Jared still attended MIT. Augusto had given them no further trouble. Jared didn't know what Prince Sheridan had decided regarding Augusto, but he felt thankful for it, regardless.

They'd reached the conclusion that Jared's resistance to the thrall came from his mate bond with Tomas. Tomas's bite had prodded it further, blocking other vampires from reading Jared's memories. Given time, the ability would develop until Jared would become completely immune to vampire powers.

They'd settled into a comfortable routine, but Jared still missed Brian. Tomas occasionally received news of the fae through the vampire court, but this was the first time Brian had contacted Jared directly.

"Hey, *corazon*, what are you doing?"

Jared nearly fell out of the chair at the sudden voice. He'd been so lost in his thoughts he hadn't even felt Tomas approach. "Just got an email a minute ago," he said, nodding toward the screen. "It's from Brian."

Tomas squeezed Jared's shoulder in silent comfort. "What does it say?" he asked.

Jared didn't know what it said, since he hadn't started reading it yet. At once, he proceeded to remedy that problem and clicked on the

message. Tomas leaned against the desk and looked away, giving him privacy.

My dear friend,

I am writing to let you know all is well at the prince's court. Everyone is very kind or at least courteous with me, and I am slowly adapting.

I have to say I expected vampires to be fiercer, given what I'd seen from them before. But so far, they've been quite nice, if somewhat secretive. Maybe they genuinely regret what happened with you and Tomas. Who knows?

Anyway, I actually made a friend here. His name is Izador. He was reluctant to open up to me at first, but I didn't let him escape. Poor man. We spend a lot of time together. I think I may like him, you know, like that. Still, I cannot tell him, not yet, not so soon. I am not sure if he feels the same and I don't want to risk it.

I do miss the university a lot. This isn't what I had in mind when I came to Cambridge, but I can't say I regret it. I miss you more, though. I wish you were here to tell me what to do. What's it like having a vampire for a mate? And how can you know if one likes you or not? Can you ask Tomas about it?

Eagerly awaiting your reply,

Your friend,

Brian

P.S. My regards to Tomas and Zongxian.

"You have got to be kidding me," Jared said as he finished the email.

"What?" Tomas asked. "Is something wrong?"

Jared surmised that Brian would not mind Tomas knowing his little secret, given that he'd openly asked for assistance from the vampire. "Brian seems to have a crush on Izador."

"I have to say I'm as surprised as you," Tomas replied. "But Izador is a good man. If they love each other, they'd make a nice couple."

"Who'd make a nice couple?" Zongxian asked as he entered the room. He wore only a towel wrapped around his hips, having just stepped out of the shower.

Jared's body instantly went into "fuck-now" mode. "Izador and Brian," he replied absently, licking his lips. As always, Zongxian looked mouthwatering. Tomas studied their mate with the expression of a famished man in front of a feast. Shaking himself, he focused on coming up with a reply for his friend. Sex could wait. He needed to help his friend. He could imagine Brian sitting in front of the computer now, chewing on his fingernails in anxiety. "So, how do you know a vampire likes you?" he asked his two mates.

Tomas laughed. "Well, he'd probably be staring at you a lot, maybe licking his lips. He'd want to taste your blood of course." Tomas's tongue traced the line of his teeth, offering Jared a tantalizing view of his fangs.

Jared nodded, his hands trembling as he hit *reply* and started writing the answer for his friend.

"He'd also be protective of you," Zongxian offered, "and want to touch you a lot."

"In many ways, vampires are still old-fashioned beings," Tomas continued. "If he thinks you don't like him, he might refrain from doing anything too forward."

Jared couldn't help but laugh at this. "So we skipped a few steps, huh?"

Tomas chuckled as well. "Yeah. But it was worth it."

Jared cleared his throat, his pants now painfully tight around his dick. "So Brian should take the initiative, to test the waters so to speak?"

“Yes. Tell him to try discreet flirting. He should be able to tell if Izador likes him easily enough. If that doesn’t work, he can always cut his finger or something and see how Izador reacts.”

Jared wrapped up the email to his friend. After wishing Brian luck and asking for updates, he hit send and logged off. “Turn that thing off,” Tomas growled, “and let me show you in practice how a vampire loves his mate.”

“Hey, aren’t you forgetting someone?” Zongxian piped up.

“A vampire and a dragon,” Tomas amended.

Getting up from the desk, Jared grinned at his two mates. “I must be the luckiest man in the world.”

“No, *bao bei*,” Zongxian replied. “The three of us are equally lucky.”

