

One

“And I thought you were rough. Those girls are . . .” Dallas Gutierrez shuddered. “What’s way worse than rough? ’Cause that’s what they are.”

“What, exactly, are you trying to say?” Mia Snow leaned away from her desk, crossed her arms, and peered at the gorgeous man across from her. Perfectly tanned skin, perfectly symmetrical features—or so he liked to brag—and the perfectly formed body of an underwear model. Lean, yet sculpted with muscle. All that perfection aside, he was an absolute pain in her ass. “And by the way, I’m not rough.”

“Perfect” ice blue eyes rolled. “You once kned me in the balls and asked me how they tasted. Just to say hi. You’re rough.”

She had, hadn’t she? Memories were fun. “Why are you complaining? There were no complications during your testicle retrieval operation. So, anyway, what’d they do this time?”

They. Best friends. AIR—Alien Investigation and Removal—trainees Ava Sans and Noelle Tremain.

Dallas tangled a hand through that thick, dark mane of his, looking like a lost little puppy rather than the stone-cold killer he was. “Get this. I took all ten of the advanced placement trainees on an assignment last night. Call came in, you see. Was told a predatory otherworlder was picking on humans at a bar. The fine group of boys and girls I took was just supposed to observe as I threw my pimp hand around, bitch slapping as necessary, and calming things down.”

Okay. What had happened to the morose, utterly annoying Dallas of the past few months? The one who whined and complained about, well, everything? There’s a smoking-hot alien queen who wants to screw me, but I can’t encourage her because her partners always turn into cannibals, whaa, whaa, whaa. My best friend Devyn married his vampire lover so I don’t have anyone to play with, whaa, whaa, whaa. I’m your husband’s blood slave, whaa, whaa, fucking whaa. If she heard that last one more time, she was going to make him taste his balls again.

He was alive, wasn’t he? He had cool new powers like mind control and superspeed, didn’t he? Kyrin, her too-sexy-for-words husband, had saved Dallas’s ass by sharing his Arcadian blood—and was now training Dallas’s ass. Dallas should have been this happy all along. But at least the old, everything-is-a-joke Dallas was making an appearance today, she thought, rather than the new I-want-to-slash-my-wrists Dallas. Courtesy of Ava and Noelle, a two-woman Apocalypse? She’d have to send the girls a fruit basket.

Or maybe something they could actually use, like a fire and brimstone basket. “Continue,” Mia said with an imperial wave of her hand.

Dallas nodded, a bit disappointed. Probably because she hadn’t complimented his bitch-slapping abilities. Baby. “The otherworlder refused to calm down, said the humans told his woman she hadn’t just been hit with the ugly stick but the entire tree had fallen on her, and the assholes owed her an apology. The humans, of course, told me they’d only spoken the truth and that I should arrest the bastard alien for harassing them about it.”

“Which you didn’t.” Even though the arrest would have been standard protocol. But Mia was head of AIR now—three cheers for her boss deciding to retire early!—and was in the process of making a few changes. No longer would aliens be arrested for de-

fending themselves or demanding respect for their race.

Secretly part otherworlder herself, she was flatout done with prejudice. And now that Kyrin's blood flowed through Dallas's veins—again secretly—Dallas thankfully was, too.

"Nope. I didn't," her second-in-command confirmed with the slightest hint of relish. "Anyway, while I was apologizing to the otherworlder for all humans and their idiot tongues, Ava and Noelle went Death Match on the assholes in question. Now, I didn't see who started it, you understand, just heard a commotion and turned around. By that time the humans, who were both big, burly males, were unconscious and bleeding on the ground, and Ava and Noelle were grinning and banging their fists together in a job well done."

Mia cut back a moan. Changes, good. High incident rate, bad. There was going to be hell—and apparently hospital bills—to pay for that Death Match. Not just for the males, but for herself. 'Cause yeah, top brass would rip into her until she begged for mercy. Which meant they would pretty much rip into her until she bled to death, because she never begged for anything. Well, except when Kyrin got her into bed.

Three boos for her boss deciding to retire early. Had he stayed, this would have been his problem. "So what'd the girls say when you asked about the carnage?"

"Ava said her hand accidentally slipped and made contact with her guy's nose. I said, Repeatedly? And she said, 'Uh, yeah. I'm really clumsy.' And Noelle said her guy was trying to escape, so she took him down like we'd trained her. And oh, we shouldn't worry about the gaping wound in his neck because he probably had that before he entered the bar."

First, how was Noelle such a hardass? The girl was Jaxon Tremain's cousin, and Jaxon was one of AIR's staunchest rule followers. Not to mention, both were richer than Kyrin, who was richer than God. Noelle had been raised in a mansion, for all that was holy, her every need attended to by servants. She should be delicate.

Jaxon's wife a bad influence, maybe? After all, Jaxon was married to the meanest female Mia had ever met. A female who was part robot—literally! Mishka actually had a longer kill list than Mia. And while Mia's list consisted of gunshot and knife wounds, Mishka's featured acid, thumbtacks, and for the people Robot Girl really hated, spoons.

Nah, Mia thought then. The pair hadn't been married that long, and Noelle's first disorderly conduct arrest had happened years ago. Mia knew because she'd studied Tremain's lengthy file before allowing the overindulged delinquent anywhere near the AIR building.

Now, poor but deceptively sweet-looking Ava, Mia understood. The girl had double the arrests, but then, she'd grown up on New Chicago's dirtiest streets. Just like Mia had. There, you were predator or prey, and there was no middle ground.

How had the wealthy girl and the impoverished girl hooked up? Jail? And how the hell had they *remained* friends all these years?

Mia sighed. "So what you're telling me, Dally, is that it's time to promote these two heathens."

Dallas grinned, revealing straight white teeth. He made a production of that grin, reminding her of a curtain rising from a movie screen, an eager crowd desperate for the show to begin. "I don't know how you do it, Mee, but you always reach the moral of the story without any prompting from me."

"Because I'm smarter than you. Anyway, they gotta complete a mission on their own before I can officially offer them a place on my team."

"What do we got on the chopping block? And by the way, I'm smarter than you. My IQ is off the charts, man."

