



GO TU
SEASON
TWO

MARKED RESISTANCE

A GAMES OF THE UNDERWORLD NOVEL

LANE HUNTER
LAWRENCE HALL

MARKED RESISTANCE

Lane Hunter and
Lawrence Hall

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secure.

SEASON ONE RECAP



From [Crimson Mourning](#):

Damon leaned back and eluded my attack. I'd seen the maneuver before, so I anticipated him dropping to the floor.

This time I countered with a downward strike, aiming the dagger with murderous intent.

Except, Damon didn't drop to the ground. He caught my arm with both his hands, and used my momentum to swing the dagger upward. It plunged straight into my heart, and when he twisted and pulled it free, I knew there was no hope.

I fell to my knees and clutched my chest with my hands. Damon dropped the dagger to the ground and walked to the door, never once stopping to say goodbye. As he disappeared into the darkness of the path, I looked to the figure crouched in the bushes. As Letos and I made eye-contact, horror written all over his face, I smiled and held out a hand covered in crimson. My human parents would be proud.

Every revolution needs a martyr.

From [Marked for Execution](#):

A few moments went by before she talked again. “You’re not going to tell them about me, are you?”

Her voice was so vulnerable, so broken, that it split my fucking heart in two. “Of course, I’m not going to fucking tell them! But you *are* going to tell *me* everything I need to know before I lose my damn mind trying to figure this out. *What the hell are you?*”

She turned her face toward the passenger window without answering me, and my rage transformed into full-blown fury. My mind replayed her dying in my arms and my mouth opened before I could filter anything I said.

“*Sili!* You’re going to do as I say or so help me...”

She turned to me with fire in her eyes, and I slammed on the brakes, parking us right where we were. Dust floated around outside of the vehicle, concealing us for a moment. It was as if the world had disappeared, and nothing existed except for this brat next to me.

“*Sili.* Answer me! What the hell are you?”

“I don’t know!”

“What the hell do you mean, you don’t know?” What game was she trying to play? Had she been planning this all along? To infiltrate my men? Was she planted in this community? Was that why she was pretending to be a boy?

“I. Don’t. Know! My memories are fragmented at best, coming at me randomly. Some things I *think* I know, only to be turned upside down with another memory that makes no fucking sense!”

My eyes narrowed in suspicion.

“Don’t look at me like that, you asshole!”

“How the hell am I *supposed* to look at you?” The tension in this Humvee was ramping up hard and fast. The air was thick

between us. *What would Reed have done if this happened in front of him?* Would he have tried to save her, too, or left her to rot the way I did with the men that came with us today?

Thoughts of Reed's mouth on hers made me growl.

She exploded and shoved me, taking me by surprise with her extra strength, slamming me against the driver side door with a hard crash, sending pain up my back.

“You're supposed to fucking look at me like you did yesterday and every other day. How does me healing fast change anything about me, huh? I'm tired of people trying to kill me for things that are out of my control!”

From [Marked by Shadows](#):

Damon was right. I was with him, and I'd been in my variance for so long, the mental strain was enormous. He'd watch my back while I got my rest, so I stepped to the back wall, sat on the floor cross-legged, emptied my lungs, and let my restoration cycle begin.

The pain was intense. My body began to convulse violently as my cells began to restore themselves to their original form.

Damon came over and knelt beside me. He placed a calming hand on my forehead. "It's okay, son. Live long enough and you'll learn to manage the pain. For now, breathe and—"

Blood spewed from Damon's mouth and he began to gurgle and choke. A pointed edge emerged from his neck and slashed through the left side, and a man materialized behind him. The pointed edge belonged to a sword the man wielded, and he sliced through the right side of Damon's neck and decapitated his head from his shoulders.

From [Marked and Ruined](#):

Everyone knew Kiara was the queen of Disaris and her twin was princess Julia. Her right hand. The second in command. She was known to be ruthless in battle. I fell against the wall of the shower room and slid down to the floor of the shower.

We have the motherfucking princess of Disaris healing underground in Blackmeadow.

And I've been in love, well, lust, with that bitch since I was ten years old. Seeing her all cleaned up, laying in that bed. *My* bed.

Fuck.

From [Marked for Humanity](#):

I closed my eyes. Flashes of my past invaded my memories. I found a place within me to grieve. Something I had never been able to do since this apocalypse started. I grieved for Lathos, I grieved for Tatiana, and I grieved for my former life with my husband, and I even grieved for everything I lost when I was human. Had it turned me soft? Absolutely not. Would I allow it to? Fuck no.

Nothing was secure. Not in life and certainly not in war. I realized things could change in the blink of an eye. It was how one dealt with things was what mattered. One could either control their life or let their life control them. I would not allow my life to control me.

I had everything that I could have wanted, and I vowed to keep it with whatever it took. Let the others come after me. I would fight them until my dying breath. I drifted off, content with knowing everything I did and would continue to do was for my Realm, my life, and my beloved next to me.

I always said revenge was sweet. The blood of my enemies was sweeter.



SEASON TWO

CHAPTER ONE

Zenobia Bell

His name came up on the communique.

Dillon Coyer.

And the hunt was on. Our role wasn't to question the assignments but to carry them out. If Command sent it, we followed it.

Simple.

Clean.

Nothing more and nothing less. Duty above love, above family. Dillon deserted his duty, which made him the enemy. And in war, there are only two sides—the allies, and the enemy.

“This fucker’s a tough one,” Tack remarked.

“Keep your eyes up,” Kristopher scolded.

Kristopher aimed his comment at Tack, but I nodded in response and fingered the small lighter in my hand. The cool, hardness of the metal always settled me, serving as a reminder of the steadiness I had to maintain to keep control.

Tack was tall with tan skin, and a rebellious feel about him. His meaningful, thin, dark eyes, angular eyebrows, and round chin, with shoulder-length, curly, dark brown hair made him

very attractive. Coupled with a long neck, and strong legs, I quietly wondered how strong his pelvic thrusts would be.

Kristopher's height mirrored Tack's. With orange skin, stern, narrow, black eyes, small ears, and smooth cheeks, he exuded authority. His medium-length, straight, grey hair, thick neck, bulky torso with defined chest muscles, strong arms, and strong hands left women panting. Or so I'd been told.

I never crossed the line with my fellow Fang members. We relied too much on each other for survival. Personal relationships and sexual trysts were the gateway to demise and offered no respite from our duties.

We'd tracked Dillon to the edge of Kepjess, one of the largest remaining cities in Shaye territory. A port city on the western border, Kepjess held immeasurable value to our clan. A population of roughly nineteen thousand men, women, children, and vampires lived here. The farmland to the east supplied the humans with food, carried up and down the territories by the ships who docked and replenished before resuming their routes on the Assirac ocean. Dillon hoped to get lost among the masses until he could board a ship and disappear at sea.

"We find his ass before that happens," Kristopher told us during the debrief.

Shaye's collapse could come at any moment. Once the strongest clan in the world, Clan Shaye now lay on the brink of extermination. Under Governor Duradel's leadership, brother turned against sister, and Warriors killed one another in an effort to escape. Or as punishment for abandoning their posts.

"I'm saying," Tack continued. "It was smart of him to come here. It's a good plan."

"*Was* a good plan," Kristopher corrected. "He didn't bet on us. Now, let's go."

Yes, he did, I thought. Why do you think he chose this place?

We entered the Jordan Hills apartments in the Long Gate neighborhood. Only a stone's throw away from the harbor, the three of us stood between Dillon and his freedom.

Kristopher looked each of us in the eye before he spoke. "Remember, if he gets by us, he gets away. Under no circumstances can we let it happen. Any Shaye vampire willing to seek asylum with another clan is a Shaye vampire who must meet their final death. To turn your back on your clan like that is to turn your back on your family. Either Dillon dies today, or we do."

Kristopher was a rock. His devotion and allegiance to the clan could never be questioned. I nodded at his leadership and flicked the lid to the lighter in my right hand. My left went over the hilt of Assurance.

"Let's get this fucker," Tack asserted.

A marvel of construction, the Jordan Hills Apartments pierced the sky. With a multitude of floors, a systematic search would have to be conducted to locate Dillon. Using hand gestures, Kristopher signaled for me to ascend using the right-side stairs and Tack would go to the left. Kristopher had the elevators. I nodded at Tack, and he mouthed the words "be careful," before he placed a piece of gum in his mouth and opened the door to his stairwell. Kristopher pushed the button to the elevator and I opened my door and went through.

With an open lid and thumb on the ignition button, I checked behind the door and the corners of the stairwell before scanning upward. Everywhere I looked, I pointed my lighter in the same direction. Cold and gray, the narrowness of the stairwell screamed at me to turn back.

I emptied my lungs and climbed.

The second-floor metal door groaned as I opened it and I wheeled my hands across my body from left to right to check the corners. Crouched outside the elevator doors, Kristopher

tilted his head to the right and I followed the motion. Tack had emerged from his door completing our deathly silent triangle.

Each floor contained three apartments. Apartment A belonged to me. Kristopher would tackle Apartment B, and C belonged to Tack. Under the authority of Governor Duradel, clan Shaye's leader and strongest living vampire, we simultaneously stormed the apartments in a coordinated effort.

I kicked through Apartment A's door, blasting it open, and immediately checked my corners and ceiling. The sound of human infant squawks filled my ears, but I had a mission to fulfill. A human child rose from their makeshift play area in the living room and ran down a hallway to my right. If Dillon was in this house, he'd done a very good job of keeping the humans settled and cozy.

I'd made up my mind to press further into the apartment to clear it and be sure of Dillon's absence when a human woman's scream filled the air. I dashed out the door and back to the hallway in time to see Tack's severed head rolling out of Apartment C, a pool of crimson blood following behind it, and a figure hiss at me and dash into the stairwell Tack cleared moments before.

"What the hell?" Kristopher shouted as he emerged from Apartment B. His gaze fell on our fallen team member's head. "Oh, Tack."

"He went up the stairs," I prompted. Tack was gone, but the mission wasn't over and I'd become very good at compartmentalizing my feelings and actions.

Kristopher nodded and we both dashed through the open doorway in pursuit. Dillon had forgone running up the stairs, in favor of climbing the sheer wall. My mouth opened at his ability. Vampires were very good climbers, but even we needed holes, crevices, and ledges to scale. Unless you had the Tactile ability, like Dillon.

“Fucker!” Kristopher shouted and sprinted up the stairs in chase.

I trailed behind and focused on the task at hand. Tack was down, but this couldn't be about revenge. Dillon's sentence had been delivered to us long before Tack's fall.

“Kris,” I shouted in a whisper. “Focus!”

Kristopher continued climbing, ignoring my plea as Dillon ascended the wall. Dillon reached the landing first and bolted through the exit door to the roof, sending beams of moonlight back which magnified the easiness growing in the pit of my stomach with each step.

Kristopher plunged through the opening next, and his body dropped. A short, narrow, warped blade flashed across his neck, and his own momentum carried him through.

The hand I held on Assurance flew to my mouth, and I bit back the scream.

“Two down,” came the sinister taunt from the darkness ahead. “One to go. Come meet your fate little fang.”

I knew he was expecting us! This whole thing was a damn ambush.

“Taunting me, so I rush forward in a blind rage?” I shot back and pressed my back to the wall of the stairwell. “No thanks. You forgot my second option.”

“You're a woman?! I thought the Fangs were only men. Duradel must *really* be getting as desperate as we think. Oh well, your fate will be the same as the others...though maybe not as quick. Killing always gets my cock up.”

“And your fate is like your cock. Too short to cause me any worry.”

“Ha! Come on then, bitch, let's see what this second option is.”

“My second option is simple.”

I sped up the last flight of stairs, lifted my right hand, pressed the ignition button on the lighter, and focused. The instant the tiny flame burst to life, I captured it in my mind and guided it with a flick of my left wrist, feeding it with the energy within me till it grew to a mighty roar and burst through the doorway in a potent stream of blazing reds and oranges.

The deadly burst supercharged the air surrounding the exit point, charring anything in the immediate area. I dove through the entrance and rolled, landing on the other side of the exit, and came up on my knees. Two swift flicks of my wrist, one to my left and the other to my right, uncoiled death by fire to both sides of the door.

Dillon was to the left of the door, so he caught the first stream and shrieked in agony as he burned. He thought to fall to the ground and roll in an effort to put out the flames devouring his body, but I poured it on, sending surge after surge of flaming torture his way until his body no longer twitched and convulsed.

I screamed so hard, my throat stung. “*That’s* my second option, *bitch!*”

The flames sang of my victory as they crackled and snapped, while I collapsed and fell to my ass. I cried so hard my chest ached, as the anger and resentment poured out of me. I lost two loyal friends to dispense damnation to one rogue.

Nothing is secure in this world, but there *has* to be a point of solace. Is there no room for joy? No room for love and the living?

There has to be.

CHAPTER TWO

Tripwire. I knelt down and traced the line with my eyes to its end. Spring-loaded spikes tipped with animal blood. A foolish, unsecured step would have ended me.

Okay.

I breathed and stepped over the near invisible wire, careful to eye the source of impending doom at the end of the line while monitoring for a second trap.

I'd circled back and collected the remains of Kristopher and Tack and buried them in one of the cemeteries in the city before I struck out on my own. Regulations required me to communicate with Command within forty-eight hours of the mission's end or face my own hunting party of Fang Rangers. The paranoid cunt in charge of our entire clan had everyone wound so tight, we were beginning to distrust our own. Someone had to do something about him, or he would be the cause of our extinction, not one of our enemies.

Forty-eight hours to decompress after fighting for your life, and yet somehow, the powers that be considered this amount of time generous. It's amazing we all haven't gone insane like Letos. At least they live before they die. The rest of us are one trip wire away from oblivion.

I had approximately thirty-eight hours left. I was grateful the farm was a straight shot south from Kepjess, and I didn't have to make any detours. Tucked away in the deepest part of the woods, it would be hard to locate, especially to those unaware of its existence. Still, nothing is secure. It might have been hidden by trees, but Shaye controlled the territory.

I circled the perimeter, mindful of any extra traps, and kept an eye on the farmhouse and the warm glow from candles

within for any signs of movement. Shaye's numbers dwindled by the day, as we lost battle after battle to human and vampire clans alike, but rogues existed. They were the members of Shaye who no longer wanted to support a leader who only cared about himself. There were many who would leave the solidarity of their teams and clan members for escape.

The idea of hope beyond war.

We had blood banks to keep the warriors' strength up, but the opportunity to hunt and feed from live humans called to the primal thirst within us all. The humans inside the farmhouse had done well to protect themselves, but nothing is secure.

Satisfied there would be no outside interference, I waited till a cloud passed in front of the moon to smother its light before I made my move. Draped in darkness, I approached the front of the house with speed and silence as my protectors and placed my hand on the knob. A gentle squeeze and turn and I would be inside.

"You know it's locked, right?" A high-pitched, airy voice said from behind me. The tip of a sharp, pointed object pressed into my back. "Drop your bag and put your hands up."

"How did you sneak up behind me?" I asked while doing as commanded.

"I had a good teacher."

I wheeled around and used my momentum and raised my forearms to shield myself and dislodge the object from my back. I captured it by wrapping my arm around and locking it in the fold of my right elbow while delivering a palm strike with my left hand to the chest of my assailant.

"Ow," the teenage girl cried as she fell on her ass.

"Your teacher wasn't good enough."

I examined the object in the fold of my elbow and smirked. "Spear? You think a spear is going to do anything against a

vampire?”

“No,” she answered and rose to her feet, dusting herself off as she moved. “That arrow is going to do something against a vampire.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Arrow?”

A wooden arrow coated in bear’s blood protruded from the ground beside my left foot.

“What the hell?”

Boisterous laughter came from above me. I spun on my heels to see a large man on the roof of the farmhouse, easing himself to his feet, with a crossbow in his hands.

“Dad!” I shouted.

“Admit it,” the teenage voice behind me demanded. “We got you.”

I watched as my father approached the edge of the roof and descended a makeshift ladder. I nodded my head and rotated around. I opened my arms, and the teenager rushed inside, enveloping me in a warm, loving embrace.

“Welcome home, sis,” she bubbled.

“Sarah,” I scolded loud enough for only her to hear. “You can’t let yourself be used as bait. What were you thinking?”

I squeezed my little sister tighter, holding on as if there was no tomorrow.

“I can’t lose you too,” I whispered in her ear.

“You won’t,” dad called from over my shoulder, as a warm, firm hand massaged my back.

A tear escaped and I wiped it from my cheek as I pivoted to hug him.

“Dad,” I cried.

“Welcome home, Zee.”

Dad rubbed my back in circles as Sarah picked up my backpack. We went inside the house and he shut and locked the door as my eyes adjusted to the dim light.

“Dad,” I scolded. “You can’t use Sarah as bait like that while you scale the roof. What if there were more vampires out there than one? You have to be smarter.”

“You can take the girl out of the Warriors, but you can’t take the warrior out of the girl,” Sarah sassed.

“Zee,” Dad sighed as he walked past me and into the kitchen. The smell of vegetables hung in the air like a warm blanket. “It’s me and your sister here, and I’m getting up there in age. If there’s more than one vampire, there’s not much we’ll be able to do either way.”

“You can live,” I declared and stomped my right foot. “You can run...hide...use your surroundings to your advantage. Do something other than try to face a superior foe head-on with her as a potential sacrifice. The goal is for you *both* to live.”

“Like you?” Sarah asked and set my backpack down in the corner of the room.

My cheeks burned.

“Listen,” Dad’s voice both comforted and disciplined me.

He always reminded me of a clever fox, with his hooded eyes and thick, straight, white hair. “I would never sacrifice my daughter...either of my daughters...to save my own skin. I would look death right in the eye and smile to keep you both safe.”

“I know,” I answered with my eyes on the floor. I felt lower than the ant I watched crawl across the floor.

The clatter of a pot hitting the table followed by two chairs pulling out filled the silence between us.

“Come eat, Zee,” he directed.

I blew out a breath and walked to the small wooden table in the dining area. Dad and Sarah both were seated and looked at me, with shimmering eyes. I knew he would never sacrifice Sarah. He'd die without hesitation if it meant the survival of his girls. Yet, they were both only human and no amount of booby traps set with animal blood would stop a determined vampire horde from feasting on them.

"It's good to have you home, Zee," Dad said with a smile.

I relaxed and took my place at the table, across from Sarah with Dad at the head.

Sarah scooped out a large amount of vegetable stew from the pot, and the scars on her hands made me drop my eyes and stare at my own. She placed it in a large ceramic bowl and handed it to me. "How much time do you have?"

"A little over thirty hours," I said in a flat, monotone voice.

Dad whistled. "That's not a lot of time."

"It's enough," Sarah chirped.

"Enough for what?" I asked.

"For you to go live," she answered.

I tilted my head and looked at my sister.

"You've been looking out for us. You taught us how to set vampire-specific traps to dwindle the numbers of any horde or to at least slow them down. You taught me how to fight—"

"Not well enough," I interjected and put a spoonful of soup in my mouth.

"Still," she continued, swirling her own soup in her bowl with her spoon. "You've risked a lot coming here tonight. We know you have, otherwise, you wouldn't be here."

"Your sister's right," Dad said. "What happened, Zee?"

I chewed the warm vegetables in my mouth, grateful to have something to put in my stomach after my trip from Kepjess. It

wasn't blood, but it was something. I had a few rations in my bag I'd saved to keep my strength up. I'd drain them later.

"Well, either way," Sarah continued. "You need something."

I swallowed and leaned back in my chair.

"And what do you think that is, oh wise one?" I asked with a mocking tone.

"To live," she answered and swirled her soup.

"Go enjoy your life, Zee," Dad added. "This is war. Between the things you had to have seen, and your worry over us, *you* haven't lived. You haven't experienced life. You were turned at such a young age..."

His voice trailed off.

"I did what I had to do," I said in a lowered tone.

"No. You did what I should have done," he responded. "Now, go do what *we* want you to do."

"That reminds me. How's *Mauricio*? Does his name still roll off your tongue?" I asked Sarah.

A flush crept across her cheeks and she started coughing.

"That good, huh?" I teased. "I guess it's not his name rolling off your tongue. Be careful, Sarah. This isn't the world to bring a baby into. At least, not a human baby."

"Mau is fine. We'll be fine, Zee," Sarah soothed. "We always are."

"Huh," I chuckled. "Someone taught you well."

Sarah reached across the table and touched my hand.

CHAPTER THREE

The number of people inside The Ghost Crab approached insanity. Kepjess remained one of the larger cities in Shaye territory, and the entertainment venues attracted humans and vampires alike, which often led to exciting evenings. One of the few venues left in the world where clan allegiance gave way to the impartiality of fun, The Ghost Crab from the outside looked warm, enchanting, and modest. Large marble stones made up most of the building's outer structure. High windows prevented me from seeing inside as I waited in line to gain entry, but the warm noises from within reverberated inside my bones.

The bouncer at the door towered over the others waiting for his approval to gain entry, his muscled frame served as a deterrent for anyone questioning the security of the facility. His demeanor struck me as bizarre as he eyed my clan mark, and I cocked my head to the side. I'd opted to braid my hair in a bun and go with an all-black look, wearing a black tank top and a matching pair of jeans.

Really? I'm not fucking you.

