



*Crimson*  
**HUNTER**

AN ONYX ASSASSINS NOVEL

SAMANTHA WHISKEY

# CRIMSON HUNTER

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AN ONYX ASSASSINS NOVEL

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*For those who know time is precious*



## AJAX

The thing about controlling something that's supposed to be finite—like time—when already damn-near immortal, is that the longer I lived, the less it meant. Seconds blended into hours, into weeks, months, years, and those became decades that morphed into centuries.

Living over a thousand years could make even the most appreciative vampire a little bored, but having a power like mine—being able to stop and start time at will—was turning me...apathetic.

Had it really been a thousand years if I'd spent five hundred of them in stasis with my brothers? Adding in all the time I'd passed in my little bubble of solitude while pausing it for others, it was probably well over a thousand, actually.

I felt fucking *ancient*.

I stretched my legs out before me, crossed my booted feet, and leaned back against the wood slats of the too-small bench under the lamppost outside Edgemont Memorial, which had become my habit these last months. There was so much emotion on the faces of the humans coming and going through the glass doors of the hospital that I couldn't help but feel whatever they were manifesting.

If I were my brother Saint, I'd be able to project a little calm into the new father walking by with his partner, pushing their new baby toward a waiting car in a wheelchair that looked like it might fly away at any second with the amount of

balloons tied to the handles. Not sure he was capable of projecting much more than pain right now, though.

A smile curved my lips at the careful way the father put the infant into the back of the sedan, handling the giant plastic case—*shit*, they said *car seat* now—with the utmost reverence. I could see the thrumming of his elevated pulse at his neck from the twenty feet that separated us, and smell the complicated mix of his fear and elation on the night breeze.

How did it feel to create life? To be responsible for something so helpless and yet so meaningful? Not that my life wasn't meaningful. It was. I existed not only in service to my king, but also my chosen brothers, fighting the battles that kept our kind—vampires—alive.

A steady, familiar heartbeat approached from my left, and I didn't bother turning to look, or reaching for a weapon. It was Talon, the youngest of my brothers, and at least he was in human form.

He took the seat next to me and crossed his ankle over his knee, resting his elbows back on the highest rung on the bench. "Figured I'd find you here."

"So you have." I scratched my chin through my dark beard. Talon was the only one out of the six of us—fuck, make that five after Samuel's betrayal—that I didn't have to fake a smile for or force a quippy remark. "You could have called, you know."

"The convenience of modern technology still...annoys me. Everyone is in such a damned hurry. It's all about instant gratification." He glanced my way, arching a dark blond brow over a Nordic-blue eye. "Should I be worried that you're hanging with the terminals again?"

"Look at you, mastering modern slang." I grinned.

"You holding the world at bay while we caught up definitely helped." He turned back toward the hospital with a smile. Out of all of us—Zachariah, Dagon, myself, and especially Saint—he fit into this modern era the easiest, but

since his gift was shapeshifting, Talon had always been the quickest to adapt to new situations.

I envied him for that.

“Was it the Marvel marathon that helped the most?” I asked, crossing my arms over my chest, the leather of my jacket tugging slightly over the Sigs holstered along the sides of my ribs. May nights were a touch too warm for outerwear, but I’d learned that humans tended to freak the fuck out when they saw me strapped. Turned out that at some point in the last few centuries, everyone had stopped walking around with swords. “Or maybe the hours and hours of historical documentaries we watched to catch up on the five centuries we spent in stasis?”

“It was the National Geographic specials.” He shrugged. “So many new animal forms to try out.” He could only turn into animals he’d seen, and since the first part of our lives had been spent in Europe and what was now Russia, he now had a wealth of new species to study and scare the shit out of us with.

“The Komodo dragon you pulled off yesterday evening at repast made Zachariah jump.” I studied the new father as he finished packing items into the trunk of the car, then led his partner to her seat with a look I recognized as pure love.

“Dagon didn’t laugh.” Talon’s brow furrowed.

“What, is my laughter not good enough for you now?” I teased, glancing his way and noting the tense set of his angular, aristocratic features.

“He’s worrying me.”

“Samuel has been his best friend for two hundred years. He’s bound to be more than a little fucked up.” My stomach twisted at what our *brother* had put us through.

Samuel had convinced us all that his twin, Saint, had been dangerously close to losing himself to bloodmadness, so we’d put ourselves into stasis, hoping that a few centuries of rest could help us save him from becoming the very thing we’d been brought together to hunt.

“Aren’t we all.” Talon sighed.

We’d spent centuries at rest before our new king—Alek—had ordered our rising to fight against the Sons of Honor, an organization of humans whose only mission was to slay supernaturals. Then Samuel had kidnapped our princess, Avianna, nearly forced her into marrying him and even torturing her, all while blaming it on Saint.

And when we’d discovered his treachery, and Hawke, one of our king’s Onyx Assassins, rescued his mate, Samuel disappeared into the damned night, leaving us all mindfucked and Saint...

Who the hell even knew what Saint was thinking?

Even Alek, who had the power of mind control, was giving Saint the respect of some space for the time being.

Which was the very thing Talon *wasn’t* giving me. “What are you doing here, anyway?”

“I should be asking you that.” He watched an elderly couple walk hand in hand toward the entrance to the right, the one for the emergency department. “You’ve been hanging out with the terminals more than usual.”

I scoffed. “They’re not all dying.”

“Just most of them.” He nodded toward the older man. “He smells like death will come calling soon.”

“And yet look how tenderly he holds her hand,” I said. “The way he looks at his wife.” The man offered his wife a sad smile, but he had that same look of the new father—love. “He knows his days are limited. Imagine how much sweeter every day must be for him? How much he must treasure every second?”

“Their lives are short.”

“And all the more precious for it. They live every day knowing it could be their last.”

“And is that what you’re hoping will rub off on you if you sit here every evening, watching the doomed head in for their after-hours appointments and emergencies?”

“I’m not seeking an end to my existence, if that’s what you’re asking.” An ambulance pulled through the arched driveway and humans scurried about with intensity, shouting as they rushed a patient through the door. “But I envy their... passion.”

“Maybe that’s what you need. A little *passion*.” Talon’s phone vibrated, and he reached into his jacket pocket.

“I’ve taken dozens of females to bed since we rose. It’s not about the sex.” Problem was that they all felt the same. The females of our race knew my rank, the status of my position, and the aristocrats that hung out at the Domum—our palace—all watched us with calculating eyes.

Turned out warriors were more likely to mate in this century, and fuck if they all didn’t want a mark that put them closer to the throne.

“Zachariah,” Talon answered as he lifted the phone to his ear.

The doors to the hospital opened, and a blonde walked out, fishing something out of her purse.

My chest tightened and I found myself sitting up, leaning forward as she walked toward me, looking both ways before she crossed the U-shaped drive and stepped onto the concrete path that would lead her straight by me on the way to the parking garage. I’d seen more than my share of beautiful women in the hundreds of thousands of nights I’d spent walking this earth, but she was...

Fuck me, she was *gorgeous*. Her petite frame was curved with dips and hollows that made my mouth water and stole every logical thought from my head, and when she lifted her head, pulling her keys from her purse, it was all I could do to keep my jaw from hitting the ground.

“Yeah, I’m with him now,” Talon said into the phone.

She pushed back her long blonde hair from a heart-shaped face so stunning it would have started wars in my time. She had a pert nose that turned up slightly at the end, succulent lips—the lower one of which she was currently biting into, and

flawless skin that looked softer than anything my calloused hands had touched, and those fucking *eyes*.

Even in the dim lighting of the lamppost, I could tell they were deep green ringed with blue, the blend so unique that I wanted to stop her just so I could stare. There was so much life in those eyes, so many emotions. Anger. Sadness. Resolve. The illogical sparkle of laughter that followed a blink of what looked like grief with a deep sigh...It was as if every human emotion had been bottled up and shaken within her, then left to bubble up through her eyes.

And I wanted to feel everything she did with that same intensity. The good, the bad, all of it.

Talon's voice faded into the background, and my entire existence narrowed to the woman. The thrum of her delicate heartbeat, the soundless steps of her ballet flats on the sidewalk as she came closer, and the dulcet scent of freesia, peonies, and citrus—mixed with something alarmingly sweet—wound me instantly tight.

What a fucking *stunner*.

Her gaze jolted, colliding with mine, and she flashed a smile that had me slamming down every mental shield I had, grasping onto control to fight the instinct-driven descent of my fangs.

“Umm...thanks?” Her nose even crinkled with her grin as she paused a couple feet in front of me.

Fuck me, I'd said it aloud.

*Smooth, Ajax. Smooth.*

“Sorry,” I said to her. “My mouth ran away with me.”

“Don't be.” Her gaze raked down me and her cheeks tinged pink with an instant blush as she fidgeted with her keys. “You're not so bad yourself. That whole Aquaman vibe you have going is totally working for you.”

“Aquaman...” My brow knit. “That's Marvel, right?”

“DC,” she answered, fumbling her keys.

I was off the bench, catching the bundle of metal before I could think not to, my movements supernaturally quick.

“Whoa. Those are some great reflexes,” she said as I stood to my full height. Her neck craned as she looked up at me.

She barely came to the level of my pecs, and yet I knew that if I were to lift her against me, that beautifully curved frame of hers would fit just right, and the peaks of the creamy breasts that rose with every breath under her blue top—

*Stop thinking about her breasts.*

“Here you go.” I handed her keys back, dropping them into her open palm and keeping my fingers from so much as brushing hers. If I touched her once, I wasn’t sure I’d be able to stop. The irrational thought flitted through my mind and I grasped onto every shred of control I had and held tight.

“Thank you...” She looked at me with expectation, lifting her brows.

“Ajax,” I answered, mirroring her smile with one of my own.

That scent...shit, what was it?

“Ajax,” she repeated. “Like the ancient Greek warrior.”

“My mother was a fan.” I grimaced. “Well, of one of them, anyway. Ajax the Lesser lost her with the whole assault thing.” Snapping my mouth shut, I found myself tongue-tied for the first time in a thousand years. Why the hell did I just say that? “Shit, that must sound creepy as fuck.”

“No.” She laughed, the sound as musical as windchimes. “Don’t worry. I know what you’re talking about. The Trojan War. The priestess. The temple. I get it. You’re more of an Ajax the Greater.”

“I think I’m in love.” My eyes widened. She was as smart as she was beautiful.

“If all it takes is a girl acing her test on the *Iliad* to impress you, then just wait until I tell you the grade I got on the *Odyssey* in college,” she whispered like it was a secret. “It was nice to meet you, Ajax.”

Yeah, I was more than into the sound of my name on her lips. “You too...” I paused just like she had.

“Grace,” she answered.

“Grace,” I repeated, then stepped aside, making sure she didn’t feel trapped.

She offered me another smile and then passed by, headed for the parking garage and taking her incredible scent with her.

I watched until she got behind the wheel to see that she was safe.

“We need to get back to the war room,” Talon said from my side. “If you’re done staring at the terminal.”

I’d completely forgotten he’d been there. That’s how focused I’d been on Grace. “Right.”

We walked behind the nearest tree, a massive oak where no one could see us, and then wended back to the residence, folding time and space and stepping through the ice-cold barrier. Wind and night ripped at my skin for the instant it took to arrive in the courtyard at the residence.

That’s when it hit me.

Talon had called Grace *terminal*.

That overly sweet note in her scent was death.

My heart clenched at the knowledge that someone so full of life would soon lose it.

Talon and I turned our back on the Domum, the formal portion of the palace, and walked into the residence, the mansion that housed the royal family, the Onyx Assassins, and their mates.

Well, their talem—dedicated servants—too. But the five of us who’d been awakened had yet to accept a talem. We’d never had them in our time, either.

We passed through the house, the marble foyer with its sweeping double staircase, and then walked by the kitchen, and the living room, where Lyric, the queen of the vampires and Alek’s mate, sat with some of the other females, including

Avianna, who finally had some color back in her cheeks after her kidnapping.

They waved, and we nodded on our way to the staircase down to the war room. Stone rose on both sides of the steps until we reached the tunnels that ran beneath the compound and took the one straight ahead that led to the vault-like door of the war room.

Talon leaned in, giving his biometrics to the scanner thing that unlocked the door. As much as we'd learned in the six months we'd been awake, I wasn't going to pretend I understood half of the technology. It was a miracle I could work the phone.

"It's about damn time," Lachlan, Alek's second-in-command, said in his thick Scottish accent from where he sat at the onyx table at Alek's right.

"Relax, they're not late," Zachariah said, leaning back in his chair on the other side of the table and arching a brow in our direction.

We weren't late—five minutes early, even, but Zachariah was an if-you're-not-early-you're-late kind of guy, which meant we were barely on time for him.

I threw out my hands, forming a time sphere around Talon and I. Everyone at the table froze in their places. "It's not too late to run," I told my friend.

"It was too late the second we woke up," he muttered, and we both took our time walking toward the table.

Talon and I took our seats next to Zachariah.

"I'm still not used to having a new king," Talon said, cocking his head and examining Alek.

"He's not new to them." I shrugged. "He's been in power for over two hundred years. But I get what you're saying."

I glanced at the table's occupants. Alek sat with Lachlan, and beside them was Benedict, whose gift tattooed lies on his forearm, Hawke, who knew anyone's darkest fears, and Jocelyn, the witch-vampire hybrid mated to Benedict.

On our side of the table sat Zachariah, who'd been leading our group of hunters for eight hundred years now, and had the gift of absorbing fallen vampires' powers, Dagon, with his dirty-blond goatee and ability to control the elements, and the massive, hulking shell of Saint, whose dark eyes no longer looked entirely sane.

"You sure you don't want to run?" I asked Talon. "Looks like another boring meeting."

"They certainly like their meetings in this century," Talon joked. "But the sooner we get it started, the sooner we're out of here."

"Excellent point." I dropped the magical tension around us, and time rushed in like a tsunami. I was instantly hungry.

Lachlan blinked at us and then narrowed his eyes. "I hate when you do that."

I grinned and shrugged, then reached for the bowl of strawberries in the middle of the table. "Didn't want to hold you up any longer."

Zachariah rolled his eyes at me, but said nothing.

"Let's get started," Alek said. "Benedict?"

"Right." The light-haired vampire stood, sporting his usual three-piece suit, and headed toward the wall of monitors, tapping on the keys. "Sorry it's rudimentary, but Ransom won't leave Olivia's side, so no fancy presentations tonight."

I could hardly blame Alek's combat master. His mate was pregnant, which meant Ransom wouldn't be dependable or predictable for anyone but her until the youngling was born.

A word document filled the largest screen, and the bullet points made my throat close on a strawberry. I sputtered, and Zachariah slammed his hand between my shoulder blades until the strawberry dislodged.

"Seriously?" Zachariah asked.

"It looks like we're having event coordinating problems, not a war," I commented, picking another strawberry and

shoving it in my mouth. Stopping time always made me ravenous.

“He’s not wrong.” Lachlan sighed. “Get on with it.”

Benedict pointed to the first bullet point. “Okay, we don’t have any conclave business tonight.”

“That’s a shame,” Dagon muttered. “At least we’d get to kill something.”

The purpose of the Onyx Assassins was to deliver the king’s justice, or in this era, the justice of Conclave, the council made up of the supernaturals that divided Edgemont into four equal territories, and a human representative who oversaw their interests. No justice meant a long, boring night.

And I wondered why I was becoming apathetic.

“Our first issue is managing the overflow of aristocrats in the Domum,” Benedict started.

“Easy, send them all home,” Hawke suggested, flipping one of his daggers end over end. Mating Avianna had settled him, but not quite civilized him.

“We can’t do that,” Alek lectured. “Especially not with families being targeted by the Sons. We owe them the safety of sanctuary.”

“So you’d like to offer up your bedroom, then?” Lachlan asked the king, his red beard twitching as he smirked.

“Fuck that,” Alek mumbled. “They can overflow onto cots in the ballroom for all I care, but unless they carry an onyx blade, they’re not sleeping in the residence.”

“From what Cassandra says, some of the aristocrats are taking in civilians at their estates,” Benedict said, slipping his hands into his pocket.

“And we’re listening to the daughter of traitors now?” Dagon snapped. “She’s lucky to be allowed on the compound after what her father has done.”

“We only hold criminals accountable for their crimes,” Alek answered. “Not their children. Benedict questioned her

and was satisfied that she had nothing to do with what happened with Olivia.”

“Her panther is causing problems,” Benedict added. “We’ve had several complaints of it frightening some of the aristocrats, to include jumping into the communal bath in the bathing chamber of the females—”

I threw out my hands and flung a time sphere around my brothers—the ones from my time. The others froze in their positions, which in Benedict’s case meant a wide-open mouth.

“I can’t,” I said, letting a laugh rumble through my chest. “I just can’t.”

“You can’t is right,” Zachariah lectured, but his mouth fought a smile. “You can’t keep stopping time every time you want to talk shit in a meeting.”

“Oh, *that* I can do,” I assured him with a nod. “We’re seriously discussing the female who was so obsessed over our king that she tattooed his mating mark on her body, and her pet panther terrorizing the nobles.”

“You can’t honestly tell me it’s worth our time,” Dagon chimed in.

Saint leaned forward, bracing his elbows on the table, but stayed silent, just as he had since coming home.

“Whatever our king says is worth our time, is worth our time.” Zachariah folded his arms across his chest.

“We aren’t just assassins,” Talon argued. “We’re fucking *hunters*, born and bred to exterminate bloodmad vampires, and you’re telling me that sitting in here is more useful than being out there hunting Samuel?”

Saint’s hands clenched into fists.

“I’m arguing that we can only see the first six bulletpoints of the briefing,” Zachariah said, waving his hand toward the screen. “We’re in the middle of a war, our species is being hunted, and a vampire we considered our brother is on the loose, conspiring with the enemy. I highly doubt we’re only here to talk about panth—” His eyes widened and his gaze

swung to Talon. “Tell me it was actually a fucking panther in that bathing chamber.”

My head whipped toward Talon as a laugh threatened to burst from my mouth.

Talon put his hands up. “Hey, that one was her panther.”

Zachariah stared him down.

“But maybe it was me terrorizing Lady Asterling.” He grinned. “Couldn’t help it. She was accusing Saint—” His smile died. “Anyway, I may have chased her around the garden for ten minutes or so. She’s faster than she looks.”

“For fuck’s sake.” Zachariah rubbed the bridge of his nose.

I laughed, my shoulders shaking with the motion, and Dagon joined in. God, I loved my brothers.

Even Saint’s mouth quirked slightly.

“Not. Fucking. Funny.” Zachariah pointed at each of us. “You’re in the court of the king. Act like it.”

“There was a reason we were never allowed at court.” Talon shrugged. “They knew we were better used doing our *jobs*.”

“I’m going to kill Samuel.” Saint’s low voice caught all our attentions. “I don’t give a shit what the next bullet points on that agenda say. My one and only mission will be to hunt down my brother and kill him like the menace he is.”

Silence reigned for heavy seconds.

“If you can’t stand behind me in this, I’ll do it on my own.” He leveled a dark stare on us all in turn.

My chest tightened. “I won’t stand behind you, Saint, but I’ll fight at your side.”

He nodded.

“We’ll make it happen,” Zachariah agreed, his words slow and deliberate. “No matter what that agenda says, Samuel is our mission. But I think you’ll find that if we give our king a moment, you’ll see it’s his mission, too. Trust him.”

Saint's jaw flexed.

"Now would you please restart time?" Zachariah asked. "And everyone get back in the same position you were in. The last thing we need is them thinking we're talking shit by ourselves."

"We are talking shit by ourselves," Talon muttered.

We shifted back to the exact places we'd been, and I restarted time, letting the tension snap.

"—and...well, swimming, I guess," Benedict finished his comment about Cassandra Zorin's panther.

"I'll handle the panther," Jocelyn said. "I'll have a little woman-to-woman talk with her. God knows she probably feels alone enough already without us banning her fucking pet."

"I'd appreciate that, Jocelyn," Alek commented. "We have enough war *outside* these walls without inviting it in."

Benedict winked at his mate.

We made it through the rest of the domestic issues, and Benedict scrolled down the list. "And to what we actually all care about."

The screen showed the patrol schedule.

"Saint," Benedict turned toward our brother and took a deep breath, as if it took strength to even look at him. "We figured you'd want to pursue any leads about your—"

Every hunter at the table tensed.

"About Samuel's whereabouts," Benedict finished.

"Take anyone you want," Lachlan continued. "You have our complete support and whatever resources you need."

Saint nodded once. "I'll take Dagon."

We all nodded, too. It made sense that the two hunters who knew Samuel best would lead the mission to find him.

"Excellent." Alek leaned forward, looking Saint in the eyes. "And each of us will be at your disposal as soon as patrols are complete for the night and any Conclave business

is attended to. This night. Tomorrow night. Every night until he's found. You have my word. Finding Samuel is our first priority not just to fight this war, but because it's what you need, and we take care of our own."

Saint looked away.

I'd been loyal to Alek from the moment we'd awakened. That was my duty as an assassin, as a hunter, but my respect for him rose to new heights in that moment.

We planned out the rest of our evening and then broke apart. *Because it's what you need.* Alek's words stayed with me long after I headed out on patrol with Hawke.

Besides slaying Samuel for his betrayal, what the fuck did I need?

The answer was the opposite of Saint's requirement.

I needed *life*.

The second the night air hit my face, I decided not only to go back to the hospital bench tomorrow night, but every night after until I saw her again.

Grace.



# GRACE

“**Y**ou see this dark mass right here?” Doctor Watson asks, pointing to the images of my brain hanging on her lightboard. “It’s as we’ve suspected.”

*Glioblastoma.*

A wave of numbness washed over me, skirting over my body like a cloud of mist.

“Huh,” I said, focusing on the black-and-white picture of my brain. I stood up and crossed the room, staring at the mass in my frontal lobe. “That little thing is causing all my problems?” I asked, shaking my head.

Doctor Watson pressed her lips together and nodded. “The headaches, nausea, dizziness. Even your instances of losing time or hearing things can be attributed to the tumor.”

I nodded, slow and languid, like a thick syrup coated my movements. This was the second opinion I’d gotten, and now I knew there was no denying it.

“There are treatments,” Doctor Watson said, settling on her rolling stool in the suddenly too-sterile hospital room. “There have been advancements with clinical trials for drug therapy after surgery, but as you know, the tumor isn’t one-hundred percent removable, since it grows directly into the brain tissue.”

“I know,” I said, my voice even as I continued to stand in front of that picture, staring at the little blob that was slowly killing me.

The same little blob that killed my mother when I was nine.

Flashes burst through my mind, images and memories that played like movie reels on repeat—my mother, vomiting because she'd sat up in bed too quickly, her skin stretching too tight over her bones after a round of radiation, the way her lips had thinned and even her smell of vanilla and sage had faded.

I used to love that smell, associated it with being home, being loved and cared for. Now, I associated it with a harsh, painful death, because that's what happened to my mother when she started treatment.

"Grace?" Doctor Watson said my name like she'd said it a few times, and I turned my back on her lightboard, focusing on her. "When are you available to start?" she asked, glancing down at the clipboard in her lap. She traced her pin down a line of charts and words I'd never recognize. My doctorate was in psychology, not medicine. "The sooner we get you scheduled for surgery—"

"I won't be having the surgery," I said, earning a shocked look from her.

She'd been my doctor for the last few months as we worked to figure out what was causing all my symptoms...the nausea, the *voices*, but I'd known in my gut what the diagnosis would be. This form of cancer runs in the family, and even though I'd spent the rest of my youth in foster care, I knew I wouldn't be able to outrun it.

"Grace," Doctor Watson's tone held that air of pleading I'd heard from her several times over the past few months. "This is fatal. Without treatment, you'll have three months, maybe six tops, if you're lucky."

I huffed a laugh, shaking my head. "Luck has nothing to do with this situation, Doc."

"I have to advise you to schedule surgery," she pressed. "If we can remove a majority of the mass, then get you on drug therapy—"

“Then I’ll spend the last few months I have on this earth in even more pain than I am now,” I cut her off. “I’ll get a front-row seat to my own demise, all from the comfort of a hospital bed.” I shook my head, trying like hell to drown out the memories of my mother. God, I missed her. Even now, fifteen years later, I wish I could’ve made her last months a little better, a little more exciting. Instead, I’d sat next to her hospital bed and read her favorite book aloud. The treatment had stripped her of any strength she possessed, robbing her of a last-minute bucket-list adventure.

I would *not* go the same way.

And maybe, if there was a life after this one...maybe I’d finally get to see her again, tell her all about the brief life I’ve lived.

Doctor Watson flashed me a sympathetic look as she stood up, heading toward the door. “I will respect your wishes, Grace,” she said, hauling the door open. “But if you change your mind, you know where to find me.”

“Thanks, Doc,” I said as she turned down the hallway one way, and I the other.

Three months.

Three *months*.

The words kept flashing behind my eyes, like a glowing stopwatch that had just been clicked. Three months used to seem like a long time—three months till graduation, three months of a trial subscription to Kindle Unlimited, three-month gym membership. Now?

Now it seemed like an infinitely short time to get all the things done that I wanted to. Because, in truth, I didn’t have anything I *needed* to get done. I’d been preparing for this diagnosis since the headaches started two months ago, and then the voices...

My living will was in order, but honestly, I didn’t have much to leave to the only person I considered family—my foster care mother, Maria Johnson. She’d be the proud owner

of the eight-year-old car I'd finally paid off, and whatever remained of my meager savings account.

My heart sank a little as I walked through the double doors to the hospital, the night sky opening up above me in a sea of glittering darkness—I'd worked for years in college to earn my doctorate in psychology and now I'd never get to work with actual clients. People who needed my help, namely foster children or adults who'd been in the system...that was where I'd planned to focus my efforts.

Planned. How stupid of me. I should've known I couldn't make plans, but after twenty-three healthy years, I thought maybe the family curse had skipped me.

I'd been so ridiculously wrong.

I sucked in a sharp breath, letting the crisp scents of the summer air soothe the emotions that were threatening to break through the numb blanket I kept them under. I didn't have time to wallow or cry or agonize over the hand I'd been dealt. The clock was ticking, and it was time I started doing all the things I'd kept myself from doing...out of *fear*. Seemed so silly to be scared of having a one-night-stand or going on a roller coaster or go sky-diving now.

My footsteps slowed as I walked along the paved path through the outcropping of trees that hugged the hospital grounds. Some sort of awareness prickled at the back of my neck, stopping my movements completely.

*Please don't be cancer, please don't be cancer.*

*He didn't even text me back. He left me on read. Why would he do that?*

*Fuck the diet, I'm getting tacos tonight.*

Voices that didn't belong to me fluttered through my mind, a stream of uninvited consciousness that had me clenching my eyes shut and curling my hands into fists. It'd been happening more and more lately, and I had the tumor to blame. Not only did it give me sometimes debilitating headaches or make me throw up my guts, it was slowly chipping away at my sanity.

*Just ask her. Just ask her. Say something.*

That voice stood out among the rest, and something about it sent warm shivers down my spine. It was deep and rough and something about it gave me the odd sensation of endlessness...like an ocean who's seen every stage of the world.

*Wow. I really am losing it.* But that voice...it was familiar and swam into my mind like warm tendrils reaching out to gently pull me back, back, back...

I turned around, opening my eyes, somehow knowing *he'd* be there.

The man from the other night, the one with the dark chocolate eyes, shoulder-length dark hair, and tattoos peeking out from underneath the leather jacket he wore. The one who'd stolen my breath the second I'd laid eyes on him, and was having the same effect on me now as he stood a few feet away.

"Hi, Aquaman," I said, arching a brow at him. Ajax. His name was Ajax and there wasn't a chance in hell I'd forget it or him ever in my life. "Am I in your way or something?" I asked, stepping to the side of the path.

"No," he said, and that voice matched the one I'd heard in my head seconds ago. It sent the same heat gliding over my body, but maybe that could be chalked up to him moving closer to me.

I had to arch my head to meet his gaze. He was so damn tall and his chest strained the thin white T-shirt he wore beneath the leather jacket. I could see the hint of ink through the white T, but couldn't make out what it was.

I held his stare, not hearing anything inside my head, at least for the moment, so that was a relief. "All right, then," I said, turning back around and heading down the path.

He followed me, his long gait eating up the distance until he was at my side.

I reached in my bag for my keys—the same ones he caught the other night with uncanny reflexes—and chided myself for not instantly threading them through my fingers. I mean, *hello*,

this guy could easily snap me in half. Where were my self-preservation skills at?

*Oh, right. Three months.*

“Did you just get bad news or something?” I asked as I headed toward where I’d parked my car. “Do you need someone to sit and listen? Is that why you’re following me? Because we can sit if you need to.” I paused, motioning toward the bench I’d seen him at the night before.

Ajax shook his head, so I kept on walking.

He followed me every step of the way, all six-foot-seven, with muscles for days and smelling like a dream.

I stopped near my car, folding my arms over my chest, my mind flipping back and forth between the shock of the news and the utter acceptance of it.

Die. I was going to die. And it could be any moment, any next breath I took.

“Ohmigod,” I said, laughing. “I *get* it.” I looked him over once more, noting the black leather pants, the black ink, his endless eyes, and the general aura of darkness around him. “You’re an angel of death, aren’t you?”

Ajax’s eyes widened, something like amusement flickering there.

“Well,” I said, shaking my head. “You’re just going to have to wait. I was promised three months, and I’m sure as hell going to spend them wisely.”

“I’m not an angel of death,” he said, then shrugged. “I mean, not technically.”

I arched a brow at him. “Okay, then,” I said. “Have a good night—”

“Wait,” he said, stopping me with a gentle grip on my elbow.

Heat lashed up my arm and across my chest, my lungs expanding like they’d been allowed to take in more oxygen. The smell of cedar and moss swirled my senses, and I swear

my knees shook. I should've jerked my arm from his grasp or smacked him with my keys. I should've been doing *anything* other than turning into a puddle from an innocent touch.

A slow, almost dangerous smile shaped his lips as he released me.

“What do you want from me, Ajax?” I asked, finally giving voice to the name we'd joked about the other night. “You followed me for a reason, and if it's not to take my soul, then I'd *love* to know what.” My shoulders dropped. “You're not selling something, are you? Because I'm all up to date on extended warranties.”

Amusement danced in his eyes again, and shock, like people rarely surprised him. “Not selling anything,” he said. “I just want to spend the evening with you.”

“With me?” I asked suspiciously. He was gorgeous, like movie-star-level gorgeous. He could literally spend the evening with anyone he wanted.

“Yes,” he said, taking a step closer to me, the heat from his body wrapping around me like a blanket. God, that felt good. How long had it been since I'd had any physical contact with another human?

Too long.

It'd been way too long.

And now I didn't have much time left.

I grinned up at him, my pulse spiking at the idea of sharing any kind of contact with this stranger. A thrill shot through me. “Sure,” I said, shrugging as I pointed behind me to my car. “This is me. Hop in.”

“Just like that,” he said, sliding into the passenger seat of my car.

“Just like that?” I teased, pulling out of the parking lot. “You're the one who just got into a complete stranger's car. How do you know I'm not going to lock you in my basement and force you to put lotion all over those insane biceps you have?”

Ajax didn't look at me like I was crazy. He looked at me like he was trying not to laugh.

"Don't think I could take you?" I asked, and he shook his head.

"I'd love to see you try," he said. "Still, you're the one who *invited* the stranger in. Doesn't that make you a tad more reckless than me?"

I focused on the road despite wanting to meet that deep, churning gaze of his, and shrugged. "I mean, why not, right? It's not like you're going to kill me." I laughed at the notion, a sudden rush of adrenaline soaring through my veins. There was something freeing about the three months I'd been sentenced with, something that stripped fear from my body and left me feeling nothing but free and wild and ready to experience everything I'd hidden from in my life—including taking up a complete stranger's offer for quality time.

"I hope you like amusement parks, Ajax," I said, taking the highway that would lead to Edgemont's pier.

"Amusement park?"

"Yeah," I said. "That's where I'm headed. I've never ridden a roller coaster before because I was always too afraid of the cart flying off the rails."

"And you're not afraid anymore?" he asked as I drove.

Something pricked the center of my chest, a pesky pang of sadness that I batted away like the annoying fly it was. I smiled, flashing him an appreciative look where he sat dominating the passenger seat of my car. "Hard to be scared when my angel of death is sitting right next to me."

"You're really hung up on that, aren't you?" Ajax asked, his tone casual as if it were the most normal thing in the world to climb into a stranger's car and strike up a conversation like we'd known each other for years.

"Well, yeah," I said, pulling off the highway and heading toward Edgemont Thrills. "There is no other logical explanation of why someone who looks like you would follow me around."

Ajax huffed a laugh, and the sound buzzed along my bones in the most delicious way.

There was a part of me—a really big part of me—that fully believed my tumor-addled brain had conjured Ajax from a collection of fantasies living in my subconscious. There was likely an eighty percent chance I was laughing and talking to myself as I parked in the lot of the amusement park, but I couldn't really find a fuck to give. If he was a manifestation, then my brain had finally done one thing absolutely right, because he was utterly magnificent, the perfect combination of protective and dangerous.

“Have you been here before?” I asked him as he walked at my side, our arms nearly touching as we headed toward the park's entrance.

“Can't say that I have,” he said, dark eyes scanning the place with what I could only call an assessing gaze. Like he was searching for dangers and escape routes where I was only hunting for the fun.

“Of course not,” I said, paying the attendant for my park pass then studying Ajax's interaction with the attendant. A slight breath of relief escaped me when she spoke to him and smiled up at him as he gave her a wad of cash.

But I knew better than anyone the power of the mind. I could've just conjured her speaking to him to validate my manifestation.

*Wow, spin down the rabbit hole much?*

“What do you want to ride first, Grace?” Ajax asked once he wore his bright blue wristband, something that looked totally out of sorts with his leather look but was somehow adorable all the same.

My eyes trailed the length of his powerful body, my cheeks heating at the idea of riding *him* for the night.

Ajax's nostrils flared, eyes darkening for a second before he blinked it away.

“The big one,” I said, motioning behind me.

“I *am* the big one,” he teased, ripping a laugh from my lips.

“That one,” I said, pointing toward the coaster.

“Looks promising.”

We weaved our way through the crowd of people, making our way to the winding line for the biggest coaster the park offered. The one I’d always avoided on the rare times Maria was able to take me here as a special treat, usually for my birthday. The ride went up over forty-five stories high and broke speeds of one-hundred-and-thirty miles per hour. It was enough to warrant its own liability waiver and was exactly what I was looking for to kick off the end-of-my-life tour.

“You want to wait in line for a sixty-second ride?” Ajax asked as I moved to the line for the front of the coaster, signs displaying our wait time and the ride duration time.

“They say the front car is the scariest,” I answered, turning to face him as we waited.

He arched a brow at me, and I noticed he had a scar running through his left eyebrow. I had half a mind to ask him how he got it, but held back, since I didn’t want to tiptoe into the too-personal lane. Though, to be fair, he’d asked to hang out with me, even if he was a delicious manifestation.

“How scary can it be if it’s only sixty seconds?”

I glanced behind me where lights illuminated the insanely tall roller coaster. The tip of it looked like it touched the sky. I turned back to him. “You seem to be hung up on the *time* factor and not the thrill factor.”

He glanced up at the coaster, then back down to me and shrugged. “Doesn’t look very thrilling.”

I gaped up at him. “If the idea of dropping straight down from forty-five stories up doesn’t thrill you, then what does?”

A muscle in his jaw ticked, the mood shifting from playful barbing to something a little deeper. Which was exactly where I didn’t want to go. Because if he shared, then I’d have to

share, and that was not what tonight was about. Tonight was about *living*.

I smiled up at him, reaching for that playfulness once more. “Guess you’re used to being up that high, huh?”

He furrowed his brow at me.

“Angel of death and all,” I teased. “Will you show me your wings later?”

Ajax moved closer to me as the line shifted forward. “Only if you say please,” he said, a smirk on his face and his voice lowered between us.

Lava shot through my veins, and I got lost in his eyes. The swirls of rich brown and almost black captivated me in a way nothing else had before. I had the most ridiculous urge to span the distance between us, to feel just how hard his muscles were, to brush my lips over—

“Next!”

I blinked out of my fantasy as the attendant hollered for us, and spun around, following the path to the very front cart of the coaster.

I slid into my seat easily, pulling the harness tight over my shoulders as I clicked in. Ajax had a little harder time getting strapped in. He was massive—which, yeah, I’d already noticed—but watching him try to bring the harness down over his muscles was almost comical. His massive thigh pressed against mine in the small cart, his warmth and scent radiating into me like the sweetest shield.

My heart kicked up a few beats, and I couldn’t tell if it was excitement over the ride or excitement over Ajax, but either way, I was here for it. This was what I’d been missing all my life. Somewhere between foster care and college, I’d forgotten how to live in the moment, to enjoy the little bursts of energy that made me feel awake for the first time in years.

*Fuck, I hope we don’t die.*

*There are fail-safes for these rides, right?*

*I think I’m having a heart attack.*

Voices tumbled into my mind, the anxiousness enough to make me clench my eyes shut. A wave of apprehension settled over me as the voices mounted, and a pain throbbed behind my eyes. I rubbed my temple, then splayed my hand over my chest and collarbone as I tried to calm my breathing.

“Grace,” Ajax said as he slid his hand over mine, his fingers grazing the skin of my collarbone, sending chills across my skin. “Grace, open your eyes.” I did, turning my head slightly to look at him. Two little lines formed between his brow. “What’s wrong?”

“The voices...” I stopped myself, taking deep breaths through my nose, and did my best to focus on no one but him. Slowly, my heartbeats buried the voices until all I could see or hear was Ajax, all I could feel was his hand on mine—

The ride jolted, shooting forward like a bullet out of a gun.

I gripped Ajax’s hand as we catapulted forward, climbing straight up in the air for what seemed like ages.

“Holy shit,” Ajax said as we crested the top. The night sky stretched out before us, close enough that I imagined reaching out to touch the thin wisps of clouds decorating the starry sky.

A blink, and we hurtled downward, a free fall like no other stealing any scream I may have managed. I threw my hands in the air, a smile stretching wide as we kept falling, the wind biting my cheeks as we soared forward.

I turned my gaze to Ajax, noting a grin on his face too, a wild sort of twinkling in his eyes as we spiraled upside down and forward again until we finally leveled out. The coaster brought us to a halt so sharp I felt it in my chest, but I couldn’t stop laughing as Ajax helped me climb out of the ride.

“That was amazing!” I bounced on the balls of my feet, feeling the rush jolt through me, my heart racing. All those years, I’d been afraid something like this would kill me, and here I was, exhilarated and thrilled and craving more. “Let’s do it again!”

Ajax grinned. “Whatever you want,” he said, only further proving that he wasn’t real. I mean, what kind of stranger

would indulge me for this long?

Two hours and way too many coaster rides later, Ajax lingered outside my car in the parking lot. While waiting in line, I'd learned that he was in collections, but he wouldn't tell me what kind of collecting he did. From the look of him, I imagined him as a bounty hunter, but then again, I also could easily see him being an angel of death here to collect my soul, so it worked out either way. I also discovered he was a fantastic listener with a quick wit who had a weakness for reality shows. He also loved snacks as much as me. Yeah, I was leaning toward him being too perfect to be real.

But I couldn't remember a time I'd had more fun.

"Can I text you sometime?" I asked. "Unless you plan on stalking me all the way home, angel?"

Ajax took my phone from my extended hand, typing a little aggressively on the screen before handing it back to me.

I grinned down at the contact name he'd given himself. *Grace's Grim Reaper.*

"Nice touch," I said, hating that I didn't have the courage to say what I was thinking—that I wanted him to come home with me.

Three months.

That's all I had to live as much as I could, and I knew one night with him—hell, one *hour*—would be truly living.

But just because I knew I was dying didn't mean I could easily change my entire personality. I was still the shy Grace who felt more comfortable lost in a book world than in the real one. I enjoyed studying minds as long as they weren't my own, and I drank coffee at midnight because I hated sleeping. And nowhere in that list of qualities did I find the courage I needed to ask him to come with me.

"I'll be seeing you," Ajax said, slowly backing away from my car.

"I hope so," I said, reaching into my bag for my keys. "Wait, how are you going to get home?" I asked, looking up

from my bag to find nothing but emptiness before me. I glanced around the parking lot, noticing other park patrons returning to their cars, but no sign of the six-seven giant that had kept me company all night.

I hurried into my car, my fingers slightly trembling as I took a deep breath.

Maybe I really had manifested him, but if that was the case, couldn't I have thrown myself a bone and manifested him coming home with me?

"Thanks a lot," I grumbled to myself before heading home.

I parked outside the little two-bedroom house I rented, noting my porch light had gone out. I glanced over my shoulder, unable to shake the sense that someone was watching me, but I didn't see anyone on my quiet street. Not even my nosy neighbor, Karen. The town was quiet except for the sound of insects chirping their nightly tunes.

Still, I rushed inside my house, quickly locking the door behind me, unable to shake that feeling. After a few deep breaths, I shook my head at myself. It was probably just death lurking over my shoulder, and I knew I'd never be able to outrun him.



## AJAX

“We’ve checked this area at least three times in the past month,” Talon said, his annoyance more than obvious as we walked on the witch-side of the forested border between our territories with Benedict on our last route of the evening.

“And we’ll check it every week next month,” Benedict answered with a sigh, approaching the empty farmhouse in front of us that had belonged to the Greenbriar coven. “Jocelyn’s sister asked us for help bringing the rest of the traitors in the Greenbriar coven to justice, so that’s what we’ll do by order of the Conclave.”

Talon shot me a look behind Benedict’s back, then rolled his eyes.

I grinned and shook my head.

“I saw that,” Benedict said over his shoulder. After weeks of being paired with the two of us to patrol witch lands, he’d generally had it with our shit, which only made me smile wider. It wasn’t his fault that his relation as the brother-in-law of the witch queen made it so he was required to be on every patrol in their territory.

“The fuck you did,” Talon answered. “And come on, I know your mate is a witch hybrid and her sister is the Queen of the Witches, but you’re seriously going to tell me that patrolling for possible turncoat witches is the best use of our time?”

The moon shone on the clearing between forest and farmhouse, making it easy to see that the last footprints around this area were ours.

“I think we’re spread thin as it is,” Benedict said, crouching to touch a footprint that was easily four weeks old, and looking over the property with an attention to detail that I respected. “Do I appreciate Conclave piling more on us while we’re searching for Samuel and the Sons? No, but it’s the job we were tasked with.” He turned, arching a brow at us both in turn. “And before you start with the *in my day*—”

I laughed, my shoulders shaking at Benedict’s uncanny impression of Talon.

“Hey, in our day, hunting Samuel would have been our *only* mission. That’s what hunters were created for.” Talon’s spine stiffened. “Back me up here, Ajax.”

“That’s true,” I said, studying the landscape around the house. I felt the residue of old magic, foreign and unnatural to me, but nothing new.

“Well, we’ve evolved to multitasking,” Benedict said. “Believe it or not, bloodmadness hasn’t exactly been the issue for us like it was for you old-timers given our modern conveniences like...oh, Conclave. The treaty does more than make us the executioners of Edgemont supernaturals. It also provides for willing human feeders because they live under our protection.”

I scoffed. “If you think bloodmadness has anything to do with the willingness of the feeders, then you don’t know the first thing about hunting a bloodmad vampire.”

“You’re right,” Benedict admitted, rising to stand. “We don’t know enough. It’s why we’re lucky that we were successful in waking you, though our worry had mostly been the Sons, not bloodmads. The few who have turned bloodmad in the last century were all relatively young and alone. Easy to track. Easy to kill. I can’t imagine living when they were organized and a constant threat.” He turned to look at us. “Or how you managed to wipe out most of the ancient bloodmads before our modern...conveniences.”

“Because we’re that fucking good.” Talon smirked.

I glanced at the pistol holstered at my thigh and thought back to the swords we carried, the daggers and bows. “Have to admit, you have better weapons in this century, though I’m never against using my bare hands.”

“The whole indoor plumbing thing is nice, too,” Talon said with a shrug. “And electricity. That’s a bonus.”

