



# NELO'S WYNTER

THE ELEMENTAL SERIES BOOK ONE

ROUX CANTRELL

*Nelo's Wynter*

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## *Series Description*

### NELO'S WYNTER

#### An Elemental Novella

By Roux Cantrell

Throughout time, mortals and immortals have lived side by side. Sometimes their worlds collide, but it is rare. Among species such as Vampires, Shifters, Fae, and Witches, there once was a species called Elementals.

In the twelfth century, the species was methodically and meticulously wiped out. All it had taken was jealousy that turned into a twisted hatred, which had propelled the eradication of the species. Unbeknownst to the immortal world, a few elementals had survived. They live amongst other immortals, masking their abilities in fear of the past becoming the present.

*Nelo Vaughan* is an elemental and an outlaw. He's refused to align himself with anyone. He's been estranged from his brothers for four centuries. All over a female. Now he's on a collision course with destiny as he tracks his mate through the Paris catacombs to turn her over to the King of the Vampire Nation.

*Wynter Dae* is an ex-soldier for the Vampire Nation. After a century and a half of fighting for the VN, she took a break from that life. A vacation to visit her ancestral home turns into a nightmare when she finds herself being hunted. Now she's stuck in the Paris catacombs with a killer chasing her and the only person that can help her is her long-lost mate.

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## *About Roux Cantrell*

A New Orleans native, she lives in a college town north of the city with her husband and her cat named Monster. Roux manages to throw some outlandish Halloween parties where the guest must adorn a costume or allow her to dress them on arrival.

She loves the classics but give her a good Vampire novel and she's all in. She takes at least one motorcycle trip a year to clear her head. Her drink of choice is a dirty martini, but a tangerine mimosa will do on the fly. Chocolate and music are her muses when she's writing. According to Roux, chocolate and a good tune can solve anything between characters.

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# CHAPTER

## *One*

Parking his denim black Harley in front of the apartment building, Nelo Vaughan looked around as he dismounted. His six-foot eight stature was intimidating to most. Pulling the band that held back the wealth of long black hair out, he let the mass fall past his shoulders. The atmosphere felt different. Something was amiss. His bright blue eyes scanned the parking lot for any unusual activity. Like always, it remained quiet. Hell, he moved to the area for peace and quiet. Soft vibration was evident in the air, alerting him to another immortal being in the area. And they were too close for comfort.

As he approached his apartment, he noticed the front door was ajar. Pulling out the small dagger, which was more like a small sword, he eased the door open, using his foot and slipping in silently. Moving through the hallway, Nelo used his abilities to detect what type of being had infiltrated his home.

He felt it then, the telltale signature of another elemental. There weren't many left in the world and because of that those that did exist kept their true self cloaked. This one was brazen enough to let his shields down.

Nelo recognized the elemental signature and hoped whichever brother had invaded his space had a good reason. *A very good reason.* Nelo turned the corner and faced one of the most dangerous beings in his world. All six foot six of the immortal male leaned against the wall.

A tinge of emotion built deep in Nelo's stomach. Too much time had passed since they'd seen one another. "You

should put that knife away before you hurt yourself brother.” Nero said.

Fighting his instincts to beat Nero’s ass, Nelo reminded himself he was new to the neighborhood. Throwing his brother out a second-floor window would not be the best way to meet his neighbors. It didn’t help that the male was his older brother and could probably take him in a fight.

“Nero, what are you doing in my house?” Sliding the dagger back into place, he addressed his brother, “Better yet, how did you know where I lived?”

“I knocked and you didn’t answer. I thought something may have happened to you. So I entered.” Nero held out his hands, unarmed. “Do you have a problem with me being here?” *Nice to see you too, little brother.* He didn’t miss the bitterness that laced his baby brother’s voice.

Nelo moved past his brother and entered the living room. “What are you doing here?” he repeated his earlier question, hoping for an answer.

He wasn’t in the mood for pleasantries anytime one of his brothers came around. Trouble followed them like a shadow. Even if it had been at least two centuries since he’d seen Nero, Nelo still didn’t appreciate him breaking into his home. And he did not like repeating himself.

Nero faced his baby brother, who stood a couple of inches taller than him. His black hair was shorter since the last Nero had seen Nelo, but the thick mass still hung well past his shoulders. His eyes still gave away his emotions—a trait from their mother.

Nelo was the only sibling that had their fathers’ coal-rimmed eyes; a genetic marker that went back to their roots. “Damn, son, have you gotten bigger?” Nero asked taking in his brothers’ stature.

*The piercing through his bottom lip was new,* Nero thought. He would admit the thin hoop suited his younger brother’s personality or what he remembered of it. Too much

had passed since they last spoke. He hoped it wasn't too late to mend their relationship.

Looking at his brother, Nero's light eyes gleamed. They held a hint of mischief in them. Nelo knew this wasn't a social visit since the stench of the VN hung on to his brother like the shirt he wore. When his brother's eyes locked on his, Nelo got a really bad feeling. "Nero..." Nelo asked giving his brother a hard look.

"You aren't still mad at me?" Nero asked. Damn, it had been centuries since that morning and still Nelo was hanging on to that shit. All it took to tear families apart was one impetuous act.

"No." Nelo answered with more bit than he intended. Too much time had passed to hold on to hurt feelings. Especially when he had caused them. It was unnerving to look at Nero directly in the eyes. One was solid black, the other was white with a black iris and a black ring around the outside of the white, giving the eye a ringed appearance. It reminded Nelo of how alike Nero was to both of their parents.

*Oh, but you're about to be pissed all over again, little brother.* Nero concealed his smile. "I have a job for you."

"You have a job for me? This is priceless." Nelo leaned against the kitchen counter, wondering why Nero would need him for a job. He also knew it would aggravate Nero to know he had been tracking Julian, their brother, who was heading down a dangerous path. One he might not be able to come back from. "Why are you really here?" Nero had never needed his help with a job or to do a job. His brother was up to something, and it would probably bite Nelo in the ass.

Nero crossed his arms and wondered if Nelo ever thought about his mate. That, after all, had been the bone of contention between them. "I need you to find a female for me."

"Why? Can't you find your own female?" Snickering, Nelo pushed away from the counter and grabbed a beer from the fridge. He didn't offer Nero one because he was a few seconds from tossing him out. Nelo had been up for three days, tracking Julian. The male needed to be brought to heel.

And soon, before Nero's friend—the King—ordered their brother painted. To be painted sounded nicer than what it actually meant. If an immortal was painted, they'd to be brought in—dead or alive. Nelo was trying to get Julian to go into hiding. The thought of Julian being painted did not sit well with him. *Brothers to the end*, he thought.

“She's not my female. She's *a* female. I need you to find her.” It was a struggle not to laugh at the thought of Nelo running down his own mate. Nero would bet money Nelo would probably kill him when he realized how he had been played. “Take a minute to think it over.” Nero told his brother.

Picking up the latest edition of *Gun & Ammo* from the coffee table, Nero took stock of where everything in the living room sat. Nelo was smart at how he had his house arranged. Nothing blocked the exits. There was a clear line to the fire escape. Nero appreciated the layout.

Nelo could almost read his brother's thoughts as he continued flipping through the magazine. He wanted Nero gone. Nelo leaned over the counter as his brother assessed his living room. *More like snooping*, Nelo thought. He hated when family came around, always asking for favors. That was a joke. Nero didn't need him to find anyone. Something was definitely going on. “Spill it.”

The last time a family member showed up on his doorstep, they had gotten Nelo involved in a shifter conflict in the Baltic Sea. It took him months to heal from that shit show.

Nero tossed the magazine back on the table. Then he turned to Nelo. “Locke wants the female found.”

“The King?” If Nelo didn't owe Locke a lifetime of favors, he'd have refused. Tipping the bottle back, he took a long pull on the dark ale. His mood spiraled fast. He had missed Nero over the years, but he just didn't like where this reunion was headed.

“He's the only one I know.” Nero dropped down in the nearest chair.

Even with them standing in the same room, too much space remained between them. Centuries had passed to patch things up then. *Sometimes, you just couldn't go back*, Nelo thought. "Why?"

"He's the damn king. Locke asked, and I said ok." Nero knew his brother's feelings toward him, and it pained him to know how deeply their separation had affected them.

Nelo pointed at him as he walked from the kitchen. "The King of the Vampire Nation had asked you to find the missing female, not me." Nelo didn't feel the need to remind Nero that he was not aligned with the VN or the king.

When Nelo opened the front door and waited for him to leave, Nero thought they had been close once, but that was a long time ago. Today, they weren't mending that fence.

Time did not heal all wounds, and memories didn't fade as one would think. Nelo's wounds went hand in hand in the form of another female, one that put a wedge between brothers. "I'm actually in the middle of something. I can't help you."

Nero remained seated, even going so much as to stretch his legs, as if he were staying. "Nelo, let it go. It's been centuries."

An argument had severed their closeness. Nelo didn't see any reason hashing it out now. "Why me?"

"I have another job I'm currently on at the moment."

"I'm busy." *Running down Julian.*

The thought hit Nero hard. Nelo had let it spill out. He heard it deep in the recesses of his mind. A connection still remained between them. Unfolding himself from the chair, Nero advanced on his baby brother. "You're running down our brother."

Damn it. Julian was a rogue and unaligned with the king or his family. Nero, on the other hand, stunk of the upper class. "It's my business," Nelo snapped back, almost coming nose to nose with Nero. Their older brother was an assassin for hire. There was a price on Julian's head, and Nelo needed to find him before someone else did.

A deep growl emitted from Nero as he stared down at his baby brother. “It’s *our* business.” Nelo needed to stop looking for Julian before he screwed the male’s job up. Maybe Julian needed to come clean with their baby brother. He was in bed with the VN more than Nero. Nelo was the only one that remained on the outside.

Pointing a finger at Nero, Nelo reminded him that their brother was in a world of hurt. “Julian’s been painted.”

“That listing was canceled,” Nero growled at his brother like a Pitbull, ready to attack. Every time Julian’s name came up in conversation with family or friend, he seemed to end up on the defensive.

Things hadn’t changed between them; it had always been this way. Nero always defended Julian, but no one had ever offered him that helping hand. It was an old argument. One that neither one of them wanted to revisit. Nelo thought.

“Leave the information and I will see what I can find for you. No promises. Understand?” Shoring up his internal walls, Nelo shoved them at Nero. His brother was not welcome to his thoughts.

Nero felt the push, like a steel door slamming in his face. His brother was right; it was time for him to leave. “Thank you.”

Nelo grinned as Nero moved toward the door. “That had to hurt.” Nelo smirked.

“You have no idea,” Nero mumbled, stepping out. *Finally.*

Nelo closed the door just as Nero waved and answered his phone.

“This is going to bite me in the ass.” Nelo sighed.

## CHAPTER

### *Two*

Wynter Dae was revered as much as she was feared during her time as a soldier for the Vampire Nation. She was as loyal to the Baroe family that ruled the VN today as she had been during her time as one of their soldiers. Some days, she missed both being back with the Baroe's and being among other soldiers at headquarters. Some days, not so much. After too many battles and not enough personal time, she had made the decision to take some time off from both.

It'd been hard and impetuous. The king had taken her decision in stride, which had surprised Wynter. In the end, she realized he probably was as glad to see her go off as she was to be on her own. How wrong she had been.

For the past half century, she'd hopped from city to city, country to country, and everywhere in between. She spent her summers in the Netherlands and her winters in warmer climates. She discovered Paris was truly the city of love, and whatever happened in Vegas should stay in Vegas. She'd eaten some of the best spicy foods in the heart of Louisiana, and sampled Bar-B-Q in Chicago that would never be topped.

She'd sailed the oceans on a ship called the Widowmaker, captained by a female pirate, Nash, and helped enslaved people free themselves from their repressors. There had been a lot of adventures in her long life.

But the one place she stayed clear of was the home of her roots. She'd visited Scotland many times; just not the north country where she had hailed from centuries ago. Now she had come full circle. The city of Edinburgh had been bustling with

holiday shoppers already crowding the busy streets. Looking around, Wynter had observed about how things had changed in Scotland pertaining to the holiday season.

In the days of the Celtic Pagans, the winter solstice was celebrated in acknowledgment of the shortest day of the year. Till date, there were folks who still celebrated the solstice with festivities to brighten the days of winter and to appease the gods where the sun would return.

Then came the Roman Catholics and parliament who decided to band the holiday. *Oh, how things changed*, Wynter thought as she walked down the street listening to a tipsy passerby's attempt at a bit of caroling.

If she strained her ears enough, Wynter would hear the sounds of ancient rituals. The clash of steel from battles fought on the very ground she stood. In the distance, the sound of bagpipes softly filtered through the crowded streets. Wynter snapped out of her thoughts and back to the present. There were no rituals tonight. No battles to fight. Just enjoyment of the holiday season.

Moving along the crowded busy streets, she took in the sights and listened to laughter. Small children ran circles around their parents. From open shop doors, she smelled the aroma of Christmas. Citrus peel, allspice, ginger, and cinnamon. If anyone asked what Christmas tasted like, that would be her lengthy answer. Thinking about soft baked gingerbread had her mouthwatering.

Stepping into a bakery, she found the gingerbread along with black buns. Wynter grabbed a half dozen of miniature mince pies to take with her on the trip north. The shopkeeper served small glasses of whisky which the patrons appreciated. The aromatic flavor of caramel flavored alcohol was warm to the taste as it moved across her tongue and down to her belly. "I'll take a bottle of the whisky," she told the shopkeeper. It would pair nicely with her mince pies.

Gathering up her packages of treats, Wynter thanked the shopkeeper again, then stepped out on the street. A group of carolers passed by in Victorian outfits, and strings of lights



began to come alive as the sun started to set. She realized her time was running out to catch the train. Knowing her reservation at the castle up in the highlands wasn't until the next day, she decided on the train trip instead of opting for a partial trip by plane.

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Standing in his kitchen, Nelo stared at the information his brother sent him. There was nothing that would clue him in on who he was hunting. Basic information, name, age, military ranking. *Impressive.*

The female hadn't been a simpering woman. She had been in some of the bloodiest battles in their world. She was part of a forward team until she was shelved. Which meant either she became injured, or she had become a liability to the VN.

That could be why Locke wanted her found and brought back to the headquarters. The female may still be a liability to them. Nelo turned over an image that Nero had sent him and shook his head. It was so blurry he couldn't actually make out her face.

*What was he supposed to do with this crap.* He texted Nero.

Nelo: Nero, I need an image of my target. The one you sent over is crap.

Nero: I'll send it over shortly.

Nelo: Thanks.

Nero: Have you found Julian?

Nelo: Haven't looked for him since you were here.

Nero: When this job is over, we'll find him together.

He was sure Nero was lying his ass off. They weren't going to find Julian together. It was more like Nero would warn Julian that Nelo was looking for him. *Family sucked. Taking a ride would clear his head.* Grabbing his keys and jacket, he headed out the door and straight to his bike.

He let out a low growl. There was no way going for a ride would help him. Not with the holiday crowds added to the normal hectic traffic. He would just be pissed in under a mile.

Turning back around, he stalked back inside, tossing his jacket and keys on the sofa as he headed for the fridge and a cold beer. Reaching in the icebox, he pulled out a bottle and twisted off the top. Flicking the cap in the trash, Nelo took a long pull on the cold liquid.

*Okay, where would I be if I was on the run from the VN.* Nelo smirked. If it was him, he'd be right under their noses. He'd be in plain sight right where they would never think to look.

Moving from his kitchen into his living room, he pulled out his laptop and fired it up. He could hack the area around the VN headquarters surveillance cameras and look for her. But how could he pick her out of a crowd when he couldn't tell what she looked like from the damn photo?

Tossing the laptop to the side, Nelo leaned back, fuming that he had said yes to his brother. The asshole probably shoved the assignment off onto Nelo because he couldn't find her with the information provided.

Leaning forward, Nelo rubbed his temples. Still, he decided to spend his afternoon on research. He would run her name through every database on the planet and see what popped.

## CHAPTER

### *Three*

She'd been in Scotland for two damn days, and already, her hotel room had been broken into and all her belongings rifled through. After the management apologized for the incident, they moved her to another room. Wynter almost bailed on staying in the room as soon as she walked along the corridor. It was a bit overwhelming to be back in her childhood room.

