

Siren Publishing

*LoveXtreme Forever*

## Fatefully Yours 4

# HELL'S TEMPEST

*The*  
ManLove  
*Collection*

GABRIELLE EVANS

## Fatefully Yours 4

# Hell's Tempest

When evil penetrates the walls of their sanctuary, the warriors suddenly realize that nowhere is safe from Hades's destruction. While the others set off to find and destroy the threat against their mate, Vapre finds himself alone with Echo for the first time since his arrival.

There's something wrong with Echo, though. He rages out of control with little to no provocation, pushes the boundaries of lewd, and even changes his appearance. Vapre fears he's losing his lover, and when Echo falls into a catatonic state, he's sure he already has.

With one mishap after another, Vapre doesn't know how he is supposed to face down a storm from the Underworld. His reluctance won't stop the new moon from dawning, though, and if he hopes to stand strong in the battle, he must first conquer the tempest inside him.

NOTE! You are purchasing Siren's newest serialized imprint, the LoveXtreme Forever Series. This is Book 4 of 9 in the Fatefully Yours collection. These books are not stand alone. Each is a continuation of the previous book and must be read in the numbered order. Each book may end on a cliffhanger but usually with a happy-for-now for the beta hero and one or more men. The final book contains a happily forever after for the beta hero and all his men.

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

**Length:** 40,657 words

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MANLOVE**



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**HELL'S TEMPEST**

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# **DEDICATION**

For Tina—just because.

# HELL'S TEMPEST

*Fatefully Yours 4*

**GABRIELLE EVANS**

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## **Chapter One**

“For the right to pass into the Elysian Fields.” The answer seemed so clear, Echo didn’t know why he hadn’t seen it before.

“Wait a minute.” Hex sat fully upright in bed and pushed a hand through his hair. “I thought we were fighting to stay here in the Top World. Now, you’re saying that we are trying to pass into Elysium. Echo, that doesn’t make sense. We’re demons. I’m not even sure we have souls. Only the virtuous are allowed to roam the Elysian Fields.”

Echo wanted to roll his eyes, but he refrained. The idea that his lovers didn’t have souls was laughable. They honestly didn’t see themselves clearly. Before he could argue his point, however, a knock sounded at the door, and Vapre eased into the room. “Morning.” He gave them all a beaming smile as he walked over to stand at the foot of the bed.

Mmm, even first thing in the morning, his hair mussed, and his eyes still heavy with sleep, Vapre looked good enough to eat. Echo couldn’t deny that he had the seven most gorgeous men on the planet. Vapre looked like he had something to tell them, but all Echo could think about was convincing his men of a little morning romp between the sheets.



Licking his lips, he batted his eyes up at Vapre and smiled. "Good morning, handsome. Care to join us?" He pushed the blankets down his body until his morning wood bounced free, coming up to slap against his lower belly. Skimming his hand down his bare chest until he reached his straining cock, he palmed the length and stroked it lightly.

Vapre groaned, closing his eyes for just a moment before he refocused on Echo. "Stop," he pleaded. "I came in here to tell you guys something."

Echo knew this of course, but whatever news came at this unholy hour in the morning couldn't be good. He didn't want to listen to bad news. So, he continued to stroke himself, his eyes never leaving Vapre's as soft moans bubbled up from his chest. "Please?"

Vapre had a hungry look in his eyes that told Echo he was about to get exactly what he wanted. Unfortunately, Hex, being the good leader that he was, whipped the blankets over Echo's lap and thumped him in the back of the head. "Behave," he admonished lightly before turning to Vapre. "What's going on?"

"Mac saw something," Vapre answered tightly. His voice sounded strained, and he continued to stare at the blankets covering Echo's lap. He shook his head as though trying to clear it, and moved his attention to Hex.

Sighing in defeat, Echo released his aching cock and slumped against Fiero's side. "They're mean," he mumbled.

Fiero chuckled softly as he wrapped an arm around Echo's shoulders. "I'll take care of you later. I think someone needs to be tied up and spanked," he whispered against Echo's ear. "Would you like that, baby?"

Echo shivered and moaned, pressing more firmly against Fiero's side and grinding his throbbing dick against the warrior's hip. "Please," he whimpered.

"Ouch!"

Echo jerked his head up to see Fiero rubbing the back of his head and glaring daggers at Hex. “What the fuck was that for?” he demanded.

Looking over his shoulder, Echo saw Hex roll his eyes. “Behave, or I’ll paddle both your asses.”

Echo trembled again, his moan mixing with Fiero’s. “Promise?” they asked in unison.

Hex groaned as he pinched the bridge of his nose. “I’m going to ignore them,” he mumbled under his breath. Then he did just that. He shifted so that his back was partially to them and looked up at Vapre.

Vapre’s attention, however, was focused on Echo and Fiero, and Echo felt a thrill run through him at the heated look in his demon’s eyes.

“Vapre!”

Jumping and hanging his head like a child that had been caught in his wrongdoing, Vapre spun around and faced Hex. “Sorry, but what do you want me to do? Just look at them!” Aww, he sounded so whiney that Echo just wanted to crawl up Vapre’s body and kiss the poutiness right out of him.

“Oh, this is no good.” Hex growled as he shoved the covers away and stood from the bed. Snatching his boxers up from the floor, he tugged them on and shoved Vapre’s shoulder to get him moving. “We’ll talk outside.”

“No!” Echo called. For all his complaining about bad news, he really wanted to know what was going on. “I’ll stop. Please, I want to hear this.”

Hex eyed him for a long time as if he doubted the truthfulness of Echo’s promise. Rolling his eyes, Echo pushed away from Fiero and leaned back against the headboard, crossing his arms over his chest. “Better?”

Dipping his head once, Hex resumed his seat on the mattress beside Echo. He waved a hand, motioning for Vapre to sit at the foot

of the bed. "Okay, now what did Mac see that has you in here at seven o'clock in the morning?"

"He says more are coming."

"Good guys or bad guys?" Echo asked.

Hex gave him a look, and Echo huffed. It sounded like a perfectly logical question to him, but Hex had been in a mood ever since Fiero's little run-in with...well, whatever those monsters had been out by the kappas' pond. Echo shuddered as he thought about them.

"Good guys, he says," Vapre answered his question.

"Okay." Hex nodded slowly. "We knew more would be coming before the equinox. I don't see the emergency, though. This couldn't have waited?"

"He says they need help."

"Another rescue mission?" Fiero sat up straighter and swung his legs over the side of the bed. "More residents from the lab?"

Vapre shrugged. "Mac doesn't know who exactly." A wry smile twisted his lips. "He got kind of hostile when I asked and told me it didn't work that way." He waved a hand around to dismiss this. "Anyway, I guess these guys are lost in the woods. They're trying to make it this way, but the storm last week got them all turned around. One of them is hurt," he added quietly.

"Does he know where they are?"

"Not far from here according to Mac."

"Okay, then what are you waiting for?" Echo struggled out from under the blankets and stood in the center of the mattress. "Go get them."

"Does it really require all of us?" Fiero asked as he pushed to his feet beside the bed.

Hex remained seated, his eyebrows drawn together while he thought over the problem. "I don't think so," he said finally. "If one of them is hurt, then I need to go. Fiero, you'll come as well. Vapre, you stay here, but go round up Gage, Onyx, and Eyce."

"I'm coming, too," Echo announced, leaping off the bed to the carpeted floor.

"No, you're not." Hex's voice held such command Echo froze in his tracks and looked up at his lover with his mouth hanging open.

Hex sighed dramatically and reached over to cup Echo's face in his palms. "We need you here, okay? This has nothing to do with you being weak. Plus, this could be a trap, a way to lure you out into the open so they can take you back to the lab. You're too important for that."

"I hate it when you go all logical." Echo crooked a finger for Hex to lean closer then dropped a quick kiss on his lover's cheek when he did. "Fine, but bring me back something good."

Hex chuckled softly and kissed Echo's forehead in return. "Did I mention that you are trouble?"

"Occasionally." Echo waved his hand to shoo them out of the room. "Go rescue something and come back in one piece. I will be very put out if you get hurt." Crossing his arms over his chest, he glared at Hex and Fiero. "Very put out," he emphasized.

\* \* \* \*

"I'm going with you." Mac fisted his hands on his hips and glared up at his mate.

Vapre bit the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing. Gods, the small ones were feisty. Mac reminded him so much of Echo, though Echo could be even more of a handful when he got a full head of steam up. His mate didn't take shit from any of them. It was frustrating as hell, but also refreshing, and even a little endearing.

"It's not safe." Gage huffed out an exasperated breath and scrubbed a hand over his face. "You're too..." He trailed off, his eyes darting from side to side as though trying to come up with a word that wouldn't be too offensive.

“What?” Mac asked dangerously. “Small? Weak? What exactly are you trying to say, Gage?”

“Nothing. I’m saying nothing, except that you’re not going.”

“I think he should go.”

Vapre swallowed back a groan as he looked over his shoulder to see Echo entering the room. His blond eyebrows were drawn together, and he had a little frown on his plump lips. Damn, even when agitated, the man was gorgeous.

Gage wasn’t as successful in hiding his displeasure. A low growl rolled from his snarling lips, and Vapre immediately stepped in front of Echo, crouching low in a protective posture. “Watch it,” he warned the werewolf. He’d come to think of Gage as a friend over the past few weeks, but no one threatened his mate.

“Can we dial back the testosterone?” Echo huffed, his slim fingers curling over Vapre’s shoulder. “He’s not going to hurt me. Relax, big guy.”

Standing straight, Vapre nonetheless kept his eyes trained on Gage. The former guard seemed to have come to his senses because he was shaking his head and looking almost confused. “Shit,” he breathed. Then he looked up at Echo and dipped his head. “I didn’t mean to growl at you.”

“I know.” Echo gave him a radiant smile as he moved gracefully across the room to stand beside Mac. “I still think he needs to go. If these are residents from the lab, then they’ll be grateful to see a familiar face. They might also try to run if they see you.” He dipped his head at Gage. “The guards didn’t exactly inspire confidence.”

“Maybe Myst should come,” Hex said thoughtfully as he trotted down the stairs. “I don’t want to be chasing these assholes across half of Montana.”

Echo threw a quick wink at Vapre before turning around to address their leader. “That’s a great idea, Hex. That’s the reason you’re in charge.” His voice sounded so syrupy sweet, Vapre had to

wonder what the little shit was up to. From the look on Hex's face, the big demon was having the same thoughts.

"What do you want?" he asked around a sigh.

"Who said I wanted anything?" Echo opened his eyes wider and pushed out his bottom lip. "Can't I just pay you a compliment?"

"No." Hex stood on the bottom stair and crossed his arms against his chest as he peered at Echo over the banister. "I know you want something, so spill it. We're leaving in ten minutes."

"You wound me." Vapre had a feeling Echo was trying for indignant, but the slight twinkle in his eyes ruined the effect. "I was just trying to tell you how much I appreciate that you take care of us and make all the hard decisions. You're so smart and fierce. I don't think I could ever do your job. You're very brave." Echo dropped his head, his chin resting on his chest.

"Oh." Hex looked like someone had clubbed him over the head. Then his eyes softened, and he hurried over to wrap Echo up in his arms. "I'm sorry, baby. I didn't mean to be such a dick."

Vapre rolled his eyes and snorted. Echo had played the demon like a fiddle, and Hex had fallen for it hook, line, and sinker. Hell, Vapre could see the sly little grin playing at the corner of their mate's lips. What exactly was he after?

"Excuse me!" Mac waved his hands around to get everyone's attention. "What about me?"

Echo extracted himself from Hex's embrace and stepped over to stand in front of his friend. "I'm sorry, Mac. I know that you could be a lot of help because you saw exactly where the guys were hiding." He reached out and took Mac's hand in both of his. "And I know that you might even be able to see something else that will help." Echo looked up and smiled dreamily at Hex. "But Hex is in charge here. He's our leader because he knows what to do and how to keep us all safe. If he says it's too dangerous, then I trust him. You have to trust him, too."

Hex puffed out his chest, looking mighty pleased with himself. "Mac, can you show us where these guys are located?"

Mac nodded eagerly. "I know the direction, and I will recognize that place when I see it. They're hiding, but I can find it once we make it to the general vicinity."

"Okay, grab a small backpack and bring only the essentials for..." he trailed off and seemed to be doing some mental configuring. "...we'll say three days. You'll have to keep up, and I don't want to hear any complaining. You're a soldier now."

Mac looked like Christmas had come early. "Yes, sir!" Then he disappeared up the staircase.

"Are you kidding me?" Gage yelled. "He's too little, Hex! He's going to get hurt."

"He'll be fine." Hex clapped Gage on the shoulder. "Pop your titty out of his mouth, and let him be a man. He can do this. Show a little faith in your mate," Hex chided.

"Un-fucking-believable," Gage muttered under his breath before spinning around and storming up the stairs after his lover.

"If Mac's going, so am I!" Sony yelled from the top floor.

"The hell if you are," Gage returned heatedly.

"He-ex!" Sony whined the word, drawing it out into two syllables.

"He's big and strong when he shifts, and he could look after Mac," Echo said very quietly. "It's a hard decision. I'm glad I don't have to make it." Then he batted his lashes at Hex.

Vapre watched the entire show with curious fascination. Had Echo ever manipulated him like he was doing to their alpha? He hated to admit it, but the answer was most likely yes, and it had probably taken very little effort. He'd give his mate anything he desired.

"Sony, pack a bag," Hex called up the stairs. "You'll be responsible for protecting Mac!"

"Yeah, so go suck on that, Gage!"

Vapre turned his face to hide his mile-wide grin at Sony's words. This whole mess was getting more comical by the second. A shoulder

bumped his, and he looked over to see Eyce standing beside him. “What’s going on?”

“Echo is letting Hex think he’s running the show,” Vapre whispered. “Hex is eating it up.”

“Do you think we look that goofy when we look at Echo?” Onyx stepped up beside Eyce and tilted his head to the side.

“Absolutely,” Fiero said confidently as he brushed against Vapre’s other shoulder. “Echo is everything that’s right in the world. Who cares if we turn into blabbering, mushy idiots when he’s around? It’s worth it.”

“Agreed,” Vapre whispered. Fiero had nailed it on the head. No matter what vile and evil things awaited them in the weeks and months ahead, Echo would be their light at the end of the tunnel.

Ten minutes later, everyone had assembled in the front yard, packed and ready to begin their journey. Vapre stood with Echo on the porch, an arm wrapped around his shoulders, as they watched their men disappear down the narrow drive that led to the main road.

“You’re bad,” he said, not looking at Echo.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” The smirk in his voice said otherwise.

“How many times have you used that trick on me? Making me think it’s my idea?”

Echo shrugged and turned, entering the house and sashaying across the room, his ass swaying invitingly the entire way. “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

“You little...”

Echo squealed when Vapre lunged for him, sidestepping the sofa and sprinting down the hallway toward the office. “Syx!”

Vapre caught up with his mate just as Syx stepped out into the hall. “What the hell is going on?” he demanded when Echo jumped into his arms, practically climbing up his large body to get away from Vapre.



"He called me stupid and said I give bad blow jobs," Echo whispered disparagingly.

Syx rolled his eyes, trying to pry Echo off of his chest. "Whatever is really going on here, I'm sure you deserve it." Then he paused and grinned wickedly at Vapre. "Just to be sure, though, maybe we should judge the expertise of your blow job skills."

Vapre's nostrils flared, and his body hummed with lust as he prowled closer to his lovers. "Yes," he growled. He didn't know what the hell had come over him, but suddenly he needed his mate with an intensity close to pain. Moving his gaze to Syx, Vapre took in the demon's long, sandy-blond hair, his smooth, sun-bronzed skin, the way his eyes heated with longing and passion as he stared right back.

Pressing himself against Echo's back, Vapre sandwiched their mate between himself and Syx, leaning over Echo's shoulder and delivering a scorching kiss to Syx's slightly opened mouth.

His tongue swept through the warrior's lips, licking at the sweet depths that awaited him, and Vapre didn't know who moaned louder—him, Syx, or Echo. Their mate squirmed between them, tugging on Vapre's hair as he joined in their three-way kiss. "Bedroom," Echo panted long minutes later when they'd finally come up for air.

"Too far," Vapre argued. He needed his lovers, and he needed them now. Pulling Echo from Syx's arms, Vapre set him on his feet and immediately began tearing at his mate's clothes. Once he had his man stripped to his skin—*oh and what nice skin it was*—Vapre pressed on Echo's shoulder, and the man readily dropped to his knees without resistance.

It took only seconds for Vapre and Syx to divest their own clothing, and they stood shoulder to shoulder, their hard cocks in hand, staring down at their eager mate.

Echo batted their hands away, wrapped his slender fingers around Syx's length, and stroked him fast as his pink lips enveloped Vapre's cock in warm, moist heat.

“Oh, gods,” Vapre moaned. One hand moved to gently cup the back of Echo’s head, while his other hand tangled in Syx’s locks and jerked the man forward to lay siege to his delicious mouth once more.

Echo bobbed his head, dragging his lips along the throbbing dick in his mouth as his tongue worked the underside of the sensitive flesh. Then he popped off, and Vapre glanced down out for the corner of his eye to see his mate dive forward to capture the leaking tip of Syx’s cock in his talented mouth.

His small hand stroked Vapre’s spit-slicked shaft while Syx fed his own cock between Echo’s lips, rocking his hips gently as he continued to attack Vapre’s mouth with enthusiasm.

Vapre disengaged from the mind-numbing kiss, watching the erotic show of Syx’s slippery prick sliding through Echo’s lips for just a moment, before he turned and hurried in through the office door. Rummaging through the desk drawers, he finally came up with a travel-sized bottle of lube. Clutching it in his hand as if it held the secrets of life, he stepped back out in the hallway and knelt behind Echo.

“Hurry,” Syx warned, both hands fisted in Echo’s hair, his face the most exquisite mixture of pain and pleasure. “Damn, he can suck cock.”

Vapre nodded once, then set to work, lubing his fingers and skimming them along Echo’s crease as he searched out the little rosette that awaited him. Ringing the muscles once, he grinned when Echo moaned, pulling a strangled growl from Syx’s lips. Then he pushed in with two fingers, swirling them around as he twisted his wrist and began pumping the digits in and out of Echo’s clenching passage.

He stretched his mate quickly, rubbing his other hand over the soft, rounded hills of Echo’s cute little ass. Then he snatched up the lube, coated his pulsing cock and tossed the bottle over his shoulder to land where it may.

Without further preliminaries, he urged Echo to bend forward slightly, lined up his demanding prick, and pushed home in one hard thrust. Echo cried out, the sound muffled around the turgid flesh in his mouth, and Syx groaned, his eyes actually rolling back in his head.

Giving Echo only a moment to adjust, Vapre began a punishing rhythm, his primal instincts taking over as he slammed into Echo's welcoming body with animalistic force. If he worried he was hurting his mate, he needn't have. Echo moaned and whimpered around Syx's cock, his throat muscles working as he swallowed around the spongy head again and again.

"Fuuuuck!" Syx cried out, his only warning before his muscles tensed and his body began to shudder.

Echo braced his hands on Syx's thighs, licking the demon clean while Vapre continued to drive his aching cock into Echo's tight hole. Reaching around his mate's slim hips, Vapre palmed Echo's bobbing dick and stroked him hard and fast. "Come for me," he demanded hoarsely.

As though he'd been simply waiting for the command, Echo buried his face in Syx's groin, groaning and whimpering as streams of hot semen bathed Vapre's hand and wrist. Echo's inner walls convulsed in waves, squeezing Vapre's cock until he felt his eyes would cross from the pleasure. Giving one final plunge, Vapre stilled, and his hands gripped Echo's hips in a bruising hold as his balls unloaded, painting his mate's dark tunnel with endless ropes of sticky cum.

"Did I pass?" Echo panted a moment later as they all slumped together, trying to catch their breaths.

"Oh, yes," Syx answered reverently. "With flying colors."

Vapre chuckled softly, leaning over Echo and nuzzling the back of his neck. "Never doubted you for a second, baby."

## Chapter Two

“I’ve been thinking,” Syx said casually as he moved about the kitchen, preparing a late dinner for the three of them.

Everyone had left, Syn and Jinx were still sleeping, and the house felt unusually lonely. There were plenty of open chairs at the kitchen table, but Echo crawled up in Vapre’s lap and rested his head on his lover’s shoulder.

“Alert the media,” Vapre teased, his hand drifting up to comb through Echo’s long hair. “What’s going on in that sexy brain of yours?”

Syx snorted at the compliment as he added more spices to the sizzling pan on the stove. “We’ve been assuming that these”—he waved a hand around without turning—“tests, I guess you’d call them, will come in the order they were given.”

Echo’s brows drew together, and he scrunched his nose. He didn’t know about the others, but that’s exactly what he’d been thinking. Upon closer inspection, he realized how naïve that might be. Knowing what was coming, or at least having an idea, was an advantage that he’d seize with both hands. What if they were wrong? What if the tasks came out of order—without rhyme or reason? That certainly fit in with what Echo had learned about the Oracle and the world his demons inhabited before their escape.

“So, you think that maybe we need to be prepared for anything?” Echo sat up straighter in Vapre’s lap and leaned his elbows on the table. Resting his chin in his palms, he studied Syx’s back, watching for the telltale signs of stress and tension.

Syx seemed completely at ease, though. He shrugged dispassionately, finally turning to face Echo. "It wouldn't hurt."

"Good call," Vapre said. "What brought this on, though?"

"A couple of things." Syx removed the pan from the burner and flipped off the stove before leaning back against the counter and crossing his arms over his chest as he addressed them. "The Oracle said that the crops will die. If we assume the prophecy is ordered, this would be the fourth task, beginning at the rise of the new moon on April third."

Echo didn't understand. "So?"

"The growing season in northern Montana is short and doesn't begin until mid-April," Vapre answered.

Looking over his shoulder at Vapre, Echo's mouth dropped open in a little *O*. "Is there anything else?"

"Yes," Syx and Vapre said simultaneously. "The bleeding moon," Syx continued after a pregnant pause. "From what I know of literature, and from the research I've done, this most likely refers to the war."

"The red moon is symbolic of the blood spilled during battle," Vapre said almost to himself.

"There was another warning after that, wasn't there?" Echo recalled something about those born of the first, but he didn't know what the hell it meant.

"Right," Syx answered, but said no more. His face looked pinched, and his shoulders seemed tense. Then he spun around and began digging plates out of the cabinet. "Echo, can you go get the vampires? The sun has set, and I'm sure they're hungry."

Echo wasn't stupid. He knew he was being dismissed so that Syx and Vapre could talk privately. Sighing, he rose reluctantly and started toward the basement door. "Have you guys figured out how to set up a light-tight space for them?"

“I’ll make some phone calls in the morning,” Vapre answered readily. “We’ll have them moved into the main part of the house by the end of the week.”

Nodding, Echo offered a small smile as he opened the door and a breeze of cool air hit him in the face. He shivered and looked over his shoulder again. “Any way we can have it ready sooner?” Though he hadn’t much cared for the vampires upon their arrival, he now considered them friends—family even—and it made his heart hurt to think of them in the dank, drafty basement.

Vapre’s brow wrinkled, and he rubbed at his chin thoughtfully. “Maybe I can come up with something a little less drastic than steel plates on the windows. Let me think about it.”

Echo snorted and rolled his eyes as he shut the door quietly and crept down the basement stairs. *Steel plates, indeed.*

\* \* \* \*

“Okay, so why did you want him out of the room?” Vapre rose from his seat and sauntered over to Syx. He stood toe-to-toe with his lover where the man still leaned against the counter. “Talk to me.”

“Did you know that Fiero is in love with Eyce?” Syx said out of the blue.

Vapre’s eyes rounded, but he couldn’t think of a thing to say. Was Syx jealous? Was he angry? The demon didn’t look to be either of those things. In fact, he looked almost melancholy. “Well, I know there’s been a lot of changes going on around here,” Vapre said carefully. He couldn’t read Syx’s mood, so he figured treading lightly would be the best course to follow.

Syx sighed and pushed away from the counter. To Vapre’s further shock, Syx stepped forward and dropped his head to Vapre’s shoulder. “Some days I wish things would go back to the way they were. Things were much simpler then.”

"Boring, you mean," Vapre teased, trying to lighten the atmosphere. Reaching up, he curled his fingers around the back of Syx's neck and massaged gently.

"Predictable," Syx countered. "I don't like not knowing what's going to happen from one day to the next."

Yes, that sounded like Syx. The demon thrived on regimen and organization. There were some deep thoughts going on inside the warrior's head, and Vapre wondered how long Syx had been thinking them. "What's going on?" He spoke quietly, barely more than a whisper.

"I think Echo should leave," Syx mumbled.

Vapre's fingers paused mid-squeeze around Syx's neck. Surely he hadn't heard that right. "You want him to leave?"

"I don't want him to, but I think it's for the best."

