

FATE OF THE TEN REALMS



ROYAL  
VAMPIRE'S FAKE  
MISTRESS

J. S. STRIKER

*Royal Vampire's  
Fake Mistress*

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J. S. Striker

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# Chapter 1

“Oi, you! Get your clothes on and stop looking like a street rat. House Seneca needs a new servant, and you are the lucky pick.”

There were some clanging sounds, then a howling protest coupled with kicking and more screaming. Winter Willows tried not to peek as she pretended to sleep, already aware of who was being taken, John Malone. He had been screaming obscenities at anyone who would listen before the man began to beg the prison guards that he would do anything just to get out of this hellhole. She understood the sentiment but could never understand why John, a half-shifter, would willingly submit himself to the hands of his greatest sworn enemy: a vampire.

*To each his own, I guess.*

When the sound was gone, she opened her eyes and scrambled to the cell bars, squeezing her head just enough to peek at the now-empty spot. She lit up at the sight of the tray and squeezed her arm through the cell bars next, twisting it to reach for the edge and drag it closer. Just as she grabbed for the piece of bread, a scaly tail slithered into view and snatched it out of her hand.

“I’m sorry, honey,” a hissing female voice said, not sounding sorry at all.

“That bread looks hard, anyway,” Winter huffed, then shut her mouth at the next hiss. Whatever she thought of the bread, it didn’t matter, as any bread was better than no bread at all. She patted her stomach as her mouth tried not to water, her ears perked at any slightest sound. Someone was lapping up water from her right and whispering came from her left, but in front of her was a hunched figure with his back turned and his hands busy.

“Hello. Can I have some of that bread?”

The figure whirled, showing a huge chunk of bread and raw meat before sharp teeth were bared. Yellow orbs glinted, the black portion piercing. She had seen wolf shifters in their prime and some had even accepted her when she landed on their island, but this one looked like he would rather give her a different kind of welcome.

“Only if you take your clothes off for me.”

Her nose wrinkled, and she tried not to glare. She had dealt with shifters like this one, too, albeit from afar.

“You don’t want to see my body,” she said, vigorously shaking her head. “It is riddled with boils and pus. The clothes are just doing a very good job of hiding them.”

“I don’t mind. Clothes off, tits out. I want to jerk myself to something interesting for once.”

Her stomach clenched, disgusted, even while she tried to school her face to pleasantness. The hissing interrupted whatever she was about to say next, and she could imagine what figure matched the sultry voice: a hot, seductive woman who could probably tempt any man on earth—or kill them. She read it in the woman’s vibes as clear as day.

“You are a wolf shifter, aren’t you?” the seductive-sounding woman asked.

“Obviously,” the man replied, grinning. “Are you going to defend her and ask me to stop insulting her? Or are you going to strip for me instead?”

“Nah.” There was a scoff. “She can strip for you. She’s human.”

There was a loud *ooh*. The atmosphere changed, carrying an air of malice that had Winter fighting back a shudder. The man leaned against his cell bars, eyeing her up and down before settling on her chest.

“I bet they will fatten her up and make her delectable for their many feasts. The bitch already has an in while we are stuck here.”

Winter bristled. But she tried to look past it and attempted once more.

“I just need a piece of bread, sir. How about that in exchange for us helping each other escape this place?”

Laughter rang out.

“Like you could bring anything to the table. Other than your tits.”

“She could offer her flesh,” the woman suggested. “I wouldn’t mind meat after this dreadful diet of stale bread and water.”

“I try not to eat meat as much as possible, but I suppose I could make an exception.” Black eyes narrowed. “Anything to get rid of vermin like her.”

More words were thrown out, all of which formed a hateful tirade that skimmed down her skin into her bones. She curled in on herself, letting them have their moment as her mind roiled with a couple of facts: She was hungry. She needed to get out of here. She was not going to get help...so, she was going to help herself.

Patience was her ally as she waited for the mocking to die down, the last words sinking in her brain.

“I can’t wait to see the likes of you get drained of blood and rot to death. You don’t belong here.”

When all was silent and the minutes ticked by, she cleared her throat.

“Snake shifter?”

There was no response. She tried once more, but all she heard was a hissing that sounded partially like a snore. Assured that the woman was asleep, Winter focused on the man, who also had his eyes closed.

“You must have been banished from the wolf island if you aren’t with your pack.”

There was no response. She read nothing from him, either, his vibe too closed-off.

“I was with them once. They were very friendly to my kind, unlike you.”

This time, there was a response as the man sneered but didn't open his eyes. “Right.”

“It's true.”

“A human in Calassius? They would rip you to shreds.”

Some had attempted to, but she bit her tongue. She pushed her mind to open and delved in until she found what she needed: a rush of information always narrated in a small, melodic voice.

*There are three wolf islands in Calassius, two of which are active. The first active one is a clan known to keep to itself, while the second one has an open alliance with other clans. They tolerate humans, but no human has ever dared stay overnight on those islands before.*

She thought back on the one she landed on—accidentally—and went for it.

“Chief Hans is a good, strict leader who gives everyone a fair chance. But he does not tolerate betrayers and would cut them off for good. They never mentioned you.” A pause. “You must have betrayed them so badly.”

Silence.

“Come to think of it, based on their records, only two shifters were kicked out of the island. One was banished for thieving under their name. The other was banished for selling \_\_\_”

“Shut up! You shut up, you filthy mongrel!”

“Mongrel shifters would be very insulted with that insult if they did exist....”



She trailed off, then she read it: the vibes that felt so strong and so intense, she nearly drowned in it. Winter tried not to scramble away as she watched the man curl in on himself and knew what was coming next. It happened in the blink of an eye, an explosion of skin and human body before the man before her transformed into his beast form. The great, hulking wolf was larger than she had expected, a massive monster with red eyes that were a little too crazed. He turned and banged against the cell bars—and rattled them hard.

“That’s not going to get you anywhere,” she said.

More banging came, each one louder than the last. At the nth slam, a bar came loose and had her eyes widening.

“Shit.”

“Shit is right.” The hiss came abruptly. “What the hell were you thinking?”

Another bar came loose, then another. Just as the wolf managed to insert its body in between the gap and barrel its way toward her, another door opened, and blurry figures came into view. They yanked the wolf back before her cell bar could be slammed into, fangs glinting.

“Stand down. Shift back—”

The wolf spun and shook them off. Her cell rattled as one crashed into it.

“Incoming,” she warned, her eyes on the wolf while her hand moved elsewhere. The vampire bounced up, ignoring her as more reinforcements came in the form of more blurs.

The next sight was a rather sickening one: that of almost a dozen vampires strong-arming the wolf into submission. The wolf was persistent at first, his focus no longer on her but on the men surrounding it as it repeatedly attacked. Then fangs and teeth came into view until the wolf had no choice but to relent after all the blood was drawn from him, transforming back into his man form. There was angry hissing from the vampires, then—

“Don’t kill him. Transfer him to the other prison chamber. We may need his strength yet.”

They lifted the unconscious man and carried him away. Silence and blood filled the space, the latter swimming in her nostrils as much as the vibe the man now carried: defeat. Sympathy rose, but she tried to shake that off, too. Prey had no room for sympathy.

“That was quite a show for someone so...weak. I’m intrigued.”

A tail came into view, wriggling as it touched the blood. Winter watched as the tail began to sweep the blood toward the unseen cage, and slurping sounds ensued. When the sounds grew louder, she looked away.

“Who are you?”

“Winter,” was her automatic response.

“You know that’s not what I meant.”

The interest was clear. Wary, Winter debated before shrugging.

“I’m a human being. Trash to your eyes. I have been researching your world for years and decided to explore it instead of writing about it.”

It wasn’t quite the truth, not when there was so much more to the story that she couldn’t reveal. The melodic voice hummed in her head like a warning bell before the woman’s voice slithered in once more.

“What did you grab from that vampire’s pocket?”

Anticipating the question, Winter tossed a candy in the woman’s direction. “Sweets. Unlike you, I don’t mind sharing.”

That shut the woman up, who grabbed the candy with her tail and became quiet after. Winter leaned against the wall, relief pouring out of her that she was out of hot water. She curled her hand into her pocket, touching the key she had

managed to grab in all the commotion. Outwardly, she looked like someone who couldn't be bothered with all the blood and gore in Ostrov Krov—the island home of the vampires, who were as vicious as the stories she read in books as a child.

Inwardly, she was already planning her escape in the quietest way possible.

Prisoners came and went, leaving her with no leeway as she couldn't risk doing this while there was still activity surrounding her. She made do with being a wallflower, which honestly worked best for her as she was able to observe every creature that they brought in.

There was a bear shifter, who looked more pleasant than the wolf, minding his business and observing her just as curiously before he was whisked away the next day. There was a man in all-dark clothes who was as violent as they came, trying to explode everything with his hands before they were restrained by special chains. *Warlock*, came feathering over her mind, the certainty stunning her. Men who created spells out of thin air or whatever materials worked best for them and lived on a separate island with witches. Then there was a creature glowing so brightly and shrieking so loudly that Winter had to cover her eyes and ears while the vampires who had taken it in grumbled repeatedly. *Fae*, her mind supplied, except she had seen them before—had been imprisoned by them before—and had no desire to create new ties with their kind.

“Why are you here?” the snake woman asked, curiosity getting the better of her after days of shutting Winter out.

“Why are *you* here?”

There was an irritated hiss. “I'm not dumb. Look at this chamber, and you will see there is one glaring difference. Your kind usually serves their kind, don't you? What I want to know is why you are here when you should be out there,

begging for your freedom while they whip you into obedience.”

It hit home closer than she wanted, particularly since Winter had already been a slave here some months ago, too—her first accidental landing and escape.

“Maybe they find me cute,” she said instead.

A scaly tail snapped towards her, its tip banging the bar.

“Don’t you dare lie to me,” the woman growled. “What offense do you have against House Bronson, and why are you kept here instead of slaving for your life?”

“What offense do *you* have against them?”

Winter jerked back just in time as the tip of the tail struck once more, stretched beyond its limit. Yet it only reached a cell bar. The snake woman tried a few more times, then retreated. Another Fae was brought in, more dignified than the last with the silkiest black hair. Then the snake woman was brought out, and Winter finally got her first glimpse of the creature: slender curves, greenish-brown scales, and the most mesmerizing green eyes ever. They pinned her in place, then fought against the restraints until the woman was out of the chamber.

Relief poured out, but Winter tried not to get too excited. The hours passed with no prisoner taken in, cluing her in that maybe it was daytime. With a deep breath, she took the key out of her pocket and into the keyhole...and hit the jackpot.

“Holy moly,” she whispered, then shut her mouth. Pushing the door open just enough for her to slip out was tricky, but even more so was sneaking towards the chamber’s main door without getting caught and ratted out by the other prisoners. Somehow, she made it out, ducking when she found herself in an open field and cursing her luck when the tall grass moved.

She eyed the moving grass, then watched when the chamber opened and closed. She glowered at the moon, then sprinted away as fast as she could until she was out of the field and surrounded by trees. The castle loomed behind her, so grand and larger than any structure she had ever seen in her life, filled with towers and barricades in all directions. Winter was glad to leave it behind, already tracking through the rough pathway and praying that her disappearance wouldn't be noticed yet.

Damn pirates, who had captured her while she had been happily strolling through Centro—a trading island where there was supposed to be a truce. Damn vampires, who eagerly took her out of the pirates' hands with a few gold coins and still thought she was a spy from House Nova out to get House Bronson. Damn Ostrov Krov, who had her description jotted down to a T and made it impossible for her to blend in. Did they take it down now, or was she still wanted? Why had they kept her in that chamber without anyone from House Bronson confronting her? Torturing her?

Where on heavens was the exit to this godforsaken place?

“Think, Winter, think,” she muttered, then willed herself to shove the answer out. It came within seconds, a map materializing in her head and pointing out that she was facing the wrong direction. Her fingers itched for a pen to draw the map, just like she had the coordinates and all her other discoveries in the past. “Common sense, Winter.”

There was no time to draw and no time to even contemplate it. There was only time to get in the right direction, so she continued running until she was at the edge of the forest and zoning in on the ocean ahead, black under the moonlight and glittering blue in the sunlight. She used the shoreline to trace where she needed to go, then stepped back towards a couple of boulders and braced herself for the jump toward freezing coldness.

“Please, Master. Please take me. It would be my honor to be drained by you. I beg you to have me.”

The words stopped her in her tracks. She whirled, terrified that a vampire would pop out in front of her and attack. When there was none, she crawled over them and peeked at the highest point until she found the source of the voice.

The woman was beautiful and slim, held by a man whose back was towards Winter. She noted light blond hair coiled to perfection, his pale skin lined with muscles as the man grasped the woman tight.

“Are you sure?”

“Anything for you, Master.”

She could read the woman’s eagerness but couldn’t read anything from the man whose voice was cool, calm... seductive. When the woman arched her neck, the man sank fangs into it. Muted sounds filled the air, emphasizing what the woman had asked for earlier.

*It would be my honor to be drained by you.*

Winter cursed in her head. Then she temporarily abandoned all ruminations of escape and picked up the heaviest rock she could carry, barreling her way towards the duo as quietly as she could. Perhaps the man was distracted. Perhaps she was quieter than she had anticipated. Whichever it was, he didn’t pick up on the fact that there was someone else in the vicinity until it was too late.

“Run,” she whispered to the woman, who was gaping at her and trying to get out of a dazed state. The rock still pressing the vampire’s stomach down, she kicked the head for good measure and dragged the woman with her, who protested the whole way before eventually following. Then the complaints came spurting.

“My dress is going to get torn from all this running. Why did you take me away? Why are you—”

“You are welcome, and you are delusional,” Winter shot back. “Did you think he was going to stop with your heartbeat still intact?”

The woman bristled. “I did not thank you.”

“And I didn’t have to save your life,” Winter snapped back, then tried to calm herself down. Her heart thundered in her chest as she strong-armed the woman out of harm’s way, then paused. “I can help you escape—”

Squawking ensued, that of a person who was very against the idea of escape and looking at Winter as if she had grown three heads. When the sound got louder, Winter contemplated knocking this one unconscious, too, before her conscience got the better of her, and she restarted their running. When she reached the area where most of the human servants resided, she let the woman go.

“Keep your head down. Don’t die. Find allies and get out of here if you can. Unless you want to leave with me now?”

The woman glared, outraged, and opened her mouth. Understanding a scream was coming, Winter reluctantly slapped a hand over that mouth and hit the side of the woman’s neck until the woman crumpled on top of some folded silks, where the silk seller would find her in the morning. Then Winter was back to sprinting away, aware that she had lost track of time and the guards could be on her tail at any second.

“Stupid island. Stupid system. Stupid me for getting stuck here again.” She glared at no one in particular. “Watch me get captured. Again.”

But she reached the correct shoreline with no interruption. Hope flared as she worked the coordinates in her head, then lunged for the water. The cold slapped her skin and had her stilling as it sank into her bones and made her tremble all over. Waist-deep and over the crashing of waves, she saw

it: a shadow passing over her until she iced over. Winter looked up.

The flying figure peered back, bleeding from his shadowy head and dark, ominous wings straightening as he—the vampire she had just attacked—glided down towards her.



## Chapter 2

The woman didn't look terrified in the slightest, which was impressive, because she also didn't look like she was fighting death in the hands of the cold waters surrounding Ostrov Krov. Anyone in their right mind wouldn't dare swim here during the cold season, and Nathaniel Hendricks wasn't looking forward to diving in there if he could help it. This woman who hit him quite heartily wasn't right in the head—and she was going to die if he didn't get her out of there.

Being a hero was the farthest thing from his mind, but he plucked her out of the water and braced against the ice hitting his hands. To his surprise, she came without thrashing, limp as a noodle against his grasp. If it wasn't for the way her heart drummed loudly, he would have assumed she was already dead.

“Playing dead?” he called out against the wind, unable to resist. There was no response, so he continued flying until the castle came into view. He dropped her first and watched her scramble inside, then landed on the balcony and tucked his wings in, not missing the torn portion on his right. Nate sneered, already foul mood turning fouler as he strode into the room.

The woman was standing behind the large bed, candelabra raised in her hand and poised to aim.

“Put that down,” he said, unable to keep the frostiness off his tone. “That's from a rare collection and irreplaceable.”

Blue eyes blazed, the color of ice. He noted that apart from her freckles, they were the only features that stood out in her otherwise ordinary form.

“If you think you can drain me to death, then rest assured that I won't do it like the woman before me. I will kick and scream and claw at you until my very last breath—and you are *not* my master.”

The wordy declaration took him aback. He stopped walking and tilted his head, observing her. She observed him back, again lacking the terror that so many who were hurt by his kind possessed. Instead, she lifted the candelabra higher, outwardly unfazed by his presence. Recognition slithered in seconds later, and his decision was uttered before he could even ponder it.

“I won’t kill you yet, not when other Houses want you more.”

Those blue eyes widened, confirming his guess. He waited for her to speak, then continued when she didn’t.

“So, you are that wanted woman that they recently captured. And you attempted to escape, I assume, and were trying to get out of the island. I bet you are regretting your decision to meddle with my affairs now.”

She should regret making him lose information already on the tip of the woman’s tongue. Now he had nothing and the woman was probably back in House Williams, where it would take Nate an even longer time to coax her into leaving. He narrowed his gaze at the culprit, whose expression was blank.

“I have no idea what you are talking about.”

The lie was smooth. He sat on the nearest chair and waited for her gaze to dart elsewhere and look for another escape route, but it remained fixed on him.

“You can leave, you know. But rest assured that the castle will be crawling with my kind, especially those already aware of your disappearance. I bet all the other Houses will try to get to you first to one-up House Bronson.”

Now it was his turn to lie, considering no other Houses would even know she existed when her wanted records had been taken down, and he was among the few who kept up with that news. But the lie got to her, her throat moving at her gulp before she cleared her throat.

“What do you want?”

Nate gestured at his forehead, no longer bleeding but still smarting. Then he lightly patted his stomach, which was feeling the effects of having a rock thrown hard at him—his fault for being too focused on his goal. “Servitude in exchange for losing me my meal. Becoming my prisoner instead.”

She sneered. “Do I even have a say?”

“Sure.” He shrugged. “You can say no and suffer the consequences.”

“I won’t be your slave.”

“I didn’t say slave,” he countered. “What else can you offer me, then?”

Silence.

“House Bronson knows I did nothing to them but continues to pretend I did so they can have a reason to retaliate against House Nova. I’m a pawn in their games.”

The words were blurted out. His brows lifted.

“I have no use for that information.”

Frustration clouded her features before her blank expression returned.

“A lot of houses despise House Hendricks, particularly the King and his tyrannical sons.”

*Do you mean my parents?* he wanted to ask, then kept it to himself. “Common knowledge. Everyone hates the ruling monarchy. What else?”

“A pirate named Isaiah is making secret deals with the nephew of House Rue, who wants the daughter out of the way so he can be their next head. Isaiah is identified with the three rings on his nostrils, which he got from a previous pirate—yanked them straight out of flesh while the previous pirate was still alive.”

It was so specific that he gaped. Realizing she witnessed his unguarded moment, Nate scowled. Then he shot out of his seat and was on her in a second. The woman

swallowed a gasp when he snatched the candelabra and returned it to the bedside table, then blinked down at the cuffs chaining her to the bedpost.

“I have a party to attend.”

“You can’t just keep me here—”

“I can, actually, and I should with all the nonsense you are spouting off. Don’t worry. I will decide what to do with you soon. In the meantime, there’s a spare uniform inside that bedside table, where my cousin always keeps it. You should get yourself accustomed to donning one and becoming a servant for my house.”

There was a splutter of disbelief, then the woman stiffening when he patted her down for weapons. He took the key from her pocket and noted the warmth of her skin, still unused to how naturally warm humans were. It was pleasant. When he was done, her lashes fluttered mockingly.

“Are you done feeling me up?”

“What’s your name, by the way?” he asked.

She hesitated. “Winter.”

“Winter, I wasn’t feeling you up. You are not my type, human or otherwise. And be careful how you speak to our kind. You will find that not everyone tolerates that kind of language, and you will be torn to bits if you attempt it on anyone else.” Nerves shimmered in her senses, the first that they were visible. He smiled, leaned closer, and crooned. “And you are lucky I have somewhere to be.”

“Or you will tear me to shreds?” she shot back, but there was a tremor to her voice.

“No. I like compulsion and bending people’s will. But I like it better when I don’t have to use anything but words.”

Her blood smelled faint but appealing. Her skin smelled of sea salt. He stepped back before he could attempt to compel her, not about to go down that route unless necessary.

“Use the servant outfit,” he reminded. “I won’t have control if someone walks in here and sees that you don’t belong to any house.”

Nate glimpsed her throwing him a baleful glance as he walked out of the room.

“Nathaniel! It’s so good to see you.”

Nate wished he could say the same, but the party was so boring from the moment he stepped into it until now, hours later, and with endless conversations that were drawn out and empty of meaning. Still, he tried to smile at the approaching figure, whose mustache didn’t match the youthful face and bouncy steps.

“Good evening, Rohan. Aren’t you supposed to be in your pajamas?”

The jest was accepted in good spirits as Rohan laughed and vigorously shook his hand.

“Those times have passed, my man, and I can finally join you and the others in glamorous events like this.”

“And here I thought your mother wanted to lock you up in the basement forever,” he mused, earning another laugh. To be fair, Rohan’s mother could be commended for that, considering the younger of their kind were the most reckless these days. Rohan was different, more interested in proving himself a powerful figure of House Sicily than fucking around.

“She can’t keep me locked up forever, but I’m relieved that I’m of an age now. What’s up with you? I haven’t seen you since....”

“Last month. When you snuck into my brother’s party,” Nate supplied. And he had snuck Rohan out just as the party had turned rowdy.

As if on cue, he glimpsed Nicholas Hendricks entering the scene and immediately snag the crowd’s attention while

the man smiled and licked his lips, where Nate deduced there was a trace of blood under the teeth. But no one would call Nick out on that, not when blood parties were being secretly held in a lot of corners of the castle and House Hendricks—the family who was supposed to be mindful against killing multiple lives on the daily and bringing balance to this island—chose to turn a blind eye. His hand fisted, so he turned away from his brother, wondering how many had been killed today and how their parents would sweep it under the rug.

“You are right. But I was just so excited and couldn’t wait. Is your brother holding any more parties in the near future? Private ones?”

“Not that I know of. Excuse me, Rohan.”

Nate glanced at the elevated throne as he walked away, unfazed to find the King and Queen absent again. So far, six men had approached him intending to discuss business while three women suggested a rendezvous somewhere private, where they could either pleasure each other, drink from a human servant, or talk about his family after some fucking. He was charming to them all but subtly evasive, understanding they all led to one thing: that he and Nick were their closest sources to sucking it up with the ruling couple. Nick basked in the attention, but there was something off about him that Nate couldn’t pinpoint.

“What the hell is it?” he mumbled, observing from a secluded corner.

It took him seconds to realize that his brother’s fingers were shaking, hence their repeated fisting in silk trouser pockets. The restlessness soon thrummed in the man’s expression, on edge as black eyes flitted around and only settled on the sight of a male human roaming around serving drinks. Nick’s gaze gobbled up the sight. Just like that, Nate knew what was up: his brother was on drugs—again—and hungry for a kill.

He casually pushed off his spot and roamed around, avoiding figures who knew him. When he reached the servant,

he plucked off the last champagne on the tray and clasped the man's wrist.

"I need you to deliver a tray of this to House Chatterley. Let them know it's from me."

The man looked up, confused. "Master, aren't I supposed to make the rounds and deliver drinks?"