The message I conveyed with my fists on my hips seemed to get through the layer of silence between us, and he waved me through to the entrance. I pushed through the heavy, wooden door—probably set this way to ensure vampires only—and the welcome smell of alcohol and cheerful singing grabbed me. Few knew of or experienced fighting a vampire with an ability like mine, so my lighter wasn't considered a threat since it was small and innocuous. I checked my bladed weapons and went further in. The bartender was quite busy but managed to welcome me with a wink. I rolled my eyes as he eye-fucked me and continued inside.

The enchantment from the outside carried through to the inside. Several walls supported the upper floor and the sconces attached to them. Private rooms were available upstairs for those who wanted to further their enjoyment, with blood as the price of entry. The walls on the lower level were completely empty, besides the lighting, most likely because customers stumbled too often and would knock anything off of them.

Separate groups occupied several long tables. The clan marks of the vampires, all enjoying themselves, were visible on different body parts. Tonight, Shaye, Letos, and Corrus could be found drinking, singing, and sharing in their similar war experiences. Though The Ghost Crab was neutral ground, clan allegiance was eternal as the groups of partygoers kept to themselves.

The other, smaller tables were also occupied by vampire clan members who seemed to be close with the owner, though they happily welcomed others among their midst. Most of the stools at the bar were occupied, but no one seemed to mind more company. The Ghost Crab was famous throughout the world for maintaining a safe atmosphere inside, while the four clans warred with each other outside.

The smell of grilled and cooked food coming from the kitchen directed me to find a seat and prepare for what I considered a well-deserved time-out from the horrors of life.

I flicked the lid to my lighter open and shut it again in a never-ending dance as I stared into nothingness. The sights around me mingled with the cacophony of sounds and faded into the background of my mind. White noise on a black night.

“You look like you could use a friend.”

A gravelly, husky voice, dark dreadlocks, shining black wide-set eyes, and a lean, friendly face with a wicked smile towered over me. Broad shoulders, a thick neck, and a muscled torso with defined chest muscles were covered by a

crisp, white button-down shirt with part of a lion tattoo peeking out under the collar.

“You’re Shaye?” I asked.

“Yeah. Is that a problem?”

I flashed him my clan mark.

Our eyes met and his darkened. “Yeah, I knew you were Shaye.”

“How?”

His wicked grin returned. “Your skin. Beautiful tan complexion.”

“That doesn’t mean anything. I could’ve been Disaris.”

“No.”

“No?”

“No. Disaris women aren’t nearly as desirable.”

Heat rushed to my cheeks.

“Where are you from?” He continued, his eyes dazzling in the dim light of the venue.

“Up north. A small town called Fevikkika. Not many have heard of it. You?”

“South. Town of Baka.”

“That’s human resistance territory.”

“On the other side, yes. You know of it.”

“Not much. Heard it’s good hunting ground.”

“Depends on what you’re hungry for.”

I bit my lip, aware of how very hungry I was.

“Mind if I sit?”

“Do what you want.”

“Really?”

“I don’t care.”

“What if I wanted to *do* you?”

“You’re very direct. Does that work for you?”

“Not always,” he said with a laugh. His smile both charmed and disarmed me. He pulled out the chair opposite of me, sat down, interlocked the long fingers on his large hands, and rested them on the small table. “But, if I can be frank for a moment— “

“You weren’t before?” I smiled back, growing hotter by the second, surprised at my own forwardness.

He licked his lips. “Listen, I go on assignment in the morning and this might be my last chance.”

“Last chance at what?”

“At fucking the hottest woman, I’ve ever seen.”

“Come with me,” I replied instinctively, yet realizing what I’d said before the words fell from my mouth.

I stood and walked around the table with my hand outstretched. He took it and electricity shot up my arm from his warm touch. I led him past the prying eyes to the stairs leading to the upper floor and to the third room on the left. The other two we passed were occupied but this one read vacant. The door was locked, requiring a submission of blood to gain entry.

I pulled him close, and the heat from his body surrounded me as he entered my space. The hardness of his chest and thighs was nothing compared to his stiff cock as it brushed against my ass. I brought his muscular arm around my breasts, extended my fangs, and bit into his wrist.

He tensed as I pierced his skin but soon relaxed as the warm, sticky liquid flowed into my mouth. He spun me around, pressed his lips to mine, and captured my mouth in a blazing hot kiss, his tongue penetrating my lips and lapping up

the blood in my mouth as it circled inside. The blood from his wound opened the door as he placed his wrist onto the sensor, and we pushed inside. He used the heel of his foot to slam the door shut behind us as I ripped open the crisp, buttoned-down shirt separating me from my prize.

I ran my hands along the hard flesh of his muscles, as he unbuttoned my jeans and pulled till the fabric pooled on the floor around my feet. His knee found its way between my legs, separating them as our mouths continued to dance in unison. He moved his hand under my thong and cupped my bare flesh, simultaneously sending a shudder throughout my body and stoking the flames within me. The heat between us could burn the whole place down, and when his fingers slipped between my slick folds, I almost exploded on the spot.

He lengthened his fangs and scraped my lower lip, sending shockwaves of pleasure and pain as a bead of blood rose to the surface. With his tongue, he licked the precious liquid and sent his free hand up the back of my neck, pressing his fingers into my scalp.

“Damn, you taste good,” he groaned and brushed his lips against my skin.

The pale moonlight streamed through the only window in the room and bathed everything with an otherworldly glow which matched the intensity of our lust. This man invaded every part of me and reduced me to a trembling mess. His fingers undulated against me making me gasp and forcing me to inhale. His scent was clean and primal, like a hot summer’s day in the woods. His mouth captured mine again and swallowed my gasps, as he kissed me deeply and fed my hunger.

His fingers slid through my folds and I ground my hips, begging for more.

“I’ll give you what you want,” he speaks against my lips.

Two fingers pressed into my core, crushing my clit with the heel of his palm and driving my inner muscles to tighten around his torturous instruments. With his fingers inside me, he played my body like a skilled musician, until all I could do was cling to his hard body and cry out as he pushed me to the edge. His thumb stroked my clit as he pumped and fluttered his fingers faster, sending my heart racing and making my breath hitch in my throat.

My head flew back and my back arched as I came, climaxing so hard the stars in the night sky shattered in a brilliance of purple and deep blues. I collapsed to the floor and threw my arm over my forehead.

“Fuck,” I breathed and shut my eyes.

“I am.”

He gripped my right ankle, pulled my jeans away, opened my legs, and pressed his hard cock into me before I could say anything else. His deep moans filled the air with desire as he pushed. My pleasure hadn't receded by the time he started to pound me, so I screamed as each of the violent thrusts of his hips found their mark.

His warm breath grew sharper until goosebumps formed on his skin.

“Open your mouth for me, Gorgeous,” he whispered.

I did as commanded and he moved higher until he entered me, exploding in my mouth and shuddering against me. His cock twitched and his warm seed spilled and flowed deep down my throat.

“Thank you,” he whispered and cupped my left breast, as he pulled out and collapsed on top of me.

I giggled and bit my lip, savoring his taste as his weight continued to press and pin me to the floor, keeping me in place.

No, thank you.

“I’m leaving tomorrow,” he continued and raised himself up on his elbows.

Our eyes met and the heat in his mirrored my own. Neither of us said a word in the gap of silence between us, as it spoke for itself.

This War of the Five as it was named had taken so much from so many, moments like these were inconceivable. This was the hottest night of my life, but tomorrow the truth would return and with it our duty. He would go on whatever assignment he’d been tasked with, and I would head north and back to the front lines. The odds we would ever meet again were infinitesimal, with the greater chance being one, or both of us would be dead soon.

We were both warriors.

We understood the mission.

Nothing is secure.

Still, it was nice to live for a change. Even if it was for but a moment in time.

Thanks, Sarah.

“I have to go,” he said and removed himself from me. I instantly felt his loss and whimpered.

“Yeah,” I sighed.

“Perhaps I’ll see you out there sometime,” he remarked as he fastened his pants around his waist.

“You know, I don’t do this kind of thing,” I explained.

“Sure.”

“I’m serious. Other than when I first joined the elite, I don’t. And I only did that— “

“To survive.”

“Right. This isn’t like me.”

He knelt beside me and ran his hand over my breasts while kissing me so softly I melted.

“Gorgeous, that’s not living.”

“Yeah, people keep telling me that.”

“Then you should start listening,” he said and kissed me again.

He drew himself up, his wicked smile returning to his luscious lips, winked at me, and then he was gone.

The minutes raced towards my deadline. Time to return and let Command know what happened.

CHAPTER FOUR

An average-sized, rectangular office with coordinating wooden furniture would be my prison for the next few minutes as I met with Command. Being the only surviving member of my team meant it was left to me to do the debrief. We'd been led by Kristopher, but as my feet sank into the carpet and I eyed the ugly paint on the walls decorated with a wallpaper border, I almost cried. The light provided by wall lamps bounced off the room colors and made me want a mocha coffee to soothe my jumble of emotions in this rustic-looking room.

Among the first things I noticed when I walked in, was a collection of knickknacks and an award plaque. Throwback items from a bygone era. The warrior I was set to meet with was Oriel Yardley, and this girl made me think of a crazed lunatic. Her deep-set eyes were the color of the evening sky. She wore her fine, curly, night-black hair in a unique style to make it look like she had horns growing out of her head. Short with a narrow build and thin eyebrows, she rolled her eyes when I approached.

"You're late, Youngling," Oriel griped.

"No, I'm not," I responded and strengthened my posture. "I had forty-eight hours to return, and I have three hours remaining. I'm not even *close* to being late."

"What do you mean, you had forty-eight hours? That allowance was rescinded."

My eyes grew as large as the travel mug full of blood she had on her desk. "What?!"

She sucked through her teeth. "You'd better be glad you showed. Otherwise, *your* name would have come up."

"When?"

“It doesn’t matter,” Oriel answered. “The new regulation is twenty-four hours, not forty-eight. It so happens we’re swamped right now so we didn’t get to you.”

This is fucked up. I’m out doing my job and could have been next because I didn’t check in? Crazy.

My nails bit into my palms. “Swamped with what?”

“You,” Oriel answered as she eyed me. “Younglings. Duradel ordered a bunch more humans and familiars to be joined to the elite.”

“Why?”

Oriel blew out a breath and shook her head. “Why? You’ve been out in the field, try taking a look around you next time. We have to replace the weak vampires and cowards Shaye’s losing.”

“*You* need to get out to the field and take a look around if Command thinks they know what’s really going on,” I scoffed. “This army lacks unity. There’s not a single mindset, but there is a single goal: Make sure you survive the war and get back home. That’s all anyone’s trying to do at this point.”

Oriel dragged her hand through her hair. “Kid, don’t bare your teeth at me. How old are you? Thirty? Forty at the most? Duradel is *hundreds* of years old, as is most of Command. We were fighting this war before your first fang descended. You think a youngling like yourself has a better understanding of what this army is than we do?”

I shook my head but maintained eye contact. “I think you’ve lost sight of what’s important and joining a bunch of new people to the elite isn’t going to help that. The lack of training and bloodlust, coupled with the loss of our leadership on the front lines is going to wear the rest of us thin. You may be ancient, but that doesn’t mean Command has a pulse on what’s going on out there.”

“Noted. You as a youngling have a better grip on the Warriors than the entirety of Command. But let’s get this debrief going. Where’s the head of your squad?”

My heartbeat began to race as my muscles quivered. “He’s dead. Killed in action.”

“Oh, that’s right. I’d heard rumors. What about your third member?”

“He died too. They both died on that bullshit mission. Two KIAs. Two experienced fighters in exchange for one rogue vampire who was tired of fighting. Command sent three of us to capture one. How does that make sense? There has to be a better use for our existing assets.”

“Oh, I see. That’s what you think, huh? Let me ask you something.”

Oriel leaned forward in her chair.

“Did you know the man you thought was merely *tired* of fighting, was actually defecting to Corrus to share all our secrets?”

My muscles went rigid.

“You didn’t, did you?” she continued. “Oh wait...did you also know that he had the location of most of us and Corrus was going to coordinate simultaneous attacks which would have decimated and practically destroyed Shaye thereby giving Cassie her revenge against her beloved Damon? Did you even know Cassie and Damon were married?”

“Who doesn’t know that? It’s the reason the night of the Crimson Mourning happened because Lawrence betrayed Damon, and turned Cassie. Damon murdered Lawrence because of what he did to his wife. I attended history class at Dobgar, but that doesn’t help me with the now. Why would he do that? Why would a brother trade all us in like that?”

“Who gives a shit?” Oriel snorted. “Answer *my* question. Did you know he *was* going to trade, while you’re thinking

you know so much more than us?”

“No.”

“What was that? Speak up, I’m a hundred-and-fifty-six, the hearing isn’t what it once was.”

“No!”

“No, you didn’t. Don’t *fucking* question Command again. Your role isn’t to question the assignments, your role is to fucking carry them out. If Command sends it, *you* follow it. Now get your ass to your area and get with your new team members. We’ve got to assign you to a new squad because you’ve proven yourself to be an ineffective change agent in the field. If you had, then perhaps your team members would be safe and alive.”

I grit my teeth so hard the sound was audible.

Oriel lifted her chin. “Nothing to say? Good. Looks like you’re finally learning. You want something to question? Question how two much older vampires met their final death, while *you* are somehow still alive.”

Her words hit me like a punch to the face, and a heavy feeling formed in my stomach.

“What are you implying?” I asked, even though I already knew.

“Listen, kid,” she sighed. “One of our oldest, and strongest vampires was found dead at the base of a mountain after he was sent to babysit, and the vampire he went with didn’t come back. Did he defect? We don’t know, and it’s all hush-hush. It’s got Duradel on edge since he was the one who sent him on the mission.

“You seem like a bright kid, and I don’t think you purposely cost your brothers their lives. But a failed mission is a failed mission. A failed mission like the one you just had? There are bound to be questions.”

I gripped the sides of my head with my fingertips and shook. “The mission didn’t fail. Dillon’s dead. We killed him, *I* killed him.”

She leapt to her feet. “The mission did fail! Three dead vampires, two of them sent to retrieve the other? That’s a failure! Get your head out of your ass.”

I dropped my eyes.

Oriel sighed. “You’re young, I get that. But you’ve got to learn to keep your eyes open and your mouth *shut*, Youngling. If you can do it, then maybe you’ll live past fifty.”

I looked back at her as she returned to her seat. “Why are you telling me this?”

Oriel interlocked her fingers and brought them up to her chin. “Because I joined Kristopher.”

My mouth flew open. She was the vampire who turned him. All this time, he had a vampire in Command he never told us about.

“Kid, close your mouth,” she commanded. “It shouldn’t be that surprising to you. We’re all either born into this thing or joined by someone else. Otherwise, there would be no clan Shaye. You remember who joined you, right?”

I nodded and bit my lip. It happened when my father was out foraging for food for me and Sarah. He wasn’t there when the attack happened. I hid Sarah and took the full fury. I awoke, hungry for blood and cock, and our lives have never been the same. I never saw the Shaye vamp who joined me to the Elite again. But I remember him. Some things you never forget, no matter how old you grow to be. Immortals have long memories.

Oriel continued with her story, drawing me from my own thoughts. “Okay, then. I joined Kristopher, so he trusted me. And for some odd reason, he trusted you. Thought you had the potential to be one of our best. Something about natural

instincts or whatever. Thought you'd make a good Shadow with enough time and training.”

“But Kris wasn't a Shadow. How would he know?”

“*You* don't know how many Shadows there are. They're our most elite. Variants with the ability to change their appearance as they wish. Only the highest levels of Command know how many there are and I'm not sharing that information with you.”

What the hell? Was Kristopher a Shadow? I thought those guys worked alone, or with only one other person. Not in visible teams, and not to do mundane chores like hunting down rogue vampires from our clan.

The words formed in my mind and pushed their way forward. I had to ask.

“You and Kris would talk? About me? Becoming a Shadow? Was he a Shadow?”

“Enough with the twenty questions, Kid. Report here for further instructions.”

Dammit.

Oriel handed me a brown manilla envelope. I nodded and turned to leave.

“And Kid? Remember what I said.”

I paused and held my breath.

“Keep your eyes open and your mouth shut. Maybe you'll live.”

In other words, stay quiet and see everything.

Like a shadow.

I nodded and headed through the door. I'd open the envelope when I was alone to find out where and when I would report, and to who. I cared for Kristopher and Tack, but this chapter had closed. I had no choice but to move forward and leave them. We were at war with four other clans and had

a faction of humans resisting all vampire kind. With this kind of life, nothing is secure.

I had a new team to join.

CHAPTER FIVE

Being the oldest, strongest Shaye vampire alive meant Duradel had command, and the rest of us had to follow. He led with reckless abandon as if he had no real direction for our part in the war. His penchant for constantly moving his base of operations provided those of us on the outside of his inner circle with his mindset. Duradel cared for only himself. Cowardice ran through his body like poison and spread to the rest of the clan, but no one dared to oppose him. No single Shaye vampire alive would be able to defeat him in single combat. Rumors circulated of a growing number of discontented Shaye, but, no one would admit to wanting to end Duradel as a leader.

Duradel moved the capital from city to city with such randomness and at any given moment, it would be damn near impossible for anyone to make an attempt at organizing a coup. It seemed he would shift locations whenever he got even the smallest hint of danger to himself. Whether it was true or not, it explained why he would change capitals and command centers. Command's location was Dobgar, which made it the current capital of Shaye.

I arrived in Dobgar and headed straight for my assignment. Known for its lumber and forestry and having exotic spices, many of us favored the city because those spices would help flavor the food we'd consume whenever we weren't drinking blood. I trained in Dobgar when I first joined the elite. Surrounded by rammed-earth walls, it had the distinct military advantage of being able to muster a number of vampires in case of attack.

I cocked my head to the side as I took in the view of the city. *Say what you want*, I thought. *Duradel is no fool. He chooses his places wisely. It's a shame we're always the ones on defense*, I sighed.

I proceeded through the city till I came to a group of Shaye vampires who trained in a general store located on a well-lit avenue with guard towers. Fallen leaves, and an ominous quiet, covered the empty street outside. The general store was a log and large single-story building, with a brown tile roof and a small enclosed deck. It was once a barracks, so it was perfect for training. Once inside, a collection of arms and armor greeted me. A crossbow sat on the counter and the walls were covered in paintings and faded advertisements. Leaning against the counter were two vampires, one female who looked up when I came in, and one chiseled male with his back to me. He appeared to be entranced by a set of papers spread out on the counter in front of him.

The female jutted her chin in my direction. "You Zenobia?"

"Yes," I answered as she eyed me. "You can call me Zee. Is this where I report?"

"Reveal your mark," she barked. "Or die where you stand."

I tensed my jaw and exhaled. "Okay," I stated with a hint of sarcasm.

If a vampire claimed Shaye as their clan, they would have the tattoo of a lion somewhere on their body. Mine was tattooed on my left shoulder right above my breast. She gave me the once over and then turned around and pulled her hair up to reveal her mark lion at the base of her neck.

Satisfied, the female faced me and spoke again. "I'm Ilanis Nailo. This is Xavier Lockhart. Let me see your papers."

My eyes narrowed, but I pressed my lips together into a slash to prevent anything stupid from coming out. We're losing the war and more and more vampires deserted our forces by the day, so my mind understood the redundancy. It was better to be safe than sorry. Annoyance still showed in my body.

I reached into the travel bag I carried on my shoulder and handed her the envelope I received from Command. She had

almond-shaped gray eyes, thick, wavy, gray hair worn in a style like an animal's ears, and an hourglass build. Her blue uncomplicated and businesslike outfit set off the fairness of her skin.

Ilanis studied me as I moved before she snagged the documents. She kept a close watch on me as she thumbed through the papers on the inside of the envelope until one piqued her interest. After a moment of study, Ilanis shoved the papers back into the envelope and handed it back to me.

“You’ve been ordered to join our Fang Ranger team because we had an opening,” Ilanis continued. “We’re November squad.”

“Why? Was July too hot?” I joked.

Her eyes flattened, and there was an audible sigh from the man by the counter.

I coughed. “Sorry. Please continue.”

“You don’t need to know how or why a space opened up for you,” Ilanis growled. “Just know that it did. And let me give you some advice. You’re a youngling, and as that little joke you told shows, you don’t know your blade from your ass. I don’t trust you, but if you can learn to keep your mouth shut and do as your told, then in time, perhaps, I’ll trust you a little.”

Great. I went from Kristopher to this asshole.

Ilanis looked me from my head to my feet, then back to my eyes. “Probably a long time before that happens though, so don’t hold your breath.”

Okay, enough is enough.

“Who’s lead?” I asked.

Ilanis had done all the talking since I’d entered, she’d yet to answer my questions. As much as I hated it since we were not getting off on the right foot, I assumed she led as Kristopher

had been on my previous team. She carried herself like an unavoidable bloodhound.

Ilanis tilted her head. “Shit, did you actually *read* the papers Command gave you, Youngling? He is.”

Oh great. He hasn't looked at me once.

My shoulders sank and I sucked in a breath. Ilanis disappeared through a doorway which led to a darkened hall, and an envelope of silence fell over us, as he continued to pour over the papers on the counter. I took my right middle finger and scratched at my scalp as I waited for this dude to say something. When he didn't, I decided to clear my throat.

“Ahem,” I coughed.

He didn't flinch. He simply held up his left hand behind him with his index finger pointed toward the ceiling.

These two really know how to make a girl feel welcome.

