



# ALWAYS EROS

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
MIA MONROE

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Immortal Assassins 3

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MIA MONROE

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This book and all elements are 100% human created.

## Content Warnings

This book features a team of vampire assassins who take out really bad people. There is on page violence including vampires being vampires and bad guys doing bad things.

- Cult elements (not Christian)
- Drug Use

The relationship between MCs is low angst and the book has an HEA.



# Contents

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[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[A Note From Mia](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Mia Monroe](#)



## Prologue

London, England 1722

“The illness is ravaging his highness. I must advise you to say your goodbyes soon.”

Though the doctor is near the door in my large room, I can still hear him, along with my mother’s soft sobs and my father demanding something else be done. It’s useless, and we all know it, but I suppose it’s important to maintain some level of hope, no matter how futile.

“Prince Henry’s condition is dire,” the doctor says, his tone somber. “I assure you, your highness, if there was anything more I could do, I would.”

“I will not lose another child to this disease,” my father says. “Henry has already lost so much.”

I’d laugh if my lungs allowed it, but just breathing is enough exertion. Delirium is setting in from the high fever, my body now too weak to hold itself up. My mother has to spoon feed me like a child, rather than the thirty-year-old man that I am. I’ve lost my wife and the child she carried. I’ve lost everything.

“Forgive my indiscretion, your highness,” the doctor says, his voice low but still loud enough for me to hear. “But I have heard of someone whose practices are, shall we say... unusual. It is likely beneath his highness, but perhaps there is help there. The common class has benefited.”

“What is this you speak of?” my father asks. “Black magic? Voodoo? For a prince?”

I turn in my bed, groaning in pain, in an attempt to watch the interaction. The doctor whispers now, and my mother clutches her chest, while my father's face turns dead serious.

"Bring him to me," my father demands. "Whatever his price, but you must be discreet."

"Of course, your highness. I will go now. Time is of the essence."

Moments later, my mother returns to my bedside with a servant. I know the process now. They will wash every inch of me in cool water to temper the fever, but it won't work. It will only provide a few minutes of relief before the heat takes hold again.

After they leave, I turn my head toward the window. My beloved gardens are barely within my view, but simply knowing they are there lifts my mood. I desperately wish to see them again, smell the blossoming flowers, sit on my favorite bench, and write my poetry. It is that desire that keeps me clinging to life.

I rarely bother to think past that or my will to live will slip away. What will my life be like now if I do recover? A weakened version of myself, the pity of England? A shallow breath rattles painfully through my chest, the urge to cough strong, but I fight it back. I cannot stand the pain it causes.

I am a prince with no wife. No heir. Certainly, another wife could be found, but no one could replace Elisabetta. Not just her beauty, but her warmth and kindness, her joy for life. Yet she was struck down as easily as a thief. There is no justice in this sickness. No discernment. No, we are all equal in its wrath—prince and pauper alike.

My eyes grow heavy as another wave of fever ravages me. Desperately, I try to conjure a picture of Elisabetta's face, but the effort is too great. Perhaps it would be better to just die. What do I have other than a garden and responsibilities I do not want? As a cousin to the throne, it will never be mine, but being part of the royal family requires a decorum I find stifling.

If I died, I could be with Elisabetta again, if what the priests say is true and there is a heaven. But even if there is, what cruel god would take a beautiful young woman carrying a child away from all she loved? I hate any god who would take her from us. I hate the god who sits back and allows this scourge to ravage all of England. I will not worship and give thanks to a god like this. Perhaps my death will lead to nothing. Right now, that sounds just fine.

With that, my mind made up, I finally surrender to it. Clinging to my

gardens is no longer enough. I simply stop fighting. Whatever is on the other side of this life, I will greet it with open arms.

My breaths grow shallow, my throat too dry to swallow. I close my eyes, hearing Elisabetta's joyful laugh, seeing the way my mother smiled so proudly on my wedding day, the hope in my father's eyes for grandchildren. All lost.

"I... tried..." I whisper. "Can't... hold... on."

The life in me slowly drains away. I want to call out for my parents, but I don't have the strength. I hope they know I loved them.

*Henry.*

The sound of my name pulls me from the darkness surrounding me.

*Henry. Drink.*

Cool metal presses against my lips as a tangy, slightly metallic liquid coats my tongue.

"That's it. Swallow it. You'll feel better."

The voice is male and accented. I've not heard it before. That I'm sure of.

"A little more," the man says, pouring more of the strange-tasting liquid down my throat.

The more I drink, the more I feel my strength returning, the fever fog lifting away. My body sits more solid around me, my breathing deep and steady once more.

"How...?" I'm too astonished to speak as the illness slips away, leaving me intact and clear-headed again. As I focus on the man hovering over me, two other men linger at the foot of my bed, but then I realize I am not in my room.

I sit up abruptly in a panic. "Where am I?"

"My home," the man with light brown hair says. His accent is definitely Irish. "Do not be afraid, Henry."

"You address me as if we are friends."

"I hope we will be since it is I who brought you back to life."

"Did I... did I die?"

"Not completely, however, your family doctor believes you did. I was summoned to your death bed to help with my 'black magic' as your father

calls it.” He smiles, brushing my hair back from my forehead. “But you were still here. Just barely.”

The two men at the end of the bed study me with curious faces. “Who are you?” I ask.

“I am Yves,” the man closest to me says. “These are my brothers, Alessio and Leander.”

Alessio has olive skin and long black hair, with features that look carved from marble. Leander is dark haired too, but his falls to his shoulders, his features soft and almost pretty. There’s not a hint of resemblance between them all, but I choose not to voice this observation. “Am I well now?”

“You are,” Yves says.

“So I may go?”

“By all means,” Yves answers, a smirk on his lips. “But first, I offer you an alternative.”

I scoff. “An alternative? I am a prince of the crown. I do not have alternatives available to me.”

“Ah, but you do now. Your family believes you to be dead. They are mourning you as we speak, preparing for your state funeral.”

My chest tightens. “My mother grieves.”

“Yes. Your father too. They have not announced it yet, not until I return with a final report.”

I shake my head. “They gave me to you?”

“A last attempt to save their beloved eldest son. Your father is dubious, but your mother pleaded with him, and here you are. Resurrected.”

“What do you want? Money? We have plenty.”

The men in the room chuckle softly. “We want so much more than money,” Alessio says, his eyes oddly fixated on me. His accent sounds Italian to me.

“I-I don’t understand.”

“Dear, sweet, princely Henry,” Yves says, carding his fingers through my hair in such a familiar way it staggers me. “Let me ask you this. What are you returning to, exactly?”

“I have... Erm, well, I am a prince. I have royal duties.”

“Such as?” Leander asks. He has a strange accent—slightly English, but mixed with something else.

“Whatever is required of me,” I answer. “I will likely make appearances to assure the public I am well. I may be asked to court another wife to

produce an heir for my father.”

“Is that what you want?” Yves asks. “You have a rare opportunity, Henry. Leave your royal life behind for one so incredible your mind cannot even comprehend it. Come with us.”

I pull my head back slightly. “Come with you where?”

“On adventures,” Alessio says, sitting on the edge of the bed.

“We joined Yves,” Leander says, sitting on the other side of my legs. “Our lives together are magical. You could be with us.”

Shaking my head, I try to make sense of what they are offering. “I’m afraid I don’t understand. Where do you live? What country are you loyal to? What is your profession? Your family name?”

“So many royal concerns,” Yves says, softly, gazing into my eyes. “To be expected. You’ve been raised sequestered from the real world.” He takes my hand in his, stroking it softly. The gesture is oddly soothing. “I know your soul, Henry. I know your heart’s deepest desires. I can give them to you. Everything you want, even the things you don’t allow yourself to wish for, can be yours.”

“That’s... not possible. You cannot know me.”

“And yet, he does,” Alessio says, rubbing my foot through the blankets. “We all do.”

“But how? Can you read my thoughts?”

“Yes,” Yves says, plainly. “I can.”

I realize with sudden shock that this is no ordinary man I’m dealing with. He has the ability to wipe away a terrible illness in mere minutes. I should not be shocked that he has other unworldly skills.

“Why do you want me to go with you?” I ask.

“Because I desire you,” Yves says. “You will fit in nicely with our family. I can feel it.”

“You look like an angel,” Alessio says.

“As soon as we saw your face,” Leander says, smiling. “We knew you had to be ours.”

“Be yours? What does that mean?”

“Part of our family,” Yves answers. He lifts my hand, studying my fingers before pressing kisses to each. The act is both scandalous and deliciously tempting. “You have longed for a masculine touch since you were barely a man,” Yves says, his eyes flickering up to me, the green in them shining like hand-cut emeralds. “But you shoved it down, buried it, and

followed your duties to find a wife.”

“I loved Elisabetta,” I whisper. “She was a perfect wife.”

“You can love your wife and still want the touch of someone else. Someone who can provide what your sweet wife could not.”

“Now you would not be unfaithful to her,” Alessio says. “You are free to keep the memory of her love in your heart, while allowing new joy into your life.”

“And your bed,” Leander says.

“But the choice is yours,” Yves says. “We will no sooner force you than we will harm you. There are just a few things you need to know should you decide to join us.”

The other two men scoot a bit closer and the energy of being surrounded by three beautiful men makes my stomach flutter. How is it possible that Yves knows my most scandalous desires? I told only Elisabetta of my secret desires. I wanted her to know me entirely, and she still accepted me as her husband. I promised her I would never stray, never seek it out, but she’s gone, and here are three men offering me something I could only have in my fantasies.

“You cannot leave once you accept my gift,” Yves says. “You cannot go back to what you are now.” His hand moves to my neck, focusing on it for a moment. “My, you have a lovely neck.”

Very slowly, it dawns on me that this man is no mere mortal. “What are you?” I ask with a shaky breath.

“I am a prince too, Henry. A prince of the night. With me, you will be equal. We will spend our days doing as we wish and our nights reveling in darkness.”

“Are you the devil?”

Alessio laughs. “The devil wishes to be Yves.”

“I am neither devil nor demon. I am not evil, but I can be. I will never harm you and will destroy anyone who tries to. With us, you will be adored, Henry, for who you are, not simply for your birthright. You will have unparalleled freedom to live your life as you wish, not as your duty dictates. You will not find another wife. Instead, you will find everything your secret heart desires, and you will have it as much as you want.”

“You want to make me your lover?”

“Oh yes,” Leander says.

“You are his lovers?”

“We were,” Alessio says, glancing at Yves with pure affection. “We are better brothers.”

“But he does want you in his bed,” Leander adds. “You are also welcome in ours.”

My body suddenly heats with the knowledge and blatant offer of carnal pleasure. These men make love to each other and offer me the same. What would it even be like?

“How do you avoid the damnation of society?”

“Simple,” Yves says. “We are only part of society to the extent we wish to be. We move around often, affording us a healthy anonymity. Obviously, if you were to say yes, we would leave England.”

“Where would we go?”

“Anywhere you will not be recognized. We’ll only return when it wouldn’t be reasonable for anyone to think it’s you. Fifty years, a hundred. Who knows.”

“A hundred years? How long do you plan to live?”

Yves cups my chin with his hand as he smiles. “For eternity, Henry. I can give that to you. If you accept, you will always be as young and beautiful as you are now. You will never fear a deadly disease again. You will remain strong and healthy and we will walk this earth together.”

“Immortality? That’s... impossible.”

“Is it? Alessio was born in 1471.”

I blink rapidly, trying to make sense of that as I gaze at the handsome young man.

“I was born in 1511,” Leander says.

“But it’s... Seventeen...” My words trail off in disbelief.

“And I am older than both of my brothers,” Yves says.

He exhales slowly, and I watch in awe as his skin grows pale and his eyes glow bright green with a red ring around the irises. As he parts his lips, sharp white fangs come into view. But I do not fear him. I am drawn closer.

“Vampire,” I whisper. “The folk stories are true.”

Yves smiles. “Indeed they are. So, fair Henry, you have a choice to make. If you wish, I will release you and return you to the palace where you can resume your royal life.”

I let that sit with me for a moment. I should want it, desperately, yet I *need* to hear the second option.

“Or you can choose to stay with us and embrace a new life. One with

untold possibilities. You will be loved, Henry, but you will not be royal. We are not your subjects. You will be equal to us.” He puts his hand on my chest. “Search your heart, Henry. We will be in the sitting room awaiting your decision.”

Watching the three men leave the room stirs something foreign inside me. Something yearning and hungry, as if I want to chase after them. Perhaps I’m already dead and this is all just a remnant fever dream. Vampires are not real, much less an immortal life. It cannot be true.

But what if it is? What if I say yes?

I’ve already lived the life expected of a royal prince and it left me a widower and on my deathbed. What if I stepped into this new, unbelievable reality? My family already believes me dead. They’ll bury my memory and carry on. My parents are strong. They still have my younger brother.

Is it selfish and cruel to let them believe I have died? Is it crueler than the disease that brought me to this crossroads? Do I return to a life of decorum and duty where I’ll be forced to find a new wife while I still mourn the dead one, or trade it for one of forbidden desire and unnatural existence?

My legs seem to carry me on their own from the bed, through the room, and into the sitting room where the three men sit in their English finery sipping glasses of red liquid. I have a feeling it isn’t wine.

Yves stands, his expression both curious and hopeful. “You have made a decision?”

I nod, slightly disbelieving the words flowing easily from my lips. “I choose to stay.”

Yves smiles as Alessio and Leander stand as well. “We are so pleased, Henry,” Yves says. “Come sit with us.”

Taking my hand, Yves leads me to the couch where the three men sit around me. “How will you handle my family?”

“Shh,” Yves says, stroking my hair. “Do not worry, sweet prince. I will take care of everything from now on.”

He bares his fangs and a shiver runs down my spine. I grip his arms, both fearful and aroused. “Will it hurt?”

“Briefly. We’ll be here when you wake up. It’s a whole new world now, Henry, but you’ll never be alone. We will always be with you.”

I nod, relaxing as Yves lays me back in his arms. Alessio tilts my head to expose my neck and Leander strokes my thigh.

“Last chance to change your mind,” Yves whispers.



“I’m not changing my mind.”

“Sweet prince,” are the final words Yves says as his teeth sink into my neck.

I pray that come morning I do not regret my decision. I somehow already know I won’t.

# Chapter One

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## EROS (HENRY)

### Current Day

“I want to kill something,” I mumble into the darkness, flicking a rock from the roof where I’m perched. Two nights without a job has left me restless, and I need something to do instead of flirting with fanciful thoughts of fated mates and romance.

It’s been four months since Bowie entered our lives, and only a month less than that since Tru came. Now two of my brothers have what I can only find in my poetry and erotic short stories. The lack of romance in my life is making me surly.

I’m grabbed from behind, but instead of reacting, I push Thorn off me. “Nice try.”

“I can never scare you,” he says, plopping down beside me.

“You can’t sneak up on a vampire. You know this.”

“Someday, one of you will be distracted enough and it’ll work.” He takes a drag from his clove cigarette, the sweet spicy smoke tickling my nose. “Whatcha doing up here?”

“Nothing. Waiting for someone to fuck up so I can make them bleed.”

“Hungry?”

“Bored.”

“Let’s go to Lair.” He bumps his arm into mine. “The guys are heading over too.”

“Oh goody, more togetherness.”

Thorn chuckles, dragging me to my feet by my elbow. “Come on, sourpuss. You need a drink, some dancing, and maybe a pretty boy to lure to

your bed.”

“That’s the entire problem, Thorn. I can’t find anyone appealing lately.”

“Well you certainly won’t find any tasty morsels sitting up here like a gargoyle.”

“Fair enough.”

We both jump down, landing softly on our feet and heading towards the direction of the club, but Thorn stops me a few blocks down, pointing to his racy sports car. Three men stand around it, as if deciding their best angle for stealing it. Foolish mortals.

“Get the fuck away from my car,” Thorn growls on our swift approach, assuming his aggressive demeanor. It’s always fascinated me how he can be so chill and goofy one minute and absolutely murderous the next.

“What are you gonna do if I don’t, rich boy?” the biggest of the three asks.

Thorn sighs, glancing at me. “I guess you won’t be bored anymore.”

“Nope.”

“I’ll count to three,” Thorn says, casting an ominous look at the would-be car thief. A smart mortal would run right now. “If I say three, you die.”

“You’re threatening me?”

“Uh, yeah,” Thorn says. “I promise you, you don’t have any idea what you’re fucking with right now.”

I grin, crossing my arms over my chest. “I wouldn’t poke this particular bear if I were you.”

The three men glance nervously at each other, while the two obviously smarter ones start to back away.

“One,” Thorn says, taking a step forward.

The mouthy one pulls a knife from his back pocket, which only makes me laugh. “Always a knife. So silly.”

Thorn chuckles. “Two. You should probably run now.”

“I don’t fucking run, man.”

His two friends are up on the sidewalk now, but I move behind them in a flash, blocking their departure. Maybe if they see what fucking with us results in, they’ll think twice about messing with anyone else. You never know what lurks around New Onyx at night.

The dumbass with the knife actually lunges at Thorn, swiping the air with the knife. Thorn wraps his hand around the man’s neck while I grab his friends by their collars, lifting them up just enough that they kick their legs in

an attempt to get free.

“Shh,” I whisper. “This is what happens when you do bad deeds.”

“H-he made us, man,” one of them stutters.

“If you’re quiet and don’t annoy me, I might let you live. Now, watch the master work.”

Thorn lifts his victim into the air, then body slams him to the ground. Not hard enough to kill him, but enough to know shit is about to get real.

A smile spreads over my face as Thorn lets the man get to his feet and run, catching up with him in the blink of an eye and tossing him in the air to land on the hood of the car.

“Thought you said you didn’t run,” Thorn taunts.

“Get the fuck off me!” the man screams, gasping for breath.

“Three,” Thorn says, then bites into the man’s neck. His screams pierce the night, and one of the men I’m holding faints in my grasp. The other is a whimpering mess. Ah, so big and mighty when they are taking advantage of the defenseless. Or at least those they think are defenseless.

Thorn looks up at me, his grin wild as blood drips from his chin. “Pretty tasty. Want some?”

“No. Enjoy. I’ll grab something later.”

“What the fuck, man?” my captive screams. “What are you?”

“Vampires. Obviously,” I answer, only mildly amused.

His friend stirs, but once he focuses on me, he starts hyperventilating again.

“Stop.”

He holds his breath while the other man stares at me with wide eyes. “I’m going to let you go. When you wake up in the morning, you’re going to turn over a new leaf. You’re going to get the help you need and be productive members of society.”

Both nod, clearly under my compulsion.

“You’re lucky tonight. I sense good in you. Your friend couldn’t turn you completely. Now go away and forget anything you saw tonight. You have no idea what happened to your friend, and vampires don’t exist. Now tell me what I said.”

The two men repeat my suggestions word for word. I set them down, turning them in the opposite direction of us and watching them walk off. By the time I look around again, Thorn is wiping his face with a wet wipe he keeps in his car. He’s tossed the body across the street, over a fence in the

abandoned parking lot that's now overgrown with tall weeds. The coyotes who roam the area will take care of the rest.

"Ready?" he asks, unlocking the passenger side for me.

Chuckling, I slide into the car. "Ready."

He joins me, starting the car and tearing off down the street. "You still need a kill."

"Yes, though it was a treat to watch you work."

"Ooh, maybe Delani will be there. Man can suck a golf ball through a straw, I tell ya. He'd take your stress down a few notches."

Laughing, I glance out the window. "I've indulged in Delani's company before, but that's not what I'm seeking. It's like an itch I can't scratch. It's driving me crazy."

Thorn pats my thigh. "Something good will show up. You deserve it, Eros."

"Do I?"

"Don't start that morose bullshit again. There is no way you only had one love allotted to you hundreds of years ago. I refuse to believe it." He turns toward me, ignoring the road, his grin maniacal. "There's something in the air, Eros. Can't you feel it? First Syn, then Midnight? Tell me you ever thought that would happen."

"No."

"Fucking fated mates. Come on. That's amazing shit."

"It is." And the issue has me fucked up, but I'm not willing to voice it to Thorn or anyone else yet. "Are you looking forward to your mate showing himself?"

Thorn scrunches his face as he returns his eyes to the road, swerving wildly and narrowly missing an old woman crossing the street with a shopping cart. She yells and flips us off and Thorn rolls his window down and tosses money, yelling, "Sorry," as we pass.

I laugh. "No, then?"

"Goddess no. Can you imagine me settled down?" He mock gags. "No, but I will delight in watching those of you who desire love falling head over heels. I hope someone is out there for Yves. The man has put in the time. He deserves a mate."

"I agree. It saddens me that it couldn't be any of us."

"Or that awful Marcello."

"Fuck Marcello. He's the reason Yves is so closed off now."

Thorn nods. “Yeah, although I think he’s opening up again. Syn could’ve been a fluke, but Midnight too? Something’s in the air. He knows it.”

“I agree. I’d rather him than me if fate must choose.”

Thorn squeezes my thigh again. “I doubt you’ll be left waiting. Hell, for all I know, someone is coming for me. We all fall down.”

Chuckling, I drag a hand through my hair. “Bowie and Tru have been wonderful additions to our family. Maybe all we needed was time. The world is so different now than it was when Yves found each of us.”

“So true.”

Thorn tears into the parking lot of The Lair, our vampire club, where mortals are invite-only and often end up on the missing persons list by morning. It’s not our coven’s style. We feed and release, only killing troublemakers or paid targets. But Lair is perfect. A hedonistic paradise for our kind, even if all we want is a snack and some carnal pleasure.

He stops in front of the ward, which to anyone passing by would appear to be nothing but more woods, but to us is a gateway. He swipes his entry badge and an opening appears, allowing us to drive through. This is how we keep Lair safe from curious mortals. The ones invited in are compelled to forget, assuming they live long enough.

Thorn swings into a parking space, shutting the car off and exiting, all in a matter of seconds, his excited aura and sexy swagger in full effect as he impatiently waits for me to join him. Wrapping his arm around my shoulders, he pulls me into him.

“I demand you have fun tonight.”

“Or?”

“Hmm. Or... I sic an incubus on you and you’ll get railed until morning.”

I laugh. “Such a threat.”

“Yeah, but you’re picky, so you’d be leaving it up to me.”

“I didn’t agree to your demands.”

He releases me, laughing before grabbing me around the waist from behind and dry humping me.

“Seriously, Thorn?”

“It’s me or an incubus unless you find your own fun.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I answer, already knowing his attention will shift off me onto his own pleasure five seconds after we enter the club.

The doors open and we’re greeted by two vampires. Yves decided when the club was proposed by the Council that we’d put it in New Onyx given its

central location, and consider it neutral territory along with a two-mile radius around it. Outside of that, we expect to be told about visiting vampires. Something Dimas needed reminding of.

Thorn dutifully approaches the table where the rest of our brothers sit. Yves's expression is tense, and a sinking feeling settles over me.

"What happened?" Thorn asks, obviously picking up on the tension too.

Yves lifts his cocktail and takes a sip. "Our gang-free reverie is already over," he says. "Dimas did a bit of digging with his crew about the men from Malice we found dead."

"The ones that smelled like vamps?" Midnight asks with Tru perched on his lap.

"Those are the ones," Yves says. "It explains a lot actually, so I'm thankful for the information. Apparently, Vinni thought he would attempt to expand the Malice territory and went to Sable Cove, straight into rival gang territory."

"Sable Cove?" Bowie says. "That's so far from here."

"It is," Yves continues. "But Dimas was told Vinni thought he could get in on a trafficking racket up there since he has some connections in the Dominican Republic. It backfired, obviously. That's why Vinni was panicking and attempting to get cash. He was trying to go into hiding."

"Greedy fucker," Tru mumbles while Midnight rubs his back.

"So the other gang is settling here now?" I ask.

Yves nods. "Unfortunately, Vinni's antics enticed them to infiltrate New Onyx. They call themselves Dread."

Syn scoffs. "Do we know how many there are?"

"No, but Dimas heard they are much more organized and stealthy than Malice was. Maybe we'll get lucky and they'll stay out of our way. We're not here to wipe out crime, after all."

A mumble of agreement washes around the table.

"But why did we scent them?" Raphael asks.

"Excellent question," I add.

"That is still a concern," Yves says. "Perhaps one of them is one of us."

"Fucking great," Syn mutters.

"At least it's not another Mafia group," Raphael notes, glancing around the club. "Those assholes are not easy to deal with."

"Agreed," Yves says. "But keep your eyes open. They're new here, so we need to learn how they conduct themselves and whether we need to intervene,



especially if there is a vamp in their ranks.”

“I’m all over it,” Thorn says, cracking his knuckles. “If they’re into trafficking, I know where they might hang out.”

“Let us know,” Yves says.

With that, Thorn is off, disappearing into the crowd, no doubt looking for a playmate for the evening. I wish I had an ounce of his carefree hedonism. At least his attention is off me.

I thank the server as he places a drink in front of me. I always have the same thing: a dirty pomegranate martini, the dirty being human blood of course. As I sip it, the agitated energy I felt since we walked in starts to slip away, and I relax.

Unfortunately, it’s brief. I swing around in my chair, focusing on the front door as if waiting for something or someone to burst through it, but no one does.

“What’s wrong, Eros?” Yves asks.

“Nothing.” I shift in my chair, facing him again. “Just a strange feeling, but it’s gone.”

Yves nods, continuing to focus on my face. “You’re sure?”

“Yes.” I sniff the air, catching the faint scent of flowers. “You felt nothing?”

“No.”

“Bowie?” I ask. He’s still the most sensitive amongst us.

“Nothing but very loud music and jumbled voices.”

I nod, sipping my drink again. “I’m sure it was nothing.”

I stretch my neck, glancing around the club, waiting, *hoping* for someone to grab my attention. Thorn is right. I do need to have some fun, and it wouldn’t kill me to have it be the carnal variety, but I haven’t felt the urge in a while. My bloodlust has been more than satiated by cocktails and killing.

*Do you need to talk?*

Yves’s offer reaches me through the noisy club.

I shake my head, offering a slight smile. “I’m fine, but thank you.”

“I’m here if you need me.”

“I know.”

I stand, carrying my cocktail and moving through the throng of bodies. All around me are vampires feeding, fucking, dancing, and having fun. Thorn already has a pretty man pressed against a column as they writhe together on the dance floor. His desire and arousal wafts off of him in waves, reaching

me easily.

I stumble for a moment, overtaken by the pheromones surrounding me, but still not aroused. Will I ever meet someone who ignites the fire inside me that once burned bright?

All the gods, I pray I do.

## Chapter Two

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## JUSTICE

Pausing on a darkened street, I strain to see the paper I've clutched for the last two hours. It has to be around here somewhere, but this doesn't seem right. There's nothing on this street. No buildings. Just trees.

I sit on the curb, exhausted and scared. I need to find the safe house before anyone from the compound finds me. Not that they're looking for me. I mean, probably not. Those were just threats. I hope so, anyway.

A car passing by slows in front of me, the passenger window rolling down. Maybe they know where the house is.

"You lost, pretty boy?" the man yells from the window.

I was already on my way to walk over, but something in his tone sets warning bells off in my head. "No. My friend is coming."

"Way out here?" he asks, his eyes roaming over me like I'm prey.

I catch a glimpse of the driver, and he looks just as threatening as the passenger, both of them in white tanks that show off muscles and tattoos. They could easily overpower me and throw me in the car if they wanted to. We were always warned that people who get tattoos are communing with the demon world.

"You want to wait with us in the car?" he asks.

I might be sheltered, but I'm not an idiot. "No, thanks. I'm good."

Unfortunately, that doesn't work and he opens his car door, so I take off running, letting my instinct carry me. I dash into the trees along a gravel path but smack straight into something I can't even see. As my butt hits the dirt, I pull my head back, staring into the darkness, but the sound of tires on gravel snaps me back into action, and I get on my feet, running into the night.

There's no way they can follow me through the woods, so once I'm sure I'm not being followed on foot, I lean against a tree to catch my breath.

"Are you alright?"

I scream and fall back on my ass, looking up to see a man that is definitely not one from the car, but where did he come from out here? He looks concerned by my reaction, his brow creased. As I focus on him and the hand he has extended, I think that this man is, in no uncertain terms, an angel.

He must be, with his flowing blond hair, blue eyes so bright I can see them in the darkness, and features so perfect, only the creator could have made him.

"I am so sorry. I didn't mean to frighten you. Let me help you up."

I take his hand and allow him to help me off the ground. Standing closer to him, my breath catches in my throat. He is breathtaking.

"Are you an angel?" I ask.

The man chuckles. "Far from it. What are you doing out here alone?"

"I'm um, I'm lost, and these guys in a car were freaking me out a little, so I just ran."

The man studies my face in a way that sends a shiver through me. Like he can see so much more of me than what I'm showing.

"I know the city well. I can get you where you're going. I'm Eros."

"Eros. That's mythological. I studied it."

"I am not the god of love." He smiles.

"No, of course not. They don't exist."

"What is your name?"

"Justice."

"Justice," he whispers. "Where are you trying to go?"

I hand him the paper with the address scrawled on it. "It's a safe house. I need to get there."

"A safe house? Are you in danger?"

"Kind of. I shouldn't tell you about it though. The less you know, the better."

"I'd rather you tell me. I assure you that I can protect you."

"Um..." I glance around, but we're surrounded by darkness. Something in me though is drawn to this man, so I nod. "I ran away from home tonight. It's um..." I blow out a breath as my chest tightens with shame. "It's a cult."

Eros nods, his face relaxing. "A cult."

"They might look for me. This safe house is a place people like me can

go. They'll help me get established and learn about the real world."

Eros looks down at the paper, and I wonder how he can read it in the dark, but when he looks up, a wave of warmth spreads through me. Like the way hot chocolate feels going down your throat.

"You're far from your destination. Give me a moment and I will take you there."

"Okay."

"You're safe here. I'll be right back."

"I'll stay here."

Eros tears off through the trees, leaving me in the darkness with only the sound of rustling leaves around me. I twist around as I lean against the tree, but before I can even think too hard, Eros is back.

"That was quick."

He smiles. "Follow me."

He leads me back the way I came until the street comes into view again. Parked on the gravel is a shiny black sports car. He opens the passenger door for me and waits as I get inside.

I buckle the seat belt while he joins me. Once in the car, Eros smiles at me before putting the car in gear and tearing off down the street.

"Oh!" I grip the leather seats.

"Don't be afraid," Eros says. "I drive fast but safely."

"I've just, um, never been..." I blow out a breath and try to fight back the bile rising in my throat.

Eros swerves the car to the side of the road and stops. "What's wrong, Justice?"

"I've never been in a car before. It's very overwhelming."

His face softens. "Oh. I'm so sorry. I'll go slower."

I shake my head. "It's okay. I just have to get used to it."

Eros smiles, restarting the car and pulling more gently back onto the main road. He lowers the window on my side by pressing a button, and the pleasant evening air across my face does help the panic settle.

"You've never been in a car?"

"No. We had a bus, but it's big and old and definitely doesn't go fast like this."

"I see. Are you hurt physically?" Eros asks.

"No. I avoided punishment. I'm probably the last person they expected to run."

“Do you want to tell me more?”

Shaking my head, I clench my hands together. “I don’t think I can yet. I just knew I had to run. It had to be now.”

Eros reaches across the seat and pats my hand gently. I almost flinch but hold back by reminding myself that Eros isn’t like the other men I grew up with. That much is already clear.

Twenty minutes later, Eros turns onto another darkened street and drives down a dirt path.

“I’ve always wondered what this building is,” he says, pulling to a stop in front of a huge metal gate. The entire area is surrounded by a brick wall, which makes me slightly uneasy. For once I would like to live without a wall holding me in.

“You don’t want to go in?” Eros asks.

“Um, yeah. I have to. I just, um, I hate fences.”

Eros nods, his eyes focused on me. In the light from one post outside the gate, I can see his face even better, and yeah, he’s gorgeous. If I thought my attraction to men was just because of my circumstances, I’m pretty sure this proves it wasn’t that.

“You could come with me, Justice. I could help you.”

His offer startles me. “Oh, uh, that’s so nice, but I don’t know you.”

“Do you know the people inside that wall?”

“Sort of. They’re people like me. People who ran. They understand.”

“Okay. Well take my number just in case.”

“I don’t have a phone.”

“I see.” Eros reaches across me to the glove compartment and pulls out a small business card. He unclasps my hand and presses the card to my palm. “If you ever need me, just call this number and ask for me. They likely have a phone inside.”

I look down at the card. “Veil Protection Services?”

Eros smiles. “Told you I could protect you.”

I nod, torn between staying right here or going where I know I should. I tell myself I have to get the right help. Eros is kind, but he doesn’t know what my life has been like at all. No one does except the people on the other side of that wall.

“I can’t thank you enough for getting me here safely, Eros.”

Reaching out, he gently touches my face, but it’s so light and over so quickly that I almost wonder if I imagined it. “Take care, Justice.”

“I will.”

I step out of his car and walk over to the keypad by the gate. Glancing at the paper, I type in the code, and wait as Eros slowly backs away but doesn't leave completely.

“Name?” says a crackling voice over the intercom.

“Justice. Carina gave me the address. I'm from Nightsky.”

The gate buzzes, slowly opening, and I turn to wave goodbye to Eros before slipping inside. I watch from the other side as the gate closes again and his headlights disappear. He might not admit he's an angel, but he just has to be. How else did he find me in the woods at night and deliver me to safety?

I fold the card with his number on it and tuck it inside the front pocket of my jeans as I walk up the gravel path to the large house. The front door opens and Carina is there, along with a tall, lanky man, and an older woman. All former members of Nightsky. Carina must be an angel too.

“Welcome, Justice,” Carina says as I approach. “We're so glad you made the decision to come.”

“Thank you.”

I step inside the house and a sense of freedom I've never experienced hits me straight in the chest, buckling my knees. Carina's arm goes around my shoulders.

“I know. It's overwhelming at first, but you're safe now. They'll never find you here, Justice. Take a breath. Your life starts now.”

Nodding, I offer a shaky smile. “I'm ready.”



## Chapter Three

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## EROS

Still parked at the end of the street where I dropped Justice off, I inhale his lingering scent filling the car. He smells of fresh grass after rain, and my favorite flower, gardenia. It's obvious to me now that he was what I was sensing from deep inside the club. When his fear hit me, I was on my feet and searching for him before I even knew what I was doing.

His scent was nice, but his face? Could there be a more beautiful human in this universe? With my eyes closed I recall the innocence in his soft blue-gray eyes, the way they dominated his tan skin, and the soft tumble of curls falling across his forehead. His lips, pink and full, his fear slipping away as soon as I appeared. He thinks I'm an angel, but if they exist, surely it is Justice who is the angel.

I don't want to leave him here. I want him close again. I want his scent to seduce my senses while he tells me his story. How will I see him again? There must be a way.

My phone buzzing in my pocket snaps me out of my lovesick stupor.

"Yes, Thorn?"

"Guess what, boo? We caught a scent. We're heading over to the north side."

"Where Tru was taken?"

"That's the spot."

"I'll head back that way."

"Did you take care of your errand?"

The curiosity in his tone brings a smile to my face. "I did. I'll tell you about it later."

Since I have to drive, I do my best to get back to the club as quickly as possible. When I pull up to the barrier, Thorn appears with Tru and Midnight close behind him.

“The others are with Yves,” Thorn says, waiting as I step out of the car to move to the passenger seat.

“Oh, Thorn’s driving?” Tru asks, clearly worried.

Midnight chuckles. “No worries, kitten. I’ll take care of you.”

“Pssh,” Thorn scoffs. “You’re one of us now, *kitten*. Indestructible.”

Midnight growls and shoves the back of Thorn’s seat. “Little madman, fine. Kitten, never.”

Thorn chuckles and salutes Midnight before shifting into gear and tearing off down the street, the tires squealing in protest.

“Does he have to push everything to the limit?” Tru asks.

“Yes,” Midnight and I answer at the same time.

“So what happened?” I ask.

“Dimas again,” Thorn answers, taking a sharp right turn that shoves all of us from one side of the car to the other. “He called Yves and said he had intel about some vamps hanging around the tracks.”

“Do you think it’s related to our new gang friends?” Tru asks.

“We’ll find out,” Midnight answers.

We make it to that side of town quicker than we should, but that’s Thorn’s breakneck driving for you. We never worry too much about being pulled over. Partly because we can compel anyone we need to, but mostly because law enforcement leaves this area unsupervised.

It’s eerily silent as we approach, but very quickly the scent of a wounded vampire reaches me. Thorn screeches to a stop, joining the rest of our brothers. We exit the car, looking around and bracing for an attack.

“There!” Bowie shouts, pointing to a huddled figure on the ground.

We hurry over as a group to find a vampire wrapped around a mortal. Yves flips the man onto his back, and it’s immediately clear what’s happened. A large wooden stick protrudes from his chest and the mortal is very dead, his throat ripped out.

Yves kneels, gently turning the vampire’s head back and forth by the chin. The wounded vampire opens his eyes, but the cloudy gray covering them isn’t a good sign at all. He’s close to death.

“What happened to you?” Yves asks.

The vampire flinches, grabbing for the stake, but Yves calms him.

“I won’t hurt you. Who did this to you?”

“Hunter,” he mumbles, clearly in pain.

“A vampire hunter?” Syn asks. “You were attacked?”

“Cha-chased,” he answers, coughing.

Thorn pulls his phone out of his pocket. “I’m calling Viv. Maybe she can help.”

“It’s a stake in the heart,” Raphael says, his face creased with barely contained rage. “This vampire was hunted.”

“We have to try,” Thorn says. “He’s one of us.”

“Perhaps,” Raph answers. “Or maybe he’s rogue and deserved this.”

“N-n-no,” the vampire manages, his breath growing weaker. “Co-coven...dead.” He coughs, spitting up blood.

“They attacked your coven too?” Yves asks.

The man barely nods, his face a mask of pain.

“And who is this?” Bowie asks, gently trying to extract the dead man in the vampire’s clutch.

“Noooo,” the vampire moans, attempting to hold on.

“Shh,” I say, kneeling to help Bowie. “We just want to help.”

“Do-don’t take him from me.”

Bowie’s concerned gaze meets mine and I nod.

“What is your name, vampire?” I ask.

“Hale.”

“And your friend here?”

“Nathan.”

“Okay. Bowie is going to take Nathan to see if we can help.”

The pained groan from Hale’s lips tears at my own heart. It’s obvious Nathan is dead, but Hale doesn’t seem ready to accept that. Bowie and I lift Nathan’s body and carry him away. We lay him on the hood of Thorn’s car under the light post, and I study his injuries.

The ripped flesh around his throat suggests a man-made weapon of some kind, perhaps a dagger, but whoever did it was going for optimal damage. This isn’t a cleanly sliced throat. It’s savage. Nathan’s hands are covered in defensive wounds, suggesting he tried to fight off his attackers, and two small bloody dots on the side of his neck are still visible. Vampire bite. I get the sense that Hale and Nathan were lovers caught unaware.

“How was he killed?” Raphael asks, appearing beside me.

“Human. Savagely. Like they wanted to cut his head from his neck.” I

look over my shoulder. “Will Hale live?”