Nate met his gaze and let his words shimmer. "You will bring a tray of our finest champagne to House Chatterley. You will tell them that Nathaniel Hendricks sent you to serve them for the night."

The man's eyes glazed. With a nod of his head, the man was floating his way out of the venue with no one the wiser as to where he was headed. Nate kept an eye on his exit, then on his brother conversing with a member of House Richardson, and didn't notice. When Nick was done and searched around again, Nate looked away, assured that House Chatterley would understand his message and keep the servant safe in the meantime.

The good thing about his brother's obsession was how Nick scouted specific targets, and any other prey just wouldn't do in that particular moment. Assured that Nick would be left frustrated for the rest of the night, Nate spun to face the next approaching sound of footsteps.

"Nathaniel. I have been meaning to talk to you."

"Of course, you have."

Denison Rue smiled, oblivious to the mild sarcasm. The man went on about how good business was without asking questions, a rather unique tactic as he preened around his words and made sure Nate knew how successful their house was in its endeavors lately. Winter's face floated in his mind. Then her words followed and had him ruminating.

"And I always knew Uncle would like it, so I pushed ahead with the idea."

“Hmm.” Nate sipped from his glass and peered over it.  
“Do you want a ring?”

“Ring?”

“Nose ring.”

Denison looked like he was torn between pretending to understand and confessing that he had no idea what Nate was talking about. The man went for the latter, laughing it off.

“I’m sorry?”

“I heard nose rings are quite the trend these days.”

“They are?”

“Yes. Isaiah sports them three in a row.”

His pale complexion turned even more ashen, the man sinking into gray territory. Denison looked like he swallowed something vile and was trying not to choke on it, which was more than enough to confirm a certain woman’s words.

“Listen, about Isaiah...”

“He’s a very popular pirate, from what I heard. He has many deals going on with many houses and might be welcomed here if he keeps up the service. I heard he trades a lot of goods to House Rue?”

The threat was subtle. Whether Denison got it or not was to be determined, but the man nodded, desperately latching on to the offer.

“Yes, he has some very good stocks. Goods. Lots of goods.”

“Good. I will make sure to tell my family of those goods and how they and the pirate could be of service to us.”

Not that he was ever going to let a pirate make any more trades with them than was necessary, considering their treacherous and hunger-ridden nature. But Nate believed in letting creatures thrive, so long as they stayed away from him.



“Yes, of course. Thank you. It would be an honor to be mentioned to your parents, Nathaniel.”

“Anytime. Give Stephanie my regards. They are especially fond of her.”

Denison hemmed and hawed, then finally let Nate leave when the man finally understood that he had fucked up. He was probably already planning ways to cut ties with Isaiah in his head. Nate let him mull over it and exited the venue without speaking to anyone else, the questions whirling. When he got to the bedroom, he paused to sweep the area, noted the clothes on the bed, and groaned. Then he was charging towards the balcony, letting his wings out, and flying as fast as the wind could carry him.

“Damn woman.”

The damn woman had somehow managed to uncuff herself and flee away from the room wearing the uniform he had offered—a brilliant idea since no one would stop her if she belonged to House Hendricks. He cursed at how he had underestimated her and furiously hurried to the shoreline. He scanned the horizon, deducing he was too late...until he spotted a figure racing to the water.

“Oh, no, you don’t.”

He swooped in without pause, avoiding forming a shadow over her. He caught her off guard when he plucked her without warning, her squeak loud and clear as she whipped around. Then he brought them higher and she stopped moving, aware that all her thrashing would just end with her plunging to the ground. He kept his speed until he reached the balcony once more, where he dropped her and marched forward before he even tucked his wings in. Her eyes widened as she backed away, gaze roaming over the edges of the torn side. Then they were gone.

“Why did you tell me about House Rue? What was your purpose?”

His question had that observing gaze snapping towards his. Her shoulders turned rigid, braced for his reaction. But her expression remained watchful.

“I heard the daughter isn’t so bad. She doesn’t kill the humans she drinks from and only has a servant for when she dresses in formal attire.”

It was so spot-on that it shook him to the bones—this human being knowing so much when most houses were secretive and wouldn’t dare reveal their innermost plans to anyone outside blood.

“Stephanie is all that. And she is my friend. Thank you for helping me prevent her death in the meantime.”

Denison still needed to be dealt with, but he had scared the man enough and knew there was time. His thank you caught Winter off guard as she stared at him, then hastily looked away.

“Who told you this?”

“I just know.”

“When did Isaiah come into play?”

“A year ago,” she blurted out, then whirled to glare at him. “Stop compelling me.”

“You would have to look into my eyes for me to compel you,” he returned and watched mortification bloom on her face. All the while, he stalked her while she continued backing away until they were on opposite sides of the room. “Would you like to jump off the balcony from embarrassment now?”

“No. I would prefer to be out of here alive.”

“You can be. If you accept my deal.”

The way her eyes narrowed told him that she didn’t trust him one bit, but it was the lack of fear—and filter—that intrigued him further. Nate considered compelling her, then

decided the victory of wordplay would be so much sweeter. He waited her out.

He didn't have to wait long.

“What deal?” she asked warily.

“I need intel on the houses and on every creature surrounding us that is connected to us—us as in Ostrov Krov. I need to know who is planning bad things for the good houses. I need you to pose as my mistress while you feed me that information—”

“No—”

“And in exchange, you will be free.”

“Define free.”

Again, the lack of outright terror was astounding.

“Your name will be written off our wanted list. So will your face. You can remove yourself from this island in whatever method you wish, so long as you do not return. I will just tell everyone it fizzled out and they won't question you missing. If you do return, I will no longer have anything to do with it.”

“When will I be free?”

“When you serve my purpose and the information I need.”

“One month,” she bargained.

He would have laughed outright, but decided to be honest. “One year max.”

“Whether or not I serve your purpose?”

“Yes.”

She looked so skeptical as she peered at him.

“And if I refuse?”

“I will return you to House Bronson, and what happens to you will no longer be my business.”

Silence. He waited for the refusal and for the woman to add more things to the bargain.

“I need my safety as your intel source guaranteed. And I need the deal signed in blood.”

## Chapter 3

It was preposterous. There were a lot of other words to describe just what she had gotten herself into, but Winter found she couldn't think of those other words as she watched the man who had offered the deal leave the room without even bothering to cuff her again. She contemplated escaping a third time, then decided to save her energy because...well, what defense did she have against a flying creature like that?

*Vampires with wings are special vampires. That means they are powerful. The extra special ones can fly long distances over water and can turn into bats. Those not special wouldn't dare, as most dislike water and do not know how to swim.*

The words fluttered in the same melodic tone, and she was getting sick of it. But she stowed the information for future use, remembering the man's wings and how he had swooped in to pluck her without breaking a sweat.

"I hope you weren't considering escaping again."

The smooth, cool voice had her jumping, so she gripped the mattress to keep herself anchored. It was a nice mattress, and she hadn't slept in one in days...no, in months. But the longing had to be bottled up as she shook her head.

"I don't have a death wish."

"Good."

He strode with ease but didn't float like most vampires did, as if he couldn't be bothered. The pale skin and long, lean lines were vampire signatures, along with his face. Not angelic, but the light blond hair close to white, the arresting gray eyes, and the sensual-looking lips made it impossible to look away—which, she supposed, was the purpose.

Refusing to be like any other human, Winter did look away, but not for long, as she needed to witness him get

through the blood ritual.

*Blood signatures are a vampire's promise. Get them to sign with their blood and it's a guarantee that they can't turn their back on it. Of course, some vampires can resist the consequences better.*

“Make sure the blood signature is thick and clear,” she blurted out, then clamped her mouth shut when he gave her a baleful look. She needed to stop pushing her luck, didn't she?

But the thing was, she had been pushing her luck for quite some time now, from jumping into the Otherworld, then jumping from one island to another in her eagerness to discover everything she had learned since she had gotten those coordinates and written about them. The word “fraud” trickled through her mind, but she brushed it off and tried to focus on what she needed now: to get out of Ostrov Krov alive.

When he was done wounding himself and letting drops of blood out, he gestured until she held out her hand. Nerves flitted in her system when there was no choice but to step forward, and this close, the flawlessness of his face became even more apparent. She looked down and sucked in a breath when his thumb pressed against her palm, sealing the deal... and then it was over. The surprising warmth from the pressure stayed with her while he smoothly kept the transaction going.

“From now on, you are officially part of my house and are protected by the power it holds. You will be watched by someone I trust to ensure your safety.”

“Not to ensure that I don't escape?”

At that, a smirk played on his lips, drawing her gaze there. “You accepted my blood. You trying to escape will be the most excruciating pain you will ever experience, so I suggest not putting yourself in that miserable position.”

She shuddered but had already known this was how it was going to turn out. The man was infuriating—but she knew she would have done the same. Winter nodded.

“Fair enough.” Then something occurred. “I need to know the name of the master I’m serving.”

For the first time, a glint came in those cold eyes. Was that amusement?

“It’s Nate. Stay here. I will get someone to take you to your new room and get you acquainted with the castle protocols. Welcome to House Hendricks, Winter.”

It was only when he was already out the door that her stomach clenched as it finally sank in.

“Holy freaking moly.”

She had just gotten herself tied to the royal family.

“Miss Winter, here are your provisions while you stay in this room. There’s a bell, too, in case you need to call for me, but I’m often in the kitchen helping out with the rest of the staff, anyway.”

The woman was a young brunette with a long nose and a cheerful smile, and there was no malice in her tone, unlike all the other servants Winter had met when she had pretended to be a servant during her first land here. Winter waited for more instructions, then cleared her throat when none came.

“How did you get here, and what’s your name?”

Surprise gleamed in the woman’s eyes, but she answered readily. “I came from Centro, traded by a merchant. And my name is Hilda.”

“Do they treat you well?”

Hilda blinked at that but recovered swiftly, an image of composure. “Yes. Master Nathaniel is a fair man who gives his servants plenty of provisions and freedom around the castle.”

*Nathaniel. Nate.* Somehow, both names fit, but the former even more so with the elegance he exuded.

“Like blood parties?”

“The master doesn’t hold blood parties,” Hilda said, baffled. “That’s his brother’s specialty.”

Brother, as in... “The crown prince?”

“Yes. There are parties every week, but we are not allowed to attend.”

Surprise coursed through her chest. Every information that was divulged made her more unsure about who Nate was and what he stood for, particularly since he belonged to House Hendricks: the leading royal family, known for their ruthless, bloodthirsty ways.

“Does he just have sex parties, then?”

The scandalized look on Hilda’s face spoke the truth. “He does not need parties for his needs when he can just have any willing woman at his disposal—and not by force. Master Nathaniel is beyond those games, though we like to give the illusion that he is all about those games.”

Her brows rose. “Technically, that means he is still playing games, then.”

“As he should. The royal family has an image to uphold.” Hilda lifted her chin. “Will that be all, Miss Winter?”

The warmth was gone, but there was still no hint of malice. Winter felt chastised when Hilda left the room without another word. Winter sighed, noting her provisions: uniforms, hygiene kits, and little snacks. Then she scanned the room, which was less flashy than the one she had been stuck in and made her feel like she was a prisoner all over again.

But there was a mattress, soft and airy, and she groaned when she lay in it. She closed her eyes for a while, basking in the comfort, then peered at the front. There was a door, too, not cell bars, so it wasn’t as bad as the prison chambers. Curiosity got the better of her and had her approaching the door, delighted to find it unlocked.



A quick peek outside confirmed that she wasn't alone as she glimpsed a figure lurking in the corner. She noted the broader build and surmised it wasn't Nate.

"I'm not going to try to escape," she called out and was rewarded with a head turn. She couldn't see his face in the dark, but the stillness of his body language screamed one thing: a vampire.

There was no response, so she shrugged and returned inside, plopped on the bed, and was asleep soon after. She woke up sometime later, disoriented, then surprised to find a tray of food and water already laid out beside her bed. Winter ate fast and waited for Hilda. When the woman didn't come, she took the tray and stepped out of her room—only to be blocked by a figure. She looked up and was surprised yet again to see that while he had the palest eyes, his skin was tanned as if he had been out in the sun for too long.

"Mr. Bodyguard, I assume you have a name?"

His expression was unreadable. Scars riddled his cheeks and neck, old and faint. "Maddox."

"Human or vampire?" When he didn't reply, she sighed. "Mr. Maddox, I'm just going to take this tray to the kitchen and get acquainted with the staff. Then I'm going to explore the castle—or parts of it that Hilda deems safe," she added when he looked ready to protest. "Surely Hilda can be trusted?"

There was a prompt nod, but the silence stretched on. Reluctance shone on his features, but he finally stepped back and let her leave, and she felt his eyes on her back the whole time.

"Three turns to the left, stairs headed downstairs. That's where the kitchen is."

She shot him a beam and followed his instructions but found the kitchen no longer bustling with activity. The smell of yeast permeated the air, a welcome scent. When she spotted Hilda arranging items on a tray, she hurried in that direction.

“Who are you sending that to?”

Hilda was visibly startled to see her but didn't seem to mind. “The master has a guest and—”

“Can I send it up instead?”

The woman didn't seem to mind getting interrupted, either, but now looked suspicious. “Why?”

*Because I'm bored as hell.*

“Because I want to make up for how I acted earlier. I am lucky to be under Master Nate's employ, and I would like to take this tray up to show that I am willing to cooperate.”

Hilda considered her, then shrugged.

“Fine. But make sure to call him Master Nathaniel in front of others.” The tray was handed, but Hilda didn't let go yet. “He has plans for you. I'm just waiting for instructions. But the number one goal is to make sure that you are not harmed.”

“Right. Okay.” She smiled. “Tell me where to go.”

A set of instructions and plenty of turns in the castle later, Winter finally found the room where she was supposed to drop the tray off. She placed it on the dresser beside the door, then slipped in when the chandelier caught her eye. Unlike the ones peppered around the castle, this one was made of glass balls and looked like it didn't have any wires holding it up at all. She admired the rest of the furniture, sleek and in deep colors, reflecting a style that made her think simple but probably mindbogglingly expensive.

Sounds were coming from somewhere inside, so she ventured further until she found a bedroom separate from the private living room. Nate's voice was soft but clear as he spoke with someone else.

“Yes. That's it.”

The croon was apparent, like invisible fingers thrumming in her senses. Then a female voice answered.

“Are you sure it’s safe?”

“It’s safe. It’s very safe. Trust me.”

Winter moved just enough so one eye can view what was inside, and the sight before her had her stilling. There was Nate, the vampire who made very specific deals with her, dressed in silk robes and fresh from a shower with his hair slicked back. He wasn’t alone...and he was very busy, it seemed, with his head buried on a woman’s neck and her expression set in the throes of passion.

Sucking sounds ensued, intensifying her look, and it took her a while to register that it was the same woman she had saved before. Her mind told her to leave, but somehow, her body was frozen in place as she gawked at the scene of the vampire feeding from the human—both of whom were very willing. She waited for the scream, for the woman to snap out of her reverie, but it didn’t happen. Nate continued sucking and the woman continued arching as if wanting more.

“Easy, darling. This is enough.”

A hand settled on the woman’s waist, gripping firmly. The woman rubbed against him, in clear heat, before he tilted his head and changed the angle of his fangs. Pleasure exploded on the woman’s face, so sheer and wild that it shot straight down Winter’s belly and squeezed tight.

“Touch me,” the woman begged. “Make me yours. Please.”

Winter waited for the hand to move up, for his fingers to play with the woman’s aroused nipples. Instead, he gripped her hips tighter until she stopped rubbing on him, then lifted his head—but not without sealing the wound he had inflicted with a press of tongue over her skin. The woman basked in that, too, moaning loudly, then weakening against him. Nate caught her easily.

“That is all I can give. Romina?”

Romina whirled and rubbed her chest against him. Then she melted when he turned her back around, eyes so

sleepy while she sighed dreamily.

“The other side of my neck is free. You barely took a sip. I know you want to.”

He tilted her head and pressed his mouth against her neck, murmuring soft words. Winter tried to listen, but his voice became the center point of her focus as he crooned once more.

“A question for every sip. Your utmost pleasure for cooperating. I will be very, very gentle, darling.”

“You can be rough with me.”

“Easy, Romina. Gentle is where it’s at. I will not ravage you.”

Heat sank in her body and had Winter trembling enough that she finally found the courage to step back. When she almost stumbled, she gripped a nearby dresser and gathered her senses, then quietly made her way out of the room, desperate not to be discovered. Somehow, she made it out of the room undetected, but her knees shook so much that she had to stop in a hallway and gather her bearings. Everything pulsed wildly, but it was when her core throbbed that she reared back.

“Oh, no. Hell, no.”

Only a fool would be aroused that a vampire decided to be gentle when they had the option not to take blood directly from a human’s body at all. She had written that, hadn’t she? Now here she was, incited just because a master showed a bit of kindness and didn’t seem to be into blood parties. Or sex parties. Or any kind of scandalous thing, it seemed.

“Kindness, my ass. I bet he holds secret sex sessions in the dungeon.”

And she would bet that he kept other human lovers and wrapped them around his finger with that irritatingly mesmerizing crooning. Winter scoffed, straightened her legs,

and stomped off. When she bumped into a figure in a corner, she scowled.

“I hope you don’t have plans of entering your boss’s room, Maddox. He’s still busy fucking Romina.”

The neutral expression broke, but Maddox recovered promptly. “Master Nathaniel does not have sex with humans.”

“What?”

“He feeds from them but keeps his other relations strictly with fellow vampires. Mostly he feeds from blood bags. They can last him months until he has to feed on a human again.”

“Let me guess. It’s an equality thing.”

“Yes. But we have to make it seem like—”

“Like he fucks humans left and right.”

He blinked. “Yes.”

“And how many people know this so-called secret?”

“Just Hilda and I. And a few trusted servants.” He frowned. “And you.”

And apparently, she was the most untrustworthy of this bunch. Annoyed, Winter continued stomping off, not surprised to find him shadowing her until she got to her room’s door. She shot him a warning look.

“Don’t enter my room. I don’t want a vampire breathing down my neck when I wake up.”

“You are not my type.”

“I didn’t mean sex,” she protested, which had his brows lifting.

“I didn’t mean sex, either. A half-human eats the same thing as humans if we can help it.”

The word registered, and she studied him in a different light. The tan complexion and pale orbs began to make sense.

“How did—”

“Goodnight, Miss Winter.”

He closed the door to her face.

It became clear that Nate’s plans for her weren’t urgent, as she barely saw him except for when she brought him trays to his room, where he was entertaining a different person every night—and no, not sexually, as some were vampires who engaged him in animated conversation. She tried to eavesdrop, but one look at his gray eyes told her that would be a very bad idea. Then another look sent a message, and each night, it felt like she was reading the words he didn’t say.

*He’s very dangerous. Leave.*

*They will catch you staring, Winter.*

*Have patience. Your time will come.*

Not being around Nate meant Maddox was hovering over her like a gargoyle who barely talked, and she found that the only way to get away from him was to be with Hilda. So, she spent time in the kitchens as much as she could until she got used to their rhythm of preparing everything in the day so they could easily pop things in the oven or arrange the trays at night.

“I always assumed that you are awake at the same time they are.”

“Some houses follow that routine,” Hilda confirmed. “But Master Nathaniel thinks it will be more effective for us to work if we follow our natural sleeping hours and not theirs.”

“And his guests?”

“I don’t know their sleeping routine.” At Winter’s silence, Hilda glanced at her. “Oh. You are asking about their identity.”

“Yes. Who are they? Why does he meet them in his room instead of his office?”

“His room is his office. And it’s best if we don’t ask about his guests in public places.”

There was hardly anyone in the kitchen with them, but she supposed the woman was just being very cautious. Winter observed her kneading dough and followed the press and pull of her fingers, then assisted the woman in shaping them into buns. By the time they were done, night had fallen, the kitchen was empty, and the dough was emitting the most heavenly scents from the oven.

“I could work here forever if only for these delicious pastries you make.”

Hilda smiled at the compliment, then removed her apron and got to cleaning. They looked up at the sound of footsteps approaching fast. The figure zipped towards them, then stopped to catch a breath. She was female, plump, and very panicked.

“House Chatterley needs assistance. They have emergency guests, and our main cooks got food poisoning.”

Winter opened his mouth to ask questions, but Hilda was already nodding and moving.

“Tell me how many guests and their preferences while I start up the array.”

The woman recited the specifics, then ran off when Hilda waved her off and instructed her to come back in an hour.

“That easy?” Winter asked, incredulous.

“House Chatterley is a good friend of House Hendricks—or Master Nathaniel, to be more precise. If they have guests and they need food, we will provide that food as best as we can.”

“So that they will owe us a favor?”

Again, Hilda looked at her oddly but was too busy to argue. With a sigh, Winter jumped in action and lined trays up in the rows of ovens they had, then more trays where they could pile up the finished pastries. The woman returned with two men an hour later, and it became a flurry of loading trays in tall tray wagons and rushing towards House Chatterley's domain.

"Are we also going?" Winter asked when Hilda began to help push the wagons. At the short nod, she followed suit and wheeled the last tray, grunting through the process before another pair of hands pushed from the other end.

"Help Hilda out," he instructed.

She did so, and her and Hilda's combined strength wheeled the second wagon faster. By the time they reached the party venue, her muscles were straining and she had to lean against the wall to catch her breath. But more men came and took over until the wagons disappeared with Maddox in tow. Hilda took her hand and immediately ushered her away.

"Are we not serving?"

"Not with these uniforms."

"Oh. No blatant assistance, only behind the scenes. Kind of like the politics in my world, too." Her mind latched on to it. "You came from that world."

"Maddox and I were born in this world."

She gaped. "You and Maddox are related?"

"I didn't say that." But there was a flush to Hilda's cheeks. "We grew up together and stuck together. That's it."

There was more to the story, but it was obvious that the woman wasn't willing to share. Winter let it go when they walked into unfamiliar territory, the halls darker and the rooms barely visible with their black doors. Lamps hung above on the walls, but the lights were dim and flickered madly.

"Whose house is this?"



Hilda shook her head, cluing Winter in that they needed to be quiet. Intrigue warred with nerves, but they passed by without a problem. The next set of hallways was golden and polished, the displays of wealth more visible. She wrinkled her nose, then paused and peered at another hallway when she glimpsed movement.

Coldness wrapped around her body at the muffled scream before she heard bones breaking in sickening cracking sounds. Then a crumpled body lay on the floor, blood pooling from skin torn open. A ball was stuck in the thick red...no, not a ball.

*An eye.*

Her gaze locked in on the man, glistening from sweat and pale under his silk clothes. They shone with blood, the features so bright and so similar to someone she knew that it squeezed something inside her. Her hand flew to her mouth when the man, the most beautiful there was, grabbed another woman with a viciousness that seized her throat. With a drag and another muffled scream, the door was slammed, leaving the lone body on the ground. Winter stepped forward—

And was immediately pulled with the sheer force of a slim, determined hand.

“No,” Hilda said firmly. “There’s nothing you can do for her.”

“She could still be alive—”

The hand squeezed tighter to the point of pain, but it was enough to break through her desperation. She whirled to face Hilda’s stern face.

“Look again. What part of her is still alive?”

She did look out of stubbornness and felt her heart breaking at the sight of the woman’s open chest and unseeing eyes. But the sorrow didn’t last long as anger spurted out, even while Hilda continuously tried to drag her away from the scene.

“So, I just leave her be?”

“Yes.”

“Is that how heartless you are?”

At that, Hilda stopped in her tracks and whirled back, glaring.

“As opposed to what? Charging in there and protesting against the crown prince? You give him a piece of your mind and it only takes one strike for him to kill you—and with a party like the one he has going on, it won’t take long before you end up like that dead woman.”