What had she been thinking? She'd been thinking about how awesome it was to be back in her homeland, sleeping in a castle her family had once owned.

Truth be told, it saddened her as she the strangers bustled around what once had belonged to her family. She knew every nook and cranny. Every tucked-in alcove. Every secret hallway, room, and laird's lug. In the bedroom, she counted steps across the floor and found the squeaky board still there.

Laughing, Wynter had popped one end with her fist, making the board tip up. It came loose just as it always had. There, amongst what remained of the old straw that was meant for insulation, she found a keep's sake box and a handkerchief that held a piece of her mother's jewelry—a little pendant with the letter D on it.

The box contained things she held valuable; a worry stone that was rubbed almost flat. A pale brown feather from a Hen harrier and a small dagger her father had given her.

Her family name was Da Viene. They had ruled over the castle and the land that still belonged to it. People admired them, envied them, and wanted to be them. Once upon a time,

she had mistakenly thought that was a form of flattery. It wasn't. It was a match to a flame. Envy and jealousy laid the path for gossip and treachery. In a blink of an eye, the name Da Viene went from revered to people spitting on the ground after saying it.

Now in the twenty-first century, Wynter had shortened it to Dae. Without thinking, her name had become a quirky, cute girl's name instead of one that announced someone of her warrior status. She had lived with the hushed snickering when her name was said and the childish comments by males.

She had proven her worth and then some. The only ones who laughed now did it out of her ear shot, or they found themselves at the end of her blade. Still, she should have thought it through for more than a minute. Wynter had tucked the long-ago items into a hidden pocket in her suitcase and put the board back in place.

Lying in bed, she prayed her mind would stop working overtime so she could get some much-needed sleep. But her thoughts were on an infinite loop. She had two weeks set aside for staying at her ancestral home, and she intended to enjoy them.

Snow had begun to fall near midnight. The wind howled as if hounds were at the very door and the thin-paned windows rattled. *Fucking Christmas in Scotland*, Wynter thought. She pulled the heavy quilts up to her chin, wanting to do nothing more than to snuggle in deep, but the incisive ringing of her phone had her rolling over to answer it. Cursing under her breath, she snapped, "Hello."

"Wynter."

The deep, rich baritone voice came across the line. Damn it, she should have looked at the caller ID. "Locke."

Being the king of the Vampire Nation did not always give folks a warm and fuzzy feeling. Wynter Dae was family to Locke and his two brothers. The female just needed reminding of that detail. By the sound of her voice, she seemed annoyed. Maybe his scheming was working, and the break-in had done the trick. If it hadn't, Locke would come up with a new plan of

attack. Wynter needed to be back where she could be protected, not out taking risk. How many times did he have to tell her this? “I need you to come back to the headquarters.”

*Nope, not happening, Your Lordship.* “Sure.”

“When should I expect you?” *You’re coming back one way or another.*

*I’ll get right on that...not.* “In one hundred years.” *Or when pigs fly, and cows talk.*

“Unacceptable.” Locke was already making plans as he tapped a pen on his desk. And he knew just who to call to help him. A couple of someone’s to be exact. Wynter might think she knew all of his associates, but there were those on the fringe that he sometimes used. He had piled favors and debts for just these reasons, and he was about to cash in on a few of them. Wynter was special in their world, different, and whether she wanted to admit it or not, she needed to be protected. Kept safe. There had been too many close calls over the centuries, and as the King, it was his job to make sure she was safe.

Centuries ago, Wynter had ferried a favor and conned Locke, forcing him, the King of the VN, to allow her to be a soldier for the nation. So many perished in the last war it amazed him that Wynter had survived. Through the years, she had become more than a soldier to him and his brothers. She had become family.

Wynter stared up at the timbered ceiling above her bed, thinking how any other immortal would be heading back to the headquarters as fast as they could if the King of the Vampire Nation called saying “I need you to come back”—but not her. No, the idea of going back did not appeal to her. She had given all the years she had to give. Being a soldier for the Vampire Nation had taken everything out of her. She had put her life on the line more times than she cared to remember. Wynter would not be giving Locke Baroe and his nation another day. She smirked as she thought about what his response would be when she refused. Locke might treat her like family, but he was still a scary SOB.

He, along with the ruling family, had taken a liking to her after a century or two. Once they figured out all the issues that came with her, they wanted to protect her. Keep her safe. It had taken some fast talking to remain a soldier. Fifty years ago, Wynter took a vacation from that life, and Locke hadn't stopped trying to get her back ever since.

Every few years, he sent someone after her. It had nothing to do with the King wanting her back as a soldier and everything to do with her limited abilities as an immortal. Wynter understood he wanted her safe, but locking her down within the VN wasn't in any way appealing to her. She had no business or desires to attend fancy teas and cultural events. "Locke, I think you need to accept the fact I'm on a break."

He snickered, which in layman's terms, meant he was already planning something. However, knowing every soldier in his employment, she would see them coming from a long, long way off. Nevertheless, Wynter already started making plans to check out ASAP. Looking at the digital clock, she watched the time tick by. "Locke, it's late. Can we argue about this after Christmas?"

"When did you start celebrating the holidays?" Damned female probably had one foot out the door and the other one on the gas pedal moving fast. "Why not come home for the holidays. Celebrate it with us. Damn it, Wynter, we miss you." Locke tried every other direction to convince her to come back.

"Bye, Locke." Hanging up, she tossed back the covers, jumped out of bed, and scurried across the room to grab a quick shower and pack. As she stood in the bathroom waiting for the water to warm up—which took forever—she bounced from one cold foot to the other while dialing Katana. Locke, that rat bastard, probably had someone already on the way to get her.

A curt "Hello" came from the other end of the line. Wynter would know that raspy voice anywhere. "Babe, I need an exit strategy."

Katana smirked, holding the phone to her ear. Glancing over her shoulder, she made sure the male currently in her bed was asleep. The last thing she needed was someone eavesdropping on her conversation. *I know why you're running, sister.* “Leaving from and going where?” Tapping her fingers on her computer keyboard, Katana listened to Wynter.

Wynter moved as close to the small bathroom furnace as she could get without catching herself on fire. *Damn, it's fucking cold.* “Scotland to anywhere.” *Maybe somewhere warmer.*

“Are you not enjoying the highlands?” *This is going to cost the king big time,* Katana thought as she searched for a one-way trip to anywhere. If anyone else had called asking for her to set up a friend, Katana would have refused, but she owed the king's family, and this favor scratched a lot off her debt. She also did not want to be on Locke's radar, even if it meant lying to a friend.

Not wanting to get her best friend involved in her ongoing argument with Locke, Wynter lied. “No. It's not what I expected.”

*Liar,* Katana thought. “Check your phone in five.” *Good luck!*

“Thanks, sweet cheeks.” Five minutes later, Wynter was looking at the train schedule and ticket information to leave Scotland. The itinerary took her to Paris. An advertisement for Christmas in Paris popped up with a note from Katana saying good luck, and Wynter smiled. Yes, Paris was beautiful this time of the year, with the snow and all the lights. With her new destination planned out for her, she tossed the phone on the counter and dove into the lukewarm water with a screech.

## CHAPTER

### *Four*

When she stepped off the train three days ago, Wynter thought Paris was still beautiful. Then reality set in as she looked closer at the ‘city of love’. Yes, there was beauty to be seen and even a little love in the air, but there was also the overcrowded streets full of tourists. Streets littered with trash and rude servers at restaurants and cafés. Current Paris wasn’t exactly yesterday’s Paris. Still determined to enjoy her visit, Wynter had checked into the hotel Katana set up for her, only to check out the next day.

Call it a soldier’s instinct, or a woman’s intuition, either way, the hairs on the back of her neck told Wynter something had been amiss at the hotel. With it being the holiday season, she had been lucky Katana was able to find a room at one of the finer hotels. And why shouldn’t she splurge? After all, she had the means to treat herself nicely. Being immortal did have a few perks.

With her belongings stored in her room and Paris laid out before her, Wynter intended to find a French patisserie and indulge in rich hot cocoa and decadent dark chocolate that only the French could create. After that, she’d think about lunch, then dinner. She hadn’t had the chance to shop in Scotland, so she put that on her list as well.

The hotel Katana had chosen was situated in the vibrant Saint-Germain-des-Près area of Paris. It was a luxury hotel sitting on the city’s Left Bank. Walking through the lobby of her hotel, Wynter took her time admiring the architectural beauty of the building’s interior. It did not disappoint when the



establishment opened in the early nineteen hundreds. The hotel's design was considered a daring move, taking the look from art nouveau to the emerging look of art deco.

Moving outside, Wynter headed for some shopping and a little lunch. Again, that tingling sensation started to crawl up her spine. Glancing around, she looked for anyone that appeared out of sorts. Wynter couldn't pinpoint anyone or anything that stood out. Shoving the feeling off, she turned and walked down the street.

Winter in Paris did have its downside. It was undeniable that it was often rainy, definitely cold, and nighttime settled in early. On the upside, you could layer your outfit and pair it with a nice warm knee-length coat and cozy scarf. When the days settled into night, it gave a good reason to duck inside museums. And one should never forget that Paris at night was beautiful when it became illuminated from thousands of lights.

One of the best parts of being here during the winter months for Wynter was fewer crowds. It was something about being crammed against strangers that felt unsettling to her. But all that aside, Paris in Christmas remained magical for Wynter. Today, the temperature was dipping lower than expected, and to everyone's surprise, a light flurry of snow was riding the wind. People seemed more joyful to Wynter as they laughed, holding out their hands, trying to catch a flurry or two. Snow in Paris was rare. When in Paris, she thought and turned her face skywards, letting the small fluffy snowflakes land on her skin.

Wiping the droplets from her face left behind by the snow flurries, Wynter looked around, following her nose as she smelled a familiar aroma. Tucking into a restaurant, she purchased a cup of Vin Chaud (mulled wine). She loved the flavor. Wynter had always considered the drink a warm winter favorite. The flavor was richly sweet, made from a mix of sugar, citrus, red wine, and spices. The aroma alone could warm one on a cold day. *The perfect holiday beverage*, Wynter thought as she took her first sip.

The day was sunny but rather chilly with a threat of rain in the evening. Holding the cup with both hands, she was

thankful she had layered her outfit. Glancing around, Wynter decided shopping could wait until after a bit of lunch. Walking along, she did a little window shopping, making a mental note of shops to come back to later.

Across the street sat a little rustic restaurant that was nearly packed with local Parisians enjoying a meal. By the look on their faces, she needed to sample some of the cuisine. Rushing across the street, avoiding a group of tourists, she stepped onto the sidewalk just in time as a group of customers exited the establishments.

“Table for one, madame?” asked the hostess.

“Oui, puis-je m’asseoir près de la fenêtre?” Wynter asked, hoping to be sat by a window where she could continue to enjoy the day.

“Oui, suivez- moi.” The hostess showed her a little two-top by the front window. As Wynter sat down, the girl handed her the menu.

“Merci.” She smiled at the hostess.

Setting her Vin Chaud to the side, Wynter looked over the menu and found the decision of what she would eat for lunch would not be an easy task.

All during lunch Wynter couldn’t shake the feeling of being watched. It was unnerving having the feeling of being watched when you couldn’t put your eyes on the watcher. She had been nonchalant but vigilant as she sat in the window eating her lunch. Unfortunately, due to the uneasy feeling that had settled into her gut, the food tasted bland on her tongue. She had tried in vain to locate the cause of her unrest with no avail. Not even a glimmer of light from a gun had caught her eye.

Leaving the restaurant, she had decided it was just residual feelings from Scotland. Having your room broken into and your things rifled through did that to a girl. How dare someone rummage through her dainties. *Her undergarments were private and not even a burglar should dig through them,* Wynter thought.

Out on the streets, the feeling was back. Moving over the uneven stone street, Wynter recognized the warnings that someone was hunting her. The tingles running up and down her spine had her brain screaming to run. She tried scouring through all the scenarios of how and why she would be targeted, but nothing came to mind.

Fifty years, she'd been on her own away from the Baroe family and the VN. Could Locke be that mad at her refusal to come home that he would have her hunted down like an animal? It had never crossed her mind that she might actually be on the run from the Nation. She simply had no intention of going back. Her obligation had ended years ago. One hundred years Wynter had given in return for a favor. A favor the recipient knew nothing about, nor would they appreciate. Shaking out of her thoughts, she kept moving.

Shots rang out from behind her, pieces of brick scattered across the ground. Ducking low, she tried becoming less of a target. She had to wonder what the hell had she done lately to piss someone off this badly. Moving along the brick wall, her arm scraped against the jagged brick ledge.

Rough brick shoved into her exposed arm, slicing it open and creating a small wound. Wynter tried sending healing cells to the wound, but unfortunately nothing happened. She didn't even have enough ability to stem the blood that trickled from it. A shot hit Wynter in her shoulder, causing her to stumble forward. A tingling sensation started immediately in her arm. Reaching her hand to where the sensation started, she pulled a dart from her body. "Damn it!" She shoved the dart in her pocket to examine later when her life wasn't in jeopardy.

Immediately, the drug worked in her system, causing a buzzing to start in her head. Struggling to stay upright, she bumped into a table. Bouncing off of the little bistro table, she apologized as she knocked into a patron. Damn, this was not going to be a fun evening after all.

Falling against the building, she blinked rapidly, trying to stay upright. It would take time for her body to decipher the poison and push it out of her system. But it wouldn't do her any good to pass out in the open. She needed a place to hide.

The last thing Wynter needed was for her scent to be caught by others of her kind. A weak immortal could easily become a dead one.

Any other immortal would already have identified the poison and pushed it from their bloodstream. Not her. Oh, no, she was the dud of the immortal world. She should get it tattooed on her forehead. That way, others wouldn't be surprised when shit went sideways. It wasn't like she had faulty magical powers like the witch she met in Wales. Or the shifter that could only partially shift, mostly staying in human form.

Nope, she had nothing. No shifting. No magic. No controlling nature. No fangs, which was probably the biggest disappointment. She needed a place to lay low for a while. Then she would hunt her target to the end of the earth. *Bastard.*

The sun tucked behind the building and cast shadows. Looking around, she saw no one on the side street she had turned onto before collapsing against the building. Across the road lay the entrance to the catacombs. Closing time should be about then. The thought of being underground didn't thrill her, but what choice did she have? *Damn it, Wynter, you're a soldier, so act like it.* The inner monologue was not helping, and her inner bitch needed to step off.

Moving quickly across the open expanse, she found the door opened slightly and ducked into the dark alcove. Voices could be heard coming from a lit passage. Pushing further into the shadows where a curious mortal wouldn't come across her, she felt her limbs start to become heavy. Dropping to her knees, she pitched forward as darkness took her.

## CHAPTER

### *Five*

Four days, Nelo had wasted waiting for his brother to send more information. Information on the female Locke wanted brought in. It took another day to find out she was in Paris. Locating her in the city of love had been a lot easier without the dossier that Nero had sent over. After he'd run her name through every data base he could think of, and nothing had popped, Nero had sent over a second file from the King. The information made it a lot easier to track her movements. Seemed Locke kept tight tabs on the female.

Now he was on the hunt, following the female through the streets of Paris. As he moved through the crowded street, Nelo kept his target in sight. For three days, he'd searched for anything on her. His instincts told him there was a whole lot more to the story than he was being told. The way she moved set off warning bells in his head. At every turn she managed to keep her face averted from his view, as if she was aware someone was tracking her. A hand full of times Nelo managed to get a glimpse of her profile. Those moments were fleeting. Keeping an eye on his target, he watched as the female moved through the Paris streets, avoiding cameras, or drawing attention to herself.

Her clothes were unencumbering and practical. The tall boots she wore had heels that were too tall for the average person to run in, but she maneuvered over the cobblestone with precise steps. His instincts told him she was part of the VN, but there had been nothing to solidify that thought. Maybe the king had a personal connection to her. Whatever it

was, Nelo didn't need to know, that wasn't the job. All Nero told him was that Locke wanted her to be brought in.