They stood there for a long time, neither saying a word. Vapre felt torn between the man he'd loved for centuries, and the little sprite that had blown into their lives and insinuated himself in Vapre's heart in a matter of weeks. How was he supposed to choose between two people he loved more than anything?

"I can't live without him," Vapre finally whispered. Closing his eyes, he rested his forehead against Syx's temple. "Don't ask me to do that."

"Something bad is coming," Syx's voice was tense, strained, and sounded nothing like its usual mellowness. "And it's coming for Echo. I don't want him to leave either." He pressed more firmly against Vapre's chest. "Gods, it hurts to even think about him not being here, but I would die if anything happened to him."

"What's coming, Syx? Talk to me."

"We have to get him out of here," Syx continued, ignoring Vapre's pleas for more information. "It won't be forever. Just until after the war. They can't have him. I won't let them take him!" He growled the last part, vicious and animalistic, and Vapre jerked his head up to stare at his lover.

“Who’s going to take him?”

“No one!” Syx shouted.

*Whoa!* Someone had woken up on the crazy side of the bed that morning. A soft noise behind him drew his attention, and Vapre looked over his shoulder to find Syn and Jinx standing near the door that led down into the basement. Jinx looked embarrassed at having walked in on what he took to be a private moment.

Syn, on the other hand, looked pissed.

Vapre patted the side of Syx’s neck and turned around slowly. “Syn, calm down,” he said gently. “Take deep breaths.”

The vampire’s face had turned a mottled red, the vein at his temple pulsed, and his fangs elongated to protrude over his bottom lips as he snarled.

*Oh, this is bad.* Vapre didn’t know what had happened to sour the normally cheery vampire, but if the look on Syn’s face was any indication, he was working himself up to an all-out rage. “Syn.” Vapre still spoke calmly, soothingly. The last time Syn had gotten himself worked up the entire house had erupted in pandemonium. “Look at me.”

Syn wasn’t looking at him, though. His eyes were trained just beyond Vapre, locked on Syx, and there was menace in his gaze. “Why?” Syn growled heatedly. “He loves you. I’ve never seen anyone more in love in my life. He’d do anything for you, and you don’t bloody want him?”

That’s when Vapre realized that Echo was suspiciously absent from the room. Darting his eyes from side to side, he scanned everywhere for his mate as though Echo might be hiding in the corner of the kitchen somewhere. “Where is he?” he asked finally.

“He left.” Some of the anger seemed to deflate from the vampire, and his eyes held a sadness that hurt to witness. “Just like you wanted.”



“What?” Syx jumped forward to stand beside Vapre. “I didn’t want him to leave. Didn’t you hear anything I said? I just want him to be safe. It’s not safe for him here!”

Syx’s eyebrows drew together, and he tilted his head to the side. “Truly?”

“You were standing right there!” Syx bellowed.

His eyes downcast, Syn chewed on his lip as his face flushed. “I, um, well, see, the thing is, I got a bit perturbed when Echo stormed out of here. He’s been good to me, and I could see he was right upset. I didn’t much like that, ya know?” He wrinkled his nose, looking contrite and embarrassed. “I may have tuned you out after that,” he mumbled.

Hoping to avoid another blowup, Vapre pushed Syx behind him with a hand to the center of his chest. “Where did he go?”

Jinx just pointed to the back door.

Vapre sighed and pushed a hand through his shoulder-length hair. He’d been so focused on Syx that he hadn’t even heard the other men enter the room, let alone heard when Echo departed into the backyard. “I’ll get him.”

“No.” Syx pulled on Vapre’s shoulder until he turned around to face him. “I did this. I’ll find him and make it right.”

“I know this is none of my business,” Jinx said quietly, “but I really think Vapre should go. I don’t think Echo is going to be too keen on talking to you until he’s had a bit to calm himself.”

Syx looked disappointed, but he nodded and took a step back. “Go find him,” he whispered. “It’s dark, cold, and too dangerous for him to be alone.”

Kissing his lover’s lips lightly, Vapre lingered for just a moment, then dipped his head curtly. “I’ll be back soon. He just needs to hear the whole story and have time to cool down. Don’t worry over this.”

Syx made a horrible attempt at a smile before giving up the pretense completely. “Just hurry.”

There was nothing left to say to make this better, so Vapre spun on his heels and jogged for the back door. Wrenching it open, he stopped, his mouth dropping open in shock when he found Echo sitting on the porch steps, staring up at the night sky.

Trying to school his features, he eased the door closed behind him and moved across the porch to sit down beside his mate. He didn't speak, figuring Echo would say his piece when he was ready.

It didn't take long. "He didn't mean that, did he? Does he really wish I hadn't come here?"

"No and no," Vapre answered quietly. "Syx is just having a hard time dealing with all the changes right now. I guess he caught something from Fiero's mind that's been worrying him. He just wants you to be safe."

"I can't think of anywhere safer than with seven demons, a werewolf, and two vampires," Echo countered, still not looking at him.

"Syx doesn't think that way. He sees the danger coming, and believes the best possible place for you is as far away from it as possible."

"But I can help." Echo finally turned to look at him, and Vapre almost wished he hadn't.

The tear tracks on his mate's creamy cheeks made his chest tighten and his throat burn. "I know. I think there's something more, something he's not telling us."

"Why is he upset with Fiero?" Apparently, Echo was done with the current line of conversation.

Switching gears, Vapre thought over what Syx had told him in the kitchen. "He said that Fiero is in love with Eyce." Surprisingly, the knowledge didn't tweak any kind of jealousy or possessiveness from Vapre.

"Yes, he is." Echo smiled fondly, his face practically glowing with satisfaction. "There's more to the story, though. Just wait for it," he said mysteriously.

Vapre had an inkling what Echo meant by that, but he'd keep it to himself for the time being. The runt had a point. He'd just wait for it. "So, are we good now? You're not going to skip out in the middle of the night, are you?"

Echo laughed softly and bumped his shoulder against Vapre's arm. "Naw. I'm not that stupid. I gotta pretty sweet setup here. Besides, where would I go?"

"Nowhere. You belong here."

"Yep, that's kind of how I see it. You guys need me. You were kind of a mess before I got here."

"You have no idea," Vapre said emphatically. And they had been. They just hadn't known it. "So, what do we do about Syx?"

"Nothing."

Vapre opened his mouth to say something, then snapped his lips closed. That wasn't exactly the answer he'd been expecting. Echo always seemed to have a plan, especially when it came to cheering one of them up. This sit-back-and-wait approach was completely out of character for him. "Uh..." *Wow, that was brilliant.*

Echo seemed to read his thoughts because he chuckled softly and rolled his eyes. "Syx will come around when he's ready. We're not going to accomplish anything by pushing him. He'll shut down, and it will just take that much longer for him to spill it."

"You're right, of course." Vapre sighed and pushed to his feet. "Let's go in. Syx is about to have a coronary wondering where you are." Vapre eyed his mate apprehensively. Though Syx may deserve it, he was hurting, and Vapre didn't want to see Echo tear into the man. "Exactly how pissed off are you?"

Echo stood as well and gave him a ghost of a smile as he led the way inside. "You're about to find out."

## Chapter Three

Syx paced the living room, jerking on the ends of his blond hair as he mumbled angrily under his breath. Why had he said those stupid things in the kitchen? Oh, right, because he was an idiot. He'd let his emotions get the better of him and blubbered on like a lovesick teenager on some corny daytime drama.

It wasn't like he felt jealous of Fiero's love for Eyce and Echo. He'd meant it when he said he was happy for the demon. Things had just gotten a little muddled in his brain, and he'd become lost trying to figure out where he fit. Okay, so maybe he was feeling a tad bit sorry for himself. It was a new and unwelcome emotion that he'd be just as happy to never feel again. Self-pity was a complete waste of time.

"Syx!" Echo called from the kitchen, and he didn't sound happy.

Sighing in relief that his mate was unhurt, Syx hurried across the room, meeting Echo in the threshold of the kitchen entryway. "You're back." He spoke calmly, his face impassive, but inside he wanted to scoop the man into his arms and never let go.

"I never actually left." Echo put his hands on his hips and lifted both eyebrows. "Or is that the problem?"

"No." Syx decided short and simple answers were the least likely to get him into any more trouble than he was already facing.

"Do you want me to leave?"

"No."

"Do you think you're better off without me?"

"No."

"Do you wish I'd never come here?" Echo fired off questions at a fast clip, giving Syx little time to think through his answers.

"No." Gods, he was starting to sound like a broken record.

"Are you finished being an asshole?"

"No...uh." Syx shook his head and frowned. "I mean, yes."

Echo winked, and his lips curved into a crooked smile. "Okay." He turned around and headed over to the kitchen table. "I'm hungry."

Syx stood frozen in place, staring at the spot where his mate had just been in front of him. "That's it? Just like that? No questions, no ass chewing, you're just going to let me off the hook?" No way could it be that easy. Echo always had something to say when one of them fucked up, and he said it pretty damn loudly. This easy acceptance seemed suspicious, to say the least.

Echo huffed. "We had a misunderstanding. You said things you didn't mean, and I overreacted. Shit happens. I don't see any reason to get all dramatic about it."

Syx walked dazedly over to the stove and began preparing Echo a plate. Something didn't fit, didn't feel right. Most of the arguments and disagreements in the house since Echo's arrival had been *misunderstandings*, but Echo had still lit into the offender like a hellcat. What did that mean? Did his feelings not run as deep for Syx? Maybe he felt Syx wasn't important enough for him to get his feathers ruffled.

Letting down his guard, he slipped into his lovers' heads, trying to find something to dismiss his concerns. Rude perhaps, and he didn't usually listen in on his men purposely, but he needed to know.

*"He looks so sad. I wish he'd just tell me what's going on. How can I help him if he won't talk to me?"* That came from Vapre. Syx felt pleasantly surprised at the man's worry for him. He'd examine that later, though. Right now he needed to know what his mate was thinking.

*"How can I make him see what's right in front of his face? I hate seeing him like this. My mate is hurting, and I can't do anything about it. How useless am I?"*

Syx closed his eyes briefly as Echo's thoughts played through his own mind. A warm liquid feeling started in his stomach, spreading out to his limbs and making his skin tingle.

*"Echo says to let him be, and he'll come around in his own time,"* Vapre thought. *"I don't know how long I can take it, though. I'll give him a few more days, but I can't stand to watch him hurting."*

And just like that, Syx's warm feeling was replaced by a cold that seeped right down to his bones. His lovers were distressed because of him, because they knew he was hiding something from them.

Plastering a wide smile on his face that he hoped didn't look as fake as it felt, Syx carried plates to Echo and Vapre. Not for the first time, he was very glad that his own thoughts were safe from prying minds.

\* \* \* \*

"It's been five days," Echo said quietly as he snuggled between Vapre and Syx on the sofa. "They should have been back by now."

He loved this time he had alone with Vapre and Syx, but he missed the rest of his men. They should have been home two days ago, safe, sound, and exactly where they were supposed to be. What the hell was taking so long? And why hadn't anyone called to check in with them?

"There's a good chance that they don't have reception where they're at," Syx answered as he nuzzled the top of Echo's head with his cheek. "Someone would have sent word if there was anything to worry about. Maybe it's just farther than Mac had originally thought."

Echo appreciated his lover trying to reassure him, but his mind still whirled with images of terrible things happening to his warriors. "Can we try to call? Just once more?" They'd tried several times in the last two days, but each call had gone straight to voice mail.

He looked up at Syx hopefully. Undeterred by the look of resignation on his mate's face, Echo turned to Vapre. "Please?"

Vapre smiled indulgently and fished his cell phone out of his pocket. He pressed it into Echo's palm and leaned over to kiss his forehead. "I don't know if you'll get an answer, but you call anytime you want."

Rubbing his cheek against Vapre's in gratitude, Echo flipped open the phone and scrolled through the call history, picking one of his demon's numbers at random, and held the phone to his ear. His face lit up, hope settling in his heart when the phone began to ring.

Twice, three times, a fourth, and Echo began to deflate, his face falling in disappointment. Then in the middle of the fifth ring, a smooth voice drifted over the line, and Echo almost passed out in relief.

"Hey, baby."

"Eyce," Echo breathed. "Are you okay? Where are you? When are you coming home? Did you find the guys from the lab? How bad were they hurt? When are you coming home?"

Eyce's low chuckle sent liquid heat coursing through Echo's body, and he shivered visibly. "Calm down, love. Everyone is fine. We found the residents, and Hex healed them pretty quickly. We're on our way home now, should be there in an hour or so. Can you guys start preparing for a few more guests?"

"Absolutely," Echo answered as he pushed up from the cushions and began pacing the carpet between the sofa and the coffee table. "How many are coming?"

"Three. Mac says you know them. He and Sony are about to wet themselves, they're so excited."

"Who are they? Do you know their numbers?"

"Hold on."

Echo could hear Eyce speaking to someone in the background, a couple of low chuckles, and then a high-pitched squeal. He jerked the phone away from his head and stared at it as though it had morally offended him. He only knew one person who screeched like that.

“Ninety-four,” he mumbled, a slow smile spreading across his face.

“Right,” Eyce responded, startling him. “Ninety-four, Eighty-eight, and Eighty-six.”

“They need names. I won’t call them by their numbers. That’s a life we all escaped, and I don’t want any traces of it in our home.”

“That’s a perfect idea, baby,” Eyce said softly. “You guys can discuss it when we get there, okay?”

“Okay.” Echo sighed, breathing deeply for the first time in days. “What took so long? Why are you just now coming home? Was there trouble?”

“Not exactly,” Eyce said evasively. “I’ll explain later.”

Echo understood that he wouldn’t get anything more from his mate. “Okay,” he repeated. “I’ll see everyone when you get home. Give the guys a big kiss from me, Vapre, and Syx.” He glanced over his shoulder to see the two demons on the couch beaming at him and nodding their heads. “Hurry home.”

“Be there soon. Miss you, Echo.” Eyce spoke so softly, Echo had to press the phone more firmly to his ear to hear him.

“Miss you, too,” he replied just as quietly. “I love you.”

“Love you, too, baby, and Fiero says ditto.”

“Ditto.” Echo wrapped his fingers around the tiny sapphire teardrop that hung around his neck like a lifeline, a link that would tether him to his mates no matter where they were. He felt the tears begin to prickle the corners of his eyes, and he had to swallow down the lump in his throat. “See you soon.” Then he hung up before his emotions could get the better of him.

He knew Syx had heard his entire end of the conversation through his telepathy. There was nothing Echo could do about that, and he wasn’t sure he would if he could. Without turning, he placed the phone gently on the coffee table and took a deep breath. It was time to get a couple of things out in the open. His men may not be ready to hear what he had to say, but he couldn’t keep going like this.



"I love you," he said in a small voice. "Both of you—all of you—I love you so much that I think I'll drown in it. I don't expect you to say the words back yet. I understand if you need time to work through what you're feeling, but I just thought you should know."

Then without further comment or looking at his lovers, Echo strode from the room, through the kitchen, and right out the back door. He wasn't running away, but he really needed to be alone for a while.

\* \* \* \*

"Did he just say..." Vapre trailed off, his eyes wide and his heart thundering inside his chest. Then he turned to glare at Syx accusingly. "You knew. You could have at least warned me."

Syx smirked as his eyebrows disappeared under his hairline. "And what would you have done if I had? Hmm? Is there really a way to prepare for that?"

Shaking his head slowly, Vapre conceded the point. "Do you think he meant it?"

"I think Echo rarely says anything he doesn't mean or hasn't thought out very carefully."

"I love him," Vapre whispered, the full impact of the confession hitting him like an emotional wrecking ball. "I guess it took me a little while for my brain to catch up to what my heart has been trying to tell me from the beginning."

"I know," Syx whispered. "I love him, too."

Steeling his resolve, Vapre shifted on the cushions to face Syx, reaching out to wind his fingers in the demon's shirt and yank him forward. His lips hovered just a breath away from Syx's as he stared into his lover's eyes intently. "I love you, Syx. I always have. It just took Echo to open my eyes and make me admit it."

Syx didn't say a word, but his eyes softened, and he closed the paper-thin space between them, pressing his lips to Vapre's in a slow,

sensual kiss. He pulled back quickly, but the kiss was no less promising for its brevity. Syx rested their foreheads together and closed his eyes on a sigh. "Love you, Vapre. Love all of you, and I have for as long as I can remember. We're warriors, though. We're not supposed to feel these things."

"Who said?" Vapre curled his fingers around the back of Syx's neck, holding him in place. "It doesn't change who we are."

"Oh, yes it does," Syx argued. He rolled his brow against Vapre's and chuckled breathily. "It makes us better."

"So, do we go tell Echo?"

"I gathered from his muddled thoughts that he really needs some time alone right now. He's been hurting for days, worried that the others wouldn't come back. We'll tell him soon, though."

Vapre released his hold on his lover and leaned away, nodding his understanding. "So, what do we do now?"

Syx pecked Vapre's cheek and stood, holding a hand out to help Vapre up as well. "Well, we promised Echo that we would get Syn and Jinx moved into a room by the end of the week." His eyes darted to the large clock over the mantle of the fireplace. "That would be in about six hours."

Taking Syx's hand and rising to his feet, Vapre stretched his arms over his head, arching his back and trying to work out the kinks of his sore muscles. "Yeah, I guess we need to get a couple of rooms ready for whoever the guys are bringing home with them." Placing his hands on his hips, he stared down at the floor and frowned. "How many more do you think will come before the war? We're running out of rooms."

Syx shrugged and led the way over to the staircase. "We'll have to start doubling up, I guess. We can room the three newcomers together, and another room for Syn and Jinx. That only leaves three open rooms. It's a big house, but it still has its limits."

“Why do you suppose all the people that keep showing up here are men?” Vapre followed Syx up the stairs as they went to begin preparing rooms. “Doesn’t that seem strange to you?”

“Hmm.” Syx’s head tilted to the side, but he didn’t pause until he reached the upstairs landing. “That’s a good question. Maybe we can ask Echo about it later. He might have some insight about why all the residents from the lab are men.”

“What about the vamps?”

Syx sighed and turned, reaching up to cup the side of Vapre’s neck. “I don’t have all the answers, babe. I’m sure we’ll find out in time.”

Vapre melted at the endearment, the longing in Syx’s eyes, and the gentle squeeze of his fingers. “Okay,” he whispered. “Okay.”

## Chapter Four

Echo was crunching over the frozen grass in the backyard, pacing and having himself a good pity party, when the wind carried the sound of tires crunching over the gravel drive to him. Snapping his head up, his heart hammered against his ribs, and his hands and knees began to shake.

“Eyce!” He screamed, sprinting around the side of the house, just as the two SUVs came to a stop in front of it. “Hex! Myst!” Echo kept running, never slowing or pausing as the doors of the SUV flew open and his men began to climb down from the vehicles. “Onyx!”

Fiero was the first one out, and he stood tall with his legs spread wide as if he knew what was coming. Echo launched himself into his mate’s arms, winding around him like a serpent as he peppered kisses across the demon’s face. “Fiero,” he breathed.

His men were home, they were safe, and Echo had never felt more relieved in his life. Something about being separated from them made him tense and anxious. They should definitely stick together from now on.

“Hey, baby.” Fiero chuckled, giving Echo a crushing hug. “Missed you.”

“Mmm,” Echo hummed in agreement.

Someone cleared their throat, and Echo lifted his head to find Hex looking at him expectantly. He squirmed in Fiero’s hold, and the warrior set him on his feet at once. In two long strides, Echo plastered himself against Hex, squeezing the life from the man as he buried his face in Hex’s shirt. “Welcome home,” he whispered.

He turned to Eyce next, then Myst, greeting his men and welcoming them home as properly as he could in polite company. "Onyx!" He beamed at the man as he rushed into his arms. "Hey, big guy. Did you bring me something back?"

Onyx snorted, holding Echo gently, as though he would shatter. "We were kind of distracted, but how about I take you shopping tomorrow? You can pick whatever you want."

"Can we go to that naughty store I heard Fiero talking about the other day?"

"Have you been naughty?" Onyx asked in a thick whisper, his hands drifting down Echo's back to squeeze his wiggling ass. "Do you need to be punished?"

"Oh, yes." Echo adopted a contrite grimace and nodded pathetically. "I was really, really bad."

Onyx claimed Echo's lips, licking at the inside of his mouth as soft growls permeated the air around them. "Whatever you want," Onyx repeated against Echo's jaw long minutes later.

"Inside," Hex said, and his voice sounded none too steady, Echo was pleased to note.

It made him smile as he scanned the group for the newcomers. "Nine—" Echo started to say but stopped. "We need to find you names." He hugged each of his fellow ex-captives in turn then gestured for them to follow him inside the house.

"Oh, we've already given them names." The tone of Fiero's voice told Echo he would probably have to revise the names the demon had chosen. "Do they ever shut up?" he grumbled.

Glancing over his shoulder, Echo sighed as the trio—he didn't even recognize one of them—chattered away excitedly, their eyes wide and round as they took in their surroundings. "I'd guess not," he muttered. Though he had a feeling he'd regret it, Echo had to know. "So what did you name them?"

“Well, the little one over there with the strawberry blond hair and green eyes, we decided to call Sage. He doesn’t talk as much as the others, and he’s damn clever.”

Echo was about to ask what Fiero meant by that, but his mate continued before he could speak. “The one with the blond hair and blue eyes that never shuts up squeals loud enough to burst your eardrums, we’ve been calling him Jet. I swear he talks as fast as one can fly, and just as damn noisy. Then the tall, lanky blond that is just as obnoxious, we call him Pax because his personality packs quite the punch.”

Echo stopped just inside the foyer and looked up at Fiero in astonishment. Those were actually decent names. He’d never have expected it.

“What?” Fiero demanded, crossing his arms over the impressive expanse of his chest. “Did you honestly think I’d name them fuckface, shithead, and asshole?”

“I wouldn’t have been surprised,” Echo answered honestly.

Fiero blinked at him a couple of times before he doubled over in laughter, bracing himself against the wall as he wrapped his arms around his midsection and howled. “You really...you thought...your face,” he gasped through his mirth.

“We like our names,” Jet spoke up, defending Fiero. Judging by the look in his eyes as he stared at the demon, the little man had quite the hero worship going on. Echo decided to nip that in the bud straight away.

“You’re welcome here for as long as you want, but understand this.” Echo stepped closer to Jet, crowding the man’s personal space. “These guys,” he waved a hand around the loosely packed circle to include each of his lovers, “belong to me, and I don’t share. I can’t stop you or even blame you for looking, but try touching, and I will end you. Got it?”

Jet swallowed hard enough to make his Adam’s apple bob along his slender throat then nodded quickly. “Got it,” he croaked.

“Good,” Echo replied flatly. He stared at Jet for another minute then smiled, relaxing his defensive posture, and jerked his head in the direction of the kitchen. “Let’s get you fed.”

Syx and Vapre emerged from the kitchen, meeting the group in the middle of the living room. They welcomed their men home, maybe less enthusiastically than Echo had, but still with a great deal of warmth and relief.

Echo introduced Jet, Sage, and Pax, and Syx assured him that there was more than enough food to feed everyone, though they’d need to go for supplies the next day. Eying their guests again, Echo only then noticed they were dressed in nothing but T-shirts that hung down to their knees, and those shirts belonged to his mates.

He didn’t like it. Maybe it was selfish and unkind of him, but he hated it. “Let’s get you some real clothes,” he said as neutrally as possible, proud of himself when his voice didn’t waver.

Pax winced and tugged self-consciously at the hem on the shirt he was wearing. “Could I maybe take a shower? Please?”

Some of Echo’s jealousy abated, and he felt like a royal asshole. What the hell had gotten into him? Every time someone new walked through those doors, he was instantly on his guard and suspicious that they would try to lure his men from him. These guys hadn’t asked to be here. In fact, they were probably compelled to seek out this house and the occupants inside the same way he had been.

Closing his eyes in disgust with himself, Echo turned and walked right into Vapre’s outstretched arms. He didn’t know how the demon knew what he needed, but he was grateful for the undeserved comfort nonetheless. “Please help them get clean and find suitable clothes to wear,” he mumbled. “I doubt they would appreciate my help after the way I’ve treated them.”

“Come on, guys,” Syx said kindly. “I’ll give you a little tour while dinner is cooking. We’ll find you some clothes and get you cleaned up. The vampires should be awake by then.”

“Real vampires?” Pax asked excitedly. “I’ve never met one before. Are they mean?”

“Not at all.” Syx began leading the men toward the staircase, and Echo turned just in time to see Myst and Onyx follow.

He nodded his approval. The three were the least intimidating of his mates and would hopefully help the smaller men be more at ease. “I’m sorry,” he said to those who remained in the living room. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I shouldn’t have reacted that way.”

Echo felt Vapre shrug around him. “I think it’s hot.”

“Hell yeah, it’s hot!” Fiero agreed adamantly. “Don’t sweat it, Echo. You’re a little territorial. So what? Do you think any one of us would react differently in your situation?”