“It’s wrong.”

Something in the woman’s stance softened, but she turned brisk again and didn’t acknowledge the words. “We are making too much noise. He’s on the hunt and will ignore us, but I can’t say the same for his guests.”

*Vampires hunt their prey with focus, and they select their prey individually once they have their scent. Stay out of their way so you won’t become a target when they are in predator mode.*

Frustration rose at the helpless feeling, even more so when she found her feet automatically shadowing Hilda’s hasty retreat. When Hilda paused, so did she. When Hilda stiffened, Winter tried to look around for a weapon.

“Ladies. Are you here for the party, too?”

The vampire was tall, handsome, and hungry. That hunger zoned in on them, lingering on Hilda’s slender neck. When Winter tried to block the view, Hilda stepped forward, head held high.

“No, Master. We are just passing by on an errand from our house.”

Dark eyes latched onto the seal on Hilda’s shoulder, then Winter’s shoulder, depicting a golden crown and two

golden swords in an X mark below it. The vampire blinked, immediately becoming less threatening as he smiled at them.

“I see. I apologize for delaying your errand. Good evening.”

Winter glanced at the man as they walked away with calm steps despite her itch to run for cover. The man watched them the whole time, then disappeared in the shadows. They were left alone until they returned to familiar hallways, but she didn't stop moving until they were in the kitchen, safe and sound—or as safe as any place could get in a castle teeming with predators. Body slack and knees shaking, she slumped against a steel counter.

“So, if we didn't belong to House Hendricks....”

“There's one rule you have to understand here,” Hilda intoned quietly. “The bigger houses devour the smaller houses, while the smaller houses fight their way to become part of the bigger houses. Above it all lies the royal house, which is feared by them all; a human such as yourself would never be able to stand against.”

“And your master? Is he above it all, too?”

“You have seen what the crown prince does and what the second son is absent from. You have delivered trays to him nightly. I'm tired of telling you what he does or does not do. That's for you to decide. You are in Ostrov Krov, their lair. There's a life to carve here if you are lucky enough to be part of the better houses.”

But was that all the life left for them?

“You don't know what's going on around here,” Hilda warned when Winter didn't speak. “The wheels are turning.”

“What wheels?”

“Go to sleep. Keep your head down. Get some rest because when the master needs you, you won't have much time for rest anymore.”

Sensing the argument rearing its ugly head from Hilda's defiant form, Winter walked away, muttering along the way.

“Fine. Call me when there's an emergency catering—or when there's a life we can save.”

Maddox didn't say a word as he lurked by the kitchen door, then tailed her on her way to her room. In her room, Winter tried to sleep off the frustration, but she tossed and turned in bed, then slept with dreams of blood, screams, and a face with no eyes. The foul mood intensified when she woke up, determined to confront Nate...except he confronted her first with a folded note just under her door.

*Party next week. Be prepared.*

Minutes later, Hilda burst into the room carrying a large box and a calmer expression than last night as the woman briskly got down to business.

“I need your measurements. We need a lot of dresses for you before your first party if you are to be Master Nathaniel's plus one. We also need an attitude adjustment.”

## Chapter 4

Nate couldn't figure out how his kind flourished in parties like this, but attending one was a different matter, considering how he was once again the only representative of House Hendricks who could make it—not that that was his excuse for attending. He made his rounds, as usual, caught up with some politics here and there, but generally kept himself removed from pledging to whatever cause was being thrown his way. He greeted closer houses with cheer but spoke of nothing personal as for the first time in a long time, impatience rang in his bones.

“I heard you have a plus one. You never bring a plus one to our seasonal parties. Is it one of the house daughters? Is it someone new? I can't imagine you bringing anyone when you have been flying solo for so long.” A gasp came from the man who spoke, his silk shirt covered with the most ridiculous purple flowers. But then again, everyone was dressed extravagantly. “Don't tell me it's a human creature.”

“I won't tell you, then,” Nate answered promptly, not ready to play this game yet. But he humored Hughes Silva, whose family was among the leading traders in Ostrov Krov. “What is your concept tonight, Hughes?”

The man lit up and puffed out his chest, displaying the flowers more prominently. “Weaved flowers from Centro. They are made of the dried leaves from an exquisite tree that only grows in the fall season, so they harvest them quickly before winter comes to their place.”

“They?”

“Shifters, I presume. They are the only ones who trade something as whimsical as clothes with us, since the Fae wouldn't dare.” There was no judgment to the man's tone, as was expected from most of the vampire traders. “But back to you. If not a human, is it a daughter?”

“Now, now, Hughes, you know I can’t bring a house daughter to an event like this. It wouldn’t be fair to the other daughters. Or mothers,” he said, aware that was what the man wanted to hear. On cue, Hughes threw his head back in laughter, an appreciative gleam in his features as he patted Nate’s back.

“Oh, yes, we wouldn’t want that. All those mothers vying for the attention of the two princes.”

“Just the one prince,” Nate countered lightly. “I’m hardly an option.”

“Trust me, you are one of the top options. Why, if only I had a daughter....”

Because Hughes had none, the conversation was easygoing, if not also a bit preening. Nate went with it until the older man bid him goodbye, gliding to talk to a fellow trader and compare notes. Nate backed away from the crowd until he was in a corner once more, watching the entrance for any sign of her. Had she read the note? Did she change her mind? Perhaps she had only said yes to get out of death but had been plotting how to wriggle her way out of the promise since then. Glittery floral dresses filled the doorway as guests stepped in to showcase their spring attires. One wore something sheer, enveloping her body like water with only the lightest-colored flowers covering the essentials...

With a start, the realization sank in that he was looking at Winter. So, he kept looking, watching as she continued walking in with her head held high. The flowers extended to her hair, the wildness tamed into a bun with only a few wisps framing her face. Sparkles dotted here and there, one at the corner of her mouth which drew his attention to the plumpness of her lower lip. On cue, she bit it and chewed it, her blue eyes flicking around, then looking down every few seconds.

*Nerves*, his mind connected, even while the concept fascinated him. He had never been one for nerves, but he supposed it was common for humans. Winter was doing a

good job of keeping it at bay, but a blur stopped in front of her, holding out a hand and closing in on her.

*Oh, no, you don't.*

Nate moved fast, sidling beside her form just as she shook the man's hand. The hovering man finally took notice of him, smiling in puzzlement.

"Nathaniel. Did you wish to speak about something?" Albert Leroy asked.

"No, not tonight," Nate said smoothly. "I just want to thank you for keeping my guest company. Even for just a few seconds."

Albert's gaze landed on Nate's hand coming around her back, then resting on the other end of her hip. The man paled, then snapped forward with a swallow.

"Guest?"

"Yes. Shall we, Winter?"

"Sure," was her smooth response, smiling in his direction. But she didn't look him in the eye. With a nod at Albert, Nate drew her to the side, navigating the crowd until they were away from the entrance. No one noticed them at first, so he led her to yet another corner until they had a good view of the crowd.

"You don't look so good."

At that, she stiffened, then tried not to glare in this direction. But her chin lifted. "That's an insult to Hilda if I ever heard one...oh." Her expression changed when she finally did look him in the eye. "You don't mean the dress."

"Of course not. The dress is great."

"I'm the only human here," she said as if that explained her stress.

"No, you are not. The servants are all human."

Winter gave him a disbelieving look but didn't respond as awareness coated her features. He did a subtle glance and registered that their incognito mode had been short-lived as figures glanced at them, some looks lingering while others began to whisper. He shut up, understanding they couldn't whisper now, and waited it out. Not to his surprise, someone approached them within seconds, expression like a hawk.

"Nathaniel, good evening."

"Good evening, Hank."

"Who is this lovely lady you brought to this event?"

"This is Winter Willow."

"A human," Hank observed, frank as always and visibly trying to figure her out. "Are you partaking in blood parties now?"

"Exclusively. I only take from her."

Because Hank wasn't the type to gape, the man only indulged in a short, wide-eyed moment before he recovered his friendly disposition. Around them, the whispers continued as her name was passed around, along with a few tags attached: lover, mistress, personal servant. Hank heard it, too, and raised his brow. Nate did the same.

"The first and second are correct. Winter, this is Hank of House Knowles, a fellow who leads the security system in most of the common grounds."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Knowles," she said, voice demure and polite. She wasn't eager, but her smile was friendly. When she held out her hand, the nerves didn't reflect as her fingers fluttered with grace. "Are you the one behind the security system of the castle gates and the barracks?"

"Yes?"

"Your security is very tight and makes everyone feel safe. Not a lot of islands can say that."



Hank finally took her offered hand and shook it, keeping it brief. “And what makes you aware of this?”

“I read my books and meet up with the right people, especially the scholars. It wouldn’t be right to be with Nathaniel and not know about the figures that make his home safe and the threats surrounding Ostrov Krov, though I have to say you have nothing to worry about at all.”

Now Hank looked mildly impressed. “Miss Willow...”

“Yes?”

“Most humans cower at my presence, especially knowing I’m the person who supplies this island with the most bloodthirsty guards and soldiers.”

“I don’t see the point in cowering when I’m with Nathaniel, and that makes me as invested in the safety of where I’m living.”

“I see. That’s a fair viewpoint.”

The man made small talk, then excused himself. When he did, Nate was quick to navigate her away and turn her around, where he witnessed her graceful smile drop as she took in a huge gulp of air. He placed his hand on her neck to look like he was kissing it, masking his words.

“Be careful what you say to these people,” he said. “They might take you for a liar.”

“I wasn’t lying. I *am* invested in my safety. And I have encountered House Bronson’s security, not his.”

He detected the anxiety in her tone, but it was gone when she turned back around and faced the crowd. Because he hadn’t removed his mouth yet, it ended up brushing against her cheek, so soft that it startled him just a little bit. It caught her off guard, too, her lips parting. Instinct had him wanting to close in, but he recalled where they were and removed his face anywhere near her—just in time, too, as he glimpsed another figure approach them at the corner of his eye.

“Nathaniel.”

He recognized the voice and was no longer as relaxed. But Nate faced the woman with a polite smile.

“Sylvia.”

Sylvia smiled back, but her gaze immediately settled on Winter. Winter eyed her curiously, waiting for the introduction, but it didn’t come.

“Great dress,” Sylvia finally commented, though her tone indicated differently. “It’s so...subtle.”

“Subtle is what I’m going for,” was the prompt response, with Winter barely batting an eyelash. “I don’t like to stand out too much.”

“Right. Because you are vulnerable to our kind.”

“Because the point of the event is to socialize, not to draw too much attention with too much flash.”

Whatever smile Sylvia held faltered as her gaze turned sinister, but it was gone in an instant as the woman finally turned to Nate.

“I heard the news, but I didn’t want to believe it.”

“I don’t know what news you heard, Sylvia, or what you are talking about.”

“If you need a date, you could have called me. You didn’t have to...settle.”

Winter didn’t bristle, looking as serene as ever. But he noted the vibration on her back and realized she was more anxious than she let on. Instinct had him drawing her closer, his hand resting on her hip. Sylvia noticed, watching the move with a frown.

“I don’t know what you mean about settling, Sylvia, when she’s the prettiest in the room—and that’s without any flash.”

The frown turned ugly, but again, Sylvia was quick to recover as the woman pasted on a neutral expression. She nodded.

“For a human.” Sylvia gave Winter a sickly-sweet smile, every bit as unsubtle as the woman was. “I will see you around the palace, then, human.”

“Winter,” Winter called out in reminder when the woman glided away. They didn’t miss the bristle, but Sylvia didn’t look back. “Tell me where she resides, so I don’t pass those areas.”

“Maddox won’t let you go to that area, anyway.”

“Maddox doesn’t have a say in where I go,” she grumbled. “Ex-girlfriend?”

“Lover. It was purely physical.”

There was a pause as she puzzled over it, then shot him the same puzzled look. “Isn’t that what we are supposed to be?”

He didn’t answer right away, noting how soft her skin was where his thumb rested. Belatedly, it registered that they were still close, and she was leaning against him with such an unguarded posture that he couldn’t help swirling that thumb. She stilled but didn’t leave his side.

“I don’t bring lovers to events like this,” he confessed.

Blue eyes locked with his, widening. Something about her ethereal look got to him and he found himself unable to look away, devouring the sight and realizing he hadn’t lied about finding her the prettiest here. Maybe it was the innocence that just oozed out of her and made her appear so fresh. Maybe it was the confidence, wrestling with her nerves and winning every time, impressing the crowd that humans often bowed down to or tried to please too much—if they didn’t run away from fear first.

Winter would have faced these people squarely just as she had faced him.

*Or maybe you’re her ticket to getting out of here and she’s just good at masking her hate.*

“He doesn’t. My brother doesn’t bring anyone here at all. I was beginning to think he just doesn’t fuck anyone.”

The rumination popped like a bubble. This time, he froze, not quite as swift to face the incoming figure as the man snuck up on him—and everyone. Gathering his composure, Nate faced his brother with a more pleasant expression than the one he had given Sylvia.

“Nicholas.”

“Let me correct that, because I know he and Sylvia fucked like there was no tomorrow during the brief moment that they were together. But he wouldn’t be caught dead bringing her here no matter what sexual acts she did.”

Nicholas grinned as he said this, deliberate in his words and watching Winter’s reaction carefully. So did Nate. Winter peered at Nicholas, putting just enough awe in her expression as she bowed slightly. Then she returned to her affable, unbothered state.

“It must have been very awesome sex with no blood exchange,” she stated.

Nicholas blinked, then burst into laughter as if it was the funniest thing he had heard. It drew the attention of everyone. A hush came over the crowd as the guests anticipated the prince’s next move—which, as always, had been Nicholas’s goal. Not knowing what to make of it, Nate was on alert.

“I didn’t think you were attending, brother. You are not dressed for it,” he pointed out.

Nicholas shrugged. “I was bored and decided to check the event. I didn’t think it would ease my boredom until I heard the whispers. Winter, is it?”

“Yes.”

He scrutinized her, peering with an intensity that gobbled up every inch. “I haven’t seen you around.”

“I’m afraid that I have been monopolizing her attention, Nick.”

“I can see why, Nate,” Nicholas returned, hand reaching out to touch a wayward flower on her dress. “But I meant that I hadn’t seen her around in the castle before you got to her. Why is that?”

When Nate started to answer, a hand glissaded towards his, intertwining their fingers. To anyone watching, it was a shocking gesture of intimacy started by the human emphasizing her lack of fear, and it had them missing her squeezing his fingers: a warning.

“Because I was a roamer, doing the odd errands outside the castle before your brother found me.”

“And is that how the seduction started?”

“There was no need for seduction. Your brother got me out of trouble. Sparks flew while I was under his house and—”

“We took it from there,” Nate finished, but it was too late. Nicholas latched on to a word, his features lighting up.

“You are under House Hendricks.”

“Under my wing,” Nate corrected. Nicholas smirked.

“I see. What a lucky wing he has to have you, then.”

The man took her free hand and lifted it, then pressed his mouth against her knuckles. Nate braced himself for the show of fangs, but Nicholas eased back right after and continued staring at her. Still, the look of hunger was so intense that Nate felt a protective surge coming out and making him want to growl. He wanted to whisk her away from here and get those curious eyes off her. He wanted to back out of the deal and...

The last one caught him off guard and snapped him out of his raging emotions. Nate gathered his bearings and attempted another smile, this one with a hint of warning.

“I think it’s best if you change your clothes, Nick, if you want to be tonight’s representative for the seasonal party.”

The message was clear: he didn’t want to discuss Winter anymore. Nicholas nodded, losing the intensity as he chuckled ruefully and affecting a boyish look.

“I think your flowery shirt is sufficient enough for the family, Nate. Besides, I have other matters to attend to.”

Nicholas shot her another grin, watching her bow in delight before the man left the party. The crowd watched the prince take his leave with all eyes on him, with some choosing to follow. When Winter still didn’t move, he turned, pretending to hug her.

“Breathe out.” She did so, losing all stiffness as she melted against him. A curse rang in his head and his hand took hers, searching for a wound. “What did he do?”

She started shaking her head, then chose to bury it against his neck. There, she spoke softly. “Nothing. Everyone’s watching.”

“I know.”

“Your brother’s more charming than you are.”

“He’s the crown prince.”

“I don’t trust him one bit.”

That had him glancing at her in question, forgetting their intimate façade momentarily. “You trust me?”

“Not a chance. But I would rather be stuck with you than him.”

Her words were lightly played off, as if she wanted to make him smile, too. But something heavy lay under it and had his gaze narrowing.

“What did you witness my brother do?”

“Not him,” she blurted out, and suddenly he knew. He took her wrist, intent on dragging her out of there, but Winter

was faster as she hugged him instead, burying more words against his chest this time. “There’s a man with silver eyes looking at us. Silver eyes represent House Ubrek, and I know they hate the royal family. It’s the same man talking intimately to a green-haired woman earlier, who I know belongs to House Esme. House Esme supports the royal family and will do anything for the King.”

“But not the Queen,” he confirmed, stunned once more that she knew the things he had only wondered about. “House Esme despises the Queen.”

She nodded. When the music started, they pretended to dance and be so enchanted with each other that no one dared to interrupt, giving them a wide berth. It emphasized her so-called role in his life and ensured they could talk more. She did talk, pointing out a person here and there with subtle finger movements while feeding him with information.

“Mary Anne Pietro is bored with the event but needs to attend it for her father. Her mother, Patricia, lights up when she meets a man’s gaze, and he’s not her husband.”

A quick look at the two surmised that they appeared serene, showing nothing of what she said. But he noted the way Patricia kept glancing at her side and meeting a man’s gaze: Jason Orson, who was years younger and the playboy son of a smaller-knit house.

“How do you know their names?”

“Hilda gave me a rundown of names and faces.”

“And their feelings?”

She turned her head away, evading the question. Casually, he caught her chin and tilted it upward, waiting for her to meet his gaze. Defiance shone, battling with the need to show her unbothered confidence to the crowd. Reluctance followed as he nudged her closer, pretending he wanted to kiss her.

“We really shouldn’t be doing this here,” she whispered. “Anyone could lip read.”

“You have been positioning yourself away from watchful eyes every time you divulge one of our many shocking pieces of information, avoiding that scenario. You only speak when the space around us is empty.” Just like it was now, as they danced in a secluded corner close to some tables.

“Because I’m pretending to be so enchanted with you every time you try to make it look like you want to ravish me.”

“It’s all part of the deal, darling. I have to make it look like I want to jump you so badly.”

“Excellent play on your end, then.”

The bold statement made him smile. She caught and smiled in response, the secret they shared bonding them for that moment. Then he focused on her mouth some more. Awareness flitted in that he was no longer pretending as he wanted to kiss her for real—just to have a taste, assuage the curiosity, and move on from there. Would she be as innocent as she looked? Or would she hold a wildness deep inside as she did with her subtle displays of knowledge? It looked like the sweetest pair of lips there was, soft and ready to yield... thinning. Then her body became rigid, bracing itself.

“Your brother’s back. He’s excited. Anxious about it. He’s about to explode with it.”

Nate glanced at the entrance. Sure enough, the crown prince was back, wearing a smile as he greeted his throng of admirers with two women clinging more closely to him. Despite the lazy stance and walk, there was a sense of purpose in his direction as he stopped in front of another female vampire and showered her with attention. Amid that, Nicholas’s gaze flicked in a certain direction once, then away. Nate’s gaze trailed off to find that it was Denison Rue, who nodded once into his drink and turned away.

“Denison Rue,” Winter said. “From House Rue. He’s...nervous. Scared.”

Nate looked back at her. “How do you know?”



Perhaps it was the pleading in his tone. Perhaps it was the slight desperation, an edge that he couldn't quite hide. Whatever it was, it had her looking at him more thoroughly, a study that slithered in his bones and heated his body in ways that he didn't want to think about. He braced for the denial and for her to keep evading.

"I can read vibes. A glimpse of people's feelings, especially if they are on the surface."

He stared, not quite sure if he was being pranked. But the expression on her face told him more than her words did.

"Are you a witch?" he asked.

"No. I'm not."

"Okay."

She blinked at his easy response, then relaxed. His silence seemed to give her a boost of encouragement as she continued.

"I also have knowledge passed on long ago from someone in the Otherworld. That's how I know things."

"I see." His brain whirled, the questions flying. But one was more important than the rest. "Was he excited when he met Denison's gaze?"

"Yes."

Then another question floated in, curiosity nudging him insistently until he had to ask.

"What about me? How do I feel?"

Her mouth parted, then closed. She couldn't quite meet his gaze, but buckled up at the last second and did.

"I can't read you," she admitted.

Again, it was the last thing he expected. Fascination unfurled as he kept eye contact, daring her to look away. When she didn't, his thumb brushed her jawline.

"Yet you are not scared of me?"

“I am.”

It was said lightly, just a tad reluctantly, but it was enough to remind him that under all of the guise, she only agreed because her life was on the line—and he held it there. It was as effective as getting doused with freezing water, jerking him back as he let her go. Winter lost her footing slightly, but he refrained from reaching out. She recovered, cheeks flushing pink. He bit back a groan, refusing to touch, and cleared his throat.

“Tonight...”

“Yes?”

“You will no longer be staying in your room but in my room.”

“What?”

“I need every information I can get.”

“No.”

“Winter...”

“I won’t...he’s still scared.”

It cut off whatever argument was about to happen as he glanced at his brother slipping out of the hall. Seconds later, Denison went for another exit. Nate’s body snapped, ready to move, but he looked around first until someone caught his eye.

“Nate.”

Matthew Chatterley approached, a welcome face in a world of pretend politeness and politics, a smile already ready for Winter. Beside Matthew was Rebekah, so polished in her dress and pieces of jewelry that no one would have suspected she had been a human servant once. Rebekah assessed Winter with more caution, but the look on Nate’s face had them both reacting. Within seconds, they were in the two’s circle, and Nate was whispering in Winter’s ear.

“I have to go. Don’t leave this hall until I’m back. Stay with them.”

Her hand reached out, tugging at his sleeve, but he was quicker in evading her grasp. He nodded once in her direction, trying to convey one message: *They won't harm you*. Then the two closed in on Winter, distracting her with introductions. They also redirected their attention until the music turned louder.

Nate slipped out of the hall undetected.

Following his brother wasn't a hardship, not when Nicholas had favorite spots all around the castle, just like Nate did. He found his brother in the third favorite spot: a large glass window that overlooked the front of the castle, the lush forests leading to the ocean, and the large strip of a market where humans who didn't belong in houses thrived doing different tasks that benefited Ostrov Krov. It was dark now as they were smart enough to get out of the vampires' way in the latter's natural waking hours.

The moonlight illuminated Nicholas's dark good looks, even more unreal against Denison's subdued handsomeness. While the crown prince looked unbothered, Denison was agitated, hands gesturing wildly and movement jerky.

"You said you were going to seduce her and get her to like you."

"I was." Nicholas grinned. "But I got distracted by your very lovely servant."

"You left her entrails all over our area, and I had to clean up all the mess. House Rue does not take kindly to their servants dying."

"You are from House Rue, aren't you?"

"You shouldn't be gallivanting around fucking and feeding from servants anywhere, especially ours. That wasn't part of the deal."

In the blink of an eye, the grin disappeared and a hand was on Denison's throat. Denison tried to get it off, but the tight grip had the man choking.

"Funny, but you make it sound almost insulting," Nicholas mused. A hard look came over him, replaced by a lighter one, as he smiled at Denison. "Are you sure you are not insulting me, Denison?"

The man frantically shook his head, choked once more, and turned purple. When Denison's eyes were closing, Nicholas let him go and watched as he scrambled back. It took a minute for Denison to regain his composure and finally register the waiting silence.