The information was thin. The image of his prey had been grainy at best. Something about her seemed familiar, but he couldn't put his finger on it. Her name wasn't one that came to mind. Confirmation on where she was staying in the city had come from an untraceable email. This whole thing stunk of the VN. What had this female done that the Vampire King was hell-bent on getting her to headquarters?

Movement to his left had him sinking into the shadows of the building, causing him to lose sight of his target. But Nelo's attention snapped back toward the direction of the female when he heard a commotion. He caught sight of her tumbling against a table, knocking into a few patrons, as she tried skirting through the crowded dining area.

Christmas in Paris, what a bitch. Nelo scanned the area as sounds of muffled shots rang out. They pinged off the bricks near the female. Whirling around, Nelo saw the light reflect off the gun's barrel. The shooter was up on the roof across the way. Pulling out his Glock, he fired at the assailant. The man turned and pointed the blasted weapon at him. When the shooter popped his head from behind the gun, Nelo recognized him. *Julian*. He and his brother seemed to be focused on the same female.

Nelo ducked for cover as Julian fired off a couple of rounds in his direction. Nelo returned fire again. Humans weren't supposed to know about them, but unfortunately, Julian wanted to fight out in the open. Concentrating on the elements, Nelo slowed the very fabric of time as he aimed high above the crowd, firing off a few rounds at his brother. Nelo waited five seconds, maybe ten, finally releasing his hold on time. Then he stepped out of the shadows to find Julian was gone. *Again*. It took a moment for the humans to steady themselves. They were like marionettes without someone holding their strings as they came off the time suck.

Centuries back, he would have found humor in the sight. Not so much now that he was older and wiser. Pushing through the crowd, Nelo lost sight of the female. Opening up

his senses, he picked up on something else. Something new, something that took him in a different direction. A scent—wild and fiery. *Familiar.*

Following the trail, he moved fluidly in and out of pedestrians. Using his keen sense of smell, he followed the faint scent as it began to fade. There, on the wall, a single droplet of blood lay on an outcropping of bricks. Nelo wiped it off the brick. Rubbing it between his fingers, he brought it to his nose. Closing his eyes, he searched for the path. When he caught it, his eyes blazed open.

She was in distress and the scent was fading. Rushing across the open area, Nelo followed the weakening aroma. *It took a certain kind of monster to hunt females. What had turned his brother into a gun-for-hire and one that hunted females?* Something he should discuss with Nero after this job was over.

The scent led him to the catacombs. He knew by the time of day; they would be closing. If she were injured, she could be disoriented, and in there, she could get lost. That was not happening on his watch. Reaching the door that lay barely open, his phone vibrated as he moved through the opening. Hissing out a string of curses, he answered, “What, Nero?”

“What’s your status?”

“I’m not sure what my status is, and our brother is after the same female.”

*Shit, the fool wasn’t supposed to be seen.* “Why do you say that?” This whole situation was becoming a pain in his ass.

“Nero, he shot at her. What is going on?” Looking around, Nelo scanned the rooftops for any sign of Julian.

“I don’t know, but I will get to the bottom of it. Be careful. Julian is cray-cray.” Nero chuckled.

*Did he just say cray-cray? What is wrong with my brothers?* “Just find out what the deal is.”

“I’ll touch base with you later tonight.” Nero snickered as he hung up.

Shoving his phone back in his pocket, Nelo headed into the catacombs. The humans had only scratched the surface of the underground. There were places deep within the catacombs that immortals had used for centuries. Tunnels that ran underneath the city were many. If mortals only knew how far they could go, they would seal the place up for eternity.

Nelo cleared his mind as he changed form, becoming more the ghost he was than the male he let be seen. The scent had become faint, but he could tell how close to the entrance she was. Moving to his left, the dim light from the open door allowed him little help. He saw her then, slumped unconscious on the dirt floor. “What have you gotten yourself into?” he asked the unconscious female as he moved closer to her. The odor of blood both alarmed and enticed him. Nelo hadn’t reacted to a female’s blood since... *There’s no way*. Kneeling down, Nelo gently rolled her over. Brushing back the hair from her face, Nelo cursed. The female was his mate.

It amazed him that he hadn’t felt that she was his mate. Days he’d been tracking her and not even a twinge of recognition had struck him. Being mated, they would know when they were in the same area. How had he not known it was her over the last few days? How had he not recognized her in the picture Nero sent him? The image had been blurry, Nelo reminded himself. Something wasn’t right.

He should leave her there, but he’d hate himself later for it. It gave him some comfort to know when she woke, she would be no happier than he was. Checking her, he found a small head wound, which she probably got when she fell. A laceration to her arm was still bleeding. *Why hadn’t she tried healing herself*, he wondered. Nelo had no luck in trying to rouse her.

Searching her body for any other injuries, he found a dart in her coat pocket, then found the small bruise where the dart had pierced her skin. Bringing it to his nose, he identified the drug as an animal tranquilizer. It was just enough to knock her out but not enough to keep her down for long.

With his options limited, he chose not to leave her, hoping she would be found in the morning still breathing. Instead, he



decided to take her to his home. He would have to use the tunnels below the catacombs where no one would question why he was carrying a bleeding female through Paris. Plus, it would give him a head start on Julian. Something didn't feel right with the situation. Nelo would figure all of it out once they were out of the catacombs.

Picking up the female, Nelo tried to not smile feeling her weight. She had filled out since he last saw her centuries ago. Under different circumstances, he would take the time to appreciate it. For now, he would get her to safety. Nelo breathed through his mouth, keeping her scent from enticing him further.

*Three centuries later and her scent still affects me. His mate was a pain in the ass just as he thought she would be. Damn it.*

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## CHAPTER

## *Six*

The smell of cedar and vanilla surrounded Wynter. It felt like coming home after a long time away. Nuzzling closer to the warmth, it gave her a feeling of comfort. Suddenly, her brain came back online, her eyes popping open. Darkness engulfed her as panic began to take over as she realized someone was carrying her. Arms that felt like steel bracketed her against a wide, muscled chest, and they tightened their hold as she struggled to get free.

“Who are you? What do you want from me?” she croaked out, the poison from the dart still wreaking havoc on her system. Her voice was rough and drowsy instead of demanding and furious.

The position her body was in made it impossible to reach any of the weapons she had hidden on her person for protection. This was bad, bad, bad. Never had she been taken so easily in her long life. Wynter had been taken prisoner in the past but not without a bloody fight.

“You’re safe, little one. I promise.”

Who was this arrogant ass calling her a little one? She’d show him little, just let her get out of his arms. “Who are you and what do you want with me?” she asked again. Her head throbbed. Reaching up, she felt a wound that still bled slowly.

“I’m Nelo. I don’t want anything from you.”

“Why did you drug me?”

“I didn’t drug you.”

“Then why are you carrying me?”

“You were darted. I found you in the catacombs.”

“Okay. Nelo who?”

“Nelo Vaughan.”

Nelo Vaughan. Nelo... Holy fuck balls, her mate was carrying her. The last thing she needed was to be near the male. Rumor had it that Nelo and his kind were a half-vampire, half-demon. They were of the purest bloodlines. The result was godlike hybrids that could control the elements. She hadn't known that information the one night they had spent together. “You can put me down.”

“It's easier and faster for me to carry you through the tunnels. I don't need you to fall off a ledge into a pool. You could drown.” Plus, the boots she wore would be a complete nightmare at trying to maneuver the catacombs.

Wynter thought about his statement. It was more likely she would drown due to her not being able to swim. Not because of her injury. “Let's not put me down.”

It did not go un-noticed by Nelo that his mate hadn't made a comment about who he was in regards to them being mated. Did she not remember his name? Damn it, it had been three centuries since they'd lain together. “Do you not know who I am?”

Could she have ended up anywhere worse than this shit? “I've heard of you.” *Take that, asshole.*

“Heard of me, is that all?” Nelo smiled as he moved along the dark passageways, wondering what Wynter would do when she got a look at his face. And he could only imagine what she had heard about him.

Wynter smiled to herself at the sound of Nelo's disbelief in her not knowing him. She tried focusing on anything other than being carried by Nelo Vaughan. Her mate had one hell of a reputation as more than an assassin in the immortal world. He had one as a ladies' man. The brand that spread over her upper back screamed “mated.” It made it clear to anyone who

saw it that she belonged to him. The problem was that she hadn't completed half of that mating.

Three centuries before, she had been sent on a mission. All she had to do was die, not get mated. She still blamed Locke for that debacle. The mission hadn't even been all that hard. Wynter often wondered why Locke had said it was a suicide mission and haphazardly warned her off.

*Too much mead had always been the fault in ruining a well-laid plan*, Wynter thought. All she had wanted was a one-night stand before running headstrong into a bloody battle. When she woke up mated to Nelo, she had run and hard. But not until she had heard his angry words about her with another male.

Wynter would love to say she barely remembered her mate's face. But that was a lie. She remembered everything that made up his great body. She knew every angle and line of his handsome face. But she didn't remember his scent. Chalk it up to her being a dud in the immortal world.

It was rare to find an immortal that didn't heal rapidly or have some form of extra special ability. Wynter was one of the rare ones that didn't have what the rest had. She had only met two other females like herself, and she wasn't even sure they were still alive. How she had survived all these centuries was probably sheer dumb luck on her part.

Listening to the sound of water dripping off the tunnel roof made her shiver. She hated being underground. Chills cascaded down her spine as the air became heavy. The one thing that Wynter did have was a keen sixth sense, and her spidey senses were on high alert. Something or someone was in the tunnel with them. "Can you feel them?" she whispered against Nelo's skin. She tightened her hold on Nelo as he quickened his pace. That was all the response she got before he tucked them into a little alcove.

Wynter tired focusing her eyes where she could get a read on the surroundings. Her feet touched the ground. Without making a sound, she squeezed his arm. She felt his breath as it

caressed her neck. “Stay here and don’t make a sound,” he whispered, sending different kind of chills over her skin.

She began to protest, but Nelo touched his lips to hers. *Barely a kiss*, she thought as he told her to stay quiet. With that, he was gone. In her head, Wynter knew he had to leave her for a moment to make sure what was following them wasn’t a threat. Still, she trembled at being left alone in the damp darkness. The air began to get sparse as the darkness closed in on her.

She grappled to find purchase against the wall. Damn him for leaving her. Surely, her mate wouldn’t leave her there to make her way out alone. If he didn’t come back, she would be lost in the tunnels beneath the catacombs for a lifetime, possibly more. *Think, Wynter, repeat the journey but backward*. Her mind fizzled out on her as the quiet closed in. The only sounds she heard was the rapid pulse of her heart pounding in her ears and her breath as it came out in heavy pants.

She had been a prisoner a century back. Her captor had kept her locked below the ground in a small dungeon. Wynter had made him suffer for a long time once she got loose. But ever since that event, she broke out into cold sweats when stuck in dark spaces.

Just thinking of her time in captivity had sweat beginning to bead up along her forehead. Shrugging out of her scarf and coat, she dropped it, trying to calm herself, before a full panic attack gripped her. Pressing tighter against the wall, she felt tears well up. She didn’t know how long she stayed like that keeping the panic at bay.

A small breeze tickled her flesh as once again she was manacled by large hands and strong arms. Biting down on a scream, Wynter swore at him, “Could you at least warn me next time?” she hissed as Nelo cradled her in his arms. “Did you find who was following us?”

“It was just grave robbers.”

“How nice.”

“They won’t find anything here. But they will be lost for quite a while.” Nelo’s foot hit a loose edge, and he slipped. It happened so fast. But still, he never let go of Wynter as they plummeted into the darkness.

Burring her face into Nelo’s chest, Wynter hung on to him for dear life. She wouldn’t scream, it wouldn’t do either of them any good. It felt like forever before they hit bottom, slamming into cold water. She felt his hands slip from her as the water rose around them. As her head broke the surface, Wynter called out for Nelo. She barely knew how to dog paddle. Struggling to stay above the waterline, she gulped air into her lungs in case she went under again.

Her head knocked into a low-hanging rock. Reaching up, she managed to move along the rocks until she found a small ledge to hang on to. Drawing in air, Wynter tried telling herself to not panic. She tried to focus, to find the smallest speck of light. Something large bumped into her legs, almost knocking her back into the water. When it stayed there and didn’t float away, Wynter took a breath. Digging in with her fingers, she held on with one hand and reached down with the other. If it were a log, she could possibly hang on to it until Nelo found her. Touching the object, she realized it was a body. *Please be Nelo and not some other body.*

Tugging at the clothing, she pulled the body closer, only to realize the person was face down. If it were Nelo, which she prayed it was, being face down wasn’t a good thing. Even for an immortal, that wasn’t a good thing. His lungs would fill with water, and he would sink. He would awaken and swallow another draft of water, sinking further. It would be nerve ending.

Wynter was a warrior, a soldier for the Nation. She would be damned if a little water would get the best of her. She reached for his waistband and felt leather—a belt. Securing her fist around it, she yanked, forcing his body to roll over. Her hand slipped from the ledge, and she went under. Instead of panicking, Wynter popped back above the water, lunging up just enough to grab hold of the ledge once more.

Her hand barely found the small ledge again. Wynter had no idea where the body was now, or if she had managed to get it rolled over completely. This was the worst situation she'd been in in a while. Wynter tried pulling herself up onto the ledge, but it felt too small for her. She should have used the body for a damn raft. But the idea of hanging on to a dead body freaked her out. Noise in the water had her holding her breath. "Please don't be a giant monster fish," she quietly chanted.

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## CHAPTER

### *Seven*

Nelo came to choking on an intake of water. When his body hit the water, the impact must have knocked him out. Thankfully, he wasn't face down. He would have sunk into the darkness and struggled to find his way to fresh air and freedom.

Looking around in the darkness, his eyes began to pick up small specs of light and he could make out some of the cavern he had fallen into. But where was Wynter? Please don't let her be struggling deep in the dark water. It would be impossible to find her. The thought of his mate desperately fighting to survive had a sick feeling washing over him.

"Wynter?" *Fuck! Where the hell is she? Less than an hour with my mate and I lost her.*

Letting out a breath, Wynter responded to him softly, "Nelo."

As he focused on the direction her voice came from, Wynter came into view. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"Sure, I'm just hanging around. Literally." She heard him moving around in the water. "Can you see in the darkness?" Her teeth chattered as the cold temperature seeped into her skin.

"Yes, mostly." Nelo moved through the water toward her. When he reached her, he took hold of the ledge as well. *This was turning out to be a hell of a day*, he thought. The best thing he could do for them both would be to find a way out of the water. "Are you good for a minute longer?"



“Think so, but I think there might be another body down here,” she mumbled as he slipped into the water. Wynter panicked and reached out for him, only to fall herself. She came back up, struggling for air. Nelo gripped her waist, pulling her to him as he treaded water. Wynter reached up and found the ledge again. “Sorry.” Coughing, she tried to settle her racing heart. “Where are you going?”

“I’m going to search for a lower ledge to get us on. I need to get you out of this cold water.” The water temperature in the catacombs stayed at a consistent fourteen degrees. The temperature out of the water was forty-seven degrees. The whole situation was unfortunate. Lifting her out of the water, he waited until she gripped the overhang. “Can you hold on?”

She wanted to tell him she could get her own ass out of the cold water. Okay, maybe not without a lot of luck. But she would figure it out. Who was she kidding? She was about as okay as an order of french fries without ketchup. “Definitely should have used that body as a raft.”

“What?”

Wynter began shaking. If he didn’t get moving, she would probably end up being lost in the water. “Nothing.”

“It could be worse, you know.”

She didn’t know how. “How so?”

“You could be down here alone.”

“If I were alone, I’d still be at the entrance.”

She had him there. “You could have died lying there.”

Wynter laughed at the thought. “No more than you drowning.” Silence was all she heard. Had he left her without saying anything? Had something happened to him and she was alone now? “Nelo!”

“Sssshhh, I’m here. I was trying to see if anyone was around us.” He couldn’t feel anything around them. He needed to find a way out of the water. “I’ll be back, don’t let go of that overhang.”

“I’ll try not to disappear into the darkness.” Wynter barely heard him swim away. Trying to distract herself from the cold and her rising panic, she started counting to hundred. If he wasn’t back by the time she finished, she would freak out. The current situation was about to bring on a full-blown panic attack.