I nodded. “I’m a fan of television and movies, personally.” And roller coasters, though I kept that thought to myself. My time with Grace felt all the more precious because it was a secret—something I almost never had—from my brothers.

“And the incredible availability of information.” Talon folded his arms across his chest. “You can learn anything you wish in nothing but a few clicks on a computer or phone. It’s incredible.”

“It is,” Benedict agreed.

“But none of that changes the fact that our talents are being wasted tonight,” Talon said, bringing us back to his original point with a pointed look at Benedict. “It’s clear no one has been here in weeks. We’ve patrolled all the routes approved by the Witch Queen—”

“Got it.” Benedict put his hands up. “Let’s head back to the —”

Talon wended before Benedict could even finish.

“For fuck’s sake,” Benedict muttered. “Is he always this impatient?”

“Yes.” I scratched the scruff on my chin. “And in my brother’s defense, we’re used to answering only to the king, not a committee of other supernaturals. It takes some getting used to. For as fast as the technology is in this world, everything else moves a little slower than what we’re used to.”

“How so?” he asked with genuine curiosity.

“Had...Samuel happened *in our day*, we would have taken off—the five of us—with single-minded focus. Hunting him. We would have left court *weeks* ago.” There was as much

mercy in my voice as there was in my heart for Samuel—none. He had betrayed Saint, kept my brother chained to a wall and nearly starved, kidnapped our princess, and worked with the Sons of Honor to overthrow our king. “There would be no patrolling another species’ lands. No dispatching with werewolves who break your laws—” I winced. “I mean *our* laws. I may have paused time to give us the precious months we needed to adjust to your century while you felt it was just days, but we’re still very much catching up.”

Benedict tilted his head. “I’m starting to understand that.”

“We put on a good front, but a year ago it was the 1500s to us.” I could escape time—and keep others with me in that sphere—for as long as I needed to, but only in my immediate vicinity.

He looked at me for a second, then nodded. “Noted. Should we head back?”

“Please, before the boredom kills me,” I said dryly.

Benedict laughed, and we wended, cutting through icy layers of time and space and stepping into the courtyard between Domum and residence.

“Took you assholes long enough,” Talon said in greeting from the center of the courtyard as Lyric, our queen, walked out of the Domum, escorted by Jocelyn and...Cassandra.

The noble female possessed classic vampirical beauty, there was no denying it. Her cheekbones were high, her figure long and lithe, and yet she didn’t move me the way a single glance at Grace did.

Weird. Vampires were biologically programmed to be attracted to the females who would give us the best chance at strong offspring—especially warriors, and yet I appreciated Cassandra’s beauty—even Lyric’s and Jocelyn’s—without so much as a stir of attraction.

Talon and I both bowed our heads at the queen’s approach.

“Guys.” Lyric sighed. “I thought we covered this. Stop it.”

I lifted my head and grimaced. “Old habits and all that.”

Cassandra looked at me, then her gaze skittered across Benedict to Talon and she paled slightly. “I’ll be available should you need anything else, Lyric.” She offered our queen a smile and all but ran back to the Domum.

“Mate,” Jocelyn said with a sly smile, sliding into Benedict’s arms and leaning up for a kiss, which he returned.

Huh. Maybe living forever didn’t feel so...pointless when mated. All the assassins seemed not only content, but deliriously happy with the females in their lives. Even Hawke smiled every now and again.

“Cassandra again?” Benedict asked, keeping his arm around his mate’s waist after pulling back.

“She’s been helpful with the nobles,” Lyric answered. “As much as the usuals at court have grown accustomed to having a human queen—”

“You’re no longer human,” Benedict argued.

“Be that as it may, some of the nobles who have been taking shelter with us since the attacks increased take direction from Cassandra easier, and honestly, I really don’t mind delegating.” Lyric shrugged.

“I worry that someone who betrayed you once will do it again,” Talon said, folding his arms across his chest and staring at Cassandra’s retreating back.

“She was more petty to me than treasonous,” Lyric reminded him. “It was her father who betrayed us. Betrayed *you*.”

“She has brothers,” Jocelyn said quietly, moving to the queen’s side. “The king may have killed her father—with good reason, of course—but she wouldn’t do anything that risks the lives of her brothers.”

“I guess we’ll just have to see,” Talon remarked. “Trust me, there’s a reason the most beautiful creatures in the animal kingdom hold such allure. To entice and trap their victims.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Lyric promised as she headed toward the house with Jocelyn at her side.

A laugh escaped me, coming out like a snort before I could stop it as the females walked away.

“Seriously?” Talon asked.

“You think Cassandra’s pretty, my brother.” I grinned, giving my brother shit even though I’d already had the thought.

“Fuck off.” He flipped me the bird and followed the queen.

Benedict stared at me, his brow furrowed in thought.

“What is it truth-teller?” I asked.

“You’ve said that twice about Talon,” he mused. “That he’s your brother.”

“They all are.” I cocked a brow at the assassin. “Zachariah, Dagon, even Saint.”

“Just don’t forget that we are, too.” He backed up a few steps then turned to walk into the residence. “Oh, and since Dagon and Saint didn’t exactly leave their plans outlined, you’re free the rest of the night,” he called back over his shoulder.

I checked my watch. It was a little after midnight, and I was free? I should take the time to feed, but sinking my fangs into one of the human necks inside the Domum wasn’t appealing.

I knew exactly where I wanted to be.



DRIVING WAS DEFINITELY the best part of living in this century. The engine of the Range Rover purred as I followed the map on the glowing screen, taking the turns the computer told me to.

I would have much rather wended, but our powers were limited to the places we’d been before, and I’d certainly never been to this particular location. It was a neighborhood deep within human territory with houses that I knew were

*Craftsmans* due to Dagon's fixation with HGTV while we were coming out of stasis.

Finding the address I'd retrieved from an online database, I parked down the street so I didn't scare Grace.

I just wanted to walk by her house to make sure that nothing was amiss. She was so full of life, so intent on living to the fullest that I couldn't stomach the thought of her being hurt, or worse, her life being cut short.

Shoving the key into my pocket, I walked the uneven pavement of her neighborhood, taking note of where the roots of trees had lifted and cracked the cement with their growth over the years. The night was soft as a lover around me, the sound of crickets making me smile.

I approached the house the internet said was hers and found the porch light on, the rhythmic sound of soft, squeaking metal accompanying the sight of a swaying porch swing.

Who the fuck was on her porch? I reached for my Sig.

"It's just me," she said. "Though I'm sure my neighbors wouldn't appreciate you shouting about my imaginary company."

My eyebrows shot up, and I left my weapon holstered. Shit, had I fired off at the mouth again without realizing it? That was becoming a bad habit around her. "I wasn't shouting," I said in my defense, walking up the wooden steps of her porch.

"May as well have been," she said with a smile from where she lay on the porch swing, gently pushing off the floor with the one leg she let dangle.

Her freesia and peonies scent hit me, and I threw my focus into keeping my fangs where they belonged—put away. Fuck, the stab of hunger in my gut was unexpected. Maybe I really *should* have taken the time to feed. I threw down every shield I had as if mentally protecting myself would keep her safe from me.

She was dressed for bed in a pair of drawstring plaid pants and a sweater—no, a *hoodie*—with the local university’s logo on the front. In my century, she would have been in a shift, but then again, in my century, a woman this stunning never would have been left alone on a porch. I shook my head and reminded myself that *this* was now my century.

“Are you just going to stand there staring at me?” she asked with a smile, crinkling her nose as if we’d planned this.

“You aren’t going to ask how I knew you lived here?” I leaned back on the sturdy post of her porch and tucked my hands into the pockets of my leathers to keep them from reaching for her.

“No.” She shrugged and closed her book, leaving it on her stomach as she continued to rock. “The Grim Reaper knows where everyone lives, doesn’t he?”

I cracked a smile. “I’m not here to take your life, Grace.”

“Even if, I’m not sure it would be a bad way to go.” She sat up and folded her legs beneath her. “But as far as figments of my imagination go, you’re definitely the hottest hallucination I’ve ever had.”

“Not a hallucination.” I watched, utterly rapt, as she tugged a circle of fabric off her wrist and then tied her hair into some kind of knot and secured it.

“Right. So you insist on saying.” She rolled her eyes. “I have to say you’re definitely a benefit of this tumor.”

My smile fell, and I took a deep breath. Right. She had a tumor. She was dying. How could I be enchanted with her passion for what little time she had left and despise her illness at the same time? “What are you doing out here this late?” I asked, mostly to change the subject.

“I should be asking you the same thing.”

“I wanted to be near you.” The truthfulness of the statement puckered my brow. “And to check that you were safely tucked in.”

“See, normal guys use the phone number the girl gives them,” she teased.

“Not a normal guy.” I shrugged. “And by the time I finished work tonight, I figure you’d already be asleep, considering you need your rest.”

“There will be plenty of time to sleep when I’m dead.” She glanced past me out into the night. “I don’t want to miss a single second.”

My stomach twisted. “But you might have more seconds if you rested so you could fight your illness.”

“My mother fought. It didn’t do her much good,” she said softly, glancing down at her book and fidgeting with the pages. “What would you rather have? A shorter time lived to the fullest, or a longer time that’s not quite as sweet because you’re sick from treatment?”

“I don’t know.” I rubbed the back of my neck. “Time is a relative concept for me. The longer I live, the less it seems to mean.”

“Good problem to have.” She patted the cushion next to her. “Come sit down. Staring up at you is putting a crick in my neck.”

I walked toward her slowly, making sure I didn’t accidentally slip into supernatural speed and scare the shit out of her, and then I gently tugged the chains holding the swing in place.

“You won’t break it,” she promised, patting again.

I sat carefully.

She laughed, the sound smacking me right behind my ribs. “Relax, Grim. You’re all stiff, like you’ve never sat on a swing.”

“I haven’t.” I leaned back, testing the wood with my weight. It creaked but didn’t give.

“I’m over here thinking of all the extraordinary things I’d like to do with the short amount of time I have left, and you’ve never sat on a swing?” She nudged me with her shoulder.

“It’s a first,” I conceded. “And I can admit, for a long time, I thought all my firsts were behind me.”

“Ah, a man of experience.” She cracked a huge yawn.

“You should get some sleep.”

“Then another day of my three months will be gone.” Her grip tightened on the paperback in her lap, and her scent changed subtly.

Fear. She was scared to sleep. And yet I knew that sleep was the most efficient way for humans to heal. *There’s no healing her.*

Three months. Grace would never hold her own child, never watch them grow. She wouldn’t celebrate another solstice—if humans still did that, or savor the first snow of the year. Three months didn’t give her anything but the summer. She sure as hell wouldn’t live long enough to be a bride or bear a male’s mating mar—

*She’s human, you idiot. They don’t mate.*

And after centuries around the females of my own kind, I’d given up hope that I would, either.

“What are you reading?” I asked, since none of those thoughts could be spoken.

Blood flushed her cheeks, and I locked my jaw to keep my fangs in place. God, she smelled even better this close, but only an animal would want to weaken her even further by feeding.

“It’s a paranormal romance novel.” She shrugged.

“Paranormal as in...” I reached for the book, and she handed it over.

“Vampires.”

I nearly fumbled the hand-sized paperback. “I’m sorry?”

She pointed to the cover, where a bloodred rose dripped. “It’s the third book in the *Eternal Nights* series. I spent so long reading academic books for school that I almost forgot just how fun fiction is.”

“Huh.” I opened to the dog-eared page. “How about I read it to you?” Hopefully she’d fall asleep and get some of that much-needed rest.

“You are going to read me a romance novel?” Her eyebrows rose with the pitch of her voice.

“Why not?” I glanced down at the page. “Seems like a good use of my time.”

“Suit yourself.” She grabbed the pillow at her side, set it in my lap, then pivoted, laying so her head rested on the pillow and her feet dangled off the end of the swing.

Fearless. The woman was fucking fearless.

And I loved it.

“You may begin.” She grinned up at me.

The urge to mold my mouth to hers and kiss her senseless nearly overpowered my common sense. Nearly.

*Taste*, my instincts demanded.

*Shut the fuck up. I’m not in the mood for your shit tonight.*

I started reading, catching on to the plot quickly. The heroine was a feisty brunette detective, out to solve a string of murders that she was certain the hero—a hundred-year-old vampire—had committed.

I immediately took his side.

As of this chapter, she’d begun to suspect he was *undead*, whatever the fuck that meant. “I grabbed the crucifix my grandmother had left me, clasp it around my neck,” I read, gently rocking the swing with every push of my feet against the porch. “It was my best defense—” I snorted.

“What?” Grace asked.

“This author thinks that the symbol of the Christian faith is going to protect her from vampires?” What the hell else kind of nonsense was in here?

“Well, yeah.” Grace stared up at me like I was a fool.

Fuck, her eyes were beautiful. “That’s just...ridiculous. A crucifix won’t protect her from a vampire.”

“Oh? And what would?” she asked.

“Sunlight or another vampire,” I answered.

“So you’re an expert on vampires now, are you?”

“I would consider myself one, yes.” I turned the page.

“Why? Because you’ve read *Dracula*? Every author is allowed to make up their own rules. It’s fiction. Keep going. I want to see if you blush at the steamy parts.” Her eyes sparkled.

“It’s hard to make me blush at *anything* when you’ve lived as long as I have.” I started reading again, rolling my eyes as the detective armed herself with a root vegetable and went out into the night, seeking her killer.

Naturally, she was sexually attracted to the vampire. Our species used our looks to our advantage when it came to our human prey. At least that was realistic.

Grace’s breathing evened out as she lay in my lap, listening.

When the vampire cut open the lip of the detective in an ill attempt at a kiss, I shook my head.

“What?” Grace whispered, her blinks coming slower and slower. “Not realistic?”

“I guess if you’re only a hundred, it makes sense,” I muttered. “But no respectable vampire is going to be so careless the first time he kisses someone. Shows a total lack of self-control.”

“I think it’s kind of hot,” she said.

I stared down at her, fighting the ache in my own fangs to descend, to bite, to taste, and claim. But I wasn’t a hundred-year-old youngling. I had some fucking control. “Of course you would. You’d probably run up to the first vampire you found and bare your neck in offering just so you could feel like you lived your life to the fullest.”

“Hmmm. Not a bad idea.”

My eyes flared, and I jerked my gaze from hers and back to the paperback. I wasn't going there. Nope. Not even thinking about it.

I read until the rhythm of her breathing slowed with her heartbeat, then kept going until I was certain she was deeply asleep. She was so trusting. Too trusting.

*Mine.* In the quiet of the night, my instincts rose.

*Not yours, you asshat.*

I pocketed the paperback and then carefully stood, lifting Grace into my arms. Her head rolled against my chest, but she didn't wake, only proving my point that she needed sleep. Then I opened her front door and headed toward where her scent was strongest, up the stairs and through the first door on the left.

Her bedroom was a little cluttered, the decor utterly feminine, and I had to smile that she'd left her bed unmade. It made it easier to slide her between the covers.

I tucked her in, lifting her blankets to her neck, and then listed every single reason it would be wrong to sit in that armchair by the window and watch her sleep, settling for reason number thirteen: it was creepy as hell.

Then I checked the locks on every window and the deadbolts on the front and back door before wending out of her living room to where I'd parked the car.

My instincts roared that I was leaving her defenseless, and in a way, they were right: I couldn't protect her from the very thing killing her from the inside.



## GRACE

“**Y**ou still drinking this nonsense without cream and sugar?” Maria asked as she held up the communal pot of coffee in her office building.

“Yep,” I said, smiling at her as she poured me a cup of the good stuff.

She shook her head, handing me the paper cup. “Here’s your hot bean water then,” she said, then fixed one for herself, loading it up with sugar and peppermint creamer.

“And there is your cup of hot sugar,” I teased right back, and we tapped our paper cups together before heading through the hallway to her office. “How are things going this week?” I asked once I sat down on the other side of her desk.

Maria was my *only* family, but she had an extended one of her own that included as many children in need as she could home. She’d started out small, but had eventually expanded her offices to include a certified estate where those who couldn’t be placed in a foster home right away could stay and have some sense of stability before they transitioned to the next.

“Same day, different people in need,” she said, settling behind her desk.

I sipped my black coffee, sighing as the intensity hit my tongue. The caffeine wasn’t medically proven to help with my headaches or the voices—in fact, it was supposed to hinder them—but somehow, a strong cup always dulled the ache behind my eyes.

“How are you, honey?” Maria asked, concern crinkling her warm blue eyes. Her dark hair was up in a bun, not a strand out of place, and she looked perfectly put together in a cream-colored pantsuit. The woman had always radiated this warmth and exuberance I’d tried to mimic throughout my life, but I’d never be able to master her sense of style.

“I’m...” I blew out a breath before hiding behind another sip of coffee. Maria had taken me on as her own after my mother passed. One of the rare kids who she’d raised in her estate and never moved out. I loved her, thought of her as family, which made the words tangle in my throat. She was the only one I had to tell about my condition, and even though she likely already suspected, I had to give her the truth. “I’m dying,” I blurted out the words.

“Child,” she said, shaking her head. She set down her coffee and rounded the desk to take the seat right next to me. Her hands gripped mine. “Is it like you suspected?”

I nodded. “Just like Mom.”

Emotion churned in her eyes, but she kept her chin held high. “When do you start treatment?”

“I’m not,” I said, and she flashed me a chiding look. “Don’t look at me like that. I won’t spend the last days I have going through treatment.”

“But, Grace—”

“No, but Grace,” I said. “Maria, you know if there was hope that I would survive this, I would absolutely do treatment.” Her eyes softened. “But there is no surviving this. Eventually, it will kill me. Skipping treatment merely gives me time without being eaten alive or zombified by drugs. Time to do the things I’ve always wanted to.”

She nodded, releasing my hands. I leaned back in my seat, sighing.

“I just wish I hadn’t wasted so much time getting my doctorate. I’ll never have clients now or feel the satisfaction of helping someone find the tools they need to navigate their mental health.”

I'd wanted to set up my own private practice right here in Maria's offices.

That dream dissolved into a mist, along with any others I may have entertained over the years, like owning a dog.

Maria, for the first time in the history of forever, looked at a loss for words.

"Should've dated more too," I said, just to fill the silence. "Danced more. Ate more." I shook my head. "Traveled more. Instead, I spent my life worrying about making money, juggling two jobs just to pay for my college degree that is now useless."

I'd already quit my barista gig and my bartender gig.

"Grace, you've never been one to feel sorry for yourself," Maria said, but I could still see the grief building in her eyes, like she was already feeling my loss despite me sitting right next to her.

I wished it were different, wished I wasn't causing her this kind of pain, but she deserved to know. It would've hurt worse if one day she simply found out I'd passed without telling her about my condition.

"Now, you've been dealt a shitty hand, my love," she continued. "You really have. You were meant for much more than this, but we can't roll back time, now, can we?"

"Wouldn't that be fun?" I grinned at the thought.

"If you could, what would you do?" she asked.

"I'd worry less and have more fun," I answered immediately.

I spent so much of my life in a constant state of worry—worry over what would happen to me if Maria ever grew tired of me and got rid of me, worry over pulling my weight, never being a burden to anyone. Worry over money and school and boys and all the things that were just exhausting. And fear, so much fear. Fear of spiders and heights and roller coasters and anything that put my body at risk of harm. Joke was on me—my body had done that just fine on its own.

“I’d go bungee jumping and skydiving and I’d eat all the dessert. I’d worry about calories less and try new foods more. I’d travel to all those places I’ve dreamed about—Italy and Paris and Ireland.”

Maria gave me a soft smile, then patted my leg. “Then what the hell are you doing wasting time here in my office?”

I gaped at her, but her smile deepened. “I love you, Grace. If I could take you to do those things, I would. But I’ve got people here who need me.”

“I know that,” I said. “I would never ask you to.”

“But you don’t need to stay here, wallowing with me. You go out there and chase that joy. You deserve every ounce of it.” She leaned back in her chair. “Is there anyone you can think of who might want to do some of those things with you?”

A little zap of electricity snapped through me at the thought of Ajax. It’d been three days since he’d magically appeared on my porch and read to me from the current romance novel I was devouring. Heat swept over my skin with the memory. His deep, guttural voice shaping the words on the page had been the sweetest, most delicious sound I’d ever heard, lulling me to a peaceful sleep that spiraled into dreams of him using his tongue in other ways to soothe me. Warmth pooled in my core, and I had to blink a few times to stop my mind from wandering.

I’d looked at the phone number he’d given me more than once, debating texting him, but I hadn’t used it.

Fear stopped me. Because what if I called the number and it turned out he really *was* just a figment of my imagination? A dying mind’s last resort for happiness?

“I think I might,” I said, standing and heading for her door. “But in all honesty, he may not be real.” What was more likely? That I happened to find an insanely attractive man who was kind, perceptive, protective, and encouraging all at the same time and somehow found me interesting as well, or that

my fractured mind conjured him from my favorite fantasies to ease me into a delightful death?

Maria tilted her head at me, and I waved her off.

“You still hearing voices, honey?” Maria asked.

I nodded. “It’s getting worse.”

Something clicked behind her eyes, like the gears turning in a clock. Before she could say she was sorry or worried about me, I winked at her.

“It’s all in good fun, now,” I said. “This way I can pretend I have superpowers on my way out.” I blew her a kiss, then shut her door behind me.

I had my phone out by the time I sank behind the wheel of my car, and before I could chicken out, I pushed Ajax’s contact information.

My knee bounced as I waited, the sun fully set now outside my car.

He didn’t answer.

And I sat there, watching the night come alive around me, seriously contemplating my sanity. Going over every detail in my mind to try to convince myself that there was no way I’d truly conjured—

My phone buzzed in my hands, jolting me out of my thoughts.

*Grace’s Grim Reaper* flashed over my screen, and my heart literally fluttered in my chest.

“Hey angel of death,” I said by way of answer.

“Hey there, little human,” he fired right back, and I swear my smile stretched wider.

“Have plans for tonight?” I asked.

“Not as of right now,” he said. “What do you have in mind?”

“How do you feel about bungee jumping?”



“SO, WHAT’S YOUR STORY, GRACE?” Ajax asked me an hour later as we waited for our turn to leap off of one of Edgemont’s tallest bridges.

The water that hugged Edgemont’s border glittered under the moonlight, little ripples stretching on and out toward the horizon. In the distance, I could clearly make out one of the more famous bridges in Edgemont, a historic site with beautifully constructed architecture in pale limestone that looked almost ghostly at night. The city sparkled like diamonds all around us, giving us the perfect view. It was one of the reasons why the nighttime bungee place was so popular.

“My story...” I furrowed my brow, looking up and *up* at him.

He wore dark jeans this time, and a long-sleeved white Henley that hugged every inch of his muscles, and black boots that looked ancient and well worn. He also was strapped into a black harness that matched mine, and looked good enough to eat standing there, the moon full and illuminated behind him as he leaned against the railing from the platform we waited on, which was at least three hundred feet high.

“Why would you want to know my story?” I asked honestly. I couldn’t help but wonder why he was hanging around at all. Then again, I wasn’t an expert on dating. I’d been on a few my freshman year in college, but quickly put that to the side when I decided to go for my doctorate in half the time.

Was this how people did...relationships? Meet a complete stranger somewhere and do the whole *get-to-know* you talk?

Ajax shrugged, a mischievous smile on his face. “Maybe I’m fascinated by you.”

“Maybe you stalked me outside of a hospital and get your kicks off uncovering the reason I was there?” I teased.

A pang hit the center of my chest as I realized I was *flirting* with the giant. And that was wholly unfair. I shifted on my feet, taking a deep breath. “You really want to know my story?”

“I really do,” he said.

“Okay,” I said, shrugging. “I just graduated with my doctorate in psychology—”

“Doctorate?” Ajax asked. “Aren’t you a little young for that?”

I bit back a laugh. “How old do you think I am?”

“Twenty-four,” he answered, like he’d already known my exact age.

I tilted my head. “Okay, then,” I said. “I graduated in half the time. Took on double the workload with the dean’s approval.”

“That’s a huge accomplishment, isn’t it?”

“It is,” I said.

“Then why do you look so sad about it?” He may as well have flayed me open right there, that’s how easily he’d seen through to the heart of me.

“I’m never going to be able to put it to use,” I said, turning to look at the view. The screams of the people ahead of us echoed through the night.

“Because you can’t do what you want with it in the time you have?”

He was so relaxed about the conversation, it made me wonder if he truly understood what was going on. I mean, I had been pretty flippant about it with him because I was half certain he was a manifestation of my mind. If he wasn’t one... maybe I needed to be more clear. Crystal clear.

“You know how I joked about you being an angel of death?”

He grinned. “Yes.”

“Well, I’m still like sixty percent sure you are.” He laughed, but I continued. “I know I’ve kind of joked about this entire thing with you before, but I’m guessing since you were outside that specific wing of the hospital, you know what it specializes in.” When he pinned me with nothing but an intense gaze, I went on. “There is no denying it. I’m not going to be around much longer. I mentioned it to you before, but I want you to understand. I don’t want to be anything but clear to you. I have three months.” I tapped my temple lightly. “Brain tumor, remember. It’s the thing that has caused all sorts of fun side effects, like headaches and hearing voices, but there it is. My story.” I motioned to the platform, noticing there were only two more people ahead of us in line. “Hence all the adrenaline stuff.” I shrugged. “I’m trying to do all the things I’ve always been too afraid to do.”

Ajax was so still, I wasn’t sure he was breathing as he took in the information. A muscle in his jaw flexed, and I clenched my brow.

“I’m really sorry if you thought I was leading you on or making the story up for attention.” Did people do that? I really hoped not, but God, I hope he didn’t think that *I* had been. “I’m definitely not trying to garner your pity either. When you asked to hang with me the other night, I’d just heard the news and was kind of in a *fuck it* mood where anything went. I didn’t take into account that I might be wasting your time. Not that I’m implying you’re interested in me like that...” God, now I was rambling. “What I mean is—”

“Grace,” Ajax cut over my rant, stepping close enough to me that all it would take was one deep breath and our chests would brush. “Why are you apologizing for your condition? It’s completely out of your hands. And I understood you perfectly the first time you spoke about it. I never thought you were lying or joking.”

I blew out a breath, shaking my head. He was right. Why the hell was I apologizing for something that I never asked for? “I just didn’t want you to get the wrong idea—”

“And what idea would that be? That you just want to use me for a rush like you are these adrenaline feats?”

My lips popped open, heat soaring over my body in a wave that nearly made my knees buckle. Images of doing just what he implied fluttered through my mind, stealing my breath and making me ache in all sorts of deep, tight places.

And from his deepening smile? He *noticed* how much his words affected me.

Jeez, could he read me that well?

“I’m doing no such thing,” I hurried to say. “You stalked *me*, remember? The roller coaster night, then romance reading on the porch? Part of me still thinks you’re here to steal my soul.”

He arched a brow at me. “Are you offering it to me?”

I gaped at him again, the words getting tangled in my throat. “I’m not sure you would want it,” I finally managed to say.

Ajax’s eyes darkened as he shifted closer. “I’ll take whatever pieces of yourself you give me, Grace.”

Awareness rippled beneath my skin, making me tight and hot all over. The way he was looking at me...like he *wanted* me in a desperate, hungry sort of way had my head spinning.

I quickly shook my head. No doubt I was reading him wrong. “What were you doing outside that hospital anyway?” I asked, turning the tables and all that. “Do you see a doctor there?”

Ajax straightened, some of that wicked playfulness leaving his eyes. “No,” he said. “I was visiting someone.”

“Oh,” I said, shoulders dropping. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine,” he said. “It led me to you.”

“How old are you?” I asked, honestly not being able to make a good guess. Maybe early thirties, but with the way he sometimes looked at me...it was like he’d been around a lot longer than myself.

“Eight-hundred and seventy,” he said, deadpan, and it tore a laugh from my lips that cut through any previous tension

lingering in my chest.

“Of course, you are,” I said as the people in front of us took their dive off the bridge. “What other age could you possibly be?”

He smiled at me, that amusement that sometimes lit up his eyes sparkling there now. “Tell me more about the things you want to get done before...” He let the sentence hang there, and I couldn’t lie, it was refreshing to have him be so nonchalant about the whole death sentence thing. “Is it all heights and jump scares or are there other things you want to get done? Things you’re upset you have to give up?”

“I’m sad I’ll never get to open up my own practice,” I admitted. “And I really regret not rescuing a dog sooner, but I was barely ever home when I was in college, so it didn’t seem fair.”

“A dog?” He furrowed his brow. “You regret not getting one?”

“Oh, no,” I said. “Are you a cat person?”

He chuckled, shaking his head. “No, I’m a dog person. I just...I guess I expected you to say you’re sad you don’t get to have children.”

Again, that casualness in which he spoke about my condition, about death so easily made me wonder if he really was some supernatural creature here to whisk me into the otherworld.

“I never wanted children, not after knowing I carried a gene that could kill any I may have, but a dog? I would’ve loved to rescue one and give it all the affection I had to offer.”

Ajax pursed his lips. “What else?”

I laughed. “You’re very good about asking for my story, yet you’ve barely shared any of yours.” I tilted my head at him. “Doesn’t it creep you out? All this death talk?”

“I’ve been a friend of death’s a lot longer than I care to remember,” he said, his voice lowering. A chill scraped the back of my neck, my pulse skipping a beat.

“What does that mean?” I asked, my voice coming out as a whisper.

A dull ache pulsed behind my eyes—

*Strap them in. Go over rules. Two more and you're out for the night.* An unfamiliar voice tumbled into my mind.

*So beautiful, so fragile*—that voice was all Ajax.

God, why now? Why was I imagining voices now?

“You two are up!” the attendant said, cutting through the voices. I popped open my eyes and headed over to where he waved us on.

Ajax followed close, and the attendant had us stand side to side, our bodies touching as he hooked us in tandem. From this position, it looked like we were standing on top of the world, the water stretching out hundreds of feet below and seeming to go on forever as the sounds of the city behind us faded into nothing.

“Shit,” I said, fear crawling up my spine with icy fingers. “Why did you agree to this?” I asked, glancing up at Ajax.

He grinned down at me. “Because you asked me to.”

Something warm burst in my chest, shifting around his statement in a way that it had no business doing. This man couldn't mean anything more to me than a fleeting moment in time that was about to run out.

The attendant explained the instructions, telling us how to fall off the platform when he gave the signal before he asked us to step up to the very edge.

I couldn't move.

This was so stupid. Yeah, I was going to die, but I didn't have to hurry the process. Why had I ever—

Ajax slid his arm around me, gliding his hand down my back and settling it on my hip. We were already attached and close, but somehow, the move enveloped me with a warmth I couldn't explain. This ridiculous sense of safety wrapped

around me, chasing away the fear as heat sizzled under his touch.

That ache wrenched between my thighs again as I savored that touch, so innocent yet so consuming with his scent swirling around me. Something inside me unfurled, like a flower blooming in the night.

“You ready?” he asked, motioning his head toward the go-signal that was flashing.

I nodded, my pulse skittering along my veins as he smiled at me, as he held my gaze and dipped his weight forward—*our* weight forward—and then we were flying.

The free fall had my stomach rising to meet my throat, but after a few seconds, the wind on my face and the strong arm wrapped around me felt like nothing else in the world. I was flying through the night sky with the most gorgeous man I’d ever set eyes on and nothing else existed outside of this moment.

Him and me and the feel of weightlessness as we hurtled through the sky, shooting downward toward that glittering water, the silence in my head so peaceful, I almost moaned from the relief in it.

And in those moments, right before the bungee jerked us to a stop and hauled us back up into the air, a glorious laugh ripped from my lips. A sense of joy and freedom overwhelming me to the point of tears. Because at that moment, I wasn’t dying, I was *flying*, and even death couldn’t catch me.



“YOU HAVEN’T STOPPED SMILING since the jump,” Ajax said an hour later, standing outside my house, where he’d insisted to see me home.

“I think I’d be really great at flying,” I said, unable to wipe off the smile he’d brought up. I was still riding that high—even more so since Ajax had followed me home, his Range

Rover following behind me the whole way like some dark guardian.

“I wouldn’t doubt it,” he said, eyes flashing to my front door behind me.

He stepped a little closer, inhaling deeply as if he was as captivated by my scent as I was his...though, I suddenly wondered what the hell I smelled like to him since my perfume no doubt wore off after the jump.

I tilted my head, locking eyes with him as my heart hammered in my chest. He wouldn’t have driven all this way if he didn’t want to come in, right? Hell, he’d tucked my sleepy ass into bed the other night. *Surely*, he wanted to come in. And he knew my story now, so it wasn’t like he didn’t have all the facts. And even if I didn’t know all of his story, I *knew* what my body was begging for, what my heart was begging for, and it was to be touched and consumed by this mysterious, gorgeous man.

“Ajax,” I whispered, as he leaned down, so close to my mouth that his warm breath hit my cheek. My lips parted, my blood already racing at the idea of reaching up and brushing my mouth over his—

“Get some good rest tonight, Grace,” he said, his voice low and rough as he took a step *away* from me.

The air deflated from my lungs as I watched him back up to his car, some kind of battle playing out over his features as he opened the door and slid in.

I watched him drive down my street, my lips parted and still tingling from how close he’d been, how easy it would have been to break that distance between us.

I swallowed hard, forcing myself to turn around and go into my house. I couldn’t really blame him for running away. It wasn’t like there was any future with me, but for just a second, I thought he wasn’t interested in a future and only interested in the present.

I’d been wrong.

Well, the smile I'd worn all night was now most certainly gone.



## AJAX

**F**or all the aggravations that came with living at court with the royal family, at least it was entertaining. I peeled my apple at the counter in the busy kitchen and watched the scenes of early evening play out in front of me like a live television screen.

Valor, Lachlan's mate, was currently telling Lachlan to shove his concerns about her caffeine consumption up his ass while she poured herself a second cup of coffee. Lucky for him, the growly Scot knew when to retreat, because I wouldn't have put it past the human redhead to hurl that mug at his head.

I grinned as they took their argument into the living room.

"And that's why I thank God every day that I've never mated," Zachariah said, grabbing one of the muffins off the counter.

Saint grunted in agreement next to Zachariah. He might not be saying much these days, but at least he was feeding. He'd filled out a little more, so his cheekbones didn't look so sharp they could cut people anymore, but the fact that the room felt about twenty degrees colder standing next to him told me that his mind wasn't healing as quickly as his body. I slammed down my mental shields, and the temperature rose.

"Never mated a human, anyway," Talon muttered, coming to stand on my opposite side. "That's why he's such an overprotective simp. He's constantly stressed that her frail little body is going to give out on him."

Right. Because humans were delicate. *Just look at Grace.* She looked completely healthy, and yet she'd be dead before fall. The dagger I'd been peeling my apple with slipped in my hand at the thought, and I barely kept from nicking my thumb.

I'd been too busy to see her last night, but damn, every fiber of my being demanded I make time tonight. Every part of me craved her, which was exactly why I'd walked away before kissing her a couple of days ago. With vampires, sex and blood went hand in hand.

There was no way in hell I was going to bite Grace.

*Taste*, my instincts demanded. Whiny bastard.

"You know, we have these things called peelers now, to prevent that from happening," Lyric said from across the kitchen island, pure concern in her eyes as she reached for a muffin.

My eyebrows rose and my brothers around me stilled. Even Saint stiffened.

"Love," Alek said softly, wrapping his arms around his mate from behind. "It's considered an insult to a warrior to even imply he should give up his dagger."

Lyric's eyes widened. "Oh. I didn't mean to suggest..." She shook her head. "It's just that we have all these modern tools now and—" She slammed her eyes shut. "I'm not helping, am I?"

"No," Alek replied, smothering his laugh in her neck.

Lyric met my gaze. "Please accept my apology."

I nodded and let my smile slip. "No apology needed, my queen."

"You've never lectured me when I handed you a peeler." Lyric narrowed her eyes at her mate.

"Because I love you," Alek said, reaching around Lyric for a muffin. The baked goods were super popular around here. "And I'm not ancient with an outdated code of what I find insulting." He flashed a teasing smile at Zachariah.

“You say ancient, I say experienced. As I recall, it was you who woke us up looking for help, and not the other way around, my king.” Zachariah took a bite of his blueberry muffin, totally losing the badass edge to his comment.

“Right.” A corner of Alek’s mouth rose. “Well, speaking of that, don’t forget that we’re meeting in five minutes.”

We all nodded.

“At least we didn’t have to eat evening repast with the nobles,” Talon said with a visible shudder. “This generation of aristocrats is...cringe.”

“First simp, then cringe?” I finished peeling my apple and shot some side-eye at Talon. “No more modern slang for you.”

“Can we just get this meeting over with already?” Saint checked his watch. “We’re wasting time.”

“Is that your sunny way of telling us you’ve found no signs of Samuel?” I asked, then bit a slice of apple off my knife.

He looked at me like he was contemplating taking my life there on the marble countertop, and I simply took another bite, holding his seething stare. Saint didn’t scare me and he needed to know that. There was nothing my brother could do that would push me to fear him. Now, fearing *for* him was an entirely different story. The pink tinge of a circle around his dark irises told me he still walked the edge of bloodmadness.

I could only hope that finding Samuel and bringing him to justice would ease Saint’s sanity back toward the light.

“Because I fucking said so,” Dagon said over his shoulder as he walked into the kitchen, tucking his dark-blond hair behind his ears.

“That’s not a good enough reason,” Olivia argued, following him into the kitchen.

“Hey! You’re out of bed!” Lyric said with a wide grin for the female.

“She shouldn’t be,” Ransom flat-out growled from behind his mate. Guy looked like he seriously needed a meal and about three weeks of sleep. “She *should* be in bed.”

“Fuck off, *honey*,” Olivia snapped back at Ransom. “You’re driving me up the wall. I’m pregnant, not dying. Was I tired at first? Of course, but I’m not going to live the next months in bed.”

I smothered a laugh. “See?” I whispered at Zachariah. “Imagine missing all of this if we lived away from court.”

“Sign me up,” Talon grumbled.

“And I’m not done with you!” Olivia damn-near shouted at Dagon, who rolled his eyes and took a muffin. “I’m not asking for hours of your precious *hunter* time. I just want you to test my niece because I’m pretty sure she is showing elemental affinities.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re not asking for hours, because then I’d have to tell you no. Again.” Dagon leaned back against the counter. “Just like I told you no when you asked me last night, and again this morning, and again when you followed me into the Domum to feed.”

“Watch it,” Ransom warned, spearing his hand through his dark hair like he was struggling for control.

It was widely known that warriors were most dangerous at two stages in our long lives: the time it took us to accept our mating bond and seal it, and whenever our mates were pregnant. I had the ultimate sympathy for Ransom, I really did. But there was something slightly amusing about watching the king’s master of combat lose his shit because the women in this century refused to be controlled.

“Watch what?” Dagon fired back. “If your mate’s niece is showing—”

“Hey, I’m right here. Talk to me.” Olivia stepped toward Dagon. “Look, if it’s about rank or whatever, then you should know that she comes from one of the best families—”

“I know what family she comes from,” Dagon retorted. “It was your family we entrusted our lives to for centuries while we slept.”

“Great, then you won’t have a problem repaying that kindness by simply testing Annika to see if her power is

manifesting with the elements.” Olivia hiked a brow at him.

“This is getting good.” I turned fully to watch the show.

“Not helping,” Dagon said my way before looking back at Olivia. “Not sure if you’ve noticed, but I’m far more comfortable killing other vampires than I am teaching them—testing them, whatever. I’m a hunter for a reason.” He shrugged.

“True,” I added, nodding. “He’s not a people person.”

“A people person?” Olivia fired back. “Come on, surely he can just test her to see how she needs to be trained.”

“Have you ever tried to push an elephant off its ass when it’s decided to sit?” Talon asked, turning to watch with me.

“What does that have to do with anything?” Ransom asked.

“You’d have better luck getting the elephant to move than you would getting Dagon to do something he doesn’t want to.” Talon bit into the muffin.

Olivia stared at him.

“What? I’m just trying to help you save some time.”

“Shut up, Eric Northman,” Olivia replied.

“Who is Eric Northman?” Talon asked me, his brow furrowing.

“Vampire from that one series we watched. You remember. Blonde. Tall. Vicious.” I gave him a once-over. “She’s not too far off, really.”

“Look, if you want your niece tested, then find a Revealer,” Dagon said. “I’m not your guy.”

“A Revealer?” Olivia shook her head.

“They were vampires in our time whose power was to detect the power of others,” Zachariah answered.

“Like you.” Olivia grinned. “You can do that, right?”

“No.” He shook his head, a horrified look on his face. “I wouldn’t know what her power was until I absorbed it, and by

then she'd be dead, and I'm not sure that's what you're going for."

Olivia blinked.

"Alek, do something," Ransom pled.

The king's phone rang. "Oh, look at that," Alek said, swiping to answer the phone. "A reason not to involve myself in the sibling squabble." He lifted the phone to his ear and stepped away to take the call.

"What if we contacted the teachers at—" Avianna started, the princess stepping into the kitchen with Hawke not far behind.

"Absolutely not," Olivia turned on her friend. "We both hated that place, and I'm not about to sentence Annika to that relic of a school. I promised my sister I'd have Annika trained —"

"Sounds like you made a promise you couldn't keep." Dagon shrugged.

Olivia's mouth dropped open.

"And that's the end of this conversation." Ransom wrapped his arm around his mate's ribs and pulled her backward. "I can't have you stressing yourself out while you murder him."

Alek came back to the counter, all traces of amusement wiped off his face.

"Time for the meeting?" Zachariah asked.

"We need to go. There's been an attack."



THE SUBURBAN HOUSE WAS A BLOODBATH.

Every member of the family had been slaughtered, shot in their beds while sleeping. There was something about the scent in the house that made my hackles rise, my instincts

urging me to get the fuck out. It wasn't death. I'd become accustomed to that over the centuries.

Eight of us swept the property, then met in the spotless living room of the home where Patrick O'Flannery, the human emissary to the Conclave, waited with two members of his own council.

"Thank you for coming," he finished telling Alek as we filed in.

Zachariah stood with Saint and Dagon, who'd paused their hunt for Samuel at the king's request for their presence, and Talon and I moved to their sides. All of us were quiet.

Finding four dead children didn't exactly lend itself to chatting.

"Of course," Alek answered Patrick as Benedict held the front door open.

Corbin, one of the assassin trainees, ran out of the house, and the sounds of vomiting reached my ears a few seconds later. Couldn't blame the kid.

"What's happened here is an obvious tragedy," Alek said, "but would the human authorities be better equipped to investigate the murder of a human family?"

I shifted my weight, ignoring the call of my instincts to vacate the premises.

"That's the thing." Patrick's jaw flexed as he took a plastic bag out of his pocket and pulled apart the zipper. "We found these shell casings and thought you might recognize—"

"Night thistle," I said as the scent permeated the room. "The scent is muted by the bodies." It was one of the few things that could kill us.

Patrick nodded. "The Sons did this."

Alek paled. "Could you zip that up?"

Patrick did so, then handed the bag to one of his men. "We were tipped off by a council member who stopped by earlier for an appointment."

“These humans were on the council?” Zachariah’s brow furrowed.

“No. He’s an auto-parts dealer,” Benedict said, running a hand down his face. “His name was Harold. He was the one hunting down the parts on the sixty-four-and-a-half Mustang I’ve been working on. I met with him a few—” His mouth slackened and his gaze flew to Alek. “Is this our fault?”

My stomach sank.

“I’m not blaming you,” Patrick said, shaking his head. “I know you would never bring harm to a human family. Can I ask where you met with him?”

“He kept his shop open late for me,” Benedict replied softly. “It’s a second-generation family business I’ve patroned for fifty years or so...” He sighed. “So he knew what I am.”

“That was never in question,” Patrick assured him. “The family has quietly been a friend of the council for years.”

“Not so quiet, now,” Alek said. “But I’ve never seen Sons use night thistle bullets on humans.”

“The scent isn’t as strong,” Benedict added. “Could be they’re adding a small amount to every bullet they make just in case.”

“Their targets have been larger than this lately,” Dagon said. “They’ve gone for schools. Clinics. Aristocratic vampire estates, not human families.”

“Guess they’re changing tactics,” Patrick muttered. “Either the Sons knew that Harold was a friend of the council, or they knew he was doing business with Benedict, but it’s clear that one of those things led to the execution of the family.”