"I wasn't insulting you," he said quickly, a hint of panic in his tone. "I'm sorry if I implied it. Why would I insult you?"

"Oh. Are you gaslighting me now?"

The way Denison paled showed his fear of what would happen next. "No, I'm not gaslighting you. I'm sure...I'm sure you have a very good reason for your actions."

The man braced for the attack. But Nicholas stayed in his spot, turning towards the window and looking down.

"Actually, I don't." Nicholas shrugged. "I just liked your servant. She was charming and kind. She also tried to resist."

A chuckle rang out. For the first time since listening in, Nate felt a coldness settle down his spine, growing as Denison stammered.

"She's not of importance."

"I know, but it's not about whether your servant was important or not." Nate couldn't see Nicholas's face, but the tone was crystal clear and matter-of-fact. "I'm next in line to be king. I can do whatever I want."

"Right. Of course."

“Including offing your servant and you not complaining one bit.”

“Yes. I understand. I apologize.”

Nicholas sighed, then spun back to face Denison, who was still massaging his throat.

“Don’t worry too much. I will seduce your cousin. You will get what you want, too.”

“Make sure she’s dead.”

The next chill came as all of Nate’s suspicions boiled up to a conclusion that he didn’t like at all. The two men mentioned more names, some in passing and others in great detail, not speaking of death. Then they circled back to House Rue.

“Make sure she’s dead.”

“You said that twice already, and it’s getting annoying. I’m bored of this conversation.” Nicholas approached Denison, eyes glinting. Denison pressed against the wall. “The plan’s all set in motion. All you have to do is sit tight and wait for it.”

“Right.”

“I’m really bored now, so...goodnight.”

Nate ducked to avoid being seen as Nicholas passed close to the corner that he was lurking in. Seconds later, Denison rushed away, muttering under his breath.

“It’s going to be all right. He’s a means to an end.”

When the man was gone, Nate went to shadow Nicholas once more, catching him in his fifth favorite spot: the party room where the man held most of his blood feedings. Inside, two women writhed and moaned as he drank from them. They arched into hands that pawed and kneaded, naked bodies flushed as they fought for attention. One snagged it better than the other and the latter was pushed back to pout, blood trickling from her neck. The other cooed in celebration

over being chosen, pressing her body against Nicholas and offering her free neck.

“Drink, your highness. Take your fill.”

Fangs glinted as Nicholas took what was offered. The moans became louder...then, transformed, as the woman's haze flared into a fear. She struggled, but it was too late as Nicholas was already ripping her to pieces while groaning in ecstasy.

The woman not chosen watched on, pleasure morphing into horror and screaming. Nicholas didn't notice, still drinking as the woman scrambled back and slipped over a pool of blood. When she was out of the room, Nate pushed at her pulse point and caught her unconscious form. In the ensuing silence, he sprinted away as fast as he could, aware of the blood he was trailing behind but refusing to stop.

Flying was the only option, so he flew to the nearest balcony, careful to stay against walls with no windows until he saw her wound healing. He returned to the castle in the same room he had cuffed Winter in and kept going until he found Maddox.

“Dress her up and find out where she comes from. If it's a good house, return her there and make sure they don't see you. If not...”

“House Chatterley,” Maddox confirmed, already taking the woman. “Blood party?”

“My brother's doing,” he said.

Maddox's jaw clenched, but he didn't comment. “I will keep her safe.”

“Thank you. Also, send a warning to House Rue and make it anonymous. Tell them there's a hit out on Stephanie's head, and she needs to be careful, including her father. Tell them it will be coming from a more powerful house.”

Maddox gawked at him, understanding he was still talking about Nicholas. At least that would slow down his

brother in the meantime until Nate found another way without putting the blame on the whole of House Hendricks. A sickening sensation came that he hadn't been able to save the other human, but he couldn't stop, already divesting his bloodied clothes and grabbing new ones before he was out again. He risked a peek in Nicholas's spot and found his brother gone while a servant cleaned up his mess. Then Nate was hurrying towards the party hall, coming to terms with a few key points.

One, his brother had sinister plans beyond hunting humans. Two, other names were involved, their purpose not revealed yet. Three, he needed more than what he overheard, and there was only one person who could help him out.

“Nate.”

Matthew's call was mild, coming at the entrance door. But the severe expression stopped in his tracks.

“What?”

And the answer had his heart dropping.

“I'm sorry, but Winter's missing. She slipped out from under our noses. Rebekah's trying to find her now.”





## Chapter 5

Guilt charged through Winter's body as she walked the hallways as quietly as she could, keeping to the dark and recalling Hilda's instructions about the safest paths. Matthew and Rebekah were lovely people for vampires, keeping her entertained and not asking uncomfortable questions as they shielded her from the more intrusive, dominant party guests. But neither they nor Nate's warning could prevent her from leaving once she had her eyes set on someone.

*Avoid the party halls and private bedrooms. There are a lot of common ones, but there are also secret ones for the blood parties. Memorize this list and make sure you are not seen in any of these locations. If you sense trouble, run away from it.*

She read the nerves and impatience, twin emotions that assaulted her despite the excitement radiating in the party venue. She tailed after those emotions when they began to fade, catching a glimpse of who they belonged to—the vampire who had blocked her and Hilda from passing while one of Nicholas's blood parties had been ongoing. It was yet another stupid idea in the making, but she was already here committing to that decision and determined to know where those emotions would lead her.

The vampire passed Hendricks's halls, then more halls leading downward. Hesitation came when the vampire went outside one of the castle's back exits, where no guard was posted at the moment. But the determination pushed through at the sound of voices floating in the air, and she flattened herself against the wall on the inside when they got louder.

"I just got away. The party's still happening, but I couldn't wait."

"It's okay," another male voice answered, soft and jolly. "I didn't mind waiting. Are you sure no one followed you out?"

Instinct had her holding the panic tight so that her heartbeat wouldn't make a commotion.

"I'm sure. They were too busy enjoying the party. What do you have for me?"

"Something you have been waiting for."

Her ears perked. What was the vampire waiting for? Another victim? A package? Their voices went softer, then it was quiet. For a second, she wondered if she was about to be trapped until a sound interrupted the silence, piercing the air with its abruptness. Was that a cry?

She risked some movement, peering through the open door without exposing herself. Then she retreated, heart pounding in her throat and the visceral image embedded in her mind: that of two males intertwined and humping each other on the other end. Clarity rocketed at the next cry, then the soft moans they tried to hide. But there was no hiding the sound of skin slapping against skin and the breathy tones when they spoke next.

"Your father will be so mad."

"I don't care. I'm not marrying that bitch. I just want you."

"Then take me."

"Harder."

It felt like a porn video but also felt like the most intimate moment between two people in love. The awkwardness had her backing away inch by inch, still aware that any sudden movement would alert them of an intruder—and honestly, it became more of her not wanting to interrupt an intimate moment rather than her trying not to get killed. At the first corner, she took off her shoes and ran as fast as her feet could carry her. Winter didn't stop until she reached familiar halls, only letting her breath go there.

"Why, hello there."

Awareness snapped. Her focus zoned in on the figure in front of her, wondering if he had snuck up on her or if she just hadn't noticed his presence. The paleness came into view, but it was the outfit of flowers printed on a formal silk suit that had her inwardly groaning.

"Hello," she greeted back. "Were you following me by any chance?"

The bold question had him giving her an appreciative look. "Were you running by any chance?"

She held out her heels when he glanced at them. "I tried. It's difficult to run in these. And I needed to hurry because the party was not over. I was just about to grab something from House Hendricks."

The emphasis didn't faze the man, who nodded. "I was beginning to wonder why my cousin's mistress would just disappear like that."

"Cousin?"

"Yes." There was a brilliant smile minus fangs. "Nilo. Would you like me to accompany you to my house?"

The rejection was at the tip of her tongue, but she blinked when he took her hand and tugged her to walk. The coldness was brief as he let her go easily, putting a good enough distance between them that she began to relax. There had been no warning about anyone in House Hendricks other than Nicholas, and this man's vibes were friendly.

"Sure," she said belatedly, then couldn't help sneaking more glances at him. "I didn't see you earlier."

"I just arrived. I'm a traveler, and the ship was late coming back to Ostrov Krov. I was just mingling at the party for a few minutes. Imagine my surprise when the gossip circulated about you."

"It's not gossip," she said firmly, then braced herself for the questions. But there was none. "Your cousin is a good man."

There was a mysterious smile. “Hmm. Powerful, too. Not like his brother, but there’s enough pull there. I heard it’s an irresistible pull.”

That had her frowning, but she decided to let it go as they neared the place that she was familiar with. When he stopped, so did she, the thank you and polite goodbye ready on her lips.

“Come with me to my house.”

Dark eyes met hers, the same color as Nicholas’s. They flared a pretty gold, light but so mesmerizing. The voice slithered in her senses and entangled until it was all she could hear. Then it sank in her bones and tugged her body until she was walking again...and leaving her destination.

“I have to go home.”

“My house can be your home,” he hummed. “I will take very good care of you there.”

Each word washed over her like a balm, telling her how good of an idea it was. But something nagged: the knowledge that it was wrong and that she shouldn’t be this eager to be with him. Then realization jolted her stomach hard and made her understand what was at play here.

*Some vampires compel and some don't. It's a skill and not everyone has it, just as how not everyone can play the piano or fly. The only way to get rid of it is to wound yourself before you succumb to its call.*

The melodic voice in her head became her anchor, so she held on to it.

“You compelled me.”

“You can tell?”

“Remove it,” she said forcefully, but it sounded weak. Heady.

Nilo stared, slowing down. “What sorcery did he work on you?”

“Stay away from me.”

“Miss Winter, relax. Come walk with me—”

There was no other choice as his voice felt like the sweetest wine. She wrapped a hand around his wrist, then brought his nails down to her arm. Pain filled her at the slash before she backed away, stumbling at the force. Nilo was gaping at her as if she was crazy, but the heady temptation was fading as she finally glimpsed the hunger on his face. Then it registered that he was looking at the blood dripping from her, and she knew she couldn't stay any longer.

“I will let this slide,” she warned, injecting confidence that she didn't feel into her tone. “I will not mention your name, and we will forget about this.”

“You can't possibly—”

Winter ripped a piece of flower from her dress, thumb hovering over the middle. “This amazing device was made by the pirates. Try a move on me, and I will press this and alert Nathaniel of danger. Don't forget who has a pull and who is a direct line of the royal family.”

Stupefaction filled his features, and it was the leeway she needed to march away while her lie still held ground. She tore more pieces from her dress along the way and wiped the blood from her arm, looking back from time to time in anticipation of a shadowy figure jumping on her. None came, but the warning that she was going in the wrong direction was persistent, and if she didn't correct herself—

Her body slammed into something hard, throwing everything she was holding in the air as she slipped to the ground. Panic blazed as she scrambled up, ready to punch whatever was about to attack her. Someone cleared their throat.

“What are you doing dressed like that, and why are you here?”

The voice was elegant, infused with frost. But the aura read curiosity and wariness, both of which felt better than the

eager hunger she had read as friendliness. Winter tried to put a name to the face in the lingering daze before the gray eyes snagged her attention, and it clicked. Then she was bowing repeatedly and trying to pick up all the bloodied cloth pieces at the same time.

“Your majesty, I apologize for bumping into you and causing you harm. I apologize for interrupting your night. I’m sure you have somewhere to be. I’m sure—”

“You haven’t answered my question.”

Winter straightened abruptly, torn between backing away and moving closer. “I was attending the seasonal party. I was...” She gulped, the lie stuck in her throat. “Bored. I found something interesting to follow, but it brought me to your son’s cousin, Nilo.”

The frosty look transformed as the woman—the Queen of Ostrov Krov—peered at her more closely, but with the air of someone looking at her subject. In a white dress and barely any artifice, Helena Hendricks was perfection in ethereal form—and Winter had the feeling that whatever she had escaped from Nilo, she wouldn’t escape her. Excuses bubbled up in her chest.

“He tried to take me to his house. I’m starting to figure out that wasn’t your house, too, and he might have been related by extension, so it was stupid of me to just assume it was the same house. Normally I wouldn’t be tearing my clothes off unless it’s necessary, but it is necessary because I didn’t want to distract the other vampires with my blood and cause a commotion—”

“Stay still.”

Winter blinked, then froze when the woman was inches from her and tapping fingers on her bleeding arm. She trembled deep within at the nail that grazed, eliciting a pleasure-pain that tipped over to the latter. The woman pressed her palm next.

“It will heal.”

Helena stepped back. Winter gaped at her, then glanced at her arm and made a sound when she found the wound already turning faint.

“Your highness...”

“Clean yourself up. And stay away from House Armand. Lino is my relative and is not as powerful as the rest of us. I’m afraid it makes him very petty and volatile.”

It registered that she was calming down, too, and that the panic had been an aftereffect of Nilo’s compulsion. Winter continued looking at Helena, whose aura was gentle and flaring just a bit with pity. Great.

*The queen of Ostrov Krov is a powerful figure that balances out the formidable king. Don’t cross her. She can be as cruel as he is when her loved ones are on the line.*

“That is noted. Thank you for the warning.” Then Winter didn’t know what to say anymore. “And thank you for healing me.”

“There was no healing involved. His wound is for play. I’m sure he would have tortured you, though, and dangled you in front of my son if you had ever reached his room. It’s a personality trait derived from all that travel he does.”

The idea alone sickened her, but she gulped it in and nodded. “I will try not to cross his path again. Thank you, kind queen.”

The woman softened again, but her look remained neutral. With a last bow, Winter watched as the woman floated away, the dress billowing at her feet until Helena looked breathtaking. Winter hesitated, then mirrored the woman’s taken path. But the queen was gone, and she was lost, both from Nilo’s steering and her running further away. Surely, her bad streak of luck ended there, right? There couldn’t possibly be any more trouble waiting for her.

Even so, the sinister sensation that she was being followed prickled at her skin and tightened her gut. Winter’s

eyes flew everywhere, trying to find its source as she continued walking.

What she didn't account for was finding it on top of her in the form of a vampire swinging from the ceiling, brown eyes pinning her when she found him.

“Hello, Winter. You still owe us.”

There was a hard jolt to her head before darkness came—but not before she understood which was the only house that could claim that she still owed them something.

House Bronson didn't put her in the prison chamber this time. Instead, the man who introduced himself as one of their sons dragged her to their part of the castle, which happened to be on yet another corner that was as far from House Hendricks as it could get. She struggled from the tight grasp, but the warning fangs were enough to stop that ploy.

“Did you think you could sneak into a party and play the spy on the other houses, too? I bet you had a lot of fun blending in with the castle folks and trying to find your next victim.” There was an outraged pause. “I bet you were trying to turn the other houses against us, too. You were about to spread lies about us at that party!”

She noted that he wasn't wearing party clothes and was getting more agitated every second. She bit her tongue from telling him to let her go, then held herself as limp as possible. The man noticed and didn't care, only dragging her harder in retaliation. Winter held back a cry when her head was wrenched away to a chest and her body was carried, effectively blocking her from seeing the rest of the layout.

“You will pay for everything you did. You will not get away with this, you silly fool. We thought we got rid of you, but you keep coming back like an itch. You will wish that you didn't come back here when we are done with you.”



She believed it and didn't like it one bit. She cursed her luck but couldn't surmise an escape plan when she was dropped on her butt and had to deal with the aches that came along with it. Winter blinked her vision into clearing, already gearing up for what was next to come.

Darkness surrounded her except for the spotlight on her, which was close to blinding. She whirled, expecting someone from behind, then spun again when a voice came.

“Tell us what you were doing at that party.”

Was it a speaker? Would she die if she ran away from the spotlight? She cleared her throat and lifted her head.

“House Nova did nothing to you and I did nothing to you,” she declared. “You used me to accuse them, and now you are using me as a scapegoat to manipulate the other houses into believing you are the victim. You were never the victim.”

“What?”

“You are manipulative. You are jealous of House Nova and delusional—”

A hand blurred and struck her cheek before she could evade. Stars rang in her vision at the force, but she stopped herself from falling and ducked to avoid the next hit. She didn't account for a third hand slapping her other cheek and reaching out to choke her neck, but it was gone swiftly as another voice hissed.

“Don't kill her yet! We need her to confess.”

“I'm not confessing to anything I didn't do.” She spat out blood, aware that they could smell her. She turned, damned it all to hell, and risked a sprint into the dark, but yet another arm was there, pushing her back to the center. Then a figure was there, brute and severe-looking, eyes glinting with cold determination. There were slashes all over his face

“This is Melony, the guard at the facility you just escaped. He is deeply insulted that you did so under his watch

and has been suffering the consequences of your action. Now, he seeks revenge and will try to prove himself by extracting as much information from you as he can.” The voice of the son turned deep. “Don’t let her get away easily, Melony.”

Melony grunted, not even wasting time as his fangs came out. Fear gripped her heart that she was about to be ripped into pieces, so she held out her hand and yelled at the top of her lungs.

“Stop!”

Whether it was the volume or the action itself, Melony stopped.

“Don’t hurt me. You will offend the house I belong in, and you will regret it.”

“What house do you belong in?” the son asked, tone riddled with disbelieving amusement.

Winter shoved away the horror that Melony was starting to sniff her blood and went right for the jugular.

“House Hendricks.”

The amusement faded. The deep voice growled. “Lies.”

“She’s not lying. She belongs to House Hendricks, and I take offense that you are careless enough not to check.”

All words flew away at the next figure that stepped into the light...no, strode in like an angel of death, ready to rip away anything that stopped its path. But Nate only had eyes for her, gray and unreadable as he briefly assessed her. Then all his focus was thrown on a spot she couldn’t see, where a spluttering could be heard.

“Nathaniel! To what do we owe—”

“You owe me nothing except the assurance that Winter Willow, under House Hendricks, is unharmed.”

“But Nathaniel, we can explain why she’s here.”

Nathaniel crossed his arms. “Very well, then. Explain to me why my exclusive mistress and date to the party is here.”

Gasps echoed all over the darkness, catapulting her into the knowledge that there were more witnesses than she had realized. There was hissing, a hysterical cry, and angry bursts of murmurs that rang down her spine and told her they were very confused. But there was also a very angry Nate, bottling it in with a mask of coolness, but she could feel it radiating from him even if she still couldn’t read him. One wrong word, and she knew he was about to snap—for her. Because they hurt her.

The idea was foreign, so strange. But it left her surging with the need to do her part.

“I’m unharmed,” Winter stated, tugging on his sleeve. When he didn’t move, she placed a hand on his jaw, feeling it stiffen. Refusing to break the act he so determinedly put on and the lies he told, she deliberately rubbed that spot that everyone could see until he softened. When his gray gaze finally flicked her way, she nodded. “I’m unharmed. Please. Let’s get out of here.”

Silence. Then Nate nodded, relenting.

“Nathaniel, we didn’t know she was your date,” a female voice said, blond peeking from the shadowy area and trying to approach. Melony was long gone. “We had no idea she was with you. She offended us a long time ago—”

Nate narrowed his gaze.

“But we are willing to let it go since, as I said, it was a long time ago,” the female finished hurriedly.

There was more hissing, but none was directed at Nate. Her hair stood on end at the sound, but she stomached it and called out.

“No more punishing Melony, either, please.”

“He is under our employ.”

“You heard her,” Nate said, the hint of warning clear. A hush came over the crowd in which he cleared his throat and took a short, respectful bow. “Thank you for your cooperation. If both sides are willing to reach an agreement, then there is no need for me to inform my father.”

“We agree!” someone cried out, then was admonished. But the silence was clearer as Nate finally stepped away from the light and tugged her with him. She followed, wincing when she bumped into something, then bit back a cry when she felt a whoosh of air. A second later, he was carrying her in his arms and moving so fast that she could only hold on to his neck.

They passed twists and turns that made her dizzy, then slowed down when there was a crowd of laughing vampires ahead. Some were dressed in the party attires. Realizing there was no other passageway, she pushed him back.

“You can put me down now.”

She felt his reluctance, but Nate let her get back on her feet. He crowded her in, glancing around before he scrutinized her again.

“I’m fine. My muscles hurt a bit, but that’s all.” At his silence, she assessed him in turn. “You are mad. As in, really mad.”

“You think?”

“I admit it wasn’t my brightest moment,” she blurted out. “I saw one of your brother’s friends, and he felt off. I couldn’t resist investigating and....”

Fingers brushed her cheeks, touching the part softened by the hits. His thumb pressed, and she hissed at the sliver of pain before something else came rushing to the forefront: sparks, so hot, so tangible. His touch felt hot and heady, and not because he compelled her.

“And you decided to follow him?” he asked.

The heat traveled to her belly, digging deep. She swallowed, grasping at the strength she had shown in resisting his closeness at the party and his repeated touches meant for show. If he was unbothered, so should she.

“Yes. Just as you decided to follow your brother.” The light confrontation had him pausing, then finally removing his fingers. A part of her lamented the loss, but she focused on his thoughtful expression. “Did you find something useful?”

“Yes.” There was some hesitation. Then she listened as he began to fill her in, voice low and careful, eyes always flicking about to watch their surroundings. By the time he was done, her head was spinning and working a mile a minute, furiously recalling things to connect to the newfound knowledge.

“I met some representatives from the houses that your brother mentioned. A majority of them do not take kindly to the crown prince carelessly fleeing in and out of an important party.”

“Which I also did,” he pointed out.

“Yes, except House Chatterley provided an excuse for your sudden absence.” A face floated in her mind and it registered that she was remembering the woman she had caught him feeding from. A violent emotion squeezed her chest before the rest clicked. “The guests in your bedroom every night. Most of them belonged to houses that do not support your brother. You were building allies. The woman you drank from. You were gathering information. Nate, what are you doing?”

Silence.

“Gathering enough houses to overturn the current ruling that’s sinking whatever fairness is left in this island. But now, it looks like it’s to counter whatever my brother is planning.”

“Your father,” she concluded, latching on to the first statement. “You don’t agree to his...policies?”

“He was good once. He just got older and sicker—not sick enough to cause alarm, but sick enough to make plans. My brother might be taking over earlier than expected.”

“How early?”

“Give or take a few years.”

Clarity glowed at Nate’s real reason for making his deal with her, aligning with what everyone was telling her about him. She already knew it, but it still felt astonishing to learn that this man was good to the core—and he was fighting to keep that goodness from fading from his home.

“What if he’s on to you?” she asked quietly. “What if he knows you are making allies and trying to get rid of those allies?”

“He’s not. I’m careful. I will always be careful. He has other plans. I just have to figure it out.”

There was assurance in the confidence of his words, easing her that he would eventually get to the answer.

“I met Nilo. Your cousin.”

In the blink of an eye, he was rigid all over again.

“He’s here?” he demanded, expression sharpening.

“He just arrived.”

“Stay away from him.”

She blinked at the growl, rough and just a tad wild.

“I will,” she whispered, tapping her arm. He got it, locking in on all the dried blood. The way he went feral had her heart pounding before she grabbed his arm. “Don’t go after him. I handled him. And your mother warned me about him.”

Nate’s brows rose at the mention of his mother.

“You have been busy.”

“So have you,” she shot back.

“Hmm. They are gone.”

It took her a while to realize that he was talking about the vampires they had been avoiding. A second later, they were on the move again, but it didn't last long as laughter fluttered in the air and he pressed her into a corner. When it got louder, he whispered in her ear.

“There will be questions about why we are in the wrong wing unless....”

It made sense, and she looked up just as his head descended on her. But the kiss didn't come. Instead, his hand tilted her chin up as his mouth pressed there but didn't do anything. His other hand came to her hip, gathering the hem of her dress up and essentially hiding the torn pieces and the dried blood. Everything was done with purpose, but her body reacted, anyway. A hot flash came as skin grazed skin, shooting down her core until she was throbbing from the simple contact. She fought it with rigidity, then realized it was just going to get them in trouble.