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It took Nelo longer to find a ledge big enough to support both of them. The bright side was that it led to another tunnel, which he could navigate. The ledge would be a good swim, but nothing he couldn’t do even carrying Wynter on his back. Moving fluidly through the chilly water, he found his way back to where she still clung to the small outcropping of rock. “Wynter,” he whispered against the dark. Her response was a scream. “It’s just me.”

“Where were you?” she asked, shaking from cold.

He could feel her distress from being left there. Dividing his energy, Nelo wrapped them in a cocoon where no one could detect them, and the other half, he would use to get them across the pool faster. All of it would weaken him, but the need to get Wynter to safety was riding him hard. “It took me longer than I imagined to find a ledge for us.” Nelo could barely see her. He realized she had scaled the ledge, managing to get more of her body out of the water. “Drop down where we can get going.”

“No.” She couldn’t if she wanted to. The panic that now gripped her refused to let her move.

Panic was evident in his mate’s voice. This wasn’t the female that had woken up in his arms earlier ready to fight him. This was a panicked female on the verge of hysteria. “Wynter, drop down.”

“No, you won’t catch me, and I’ll drown.” She could hear the fear in her own voice and knew Nelo would hear it as well. There was nothing she could do about it.

“Can’t you swim?”

“No.”

*That explained some of the problem*, Nelo thought. “If you don’t drop down into my arms, I’ll be forced to yank you down.”

“You wouldn’t.”

After a few minutes of them arguing back and forth, Nelo managed to convince her to drop into the water. “I promise I won’t let you go beneath the waterline.” Being her mate, it went against everything in him to allow her to be hurt. “Make sure you hang on. It’s a good distance to where we are headed.”

“I won’t let go.”

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## CHAPTER

### *Eight*

With Wynter on his back, Nelo glided through the dark water. He spoke occasionally to her, trying to keep her mind from wondering about what else could be down there with them. With her body pressed against his back, Nelo could feel the change in her. He worried she was becoming lethargic from the cold. More than once, he felt her hands slip from his neck. After sometime, Nelo felt Wynter tangle her hands into the fabric of his shirt.

“Just a little bit longer. Don’t fall off,” Wynter mumbled.

Nelo heard Wynter mumbling to herself about not falling off. He worried about his mate going into shock from being in the cold water. “Wynter, I promise I won’t let you get lost in here, even if you slip off my back. I would find you in the darkness.”

“Promise?”

“Yes.”

Coming up on the low ledge he had found earlier, Nelo helped Wynter up onto it first, then pulled himself from the water. Using his senses, he scanned the area for any danger. Finding none, he picked her up in his arms, surprised that she didn’t fight him. That alone told him she was in danger of going into shock.

Taking a seat against the wall, Nelo pulled her against his chest. He was exhausted from using so much of his energy keeping them hidden from Julian. Nelo made the choice to use his energy to emanate heat to warm Wynter up. He needed to

rest before beginning the rest of their journey. They still had hours to walk before they would be able to leave the catacombs.

Closing his eyes, he kept Wynter in his lap, hoping she would absorb some of the heat his body was producing. They needed to recharge before starting the long, arduous walk through the passageways. It wasn't working; they were too cold, wet, and tired. Maneuvering his mate away from his body, Nelo tugged his wet shirt off, laying it on the ground next to him. Then he proceeded to tug hers off.

“What are you doing?” Wynter pulled her top down over her pebbled flesh. God, she was freezing.

“We need body heat. Our cold, wet clothes aren't helping us.” Nelo once again tugged her shirt up, and Wynter slapped at his hands. In the end, he won, stripping her shirt off. She was left with a sheer lace bra that barely hid anything.

It was fast—the heat that exploded in him. The desire to feel her in his hands spurred him into action. Nelo didn't think twice before smashing his mouth to Wynter's. A moan escaped her as she gave in to his kiss. Then it was all hands and mouths as he took her to the floor of the cavern.

A noise had Nelo breaking his kiss and hold on his mate. Holding his finger to his lips, he signaled her to remain quiet. When everything remained quiet, he leaned in toward Wynter. “Tell me you remember me.”

“I remember you,” was all she said. Wynter shoved the now gritty, cold, wet top over her head. “Don't think what just happened changes anything between us. Because it doesn't.”

Nelo kept them tucked against the wall for a few hours. A noise had Nelo opening his eyes. Cracking his neck, he felt somewhat recharged. Using the minimum amount of energy, he used the air to dry their clothes. “Wynter, we need to get going.” He felt her move away from him as he got to his feet.

Wynter was exhausted from being cold. She had kept herself just far enough from Nelo where he wouldn't touch her but close enough to feel the heat he was radiating. As she sat

slumped against the cavern wall, a dozen questions ran through her head. The one that remained at the forefront was how did he know her name. There was no way Nelo remembered her name.

It wasn't like she mated him, and he was branded with her family's marking. No, he had been free to sample any and all females that looked his way. But all the questions in the world wouldn't get her out of the catacombs, so she would bide her time. When the time was right, she'd either ask them, or just walk away from him like Nelo had done to her a very long time ago.

Keeping her hand in his, Nelo dragged Wynter through the tunnels, leading deeper into the catacombs. "Are you not any warmer?"

The dust from the ground tickled her nose. Wynter rubbed at it with her free hand, trying to stifle a sneeze. "What do you think?" she snapped as she stumbled over a rough patch of uneven ground.

Stopping, Nelo turned his focus on his mate. "Do I need to carry you? Or are you capable of walking?" Tired, still somewhat chilled and a lot annoyed, he growled at her in the dark.

Her boots were soggy on the inside and the outside was covered in who knew what from wandering around in the underground passageways. Not to mention, the heels were digging into the dirt. "Just keep moving your big ass and don't worry about me."

"It's hard not to worry when you keep tripping." Did she not realize how much energy he was expelling just to keep her safe?

"Well, if you would stop dragging me like some Neanderthal, maybe I wouldn't keep tripping." Yanking her hand free from Nelo's only got her wrist manacled. What was she, a damn prisoner?

Nelo whirled around, pressing right against her. He could feel her distress. "So it's my fault you can't walk correctly?" It

came out harsher than he expected, but the mere inches between them had his body reacting in a way that was unsettling under the circumstances. Letting go of her wrist, he reached down, grabbing one of her feet and snapped the spiked heel off the boot, then repeated the action on the other boot.

*God, he smelled good,* Wynter thought when he stepped into her space. Her mouth watered as her eyes tried to focus on his face. It pissed her off that after centuries of being alone, her mate was here, and he seemed annoyed to be near her. Well, she was annoyed too. “Yes, it is.” When he let go of her wrist, she thought, *Finally*, until he grabbed her foot and broke the heel off. Pissed, she punched him in the back repeatedly. When he stood up staring at her, she growled at him like he had done her so many times during their trek through the catacombs. “You jackass, you owe me a new pair of boots.”

“If I buy you boots, they’ll be practical.”

They both glared at one another in the dark, neither wanting to give in. Wynter was too damn tired and cold to continue arguing with him. She had basically been led blind through the catacombs without complaining until now. Did he not realize how much trust she was giving him? *What an asshole.*

“Now, maybe you can try and keep up where I don’t have to drag you. Better yet, let me carry you.”

“No! I’m done being carried around like an infant.” And if her body got any closer to his, she might be tempted to kiss him. Maybe lick him right along his collarbone up the column of his neck and nuzzle into that delicate spot right behind his ear. *Damn it, stop thinking like that. Stay mad about the boots. Stay mad about him leaving. Stay mad about the unanswered questions.*

“What were you thinking about coming into the catacombs in the first place?” Nelo snapped at her.

And the sexy thoughts were gone, replaced by aggravation. Maybe if he shut the hell up, she could do a little more fantasizing. That would go a long way in the direction of

distracting her from being afraid. “Someone was shooting at me.”

“I found the dart in your pocket. Any idea why someone darted you?” This was not the conversation any male wanted to have with their mate. Especially when being reunited after centuries, but it was one hell of a distraction. Any other female would be swooning over his rescue attempts. They would be offering him anything he wanted as long as he got them to safety. Not his mate. No, Wynter was the exception.

“Probably you,” she mumbled. “I have an idea.” No, but she would be finding out shortly. Her first guess would be Locke. “Why were you in the catacombs, and don’t say you were on a tour.”

“I was tracking you.”

Wynter stumbled as his answer hit her. He wouldn’t lie. He needed to find out why Julian had been hunting her. Nelo knew his brother was in the catacombs, searching for them. He couldn’t sense him, but he knew damn well if the shoe was in the other foot, he would be hunting Julian.

Wynter wasn’t taking another step without some answers. Her heart rate sped up. Why had she trusted him to get her to safety? He could be leading her into a trap. He could be the one that had shot her. How would she know? “Why and for who?”

They had a long walk, and Nelo decided to come clean. It wasn’t like she could run away from him in the tunnels. “My brother asked me to find you.”

“Who’s your brother?” Wynter silently cursed at the sound of her voice. It sounded fragile instead of firm.

That was a loaded question. *One was working for the VN and the other was rouge*, Nelo thought. “Nero.”

“Never heard of him.” Wynter rubbed her hands up and down her arms, trying to bring some warmth into her limbs.

Being a hybrid Nelo was able to see easily in the darkness. Staring at his mate, Nelo watched as Wynter shivered. He couldn’t stand there and let her freeze. Rubbing his hands



together, he used the elements to create heat in them. Stepping into her space, he replaced her hands with his own, running them over her arms. “Seems King Locke wishes you to be brought to him.” He spoke as he continued to run heat over her arms. Tugging Wynter to him, he ran his hands over her back. He felt her lean into him.

“Locke needs to give it up,” she said against his chest.

“Why does he want you?”

“It’s personal.” Locke and his brothers needed to understand she wasn’t interested in living under guard at the VN. Yes, her days of being a soldier were behind her. It didn’t mean she couldn’t take care of herself as a civilian. The Locke brothers seemed to forget she had saved their lives on more than one occasion. “I see,” Nelo mumbled.

*No, you don’t.* He let her go, and for a second thought, she insulted him. Then her senses caught up with her surroundings. She had been too cold and tired before. Now, the air dropped again, causing a shiver to run through Wynter just as the sound of movement caught her attention. Reaching out, she squeezed Nelo’s hand tightly, stopping him from moving. Her heart sped up; they were too deep in the tunnels for someone to happen upon them. No, this was someone or something tracking them. *Her.*

In an instant, Nelo had her in his arms, moving them into a small side tunnel. He started using the elements again, but then, he stopped. “Woman, you have really annoyed someone.” She just couldn’t think of anyone with a hard-on for her other than Locke. But even this was drastic for him. Wynter had enough. She was a damn soldier, not a simpering woman.

Wynter shoved at Nelo, but he didn’t budge. He gave her a firm look. Julian was gaining on them and Nelo had no idea what his brother’s agenda was. The need to get his mate to safety urged him on until Nelo decided he would have to carry Wynter through the tunnels where it would be faster. Surprisingly, she didn’t protest when he scooped her up and took off through the underground passages.

Maneuvering through the passageways, Nelo made quick work as he found the tunnel he was searching for. It would take them down around another set of underground pools, then back up underneath some of the older buildings in Paris. One in particular had a secret door leading into the basement of a building adjacent to his apartment building. They would be exposed to the elements momentarily.

At some point, she had fallen asleep in his arms. Nelo had tucked her tightly against his chest, hoping some of his body heat would keep her warm. Her clothes were still damp, and he could feel her shivering, which, to his surprise, did bother him.

She mumbled incoherently against his chest, and on a couple of instances, he tried engaging her, only to realize she was still passed out. Nelo wondered if the drug was still wreaking havoc on her system. What made an immortal unable to remove toxins from their system? Nelo also found it curious Wynter hadn't showed any signs of being able to aide herself. Overall, his mate seemed in a lot of distress down in the tunnels.

There was a lot he would be asking her once they were safe. Nelo hadn't forgotten his brother Julian had been hunting Wynter. The whys of it would be the first thing he asked Nero when he got back to his apartment. And Nero better have the answers, or they wouldn't be speaking for another three centuries.

## CHAPTER

### *Nine*

After coming around to the far side of the lower pools, Nelo felt he had put distance between him and Julian. The darkness of the tunnels was slowly dimensioning, and small pricks of light could be seen further ahead. He was sure that would make his mate feel better.

Glancing down at the female asleep in his arms, Nelo could make out her appearance again. And just as it had affected him the first time he met her, it affected him now even more. Maybe it was just the proximity between them. Maybe it was something more.

It was an odd feeling to feel so strongly about a female he knew nothing about, and even stranger that they were mated. How would he leave this time around? Sneak away in the night, or sit her down and tell her he just wasn't the type of male to be mated? That thought brought him up short. He had never been fully mated to her, where Wynter had one hundred percent been mated to him. Damn, Nero was right, he was a bastard.

Two more turns and Nelo found the exit he was looking for. Light shone through the cracks in the roof where a doorway appeared. The stone steps wouldn't be hard to navigate as long as they hugged the wall. The small hatch led into the basement of an older hotel in the lower district. His apartment building was the next building over. "It's time to wake up, little one."

Wynter came awake with such a start that she tumbled from his grip. "What the hell. Did you drop me?" she snapped,

shoving hair from her face. Wiping a hand over her mouth, she made sure there wasn't drool on her chin. Wynter had been having the most wonderful dream. Now it was a nightmare again.

Nelo laughed; he couldn't help it. He had heard the analogy "cat on a hot tin roof" but never witnessed it until just then. "You jumped out of my arms."

Smoothing down her clothes, Wynter argued with him, "Did not."

Nelo shook his head, smiling at her. "Did too."

Hands on her hips, she squinted her eyes to make out his features. "Why?"

"I was whispering in your ear."

"Yeah, that would make me want to get away from you." She could barely make out a set of stone steps carved out of the bedrock. *Fuck, they were high.* Her eyes followed the streaks of light coming from the hatch high up in the ceiling of the tunnel. Not a problem since her boots no longer had heels in them.

Taking her hand firmly in his, Nelo tugged Wynter up the stone stairs with him. Nelo shoved open the hidden door in the floor. He kept Wynter firmly behind him in case of trouble. He felt her tug to get her hand free, but he yanked tighter to keep her in place. If she weren't careful, he'd toss her over his shoulder and carry her through the Paris streets like that.

Wynter was done being pulled, yanked, and treated like a child by her asshole mate. If there wasn't the risk of being flattened like a pancake if his large hybrid ass fell on her, Wynter would yank harder to get her hand back. She shivered at the darkness behind her as she looked back to see how far they had climbed to reach the door. She heard him assure her she was safe with him. She rolled her eyes at the mere thought that she needed him. Surely, he did not think she would remain with him once they were out of the darkness of the catacombs.

It was a trifecta of sorts. One, the trap door in the floor opened. Two, soft light engulfed them. Three, Nelo turned to

face her as he pulled her out of the hole. *What in holy hell was this shit?* she thought. She knew it was him, but somewhere in her brain, she had thought maybe... just maybe she was mistaken. After all, they had only been together one night. “What the hell are you doing here?” It really was him, and it hurt to see him after all this time.

“Little one, I’ve been here the whole time.” Was she suffering memory loss from being cold for so long?

This wasn’t happening to her. She really didn’t know what to do now that she could actually see him. “Why? And stop with the ‘little one’ crap. It’s insulting to be spoken to like that.”

Looking down at his mate, he thought he should introduce himself. “Maybe you forgot my name. I’m Nelo.”

Shoving his hand off of her, she glared at Nelo, feeling played. He knew the entire time who she was while they were down in the tunnels. He could have admitted that to her. But no, he hadn’t thought to say anything to her. “I know who you are.”

She had made him think that she hadn’t recognized his name. They had both been playing the game. “It seems we were both aware of each other.”

“Fuck this.” Wynter was done with the reunion crap. She didn’t need his protection, nor did she want it. “I want to know how you found me and why you chose to haul my ass through the catacombs and not carry me back outside?”

Gritting his teeth, Nelo realized quickly his mate needed taming. “Watch your mouth.”