“Don’t know, but Viv said bring him back. She’ll try. Yves says there’s a chance. If the wound were effective he’d be dead already.”

“Excellent point. What should we do with Nathan?”

“Bring him with us,” Tru says from behind me. “Hale needs to say goodbye once he’s better.”

“Very compassionate,” I answer with a smile. “It seems you bloodlings are reminding us of our lingering humanity.”

Tru simply smiles.

“Let’s put him in the SUV with Hale,” Raph suggests.

I lift Nathan’s dead body and carry him to Yves’s vehicle, laying him down carefully as Syn carries Hale and lays him down on the third seat in the back.

“Meet back at the house,” Yves says as he heads for the driver’s seat.

I rejoin Thorn, Midnight, and Tru. While Thorn drives us back home, I gaze out the window. The little bit of excitement took my mind off Justice for a bit, but those thoughts return as soon as they have a chance. I have to find Justice again and learn more about his story. I don’t know why yet, but my intuition tells me he’s going to need me again.

And if he needs me, I’m going to be there.

## Chapter Four

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## JUSTICE

I have my own room. And my own bed! In almost thirty years of life, I've never slept all by myself. I showered in a bathroom alone, dressed in pajamas in private, and now I'm spread out on a queen size bed. It's so surreal I pinch my arm to make sure I'm not dreaming or dead. Nope. I felt that.

I can't believe I did it. I got away. Tears sting my eyes as the reality sinks in. I really did it. I know none of this is going to be easy, but it has to be better than what was coming for me back at the commune. With only two months left before my thirtieth birthday, I made it out just in time. There was no way I was letting them do to me what had been done to so many others before.

My thoughts shift to Frank and Moses, my two friends growing up who turned thirty before me. I've wondered where they are every night since they were sent away to the Vessel. None of us know what happens there, but it's enough for me that no one who goes there is ever seen again.

My dad told me it's an honor and the time when a boy steps into his power as a man. He never had to go since he was over thirty when he joined Nightsky, so he also couldn't tell me specifics. Like many things within the compound, it was kept shrouded in mystery.

Now that the adrenaline is dying down, exhaustion starts to set in. My limbs feel heavy as I sink into the soft mattress. I close my eyes, wishing for sleep, but I'm met with visions of an angel rescuing me from harm instead. I'd rather dream of an angel anyway.

A strange tapping noise pulls me from sleep, and as I peel my eyes open, it takes a second to figure out where I'm at. I sit up slowly, realizing the tapping is a knock at the door.

"Come in."

The door opens and Carina steps in, smiling, with a tray in her hand. "Morning, Justice. I brought you some tea."

I stare at her like she's speaking a different language. She sets the tray down, still smiling.

"In about an hour, you'll attend the first deprogramming session," Carina explains. "We start all our newcomers there." She sits in a chair by the window. "It's going to be intense for a few days. It's okay if you feel overwhelmed or like you made a mistake leaving Nightsky, but I promise you made the right choice."

My eyes sting with tears again.

"What's wrong, Justice?"

"I... um..." Shaking my head, I wipe my eyes with the backs of my hands. "I don't know."

Carina's warm smile instantly soothes me. "You're used to the bell and the breakfast hall."

I nod, still sniffing.

"That's not what life is like here. You get to design your day for the most part. We're just here to provide support and education to help you find your way." She points to the tray she set on the nightstand. "There's a schedule on the tray. It's there for you to understand how the house runs and look for volunteer opportunities to support what we do, but you're not allowed to help the first week you're here. You need to heal and decompress from the stress of what you've been through. Counseling helps with that."

I nod. "Okay. I want to be useful."

"You will be, but you need to take care of yourself first. I know that's a new concept."

"Yeah."

Carina stands, walking over and gently squeezing my shoulder. "Just remember that you're strong and brave and no matter how hard this is, you'll get through it."

"Do you eventually get over leaving your family behind?"

"No," she answers. "But you learn how to make sense of it."

"Okay." I blow out a breath. "Where is counseling?"



“We’re going outside today. In the backyard. The weather is beautiful.”

I watch Carina leave, then lean back in bed and sip my tea. I remember the one time I caught a TV show when we were volunteering to clean the back lot of a senior center. It was on in a common room I passed on my way to the bathroom. I was still a kid, but I remember the man and woman sitting in bed drinking coffee and talking about work at a hospital. It was such a foreign scene seeing two people of different genders together, much less in bed, and I was mesmerized by the idea of lying in bed with a drink and a person you liked. It seemed so luxurious to me. I was pushed away and told television was demons’ work, but I never forgot it. Now here I am, in a comfy bed with a warm drink. All I need is a person I like.

Romance. The mitigating reason I finally found the nerve to flee. If I ever wanted a chance to love someone and be loved in return, I had to go. Romance is strictly forbidden in Nightsky, except for the Supreme Being, who requires love and intimate relations to survive. He feeds off sexual pleasure and the romantic feelings of both men and women, but only until we turn thirty. Then we are expired and sent to the Vessel. Well, that’s where men are sent. Women are sent to the Ceres, the place where women become mothers.

I shake my head, trying to put these thoughts out of my mind and recall the face of my savior. Eros. An angel walking amongst men. The creased card with his phone number on it sits on the nightstand. Maybe there’s a phone here and Carina will allow me to use it. I could call him and say... what? I have no clue how to talk to a normal person, much less one whose face makes my stomach do flips. He was so nice though. Maybe just a simple thank you would be enough. Because of him, I made it here safely. Because of him, I get to start a new life. The least I could do is say thank you.

After finishing my tea and dressing, I head downstairs to find the house still as quiet as it was last night. There aren’t throngs of people bustling around doing chores, no children crying or playing, no compartment classes. No offerings to the Supreme Being.

I walk through the living room to the back of the house, where there are two large sliding doors. I don’t know what a normal house should look like, but this one looks comfortable. There is art on the walls but it’s just landscapes and flowers. No spaceships or planets or enlightened beings. No subconscious messages or reminders of our chastity. It’s... strange.

Outside, there’s a group of people gathered around a tree surrounded by

folding chairs. I step outside, inhaling the fresh air. Several people turn towards me and smile, and Carina gestures for me to join them. Today starts my deprogramming—the end of one life, and the beginning of a new one.

## Chapter Five

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## EROS

It's my shift to sit over Hale. Viv gave him some healing potion that his body is doing its best to reject, but so far, he's held it in. Viper's energy work seems to have calmed his mind, but it's difficult to sit idly by while he twitches and moans in pain, seemingly reliving the attack mentally.

"He should be more coherent by morning," Viv says from behind me as she enters the room we have set up in one of the empty units on our floor. She's carrying a bowl and a washcloth, which she uses to wipe his brow. Whatever the liquid is made of, it's foul smelling.

"What kind of concoction is that?"

Viv chuckles. "My most powerful healing salve yet, mixed with a bit of Yves's blood. Try it. Cut your arm."

Using my thumbnail, I cut a line into my forearm. Viv dips her finger in the bowl and drags some of the liquid over my wound, which sizzles and heals even faster than it normally would.

"Intriguing," I murmur, twisting my arm back and forth.

"I wish I knew what it could do to a mortal. You vampires aren't good examples."

"I'm sure we could procure a mortal for you if necessary."

She nods, smiling. "For now, I just want to see if it's enough to help Hale fight off the injury. The stake clipped his heart. Hunter had bad aim."

"It's very concerning that there are vampire hunters amongst us. It's been centuries since we've had to deal with this."

"Yves was telling me about that," she says, dabbing the cloth over Hale's forehead. "I wonder how a human even became aware of your existence."

“Same. It begs the question. I was thinking perhaps they were attacked but somehow survived.”

“That would make the most sense.”

“Except I’ve yet to meet a vampire who would allow their prey to survive.”

“Huh. Yeah.” Viv sits back in her chair, pulling one leg up and resting her arm on her knee. “Are you worried about it?”

I scoff. “No. Anyone foolish enough to come to New Onyx hunting vampires is in over their head. I’m certain Hale and Nathan must have been ambushed for an attack like that to even happen. It won’t happen a second time. We’ll find this hunter and take him out.”

“I wouldn’t fuck with the House of Orpheus,” Viv says, grinning.

“It’s not advisable.” I shift my gaze to the sick vampire. “Do you think he’ll pull through?”

Viv nods. “He will.”

“Good. I have questions only he can answer. How did you explain his appearance to Viper?”

“Glamour. I hid him behind it first. I have to talk to Yves about that. It’s obvious Viper is going to work out and stay with us. We should disclose it to her.”

I nod, thinking it over. “Yes, I suppose it’s time. She’s proven herself reliable and discreet.”

Viv nods, but her cheeks bloom bright pink. “She’s brilliant too. She knows so much and every spell or potion I show her, she grasps right away. I want to tell her what I am too.”

“She doesn’t know?”

“I think she’s suspicious. She’ll say things sometimes like she never knew this kind of magic was possible. She’s given me the opening, but she doesn’t push me.”

“She’s respectful. She’s too smart not to pick up on things around her.”

“I agree. I notice how her eyes linger on you guys sometimes, like she’s looking for clues.”

“Yes, you should talk to Yves.”

Viv nods, glancing at Hale as he settles down and seems to drift to sleep. “Good. The medicine is working. He needs to rest for his body to heal. I’ll bring Viper back to do some more energy work in the morning.”

“You like her, yes?”

“Of course. She’s my friend.” Her words are calm, but her flustered appearance and the uptick in her heartbeat give her away.

“That isn’t what I meant.”

Viv laughs, tucking a lock of her long red hair behind her ear. “Gah, I’m crazy about her. Oh, Eros, I wish you really were the god of love and could shoot her with an arrow. I don’t think she’s into me at all.”

“Why do you say that?”

“She’s so professional and serious. Even when we’re alone, she doesn’t give me any clues at all. I know she dates women, but maybe she doesn’t see me that way.”

“Have you told her how you feel?”

Viv scoffs. “No. I don’t want to make it weird if she’s not into me. I’ll just suffer in silence and take my frustrations out with my vibrator.” She scrunches her nose. “Too much information.”

I laugh, rubbing her arm. “You can’t offend a vampire.”

“No, I guess not.” She smiles, dragging a hand through her hair. “Maybe I’ll get up the nerve one day. For all my confidence and swagger, something about her leaves me weak, but, like, in a good way.”

“There must be something to it then. Maybe she just needs a little hint that you’re into her.”

“Maybe. I know the job is really important to her.”

“That could be it. Just be patient. The best things are worth waiting for.”

She smiles. “Right. Thanks for the pep talk.”

“My pleasure.”

“The patient should rest now, but if he gets agitated again, just text me.”

“I will.”

Viv leaves and I sit back in my chair with my notebook on my lap. My thoughts are on Justice still, which is both intriguing and annoying. It’s been a long time since I’ve been moved by a mortal. Maybe I can swing by the place I left him and check in on him. That would likely put my mind to rest.

A few hours pass before Syn enters the room for his shift.

“How is Hale?” he asks.

“Resting finally. Viv was here and gave him a new healing potion. It

seems to be working. His heart rate is calming.”

“Good.” Syn sits in the empty chair next to me. “Yves contacted the Council to inform them of the attack. They haven’t heard of others, but they are going to investigate.”

“Excellent. It’s very concerning if there are mortals out there aware of our existence.”

“Agreed, and they would have to be mortals. Anyone else would know how to kill a vampire, except for us legacy vamps.”

“My thoughts exactly. I wonder if somehow a mortal was attacked but survived.”

Syn scoffs. “Only a truly sloppy vampire would allow such a mistake.”

“I know, but we can’t rule it out.”

“True. Midnight had a thought. What if a vampire revealed themselves to someone they loved?”

“Oh fuck. I didn’t consider that option.”

“And if their lover ran, they would find it difficult to destroy them even for the good of the whole,” Syn notes.

“Right. Hopefully when Hale wakes he can tell us more.”

“Let’s hope. You can rest now.”

“Rest.” I laugh softly. “Not since earlier tonight when I found a lost man in the woods behind the club.”

“What do you mean?”

“I caught a scent and then a…” I shake my head. “A feeling, for lack of a better term. I was drawn out like a moth to a flame, and there he was, so slight and scared. He had been chased.”

“Interesting. What did you do?”

“Took him where he was going. He told me he escaped a cult and was on his way to a safe house but got lost. Apparently, he’s never been outside of the cult.”

“Fascinating. Did he say what it was called?”

“I don’t think so. If he did, I didn’t hear it. I was entranced by him, Syn.”

Syn grins, nudging my arm. “Entranced, huh? What is his name?”

“Justice. Beautiful, isn’t it?”

“Very. What does he look like?”

Smiling, I exhale as memories of his face rush back. “He’s gorgeous. Tan skin, big blue eyes, soft, curly hair. Dark brown or black. He’s small. Short but not terribly thin. He has some meat on his bones.”

“Sounds delightful. Do you plan to pursue him?”

“I shouldn’t. He obviously has some trauma to work through.”

“Fair enough, but when was the last time you were affected by a mortal?”

“Centuries.”

“Exactly. That in itself is worth investigating.”

“Maybe you’re right. I suppose it couldn’t hurt.”

“No.” He pats my thigh. “And I am a prime example of unexpected gifts from the universe. Be open to it. That’s my advice.”

“I’m always afraid to hope for what you and Midnight have found. I’ve wasted too many decades searching for love, pinning my hopes on every man I fancied, nursing my wounded pride when it all fell apart again. I don’t know if I can take any more.”

Syn nods. “Perhaps you won’t have to. There must be a reason this man is so compelling to you. Isn’t finding out why worth the risk?”

“You are a wise soul, Syn. I’m supposed to be the hopeless romantic amongst us.”

“I am no longer hopeless, my brother. I speak from experience now. Bowie is worth everything I had to go through to get to him. All of it.”

I nod as a flicker of hope blooms in my chest. “Thank you.”

“Anytime.”

I take my leave and walk back to my unit. It’s nearly morning now, so I’ll rest a bit and decide just how I plan to seek out Justice, and what I’ll say to him if given the opportunity.



## Chapter Six

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## JUSTICE

Back in my room after an intense day of deprogramming counseling, I collapse on my bed, exhausted. It's not that I thought this would be easy—I didn't—but tearing down every belief system you've ever had is intense.

Finding out that no one outside of the cult believes in the Supreme Being was my first revelation. I have doubted some of our teachings, obviously, or I wouldn't have run, but hearing that the Supreme Being is just a corrupt man with a narcissistic need for power and control is very disruptive. Learning that there are literally thousands of religions and belief systems in the world is wild. It feels like everything that made me who I am is being stripped away. What will be left when all of it's gone?

I rub my sternum to relieve the tightness, but it doesn't help. How could my parents fall for something like this? They were on the outside before, so I don't understand what drew them to believe in this guy. All the rules and rituals... I shake my head as my eyes cloud with tears. I'm so lost now. I don't know what to believe in.

A light tap at my window draws my attention and I sit up on the bed, peering out but only seeing darkness. I stand and walk over, pausing before I get there. There's another small tap, like a pebble hitting the glass, but I still don't see anyone. I take a few steps closer, then carefully slide the window open and stick my head out, but no one is there. How could they be? I'm on the second floor. Maybe it was just the wind.

I start to close the window, but decide to stand here for a moment and enjoy the cool night air. It's the only thing that feels real right now.

“Justice.”

I gasp and jump back when I hear my name. A shadow appears in the darkness, then as it gets closer, a man comes into view. It's my angel!

"Eros. How did you...?"

"I'm so sorry I frightened you. Can I come in?"

I turn and look at my closed door, knowing it's locked. They allow that here. "Yes, but be quiet. I don't know the rules about guests yet."

He does, slipping easily through the open window. He's wearing black jeans with black boots and a white t-shirt, his long hair flowing around his face.

"How did you get on the second floor like that?"

"I'm a good climber."

His answer makes no sense. It's like he floated here. "But—"

"How are you?" he asks.

"Um..." His question distracts me, bringing fresh tears to my eyes, so I look away. "Okay," I lie.

"Justice, please. Are you safe here?"

"Oh yeah. I'm safe." I nod, wiping my eyes. "It's hard to explain, but I'm questioning everything I've ever believed, and it just feels so disorienting."

"I can only imagine."

"What are you doing here? How did you get up here?"

"I had to make sure you were okay. The way we met, it just felt too abrupt to leave you and never check in." He smiles and the sight leaves my knees weak. "As far as how I got up here, I climbed. I didn't think knocking on the front door was an option."

"You did all that to see me?"

"Yes."

Nodding as my whole body warms, I sit on the edge of the bed while Eros stands in front of me. "Can I tell you some things that I learned today?"

"Please."

"Nightsky is the name of the cult I was raised in. My parents joined back in the nineties so I was born into it."

Eros nods, joining me on the edge of the bed. I prefer this so I don't keep getting stuck on his face.

"Nightsky has one leader, the Supreme Being. We were raised to believe that he's immortal and chosen by the blood king."

"Blood king?"

"Yes. The blood king was born to royalty centuries ago and lived a sinful

life until he went on a trip and was lost in the woods. There he met a creature who gave him all the secrets of the universe and told him to spread the word to those most worthy.”

“Okay.”

“The blood king searched the earth for centuries, finding worthy men and women based on the purity of their blood, and created his sanctuary. That’s how he found the Supreme Being, but the blood king made a fatal error in judgment. He allowed his heart to stray from the truth and gave it to another. Her blood was tainted and poisoned the blood king. On his deathbed, he gave the secrets to the Supreme Being and appointed him as his successor.”

Eros watches me intently, his brow furrowed.

“Do I sound insane to you?” I ask.

“No,” he answers. “I want to know more.”

I glance down at my hands, wringing them together. “The Supreme Being outlawed blood testing for new members until they reached the age of thirty. That is the age we are considered mature enough to take on the task of creating the next generation. That’s the reason I had to run now. I’ll be thirty soon and...” My voice cracks with emotion. “I couldn’t do it, Eros. I couldn’t give my body to the cause.”

“What happens when you turn thirty?”

Wrapping my arms around myself, I squeeze my eyes shut for a moment. “The details are kept very secret. All I know is that you never see anyone over thirty again.” Sniffling, I push on. “But today, here, they told me I got away just in time. At thirty the men are castrated.”

Eros pulls his head back. “What?”

I nod. “Castrated and sent to a camp to raise the boy children. The adult men never return to the main unit. They are sacrificed for the group.”

“Your male children are raised only by men who are not their fathers? Who raises the girl children? Women over thirty?”

I nod. “Eros, it’s all so terrible. I didn’t know how bad until today. I had my doubts about some of the rules. The ones around sex and masturbation are so strict. The Supreme Being told us that spreading our seed without purpose was a violation of the universe and would prevent our entry into Eternal Bliss.”

“Eternal Bliss? What is that?”

“It’s the goal. It’s where you are finally rewarded for your sacrifices and loyalty. Your blood is drained into the holy vat to remove your earthly

essence and to be made pure.”

“Your...” He tilts his head. “Your blood is drained?”

I nod. “I’ve never seen the death ritual, but we’ve worshipped at the holy vat before. The Supreme Being lives off it.”

Eros narrows his eyes. “I’m sorry. Your leader drinks the blood?”

“Yes.”

“And has sex with the women?”

“Only once they are level one mature. That happens at eighteen. He can have sex with the brides because his seed is sacred and when he shares it, he brings the women closer to Eternal Bliss.”

“I see.”

“At eighteen, he selects his brides, and from the men, he selects his disciples. I wasn’t chosen because I was unworthy.”

“Why?”

Tucking my chin to my chest, I clam up, not wanting to taint this man’s view of me.

“You can tell me anything, Justice. I have no judgment.”

I steal a peek at his face. “How do you know that?”

“Let’s just say I’m a lot of things, but a hypocrite isn’t one of them.”

Exhaling, I nod, searching inside myself for the courage to utter the words. “I was caught in an indecent act at sixteen. I was put on probation, but then two years later, I was caught again.”

“What kind of indecent act?”

My cheeks burn with heat. “It’s so shameful. I broke the rules.”

“Those rules don’t apply here, Justice.”

I blow out a breath, trying to believe that. They told me the same in counseling today, but I didn’t have to tell them what I did. I stare at my feet instead of Eros’s face, hoping that helps me say the words.

“At sixteen I broke the rule of restraint and was found touching myself. At eighteen, me and another boy were found in bed together.”

“All sex is forbidden?”

“Oh yes, for men unless chosen for fatherhood. Sex for pleasure has ruined our species, made us weak. The only reason I wasn’t punished is because I chose sex with a man, which is less of a penalty than taking a woman.”

“Oh, Justice,” Eros whispers. “I’m so sorry you were led to believe that sex is wrong. It’s not. How could something so beautiful and pleasurable be

bad?”

I shrug. “It’s all I was ever told from as soon as I could understand. We had rules about how to wash ourselves, how to avoid lust, but I was deemed too weak to be a disciple. My fate would be the workhouse until I was sent to the Vessel, the place we go at thirty.”

“I see. How do you feel now that you’re away from it and learning that it wasn’t all true?”

“None of it was true.” I stand and pace the small space, stopping to lean against the wall. “Everything I’ve ever been told was a lie, Eros. The Supreme Being is just a man like me. He controlled us just because he could. I don’t even know what’s real anymore.”

Eros stands, approaching me slowly. “You did the right thing by running. I can only imagine how afraid you are, but these people are here to help you, right? You’re safe here?”

I nod. “I’m safe. They told me in a month I can start going outside the house. Like to the store and stuff. I have to learn how to use money and technology and...” I crumble under the weight of being overwhelmed, but Eros catches me under the arms before I hit the floor, gently leading me to the bed.

“What can I do to support you?” he asks.

I gaze up at him, my eyes full of tears. “Why would you want to? You don’t even know me.”

“Why am I here right now? Because I couldn’t stop thinking about you. I’m... interested in your progress. I want to get to know you.”

“Really?”

“Yes.” He smiles. “It’s a big world, Justice. There are wondrous things waiting for you to discover. I would love to be a part of your journey in whatever way feels comfortable for you.”

I stare at the beautiful man, still convinced he must be an angel. Surely those exist.

“Are you... I mean, do you date, um...” I shake my head, unable to speak clearly.

“Do I date men? Yes, I do. If you’re wondering if I’m romantically interested in you, I’d be lying if I said no.” He gently touches my cheek. “But I am an exceedingly patient man. I’ll be here if and when you’re ever ready for that, but right now, you just need to get your feet under you again. If all you want is my friendship, that is available too.”

I blink rapidly, allowing the tears to stream down my cheeks. “Thank you.”

“My pleasure. I should go now, but you have my number.”

“Wait.” I grab his arm. “Will you visit me again?”

A fresh smile spreads across his lips. “I would love to.” Eros lifts my hand and kisses the back of it. “Be well, Justice.”

I watch as Eros slips out the window. It takes me a few seconds to move, but when I hurry over and look outside, he’s gone. Like a dream.

I slide my window closed, feeling far more settled than before Eros’s visit. What a mysterious man. I’ll never tell anyone about him. Then I can make sure he’s not just made up like everything else in my life has been. No, Eros is my secret angel.

I climb into bed with a smile on my face and the tension in my chest gone. I indulge in the idea of having Eros in bed with me, pleasuring me. I was never meant to succeed at Nightsky. My libido is too strong. Now all I have to do is unlearn the intense guilt surrounding pleasure, and then maybe, someday, I can be with someone like Eros. That idea alone is enough inspiration to face the challenges ahead.

# Chapter Seven

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## EROS

I'm far more settled now than I was before I saw Justice. I spend the rest of the night lurking on rooftops around the district where we found Hale and Nathan just in case trouble shows up again. Maybe I'll even find a clue.

A soft thud alerts me to Raphael's presence. He slinks across the rooftop to join me.

"Find anything?" he asks.

"Nothing. How did your job go?"

"Terrible. He was so scared he had a massive heart attack before I could even bite him. He looked so juicy too."

"Damn. Anyone noteworthy?"

"Not really. Yves gave me a little nugget to fuel my rage that he abuses women, but the rage is left unsatisfied." He huffs. "I was thinking about hunting for a while to see if I could find some trouble."

"I'll go with you. Nothing happening here."

Raph leaps from the building, waiting as I join him. "How's your bloodlust?"

I shrug. "It's under control at the moment. I'm afraid a different kind of lust is ruling me."

"Your find in the woods?"

Chuckling, I nod. Raphael knows me so well. "Yep. I visited him earlier. He's doing well."

"Did you take a taste?"

"No. He's traumatized. The last thing I should do is take advantage. Besides, you know how I feel about mortals and sex."

Raph shoves my arm with his as we stalk down the alleyway. “I don’t know how you haven’t gotten over that yet. Who else are you gonna fuck, Eros? Vampires? Which ones?”

I blow out a frustrated breath. He’s right, but damn. “I don’t need sex.”

He laughs loudly at that, twisting around to face me as he walks backward. “A vampire who doesn’t need sex? Next you’ll tell me you’re becoming a vegan.”

“You don’t have a lot of sex.”

“We all know I can feed differently.”

“Yes, I’m very jealous of that ability.”

Facing forward again, he hooks his arm through mine. “Remember the old days in Paris? The orgies and bloodbaths? What a time that was.”

“I remember. That was all before Marcello ruined Yves.”

“Right. At the time I was so happy for Yves.”

I nod. “We all were, but he broke Yves and, honestly, the rest of us too in some ways. We could never go back to what we were before him.”

“A shame, really. None of us have been the same.”

“Yes. Well, now two of us have mates.” Raphael’s wide, rarely seen smile spreads across his pretty face. “Maybe you’re next.”

“Maybe you are.”

His smile dims slightly. “If anyone is next, I hope it’s Yves. He wants it the most.”

“True, although it would be amazing to see Thorn fall. He wants it the least.”

We both laugh at that.

“Maybe fate will shine on all of us,” Raphael says, squeezing my arm a bit. “We’ve certainly earned a little bit of joy by now, haven’t we?”

“You’d think. Mother Teresa we’re not, but we’ve cleansed the earth of more than a few bad actors.”

“That we have. Speaking of...” He points straight ahead where it looks like a young kid is getting harassed by some older kids. “Not enough to shed blood, but enough to scare the shit out of someone.”

“Works for me.”

We descend on the group, finding them to be just a bunch of young teenagers bullying a smaller one. The tallest boy is holding the smaller one by the neck of his t-shirt with his fist ready to make contact.

From behind the bully, I grab his fist and squeeze until he yelps. He

twists on me, ready for a fight, but when I hiss and bare my fangs, his eyes go wide and he falls to his knees. Raphael is busy scaring the other ones, while the boy who was being attacked crumples to the ground, watching in awe.

“What the fuck?” the one I’m still holding by the fist yells. “Let me go.”

“Maybe.” I kneel down to meet his gaze. “Why don’t you tell me what you were doing to that boy.”

“I don’t gotta tell you shit.”

Squeezing his fist tighter, I smile, knowing my fangs and glowing eyes are on display. “You sure about that, tough guy?”

“Why were they attacking you?” Raph asks the small kid sitting on the ground.

“They wanted my money from my delivery job.”

“Do you owe them money?” I ask.

“No. I don’t know these guys. I was just trying to go home.”

“That’s very unfortunate for you,” I say, glaring at my victim. “I hate bullies.”

“He really does,” Raphael says, helping the other kid to his feet.

I grip the guy in my clutches around the neck. “I could kill you. I could drain every drop of blood from your body in minutes.” He doesn’t speak, his body trembling in my grasp. “How old are you?”

“Nine-nineteen.”

“Just a boy. Tell you what, if you promise not to pick on people who are helpless and who did nothing to you, I will let you live to see another sunrise.”

He nods rapidly, clawing the concrete beneath him.

“What is your name?”

“Max.”

“Okay, Max. Here’s the deal. I frequent this neighborhood, so I will be watching. If you fuck up, you’ll see me again, and you won’t be so lucky next time. Is that clear?”

“Y-yeah.”

“Good.” Focusing on his eyes, I send a wave of compulsion over him so he’ll forget the details of my appearance but not the message. “I’m just a regular man who doesn’t like bullies, got it?”

“Got it,” Max says, his eyes slightly glazed.

“I expect you to keep your friends in check too.”

“Yes,” he agrees, nodding.

“You can go.”

Max scrambles to his feet and takes off, looking back once. Seconds later, Raphael joins me again.

“Made sure the kid got home safely and doubled his income for the night.”

“Nice. I made sure his bully cleans up his act. He’s only nineteen. He can still be saved.”

“I love when we can reach the young ones before they are too lost.”

“Yes. Hopefully bullying is the worst of it.”

Raphael slips his arm around my shoulder. “Want to grab a drink at Lair?”

“Sure. It’s a quiet night. Nothing in the wild.”

“The owner told me last time they have a new curated blend they’re ready to taste test. Maybe we can get in on that.”

“I could eat. Let’s go.”

Hours later, we enter our home to find our crew standing in the common staring upward. Yves is shaking his head with his hands on his hips while Bowie and Tru are cracking up.

“What’s going on?” I ask as Raph and I enter the fray.

“Look up,” Syn says.

I do, only to see Thorn hanging upside down from a rafter high above our heads.

“What the fuck, Thorn?” Raphael exclaims, chuckling.

“Remember the old ways?” Thorn says, swinging from his bent knees. “I was wondering if I could still do it.”

“We never hung from the rafters,” Yves says, his tone full of disdain. “Our kind evolved past that.”

“Yeah, well, I’m still pissed we can’t explode into a cloud of bats when we want to,” Thorn calls down.

“Feel free to sleep upside down,” Yves says. “Would you like me to order a coffin?”

“Why? Is it fun?” Thorn swings back and forth, then flips, dismounting like a gymnast.

“It’s claustrophobic,” Syn says.

“How do you know?” Bowie asks. “Did you sleep in one?”

“Once. Accidentally.”

“How do you accidentally sleep in a coffin?” Tru asks.

I lean against the column, smirking. “You participate in a voodoo ritual in New Orleans, get so fucked up you can’t remember your name, then crawl to the cemetery and into a coffin.”

“Eww. Wasn’t there a body in it?” Tru asks.

“Yes,” Raph, Yves, and I answer simultaneously, while Midnight cackles with laughter.

“You should have seen his face when the potion wore off,” Midnight continues, slapping his thigh.

“Funniest shit ever,” Raph says, nudging Bowie’s arm. “Your normally stoic love was truly scandalized. He ran through the cemetery like his pants were on fire.”

“I can’t even imagine it,” Bowie whispers, staring at Syn with pure awe.

“A moment of curiosity that I paid for,” Syn says, trying but failing to hold back his grin. He actually chuckles. “Thank Hades for Yves bringing the priestess to me to counteract the ritual.”

“What happened?” Bowie asks.

“The ritual wasn’t meant for supernatural beings like myself, so it was slowly dragging my soul to the underworld. An average mortal’s soul protects them from seeing too far beyond the veil.”

Yves nods. “I was able to scent him, and I found him in the cemetery beating on the lid of the coffin, too weak to get out on his own.”

“Would you have died?” Tru asks.

“Worse,” Syn says. “Trapped in the underworld, but not dead. Just stuck.”

“Sounds like such a Thorn thing to do,” Bowie says.

Thorn chuckles. “I was otherwise occupied that evening.” He winks before continuing. “But we all learned a lesson that day,” Thorn says. “Don’t fuck with voodoo.”

“Glad I could help,” Syn says, then pulls Bowie into his arms and kisses his neck.

“How is our patient?” Raph asks, changing the subject.

“Resting comfortably,” Yves answers. “Viper will do more energy work on him in the morning.”

“Good.”

The group breaks up and I head to my unit, ready to strip out of my clothes and relax. It's been a weird night, but all that's on my mind is when I'm gonna visit Justice again. Is tomorrow too soon? Fuck if I know what's appropriate.

Thinking back to all he told me, I accept that I probably need to use that patience I told him I have, and be prepared to stay in the friendship lane, even though his lips are what poems are written about. Maybe I'll do that. Put his beauty into words.

After peeling my clothes off, I lie on the bed nude, enjoying the unrestrained freedom. I close my eyes, recalling Justice's sweet face, pert mouth, searching eyes. He's been hurt, and this world is not always a safe place. An intense sense of responsibility to take care of him washes over me.

The more I think about his beauty, his innocent trust in me, his bravery, the more my body reacts. My cock swells, its weight growing heavy on my thigh. It's been so long since I've had a reason to pleasure myself, my reaction is almost startling.

Precum pools on my skin, sticky and warm, luring me to touch. I slide my hand down, dragging my fingers over my sensitive skin, then with a deep exhale, I grip the base, squeezing hard as I moan.

Fuck it.

With visions of Justice dancing behind my eyelids, I stroke myself at a frantic pace, arching into my touch and biting my bottom lip hard enough to draw blood. I imagine it's his, as he offers his neck and body to me, and in mere minutes, hot cum shoots out of me, sliding down my hand. I stroke through it until sensitivity takes over. Damn. That was quick.

Either I really needed that, or Justice is affecting me more than I realized. Maybe both. Whatever the reason, I know for certain that I have to see his face again. And tomorrow night, that's exactly what I intend to do.

## Chapter Eight

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## JUSTICE

Sitting under the tree with my head tilted back, I watch two birds in the branches above me, seemingly having a conversation with their happy chirping. It's so odd to me to be outside, simply sitting. Not doing any chores or hustling from one compound building to the next. The struggle to always be busy so as not to be accused of laziness was real. The Supreme Being thought laziness was the worst trait a person could have.

But here, they want me to have downtime. They want me to sit with my thoughts and let them bloom without being influenced by what I was taught. They want me to listen to my own inner voice. Do I even know how?

"How did yesterday go for everyone?" Kirk, our counselor, starts the session.

There are five of us newbies here, and the weirdest thing is that even though we escaped the same compound, we've never met each other. Two of the people are women, sisters who ran off after turning seventeen, avoiding the fate of becoming a bride. The other two men are under thirty like me, but ran after an experience they have yet to talk about. They are quiet and withdrawn, and I would say traumatized.

No one answers Kirk's question, which makes everything feel awkward, so I decide to chime in.

"It was strange." Everyone looks at me. "I was born into Nightsky, so all I've ever known is this life. I had no reason to question it until recently."

"Why did you run?" Kirk asks.

I shrug, trying to put the feelings into words. "It's hard to describe, but it's like, I don't know, like I had blinders on all my life, and then they fell off."



Sitting in Devotion, starting to feel uncomfortable. The words weren't sitting right with me anymore."

"Me too," one of the guys says. I think his name is James. "Same thing happened."

"Let's talk about that," Kirk says. "Can you remember the first time, Justice?"

I nod. "It was only a couple of months ago. My age group was having a preparation meeting as part of our Devotion, and..." I pause, shaking my head as memories come back to me. "To me, it felt like our leaders were nervous. Everyone is always so confident, but I sensed something different. It panicked me."

"What did they say to you?" James asks.

"They told us that entering the Vessel was an honor and that our souls would reach Eternal Bliss. I had heard it before, of course, but this time, Disciple Marcus told us that only the purest and most devoted among us would enter the inner sanctum. We would be tested upon our birthdays to decide our fate."

James looks at his friend, who nods. James continues speaking. "We snuck into a Devotion meeting with the disciples and the Supreme Being."

We all gasp, even Kirk.

"We had to," James says. "Scott..." He looks at his friend, who exhales slowly.

"I was caught communing with the occult," Scott says. "Tarot cards. I've been teaching myself divination for years in secret. But someone from our room followed me into the woods and saw me. I was reported, but that same day, I had a vision of what would happen to us when we went to the Vessel. I wanted proof, and James came to help me."

James wraps his hand around Scott's. "We're in love."

The two sisters are awestruck, their mouths agape and eyes wide as they listen.

"Anything Scott was doing, I was doing too," James continues. "We snuck into the Devotion chapel in the back where they keep the documents."

We're all aware of the documents. The detailed accounting of our lives and behaviors, held over us to control our behavior.

"In the middle of digging through them, the Supreme Being entered, along with several disciples," James says.

"My word," Kirk whispers. "How brave."

“And stupid,” Scott says. “But I did learn the source of the vision. We’ve all been taught about the death ritual and the holy vat.”

We all nod.

“But what we weren’t told is that there are three groups. Those that are most worthy enter the inner sanctum where their duties are to manage the Vessel and the others. The second group cares for the boy children, and the third group are the deviants.”

“Deviants?” Kirk says. “I don’t even know about this.”

“It’s super secret,” James says, “but there’s a list of those who enter the Vessel and are deemed unworthy of any task. They are taken to a secret place called the Pasture.”

Scott flips his notebook open. “I drew a sketch based on how it was described.” He passes it to Kirk first, who goes pale when he sees it. “The death ritual begins, but slowly. Your blood is draining a little at a time, just enough to keep you on the edge of life, until the Supreme Being decides you have either been made worthy again, or there is no hope for you.”

“Oh my stars,” Kirk says, clearly shaken.

When the notebook makes it to me, I see an image of men tied to pillars with buckets beneath them, blood dripping from their wrists, some of them clearly dead, with slashed throats.

“The blood is not part of the holy vat,” Scott continues. “It’s for the Supreme Being’s offerings to the blood king.”

“What makes you unworthy?” I ask, still staring at the sketch. “Do you know?”

“So many things,” James answers. “Everything from unholy touching to lying to laziness.”

A shaky breath rattles in my chest. “It was so easy to be accused of those things.”

Scott nods. “Yeah. We decided they wanted to find people unworthy. It happens to the women too. They don’t tell anyone that until you’re thirty and already there.”

“What happened when you were found?” one of the sisters asks, finally speaking.

Both men clam up at that point, their expressions turning sour. Scott’s eyes fill with tears as he shakes his head.

“It’s okay if you can’t tell us yet,” Kirk says softly. “But it can be helpful to your healing if you can.”

James lifts Scott's hand, holding it to his chest. "We were, um, beaten by the disciples. Not just beaten. They tortured us until we confessed our weaknesses, admitted we were not worthy, and accepted our fate."

"What fate?" I ask.

"The Pasture," James answers while Scott shakes with silent sobs. "Or we could commit to a year-long penance to restore our worthiness, but that included separation from each other and..." James and Scott exchange glances, and Scott seems to crumble even more.

Kirk is on his feet, crossing the space to where the men sit. He kneels, whispering something that they both nod their heads to.

James looks up at us, clearing his throat. "Participation in a blood ritual which would require us to harm others and consume their blood."

Kirk returns to his seat, his face now ashen. "We had heard rumors about this. There is deviant behavior in any large group of people. Those deemed unredeemable were sacrificed."

"Killed," one of the sisters says softly. "They were killed. It happened to our older sister. She fornicated with another. Her body was brought to us as a warning."

The other sister's expression crumples. "It was awful. So brutal. She was covered in bruises. The man who fornicated with her was released. They made my sister a temptress and said it wasn't his fault. That's why they separated us. We ran that same night."

James and Scott nod. "Yes. We had to participate or be sacrificed ourselves."

I'm stunned, still gripping Scott's notebook. People were killed. People my age. People who did nothing but be human. Now I feel like an asshole. I got off so easy compared to these people with me.

"What's on your mind, Justice?" Kirk asks.

"I feel bad. So many people suffered, and I didn't know. I ran because I was scared. I was worried because I had two demerits. I don't feel worthy of my sadness. I didn't earn it."