I pursed my lips and blew a strong stream of air at my forehead, as I wondered if there was a way I could convince Command to reassign me. This man already annoyed me, and Ilanis cornered the market on being an asshole. I could tell this would be a completely different team dynamic than I had with Kris and Tack. Kris worked hard to include us in anything, so we had unmatched team chemistry. I began to fidget with my hands as I thought about how this team would function. Here, Ilanis apparently ran the show while Xavier read papers all day. I bit my lip and squeezed my eyes tight.

“Open your eyes, Youngling,” Ilanis said as she emerged from the hallway.

How the fuck didn't I hear her coming?

“We're going outside,” she continued.

“But—“ I started, and stared at Xavier's back.

“Outside!” Ilanis demanded.

I tightened my fists but did as I was told and pushed back through the doors of the general store. The cool night air brushed my cheek as I stepped onto the rough pavement of the empty street.

“Alright, Youngling,” Ilanis called from over my shoulder. “Let’s see what you got.”

I spun around to see her close behind me. We were practically nose-to-nose.

“What’s your problem?” I asked with a frown.

“No problem, Youngling. I just don’t like you.”

“You don’t even know me.”

“Exactly *why* I don’t like you.”

My eyes tightened.

“Xavier and I have been hunting deserters, and I want to know where you stand.”

“What?” I scoffed. “You’re crazy. I’m Shaye.”

“You have the mark of our clan, but are you Shaye? You didn’t read your paperwork. You were supposed to report to Command within twenty-four hours. It took you almost forty-eight. What? Have a change of plans? Thought about going rogue? Bailing on your clan to go join somewhere else? What changed your mind, Youngling? Or maybe you’re not Shaye after all. Maybe you’re a spy from Disaris. You do have the look.”

“I don’t believe this. I didn’t have a change of plans, and I’m not from the Disaris clan. I’m here to help you bring down deserters. I’m Shaye, and I didn’t even know about the new twenty-four-hour time limit.”

“Bullshit. Everyone knew that changed. You’re lying to me.”

“And you’re full of shit.”

Ilanis pushed me with both of her hands so hard, I almost fell to the ground. I kept my balance, but definitely moved back more than a few feet from the strength of her shove.

I shook my head. “Don’t do that.”

For the first time, Ilanis bared her fangs. “Or what?”

She’s enjoying this.

“How old are you?” I asked. “Whatever it is, aren’t you past juvenile bullying tactics?”

“I’m not bullying you,” Ilanis corrected. “I’m about to kill you, so I was giving you space. Doesn’t your Wildfire ability rely on you needing distance to shoot your flame?”

My eyes narrowed.

“Oh, what? You didn’t think I knew about your ability. First lesson, Youngling, know the mission. Always read the details. I read your file. I know what you can do. Now, I want to see it for myself.”

“You don’t want that.”

“Oh, but I do. I *really* do. Now, fight on your feet, or die where you stand.”

CHAPTER SIX

The intensity of the training here at Dobgar prepared me for the real world. A virus caused vampirism. Everyone knew it since the world remained unchanged for the last five hundred years or so. Well, unchanged for those infected by the virus. Humans lived with the fallout of the war and treated as nothing more than cattle, while those of us infected received the benefits.

Speed, strength, and agility were all enhanced by the virus, but another thing known throughout the world was the virus mutations granted extra abilities. The training I received in Dobgar taught me to understand the true danger of the world. Vampires were elite killing machines, hence the reason why being turned into one garnered the phrase “joining the elite.” But the extra abilities made it so much worse. In battle, there would be only a fraction of a second to determine the strengths and weaknesses of my opponent. Failure in assessing the situation would ensure death.

Ilanis called me a “youngling,” so age and experience belonged to her. Youngling was a term reserved for new vampires under the age of fifty. She referred to *me* as a youngling, so she was the elder. She knew of my Wildfire ability, so there existed a huge knowledge gap between us. She’d prepared for this since the moment I walked through the door, and I was unaware. I had no idea what ability she possessed if any. She had the advantage of anonymity. The only thing I could lean into would be younglings were faster than older vampires. Speed versus knowledge. I had to be quick on my feet to survive.

Maybe there’s still a way out.

“I don’t want to fight you,” I explained as I backed away. She’d given me space to use Wildfire, but it would be my last resort.

“Too bad,” she seethed and drew her sword. “You might have made me break a sweat.”

“I’m serious. We’re both Shaye, you *saw* my mark. We’re losing clan members left and right in the war, and then we have to end our own if they desert. Our numbers are growing thin as it is. We shouldn’t add to the problem by doing this.”

Ilanis advanced towards me, the tip of her sword dragging menacingly in the dirt beside her as she moved. “Or maybe, your *mark* was forged and I’m fixing the problem by eliminating an assassin sent here to send Duradel to his final death.”

“I’m not a spy! If I was, would you have been able to figure it out so easily?”

“I never said you were a very good spy. Even morons can be dangerous given the proper circumstances.”

“And what about Duradel? He’s much too strong and too paranoid to be assassinated by someone like me.”

“Someone like you?” She chuckled. “Someone who happened to show up to the very capital where he’d be, much later than you were supposed to? Perhaps you ambushed the real Zenobia on the way here and assumed her identity?”

“You’re as paranoid as he is.”

“And that’s why I’m alive. And you’re dead.”

Ilanis lunged at me with an upward strike. I drew Assurance from its sheath and parried in time to deflect her blow, but the strength of her strike knocked my hands wide and exposed my chest. She brought her sword back in a downward strike designed to end my life. I leaned back enough to avoid a killing blow, but her blade tore through my clothing and sliced my skin deep. I dropped to my knees, and she stepped forward and aimed the tip of her blade, impaling it through my chest.

“Useless,” she spat.

Blood seeped from my wound and sweat dripped down my forehead. It was a dull pain, numbed by the adrenaline pumping through my veins.

“Dammit, Ilanis,” I heard a voice say. It was familiar, but I couldn’t quite place its owner. “I need a human over here! She needs to feed.”

I looked down and stared at the hilt of her sword as it protruded from my chest. My heart raced and drove more blood through the opening beneath and around the remaining exposed metal of the blade. My eyes clamped shut as my body shook.

“I don’t,” I gasped. “I don’t feed from humans. My sister...”

“Don’t be stupid,” the voice chastised. “You don’t feed, you die.”

“Oh, I missed her heart on purpose, Xavier,” I heard Ilanis declare.

Xavier.

“That was reckless,” he answered.

His voice rolled around in my head like the gentleness of the ocean waves on a calm night.

“*That* was necessary,” Ilanis countered. “She talks too much, and *if* she’s to ride with us, we can’t have her weak. She didn’t even use her Wildfire.”

My entire body screamed at me to stop what I was doing, stop and find relief from this hellish feeling. I tried as best I could to block out the pain, to find some form of meditative trance in order to cope with the agonizing sensations, but I was tired. Tired both because of the pain and tired of having to deal with the pain. I longed for a bed, a hot bath, or a fluffy pillow to lie on, but right now, none of that was an option.

Then I remembered.

“She may not have mastered it yet,” Xavier continued. “You know it takes great restraint and control.”

“Or, maybe she’s not like you.”

“No. I think she’s better.”

“Blood bag,” I whimpered through the darkness of my closed eyelids.

I didn’t have a choice in the matter. I abhorred feeding from a live human. Every time I did, I could only envision my sister Sarah. I wanted to protect Sarah’s humanity for as long as she could have it. My worst nightmare would be for her to be the one fed on by some heinous vampire who had no limits. Sinking their teeth into her flesh, or tearing into her body. Abusing her with little regard for who she was as a person in life. This is why I refused.

Most vampires preferred to feed from a human, regardless of their clan affiliation.

Most vampires.

Not me.

I always had a second option.

“In my bag,” I moaned. “I have a blood bag. I can drink the blood from there.”

A strong hand came and rested on my shoulder. “You need a live human to feed from to trigger your healing,” Xavier’s voice responded from above me. “A blood bag isn’t enough.”

I opened my eyes and met the gaze of a familiar face. Through the haze closing in on me, memories of a specific night flooded my mind, and a smile formed on my lips. As I sank into the darkness, the image of Xavier, his eyes widened and his hand waving frantically to someone beyond my vision, somehow comforted me. If I were to die, at least it would be in the arms of the man who showed me how to live, if not but a moment.

“Open your mouth for me, Gorgeous,” he whispered.

The man who was already used to getting me to do things I wouldn't normally do, stood over me as he'd done before. And as I did on that night, I complied without hesitation.

I must be losing my mind as I'm losing my life.

I did as commanded and he gripped my chin. He squeezed firmly and my fangs descended. A warm body pressed into my mouth and my fangs pierced the skin, sending a cascade of sweet, sticky nectar into my mouth.

“I was beginning to wonder if she even *had* fangs,” Ilanis taunted.

“Stop it, Ilanis. Drink, Zenobia,” Xavier directed and placed his hand on my forehead. It was warm to the touch. “Because this is going to hurt.”

“She's weak, Xavier. You know it, and I know it. Now, you charged me to assess her, and I did. She's not ready.”

With that, he snatched the blade out of my chest. It was difficult to focus between the moments of pain and the voice telling me to stop what I was doing, but I pressed onward. The cold metal seared and burned as it went, so I pulled from the human flesh until it fell dull and distant. Was it the screams of the human echoing in my ear, or my own?

“Sleep now,” Xavier soothed. “We'll speak again tomorrow.”

My own blood drenched the ground beneath me, but all I wanted to do was sleep. I figured if it was going to be the last nap I take, it would be the best. The irony of my being light-headed but my head was too heavy to lift.

Ilanis spoke again, her voice full of contempt. “If you're going to coddle her, she won't last long.”

Xavier squeezed my shoulder. “Were you any different?”

“You know I was.”

“She’s here now, Ilanis. We need to get her ready, not kill her.”

“If she dies,” Ilanis scoffed. “She wasn’t ready.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Hello, from the other side.”

I rolled over and there was Xavier, smiling like a cat pleased with himself over the dead mouse he’d presented to his master. Rubbing my eyes with the back of my right hand and blinking a few times till they cleared revealed my location. Somehow, I found myself inside an average-sized room with matching wooden and metal furniture done in the colors of a tropical forest.

Xavier sat on a metal chair by the door, his back to the exit, with both hands resting on his muscular thighs.

“That’s not funny,” I groaned, my body wracked with soreness. “How long was I out?”

“Couple of weeks,” he stated flatly.

“A couple of weeks?!”

“You took a pretty good shot.”

The mental image of her sword’s hilt protruding from my chest caused a shutter to run through me.

“But that doesn’t make sense. I drank from...you *forced* me to drink from a live human. My healing should have accelerated.”

“Yes, it was the damnedest thing. I made a vampire drink from a live human to save their life. You’re welcome by the way.”

“Whatever,” I scoffed and sucked in some air through my teeth.

“Still. You should have healed quicker than you did. It was like your wounds wouldn’t close.”

“Wounds from that asshole Ilanis.”

“We’re *all* assholes, Zenobia,” Xavier corrected in the same flat tone.

“*You’re* an asshole, sure. You let her almost kill me. Why did you do that? Why didn’t you try to stop her?”

“Zee— “

“Zenobia,” I declared. “Only people I care about can call me Zee.”

“Fine,” he said and waved his hand. “Whatever you like.”

“Why did you let her do that? Why did you let her try to kill me?”

Xavier held one hand up and showed his palm. “*Zenobia*, take a breath. Ilanis is a highly skilled warrior. If she wanted to kill you, we wouldn’t be here speaking to one another.”

“Then why did she gut me?”

“She was testing you.”

“And?”

“You failed.”

My head tipped back till I collapsed back onto the bed and looked skyward. A dull white coated the ceiling and agreed with the emotions roiling within me.

I blew out a breath and groaned. “Of course, I did.”

I wanted to fall through the bed, through the floor, and into the hot, molten core of the planet to burn in a sea of pain and misery forever.

“Get up. We need to get going.”

Wait. What?

I raised myself onto my left elbow and stared at him. His face was as matter-of-fact as it was a moment ago when he said I’d been unconscious for two days. “You just said I failed.”

“So?”

“So, why would you want to take me anywhere?”

The corner of his lip curled up. “Because you were taught a very painful lesson. I trust it’s not a mistake you’ll repeat?”

“No. I won’t.”

“Good. Then get up, and get dressed. We need to get going.”

Xavier rose to his feet and tossed me some clothes. They landed with a soft thud on my shins. He wanted me to get dressed, but the last time we spoke, we were taking off clothes, not putting them on. I had to address the elephant in the room.

“I thought I’d never see you again.”

“Yeah, well, life’s funny that way.”

Okay. Not quite the response I was expecting.

“Life. I keep hearing that.”

“Get dressed, Zenobia. We’re going on a hunt.”

I was in a white t-shirt and matching panties which left little to the imagination and made me wonder which was worse—the fact I didn’t catch him staring at my breasts or the fact I was a little angry I didn’t catch him staring at my breasts. I thought back to the last time we were alone in a room together and couldn’t remember if he’d given my ladies the proper attention they were due.

Maybe he’s not a breast man?

I peeked over my shoulder, looked at my ass, and gave it a shrug. As if this couldn’t be any worse. My first day on the job with my new team, I get beaten within an inch of my life, am forced to break my vow to not drink from a live human, miss days of action, and report to a man who watched it all unfurl and did nothing to stop it. All while I’m wondering if he’s a breast man or not.

Placing my palm to my forehead, I shook my head and sighed. I resigned myself to the fact that this man obviously had no intention of revisiting that night so, why should I? Xavier left out of the room and shut the door behind him with a soft click. Dressing and cursing myself for acting like the youngling they insisted on reminding me I was, a few minutes later found myself on the outside of the door, basking in the moonlight.

“Glad you finally decided to join us,” Xavier said. He’d waited for me. I guess he felt I needed a babysitter.

Maybe I did.

“Sorry.” I dropped my eyes to the floor and crossed my arms to hold my shoulders. A sudden chill swirled around my body, but not from the night air.

“I don’t need you to be sorry. I need you to be better.”

This wasn’t going the way it should’ve. I seemed to be playing catch-up and every time I did, they moved the finish line. A mix of emotions swirled in my stomach as he spoke, respectfully but authoritative mixed with disappointment.

One of the emotions crashing into the inside walls of my stomach bubbled to the surface. The words came out but under my breath. “Why are you all such assholes?!”

“You’re young,” Xavier remarked. “You’ll get there in time. It comes with age.”

Shit. He heard me? Fine then. I’m not about to be spoken to, or look down on like some lonely grade school student on their first day of school.

“No, no it doesn’t,” I responded. “My last team had old vampires on it and they were anything but— “

Xavier’s voice boomed. “This isn’t your last team! And you’d do well enough to remember that. I don’t plan on dying in a hallway.”

My eyes narrowed to slits and heat rushed to my neck.
“Fuck you.”

“Come with me.”

Xavier marched with purpose down the left side of the corridor with me in pursuit until we reached the last door at the end of the hall. He threw open the door which emptied out into a wide cafeteria. Long blue metallic lunch tables aligned themselves with each other in parallel lines and filled the room like stripes on a zebra. Incandescent lighting sprayed the area with illumination and flickered like a heartbeat. The serving area contained silver, metallic bins with handles sticking out. The smell of blood filled the air.

My forehead scrunched as I surveyed my surroundings.
“We’re in a school?”

Son of a bitch! They really are treating me like I’m some young kid.

“No,” Xavier responded and headed towards the middle aisle. “This *was* a school. Past tense. Now it’s a base to operate from.”

Oh. Dammit, why’s everything so confusing with him?

Seated in the center of the room, Ilanis glanced up at me with a scowl on her face as we approached. There were three manilla folders on the table, one in front of her, and the other two on the opposite side. Xavier took the seat slightly off-center from Ilanis and gestured with a wave of his hand for me to sit beside him and directly opposite of her. He grabbed his folder, opened it, and cleared his throat.

“You’ll find our next assignment inside,” he informed us.

I opened the folder and inside were two different sets of documents.

“You’ll also find information on another team member we’re set to take on,” Xavier continued.

“You know I’m pissed, right?” Ilanis growled.

“Who’s surprised?” I muttered under my breath.

Ilanis shot me a look full of venom.

Shit. How do they keep hearing me?

“We’ve always been a team of three,” she continued while glaring at me. “Now, we move to four? It’s not right, especially when our current makeup is less than desirable. Zenobia over here, couldn’t beat a cold, let alone another vampire. Why are we being forced to take on *another* one?”

My jaw tightened and my lips pressed together.

Ilanis tilted her head. “What? You have a problem with something I said?”

I lifted my chin.

“Didn’t think so,” she said with a smirk.

“Because Command said it,” Xavier interjected, drawing our attention to him. “They send it, we follow it. Do *you* have a problem with something I said?”

The smirk on her face disappeared. One formed on mine instead.

“Alright then,” Xavier settled. “The only thing left to do is decide which order we want to do it in. Do we go after the rogue, or pick up our new team member?”

Both sets of eyes went to me and I became very aware of how lonely the cafeteria actually was.

“What? Why are you both staring at me?” I asked.

“Because we’re letting you choose,” Xavier answered.

I shrugged. “Why? You both have reminded me many times of how young I am since I got here. Why rely on the least experienced person to decide?”

“You failed my test,” Ilanis stated.

“I know.”

“Don’t make it worse.”

“Your choice, Zenobia,” Xavier said.

“Fine,” I sighed. “Give me a second.”

I started to thumb through the pages in the folder, only half seeing the information held within. We could go after the rogue, but having another person upped our chances of success and lowered the risk for us all. But, if we rendezvous with the team member, the rogue’s chances of slipping through our fingers are greatly increased.

Ilanis sighed loudly. “We only have time for one, Youngling. Make up your mind and do it quick.”

“Zenobia, we’re putting our success in your hands,” Xavier chimed in.

Ilanis chuckled. “Exactly, if you consider success as breathing. Best make the right choice, ‘cause if you choose wrong and the rogue gets away, we’re all dead.”

Great. No pressure at all.

Fuckers.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“Sure hope you chose right, Youngling,” Ilanis whispered as we walked.

The wooded area surrounding the city of Moft to the south of Dobgar was huge, compact, and blooming. Its canopy was monopolized by oak, Lawrence trees, and walnut, which permitted ample, shimmering lights to descend for a motley of saplings to monopolize the crunchy layer of leaves below. Curving creepers embraced most trees, and a mishmash of flowers, which grew all over the place, added colorful, scented elements to the otherwise beige lower level.

A tumult of noises, predominantly those of prowling animals, added life to the forest and death to vampires, as animal blood had brought even the strongest one of us to their knees. The symphony of sounds almost completely muffled the occasional fluttering of birds of prey as they glided in the air.

“If you want to disappear,” Xavier said. “A forest full of animals is one way to do it.”

As a species, we vampires tended to avoid animals as much as possible. Animal attacks were one way the humans could protect themselves from us as they could sense our presence faster than a human could, and also poison us if animal blood somehow got into our bodies. For a vampire, there was no known cure for animal blood poisoning, and it was considered cowardly for a vampire to use it against another vampire. Even as the four clans warred with one another, there were a few rules which we all observed—no Interclan or interspecies relationships which may result in hybrid offspring, and if you wanted to kill someone, do it through combat. Only a weak person would utilize poison to accomplish their goals, and strength ruled most aspects of vampire life.

The team didn't have to enter Moft, as the intelligence report indicated our prize held fast along the perimeter. The density of the forest floor prevented us from driving through, so most of the trip had been spent on foot. Command's mission parameters gave us seventy-two hours to bring the rogue in, and the trip itself cost us two. Coupled with the briefing, preparation time, and rest, we were at about sixty hours remaining.

"Ouch! I fucking *hate* Lawrence," Ilanis spat.

The Lawrence tree's thorns were well known and extremely annoying to anyone unlucky enough to come across them. I resisted the urge to chuckle at her displeasure, no matter how much she deserved it.

"You probably think I deserve that, don't you, Youngling?" Ilanis quizzed.

I didn't miss a beat. "Whatever are you talking about? I'm focused on the mission, not you."

"Uh-huh," she grunted.

"Quiet," Xavier commanded.

We were in Shaye territory, as Fang Rangers never crossed the borders to pursue deserters. Command deemed it to be too risky to lose a deserter and then lose two or more clan members to the enemy in pursuit. Still, even as we traveled, aware of our wooded surroundings, we moved cautiously. Pockets of humans who didn't support vampirism existed throughout the land, and most would defend themselves if caught. These humans either couldn't travel to human resistance territory or didn't want to travel and were considered a risk. If a vampire horde discovered a human outpost, it would be open season. The vampires would attack and feed, with a high conversion rate. For the humans, it was kill or be killed, even more so than those we battled from the resistance. This meant any humans discovered in Shaye

territory who were not familiars or sympathetic to the elite were considered as deadly as cornered animals.

We came to a clearing full of Queen's Lace in full blossom and I paused to soak in the scenery. The softness of the field as the plants wrapped the opening in lace made me squeeze my legs together. The animal sounds too had receded into the background of the night and left this field full of tranquility.

Xavier's deep voice penetrated my thoughts. "He's on the other side."

I nodded and reached my hand into my pocket. Cool to the touch, my lighter remained at the ready. With Assurance on my hip, Xavier gave us the signal to advance. He stayed to my left and Ilanis to my right. We crouched low and the three of us began the stealthy journey to the other side of the clearing. Ahead with his back leaning against a tree, was the purpose of our trip. Even partly covered by shadows, I could see he was an imposing figure. He pulled a drag from a cigarette in his lips and blew out a puff.