We were quiet as we filed into the front yard. There wasn’t anything else we could do but leave the human police to do their jobs.

One by one, we scattered to our nightly missions, until only Benedict, Talon, and I remained.

“This isn’t your fault,” I told Benedict as he stared at the house, his face stricken.

“It is if they saw me with him.”

Talon turned to me. “You’d better check on your human.”

*Grace.* My chest tightened. I’d been at the hospital in plain sight, at the amusement park, the bungee jumping place—everywhere.

“What human?” Benedict asked, his brow puckering.

“He’s been spending time with a human woman,” Talon answered.

Benedict’s gaze snapped to mine. “You have?”

I nodded. And if they’d seen me...

“You’d better go,” Benedict urged. “We’ll cover the patrol tonight.”

I didn’t need to be told twice.



I WENDED into the shadowed side yard between Grace’s house and her neighbor’s, then paused time, so I could recon unseen and unheard.

Had I inadvertently put her in danger? Simply by being seen with her in the human world?

I examined the area around the house, checked her back door, her garage, everywhere considered an entrance point to the house before I started toward the front porch, my thoughts tangled in a knot of self-loathing. In my time, humans weren’t a considerable threat to vampires. Sure, there was the occasional pitchfork-carrying mob when a bloodmad eliminated a village, but there had never been an organized movement to exterminate us. In fact, in my time, the only threat to Grace besides her own body would have been a bloodmad using her to get to me.

*Samuel.*

How fucking stupid had I been?

I didn't breathe until I stood on her front porch, seeing her paused mid-swing, reading her novel.

She was alive. Samuel hadn't followed me here. The Sons hadn't hunted her down. She was still breathing, still existing.

*For now.*

I backed away and sat on her steps just out of her view before I released time so it could carry on. I'd sit here all night if that's what it took to make sure she was okay.

Illogical laughter bubbled up in my chest, but I kept it in check. I was one of the deadliest predators on the planet, and here I was, sitting guard for a human woman I couldn't get out of my head, determined to save her from a premature death, when death was already stalking her.

The creaks of the swing slowed my heart rate, calming me as I unfucked my head.

*She deserves so much more.*

"Shit," I whispered to myself.

"I can hear you, you know," Grace said, and the swing kept its steady rhythm. "Stop being weird and come sit with me."

Damn, that woman had some incredible hearing. I slammed my mental shields down like it would help me contain my reeling emotions and stood.

She cocked her head at me as I climbed the rest of her steps. "How long have you been sitting there?"

"Just a second or two," I answered. I never counted the time I kept paused. The breeze carried her scent to me as I reached the top step and moved onto her porch.

*Taste.*

Fucking instincts.

Hunger stabbed low and painfully. I needed to feed again before I saw her. Maybe that would shut my instincts up. Hungry vampires were dangerous vampires.

“You look...” She studied me. “Off. Bad day collecting souls, Grim?”

A tiny smile quirked my mouth. “You could say that.”

She sat up and patted the cushion next to her. “Sit.”

God help me, I did.

“It’s been a couple days,” she said, but it wasn’t a lecture.

“I’m realizing that it’s not entirely safe for you to be around me.” I braced my elbows on my knees. “And it’s... troubling.”

“I don’t understand.” She closed her paperback and set it next to her. “I’m the one who keeps dragging you on roller coasters and bungee jumps. Seems to me like it’s not entirely safe for *you* to be around *me*.”

I cracked a smile. “You couldn’t kill me if you tried, Grace.”

But Samuel would have no problem slaying her.

I blinked. *It’s been a couple of days*. If Samuel knew about her, she’d be dead by now. If the Sons had seen us, she would have been their target today. If a vampire’s auto-parts dealer was enough to stir them to violence, then surely a vampire’s female—

*She’s not your female.*

And yet, here I was.

Dagon and Saint would never let me hear the end of it if they saw me like this.

“What are you thinking?” Grace asked, pulling her long hair over one shoulder and exposing her neck. Her pulse beat steadily while mine lurched to a gallop.

“Nothing I should tell you.”

She rolled her eyes. “Fine. Tell me something else.”

“What do you want to know?” I smoothed her hair back from her beautiful face.

“Why did you go into...reaping? Bounty hunting. Whatever it is you do?” She leaned into my touch.

“Ah, the psychologist makes her appearance.” She’d have a field day with me if I ever let her inside.

“Not at all, I promise. I’m just curious.”

“I serve my...society.” My hand slid to the side of her neck. “It’s my honor to make the world safer.”

“So loyalty and honor are big to you.”

“The biggest.” Which was why I was going to have to get away from Grace and stay there.

“And what were you thinking just now?” She touched the ridges between my brows. “What made you crinkle?”

“I was thinking you should be safe as long as I stay away from you,” I confessed in a low voice. “I should walk off this porch and disappear out of your life. That’s the safest bet for you.”

She lifted her brows. “And who said I want to be safe?”

“You only have a few months, Grace. The last thing I’m going to do is put you in any danger that could shorten that time, and there are people who would use you to hurt me.” It was the most honest I could be without flat-out saying it.

“Other reapers?” She shifted to face me. “*Are* there more reapers? I’m curious about how this hallucination works.”

“Hallucination?” I shook my head at her. “You’re still stuck on that?”

“Clearly. You’re far too perfect to be real.” She shrugged.

“And it doesn’t worry you that you think I’m a figment of your imagination?”

“Meh.” A slow smile spread across her face and the spot behind my ribs warmed. “I’ve decided to roll with it. Hallucinations like you are way better than what my mother suffered. And besides—”

Before I could think through what she'd said, she swung her leg over my lap and straddled me. *Holy shit.*

"I've never wanted to kiss anyone the way I want you." Her hands framed my face.

"Is that so?" Mine bracketed her hips like they'd been pulled there by magnets, like that was exactly where they belonged. "You might not like kissing me."

Because I might not be able to keep control. I might be no better than that shittily-written vampire in her novel, cutting her soft lips with my exposed fangs, which I was currently fighting to keep sheathed.

"I highly doubt that," she whispered, her gaze dropping to my mouth. "But even if I don't, then I'll know. And I've decided if I only have a few months, then I don't want to miss out on a single thing."

She kissed me.

Her lips were so fucking soft as she pressed them to mine.

In all my centuries of existence, I'd always been the hunter, the one who made the first move, and yet this delicate, beautifully curved, horribly-fragile *human* woman was now the one making the move.

And I'd fuck it up if I didn't get over my surprise.

I lifted a hand to the nape of her neck, tilted her head slightly and *kissed* her. She moaned, parting her lips, and I sank my tongue into the mouth I'd been dreaming of since I first saw her. The taste of her flooded me, consumed me, raced through my veins and awakened every nerve ending.

*Taste.* The demand roared through my head as I did just that, exploring every line of her mouth, coaxing her tongue to play with mine. Grace kissed me back with complete abandon, her hands sliding into my hair as she rocked forward on my lap and gasped at what she found there.

Yeah, it had taken nothing more but that first touch of her tongue and I was harder than the metal of the porch swing. I fucking *wanted* her.

The need for her body wasn't a suggestion of mine, or even a response of lust. No, it was primal, as though taking her was essential to my existence.

My hand flexed on her hip as I pulled her closer and angled her so she could feel me against her clit every time she rocked, the thin fabric of her pajama pants presenting a barrier in name only. Fuck, she was warm. The heat of her burned through me, incinerating what common sense I had when it came to her.

“Ajax,” she murmured against my lips.

*Claim!*

I kissed her harder, deeper, as her hands slid down my torso, exploring my body with touches that unraveled my control with an ease that would have terrified me if I'd stopped to think about it.

“Touch me,” she demanded, grabbing my hand and slipping it under the bulky fabric of her hooded sweatshirt.

Her skin was pure fucking satin, and I groaned as I moved my fingers up her ribcage. Every part of her was perfect, and God, the *scent* of her. That hint of citrus sweetened with her arousal.

I wanted to taste her, to slide my tongue between her soft thighs—

I yanked back, severing the kiss and slamming my mouth shut as my fangs punched down. My body was so on board with taking *everything*.

And that wasn't going to happen. Not tonight. Not ever. She was already fighting a fucking brain tumor. She didn't need to add blood loss to that.

She stared at me with wonder, her eyes lust-glazed and her breasts rising and falling quickly with her breaths. “Good God, you can kiss.”

As gently as I could, I gripped her hips and shifted her off me. Her ass hit the swing and I moved as quickly as possible—which was pretty fucking quick—across the porch.

“Whoa.” She blinked. “You’re fast.”

“You don’t know the half of it,” I ground out, gripping the porch railing so hard the wood creaked under my hands.

“But I want to.” She stood, and I gritted my teeth. “Why are you over there? You can’t tell me you didn’t like that kiss. I felt *exactly* how much you enjoyed it.”

“Because if I come back over there, I’ll have you on your back within two heartbeats, Grace. My hands will be on your skin, my tongue buried inside you, and my teeth...” I shook my head.

She tugged that kissable lower lip between her teeth. “Maybe I’d be okay with that.”

Of course she would. Because she wanted to experience everything, and she didn’t know that she really was flirting with death at this moment. I prided myself on my control, and yet I wasn’t sure I’d be able to hold back if she so much as *touched* me. The very thing that had first attracted me to her—her passion, her yearning for life—had a very real chance of getting her killed if I didn’t get a damned grip.

“But I wouldn’t be.”

She stiffened.

“There is something about you that completely steals every ounce of control I can muster, Grace. And I don’t want to...” *hurt you*. “Look, there’s just a lot you don’t know about me. So I’m asking that you walk right past me, go inside your house, lock the doors, and go to sleep before you learn things you’re not ready for.”

She cocked an eyebrow. “I think I should be able to decide what I’m ready for.”

Modern females were going to be the death of me. At least this one was.

“Right. But I get to decide what I’m ready to tell you.” I worked at keeping my fangs hidden. “So have some fucking mercy on me and go inside.”

She studied me for a second, making her choice. Then she turned and grabbed her book. “Fine,” she said as she walked to the door. “But I’m going to fantasize about you tonight and there’s nothing you can do about it.” She yanked the door open and then slammed it behind her.

I sat guard on her porch for the rest of the night, replaying every second of that kiss.

It had been too fast, over too quickly, and I knew if I opened that door, she’d welcome me with open arms and that reckless spirit.

But it wasn’t my lack of control that horrified me as much as the low, insistent voice of my instincts that had one single word on fucking repeat.

*Mine.*



**GRACE**

MY PULSE RACED AS I STRADDLED AJAX.

**H**e was so hard—muscles and a considerable length I could feel every time I rocked against him.

*And warm. God, he was so warm as he stroked my mouth with his tongue, urging mine in a dance that stole my breath and made me tremble against him. His hair was silky between my fingers and I relished the touch as I tugged him closer to me.*

*This was kissing.*

*This was something worth living for...*

I blew out a breath, shaking myself from thoughts of last night. It'd been twenty-four hours, and I'd already replayed that kiss in my mind a hundred times.

I'd been kissed before, but what Ajax had done had been so much more.

He'd consumed me. Woken me up. Made my body feel like a live wire with just the power of his mouth. How was that even possible?

Determined to think about literally anything else, I climbed into my bed, dragging my laptop along with me. The sun was setting outside my windows, the last rays of golden light transitioning to shades of indigo and violet.

I opened my email, going over the last details of my living will with the lawyer setting everything up for me. He just needed one last signature and had sent over a digital form to

sign. I clicked it, scanning the details we'd been over a dozen times in the last week.

Anything I had left over in my savings account would go to Maria and her foster care estate, plus my car, which wasn't really worth much now, but maybe she could give it to one of the teenagers currently under her care.

I signed the document and double-checked the confirmation email stating I had. A little weight lifted off my shoulders knowing I'd done everything in my power to make things as easy as possible when I passed. Hell, I'd even given specific instructions for Maria to utilize anything she could from my apartment for the kids in her care.

Now all I had left to do was...whatever I wanted.

I clicked over to my bank website, checking my balances. Running the figures in my head, I had plenty to live off of for the next three months, even enough for a trip overseas, if I wanted.

Opening another browser, I searched for flights to Ireland. I'd always been fascinated with the culture and legends, and I'd read about the *Giant's Causeway* more than once. The historic site not only captivated me with the stunning images I'd seen online, but in the legends surrounding it. Steeped in folklore, the place was rumored to be riddled with magic that couldn't be explained, only experienced.

I'd always wanted to visit, to lose myself in the rich history, and who wouldn't want to experience magic, real or imagined?

I let my mouse hover over a flight option, hesitating as a headache formed behind my eyes. The sky had transitioned to night outside my windows, leaving my room blissfully dark except for the lone lamp I had on my nightstand and the glow from my laptop screen. I closed my eyes, inhaling through my nose as I waited for the pain to be followed by the voices.

But nothing happened beyond the dull ache and a little turn of my stomach. My mind was peacefully quiet, except for my own internal debates as I finally looked back at my laptop

screen. I could hop the flight tomorrow and be exploring the *Giant's Causeway* the following day. Excitement climbed inside me, but something stopped the sensation dead in its tracks.

The image of a different kind of giant flashed behind my eyes.

*Ajax.*

The kiss, the way he'd been keeping me company since we met that night outside the hospital. The friendship we'd formed and the lines we'd crossed. Even when he'd confused the hell out of me and told me to stay away from him, that I'd somehow be *safer* if he wasn't around. Which didn't make any sense, because I'd never felt more safe when I was with him.

Ireland was tempting, but Ajax? He was an exotic locale I wanted to explore more than any other place in the world. I didn't want to lose one second with him, let alone *days*, even knowing our time together had an expiration date.

I closed my laptop and set it on my nightstand before leaning back against the pillows on my bed. I was unusually tired today, even though I hadn't done anything to wear myself out beyond my indecisiveness on what to do next. I could feel it all along my body, a heaviness I couldn't shake, a hunger for something I most certainly didn't have in my house.

*Ajax.*

I wanted more of Ajax, even if it was just his voice.

Reaching for my cell, I quickly dialed his number.

"Hello, Grace," he said by way of answer, and it made a smile stretch across my face.

"Hey, Grim," I said.

"What are you up to now?" he asked.

I stretched out on my bed, sinking deeper against the pillows. "I'm just lying in bed," I answered.

"Lying in bed and thinking about me," he said, his voice gravelly. "Sounds about right," he teased, but he wasn't

wrong. I couldn't *stop* thinking about him, especially after last night.

"Maybe I'm bored and you were the first person I thought of to call," I teased right back. Sounds of metal clinking together echoed in the background, and I furrowed my brow. "Where are you?"

"Home," he said. "Just about to go out on a hun...go out with some of my friends."

I wilted slightly at that, not that I'd expected him to race to my place merely because I called.

"It sounds like there's a sword fight happening over there," I joked, and he huffed a laugh.

"My friends are messing around," he said, but I could hear him moving through his home, finding a quieter space. "There," he said after a few moments. "Now I'm on my bed too."

"Look at us," I said, my cheeks flushing. "We're both in bed."

*Wish you were in my bed.* The words climbed up my throat, but I couldn't free them.

"I can let you go," I said instead. "If you need to be with your friends."

"I'd much rather be out with you," he said, making my pulse skip. "And I have a little time."

Time. I swear the man was obsessed with it more than I was, and I was the one who only had so much of it left.

"You say things like that," I said softly, fiddling with my comforter. "But you also said it would be better if you weren't around me."

"I know," he said, sighing. I could almost picture him raking his fingers through his long hair. "I'm a complicated individual, Grace."

"So if I hadn't called..."

“I’ll always answer if you call,” he finished for me, and warmth expanded in my chest. But he said nothing to my unspoken question...if I hadn’t called, would he have? Or would he have stuck to his intention of staying away from me in the name of safety? Was I being ridiculous, thinking of passing up a trip to Ireland for the mere chance that I’d see him again?

What had he done to me?

“You’re not doing anything dangerous tonight, are you, Grace?” he asked when I’d stayed silent too long.

“What if I was?” I teased. I had no intention of leaving this bed, not when exhaustion clung to my bones. An off day. I was definitely having an off day. I knew I needed to sleep, even though it was the last thing I wanted to do. I needed energy for the last moments I had left.

“I’d have to bail on my friends and my rules and be dangerous with you.”

I grinned at that. “Because you’re my reaper?”

“You know it,” he said, and I felt tingly all over. Something about him filled me with an energy and craving I couldn’t explain. Like simply talking to him made everything better, made everything in my life make sense. Which made no sense at all.

It was too perfect, the way he made me feel, which only further added to my suspicions that he was a manifestation of my mind, a delusion created to ignore the tragic reality of my situation.

“Do I ever get to see your house?” I asked, and Ajax fell silent over the line.

Yep. Mark that one in the delusion column. Couldn’t visit a figment of my imagination’s house.

“I told you, Grace, it’s not safe—”

“And yet here we are...talking.”

“That’s different,” he said, almost a plea in his tone. “No one can see me talking to you over the phone.”

I furrowed my brow. “Who would see you?” Panic lashed through me. Oh, God, did he have a wife? A family I didn’t know about. Was that what *keeping me safe* meant? Sparing my feelings from when I found out he had someone else in his life who loved him and cared for him and would be devastated if she found out he was with me?

“You don’t want to know.”

“No,” I said, spiraling. “I think I do. I think I deserve to know if you have some wife out there who is eventually going to catch—”

A low growl cut off my words. “You think I would lie about something like that?”

His wounded words speared straight to the center of my heart. I swallowed hard, sighing. “No,” I sighed. “I don’t know. It doesn’t make sense, Ajax. This sudden insistence that we stay away from each other. Unless...”

Unless he was trying to protect himself from the hurt my death would cause.

Now that made sense in a way that nearly broke my heart.

But surely, I couldn’t mean that much to him already, right?

“Grace,” he warned. “Don’t do that.”

“Do what?”

“Whatever you’re doing in your head,” he said. “I can practically feel the analyzing through the phone. Me wanting to keep my distance has everything to do with my life, my circumstances, not yours. If I did anything that caused you harm...”

“Those parts of your life you said you weren’t ready to tell me about?”

“Yes.”

I sighed, but understood. I wasn’t a person to push or beg for information, especially if it was this personal. Sure, I’d

shared every gritty, dark piece of myself with him, but that didn't mean he had to reciprocate.

I toyed with my blankets some more, wondering how we'd gotten here. I shrugged, even though he couldn't see me. "Still wish I could see your house," I said, circling back.

"Why do you want to see my place?" he asked, clearly deflecting.

"You've seen mine..."

"So, now I have to show you mine?" he laughed, and I couldn't help but laugh too. The tightness in my chest from the previous conversation eased slightly.

"Maybe I'm curious what your room looks like." *And your bed and your shower...*

"Basic," he said. "Bed, bathroom, books."

"What kind of books?" I asked, perking up.

"Old ones."

"Like the classics?"

"You could say that."

"You know how much I love reading," I said. "And how much I enjoy you reading to me. I respect the classics, but you know I'm more of a paranormal romance and fantasy kind of girl."

"I know," he said. "If I had a supernatural book, I'd pick it up and read it to you right now."

I grinned, warmth fluttering underneath my skin.

"We read about a vampire," he continued, his voice almost hesitant. "But I know you have other paranormal books on your nightstand."

I glanced at said books, my brow furrowing. "Do you have a favorite supernatural creature?" he asked before I could remember.

"Oh, that's a hard one!" I chewed on my bottom lip for a moment. "I really do love them all. Fae and werewolves and

grim reapers, of course,” I said. “But I guess if I had to pick one creature to read about for the rest of my life, it would be vampires.”

Ajax coughed on the other end of the line before sucking in a deep breath. “Really? Why?”

“They’re fascinating,” I said. “And come on, eternal life? No sickness, no diseases. Just life. How could I *not* be interested in that?”

“All in exchange for consuming human blood though,” he countered. “Wouldn’t that bother you?”

“No way,” I said with confidence. Truly, I’d given it way more thought than anyone should. Gotta love getting lost in fantasies when your reality is shit. “I’ve worked it all out,” I said, laughing a little. “If I *had* to kill people, I’d only feed from the absolute worst humans. You know, murderers and child abusers and the like. And if all I had to do was make sure I fed a little, then there are such things as blood banks. I’d just borrow some so I wouldn’t hurt anyone.”

Ajax laughed. “And what about the sun? Giving it up?”

“I’d give up the sun right now if it gave me a chance at forever.”

A heaviness settled over the line between us, and I almost facepalmed myself. I sure knew how to bring down a fun conversation.

“I can see your point,” he finally said, but he sounded sort of sad for some reason.

“Vampires are also sexy as hell,” I said, trying to get back to the playful place the conversation had started.

“What is it you find sexy about them? That they sparkle?” he teased.

“Ah, so you know Twilight.”

“I may have come across it.”

I chuckled. “No, sparkling is cool and all, but the sexy is in the dominance, the claiming and the passion vampires in

books always have. The way they are so devoted when they find their true match, the way they will do anything for that person.” I let out a wistful sigh. “It’s a delightful fantasy to get lost in.”

“A fantasy,” he repeated, something heavy about his voice. “You’re not wrong. But the idea of a vampire biting you doesn’t creep you out?”

Warm shivers danced over my skin. “Not at all,” I admitted. “That’s part of the fantasy. Being totally consumed by something else entirely. Submitting in a way that takes total trust. It’s all very romantic.”

Ajax laughed again. “Good to know,” he said, a hint of teasing in his tone.

I yawned, unable to help it. “When can I see you again?”

“Grace, you sound tired,” he said instead of answering. “You need to rest.”

My eyes were already drifting closed. They were so damn heavy. “I like hearing your voice,” I admitted. “Just a few more minutes?”

“You can have as many minutes of mine as you want.” I could hear the smile in his voice.

“Thank you,” I said, my voice softening as sleep hooked its claws in me and tugged.

“For what?”

“For being here,” I said. “Even if you are just something I conjured to help make my last days more enjoyable.”

“If I really was some figment of your imagination, Grace, wouldn’t I be in your bed right now?”

“Yes,” I said, a little dazed. “You’d be right here, those delicious arms wrapped around me. Nothing between us. I’d get to finally trace the lines of ink decorating your skin. And find out what your hands feel like against the softest parts of me. It would be just you and me and...”

“And what?”

“Time,” I whispered. “Just you and me and the time I need to *feel* you.”

“*Grace*,” Ajax breathed my name, the sound filled with warmth and longing and something else I couldn’t place.

I woke up a few hours later, my phone still pressed to my ear, the line long since dead. And I couldn’t help but wonder how long Ajax had waited until he’d hung up. A part of me felt like he’d been here the whole time, watching over me, helping chase away nightmares that would keep me from the rest I needed.

I rolled over, tucking myself under the covers, the blanket of sleep still holding me tight as I imagined what it would be like if he really were here. Arms around me, grounding me, protecting me, and ensuring not even my mind would betray me.



## AJAX

“**T**hey’re calling it a home invasion gone awry,” Lachlan said quietly as we walked across the courtyard to the Domum.

“Even though not a single thing was taken?” Zachariah arched a brow at the second-in-command.

“And you wonder why we’re doing more than hunting bloodmad vampires in this century,” Zachariah answered.

The payment for eating evening repast in the relative solace of the residence was the one day a week Alek asked us to eat with the nobles, and it was time to pay the piper. At least he didn’t make us dress up. Benedict might be wearing one of those three-piece suits he liked, but the rest of us were rolling in our leathers, boots, and an assortment of shirts.

I favored the Henley style. The fabric of this century had the kind of stretch I’d longed for the first few centuries of my life, especially since I wasn’t exactly the smallest guy in the room. Zachariah enjoyed the crisp lines of a button-down with no tie, Dagon liked short-sleeve shirts—black, of course,—like the rest of us—and Talon was wearing a T-shirt from a band called *Pink Floyd*.

In deference to the setting, most of us only carried a weapon or two. My Sig was holstered at my hip, and my dagger sheathed along my right thigh. I might have enjoyed the modern convenience of guns, but I was still more comfortable with a dagger.

Then there was Saint, who looked like he'd just stepped out of one of the Matrix movies, sans trench coat. He practically dripped weaponry, as if there were a chance Samuel might walk around the corner and present himself for execution.

Ransom had blinked when we'd presented ourselves for repast, but Zachariah stepped in front of Saint and everyone was smart enough to keep their mouths shut.

If my brother wanted to deck himself out like he was a one-man army, then so be it.

"Maybe it's for the best that the police are so quick to assume it was a home invasion," Talon said as we approached the massive glass doors of the Domum. "The last thing we need are non-Conclave humans stumbling into this war."

"Good point," Alek noted before walking in with Lyric on his arm. The rest of the assassins filed in, and then we hunters stepped into the pristine hallway.

This place was as formal as the residence was comfortable.

Every aristocrat halted, moving to the sides of the hall as we passed, bowing as Alek and Lyric passed.

"You can walk up here with us, you know," Ransom said over his shoulder. "We don't think you're inferior, for fuck's sake."

"Inferior?" I replied, grinning widely in the middle of our informal formation. "You think we let you go first because we feel...inferior?"

"Arrogant ass." Dagon grumbled.

Talon flat-out laughed.

Ransom's forehead puckered as we turned the corner into the glitzy ballroom, his hand on the small of Olivia's back. "I don't get your meaning."

"Put him out of his misery, Ajax," Zachariah ordered, a slight smirk curving his mouth, all of us walking down the center aisle between the perfectly spaced trestle tables full of stumbling aristocrats, hurrying to stand as we passed by.

“We take the rear because we’re more experienced in combat and better capable of protecting the king’s back,” I answered, my grin only growing at the indignation in the combat-master’s face.

“That’s...” Ransom’s mouth dropped.

“True,” Zachariah supplied. “True was the word you were looking for.”

“Close your mouth, dear.” Olivia reached up and gently closed her mate’s mouth for him. “We’re in public.”

Talon laughed harder, and we climbed the few steps of the dais, taking the closest seats as the other vampires—and Valor—filed down the long table.

“It never bothers you that Zachariah doesn’t sit at the king’s right?” Dagon asked in a low whisper from my left as we pulled our chairs closer to the table like the spectacles we were.

“If it doesn’t bother Zachariah, it doesn’t bother me,” I answered, keeping my voice equally quiet.

Zachariah shot us a look from the other side of Talon that said he heard what was being said. He’d perfected that look over centuries of leading our peculiar family, and it usually meant we were in for a lecture later.

“You know what bothers me?” I said as the talem began serving our plates and filling goblets with the canned shit none of us preferred. The scent of it hit my nose and my stomach twisted with nausea. “Feeling like I’m in a zoo.” Every aristocrat tended to look at us with a healthy mix of respect and fear, and an annoying fascination that gave us almost no privacy.

“Amen,” Dagon responded, holding his hand over his own goblet when the talem reached over his shoulder. “No, thank you.” The talem moved on and Dagon flicked his wrist, lifting a precise stream of water from the pitcher in front of Zachariah and arching it to his own goblet. He didn’t spill a drop. Fuck, was his control incredible.

“I hate when you do that,” Zachariah lectured, leaning forward slightly. “Just ask me to pass the damned water.”

“My way is faster.” Dagon shrugged.

I looked out over the sea of nobles to see them staring at Dagon with wide eyes. The room was almost full now, which meant there were *a lot* of them. At least Alek didn’t keep an overly formal court. People came and went as they pleased within the room.

“Plus, we may as well put on a show for the patrons.” His smile was frighteningly fake as he took a drink.

“Just once,” Zachariah muttered. “I’d like to get through a repast just once without feeling like you guys are going to throw the tables over—”

“Like that one time—” Talon started, his eyes dancing.

“In Constantinople,” Saint finished.

“Istanbul,” I corrected him.

“Right.” He nodded. “Istanbul.” He glared at the blood goblet like it had personally done something to offend him. “Remember the days when the humans came to the table?”

Dagon grunted with a smile. “Good days.”

“So convenient, too,” Talon added. “And I’m never against a curvy ass in my lap while I—”

“Just once,” Zachariah interrupted, shaking his head. “Ajax,” he ordered in a tone I knew all too well.

Every hunter heard the cue and set their hands on the table.

My power flexed, and I threw it into a spherical bubble, stopping time for everyone in the ballroom except those of us at the end of the table.

Zachariah glanced at the room before turning his disapproving glare on Talon. “You cannot sit at the king’s table in the middle of court and loudly reminisce about some feeder’s ass in your lap hundreds of years ago.”

“King Tarak never minded,” Talon retorted. “In fact, I remember more than a few humans in his lap.”

Most of us muttered our assent. The king before Alek’s father had been...raucous in the best possible ways.

“That was over eight hundred years ago,” Zachariah lectured, his hazel eyes narrowing on us. “As you can see, things have evolved.” He gestured toward the room.

“I don’t think fake-ass nobles dressing themselves in jewels and drinking bagged blood from a cup make them evolved,” Dagon argued. “I think it makes them fake.”

“Agreed,” Talon said, reaching for a piece of bacon and looking at the closest table of nobles. “Look there.”

I bit into a biscuit and followed his line of sight to where Cassandra Zorin sat with a preening group of aristocrats, all daintily holding their goblets mid-sip.

“Half of those nobles would happily unseat our king for his throne,” Talon continued.

“Same could be said for our time,” I argued, just for the sake of arguing.

“This *is* our time,” Zachariah chided.

“Fine, but in *our* time, those nobles would have been open and honest about their intent. Someone would have brought a challenge against the king. Today it’s all done in shadows and lies. There’s no integrity among the nobles.” Talon bit into his bacon.

Hunger bit into my stomach and surged through my veins. I reached for the crimson-filled goblet, but the scent of the bagged blood turned my hunger to overwhelming nausea.

“We simply have to”— Zachariah started, then narrowed his eyes on me. “What is going on with you?”

“It’s the blood. Probably bad or something.” I set the goblet back down.

“It’s the human,” Talon muttered between bites.

*And here we go.*

“What human?” Zachariah cocked his head and leaned forward in his seat.

“Seriously?” I shot a look at Talon. So much for keeping Grace a secret.

“Hey, if you’re going to spend almost every night checking in on the woman, then your brothers should know.” Talon kept eating unapologetically.

“What. Human.” Zachariah repeated.

“She’s...” Fuck, what *was* she? She wasn’t my girlfriend or whatever mortals called courting in this century. She wasn’t *nothing* to me, either. She was the first thought I had at rising, and the last thought before my eyes shut in the morning.

And I wasn’t ready to examine why that was.

“She’s a friend,” I finally managed to say.

“A friend you’re fucking?” Dagon asked, stabbing his food with his fork and carrying on like we weren’t examining my personal life.

“Please. Ajax fucking a human? That’s laughable.” Saint drummed his fingers on the tabletop.

“Like you haven’t fucked a human,” Dagon retorted.

“I’m not the size of a fucking tree.”

“True.” Dagon waved his fork at me. “He makes a good point. Humans are kind of fragile, and you’re...not.”

“We’re not having this conversation.” I shook my head. Not that we hadn’t been in the same situation countless times over the centuries, giving each other shit about whichever female’s bed we were occupying, but Grace was...different.

“I mean, aren’t you scared you’ll break her?” Dagon continued.

Yes, actually, I was. It was one of the many logical reasons I had for keeping away from her. Problem was, the illogical knowledge that I didn’t want to. She was laughter and life, and everything I’d thought the centuries of my existence had numbed me to.

“Grace isn’t up for discussion.” The words came out as little more than a growl, as a primal, undeniable anger prowled through me.

“Touchy.” Talon smiled, clearly enjoying my discomfort.

“What human?” Zachariah’s voice rose, and my temper snapped.

“She’s not up for discussion!” I snapped, jerking back my power so that time started around us again.

My brothers stared at me like I’d lost my mind, and Zachariah’s forehead puckered.

I sat back in my chair and stared at the goblet of blood. What the fuck had just happened to me? I never lost my temper. Never.

I was the easygoing one. The calm one. The rational one.

I wasn’t...whatever this was.

“Why don’t you take tonight off?” Zachariah suggested in a tone that implied it wasn’t a suggestion.

“Yeah.” I nodded.

“Everything okay?” Ransom asked, glancing over us with confusion.

“Yep,” Talon answered.

“Ajax,” Zachariah commanded my attention.

I turned slightly to look him in the eyes.

“Don’t go there hungry.”



THIS WAS A BAD IDEA, and yet here I was anyway, standing in the corner of Grace’s kitchen as she made spaghetti carbonara for the two of us.

The space was a mix of efficient and feminine, the room painted with bright, warm colors that made it feel more like a home than anywhere I’d ever lived.

“It smells amazing.” I leaned against the counter of her cozy kitchen, having been forbidden to touch anything. Dinner wasn’t the only thing that smelled mouth-watering. Every time Grace leaned into my space, reaching for various spices, I had to bite back a groan and fight to keep my fangs from extending.

“Thank you,” she replied with a smile that simultaneously made my chest ache and my dick hard. “It’s the only thing I’m really good at making, so don’t get used to it.”

“I won’t.” Fuck, did she look good tonight. But she always did. She’d traded her pajama pants for a green sundress that flirted with her thighs as her hips swished back and forth to the rhythm of the music coming through the speakers.

How could someone so in love with life be dying?

I’d tried to heed Zachariah’s advice, but my stomach had rioted the second I’d gotten near the feeders in the Domum. Instead, I’d pretty much plugged my nose and swallowed as much of the bag of O negative as I could handle, which wasn’t nearly enough to constitute a feeding.

Which meant I wasn’t just hungry for the pasta she was happily preparing.

“You seem...restless tonight,” Grace noticed.

“I haven’t moved from this spot since you told me to stay here.” I folded my arms across my chest.

“You can’t blame me for wanting to keep an eye on you. You always end up disappearing on me. And besides, I don’t mean restless like you’re about to go run a mile,” she said, studying me carefully. “There’s just something about you that’s a little different, a little edgy. Your eyes seem darker, and...” She shook her head. “Maybe it’s just me.”

Nope, not her. She was just that observant.

My kind weren’t exactly fun to be around when we needed to feed.

“I’m hungry. Nothing to worry about.” I flashed her a smile.

“Really? That’s all?” She lifted a brow at me.

“It’s a little more complicated than that, but basically, yes.” If she knew how she smelled, how that steady, thrumming pulse at her neck called to me, she would have shoved me out the door and thrown the deadbolt.

At least, I hoped she would have.

“Well, I’m getting ready to feed you, so that should solve that problem.” She stirred the pasta one last time, then donned hot pot holders and drained the silver pot into a strainer in the sink. Steam caressed the lines of her cheeks. “And then we’re going to have sex.”

I blinked. There was no way I just heard her say that...was there? My body was pretty fucking certain, though, and it was fully on board with the suggestion. Heat and lust raced through my veins, triggering the very instincts I’d tried to keep quiet tonight.

*Taste.*

She put the pasta back into the pot and smiled at me as she spun back to the stove.

“I’m sorry. I think I misheard you,” I said slowly.

“I said we’re going to have sex,” she said, glancing over at me before adding the pasta to the sauce. “After dinner.” She set the pot on one of the unused burners. “Plus, by then I’ll have a pretty good grip on if you’re a hallucination, right? Unless I can magically eat all this by myself.”

I stared at her, and then stared some more, locking every muscle to keep from lunging for her and forgetting about dinner. “That’s not going to happen,” I finally managed to say.

She came toward me, those spectacular eyes locked on mine, then reached around me and opened the cabinet behind my shoulder. “Sure it is. I want you. From what I remember of that kiss, you want me. We’re both consenting adults, and I’m sick of wasting every minute I have left on this earth. I’m ready to act.”

Dishes clanked softly behind me as she retrieved two plates without breaking eye contact, bringing her mouth perilously close to mine with the way I had my head tilted down to watch her.

“Come on, Ajax. Where’s that warrior spirit your mother named you for?” she teased, slowly lowering herself from her tiptoes. “Act with me.”

With that taunting little line, she turned away from me, toward the stove.

“Not sure you’d enjoy my particular brand of kink, Grace.” The truth—in so far that I could tell it—was the best bet here. The best thing for Grace would have been to scream in terror at the realization of the predator I was and kick me out of her house, out of her *life*.

But fuck, did I want to sink my fangs into that sweet neck at the same moment I claimed her curvy little body.

*Taste*. Yeah, the predator that lurked within me absolutely agreed.

“Try me.” She shot me a look of pure challenge as she heaped food onto plates.

What the fuck could I say to this woman to convince her that getting the hell away from me was her safest option?

“What if I want to sink my teeth into you?”

She turned off the remaining burner and set the pan down, then turned toward me. “I’ve never been into the whole biting thing, but okay.”

My lips parted, and my fangs ached, but stayed in place.

I was not some decades-old novice. I could fucking control myself.

“And what if I want to do more than bite?” I lowered my arms as slowly as she took her time walking toward me, her bare feet silent on the floor. “What if I’m exactly like that book you love?”

“A vampire?” she asked, stopping short, only a few feet away. Her eyebrows rose, but there was no fear in her eyes. “I’ve never really done role-play, either, let alone with a hallucination. Come to think of it, there are so many things I’ve never done. That’s kind of sad, isn’t it? I’ve spent my entire life pushing myself for a degree I’m never even going to use, and completely neglected everything...fun.” She held up her fingers one at a time. “I’ve never had sex in a public place, never tried bondage, or anything really outside a few positions.”

A growl started low in my chest at the thought of her sharing her body with *anyone* else.

*Fucking stop it.* Women in this century slept with men with the same degree of freedom that men had always used to sleep with whomever they wanted. My territorial pain-in-the-ass instincts were just going to have to catch up to the equality of the times.

“Nothing outside a few positions,” I repeated, needing to fill the silence before the only thing she heard was the sound of her own moans as I started ticking off her little list.

“Nope.” She shrugged. “My undergrad boyfriend wasn’t exactly worth bragging about, and then graduate school...” Her nose crinkled in distaste. “Well, he wasn’t anything to brag about.”

“Hmm.” Controlling myself around Grace was hard enough already without her casually talking about sex like my dick wasn’t hard enough to punch through my fucking pants already. This was fucking *torture*.

“I’ve never even had sex in the shower, or had a guy go down on me, or tried—”

I stopped her mouth with mine and kissed her quiet, only to realize that I’d pretty much thrown gasoline on the fire that already raged within my body for her.

She melted against me, her tongue stroking against mine as I took her mouth over and over, telling her wordlessly how badly I wanted her. Grabbing her ass, I hauled her against me

and lifted, grunting at the perfection of her curves. Her hands tunneled through my hair as I walked forward to the kitchen table and sat her on the edge.

“Tell me no,” I demanded as I trailed my mouth down her neck, cataloging every response she had as my hands roamed over the swell of her hips and the dip of her waist.

“Why would I do that?” She sighed, letting her head fall back as my lips found her collarbone.

“Because if you don’t, I’m going to take care of one of the things on that little list of yours right fucking now.” I kissed my way to the swell of her breasts, then gave in and let my teeth rake gently across the soft skin.

“Again...why would I say no?” She separated her knees.

“Fuck.” I stepped between her thighs, grasped her hips, and dragged her to the very edge of the table. Then I kissed her and let the rest of the world fade away.

Nothing mattered. Not the dinner rapidly cooling on the counter. Not her sickness. Not my unchecked hunger. She was air and she was sustenance, and damn, did she kiss me back like she felt the same exact way.

My hands skimmed the outside of her thighs, slipping under the hem of her dress.

“Tell me no,” I repeated as I reached the strands of lace she called underwear.

“Yes.” She grabbed ahold of my face and pulled back so I could see her eyes. “Yes.”

*Taste. Claim.* I was fucking working on it.

I dropped to my knees, shoved her dress up to her hips, and tasted the skin of her inner thigh all before she could so much as gasp. Slower. I had to go slower.

She wasn’t a vampire. Grace was beautifully human, and my speed would scare the shit out of her. I had to be gentle. So. Very. Gentle. But fuck, she smelled like desire, and that heady scent filled my lungs with every breath.

But I could do slow. I could do gentle.

Then her hands tightened in my hair and all bets were off.

My fangs punched down.

I nicked each of the strands of her underwear with the sharp edges of my elongated canines and the fabric fell away.

Her heart rate sped to a gallop as I drew back and looked at her. Pink, glistening, shiny, and wet, she was pure perfection.

*Mine*, my instincts roared as animalistic need ripped through me.

“Ajax?” Grace’s voice was as soft as she was.

“You are fucking gorgeous.” That was all I could say before I lost all semblance of gentleness and set my mouth on her pussy.

Her breath caught and then she moaned.

It was the sweetest sound I’d ever heard. She was hot beneath my lips, and the taste of her went straight to my head. The sweet florals and tang of citrus mixed with a sweetness I couldn’t get enough of. My tongue tasted every inch, flicking over her clit until it swelled for me, until her hips rocked against my face as I devoured her.

“Oh my *God*.” Her hands held my head against her as if there was anywhere else in the world I wanted to be.

I was careful to keep my fangs safely behind my lips as I swirled my tongue around her, then dipped to slip inside her.

“Ajax!”

I groaned, then fucked her with my tongue like I wanted to with my cock, spearing her over and over as she rolled her hips for more. Her entire body went tight as her cries came faster, higher in pitch.

My Grace wasn’t quiet and I fucking loved it. I wanted to hear her scream my name from now until the end of time.

Her pleasure was all that mattered, and I switched my tongue with my fingers, savoring the way the walls of her

pussy gripped me tight as I stroked her higher and higher, curling in at just the right angle.

“Yes! Don’t stop. Don’t...” Her breaths became choppy and her thighs all but locked around my head.

Right there. She was right fucking there. I lashed my tongue against her clit and pressed and she flew apart, her cries echoing off the walls as she arched against my mouth, coming hard.

The second I started to work her down, the hunger I’d kept at bay surged within me, turning my vision thermal.

*Fuck.* I wanted to bite her so fucking badly—

“Bite,” she demanded, and I could hear the smile in her voice, the lethargy that came after the high. “Come on, Ajax. Do your worst,” she teased.

Her scent, her warmth, her rushing pulse, it was all too much.

“Bite,” she urged.

I turned my head, into the silken skin of her thigh, and *bit*.

Then I moaned. Her blood was thick and sweet, coating my throat as I swallowed, as I drank.

She gasped, and I paused, fighting through the predatory haze of hunger to remember that she was delicate. She was fragile.

“More,” she demanded, her hands in my hair.

I gave her more, slowly fucking her with my fingers as I drank from her thigh. She was sunshine I’d missed for centuries. She was light and passion and everything I needed. She was already tightening, already breathing quickly, already climbing that second peak the bite had given her.

I added my thumb to her clit and sent her careening, groaning at how her blood sweetened with the second orgasm. Fuck, I was never going to get enough of this. I drank and drank, trying to appease an insatiable thirst.

She melted above me, her hands falling away from my hair.

Then her heartbeat slowed.

Too slow.

*Shit.* I retracted my fangs from her thigh and licked over the tiny wounds, sealing them so she didn't lose any more blood. She'd already lost too much.

I rose to my feet, catching Grace before she wobbled backward, and my stomach clenched. I'd taken too much. There was no excuse. Nothing sweet I could say to pardon the absolute abuse of the gift she'd given me.

Fuck. Fuck. *Fuck.*

Her eyes were glazed, her blinks coming slower and slower as she looked up at me. "I think I like it when you bite me."

"Yeah, I like it a little too much." Cradling her head against my chest, I lifted my wrist to my mouth and cursed what was surely about to end whatever relationship we'd had. A quick, clean slice of my fang opened the vein. "I'm going to need you to do something weird."

"I'm game." She grinned at me.

"Drink." I put my wrist against her mouth. "Please, baby. You have to."

*Baby?* Since fucking when did I call anyone *baby*?

Keeping her eyes locked on mine, she did as I asked. Her blink of surprise wasn't revulsion. She didn't push me away and scream. No, she moaned as my blood flowed into her. Then she grasped my wrist and held on tight, taking swallow after swallow.

It was the hottest thing I'd ever seen in my hundreds of years of existence. My cock throbbed behind my zipper. I wanted to be inside her, pumping hard and deep while she drank her fill, while I gave her everything she needed.

*Stop that. She's not a vampire. She's a fucking human.*

A human I'd nearly drained to death with my lack of control. A *sick* human.

God, I really was a monster.