“I guess not.” Echo bobbed his head half-heartedly. “But they need help, and I was a complete ass to them. It wasn’t as bad as what happened with Syn, but a damn close thing.”

Hex rolled his eyes. “Okay, I’ll admit your welcome was a bit hostile, but I liked it. You were staking a claim on what belongs to you. You’re not going to hear any of us complain about that, so stop worrying. Once you’ve decided they aren’t a threat to your position in this relationship, then you’ll be as sweet and charming as ever.”

Echo didn’t think he’d heard Hex talk so much at one since he’d arrived. The man was right, though. It had been the same with Syn. Once he realized that Syn didn’t have designs on his men, he’d calmed down and embraced the man’s presence in their lives with open arms. Still, he needed to rein in some of this jealousy or it might just blow up in his face.

\* \* \* \*

“So, what are your powers?” Vapre asked bluntly as they all dug into the pulled pork sandwiches, baked beans, and potato salad Syx had made.



Sage slowly set his fork down and met Vapre's eyes steadily. "Why do you need to know?"

"Because you're living in our house, with our mate, and because I fucking asked." Vapre took a deep breath to control his temper. Fighting wouldn't get him anywhere, and he needed answers.

"Mate?" Pax tilted his to the side as his eyes moved back and forth between Vapre and Echo. "What are you?"

"Why do you need to know?" Myst responded coldly. Seemed Vapre wasn't the only one pissed about Sage's evasion.

Pax shrugged and bit into his sandwich. "Just curious," he mumbled around the mouthful.

"Demons," Vapre answered and enjoyed watching the blood drain from Pax's face a little too much.

"Werewolves, vampires, and demons," Jet said excitedly as he bounced in his seat. "This place is totally cool!"

"You are taking this very well," Eyce observed. "You're not afraid?"

"Why would we be?" Jet looked completely bewildered. "You're not going to hurt us, are you?"

"No." Echo cleared his throat, and Vapre could tell he was making an effort to repair the damage he'd done earlier. "No one is going to hurt you. What Eyce means is that you're not reacting the way a person normally would when they find out that these things really exist. I actually passed out when they showed me what they were."

"Oh." Jet looked down at his plate, his shoulders sagging a bit. "I'm sorry."

Vapre started laughing. "What are you sorry for? It makes our lives a lot easier that you aren't running and screaming, I assure you."

Jet shook his head. "I'm sorry that Echo doesn't know. We weren't great friends at the lab, and it never came up, and we," he jerked a thumb to indicate Pax as well, "mostly tried to keep to ourselves. We were just too different."

"Different how?" Echo sounded curious and nothing more.

“Promise you won’t freak?” Pax asked quietly. “I don’t have a problem with you, Echo, and I’m sorry that you thought we were going to try to come in here and take over. It’s not like that, and I don’t want you to hate us.”

“I don’t hate you. I was jealous, but I’m fine now. I’ve seen a lot of weirdness since I escaped the lab. I doubt there’s anything you can tell me that would shock me at this point.”

“How exactly did you guys get here?” Hex asked, interrupting.

Vapre frowned. He figured that was something that would have been brought up before now. He’d actually been planning on asking Hex about it later, away from curious ears.

“We told you,” Pax said with a sigh. “We don’t know. We have no memories between the helicopter exploding and waking up cold and naked in the woods.”

“You do know that we’re the ones that blew up that chopper, right?” Fiero looked very smug as he leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms behind his head. “So, you’re welcome.”

Echo covered his mouth and tried to turn his snort into a sneeze without much success. “Ignore him. He likes himself a lot, but he’s a good guy most of the time.”

Before anyone else could say a word, a glob of potato salad hit Echo in the side of the face with a wet *plop*. No one spoke, and Vapre hardly breathed. He kept his eyes down on his plate, his huge frame shaking with the effort to contain his laughter. Glancing at Fiero from the corner of his eyes, he saw the demon smirk at their little mate.

“You were saying?” Fiero drawled.

“You are old enough to know better than to play with your food,” Echo admonished as he began cleaning the mush off his face with a napkin.

“Now, wait a minute!” Hex pointed his fork at Echo and glared. “Who was it that hit me in the face with waffles a few weeks ago?”

“Myst started it,” Echo mumbled under his breath.

“Did not.” Myst leaned forward in his chair and grinned widely.

"You dirty liar!" Echo pushed back from the table and jumped to his feet. "You most certainly did!"

"Nope."

"Oh, you're a pain in my a—"

An entire sandwich flew across the table to hit Echo in the chest before it slid down his shirt to land on the floor. Echo's eyes widened as he stared at the mess by his feet. Then he looked around the table, his mouth twisting into an evil grin when his gaze landed on Eyce. "You asked for it."

"Bring it on," Eyce challenged.

Vapre groaned and ducked for cover under the table just as food began flying everywhere. "You guys are acting like toddlers!" he called from his hiding place.

"Oh, lighten up," Echo said as he crouched down to peer at Vapre. His upper half was completely coated in grossness, but he had the biggest smile on his face. "You need to have a little fun." Then he leaned forward, his lips puckered to receive a kiss.

Vapre hesitated for just a moment, judging his chances of stealing a kiss without getting the gunk covering his mate all over him. He couldn't resist that delectable mouth, though. Leaning forward as well, he held his breath in anticipation as their lips moved closer together.

Instead, he ended up with a face full of baked beans. Echo did a good job of it, rubbing and smearing it all the way down Vapre's neck. Echo fell back on his butt, then rolled over on his side, tears streaming down his face as he roared with laughter.

Vapre growled, crawling out from under the table with every intention of seeking payback on the little imp. The second his head rose above the tabletop, food came flying at him from every direction.

The room erupted into raucous laughter, and Vapre retreated back under the table. His lovers and friends were much too pleased with themselves, and it just wouldn't do for them to see the huge smile that stretched across his face.

## Chapter Five

When the laughter finally died down, everyone pitched in to help get the kitchen clean and sparkling. Echo tossed a dishrag in the sink and sighed wearily. “I’m taking a shower and going to bed,” he announced. “Syn, Jinx, there are new movies by the DVD player. I guess I’ll see you tomorrow night.”

Jinx looked at Fiero uncertainly as he shifted from foot to foot. “Could you please start the fire before you go to bed?” he asked in his slight British accent. “The weather says there will be more snow soon, and it’s a bit drafty tonight. I’m sorry to be a bother.”

Though the vampires were coming around more every day, Echo still hated that they felt they were a burden. He’d have to see what he could do to fix that—starting with getting them out of that damn basement. He glared across the room at Syx and Vapre where they stood near the back door. They’d said they would have a room ready by the end of the week, but he hadn’t seen them lift a finger to make good on their promise.

“Not a problem,” Fiero answered genially. “Let me wash off real quick, and I’ll be back down to get it going before bed.”

Everyone began moving, heading off to clean and do their nightly rituals. “Wait!” Myst called. “I still want to know what these guys are.” He pointed to Pax, Sage, and Jet where they were huddled together beside Echo.

Echo looked at them and held his hands out in a “let me have it” gesture. “I’m prepared to be amazed.”

“Well, we’re kind of like Gage,” Pax said slowly. “Only, we don’t become half and half on the full moon. We shift into full wolves.”

"I thought you smelled like a dog," Onyx said, then bit his lip and hung his head. "That came out really wrong," he muttered under his breath.

Echo chewed on the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing. Poor Onyx was always sticking his foot in his mouth. It was kind of endearing once you realized that he wasn't purposely being a dick.

"What is it with you and puppies?" Vapre asked around a chuckle. "And speaking of dogs, where the hell is Gage, anyway?"

"What do you want to do to Echo right now?" Hex asked as he cocked an eyebrow.

"Oh!" Comprehension dawned, but then Vapre's brow wrinkled. "But they were together."

"Yeah, they were together, but it wasn't exactly private or appropriate for what Gage is doing to his little mates right now."

"I would love to be doing something *very* inappropriate to my mate right now," Onyx mumbled under his breath, and the entire room exploded into laughter.

Echo chuckled along with them before returning his attention to the men beside him. "So, you're, what, like shape-shifters?" True, a few months ago, he would have either thought them crazy, or lost his head completely and done something embarrassing. Now, it wasn't much different than watching the weather change from day to day.

"Yep." Jet seemed neither proud nor ashamed of the fact. It just...was.

"Can I see?" Echo had seen Gage transform on the full moon, had seen his own mates shift during times of distress, and even witnessed Sony's enormous growth spurts, but this was something new. "A real animal," he mumbled under his breath.

"Can we do it tomorrow?" Pax hedged. "It's a lot harder when we're tired, and I could probably sleep for a week right now."

"Oh, sure." Echo hadn't thought of that, and why would he? He couldn't turn into an animal or anything cool like that. "That would be

great,” he added so as not to sound as disappointed as he felt. He had really wanted to see them shift.

“Tomorrow, I promise,” Jet said with a smile.

“So, are you three lovers?” That was Fiero—always straightforward.

“We play sometimes,” Sage hedged, and Echo figured that was the best answer they would get. Not that it was any of their business to begin with.

Fiero nodded, apparently content with the answer. “And you?” He pointed at Syn and Jinx.

“I just met them,” Syn answered.

Fiero rolled his eyes. “You know what I mean. There’s been a lot of do-si-doing around the issue, so I just want it straight. Put it all on the table so we don’t run into any misunderstandings with jealous lovers and shit.”

That sounded reasonable to Echo. He’d wondered more than once about the two vampires. Some of the things Syn said, his actions, made it seem like a real possibility.

“No,” Jinx said quietly and left it at that.

Maybe he should have kept his mouth shut, but the answer didn’t jive with Echo. There had been too many mishaps. “You’re lying.”

“No,” Syn said firmly. “We are not lovers.” He sounded cold and bitter, and Echo knew there was something more going on. He’d pushed far enough for one night, though, and decided to let it be for now.

“Okay.” He shrugged as though the entire conversation had been of little importance.

“We finished your room,” Syx said to Jinx and Syn. “There’s only a small window in the attic, and we put boards over it, then duct taped blackout curtains over that. It’s as light-tight as we can make it and much warmer than the basement. I hope you like it.”

“Thank you,” both vampires said in unison. “I’m sure it will be perfect,” Jinx added. “You didn’t need to go to so much trouble.”

“Yes, we did.” Vapre glanced over at Echo and winked. “It was the only room in the house that we could be sure all light was blocked from. We put rubber seals around the attic door and another blackout curtain that I’ll show you how to pin down. We installed a lock on the inside of the door as well.”

Echo felt his heart swell with pride and love that his mates had done everything they could to ensure the vampires’ safety from the sun.

“We’ll move the beds up right after we shower.” Vapre glanced over at the basement door. “It might be a little cramped tomorrow, but we’ll move the boxes and stuff to the basement after you wake up.”

“You did all that for us?” Syn asked in awe.

Vapre nodded but didn’t look at him. He was still staring at Echo when he answered, “Mostly.”

\* \* \* \*

Echo moaned as the hot water cascaded over his head and down his body. Four showerheads and six jets lined three sides of the enormous shower, and Echo loved every inch of it. He didn’t often use Hex’s private bathroom, though he knew he’d be welcome. He figured the responsibility of being the leader should come with certain perks, and not having to share a bathroom with the rest of the house seemed like one of them.

Strong fingers massaged Echo’s scalp as Vapre washed and rinsed his hair for him. Echo leaned back against his lover’s chest and sighed. He wouldn’t deny that he loved being pampered like this.

Hex’s hands drifted over Echo’s skin, washing the food, dirt, and general yuck from his body. Gods, he’d needed this. He only wished the shower was big enough to accommodate all eight of them. Worry had eaten away at him when his lovers hadn’t returned home on schedule, and he suddenly felt weary and exhausted, much older than his twenty-three years.

Onyx moved around Hex, dropping to his knees at Echo's side, his hands coming up to rest on Echo's hips as he began kissing and tonguing Echo's sac.

Hex's hands drifted lower, skimming across Echo's lower abs and leaving a trail of fire in their wake. Then a sudsy hand wrapped around Echo's swelling cock, stroking it in long, smooth motions.

Groaning at the sensations zipping through his body, Echo sagged more heavily against Vapre and let his men take care of him. He wished he could be a more active participant in their lovemaking, but his body felt as weak and wrung out as his brain.

Slippery fingers caressed along his crease, gently parting the globes of his cheeks, and Vapre's long digit nudged against his opening. Echo pushed back against the finger, signaling his willingness. He sighed contentedly when Vapre slipped inside his eager hole to the second knuckle, just as Onyx enveloped the head of Echo's cock in his heated mouth.

His eyes fluttered open when he felt warm breath wash over his face, and found Hex leaning over him. His lips descended on Echo's, claiming his mouth in a possessive kiss that curled Echo's toes and quickened his heart rate.

A second finger joined the first inside his twitching passage, and Vapre sawed in and out, stretching him slowly, lovingly. Onyx continued to work Echo's cock, dragging his lips along the throbbing length as he rolled Echo's balls in his hand. The water continued to wash over them, adding a new level of sensuality to their little homecoming party.

Hex continued his assault on Echo's mouth, his hands caressing up Echo's arms and across his shoulders, until he cradled Echo's face in his palms like a precious treasure. "Missed you," he panted against Echo's lips when they finally came up for air. "Need you, baby."

Echo would give his men anything they wanted. They didn't even have to ask. "Take what you need," he returned breathlessly as his fingers wound in Onyx's short, dark hair. The demon took Echo's



prick to the back of his throat and swallowed, pulling a jagged cry from Echo's parted lips. He rocked his hips, fucking himself between Vapre's fingers and Onyx's welcoming mouth. "Please," he begged.

Vapre's fingers eased out of his hole, and Echo felt more than saw the warrior ease around him to sit on the long bench seat built into the shower wall. Onyx let Echo's prick fall from between his lips, and Echo whimpered at the loss. Then Hex picked him up easily and moved him to Vapre's lap, holding him steady as Vapre lined up the bulbous head of his cock with Echo's fluttering entrance.

They worked together, slowly lowering Echo over the turgid shaft, until his ass rested against Vapre's thighs and his back pressed against his lover's warm chest. "Open your eyes," Vapre whispered against Echo's neck. "Watch us." His hands began roaming Echo's chest and down his flat belly. "You're so beautiful, baby, and you fit so perfectly with us."

Echo kept his eyes open, but dropped his head back on Vapre's shoulder as the man began a slow grind, working his throbbing cock farther into Echo's ass. "You like this, don't you, Echo? You love being the center of attention." He thrust his hips upward as he pulled down on Echo's hips. "You love my cock in your ass, filling you up and stretching you wide."

"Yes," Echo hissed, rocking his hips in jerky movements. "More!"

With that one word, Onyx immediately resumed his position between Echo's splayed thighs and swallowed his cock to the root, burying his nose in Echo's blond pubes. Crying out, Echo rocked his hips faster, pushing his aching dick farther into Onyx's mouth as Vapre's cock brushed over his sweet spot again and again.

Hex knelt behind Onyx, wrapped an arm around the warrior's chest, and pushed into him slowly. Onyx groaned around Echo's prick, sending faint vibrations speeding along his shaft. Hex gave the man just a moment to adjust to his size, then began a quick pace, thrusting into Onyx's body in quick, hard jabs.

Vapre moved his hips, pushing up into Echo's body along with Hex's rhythm, and Echo didn't feel tired anymore. Tingles raced along his spine, little zaps of electricity that chased each other in a never-ending loop up and down his back.

His orgasm caught him by surprise, stealing the breath from his lungs, and he tossed his head back and gasped as he filled Onyx's eager mouth with his seed. He expected his men to continue, to find their own releases, but they didn't. Echo was lifted off of Vapre's cock, positioned on his knees on the tiled shower floor, and his head shoved between Vapre's legs. The water beat down over Vapre's cock, then the back of Echo's head as he lowered to encase the hard length in his mouth.

"Not good enough," Onyx mumbled as he pushed into Echo's still-convulsing hole. "Need you to scream. Love when you fucking scream."

Echo knew this of course, but he wasn't sure how he would accomplish what they wanted with Vapre's cock filling his mouth. Deciding to worry about it later, he set to work, bobbing his head and sucking hard.

Onyx thrust gently as first, trying to find his rhythm with Hex's cock still buried in his ass. Eventually, they worked it out, and Onyx's fingers curled around Echo's hips, tugging him backward with every one of Onyx's forward jabs.

Fingers tangled in his hair, encouraging him to move his head faster, suck harder, and Vapre thrust up into his mouth. Echo moaned and whimpered, the sounds muffled around Vapre's cock as his men overwhelmed him in sensations.

Then Vapre growled, a deep, feral sound from his chest, and warm, salty semen bathed Echo's tongue, filling his mouth and sliding down his throat while he swallowed as much as he could.

Before he could blink, everyone was moving again. Onyx pulled from Echo's hole, Vapre slipped out of his mouth and stood, and Echo found himself lifted into the air and his back pressed against the

shower wall. Hex anchored him there, pinned between the tiles and his mate's massive frame as he entered Echo in one swift plunge.

Echo cried out, his head whipping from side to side when Hex immediately began a quick, hard pace that left him struggling to breathe. The warrior buried his face in Echo's neck, slamming into him hard enough to rattle his teeth, and Echo couldn't get enough. "Yes!" he cried. "Harder, please!"

Hex obliged him, increasing his pace until Echo felt sure the man would fuck him clear through the wall. Over Hex's shoulder, Echo watched Onyx bend Vapre over the shower bench and work his cock into Vapre's hungry ass. Echo's entire body clenched at the erotic sight, his balls tightening against his body and his lower belly cramping as his orgasm raced toward him again.

Keeping up his relentless pace, Hex drove into Echo's tunnel over and over as he licked and sucked at the wet skin of Echo's neck. His sharp teeth grazed the flesh, scraping over him lightly, and Echo felt the thrill rush through him.

He tilted his head to the side, offering his neck in a silent plea for Hex to bite him, reestablish his claim. Then his mate's canines sank into the apex of his shoulder and neck, and Echo finally screamed for his men.

The pleasure bombarded him, immediate and intense, and Echo gripped at Hex's shoulders as pearly ropes of cum sprayed from his still-hard cock to paint the space between them.

Extracting his canines gently, Hex gave one final plunge, froze, and followed Echo over the edge, roaring out his name as molten lava bathed Echo's inner walls to the point of overflowing. So lost in his pleasure, Echo only vaguely heard the groans of completion from Vapre and Onyx, but was pleased when they penetrated the fog surrounding his brain.

Sagging limply in Hex's arms, Echo's head swam, and his heart beat a quick staccato against his sternum as he struggled to drag in air to his aching lungs. "Thank you," Hex breathed, giving one final lick

over his mating mark before easing his half-hard prick from Echo's opening and lowering him to his feet.

His mates held him up, cleaning him thoroughly, before Vapre lifted him into his arms and stepped out of the shower. A soft, fluffy towel swiped over his body and hair, Onyx giving him a quick pat down, then Vapre carried him into Hex's bedroom.

Echo was asleep before Vapre even laid him on the mattress.

## Chapter Six

“Syx is right, isn’t he?” Vapre ran his hands over the thick grass as he squinted against the sun, looking up at the Oracle where she stood beside him. “The tests aren’t coming in order.”

“Your tests will come as they should,” she answered cryptically. “You must be prepared for anything.” That was the closest she’d ever come to giving him a straight answer.

“This storm, it’s not going to be a regular Mother Nature hissy fit, is it?”

The Oracle smiled down at him, her eyes studying him intently. “The bearer holds many secrets.” Vapre was beginning to understand that if he read between the lines, her answers to his inquiries were a little less vague.

“Why am I here?” he asked bluntly. “There must be a reason.”

“To understand.”

“Understand what?”

“That is for you to learn.”

Vapre sighed and pushed to his feet. He’d only had encounters with the Oracle on a handful of occasions, all in dream form such as this, and each time they left his mind exhausted. If what she had to tell them was so damn important, why couldn’t she just spit it out? His lovers might have deemed him the brains, right along with Syx, but he wasn’t good with riddles.

“You have more knowledge than you realize,” the Oracle said softly as she lifted her face to the sun. It was such a normal gesture that Vapre could only stare at her.

And why did he feel protective of this woman? She obviously had more power than he and his lovers combined. She was mythical, ethereal, omniscient to the *n*th degree, yet he felt the need to shield her, to defend her with his life if necessary.

“You hold the answers, but you hide from them. Why?”

Vapre didn’t have the slightest clue what she was talking about. “I’m not hiding from anything.”

“You lie. You hide yourself, your heart, and in this, you will fail. Put away your pride and accept what is freely offered. Second chances are rare, and I fear one does not await you.”

This was almost babbling for the Oracle. Still, Vapre didn’t understand a word of it. He opened his mouth to ask her to expand, but when he glanced her way, he found only empty space. Well, that was just fucking dandy.

Dropping back to the grass, Vapre lounged on his back, soaking up the warm rays of the sun as he closed his eyes and drifted into a peaceful sleep.

\* \* \* \*

“Where are we going?” Echo climbed into the back of the SUV and buckled his seatbelt. “Shouldn’t we be preparing for the new moon?”

“It’s still three weeks away.” Vapre slipped into the backseat beside him, not bothering with his safety belt. “Besides, one afternoon isn’t going to make a difference. It’s not like we have any idea about what’s coming.”

Hex situated himself behind the wheel while Syx rode shotgun. “Relax and try to have a good time. Our problems will still be here when we get back,” Hex said as he started the engine and shifted into drive.

“Fine,” Echo huffed, but he didn’t like it. Even if they didn’t know for sure what was coming, they still needed to be doing

*something*. He should be practicing with his men, honing their powers and increasing their strength, not traipsing into the city to... “What the hell are we doing anyway?”

“We’re getting you a cell phone for one,” Vapre answered as his hand landed on Echo’s thigh, giving it a light squeeze.

“What on earth do I need a cell phone for?” Echo rolled his eyes and crossed his arms over his chest as he stared out the window, watching the trees zipping past.

“Then you can get in touch with us anytime you want. If we ever get separated, it could come in pretty handy.”

Echo knew Vapre was referring to his constant badgering over the past couple of days when he’d insisted on calling his mates nearly every hour. Still, he didn’t like the sound of them being apart. “Why would we be separated?” he asked cautiously, not daring to look at any of the men in the vehicle.

“We won’t,” Hex said firmly. “But it never hurts to be prepared.”

This all sounded a little foreboding to Echo, but it also brought up other questions that had been nagging at him. “Why did it take you so long to get back?”

No one answered him, and Echo finally turned away from the window to glare at the back of Hex’s head. His eyes shifted to Syx, then finally over to Vapre. “You know something,” he accused. “If Hex isn’t going to tell me anything, then I suggest you start talking.”

“There was...trouble,” Hex said guardedly.

“Believe it or not, I figured that much out on my own.” Echo growled and grumbled under his breath for a minute until he felt calm enough to speak without starting a fight. “Please, tell me.” There, that was perfectly polite and not at all argumentative.

“We lost Mac.”

Echo’s mouth dropped open before he could stop it. “What the fuck do you mean you lost him? Didn’t he come home with you?” He’d seen his friend when everyone had returned. Right? Damn it! He’d been so happy, so relieved, that his men were home, he hadn’t

paid much attention to anything else around him. “Where is he?” Echo hated the quavering in his voice, the trembling of his lip, and the uncertainty that ate away at his calm façade.

“Relax,” Syx said soothingly, turning in his seat to face Echo. “Mac is at home and perfectly safe.”

“Then what happened? How the hell do you lose a full-grown man? And Gage! He just let Mac wonder off by himself?” Echo was working himself into a good yelling fit, but he couldn’t squelch his panic. His lovers were keeping things from him. Again.

“I don’t mean that we lost him physically,” Hex hedged. “I mean...well, I don’t know what the hell happened. He was catatonic for a good two days after we found the shifters. He never closed his eyes, didn’t speak, was stiff as a corpse all the time. I thought Gage and Sony were going to lose their damn minds. I’ve never seen anyone so scared.”

“So, what happened?”

“He just woke up. I don’t think he’s said a word since.”

“But why didn’t you just bring him home like that?” Echo’s brows drew together in confusion.

“Well, he didn’t talk, but he screamed bloody murder every time someone touched him. If he hadn’t woken up when he did, we were going to try it anyway. Can you imagine listening to that, cramped up in a car for three hours, though? I tried to heal him, but nothing worked.”

“So, when you said that Gage and Sony and Mac were in their room last night...”

“I might have smudged the truth a little.” Hex shrugged his massive shoulders. “I didn’t want to drag their business out into the open.”

Echo could respect that, but he still didn’t appreciate being lied to about something so important. “Have you talked to Gage this morning?”



"No," his mates chorused. "He hasn't left his room since we got back. Sony came down and got him some breakfast, and the guy looked bad, like he hadn't slept in days."

"Can we help him?" Echo spoke quietly, his chest aching at the thought of his friends suffering. If there was something he could do to erase their pain, then he wanted to help.

"I think we just need to give Mac some time," Vapre answered just as quietly. "He'll talk to his mates when he's ready."