If the chart only reached fifty, then yeah. No need to tax his poor brain with

numbers, though. Silent, she let her head fall against the back of her chair and stared up at the ceiling. They were inside her new office, and she'd had the panels painted blue and white, a replica of the sky, to help with her claustrophobia. This way, she could pretend she was lying on the ground in her spacious backyard with Kyrin resting beside her.

"McKell," she finally said, thinking of the latest case to hit her desk.

"Ouch," Dallas said. "Dousing the girls in gasoline and throwing them straight into the fire."

"I know."

"Poor McKell, though."

Poor girls. McKell was a vampire warrior able to stop time in short bursts, do his damage with no one the wiser, then restart the clock, leaving the raging flames of hell in his wake. His own people had kicked him out of their underground world for being "unstable."

The term amused her—the man had slaughtered hundreds of vampires for daring to lock him up for a few days. Unstable? Try psychotic.

AIR wanted to talk to him about his actions. Preferably alive. But no one had been able to bring him in. In fact, Mia had sent three top-of-the-line agents to apprehend him—bastard wasn't even trying to hide—and he'd sent all three back with severe blood loss, missing fingers, and brain damage. Fine. The agents had been brain damaged before encountering McKell, but then, weren't all men?

Exhibit A: Dallas.

Maybe Ava and Noelle would have better luck.

Besides, it was a scientific fact that females always outperformed males. And who was she to mess with science?

Sure, Jaxon and thereby Mishka would kick up a fit when they heard Little Miss Cousin would be going after a vampire, but Mia didn't exactly care. *Bring on the spoons, bitch.* But maybe she'd send the couple on a prolonged vacay, just in case. Plus, it wouldn't do for Jaxon to give the girls a helping hand. And he would. He wouldn't be able to help himself, and that would do a lot of damage to their street cred. The girls were moving up the ladder fast, so they had a lot to prove—on their own—or none of the other agents would ever take them seriously.

And if the girls did this, if they brought in the big bad, no one would be able to question Mia's decision to advance them rather than incarcerate them. Even better, Ava and Noelle might just think hunting and capturing a rabid vampire was a *good time*.

"Prep them without telling them why they were chosen or what's at stake, and send them out." That way, they'd work this case the same way they worked the rest of their cases, without putting on a dog-and-pony show trying to impress her, and Mia could discover just how much determination those "rough" girls possessed.

Dallas snickered.

Mia blinked over at him, confused. "What?"

"You said 'stake,' and they're going after a vampire. Get it? Stake . . . a vampire? Like in old books and movies."

She rolled her eyes. "You're such a child."

"And you're a jealous old woman because you didn't think of it yourself. Said with affection, of course."

"I'm a year younger than you, jackass. Said with annoyance."

"Yeah, but you're only younger physically."

Brain. Damaged. She liked the morose Dallas better, she decided. "Have you forgotten that you're wanted by a diseased alien queen, your best friend is busy with his wife, and you're Kyrin's blood slave?"

Dallas flipped her off, but his grin never faded.

Maybe she wasn't on top of her game, because she automatically returned that grin with one of her own.

"You love me, you know you do," he said confidentially.

True.

"Seriously. You're like my mom, and I'm like your favorite son. No matter what I do or say, you'll always think I'm adorable."

Mia stood and leaned over the desk. She crooked her finger at him as if she had a secret to share. He, too, leaned forward, eager to learn that secret—poor, brain-damaged kid—and she punched him in the nose. "There. Now I'm like the mom who keeps her stupid shithead in line with a firm hand."

He laughed as blood trickled down his lips and chin. "See. Rough."

And he thought Ava and Noelle were worse than her? Good. Then by the time those two were done, McKell might just wish he'd decorated himself with bows and walked into AIR headquarters on his own.

Two

He never stopped sharpening his blade. Ava Sans watched her target from a few feet away and tried not to drool. Key word: tried. He sat on a large rock in the middle of a government-owned forest. A forest he didn't have permission to be in. Clearly, following rules wasn't his thing. Bless his heart, as her mother used to say about anyone in need of spiritual guidance. "Anyone," of course, had meant everyone. Which had been ironic, since her mother hadn't been sober a day in her life.

Concentrate. Golden moonlight framed the target's back, and a crackling fire illuminated his front. He had pale skin and a face that proved God had an A game. And why the good Lord would have chosen to deviate from that formula and create other faces, she would never know. If everyone looked like this man—like fevered whispers in the dark, forbidden chocolate, and sin in its most tempting incarnation—crime would have ceased long ago. Or maybe never even started. Everyone would have been too busy staring at themselves in the mirror to fight. Or maybe they'd be too busy bedding themselves to even stare in the mirror.

Seriously. That face was flawless. Everyone always talked about how perfect Dallas Gutierrez was, but this man . . . His forehead wasn't too long or short, his nose was wonderfully straight, his cheekbones delightfully sharp, and his chin magnificently square. His bottom lip was plumper than his top, but both were pink and utterly nibbleable. Was that even a word?

Anyway. Vivid violet eyes were framed by long feathering lashes, and his black-as-night hair boasted the slightest wave. His shoulders were wide and his body thick, built for war. Which just happened to be her favorite body type; muscles equaled delicious.

In seconds, she'd memorized every detail about him. For the job. Of course. But the best thing about him, besides that devastating beauty? He wore a necklace made of bones. Human finger bones, from the looks of them. Which meant the case of the missing AIR agent phalanges was solved, at least.

Why had he taken them? Whatever the reason, she wanted a necklace like that for herself. Not only because it would go with all of her outfits, but also because it screamed *powerful and just a little insane*. One glance at that necklace, and most people would run, too afraid to bother him. They wouldn't tease him mercilessly for his mistakes and laugh about them days later in front of his AIR peers.

Ava's hands curled into fists. Maybe she'd steal the necklace from him after she arrested him. Food for thought.

What she knew about the man, besides the fact that just looking at him could give a girl an orgasm: He needed to feed—aka drink blood—only once a week. His name was Victor, but McKell, what everyone called him, was his classification. And in layman terms, his classification was “bad motherfucker.” Apparently, he was a warrior. The warrior. Once leader of the entire vampire army and still savage beyond compare. Unless the comparison was with her best friend Noelle. “Savage” was a wee bit mild for Noelle.

