

Caged View

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CAGED VIEW

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INTRODUCTION

Since the 1970s, Humans have forced Supernaturals to live in caged cities known as habitats. Supernaturals are tagged at birth with silver brands embedded in their foreheads to identify them by species: a full moon for Vampires, a crescent moon for Shifters, a pair of wings for Fairies, an X for Mixbreeds, and the list goes on. Each supernatural species has been tagged and categorized by Humans.

Each habitat is themed and organized by a particular religion. This short story collection is set in the Santeria habitat. The first three stories are in the points of view of characters (MeShack, Zulu, and Lanore) from the novel *Fire Baptized*, and serve as a prequel to that story. The last short story is from the point of view of Cameo, a character who lives in the Santeria habitat and is from the young adult novel *Chameleon*, scheduled to be released in June of 2012.

LOVE LOST, LOVE FOUND

MeShack



I knew what Felix, that motherfucking Were-rat, was going to do before he did it. His freckled hand stretched out a foot from his hip. He glided toward La La as she stuffed a pair of thick books into her orange locker.

I peeked further around the corner.

Felix's gray eyes targeted the plump curve of her behind.

Kill him, the cheetah inside me ordered, always impatient and ready for a quick fix. The beast slammed his sharp claws against the inside of my ribcage when I didn't move, stinging the tissue surrounding it.

Relax, I told him and shifted my eyes so my cheetah could see him better.

My beast stirred within me, full of excitement.

Felix whistled through cracked lips as he approached his destination. He checked the hallway around him, probably noting that it was just La La and him.

I gritted my teeth, dropped my book bag, and leaped toward the Were-rat in a blur of speed that impressed even me.

Felix shrieked and dove to the side.

Too slow.

I seized his pudgy arm and slammed him into the lockers across from La La. A crash bellowed from the now-warped metal.

Gotcha.

"What are you doing?" La La's dreadlocks whipped around as she whirled my way. Alarm spread across her face.

"Yeah, man," Felix said. "What are you doing?"

I smashed his jaw with my fist. Bones crunched under the impact. His white skin swelled and thrust a few inches toward me as the bones re-formed back to new.

"I saw where your hand was going." I gripped his shoulders, shoved my claws out of my fingertips, and pierced his skin.

Felix yelped as the locker's metal dented under his weight. Breathing in and out at an erratic pace, he wobbled his head from side to side. "MeShack, I wasn't—"

"Give me your hand." I inhaled his fear. It smelled like boiled peaches.

"Man, I wouldn't touch her," Felix mumbled. Beads of sweat formed around the crescent moon brand embedded in his forehead. Red hair stuck to his wet skin.

"I hate repeating myself," I said and spotted La La coming up on my right, bringing her lavender fragrance that haunted me even when I was asleep. Her X forehead brand shined in the ceiling's light.

“Don’t do it, MeShack.” She moved her dreadlocks away from her face with chocolate fingers and peeped behind her shoulder, searching the hallway for teachers or, even worse, Principal Hendricks. “He didn’t do anything. Let him go.”

“She’s right, man.” Felix’s heart hammered against his chest. My beast and I were both thrilled at the sound and hoped Felix would free himself. We hadn’t chased anyone in months.

“I didn’t touch the Mixbreed.” He shivered under my grip.

“You know her name. Say it.” I dug my claws deeper into his skin.

“Lanore,” he whimpered and hit the back of his head against the locker.

Blood shaded Felix’s white cotton shirt to pink.

“That’s quite enough.” La La’s eyes blazed to a fiery orange.

The temperature around us increased from warm to sizzling.

I had no doubt that she was preparing her body for fire.

She never lets us have fun, my cheetah said.

“Take your claws out of him,” La La insisted and placed her hand on my arm, sending a scorching heat into my flesh.

A vicious pain seared all of my senses. My skin bubbled under her fingertips as my ears rang. White light shined over my eyes. Fangs broke free from my aching gums. My lips quivered.

“Okay. Damn it!” I yelled.

She removed her burning hand.

I found the breath that I’d lost; the burns on my arm instantly healed.

The cheetah retreated within my core, no longer wanting to deal with the situation.

She always has to use her damn fire to make a point.

“Was that necessary?” I hissed and clamped down hard on Felix’s shoulders. His bones shattered under my fingers.

Felix screamed. The noise rose high above us to the school’s ceiling and down the hallway, no doubt hitting all the ears of the Supernaturals hanging out in the commons area. There would be a crowd soon.

“Damn it!” La La’s hand rose to me.

I blocked it.

She tried to burn me again.

I tapped her hand away.

“Leave him alone.” She gave up and crossed her arms over her chest. “The point is, he didn’t do whatever you think he was going to. MeShack, you’ve now gone from hero to bully.”

Very well.

I dragged my claws out of his skin, taking tattered flesh with me. “Say sorry.”

“S-sorry.” Felix gently rubbed his right shoulder with his hand.

“Not me, you furry sewer bastard.” I edged closer to him until my nose was an inch from his. “Say sorry to La La.”

Felix faced her. His body shook. Blood dripped from his wounds down to the apricot linoleum-tiled floor. He placed his hand on the dented locker to maintain his balance. “I’m sorry, La La.”

“Only I call her that,” I said in a low voice as I wiped my slimy fingers on his shirt.

“I’m sorry, Lanore.”

She glanced uneasily at the Were-rat and sighed. “Thank you, Felix.”

He checked for my reaction.

I nodded.

He raced away, leaving his books on the floor.

“Come on, before Hendricks suspends you again for fighting.” Lanore’s small hands grabbed my arm to guide me toward the front entrance. “You’re freaking ridiculous.”

“I’m not afraid of him either.” I flexed my bicep, making the muscle expand against her palm.

Within seconds, we approached our high school’s double doors.

“Stop bullying guys over me.” She released her grip from my arm and strolled through the exit.

“Would you rather he grab at you like a piece of meat?” I asked as the school’s doors slammed behind us. “He’s always cornering girls by themselves and groping them.”

Sunlight’s rays leaked through the city’s barred ceiling and washed over me, giving my caramel skin a much-needed tan. The longer I stayed in the sun, the more my flesh shined like gold.

“Thank Shango. The rain has finally stopped,” I mumbled.

This was a great day to jog around Santeria, the caged supernatural city located a few miles outside of Miami.

The air possessed that luscious aroma of spring: freshly cut grass, newly blooming flowers, and the baby oil that the cheerleading squad smeared on their slender legs as they practiced in the school’s front lawn.

I pulled my long curls out of my hair tie. The kinky curls fell over my huge shoulders. I hated having it out. It always got in the way, but the ladies loved it.

“Hey, MeShack.” The captain of the cheerleading squad waved at me.

Her lemon-yellow shirt stretched over her breasts. Shango High’s mascot was the Fighting Ram. Its face covered the front of her top and its eyes lay between those two huge peaks.

I wished to be the Fighting Ram right now and bury my head between her cleavage.

“Hey, yourself.” I beamed at her and then leaned down to whisper to La La. “What’s her name again?”

“Jackie.” La La slung her jean satchel on her right shoulder and exhaled noisily. “I can’t wait until you get out of your Shapeshifter horny phase.”

“The proper name is Season.” I drank in Jackie’s image as she jumped around, doing a cheer. Those round melons bounced with each movement. “And it usually takes Shifters seven to ten years to mature out of it, so buckle up and enjoy the ride.”

La La snorted.

I winked at Jackie.

“So, have you seen Fiona lately?” La La asked.

The day turned dark at the mention of that name.

My nerves flared on edge. Something plunged down to the pit of my stomach, filling my core with a murky liquid that threatened to drown me. Gone were Jackie’s perky breasts.

My mom’s face flashed in my mind.

“I told you not to mention that woman’s name anymore.” I stared ahead, quickening my pace.

“Don’t be so dramatic.”

“She’s not your mom,” I said. “It’s why you can stomach her better than me.”

“Hey, she’s kind of my pseudo mom.” La La hit my back with her little fist. “I’d trade you my dad for her.”

I waved her comment away with my hand. “I’ll take Graham over my mom any day.”

“She hasn’t come home in weeks.” La La tucked a couple dreadlocks behind her ear.

A group of Were-wolves packed a car that drove by, blasting a rock song. I waved at them since most of them were Shango High's defensive line. They howled at me in unison.

"The brothel on Rooster Way is her home now. She won't come back to stay with us unless she gets kicked out." I turned the corner, bumping into an Air Witch.

"My bad, MeShack." He tapped my shoulder. "Good game, though. None of the Yemaya Sharks could catch you."

"Thanks." I forced a smile as I headed in the opposite direction.

La La stepped out of the Air Witch's way, staring at the ground. She liked to be invisible around Purebloods, hide in the shadows. She said it helped decrease the chances of them terrorizing her. Little did she know all the Pureblood males knew she existed no matter where she looked or how hard she tried to hide.

Once we passed the Air Witch, she sped up to my side. "You didn't answer me. Have you seen her?"

"No."

"Are you worried?" La La asked.

"Fuck her," I muttered.

The damn woman's been missing my whole childhood. What's another day to a lifetime?

"Fiona hasn't picked up any of her disability checks," La La said.

I halted in the middle of the sidewalk. Supernaturals strolled by. Some congratulated me for last Friday's football scrimmage. Others just got out of my way.

I turned to La La. "How many checks has she missed?"

"Two," she muttered. "And you know she never forgets payday."

I rubbed the temples of my forehead. Stress pulsed through them. That shaky anxiety that always filled me when my mom went missing rushed back.

I thought this crap would be over if I stopped talking to her and got on with my life. Instead, here I was again, a little kid hiding in his closet in the middle of the night under a bunch of blankets, waiting for his mommy to come home.

"Take my books to the house. I'm going to search for her." I tried to hand my notebooks to La La.

"What am I, your servant?" She stepped back and didn't take them. "You're crazy if you think I'm not going with you."

A grumble ripped from my throat.

"Am I supposed to be scared?" She twisted around and headed toward the southern edge of Shango District.

Damn it all!

* * *

It took us five minutes on the tram and a fifteen minute walk to get to The Castle, a shady brothel located at the dead end of Rooster Way. It resembled more of an abandoned house than a sex business. Dusty white paint plastered the wooden shack, creating a gray, tore-down effect instead of an ivory castle. The odor of cheap perfume dangled around the gate's entrance. Overhead, a big sign hanging on a shingled wooden frame stated the rules:

1- The Castle is not liable for any misdirected spells or other magical injuries.

2- Customers must provide payment before sex.

3- Please, no fangs: this is a sex service with no blood drinking facility.

“And the guys run the other way when they see me,” La La complained. She’d been reprimanding me about what I had done to Felix the whole journey.

“You’re imagining things.” I tapped the sign’s jagged edge with my hand as we passed, making it swing back and forth, creaking with each movement.

“MeShack, I’m serious. You have to stop. It’s getting old.” La La climbed the steps toward the decaying shack. It must have been at least thirty steps.

A dwarf ambled down the stairs, passing us as he zipped up his black-and-white striped pants.

“Felix was going to grab your ass.” I scanned the women that lounged on the gray porch, wearing nothing but faded lingerie.

None of them had my mom’s golden eyes or smooth olive skin. Their eyes appeared unfocused and in a daze. Wrinkles covered most of their pale faces.

A bleach scent mingled with the cheap perfume as we got closer to the front door. One of the hookers must have smoked Blue-Fi. It always left that chemical stench when my mom used it in the house.

I interrupted La La’s rant and said, “If someone taunts you for being a Mixbreed, or grabs you inappropriately, I’m going to break their hand off. Everybody at school knows that.”

“I can handle myself,” she argued. “Besides, you beat up Kris in the library yesterday, and he didn’t even do anything.”

I stopped and gazed back at her. “You were wearing his scent on your neck and lips.”

She averted her eyes to the area behind me. “I mean he didn’t do anything that I didn’t want him to.”

My beast woke up, stretching inside of me. The pressure pushed against my lungs. I concentrated on slow breaths until he was done.

Relax, I told him. I’m taking care of this.

My beast tensed but said nothing.

“You’re dating Kris now?” I placed my hands in my pockets. They formed fists underneath the jean material.

“I doubt it, now that he has a fractured jaw. He’s not a Shifter, you know. It’ll take him forever to heal.” She targeted me with those coffee-brown eyes. “I went by his house this morning to give him his Physics book, and he wouldn’t even open the door. He just told me to leave it outside.”

Good. I scared Kris’s punk ass away.

But there would be others. I’d already spread the word around school to stay away from her, but still a few guys had sniffed that lavender scent of hers and gathered up the little courage they had to sneak a conversation in when I wasn’t around.

La La and I approached a plastic red and white sign nailed to a post that requested we knock to gain entrance.

“I swear, MeShack, you hurt somebody else, and I’m setting you on fire.” She got on the porch, headed toward the door, and then knocked.

The lounging hookers on the porch ignored us and continued to scan the Supernaturals, or Supes as most called them, walking on the street.

Footsteps sounded from behind the front door.

“Well, Kris is not my fault. I thought he hurt you,” I lied, forcing myself not to grin.

“Whatever,” she muttered. “He’s a math genius that’s half your size and wouldn’t hurt anybody.”

“Genius, huh?” I laughed.

He wasn't smart enough to stay away from you.

If I couldn't touch La La, no one would.

My mom and her dad had been drug buddies since we were nine. It was my mom's idea to move in with them.

The kids can watch each other while we make our runs, Mom had said.

Nine years later, our parents were still addicts as we continued to raise ourselves.

Her dad only had two house rules. One, no one but him sits in the rose-patterned recliner in the living room. Two, don't touch his daughter in any romantic or lust-filled way.

When puberty hit, the second rule got harder and harder to follow. My cheetah chose her as my mate immediately, without hesitation. A mating process that normally took several years was completed as soon as I looked into her eyes.

“I'm serious,” La La said. “Don't hurt anybody else.”

The brothel door opened. A Mixbreed peered out. Sunlight shined on the X brand embedded in her tan forehead. “You're both too young. Come back when you're eighteen.”

I put my foot in the doorway before she closed it. “I'm looking for a Were-cheetah named Fiona. She works here.”

“Who are you to her?” The Mixbreed scratched her head, making the platinum blond wig she was wearing slant off balance and reveal a scarred scalp.

“She's my mom.”

The Mixbreed's mouth dropped open. She glanced behind her shoulder and then gestured with her hand for me to come in closer.

I leaned her way.

“I don't know where she is, Sugar. But when you find her, tell her to hide,” the Mixie whispered. “Joe knows she stole from him. He's been tearing up the habitat all week looking for her.”

“So he hasn't found her?” La La asked.

The Mixie shrugged. “It's not like he would tell me.”

She closed the door.

I covered my face with both hands and rubbed my skin. An aching pain crept along the areas above my ears and met at my forehead.

Joe wasn't a big-time pimp, but Vampires always had connections.

Damn, Mom. Now what did you do?

“You think she really took the money?” La La asked and started walking down the steps.

I trailed behind her. “Of course she did, and probably smoked it all away with drugs.”

La La slowly nodded in agreement. “Now she's most likely freaking out, trying to figure out a way to get the Vamp his money back.”

“Exactly.”

We paused at the bottom of the steps.

A breeze traveled by, lifting some of La La's dreadlocks and guiding them back over her shoulders until they fell near her waist.

I yearned to reach for the locks and surround my fingers with their softness, forgetting about this current problem and drowning in her.

Yes, the cheetah replied. The Demon will not hurt us. We can kill him.

I tensed. *I already told you. The Demon is her dad. The ladies tend to frown on murdering their loved ones.*

My beast settled down as if satisfied with my answer and began attacking his tail.

I returned to gazing at the woman who would one day recognize me as her mate, relishing in the view of the smooth skin that I brushed with my fingers whenever she wasn't paying attention.

La La caught me gazing at her. Those brown eyes brightened to orange before she looked away. "What are you thinking about?"

"Something that has nothing to do with my mom."

"Well, I'm still worried." She continued to avoid meeting my eyes. "If your mom is desperate for money, wouldn't she have at least picked up the disability checks?"

My mom tended to work at a place and pocket things whenever possible. It didn't matter what it was. Whether the item was money, drugs, jewelry, or even magic potions, she grabbed, spent, used, or hocked it on the street for something else. The probability of her taking Joe's money soared high off the charts.

"Yeah, she would've chased down the mailman for the checks before he even reached the house," I said.

That sludge in my stomach twisted into knots.

"Where do you think we should check next?" La La asked as her heartbeat increased.

I knew what she was thinking. There were only a few possible outcomes when you stole from a pimp like Joe. The fact that it had been two weeks that she'd been missing and hadn't gotten her checks told me that things hadn't turned out good for Mom.

My heartbeat raced with La La's. It became hard to breathe. I gulped a large breath and exhaled.

I cleared my throat and said, "We should check Linderman's Blood Factory first, before we go anywhere else. If Joe caught and killed her, then he probably dumped her body behind there."

She snapped her head toward me. "Would you stop the hardcore I-don't-care-about-my-mom act."

"I'm not acting." I turned around and headed to the factory.

The sun still gleamed through the bars, but to me it felt like dark clouds hovered over us. The barred ceiling that had once soared so high above my head now came down on me, as if trapping a wild animal.

Could she actually be dead?

My eyes watered. Tears threatened to spill out of them. I directed my attention on each step I took instead of the anxiety that overflowed inside of me.

"Do you want to talk about this?" La La jogged on my right, trying to keep up with my pace.

"No."

"Maybe I can go check for you, so you don't have to."

"No. In fact, I'd rather have you go home and not come with me." I caught one tear with the back of my hand as it leaked out the corner of my eye, hoping she hadn't seen that.

"I'm staying," she whispered through rushed breaths as she trotted along.

She saw the tears.

"Fine," I muttered.

"Fine."

* * *

The tram dropped us off in front of the factory and then sped off with a wobbling back wheel that made a clanking noise.

Blood coated every air molecule within a three-block radius of Linderman's Blood Factory. I would have suffocated on the stench if not for La La's lavender scent wafting from her pores.

We'd both maintained a thick silence between us the whole tram ride, lost in our own thoughts.

Linderman's Blood Factory had been in business since the first year of the habitat. The huge facility produced blood products, everything from medical to beauty. They were the habitat's top exports to the Humans living outside of Santeria.

If a Pureblooded supe needed to make some extra money, all he had to do was drain some of his blood into a cup and take it to the factory. Linderman officials handed out cash without any questions. Other more desperate and unethical Supes simply attacked unsuspecting people, drained them, and dumped their bodies behind the factory. Bloodless supe corpses packed the dumpsters in the factory's alleyway.

If Joe murdered my mom, he'd most likely snack on her until she wasn't fresh, and then drain the rest to give to Linderman's. It was the most logical thing to do for a cold-blooded killer in the habitat. It was why La La and I were heading toward the dumpsters.

"I still think you should let me search first," she insisted, breaking the quiet.

"So somebody can jump out of the shadows and take you, too?" I passed Linderman's on my left, heading to its alleyway.

"We don't even know if Fiona is dead." La La shook her head. "Truthfully, she's probably hiding or—"

My mom's scent hit me before I even turned the corner, fresh maple syrup poured over warmed ginger. I sniffed some more. It was her scent, but not completely. It had a stale after effect, like it had been left out on the counter all night, decaying.

I halted, shivering with fear. My feet planted themselves to the pavement as if they'd been covered in cement and had completely dried. I couldn't move forward. Every cell in my body cried out in agony.

She's gone.

"Mom," I whispered.

Tears dripped down my face in hot lines. My throat instantly became hoarse.

La La rushed into the alley.

A bang sounded, maybe the lid of a dumpster as it hit the brick wall. I don't know. I was frozen. I could barely think.

Silence passed for a few minutes, and then I heard a faint cry escape La La's lips.

She muffled it somehow, but the noise still managed to echo off the alley's walls and reach my ears.

My legs collapsed under me. I stumbled to the ground and stayed there.

La La approached, sat down next to me, and wrapped her arms around my shoulders. Tears streamed down La La's cheeks and dripped to her shoulder.

"I saw her," she said.

I have to do something.

I gently moved her away. "Not now. Your body will only distract me."

She inched away, but her eyes remained focused on me.

I rested my elbows on my knees and put my head in my hands.

So many thoughts and scenarios ran through my mind, but none of them brought my mom back or would take away the suffering. The only thing that I kept coming back to was that I could kill Joe.

Something about that option lifted my spirits a little. To watch his breath leave his body would definitely be satisfying, at least for a few moments.

“Go home, La La.” I roused my cheetah from his slumber. He’d been napping since the tram ride.

“What are you going to do?” she asked.

“Just leave.” I ripped my shirt off.

Yes? My beast asked and then he caught our mom’s scent of death and came to the realization that she was gone.

A primal yowl erupted from my lips.

He tore apart my flesh, pushing through and claiming my body as his.