“Asshole.” Moving around Nelo, she searched for a sign where they were. But she dropped her head when she realized she was at his mercy. She was mated to Nelo fucking Vaughan. The reputation that preceded him pissed her off. Wynter turned on him and unleashed everything she had pent up inside her. He had left her the morning after mating her. Dismissed her like she had been nothing more than a roll in the hay. Mating’s were rare. So many mates perished during the wars. The fact

he hadn't wanted to stick around had been painful. "Answer me!"

"I already told you I have been tracking you for Locke Baroe, King of the Vampire Nation."

"I don't believe you. Locke might want me to return to the VN, but he wouldn't stoop so low as having me darted where I could be harmed. I think you're nothing but a piece of shit and an opportunist that found a female passed out and hoped to take advantage of her."

Reaching deep for patience, Nelo reminded himself that they had been in the dark for hours. He crossed his arms across his chest and waited for her tirade to end before attempting to talk reason into her. He'd been privy to some amazing and lengthy combinations of swear words, but she came up with a few he'd never heard in his four hundred years. When it seemed she had run out of steam, he attempted to discuss what had happened to land her in the catacombs. She got fired up all over again.

Commotion from the hallway had him pressing her up against the far wall. His mouth covered hers in an attempt to quiet his feisty mate, but his intention of pushing the sound back down her throat ended in Nelo kissing her softly. The low moan that escaped her throat shot straight to his cock.

Taking advantage of the situation, he deepened the kiss. Her hands tightened around his arms, propelling him on. When the couple walked passed them, he moved back. Her eyes were glazed, her lips swollen from the kiss, and he liked the look on her more than he should.

He needed to remember they hadn't seen one another in centuries. The likelihood of her wanting to jump into bed with him was probably slim to none. Especially after the few moments in the caverns had ended in her being annoyed with him. Just as she was now.

Wynter touched her lips with trembling fingers. They felt like they were on fire. Damn him for coming back into her life as some kind of hero. "Don't you kiss me again." To prove her

point, she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. She desperately wanted the tingling sensation to stop.

“Little one, that was merely a peck. When I kiss you again—and I will—you won’t want me to stop.”

Arching an eyebrow, she glared at him. “Cocky much?”

This should be fun. “It’s time to go. My apartment isn’t far from here.”

Oh, hell no. He’d lost his mind. “I’m not going with you.”

“Wanna bet?” Nelo relished the moment when Wynter lost the battle. He didn’t give in to the smile that threatened to cross his face. That would only add insult to injury. No, he would just keep her close to him until they were safe inside his home. Once there, he would find out all he needed to know from both his mate and Nero.

Leading Wynter down the corridor, he kept hold of her hand as they stood waiting for the elevator to arrive. Once inside, he hit the button for the hotel lobby. Neither spoke as music played through the hidden speakers. A ride that usually took minutes to get from the basement to the lobby seemed to take forever.

Their appearances drew some attention but not more than for a minute as they made their way across the small lobby floor. Wynter shivered as a blast of cold winter air hit her. Wrapping an arm around her slender shoulders, Nelo led her down the street toward his apartment building. He kept an eye out for Julian, knowing his brother was on a rooftop, waiting to dart them.

## CHAPTER

## *Ten*

With Wynter tucked under his arm, Nelo maneuvered them through the lightly crowded street, making their way to the apartment building. Everything about her had him remembering how her body felt wrapped around his long ago. In that single moment, Nelo realized why not one female had slackened his lust; none of them had ever compared to her. Pulling her closer as the wind picked up, he kept warmth flowing from his body to hers.

A car backfiring had Nelo looking over his shoulder as he quickened his pace. If Wynter wouldn't scream, he would scoop her up and run with her, but knowing his mate, she would make a scene and the last thing he needed was the police to come asking questions.

Nelo smiled to himself, thinking about how Wynter had argued over her coming with him. Now they were walking toward his building. Pressing a hand to her lower back, Nelo guided her inside. Once he had Wynter secured in his apartment, he would be able to breathe easier. He wanted to know what the deal was. There had to be more than the king simply wanting her back at headquarters.

Nelo unlocked the apartment door, holding it open. "Make yourself comfortable. I need to make a call." Nelo handed Wynter a small blanket from a side chair before walking into his bedroom to call Nero. Putting his phone on speaker, he listened to the phone ring.

"Hello." His brother's voice was rough and clipped, letting him know he had interrupted something. "Nero. What do you



know about this job?” Nelo asked, pulling his damp shirt over his head.

“Hello to you, and which job are you referring to, brother?” Damn, his brother sounded put out. Nero tried stifling a laugh, but it slipped out.

*The motherfucker is laughing at me.* “Do not fuck with me, Nero.” Nelo kicked out of his soggy boots and tugged off his wet socks. Digging his toes into the plush carpet, he almost moaned at the simple comfort.

“All I know is that Locke called me to find Wynter Dae, and as I was busy, I asked you for help.”

“Why?” There was more to this. She hadn’t needed his help before, and Locke had an army of soldiers that could have retrieved her. His mate was not the meek female that needed him once they were out of the dark caverns. That was proved as soon as they got back in the world of the living.

“I don’t know. Is there a problem with the female?” Nero asked.

The silence stretched out between the brothers as Nelo decided if he wanted to tell Nero who Wynter was. The mating had been the straw that had broken the camel’s back centuries past when Nelo had gone to Nero explaining what had happened. He had confided in his brother, hoping for guidance. Instead, his anger had gotten the better of him and as he spewed his dislike of being mated. Nelo had spewed vicious things about Wynter specifically. Nero had set him straight by an ass-kicking that Nelo had never forgiven. Nelo had felt his brother turned on him over a female. “She’s, my mate.” Silence. Walking across the room, he pulled the bedroom door closed. “Cat got your tongue Nero?”

“Are you telling me, the female Locke is looking for is the one you...” Nero stifled the laugh that bubbled up. He wished he could have seen his brother’s face when they first ran into each other. Served the bastard right for mating the female and leaving her.

What could Nelo say? She had bewitched him before, just like she was doing now. With her full lips that turned into a roguish smile like she had some secret. Or the way her hips swayed when she walked—not intending to arouse or distract, it was just Wynter. Her eyes, a deep blue with the white rims that pierced his well-shored walls. “Yes, Nero, a one-night stand centuries ago.”

“Is she still homely?” He laughed, knowing the truth. He had seen a picture of his sister-in-law and she was far from homely.

*He’s playing me, the asshole.* “No, she’s breathtaking.” No, Wynter was much more than breathtaking. Nelo just hadn’t found the words to describe her yet.

“The years have been good to her, then,” Nero said with a hint of humor in his voice.

“Shut up. Something’s not adding up. I didn’t even feel anything from her. As if she has blocked the mating markers,” Nelo argued with his brother. Instead of talking to Nero, he should be talking to Wynter. Setting the phone down on the dresser, Nelo began stripping out of his damp jeans as he listened to Nero’s opinion on the matter.

Nero thought about his brother’s comment and found it curious. “That’s impossible. Demons can block it when they don’t want to jeopardize their mates. That’s why we can, being half-demon. But I’ve never heard of any other immortal being able to do it.”

Grabbing a towel from the bathroom, Nelo wrapped it around his waist. “She doesn’t look like a demoness,” he called out, walking back to the phone.

“What does she look like?”

Turning at the sound of the door, Nelo watched Wynter lean against the doorframe. “Annoyed.”

“What?” Nero asked, a bit confused.

“I’ll call you back,” Nelo said, hanging up.

Nelo tossed the phone on the bed and tucked the towel a little tighter around his waist. He hadn't missed the look of hurt in his mate's eyes. *He really sucked at the whole mating thing.*

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## CHAPTER

### *Eleven*

Wynter took in her mate. Damn, she would have loved spending some time with him. He had to be six foot six or seven and the towel tucked around his waist had her mouth watering just a tad. His long black hair had already begun to dry, and pieces of it hung down over his chiseled chest. And his piercing blue eyes were the color of a soft morning sky, rimmed in black—a sign of his demon half. *The eyes always gave them away*, she thought.

He had been foolish leaving her alone in his apartment while taking time to get himself cleaned up. It gave her time to search his home. What Wynter discovered was that her mate didn't feel like he had to hide his weapons. Thankfully so because she was able to find a fully charged taser.

It now rested at the small of her back hidden from view. She just needed to get close enough to him to use it.

“Was that your brother?” Wynter asked, waiting to see which way the conversation would go. She needed to buy a little time. Luck had been on her side while Nelo talked to his brother; she had lined up a ride while hiding in the bathroom. Now, she just had to find a way to take him out.

Wynter didn't have to rely on her feminine wiles ever. She was a damn soldier, a deadly assassin. Well, she had been one fifty years ago... but she still knew how to fight. And at the moment she was trying to devise a plan to escape the one male she thought she would never have to run from.

“Yes, one of them.”

“So, you thought I looked *what* back then?”

“You were pretty.”

Arching her eyebrow, she smirked. “That’s not what you told your brother.”

He saw the fire behind her eyes, and the realization he liked it shocked him. “I was worried you wouldn’t remember me.”

What a smug arrogant ass. As if she could forget his ass—the brand on her back reminded her daily. “I remember you. I remember a lot about you.”

He took a few steps closer, and her scent curled around him, making him want to reclaim his mate. “Like what?”

“I remember how gentle you were with me. I remember the smell of your freshly bathed skin. Those memories haunted me. I also remember you telling your brother the next morning you had mated me and that you didn’t want a mate, especially one that looked like me. That memory hardened me.”

Nelo felt like he had been slapped. She’d heard him as he had insulted her to his family. No wonder she had blown him off. Worse, he had hidden their mating most of his long life and insulted both of them by doing so. Nero was the only person that knew. “I’m sorry you heard that.”

“It doesn’t matter. It was and is the truth.” Did it bother her that her one shot at a family was wasted on him? Fuck yes, it did. Fate had a funny way of screwing you over. It didn’t matter then, and it didn’t matter now. He wouldn’t want her anyway. How many times had she been told not to burn bridges? Well, this bridge burned down a long time ago and the water washed it into oblivion.

“Why do you say that?”

His question cut into her thoughts. She needed to get out of there and away from him. Just being around her mate threatened to make her weak with want. Want for something different. Something that couldn’t happen. That one word lingered in the back of her mind. *Dud*. “You don’t want a mate. If I could end the mating, I would.”

“Because you don’t wish to be mated either.”

“I’ve gotten used to be on my own. My life has been good. I don’t need a male between my legs to make me whole.”

Another slap to his ego. While she had been without the touch of a male, he had plenty of the opposite sex. A tricky situation when it came to their mating. There were two sides to it. If he had let her hands remain on him longer than what Nelo had, he would have carried the markings of her family. He had realized what was transpiring and kept her hands at bay. Nero called him a bastard when he found out, and his brother had been—and still was—right.

Wynter walked toward him, but not seductively because he wouldn’t buy it. She just approached him cautiously. This was her one chance to get away. He should have never shown signs of vulnerability. “You know, Nelo, you could do me a solid.” Her hands ran up his torso, where her skin could connect with his. Leaning forward, she breathed him in, wanting to remember his scent.

“What’s that?” he asked her, his voice rougher than normal.

“Well, you could take me to bed for old time’s sake. Remind me what I’ve been missing.”

“I thought you didn’t need a male between your legs.”

“I don’t, but it would be fun for a night. It should last me for... let’s say, another three centuries.” She pouted her lips and tried batting her lashes for good measure.

When he started to reach for her, she struck hard and fast. Damn males always thinking with their dicks. Her knee met his balls, bringing his torso over just enough so her elbow could break a few vertebrae in his neck. When he tumbled forward, she punched him in the jaw. His eyes flared white as he lunged to grab her. Wynter flipped backward, landing out of his reach. He had no idea who she was, and that worked for her. Reaching behind her, she pulled the taser and aimed it at his chest, praying the damned thing would fire enough of a charge to put him down long enough for her to escape.

“You wouldn’t,” he growled before she pulled the trigger twice. Two darts hit him in the center of his chest.

Surprised it had worked, Wynter smirked. “Oh, but I did.” Turning, she headed for the door, only stopping to look back over her shoulder before she slipped out the front door. Wynter blew him a kiss as she closed it behind her. A little pang went through her as she heard the thud. Damn, Nelo would be furious when he woke up.

*It would have been nice to have Nelo want me as a mate,* she thought, stepping into the elevator. She shrugged as the door slid shut. It was better for them to go their separate ways. His life hadn’t been altered at all. Hers, on the other hand, had abundantly so. Staring at her reflection in the mirror, she remembered who she had been all those years ago and wondered if everyone had thought she was less. What did it matter? She had grown into something more. Something better. And no man would undo all that hard work. Especially not Nelo Vaughan.

Once across town, Wynter quickly entered her hotel room. Grabbing a spare phone from her go bag, she called Katana.

“How’s Paris?” Came her friend’s sultry voice.

“Crowded. Listen, I need everything you can get me on Nelo Vaughan.” She heard coughing on the other end.

“Nelo fucking Vaughan. God amongst immortals. Every female’s wildest dream. The male with the stamina of a dozen men. *That* Nelo fucking Vaughan?” *The King didn’t tell me this little piece of info.*

“He’s not all that.” Thinking about those rock-hard abs her fingers had danced across, she knew he was.

*Oh, my girl, you’re done for.* “He’s practically a god, Wynter.”

“Well, he’s not one. He’s just... gorgeous and has these perfect lips meant for kissing.” She should know; her lips still tingled from the kiss earlier.

Katana chuckled. “Wow, you’re done for.”

“No, I had him centuries ago.” A few times, and it still haunted her dreams. “He’s, my mate.”

“Wait one damn minute. Are you telling me you’re mated to Nelo?” Katana stared at her phone. Her friend’s mate was a ho-bag. And the king was being sneaky. “If you’re mated to him, how has he been with other females?”

“He mated me; I never got the chance to reciprocate that little detail.” Wynter dropped her head. She didn’t need reminding of who she mated. “Now get me the information, Katana.” She needed to know what she was in for if he came after her.

*Well, that sucked,* Katana thought about her friend. She felt for the female. “I’ll upload everything I have on him to you. Keep your head down, sister. That mofo won’t stay down long.” Lord help Wynter if she harmed him. Nelo Vaughan didn’t just have a reputation as a ladies’ man. He also had a reputation as a killing machine.

“I can handle him.” Wynter clicked off as she surveyed the suite. Looking around cautiously, she half expected to find Nelo waiting on her. She was a little disappointed that he wasn’t coming after her. A male like that with his muscles, his beautiful eyes, sexy smile, and what was up with that bottom lip all full and pouty with a piercing through it? Damn him for turning her inside out so easily. *Forget him. He will forget you in a moment.*

Yes, because if he had been interested in her even in the slightest, he would have stuck around. *Fucker.*



## CHAPTER

### *Twelve*

Standing on the balcony of her hotel room, Wynter looked like the soldier she had always been. Someone was after her and she'd be damned if she'd hide behind a male. How dare he think she needed his help? Wynter would never lie and say she hadn't been scared while in the catacombs, because it would make her look even weaker than the situation had. But just because she was fearful while down in the dark tunnels did not mean she wouldn't have survived.

Standing there staring out at the city illuminated with lights, Wynter reminded herself she had survived centuries of war and famine. She could survive a hunter and a mate at the same time. Her eyes blazed with the fire that three centuries had built in them. Now she wanted the fucker who had drugged her, then took potshots at her. She wanted them at her feet, writhing in pain, before she ended their sorry life.

Katana had come through with the information on Nelo. Talk about a bubble buster—it seemed her mate hadn't missed a step in the female department. When she scrolled through his military career and learned about his species, her mouth dried up. She could still taste the sandpaper as she wondered how long it would take someone like him to find her. Wynter could lie to herself, saying he could bring the fight. She could tell herself a hundred times whatever he came at her with she could combat. If that were the truth, why did her hands shake when she held them out? The time had come to fight for what she wanted. She wanted what she had always had... her freedom. *Liar.*

She donned black fitted pants with hidden compartments and a black long sleeve tee. Then she braided her hair into a tight knot under her black trucker's hat that read *Fuck Everything*—it was her motto. This world had handed her more pain than one individual should have had to endure, and it was time to remember how to pay it back.