"Emotions aren't earned," Kirk says. "And trauma looks different for everyone. Just because you didn't experience what they did, doesn't make yours less."

"I'm happy you're here," Scott says softly. "It means people can get out before something very bad happens. I put myself and James in that position. I broke the rules."

I nod, but I'm still upset. There are so many people still there, still suffering, still dying.

"What matters," Kirk says, "is that you all got out. You're all safe now. You can begin to heal, and the first step is forgiving yourself for any perceived mistakes. The rules you were given to live by were unreasonable. Love is good. Sex between consenting adults is good. Asking questions about things that affect you is good. Self pleasure is good. None of you did wrong. You were in a bad situation that was never your fault."

After counseling, I stay outside in the yard, lying in the grass with my fingers and toes tickled by the soft blades. Tears stream from my eyes and I let them fall. I don't even want to think about what could've happened to me there, I'm just going to be grateful that some inkling of self-preservation bubbled up in me and made me run.

Grief and anger tangle within me, but as a butterfly flutters above me and the sun warms my face, those emotions are replaced by a sense of peace and safety. I wish I could call Eros and tell him... tell him what? Maybe I just want to see him again to make sure he's real. I guess I could ask to use the phone, but what would I say?

The butterfly ventures on, so I close my eyes, reminding myself that Eros said he would visit me again. I hope it's soon.

## Chapter Nine

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## EROS

Sitting next to Hale with my notebook in hand, I try to summon the words to capture Justice, but I'm too distracted to compose poetry when I just want to see his face again. I've been watching the clock for hours waiting for nightfall, wondering if he's had another heavy day, is he doing alright, does he think of me as much as I think of him. All very heavy thoughts.

Hale stirs, as he's been doing quite a bit the last couple of hours after Viper did more energy work on him. This time though, his eyes open slowly, adjusting to the light even though we've kept it dim in here, and as his eyes focus on me, he exhales.

"Vampire," he whispers.

"Yep. We rescued you. Do you remember?"

His brow creases as he studies my face. "Nathan?"

I frown, shaking my head. Hale sits up abruptly, his hand flying to his side in pain.

"Careful." I help him lie back again. "You've survived, but barely."

Bloody tears stream from his eyes as he shakes his head. "Nathan."

"I'm so sorry, Hale. We don't know what happened to you. Your account was choppy at best."

The door opens and my brothers pour in, obviously having sensed the change in Hale's condition. His eyes flicker to them, and I see the moment of recognition on his face. Hale grips my hand, squeezing gently.

"Thank you. All of you."

"We'll always help our kind. Can you tell us what happened?"

He nods, and I help him prop himself up in bed. Bowie appears with a tall

glass of warmed blood, which will help the healing vampire greatly. As he drinks, I take in his features. He seems as tall and strong as the rest of us do, so he must have really been caught off guard. His jet-black hair is wavy and short, his skin remarkably pale even for a vampire, but that could be because of his injuries. His eyes are unique—dark, with an eerie white hue around the irises—but again, it could be a result of what happened to him.

After Hale finishes his drink, a bit of color returns to his cheeks, but the eyes are still off. “Where am I? Not Sable Cove?”

“You came from Sable Cove?” Yves asks.

“Yes. We... My coven and I—” His voice breaks and he coughs, holding his side. The pain he feels over his loss is written all over his face.

“I was with Nathan. We were ambushed by vampires we’ve never seen before.” Hale shakes his head as if trying to remember. “They took Nathan from me and did terrible things to him. I was wrapped in silver chains to restrain me, and they were asking questions that made no sense. They insisted I knew, but I didn’t. They told me no one in my coven was left alive and dropped their mutilated bodies in front of me. I don’t know how but my rage...” He exhales slowly as his face screws up in anger. “I tore through the chains and grabbed my love, and we ran. We ran so fast, but they caught up. They slammed me to the ground and then the spike came. I don’t remember anything after that until I woke up here.”

I’m sure we all share the look of horrified concern on Yves’s face. “Traitors,” Yves says. “To kill your own kind is a travesty that should not go unpunished. Do you have any idea what coven these vampires belong to?”

Hale rubs his forehead. “I heard a bit of talk about Sable Cove, something about a gang named Dread, but we’d never heard of them before. The rules are different in Sable Cove. It’s less territorial than other places I’ve been. There are numerous covens in the area.”

Yves nods, shifting his gaze around to all of us. I’m sure we’re all making the connection to what Dimas told Yves earlier.

“What kinds of questions were they asking you?” Syn asks.

Hale’s forehead creases again. “They were demanding to know where the blood king was. Who the fuck is the blood king?”

I perk up at that. “Blood king. Tell us more.”

“They said they knew his people were in Sable Cove or the surrounding areas, and so the local vampires had to know where he was. I’ve never heard of anyone like that. The vampires were so... brutal. Not like any modern ones

I've met. It was as if they had no decorum."

"Obviously not if they slay their own," Raphael says.

"Right," Hale says. "They were hell-bent on locating this blood king they spoke of. I need to find them and take my revenge. Nathan was just an innocent mortal." His eyes seem to burn with anger. "I will find them."

"We'll help," Yves says. "They entered our city and we *are* territorial. We have cause."

Midnight steps closer. "You are absolutely certain neither you nor your coven harbor secrets we should know about that led to this attack?"

Hale meets Midnight's intense gaze head on. "I am absolutely certain that I harbor no secrets other than my desire to..." His face twists with pain. "To turn Nathan. I had not spoken to my coven about it yet. I loved him."

"That's obvious," Tru says softly. "We're very sorry for your loss. He was gone when we found you."

Hale nods, touching the wound in his chest. "They missed my heart?"

"They got the edge," Yves says. "We found you just in time."

"How did you heal me?"

"We have a very powerful witch amongst us," Yves says. "Two actually."

"Witches who aid vampires? What wondrous place is New Onyx?"

"We have our problems too, but attacking our own or others like us is not one of them." Yves shifts his gaze to all of us. "Rest, Hale. We'll see what we can find out about this coven that attacked you and Nathan."

"Where is Nathan?"

"In the front room," Bowie says.

"Can I see him?"

Bowie frowns. "Are you sure you want to? It's pretty bad."

"I have to," Hale whispers.

"We'll bring him to you," Syn offers. "You stay in bed and rest."

Hale nods. "Please, if you find them, I need to be included. I won't rest until mine is the last face they see."

"I assure you we will not act without you," Yves says.

We leave his bedroom and settle in the living room while Syn and Bowie carry Nathan's body to Hale. The wounded howl Hale releases upon seeing his dead lover rattles me, pulling at my own heart. It must be how Midnight felt when Benedict died. How Yves did when he lost Marcello.

"I have something to share," I announce when Syn and Bowie return. "The man I found in the woods, Justice, he escaped from a cult. He's at a safe



house now. I bring this up because he told me the background of it and he mentioned a blood king.”

Yves tilts his head. “Did he?”

“Yes, but according to Justice, the blood king was poisoned and died. The cult is now run by a person they call the Supreme Being. He talked a lot about blood rituals. At the time, I assumed it was just some mortal nonsense, but given what Hale just told us, I’m beginning to wonder if we have a vampire cult on our hands.”

“Not only that,” Syn says, “but Hale’s attackers could be looking for said cult. If this is truly connected, this could be a huge problem for us.”

With a clenched jaw, Yves walks to the window, gazing out for a moment before turning to face us. “Why is this all happening in New Onyx when none of it originated here?”

“Justice came here intentionally because of where the safe house is. It had to be far from the cult compound to avoid discovery. Everything else is still a mystery.”

“We need to visit with your Justice then,” Thorn says. He’s been oddly quiet during all this, and I can’t be the only one wondering why. “If there really is a vampire cult, who’s not to say he’s still in danger?”

My chest tightens at the mere thought considering the dead mortal in the other room. “I will visit with Justice. I promised I would, and I don’t want to overwhelm him with a group of vampires.”

“I can go with you,” Raphael offers. “Stay outside and alert. Just in case.”

“I’ll go too,” Thorn says.

“No, Thorn. You’re too... excitable.”

He pops his bottom lip. “I am offended.”

“You’ll be okay. I’m sure Yves has a better use for your energy.”

Yves nods. “I do. I suggest we all go out for a hunt later. See what we can learn and if the attackers left any clues. I’ll call Viv and Viper to stay with Hale.”

“I think that’s a good idea,” Syn says. “We’ll need everyone tonight.”

Thorn shrugs. “Works for me. Let’s hunt some vampires.”

As we start to scatter, I catch up with Thorn. “Is something going on? You’re being quiet.”

“Hale’s pain has affected me. It worries me to think of any of ours being attacked.”

Patting his back, I smile. “We can handle it though. We are never caught

unawares.”

“You’re right.” He grips my wrist, uncharacteristically serious. “Just protect your mortal. If he’s caught up in this, he’s not safe.”

“I will.”

As we separate, I head to my place, filled with too much energy. I need to see Justice and it needs to happen soon. I won’t rest until I’m sure he’s safe.

# Chapter Ten

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## JUSTICE

Is it totally stupid that I've been staring out my window for the last twenty minutes wondering whether Eros will visit? Yep. Do I care? Not at all.

It's weird to be so wrapped up in someone I barely know, but Eros is special. I can tell. One thing I've always been good at is judging someone's character. I knew Carina was a good person right away, and I know Eros is too, even if there is a dark edge to him. It doesn't scare me though. Instead, it makes me want to know him even more.

After a few minutes, I give up and grab a book, trying to distract myself, but I'm rewarded just a little while later when I hear tapping on my window. I rush over and shove it open, smiling when Eros appears seemingly out of nowhere. He must be a damn good climber.

"Hi."

Eros smiles. "Hello, Justice. How are you?"

"Good." I nod. "It was another emotionally heavy day, but I'm handling it."

"I'm glad to hear that. Can we sit for a moment?"

"Yeah, of course." I gesture to the bed and Eros enters my room then sits on the edge. I settle next to him, wondering what's on his mind and hoping he isn't about to tell me he can't visit me anymore.

"I have questions about Nightsky. I learned some things today that may be connected to the place you came from. Are you okay to talk to me about it?"

"Yeah. I'll tell you whatever you want to know."

"How did you find this place?"

“Carina and some of the others lurk around stores and wait for us to be alone, then they hand us a card with the address. We’re easily identified because we have to wear all white and the women always wear dresses.”

“I see. You mentioned a blood king. Have you ever seen him?”

“Oh no. I’ve only seen the Supreme Being from far away. He’s strange looking. Young, but somehow he comes across very old. He’s very pale and his eyes are, like, crystal blue. Eerie, in a way. I’ve never seen him smile or anything. He’s always serious.”

“Is there anything else you can think of that stands out? Have you seen anyone drink blood?”

I shake my head. “I wasn’t allowed in those ceremonies. All we’ve heard are stories to inspire us. It doesn’t seem true, but they said the Supreme Being is, like, sixty years old, but he looks twenty-five. We’re told the blood king was hundreds of years old before the poisoning. He wasn’t supposed to die, and neither is the Supreme Being.”

Eros nods, and I can tell he’s thinking. “Is it possible your cult has enemies?”

“Oh heck yeah. The whole world is against Nightsky because they have the truth and it threatened all other religions and politics.” I shrug. “I mean, that’s what they told us. I don’t believe that anymore. We were told there was a huge power struggle a long time ago and the blood king won, but out of that conflict came a division between the cult and the world. That’s why they keep us hidden away, so the world can’t taint us.”

Eros furrows his brow as he puts his hand on my thigh. “This is likely going to sound very strange to you.”

I huff a laugh. “I doubt anything sounds weird after how I’ve spent my life.”

“Possibly. Was the word ‘vampire’ ever tossed around?”

My eyes go wide. “How... What?”

“Justice, I need to know. Was there talk of vampires?”

I shift uncomfortably. “There were rumors. The adults told us it was just silly fodder and that vampires didn’t exist, but...” I pause, glancing at my closed door. “I’m not sure I’m supposed to talk about it.”

“No one from there can hurt you.”

“Oh, yeah.” I exhale slowly. “It was a few years ago. I think I was about twenty-two. My age group was in the dining hall for dinner, and this man burst through the doors. He seemed hysterical. He was bloody and beaten.

We rushed to help him, and I don't think I can ever forget the haunted look in his eyes. He kept repeating 'vampire' over and over. He grabbed my wrist and told me we were all doomed."

"What happened to him?"

"No idea. Some guards came in and dragged him away. He was screaming at us, telling us not to let them have our blood. The next morning a meeting was called. We were told the man had been lured by worldly demons and indulged in drugs that gave him hallucinations. They told us to forget what we saw and to never speak of it." I pause, reliving the terror of that night. "But I never forgot it. I don't think any of us who witnessed it did. Something about it rang true to me, which is weird. I had no reason to believe in vampires, but I didn't believe he was on drugs either. Why are you asking me this?"

"What if I told you that vampires are real and there's a chance your cult is being run by one?"

A lump forms in my throat. "How would you know that? No one knows about the cult's inner workings. Even our leaders here don't know a lot of what goes on. It's very secretive."

Eros puts his hands on both my shoulders. "My work involves dealing with a lot of unsavory characters. We rescued someone recently who told us a story about vampires. The people who attacked him were looking for a blood king. I'd never heard the term until you said it. It made me wonder if somehow your cult's teachings are real. At least the origin story portion."

Staring into his eyes, the strange truth I've kept inside since I was young bubbles to the surface. "I've tried to convince myself that they aren't real."

Eros nods.

"But when I was a kid, I continually had dreams of beings I can only describe as vampires. I wasn't scared though. They were beautiful to me. Men and women, ethereal and sexy, even. I told my mother once and she scolded me for being fanciful and told me to put the thoughts out of my mind. I tried to. I really did." I laugh softly, searching Eros's eyes. "On a rare outing to a bookstore, I snuck a book on paranormal creatures. I couldn't be caught with it, so I shoved it into my pants. I wrote a sticky note apologizing for taking it and told them I would try to send money for it, but I wouldn't be allowed to have it. I felt guilty but I had to have the book."

"And?"

"It was just like my dreams, but it said to be afraid of vampires and fae.

Oh, and witches. It said vampires were charismatic and seductive in order to get your blood and kill you.”

Eros nods, but doesn't say much.

“Until now, tonight, I think I was still trying to convince myself they weren't real. Are you sure they are?”

“Yes. I need to know how to find Nightsky.”

My eyes go wide. “Don't go there, Eros. They might hurt you.”

He brushes his fingers across my cheek. “Don't worry, Justice. I am very capable of taking care of myself, and I won't go alone. My brothers will come too. We have to know if they pose a threat to us here in New Onyx.”

I nod, gripping his hand. “Maybe I should go with you.”

“No. I need to keep you safe.”

I nod, torn between relief and honor. “Maybe I should face what they really are.”

“Such a brave soul you are, Justice. Please let me handle this. I wouldn't forgive myself if any harm came to you.”

“Okay, but what will you do if it's true? If there really are vampires there?”

“I don't know yet.”

“Okay. Be careful though. My family is there.”

“No mortals will be harmed.”

I smile at his wording. “Good.” I glance at my door again. “Do you have to go right now?”

“No. Would you like me to stay?”

“Yes. I waited all day to see you again.”

His expression softens. “I did too.”

“Do you mean it?”

“I do. There's something about you, Justice. Something beautiful and warm that calls to me. I would very much like to know you better.”

I lean in just a bit. “So you're really attracted to me? Because I'm wicked into you.”

Eros lifts his eyebrows in surprise. “Are you?”

“Yeah.” I rub his thigh as I lick my dry lips. “My sex drive was always my downfall at Nightsky.”

“I don't want to take advantage of you when you're feeling vulnerable.”

“I know, but the best thing that could happen to me right now is experiencing pleasure without fear of punishment.” I take his hand and put it

between my legs, on my growing bulge. “You don’t have to do anything to me. I would be happy enough to pleasure you.”

Eros clears his throat. “I hear your words, but I need to be certain this is truly what you want.”

“How can I prove it?”

“Look into my eyes and tell me what you want.”

I focus on his perfect face and pretty eyes, slightly swaying as my body warms.

“Do you truly want me, Justice?” Eros asks, his voice soft and sweet.

“I do. I would have tried sooner if it weren’t for my weird circumstances.”

“What do you want from me?”

“Everything. I want to touch you, kiss you. I want to please you, Eros. I need to feel this with you. Please.”

Eros nods as he slides his hand behind my neck. “It would be a true pleasure to make love to you.”

My stomach flutters. “Make love. What a beautiful term. Is that what it’s called outside?”

“Yes. I’m so sorry about what’s happened to you up to now, but you are free, Justice.”

“I know. I want to make love. I want to know what that feels like. Even if it’s not really love.”

Maybe someday it could be. Maybe Eros is in my life for a reason, and knowing that I’m not fanciful and vampires are real just proves our paths were meant to cross.

Eros smiles, standing. “Do you trust me?”

“Yes.”

“Good. I have somewhere to take you.”



# Chapter Eleven

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## EROS

As difficult as it is, there is no way I'm making love to this sweet creature. Not yet. I sensed his truth, his real desire for sexual touch, but it's still wrapped up in so much fear and shame and confusion. I never want him to regret any interaction with me, so I have another idea, one that will satisfy both of us.

Justice follows me to the window, curiosity all over his face. His calm, steady heartbeat tells me he trusts me, which is miraculous given his experiences. I climb out the window, balancing on the ledge, then help him join me.

He laughs softly, gripping my arm. "I should probably just ask if I can have visitors so we don't have to do all this."

"It adds to the fun, no?"

Justice smiles. "It does."

"Close your eyes."

"Okay."

"Promise you won't open them."

"I promise."

Once I'm sure his eyes are closed, I leap down from the ledge to the grass and take off, easily disappearing into the woods. To Justice, he won't even feel like he's moving, but when he opens his eyes, we'll both be in a secluded spot.

"Open your eyes, Justice."

He does, blinking a little before realizing we're surrounded by trees. "How did we...?"

“I walk fast. Come.” I take his wrist and pull him through the woods to a clearing where I go to sit and write poetry. I’ve often thought it would be a beautiful spot to stargaze and worship the moon given the way the tall branches part near the canopy, as if they refuse to hide the beauty of the night.

“Let’s lie down here.”

Justice nods, still grinning. I can feel his joy radiating off of him as he lies back on the bed of fallen leaves. “How do you know about this spot?”

I lie down beside him. “I write here sometimes when I want to be alone.”

“What do you write?”

“Poetry mostly. Short stories sometimes. I also document my experiences. Should a day come when I no longer remember, I’ll have them to look back on.”

“That’s such a good idea.” His smile quickly fades. “Maybe I could start now. I don’t want to remember anything before this.”

I turn my head to gaze at his face. “Now is a good time to start. Sweet Justice, look up at the stars. Notice their beauty as they twinkle in the sky. The moon cleanses us with her rays.”

“The moon is a girl?”

“The moon is whoever you want it to be. I think of it as a female because she nurtures me, like a mother.”

He smiles, gazing upward. “That’s a nice thought. I’ve never really paid attention to the sky.”

“No? Why is your cult called Nightsky?”

“The blood king said a being from another world told him the name. Gah, it sounds so stupid now. I can’t believe so many people fell for it.”

“What other choice did they have if it’s all they know?”

“My parents joined as adults. They were exposed to the real world.”

“You probably know this, but there is a psychological reason people join religions and cults.”

“Yes. They told us people go searching for meaning or community and end up seduced by these insane leaders. It makes me sad. I know my parents will never leave, but they might be in danger. I don’t think that would change anything. They’re willing to die for the Supreme Being.”

I wrap my hand around his, tangling our fingers together. “I’m sorry, Justice. I know how painful it is to leave family behind.”

“You do?”

I nod as the vague memories of my family's faces strain to escape the box I keep them locked in. "I left my family too, in order to embrace a new life that I was better suited for. It hurts, but sometimes it's the only thing left to do."

"Yeah." Justice falls silent as he gazes up at the moon. "This is nice, but it's not sex, Eros."

I chuckle. "I'm well aware." I roll to my side, balancing on my elbow as my hand rests on his chest. "I have something almost as good if you want to try it."

His brow creases. "I thought you wanted me."

"Oh, I do. Very much so."

"But?"

"But whatever this is growing between us, I want it to last. I don't see a need to rush anything." I slide my hand up his chest to his neck, then his cheek. "You are beautiful, Justice. You rival all the stars and the moon herself. If you can trust me, I promise to make you feel incredible."

Even though disappointment lingers in his eyes, he nods. "I trust you."

I lift his hand and kiss the back of it. "Close your eyes."

With a deep exhale, Justice closes his eyes. I take a moment to center myself. I haven't done this in years, but I want to now.

As I focus on giving Justice pleasure, my body tingles, starting at my toes and moving up to my scalp. I keep my hand on his chest, my body pressed to the side of his. Justice holds my hand to his heart, his breathing already quickening. Good. He feels the connection.

"Open your eyes," I whisper.

He does, gasping when he sees mine, but relaxing quickly as I send waves of compulsion mixed with sexual desire to him. His mouth opens as he holds my gaze, and I brush my thumb across his plump bottom lip.

The connection is growing. Justice reacts with wide eyes, attempting to speak, but no words come. He's actually in a state of semi-paralysis, which will slowly yield to pleasure the more I focus. It's an old trick that Raphael taught me, but it still works.

I envision peeling Justice's clothes off and worshipping his nude body under the light of the moon, and he arches his back as if he can feel my kisses down his torso. Next, I focus my attention between his legs, and what I imagine he looks like. Is he as small and lithe there as he is overall, or does he hide a surprise? Gods, I want to know.

Unable to hold back further, I straddle his hips and hold his gaze, sending him visions of what I want to do to him. He gasps again as his cheeks bloom a pretty shade of pink. His fingers crinkle leaves between them.

“You are stunning, Justice. What a pleasure it is to gaze upon your face.”

Justice writhes beneath me, attempting to make our bodies connect more fully, but I hover above his body, keeping just a few inches between us.

“Er... os,” he finally manages.

“So good, isn’t it? You can feel me in every part of you. You’re in every part of me too.”

His eyelids flutter as he nods, and the desire to taste his lips is nearly overwhelming, but I hold back. I won’t touch him while he’s under my compulsion.

“You’re going to feel a release like none other,” I whisper. “Such ecstasy it will leave you woozy. You will know without a doubt that it was me who gave you this pleasure and who desires you desperately.”

“P-p-please.”

Clasping our hands together again, I focus my gaze, aware that my vampire traits are on full display, but he won’t remember when I wash it all away. I send visions of the two of us, naked and writhing together in a luxurious bed, our hard cocks bumping together, and then the moment I enter him.

Just imagining his face is enough for me, and I tense as pleasure floods my body. Beneath me, Justice gasps, whispering my name as he trembles. A tear escapes his eye, trickling down the side of his face, and once I see the last of it subside, I blink to let the compulsion wash away and pull my beast inside once more.

I roll onto my back, soaking in the cool night air and waiting for Justice to recover.

“How the hell did you do that?” he asks several minutes later.

“Just something I learned on my travels.”

“But...” He sits up, patting his crotch. “I came, but I didn’t come.”

Chuckling, I sit up with him. “Right, but did you *feel*?”

“Everything. So much more intense than I ever have. Is that making love?”

“It’s a prelude to making love, which I hope to do with you someday.”

Justice nods. “Somehow I think that was better than sex.”

Reaching out, I brush my fingers under his chin. “Better than the sex you

had before me. When we do make love, Justice, I promise to give you all that I am in pursuit of your pleasure.”

“What about yours?”

“Your pleasure is mine. I would, however, love to kiss you.”

He nods. “Please.”

With my hand behind his neck, I pull our mouths together, exhaling when our lips meet. Justice moans, scrambling onto my lap as he opens up to me, his hot tongue seeking mine. The kiss isn’t delicate at all. No. It’s desperate, needy, and a promise of so much more.

I force myself to break the kiss before I allow him to push us further than we should go. “Soon,” I whisper against his mouth.

Justice nods, his lips now damp and plump from our kiss. “I think I was meant to meet you, Eros.”

“I’m starting to believe that myself. I should get you back to your room.”

We walk back slowly this time, hand in hand, our path lit by the moon as if she’s following us. I encourage him to close his eyes again as I lift us easily up to his room on the second floor. Once inside, I linger by the window.

“I will see you again soon, Justice. I promise you.”

“Promise that whatever you find out about Nightsky, you’ll tell me.”

“I promise that as well.”

He grips my wrist. “Promise me you’ll be safe.”

Smiling, I nod. “You don’t have to worry about me. I assure you that any bad guys out there have more to worry about than I do.”

“Even vampires?”

“Even vampires.” I kiss his forehead. “Be well, sweetheart.”

His face lights up. “You too, Eros.”

I leap from the window down to the ground, tearing off into the night. His words linger with me. Maybe we really were supposed to meet. If we were, I pray fate is kind to me and lets me keep him.

## Chapter Twelve

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## JUSTICE

By morning, I'm still on cloud nine after Eros's visit last night. Sitting in the breakfast room, I find myself staring outside instead of eating my yogurt. I can't believe my luck in stumbling across a man like him so soon after escaping.

My attention returns when Carina enters the room. I pop up from my seat and hurry over to her at the coffee station.

"Morning, Carina."

She smiles brightly. "How are you, Justice? Acclimating so far?"

"Yeah, mostly. A lot to process."

"Of course."

"I was wondering if we're allowed to have visitors here."

Her brow crinkles. "Visitors?"

"I met someone the night I escaped. A friend. I'd like to call him and let him know how I'm doing, but I wondered if he could visit me here."

"I see." She takes her mug of coffee and motions for me to follow her to a table.

I sit with her, but from her expression, I'm already guessing the answer is no.

"We like to provide as much freedom as we can here. We want it to feel like the real world."

"But?"

"There are many people here who are traumatized. They've been through physical and mental abuse. It could be triggering for them to see a stranger who isn't from the cult here."



“I understand. You said I could go out after a month, but am I able to go out sooner if I want to?”

“Yes.” She smiles again. “Again, we do our best to not restrict you. Our guidelines are based on experience and some people aren’t ready, but you do seem to be very resilient.”

“I don’t know about that. I just want him to know that I’m doing well.”

“By all means.”

“There’s a phone I can use?”

“Yes. In fact, we can move up the process to get you a cell phone so you can stay in touch with us should you need to while you’re out.”

“A cell phone?”

“Ah. You haven’t been through the technology seminar yet. It’s a small phone you can take with you everywhere you go.”

“Oh. I saw a disciple with something like that once. I thought maybe it was a radio until I realized he was talking to it.”

“I heard they had upgraded from walkie-talkies.”

Nodding, I think about all the things I probably don’t know yet. “How did you get here, Carina?”

“I’ll tell you, but you have to pretend to still be interested when I do my presentation to the newcomers next week.”

Laughing softly, I nod. “Promise.”

“I’m afraid it’s a tragic story. My sister Elaina was two years older than me.”

I immediately notice the past tense use. Oh dang.

“Meaning she turned thirty before me. She was sent to the Ceres. Within a week of being there, she was...” Carina pauses, gazing into her coffee mug with a tight expression. “Do you know what the Ceres is, Justice?”

“The place for women to become mothers.”

“Yes, that’s what they tell you.” Her tone is bitter now. “But it’s not as beautiful as it sounds. Women don’t become mothers. They become birthers to create the next generation of Nightskyers.” She shifts her gaze to me. “Have any idea how they become pregnant?”

I shake my head, already nervous about what I’m about to hear.

“Do you want to know this story?”

“Yes. I want to know everything that happened there.”

Carina nods. “Very well. The women are brought to a room called the Digna. It means worthy in Latin. There the disciples enter and proceed to take

the woman until each of them has implanted their seed inside her.”

I don't know how to define the emotion gripping my chest, but it's tight and ugly and foul.

“She is then kept in a room with other women who experienced the same and monitored to determine whether she becomes pregnant. If she does, she is deemed worthy and moved on to the main section, Exaltatus, which means Exalted. Pregnant women are then pampered and cared for, ensuring a healthy pregnancy.”

“And if they don't become pregnant?”

“The Pasture,” she answers. “Elaina became pregnant but during the experience in Digna, she had an awakening. She never wanted another woman to go through what she did. So she escaped one night. She hitchhiked and walked barefoot in the dark until she reached me at the compound. She told me her story and made me promise to run before I turned thirty. She told me the stories of women who lost their pregnancies, of children born imperfect in the eyes of the Supreme Being, of women with mental health challenges after delivery. All sent to the Pasture.”

“Killed?”

Carina nods. “They have no use for you if you cannot produce healthy children.”

“I don't understand. Why can't those women help rear the other children?”

“Because they've been deemed unworthy.” She touches my hand. “The only way a cult like this survives and endures is by having children born into it and indoctrinated from birth.”

“What happened to Elaina?” I'm afraid of the ending, but I have to know.

“She was turned in by our own mother. I can still hear her screams as they dragged her away. I knew I would never see her again. They watched me for a year, so I did everything perfectly to prove my devotion, but inside I was dead. I couldn't look my mother in the eyes for her betrayal.” She shakes her head as her gaze grows distant. “They told us Elaina died during childbirth, as did her child, but I knew it wasn't true. I knew what they did. Disobedience is the ultimate sin.”

I murmur the last sentence with her at the same time. It was hammered into our heads every day.

“I'm so sorry, Carina.”

She blinks, smiling slightly, but I can still see the pain behind it. “I'm not.

My sister sacrificed herself for my benefit. I had a plan and I just had to wait until I was certain they weren't watching me anymore. I was part of the supply team, so I had the opportunity to leave the compound once a month for shopping. We went to the big store the city over from us as we always did. I volunteered that day to pick out undergarments for the women."

I nod, completely entranced.

"I snuck jeans, a sweater, and a hat into the dressing room, where I changed clothes. I left an envelope with money and a note for the employees and then I crept through that big store, avoiding the other members, until I was able to walk right out the front door."

"Wow."

"And then I just ran. I ran all the way to an area close to the freeway where I found a women's shelter."

"They never found you?"

"Never." She smiles. "From that moment forward, I made it my mission to rescue as many people as possible. I knew all the places the members went. I threw flyers over the compound walls, I even called sometimes. I was threatened with death more times than I can count. A disciple told me that they would make my mother's life hell if I didn't stop what I was doing." She blows out a breath. "I had to make the decision to value myself and the freedom of those who were able to be saved over her well-being. I knew she would never leave. Not after what she did to Elaina."

"I'm so sorry."

"It's okay. That was many years ago, and look around you now, Justice. Look what came of that pain. You're here. Hundreds of others have been through here and now live normal, well-adjusted lives. This was my purpose."

"I'm so glad you found me."

"Me too. I sensed something in you the day I approached. I don't know what it was, but I just knew I could get to you. Maybe there was a tiny crack I could slip into. You needed the truth and I had it."

I nod, glancing at my folded hands. "That tiny crack. Yeah. I feared I would be deemed unworthy. I broke the rules twice that they knew of. I broke them a lot more than that. I was scared of what would happen to me."

"Rightfully so. Your instinct saved you. My goal is to expose the truth to everyone. I just need evidence. I need proof of what they do there and the evil behind the Supreme Being."

The story Eros told me lingers in my mind. “Did you ever hear rumors about... well... vampires?”

I’m expecting her to laugh or look at me like I’m crazy, but instead she pulls her head back. “Why do you ask that?”

“There was a situation, years ago, but I never forgot. The man was so bloody, and he kept saying ‘vampire.’ I have these dreams sometimes, Carina. Dreams of vampires.”

She nods, glancing around before leaning closer. “As much as I want to discount the rumors, some of them sound authentic, but I don’t know. I’ve never seen or heard proof.”

I nod, chewing my bottom lip. “Just wondering.”

“At this point, honestly, nothing would shock me. Why not vampires?”

I laugh a little. “Yeah. So I can call my friend and visit with him?”

“That’s a decision you can make for yourself, but please be careful, Justice. You’re more vulnerable than you know. You’re at the mercy of whoever you’re with as you make sense of the world.”

“I’ll be careful.”

“Okay. We’ll get you set up with a cell phone this afternoon.”

“Thank you. And I really appreciate hearing about Elaina. She didn’t die in vain.”

“I know.” Carina smiles. “I sense something in you still, Justice. I think you’re going to do great things.”

“I don’t plan to waste this opportunity.”

I leave the breakfast room and wander outside to sit under the tree. The sun shining down on me and warming my skin feels amazing, but not as good as the moon did last night. Or maybe that was just Eros. I can’t wait to call him and see him again.

Carina is right to warn me, but my gut tells me Eros is the safest person I could choose to be with outside of these walls. It’s just a feeling, but since my instinct got me this far, I’m gonna keep trusting it.

# Chapter Thirteen

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## EROS

While lounging in my favorite armchair, my phone vibrates with a rare call. Hades help the caller if the telemarketers have discovered my number again.

“Hello,” I answer in a gruff voice.

“Eros?”

I sit up straight. “Justice. Hello. How are you?”

“Good. Guess what?”

“Tell me.”

“Carina got me my own phone today and I can’t have visitors, but I can go out and visit with you. I mean, if you’d like that.”

“I would like that very much. It’s so nice to hear your voice.”

“You too. I’m still thinking about last night.”

“So am I. Would you like to go out tonight? We can do anything you want.”

“Anything?” His tone is immediately flirtatious.

I chuckle. “Behave, brave one.”

“I’ve heard that my whole life,” he says, his tone turning melancholic. “Disobedience is the ultimate sin. That’s what we were taught. I want to have fun and make my own decisions and do the wrong thing sometimes.”

“I understand. I don’t believe in sin, Justice. It’s a construct used to control people. You’ll never find that judgment with me, and while mistakes can be a beautiful thing, I want the things that happen between us to feel good in the long run.”

I hear him sigh. “Right. I have a lot of deprogramming to do, but, Eros... Nothing.”

“No, please tell me what’s on your mind.”

“Um, okay. It’s just that I’ve never said it out loud.”

“It’s a good time to start then, no?”

He laughs softly. “Yeah.” He pauses, blowing out a breath. “I want to be bad, Eros. I want to be so bad, and I want to be with you when I do bad things.”

My chest warms with delight. He’s so innocent and yet desires to be much more.

“You want to taste the dark side of life?”

“Maybe. I don’t even know what it is. I just want to know what normal life feels like. I want to do the things I wasn’t allowed to do before. Can you help me, Eros?”

“Absolutely. I know where to take you tonight. Can I pick you up at nine?”

“I’ll be waiting outside.”

“I look forward to seeing you.”

“Me too. Oh, what should I wear?”

“Jeans are fine.”

“Okay. Bye, Eros.”

“See you later, Justice.”

I end the call and lean back with a smile on my face. Raphael enters the room, carrying two glasses. As he hands me one, he eyes me suspiciously.

“What are you up to?” he asks.

“Justice just called. I’m taking him out tonight.”

“Ah. Your fascination with the mortal continues.”

“Yes. He’s intriguing. I’ve never met such an innocent, but he’s craving a bit of debauchery.”

“So you’re bringing Thorn with you?” he teases as he sits across from me.

I inhale the bouquet of the blood cocktail he gave me before taking a sip. “Justice will need to be eased into Thorn’s level of hedonism.”

“As we all required.”

We both laugh.

“But seriously,” Raph continues. “Do you think you could keep Justice?”

“I have no idea, my friend. I used the trick you taught me, and it was wonderful, but not nearly enough.”

Raphael grins. “It is only meant to be an appetizer before the feast.”

Perhaps tonight you can get your fill.”

“I wish I could, but I hold back. He’s inexperienced in the ways of the world.”

“A virgin?”

“No, actually, but he’s been kept in containment like an animal. Besides, he has no idea who he’s dealing with by choosing my company.”

“Your restraint has always been admirable. You’ll be careful. I’m sure of it.”

“Careful, yes, but I have my limits, just as anyone does. He stirs parts of me I had forgotten about.”

Raphael grins. “That is wonderful, isn’t it?”

“I think so. He doesn’t raise the alarms I’m used to feeling around mortals.”

“That in itself is promising. Where will you take him?”

“Maybe I’ll take him to Chaos.”

Raphael raises his eyebrows. “A kink club straight out the gate?”

Chuckling, I sip my cocktail, shaking my head. “Just the dance club downstairs. I like the vibe there. The only place better is Lair, but I can’t take Justice there.”

“No. His scent would drive everyone mad.”

“Exactly. If he ever steps foot in there, it will only be because he knows what I am.”

Raphael swirls his glass with a smirk on his face.

“What?” I ask.

“Oh nothing. I’m just enjoying the fact that you’re obviously considering the idea that he could be the one you keep. Perhaps fate will shine on you too, brother.”

“Perhaps. What once was just folly is now tangible again, thanks to Syn and Midnight. I’m cautiously hopeful that my path crossed with Justice’s for a reason.”

“I am too. After all these centuries, what a joy it would be to find an endless love. Part of me is too afraid to hope it will happen to all of us. Well, specifically me. It’s all I’ve wanted, but it remains out of reach.”

His confession isn’t shocking to me. I know Raphael better than most. He often hides behind his stoic, brooding artist persona, but inside all he wants is someone to love.

“I have hope. After Syn I thought it was a fluke, but now there’s



Midnight too. It's not random. After all these years, I believe fate has deemed us worthy. I have no idea whether Justice is meant for me for good, but I know I want to try, and that in itself is incredible."

"I agree. I'll borrow some of your hope."

"That's the spirit. Stranger things have happened."

Raphael laughs. "This is true. Have fun tonight."

"I plan to."

I pull up in front of the gated home, tapping my fingers on the steering wheel while I wait for Justice to appear. I'm early, but as Thorn pointed out before I left, I have "zero chill." I can't disagree. The hours dragged by so slowly I thought I would go mad, but now I'm minutes from seeing him again.

The gate opens and a woman steps out, followed closely by Justice. I shut the car off and step outside to greet them. The woman's gaze is critical, assessing, but she offers a slight smile.

"Hi, Eros," Justice says, his smile wide and beaming. "This is Carina. She runs the house. I wanted her to meet you so she knows you're a good guy."

"My pleasure." I offer my hand to the woman. "Eros Orpheus. Nice to meet you."

"Carina Ortega. Justice is an adult and able to make his own choices, but I am kind of a mama bear when it comes to protecting the people at the house. We've had situations in the past where cult members attempted abductions of those who'd escaped."

"Really?" Justice asks, looking worried.

"It's why we moved to New Onyx," Carina explains. "It's never happened at this location, but you can't be too safe. I can be overprotective."

"I don't blame you at all," I say. "It sounds like they've all been through a lot to get here."

"Yes."

"Even though Justice can make his own decisions as you stated, I want to assure you that I have only his best interests in mind. His well-being is front and center for me."

Carina nods, seemingly appeased. At least her energy says as much. "Well, have fun, you two." She puts her hand on Justice's shoulder. "Just

remember, this is a new world for you. Take it all in, but if you get overwhelmed, know that you don't have to understand everything all at once."

Justice nods, glancing at me. "I bet Eros can help me learn too."

I bow my head slightly. "Of course."

Carina steps back and watches me open the passenger door for Justice. I walk around and get in the car too, and as we back out of the drive, Justice waves to Carina, but I notice his sullen expression.