La La backed away. “No, MeShack. Don’t—”

I dropped to the littered ground and screamed as my bones broke in each arm and leg, and then reshaped in seconds. My clothes shredded and scattered to the ground. New muscles formed around the new bones. A burning sensation pulsed through me. My heart changed position within my chest. My neck cracked backward, stealing my breath, as it transformed into my cheetah’s neck, stronger and more durable for impact. Claws ripped through my fingers and toes. Tan and black fur sprouted from every pore, spreading across my entire body.

When it was all over, the cheetah licked our paw.

I peered at La La from his eyes. They gave me an amber view. I could make out every detail around me.

He cleaned us to his satisfaction and then stalked around La La.

“Can you shift back so we can discuss this?” She held out her hands in front of her, slowly edging back. Her eyes flickered to an orange gleam and brightened against the darkening sky.

“I can’t let you do this,” she said as fire formed around her hands.

My beast pushed out *our* own flames from *our* mouth. They seared the pavement, leaving black marks and steam. The power to create fire was a present from La La’s father. I’d gone through a lot of pain to get it, but was glad he did it.

She simply waved her hands to extinguish the blaze. “MeShack, the Vamp could hurt you.”

I took control of the cheetah body and snarled at her.

Calm down, the beast said. *This is our mate*.

She formed two fireballs in front of her.

I leaped away and increased my speed, knowing she couldn’t catch or keep up with us. No one could, except Mom.

Another howl ripped from my throat.

“MeShack!” La La yelled from behind us, and then she was gone.

Nothing but miles lay between as I raced back to The Castle.

* * *

Fifteen minutes later, I charged past the wooden sign and soared over The Castle’s front steps.

Those same hookers from earlier jumped up from their chairs and shrieked. One dove off the edge of the porch.

I crashed head first into the door. Wood exploded around my body as splinters from the door fell to the red carpet. The front room was empty.

My head ached, but I shook it off and galloped through the house, tracking Joe’s scent.

He’d been pimping my mom for years and supplying her with any drug she ever wanted. I knew his scent like I would’ve known a relative’s, if I had any of them.

The old carpet tore under my claws. Hookers peeked out of their rooms.

“Get Joe!” a female yelled behind me.

Yes. Go get him.

I caught the Vamp’s odor. It smelled like burnt fish.

I banged against the hallway’s walls, growling and knocking over red and black chairs.

Men scampered out of bedrooms, darting away from my jaws as I snapped at their feet. Hot saliva dripped from my fangs in thick tendrils. None of the clients shifted into their animal forms or tried to stop me. They probably had wives and were scared they would be caught in the middle of a brothel brawl and exposed on the nine o’clock news. Regardless, they ran out of the house barefoot, tripping over unbuttoned pants and holding their clothes.

My tail slammed against the windows in the middle of the hallway and shattered the glass.

Where are you, Joe?

The burnt fish odor stopped at the last bedroom door. I crashed into it, splintering more wood. It scratched against my fur.

I stalked around the bed, sniffing for him.

The bed rose in the air.

Joe yelled something in a foreign language. I jumped back as the mattresses and box springs crashed into the wall.

Joe advanced toward me, baring fangs and black claws.

I snapped at the Vamp, scratching dead flesh. It healed as Joe twisted in mid-air and landed five feet across the room.

“You’re here about your mom, huh?” Joe’s blue eyes changed to crimson red. “I didn’t want to do it, but it was the third time she stole from me. I had to make her an example before others did ___”

I snarled so loudly, my head vibrated with the force. Fire pushed out of my nostrils. I was seething. The taste of rage dripped from my fangs.

“Look, she told me to tell you she loved you.” He raised his hands in front of him. “Shift back and calm down. This was between her and me.”

I leaped for him, pouncing on him with extended claws. He fell back, and I took that moment to clasp onto his crotch, tearing it off and spitting it out.

Blood burst from the ragged hole, gushing down his jeans.

Joe’s loud screams thundered throughout the room as he grasped with his hands for what was no longer there.

He dropped to the ground.

I opened my jaws and dug my fangs into his chest. The taut flesh battled against my teeth as I ripped him apart.

Joe boxed my ears, but I never released him.

My mom’s face flashed in my head: golden eyes, olive skin, and long wavy hair that fell beyond her waist.

You’ll die tonight, Joe.

His blood seeped into my mouth as I tore his heart out. It beat against my tongue.

Without hesitation, I pierced it with my fangs, watching Joe’s body go still. Black lines crept along his body, transforming his skin into a gray and black husk. His mouth was open. His eyes focused on something far away and distant. Rotting flesh replaced the burnt fish scent immediately.

I dropped the heart into his mouth and spit the Vampire’s blood out next to him.

“Hey! Someone called the Habitat Police. You better hurry!” The Mixbreed that had talked to La La and me earlier stood in the doorway. “Take the back door and run.”

Reality hit me.

I’d taken a life. I did it in the most horrific way possible and had still felt no relief or peace, just an overwhelming sense of injustice and grief.

Gazing at the dead Vampire before me, I blinked.

His blood dripped into my eye.

I took a life and my mom was still gone. Those two truths together pushed me over the edge. I drifted into my core, giving the cheetah full control of our body. My mind twisted and then sank into a safer place where only silence rested.

Take us home, I said.

I collapsed into darkness, a kind of nothingness that existed within me. A hushed gloom soothed me like a warm blanket on a cold evening. My eyes were shut tight, picturing my mom and thinking of everything that we’d left unsaid.

I do love you, Mom.

I’d quit telling her that I loved her years ago, even when she would hold me to her and kiss my forehead brand, begging me to say it.

Now it’s too late.

I balled up into the fetal position and thought of the times when there were no drugs in her life or home, just the warmth of her skin and the smell of her hair as she read to me and kissed me goodnight.

* * *

Minutes turned into hours as time slipped past without notice.

Hot water poured over my skin. I shook my head, blinking in the darkness.

“Come back to me, MeeShee,” La La whispered within the downpour of water.

Should I come back? I asked the cheetah.

No, he said. *I like her touching me.*

Touching?

I rushed out of the darkness and surfaced to witness La La sponging my naked body with soapy water.

At some point, while my beast was in control, he had shifted us back to Human form.

La La hated being immersed in water for long periods of time. It made her weak and unable to create fire minutes later. The fact that she’d gotten in the shower with me melted my heart.

I stiffened, wondering what else had happened between her and the cheetah, while I had lain within the darkness.

Does she know you’re in control? I asked.

Yes, and she is not afraid, the cheetah said triumphantly.

I gazed at La La through his amber view.

Water soaked her violet nightgown. The fabric stuck to her skin like glue, outlining every delicious curve. Her hard nipples poked out through the material.

I silently thanked the god Shango for giving me a distraction from my sorrow.

Give me rein, I said.

Later, my beast groaned.

Now!

He howled. It came out deep and rose throughout the bathroom, startling La La.

Her eyes widened. She held the thick, brown sponge a few inches away from my chest and gazed at me as if unsure of what to do next.

“What’s wrong, Beast?” she asked.

They’d also been communicating somehow. A tiny bit of jealousy pinched at my gut.

The full moon comes next week, I said to my beast. *I’ll give you control on that night.*

The cheetah retreated back into my core, dragging his claws against my ribs.

I gritted my teeth at the pain.

Don’t you think you’re being a bit petty? I asked him.

He didn’t respond.

“MeShack?” La La whispered, staring into my eyes.

“Yes.” I let my head fall back into the shower’s aim. Blistering water sprayed along my face and trickled down my shoulders. I shook my head. My long, drenched hair splashed around, dripping water onto La La’s face.

She wiped the drops away with her hands.

“How did you know I came back?” I leaned down to her and slowly rubbed my chin against her forehead, tracing her X brand.

“The rims of your eyelids were black, and all the gold in your irises disappeared.” She sighed, put the sponge down in the soap dish, and turned to leave the shower.

I seized her waist. “Where are you going?”

“I’m going to heat up some food. You have to be hungry.”

“I’m naked with you in the shower.” I turned her around and pulled her to me. “You really think all I want is food now?”

“Stop being crazy.” She gently tapped my hand away. Her heartbeat sped up, banging against her chest. She avoided my eyes. “We need to talk about tonight.”

“Let’s talk about why I’m naked and you’re not.” I put my left hand back on her waist and turned off the shower with my right.

She cleared her throat and fixed her eyes on the purple Captain Habitat bathroom stickers decorating the shower wall. “You were covered in blood so I decided to wash you.”

“Please look at me,” I whispered.

She didn’t move at first, like she was considering if it was a good idea or not, and then she turned those beautiful coffee-brown eyes to me.

“Did you kill him?” she asked, her voice more anxious than I wanted it to be.

“I don’t want to talk about that right now.”

“You were completely covered in blood and shaking,” she said.

I growled.

“Fine, but we do need to talk about this,” she insisted as I wrapped my arms around her, bringing her in closer to me and inhaling that lavender scent.

I began to purr. The noise hummed loudly from my neck down to my chest.

She shivered underneath me.

Was it fear or need?

“MeShack, what are you doing right now?” Her eyes shimmered into that flaming orange glow.

“Doing what I’ve always wanted to do.” I pressed my body into hers.

“You’re using me as a diversion for your real feelings.”

I grunted in aggravation.

“I hate that you’re taking that psychology class.” I kissed her cheeks, leaving a trail to her ears. “If you don’t want me to touch you, then say it.”

A tiny sigh left her lips as I licked the tip of her ear.

The desire to make her more vocal charged inside me, waking my body out of its agonizing slumber. I hardened at the mere thought of her saying my name in ecstasy.

“My dad is going to tear you into tiny little pieces if he walks in on us,” she muttered.

I didn’t even tense at that possibility.

“Do you know how many nights I lay on the couch in the dark, contemplating whether I should act on my feelings for you?” I buried my face into the curve of her neck, licking the drops of water from her skin.

She moaned, her body trembling within my arms. Her stiff peaks pressed against my chest.

My hunger for her rose to an impossible height. I had to have her tonight or I wouldn’t be able to eat or sleep.

“I won’t fear death anymore.” I nipped at her flesh, savoring the luscious texture. “Life is too short. Besides, you’re all I have left now.”

She gently pushed me away, catching her breath. “I really don’t think we should. Let’s wait and make sure this isn’t just—”

“No.” I looked at her nightgown and considered tearing it apart. “You want me. That’s something I’ve known for a long time.”

“I also want more than sex. Has that been clear to you too?” She brought both of her hands to her face and wiped more water away. “Let’s just discuss this later. Too much has happened tonight.”

She tried to climb out of my arms.

“Wait.” I scowled and tightened my grip.

Be careful with our mate, my beast said.

“I love you. That shouldn’t be hard to believe, right?” I kissed her X brand.

“No. Let’s just slow down.” She averted her eyes. “And...I love you too.”

“Then stop trying to move away.” I pressed my lips against hers and thrust my tongue between her lips.

She bit it hard.

I jerked back. “What was that for? You want me to stop?”

Her eyes widened as she shook her head. “No...I’m just not that...experienced with kissing.”

“Well, you don’t bite when you kiss.” I chuckled.

“Shut up,” she muttered and pulled away from me.

“Wait, La La. I’m sorry.”

Some of my sadness left, and for a few seconds everything was back to normal as she returned and faced me.

“So you don’t know how to kiss at all? What about Kris?” I asked, enjoying our playful banter. I touched her bottom lip with my finger and traced its fullness.

“I bit him too.” She sighed. “And also the others—”

A deep, murderous growl boomed from my chest. “Others?”

She moved her mouth away from my fingers. “Well, I’m done confessing if you’re going to react like that.”

Who were the others?

I tried to direct my concentration back to her, shoving away the thoughts of someone else touching those lips. Regardless of whether she’d injured their tongues or not, I didn’t like it.

However, tonight I'd let myself go over the edge. I hadn't yet decided if murdering Joe was right or not, but I had to control my rage.

I looked down at her.

I have to make sure I don't hurt her.

"You're being ridiculous," she mumbled under her breath. "You made out with half of the cheerleading squad last year."

I grinned.

I'd actually made out with the whole squad and a few of their friends, but I doubted she wanted to know that.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I don't like to think about anyone touching you."

"I'm sorry about Fiona."

Sorrow swam inside of me and threatened to take me under.

Why did she have to remind me?

I tilted my head forward and rested my forehead against the wall behind her, hiding the tears that began to well up in my eyes. Part of me wanted to go back into myself and let the cheetah take over again.

The cheetah perked up as if waiting for me to decide.

La La embraced me, tightening her grip around my waist and surrounding me with her soft, sweet-scented flesh.

Fuck. She feels so good.

I'll stay for now.

The cheetah snarled.

My hands slid up to the center of her back, caressing her damp skin.

"Promise me you'll never leave me," I whispered.

"I promise." She kissed my chest once, stopped as if unsure of what to do next, and then kissed me again.

"Promise me we'll always stay together, whether you're mad at me or not."

She paused for several excruciating seconds and then said, "I can't. You're going through your Season. We should wait until you're done. Maybe try this again when your mind is more clear."

"Fuck waiting." I picked her up and devoured her lips, exploring her mouth with my tongue.

Every now and then she accidentally bit me, but it was worth it to my beast and me to finally take our mate in our arms.

I wish I'd told Mom that my beast chose La La. She loved La La like her own daughter and would have approved of the union.

Minutes rolled by as we savored and tasted each other until our lips went numb from the kissing. My tongue ached from the workout.

Tiny love marks covered La La's neck and chest. I smiled with pride at the plum-colored bruises.

Graham, her father, is going to kill us.

Let him try, the cheetah said.

She climbed out of my arms. "We should stop. Dad will be home soon."

"He'll probably be high and pass out on the couch."

"Please let me down, MeeShee."

I put her down and was forced to calm my beast's complaints.

Relax, I told him. *We'll hold her again.*

My mom's face flashed through my mind. The last time I'd seen her, she'd told me to take care of La La and stick together because the habitat life was rough and would swallow us up whole.

I'd snorted and left her standing there in the rain without a reply.

But now I understood what she'd been trying to say. It all clicked in my head. If we stuck together, we'd be stronger to deal with life's heartaches. We wouldn't have our parents' fates. We could charter our own destinies.

I will take care of her, Mom.

I will.

THE HEART RIPPER'S SONG

Zulu



“Zulu, we do this quick and easy,” Ray said. “No ripping his chest apart, taking out his heart, and painting his blood across the pavement.”

“Come on. I did that once, and you still won’t leave it alone.” I shrugged my shoulders and leaned back in the van’s backseat.

Ray wiped sweat off his wing forehead brand that identified him as a Fairy. He’d been sweating, burping, and farting our whole stakeout. The brown carpet lining that covered the van’s walls and floors reeked of Ray’s watermelon candy scent.

“You’ve ripped several hearts out,” he argued.

“I have not,” I insisted and pushed open the van’s tinted window to air the space out.

“No, mon,” Nona said, on my right, in her thick Rebel dialect. “Me think it was six times.”

I didn’t respond.

If Nona said it was six, then it was probably true. The Were-dog was many things; the Rebel Shifter’s fierce leader, a mom to three rowdy Were-pup boys, and, most of all, a painfully honest observer.

“Me think you go too far, mon.” She took off her hunter-green sunglasses that matched her emerald-green Mohawk. Those black eyes peered at me as her tan fingers stuffed the glasses in her suit pocket. “You roar and bang your white hands upon your chest like a crazy mon and—”

“I got it, Nona,” I muttered.

She and the Fairy exchanged worried glances.

“What now?” I held out my hands.

“The little mon and me,” Nona said, pointing to Ray as he peeked around the driver’s seat and faced us. “We think you need to change your look.”

This from a six-foot female with a green Mohawk and flashy dress suit.

“I’m not a little man,” Ray corrected Nona. “This is just my fairy glamour. I’m bigger than five feet.”

I chuckled.

Nona hadn’t seen Ray’s real form yet, the one he hid under Fairy magic. It would give her nightmares, which was saying a lot considering I’ve watched her eat a man while he was still alive.

“What do you both mean I need to change my look?” I crossed my arms across my bare chest.

“When we do these missions, everybody knows it’s you afterward. We might as well hold up signs over your head,” Ray said. “There aren’t that many white Mixbreeds running around the habitat with blond dreadlocks.”

“I won’t cut them.” My lips curled down at the edges. My fangs pierced my gums.

“No. We want you to put them in a ponytail or something,” Ray explained and launched a bag of rubber bands at me.

They landed on my lap with a thud.

“You can’t be a thug anymore. Now that you started Mixbreeds for Equality, you have to act more like an upstanding individual,” Ray said.

I gathered all of my blond dreadlocks into one hand and attempted to stuff them into a rubber band. The end result was a huge haphazard dreadlock ball the size of a melon that stuck to the back of my head.

I groaned. “Anything else?”

Ray pointed to all of the multicolored cords sewn individually into the muscles on my arms. They covered the majority of the space from my shoulder to my wrists.

“You know I can’t get rid of these,” I said.

They were permanent. I’d had them since I was a kid. My existence without the cords would cause misery and bloodshed to the Santeria habitat.

“I know you can’t take them off.” Ray pulled out a black jacket. “But you can just as easily cover your arms. You can’t just walk around the habitat all the time with no shirt on. It’s not normal. Even Shapeshifters wear shirts.”

Nona nodded in agreement.

“My cords like the sun.” I snatched the jacket from Ray. My arm cords glowed to bright blues, reds, and purples before I slipped the rough jean material on.

Aggravation flowed through me, almost reaching to my boiling point.

There better not be anything else, or I’m going to roar.

The fabric tore as I wrenched it over my biceps.

I grinned at Ray. “Oops. I ripped it. Maybe I should take it off.”

“This was the worst day to stop drinking.” Ray rubbed his eyes with both hands.

I snorted.

Ray stopped drinking every Friday and started right back on Monday.

“Just keep the jacket on,” Ray said. “It’s a temporary fix anyway. Besides, X-large was the biggest I could get. I’ll get you something else later.”

“Like a cape? Or a tight polyester suit with a big Z sewn on my chest?” I gazed out of the window, focusing on the corner across from the middle school where Tango was dealing Hemo Drop to little kids.

Oya District was named and themed after the goddess Oya. Every building had bricks in some shade of purple, her favorite color. It was why Tango was so easy to spot as he hung out in front of the violet-bricked store.

He wore an all-white linen short set that matched his ivory-colored shoes and fedora. An auburn beard wrapped around his chin and was so long, it hung all the way down to the center of his chest. Every few seconds, he would twist the tip of his beard.

Watching the Were-wolf had been the most boring thing that I’d ever done in my life.

For the past five hours, he’d yapped away to his entourage and chewed on a cherry root stick, which was typical behavior for a Were-wolf since they loved to gnaw things. He’d moved from the area only once, and that was to run next door to Lightning Market for their specialty sausage-stuffed eggplant. Any time he had to urinate, he would simply turn around, paint the store’s violet bricks with his piss, and return to his conversation.

I exhaled loudly.

“Relax, Zulu. We’ll get him.” Ray twisted around in his seat. “Just wait till it gets a little darker. The habitat police end their patrol of the school at dusk.”

I can hardly wait.

The habitat police officers, or habbies like most people called them, didn't patrol the school to keep the kids safe. They were out there making sure that no other drug dealers violated Tango's territory. The Were-wolf had been paying the habbies for over a year now. He thought he was untouchable.

We'll see about that, Tango.

I'd already given him two warnings to stay away from the kids. The first time, he'd left for a week and then immediately returned. The second time, he only stayed away for a day.

You'll regret that.

Most dealers only got one warning before I ended their existence.

Tango and I had history. We'd done Green Goblin together when we were teens. It had been a popular drug that got most addicted with one spoonful of the lime-green gel. After we tried that drug, we hung out together, putting any harmful thing we could find into our bodies.

I'd been clean for three years now.

Tango remained in the drug game.

"You just had to be so hardheaded." I tapped my fingers against the window over and over, getting Nona and Ray's attention.

They both stared at me.

"What? I'm ready to get this over with," I said. "I have things I want to do later."

"You'll see your Mixie tonight. Don't worry," Ray said.

"She's not mine yet," I murmured.

"By the way, does she know about this?" Ray asked.

"No."

Ray sniggered. "Well, then, you better behave yourself."

* * *

Dusk approached. The black and yellow habbie vehicle rolled out of its parking space at the same time it had every day this week.

I jumped out of my seat.

"Wait." Ray raised his hand out. "At least until the habbies turn the corner."

I slid the van door open anyway, stepped out, and peered around to see that the streets were empty. Nona hopped out after me. Ray remained in the van, as planned.

Humid air clung to my skin. Even though the summer sun had disappeared from the sky, the habitat ceiling's bars still retained the horrid heat. The bars wouldn't cool down until late in the evening. Sweat leaked out of my underarms, soaking the thick jean jacket as I headed toward Tango.

I'm going to stuff this blistering jacket up Ray's anal cavity when I'm done.

Tango stood on the corner, talking to his usual entourage, three Mixies that had been tagging along with him since we were all young and growing up in the orphanage. Brick, Alt, and Curry were their names. They never truly harmed anybody—except they didn't stop Tango from selling drugs.

I won't hurt them unless I have to.

"I mean her ass was this big." Tango extended his hands far out to his sides.