Nodding slowly, Echo trained his eyes on Syx and opened his mouth to ask his next question. He saw the demon flinch before he'd even spoken the words and suddenly thought better of it. Not that he was going to let Syx off the hook that easily, but he'd wait until they were alone. The man was hiding something from not only Echo but everyone else in the house as well. Whatever it was, his mate didn't need to shoulder the burden alone.

"Can I get my hair cut?" he asked instead, changing the subject to a less depressing topic.

Apparently, that had been the wrong thing to ask. Syx and Vapre whipped around to stare at him as though he'd grown a second head, and Hex jerked on the wheel, almost sending them careening into the drainage ditch along the side of the road.

"Is that what you really want?" Vapre's fingers combed through Echo's long hair, lifting it gently as he brushed it back from Echo's forehead. His eyes looked a little sad, but Echo couldn't understand why. It was just hair.

"Maybe we could get it trimmed and braided," Hex suggested casually.

Pulling his blond mane over his shoulder, Echo stroked the silky strands, straightening it out to its full length so that it hung just above his hip. "We'll see." It wasn't like he wanted to shave his head and get a tattoo, so why was everyone making such a big deal about it?

They'd never allowed him to cut his hair at the lab. Though it hadn't mattered much then, Echo wanted a fresh start, removing all

traces of that life he'd left behind. Besides, men didn't have hair this long. Did they? He might be the smallest member of their little group, but that didn't make him any less of a man. It was time he grew up and started dressing and acting the part.

Syx gave a deep sigh, his back still to Echo, and shook his head sadly. Echo didn't know what that meant, but he had an inkling, and it only served to cement his decision.

\* \* \* \*

"What the fuck?" Fiero yelled when they walked in the front door several hours later. He was sitting on the sofa, remote in hand, flipping through the channels at random. "What the fuck?" He repeated, but with less heat, as he jumped to his feet and stalked toward them.

Vapre didn't know whether to laugh or nod in sympathy at the dumbstruck look on Fiero's face. He was pretty sure he'd worn a similar expression when Echo had first stepped out of the salon at the mall. Though his reaction hadn't been quite as vocal, he'd been asking himself the same question all afternoon.

Fiero grabbed Echo by the shoulders, pulling him farther into the room, and spun him around abruptly. Then he just stared, his mouth hanging open, and his eyes wide. "What did you do?" he whispered.

"Don't you like it?" Echo's tone made it clear that Fiero better like it or else. They'd all received similar pointed looks like the one he was giving Fiero over his shoulder as well.

Fiero seemed to get the hint fairly quickly and cleared his throat as he took a step back. "It's just really different."

That was an understatement to the extreme. Gone were the waist-length blond locks that Vapre had loved running his fingers through as Echo curled by his side at night. Echo hadn't let any of them accompany him into the salon, saying he wanted it to be a surprise. Well, it was definitely shocking.

Not only was Echo's hair much shorter, reaching just long enough to brush between his shoulder blades, but he'd gone a step further, having the golden blond dyed to a deep chestnut brown. It looked soft and shiny, swaying gently as he moved his head, but it just wasn't the same.

"Well, I like it," Echo told them as he spun around and fisted his hands on his hips. "It'll be much easier to take care of, and I don't look like a fifteen-year-old girl anymore." The little imp actually stuck out his tongue. "It's my hair, and I'll do what I want with it."

"Wow, that's hot!" Myst strolled into the room, beer in hand and grinning from ear to ear. "I like it. Makes you look all mysterious and sexy."

Vapre didn't know if Myst was being sincere, or if he'd overheard the conversation before announcing his presence. Watching the radiant smile stretch over Echo's lips, he decided it didn't matter. They were all being ridiculous. He loved Echo because of who he was, not the color or length of his hair.

Sidling up to his mate, Vapre wrapped his arms around Echo's waist and kissed the top of his head. "He's right. You look amazing, baby."

"You're just saying that," Echo responded, uncertainty in every word.

"Nope. I love it."

"What's Eyce going to say?"

"We'll make him love it, too," Fiero said unexpectedly as he came to stand behind Echo. "Sorry I acted like a douche." He bent and nuzzled the side of Echo's neck. "You look gorgeous, baby."

"Where is everyone?" Vapre tilted his head to the side, listening for movement upstairs.

"In their rooms," Myst answered from the sofa where he'd plopped down on the cushions. "The little bloodsuckers are still in the attic, Gage and Sony won't leave Mac's side, and our new residents are sleeping like the dead."

“Good,” Vapre purred as he turned back to his mate and began slowly unbuttoning Echo’s shirt.

“What are you doing?” Echo’s inquiry came out a little breathless, his eyes drifting closed as he leaned back against Fiero’s broad chest.

Vapre continued working the buttons one-handed as his other drifted lower, cupping and massaging the growing mound behind Echo’s zipper. “What does it feel like I’m doing?”

“It feels like you’re trying to seduce me right here in the entryway.”

“Perceptive,” Fiero mumbled against Echo’s throat.

## Chapter Seven

Echo's head swam as all the blood in his body rushed south to pool and burn in his groin. His men stripped him quickly, leaving him trembling and needing as his cock jerked and throbbed, jutting proudly from his nest of blond curls.

Peeking through his partly closed eyelids, he watched Hex and Syx steal kisses and nibbles as they worked to undress each other. Myst sauntered up behind Vapre, completely and gloriously nude. His tanned fingers found their way under the hem of Vapre's shirt and began lifting the cotton slowly, revealing smooth, pale skin stretched over rock-hard muscles.

Echo's body hummed with expectation, his ass clenching and relaxing, begging to be stretched and filled. His skin felt prickly, overheated, and his heart raced, pounding heavily inside his chest. Fiero scooped him up, carrying him to the sofa and dropping him on the cushions. He rummaged around in the drawer of the side table, producing a large bottle of lube, and tossed it to Echo's chest. "Get started," he growled, then began stripping out of his clothes.

Popping the cap on the bottle, Echo coated his fingers generously and rubbed the silky oil around his pucker before pushing in with two digits. The lube smelled minty, and the muscles stretched around his fingers began to tingle and warm. *Interesting.*

Judging by the heavy breathing and growls that emanated from his men, he wouldn't have long before they pounced, so he better do a good job of stretching himself, and do it quickly. Skipping right on to four fingers, Echo pushed inside his slick hole and began sawing them in and out of his snug passage. He felt full, really fucking full, but he

didn't experience the quick bite of pain, or the burning sting he'd expected. Echo decided he loved this new lube.

"Gods, that's pretty," Fiero breathed reverently as he grabbed the oil and slicked his own cock, stroking until it glistened in the overhead lights. He knelt on the floor, his eyes heavy-lidded as he watched Echo's fingers continue to pump in and out of his slippery entrance.

Myst dropped to his knees beside Fiero, gripping Echo's leaking cock and holding it up so he could envelop the engorged head with his full lips. Echo cried out, rocking his hips and moving his fingers more vigorously. Myst licked and laved, teasing the slit with his tongue, before diving down to encase Echo to the root in the wet heat of his mouth.

So lost in the pleasure, Echo didn't immediately realize that his ass felt much fuller all the sudden. Peeking over Myst's head, he met Fiero's eyes, and the burning need in those amber depths almost made him blow right then and there.

Fiero's fingers worked alongside Echo's, two of the thick digits sawing in and out of Echo's ass. Then Vapre was kneeling on Fiero's other side, his eyes hungry, and his chest heaving as he slowly inserted his own finger until Echo had seven pumping into his hungry hole.

The pressure was enormous, but it didn't exactly hurt. More cool lube dribbled down his crease and another finger worked its way inside his straining entrance. What the hell were they planning to do to him exactly?

Hex lowered himself to the sofa, fisted his hands in Echo's hair, and jerked him forward to claim his mouth in an earth-shattering kiss. Struggling to breathe, Echo forgot all about his worries and thrust his tongue into his alpha's mouth.

A hand gripped his chin, pulling his face away from Hex's, and then Syx was devouring him, twining their tongues together as he growled into Echo's open mouth. Myst lifted his head, letting Echo's

cock slip from his mouth, and wrapped his fingers around Echo's wrist, easing his fingers from his clenching opening.

Fiero's and Vapre's fingers disappeared as well, and Echo found himself lifted into Syx's lap, his back pressing against the demon's damp chest. Lowering him slowly, Syx impaled Echo on his thick cock then gripped Echo's hips, urging him to move.

Echo dropped his head back to Syx's shoulder, bracing his feet on the cushions, and began a steady rhythm, rising and falling, taking Syx's impressive length a little deeper each time. His own aching cock bounced between his spread thighs, slapping his lower belly and smearing his abs in sticky, clear drops of pre-cum.

Vapre moved between his legs, crouching over him as he bent and licked at Echo's panting lips. Echo stilled his movements, resting his ass against the top of Syx's thighs, and wrapped his arms around Vapre's neck. He attacked his mate's mouth with an enthusiasm born of hunger and need, shoving his tongue inside and leaving no space unexplored.

Syx inched lower until his ass hung off the end of the couch, and Echo sprawled back against his lover's chest. A blunt pressure nudged at his hole, and Echo's eyes flew open when he realized Vapre's intention. He jerked out of the kiss, intending to open his mouth to protest, but it was too late.

The head of Vapre's steel-hard cock popped through the guarding muscles, working in slowly as it slid over Syx's length. Echo closed his eyes, breathing deeply through his nose as the pressure built inside his ass. He'd never felt so full in his life. It didn't exactly hurt, but it was kind of uncomfortable.

"Breathe, baby," Vapre whispered against Echo's lips. "Gods, you feel so amazing." He continued moving slowly, rocking his hips gently until he'd seated himself inside Echo's channel. His cock swelled and throbbed, and Echo could feel every inch, every vein, every pulse of his lovers' dicks as his inner walls strained to accommodate them.

Syx's hand caressed Echo's chest, skimming over his collarbones and down to pinch and tug at his nipples. Vapre attacked his lips again, sucking Echo's tongue into his mouth and nipping at it lightly.

As his body became used to the pressure and the slight burn began to subside, Echo's flagging erection started to swell again, springing back to life and demanding attention. "Move," he panted.

Vapre groaned, long and low, and Echo peeked over the warrior's shoulder, grinning seductively up at Hex as their alpha stood watching, breathing heavily while Fiero converged on his straining cock, sucking him in to the root. Very slowly, in very minute movements, Vapre's hips began to thrust, his cock retreating and plunging back into Echo's straining tunnel as his dick slid along Syx's pulsing length.

Syx groaned, his arms tightening around Echo's chest as he rocked his hips with Vapre. One in, one out, over and over they moved inside him. Echo moaned and whimpered, the pressure in his ass moving down to his balls, drawing them tight to his body as lightning bolts of pleasure zipped through his body.

"Echo?" Myst knelt on the sofa beside them, his long cock in hand, jerking himself roughly. He looked down at Echo with need, and Echo smiled in return, lifting his head and parting his lips, allowing Myst to feed that gorgeous dick to his mouth.

Myst growled above him, his fingers slipping into Echo's hair, and his hips snapped forward, driving into Echo's welcoming mouth. Relaxing his throat muscles, Echo allowed his mate to set the pace, offering himself up for Myst's pleasure. Not that he wasn't enjoying the hell out of himself as well.

His legs draped over Syx's, his body spread out in wanton display of submission and surrender. Electricity sped up his spine, sweat beaded across his skin, and his cock jerked with every beat of his thundering heart, pulsing inside Vapre's hand as his mate stroked him quickly.



Syx and Vapre began to move more quickly, and Vapre buried his face in Echo's neck, growling and panting as he licked the salty skin. "Gonna come," he warned. "Can't stop it. You feel so fucking good."

Echo couldn't speak, but he hummed his approval around Myst's cock, bobbing his head lightly to let Vapre know he was right there with him. Syx's tongue snaked over the shell of Echo's ear, his warm breath following and making Echo shiver in desire. "Your ass loves my cock," he whispered raggedly. "Fuck, I love how you tremble." He tugged harder on Echo's nipples. "Do you want me to come in your ass? Flood this tight passage until it flows back out?"

Echo whimpered, nodding his agreement as much as he could, practically begging for the naughty delights that Syx was offering. Then suddenly, his mates stilled, Vapre groaning so loudly Echo could feel it vibrate his massive chest. Hot lava splashed against Echo's inner walls, filling his channel until it did indeed begin seeping out and running down his crease.

Vapre eased out of him first, his big frame shaking while he panted heavily. Myst pulled out of his mouth, and Syx rolled him until he was on his knees, his chest pressed against the back of the sofa. Myst knelt behind him, stroking his spit-slicked cock a few times before he lined up with Echo's stretched hole and pushed in roughly.

Echo cried out, his fingers digging into the fabric of the couch as Myst began a hard, fast pace, slamming into him with animalistic need. Fiero appeared in front of Echo, his six-six height putting his jutting cock level with Echo's mouth.

Smiling softly, he caressed the side of Echo's face with his fingertips, running the tip of his dick along Echo's lips, smearing them in warm, slippery pre-cum. Echo nuzzled his face against Fiero's palm then sucked him in to the base. It didn't take much doing, considering Myst continued to drive into him, shoving him forward so that Fiero's cock slid right down his relaxed throat.

Hex stood beside Fiero, his hand moving in a blur over his own hard dick as he stared down at Echo with lust and desire. To see the evidence of how much his men wanted him was a heady feeling, and Echo basked in the glow as he worked his lips up and down Fiero's slippery cock.

Fiero and Myst moved in tandem, in and out, until Echo felt his orgasm barreling down on him. His body tingled, his ass ached, his balls churned, and his dick throbbed. Myst gripped his hips in a bruising hold, pulling him back onto his cock with every forward snap of his hips.

Vapre and Syx knelt beside them on the sofa, each working their slippery lengths as their eyes ate up the scene before them. Then warm fingers wrapped around Echo's cock, jerking him in time to Myst's thrusts.

Echo released Fiero's prick, turned his head, and captured the bulbous head of Hex's cock, licking at the slit and swirling his tongue around the crown before sucking more of the silky shaft into his mouth. Closing his eyes and sucking hard, Echo grunted as his release ripped through him, racing up his dick and spilling from the tip in long, creamy ropes of sticky seed.

Myst growled pumping through his own climax and filling Echo's passage with his cum. Through his haze of pleasure, Echo heard Vapre and Syx grunt before warm wetness splashed over his side and hips as his mates reached their completion.

Hex's fingers gripped Echo's hair, jerking his head back roughly and pulling his flexing cock out of Echo's mouth. He stroked his shaft in a furious motion, his other hand still tangled in Echo's hair. His head dropped back on his shoulders, the cords in his neck straining as he roared out to the ceiling. Fiero pressed against Hex's side, working his own cock inside his fist and staring straight into Echo's eyes.

Hot ropes of semen erupted from the slit, and Echo opened his mouth quickly, catching most of it on his tongue while the rest

painted his upturned face. Hex exploded next, his own cum mingling with Fiero's and coating Echo's lips and cheeks.

"Beautiful," Hex gasped, his huge frame shuddering and trembling.

"Gorgeous," Fiero agreed in a strangled moan.

Echo sighed, swallowing the cream in his mouth and smiling serenely. He decided it was the most perfect compliment he'd ever been paid.

\* \* \* \*

"Seems we missed the fun," Eyce said around a chuckle as he followed Onyx into the living room.

Vapre just grinned stupidly and slumped back on the sofa, his legs sprawled, his dick nestled limp and sated against his thigh. He'd just had two of the most mind-melting orgasms of his life, and the ability to form coherent sentences had yet to return to him. His T-shirt hit him in the face, and Hex laughed as he began pulling on his own clothes. With a great effort, Vapre stood, found his clothes, and dressed at a leisurely pace.

"I can tell you have something to say," Echo said, his voice a little dazed still. Vapre liked that a lot. "Before we powwow, can I have a shower first? I'm covered in jizz, and it's starting to itch." He picked at the drying cum on his cheek, but he was grinning the entire time.

Eyce didn't answer, so Vapre looked over to see what had distracted the demon. Eyce's eyes were locked on a small white bottle with a black label and flaming red writing. "Anal Easy," he muttered. His eyes rounded, and his mouth hung open as he looked up at Echo. "You...both...two...holy fuck."

Continuing to grin like the cat that ate the canary, Echo seemed very pleased with himself. He pointed to Syx and then to Vapre. "Talk to them."

Swinging his gaze to Vapre, Eyce looked stunned beyond speech. Then he shook his head in wonder and placed his hands on his hips. “I’m fucking jealous.” The smirk on his lips said he was jealous he’d missed the show, not that he hadn’t been asked to participate. “I’m so getting in on that next time.”

“I look forward to it,” Echo purred seductively. Then he rose from the sofa and padded up to Eyce, rubbing himself against the man like a bitch in heat. “I’m pretty loose right now. Wanna try?”

Vapre bit back a chuckle when Eyce looked in danger of swallowing his tongue. “Now?” he choked.

“Ooh, yes. There’s cum leaking out of my ass, and my hole is all nice and stretched.” He pouted his swollen lips up at Eyce and batted his lashes. “I haven’t gotten to play with you since you came home, and I’m all lubed up and ready.”

Eyce looked around the room as though seeking permission. Well, he wasn’t going to get a complaint from Vapre. The only thing more fun than taking his pleasure from Echo’s body was watching one of his lovers do the same. Sometimes he figured he was the luckiest son of a bitch on earth.

A devilish smile ghosted over Eyce’s lips, and he actually began reaching for his zipper before he stopped suddenly and shook his head. Bending from the waist, he kissed the top of Echo’s head and sighed. “I like the hair,” he whispered as he cuddled Echo close. “We need to talk, but I’ll take a rain check, okay?”

Echo looked disappointed for just a minute but then shrugged and bobbed his head. “I’ll hold you to it.” He twisted his hips, grinding his groin against Eyce’s hip, making clear exactly what he intended to hold the warrior to.

His eyes closing briefly, Eyce groaned and swatted Echo on his naked rear. “Behave.” Easing away from their mate, he chuckled, though it sounded strained. “Go shower, and get that sexy ass back here.”

Sighing dramatically, Echo turned to leave the room. "Spoilsport." Then he looked over his shoulder and made kissy faces at them all before he flounced up the stairs.

"That brat is hell on long legs." Vapre felt his cock twitch inside his pants as he watched Echo's swaying ass. Mmm, he couldn't get enough of his mate.

"I'm not arguing that." Eyce still sounded tense, and he reached down to readjust the sizeable lump in his jeans. "I hate telling him no."

"Join the club." Myst laughed from where he lounged on the sofa, his jeans pulled on but undone and his chest bare.

"You're not helping." Vapre drank in the sight of Myst's smooth skin, his cock doing a little more jerking as it made a valiant effort to swell inside its confinement. Apparently, Echo wasn't the only one who kept his motor running.

As he watched his lovers move about the room finding seats and settling in for whatever discussion Eyce had planned, Vapre struggled to swallow around the sudden constriction of his throat. These were *his* men, *his* lovers, and he loved each one of them so much that his heart hurt with it.

*"Put away your pride and accept what is freely offered."*

The Oracle's words came back to him, replaying over and over in his brain on a constant loop. Did he dare speak his heart, put all of his cards on the table and risk rejection?

*"Put away your pride and accept what is freely offered."*

Could it really be that easy?

## **Chapter Eight**

“Mac is talking,” Eyce announced.

Fresh out of the shower, Echo went straight to Vapre and cuddled in his lap in the recliner. He couldn’t quite explain it, but some voice in his subconscious told him that Vapre needed him. He could feel his mate’s internal struggle almost like a palpable force and hoped his presence would soothe his agitated lover.

Vapre’s arms twined around him, and his chin rested on Echo’s shoulder. The deep, contented sigh that heaved up from his chest served to prove Echo’s theory. He didn’t know what war raged inside his man, but he hoped Vapre would confide in him soon. Echo couldn’t stand to see his men suffering, especially if he could do something to help.

“What’s he saying?” Hex was the only one standing, doing his normal pacing as he tugged on the ends of his ebony hair. He looked deep in thought, and judging by his stilted movement, those thoughts weren’t pleasant.

“Gage says he’s not ready to talk to the rest of us yet, but he wanted to warn us not to go back to that place where we found the shifters.” Eyce looked just as troubled as he spoke, and Echo wished his arms were long enough to pull them all into one huge embrace. The only downside to having seven amazing mates was having to evaluate their levels of distress and choose who needed comfort the most.

Though Vapre seemed calm on the outside, Echo knew in his heart that the man needed him more than the others just then. There was no use in trying to pry the burden from the man. He would talk

when he was ready, and Echo promised himself that he'd be there to listen.

"I don't see why we would, but did Mac give a reason why we shouldn't?" Onyx sprawled in the other recliner, his hand drifting up and down Myst's spine as the warrior perched on the arm of the chair.

"He says it's evil. At first he thought it was the shifters, but now he thinks it was the place itself. Mac says that an all-consuming evil lurks there. We were lucky to escape notice this time, but second chances are not often given. I'm paraphrasing, of course."

Echo felt Vapre tense behind him, his arms squeezing around Echo like iron bands. The air rushed from his lungs in a tiny squeak when he felt his ribs begin to protest the crushing embrace. Vapre loosened his hold immediately, rubbing at Echo's chest to comfort him. "Sorry," he whispered demurely.

In that instant, Echo knew that whatever plagued his mate, it couldn't wait any longer. Something was very, very wrong. "I'm fine," he assured his man, but his eyes drifted to Syx.

Syx nodded, just a small, almost imperceptible dip of his head. Echo nodded in return, giving the warrior a meaningful look that spoke volumes. Syx had seen inside Vapre's head, and Echo planned to coerce the knowledge from him. Then he remembered that Vapre wasn't the only one keeping secrets, and he watched Syx squirm under his narrowed gaze.

"Are we sure it's not the shifters?" Myst asked. He moved his hand to twine with Onyx's, and Echo beamed at the pair.

*If only they would stop being so afraid and just say the words,* Echo thought to himself. All this pussyfooting around the issue was really beginning to grate on his nerves.

"Not a hundred percent, no." Eyce leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees, and shook his head in obvious frustration. "I don't know what to do." This was a big admittance for the demon, and Echo knew it hurt Eyce's pride.

“Okay, I didn’t want to do this, but I think we need to get some things out in the open. Several of you are hiding something from the rest of us, and I for one want to know what the fuck it is. We’re in this together—family—and family doesn’t shut each other out.” Echo felt Vapre go very still beneath him and reached down to squeeze the warrior’s knee in reassurance.

“What are you talking about?” Eyce’s head popped up, and he eyed each of his lovers in turn. “Does someone have something to say?”

Echo sighed. Eyce sounded angry, and that wouldn’t help matters in the least. Hoping to steer them out of dangerous water, he twisted in Vapre’s lap. “Do you have something to ask me?” Maybe this would get the ball rolling, so to speak, and they could finally clear the air.

“Why are all the residents from the lab men?”

“Uh.” Echo realized that probably wasn’t the response Vapre had hoped for, but the question had come from so far out in left field, his brain needed a moment to redirect. “I think that’s a better question for Gage,” he finally replied. “I can confirm that there were no women in the facility, but I can’t give you an answer as to why.”

“Fair enough,” Vapre replied with a crooked smile. “I’ll talk to Gage about it. I can’t put my finger on it, but it seems important.”

Echo thought it over for a moment before nodding. “I see your point. Yeah, I think we need to talk to Gage when Mac is feeling better.”

“Anyone else?” Eyce looked around the room expectantly.

“The other two are fine, but I get a bad vibe from Sage.” Onyx scowled down at his lap. “I think we need to watch him.”

“Agreed,” Eyce said to Echo’s surprise. He didn’t exactly see him ever being bosom buddies with the shifter, but he didn’t get a suspicious feeling about him either.

Deciding to re-evaluate his opinion of Sage at a later date, Echo turned his attention to Syx. “Why do you want me to leave?” The



words escaped his mouth before he could call them back, and as expected, several gasps and growls went around the group. Everyone turned as one to glare at Syx, and Echo wanted to smack himself in the head.

“What?” Hex snarled. “If you have something to say, you better start talking.”

Syx didn't look angry, contrite, or even afraid. He just looked blank—numb.

“That came out wrong,” Echo hurried to intervene before things could sour further. “Syx knows something, or at least suspects—something that has him scared for my safety. Don't lynch him just yet.”

His mates seemed to calm a little at this, and Eyce actually reached over and took Syx's hand, giving it a light squeeze. “Talk to us,” he murmured softly. “If it involves Echo, then it involves all of us. Maybe we can help.”

“Syx thinks that the tests won't come in order of the prophecy,” Echo said when Syx continued to look blankly ahead.

“I've been concerned about the same thing,” Hex replied as his long legs continued to eat up the carpeted floor. “That just seems too easy if we always know what's coming.”

“Hell, we don't have a goddamn clue about what's coming,” Fiero spoke for the first time since their meeting had begun. “But I guess I see what you're saying. If we know whose task is next, then we're at least somewhat prepared.”

