

Chapter 20 Sacrifices of Love

Aba lifted his head out of the water, gasping for air. He turned and lifted a sharp glance up at Bernard, who was walking onto the shore.

Bernard turned and looked at him, raising his brow. "What?"

"Nice to take the scenic tour underwater. Were you wanting me to drown?"

"Hey, I don't exactly travel underwater in that area. How should I know which way to go? You're the one who refused to let me pull you underwater. Besides, if I wanted to drown you, I would have done it long ago. But I could never hurt Elena like that."

Aba chuckled as he crawled to the shore. "That is the only reason you're alive right now too." He smirked up at the man then looked around the dark enclosure. "A tunnel? Where does it lead?"

"How the hell should I know? I didn't build this place. I was just searching for an oxygen pool. You were the one who said there was a way out."

"You're the one who has some territorial radar."

"If you're asking if we are within my territory boundaries—" He suddenly stopped, lifting his

head to the ceiling. His brows knitted together as his lips pulled down. "We aren't." He looked back at Aba. "I closed in the whole vampire territory. So that means the underground kingdom—"

"Is bigger than we thought. It even ventures outside their territory. Well, it didn't at the time. But they lost this bit of land over the years."

Bernard shrugged. "Maybe, or they intentionally ran their underground kingdom below enemy lines."

Aba nodded his head. This was more accurate and he hated that the horse thought of it first. He walked down the tunnel without looking back. "Let's go. We need to get to Elena."

They walked in silence down the stone tunnel for a few moments. The two men weren't friends and didn't have anything in common but Elena.

"You shouldn't have left her so much." Bernard finally broke the silence with an irritated voice. "How could you leave her like that? Not only is she your charge but also your mate."

Aba sighed, letting out a small hum. "I didn't realize how numb the mate block had actually made me until it was drained from my system. It was supposed to suppress the mate bond and help me control my emotions. It did that, but also more. I can't even fathom leaving her side. I feel

panicked thinking about all the times I wasn't there." His heart was full of regret for everything. He panicked when he found out they were mates and thought he had to block the bond in order to protect her from himself. If he had known then what he knew now, he would have approached it differently. The consequences of his decision became painfully clear as he realized that, in blocking the bond, he had deprived himself of the ability to comprehend and interpret Elena's emotions. It was a skill that all guardians possessed, but one that was foreign to him now. He wondered how different it would be when he saw her again.

"I'm more selfish than you, but I don't care. I don't need rationality or morality. I just need her. I knew she was out of my league, but my love for her overpowered all logic. She was perfect, every part of her captured my heart and I refused to let go. I would have given her everything, if only she would look my way. But she never did. Her eyes, always locked on you and were a constant reminder that I was not who she wanted. And it tore at me, threatening to turn me into someone I'm not. Still, I held out hope that one day she would feel the bond. I guess it's over for me now." He let out a bitter laugh as his insides twisted in pain. She didn't want him. He had hoped for so long that if he loved her enough, she would finally look at him.

"I know you don't want to hear this, but I love her. I

love her so much that I couldn't be selfish with her. I wouldn't risk my demon losing control, so I hid what I wanted. You know—that night I decided to block the bond I cried like a baby." Aba turned his head giving Bernard a crooked smile. "It was so painful to think about, but I thought I was doing the right thing. I didn't realize that I had been mistaken about my past." He shook his head looking forward as he silently walked. The sound of their footsteps echoed off the tunnel walls. "After I began to block the bond, my emotions became more detached, but even then it was only her touch that could calm me. I craved her scent. She had a way to reach the emotions that were usually dormant. The demon part of me was taking over. Seeking out Elena. Trying to use every opportunity it could to break free. I almost caused the very thing I feared. All because I didn't want to be selfish. I ended up hurting us both. I won't do that again." He stopped walking to turn and face Bernard. His eyes blazing in a fiery darkness.

"I love her, and I am going to be selfish this time. I'm sorry to you and the circumstances, but I am not sorry for wanting Elena. I'm going to protect her and I will love her more than anything."