"Is something wrong?" I ask.

"No. Not at all. Just..." He exhales, relaxing into the seat. "Carina treats me better than my own mother did, and she's only known me for a couple of days. It's just weird, you know?"

"I can only imagine. Your parents weren't kind to you?"

"It's not that easy to categorize. The compound was so different. Family units were separated by gender and age and all kinds of other things. The Supreme Being has all these 'filters,' as they call them. They group us by similarity in traits and strengths. Weaknesses too. The belief is that there's benefit in numbers."

He glances out the window, and I remain silent to give him time to talk about whatever he wants.

"When they took me away from my parents, I was barely old enough to do any independent tasks. I guess the older I got, the more it bothered me that they never came to see me. Only during Devotion did I see them, and it was never hugs and joy. It was rules. They only cared that I was compliant so that I could be a disciple. When I received my demerits, they didn't talk to me for over a year."

"A year?"

"It was required of them, and they cared more about their standing than their son. The only sort-of kind thing my dad said to me was that at least I had the good sense to choose a male. My punishment would have been far more severe if I had defiled a female."

"So they have no problems with same-sex love?"

"I wouldn't say that. We're supposed to suppress all earthly desires, but if we fail, it's better to fail amongst our own than to tempt the other. We're taught women make men weak."

"Oh, that's right. You said that."

"So at least we can say we weren't weakened by feminine desire. Same

for the girls. They didn't harm a man if they fornicated with each other."

"It's oddly fascinating. One thing you told me stood out. Why do they wait until the women are thirty before they become pregnant? In my experience, youth is often more associated with childbearing. Very young."

"Oh yeah." He turns toward me in his seat. "It's a blood thing. The young people are prized for the purity of their blood. That's why staying a virgin is important. Thirty is the age deemed mature enough to move past that."

I glance at him, choosing my words carefully since this is the only world he's ever known until now. "And what is done with the virgin blood?"

"Good question," Justice answers. "I wasn't allowed to know that, and I haven't asked the group yet. Remember I told you about the blood testing?"

"Yes."

"Well, that rule was for newcomers to the group and males. As I understand it, the younger females did provide blood to the Supreme Being."

"Did he father children?"

"No." Justice shakes his head. "He *chose* his children based on reports from those at Ceres and the Vessel. Children deemed worthy became his. I never saw any though. I heard they were raised in a special center far away from the others to avoid being tainted."

Justice leans his head back with his eyes closed.

"Do you know that until today I didn't know what a cell phone was?"

"What?"

"Technology was forbidden. All we had were occasional books, but they were curated. I saw television sometimes when we went out, but you couldn't be caught watching it. I know about basic things like cars and what a computer is, sort of, but my life was labor." He opens his eyes, staring straight ahead. "I feel like a child in a grown man's body."

"You're not though. You're articulate and obviously smart. You light up a dark room. I already know this because my life is full of dark rooms, and you light mine up."

Justice shifts his gaze to me, his mouth slightly agape. "You barely know me."

"Doesn't matter. I'm an excellent judge of character. If it helps, technology is not my favorite invention. Sure, it has some benefits, but I prefer the days of long ago when..." My words trail off when I realize where I was going. "Anyway, I'm not very tech savvy either."

"But you know what it is."

“And so will you.” I exit the freeway and enter the downtown area where Chaos is. “Tonight, you’ll experience a nightclub.”

“What do we do there?”

“Dance, have some drinks if we wish, talk. Whatever we like.”

“Okay. I’ve never done any of that.”

“No music at the compound?”

“Just instrumental stuff. Sounded like... maybe opera or classical. Only during Devotion.”

“What did you do during Devotion?”

“Listened to stories about how someday the Supreme Being would rule all the races and peoples of the world. Slowly, his power and influence would seep into the highest offices. His disciples would pave the path, and only those who faithfully followed him would enter Eternal Bliss. Anyone who resisted would die unanointed. Then your soul is trapped in darkness.”

I nod as I pull into a parking spot. I definitely need to learn more about this cult. If this isn’t vampire shit, I don’t know what it is.

“Well, let’s put thoughts of that aside and have some fun.”

Justice squeezes my hand, his face lighting up. “I’ve never been allowed to have fun. Show me how it’s done.”

“I will.” Leaning across the seat, I kiss his forehead. “Let yourself go, Justice. You are safe with me. I promise no harm will ever come to you while I’m around.”

He nods, searching my eyes. “I believe you.”

## Chapter Fourteen

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## JUSTICE

Eros takes my hand in his and leads me across the street to a black building with two men standing out front. Next to it is another building with very loud music playing and lots of people standing outside. He must have known that would be too intimidating for me.

He steps up to the front door and leans in, whispering to one of the men, who nods. The other man opens the door, nodding at me as I pass.

“What’s going on?” I ask.

“It’s an exclusive club,” Eros says. “Only those with memberships or an established presence can enter. I let them know we’re only partaking in the main club tonight.”

“What else is there?” I ask, glancing around the darkened foyer. It looks like a castle to me, like in the fairy tales we sometimes read as kids.

“The upstairs is dedicated to people with more... specific ideas of fun.”

“Sex stuff?” I ask with a grin.

“Definitely sex stuff.”

A woman steps out from behind a curtain and smiles when she sees Eros. “Well, if it isn’t the elusive god of love.”

“Hi, Sinister.” Eros kisses her cheek. “How are you?”

“Beautiful as always. Who’s this little nugget of yumminess?”

I widen my eyes but say nothing, stepping slightly closer to Eros.

“My date,” Eros says, smiling proudly. “Justice, meet Sinister.”

“Pleasure,” Sinister says, her eyes focused on me in a way that doesn’t make any sense.

“Ah ah,” Eros says, pulling me closer. “All mine, Sin.”

The woman pops her bottom lip out. “You never share.”

“No, I do not. We’re going to the main part tonight.”

“Have fun. Tell Zax your first round is on me.”

“Thanks.”

Eros grips my hand and we step through a curtain to a wide-open space. It’s still dark, with black walls and red furniture. There’s a square in the middle of the floor that has people dancing on it.

“I don’t understand anything that just happened,” I say, rising on my toes so Eros can hear me.

“Sinister was flirting with you. She thinks you’re attractive.”

“Right in front of you?”

Eros stops walking, turning to face me. “You’ll learn that some people are more open with their sexuality than others, especially people who frequent clubs like this. You never know what someone is into until you ask. For all she knows, I may have invited her to join us in bed.”

“So normal people have sex with both genders?”

“It’s an orientation like anything else. Some people are attracted to all genders and others attracted to people regardless of gender. Are you familiar with things like sexual orientation and gender?”

I shake my head. “No. I mean, I know what boys and girls are. I know how sex works. Is there more?”

“So much more. We’ll talk about it. Sinister is actually transgender. Do you know what that means?”

“No.”

“It’s when a person’s assigned biological sex doesn’t match their internal gender. Sinister was assigned male at birth but came to understand she is actually female.”

“Oh. We have people like that at the compound. We call them tertius.”

“Third,” Eros whispers. “Are they treated well?”

I shrug. “Probably. They live in the Supreme Being’s home because they are deemed transcendent. I never got to see any of them, but if you expressed the tertius traits, you were sent to live at the higher compound.”

“Sounds like better treatment than this world sometimes. Transgender people are not always treated kindly, but in New Onyx, they are safe. Sinister is the only woman who works here because she transitioned during her employment, and they kept her on staff anyway. The patrons all understand and accept it.”

“Wait. Only men work here?”

“It’s a club for queer men.”

I nod, glancing around and realizing, yep, no women. “Is that a common thing? Separating genders?”

“For the purposes of entertainment and sexual pursuits, yes. There are lesbian clubs, gay clubs, and mixed clubs. Something for everyone in New Onyx. I assume Sable Cove has the same landscape, being a big city, but you were sheltered from it.”

“Right. Like everything.” I smile. “I’m not unhappy though. I’m so grateful to be experiencing this. I was never told whether I’m gay or tertius or whatever. I was just taught to stay away from women, but it was easy. I didn’t want to do anything with them.”

“Perhaps you are gay, but you don’t have to label anything unless you want to. You can just be attracted to whoever you want to be without naming it. There are no boxes or groups you have to fit into out here.”

Nodding, I gaze into his eyes. “So if my orientation is Eros, that’s enough?”

He laughs heartily and I really like the sound. “That suits me just fine.”

“Me too.”

Eros takes my hand again and continues to lead me to a large wooden counter with lots of people standing around it. Two men are behind it with glass bottles in their hands, flipping them in the air and talking to the people.

A tall black man with a bald head notices Eros and grins as we push forward. “Haven’t seen you in a while,” he calls out.

“I haven’t been out in a while. Sin said she’d cover our first round.”

“I’ve got your second one then.”

I notice how the man looks at Eros. I’ve seen that look before. It’s desire. I bet that’s how I look when I see Eros. The man moves closer to the bar, leaning in to talk to Eros. I can’t hear the discussion over the music, but I’m well aware of the hot pit of jealousy growing in my belly. That man wants to take Eros from me, but there’s no way I’m letting that happen.

I shove forward and get between them, glaring at the handsome man behind the bar. “I’m Justice. I’m with Eros.”

The man pulls his head back with an amused smirk. “I’m Zax. Just making drinks, little warrior. Don’t worry.”

“Don’t call me little.” I puff my chest out.

Zax puts his hands up in surrender, but he’s still smirking. “You’ve got



yourself a lively one, Eros. Good for you.”

Zax turns his back on me, and then embarrassment sets in that I just acted like that. When I turn around to face Eros, he’s gazing at me with the sexiest expression I’ve ever seen. My dick twitches in my jeans as I bite my bottom lip.

“Sorry. I don’t know what came over me. I didn’t want him to take you from me.”

Eros cups my chin with delicate fingers. “He can’t, Justice. No one can. I want to be honest with you and tell you that I have been with him before, but it was only once and a very long time ago. He’s just flirtatious.”

That hot, prickly feeling is back, and I want to punch the much bigger man in the face. “I don’t like that.”

“Darling, my sweetheart,” Eros whispers, but somehow I still hear him. “You can’t blame me for what I did before I knew you existed. Just believe now that no one could possibly tear my attention away from you.”

I nod, trying to push away the ugly feelings. “I’ve never felt like this before. It’s weird.”

“It pleases me.” Eros lifts my hand and kisses my knuckles. “It lets me know that you desire me as much as I desire you. I’m usually the possessive one.”

I chuckle, shaking my head. “I’ll try to calm down.”

“And if you can’t, that’s okay. I’ll prove my devotion.”

“Two dirty pom martinis,” Zax says, putting two glasses filled with vibrant red liquid down. He winks at me and moves on to the next customer.

“Have you had alcohol before?” Eros asks.

“No.”

“Okay, we’ll take it easy then. This is my favorite drink.” He hands me a glass and holds his up between us, so I mirror his action. “A toast. To freedom.”

Smiling, I nod. “Yes, freedom.”

Eros bumps his glass against mine and then drinks. I take a sip, immediately blown away by the explosion of flavor on my tongue. It’s fruity and sweet, but there’s something earthy and rich in the finish.

“This is delicious.”

“Isn’t it?” Eros’s cheeks get a little color in them, and his eyes are so vivid they almost seem to glow in the dim club lights. “Would you rather dance or find a table and talk?”

“Dance.”

“Perfect.”

With his free hand, he takes mine and leads me to the large square on the floor filled with people writhing against each other. The air is electric— heated and humid like after a summer rain. Many of the men are scantily dressed, with plenty of skin showing. There are cropped shirts, shorts or skirts, clothes with mesh or slashes in them.

One man in particular catches my eye. He’s wearing a shirt that looks like a net and very short, shiny shorts. I can see part of his butt cheeks. When he twists around to face me, I see the makeup on his face as he bumps his butt into the man behind him.

“Men can wear makeup?”

“We can do anything we like, Justice. Do you want to wear makeup?”

“I don’t know.” I laugh shyly. “I only know what it is because they showed us pictures of earthly women. Women who let the demons into their lives. But none of that is true, is it?”

“No. Makeup is just for fun, and it’s for anyone who wants to use it.”

Nodding, I step closer to Eros. “I have so much to learn.”

“Remember what Carina said. You don’t have to learn it all tonight. This place is just one experience. One microcosm of society.” He wraps an arm around my waist, pulling me into him. “There are people in regular life who follow religions that don’t allow self-expression either. Your cult was extreme, but not alone.”

I nod, pushing away memories of all the lessons and talks we had. That was my old life. This is my new one. “Let’s just dance.”

Eros finishes his drink in one gulp, then sets the empty glass on a nearby table. I do the same, laughing as the liquid tickles my throat. Then Eros grips my hips, moving them back and forth to the beat.

“What is this music called?”

“You’d have to ask Thorn. I don’t follow pop culture. All I know is that it sounds nice and allows me to be close to you.”

As we find a rhythm, moving closer and closer until no space remains between us, I shut out the rest of the world. Only Eros and I exist, and I hope that by the end of the night, he’ll make me his completely.

Eros keeps his sensual gaze locked on my face, filling me with all kinds of good emotions. I can feel that he wants me, and I hope he can feel the same from me.

As the song changes, Eros leans in and kisses me deeply, his tongue tangling with mine, in front of all these people! My chest swells with pride that he wants all the men around us to know that I'm his and he's mine.

Suddenly, I don't want to dance anymore. I want to get naked with him.

"Please, Eros," I whisper against his lips. "I want you so bad."

He slides his hand to the back of my neck as he presses our foreheads together. "Gods, I want you too."

"Then have me. I'm saying yes. I know what I want. Please don't make me go home without it."

He pulls back enough to meet my pleading gaze. "You're sure?"

"You're not taking advantage of me. How can I prove it?"

Eros puts his hand on my chest over my heart, still holding my gaze. Whatever he's doing seems to do the trick, because he nods.

"Let's go."

# Chapter Fifteen

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## EROS

If I could, I would whisk this beautiful man into my arms and be home in a flash, but I must maintain the mortal facade a little longer.

Which begs the question, when will I tell him what I am? Now that I'm pretty certain his cult involves vampires in some capacity, he might come to fear me. The idea sits like a weight in my chest. I would hate myself for frightening him.

He turns his head and smiles at me while buckling his seat belt. I sense nothing but happy and excited emotions pouring from him. He's so innocent in some ways, yet so divinely appealing he sets my senses on fire. My gums throb with need. Hades, the man is tempting. I want to taste him in every way possible.

"You seem deep in thought," Justice says.

"Ah, no. I'm not. I'm just calming myself down."

I start the engine and pull out of the parking lot, driving like I'm Thorn to get back home. At a stoplight, I turn my attention to Justice, who has his hand out the window, enjoying the evening breeze.

"How were you educated?" I ask to shift my own attention from desire.

Justice glances at me. "At the compound. A lot of members were certified to teach, but we moved through the grades quickly since all earthly concerns were removed."

"What do you mean?"

"One of the guys at the safe house, Mike, told me at breakfast that he's learned since he left the cult that most of the history we were taught is false or seriously revised. We were led to believe that outside of the compound

was nothing but war and misery because humanity was lost. I guess that's how they kept us controlled. With fear."

"Do you not know much about American history?"

Justice scoffs. "No history other than what Mike called folklore. We spent a lot of time discussing the origin of Nightsky. We had to know it to be able to teach it."

I nod while my mind swirls with thoughts. "How do you get new members, besides the children being born?"

"Disciples. They go out on what's called rescue missions to look for the worthy. They try to identify people who are almost completely lost to the demon world. Those struggling with addictions and other ailments."

I roll my eyes. "Common tactic for cults and religions."

After a moment, Justice shifts in his seat toward me. "What god do you believe in?"

"Myself. I am god. So are you. To me the divine is what we embody. Everything is energy, Justice. We are nothing but intricately composed stardust. Believe in yourself."

I hear the uptick of his heartbeat and the swoosh of blood through his body. He's excited.

"How did you learn that? Who taught you?"

"Yves taught me. I was raised Christian."

"Ooh," Justice says. "The Deconstruction."

"What?"

"A lot of adult members who came to Nightsky were formally Christians. They had to go through intense deconstruction to rid themselves of the pervasive evil they were taught."

"Oh, my darling Justice. While I don't necessarily disagree, I think it's important to recognize that that's the tactic of all theologies. They all purport to be the only truth, the only path to salvation, but ask yourself, salvation from what?"

"Well then, what happens when we die?"

"What if we don't die?" I glance at him before returning my gaze to the road. "What if we simply return to the stars?"

"You mean, we just go somewhere else?"

"I don't believe in hell or heaven or paradise or eternal bliss. It's all just bollocks to control people. When one person wants to control the world, they are the evil they warn you about."

“That’s obviously true of Nightsky. The one thing I wish I understood is how or why my parents joined.”

“Sometimes the answers we seek never appear. We have to find our own path to peace.”

“You’re happy?”

“I’m content. My life is…” How do I find the words? “It’s so much more than I ever thought I could have. Even more so now that I’ve met you. My family consists of a crazy group of men and two lovely women, and I can’t imagine what I would do without them.” I reach across the seat and pull his hand into mine. “Life is what you make it, Justice. Happiness is a perspective. I chose my path, as radical as it was, and I’ve never regretted a day of it. To me, that is peace.”

I exit the freeway heading to my building, brimming with the anticipation of having Justice in my space, his scent on my sheets. It’s almost too much to contain my beast, but I must tread carefully. I don’t want to use any compulsion on him.

When I glance at him, he’s gazing down at his folded hands.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

He lifts his head, smiling. “Yeah. I really like what you said. I’ve spent most of my life feeling like a bad person because I couldn’t obey all the rules. I lived in fear of being discovered again. I woke up with this heavy weight on my back as the calendar ticked closer to my birthday. For the first time in a long time, that weight is gone. I don’t understand why anyone would choose rules over freedom.”

“Some people need structure and ritual to feel something. Some of us would rather die than be told how to live.” After I enter the parking garage and pull into my spot, I shut the car off and turn to face Justice. “You have a chance to remake your future. You get to decide what it looks like.”

He nods, chewing on his bottom lip. “They told us at the safe house they can help us get paperwork and stuff we need. Job training, things like that.” His eyes turn glassy as he speaks. “Maybe I do understand why some people let others control them. This is a lot.”

“Is there a time limit for how long you can be at the safe house?”

“No. Carina said most people stay between nine and twelve months, but everyone’s on their own path. Some people never leave and become employees of the house.”

“Good. Then there’s no rush. You’ve only been away from there a few

days.”

Justice smiles, blinking away his sadness. “Right. That’s important to remember.”

“It is. Are you ready to go upstairs?”

His smile grows. “So ready.”

As we enter the building and ride the elevator up to our floor, I realize too late that I should have warned my brothers I was bringing a mortal into their midst. It’s unlikely anyone is there other than Yves though. Most of them will either be tucked away with their lovers in their own units, or out working. I’m sure it’s fine.

But as the elevator doors slide open, the strong scent of flesh and blood hits me. I go to reach for Justice’s hand to take him away, but it’s too late. He’s out before I can stop him, rushing toward the same scent luring me.

I’m behind him quickly, but he’s already backing away, his eyes wide with fear as he stares ahead at the macabre scene before us. Hale is on the leather sectional, actively feeding from the neck of a nearly unconscious man while Thorn drinks from the man’s wrist.

Yves looks on with mild disapproval on his face, his eyes flicking up to see me and Justice, his expression morphing quickly to terror.

“Bl-bl-blood,” Justice stutters, falling onto his butt and scrambling backward. “Supreme...” He shakes his head, eyes locked on Hale as he mutters words that make no sense.

“Dammit, Eros,” Yves says, stomping toward me while I’m still trying to understand what’s happening. “Compel him before he passes out from shock.”

“You know them,” Justice accuses. “You know the disciples.”

“What?” I ask, kneeling and grabbing his shoulders.

Justice shakes me off, a look of terror and betrayal all over his features, but I am confused as fuck.

Yves intervenes, scooping Justice up by the arms, and compelling him to sleep in the blink of an eye. Yves puts Justice in my arms. “To your unit. Now.”

Walking past the scene in a haze, I take Justice to my bedroom and lay him down on my bed, falling to my knees beside him.

I feel Yves’s commanding presence behind me. “What the fuck, Eros?”

“I have no idea what just happened. Why did he react that way?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Could it be because he witnessed two vampires



having a meal?”

“No.” I shake my head. “His words didn’t make sense. He was muttering about the cult he was in. He said we knew the disciples.”

Yves’s expression shifts from annoyance to interest. “Did he?”

“Is it possible Hale is one of them?” I get to my feet and face Yves. “I think Justice recognized him, and we know little to nothing about Hale.”

“Fuck,” Yves grits out. “The last thing we need is a vampire killer amongst us, but I don’t get the sense from Hale that he’s lying or hiding anything.”

“Nor do I, but perhaps he doesn’t remember. His attack was brutal, and he watched his love be murdered.”

Yves nods. “Yes. Thorn brought him the mortal to feed. We know it’s more powerful directly from the source and we hoped it would help his strength return. It’s obvious we need to know more about Hale.”

I turn my attention back to Justice. His resting face is damn near angelic, and desire swirls in my core, but now it’s even more important that he knows what I am before we go any further.

“Thank you for your prompt intervention.” I glance up at Yves. “I froze.”

“Understandably. That was a lot all at once. Why didn’t you warn anyone you were bringing a mortal in?”

I shake my head. “Honestly, my thoughts were completely caught up in Justice. I had planned to bring him straight here. It was poor judgment on my part.”

Yves nods, his expression softening. “You have feelings for him?”

“Of the carnal variety, yes.”

Yves chuckles. “Come on, Eros. You’re talking to me. If your interest was solely carnal, we wouldn’t even be having this conversation.”

I nod, sufficiently called out. “I admit he intrigues me, and his nature is so lovely. I’m drawn in. Now that I know what I do, I can’t indulge in his flesh without revealing what I am.”

Now Yves looks annoyed. “One by one we expose ourselves. What happened to the times when we just took what we wanted?”

“Did you? No. You revealed yourself to me. You could have taken me against my will, but you didn’t. You invited me to join you. You taught me how to be a vampire, Yves. How can you show disdain for the morals you gave us?”

“Morals,” he scoffs. “I made you killers.”

“With a purpose. You gave us a mission and a healthy outlet for our instincts. You gave us family and a safe place to be ourselves. You gave us more than our parents ever could. Do we have the morals of saints? No. But not even the saints were perfect. Do not underestimate what you’ve done for us. Any single one of us would give our immortal soul for yours.”

Yves nods, the creases in his brow relaxing. “I understand how fortunate I am to have found all of you. You have made this eternal walk joyful and meaningful. Perhaps...” He pauses, turning to the window to gaze out into the night. When he turns back, he chuckles darkly. “I’m jealous, Eros. All I have ever wanted was a lover of my own. Yet it eludes me. Perhaps fate has determined I am not worthy. My punishment for my dark deeds is watching each of my brothers find love.”

I stand and walk over to him. “Or perhaps the most epic love any of us will ever know is on its way to you. Haven’t you heard of saving the best for last?” I put my hand on his chest over his heart. “Yves, if any of us could be gifted a love, there is no way you are unworthy. Not when you are responsible for all of this. Neither Syn nor Midnight would have found their mates without this beautiful life you created.” I move my hand to his cheek and he leans into it. I can feel his loneliness and longing.

“I want to believe you.”

“Then do. I don’t know what Justice is to me yet, and if fate is kind enough that he is meant to be mine, I will cherish the gift. That said, if any of us deserve love, it is you. Don’t give up hope yet.”

Yves nods, blinking away his vulnerability and replacing it with a stoic nod. “I will try.”

As he steps back, clearing his throat, thoughts of the man he believed was his mate engross me, filling me with the rage I had hoped I’d buried, but how can I when his wounds are still so fresh?

“I’m fine, Eros,” he whispers, knowing what I feel. “I made a mistake I simply wish to prevent all of you from making, but I need to accept that I chose wisely in all of you. You are smart and careful. We’ve survived this long because of it.”

“Because of you.” I step forward again, embracing my maker and kissing his cheek. Yves doesn’t show as much affection as he used to, given our history, but he melts into my touch, allowing himself to be held for a moment before he moves back.

“Justice will wake soon. I simply knocked him out, so I don’t know what

he'll remember.”

I nod. “Thank you again. I'll get him home so we can meet with Hale and understand what's going on.”

Yves nods and turns to leave, but pauses, slowly twisting around to face me. “You and Syn have always understood my heart the most. I thank you for your kind words tonight.”

“I speak nothing but truth.”

Once he's gone, I return my attention to Justice, sleeping peacefully on my bed. Kneeling beside him, I stroke his hair. I need to wake him and face whatever he saw. Hopefully, he has answers that will help us, and I pray to Hades that Hale isn't a traitor. If he is, he will need more than prayers to save him.

## Chapter Sixteen

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## JUSTICE

I peel my eyes open, scrunching my nose. My mouth feels like I'm sucking on cotton balls, and I have no memory of falling asleep. When I'm able to focus, Eros's angelic face hovers over mine and I immediately calm down. As long as he's here, I'm safe.

"Hi," I whisper, my throat scratchy. "What happened to me?"

"You don't remember?" Eros asks.

I focus for a second, but everything after stepping into Eros's building is hazy. "Not really. I didn't drink or take anything. Am I sick?"

"No." He cards his fingers through my hair, smiling softly. "I have to ask you a few questions. Are you up for it?"

"I think so."

"It's about Nightsky."

"I figured."

"You told me before that the blood king is dead and has been replaced by the Supreme Being, but you have no idea who the Supreme Being may have been before that title?"

I shake my head. "Oh no."

Eros nods. "What about the disciples? You said they go out and recruit people."

"Yeah. Mostly in Sable Cove, but they go outside that area sometimes. Before I was pretty sure I wasn't going to be one, I tried to learn as much as I could. It sounded so exciting, because you get to be in the real world. I was so curious about it."

"And you saw the disciples?"

“Sure. They were among us before they were chosen. And all the disciples of the past are in the hall in the Devotion room.”

Eros’s brow furrows. “So you’d likely recognize a disciple from the past?”

“Oh yeah. We spent a lot of time admiring them. We had to. To be a disciple is what all male members aspire to.”

“Right. Okay, well, it’s possible you recognized a disciple tonight. Here.”

I pull my head back in confusion. “What? No... I didn’t—” Then a memory comes back to me that makes my chest tighten. An image of a man on the couch, his face covered in blood. My stomach churns as bile rises in my throat. “Yes.” I rub my forehead. “I saw him.”

“Breathe for me, Justice. I need to know what you know about him. We don’t know him well. We found him injured and his memory isn’t great.”

“Why...” I blow out a breath to calm my shaking voice. “He looked like he was drinking blood. The disciples drink blood from the holy vat. They need it for strength. When we came in, it smelled like the Devotion room.”

Eros’s face registers surprise until he blinks it away. “Do any disciples ever leave the cult?”

I shrug. “I don’t know. If they do, I bet someone would hunt them down and bring them back. They know too much. That’s why it’s such an honor. They get to see the Supreme Being and talk to him and stuff. They know all the inner workings so they can carry on if they ever have to.”

“I see.” He takes my hand in his. “Do you remember when I told you that vampires are real?”

“Yes.”

“Hale is a vampire. If he truly came from your cult, it’s possible all the disciples are. Based on what you’ve told me, I’m fairly certain your Supreme Being is, as was your blood king.”

A cold sweat breaks out across my skin, raising goose bumps in its wake. “That man was really drinking blood in front of you?”

“Yes. He needs it to heal.”

“Who was the man he was... I can’t say it.”

Eros nods. “A volunteer. Justice, I could really use your help. Do you think you could face Hale and help us put the pieces of his memory back together? There’s a chance that your cult and others from it are in danger.”

“Why?”

“Whoever attacked Hale was looking for the blood king. Hale claims he

doesn't know anything about that."

"But the blood king has been dead for a long time. Or so we were told."

"Will you talk to Hale?"

I push out a shaky breath. "Will he hurt me?"

"Justice, my darling. I would never let anyone hurt you. Ever. If Hale so much as looks at you in a way I don't like, he'll be the one hurting."

I nod, sensing the truth in his words. "Okay then. I'll talk to him, but I don't know how much I can help."

"Just your knowledge of Nightsky should be enough."

"I'll help if I can."

"Great. One moment."

Eros turns away from me and pulls his phone from his pocket, speaking so softly that I can't hear a word even though he's not that far from me. He ends the call quickly, turning to me with a guarded smile.

"Hale is ready for us. Everything has been cleaned up."

"Okay. Can I freshen up real quick first?"

"Of course. The bathroom is right over there to your left."

I climb out of bed and walk to the attached bathroom, closing the door behind me. There, I gaze at my reflection before splashing my face with cold water and rinsing my mouth out. Once I feel solid on my feet, I open the door and join Eros, who is waiting by the bedroom door.

"I'm ready."

Eros takes my hand and leads me through his apartment. I'd like to look around more, but all I can think about right now is what I'm about to learn. I never in a million years thought this life would collide with my former life, but apparently, the world is truly a crazy place.

When we enter the room we were in before, there are several men there, and the one I recognized earlier is sitting calmly on the couch, all cleaned up and normal looking, like he didn't have blood all over his face before.

He looks just as nervous to see me, which calms my nerves a little. He doesn't look like he wants to attack me.

Another man with a very imposing presence steps forward, a welcoming smile on his face. "Hello, Justice. Welcome to the House of Orpheus. I am Yves."

"Hi, Yves."

Another man with long hair and wild eyes stands close by. "I'm Thorn." A shiver of recognition runs down my spine. He was drinking blood too. Is

he a vampire?

“Hi.”

“This is Hale,” Yves says, gesturing to the quiet man on the couch.

I force my eyes on him, nodding. “Hello.”

Hale nods, his eyes flitting to Yves, who seems to gesture toward me with his chin.

“I’m told that you might know something about a blood king,” Hale asks. “I was attacked a few nights ago by, um... men, who demanded to know his whereabouts.”

“I know the men who attacked you were vampires,” I answer. “Eros told me they exist.”

Thorn seems to laugh, but ends up coughing. Did I say something funny?

“Right,” Hale says. “Do you know anything about a blood king?”

“More importantly,” Eros says, gently rubbing my shoulder. “Do you recognize Hale?”

I glance at Eros and nod before turning back to Hale. “Your picture is in the Devotion hall,” I answer. “As a disciple.”

Hale’s face screws up. “Disciple? I honestly have no idea what you’re talking about. I’ve never been in a cult and certainly not referred to as a disciple. This doesn’t make any sense.”

“When were you turned, Hale?” Yves asks.

Hale opens his mouth to speak, but seems to lack words to answer. “Um, my rebirth is hazy. I don’t know the exact year or who my maker is. I awoke in a mansion surrounded by the others who would become my coven. We were dumped there.”

“But when was it?” Eros asks.

“Roughly a hundred years ago. Maybe a bit more. As I said, it was hazy. We stayed in darkness for years, fed by men in masks. Other vampires.”

“And you have no idea who turned you or why?” Yves asks, sounding as skeptical as I feel. “What were you doing before that?”

Hale rubs his forehead. “I don’t know. It’s like I just woke up and was this. My life before that...” He shakes his head. “No memory of it. Eventually, we were freed from our confines. After that, one of us stepped forward to lead the coven. His name was Nalan. We stuck together and slowly learned what we were and how to take care of ourselves. No one came. No one explained anything.”

“You were turned and abandoned?” Thorn asks. “That’s fucked up.”



“Indeed,” Yves agrees. “And suspicious. Who does that? And not just one person, but several? It doesn’t sound right.”

“Honestly, I haven’t thought about it in so long. We found our own home, met other vampires, learned how to exist beyond the mortals.” His eyes flick to me. “To hear that I’ve been recognized in this way is alarming. It makes me wonder what my life was before this.”

Biting my bottom lip, I search my memory for anything that could help. “We were told the blood king died from tainted blood and appointed his best disciple to take over, who became known as the Supreme Being.”

Hale tilts his head. “Supreme Being...”

“Does that ring a bell?” Eros asks.

“Vaguely. Many years ago now, Nalan disappeared for a few months. It wasn’t unlike him. Sometimes he wanted to be in solitude. This time was a little different because he was gone longer than usual and he never checked in. We worried. When he returned, something was different. He didn’t want to talk about it, but I overheard him mumbling in his sleep one night. I couldn’t make it out but hearing you say those words feels familiar. Supreme Being. I think that’s what Nalan was saying.”

Yves and Eros exchange looks before Yves speaks. “I think we need to learn more about Nightsky.”

Hale’s eyes go wide. “Nightsky? Where did you learn that word?” he asks, looking at each of us.

“It’s the name of the cult I was in. Where I saw your picture.”

“No.” Hale stands, gripping his side as he backs away from all of us. “No, that can’t be true.”

“Well, it is. Do you know about Nightsky?” I ask.

“Nathan talked about it all the time. He didn’t call it a cult. He said it was a religious order that his brother belonged to. A peaceful religious order.”

“Oh shit,” Thorn says. “Nathan was connected to Nightsky.”

“And was possibly tracked down because of that connection,” Yves adds.

“And it’s becoming pretty fucking clear there’s a lot more going on at Nightsky than a peaceful religious order,” Eros says. He grips my hand in his. “You could be in danger, Justice. If they hunted Nathan...”

“They weren’t looking for Nathan,” Hale says. “They wanted me. I am certain of that.”

“It’s too much of a coincidence that they were hunting vampires who had a mortal with them connected to their cult,” Eros says. “You have to see that,

Hale.”

His face falls. “But why?”

“That’s what we have to find out,” Eros says. “This whole thing could be much bigger than any of us understand.”

“What if…” I begin, letting my thoughts come together as everyone’s attention turns to me. I clear my throat. “Since leaving, I’ve learned that most of what I was taught is complete bullshit, but the one thing that’s always been consistent is the goal of taking over the world. It was presented to us as a peaceful spreading of truth, but if Nightsky is run by vampires, and I can’t believe I just said that sentence, then maybe their goal isn’t as benign as it sounds. What if the blood king isn’t dead? What if he’s only in hiding because someone wants him dead? We’ve never seen him. For all we know, the Supreme Being and the blood king are the same person.”

“Fuck,” Hale whispers. “They killed my entire coven. They killed Nathan, and they tried to kill me. They don’t want to dominate vampires. They want to eradicate us.”

Yves narrows his eyes, his expression hardening. “Well then, they’re about to find out they picked a fight with the wrong crowd.”

The question of why Yves wants to protect vampires tugs at me, but I bite it back. Maybe there’s a self-protecting part of me that doesn’t want to know the answer. This whole world is strange and new, and there’s only so much a person can take. If I’m to believe everyone, I’m in the same room with a real-life vampire, and I may have been surrounded by them my entire life without even knowing it.

Yep. Best not to ask too many questions I might not be ready to hear the answers to.

“Are you okay?” Eros asks softly as he rubs my lower back.

“I’m not really sure. This is a lot to take in.”

“Just remember you aren’t alone.”

I nod, searching his eyes. I want so desperately to see safety and comfort in them, and I do, but there’s something else there too. Something dark and dangerous.

“We need to get inside Nightsky,” Yves announces. “Can you take us there, Justice?”

My jaw drops. “If they find me, they’ll force me to come back.”

“Don’t you worry about that,” Thorn says, cracking his knuckles. “No one is taking anyone while we’re around.”

Eros is up and out of his seat in a flash. He stands close to Yves, the two of them speaking so quietly I can't hear anything, but then Eros seems satisfied.

"If you can take us there, I assure you, you will be safe," Eros says. "You have our word."

Swallowing, I glance at everyone watching me. Maybe this is the purpose I always wanted to have. If Nightsky is hurting people, then I have a responsibility to help. Maybe I could even get my family out.

"Okay. I'll do it."

# Chapter Seventeen

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## EROS

After Yves sends a quick text, the remainder of my brothers file out of their units, dressed and ready to face whatever is coming. Just a few minutes later, Vivienne joins us, looking groggy from sleep, her normally tidy appearance in disarray.

“Vampires,” she mumbles as she passes me. “Always keeping late hours.”

“Thank you, love,” Yves says, gently pinching her cheek. “I wouldn’t bother you if it wasn’t important.”

“I know.” She hands him two vials. “The green one is for Hale. The red one is for the new kid. It’ll work until he drinks...” She leans in, whispering to Yves, but I can hear her quickly say he needs a drop of vampire blood in a drink to erase the glamour potion.

“You are a lifesaver, Vivienne,” Yves says.

“I know.” She turns to face Justice, smiling warmly. “Hi. I’m Vivienne or Viv. Whichever. You must be Justice?”

“Yes.” He stands, shaking her hand. “Nice to meet you.”

“Likewise.” Vivienne studies his face for a moment, then exhales, blowing her breath across his face.

Justice’s eyelids flutter, and all the tension he was holding melts away. Mighty Hades, Viv is talented. Now she has calming spells in her breath? Justice sways slightly, and I wrap my arm around his waist for support, whispering, “Thank you,” to Viv.

“Have fun, boys, but be careful. You know where to find me if you need me.”

Then she's off. Justice gazes up at me, a dreamy expression on his face.

"She's so pretty."

"She is. Are you ready to go?"

"Yeah."

Yves hands me the vial, gesturing to give it to Justice. "Here. Drink this."

"Okay," he says without even flinching. "What is it?"

"A supplement."

I watch as he drinks it, screwing his face up from what I assume is the bitter taste of it. "Ew."

I gently pinch his chin. "It'll help tonight."

Again he nods without asking too much. Viv came through with a glamour potion that will prevent Justice from witnessing any specific vampiric traits or actions. All he'll see is mortal men doing mortal men things.

She gave Hale a memory restoration potion. It could take hours to kick in, but the more he's exposed to things locked in his head, the faster it will work.

We head out as a group, joined by Raphael just as we make it to the parking garage.

"Well this is exciting," Raph says, bumping my arm with his.

"How did your job go?"

"Boring. I had to make it look legit," he whispers. He glances at a still dazed Justice leaning into me. "What's up with your boy?"

"Vivienne."

"Ah." He chuckles. "Good. Then catch me up."

Sitting in the back of the SUV, I give Raphael a quick update while we drive toward Sable Cove. Justice seems to slowly return to normal, sitting up abruptly as he does.

"Where are we going?"

"We were hoping you'd tell us," Yves answers from the driver's seat. "Right now we're heading toward Sable Cove. That is where Nightsky is, right?"

"Oh, right. Yes. You'll take the... um... let me think." Justice stares out the window for a second. "Concord exit."

Hale is as still as a statue in the seat on the other side of me. I have to wonder what is happening in his head after drinking Viv's potion.

When we finally reach Sable Cove city limits and the appropriate exit, I can feel the air shift. The paranormal energy here is intense.

“Fucking hell,” Thorn says. “What is this place?”

“Just Sable Cove,” Yves says. “Its history lures those who lurk beyond the veil.”

“It’s normal to see vampires, witches, and fae everywhere. Hiding in plain sight,” Hale says, his voice distant. “There are some astute mortals who are aware of our presence, but most are blissfully ignorant.”

“How is there not constant fighting?” Raphael asks.

“Most of us keep to our own kind and designated areas. Most of the time.” He rubs his forehead. “I have been here before. I feel it in my bones.”