They were all taking this much better than Echo had first imagined. At least they were talking, trying to work through what to do next. It was more than they'd done in over a week. Three weeks wasn't a terribly long time, and they needed to be working out a plan, not arguing or ignoring the problem.

“Other than the obvious,” Myst began, “why do you think Echo is in danger?”

A deep, shuddering sigh blew through Syx's lips, and his eyes finally began to lose some of the lost, dead look. "If we agree that it is unlikely for the tests to come in order, then we also agree that we need to be prepared for anything."

Everyone nodded their agreement and waited for Syx to continue.

"The last part of the prophecy..." And here Syx faltered again. Whatever he had to say, it weighed heavily on his heart and mind.

Echo gave a soft kiss to Vapre's cheek and rose to his feet. Moving across the room, he climbed up in Syx's lap and nuzzled his cheek against the warm skin of his lover's throat. "Tell us," he whispered.

Syx held him gently, his fingers playing through Echo's freshly washed hair. "The last part of the prophecy," he repeated in a hoarse murmur, "the part about those born of the first."

"Okay, what does that mean?" Onyx moved to the edge of his seat, leaning toward Syx with interest. "I would say it means those born on the first of the year, or maybe the first of the month. I can't think of anything else that makes sense."

Syx was shaking his head. "There is one more first."

"The firstborn," Hex said flatly.

Echo gasped, sitting up straight in Syx's lap and darting his eyes around the room. "Which one of you was born first?"

"I don't think we count." Fiero grimaced as he crossed his arms over his chest. "We weren't exactly born from a womb."

"It doesn't matter." Echo shook his head frantically. "Tell me."

"I was." Hex stopped his pacing and shifted to face Echo. "I agree with Fiero, though. I don't think the prophecy is referring to one of us."

All seven of his mates turned their eyes to him, and Echo suddenly felt like he was suffocating. "What are you trying to say?"

"Do you have any siblings?" Eyce asked gently.

"I-I don't know." The longer they stared at him, the harder it became to drag air into his aching lungs. They were trying to tell him

something—something his brain was rebelling against, so he couldn't get a clear hold on where they were trying to lead him.

"So, there is a good chance you were an only child," Eyce continued, speaking as though he were comforting a small child.

"I suppose that's true."

"Which would make you a firstborn," Fiero added, and Echo didn't like the fear that tinted his lover's words.

"So, I...that means...oh, shit." Echo snapped his head around to glare at Syx. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Why would I?" Syx snapped. "So you can sit here, waiting and worrying about something that we have no control over? This isn't like the other ones. I have no idea how to fight this!"

"And we can't know when it's coming," Myst added quietly. "It could be this new moon, or the next, or the next."

"I think you're wrong." Echo didn't have a whole lot of conviction behind his words, but he refused to accept this. "There has to be another meaning."

"Damn, you're stubborn." Eyce chuckled, but it didn't hold much humor.

"Well, what do you want from me? Do you want me to just roll over and die? Because I won't do it!" Echo's chest heaved, the words flowing swiftly and vehemently. "You're missing something, so I suggest you keep looking. I finally have everything I've ever wanted, and I'm damn sure not going to give it up because some fucker with a superiority complex thinks he owns you!"

"There is a way to know what's coming," Vapre said so quietly, Echo almost didn't hear him over the pounding of his own heart. "The Oracle has visited each of us in our dreams before the test."

Echo didn't miss that Vapre had said "us," which added one more thing to the list of shit his men were keeping from him. "What did she say?"

"Same old thing." Vapre shrugged in a noncommittal way. "A lot of riddles, questions, no real answers, you know, the usual."

“What. Did. She. Say?” Echo bit off each word through clenched teeth.

Vapre sighed and hung his head. “That I needed to take what was offered to me freely and that there would be no second chances.”

No one knew what to say to that, if the deafening silence was any indication. Echo was finished with this depressing crap anyway. “Okay, so I guess that means you’re up next,” he said to Vapre. “Tomorrow, we start working on building your strength and endurance. You got a little taste of it last week, but you’re going to have to do better. We’ll try to redouble and rebound, like I did with Fiero.” Echo surveyed his men for a moment. “It might not hurt to try to combine some of your powers as well.”

“Can it wait until the next day?”

“Why?” Echo lifted his eyebrows at Eyce’s hesitation.

“We kind of have plans for tomorrow.”

“Oh? And what would be more important than Vapre being ready for his test?”

“Cut it out,” Vapre grumbled. “We have a surprise for you, and you’re ruining it. I promise to work doubly hard the next day. Deal?”

Echo considered him for a long time before he finally dipped his head in consent. He couldn’t deny that he was insanely curious as to what his lovers had planned for him. They already spoiled him beyond reason, so what more could they possibly give him? He kind of hoped it involved them all naked and sweaty, though.

Syx groaned, his hips arching up, grinding his groin against Echo’s ass as his fingers dug into the flesh around Echo’s hips. “Behave,” he warned. “I imagine you’re pretty sore, but if you don’t cut it out, I’m going to take you here and now.”

Shifting slightly, Echo had to admit that his ass did ache. It was a pleasant ache, though. The kind that throbbed in all the right places, telling him he’d been thoroughly loved. Still, he didn’t know if he could handle another round of “love” just yet. “Fine,” he huffed.

“Play nice,” Eyce teased as he wiggled his eyebrows playfully.  
“You promised me a proper welcome home later, and I fully intend to collect.”

## Chapter Nine

“Son of a bitch, cocksucker, motherfucker, piece of shit!” Echo screamed as he pounded his fists against the steering wheel of the Tahoe. “This is so not what I pictured when you said you had a surprise for me.”

Syx bit his lip and squeezed his eyes closed as he tried desperately not to laugh from the backseat. This wasn’t exactly the surprise, but it was leading up to it. He had to admit it wasn’t going as planned, though. Echo’s impatience and frustration were hilarious to witness, but Syx figured it wouldn’t earn him any brownie points to say so out loud.

And he really needed those brownie points for what they had planned later.

“Stop thinking so hard,” Eyce instructed from the passenger seat. “Just grip the wheel like I showed you and press lightly on the gas. Imagine you’re barefooted and using your big toe.”

“I can’t do this!” Echo sounded close to tears, and it went a long way to deflating Syx’s amusement.

Glancing over at Myst where the warrior sat across from him on the bench seat, he saw a similar look of distress on his lover’s face. “Echo, what’s wrong?”

“I suck at this,” Echo answered dejectedly. “It’s not supposed to be this hard.”

Syx sighed and stared out the window. They were parked on the side of their long, meandering driveway and hadn’t even made it to the main county road yet. “Have you ever driven a car before?”

“You know I haven’t.”

"Then why are you being so hard on yourself? It takes practice, just like anything else. When you first started using your powers, could you control them as easily as you can now?"

"Well..." Echo thought it over. Syx could hear his thoughts as clearly as though he were speaking aloud. "No," he answered slowly.

"How about reading, writing, or tying your shoelaces? Were those easy when you first learned?"

"Okay, I get it." Echo took a deep breath and blew it out slowly. Hesitantly, he wrapped his slender fingers around the gearshift and eased it into drive. One more huge breath, his fingers grasping the steering wheel in a white-knuckled death grip, and Echo eased his foot off the brake.

The SUV crept forward smoothly, without a jerk or jump. "Now give it a little gas," Eyce instructed. "Remember, just press the pedal, don't mash or stomp on it."

*"I can do this. I'm not a child, and adults know how to drive cars. I might need to drive some day in an emergency, so I need to know how to do this. I just want them to be proud of me."* Echo was broadcasting very clearly just then.

Syx kept his mouth closed, but he felt his chest swell at his mate's determination. Echo wasn't one to whine or complain, so he still didn't understand where the self-doubt had come from a minute before. This was much more like the Echo he knew.

*"You can't do this. Why would they ever be proud of you? What can you give them? You're stupid and weak. You can't even drive a car."*

Syx tensed, his body going rigid as the words seeped into his mind. The thoughts were coming from Echo, but it wasn't him thinking them. The "voice" was deeper, colder, harsh and unforgiving.

*"I'm not stupid!"* Okay, that had been Echo. What the fuck was going on here?

Syx sat up a little straighter, leaning forward slightly, concentrating intently on the battle commencing inside Echo's head.

*"You know I speak the truth. This is too hard. You'll never learn it. Maybe it would be better to give up than look like a fool in front of your lovers. They can barely tolerate you as it is."*

"Shut up!" Echo screeched inside his head so loudly that Syx flinched.

*"They will leave you,"* the voice continued. *"They will grow tired of watching you fumble your way through life."*

"They love me," Echo said mentally. The conviction in his voice went a long way in soothing Syx's fears. Still, this was Bad with a capital B. Whoever, or whatever, was playing inside Echo's head was digging right in, preparing a nice place to set up residency.

*"Have they told you? Syx says they were better off without you. Eyce and Fiero love each other. What do they need with you? You will do nothing but get them killed."*

"Stop the car!" Syx shouted.

Echo obeyed, jumping in his seat and slamming his foot down on the brake, throwing Syx forward so that his face bounced off the back of the seat in front of him. "What? What did I do?" Echo asked anxiously.

"Put it in park and turn off the engine," Syx replied a tad softer.

Echo did as he asked, then shifted so he could look around the headrest. "What's going on, Syx? Did I do something wrong? I thought I was finally getting it."

"You were doing fine, Echo, but we need to go home. Let Eyce drive." Everyone stared at him as though he'd grown horns and a tail. "I'll explain when we get there." Syx only wanted to say this once, so he'd wait until they'd all assembled. "Just hurry."

"What happened?" Eyce threw the car door open and hurried around the front of the SUV. Echo unbuckled his belt and slid over to the passenger seat. "Tell me," Eyce growled as he slid behind the wheel, jammed it into reverse, and sped backward toward the house.



"You're starting to scare me." Echo turned in his seat, sitting sideways as he tried to look at all three of them at once. His face look pale, his eyes wide, and his lower lip trembled.

Syx met his lover's eyes steadily, though his heart galloped against his ribs. "You're starting to scare me, too."

\* \* \* \*

"That was quick."

Syx gave a quick shake of his head, and Vapre understood that whatever the reason, it wasn't a good one. "Get everyone, and I mean everyone."

Vapre hesitated for only a heartbeat. The quicker he rounded up the residents of the house, the faster he'd find out what the hell was going on. Syx seemed pretty determined to keep a tight lip until he had everyone gathered, and there'd be no point in arguing the issue.

"Hex, Myst, and Fiero are in the kitchen," he said over his shoulder as he darted up the staircase and hurried down the hall, beating his fist against doors as he went. "Everyone up and downstairs. Move your asses!"

The door to Gage's room swung open, and the big werewolf looked mighty pissed off. "Mac still isn't ready to talk to anyone." At least he made an attempt to be civil, though he hadn't fully succeeded.

Vapre shook his head. "I'm sorry about that, but he's going to have to put his big girl panties on and deal with it. No one's asking him to talk, just listen. Syx said everyone needs to meet in the living room, and he looked almost sick when he said it."

"What happened?" Ah, now he'd gotten the man's attention.

"I don't know, and Syx won't say until everyone is downstairs. I don't want to hurt you, Gage, but I'm thinking it has to do with Echo, so I want to know what the fuck is going on, and I want to know five minutes ago." Vapre could still picture the look on Syx's face when he'd walked through that door. He didn't know what could have

happened in the half hour they were gone. They'd barely even left the damn driveway!

"Something happened to Echo?" Mac appeared at Gage's side looking pale and thin. His voice sound raspy and unused, his dark hair stood on ends, and his eyes appeared a bit glazed. "Let me get dressed, and we'll be right down."

"Mac," Gage said tenderly. "Baby, are you sure?"

A fierce determination crossed Mac's face, and Vapre suddenly felt a great fondness for the guy. "My friend is in trouble. I'm going to help." Then he spun on his heels and disappeared back into the room.

Gage sighed but dipped his head. "We'll be right down."

Vapre didn't waste time with further conversation. As he trotted back down the hall, the shifters filed out of the room they were sharing, jumping when they saw Vapre running at them. "What's going on?" Pax asked once he'd recovered.

"Downstairs," Vapre growled. He gave Sage the once-over, still trying to decide if he could trust the man or not. Their conversation of the night before hadn't exactly endeared him to the man. If he was the source of their newfound problems, Vapre would crush his larynx without blinking an eye. No one fucked with his mate.

Pushing past the trio, he took the stairs two at a time, barreling into the living room to find the rest of the house gathered there, sans the vampires. Not a lot they could do about that considering it was only nine o'clock in the morning. The sun spilled through the windows, bright and lethal to those of Syn and Jinx's particular persuasion.

"Talk," Hex said, pointing a finger in Syx's face.

Instead of replying, Syx turned to Echo, placed his hands on their mate's shoulders, and stared right into his sapphire blue eyes. "Who's in there with you?"

Echo's eyes widened almost comically, and he began whipping his head from side to side. "I don't know what you're talking about. Syx, you're acting fucking creepy."

"Baby, I heard him. Who's inside your head?"

Echo froze, his entire body going rigid. He looked like a gentle breeze would plow him right over.

It scared the shit out of Vapre.

Stepping forward cautiously, he paused and jerked his head up when he heard their guests enter the room. All six of them gathered near the foot of the stairs, looking confused and worried. All except Mac. The little man hurried forward, pushing Syx out of the way and cupping Echo's face in his hands. "Look at me," he demanded.

Echo blinked several times before his eyes finally focused on Mac. Vapre swiveled his head, looking around the room at his lovers. None of them seemed to have an idea what was going on either. The fact did little to calm his anxiety.

"That's right," Mac said calmly. "Right here, keep looking at me."

Echo nodded, but it seemed more of an automatic response than a purposeful motion, and he just kept doing it. The longer his head bobbed on his shoulders, the more Vapre felt his gut tighten and his stomach churn. "What's wrong with him?" he whispered.

"I can't tell."

Everyone swung around to face Syx. "What the hell do you mean you can't tell?" Fiero exploded, causing everyone in the room to jump. "You heard something. Well, hear it again, goddamn it!"

"I can't." Syx's eyebrows drew together, his brow wrinkling, and he stared intently at Echo. "I can't hear him. It's more like a muffled buzzing sound, as though his mind has been wrapped up in cellophane."

"Shit!" Eyce's long fingers shoved through his hair, fisting it and yanking roughly. "What do we do?"

"I don't know," Syx answered sadly.

“At least he’s not screaming.” Myst pressed closer to Hex’s side, his face drawn and his eyes shuttered.

“This is your fault,” Fiero growled at Syx.

“Stop it,” Mac called over his shoulder. “It’s no one’s fault, and your bickering sure isn’t going to help your mate. Now shut up and let me think.”

“He’s hot when he gets all demanding, huh?” Sony whispered to Gage.

“Hush,” Gage scolded lightly as he wound an arm around Sony’s shoulders and kissed the top of his head.

Mac ignored them all. His fingertips roamed over Echo’s face as though mapping out every dip, valley, and subtle curve. His eyes were closed, his lips pressed together in a thin line, and his nostrils flared occasionally as he breathed deeply through his nose.

Trying to tame his impatience, Vapre shuffled over to Syx’s side, wrapping his arm around the warrior’s waist and squeezing his hip. Syx looked so downtrodden, like his entire world was crumbling before his eyes, and it broke Vapre’s heart. He nuzzled against Syx’s cheek for just a moment before whispering in his ear, “Not your fault, yeah?”

Syx shrugged halfheartedly but leaned into Vapre’s embrace.

No one spoke after that, and Vapre wondered if they were all holding their breaths as he was. Then Mac’s eyelids flew open, his head snapped to the group still standing near the entryway, and a very impressive, though human, growl escaped his snarling lips.

Before anyone could do or say anything, Sage hissed once before throwing his head back and cackling madly.

Gage looked shocked for just a moment before comprehension hit him, and he reached out to grab Sage by the throat. The smaller man’s laugh died away, and he grinned at them maniacally. “Ciao,” he rasped and then simply vanished in a mist of putrid-smelling smoke.

Echo cried out, his knees buckling, and crumpled to the floor where he began to shake and sob. Vapre reached their mate first,

kneeling beside him and rolling him gently to his back. "Echo, look at me. Are you okay? Are you hurt?" The words spilled from his mouth in an anxious whisper. The thought that he should probably be asking, "Do you know who I am?" flickered through his mind, but he swatted it away.

The sobbing quieted, and his eyes were open, but Echo still shuddered where he curled on the carpeted floor. Reaching up to brush the hair out of his face, he gripped a handful of the locks and sat up sharply. "What the hell happened to my hair?" he cried.

"You cut it," Eyce said matter-of-factly.

Vapre didn't trust himself to speak. He could feel the hysteria bubbling up inside his chest. *Please, gods, let him be okay.*

"I cut it?" Echo sounded skeptical. "Why would I do that? You love my hair."

The knot in his chest loosened a fraction, and Vapre breathed a little easier. If Echo remembered that they had loved his long, golden hair, then maybe everything was going to be fine.

"Well, we like this, too," Hex replied cautiously. "Don't you like it, baby?"

"Yeah, I guess so." Echo shrugged. "What happened to me?"

"I'm not really sure," Syx whispered, and he sounded ashamed for not having the answers that their mate sought. "I'm going to find out, though."

"Is Sage gone?"

"Is that who was inside your head? He sounded different."

"Yeah, I think so, but I know what you mean. The voice in my head was deeper, almost evil. It didn't really sound like Sage, but I have this...impression, I guess you call it."

"It was him," Mac said from behind Echo. His eyebrows drew together, and he cocked his elbow out, sniffing at his underarm. Then he jerked his head away and wrinkled his nose. "Sweet hell, I reek." He patted his stomach. "And I'm starving."

“Do we have to leave?” came a tiny voice from near the front door. Jet bit his lip, shifting from foot to foot as his fingers fumbled together in front of him.

“We’ll talk about it,” Vapre answered icily. Logically, he knew they hadn’t been the ones to hurt his mate, but reason had taken a temporary vacation from Vapre’s thought process. Jet and Pax had allied themselves with the enemy, therefore forfeiting any friendly consideration he’d felt for them.

“What is wrong with you?” Echo gasped. “Of course they can stay!”

“We’ll talk about it,” Vapre repeated just as coldly, his eyes boring holes into the shifters.

A soft palm caressed his cheek, and Vapre couldn’t stop himself from leaning into the touch. “They hurt you,” he whispered. “We can’t trust them.”

“Sage hurt me,” Echo replied firmly. “He tricked us all, but that doesn’t mean we should condemn Pax and Jet just because they knew him. In fact, they may be able to help us.”

He struggled to his feet with a groan, gripping Vapre’s shoulder to steady himself. “Now, I’m hungry, I know Mac is, and I guess we’re having another meeting.” He sighed as though he found this quite irritating. “Oh, and Mac, be a sweetie and shower first. You’re burning my nose hair.”

## Chapter Ten

Men moved around the kitchen, talking in hushed voices and casting furtive glances at Echo. He ignored them as he rubbed his temples, trying to massage away the deep ache and constant throbbing. He'd felt a little off since his episode in the living room, as though his head wasn't quite attached to his shoulders, but floating somewhere just above.

Things seemed murky and unclear, and he had to think extra hard before he could answer any questions that were tossed his way. His other hand pulled absently at the end of his chestnut locks. He vaguely remembered being all fired up about chopping it off and casting aside his "golden boy" image. He just couldn't remember why. His mates loved his hair, and he'd never had a problem with it before, so why had it seemed so imperative at the time?

"You're thinking too hard," Eyce whispered in his ear. "Relax and breathe, baby. We'll figure this out, and if you're that worried about your hair, we can always dye it back. It's just hair, sweetheart."

Echo gave his lover a lopsided grin in gratitude. No one had called him sweetheart before, and he thought he might like that even better than *baby*. "I know, and it's not the hair exactly. I just can't remember why I felt the need to cut it in the first place."

"Do you remember what happened in the car?" Syx sat up a little straighter in his chair and bent forward, folding his arms on the table.

After a moment's hesitation, Echo shook his head slowly. "I know there was a voice in my head telling me all kinds of nasty things, but it's all muddled like a dream you can't quite remember when you wake up."

Mac entered the kitchen then, followed closely by his mates, and headed straight for Echo. Eyce rose instantly, moving to the next seat over to allow Mac to sit beside Echo. “How are you?”

“I should be asking you that.” Echo leaned forward and pecked his friend on the cheek. “We’ve missed you around here.”

Mac’s cheeks heated, and he smiled shyly. “I’m better now, thank you.”

They were being awfully formal, each tiptoeing around the other. Some things you just have to jump into with both feet, however. “What happened out in the woods?”

Everyone stopped, and all heads turned to Mac, waiting for his response. Gage seemed the most interested in the answer, moving around the table to sit on Mac’s other side to lend his support. Echo smiled at the former guard and nodded his approval. Sony stood just behind Mac, his fingers drifting through his mate’s curly brown hair. “You can tell us, Mac,” Sony whispered. “Did you *see* something?”

“Not exactly,” Mac began, and everyone listened with rapt attention. “Everything went black with kind of a tangled red haze at the edges. I felt like I’d been plunged into a bucket of ice water.”

“That’s when you first arrived at the place where you found the shifters?” Echo asked.

“Yes.” Mac bobbed his head up and down, staring at his hands where they twisted together on the table. “I couldn’t see anything except what was inside my head. I couldn’t hear, or smell, or even feel my own body.”

Echo shuddered in empathy, remembering the time he’d spent inside the capsule at the lab. He recalled the feeling of being disconnected, as though his brain was somewhere outside his body—functioning independently from him.

“There were these things...these monsters, living inside my head with me. I guess I could feel when someone touched me, but in my mind, it was the creatures attacking me. I didn’t know I was screaming out loud, though.”



Jet and Pax stood by the back door, both looking contrite and fidgeting nervously. They looked afraid, but not in the guilty kind of way. "Did you meet Sage in the lab?" Echo wracked his brain, trying to place the stranger. He remembered Jet, and Pax a little more, but he couldn't remember seeing Sage before he'd shown up in their house.

"No," Jet whispered. "We woke up in this cave near where you found us. It was snowing outside, and we had no idea how we'd gotten there."

"Sage was there when we finally came around. I don't even know how long we were asleep," Pax picked up the narrative. "He said he was from a different facility, just like the one we came from. He had a number." Pax said the last part as though that explained everything.

"So before a few weeks ago, you'd never met him?" Echo didn't like where this was heading.

"No," the shifters answered together. "He seemed kind of...different, though. We figured it was because he'd been alone for so long and didn't know how to interact with people anymore." Pax shuffled from foot to foot as he spoke.

"Alone?" Echo sat up a little straighter and tilted his head to the side.

"That's what he said," Jet replied. "He told us that he'd been hiding out for years."

"You lied to us," Vapre broke in. "You said that you'd all been in the lab together."

Jet and Pax bobbed their heads slowly. "He said that if you knew he didn't come from the same lab, you would be suspicious, and we wouldn't be allowed to stay here." Jet still wouldn't meet their eyes.

"We were cold and hungry," Pax whispered. "I'm sorry that we tricked you."

Echo glanced over at Mac. "Did you see two or three in your vision?"

"Two," Mac answered immediately. "But I could kind of feel a third person at the peripheral."

“How did you know to come here?” Fiero asked pointedly.

“I don’t know.” Jet looked like he would pass out from the admission. “I swear I don’t,” he added hurriedly. “I had these dreams and a kind of pull in this direction, but I can’t explain it.”

“Then why were you hiding in the woods?” Fiero lifted both eyebrows, the suspicion written all over his face. Echo couldn’t blame him. After finding one traitor in their midst, it would be hard to trust any newcomers.

“We wanted to,” Pax took his turn at the story. “Sage said we needed to stay put, that someone would come for us.”

“Bait,” Eyce murmured under his breath.

Echo closed his eyes and rubbed at his temples again. “Did Sage...Did he hurt you?”

Jet and Pax stared at their feet, hands linked behind their backs, and didn’t say a word. Their silence spoke volumes. “He said that you three...um, played around some.” Myst wrinkled his nose and sighed. It wasn’t exactly a question, but at least he was trying to be tactful. “Did you...” Myst huffed out a breath and rubbed a hand over his face. “Did you volunteer?” he finally blurted.

If Jet’s face turned any redder, Echo would have worried he was having a stroke. Pax made a noncommittal noise in the back of his throat, and Echo couldn’t take it anymore. Rising from his seat, he gripped the back of his chair until the dizziness passed, then moved carefully over to the two shifters. He hugged Pax first, then Jet, squeezing the man tightly. “You’re safe here,” he whispered.

Jet hugged him back, shuddering as he pressed his face into Echo’s neck and exhaled on a long sigh. “I’m sorry.”

“Which one of you was hurt?”

Jet tensed in his arms and tried to move away, but Echo squeezed him tighter. “You can tell me, Jet.”