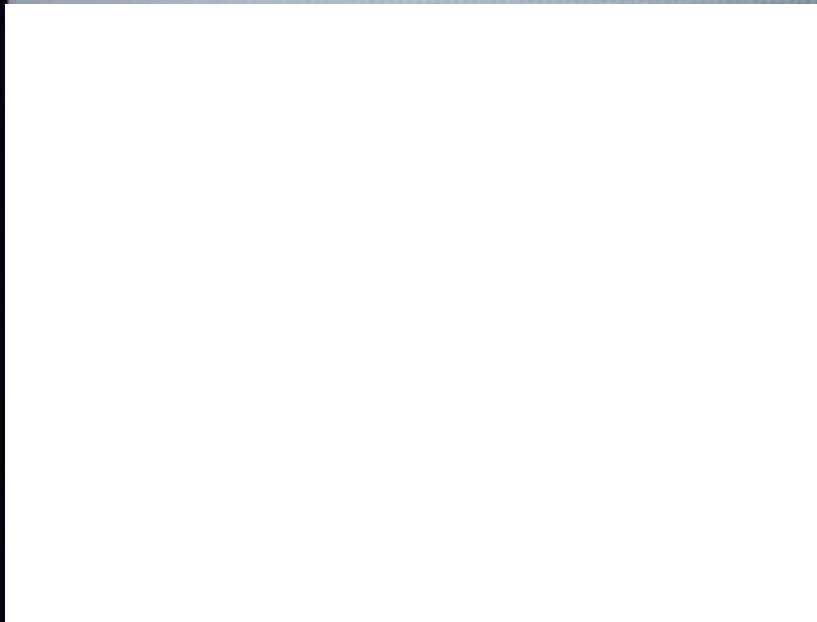
"You can't love her more than Elysium. If it came between the fairy kingdom falling and Elena—"

"Let it fall."

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Bernard's eyes widened as he stared at Aba. With all the fairy royalty in Elysium, this should go against a guardian's nature. Protect their charge, but always protect Elysium.

"I only need Elena. I don't need anything else in this world. Everyone else I care about is minor in



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comparison. If it came to a choice, I would choose Elena every single time."

Bernard gave him a hard look before he rolled his eyes. "You want me to throw you a party for having the same feelings that I have?"

"No, I want you to understand that your feelings

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for her are not greater than mine." He growled as his fingers curled into his hands. "I know you think she should be yours. That you have some moronic claim on her because you have been more

boisterous with your feelings. But let me tell you something, my friend, love is not measured by who shouts the loudest or makes the grandest gestures. I loved her in silence. I sacrificed trying to protect her, but every beat of my heart belonged to her, even if she never knew it."

"So now you have the bigger claim on her?"

"We are mutual mates. What do you think?"

"I think you know she could still choose me one day, and that has you terrified."

Aba let out a dark menacing chuckle as his predatory eyes fixated on the kelpie. "I told you. I'm going to be selfish now. I would kill you before I saw her with you."

"That is your demon talking."

"Well maybe he had the right idea all along."

Bernard let out an airy laugh as he continued to walk down the path. "Gods I hate you, but at least you have finally convinced me. You love her. I at least needed to know that. I couldn't see her going to anyone who wouldn't cherish her like I would. I'm always going to hate you, but I guess this is

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me not being selfish. I just want her to be happy. Even if it means with an ass like you."

"Even if every look and touch you make will bother me. I know you will be an invaluable friend to Elena. Someone else who would protect her with their life. Even if it means smelling an ass like you."

"Are you calling me a donkey?!" Bernard turned his head sharply to give Aba a side eye. He watched as his lips twisted up in a smile. His eyes lifted as light began to trickle in from up ahead. "There."

"It's about time." Bernard trotted up to the opening, stepping out of the tunnel. "This is the Pyrite Pack territory." He lifted his nose in the wind. "The lake will be that way." Without hesitation, he began marching in that direction.

"Easy Bernard. We aren't going to be welcome visitors here or in vampire territory."