Anyway, Ava had walked into McKell's makeshift camp a few minutes ago, yet he hadn't even glanced up from his task. He hadn't asked her to leave and hadn't questioned her about her sudden appearance and obviously nefarious intentions.

He knew she was here, though. She'd watched his nails grow and sharpen, becoming claws. Yet he didn't fear her enough to bother with her. Or Noelle, who stood beside her. A mistake, but he'd learn. Everyone did.

Ava glanced at her friend, fellow (almost) AIR agent, and partner in many (allegedly heinous) crimes, to gauge the girl's reaction to the man. Noelle, too, stared at him, completely fascinated. Fascination was a good look for her. Hell, everything was a good look for her. Bastard wouldn't stand a chance. Tall, slender, with silky brown hair and velvety gray eyes, Noelle was always the epitome of elegance. Until she opened her mouth. Then she was the epitome of mean. And sarcastic. And rebellious.

The contradiction intrigued anyone with a pulse.

Wait. Did vampires even have pulses? Ava suddenly wondered. Were they the living dead? Maybe. What did she know? Okay, so. Rephrase: the contradiction intrigued . . . anyone. McKell would be no different.

“Dibs,” Noelle said in her hoarse, used-to-be-a-smoker voice.

Ava massaged the back of her neck. “The fact that he's a murderous bloodsucker isn't a deal breaker?”

“With those biceps? No.”

Her gaze returned to McKell. He was shirtless, his muscles on full display. Those to-die-for biceps—literally to-die-for, since a lot of people had probably watched their lives flash before their eyes while those meaty clubs descended—mouthwatering pectorals, and rope after rope of hard-won abs.

“You're right.” Damn. But since Noelle had already called dibs, Ava would never be allowed to run her hands over that deliciously strong body. Was that a . . . tear in her eye? “Just a warning, though. Your name rhymes with his, and I plan to torture you about that *forever*.”

“Still not a deal breaker.”

Damn her friend's stubbornness. Stubbornness Ava was intimately acquainted with.

They'd met years and years ago, after Noelle had been kicked out of every private school in the state and no boardinghouse would take her. Ava had understood the reason why within five seconds of meeting the girl. Noelle's first day at New Chicago Junior High No. 17, she'd taken one look at dirt-poor Ava and said, “I'm bored and need a project. You'll do.”

Ava, of course, had said, “Project this,” and busted her two front teeth.

The next day, Noelle had held her down and chopped off her hair. She'd then given Ava a glittery ribbon to style away the damage. And when the principal had arrived a few minutes later, demanding answers, neither had told on the other.

They'd been inseparable ever since.

“Can I at least have a feel of him when you're done?” Five minutes. That's all she

needed. She'd touch every inch of him—if anyone asked, she'd just say she'd frisked him—and then, the next boyfriend she had . . . hello pretend vampire. Win, win. Not that she'd had a boyfriend in years. Not that she wanted one in the future. Commitment sucked. But hey, so did McKell. She snickered. Anyway, thumbs up for sex. Which she hadn't had in a while, either.

Noelle shrugged. "You can touch him, but only if you do my laundry for a week."

Oh, no. No, no, no. Even the suggestion was cruel. But she said, "I need some think-time." There was a scar on McKell's sternum, stretching to his navel and dipping inside his pants, and the thought of tracing it . . . maybe she could survive the laundry. *That's craziness.*

"I'm kinda pressed for time, so you've got two minutes to decide," Noelle replied. "Starting now."

Finally the vampire stopped running those silver blades together. Had he been listening to their conversation, as they'd hoped? Was he now waiting for her think-time to end to discover her answer?

Two minutes after her two minutes had passed, McKell growled low in his throat. "I'm right here. Stop talking about me as if I'm not."

That voice . . . God hadn't just been on his A game when he created this being. He'd decided to enter a new league. Rough, raspy, and purring, McKell's voice was like hot butterscotch poured over—hmm, butter- scotch. The thought of her favorite candy distracted Ava for a moment.

Yep. Should have called dibs yourself.

"We did," Ava said, forcing her mind on the task at hand. "We stopped talking about you. In fact, you had to break the silence. Remember?"

That earned her a snarl. "Just answer the woman and leave. This is my camp. *Mine!*"

Or not have called dibs. Selfish much? "I've decided. You can have him," Ava said to Noelle. "He's a little too cranky for me. Besides that, I promised myself I'd take a razor to my wrists before ever doing your laundry again."

She hadn't minded the blood and gore on the clothes. Why would she, when the same stuff could be found on her own? The problem had been folding the skanky costumes Noelle supposedly liked to wear in the bedroom—in full view of everyone inside Suds and Bubbles Laundromat. Costumes Ava suspected Noelle had purchased only for her benefit and subsequent humiliation.

"You're such a prude," Noelle muttered.

"Well, you're a pain in my ass."

"Me? You're the ass pain!"

McKell flashed his fangs—long, sharp, and oddly beautiful—before Ava could call her best friend a raging bitch. "Be quiet! Seriously. I preferred the silence." Then, contradicting his own demand, he asked, "So what are you doing here, anyway?"

Mmm, butterscotch. The real deal was too expensive for her to have at every meal, as well as between meals, during the middle of the night, and for all snacks. As she would have preferred. Citywide, sugar was in low supply, the price for it rising every week, it seemed, so she only indulged once a month. Which just happened to be her favorite day of the month. Even if she was on her period.

His voice, though . . . *give me a spoonful of that.*

"Mind out of the candy bowl," Noelle said on a sigh.

They knew each other too well. Right. The vampire had asked a question, and she had a job to do. "We were just passing through, saw your fire, and thought we'd stop by and make out with each other."

His jaw dropped.

“Wanna watch?” Noelle added hopefully.

“Or maybe join?” Ava suggested.

“Whatever. We’re not picky.”

That violet gaze shifted from one to the other, pupils expanding. He licked his lips, tongue pink and wet and, well, pretty. Was everything about the man attractive? Doesn’t matter. Good news: even vampires were perverts.

She shouldn’t have been surprised, even though a part of her still reeled at the knowledge that vampires existed at all. Sure, Ava had known aliens lived here. They’d walked this planet for over eighty years—and as she was only twenty-three years old, that meant they’d lived here her entire life (duh). All different races, sizes, colors, and shapes.