*Get over it and get with the program.*

The internal warning got to her and she listened, willing her body to give in to the sensation. When it did, she softened immediately, leaning into the press of his mouth, arching into the dig of his hand. But it didn't stop there as the rest of her followed suit, her lips parting despite no mouth nearing it, her body angling for better access to more of him. Like a wave, his hips mirrored her rhythm, molding into her in a way that left no room for breathing space.

Her belly tightened. Her nipples grew stiff. She avoided his gaze, afraid he could see just how horny she had gotten in the span of a few seconds. The whole head-on-her-neck thing worked that out perfectly, but then that mouth right there was also doing the most insane, heart—racing things to her system...

“Oh, Nathaniel. We were wondering where you and your date were. I guess excitement can do a lot of things to the libido—fine, I will shut up now.”

“Have a good night, lovers,” another voice greeted. Then no one else said a word, but their presence dictated her to arch just a little bit more and let out a tiny, shaky moan to ensure there was not an ounce of suspicion.

She paused a bit, then let out another moan. And another. She stopped when she felt his warmth leave her and understood they were about to move again, but she felt so... dissatisfied. Wanting more.

“I think—”

Agony pierced her head like a hammer dealing a lethal blow. She masked her cry with her hand on her mouth, but couldn't quite stop her body from crumpling as the agony halted and other things took over: the melodious voice bombarding her with line after line of information that she didn't need, then the tumultuous emotions of the crowd that had just stumbled upon them. It all whirled into overwhelming chaos that made her blind and deaf to everything around her, unable to escape the trap that was her mind.

“Winter?”

She heard his voice, worried. The melodious voice was louder.

*There is another side to Ostrov Krov—the more uncivilized side. It is where they throw away their rejects, their rogues, and those who have defied them greatly, both vampires and servants. It's at the back of the island, separated by a border. They even take those who torture humans for fun there because everything has to serve a purpose, including hurting humans.*

Except the prince and House Bronson were doing it and getting away with it.

*I am now a piece of you and will always be a part of you. You cannot get rid of me, no matter how hard you try. You are to preserve the knowledge within you and put it to good use. You cannot tell anyone, but if you must, you have to make*



*sure it serves a purpose, too, otherwise, my death will be in vain.*

She looked up into gray orbs expressing fear for her life—and Winter didn't have it in her to lie to his face about this anymore.

“Everything I know is from a pixie. She transferred all her knowledge to me before her spiritual death, and gave me the gift of reading people.”

His eyes widened a fraction, but that was it. There was no gleam of excitement as only that fear danced.

“Tell me how to make it better.”

The demand fought with the voice—no, voices now—and she couldn't think on her own.

“Hold me. Take me...”

Take her where?

Hands took her and carried her. A body pressed against her, holding her close.

*The Wasteland is an island where all other rejects from all other islands are deposited. It is a dangerous land filled with treacherous terrains, weather, and creatures, but it is nothing compared to Hellhole or the Underworld...*

*Be careful of Fae and witches. And warlocks. Don't make deals unless necessary, but never make deals with Fae. And do not ever let a vampire feed on you and take away your soul...*

Winter lost consciousness to the voices trying to tell her everything that she already knew.

## Chapter 6

He woke up in increments after a night of dreamless sleeping, which felt heavier than any other sleep he had in the past few days—an oddity because Nate hadn't been sleeping well with all the problems that had been materializing before him. This strangeness stuck in his mind for a while as he glimpsed the light from the window first, reminding him that he hadn't closed the curtain in the room. His throat was dry with thirst, another reminder that he hadn't fed in a while and needed to get some blood soon. Then the lump on his bed came into focus, and so did everything else that had led to this.

“Winter?”

Silence met his question. Belatedly, it sank in that despite the cover he had very carefully placed over her last night, half of it had still come down and her arms were very visible. So were her shoulders, smoother than silk and golden in the light that touched her. So were her arms, one wrapped tight around his waist as the rest of her was pressed into him like a pillow.

The crown of her head was tangled, and her hair splayed in all directions. He scented sweat from all her shivering last night as she had made another confession: that the voice in her head was going crazy, multiplying, and driving her insane to the point that all she could do was shake. He didn't know much about pixies, but one thing he did know was that they were rare, vicious, and the type of creature one went to whenever one needed answers to their questions. They were also hard to find, nowhere and anywhere at once.

*She transferred all her knowledge to me before her spiritual death and gave me the gift of reading people.*

What kind of pixie would throw all that knowledge to hell and put that burden on a human?

He shook it off, not wanting to think about it now. He tried to push her slightly, but Winter looked so cozy in his arms and refused to budge.

“Winter, wake up.”

There was some stirring, then parts of her body moving...like her hand, coasting up to rest on his stomach. The warmth of her palm jolted before it was gone as she moved once more as if trying to find a more comfortable position. Seconds later, his head ended up somewhere between her neck and her chest, the latter still covered by the sheets but unable to hide the outline of the firm, peach-like tits, and tiny, pointed nipples. Her neck was bare, smoother than her shoulders, and unguarded.

Hunger punched him in every muscle, the scent of her blood last night still crystal clear in his senses. But it wasn't just his fangs that itched as his cock reacted, too, hardening eagerly and jutting up. His mouth watered, wanting to suck on her neck...on those ripe tits. An alarm rang that her hand was fluttering lower and would be on that cock soon, and he didn't have it in him to fight her if it was already there.

*She is under your contract. She is helpless to your authority.*

“Winter,” he called out, sharper than usual.

Her hand stilled. Her head tilted down as her eyelids fluttered open, revealing those icy blue irises still trapped in the vestiges of slumber. The cloudy effect felt like another punch, but also a pull that he was falling into. Then they blinked, and the moment was gone as Winter became truly awake and snapped into movement.

He held her before she could hurt herself, then firmly tucked the blanket more securely around her when she froze. Side by side, they were more aligned to look each other in the eye.

“You undressed under the blanket while you were fighting off your pixie demon. You asked me to hold you after,

and we fell asleep. I just woke up, too.”

Her mouth opened, then closed. Pink bloomed on her cheeks and spread down her neck until she was flushing all over.

“I didn’t see anything, if that’s your concern,” he began, but she was already shaking her head.

“That’s not my concern. I just...last night was crazy. I remember bits but not everything.” Her expression softened. “You held me.”

“I did.”

“Thank you.”

“You are welcome.”

She licked her bottom lip, then chewed on it. “How can I return the favor?”

If his cock was hard before, it was nothing compared to the rock that it was now. It was his call, he knew—and the temptation of that was heady and horrible at the same time. Nate deflected.

“You were sobbing like a maniac.”

Surprise coated her features, then suspicion. “I was not.”

“Well, you were hysterical.”

“I guess I was.” She pursed her lips next, tempting him even further. But it was her morose tone that got to him as he frowned.

“Is that always the case?”

“It was the first time. The pixie...she didn’t die. She wanted out of this place and freedom, and I was a researcher who just found out about the existence of the Otherworld.”

“And you couldn’t resist saying yes.”

“Yes,” she breathed out, lost in the story. He glimpsed the joy she must have felt when that happened and knew it had

been her heart's desire at that moment.

“Do you regret it now?”

“No,” was the prompt response, surprising them both. But she nodded, strengthening with conviction. “I can't regret it. You don't understand.”

He tilted his head. “Try me.”

She hesitated, then went on. “I wrote books as a proper researcher would. But they weren't enough, and there was just this...yearning inside me to do more than write. So, I took the plunge—literally—and came up in the Otherworld. I first landed here and got tangled in an intricate plot between two houses, one of which accused me of being a spy.”

“House Bronson.”

“Hmm. It got cleared, and I got sent away to a trader clan that posed as a shifter clan but was actually a Fae clan in disguise trying to cause trouble with the shifter islands. I got saved by another shifter clan and was finally free enough to roam for months.” Here, a light sparkled in her eyes. “It was wonderful. I got to explore Centro and get a feel for a lot of creatures.”

“Since it's a trading center and a neutral island.”

“Exactly. I jumped around some more, following the coordinates I wrote and whatever information I had in my head, and managed to visit a few more abandoned islands. Then I returned to Centro, got taken by a pirate, and traded to a vampire who recognized me. I guess the whole my-name-has-been-cleared thing didn't reach everyone.”

“And there went your freedom.”

A smile flitted on her lips, brief but sardonic. “And there it went. But it doesn't erase the number of adventures I had and will be having in the future, whether I stay in one place or jump to the next.”

“You sound so sure of herself.”

Winter grinned. “You held me when vampires are known to kill their prey without blinking. How can I not be sure of things?”

He didn’t know her well, aside from the brave bouts she displayed, the vulnerability when he held her in her arms and rocked her out of her shaking, and the bursts of passion when she loved what she was doing or talking about. But that didn’t stop the want from surging as he envisioned all the things he could do to her in this bed, starting with shoving those sheets aside and seeing everything that she hid from him. He wouldn’t stop at just watching. He would touch, then taste. He would tease until she was begging, then pierce her neck and drink her blood while he slipped his shaft inside her wet heat and fucked her to oblivion...

Nate closed his eyes, which only made the images clearer. He bit back a groan and shot up from the bed, reluctant to part from the intimacy but understanding that it was the only way.

“I need blood.”

When he opened his eyes, there was an open, vulnerable look at her.

“I have blood.”

The sweet offer tugged a direct line to his cock. He willed it down.

“From a pouch. I don’t drink from others unless it’s necessary. It is never a good idea to mix business with pleasure.”

The clarification had her brows furrowing, a stark contrast to her otherwise relaxed body lines and a lot of skin still bare.

“So, drinking blood is business? Or is it pleasure?” she asked.

*Fucking you would be pure pleasure.*

Nate looked away. He remembered his brother and all the things that he still needed to figure out and the dangers that were on her feet at the deal that she entered with him.

And he got a grip.

“It’s complicated. But we need to talk more about the things we know and how they correlate.” A pause. “And your secret, it’s safe with me. I won’t reveal it to anyone.”

Her thank you resonated like a lullaby to his ears on his way out.

He entertained a few more guests every night, filling them up with food and wine and dropping subjects as innocently as he could to see how they would react. When they were gone, Winter glided in on cue, vibrating with what she knew.

“He’s interested. There’s a yearning there, and I think he wants to ask you where you stand regarding your brother’s antics, but he’s being careful. There was a big spike of negativity when you mentioned Nicholas. That means there’s a big chance that he will stand with you.”

“We won’t know until he asks.”

“Or until you ask.”

“I will invite him for a few more visits before I decide. What about Jessa?”

The vibration lessened as she grew more subdued.

“There’s interest there, too. But it doesn’t have anything to do with your brother.”

He got what she wasn’t saying and was fascinated with what she wasn’t trying to show. But as often, Winter went through emotions in a flurry, bouncing in excitement as she told him the rest.

“But she is loyal to him and whatever his decision is. There’s a certain gratefulness there.”

“He saved her sister from ruin. Her sister’s a vampire now.” Curiosity sparked, and he could see her wheels turning. “What do you know about that?”

“Turning a human is as simple as taking that human’s blood and the vampire giving his—willingly,” she recited. “Willingness can be accomplished through compulsion on the human side. A majority of the turned ones die, so it’s only a practice done when necessary since vampires have found a way to expand their houses through procreation with other vampires.”

“It’s forbidden unless there’s a valid excuse accepted by the law,” he added.

“Like a loved one dying. Or someone who plays a huge part in Ostrov Krov.” Her hand went to her neck, rubbing a spot. So did his gaze. “The pixie never mentioned what it feels like. Does it hurt?”

“I would assume so. Turning is a private matter, but I heard a few accounts of humans going crazy from the pain.”

“Yes. And all that sudden craving for blood.” She continued massaging her neck, slow circles that were distracted...and distracting. Hunger filled his system. She sighed softly and the hunger flipped into lust, clutching him so hard that everything turned hot and heavy all at once.

“I need blood.”

Winter looked up, broody expression clearing as she noted him with worry. Belatedly, she removed her hand from her neck.

“I still have blood.”

“Not you,” he said quickly.

“Why not?”

“It’s an imbalance.”

“Imbalance?”



“I’m your boss, and you are under our deal. I would be taking advantage.”

“You are not my boss,” she countered, approaching him with a determined expression. Something about it got to him and had him backing away once before he realized he was running like a coward from a human. “We are in this together, exchanging needs. And I’m offering willingly.”

The words felt intimate, caressing. His mind went blank, heady with the need to just let go and accept anything she offered. His mouth itched, no longer sure if it was because of the offer of blood or those soft, parted lips. Then common sense kicked in once more and he shook his head.

“I will drink from her. I can get more information that way.”

It was a mistake to say as hurt streaked in her features before she got it under control.

“Okay. Whatever you need to do.” She shrugged. “I’m sure she will be very eager to give you whatever information you require.”

“I’m sure.”

“I’m helping out in the kitchen unless you have any other need for me.”

*Stay here. Talk to me. Just...stay.*

“No. I do not need you.”

There was no flicker in her expression this time despite his words sounding harsh to his ears. A second later, she was gone. Winter didn’t come to visit in the next two nights, but Maddox checked in to let him know one crucial piece of information.

“Hilda is getting her prepared. I’m told she will be late due to some hairstyling issues, but they are getting it under control.”

“I can wait.”

“I’m also told that it’s best if you are punctual as the representative of House Hendricks.”

His mouth thinned, not liking being related to that house as the days went by with utmost frustration. But Nate took it in stride, got dressed, and was already in a bigger event hall, transformed to resemble Ostrov Krov during a summer day: white sand, crystal blue waters, and the greenest trees all around. The use of the three materials on the stage was impressive, but it was the extended garden swirling around the rest of the hall and the golden and white lights resembling the sun and clouds that sealed the deal.

Among the first to join, he mingled quietly and avoided the first few women who tried to rub their oiled chests on him. Then he found a corner yet again and immediately grew bored, used to this scene that had been happening for years now. There would be more guests coming over, dressed in attires that they normally wouldn’t be able to wear because...well, they couldn’t stand the sun. There would be more preening and politicking amid a façade of gyrating bodies and heavy petting because vampires just often interpreted summer as that: quenching the heat with even more heat. He eyed the ins and outs, glimpsed someone wearing a gown, and watched a female saunter in barefoot, a gold anklet accentuating slim calves while some billowing material covered her hips. There was a necklace of flowers on her neck, dangling down her throat and—

He was on her within seconds, unbuttoning his cotton shirt. Winter shook her head.

“Don’t. It will mess up the outfit.”

“What outfit?” he growled, then blinked when she sighed. The action emphasized the necklace of flowers that didn’t move, seemingly pinned over her chest and ending in a glittery trail down her bare stomach. The side of her breasts peeked from the necklace and his mouth went dry.

“This outfit,” she said, gesturing. “It’s reminiscent of what my people wear in...oh, hello.”

Rebekah Chatterley greeted her with a kiss on the cheek and an enthusiastic light in her eyes that Nate hadn't seen in a while. Then his focus was dragged across her back, where nothing was hidden, and every inch of tanned, smooth skin was out for everyone to see. A hand took his, and he realized it was Winter, drawing his attention to the conversation.

“That’s so nice of you, Rebekah. And you, too, Matthew. I’m sure your staff would enjoy that private summer party. Nate here thinks summer parties are strange and doesn’t get the excitement. He thinks everyone looks the same.”

“You look beautiful.”

“Oh, you are just saying that because I am your date.”

His hand clasped her waist, trying to avoid her skin. But it was impossible, and the bit he touched had his body going haywire. When he turned her around, her hand went to his chest, curling on his shirt. Surprise gleamed before she put on a smile so seductive that it shot straight down his core muscles, clenching hard.

“No, I am not.”

Matthew and Rebekah stayed a bit before moving around to talk to others. He didn't let go, circling his thumb over her hip and feeling her body jerk.

“You shouldn't show too much skin. They will long for your blood.”

“If you can resist my blood, so can they.”

*Resisting isn't the same as not wanting*, he wanted to say but bit his tongue. “Where are you getting all this confidence?”

“From your confidence,” she replied easily. “From Hilda’s lessons and watching how you move. I’m here with a purpose. The outfit is the perfect distraction...Hello, Mr. Evans.”

Damon Evans eyed her like he would the women he hunted during parties to take home for the night, not caring whether it was a vampire or a human. The hunger had Nate's back going up, but Damon's words were polite.

“You look very lovely tonight, Winter.”

“So do you, Damon.”

Damon grinned, proudly displaying his bare chest oiled up. He took her hand and kissed her knuckles, lingering, then didn't let go.

“I must insist on a dance. I want to watch all that glitter shimmering while you move. Wouldn't you like to witness the same thing, Nate?”

Nate knew the guy was a valuable source of information, particularly since House Evans had been one of the houses that Nicholas had mentioned. But the way Damon was already caressing her hand had instinct screaming at him to say no.

“I'm sure he would,” she crooned, then shifted her hold and tugged Damon to the dance floor instead. “Come on. A dance for an old friend.”

She gave Nate a meaningful look, in line with his speculation over Damon, and there was nothing he could do but watch as they danced. It started awkwardly until the two picked up their rhythm, lost in animated conversation. Damon moved in to whisper in her ear, and her eyes widened before she threw her head back in merry laughter—a sound that caused a few heads to turn and more than one vampire's gaze to linger on her neck.

Nate took a glass of champagne and drank. A roar started in his head, dim at first then growing, and it was all he could not to throw himself in between them and punch Damon's face off. He wanted to whisk her away so these people would stop looking at her like she was their next source of blood. But that was only partially true, because he wanted to whisk her away to see if she would laugh for him like that,

too, all open and throaty, before she let him touch all that skin to see if it was as soft as it looked. He wanted that sparkly smile on him, wanted that lavished attention. He wanted sparkling to turn hot and bothered, only for him.

But it was never going to happen because he had set the boundaries himself, and Winter was determined to get on with the deal—even if it included flirting like mad with the potential enemy.

“Easy there. He can’t do more than that. Everyone knows who she is.”

It took him a second to register that his knuckles were white, and Rebekah was covering them with her own. It was gone quickly as she drank her champagne, too.

“Yet he’s trying.”

“Who wouldn’t? He asked, and you didn’t say no. She couldn’t very well reject him, so she took the lead and decided to play nice.” Rebekah paused. “It’s a game I played a lot, too, when I was navigating your world and wasn’t sure of my place.”

That had him glancing at her in speculation. “Matthew always had your back.”

“I know, but a lot of people didn’t. You have hers, and that’s what’s making her go out there and risk herself to try to get along with others. We are playthings to them until we prove ourselves.”

It didn’t bode well with him, but he couldn’t tell Rebekah about the deal yet, either, no matter how he trusted House Chatterley. Laughter rang out again as Winter trudged back towards them, flushed through her tan and all the more delectable for it. Damon’s hunger was still visible, but an admiring look accompanied it this time. The man kissed her hand one more time, then the other as a teasing. Winter fluttered her lashes and waved him off, then returned to them.

“Hi. I would ask you to dance, but I don’t think—”

“Sure. Let’s dance.”

A sound came from her throat at his reply before they were on the dance floor. But instead of wriggling and gyrating, he guided her hands on his shoulders, placed his on her hips, and gently swayed them. Like before, he pressed his mouth on her head while she nuzzled his chest, hiding her lips.

“You danced quite intimately with Damon.”

“It was for show.”

“I know it was. This is also for show.”

“We are not dancing with the beat.”

“We don’t care about the beat when we are together.”

She fell in line with that, and soon it felt like they were in a world of their own.

“Friend,” she said after a while, and he got it.

“I see.”

“Who wants to eat me, but besides that....”

A bolt of jealousy electrified his body, imagining Damon anywhere near her neck or other body parts. It raged in his blood.

“You were flirting with him.”

“He opens up to flirty women.”

“I didn’t know you could flirt.”

“I can flirt.” At that, she looked up. “I learned in Centro to draw out true emotions. But it won’t work for you. I don’t think I can ever read you.”

“Try.” Then, “For show.”

She considered it. He knew it was yet another mistake, but Winter was already easing into him, a gentle press that teased. She tilted her head, fluttered her lashes, and gave him the sultriest smile there was.

“You are not a bad dancer, Nathaniel. If I didn’t know better, I would say you enjoy it.”

“I’m hoping I look good doing it.”

“Oh, it’s not about the looks. It’s about how you use it.” Blue eyes glinted, lost in the role she played. “Dancing is an art. It’s about feeling it, the sensuality of the music. It’s about letting it touch you until you have no choice but to let go.”

The innuendo was light and playful, but it did things to his insides that made it difficult to respond. She seemed to enjoy it, too.

“Oh?”

“Let go. Your body’s begging you to. Give in to it.”

“And what will you do if I give in?”

Her gaze widened a fraction. A smile flirted on her lips. “I will enjoy it to the fullest.”

The teasing went on, heavy on her side. They continued swaying when the music changed to something equally light and playful, and his hand traveled up to brush against her back. She stilled, then relaxed.

“You look delectable.”

“Thank you. Should I return the compliment? Or maybe correct myself and tell you how good you are at dancing?”

“There’s no need. I know I’m good, especially when it’s a horizontal dance.”

Her mouth formed an O, realizing he was flirting just as heavily.

“I heard...wait, no. I *know*.”

“Do you?” He tilted his head again so that everything he said was a whisper touch, lips brushing her cheek...the side of her mouth. “Maybe you don’t.”

“I know your kind likes the thrill of the chase,” she said. “I know that scent plays a big part, and a human has to smell sweet and...and....”

“You were saying?”

“And delectable,” she blurted out, cheeks turning pink. Breath hitching. His fingers continued circling the side of her back, close to the space it wanted to cross the most. “I know you like seduction, but when the hunger’s too much, you just want to fuck the person and get it over with. It’s your amplified senses in the works.”

Somehow, he knew they were no longer in their roles. “I’m not like that.”

“You are not?”

“No. I like to take my time.” His thumb inched closer, touching the side at the front. Her fingers tightened on the air at the nape of his neck, not immune to it. “I like to work my way over every inch. Do you want to know why?”

She swallowed. “Why?”

“Because it’s different in every area. The shoulders and legs are working points that would open up if one pays attention to them. The neck, tits, and back of the knees are sensitive and deserve to be played with gently. But the wet heat between the woman’s legs is the most sensitive, and it doesn’t just deserve a cock thrust like a barbarian in it.”

“It doesn’t?”

“It needs fingers. A mouth. A tongue. All working together to get it wetter and make it open up more. I like when a woman opens up. I like it when she’s so lost in it, and it’s not just me receiving pleasure from the exchange.”

Her pulse stopped, then stuttered. He felt the heat doubling over her body and seeping into his and took in how they were so close, they were almost tangled up on that dance floor. The sheer want made his nerves tremble, but he wasn’t the only one as Winter quivered once or twice, a delicious



tremor that made him want to haul her out of here. Drag her somewhere private, spread those legs, and...

*Contract. Helpless. Authority.*

“Why, Nathaniel, if I didn’t know better, I would think you were trying to seduce your mistress all over again.”

The chirped words had him blinking, breaking the desperate fight to keep him from doing what his body dictated. A look at her had comprehension dawning that she was no longer flirty and relaxed but wide-eyed and careful, the wall erected. Then there was a subtle pinch on his chest before she beamed.

“How about you go check in with your father?”

