

Broken by One, Desired by All

C – 8

Zane's Point Of View

The night air bit at any part of me not covered by the cloak, sharp and cold like warning teeth. The further I climbed, the quieter the world became, like even the wind was holding its breath.

The library loomed like a cathedral of old secrets.

Stone arches. Endless rows of ancient books. Dust motes caught in the faint blue glow of magical orbs floating lazily above the stacks. I could hear the faint tick of some unseen clock echoing in the space between shelves, steady and slow, like the heartbeat of something ancient.

And then, I saw him. Top floor. Eastern wing. Just like Miles said.

Ronan.

Not the untouchable, arrogant Alpha everyone knew, the one who carried himself like he owned every inch of the ground he walked on. No. This was something different.

He was in the far corner by one of the massive stained-glass windows, his back pressed against the wall, one knee drawn up to his chest. His head hung low, strands of dark hair messy, shadowing his face. His breathing was wrong. Shallow. Sharp. Like someone drowning on dry land.

Something was off.

I should've left.

Should've listened to the prickle running up my spine, screaming danger.

But I couldn't. The bond... that cursed, cruel thread between us, pulled like invisible hooks beneath my skin.

Step by step, I moved closer. Silent. Breath barely there. I didn't even fully realize I was holding it until my lungs burned.

And then, his scent.

It hit me like a drug.

Warm spice, sharp pine, wild and sweet and maddening all at once. Something old, something wolf, something mate.

I staggered slightly, clutching the edge of a bookshelf to stay upright.

What is this...?

My body... traitorous, broken thing that it was, reacted before my brain caught up. Heat rushed up my spine, curling deep, low, fierce. My vision swam for half a second.

I squeezed my eyes shut. Stop. Stop. This wasn't about that. I was here to awaken my power, not... this. Not him.

I opened my eyes just in time to see Ronan's head jerk up sharply, like a predator catching the scent of prey it didn't know was near.

His eyes, glowing faint gold. Wild. Frantic. Beautiful. His gaze scanned the room like a blade cutting through fog. Looking. Searching.

I pressed myself tighter against the shelf, every muscle locking in place.

Then, his gaze locked directly on where I stood.

My heart stopped.

I couldn't breathe. Couldn't think. The cloak was supposed to hide me. Sound, scent, sight, I was supposed to be nothing but air.

But those golden eyes saw me. Saw through me. For a long, terrible second, we just stared at each other across the distance.

I was frozen, heart hammering so violently I thought it might shake the cloak off my skin. His eyes wild, lips slightly parted, chest heaving.

Then... He blinked and looked away, just like that. Like he hadn't seen anything at all.

He curled tighter into himself, pressing his fist to his mouth like he was holding something back. His whole body was trembling, sharp, violent shakes rolling through his frame like waves breaking over sharp rocks.

What the hell was happening to him?

I wanted to move. Wanted to run.

I stood there frozen, throat dry, heartbeat like thunder in my ears. The heat swirling through my veins was starting to dull, like an ember burning itself out when it's not fed.

Whatever I thought I felt... whatever reaction I hoped for... it was slipping away.

This isn't going to work.

My fingers curled at my sides, frustration rising like bile.

What the hell was I thinking? Sneaking into the library, wrapped in invisibility, stalking my mate like a thief desperate for scraps? I was pathetic. This whole plan was pathetic.

I clenched my teeth. No more.

This wasn't worth it. Nothing was worth this humiliation.

I shifted my weight, careful not to make a sound. Slowly, I turned, muscles taut, ready to slip away, that's when it happened.

A blur. A growl. And before I could blink, he moved.

Fast.

So fast the cloak didn't even have time to protect me. It whipped off my shoulders, fluttering uselessly to the floor as something solid, wild, furious crashed into me.

A hand... no, claws closed around my throat, slamming me back into one of the massive shelves. Books rattled and toppled. The cold stone pressed against my spine, knocking the breath from my lungs.

And then golden eyes.

Wild.

Blazing.

Beautiful.

Ronan's face was inches from mine, sharp teeth bared, lips pulled back in a snarl that was both fury and hunger all at once. His chest was heaving, his whole body tense like a predator on the edge of tearing something apart.

"I knew it was you," he growled, voice hoarse, wrecked. "You think I wouldn't feel you? You think I wouldn't know?"

His grip tightened, not enough to snap my neck, but enough to make it hurt. I gasped, struggling for breath, panic flaring under my ribs, sharp and white-hot.

"I..." I tried to speak, to explain, to anything, but his claws pressed just enough to choke it back down.

The scent between us was unbearable now, him. Wild, sharp, addictive. I could barely think through it.

This was it. This was where I died. Throttled by the one person fate decided to tie me to. Choked out like trash by my mate, then he kissed me.

No warning. No softness. Just the brutal crash of his mouth against mine, rough and desperate like it wasn't affection but possession.

I made a noise... shocked, furious, breathless and he swallowed it like he owned it.

His lips moved over mine with brutal, clumsy hunger, sharp canines dragging against the soft skin of my lower lip until I tasted copper. Blood. My blood. Warm, metallic, real.

And when his tongue flicked out to claim it, to taste it, a violent shudder racked through his entire body, like that single drop set something off.

A growl rumbled low in his throat, deep and guttural. His hand at my throat didn't loosen, it flexed, holding me in place, a predator marking what was his.

"You don't get to run," Ronan breathed against my lips, voice thick with something dark, something sharp. "Not from me."

I gasped, half in fury, half in something else I didn't want to name. "I wasn't running."

"Liar."