Justice stares at Hale, his expression bordering on fear.

“How do you feel?” I whisper, nuzzling his cheek.

“I feel a lot of shit. I never thought I’d willingly come back here.”

“You’re very brave.”

He searches my eyes, and I see the question forming in his. He’s suspicious. Whatever happens tonight, when it’s over, I have to tell him.

“Where to now, Justice?” Yves asks.

“Take a left at the light and keep driving. It’s going to get very dark and the paved road will turn to gravel. You won’t see it at all through the trees, but suddenly it will appear.”

Hale shifts in his seat, his heart rate kicking up.

“What’s wrong, Hale?” I ask.

“I don’t know,” he answers, twitching as he speaks. “I feel very unsettled. Like I shouldn’t be here.”

“If you were a disciple who escaped, you shouldn’t be,” Justice says plainly. “If they find you, they’ll take you away.”

“It’s been hundreds of years though, hasn’t it?” Midnight asks.

“If they are truly vampires, time doesn’t matter, brother. You know this,” Syn says.

Justice shivers next to me, but I know he’s not cold. It’s foreboding running through him. Through all of us.

Reaching for his hand, I squeeze it and press it to my chest. “Don’t be afraid, Justice. No matter what we find, we can handle it and protect you.”

“Why?” His tone is slightly defiant. “Why are you so confident?”

*A feisty one.*

Yves’s thoughts reach me.

“I promise to reveal all once we get through this next part.”

He narrows his eyes slightly before nodding. “Please don’t make me

regret trusting you.”

“I will not hurt you, Justice. Ever.”

“I believe you. It’s just that…” He shakes his head. “I’ve believed a lot of stuff that turned out to be lies.”

“I know. All of this tonight is about keeping you safe in the long run. When we get back, I promise to answer any questions you have. I will keep nothing from you.”

“Okay.”

Surprising me, he climbs into my lap and presses a kiss to my lips, unbothered by everyone around us. I sink into it, reveling in his sweet taste and warm scent, desire swirling in my core. He forces himself away but keeps his forehead pressed to mine.

“Just in case.”

“In case what?” I ask.

“In case something happens. Something that tears us apart.”

A tightness like nothing I’ve ever experienced wraps itself around my heart, a voice deep within me screaming no. It’s becoming clear that Justice entering my life is anything but a coincidence, and I know now I’d risk my own life to save his.

“That will never happen, Justice. Not while I still exist.”

He nods, but his eyes are sad and his mood somber. I have no idea what’s next, but I do know that Justice and I are leaving this place intact tonight. No matter what has to happen to make it true.



# Chapter Eighteen

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## JUSTICE

The massive stone fortress I called home my entire life appears through the trees. Upon seeing it, bile rises in my throat. I never wanted to see this place again, but here I am. My only hope of getting through this is believing Eros and his brothers will protect me.

“Whoa,” Thorn says, peering out the window. “You were not joking about appearing out of nowhere.”

“What kind of security is there?” Raphael asks. “I don’t see guards.”

“No guards,” I answer. “No major security. It’s not needed. We’re mentally beaten into submission, and I am one of the rare ones to actually escape.”

“How did you get out?” Bowie asks, twisting in his seat to face us.

“Just crawled out the window in the library. There are always people in the common areas, no matter the time, so I waited for the library to clear out and just left. As long as it’s dark enough, you can get away.”

“How did you get back to the main road?” Tru asks, peering out the window at the large walls surrounding the property.

“Climbed” I answer. “And then just a long walk through the woods. When I made it to the street, I grabbed a bus with money I took from the supply fund. There wasn’t enough to get all the way to New Onyx, but I got close enough to walk the rest of the way.”

Eros kisses the top of my head.

I clear my throat. “We should be able to go through the trees where the Devotion room is. It has its own entrance because there are services outside sometimes. Guys, I don’t know if it’s true, but I don’t think good things will

happen if we get caught. The Supreme Being believes the outside world is ruled by demons and should either be saved by us or destroyed. I mean them. I'm not one of them anymore."

"We'll be fine," Yves says, his gaze intent on the building. "Stay together. Hale, you stick with me, Eros, and Justice."

"Of course," Hale mumbles.

Another wave of nausea hits me as I slide out of the car. As a group we move through the darkness, me slightly in front, leading the way. Having all these men around me does make me feel somewhat safer, but now that I know this place might be way more dangerous than I thought, it's hard to feel relaxed.

"Through those glass doors," I whisper, pointing through the trees.

"It's beautiful here," Tru says. "Too bad it's toxic."

"Probably one of the ways they get you," Syn says. "It's peaceful."

"I was born into it," I say. "I wasn't given a choice."

"You made your own choice," Eros says, squeezing my hand.

"I'll go ahead to clear the way," Yves says, and before I can even comment, he's gone.

I tilt my head, wondering how he can move that quickly, but it doesn't matter. He opens the door—mere seconds later, I swear—and motions for us to enter.

The Devotion room is dark, as expected, except for the few continuously burning candles on the altar. Above it is a picture of the Supreme Being dressed in white robes, his long white hair like a halo around him. In his hand is a painted version of earth.

Hale stands before it like a statue.

"Is it familiar?" Eros asks.

Hale slowly turns his head and nods, his expression blank. "Vaguely."

"Where is the disciple hall?" Yves asks.

"This way." I turn to the left and lead the others to the hall, which is really more of a room of its own. The walls are lined with major historical points and accomplishments of Nightsky, and on the other side, past and present disciples.

I walk to the one I recognize as Hale. "Here. Look."

Hale is right next to me, gazing up at what is obviously his own image.

"There's a name plaque," I say. "Hezekiah Miller, Esteemed Disciple, Ordained 1783."

“Hezekiah...” Hale whispers. His knees buckle as he reaches out and grabs Yves’s arm for support. With his hand clutching his throat, he stares wide-eyed at the black-and-white photo. “It’s me. It’s really me. I remember it now. They came to us during war. I had defected and...” He grips his forehead. “Can’t remember yet.”

“That’s a start,” Yves says. “Justice, where is the holy vat?”

“On the altar where we came in.”

We head back that way, while Thorn and Midnight walk with a dazed Hale, who keeps turning and looking at his picture on the wall.

Yves walks up to the holy vat—a tall glass vessel filled with deep red liquid that swirls like an ocean current. He starts to lift the lid, but I run towards him.

“No. If anyone other than the designated ones open it, the Supreme Being will know.”

“Good,” Yves says. “I’d like to meet this... whatever he is.”

I look over my shoulder nervously as Yves lifts the lid and dips his finger inside the liquid. He lifts it to his nose, sniffing it, and his eyes narrow. “It’s mixed blood. Hundreds, if not thousands of varieties.”

“It’s given by those who enter Eternal Bliss.”

“What?” Yves asks.

“The death ceremony. When this life is over, we are to donate our blood to the holy vat for the benefit of the Supreme Being and the disciples. Then we die.”

I don’t miss the hard look Yves gives Eros. “Where is the leader?” Yves asks.

“I would assume he’s in his sanctuary across the property. It’s guarded.”

“Not a problem,” Yves says. “Lead us there.”

“If you say so.”

Hale is staring at the picture of the Supreme Being, gripping the altar hard enough that I can hear the wood crack in his grasp. “I think we should go.”

“And why is that?” Yves asks. “If you think I’m afraid of a vampire with a god complex, I assure you—”

“No,” Hale interrupts. “It’s all coming back. I know what happened to me.” He exhales a shaky breath, focusing on me. “This is a cult, but not the religious kind. The vampire kind, and what I have to tell you might change everything.”

# Chapter Nineteen

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## EROS

After helping a shaky Hale back to the car, we ride back to New Onyx in silence. It would be impossible to have a productive conversation while Hale deals with his memory returning in what seem to be violent waves.

He moans and trembles in his seat, mumbling incoherent words as if reliving his experiences all over again. More than once, he seems to repeat some sort of incantation, but he always stops before he's done.

"Is he dying?" Justice asks, clutching my arm.

"No. His memory is returning."

"Looks like it was way better to forget."

"I have to agree." I turn my attention to Justice, brushing his hair from his forehead. "And how are you holding up?"

"It wasn't as bad as I thought. I should've been more scared though. Guess I'm still wrapping my head around the idea that I might've been raised by vampires." He scoffs. "In some ways it makes sense, well, as much as it doesn't. I mean, vampires? What the fuck?"

His laugh is nervous and bordering on breaking into sobs. "I can only imagine what you've been through since leaving. It has to be a lot to take in."

"Yeah."

"Not all vampires are bad," Tru says softly, capturing Justice's attention. "Some of them are just like regular people. They want the same things everyone does."

"Like what?" Justice asks, his tone skeptical.

"Family, joy, fun. Love. They are misunderstood."

"Like mortals, they are complex," Midnight says, gazing lovingly at his

mate. “Some are bad, some are good, some are pure evil, and others are... in the gray.”

“What does ‘in the gray’ mean?” Justice asks.

“Doing good through bad means,” Thorn says, grinning. “Not all heroes wear capes. Some of them have fangs, but they still make the world a better place. Don’t believe the myths.”

Justice shrugs. “I don’t know any myths. I grew up in a sheltered place. All I know about vampires is that they kill to eat.”

“Not true,” Syn says. “Not always.”

Justice doesn’t say anything, but he does lean into me, pressing his weight against my arm. I can feel his confusion and exhaustion, the questions he both wants to know the answers to and doesn’t simmering beneath the surface.

When we arrive home again, we enter the building in silence. Hale has calmed down now. Vivienne sure knows her stuff.

In the common area, we gather around Hale, who sits in a chair on his own. He’s offered a drink by Bowie, and after drinking it down, he puts the empty glass on the coffee table. Tru hands Justice a cup with a drink in it too. I assume the drop of blood to end the glamour potion. He drinks it and sets the empty cup down.

“I guess being there again triggered my memory to return,” Hale says.

Yves glances at me with a slight smirk. “That’s good,” Yves says.

“In a way, yes. What I couldn’t remember is as clear as glass right now. I was born in the American colonies in a village that no longer exists. Eventually, it and several others became what is now Sable Cove.”

“The American colonies?” Justice says. “What is that?”

Hale looks confused until I jump in.

“Nightsky doesn’t teach accurate history.”

“Oh, right,” Hale says. “Apologies, Justice. The United States used to be called the colonies when people from England came over to make a home in the New World. Granted, the land was stolen from indigenous people, but that’s a different story.”

Justice nods. “When was that?”

“I was born in 1758,” Hale answers.

Justice audibly swallows. “Okay.”

“The war broke out when I was seventeen. Historically, it is known as the Revolutionary War, the time when the colonists pushed back against

England's tyranny. It would lead to the formation of what is now the United States."

"Go on," Yves says, perched on the arm of the couch.

"I was obligated to fight, of course, but it wasn't my nature. Years into it, I defected. I hid out in a village that would ultimately lead me to Nightsky. They offered me safe haven from the war, food, shelter, everything I needed. All I had to give in return was my soul."

He looks down at his hands for a moment before lifting his gaze to continue.

"Of course, I didn't know that was what it was at the time. They weren't so forthright about their intentions. They told me they were a group of pacifists who had no side, and that felt right to me. I immersed myself in their community, worshipping a man who stayed hidden from view."

"Why?" Thorn asks.

"We were told he was ill and needed time to recuperate. Each week, we endured weekly bloodletting sessions to give our healthy blood for the benefit of our leader. We did so gladly. Eventually, I and a few others became disciples. We were chosen for our obedience and integrity to uphold the rules. We went out and found others to join us. Over time though, things changed. There were so many new rules and strange ceremonies. Rumbings began. Thoughts of leaving."

Hale seems distant again, staring off into space until he blinks and focuses on Yves.

"The night everything changed, one of the men in our group disappeared. We feared our unhappiness had been found out and that punishment was coming." He shakes his head. "Two nights later, I was yanked from my bed and knocked unconscious. When I awoke, I had no idea where I was."

Justice is hanging on Hale's every word, while the energy amongst me and my coven is tense at best.

"There were several of us there and..." Hale pauses, clearly struggling to continue. "After being alone for hours, the doors opened and we were attacked, our blood drained. On the brink of death, a man appeared before me." Hale closes his eyes. "He was old and grotesque, but he had these fangs. He told me I owed him." When Hale opens his eyes, they glow crystal blue. "The blood king is my maker."



## Chapter Twenty

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## JUSTICE

Am I really expected to believe that this young man with the wild story is several hundred years old? Really? And the blood king, who's allegedly been dead for a long time, is not only a vampire, but turned other people at Nightsky into vampires?

Cool. Okay. I've obviously gone insane at some point, and all of this is just a weird fever dream.

"Do you need to take a break?" Eros asks me.

"No. I need to hear the rest of this."

Hale stands, pacing behind the chair for a moment before turning to face us again. "When we woke in the morning, one of my friends was hanging from the stairs in the hallway, his neck snapped and a wooden stake in his heart. It was all the warning we needed to stay put. We were kept there for years, as I explained before. We were weak for some reason, but eventually, we found strength. I felt like I could move mountains on my own. We were told we'd be returning to the compound soon, but no one came. That was when Nalan stepped up to lead us."

"And what happened to the blood king and the whole cult?" Yves asks.

"I don't know."

"You have to know something," Syn says. He looks pissed off.

"There were rumors, but—"

"Then tell us the rumors," Raphael says from his chair, shifting forward in a threatening manner. "Whatever happened at that time obviously has some relevance to recent events."

Hale's expression tightens, but he nods. "We heard the poisoning rumors

too. Two members of my coven wanted to return to the compound. They felt safer believing the blood king was dead. While there, they heard that the one who would come to be called the Supreme Being was the one who betrayed the blood king and gave him poisoned blood. He wanted to take Nightsky in a new, more terrifying direction, while the blood king wanted to stay more underground. Believing we'd be in danger if discovered, Nalan decided we should leave the mansion. Others returned to the compound, believing their chances were better there. We heard, but never confirmed there was some sort of uprising. Our friends who returned were killed during it."

Leaning against Eros, I listen to Hale's story with a sinking feeling. It has to be true. Too much of it is similar to the stories I've been told. I rub my temples, trying to adjust to this new reality.

Eros rubs my back, smiling warmly. "Do you need a drink? Tea?"

I shake my head. "It's weird, because even though no one ever said vampire, everything I've learned since leaving, combined with what Hale is saying... It's gotta be true. I just... I can't believe I was surrounded by... My parents..." My voice cracks under the strain. "Maybe I do need a break."

Eros scoops me off the couch and takes me back to his apartment. Once I'm on my feet, I stand in front of the windows, gazing out over the city skyline.

"That's what really happens to disciples, I think. They get turned into vampires, then they go find other people to turn. It's not missionary work. The Supreme Being is trying to turn the world into vampires."

Eros shrugs slightly. "Not everyone. Vampires need mortals for blood."

I lean against the window, gazing at this enigmatic, gorgeous man. All night the question has been poking at me, and as much as there's a part of me that doesn't want to ask it, I think I have to before anything else happens between us.

"You promised me you would answer any questions I had."

"I did," he says, his jaw tense. "I will give you any knowledge you seek."

"What do you do for work? Are you, like, vampire hunters, or something?"

"No." Eros sits on the sofa, obviously reluctant to answer me fully.

My stomach churns with anxiety.

"We are assassins, Justice. We're hired hit men."

"You..." I shake my head. I don't know what I was expecting, but it definitely wasn't this. "Assassins?"

He nods. “We’re hired by very rich and powerful people to rid them of their problems.”

“You *kill* people?”

“I do.”

I’m stunned speechless, my mind too full of chaos to form a question.

“Typically they are very bad people,” Eros continues. “We don’t go around hurting innocent people. Mostly criminals or pedophiles, abusers. People like that.”

“Is that how it’s handled? That’s the punishment for a crime in this world?”

“Not always, no. We have a system meant to handle crime, but it fails sometimes. Justice...” He stands, approaching me slowly, but stops before he reaches me. “You must understand that I have a deep and abiding interest in you. I very much want you in my life and in my bed.”

My throat tightens. These are nice words, but I don’t think I like where they’re heading.

“Before I can allow myself such an indulgence, it’s only right that you know...”

“Know what, Eros?”

His brow creases. “Please, do not run. I won’t hurt you. Not ever. Nor any of my brothers.”

“Oh no,” I whisper. “No.” I shake my head, backing away but stopped by the window. “You know a lot about vampires.”

Eros nods. “I do.”

I squeeze my eyes to stop the stinging tears from falling. “Because?”

“Because...” Eros steps forward but stops himself when I flinch. “Because I am one.”

# Chapter Twenty-One

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## EROS

Justice's eyes go wide and I make it to him just as he collapses. I carry him back to my bedroom, hoping with everything in me that this isn't the last time he'll be in my space.

I could restrain him and force him to stay. The dangerous thought taunts me, but I push it back. No. I won't be so cruel. If Justice is to stay, he has to do so willingly.

I stroke his hair, blowing cool breath on his face until his eyelids flutter. When he focuses on me, he gasps, attempting to scoot away from me. My heart breaks.

"I won't hurt you, Justice. Please believe me."

Pressed against my headboard, he stares at me with terror in his eyes. "I want to go home."

"I understand." I close my eyes to push my beast back. The territorial, possessive part of me wants out, but that would only frighten him. "I can take you back."

"No. I'll find my own way."

"Justice, please. After everything tonight, surely you can see you're safe with me."

His breathing is fast and labored, bordering on hyperventilating. "But... vampires are..."

He squeezes his eyes shut, and as tears dot his cheeks, my fangs throb to descend. Not to feed. No. The need to hold him, rub my nose in his scent, is overtaking me.

"I can have one of my brothers take you home."

“One of your *vampire* brothers? No thanks.” He gives in to his tears. “You said I could trust you.”

“And you can. I promised I wouldn’t hurt you. That’s true.”

“But how could you keep this from me?”

“Justice.” I take his hand in mine, but he yanks it away, holding it to his chest. “I knew I had to tell you when we grew closer, and once I found out what’s really happening at Nightsky. I planned to tell you tonight. Why do you think I haven’t made love to you yet? I want you more than anything, but I refused to take such a gift without disclosing myself to you.”

He shakes his head, trying not to believe me. “I’m scared of you.”

His admission tears the last bit of hope I had to shreds. I rise from the bed to put space between us. “It devastates me to hear such words, but I cannot force you to understand me. I will call a ride for you.”

I leave the room before he can say anything else, afraid of my own breaking willpower. The urge to lock him away until he sees me as he did before is strong, threatening to ruin my attempts to remove his fear. If he saw what I am, what I’m capable of...

A moment later, I sense his presence in the room, but I don’t turn to look, keeping my gaze on the windows. I should have known it would be too good to be true. As my heart crumbles to dust, I realize how much I had hoped Justice was mine to keep. My mate. If I were capable of crying, I’m sure I’d be drowning in tears right now.

“Eros?”

“Yes?”

“Can you look at me?”

“I’d rather not.”

“I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

I turn slightly, but can’t bring myself to see his beautiful face. “I didn’t mean to hurt you either, but I am what I am. I cannot change it. Not even for you.”

“It’s just... it’s a lot, Eros. A few days ago I had no idea any of this...”

His broken voice forces me to face him. When I do, my beast stirs within me, desperate to comfort him. Tears streak down his lovely cheeks, and his hair is mussed from his fingers twisting through it.

“I need to think,” he says. “Away from all of this.”

I nod, forcing my feet to stay put. “Fair.”

His expression crumples. “I want to be with you, but... how?”

I could offer options, but I remain silent. I will not beg him to stay. If he did, I would always doubt his commitment. Instead, I pull my phone from my pocket and order a taxi.

“I jinxed it,” he says softly. “When I said just in case tonight. I ruined it.”

“You did no such thing. Besides, it would never work if we weren’t honest with each other. It’s better to know now before...” I stop before I utter words of eternal love. “I will give you the space you need. If you wish to speak to me, you know how to contact me. I would love the opportunity to explain more to you, so much more, but that is up to you. In the meantime, I only ask that you not share what we are with the people you know.”

“I won’t.”

I know I could compel him right now, make him forget it all, and take him back to my bed. I could spend the evening luxuriating in his scent, his flesh, his blood, but I cannot bring myself to abuse his trust, no matter how desperately I don’t want to let him leave.

My phone buzzes and another part of me dies. “Your ride is here. I can walk you downstairs.”

Justice nods, wiping his cheeks. I keep my distance, inhaling his scent in the hopes I will remember it forever if this is the last time I see him.

Once we’re downstairs and outside, he looks at me like he has something to say, but instead he turns and slips into his waiting ride. I watch the taxi until it’s out of sight before walking somberly back to my unit. The most joy I’ve had in centuries is afraid of me.

The world could burn to the ground right now and I wouldn’t give a single fuck.



## Chapter Twenty-Two

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## JUSTICE

The house is thankfully quiet when I enter, but as I walk toward the stairs, I see a light on in the study and head toward it. I peek inside, finding Carina curled up in an armchair, her face buried in a book, a cozy robe wrapped around her like a blanket. She looks up and smiles.

“Did you have a nice night?”

I want to lie and tell her it was great or at least fine, but I can’t bring myself to do it. Instead, I nod with a forced smile on my lips. Carina doesn’t buy it at all, closing her book and tilting her head.

“What’s wrong, Justice? Did that man hurt you?”

“No.” Not physically. “Nothing like that. I’m fine. Just, um, there’s a lot to learn about the world.”

“Yes. Do you want to sit with me for a minute?”

“Sure.” I shuffle to the chair next to her and plop down. Even if I could tell her what happened, where would I start? Plus, I promised Eros.

“Overwhelmed?” Carina asks.

“Yeah.”

“It’s totally normal,” she says. “I know I was shocked to learn how wrong all the things we were taught there are. It takes time to get used to it.”

“Right.” I rub my forehead, trying to process everything. “Um, have you ever been in a situation where someone you cared about had things about them you weren’t sure how to deal with?”

“Things? Like traits or habits?”

“Um, traits.”

“Sure. I think it’s not uncommon, especially for those of us who have

limited understanding of the outside world. We learn quickly that the morals we were raised with aren't universal. Are you sure you weren't hurt tonight?"

"Yeah, I'm sure. Eros didn't hurt me. He just, um, well, he's pretty different. So, how do you know if you can get used to those differences?"

"I think first you have to decide how you feel about the person. Is the discomfort worth getting through to be with them? Is there a compromise? Is he willing to meet you where you are and work together for the relationship?"

"I think he is. I'm the one who pushed him away." My eyes well with tears again. "Is it weird that I just met him a few days ago, but I really like him?"

"It's not weird, Justice. We can't always help who we're drawn to, but I want to gently caution you to keep a clear head. He's the first man you've met outside of Nightsky. That in itself is very seductive."

I nod. "Right. I asked him for a little space."

"And he respected that?"

"Yes. Completely."

"That's a good sign." Carina smiles warmly. "After spending our lives being told what to do, how to feel, what to think, I'm an advocate of listening to our hearts with a healthy dose of checking in with our intuition. I believe your gut won't lead you astray while you're still purging the cult's influence from your life."

"That feels good. I can do that."

"I know you can. You're special, Justice. More resilient than many. I know you're gonna be just fine, and if Eros is the right person for you, he'll be there when you're ready."

"Thank you. I'll let you get back to reading."

"I'm always here if you need to talk. About anything. Think of me as a big sister."

"I will."

After leaving Carina, I go to my room and peel out of my clothes before climbing into bed. The night didn't go at all the way I had hoped. All I wanted were kisses. And more. I wanted his body against mine. Instead, my world was flipped upside down.

How do I accept what he is when I don't even fully understand it? Not to mention his job is to kill people. But is it wrong if those people are bad? It's just hard to separate the kind of vampire Eros is from the ones running Nightsky. If it's true, and based on what Hale said, it would have to be, then

is it a choice to use violence or an inevitability? Will Eros turn on me if he's angry or hungry or...? Ugh. I have too many questions and no one impartial to ask.

Tru's earlier words come back to me. Not all vampires are bad. That must be true. Everyone has been so nice to me. Maybe I could ask him questions. He seems more modern than the others. Maybe he's younger? Maybe he's not even a vampire. Bowie too. It would be cool to have another regular human in the group. I suppose I could ask Eros in the morning if that's okay.

For now, I close my eyes and pray to any deity listening for sleep.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

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## EROS

Only minutes after Justice leaves, I tear off into the night, filled with regret, longing, and a desperation morphing quickly into rage. Someone needs to bleed.

I slip through the darkness, navigating trees, then buildings, until I arrive in the seediest part of New Onyx, knowing without a doubt I'll find a worthy victim to unleash my beast upon. Landing on top of an abandoned apartment building, I scan the streets below, looking for trouble. A woman's scream meets my ears and I smile darkly. Perfect.

Leaping to the building across the street, I listen for her wails, knowing I'm getting closer. The smell of terror is in the air, luring my monster to the surface. Seconds later, I spot them. Two men hold her against a wall, and it doesn't take a genius to imagine what their plans are. Not tonight, fuckers.

I swoop down and knock one of the assholes across the alleyway. I'll deal with him in a minute. The man with his hand on the woman's throat and the other up her skirt turns to look at what happened to his friend, not seeing me as I dart behind him. When he turns back to face the woman, he's met with my hand around his neck.

"What the fuck!" the man exclaims.

I focus on the woman, sending waves of compulsion through her to erase her trauma. "Run."

She nods, tearing off into the night. The man in my clutches squirms, his attention on my grip as it digs into the flesh of his neck. Despite being an absolute loser, his scent is appealing. Not as nice as Justice's, but it will have to do.

“You really shouldn’t pick on people weaker than yourself,” I murmur as my fangs descend. “Do you know how much it disgusts me when men take advantage of women?”

“Fuck you,” he grits out. “I don’t give a fuck what you think.”

“Clearly. Unfortunately for you, I’m in a very bad mood tonight, and you walked straight into my line of fire.”

The man kicks his legs in an attempt to break free, but I just chuckle. He screams for his friend, still lying unconscious on the dirty ground.

“Scream all you want. You know no one will come. That’s how pieces of shit like you operate here. You lurk and attack, knowing her screams will be ignored. Just like yours now.” I tilt my head, inhaling the scent of stress and terror pouring off of him.

“I won’t do it again,” he tries. “I swear.”

“I already know that. Do you know how I know?”

He shakes his head.

“Because you die tonight.” I smile, revealing my fangs and squeezing his neck just a little bit harder until my sharp nails draw blood. He’s coughing and choking now, which only stirs my beast to attack.

I tilt my head back and lurch forward, moaning as I sink my teeth into his neck. But this isn’t a pleasure feeding. Quite the opposite. Pulling back, I watch the blood trickle from his neck. My beast is slightly placated, but that will fade quickly.

“Beg,” I growl. “Beg me to save you.”

“Pl-please,” the man whimpers, clutching my hands as I lift his feet from the ground. “I’ll do anything, man.”

“Why should I show you mercy when you showed the woman none?”

“I wasn’t gonna kill her. I swear.”

“No, I don’t think you would have. You would have violated her, crushed her sense of safety and self, destroyed her faith in humanity. She would have wished for her death. What you had planned is just as cruel if you ask me. So tell me again, why should I allow you to continue to breathe?”

The man begins to tremble as tears streak down his face. Not so tough now, is he? The more he begs and sobs, the more I absorb it all, stoking my vampire. Then, in an absolute explosion of blind fury, I give in to the most feral part of me.

It’s almost like an out-of-body experience when the man I am retreats and the monster within takes charge. Blood and flesh splatter against the brick

building as I play with my food, tearing at his exposed skin, releasing him long enough to let him crawl away, only to capture him again.

The other man comes to. It takes him a few seconds to realize what's happened, and then he scrambles to his feet to flee.

"Ah, ah, ah. Not so fast, dickhead." I grab him by the back of the shirt and toss him across the alley, laughing as he slams into the building. His friend lies on the ground, slowly and painfully bleeding out.

"We'll give you money," the man against the building says.

They always try to give us money.

"I don't want your fucking dirty money," I growl, my voice more animal than human. My skin feels too tight. "I want your blood."

I tear his throat out, exhaling with pleasure as his blood splatters across my face. With wide eyes, he holds my gaze, clutching his neck as he slides to the ground. I turn my attention back to my first victim, who watches me approach with pure terror in his eyes.

"Scream," I demand. "Scream and I will show you mercy."

The man releases a bloodcurdling scream that titillates my beast, and I launch myself at him, straddling his body as I finish him off, my teeth shredding the man until he is unrecognizable. I turn on his friend, now slumped on the ground with his back to the wall as he too bleeds out.

I scoop him up and toss him over my shoulder, and since he's still alive, the pain it causes him is like a siren song to me. I drag the other man by the collar of his shirt, tearing off into the night to a cellar where I can deposit both bodies to rot away undiscovered. And if anyone does find them, they'll just be two losers whose bad deeds caught up with them.

Finally satiated, I return home covered in blood, my heart still heavy but the agitated discomfort appeased. I still want to find Justice and lock him away to prove my intentions, but the rational part of me that still exists won't allow it. Instead, I will bury my face in my sheets, inhaling the scent he left behind.

After peeling out of my bloody clothes and washing up, I crawl into bed and rub my forehead. Yes, I've satisfied my bloodlust, but the restlessness of missing Justice is too fresh. With my eyes closed, I run my hand down my chest, imagining it's Justice touching me and not myself.

I conjure his perfect face with his curious eyes, pretty mouth, and sunshine smile. I've written poetry about men I never thought to exist, but I was wrong. True beauty amongst mortals lives in Justice.



Flipping to my stomach, I press my nose into the pillow, catching the hints of sweetness left behind by him, and rut against the sheets and bedding. My cock swells with need, my skin tingling with desire. I flick my tongue over my lips, hoping to catch a lingering hint of his kiss. Breathing into the pillow, I can smell him, hear his sweet moans, and practically taste him on my tongue. Given the chance, I could lose myself in his body. No—I could find myself again. He could be my soul's home, if only I can convince him that he is safe with me. So safe.

I run my thumb over the sensitive head of my cock, catching precum to ease the friction as I slide my hand down my shaft. I indulge in thoughts of entering his body, becoming one with him, and tasting his essence in every sense of the word. His cum, his kiss, his blood.

Fuck! My body tenses as a powerful orgasm rips through me, unraveling the tension I've felt since he left me hours ago. But it's not enough.

I roll over onto my back, continuing to stroke myself as I scramble for the rarely used dildo in the drawer beside my bed. Yes, I need this.

Using my cum, I slick the dildo and impale myself with it, hissing at the sting and stretch. Fuck, would Justice do this to me? Would he like to be inside of me, owning me as much as I desire to own him?

Nearly delirious at this point, I rock my hips up and down on the rubber cock, twisting my head back and forth against the pillow as I barrel towards a second epic orgasm, Justice's name on my lips like the sacred prayer it is.

I have to get him back. I simply have to.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

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## JUSTICE

I sit straight up in bed, my body tingling strangely. My breath catches in my throat as my skin heats and goose bumps dot my flesh. Tugging off my pajamas, I lie naked, staring at the ceiling as lust takes over out of nowhere.

My cock twitches, filling quickly and drawing my hand there for relief. The simple act of touching it makes me hiss with pleasure. I close my eyes, immediately flooded with images of Eros hovering over me, his hypnotic eyes focused on my face as his hands roam over my body.

I try to shake it away, but I can't seem to. I open my mouth to speak but no words come to me. All I can do is give in to the intensity of desire gripping me.

Rolling over onto my stomach, I grab a pillow and shove it between my legs, humping like a horny teenager. I reach behind and finger my hole, whimpering with need and almost crying out for Eros.

I squeeze my eyes shut. No. I can't run to him. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

*Justice.*

I gasp, frantically searching the room but seeing no one. I swear I heard his voice say my name. Am I going crazy now?

"Eros?" I whisper. "Are you here?"

There's no reply. Of course not. I sit up, trying to shake off the unexplained lust, but my cock has other plans, twitching and tingling. I touch myself again, accepting that this is something I can do now without punishment or fear of discovery. I can feel this way and I can fantasize about Eros even if I don't want to.

I spit in my hand and fist my erection until I'm nearly delirious from the

need to come. I want Eros here. Want him inside me. Want to taste him. Want everything.

No. No, brain. Don't betray me.

I squeeze my eyes closed, trying to push away any thoughts except the pleasurable tension building deep in my core, but no such luck. All I can see is Eros. He's smiling down at me, his brow furrowed with exertion as he fucks into me, claiming me. His lips part, revealing sharp fangs, but instead of scaring me, I find myself reaching up to touch them.

His eyelids flutter as his breath catches. "Justice," he whispers again. "Be mine. Always."

It's a dream. A fantasy. This isn't real. He couldn't want me like that. Why would he?

"Justice."

The line between reality and fantasy is so blurred I can't determine which is which.

"I would never hurt you. I couldn't. You're too precious. I would sooner destroy myself."

"Is it true? Can I trust you?"

The vision fades, replaced by an orgasm that rocks my entire existence. I bite my lip to keep from crying out as wave after wave rips through me, leaving me a sweaty, trembling mess on cum covered sheets.

When it's finally over, tears pour from my eyes as I catch my breath.

What the heck was that?

After a restless night filled with dreams of Eros and vampires, I'm thankful to see the sunlight streaming in through my windows. At least I have a reason to be awake now. I shuffle to the bathroom for a quick shower, then with my towel around my waist, I sit in the chair by my window, simply staring outside.

The way I left Eros last night feels all kinds of wrong. I made him sad. I guess I could call him, but what would I say? I'm sorry I'm scared of you? That's dumb. Maybe I should figure out *why* I'm scared of him. Is it just the unknown? Is it because I know the bad things vampires can do based on Nightsky? Shouldn't I be able to trust him given how he's treated me so far?

I twist my head back and forth as I rub the back of my neck. I feel like crap, and I want to see Eros again, but I'm just not sure what I should do. Maybe I should listen to Carina's advice and focus on how he makes me feel and treats me.

I force myself to get to my feet, dress, and head down for breakfast. I'm not hungry but I could use some coffee. After filling my mug, I choose to go outside and sit under the tree with my thoughts. Leaning against the trunk, I close my eyes and recall the strange sex dream I had last night. It felt so real, like Eros was really there, really touching me. Dang, I want to feel that so much, but then I'd have to face my fears. Am I ready for that?

"Hey, Justice."

I turn my head to see Micah approaching. "Hey."

"Mind if I join you?"

"Not at all."

"Cool."

He sits next to me, leaning against the tree as well with a book on his lap. I recognize it as the journal they gave us on our first day.

"I like to journal here. It's so peaceful."

I nod, offering a slight smile. "I should try the journal instead of just staring into the sky hoping for an answer."

He laughs softly. "That could work too though. Nature is very soothing. I think that's why they picked this location."

"Good point."

"If you want to talk about anything, I'm a pretty good listener," Micah offers.

I glance at him, considering it. "I think it might be hard to explain." How do you tell someone you might be falling for a vampire?

"Harder than the cult we left?"

I laugh at that. "Another good point, Micah."

He watches me with pretty, light green eyes. I noticed him right away because of those eyes and how they pop against his darker features. He has curly black hair cut close to his scalp, and dark tan skin. He told us on the first day that he's black and Puerto Rican and he wanted us to know that because he wants to connect to his heritage and erase the destiny pushed on us through Nightsky. He's attractive, earnest, and kind. If I hadn't met Eros, I'd probably be interested in him romantically.

"I met this guy, the night I escaped actually. I got lost on my way here,

and he found me and drove me here.”

Micah nods.

“He’s... gorgeous. I mean, like an Eternal Bliss angel.”

“Really?” Micah turns slightly toward me, a huge smile on his face. “What does he look like?”

“Long blond hair, crystal blue eyes, and an aura that’s just...” I sigh. “Calming. I felt so safe with him.”

“Tell me more.”

“He gave me his number and told me I could call if I wanted to. At first, I thought I probably shouldn’t be distracted, you know?”

Micah nods. “Yeah.”

“But I couldn’t stop thinking about him. So I called and he took me out last night.” I rub the back of my neck as my body heats again. “I really like him, but, um, he told me something about himself that’s hard to accept, I guess. Something I don’t know how or if I can get over.”

“Like what? What could be so bad?”

“I promised I wouldn’t tell anyone, but just imagine something really bad and kind of scary. What would you do?”

“Hmm, something bad and scary. Like a demon?”

Close enough. “Okay, let’s go with that. Let’s say he’s a demon in human form.”

Micah twists his lips in thought. “I’d probably ask myself if he’s really bad and scary, because Nightsky told me that’s what demons are. Maybe it’s not true. A lot of stuff they told us isn’t true.”

“Right.” I nod. “I considered that. What if it is true though? What would you do then?”

“Honestly?” His face lights up. “I’d be excited.”

“Excited?”

“Yeah. A real live demon? What could be cooler?”

“But Micah, what if he’s dangerous?”

Micah shrugs. “What if he’s not? Or what if he’s only dangerous when he has to be? Does your demon like you back?”

“He’s not really a demon, for the record, but yeah, he likes me back. A lot, I think.”

“Ooh, I’m jealous.” Micah leans in. “Do you think he would hurt you?”

“No. Not on purpose, but what if he had to do something bad and I was just caught in the middle?”

Micah raises one of his eyebrows. “Are you just making up things that might happen? I mean, what if we went to the store and got hit by a bus? What if a plane falls out of the sky right now and lands where we’re sitting? What if we never left Nightsky? ‘What if’ isn’t a good game to play.”

Chuckling softly, I nod. “Point taken.”

“Remember what they told us in group. We’re going to experience so many new and bewildering things. We have to forget everything we were taught. All we have is how we feel. If this man makes you feel good, maybe that’s enough.” He pats my knee. “Honestly, I think you’re lucky. Eventually, we’ll all leave this place and venture out into the real world. We’ll meet lots of new people, and hopefully some of them will be romantic partners. You already found one. He could help you so much.”

“Yeah, I guess I am lucky.” I study his face for a second. “Did you have... urges? Urges you found hard to ignore?”

Micah’s face falls as he twists around and lifts the back of his shirt, revealing several scars on his back.

“I was caught once,” he says softly. “An older man seduced me, but I was punished for it.” He drops his shirt and turns to face me again. “By him. I was made the seducer. I had three months on my knees in solitary.”

I gasp. “I only heard rumors about solitary.”

Micah nods. “It’s real. When he confessed that we had been together for months, the punishment was abstinence. They felt if I couldn’t see him or hear him, my fascination would fade. So yes, I had urges, but I didn’t initiate it. I swear.”

“I believe you.” I squeeze his wrist. “I’m sorry that happened to you.”

He smiles again, erasing the melancholy. “It’s okay. I made it through, and since coming here, I’ve learned that I didn’t do anything wrong. The disciple did.”

“He was a disciple?”

“Yes. I look forward to finding a healthy romance in the future. Harris only wanted my body.”

We sit silently under the tree for a few minutes before Micah speaks again.

“I guess if I had a man who was at least interested me, I would see it through. Maybe your heart will get broken, but that’s a chance we take with love, isn’t it?”

“Yes, I suppose so.”

“And if you believe he wouldn’t hurt you no matter what other bad things he might do, then maybe he’s worth facing your fears for. Way I see it, we have a lot of that in our future.”