In high school she’d dated a Teran for six whole days, and they were a very catlike species. Lots of rubbing and purring and shedding. Too much rubbing and purring and shedding. Anyway. Vampires had never revealed themselves, even during the human-alien war, and everyone had assumed they were the stuff of myth and legend.

Apparently they’d been living underground for thousands of freaking years. They might have remained a secret forever, even, but AIR had a way of ferreting out the truth.

“Do you always wear weapons when you plan to make out?” McKell snapped, dragging Ava from her thoughts. God, she had to stop letting herself become distracted. And funny that his gaze seemed directed at her, and her alone, boring past her clothes and her skin and, somehow, into her soul. “Don’t try to tell me you’re unarmed. I can smell the weapons on you.”

“Uh, hello. This forest is miles from town, and it’s the dead of night. Of course we’re armed. Plus, my friend is a freak and likes when I rough her up.”

Noelle snorted. “No way. You’re the one who likes it rough.”

“Please! I’m a fragile flower. You know I like to be treated like a lady.”

“I’m not foolish,” McKell interjected, his voice now flat. And yet, somehow that timbre crackled with fury. “You’re both from AIR. You have to be, despite your . . . distractibility. Only agents would be foolish enough to approach me. Again.”

Distractibility—a nice way of saying they argued too much? Probably. And wasn’t that a shocker? A savage who didn’t want to hurt their feelings. She and Noelle would, of course, use that against him.

“We can do this easy, or we can do this hard,” he continued in that same flat, yet furious tone. “Leave, and you can return to Agent Snow just as you arrived. Stay, and you can return to Agent Snow in pieces. Although I’ll keep your fingers for touching what’s mine.” As he spoke, he caressed his necklace. “Your choice.”

Butterscotch, even while threatening.

Ava didn’t reach for her pyre-gun or any of her blades. She kept her arms at her sides, hands empty. She and Noelle had to be careful with this one. He could stop time—for them—while moving freely himself. Which meant he could slash their throats, and they wouldn’t know until he restarted the clock.

“News flash: we didn’t touch anything that belongs to you,” she said, to keep him talking.

“You’re here, aren’t you? So, what’s it to be, girls?”

He’d do it, too. Cut off their fingers without a moment’s hesitation. He was cold, and he was hard, and not in the good way, that she could tell. There was no line he wouldn’t cross to achieve what he wanted. No black and white for him. Only shades of gray. And crimson.

Why the hell was he suddenly a thousand times sexier? The dibs system sucked worse than commitment, she decided.

“Dude,” Noelle said. “You totally stole my line. Ava, did you hear him steal my line? Easy or hard way,” she mocked while pouting. “I had planned to say that to him.”

“I heard, Noelle. At least give him a chance to apologize, though. We do not want a repeat of the last time this happened.”

A muscle ticked in McKell’s jaw. “Did you also hear what I did to the last three agents who came for me? Ava.”

Her name on those wicked lips . . . delectable. She shivered.

Noelle splayed her arms, deceptively innocent. “First, eyes on me, cowboy. I called dibs. Second, we heard. You ate them. So can I sign up for the feasting now, or would you rather I wait until later?”

Now those violet eyes widened, confusion swirling in their depths. A common occurrence around the girl.

“And was that a no on watching us make out with each other?” Ava asked. No mercy. No matter how badly she wanted to tongue him.

His nostrils flared, even as his gaze—which had never left her—traveled over her, lingering in all the right places. Her suddenly pebbling nipples, the now aching apex of her thighs. Goose bumps broke out over her skin, the cool night air blending with the warmth from the campfire and licking over her. Another shiver rocked her.

“Well?” she prompted, hating the breathlessness of her voice.

“That’s a yes,” he rasped.

She almost grinned. Typical male. Little did he know, he’d just bought himself a one-way ticket to AIR HQ.

“Excellent choice! I’ve been dying to put my mouth all over this little morsel for too long. So come here, you sexy piece of sexy goodness, you.” Noelle grabbed Ava by the shoulders and tugged her close, lips lowering to plant a big, wet one.

Ava made sure to moan really loudly as her hands slid down . . . down . . . the seeming delicate bumps of Noelle’s spine. She cupped Noelle’s ass with her right hand, made a mental note to inquire what kind of workout program her friend had been doing, then curled the fingers of her left hand—the one farthest away from the vampire—around a tiny pyre-gun stored beneath Noelle’s too-tight jeans.

“Dear God,” McKell said now. Had he expected them to balk at kissing each other, even after offering to do so?

Without pulling her lips from Noelle’s, she aimed the gun toward him, keeping the barrel flat against her friend, hidden. Then she released Noelle’s ass, let those fingers trace the waist of the jeans, as if desperate to sink down, past her panties and into heat, knowing the vampire’s attention followed, all the while allowing the gun a straight shot.

She squeezed the trigger.

A blue beam erupted, lighting up the night, nailing him in the chest, and stunning him in place. Boom. Done. For the next twenty-four hours, he would see and hear everything around him, but be unable to move.

Too. Easy.

The kiss ended, and Noelle grinned down at her, all white teeth and smugness. “Wow. I really felt your passion for me that time.”

Ava rolled her eyes as she stuffed the gun back into her friend’s pants. “Shut up.”

“Seriously. How long have you been walking around with this huge crush on me?”

“Like you could handle me.”

“Egomaniac.”

“Narcissist.”

Noelle glanced at the unmoving McKell and tsked under her tongue. “What an amateur.”

“I know, right? Mia said he’d be a challenge.”

“Clearly our idea of a challenge differs.”

“Who falls for the lesbian act anymore, anyway?” Ava asked with a disappointed shake of her head.

“Men. Always.”

“Yeah, but this one’s a vampire.”

Noelle patted the top of Ava’s head as if she were a child. And stupid. “A vampire with a penis.”

“True.”

As if the insects surrounding the camp realized the vampire no longer posed a threat, they began to sing and chirp. Amid the chorus, she and Noelle approached McKell. He still sat upon that rock, still held those blades, only now he was immobile. Both of them crouched so that they were eye-to-eye with him.