Cracking her neck to relieve some of the tension, her fist twisted on the handle of her favorite curved Parisian dagger. The design etched into the steel was as ancient as she. It mimicked her life as a warrior. The sky darkened, bringing the city to life a little more.

Tugging on the black neck gaiter, Wynter wondered what she would find at the end of this road.

Noise from the hallway had her listening intently to the movement. Had someone found her? Damn, she liked this hotel. She picked up the duffel bag from inside the door and flung it over her shoulder. Grabbing the rappelling rope, she waited until the door was breached to hop over the railing. The last thing she saw as the small explosive went off was one pissed off male. He wouldn't die from the explosion, but he would be a little madder than he had been.

Looking up as she belayed to the street below, she saw Nelo looking over the edge. In a flash, he cut the rope, sending her plummeting to the ground. Any other immortal would brush off injuries sustained from such a fall, but not her. She would be a pancake for weeks. *Asshole*.

She felt the first of many fabric canopies as she plunged through them. By the last canopy, she felt her body bounce once, giving her the chance to grab a framing bar and halt her descent. Wynter breathed out when she realized she could jump down without injury. Swinging off the pole, she landed gracefully next to an elderly couple who looked startled by her appearance. "Pardon me." Pushing past them, she hopped into their waiting cab and told the driver to floor it.

Leaning back, Wynter detonated a second small explosion on the balcony where she had last seen Nelo, hoping he was

still there. “Take that, asshole.” The cab peeled off, leaving Nelo and the hotel behind.

Glancing out the back window, she didn’t see her mate, which was a relief. Sliding down in the seat, she made herself smaller just to be safe. Her mate was starting to be a pain in her ass.

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Nelo coughed on a swirl of smoke from a second explosion and floundered getting to his feet. Reeling with anger, he lurched forward, grasping the back of a chair hoisting himself up. A commotion began to gather outside in the hallway. Gathering all his energy, Nelo slowed time. Blurring his image, he moved through the small crowd. Then he healed himself as he rushed toward the stairwell. If he dropped down to the ground level, someone may notice him due to his distressed state.

Seething, he hopped from one landing to the next, making quick work of the stairwell. His mood was more about him underestimating his mate versus her not wanting to be ordered about by the likes of him. One couldn’t blame her—after all, one day together didn’t wipe away three centuries of being MIA. *She would come to heel*, Nelo thought.

Out on the street, he scanned the area for any signs of Wynter. With no luck, he skirted into the alley. He opened himself up to the elements, to nature, to the world. He had her scent now. He could track her for miles. His eyes snapped open. “Gotcha.” Ghosting into mere fog, he moved upward to the rooftop where he could track her from above. He hoped to find who else was tracking her—other than his brother.

Moving along the rooftops, he caught up with the cab she traveled in a few blocks away. Keeping with the cab as it maneuvered through the streets of Paris, he wondered where she was headed.

Watching as the cab stopped at a traffic light and the passenger door opened, he saw Wynter make her exit. *Damn if*

*she wasn't fucking beautiful.*

It took a little more concentration to move across open ground without someone catching a glimpse, and he did not want to slow time, otherwise she would know he was near. Dropping down onto the street, he landed, becoming corporeal. As he moved fluently with the crowd, someone bumped into him and apologized for not seeing him. He nodded and headed after his mate. *His mate.*

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Easing along the alley wall, she stepped over discarded trash. The smell of vomit, along with the odor of something that probably died a week ago, assaulted her nostrils. She almost laughed when a stray cat cried out in the distance. This was such a typical dark alley where a poor female would get cornered by an assailant while fruitlessly trying to escape.

After reaching the end of the alley, Wynter was beginning to think her friend had set her up on a wild goose chase. She reached the end and still... no door. No escape other than going back out the way she came in. *Fuck.* A shadow fell across the entrance of the alley. The lights from the streets kept the identity of the person a mystery. Pulling a gun, Wynter was ready to put them on their ass. She glanced up, calculating how far up it was for her to escape to the roof. *Too far, that's how far.*

Across the alley, a dark figure peered over the edge of the roof. She saw a rifle come up as shots whizzed around her, hitting bricks, and sending chunks of mortar everywhere. Returning fire, she moved toward the entrance while sticking to the shadows. Sweeping her arm around, she aimed a couple of rounds in the direction of the shooter. One minute, the figure was there and then it was gone. A bullet hit the wall next to her, causing Wynter to duck lower. What was the odds that two shooters were using her as target practice? She hated feeling trapped—and if she couldn't get out of the damn alley, she was trapped.

Movement caught her eye as Nelo stepped from the shadows. He had her in his arms and ran with her before she had time to scream. He didn't stop until they were well inserted amongst the crowd on the busy streets. Dropping her to her feet, he dragged her along until shoving her into a cab. When she went to speak, he leveled a heated stare at her. Knowing when to stay quiet, Wynter eased down in the seat, crossing her arms across her chest. Never had she been unable to ditch someone. Not until Nelo. She took comfort in the fact he still smelled like smoke, and his shirt and jeans were a little worse for wear. *Served him right*, she thought as the cab turned down a side street.

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## CHAPTER

### *Thirteen*

Nelo shoved Wynter into the apartment. He'd had enough of the games. He wanted to know what the fuck was going on. Ripping what remained of his shirt off, he tossed it on the bar top. Grabbing her by the arm, he snapped at her, "Who the hell have you pissed off lately?"

Snatching her arm out of his grip, Wynter whirled on him, pissed that he felt the need to manhandle her like she was some fragile human woman. "I have no clue," she bit out. It pissed her off that she had no idea who was after her. Locke wouldn't send someone to drug her or kill her. So, who was after her and why?

Walking behind his bar, Nelo grabbed a bottle of whisky and poured himself a glass. Tossing it back, he watched his mate's full lips set firm as she glared at him. He set the glass down and grabbed a second squat glass, then poured another round. Sliding one glass toward her, he said, "I've never had this much trouble in my long life."

Wynter picked up the glass, tossing back the warm liquor. "What can I say, I'm complicated."

"We're going to have to fix that." Nelo poured another glass of whisky. His intention might be to get one of them drunk.

Wynter set the glass down to keep from throwing it at Nelo's head. "Oh no, we aren't. You didn't want a mate." Walking away from him, she was already working on a way to get away.

“No, I didn’t. But I’m thinking you need one,” he shot back.

Turning back to face her mate, Wynter smiled. “I’m not interested in just any old mate.”

Nelo saw the smile and wondered what she was thinking. “No?” Not being able to help himself, he smiled back.

“No. I need a mate who can take the heat and keep coming back for more.” Wynter smirked, giving him a wink.

Nelo knew she was up to something; he just needed time to figure out the clues. “I think I may know a male.”

“Oh baby, don’t tease me.” Grabbing the glass, she tossed back the whisky to hide another smile. Somehow through the arguing, she had begun to notice her growing attraction to Nelo. Even if he didn’t want her, maybe she could get another one-night stand out of him. It wasn’t like they could get anymore mated than what they were. Well, that wasn’t the complete truth. He could get a whole lot more mated than what he currently was. It wouldn’t bother her one damn bit to even the playing field.

Nelo crossed his arms across his large chest, looking down at Wynter. If it took another three centuries to tame her, it would at least be interesting. He needed to get her to a new safe house before she managed to blow him up again. Not to mention Julian was still on the hunt for her. “When did you start having problems?”

Wynter licked droplets of whisky from her lips, trying not to notice his strong muscular arms and his chest. It was the veins running along his torso dipping below his waistline. That V could make her do some stupid shit if she wasn’t careful. Swallowing hard, she answered his question, “A few days before you showed up.”

Nelo raised an eyebrow at her. “Don’t look at me. I came looking for you after my brother, Nero, asked me to.” Grabbing the bottle, he poured two more glasses of whisky. Maybe if he got her plowed, her lips would loosen up a bit.

“How many brothers do you have?” Playing with the glass, Wynter tried not to think about her mate. It was hard. She could remember everything about him. Every inch of him. And those memories had both haunted and helped her through a lot of lonely nights.

“Two. Nero and Julian. How about you?”

It was sad how they didn’t know each other. “It’s just me.” Picking up her drink, she stepped over to the windows and looked out at Paris. This was supposed to be an enjoyable experience—not being taken hostage by her mate. A mate she hadn’t seen since being mated.

What did he know about her? She was a fierce soldier for the Nation. If she didn’t know better, she would swear this was all a game Locke cooked up to get them together. There was just one little problem with that thought. Locke didn’t know she and Nelo were mated.

At the least, it stunk like something he and his brothers would pull to get her back to headquarters. Dropping down in the nearest chair, she thought about that a little more. “Why would your brother be looking for me?”

Nelo saw where her mind was going. Nero hadn’t been looking for her. Locke had been—but why? And why was Julian in Paris at the same time? “Like I said, Locke asked Nero to find you.” Now that he could see the expression on her face, he knew she had thought it had been the king also. “You don’t look surprised.”

“It’s typical of Locke.”

“Why does the king want you to come back to headquarters?”

“He doesn’t. Not really.”

Nelo stopped drinking his whisky. That made no sense. If Locke didn’t want Wynter back at headquarters, why go through the trouble of getting him to track her down? Unless... Grabbing his phone, he stepped out of the room to make a call.



Wynter listened as Nelo's raised voice came from the adjacent room. Setting down the glass she was still toying with on the side table, she rose and crossed the room quickly and quietly. Looking back toward where Nelo still argued on the phone, she eased the front door open, cringing, as it creaked loudly. She halted her exit as the sound of Nelo's voice stopped. *Shit!*

Yanking the door wide open, she tore off down the corridor, rushing into the elevator and hitting the first-floor button. Scrambling out as the door closed, she hustled around the corner and into the stairwell. Heavy footsteps pounded behind her. He was hot on her trail. She took the steps two at a time, heading up instead of down. She pressed herself against the wall as the door below yanked open and Nelo ran through it and down the stairs.

She counted to twenty before moving up the stairs. She took one flight at a time before stopping and making sure Nelo did not backtrack when he didn't find her out on the streets. What she wouldn't give for a witch's power right about now. She could blur herself or... hell, why stop there if she was wishing for things? Why not her mate's powers to slow down time? She rolled her eyes at the thought. She knew for a fact that little trick didn't work on immortals. Thinking it could be a long night, Wynter headed for the rooftop. Maybe she could spot Nelo out on the street and possibly figure out how she would get away from him.

If Locke were behind this shitshow, she would kick his gigantic ass for having someone dart her and shoot at her. Finding the roof entrance had no alarm system gave her hope things were going in the right direction. Her direction was to escape. When she shoved open the door, a cold wind assaulted her. Fuck, Paris was cold. Turning to move across the rooftop, Wynter slammed into a wall... a wall that was her mate. "Damn it, Nelo!" She glared up at him as she rubbed her forehead.

"Did you think it would be that easy?" he growled. His mate was about to learn who he was. He was done with this shit.

“Yes.” Shivers ran along her body as the wind gusted, almost blowing her back into Nelo. He raised an eyebrow. His large hand, the size of an oven mitt, reached out, pulling her into the shelter of his larger frame. Deciding there was no use in fighting with him, Wynter reluctantly went along with Nelo. It was that or freeze to death up on the blasted roof. Immortals couldn’t die, metaphorically. Unless their heads were cut off.

In her case, any other way a human could die would cause her a lot of irritation. She was a dud in the immortal world. Even if Nelo Vaughan wanted a mate—and he didn’t, no matter what he said—she was not the one he needed. “How did you get up here?” He stared at her with a look of confusion. Wynter shrugged at his expression.

“I’m immortal.”

He said it matter-of-factly. Looking at the ground, she let him guide her back into the stairwell. She needed some space to figure out her next move away from his icy stare.

“Move your ass, Wynter, or I swear I will move it for you.”

“Stop being so bossy.” Pulling at the door, the wind caught it causing her to lose her grip on it. She hoped the damn thing hit him in his smug face.

## CHAPTER

### *Fourteen*

Shoving open the apartment door, Wynter stormed inside, pissed that her mate had simply ghosted up to the roof and forced her back to his apartment. She tried slamming the door in his face, but he pushed it back, almost taking her down as it swung open. “Asshole.”

Grabbing the whisky bottle and one of the discarded glasses, Wynter dropped down onto the leather sofa. The damn thing probably cost more than anything she owned. Pouring the burning liquid, she kicked back, placing her boot-clad feet onto the coffee table. She wrinkled her nose as Nelo came over to grab the bottle. She couldn’t help herself. “Do you smell that?”

Nelo knocked Wynter’s feet off his coffee table. “What?”

“Smoke and burned flesh.”

Wynter stifled a laugh as he growled, walking across the room, putting distance between them. Wasn’t her fault he refused to leave her be. He’d have to tie her to him if he wanted her to stay—and then she would just cut herself free.

“I need a shower.”

The thought of a naked Nelo had her smirking. “Go for it.” She watched him over the rim of her glass.

Did she think he’d leave her sitting alone in the living room? “Let’s go.”

Holy hell, was he asking her to shower with him? “Go where?”

“I’m not leaving you out here... alone.” *To run away again.*

“I’m not showering with you.” He unbuckled his belt and pulled it through, loop by loop. As it swished from its resting place, she crossed her legs, refusing to allow herself to be turned on. No matter what, she had her pride. Her dignity.

Fuck that. If he offered, she was taking it. It had been way too long, and he was the only male she could sleep with. Swallowing the whisky, Wynter let her eyes drift over Nelo’s lean, well-muscled body. His jeans hung low on his hips, showing off the V every woman loved to dream about. Pressing the glass against her lips again, Wynter thought about running her tongue down those veins. She might not have the actual experience, but she’d seen some salacious porn in her day.

The pretty blush that crept up her neck gave his mate away. Yeah, she liked the thought of showering together. “Are you sure?”

*He’s nuts if he thinks I’m that easy.* “Is that your way of convincing me?”

Stepping toward Wynter, he watched as she rubbed the glass against her lips, making her sexier than she already was. “You offered earlier.” Those full lips and light eyes made his blood heat up and head straight to his cock. If she looked down, she would be red.

“That I did. Maybe I changed my mind.” He prowled toward her. If he kissed her, she was done for. The belt dropped next to her on the sofa as he leaned in, bracketing her body with lean muscular arms.

Biting back a moan, Wynter tried leaning away as he nudged her head to the side. Sharp fangs scraped the vein along her neck. “Fuck it.” She reached up, shooting her hands into his hair, tangling her fingers in its length, dragging his mouth to hers. He halted the movement and looked into her eyes like he could see every single thing, telling her to make sure.

She smashed her mouth to his, wanting to know the feel of him again, even if when it was over, she would leave him behind. *Like he'd done her the first time.*

Grabbing her by the waist, Nelo picked her up, forcing her legs to wrap around him, and headed for the bedroom. There would be no asking a second time. If Wynter thought for a second she remembered everything about him, she was about to find out how wrong she was. His hands gripped her ass. He loved her ass. When she walked away from him, all he had wanted to do was sink his fangs into the spot where her butt met her thigh.

Stepping through the bedroom door, he kicked the door shut with one boot-clad foot, not missing a step as he headed for the bed. He had been gentle with her long ago, but tonight, she would get to know the other side of her mate. When he was done with Wynter, she'd be on board with whatever he said. If not, he'd fuck her into submission, and she would give it to him. One way or another.

He let her slide down until her feet touched the floor. Keeping her within his arms, Nelo glided a hand up her arm, caressing it as he went. When it came to her throat, he wrapped his hand around her beautiful neck, using his thumb to tilt her head back and press on her jugular. "You blew me up."

"Yes, I did. But..."

He shook his head. "You will not do it again."

When she attempted to argue, he tilted her head further back with his thumb. She swallowed hard; her blue eyes wide as he pushed her back toward the bed. "I..."

"Shhh, we aren't negotiating, little one." The look in her eyes told more than one story. His mate was very complicated and feisty. Who would have guessed he liked those traits. No simpering woman for him. "When I tell you no, I mean no."