"Awe, Puddin, I didn't know you cared." Bernard chuckled as he continued walking through the brush. "If we sneak around, it will take us that much longer to get to Elena. Besides, I'm faster than any vampire. Of course, you're a fat bear and probably can't run very fast. However, I bet if we find a hill we can roll you down it."

"You are not very funny. The vampires are just following orders. They don't understand what's

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going on. I don't want to hurt anyone."

"Then you better figure out a way to outrun them."

"And then what? What happens once we reach the lake?" He watched as Bernard slowed down.

"I'll be jumping in to get Elena, but then what? I can't bring Elena back if there are a bunch of vampires around."

"You expect me to keep running around until you bring Elena back to the surface?"

"What? Don't you have enough stamina? Elena would be better off with me. I have plenty of stamina." Bernard grinned as he listened to the threatening growl that came from Aba.

"Stamina is just the beginning. It will take more than mere endurance to please Elena. A woman like her has an unquenchable fire, a fierce craving that can only be satisfied by a man who will ravage her with raw passion and leave her trembling in his wake. Your fleeting bursts of energy are not enough to satisfy her hunger. She needs a lover who can truly own her body, leaving her gasping for air in pure ecstasy."

Abruptly, Aba and Bernard's bodies froze. A haunting sound cut through the air like a rushing wind, but it wasn't just that sound. There was also the swift sound of footsteps snapping twigs ahead of them. They both exchanged a wary

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glance as the footsteps drew closer. The eerie rustling sound behind them was also closing in. As the source of the noise drew closer, Aba's intuition kicked in.

"Get out of here, Bernie. Get to Elena and keep her safe." Aba knew what was in front of them were vampires. However, there was something more sinister behind them.

"And then what?"

"Just stay there for now. Damnit there isn't time. Just get out of here!" Aba growled as he immediately shifted into his towering two-toned bear.

"As if I can just leave you here. How could I ever face Elena?" Bernard smirked at the bear before he shifted into his colossal gray horse.

There was no time to press Bernard more as vampires dropped down from the trees in front of them.

"Where is Elena?!" One of them hissed.

Aba stepped forward, feeling his rage swirl into energy.

He towered over them, his massive bear form emanating a raw power that sent shivers down their spines. His eyes glowed with an otherworldly intensity as he growled, the sound reverberating

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through the dense forest. The vampires froze in their tracks, their overconfident grins twisting into grimaces of fear. Aba's sudden transformation had caught them off guard, and they now faced a being far more formidable than the kelpie they had expected to encounter. This was a fairy guardian. His eyes were fixated on them as they glowed with ancient power. They knew they were no match for him.

The lead vampire, a tall and imposing figure with jet-black hair and piercing red eyes, took a step back, his fangs glistening in the light. His voice trembled with a mix of fear and defiance as he addressed Aba. "We demand to know where Elena is, by order of the king," he hissed through clenched teeth.

Bernard stomped his hooves against the ground, sending vibrations of earth beneath them. He snorted loudly as his dark eyes focused on the vampires. He was ready for whatever might happen.

"Did you leave her down there?" The lead vampire suddenly smiled as his eyes lit up. "As if the king doesn't have sirens on his side." Aba's eyes narrowed, his fur bristling with fury. He knew the vampires were trying to provoke him, to distract him from their true intentions. But Aba was not easily swayed. He had seen enough battles and faced enough foes to know when he was being

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played. However, the kelpie did not.

He watched as the gray horse danced around, nervously eyeing the lake.

*Don't do it, i***t. It's a trap. If they could get to Elena, they wouldn't be here bothering us.*

Aba took a bold step forward, his eyes blazing

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with defiance as he dared the bloodthirsty vampires to come at him. The air around them suddenly grew thick with an ominous darkness, chilling the forest to its core. As if on cue, black shadows began to rise, surrounding them as if they were in a bowl. As they looked around in

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disbelief, their breaths turned to white puffs in the frigid air. A deafening wail filled the forest like a tsunami of malevolent forces. Suddenly, the dark shadow fell upon them, casting a foreboding stillness over the scene. Not even the whisper of a breath could be heard as the forest grew still.



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