Two little boys walked up to him, maybe ten years old or less, with brunette cornrows. The tallest one held money in his hand.

Nona rushed toward them, shooed them away, and searched around for any other kids. Her job was to clear the streets of any young witnesses.

“Tango, how you doing, man?” I flashed him a smile.

He slowly turned around. If he’d been smiling, it was definitely gone now. His thin lips were formed into a straight line. His hands shook as he placed them in his pockets.

Brick and Alt looked at me and ran.

Smart guys.

Curry remained sitting on the ground, drawing a circle with a stick. He seemed unsure of what was going on. His eyes went from me to Tango and then back to me.

“Zulu did you come to sing a song?” Curry asked. “I love kites.”

The rumor on the streets was that Curry’s mom had worked at Mason’s plant when she was pregnant with him. It was a plant that casted high-level spells and toxic potions that pregnant women weren’t supposed to be exposed to. Apparently, Curry was the top example for why people should follow magic-safety rules.

“Run away, Curry,” I ordered and kept my focus on Tango to make sure he didn’t escape.

Curry just gawked at me. “You think I should run?”

I glanced over my shoulder and noticed Nona herding several kids around the corner.

“Yeah.” I nodded. “You should definitely leave.”

Curry jumped up and jogged away, tripping over his ankles and falling every few feet.

Tango raised his hands in front of his chest. “Look, Zulu. I wasn’t even selling around here.”

“I’ve been watching you for the past five hours.” I stepped toward him.

He backed up and looked at the empty parking spot where the habbies had been located. His lips moved, as if saying a chant, and then he disappeared into thin air like he’d never been there to begin with.

I laughed.

He was using fairy glamour to hide himself. I could smell the familiar sweet fragrance of fairy magic as it sparked. It was like strolling into a candy store.

“Not a good idea, Tango!” I yelled.

Purebloods always assumed Mixbreeds had no power, that they could just do whatever and not suffer the consequences from us.

No one knew what I was mixed with, and I wanted to keep it that way.

So instead of shifting completely, I changed my eyes to black and chanted, “Once was hidden. Now is seen.”

Tango’s fairy glamour immediately dropped. He must have bought a cheap cloaking spell from some desperate Fairy. His image came into my view as he sprinted down the street, looking over his shoulder and laughing, confident that he’d escaped.

Once he turned the corner, I raced after him.

The cool thing about Oya District is that each alleyway ran parallel with its nine major roads and provided great short cuts for chasing after your local drug dealer.

I dashed to the alleyway next to the Dollar Store, searched around for witnesses, and leaped thirty feet into the air, gliding to the other end within seconds.

A rush of wind blew past me, raising my dreadlock bun high above my head. The back of my jacket rose with the current of air. I dropped to the ground, causing the alley’s dust to rise around my boots.

A one-legged, red Pixie screeched and hopped under a dumpster.

I burst out of the alleyway, turned the corner, and spotted Tango racing across Hurricane Road. Cars honked. One hit him. He smashed onto a sports car’s red hood face first, denting the metal.

The car screeched to a stop. He fell into the street, rolled up, and did a sort of one-leg-at-a-time stumble onto the sidewalk.

“Hey, Tango! You alright, man? Need any help?” I asked.

He glanced back and yelped. Shock plastered across his face.

That’s right. I see you.

I snaked around two cars that had stopped to watch Tango run off. It took me ten seconds to get to the sidewalk.

Tango ran, spitting blood onto the ground. He glanced over his shoulder, spotted me, and screamed again.

I roared.

Just a few more feet.

I mentally called on my power, gritting my teeth at the pain. It felt like icicles stabbing at my temples and stinging everywhere they hit with an agonizing twinge. The freezing sensation spread down my body, trickling to my hands. Each slam of my feet against the pavement felt like I was stomping barefoot through broken glass.

I roared in misery.

Tango looked back and crashed into a trashcan.

Now, barely twenty feet away, I reached out for his beast, sensing it hiding near his core.

Come here, little wolfy.

His beast, a black-furred wolf, peeked back at me in distress. The wolf’s transparent head stuck out of Tango’s back, not used to being seen or felt by anyone but Tango. He turned his furry muzzle from side to side.

Here I am, little wolf.

The beast’s eyes snapped to mine. He barked at my presence.

No one could hear him but Tango and me.

Tango frantically looked around for some sort of escape.

I threw out a mental lasso. No other Supernaturals, except Fairies and Trolls, could see it. To any onlooking Fairy that had shifted his eyes, my lasso resembled a clear liquid rope with silver dots swimming in it.

To any other supernatural, I was just wagging my hand around.

The lasso hooked onto the wolf’s neck. The wolf yapped for a while, and then surrendered.

I heaved the rope toward me.

The translucent beast fell out of Tango’s back and crashed into the pavement with a hard smack. Tango collapsed to the ground, screaming, his body riding spasms of pain.

His noise startled the old Troll sitting on the bench and knitting a maroon bone-holder.

“Sorry for the disturbance, ma’am,” I said to the Troll.

She stopped moving her knitting needles. “It’s okay.”

The fear in her eyes told me it wasn’t.

The wolf lay behind Tango, tangled in my lasso.

I jogged toward them, out of breath and drained from using my power. I could only take the beast out for a few seconds, which always gave me an advantage when I fought Shifters.

By the time I got to them, the beast had chomped the lasso into bits, charged toward Tango, and hopped back inside his body.

Tango shot up to a sitting position, gasping on a new-found breath.

I moseyed on over, whistling a song of doom. My sharp claws sliced out of my fingertips.

“How the fuck did you do that?” Tango hit his chest and touched his head as if unsure he was still alive. “What are you?”

“Ask your god Shango.” I tore into his chest with my claws, ripping away flesh and slinging his intestines onto the stony sidewalk. Tango’s lifeless body crashed back into the pavement. I dug my claws deeper into his chest. Blood pooled around my hands while I searched for his heart.

The Troll returned to knitting as she watched.

An Elf on his bike spotted me digging through Tango’s chest, lost control of his handles, and collided into a poison berry bush.

A bronze sports car crashed into a large truck. Both drivers gaped at me. Others saw the drivers and checked to see what they were gaping at.

And that’s when Supernaturals all over Hurricane Road started to scream.

“Got it,” I announced against the racket.

I retracted my claws. The muscle beat in my hands. I ripped it out and stood up, holding it over my head. Dark scarlet slime streamed down my arm.

The horde of spectators silenced.

All traffic had ceased. Supes froze in their spots with open mouths, staring at me and holding their belongings to their stomachs or chests.

“Enough with the drugs in Mixbreeds’ neighborhoods!” I waved the heart around. “Spread the word! If you sell drugs to Mixbreeds, then Zulu’s coming for you!”

I leaned down and wrote a sentence on the sidewalk with Tango’s heart, squeezing the blood out of it to get more ink. When I finished, I threw the useless organ over the park’s gate.

A woman jumped to the side.

My sentence read, *Don’t do drugs!*

Three beeps sounded, and then a horn blared. Ray’s white van pulled up on the sidewalk, quickly separating the crowd. Anger spread across his face as he violently motioned for me to get in, hitting his elbow by accident on the steering wheel. He cursed.

Nona arrived at my side.

“You a Drama King, Zulu.” She laughed and hopped in the van.

“Gob-dobbin sculanch!” Ray cursed in Fey, an ancient Fairy language.

I climbed in.

“Scramp sculanch! Blux sculanch!”

“I don’t even know what you’re saying,” I said.

“Every damn thing I asked you not to do, you did it!” He drove us off. “You don’t motherpounding listen! Not even since you were a boy!”

I glanced out of the window, smiling and thinking of tonight. Excitement sparked within me.

“I just wanted to make sure everybody got the message this time,” I explained.

“They didn’t even hear what you said!” Ray continued. “You scared the shit out of them, wagging a bloody heart around!”

* * *

Five hours later, we stood in front of Club Metamorphosis.

Electronic drums beat in a rhythmic pattern against an enchanted organ. The Vamp singer’s words sounded mumbled from where I stood, but I knew he was singing about a love affair he had with a Human during the Pre-habitat years.

His name was York. It was one of the few supernatural albums I owned.

“You should come to the Bembe Hall with me and the family on our goddess’s day.” Ray smoothed down the silk collar of his hot-red shirt.

Ray had been beyond pissed at me. It took a warm shower, two bottles of honey, and a ground-cow-hoof-with-mayonnaise sandwich to calm him down.

“Let my Santero priest bless you,” Ray added.

“I told you, I’m not interested.” I raised my hands so the Earth Witch bouncer could check my body for weapons or harmful spells.

The bouncer’s eyes illuminated to bright green. His lips moved as he whispered a chant.

A current of cold magic sparked in the air. Bright green lights swirled around my skin, stinking strongly of mint. If I had anything illegal, like a dark curse or a knife with a silver blade, my skin would shine red. The darker the shine, the deadlier the weapon or spell.

“Go ahead,” the Earth Witch said with a hint of disappointment. He was used to seeing me with no shirt on. Tonight, I wore a powder-blue shirt with indigo jeans. He’d probably assumed when I walked up to him with my chest covered that I’d hid something under it.

Mixbreeds for Equality, or MFE as most Supes called it, had been picketing the nightclub for weeks. Most places had a few nights where Mixbreeds were allowed to enter, party, and eat.

Club Metamorphosis hadn’t allowed Mixbreeds to come in any night. In fact, there had been a big billboard sign above the club with an X brand floating in blood.

The words above it read, *No Combo Trash Permitted!*

The picture had been disrespectful enough, but adding the speciest term *Combo Trash* to refer to Mixbreeds was what got me and my organization involved. As far as I was concerned, they had not only crossed the line, they’d pulled down their pants and taken a crap on it.

The Earth Witch checked Nona and Ray’s forehead brands, saw that they were Purebloods, and waved them through without checking them.

Figures.

“I’ve watched you fill with darkness in the past few years,” Ray whispered as we entered the nightclub. “You need to work on your spirituality. Clean up that gloom inside of you.”

I grunted in response.

Nona trailed on my other side, smirking.

White laser lights sliced through the dark club, blinking on and off our faces.

Zebra prints now coated every free space of the wall. Soon, the club would change form, like a Shifter, into another type of nightclub, and minutes later, it would change again. No one but the witches that owned the place knew when, where, or how it transformed into something else. It was just what happened in Club Metamorphosis.

Hundreds of Mixbreeds crowded the dance floor, rocking, jumping, and frantically swaying to the electric beats.

MFE had been so persistent with our picketing that the Witches immediately took down the sign and opened the club to Mixbreeds on Wednesdays and Thursdays. Granted, we’d gotten over two hundred Mixbreeds to picket. Surely, one of the Witches had seen the possibility of more future, paying customers.

Tonight was Club Metamorphosis’s Mixbreed grand opening.

“Hey, Zulu.” A woman’s voice sounded at my side.

I kept walking, without saying hello.

“*And I miss you, blue-eyed girl with the curls.*” The Vamp singer York walked on the air, three feet above the dance crowd, singing the lyrics. “*We were both from two different worlds. But we held on!*”

“We held on!” the crowd screamed. Many of them jumped high to touch his feet.

“We held on.” He twirled in the air.

Everybody screamed again. “We held on!”

I scanned the club, searching all of their excited faces.

A strawberry-red-haired woman seductively waved at me.

I peered around her.

“How long do we have to be here?” Ray nervously gazed at the bar on the right.

“You don’t,” I corrected. “I do, to show MFE’s presence.”

“Isn’t it enough that you got the club to let Mixies in?” he asked.

“I didn’t do that. Lanore did.”

I’d actually thought the whole picketing thing wouldn’t work. Holding signs and chanting crap? My plan was to go in on one of their busiest nights, rip two of the owners’ heads off, and nail them to the offensive sign.

Lanore disagreed. She’d spent hours cornering me in my office, holding open history books, and pointing to this or that social movement. When I caved in, she thought it was because of her arguments.

I leaned Nona’s way and asked, “You see her?”

“No, mon, but me smell her coming from over there.” She pointed far off to the right.

I shifted my eyes to black to get a better view and headed that way.

Where are you, Lanore?

And then I spotted her.

My heart sped up to an erratic pace. My cords vibrated on my arms. I knew that they glowed under the shirt.

It was what always happened when she was near.

Lanore swayed back and forth with the beat. A strapless plum dress wrapped around her cinnamon body. The silky material ended in the middle of her thighs but didn’t cover everything. Her waist, tiny belly button, and the top of her ample cleavage were exposed.

I licked my lips in anticipation, just happy to be near her for a few hours.

She kept MFE and me out of the rest of her life, never letting me take her home, and didn’t stay too long at any of MFE’s social functions.

I grinned as she raised her hands and waved them around. Amethyst gems hung from her ears and dangled all the way to her shoulders. I’d slipped them in her jean satchel, without a note, one night when she wasn’t looking.

“And in this cage, behind these bars, I think of you and me,” York sang. *“And how we held on.”*

“We held on!”

Lanore jumped up and down, repeating the lyrics with the rest of the crowd. She’d curled those long, black dreadlocks tonight. They hung in spirals a little bit past her shoulders and bounced with her movement.

I got closer and spotted Wallace, MFE’s technical expert, jumping in front of her. He bobbed around like an idiot, getting her full attention. His bushy red hair flopped up and down as he twisted his hips. He wore a purple shirt with the fictional superhero Captain Habitat covering the front, as usual. His pale, splotchy fists pumped in the air.

She laughed, which motivated Wallace to act even crazier.

He knelt down and started flapping his arms like he was flying.

She covered her mouth in clear amusement.

He's always fucking making her laugh.

My hands formed into tight fists. I couldn't do anything but stand back and bear it. She preached too much about peace. I figured ripping off Wallace's arm might turn her off.

"Love whispers beyond the bars. It washes the pain. No more scars."

I glided by her, rubbed my arm against hers as if there was just no space to maneuver through, and inhaled her scent of lavender mixed with sweet cream.

Our eyes met within the blinking laser lights.

And then the club shifted.

York disappeared.

Electric guitars drowned out the enchanted organ until they were the only sounds rocking out every speaker. The walls bulged out five feet toward the crowd, bubbled, and then rippled, transforming zebra print to cheetah print within seconds. The large circular bar that had been on the right side of the club vanished and materialized in the center of the dance floor.

Three women wearing silver body suits and wigs danced on a stage that appeared near the entrance.

"No Daddy! No Papi!" the women sung into microphones in their hands. *"I don't need you! I got me!"*

Supes roared with excitement.

The ground quaked, knocking a few people off balance.

Lanore fell, her body slamming into mine.

I seized her waist, relishing in her soft warm skin.

"Thanks." She scowled at me for a few seconds and quickly climbed out of my arms.

No Hey, Zulu? Or How are you doing, Zulu?

She walked away without glancing back over her shoulder, the curve of her ass moving deliciously in that silky dress.

I frowned.

I'm in trouble.

She headed to the bar, maneuvering around gyrating couples.

A big circle opened up on her side. Two Mixbreeds jumped in the middle and began having a dance off. Everyone watched and cheered, except Lanore. She put her back to the mini dance competition and leaned on the edge of the bar.

Not willing to take defeat, I moved in a blur and appeared at her side, whispering in her ear, "What's wrong?"

She jumped when she saw me, and then rolled her sexy brown eyes. She didn't respond and, to make things worse, she looked behind me as if I was invisible.

"Excuse me," she said to a bartender with silver and blue braids swinging around his bare shoulders. She motioned with her hand for him to come over.

He came, twirling a white dish towel.

She got up on the tips of her toes and whispered in his ear. He scrunched his face up at whatever she had said, shrugged his shoulders, and laughed.

I tapped my fingers on the bar's onyx surface, struggling to draw in my jealousy.

I'll give her a minute to explain why she's ignoring me. If she doesn't, then I'll drag her out of here.

He whispered something back to her.

She nodded and grinned.

And just when I was about to say fuck it and break the bartender's neck, she sat back down. The bartender dove under the bar, searching for something, and then stood up, handing her a pen.

She twisted my way and gave the object to me. "Here's a pen so the next time you want to write a message about drugs, you won't have to use someone's heart."

She slid off the stool and left the bar, taking her scent with her.

Fuck me.

I thought I had a day or two before she found out about Tango. I left the bar in a flash and arrived next to her as she passed two girls fighting around one guy who stood in the middle of them, beaming.

I put my lips close to Lanore's ear. "You disagree with my methods. Fine, but don't ignore me."

She stopped moving, got on her toes, and whispered, "What are you going to do, rip my heart out?"

She walked off.

The music drowned out my growls.

"*Yes Mama, yes Mami!*" The three singers ground into each other as they danced on the bar. "*I got you! Come get me!*"

The club shifted.

Cracks rushed down the walls. The cheetah wallpaper exploded into tiny bits that disappeared before it plummeted to the floor. Jade tile swallowed up the plush tan carpet. Alligator skin emerged on the walls.

A rap song blasted through the DJ's speakers that appeared by the entrance, right as Lanore left.

I shouldn't go after her. I should just stay right here and take a willing woman home tonight.

There'd be plenty of eager women.

Sighing, I raced toward the front door as it slammed behind her.

It took me less than half a second to find her. Those heels beat against the pavement as she stomped toward a tram stop.

"You're so disgusted with me, you left the grand opening?" I asked.

"You viciously murdered someone." She stopped and twisted around. "Why would you just kill him like that?"

"He'd been doping up little kids all week." I held my hands out to my sides.

"And there will be another dealer at the corner by tomorrow. Except, this time, the sidewalk will be pink from Tango's blood." She turned and continued down the block.

"No." I got to her in no time and gently grasped her arm. "That's the last time you turn your back on me tonight. We finish this conversation now."

Her skin heated under my hands, burning me. I jerked my hand away and gazed at her. She stared back as if nothing weird had just happened.

Fine. You have some type of heating power. I get it.

"So," I said. "You think I should just let these guys give kids Hemo Drop and do nothing about it?"

"If you want to clean the streets, then get the people who are in charge." She began pacing in front of me. "Tango was just a little guy. Get the suppliers or the law makers that authorize illegal shipments into the habitat, but don't disturb an entire district with horrific images."

"One Troll was knitting. It couldn't have been that bad."

She put her hands on her hips and rolled those beautiful eyes. “It doesn’t matter. You’re reconfirming to everyone that Mixies are barbaric thugs that should be in jail.”

“Is that what you think?” I stepped toward her.

She edged back, shaking her head. “No. But I would have thought that if I didn’t know you.”

“Fine. I like your idea about getting the suppliers.” I inched forward. “Help me do it.”

She opened her mouth for a few seconds as if unsure of what to say, then said, “I already have a lot going on; college, tutoring, I’m already doing more than I wanted to with MFE—”

“Boyfriend?” I raised my eyebrows.

“I told you I wasn’t interested in dating you.”

I leaned my head to the side. “But you never said if there was someone else.”

“Wait a minute. We were talking about drugs and—”

I closed the distance between us and pressed my lips to her full ones. Her tongue tasted of peppermint candy. Groaning, I sucked on it and wrapped my arms around her waist, pulling her into my chest. Her whole body was as soft as a pillow. The desire to take her back to my condo burned within me.

She pushed back and whispered, “Stop.”

I forced myself to release her. It took all the strength I had. “I want you.”

She stumbled back, catching her breath. “Zulu...I’m not interested.”

“Did I just imagine you kissing me back?”

Her eyes glowed a fiery orange as she bit her bottom lip. “Just don’t do that again.”

She raked her fingers through her curls with shaking hands.

My eyes traveled down her body, drinking her in. “Why not?”

“I just ended a really long relationship,” she said. “I need to be on my own for a while.”

“So we’ll only be friends?”

She nodded.

“Can I take you to Choblie tomorrow night?” I asked. “It’s where I take all of my friends.”

You should be eating high-end food while a piano plays in the background.

“You’re lying. There is no way you and Nona sit in Choblie, sipping wine and eating foie gras.” She smiled. “Nona would bite the waiter.”

I couldn’t think of anything else to say, so I said nothing.

Silence sat between us for a few seconds. The moonlight bathed her cinnamon skin and made the amethyst earrings sparkle.

The Oya District Tram pulled up.

“Let me take you home, please,” I said, hoping I didn’t sound as desperate as I felt.

“My ride is here.” She bent down to the Tram’s screen on the left side of the door. A red laser shot out and scanned her X brand.

The doors opened.

“Besides, it would be uncomfortable riding on your motorcycle in a dress.” She stepped on. “Bye, Zulu. Do me a favor and try not to kill anybody tonight.”

I blocked the Tram doors with my arm before they could close. “Then meet me at MFE tomorrow, so you can help me with these dealers.”

I moved my hand away. The doors closed behind her before she could reply, but I knew she would come. She wanted to fix the problems in Santeria as much as I did.

We just disagreed on the methods.

* * *

The scorching hot sun beat down on my skin.

Lanore held my waist as we rode on my motorcycle, tailing the drug supplier through Shango District. Nona and Ray hung back in the van.