Color flushed her cheeks, and I nodded as her heart rate steadied. "That's enough." I pulled my wrist away from her mouth and sealed the cut with my tongue.

"That was..." Her eyes were wide as she looked up at me, and the scent of desire coming off her again was nearly my undoing as she reached for me.

It would be hers if I gave in.

"That was the last time that ever happens." I steadied her on the table, then turned and practically ran the fuck out of the house.



# GRACE

“How are you feeling, Grace?” Doctor Watson asked as she came into the room, her white lab coat fluttering behind her.

I nodded slowly from where I sat in the patient chair tucked across the tiny exam room. “I’m doing okay,” I answered. Honestly, I hadn’t wanted to come in to see her, but I needed a refill on my anti-nausea meds, and she’d insisted I come in for another set of scans while getting the refill. Plus, there *was* a question I really needed her to answer.

Apprehension climbed up my throat, threatening to steal the words away.

“How are the headaches?” she asked, taking a seat across from me as she clicked her pen and scribbled something down on my chart.

“Come and go,” I said.

“And the nausea? You’re here for a refill on the meds I gave you a few weeks ago?”

“Yeah, the nausea has been more persistent. It’s making it difficult to do the things I need to do.”

Like convincing Ajax to let go of whatever was holding him back.

*Citrus and vanilla.* His blood had tasted better than my favorite coffee, my favorite wine, any of it. And what he’d done to my body? God, I’d never been so consumed before. Never felt so cherished, so safe in his arms.

*His teeth sinking into the sensitive flesh of my inner thigh.*

Did that even happen? Or had I manifested a scene straight out of my favorite fiction? To be fair, Ajax was way better than any fantasy, but I was *terrified* he was just that...a fantasy.

And he'd been so incredibly busy the last five days—something about his work—that I was back to my theory that I'd conjured him out of thin air. Maybe more so, after the delicious swapping-of-blood scenario.

“We'll get that taken care of,” she said, jerking me back to the present. Something bright danced in her gaze. “I got your scans back,” she said, sliding two clear image boards out of the folder she held. She stood up, positioning them on the light board and clicked it on. “You see this?” she asked, pointing to the dark mass that was slowly killing me.

“Yep,” I said. “Looks the same as two weeks ago.”

“But it's not,” she said, turning back to me. “It's a millimeter smaller than your last scan.”

“Okay,” I said, shrugging. “Is that significant?”

Her shoulders dropped as she sat back down. “Well, in your type of case, we usually love to see any kind of shrinking. I know it's not a lot, but it's something of note. Have you given any more thought to treatment? If it's shrinking on its own—”

“Thanks, doc,” I said over her. “But I'm not changing my mind about treatment.” I blew out a breath, watching the frustration shape her features. “I appreciate you taking the scans and telling me, caring enough to continue to give me the anti-nausea meds and offer treatment, but I just can't. I finally feel like I'm enjoying what's left of my life, and I don't want to throw a roadblock in that.”

Doctor Watson nodded, understanding flashing in her eyes. “That's definitely your choice, even if I'd advise against it.”

I smiled at her. I knew she meant well, but I couldn't give myself the hope. Especially with how little the movement was. And how? What had caused that millimeter difference? Maybe

the scan just didn't capture it all or maybe it did shrink on its own. It wouldn't make a difference in the end. Death, I'd accepted. Hope wasn't something I could survive.

"Was there anything else you needed to talk to me about today, Grace?"

I blinked out of my thoughts, nodding. "Yes," I said. "Even though I'm not getting treatment, I still want to be educated on my situation. I remember certain things about what happened to my mother, and I've Googled some stuff, but I figured you're a much better source than a search engine."

"I'll do my best," she said. "Shoot."

"What other kind of side effects can I expect over the next few months? The headaches and nausea I understand, but could there be other...things?" I swallowed around the lump in my throat.

*Like hearing voices or hallucinating about a sexy man sinking his teeth into me and then feeding me his blood in return?*

She sighed, laying her palm flat over my chart. "Yes, there are a multitude of side effects that come with your condition. You could experience blurred vision, dizziness, the inability to remember common words, even seizures in some cases."

Icy fear crackled down my spine at the thought of losing total control of my body for moments at a time.

"Anything else?" I asked, unable to say the word aloud.

She tilted her head. "Is there something specific you're concerned about?"

"Sort of," I said, and nearly choked on the lie I was about to tell. "Like I said, I can't remember everything about my mother and what she experienced, but I think I remember her having hallucinations?"

Doctor Watson nodded. "That is a possibility, yes. But it's rare."

My heart sank to the pit of my stomach.

*Ajax wasn't real.*

I'd had a suspicion all along because he'd been too perfect, his appearance in my life too perfect. Sexy, strong, and protective. Kind and mysterious and a fantastic listener. Funny and surprising and incredibly perceptive. All the qualities I found attractive in a partner, and I'd put them in a brain mixer and blended him up.

The certainty made me feel like the floor was disintegrating beneath my feet.

"If you have experienced hallucinations or start to, it's imperative that you get here straight away. We'd need to hospitalize you for your own safety," she said, drawing me back to reality.

I shook my head, feigning a smile. "I haven't," I said, and maybe it wasn't a total lie. Yeah, Ajax was most likely something I created in my mind, but I didn't have proof one way or another. And besides, I hadn't hurt myself or anyone else while hallucinating him. That had to count for something.

"That's good to hear, Grace," she said, rising from her seat. "Your meds are downstairs and ready for you at the pharmacy." She held the door open for me, and I stepped into the hallway.

"Thank you," I said. "Again, for everything."

She smiled softly at me. "I'm always here," she said. "If you change your mind or need anything else."

"I appreciate that," I said, then turned down the hallway.

I hit the pharmacy, shoved my pills in my purse, and headed outside. Appointments with Doctor Watson were always in the evening because she worked the graveyard shift, but I didn't mind. I loved inhaling the night air as I stepped outside on the hospital grounds. The red brick buildings sat among large green trees, the moon shining high above, making the place seem more welcoming than it likely should, seeing that it was a place surrounded by death.

I pulled out my cell, clicking on the Lyft app. I'd already given my car to Maria when we'd chatted last week. One of

the teenagers under her care had just gotten his first job and needed the transportation, and I could easily Lyft anywhere I needed to go. It made my heart feel a tad lighter just to know it was going to someone who really needed it.

I paused a few steps down the pathway, a shiver of apprehension bursting on the back of my neck. I glanced around, unable to shake the feeling of being watched. There were a few other patients going in and out of the building, or doctors and nurses and interns, but none of them were paying any attention to me.

Weird. I shook of the sensation, telling myself it was likely just another symptom of the tumor, and kept walking.

*Grace.*

I gasped as the sound of Ajax's voice filled my head, the sound so jarring I nearly dropped my phone. I looked up from it, instinctively following the warm sensation I felt pulsing around his voice in my mind, and turned around.

Ajax was sitting on one of the little wooden benches that decorated the hospital grounds several feet away, his arms stretched over the back, his massive frame dominating the small furniture. I swallowed hard, unable to stop the reaction my body had to seeing him.

One look, and I could almost feel his lips against mine, felt the tingle there as if he'd just kissed me. One glance, and I ached for him to hold me, to speak in that deep tenor of his and make the real world fall away.

The real world.

But he wasn't part of the real world, was he? He showed up when I needed him most, as most common coping mechanisms would. I'd met him outside this very hospital, for fuck's sake. So why did my fingers tremble when his eyes locked on mine?

"Hi," I said, because honestly it felt rude to just stand there staring at him.

He grinned at me, and I took a step toward the bench, but he...

Disappeared.

The breath turned icy in my lungs.

I clenched my eyes shut, panic making my heart race. There was my proof, Ajax was just in my head—

“Grace,” he said my name aloud right behind me.

I whirled around, looking up at him. “How did...what just happened?”

*I don't want anything between us anymore.*

His voice sounded in my head, but his lips absolutely *didn't* move. Something like apology churned in his gaze as he looked down at me, his hand extended between us. “Do you trust me?”

I eyed him, then his hand and back again.

Did I trust him?

Of course, I did. Why else would I have instantly folded him into what little life I had left? Plus, if I made him in my mind, I suppose there was no one better to trust than myself.

“You had your tongue between my thighs last week,” I said, biting back a laugh. “And I'm pretty sure I drank your blood, so...yeah.” I slid my hand into his.

He breathed out slowly, almost as if he'd been holding his breath waiting for my answer. “Good,” he said, then tugged me closer before he scooped me into his arms.

I yelped in surprise, my arms automatically flying around his neck as he cradled me to his chest.

“What are you doing?” I asked, not at all certain he wasn't about to sprout black feathered wings and whisk me into the sky like the Grim Reaper I always teased him about being.

“I want to show you something.”

“Okay,” I said, unable to take my eyes off him. From the position he held me in, I was dangerously close to his mouth, those full lips beyond tempting as he held my gaze. His arms

held me effortlessly, the muscles in his chest and abs grazing the side of my body that was pressed against him.

A slow, almost wild grin shaped his lips. “You have to look around in order to see,” he explained.

“Oh,” I said, blinking as I managed to tear my eyes off his. I glanced around us, my eyes widening as I gripped him just a little bit harder. “What the hell?”

Other people walking in or out of the hospital had just... frozen. Like mid-walk, mid-opening the door, mid-playing with their keys, *stopped*.

My heart rate kicked up, my body rebelling at what my eyes were seeing. “Ajax...” I clenched my eyes shut. Fuck, was this it? Was I about to die? Is this what happened when you died, the world around you stopped?

“I’ve got you,” Ajax said, walking us across the grounds. “You’re not hallucinating and you’re not dying.”

His words did little to comfort me as we walked past all the people frozen in their movements, but I managed to breathe deeply. Ajax stopped outside his Range Rover, opening the passenger door before settling me inside. I was too stunned to even argue that I was fully capable of getting into his car myself.

Ajax climbed behind the wheel, the silence in the car near stifling.

“Keep watching,” Ajax said before he snapped his fingers.

Everyone that had been frozen returned to their previous actions as if there had been no break in them at all.

My lips parted open, shock fluttering through me as I turned to look at Ajax.

“You did that?”

He nodded.

“You can control time?”

Another nod, and a flash of worry in his eyes. “Are you scared?”

I shook my head, excitement and wonder filling me to the edges of my soul. I'd just given my manifestation super powers. And seriously, controlling time? What could be better, when I was so quickly running out of it?

I smiled at him. "Not at all," I said, leaning back in the seat.

"Seriously?" he asked.

"Seriously," I answered. "I could tell you that when you know you're going to die soon, nothing is terrifying, but that would be a lie." I sighed. "It's you, Ajax," I admitted, putting a little of my heart out there for him to destroy if he wanted to. "You've become the one safe space my life has. You're the person I think of when I wonder what would be worth living for, worth risking the pain of treatment for. You could never scare me. Never."

Ajax opened and closed his mouth a few times, the words clearly getting tangled as emotions wreaked havoc across his face.

"You don't have to reciprocate, Grim," I teased, trying to lighten the mood. "I just wanted you to know." I couldn't keep things to myself, not when time was running out with each ticking second of the clock.

A grin stretched across my face. "Controlling time," I said, almost to myself. "That is so freaking awesome. Do you ever stop time just to have some peace and quiet?" I knew I definitely would, especially when I was reading in public. Why was it that anytime you had a paperback out in public, people felt the need to start talking to you?

"Yes," he said, starting the car.

"So, where are you taking me?"

"Where do you want to go?" he asked, starting the car.

Memories flooded me from the last time he was at my house—his mouth on my skin, his tongue against my oversensitive flesh, his body pressed against mine. The way his teeth had sunk into me...

I wanted that freedom again, that total loss of reality. I wanted to be devoured by him and consume him in return. I wanted...

I wanted *him*. Now, then, always.

“My place,” I answered.

“I show you what I can do, and you don’t immediately ask me to take you to a public place so you can get away safely?” he asked, half-tease half-truth.

I shook my head. “The only thing that is getting me away from you is death,” I answered, then cringed at my lack of filter.

But Ajax smiled at me, shaking his head before he grumbled something under his breath that I couldn’t make out.

And as he pulled us onto the highway, I couldn’t help but think that as horrific as my situation was, this tumor certainly was making my last days extraordinary.



## AJAX

I'd lived centuries upon centuries, met thousands upon thousands of people—both human and vampire, and yet Grace was the first being to confound me at every possible turn.

I took the turn toward her house as she stuck her hand out the window, playing with a stream of air as we cut through the night, a content smile on her face. And that smile...it gave me that same content feeling, radiating peace through my chest even when my hunger threatened imminent violence.

Five days. That was all I'd managed to stay away. Five fucking days. And each one of them had felt like I was being torn apart, like the physical distance from Grace was stretching pieces of me to their limit.

Tonight, when Zachariah had shot me a knowing look I wasn't ready to interpret, then "given me the night off," again, I'd taken it without a second thought. I'd been distracted as fuck the last five days—moody, achy, and the worst of it was the hunger. Endless. Gnawing. Hunger.

I'd tracked her through the blood we'd shared, hoping that maybe showing her my powers would finally trigger a healthy dose of fear in her. That she'd finally see me for what I am—a danger to her. But instead, she'd reveled in it, accepting me just as I was without question, and I'd lost all desire to scare her off for her own good in my desperation for just a little more time with her.

I was such an asshole. She was dying. Her blood only tasted faintly of the illness I knew was consuming her, but that was no excuse to lose control the other night. I never should have taken from her, let alone drank so much she'd needed to drink my blood to replace what I'd greedily consumed..

And yet I wanted more. I wanted her under me, her thighs spread, her pussy wet, her blood flowing into my mouth as I fucked her to completion so many times that it would only ever be my name she called out when she came.

My blood heated and my body drew tight just thinking about it.

*Bite*, my instincts demanded like the insistent assholes they were.

*Shut the fuck up*. I concentrated on Grace's scent, hoping it would ground me from the predatory needs prowling through me as we pulled into her driveway, but that was the wrong move. Hunger flared anew as the sweetness of her filled my lungs. Staying away had been my only defense against the addiction I recognized brewing in my blood, and yet here I was.

Yep. Asshole incarnate.

I put the car in park.

"You're coming in, right?" Grace asked, turning toward me.

I gripped the steering wheel. "I can think of about a thousand reasons why I shouldn't." A thousand reasons that all began and ended with the fact that she wasn't completely safe with me, not with the way I'd lost it with her. I wanted her too badly to trust my own control.

"And I can think of just as many reasons as to why you should."

Her soft voice drew my gaze to hers, and in that second, every responsible thought fled. All that mattered was what Grace wanted. What she needed. What I could give her.

I froze time and got to her side of the car before she could open the door, just because I liked doing it for her. The sounds of crickets resumed as I swung the passenger door open.

Her eyes flared. “Did you do the time stop thing again?”

I nodded and offered my hand to help her out of the Rover. Her balance had been a little off when walking out of the hospital. Not enough for her to notice, but I sure as hell had.

“You don’t have to do that, you know.” Her fingers brushed across mine as she stepped onto the driveway and the simple touch shot straight through me. “I can open my own doors.”

“I want to,” I said, my voice low as I scanned our surroundings and shut the door. Another human family had been slaughtered last night, this one related to one of the feeders at the Domum Alek had sworn to protect, and I wasn’t taking any chances with Grace’s safety. But the scents in the air were the same as every other time I’d visited, and her neighbors were parked in their customary spaces.

Maybe I was turning paranoid in my old age.

“It’s just a door.” She fished her keys out of her purse as we walked up the steps to the door.

“It’s not.” My hand drifted across her lower back as she unlocked the door and she softened at my touch. “In my day, I would have helped you into your carriage, walking with you on my left side so I could be prepared to draw my sword in your defense at any moment. Opening a door is the least of how you deserve to be taken care of, Grace.”

She paused, looking over her shoulder at me with something akin to awe parting her lips. “You make the assumption that I even would have had a carriage in your *day*,” she teased. “Maybe I would have been a farm girl. A peasant. A servant.”

“You would have been a noble,” I said quietly, running my thumb down her soft cheek. “And if you hadn’t been, I would have made you one.” The words slipped from my mouth before I thought to censor them.

Our eyes locked and her scent changed in a way that made my mouth water at the memory of her taste on my tongue, her hands in my hair, her moans in my ears. My need rose instantly in answer to hers. What was it about this woman I found absolutely impossible to resist? It wasn't just her passion for life, not anymore.

It was the way she made me feel when she looked at me, like I was someone worth spending what little time she had left with.

I reached around her curved frame and opened the door.

She spun to face me on the porch, then gripped the edges of my jacket and smiled up at me, walking backward and tugging me into the house with her.

“God, I love your smile, Grace.” I shut the door with my boot, and she changed tactics, spreading her hands over my chest and pushing me backward.

I went with it, and the second my back hit the wooden frame, she rose up on her toes and tugged at my jacket, lifting her mouth to mine. A growl of satisfaction rumbled through my chest as I lowered my head and kissed her.

At the first touch of our lips, my vision flickered into thermal, predatory mode, and I slammed my eyes shut and fought for control. The want I had for her, the craving, the attraction, it was nothing compared to the need that crackled down my spine, demanding I claim what my body insisted was mine—all of her.

*Claim. Taste.*

I filled my hands with her ass at the same moment that I pulled my mouth from hers. “I should go.” My actions were completely at odds with my words as I lifted her against my chest, as though my body already knew what my mind hadn't grasped—this was where I belonged, wherever she was.

“You should stay.” She buried her hands in my hair and wrapped her legs around my waist.

*Breathe.* I had to breathe in order to get some semblance of control, but every breath carried the sweet scent of her arousal

into my lungs. Never in my life had I wanted someone so badly, needed someone more than my next feed.

I needed to go, to spare her, to protect her, but I couldn't make my fucking feet work, couldn't make my arms put her down. Every cell in my body throbbed until I was one relentless, pulsing ache for her body, her blood, for all of her.

“Stay, Ajax,” she whispered, her hands gentle as she stroked them down the sides of my neck. Everything about Grace was so damned soft, especially her touch.

My resolve slipped, but at least my vision had returned to normal when I opened my eyes. “I want you too badly to stay.”

“And I want you too much to let you leave.” She leaned in and kissed me.

I snapped.

Slanting my mouth over hers, I kissed her with complete and utter abandon, sinking my tongue behind her teeth with lush strokes. Hunger exploded in my veins, the need for her body equal to my craving for her blood. One taste hadn't been enough.

She didn't shy away, didn't hesitate, oh no. Her tongue was relentless against mine, her hands stripped off my shirt, her thighs tightened around my waist when I leaned her against the wall at the base of the steps.

“I'm scared I'll hurt you.” It was the most honest I could be, the most honest I'd ever been with any lover. I'd never been on edge like this, never warred with my own common sense, never doubted my ability to remain in complete control.

“You could never hurt me.” She pulled back from my kiss, her eyes flaring as she stared down my torso, her eyes lingering on every tattoo, especially the one above my heart I'd carried with me for nearly a thousand years. “You are too perfect to really exist.” Her touch set fire to every inch of my skin as she explored my chest.

“I often think the same exact thing about you.”

“Take me to bed.” Her gaze met mine, glazed with want.

“Grace...” I groaned, my cock twitching, pulsing in time with my heartbeat. She had to understand, had to know exactly how close I was to fucking losing it when it came to her. “If I take you up these stairs, I’ll be inside you within minutes. Not my fingers, not my tongue, my cock.” *And my fangs.* Even now they ached, the pleasure of holding Grace only tempered by the pain of holding them at bay.

“Promise?” She smiled, and every muscle in my body clenched.

“Fuck.” I slammed my mouth over hers, kissing her, consuming her, laying claim one inch at a time as I walked us up the stairs, our lips never parting. I wanted to kiss this woman every night for the rest of my life, she was that responsive, that sweet, that addictive.

She kicked off her shoes as we moved down the hallway and had my belt undone by the time we got to her bedroom door.

I fumbled with the doorhandle—actually *fumbled*, that’s how addled I was—and she stripped off her blouse, letting it fall to the floor as I got the door open.

“Beautiful,” I mumbled into her cleavage, kissing the tops of her breasts as I carried her to her bed. I laid her down on top of the covers, then flicked on the bedside lamp. “I want to see every expression on that gorgeous face when I take you.”

Her back arched as I kissed a path down her chest, and her moan made my fangs punch down as I licked over the rise of her nipple under the pale lace of her bra. A flick of my fingers behind her back and the lace hit the floor, leaving her skin deliciously bare.

“So fucking perfect.” I took turns worshiping each breast, bringing the tips to hard, rosy peaks.

She reached for me and I groaned as I settled between her thighs. There was something so incredibly right about the way she fit against me, the way she smelled, the way she tasted. Everything about her felt like home.

She felt like she was *mine*.

My instincts purred, settling enough for me to enjoy every inch of her skin that I kissed along her ribs, the plane of her stomach. It was as if the predator inside me quieted, knowing he'd finally get what he wanted...what we both needed.

I grazed my fangs along the curve of her hip and she gasped, her hips bucking as her fingers tangled in my hair.

"Everything about you is fucking intoxicating, Grace." I locked eyes with her as I unzipped her jeans, watching for any hesitation, scenting that her arousal didn't decline as I drew them down over her ass.

She arched her hips to help.

The jeans joined her bra on the floor, and a few seconds later, so did the scrap of fabric she called underwear.

Fuck. Fuck. *Fuck*. Having her under my mouth, her soft thighs wrapped around my head hadn't begun to do the woman justice. She was every fantasy come to life.

I was going to devour every fucking inch of this woman.

"The things I want to do to you." The words came out as a growl.

She sat up with a grin and reached for me, her fingers coasting down the lines along the sides of my abs before I caught her wrists. Lunging forward, I pinned her arms above her head as I put her on her back.

"You can't touch me. Not right now."

"Not fair," she fucking pouted, her lips pursing as her eyes danced up at me.

"You touch me and this will be over before either of us wants it to be," I warned her, shifting my hips against her heated center so she could feel exactly where I was at. "And that's not going to happen, not before that sweet little body of yours comes for me at least twice. I refuse to lose control with you."

“Go ahead and lose it,” she challenged. “Something tells me you’d get me on round two.” Arching up, she pressed her breasts against my chest, and the contrast of her skin against mine was nearly my undoing. “You don’t seem like the kind of guy to leave a girl unsatisfied.”

“Not you. Never you.” I could make her come simply by timing my bite correctly, but I wasn’t about to say that.

I released her hands and sank down her body, my hands stroking every curve, memorizing and mapping her body as I made my way between her thighs. That first gasp on her lips when I licked from her entrance to her clit would live in my memory for the rest of my days.

“Ajax!” she shouted, her hips rising for every lash of my tongue against her pussy.

“I’ve been dreaming of this since I saw you last.” The admission was low and rough, punctuated by a flick of my tongue over her clit. “I wake with your name on my lips, the taste of your pussy on my tongue, the sound of your cries echoing in my empty bedroom. I’m hard for you before my eyes ever open. Always hard for you.”

“Oh my *God*.” She writhed under me.

I licked and sucked, keeping her on the edge, giving her just enough to bring her to the edge, then backing away just so I could build her higher again. I didn’t just want her to come for me, I wanted her to fucking shatter, wanted her to feel as absolutely destroyed for me as I was for her.

Her breaths came faster and faster, and when her thighs locked and trembled, I pushed her over the edge, my own body throbbing with a need so demanding I could taste it as I watched her find her release, her back bowing as wave after wave took her.

“You,” she demanded as she came down, clutching at my shoulders. “I want you, Ajax.”

*Claim.*

For once, I was in total agreement with the instincts driving me to take this woman in every way possible.

My gaze never leaving hers, I dropped my boots and the rest of my clothing by her bed. Her eyes were hooded and glazed from pleasure, but the unmistakable flare of raw need I saw there set my pulse to pounding.

Keeping my fangs sheathed safely behind my lips, I kissed her as I settled between her thighs, luxuriating in the taste of her kiss and the feel of the soft skin of her inner thighs against mine. But it was the heat of her, slick and welcoming, on my cock that had me groaning. She felt so fucking good and I wasn't even inside her yet.

"You're sure this is what you want?" I ground out between kisses, barely leashing myself when she undulated her hips.

"Absolutely sure." She wound her arms around my neck and looked up at me with so much trust that I felt something behind my ribs crack a little, warmth spreading through my chest. "And I have an implant, so you don't have to worry about protection." She drew her tongue across her lower lip. "And it's not like I've had a partner in a while, so I know I don't have anything..." A deep blush stained her cheeks. "That you know...you could catch."

Right. Because humans used condoms. *Shit*. Why hadn't I thought about that?

And we definitely didn't need to. Vampires didn't carry diseases that could transfer to humans, or vice versa, and though the scent of her was sweet enough to hit like sugar to my tongue, I could tell she wasn't in her fertile time.

But how to tell her that? It didn't matter that I'd never hidden my true nature from her, she still thought my vampirism—hell, even my very existence was a figment of her imagination.

"I'm completely devoid of any disease," I said, my brow furrowing. "But if you're even a little uncomfortable I'll go buy—"

"I'm completely comfortable," she said, arching her hips up so I slid through her slickness, ripping a groan from my

lips. The head of my cock nudged her clit and she gasped. “I trust you.”

With the way my fangs ached for the taste of her, that made one of us.

I was just too selfish, too needy for her to walk away.

Sinking into her kiss, I braced my weight with one arm and then stroked the perfect lines of her body with my free hand, marveling in every dip and hollow. When I reached between her thighs, she moaned into my mouth.

“So fucking wet for me.” I slid one finger inside her, stroking the tight walls of her pussy, then two, stretching her as I worked her clit with my thumb, drawing out every sigh and whimper from her beautiful mouth, careful not to nick her with my fangs.

One taste of her blood and I’d be at her throat.

Control. I had to stay in complete control.

Her nails dug into my arms as she rode my hand, her passion rising swiftly, the embers of her first orgasm building quickly into a second.

“You!” she ordered, her eyes pleading with mine. “Not your fingers. I want you inside me.”

A corner of my mouth lifted and I kissed the side of her mouth on my way to whisper in her ear. “Are you saying you want to come around my cock, Grace?”

She nodded.

Fuck, this woman was going to kill me. Death by pure *want*.

I slid my fingers from her warmth and took my cock in hand, notching the head of me at her entrance. “Then you’re going to have to say it.”

Her eyes flew wide when I rose to look at her. I wasn’t going to miss a second of this. “Say it?”

I nodded. “You want my cock? Say it. Tell me exactly what you want Grace, and I’ll always give it to you.”

“Ajax.” Her lips parted and she swirled her hips, taunting me.

I held completely still. Every cell in my body demanded that I drive forward, but fuck if I didn't want to hear those words. Rocking slightly, I slid in that first tight inch and she whimpered. Holy *fucking* tight. “Say it.”

“I want you to fuck me!”

*Close enough.*

I rolled forward and rocked back, consuming a little more of her with every thrust, giving her just a second before taking more. “You're so fucking perfect, Grace. Feel the way you take me? Sheer perfection.” Going slowly was going to kill me, but she was fucking tiny and I wasn't.

She cried out when I claimed her fully, and I groaned from deep in my chest, my jaw working, flexing with the effort it took to hold back as I gave her a moment to adjust.

*Mine.* She was mine. I knew it with every breath, every heartbeat. The thought was illogical, territorial, fully ludicrous and yet...I knew.

“Are you okay?” I had to know.

“As you said, I'm fucking perfect,” she assured me, lifting her hands to cup my cheeks as she smiled.

Hell yes, she was.

I watched every line of her beautiful face as I started to move, dragging out slowly only to thrust home again and again. She felt like heaven, and sweat soon beaded on my skin as I took her over and over.

She met every thrust, our bodies moving in wordless accord that took my breath and tightened my chest with how fucking good it was. Every one of her cries made it harder to hold my rhythm. The scrape of her nails and the feel of her lips on my jaw, my mouth, her breaths hitting me in quick pants, sent pure bliss down my spine, coiling low.

Everything about her was unraveling me.

I tilted her hips, taking her at a deeper angle, and we both groaned. She was close. I heard it in the little catches of her breath, felt it in the constriction of her thighs around my hips as we came together over and over.

“I’m never going to have enough of you,” I growled into her neck, my fangs scraping the delicate skin.

“You can have whatever you want from me,” she countered as her hands found my hair. “Bite me again.”

I lost the rhythm for a second and my mouth *watered*.

“Please?” She locked her ankles over the small of my back. “It felt so damned good.”

“Grace,” I warned, my self-control hanging by the barest of threads. There was nothing more I wanted in this world than to sink my fangs into her neck and feed from her as she found her release.

“Please, Ajax? I’m almost...almost...”

That thread snapped.

“Yeah, baby. I know.” I took her harder, let my hand drift between our bodies, and stroked her clit.

Then I struck.

*Fuck yes.* Her honeyed taste filled my mouth, and I drank greedily, losing all rational thought as I fed at her throat, her blood only heightening the pleasure between us.

She tightened, then arched, screaming my name as she came, her blood sweetening as I drank from the bite and then changed the pace of my hand as my hips began to swing with abandon, plunging again and again, kickstarting her fading orgasm into another.

She came and came, her body a living flame beneath me, my name a plea on her lips as I barreled toward my own release. It claimed me with a pleasure so acute it bordered on pain, darkening my vision as I emptied into her, barely remembering to seal the puncture wounds at her throat before I collapsed, remembering to roll to my side so I didn’t crush her.

My chest heaved as I caught my breath, cradling her against my chest.

“That was...” I didn’t have the words.

“Mmmm,” she replied.

I grinned, and brushed her hair back from her face so I could see those gorgeous eyes.

*Shit.* My stomach hit the floor. She was pale. Too pale. Even her lips were a dusky hue.

Acting on instinct, I lifted my wrist and sliced into it with my fang, then lifted it to her mouth. “Drink,” I ordered, panic rising. “Please, Grace.”

She blinked, but did as I ordered, closing her eyes and drawing from my wrist.

Fuck. It was wrong to feed her, but I’d taken too much, and knowing that it was my blood coursing through her veins had my dick already hardening again.

Once she’d taken enough, I pulled my wrist away and licked over the wound as she watched me quietly.

“I’ve never seen you this quiet,” I said, stroking my hand down her face, her eyes luminous in the moonlight coming through the window. What the hell was wrong with me? I couldn’t seem to stop touching her.

“I think you fucked me speechless.” She grinned, but I heard the slight raspiness in her voice, and the questions in her eyes? I wasn’t ready to answer those.

“I think I fucked you hoarse.” I leaned in and brushed my lips across her throat, ghosting a caress across the tiny pinpricks I’d fed from. “Wait here.”

A kiss later, I rolled out of bed and pulled on my leather pants while she watched, biting her lower lip. It took everything I had not to crawl back into that bed and suck that lip into my mouth. But she was thirsty. I heard it in her voice, somehow...felt it, too.

Fucking weird, but okay.

I grabbed a bottle of water from her refrigerator and then headed back upstairs, reveling in the peace, the relative quiet in my head.

My instincts had finally stopped screaming at me with incessant demand. The predator inside me seemed content to sit back and watch as I carried water to my woman, satisfied that she was being provided for. What the hell? I rubbed at my chest absentmindedly as I headed down the hall to her bedroom.

I think I preferred my instincts shouting at me over whatever was going on inside me right now.

I found Grace in bed, a thigh-high silk robe wrapped around her delicious curves as she sat back on her heels, waiting for me.

“You look delicious.” I closed her bedroom door the way she liked and sat on the edge of the bed, handing her the water.

“I was thinking the same thing about you.” Her gaze raked down my naked chest as she took a drink.

Everything happened at once.

Glass shattered as her bedroom window exploded. The bedroom door splintered and two men stormed in. A bullet hit the wall above Grace’s headboard only inches from the top of her head.

The Sons had found me.

Moving with preternatural speed, I grabbed my dagger off the nightstand and spun, slicing open the throats of the intruders in one smooth motion before throwing my hands out, stopping time around us and forcing the world into a standstill.

Fuck, I should have left one of them alive for questioning.

“What the—”

“Don’t move!” I ordered her. Rage pounded through my veins, instant and lethal.

*Protect*, my instincts demanded as I armed myself with every weapon I’d brought.

*No shit.* I turned toward Grace and a growl ripped from my throat. Not only did glass surround her, inches from cutting into her smooth skin, but there was a red laser dot on her forehead. The next shot could kill her when time started again.

*The fuck it will.*

“Come here.” I held out my hand. I had to get her out of here, now.

“I don’t understand,” she whispered, taking my hand and moving sideways off the bed, out of the path of the glass, her dainty feet landing beside mine.

“There are men who hunt us,” I explained it as simply as I could, dropping Grace’s hand and cursing myself with every step I took toward the men. “They’re hunting me.” I brought this on her.

The men looked to be in their mid-twenties, dressed in hundreds of dollars in tactical gear and carrying expensive assault rifles. I sniffed the air. Assault rifles with Night Thistle bullets.

*Fuck.*

Their blood hadn’t yet spilled, but the cuts through their throats would see to that once I restarted time. A folded slip of paper stuck out of the first man’s pocket, and I took it, careful not to touch him so time didn’t start up again.

“They’re here to kill you?” Grace asked, her voice trembling behind me as I flattened the paper, my stomach hitting the floor at the list written there.

“No,” I whispered as wrath unfurled throughout my body, stiffening my muscles at the first person on the list.

Grace’s name.

Grace’s address.

“They’re here for you.” I shoved the paper into my pocket and turned back toward her, barely managing to hold myself in check as anger coursed through me with an intensity I’d never felt in my life.

They were trying to kill her.

She was mine.

“What?” Her eyes were wide, fear streaking the green and blue depths as she stared up at me, her jaw hanging slack. Her arms dropped to her sides and her robe fell open at her chest.

A chest that now bore a circular mark I recognized all too well.

No. Fucking. Way.

*Protect!*

The predator within me snapped my control, and my vision flickered into thermal, turning me into something far more animal than male.

It was impossible, wasn't it? But Lyric had been human. Valor still was. And I knew that tattoo beneath Grace's collarbone as well as I knew my own hand. It was my mating mark.

Safe. She had to be safe.

Rational thought abandoned me and I let time rip free, snatching Grace into my arms and wending as another bullet hit the wall.

Icy cold ripped over my skin as time and space folded at my command, and I stepped into the courtyard of the residence, carrying a gasping Grace.

“Ajax?” she asked, her arms tightening around my neck as I strode for the front door.

She'd be safe inside the house. She had to be inside the fucking house.

Alek's talem jumped out of the way at our approach, hastily throwing the door open as I marched inside the two-story foyer.

“Ajax,” Grace said again. “You have to put me down.”

“No.” There was no room for argument in my answer as I moved through the house, looking for Zachariah. He would

know what to do. He always knew.

I found him—and pretty much everyone else in the kitchen, gathered around those fucking *muffins*.

Zachariah's eyes widened for a heartbeat, then he moved toward us, moving faster than any vampire in the house could. "Ajax?"

"I didn't know where to take her." It was all I could say.

"You brought a human home?" Ransom growled, moving in front of Olivia as if she actually needed his protection.

I shot him a look that dared him to take a single step in my direction.

"Ajax..." Grace groaned. "Put. Me. Down."

I held her tighter. "They came to her house! They tried to kill her! She's mine!" I barely recognize my own voice.

"Holy shit," Talon muttered, moving to Zachariah's side. "Look at her chest."

"Keep your eyes to yourself!" I snarled at my best friend.

"I'd put her down," Saint said, leaning back against the counter.

"Fuck off!" I shouted.

He winced. "Don't blame me when—"

"Let me go!" Grace screamed, and her tone made me loosen my hold. She hit her feet and lunged for the nearest thing—a potted fig tree—and then heaved up the contents of her stomach over its roots.

"Shit." I hit my knees next to her, rubbing her back as she vomited, her pain taking precedence over my anger. "It's the wending. Damn it. I'm sorry, baby."

"Baby?" Dagon whispered on a half-choke.

Talon whistled.

"We have to get her to Alek," Zachariah said. "He's in the library."

“Where are we?” Grace asked as the heaving stopped.

“I’ll explain everything in a minute,” I promised, helping Grace to her feet and tucking the robe tighter around her as Cassandra and Jocelyn walked into the kitchen.

“Holy fuck, you brought a human to the residence?” Jocelyn openly stared at Grace.

I glared at Benedict’s mate and Zachariah sighed.

Cassandra inhaled deeply and then cocked her head to the side. “Oh, she’s not human.”

“I’m not?” Grace said.

“She...what?” I snapped at the same time.

Cassandra looked at Grace, her gaze dropping to the mating mark on her chest, and then gave me her full attention. “She’s a half-blood.”



# GRACE

**M**y heart raced against my chest, making it hard to get the proper amount of air in my lungs, and I seriously needed a toothbrush. Like now.

*Half-blood.*

The words from the stunning woman standing next to an even more striking woman with purple hair had said the words that had Ajax going as still as a statue.

I glanced up at him, my mind whirling. “Ajax?”

The sound of my voice shook him from whatever trance he’d been in, and if it hadn’t been for the movements and concerned looks from his...friends, I would’ve thought he stopped time again.

“Get her to Alek,” one of the men said. “We’ll figure the rest out after you speak with our king.”

“King?” I asked as Ajax gently tugged me down a hallway. God, now I sounded like a bird squawking out everything I didn’t understand.

“I promise I’ll explain everything,” he said, his voice edged with fear, anger, and some kind of desperation that pulled at my heart. I couldn’t blame him. Not after what had just happened.

*Men breaking into my house. Shooting at me. Ajax stopping time and slitting their throats before...*

*God, had he teleported me here?*

Shivers of doubt chilled my blood. I'd been on the fence with the reality of Ajax's existence since I met his perfect, stubborn, funny, caring, sexy ass...but this? How could I possibly deny this?

*Breathe. Just breathe.*

I chanted the mantra to myself as we walked deeper into the estate, the panic nipping at my heels and threatening to suck me under.

Grand chandeliers hung from the high ceilings, the golden lights twinkling off of teardrop crystals hanging from each candelabra. Vibrant, colorful tapestries hung along the stone walls, some purely artistic while others depicted what looked like historical events. My eyes could hardly settle on one thing as we wound through the halls, Ajax on a mission to get us to the king mentioned before.

And there *were* people...several people we passed along the way. Some seemed to be servers while others looked like they lived here too, most giving us wide-eyed stares as Ajax led me along.

"You've got to be kidding me," a masculine voice sounded inside a grand study as Ajax led us inside.

"I'm afraid not, your highness," another male said.

*Your highness?*

A man stood behind a beautiful desk, floor-to-ceiling shelves of books lining the walls behind him. He had black hair and searing blue eyes which were narrowed at the smaller man standing on the other side of the desk.

"Cassandra's panther is becoming an issue with our volunteer feeders," the smaller man explained as Ajax nodded toward the man behind the desk, leading me to a set of chairs on the far left of the room.

I sank into one when he nudged me that direction, eyes wide and mind spinning. Nothing made sense and yet, that terror I felt when those men attacked my house had subsided, giving way to a spiraling sort of sensation I could barely keep at bay.

The man behind the desk let out a heavy sigh. “I’ll speak with Cassandra regarding her pet. Is there anything else?”

I furrowed my brow, wondering how the two words *panther* and *pet* could ever go together.

“Yes,” the smaller man said. “Earl Browning is displeased about his chambers.”

“What’s wrong with them?”

“He says they’re the smallest in the estate and since he gave up his personal home to civilians, he feels he should be better compensated.”

The man behind the desk shook his head. “Explain to the earl that we are at capacity after the attacks and there are no other accommodations. He’s free to find new lodging outside estate grounds.”

The smaller man bowed, then turned on his heels and hurried from the room.

The man behind the desk turned to look at Ajax then me and back to Ajax again.

“Panther problems, nobility problems, and now you’re bringing home humans?” He waved an arm toward me, and I tried not to cower under the attention. There was something about this man—he wasn’t built like Ajax but he was tall and radiated a power that had warning bells flaring in my head.

“I know, my king,” Ajax said, and my eyebrows shot up my forehead. “There were special circumstances, I assure you.”

“I’m sure there were,” the man said, looking me over before returning his attention to Ajax. He rounded his desk, coming to stand before him. “Are you all right?” he asked, as if he could sense Ajax’s lingering tension over the attack.

“I’m fine. But we need to talk.” Ajax glanced over his shoulder at me.

Alek stared at Ajax for a long moment, looking as if the two were having a silent conversation...

*The Sons targeted her, Alek. There were six of them. Why would they go after her?*

Ajax's voice fluttered through my mind, startling me so much I shifted in my chair.

Alek tracked the move, then narrowed that gaze on me.

Something pressed against my mind, a sort of pressure that felt cool and crisp—

*Can you hear me?*

That was the voice of Alek, but I was too petrified to respond to him. What if doing so only showed how far gone I really was? What if all of this was still in my mind. What if—

*Cassandra said she was a half-blood, but that can't be true, can it?* Ajax's voice was more soothing than the separate pressure in my mind.

"Interesting," Alek said, then turned to Ajax. "She looks dead on her feet," he said. "Why don't you let her rest and we'll discuss the rest of this tomorrow evening."

Evening. Because the sun was almost rising now. How had our schedules gotten so backward?

And he wasn't wrong, I was exhausted.

Exhausted and terrified and confused as all hell but somehow also mesmerized by it all.

Ajax nodded, then took my hand, gently hauling me from the chair and leading me through the beautiful estate until we found what I could only assume was his room because his scent was all over it.

Ajax shut the door behind us, and I instantly relaxed. All the tension in my muscles waned as I surveyed the room—simple yet elegant with tones of black and purple, a king-size bed tucked against the centermost wall, and ancient looking books scattered here and there.

"You haven't said much since we got here," Ajax said, leaning against the closed door.

I walked to his bed and sank atop it. "Can you blame me?"

“No,” he said. He motioned toward the bed. “You should really get some sleep, Grace.”

Heat sizzled down my spine, memories of what happened right before the attack skipping through my mind. Then a heavy dose of fear followed right along behind it. My mind felt like it hung by a thread and one more thought...one more acknowledgement of everything that happened would break me.

“Will you be sleeping here?” I asked, suddenly terrified that if he left, I might wake up from this nightmare and never see him again.

He nodded, a longing in his eyes that I’m sure matched my own. “I have to speak to Alek again before I come to bed.”

Hope deflated in my chest, but I nodded. “Those men,” I said. “They won’t find us here, will they?”

A muscle in his jaw ticked. “Not a chance,” he said, his tone gravelly. “You’re safe here, Grace. I promise.”

Those words wrapped around me like a warm blanket. “Safe,” I said, testing out the word. I felt safe with him, that wasn’t a question. But in my own mind? That didn’t feel like a safe space right now.

“I promise, Grace,” he said, crossing the distance between us. He slid a hand along my cheek. “We will figure this out together.”

I nodded, leaning into his touch. Somehow, his words, his touch, the bed with his comforting cedar and moss smell on the sheets, was enough to keep my panic on a breath’s edge.

“Sleep,” he said. “You’ll feel better if you do. And I’ll come to you when we’re done.”

I blew out a breath, my eyes heavy as I laid down on his bed, tucking myself under his covers. His delightful scent swarmed me, enveloping me into a relaxed state of clam, and I fell into a sleep I couldn’t fight even if I wanted to.



I WAS SOMEWHERE between sleeping and waking, just coming out of a dream that had nothing to do with violent men trying to kill me and everything to do with Ajax and the way he made me feel. I lingered in that heavy space between two worlds when I felt the bed shift.

Instinctively, I rolled toward the warmth I felt settling behind me, and I inhaled a deep breath of cedar and moss.

*Ajax.*

Had I slipped back into my dream?

My nerve endings sprang to life, a hunger wrenching in my core.

Powerful hands slid over my waist, tugging me the rest of the way until my body was flush with his. Heat zapped through my veins, my heart kicking up as I pried open my eyes that were still heavy with sleep.

“You’re back,” I whispered, smoothing my hands over his bare chest, relishing the feel of his muscles beneath my fingertips.

“And you’re naked.” Ajax’s voice sounded like it’d been scraped raw, his hand flexing on my hip.

The statement jarred loose a memory of shucking my robe sometime during the night. “I got hot,” I explained.