"Oi," he called in our direction with an accent which held my breath. "You three are the worst sneaks I've ever seen in my two hundred years."

Xavier sighed and brought himself up to his full height and out of the cover of the Queen's Lace. When Ilanis did the same, I reciprocated and the three of us walked the rest of the way to the other side.

"I see why Command assigned me to you," the man by the tree said. "You need some serious help. It's a wonder any of you are still alive with as much noise as you make traipsing around the forest like a bunch of undisciplined bears."

Xavier extended his hand and the two grasped each other by the forearms in greeting.

"Grim," Xavier said with a smile. "Bears? You're on to talk. You look every *bit* your two hundred years."

“Oi, fuck you,” Grim joshed and gave Xavier a shove on his shoulder. “I seem to remember you having a great deal to do with the way I look.”

“Hey man, listen,” Xavier said and patted Grim on his shoulder. “Two wrongs don’t make a right, just look at your parents.”

Grim laughed a booming belly laugh. “Oi, fuck *you!*”

Grim wore dark clothing and a heavy breastplate, which kept many of his physical features obscured, but power emanated from his frame. His attire stood in sharp contrast to his sword, which was beautifully polished and possessed an ornate carving of a butterfly on it. His dark hair was knotted and matted and sat on top of a feral face with sharp distinguishing features. His spectacle-hidden eyes were the color of the night sky, and a large scar ran across his neck. A reminder of some past battle no doubt.

I alternated between the two and relaxed my muscles. “I guess you two know each other?”

“You bet your sweet little ass we do,” Grim answered and eyed me up and down. He flashed a smile in my direction. “Damn. Aren’t you beautiful?”

A tingle swept up the back of my neck and across my face.

Xavier stepped forward and in front of me, shielding me partially and breaking the strong eye contact from Grim. “We know each other a little,” Xavier answered, his voice deeper than it’d been a second ago.

Grim’s smile remained as he stepped sideways to see me fully. “We joined the elite together. He showed up out of nowhere, and I was a familiar who’d been turned. Best cunt I ever had, the vamp who turned me. Best by far. I’m *still* trying to find that high. I still don’t know who joined Boss vamp here to elite vampire status. How come you’ve never told me? Were you a familiar like me? Was a vampire attack ravaging your

home and leaving you for dead? He never tells. It kind of makes me wonder about you.”

“I don’t lose much sleep over it,” Xavier quipped.

“Well, you don’t lose much sleep over anything, if memory serves me correctly,” Grim ribbed. “Ole cool man X.”

“Cool man X?” I echoed.

“Oh yeah,” Grim answered with a mischievous smile. “This man here? If I’m oil, then he’s the water. Nothing rattles him, no sir. Cool and steady as a bubbling brook. Why I remember a time when I saw— “

“Another time, Grim,” Xavier interrupted.

Xavier looked at me as he spoke and my chest tightened.

Grim nodded. “Oi. Some other time, little lady. Maybe over dinner? I know where we can find a couple of human holdouts right over by the— “

“Grim,” Xavier jumped in.

“Right,” Grim said with a sigh. “Don’t worry Sweetheart. Maybe I’ll get to show you why I’m called *Grim* another time.”

A cold chill went up my back making me shudder.

“So, let’s get to it then,” Grim continued. “You three are supposed to be chasing a deserter. Why are you wasting time connecting with me? You know what happens if you don’t get this guy in the time allotted.”

“You know the mission?” I asked.

“Oi, I got the folder, as you three did. I studied up.”

Ilanis looked at me with a smirk on her face. “Ask the youngling here. It was her decision to rendezvous with you first.”

“Was it now?” Grim asked and rubbed his chin with his right hand. “Tell me something, Sweetheart. Why’d you make

that call?”

All three pairs of eyes were on me, and the air around me grew thick. I swallowed hard and made myself stand taller.

“I joined this team a few weeks ago, and we’ve already been given the assignment to catch a rogue. We’re not used to working together, haven’t trained together, or hunted together. We don’t know each other’s strengths or weaknesses on the battlefield where a moment of hesitation can be your last. I’ve seen it...experienced it. It’s not something to be taken lightly.”

“But you *know* who your lead is?” Grim said more as a statement than a question. “And you know how to follow orders, correct? So, why not trust the system, trust your training and go after the threat?”

“I do trust the system, and I do trust my training. And I follow orders. But there’s something to be said about chemistry. We’re unfamiliar with each other. I thought our best chance for success was in a numbers advantage. So, given the option of going in as is, or adding another Fang, I chose strength in numbers.”

“You mean, you’re unfamiliar with them. Xavier and Ilanis have been working together. You don’t know if you can trust *them* with *your* life yet.”

Grim crossed his hands and rested them on the hilt of his sword at his waist. He lifted his chin slightly and studied Xavier. “And you agreed with this call, brother?”

“We’re standing here, aren’t we?” Ilanis said.

“Huh. I take it you disagree?” Grim inquired of Ilanis.

Ilanis focused her attention on me as she spoke. “Where Xavier goes, I go. Simple as that. He’s the extension of Command. They tell him and he tells us. He leads, *we* follow. Nothing else needs to be discussed.”

Grim nodded and chuckled. “Well said, Doll face. Well said.

Ilanis raised an eyebrow. “Did you just call me what I thought I heard you call me?”

Grim shrugged. “I have an affection for ancient human vernacular. What can I say?”

Xavier and Ilanis stared at him with partly opened lips.

“Oi, fuck *you*. I’m not stupid. I have a vocabulary. Anyway, what now, Boss vamp?”

“Now,” Xavier answered. “We head north. We have less than sixty hours to bring down this deserter.”

“Let’s hunt,” Grim declared with a huge smile.

CHAPTER NINE

Grim led us back across the clearing and into the forest. “Oi, what is that smell?”

I lifted my chin and breathed deep. The warm, earthy scent of the woods wafted through my nostrils and gifted me with a reassuring feeling, but nothing else. “I don’t smell anything out of the ordinary.”

Grim sniffed again and his face scrunched up. “No, no. I’ve smelled this before. It’s rancid. Putrid.”

“What are you smelling?” Ilanis asked.

The three of us stopped and started to inspect the air with our noses. Xavier stopped and cocked his head to the side, his hands resting on the sword at his hip, his lips in a straight line.

“Oi, I know what it is,” Grim remarked after a few moments of us sniffing and searching the area.

“What?” I asked.

“That horrible smell is Xavier’s cologne,” Grim joked and followed with a deep laugh.

Xavier didn’t miss a beat. “It’s a poor attempt to be like you, my friend. You’re all man, I just wanted to try to measure up. Though, you’re not half the man your mother is.”

My hands covered my mouth to hold the laughter. I squeezed my eyes shut and my cheeks ached from the strain.

“Oi, that’s not funny.”

“Then, stop wasting time and let’s get going,” Xavier responded with the authority of a commander.

Ilanis and I looked at Grim whose face turned a deep purple. He pivoted on his heels and we resumed our journey through the woods and back to our travel vehicle.

Grim led, with Ilanis following as a close second. I trailed her and Xavier brought up the rear. We traveled in a single line under the moonlight, until I slowed my pace and fell back. Grim and Ilanis continued, but I pulled even with Xavier. The distance between the two pairs grew with every step. Grim and Ilanis could handle themselves, and we weren't far enough behind to not respond if any danger presented itself, but I needed to take this opportunity.

“Xavier...”

“Zenobia,” he answered. His eyes remained set straight ahead even as I walked beside him.

“Listen, I want to apologize. I shouldn't have attacked you like that earlier. You didn't deserve it. Please call me Zee.”

“No,” he said with a shake. “It's best to keep it at Zenobia.”

“Why?”

Xavier sucked in a deep breath and released it slow and strong. “Because I'm lead. If this team falls apart, that's on me.”

I raised an eyebrow. “What does that have to do with calling me, Zee?”

Xavier slowed his steps. I matched and watched as Grim and Ilanis disappeared up the path ahead of us. “We had a moment, Zee...Zenobia. A very *intense* moment.”

“Yes.”

“If I call you Zee, it'll soften me towards you, and remind me of what we shared.”

My head flinched back slightly. “So?”

“So that could lead to me making the wrong decision in the heat of battle. I'm lead, Zenobia. I can't afford to be distracted.”

“So, I'm a distraction?”

“You are more than a distraction. You’re a weakness.”

“Fuck you, Xavier.” I glared at him and stormed up the path. I only got a few steps ahead before a strong hand grabbed my arm from behind and held me in place.

“No, that’s not what I mean,” Xavier sighed.

I looked at his hand on my arm and he released his grip.

“See?” He asked and we continued walking together. “Even now the words aren’t coming to me in the right way. Imagine for a moment what could happen if our lives were in the balance.”

“I trust you,” I told him, unsure why the words fell from my mouth.

“Thanks, but I have to stay clear-headed. I have to remind myself you are a soldier under my watch, and I have to fight the desire to fuck the shit out of you at any opportunity.”

“Oh.”

The way he laid it out there, made me bite my lip.

“I can’t do it,” he continued. “If I’m constantly desiring your body then I’m not thinking with my head.”

“Yeah, you are.”

“Wrong head. I need to think with the one up here, not the one down there. Can you understand that?”

“I think so,” I answered, fighting back a whimper.

“You’re not weak, Zenobia. You’re just untrained.”

“I went through training, and I’ve seen combat. Fuck you.”

“Are you still fingering your lighter?”

I cleared my throat. “You know about that?”

“I do. Because I used to do it too.”

“You’re a Wildfire?” I gasped.

“You didn’t know?”

“I had a feeling. When we...”

“Fucked.”

“Yes. When we fucked, the heat between us was more than I could bear. I thought it was just passion.”

“It was.”

“Then why?”

Xavier paused in his tracks and I did the same. He squared his shoulders to mine, and I looked up into his eyes. The glint of the moon’s light allowed me to see into his very soul.

“We’re drawn to each other, Zenobia,” he professed. “Fire seeks out fire so it can spread.”

I couldn’t move. His words, his voice, and his stature all captured me. I was a prisoner of this man. “I...I don’t know why I feel like this with you.”

“I craved you that night, Zenobia. Like I’m craving you right now. It’s taking every ounce of strength within me not to rip your clothes off and ravage you right here on the forest floor.”

“Then, why don’t you?”

Xavier released his spell on me by dropping his head. We continued our journey down the path, though his steps were small. “You know why. We have a mission, and this is exactly what I mean. My desire for you can’t trump my rationale.”

He’s as conflicted as I am.

“If I’m such a weakness, then why don’t you have me reassigned?”

The strength in his voice returned. “I told you, you’re not a weakness, Zenobia. I think you could be the strongest Wildfire I’ve ever known. And I’m going to train you.”

“I told you, I’ve already been through training. The training at Dobgar was— “

“Shit. The training at Dobgar was shit. We learn more about our abilities out here in the field than they could ever show us. When we have to hunt humans, who’re fighting for their lives. When we have to defend ourselves against not only the rival clans but our own clan members. That’s when you truly learn your limits. And that’s how Ilanis was able to beat you. She’s had to face her limits and learn from them. You haven’t.”

“And what are my limits?”

“Honestly? I don’t think you have any.”

My jaw dropped.

“But something’s holding you back.”

I shook my head. “You know all this about me from one random night in a bar and a file from Command?”

Xavier turned to me and his eyes darkened. The look on his face made my heart race.

“I know this about you because the same flame burning in your chest roars for you in mine.”

My legs trembled.

“I’ve learned to listen to it,” he continued.

“What’s it saying?” I whispered.

Xavier stepped so close I could feel his breath on my lips. “It’s telling me that you are a singular fire so bright, you could illuminate this whole forest if you wanted to.

A smirk formed on Xavier’s lips, and then he turned and resumed walking. I bit my lip and joined him.

“I’m going to clue you in on something you probably didn’t know.”

“What?” I asked, trying not to let him notice my attempts to catch my breath. I hated this game we were playing. He was so

self-assured and relaxed, in control at all times while butterflies danced around my stomach like a high school prom.

“Did you know the vampires before the Crimson Mourning had more than one ability gifted to them by the virus? Damon, Cassie, Lawrence, and Michelle all had more than one.”

I tried to bite some of the bitterness back. I didn't know whether to hate him or fuck him. “No, I didn't know.”

“Most people don't.”

“Then how do you know? Cassie hides behind that fucking pile of snow, and Lawrence and Michelle are dead from the night of the Crimson Mourning. No one's seen Damon in centuries, so how would you know?”

“I have.”

“You have what?” I gasped.

“I've seen Damon.”

My jaw dropped so low, my chin scraped the ground as we walked. “Damon. The man who was the leader of our clan and whose actions started this War of the Five hundreds of years ago.

“That Damon. It was years ago when I came across him, but it was him.”

I smacked his left shoulder with my right hand. “Get out of here! Damon's alive? No fucking way. If he's alive, why is Duradel leading us then? He's the oldest vampire, he could end this entire war in a heartbeat if he wanted to.”

“I don't know if he's *still* alive, and even if he was, I don't know if he's *that* powerful or if he's even that invested,” Xavier chuckled. “But I did ask him those same questions at the time.”

“And?”

“He told me to imagine this entire world as nothing more than a story written by a bunch of authors. If I were to read

this story and all the other ones, I wouldn't get any answers by asking him questions like that. I wouldn't know the full truth until it all played out at the end. I had to keep flipping the pages and following the stories, chapter after chapter, book after book, until I reached the conclusion. A shared world written by different authors, none of them knowing what the hell they're doing."

"That's a bullshit answer."

"Damon's a complicated guy it seems. I guess that's what you get when you've been alive for almost a millennium, and had your best friend and brother, fuck and turn your human wife, poison your father, and then try to kill you."

Xavier shrugged and continued. "Anyway, he said before everything went down with Lawrence, his best friend, and his betrayer, he possessed more than one ability. They all did. All the vampires back then had at least two abilities. His father had even more than that. But the virus is degrading and reducing the number of mutations."

"Which means what, exactly?"

"I don't know. Maybe after all these centuries, vampire bodies are finally catching up and our old immune systems are fighting the virus off. Maybe natural immunity is kicking in. I don't know. All I know is it appears as if vampires are more vulnerable than we think we are. Given the right set of circumstances..."

"What?"

He shook his head. "I don't know."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because Damon taught me how to truly use my Wildfire."

This man made a habit of stunning me.

"He said his father had the ability. It's part of the reason he was able to defeat the other clans and unite the vampires under

one rule and place the one council as the governing body. It's also why his family, Shaye, had special privileges granted by the council."

"Like Cassie and Damon being allowed to marry in the first place."

"Exactly. The council originally was afraid of Shaye, and after Damon lost his cool and murdered them all, you can see why. Shaye has the potential to be the strongest of all living vampires. And I'm going to show you, as he did me, how to tap into your full potential. It's the only way to truly live."

"People keep telling me that."

"Then Gorgeous, it's time you finally listened. And that's an order."

And just like that, his smile returned and so did the mix of emotions he created. If it were true what he said about our internal flames seeking out each other, how was he able to be so damn calm when I wanted nothing more than to rip his clothes off and let him tear into me? How could he teach me to reach the limits of my Wildfire if all I could focus on was his incredible mouth?

We cleared the last of the trees and stepped out onto the rocky path which led to where we left our vehicle. An abandoned silver tour bus from a bygone era, outfitted to carry Xavier's team. Grim leaned against the side of it, while Ilanis occupied the driver's seat.

"Oi," Grim called and flicked a cigarette to the ground. "What took you? What, were you back there fucking?"

Heat rushed up my neck, while Xavier rolled his eyes. He entered the open door and walked up the steps to board. I followed, but before my foot hit the first step, Grim stepped in front of me and blocked my path.

"Watch out for him, little lady," he cautioned. "Xavier's not all he seems."

“Why, Grim,” I cooed and placed my hand on my chest. “Do I detect a bit of jealousy? I do declare,” I teased with a drawl, “what would I ever do without a strong man like you watching over me?”

“Honey, I’ll watch you do *anything*.”

Grim moved behind me, and I knew his eyes were locked on my ass as I boarded the bus. Xavier had taken his seat in the middle on the left side of the bus. I walked past Ilanis, who didn’t bother to acknowledge me, and to the last seat on the right.

“All aboard, Captain!” Grim declared as he took the first seat on the right, and Ilanis shut the door. “Where to?”

“North,” Xavier answered.

“Oh yeah,” Grim crowed and rubbed his hands. “Time to go huntin’.”

CHAPTER TEN

Xavier moved to the front of the bus. “Park over there in that brush, Ilanis. We’ll take the rest of the trip on foot.”

The bus groaned to a stop after Ilanis maneuvered it off the main road. With a whoosh, the doors opened and our party of four descended and made the trek to the township of Inode.

“No walls,” Ilanis noted as we approached.

I scanned ahead and agreed. Inode’s protection didn’t include walls to surround and protect them. Under the moonlight, the area seemed even more desolate. The main street leading inside had a beggar harassing passers-by sitting beside a parked wagon. A weird smell permeated the air.

“Is that animal blood?” I asked, the goosebumps on my skin warning me against entry.

Ilanis had her hands on her sword’s hilt by her side. “If it is, it’s not any animal I’ve ever smelled.”

“Doesn’t make sense,” Xavier said with a shake of his head. “No walls? In Shaye territory? How are there humans here? They’re defenseless.”

“Nah, they ain’t defenseless,” Grim responded.

Xavier glanced sideways while he kept his head. “Something’s not right here.”

My head tilted to the side as Grim assumed the lead. He crouched low and we mirrored his positioning as we moved, silent as the night itself. As we approached the first building inside the village limits, Grim threw up a fist. We all paused at his motion. I reached into my pocket and clutched my lighter tight.

Grim stretched his hand out and extend a couple of fingers. He waved his hand in a back-and-forth motion along an

invisible line. Then he chuckled. “Tripwire. Just as I thought.”

“How so?” Xavier asked and moved up beside him, staying low and in the crouched position.

Tripwire?

Grim rose to his feet and extended his hand. Xavier clasped it and Grim brought him up to his full height. “This place reminds me of this little farmhouse I found about a week or so ago.”

Ilanis stood and I followed suit. Grim rotated his head around his shoulders and relaxed his stance.

“What are you doing?” Ilanis hissed. “Our target is in there. You’re giving away our position.”

“Doubt it,” Grim threw back and stepped over the tripwire. “This is more the work of humans than vamps.”

Xavier stepped over the line as well and squared himself. “You don’t think this is a trap for us set by the deserter? The rogue?”

“Us? No. This is their defense against the Elite. They think a few measly wires are going to prevent a vampire horde from attacking. Fucking sad. Probably have arrows or spikes lined to the wire bathed in animal blood. Easily beat. No, the target’s probably long gone by now. You all probably missed your chance when you chose to rendezvous with me instead.”

I caught sight of Ilanis glaring at me as she stepped over the line. “So, we’re fucked.”

“Pretty much,” Grim answered. With deadly accuracy, Grim sped to the inside of the village and snatched up the beggar by the throat, as I stepped over the wire. The man never had a chance. Grim’s face hardened, his fangs descended and he ripped through the soft tissue in the man’s neck. He drank like a thirsty man crawling through a desert would a cool bottle of water. By the time the rest of us arrived, he had tossed the body to the side like discarded trash and wiped his hands. A

silent, gruesome kill. Even though the man was only human, Grim's flawless execution unnerved me.

"No," I said. "No. They had to have gone somewhere. We'll track them and get them."

"Oi, listen Sweetheart. The deserter either headed to human territory to the east or jumped on one of those boats and headed out to sea. Either way, we're fucked. Not much left to do except go our separate ways and enjoy life before Command gets wind of our failure. I'm going to look around the village for a bit before I head out. Hope the fucker left something to eat before they split."

My mouth went dry at the thought. I put the team's life in danger trying to minimize the danger. My knees went weak and I knew I would collapse at any second when Xavier cleared his throat. Even as my lip trembled, I called to him. "Xavier?"

His cool demeanor remained steadfast and calm. "You're not lead on this, Grim. She is," he said and pointed to me.

Grim smirked. "So? What difference does that make? The reality is—"

"We're fucked," Ilanis shot.

"Exactly," Grim agreed. "Best to live while we still can."

Xavier shifted his balance so he faced me. "What do *you* want to do, Zenobia?"

With Xavier's eyes locked with mine, a wave of confidence washed over me and the air around me grew warm.

"It doesn't matter what she wants to do," Grim said.

"Yes, it does," I shot back.

"What?" Ilanis said through her teeth.

I squared myself to face both of them. "How many clans are there?"

Grim's eyebrow raised. "You don't know?"

"Younglings," Ilanis laughed.

The air around me grew hot. "I said, *how* many clans are there?"

Both Ilanis and Grim's eyes narrowed. Ilanis cocked her head to the side, while Grim's muscles tensed.

"Four," Ilanis answered as she wrinkled her brow.

"Name them," I ordered.

"Shaye, Corrus, Letos and Disaris," Grim answered.

"And who leads them?"

"What?"

"*Who* leads them?"

"This is ridiculous," Ilanis scoffed.

"Queen Cassie leads Corrus, Mathias leads Letos, Queen Kiara leads Disaris and Governor Duradel leads Shaye."

"And which are you?" I asked.

Ilanis tilted her head. "What?"

"I said, *which* are you?" I demanded.