After another moment of struggle, Jet slumped against him in defeat. “Pax,” he murmured. “Hex fixed him right up, though.”

"Is Sage the one who hurt him?" Echo spoke quietly into Jet's ear, barely more than a breath.

Jet nodded.

"Are you hurt?"

"Just some scratches."

Echo finally released him and took a step back. "Let me see."

Dropping his eyes to study the kitchen floor again, Jet slowly lifted the hem of his shirt just past his belly button. Echo gasped, and his eyes stung as unshed tears prickled the corners. Jet's "scratches" were four long gashes that stretched from one side of his rib cage to the other. "Hex, why didn't you heal these?"

"They weren't there," Hex replied with a growl.

"This happened since you've been here?" Echo hadn't thought his eyes could get any wider, but he'd been wrong. "Why didn't you tell someone?"

"Please," Pax whispered. "No more questions right now."

Echo closed his eyes and held a shaky hand over his face. "Hex..."

"Come on, baby." Eyce scooped Echo up in arms and cradled him close. "You need to rest. You're still a little unsteady."

Echo didn't resist, didn't argue. He felt miserable down to his bones, and he just wanted to wrap his men around him like an Ace bandage and sleep until things were better.

"I'll get him fixed up and food in his stomach, then send him back to bed."

Echo opened his eyes to see Hex standing beside Eyce. He offered his mate a wobbly smile and inclined his head. "Thank you." Eyce started to carry him out of the room, but another thought occurred to him, and he patted his lover's chest to stop him. "Sage or the forest?" he asked weakly. His head swam, and his tongue felt too big for his mouth, making speech almost impossible.

"Both," Mac answered, understanding his inquiry. "There's still evil in the woods, but Sage brought it to this house."

“M’kay. Fix later,” he mumbled, then turned his head into Eyce’s chest and drifted off to sleep.

\* \* \* \*

“Interesting,” the Oracle hummed as she lifted a strand of Echo’s dark hair and let it slide through her fingers.

“Do you like it?” For some reason, he wanted to please her.

“No,” she said flatly. Then she combed her fingers through his hair, starting at the crown and ending at the newly shorn tips. “Ah, much better.” She smiled radiantly.

Staring down at his hair, Echo gasped. Lifting the waist-length blond locks, he stroked them in amazement. “Thank you,” he breathed.

“You have had many adventures since we last spoke.”

Echo’s cheeks heated as he recalled some of his more carnal adventures. “Yes, ma’am.”

The Oracle laughed her soft, tinkling laugh. “My dear, Echo, it is always a pleasure to see you.”

“Who are you?” Echo slapped a hand over his mouth. He hadn’t meant to ask that.

“All answers in time.” The Oracle continued to smile and reached for his hand. “Walk with me.”

Taking her hand without thought, Echo drifted along beside her, his heart light and his mood peaceful. “Why am I here?”

“You are in great danger.”

“Well, no shit.” Echo bit his lip and winced. “Sorry,” he mumbled.

“This is unexpected. You must remove this obstacle from your path, or you will surely fail in your tasks.”

“What is unexpected? What obstacle?” He knew better than to anticipate an answer, but he couldn’t stop himself from asking. The

realization that the Oracle was not all knowing was a hard pill to swallow.

“You will need to be wary. Your adversaries grow more desperate.” And her grip tightened around his fingers as she spoke quickly. Echo had never seen her so agitated before. The Oracle had always seemed like an omniscient being to him, but now, in her current state, she appeared almost...normal.

He decided he liked her better before.

The Oracle stopped suddenly and swung around to face him. “Go. Go now and warn the others. They must stop the evil, or there will be no hope.”

“What evil?” Echo shouted. “Warn who? You are being even creepier than usual!” He yanked his hand away from the Oracle and glared at her. “Who are you?” he demanded.

“Shine the light and force out the evil,” she whispered and then vanished before his eyes.

Groaning, Echo closed his eyes and dropped his head back on his shoulders. What the hell was he supposed to do now?

## Chapter Eleven

“That bitch is crazy,” Echo said quite clearly as his eyes snapped open and he pushed up in bed. He looked royally pissed off, and it was the best sight Vapre had seen in days.

Moving quickly, he settled onto the mattress, touching Echo everywhere and trying to form coherent words past the burn in his throat. “You’re okay. Oh, gods, you’re awake.”

Echo rolled his eyes and huffed. “Of course I’m awake. Why are you looking at me like that?”

The door eased opened, and Eyce stepped into the room, freezing almost immediately when his eyes landed on Echo. He closed his eyes tightly and clenched the doorknob in a white-knuckled grip. “Thank you,” he whispered before opening his eyes and hurrying over to crawl up beside Echo and Vapre. “You’re awake.”

Echo batted their hands away. “Why does everyone keep saying that? Yes, I went to sleep, I had a nice nap, and now I’m awake.”

Vapre looked at Echo, then at Eyce, then back to Echo once more. “Baby, you’ve been out cold for five days.”

“You kept mumbling in your sleep, or we would have thought you were dead,” Eyce added quietly. “That’s the second time you’ve done this to us.”

“Five days.” Echo considered this for a long time before he shrugged nonchalantly. “I guess that would explain why I need to piss like a freakin’ racehorse.” He maneuvered to the edge of the mattress and let his feet dangle over the side as he peered out the window. “Hey, it snowed!”

Vapre met Eyce's gaze, and they stared at each other in alarm. Their mate was taking this much too casually. Echo pushed up from the bed and walked across the room to the door. His strides were steady and purposeful, not the weak and shaky movements of someone who'd been bedridden for nearly a week. "Be right back," he called over his shoulder as he slipped out the door, and even his voice sounded healthy and vibrant—not croaky and unused.

"What the hell just happened?"

Eyce shook his head thoughtfully. "I get so tired of saying this, but I really don't know." They sat in silence after that, each contemplating their own thoughts, until Echo flounced back into the room, his blond hair wet and clinging to his nude body.

"I'm starving," he announced. "What's on the menu?"

"Echo?" Vapre asked uncertainly. "Are you okay?"

"Sure. I had a quick shower, and I feel great." He stretched his thin arms over his head and arched his back. "A little stiff, and a lot hungry, but that's about it."

"I'm going to get Hex," Eyce muttered and jumped up from the bed.

"Bring Syx," Vapre suggested. Something was definitely not right with their little mate, and hopefully Syx would be able to give them insight.

"Right." Eyce paused beside Echo. He appeared hesitant, but leaned forward and kissed Echo's forehead. He jerked his head away and gasped. "You're cold as ice."

Echo giggled, and not very pleasantly. "Hurry along." He dismissed Eyce with a flick of his wrist.

Once the warrior had left the room, Vapre stood as well and moved cautiously toward his lover. Echo's head snapped toward him in an unnaturally jerky movement. Something flashed inside his eyes, a faint, flickering glow, then disappeared just as quickly. His lips parted slowly, stretching into a wide, menacing smile. "Hello, lover," he purred.

That light flashed in his eyes again, and Vapre tilted his head to the side. “Echo, are you in there?” There was no doubt in his mind that this was not his mate. Perhaps in body, but someone or something else controlled him.

The smile slid off of Echo’s face, replaced by a look of sheer terror. “Vapre?” he whispered. “What’s happening to me?”

Rushing forward, Vapre reached Echo in two long strides and wound his arms around him tightly. “Hex is coming, baby. We’re going to help you.”

Echo clung to him, sagging into his arms, and shuddered. “The Oracle,” he panted. “She said we have to defeat the evil. She told me to shine a light.” He gasped for breath, his teeth chattering as he tried to speak.

Then he stilled completely, and his breathing became normal once more. Vapre took a deliberate step in retreat, his chest constricting at the devious look on his angel’s face. And that’s exactly what Echo was to him—his salvation, his angel, his light. Now, he could scarcely find a trace of that man in the cold, hard lines of Echo’s face.

“Aww,” Echo leered. “You don’t look happy to see me.” Another flash of his eyes.

“*Be the light,*” a sweet, feminine voice whispered into Vapre’s mind. “*Find your star and lift it from the darkness.*”

For once, Vapre didn’t question the Oracle’s wisdom or even stop to decipher the meaning. Reaching out with both hands, he wound his fingers in Echo’s hair and jerked his mate to him, crushing their mouths together and licking inside. He kissed Echo with everything he had, pouring every ounce of love, trust, need, and hunger into the mating of their lips.

Echo’s tense muscles began to relax. Then all at once, he threw himself into the kiss, coiling around Vapre like a second skin. His hands were everywhere in a hurry, pulling at Vapre’s clothes, his hair, biting, scratching, and hissing.



Ignoring the sting from the Echo's fingernails across his rib cage, Vapre crushed his lover closer and kissed him harder, deeper, more desperately. Echo bit his lip, his teeth sinking into the tender flesh until blood spilled into his mouth. He moaned seductively, licking and sucking at the wound.

Vapre jerked away, still holding Echo's hair tightly, and stared into his eyes. The brilliant sapphire blue was seeping away, replaced by a deep, dark midnight. "Echo, listen to me," he growled vehemently. "I know you're in there. Are you really going to let him win?" Vapre used "him" loosely since he honestly didn't know what had taken over his mate.

"Vapre? Help me," Echo pleaded. He began trembling again, and tears overflowed, slipping down his soft, pink cheeks. Without warning, he clapped his hands over his ears and crumpled to the ground, a bloodcurdling scream pouring from his swollen lips. "Shut up! Shut up!" he screeched.

Falling to his knees in front of his lover, Vapre took Echo's hands and pried them away from his head. "Look at me," he demanded. "Look right into my eyes." When Echo took too long to comply, Vapre released his hold on the man's wrists and cradled his face, forcing him to lift his head. "You can do this. You're stronger than you think."

The life ebbed from Echo's gaze, his skin turned cold and clammy, and he became eerily motionless. "Would you like to see how strong I am?" His normally mellow voice flowed thick and gravelly. His fingertips skimmed down his bare chest enticingly. "Do you want me, lover?"

Pushing to his feet without a word, Vapre stalked about the bedroom, beating his fist against his thigh in frustration. Just when he thought he'd lose his mind, the door banged open, and all six of his lovers filed into the room. Vapre dropped down on the foot of the bed and stared up at them hopelessly. "I can't help him," he whispered.

Fiero and Eyce came to sit on either side of him, wrapping their arms around him and lending their strength. “We’ll do whatever it takes,” Fiero answered with conviction. “We’ll get him back.”

Syx and Hex crouched down beside Echo, each touching him and mumbling words that Vapre couldn’t hear. They’d look up occasionally, their eyes meeting for a brief moment, then return their attention to Echo. Their little mate preened and purred from all the attention, making lewd advances at every opportunity.

Hex stood first, scrubbing both hands over his face. “This is not something I can heal.”

Syx remained on the floor in front of Echo, holding his delicate face in both hands. “Help me,” he whispered. “Where am I? I hear you, but I can’t find you.” He was repeating the information he heard inside Echo’s head. “It’s so dark here.”

“What does it look like? Can you see a picture?” Eyce asked practically.

“It’s like Mac described—very dark with a swirling red haze. I can’t hear what’s causing it. That part is cut off from me.” Syx leaned closer until his nose was almost touching Echo’s. “I have to concentrate to hear Echo, and still, I only get bits and pieces at random intervals.”

“But he is in there, right?” Myst slid down to the floor and crawled over to sit beside Syx. “We can get him back, right?”

Onyx just looked lost. He stood beside the open doorway, arms hanging limply at his sides, and stared straight ahead.

“*Second chances are rare,*” the Oracle whispered to Vapre. “*Be the light in the tempest.*”

Sucking in a deep breath, Vapre squeezed his eyes closed and tried to calm his racing heart. This was one of those unfortunate times when he understood exactly what the Oracle wanted from him, but that didn’t make it any less difficult. It would probably be the hardest thing he’d ever done.

Slipping off the mattress, Vapre walked on unsteady legs until he stood just in front of his lovers. Syx and Myst made way for him, watching him with interest as he slowly lowered himself to the floor and cupped Echo's face in both palms.

He wished he didn't have to have an audience for what he was about to do, but it couldn't be helped. His pride and insecurities could go to hell if this is what it took to save his mate. He stroked Echo's cheek with the pad of his thumb and tried to smile. The attempt was weak and fake, but he did manage to part his lips in a shaky imitation.

"Echo, you're putting us all in danger. If you can't fight this, you'll have to leave." The words tasted sour on his tongue, but he needed to be sure his angel could hear him. Ignoring the gasps and growls of the other men in the room, Vapre continued. "Do you want to leave us?"

"You fight dirty," Echo murmured, and he began to shudder violently as some of the sapphire color returned to his eyes.

"There you are." Vapre pulled Echo to him, kissing his lips slow and tender. "Come back to me, baby," he breathed. "I love you, Echo. Come back to us."

Echo cried out, his body going rigid though he continued to shake as he fell forward into Vapre's arms. Vapre held the smaller man to his chest, running his fingers through Echo's damp hair and nuzzling the top of his head with his cheek. "I love you," he whispered repeatedly, chanting the words like a magical spell.

Echo continued to convulse as he screamed and wailed until his voice sounded raw and abused.

The demons moved as a unit, surrounding Vapre and Echo, wrapping their strong arms around them and whispering words of, maybe not love, but caring and devotion. If this had been a movie, Vapre guessed this is where they'd cue the dramatic music and dim the lights. Tension buzzed around them, filling the air with an electrical charge and building up to something explosive.

So when Echo finally quieted and sagged limp and unconscious against Vapre, he found it to be a little anti-climactic. “Is it over?” he asked uncertainly.

Syx pulled Vapre around to face him and rested their foreheads together. “He’s sleeping, dreaming about pumpkin pie of all things.” Syx chuckled at this. “Echo is broadcasting louder than usual, especially since he’s asleep, but there’s no one else in his head with him.”

Before Vapre could express his relief, Myst disentangled himself from the group, jumped to his feet, and sprinted for the door.

“Where the hell are you going?” Hex called after him.

Myst popped his head back into the room and grinned from ear to ear. “To make a pumpkin pie.”

\* \* \* \*

Echo licked the last of the gooey goodness from his fork and set it on his plate. “That was amazing. I was having a dream about pumpkin pie.”

“We know.” Syx smiled so huge, Echo thought the demon’s face would split in two. He snatched the plate out of Echo’s hand and set it on the nightstand beside the bed. “How are you feeling?” he asked seriously.

“Tired,” Echo answered honestly. “But I think that’s a good thing, right? I feel weak and shaky, a little cold, and I have a headache, but other than that, I feel like myself.”

All of his men huddled around him on the bed, staring at him with a mix of relief and worry. “You scared the hell out of me,” Fiero whispered into Echo’s ear. “Don’t do it again.”

Echo rolled his eyes and bumped Fiero with his shoulder. It wasn’t like he’d meant to be possessed. He wasn’t sure if that’s exactly what had happened, but it seemed close enough. He didn’t say

anything, though. He knew Fiero wasn't really chastising him. The man had been afraid, and big, macho demons did not scare easily.

"Do you think it will happen again?" Onyx asked quietly, and the atmosphere instantly sobered.

"I think we need to go back to that clearing in the woods," Hex said equally as quiet. "There's something out in those trees that is obviously a threat to us."

As much as Echo wanted to deny the obvious, as much as he wanted to beg and plead for his mates to stay home where it was safe, he didn't. Home wasn't safe anymore. The enemy had infiltrated their sanctuary, and Echo was pissed. "You're right," he agreed to everyone's astonishment. "The Oracle said that we will have to defeat the evil to succeed in our tasks. Of course, I never know what the crap she's talking about, but that seems pretty clear to me. So when do we leave?"

"You don't," Eyce said flatly, his voice brooking no argument. No argument from anyone except Echo, that is.

"Oh, can it with the *Me, Tarzan* bullshit. I can help, and you damn well know it."

"We need you here to help Vapre in case we don't return in time," Hex said diplomatically.

Echo glared at their leader for a long time before he finally deflated, the air rushing out of his lungs in a huff. "Who's going?"

"All of us," Eyce answered immediately, "except for you, Vapre, Mac, and the vampires."

"Sony's going?" Echo lifted a brow skeptically. After what had happened to Mac out in those woods, he could not picture Gage letting Sony within twenty miles of that place.

"Yep. He was very...insistent." Eyce snorted, his shoulders shaking as he tried not to laugh. "Pax and Jet are coming as well. They know that place better than we do."

“Did you ask them? Or did you just tell them they were going?” Echo could only imagine how terrified the shifters would be of returning to the place where Sage had more or less held them captive.

“They volunteered, actually.” Vapre rubbed Echo’s knee through the thin sheet and smiled. “They want to help, and we can use all of it we can get.”

“Take care of them.” It was more of a command than a request, but Echo felt he deserved a little leeway after the week he’d had.

“Don’t worry, baby.” Fiero kissed Echo’s temple. “They’re pretty tough, but we’ll watch out for them, okay?”

Echo nodded briskly. “Okay, so the new moon is...” He trailed off and darted his eyes around the room. “What is today anyway?”

“February seventeenth,” Myst answered. “The full moon is tomorrow night, and it’s two weeks before the next new moon.” He beamed proudly at being able to recall the information.

Echo blew him a kiss in reward. “Okay, so, what are you going to do about Gage on the full moon?”

“I think he’ll be fine if he has Sony with him. Plus the shifters said they could help control him. We have to trust that will be enough for now,” Hex answered with a scowl. He didn’t like the plan, and Echo could see why. Too many things could go wrong with that little scenario.

Resigned to the inevitable, Echo sighed and bobbed his head. “When are you leaving?”

Everyone looked hesitant to answer, but Syx eventually bolstered his courage and whispered, “Tonight.”

## Chapter Twelve

“Did you mean it?” Echo asked when he and Vapre were alone. Their men had left just minutes before, and Echo felt the loss as a deep pain in his chest. He had the unshakable fear that some of them wouldn’t return, and it had taken every ounce of willpower to not beg them to stay.

Pushing away his panic, he shifted on the sofa, turning so that he could face Vapre, and arched one eyebrow expectantly.

“Yes,” Vapre said clearly. Well, kudos to him for not playing ignorant and making Echo drag the answers out of him.

“And the others?”

“Yes.”

“Have you told them?”

“I told Syx, but not the others. I will soon. I didn’t want to add any undue stress to them before they left, though.”

“Coward,” Echo teased.

Vapre smiled crookedly and shrugged. “It’s not easy. I’ve had these feelings for a long time, but I never did anything about them. After a few thousand years, it became easy to just push them to the back of my mind, ignore them, and enjoy the companionship that was offered.” His eyes softened along with his voice. “Then you came and changed everything. Now, I don’t see how I can keep it all bottled up anymore.”

“Good. You guys are going to drive me nuts with all this evasiveness.” Echo wiggled his eyebrows and scrunched his nose to make his lover laugh. It worked, and the mood lightened considerably. Then he had to go and ruin it. “I miss them already.”

Vapre gathered Echo into his arms and sighed. "I do, too, but they'll be back soon." His voice held little conviction, and the hole in Echo's chest stretched a little wider.

Running his fingertips lightly under Vapre's eyes, Echo found himself lost in the stormy gray depths. It didn't escape his notice that each time one of his mates finally faced the truth of his feelings, his eye color changed. Echo didn't know what it meant but hoped it was a good sign. "Your eyes are beautiful."

"They're different," Vapre agreed offhandedly. He bent and touched his lips to Echo's, and suddenly, conversation didn't seem so important.

"Make love to me," Echo whispered. "Make me forget for just a little while."

Vapre didn't ask questions, didn't say he thought it was a bad idea. His warm fingers slipped under Echo's chin, holding his face steady, and his mouth descended on Echo's lips. They held each other for a long time, their tongues sliding and twining together, and everything else began to slip away until only Vapre remained in Echo's world.

Slowly but confidently, Vapre's hand slid under the hem of Echo's T-shirt, lifting it up his chest and breaking the kiss only long enough to pull it over his head. Then their mouths collided again, the tempo and intensity increasing. Need and hunger akin to pain coursed through Echo, and he worked feverishly to divest his lover of his clothing. Minutes passed that felt like an eternity, and then they were both naked and sweating, wrapped around each other as they panted and moaned on the sofa.

The day had given way to the night, the sky pitch black, and the dark oppressive. A small voice in the back of his mind argued that Syn and Jinx would be awake and could walk down the stairs at any moment. Mac had said he was going to bed, but that didn't mean he wouldn't wander down for a late-night snack.

Echo didn't care.



Even those small concerns faded away as Vapre demanded his full attention. Echo was happy to let go and give it to him. His lover ended up sprawled on the cushions, Echo draped over his chest and straddling his waist as their tongues and lips continued to duel. Echo rocked against his mate, rubbing their hard cocks together in a silent plea for more.

Vapre reached over his head and around the arm of the sofa, fumbling with the drawer of the end table while his mouth continued its assault on Echo's senses. Growling in frustration, he ripped the drawer out and emptied the contents on the floor.

Echo giggled into Vapre's mouth at his mate's impatience. Then a deep sigh rose up from Vapre's chest, and Echo figured the man had found what he was searching for. Sure enough, seconds later, there was the unmistakable snick of a bottle cap, and then slippery fingers nudged at his eager hole. Echo pushed back against the digits as he trailed his mouth down Vapre's neck and over his collarbone.

Then one finger slipped into his opening, wiggling and pumping, causing his dick to jerk and throb against Vapre's belly. It disappeared as quickly as it had entered, leaving Echo feeling empty and lost. "What's wrong?" he mumbled against Vapre's throat.

"I want...I want you to fuck me."

Echo's lips paused in their trek for just a moment before a greedy smile stretched them from ear to ear. "On your knees," he ordered as he rose off of his lover to stand beside the sofa.

Vapre flipped over instantly, presenting his upturned ass for Echo's viewing pleasure. One knee slid under him, the other foot braced on the floor, and he lowered his chest to the arm of the sofa.

Scanning the floor, Echo found the little bottle of lube and snatched it up, flipping open the cap and pouring a generous amount into his palm. He coated his cock carefully, lingering a bit and moaning from the pleasure. Then he dribbled more of the slick over his fingers, tossed the bottle aside, and eased onto the couch behind his mate.

Gods, Vapre had a gorgeous ass. The pale skin stretched taut over the well-developed muscles, and it rounded and dipped in the perfect heart shape. "How do you want it?"

Vapre groaned. "Hard and fast. I need...I don't want..." He seemed to be having trouble voicing his needs, but Echo understood.

Smoothing his hand over the supple flesh, Echo skimmed two oiled fingers along Vapre's crease, burrowing between the rounded cheeks, seeking out his prize. He found Vapre's entrance and caressed it gently, ringing the fluttering muscles with two fingers. "Shh," he cooed. "I'll take good care of you." Then without warning, he shoved both fingers into Vapre's hole, clear to the second knuckle.

Vapre growled, a primitive sound that made Echo shiver in anticipation. He gave his lover only a second to adjust, then pumped his fingers in and out of the velvet heat in long, hard strokes. "You're going to come for me," he demanded. "You're going to come so hard that you forget your own name. Then when you think you can't take anymore, I'm going to fuck you until you come again."

"Fuck," Vapre breathed as his entire frame began to shake.

Echo smiled in approval, adding a third finger and pumping in and out of Vapre's ass. "That's right. You're going to love every second of it, and you're not going to touch yourself." Hey, he was pretty good at this dominating stuff!

The hand that had been drifting toward Vapre's straining cock stilled, then hesitantly began its downward trek again. Echo slapped his mate's ass hard. "No," he growled.

Vapre cried out and lifted his hand back to the arm of the sofa. "Again."

Echo's cock pulsed and jerked, weeping freely from the tip as he worked a fourth finger into Vapre's clenching passage. "If you want more, then come for me." He pushed his fingers into Vapre's ass hard, twisting and curling them until he found the walnut-sized gland he sought. He stroked it relentlessly, pumping in tiny movements as his other hand landed another heavy swat to Vapre's pale cheek.

His demon roared, his inner walls clamping down on Echo's fingers as semen erupted from his swollen cock. Echo didn't even give him a chance to come down from his high. As creamy ropes of cum continued to shoot from Vapre's slit, Echo removed his fingers, lined up the head of his cock, and thrust in to the root.

Vapre groaned again, his fingers digging into the upholstery of the sofa. Echo wrapped one arm around Vapre's lean hips for better leverage and began a hard, demanding pace, slamming into his lover as though he could reach his warrior's soul if he could just bury his cock deep enough.

He expected the urgency to fade, but it only escalated until Echo felt it would consume him. Releasing his hold on Vapre's waist, he sat up straight, one hand gripping his lover's hip firmly as the other began a steady rhythm, spanking Vapre's ass on every outward glide of his cock.

Vapre went wild, snarling and growling, pushing back against Echo and meeting him thrust for punishing thrust. Stilling his hips, Echo let his mate take over as he used both hands to swat his demon's ass until the skin glowed red and hot, his handprints standing out in sharp relief against the milky skin. Damn, it was a beautiful sight.