“You’re right. Thanks, Micah.”

“No problem. Real quick, does he have any hot angel brothers?”

I laugh. “He does, actually. I think a couple of them are still single.”

He waggles his eyebrows. “Well, you know where to find me.”

I leave Micah to his journaling and walk back to the house. All signs seem to point to me seeing Eros again and seeing if we can make it work between us.

I just have to be ready for anything that might come my way and figure out how to separate the man from the actions. If I can do that, maybe we have a chance at something amazing.



## Chapter Twenty-Five

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## EROS

As another night fades to morning, I force myself off the window ledge of Justice's bedroom. Is it creepy that I watched him sleep all night? Probably, but when have I ever been concerned with that?

I gave him two nights to himself, but I couldn't stay away any longer. Until he's back in my arms, my focus is him.

In a flash, I'm back home and sulking in the common area. It's my only shot at avoiding the unrelenting thoughts plaguing me since Justice left me. Yes, my brothers will likely annoy me, but that's far better than driving myself mad.

Thorn is splayed on the couch, sound asleep as usual. I have no idea why the man doesn't choose his own bed, but whatever makes him happy. I choose to tuck into my window seat with my poetry book in hand. Maybe I can dump some of these obsessive thoughts onto paper and get them out of my head.

But as I stare at the blank page, it's nearly impossible to find words that would capture all that Justice is. How does one reduce the essence of sunlight to twenty-six arranged letters? What trite, pedantic phrases could I conjure to embody the light he's brought to my existence? What angsty nonsense would capture the damage his absence has done to my soul?

"Good goddess, Eros. Who tainted your blood?" Raphael flops into the armchair closest to me.

"I think the phrase is 'who pissed in your Cheerios,'" Tru says with a sweet smile as he settles on the couch with Midnight.

"I have no idea what a Cheerios is," Raphael notes. "Anyway, why the

sour face?”

“Why are you all awake so early?” I ask.

“You would know if you had been here last night,” Syn says, carrying a tray filled with mugs of warmed blood.

I take one, sipping it, but it does nothing to lift my mood. “What happened now?” I grumble.

“Dimas is on his way for an update,” Syn answers, kicking Thorn’s side with his boot.

Thorn grumbles, but then, sniffing the blood in the air, he sits up, looking around with half-open eyes until Bowie hands him a mug.

“Ah, the nectar of mortals,” Thorn says, taking a sip. “What in the underworld is going on right now?”

“Yves will join us shortly,” Syn answers, settling into a chair and pulling Bowie onto his lap.

“Where is Hale?” I ask.

“With Yves,” Syn says.

I can see the stress all over Syn’s face, only mildly soothed by his mate’s fingers carding through his hair. The two of them nuzzle and trade kisses, and the growing pit of loneliness and longing sits heavy in my chest.

“Eros,” Raphael says. “Why are you down?”

“Have you considered that I have no desire to discuss with the entire group?” I snap.

“It’s about Justice,” Thorn says in a bored voice. “Duh.”

I growl in his direction, which doesn’t faze him in the slightest. Fortunately, Yves and Hale enter the room, both choosing to sit on the love seat. Yves nods at me, but Hale stares at the floor, clearly still unbalanced by recent events.

“Dimas should be here soon,” Yves says. “He said he didn’t want to wait to tell us what he learned.”

“Well that’s concerning,” Syn says.

“Indeed. Hence the early morning meeting when we should be sleeping.”

I scoff, sipping my blood. As if I’ll ever sleep again. I notice Yves’s concerned expression, but I wave it off.

I can smell more than hear the moment Dimas arrives. Yves leaves to let him into our building, and all of us tense. Something about Dimas bothers me, but it could just be the way we met him. Disrespect for territory lines is cause for suspicion.

Dimas returns with Yves alone, which settles my nerves. If he were up to no good, he would've brought his people with him. He nods, sitting in the chair Yves set out for him.

"Thank you for meeting so quickly," Dimas says, his nearly white eyes scanning the room. "Just about two hours ago, we witnessed something highly unusual just outside New Onyx, heading north to Sable Cove."

"Go on," Yves says.

"As we discussed before, there are concerns with this new gang that it includes at least some vampires. Dread has intentions of infiltrating the entire Eastern Seaboard. Not terribly alarming until tonight."

He leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees.

"There's an abandoned farm out there off the freeway."

"The old Shackleton dairy farm?" Syn asks.

"That's the one," Dimas confirms. "We were passing through there returning to Sable Cove from a rendezvous in Ravenbrook."

"What could be of interest to vampires in Ravenbrook?" Midnight asks, with narrowed eyes.

I'm just as interested in the answer. Ravenbrook is barely a blip on the map.

"There's a magic lady there who provides glamour to us at times," Dimas explains. "Anyway, the scent of our kind was strong in the air, so we turned off the freeway and decided to investigate. Turns out there is quite a bit of nighttime activity at the farm." He focuses his intense gaze on Yves. "Not only is it the official headquarters of Dread, it's teeming with vampires."

Yves pulls his head back. "So the gang..."

"Is a nest," Dimas says. "Not a gang."

"Well fuck," Midnight murmurs.

"What's the difference between a coven and a nest of vampires?" Bowie asks.

"Yeah," Tru mirrors.

"A nest tends to be more nefarious," Yves explains. "They feed off each other's negative energy, whereas covens form out of camaraderie. We keep each other's humanity intact."

"You don't want to fuck with a nest of vampires any more than you want to walk into a nest of wasps," Raphael explains.

"So what do we do?" Tru asks. "Are they a problem for us?"

I turn to look at Hale, who is clearly very aware of why they are a

problem for us.

“I think the problem is bigger than a nest,” Hale says softly. “If what we learned at Nightsky is accurate, then this nest is actually attempting to eradicate any vampires who resist joining their ranks.” He looks straight at Dimas. “We could be facing a vampire civil war.”

Dimas’s mouth drops. “A civil war? What?”

“Hale was attacked by our own kind several nights ago,” Yves says. “In unraveling the events and with some help from a memory potion, we’ve determined that the attackers originate from the same cult where Hale initially grew up. This has potentially been in the works for centuries.”

“Why now then?” Dimas asks.

“Perhaps their ranks are strong enough,” Syn muses. “Maybe they simply believe they’re ready.”

“This cult is made up of vampires?” Dimas asks.

“No,” I answer. “There are mortals there. Mortals who have no idea what they truly belong to.”

Dimas nods, scanning the room with his eerie eyes. “Anyone have an idea of what we should do next? I don’t think sitting around waiting to be attacked is prudent.”

“I say we strike first,” Thorn says, grinning maniacally. “Let them know they don’t stand a chance.”

“While I don’t entirely disagree,” Yves begins, “I think we need more information first.”

“I agree,” I say. “There could be a lot of mortal collateral damage.”

“So?” Dimas says. “Hang with vampires and that happens.”

“They don’t know that, Dimas,” I growl. “There could be good people there.”

“And if we lose a few good mortals, so be it. There are plenty of them still leeching off the earth.”

It’s suddenly clear why Yves has no interest in this man, friendly or otherwise.

“There’s no point in arguing amongst ourselves,” Yves says, ever the rational voice. “In fact, now more than ever, we need to find those who would side with us if it came down to war.”

“You can count on my coven,” Dimas says. “We would never allow ourselves to be run by power-hungry vampires.”

Yves nods. “I have a few connections I can reach out to as well. One in

Ravenbrook and another in Neubrook.”

“I know some guys up in Sable Cove,” Thorn says. “Don’t ask why.”

“I’ve never spoken with Ravenbrook’s resident vampire, but we have friendly relationships with several covens up that way as well,” Dimas says. “There’s a group near Salem in Eaton Falls who stay to themselves, but I’ve never had a problem with them. I’ll give their leader, Augustus, a call.”

“Excellent,” Yves says. “For the rest of us, I’d like to see if we can find out anything else about Nightsky that could be relevant.”

Hale shifts uneasily in his seat, glancing at me before turning away. “Perhaps the mortal can help. I am so far removed.”

My stomach churns. “I would prefer not to involve Justice.”

“He could be in danger, Eros,” Raphael whispers. “Look what happened to Hale and his mortal mate.”

Raph’s words turn my blood to ice. “That was different.”

“I have to agree with Raphael,” Yves says. “We don’t know to what lengths this group is willing to go to protect their secret. They could be searching for him now for all we know.”

I blink rapidly as the verity of their words settles in my chest, awakening the monster that lives inside me. My fangs and nails descend. “I will not let anyone hurt him.”

Raphael rubs my arm. “We know. He’s safer with us though.”

I’m nearly blinded by rage and fear that I cannot protect Justice. What if he refuses to come back to me? Can I just lock him away until I’m sure any threat is dealt with? Would he forgive me if I did?

Dimas and Yves go to his office, leaving me soaking in anger and confusion, surrounded by my well-meaning but nosy brothers. Fortunately, their attention shifts to Hale.

“Have you remembered anything else?” Syn asks.

Hale nods. “I’ve been having very lucid dreams, but none of it makes sense yet. It’s a jumble, but I believe it’s my mind trying to sort it all.” He grimaces as if he tasted something sour. “This is difficult to admit, but the dreams about Nathan have been terrible. Nightmares really. I fear what I might discover.”

“Maybe it’s just the sadness because of what happened to him,” Bowie offers with a kind smile.

“Yes, maybe,” Hale says. “He always appears to be the beautiful, sweet man he was. We are making love and then...” Hale squeezes his eyes,

shaking his head. “He turns grotesque. Like a monster. He puts his claw-like hands around my throat and squeezes. Just as I’m losing my life, I wake.”

“But you can’t be killed that way,” Raphael notes. “It’s just a dream. You’ve been traumatized.”

He nods, but I can see he’s unconvinced. I hope for his sake it is just a dream.

I feel Syn’s intense gaze on me and shift my gaze to him. “Yes?”

“Raph is right, Eros. You need to get in touch with your mortal.”

“I can’t. He asked me to leave him alone.”

“And?” Thorn says. “Who gives a fuck?”

“I do. I respect his wishes.”

“Really? Is that why you sat by his room all night watching him?”

I narrow my eyes at my brother. “Were you following me, Thorn?”

He scoffs. “You’re not exactly being discreet. Your emotions pour off you like waves. I *felt* you as I passed. Lie to yourself, but do not lie to us.”

I stand up, tossing my notebook to the floor and getting in his face. In seconds, our chests are pressed together, teeth bared, until Midnight puts his hand between us.

“Stop this. We are brothers.”

I back off slightly, still glaring. “I don’t want to push him away,” I admit. “He’s already frightened of me.”

Thorn nods, his eyes softening. “Would you rather he be afraid of you or dead?”

“Thorn,” Bowie chides. “So harsh.”

“He needs the truth,” Thorn says. “His emotions are clouded by love.” Thorn cups my cheek. “He’ll understand, Eros. You have to believe that and keep him safe.”

Thorn’s words do their job. I nod, stepping back. “I could not live if something happened to him.”

“So don’t let it,” Thorn says. “Go get him.”

I gaze around the room at my brothers and Hale, their supportive energy surrounding me like a strong embrace.

“You’re right. I’ll go now.”

## Chapter Twenty-Six

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## JUSTICE

I haven't moved from my bed for hours. I can't. It's like I'm boneless, frozen with indecision. I want to see Eros so badly, but then what?

A cacophony of voices grabs my attention, finally luring me to sit up straight and pay attention. I don't know how, but I'm positive it's Eros.

I climb out of bed and hurry downstairs to find him standing in the foyer with Carina. Jackson and Mark are holding his arms, which is cute. He could obviously break free if he wanted to. When he sees me, his shoulders drop and all the panic in his face falls away.

"Justice."

"Eros, what are you doing here?"

"I had to see you. It's important."

Carina turns to me, her arms folded across her chest, her expression tight. "Do you want to speak to him?"

I nod. "Please. Thank you."

"Fine. Outside please."

"Of course."

The guys release Eros and he hurries over to me. I put my hand up to stop him though.

"You shouldn't have come here without telling me. You could traumatize someone."

Eros frowns. "Shit. I'm sorry. I didn't think of that."

"Alright, let's go outside."

I take him by the wrist and drag him through the dining room and out the sliding doors to the garden. Fortunately, the spot under the tree is open, so I

lead us that way.

“What’s so important?”

“You have to come back with me. It’s the only way I can protect you.”

“I don’t feel comfortable with that, and I’m perfectly safe here.”

“Are you?” He narrows his eyes. “It took nothing for me to get past the security, and we both know I could have freed myself if I wanted to.”

I nod, leaning against the tree. “I know, but why would anyone come here?”

Eros steps closer, his eyes searching my face, and the longer I look into his, the more I’m drawn to him. My resolve is melting away, but I blink and tear my eyes away.

“I need more time.”

“Justice,” Eros says, his voice soft as he delicately touches my cheek. “I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t think it was necessary. I was committed to giving you the space you needed, but I learned information this morning that cannot be ignored. Please. I would stake my own heart if something happened to you.”

“That’s very sweet, if not a little dramatic, but I feel safe here.” The look on his face sends a shiver of foreboding through me. “Are you mad?”

“No.” He rubs the back of his neck. “I could force you, Justice, but I don’t want to. I want you to believe me and trust me. This isn’t something Carina can protect you from. Please. Once I know it’s safe, I’ll bring you right back here if that’s what you want.”

The seriousness of his tones move me, erasing the rest of my resolve. He believes in this so I guess I should too. I lift my eyes to him. “Okay.”

Eros nods, his expression softening. “I know this is a lot. I’m a lot. But you have to understand, you have nothing to fear from me. I would never harm you. I…” He pauses, shaking his head. “In time you’ll come to understand what you mean to me.”

“You barely know me.”

“You’re wrong.” He lifts my hand and kisses my fingers. “Just please try to trust me if you can. If I thought you were safe here, I would leave you here far away from anything else, but I have concerns.”

“No one here would hurt me, Eros.”

“No, the threat is from outside. Please, come with me and I’ll explain everything.”

“Yeah, okay.” I look up at the house to see Carina watching from the

patio doors. "Let me talk to Carina. Can you meet me out front?"

"Yes."

I watch Eros slip away before walking back to face Carina. She opens the door for me, but she's obviously waiting for me to say something.

"I need to go with Eros for a while. I'm totally safe with him. We just, um, thought things were going too fast, but..." I bite my bottom lip, not sure what to say.

"You don't have to tell me everything, Justice," she says, touching my shoulder. "As long as you're willingly going with him, that's enough for me."

"I am."

I walk to my room and glance around, deciding to just take a light jacket with me before I join Eros, who is pacing the gravel drive. He looks up when I come out and smiles.

I take the hand he offers and follow him beyond the gate, where his car is waiting.

"I'd ask how you got through the gate, but I'm pretty sure I already know the answer."

Eros smirks. "I didn't think they'd let me in if I rang the bell."

"Maybe not."

He holds the passenger door open for me and waits as I buckle my seat belt before climbing in the driver's side. Eros starts the car and as the engine rumbles beneath me, I have to grab my seat as he tears off.

He glances at me every so often but doesn't speak. I don't pry. I have a feeling I want to be in a steady seat before hearing what's got him so worked up.

"Carina cares for you, doesn't she?" Eros asks as we exit the freeway. "I can feel it."

"Yeah. She's like a mom to us, even though I don't think she's much older than I am."

"I'm glad. I can sense people's true intentions. Hers are pure."

"That's good to know." I wring my hands together, unsure of what else to say. Then I remember the weird sex dream and end up squirming. It felt like that day in the woods under the trees, but I know he wasn't in my room.

"I've missed you," Eros says softly. "So much."

"I missed you too, Eros. I'm just... It's... I don't know."

"I know." He turns into the parking garage where his apartment is, and after swinging into a spot and stopping the car, he turns in his seat to face me.

“I didn’t know a better way to tell you. I’ve never had to confess my true nature to someone before.”

“You’ve never been serious about anyone?”

His face falls slightly. “Once. A long time ago. But I closed my heart to the possibility until I met you. Regardless of how you feel about me or what happens between us, you deserve to know what I am. Especially because I hope for so much.” He takes my hand, kissing it again, like he can’t help himself. He inhales deeply, his eyelids fluttering. “Your scent is amazing. I adore you, Justice.”

“Why though? We don’t know each other that well, and I’m just this weird, naive guy. I’ve lived my whole life locked away from reality. I don’t know what I have to offer you.”

“You. I need nothing else. If I were fortunate enough to be the recipient of your love, that would be sufficient. I have everything else.”

I nod as my eyes well with tears. “I want to be with you, but I’m so scared. I’m in over my head.”

“That’s why you have to trust me.” He leans close, kissing the tip of my nose, and my breath hitches as I grip his shirt. “Let me take care of you, Justice. I can give you the world.”

“What if I don’t want the world? What if all I want is a normal life?”

“I can’t give you that.” His expression falls as he sits back. “My life is normal to me, but to you...” He shakes his head.

“What about Bowie and Tru? They’re normal like me, right?”

His brow crinkles. “Why don’t we go upstairs to my apartment?”

“Okay.”

After exiting the car, I take his hand and follow him to the elevators. All the angst I was feeling earlier over being apart is gone now, completely soothed by being in his presence again. That must mean something, right? Maybe Micah was right and I should just take a chance. Being with him has to be better than being without him. Even if he is a vampire.

Upstairs, we step off the elevator and walk down the hall to the living room area, where it looks like everyone is sitting around. When they look up and see us, the room falls silent.

Eros squeezes my shoulder, smiling at the group. “You all remember Justice.”

I’m greeted with head nods and smiles.

“We’ll be in my unit if anyone needs anything. All good since I left?”

“All good,” Thorn answers, winking at me.

There’s just something so unusual about him. Then as my eyes roam around, it slowly sinks in that all of these men are murderers and vampires. I grab Eros’s hand and squeeze, trying to hide my nerves.

“Come on,” he says, gently pulling me away. “They would never hurt you,” he whispers as we walk.

“But some vampires would?”

“Yes. It’s true. In fact, that’s my concern. We believe there is a group of vampires that are attacking members or former members of Nightsky. They hunted Hale and his entire coven, and his lover, a mortal, was killed in the process.”

My mouth drops open as a shiver runs down my spine. “I see.”

“We discussed it as a group.” He pauses, opening the door to his apartment and stepping to the side to allow me to enter first. “I wanted to respect your wishes to be apart from me.”

“That’s not what I wished. I panicked, Eros. Imagine one day finding out cellphones exist and then the next day, learning that vampires do too. I barely know how to wipe my ass by myself. So I freaked out.”

“I rushed you and I’m so sorry. I never would have if not for the situation. If there is an attack, you are safer with me than anywhere else.”

I lean against the wall, my legs shaking. “What about Carina and the people at the house then? I don’t want anything to happen to them.”

Eros nods. “First things first. I couldn’t focus on anything while you weren’t with me.”

Nodding, I blow out a breath. “I feel better too. Being here, I mean.”

“Good. Are you thirsty? Hungry? Can I get you anything?”

I glance around the glamorous apartment. It looks like it belongs in some European palace, but it still feels comfy, with lots of blankets and books everywhere.

“I’m okay.” I take a small step toward him. “I think... um... Well, I think I’d like to know how you became a vampire.”

“I’m happy to tell you.”

“And also, what happens if you fall for someone who isn’t, because...” I shrug, unwilling to say the rest.

The sweetest smile ever lights up his face. “Because it’s relevant?”

“I mean, it could be.” I try to play it off with a smirk. “Besides, you’re the one who wanted me to know before you took me to bed. I know some of it. I

want to know the rest. Just promise me one thing?”

“Anything.”

“Be patient with me, please. This is a whole new world for me inside of what was already a whole new world.”

Eros steps forward, his angelic eyes softening. “I promise.” He lifts my hands and kisses the backs. “I suppose I’ll start with the night I died.”

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

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## EROS

Leading him by the hand, I guide Justice to sit with me on the sofa. The sound of his racing heart and the blood whooshing through his veins nearly drowns out everything else, but I have to remain focused and not succumb to my desire to rub myself all over him.

“I was born in 1692 in England.”

His eyes go wide, but he nods. “Wow. Okay.”

“I was part of the royal family, a cousin to the crown.”

“You were a... a prince?”

I nod. “Yes. Prince Henry the second of Gloucestershire. As a prince and representative of the crown, I spent my days making public appearances and standing around in bureaucratic rooms talking of war and the colonies, though I had almost no influence at all.”

“Were you happy?”

“I don’t know that I even considered it. It was just my life. I married a beautiful woman from Italy. Her name was Elisabetta, and we were compatible, though we had hardly known each other before the wedding.”

Justice nods, placing his hand sweetly on my knee in encouragement.

“I haven’t said her name in centuries.”

“You loved her?”

“I did, yes. We were planning a tour of the American colonies, but we found out she was with child.” Faded, fractured memories try in vain to resurface. It was too long ago. “But then a strange illness spread through England like wildfire. No one was immune. No peasant, no royal. She died in my arms long before our child would ever know me.”



“I’m so sorry, Eros.”

I nod. “It no longer hurts me. In fact, if I did not have my journals, I might not even remember. A vampire’s memory is long, but functions the same. With time, memories fade.”

“You had a journal?”

“I wrote poetry and musings. My father hated it. He wanted me to be fierce and lead armies. I did my best, but I have the heart of a poet.”

“Still,” he whispers.

I nod.

“What happened next?” Justice asks.

“I fell ill with the same fever that took my wife. Nothing helped. One by one, my mother lost her children, except my brother and me. In desperation, my father sought the help of a magic man. He turned out to be Yves.”

Justice gasps. “Really?”

“Yes. I was almost dead by the time he was summoned. My parents believed I had already slipped away, but I was still there, clinging. My will to live was fading though. I had nothing to hold on to. My wife and my unborn child, gone. The few people who had recovered were only shells of their former selves. I couldn’t bear it.” I tickle his palm as I remember it all. “Yves offered me an alternative. He promised me a life independent of the crown. The idea of that type of freedom was seductive. I understood what I would become, and yet, I welcomed it. I was a man of thirty with a secret I thought only I and my journal knew.”

“What?”

“That I desired a masculine touch. Yves knew it and laid it out for me on a silver platter. When I thought of joining those three beautiful men, I bared my neck with ease.”

“Were you and Yves lovers?”

I take his hand in mine, hoping he’ll understand. “We all were at the time, but please remember, this was 1722. Hundreds of years ago. It ended not long after.”

“So... Yves wasn’t looking for brothers?”

“Not initially, no. He wanted a companion. A lover. He chose Syn first, then Midnight, then they found me. In the beginning, our lives were very hedonistic.”

“You made love to all of them?”

I nod. “Yes. It was the first time in my life I felt as if I finally knew

myself. I adored my wife, but the touch of man was unparalleled.”

“Why did it stop?”

“Yves is a beautifully warm and caring man, but he is complex in his desires. He is looking for his mate, not just a lover.”

Justice crinkles his brow. “What’s the difference?”

My own heart speeds up at the thought of sharing this information with Justice. I can only hope my own desperation for him to be mine doesn’t spill out.

“It may be difficult to believe, but we believe that fate handpicks the person we will spend eternity with. We call them fated mates.”

“Um, like soulmates?”

“Somewhat, yes, but the bond is even stronger. Yves wants that or nothing.”

“And you?”

“I imagine everyone who believes in fated mates wants one, but some of us are a bit more jaded than Yves. Behind that stoic mask of his is a hopeless, longing romantic. As for me, well, I used to want it, but I lost hope.”

“Oh.” He nods, but the uptick in his pulse is delightful. “How do you know if you’ve found it?”

“It is unmistakable at some point. There are too many signs that can’t be ignored.”

He bites his bottom lip. “So Yves has been with all of you?”

“Yes, but I no longer harbor attraction or feelings of desire for him. I see him truly as a brother. I will say that now that Syn and Midnight have found their mates, it has reignited hope for me and Yves that ours are still coming.”

“Not Thorn?”

I chuckle. “Thorn would rather become a celibate priest than fall in love. As for Raphael, he is mostly silent on the subject. Perhaps he is afraid to hope.”

Justice shifts his gaze to his lap for a moment. “Do you know right away when you meet someone whether they’re your mate?”

“I suppose it depends on how open and astute you are.” Do I tell him? Is his questioning a hopeful clue for me?

“And, um, if a vampire has a fated mate who is mortal, then what?”

Oh yes. This is hope!

“Ideally...” I pause as my throat unexpectedly tightens. “The mortal would choose to join the vampire on their eternal walk.”

“Be-become a vampire?”

“Yes.”

He nods as the color drains from his face. “And if they didn’t? Would they just grow old and die like a normal person?”

“Yes.”

“And leave their vampire behind?”

“In indescribable grief. The vampire could never love again. Once they know the love fate intended for them, nothing else will ever compare.”

“No pressure,” he mumbles. “Does that happen or does every mate just become a vampire?”

“It happens. Some mortals cannot bear the idea of it, and to be fair, it’s not for the faint of heart. When you are turned, you literally die, as I did, until your maker brings you back.”

“How do they do that?”

“By feeding you their blood.”

Justice shifts uneasily, scratching the back of his neck. “You have to drink blood?”

“Yes. But understand, it’s not how you experience blood as a mortal. Have you ever cut your finger and put it in your mouth?”

“Yes.”

“It likely wasn’t pleasant or anything you even thought about, but when a vampire tastes blood, it is like...” I pause as my fangs threaten to descend. “It is the only thing you really want. That is... until you meet someone who fascinates you more than your bloodlust ever could.”

Justice stares at me, his face revealing his awe. “Your eyes are glowing.”

“I desire you, Justice,” I admit. “More than anything.”

“More than blood?”

I close my eyes for a moment to calm my beast. “More than anyone else’s blood.”

“You want mine?”

“Gods of lore, I do. I want everything of yours. I want your body in my bed, your scent all over my skin, and yes, I would bathe in your blood if you allowed it.”

He moves back slightly.

“Do not fear me, my beautiful, sweet Justice. I would never harm you or take anything you did not give me permission to have.”

He swallows hard, nodding. “Does it hurt?”

“Becoming a vampire hurts. Becoming my lover does not.”

“Drinking my blood?”

“No. It is euphoric.”

He visibly shivers. “Oh wow. Your teeth.”

“My beast desires to be near you. But you see, I am in control of myself. You are safe.”

“Your beast. Is it separate from you?”

“Not exactly. I am always a vampire, but when necessary, I can show only the man.”

Justice nods, the crinkle between his brows present again. “I think I understand. Is it possible, I mean, do you think we could be, um...”

“Fated mates?”

Justice nods.

“I was afraid to hope for it.” I scoot closer, relieved when he doesn’t flinch or move back. “I spent decades longing for a mate of my own, only to give up all hope. Then you came into my life. The way I feel about you, Justice, is unlike anything I’ve experienced before. I kept it in so as not to overwhelm you. I wanted to take things as slow as necessary, but I didn’t expect all of this madness around us. I don’t know what is right when it comes to a mortal. Is it better to let them fall in love not knowing my true nature, or tell them up front? My only guidance with you has been my heart.”

“Okay, but um, what if I say I want to be with you, but I don’t think I can do the vampire thing?”

“Then I would tell you that I accept whatever you give me, and there is no rush. Maybe it’s decades from now when you decide. The only rush is your mortal life expectancy. I will always be here.”

He nods, biting that bottom lip I so desperately wish I could suck. “So I have time to think about it?”

“All that you need.”

“And you think it’s possible we’re fated mates?”

My eyelids flutter as a feeling of absolute rightness settles over me. “This conversation is proof. I believe if we weren’t, you’d be running for the hills right now.”

“A tiny part of me thinks I should run, but a much bigger part wants to be with you. So much. I hated being apart. I’m scared that I’m falling for the first man I met after being freed, but at the same time, I can’t pretend not to notice how good I feel with you. I still don’t know how I feel about the

vampire thing, but I know how I feel about the man. I'm not running, Eros. I want to be your lover, and if we're really fated mates, then I want to love you." He blows out a shaky breath. "Oh, do I want to love you."

"I cannot think of a higher honor."

Justice crawls across the sofa to me and straddles my lap, his arms draped around my shoulders. "Thank you for considering me and for telling me the truth tonight. I know you care."

"Yes."

"So now that I know, will you please make love to me before I literally start begging?"

I smile, nuzzling his neck and rubbing my nose along his pulsing vein. "No begging required."

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

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## JUSTICE

A shiver of anticipation rolls down my back as I rub against my handsome savior. Okay, so he's a vampire. I can handle this. I think.

"One question before we start?"

Eros nods. "Anything."

"You want to bite me, right?"

"Yes, but I won't."

"How do you know?"

"Because I've had centuries to learn how to control my impulses."

"Is it uncomfortable?"

"To be a vampire?"

"Yeah. Like..." I shrug. "I don't know. When you want to bite but you don't?"

"Yes, it's a challenge, but I can handle it. Being a vampire though, is far from uncomfortable. The night I found you, I was at our vampire club, Lair. It's the one place besides home where we can be our true selves. No hiding our features or our instincts."

"So it's kind of hard being a vampire in public?"

"Only when I'm aroused."

"Sexually?"

"No, any type of strong emotion. It's why Yves created our business. It's an outlet for us that keeps the innocent safe, but allows us to be what we are with those who deserve it."

Oh, right. He's an assassin. "Killing doesn't bother you?"

He shakes his head. "No. The moral compass of a vampire is almost

nonexistent except for those we hold dear. You don't want to see what I would become if someone threatened you."

I drag my hand through his silky locks. "I don't think I'm scared anymore."

He puts my hand on his chest over his heart. "It barely beats, but when it does, it's for you, Justice. My brothers would protect you with the same tenacity that I do."

I nod, my gaze roaming over his insanely perfect features. "Would it help you if I let you bite me?"

His breath catches. "What?"

"Just, like, a little bite. So I could see what it's like? I don't know if a small taste is better or worse for you."

"You would allow it?"

I nod, surprised by my own answer. "I think it would help me understand you better and get over the anticipation of it."

"Mighty Hades, Justice. What a gift."

"You say Hades a lot. Who is that? A god or something?"

He nods. "God of the underworld. A place believed by some to be where souls go when their earthly journey is over. I do not worship him, only revere him."

"Cool." I bite my bottom lip. "So, yeah? A little bite is good?"

"I would take a mere pinprick if that's all I could have."

As his eyes glow and his voice grows thick, my cock reacts, twitching. Oooo-kay, I'm turned on by Eros in vamp mode. Good to know.

"Where do you want to bite me?"

His eyelids flutter as he clears his throat. "I think the wrist is a good place for you."

"But that's not where you want to bite me, is it?"

"No. If left to my own desires, I would drink from your elegant neck, or your supple thighs, but for a first taste, your wrist is more than beautiful."

"You are a poet, aren't you?"

"Inspired by you, a most perfect muse."

I lift a shaky arm, offering my wrist. "Taste me then, my poet."

Eros's glowing gaze holds mine, and as he gently grips my arm, he opens his mouth to reveal very long, very sharp, very white fangs. I guess at least I know he's not making up weird shit. This man is a legit vampire.

"My darling, Justice," he whispers, still holding my gaze. "What a joy



and a gift you are in this dark world. You are my sun and I your earth. My entire existence revolves around yours.”

With those sweet words, he sinks his teeth into the fleshiest part of my wrist. I’m expecting pain but instead it’s almost the opposite of that. Like a mild sting, immediately replaced by feelings of cozy warmth. I gaze into his eyes as he drinks from me, and it’s not gross at all. It’s weirdly beautiful.

After only a few seconds, Eros pulls back, licking my wrist, and I watch in amazement as the two puncture wounds instantly heal.

“It’s over?” I ask.

“It has to be for now.” His lips are tinged red, and somehow he’s even more attractive.

“How do you feel now?”

“Indescribable.” He lifts my arm again, dotting sweet kisses along my skin. “I expected your essence to be as sweet and compelling as you are, but there are no words to explain it.”

“In a good way?”

“Oh, my darling, you are delicious. The nectar of gods.”

“Okay sexy, romantic angel. Can we make love now?”

He smiles. “Absolutely.”

Eros scoops me up effortlessly and carries me to his bedroom. He tosses me on the bed, and I shiver as he pulls his shirt over his head. His eyes still glow, and his teeth are still fangs.

“Are you gonna stay like that?”

He nods. “I have no choice. My desire for you is too strong to hold back.” He unbuttons his pants. “But I won’t bite again. I promise.” Eros grins. “Unless, of course, you invite me to.”

I shiver again, kicking off my shoes and tugging my socks off while Eros lets his pants drop to the floor. He’s completely naked, and the sight of him makes my mouth water.

“Holy shit,” I murmur. “You are unbelievable.”

“Do I please you, my treasure?”

I nod, trying to get my brain back online. “I-I can’t believe I get to touch you.”

“As much as you desire.”

I pull my shirt off as Eros slinks toward me, then gasp as he grabs my ankles and pulls me underneath him.

“I dream of you,” Eros whispers. “Sometimes it’s as if I can feel you.”

“It happened to me too. Like the day in the woods.”

He smiles, his eyes softening. “By the gods, it could be true. You could be my mate, Justice.” His hand moves to my throat, not squeezing, just holding. He searches my eyes for just a second before closing in and claiming my lips.

I sink into him, gripping his shoulders as his lips melt away any remaining doubt or resistance. He manages to get my jeans off without breaking the kiss, and as our naked bodies touch for the first time, I swear I fall apart. Touching Eros isn’t like anything I’ve felt before. It’s so much more.

His mouth leaves mine and I whimper, but only for the second it takes for him to move to my throat, kissing and sucking until I’m positive there will be a mark there. Why is that idea so hot? Everyone will know what we did, and I like that thought. A lot.

From my neck, Eros traces kisses down my chest, circling my nipples and sucking on them before continuing to my belly. He grips my hips, his fingers digging into my flesh just this side of pain, and I buck my hips for relief. My cock is so hard and throbbing, I swear it’ll burst if I don’t get relief soon.

Eros’s teeth graze my belly as he inhales. “Gods, Justice. What a scent you have.”

“What do I smell like to you?” I ask, carding my fingers through his blond tresses.

“Paradise. Summer. Fresh rain and cut grass. You smell like autumn—crisp leaves and warm drinks. Like winter, peacefully falling snow, and like spring, the rebirth of the world.”

“Eros...”

“You smell like eternity. Like everything my soul desires.” He lifts his face to mine. “I am obsessed with you, my darling. I have waited centuries to love you, and now I will spend the rest of time adoring you, if you allow it.”

My eyes well with tears, and I’m too speechless to say anything back, so I just nod.

“Are you happy, Justice? Happy to be in my arms?”

I nod again as the tears fall. “So happy,” I manage.

He smiles, those dangerous teeth at odds with the beautiful softness of his face. I’m expecting another sweet, poetic line of prose, but that’s not what I get. Eros dives between my legs, rubbing his nose along the inside of my thighs, over my balls, and finally my cock.

I arch into his touch, whimpering. I need him so desperately, I think I might go crazy from it. Eros opens his mouth, and his hot tongue licks a stripe along my shaft. I hiss with pleasure, then gasp as he spreads my legs and buries his face between them.

He runs his tongue over every intimate part of me, and all I can do is rock against his mouth, trying to get myself off, but Eros is in complete control. His fingers tickle my entrance as he tongues my balls and cock until I'm delirious and unable to do anything but make needy sounds of lust.

When he finally swallows my length, I cry out with relief. He sucks me hard and fast, until I'm barreling toward the edge, only to release me just before I can fall over.

"Nooooo," I whine.

Eros chuckles, straddling my body and offering me the most perfect example of male beauty in existence. Granted, I haven't seen every dick in the world, but there couldn't possibly be a better one than this one.

I grip his hips, lifting my head to gobble him up. The burst of sweet precum on my tongue makes my stomach flutter and my hole twitch with need. Eros is thick and long and veiny and absolutely fucking everything. His is the cock of dreams. My dreams anyway.

He fucks slowly into my mouth, sliding with ease down my throat and carding his fingers through my hair as I suck him with everything I've got.

"Beautiful," Eros whispers. "So sexy."

Eros looks at me like I'm the best lover he's ever had. My limited experience seems to be less of a problem than I thought. Either that, or Eros is just really good at making a guy feel incredible.

He reaches behind him, playing with my hole again, and the sensation coaxes my orgasm to the surface again. That is, until Eros pulls away again.

"Stop doing that," I whine.

Eros grins, leaning down to kiss me. "Patience, my darling. I will make it worth it for you."

He wraps an arm under me and hooks it around my waist, lifting me easily onto his lap. "I need to be inside you when you come. I need to feel it happen." He rubs my hole, entering me with a finger. Both of us moan. "You are so wonderfully tight."

"I've never, um, never been penetrated."

His eyelids flutter. "Fuck," he whispers. When he takes his finger away, I want to cry out, but I bite it back, knowing I need to trust him. He rubs the tip

of his cock, showing me how slick his fingers are. “Vampire advantage. Plenty of precum.”

“Let me taste it again.”

He feeds his thumb to me and I suck it, closing my eyes. “You taste so good.”

Eros smiles at me, but his lids are heavy with lust. My chest flutters from the knowledge that I’m turning him on like this.

“Are you ready?” he asks, returning his slick fingers to my hole. “I promise it will feel so good.”

I nod, licking my lips. “I’m ready.”

“We don’t need condoms. I cannot harm you. Vampires don’t contract or transmit human infections.”

“I wasn’t worried about that, but thank you for explaining. Now please, please, Eros, make me yours.”

“I will.”

He removes his fingers and replaces them with the thick head of his cock. I close my eyes as he enters me, but Eros clicks his teeth to get my attention.

“No. I need to see you and for you to see me.”

I hold his gaze as inch after *very thick* inch of cock enters me. I’m impossibly full, stretched to my limits, but it doesn’t hurt. Just the opposite. It’s addictive.

“I want to live like this,” I whisper.

“Don’t tempt me,” Eros says, very seriously. “You have no idea how much I wish to lock you away to keep you safe from this world.” He strokes my cheek. “But you have been caged too long. I will never take away your freedom.”

“What if I give it to you?” I ask, moving slowly as I adjust to his cock inside me. “What if I give you everything, Eros?”

“Don’t tease me. I cannot take it.”

“What if…” My words trail off. Now isn’t the time to make life-altering decisions. “Just fuck me.”

Eros bites my chin. “Never. We’re never *just* fucking.”

Then he leans me back, my body supported by his strong grasp, and lets me have it. No longer holding back, he fucks into every part of me. I’m boneless, flailing beneath him in delirious pleasure. I waited a long time to be made love to like this, and it doesn’t disappoint.

My cock rubs against his rock-hard stomach, my sweat and precum

creating the perfect amount of friction, while I watch him react to being inside me. He looks so happy and pleased, but when his lips part and his fangs appear, I shiver with need.

“I want you to bite me again.”

He shakes his head, his brow creased. “I cannot in this condition. I would go too far.”

I drag my hands down his chest. “I trust you.”

“No, Justice. Gods, I want to, but your safety comes first.” He opens his eyes fully and focuses on mine. “When you are ready, I will give you everything you desire. There is no rush. I’ll always be here.”