“He really is beautiful, isn’t he?” Noelle observed.

Since Ava wouldn’t be enjoying him anytime soon, she saw no reason to praise him. “He’s okay, I guess.” God, those eyelashes stretched forever. And up close like this, she could see the flecks of emerald mixed with the violet of his irises. What an odd combination. Odd but gorgeous. Even better, there was a rose tint to his cheeks, as if he was flushed with arousal. For her and only her.

Noelle patted his cheek, just as she’d done to the top of Ava’s head. “Don’t let this destroy your desire for me, McKell. Like I told you, I called dibs, so if you just cooperate with Mia, you and me will be rolling around in bed before you know it. Well, maybe. You were a very naughty boy, and I’ll need to tame you first.”

What was AIR going to do with him? Ava wondered. Question him, yes. She knew that. Test his blood, she knew that, too, since certain vampire blood was the only thing that could defeat a deadly alien virus that caused cannibalism in humans. But would they torture him for hurting several agents? Keep him locked up for the rest of his life? Eventually kill him?

A shame if they did. So pretty. “Let’s discard his weapons and drag him to the car,” she said, straightening. Better to get back to business than consider circumstances she couldn’t hope to change. And shouldn’t want to change.

“But he looks so heavy.” Noelle straightened as well, towering over her.

Most people towered over Ava. She hated it, but no one had invented a way to artificially lengthen legs, so she’d learned to deal. And by “deal,” she meant she beat anyone who teased her into a bloody pulp. “Hence the reason I said drag and not carry.” A groan.

“Why not call AIR and have them swoop in to pick him up?”

“Because we’ll miss our Victory Walk through headquarters.”

Indecision played over her friend’s beautiful face. “I do like a good victory walk, but I don’t like the thought of sweating. Oh, I know!” Noelle brightened. “If you drag him on your own, you can have him. We’ll pretend I never uttered the word dibs.”

“Hell, no. I already told you he’s too cranky for me. He’s all yours.”

“You need to get laid more than I do. Your last overnight relationship”—she air-quoted the word relationship —“was, what? Six months ago?”

“Seven, thank you very much.” And five minutes after the guy had fallen asleep, she’d snuck out. As always. But she’d known then, as she knew now, that having sex with him had been a mistake. He was an AIR trainee like her, and now that all their coworkers knew he’d nailed her—he had a big, stupid mouth—the other guys assumed she was easy, and constantly made a play for their turn.

How much worse would the situation be if she slept with a criminal? Even so sexy a criminal?

“Lookit. I’m only thinking about your health,” Noelle said. “You’ve been so tense

lately, and—oh, my God! I just had the best idea.” Grinning, she clapped and twirled like a toddler who’d just discovered a room of candy-flavored toys. “Let’s take pictures with him before you drag him to the car.”

Split-second subject changes were a Noelle Tremain trademark. “No way. And you’re helping me drag.”

Ignoring her, Noelle settled on McKell’s lap. “Me first. I plan to tell everyone he’s my new boyfriend. Since he is. Someone, and I won’t mention your name, Ava, is just being stubborn about a little heavy lifting.”

She was the stubborn one? Ha! But she knew when she was beaten. Noelle wouldn’t budge until she had her pictures. Sighing, Ava withdrew her cell and captured a few images while her friend switched poses. Over and over again. If she wasn’t mistaken, murderous rage blazed in McKell’s eyes the entire time. Way to poke at the bear. And yet she never stopped snapping those pictures. And not because of Noelle.

One, McKell was completely edible on film. Something a guy like him had to appreciate. And two, once AIR had him, she probably wouldn’t see him again and definitely wouldn’t be able to point at him and say, “Guess what? I bagged and tagged him,” to other agents.

Now she could say the words, and when those agents replied, “There’s no way a shortie like you could have taken down a hulking vampire like McKell,” she could bust out the photos. Everyone would be impressed. They’d stop looking at gutter-raised, baby-faced Ava like she needed to be in a kitchen baking cakes—or in bed waiting for a man and charging two hundred an hour.

“All right. We’ve got enough pictures to fill a scrapbook. Let’s do this,” she said. “I wanna go home. I’m starved.”

“Fine. I’ll help carry. But FYI, you’re always starved,” Noelle muttered, frisking the vampire and tossing his weapons to the ground.

For some reason, the fury in his eyes increased from I-could-explode-and-kill-you-both murderous to I-could-explode-and-take-out-the-entire-world nuclear. As if removing his guns and knives was a far worse crime than capturing lifelong images of his shame spiral.

“Done,” Noelle said, unaware of the change. She slid her arms under his right armpit. “He’s now clean.”

Ava did the same to his left armpit, wholly aware yet unwilling to let it detour her. “What do you mean, I’m always starved? What are you trying to say?”

“Oh, sorry. I thought I made that clear. I was saying you eat too much, and maybe you should have rethought the miniskirt tonight.”

They hefted his big, heavy body up, and her biceps immediately began to shake.

“I look fat to you?” All hundred and twenty pounds of her? Most of which was muscle, if she were being (kind of) honest. Damn, that irresistible butterscotch. She ran her tongue over her teeth, even though she knew Noelle was prodding her only to energize her. “Oh, poor thing, I think one of your contacts has slipped. Let me help.” With her free hand, she slapped her friend on the back of the head. Hard.

“Ow! I don’t wear contacts, and you know it.”

“My bad.”

“From lover to fighter,” Noelle said with a dejected sigh. “Sad, really, that you let our romance die so quickly.”

Ava bit her lip to stop herself from laughing. What a great day this had turned out to be, she thought. And really, it was only going to get better. How could it not?

Three

As the females tugged him through dirt and leaves, occasionally dropping him, tearing his pants, his skin, kicking him once out of spite because he “could stand to lose a few pounds,” McKell seethed. Puny humans. Taunt him, would they? Take pictures of him in this hated state, would they? Take his weapons, would they? He, who didn’t share anything. Ever! And that wasn’t the worst of their crimes. Kiss in front of him and not finish what they’d started, would they?

They would learn the error of their ways. Soon. He would teach them, as they’d just taught him.