Tomas shook his head at the exchange. “And I’d prefer to get lucky, today, if it’s possible.”

With no warning, Tomas lunged at Jared, taking his mouth in a devastating kiss. At first surprised, Jared accepted his lover’s assault in instants, already used to Tomas’s impulsive behavior.

Tomas tore at his clothing, unzipping Jared’s jeans and pushing them down. They broke the kiss for a few moments as Zongxian helped Jared with his T-shirt. Jared had lost too many clothes to impromptu sex fests, so he now tried to get at least one item of clothing off him in one piece.

As the shirt and denim landed at his feet, Jared leaned against Zongxian’s strong chest. “You feel so good in my arms, *bao bei*,” the dragon whispered as he wrapped Jared in a powerful embrace. The towel fell to the floor, joining Jared’s clothes, and Jared could feel Zongxian’s erection against his naked ass.

Tomas knelt at Jared’s feet, grinning up at him as he swept his gaze over him and Zongxian. “What a sight you two make.”

Zongxian’s arms tightened around Jared, holding him captive against the other man’s chest. By now, Jared had gotten somewhat

used to his mates' idea of cooperation, so he allowed Zongxian to hold him down while Tomas lowered his mouth over Jared's dick.

As his vampire started sucking his cock, Jared let his head fall onto Zongxian's shoulder. He stared at the ceiling tiles, trying to control himself, to hold the pleasure in check and not come on the spot like a teenager. It was easier said than done. His vampire knew exactly how to drive Jared wild, licking and teasing, giving him just the slightest hint of fang. Zongxian's fingers went to tweak on Jared's nipples as the dragon rubbed against him, nibbling on his neck.

At first, Jared managed to hold back, but when Tomas increased the rhythm of his suction, his thoughts scrambled. Jared forgot all about control and simply let go. He started fucking his mate's mouth, groaning as Tomas took him with ease. Honestly, didn't vampires need to breathe?

Zongxian lowered his hands over Jared's hips, forcing him to stop. Jared let out a cry of protest, but obeyed. Tomas started bobbing his head up and down Jared's shaft, his talented hands rubbing Jared's perineum, playing with his testes.

And then Tomas took his cock all the way into his throat and swallowed. Jared couldn't take it any longer. Screaming, he came, drinking in the sight of his vampire swallowing his load.

As his orgasm buzzed through him, he went limp against Zongxian. Tomas got up and pressed his lips to Jared's. As their tongues dueled, Jared tasted himself in Tomas's mouth, and his cock went rock-hard once again.

Zongxian released him in Tomas's embrace as they kissed. Tomas pushed him a few steps back, until Jared's ass hit the edge of the table. He felt Zongxian move around them and distantly acknowledged his dragon mate place the laptop on the chair then roll it away. The rest of the office supplies didn't receive the same courtesy. Tomas blindly swept his hand over the desk and Jared heard the papers and pens scatter all over the floor. He'd have to reprimand his mate about that later. Much later.

Tomas broke the kiss and, in a swift motion, pushed him face down on the desk. Jared hung onto the edge of the table, panting. "God, you're beautiful," Tomas said.

Jared rolled his eyes. "Get on with it," he replied, wiggling his ass.

Chuckling huskily, his mate separated his ass cheeks. "Look, *mi amor*," Tomas told Zongxian. "Isn't he pretty?"

"Very," Zongxian answered. "Go on, eat his ass."

Before Jared could even process the words, a warm, wet tongue licked across his crease. Jared yelped, the sensation sending shocks of forbidden pleasure down his spine. "Tomas," he moaned. "Please!"

Tomas poked and prodded at his opening, loosening Jared's hole, preparing him. As Tomas's tongue thrust in, Jared howled. "Tomas, Zongxian, fuck me!"

* * * *

As Tomas listened to his mate beg, he licked and sucked Jared's puckered opening, alternating with more daring explorations of his mate's channel. He tongue-fucked his lover, and Jared's taste exploded in his mouth, driving him crazy with lust.

All the while, he felt acutely aware of Zongxian watching him, his greedy gaze sweeping over them both. The dragon often liked to see Jared and Tomas together before actually joining the party. It was almost as if Zongxian wanted them so much he needed to be sure they wanted him back.

Tomas's cock throbbed in his jeans, begging for release. He lowered his zipper and massaged his own shaft as he continued thrusting his tongue inside Jared. "Enough of that," Zongxian growled. "It's a waste."

