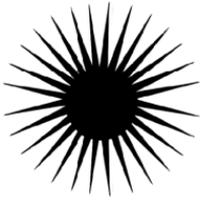


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For Bea –

The only person who understood from the very beginning that the real love story has always been Sage and P, because some of the greatest and most powerful relationships of all are the ones we share with our friends.



I

P

The front door had barely clicked shut behind them as Berion twirled, threw Parisian shopping bags in the corner and told Sage to sit. ‘We need to talk.’

And it all came spilling out. The big secret they were all in on apart from Sage, the last to find out.

And the look on Sage’s face at the end of it all? It took everything inside P not to cover her face with guilt as she watched her friend look between them and realize, one by one, they all already knew, and none of them had told her.

P had made her peace a long time ago with the fact that her one curse as a poltergeist was that she could not touch a living soul. She didn’t even mind it so much. The only time she ever regretted it was when she couldn’t comfort her best friend.

‘You’re saying . . . I’m . . . I’m . . .’

Berion nodded.

Sage was part-werewolf, part-warlock. A werewolf with magic. She was an illegal hybrid.

So illegal that Oren himself had executed every other

hybrid known to exist.

Made by a powerful warlock who had allowed himself to be changed by a werewolf and then set about conducting experiments on humans to see what he could create. Magical wolf hybrids. He'd been building an army. For what, who knew? Whatever it was, it wouldn't have been good. Oren had executed him too, before his plans could come to fruition.

But one or two hybrids had slipped through the net.

Harland. Their supposed friend. Assailant in the case that'd brought Sage and Oren together – he'd been a hybrid. But he was dead now. Oren had executed him, as well.

And now there was Sage. As far as they knew, the last of her kind.

And Oren was in love with her.

'Could I . . . settle?'

The fact that it was this question Sage asked first broke P's heart. Because P understood exactly why she was asking it.

'Perhaps,' Berion told her truthfully. 'But we just don't know for someone like you.'

'Settling varies from warlock to warlock but can start anywhere from late teens into early twenties,' Hozier offered gently from her seat in the spare armchair. Settling, the process where warlock magic hit full maturity and the ageing process slowed into millennia. 'So, I suppose we'll find out soon.'

‘Sage?’ P pushed quietly.

Sage stared blankly at the wall, processing.

Berion tried instead. ‘Are you OK?’

She shook her head.

And then she exploded.

‘I’m not OK. *This* is not OK.’ She rounded on Oren. ‘You knew and never told me?’

‘I didn’t know for sure. I didn’t want to get your hopes up—’

Then Sage was on her feet. ‘Get my hopes up?’ she screeched, her voice rising a thousand decibels in seconds. The finger pointing in his face was already turning into a talon, blood dripping on to the rug. P tried not to cringe. It wasn’t the time to start sponging the rug before it stained but— ‘You bastard,’ Sage snarled. ‘I begged you to let me die. *Begged* you, Oren, so I could stay young forever. Stay with *you!*’

‘Well . . . this is the better option, isn’t it?’ he shot back, holding his arms out wide.

P groaned internally. It was the wrong moment to be flippant. Berion winced at Sage’s bark of hysterical laughter.

‘The better option?’ She took a half-step back, shaking her head in disbelief. ‘Do you know how many times it’s crossed my mind to just do it myself? Die now, so at least my ghost would be young—’

‘Sage!’ P gasped, appalled.

But Sage only had eyes for Oren. ‘So, yeah. It is the better option. And *thank God* you’ve finally bothered to tell me before I jumped off a *FUCKING BUILDING, OREN!*’

P couldn’t even look at the devastation on Oren’s face. It almost felt obscene. It felt like none of the rest of them should be there for this . . . as something so precious between them fractured.

‘How long?’ she demanded. ‘How long have you suspected?’

Oren opened his mouth, then closed it again.

P swallowed.

‘I swear to God,’ she warned him, a flash of wolfish yellow crossing her eyes. ‘You’d better answer me.’

‘Does it matter?’

‘*How long, Oren?*’

‘The first time you grew just the claws and never realized that shouldn’t be possible.’

‘That happened days after we met! That’s the whole *goddamned time!*’ The hand that came to her mouth was shaking, blood from those claws smearing across her cheeks as she tried to wipe her tears away. Her breaths were becoming shallow, and P could see she was losing the internal battle for this not to descend into a full-blown panic attack. ‘Everything we’ve built together, Oren?’ Sage sobbed. ‘You’ve let it be built on a lie!’

‘Sage, no—’ Oren made a sound P couldn’t describe. Like a wounded animal. ‘I just . . . I didn’t want to scare you!’

Other than that awful night Sage had lain dying on that storage room floor, it was the first time P had heard Oren raise his voice, loud and full of strained panic. Berion sat still as a statue, his head bowed, trying to make himself as invisible as possible as this pair they'd watched kiss under a glittering Eiffel Tower only a couple of nights before screamed at each other, tears rolling down their faces.

Hozier looked at her across the coffee table, eyes wide, but P shook her head. *Don't get involved.*

'Scare me?' Sage demanded. 'You thought lying was better? You thought keeping me in the dark was fairer than risking me fearing the truth? That wasn't your decision to make—'

'I didn't want you to be scared of *me*, Sage!' Oren's chest heaved. 'I'd already told you what I did to them! What I'd be expected to do to you too.' He looked like he might be sick. 'I kept telling myself it'd never last; all of this.' He gestured helplessly around the room – their home. 'And I can accept if it all ends because of something else I've done in my past, but not out of fear I'd do something to you over this.'

The room fell into a painful, horrifying silence.

Sage said nothing else. She turned on her heel and left.