Orange-bricked buildings rushed past us. Flaming pots topped every light pole for the upcoming Fire festival. The district flooded with the aroma of cooked honey cakes and roasted ram meat.

I wished Lanore and I were on a date instead of a mission.

Every few seconds, her fingers would touch one of the gems embedded in my back. Like my cords, the diamonds, rubies, sapphires, and amethyst in my skin contained a lot of magic. They formed a massive wing pattern that spread across my back and soared to my shoulders.

Supes thought the cords and gemmed wings were all skin decorations, something to show off. It was why I'd bought an old tattoo and piercing shop, rebuilt it with fairy magic, and named it the Inked Guerilla. I hired a Were-hyena named Quinn to be the manager and head body artist so I didn't have to mess with it.

Apparently the shop got lots of business, not that I cared. I had enough money to be comfortable until an old age.

No. Inked Guerilla's main purpose was to serve as headquarters to MFE and give Rebel Shifters a place to enjoy, where they wouldn't be judged for their furry skin and crazy rebellious styles.

"I should get something cool like this done." She brushed her hands against the tip of my gemmed wings. A lusty tingling hit where she was touching.

I bit down on my tongue so I wouldn't moan, tasting blood.

The rusty yellow truck moseyed down the road, spitting out black smoke every couple of blocks. We'd been following the truck all day as it dropped off drugs to dealers throughout Oya and Shango District. The truck's bed was now empty. Hopefully, these guys would lead us to the head honcho.

"What type of pattern do you want in your skin?" I asked as we turned the corner.

"A small lily under my navel."

I gripped the handles hard. "I'd do that for you, free of charge."

First, I'll have to learn how to do it, but it'll be worth it.

"I was going to have Quinn do it," she said

"Well, if Quinn is busy." *And she will be.* "I would love to do it for you."

And so much more.

Lanore cleared her throat. "I'll have to think about that."

"Are you nervous to have my fingers down there?" I licked my lips, glad she couldn't see me.

She didn't say anything.

I laughed. "Well, you should be."

She pinched my side. "Just focus on the truck."

It turned on Ram Road, stopped at a dead end, and parked.

I pulled up behind several parked cars in front of a red and gold house. It gave us a good view without giving away our position.

They sat in the car for about ten minutes.

I glanced behind Lanore. "What do you think they're waiting on?"

"Maybe they're—"

The two Mixbreeds got out of the car. They wore black jeans and dark shirts. Both had brown hair that peeked out of their black hats. The driver glanced around a few times, pulled out a gray phone, and said something into it. The other Mixie arrived, carrying two big flashlights.

The guy with the phone lifted the sewer cap, looked around some more, and then disappeared into the hole. The second walked up to it.

Lanore jumped off the motorcycle.

I grabbed her arm. “No. I said I would investigate and you would—”

“What? Make pancakes and clean the house?” She twisted out of my grip. “Come on, before the cap closes.”

“Damn it,” I muttered under my breath and signaled for Ray and Nona to come out of the van.

It was daylight. A sewer would be the perfect place for homeless Vampires and Goblins to sleep the sun away.

Lanore began doing some sort of half-back-bended-jog toward the guys as she hid behind parked cars. I dashed toward her in seconds, unhappy. Now I would be worried about her and myself as I checked out the sewer. Not to mention the fact that we didn’t know where the fuck we were going or what was down there.

The last guy jumped in.

I dove toward it, putting my foot between the cap and pavement to prevent it from closing. Lanore and Nona ran up behind me.

“Hey man,” the Mixbreed said, hanging on a ladder. “This is a personal hole.”

“Nona,” I called.

Nona grabbed him by the shoulders in one swoop, lifted him out of the hole, and slung him across the street. His body crashed into a parked car, setting off the alarm. Broken glass shot into the air as a boom thundered. A transparent blue bubble formed around the entire car, swirling with mystic liquid.

I almost laughed at the car’s old security magic system. Almost no one used it anymore.

Nona leaped into the air. Her green body suit ripped apart as fur and muscle pushed through. Her jaw stretched and elongated into a snout. Claws tore out of her fingers.

Her clawed paws burst the security-spelled bubble. She landed on the car and the guy in Were-dog form, resembling a massive pitbull. The car crashed into itself under her weight. The tires shot out and flattened.

“No. Wait a minute. Who?” the Mixie babbled as Nona hovered over him.

I glanced back at the sewer hole. Lanore was gone. My hands still held the rim.

“Damn it,” I peered down into the tunnel.

A fire blazed up for a few seconds, and then there was nothing but steam.

I yelled, “Lanore!”

I got into the sewer, hooking my hands on the ladder rungs. The blistering metal seared my fingers, but I continued down the ladder into the hot air and steam.

I’m going to kill her for going in here without me.

It took no time to get to the bottom.

My boots sunk into a muddy floor. Murky sewage flowed in a stream on my right, radiating a putrid blend of garbage and bodily waste.

The sewer would have been pitch dark if not for the burning husk of a man that sat at my boots’ tips.

Was this the Mixbreed that went into the tunnel?

I studied the man's damaged face. Blood bubbled around an X brand. Some of his unmelted clothes looked black, but then, the fire could have done that. Flames spread over him and trailed into a tunnel.

"Lanore!" I roared and raced down the burning tunnel, stepping on cracked flashlight pieces.

She bumped into me, coming out of the shadows, and I immediately seized her.

"Stop yelling," she whispered and pulled me into a dark, tight corner.

"Stop yelling? You just jumped down here without—"

She shushed me and turned around, pressing her behind into me as she peeked around the corner.

A lusty heat burst at my loins as if I was a horny teenage Shifter going through my Season.

I put my hands to her waist, rubbing the lush skin under her shirt and enjoying the pressure of her curves. "Damn you. I can't even concentrate."

She stood up and smacked my hands away. "You better concentrate. There are several Vamps down the tunnel. Some of them look homeless, but the others are wearing suits and guarding the front of a door."

"It's daytime. They'll be slow and weak." I released her waist and peeked around, spotting the Vampires she was talking about.

"How do you want to do this?" I asked. "Since you're clearly going to do whatever you want?"

She turned to me. Her lips formed into a smile. "I could probably take care of the Vamps, and you go into the room."

I raised my eyebrows.

"What?" she asked.

"Did you do that to the Mixbreed by the sewer opening? Set him on fire?"

"Yes."

I nodded. "I'm impressed, but I don't want you fighting Vampires, even slow ones."

We heard movement behind us. Nona trotted up in animal form.

"Ray got the Mixie on the car?" I asked.

The dog moved her snout up and down.

"Get those Vampires over there."

Nona charged forward and leaped for the first Vampire. He'd only moved one inch by the time her fangs pierced his tough flesh. Blood sprayed all over Lanore and me.

Lanore wiped her face.

I pushed claws out of my fingers and darted for the other Vampire as he slowly moved like an enchanted statue.

He went up in flames before I could touch him.

Did Lanore do that?

My heart stopped beating. I halted in mid-movement, searching the tunnel for others.

Lanore strolled up behind me, grinning.

So she definitely has some sort of fire power.

I wondered how it worked, but I wouldn't ask. Most Mixbreeds' survival depended on keeping their powers secret and using them during attacks.

Rat corpses surrounded four homeless Vampires lounging in the tunnel. A few lay on cardboard beds piled with tattered clothes. They looked up at us, and then averted their eyes.

"We aren't here to bother you," Lanore assured them.

It was difficult for Vampires to talk or move during the day, which is probably why they remained stiff and just followed us with their eyes.

I opened the double doors, surprised there wasn't a lock or more secure system than day-comatose Vampires. Maybe the fact that the supply was in a sewer gave the owners a false sense of security.

I snatched the door open. The odor of brimstone hit me first.

Lanore wheezed, immediately covered her face, and appeared as if she was going to gag. She coughed several times and backed up. I rushed over to her, but she waved me away.

"Are you allergic to brimstone?" I asked.

"Mind your business." She lifted the top of her shirt over her nose and continued into the room.

Interesting.

There were only a few species that had allergic reactions to brimstone. I'd have to look them up to figure out what Lanore was mixed with.

I stepped into the area.

It resembled an old utility room. Dust and spider webs hung on the metal walls. Dingy ceiling lights dangled above four glass tables that sat in the middle of the room. Each table had five goblins focused on their tasks. None of them looked up at us, probably used to only authorized personnel coming in. Their green, scaled fingers separated crimson powder.

It was Vampire blood. It formed into powder once removed from the Vampire's body and was one of the main ingredients in the drug Hemo Drop.

The Goblins at the end of each table poured all three powders into pots that held a brown liquid.

Lanore dropped her shirt and whispered to me, "We should probably tell them they're out of work."

"I have other plans," I groaned.

She glared. "We are not killing them. They're just Goblins trying to make some extra cash."

A cracking sound came from my left. Nona shifted back into human form. "Me think your breeder is right. Them no mean any wrong."

"Who is the breeder?" Lanore coughed some more and rubbed her eyes.

I ignored Lanore's question and said, "I think we should make an example of them."

"You kill anyone in this room, and you'll get the same fate that Mixie got at the end of the ladder." Lanore rubbed her eyes again.

I smirked at her and her little threat.

We're perfect for each other.

"Nona, can you handle getting the Goblins out?" Lanore sucked her teeth at me.

"Yeah, mon." Nona stomped over to the Goblins, tapping on their shoulders.

Piles of glittery blue and yellow powder lay in the center of each table.

"Where is the brimstone coming from," I asked.

"It's the brown liquid in the pots." Lanore pointed to them. "They're using brimstone to bind the Vamp blood to the Pixie poop."

"Pixie Poop?"

"Yep, that's the secret ingredient. Freeze-dried Pixie poop. A bunch of college students from the Christianity habitat invented it."

"At least they didn't waste their education," I said dryly.

I shook my head and watched one of the Goblins grabbed a dropper, stuck it in the boiling pot, and then released red drops onto a silver tray.

“We’ll have to figure out a way to destroy the drugs.” Lanore backed up a little more.

Red shaded the whites of her eyes. She blinked them several times and coughed again. She added, “If we burn the place up, the fumes will get all of Shango District high.”

Nona rounded up the Goblins. Each one jerked a little in surprise and then waddled to the wall where she had others lined up. They couldn’t come out during the day. The sun burned their skin. We would have to let them stay down here for now.

They’ll tell whoever owns this place we destroyed the drugs.

A grin formed on my face.

Good.

Lanore had now retreated to the doorway. “It must be over \$100,000 worth of drugs in this room.”

“Ray will consume it all.” I walked around, looking under the table and at the walls. “He’s on look out and garbage duty.”

“I don’t understand,” she said. “He’s such a little guy.”

“Trust me. He’ll lick the room clean within minutes.”

“Won’t that get him high?” she asked with concern in her voice.

“His metabolism is too high,” I replied, not willing to give her the real reason, which was that Ray was too big of a monster to get high off such a small amount.

The whites of her eyes were now dark red. She seemed as if she had difficulty swallowing.

So stubborn. She wants to make sure it’s done to her liking even if she passes out.

She stepped back in the room, covering her nose, and peered down at the tiny Goblins, waving her hand in front of their faces.

They stared beyond her with blue glowing eyes.

“They’re all spelled.” She touched one of their necks and examined the bronze amulets hanging from bands of leather. “This has a letter B on it. This one is probably owned by a Vamp family since they love to tag their property with bronze labels.”

She dropped the amulet and checked the other chains. “Another B, two P’s, and several O’s. I’m sure the O is for the Ortiz Vamp family.”

“Nona, grab all of the chains off their necks.”

“Why?” Lanore asked, pulling the shirt back over her nose.

“I have a habbie that could check for fingerprints.”

“Can I take them to my Air Witch first? There may be some spell residue on them. Then we’d have residue and fingerprints to make a stronger case.”

“For who?”

“The habbies.”

There won’t be a trial for these drug mongers.

Nona chuckled. “Your breeder is funny.”

“I’m not his breeder.” She gazed at Nona.

“Nona, have your Rebels check other sewer systems throughout Santeria. I’m sure we can find more drugs to destroy,” I said. “Make sure the Rebels know they’ll be compensated.”

“We still don’t know who’s in control of the drugs,” Lanore said. “Vamps are just my first guess.”

“Leave my business card, the ones without the location spells, on the door.” I stepped in her way. “Maybe these guys will be so pissed they’ll come to us.”

“Definitely much better than the blood message.” Lanore smiled.

“Let’s go,” I said. “You’re dying in here and Ray doesn’t like an audience when he eats. He’ll be down here soon.”

She left the room, staring back at the Goblins every few steps.

* * *

When we returned to the Inked Guerilla, Lanore had tasked me with the job of researching all the powerful Vampire families while she took a shower in my office bathroom.

Instead, I typed brimstone and allergies into my computer.

Four results discussing supernatural species came on the screen: Sprites, Demons, Dark Elves, and Mountain Trolls.

“So what did you find out?” Lanore peeked her head into my office. “Anything on the Vamp lead.”

I quickly shut off the computer, knocking over my cup of pens. I slung my sketch pad into my top drawer. I’d been doodling images of her with no clothes on.

She stepped out, wrapping a turquoise towel around her head. “Thanks for letting me clean up here. My roommate would freak out if I came home covered in Vamp blood and smelling of Hemo Drop.”

She wore a black dress with tiny straps. “Sorry about the unprofessional outfit. Quinn said this was the only extra clothes she had here.”

The dress barely went to the middle of her thighs. It stuck to her as if an artist had taken a careful amount of time to paint the dress on her skin.

I licked my lips. “Quinn is going to get a raise.”

“What’s that?” Quinn strolled in, holding a joint and passing it to Lanore. “I’m getting a raise?”

I glared at the joint. “Are we all going to just ignore my no drug policy?”

“Sorry.” Lanore quickly inhaled and gave it back. “I’m trying to quit, but it’s been difficult.”

“I’m sure that’s impossible since MeShack grows the stuff in his closet.” Quinn took a hit and returned it to Lanore. “Shango only knows that man is drop-dead gorgeous. How you’re not butt naked, on your knees, and in front of him right now, I’ll never know.”

Lanore choked on the smoke as she grabbed one of the many folded MFE shirts on a table across from my desk, put it on, and tied a knot at the shirt’s bottom.

“Is MeShack your roommate?” I raised my eyebrows. Under my desk, my claws came out of my fingertips.

“Yes, he’s my roommate.” She scowled at Quinn.

“So he’s the Shifter I always smell in your hair?”

Quinn laughed. “Zulu the Heart Ripper is smelling Lanore’s hair?”

“Why don’t you go maintain the books or maybe get rid of the pot,” I said to Quinn.

Lanore gave the wretched joint back.

I continued to focus my eyes on her.

“Okay so...thanks for bringing me along. I’m going to leave,” Lanore said as Quinn walked out.

She stuffed a plastic bag full of dirty clothes into her satchel and then paused. “I’m not with MeShack anymore. We just live together.”

I retracted my claws. “Okay.”

She went back to packing her bag. “I mean, not that you would care or anything.”

“I do,” I muttered.

“Well, I just wanted to clear that up.” She pulled off the towel. Her dreadlocks fell down past her shoulders. “It’s weird but it works for us. We’ve been living together most of our lives.”

I stood up and came around to her. “Is he the reason why I can’t date you? Are you still in love with him?”

“He’s not the problem.” She faced me. “You’re exactly my type, but I have a lot of issues that I have to take care of right now before I start dating anybody.”

“Lanore, you know I like you a lot. I get excited any time I know I’m going to see you.”

She sighed and glided by me, folding my towel and placing it on my desk. Her arms brushed by my cords. Tiny sparks burst around our arms then disappeared.

“You’re the only woman that makes my cords react that way.” I sat on the edge of my desk so I was at face level to her.

“I bet you tell all the girls that.” She smirked and rolled her eyes.

I reached for her soft hands and pulled her to me. “You may not know this, but I’m difficult and tend to not listen to others.”

“Nope. I definitely know you are hardheaded and closed-minded.” She flashed me a smile.

I brought her to me until her soft breasts pressed into my chest, surprised that she hadn’t stopped me. The earthy scent of marijuana mixed in with her creamy lavender surrounded me.

“I listen to you when you tell me things. Right?” I said, wanting to nip at her chin or feel that smooth skin under my tongue.

“You do,” she whispered and placed her arms on my shoulders.

So far, so good.

“I want to be the type of man you could fall in love with.”

She sighed and looked into my eyes. “Trust me. You are my type. Like I said, I have some personal issues I need to work on.”

“I don’t want to wait,” I said in a low voice.

She touched my forehead brand with her fingertips and moved my dreadlocks to the side. “Zulu, I’m not going to rush into a relationship right now.”

“Then give me a few dates.” I kissed her.

She parted her lips to take my tongue and suck on it.

A deep rumble came from the center of my chest.

I picked her up and flipped her over onto the desk, devouring her neck. “You know how hard it is for me not to touch you?”

“We should stop,” she groaned as I tore the MFE shirt off her, pulled the top of her dress down, and exposed one taut chocolate nipple.

I licked its peak.

She moaned. Her body trembled in my arms.

“It’s hard to resist you,” I said.

“I feel the same way,” she said in a low voice. Her hands went to the back of my head pulling me closer to the nipple.

I used my right hand to slip her dress up those luscious thighs.

Without a knock, Ray burst in my office. “Zulu, the sewer is completely clean and—”

He stopped in the doorway.

“Oh, I’m sorry.” He turned, stepped out, and quickly closed the door.

Lanore began to sit up, gently moving my hand away.

My eyes shifted to black as I said, “We’re not stopping.”

“I’m sorry.” She pulled the top of the dress up and whispered, “But, yes, we are.”

“So, how long are we going to do this back-and-forth tease crap?” I jumped off the desk and took several steps back. I couldn’t trust my hands right now. They wanted to hold her down and tear that dress off.

“I’m sorry,” she mumbled, sliding off the desk. She grabbed her satchel and rushed out of my office. The door swung back and forth, never stopping.

“Fuck!” I kicked a hole in my desk. “Ray!”

He stepped around the corner. “Don’t be mad at me. I haven’t seen you with a woman in six months.”

“Because I met her.” I pointed to the empty doorway.

Ray shrugged. “I never thought I would walk in on you with a woman on your desk. You’re pretty restrained and—”

I glared at him.

“Just give her a day, and then try again,” Ray said.

“No. She’s constantly doing a cat-and-mouse chase with me.” I unbuckled my belt and hit the button under my desk to open up my ceiling. Only Ray and I knew about the secret opening.

“Now, wait a minute.” Ray marched over to me. “Zulu, what are you doing?”

A hole appeared in the middle of the ceiling and expanded.

I pulled off my jeans and began to shift.

“Zulu, seriously. Do not go after her.” Ray stepped forward, holding his hands out.

My body finished forming. “I’m done chasing her. I’m going to claim her now.”

I leaped up into the air.

Ray caught my foot and pulled me down.

Strong bastard.

“Boy, I helped raise you. I’ve seen you mess up a lot in your life with your drug addiction, burglaries, and underground fighting.” He brought me back down into my office. “I am proud of you for changing your life these past three years. Even though you have some darkness within you, but I like your organization—”

“Get on with it, Ray.” I stared at the midnight sky.

She’s probably already on the tram now.

“You can’t force her to do whatever you want. She’s not some Shifter you can magically control. She’s a woman, and believe me, women are difficult.” Ray rubbed his bald head. “Be patient.”

I closed my eyes. Rage burned within me.

“You’ll push her away,” Ray insisted.

I swallowed down some of the anger and opened my eyes. “You’re right.”

I leaped back into the air.

“Now where are you going?” Ray tried to grab my foot but missed.

“I’m not going to do anything crazy.” I hovered in the air above him. “I’m just going to follow her home. Keep to the sky so she won’t see me.”

Ray covered his face and cursed in Fey.

“What?” I asked as I rose toward the sky.

“Nothing.” He shook his head and walked off. “I give up with you. I’m going to get a drink.”

* * *

I soared high near the habitat ceiling's bars, blending into the darkness and trailing Lanore as she stomped home, cursing to herself every minute or so.

I frowned.

She regrets kissing me.

She entered Caged View Apartments—one of the crappiest buildings in the habitat and located in the most crime-ridden area of Shango District. Hookers in burnt orange lingerie strolled around the entrance, waving at cars that rolled by. A hot drug spot was located several blocks down.

I exhaled noisily.

Be patient.

I wanted to take her out of here, put her somewhere better, maybe near her university and closer to me.

The warm wind glided against my skin as I flew up to her fire escape. I'd done this many nights, making sure she got home safely. The fire escape creaked as I perched on the edge of the railing, tucking in my wings behind me.

Her roommate, the Were-cheetah, sat on the russet brown couch in their living room, kissing a blonde. I'd seen him in her apartment before, but never knew he was her ex-boyfriend. He always had a woman in there, and the few times I'd seen him in the apartment with her, she had barely spoken to him.

There must have been at least twenty teeny Pixies flying around the Were-cheetah as he made out with the blonde. A turquoise and silver one landed on top of his head and peered over to get a closer look. The Were-cheetah wagged his hands, and they all scattered away to the black dining table on the other side of the apartment.