I nod as warmth and happiness rush through me. A new feeling takes over as Eros presses his hand to my collarbone and ruts into me, slamming his cock inside me and hitting a spot that sends me over the edge.

I cry out, moaning his name as the pleasure explodes within me and my cock pulses with the orgasm I desperately needed.

Eros moans, scooping up my cum and licking it from his fingers.

“Oh fuck,” I whisper. The sight of Eros gobbling up my cum makes my cock twitch and pulse one last time, eager for another release I’m incapable of.

Eros grunts, his face tensing up as he thrusts deep inside me. He holds me to him, my face buried in the crook of his neck, and I shiver as he drags sharp teeth over the flesh of my shoulder. He collapses on top of me, shifting his weight slightly to the side but keeping me in his arms.

With his eyes closed and a peaceful smile on his face, I realize that while I’m not ready for everything that comes along with it, I’m never leaving this man if I can help it. Wild vampires couldn’t drag me away.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

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## EROS

I take slow, deep inhales of Justice's addictive scent while he drifts to sleep in my arms. What a joyous day. My soul is settled as if every moment and decision in my life led me to this one. I thought a feeling like this would remain elusive for me, but now I'm certain fate has blessed me with my own mate.

After listening to his soft breathing for far too long, I pull myself away to get a warm cloth to clean his body. As I wash him, he opens his eyes, smiling before drifting off again. He even giggles in his sleep, and my long-sullen heart flutters in my chest.

I love him.

He is mine and I know it. One taste of his blood was the final proof I needed. Never has blood been so sweet and nourishing. Any other source will be bitter now, I'm sure.

*Are you available?*

I scowl as Yves's thought reaches me.

*Be right there.*

I kiss Justice's cheek, smoothing his hair back from his face. He smiles as his eyes open slightly.

"I have to go talk to my brothers. Sleep. You are safe here."

He pops his bottom lip and looks so adorable, I cannot help but smile.

"I don't want you to leave."

"My darling, *la mia gioia*. I'll only be in the common area."

"That's... Italian, right?"

"It is."

He smiles. “We had a family from Italy that joined us. I recognized the ‘la mia’ part. What did you say?”

“My joy. That’s what you are to me. Pure joy.”

“How do you say ‘pure joy?’”

“*Gioia pura.*”

He chuckles. “I like that. You’re sexy and somehow even better when you speak another language.”

I kiss his nose, then, unable to resist, his sweet lips. “And you are my everything. Just rest. I’ll be back before you know it.”

“Fine, but you’ll probably have to rail me again to make up for it.”

I laugh out loud. “I can handle that.”

Forcing myself away from the bed, I shake off the desire and head to the common to see my brothers. There, I find several vampires we’ve come to call friends over the years.

“Eros,” Yves says. “You remember Michel Toussant from Neubrook, Ambrose Stone from Ravenbrook, and Dimas.”

“Hello.”

“This is Augustus Rainier,” Dimas says, gesturing to a man I haven’t seen before. “And two members of his coven, Beto and Willem. They are here from Eaton Falls.”

“Welcome.” I shift my gaze to Yves. “Are there new developments?”

“There are,” Yves answers. “Dimas?”

Dimas nods. “Two covens were destroyed last night. My crew found them. It has to be the actions of the nest we found. Neither of the covens even interacted with society, choosing to live in seclusion.”

“I recognized some of them,” Hale says. “So our theory that this gang of rogue vampires is hunting former Nightsky members is likely accurate.”

“Which means…” Yves says, allowing his words to trail off.

“Hale is in danger, and possibly Justice,” I finish.

“Exactly,” Dimas says. “My suggestion is the same as it was. We strike first. They have no idea we’re even aware of them. We go at night and burn them to the ground.”

“Nighttime is risky,” Thorn says. “They’ll be active.”

“You propose we go during the day?” Dimas says, his tone incredulous.

“We don’t even know what their habits are, do we?” Raphael asks. “They could be active during the day. We are.”

A phone rings and Michel turns away to answer it. My attention is



focused on my front door as foreboding creeps over me. I will not, cannot, let anything happen to Justice now that I've found him.

"We won't let him get hurt," Raphael says, squeezing my shoulder. "I'm so happy for you."

"What do you mean?"

"You've changed. Your heart is at peace, yes?"

I gaze into his warm eyes. "You can tell?"

"Yes. Happiness pours from you, my friend. You've found your mate?"

"I believe so, yes."

My brothers crowd around me for a moment, not speaking, but their feelings of happiness wash over me like summer rain. I have to clear the lump of emotion from my throat.

"Now, more than ever, we have to protect him."

"And we will," Thorn says. "I'm glad you brought him here."

"Thank you for the *gentle* encouragement."

We both laugh.

"Gentlemen," Michel says, returning to the group and tucking his cell phone into his jacket pocket. "I have a contact in Neubrook who let me know we had visitors about ten minutes ago. They were visiting an area that used to be our bad side, and they were asking the residents if anyone had heard of Nightsky. They didn't find anyone, so they left quickly."

"But that means they are getting closer," Syn says. "They're saving New Onyx, likely because of the size and the known vampires here." He turns to me. "Do we follow Dimas's plan?"

"The sooner the better, in my opinion. I won't be able to relax until I know the threat is dealt with."

"Just understand what we're dealing with," Hale says. "They seek to annihilate. There isn't any talking except for strange demands of a blood king. When they don't find what they want, they kill."

"Not this time," Midnight says. "This time they fucked around with the wrong coven."

Ambrose, who's been silently watching, finally speaks up. "They deserve to die for disturbing the harmony amongst us. I'm in."

"We are too," Augustus says.

"And I," Michel adds.

"Obviously you can count on me," Dimas says.

"Well then," Yves says. "Sounds like we have a plan. We'll descend on

their compound at nightfall, and we won't walk away until they're dead.”

Thorn grins, rubbing his hands together. “Ooh, I do love a good fight.”

I'm glad he's excited. As for me, I want to crawl out of my own skin. Whatever happens tonight, Justice has to walk away unscathed. If he's harmed, I'll burn this fucking city down.

## Chapter Thirty

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## EROS

I enter my apartment and stop in my tracks, suddenly torn about how to protect Justice. Should I return him to the safe house? No. I shake my head. They could be in danger too. Leaving him here doesn't seem right, but I could get Vivienne and Viper to come over. Yes. That's the right approach. Both witches have enough power to protect him until I return.

Twisting my neck back and forth to push my beast down, I head down the hallway to find Justice lying in bed, propped up on pillows, and holding a book in his hand. My heart clenches.

"Where did you find that?"

Justice turns and looks at me with a huge grin. "You're incredible. You deserve to be published, Eros. The world should read your stuff."

"Thank you, but where did you find that?"

"On the shelf." He points to my bookcase across the room. "It's not like it was hidden. Who is it about? A lover?"

Shaking my head, I approach him. "No," I answer, propping myself on the bed by his feet. "A desired lover. A fictional one. I had never loved someone the way I hoped I would." I drag my finger over his bare thigh. "The way I love you."

Justice's mouth falls open and his cheeks turn pink. "Is that really true? It's not just because it's all new and exciting?"

"My sweet treasure. I've lived enough to know the difference. I knew you would be different the moment I saw your face. I haven't stopped thinking of you even for one minute since. You are the muse who inspired all my poetic words."

He closes the book and sets it down. “It’s amazing to hear that. I just don’t know—”

“I told you before, you’re under no obligation to return my feelings, but I’m sure in time you will. I believe we are fated mates. It was no accident that our lives merged.” I take his hand in mine. “I’d love to talk about this more, and we will, but for tonight, I need you to stay here with Viv and Viper.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Why would I do that?”

“We’ve learned some dangerous information about the vampires who were hunting Hale. They are looking for former members of Nightsky with the intention to kill. You’re safer here than anywhere else.”

“What are you gonna do?”

“Attack.”

Justice blows out a breath and leans back. “Where?”

“We hope to find them closer to Sable Cove. Trust me, Justice, I don’t want to leave you, but I have to eliminate this threat to know you are truly safe.”

He nods, biting his bottom lip. I reach over and gently tug it free before pressing a kiss to his mouth. He smiles, but there’s an unusual glimmer of mischief in his eyes.

“It’s cute that you think I’m going to stay here while you go out and save the world.”

I cock my head. “What?”

“I’m an adult, Eros. Granted, not the most worldly one, but still legally allowed to make my own choices. I’m going with you.”

“Absolutely fucking not. These are vampires we’re dealing with, Justice. Killer, vicious vampires. They would attack a mortal without batting an eye. I cannot let you expose yourself that way.”

His face falls. “You’re right. Yeah. Okay. I’ll stay here.”

I scoot closer, pulling his hands into mine. “I want you to have everything you want in life. In order for that to come true, I have to do this tonight.”

“And you promise nothing bad will happen to you?”

“I promise. They aren’t expecting us and…” I pause, lifting his hand to kiss it. “Our coven is special. We’re descended from the original vampire. We are nearly impossible to kill.”

“Oh,” he says, his voice whispery. “You’ll tell me more about that later?”

“I will. Anything you want to know.” I kiss his hand again. “You mean everything to me, Justice. Everything. Success is the only possibility. I spent

centuries waiting to love you, and I intend to do just that for as long as you allow it.”

“That sounds really good to me.”

I lean in and kiss him the way I want to, pressing my clothed body to his still-naked one. “When I get back, I want to run you a bath and wash every inch of your beautiful skin. I want to spoil you and show you what a treasure you are to me.”

“I want that too. Will you read to me? I want to hear your voice say these words.”

“I will do anything you ask of me.”

He smiles, tucking a lock of my hair behind my ear. “I hope you’re not gone long.”

“I’ll only be gone as long as necessary and not a second longer. Honestly, I’m pissed off. This is against a vampire’s code of honor. It’s just not done. They deserve every awful thing that will happen to them.”

“But you’re going to kill vampires.”

“To maintain honor and balance. We didn’t initiate it.”

“That makes sense, actually. Why do I have to be babysat? You don’t trust me?”

“I do trust you, but Viv and Viper have special... tools at their disposal, should it be necessary.”

“Are they vampires too?”

“No. They’re witches.”

His eyes go wide. “So magic is real too?”

“Very much so, but not the way you think of it in books and movies.”

He shrugs. “I haven’t seen a lot of that, but this one kid told us about a movie he was allowed to watch before they joined. It was about witches chasing kids. That’s as much as I know.”

“In time, you’ll learn so much more.” I gently pinch his chin. “They are not babysitting you. They will only be here to protect you. I have to ensure you’re safe.”

He nods. “Okay. I understand.”

“Thank you.” I kiss his nose. “I should get ready. Do you need food? I can order something?”

“I’m okay for now. I’ll eat when you get back.”

It takes all my willpower to force myself off the bed and away from him. “I’ll be back as soon as possible.”

The front door opens and before I even blink Yves, Syn, and Hale are in my bedroom. Justice gasps, tugging the blankets up to hide his bare chest.

“What?” I ask, annoyed at this interruption to the small moment of time with Justice.

“Tiago called,” Yves says. “They’ve detected a nest of vampires on the way to Lair. It looks like Dread has arrived in New Onyx. We need to go. Now.”

# Chapter Thirty-One

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## JUSTICE

“Dammit,” Eros grumbles, clutching my hand in his. “I need Vivienne here.”

“We can’t wait,” Syn says, glancing at me. “Bring him with us.”

“What?” Eros launches off the bed, shoving Syn in the chest. “Are you mad? That’s dangerous.”

“Syn is right,” Yves says. “While it’s not preferred, he’s likely safer with us than not.” Yves turns his intense gaze to me. “You have to promise to do exactly as we say. It’s the difference between life and death.”

I nod. “I’ll do what I’m told.” I think I sound confident, even though I kind of want to vomit.

“We have some glamour left,” Syn says. “We can mask his scent. That will help.”

Eros paces in front of the bed, dragging a hand through his hair. “It’s so risky. If they find out we have a mortal with us...”

“They won’t,” Hale says. “I won’t let what happened to Nathan happen to someone else, even if I have to take a stake myself.”

Eros nods, but his face is creased with worry. I extend my hand, staying safely under the blankets, and he takes it, stepping closer to me.

“I promise to stay wherever you tell me to. You don’t have to worry.”

“I waited my entire existence to find you. I cannot lose you.”

“You won’t. I’ll be careful.”

Eros squeezes my hand. “Fine. Let’s get this over with.”

The vampires leave the room while Eros watches me throw on my clothes. Minutes later, we’re heading out the front door, but instead of going down to the garage, we take the elevator up to the roof. Do they have a

helicopter I didn't notice?

Nope. It's just an empty roof. I'm about to ask when Eros turns to me and says, "Hop on my back and hold on. We don't have time for cars."

I do as I'm told then literally scream as Eros and the others leap from the roof. We land on the grass below effortlessly, but before I can catch my breath, he takes off, sprinting so fast everything around me is just a blur. It's equal parts terrifying and amazing.

We stop abruptly, and I immediately recognize the neighborhood where Eros found me. There's nothing here but woods and darkness, until we step into what appears to be a wall. Suddenly, a huge black building appears. It's some kind of strange blend of Victorian and modern, with moody lighting and the soft thrum of bass-heavy music seeping through its walls.

The parking lot is packed with cars, and as we get closer, the front doors open, and three truly imposing men step out to greet us. Yves hugs the closest person to him, a mountain of a man with jet-black hair and equally black eyes, at least from where I'm standing.

We enter the club as a group with Eros clinging to me, his arm wrapped protectively around my waist. I listen as the tall man explains the situation.

"They were spotted about ten miles from here in an abandoned house," he says. "Our guys did a little snooping and they talked about Lair. Their intent is to recruit as many vampires as they can to their cause and kill those who resist."

Yves shakes his head, his face truly terrifying. I've seen anger before, but nothing like what's all over Yves's expression. He looks like he could tear the world apart with his bare hands.

"We have a mortal to protect," Yves says through clenched teeth as he gestures at me.

The man who seems to be the leader of the club steps toward me with a curious expression, but Eros hisses at him, pulling me protectively behind him.

"Keep your distance, Tiago."

The tall man, Tiago apparently, chuckles. "I won't touch your pretty mortal, Eros. I was just investigating since his scent revealed nothing."

"Protection spell," Eros mumbles. "Where will he be safe while we deal with these treasonous bastards?"

"We have a saferoom in the back. He can go there." Tiago gestures for us to follow him.

As we pass through the club, the other people there—vampires, I assume—are on high alert, all of them tense and ready to fight. I can literally *feel* the tension in the air.

“How do vampires fight each other?” I whisper.

“Violently,” Thorn answers, even though he’s several people ahead of me.

“It’s not something I want you to see,” Eros says. “Not the side of me I want you to know.”

I nod as his words vibrate through me. A warning. An admission of what he truly is behind the poetic gentleman. A truth I have to accept if we’re going to stay together.

Tiago opens a wooden door, but behind it is a metal grate. Raphael hisses as he steps back from it.

“Silver,” Tiago says proudly. “Vampire deterrent.” He presses a panel of numbers on the wall and the grate slides open. “Your mortal is safe inside.”

“And the code?” Eros asks. “Should something happen to you.”

Tiago nods. “Twelve forty-two. The year of my rebirth.”

My eyes widen, but I force my gaze to the floor. Eros takes my hand and leads me into the prison cell. That’s what it is really.

“Please, my love, stay here. I will return as quickly as possible.” He kisses my forehead, then my lips. “Don’t forget how much you mean to me. We’ll be together again soon.”

I nod, glancing around the sparsely decorated room. There’s only a twin cot, an armchair, and a small table. At the back, there is an opening that appears to be a window, but it’s covered in wood and high above my head.

Eros steps back until he’s on the other side of the grate. Tiago presses the code again, and the grate closes. I grasp the metal bars, unaffected by the silver.

My emotions bubble to the surface, teasing my tongue to utter those three words I know Eros wants to hear. For the first time, it’s so clear.

*I love him.*

I desperately need him to come back so I can tell him. So we can be together.

The other vampires filter out of the room, but Eros steps closer to where I’m standing. His face shows every emotion he feels right now: anger, fear, desperation, and love. So much love.

“I’ll be safe, Eros. Go do what you have to do.”

He nods, glancing at the door. "I love you, Justice. I love you with all that I am, all that I have been, and all that I may become."

"I know. I feel it." I want to say it, but it doesn't feel like the right time or place. Maybe it would distract him. "Go. I'll be okay."

With a final look, he tears off, leaving me in silence. All I can do now is wait and hope he returns unharmed and quickly. When he does, I'm going to tell him I'm in love with him. I'm not sure about the whole becoming a vampire thing. I just don't know if I can do that, but we have time.

At least, I hope we do.

## Chapter Thirty-Two

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## EROS

Entering the main part of the club is painful. Leaving Justice behind in a locked cell feels all kinds of wrong, but I have no choice.

“He’ll be safe there,” Raphael says, gripping my shoulder. “Even if a vampire finds him, they won’t be able to get through the gate.”

“I know. It’s just difficult. It’s like cutting off my own hand.”

“We need to get through this,” he says, his tone comforting. “Then you have forever to love him.”

I nod. “Yes. I need to remember that.”

“They’re getting closer,” Tiago announces, peering through the front door.

“These assholes have no idea who they’re fucking with,” Thorn says, grinning. “There must be over fifty of us here. It’s been a few decades since I’ve gorged on vampire blood.”

Midnight chuckles. “Only Thorn would find this exciting.”

I glance around the room, somewhat placated by the amount of vamps on our side. Even Bowie and Tru are braced for a fight, though they look slightly less confident about it than the rest of us. This is vampire life sometimes though. We fight to protect what matters.

The gritty roar of motorcycles fills the air around us, and I glance back in Justice’s direction just as the violent energy of rogue vampires reaches me.

“Here we go,” Thorn says.

Tiago opens the large wooden door and steps out with a horde of vampires behind him. Me and my coven make up the second line, with our friends grouped around us. The motorcycles come to a stop on the gravel

drive, and a man with very pale skin dressed all in black climbs off his bike, his grin menacing and the promise of violence swirling around him. His green eyes glow bright in the darkness.

“I see we were expected,” he says. “My name is Callias.”

“Don’t give a fuck what your name is,” Tiago says. “You’re uninvited.”

Callias shrugs. “So I am, but I come to you with an offer.”

“We need nothing from you,” Yves says, appearing next to Tiago. “This is Orpheus territory, and you are trespassing.”

Callias glares at Yves, and Syn moves forward defensively. “State your business,” Syn growls. “Or face the consequences.”

“I had heard you New Onyx bunch were assholes,” Callias says, sneering. “My *business* is to save our species.”

“From what?” Yves demands.

“Slavery,” Callias says. “We’ve been the target of a blood cult for centuries, and now, they are ready to increase their efforts to take over. I’m simply spreading the word and building an army.”

Hale pushes his way forward. “It’s you. I recognize your voice. You attacked my coven.”

Before any of us, including Callias, can react, Hale launches himself at the offending vampire, and everything dissolves into chaos.

Mild mannered Hale is in full beast mode, tearing through vampires while Callias breaks free and attempts to take cover like a coward. I don’t have much time to observe as I’m attacked from behind. I fight off the vampires, tearing through flesh and doing my best to keep them away from the back of the club.

As bodies fly and blood splashes, there’s only one thought on my mind.

Get back to Justice.

It’s the only thing that matters.

## Chapter Thirty-Three

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## JUSTICE

I sit crouched in a corner, listening to the sounds of vicious fighting. Every time the sound of a body smashing into a wall or furniture reaches me, I flinch, filled with worry about Eros.

Somehow, I can sense him. His emotions are like my own, making my heart race and my body tingle with an energy I've never experienced before.

Becoming restless, I stand and pace the small room, but as curiosity takes over common sense, I push the table to the window and climb up, pulling the wood shutter open and realizing I can see the entire club from here.

I was not prepared for the carnage. Bodies litter the floor, seeming dead, but seconds later, rising again and rejoining the fight. I spot Thorn in the mix, ripping the heart out of a man's chest before tossing him aside and grabbing another one around the neck.

My stomach turns from the scent and sight of blood everywhere. I see Yves and Syn, Midnight and Raphael, Bowie and Tru, but I don't see Eros. Panic sets in as I search the chaotic scene for him, finally finding him struggling beneath a much larger man who has his hands wrapped tightly around Eros's throat.

I scream for Thorn or Yves or someone, but they can't hear me through the glass. I can't let Eros get hurt. Without really thinking it through, I jump off the table and cross the small space, reaching through the bars to type in the code. I can't see the box, so it takes three tries before the clanging locks release and the door slides open.

I rush out, only stopping long enough to pick up a piece of wood from a broken table for protection. Then, blinded by my love for Eros, I dive straight

into the middle of the fight.  
I have to help Eros.

## Chapter Thirty-Four

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## EROS

I feel him long before I see him. The vampire above me is stronger than expected, and I'm finding it difficult to fight him off, but knowing Justice is getting closer is motivation to push a little harder.

"Your heart will look nice in my collection," the vampire growls, his eyes glowing with rage, his face covered in blood.

"Fuck you," I growl, tearing his throat open.

His nails cut into my flesh, threatening to break through my ribs, but then his weight is off me. I look up to see Justice with a proud smile on his face and a large wooden table leg in his hand.

"I hit him," Justice says.

I grab the stick Justice is holding and roll over just in time to stake my attacker. Taking a second to catch my breath, I shift my focus to Justice, ready to carry him away to safety.

Right before my eyes, a vampire swoops in and grabs Justice around the throat, lifting him off his feet and dropping him to the ground. Justice lands with a thud and his body lies limp at my feet, lifeless.

The sight sends me into a rage I didn't know I was capable of. I lunge at the offending vampire, ripping his head straight off his shoulders and releasing a roar that shakes the walls.

Every one of these fuckers is about to die.

## Chapter Thirty-Five

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## JUSTICE

Pain.

That's the only thing I can feel right now. Not even fear. Just intense pain spreading through me as my life slowly drains away.

I hear Eros scream and watch through blurry eyes as he tears through bodies. His brothers can only watch, astounded. I want to call out to him. I want to tell him I love him before I can't.

I don't want to die. Not yet. Not when I'm on the brink of finding real happiness. I can't leave Eros. He needs me.

I need him.

Tears leak from my eyes. I'm dying. I gasp for air. No.

*Please, Eros. Save me. Please.*

## Chapter Thirty-Six

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## EROS

“Brother.”

Yves’s hand on my shoulder snaps me out of my rage-driven massacre. When I blink, I’m surrounded by the bodies of vampires. Their leader, Callias, is wrapped in silver chains, kneeling defiantly at Thorn and Tiago’s feet.

“Your mate needs you,” Yves says softly.

“He’s dead.”

“No.” Yves puts his hand on my chest over my heart. “Feel him. He’s alive, but barely.”

I search the room, finding Justice’s body on the floor, his head propped up on Bowie’s thigh as Tru holds his hand. I rush to his side, falling to my knees.

“Justice. I’m here.”

He doesn’t respond, but his eyes flutter behind closed lids. His neck wound is severe, and Syn is holding his open wrist over it, dripping his blood into the wound to slow the wound’s progression.

“You have to save him, Eros,” Yves says from behind me. “He will die otherwise.”

“He... he doesn’t want to be a vampire. He’s not ready.”

Yves kneels beside me. “He won’t have time to decide if you wait much longer.”

Conflicting emotions grip me. Do I go against his desires to keep him with me, or sit here helplessly watching my mate fade from this life?

I take his hand from Tru, holding it to my chest. “Justice,” I whisper. “My



treasure. My mate. Tell me what to do.”

Leaning down, I press my ear to his chest, listening to his weakened heart. For a moment, I imagine a world without Justice’s light in it, and the pain that spreads through me rocks me to my core.

I can’t let him die.

I’d rather he hate me and live than love me and die.

I rise, using my nail to slash my wrist open. As my blood drips into his mouth, I whisper, “Forgive me, Justice. I pray when you wake, you’ll understand.”

## Chapter Thirty-Seven

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## EROS

Back at my unit, I continue my vigil beside Justice, watching helplessly as he convulses. His mortal soul is strong, fighting off death, but it's losing the battle. Very soon, Justice will release the body and life he's always known, and join me on my eternal walk.

My emotions continue to war against each other. I'm equal parts elated and terrified. What if he leaves me?

A knock on the door irritates me, but I grumble a, "Come in," before clutching Justice's hand in mine.

"Hey, Eros."

It's Viper.

"Hi."

"I know you want to be alone with Justice, but..."

I turn to face her when she doesn't finish her sentence. "But?"

"I wondered if you'd let me do a bit of energy work on you. I think it would help."

"Help what?"

Her expression softens as she approaches me slowly. She looks like she'd be a tough badass with all her tattoos and black clothing, and I suspect she can be, but when she's with us, she's nothing but warmth and softness.

"Justice can feel everything you feel. Don't you know this?"

I pull my head back slightly. "How do you know this?"

She chuckles, placing gentle fingers on my shoulder. "I know you're all trying to protect me. Even Viv won't fess up, but I'm very observant. I know what you are."

“You do?”

She nods. “Almost since the beginning. I had hoped to gain Yves’s trust enough for him to tell me.” She shrugs. “I know he’s a tough nut to crack.”

“He trusts you. I think we were waiting for Viv to tell you. Or waiting for you to decide you really wanted to stay with us.”

“Yeah, you guys are stuck with me. I love this job, but mostly it’s nice to be myself. No one here wants me to change or fit into some arbitrary standards.”

“No.”

She takes my free hand in hers and holds it in her lap. “So I did some research about vampires. I think Justice would heal better, turn better, if your energy was happier. I know you’re worried, but what’s done is done. Send him love, Eros. Make sure he knows he’s safe and wanted here. Help him.”

I nod, gazing into her hypnotic eyes. “Yes. Do your energy work.”

She lets go of my hand. “Close your eyes.”

I do, sensing it as she kneels before me. She’s not touching me at all, but I *feel* her presence, warm and comforting, as it pushes away my grief and fear. My heart actually fucking flutters in my chest, beating harder than it has in centuries, and my lungs fill with air.

As I blow it out, the tension gripping my muscles releases with it. The relief is tangible and truly mind-blowing. Her hand moves over my head next, drawing visions of Justice and his gorgeous smile to mind.

I sway back and forth as thoughts of a future with Justice swirl around me. Viper blows warm breath on my face, pushing away any remnants of bad feelings.

“Open your eyes,” she says softly.

I do, blinking rapidly. “Mighty Hades. You are incredible.”

She stands, putting her hands on my shoulders. “Now, focus all that love and hope on Justice.” She leans in, kissing my forehead, then silently turns to leave.

I shift my gaze to Justice, whose thrashing has slowed considerably. I lift his hand to my lips, pressing a kiss to his knuckles.

“Wake up, my love. You’re safe now. You’re safe forever.” As his eyes move behind his lids, I lean in and kiss his lips. “I love you, Justice. Please come back to me.”

## Chapter Thirty-Eight

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## JUSTICE

So dark.

And cold. I hear Eros but I can't find him in the darkness.

*Justice. Please come back.*

With a jolt, my eyes fly open and there he is. My angel. I sink into the mattress beneath me with relief.

"There you are." I cough from the strain of speaking. "Wha-what happened?"

Eros grips my hand, holding it to his chest. His brow is creased with worry, but he's still so gorgeous my stomach flutters.

"My darling," he whispers. "Please forgive me. I had no choice."

"Forgive you?" I search my hazy brain for the reason he's so upset, but find nothing. "Why?" The sounds around me are so loud, I cringe. Voices, shoes scraping on floors, and a loud thumping noise. "I don't feel right."

"Justice..." Eros kisses my hand. "I... I turned you."

"Turned me? I don't understand."

"You were dying. Bleeding out. I had to make a decision, and I just couldn't lose you. Not yet. I love you so much. We're mates, my darling."

The haze begins to clear as his words reach me. "What did you do?"

"I saved you. I... Justice, you're a vampire now."

Blinking rapidly, my heart rate speeds up as memories rush back to me. I hit the man attacking Eros, and then... then I was in the air. And pain. The pain was intense.

I nod, recalling my desire to live and love this man before me. "You are an angel."

“Hardly.”

“You are. You saved my life.”

“I switched it out for an immortal one. I am your maker. I can only pray to Hades you don’t hate me for it.”

“Hate you?” I shake my head. “I could never. I didn’t want to die.”

“But...” He squeezes his eyes closed briefly. “You didn’t want to be what I am.”

“True, but given the two options, I’m glad you chose this one.”

“You are?”

“I am.” As more of the haze lifts away, I realize how amazing I feel. “Wow. I feel so good. Strong and rested.”

“Yes. That is what happens. The noise is because of your enhanced hearing. It will mellow out soon. You are strong and you always will be.”

“I’m never gonna get sick or old?”

“Never.”

“But I have to drink blood now?” As if on cue, my stomach rumbles loudly, almost painfully.

“Especially in the beginning, but you can feed from me.”

I nod, trying to wrap my head around this concept. “Did we win?”

“Yes. Because of you, actually.”

“What do you mean?”

“When the vampire attacked you...” He pauses, shaking his head. “A blind rage took over me. I ripped through them until Yves calmed me down. We have their leader locked in the basement.”

“Badass.” I cough again. “My throat feels so dry.”

“You’ve been through a lot.” He touches my neck, which feels tender. “You’ll be entirely healed and changed by morning.”

I nod, looking down at my hands. I still look the same. At least from what I can tell.

“No, actually,” Eros says, clearly hearing my thoughts. “You should look in the mirror.”

“How did you do that? Hear my thoughts.”

“Because I am your maker, Justice. Our connection is like no other. You will always be tied to me.” He cards his fingers through my hair. “We are mates, lovers for eternity, and forever connected through our blood.”

That sounds hotter than it probably should. “Okay.”

“Are you frightened? Can I answer anything for you?”

“I’m not scared. I think...” I shrug. “Maybe a part of me wanted this. I knew I wanted to be with you. I figured we had time for the rest of it, but I was impulsive and jumped into the fight. I couldn’t just stand there and watch you struggle. Are you mad at me?”

Eros chuckles. “My darling, my treasure. I could never be mad at you. What you did was brave and so beautiful. You scared the hell out of me though.”

“I’m sorry. I often do things without thinking them through.”

“You and Thorn have something in common then.”

I laugh softly, playing with his fingers. “What happens now?”

“That is up to you.”

“Okay. What do you *want* to happen?”

“I want to take care of you, Justice. I want to move you into my home and wake up with you every day. I want to smother you with all the love my heart has hoarded for centuries. I want to make love to you until we’re exhausted. I want to feed you. Bathe you. Adore you. I want to stare at your lovely face and taste your delicious kiss. I want everything.”

My stomach flutters, but the telltale warmth I usually feel in my cheeks when I’m overwhelmed is absent. “One thing at a time. What do you want most?”

“You to live here with me. I don’t think I could bear returning you to the safe house. Unless you don’t mind me sitting outside your window all night.”

Smiling, I shake my head. “I wouldn’t want that. But... isn’t it too soon? What if you don’t like me once you get to know me?”

“Don’t you see it yet?” Eros asks. “It’s impossible for our bond to break. We are fated for this. Our love is destined. I will always like you. I will always love you. Always.”

“Always,” I whisper. “It will never end.”

“Never. Your heart is safe with me, Justice.”

I nod, letting it all sink in. “So if I move here, then what? I just... exist?”

“Whatever you want. You can work if you like. You can study. Or spend your time reading. It really doesn’t matter to me as long as you’re happy.”

“I don’t have to become an assassin like Bowie and Tru?”

“No. They chose it.”

“Because they want to kill people?”

He tilts his head back and forth. “They have their reasons. Some of it is a desire to release their inner beasts in a controlled way. Some of it is likely a



desire to be with their mates at all times. You are not required to do that though.”

“How will I eat?”

“I will provide for you.”

I nod. “Can I eat regular food?”

“You physically can, but you may find a lack of interest in it, and at first, it might make you sick as your digestive system adjusts. It isn’t necessary though. You’ll get everything you need from the blood.”

“Does it taste gross?”

“I will let you decide that.”

I watch as he uses a sharp thumbnail to slit his wrist open. The moment the deep red liquid seeps from the wound, my stomach clenches with need and my gums throb.

“Oh. What’s happening?”

“Just your beast preparing to feed. Take all you need.”

I grab his wrist, latching onto his flesh and moaning as thick, warm liquid fills my mouth. It’s not gross. It’s fucking delicious. Like drinking honey flavored with cherry and rich earth. My mind doesn’t even seem to process what’s really happening, only focusing on the desperate need deep within me.

Eros watches me drink with hooded eyes, his fangs on display through parted lips and his irises glowing. He’s so beautiful, and he’s mine. Always.

After several minutes, the pain in my stomach relents and pure satisfaction washes over me. I pull off his wrist, licking my lips to get the last of it.

“That’s addictive, isn’t it?” I ask.

Eros nods. “Your bloodlust will become more rational and manageable over time, but in the beginning, all you want is flesh and blood.”

“Sex?”

He nods, and my cock instantly swells with interest. “Fuck. Now I need that too.”

Eros chuckles. “I will give you everything you need. My cock...” He leans in and nuzzles my neck, causing my eyelids to flutter. “My cum.” His hand moves down my chest and tweaks my nipples. “My blood.” Eros grips my chin, gazing into my eyes. “Everything of mine is yours.”

I nod, focusing on his plump bottom lip. “Then make love to me.”

“With absolute pleasure.”

As Eros climbs over me, it’s like my logical brain checks out and all

that's left is this feral beast as he calls it, taking over all of me. Clothes fly and hands grope with desperate need. If I don't get him inside me soon, I think I might explode.

"You won't," Eros whispers as he flips me onto my stomach. "Gods, I adore you."

I rub my ass shamelessly against his erection, whimpering as I clutch his arms to my chest. "Please, Eros."

"Don't worry, darling."

I cry out with pleasure as he rubs his thumb over the sensitive tip of my cock, showing me how slick it is. When that same thumb breaches my entrance, the relief is beautiful, but it only lasts a few seconds, and then I need more.

"More," I whimper.

My cock drips precum, astonishing me for a second as I notice how different it all is. Sex has always been a good thing, but this is next level. I can *feel* my heartbeat, the blood rushing through my body to my cock, my own breath.

What's even cooler though, is experiencing everything Eros feels. His body feels warmer than usual as he plays with my hole, his breath sweet as he nuzzles my neck from behind. His heart beats in perfect time to mine, and that beast within me is slightly soothed by it. I believe him now more than ever. We were absolutely destined to be together.

"Mighty Hades, your body is divine," Eros whispers, grazing my earlobe with his teeth. "I would live inside you if I could."

"Ooh, I wish you could. You'll just have to fuck me as much as possible."

Eros chuckles. "That won't be a hardship."

He bends me forward just slightly, aligning the thick head of his cock with my entrance. I rub my ass against him, so ready to be impaled on that majestic beast between his legs. Eros finally shows me mercy, pushing into me and bottoming out in one thrust.

As if I was truly made for him, my body opens up and accepts the intrusion before tightening around his cock, leaving us both moaning with extreme pleasure.

Eros grips the front of my neck, pulling me up to my knees, and the fullness is overwhelming. He fucks into me in this position, sucking marks into my neck and shoulder, his violent thrusts both punishing and redeeming at the same time.

I claw at his arms with my new sharp nails, hard enough to draw blood, and the scent of it makes me delirious. I watch with heavy eyes as he slices his wrist open again and offers it to me. My mouth waters and my fangs tingle before I lick his dripping arm like an ice cream cone, savoring his earthy taste on my tongue.

“Drink, darling,” Eros whispers, pounding into me. “Get your fill.”

“Want your cum too,” I murmur. “Want to taste.”

Eros chuckles. “My greedy lover. You’re insatiable, aren’t you?”

I nod, still sucking away on his wrist. “So good. Everything about you is so good.”

“Because I was designed for you,” he whispers. “I will always be everything you want and need. Fate has promised it.”

His sweet words leave my knees weak, and I fall forward. He follows me, pressing me into the mattress as he rearranges my insides with his beautiful cock. I thought I liked sex, but this, with Eros? It’s indescribable. It’s like living with an itch you couldn’t scratch and then someone comes along who knows exactly how to tame it.

As his cock swells within me, I rub myself against the bedding. Eros bites into my neck and I cry out, overstimulated in every way, but so damn happy.

I know when he comes because I can literally feel it. Hot, thick cum spreads through me, warming me from the inside out, but I don’t bask in it for too long because Eros pulls out and flips me onto my back, coating my stomach and chest with more of his cum.

His hand is around my cock, stroking me perfectly as he keeps his stunning gaze locked on my face, and mere seconds later, I join him in an epic release. He moves between my legs and closes his mouth over my cock, swallowing every drop I offer.

But he’s not done yet. He drags his tongue up my torso, collecting his cum and offering it to me with a heated kiss. I lick his tongue, gobbling up every remnant of him I can get.

Eventually, the frantic desire settles slightly, and I giggle. “Damn.”

“Yeah,” Eros says in an amused tone. “We are good together.”

“Better than good. That was epic.”

He rolls to his side, his expression happier than I’ve ever seen it. “I’m so glad you’re happy.”

“Really happy. I think I’m gonna like being a vampire.”

## Chapter Thirty-Nine

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## EROS

After cleaning ourselves up, we're just about to get comfortable in bed when Yves summons us.

When we enter the common, Midnight and Syn are standing on either side of a chained Callias. The vampire is sullen, his eyes dark with rage he can't release. He lifts his head to gaze at me, focusing too long on Justice before growling as he lowers his head again.

"Hey," Yves says, kicking the vampire's boot. "We complied with your demands. Your turn."

Callias lifts his head again. "Very well."

I lead Justice to the sofa where he sits next to Hale. The rest of us gather around.

"What demands?" I ask.

"Callias wanted to see the source of the blood king's essence," Yves explains. "That would be Hale and Justice."

"What?" Justice sputters. "What are you talking about?"

Callias focuses his odd eyes on my mate, stirring my beast to the surface. Knowing he's chained keeps it somewhat at bay.

"You have no idea, do you?" Callias says. "Nightsky, as they call it now, was once just a humble nest of vampires. That is until the one you call the blood king wanted to seize power for himself."

"When was this?" Hale asks.

Callias makes a circle gesture with his hand. "Hundreds of years ago. Before the uprising."

"Uprising?" Justice asks.

“Yes,” Callias nods. “There were two groups—those with the blood king and those against him. I was in the latter group. We were not keen on his plans to wipe out humanity and have vampires be the dominant race. He wanted to enslave the mortals purely as a source of blood. We wanted to assimilate and exist in harmony.”

“Wait,” Thorn says. “You’re *against* that?”

“Yes. Unfortunately, our efforts were thwarted. We were tricked and buried alive.”

Yves pulls his head back. “Fucking hell.”

Callias nods. “With no blood available, we grew weak, unable to fight our way out, but hell-bent on revenge. Little did we know how much had changed.”

“You were buried for...?” Justice asks.

“Centuries,” Callias answers.

“How did you get out?” Hale asks.

“Just luck. Some workers dug up the ground where we rested, unearthing our graves, and sadly for them, providing much needed nourishment. That was a few months ago, I think. Time is still difficult for me to grasp.”

Justice squeezes my hand as I stand beside him.