“And now?” Ajax asked, planting tender kisses down the column of my throat. “How do you feel now?”

Somewhere in the back of my brain were lingering questions that had chased me into sleep—how this was real, what was happening, what had the woman meant about being a half-blood, and on and on and on.

But, since I was still dancing in that beautiful space between reality and dreamland, I chose to vehemently ignore them.

Instead, I gave myself over entirely to the physical present and arched against him, wanting to give him better access to my neck. “I feel achy,” I admitted.

“Where?” he asked, tensing against me as his eyes roamed over my body as if he was looking for an injury.

“Everywhere you touch,” I clarified, sliding my fingers into his hair, pulling him closer as I rolled my hips against him again. A gasp stole through me at what I felt, that hard length of him barely restrained by his boxer briefs. I brought my mouth to his, my eyes finally adjusting to see his face clearly in the darkness.

God, he was magnificent. Those dark eyes drank me in like warm pools of melted chocolate, and the hungry look churning there had me shivering with anticipation.

“What about here?” he asked, inching his lips toward me, holding me in a suspended moment that stretched on forever before he slanted his mouth over mine.

I whimpered at the contact, at the relief that tingled along my body when his lips met mine. He tasted like spice, an invigorating flavor that I wanted to drink by the barrel. His hand slipped over my thigh, hooking my leg over his hip as his tongue explored my mouth with powerful flicks and consuming thrusts.

His kiss awakened every inch of my body, of my *soul*, as he took control, pressing that hard length against me as he devoured my mouth.

“Yes,” I sighed between his lips, finally answering his question.

He pulled back enough to look down at me, a smirk shaping his lips. “And what about here?” he asked, shifting us so he was above me, his muscled body between my thighs as he leaned down and trailed the tip of his tongue over my collarbone, right where that mark had magically appeared.

“Yes,” I said, arching beneath him, needing to feel more of him.

A low groan rumbled in his chest as he moved above me. He took his time kissing my neck and lower, to my breasts which were bare and heavy as he palmed them. Fire licked every inch of my skin, making me hot and sensitive as he moved in slow, languid teases.

“Here?” he asked, and I trembled as he flicked his tongue over one nipple, then the other, moving back and forth, sucking and biting and teasing until my nipples were peaked and tingling.

“Yes,” I answered, desperation and bliss coloring my tone. I loved the game we were playing, but Ajax was taking his time with me when I ached to the point of pain for him.

He grinned against my breasts, kissing his way down my stomach and over my hip bones until he reached the apex of my thighs. His large hands easily parted them, and he planted the softest of kisses over my heat.

“And what about here, Grace?” He dragged a finger right down the center of me, but the touch was too light, too soft. “Is this where you’re aching for me the most?”

“Yes.” I arched upward, dying for more contact. “Yes, yes, yes,” I said, breathless.

“Tell me how bad you need my cock,” he demanded, continuing with his too-light teasing, winding me up to the point I was certain I’d snap at any moment.

He’d completely owned me from the minute he appeared in my life—my happiness, my pleasure. He’d taken responsibility for my heart the second his lips had met mine. And I knew I didn’t have much time left, I knew my world had completely changed since meeting him, and I didn’t care. I didn’t care about the attacks or the voices or the fact that he was a vampire. All I cared about was him and spending every last second I had on this earth with *him*.

I glanced down at him, the sight of this infinitely powerful male between my thighs enough to make my stomach flip. “I’ve never needed *anyone* as badly as I need you, Ajax.”

Something flickered in his dark gaze, an emotion that stole my breath as the playful smirk faded and was replaced with something I couldn't exactly describe. And I didn't need to, not when the chemistry between us was electric and building like a current.

Ajax slipped his hands beneath my ass, hauling me upward toward his mouth. I was completely bare before him, sprawled beneath him on his bed like his own personal feast—

He dipped his head between my thighs, still holding my ass a few inches off the bed, and licked through the heat of me.

I gasped, the sensation like lightning crackling up my spine.

And he did it again.

And again.

“Ajax,” I moaned, gripping the bedsheet with one hand, my other flying to his long hair. My fingers tangled in the silky strands, tightening as he thrust his tongue inside me only to pull out and tease my clit.

“You taste like sunshine and honey,” he growled against my oversensitive flesh, licking and sucking and working me into a tight string of need. “I could eat your pussy for hours.”

“Ajax,” I groaned. “*Please.*”

“Please, what?” he asked, and I could feel him smile against my skin.

I arched in his hands, trying to get more pressure, chasing my release as he pushed me right up to the edge of it, but his hands were holding me up, and I was totally at his mercy.

A thrill shot through me at the knowledge, at the certainty that there was absolutely nothing I could do to overpower him in any way. He held me captive in his bed, in his hands, and on his timeline.

*His.*

I was his in a way I'd never been before, and with the way my soul ignited, I fucking *loved* the idea of submitting to him

entirely.

“Please make me come,” I finally answered, not a hint of coyness or embarrassment as I begged for what I wanted, what I needed.

“I’ll always give you what you need,” he said, using his grip on my ass to rock me against him as he unleashed himself on me. I could do nothing but hold on as he ate at me, using his powerful arms to control my body, having me ride his face as he thrust and flicked and sucked—

“Ajax!” his name was a plea as he sucked and swirled his tongue around my clit, sending me into orbit as my orgasm tore through me. Wave after wave of pleasure rippled over my body, my muscles trembling, my thighs clenching around his cheeks as I came.

And he didn’t take one second to let me catch my breath or work me through the throes of it.

Not. One. Second.

He immediately flipped me over, shifting to his knees behind me as he hauled me up until my spine was against his muscled chest. He nudged my thighs apart with his knee, gripping my hips and lifting me until I was situated right over his hard cock, the tip teasing the wetness there.

And then he released his grip at the same time he thrust upward, sinking into me to the hilt.

I gasped, electricity crackling across my skin with the sensation of him inside me. He was hot and hard and felt like fucking heaven. He wrapped his arms around me, palming my breast with one hand and plunging his other between my thighs as he thrust up again and again.

Breathless, I leaned my head back, turning it so I could capture his mouth in a hungry, intense kiss that showed him exactly what he was doing to me.

Bringing me to life in a way I never thought possible while dying.

Shaking my soul awake.

Sending me to places I never knew existed.

I reached behind me with one arm, gripping his neck as he slid in and out of me, his fingers rolling over my clit with each thrust. His thighs were powerful beneath me, my legs hugging the outside of his, the position allowing him to sink deeper and giving him total control.

Still, I could feel him resisting, almost like he was restraining himself.

And I couldn't have that.

“Harder,” I demanded between kisses.

Ajax slowed beneath me, pulling his lips away enough to catch my gaze. “I don't want to hurt you,” he admitted.

“You won't,” I assured him, clenching my thighs and lifting enough to sink down atop him in one delicious movement.

He groaned, his fangs distending, the sight igniting this deep, unshakeable need inside me.

“Harder,” I demanded again, then tilted my head to the side, exposing my neck.

“Grace,” he growled, his grip on me tightening. “You know I can't bite you again, it could—”

“Kill me?” I laughed. “You make me feel more alive than I ever have before. Now, take me, Ajax. In the way I know you need to.”

Seconds ticked by between us, a suspension in time that I'm not entirely certain Ajax wasn't controlling. My heart pounded against my chest as I waited, anticipation curling my senses—

Ajax slammed into me from below with such speed and force I immediately came.

“Fuck,” he growled, pounding into me. “Your pussy feels so good fluttering around my cock.”

His words were like flames bursting beneath my skin, his movements twisting my body up only to untangle it in the

most delicious way. I brought my hand back down, digging my nails into his flexing forearm as he held me tight, my neck still exposed to him.

And as his pace increased, his fingers moved faster against my clit, faster than any hand should be able to move and it felt so fucking good. Ajax was riding me up to that edge again, so quick and fast my head was spinning, a dizzy sort of bliss sending me to a place where nothing else existed but him and me and this insane pleasure between us.

“Oh, God, Ajax,” I moaned as my entire body clenched around him. “I’m...I’m...”

How was it possible to already be ready to come again? How was he doing this to me? How—

“Fuck, Grace,” he groaned, that hand between my thighs nearly vibrating as he slammed into me with his cock and his fangs with such a delightful bite I cried out, my orgasm rocking through me so hard I trembled around him. He didn’t feed though, that much I could tell from the bite being too soft against my neck. I hated that he wasn’t taking what he needed, but I couldn’t form any coherent sentence to tell him as much. Ajax pumped a few more times, harder and stronger as he spilled into me with a groan.

Sparks shot across my soul, the delightful sounds of satisfaction rippling along my skin as he slowed his movements inside me. Our bodies were slick with sweat, our breaths matched in rushed heaves as he held me there.

“You’re shaking,” he said after a few moments. He gently lifted me, shifting us so we were laying on our sides on the bed. “Did I hurt you?”

I smiled at him, drunk on pleasure and exhausted from the way he’d taken my body.

“Not at all,” I said, but he eyed me worriedly. I cupped his cheek, shaking my head. “Not at all,” I repeated, then bit my bottom lip. “When can we do that again where you’ll feed?”

Shock colored his eyes. “Feeding is too risky,” he said. “But the fucking?” He smirked, tugging me against his body.

“We can do that right now.”



## AJAX

I rocked on the back legs of my chair as we all sat gathered around the onyx table of the war room.

Zachariah shot me a look full of side-eye, but I simply shrugged and kept rocking as Lachlan went through the orders of the night.

There was a restless energy in my body that only seemed to settle when I was with Grace, and now that she wore my mark in the center of her chest, I understood the reasoning.

She was my mate.

My mind hadn't stopped racing since I'd spotted the tell-tale magic on her flawless skin.

No wonder my instincts had nearly consumed any logical thought when I was with her. The urge to feed at her throat, to bury myself between her thighs, to claim her very soul—it was all the calling card of a mating bond. I'd simply been too ignorant to see it.

“Which brings us to tonight's Conclave,” Lachlan said, lifting his brows at me as I started drumming my fingers on the arms of my chair. “Benedict and Ajax will escort Alek—”

“Fuck that, I'm not leaving Grace,” I snapped, shaking my head. There was no chance in hell. None.

“I need to go,” Saint said, and every head turned his direction. He ran his hand over his close-cropped hair. It had grown back after his captivity, but he still wore it closely shorn. “The demons denied me entrance to their territory last

night, and I know I felt a trace of Samuel leading there. And the new lycan alpha is a jackass trying to deny us access for Conclave business.” His hands curled into fists atop the table. Had to give it to him, he was holding himself together better than any of us could have imagined, but I had the sense that he held onto his sanity like an unpinned grenade, waiting to take out his twin in his inevitable explosion. That kind of effort could only last so long.

“Oh, did you think that was a suggestion?” Lachlan glared at Saint, then me. “First bringing home humans, and now arguing about what is undeniably a place of honor—”

“She’s not just a human, she’s my mate,” I growled, rocking forward and slamming the legs of the chair onto the floor.

Every hunter jolted upright, tense and ready.

“Enough,” Alek said to Lachlan, leaning back in his chair before looking at me. “Grace, like all mates, is welcome here.” He shifted his gaze back to Lachlan. “And you of all people should know what it’s like for your mark to appear on a human. Stop being an ass.”

Lachlan grunted. “I don’t like exposing the royal family to unvetted people, mate or not.” He sighed, stroking a hand down his red beard. “But Alek’s right. I know what it is to bring home a marked human.” He grimaced. “And in my particular case, she was actually our enemy at the time, as where yours is not, Ajax.”

“I didn’t know where else to take her,” I barked, recognizing that my defenses were up and my body was poised to strike. “They were trying to kill her. I saw the mark. I reacted.”

“As you should have,” Alek assured me. “I think there was simply a certain degree of...surprise at her arrival.”

“And the announcement that she’s a half-blood,” Dagon settled back against his chair at my side. The rest followed suit, but Saint didn’t look any more relaxed by the change in posture.

“She’s a quarter-blood, actually,” I said, shifting in my seat as my instincts demanded I end any threat to Grace and then return to her immediately. “According to what Cassandra said this evening after spending a few moments with Grace.”

Talon’s eyebrows rose. “That’s a peculiar ability for a noble to have—scenting those who have vampire blood.”

“It’s the first I’ve heard of it,” Alek admitted. “I would guess quite a few of our aristocrats are hiding abilities we know nothing about.” He put his hand up. “And before you ask—no, I’m not going to invade their privacy by sorting through their heads to see what they all can do.”

Everyone was smart enough to keep their mouths shut. Had to admit, it would be nice to know if we had another weapon or two over in the Domum.

“As for tonight,” Alek continued, his expression softening as he looked at me. “I understand the absolute torture of leaving a newly marked mate. I truly do. But you and Benedict are invaluable to me in that room.”

Duty and need warred within my chest, my heart battling my head. My honor required that I accompany my king. My very nature demanded that I stay as close as possible to Grace.

“She’ll be safe here with us,” Zachariah added. “We would all forfeit our lives to protect your mate.”

There was a murmur of assent among the hunters, and the truth of his words eased the tightness in my chest just enough for me to nod. “Okay. Then I’ll go for Conclave.” I turned toward Saint. “Trust me to advocate for you, brother.”

Saint’s jaw flexed, but he nodded, too.

“Or you could both trust me to protect your best interests,” Alek raised his brows at both of us. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, we need to leave in the next fifteen minutes, and apparently I need to bring some bribery material with us.”



THE EARTHY SCENT of the tunnels beneath the Edgemont opera house filled my lungs as we stalked down the corridor that led to the vampire entrance of the Conclave chambers.

We disarmed—which I'd always thought was bullshit, laying our weapons on the table just before the door.

“Still not sure why we have to give up our Sigs when the witch queen has no problem wielding her power in the chamber,” I muttered as I lay down the last of my daggers.

“Luna wouldn't act out of anything but self-defense,” Benedict replied, hanging his jacket on a hook that had been installed for just that reason and rolling up the sleeves of his dress shirt. “Don't forget, she's my sister-in-law.”

“Right.” I rolled my shoulders, trying—and failing—to loosen the muscles there.

“And to think,” Benedict grinned. “You used to be the funny one.”

“Stop giving him shit,” Alek ordered. “You weren't much nicer during the first days of your mating with Jocelyn.”

“True.” His grin widened. “Just wait until you fall in love with her. Then you'll really be out of your mind.”

“She'll be dead in three months from that tumor in her head.” Every word carved itself on my heart. “Doubt I'll get the luxury of having enough time to fall in love with my mate.”

Benedict's face fell.

“Ironic, right?” I reached for the door handle. “I go through centuries on this earth and then fate hands me the most perfect female—woman, only to yank her away within months.”

“Ajax—” Benedict started.

“Let's just get in there.” I threw open the door to the Conclave chamber and took stock of the room before allowing my king to enter.

Luna, the witch queen, sat on her chair, flanked by her advisors, as did Patrick on the other side of the circle. A massive male with shaggy hair and sharp, hazel eyes sat on the throne of the lycans, accompanied by two others I'd never seen before.

“Who might you be?” I stepped in front of Alek and Benedict quickly moved to my side.

He snarled. “I am Ruyan, the new alpha of the lycan. Who the fuck are you? Never mind. I no longer speak to underlings.”

No wonder Saint was having issues.

A snort sounded from across the chamber as Xavier walked in, the demon king offering Ruyan a mocking smile as he slow clapped. “A little melodramatic, but I'll give you points for attempting to make an intimidating first impression.”

“Attempt—” Ruyan's growl cut off and my eyes widened slightly at the visible impression of what looked like invisible fingers crushing his throat. The lycan clawed at his own neck, leaving horrendous red streaks.

“Xavier,” Alek lectured, walking between Benedict and I nonchalantly. “Stop hazing the new guy.”

The corner of Xavier's mouth quirked upward, his gaze intensifying on Ruyan, and for a second, I wondered if he'd let the Lycan alpha go. One never really quite knew when it came to Xavier. He was millennia older than every single one of us, and his cruelty was more than notorious, it was legendary.

He sighed, as if bored, then strolled forward to his seat across from Alek's.

The invisible fingers released from Ruyan's throat and the lycan took a series of gulping breaths as Alek found his own seat, completing the council of five.

“And you call him melodramatic?” Alek asked, leaning back in his chair as Benedict and I took our respective sides around our king.

Xavier shrugged, a golden goblet magically appearing in his hand. “I’ve been watching Star Wars in my downtime.” He took a sip from the chalice and glanced at Ruyan. “Learn how to respect your elders and it won’t happen again.”

Ruyan’s escorts lunged toward Xavier, their hands forming claws, only to freeze in place. Their eyes darted comically back and forth as their bodies remained immobile.

Xavier tsked them. “Play nice or you won’t be invited back.”

Alek rolled his eyes.

“Xavier,” Luna sighed, rubbing the bridge of her dainty nose.

“Fine.” Xavier took another drink, and the lycans stumbled forward. They quickly regained their balance and at the look on their alpha’s face, retreated to his side. “And to think, you’re the best the lycans have to offer.”

“Can we get started? I have matters waiting at home,” Luna said sweetly.

Conclave was called to order and went through the usual business. Who had violated the Covenant, who would need to be brought to justice. What concerns each leader had.

Patrick cleared his throat when it was his turn. “The Sons of Honor are slaughtering human families.”

Luna’s eyes widened. “You’re certain?”

“We can corroborate,” Alek added. “Two families so far. Night Thistle bullets were found at the scene.”

“That tells me they weren’t looking for humans.” Xavier lounged, throwing one leg over the armrest.

“Agreed,” Alek stated. “We had some intel come in last night—a list.” He glanced at me, and I walked copies of the list to each of the thrones before returning to Alek’s side.

“There are two witch families on this list,” Luna said, scrolling down the dozen names.

“Where’s the rest of the list?” Xavier asked. “It’s clearly cut off.”

“It’s all they had on them,” I answered.

“We think they’re targeting half-bloods, or those with vampire ancestry,” Alek said. “Which is why I need to formally ask for your temporary permission for unfettered access to your territory.”

“The fuck you—” Ruyan started, then grasped for his throat.

I pressed my lips together to keep from laughing.

“Manners,” Xavier said without so much as looking Ruyan’s direction. “Learn some.”

The sound of gasps filled the chambers and Ruyan fell back in his seat.

“You were saying?” Xavier looked Alek’s way.

“We need unfettered, temporary access to your territories not only on Conclave business for agreed-upon justice, but to investigate and protect these listed families.” Alek glanced from throne to throne.

One by one, they agreed, even Ruyan—if only to avoid Xavier.

“We also ask it for the time being in regard to our search for Samuel.” His gaze landed on Xavier. “We’re asking for all the hope we can get, and as I understand it, you denied access to Saint last night.”

Xavier shrugged. “He looks too much like his brother for my liking. Besides, the Covenant states that assassins have access for agreed-upon justice, not so you can take out your own trash.”

“That trash is likely to take out half the supernaturals in this town if we don’t find him,” I answered, holding the demon king’s stare. “I’ve known Samuel for centuries. He’ll kill with single-minded focus. He won’t mind slaughtering every demon he can get his hands on if he thinks it will get him closer to the vampire throne.”

“You somehow think that dealing with bloodmad vampires is something demons are strangers to.” Xavier sipped at his drink. “I remember when your kind—your order—was created, Ajax.”

“And you forget that if Samuel is coming for the throne, then he’s—” Benedict started.

Alek put up his hand, silencing Benedict.

*Ajax.* I heard Alek’s voice in my head and immediately threw time into a halt around the three of us, pausing the other members of Conclave.

“He’s being obstinate,” Benedict said, folding his arms across his chest.

“He can hear you.” Alek said, staring at Xavier.

“It’s always funny how you vampires assume your powers affect us.” Xavier smirked. “I’d even go so far to call it cute.”

Alek stood, removing a parcel from under his jacket, and without speaking, Benedict and I followed him across the room toward Xavier.

“The longer Samuel remains free, the longer the throne is in danger, and you and I both know that you don’t want extra danger placed on *anyone* under my protection.” Alek raised an eyebrow at Xavier.

“There you go assuming again. As if I don’t have eyes on Daphne.” He swung his legs over in a motion too quick to be seen by even vampire eyes and sat up.

“Well, just to keep things...amicable, seeing as she’s still a minor.” Alek handed Xavier the parcel. “Consider it bribery for allowing my assassins access. It’s from Daphne, obviously.”

Xavier blinked, then took the brown-paper-wrapped package with his name scrawled across it in feminine handwriting and a note I quickly made out that said, “*For the next time we meet.*” He opened it and laughed out loud. “Do you know what she sent me?”

Alek shook his head. “I asked her if she had anything to send given the situation.”

Xavier thumbed through a book, a smile widening on his face. “It’s a copy of *Men Explain Things to Me*, by Rebecca Solnit. It’s considered a modern feminist tome on the propensity of men to mansplain.”

Alek groaned.

Xavier shook his head and put the book in his lap. “Sweet little Daphne.”

Alek’s eyes flashed at Xavier. “She’s still a child, you know.”

“Not for long.” Xavier waved him off. “And I have no intentions of removing her from your custody as long as she’s safe. And as for anything else...” He shrugged. “She’ll have to come to me when she’s ready.”

“That’s never going to happen,” Alek said with a certainty I didn’t share. Valor’s little cousin had a mind of her own, and I’d caught her reading a history of demonology more than a few times.

“We’ll see.” He leaned back, and that was that.

We returned to Alek’s seat, and once we were all in place, I released time.

Every eye in the room darted between Xavier and Alek, not realizing the exchange that had happened.

“You have whatever access you desire to my land.” Xavier held up his hand. “Only the hunters in your little order of assassins.”

Benedict’s jaw dropped.

My eyebrows rose.

“Accepted,” Alek said without question.

Conclave concluded, and we all headed back toward our separate entrances, but I kept my eye on Ruyan until our door was sealed behind us.

“Saint will appreciate what you did,” I told my king as we armed ourselves once more.

“The hunters-only rule is a crock of shit,” Benedict snapped.

“It’s half the order,” Alek reminded him, his voice low and level. “When it comes to Xavier, we take what we can get.” The king turned to me. “I’ve been thinking about your mate.”

A growl rumbled up through my chest. No one needed to think about Grace besides me.

“About how she might live,” he quickly added.

I blinked. “She has a terminal brain tumor. It’s hereditary and aggressive, and she’s already refused treatment.”

Alek nodded. “I understand. But she’s only refused treatment as a *human*.”

My heart thundered in my chest as I caught his meaning.

“You need to take her to Gabriel.”



I CLASPED Grace’s small hand and led her down the stairs, past the entrance to the war room and into the tunnels of our underground compound, keeping my pace as slow as possible so she could keep up.

I’d treasured my time with her before the mark appeared, but the bond growing between us reveled in her nearness now. If there was even a chance that she could survive, I was going to take it.

“So this is the royal residence, not the palace, because that’s across the yard—courtyard,” Grace corrected herself.

“Correct.” I turned left at a fork in the tunnels, though the wide, expansive hallways that could only be called such since they were windowless and underground.

“Because you’re really a vampire. And everyone here is a vampire—”

“Almost everyone.” I stroked my thumb across the back of her hand, fighting back the hope that had taken root in my chest since Alek had suggested this very course of action.

I could turn her. The transformation would wipe out the tumor. We would be together forever, have the time that we both needed to fall in love, to have what the others in my Order already did.

“Right. Valor and her cousin, Daphne, are human.” Her nose crinkled just like it did whenever she was processing new information. “But the rest of you are immortal vampires on a quest to rid the world of vampire hunters and other vampires who like to drain people.”

“In not so many words,” I agreed as we approached Gabriel’s infirmary. “You’re kind of getting a crash course. When we were brought out of stasis—”

“You and your brothers. The hunters,” she interjected, looking up at me with those incredible eyes to see if she was right.

“Yes.” I lifted her hand to my mouth and pressed a kiss against the back. The sooner we got out of this appointment, the sooner I could have her naked under me again. I paused time around us so we could catch up on...everything. “You’re taking it like a champ.”

“And you didn’t hesitate to pick up on idioms,” she answered with a smile that stole my very breath. “Are your brothers catching on as quickly?”

I paused, my hand on Gabriel’s door handle. “About my brothers.” I swallowed, searching for the right words. “If you need something, you go straight to Zachariah. He’ll know what to do. Dagon and Talon are equally protective, but Saint...” My chest constricted. “I love my brother, and I have no doubt that he would die for you, but he walks an edge between sanity and bloodmadness. Steer clear of him whenever possible. Please. For me.”

Concern furrowed her brow, but she nodded. “Okay.”

“Thank you.” I leaned down and brushed my lips over her forehead.

She squeezed my hand. “And now we’re going to see your doctor.”

“Your doctor, too,” I answered, pushing the door open into the infirmary. It was a spacious area with a trauma room, recovery, laboratory, and Gabriel’s offices, from which he walked out of at the sound of our arrival.

“Ajax,” he greeted me with a smile, sticking out his hand. I released Grace’s hand and shook Gabriel’s. The vampire was big enough to be an assassin and even hailed from some of the same bloodlines, but lucky for us, his intellect matched his physical appearance. He’d kept us alive on too many occasions to count. “I see you’ve brought your mate.”

“Grace,” she said, holding out her hand.

I tensed and my fangs punched downward.

*Get a fucking grip.*

Gabriel lifted his eyebrows and backed up a step. “No offense intended, but touching the newly marked mate of a warrior vampire is pretty much tantamount to a death sentence. Ask me again in a couple months and I’ll be happy to shake your hand once Ajax has himself under control.”

Grace looked up at me like I’d lost my mind, and I could only offer her an apologetic smile.

“It’s a thing.” I shrugged.

“And how exactly is your doctor supposed to examine me if he can’t touch me?” She arched a brow. “Maybe you should step out.”

A growl erupted from my throat.

“Nope.” Gabriel put a set of scans up on a lighted board. “Being alone with a newly marked mate? Even worse. Sorry, but that male of yours is going to be a territorial asshole for the better part of a few months.”

“I won’t be alive in a few months.” She said it with a finality that hit me like a punch to the gut. “And how did you get my scans?”

“Medical records are digital and networks are easy to hack when you have Ransom living with you.” Gabriel locked eyes with me, then looked back to the scans. “I can see you have an aggressive glioblastoma. From the scans it looks like it shrank a bit in the past month, though, which isn’t just odd...it’s miraculous. What did you do?”

“Nothing.” She shrugged.

“Drank my blood,” I answered at the same time.

Gabriel paused, then turned slowly to face us. “You... exchanged?”

I nodded. “Twice. I know the rules.” Three times would transition or kill her.

He looked at the scans side-by-side. “A full transfusion? Or—”

“Full,” I answered.

Gabriel’s shoulders dipped. “The small bit of good it did probably bought her a week, but nothing more.” He looked at Grace. “You’ve refused treatment from the human doctors?”

She nodded. “I watched my mother spend her last months in complete and utter misery. I want to still be *me* at the end of my own life. Besides,” she smiled up at me, her hair sliding back over her shoulders. “The hallucinations are too good to give up.”

Gabriel cocked his head at me.

I sighed, and rubbed my forehead. “She thinks this is all a hallucination.”

“Duh.” Grace pointed to the room around us. “I’m surrounded by vampires, somehow attached to this sex god of a man, and then there’s this.” She tugged down the neckline of the shirt Lyric had loaned her, displaying her mating mark. “Tattoos just don’t magically appear because you’re having the best orgasms of your life.”

Gabriel looked at me in pure confusion.

“I know.” I could only shrug. “I’ve tried telling her. And I get how aggressive the tumor is, I really do, but here’s the thing. She’s a quarter vampire according to Cassandra.”

“I’m guessing it would be my father’s side. They seemed like the disappearing kind, if you know what I mean.” Grace joked.

She fucking *joked* because she still thought this was all in her head.

“I can turn her, right?” I asked Gabriel. “She should be completely healed in the transition.”

“Turn me into what?” Grace shook her head at me.

“One of us. A vampire.” I cupped her cheek, looking at her with every ounce of hope in my body. “We found each other at this time in our lives for this purpose, Grace. I know it. I can save you. We can be together for every night of our lives.”

She sighed and leaned into my palm, then turned toward Gabriel. “See? It’s the best hallucination ever. Not only is he constantly telling me I’m his, but now he thinks he can save me.”

Gabriel looked at the scans, then toward me, and finally Grace. “I don’t know how to tell you this, Grace.”

“Just say it. I’m used to getting bad news at this point.” She leaned into my side and I wrapped my arm around her waist.

“See this area here?” He pointed to a clear area on her scans.

“Yep.”

“That’s where we’d expect to see a tumor if you were suffering from hallucinations. But yours is here.” He moved the pointer. “So as hard as this is to absorb...” Sympathy lined his features as he looked back at Grace. “You can’t be hallucinating. This is all very real.”

Grace's mouth opened, then shut, then opened again, and her eyes flew wide as she looked up at me. "You're saying that all of this—him, you, the house...it's all real? I'm surrounded by...vampires?"

I nodded. "That's exactly what he's saying, baby."

"Oh...God."

She pushed away from me with all her strength and my chest cracked in two.



# GRACE

“**M**y boyfriend is a vampire,” I said, my heart climbing up my throat as my mind shifted on its axis.

This is real.

This is all totally and one hundred percent real.

“Mate,” Ajax corrected me, his eyes full of concern as he studied the lines of my face.

I held up a hand toward him, indicating I needed a second.

A lifetime, maybe. That’s what it would take for me to fully wrap my head around the fact that everything I thought was some sort of stellar death knell these past few weeks was actually all real.

Ajax. His hunter brothers. The men trying to kill me.

“Grace,” Gabriel—the king’s vampire doctor—said in that calming way only super intellectual people like doctors can manage. “You’re safe. I want you to try and take a few deep breaths for me, please.”

I almost laughed because the vampire looked like he could’ve walked right off of that vampire show *True Blood*. Did they all have to be so magnificent looking when I was totally ordinary?

I took the few breaths he requested, my muscles relaxing with each release of oxygen.

*Okay, nothing has really changed. I'm still dying and I'm still totally head over heels for Ajax. The rest...the rest I can work out later. Or never.*

My thoughts were erratic but I cut myself some slack seeing as all of this seemed too unreal to be true.

“Good,” Gabriel said. “Now, can you tell me how you’re feeling?”

“You’re all vampires,” I blurted out, but at least my voice didn’t crack. “Beings I never knew existed outside the pages of my favorite books and it turns out I’m a quarter vampire too? And there are people after me because of that and I have a tumor the size of an egg trying to kill me. How do you think I’m feeling?” The words spilled out of me on a rushed breath and I immediately cringed. “I’m so sorry. That was a lot and shouldn’t be directed at you.”

“Quite all right,” he said, flashing me a genuine smile. “It’s a lot to take in.”

I huffed a broken laugh.

*Understatement of the century. Poor girl, first the tumor and now the Sons want her? And Ajax, Gods, a vampire who can stop time but can't stop it enough to save her.*

I flinched at the sound of Gabriel’s voice in my head.

“So, you don’t think I can be saved,” I said, and his blue eyes flared wide at my responding to something he hadn’t spoken aloud...which means all the other voices I’d been hearing weren’t a symptom of the tumor either. Great, add that to the list of my shifting reality.

Another deep breath. Ajax was a vampire but his blood couldn’t heal me like in all the books I loved to read. Not from the way Gabriel was thinking anyway. I’d tried to let go of hope the second I saw the scans of my brain, but this truth was a bitch to take.

Gabriel turned away from the table where he’d been examining my most recent brain scans, crossing the room to stand before me.

*Grace. Can you hear my thoughts right now?*

A bolt shot down the center of me at the direct question inside my mind. Up until now, I'd been able to chalk the voices up to the tumor, but that was extremely hard to do when a vampire was staring me in the eyes and asking me questions without moving his lips.

*Purple penguins.*

Another laugh ripped through me. "Purple penguins?" I asked, and he gaped at me. "That's pretty random, even for a vampire, I imagine."

"Gods," he whispered.

I swallowed hard, anxiety clawing up my throat and threatening to shut it. I closed my eyes, inhaling deeply to try and quell the panic. "So," I said, opening my eyes again. "This is real then? All of it?" I glanced around the elaborate space we were in, and then pictured the rest of the estate beyond. Pictured Ajax, the way his fangs had sunk into my flesh and he'd drank from me, the way it'd made me feel—floaty and tingly and all kinds of hot. Thought about the mating mark that had appeared over my collar bone. If it was real, then that meant Ajax's feelings were real, which actually made butterflies take flight in my stomach. If anything good came out of this entire mess, it was Ajax.

God, I wished I had more time with him.

"I suppose that depends on what you're referring to," he said in the most doctorish way ever.

I tried not to roll my eyes. "Vampires. Telepathy. The tumor that is killing me." Not that I'd ever doubted *its* authenticity.

Awareness rippled along the edges of my body, a flash of heat skirting over my chest as Ajax moved closer to me.

"It's all right," I answered his silent gaze of concern as he smoothed a hand over my lower back. The breath in my lungs loosened with his touch. Even my rising panic at the realization that all of this was real dulled with him so close.

“It is real,” Gabriel answered my question. “And no, the tumor isn’t the cause of your gift.”

“Is it because of the quarter vampire in my bloodline?” I asked.

Gabriel nodded. “That is highly likely.” His eyes flashed to Ajax. “Her telepathy is far more advanced than Alek suggested.”

“The king suspected...” Ajax said slowly.

“He did,” Gabriel answered.

Ajax raised his brows at me, and I shrugged.

“That’s not his fault,” I said. “It’s not like I advertised this. I thought I was hallucinating half the time I was with Ajax.”

Ajax laughed. “No one could hallucinate all this perfection,” he teased, motioning to himself. It was hard not to agree, especially when the leather pants he wore hugged those massive thighs I liked to dig my nails into. “Not even your brilliant mind, Grace.” His features turned serious as he focused back on Gabriel.

“You didn’t answer my question,” he continued. “So I’ll ask you a different one. With you being you, could you remove the tumor more successfully than a human doctor?”

Gabriel sighed, then shook his head.

“What?” Ajax snapped, the intensity in his voice jolting me. “You’re the best healer Alek has ever had,” he said, exasperated. “You have skills no mortal doctor ever will. And I can pause time, I can give you what you need to fix this.”

A pang twisted my chest at the desperation in his tone, the pleading look in his eyes. Ajax was a powerful immortal who looked like the last creature on Earth who would beg for something, but here he was, begging a vampire doctor to save my life.

And for the first time since I’d gotten the diagnosis, I was *not okay* with it. I wasn’t in my accepting this-is-going-to-happen mood. I’d found someone worth living for, someone who had the ability to make me laugh in the face of death and

cry from loving life so much. And now, I was going to have to lose him.

“I’m sorry, Ajax,” Gabriel said. “You know if I thought we had a chance at successfully removing the mass, I wouldn’t hesitate. The risk is too great with its placement and size. It could kill her faster. Instantly even. We’ve never been able to cure human cancer.”

I cringed at that, and so did Ajax

“There has to be something we can do,” he said.

Gabriel arched a brow at him, looking between us. “And to answer your other question, about attempting to transition her...that would be incredibly risky.”

“How risky?” Ajax asked.

“*Too* risky,” Gabriel said, his shoulders dropping. “Even with her quarter-vampire blood, you know the odds of survival. I worry the process might even accelerate her condition. And yes, we’ve successfully transitioned the queen and even Jocelyn, but you know as well as I do every transition is different. And we’ve never tried with someone in a condition like Grace’s.”

*If we could somehow make it work, it would save her life.* Gabriel’s voice cut through my own thoughts, his mind a whirlwind as he ran through odds and past situations in his head.

“Wait,” I said, heart racing. “When you say transition, you’re talking about turning me into a vampire?”

Ajax nodded, but he looked deflated. “If Gabriel says it’s too risky, then it is. We can’t risk you—”

“Okay, we’ll get to that later but...” I turned, giving my full focus to Ajax. “Is that something you’d actually *want*?”

Ajax tilted his head. “Of course, we’d talk about it, Grace. I would never force a choice that life-altering on you without discussing it.”

“Right, that’s not what I meant.”

“What are you asking me?” Ajax asked.

I blew out a breath, glancing at Gabriel who very poignantly walked to the other side of the room, pretending to be studying my scans again. “I mean, would you want to turn me if there were no risks? Would you actually want me to become like you?” I whispered the question.

“Why wouldn’t I?” he asked.

I parted my lips. “I don’t know,” I said, heat flushing my body. “We haven’t known each other more than a month. Asking someone to be immortal with you is kind of a huge step.” I clenched my eyes shut. “Not that you were exactly asking me to be immortal *with* you, like stay with me for eternity and everything,” I rambled. “Okay, this is sounding terrible. Forget I said anything—”

Ajax’s lips met mine, cutting off my words and stealing my breath. He cupped my cheeks, pulling back to look at me. Devastation and anger and passion churned in those eyes. “You’re my mate, Grace. I know all of this is new to you but that mark on your skin means I belong to you and you belong to me, *forever*. If I knew you were safe,” he said. “I would turn you.”

My heart sank and soared at the same time, if that was possible. “I would let you,” I said, and his eyes widened.

“You’d want this life?” His eyes flared wide with surprise.

“A life? Yes, I’d love that. Especially if it had anything to do with you.” Traitorous hope flared in my soul. “Let’s do it.”

Ajax pulled away from me. “What? Didn’t you just hear what Gabriel said?”

Gabriel cleared his throat. “I’ll just step outside—”

“Don’t you dare go anywhere,” Ajax cut him off, stopping the doctor in his tracks. “She obviously needs you to explain the risks again.”

“I do not,” I said. “I know the risks. I’m willing to take them—”

“You don’t know what you’re saying,” he said. “Gabriel, tell her again. You said it could accelerate her condition.”

“It’s very likely,” Gabriel chimed in.

“Right, and so could me just living out these last months of my life, Ajax,” I fired back. “Any minute could be my last—”

“You have months, Grace. Months. You don’t understand the value of that time. I will not rob your peace in your last days.”

His words killed any retort I might’ve made. I’d said those same words to my doctor when she’d pushed for treatment. I understood where he was coming from, but surely this was different than radiation and meds and surgery. This would either work or it wouldn’t.

I held Ajax’s gaze, and fear rippled in my mind. Not my own, but his.

*I can’t hurt you. I can’t risk hurting you. Please, Grace.*

I wasn’t sure if he knew I could hear him in that moment or if he cared, but it shattered the fight I’d been gearing up to have.

“There is one matter we should discuss,” Gabriel chimed in when the silence grew too heavy.

“What’s that?” Ajax asked without taking his eyes off mine.

“The matter of her telepathy.”

I broke our gaze, looking at Gabriel. His features were understanding, comforting. “I imagine it is causing you a great deal of strain,” he said. “Not being able to control the stream of thoughts coming into your mind?”

I nodded. “It’s not as bad here,” I said. “Before we came here, it was constant and exhausting.”

“That’s because a vampire’s thoughts are more guarded. We’re used to shielding our minds from outside attempts to penetrate them. Humans have no shields; therefore, they bombard you.”

“What are you suggesting?” Ajax asked.

“You know who can help her,” Gabriel answered.

Clarity cleared the pain in Ajax’s eyes. “Alek.”

I sputtered. “The vampire king?” A shiver of ice scraped down my spine.

“You shiver at the thought of him but for me you coo?” Ajax teased, as if he’d felt the fear curl inside me.

I laughed, unable to help it. He had a point. Ajax was as big as the king if not a tad larger, and was far more menacing looking with his long black hair, dark eyes, and tattoos. But I couldn’t help it. Something in me had always been drawn to Ajax, had never once feared him, even when logic suggested I should.

But the king? With his ice-blue eyes and that power that radiated off him in waves? Every human instinct in my body had told me to run when I’d first seen him.

“I would hurry,” Gabriel said. “With her lessons. She doesn’t have much time.”

Ajax nodded, ushering me off the exam table and out of Gabriel’s offices.

“You know what would give me more time—”

“Don’t,” Ajax cut me off, stopping outside of the king’s study. “Please. I would’ve done it right then and there if Gabriel had said it would work without a risk. But, Grace...I can’t fathom stealing the last moments you have because I’m a selfish prick who wants to attempt to keep you forever.”

I blew out a breath as he knocked on the door to the study. I dropped the subject, not wanting to cause a rift between us, but it wouldn’t be the last time I brought it up.

How could it be? When it was the last ray of hope I had left?



“GOOD,” Alek’s voice didn’t need to be raised to feel like it boomed through the study we’d been working in for the past four hours. Ajax had stalked off the minute the vampire king agreed to help me, and I knew it was because of my wanting to try transitioning, but there was nothing I could do about it now. “Again.”

There were no dramatic movements, no flourishing arm motions, nothing like in books or movies. There was just the vampire king sitting in a cushioned chair across from where I sat in an identical chair, him using his power to penetrate my mind and me doing everything he’d taught me about shielding.

I’d gone into psychology not only because I’d wanted to help younger children in foster care, but because I’d always had a knack for visualizing. My imagination was a wild one—hence, my certainty that this had all been a hallucination in the beginning. I could manifest crystal clear pictures while I read, making reading one of my favorite past times.

So, when the vampire king had explained that I had to visualize a physical shield around my mind, I went all in.

I slammed the shield over my mind, fully formed and detailed, and the king laughed.

“That’s quite...fantastical,” he said, amusement in his voice.

He wasn’t wrong. I’d constructed my mental shield out of what I imagined dragon scales looked like, each scale linking over the other, hard as adamant and shimmering with an iridescent indigo color.

“I mean, why not?” I replied, focusing all my energy on keeping the shield in place. Not as easy as it had sounded when we’d begun our training. Alek had been able to tear it down within seconds the first time, and now that it was the... I’d lost count...but now I could *feel* his power on the other side of my shield, like claws on a chalkboard.

But still, his thoughts remained at bay.

The control was exhilarating, filling me with a renewed energy I was certain was lost hours ago.

“Good,” he said, and I half wondered if he was even trying to break through.

He’d allowed me to enter his mind earlier, lowering his own shield that looked like a wall of onyx when we’d begun. I only needed to be in there a second to understand the depth of his power. Like Ajax’s, it was ancient, but the king’s ran in wells that had no end in sight—probably one of the reasons he was, you know, the king.

But that power likely meant he was only indulging me here. “Be honest,” I said. “You could break through if you really wanted to.”

Alek gave me a slow nod. “Of course,” he said, matter of factly. “But I’m not prone to doing so. And with humans? Their thoughts won’t reach you if this shield is in place. You’ll have total control then.”

I swallowed hard, my bones feeling the weight of the training. “And how soon will I be around humans again, you think?” I tried to ask the question casually. This was Alek’s estate, and Ajax served him. I highly doubted he took kindly to having dying quarter-breeds infiltrating his home.

“I’m not sure,” he answered honestly. “You are not a prisoner here, Grace, but you must understand the danger you pose to us.”

“Me? A danger?” How could I possibly be—

A pressure sliced through my dragon shield, turning it to ash in a matter of seconds.

*Because you know the truth of our kind now and you’ve become important to one of my hunters. We take great strides to not expose ourselves to the human population, for their safety and ours. If you were to tell anyone—*

“I have no one to tell,” I said aloud. “And I wouldn’t even if I did. Ajax is...he’s important to me too. I would never risk any harm coming to him.”

*Ajax is my mate*, I said silently into Alek’s mind, trying to put all the emotion I had around that statement. I may not understand it on the vampire level, but I understood the feeling

in my soul whenever Ajax was around. He was vital to my survival, my happiness, my existence.

The corners of the king's mouth ticked up as he nodded, and I felt his mental retreat as he slid out of my mind. "That's enough training for tonight," he said, rising. I followed him to the study's door. "It's nearly sunrise, and you look like you could use some rest."

I nodded, feeling a bit wobbly on my feet. "Thank you for taking the time...your highness," I fumbled over the title and even did an awkward as hell curtsey that brought a genuine laugh from Alek's lips.

He waved me off. "Gods, if only Lyric had seen that," he said. "She'd give me such grief over it."

I laughed too. "I'm sorry, I don't know the etiquette."

"And you don't need to," he said. "You're not a vampire, so technically, I'm not your king. But I appreciate your respect and your kindness, especially toward my hunter."

I nodded, taking his smile as a dismissal as I made my way back to Ajax's room.