I moved my attention away from him and checked out Lanore's bedroom for the hundredth time, smiling.

Fifty candles in different shades of purple were spread around the room. Some were placed on her fuchsia bookshelf. Others floated over her bed by suspension spells. She had a huge poster of Captain Habitat taped on her ceiling as if she liked to ogle him while she lay in bed. Hundreds of books were stacked and scattered everywhere. Some were thick and leather bound. Others were small paperbacks with various muscular men ravaging women's breasts.

A solid white Pixie chased a lemon-colored one into a pile of clothes slung in the corner of Lanore's room. The lemon Pixie dove out from the other side and flew away with a lilac sock sticking to one of its wings.

I chuckled.

The apartment's front door opened, getting my attention.

The Were-cheetah immediately separated from the blonde and was on the other side of the couch by the time Lanore stepped into the apartment.

So the cheetah still wants her?

She walked through, spotted him and then the blonde, and released an annoyed breath before speeding off to her bedroom.

The blonde moved her lips, saying something that I couldn't hear. The Were-cheetah ignored her. Instead, he leaned back until the tip of his nose pointed up to the ceiling. His nostrils flared as he sniffed the air.

I grinned.

You smell me on her. Don't you?

He shot up, knocking over their orange coffee table, and dashed into her bedroom before she could close the door.

Be careful, cat.

I got off the railing and stepped onto the fire escape, lifting her window up a tiny bit and peering through her sheer lilac curtains.

If he touches her, I will kill him.

“How was your night?” he asked, edging to her and sniffing her hair.

“Fine.” She waved him away, slung off her sneakers, and threw her bag in the corner.

Without even looking up at him, she said, “Stop smelling me!”

“I wasn’t. You’re being paranoid.” He leaned back on her dresser. “You weren’t wearing that when you left the house this morning. I definitely would have remembered you wearing a tight black dress like that.”

As the cheetah continued to yap, I shifted my eyes to black so I could get a look at his beast.

Where are you, kitty?

The beast appeared in the middle of the Were-cheetah’s chest, watching Lanore’s every movement. It didn’t matter what she did or what part of the room she went to, those feline eyes followed.

My stomach twisted into a tight, stressful knot. I’d never seen a beast act like this unless he was gazing at his mate.

I shook my worry away.

This Shifter is too young to mate.

I studied the cheetah’s body, noting the tiny paws and tail that signaled a Seasoned beast, not yet mature.

He’s still in his Season. There’s nothing to worry about.

“Did you go on a date?” the Were-cheetah asked.

“Would you leave me alone and take care of your guest?” Lanore seized a lilac bathrobe off her desk. “I’m taking a shower.”

“I can ask her to leave,” he said to her back as she went into the bathroom.

The bathroom door locked. The shower turned on.

The Were-cheetah leaped to her satchel and went through it, inhaling every item. His eyes shifted when he got to the bloody clothes. Claws appeared from his fingertips, ripping the bag open. Deep growls erupted from his chest.

The shower turned off.

He raced out of the bedroom.

This cat may be a problem.

* * *

Thirty minutes later, I still sat there, watching her.

The Were-cheetah had left with the blonde.

Lanore finished spreading vanilla oil onto her skin and put on a lilac gown. I’d actually closed my eyes most of the time, already feeling like a pervert for watching her through the window and invading her privacy. The least I could do was not ogle her while she walked around naked.

I pulled out my phone and dialed her phone number.

She raced out of the bedroom to a phone that was on the wall. Her eyes scanned the screen as she sighed and picked up the phone. “I’m sorry for running out like that, Zulu.”

“I want to talk about you and me later.”

She paused for a minute, and I could see her biting the nail on her index finger. “Okay, but no more kissing.”

I growled over the phone.

“You keep growling like that, and I’ll hang up,” she said.

“I’ll give you some time to yourself, a few weeks, and then I’m coming for you,” I said in a deep voice.

“Coming for me?” She covered her face and giggled. “You know you’re absolutely insane.”

“You have no idea,” I muttered as I gazed at her through the window.

“I’m not promising you that we’ll start dating,” she said. “But I will explain why I’m hesitant.”

“That’s fair.”

“Good night,” she said in a sweet voice that made me want to climb into her apartment and taste her tongue.

“Good night,” I reluctantly said as she hung up.

She strolled away from the kitchen, entered her room, and turned off the light. The fifty candles all over the room lit together in one instant.

How is she doing that?

She got under her fuzzy purple blanket, blew a kiss to the Captain Habitat poster on the ceiling, and lay in her bed.

Minutes passed. I waited to hear the soft sound of her slumber.

But instead, she sat up. Her hand went to her nightstand’s top drawer, pulled something out, and took it under the blanket.

A humming sound filled the room.

It has to be a vibrator.

I bit my lip, wanting to come through the window and please her myself.

“Zulu,” she moaned.

I froze, standing there for a few seconds more, watching her pleasure herself with my name on her tongue.

“Zulu.”

You’ll say more than that when I claim you.

I had to go now, or I’d do something that we would both regret. I flashed a grin and back-flipped off of her fire escape, falling into the air.

A cool wind rushed up my body.

My wings expanded with a snap, and then I rose high into the sky, above Lanore’s building, singing York’s song in my mind.

In this cage, behind these bars, I think of you and me.

THE VICIOUS CIRCLE

Lanore



“Although our vaginas are in different places and respond in different ways,” the Fire Witch professor said as she magically lit all of the yellow candles in the room, “we all have them, and that is what binds us together in a sisterhood.”

I raised my eyebrows and smirked.

The Mixbreed, Demon, and Troll students had been asked to sit on their rugs on the right side of the room. The rest of the Purebloods sat on the far left.

So much for a sisterhood.

Professor Frei sat down on the gold rug in front and crossed her legs until they were under her thighs. Usually her carrot-orange hair spread out in a wild, curly heap on top of her head. Today, she’d slicked it all back into a tight bun. Her eyes had a bronze hue in the candlelit room as she gazed at the rest of the students and me, giving us each a nod and smile.

“Remember, this is not a competition.” She sliced the air in front of her with her tattoo-covered hands. “We all must take our own journey using Dr. Xandon’s principals of vaginal meditation. Let’s begin a warm-up meditative silence.”

Everyone, except me, closed their eyes.

I scanned the classroom.

Gold bowls full of silver water circled Professor Frei. A pink lotus flower floated in each. Four-foot statues of Dr. Xandon meditating were carved in gold and placed in every corner of the candlelit room. The candles must have been a citrus blend because the room had the scent one would get when peeling a ripe orange.

Just thinking of chomping down on a sweet orange made my stomach grumble.

Professor Frei snapped her eyes open and sighed as she looked at me.

This was our third course together. The first one, Navigating Fire for Transcendence, she’d kicked me out for constantly sneaking Pixies into her class. They’d devoured most of her lotus flowers and had crapped glittery multi-colored poop on two statues.

During the second course, Blood Peace Potions, she’d caught me taking a purple candle from her goddess’s altar. I’d really felt bad about that later. Granted, there wasn’t a sign that said you couldn’t take it.

She’d barely permitted me to register for this course. I’d begged and given her a huge box of new candles. She’d taken the box and admitted that I would have to go through a probationary period.

My stomach rumbled again. I sucked my gut in and whispered, “Sorry.”

Professor Frei shut her eyes and hummed.

I closed my own, twirling my fuzzy yarn rug with my hands and sliding my fingertips across its rugged surface.

“Okay. Let us begin with Dr. Xandon’s first principle.” She closed her eyes and held her hands out. “You must first align your mind with your vagina.”

I loudly snorted.

Shuffling ensued. I opened my eyes to see that everyone was glancing at me. Some scowled. Others glared. Apparently, snorting was not proper behavior in this class.

Calm down, people. I didn’t do it intentionally.

“Lanore Vesta,” Professor Frei said. “Surely this seems funny at first, but trust me. If you learn the Alignment Rituals, you will experience a peace within your life like no other.”

“Yes ma’am.” I nodded and closed my eyes again.

That was the reason I’d enrolled in the course, to gain some sort of harmony within my life. Maybe I did need to align my vagina with my brain. They definitely didn’t work together. My brain found sensible men that were nice and quiet—like Wallace. He’d been awesome to hang out with. We both liked Captain Habitat, lounging in the library, and abhorred all of the famous Vampire philosophers.

But my vagina didn’t want him.

She wanted men that stomped around, beating their chests and injuring people who got in their way.

I exhaled.

“Focus on your vagina,” Professor Frei whispered.

How do I do that? Picture it? Think about it? Do I really know what it completely looks like? Do I want to? Wait. Maybe that’s the problem; maybe I should take a picture and—

“Miss Vesta!” the professor yelled.

The Troll on my right giggled into her hairy hand.

“Yes?” I asked, raising my eyebrows.

Professor Frei halted a minute, inhaled and exhaled a few times, and then said, “You’re grinding your teeth and tapping your knees to the point that it is distracting everyone.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I just don’t understand how to align everything together.”

“Close your eyes and think of what would make your vagina happy,” she ordered with an edge of aggravation. “You are making this harder than it needs to be.”

“Alrighty.” I closed my eyes. MeShack’s fingers immediately came to my mind and then Zulu’s lips.

“Just think of a warm bath or comfortable underwear,” she suggested.

Oh.

“Not a past or future lover?” I interrupted.

The entire class broke out into laughter.

I bit my lip and opened my eyes to see the professor glaring at me. The candles’ flames shot four feet in the air. She pointed to the door.

I quietly got up, rolled my violet yarn rug, and left the class.

“Combo Trash,” an Earth Witch near the door rudely whispered.

I leaned down her way. “Say that outside so I can set your vagina on—”

The professor cleared her throat. “Miss Vesta, please leave my class in a peaceful manner.”

* * *

“How was the coochie class?” MeShack asked over the phone.

“Vaginal Meditation,” I corrected, leaning against the red wall of the hospital’s phone booth. “I got kicked out.”

He laughed. "What time are you coming home? I wanted to celebrate your last day of Anger Management."

I could hear dishes clanking together over the phone. "I'm not coming home. Wallace bought tickets for *Meridian: The Super Force Unites*."

Dishes crashed into something, and MeShack growled.

I waited for a few seconds, shifting my weight to the other foot while three doctors wearing crimson red jackets and silver scrubs ambled by. "Is everything okay over there?"

MeShack cleared his throat. "What time is the movie over, and will you both be partying hard at the library tonight with your blueberry smoothies?"

"No." I shook my head. "Wallace has to work the Vamp-shift at Witch Mart. I'll be home by nine."

"You know most of the people in the audience will be under twelve years old?"

"And your point? It's a re-make of Captain Habitat's best movie."

Silence hung on the line, and then MeShack said, "I wanted to do something special for you tonight."

"We're not together, so that's not necessary."

He blew air through the phone. "It doesn't mean we can't spend time together. Can you call me when you are on your way?"

"Yes, I will." I hung up as Dr. Patterson opened the door to her office.

I walked down the hallway to greet her.

"Come on in, Lanore," she said.

I took my shoes off and stepped onto the coarse twig carpet, knowing I'd get splinters by the time I left. I carefully tiptoed to the tan couch and waved to her assistant Nick as he pulled out his huge wooden drum shaped like an hourglass.

Rose-colored incense was spread all over the room, pushing out a floral fragrance.

Nick put on his mask. It was carved in the image of some Santeria god or goddess. If MeShack was here, he'd know the god and why Nick wore it. Regardless, black paint covered the right side of the mask. The left was red.

Dr. Patterson closed the door behind her and strolled in. Her crushed velvet robe colored in tangerine and ivory twirled around her bare feet.

"Tonight is bittersweet." She sat down in a chair made of straw, filling the air with a creaking noise.

Every session, I always worried that the chair would break or tear apart under her, but it never happened.

Dr. Patterson grabbed a pair of tangerine-colored eyeglasses and put them on. She yanked out a notebook and said, "I'm happy to announce that you'll finally be ending your anger management sessions with me. Of course, on the other hand, I truly enjoyed our time together."

"Thanks." I closed my eyes as my head sank into the tan pillows.

Nick drummed a slow rhythm that was supposed to be a soothing sound to call the gods of whatever, but I just found that damn thing annoying.

I shifted in my seat, thinking about how good the movie would be.

"So let's begin," she said.

I cleared my throat. "I have an anger management problem and an addiction to self-destructive behavior."

"And when did you realize that?"

Every damn Wednesday night for the past year, I say the same freaking thing and—

“Lanore? When did you realize this?” Dr. Patterson repeated, patiently waiting.

“The night I walked in on my boyfriend.” I cleared my throat. “I mean my ex-boyfriend having sex with two women in a nightclub bathroom.”

Rage rose as the images flashed in my mind; MeShack’s face buried in a blonde’s cleavage, his hands groping the other woman’s behind.

We’d gone to Liquid nightclub together to check out the venue before he performed the next week. He’d excused himself to go to the bathroom. Groupies trailed behind him, all wearing his band’s shirt and screaming his name.

Initially, I thought nothing of it. He’d been in the band since the beginning of college. They had a mild success in Shango District, but the groupies had just begun pouring in that month. I figured he’d sign an autograph, go to the bathroom, and come back to me.

Thirty minutes later, I went looking for him. I recognized his moans before I opened the Pureblood female bathroom.

“Lanore?” Dr. Patterson said, getting my attention. “What did you do that night?”

I gripped the couch cushions. “I set him and the women on fire.”

That night, I’d raised my hands in the air and pushed flames out of my hands, directing them to the walls to form a circle around the gyrating threesome. MeShack hadn’t even realized what was happening until flames licked up his legs.

I’d screamed curse words until I was hoarse as fireballs flung out of my hands, greeting the women’s skin. Their flesh bubbled into black, bulging distortions, and I laughed or maybe cackled. Either way, I scared the shit out of the club manager when he raced into the hallway to discover the source of the smoke and smell of burning hair.

“And do you have any regrets?” Dr. Patterson asked for the three hundredth time.

Those guilt-ridden knots formed in my stomach.

One of the women was a Shifter. It took her and MeShack a month to heal.

The other woman was a Mixbreed. Unfortunately, she had sat in the burn unit for six months, using a machine and several complicated spells to breathe. I’d volunteered at the hospital under another name and read to her every night, but it didn’t make up for the suffering I’d caused her.

When she was released, her parents had wheeled her out. Permanent scars covered the right side of her face. She wasn’t able to walk until a month later.

“Lanore?” Dr. Patterson tapped her pen against her tablet. “Do you regret your actions?”

“Yes. I regret it all. No man is worth causing so much pain to others.”

Nick sped up the drumming.

“Have you burned anyone recently?” the doctor asked.

“No,” I said too quickly.

If you don’t include the Mixbreed in the sewer last week that tried to kill me when I was with Zulu.

“And are you staying away from men that may promote self-destructive behavior?” Dr. Patterson asked.

“Yes.”

If you don’t include a few things.

I’d made out with Zulu on his desk. The next week, I made out with MeShack after he’d seduced me with wine, lobster, and chocolate. With both men, I’d raced away like a hysterical woman and had been avoiding them like the plague.

I groaned.

There’s no hope for me.

Nick beat out a smoother pattern.

“And do you forgive your ex-boyfriend?” Dr. Patterson asked.

Absolutely not.

The temperature rose to sweltering.

The doctor cleared her throat.

Nick stopped drumming.

Damn it.

I couldn't get my certificate of completion without full rehabilitation.

“Yes. I forgive him,” I muttered.

“Lanore, please look at me,” the doctor commanded.

I opened my eyes and sat up.

“Nick, you're excused,” she said.

It took him barely five seconds to speed out of there.

“I like you Lanore, but I'm tired of seeing you every Wednesday. You have to forgive him and yourself.” She lit another incense stick on her right. “Release the anger. It's been a year. He's a Shifter. It's time to let go.”

I rolled my eyes.

That's what everybody says.

A Mixbreed cheats, it's horrific. A Shifter cheats, oh that's because they're in their Season.

Fuck their Season.

The drapes erupted into flames.

Dr. Patterson waved the fire away. The flames disappeared.

“I'll get you some more curtains,” I mumbled.

“That is okay.”

Although I tried to keep my power secret, Dr. Patterson knew the first time I walked in her office that I could create fire. She said she'd sensed the heated blood running through my veins. Additionally, I set a lot of stuff in her office on fire during my rants.

“Repeat after me,” she commanded. “I forgive MeShack and I forgive myself.”

“I forgive MeShack and I forgive myself.” I forced myself not to roll my eyes.

“We're ending early. Go ahead and enjoy your life.” She stood up. “I don't want to see you back in here or find out from a newspaper article that you set someone on fire. Don't be impulsive. Think through the situation. Try a peaceful alternative first.”

“Okay.”

“And rule number one. Don't date any Shifter until he's matured out of his Season. Monogamy just isn't going to happen until then.”

I nodded, grabbed my stuff, and said, “Well, I think I have a great plan. I'm attempting to date a different type of guy.”

“Well that's definitely a start.”

“It's foolproof.” I flashed a wide smile.

* * *

New beginnings.

The moon glowed through the habitat's barred ceiling as I stepped off the tram. I breathed in the cool, fresh air, ready to see the movie.

I'm going to really try some sort of romantic relationship with Wallace. Eventually.

There were things that I had to get used to with him.

He scratched his arms and chest a lot due to some sort of skin disease he had. It was why his skin appeared really splotchy. At times, he smelled like rotten cheese, but hey, I didn't walk around smelling like flowers all the time, either. And then there were those awkward moments where I tried to hold his sweaty hand, and he would move it out of my reach.

He probably needs more time to get to know me.

I chewed the inside of my cheek.

Not all men are sexual deviants that constantly need to touch the women around them.

I inhaled and turned the corner, ready to greet my future.

New beginnings.

I spotted Zulu immediately among the crowd of Captain Habitat fans. He stood right next to Wallace, conversing with him as if they'd been childhood friends. His massive biceps and pectoral muscles stretched the black Captain Habitat shirt he wore.

I almost laughed at the absurdity of him wearing my hero's shirt. If only the need to tear that shirt away and savor each muscle's curve hadn't overflowed in me.

"Lanore, over here," Wallace shouted over the loud, chattering group of movie-goers. He waved his hand from side to side.

Forcing a smile, I slowly maneuvered through the massive crowd. My nerves flared on edge as I swallowed.

Now what am I going to do with Zulu here?

I scanned the area outside the movie theater. I could probably slip behind a tall group and then crawl out of there, but of course MeShack had been right about the type of people that would come to this movie.

Most of the mob standing outside were young kids with their parents. They all wore different types of Captain Habitat shirts, from purple to black. Some even had the cool retro shirts where my favorite superhero wore brown cowboy boots and had a violet lasso instead of his transparent Hexagon laser gun.

Regardless, there were too many short kids and nowhere to escape.

"Excuse me," I muttered, passing four boys who were acting out some fight scene and bumping into everybody.

Now only a few feet away from Wallace, I glanced their way—only to notice Zulu focused on me. The dark blue and gold in his eyes gleamed. The portion of the cords that I could see on his arm brightened into different colors and looked like rainbow veins on his skin.

I approached them.

Wallace hugged me and said, "I was at the Inked Guerilla telling Zulu about our plans, and he wanted to come along. He's a huge Captain Habitat fan too."

I opened my eyes wide. "Really? Because I remember you commenting on how his purple tights must have constricted his balls."

"No. You have me confused with someone else." His voice came out deep with a smooth tone. His eyes journeyed from my mouth all the way down to my toes. "You look lovely tonight."

"Thanks." I ruffled my locks to let them fall around my face and hide me from his view. "We should probably head in."

Zulu appeared on my side, guiding me to the door with his hand snugly placed at the center of my back.

I glanced up at Zulu and bumped into Wallace, head first.

"Are you okay?" Zulu leaned down and asked, seizing my senses with his sandalwood cologne.

“Yes.” I moved away from his hand and got on Wallace’s right, putting distance between Zulu and me.

“So I’ve been catching Zulu up,” Wallace said, getting behind me. “He didn’t get a chance to see Super Force II.”

“Okay.” I could feel Zulu’s eyes on me, or maybe it was just my own imagination. “And what do you think, Zulu?”

“Well, I like that midget guy’s powers.” Zulu rushed up to the door and opened it for me.

The aroma of freshly popped popcorn hit my nose.

“Midget is offensive you should say little person,” I insisted.

“Really?” Zulu raised his eyebrows. “I would assume calling him a little guy would be more offensive. It would make me mad.”

“Well regardless G-5 is small but really cool. He can see through walls and buildings.” Wallace moved his hands around like a wild man.

I blocked the conversation out as Wallace began describing some scene from the latest graphic novel he’d read that reminded him of Zulu.

Why don’t you just give him a freaking blow job, Wallace.

In his bedroom, Wallace had a picture of Zulu in between Trojatom the Mighty Robot and Captain Habitat. He’d confessed this to me one time in the library and then discussed Zulu the rest of the night. The conversation had been unbearable because all I wanted to do was stop thinking about Zulu.