"That's it, babe. Fuck yourself on my cock. Take what you want." He growled. The heat and tightness surrounding his dick felt like heaven. Dominating his partner left him feeling high. His skin burned, his balls tingled, and every thought floated. "Come for me. Come on my cock and make me feel it!"

One last hard smack to Vapre's rounded globes, and Echo abandoned the spanking, dug his fingers into Vapre's hips, and drove forward with enough force to rock his lover into the arm of the couch. Echo swiveled his hips, grinding his groin against Vapre's ass, then pulled out slowly, inch by inch until his cock only nudged at Vapre's hole.

He pushed just the tip in and then retreated. He did it again. Once more. Then on the fourth invasion, he plunged into the base as he

jerked back on Vapre's hips. Vapre's loud cry mingled with Echo's scream, and they tumbled over the edge together.

His warrior's passage convulsed in waves, squeezing and strangling Echo's cock, milking his orgasm until he had nothing left to give. His balls unloaded, filling Vapre's ass to the brim until the cum began seeping out around Echo's still-hard dick. He didn't think he'd ever come so hard or so much in his life.

Panting heavily, his heart about to explode inside his chest, Echo slipped out of Vapre's body and fell back on the cushions with a grunt. "Holy shit," he breathed. "I need a nap."

Vapre struggled to catch his breath as well, but apparently, he had other ideas that didn't include sleeping. Peeking at Echo over his shoulder, he grinned mischievously and lifted his eyebrows. "Again?"

"Yes, please," a voice moaned from near the stairway.

Echo jerked around, his mouth falling open when he saw Syn and Jinx standing shoulder to shoulder, pants open, dicks out, and stroking themselves vigorously. Echo figured he should probably be embarrassed, but he wasn't. That might have something to do with the fact that his brain wasn't exactly firing on all neurons, but he'd examine that later.

An idea wiggled into his brain, and Echo smiled. "You've seen us. Let us watch you." Well, that sure got their attention. The two vamps stilled their movements but continued to palm their leaking cocks.

"You want to watch us wank off?" Jinx asked slowly.

"No." Echo shook his head. "I want to watch you fuck Syn." Echo glanced over his shoulder to see what his mate thought of the idea. Judging by the heat in Vapre's eyes, the way his nostrils flared at the corners, he thought it was a pretty fucking good one. Turning back to the vampires, Echo smirked. "It's only fair," he said innocently.

Both men hummed with desire, but there was a hesitancy about them. Echo remembered what they'd said about not being lovers, but he had a feeling there was a whole lot of miscommunication going on there. Just to make the offer a little more appealing, Echo pulled

Vapre down to sit on the sofa and squirmed up in his lap. "You can watch Vapre fuck me, while you fuck Syn."

Both vampires groaned and turned to look at each other. Some kind of silent communication passed between them, and they nodded in unison before walking over to stand in the center of the room in front of Echo and Vapre. "Deal," Syn said.

Echo pointed at the bottle of the lube on the floor but lost his ability to speak when Vapre's tongue started gliding along the side of his neck. Syn picked up the little tube in a tentative manner, as though it were a deadly snake poised to attack.

Vapre's arm wrapped around Echo, holding him firmly in place with his back to the warrior's chest. The demon needn't have worried. Echo wasn't going anywhere. He kept his eyes on the pair in front of him, but his body sang from the attention his mate was giving him.

"Are you sure about this?" Syn whispered to Jinx. "I'll understand."

*He loves him*, Echo thought, and his heart hurt just a little for the man. How awful to have something in front of you that you want so desperately, but not be able to claim it for yourself.

"I want this," Jinx whispered just as softly. "I'm tired of hiding."

*Yes!* Echo actually bounced a little in Vapre's lap. His mate, however, seemed completely oblivious to what was going on around him as he humped his hard cock against Echo's ass.

"You mean..." Syn left the question unasked, but his face looked hopeful.

Jinx held Syn's face in both hands and looked him right in the eyes. "I love you, Syn. I couldn't tell you before, but we're safe here."

*Yes! Yes! Yes!* Maybe not the ideal situation for such a deep confession, but Echo decided to let that slide. He also decided that their current venue was not the appropriate place for the lovers' first time together either.

Without a hint of disappointment, Echo smiled widely and jerked his head toward the stairs. "Go make love to your man away from perverted eyes."

"Whose idea was this?" Vapre murmured indignantly against the side of Echo's throat.

Echo rolled his eyes. "That was before. This is now." He grinned at the vampires again. "I don't want to see you again until tomorrow night. You have a lot of time to make up for."

Though Jinx was only a few inches taller than Syn, he lifted the man easily into his arms, encouraging Syn to wrap his legs around him. Then he claimed his lover's lips, kissing him with such passion that Echo was amazed that the room didn't ignite around them. "You heard the man," Jinx panted. "I have a lot more than time to make up for." Then he was gone in the blink of an eye, Syn still plastered to him as he raced them up the stairs.

"That was great," Echo sighed happily.

Vapre chuckled breathily, his hand coming down to wrap around Echo's pulsing cock. "Oh, it's about to get even better, baby."

And it did.

Vapre stroked Echo's cock, twisting his wrist around the head and dipping his thumb into the slit to smear pre-cum over the spongy crown. It took only minutes to stoke the smoldering embers into a raging wildfire, and Echo gasped as his orgasm raced through him.

"Mine," Vapre whispered as he nuzzled against Echo's neck. Then his long canines pushed through the yielding flesh, and he sucked hard, growling and groaning as his body tensed.

Echo felt the warm, slippery wetness of his mate's release against his backside and moaned loudly when his own climax took him by surprise. Mm, he loved it when his men claimed him. The tiny prick of pain before the intense pleasure took over always left him breathless.

Strings of pearly seed erupted from his cock, coating Vapre's hand and painting Echo's lower abs. Sated and unbelievably tired, Echo leaned back against Vapre's chest and panted.

They'd accomplished nothing. Their problems were still waiting for them, bigger and more perilous than ever. But for just a little while, because of his mate, he'd been able to forget they existed.

"Tomorrow, we get to work," he whispered.

Vapre extracted his fangs and licked over the claiming bite. "Tomorrow," he breathed.

## Chapter Thirteen

“Perfect!” Echo beamed up at Vapre where the man hovered several feet in the air. The cold wind whipped around them, howling in agitation and freezing Echo down to his bones. “Okay, now come down, and let’s see if we can double that.”

The air began to still, and Vapre floated to the ground with a huge smile on his face. “This is fun.”

“You say that now.” Without waiting for Vapre’s reply, Echo grabbed the warrior’s hands and closed his eyes, dropping all of his guards at once.

Vapre yelped and tried to jerk away, but Echo hung on tight. He’d siphoned a little of Vapre’s gift earlier, and now, he tried to redouble that power and mix in a little of his own as he pushed it toward his mate like a tidal wave.

He really wished he could take more time, work up to it, because he knew from Fiero that the experience was painful and unsettling. They’d been working all week and not getting a hell of a lot accomplished, though. With only three days until the new moon, they were running out of time.

When Echo felt his energy began to wane, he released Vapre’s hands, and the warrior immediately crumpled to the ground, trembling and heaving as he expelled the contents of his stomach. With a heavy sigh, Echo knelt beside him, running his hand up and down Vapre’s spine.

“I’m sorry, love. I know it sucks, but I don’t know what else to do.”



"I'm fine," Vapre said shakily. He spit a couple of times and wiped a hand over his mouth. "That is some serious shit."

"So I've heard."

"I don't remember it being this intense last time."

"You weren't getting my full ability then. I was just kind of melding your gift with Fiero's and vice versa."

Pushing slowly to his feet, he put a hand on Echo's shoulder to steady himself then nodded once. "I'm fine," he repeated. Echo wasn't sure which of them Vapre was trying to convince. "What do we do now?"

"We're going to create a tempest."

Vapre's head snapped up, and his eyes pinned Echo in place. "What did you say?"

"We're going to build a storm?" Echo answered hesitantly, though it came out more of a question.

"No, what did you call it?"

"A tempest? Why?"

Vapre shook his head, and his body relaxed. "Just something the Oracle said to me when you were...sick."

*Sick?* That was certainly an interesting way to put it. "What exactly did she say?"

"She told me to be the light in the tempest."

Echo thought this over for a moment as he scratched at the back of his neck. Knowing the Oracle, which he didn't really, but he guessed her words held a double entendre, and he said as much to Vapre.

The demon didn't disagree. "I thought about that. I think I took care of the first meaning. It wasn't a literal storm, but the emotions raging in that room were comparable to a gale force hurricane."

"I'm glad you did." Echo smiled tenderly at his mate. "I love you, yeah?"

Vapre caressed Echo's cheek with the back of his knuckles, his expression unreadable. "I love you, Echo."

Echo took just another moment to soak up his warrior's attention, then took a step back and put on his serious face. "What else does it mean?"

"That we're going to be facing down Hades's wrath—a storm of epic proportions."

"Oh, goody," Echo quipped sarcastically. "And here I thought this might be hard. We're just going up against hell's tempest. That should be a piece of cake."

"How do you think Gage did during the full moon?" Vapre asked, effectively changing the subject.

"I hope everyone is okay. It's been over a week, and we haven't heard a word." Echo had been taking full advantage of his new mobile phone, calling his lovers at every opportunity. The phone never rang, no one ever answered, and his calls continued to go straight to voice mail.

"Hey, aren't we supposed to be working here?" Vapre gave his best attempt at a smile, but it fell short in Echo's estimate. Still, he appreciated the effort.

"Right, let's get this show on the road," Echo answered with false bravado. Damn, he missed his men.

"Echo, I play with the wind, but I don't think I can actually control the weather. How the hell do you expect me to create a storm?"

"We need Eyce." Saying it out loud only brought home the fact that the man wasn't there. Echo sighed and closed his eyes for just a second. "He's not here, though, so we'll just have to do our best."

"Do you think it's wise to do it now? Maybe we should wait."

"We need to know if this will work. If it doesn't, we'll have to come up with a different plan of attack. Have you done any research?"

Vapre hung his head guiltily. "Uh, no, not really. There's been a lot going on," he added defensively.

"Fine, you can do that tonight." Echo wasn't in the mood for excuses. "Now, give me your hand again. It won't hurt so much this time," he said more gently when Vapre flinched. "I need to be touching you if I'm going to help."

Hesitantly, Vapre placed his hands in Echo's and squeezed. "What do we do?"

"Close your eyes and picture a massive storm—rolling clouds, huge gusts of wind, torrential downpour—that kind of thing. You know how to use your power to manipulate the wind. Well, just try pushing it further."

Vapre gave him a skeptical look, but finally closed his eyes and breathed in deeply through his nose. Echo did the same, foregoing the deep inhale in favor of more concentration. He did just as he'd told Vapre, reaching out with his gift to taste the air, touch it, bend it to his will.

It took only minutes for the wind to reach such substantial gusts that Echo actually had to step closer to Vapre to keep from falling over. Vapre's arms went around him, his big body sheltering Echo from the worst of the wind, and Echo clung to him just as tightly.

He didn't know how long they stood like that, locked together in the middle of the field behind the house, each concentrating on their own task, but eventually, Echo felt something wet hit his face. Blinking open his eyes, he stayed huddled close to his mate as he peeked up at the darkening sky. He wanted to whoop for joy.

"It's working," he yelled to be heard over the roar of the wind. A disturbance in the air caught his attention out of the corner of his eye, and Echo almost choked. "Stop!" he screamed, wrenching himself out of Vapre's arms so hard he fell on his ass. "Vapre!"

Vapre's eyes snapped open, and he shook his head as though to clear it. "What?" he shouted.

"Let go! You have to stop!"

Instantly, the wind died down to a gentle breeze, and the clouds began to part, letting through the last lingering rays of daylight.

“Holy shit,” Echo breathed. “You have a *lot* of power, babe.”

Vapre looked around him curiously as he rubbed at his chin. “Why are we stopping? You said it was working.”

“It was working a little too well. You were creating a twister.”

Vapre’s eyes went wide, and he dropped to the ground in front of Echo. “I didn’t mean to do that. I didn’t even know I could.”

“It might come in handy on the new moon, but I’d prefer if our men had a house to come home to right now.”

Chuckling lightly, Vapre reached out and ruffled Echo’s hair. “Yeah, besides, with the vamps in the attic, we really don’t want to rip the roof off.”

“Excellent point.” Climbing to his feet, Echo held out a hand to help his lover up—not that Vapre needed it. “I guess I’m going to cook. You should start doing some kind of research. I realize there’s not a whole lot you can find for something like this, but you never know.” He shrugged and dusted the grass from his backside. “We’ll practice again tomorrow.”

“How did you hair grow back so fast?” Vapre asked at random.

“The Oracle.”

Vapre nodded as though that explained it all. “I didn’t want to say anything before, but I like it a lot better like this.” He grinned sheepishly as though waiting for a scolding.

Echo just took his mate’s hand and led him toward the backdoor with a smile. “I like it better, too.”

\* \* \* \*

“We’ve been out here for over a goddamn week!” Syx stomped through the underbrush, kicking at the clumps of snow that were making a heroic effort to stay intact and not melt. “We can’t find the cave. We haven’t seen or heard anything.”

Fiero found his way over to him and draped his arm around Syx’s shoulders. “I miss him, too,” he whispered just for Syx. “That’s why

we're out here, though. Whatever this is, we have to kick its ass and save the day. Do you want a repeat of what happened to Echo?"

Resting his forehead against Fiero's temple, Syx groaned. "You know I don't, but we're not getting anywhere. We've been traipsing through these fucking trees for days. I'm willing to bet we've covered a good twenty miles, and we haven't found a damn thing. Pax and Jet can't remember where the cave is, and I don't even know where to start."

"We need Mac, and maybe Echo."

"I am not bringing Echo here," Syx snarled.

"We may not have a choice," Fiero answered calmly. "Speaking of Mac...where's Gage and Sony?"

"Still sleeping."

"What do you think we should do?" Eyce asked as he sauntered up to them. "I vote we go home, regroup, and try again when we have more facts. I'm cold. I'm tired. I miss Echo and Vapre."

"I miss them, too," Syx replied. "I imagine they could use our help as well."

"I like the way you think." Fiero released Syx and took a step back. "Okay, so who's going to tell Hex?"

"Not it!" they all three chorused.

"Not it," Myst repeated as he came up behind Fiero. "What am I not doing?"

Fiero, Eyce, and Syx turned to look at Onyx. "Congratulations." Eyce beamed at him. "You get to tell the boss man that we want to go home."

Myst howled with laughter. "Oh, that's dirty, but I'm so glad it's not me!"

Onyx spluttered for a second then finally sighed in resignation. "Fine," he grumped and spun around to go find their alpha.

"That probably wasn't very fair, was it?" Syx couldn't stop his chuckle, though. Poor Onyx always got the shit jobs. Maybe they could make it up to him when they got home.

“Cowards,” a deep voice called from behind them.

Everyone whirled around and fidgeted like little boys caught with their hands in the cookie jar. “Oh, uh, hey, Hex.” Syx rolled his eyes at his foolishness. “We want to go home.” Oh, that had been ever better. Now, not only did he look childish, he sounded it as well. “We, this is I, well, I guess we...” Syx just stopped talking and scrubbed a hand over his face. “I give up.”

His lovers burst out laughing, falling against each other and clutching at their stomachs. “I think what Syx is trying to say,” Eyce spoke up when he’d calmed himself some, “is that we think we need to regroup and possibly bring Mac and Echo in on this. We’re not getting anywhere.”

“As much I don’t want Echo anywhere near this place—and I’m thinking Gage shares my feelings in regards to his mate as well—I think you’re right. We’re just stumbling around in the dark here.” He paused dramatically and smirked at them. “Let’s go home.”

Syx joined in with the other warriors, whooping and shouting. No one would ever suspect they were rogue warrior demons from the Underworld the way they were carrying on. Well, those people could go fuck themselves. Things had changed since Echo came into their lives, and Syx liked to think it was for the better.

“I’ll go find Onyx,” Fiero offered with a snort.

“I’ll get Gage and Sony,” Eyce announced, then trotted off through the trees.

“Don’t look at me.” Myst held up his hands when Syx and Hex did just that. “There’s no one left to get.”

“You could start loading up the gear,” Hex suggested with just a hint of command.

Myst deflated and stomped off in the direction of the camp. “You suck,” he mumbled just before he disappeared out of earshot.

“Should we call home?” Syx asked when he was alone with Hex.

“We haven’t had reception this entire time. I’m sure the guys are worried about us. I bet we each have a hundred messages a piece from Echo and Mac.”

Syx nodded but waited for Hex to continue his thought.

His lover smiled impishly and cocked an eyebrow. “Let’s surprise them.”

“Echo’s going to freak.” Syx could just picture his little mate’s face when they came strolling into the house without announcement.

“Oh, yeah,” Hex agreed. “I’m counting on it.”

## Chapter Fourteen

Echo jumped up from the couch and gasped when he heard the crunch of tires pulling up in front of the house. Mac leaped up from his armchair as well, and they looked at each other with wide eyes.

Jinx and Syn cuddled together on the loveseat, watching them with keen interest. Then a warm weight pressed against Echo's back, and Vapre nudged him forward. "Go get 'em, baby. I'm right behind you."

Echo didn't have to think twice. He grabbed Mac's hand and dragged him along, running for the door at top speed. There was a little hang-up when they both tried to wrench the door open at the same time, but eventually, Echo shoved his friend out of the way, yanked open the door, and bolted out into the night.

Gage stepped down from the first vehicle, Sony scrambling out right behind him. No one spoke as Mac raced to them, throwing himself into Gage's arms and kissing the living daylights out of the man. "You're home," Mac chanted over and over between kisses.

"Hurry," Sony whispered desperately. Gage wrapped his fingers around Sony's wrist, lifted Mac into his arms, and hurried them into the house.

Echo stood a few feet from the SUVs, trembling and waiting for his men to emerge. Then all the doors flew open at once, and his men slid out of the vehicles slowly. They moved together, forming a tight group with Hex in the middle. Echo felt hot tears streaming down his cheeks even as little clouds of white smoke streamed from his mouth on every exhale.



"C'mere, baby." Hex held his arms open wide, and Echo finally shook off his momentary paralysis.

Bolting across the distance that separated them, he launched himself into Hex's arms, crawling up his big frame and locking his legs around his warrior's waist. His hands flailed at his sides, searching out his other mates and pulling them close as he attacked Hex's mouth like a starving man.

"Need you," he panted, jerking his head away from Hex's mouth and turning to claim Eyce's in another soul-shattering kiss. "Right now. Right here."

"It's too cold," Myst whispered reasonably, but Echo could hear the strain in his voice, read the desire in his eyes.

Releasing Eyce, Echo twined his fingers in Myst's hair and jerked him forward roughly, thrusting his tongue through the demon's parted lips. "Now," he growled.

"I had a feeling we might need this." Vapre strolled toward them, carrying an extra-large blanket and three bottles of lube.

"Gods, I love you," Syx breathed as he rushed forward, grabbed Vapre's face in both hands, and crushed their mouths together.

Echo squirmed until Hex set him on his feet then began ripping at his clothes, tearing them off at lightning speed. "You are all going to fuck me until I don't walk right for a month. Then, if I'm not satisfied with your performance, you're going to do it all over again."

"What the hell did you do to him?" Fiero gaped at Vapre as though he were a god.

Vapre chuckled and shrugged. "It seems our mate has quite the little dominant streak. We explored that," he finished cryptically.

"I'm waiting." Echo fisted his hands on his hips, standing completely nude under the moonlight and shivering in the frigid wind.

"I have an idea." Fiero stepped away from them while everyone else started undressing. He retrieved his lighter from his pocket and flicked it, capturing the flames in his palm. Then he lifted his arms to

the side, closed his eyes, and all at once, a ring of fire encircled them, and warm air bathed Echo's naked body.

Sighing in appreciation, Echo dropped to his knees on the blanket Syx and Vapre had spread out for them, grabbed one of the bottles of lube, and flipped open the lid. Slicking his fingers generously, he dropped the bottle beside him, reached back and pushed two fingers into his needy hole. He moaned and writhed, fucking himself on his own fingers as he inserted a third, stretching himself quickly for his mates.

His men had finally caught on to his urgency and were scattered around the blankets in twos and threes, their damp bodies twined together as the firelight flickered over them. A hand wrapped around Echo's wrist, pulling his fingers free of his opening, and he glanced over his shoulder to find Onyx staring at him with hunger and need.

He pressed his palm between Echo's shoulder blades, urging his chest to the ground as he lined up the thick head of his cock and shoved into Echo's ass roughly. Rolling his head against the blanket, Echo cried out, his inner walls clamping down around the enormous length. "Harder," he panted when Onyx began snapping his hips, gliding in and out of Echo's twitching hole.

Taking him at his word, Onyx's fingers held Echo's hips in a bruising grip, pulling him back to meet every forceful thrust. "Yes!" Echo hissed. Damn, he needed this. He needed *more!*

As though reading his mind—*oh, right, he could*—Syx crawled across the blanket to Echo, rose up on his knees, and presented his leaking cock, stroking it slowly as his fingers tangled in Echo's hair and forced his head back. "Suck me," he growled.

Moaning like a twenty-dollar whore, Echo licked his lips and dove forward, wrapping his lips around the head of Syx's cock. A couple of slow bobs to slick the hard shaft, and Echo let his warrior take over, relaxing his throat muscles as Syx rocked his hips, pushing his dick to the back of Echo's mouth.

Seven sets of strong hands touched him everywhere, stroking his skin, smoothing his hair, pinching his nipples, and jerking his throbbing cock. His men were home, and Echo was in heaven.

Hex and Fiero appeared on either side of Syx, fisting their heavy erections and pointing them toward Echo's mouth. Turning his head one way and then the other, Echo rode Onyx's cock as he lavished attention on the three men in front of him. One after the other, he sucked each gorgeous prick to the back of his throat, letting his lovers thrust into his mouth for several minutes before moving on to the next.

Then he felt Onyx tense behind him, his hips stilled, and a loud roar rent the air around them as scorching lava painted the inside of Echo's tight passage. Groaning deep in his chest, Echo closed his eyes and gloried in the sensation.

Onyx pulled out, and before Echo could even miss the fullness, another cock filled him in one swift slide. Peeking over his shoulder, Echo smiled up at Vapre as he pushed back against him. His lover's hand landed on his ass, and the sharp sting pulled a strangled cry from Echo's panting lips.

Myst's hand continued to work Echo's cock, jerking him in time to the unrelenting pounding Vapre delivered to his hungry hole. His head was jerked back around by the hair, and Syx pressed the tip of his weeping prick to Echo's lips. "Open for me," he demanded.

So Echo did. He opened right up, sucking Syx in to the root and swallowing around the spongy crown. His mate groaned, his head dropping back on his shoulders, then pulled out and turned Echo's head toward Fiero.

It didn't take long for Vapre to find his release. Apparently, he was just as happy to have his men home as Echo. He overflowed Echo's channel with his seed, growling and groaning as his fingers dug into Echo's hips. Echo knew he'd have marks the next day, but he couldn't bring himself to care.

Vapre eased out of him, and Echo felt more cool lube dribble down his crease. He smelled the slightly minty scent, felt the tingle and numbing around his fluttering muscles, and whimpered in anticipation.

Hex stretched out beside Echo on his back, then grabbed him around the waist and lifted him to drape over his hips. Panting, moaning, and trembling, Echo lowered himself over Hex's cock, impaling himself in one quick drop and crying as his dick jerked and throbbed, begging for release.

Eyce's warm chest pressed against his back, and Echo leaned forward obligingly, bracing his hands on Hex's shoulders. "Deep breath," Eyce whispered as the head of his cock pressed against Echo's opening just above Hex's prick.

He'd done this before and loved every second of it, but that didn't stop a sliver of unease to pass through him. Before he could get too worked up, though, Myst knelt beside him and pulled him into a mind-numbing kiss that melted every bone and muscle in his body. He felt Eyce's cock slip into his straining hole, stretching him wider, and the pressure stole the breath from his lungs.

Myst released Echo's mouth and stood, replacing his tongue with his cock and pushing it between Echo's parted lips. Echo gulped him down greedily, humming around the thick shaft as Eyce and Hex began to move in slow, tiny movements, sliding their pricks together inside his clenching ass.

"Oh, fuck," Eyce moaned. "I didn't realize it would feel this good." His sweaty forehead pressed against the nape of Echo's neck as the warrior continued to move his hips in slow, sensual waves. His arm slithered around Echo's chest, holding him close as the tempo increased. "Love you, Echo."

Echo couldn't respond with Myst's dick in his mouth and his brain all mushy from erotic overload, but he hummed a little to let Eyce know he heard him. Myst groaned his approval of the faint vibrations and caressed the side of Echo's face with his fingertips.

Fiero stood beside Myst, Syx came to kneel on Echo's other side, and he could see Vapre and Onyx locked together just behind Fiero. Damn, he loved these men.