“We were told the blood king is dead,” Justice says. “Replaced by a chosen disciple, the Supreme Being.”

Callias scoffs. “The blood king is not dead. As for disciples, they are merely vampires, and he is their maker. Perhaps he thought renaming himself would fit a modern world and allow him to continue his recruiting.”

“Why were you attacking us if you’re against those plans?” Hale asks.

“We were going to kill anyone who had the blood king’s essence within them, make our race pure again, and find our way back to him to end this once and for all.”

“But I don’t,” Justice says. “I’ve never even seen him. Eros is my maker.”

Callias shakes his head. “You really didn’t know.” His tone is slightly sad. “I thought everyone there was complicit.”

“Will you please explain what you mean?” Justice demands.

“Yes. The blood king feeds his people his blood in small doses. It allows him to have a level of control over you, while also conditioning you to be one of his trusted soldiers. Disciples, I believe, as you called them. You probably had it in all your drinks and meals. It increases over time until he’s ready to turn you.”

Justice pales, his expression one of shock and disgust. "Is that true?"

"That's how I found you. Hale too. We can smell it on you." Callias's voice is raspy as his fangs descend even more. "It's how we found everyone."

Hale rubs his forehead. "I have no idea what happened. I was attacked too. My memory erased. I had no idea I was part of this cult before meeting Justice."

Callias nods. "Ah. So the rumor is true. We heard the blood king had some of his coven hidden away with the intention of bringing them back after the uprising, which he intended to win. I couldn't tell you why he never went back for you. Perhaps he simply changed his mind."

Justice looks shellshocked, as does Hale. After a moment, it's Yves who asks the next question.

"This cult still poses a threat to the sanctity of our species?"

"According to some of those we've discovered who were... encouraged to tell us the truth." He slumps slightly. "Can I have a drink please?"

Bowie steps forward, offering a cup of blood to the vampire, holding it to his mouth. Callias takes a few sips and nods.

"Thank you. I didn't know how much had changed," Callias continues. "When we were freed and found the area so populated with vampires, we assumed the blood king's plan had been a success."

"And you didn't think to check into it before you went on your massacre?" Yves asks, his tone hard. "You broke the honor code, Callias. You should die for that."

"Yes, I know. I accept my fate, but please, allow me the opportunity to see the blood king's destruction. Then I will offer my heart to you and accept your stake."

Justice shivers. "But how? How do we even find him?"

Callias shifts his gaze to Justice. "I know where he is. We had planned to burn the compound down, after we took his head of course. We'll kill everyone there."

"No," Justice says, standing. "I have family there. Friends too."

Callias, with his dead eyes, merely shrugs. "Our species is not safe if any of them subscribe to his views."

Justice stomps over to the vampire, his chest puffed and eyes full of fury. Thorn grins and Syn looks at me with surprised eyes. I only shrug in response.

"You listen to me, vampire killer." He leans down to get close to Callias's

face. “None of us even know about vampires. Until I met Eros a whole whopping week ago, I thought that was a myth. No one there knows what they’re part of. Maybe the disciples do, but I guarantee the rest don’t. You can’t just kill innocent people because you have a revenge kink.”

Thorn snorts a laugh and Yves slaps him on the arm.

“Well, he’s spicier than we knew,” Raphael says beside me.

“Than even I knew.”

“What’s your plan then, boy wonder?” Callias taunts.

I’m about to defend my mate, but Justice is all over it.

“My name is Justice, dickhead. My plan is... well...” He huffs, turning to me. “My plan is to listen to people with more experience than me.”

Yves smiles at Justice. “I have an idea.”



# Chapter Forty

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## JUSTICE

Eros pulls me onto his lap as Yves begins sharing his idea.

“We get Vivienne to provide a glamour spell that will mask our essence to other vampires at the compound,” Yves begins. “We show up there with the staged intention of joining.”

“No,” I say. “That won’t work. No one just shows up to join. They have to be recruited. They won’t buy it.”

“Hmm.” Yves paces. “Anyone have ideas on how to get into the compound?”

“I think I do,” Hale says. “I’ll go. As soon as they see me, all hell will break loose, so we must be prepared.”

Twisting my lips, I nod. “I think Hale is right. If they recognize him, which they will, since I did...” I shrug. “Yeah. Chaos.”

Yves gives a curt nod. “Okay then. Once we’re in, some of us should go in search of the blood king and the others should evacuate the compound. Then we burn the fucker to the ground.”

“I should call Carina.”

Eros rubs my back. “Will she help?”

“I think so if I tell her what’s happening.”

“Who is Carina?” Raphael asks.

“She runs the safe house where I live. She helps rescue former cult members.”

“Excellent,” Syn says. “Will she have room for anyone who chooses to go with us?”

I shrug. “Don’t know. I need to ask her.” I turn to Eros. “Will she know

I've changed?"

"Not automatically. Not unless you show your features. To be fair, it's harder to control in the beginning. A phone call would be preferable."

"Okay. I know where the blood king should be if what they told us about the Supreme Being is true. He lives in a large house directly behind the compound. It's heavily guarded."

"Not a problem for us," Thorn says.

"Please," Callias says. "I need to be involved. I need to see him pay for what he did to us."

Yves nods. "You'll be with me and Syn."

"And Thorn," Syn says.

"Right. Callias, Thorn, Syn, and I will tackle the Supreme Being. Raphael, Midnight, Eros, and the others will handle evacuation. Hale, please go with them."

"Bowie stays with me," Syn says.

Bowie shakes his head. "My strength is better suited for helping people get out." He kisses his surly lover on the cheek. "We'll meet up again soon."

Syn huffs his discontent but nods. "Fine. Okay."

"Let me call Carina to tell her what's going on. She needs to be prepared for this if we're really taking down Nightsky tonight."

"Let us know what she says," Yves says.

Eros walks with me to his unit, clutching my hand in his. "Are you nervous?" he asks.

"Very. My parents are there, but I don't think they'll leave. So many loyal people..." I shake my head. "I'm scared for them."

"We'll do our best to get people out."

"I know."

I sit on the couch, holding my phone in my hand. That's when I notice the lack of physical reaction to my nerves. No sweat, no heavy breathing or pounding heartbeat. Just... neutral. That's kind of cool.

My stomach rumbles again, but I can't deal with that distraction. I have a task to do. I dial Carina's number, realizing I didn't look at the time to see how late it is. She answers, sounding perky and awake.

"Hi, Carina. It's Justice."

"Hi. Are you okay?"

"Yeah, totally okay. Um... I have something to tell you and I'm just gonna say up front, it's gonna sound pretty wild, but I swear it's absolutely

true, and we need your help.”

“Oooh-kay. Lay it on me.”

“What if I told you that Nightsky isn’t just some weird cult, but it’s a blood cult?”

“Well, that’s obvious, Justice. The holy vat?”

“Right, um, I should be more clear.” I glance at Eros who smiles and nods at me. “It’s a blood cult because it’s run by... well, by, um, vampires.”

I wait for her to start laughing, but she’s dead silent for a few seconds, until she murmurs, “Vampires.”

“Yeah. I know it’s sounds crazy, but I know it’s real now.”

“No. It doesn’t. I mean, it does, but we talked about this. Where did you hear it?”

“I ran into someone who confirmed it. He used to be part of it. He’s...” I pause.

“Justice?”

“He’s a vampire, Carina. I saw proof. He knew so much about Nightsky. The blood king isn’t dead. He’s the Supreme Being and their goal is to wipe out mortals and be the dominant race.”

I scrunch my nose up, glancing at Eros. It sounds like nonsense when you say it out loud.

“Is that why... The Vessel and Eternal Bliss?” Carina blows out a breath as she speaks in broken sentences. “All of it?”

“The disciples become vampires. Eternal Bliss is where they bleed you out. The unworthy are killed and used for their blood.”

“Fuck,” she whispers. “It’s so much worse than we knew. You’re positive?”

“Absolutely. I’ve seen stuff with my own eyes.”

“Okay, um, what do you need from me?”

“I know some people who are going to invade the compound tonight and kill the Supreme Being. I’m going to try to get innocent people out, but they’ll need a place to go. I know it’s last minute, but is there any way you can help? I don’t know where else to go.”

“I’ll make it happen, Justice. You get them to me, and they’ll have a place. Are you sure you’re okay? This sounds dangerous.”

“It is, but I have a lot of backup. I’ll be okay.”

“I’ll get ready.”

After I end the call, I sit motionless for a second, imagining seeing my

parents after defecting. They must know by now that I'm gone. Morning roll call would have revealed my exit. I hope they forgive me, but knowing what I know now, I mostly hope they'll agree to leave. If they won't, there won't be anything left for them anyway.

Eros kneels in front of me. "Are you okay, my love?"

I nod, touching his cheek. "I'm good. Just thinking. Did the other vampires leave?"

"No. They're at Lair. Yves is going to let them know what's going on." He takes my hands in his. "I know this is a lot, but it's the right thing to do."

"I know. The cult was no good even before I knew their evil intentions."

"The way of cults."

"Right. When this is all over, will you teach me how to be a good vampire? Like, you said it was an honor thing not to kill other vampires. Will you teach me stuff like that?"

"Of course. Anything you want to know."

"Good. Was it weird the first time you killed a person?"

His brow creases. "My love, don't concern yourself with things like this."

"But it could happen. Tonight. It could be me that has to... do something like that."

"Fair. The only way I can explain is to say that I've never ended someone's life while in human form. My vampire takes over, and nothing feels the same as it does to our mortal minds."

"But you said it's one and the same."

"Yes, but right now, I am Eros the man. My emotions are subdued, my lust tamed. If aroused or provoked, the beast within me takes over. That will happen to you too. Your mortal sensibilities will slowly fade, replaced by a new code of ethics that wouldn't be okay in regular society at all. We are neither bad nor good. We don't subscribe to such black-and-white categories. We live in the gray, driven by our instincts."

"That's how you felt the first time?"

"I don't even remember the first time, darling. It was so long ago. Killing is a release for me now. It's freedom. This is why we do what we do with Veil Protection. We kill, yes, but we're doing the world a favor in most cases. Is that honorable? No, but the world isn't honorable. We are just part of it, doing what we can to survive."

"I understand. I just want to be someone you can be proud of."

"You already are."

Nodding, I glance down at our entwined hands. “When I was dying, there were two thoughts running through my mind.”

Eros searches my eyes, listening intently.

“The first one was that I wasn’t ready to die. I didn’t want to leave you. I just wanted to be saved.”

“Thank Hades.”

I smile. “Yeah. The second one was something I wanted to tell you. Actually, I needed to tell you.”

“Okay.”

Gazing into his pretty blue eyes, I know this is the right time. “I’m in love with you, Eros.”

He gasps, his mouth falling open.

“I was afraid I didn’t know how that would feel,” I continue. “Or that it would take a long time because we barely knew each other. But now I believe you that all of this is destiny. Us meeting, the cult, Hale and Callias, and us. Me becoming a vampire. All of it. My life was slipping away and I just...” My voice cracks. “I needed more time. I needed to tell you that I loved you, and I fought to hold on because I refused to leave you. Your blood may have changed me, but your love saved me.”

“You love me?”

Smiling, I nod. “I do. I want to be with you. Always. No end, just like you promised me.”

Instead of speaking, Eros climbs on top of me, pressing me back against the couch as he claims my lips in a heated kiss. Instantly, my body tingles and my gums throb. My cock swells and my fingers twitch.

“What’s happening?” I whisper.

“Vampire,” Eros murmurs, sucking on my neck. “You’re aroused. Just let it happen.”

I throw my head back and open my mouth, gasping as my teeth elongate into fangs. Eros is sucking hard enough on my skin to draw blood, so I bury my fingers in his hair.

“Bite me.”

He does without hesitation, and the sensation makes my cock throb and my hole clench. “Holy shit.”

“All the gods,” Eros whispers, kissing my chin before returning to my neck.

I can hear my blood flowing through my veins, hear as he swallows gulps

of my blood, smell his heady scent as he grows more aroused.

“I want you to fuck me, Eros,” I moan. “Please fuck me.”

He pulls off my neck, gazing into my eyes. His own glow, just like the angel he is. “No time, but I promise, later I will keep you in my bed until you beg to leave.”

I cup his cheeks. “And if I never beg to leave?”

“Then you never will. I am your maker, my beauty. I will meet every need you ever have, and all your desires. It’s why I exist.”

“My sweet poet.” Leaning forward, I sink my teeth into his bottom lip. He hisses, gripping my ass cheeks and squeezing. “I need you.”

Eros leans his head to the side, exposing the prettiest neck I’ve ever seen. Long and elegant, pale flesh and a throbbing, prominent vein. “Do it. Feed.”

On instinct, I lean forward and bite, moaning with pure elation as his warm blood floods my mouth. Why does it taste so good though? Better than honey or any sweet I’ve ever had. As I drink, the desperate need for *more* begins to settle, and I calm down enough to be level-headed again.

“Lick my wound as you finish,” Eros says. “If you ever drink from a mortal, lick it to close the wound.”

“Okay.”

“My wounds heal on their own, as do yours, but anything inflicted by another vampire takes longer.”

“Got it.”

He drags his thumb over my bottom lip, offering me the drop of blood on it. “How do you feel now, my treasure?”

“Better.”

Eros smiles. “It gets easier.”

“But you’ll still fuck me later, right?”

“You bet I will.” He leans in, dragging his tongue over my lips. “And I have a little secret.”

“What?”

“I love to be fucked too, every now and then. You up for it?”

A powerful shiver moves through my entire body. “I sure the fuck am.”

Arriving at the Nightsky compound for the second time since I ran off feels

as surreal as it did the first time, but knowing the purpose of our trip tonight adds a new level of tension.

We drank some awful liquid Vivienne gave us, ensuring that any vampires on site won't be able to detect us. At least not by scent.

As we creep up to the wall, we split off into three groups. One will go to where the Supreme Being is supposedly at, the other group will go to the Vessel and Ceres buildings, and the final one, the one I'm in, will go to the main building to evacuate.

Part of me is curious to see the Supreme Being with my own eyes, but it's more important for me to get the others out, my parents included.

Hale walks straight up to the compound building and rings the buzzer, knowing damn well his presence here will cause chaos. Floodlights come on, and Hale shields his eyes but grins, staring into the camera.

"Hi, honey. I'm home."



# Chapter Forty-One

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## JUSTICE

The gates buzz open, and as throngs of men rush towards us, we step out of the darkness, taking them by surprise. It's a blur from there. I catch bodies flying as I run past to get to the main housing building, surrounded by Eros, Midnight, Bowie, Tru, Raphael, and some of our visiting vampires. I feel protected for sure.

The door is open and people are gathering to see what the commotion is in the courtyard, but I push past people, looking for my parents. I find them in their unit, huddled together. My dad looks up, his face surprised.

"Justice."

"Mom. Dad. I need you both to come with me. It's time to leave this place."

"What?" Dad asks. "We can't leave. It's not allowed."

"Dad..."

Eros is right next to me. "Your leader will be killed tonight," he says calmly. "By morning there will be no more Nightsky. You must come with us to live."

"Who are you?" Mom asks.

"He's my boyfriend," I blurt, then smile proudly. "Yeah. He's my boyfriend."

My dad stands, gripping my mom's hand as he approaches us. "We can really leave?"

His question surprises me. "You want to?"

Mom sobs, pressing her forehead to my dad's shoulder. Dad rubs her back.

“We’ve wanted to leave for years,” he says. “But we were threatened. If we didn’t keep you in line...” He shakes his head. “Death to us, to you, and...” He shifts his gaze to my mom.

“You have a little sister,” she says.

“What?”

“We had to provide a second child after you were caught...” She gives me a pained expression. “Oh my son. I’ve missed you so. I was so happy when you got away.”

“Really?”

“I hate to break this up,” Eros says, looking over his shoulder. “But we have to hurry this along.”

“Right. Let’s get you both out of here. Take anything important because we’re burning it down.”

My parents hustle, packing a couple of bags while me and Eros communicate with the surrounding rooms. Surprisingly, many of them are just as happy to leave as my parents. Apparently, there’s a lot more I didn’t know about this place.

“Your sister is in the children’s room for ten-year-olds,” my mom calls out to me.

“Okay. Let’s go get her.”

As we move into the hallway, people are screaming and rushing from one room to another. Children are being pushed along to the exits, and Raphael and Midnight are taking out guards and resistors left and right. It’s a mess, but a necessary one.

We get to the ten-year-old room, and there on a bed is a small, confused-looking girl with long black hair and big eyes who looks exactly like me. She starts crying as soon as she sees my parents, and as my dad scoops her into his arms, her eyes land on me.

“Hi. I’m your brother, Justice.”

She nods, her cheeks wet with tears. “I’m Destiny.”

I smile. “Yes, you are.”

## Chapter Forty-Two

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## EROS

Now that Justice's family is safely reunited and heading for the exits, I can focus my attention on helping the others get the children out, and there are many of them. I scoop up several of the smaller ones at a time, while Justice grabs two more, and we usher them to safety.

When we hit the front courtyard, two buildings in the distance are already burning as streams of people run towards us.

"How the fuck are we gonna transport all of these people?" Raphael mumbles, appearing next to me.

"Steal some buses?" Bowie offers.

"Not a bad idea," I answer.

"I'll call Carina again," Justice says.

But before he can pull his phone from his pocket, a sharp sting grips my chest. "Shit."

"I felt it too," Raphael says. "Yves needs us."

"Yep. You stay here with Bowie and Tru," I say to Justice, who just shakes his head.

"Not so much, vampire. Let's go."

He tears off before I even blink. Oh, *now* he uses his vampire speed.

"We got this," Bowie says. "Go."

Me, Raph, and Midnight tear off after Justice, arriving to utter pandemonium. It's even worse than the vampire fight at Lair. And there atop the house is a man in a white caftan, snapping the neck of a man I've never seen. He's a vampire but not one of ours for sure.

When I search the yard for Justice, I spot him climbing the house to get to

the man, who I'm pretty sure is the Supreme Being. Torn between helping my brothers and my mate, I'm frozen to my spot until Raphael squeezes my shoulders.

"Go to your mate. Midnight and I can help down here."

I nod, heading after Justice. I reach him quickly enough, but when I grab his ankle to slow him down, he shakes me off, apparently hell-bent on getting to the man behind all of this. But he's not just a man, he's a vampire, and Justice doesn't know what to do.

From the left, I see Hale and Callias lunging at the man, fighting their way through the throng of vampires coming their way, leaving a clear path for Justice.

Justice leaps over the edge, jumping onto the Supreme Being's back as he bends to shove another man off the roof. I'm going to guess that some of his own people have turned against him.

He swings around, trying to get Justice off his back, but Justice clings to him like a monkey, clawing at his neck, which unfortunately doesn't have much of an effect. Hale makes his way there next, helping Justice tackle the Supreme Being to the ground.

Callias disappears as I join Hale and Justice, and Dimas lands on the roof, tossing me a length of silver chain. The risk of a few burns is worth getting this fucker under control. I toss it over his body, but except for a little sizzling he seems immune to that too.

He laughs, shoving us all away. "You fools. I am the product of a thousand vampires. Stronger than all of you. Stronger than any vampire. I am invincible. And now, you will die."

Flinging his arm out, he tosses Justice across the large roof, and I watch in horror as he lands with a thud. But he's not a mortal anymore, so he just stands up and stomps right back into it. I grab him around the waist before he can reach the Supreme Being though.

Hale screams as the Supreme Being claws at his chest, drawing blood.

"Hey, fucker!" Callias yells from below.

I scramble to the edge of the roof. Below us on the lawn are Yves, Syn, and Callias, who's holding the large vat of blood.

The Supreme Being sees this and seethes, heat pouring off of him like rain. "Get away from that."

"This is it," Hale says as he leaps down to join the others. "This is what keeps him alive and strong. We have to destroy it."

“Nooooo!” The Supreme Being leaps from the roof, moving at breakneck speed to protect his vessel, but just as he reaches it, Callias punches his hand through the glass, shattering it.

Blood spills onto the ground and the Supreme Being screeches, scrambling for what’s left. We watch as he drinks the remaining liquid, and I clutch Justice in my arms as we leap down and join the others.

“Get ready,” I whisper. “He’s going to be very strong.”

Then he freezes and time seems to stop. His eyes open wide as horror takes over his expression. Callias grins, gazing down at the vampire as he grows paler.

“I heard the myth about the blood king,” Callias says. “He was given poisoned blood to drink and died.” Callias steps forward, pushing the Supreme Being back with a boot to his chest. “I thought it a fitting end to this nightmare. Life imitating art, if you will.”

The Supreme Being clutches his throat as his mouth begins to foam.

“Oh shit,” Justice whispers. “The blood is poisoned.”

Callias kneels in front of a writhing, dying leader. “You took everything from me. Everything from so many of us. It was easy to taint your ‘holy vat’ as you call it. The blood you stole from innocents who believed in your cause. But look around you, Blood King. They turned on you and the others are dead. I will hunt every single one of them that you made and end them. You failed. Now, you die.”

“Ca-lli-as,” the blood king chokes out. “You... weren’t worthy.”

“And yet, I live. Enjoy the underworld. I hope you burn.”

Hale stands above him and brings down a thick wooden stake, driving it through the Supreme Being’s chest, who wails in agony. “That’s for Nathan.”

We watch, gathered around him, as he shrivels away before us. Justice leans against me, taking it all in, but I sense peace and relief coming from him.

When the blood king is nothing but a pile of ashes, Callias drops to his knees before Yves, tearing open his shirt to expose his chest. “My mission is complete,” he says. “I accept my punishment for my misdeeds.”

“Oh no,” Justice whispers. “Is Yves going to kill him?”

“I don’t honestly know. It’s what’s right for what he did, but only Yves knows what Yves is thinking.”

“Stand up, Callias,” Yves says.

“No. I wish to die now. I don’t belong in this world. I have no coven, no

home. Just end me.”

“So dramatic,” Thorn says, rolling his eyes.

Syn steps forward. “You promised you would kill any vampire with the blood king’s essence. That means you would harm Hale and Justice. How do we trust you if we let you live?”

I clutch Justice closer to me.

Callias shakes his head, bowing it. “I was wrong. I didn’t understand it wasn’t voluntary. I know that now. I would never harm Hale or Justice. If there are others out there, others who plan to carry on the blood king’s cause, I will deal with them then.”

“So you do wish to live?” Yves asks.

Callias gazes up at Yves. “Honestly, I don’t know. I don’t know what this modern world has to offer me, but obviously vampires can thrive here.”

Yves turns his gaze to all of us. *I am conflicted. Innocent vampires and at least one mortal have died because of him.*

Midnight scoffs. *Do innocent vampires even exist?*

“What’s happening?” Justice asks.

*Telepathic communication.*

Justice’s eyes go big. “Whoa. That was cool.”

“I am your maker, remember.” I brush my thumb across his cheek. “I can do this with Yves because he is mine.”

“Neat.”

“It is. If you were Yves, would you give Callias a chance?”

Justice twists his lips, thinking it over. “I think I’d let him go and trust him to keep his word. We could always find him again if he fucks up.”

Yves chuckles, obviously hearing our conversation. Callias does too, bowing his head.

“But we should ask Hale,” Justice adds. “He suffered the most because of Callias.”

“I agree with Justice,” Yves says aloud. “Hale, the decision is yours. Does Callias live or die?”

Hale glances at all of us and then closes his eyes for a second. When he opens them, he nods. “Whether you live or die will not bring Nathan back to me. I believe you are aware now of the mistakes you made.” He looks at Yves. “Callias can live.”

Yves nods. “We’ll release you, Callias, on your honor. Don’t prove me wrong, or I will hang your head in my study.”



“Understood,” Callias says. He rises to his feet and shakes Yves hand. He approaches Hale, whispering something, then he takes off into the night.

“What about Hale?” Justice asks.

“Hale...” Yves says, turning to the vampire. “Hale is welcome at the House of the Orpheus, if he wishes.”

A rare smile spreads across Hale’s face. “I’d like that.”

“Now what?” Justice asks, looking around at the madness.

Buildings burn and people flee to the street since our vampire friends have demolished the walls.

“Now we make sure we get all these people to safety.” I turn to him, putting my hands on his shoulders. “I’m very proud of you. You were incredibly brave tonight, and I admire the humanity still running through your veins. Hold on to it as long as you can.”

He puts his hands on my chest, gazing up at me with the prettiest smile I’ve seen yet. “It’s a new beginning in so many ways. My parents are free, Nightsky is done, and I’m a vampire.” He shrugs. “I don’t even know where to begin.”

I lean down and kiss his forehead. “I’ll be with you every step of the way to help you figure it out.”

“I know. I don’t know much, but I do know that.”

We both turn to the sound of a vehicle honking. A huge bus pulls up the gravel drive, coming to a loud stop. The driver’s door opens and Carina steps out on the door ledge, waving.

Justice laughs, running toward her. “What’s this?”

“I started thinking about how you’d get all those people to me, and I figured out I better come to you. I have two more buses on the way, and we have teams working on getting the rec center and gym converted to bedrooms for the time being.” Her eyes shift past Justice to me. “This is all your doing, isn’t it?”

“Not at all. What happened here tonight was nothing but destiny.”

“You know, I really believe that. Nothing is a coincidence.”

Justice turns to me and smiles so bright, he could light up the night. Behind him, his parents and sister walk up. As much as I’d hoped to hide him away in my bed for a few nights, he needs time to reconnect with his family.

I walk over to him and kiss his cheek. “Go with your family. I’ll be at home when you’re ready to return.”

“Home?” He drags his hand down my chest. “I live with you?”

“I hope you want to. I’m ready for it all with you. Whatever comes next.”  
He rises on his toes and presses a chaste kiss full of promises to my lips.  
“I can’t wait to start.”

## Chapter Forty-Three

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## JUSTICE

It's a few hours since we took down Nightsky when I arrive in front of the Orpheus apartments again. To say it's strange talking to parents I haven't really seen in person for years is an understatement, but now I know why. It's changed everything.

I wave to Carina as I exit the car and walk up the long sidewalk, knowing my family and the other survivors are safe with her. There's a feeling of peace I've never known until now.

The front doors open before I get halfway up the walk, and Eros is there, his expression one of longing. I break into a sprint to reach him faster, tumbling into him when I reach him, but he steadies us as we both laugh.

"I missed you too," he says, kissing me softly. "Oh, how I missed you."

"I have so much to tell you." I cup his face. "But first, I need you."

"I'm here. Come."

Taking my hand, he leads me to the elevators, but he pushes the button for the roof instead of his floor. I'm curious but totally along for the ride. I'm going wherever Eros is going.

When the doors open, we step outside and walk to the center, where there's a blanket laid out and a small tray with glasses on it.

"What's this?" I ask.

"This is one of the ways I often get inspiration." Eros tilts his head back to gaze at the sky. "The stars whisper their stories to me, and I listen, translating them to simple words of love and longing for something I thought didn't exist."

He turns his gaze back to me, brushing my hair from my face.

“But it does exist. You’re here, Justice. You found me.”

“Technically, you found me—” I press our chests together, looping my arms around his neck. “—in so many ways. I love you, Eros, and I’m so happy. I thought all I wanted was a simple, normal life like other people had, but I can’t imagine that now. I want *this* life with you. Whatever that looks like, I’m here for it.”

Eros cups my face, his smile serene and stunning. “Then I am a happy man.”

As he closes his lips over mine, he pulls us to the ground, laying me on top of him. The kisses are slow but heated, and that new tingle starts up again, spreading through me like wildfire, lighting up my nerves. My body responds by elongating my fangs, my nails, and swelling my cock with urgent need. I’ve always been a horny guy, but this is next level.

“Give in to it,” Eros whispers against my lips. “Let your beast out. You’re safe with me.”

I bite into his bottom lip, getting just a few droplets of sweet blood, and it has an effect like letting a ravenous lion out of a cage.

I break the kiss, sitting up enough to pull my shirt over my head. Eros chuckles beneath me, getting his shirt off too. Faced with his flawless skin, I attack, biting and sucking marks all over his skin. Eros moans and bucks his hips into me, making it clear how hard he is for me.

I move down his body, desperately trying to quell the fire in my belly, but the more of him I have, the more of him I want. I tug his linen pants open, moaning when I unleash his cock, and close my mouth over it. My technique is shit, but hopefully passion makes up for that. Eros seems to be enjoying himself.

Sweet precum floods my mouth, drawing my own cock to leak as my hole clenches. Eros lifts his hips and I yank his pants off. He grabs the back of my neck, pulling my mouth to his, but instead of a kiss, he flicks his tongue over my lips.

“I want you inside me, Justice.”

“Oh fuck,” I moan as shivers run through me and my gums throb.

Eros grins, unbuttoning my jeans and reaching in to rub my erection. “It’s been... a thousand years. I want to feel you.”

“A thousand years?”

He chuckles. “A few decades, at least.” His grin fades. “I don’t trust easily, but I know my heart is safe with you. You have all of me, my love.

Every part.” His eyes glow brighter as he reveals his fangs to me. “So take me, darling.”

“I-I don’t know how.”

“Instinct will guide you.” He pushes me back gently so that I’m lying on the blanket. “Besides, I’m hardly a passive bottom.”

I giggle at that, but the sound is broken as Eros pulls my jeans off and strokes my sticky cock.

“Gods, your scent,” he whispers. “There is nothing better.”

He straddles me, rubbing his ass against my erection. The head catches his rim as I slip between his cheeks, and I moan. “Oh fuck.”

Eros smiles down at me, helping the process as he guides my cock to breach him. The tightness and heat inside him takes my breath away, and I’m frozen for a few seconds while my brain tries to get back online.

Eros grips my arms, pulling me up to a seated position as he sinks completely down my length. The sound he releases is like the prettiest song, the look on his face priceless. We sit like that, unmoving and gazing into each other’s eyes.

“Good, right?” he asks.

“Way beyond good.”

His fingers wrap around the back of my neck. “Now fuck me, my love. Let your beast out and he will show you how it’s done.”

I blow out a breath, embracing the tingle moving through me. Sliding my hands up his back, I grip his shoulders and begin to move my hips, slowly at first, but then something seems to take over me, and I let loose.

Eros grins, pulling us both until he’s on his back and I’m poised between his legs, slamming into his body with a force that shouldn’t be possible. The strength coursing through me is wild, but I know I can’t hurt Eros.

He drags long nails down my chest, drawing blood from wounds that heal instantly. With his legs wrapped around my waist, he keeps our bodies locked together, and I lose myself in the incredible tightness of his ass.

If I’d known it felt this good to top, I would’ve been a menace.

The sounds of skin slapping skin, of moans and chanted names, of prayers to gods I’ve never heard of, fill the air around us. I don’t care if everyone in the world can hear us. This moment is too damn perfect.

My teeth throb the closer my orgasm gets, and Eros sits up, flipping us over with ease and riding me like a sex toy. As his long blond hair catches the breeze, and the light of the moon shines down on us, I smile. He really is an

angel, but he's just mine. All for me. Always.

Eros falls forward, biting my neck, and I sink my teeth into the fleshy part of his shoulder, his blood filling my mouth. My orgasm barrels through me, rising to the surface and taking me to a place no longer in this world.

As if I'm floating in the sky with all the stars, I give into the waves of pleasure dragging me under, every part of my psyche satisfied. Eros leans back, grinding his ass on me as he finds his release too, and when he comes, shooting sticky ropes of cum all over me, I sob with pure joy, my body shaking as all the pain and confusion of the past washes away with my tears.

Eros falls forward, wrapping me in his arms and kissing my face. "Let it out now."

I cry for several minutes as we both come back to earth from such incredible heights. "Holy fuck," I finally manage. "That was incredible."

"So perfect."

When he rolls off me, I flinch, both from losing his weight on me and the tightness of his body. "We can do that again, right?"

"You like being a top, huh?"

"I like being *your* top."

He chuckles. "I live for your joy, my love. You can have whatever you want, but I do hope you'll allow me to pull you apart every now and then."

"Don't worry about that. I'm gonna be a greedy little dick whore."

He lifts my hand to his lips and kisses the back of it. "There's nothing wrong or shameful about indulging in the pleasures of the flesh. Why were we created with the ability to feel such joy, if not to experience it as often as possible?"

"Ooh, I like that thought."

We lie in silence for several minutes, just watching the stars. I hope Eros knows what I'm thinking right now. Can he feel how happy I am? How much I love him? How excited I am for the future?

"Yes," he whispers. "I feel it all as if they were my own feelings." He turns his head to face me. "Mighty Hades, you are stunning."

"Yeah, well, you're still an angel. You're everything I need, Eros."

"You're not afraid of me anymore?"

I shake my head. "Nah. After what I saw tonight, I'm only proud of you. I can't believe I get to be part of this. Before I left the cult, I was so scared that I'd be too far behind the rest of the world, but the one gift you gave me that I never expected to have was time. I can catch up."

“You’re not behind, Justice. There’s nothing to catch up on. I want you to focus on what makes you happy, with the knowledge that I’ll always be here to support you. The world is yours, my love.”

I roll to my side, dragging my hand down his chest. “No, Angel. The world is *ours*.”



## Epilogue

One year later  
Justice

Sitting around a table inside Lair, I watch the shenanigans happening around me. Vampires seduce mortals into following them to darkened corners, others grind on the dance floor or drink blood-tinged cocktails. It's been a whole year since I ran away from the cult and found my way to Eros, and in that year, so much has happened.

I tried college but found it too structured and restrictive. Then Eros introduced me to Yves's collection of books, and I learned everything I needed to know about the world. I spend Sundays with my folks and my new sister, and I volunteer several days a month at the new housing structure we had built for Carina. She's expanded her services because the world isn't short on cult survivors, unfortunately.

And after trying to come up with something I could do to be useful to the coven, I've been working with Bowie and Viper on developing our own private tracking technology. Turns out I have a mind for coding.

Yves's phone rings and he frowns as he looks at the screen. "For fuck's sake," he mumbles, rising from the table and stomping off.

Syn, ever the protective one, follows him, as does Midnight.

"What's going on?" I ask, perched on Eros's lap.

"Don't know, but I'm sure we'll find out."

"It must be something," Bowie says. "I can feel Syn's tension from here."

“We all can,” Thorn says with a bored tone. “But Syn and Midnight often act like Yves can’t take care of himself.”

“Is it that, or are they just nosy?” Raphael asks with a chuckle.

Thorn shrugs. “Good point.”

Yves and the others are back just a few seconds later. Yves’s face is hard with tension. “That was our dear friend Dimas.”

Syn scoffs, sitting in his seat and pulling Bowie onto his lap. Tru drapes himself around his man’s shoulders from behind.

“What happened?” Raphael asks.

“He met up with some vamps from London,” Yves starts. “They said there’s been some hunting activity going on and there’s at least one group on the East Coast.”

“Hunting activity?” I ask.

“Vampire hunters,” Syn growls. “I thought those died out long ago.”

“Seems there’s been a resurgence,” Yves says.

“Which can only mean one thing,” Thorn says. “Someone saw one.”

“Exactly,” Yves agrees.

“What does that mean for us?” I ask.

“Hopefully nothing,” Yves answers. “But we need to be on alert among strangers and on the lookout for any unusual activity. I’ll alert our friends tomorrow.”

Eros rubs my back. “Don’t worry, darling. If hunters come to New Onyx, they’ll wish they hadn’t. We’ve been hunted before and survived it.”

“Why would they hunt vampires who aren’t doing anything to them?”

“They hate us for merely existing,” Thorn says. “They see us as abominations and a threat to humankind. Not entirely inaccurate.”

“And unfortunately,” Midnight says. “Not all vampires are discerning and savor life. They kill to eat like uncivilized beasts. They give us all a bad name.”

“We’re not exactly saints,” Eros says. “But we kill with purpose.”

I nod, absorbing the information. I’ve been out with Eros and the guys on some of their jobs, and while it definitely didn’t freak me out like I thought it would, it’s not for me. I guess I’m still a gentle soul on the inside.

“And I love that about you,” Eros says, kissing my neck.

I tangle my fingers in his hair, leaning in to kiss his cheek. “Just be safe out there.”

“Always.”

“On that note,” Raphael says, standing. “I spy a sweet little twink just waiting for my bite.”

I follow his gaze to see a man who just entered the club. He looks a little lost, but when his eyes settle on Raphael, a bright smile pulls at his lips. It takes Raphael only a few seconds to lead the pretty man to the back where the private rooms are.

“Gods, Raph is finally getting laid,” Thorn says, slamming back his cocktail. “Think I’ll follow his lead.”

And he’s off, disappearing into the throng of bodies on the dance floor.

“What do you say we go do a little stargazing, my love?” Eros asks, nuzzling my neck.

“Lead the way.”

As we rise from our seats and say goodbye to the others, I grip my angel’s hand. My life is nothing like I expected, but then it never really was. I don’t know what the future holds, but I know what my family looks like, and I know who I’ll spend it with. Turns out, everything from the cult to the escape was all part of the plan. I was meant to love this man. My destiny was always Eros, and I wouldn’t trade any of the hard times for what I have now.

“Hey, angel?”

“Yes, treasure?”

“I love you.”

Eros smiles at me before scooping me up and carrying me in his arms. “And I love you.”

“Forever?”

“Forever and always.”

“Perfect.”

## A Note From Mia

If you enjoyed this book and want more from Mia, then subscribe to The BITE, Mia's Newsletter, to stay connected to Mia and be the first to know about upcoming releases, events, and other special news. You also get freebies galore starting with my brand new short, Fake Date with a Demon and follow along with a Choose Your Own Adventure story, My Roommate is a Vampire. You can catch up on past segments too.

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## About the Author

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Mia is a USA Today Bestselling author of queer paranormal and contemporary romance. She's obsessed with vampires, mermaids, and tattoos, all of which make regular appearances in her books. She's fluent in sarcasm, addicted to caffeine, and easily amused by memes. She may or may not be a witch.

Her books are low to mid-angst, high heat, and celebrate the many ways people of all types can fall in love- even the paranormal kind. After all, love is love.



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**California Crush Series:**

[readerlinks.com/l/2235236](http://readerlinks.com/l/2235236)

**Friendship and Desire:** Low angst, high heat, friends becoming lovers. [readerlinks.com/l/2235237](http://readerlinks.com/l/2235237)

**Love in LA:** Doting Daddies and their sweet boys finding love in Los Angeles. [readerlinks.com/l/2235256](http://readerlinks.com/l/2235256)

**Tattoos and Temptation:** Featuring low angst, steamy tales complete with decadent desserts, hot Miami nights, and boys with ink. [readerlinks.com/l/2235255](http://readerlinks.com/l/2235255)

There's an [adults-only coloring book](#) too!

**Written in the Stars:** Featuring low angst, found family, space nerd love set in a Boston Planetarium. [readerlinks.com/l/2235254](http://readerlinks.com/l/2235254)

**Other Books and Series**

**The Jerk Next Door:** Enemies (kind of) to lovers, bi awakening, low angst, high heat

**Snow Big Deal:** Winter-themed, holiday adjacent, crushes to more, fake boyfriend novella.

**Deviate:** Best friends to lovers, bisexual awakening, fake marriage

**Damage:** Second chance, tons of groveling

**The Secrets We Keep:** Forbidden romance, cheating with a twist