"Shaye," she responded.

"Fucking right, we're Shaye," Grim added.

"No, you're not," I snapped.

Ilanis drew her sword with a quick flick of her arm. "What did you say?"

"You fucking heard me. I said you're *not* Shaye," I retaliated and drew Assurance in response. "Because if you *were* Shaye, then you'd know that if Command sent it, we follow it."

"Heh," Grim chuckled but shook his head as he did. "We know that."

I jabbed my right forefinger at both of them. “Then we’re not done. Command sent it, and Xavier put me as lead, which means I’m Command. You follow, or I’ll gut you both and feed you to whatever animals roam these roads.”

The air thickened with the silence between the three of us. My heart pushed the adrenaline pouring into my bloodstream and through my body so hard, my ears began to pound. I gripped Assurance and readied myself.

“Ha! You got spirit, Sweetheart,” Grim’s deep laugh cut the tension as his sword would human flesh. “Ok, *Command*. We’ll follow, you lead.”

I glanced at Xavier. He’d moved beside me, and stood at the ready.

When did he do that?

“What now, *Command*?” Ilanis asked, her mouth turned down.

“Spread out,” I responded, ignoring her attempt at disrespect. “If the target is still here, don’t engage without backup. If not, then try to find some clue as to where we should head next.”

Xavier took a step forward and situated himself between me and them. “And Ilanis? Don’t question her again. You either, Grim. Not while she’s lead and not while I’m here.”

Power raged through my veins like a river. With Xavier beside me, what more could she do other than listen to my commands and obey?

Bitch.

Grim nodded, turned, and headed to the right. Ilanis remained still and studied Xavier before her focus went to me. “She won’t always *be* lead, Xavier.”

“But for now, she is,” he answered. “My will put her there. Don’t forget that.”

Her lips parted slightly and her eyes tightened before Ilanis turned and moved off to the left.

Bye-bye, bitch.

“Thanks,” I exhaled when they were gone.

“For what?” Xavier asked as he pivoted and faced me.

“For having my back. Somehow, knowing you were behind me gave me strength.”

“No, you found your own strength, I didn’t give you anything.”

“But I— “

“Zenobia,” Xavier interrupted and entered my space. “I’m just the ignition. Your fire is already there. Trust yourself.”

I bit my lip and nodded.

“I’m heading that way,” he pointed behind him. “You’ve got your lighter?”

I nodded again.

“My lead told me to search, so that’s what I’m going to do. Don’t burn the place down while I’m gone.”

Xavier winked and sped off in the direction he decided to investigate, leaving me alone with my thoughts. Since all three chose directions covering the interior of the village, I decided to remain at the entrance and search.

There wasn’t much to explore. Humans sought refuge here, and for a while, had been able to either resist Shaye vampires or remain undetected. Inode’s size made the latter more probable and would explain the tripwire Grim discovered upon our entry.

Tripwire.

Thoughts rammed to the front of my mind when a scream from behind focused my attention. I spun on my heels and

unsheathed Assurance in time to see a human child run out of one of the buildings on the far right.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The wailing could be heard from the street. Inode's size didn't leave much in the way of places to hide, with its rusted rooftops, lava stone walls, and scavenger birds, Inode had a gruesome atmosphere. Where the child ran to was of little consequence as she could easily be located later. The inside of the building she came from is where my attention focused.

I sped to the building the child ran from with Assurance in my right hand, and burst through the front door. A plaster and wood framed and sprawling single-story building, with a yellow tile roof and shuttered windows, a small dragon's skull hung over the hearth, and a large bookshelf filled with books and messy tables covered in cutlery and leftover food awaited me. The small fire in the hearth bathed the room in an ethereal glow. In the corner by the hearth were three women of different generations huddled together. While one of the women covered the eyes of the youngest member, the other two stared with horrified looks at the scene in front of them.

In the center of the room, Grim had his pants down around his ankles. He fucked savagely a bent-over human female whose head had rotated around so her chin flopped on her back as he banged into her dead body from behind. A deep red pool of blood inundated the floor around them, and rivulets of blood dripped from an open gash in her neck. Blood coated his mouth and chin. Her open eyes stared into nowhere, and yet Grim continued to slam into her as if she were alive, enjoying every violent thrust of his hips.

My head jerked back from one of his collisions. "What the fuck are you doing?!"

"What? Oh, this?" He panted. "Told you I'd get to show you why I'm called *Grim*. It's my thing."

The sound of Grim's hips as they slammed into the woman's ass sickened me.

"I fuck them till they're one drop of blood away from death and then turn them, joining them to our elite vampire clan. I bring them back from the edge and then fuck them again. You of all people should know newly made vampires have to fuck within a couple of hours of turning or they die. I'm like the Grim Reaper, I get to bring them back from death while getting my rocks off twice. It's amazing orgasms."

"You dumb shit. She's dead."

"Oh," he moaned, and right in front of me, his eyes rolled back into his head and a wicked shudder coursed through him. "Fuck!" He bellowed as he orgasmed. "Damn she had some good pussy. Well, they're nothing but food for us anyway. No second life for you," he remarked and released her body. She crumpled to the floor in a disgusting heap which seemed to ramp up Grim's desire more. He looked at me with hunger in his eyes.

A look I'd seen many times.

"I'm not fucking you, Grim," I said as a bitter tang entered my mouth. "Get your creepy eyes off me."

"Hmm," he said and turned his attention to the women curled in the corner. "Okay, time for a double."

One of the women screamed. Her shrill voice pierced the eerie glow from the flames and shot through me. She was a mite stocky and well-dressed, for this tiny village, but even with her fine clothing, she looked run-down. Her long golden hair reached to her waist.

"Oi, I *love* screamers. Don't worry, I'll make it...no. I was going to say quick, but my second nut never comes quick. I can't promise it'll be painless either. I do love me some blondes."

“Do something,” the eldest woman cried out to me. “Don’t stand there and let him do this to us. Whatever you are now, you’re still a woman. Help us!”

“Oh, she’s not going to help you. She’s going to join in, and *eat* you. Aren’t you, Sweetheart?”

My skin crawled. “What makes you think I’d feed with you?”

A slow smile built on his face. “Because you need to get your strength up. We’ve got a deserter who is light-years ahead of us, and we’re going to need to be ready *if* we even find them. Or ready to run if we don’t.”

“I’ll pass.”

Grim shrugged. “Suit yourself. More for me then, but when you’re on the wrong end of another Fang Ranger’s sword, you’ll wish you’d listened to me. Come here.”

With powerful strides, Grim covered the small distance between him and his next meal. The women sobbed as Grim ripped the blonde away from the next youngest who’d she’d covered her eyes. As she squirmed in his vice-like grip, he put his hands over both of her ears, ready to twist her head with ease.

“No, wait,” I held my palm up to him.

Grim’s forehead scrunched. “What?”

“I…”

“I *know* you’re not about to stop me.”

My mind raced, searching for answers as I tried to formulate a response. Before I could, the door groaned on its hinges and opened, sending a cold wind in.

“What’s going on?” Ilanis asked as she entered. “Oh, good. You found something to eat. I thought we’d starve soon. Not all us use the blood bags.”

Grim cocked his head to the side as he kept the young woman pinned between his hands. “Blood bags might be all we get. Sweetheart here is about to stop me from feeding.”

Ilanis lifted her chin. “Is that true? You’re about to stop a vampire from enjoying a meal?”

“No. I...”

Grim’s lip curled. “I didn’t think so.”

I needed to think. Things were crashing in too quickly for me to process. Humans were at the bottom of the food chain, I knew this. But the young blonde was around the same age as my sister and seeing as how savagely Grim ravaged the poor dead girl on the floor, with the pleas for help, clouded my mind.

The door swung open again. Xavier entered with sword in hand but lowered and by his thigh. “Report,” he ordered and sheathed his weapon.

“Nothing *to* report,” Grim answered and eyed me. “I found us a nice meal. It’s dinner time.”

“Oh,” Xavier remarked and shrugged.

Ilanis sped and grabbed the eldest. “I do like them vintage,” she teased, her face hardened and fangs descended.

Xavier took a step and then cranked around back to me. “Want to split the last?”

“I’ll pass.”

It might have been the clearest thought in my mind.

Xavier tilted his head and then nodded.

“Xavier?” Ilanis called as she pulled in opposite directions on the elder woman’s head and shoulders to expose her neck. A lone tear strolled down the woman’s cheek. “Want a bite? They taste different when they’re older. Sharper. Sourer. It’s a bit of a kick.”

“I’m not hungry,” Xavier answered as he maintained eye contact with me.

Ilanis flicked her wrist and discarded the woman. She slammed into the wall and collapsed into a mass of broken flesh and bone. “That’s ridiculous. We haven’t fed in hours. We need to eat before we go hunt. *You* need to feed in case we need to rely on your...” Her mouth curled and she glared at me. “Guidance,” she finished.

“What more can you all hunt?” The blonde shrieked as she remained pinned between Grim’s hands. “What’s left? You’ve already taken so much from us,” she cried.

“We’re not hunting you,” Ilanis answered. “You’re not even smart prey. Sitting there huddled up waiting to die? You’re not a challenge. No, we’re searching for a vampire. A rogue. A deserter to our clan.”

The blonde sniffed and widened her eyes. “Wait. Wait,” she pleaded. “A lone vampire passed through here a little while ago. It’s why we were already in hiding.”

The four of us froze in our movements and became as still as statues.

“A lone vampire. How long ago?” Xavier asked, breaking the silence.

“Not long,” the blonde answered with a minimal shake due to Grim’s restraint. “If you spare us, I’ll tell you all I know.”

“Or, we could turn you,” Ilanis reminded her and pointed a finger, “and then you’d tell us anyway. Don’t forget who and what we are, *human*.”

“I’d rather die. You’ve already killed my sister. There’s nothing left for me. Not even immortality. If what I’m understanding is correct, you either feed on us and kill us or join us to your Elite vampire clan. But both of those options appear to have horrible consequences for you. Something about you all having to run? Maybe even get killed

yourselves? If you make me a vampire, I have to fuck and feed to complete my transformation, or I die within a couple of hours, right? I *promise* you, I won't do either. I'll die and leave you to fend for yourselves. Or, you can *listen* to me right now, and let us live. Then you can live too."

Live. It keeps coming back in my face.

Xavier rubbed his chin. "Hmm."

"I believe her," I said. Her words gave me the opportunity to think and see a clearer path. "Let her go."

Grim's nostrils flared. "What?!"

Xavier stepped forward. I placed my hand on his right bicep and halted his movement.

Ilanis clenched her jaw and blew out an audible groan. "Oh, now we can't even *feed*?" She stepped in front of the blonde and came close enough where their noses almost touched. "This better be worth it, *human*. Or my friend and I are going to come back here and grind you and these other stupid women's bones to dust and drink you in my tea."

Grim released his grip on the blonde, who side-stepped Ilanis and rushed over to help the eldest woman. The youngest was wild-eyed, but she and the eldest huddled behind the blonde. She straightened herself into a strong posture and stood as tall as she could in front of her predators.

"There was a young woman," the blonde began. "She couldn't have been older than her early twenties, if not in her late teens. She wandered into the village with blood on her clothes and the look of death upon her. We took her in and gave her clothes, but that was our mistake. When we asked her where her injuries were so we could try to treat them, she had none. She was a vampire in disguise. It was a good disguise too, she certainly fooled all of us. She wore a bloodied wedding dress, a wedding ring, and everything."

"Describe her," Ilanis commanded.

CHAPTER TWELVE

“Black eyes, dark, thick hair. Curvy. About as tall as that one,” the blonde said and pointed at me. “Big breasts.”

“What else?” Ilanis demanded. “That could be any woman. You’d better have more than that, honey. Your life depends on it.”

“Oi, she has more,” Grim added, his voice deep and full of lust.

“I’ll never forget this. When she was...” the blonde gagged, choking on her words and the memory.

Ilanis leaned closer. “Get it together,” she said in a menacing tone.

The blonde nodded. She trembled but regained enough of her composure to continue. “As she fed...she said, ‘this is so good, it rolls off my tongue.’ She kept saying it as she bit more and more.”

No way.

“She said she’d just gotten married when her farm was attacked by a vampire. He slaughtered her father and had his way with her before he—wait. She said *exactly* what this one said he likes to do.”

Grim’s eyes rolled back in his head and he licked his lips. “Oh, the farm! Yeah, I remember her now. Sweet cunt. Slaughtered her father like a sheep and made her new hubby watch as I fucked the shit out of her, then fucked her again. I left him alive so she could feed from him once I was done to complete her turn. Told her to report to Dobgar after we were through for training and assignment. Guess she didn’t. Damn, she felt good wrapped around my cock.”

“And now we know,” Ilanis concluded. “She never reported. That’s why she’s on Command’s radar.”

“Yeah. I sent a message like we’re supposed to whenever we join humans to our elite vampire ranks. I turned a new one, so I gave them the heads up. What was her name? Farrah? Cierra?”

My limbs tingled. “Sarah?!”

“Yeah, that was it. Sarah with the sweet cunt.”

My vision filled with red. My muscles quivered, and my heartbeat pounded in my chest. A bloodcurdling wail flew out of my mouth and I used all my might to slam into Grim. I knocked him into the wall and angled my right forearm upward, pinning him with it across his throat. “You motherfucker! That was my sister!”

I leaned in to crush his windpipe with the weight of my body when Xavier’s voice pierced through the red. “Zenobia.”

“What?” I snapped back.

“Look at the hearth.”

“Huh?” I scrunched my forehead as I looked over my shoulder. The flames inside the fireplace had quadrupled in size, threatening to explode outside of their stony containment.

Am I doing that?

“Control, Zenobia,” Xavier directed, his voice both soothing yet authoritative. He flattened both his palms and pushed down as if he was moving the air beside him and directed it to his feet. “Bring the fire down through control.”

I’d never managed flames so far from me. Shooting fire from my lighter had been the best I’d been able to do at any given moment. Never anything like this. This new experience made a tingle spread all over my body. I breathed in, shut my eyes, and realized I could feel them.

I could feel the heat of the flames.

I could hear the flickering and crackling of the fire in my mind.

I could feel each blade as it moved and pulsated.

It was life.

I exhaled slow, and using Xavier's image, I mimicked the motion he made in my mind. I imagined myself pushing the flames down. As the air left my body, I saw in my mind the flames lowering in intensity until they'd died down. I opened my eyes and the fire in the hearth had returned to its previous state. Ilanis and Grim were both wide-eyed. Xavier tried to hide it, and I don't think anyone else would have noticed it, but he held a slight smirk on his lips.

I released my hold on Grim and backed away, giving him the space to maneuver around me.

"Feisty," he teased and swung his arms across his chest in an exaggerated movement.

Without warning, he swung his huge right hand with destructive force toward my head. Using my speed, I dashed backward and out of the way, causing him to stumble and crash to the ground.

"Be glad I didn't send you to your final death," I mumbled. "You fucking robbed my sister of her life and turned her."

"No, I fucking found some random humans and fed," Grim corrected. "Stop acting like this isn't what we do on a regular basis. We're fucking vampires. I fucking got hungry and ate."

"And then you left her out there? To fend for herself? In the middle of a vampire war?!" The red in my vision began to reappear. "Something tells me it was more than that. You enjoyed killing them. Killing my family. My father? My sister?! She never had a chance."

"Oi, I told her to report to Dobgar, what more did you want? I fuck them then I turn them. Or is it I turn them *then* I fuck them? I don't know what order it is, it depends on my mood. Either way, I'm living up to my *Grim* name. It's about time

you all started living up to yours. We're vampires. This is what we do."

"I'm going to find her. I'm going to find my sister and I'm going to take her back to Command."

"No," Ilanis shot in. She moved over behind Grim, put her hands under his shoulders, and heaved him to his feet with unnatural strength. "*We're* going to find her, and we're *going* to send her to her final death. *That's* our assignment. Or did you forget you're a Fang Ranger?"

I lowered my pitch and spoke in a steady voice. "I'm not killing my sister."

"How long ago was she here?" Ilanis asked.

The blonde stood bravely, but her voice trembled as she answered. "Last night."

"What?!" The eyes in her grew doubled in size as Ilanis questioned the blonde.

"She fed while we hid."

"Did she leave town?" I asked.

The youngest shook her head. "We...we don't know," she chimed in. Her voice was high and mouse-like.

"She may have taken one of the boats," the blonde added. "We didn't track her. But during the day, we saw no signs of her."

"Then why were you hiding?" Grim asked.

"Because you vampires are tricky," the elderly woman interjected. "She could have left or she could have stayed to draw us out. We weren't sure, so we stayed hidden."

Xavier stepped into the center of the room. All eyes fell on him. He lowered to one knee and met the gaze of the youngest woman, whose chin and lips trembled. "I know the word of a vampire doesn't mean much to you in this world. But my word

means something to me. As lead of this team, when we gave you our word, we gave you my word. You're free to leave."

"Yes, leave ladies. Before I eat you in more ways than one," Grim grunted.

The three women inched from their place by the hearth and past Xavier and the dead body of their fourth member. As they passed, the youngest covered her face, the blonde cringed and the eldest woman's entire body quaked. The smell of fear wafted from them and filled our nostrils. Grim inhaled when they edged by him as if the most delicious food imaginable passed under his nose on a silver platter. The eldest woman made eye contact with me and mouthed a thank you as they sidled out the door.

Xavier sighed when the door clicked shut. The muscles in his thick neck flexed as he kept his back to us. "We don't fight in front of humans. Is that understood? It undermines us and our war efforts."

I knew I spoke out of turn when I did it, but it had to be said. "Our efforts have already been undermined, Xavier. They're trying to kill my sister. I'm not going to let that happen."

Xavier's silence spoke louder than anything he could have said.

"I *already* killed her," Grim said, filling the silence. "*We're* going to end her. Those are our orders."

"As you reminded us," Ilanis jumped in, her lip curled. "Command sends it, we follow it. Now we have a lead, and I'll be damned if I let your youngling ass put my life in jeopardy again. We either end her together as a team, or we end you as an individual. Your human ties should have died with you when you died the first time. Now tell me, which clan do *you* belong to? Clan Shaye, who follows Command? Or are you a deserter? Are you *my* enemy? *Our* enemy? Because our orders

are *very* clear on how we are to treat our enemies and any deserters we come across. Shaye obeys.”

“Nice speech,” Xavier concluded.

Ilanis glared at him. “You’d better not.”

The orange glow of the flames in the room began to color my vision. I pointed a sharp finger at Grim’s chest. “It’s *your* fault my sister is even in this mess.”

Grim studied me and then spoke in a low tone. “I’m a vampire. It’s what we *do*. I’m not confused about my role here, but I am starting to get very confused about yours.”

“As am I,” Ilanis added.

Xavier exploded. “Enough! We’ve already lost a lot of time. How much do we have left?”

“Just over thirty hours or so,” Ilanis answered.

“Then we’d better split up. We no longer have the luxury of taking our time. We need to cover more ground. Ilanis, you, and Grim check the dock and the coastline. Zee and I will stay here and search the town. Remember, she’s a youngling, so she’ll be fast.”

“She’ll be easy pickings,” Grim said with a sneer. “She didn’t report to Dobgar. She’s untrained.”

“I wouldn’t be so confident, *Grim*,” I hissed. “You’ve already had your ass kicked once tonight by a youngling. It’s not much of a stretch to think it could happen again.”

“Trust me, Sweetheart. I held back. For the sake of the team.”

“And if you don’t do your job? I’ll do mine,” Ilanis fired. “You’ve already had *your* ass kicked, remember? You were laid up for a couple of weeks. Next time I draw my blade on you, I won’t miss. I’ll lay you low. And Xavier?”

Xavier flexed the powerful muscles in his back. “Will you be drawing your blade on me as well, Ilanis?”

Her eyes dropped to the floor. “Just make sure your allegiance is where it’s supposed to be.”

“Hmm,” Xavier hummed. “We’re running out of time. The sun will be up soon. It’s best you two get going.”

When the door shut behind them, as Ilanis and Grim left, I slid up beside Xavier. A room so full only moments before held only the two of us and the fire Xavier studied. I focused my gaze on it as well as I spoke.

“We can’t kill my sister, Xavier. Please.”

Both our arms hung loosely by our sides. Xavier’s fingertips brushed mine, and the flames no longer existed in the hearth but were now housed in my body.

“I know,” he responded. “That’s why we have to find her first.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

We stepped outside and into the night air. The chill I experienced didn't come from the air but from the thoughts of what would happen to Sarah if we didn't get to her first.

"We're running out of time, Zenobia," Xavier reminded me. "Sunrise is in a couple of hours and we'll need to find shelter. If we don't find her by then, we'll lose another twelve hours."

My stomach churned. "I know."

"She's your sister. You know her better than anyone, even Command, and their infinite intelligence." There was a hint of sarcasm in his voice as he spoke about Command. "Where do we start first?"

"I don't know," I said and rubbed the back of my neck with my right palm. "I can't think."

Xavier placed a hand on my shoulder and gave it a gentle, yet firm squeeze. "You have to learn to remain in control."

"What are you talking about? I am in control!"

The look on his face.

"You're a Wildfire, Zenobia," he sighed. Then he reached out and took my hand, interlocking our fingers together. The strength in his hand made me tingle. "As the flames of the fire flicker and dance, rise and fall," he explained, moving our hands together in unison, "so does the power inside you. It can cause you to flicker bright and dominate your surroundings, or burn out. You must learn to steel yourself like the blue flame. They are the hottest. They are the purest. And when the supply is steady, nothing can put it out. If you ever want to become the blue flame, you must learn to keep steady."