He hadn’t expected them to follow through with their “desire” to kiss each other. Much as he’d wished otherwise. Neither had smelled of lust, so he’d known the pretend affection was for his benefit. He’d expected them to lean in, then launch themselves at him just before contact. That’s what he’d prepared himself for. That’s when he would have frozen them in place and drank from them one at a time before sending them back to AIR, defeated and humiliated.

When they had kissed, he’d been momentarily blinded by lust of his own. The dainty hands of the tiny one, roving over the Amazon’s body . . . his blood had heated, singeing his veins. He’d suddenly wanted those hands on him. Roving over his body.

Suddenly? *Liar*. He’d imagined touching her since the first moment he’d spied her. Which had been a shock. Humans were food to him, nothing more, and a man didn’t play with his food. Honestly, he shouldn’t have wanted her—Ava, that was her name, and it was as soft and delicate as she appeared—in any way. Not even as sustenance.

He’d gorged only an hour before her arrival, and should have been satisfied for the next six days. But the moment she’d entered his camp, he’d smelled her—orchids, sunlight he’d loathed until that moment, and some kind of sugary candy completely unique to her—and his mouth had watered. His shaft had ached. He was absolutely certain he’d smelled something as decadent at some point in his long, long life, though he couldn’t recall when or what.

His reaction was explainable, though. He’d been without a vampire lover for months, so his body would have lusted after anything. *So why didn’t you want the tall one who called “dibs”?*

What a ridiculous question. He hadn’t lusted after the one named Noelle because she reminded him too much of his own kind, and right now he was furious with all vampires and would rather kill a bloodsucker than screw one.

He ignored the flaw between the two rationales. And what the hell was “dibs,” anyway? He’d visited this surface world many times before being kicked from the vampire caves, but he’d never heard the term. Was it some type of ownership? Probably. The females seemed to think he now belonged to Noelle.

Well, he belonged to no one. The only female he would have bound himself to was Maureen, known here as Bride McKells, but she’d chosen to give herself to another. To Devyn, king of the Targons. As if McKell weren’t good enough. As if he wasn’t a thousand times better than that bastard Targon scum.

McKell had slaughtered entire vampire villages in less than an hour. With no aid! He was good enough for anyone. Even Ava, who hadn’t wanted to do Noelle’s laundry to be with him. Laundry—the washing of clothes, for God’s sake—when there were hundreds of vampires who would have been willing to cut out their own hearts to even touch the dirt on his boots. Well, maybe not hundreds. Thousands was probably more accurate, he decided in the next instant, refusing to give in to self-deprecation. He was a prize, damn it!

Even still, now he just wanted to be on his own, left alone, with time to come to grips with the horrid topside eternity that awaited him. And in a hundred years or so, he should be able to say, “mission accomplished.” Maybe.

All he knew now was that he hated this world. The sun, burning his beautiful skin and ruining part of his day every damn day. The cloying scents of human food and perfume. AIR constantly trying to “chat.” Annoying.

“Come on, Noelle. Put your back into it!” Ava said, irritated.

“I am, damn it! But I can’t help it if I’m not strong enough to lug around this much dead weight.”

“You’re a hundred pounds heavier than me. You should be running laps around me.”

“A hundred pounds? You bitch! You better watch your back, because I will punish you for that whopper.”

Clearly, they despised each other. He’d dealt with humans all the many centuries of his life, stealing them from this surface and carting them underground to keep them as food-slaves. Most argued, yes, but only enemies had argued like these two, calling each other hateful names, complaining, kissing—uh, never mind that last one. That devastating kiss had no bearing on the situation. What did: he could use their dislike of each other to his advantage.

“You once pushed me and the weights you’d tied around my waist into oncoming traffic,” Ava growled. “You’re strong enough for this. You’re just lazy!”

Noelle had once tried to kill Ava? That, he didn’t like for some reason. But he wouldn’t worry about that now. She meant nothing to him. Well, except maybe breakfast.

“Your brain has clearly rotted,” Noelle snarled. “I’m as lazy as Mia Snow on steroids, adrenaline injections, and caffeine overload.”

“Don’t make me kick your ass.”

Would they ever kiss again? he wondered, then scowled. No, they wouldn’t kiss again, because he was going to murder them both. If they didn’t kill each other first. Which seemed highly likely. They were predators, both of them, and they’d probably scratch each other to death if they ever got into bed. An arousing thought. An irritating thought, since they didn’t deserve a single moment of pleasure.

“I swear to God I’m going to stab you in your heartless chest with a butter knife if you don’t—oh, good. I see the car,” Ava said with relief. “Act like my friend for five more minutes and actually help.”

“Have I told you yet that you’re a bitch?”

“No. You’ve been too busy tilting McKell so that I’d have to take the brunt of his weight.”

He liked Ava’s voice. Smooth, as deceptively sweet as her face. A face that was slightly rounded, with big brown eyes, an up-tilted nose, and heart-shaped lips. A face better suited for angelic paintings, and yet midnight fantasies were what claimed his mind every time he looked at her. And framing all that sweetness was an even sweeter tumble of amber curls. Curls made for fisting, tugging, pinning so that she would be forced to take the hottest flames of his kiss.

Only thing that wasn’t sweet about her—besides her demeanor—was her body. What she lacked in height, she made up for in curves. She had breasts that strained the white tank top she wore, a waist that flared beneath a dangerously short skirt, and sun-kissed legs encased in calf-high boots.

“Moment he comes out of stun,” Noelle huffed, “I’m breaking up with him.”

“So I don’t get to sing about Noelle and McKell sitting in a tree?”

“Shut up. Anyway, I can’t be with a man who can’t find a way out of stun to help

me carry him. It's discourteous, you know? And selfish."

Her babbling made no sense. What an odd woman.

"I agree," Ava said.

She understood that nonsense? *Just you wait*, he thought darkly.

When the females pulled him out of the line of trees and into a clearing, he froze them in place with only a thought. Their minds, their bodies. They were stunned, like him, only they had no idea what happened around them.

Inside, he grinned. Everyone assumed he could stop time, and they were right. He could stop the clock for several minutes at a time. But that wasn't all he could do. He could also stop the people around him while time passed without their knowledge. And that's exactly what he did now.

He held his captors in place for one hour . . . two.