I trailed behind both men. It made it harder for Zulu to gaze at me, and yet I got a great view of his muscular behind.

Stop it, Lanore.

“Is that him?” A Mixie woman with short red dreadlocks said near several Coming Soon movie posters.

“It has to be,” her short pudgy friend said. “Look at the arm cords sticking out of his shirt.”

This is exactly why I would never date him. Too many groupies.

“Oh, girl, a bunch of Supes are getting that now.” She bumped into me, didn’t say excuse me, and then glided toward Zulu. “I’m sorry to interrupt, but are you—”

“No.” Zulu shook his head, blurred to my side, and grabbed my hand.

My breath caught in my throat at his quick speed.

“What are you doing?” I gently pulled my hand away.

“They think I’m available.” He grinned.

“You are,” I muttered.

With clear persistence, the two women strolled around Wallace and marched Zulu’s way.

“Are you sure? Because you look just like him,” she said as Zulu’s hand went back to the center of my back. “Can we have your autograph? What you do for Mixbreeds is awesome!”

He leaned back on the wall as they remained planted in front of me.

“You should give them an autograph,” I offered, pulling out a pen and an old receipt.

He sighed, took the pen, and signed his name on the receipt and their Captain Habitat shirts.

We stood there for several more minutes as they asked him questions from what his favorite color was to how many pounds he could lift when he worked out.

Once they left, he glared at me. Aggravation creased on his face.

I shrugged. “This is the life of a hero.”

“So cool.” Wallace grinned, scratching his arm. “Do hot women always come up to you like that?”

I smirked. "Yeah, does that happen a lot?"

"No." Zulu avoided my eyes.

"I wish I could have hot girls come up to me," Wallace whined. "No one hot ever comes around me."

"Thanks a lot, Wallace," I mumbled.

Zulu smirked at me and got off the wall. "Do you both want popcorn and drinks? I'm paying."

I shook my head and pointed to my satchel. "No. I brought sandwiches from Cinnamon's Meat Shack."

"And it's probably enough for all of us." Wallace peeked in my satchel as I opened it. "You pack food like you're feeding a big Shifter."

My mouth dropped open as I counted the sandwiches. There must have been six in there. The perfect amount for MeShack and I to sneak into the movie theater. I guess old habits are hard to change.

"They smell good. I can't wait to eat one." Zulu pulled out a stack of bills. "Wallace, why don't you grab us some sodas and anything else you want? Those Captain Habitat cups look cool."

"Sure. You're the greatest." Wallace attempted to high-five Zulu, missed, and laughed as he left.

Once Wallace was five feet away, Zulu's lips brushed my ear. "I meant what I said. You do look lovely tonight."

"What happened to giving me time to myself?" I edged away from him.

"I wanted to see you." He tucked some of my dreadlocks behind my ear and let his finger linger a few seconds on my skin.

I shivered and shifted to the other side.

A mom walked by, pushing a stroller with twins and holding a toddler. She glanced at Zulu and blushed.

"Another fan," I announced.

He edged closer to me. "Why are you spending so much time with Wallace lately? He told me you both hang out every night now."

"I'm opening my mind, starting new beginnings." I shrugged my shoulders.

He nodded and focused on two guys Teacuping near the theater's arcade. It was a new dance that used spells to keep the body elevated several inches above the ground while the dancer spun around. Currently, the pimple-faced kid was upside down and spinning. His green sneakers blurred together.

"Well." Zulu clapped along with everyone else in the theater lobby as the dancing kid finished spinning. "I would just hate for something to happen to Wallace during your pursuit of new beginnings."

"Is that some sort of threat?" I snapped my head to his.

He centered his attention to me. "I wanted to maim Wallace when he told me he spent time with you, but I doubt that'll get me any points."

"It won't."

"You see how good I'm being for you? I haven't ripped out any hearts or anything." He got in front of me and put his hands on the wall above my head.

"That's good." I ducked under him, noticing a lot of people looking our way. Zulu got right back in front of me. This time, he blocked me with both arms so that if I wanted to escape, I would have to do a duck walk.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“I’m spending time with my lady.” He nipped at my chin.

Heat swirled inside of me.

Fuck me.

I sighed. “Zulu, absolutely nothing is going to happen between us.”

I would have loved it to, but Zulu is too much like MeShack.

“Lanore, what color cup you want?” Wallace asked, interrupting Zulu and my exchange and holding up one purple and one white cup. Wallace didn’t even appear uncomfortable about Zulu’s and my position.

Wallace is definitely not interested in me.

“I didn’t know what you would like, Lanore,” Wallace admitted.

“She wants the purple cup,” Zulu said without looking that way. “Get the purple one with him wearing those stupid cowboy boots, and then get her a large popcorn with the hot pepper butter sauce.”

How does he know that?

My mouth dropped open. I almost beamed at Zulu, ready to ask for his autograph myself.

“So, purple with boots and hot popcorn?” Wallace asked.

“Yes.” I nodded. “But…”

I gazed at Zulu’s huge arms and inhaled his sandalwood scent.

If I don’t get out of here now, I’ll end up making out with Zulu before the movie’s opening credits begin.

Wallace stood there staring at me.

“I’m actually feeling really sick.” I held my stomach with my hand and moved Zulu’s arm out of the way. “I’m going to go home. You both have fun though.”

I rushed away before Wallace could say anything else. Not that it mattered; he’d been drooling over Zulu anyway.

Cool air hit me as I got to the door and quickly walked out, hoping the next tram would be here shortly.

A hand grabbed my waist. I halted and turned to see Zulu in front of me.

“No. I’ll leave. You really want to see this movie.” He dragged his hand away from my waist. “Don’t go. Like I said, I just wanted to see you. I’m satisfied for now.”

I bit my lip as the wind blew through my locks. “But Zulu, do you understand that I don’t want to date you?”

“We’ll talk about it later.” His eyes shifted dark blue and gold to black, and he put his hands in his jeans pockets. “Go back and enjoy the movie. Quinn and Wallace both told me that you’d been talking about the damn movie all month.”

I sighed.

“I’ll see you later.” He leaned down and pressed those full lips against mine and took them away after several delicious seconds. “I may have gone overboard tonight, showing up here like I did.”

He stepped around me and maneuvered through the crowd still lingering outside.

I can’t let him leave like that.

“Zulu!” I raced up to his side and stopped him. “I can explain my weird behavior.”

“So you’re not just crazy?” His blond eyebrows rose as he grinned.

“Well, that’s the point. I am crazy.” I raked my fingers through my hair and blew out a long breath. “I set my ex-boyfriend and the two women he was cheating with on fire. They were all in the hospital for several months.”

He didn’t say anything and just continued to stare.

Feel like running away yet?

“So,” I said. “I’m not the sanest person you could spend your time trying to be with.”

He flashed me a huge smile. “If someone touched you now, they would be lucky to have only one month in the hospital.”

Oh, my goodness.

“Okay. I don’t think you understand me.” I held my hands out to my sides. “What I am trying to say is I’m insanely jealous and act on it in violent ways that are frankly detrimental—”

“You have a few more weeks.” He tapped his watch. “And then I’m coming for you.”

Coming for me?

I shook my head. “Clearly you’re not getting what I’m trying to say. I need to get my personal issues together before I date anyone.”

“Isn’t that the point of two people uniting, to lift each other up?” He leaned his head to the side. “I’m already a better person around you.”

My mouth dropped open. I searched for something to say.

He kissed me again, and this time I didn’t want him to stop, but he did and then nipped at my chin. “I’m really going to enjoy tasting you when you’re mine.”

My skin heated as if I’d been set on fire.

“The clock is ticking.” He gave me a wicked smile and left.

EXCERPT FROM *CHAMELEON*,

(A young adult paranormal romance novel set in the Santeria habitat.)



Police tape surrounded my mom's studio apartment.

I stared at my mom's feet as she hung, lifeless, from the mango tree. She'd painted her toenails teal and used a marker to draw smiley faces on each one.

It's funny how people tend to notice the craziest things in time of shock.

Each time the treacherous wind blew, the mango tree's branches swayed, and her dangling body twisted and turned.

I stood among the crowd in disguise. Today, I was an Earth Witch, with almond skin instead of my regular pale complexion, thick, curly black hair in place of my white bushy strands, and fuller breasts versus my nonexistent ones.

Normally, I had an X brand embedded in my forehead that identified me as a Mixbreed. It was the forehead brand I'd been born with, the one Human doctors tagged me with, like they did all Supernaturals.

However, to fit my current Earth Witch disguise, I'd covered the X brand with an illegal brand cap that had an illusionary spell. When people now saw my forehead, they saw an upright triangle with a line going through it.

"That's the crazy lady who talked to ghosts," an Air Witch whispered to a tall man as she tucked her red hair behind her ear.

"Too bad the ghosts never talked back." The man covered his mouth to quiet a chuckle. "They would have told her to wash."

Even in your death, they make fun of you.

I forced myself to walk away from them without yelling. My hands balled into tight little fists. My nails dug in my skin.

"How long has she been up there?" a Shapeshifter asked another.

I paused to hear the reply.

"Don't know. They found her there this morning."

"Where's her family?"

"Don't know," the guy replied. "I think someone said she had a daughter or maybe a niece."

I checked the guys out from my peripheral view. Neither one looked familiar, but then, I'd run away from home two years ago, when I was thirteen. They could have recently moved in.

I edged away and bumped into the one person that I didn't think I would meet on this end of Oya District.

Wiz.

I'd kept my regular height for my disguise, so he towered over me. His short, sandy-blond hair brushed against the middle of his ears and blew in the wind, getting in the way of his unique eyes. The left one was emerald green, the right one sapphire blue. His eyes never truly focused on one thing. They always gazed off into the distance.

Although he was only two years older, he resembled more of a man than a teenager. His arms possessed the sort of muscle that a lightweight boxer would have, taut and curved but without all of the bulk. Jagged scars covered every knuckle on his hands. Ancient runes were carved in his light brown skin above the scars.

He would have had thousands of girls screaming at his feet if it wasn't for that hooded trench coat he wore. It was formed from patches of Shapeshifter flesh. Every time he fought and won, he'd cut a square patch of the loser's skin and add it to his coat.

Currently, it hung beyond his knees, and Were-lion fur bordered the hood.

"Excuse me." I averted my eyes and stepped around him, wondering if I could trick him this time. For some reason, he always knew it was me, regardless of what image I'd formed into.

Wiz's hand went up to block my way.

"Cameo, I have a job," he said in a low voice. "Let's go to the playground over there to talk."

I snapped my face up and glared at him. "How did you know it was me?"

"Does it matter?" He flashed me a crooked grin, displaying silver fangs. "Are you going to start hiding from me?"

"Nope," I muttered. "Not even if I wanted to."

I'd met Wiz the first month I ran away. It was during one of Santeria's notorious tropical rainstorms. The downpour had beat down on me while I sat in a semi-flooded dumpster, shivering. That night, I wore the image of a Hispanic Shapeshifter boy.

Out of nowhere, Wiz had jumped into the dumpster, pulled me out, and taken me to one of the many small rooms he rented around Santeria. I was sure he was going to hurt me, but I was too weak and sick to put up a fight.

But he never hurt me.

He'd kept me covered in a pile of fluffy blankets the rest of the week and declared I had a fever.

And that was how he found out about my power.

When I'm sick, it's really hard to keep my body in any disguised form. I'd passed out in his arms, transforming from a little Hispanic boy to a pale teenage girl right before his two-colored eyes.

We'd been in business together ever since.

"Did you happen to be in this area, or were you looking for me?" I headed to the playground in the apartment complex and sat on a swing.

"A little bit of both." He stood in front of me. His lips formed into a straight line. Worry creased his face.

"What's wrong?" I asked as I slowly rocked back and forth in the swing.

"Did you know that woman?" Wiz gestured to my mom as the habbies cut the rope from her neck and pulled her down.

"No." I shook my head, lying.

He targeted me with his eyes and remained quiet for a few seconds.

I moved my attention to the Santeria habitat's ceiling that covered my caged city. Gray clouds traveled north beyond the bars, concealing the sun. Thunder boomed in the distance far outside the habitat to where the Humans lived.

When I'd run away from home, the weather had been exactly the same, chilly gray with a certainty of rain ahead.

Another habbie car arrived and parked in front of my mom's apartment.

I need to get out of here.

“So, what’s the job? Another jock wants me to take the Supernatural Scholastic Aptitude Test for them? I’ve been studying the Math section. I can probably get somebody a perfect score.”

Wiz leaned back on the swing set’s main foundation pole. “You don’t have to take this job.”

“Why wouldn’t I take it?” I rolled my eyes, laughing nervously. “Like I said, I don’t know that dead woman over there.”

“Whatever.” He got up and sat on the swing next to me. “This job isn’t a test. I need you to take the physical image of a chick that doesn’t want to go to her debutant ball.”

I groaned.

High society supernatural jobs sucked. I never knew how to properly act.

I glanced at him. “How much?”

“A thousand dollars.” He watched the emergency unit put my mom’s body onto a stretcher and cover her with a white sheet. “I’ll put ten percent away for your college fund, give you half now, and then the rest later.”

I nodded.

That money would keep me in the room I was renting for a month, get me some new sneakers, comics, and a couple bags of groceries.

I kind of wanted to ask him to just give me that ten percent this time and forget about the college fund.

Wiz had made me save money to go to college. He thought I was smart and had a future away from the streets. I let him keep the fund, humoring him.

You’re more than a Cage Punk, he would say. You have the type of brain that can take you off the streets.

“So,” I said as the habbies began bordering the tree my mom hung from with police tape. “That’s a pretty high amount just to avoid a debutant ball. Why doesn’t she want to go?”

“I don’t know. The girl you are supposed to be isn’t even the contact person. It’s her sister.” Wiz shook his head. His emerald eye glimmered to bright green. “I almost didn’t take the job, but we need the money.”

“True.”

“I made the sister agree to have me as your driver for the whole event, just in case. I feel uneasy about this job.” He glanced at an area behind me.

“The full moon is coming. That could be why you’re on edge,” I offered.

“Regardless, be careful and always stay where I can see you,” he ordered. “You’ll have a date the whole time, so don’t talk much. Just nod and look pretty.”

I blew out a long breath.

Anytime Wiz felt weird about a job, something crappy usually happened.

But a thousand dollars is worth the risk.

I stared in front of me.

The habbies had jumped back in their cars and sped off. They hadn’t even closed my mom’s front door. There would be looters and homeless Vampires in her apartment by tonight.

“You sure you’re down to do the job?” Wiz asked. “We can always cancel.”

“I’ll do it.”

He handed me the debutante’s photo, a flask of her blood, and a sheet with her body measurements. Blond curly hair fell down to her shoulders. I noted the shade, honey blond instead of a reddish hue. She had regular blue eyes, no special flecks of color, nothing too hard to copy; however, drinking her blood would guarantee that I was in her exact image, from every

scar to pimple. I also preferred doing a blood transformation because it always allowed my brain to store the DNA for later use.

“The dress and shoes are at my place,” Wiz said. “You’ll change there, and then I’ll take you to her house for the switch.”

I nodded as I watched the emergency unit drive away, and, just like that, my mom was gone.

I closed my eyes for a few minutes.

A chilly breeze rushed past me. The black curls of my current image brushed against my face.

“You’re an abomination!” My mom stumbled after me, holding the worn-out leather belt in her hand. “I should have killed you when you were in my womb.”

She seized my neck and slammed me into the wall, the chemical scent of vodka on her breath.

I concentrated on the eight-year-old kid I’d babysat earlier that night. Guilt had filled me when I’d taken some of the boy’s blood with a syringe while he was asleep. But now, I was glad I’d done it. I’d consumed the blood before coming back home, so my brain could study and file the DNA away for further use.

I needed that DNA now as I pictured the boy’s huge father standing before me, broad shoulders, long legs, and huge hands.

The right side of my brain throbbed.

My mom screamed something, and then slapped my face.

I didn’t drop my focus as a stinging pain spread across my skin.

I imagined myself transforming into the man.

My skin bubbled, but Mom was too drunk to notice as she screamed more insults at me.

A tightening sensation formed in my chest and sucked the rest of me in as if a vacuum was inside of me.

I transformed into the man’s image, my clothes tearing apart with the change.

She backed away in fear, as usual, covering her mouth. “You’re a curse sent down from the gods!”

I raced away before she could gain control of herself and hit me anymore.

Although I looked like the man, I didn’t have his strength, but Mom didn’t know that.

“You ate his soul, didn’t you?” she whispered, shaking and backing up into a corner.

I raced for the door, trying desperately to adjust to the new legs and large feet. I stumbled into the desk near the door, banging my knee.

The door was locked.

I scrambled to open it.

“Wait a minute! Get back here!” she yelled, but didn’t come out of the corner.

I slammed the door behind me, speeding off into the rain.

I heard the door open.

“Cameo! Don’t leave,” she shouted behind me. “I’m sorry. I won’t do it again.”

I didn’t glance back that time. It would make me turn around and go back to her, like all of the other times.

No.

That time, I kept looking forward as the sky darkened around me.

Tires screeched.

I opened my eyes, falling back into this new reality, Wiz in front of me and my mom gone.

The crowd in front of my mom’s apartment had dispersed.

She’s really dead now.

My fingers trembled against the swing's rusty chain. I shook away those memories and forced myself to focus on the present.

Why don't I feel relieved?

I looked at Wiz.

He'd been facing me the whole time. No expression was on his face. He held his usual neutral mask. He caught me staring at the runes on his hands and put them in his jeans pocket, making his chained belt clank against itself.

"So, what color is the debutante's dress?" I asked. "If it's pink, I want an extra hundred."

"I think it's green." He gazed down at my cleavage. "Did you have to make your image's breasts that big?"

"I like them." I stood up from the swing and headed off to Eleggua District, where his current room was located.

"Cameo," he whispered.

I twisted around to face him.

He still stood by the swing.

"Take my keys." He threw them at me.

I caught them, just barely. "You're not coming with me?"

"No. I'm going to grab the belongings out of this place over here." He gestured toward my mom's home. "Some people in the crowd said the dead woman had no last relatives. I figure there has to be something of value right?"

I gritted my teeth and gazed down at the ground, my feet kicking the dirt. "Yeah, probably."

Unease sat in the pit of my stomach.

"I'm going to box the stuff up and take it to my place later." He took a few steps my way. "I'm not good with knowing the value of things. You think you could take your time and go through the boxes for me?"

He knows it's my mom.

I remained focused on the grass as it leaned in the direction of the wind. "I could do that, but it may take a while."

"Then I'll drop the woman's stuff off at your room. Take as long as you need to go through it."

I held back the tears that formed in the corner of my eyes. "Okay."

"I'll meet you back at my place in two hours. Take your time walking back. The spoiled debutant can wait for a while."

"Thank you, Wiz." I sighed and glanced up, but he was gone.

FIRE BAPTIZED

First Three Chapters

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I raced past the university's gates, splashing water onto homeless Vampires. The campus security Trolls would've caught me if I were Human. Mixbreeds didn't have Pureblood speed, but we could outrun Trolls.

"Drop those books!" The Troll's voice sounded muffled against the books' alarm spell, which blared in a long staccato pattern.

"Where is she?" another Troll asked.

Heart pounding, I stayed close to the buildings, hoping my brown skin would blend with the night's shadows. Cold rain dripped into my eyes. My wet dreadlocks fell onto my face, sticking to my cheeks and blocking my view. I pushed the dreadlocks away. Some of them fell back in my face. Others flung over my shoulders and down my back.

Almost out of breath, I trudged through a flooded street. Water filled my sneakers, making my feet feel like they were enclosed in sponges. The blare of the books' alarm spell almost drowned out the Trolls' distant shouts.

"There she is! Over there!"

"She's going to Shango District!"

The Trolls headed my way. I sped up so fast, the streetlights above me blurred together in one long, illuminating line. My numb hands held the satchel of books closer to my body.

My Sociology of Shapeshifters course required the books. I'd been stealing from the campus bookstore for years. It was just my luck; the store's security had been improved during my senior year. When I stole the books, their attached alarm spells gave me away. I took them anyway. I knew an Air Witch in Drum Housing Projects who would remove the alarm spells for twenty bucks.

I passed a flooded playground and then glanced over my shoulder, only seeing obscure shapes through the rain. *Did I lose the Trolls? Maybe.* I crossed the street, barely looking both ways. A car horn blared. I jumped on the sidewalk, slipped, and cursed as my body crashed into the wet pavement. Sharp, raging pains shot through my arms and legs. It took me a few moments to stand up.

"What a great day." I'd ripped my MIXBREEDS FOR EQUALITY shirt, but there was no blood. I checked my satchel. The books were still there—loud, but secure. I looked behind me. Supernaturals with umbrellas ran for shelter as thunder roared, but there were no more Trolls

chasing after me. Perhaps the tropical storm drowned out their motivation. Relief poured over me, knowing I'd escaped campus security again. Letting out a long breath, I kept to the shadows and moved on. All I needed now was to get out of the rain.