Her legs bumped the edge of the bed as she tried to figure out what she had just gotten herself into. His smile disarmed her in every way. She realized too late that she was out of her

league. What would a male like Nelo Vaughan find attractive in a female like her? There was nothing soft and pliable about her. Nothing delicate and vulnerable that screamed *please save me*. He may have been mistaken about that while in the catacombs, but surely after she'd tasered him and blown him up not once but twice, he knew better.

He was all ripped, corded muscle from head to toe. Long jet-black hair that went well past his shoulders. His eyes were the darkest of navy blue, coal rimmed and penetrating. No doubt the demon in him shining through.

“Strip,” he growled.

Okay, maybe he needed a little reminding of who she was. Wynter had no doubt he had been given some information on her before tracking her down.

“You want me naked, then you take my clothes off.” She saw the look, the heated stare. He grabbed her shirt. All in one smooth move, he had it over her head, sailing it through the air. His hands gripped the waistband of her pants. She stopped him, her hands trembling. What was she thinking? This was Nelo Vaughan, ladies' man—she couldn't do this. Even if they were mated. He had moved on without her. “I can't.”

“No changing your mind... MATE.”

Putting her finger on his chest, Wynter had her mate stepping back. She kicked off her boots and walked toward the bathroom, wiggling out of her pants as she went. The low feral growl had her turning right before a large shoulder lifted her ass over end, moving fast into the bathroom. Laughter erupted from her as Nelo turned on the shower, putting them both under the spray. He kept her firmly against his muscular body. His mouth covered hers, smothering the laughter.

*Get moving already, Vaughan.* The man was killing her with the kissing. If she was gonna die by his hands, could it be by him impaling her instead? Squirming against him got her slammed against the shower wall. She loved the feel of his fangs scraping along her neck. “Please,” she mumbled against his mouth. Her brain went to fuzz when he ended the kiss. She

smiled. “My turn.” Nuzzling into his neck, she nipped along his collarbone.

Nelo drove into her. The feel of her teeth sinking into his flesh, her nails digging into his arms as he took her higher, his need to dominate rose. The shower tiles did wonders to cool down her heated flesh as the spray rained from the showerhead.

He’d gone too long without his mate wrapped around him. Her sex clenched around his cock, and all he needed was for her to fall with him. His weight pushed against her, shoving her harder into the tiled wall. His name was on her lips as she cried out. Her body tightening drove him over the edge. Dropping his head to her shoulder, Nelo waited for his breathing to even out. He’d lost all control, forgetting his mate hadn’t been with a male in centuries. “Are you okay?”

Wynter mumbled against his neck that she could use a minute. When she felt him adjust her, pressing her back into the wall again, she hissed. She’d forgotten the one small detail that Katana had always said about hybrid males. *They were large in many areas.*

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## CHAPTER

### *Fifteen*

Wynter lay wrapped in Nelo's arms, attempting to even out her breathing. Turned out, her mate had plenty left to give her after they showered. Who knew getting reacquainted would be so delicious? Concern filtered into her thoughts, whether Nelo would want to keep in touch after the threat to her was eliminated.

Deciding not to worry about the future for the rest of the night, she thought about what her plans were next. Once she figured out who was after her and why she could go back to Scotland and finish her stay at her ancestral home.

Closing her eyes, she relaxed, enjoying the feel of Nelo's fingers gently caressing her stomach. Warm breath tickled her ear, causing Wynter to smile as Nelo began to snore softly. *Some ladies' man.* Wynter laughed quietly, trying not to wake her mate.

"What are you laughing at, mate?"

"You were snoring."

"I do not snore."

"Yes. You do."

"I think I would know if I snored."

"How? You're sleeping when you do it."

Wynter screamed when Nelo rolled them over and started tickling her. When she scrambled away from him, he grabbed her foot, dragging her back to him and giving the arch of her foot a nip from his fangs. Things went from a tickle to Nelo



pinning Wynter to the bed underneath his much larger frame as he kissed his way down her body.

Staring into her eyes, he felt like he was being pulled underwater. Something in those blue depths entranced him. No matter how hard he tried, Nelo couldn't get a read on his mate. "What are you?" he whispered, dipping down to kiss her lips.

*And the beginning of the end starts now,* Wynter thought. May as well tell him the truth and get this reunion over with. "One step up from human. I'm a dud," she yawned out, feigning sleepiness.

Nelo kissed her neck because he liked being that close. Also, he wanted to know what species she was. But he couldn't find a hint of anything except her unique aroma which had his mouth watering... again. Moving back, he eyed her curiously. "Why do you say that? You have superior speed?" He didn't like her feeling less about herself. Whoever convinced her she wasn't enough, he would be speaking with them, even if it was the King himself.

"Nope, I've trained my whole life," Wynter mumbled, hoping he would let it go.

"Superior strength?" Nelo pried further.

He was so damn sexy. She'd miss him when he realized what she was trying to tell him. "No."

Could she be just one genetic marker above a human? Nelo had heard of immortals that had no extra abilities, but never had he met one. "Healing abilities?"

"Yes, but I don't heal as fast as you." *Okay, let's try humor. Maybe he will catch on.* Pushing herself into a sitting position, Wynter pulled the blanket over her, feeling a little vulnerable. If they were going to discuss her limitations, she'd rather not be sitting, butt naked, with her lady parts hanging out.

"I can't jump over buildings in a single bound. I don't have X-ray vision. I'm just immortal." She could see him trying to figure out if she spoke the truth. His eyes gave him away. "I can see your disappointment."

Nelo leaned up onto his elbow. He could see her fear that he would shun her for a few limitations. “No, you don’t because there isn’t any.” How had this beautiful female managed to stay alive all these years? His mind raced with unanswered questions. One thing he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt was that she needed him. “We need to talk about what’s going on. Before we do, I want you to stop calling yourself a dud. Every time you say it, I think of candy.”

“Who’s Candy?”

“I don’t know who she is.”

“Then why do you think about her?”

“I said I think about candy, not a person named Candy. Haven’t you heard of Milkduds?”

Letting a smile spread across her face, Wynter tried to hold her laughter. She knew the moment was about to get serious and had wanted to stop that from happening. Nelo shook his head at her.

“Okay. Let’s talk,” she told him.

Tugging her back down to lay in his arms, he thought about how to tell his mate that the person shooting at her was one of his brothers. “Earlier you asked me how many brothers I have.”

“You said two.” Wynter tucked herself into his side, not wanting to think about who might want to harm her.

“Nero and Julian. Nero is aligned with the VN. Julian is a rogue assassin.” Wynter tried to sit back up, but he kept her next to him.

“If Nero is part of the VN, it would make sense that Locke asked him to find me.”

“I agree. The shooter that has been targeting you is my other brother, Julian. And no, I don’t know why, but I intend to find out.”

“We should probably call Locke and ask him,” Wynter suggested as she started kissing his neck.

“I think...” Wynter rolled out of his arms as her phone started ringing. As she grabbed it, he laughed. Only his mate would take a call in the middle of an intimate moment.

Wynter smiled as she answered the phone, but at the sound of Katana’s strained voice, her smile disappeared. Putting the phone on speaker so that Nelo could hear the convo, she started to get out of bed. “Katana. Slow down and start over.”

“I made a mistake. Get out now. There’s a hit team coming after you. They’re ten minutes out.”

“What?!”

“No time to explain. It’s all my fault.” *Fucking Locke, that scary SOB owes me for lying to my best friend. But this was it, no more playing in the King’s sandbox.* Katana was in enough trouble as it were, and one of her friends, Eden, had gotten mixed up in the whole affair. If she had to expose the entire Manhattan coven to the mortal world to free Eden from the witches’ clutches, then Katana would burn their house to the fucking ground.

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## CHAPTER

### *Sixteen*

Katana told the couple that if they could get to the roof, there was a low-lying building on the north side. “Wynter, you can make the jump without sustaining any injuries.” She pushed as much fear into her voice as she could muster.

“Wynter, do not try to contact me, it will just make things worse.” She heard Katana say.

“Katana, tell me what’s going on. I can help.”

“We can help.” Nelo spoke up.

“There’s not time. I’ll get in touch when the heat is off me. Now go!”

“Stay safe.” The phone went silent as Wynter hopped across the room, gathering up her panties. After slipping them on, she wiggled into her shirt. How the hell did her clothes get thrown all over the place? She picked up her boots and pants, ready to run, as Nelo threw on his jeans just as quickly.

Shoving his boots on, Nelo looked up at Wynter. “Okay, I’m going to assume you’ve never disintegrated.”

“Nope.” She put her boots on as she listened to Nelo call his brother and ask for a safe house. After he hung up, he grabbed a go bag from the closet.

“I need you to trust me, Wynter.”

“I do.”

“Here’s how this works. You hang on to me tightly. Keep your eyes closed. If you don’t, when we land, you will be

sick.” She nodded in acknowledgment. “Grab your bag.”

“I can bring stuff?” She looked at her pants in her hands. For a minute, she wondered why she didn’t put them on before her boots. Oh yeah, she was used to running, not simply evaporating.

Nelo tugged on a shirt. “Yes, it will come with you.”

She tossed the pants in the bag. Trusting him to get her to safety, she wrapped her arms around his waist, twisting her hands in his shirt. She leaned her head against him. “Wynter?” He waited for her to look at him. When those blue eyes gazed into him, the emotion behind them hit him hard. This was his mate. Everything in him stilled.

“Yes?”

“When this is over, I’m going to kick Katana’s ass. Now close your eyes.”

*Stand in line.* She barely had them closed when they fell into nothing. It felt like floating in darkness. And then she felt herself land on solid ground. Her face remained planted in his chest as his presence surrounded her. Her fist tightened in his shirt, twisting it in an attempt to settle her nerves. A small moan slipped from her throat as his large hands smoothed over her back. The simple feeling of protection caught her off guard and she had no idea how to handle it. Leaning her head back, her eyes widened as his narrowed, staring down at her as if he could read every thought, feel every emotion she felt.

She watched as he leaned down slowly, covering her mouth with his. She never closed her eyes as heat wrapped around her. Her hands moved on their own, tugging at his shirt to get her hands free and it off of him. A snicker from behind them had Nelo growling. Wynter reeled around, going into a fighting stance. There was a male standing in the doorway. A firm hand on her shoulder had Wynter relaxing.

“Wynter, this is Nero. Nero, this is my mate, Wynter.”

With a bored look, she eyed Nelo’s brother as he leaned against the doorframe. “It’s nice to meet you, Nero. Thank you for the safe house.” Folding her arms across her chest, she

took in the creature across the room. He was definitely a hybrid. His long black hair fell to his chest, and a slash of pure white ran along one side, framing his face and making his eyes even more impactful. Those white irises with black rings around them were unnerving. She had to wonder how many females had fallen to his charms. *Sex on a stick.*

“Little one, you might want to pull that mental shield back up when thinking my brother is sex on a stick.” Nelo aimed a glare at her.

Oh my God, he had heard her. Before another thought passed through her brain, she slammed her shields in place. It had to be the disintegration that caused it to fall. “Stop with the ‘little one.’”

Nero roared with laughter. It had been a long time since he found a female to be interesting, and his brother’s mate—whether she wanted to be or not—was interesting. He took in her petite stature. She was demure compared to them. Not much taller than five foot three, maybe four, and the tribal braids mixed with her dreads made her facial features striking. Her eyes had demon written all over them. “You’re a demon female?” he asked more than stated.

Cocking her head, she glared at Nero. “I’m nothing.” Moving past the male, she took her bag from around her neck, deciding she needed to assimilate to her surroundings. Maybe put some pants on. After all, someone—or more than one someone—was after her because of Katana. What in the hell had her friend done?

“What have you gotten my brother into?” Nero asked her.

“Let’s clarify something. *You* got your brother involved. I was perfectly happy being a single mated female.”

“Single mated female. Is that a thing?”

Shrugging, Wynter walked around the house. Movement at the doorway had her swinging around. She recognized the male walking into the room. He had been staying at the castle in Scotland. He had been in Paris the day she got tranquilized. All of it came slamming together at once. “You bastard!”

Nelo grabbed her around the waist, lifting her off the ground as she struggled to get to his brother. *What the hell was Julian doing here with Nero?* Dropping Wynter, he shoved her behind him as she fought to get around him. “Stop!”

Nelo struggled to keep Wynter where she was. Surely, she hadn’t had a run-in with his brother. “Julian. I didn’t know you would be here.”

Julian shrugged, walking through the room, all the while staring at Wynter. “Making sure you got the package.”

Wynter glared at him. “You broke into my room.” Julian smirked. “Did you dart me?”

Leaning into her, he grinned a menacing grin. “Sanctioned.”

It happened so fast. Wynter was tossed into Nero’s body as Nelo leapt over the kitchen counter, slamming Julian to the ground. They crashed through the table and chairs, smashing the ornate China cabinet before Nelo took them both through a picture glass window.

Pushing away from Nero, she pulled a dagger from her bag and attempted to head out the broken window. Julian would die for attacking her. A large hand gripped her waist, halting her. “Let me go.”

Damn, his brother had a hellcat for a mate. “It’s best to let them work it out. Also, you need pants.” Nero laughed.

She held out her arms to show she was not fighting him. Nero released her, but he did block the exit. Picking up an upturned chair, she sat down, fuming. “Aren’t you going after them?”

Nero leaned against the counter. “No!”

“Nelo is trying to kill Julian. Why aren’t you helping?” She crossed her legs, trying to feel a little less exposed. If he would go after his brothers, she could go with him. A dagger through Julian’s heart wouldn’t kill the asshole, but it would hurt a hell of a lot.

“You want me to help one brother kill the other? What kind of female are you?”

Giving up on the shirt, she glared at Nero. “That’s not what I want. Why aren’t you stopping them?”

“Do I look stupid?”

“No, you look—”

Nero cut her off with a charismatic smile. “Sexy. That’s the word you’re looking for.”

Shaking her head, she almost laughed when a bleeding Nelo stumbled through the door, falling hard against the doorframe. “Oh my God!” She rushed for her mate, but Nelo stopped her as he shoved off the doorframe, taking a seat. “What can I do to help?”

“Give me a second and I will let you know, little one.”

“Stop calling me that,” she hissed. It sounded demeaning to her. His injuries started healing. Nero tossed him a towel. Nelo wiped the blood from his arms and chest. His heated expression made her lick her lips. She stepped between his legs, running her hands over his freshly healed chest. “Are you sure you’re all right?”

Nelo grabbed Wynter by the waist, pulling her into his lap. She smelled of chocolate and cayenne. “Were you worried about me?”

“She was ready to take out Julian for you.” Nero met Nelo’s stare. “She’s still half-dressed.”

They had forgotten Nero had been standing in the destroyed kitchen. Nelo looked over at his brother, shaking his head. “Go check on Julian.”

“He’s fine. Plus, you two are just precious. I think I’ll keep watching.” Nero winked at Wynter. “Your mate thinks I’m sex on a stick.” He smirked, knowing he was annoying his baby brother.

Nelo grabbed the bloody discarded towel from the table and flung it at his brother. “You’re such a weirdo.”



“And don’t you forget it.” Turning to go find Julian, Nero whistled a haunting tune as he faded into nothing.

“What happened? You looked like you had been beaten from the inside out,” Wynter asked her mate.

“Julian has more demon in him than vampire. He doesn’t fight fair, and he doesn’t play nice with others.”

Commotion from the doorway had Nelo getting to his feet fast, shoving Wynter behind him. He readied himself for a fight. Nero appeared with Julian in the doorway, cursing, as he dropped him. Julian slid down the wall, leaving a blood trail all the way down. He didn’t so much as twitch.

“Why is he here, Nero?”

“He told you.”

Growling low, Nelo leveled a furious stare at Nero. The son of a bitch had known where their brother had been all along. They still didn’t know who had put Julian on Wynter. Remembering what his brother had said that set him off, Nelo asked Julian, “Sanctioned by whom?”

“Locke.” Julian coughed out, still sitting on the floor.

“Why?” Nelo snapped.

Julian reached up with a bloody hand and pulled out a cigarette. Lightening it up, he took a long drag before speaking. “Locke said to make sure Nero caught her. I didn’t know he turned her over to you.” Shrugging at the pair, he took another drag and shoved off the floor as his body healed. “Talk to the king.” Taking a long drag on the cigarette, he pointed at Wynter. “Nice legs.”