He should have grown bored, simply staring ahead as he was, but too much relish filled him. Oh, yes, these females would learn. He knew this area, knew the forest itself was gated to keep humans out, and knew no one would stumble upon them.

They were his.

Ava . . . his . . . Down boy, he thought with a growl.

To think of her in such a possessive way was to undermine his plan for her. And he— McKell cursed as he noticed a shimmering curtain of air to his right. A doorway. The air had thickened, dust motes glowing in the moonlight, a tangible glitter that somehow looked like welcoming arms. Not again. He'd seen such a doorway every time he'd visited this topside world.

In fact, he'd seen one yesterday, and the day before, and the day before that. Once and only once had he been tempted to touch. He'd reached out, but that dappled air had sucked at him, pulling him closer backward, warrior instincts saving him—sometimes you fought, sometimes you retreated, always you returned later and killed—and the suction had ceased. But he'd never forgotten the experience, and never wanted a repeat.

How did you fight a split in the ether? Especially when that split might be sentient. Deep down, he thought he knew where the doorway, or whatever it was, led, what it wanted. The answers? To eternal darkness and his damnation. Why target him, though, he wasn't sure.

Pay it no heed and it will go away. As always. He released the women from his mental hold.

No longer fettered, Ava and Noelle continued forward, unaware anything had changed and thankfully avoiding the curtain. Though he knew they couldn't see it. Only he could. Over the years, he'd watched humans, otherworlders, and vampires alike walk through them, as if the air were merely that. Air.

When they had passed the curtain and adjusted to the fading darkness, he froze them in place once again. Another hour, then two, passed quickly for him. Thankfully, another doorway never opened.

Again he released them for only a moment, let them continue with their chat, move forward, adjust, before refreezing them.

Another hour. This one eked by. But finally, he let them go for good.

"Holy shit, my arms are burning," Ava rasped. "And shaking, too. I feel like I've held him for days."

"Me, too. And damn, the sun's coming out already. We're slower than I realized."
"Damn it. Hurry."

Obviously exhausted, they hauled him the rest of the way, tripping and cursing, and stashed him inside the waiting vehicle.

"His skin will burn if we leave him like this. Right? Didn't Mia tell us vampires are

sensitive to light?"

Ava stood in his open doorway, peering down at him and tapping a blunt-tipped finger against her chin. Not for a moment did he delude himself into thinking she truly cared about keeping him unharmed.

"So what?" Noelle said.

"So. Mia will be pissed if we bring her damaged goods. Let's cover him."

Good thing he hadn't deluded himself. He would have been feeling supremely disappointed just then. Which he wasn't. Not even a little.

Damn her. He was a vampire, far superior to a measly human, and he deserved her admiration and consideration.

"Shame to cover up that face, though." With a sigh, Noelle tossed a blanket over his head. The material draped his bare shoulders and torso, protecting him from the sun's rapidly strengthening rays.

"Happy now?"

"Cranky as the vampire now?"

Muttering curses at each other, they settled into the front of the car. He heard one of them push a series of buttons on the dash. A second later, the air conditioner blasted. Before either female could program the car to return to AIR, however, McKell froze them in place. And this time, he didn't bother releasing them every few hours to keep them from suspecting he was manipulating them. He simply allowed the hours to pass, the sun rising, heating, ruining what should have been the best part of the day.

Hour after hour after hour passed, washing him in gold, then orange, then a hazy pink. Finally, blessedly, that hated sun began to wane, dulling even the pink light seeping through the fabric of the blanket. By the time darkness once again surrounded him, the stun had worn off, freeing his muscles from immobility.

Vengeance.

Scowling, McKell tossed the blanket aside. A moment ticked by as his gaze accustomed itself to the open space. He saw that Ava and Noelle were in their seats, Noelle's hand raised to push more buttons, Ava's deep in a bag, as if she'd been digging through the contents.

What had she been searching for?

He couldn't lean forward and check as he wanted. Clear, impenetrable shield-armor divided the front and back of the car. That wouldn't be a problem, but breaking through it would take longer than he was willing to spend. He glanced at the door beside him.

No handles.

The car, he knew, would only obey Ava and Noelle's commands. If they said, "Open," the door would pop open automatically, since it was programmed to recognize and obey their voices, but he wasn't about to free either female yet. At the moment, surprise was his best friend. So McKell did the only thing he could—he kicked the door off its hinges and unfolded from the backseat, a move that allowed him to exit just as quickly as if the car had catered to his voice.

Cool night air wafted around him, bringing with it the scents of pine, night birds, and seductive moonlight. He stretched, his abused body protesting every movement, and that intensified his anger.

So angry was he, in fact, that he slashed his claws into Ava's door with more force than necessary, letting them embed deeply before ripping the offending block out of the way. The metal soared over his shoulder, landing with a heavy thud behind him. Then Ava was in front of him, nothing preventing him from ripping her out, as well.

"I warned you," he growled at her, even though he knew she couldn't hear him.

“Easy or hard, and you picked hard.” Rather than slash her to pieces, however, he crouched beside her and grabbed the bag.

Motions still stiff, he rifled through the contents. Different sized blades. A badge that read “Agent in Training.” His eyes widened. In training? She was merely *in training*? AIR had sent a child after him? God, the insult. Almost enough to send him racing to their base, destroying every brick, every human inside, just to prove that he could.

Don't lose focus. He could rant about their insolence later.

Teeth grinding, he continued his search of little Ava's bag. Lastly, he found “butterscotch”-flavored lipgloss. Butterscotch. Not something he was familiar with.

He twisted the cap and sniffed the contents, and his mouth instantly watered. That's what Ava smelled like. Sugary, warm, and toasted in the sun. All the things he suddenly wanted to be. The desire was foreign, unwelcome, and not to be tolerated. He wasn't some callow youth, so easily swayed by sexual urges.

He'd had countless lovers over the centuries, and knew how fleeting those urges could be. How meaningless. He couldn't even recall a face or a name of one of the women who had warmed his bed. Cold of him, perhaps, but for a man with his sense of possession, he had always purposefully maintained distance in that area of his life.

He stuffed Ava's gloss in his pocket—to torment her with its loss, he told himself, and not because he wanted a reminder of her, of her scent, of the hunger she elicited—then tossed the bag and the rest of its contents behind him. Then he focused on Ava.