He was already in bed, half naked under the covers, sleep clinging to his body. He looked downright peaceful as I climbed in next to him. His breathing was deep and even and his features didn't carry the heaviness that had been there before.

I settled on the pillow next to him, Alek's words flashing through my mind.

*You are not a vampire, so technically, I'm not your king.*

Why did that make my heart so heavy?

I looked at Ajax, the realization unraveling inside me.

I was willing to risk death to try and earn more time with this male.

I was willing to alter my life entirely for him, and I'd only known him a handful of weeks.

I wanted to *live* for this male, even if it meant dying first.

My pulse skipped as I tried to breathe evenly around the absolute certainty storming my soul.

I was one hundred percent, full-on, head over heels in love with him.



# AJAX

**F**or someone whose biggest problem had always been having too much time, it wasn't lost on me that now I couldn't get enough of it.

It had been two weeks since my mark had appeared on Grace's chest. Two weeks that I'd had her in my bed, waking with me in the evening at the residence and welcoming me home before the sun rose in the morning. Two weeks that should have been a preview into our forever, and instead, marked what Gabriel estimated to be about a fifth of all the time we'd ever have.

Fuck time. It was betraying me when I needed it most.

I brushed my lips over Grace's cheek, a little less full than it had been a few weeks ago, and sneaked out of our bedroom, armed to the hilt. She'd give me shit when I got home about not waking her before I headed out for the evening, but she needed all the sleep she could get now.

My heart did that skipping, squeezing thing as I glanced at her one last time before quietly closing the door behind me.

Talon pushed off the wall from across my door, dressed for hunting. "I was giving you two more minutes before I started knocking."

"I would have killed you for waking her." I walked past my best friend, tying my hair behind the nape of my neck with an elastic band.

“Hence me waiting until I was positive that you were going to be late for the evening meeting.” He sent a sideways look my way as he kept up with my long strides down the wing we hunters had claimed for ourselves in the residence. “You missed evening repast.”

“I didn’t want to leave her side,” I grumbled the response as we reached the staircase that led down to the foyer.

“Look, it’s not for me to lecture—” he started.

“Then don’t.”

“You’re not feeding enough. You’re not eating.”

“I thought you weren’t going to lecture.” We hit the marble floor and kept going. I nodded at the staff, the talem we hunters still avoided taking.

“I said it wasn’t for me to lecture, not that I wasn’t going to.” He put his arm out, blocking me for show only. We both knew I could have walked right through him. “Listen to me.”

I halted my steps at his lowered voice and the concerned intensity in his eyes.

“You are my best friend, Ajax. You are my brother. I will not pretend to know what it is to be mated, let alone to be mated to a human you’ve only had a month with.” His shoulders dropped slightly. “All I know is that my brother is suffering. We can all feel your hunger. We know you’re not feeding enough—”

“I will not feed from anyone but my mate,” I growled.

“And she needs all her strength to sustain herself!” He hissed, his gaze darting toward the kitchen to be sure he hadn’t been heard. “We know. We all feel it. We are all...worried. Are you trying to die with her?”

My hands curled into fists at my sides and I pressed my lips into a thin line to avoid saying something catastrophic to Talon.

“Because that’s what it looks like from where I’m standing,” Talon finished in a whisper.

“I...” Air moved through my lungs, and I recognized the sharp bite of hunger within me, but I felt almost separate from my body, as though I might reside in this vessel, but I only existed for the woman in my bed. “I refuse to think about what will happen when Grace...”

An immovable lump formed in my throat and there was nothing I could do to swallow it down.

“Okay.” Talon nodded and squeezed my shoulder. “Let’s just do what we can to keep you healthy so you can keep *her* healthy as long as possible, my friend.”

I nodded.

“Have you considered pausing time around her?” he asked.

“I’ve considered everything. If I pause Grace and I the way I did for us when we came out of stasis, then the cancer would still continue to grow. We hungered while in that bubble. We thirsted. Our hair grew.”

Talon nodded, sadness softening his aristocratic features.

“And if I pause only her, and remain outside the bubble, then she is frozen only as long as I can hold the power, which would require I stay in the room with her without touching her, talking to her, knowing anything more about her until what... humans find a cure? I already suggested it to Grace and she shot me down saying that she wasn’t going to be some Sleeping Beauty while I morphed into a bloodthirsty dragon standing guard.” My lips curved into a smile. Another thing I’d learned about my mate? She was all about the fairytales.

She loved magic.

Loved her power and was learning to control it with Alek’s help. She wanted control over something in her short amount of time, and this was it.

She loved everything about the world that was mine and should have been ours.

“I’ve never lost at anything since I discovered my power,” I said to Talon. “It’s the ultimate advantage in battle, in cards —”

“You cheat,” he accused softly, giving me a half-smile.

“I use every weapon I have,” I corrected him. “But knowing that my first loss is going to be the only loss that actually matters?” My throat closed and I shook my head.

“You two are late!” Zachariah lectured as he walked in, waving his finger between us as he walked into the room like a disappointed father. “Lucky for you we’re in the dining room. Not the war room.”

We followed him right instead of left and walked into the nightly meeting, where the assassins and hunters had gathered around the impossibly long formal table of the residence.

Zachariah pointed to two empty seats, and then he threw a blueberry muffin at me from one of the five baskets on the table as we sat.

“Nice of you to join us,” Alek said, lifting an eyebrow at me, but it was his only rebuke.

I made no excuse and didn’t feel I had to. I did, however, eat the fucking muffin to appease the noisy growl of my stomach.

“You’re starting to look worse than me, and that’s saying something.” Saint shot me a look, barely pausing in his methodical cleaning of his weapons on the table in front of us. Pretty sure each of his bullets had been engraved with Samuel’s name.

The French doors slid open again, and Cassandra walked in, dressed in an evening gown the same midnight black as her hair. “Sorry,” she said, her eyes darting around the table. “Lyric said you needed me and I hadn’t changed from repast.” She held her head high despite the awkwardly tense atmosphere at her arrival.

“Absolutely.” Alek pointed to the empty chair beside his at the head of the table. “If you wouldn’t mind.”

She sat with perfect posture, her back ramrod stiff.

“Guess this explains why we’re not in the war room,” Saint muttered, not bothering to spare her a glance.

“She’s nervous,” Talon said, his tone so quiet that only Saint and Zachariah hear him. He watched Cassandra with the shrewd assessment he was known for. His power of shapeshifting had made him an expert observer over the centuries, and the things he picked up on that we all missed never failed to floor me.

Alek nodded to Lachlan, who then stood and handed out printed rosters of names down the table.

“All the technology in the world, and we’re still passing around paper,” Dagon said, reading over names and addresses I didn’t recognize.

“It can’t be hacked,” Ransom noted, shifting his weight as he stood behind Alek’s chair.

The guy was going to have to settle down or he wouldn’t live to see his mate give birth.

The sour taste of jealousy flooded my mouth. His mate carried his child. He would hold her, watch her body grow and swell, paint a fucking nursery, protect her and his youngling... as long as his mate survived the birth.

My heart sank at my own pettiness.

Given the mortality rate of our females during birth, there was no guarantee Olivia would survive.

Now I wanted to pace the floor, too.

“As you all know, Hawke and Zachariah stumbled into another human massacre last night while on patrol—” Alek started.

My eyes flew to Zachariah’s because I *hadn’t* known.

He gave me a tight, understanding, smile from Talon’s other side.

“They arrived too late to save the father, unfortunately, but the mother and two children are safe and Patrick has them hidden.” Alek set his own paper down on the table. “Two Sons were killed on sight, but Zachariah retrieved this list from the pocket of one.” The king looked at me. “It seems to be a continuation of the one you found at Grace’s house.”

I scanned the list. There had to be forty names on here, and the addresses spanned all five territories in Edgemont.

“We’re working on the assumption that every name on this list is a half-blood.” Alek grimaced. “Quarter, eighth, whatever. They descend from vampire lineage. But Cassandra here has agreed to help test that hypothesis.”

Cassandra didn’t move a muscle. I couldn’t help but wonder how many years that female had been trained at finishing school. Her composure was admirable.

“We’ll divide up the list and check every house,” Alek said. “Hunters, take the bottom half. Assassins take the top.”

“Where do you want me?” Cassandra asked.

“Your choice.” Alek shrugged. “Going with either team should be enough to confirm our theory.”

She glanced around the table, her eyes skimming over the assassins that openly disliked her from her past with Alek, to our end of the table. “I’ll go with the hunters.”



AN HOUR LATER, the six of us patrolled through demon territory, near the waterfront of Edgemont.

We’d already cleared three houses—all with perfectly safe, perfectly *human* occupants. Either our theory was bogus, or Cassandra wasn’t as adept as we gave her credit for.

“This is a waste of fucking time,” Saint said beside me, his gaze darting back and forth, scanning our surroundings.

I bit my tongue to keep from agreeing with him. I’d rather be in bed with Grace, but if this led me to whomever had tried to kill her, she might be able to leave the residence to see the people she loved again before—

*Don’t go there.*

“The names are familiar, though,” she said to Zachariah, scanning down the list as we strolled down the darkened street.

“Stroyola, Montview. Those are vampire names, just held by humans. It’s almost...maybe they’re guessing?” She’d traded in her gown for a pair of slacks and blouse.

“That’s your assessment?” Talon snorted. “That the Sons are *guessing*?”

She shot a glare at Talon. “Do you have anything better?”

Saint paused.

Everyone but me kept walking.

“Saint?” I turned toward my brother.

His eyes were wide, his chest rising and falling as he sucked in breath after breath, as if he was...

“You scent him.” That was the only possible answer.

Saint’s dark gaze flew to mine for a heartbeat before he broke into a sprint toward the right, off the street and into the alley between townhouses.

“Fuck!” I snapped, breaking into a run and chasing after Saint. “Zachariah!”

I heard the pounding footsteps of my brothers behind me as I followed Saint down the musty alleyway and onto the next street. The salt air hit my lungs, disguising the scent of nearby demons and anything else I could have possibly picked up on.

But Saint and Samuel were more than brothers. They were twins.

“For fuck’s sake, wait!” I shouted.

“Keep up!” he countered. Fucker was *fast*.

The townhouses facing the waterfront were anything but pristine. This entire section of the territory had been earmarked for demolition and development. Saint shoved through a selection of wide, yellow tape, warning that the area was condemned, and continued his headlong flight not up the stairs to the main entrance, but to the side, where a door waited five steps beneath the surface of the street.

I barely had my Sig unholstered before Saint raised his boot to the heavy wooden door and kicked it in with one shot. Splinters flew and he jumped headfirst into the darkness.

“Damn it!” Trusting my vision to flicker thermal if needed, I followed after my brother.

If Samuel was here, we’d know it soon enough. We’d all be sick on the floor from his unusual powers, completely at his mercy.

I threw out my power around us both. “Stop it!” I shouted. “If you continue without thinking, you’ll get us both killed!”

Saint stopped just before the wall of time that held us both suspended, his chest heaving, his eyes wild as he turned to me in the dark basement. “He’s either here or he just was.”

“You’re sure?” I breathed in, catching the subtle darker notes of Samuel’s scent. Bloodmadness had changed it too much for me to be certain, but I trusted Saint.

“Positive.” The strain on his face was enough to convince me.

My chest tightened. As much as I knew we had to hunt Samuel, had to end his existence, accepting that my brother had actually turned was...difficult. “Stay with me. We’ll search room by room. If he’s here, we have to wait for the others to catch up. Time is mine, brother. It is on our side in this scenario. Do not let your need for vengeance cost your life.”

“My life is already forfeit,” he snapped.

“Saint—” I started, unable to comprehend why he even thought that.

“Let’s go.” He turned abruptly and started stalking down the darkened hall.

I went with him before he breached the barrier of time. We took the steps and cleared the dilapidated house floor by floor, and even though I knew there was little to no chance of Samuel playing house above the ground level when there were clearly no blinds or drapes to block the sun coming through

the broken windows, I covered every inch with Saint just so he'd be sure.

“His scent is stronger in the basement,” Saint muttered as we went back down the splintered steps and into the dank sublevel.

“He smells different to me.” We turned and followed the maze-like hallway deeper into the house.

“Me, too.” Saint shook his head in frustration as we cleared each room we came to. “It’s weaker somehow and yet...” Weapon in hand, he opened the last door, and we both fell silent.

The room was pitch black, and my thermal vision picked up on a form in the corner, and the shapes extending up the wall looked to be...arms. It was a person, but the heat signature wasn't nearly warm enough—

“Shit.”

“It's...him.” Saint aimed his weapon at the shape. “Drop the barrier.”

I snapped back my power and slammed my hand toward the wall, flicking on the light, and a second later, Saint lowered his weapon.

“What the fuck?” he whispered.

I moved to Saint's side and stared in open-mouthed shock at the sight before us.

A woman lay slumped against the cinder-block wall, her arms held above her head by steel handcuffs around her too-thin wrists. All of her was too thin. Emaciated was a better word. The color of her hair was indistinguishable for the blood in it, and what had once been a nightgown covered her body in tatters. And her neck...

“Gods, her neck.” I moved to her side, but Saint was already there, moving faster than I'd ever seen.

“Her pulse is barely there.” His fingers rested above the jagged unhealed bite marks at her throat.

“Her temp is low, too.” I reached up and snapped the chains above the cuffs, the metal crumpling easily under my anger at how brutally the woman had been treated.

Familiar footsteps pounded down the hallway. By the sound of it, our brothers had found us.

“Could you assholes give us a little warning before—” Zachariah’s words cut off behind us. No doubt he’d seen the woman.

“She has Samuel’s blood,” Saint said, crouched next to the woman. “That’s why I smelled him.”

“A human?” Dagon asked, edging past Zachariah into the room.

Cassandra was next. “I could have tagged along faster if you’d turned yourself into a horse and let me—”

“If you want to ride me, you’re going to have to ask me a lot nicer than that,” Talon fired back, his voice trailing off as he brought Cassandra inside. “What the hell is going on?”

“Samuel has a feeder—” I started.

“She’s a vampire,” Cassandra corrected, pushing her way forward to crouch on the other side of the unconscious woman, her gaze sweeping over her. “Newly turned. I’d say she’s no more than a few days out of transition.”

“And hasn’t fed,” Saint noted. “Her temperature would be up, and these bite marks would have healed if she’d fed.”

The woman’s—female’s—eyes snapped open and her gaze flew around the room, wide and terrified.

Then she saw Saint.

And she screamed, scrambling as if she could somehow get farther into the corner. The sound would have shattered glass had there been any in the room. It was the stuff of nightmares, horror and panic compressed into a single shrill cry.

“She thinks he’s Samuel,” Dagon said.

“Saint!” Zachariah snapped.

Saint blinked, and the woman stopped screaming. His hand flew out, catching her head before it could fall back against the wall as she stared up at him, a slight smile tilting her lips.

“I am not him,” he said so softly that I barely heard it.

“Not him,” she repeated.

“What...” Cassandra stood and backed away. “What just happened?”

“He’s using his abilities,” Zachariah explained quietly. “He’s altering her mental reality.”

“What did he do to you?” Saint asked, his hand still cradling the female’s head.

“He...he...” Her eyes flared.

“You’re safe,” Saint whispered, and the woman relaxed. I’d never seen him so...gentle. Not in all our years together. “Can you tell me your name?”

“Rory,” she said, her voice raspy and broken from what I could only guess was screaming.

“He bit me. He forced me to drink...” She fought Saint’s compulsion. “To drink. Oh, God. I didn’t want to! And then the pain! I’m on fire and the burning won’t stop. Make it stop.”

“I’ve got you,” Saint promised, and the woman’s eyes fluttered shut.

My stomach plummeted. “The fucker turned her against her will.”

Dagon swore.

“We have to get her back to Gabriel if she’s going to have any shot at surviving,” Zachariah said. “Samuel won’t come back. Not with all our scents in this place.”

A mutter of ascent echoed in the empty chamber.

“I’ll carry her,” I offered, bending down.

“I’ll carry her,” Saint countered, slipping out of his jacket. He wrapped it around her shoulders before sliding his arms

under the female and lifting her frail frame against his chest. “Samuel did this. I should have killed him centuries ago when I realized he was turning. What’s happened to her is a direct consequence of my inaction. She’s my responsibility.”

He didn’t look at any of us before wending out, leaving us all staring at blood-soaked floor where the woman had been blatantly tortured.

“She’s on the list,” Cassandra said, pulling a folded paper from her pocket. “She was a half-blood.”

“You’re sure?” Talon asked, looking over her shoulder at the paper. “There’s more than one Aurora in the world.”

“Yes. But I doubt any of them have eyes that color.” She glared at Talon and shoved the paper back into her slacks. “She’s Duke Somerhaul’s daughter.”



I WAS careful to keep my mental shields in place as I stood in the doorway of our archives and watched Grace take a book from the stack that sat on the table between her and Lyric.

Her smile was wide as she laughed at something the queen said.

Mine. She was *mine*.

My chest hummed and threatened to crack wide open with an emotion I didn’t recognize. It wasn’t just adoration or lust, though there was plenty of both. It was so much more.

Damn, was my mate beautiful. Happiness lit up her astonishing eyes and her hands flew as talked excitedly before thumbing through the text. Even now, with weeks to live, she found joy, found things to be passionate about.

How could someone so in love with life be so short on it?

Grace lifted her head and spotted me, and her already bright smile grew to radiant. She said something to Lyric, then pushed away from the table and came my way.

Her curves were slighter—the cancer was clearly wearing on her—but she was no less gorgeous to me. Her body, as delectable as it was, was only a vessel for the incredible woman within. I just wished it would give her the time we both needed.

“Hey,” she said, smiling at me as she rose up on her toes for a kiss.

My mouth brushed over hers and I groaned. All it took was that touch, and heat flooded my veins, awakening my hunger with a speed that forced me to pull back before my fangs punched down. I hated the distance I forced between us, even if it was only inches, but I hated the thought of weakening her body even further more.

“What have you been up to this evening?” I asked.

“Research.” She leaned up and took another kiss that I happily gave. “Lyric, Julian, and I were going through the archives to see if there was any record of turning a human with cancer.” She cocked her head to the side. “Though it wasn’t always called cancer, which is making the process so much longer than it has to be.” She lost her balance, which had been happening far too often this week, and I caught her easily.

“You what?” My hands flexed around her waist and I tugged her against me, as though I could keep her safer the closer she was to me.

“Research,” she repeated. “We figured if we could find a record of a successful turn—” Her nose crinkled. “Wait, you call it a transition. Anyway, if we could find a successful transition of someone with cancer, then it’s worth a try.”

My teeth clicked as I snapped my mouth shut to keep from voicing the rage that quickly swept through me.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” She arched a brow.

“Like. What?” I got out between my clenched teeth.

“Like you might bite me for something other than pleasure?” There was no fear in her eyes, and damn did I love that about her. She had no problem staring down a six-and-a-half-foot vampire like she wasn’t a delicate little human.

“One, I would *never* bite you in punishment.” My stomach churned at the thought of Aurora’s throat. “And two, I thought we agreed that we weren’t going to try and turn you.”

“You agreed.” She pushed out of my arms and I let her go. “I want to try.”

“Absolutely not.”

Grace glanced over her shoulder at the queen and our historian, Julian, then grabbed my hand and tugged me out of the archives and into the tunnels that ran beneath the residence. “You’re being irrational.”

My eyes flew wide. “I’m the one being irrational?” Fuck this. She had no idea what she was asking for, but I did. “Come with me.” Lacing her fingers with mine, I started walking toward the infirmary, keeping my pace slow enough to be comfortable for her.

“It’s my body!” she argued.

“And I’d like that body to live!” I countered.

“Well I’m not going to!” She squeezed my hand harder. “I’m dying, Ajax. You turning me is my only chance.”

“And if I thought we had a chance, I’d take it! Gabriel is the foremost physician of our kind, Grace. He’s told us that he doesn’t know. That transitioning you might even speed the rate of your death, and that’s not something I’m going to gamble with!”

“But it’s my gamble to take!” She ripped her hand out of mine as we approached the infirmary. “If there’s even the slightest hope that it would give me more time with you, then I want to try, and if you won’t do it, then I’m sure I could find someone—”

I spun quickly, pinning her body between mine and the wall. “Don’t. Even. Think. That.” My vision flickered to thermal and my fangs erupted as the predator within demanded that I fuck her and feed from her, claiming my mate in every possible way to warn off any other male in the vicinity. “I’m not human, Grace. You go near another male’s fangs and I don’t know what I’ll do. I’d even kill one of my brothers if

they got close.” The thought was more than enraging, it was terrifying.

“I won’t,” she promised softly, cupping the side of my neck. “Ajax, I won’t. I’m sorry.”

I breathed slowly, forcing my vision back to normal as I got myself under control. “Do you even know what you’d go through in the transition? The pain alone might kill you, and in your weakened state...” I shook my head.

“I can handle it.” She tilted her chin.

Pride. Sorrow. Grief. Every emotion I could label coursed through me as I backed up a step and took her hand. “You can’t.”

Hurt flickered through her eyes.

I guided her through the soundproof infirmary doors, and the sound of screaming immediately assaulted our ears.

Aurora lay on the clinic’s bed, her frail body writhing as she cried. Her spine arched and she threw her head back, letting out another scream as Gabriel struggled to get an IV line in. Aurora kicked out, sending the bedside table—and its bags of blood—to the floor.

Grace drew back, her hand covering her mouth.

“This is really what you want?” I asked. “Listen to those screams and tell me it’s what you want.” I didn’t wait for her to respond before going to Gabriel’s side. “Tell me what you need.”

“She refuses to feed. Her body is stuck at the final stages of transition,” Gabriel said, his voice calm even though the lines of his body were so tense I thought he might snap.

“She’ll die if she doesn’t,” I replied quietly.

“Let me die!” Aurora screamed.

My heart broke.

“Get Saint. He can put her under just enough to get her fed,” Gabriel ordered.

I nodded and left, Grace following me out into the hallway. “You’re going to tell me that’s what you want, Grace? That’s how you want to spend your last moments on this earth? Because I won’t put you through it. I’d rather have these weeks with you than hold you as you fade away, screaming in agony before you die.”

“She doesn’t want to transition,” Grace said. “I do! It’s different!”

“Don’t ask me to kill you!” I paused, taking her face in my hands. “I want you to live more than anything, more than my own life. I don’t know how to live without you, how to breathe if your heart isn’t beating.” The words struck my chest like a physical blow. “Please don’t ask me to take your life faster.” I kissed her hard and quick, then left her standing in the hallway so I could find Saint.

I knew what that emotion was behind my ribs and it scared the shit out of me.



# GRACE

“**W**ait,” Valor said, pausing with a drink extended toward me. “Are you okay to drink this?”

I tilted my head at her where I sat on a barstool at the bar, eyeing her where she stood behind it. The thing was custom built into one of the game rooms in Alek’s estate, currently filled with my new best friends, Valor, Lyric, and Jocelyn.

“Are you asking if I’m of legal drinking age?” I teased, the tension in my chest easing at the easy banter we’d adapted the last few weeks. The girls had all been a lifeline for me between training and arguing with Ajax over the state of my humanity.

Valor chuckled, shaking her head. “I only meant...you’re not on any medication that would be harmful if you drank this?”

I eyed the concoction she’d created behind the bar—something with whiskey and absinthe and crushed ice. “You think I’d let you make me a drink if I was?”

Valor eyed me knowingly. “I think you’re living your life on the edge right now, so I wouldn’t put it past you.”

I couldn’t really blame her there. They’d all been privy to my nightly debate with my mate, but they—and all their mates—had graciously stayed out of it.

“Give me the drink,” I said, grinning at her. “I’m totally fine.”

And I was...to drink it, at least. I wasn't on any medication beyond the nausea meds, but I could feel my body slowly deteriorating on its own as it tried to fight off the mass in my brain. Training was getting easier—my mind was stronger than ever, but my body? That was another matter entirely. I was weak, sometimes barely able to stand from a sitting position, let alone take long walks in the estate's gardens, which was my new favorite pastime—especially under the moonlight when all the night-blooming flowers were awakening.

Valor slid the drink across the ebony bar, and I took a fast sip. The sweet burn was a delicious, welcomed sensation when I usually felt like a strong wind would knock me over. She made quick work of making three more, and handed Jocelyn and Lyric theirs before settling on a barstool next to me. The vampire and witch-hybrid elected to take up a loveseat opposite us. A pool table, dart board, and sound system finished the large space, creating a bar setting with the safety and protection of a mansion full of vampire assassins and hunters.

*What is my life?*

I hadn't been outside the grounds since Ajax brought me here, and after the arrival of poor Aurora—a forcefully turned vampire by Saint's deranged and bloodmad twin—I doubted I'd be let out any time soon. Not that I was complaining. The only person I missed was Maria, but we'd been texting, and it wasn't like we hung out on a regular basis. She was busy and I was...

I was still dying.

And noticing it more each and every day.

“Lyric,” I said after we'd all finished our first drink and had moved on to our second, our conversation hopping from topic to topic at rapid speed. “Can I ask you something?”

The vampire queen looked as regal as her title, sitting on the loveseat next to Jocelyn in a pair of red silk slacks and top. “Anything,” she said, so much friendlier than I ever imagined a queen would be. I mean, wasn't there a rule about royalty

looking down their nose at lowly newcomers like me? Especially supernatural royalty? Maybe Lyric was the exception or the books and movies had gotten it wrong.

Jocelyn raised her brows, sipping her drink as her long lavender hair fell over her shoulders. She was always down for spilling tea, and as the sole witch hybrid—one of the most powerful creatures in existence—she also had this constant crackling energy around her that was both intimidating and infectious.

“What was transitioning like?” I managed to ask the question I’d kept buried for weeks.

“I was wondering when you were going to ask me that,” she said, twirling the drink in her hand. “What exactly do you want to know?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “The process, I guess? Or how you convinced your mate to do it.” We all laughed softly, Lyric’s eyes compassionate as she focused on me.

“I didn’t convince Alek of anything,” she said. “I was near death. There was no choice. Turn me and risk me dying or watch me die. He went with the option that had a sliver of hope.”

My heart sank at her words. I *was* dying. Ajax knew that but claimed the nights we had left together were worth far more than the risk of ending things too soon. But I could feel death on the back of my neck like an icy breeze. Time was more than running out, and if there was even the slightest chance I could stay with Ajax, I would take it no matter the risks.

“Something similar happened with me,” Jocelyn said, shrugging. “But there were even more risks because of me being a witch. It took longer for me to come out of the transition process too. Benedict thought he made things worse and had to live with that and just... *wait* to see if I survived it.”

We all instinctively turned to Valor, who’d remained quiet on the subject.

“I’m undecided,” she said.

“And that’s fair,” Lyric supported her. The two were closer than all of us combined, almost like sisters.

“Why?” I asked, not wasting time being coy. She didn’t *have* to tell me, but I was dying to know. “You’re mated,” I continued. “You have vampire blood in your line and you have no underlying conditions that make you high risk. You’d likely transition without a hitch.”

“All valid points Lachlan and I have discussed at length,” she said, taking a sip of her drink. Music played on the speakers hung throughout the room, filling the silence as she gathered her thoughts. “I’m still adjusting to my new role in this life,” she explained. “I grew up practically brainwashed by my family...” She paused, an old pain flashing in her eyes. We’d spoken about it before, about her father and brother and their role in the Sons of Honor. “And I don’t want to make another life-altering decision until I’ve healed from some of the trauma that family caused.”

I reached over and squeezed her free hand. “That’s incredibly self-aware of you,” I said. “And a very healthy approach at life.” The psychology doctorate in me couldn’t help but spill out a little.

“But our situations are incredibly different,” Valor said. “I don’t have a clock ticking over my head like you do. If I were you, I’d be making the same demands.”

Lyric and Jocelyn nodded their agreement.

I breathed deeply, happy to have found this circle of friends who didn’t judge me and never treated me like glass.

“I just feel like I’ve finally found my place in this world,” I said, thinking of Ajax and my new friends and the world that felt right despite how wrong it should feel. “But with him refusing to even entertain the idea...I feel like my choices are being stripped away.”

And I didn’t have many choices left.

“Any...” I paused, my mind suddenly drawing a blank on the word I was searching for. My skin tightened, a little flare of panic bursting inside me when I kept searching for the word

I wanted to say and couldn't remember it. It was a common word, I'd said it hundreds of times before.

Sympathy and patience radiated from the girls as I opened and closed my mouth several times.

“*Advice*,” I said on a rushed exhale, then swallowed around the fear climbing up my throat. The same fear that was streaking through my blood, turning it to ice.

I was starting to forget words.

*Words.*

The chilly breath of death washed over me, my already weak muscles trembling.

“Don't give up,” Lyric whispered just as awareness rippled over my body.

A second later, Ajax sped into the room, dropping to a crouch before me. “Grace, what's wrong?” he asked, eyes wide and concerned as he cupped my cheeks.

I kept my lips closed, terrified I wouldn't be able to find the right words to explain the fear he must've felt down our bond. He leaned his forehead against mine, and I breathed in his scent.

“I'm just...I think I need some air,” I lied.

He scooped me into his arms, cradling me against his chest as he turned to dip his head to Lyric, then Jocelyn and Valor. “If you'll excuse me,” he said. “Me and my mate have places to be.”

The girls waved me off with looks of support, and I smiled at them as Ajax took off at vampire speed, not stopping until we were in my favorite spot in the estate's gardens—a little gazebo tucked among high hedges and night-blooming flowers, offering the best privacy save for the night sky watching above us.

Ajax sat me on my feet, towering above me as he looked me in the eyes. “Tell me the truth.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, moving past him to sit on the little wooden bench edging the gazebo so he couldn’t see the shakiness in my limbs while standing.

He tracked the move anyway.

Again, he crouched before me, hands on my thighs as he stared at me eye level. “You lied to me. You didn’t need air. Needing air doesn’t cause the kind of fear I felt. Talk to me, mate.”

I blew out a breath, two tears sliding down my cheeks. Ajax swiped them away.

“I forgot a word,” I said, and his eyes widened. “While talking to the girls, I forgot the word *advice*. *Advice*, Ajax.”

Understanding flickered over his features. “I’m sorry,” he said. “We knew that was a possibility. And you’re okay now? No headaches or nausea?”

“Two of Valor’s signature cocktails have me feeling pretty loose,” I tried to deflect, but my giant of a mate wasn’t buying it for a second. I swallowed hard. “I’m weak. I can feel the difference despite doing everything to fuel my body properly.” Thanks to Alek’s incredibly talented chef and staff, I had been eating the best diet to help increase longevity anyone had ever seen. I couldn’t thank them enough and always made a point to seek them out and compliment them on the meals they prepared for me...but it wasn’t enough. “Ajax, I think it’s going to happen sooner than we thought.”

“Baby, don’t say that,” he said, sliding his hands up into my hair, cradling my head as he gently pressed his lips to mine. “You have time. We have time.” Suddenly, even the insects silenced around us, and I felt Ajax’s power as he paused time.

“Just because you can stop time doesn’t mean you can stop what’s happening to me,” I said, leaning my forehead against his. “Stopping it does nothing to slow what’s killing me.”

Ajax’s brow furrowed against mine, a battle raging behind his eyes. “Tell me what you need,” he said. “Tell me how to help you.”

“You know how to help me,” I whispered, and he pulled away from me, releasing me as he paced to the other side of the gazebo, the silver moonlight casting him in a brilliant glow.

“That’s not helping you,” he growled. “That’s killing you sooner. That’s stealing what little time you have left!” His chest rose and fell rapidly, and if it wasn’t for the absolute devastation in his eyes, the helplessness, I would’ve geared up for a fight. But it was so real and raw, I couldn’t argue with him.

Instead, I rose on shaky feet, crossing the distance between us as I reached for him. He instantly held me against him, supporting my weight so I didn’t have to strain. He brought me up to his eye level without effort, and I wrapped my arms around his neck.

“I’m not trying to fight with you,” I assured him, never losing his gaze. My heart swelled with what I felt for him, with what I felt slipping away from us like sand through a glass. “Ajax, I just want you to be prepared. I don’t know when it’ll happen. I could fall asleep and—”

“Please don’t say it,” he begged, holding me tighter. “I can’t...Grace, I can’t...”

“You have to,” I said. He had to come to terms with it. “Especially if you’re intent on not trying to transition me, you have to make peace with the fact that any moment now could be our last.” The words tangled in my throat, threatening to break my own heart.

“I can’t steal the life you have left. You know why I can’t.”

Because if he did try and it made me worse, he’d never forgive himself. I understood his side of it, truly I did. And honestly, I was too exhausted to fight my side. I didn’t have the energy left, and that terrified me.

“Ajax,” I said, holding his gaze. “I need you to know something. In case...” My words trailed off, and I sucked in a sharp breath. “I love you,” I said, the words freeing. “I’ve loved you since the moment I saw you. I love the way you see

the world and I love the way you make me feel like I can do anything. I love the way your touch makes me come alive and I love the way you make me laugh. I love the way you are with your family, and I just wish..." Tears lined my eyes, and shimmered in his as well. "I just wish I would've found you sooner, so we would've had more time." I pressed a quick kiss to his lips. "And I need you to know that all of that... everything I just said, happened long before the mating mark ever showed up."

Something like a groan rumbled in his chest.

"I love you too," he said on an exhale, and my heart expanded in my chest. He kissed me, hungry and fast, before pulling back. "I love your heart, your mind, your soul. I love every piece of you, Grace. I've lived almost a thousand years, and you're the best thing that has ever happened to me."

Another tear slipped free, but Ajax swiped it away before claiming my mouth in a carnal kiss that awakened every inch of my soul. His tongue swept into my mouth, demanding and giving, stroking me until I was trembling against him.

With uncanny speed, he spun us, shifting so I was straddling him as he sat on the bench. I broke our kiss, gasping as he slid his hands beneath my shirt, cupping my breasts and pinching my nipples until they were pert for him.

I rocked against him, his hard length hot beneath my leggings.

Ajax reclaimed my mouth, the kiss a tangle of tongues and teeth, only breaking to shed clothes. I'd barely taken my leggings off before he settled me atop him again, his cock sliding through my already slick heat.

"Fuck, Grace," he said, hissing against the sensation. "You're so wet for me already."

"I always need you," I said, rocking over him before I shimmied off his lap, dropping to my knees and taking him into my mouth so fast he jolted, his hips thrusting him deeper inside.

“*Fuck*,” he said again as I bobbed up and down, swirling my tongue over the head of his cock, licking the precome that beaded there. He groaned, arching back against the bench as I sucked him, and heat sparked along the edges of my skin at the power I felt. The intensity of making a vampire like him writhe with pleasure.

I loved him.

I loved him so much it fucking hurt.

And he needed to see that, know that, feel that.

“Grace,” he growled, gently lifting me after a moment. He sprang free of my mouth, the motion jarring me as he pulled me back into his lap. “I love you,” he said the words again, the same warm sensation spreading in my chest with the declaration.

“I love you,” I said right back, claiming his mouth in the way I’d claimed his cock seconds ago.

He moaned, his powerful hands gripping my hips as he rocked me over his slick cock, the sensation making me tremble as warm shivers danced up my spine. A white-hot knot tightened in my core, the ache pulsing with need.

“Ajax,” I begged against his mouth.

“I know, mate.” He held me poised and aching above him before thrusting inside me.

I whimpered from the delicious sting, my nails digging into his shoulders as I adjusted to the size of him. Ajax broke our kiss, working his way over my collarbone and down over my breasts.

“Take whatever you need from me,” he said, and I didn’t hesitate.

I rolled my hips, over and over again, riding him with an intensity that matched my need. It was like I was trying to outrun death, using our love for each other as a bridge to a future that I knew didn’t exist.

“Goddamn, Grace,” he said beneath me, gliding his hands up my bare back. “You’re a fucking goddess. A vision. Look

at you.”

I glanced down to where our bodies were joined, to where I rode him and gripped him, the sounds of our joining filling the quiet peace of the night. I met his gaze, smiling wild and unhindered as I continued to move on him. Continued to squeeze him, demanding every ounce of his pleasure and taking plenty for myself too.

His fangs distended, and I throbbed with a hunger I knew he felt. But I knew he wouldn't bite me, not tonight. So, I leaned down, kissing him too quick for him to guard against it, just nicking the thin skin of my bottom lip against his fang, a drop of blood welling there.

“Dangerous little mate,” he growled, but sucked my bottom lip into his mouth, groaning at the taste of my blood.

“Yours,” I said. “I'm all yours. My heart, my blood, my soul.”

Ajax kissed me harder, stealing the words from my tongue as I continued to rock above him. God, he felt good inside me. All heat and strength and power.

I threw my head back as I found that edge and rode it as long as I could, wanting to stretch this moment out into a thousand forevers.

The night-blooming flowers rustled behind him with a gentle breeze and when I arched my body back, Ajax supporting me as I rode him from a better angle, I saw stars. An infinite sea of stars sparkled in the midnight sky above us, hinting that we were the only two beings in the world.

“Come with me,” I begged, feeling him harden another degree inside me. “Please, Ajax. I need you to.”

Ajax groaned, thrusting up and into me harder, stretching out my pleasure in a way only he knew how to do.

I brought my hands to his face, holding his gaze as sparks ripped through my body, sending tiny bursts of energy crackling along my insides as he came right along with me. Our bodies trembled and shook in sync, our souls matched, mated.

I couldn't help but feel *grief* as we sat there clinging to each other as we caught our breath. I shoved it away, buried it like he'd bury my body in a few weeks' time, if we were lucky to get that long.

I forced those thoughts away, clinging to the present. Because in this moment, here with him, I always felt alive.

Felt hope and love and peace.

And I suppose, when death was tapping my shoulder, that's all I could really ask for.



## AJAX

“These should help.” Gabriel handed me a little orange bottle.

“Trusting me with narcotics?” I tried to joke.

He was kind enough to smile. “They’re not narcotics. Corticosteroids will help the swelling and pressure. I know your mate is trying to go as long as she can before taking anything stronger for the pain.”

I nodded, my fingers curling around the bottle. “She’s stubborn.” Every moment I caught her trying to hide the pain, the nausea, I wanted to drop to my knees and beg her to medicate.

“Can’t blame her,” Gabriel said, looking at me with something akin to pity. “If I didn’t know how many nightfalls I had left, I’m not sure I’d want to spend them drugged up.” He grimaced. “But I also don’t know how I’d cope with the burden of the pain she bears every day.”

My throat tightened. “And the scans you took yesterday?” Of all the things I had to thank my king for, his spare-no-expense attitude when it came to the imaging machinery Gabriel had purchased over the last month was at the top of the list.

When Grace inevitably left this world, I would spend the rest of my nights serving Alek to make up for it.

Gabriel’s face fell. “She didn’t tell you?”

“She told me that it’s growing,” I managed to say. “Rapidly.”

He ran a hand through his usually perfect hair. “It is.”

I left the *how long* question hanging silently between us. She’d been given three months over six weeks ago. We were halfway through her time. “She’s been spending her nights in the archives with Julian and Lyric. Have they found anything that might sway your opinion?”

He leaned back against his desk. “There were some experiments done around the time of the renaissance.” His blond brow furrowed. “All very...inhumane really, but some of our kind didn’t hold the highest opinion of humans.”

“What were the results?”

A sigh ripped from his lips and the door swung open behind me. A quick look over my shoulder confirmed what I’d guessed by scent alone. Zachariah was here.

“Nothing positive,” Gabriel said, his voice dropping.

“We’re discussing alternative treatments for Grace,” I explained to Zachariah as he moved to my side.

“Have you found any?” he asked.

Gabriel shook his head. “The experiments tried injecting our blood straight into tumors. They only grew faster.”

My stomach churned. “When I fed her, the tumor shrank. It was only a millimeter or so, but it shrank.”

“Could be that the difference was ingestion. Problem is that once you feed a human three times, they go into transition...” His voice trailed off. “Every record we’ve uncovered has found that to be an unsuccessful method.”

“They died.” I pocketed the bottle of pills and folded my arms across my chest. “Don’t bullshit around the truth on my behalf. If I didn’t want the truth, I wouldn’t have asked.”

Zachariah moved closer, a steady, comforting presence.

“They died,” Gabriel admitted. “But the experiments are flawed, Ajax. They don’t take vampire heritage into account.

They don't mention special abilities like both Lyric and Grace had during their humanity. They didn't exactly do a control group for those transitioned with normal vampire blood and those transitioned with stronger warrior blood. There are too many variables to make any of it scholarly."

"So we still have no clue if she'd survive transition." I had to ask. Every day my resolve weakened, hoping for the sliver of a chance that Grace might live.

Gabriel shook his head. "And she still refuses human treatment?"

"She does. She watched her mother go through it. She was given three months and treatment gave her a fourth month, but she spent most of that month unconscious in the hospital." I understood her choice, at least *part* of it. Her choice to transition was...unthinkable.

"I'm researching everything I can find. I just wish there was more I could do."

We all turned as Saint pushed through the doors from the recovery room, his skin pale and drawn tight across his cheekbones.

"She out?" Gabriel asked.

Saint nodded and rubbed his hand over his close-cropped hair. "I got about a quarter of the canned shit down her. Made her think it was wine."

Gabriel sighed. "That's not nearly enough, but it's better than yesterday. Thank you."

"Don't thank me." Saint's dark gaze snapped toward Gabriel's. "Samuel did that to her. It's my fault she's—"

"It's not," Zachariah interrupted. "You are *not* responsible for Samuel's actions."

"Well I'm sure as hell responsible for hunting him down and yet here I am, chained to this house because the only time Aurora isn't screaming is when she's asleep, or when I'm fucking with her head to make her think that she isn't trapped in her own living nightmare. And believe me, her dreams

aren't any better than her reality. I've only seen moments of what he put her through, but it's enough to make my stomach turn."

None of us had a response to that.

"Has anyone told her father?" I asked.

"He's been informed, but he wasn't exactly involved in the woman's upbringing," Zachariah answered. "I don't think he's ever met her."

"How long are you planning to keep her in the infirmary?" I asked Gabriel. "It might help her to see a window after that many months of captivity."

"As soon as I'm sure she's fed enough to finish the transition successfully," Gabriel said. "But you make a good point. I'll talk to Alek about getting her a room in the Domum."

"She stays here." Saint walked right by us, shoving open the infirmary doors. "I might be at your beck and call, but I'm not spending any more time with the nobles than necessary."

None of us mentioned that he was noble himself.

"Right." Zachariah nodded to me, and I followed him out after thanking Gabriel for procuring the drugs for Grace. "You should take tonight off," he said as we started up the stairs to the residence.

"I've taken too many nights off as it is. I'm not exactly carrying my own weight around here right now."

He put his hand up, stopping us midway up the staircase. "You have given centuries of loyal service. The least we can do is give you what time you have with your mate."

"It's not enough." I leaned back, feeling the cool stone against my back. "And I know it's greedy, because there are so many vampires who never find their mates, but how is this... fair?"

"It's not," he said quietly, watching me with a wisdom I swear he'd been born with.

“I wait centuries and go into stasis, certain that I’d missed my chance of ever mating, only to wake hundreds of years later, and be gifted with Grace. And she has weeks, Zachariah. *Weeks*. What are weeks in the lifespan of a vampire? They’re a blink. They’re a heartbeat.”

“They’re everything.” He moved forward, clasp my bicep. “They’re *everything*, Ajax.” His wide shoulders dipped. “I know what it is to choose duty and miss out on the love of your life.”

My gaze jumped to his. He *never* talked about her. Ever.

“And I’m telling you that duty can wait. Spend every minute you can with Grace.” His hand fell away from me. “And go fucking feed already. If you won’t take from your mate, then find another source. You won’t do her any good if you’re too weak to care for her, and if you change your mind about transitioning her—”

“I won’t,” I snapped. “I’m not risking what little time she has.”

“Fine. But just in case you do. Just in case it’s her last breath and you make that choice, then you have to be at your strongest to pull her through, so go feed.”

I took his advice to heart and swallowed down the equivalent of a bag of O positive, chasing it with one of those fucking muffins everyone loved to make sure it stayed down before heading upstairs to Grace. She’d been sleeping later and later, her body claiming the rest she tried to deny it.