Eyce gave a sharp jab of his hips, and lights danced in Echo's vision as his orgasm rocketed through him, blasting from his cock and painting Hex's chest with reams of pearly cum. His inner walls tightened, clamping down on the cocks in his ass. Hex growled, Eyce groaned, and more sticky heat filled Echo's overflowing passage, leaking out and sliding down the insides of his thighs.

Though he didn't think he could move, Echo found he'd been wrong. Eyce slid from his convulsing hole, Myst pulled out of his mouth, and Hex lifted him into Syx's waiting arms. "Tell me if you're too sore," Syx mumbled as his luscious lips glided over the side of Echo's neck.

In answer, Echo rose up, gripped Syx's cock, and lined it up with his loosened hole. "Fuck me," he demanded as he began rising and falling, riding his lover with wanton delight.

Syx eased back to the blanket, careful to not unseat Echo. His arms looped around Echo's back, pulling him down to his chest as he bent his knees and planted his feet on the ground. His hips jerked upward, slamming into Echo as his chest vibrated with the primal sounds pouring from his mouth.

Within seconds, Syx roared out to the night sky, clutching Echo to him while his body jerked and shuddered, and he filled Echo with his climax.

Exhausted but still craving more, Echo rose off of Syx with wobbly legs and dropped into Fiero's lap. "Make it good," he murmured as he claimed the demon's lips with his own.

"Two for one?" Fiero asked hopefully, and Echo found that was exactly what he wanted.

Fiero eased him into Myst's lap so that his back pressed against the warrior's chest, and Myst's prick slid right inside his overflowing

channel. Echo groaned, wiggling his hips and lifting his arms to loop them around Myst's neck.

Bracing one hand behind him, Myst held Echo steady as he leaned back, tilting Echo's ass at just the right angle for Fiero to enter him. Considerate as ever, Fiero dribbled more of the numbing lube over Echo's hole and swirled his finger around the muscles where they stretched to accommodate Myst's pulsing prick.

Then he maneuvered between Myst's bent knees and leaned forward to claim Echo's mouth in a blistering kiss as the head of his cock slipped inside Echo's entrance. "So full," Echo panted long seconds later when Fiero was fully seated.

Myst groaned from behind him, his hips arching off the blanket to work his prick a little deeper into Echo's hungry ass. "Move," the warrior begged.

Echo sprawled limply against Myst's chest, his arms still encircling the man's neck, and his head lolling over his lover's muscled shoulder. His mates moved together, one in, one out, creating a steady rhythm as Echo pleaded for more.

His other mates converged around them, touching, stroking, kissing, and licking him everywhere. Fiero's hand palmed Echo's needy cock, stroking him in long, fast movements. "Come for me, baby. Need to feel you come for me." He bent over Echo, licking a long trail up to his ear and sucked the lobe into his mouth. "Love you, Echo," he whispered.

"Fuuuuck!" Echo screamed, and once more he hurdled over the edge, his muscles clamping down, and his joints locking as he exploded into Fiero's hand.

Myst shouted something unintelligible, his body becoming motionless as he followed Echo into euphoria. Fiero threw his head back and roared, the circle of fire around them growing in height and heat as he pumped through his orgasm.

Utterly exhausted but happier than he'd been in days, Echo barely even noticed when his lovers eased out of his ass and Fiero lifted him into his arms. "Bath time, baby, and then you can sleep."

Normally, Echo would object to being treated like a child that needed to be bathed and tucked into bed, but just then, he didn't care. "M'kay," he mumbled wearily. His mates were home safe. They'd come back to him, and not much could ruin Echo's high. "Welcome home, my loves."

## Chapter Fifteen

“Are you ready?”

Vapre looked down at his mate and smiled crookedly. “Not in the least.” Then he took Echo’s hand and pulled him off the back porch. “Let’s do this.”

“Are we sure this is where it’s going to happen?”

“Everything else has happened close to home. I don’t know why this should be any different.”

“What do you want us to do?” Eyce asked as he jogged up beside them. The other warriors, the two shifters, the two vampires, and even Gage and his mates filed down the steps and followed behind them.

“You, we’re going to need. The others need to stay out of the way because this could get ugly.” Echo glanced over his shoulder and sighed. “I really don’t like them all being out here. Someone is going to get hurt.”

“They want to help,” Eyce said quietly. “Besides, they need to see what we’re up against if they’re going to help us in the war.”

“Wow, that sounds so melodramatic.” Echo sighed and squeezed Vapre’s hand. “I guess that’s what it is, though—a fucking war.”

Vapre understood what his mate was trying to say, but any way you looked at it, a war was coming. Not a skirmish, a fight, a brawl, or even a battle, but full-out war would darken their doorsteps before the year’s end. “The sun has almost set.”

Echo nodded wordlessly and reached out to take Eyce’s hand as well. “I hear this hurts, but it can’t be helped,” he said matter-of-factly. “I would appreciate it if you didn’t throw up, though.”



Eyce's eyes bugged, and he whipped his head around to Vapre. Biting the inside of cheek to keep from laughing, Vapre just shrugged. It felt like the closest he'd ever come to being struck by lightning when he'd practiced with Echo. They'd tried it a few more times, and the sensation had lessened, but it still left him shaky and nauseous every time.

Before Eyce could argue or Vapre had even finished his thought, Echo opened the bridge between them. Tensing and jerking, Vapre felt the power ebb and surge, coursing through him at a fantastical speed. His head swam, his stomach churned, and he gritted his teeth together to keep from biting his tongue.

Eyce was not faring as well. His head dropped back on his shoulders, the cords in his neck straining as he struggled to keep quiet. Vapre wanted to reach out to him, comfort him, but his own body stood frozen and locked in place.

As the electricity coursed through him, Vapre tried to push away the uncomfortable sensations and focus on what was to come. He'd done very little research, to Echo's severe disappointment. He just hadn't seen the need. No matter what it found in the endless pages of information, nothing would prepare him for this test.

It didn't matter either. No matter what ugliness decided to rear its head, Vapre would face it, and he would win. Failure was not an option. Echo's safety, the well-being of all his men, rested in him being able to face down and conquer the danger that threatened them.

Echo released his hand just as the sun sank below the horizon, and Vapre let out a shuddering breath. Eyce, on the other hand, dropped to his knees and hurled his cookies all over the frozen ground. Vapre winced in sympathy and moved to hold Eyce's long hair back from his face.

"Are you nervous?" Echo asked.

"No," Vapre answered honestly. During the five days when he'd thought Echo would never wake up again, and the week when he wasn't sure if his lovers were alive or dead, Vapre had come to one

very important conclusion. He would do whatever it took to keep them safe.

Echo's love had opened the door, shining sunlight into Vapre's heart and giving him a strength he never knew he possessed. It had also opened his eyes, allowing him to see the rest of his men in a whole new way. Finally, his mate had made him realize exactly what he stood to lose if he should fail. Though he hoped it didn't come to it, Vapre would gladly give his life for any one of his men.

Peace and confidence settled around him like a warm blanket, and Vapre pushed to his feet, offering a hand to help Eyce up as well. "I'm ready," he said just as the fat raindrops began to fall from the sky.

"Good," Echo replied, tilting his face upward and blinking against the rain, "because it's here."

Loud screeching rent the night air as the wind intensified, whirling around them as it whistled through the nearby trees. The clouds churned and rolled overhead, and three shadowy figures swooped and cackled in the dark sky.

"Fiero!" Echo called. "Can you shed some light on the situation?"

"My pleasure," Fiero answered, and Vapre could hear the smirk in his voice. *Cocky bastard.*

Three balls of fire shot into the air, melding together at the highest point and fanning out to form an enormous circle directly over the house. "Damn, he's good," Vapre breathed as he watched the flames dance above them, unhindered by the rain that poured from the sky.

"He's stronger now," Echo answered as though they were discussing what to cook for dinner. "Can we do this now? I'm cold and wet."

Vapre pushed his soaked hair back from his face and wiped the water from his eyes. He held out his hand, palm up, and nodded. "Let's go."

Echo took his hand, then held the other out for Eyce. "Shit," Eyce mumbled but took the offered hand and squeezed his firmly. "I'm in."

"Like you had a choice," Echo mumbled under his breath.

"I heard that."

"You were supposed to, dumbass."

Vapre rolled his eyes and huffed. "Can we focus now, children?"

Echo just lifted his head and stuck his tongue out. "Fine. What the hell are those things anyway?" He jerked his head skyward. "They look like birds, but the head is all wrong."

Vapre studied the flying creatures as he flipped through his mental list of mythological beasts and groaned. "Harpies," he snarled. "Everyone inside!"

"I'm holding the fire!" Fiero yelled back.

"I want to stay!" Jet whined.

Vapre growled, a purely animalistic sound, and snapped his head around to glare at them. "Everyone get the fuck inside!"

With a lot of groaning and grumbling, the group moved back up the porch and disappeared inside the house but stayed close by the windows to watch the action unfold. Fiero didn't move. He glared right back at Vapre, crossing his arms over his chest as if daring Vapre to say something.

"Stubborn fool," Vapre muttered in disgust.

"What's wrong?" Echo still stared up at the winged women, his hair plastered to his face and his sodden clothes clinging to him. He shivered in the wind, his teeth chattering, and his lips turning blue.

"Harpies are known for abducting and torturing people on their way to Tartarus," Eyce said.

"Oh," Echo breathed.

One of the harpies broke free from the rest and swooped low, her talons extended and heading straight for Fiero. With little effort, Vapre sent a gush of wind toward the creature, sending her flipping through the air where she shrieked and hissed before soaring upward to join her sisters.

"Eyce, we need you to stop the rain."

Looking at Vapre as though he was crazy, Eyce shook his head. “Uh...”

“Oh, just do it, damn it,” Echo snapped.

Ignoring both men, Vapre spread his legs wide, bracing himself against the roaring wind that threatened to topple him, and closed his eyes. He didn’t know how he’d done it before, but this time he imagined swirling the wind, molding and twisting the clouds into a destructive cyclone.

“Holy crap,” Eyce whispered in shock.

Vapre allowed himself a little smile when the rain stopped beating against him. He didn’t open his eyes, though, so he didn’t know if Eyce had actually stopped it or just moved it. Not that it mattered. Vapre just needed to concentrate.

Drawing on the power that flowed from his mate, Vapre reached out with his mind, building the funnel, stretching it and increasing the speed of its rotations. The harpies screamed and shrieked, their voices rising over the howl of the wind.

Then everything went to hell.

Eyce and Echo yelled at the same time Vapre heard the flapping of wings. He snapped his eyes open in time to see Echo lifted off his feet. Eyce grabbed for him, but Echo’s kicking feet knocked his hands away. Flailing and twisting, Echo cried out as the harpy’s talons pierced his skin, and blood flowed heavily from his wounded shoulders.

Vapre’s concentration dissolved, and he growled viciously at the ugly beast. Cold, unprecedented rage swarmed him as a red haze filled his vision. His chest heaved, his upper lip curled over his teeth as his teeth elongated into razor-sharp fangs. He felt his body grow, felt the lethal claws extend from his fingertips, and heard his clothes rip and tear.

Hades was a fucking fool. Perhaps because he’d never known love, he underestimated its power. Or maybe he’d never imagined the warriors would be capable of such tender, yet strong emotions. Either

way, his oversight was Vapre's advantage, and he intended to make full use of it.

Not the gods on Olympus, Hades, Ares, or creatures of the Underworld would harm his mate and live to tell about it. Stretching his arms out to the side, Vapre let his fury feed his power as he watched his mate lifted higher and higher into the sky. Some logical part of his brain understood that Echo's abduction had been the main purpose all along.

Wrapping the wind around the ring of fire, Vapre twined the two, twisting them into a fiery tornado that lit up the dark sky. Then with a wave of his hand, he sent the cyclone swirling toward two of the harpies, sucking them into the vortex before they could escape.

"Don't hurt Echo." Eyce kept pace with the harpy that held their mate. He stood directly beneath her, his arms outstretched.

And then Echo fell, screaming the entire way to the ground as the creature flung him well out of Eyce's reach. A sick feeling settled in Vapre's stomach, and he sent out a gust of wind to catch his lover before he could hit the ground.

Echo tumbled twice, somersaulting through the air and landing right in the arms of a small man with glowing eyes. The figure cackled evilly, clutching Echo to his chest, then simply vanished.

Vapre roared, the rage overwhelming him until he lost complete control of his power. A strong blast of air caught the remaining harpy in the chest, sending her rushing backward into the burning cyclone that seemed to pulse and grow with each passing second.

"No! Stop!" Eyce shouted.

Footsteps thundered toward Vapre, and strong arms locked around him, tackling to the ground. A sharp blow caught the underside of his jaw, snapping his head back as a heavy weight pinned him to the ground. "Let it go," Eyce yelled. "Let it go so we can find Echo!"

More feet hurried across the yard, and Vapre blinked up to find every member of the house gathered around him. "I know where he is," Mac said instantly.

That, as nothing else could, calmed Vapre as he let the power drain from him, shrinking the twister until it blinked out of existence. “Where?” he demanded.

“Right here,” called a soft, familiar voice.

Everyone whirled around, and Vapre launched himself to his feet, pushing to the front of the group. “Ares,” he growled. “This wasn’t part of the deal.”

Ares tossed his long black hair over his bare shoulder—*didn’t the guy own a shirt?*—and laughed. “You’ve heard the saying about making deals with the devil.” His hand was curled around Echo’s upper arm, holding him in place beside him. Sage stood just to the left and behind Ares, grinning from ear to ear.

“Yours?” Eyce asked coldly as he motioned toward Sage.

Ares glanced over his shoulder in a bored manner and sighed. “In a way, I suppose. Much too eager and annoying for my tastes, but he’s served his purpose. My uncle is not the only one who can create demons, you know.”

“Let him go.” Vapre still hadn’t reverted back to his human form, and he used every expanded muscle and added inch to appear as threatening as possible.

“Hmm, interesting proposal, but I think not.”

“We completed the task and defeated the enemy,” Hex said calmly. “You have no claim to him.”

“Then take his place,” Ares challenged.

“Fine,” Vapre answered as once and stepped forward.

“Not you.” Ares pointed a long, tanned finger at Hex. “You.”

“You have no claim to him,” Hex repeated. “I will not bargain with you. Release him and honor your word.”

Ares gave a long-suffering sigh. “You warriors and your honor are irritating to the extreme. Unfortunately, I am bound by my own laws, as you have seemed to realize.”

“I am very aware of the laws that hold you,” Hex agreed. “Unless one of us fails in his tasks, you can’t touch him.”

"I'm assuming you mean that in a metaphorical sense." Ares laughed and shook Echo like a ragdoll to prove he could indeed *touch* the man.

Vapre watched the exchange with half-interest. The majority of his attention focused on Echo, his neurons firing at a frantic rate as he strategized how to pull Echo from Ares's grasp without hurting his mate.

"Fine, he's yours," Ares said at last, but he didn't sound happy about it. "You will be mine," he added to Hex, then gave a deep bow and disappeared as per his style.

At least he took the little bastard, Sage, with him.

Echo sprinted across the clearing, barreling into Vapre and gripping him tightly. "You did it!" He tilted his head back and beamed, not looking in the least afraid or unsettled by what had just transpired.

"Let me look at your shoulder," Hex muttered as he stepped up beside them.

"It's fine," Echo said distractedly as he continued to smile at Vapre. "We did it."

Holding his mate to him, Vapre closed his eyes and breathed deeply as he felt his body shrinking to its normal size. Once the shift was complete, he opened his eyes and bent down to brush his lips over Echo's forehead. "Yeah, baby, we did it."

## Chapter Sixteen

“Why does Ares want Hex so much?” Echo smoothed his fingertips down Vapre’s chest as he spoke.

“That’s something that you’ll have to ask Hex,” Vapre said evasively as he shifted on the sofa, pulling Echo closer. The man had barely let Echo out of his sight in the three days since the new moon. It was nice at first, but Echo was beginning to feel a little smothered.

“Love, I’m not going to disappear if you’re not touching me.”

Vapre sighed heavily and turned to nuzzle his face into Echo’s neck. “I know, and I’ll be better soon. Just indulge me for a little while longer.” His tongue traced up the side of Echo’s throat. “Please?”

“How am I supposed to say no to that?” Echo shivered and pressed closer to his mate. “I guess there are worse things in life.”

“Speaking of,” Hex said as he entered the room and plopped down in one of the armchairs. “We have to find that cave.”

“I’m going,” Echo said immediately, squirming out of Vapre’s arms and jumping to his feet. No way in hell were they going to keep him away this time. He’d lose his mind if he had to be separated from them again.

“Yes, you are.”

Echo opened his mouth to argue before Hex’s words sank in, and he stared in shock. “Really?”

“Yep.” Hex chuckled and opened his arms for Echo to come to him.



Without hesitation, Echo walked up and settled in Hex's lap. "You're not going to give me lame excuses or half-ass reasonings of why I can't go?"

"Not this time," Hex said around his smirk. "Think you know everything, huh?"

"I don't know why Ares is hell-bent on having you." Echo arched an eyebrow, angling for information.

"I'll tell you later," Hex hedged.

"So, when are we leaving?"

"Tomorrow morning."

Echo nodded as he mentally listed what he'd need to bring.

"Why weren't you scared?" Vapre asked, seemingly out of the blue.

Switching gears, Echo tried to discern what his lover was asking him. "Oh, you mean when Ares was shaking me like a puppet?"

Vapre dipped his head once.

"Were you really going to let him just run off with me?"

"Not on your life," Vapre growled.

Echo shrugged and smiled. "I have seven of the biggest, strongest men on the planet who would tear anyone apart that tried to hurt me. Why would I be afraid?"

"You have entirely too much faith in us, little one," Eyce said as he strolled in from the direction of the kitchen.

Blowing his mate a kiss, Echo shrugged again. "I don't think so. Even if he'd taken me, you'd have come for me."

"I am honored that you trust us so implicitly, but please be careful." Hex leaned up and kissed Echo's temple. "Ares is not someone you want to mess with."

"So is Sage a demon?" Echo changed the subject, steering them out of less hazardous topics. He didn't want to argue with his men, but if they continued to treat him like a child, that's exactly where they were headed.

"Yes," Eyce answered, and that was it.

*Oh-kay.*

“So, I guess he’s kind of like Syx. I mean he can slip into people’s minds and implant thoughts and things like that?”

His men exchanged looks, all looking decidedly uneasy. “He’s a little stronger than that,” Eyce answered cautiously. “It would appear he has the power of full body possession.”

Echo shuddered and wrinkled his nose. “Eww. That little creep was inside me, and probably Mac, and not in the good, make-me-moan kind of way either.”

Loud growls filled the room, and Echo rolled his eyes. “Oh, you know what I meant!” He grumbled under his breath for a minute, then addressed the room again. “So, if we know what Sage is, and we know that he’s working with Ares, why do we need to find that cave?”

His men did that annoying thing where they gave each other meaningful looks again. It was really starting to grate on Echo’s nerves. “Oh, just spit it out.”

“We think there’s more than one,” Vapre said slowly.

“Another one like Sage? Are you kidding? And we’re what? Going to go find it and give it a good spanking?”

“Not exactly,” Hex answered vaguely, and Echo growled at them. It looked like they were in for a good argument after all.

Luckily, Fiero and Myst chose that moment to come rushing in through the front door. “It’s here,” Myst announced.

Echo looked at his men and frowned. “What’s here?”

“Remember that surprise we had for you a couple of weeks ago?” Vapre asked as he stood from the sofa.

“Yeah,” Echo answered as he nodded slowly. Then his eyes narrowed, and he crossed his arms over his then chest. “What did you do?”

“Come look.” Fiero waved a hand for him to follow and darted back out the door.

Eyce grabbed Echo's wrist, unwound his arm from his chest, and yanked him to his feet. "Come on," he said eagerly.

"Okay, okay! You're going to pull my damn arm out of socket."

Eyce ignored him, of course, and continued to drag him across the room. When they reached the door, he pulled Echo in front of him, and practically shoved him through it. Echo stumbled out onto the front porch, whipping his head around to glare at his mate over his shoulder.

"Surprise!"

Echo turned his head back slowly, unsure of what he would find, and almost choked. "You...you bought me..."

"Do you like it?" Onyx asked, practically bouncing where he stood beside the shiniest, most gorgeous SUV Echo had ever seen. It was an odd look for such a large man.

"We thought about a sports car, but we wanted you to have four-wheel drive during the winter," Eyce was explaining as he led Echo down the steps. "This is a lot safer as well, and big enough to fit us all in a pinch."

It looked big enough to fit a freaking elephant as far as Echo was concerned. "What is it?"

"It's a Denali, of course." Vapre said this as though it should have been obvious. "Decked out with all the bells and whistles and anything else you could want or ask for."

"You bought me a car," Echo said in a tiny voice. They had actually bought him a damn car.

"Do you like it?" Onyx asked again, though some of the excitement had died from his eyes.

"I love it," Echo said immediately, "but it's too much."

"Nothing is too much for our mate," Hex said proudly. "Only the best for you, baby."

"I don't know how to drive." Echo remembered back to their last lesson that had ended in utter failure.

“We’ll teach you.” Hex’s hand landed on his shoulders and began rubbing at the tense muscles. “Then you’ll take the test and get a license. We wanted you to have something of your own, something to give you a little more independence.”

“Thank you,” Echo whispered, his voice thick with unshed tears. “It’s beautiful, and I love it.”

“How about we take it for a test drive?” Vapre suggested.

“Where are we going?”

“On our first date.”

\* \* \* \*

Echo had never been on a date before, but he figured his first real outing with his men had to be the best one in history. His lovers were dressed to the nines in expensive-looking tailored suits with ties and cufflinks. They’d even thought ahead and bought a gorgeous Armani suit for Echo. He looked pretty damn good in it, too, if he did say so himself.

They’d taken him to some fancy restaurant in the city where Echo couldn’t pronounce half the items on the menu, but it had been fun. They ate and drank, talked and laughed, and Echo swelled with love until he thought it would leak out of his ears.

Then his men whisked him off to some play where the usher had led them up to a private balcony. Echo sat on the edge of his seat the entire time, his arms crossed over the railing as he watched with rapt attention. He didn’t understand all of it, but he found it amazing just the same.

Now, Echo lounged in the backseat of his new car, Eyce behind the wheel, and leaned heavily against Syx. “Thank you,” he whispered, struggling to keep his eyes open. “I had a great time.”

Syx’s arm wound around him, tucking him against his side, and his lips landed on the top of Echo’s head. “I’m glad you enjoyed yourself, baby. We’ll do it again soon.”

"Maybe we should have another party," Myst suggested.

Echo turned his face into Syx's chest and smiled. His men were forever trying to make his life as normal as possible, and he adored them for it. Being mated to seven warrior demons pretty much guaranteed that nothing in his life would ever be average. Personally, he preferred it that way.

"A party sounds like a great idea," Eyce said from the driver's seat. "Echo, when is your birthday?"

"I don't know exactly. When I was younger, the people at the lab would bake a cake and give me presents, but it was never on the same day or even in the same month every year."

"Well, your new birthday is April ninth, and we're going to have us a hell of a party," Fiero announced. "Maybe we can get some strippers." He leaned around Syx and wiggled his eyebrows at Echo.

Echo started laughing and didn't think he would ever be able to stop. When he finally got his amusement under control, he took a deep breath and let it out on a happy sigh. "What time are we leaving tomorrow?" He didn't look forward to the journey or what they'd find when they reached their destination, but he was determined to do his part.

"First light," Hex said from beside Eyce.

Echo closed his eyes and groaned. He was totally not a morning person. "Can we make it first noon?"

His lovers chuckled, but Echo had a feeling he wasn't going to get his way on this one. "Fine, but I'm sleeping the entire way there."

"Deal," Hex answered as though Echo had been asking permission.

"Oh, and we need to make sure there's a fresh stock of blood for Jinx and Syn before we leave, especially if we don't know how long we'll be gone."

"Good thinking," Eyce said with approval. "And maybe one of us should stay here with them. They're pretty defenseless during the day."

Hex sighed and shook his head. “We’ll get everything sorted out and taken care of before we leave. You win, Echo.”

“This seems to be a recurring theme,” Vapre grumbled from behind them where he sat in the third row seat. “It would nice for him to be wrong for once.”

Smiling to himself, Echo let his eyelids drift closed and snuggled into Syx’s embrace. It might take a little more training, but eventually his men would learn.

Echo always won.

## **End of Book 4: Hell’s Tempest**

**To be continued in  
Book 5: Shades of Black**

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Gabrielle Evans grew up in a small town in southern Oklahoma. We are talking one red light that may or may not work depending on the day of the week. She married her high school sweetheart and the rest is pretty much history. They have two very active boys and one high-strung wiener dog that keeps her constantly on the go. For now, she parks her car in north-central Texas, but who knows what tomorrow will bring.

Gabrielle believes in love at first sight, falling hard and fast, taking chances, and grabbing your happy-ever-after with both hands. She also believes that a great cup of coffee can cure anything.

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