"Calm yourself. Dwelling on the worst-case scenario is not going to do anything but convince you it's the *only* scenario. Now, think. Your sister is alone, frightened. She's recently

turned into the thing you tried to protect her from with no one to guide her.”

“Have you reached the blue flame?”

“There’s only been a handful of Wildfires who have reached that level. You have the potential to not only reach the blue flame but become the brightest ever. But for now? We need to focus on your sister.”

“Why would you think she was frightened?” I asked with a frown. Mental images of Sarah alone, afraid for her life, running from place to place with no idea of who or what she’d become pushed me to the brink. Xavier was right. This line of thinking was *not* going to help me calm down.

“Because she just turned,” he answered. “She has a rush of emotions, all stronger than anything she’s ever experienced being a human. With everything that’s happening to her, her instincts and impulses screaming in her mind, what would anyone else want to do?”

“Seek out help. Try to figure out what’s happening or what to do?”

“Exactly. And she was told what to do, but she didn’t.”

“She didn’t go to Dobgar.”

“But she didn’t go to Dobgar,” he echoed. “Why?”

“She’s waiting for *me!*” I gasped.

“You’re the only one she trusts. To find your sister, where would she go to wait for you is the only question you need to ask yourself.”

“The village. She picked this place because it’s small. She’s comfortable here.”

“She set the tripwire?”

“Yes. I taught her and my father some rudimentary ways to protect themselves in the event of an attack. Guess I didn’t do a good enough job.”

“Nonsense. You did the best you could with what you had to work with at the time.”

“How can you be sure?”

“Because it was your sister and father. You wouldn’t withhold anything from them.”

“True.”

“Forgive yourself, Zenobia. You did the best you could. Accept what happened and embrace what has to happen. This is how you remain steady. What else?”

“The village is compromised.”

“Would she run?”

“We never ran on the farm. Dad was determined to defend it until his final breath. He instilled in us the same. Regardless of the situation, we don’t run. We face it.”

“That’s why you didn’t run when facing Ilanis in open battle?”

“Right. She’s older, stronger, and more experienced. But I’m not running.”

“It’s also why you were able to kill the vampire who murdered your other team.”

“Yes.”

“Good to know. If your sister is the same, and she didn’t run...where?”

“Not the docks, that’s for sure. She’d lower her exposure, and shrink her area. She’d find someplace like— “

“Like your farmhouse?”

“I know where she is.”

I headed in the direction I saw the little girl run to when she fled the building from Grim. The child ran to a thicket, so I headed in the direction of where I saw her disappear. Pushing

the bushes and branches aside, revealed a small path which led to the back of the building and beyond. I drew Assurance from its sheathe, but Xavier held up his hand and entered first. The midnight symphony of crickets and birds as they fluttered in the branches of the trees, played like a horror soundtrack as we made our way. The path led us to a small hut. Xavier paused and turned around to face me before he entered. I nodded and he pushed on the door.

The little bit of moonlight we had flooded in and gave us what we needed. Inside the hut, on the floor with her arms wrapped around her knees, sat the young girl. In front of her, a woman whimpered as a vampire had their fangs on the woman's neck. The vampire hadn't bitten the woman but could do so at any moment. When the door opened, the vampire's eyes met mine and a small gasp escaped my lips.

"Sarah?" I whispered. "Oh, Sarah. Is that you?"

"You came?!" She sobbed, and her eyes broke. "I didn't know if you would, but you did. You came for me!"

My heart tore into twenty million pieces. "Of course, I did. I'll always come for you, little sister."

Sarah released the woman and jumped into my arms. Together, we embraced and hugged as if she would collapse at any moment, or I would, and we were the only two things holding each other up.

"Leave," I heard Xavier's husky voice direct the woman and child from behind me.

As Sarah and I continued to hold each other up, tears streaming down our faces, the clatter of the woman as she made her way past us with the young girl in hand existed as white noise. Nothing else mattered except Sarah.

Xavier's hand touched my shoulder. "We have to go," he whispered in my ear.

I nodded and pulled back enough so I could take Sarah's face in my hands and give her a once-over. Her thick, wavy, black hair had grown and she wore it in a utilitarian, severe style. Her loose top and short lacy skirt didn't hide the hourglass build her change to the Elite gave her. A pair of matching lacy embroidered shoes completed the outfit over which she wore a medium-length black cloak. Her accessories included a scarf, a hair ribbon, and a single wolf earring. The whole ensemble was coordinated in black and rich brown.

With my thumbs, I wiped her cheeks and smiled. "Whew, someone got hot and *sexy* on me."

She chuckled but shook her head. "It's a shame Mau won't ever see it."

I nodded and released my grip on her. "I'm sorry, Sarah. I heard what happened. Why didn't you go to Dobgar? You know...after?"

"Ha! I remember your stories of how they trained you. I wasn't going through that. The only person I trust is you. I hoped you'd be the one assigned to come to get me and so I found this place. Oh, Zee...I don't know what to do. I'm hungry all the time, and I'm eating people."

"I know."

"I don't like it."

"I know."

"Ladies," Xavier cut in. "We need to leave. Now!"

I nodded again and spun on my heels. I reached back and grabbed one of Sarah's hands. "Stay close," I told her. I'd kept Assurance out the entire time, so I had no worries about not being armed at the moment.

Xavier pushed on the door and it swung wide, granting us the room to exit. When he didn't move, I leaned to my left to see past him. Standing in the moonlight with their swords in

hand outside and on the path were Ilanis, Grim, and three other vampires I didn't recognize.

Grim made an audible sigh. "I should have known.

"I knew it!" Ilanis yelled. "I didn't want to believe it, but I knew you would choose her over your duty."

Xavier growled a low, guttural, menacing growl. "I *am* choosing my duty." My duty to my clan! This is why we can't win the war because we're too busy fighting ourselves. The curse of Damon and Lawrence, two brothers with different agendas. We have to come together if we're to survive. We need more warriors, not less."

"This man thinks he's Damon or some shit like that," one of the other vampires said. "Giving speeches and shit. I tell you what...hand over the rogue and we'll make it quick for you. Fight us, and it's going to be a slow death."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“Who the hell are you?” Xavier said.

“I’m Rene. This is David and Mikhail. We’re Echo squad.”

Rene wore a perfectly clean shirt and a pair of pants. He sported a flattop haircut, and his otherwise smooth face was marked with small tiny scars. Tall and slender, David wore blue pants and a white t-shirt. He wore his mopish silver hair in a traditional bowl cut, and his face possessed mild wrinkles. A petite short man, Mikhail dressed in red-painted combat armor, marred by battle. His slicked-back black hair looked like a classic pompadour. All three men had swords of varying lengths, but all three held them with deadly purpose and skill.

“What?” I asked through restricted breaths. “Another Fang Ranger team? Why are you here?”

Rene spoke in a monotone voice. “We were hunting this rogue named Ruby. She’s been a menace round these parts. Wreaking havoc and such. If she’d stayed quiet, Command wouldn’t even know about her. But apparently, she was some sickly human and now is making up for lost time. We were sent to dispatch her but hadn’t been able to locate her. She moves too fast and doesn’t stay in one place for long. Matter of fact,” Rene added and pointed at me, “you kind of look like that bitch.”

“I’m no rogue,” I snapped.

“No,” Ilanis retorted. “You’re worse than that. You’re a traitor.”

My vision filled with red. “Fuck you!”

“Why are you here?” Xavier repeated.

“We ran into these two down at the docks. They asked us to accompany them once we all verified Shaye.”

Xavier shifted his balance and studied Ilanis and Grim head-on. “You never trusted me?”

“Oi, you’re my brother. You *know* this! But when it comes to cunt? No, I don’t trust you, or any man.”

“I don’t know what this weird hold she has on you is,” Ilanis answered. “But I knew something. You slipped up, Xavier.”

Xavier raised an eyebrow. “Excuse me?”

“When you called her ‘Zee,’ back in that building.”

“I didn’t call her, ‘Zee,’ as you put it,” Xavier answered as monotoned as Rene.

Rene cleared her throat. “And I quote, ‘then we’d better split up. We no longer have the luxury of taking our time. We need to cover more ground. Ilanis, you, and Grim check the dock and the coastline. *Zee* and I will stay here and search the town. Remember, she’s a youngling, so she’ll be fast.”

Xavier’s demeanor remained steadfast. He didn’t move, he didn’t speak, he didn’t so much as blink. He stayed fixated on Ilanis and Grim. His silence wrapped the area in tension so thick, a sword would be unable to work its way through.

“Someone fucked up,” Mikhail deadpanned.

“Is that the girl?” Rene asked Ilanis.

“Yes,” she answered with a nod. “That’s our target. That’s our rogue.”

“That’s my sister!” I barked.

“Well, then,” Rene said. “I recognize a lead when I see one,” he directed to Xavier.

“As do I,” Xavier agreed.

“As two leads, you know how this has to go. Command tasked you to end a rogue. Since the three of you emerged from inside the hut, with everyone intact, it’s pretty safe to say you had no intention of harming the girl. That puts you in

direct defiance of a direct order. That makes you at best a deserter, and at worst, a traitor. There's not much more to be said, is there?"

"You can still walk away," Xavier warned. "Turn around, lead Echo squad out of her. Live."

David chuckled and Mikhail scoffed. Rene sucked in air through his teeth.

"Where do they find these kinds of guys?" David asked. "Hello? Genius? We're Echo squad, you're November. That means we're better than you."

"Walk away," Xavier said. "This will not end well. For you. Turn around, and head back up the coast. Go find your rogue named Ruby. Live to fight and serve another day."

"Or," David countered. "We kill you two for being traitors and murder your rogue. Then Command will forgive our failure. Three in exchange for one is a much better prize."

Xavier shifted to Ilanis. "And you agree with this?"

"Oi, it was her plan," Grim schooled.

"So be it," Xavier said and sighed. His voice broke as he spoke. He rotated partly to look over his shoulder at me and Sarah. "You two get out of here. I'll catch up with you soon."

"I'm not going anywhere," I snarled and clenched my teeth.

"She's not going anywhere," Rene said.

"Are you not going to draw your sword?" David asked Xavier.

Xavier's eyes narrowed. "No. You only have a few minutes left. I want you to feel like you had a chance before you leave this world."

Xavier turned his back to them and faced me completely. "You and your sister stay behind me."

The nerve of this man.

“What?! I’m a Fang Ranger. I don’t run and I don’t need you to defend me.”

“Did that motherfucker turn his back on us?” Mikhail asked, his voice two octaves higher than earlier.

Xavier ignored him and remained locked on me and Sarah. “I know I don’t need to defend you, Zee. I need you to defend your sister. She’s untrained. If anyone gets by me, they can’t get by you.”

Xavier pivoted around until he faced the five Fang Rangers sworn to end us.

“Hey!” Sarah called out to him. “There’s five of them and only one of you.”

“I know,” Xavier exhaled. “It’s a shame they don’t have more. It’s unfair to them.”

“You mother—” Rene started.

Xavier interrupted him with force. He dashed forward at speed unseen up to this point, through the door, and barreled himself straight into the body of Renee. They both catapulted into the air from the force of the impact, with Xavier’s knee on Rene’s chest as if he surfed the waves of the ocean with Rene as the surfboard. With both his hands, Xavier grasped the sides of Rene’s head, pulled, and wrenched it off of his neck in a bloody explosion of muscle, bone, and flesh. Rene’s body slammed into the ground with Xavier on top and Rene’s head in his hand.

“Bastard!” David bellowed.

Xavier drew Rene’s sword and took it in his hands. He threw it like a javelin with deadly accuracy and speared David in his left eye, impaling him deep. The tip of the sword protruded out the back of his skull, and David twitched and dropped on impact.

“You will fucking *die* for this!” Mikhail bellowed.

Rapidly waving both arms in a huge circle, the air around Xavier turned orange and then red. With a sudden thrust of his arms forward, Xavier formed and propelled an incredibly large fireball forward. The fireball's intensity as it jetted past me singed, my clothing. It landed in a large explosion of red and orange flames, and engulfed Mikhail, burning him instantaneously. His screams were drowned out by the red-hot intensity and his armor melted like snow on a summer day. His body fell to his knees, then to the ground, in an awesome display of terror.

I gave a small yelp and widened my eyes as my heart froze, and then pounded in my chest. I rushed to Xavier, flung myself into his arms, and wrapped mine around his neck. "That was amazing!"

"Where's Ilanis and Grim?"

I heard him speak, but the crackle of the flames, and the rush of blood flooding my ears, masked his words. "How did you do that?"

Xavier placed his hands around my forearms and removed him from his neck, pinning them to my side. "Do what?" He asked. His eyes darted everywhere as he scanned the surrounding area.

My heartbeat began to slow. "Generate flame like that? Where's your lighter? I didn't see you pull out a lighter, so how did you do that?"

"Later. Zenobia, *where's* Ilanis and Grim? And Sarah?"

Sarah? Shit!

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“I failed her,” I wailed and collapsed to my knees. My hands flew to my chest and all air left my body. Waves of throbbing, nauseating pain pulsed within my abdomen, and my breakfast threatened to return to me in an instant.

“No.”

My eyes darted all over, searching for Sarah and any way to relieve my body from the miserable pain blasting every inch inside of me. “In the excitement of the moment,” I sobbed, “I did the one thing I swore I’d never do. I’ve killed my sister.”

“They didn’t kill her,” Xavier corrected as he walked around the bloody battlefield.

Clouds infiltrated every inch of my mind, but his voice guided me like a ship lost on the waves and only a lighthouse could guide it to safety. My body grimaced and I swallowed harder than at any point in my life, human or vampire. Xavier knelt on the ground and examined the blades of grass where Ilanis and Grim stood prior to the fight with the calm of a scholar studying for an exam in which he already had and knew the answers.

“How do you know? Xavier?”

I needed something. Anything to lighten this load pressing down on my chest and crushing my lungs.

“No blood,” he explained and returned to his feet. “The grass is pressed down. They sped to her under the cover of the chaos and swooped her away.”

“That doesn’t mean they didn’t kill her when they reached a safe distance.”

Xavier’s jaw tightened. “You’re smarter than that, Zee. Think. If it were you, what would you do? A massive battle is happening all around you, and your target is right there. Right

there. The reason why you're here. The reason for the battle and bloodshed is right there waiting for you. Her would-be protectors were engaged and distracted. What would you do? You know she's untrained. You know you're superior in skill, numbers, and experience. What do you do?"

Images flashed in my mind of Dillon.

"I kill her. I don't hesitate, I don't waste any time, I chop her head off and be done with it. Deal with you and the consequences after."

"Exactly," Xavier agreed and pointed a finger as if I'd hit the nail on the head. "Ilanis and Grim are more experienced in this vampire life and on the battlefield. They've fought rival clans, other Shaye vampires, and the human resistance. They are skilled. They are deadly. And if you reached that conclusion..."

"They did as well," I finished.

"They did as well."

"Then why? Why carry her off, knowing we'd search for her?"

"Me."

"Come again?"

"They kill Sarah, that puts them square in my line of sight. You're under my protection, which means until I decide otherwise, she's under my protection. Command's authority only extends to the door that they use to get in and out of whatever building Duradel hides in. Leads are the authority on the field, everyone's trained to follow them with no questions asked. But when a vampire asks questions about Command, they tend to become branded as deserters.

"You say you'd deal with me later? That's because you've never faced me. You've only now seen what I do. Those two on the other hand have a very clear understanding of what I'm capable of. Ilanis has fought by my side for years, Grim

centuries. They are under no misconceptions. They know almost everything about me.”

My forehead tightened. “Almost everything? What don’t they know?”

Xavier turned his back to me and walked the pressed grass path in the direction they traveled with my sister.

“Xavier?!”

Xavier sped down the pressed grass path. I sheathed Assurance and sped after him, running as hard as I could. He was much older than I, so it would be easy to catch him since the younger the vampire, the faster they moved. When I caught him, he continued to run and didn’t pause or speak. He stayed focused on the tracks left behind by Grim, Ilanis, and my sister.

After a couple of moments, the trail returned us to the area where we’d left the travel vehicle.

I threw my hands up. “They took the truck?! Dammit!”

“Of course, they did Zee. But look there,” Xavier instructed and pointed a finger to a place on the ground where the truck had been located.

A single wolf earring.

I wanted to move. I wanted to run. I wanted to leap for joy. Instead, I had to exhibit control, so I did neither. I had to remain even because one earring didn’t signify the current state of my sister. However, I did speak a little louder than I wanted. “She left that for us!”

“Or they did,” Xavier countered.

“No,” I said and shook my head. “No, I’m positive Sarah left it for us. She dropped it as a clue.”

Xavier rubbed his chin. “Smart girl.”

“Okay, what now?”

“Come on. It’s going to be daylight soon. Neither of their abilities allows them to travel while the sun is up without daylight armor, but the truck’s tinted windows do. We have to double-time it. We can last longer in daylight than most without our armor, but even we have our limits, so put your day armor on. Sarah had no armor, so they’ll need to go straight through and not risk having to stop.”

“Straight through to where?”

“Where do you think they’d go? You have the main target, but you didn’t execute them. Where do you go?”

I paced the surrounding area and threw my head back, casting my eyes on the skies. The partly clouded night sky began to lessen as the sun signified its journey across the sky to begin.

“The only place I could think to go would be Dobgar. Command is still there, so perhaps they’ll attempt to barter Sarah’s life for their own. Show Command they didn’t fail in their mission.”

“Do better, Zee. Sarah’s separated head from her shoulders would serve the same function. There’s no need to transport her alive to simply barter.”

“Well, it would be if the purpose is to save their own skin by having Sarah admit she’s my sister.”

“Go on.”

“If Sarah admits to Command that she’s my sister, then that would explain why we’re not with them. We turned on them to save Sarah. But, if they bring them only Sarah’s decapitated head, she can’t testify against me dead. Which leads to questions from Command on what happened on the field. Then it becomes your words against theirs, and since you’re lead, their words may have no weight.”

“Good,” Xavier nodded. “Now what?”

“Why do you keep asking me? This isn’t the time for training!”

“You’re always training, Zee. The minute you think there’s nothing left for you to learn is the minute death overtakes you. Always learn. Always grow.”

I blew out a breath. Xavier made sense.

“Now what?” He echoed.

“If I’m constantly training, then I’m preparing to lose.”

Xavier cocked his head. “How’s that?”

I moved till we were within arm’s distance of each other. “Because I don’t have all the intel I need to adequately plan. You’re still holding out on me, Xavier. What don’t they know?”

Xavier turned his back to me. “I haven’t been completely honest with you, Zee.”

“What?!”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I cursed myself.

How could I be so stupid?

Right there in front of me stood a vampire, but also a man. A man I had an intense connection with. A man who had set me as the priority even when faced with other, better options. A man who'd respected my differing viewpoint and lifestyle. A man too perfect for me to be true. I fell for the classic blunder every woman from the beginning of time had fallen for.

How could I not have asked the question before I fell into bed with him?

“Are you married?”

Xavier's shoulders slumped and he sighed, long and deep before he answered. “I was.”

“Was?”

“Yes. Was. Past tense.”

A slow smile built across my face. His back was still to me, so he didn't see it. I tried to mask the desire in my voice, as I needed to know more. “What happened?”

“A rival vampire.”

“Oh.” That sucked. I hoped for something more definitive. Like she'd died a horrible death and never had the chance to return. I felt horrible for the thoughts in my mind but didn't push them back.

“She was human,” Xavier continued. “He turned her, and joined her to the Elite.”

“I know how that feels. Losing the human life, you were trying to keep innocent.”

“I know you do.”

“What happened to him?”

Xavier didn't answer me. He didn't have to.

“Right. Sorry. What happened to her?”

“She's still alive.”

“Where?”

“Up north.”

I gasped and placed my hand on my chest.

“She's Corrus now, and from what I know of the war effort, not long for this world. Corrus is fighting Disaris, Shaye, and Letos. Advisors are saying there's no way they can continue to fight on three fronts. They're stretched too thin. If they don't make a change, they're going to lose to Disaris, and Disaris is *not* going to take any prisoners. There's no chance for reconciliation between her and me. I made my peace with that a long time ago.”

“Has she?”

“We'll have a conversation at some point.”

“Oh,” I moaned softly and bit my lip.

“Hey,” Xavier turned around. He entered my space and lifted my chin with his finger. His eyes were darkened and locked in with mine. “I said there was no chance we're getting back together.”

The air between began to heat and shrink. All the nerves in my body were aflame.

“But you just said you're going to talk to her,” I said in a low tone.

“At *some* point. Maybe. But what is definite is she's my past.”

“What about your future?”

“What about my future?” He asked, his voice a deep growl.

“What does your future hold?” I breathed.

Xavier captured my mouth in a fiery embrace. His kiss made the moon shatter and the star collide. My hands searched his body and rolled over the hard muscles hidden beneath the fabric of his clothing. My body responded to his touch by turning me into a dripping mess.

I can't.

The thought swirled around in my mind even as the heat from his body made me want to melt. I pulled away and we gazed into each other's eyes. Where I expected to see surprise, I saw love.

“I can't,” I whispered.

“I know.”

“I want to.”

“I know,” he repeated. “But you're going to need it.”