Her curls fell over her shoulders, shiny and—he pinched several between his fingers—soft as ocher velvet. Moonlight caressed her, turning her flawless skin to liquid gold. He traced the back of his knuckle along the curve of her cheek, far more gently than he'd meant. That, too, was soft. Would be a shame to mar her, he decided, then frowned.

She was already marred. There were several scars running the length of her arms, and many crisscrossing her hands. He lifted each hand, studying. Too many scars for such a young, “in training” agent. Besides, though some of those scars were clearly newer than others, none were pink and fresh. Which meant she'd been fighting most of her obviously short life. McKell wasn't sure if that disturbed him, aroused him, or amused him.

Scowling again, he slid one arm around her lower back and one under her legs. He carried her a short distance from the car and lay her down, careful, so careful not to jostle. He did the same with Noelle, only he dropped her flat on her ass. Why the difference in treatment, he didn't know. Didn't care to ponder. Then he proceeded to rip the vehicle to pieces, just as he'd promised to do to the girls, piling the remains around them, forming a wall. A reminder of their failure with him.

When he finished, he was panting, covered in a sheen of perspiration, his anger somewhat dimmed. Still. He was tracing his tongue over his fangs, some other unnameable emotion humming inside him as he rejoined the humans and removed their clothing.

Noelle was first, and he stripped her without pause. Ava, however, he found himself lingering over, every new inch revealing a deeper appreciation of her femininity and his wavering restraint.

White lace bra. Front clasp. *Nice.* Her breasts were lush, with nipples that were the color of honey-dipped apples. Her belly was flat, with a navel that hollowed perfectly. A tongue could lose itself in that navel. White lace underwear. Ribbioned on the sides. Only needed a tug to unlace them . . . *Really nice.* Her thighs were firm, the apex guarded by a tiny triangle of amber curls.

When he finished, he realized pure temptation lay before him.

She's human, he reminded himself. Weak, withering. Food. Still. He couldn't leave her naked, he decided. If she were to stumble upon a male, that male would want her. Obviously. That male would probably try to "hit on her," as the humans said. She would rebuff him. McKell knew this only because the thought of her accepting returned the plumes of rage. And when her tart tongue finished rebuffing, the male would fight her, as pride demanded. The two would roll around on the ground, and the male's penis might accidentally slip inside her. McKell couldn't risk it.

Not because he cared who the woman slept with, that wasn't why he raged, he rationalized, but because, again, she didn't deserve pleasure. Not that she'd find pleasure from her attacker.

His teeth gnashed together. Again, he refused to acknowledge the flaw in his reasoning.

He put Ava's bra and panties back on her, then reluctantly did the same for her . . . friend. Enemy. Whatever. That done, he pocketed Ava's phone and again peered down at the curly-haired witch. Beautiful.

Shove your tongue back into your mouth, and finish what you started. He forced all thoughts of touching and tasting from his mind, and withdrew the gloss he'd stolen from her. Then, he began writing directly on her body.

When he finished, he was actually trembling from the effort to resist doing more to her.

In a few days, when he'd gotten his desires under control, he would find her again, he decided. He'd use her as she had planned to use him. Because, if he liked her scent, connoisseur that he was, other vampires would, too. They would be drawn to her, would want to drink from her. And rather than having to track them down himself, as he'd had to do before AIR had started gunning for him, distracting him, they would come to him.

Now they ran from him, scared of him. But if they were preoccupied with Ava, he would have no trouble grabbing them. Finally he could question them and discover how they lived here. How they survived in that wretched sun.

Yes, he liked this plan.

Ava wouldn't, though, he thought, and he was grinning as he strode away.

**

"What the hell?" Ava gasped out. One moment she'd been inside the car, searching for her lipgloss, the sun fighting its way into the sky. She hadn't moved, only a second had passed, yet now she was outside, the night thick and dark, an almost suffocating cloak.

And holy hell, the car was in shambles around her, claw marks slashing through the metal.

"We're in our undies!" Noelle squeaked beside her.

Ava jackknifed to her feet, knees almost giving out as she peered down at herself. No top, no skirt, no shoes. Only her bra and matching panties.

Shit. She searched, but there was no sign of her clothes. "That tricky bastard! He did this." And she floundered between admiration, humiliation, and horror. The strength required to destroy a car like that . . . immense. The intelligence required to outwit her . . . equally so. But God, the knowledge that she'd failed, choking.

What else had he done?

Frantically she patted her neck. Thank the Lord. No puncture wounds. Still. There was no question McKell had defeated her just as surely as he'd defeated the other agents sent after him. She'd been so cocky, so certain of her success. After all, she hadn't lost a fight since Judy Demarko, the world's biggest seventh-grade bully, had slammed her head into a brick wall and hacked off her hair—why did girls always do

that to her?—while she was too dazed to move. All because Judy's ex-boyfriend had asked her out. Well, and maybe because Ava had stashed Onadyn, an illegal alien drug, in Judy's bag the day before, getting her kicked out of school, her reign of terror finally over. But that was merely speculation.

"I thought he could only stop time in short bursts," Noelle said. She stood, as well, and tossed up her arms, the picture of exasperated female. "Yet he clearly stopped us."

"Which means you thought wrong." Ava, too.

"Thanks for stating the obvious. You're lucky I don't—" Noelle gasped.

"What?" Ava whipped left and right, scanning the forest for any sign of intruders. They were alone, the insects as quiet as they'd been around McKell. The scent of him lingered, though, as if he'd only just left.

Warm, intoxicating . . . necessary.

Oh, hell, no. She hadn't just thought that word. Necessary. She wiped it from her vernacular.

The gasp turned to giggles, and Noelle pointed to her chest.

"What?" she demanded again, looking down and seeing something golden—letters, she realized—smeared on her skin, just above her bra. She frowned, sniffed. Butterscotch. Mmm. Her stomach rumbled. "What does it say?"

Noelle just grinned at her.

She tilted her head, trying to decipher all four of those letters. When she did, she gnashed her molars in irritation. And more admiration, damn it, followed by a stupid wave of giddiness.

McKell had taken her lipgloss and spelled the word DIBS.