It took a while, but the arousal crashed hard. Mortification rose that he had been too busy getting horny over her that he had gotten distracted. Around them, guests danced closer, then craned their necks, a back-and-forth as they watched father and son in the same event. Nate stiffened, zoning in on the man on the other end of the room already seated on an elevated throne that was always set up in case they made an appearance. Then he looked back at Winter, who still beamed but whose body was betraying her nervousness.

“I should. I will.” He hesitated.

“There you are,” Rebekah said, taking Winter’s wrist. “My husband doesn’t believe that sandcastles are fun, so I was hoping you could help me defend my case.”

He could have kissed her out of gratefulness, but Nate merely nodded, maintained brief eye contact with Matthew, and let Winter go. Rebekah ushered her away from prying eyes while Nate strode to the front. He bowed to his father, then approached the man and sat on the empty chair beside him. There were gasps and whispers that he was sitting on the queen’s spot, but he ignored them.

Hathor Hendricks was enrobed in his standard attire of silk, sewn jewels, the golden logo emblazoned more prominently on the chest area, and the simple gold crown on

his head. His ruddy cheeks were sharp, and his eyes were a bright black as they flickered over to him.

“Son,” was the short greeting. “I was told there would be a real sun.”

“That would be suicide for most of our kind. Father, aren’t you...?”

“Happy to be here. Glad to have sunshine as always.”

The warning not to ask about his health was clear, but so was the reason for this abrupt appearance: the king wanted to establish that he was one of the rare ones whose favorite season was summer, and nothing was changing that—hence, nothing was changing that he was still as powerful as ever, unshaken. The absence of his mother established another point: that she wasn’t worried about her husband and could care less about this event, as always. In short, the secret was still a secret, and images were perfectly maintained.

“I see.” An idea formed and he leaned closer. “Have you ever heard of a pirate with three nose rings?”

“I have heard of pirates back in my day.” There was a contemplative pause. “Isaiah, isn’t he?”

“Yes. I was wondering if he would be a good candidate for the exclusive distribution of silks to our house. He sources the finest ones.”

“Our silks are great as they are.”

“House Rue has been quite the talk of the town for their new fits. They are wearing rare materials from Fae and shifter hands.”

Black orbs met his. “Let me guess. Your mother might get word of it.”

“You know how she loves her silks.”

And how she threw a tantrum when someone wore something rarer than she did. The king seemed to realize this, too, and nodded.

“He’s dangerous. Useful, but dangerous. Interview him first. Make sure whatever he sells you isn’t a scam and a copy of whatever he sells the other houses.” A pause. “Make sure we get to choose first.”

And there was Nate’s opening to set up a meeting with the notorious pirate and let Winter read him without arousing suspicion.

“I will make sure, father.”

The king was in his element, spouting off more instructions and vibrating with the energy of being in charge.

“We will need to attend an event together eventually. Your brother can lead that, but make sure you are...yes.”

The king frowned, confused. Nate watched the wheels turn, struggle, and not continue, and disappointment crashed hard that the initial energy was gone, and the man looked as blank as ever.

“And the blood parties? They are getting more uncontrollable.”

“Your brother will handle that.”

There was a finality to the tone that ended the conversation before it flew off the ground, and there was nothing Nate could do save for insisting on it, forcing his father’s hand, and either embarrassing both of them or cluing the guests in on the man’s current state of mind. It became more obvious as Hathor entertained some houses and conversed with them, losing track of some questions and not answering a few. To anyone else, Hathor was either just developing a haughty mood or playing with them. Nate knew the truth and was ready to step in when the man stood up.

But someone beat him to it. “Your highness, may I accompany you to your destination? My father couldn’t make it, and I know he likes accompanying you on your garden walks.”

Hathor looked at Stephanie Rue, recognized her, and nodded his assent. The crowd parted for them and bowed as he left.

“The queen always sits on that throne,” a silky voice announced, the disapproval clear. “Just because you are the prince and very hot doesn’t mean you can.”

“I sat there as a son keeping his father company,” he replied, turning to acknowledge Sylvia. The bikini she wore bared everything and even made her nipples visible when she arched them, but he felt nothing.

“Our house sets it up for every single event, and we always want it honored, not disrespected,” she mused. “Of course, I can let it go just this once. How about we....”

“Oh, there you are. Nathaniel, I have something exciting to show you. You can touch it, too, since I know you are in so much need of it. Come on.”

Astonishment flooded his system at the kiss on his cheek before he was dragged out of there. He followed her along the halls, then couldn’t stifle his chuckle when they were out of earshot.

“What was that all about?”

“Giving you an excuse to leave early, of course. You want to follow Stephanie and your father, don’t you?”

Oh, this woman...he nodded, then continued shadowing her before he took her hand, reveling in how she knew him so well.

“Wrong way. Come on.”

He led her in the other direction, using a shortcut that would end in the garden but ensured that they wouldn’t bump into the two along the way.

“What’s this exciting thing I can touch and am in so much need of?” he asked, glancing at her.

She smirked. “Flowers and fresh air. I’m assuming the garden has that.”

He didn’t confirm, hastening until they reached their destination. He stepped back to let her soak in the view of the large room with a domed roof, where tiny lights dotted the beamlines and matched the stars visible through the glass paneling.

“No flowers,” she said in disappointment.

“The sun’s what matters to my father. And look.”

He placed a finger on his lips, signaling her to be quiet as shadows crossed the artificial light. As soon as Hathor and Stephanie passed the first row of bushes, they glowed, spreading until the rest of the garden glowed a vibrant green, too. The eerie, haunting effect had Winter’s face enraptured, the visible joy of seeing something she considered magical drawing her in. On instinct, he didn’t let go of her hand, tugging her to a hidden corner as they listened to the laughter. The garden visit was brief and the other two left. But Nate and Winter stayed behind and watched until the glow turned dim again.

“Does it only glow for him?”

“No. It glows when it feels a presence. But the presence has to be close. The bushes were imported from an abandoned Fae land. We don’t get along with Fae. A majority of us despise them on principle due to our history of war. But he loves this garden.”

She got lost in her ruminations, no doubt reviewing the pixie’s lessons.

“I felt the king’s excitement earlier,” she finally said. “Then it just turned...ugly. He was struggling to think. He was in pain here.”

She touched her chest, sadness etched on her features as if she could feel it, too. His thumb brushed her cheek.

“He’s fighting it. He can’t let the other houses see his weakness or else....”

“They will be on him like sharks.”

“Yes.”

Winter sighed. “Stephanie likes him. She looks up to him despite what her house thinks. He likes her in turn. Nate, I don’t think he’s aware of just how cruel your brother can be. Maybe if he was healthier and paid more attention....”

“It’s too late now. The golden child’s bursting at the seams, and they both refuse to see it.”

“Maybe we can make them see it.”

“Evidence. My brother’s plan. Exposing it—whatever it is—is the only way.”

She opened her mouth to argue, then pointed at bushes. He turned, glimpsed the glow, and looked around until he found Nicholas in the corner, sniffing the air and grumbling to himself.

“Damn woman, always with an escort. Did you see where she went?”

“She was with the king. They were headed here from what I heard.” Nate recognized his brother’s friend. “What is this about, anyway? Are you trying to seduce her or something?”

“Or something,” Nicholas smirked. “But I would prefer it if you told people that *you* were planning to seduce her.”

“Right. House politics and all that. We can’t have the crown prince gallivanting exclusively with one of the daughters,” the other man teased.

“Exactly. Go, spread the news while I conquer her pretty legs.”

Or murder her, leaving the other man pinned with the crime. Nate’s heart pounded, but he called on calm and waited for the glow to die down.

“Go back to our area. Stay there until I’m back. Use the path we used.”

He marched to follow and was stunned when she fell in step with him. He glowered at her, but she didn’t say a word and stubbornly gestured at him to hasten it up. Understanding there was no time to argue and she wasn’t budging, Nate let instinct take over once more and found shortcuts where his brother couldn’t spot them, effectively reaching the king and queen’s area. They went past it until they glimpsed Stephanie, walking alone.

Nicholas came into view next, prowling and waiting at a distant but visible stop. Nate watched his brother lock in on his approaching target with an anticipation that was nearly tangible and knew there would be no seduction in play. A pull went over his body, then it registered that Winter was dragging him to somewhere in the middle that wasn’t in either’s line of vision. There were no words as she backed into a wall and positioned his body against her, her face telling him what her intention was. His brows furrowed, the question hovering in the air.

*Are you sure?*

She nodded, then let out the sweetest, loudest moan there was. Another nod, an insistent tug, and he knew they had attention—and they couldn’t lose it just yet. Her eyes flashed. *Hurry, Nate*, they seemed to say.

Nate crowded her in, mouth hovering over her ear at her next sound. It was soft, too soft, and just a tad bit unconvincing that the next step was needed. So, he blew on her ear, tugged on the lobe, and sucked until a moan flowed off her lips. His thumb brushed the underside of her breast, just enough so that her next sound would indicate to anyone listening that they were up to no good.

A hand went to his waist, and a body arched into his. The action shifted his hand until he was fully touching a mound, and a hiss slithered off him when he felt a stiffened nipple. The sound egged her on as she kissed the corner of his

mouth in turn, then latched on to his jaw and sucked for all she was worth.

His cock rampaged in his trousers. His hips surged forward, rocking hers. Her breath hitched against his skin, so much more real this close, until he was losing his mind and emptied of anything but the thought of touching her. Common sense still wrestled for control, desperately reminding him to just touch what would look believable, to not dip under her legs and see if he would make her as wet as he wanted her. He was pretty sure he groaned at some point, but nothing made sense anymore but the need to end this torment and just capture those lips in his, trail his hand lower and make them both feel so good.

Then Winter angled her head upward and the tide turned. Desire pulsed a different brand, her pulse roaring in his ears and her throat ready for the taking. A second later and there was a slash, thin and small, with enough blood trickling that she scooped up and smeared on his chin. His fangs came out, ready to risk it all...but the look in her big, blue eyes locked him in place, swirling with trust and uncertainty.

Nate buried his head in her neck but angled his mouth away from her wound. He tried very hard to be the better man, but temptation had a way of wrangling even the strongest of convictions into surrender. So, he covered her wound with his hand, then urged her head down. He covered her mouth with his, giving in to one temptation and hoping it would alleviate the more dangerous one.

“Moan for me,” he said against her, cajoling her open. “I want to hear it.”

*For show*, his mind supplied. Then the rough, shaky sound opened her up for him until he was tasting every bit of those plush, warm lips and sinking into a world that knocked him inside out.

“Nate.”



Her breathless voice saying his name was an explosion to the senses, so he kissed her to emit more of it. He kissed her to not think of her blood, kissed her until he forgot why he was kissing her and was only doing so because there was no stopping him now. Awareness coasted over him when her tongue brushed lightly against his, then when their rocking bodies couldn't seem to be still. A chuckle echoed in the air, light and airy...familiar, and it sent a chill down his spine.

He circled back to the purpose of the kiss, returning to the ground bit by bit until his mind was no longer blank. He stopped moving but kept his body on Winter's, shielding her from dark eyes that watched them with the smugness of someone who liked what he was seeing. A kick of possessiveness gushed out at the ravenous look Nicholas held. The man licked his lips and settled on her neck.

"Mine, brother," Nate said, voice booming in the catching of breaths and consequential silence. His fangs bared, and his body braced to attack.

Nicholas continued licking his lips while watching Winter before finally meeting Nate's gaze.

"I can see that, brother. It's good to see you enjoying yourself. I guess this lover of yours is good for something."

Violent rage made itself known, but the nails grazing his chest pushed desire out all over again. Then he looked at her face and realized Winter was sending a warning, pleading at him not to give in to the former. He watched his brother go, sauntering with bouncy steps away from House Rue's castle area. He counted the seconds until his brother was truly gone and felt her body go slack when that moment came.

"Oh, God. We did it. A stupid ploy that could have failed brilliantly, but..."

There was nothing else to say to that except a grunt of agreement. She was right. It had been stupid, yet effective. Stephanie was gone, no longer stalked by her potential killer.

They had just saved the day, but Nate felt like he had lost his sanity just a little bit because now he knew what her blood smelled like. Knew what she tasted like.

And he didn't think he was going to forget either anytime soon.

## Chapter 7

Arousal pounded in her blood, dancing to a rhythm that teetered at the edge of control. Winter wanted to turn back time, wanted to experience it all over again. She also wanted to turn back time and make a different decision altogether, only because Nate was gone now and she was left alone in the room again—his room, where every bit of object inside reminded her of him and what they had done earlier.

*No, don't lie to yourself.*

Correction: what she had put themselves in out of pure dumbness and recklessness, not thinking for a second of the consequences. It could have gone as badly as any dumb plan, but once again, Nate proved to be the bigger man, his resistance like steel that refused to break, even when he gave in to one other thing.

“Dumb. Dumb, dumb plan,” she mumbled, even while her fingers touched her lips and felt them still tingling. “But a plan regardless, and you are one lucky human for landing on the lap of the most controlled vampire in the Otherworld.”

And now she was thinking of his lap and climbing into it. Winter stood up in frustration and stomped around the room, wriggling her body in the frustration vibrating in every nerve ending. When that didn't do anything, she went to the shower, glad that this was one feature they hadn't left out in her world. She made do with the cold water from the showerhead directly connected to a river, her breath heaving when she rubbed the soap suds over her body. A curse lit inside her when she finally gave in and soaped in between her legs, and she had to grip the shower stand hard to stop herself from going through with the rest—and that was when the stand chose to break.

“Oh, for the love of—”

Hissing water sprayed everywhere and had her slipping repeatedly before she managed to push the stand back into place. She wrapped a towel around herself and hurried out to call Hilda, but the sliver of vibe that skimmed down her senses had her freezing instead. A second later, she was pressed against the wall by the doorway, a lampshade in hand and a mantra in her head.

*Stay calm. You know how to deal with this. Bash them hard and repeatedly.*

When the figure crossed the doorway, the lampshade came down. But the hand was faster, blocking it out of the way and terrifying her with the knowledge that she was doomed as nails descended. They stopped just across her chest and a gasp filled the space.

“Oh, my goodness. I was just about to kill you!”

The voice was female, dumbfounded, and glittering with excitement, an emotion that hadn't been there earlier. Winter gaped at the woman—obviously a vampire—with retreating fangs and the most brilliant set of even, white teeth replacing them. Dark blonde hair framed a heart-shaped face with a button nose and the smokiest green eyes that looked like they were caught in a storm. Then a smile so beautiful blinded Winter before hands were patting her up and down.

“I didn't wound you, did I? My brother would kill me if I did. I didn't mean to startle you. I was just going to surprise him, but I didn't expect to walk in on one of his sexcapades—”

“We weren't having sex,” Winter blurted out, then paused. “One of? He has many of them?”

The streak of jealousy was unexpected but also expected with her recent bombardment of feelings.

“I'm sure this isn't the first, considering you are his only declared mistress and all. It must be really special—and gosh, here I am blabbering like a madwoman.” The woman beamed and thrust out a hand, nails perfectly manicured and

sharp like talons. “Nicola Hendricks. Youngest of House Hendricks, and perhaps the most normal, too. You can call me Nic, which is reminiscent of Nick, who is always in the spotlight, so people tend to forget I exist—which I don’t mind, honestly, because it frees me up to do whatever I please.”

There was a flush to the woman’s cheeks and a vibrancy that was contagious, but Winter was wary as she accepted the handshake.

“Winter. Winter Willow. I don’t have a nickname. Your brother isn’t in the shower. I broke it.”

Nicola’s eyes widened before she marched in, and the loudest tinkering sounds began. Curiosity had Winter peeking a head in, astonished when she found the vampire had permanently fixed the shower stand, screws and all.

“It’s not broken, just loose. It’s a good thing I came here before you guys decided to have a happy time in there.”

“It’s a good thing because heaven forbid you walked in on us, you little freak.”

There was an astonished squeal, then two blurry figures hugging each other. The warm vibe that seeped from them had her studying the connection and noting that Nate had never treated Nicholas like this.

“How was your trip to wherever the hell you decided to travel?”

“It was a scholar’s retreat so they could have something more to write about and fill the library up with. We visited a lot of islands—from afar, of course—and I have so much information that we would never have discovered otherwise. Can you believe it?”

Gray eyes trailed in her direction, and now she felt their connection at the secret they shared. Then his gaze flicked downward, noticing the towel wrapped around her and the suds still stuck to her wet skin. Something darkened in his features, a smoldering that felt like a physical caress. Then it was gone.

“Sure. I believe it.” His voice was low, and she was having a hard time convincing herself it was still for show. “Have you met...?”

“Oh, I have. And I can’t wait to know more. Winter, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“How about missing a few hours of sleep and you guys having late dinner-breakfast with me? I’m hungry, and I have so many stories to tell.”

Hilda seemed pleased to see Nicola, indicating that perhaps this female vampire was okay to hang out with in the middle of the night. Winter found herself sitting between Nate and Nicola while actual food was served, except there was more animation to him than when he was entertaining one of his many guests. Her chair was closer to Nate’s, their arms brushing against each other every time one of them moved. It was supposed to feel comfortable, but her body had different ideas, lighting up every time he leaned in to get something or a brush or two lingered. Then Nate announced that he had some matters to attend and the two were left alone, allowing Winter to calm down her hyperaware senses.

“So, you two.”

Nicola’s voice was thoughtful as she sipped her tea and studied Winter. Winter looked back, a part of her waiting for the subtle threats and start of politicking.

“Hmm?”

“It’s nice to see. I haven’t seen my brother this... tense.”

Winter’s eyes widened, unsure how much Nicola knew of her home’s current situation. “It’s all the parties, I’m sure.”

“Oh, there are all kinds of parties here all the time,” Nicola mused, humor in her features. “And my brother handles

it like a pro. You would think Nick is the only charming one, but Nate's the real charmer. He's always so self-assured and composed that people can't help themselves from getting drawn to him. It's all a façade, of course, because despite being the middle sibling, Nate is the worrier. He worries about us...about Nick." A frown marred Nicola's lips, showing a glimpse of the woman's frustration, too, before it was schooled back. "But now he's not so composed."

"He's not?"

"On the contrary. There's a light of contentment when you are around. Heck, the man can't take his eyes off you." Smoky green eyes glinted. "But there's tension, too. It's like he can't wait to get rid of me and get you alone so he can ravish you already."

Heat flooded Winter's body, especially her cheeks. She swallowed. "He's had enough of me, I'm sure. It's not like we are not together all the time in bed—I mean—"

An image of them tangled up in bed gushed into her mind and melted every other rumination.

"Not just in bed!" she corrected, then realized how it could be construed. Nicola giggled.

"Oh, I'm sure."

"I meant it's not just constant sex."

Jesus, she needed to shut up.

"A different connection, then. With a human, too." Nicola shook her head in pleased disbelief. "That explains the tension. Winter?"

"What?"

"My brother wants to jump you. And it's eww talking about him like this, so let's leave it at that."

*It's just acting* was at the tip of her tongue until the kiss they shared came back to the forefront. His mouth had been so decisive, cajoling...hungry. Could hunger like that be acted?

She didn't think so, but her heart refused to have all its hopes up, only to have it come crashing down.

“Of course, it could be the wings.”

Winter nodded, latching on to the shift of topic until she comprehended what the woman was talking about. He hadn't displayed his wings in a while, but she could still remember that first night and first view: glorious wings that looked like shadows of the sky, fiery and beautiful despite the terror they had once struck in her. One wing broken, with parts missing and crooked lines.

“What happened to his wings?”

“I don't know the story much and he chooses not to talk about it, but I know it happened months ago when he almost drowned in the water.” Nicola shuddered as if the very idea was daunting. “It was two impostors trying to escape the island, I believe. He flew in after them when they were already in the water and somehow, he was already in the water, too, fighting for his life. They ripped at his wings and injured him badly, but it's a good thing that he can still fly.”

“It is. Did he catch the culprits?”

“No, they managed to escape. It was a bear shifter, I think. And some human named Sunny. I don't know what they did beyond...are you okay?”

“Yeah, I'm okay.”

The words felt hollow as the name reverberated in her head. She knew Sunny. Summer Willow had gone by Sunny during her first land in Ostrov Krov, with the hopes of finding the missing Winter. The bear shifter who had helped Summer out, Dante Hamilton, had eventually become Summer's mate...and somewhere in all that fiasco of them eventually finding Winter, they had punctured Nate's wings and scarred him for life.

“I'm okay,” she repeated when it registered that the silence had gone on. “I'm just imagining how awful it must have been.”



“Oh, it was. He was rescued in the nick of time, but he had to recover for a while. But oh, if I had my hands on the culprits....”

“It’s a good thing he’s okay now,” Winter interjected, sipping her tea and avoiding the woman’s eyes. The topic shifted yet again as Nicola continued talking about her adventures, most of it correlating with the knowledge stored in Winter’s brain. She asked questions and dreamed about going to some of the places mentioned. She ate and sipped her tea until Nicola was nodding off, and they both decided to call it a night—or a morning.

“We have to do this again sometime,” Nicola said, then hesitated. “I know we don’t come off as the nicest people, and a lot of things here have to change. But Nate’s trying to get that change to happen. Just trust him, okay? There *are* non-assholes and non-judgmental pricks around here.”

And that was the pivotal moment that cemented where Nicola stood, however subtle she was about it.

“Yes. Okay.”

“And Winter?”

“Hmm?”

“If you ever hurt my brother, I’m not going to kill you. But I might hurt you.”

Winter gulped, then smiled. “Okay.”

“Your sister’s a lovely person.”

“She’s a sassy rebel who gives my parents the worst headaches with her non-conservative approach to life, but yes.” Nate’s lips quirked, the fondness visible. “She’s lovely. You should see her when she’s in her element.”

“Define in her element.”

“Adventuring with the scholars or kicking ass. The brat’s unstoppable under all that silly façade.”

“She’s not a brat,” was the automatic defense, which had Nate chuckling.

“It’s a jest. She calls me a jerk all the time. We are your typical siblings, I suppose.”

Guilt charged through her body. “Yeah.”

“If you have siblings, you would understand.”

“I do.” The guilt intensified until she couldn’t take it anymore. “I have a sister.”

“Oh, that’s nice.”

“She came to the Otherworld looking for me when I was missing in our home for half a year. She enlisted the help of a shifter.”

“Oh?”

“They destroyed your wing. Wings.”

She watched the moment his amused puzzlement at where the story was going turn into a stupefying realization of what this story was about. A thunderous expression settled over his features as he shot up from his seat and approached her with a frown. She backed away, unprepared for the sudden movement, and fisted her hands at her sides.

“Sunny. Sunny’s your sister?”

“Summer. Sunny’s an alias.” When he was inches away from her, she lifted her chin. “I’m not going to tell you where she is.”

“I’m not going to ask. How is she?”

“She’s alive.”

“Okay, I hope? Healthy and not imprisoned?”

Winter blinked, taken aback at the line of questioning.

“Yes, she’s healthy. No, she’s not imprisoned. She and the bear shifter are mated with each other...at least, that’s what I learned when I revisited his island and found out that they had defected to live a freer lifestyle.”

“Oh.” A light came into his eyes as if he was seeing things for the first time. “What’s his name?”

“Dante.”

“They posed as servants for a very bad house. I compelled her, intending to seduce her for blood.”

Jealousy spiked, a reaction that had no place here.

“I see.”

“But he whisked her away and saved her life.”

Winter sniffed. “I guess he deprived you of all that blood, then.”

“No. I think it all worked out just fine.”

She tried to hold on to the jealousy, but the relief was immediate upon knowing that nothing had happened. Then she perused Nate, who no longer looked stunned.

“Are you not furious about your wings?”

“I was. But you have nothing to do with it, and I can still fly, so all is well.”

“It doesn’t hurt?”

“Sometimes.”