August marked the peak of hurricane season in Miami, the home of the Santeria Supernatural Habitat. Tropical rainstorms occurred weekly. Our caged city needed an irrigation system, but no Human contractors would enter the habitat's walls and barred ceiling.

I speed-walked, my jeans sticking to my legs as the storm picked up. A furious wind blew through the palm trees and dragged debris through the habitat's ceiling. I brought my arm to my forehead, shielding my eyes as I searched for shelter. Lightning flashed near nightclub signs that said, "No Mixbreed Customers Allowed."

A stray crimson and gold Pixie scurried by my feet. His soaked gold wings dragged on the ground behind him. I considered catching and taking him home, but decided against it. MeShack would kill me if I brought another stray to our apartment.

Seeing the Black Closet Shop ahead, I crossed my fingers. Two figures lurked under the shop's awning as the red light glowed from inside. I sighed, hoping they still had cashew butter cookies on the counter. The owner always let me grab some since I helped her kid get an A in English.

"Is the shop open?" I asked as the shorter of the two guys walked to the edge. A silver crescent moon embedded in his forehead identified him as a Shapeshifter.

He waved me over. "It's open."

Walking toward him, I noticed the raindrops falling on his pale hand and images of dogs biting each other tattooed up his arm in liquid silver. Just when I was going to compliment him on the tattoo, he grabbed me, flinging me into the air. I screamed and crashed into the shop's door. The CLOSED sign fell to the ground. He grabbed me again before I could catch my breath and threw me against the door. Pain surged up my back. His hand clamped over my mouth.

"You got anything that'll make me happy?" he said with his lips next to my ear and his body pressed into mine. I shook my head from side to side. The slime of his hair dripped on my cheek. He moved his face in front of mine.

Our eyes met, putting him at my height of 5'2", but his short stature gave me no advantage. A Pureblooded Shifter's strength outranked mine. He snatched my satchel away from me. The smoky scent of the drug Hemo Drop filled my nose. Red tinted the whites of his eyes. He looked over his shoulder. "Check her bag, Tony."

Tony stepped out of the shadows. "You hear that alarm spell? She must've stolen something good." He dove into my satchel, grabbed each book, and then threw them across the street.

Realizing that my left arm remained free, I focused on creating fire. A tiny flame formed near my palm and then faded out. I tried releasing more heat. The flame faded again. *Fuck*. Fire is created when flammable liquid and oxygen are exposed to heat. My pores naturally released heat and flammable pyroben oil. Presently, water drenched my skin, depriving my fire of the oxygen and heat it needed for combustion. I rubbed my hand again.

"What's she got?" the Shifter asked, tightening his grip on me.

"She's just a university girl." Tony turned my satchel over, making everything fall out. "I don't see any wallet."

The streetlight reflected off Tony's forehead brand, displaying a silver crescent moon. *Another Shifter*. I looked back at the guy who was holding me and tried to figure out what type of Shifter he was. All Shifters had the same crescent moon brands. I hoped he shifted into something small as I continued to rub my hand against my jeans.

“What are you mixed with?” he asked, tightening his grip on me with his right hand and moving his other to my face. His calloused fingers rubbed the silver X brand embedded into my forehead, scratching my skin.

“You’re a sexy Mixie, aren’t you? Dark, like chocolate. You Haitian?” He looked at my chest, licking his cracked lips. “Big tits, too.”

Hot bile rose in my throat.

“Shorty, she doesn’t even have a penny.” Tony threw my empty satchel onto the ground. *So, this Shifter’s name is Shorty. What a surprise.*

“No drugs either? I thought all those big-time university kids did drugs.” Shorty continued to lean into me. The storm transformed into a light shower. The streetlights became more visible. I watched Tony pull out a cigarette. *Please have a lighter.*

“Nada, Shorty.” Tony patted his ragged shirt pockets. “Why would somebody put a spell on books? They ain’t worth shit.”

I looked at his cigarette and focused on the pocket he was searching, my heartbeat pounding in my ears. Tony rubbed the back of his jeans pockets. “Might as well let her go. She’s not going to the Habitat Police. Those Humans don’t care about Mixbreeds.”

“No, she won’t go to the habbies. But let her leave? You’re crazy!” Shorty focused his eyes on my breasts. “Might as well have fun with her.”

No.

Tears appeared in my eyes but didn’t spill over. I focused on my left hand. Two fire marbles formed at my palm. I closed my shaking hand around them, attempting to intensify and hide them. I’d been held down before, but I’d never had to surrender.

Come on, Lanore, focus.

“I don’t really care,” Tony muttered, taking a couple steps toward me. His eyes focused on my face and followed the curves of my body. He nodded. “I would do her.”

“Ever had a Shifter?” Shorty’s hand left my arm and glided down my breasts. He pressed his body closer into me and licked the right side of my face.

I wanted to vomit and hoped I would. If the fire didn’t work, I would throw up all over him and run.

“Let me finish my cigarette. I’ll hold her down,” Tony said.

What a great guy.

He pulled out a lighter and placed the cigarette between his lips.

Yes! I swallowed, watching the lighter produce an orange flame, and mentally reached out for it. The fire leaned in my direction as if in a trance.

“Come on, Tony. Smoke it later.” Shorty put his hands down to his jeans. The sound of a zipper made my tears spill over my eyelids and fall down my face.

Tony dragged the lighter to the cigarette’s tip. I increased the flame until it was a foot long.

“What the fuck?” Tony opened his mouth. The cigarette fell to the ground. In a flash I pushed the flame to his face, commanding the fire to snatch at his flesh. He violently hit his face. Fire spread to his wrist and swirled around his elbows. He screamed, his head forming into a glowing mass of fire. He fell back to the wall, skin crackling like bacon in a hot pan. His eyes bubbled and bulged, while the flames swallowed his head.

I held in a scream, knowing that I would have nightmares about this.

Shorty released me. His mouth opened, looking from side to side, while Tony’s high-pitched screams rose above us. The smell of meat cooking filled the air. Tony moved away from the wall and fell into the street, thrashing madly at the flames.

“Oh, shit.” Shorty stumbled back, covering his nose and gaping at Tony. I increased the fireballs in my left hand, sparks flickering in the air. Smoke rose and carried ash around me. I threw one of the fireballs, aiming for the back of Shorty’s head. The ball flew over him and captured his attention. He snapped his head to me.

“Shit!” Shorty gazed at me, then at the fireball. A growl came from his chest. He fell to the wet ground in a crouching stance, skin rippling in large waves around his forehead brand. If he shifted quickly, I would be screwed. My left hand shook, making the last fireball bounce up and down.

“You Mixie bitch! Y—you did it,” he stuttered, pointing at me. “Your eyes are on fire.”

“Yeah. I did it.”

His pupils expanded and shifted into black pools.

Okay. He isn't from the Were-cat family.

Brown bits of fur sprouted around his face and arms as his jaw began to extend and reshape. Claws erupted from the tips of his fingers. I almost choked on the ash that floated near my face. A cracking sound came as his back rose to a hump and his shirt ripped away. I brought my left hand to the front of me, letting him get a closer look at the fireball. He froze. The cracking stopped.

“Shifting is useless. I can make hundreds of these go to your face like a machine gun,” I lied.

He quickly held his paws up as if to shield himself from oncoming rapid fire.

Paws? Fuck, a Were-dog.

I pointed to Tony. His burning body lay on the pavement. The rain had smothered the flames, leaving charred flesh and a pile of ash in place of his face.

“You want to burn like him?” I asked.

“No!” Shorty yelled, guarding his face with his paws.

I sighed, wishing I really could blast fire like a machine gun. “Put the books in the bag and leave.”

“Huh? What books?” Shorty’s eyes widened. I raised the fireball in the air. He fell to the ground, covered his head, and said, “I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

“Those books.” I pointed to them. “Put the bag there and leave.”

Shorty ran to the books and slung them into the satchel. Once the books were put beside me, he darted away in the direction that I was heading.

Fuck.

Rain tapped against my head as the book’s alarm spell began to fade in and out. I counted myself lucky, grabbed the satchel, turned the corner, and hoped I wouldn’t see Shorty again on my way to the apartment.

I passed Linderman Blood Factory on my left, slowly inhaling and exhaling. The cool wind carried the scent of blood as it blew past me.

I've got to get out of the Shango District before I end up getting raped or worse.

I shook my head from side to side, quickening my pace. Out of all the districts in Santeria Habitat, Shango had the most deaths and highest crime rate.

One day, I'll move to a nice place.

Broken streetlights met me as I turned the corner.

Maybe I'll get a good job after college or go to law school.

I passed the border wall on my right, which was glowing with multicolored graffiti. *Free Us!* was spray painted near the wall’s attached bars that extended thousands of feet in the air and covered the habitat’s districts like a ceiling.

The alarm spell buzzed a little then stopped. A low-level Air Witch must have cast the spell.

Silence greeted my ears. Smiling, I sped up, glad to finally get a break on a night that was becoming the worst night of my life.

A female screamed.

Of course.

I stopped walking but couldn't see anybody, so I leaned forward, straining my ears for another sound. *Is Shorty with victim number two?* He'd run this way. I should have given him Tony's fate when I had the chance. Wind blew, bringing more rain.

"No!" a woman yelled.

Pulling the satchel closer to me, I increased the heat in my body and only saw steam. I raked my fingers through my dreadlocks, dreading whatever lay ahead. I was wet, defenseless, and just wanted to sit in my apartment, lie in MeShack's arms, and cry. But I had let Shorty live, putting another female in a similar predicament. I tried drying my hand against the inside of my satchel as my feet carried me forward.

"No, don't!" the woman said. "I have a kid!"

Biting my lip, I heard her scream again from the alley in front of me. I stopped at the edge and crouched down until my fingers touched the sticky pavement.

"Please!" she said as I peeked around the corner. A large figure wearing a raincoat and hat stood over her. The hat's wide brim hid the figure's face and brand. Relief filled me. It wasn't Shorty.

"No!" The woman held up her hands.

The mystery figure's arm rose. Moonlight reflected off a knife. The short-lived relief drained from my body. He grabbed her hand and held it up. Fear wormed its way down my body.

What should I do?

A bang came from behind me, making my head snap back. Wires swung from a utility pole and splashed into a puddle. Electric sparks flew up in the air. Glowing blue lines of electricity formed a wall that cracked and popped each time the rain hit it.

Fuck. There goes my detour to get her help.

I bit my lip. Home was three blocks ahead. I could run across the alley's entrance and get MeShack to help her. The problem with running across the entrance was that I couldn't tell if the knife holder was a Shapeshifter or not. The average Shifter could snap my neck before I took a second step.

"Yemaya! Help me!" she screamed. I hoped her goddess was listening, because we could both use the help.

In a blur, he raised the knife and chopped off her hand. Blood spurted out of her stump and fell to the pavement. Her screams scraped against my eardrums. Shock beat against my head. My heartbeat became erratic. I had to do something. Against all sane thoughts, I crawled across the alley's opening, shaking and trying to hide behind boxes sprawled around the entrance.

"Help me! You, right there," she screamed. "You! Help me!"

I froze.

She isn't talking to me, right?

My head turned toward the alley. Moonlight hit her eyes as they focused on me.

I should have run.

"Help me!" She flailed her arms as he pinned her down with one hand.

I could have helped you if you hadn't made him notice me.

I jumped up, put my hands in the air, and kept my eyes on the dark figure as I took a step back.

“Please,” she begged.

He put the knife to his side, turning his face to me, his features still hidden by the shadow beneath his hat’s brim. I resisted the urge to release the scream lodged in my throat.

“I have a gun.” I put my hand in the satchel.

He inclined his head.

She started to get up, holding the injured arm. Blood dripped down her dress and onto her leg. He pushed her down.

I edged a few steps to the side, hoping he didn’t notice.

“I’ll call the habbies!” I backed away a few more inches. He remained standing. Maybe he wasn’t a Shifter.

“Go ahead. Shoot,” she sobbed.

“Don’t push me.” I formed a fireball with the hand that was inside the satchel. “Let her go and leave.”

I felt the ball’s heat, pulled it out to throw it, and then watched the wind extinguish the fire. I almost pissed on myself.

“No,” she cried, seeing my empty hand. My stomach twisted into a knot.

“I see you! I know what you look like,” I lied, pointing to him.

Within two heartbeats, he raised his knife above her head. It came down in a flash. She fell to the ground like a sack of bricks. Blood sprayed from her open wounds, splattering everywhere and pooling around her now limp body.

Screams escaped my throat. I raced away. Streetlights blurred past me. My lungs burned. I never looked back and raced by the Aztec Hotel, my arms flailing in the air.

The Caged View Apartments’ sign appeared, swinging back and forth with the wind. A chair was wedged between the lobby door and its post, propping it open. I kicked the chair into the lobby, pulling the door closed behind me. The lock clicked. I raced upstairs, never looking back and hoping to any god or goddess who listened that he wasn’t behind me, following me home and waiting to kill the only witness to the murder he’d just committed.



The bed slammed into the wall every second as Joanne's loud moans filled the air. The kitchen and MeShack's bedroom shared a wall. Every time MeShack had sex, he damaged it.

"Oh, daddy, give it to me!" Joanne yelled. *Daddy?*

I rolled my eyes. A joint lay between my shaking fingers. *Is the woman from the alley dead? Did the man follow me home?* I brought the joint to my lips, inhaling the bluish smoke of marijuana and lotus petals, and wiped tears from my face.

"Right there!" Joanne moaned.

My book sat in front of me. It was Freud's psychoanalytical approach to Vampires. Holding a yellow highlighter in my hand, I wondered if witnessing a possible murder would give me a pass on tomorrow's discussion and inhaled more blue smoke. The words on the page merged into a blurry black and white pattern.

"Oh, daddy!"

"Turn around." MeShack's voice thundered through the walls.

I exhaled, rubbed my eyes, and put my feet on our table, which was a huge door MeShack had found. He'd painted it black and then placed it over cinder blocks.

"Don't stop, daddy!"

I could clearly hear the booming sound of MeShack's bed banging into his bedroom wall. Pieces of plaster fell from the ceiling and crashed onto the kitchen floor.

"Come back here," MeShack said over Joanne's shrieks. "Don't run from it."

"Yes!" Joanne screamed. "Yes!"

I lifted my head, crossing my fingers. The bed's pounding stopped. A beautiful silence filled the apartment. *Finally.* I started reading and almost finished a page when loud purring vibrated throughout the apartment. *Son of a mixed bitch.* I closed my book.

One downside of living with a Were-cheetah is that he purrs when he's happy. At times, the apartment vibrated all day from MeShack's enjoyment of life.

After a few minutes, the purring stopped. I exhaled more blue smoke, knowing he'd be out soon. I scanned the living room and was sure MeShack would complain about the mess.

My wet clothes hung over the arms of our russet brown couch, hiding the tan patches I'd sewn in last month. Damp pages from the books I'd stolen tonight covered the burnt orange coffee table, drying. More pages decorated the olive green carpet near our old flat-screen TV. I increased the heat in the air, hoped the pages would dry faster, and heard movement from MeShack's room.

Yep. He was definitely coming out, and there was no time to clean. *Fuck it.*

I brushed away my bitten nails from the door table, watched them fall onto the carpet, and kicked them under the table. Besides the drying papers, the carpet appeared clean. My dad gave it to us. It was a housewarming gift/I'm-sorry-I-tried-to-kill-you-both-in-a-drug-induced-rage-

and-forced-you-both-to-flee-from-your-childhood-home gift. Nevertheless, MeShack had a profound affection for the raggedy rug. If he found a mark on it, fangs and claws would appear.

A creaking sound announced MeShack's door was opening.

"Like a slow river, baby," MeShack sang. His voice was a musical instrument, sending smooth liquid tones through the apartment. "So slow, you run through my heart."

He bent his copper-toned body under the doorway's frame.

"Like a slow river, baby." He wrapped a pink towel with yellow flowers around his waist and closed the door. Drops of sweat clung to the rows of muscle on his stomach. "You run through my heart. Like a slow—"

"Would you stop? You're going to get that song stuck in my head." I glared at him. His skin glowed like honey poured over layers of caramel. His black pupils blazed within hazel irises. I looked away and asked, "Is Joanne asleep?"

"Is that her name?"

I rolled my eyes and nodded.

"Yeah, she's asleep." He walked in a bowlegged stride toward me, bent down to kiss my X brand, and snatched the joint from me. "Cool shirt. The hot Were-cheetah that bought you that shirt must be a comedic genius."

"Or a pre-med geek who thinks he's funny," I muttered. The shirt I'd put on after my shower read, *I wish I was an Ion so I could form an exothermic bond with you.*

"I see you've been in my marijuana supply tonight," he said. "And I'm not a geek. Hot band leaders can't be geeks."

"You're right. Perhaps the best words to describe you would be humble and modest," I replied. He smiled and flexed his biceps in response.

Humming, he walked into our kitchen, pulled a rubber band out of the "everything" drawer, and tied his black curls into a pony tail that went beyond his shoulders and lay at the center of his back. He'd gotten the hair from his father, a Were-cheetah from somewhere in Africa. Everything else came from his Iranian Were-cheetah mother.

Ten stray Pixies flew from under the door table and swarmed in MeShack's direction.

"These freaking strays are killing me. No more, La La. I'm serious. I convinced Janice to take two home with her."

"Joanne," I corrected, watching him pull out sugar cubes and hand one to each Pixie.

"I haven't seen you smoke in years. What's up?" He grabbed a slice of raw ostrich meat from the refrigerator, folded it, and then stuck the entire piece in his mouth.

I scrunched my nose up in disgust. "On a scale of one to ten, with ten being horrific, today was a hundred thousand."

"Why?" He drank milk straight from the carton, threw the empty container into the trash, and burped. "What's wrong?" He balanced the joint between his full lips and sat down next to me. "Whose neck do I have to break tonight? Please say it's Zulu."

"For the thousandth time, I'm not dating him."

"Whatever, La La."

MeShack had called me La La since we were nine. Most Shapeshifters know how to control their shifting by six. His mother and my father were drug buddies. She'd been too busy getting high with my dad to teach MeShack control. When I met him, he couldn't say Lanore. His face had shifted in and out of cheetah form. La La had been the only words he could manage as his long tongue hung out of the side of his furry mouth.

“So?” MeShack’s eyes focused on me. My stomach clenched into a tight ball as I told him what had happened. With each detail, the muscles in his jaw twitched.

“Why did you start crawling across the alley?” He stamped the joint out on his hand. The charred skin surrounding the burn healed and vanished.

“I don’t know why. I keep correcting my actions in my mind over and over.”

“You think this Shorty guy saw the murderer too?” MeShack’s eyes transformed to feline.

“Maybe. I don’t know.”

“You said the killer was holding a long knife, right? Could you draw it for me?” He handed me my notebook. I drew it. He looked over my shoulder. “That’s a machete.”

“Do you think he’s out there looking for me?”

“Stop it. If he wanted you dead, he would have already been in this apartment.” MeShack scooted his chair over to me and rubbed the back of my neck with his fingers. I exhaled, enjoying the feel of his fingers caressing my skin.

“I would never let anything happen to you. Nothing.” The veins in his large neck bulged. “Just play it safe and stay out of the rain. Only go out when it’s dry enough to make fire.”

He stopped massaging me, opened his box of marijuana, and took out a gold piece of smoking paper. His eyes returned to normal. “And since we’re discussing your safety, I think you should stop hanging around Zulu.”

I ignored the comment and asked, “How was last night’s gig?”

“I beat up a Were-leopard for booing.” He laid his right arm on my chair. “Javier dropped the band from next month’s line up.”

“You need anger management.”

“I’ll fix my anger problem when you do something about your kleptomania.” He pointed to the wet books I’d stolen earlier. I showed him my middle finger. He leaned forward until his chest touched my arm.

“Is that an invitation?” The flecks of gold in his hazel eyes sparkled.

I tried to calm my heart pounding in my ears. When would his effect on me stop?

“Your invitations expired when you cheated on me last year.” I leaned away from him. *Good job, Lanore.*

He continued to stare at me.

“Everybody is saying that Mixbreeds for Equality did the bombing in St. Barbara’s square,” he said. “Hanging around with them will hurt your chances of getting into law school.”

“That’s a bad rumor. I would never be in a group that harmed others.” I got up from my chair and headed to the kitchen. A sharp pain throbbed at my temples. “Stop worrying about me being in MFE.”

“You’re all the family I have.”

Our parents would get high, argue, and then get high again. On payday, they’d turn on some cartoons, give us candy bars, and leave for days. As kids, we thought it was an adventure. We ate syrup sandwiches and stayed up all night watching TV. A year later, MeShack and his mom moved in. Sometimes her pimp, Joe, stayed for a few weeks.

Everything changed when I was fourteen. MeShack’s mom disappeared. A month later, the habbies found her behind Linderman Blood Factory, drained dry. We figured Joe had killed her and took her blood. Back then, Supernaturals could get \$5,000 from the factory for a bucket. The next night, MeShack returned to me, silent, and covered in blood. The habbies discovered Joe later that evening with his head ripped from his body, his heart torn out of his chest and stuffed into his mouth.