“I don't need sex right now, Xavier. I need to find my sister.”

Xavier chuckled as a sly smile crossed his very kissable lips. “I'm not talking about sex, Zee.”

Oh? Fuck, I do need sex. I do need to feel him inside me, just...just not right now.

“I'm talking about the heat in the air,” he explained.

Oh.

“Do you feel it?”

“Yes. I thought it was just us,” I whimpered and bit the inside of my lip.

“It was.”

Oh!

“It’s also more,” he continued. “You need to learn how to tap into it. How to not rely on the flames of a fireplace, or the metal lighter you carry, but the fire in you.”

My nose wrinkled and I blinked a few times, while his words rattled around in my mind. “Come again?”

“Fire is all around us. Fire *is* life. You once told me people keep telling you to live. It’s because you don’t see the beauty in it. Why? Why are you holding yourself back?”

Oh.

My chest began to ache as memories returned to me as if I’d never left. “Because I burned Sarah.”

“Tell me about it.”

My throat and lungs grew sore, and the world started to spin as I pulled the images from my mind and gave them a voice. “When I first joined the elite, I had no control, driven off instinct, like she is now. I also didn’t know my ability. The one ability the vampirism virus grants us all. All the infected get an ability and it seems so random, doesn’t it? Each of the four clans seems to have one of four abilities, but I didn’t know which one of the four abilities from clan Shaye I had.

“Sarah came into the room when I was by the fireplace. She was scared by my change and I wanted nothing more than to console her, to comfort her. Even in my bloodlust, I knew one thing—I would never hurt her. I needed to protect her so she would never experience this curse. I reached out to hug her and when I did— “

“You shot the flames forward?”

“Yes. I burned her. I burned my only sister, the person I always said I’d protect. I hurt her, and now? Now, I’ve killed her. They got to her because I was all about you.”

Xavier stepped back and looked at me. For the first time since I’d known him, it appeared for an instant he’d lost control of himself.

“That’s not what I meant. I mean...you know what I mean.”

Xavier exhaled and steadied himself. “We’re going to find your sister, but first you’ve got to trust yourself.”

“How?”

“Do you trust the sun?”

I hate when he does that.

“What are you talking about, Xavier?”

“Think about it. Have you *ever* thought about if you trust the sun or not?”

My finger flew to my bottom lip and I rolled my eyes up. “Now that you mention it, no. I don’t think I’ve ever thought about whether I trust the sun or not.”

“Do you know why?”

“Not really, no. The sun is...the sun. It’s just there. I don’t trust it or distrust it.”

“No. You trust it, and do you know why? Because it’s there.”

I raised an eyebrow so far up my forehead I know it kissed my hairline. “*I just said that.*”

“It’s *because* the sun is there that you trust it. You don’t worry about whether it’s going to rise today, or stay stuck in the sky and not set tomorrow. You trust the sun because it’s consistent.”

Oh.

“But the sun *is* fire, Zee. Without the sun, there would be no life. Yes, it can burn if its energy is concentrated enough, but mostly, it provides warmth and light. It feeds the plants and comforts the animals. The sun is *life*, Zee. The sun is fire. The fire that burns within you. It’s always there. You have to trust it to come out and focus it when you want to burn like you would the sun’s rays. Or use it to comfort and feed. How you

choose to use your fire is up to you, but it *is* there for you to use, whenever you want. Do you understand?”

For the first time since I discovered my Wildfire ability, I did. This was not a lesson I could learn in the training classes at Dobgar. This was a lesson I had to experience, and only with a man who truly understood what burned inside me. Xavier lost someone dear to him, as I had. He had to learn how to control his fire, as I do. He was the perfect teacher for me, and now I know why he requested me. Even after our one-night stand, he sensed I could be more. He pushed me because I had more to give. He wanted me, and I want him more now than I ever did.

“So, I’ll ask you again,” he said. “What now?”

With no hesitation and no doubt, I trusted myself to give the right answer. “We double-time it to Dobgar. They have a head start on us, and they’re traveling in a vehicle faster than us.”

“You realize we’re walking into a trap, right?”

“They think they know us. They have no idea what’s coming for them.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Regardless of clan affiliation, no vampire liked day armor. Clunky and cumbersome, it didn't give the freedom of movement typical of our natural state. But, if a vampire needed to travel by day, outside of a car, truck or SUV refitted with shielding from the sunlight, we needed day armor.

Being a Wildfire like Xavier, we were able to travel through the early morning without fear of death by day. By granting us an internal flame, the virus which caused vampirism also gifted us the ability to withstand the sun's poison longer than most vampires. We could travel without our armor till a couple hours before noon, but if we were not in our armor, or in shelter by the midday sun, the sun's poison would be too much for even our flames to absorb and we'd die a death by the sun's rays like most.

We ran as fast as we could without the armor, then spent the remaining time in it. We didn't stop to rest or feed. We had to reach Dobgar. Traditional wisdom said we should rest and gather our strength, but I couldn't do it. They had my sister. I wanted her back.

We arrived at Dobgar after the sun had long dipped its rays below the horizon. The moon had risen to its apex and the night animals were on the prowl. I didn't know what to expect when we arrived, but to their credit, Ilanis and Grim didn't run from us. As soon as we entered the city, they emerged from one of the side buildings with Sarah. Her hands and legs were bound in a Y-shaped restraint made of metal and chains. My guess was they'd weakened her to the point of exhaustion, so she couldn't resist.

Sarah was on our left, Grim stood in the middle, and Ilanis was on the far right. The two of them faced the two of us in the middle of the main street like I pictured outlaws did in the

days of the ancient west. If a shoot-out vampire style is what they wanted, I would give them what they asked for and more.

An eerie quiet rested over the city. There were no lights shining through the windows of the surrounding buildings, and no other sounds to indicate there was more to this place. Xavier must've sensed it too because his eyes searched the buildings while I searched the rooftops.

"Nope," Grim called out. "We're all alone. Everyone's gone bye-bye. Just us and the scavengers waiting to see how this plays out."

"How this plays out is, you're going to let my sister go!" I yelled. By my estimation, a city block separated us from them. "Or, I'm going to murder you."

"Oi, get hold of yourself, Sweetheart. No need for threats."

"Especially the ones you can't back up," Ilanis added.

"Here's what we're going to do," Grim shouted. "An even exchange. We'll let this youngling go, and you too, Sweetheart."

I couldn't believe my ears.

"What?" My mouth opened, but I couldn't tell if the word actually left it. I looked to Xavier who maintained the same steady demeanor.

"In exchange for your lives," Grim continued, "Old boy Xavier over there is going to forfeit his."

Xavier scoffed.

"You're insane," I called back. "We're not trading."

"And I have your word they go free?" Xavier answered.

My mouth went dry. "No."

"Oi, I'm not a liar. You know that. Unlike you."

I pivoted to my right and grabbed Xavier's face between both of my hands. "Xavier," I pleaded. "Whatever you're

thinking about, forget it. We're not trading one life for another."

"Ha!" Ilanis laughed bitterly. "He still hasn't told you who he is yet, has he?"

"Liar," Grim echoed.

I released my hands from around Xavier's face and stepped back. "What are they talking about, Xavier?"

He didn't flinch. Xavier returned to speaking with Ilanis and Grim as if I had said nothing. "How can I trust you? How do I know there's not a horde waiting for them the minute I surrender?"

"Duradel's left the city, *Xavier*," Grim answered. "Command too. He knows you. He knows the real you. He knows who you are and what you're up to. So, he left. The minute he heard we were in town, he packed everything up and left."

"Why didn't they kill you before they left?" Xavier asked.

"Command told us to see how far you were," Ilanis said. "Told us to offer you this deal. Put your honor to the test. If you surrender yourself, then Duradel no longer has to run. He can put down roots in one spot and begin to lead Shaye's counterattack. Restore the clan to its rightful glory. He said he'll even let the younglings live. They can return to that gawd awful farm they lived on and wait out the rest of their days eating nothing but vegetables."

"But if you don't accept the deal," Grim added. "If you don't surrender yourself, then we're to put you down. And in case we can't, and you do manage to save both of these ladies, then he'll make it his life's goal to see the slaughtered like humans."

"Or," I interjected. "How about you and Duradel and Command go fuck yourselves."

“Heh,” Grim chuckled. “I knew I liked you, Sweetheart. Here’s the deal. There’s no way you or your boyfriend over there can reach us before I twist little Sarah with the sweet cunt’s head clean off. So, here’s the question you’ve got to ask yourself. Someone *is going* to die today, but who will it be? Sarah with the sweet cunt? Or your boyfriend who’s been lying to you this entire time.”

I turned to Xavier. “What are they *talking* about? What lies?”

Xavier sighed. It was long and slow and he kept his eyes facing forward, not meeting mine. “Remember when I told you how before the Crimson Mourning, vampires had more than one ability?”

“Yes. You said Damon told you that.”

Xavier rotated to his left and faced me straight on. A gentle breeze blew through the air and the moon hung behind him, bathing him in its pure white light and causing him to glow.

“Damon didn’t tell me that.”

I scrunched my forehead. “Why would you lie about that? I don’t care who told you about how the world was more than five hundred years ago. That’s meaningless to what’s happening right now, or how I feel about you, right now.”

Silence.

Something stirred within me, and I blew out a breath. “Okay,” I sighed. “Okay. Who told you about vampires before the Crimson Mourning happened?”

“Davon.”

I shook my head. “Is that name supposed to mean something to me?”

“Jeebus,” Ilanis groaned and threw up her hands. “What are they teaching in schools these days? No wonder we’re not

putting out quality warriors. Grim, after we kill them, I'm burning Dobgar to the ground. It's useless."

I screamed and covered my ears with my fists. "Shut the fuck up!"

"Fuck you, bitch!" Ilanis retorted.

I groaned so hard, my throat ached. "Xavier? Who is Davon?"

His stance didn't change. "My father."

I opened my palms and lifted them skyward. "So, what? Your father taught you vampire history. So?"

"Jeebus, she's slow," Grim said.

"Told you," Ilanis stated.

"Sweetheart, the Crimson Mourning is the night Damon, Lawrence, Michelle, and Cassie all went to war with each other. It's the night the four clans of Shaye, Letos, Disaris, and Corrus were birthed through that bloodshed. Prior to that rebellion and subsequent upheaval, the world was controlled by one man."

"There's only one vampire who existed before the Crimson Mourning," Ilanis added, "who would know about the other abilities the virus gives, and could teach it to his son. Only one vampire named Davon, and he controlled the world."

"You're wrong!" I hollered. "There was a council of vampires who controlled the world. Damon went to war with the council, because of Lawrence's rebellion."

"The council was set up *by* Davon, you dumb bitch," Ilanis fired back. "Davon was Damon's father!"

My stomach tensed. "Wait."

"He's Damon," Ilanis yelled. "Don't you get it? Xavier *is* Damon!"

I shook my head and took another step back. My eyes trembled as I looked at Xavier. His face began to bubble and twist in a grotesque manner, as his muscle fibers, skin cells, tendons, and even bone changed before my eyes. “No.”

In place of the man I’d spent days with, stood another. Tall, with dark hair, dark eyes, and chiseled, he was breathtaking. He was also a liar.

“How is this possible?” I asked, gasping for air as I spoke.

“I am Damon. I am both a Wildfire and a Variant. I can change my appearance as I please.”

“If you’re Damon, that makes you the oldest vampire alive.”

“And the direct threat to Duradel’s leadership,” Grim added. “Which is why he wants you dead.”

“Damon turned his attention to Grim and Ilanis. “How did he know I was alive?”

“He marked resistance a long time ago. The man’s not stupid, Damon,” Ilanis answered. “He’s paranoid, but he’s not stupid. It’s his paranoia that keeps him alive and keeps him moving around.”

“He does it so I can never get an accurate fix on his location,” Damon concluded.

“You know this,” Grim said. “He heard the rumors, we *all* heard the rumors. Damon had actually been alive for the past five hundred years, hiding on some mountain like a bitch. Then some Letos fucker killed him. Everyone heard that.”

Ilanis stepped forward. “But, since Duradel is so paranoid, he figured the only way you could be alive for five hundred years, even hidden on a mountain, is if you could change your face. You must’ve had the variant ability all that time, and no one knew about it. So, he figured the most powerful vampire in the world couldn’t possibly get killed by some peon.”

“I wouldn’t call him a peon,” Damon deadpanned. “Ian is actually a pretty good fighter.”

“Whatever,” Ilanis said with a dismissal wave of her hand. “Duradel figured you must’ve had a way to make people think they were seeing you, when in actuality, they were seeing someone else, but your variant ability allowed you to project your appearance. No one knows, because none of us are that old, and only Cassie, Kiara, and Julia lived through the Crimson Mourning, but even they aren’t as old as you. No one knows how powerful you actually are, or what the extent of your abilities is.”

Damon rubbed his chin. “Well, if no one knows how powerful I actually am, and no one knows the full extent of my power, then what makes you think you’re safe? What makes you think I’d go for this exchange?”

“We don’t,” Grim answered.

“It’s a gamble,” Ilanis said. “But knowing history as we do,” she looked at me, “we’re taking a risk here. You asked for her specifically. Why? You have feelings for her, and what history showed us is there is nothing you wouldn’t do for your love. You loved Cassie and murdered the entire council of vampires for her. If this little twat has found her way into your heart, then you’d— “

“I would murder the world for her,” Damon finished and glanced at me out of the corner of his eye. “How do we do this?”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“Simple,” Grim answered and pointed at me. “She takes her sword and takes your head. When we *know* you’re dead, we let them walk.”

“You must think I’m stupid,” I shot back.

“Fine,” Damon said.

“What?!” I exclaimed.

“What?” Grim asked incredulously.

“Ridiculous,” Ilanis spat. “What a man will do for love.”

Damon lowered himself to his knees and faced away from me. He interlocked his fingers and placed them on top of his head.

“No,” I blustered and shook my head. “No, I won’t do it. Damon is here, don’t you see? He’s the rightful leader of Shaye, he’s the oldest and strongest vampire *alive*. He can win this war for us.”

“Not by myself,” Damon said from his knees. “And not without people I can trust. People who want to live, not for themselves, but for others.”

I narrowed my eyes.

“He’s also the coward who let his wife turn into a murderous bitch who wants to burn the world to the north while he cowered on a giant hill,” Grim taunted. “We don’t need *him* to lead *us*. Fuck him.”

“Do it!” Ilanis screamed. “Kill that bastard before we kill your little sister.”

“I trust you, Zee,” Damon said. “But the only way to truly live is to trust yourself.”

I sucked in a breath and steadied myself. This is what Oriel meant when she told me to “Keep your eyes open and your mouth shut. Maybe you’ll live.” Inward, was my flame. It had burned all this time in yellow and orange, but I never trusted it. The only color I could trust now was blue.

I exhaled, drew Assurance from its sheathe, and held it aloft. I shut my eyes and saw it. I mentally saw my inner flame change from waves of yellow and orange to a pure blue stream. I waved both my arms in a huge circle, opened my eyes, and slammed my fist into the ground. The air in front of us exploded in an enormous fireball of pure rage.

“What the hell?” I heard Grim ask through the explosion.

“Kill her!” Ilanis shrieked.

But it was too late. Trusting myself with every ounce of my being, I threw Assurance like a javelin in the direction of Grim’s voice. With deadly accuracy and speed, it speared Grim in his left eye, impaling him deep. The tip of the sword protruded out the back of his skull, and Grim twitched and dropped on impact.

Damon used the opportunity of Grim’s demise to launch from his knees and speed over to Sarah. I followed and sped straight ahead and through the flames. They were my flames, my fire. They were my life.

Ilanis leaped to her left with her sword drawn and slashed at Sarah with lethal intentions, but I intercepted her. My speed as a youngling enabled me to greet her with my shoulder as I barreled into her chest right before she could deliver the death blow. We both catapulted into the air from the force of the impact, with my shoulder on her chest as if I surfed the waves of the ocean with Ilanis as the surfboard. Our bodies crashed to the ground, and pain shot through me, but I rolled off her and onto my feet. Ilanis equally leaped up and held her sword in a guarded position across her chest. She’d never released it from her grasp.

Damon had ripped the chains away from Sarah and opened his wrist. She drank from him deeply and safely. We were all Shaye, so drinking from each other would have no adverse effect, and I could only imagine how drinking from the oldest living vampire would strengthen Sarah. Ilanis surveyed the scene in front of her and chuckled. The three of us had her trapped. I was in front of her, Damon and Sarah to her left. I was quicker than her, being younger, so escape wasn't an option.

“So, it's come to this, has it? We were here before, you and I. Remember? When I first met you, I had my sword out, just like so, and you were quacking in your boots.”

“I'm not quaking right now,” I seethed.

“Oh, I see? Because Damon's here? Your sister? You think that makes a difference? You might be faster than me, so I can't run, but I'm faster than Damon. I'll kill you and get away from him. This isn't the end of me.”

“Oh yes,” I nodded. “Yes, it is.”

“You can't beat me.”

“You put your hands on my sister. My *sister*. I'm not going to beat you. I'm going to destroy you.”

“What? Am I supposed to apologize for that? Am I supposed to be seeking your forgiveness,” Ilanis spat. “It's because of you Xavier flipped like you've got some magical pussy or something. But, you're no witch, Youngling. You're no witch, just a bitch.”

“Xavier never flipped you stupid cunt. He was Damon the entire time. He moves how he wants.”

“Well, come on then. I'm about to move you. Twice. Twice I should have killed you and I let you live.”

I shook my head. “What are you talking about? This *is* our second match.”

“This isn’t a match because you’re no match for me. Just as you weren’t a match when you first reported to us, and just like when you were recovering.”

“What?”

“I took joy in coming in your room every day and stabbing you with my blade. Every time I imagined Xavier stabbing you with his cock, I thrust my sword deeper and deeper into your chest. It was almost better than sex.”

“That’s why it took me so long to heal. You kept attacking me? Your fellow Ranger?”

“You’re nothing. You’re not a Ranger. You barely have fangs. You’re definitely not a Fang Ranger I want to be associated with. You’re just the dumb bitch who got lucky enough to spend one night with him. A night I should have had with him a long time ago. He’s been pining for you ever since. I’ve seen it in the way he moved, the way he acted. And when he specifically requested you instead of any number of more qualified individuals to join us, bumping us down to November? We were Beta squad! The second highest in all of Shaye.

“No. I knew exactly what I had to do. Expose you as a traitor to our clan. Xavier was lost, but I’m helping him.”

“You’re crazy. You did this because you were jealous? You must have Letos blood in you.”

“Say’s the traitor. You’re willing to sacrifice our entire ideals for the life of one measly human. It’s the same with him. He’s so full of honor, I can see why he’s drawn to you. But there’s no way he’ll stay with you now, not after I’ve exposed you. And now I’m going to kill you.”

“Wrong! I’m going to do what everyone’s been telling me to do. I’m going to live!”

“You talk too much,” Ilanis growled.

The air around me turned a deep orange, then red as Ilanis charged. Ilanis lunged at me with an upward strike. I dove to my left and rolled in time to miss her blow, and came up on my knees. She wheeled around and brought her sword back in a downward strike designed to end my life, but two swift flicks of my wrist fired two twin jets of pure blue flame out of the supercharged air. The flames smashed Ilanis in the chest and rocketed her off her feet. With an ear-splitting shriek, Ilanis body exploded in a brilliant display of blood, flesh, and bone.

EPILOGUE

The flames danced all around us as Damon walked over the burning chunks and remains of Ilanis to me. He extended his hand and lifted me off of my knees when I grabbed it.

“Thanks,” I said, a slight quiver in my voice.

Sarah rushed over to me and damn near tackled me, wrapping me in a solid bear hug, as tears streamed down her face. I shushed her and placed my hand on the back of her head. I stroked her hair as I stared at the man in front of me.

“What now?” I asked him, aware of the significance of the question.

Damon looked to the sky as it began to lighten. The sun would soon rise as it always had. Constant. Consistent. Steady.

“I watched this war from afar for too long. Ilanis and Grim betrayed me because I let brother after brother, vampire after vampire betray and murder each other.

“Betray you?” I asked.

“I’ve set things in motion to end it all. They knew my true identity the entire time. I’ve had them in strategic locations gathering information, but when they were confronted, I believe they gave me up to Duradel. I don’t believe he knew I was alive. I believe they saw an opportunity and tried to take it. I need people I can trust with my life. The time for betrayal is over. I’ve infiltrated Shaye at every opportunity, posing as different warriors to assemble those people. When Ian came to murder me, one of my followers volunteered to take my place. Everyone with me is willing to lay down their lives for me, to end this.”

He met my eyes and looked deep. “You are different. Cassie was my love, but you? You are my flame. You make me want

to burn bright again. You are my ignition. You make me not only want to end this war but to live again in this world.

“But until I deal with Duradel, Shaye will continue to be splintered. You ask me what’s next. Here it is. I have some people I want you to meet. We have a safehouse stashed away at the top of a mountain. I will bring you together, and soon, I will unite our clan and bring all my vampire children back under my protection. Cassie, Kiara, and Mathias, better enjoy the time they have remaining. They’re on top for now, but as I always say...

“Nothing is secure.”

Stay tuned for a sneak peek at [Marked for Redemption!!!](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lawrence Hall writes wherever, whenever he can. Okay, that's a lie. Lawrence Hall plays video games wherever, whenever he can, and writes when he decides to put down the controller.