The sound of her retching hit me before I got the bedroom door open, and I raced to her side, falling to my knees beside her as she threw up what little she’d eaten the morning before. Fuck, I hated this for her. Her slight shoulders shook as I rubbed her back, waiting for her to finish.

“You shouldn’t see this,” she protested weakly.

“I should have been here when you woke.”

She flushed, and I lifted her into my arms to carry her back to bed. “I just got up too fast. I know better. It’s been affecting my equilibrium for weeks now.”

“Well, then we’ll start the night again.” I put her back in our bed, propping the pillows behind her before setting her meds on the nightstand. “Gabriel gave me these for you. They should help with the swelling and pressure.”

She gave me a weak smile. “So I don’t hurl every time I try to walk across the room?”

“Something like that.” I left her only long enough to pull a bottle of water out of the small refrigerator I kept in my room so she could take the pills.

She took the meds and then leaned back against the headboard. “I know I slept a lot last night, but did you get the...” Her brow puckered. “The...” She took a deep breath. “Square. Brown. Tape.”

“The stuff you wanted boxed up from your house?” I finished for her, smiling through the terror that seized my heart.

“Boxes. Right.” She nodded.

“I brought what you wanted,” I said, gesturing to the closet door. “And I made sure that the rest was ready for donation for whatever Maria wanted.” Even in her weakest moments, Grace was still thinking about how to help others, how to make sure that her foster mother and the kids she cared for had what they needed.

It was one of the reasons that I loved her. And that’s exactly what this feeling was, consuming my heart, glowing so brightly that it was a physical ache.

“Thank you.” Her eyes fluttered shut. “I feel like I’m wasting a night with you.”

I brushed the loosened strands of her hair back behind her ears. “Why don’t we give the meds a chance to kick in and then reassess? And even if we stay in this bed all night watching whatever documentary you’ve chosen for the evening, then I can hardly call that wasted.” My lips curved into a smile. “I personally found last night’s selection on the sex lives of historical figures to be particularly illuminating.”

The fact that she never stopped learning was just another thing to love about her.

She grinned, but it fell quickly. “There will be good days again, right?”

“Absolutely.” I leaned in and kissed her forehead. “Good nights, anyways.”

“Nights. Right. Promise?” Her eyes fluttered shut.

“I promise.” It was the first vow I wasn’t sure I’d be able to keep.



“I DECLARE this to be a good night!” Grace said the next night, holding onto the kitchen counter as she slid onto one of the barstools.

I grinned and slid a smoothie across the island for her.

“I think that’s the first time I’ve seen you smile in a week,” Talon noted, reaching past me for an apple. “It’s because you’ve gotten out of every formal evening repast this week, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, that’s it.” I gave him a thumbs up and moved around the island to sit at my girl’s side. “What are you guys up to tonight?”

“Patrolling the houses on the half-blood list and hoping we stumble onto another lead.” Talon scratched the back of his neck. “I’m getting really fucking sick of hoping we’re lucky. There has to be a better way to track them do—” His voice died as Daphne walked into the kitchen.

Valor’s cousin pulled her strawberry-blonde hair into a knot on top of her head and opened the refrigerator. “No need to go all quiet around me, you know. I’m well aware of what goes on here. Death. Dying. Mayhem. Hunting down the assholes in my family and killing them so they don’t commit more acts of assholery.” She shrugged.

I laughed, the sound rumbling in my chest.

“You don’t think that’s a little heavy for a seventeen-year-old?” Grace asked, then wrapped her lips around the smoothie’s straw in a way that made me remember exactly how they felt wrapped around my cock.

Great. And now I was hard.

I kept my ass firmly behind the island and tried to think of the unsexiest thing possible. The problem? Grace was right beside me, declaring it was a good night.

“I mean, you’re the one with weeks to live,” Daphne said, pulling out a carton of yogurt and shutting the refrigerator as she turned toward Grace. “I’d say that’s far heavier than me having to take night classes because I nearly ended up in a teenage marriage and was saved by a bunch of vampires, one of whom happens to be mated to my cousin. And you seem... pretty well-adjusted.” She blinked at my mate and opened her yogurt. “Maybe this is just where the people handling heavy things end up.” She shared a soft smile with Grace.

“Maybe,” Grace agreed and sipped at her smoothie.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a history test tonight, and if I fail, I have a feeling a particular demon is going to kidnap half the Edgemont University history department to tutor me so it doesn’t happen again.” She took her yogurt and walked off.

“Catch you guys later.” Talon gave me a wave and followed, heading out the door with the rest of my brothers.

“Should you be with them?” Grace asked, worry putting two lines between her eyebrows.

“I’m exactly where I need to be.” I kissed her temple and a mischievous idea came to mind. “Well, there’s one other place I could be, but only if you swear you’re feeling good tonight, and only if you’re up for walking across the courtyard.”

She arched an eyebrow at me. “What do you have in mind?”

“Finish that smoothie, and I’ll show you.”

A wicked smile curved my mouth.

A half-hour later, I held Grace's hand as we walked across the courtyard toward the Domum. Her sundress swished around her thighs with every step, and my blood ran thick and hot just thinking about what I was going to do with her.

"You promise you're feeling well?" I asked for the fourteenth time.

"Promise." She squeezed my hand. "The meds are helping, I think. Barely any pain. No nausea."

The drugs were masking the symptoms, but they weren't treating the cause.

*Don't think about it. Not tonight.*

"What's going in there?" she asked as we came closer to the palace and the music reached her ears.

"The nobles are having a party." I lifted her hand and kissed the back of it.

"Any special occasion?" She tugged her hair over one shoulder, exposing the flawless skin of her neck.

I stared, hunger pulsing through my fangs as her pulse beat, strong and steady in her throat.

"Ajax?"

I blinked. "Right. No. There's no special occasion. They're just a bunch of bored vampires hiding out in the Palace because they're being targeted by the Sons."

"So they party."

Reaching for the door, I held it open so she could walk in. "So they party."

The expansive hallway was full of nobles making their way to the ballroom, dressed in black-tie as usual. None of them dared to look at me or Grace with anything but the utmost respect.

"I'm a little underdressed," Grace said quietly, hugging my arm as we made our way down the marble hallway to the foyer.

“Not yet, you aren’t.” A corner of my mouth lifted into a smirk.

“What does that mean...” Her mouth dropped as we found the foyer and the ten-foot-tall fountain that sent water cascading in a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree curtain around the pillared base. “Wow.”

“Yeah.” I tugged her under my arm, holding her close as a couple walked by, nodding to me respectfully as they continued on toward the ballroom. As soon as they turned their back on us, I leaned down and kissed Grace.

She gasped, and I pressed my advantage, consuming her mouth with long, flicking strokes of my tongue. Her moan went straight to my dick, and the bite of pain at the back of my neck from her fingernails was my complete undoing.

I hauled her against me and kissed her breathless.

Half a dozen couples walked into the foyer and Grace pulled away, ducking her head against my chest.

Oh, it was about to get fun.

Throwing out my hands, I stopped time everywhere around us, including the fountain in our little bubble. “Look at me.”

Grace arched her neck, her eyes meeting mine.

“Fuck me, could you be any sexier?” My thumb grazed her kiss-swollen lower lip. “This mouth.” My hands skimmed the sides of her ribs, pausing to lovingly cup her breasts before trailing down to the curve of her waist. “This body. You were made for me, you know that?”

She bit her lower lip and nodded, then glanced around us. “What are we doing?”

I gripped the backs of her thighs and lifted her so our mouths were level as the scent of her arousal flooded my lungs. “Checking two of the boxes off that list you mentioned. I know it’s not exactly a shower, but it’s definitely public.”

Her eyes widened as I stepped over the edge of the fountain and into the six-inch-deep pool. Water poured into my boots and I couldn’t have cared less, not with how Grace

smiled at me. “But if you stopped time, how is the fountain still going?”

“The whole unit is self-contained.” I’d asked Alek weeks ago, immediately fantasizing about what I was about to do right now. Lust and need rose quickly, overruling almost every shred of common sense. “Tell me you’re really feeling okay.”

She locked her ankles behind my waist and leaned in, nipping my earlobe with her teeth. “I feel like I’m going to combust if I can’t have you inside me.”

I growled, my instincts roaring to life, demanding I fulfill every want, every need my mate had, and then I walked us straight through the curtain of water. It slicked our skin, drenched our clothes, and the droplets caught up in our kiss as I pressed her back against the marble pillar. In here, I could’ve restarted time and no one would’ve been the wiser about what I was doing to Grace.

No one would’ve known that the fabric of her sundress protested as I shoved it up her thighs.

No one would’ve known that her hands were frantic as they roamed my body, shoving my shirt up so she could trace the lines of my abs.

No one would’ve known that my cock throbbed, straining at the fly of my pants to get inside her.

But they would’ve heard her breathy little cry when I dragged the neckline of her dress down and took her nipple into my mouth. And hearing my Grace’s moans? That pleasure was mine and mine alone.

“Oh God!” she cried out as I licked and sucked her nipple, drawn tight from cold and pleasure. “Ajax, everyone is still out there.”

“They’re frozen.” I moved to the other breast, giving it the same attention before brushing a kiss over the mating mark that sat like a pendant on her collarbone. Touching her quickened my pulse, heated my blood, and drove me right toward madness, but when she fought with my zipper and set her hands on me, I came undone. “Fuck, baby.”

“So they can’t see us?” she asked, testing her teeth on my neck as she stroked my cock from root to tip.

“Or hear us.” I adjusted my grip, balancing her against the pillar, then sent my hands up her dress and shredded the tiny straps of her underwear. I pocketed the scrap of lace. “You could scream for me, and they wouldn’t know. In fact, I think I’ll make you do just that.”

I swirled two of my fingers over her clit, and she gasped.

“So fucking wet.” She was a goddamned dream, complete and utter perfection.

“Ajax,” she demanded, squirming in my arms and releasing my cock when I teased her slick entrance with my fingers.

“Should I start time again, Grace?” I slid one finger inside her tight pussy, savoring the way her hips bucked against me. “Should we see what happens? See if they come to see who’s making you moan?”

“Oh, *God*.” She leaned her head back against the water-slick pillar.

“They’re just beyond that water,” I growled against her ear, then kissed a path down her jawline. “And they’d be so fucking jealous if they knew where my hand was. Where my cock is about to be. Should we let them hear us?”

“No.” She trembled as I added a second finger, fucking her with my hand the way she liked, deep and slow.

“No?” I paused immediately, my fingers deep inside her. “No to them hearing us? Or no to me fucking you?” I already knew the answer, but I’d never take her complete enthusiasm for granted.

“No hearing us!” She rocked her hips against my hand, rising and falling on my fingers. “Don’t stop!”

I looked down between us, my hand appearing and disappearing under the wet folds of her skirt. “I’m going to fuck you right here, and then I’m going to carry you to our room and fuck you again, where I can peel every stitch of

clothes off your body and worship every. Single. Inch.” I punctuated each word with a thrust of my fingers, adding my thumb to sweep across her clit.

“Yes.” She reached for my cock, shoving my pants down under the swell of my ass. “That’s exactly what I want.”

The feel of her little ballet flats digging into the bare skin of my ass made me groan. Every single thing about this woman turned me on, made me wild to get inside her.

“Then tell me you need it.” I slid my fingers from her body and nudged my cock to her entrance. She was hot and wet on my tip, and it took every ounce of my self-control not to drive into her the way we both craved.

“I need it.”

I grinned, then sucked at a sensitive area on her throat. “You need what, baby?”

She groaned in frustration, swirling her hips over my dick, and I nearly fucking lost it.

“Say it.” I grazed my fangs down the soft skin of her throat, but had enough sense not to bite. It didn’t matter that I was starving for her, that my hunger was a gnawing, ever-present agony. The only thing that mattered was Grace. Her needs. Her wants. Her health.

She took my face between her hands and demanded my attention.

I gave it, locking our gazes as the water fell on every side of us.

“I need your cock inside me.”

Whatever tether I’d had on my instincts snapped, and I drove my hips forward at the same time I pulled her against me, taking her in one deep thrust.

She cried out once, and then I swallowed the next scream, kissing her hard and deep as I pounded into her, cushioning the back of her head with one hand and gripping her hips with the other.

Indescribable pleasure consumed me with each drive of my hips. Each thrust was better than the last. Every time I withdrew was only a preamble to the absolute perfection of sliding back home. Because that's what she was to me. Grace was home.

Grace was *mine*.

Her muscles tightened, and when I felt her breaths change, her body tighten, I reached between us and stroked her to orgasm. She fell over the edge with a cry the entire palace would have heard if I hadn't held us suspended in this little bubble of infinity.

"Fuck, the way you ripple around me," I growled against her throat as her pussy convulsed in waves. She smelled so fucking good, felt so fucking good, tasted so—

"Bite," she ordered, her fingers threading through my hair to hold me at her throat.

"Grace," I moaned. The temptation was too much, and her permission...

"Fucking bite me!" she demanded.

My fangs struck deep and I lost all semblance of control as her honey-rich blood filled my mouth, coated my throat. There was *nothing* like her on the planet. She was life and love wrapped around me, taking every thrust as my hips swung wildly, claiming her over and over.

I drew from her throat and relished every second, memorizing the taste of her on my tongue, the feel of her pussy fluttering as she came again from my bite, the sound of her sweet cries in my ear as I fell over the precipice, giving in to the pleasure that barreled down my spine.

My orgasm nearly took out my knees, but I threw out a hand against the pillar to keep us upright.

Her blood, gods, her *blood* hit my veins like high-test gasoline.

And she couldn't afford to give it.

I fought every single instinct that demanded I drink my fill of my mate, then sustain her own life with mine, and withdrew my fangs from her throat, closing over the pinprick wounds with a lick of my tongue.

Grace moaned, her legs falling limp around my waist.

I caught her by the backs of her thighs and lowered her to the pool, sliding out of her with a regretful groan.

“That was so delicious,” she said, grinning wide as I tucked myself into my pants and hauled the wet fabric back where it was supposed to be.

I cupped her cheeks and studied her eyes, guilt hitting hard and true. “You’re sure you’re okay? No headache? No dizziness?”

“Nope.” She slid her hand up my shirt. “Just pure post-orgasmic bliss.”

“Thank the gods.” I scooped her into my arms, lifting her high against my chest, careful to keep the fabric of her dress over her now-bare ass, and then walked us out through the curtain of water and back into the foyer, where the other vampires stood paused, all dressed to the nines.

“Think they know?” Grace asked, laying her head on my shoulder.

“Nope.” I stepped out of the fountain, then released the power I’d held onto so tightly, letting time snap back into place.

Every head in the foyer turned toward Grace and I, and every expression was a varying degree of perplexed. They glanced between where I’d stood with Grace what was a second ago to them, and where we were now, dripping water onto the pristine floor.

One of the nobles lifted her hand to her necklace, blinking quickly.

I felt the heat of Grace’s blush against my neck as I walked past them, leaving wet footprints.

“Might want to watch your step,” I said over my shoulder to the gawking nobles as I carried Grace out of the Domum. “Floor seems a little wet.”

Grace laughed.

I kissed her forehead and decided that if I could freeze any moment of my life and live there, this would be it.



# GRACE

**I**t had been seven weeks since Ajax brought me into the safety of the royal vampire estate.

Seven weeks since my world had been changed in ways that were exponentially more drastic than what my own doctor had told me days before.

Seven weeks of discovering vampires were real, I was mated to the best one ever created, I was a quarter vampire, and telepathic.

And somehow, despite all those fantastical, world-changing revelations, I was still dying.

My fingers trembled as I flipped the pages in an ancient tome, sitting at a wide table in a comfortably lush chair in the archives room. The place smelled of dust and aged paper and leather and it had become somewhat of a second home to me, especially when Ajax was off with his brothers, helping with the war efforts.

War. Efforts.

I never thought I'd be so close to a war, let alone one I'd never known existed. I worried about Ajax when he was gone, despite knowing he could more than handle himself. Hell, he could stop time and move out of the way of a bullet—he was that powerful—but that didn't mean he had eyes everywhere. He couldn't always see the threats coming and that terrified me. When my mate was off the property, I felt it like my soul was stretched thin—a rubber band on the verge of snapping—and it never went away until he returned home.

I wondered what would happen to the bond after I passed? Would Ajax always feel that loss or would he be able to grieve and move on and find love again?

Irrational jealousy and hope mixed together in a swirl of uncomfortable emotions. I hated thinking about him with anyone else, but I would never want Ajax to live his immortal life alone.

“Down here again?” Julian—the king’s historian—asked, coming around one of the tall, dusty stacks that surrounded my table.

We’d become friendly with how much time I’d been spending down here lately, and he was beyond helpful since he had a photographic memory when it came to the texts that were tucked into neat little stacks among the shelves. He’d been helping me try to find the right piece of text to convince Ajax to try and transition me, but nothing we’d turned up yet had leaned that direction.

“Can never read too much,” I said, flashing him a genuine smile. He was a welcomed distraction after an hour staring at the same text without finding any results.

He shifted a book beneath his arm, his brow furrowed. “What are we researching today? More experimental trials with vampire and human blood among the ages or your own personal family history?”

I waved to the tome before me. “The latter. Not having any more luck with this than I did the nights prior,” I said.

Julian flashed me a sympathetic look. I still had a hard time reconciling his laid-back style—always in athletic pants of some sort and more often than not, hoodies—with his intellect and thirst for knowledge. Somehow, he pulled it off in a way that made him look like a college student fresh on a study hunt, not a vampire who was a master of their history.

“What do you remember about your mother?” he asked as he took a seat at the table across from me.

I blew out a breath, my heart clenching with that old piece of grief that had never actually healed. “Her name was Lilith

Ashcroft,” I said on an exhale. “She used to make the best strawberry pancakes in existence and she would sing me to sleep.” I swallowed hard. “And then, when I was eight, she received the same diagnosis I just did, and she passed away not long after.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” Julian said. “What about your father?”

I shrugged. “I never knew him. I was placed in care shortly after my mother’s death because I didn’t know any extended family either. It was always just me and her.” And now, knowing what I did about my bloodline, I wondered if there was a reason for that. “Do you think she knew? About our history? Do you think she was keeping me from any part of my family that knew the truth?” I leaned my elbows on the table, needing the support to keep me up.

Damn my body, it wasn’t functioning like I needed it to.

“It’s a possibility,” Julian said. “But it could just as easily be she had no clue about your ancestry and had very realistic reasons for keeping it just the two of you.”

I sighed. “There’s a lot of that going around,” I said, then explained when he tilted his head. “The whole *it could be this but also just as likely this.*”

I looked down at the tome in front of me, thinking of the one thing Ajax and I couldn’t agree on. The risk verses reward of turning me.

“You said Ashcroft?” Julian asked, pushing away from the table.

“Yes.”

Julian sped out of the room faster than my eyes could follow, returning before I’d even realized what happened. He pushed aside the tome in front of me, then set a new one in its place. “This is a historical index containing anyone named Ashcroft from this area,” he explained. “Of course, I don’t know if your mother was born and raised in Edgemont, but maybe it’ll point you in the right direction.”

“I adore you,” I said by way of thanks.

“Everyone does,” he teased, then winked at me and sped out of the room again, giving me privacy to study the index alone.

An hour later, and I’d studied the Ashcroft line as far back as the index recounted—all the way back to the eighteen hundreds. But I still wasn’t sure when the vampire blood entered our line or how it was possible when humans and mortals weren’t supposed to be *able* conceive children. But it seemed like, just from my brief study, that sometimes the *able to* and *actually happened* were two totally different things.

A warm shiver bloomed on the back of my neck and spiraled down my spine.

“I can feel you, mate,” I said without looking up from the book. “You can’t sneak up on me.”

“I was so close,” Ajax said, coming around the stacks and leaning close to me as he planted a kiss atop my head. “Can I steal you away from your books?”

I sighed, every unsettled thing inside me snapping back into place now that he was here and safe. “Always,” I said, closing the book and leaving it on the table since I knew I’d be back tomorrow. “What do you have...” My tongue stopped working as the word I was looking for evaded me.

It’d been happening so frequently lately that I didn’t even have that rising panic anymore. It simply *was*.

“In mind,” I finally breathed out the words.

Ajax tugged me closer, kissing me gently, taking his time to part my lips and steal a taste.

“It’s a surprise,” he said, grinning mischievously.

“Does it involve leaving the estate?” I asked hopefully. Not that I hated it here, I felt quite the opposite. I loved it. I just was feeling a little stir crazy.

“Sort of,” he answered, tugging me through the archives room. “Do you trust me?”

“You know I do,” I answered immediately.

His grin deepened, and anticipation flared in my chest, giving me a boost of energy I didn't realize I was desperate for. Sleep had been harder to come by lately, the fear of falling asleep and not waking up a real deterrent to the rest I needed.

Ajax led us outside the manner, then scooped me up into his arms, cradling me against his chest. He held my gaze as he ran at vampire speeds, the motion so fast it felt like we were flying.

He slowed to a stop minutes later, the smell of fresh vegetation and citrusy flowers hanging in the air around us. The sound of bubbling water trickled nearby, and my eyes widened when I saw where he'd brought us.

"Are those *hot* springs?" I asked as he set me on my feet, but he kept me tucked against his side, supporting my weight.

"Yes," he said, eying the pools of tranquil water with steam wafting off them a few yards away from us. The night sky was clear and the moon nearly full, casting the smooth stones surrounding the springs in a silver glow. "We're technically still on the estate grounds," he said, tugging me toward a little manmade wooden deck and stairs that dipped into the springs natural bubbling water. "But we're not in the house, so, did I do good?"

"First the fountain and now this?" I grinned up at him, emotion clogging my throat. "I'm starting to think you have an obsession with seeing me wet," I teased.

"You have no idea," he all but growled.

"You're beyond amazing," I said, just because I wanted him to know that without a doubt. "Can we get in?"

Ajax smirked at me, tugging his shirt over his head in one smooth motion. Heat unfurled in my core, the reaction unavoidable whenever he took his shirt off. He was just so gloriously constructed, like he was carved out of the stone surrounding us.

"Are we alone out here?" I asked.

"Totally alone," he said. "Besides, if I hear anyone coming this way, I'll stop time and hold it long enough for you to get

changed. No way in fuck anyone is seeing my mate's body."

I followed his movements, slipping out of my clothes quickly and taking his extended hand as he guided us down into the shockingly warm water. I mean, yeah, it was called a hot spring, but I didn't realize just how hot it would be.

I nearly moaned as I sank into the water, letting it rise above my shoulders. The warmth seeped into my muscles, soothing every ache and strain that had felt near permanent lately.

Ajax pulled me across the water, tucking me against him so my spine was against his chest as he leaned against the stones around the spring. "Look up," he whispered in my ear.

I obeyed, and my eyes widened.

Shooting stars soared across the sky, one after the other.

"I've never seen that many before," I said, wonder slipping into my tone.

"It doesn't happen very often," he said, wrapping his arms around me.

"Did you know it was going to happen tonight?"

"Yes," he said. "I figured the water would feel good on your body and the meteor shower would be a bonus."

I shook my head against him. "I don't know how I got so lucky," I said, the words catching in my throat. Because I truly did feel like the luckiest woman on the planet to be mated to male like him. Even if...even if...

Ajax tensed beneath me. "I'm the lucky one," he said, gently stroking my arms in languid circles.

I breathed deeply, relaxing even more into his embrace. The tension melted from my body and soul with each stroke, each graze of the warm water between us. "I'm sorry I'm so tired tonight," I said, turning just enough to look into his eyes.

"You have nothing to apologize for, mate," he said. "Never. Not with me."

“But I don’t like wasting what time we do have. I love being with you, I love feeling you inside me...” I sighed as my body trembled, the mere idea of trying to have sex right now exhausting it.

Ajax cupped my cheek with one hand, kissing me gently before tugging away. “I don’t need to fuck you to enjoy being with you,” he said. “If I could pause time and live in this moment with you forever, just holding you and watching the stars fall, that would be more than enough of a paradise for me.”

Tears welled in my eyes, and Ajax kissed them away, nothing but pure love radiating down our bond. I rested my head against his chest as we continued to watch the sky light up, convincing myself this is what the afterlife would look like—just a slice of bliss with Ajax beneath a midnight sky.



## AJAX

“As you can see,” Gabriel said, pointing between the two different scans up on the lighted board in the infirmary. “Unfortunately, it’s advancing.”

No. No. *No*.

I could have denied it all I wanted to, but the evidence stared me in the face. The tumor wasn’t just advancing, it was conquering.

My throat threatened to close and I locked my jaw to keep from cursing, stroking my thumb over the back of Grace’s hand as we sat in the chairs Gabriel had brought out for tonight’s meeting—the chairs we’d needed because Grace was rapidly losing her ability to keep her balance for any length of time.

“That’s why...” Grace swallowed. “The words...” The stricken look on her face would have brought me to my knees if I’d been standing.

“Yes.” Gabriel leaned back against the exam table. “That’s why it’s harder for you to find the right words.”

“And her balance?” I asked, doing everything I could to choke my feelings down for Grace’s sake. I felt her terror through the shimmering bond that linked us, and forced my lungs to suck in a deep breath.

Rage swept through my veins, all-but overwhelming my common sense.

Vampire males were biologically programmed to slaughter any and everything that threatened our mates. Had it been Gabriel with a dagger at her throat, I would have ended him in less time than it took a heart to beat.

But it wasn't Gabriel threatening to take my mate. It was fucking cancer, and it wasn't like I could slay a disease.

"About the balance." Gabriel sighed, gesturing to scans he'd taken yesterday. "There are two new lesions."

*Breathe. You have to breathe.*

But how the fuck was I supposed to breathe when there wasn't any air?

"New ones?" Grace asked in a small voice.

Gabriel nodded. "Here and here." He glanced at me, then quickly looked back to Grace. If I looked as dangerous as I felt, I couldn't blame him. "I'm so sorry."

Grace forced a smile and shrugged. "It's what I..." She blinked once. Twice. "Expected. It's been over two..." Her smile fell. "Blocks. Things. Time." Her head swung toward mine and the panic in her gaze cut through me like a knife.

"Months?" I suggested.

"Months." She agreed. "They only gave me three to start with."

Which meant I had less than a month left. She was going to die.

"You already knew that," Grace said to me.

"Stop reading my thoughts." I snapped my shields down.

"Not my fault that you're pretty much blaring them my direction." She turned back to Gabriel. "So I have what? Weeks left?"

Gabriel glanced at the scans. "I'm sorry to say that I'm going to have to agree with the original prognosis, especially with these new lesions. Weeks are a best-case scenario, and if you seize..."

Grace straightened her shoulders, and I pulled my shit together. If she could handle this, then so would I. The last thing my mate needed was to be comforting me when she was the one...dying.

“What can we expect?” I asked after clearing my throat.

Gabriel sighed, and the reluctance in his expression told me to prepare myself. “You’re going to go downhill fast,” he said softly to Grace. “The rate of growth from last week, and still untreated?” He looked back at the scans like they might have changed in the last five minutes.

“What’s the timeline look like?” Grace asked.

“Hard to say. We’re at the phase where things will begin to move exponentially. You’ll lose your gross motor functions soon. Your speech will decline. You’ll lose the ability to care for yourself.”

“I can take care of her.” The response was automatic.

Gabriel nodded. “Of course. And when the time comes and swallowing fails you, we’ll prep for a feeding tube to keep your body as strong as possible so you can fight.”

Grace snorted. “If this is a fight, then I’m getting my ass handed to me.”

“What about surgery?” I asked, leaning forward.

“I told you I don’t want that,” Grace snapped. “I don’t want to spend my last days recovering from an attempt to hack out the tumor, or throwing up from radiation, Ajax. If it was any other kind of cancer, I’d consider it, but this is glioblastoma. The mortality rate is pretty much...everyone.” She yanked her hand from mine.

“I understand completely that this is *your* choice.” My voice lowered lethally. “But don’t I at least deserve to know what options there are if you were to change your mind?”

“Guys.” Gabriel waved his hand. “Surgery isn’t an option anymore. Not that it really was before, but the spread is...” He looked at me with something worse than compassion. It was

*pity*. “There’s nothing to do at this point. She should really say her farewells to the people she loves outside these walls.”

I sat back in the chair. How the fuck was I supposed to accept that?

The door behind us swung open and Saint stormed in looking more haggard than normal, and the look in his eyes—

I stood. “Saint?”

“I know where he is.” He blew by without another word, shoving through the infirmary doors and heading upstairs.

“Go,” Grace said. “He needs you.”

I moved quickly, scooping her into my arms. “I’m not leaving you to navigate the steps on your own.” Glancing toward Gabriel, I nodded out of respect. “Thank you for all you continue to do for my mate.”

The answering bob of his head was sad.

I sped Grace up the steps, then followed the sounds of arguing to the library. Seconds later, we made it into the room just ahead of the other assassins, who had all come running.

Spotting an empty couch in the two-story library, I slowed and gently set Grace down, then turned to face Saint and Jocelyn, who weren’t keeping their voices down despite Alek standing with his arms crossed beside them.

“Because I know the territory!” Saint seethed, his hands curling into fists.

“And you *dare* insinuate that Luna would know? That she’d shelter that bloodmad lunatic?” Jocelyn shouted, her hair beginning to rise around her.

Oh shit.

Benedict sped by me in a whirl of air, putting himself between Saint and his mate. “That’s close enough.”

“Fuck me,” Zachariah muttered, moving closer to Saint. Every hunter in the room did.

Every assassin? They stood in front of Jocelyn.

Scratch that. They *tried* to stand in front of her. She shoved her way through the line of males to stand at Benedict's side. "If she knew, she would have told me."

"Be that as it may, I've seen flashes of the house Aurora was taken to at first," Saint growled. "And it's in Greenbriar territory. *Witch* territory."

"The Greenbriars were tossed off witch land," Jocelyn argued, baring her teeth. "My sister is a good queen. An honorable queen. She wouldn't allow that coven to exist in her territory."

"I know what I saw." Saint glowered at her, giving her a look that would have sent seasoned fighters running for the hills.

"What you saw?" Jocelyn tossed back. "Where?"

"In Aurora's nightmares!" he snapped.

*Fuck.* Zachariah and I shared a look, and the hunters moved closer to protect our brother. The assassins looked... green.

"You can see inside her dreams?" Alek asked, narrowing his eyes on Saint in a way that elevated my blood pressure.

"I can," Saint spit out. "I can alter them, too."

Alek gave us all a once-over, his eyebrows rising when he realized that none of us looked shocked. "And you all knew."

Zachariah stepped forward. "It wasn't exactly a power that was looked upon with any acceptance in our day. I've known more than one dreamwalker who lost his head over the ability."

Shit, I wanted Grace out of here. Now.

Alek's eyes flared. "And you thought I would take his head for it?"

"We weren't going to take the risk." I edged myself between Saint and Lachlan. The second-in-command was a big fucker and a phenomenal fighter, but I had literal time on my side. And I never lost.

“You have to be fucking kidding me.” Alek ran his hands through his hair and looked at everyone—including his own assassins, shaking his head in disappointment. “At some point we’re all going to have to trust each other. You get that, don’t you?”

Silence was the only answer as seconds ticked by on the giant grandfather clock.

“You’re going to have to start trusting *me!*” Alek’s voice rose.

“In our defense, you did want us to kill Saint,” Dagon said, digging something out of his boot with the tip of his dagger. “That didn’t exactly give us warm, fuzzy feelings.”

“When I thought he was the one who kidnapped Avianna!” Alek argued. “When we thought he was bloodmad!” Color rose in the king’s cheeks.

“And if the second part of that was still true?” Saint asked, his icy tone far more lethal than Alek’s shouts. “Would you order my death?”

Alek took a single step, putting him within inches of Saint.

I shot Lachlan a look that dared him to come any closer.

“Don’t forget that I can see inside your mind,” Alek said to Saint. “You may walk the edge, even wobble a little, but you have not fallen over the line. If you can see inside dreams, then you provide us—” he motioned to all of us who had managed to cram ourselves into the space between the farthest couch and the nearest bookshelf, “—with an unparalleled weapon for interrogation. I would have welcomed the gift you were so intent on hiding. I still do.”

Saint’s chin rose. “Then believe me when I tell you that I saw the Greenbriars welcome Samuel as he dragged Aurora into the house. Believe me when I say it’s in the territory of the witches.”

“I do believe you.” Alek nodded at Saint without even looking Benedict’s direction to see if Saint told the truth, and I took an unsteady breath. “I believe that you saw the house. I

believe you know where it is.” He glanced at Jocelyn. “I believe that Luna is unaware of its existence.” He brought his focus back to Saint. “I also believe that there’s an explanation as to how both truths can exist at the same time.”

“They’re shielded.” Jocelyn sighed and rubbed the bridge of her nose. “Luna is brilliant, but she’s still a young queen, and hasn’t mastered every spell from every coven. The Greenbriars have always been exceptionally gifted with their shields.”

“Exactly.” Alek turned, exposing his back to Saint.

My eyebrows rose. *Talk about the ultimate gesture of trust.*

“The intel is too old,” Lachlan growled. “It’s been *weeks*.”

“At least it’s something to go on,” Talon countered, picking at his nails. “Which is way more than we’ve had lately.”

“Can you break through the wards if Saint leads you there?” Alek asked Jocelyn.

“If I have Luna with me,” Jocelyn replied, already taking out her cell phone.

“Call her, but don’t give details over the line,” Alek ordered before pivoting to face Saint. “You have every assassin in this house at your disposal. Happy hunting.”

We developed a plan quickly, and then separated to further arm ourselves.

“Five minutes!” Zachariah ordered as we scattered.

I gathered Grace in my arms and sped us to our chamber, where I placed her on our bed, making sure she was settled before heading into our closet where I kept the majority of my weaponry.

It only took a moment to arm myself, and my jaw nearly unhinged when I came out of the closet to find Grace stumbling to her feet.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” I wended to her side, catching her before she fell.

“Coming with you.” She planted her feet and stood, straightening her shoulders. “I’m useful, Ajax. I can read minds.” The plea in her eyes crushed my heart.

“I know you’re useful,” I said softly. “But there’s no way in hell that I’m taking you into a battle.”

She lifted her chin. “But Jocelyn gets to go?”

“Jocelyn isn’t just a witch, she’s a *hybrid*. A fully transitioned vampire, Grace.” How the hell were we having this argument? I put her back in bed as gently as I could, but she swung her legs over the side of the bedframe again.

“Which I would be if you agreed to transition me!”

“We aren’t having this argument now.” I tied my hair behind my neck to keep it out of my way.

“I can give you an...” She gritted her teeth. “Above. Better. In front...fuck!” she screamed, slamming her fist into the pillow.

The fight fell right out of me. “Advantage,” I said softly. “You could give us an advantage. But baby, as mentally strong as you are, as *gifted* as you are, you’re also my one and only weakness, and I can’t focus on hunting Saint if all I care about out there is keeping you safe.”

She opened her mouth and I traced her lower lip with my thumb, silencing her.

“Believe me, if you were out there, you are all I would worry about. I need you here, Grace. I need you safe. I can’t breathe if I don’t know that you’re safe.”

She blinked back tears. “Even if I were healthy?”

I brushed her hair back behind her ears and kissed her forehead. “Even if you were a fully healthy human. This isn’t about your illness, it’s about my inability to put any mission above my love for you.”

She sagged, and I drew a full breath.

“Well, I guess when you put it that way,” she muttered.

“I love you.” I cupped her face, tilting it toward mine. “Stay here.” I kissed her beautiful mouth. “Stay safe.”

“Only for you,” she whispered.

“Thank you.” I kissed her then, long and hard, pouring every ounce of feeling into the melding of our mouths. We were both panting when I lifted my head. “I love you, Grace.”

“I love you,” she whispered. “Just promise you’ll come back in one piece.”

“Oh, baby,” I grinned and stole another kiss. “That is one thing you never have to worry about.” I glanced at her mouth one last time and then strode out of the room before I did something stupid, like let Saint down so I could stay with Grace.

I couldn’t keep her alive.

But I could help my brother get the justice he deserved.



# GRACE

**I**t was amazing what a twenty-minute power nap could do for a girl. Or maybe it was just the latest meeting with Gabriel that had given me the energy boost, but either way, I was rolling with it.

I'd fallen asleep right after Ajax had left with the others to help Saint on the latest Samuel-focused mission, and while I was worried about him, I knew he'd come back to me. I wished I could say the same for myself. Gabriel's prognosis was harrowing for sure, but it was nothing I hadn't already been mentally preparing for. It sucked, and if I let myself think about it too long, let myself think about the pain that Ajax would suffer when I finally left this plane...God, if I could spare him that suffering, I would in a heartbeat.

Sitting in bed with pent-up energy made me entirely too restless, and if I were being honest, I would rather hear anyone else's thoughts but my own at that moment. After slipping on some yoga pants and a long-sleeved tee, pulling my hair back in a messy top-knot, I'd headed toward the most popular haunt this time of evening—the informal dining room. For some reason, I actually had an appetite. I hated that thinking that this sudden burst of energy and hunger could mean the worst—that I was transitioning into the last hurrah stage of my life—but the thought was there all the same.

Ignoring it, I focused on my hunt for those muffins the baker constantly piled on the wide table in the dining room. Walking through Alek's mansion never ceased to amaze me—it was gorgeous and massive yet had such a homey atmosphere

I couldn't help but feel like I belonged here. And the certainty that I wouldn't be able to have a future here with Ajax made me bubble with anger at the unfairness of it all.

*Stop with the pity party, Grace. It's not a good look on you.*

I nodded to myself, rounding the corner and stepping into the main residence's entryway, the last stop before I'd find my muffin fix another hallway down.

"You honestly think I'd welcome you with open arms? Are you out of your fucking mind?" Ransom's voice took on that predatory tone I'd heard a couple of times when anyone had done anything even remotely dangerous around his pregnant mate, Olivia—you know, like light a candle or wear too much perfume. Most the time the way he protected and cared for her was incredibly romantic, but Olivia was nowhere in sight now.

Instead, a male vampire stood in front of him, one hand holding a black duffle bag, the other shoved into the pocket of a suit that likely cost more than my entire life savings. The sleek navy-blue fabric was cut to his body, showing off tons of carved muscle that was more lithe than bulky. His hair was cut short and was so black it almost looked blue and his dark eyes were *so* familiar.

"Warrick!" Cassandra's voice echoed from down the opposite hallway, her massive panther prowling behind her as she ran to the male and threw her arms around his neck. He wrapped his free arm around her side, but never took his eyes off Ransom.

Smart of him, because Ransom looked like he wanted to tear his throat out.

"I didn't think you'd show up here," Cassandra said, releasing him and switching back to that beautiful severity she normally exuded now that she'd gotten her excitement out of the way.

*Fucking Zorins.* Ransom's voice filtered into my mind, and I did my best to block him out, but maintaining my shields was getting harder every day.

Zorin.

Oh, now that made a whole lot of sense. Warrick's eyes were the same dark brown shade as Cassandra's, the color of freshly ground espresso. This was her brother.

I chewed on my lip, watching the exchange before finally deciding I'd better just quietly make my way to the muffins—

"I came here to train," Warrick said. "And to give you this." He handed a piece of paper to Cassandra, and my feet froze when I recognized the format.

It was another list of targets from the Sons.

"The fuck you're here for training," Ransom said. "Your family tried to slaughter my mate—"

"My father," Warrick cut him off, his jaw going taut. "My being here should prove I wasn't aligned with his zealous antics. I never have been. And neither has she." He motioned to Cassandra, who looked up from the list with something close to pity and shame in her eyes. I've only gotten pieces of her story, but she'd only ever been kind to me. "That's a peace offering," he continued, pointing at the paper in his sister's hand.

"I don't give a fuck, Zorin," Ransom spat. "Cassandra has proven her loyalty to Alek, but you show up unannounced and expect to be welcomed into the assassin fold?"

"No," Warrick answered, somehow keeping his composure. I'd be terrified if Ransom were directing all that anger at me, but seeing as I was just a spectator at this point, I was okay. "Of course not. I understand it will take time for you and yours to trust me. That's why I'm here. It never sat right with me what happened between our families, and I'm here to show you what side I stand on." He raised his hands in an innocent gesture.

Cassandra noticed me then, giving me a soft smile and waving me over. I skirted behind Ransom, going to her side and giving her panther a soft pet between his shoulder blades, his favorite spot. Yes, Ajax had nearly lost his shit when I'd befriended the creature, but could he really blame me? He was

just a giant kitty cat who loved to lounge with us girls when we had downtime. And he was so *soft*.

Cassandra chuckled, shaking her head. “I’m shocked he likes you so much,” she said. “No offense intended,” she hurried to add. “He’s normally more standoffish with people, especially humans.”

“Maybe it’s because he knows I’m dying and is offering me comfort, like a giant support animal.” I kept stroking him, arching a brow at Ransom, who was still standing there surveying Warrick.

I really hoped they weren’t about to brawl. This family didn’t need any more internal conflict. The small spat between the assassins and the hunters earlier was enough proof that the war, the attacks, and everything that went with it was stretching them all too thin. And as much as I loved Alek and his family, I was firmly in Team Hunter mode, so it would be so much easier on me if they sorted their shit out. Throwing this into the mix? Probably not good for morale.

“Grace,” Ransom said my name so softly I thought it was inside my head for a second. But he looked right at me with an apologetic yet pleading glance. “Do you think you could...”

*“Pop into his mind and tell me if he’s planning to slit all our throats while we sleep?”* he asked silently.

I gave him a subtle nod, never stopping from my panther pets, and reached out with my power. God, it felt good to not be treated like glass for five seconds, and I couldn’t help but love Ransom a little for the respect in his request. I couldn’t fault Ajax for his protectiveness though, knowing I’d be acting the same way if it were his life on the line.

Stretching out with my gift, I lifted the shield I’d placed around my mind, just like Alek taught me. I directed my power at Warrick, imagining a fluttering black satin ribbon weaving its way over and into Warrick’s temple—

*I just want to be with my sister. I want to be an assassin and actually do good for once instead of being surrounded by wealthy monsters who want to rule the world. But if you keep*

*looking at me like that, I'm going to tear your arms off and beat you with them.*

I flinched a little at the last stream of consciousness from Warrick. The first thoughts felt genuine, but deciphering intention behind private thoughts was a bitch. Alek and I had discussed it in length. There were countless times someone could think about killing someone or hurting them without ever having any real intention of doing so, and that made it incredibly hard to take thought as truth.

Plus, I didn't know Warrick at all. He was a complete stranger who could very well follow through on his threats just as easily as he could have good intentions. Damn it, I wished I had centuries to hone this gift like Alek had.

A pang of grief hit me square in the chest, but I forced myself to focus.

*"Fifty-fifty,"* I finally spoke into Ransom's mind. *"He wants to be here and has no immediate plan to kill us all, but he's not carrying a banner for you at the moment. That could just be because you've been yelling at him since he walked in though."*

Ransom sighed. *"I'm not taking any chances."*

"Are you two going to stare at me all night or what?" Warrick finally asked, irritation evident in the tight set of his shoulders.

"I can't risk this right now," Ransom said. "You may be here for the reasons you said, but Alek and the others are on a mission. If you're really here to prove yourself, you'll let me contain you until they return."

Cassandra gaped at Ransom, but quickly smoothed the shock off her face. A little hurt radiated in her eyes, and I gave her a sympathetic smile.

"Fine by me," Warrick said, surprisingly agreeable to the idea of imprisonment. "Whatever I have to do to prove myself. I'm here to train. To help my sister in any way I can. And to serve my king."

Ransom cocked a brow at him. “Interesting that the serving part comes last.”

Warrick leaned in a little closer to Ransom. “Unlike my other family, I don’t pretend to grovel at royalty’s feet,” he said. “I’m loyal to Alek, but I’m also not a liar. Cassandra will always come before him.”

*Whoa, go brother.*

I resisted the urge to clap. The brutal honesty thing leaned me in his favor for sure, and I’d always wanted a sibling who would go to the ends of the earth for me, so I was happy Cassandra had that, especially when things here were still so tense for her. She didn’t have a mate who made her feel welcome and safe and alive like I did. Not everyone could be so lucky, no matter how hard I wished it.

Wishing didn’t do anything when it came down to it really. If it did, I’d be able to spend the rest of forever with Ajax.