Tomas would have laughed, but he completely agreed with his dragon's assessment. He wanted to come in Jared's ass, not in his own hand. He lifted his head and swept his hands over Jared's naked

sides, feeling the light hairs under his fingertips. “Tell me, *corazon*,” he whispered teasingly. “What do you want?”

“You,” Jared croaked out. “Both of you. Please.”

Growling, Tomas flipped Jared on the desk. Face front, Jared just lay there like an offering to the pagan gods. He looked so decadent that Tomas wanted to devour him whole.

Zongxian tossed him the lubricant they kept close by in most of the rooms and Tomas squirted some of the liquid on his fingers. He pressed one digit inside his mate’s channel, and Jared’s body greedily swallowed him. The second one went in with no problem, while the third one encountered some resistance. The little rimming session had prepared Jared quite thoroughly, but Tomas still took his time to stretch his lover. It wasn’t even because he feared Jared would be hurt. His two mates could take anything Tomas dished out. Even so, Tomas loved to extend their foreplay, to build up the heat between them until he drove Jared and Zongxian both crazy with lust. And even then, he sometimes still took it slow. Perhaps he had a little sadistic streak, but his mates never complained, so it worked out.

He crooked his fingers inside Jared’s passage, finding the spot that knew would make his mate scream. By now, he knew Jared’s body as well as he did his own, and he rubbed the tiny gland over and over. He stopped when his mate started writhing on the desk, concerned that Jared would rub his skin raw against the wood. Zongxian must have thought the same thing, as he pressed his hand against Jared’s shoulders.

“Settle down, *bao bei*,” Zongxian purred, his voice like liquid fire. “You wouldn’t want us to stop, right?”

Jared trembled against the desk, but he calmed down. “You wouldn’t dare,” he muttered, voice raspy.

Tomas laughed as he removed his fingers from Jared’s hole. Yes, they would dare, and Jared knew that well. They wouldn’t like it, though, and they didn’t want to either. He grinned at Zongxian, and his dragon answered with a smirk of his own.

They turned Jared on his side, and Tomas lifted Jared's right leg on his shoulder, exposing his hole. As he thrust inside his mate's body, he saw Zongxian feed his cock into Jared's mouth. The sight of Jared's lips wrapped around Zongxian's cock made Tomas stop thrusting inside his werewolf's body, afraid he'd come right then and there.

When he regained control, he started pounding in and out of his mate's body. They moved together in perfect synchrony, united through their mate bond. The beautiful tattoos that marked them started shining as Zongxian's magic began to break free. It made a peculiar sight against the dark walls of the study, three bloodmoons coming together as one.

Tomas increased the speed of his thrusts, making the desk creak in protest. He could feel his orgasm closing in, and he knew his mates were right there with him. On and on it went, until, with one final thrust inside Jared, Tomas exploded. Zongxian's magic flowed over them, out of control, prolonging his orgasm as his dragon came as well. Jared's ass tightened around Tomas's dick as he found his peak, sending jets of pearly white cum flying through the air.

Tomas and Zongxian collapsed to the floor and leaned against the desk, and Jared rolled into their arms. As Jared smiled at him, Tomas's fangs ached for a taste of his lovers' blood. As usual, his mates felt his need. They cuddled by his side, exposing their necks. At first, he took Jared's essence, the familiar flavor of his werewolf's blood bringing him a wild pleasure beyond words. And when Tomas buried his fangs in Zongxian's throat, sending fire through his veins, Jared did the same for him, claiming him with a powerful bite.

Happiness swelled inside Tomas. He didn't know what he'd done to deserve his two mates, but he'd spend his whole life being thankful for it. And no matter what perils awaited them in the future, Tomas would protect them, his werewolf and his dragon, the two men he loved more than anything in the world.

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A native Romanian, Scarlet was born in 1986 and grew up an avid fan of Karl May and Jules Verne, reading fantasy stories and adventure. Later, when she was out of fantasy stories to read, she delved into her mother's collection of book and, of course, stumbled onto romance.

As a writer though, Scarlet Hyacinth was born one sunny summer day, when a dear friend of hers—the same friend who introduced her to GLBT fiction—proposed they start writing a story of their own. As it turns out, the two friends never did finish that particular story, but Scarlet discovered she had a knack for writing and ended up starting to write individually. And so, between working on her dissertation, studying for exams, and reading yaoi manga, she started writing the Kaldor Saga. Along the way, Scarlet met a lot of wonderful people who supported her, and in the end, she found her story a home and, in the process, fulfilled a beautiful dream.

Also by Scarlet Hyacinth

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