On cue, the wing peeked out of his back as he took his shirt off. Her gaze gobbled up the sight of sleek muscles hidden from most people before she settled on the edges of the wing, where the torn parts were visible. Her hand reached out to touch and felt the velvety silk and steel underneath. He closed his eyes when her fingers drifted.

What was supposed to be a confrontation and her defending her sister became a moment of her exploring the expanse of a wing that he opened and him just...melting into

her touch as if it felt good. Big, strong hands rested on either side of her head, his body leaning forward as he accommodated her touch.

“Does it hurt now?”

“A bit,” he said, voice gruff. Her body ached at the sound.

“Is there anything I can do to make it feel better?”

His eyes snapped open, a smoldering gray.

“There are a lot of things you can do to make me feel better.”

Winter caught her breath. “Let me.”

“Winter—”

The persistent knock on the door had his wing retreating on impulse and her darting towards the door. She called out to ask first, then opened it. Maddox barged in, face scrunched seriously and putting them on alert.

“House Chatterley sent a signal. It’s red.”

That was all it took for Nate to zoom out as the two scrambled to catch up. Outside, she made a sound when hands wrapped around her waist.

“Brace yourself. We have to head there quickly.”

Maddox stepped back, watching them go. Then Winter could only cling on as they were already in the air, then zipping out of one of the windows to fly a greater height. The wind whipped at her face, the freedom of it and her trust in him making her want to spread her arms. But she tucked them at her sides and tried not to draw attention—not that they would draw any since he was careful to fly in the fog and away from windows and towers.

“Do you realize we could have avoided confrontations with you flying instead of those awkward hall pretend seductions?” she shouted in the wind.

“You liked them.”

She bit back a smile. “No, I didn’t.”

“The hall confrontations were more believable. No one would believe we are having sex in the sky.”

There was a brief moment of her speculating how that would look before she forced her mind to the present.

“What does red mean?”

“It means there’s an emergency. It means they can’t send one of their servants, and they are asking for help.”

And they were there soon enough, landing inside a window in House Chatterley’s domain. But no servant or guard met their arrival, and a weird vibe fluttered in her senses. She took Nate’s hand and cajoled him to slow down, then bit back a gasp when he was the one hauling her out of sight.

They lurked in a corner, moving forward with painstaking silence. His nostrils flared at the streaks of blood on the wall, and she knew the smell must have been so stark. When a muffled scream pierced the air, Nate blurred and was gone, leaving her to grasp around the darkness until she stumbled into an empty hall. It wasn’t empty for long as Rebekah came running...no, limping while she dragged unconscious humans in servant uniforms with her.

Winter jumped on the scene, taking one of the women. “Tell me where we are going.”

With a nod, Rebekah led the way, and the two continued dragging the group until they found conscious servants huddled in a corner, protecting a secret room. Once deposited, Rebekah and Winter were on the move. Winter blinked at the club handed her way, heavy and laden with gold.

“Smash hard if someone comes swooping.”

A second later, a shadow swooped towards them after crawling from a ceiling. But Rebekah’s nails were ready, clawing at the incoming attack before the two wrestled it out

on the floor. There was a crack, some ripping, then the creature was limp on the ground. At the buzz of hunger behind her, Winter's instincts kicked in as she whirled, smacking the club into the face of the hurling vampire with red eyes. Rebekah finished him off with an aggressive kick.

“Impressive, Winter.”

Crashing sounds from another hall had them racing. But Rebekah's hand on her arm stopped her as they both stayed out of sight and watched the one before them.

“Which house are you from?”

The vampire grunted, even when Matthew let loose of his hold. Red orbs beamed with a fury that defied surrender as the vampire kicked and thrashed around, then got enough surge of strength to whip their positions around until Matthew was the one being choked. Rebekah bristled, but Winter's hand snapped out to stop her when another surge came in the form of brute force, knocking the vampire to the ground.

Gangly and haggard, the vampire was no match for Nate and was bloodied by the time Nate was done.

“He asked you a question, Rupert, but I think the better question is why you are violating the rules we have in Ostrov Krov. Perhaps you should get a brush-up and ask your father what the punishment is for those who kill humans for sport.”

“It wasn't for sport! His humans scratched us, and needed to pay the price.”

“Turn around. Clear your head, and we will deal with this tomorrow.”

Another grunt as the vampire turned around—then spun back so fast, claws reaching for Nate and Matthew. But Nate was no longer there but flying in the air. A second later, he landed on the vampire, gray eyes glowing.

“You will forget that I was here. You will be filled with guilt and terror and will confess your sins when you wake up.”

Cracking sounds filled the air as bones were smashed. Winter forced herself to look away, but she could only stare at the sinister force of life halted with so much precision.

*Vampires need to either have their heads cut off or their hearts ripped out to die. Broken bones and wounds can regenerate, depending on how shattered the bones are, but the former can take longer to heal, and the vampire will be incapacitated in the meantime.*

The gentle hand on her back had Winter finally glancing at Rebekah, who was watching her carefully. Quietly, they made their way to the two men.

“It’s a hunt,” Matthew was saying, expression grim and multiple wounds covering his face and body. “They found a few of our servants and wouldn’t take no for an answer. The secret blood parties are getting out of control. There are a few running now.”

“I know.”

“Thank you for coming. We were overwhelmed earlier and didn’t think we could rescue our remaining servants. It was crazy. They were so focused on the kill and wouldn’t listen anymore.”

Winter shivered at the shadow that crossed Nate’s face.

“The king will know about it,” he assured. “I promise you there will be retribution.”

Nate made well with his promise, the blaring sound echoing all over the halls and triggering everyone awake. They had managed to get back to their wing before all the commotion, where Maddox was given instructions to keep on alert and their area secure.

“Will they be all right?” she asked once they entered his room.

“They will. Matthew will sound a different alarm and will report the break-in. I will attend a meeting tomorrow and ensure that Rupert and his pals won’t get away with this.”

“How will you do it without mentioning your involvement?”

“Just a heavy pressure on the rules we already have in place.”

Winter pondered over it and a suspicion that had been lurking since hearing Matthew’s words.

“Do you think it was a deliberate ambush under the guise of an attack?”

Nate’s mouth hardened, but he didn’t answer. When he turned around, she gasped at the sight of his back before she was pacing after him.

“Sit down.”

“Winter—”

“I said sit down, Nate.”

The steel in her tone had him slowing down, then turning to sit on one of the couches in the living room. She left him there, rummaged through another room, and carried the box back to him. She rummaged some more, found what she needed, and knelt behind him to pour the acidic liquid. Nate hissed in astonishment.

“Are you trying to heal me or attack me?”

Recognizing his muted sarcasm, she smiled. “I’m trying to stop the bleeding. This is a special liquid made for the servants who get injured around here. It’s a secret formula.”

“Including sunlight?”

At that, she laughed. “Don’t worry. Your skin’s not going to burn. It will sting but will feel better after.”

“I’m a vampire. I can heal fast.”

“Just shut up and let me do this. This is faster.”

To her surprise, he did shut up, so she focused her energy on removing the blood and cleaning his wound. When



the broken wing popped up and got agitated, she switched her attention to it and soothed, triumphant at the feel of it succumbing to her touch. She then transferred to the front, cleaning his chest until the slashes were faint.

“See? It’s better.”

“Hmm.”

“Even supernatural creatures need help. You should ask Hilda to stock this up so you can have access to it anytime, too.”

“Uh-huh.”

She stilled when his head came down to rest on her side as if he didn’t have the strength to lift it. Her fingers intertwined in his hair, basking in the softness. Then his mouth was on her skin, and an electric shock surged through her body. He jerked back, pupils dilating and looking just a little drawn out and desperate that comprehension dawned.

“When was the last time you fed on someone? Or a blood pouch?”

Silence.

“I was supposed to fly tonight and find an animal,” he admitted. “Just get enough blood without killing it.”

“I still have blood.”

“I won’t have it.”

Anticipating his retreat, she locked her hand on his arm and stubbornly held on.

“But you want it.” Nerves skittered in and out of her before the same courage to shut him up returned. She looked up. “You want me.”

“Wanting is different,” he replied, tone hard...almost like he was trying to convince himself.

“Different how?”

His thumb on her chin was the only warning she got before her head was tilted to receive the mouth descending on her. There was a gentle press, then a harder movement that felt like a hot brand into her soul. Before she knew it, her mind was blank, and her body was overwhelmed with sensations as the man kissed her with a hunger bordering on desperation. She kissed him back, unable to deny her need any longer. She tasted him, a combination of heady, delicious male and sexual tension on the verge of exploding.

Nate's tongue tapped hers, sending an electric shock that made everything spin. Then his mouth was gone.

"That's want," he said, voice hoarse and body rigid with tension. "It doesn't give me the right to take your blood."

The ache of his words and the kiss intensified, and she had to bite her tongue.

"Because you want to touch me?"

"Especially because I want to touch you. I don't mix sex with feeding. It never goes well. I can't do that to you."

But she felt his hunger, brimming from every inch of his corded muscles. She felt his need, reaching out to her in a way that told her it was meant solely for her. Winter knew, at that moment, that he would not do anything about it, stubbornly sticking to his honor and the belief that he would be taking advantage. He would hang on to control, rebuilding that wall back into place so she wouldn't get a glimpse of how he felt again.

And something in her snapped.

"Fine. Then let me distract you from both."

## Chapter 8

One minute, he was fighting with the internal desire that wanted to heave Winter in his lap and just have his way with her, the kiss intensifying a craving that had been raging in his blood for weeks. The next, Nate was flattened on the couch and hands were already moving to unzip his zipper and—

“Winter—”

“Shut up.”

Hands tugged him out with a deftness that should have made him jealous, but there was no space for that emotion when she wrapped her fingers around his bare cock and squeezed softly. Then she was there, kneeling in between his legs that he hadn't been aware were open, her head so close to his undeniably hard tip that the only way to get her out of there was to forcibly push her back.

*Good idea*, his conscience said. *Bad idea*, desire contradicted. Then she was licking the tip and all dilemma halted altogether as lick after lick became the epitome of his walls of self-control crumbling into pieces. The rest of her mouth moved, lips wrapping around him and descending until she had him deep inside. Then it was a mixture of hands, mouth, and tongue on him, hesitant but determined, gaining traction when he finally groaned out the desire he had been trying to hide for so long.

In whichever way Winter was inexperienced, she made up for in eagerness, and the attentive way she licked and sucked on every inch sent him making sounds he didn't know he could make. His hands gripped her hair, intending to pull her head away but ended up holding on at a particularly hard suck that sent his awareness spiraling downwards. Hunger and desire swirled as he hardened further under her ministrations, but it wasn't until she cupped his balls and massaged thoroughly that his body could no longer take it.

He jerked her up and felt her willing and reluctant at the same time as she settled on his lap. The warm, vibrating body was madness, an addiction that he couldn't quite remove.

"I'm about to come," he rasped.

"My mouth..."

He groaned again and kissed her hard, daring her not to finish the sentence that would have tempted him all over again. Then a different temptation presented itself with her bare neck, where her pulse visibly rampaged. His thumb reached out, touching it. Her hands found his cock again and finished what she had started.

All fight and resistance left. He snapped, fangs sliding out and puncturing her skin until her hot, sweet blood glissaded down his throat and into his system. Her cry was sweet music in his ears, clouded with so much desire as she clung on and let him have his fill. So, Nate took it, sucking for all he was worth, arching up at her every tug of his shaft until it became a sexual dance and a feeding. She arched back to his fingers, opening her top enough to pluck at her nipples, and the dance became so much more than any fantasy he had ever had of her.

Nate continued his feeding until he was at the threshold, then withdrew and licked her neck until the wound was sealed. He came in her hand as his mouth crashed into hers, swallowing his groans up as a white-hot vision hurtled over him. Blown away, he could only hold on to her and bask in its goodness, his body a slave to the overwhelming sensation of climaxing and feeding in one go. When he came down from his high, she was still kissing him lazily, body wrapped in his and contented.

"You are a dirty minx," he whispered in her ear, tugging on the lobe with his teeth.

"I'm not a minx," she shot back. But there was mischief in her voice as well as a breathlessness that clued him in on what was going on underneath the calm façade. That

mischief connected to his as his fingers glided on her thigh, casually massaging before he coasted it inside. Her voice hitched. “And you don’t have to. I did it because I wanted to.”

“What makes you think I don’t want this, too?”

“Nate...”

He smirked. “Yes. Keep saying my name.”

And that was the music that filled his room as he plunged his fingers inside her, thrust to a beat they both knew, and brought her to her climax, too.

It became harder for Nate to stay away from Winter after that night of torrid touching and feeding, so his retaliation was to avoid her even more than he already did. What was difficult once became unbearable, his hunger egging him on and craving her taste day in and day out. Then there was his body, longing for what didn’t happen that night, wishing he could just damn it all to hell, climb in her bed, and screw her until her brains were fried and his name was the only word she could utter.

But responsibilities couldn’t take a back seat, and his days became preoccupied with meetings, sneaking, and making sure that House Chatterley was compensated and the identified assailants paid for their crimes. Nights were then spent monitoring the listed houses and Stephanie, who was being smarter and bringing escorts with her wherever she went. Then it was the winter party, and for the first time, he didn’t have to make an appearance as Nicholas was prompt for his favorite season.

“I didn’t see you all week, Nate. I’m assuming it has a lot to do with that scenario I walked into before. Are you keeping it in your private quarters now?”

Anyone else’s teasing, like Matthew’s, would have been in good jest, but something in Nicholas’s tone set

warning triggers in Nate's brain. Still, he was calm when he answered.

“Yes. It's not a scenario meant for others to see.”

“I didn't mind seeing. Or watching.” Slyness wrapped around Nicholas's voice along with smugness. “It was quite an entertaining sight.”

“It wasn't for you to see.”

“I don't blame you. I didn't think she was anything special until that moment. It must be very addictive blood. She must be a fantastic lay, too. I wouldn't mind testing it out for myself when you are done with her. You know, drink all that blood and that tight ass and puss—”

Before he knew it, a hand was on Nicholas's arm and digging deep. Nicholas glanced down, a smirk forming on his lips before noting Nate's face. It couldn't be helped, not when the very idea of this man doing things to Winter sent a rage forming in his soul.

“I'm not done with her. I'm never going to be done with her.”

It was meant as a warning to turn the man off completely, but the hint of truth slapped him hard and had him freezing. Nicholas took note of this, too, but Nate yanked the rest of his emotions in until he could let go of his brother. Casually, Nicholas dusted his fur sleeve off and shrugged.

“You say that now until you had your fill. Either way, I'm glad to see you happy.”

The mocking tone rang in his ears before the man left and grinned his way through the rest of the crowd, who didn't hesitate to shower his all-white attire with praises. The crown prince basked in the attention, a man who could do no wrong in most unaware eyes. When another person walked in dressed in all-black, Nate grinned, watching the spectacle of his sister sashaying toward Nicholas.

“Black isn’t part of the theme. The theme is white, silver, and gray tones. Light tones,” Irma Galloway berated, eyeing her with a frown and clinging to Nicholas’s arm.

Opposite the woman, Nicola smiled, framed by a backdrop of fake falling snow and trees packed with even more powdery white.

“Is there a reason for black not being part of the theme?”

Irma blinked, taken aback. “It just doesn’t look good.”

“Oh, I get it now. White and all those light tones look good, huh?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Especially since it hides all darkness lurking underneath all our little souls.” With a smirk, Nicola patted the woman’s shoulder, emphasizing her all-white outfit matching the crown prince’s and what she meant. Irma frowned, anger careening. Nicola raised a brow, challenging a response.

Before things could take a turn, Nate inserted himself into the group, swooping in to excuse Nicola at the pretense of needing her to see a very nice Christmas-themed tree. That included removing Irma from trying to cling to his arm, too, and ignoring his brother’s frown as they walked away. When they were out of earshot, he lightly elbowed his sister.

“And here I thought you would be singing praises to our brother when you arrived, not offending his friends.”

“His friends are jerks,” she replied with a shrug. They stood before the Christmas-themed tree, a human tradition in their library’s record books but one Ostrov Krov didn’t practice—unless there was a winter party. “He is, too.”

Something in her tone sent him on alert. “What did he do?”

“Invited my maid and I to a party where I didn’t know humans would be the main snack. His asshole friends got insulted when I refused to hand her over.” But a smile played

on her lips, coy and mischievous. “Naturally, I had to do something.”

“What did you do?”

“Oh, nothing much.” Her smile turned into a smirk. “Just a few altered drinks here and there, so partying would be the last thing on their minds. I took their human guests, too, and got my maid to make them free dinner—better than any of their lousy parties.”

Pride shifted in his chest. He tilted his head. “I take it you are not a fan of blood hunts?”

At that, her expression turned neutral, portraying the image of a sister who didn’t have any particular disapproval of her family. Her voice was light when she answered.

“It’s boring. Kind of messy, too. Not my type of fun.”

She made it sound playful, but he knew better. Nate didn’t push it, understanding Nicola could insult Nicholas’s friends all she wanted but was no match for Nicholas’s wrath raining down on her if she also crossed him openly. That meant her being careful around Nate, too. Sadness encumbered him, wishing he could tell her where he stood, but the success of his discovery depended on people who didn’t have any connection to Nicholas—and as much as Nicola denied it, she had a connection and loved their older brother.

“I see. So, your type of fun is gallivanting around the Otherworld?”

Nicola beamed, nodding enthusiastically. Then she glanced elsewhere and sent a light tap on his shoulder.

“Hmm. And yours is headed towards us.”

His head snapped up, gaze locking in on the figure gliding across the floor. His heart stopped at the short silver dress she had on, clinging to long, smooth legs that shimmered with whatever she put on. A soft ivory coat hung below her shoulders and trailed to the back, emphasizing the lack of footwear.



Desire flooded his system, starker than anything he had ever felt. The longing grew tenfold, indicating how much he had missed her. But he schooled it all in into a pleasant expression.

“Close that mouth, brother, or else everyone will think you are head over heels,” Nicola teased, not the least bit fooled. Still, she grinned at Winter in approval. “Winter in winter clothes during a winter festival. It’s perfect.”

Winter grinned back, albeit shyly, and he wanted to kiss every inch of her blush away. “Thanks. But trust me when I say humans don’t wear skimpy stuff like this during winter. We will freeze our asses off.”

Nicola laughed, delighted by the honesty. The two got into animated conversation, allowing him to continue admiring her discreetly before ice-blue eyes finally met his.

“Hi,” she said, voice softening. The sound had his gaze straying to plush red lips before he returned to her eyes.

“Hello.”

“And that’s my cue,” Nicola teased, but kissed her brother’s cheek and squeezed Winter’s hand before she walked away.

The two watched her go, standing side by side... fingers brushing against each other. They still needed the perfunctory cheek kiss, a few intimate touching here and there, and to mingle. The thought of touching her sent fire to his senses and made him itch.

“Mingle?”

Winter smiled. “Sure.”

She initiated the kiss on the cheek and sent his jaw clenching. She noticed it, fascinated, and drew his mouth to hers, kissing him gently. But gentleness couldn’t last long as the action only tugged his desire out, and he angled his head to kiss her harder and deeper. Her breath hitched and her body

lurched, taken aback, but she clung on to him and responded with a fervor that sent his blood roaring.

When they parted, the crowd was as they were, used to seeing them being intimate. But the intimacy was different, no longer practiced and no longer leashed. Before he could make a spectacle, he broke the connection and breathed hard against her, aware that he was hard and raging inside his trousers.

“We need to get out of here,” he said.

“You said we needed to mingle,” she whispered against his mouth, breathing just as erratic.

“My siblings are here. The royal family is covered.”

“Oh...”

“Even if we aren’t, I can’t possibly last a minute not touching you, Winter.”

“Oh,” she murmured, eyes widening at whatever she glimpsed in his features. Perhaps lust. Perhaps everything else. Still, she tried to clear her throat, sounding shaky. “You lasted a week.”

“A stupid, miserable week.”

Winter swallowed, the longing clear on her face. But she glanced around, too, until her shoulders straightened and determination fought with desire. “No.”

“No?”

“We mingle a bit.” She kissed his cheek, mouth close to his ear. “I read them. We leave if we find nothing bad. I don’t want to ruin what we came here for.”

Disappointment curled, but so did understanding as he knew she was right. It took everything in him to shove the desire down, tucking it in as he grasped for composure. When he nodded and they parted, the first party guest was already on them, greeting them enthusiastically.

Nate tried to be pleasant, respond to questions, and join in on the conversation. All the while, his body pulsed with

awareness at her closeness, every brush of arm and graze of skin tripping his senses haywire. Then they were by his brother, who was surrounded by some of his friends and had Nate going into alert.

“You are looking great as always, Winter, and the perfect match for my always-scowling brother here,” Nicholas praised, taking her hand and kissing her knuckles. Despite not lingering, the action had a violent streak spurting from Nate. He kept a lock on it and didn’t say a word.

Winter smiled demurely. “He’s not always scowling. And it’s an honor to be here, as always. I heard that winter is your favorite season.”

“Yes. You have to tell me all about it.”

“Sure. Next time.”

Nicholas kept throwing praises, riddled with slyness here and there. Winter caught them smoothly and pretended she couldn’t understand, laughing at his friends’ jokes and opening herself up so they could be open to her, too. Nate didn’t like it one bit but kept his emotions on lock, watching her in play and unable to help being fascinated.

“So, that dress,” a vampire named Emilio said, eyeing her appreciatively. “You have to tell me all about where you got it, maybe take me there someday.”

The hunger was light, but her stiffening spine had Nate touching her back to soothe her. She relaxed slightly and offered the same demure smile in the man’s direction.

“Sure. Nate will take you. Won’t you, Nate?”

“Sure. Just tell me where and when, Emilio, and I will make sure you walk away, not forgetting the experience.”

Translation: make a play for her again and Nate would make sure that the man wouldn’t walk away unscathed. Emilio paled, getting it immediately, and backed away from the small circle without another word. Nicholas smirked through the

conversation and Nate nodded, even though there was nothing he wanted more than to punch the man. All of them.

“Now, we had best get going,” he said. “Unless you don’t plan on staying here for long, brother.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Nate. I’m staying here until I’m bored. Snow doesn’t bore me at all.”

They walked away calmly, but Winter shivered when they were out of sight.

“Nicholas was derisive the whole time. The vibe was brimming on the surface. He was waiting for me to say something insulting or disagree with him so he could act accordingly in public.” Already knowing it, it still had Nate bubbling with rage. But she squeezed his hand. “It’s not any different from how many of your folks here have treated me.”

The truth wasn’t easy to hear, but she was right. “And there are a lot who like you. Don’t forget that.”

She shook her head. “I don’t.” She leaned in closer. “The other men in that circle were either bored or impatient, but Nicholas’s lack of excitement tells me that they have no plans tonight. Emilio was the only one who had violent vibes when he spoke to me. I’m guessing there hasn’t been a blood hunt in a while, and he’s restless.”

Triumph came over him that the attack and resulting last meeting had ensured his father was staying on top of things for now, but it was overpowered by the need to protect her. So, he hugged her towards him, basking in the way she melted into his arms before he realized that Winter had handled that like a pro and it was him who was shaking. Her hands clutched his side and rubbed soothingly until he looked down. When he did, she tiptoed to kiss him.

“Take it easy, champ,” she teased.

Hunger leaped, no longer willing to be tucked in. His hand captured her neck and responded hard until her teasing turned into a series of small trembles.

“Do you still want to mingle?” he asked, breaking the kiss enough to gather air into his lungs.

Her dazed shake of head was the only signal he needed as he tugged her out of her with no more resistance. They raced through the dark halls and took as many shortcuts as they could until they reached his wing. Then he was pushing her inside a room that had her looking around in fascination.