Currently residing in the state of North Carolina, he lives with his wife of twenty-plus years, and three children. Looking forward to the time when he is an empty-nester, Lawrence fights the evils of drinking too many sodas during the day, while resisting the temptation to wear skinny jeans. It's just not a good look for him. He knows this. But as fashion gets tighter and tighter, Lawrence spends hours scouring the internet searching for loose-fits. Then he rage quits and goes to play his video games to relax. Then he realizes he should be writing, and grabs his laptop, but then gets distracted and surfs the internet again.

Thus, the nasty cycle he finds himself trapped in.

Find him at www.lawrencehallauthor.com

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lane Hunter is a fantasy author who writes about strong women who can stand side-by-side with the hero. Lane is currently with a family who seems to enjoy interrupting the writing process at every opportunity. Lane's love for storytelling developed from childhood fantasies involving dolls, action figures, turtles, sentient robots, an occasional sword-wielding cat, and a perfect pitch rockstar.

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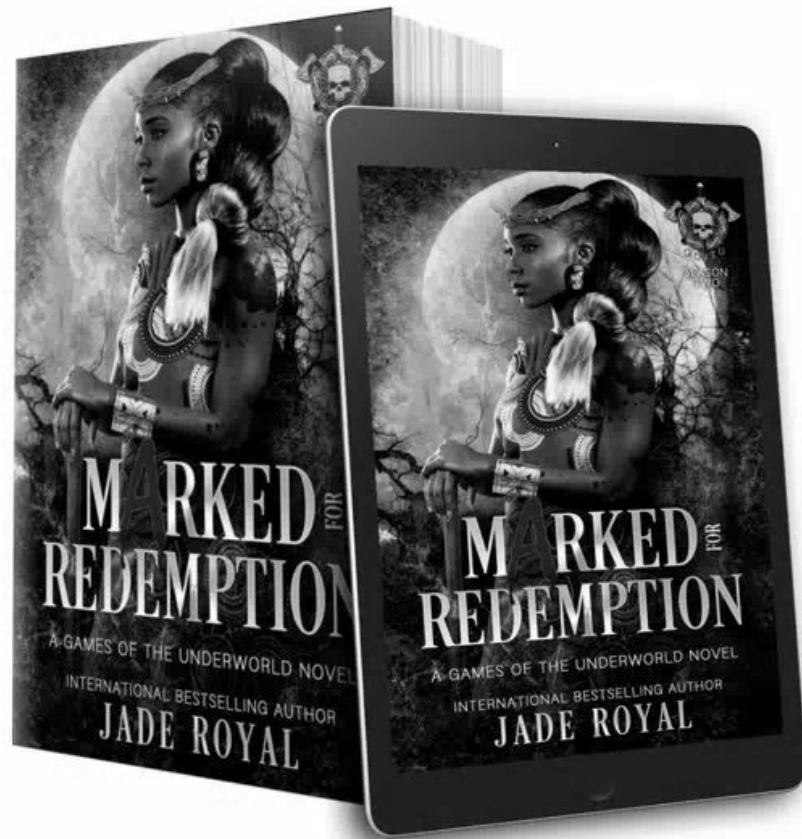
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CHAPTER 1

Zendaya- Opportunity

The club I sat in was a mixture of crass behavior, dwellers, and adrenaline junkies. I would pass judgment, but I sat among them as one of their kind. Skirting my nail around the glass of grief that I was holding. I stared into it, searching for answers I'd never find. Before I became who I am now, I was looked upon with respect and I restored order while doing the queen's bidding. Kiera.

Loyal to her cause, whether people saw it as right or wrong, I fought her battles because I chose to. Now, because I'd failed her, I was less than honorable in her eyes. Taking a swig of reddish amber gold, my throat welcomed the burn. Bliss. I closed my eyes as the devil's fuel danced in my soul. Opening them, I sensed someone staring at me. Casual glances didn't feel this intense. There was a purpose behind them being here.

My eyes met theirs and instead of squaring off, the figure walked through the crowd. When I didn't follow, they glanced back my way as if to ask what I was waiting for. I finished my drink, paid my tab, and followed the hooded unidentified seeker until we reached outside where there was an empty field behind the club.

"You have a choice to make. Queen Kiera needs you to find someone and get the answers to the questions she has. If you succeed, you'll go back to being that highly regarded weapon of hers. Not getting them or the answers will result in you being marked as a traitor and sentenced to death. There won't be a second chance. You can say no and there'll be no way to prove this conversation ever existed." Her voice was deep like a male, but the pronunciation of her words was precise like a

female's. She hid her face to prevent me from identifying her. Didn't matter, I'd remember her voice.

The wind blew, almost as if I was being warned of a future that would consume my soul. I'd followed my queen blindly many times before and it worked out. This did not differ from those times.

"You have until this time tomorrow. Once you decide, there's no going back. Meet me at the address in your pocket if you're interested." She walked off in a painfully slow descent. She knew I wasn't following her. There was no reason to.

Instead, I tossed around the choices I was given. If I was honest with myself, I already knew the answer. But I was blinded by willpower and thinking that I could walk away from this deal if I wanted to. Not really. Duty ruled my actions, but the thing that weighed heavily on me was what lurked in the air. It was telling, and I knew whatever was coming would be a test. I didn't know if I could pass or not.

If I didn't, I'd be staring down death's door. That was all I saw. Failure. Because I'd choked before. Desperate for redemption, I couldn't let it drive my decision. I took the pristinely folded paper from my back pocket. I stared at it for longer than I should have before going back inside for another drink. I needed to wash this shit down and away.



Walking into the small building, I checked for lurkers. There seemed to only be one way inside. When I entered the first room, the lights flickered on, illuminating the space. I'd died and gone to a torturer's dream world. On the first wall, pleasure tools lined the walls. Crops, whips, chains, and even dildos. The next wall held blades, knives, and sharp items meant to draw blood. I ran my fingers over the cool metal, curious about the weight of each. The third wall held belts, collars, spikes, gags, and items used to extract shit, glanced back at me. The last wall held guns and rifles, quick-kill

weapons needed in a flash. The middle of the room was decorated with leather tables, chairs, and hooks hanging from the ceiling.

I licked my fangs in delight. This room was a party waiting to happen, and all it needed were the guests. Everything was white, black, and metal. It wouldn't stay that way when the blood was spilled.

"Where are they?" I turned in circles, not knowing where she was located.

"You'll get that information soon enough. What's your answer?" She still hadn't shown herself.

"I'm here, aren't I?" I exclaimed, tired of this game.

"You are. I'm not sure that you understand the risks. You'll either win or lose. There aren't any gray areas."

"I know."

"Do you? Because I can smell the fear from here. You'll fail, you know."

Would I?

"There's no honor in death."

Says who? I turned in a circle, waiting for her to appear, not wanting to get caught off guard by where she was.

"I don't know what she sees in you."

Dedication.

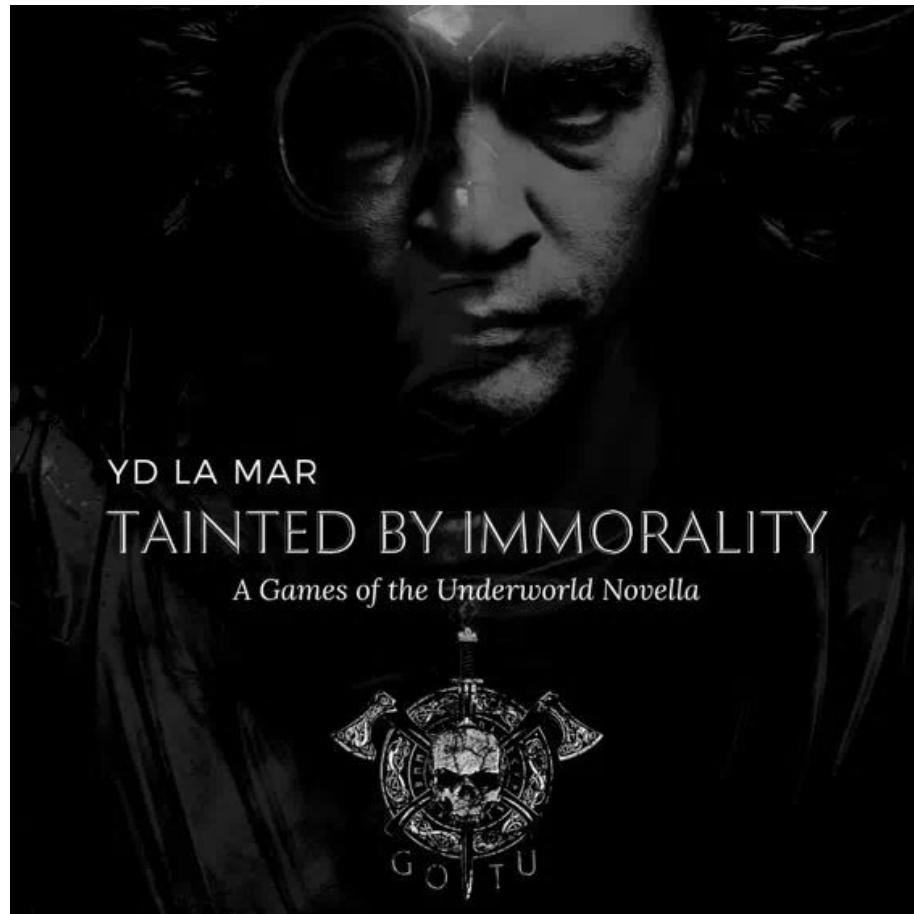
I was going to answer, but the lights went out and black-clothed figures entered the room. They rushed me, hitting me with weapons and fists. Taking a deep breath, I gathered both strength and bravado because even if I died this night, I'd do it with the honor I was accused of not having. I thought I was doing well. Landing blows, fighting back. I'd even managed to steal a weapon. But then something hard crashed down on the back of my head, making me stagger forward, losing my

balance, and then I crashed to the ground where the violence against my body continued.



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PROLOGUE

LOST RUBIES

Leonard

“How are we going to survive this crazy life? It’s been so hard just surviving the week.” I could barely hear her voice.

“We’ll be alright, Ruby. We’ll find something. Don’t worry.”

Her expression told me she knew we were going to die within the week. She was probably right. Surviving *this* life was hard enough. Surviving on the outside was suicide at best.

The elite had no mercy on humans. We were ripe for the picking, too far from our flock. It wasn’t our fault that our previous settlements began to evolve into something sinister.

Cold seeped into our marrow as night fell. We were vulnerable; humans without sanctuary in a world dominated by something else at the top of the food chain.

“We need to keep going, Ruby, at least until we reach some sort of building. Come on. Do this for me, baby, please.”

I looped my arm under hers, picked up her frail body, and we trudged forth. We had been on foot for a while now, blisters covering our soles despite switching out boots every so often when we stumbled upon the dead.

“Leonard, I can’t.”

“Yes you can! I’m not letting you die today!” Save death for tomorrow. Today, I needed her in my arms. I needed her love to get me through.

About a mile down, we finally ran into a dilapidated house in an overgrown field. This would have to do. If we were lucky, there would still be blankets in there.

My shoulder ached with the weight of my wife, my love, my best friend. The porch steps were shallow but still tall enough to make for a struggle as I dragged her feet over the broken wood with loud thuds.

Trees rustled nearby, and my adrenaline spiked. *Shit*. Was it the wind, or something else? My heart hammered like the tortures we had witnessed the others perform on those who needed to be recycled.

I grabbed the rusty doorknob to find it unlocked. I swung it open with a creak, and it showcased nothing but darkness before us. The windows were all covered with thick, dark curtains, and my mind had already decided that if there were no blankets to be found here, we would have to take down the curtains and make do.

Closing the door the best I could without dropping Ruby, I turned the lock on the knob, knowing full well it wouldn't stop the monstrosities our current world had to offer.

“Ruby, stay with me. Are you awake?”

She moaned, and my heart raced. She was fading; I needed to put her down. My eyes took too long to adjust, but I found a dirty couch big enough for her to lie on. Bending my knees, I lifted up her starved body bridal style and deposited her safely onto the cushions. I gently pushed her brittle hair back and stared at her face with an overflow of emotions.

I couldn't lose her. Not like this.

“Ruby, baby. Stay with me. I got you, okay? Let me see if the water works.” We hadn't eaten for over a week, but water would get us through today.

“No. Don't go. Stay. I'm scared.”

The crack in her voice cracked my fucking heart.

I should have been the one starved. When we made it out of this predicament, I would go back and burn that fucking settlement to the ground with everyone in it. I would listen to their screams and know that I got retribution for what they did to Ruby.

I planted a chaste kiss on her sweaty forehead and began to explore the house until I found the kitchen.

There was some rust on the knob, but I turned it anyway. It was gummy. With more effort, I was able to finally break through whatever sealed it, and brown water began to sputter into the broken sink bowl.

More air bubbles in the pipes made it groan and whine until, finally, the color of the water lightened.

“We almost have water, Ruby. Can you believe it?” We were going to live to see another day.

The pipes groaned aloud again, camouflaging the sound of the creaky front door.

I wasn't able to get to her until it was too late. The sounds of her terrified screams would play on a loop in my nightmares forever.



“Where the fuck did you see her?” I shook the asshole by the scruff of his shirt, his legs dangled above my own. “Tell me right fucking now, before I slit your throat!”

I was insane. My mind was hyper-focused on one thing, and one thing only.

He coughed and sputtered and it grated my fucking nerves. Smelled like fucking piss to boot. I should have killed him and been done with it.

“I-I said I don't fucking know, man.”

Useless!

I slammed him against the trunk of the nearby tree and punched his throat with my makeshift spiked knuckle guards. He gurgled louder, choking on his own blood, spraying it across my cheeks as I pulled my arm back for another blow. Watching the life fade from his eyes did nothing to cool my ardor.

I needed to find her. She was out there.

I dropped him on the ground and flicked my hand to rid myself of the rest of the blood before wiping the remnants on my pants and walking away.

The sun was going down. Everyone was seeking shelter. I'd been heading southeast for what felt like weeks, but it could have been months.

I pulled up the collar of my trenchcoat and continued on my path. The trees were densely packed up ahead, but I didn't want to stray too far from my pre-planned course. The last two guys I killed described Ruby perfectly after some torture. They wanted trade for information. *Didn't they know that I was running out of time?*

Fuck them. Fuck them all.

Thieves and cheats, all of them. This was what humanity had been forced to become. This was what I had been forced to become.

A murderer with a vendetta.

A twig snapped, and I stopped in my tracks between two tree trunks, hidden from view. I strained my ears to listen and slowed my breathing, exhaling through my slightly parted lips. The season hadn't changed completely to the cold weather just yet. My breaths didn't come out in a fog; that would have given my position away.

My eyes tracked my surroundings without moving my head. A breeze picked up, and a familiar, sweet smell hit my nostrils with longing.

“Leonard.”

I jerked my head back and turned. There she was, almost fucking glowing before me. My heart ached like it had been stabbed with a serrated knife.

Ruby’s hair was dark, thick, and flowing with the breeze. She filled in her curves, her voluptuous breasts pushed up, with her arms crossed beneath them, staring at me.

I missed her like a pitiful, lovesick fool.

“Ruby...” I extended my hand toward her as if she was a waking dream about to dissipate with my sudden movements. Her lips curled into a soft smile, and it felt like my chest was being rubbed with a cheese grater, back and forth, back and forth.

Love shouldn’t hurt this much, should it?

“What are you doing here, Leonard? You’re too far from your usual haunts.”

I took the next few steps quickly and grabbed her by her forearms, afraid of her disappearing on me once more. She let me. Standing there, stock still, as if she wasn’t affected by me the way I was by her. How could this be? It hadn’t been that long between us.

“What am *I* doing here? Where have you been? I’ve been on your trail since—”

“Landwall. I know. There’s not much left of it.”

Her blunt assessment of the massacre I left behind made me grind my teeth. They lied to me. They told me they held a woman with her exact description in their cages, waiting for trade. They should have known they signed every single person’s death warrant with those words.

But I wasn’t without mercy. I left the prisoners alive after unlocking their cages. Whether they made it on the outside was another story—one that had nothing to do with me.

I shook her and gritted my teeth so hard I could feel my jawbone pop. “You know? You *know?!?*” She was messing with my mind. *I was going insane without her. Didn't she realize that?* She slowly cracked my moral compass with each passing day without her by my side. “Ruby, I’ve been looking everywhere for you.”

It sounded like a plea. Maybe it was.

With a strength I didn’t know she possessed, she broke my hold and cradled my face in her fierce grip. Her eyes searched mine, and I felt a million miles away from her despite our proximity. How could I have found her only to feel like I had already lost her—*again?*

“Leonard. You need to stop looking for me.”

“Never.”

“I demand it. There’s nothing left for us—”

“There’s only *been* us!” My head was throbbing. *She wasn't thinking straight. They did something to her mind. Brainwashed her somehow.*

“Leonard...”

“Don’t!” I knocked her arms down and shoved her away, turning to face the opposite direction. *I couldn't listen to this bullshit. I couldn't look at her while she was spewing these acidic lies!*

My head was pounding. I slapped my temples and hissed from the pain of my spiked knuckle guards. Warm blood trickled down the side of my head, and as quickly as I realized it, Ruby leapt onto my back, knocking me to the ground, face down.

She purred against my ear, and despite my resistance, my cock responded. “Leonard...we should have started our reunion like this. With you beneath my body, with your blood —” her warm tongue licked up every drop, and the softness of

her lips reminded me of our nights together, keeping each other warm in the best ways, “—inside of me.”

She groaned at my taste, and my dick twitched despite the disadvantaged position she put me in.

Everything about this moment was so wrong, but so right. Fuck, I missed her.

She licked my face again and moaned. I took that exact moment to get on my knees and throw her over my head, stunning her. She gasped in shock, and I straddled her with a blade against her neck and chin. The dominant position thrilled me to the core. All these weeks—*months*—of my bloodlust to find my wife...

She tilted her head back to stare directly into my eyes with her lips stained crimson and her chest straining against her shirt.

She shouldn't be this beautiful, calling to me like a siren. She shouldn't look at me like she wants me to bury myself inside of her. Not when she was just speaking of endings.

“Leonard...”

Fuck. I was only a man.

The sound of her breathy voice broke my resolve, and I ripped down her pants, locking both of her legs together. I pushed them up toward her right shoulder beneath me, exposing everything to my view.

Her eyes became pitch black, the original dark brown-green irises gone and in its place was a creature I should remove myself from. But the way her lips parted and the way she whispered my name made me lose all resolve and common sense before a predator.

I kept her legs against her chest with one hand while my other undid my pants just far enough for my hard cock to spring free into the open air.

It slapped against her naked swollen lips, and I hissed against her heat. I watched as she slowly licked the remnants of my blood around her mouth and I growled, slamming myself inside the inferno between her legs.

Thoughts of her fucking another male made me pissed beyond reason. It was a necessity for newly-made vampires to fuck and feed. Common knowledge, especially to those who constantly lived on death's door like I did.

I rammed her into the ground, uncaring of the bruises I left behind. She should have come to *me*. She should have *used me!*

“Fuck me harder. Yes. Just like that. You hate me, don't you?”

“Shut up.” I hated that she still affected me like this.

My hips slapped against hers and the squelching noises could be heard echoing around us as the rest of the world faded away in the background. It was just her and me at this moment. Husband and wife. Predator and prey.

“You should hate me.” She moaned, and my balls tensed up. She shouldn't feel this damn good, this damn tight. “Fuck me like you hate me, Leonard.”

And damned if I didn't do exactly that. I covered her body with mine, tucked my arms beneath her, and pulled her down by the shoulders with each thrust, twisting my hips and grinding myself as deep as I could inside, wishing I could turn back time.

This world had gone to shit, and hope was for the weak. There was no room for hope between us. She chose her path.

I was lost in my thoughts and chasing my pleasure when Ruby flipped me over without effort, ripped off the rest of her pants and rode me like she owned me.

And she did.

The bitch *knew* she did.

She used it to her advantage as she scored her nails down my chest and through my shirt, drawing blood for her satisfaction.

Her hips continued their hypnotizing motion, grinding her clit against me as she drank from the wounds she'd created.

My balls tightened to the point of pain. I tried to hold back, wanting to prolong the moment with my beloved wife.

But she was not herself. *Not anymore.* Greed consumed her entire being as she lifted her head from my chest and bit down into the flesh at the crook of my neck. The pain shocked my system and grounded me all at once. My hands went to her hips, forcing her to grind on me harder to seek her pleasure just as surely as I sought my own. Her temperature spiked to unbearable levels, but she didn't stop her torment. She sucked hard and pulled my life essence into her mouth, making me groan in both agony and bliss.

Why the hell does she feel so hot?

When she cried against my shoulder, I brought my knees up and planted my heels on the ground for leverage as I fucked her harder until my own release spilled inside. Was it wrong of me to wonder if it would take root and bring her back to me? To change her back to the woman I knew.

I was left without answers once again when she screamed bloody murder into the night air, shoved me into the ground, and moved so fast it was as if she disappeared into thin air.

I lay there panting, with my dick chilling in the coolness of night fall, still wet from our tryst. She destroyed me. She destroyed *us* in a single session.

Her cries of pleasure had turned into cries of pain and suffering. Fuck this life and everything in it. Fuck it all.

The sudden howls of wolves sent a chill down my spine, but I shook my head and stared at the glowing moon.

She killed me in more ways than one, and she knew it.

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