“MFE is getting a lot of bad press.” I heard MeShack say as I opened the freezer section of the fridge. Cold air hit my face. I took out a large tub of ice cream that I’d stolen from the university’s cafeteria.

“And this Zulu guy is telling people you’re his lady,” he said as the skin wrinkled around his crescent moon brand.

I shook my head and laughed.

“That doesn’t sound like something Zulu would do. You Shifters gossip worse than Witches.” I spooned ice cream into bowls. “If I was involved with him, I would tell you.”

“And what happens if I don’t want you to be with him?” He stood up.

“Absolutely nothing will happen.” I grabbed honey off the counter. “I just listened for an hour as you pounded my classmate, Joanne, whose name you keep forgetting, by the way. I don’t think you’re the authority on what makes a decent guy.”

He marched over to the kitchen’s doorway, wrapping his huge arms around his chest. I exerted heat into the air as a warning for him to calm down. Ice cream dripped from the spoon onto the counter.

“You’re about to lose your temper and shift.” I attempted to focus on the bowls in front of me. The pounding in my temples increased. “And you’re aggravating me.”

Within seconds, MeShack charged in a blur of motion toward me. The towel fell from his body. I resisted the urge to look below his waist and remained standing, not moving one inch. His beast loved a good chase. I had to keep still.

“If I find out you’re dating him, I’ll rip his throat out.” His nostrils flared.

Swirls of fire erupted from my hands.

I targeted my eyes on his. “You mess with Zulu and I’ll burn your balls off. I’m not with him, and even if I was, it’s none of your business.”

MeShack stared at the fireball I bounced in my hand. He opened his mouth in shock, exposing sharp fangs that stuck out of the top and bottom rows of his teeth. Silence hung between us for a few seconds until he said, “I wish I wouldn’t get jealous, but I do. You spend a lot of time with him, and for the past few weeks he’s been leaving messages and sending flowers.”

“Flowers?” I scrunched my face in confusion, searching the kitchen with my eyes. “Where are the flowers?”

“I threw all of them away.”

“Asshole! You had no right. You know how much I love flowers.” I slung the spoon into the sink and walked around him. He reached for my arm, but I moved it away, grabbed my satchel, and headed for the door.

“Where are you going?” He stared at the floor.

“I’m freaked out from this murder. Instead of you calming me down, you take the opportunity to belittle MFE and act like a jealous ass.”

“La La, I’m sorry.”

“I need fresh air. I’m suffocating in here with you and your ego.” I put my hand on the doorknob.

“MeShack?” Joanne yelled from his bedroom. “Is everything okay?”

“Go back to sleep, Jane,” he replied.

I exhaled, forcing myself not to correct him on her name.

He stepped forward. “Okay. I’m being an asshole, but could you get fresh air from your fire escape? I want you close just in case that guy is hanging around the building.”

Frowning, I thought about it for a few seconds. I could light some candles, make a huge cup of tea, and sip it out there, but Joanne was awake. They'd probably have sex again, and the serenity of my fire escape would just transform into a self-loathing cage of depression. At least downstairs, I would be free from the noise.

"No. Bernie the guard probably started his shift. I'll hang out with him, clear my head, and be back." I snatched open the door before he could offer an opinion, stepped into the hall, slammed the door behind me, and froze.

A note was taped to the door with black letters and red splotches. *Please say that's not blood.*

"I SEE YOU TOO!" it read.

I held my breath and looked down the hallway, but only saw my Air Witch neighbor bringing in groceries. I snatched it off the door.

"Lanore. The storm stopped." My neighbor flashed a toothless grin as grocery bags floated behind her. She did a zig zag motion with her hand. The groceries obeyed, lined up, and flew into her apartment. "You better grab some food before more rain comes."

"Have you seen anybody weird around the halls tonight?" I asked.

"No. But Bernie started guarding if you're worried." She took a sip from her copper flask and stumbled into her apartment.

"Thanks, Mrs. Flora."

As her door closed, I let out a long breath.

The streets would be busy. Hookers and dealers hung near my building. I would be relatively safe. I could just stand outside for a few minutes with Bernie. Not that the hundred-year-old Were-lion could do much, but at least he could get MeShack if anybody tried to attack me.

I read the note again.

"I SEE YOU TOO!"



Outside of my apartment building, hookers covered in orange lingerie strolled the streets, calling out to passing cars. A cool breeze blew through my dreadlocks. It smelled fresh and clean, as if the earlier storm had washed away all of the neighborhood's impurities. The habitat ceiling's beams came on after the storm, bathing the caged city in a threatening light.

I sat on the cracked concrete steps, half listening to Bernie tell me for the hundredth time about fighting in the Supe-Human Wars. The killer's note sat in my pocket, weighing me down.

Is it just a threat to be silent? Or a declaration that I would be the next victim?

Seconds later, I spied Zulu stomping my way. The security lights shone on his X brand. His blond dreadlocks hung beyond his broad shoulders, slapping around his elbows. He wore no shirt, just indigo jeans that hung low and framed perfect abdominal muscles. Multicolored cords were sewn into his ivory skin in a swirly pattern that stopped at his wrists. It had to have been pretty painful when he'd gotten it done. With each furious stomp, his muscles bulged under the cords.

Fuck. He is pissed. I stood up, told Bernie I would be back, and headed toward Zulu.

"What are you doing here?" I held my hands out to my sides.

"You forgot about our date," Zulu growled, his voice deep with a dominant edge. It was why Supernaturals, or Supes as they were most often referred to, stopped and listened when he spoke at MFE rallies.

"Zulu, it wasn't a date."

He narrowed his eyes. Usually they were a blend of dark blue and gold, reminding me of the dawn's sun as it peeked through the habitat's ceiling. Tonight, his eyes were midnight black. His gaze was like the sharp edge of a sword pulled out for battle.

I took a step back and cleared my throat. "We were just going to talk about what happened."

He raised his blond eyebrows. "You mean when I had you on my desk, dress lifted, shirt ripped, and your lips on mine?"

"Fine. When we kissed." I bit my lip.

"Why did you stop me and run away? Why aren't you coming to the meetings or returning my calls?"

"I can't do this tonight." I crossed my arms over my chest.

"No, mon. This is your fifth cancel." He got in front of me, leaning down so that our eyes met. "You've been avoiding me for three weeks. You promised me tonight; and besides, me made us dinner."

I resisted the urge to correct his use of *me*. It was Rebel dialect. They called it Lib Lib. It had taken him years to learn the crazy speech patterns and communicate with the Rebels. The fact that he'd so easily slipped into Lib Lib told me that he was upset.

“Zulu, trust me. Tonight I’ve been through so much. I can’t . . . wait a minute.” I looked up at him. “You cooked?”

“Duck and some cheese potato thing that my sister said would impress you. Me . . .” He stopped for a few seconds as if he’d realized that he was speaking in the dialect, and then cleared his throat. “If you had a rough night, then tell me about it on the way to my condo. I’ll help you solve whatever it is—but no more cancellations.”

“It’s midnight.” I pointed at my purple Captain Habitat watch. Angry lines formed around his X brand. He glanced at my watch and then back at me.

“Hey, Blondie,” a Vamp hooker called to Zulu from across the street. “Come here. Mama want to give you something for a tiny fee.”

Zulu ignored the hooker. He gently grabbed my hand, kissed it, and whispered, “Like it or not, that night started something inside of me. You have two choices. We talk in your apartment or my condo.”

Chewing the inside of my cheek, I raked my fingers through my hair. There was no way we would talk in my apartment. Letting MeShack and Zulu meet would be a disaster. On the other hand, would it really be that bad to leave with Zulu for a few hours? I needed to go to sleep, but I doubted I could keep the image of the machete and spraying blood out of my mind.

“I can only be out for an hour,” I said. “I have class in the morning.”

“Fine.” He turned around and walked away. “I parked my bike around the corner so you wouldn’t see it and run away like you did after the kiss.”

“Are you mocking me?” I trailed behind him, rolling my eyes.

He laughed. The huge wings tattooed in silver on his entire back moved. Sparkling gems formed the feathers’ design. I’d spotted sapphires, amethyst, diamonds, emeralds, rubies, and some gems I didn’t know the names of.

The wings were beautiful and took my breath away every time I saw them.

Zulu stopped at his red bike, grabbed a black helmet with white wings off the handle, gave it to me, and then jumped on. Putting the helmet on my head, I climbed on, wrapping my arms around his waist.

“You can hold on tighter,” he offered.

“Just drive.” I smiled and tightened my grip. Heat radiated off him. I leaned my face on his back, secretly enjoying the satin texture of his skin with the gems’ rough edges. Closing my eyes, I inhaled his scent of sandalwood.

“What happened?” he asked without starting the bike.

I reluctantly sat up, sighed, and told him everything. By the time I’d finished, his body hardened under my grip, and he still hadn’t started the bike.

“Let me see this letter,” Zulu said, with an edge of violence in his voice. He remained with his back to me, but I could see him clenching and unclenching his right hand around the handle. I pulled the letter out and handed it to him. After a few seconds, he said, “I’ll use all of MFE’s resources to help you.”

He pushed a button and whispered some words to start his bike. Turning around, I noticed gold sparks fly out of the back pipe. I didn’t want the magic to touch my skin, so I inched closer to Zulu.

“I have a connection with a habbie,” he said. “I’ll report the body to him. And then see if he can give us some information on what he found. He’ll give us anything if the price is right.”

“We’re not going to exhaust all of the organization’s resources,” I yelled over the sound of Zulu revving the engine. We drove away from my building, and the noise disappeared. A smooth humming sound came from the bike while the wind whipped around my face.

“You’ll get all of our resources. That’s why I created MFE, to help Mixbreeds.” Not making any effort to stop, he drove us through a red light. I screamed as cars honked their horns, and a group of Vamps in a truck cursed at us.

“Damn it! Red lights mean stop.” I cringed as he cut off a delivery van and drove through another red light. More cars honked. Closing my eyes, I hid behind his back and yelled, “This is the last time I ride with you.”

“You said I only had you for an hour. I’m trying to cut the driving time.”

“Fine! I’ll give you more time.” I kept my eyes closed and heard more horns blare. “Just obey the damn traffic laws and slow down.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The rush of wind lessened to a breeze. I opened my eyes and peeked over his shoulder as we turned out of Shango District. The habitat was divided into five districts. Each district was named and themed after a popular Santeria god. I lived in Shango’s flaming orange district. Zulu lived in Yemaya.

We entered the sapphire gates of Yemaya. A life-size statue of the goddess stood near the entrance, carved from spelled ice that could not melt. It shimmered in the moonlight, giving the effect of wavering liquid. Blue and white flowers lounged at her sandaled feet.

Even though it was in the middle of the night, Supes kneeled in front of her, chanting. Their voices rose above the jeweled gates. Teal silk robes covered them. Cowrie shells, dyed in blue ink, draped around their necks. Gone was Shango District’s smell of death and blood, poverty and depression. The soothing scent of the sea hovered in the air and seized me, stirring up memories of Orisha beach during the summer, salt on my tongue, sand between my toes, and the calming waves of the ocean pushing me forward.

I sighed.

“You’re lucky to live here,” I whispered. Zulu’s body tensed under my arms.

“Luck has nothing to do with it,” he said as we stopped at a light. “It’s a way for my mom to pay me off. To make sure I don’t call her *Mommy* in front of her Pureblood friends.”

“So then, what do you call her?” I asked, watching a couple stroll by, hand in hand.

Each time the Pureblood laughed, her massive diamond earrings sparkled like expensive champagne. I shook my head. Her jewelry could fund both MeShack’s and my education and provide us room and board for several years. I hated her for flaunting her wealth and looked in another direction.

“I usually call my mom by her first name,” Zulu replied.

“Which is?” I raised my eyebrows.

“Nice try, Lanore. If you want to know my secrets, then tell me yours.”

I laughed.

Zulu maintained a reasonable speed as we passed high-end restaurants painted in cobalt blue. An aroma of slowly roasted meats and simmering delights tugged at my senses. Crystal fountains glowed, producing playful shadows of fish. Luxury condos with bricks the color of the ocean decorated the clean streets. There was no litter—anywhere. Nothing to suggest Supes walked on the sidewalks at all.

“I’m going to have two Rebels follow you around until we catch this guy,” Zulu said, getting my attention.

“No Rebels. Are you insane? My professors already hate that I’m in their classes. And you want me to bring two Rebels?” I shook my head. “Not happening. They can’t come with me.”

The Rebels were a group of Shifters who considered themselves revolutionaries. They hated Humans and shunned most laws, wearing bright colors instead of the blacks and whites that you saw Humans wear on TV. They remained in partial animal form, which freaked out most Purebloods, even regular Shifters.

Fur covered their faces. Animal ears stuck out of their hair. Fangs were usually fully extended and protruded out of their mouths. Whenever I was near them, my skin always felt like hundreds of ants were crawling up my arms.

“I don’t know why you hate them. They’re great for MFE,” Zulu said as we sped off, just as the light turned green. “They listen to you and me, which is a miracle.”

“I don’t hate them. But if we continue to involve them, they’ll ruin us.” A tiny pain began at my temples. “And those freaks destroyed my peace demonstration.”

He shrugged his shoulders. “I didn’t like the peace thing either.”

“Peace demonstration,” I corrected. “And like it or not, nonviolent actions are going to get us funding. And funding is what will help MFE get results.”

He glanced over his shoulder at me and smiled.

I opened my eyes wide and screamed, “Keep your eyes on the road!”

He laughed, turned his head forward. “Besides the peace stuff, your ideas are brilliant. This is why you’re second in command.”

“Don’t start with that again, Zulu.” The pain at my temples transformed into a pounding headache. “I don’t want the position or any leadership responsibilities.”

“If you won’t take the Rebels, then consider a regular guard,” Zulu said, ignoring my refusal to be his number two. “You’re too important to me. Just one guard?”

“Fine. But he can’t come into my classrooms.”

“Deal.”

We turned into the driveway of a turquoise condo building.

“On another topic,” Zulu said. “When are we going to talk about the fun we had on my desk? I would like to try that again, though your escape last time tells me that I’ll have to wait.”

I opened my mouth but was unable to find the words that I’d planned on saying. He parked the bike and kicked the stand down. Regret filled me. He stiffened under my arms.

“Are you going to answer me?” he muttered, not looking at me.

I swallowed. “Zulu, I like you.”

“But?”

“You’re the face of MFE,” I said. “Supes know you all over Santeria, especially the women. They throw themselves at you after every rally.”

“What does that have to do with you and me?”

I blew out some air, removed the helmet, and jumped off of his bike.

“Lanore?”

“I’m just not interested in dating another guy that’s in the public eye. MeShack’s band was successful only in Shango, and there were still lots of female fans knocking on our door and sneaking into his room. The temptation is—”

“MeShack’s dick was the problem. He’s a Shifter. That’s what the males do when they’re young.” Zulu climbed off of his bike and grabbed the helmet from me. “Don’t let his crap mess up what we could have.”

“I’m not interested.” I shifted all of my weight to my right foot, leaning my head forward so that most of my dreadlocks hid my face. He put the helmet on the bike’s handle.

“I’m sorry I kissed you,” I said. “I shouldn’t have. Now I just want everything to not be awkward.”

He eliminated the distance between us and was so close, the tips of his blond dreadlocks touched my breasts. I shuddered and took a step back.

“Your nipples get hard when I’m near you,” he whispered. “And you stop breathing for a few seconds.”

I forced myself to breathe.

He came closer. The cords in his arms glowed white.

“My body reacts to you, too,” he said. “I would have been content with wanting you from afar, but you kissed me. Now I can’t get your taste out of my mind.”

He pulled me to him, pressing his lips to mine, thrusting his tongue inside my mouth, and bringing with it a peppermint flavor.

So perfect.

I moaned and attempted to push him away, but it was a lackluster effort. As soon as my fingertips touched his chest, I stopped pushing and glided them down his smooth skin.

It’s just a kiss.

He wrapped his hands around my waist, pulling me closer. A groan escaped from him. I sucked on his lip and then bit it. He tightened his grip, and in that moment, I knew I wouldn’t stop if he wanted more.

A horn beeped. Light flashed over our faces. We stopped kissing and looked in the light’s direction.

“Mixies! Get your asses out of here,” a guard shouted from a security car. He held a flashlight in his hand. “Take that to Shango where you Combo Trash are allowed.”

“I have a condo here.” Zulu spat out the words as he pulled me behind him. “And don’t flash that fucking flashlight in my face.”

“Zulu, stop. Let’s just go.” I couldn’t see the guard’s brand and figured it was best to avoid any more problems tonight.

“Listen to your lady.” The guard turned off the flashlight. “You don’t want my type of trouble, boy.”

The guard twirled his hand in a circular motion. Wind appeared from the guard’s palm, spinning into a tiny tornado. *An Air Witch.*

The mini tornado headed toward us. Zulu grabbed my arm, trying to help me keep my balance within the current of air as it pushed against our bodies. I stumbled, falling to the ground and dragging Zulu with me. The wind stopped. The guard laughed.

I increased the heat within me, ready to end his entertainment, but he drove off.

A growl shot out of Zulu’s throat. He jumped up and then gave me his hand.

“This is why peace doesn’t work with Purebloods.” He pulled me up. “You have to speak their language. Meet violence with violence.”

He stormed off before I could reply.

Hours later, I lounged on Zulu’s couch, my stomach full of roasted duck, watching the NSFL championship on his 6DTV. He’d recorded it earlier. I grabbed the couch’s pillows as he massaged my feet. Pleasure spread throughout my body. I’d lost a bet that the Buddhist Monks would be in the lead before halftime. Being that he had a foot fetish, he chose massaging my feet as his reward. I found it to be a win-win situation.

As far as the kiss in the garage, neither one of us brought it up. It was too closely linked to the asshole Air Witch. It had taken the whole dinner to calm Zulu down.

“Tackle him!” Zulu yelled.

The game’s images floated throughout the room. The 6DTV had just come out on the market. Two Air Witches had patented the spell. A football flew by my head. The referee’s whistle blew right next to me. I covered my ear.

“Could you turn the weather effects down?” I said as the wind from the stadium blew into the living room.

Zulu grabbed the remote control and stuck it on his X brand. The cold breeze disappeared. Several players ran off the field and sat on the bench next to me. A horrid funk floated off the players. I covered my nose.

“Zulu, we’re too close to the action.” Sweat sprayed on my neck as a player flung off his helmet. I wiped it away.

A boy walked through me with a barrel of water.

“Come on, tackle him!” Zulu roared.

I looked in front of me and froze. The Monk’s quarterback raced toward me. Ten feet away. Dust flew under his feet. Eight feet. My heartbeat increased. Six feet. I could see five Santeros behind him. Four feet. I dove off of the couch and onto the carpet as the Santeros slammed into the quarterback and pushed him into the place where I’d been sitting. They fell through the couch. Helmets crashed. The quarterback grunted.

“Yes!” Zulu cheered.

I stood up, shaking my head as a commercial came on. A blonde Vamp with huge breasts slid her hands up and down a Burglar beer can. Words floated, stating that all raccoon blood was extracted humanely.

“Thank you for hanging out with me tonight.” Zulu grabbed my foot when I sat back down on the couch. Licking his lips, he glided the tips of his fingers up my feet and then thrust a finger between my toes. A tingly sensation rippled up my leg.

I jerked it away from him.

“You said I could play with your feet if I won,” he said. “Do I only get to use my hands or can I play with them in other ways?”

“I don’t think I want to know what other ways you can play with them.” I shook my head and grinned. “You’re a very naughty Mixie.”

He lifted my right foot to his lips.

Raising my eyebrows, I opened my mouth to speak and then stopped, turning my attention to the TV.

“... her body found in pieces throughout the alley,” the reporter said.

I spotted the words *Breaking News* floating around the room. The Earth Witch reporter held an umbrella in her hand and stood next to the coffee table. Red and blue lights flashed. A crowd dressed in raincoats stood around her.

“The female’s head was found on boxes stacked over there.” She pointed her hand by Zulu’s hallway, where yellow tape faded in and out. *“Her identity is still unknown. Her brand will be scanned tomorrow to discover it.”*

A chill crawled up my spine.

“Habitat police say she is a Hispanic Were-dog with black hair. If you know someone missing who may fit this description, contact your district’s crime stoppers.”

Phone numbers flashed in red over Zulu’s coffee table.

“Although this is the second body found this week, the habitat police are refusing to say the murders are related.”

A beep sounded. All of the 6DTV images disappeared. Figuring Zulu turned off the TV, I looked at him with shivers running through my body. He slid over to me and wrapped his arms around my waist. “I’m going to take care of this.”

Zulu’s lips moved, but I stopped listening. The machete slamming down on the female replayed in my head. The reporter said two murders.

Will I be number three?

Zulu’s lips continued to move.

She had a kid. I closed my eyes. Who will tell the kid that mommy was cut into pieces?

“I SEE YOU TOO!” the note had said.