Wynter moved from Nelo, both embarrassed and upset that the king would think after all the years of her serving as a soldier that she couldn’t take care of herself. He’d overstepped this time. What about Katana—was she in on it too? Or was she truly in trouble? “Excuse me for a moment.” Pulling out her phone, she stepped out of the room to call Locke. It was time to end this charade.

Wynter walked into the sitting area. “Is your mate, ok?” Nero asked.

“I’m not sure. According to Wynter, Locke wants her back at the headquarters under protection.”

“Protection from who? Himself.” Julian spoke between taking puffs on his cigarette. “Your mate was a solider for the VN. Locke’s the one putting trackers on her.”

“I’ll give her time to speak with the king before I step in.”

“All I want to know is who’s paying for the damage to the house?” The house had been in their family since the 1700’s. The last thing Nero had considered was his brothers destroying it. Their mother would have been heartbroken, and his father would have tanned their asses.

“Locke,” Nelo and Julian said in unison.

Nero pulled a chair out, taking a seat by Nelo along with Julian. “It’s nice to see all of us in the same place.” If he would have known one argument over Nelo’s mating would separate the brothers for centuries, Nero would have kept his mouth shut. Julian had simply walked away, not wanting to pick sides.

“Nero, were you even on another job?” Nelo asked his brother. He watched the way Nero moved. He watched as Julian occupied himself with his cigarette, trying to look uninterested in the conversation.

Nelo had been a century old when he mated Wynter and set off the events that had separated them. But he could still feel the unique vibrations that made up both Julian and Nero’s elemental signatures. Julian’s seemed normal, but Nero’s were masked ever so lightly. Nelo pushed a little more and felt the masking drop from Nero. Pain shot through his head. “Fuck!” he growled, grabbing his forehead.

“One day, you’ll learn not to look where you’re not wanted, Nelo.” Nero shook his head at his brother.

Nelo rubbed his head as his eyes watered. His throat burned at the feeling he was getting off Nero. “What the hell is going on with you?” Walking to the sink, Nelo grabbed a glass

of water in hopes the cool liquid would halt the burning sensation. As he drank, he heard Nero say it was an old wound that hadn't healed yet.

"How old?" Nelo asked, setting the glass down. Rubbing his forehead, he tried to get the pain to subside.

"Not old enough to worry about." Nero shrugged.

"Liar." Their brother Julian snapped as he shoved out of his chair. Nelo chose to remain quiet as Julian paced the kitchen floor.

"Why aren't you healing?" Nelo finally asked.

Deciding if he didn't tell his baby brother the truth, then their older brother would, Nero came clean with his brother. "The wound was a gift from a witch. It's laced with a poison we can't identify." If he could track down Katana, he might have a chance. Julian was already chasing down a female witch that might be able to help him if Katana couldn't. "Julian and I have a few leads that could give us some answers."

"What can I do to help?" Nelo asked, wanting to help his brother in any way he could.

"You can give me a niece or nephew. You're not getting any younger, brother." Nelo heard his brother say. When the kitchen erupted into laughter Nelo decided it was time to find his mate.

"Where are you going, Nelo?" Nero continued laughing, now joined by Julian.

"To get started on your request." Then Nelo disappeared out of view.

## CHAPTER

### *Seventeen*

Standing in the adjacent sitting area, Wynter listened as the phone rang and rang. She had always felt lucky that Locke's family had brought her into their lives. Now, not so much. All she could think as the phone continued to ring was that they felt sorry for her. She didn't need any one feeling bad over the fact she had gotten short changed in the ability department. Wynter had done fine with what she had been given. Why was that so hard for Locke and his brothers to accept?

Picking up a throw pillow from the floor, she placed it on the sofa. She liked Nero's house, or whatever she had seen of it. She'd have to ask Nelo where it was? That was if he wanted to see her again.

Walking around the room, she ran a finger over leather bound first editions that donned the rich walnut bookshelves. Wynter was impressed at the collection. There was a copy of the *Codex Leicester*. Next to it was the *Codex Vitacanus* and then the *Codex Sinaiticus*. It was interesting to her that copies of those ancient text sat on the bookshelves.

Her fingers danced across the shelves as she continued listening to the phone ring. She jerked her hand away when she came upon a first edition of *Prophecies of Nostradamus*. The book didn't hold a candle to the others; just something about being near anything to do with the profit gave her the creeps.

"Hello," came the graveled voice of the king. Wynter's anger surprised her as she fired off at Locke.

“Locke. What the hell are you up to sending Nelo after me?” she snapped, still staring at the bookshelf.

*Well, the jig was up*, Locke thought as he listened to the sound of Wynter’s voice. “I didn’t ask Nelo. I asked Nero. And I told him I wanted you back at headquarters.”

“Because you don’t think I’m capable of taking care of myself?”

“I want you safe.” What was wrong with wanting her somewhere she would be safe. It wasn’t like he had ever tried to keep her under lock and key.

“Well, I’m safe away from there.”

Locke’s temper rose at her defiant tone. He was the bloody king and Wynter Dae would come to heel if he had to send a thousand soldiers to drag her back kicking and screaming. He was done being nice. “No, you aren’t.”

Wynter took a breath, thinking this bullshit had to end, and the only thing she could think would stop Locke was the truth. “Locke, I’m mated and have been for centuries.” She heard the silence; it stretched out far and wide. “Nothing to say?”

Sometimes people surprised him, and this was one of those *what the fuck* moments. “I’m wondering if I should be angry at you or not. Who?”

“Nelo.”

“I didn’t know that piece of information.” Locke wanted to say no to Wynter being mated to Nelo Vaughan, but what fate wanted, fate got. “Why haven’t you been with him all these years?”

“We had some issues to work out.” Like Nelo not wanting to be mated to her. That was not something she would tell Locke, though. The male would probably make her a widow if he knew the details of her and Nelo’s separation. Changing the subject, she went back to the fact. “Who else was in on it?”

“Katana.”

Locke explained unapologetically how he had sent Nero to find her and used Katana to move her in Nelo’s direction. She

shook her head as she learned the truth. “There’s nothing like a mate in need of protection,” Wynter stated flatly. She heard snickering on the other end of the line. Such a bunch of asshats. “What about Julian?”

“What about him?” Damn, how did Julian get involved. As king, he should have known asking Nero would bring all of the Vaughan brothers together. That was a bomb he did not want to be around when it exploded.

Trying for patience, Wynter paced the floor. She wanted to understand why Locke and his brothers couldn’t wrap their heads around the fact she was fine on her own. “He shot me with a tranquilizer dart. That’s how Nelo nabbed me.”

“That’s on him.” Locke would kill Julian when he saw him next.

*Well, it had been fun seeing Nelo,* Wynter thought. Now that they knew the deal, he could be on his way. “I promise I’ll visit the VN and soon.” Locke laughed as he told her to bring her mate.

She didn’t think Nelo would be sticking around. If Nelo Vaughan had wanted a mate, he would have found her a long time ago. Wynter almost laughed when Locke said he would stop meddling in her affairs. It was a lie, and not a very good one.

Hanging up the phone, Wynter stopped in front of the picture window. Outside, the day was settling into evening and she wondered where they were. An hour ago, she had been in bed with her mate in Paris. Now, she was looking at the evening sun making its descent into twilight. *Must be in the States.*

She needed to let Nelo know there wasn’t a real threat; it was just the king trying to get her back home. Family could be a pain in the ass. Turning around, she saw Nelo leaning against the doorway. She would keep that image with her for a long time. That and many others from this sordid affair. “I guess you heard some of that.”

“I did.”

“I’m sorry Locke got your family involved.” Glancing around, she realized she had no idea how she would get back without his help.

“I’m not sure where I’m at, but if you could pop me somewhere else, I’ll get out of your hair.”

His mate was cute when she was unsure of herself. He liked the look on her. It made him feel needed. “No!”

“You won’t give me a lift?”

He stepped toe to toe with his mate. Staring down into those beguiling eyes of hers, he smiled. “No, I won’t let you go. Period.”

“Why not?”

“I think it’s time we both settle down.”

“You don’t want a mate.”

“But I think I need one.” Nelo ran his tongue over his fangs. She needed to mate him, and Nelo was all about having her hands all over him.

“I’ll think about it.”

Nelo rushed her, tossing Wynter over his shoulder. She barely had time to close her eyes as the world slipped away. When she opened them again, they were back in his apartment. From what she could tell, no damage had been done. Wynter slapped at Nelo’s back. “Put me down.”

“I will.”

Good grief, they were headed for the bedroom. “What are you doing?”

“Taking you back to bed where you can mate me.” Nelo laughed, kicking the bedroom door closed and tossed her on the bed. She smiled as he kicked off his boots.

“You sure you want me to mate you, baby? Wynter teased, wiggling her fingers at Nelo.

“Oh yeah, little one,” he growled low, watching the fire light her eyes. Maybe he would stop calling her that... in

another century or so.

She couldn't wait to brand his ass, and she would enjoy every bit of it and more. When he leapt for her, Wynter screamed as he rolled her over, pinning her to the bed.

Being mated to Nelo would be both exciting and fun.

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## Epilogue

Back in the dream, Katana watched as her younger self stared up into the faces of her mother and grandmother. They stood with their arms outstretched to their sides. Their palms turned skyward as the language of their ancestors spilled out of them. Katana's tiny hands ran across the open pages. Perspiration beaded her brow as the burning sensation started running over her skin.

Pain searing into her flesh, she immediately understood every word that was written on the ancient text. Page after page flipped as Katana listened to the chanting of her mother and grandmother. Words that once she had never understood now were clear in her mind. They said blessings over her.

“You are the dragon's keeper,” her grandmother said.

With her small mouth turned up in a pout, Katana looked at her grandmother's face and locked eyes with the older version of her mother. The voice in her head said, *No, she wasn't just the dragon's keeper. She was the dragon.* As she heard the words, she let them slip past her lips. “I am the dragon.”

Her mother smiled.

Opening her eyes, Katana stared up at the ceiling of her bedroom. Small tendrils of sparks cascaded through the air lighting up her room. Holding out her hand, she called the tiny blades of the dragon's fire back to her. Closing her hand around the heat, she turned it to ash and sent it off into the night.

The dreams shouldn't bother her, but they only came when something was about to happen. Her very own alarm system. Laying an arm across her eyes, she listened as the phone rang. Knowing who was calling, she thought about ignoring it. But she knew it would do no good. Locke would just keep calling. Rolling over, she grabbed the phone from the bedside table. "Locke. How can I help you?"

"Katana, you're the last daughter of one of our Samurai families. You're highly intelligent, talented in art and musical instruments." Not to mention she was breathtaking. "You could have gone down any path. But no, you had to meddle in business that isn't yours."

"Locke—"

"I'm not done, Katana."

Thinking fast, she blurted out another lie to keep her one step in front of the King. "Locke, I have a fanatical group after me. Can I get back with you as soon as I'm somewhere secure?"

Locke reined in his temper. If Katana was in trouble, he could bring her to headquarters and keep her safe. Then he would finish lecturing the girl. "I want to know who's after you this time."

Shit! "They call themselves the Dragons." She was in deep crap now. "They're a group of fanatical witches." Katana hated lying to Locke, but she had something to do before she could allow him to lock her down at the VN. Picking up a piece of paper, she crumpled it over the phone, pretending she was losing network, then hung up.

*I need to get Eden out of the coven's dungeon and leave town. And not get killed.*

## *Bonus Epilogue*

Nero Vaughan, elite hunter, former assassin, and now a tracker for King Baroe and the Vampire Nation had always thought sometimes it was easier to break the rules versus following them. Even if they were your own rules, they were meant to keep things in their places. It had been a long flight from London to New York. In the past, Nero would have just disintegrated and traveled through time and space across the world. But that wasn't a possibility at the moment, nor had it been one for a long time.

Staring out the living room window of his brownstone, he watched the moon as it climbed higher in the night sky. The Brownstone had been his since being built two hundred years ago. It's rich chocolate exterior reminded him of their family's French house in the old country.

Two weeks ago, a sequence of events had gotten him and his brothers back together. Nero had turned over an assignment from the king to his baby brother where he could help their other brother track down a witch that could possibly help Nero with the toxin. Things had been set in motion, leading Nero to unknowingly help his baby brother get back with his mate.

Everything had gone to shit when Julian had decided to screw with Nelo. Now, Nero owed Locke Baroe a boon, and the payment was finding and protecting a female that had helped the king out.

Locke had spared no expense flying Nero from London's Gatwick Airport. While on the plane, Nero had looked over

the dossier on Katana Samurai. The female was the last daughter of one of the Samurai families. She was particularly beautiful, a vixen with long hair that was dark as pitch, hips he wanted to grip, and breasts that begged to be touched and suckled. *Katana Samurai*. Nero's mind was full of her.

She could have gone down any path leading to a healthy destiny, but she decided to become a whistleblower in the human world.

Nero needed to get more information on the situation the female was in. She had gotten herself into trouble with a group of immortals calling themselves *Dragons*.

Locke had very little information on them. According to the king's sources, the Dragons were a fanatical group of witches that wanted things to go back to the way they were in the old days. The king was trying hard to smooth things over with the group of witches, and so far, he wasn't having any luck. According to Locke all contact had been severed once he inquired about a meeting to reach a beneficially understanding. His mind remained on a continuous loop thinking about her since seeing the picture three days ago.

According to the information Locke had on her, Katana had had her fair share of scrapes with immortals that did not like what she was doing. The King wanted her protected while he continued to find this latest group of witches she had pissed off. The male was getting hassled from both the mortal and immortal world. Who knew the religious enthusiast in the world still believed in hanging, burning, and drowning of witches? He didn't think that was an acceptable practice.

The king had given him this one chance to prove he was ready to come back full time with the VN. His body raged at him, the wound he had sustained over a year ago was slow to heal. And until he figured it out, he wouldn't be able to rid his body of it and heal completely. The effects of the toxin messed with his abilities.

Nero had taken the job of hunting down Katana for two reasons. One, Locke being the King of the Vampire Nation

would owe him a boon. Two, Katana and Wynter were best friends.

If Nero were honest with himself, there was a third reason he took the job. The female was a full-blooded witch, which was rare these days. With her lineage, Nero hoped the female could determine the toxins which could help him rid his system of the poison. If she couldn't help him, he would have no choice but to tell the King he wasn't healing. And that would end his career with the VN and eventually his life.

Turning from the window, Nero headed for the kitchen. There were a dozen or so takeout menus. He couldn't cook anything that came close to eatable, but he could order takeout like nobodies' business. Some people cooked great, some made reservations like a rock star's business manager, his super romantic power was takeout.

Flipping on the kitchen light, he walked around the center island, opening drawer after drawer. If his housekeeper tossed them out, he would toss her out of a job. It took years to get a collection of takeout menus like his. Opening the last drawer, he found the dozens of menus. Closing his eyes, he stuck his hand in the drawer, moving the papers around and pulled one out. Opening his eyes, he smiled. *Chinese* it is.

His phone ringing halted his happiness. "Yeah."

"Nero, where are you?" Nelo asked in a clip tone.

"In New York at my home. Why?"

"Katana. Can you help us track her down? She might be in danger." Nero heard his twin ask.

*No secrets*, Nero reminded himself. "Already on the case."

"What's the address where we can come help?" Nero heard Wynter chime in.

"Give me until tomorrow and I promise to give you the location." Nero slammed his shields up so fast he had to grip the kitchen counter where he wouldn't hit the floor. "I would appreciate some time to scout the area where she may be."

Nelo tried getting past Nero's shields without luck. "I can give you until tomorrow, but after that, you can deal with my mate."

"I see you're already whipped." Nero laughed as Nelo growled at him, then the phone went dead. Shoving his phone back in his pocket, he wiped the blood that now dripped from his nose. "Damn it." Snapping off a paper towel, he wiped the blood from the counter as he pinched his nose, trying to stem the flow.

Tilting his head back, Nero could feel his time ticking by and knew soon time would be up. Nero wiped the blood from his nose and tossed the paper towel away.

"Screw having food delivered."

The End

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