“I’ll be back in a few,” Ransom said, eying Cassandra. “I’d like to speak with you after.”

“Of course,” she said, and hugged her brother again before he scooped up his bag and followed Ransom down the hall and out of sight.

Cassandra let out a heavy sigh, and looked over the paper again. Her panther must’ve felt her anxiety over Warrick, because he leaned into her hip, purring softly. “I don’t recognize any of these names,” she said, and I wasn’t sure if she was talking to the panther or me, but I shifted my feet to get a better look at the list anyway.

“Oh, my God,” I said, reaching for the list with frantic fingers but stopping just shy of the paper. I looked at her with questioning eyes. I knew better than to rip something out of a vampire’s hands, but thankfully she handed it right over.

My fingers shook as I re-read the names on the list six times.

“Do you know some of them?” Cassandra asked.

“Whoa, girl time in the entryway?” Avi’s voice sounded as she rounded the corner, stopping before us. “Why aren’t we in the dining room eating muffins? Isn’t it muffin o’clock?” The light mood drained from her face when she noted the seriousness in my expression. “Grace? What’s wrong?”

I held up a finger, my breathing erratic as my mind worked out the kinks in the puzzle I held. They were both used to me needing a minute, so neither pushed me to speak.

Every single name on this list belonged to a child in foster care, and I only knew that because they were in *Maria’s* foster care.

“The Sons are targeting associates of vampires or humans with any amount of vampire blood in their line, right?” I asked for clarification. They both nodded. “And the likelihood of children being acquaintances of vampires?”

“Zero,” Cassandra said. “Well, unless they were saved by an assassin or something rare like that. Why?”

Panic and understanding lashed up my spine. Maria...oh, my God, Maria knew. She knew about my bloodline and had to know about these children’s lines too. Could she detect it, like Cassandra’s gift? Is that why she’d taken me in all those years ago or is that why my mother was friends with her? Was her entire agenda to help these children with these special histories?

It made all the sense in the world, but figuring it out wasn’t the priority right now.

“These are all names I recognize,” I finally answered her. “They’re children, Cassandra. Some of them aren’t even eight years old yet.”

Avi gasped, a hand flying over her mouth.

“They live in the home I grew up in,” I continued. “We have to go. Now. If they’re being targeted...” My voice trailed off as my heart trembled for what could happen.

“We have to tell the hunters,” Cassandra said.

“We can’t leave these children to die!” I countered. “What if the Sons are already there? What if we get the hunters and then we’re too late?”

Cassandra contemplated for a moment, then nodded. “Fine, we have time to do one thing. Go to the location and try to move them to a safer location, or we go get help.”

“I can’t stand here and wait when those children could be attacked any second. You can make other people around you invisible right?” I asked Avi.

“Yes. But not very many.” Avi said.

“We can get in and get the children out with that trick. And we’ll take weapons, just in case.”

“I’ll go get Valor. She has a go-bag filled with what we need,” Avi said, disappearing at vampire speed.

“Ransom would stop us, right?” I asked, wishing above anything we could bring him.

“He’d definitely make us wait for the hunters and assassins,” Cassandra answered.

I shook my head, spinning around and hunting down a pen to write down the address of the foster home on the list of names. “He’ll be back any minute,” I said just as Avi returned with Valor and Lyric. “We’ll leave this here for him to find.” Cassandra arched a brow at me, but I shrug. “I’m in a hurry, not suicidal. He’ll rally everyone when they return and we’ll get the help we need, if we need it.”

All of them nodded, but Cassandra eyed me as we headed out the doors. “You know Ajax will never forgive you if this goes south, right?”

“I’ll never forgive myself if I stand by and do nothing while children could be dying. Children who have already suffered enough trauma as it is.” Losing parents or any situation that led to them being cared for by Maria. That was enough to deal with for one lifetime, let alone being targeted by a malicious cult with a dangerous agenda.

“I’ll drive,” Cassandra said, and we all piled into her car, Valor handing out weapons as we went. I’d never held a gun before, but I’d seen Ajax do it enough times that I figured out the safety pretty quick. My adrenaline was so high I didn’t even contemplate the fact that I was holding a gun, the weight heavy in my hands.

Cassandra hit the gas and we reached the foster home in a matter of minutes. Each second that ticked by had my heart thumping hard against my chest, my mind conjuring horrible scenarios about what we might walk into.

We climbed out of the car and instantly heard the screams.

I didn’t waste a second waiting for an order or a plan. I ran.

Bounded into the house, the girls behind me, and I swallowed back a cry.

The Sons are here, and I could hear them, feel their thoughts pounding at my mental shields. They’d already made it upstairs to where the bedrooms were.

“Save as many as we can,” I downright demanded before sprinting up the stairs and diving straight into a nightmare.



# AJAX

Defeat had a certain taste to it. Bitter, of course, but also musty, like a house that hadn't had a breath of fresh air from an opened door or window in weeks.

It tasted just like this.

"Fuck!" Dagon shouted, losing his temper and clearing the desk of the abandoned office, sending everything to the floor in a crash.

Saint stood by quietly, seething as he practically stared holes into the wooden floor. He was unreachable to us in his anger, lost to quiet rage that touched us all but consumed him.

"There's nothing we can do?" Zachariah asked softly.

I shook my head. "Much to Jocelyn and Luna's dismay, it's been too long for the witches to work a tracing spell to see who has been here, and it's not like stopping time is going to help us here. If Saint can't scent him, no one can." It had obviously been months since this house had been used, which meant Aurora had been held captive longer than any of us had realized.

The witches had the same problem with the house we'd found Aurora in. They could only trace back twenty-four hours.

And the trail wasn't just cold. It was icy.

"The problem with hunting Samuel is that he's hunted *with* us for so long that he knows exactly how to avoid detection,"

Zachariah said, rubbing the bridge of his nose as Hawke's phone rang.

"Yeah, well that's a problem we're going to have to figure out sooner rather than later." I glanced meaningfully at Saint.

Zachariah nodded.

"What the fuck do you mean *they're gone*?" Hawke snapped, squeezing his cell so hard I heard the plastic parts creak. His tone made my stomach twist into knots, and every head turned his direction—even Saint's. "You have *who* in the —" Hawke shook his head. "Forget that part. We'll deal with that later. Where the fuck is my *mate*?" His jaw flexed. "Yes, I think meeting us there would be the fucking prudent thing to do!" He stabbed the end button on his phone and slammed it into his pocket, then recited an address to the rest of us that had me blinking. "Apparently that's where the females have gone. And I mean all of them except Olivia. Warrick Zorin brought them another list like the ones we've been finding on the Sons and the females all *left* the estate while Ransom was escorting Warrick to the dungeons."

There was a mutter of swear words from every male in the room.

"That's where Grace was raised," I said, the hairs on the back of my neck rising. "I came across it while we researched her lineage." And if they'd gone there after finding it on a list for the Sons... "We have to go. Now."

"Fucking Valor," Lachlan growled. "If she's going to throw her body into every battle, the least she could do is be transitioned!"

Fear and rage warred for control of my body.

"You've been there?" Hawke charged my way.

"Driven by," I said, immediately holding out my arms. I'd been there. I could wend. It was only a matter of how many of my brothers I could wend *with* me.

Hawke grabbed hold of my forearm before I even said his name. "Hawke. Saint. Dagon. Alek." The deadliest of my brothers and the one who could mentally send back the

location so the rest could follow after. Taking any more would leave me weaker than I wanted to be when I finally got to Grace.

What the fuck was she thinking, going after the Sons?

*That her life is already forfeit.*

I took a deep breath and tried to calm my racing heart as my brothers clasped my arms.

She was alive.

She had to be.

I would know if she had died. That shimmering tether that bound us as mates was still there, still vibrant, still...fuck, I could feel the echoes of her panic even this far from human territory.

“Here we go.” I focused on the house, the artful details of the Victorian architecture, and wended, dragging the weight of my brothers through space and time with me through the rush of frozen air.

My feet hit solid ground and I immediately shook off my brothers at the sound of gunfire coming from the house. They were here.

“Fuc—” Hawke’s mouth froze wide open as I threw out my hands, freezing time around me. That act had been enough to calm even my highest heart rates in the past, knowing that I had all the time in the world to stop whatever was about to happen, but my heart still thundered like a fucking drum as I ran up the stairs of the house and onto the porch, ripping the door from its hinges.

As long as I didn’t come into contact with another being, I could keep my time-bubble in place.

I scented the air and immediately tasted the notes of freesia and citrus that marked Grace’s presence. There were no thoughts, no plan, no strategy that came to mind, I threw away centuries of training and acted on instinct alone. She was upstairs, and I found myself on the second floor what would have been a second later, my weapon drawn as I kicked in one

door after another. The first had two kids both clutching their covers, their hair flying as if they'd just awoken from the gunfire.

Grace was in the next one.

My heart stammered, its beat erratic at the scene.

She had thrown herself in front of two girls who stood cowering in the corner, holding on to each other as a gunman in his late twenties stared them down, the flash still evident from the pistol he had pointed at them.

The bullet was inches from Grace's chest.

My entire being flexed with a blast of acute, painful panic.

*Stay calm. Breathe.*

Letting go of time would ensure my mate's death, not just in the coming weeks, but in this very instant.

Wrath vibrated my bones as I walked toward her, careful not to brush the gunman as I slid between him and the child-size desk in the room.

“What the hell were you thinking, baby?” I whispered as I approached Grace, sure that the look on my face probably more than earned me her favorite nickname of Grim. Stark terror filled her eyes, but her chin was tilted upward, and something told me she'd made her choice before putting her body in front of the girls.

She'd chosen her own death over theirs.

I didn't need to ask why.

She had weeks.

They had decades.

Grasping the bullet, I poured my energy into shifting its trajectory back toward the shooter, giving it a little shove so it would continue back at him when I started time again.

Somehow, I managed to ignore the shriek of my instincts as I ripped myself away from Grace and out of the room.

She'd never forgive me if I didn't do the same for every other person in the house that I'd just done for her.

I cleared every other room, changing the trajectory of every bullet that had been fired except for Valor's. Hers was already inches from the forehead of one of the shooters, and I couldn't think of a better place for it.

Cassandra was in the third bedroom, gathering one of the kids into her arms. Lyric was with her, grabbing a baby out of its crib. And Aviana? Just because I couldn't see her didn't mean she wasn't here.

No doubt Hawke would be on her the second I released time.

There were three Sons in total, sent to execute a total of nine children.

*Children.*

And Grace's foster mother? She was in the final bedroom, standing just as bravely as Grace, guarding a few of her charges. I couldn't grab the gunman without losing time, so I shoved the dresser between them, then stripped off my own Kevlar and braced it in an open drawer to protect her from any shots that could be fired before we could get back in here.

Certain that I'd found every shooter and every kid in peril, I went back to the bedroom Grace was in, stood directly in front of her and released time only long enough for the bullet to hit the shooter in the throat, then froze it again, wrapping it around Grace and I.

She blinked up at me in shock. "Ajax!"

"I'm torn between kissing the hell out of you and shaking some sense into you!" I snapped, pulling her into my arms and lifting her against my chest.

"I just—" she started, winding her arms around my neck.

"No!" I held her tight. "I'm not even *remotely* ready to hear it yet."

"The kids..." She glanced their way.

“It will be less than a second for them,” I promised her. “But if I don’t get you out of this house right now, I’m not sure I can be responsible for my actions.” That was putting it lightly. The storm brewing within me was the kind that could topple cities and rearrange mountains.

She nodded, and I whisked her out of the house, charging down the stairs and out the door to where my brothers were all mid-lunge toward the house, with the exception of Alek, who was focused inwardly, no doubt sending the visuals and location of the house so others could wend.

The summer air was thick, clogging my throat—or maybe that was fear lodged like a boulder in my windpipe. I set Grace on her feet but kept my arm around her small waist to hold her steady as I released time for the length of a heartbeat, then threw it out around my brothers.

“Stop!” I shouted, and gods help Hawke, he bounced at the edge of the shield, knocking him back on his ass. At least he hadn’t broken the barrier. The hunters looked back at me in expectation, but the assassins were shocked.

Guess they still weren’t used to this kind of advantage in battle.

I gave them the layout of the house and the position of every child, adult, and shooter. Then I looked at Hawke. “Sorry, but I think Avianna is invisible. I didn’t see her.”

“Go fucking figure.” He glared toward the house. “I swear she thinks invisibility makes her bulletproof. It doesn’t.”

There was a grunt of agreement from Alek.

We devised a strategy that was better than every male throwing themselves headfirst into battle, and then I sat Grace on a bench outside the house.

“Stay. There.”

She tilted that damn chin at me. “And if I don’t?”

“I came within *seconds* of losing you in there,” I growled, leaning down and bracing my hands on the wooden back on

each side of her, caging her in. “There is *no* telling what I might do to you.”

She narrowed her beautiful eyes at me. “You wouldn’t hurt or...” She blinked. “Ground. Limit. Bars. Fuck!”

“Punish?” I supplied.

Her lips pursed, but she nodded.

“Can we get going already?” Hawke shouted.

“Give me a second!” I snapped over my shoulder. “It’s not like we’re wasting time or anything.” Lowering my head to her ear, I whispered. “I’ll never hurt you, Grace. But I might just keep you edged for hours with my tongue and teeth, bringing you right to the edge of coming before backing away, never letting you find your release.” Lifting my head, I found her eyes wide on mine. “Yeah, I’m that angry.”

“I’ll stay here,” she agreed, but there was a definite challenge in those eyes of hers.

“How gracious of you.” I pressed a kiss to her forehead, terror still tingling my tongue at how close I’d come to losing her, and then I stood and turned toward the house. “On three. One. Two.”

“Three,” Hawke snapped, and I released time.

It was a matter of seconds—and a few time pauses—before every shooter was dead, every child was rescued, and every mate had been located. The rest of our brethren showed up just in time to finish the cleanup. There was more than one angry voice lecturing more than one unapologetic female by the time we were done.

“That’s your choice,” Alek said to Maria.

“Not much of a choice,” Maria said, glaring at our king in a way I’d never seen a human dare. “Either I agree to a full-time patrol of the house, or I move these children to your palace.”

“Still a choice.” He shrugged. “They’re all part vampire, though something tells me you already know that.”

“Yes. I know.” Her gaze skipped over to Grace, who was tucked against my side, my arm wrapped around her. “I’m sorry, Grace. I should have told you.”

“Don’t apologize,” Grace insisted, leaning heavily on me.

“It’s not as simple as bringing the kids to your estate,” Maria told Alek. “They’re all in foster care. Visited by social workers, guardians ad litem, the works. Two of them have parents who are in the process of reunification.”

“Guard duty it is,” Alek said. “The Sons will come back. If they’re targeting humans with vampire lineage then keeping these kids here is putting a target on their back.”

Maria paled. “We’ll take the guards for now. Let me...” She swallowed.

“You don’t have to decide anything tonight,” Grace said, stumbling forward and taking Maria’s hand. “These males are really spectacular. They’re *good*, and they’ll keep you guys safe until you decide what’s best for the kids.”

Alek nodded.

Grace looked over at me.

*Time for us to talk.* I thought in her general direction.

She swallowed, then lifted her chin and came toward me.

The second our hands touched, I pulled her to me and wended.



I TOOK what had to be my sixtieth deep breath since we’d returned, and then grasped the doorhandle to my bedchamber. Instead of talking to Grace, my temper had ruled, making me deposit her in our bedroom and leave immediately to walk off the worst of it.

To her it had only been a matter of seconds since I’d walked out.

To me, it had been hours.

*I can hear you out there, Grace said directly into my head. Come inside and fight with me.*

A growl rumbled through my chest, and I pushed open the door, finding her exactly where I'd left her—on our bed. “The last thing you want is me to fight with you.”

“Why not?” She shrugged. “Fighting is what every healthy couple does. It’s a way to work out issues that otherwise would go unresolved.”

“And don’t play psychologist on me, either.” I pointed a finger at her, then leaned against one of the massive posts of our bed. “You deliberately put your life in danger tonight.” Even now a chill shivered down my spine at the memory.

“Yes.” She crossed her legs under her and folded her hands in her lap.

“You knew there was danger, and instead of calling me, you went and threw yourself into the fracas.”

“Fracas?” She lifted a brow. “Sometimes you *so* sound your age.”

Another growl worked its way up my throat.

“Fine.” She sighed. “Yes. I knew there was danger.”

“Was it because you didn’t trust me to go?” I had to ask. “Did you go yourself because you didn’t think I’d do it for you?”

Her lips parted. “No, Ajax, no.” She shook her head. “We knew you guys were hunting Samuel, and we knew that Ransom would do his best to stop us, so we took off before he could. It’s not like we’re defenseless.”

My eyes flew wide.

Grace grimaced. “Okay, it’s not like we don’t all have our own capabilities. Valor is a freaking *product* of the Sons, and she’s pretty deadly. Avianna could scope everything out invisibly. I could hear every thought to give us a heads up, and Lyric wasn’t about to be left behind—” Grace caught the look on my face and stopped. “That’s probably not helping.”

“It’s not,” I agreed. “Are you that anxious to die?”

Grace blinked.

“You put yourself in front of a bullet. If I hadn’t arrived when I did—alerted by *Ransom’s* call and not yours, I might add—that bullet would have pierced your heart a second later.” I folded my arms across my chest to keep from reaching for her. “You could have died tonight.”

“Today...next week.” Her shoulders lifted in a half-hearted shrug. “At least I would have died for a reason.”

“And if it had been me in that situation, would you feel the same?” I couldn’t think of another way to get through to her. “If you had walked in to find that bullet aimed at my heart, would you have felt comfort that you may have been robbed of our final weeks together, but at least I was noble until the end?”

“But it’s not you!” She surged up on her knees, then lost her balance.

I moved quickly, catching her forearms to keep her from falling.

“It’s not you, Ajax,” she whispered. “It’s me. I’m going to die. Whether it’s tonight, or in a couple weeks, I will die. Please tell me you realize that. You can’t keep me safe in this palace. Not from my own brain.” The torment in her eyes choked me. “I have one chance left. One.”

One that we weren’t certain of. One chance that Gabriel warned me was more likely to kill her than save her. But wasn’t a *chance* of living better than a certainty of dying?

“One that’s slipping away by the day.” I slid my hands around her body to her hips and tugged her to the edge of the bed so she was flush against me.

She tilted her head slightly in confusion. “I don’t understand.”

“The weaker you get, the less likely you are to survive transition.”

Her eyes flared in surprise.

“I have one idea,” I admitted. “It’s just that—an idea, but it’s the best chance you have if you still want to be transitioned.” The words came out like they’d been dragged over shards of glass. How the fuck could I even be suggesting this to her?

Because tonight had made it clear that I was going to lose her either way.

“I do,” she assured me, clutching at my shirt. “But what changed your mind?”

I lifted one hand and pushed her hair behind her ear, then cupped the side of her face, memorizing everything about the moment. “I am an expert when it comes to time, Grace. But as much as I want to fight what’s happening to you, I can’t. And the truth is that whatever’s left of your time is yours, not mine. It’s yours to decide what to do with, and if this is what you want, then I’ll give it to you.”

“Even if it means I die tonight?” she whispered, her gaze searching mine.

My body rebelled at the thought, every instinct demanding I put her in a time bubble and hold her there forever like that damned fairytale. “Yes.”

She drew her tongue over her lower lip. “Let’s do it.”

My chest caved in. “You’re certain.”

She nodded. “Now. Right now before I get any weaker.” Tilting her head to the side, she exposed her neck like I was going to sink my fangs into her right there. “Come on, I know you have to complete a full third transfusion, and honestly, it’s hot as hell when you bite me.”

“Yeah, that’s not how this is happening.” I reached for her, swinging her up into my arms. “I’m not going to transfuse you up here and then hope for the best. I’m not leaving shit to chance when it comes to you.”

“Isn’t it all just a chance?” she questioned, laying her head against my chest.

“Not if I can help it.” I savored the scent of her, the feel of her skin, her slight weight, the way my heart felt like it was wrapped around hers through that bond we shared as I carried her into the hallway.

I’d had hours, weeks to think about this, and there was only one path I could see as even a possibility, and it depended on way more than just me and my intentions.

We entered the foyer at the same time as my brothers, who were returning from Maria’s house. *Right on time.*

I looked straight at Saint. “I need you.”

Saint nodded without hesitation, then followed us past the kitchen and down the steps into tunnels under the mansion.

“I don’t know what you’re thinking,” Grace said as we approached Gabriel’s infirmary.

“Good. I’m keeping my shields up until I know if it’s a possibility.” Shit, a tiny kernel of hope blossomed in my chest that this might actually work.

We walked into the infirmary, where Julian was having midnight meal with Gabriel in his office. Both stood as we entered.

“Is everything okay?” Gabriel asked.

“Not sure,” I answered honestly, setting Grace on the exam table with the utmost care. “Is Aurora up for visitors?”

Gabriel’s brows rose.

“Fuck,” Saint muttered, as if following my train of thought.

I honestly didn’t know why I hadn’t thought of it sooner.

“I’m right here,” a soft voice said from behind us. “You can ask me yourself.”

Turning, I saw Aurora in the doorway to the recovery room. She was thin—far too thin—and from what I’d heard, would still only feed when Saint fucked with her head to make her think she was drinking something else out of that wine glass. Her eyes were haunted and too big for her face and she

clutched the robe closed like it would protect her, but to her credit, she didn't flinch away from me.

"I need your blood." I said it without preamble.

She stepped back, her eyes flying wide.

"Damn it, Ajax." Saint moved, subtly putting himself between us.

"I said I need it, not that I was going to take it." I glanced back at Grace, who looked just as stunned as Gabriel. "I need your blood to save my wife."

Mate was a better term, but this female didn't exactly look like she was interested in hearing anything but humanized words.

Aurora looked at Grace, but remained silent.

"What the hell are you doing, brother?" Saint demanded, his voice more growl than anything.

"Can you still scent Samuel on her?" I asked.

Aurora recoiled.

Saint's jaw worked. "Yes," he ground out.

I nodded. "Because his blood is still in her. He's the one that transfused her, and my guess would be all three times if he was hoping she'd bond to him."

Aurora half-hid behind the door, but kept her gaze locked on Grace, as though she'd completely disassociated from the conversation.

"You don't know what Samuel was thinking," Gabriel argued.

"I know he took the half-blood daughter of a duke and transitioned her. A high-ranking noble. He's what? Fourth in the line of succession?" I asked.

"Third," Saint admitted quietly. "My thoughts took the same path weeks ago. He wasn't successful in wedding the second-in-line, so he went for Aurora."

Grace gasped behind me. "I'm so sorry," she whispered, and I knew it was for Aurora.

"You still have Samuel's blood in your veins," I said directly to Aurora, who seemed to make herself even smaller. "You probably will for the next few months or so given how little you're feeding."

She flinched.

"And what you probably don't know is that Samuel has a very *special* gift," I said slowly.

Aurora glanced at me, but only held my gaze for a split second. "He's good at causing pain."

"But he can heal, too," Saint added, his voice low and quiet. "When he chooses to."

"As if there's *anything* good from him inside me," Aurora countered. "Because there was absolutely nothing good about him. Nothing." Her breathing changed, coming faster.

"Ajax, this isn't fair," Grace said quietly, reaching forward to tug on my hand. "Don't ask this of her."

"How can I not?" I said to my mate. "You want a chance at life? This is it."

"You're hoping the transition will activate his blood inside your mate?" Gabriel pondered, looking at Aurora in a new light.

"I'm hoping the transition, mixed with a vial of Lyric's blood, will combine with a vial of Aurora's and kill the cancer in her brain during the transition." I'd never voiced the thought aloud, but now it was out there. Our queen was unique among vampires, born of the last line of seers with blood capable of fighting Night Thistle. Adding it to the cocktail could only help.

Gabriel blinked, as if considering it.

"The older the vampire the more powerful the blood," I said to him. "And Grace can drain me dry if it means she lives." I squeezed her hand.

“Samuel is also the most lethal form of poison in our kind,” Gabriel noted.

“Samuel is lethal when he chooses to be,” I agreed. “But the power for healing is in his blood. We all know it.” I nodded back toward where I knew Aurora was doing her damndest to blend into the wall. “Why do you think she’s survived this long refusing to feed adequately? Samuel’s blood is what kept her alive when he abandoned her in that house.”

I knew the idea had merit when Saint looked Aurora’s way.

“Please,” I said to Aurora, clenching Grace’s hand. Grace, who I couldn’t live without, couldn’t take a breath in a world where she didn’t. “You’re the only shot she has.”

“What if my blood poisons her instead?” Aurora whispered, looking at the floor.

“I’m pretty much already a walking death sentence,” Grace tried to joke. “The cancer is going to kill me in the next couple of weeks. In some ways, I think this might be a more merciful way to go.”

Aurora slowly drew her gaze upward, but it wasn’t Grace she looked at, it was Saint. “You think I should let her bite me?”

Saint blanched.

“No!” I assured her, but kept my feet where they were so I didn’t scare her. “We could have Saint do...what he does to sedate you, and withdraw a vial, just like Lyric does when Gabriel is studying her blood.”

“You wouldn’t feel it,” Saint promised, shoving his hands into his pockets.

“And you think it would work?” she asked him.

“I think it’s the best shot she’s got. Lyric’s blood doesn’t cure cancer, but maybe it can convince what’s left of Samuel’s blood in yours to.”

“What’s left of his blood,” she said quietly, looking down at her hands with what could only be described as loathing.

“It’s your choice, of course,” I managed to say. Too much had been taken from the female already to force anything from her—even a conversation like this one, let alone something as personal, as sacred as blood.

“I won’t do anything you don’t want,” Saint assured her.

She glared at him. “Like you *don’t* make me drink?”

He ripped his hand over his hair. “That’s different and you know it. I’m not going to sit by and watch you—” His eyes closed and he took a deep breath. “Make your choice, Aurora.”

She looked past me to Grace, then down at our joined hands.

Silence echoed through the room for too many seconds to count.

“I’ll do it,” Aurora said softly. “But only if you knock me out,” she finished at Saint. “No one else touches me.”

He nodded once, but I didn’t miss the flinch.

She retreated to the recovery room, and Gabriel launched into action, getting everything ready.

“What was that about?” I asked Saint. “Only you?”

He shrugged. “I can’t decide if it’s because she knows I can *knock her out*, or if it’s because I look just like him and she hasn’t stopped punishing herself for something that was never her fault.” His footsteps were slow as he followed Gabriel back to the recovery room.

Fifteen minutes later, we had everything we needed.

I sat on the edge of Grace’s bed and stroked her face, glancing over her features. “I never deserved someone like you. You’ve always been far too good for me.”

“Eh.” She grinned, but there was a tremble in her lips. “Personally, I think I married up.”

“You know this is going to hurt like hell.” I couldn’t stop touching her, my fingers caressing the high line of her cheek, the smooth arch of her neck.

“I can take it.” She captured my other hand and brought it to her lips, kissing the back of it. “Just give me a few days, okay? If I’m not as fast as other transitions, don’t give up on me.”

“Never.” I’d wait forever for her.

“We’re ready,” Gabriel said, two syringes prepared on Grace’s other side.

But I wasn’t.

Leaning down, I kissed Grace like we weren’t surrounded by others. I stroked my tongue over hers, taking what I knew might be our last moments together and holding on with everything I had.

Then I lifted my head and stared down at my beautiful, kind, perfect mate.

She reached for my face and braved a smile. “I will love you for the rest of my life.”

I pressed a kiss into her palm. “And I’ll love you every day for the rest of *mine*.”

She held my gaze and tilted her head, baring the side of her neck.

*Gods, please forgive me.*

I struck.



# GRACE

*“And then she knew without any shadow of a doubt, that he belonged to her. Wholly. Significantly. Even when it didn’t make sense. Even when a world wasn’t supposed to exist where he loved her as intensely as he did. She was human. He was vampire. But the fates had mated them, the stars aligning and propelling them toward each other, giving them a piece of happiness in an unforgiving world. He was her mate. And she was his.”*

Ajax’s voice filled every crevice of my mind.

At first, it had been far away, almost like he was speaking to me from the end of a long tunnel. A long tunnel that happened to be on fire.

No wait, that was just my body.

And my blood.

Fucking hell, every inch of me burned and twisted and I swear, someone had lodged an axe in the center of my skull. Maybe Aurora, for putting her through what we had, asking for her blood that tortured her on a daily basis because of its source.

*“Drax’s fangs felt like nothing else sinking in her skin, it was almost impossible to describe. Pleasure and pain, life and death, the end and the beginning. Drax was all that and more. My mate, my glorious, stunning mate.”*

Ajax’s voice was getting clearer as the fire died down in my body. Nothing like the fire he ignited inside me with a kiss,

a brush of his fingertips over my skin, the smell of him surrounding me. No, this fire was a cleansing one, and as many times as I wanted to give up, to just let go and let the pain take me into oblivion, the thought of Ajax kept me holding on to whatever sense of myself I could.

*“He fucked her with his tongue, using long strokes and spearing jabs. Lapping and sucking her throbbing clit until her desire coated his tongue—”*

Omigod, Ajax was finishing the vampire novel I’d been reading...God, was it days ago, hours ago? I had no sense of time, no sense of anything beyond the pain.

*“And only after she’d come twice more did he slick his thick cock with her wetness and sink into her until he bottomed out. They were made for each other. What he took she gave and what she gave he took. He fucked her like he’d never have another chance to again. He fucked her until she cried his name and her body went limp against him.”*

The desire and embarrassment that washed over my soul was a welcomed reprieve from the pain...

It was ebbing.

The clearer Ajax’s voice grew, the more my senses returned to her. They weren’t hindered by the blinding pain anymore, instead they felt...sharper, more sensitive. Even the axe had dislodged from my skull.

Inch by inch, my body started to realign itself, turning away from the fire, away from the pain and shifting toward an energetic burst of power I’d never felt before.

I swallowed hard, shifting against the softness cradling my body.

*“Grace?”*

Ajax’s voice still rang inside my mind, a beacon drawing me to him and only him.

“Ajax,” I said, my voice hoarse. I wet my lips, my throat burning when I swallowed. “Did something go wrong?” I

asked once I opened my eyes. I had to blink against the warm glowing lights in his bedroom.

Ajax sat in a chair next to the bed, discarding the book in his hands and coming to my side in seconds. Tears lined his eyes as he took my hand in his. “You did it, Grace. You’re here. You made it back to me.”

I reached up and cupped his cheek, shocked at just how quickly the motion happened—I’d barely finished thinking about touching him before my body reacted.

“Whoa,” I said, the breath rushing from my lungs as I switched our positions from merely thinking about it. One second he was there, stroking my face and the next I’m pinning him to the bed, my thighs straddling his hips as my palms splay on his chest.

Ajax smiled up at me, his hands on my hips as he slowly sat up so we were eye to eye. “How are you feeling?” he asked, rubbing his powerful hands up and down my back.

A little whimper-moan shuddered out of me at his touch. “That feels amazing,” I said, not able to keep focus on one singular thing.

Ajax laughed again, our mating bond shimmering with him being overjoyed at my being alive. The bond, that connection between us was stronger, a thousand times more powerful than before the transition.

My eyes flared. “Wait,” I said, gripping his biceps. “It worked? I’m...I’m...” Ajax nodded, and I reached up, fingering my teeth. I furrowed my brow. “But if I’m a vampire where are my—” My fangs popped out at the very thought of them, making me gasp. “*Ajax*,” I breathed his name, relief barreling down my spine at the reality that had just caught up to me.

I survived the transition.

“Is it gone?” I asked, almost in a whisper. “Is it really gone?” I ran my fingers over my head, through my hair, right above the spot I imagined my tumor being.

“Gabriel ran scans the first night of the transition,” Ajax answered, his voice soft and full of love. “The tumor is gone, baby.”

I sobbed, falling against his shoulder as happiness and relief and unbelieving joy rocked through me. “I get to keep you forever,” I said through my sobs, and Ajax held me tighter against him.

“An eternity won’t be enough,” he said, the love between us swirling around our mating bond.

I turned my head toward his neck, inhaling deeply to get some composure—

And scented his blood. I jumped back enough to look at him, covering my aching fangs as I swallowed. “It burns,” I said, rubbing my throat like that would help ease the pain.

A delicious grin shaped Ajax’s lips as he moved his long hair away from his neck. “Why do you think you woke up here, in our bed—not a doctor in sight to look after you?” He wet his lips. “You need to drink, mate, and you’re sure as hell only doing that from me.”

The mention of drinking had adrenaline shooting through my veins, my fangs throbbing with need in the same pulse that was terrorizing my clit.

“Tell me what you’re thinking,” he said, eyes pleading as he watched me. “Let me into your mind like you can get in mine.”

I blew out a breath. “I can’t decide what I need more right now,” I admitted. “Your blood or your cock.”

A low growl rumbled in his chest, and he gripped my hips, rocking me forward against what was very hard and very ready for me in his barely-there pajama pants. “You don’t have to choose, mate,” he said, continuing to rock me against him. “Not with me. Not ever.”

Warm shivers had my body trembling, every sensation heightened to a point of clarity I’d never experienced before. It was like someone had upgraded my system and I was operating in high definition.

Ajax lifted me by the hips, having me stand on the bed only long enough for him to rid me of the silk shorts he must've dressed me in. I made quick work of my top, more than ready to feel every inch of his skin on mine. I practically ripped the pajama pants off, tossing them over my shoulder and grinning thankfully at him that he wasn't wearing a shirt.

And then I was back to straddling him, his muscled chest pressed against mine, his lips crushing mine with a claiming kiss that made my pussy slick. I moved over his hard cock, just gliding against him, and he groaned into my mouth.

"Need you," he said, reduced to barely even sentences.

"Take me," I answered, in sync with the primal instincts fully taking over.

*Claim. Fuck. Bite.*

I couldn't tell whose thoughts were whose, but it didn't matter. Not now. Not when he was gripping my hips and lifting me over his cock only to release me so I dropped right over him.

"Ajax!" I gasped as he filled me in one quick move. There was no pain, no flinch, just pure, undiluted need. Oh, being a vampire fucking rocked. I dug my nails into his shoulders, riding his cock like my very life depended on it, and goddamn was I *fast*. I kept having to lock my muscles to slow myself down, losing myself to the wild need pounding inside me for this male.

"Fuck, baby," he groaned, his fangs out as he clutched my hips and held on while I rode him. "You're so fucking gorgeous," he growled, eying the fangs then my eyes. "Made for me. Made for this," he said, thrusting upward, claiming me from beneath just as I was from above.

God, it never felt as good as this, and that was saying something since sex with Ajax had been the best I'd ever had. And now? Now it was unmatchable. Now he knew he wasn't going to break me and wasn't holding back.

I ground against his cock, bobbing up and down on it with a furious need as I chased that release at the edge of my soul.

Gripping his chin, I forced him to look at me without breaking our pace. “Will I hurt you?” I asked, showing him my fangs, my eyes on his neck.

“Never,” he answered, pumping into me harder, faster.

My head rolled back, my mind shimmering with building pleasure.

“Promise?” I asked, needing to be absolutely certain I wasn’t about to lose control and drain my mate dry. “I’m starving for you,” I added.

He shuddered against me, tilting his head to expose his neck. “Fucking drink, baby. I’ve got you.”

Instinct flooded my body, taking the reins as I lunged for his neck. I crashed against him, my pulsing clit rubbing against his pelvic bone at the same time his blood flooded my mouth. It was sweet and heady like spiced hot chocolate. One swallow, and every white-hot knot inside me sparked apart, sending waves of pleasure rocking over my body as my orgasm ripped through me.

“Fuck, yes, mate,” Ajax groaned, spilling himself inside me while I continued to drink and drink and drink.

He tasted like dreams and fantasies and ancient power.

But most importantly, he tasted like *mine*.

I swallowed a last mouthful, drawing my head back to breathe the deepest breath I’d ever breathed before. I’d never felt as alive as I did in that moment. Never felt as strong and powerful as I did when Ajax’s blood was rushing through my body.

I licked the stray drops off my lips, leaning my forehead against his as we came down. “I love you,” I said, tangling my fingers in his hair. Already my desire was ramping up again, the need a consuming thing that had me aching in all sorts of new places. “And I want more.”

Ajax nipped at my bottom lip, just enough to draw a drop of blood before he sucked it off. Hot tendrils of pleasure shivered inside my body from the move, and he hardened

inside me again. “You can have as much as you want,” he said, spinning us so he was on top of me, my spine kissing the bed. “Take all of me. I’m yours.”

I rolled my hips, holding his gaze as he pumped into me again and again. He took his time this round, rocking into me with torturous strokes that had me keening, had me thrashing beneath him as we crashed together over and over again.

And then it hit me...

We *had* time.

We had all the time in the world to do this—be together, fall deeper in love together, *live* together.

Tears lined my eyes with the utter joy rocking through my soul, and Ajax reached up to cup my cheek.

“We have time,” I said, letting him in my head the way he’d asked. “We have all the time we want, Ajax.”

His eyes guttered as he continued rocking inside me, his lips slanting over mine in a deeply loving kiss. “And we’re just getting started.”

# EPILOGUE

The atmosphere in Alek's office was anything but cozy, especially with the way Lachlan refused to sit the fuck down.

Seriously, the Highlander hovered behind the king like a damned nursemaid, but at least he didn't insult me by keeping watch on me. Oh no, the second-in-command's eyes were on the door behind me.

"I'm sure you're wondering why you were summoned," Alek said, shooting a look at Lachlan that said he'd had enough of the pacing, too.

"I can admit I'm curious." I lounged back in the chair across from his desk.

"You have a skill I need," Alek admitted, reaching into his drawer and pulling out a few papers. A quick glance told me they were the lists of names we'd acquired from the Sons. "As you know, we're about to head into the war room for a meeting, and I would like you to agree to my plan before I pitch it to the rest of the table."

"Before?" I arched an eyebrow.

"I'd rather know you're on my side and agree before fighting Zachariah about sending you into danger," he admitted. "You all tend to stick together."

A slow smile played across my face. "You have my attention." I casually crossed my ankle over my knee.

“These lists,” Alek pushed the papers my way. “The last one arrived with Warrick Zorin.”

I nodded, knowing the others had put the kid through his paces before they’d let him out of the dungeon and into the barracks to train with the others. Not that he was a kid. He was just a fuck-ton younger than I was.

“And he says that he got it from his older brother, Edward.” Alek looked me in the eye. “Which means the oldest Zorin is in league with the Sons just like his father had been.”

My jaw flexed, seeing where this was headed. “You want me to leave my brother’s mission to hunt Samuel and focus instead on the Sons.”

“I’m not saying that Samuel isn’t involved—” Alek started.

“Do me the honor of *not* bullshitting me.”

Lachlan’s focus changed from the door to me.

“Fine.” Alek shrugged. “I’m asking you to switch your focus, because you are uniquely able to get inside the fortress the Zorin’s call a home.”

My brow furrowed. “You want me to do what? Change into a hawk? A mouse? How the fuck would that help get past the wards they have on that place?” The protections the Zorins kept on their family home weren’t just formidable, they were legendary, and while I’d known more than one Zorin in my time, it seemed this generation had taken their security to a whole new level.

“Not exactly.” Alek cringed.

“It’s about to get interesting.” Lachlan’s beard twitched, and I had the distinct impression that there was a joke I wasn’t in on.

A knock sounded softly on the door behind me.

“Come in,” Alek answered.

The door opened and Cassandra Zorin swept in, her gown rustling around her ankles. The female was still dressed

formally, apparently having attended evening repast. Her panther sauntered in after her.

Fuck me, but Cassandra was exquisite to look at. High cheekbones, dark hair that I would have bet looked great sweeping over my thighs as she wrapped those blood-red, perfect lips around my cock made her...well, too gorgeous for her own good. She was tall and lithe, the perfect specimen of a female of our species, and had a way of walking that made me wonder if her feet ever touched the floor.

She was the epitome of nobility, of grace, of centuries of breeding.

She was also as trustworthy as a fucking pit viper.

“You asked to see me, my king?” She dropped into a curtsy, sinking low enough to raise my eyebrows. What a well-trained little snake.

I couldn't help but wonder if my king's mating mark was still falsely tattooed on her skin, or if she'd gone through the rather painful procedure to have it removed after Lyric had shown up and claimed Alek's heart...and his mark.

“Please, sit.”

Cassandra rose just as gracefully as she'd dipped, and her dark eyes widened slightly as she saw me in the chair. Then she swallowed and sat in the chair next to me. The look on her face was...resigned.

She knew what was going on.

Interesting.

“Have you given thought to what we spoke about earlier?” Alek asked.

“I have,” she said, nodding once. She folded her hands in her lap and kept her spine ramrod straight.

“And?” Alek prodded as Lachlan crossed his arms across his chest.

“I'll do it,” she said with a note of certainty that told me she'd pondered his request. It wasn't just off the cuff. “If

Warrick says that Edward has been making use of our family home from time to time, then I believe him.” She eyed the papers on the desk. “I’d like to *not* believe that Edward is involved in any of that, but I’m willing to journey home for a...sabbatical, and ferret out the truth. I’ll report back as agreed.”

“Good.” Alek nodded.

“Sending you doesn’t mean we trust you,” Lachlan stated, his eyes narrowing on Cassandra.

“I’m well aware that you have Warrick to assure my compliance,” she seethed, color rising in her cheeks.

Damn, the female was exceptionally stunning when riled.

I made note to rile her at the earliest opportunity.

“We’ll be sending someone with you to report back and keep you...loyal,” Alek said, watching her in a way that told me he was monitoring more than her body language.

“And how do you think that would go over with Edward?” Cassandra blinked, but that was her only physical reaction. “Oh, I’ve come home to vacation, and happened to have brought a hunter with me?” She arched a perfectly sculpted dark brow.

Lachlan pressed his lips together and smothered a laugh.

Alek glanced at Cassandra’s panther and I cursed, the pieces of his plan falling into place as I took a deep breath.

“You have to be fucking kidding me,” I said to Alek.

Cassandra glanced at me, then our king. “Him? You want me to spend months with *him*?” Her voice pitched upward.

“Why not?” Alek shrugged. “He is from an ancient, noble family. He knows the rules of aristocracy better than almost anyone—”

“He loathes me!” She gripped the arms of the chair.

So she *could* lose her temper. How...enticing.

“She’s not lying.” I laced my fingers together in my lap, keeping my composure. “I don’t exactly hold her in high regard.” Months with Cassandra Zorin? Behind what were obviously enemy lines? Gods, we were just as likely to kill each other as we were to discover anything.

“See?” Cassandra said.

“He’ll control himself,” Alek promised on my behalf.

“Eh...” I lifted a corner of my mouth in a slight grimace. “Let’s not make promises I’m not sure I can keep.”

“And just how do you expect *him* to be accepted at my family’s home? By my family’s servants? He’s a giant red flag where Edward is concerned!” She was white-knuckling that chair, now.

“Because I won’t be going as myself, will I?” I asked Alek. There was only one reason it was me sitting in this chair and not Zachariah, or anyone with more years in service.

Cassandra shot me a look that would have withered a lesser male. I, however, was not a lesser male. I was a fucking *hunter*, trained for years in the execution of bloodmad vampires, and an aristocrat in my own right—if I really felt like pressing it...which I didn’t. “And just who do you think you’ll be going as?” she asked me, pursing those red lips.

Was that lipstick? Or was the color natural? Would she leave a lip print on my—

“Well?” she asked, jarring me from my wayward thoughts.

“My guess is that I’ll be going as *her*.” I glanced past her to the panther sitting at her side, currently cleaning herself with massive paws. It wouldn’t be the first time I’d posed as the panther, but usually that was just to fuck with Cassandra.

“Absolutely not.” Cassandra’s eyes widened to an almost impossible size.

“I’m afraid so,” Alek said.

“Better pet me really nicely or I’ll bite.” I winked. If I was going to be stuck with Cassandra for...however long this took,

I was going to be just as much of a pain to her as she'd been to everyone under this roof.

Alek couldn't take his revenge for the hell she'd put him through, but I could.

This was going to be fun.

## **THE END**

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Samantha Whiskey is a wife, mom, lover of her dogs and romance novels. No stranger to hockey, hot alpha males, and a high dose of awkwardness, she tucks herself away to write books her PTA will never know about.

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