“Is this your office?”

“Spare,” he said. “My room’s too far.”

Her eyes blazed with lust, just as intense as his. He backed her into a spare desk stacked with papers and swept them away with a fling of hand. She gasped at the movement, then when he unceremoniously lifted her onto the desk. Her thighs parted at his urging, her tongue tangling with his in a way that made him lose his mind just a little bit.

When she sucked on his tongue, he hissed. His fangs came out and tasted blood, then jerked back and tugged on whatever self-control he had left. But Winter’s hands were there, cajoling him to return to him, her voice holding a sweet, breathless tang.

“Please. Take what you need.”

Self-control shattered as he descended on her like a madman, but it couldn’t be helped. He rocked into her body, then got impatient and jerked her dress up. At the same time, his other hand glided the top down and he could only gawk at her in stupefaction.

“No underwear?”

“It would have been visible...Nate.”

His name ended with a moan when his fingers skated in and curled to her wetness. Mouths and hands grew frenzied as they started removing what they could but only ended up removing what was needed: his pants just a little bit below his ass, his shirt just open enough for her fingers to explore, her dress just enough to bare her so his mouth could finally have

access to her tits. The pink tip grew rigid at his touch and she slapped a hand over her mouth at his ministrations. But he brushed it away, returning to kiss her there.

“No. I want to hear you.”

Her moan was soft when she grasped his cock and stroked it in time with his finger thrusts. It grew in volume when he positioned himself at her entrance, watching as her slick folds took him in. Nate closed his eyes from the hot sensations that overwhelmed him when he finally sank into her. She clamped tight, willingly wrapping her legs around him at his next urging. Their eyes met, lost in a haze of pleasure but anticipating what was to come.

At her nod, he moved, withdrawing from her, then plunging back in. A stunned silence came over them before sounds flitted out to express just how good it felt. Nate fucked her slow, kissed her hard, and teetered on the edge of coming faster than he ever had in his life. He muttered incoherent sounds that turned her on as Winter gasped, arched closer, and bit his lower lip.

“Nate.”

His name was the trigger that was the last straw, snapping his mouth to her neck and finally taking what she had been offering from the beginning. Blood pierced his system, sweet and hot, while he pounded faster into her. When he found her most sensitive spot, he pumped in that angle until she was a symphony of pleased cries, trembling body, and heated skin that he couldn't wait to kiss every inch of.

Winter came, gripping his hair to anchor herself. More thrusts, a few more seconds of sucking her blood, and a taste of her tits brought Nate to the point of no return before he was rocketing into his orgasm, too, and pumping his release into her. Then the realization hit, but she shook her head and willed him to stay in her arms.

“It's okay. I'm protected. They have a potion for that, too, with all the sex going on around here.”

The idea of spilling his seed inside her every time they fucked had his body growing hot all over again...and it wasn't just his body. She gasped, wriggling against him, then stopping with another gasp when he went hard like a rock.

“That’s not doing me any good, darling.”

He rained kisses on her jawline and cheek until her breath turned erratic. He lavished her neck with kisses, too, then thumbed the wound he had opened with his fangs, which were now just pink lines. Still inside her, they rocked into each other, meant to just savor each other until the gnawing desire egged them on faster, harder, more intensely.

Before he knew it, he was carrying her into the room and straight into the shower, where he solved her protests over Hilda’s hard work by removing all her clothes. In the bathroom, he took her against the wall until she came under the hot water, then took what he needed until he was gasping for air and blinded by severe white-hot pleasure, too. They soaped each other in the aftermath, an intimacy that sang into his soul and left him kissing her shoulder.

“Oh, no,” she groaned, playfully pushing him off. “Don’t tell me you aren’t sated.”

“I’m thoroughly, happily satisfied,” he confirmed but didn’t stop kissing that spot. “But you are still so stiff, darling, and I would be very happy to massage your back before we get on to business.”

She laughed, noting his pout when he reluctantly backed off at her next push. A twinkle came over her eyes. Amused, she gave him a pointed look. “I’m hungry. If we are doing what I think you are planning to do the whole night, then we need sustenance...wait, scratch that. *I* need sustenance.”

“You know me so well, then.” But he took her hand before she could leave. “Winter.”

“Hmm?”

“Ten minutes. Then I’m following you out.”

He handed her a towel, excitement surging at the sheer need that hurtled in her expression at his words. He spent a few more minutes in the shower, giving her leeway to get dressed, else he knew he would just end up jumping her into the bedroom. When she was gone, Nate stepped out, carefully folded their clothes out of the way, and strode to the door wearing nothing but his pants, aware that it would only take a few seconds after her arrival to convince her to another round in bed. The force of his desire had him biting back a grin, but so did the way she systematically broke through his defenses.

“Nate.”

His name was uttered while the door was mid-open, but the grin had already been wiped from his face. Her expression matched her grim tone, but it was the anguish she was fighting that sent him racing out into the halls. Seconds later, he found the source of her emotions and gaped at the scene before him: Hilda struggling to rebutton her ripped clothes, Maddox covered in blood, and Emilio on the ground, spread-eagled and heart ripped out. Winter was on Hilda instantly, wrapping a blanket around her form and hushing her incoherent words. Nate strode closer to the scene, stopping beside Maddox, who was battling a trembling as he held on to a knife tightly.

“I assume it wasn’t you who instigated this.”

Maddox blinked, breaking out of his stupor and facing Nate squarely.

“I walked into him, trying to get Hilda’s blood and clothes off. He wouldn’t budge, so I did what I had to do.”

There was defiance as well as a quiet acceptance shining on the man’s face, then relief at Nate’s nod and words.

“And we can’t have that. Is she hurt?”

“No.” It was Winter who replied. “Maddox came just in time.”

Nate thought hard, but there wasn’t much time for more as a horrible sensation tapped at his instincts. “Clean this



up. As fast as you can. Hide the body and evidence.”

Reading the urgency, Maddox nodded once. Then the man was on the move, grabbing a nearby apron and slapping it on the bloodied floor. After some tugging, Hilda was on her knees, too, wrapped in the blanket and brows furrowed in concentration despite her body still shaking. Nate left them like that, surprised when footsteps came running after him.

“Are you not going to report it to your father?”

“Rupert belonged to a powerful house, while Emilio didn’t.”

“Meaning?”

“He spent more time with my house and my brother.”

Clarity dawned and had her paling. They walked in silence, him trying to process how to handle this and her lost in her ruminations. The horrible sensation doubled to prick his skin—and he promptly knew what he was going to find when he turned a corner.

“Hey, brother.”

Winter stopped in her tracks, but his thumb pressing against her wrist clued her in not to take a step away. To her credit, she calmly snuggled in his arms and fluttered her lashes, slipping into the act of someone just on the verge of sleep.

“Nick,” Nate said in acknowledgment, then tilted his head in question. “What brings you here?”

Nicholas’s hands were in his pocket, and his gaze was on Winter with a glimmer of amusement. Then it flicked towards Nate.

“I was wondering if you had seen my friend. Medium-height, handsome, was hitting on your lover back at the party until you cut it short.”

Nate raised a brow, ignoring the last comment. “And why would you be looking for him here?”

“I don’t know. He left the party, and she was all he could talk about before that. How lovely she looked, how... fun she must be if she managed to monopolize your attention for so long. I guessed that he came here to try to entice you into partaking in a threesome. His idea, not mine,” the man added, watching Nate carefully. “I’m all for good fun and threesomes, but I would never disrespect you, brother.”

There was a certain relish in the tone that told Nate how Nicholas truly felt saying the words, but again, he didn’t take the bait.

“He’s not here.”

“Are you sure?”

“I know my area, and when an intruder like Emilio crosses into it. You wouldn’t find us strolling around if that was the case.”

“Hmm. I suppose you are right.” Nicholas glanced at Winter once more. “And you, my dear?”

“Not a soul,” she murmured, innocently watching him back.

“Oh, well. He must have gone off to indulge in someone else.” Then, “I’m hungry. Any food?”

Nate’s heart skipped a beat, but his face didn’t show it. “You haven’t had your blood fill yet?”

“I meant food. I’m not always craving blood, you know.”

“I will have my cooks deliver something to you.”

But the man shrugged and was already on the move, sniffing the air. “I’m already here, and something smells good in your kitchen. Or I think it’s coming from your kitchen. Don’t wake your cooks up on my account.”

Nicholas sounded so pleasant that anyone would have been tripping over themselves in their haste to please him in turn. Nate wanted to scream and drag him back, but could only

remain calm so as not to give anything away. Winter's hand on him quivered with nerves, but her face was a mask, too, as she followed them.

“Of course not. We always have food ready for other house guests, and I can get you those, too.”

“There's no need for all that fuss, Nate.” A spring came to Nicholas's glide, outpacing them towards the kitchen. Nate braced himself when the man got to the door and sniffed repeatedly...then, he mumbled an *oh* of disappointment. “What's with all the baking at this time?”

“Treats,” was Winter's reply, bouncing towards the ovens and sniffing the air, too, with a grin. “For the servants tomorrow. We always like to treat them from time to time, love, don't we?”

*The floor's clean* was the only thing ringing through his mind before he snapped out of it and nodded at her.

“Yes. They deserve it with all their days of hard toil and loyalty.”

There was no smell of blood, either, astonishing him considering the short amount of time that had passed. But there was no time to figure it out as Nicholas stood there, surveying the kitchen and its emptiness before his focus landed on Winter.

“You have grown soft, brother.”

“Showing appreciation to those who are loyal isn't being soft,” Nate shot back lightly. “It's just plain appreciation.”

“It's fun, too,” Winter added. “You should do it sometime.”

The suggestion had Nicholas's lips curling before the man sighed. “I change my mind. I thought the rusty smell...”

“Animal innards always smell rusty at first,” she confirmed. “But they taste amazing when they are properly cooked or baked.”

“Right. Well, I still need to look for my friend, so...”

There was a small incline of his head, then the man was floating off. Nate went to the door, watching his brother’s departure and absorbing the silence in the hall before he returned his attention to the kitchen. Winter was slumped against a long table like the act had taken its toll on her. It enraged him and made him feel guilty, but he couldn’t very well go to her with the assurance that she didn’t need to do it anymore. As if sensing how he felt, she looked up, waiting.

“We need to step up the game. Rock the boat and make them show themselves instead of just waiting to catch them in the act.”

Silence. But her face already confirmed her answer before she spoke the words.

“Tell me what I need to do.”

## Chapter 9

“I heard that Nathaniel sent you to hang out at House Chatterley for a reason. It must be a very important reason considering he hasn’t mentioned the why. And he often does.”

Winter glanced at Rebekah, who was watching the view from a balcony overlooking the ocean out front and the many lush forests before it. Unlike most vampires who shied away from direct exposure to the sun, the woman basked in it, tilting her head upwards from time to time under her cloak.

“Does it hurt you?”

“Not as much as it hurts them,” Rebekah said promptly. “I can withstand the sunlight for a long time, but eventually it will feel like a really bad sunburn.”

“That doesn’t sound too bad.”

“When I say sunburn, I meant an actual burning. It feels like you are on fire.” The woman smiled. “But I miss it, so I time my exposure just enough.”

“And the blood cravings?”

“It’s there, but living off of actual food for a major part of my life makes it my go-to for regular meals.”

“I see.” A pause. “Nate is off to run errands. What happens next depends on how it goes.”

Rebekah gave her a quizzical look but didn’t ask further questions. They sat in silence over a table of bread, eggs, and cuts of meat, then some orange juice that made her miss home just a little bit. She looked over to the market area that resembled a dollhouse at this distance.

“The humans who don’t belong to houses live off of bread and exchange whatever they make and service with other kinds of food. Sometimes they negotiate better and end up getting into a house. Those who have nothing to exchange steal out of hunger, and those who get caught are punished.”

There was a thoughtful pause. “All of House Chatterley’s servants were saved from prison, from being sent to the other side, or castaways from other houses. Then there are the stowaways working out of the other houses’ sight and essentially kept safe because of it.”

“Hmm. Why is this being brought up?”

“I don’t know. I just thought it was cool. I wish more houses did this.”

Rebekah shrugged, her response light. “We do it because it’s a benefit to us. We get connected to more houses. That is all there is to it.”

And Winter didn’t believe a word of it, but she nodded.

“Either way, I still wish more houses did this.”

“I will let you in on a little secret.”

“What is it?”

“It’s the ones who want to preen and be a jerk to each other who always attend the parties you have been to. Except for Nate, of course.”

Translation: there *were* other houses like House Chatterley. It made Winter feel better, understanding there was hope to make a change around here. Before she could ask what the house names were, Matthew entered the room and ushered them away from the balcony, cutting their breakfast short. Beside him was Hilda, bags in hand and already reaching for Winter.

“We need to wash your hair today and get you outfitted before the sun sets,” the woman rattled off, already fluffing up her hair. “Master, would you have a room for all that we require...?”

“I have plenty of spare rooms,” Matthew replied. “And you are most welcome to them.”

“I’m sorry, but why are we doing all of this at House Chatterley?” Winter asked, mystified.

“Because Nathaniel has sent out the announcement to everyone awake, so the news is spreading like wildfire, and other houses will be flocking to your wing the whole day to try to get acquainted with you.”

“What announcement?” Rebekah asked.

“Her engagement to the second son of the crown family.”

Her stomach clenched, stunned. Nate had done it and the wheels were in motion. Soon people would be approaching her more as she was no longer dispensable in their eyes. A smile bloomed from Rebekah’s lips as she wrapped Winter in a hug, offering the comfort that House Chatterley would stand by them no matter what.

“I don’t mind getting acquainted,” Winter said.

Matthew nodded. “I’m sure you don’t. But you can’t entertain them today, not when you have a very important dinner to attend soon.”

“Let me guess. An engagement party?”

“No. Dinner with the crown family at their request.”

Whatever she expected, it wasn’t that. Panic flared in her chest, but she tamped it down and squared her shoulders, remembering what she had signed up for. It just had to happen sooner.

“Oh. That’s lovely, then.”

Hours later, Hilda confirmed Matthew’s words as the woman got started with her hair.

“Maddox reported that fifteen houses have visited the wing looking to introduce themselves to you.”

“I’m not sure whether that’s good or bad.”

“It depends on who has visited, but I suppose that’s for the master to decide.” There was a pause. “How do you feel?”

She looked at Hilda in surprise. “It’s nothing new, I guess. Just bigger players and those who want to talk to Nate using me as a stepping stone.”

The woman nodded as if approving how Winter thought of it. Winter observed her.

“How do *you* feel?”

Now Hilda met her gaze, puzzled before she understood what Winter was asking about. A flare of vulnerability came and went. “Good. That’s not the first time it happened.”

“What? When was the last time?”

“Not to me. I meant in general. The house protects us because we have a good master. And Maddox.” Pink tinged the woman’s cheeks at the mention of the latter, but there was no elaboration. Instead, Hilda’s tone grew no-nonsense and firm. “Tonight is important, and you have to make a good impression.”

“Any tips?”

“Answer questions asked. Be respectful no matter how you disagree with them. Do not put the master in a bad spot. Do not correct the king when he forgets something. Do not cross the crown prince or upset him.”

It was a tall order, but Winter nodded. “Done and done.”

The sight of Nate in a silk shirt that emphasized his muscled chest had her staring for a long minute before she snapped out of it—just in time, too, as Nicola entered the dining room looking rebellious in another all-black ensemble. But the woman lit up at the sight of Winter, marching over to squeeze her hand before they took their places at the long dining table.



Seconds later, Nicholas strode in by himself, wearing the fur coat he had on the last time and a scowl on his face.

“I take it that’s your reaction to the engagement, brother?” Nicolas asked, unwittingly helping Nate and Winter out.

Nicholas shot her a dirty look. “It’s my reaction to being ordered to attend a family dinner when I have other important matters to deal with.”

“And what are those matters?” Nate asked.

“Nothing to worry your lovely head over, brother.”

The mocking vibe came on cue, running in Winter’s senses. She tapped on Nicola’s amusement, too, then was interrupted when a small entourage entered with clacking boots, a deliberate sound to announce another arrival. They all stood up at the king’s and queen’s entrance, surreal in how they seemed so in sync and looked like two ethereal creatures ready to bask everyone with their greatness. Awed, she could only bow and follow the others as they waited for the heads to be seated before they sat down, too.

Servants rushed in and food was served, tray after tray of colorful, delicious-smelling cuisine that had her mouth watering. She noted the vibe of disgust and glanced at Nicholas, who wrinkled his nose and scowled again briefly but didn’t comment on it. She took a bit of what was in front of her, too nervous to eat as the disgust bubbled over. Another glance at Nicholas ensured he was eyeing her, this time with a smile on his face. She smiled back.

Under the table, Nate’s hand rested on hers, as if sensing her nervousness. She squeezed it, then let go to make use of the utensils before her. Silence coursed over the dinner until Nicola leaned forward.

“Are we ever going to address what this dinner is for?”

“Because I want to see all my children together again after a long time of excuses and excursions.” Helena gave

Nicola a pointed look, emphasizing the latter. Amusement rang from both with a touch of sheepishness from Nicola.

“It was a very rewarding excursion, mother. The scholars will have loads of books with new information stocked in the library soon.”

Nicholas grinned. “Funny, but I never took you for a very scholarly person, Nicola. You are all about going against what everyone tells you to do, and writing books to help us with our boring lives doesn’t sound rebellious.”

“Did I ever say that I write the books?” Nicola shot back. “Or that I care about what you think?”

Unlike the earlier amusement, there was only tension now and hints of negative energy that swelled and retreated. The two went on until someone cleared their throat. A hush promptly went over the table as the king drank his wine and wiped his mouth.

“So, this engagement. Are we sure she isn’t a gold digger or a spy from another family?”

“I’m not—”

“Son?”

Winter closed her mouth, remembering Hilda’s instructions with mortification. Nate’s hand went to her knee.

“She is not. She is loyal to me and will always be. That is all I can say.”

“And that is all you need to say,” Nicola agreed. “It’s not like Nate will get engaged to someone just to spite you guys.”

“Are you sure that you don’t want a daughter from a close house? Or someone with more breeding?”

Glee came and went, matching the smile Nicholas hid. Nate lifted his chin, expression stern.

“Breeding and an allied house will do me nothing when all the woman is after is the position. I’m uniting with

someone with integrity, independence, and an open mind—and someone with enough compassion to even out what we lack with our very callous actions.”

He didn't specify their house, but the message was clear. Winter noted Nicola beaming with pride, relieved to find support from at least one party. Then something odd happened: more emotions gushing into the mix, each one clearer than the last, and she didn't know who it was coming from.

The pride remained. In came disbelief and reluctance, as well as hints of stupefaction and what felt like relief. Then a hate so putrid grabbed her by the throat until she was stiffening, the negative energy bright and sickening. Death and violence washed over her until she was dizzy from the intensity. That it came from Nate's direction, too, startled her, and she clasped a knife tightly, instinct demanding that she defend herself—

Nate's hand grasped hers, lowering it under the table and slowly, gently removing the knife from her hand. She looked up at his concerned expression, common sense returning to ground her. *Not Nate*, her mind supplied. But it surrounded her like an attack.

“Who are you calling callous, son?” Hathor asked, frowning. Before he could pose more aggressive questions, Helena's hand was on his shoulder, rubbing gently until the man loosened up. She patted his hand next.

“Us and a lot of houses, I presume,” Helena said lightly. “But he's right. We have grown lenient with some rules, and I suppose bringing someone independent and loyal into our house works in our favor...even if she's human.”

There was more soothing, then the hate vibe coming from someone who wanted to kill her. Nate continued calming her down with his hand on her palm, fingers drawing circles until she could ease out of her tension. She took a quick peek at everyone and glimpsed the two men still frowning but the two women eyeing her with curiosity.

“Thank you for your kind words,” she said.

Helena gave her a brief smile and returned to soothing her husband. Nicholas lifted a brow.

“I suppose this means babies in the future, brother? Future contenders to the crown?”

“Is that what you are taking from this, Nick?” Nate challenged.

“The crown will be passed on to the eldest child of the next king as tradition dictates,” Helena said firmly, then patted Nicholas’s hand. “There is no need to grill your brother and his fiancé on such a joyous occasion for them...for us.”

Winter hid a smile while she drank her wine, braced for more of the hate from Nicholas to stagger her. But she got distracted when the thumb on her palm transferred to her thigh, running lazy circles and signaling that the worst part of dinner was over. Higher and higher it went, almost teasing, and astonishment had her gripping her spoon tighter when she realized she was more than ready to spread her legs. She closed it immediately, narrowing her gaze at him while he nodded serenely at whatever Nicola was saying.

When he continued with that hot, calloused thumb, she snaked her hand down his trousers, squeezing it in warning. A sound got stuck in her throat when she felt a bulge growing, her fingers itching to unzip him and take care of it now. Laughter from Helena had her retreating her hand, then swatting his off as she tried to get her act together, but it was impossible.

“So, Nicola, tell us more about your excursion and if there’s any hope to get you to attend more events in the future,” Helena prompted, taking control of the conversation when the king decidedly grew grumpy, his vibe once again a blank slate. “And Nicholas, do tell me about your romantic prospects.”

Just like that, no one was paying them any attention as Nicola told grand tales and Nicholas’s charm returned to regal

them with the pros and cons of all the house daughters who were his speculated potentials. Sometimes, she was asked a question or two, allowing her to respond in a way that opened up the vibe gates once more.

All the time, Nate sent her hot, promising looks that took her breath away, but his hand never returned to her thigh.

“Congratulations on surviving dinner.”

“I don’t know if it’s an accomplishment or not.”

“It’s an accomplishment,” he confirmed. “Especially when it comes to my family. You are lucky that my father wasn’t in an assertive mood and my brother wasn’t in a nasty one—and that my sister wasn’t in the mood to keep egging him on.”

She recalled the violent vibe and shivered.

“Your mother is admirable. I met her before. She didn’t know me, but she treated me kindly.”

“My mother has her moods, too, but she generally is the peacemaker around here.”

“How she does it is impressive. And how you keep your calm no matter what it is, too.”

“I wasn’t calm,” Nate admitted.

“Oh?”

“I was raring to have a go with my father over his comments of you and as usual, to knock some sense into my brother.” He drew her closer. “But that wasn’t the reason I wasn’t calm.”

Their walk halted as he ushered her into a space that didn’t belong to House Hendricks. Winter looked around the lavish bedroom, confused, then went on alert when Nate began to stalk her. The constant evasion of predators around her

dictated she back away from the look on his face, but she stood her ground as she watched his approach.

“Why are we in House Chatterley?”

“Because House Hendricks still has a lot of visitors, and I asked Matthew to provide us with their safest, most comfortable room.”

“Oh.”

“Ask me why I wasn’t calm.”

Winter gulped as he stood inches away, his heat curling into her belly. She reached out to touch his half-exposed chest, but he took her hand and kissed her fingers one by one until her heart was pounding.

“Why weren’t you calm during dinner?” she asked.

Hot, hooded orbs pinned her in place, his gruff voice filled with an emotion she identified with.

“Because I couldn’t stop thinking about taking this tiny, glittery little thing off,” he replied, fingering her dress... her nipples. She arched into the touch, then gasped when he lifted her off her feet and was carrying her elsewhere.

“It’s highly risky to do this here,” she warned, but her voice didn’t sound steady anymore. She bit her lip when he deposited her to the bed and trapped her legs, then began the slow, excruciating task of peeling her dress off and putting his mouth on newly exposed skin. “They could hear us.”

“I asked for a soundproof room, darling. So, don’t be afraid to make a sound.”

Dumbfounded, she gaped at his lowering form, wanting to tease about his confidence. But all teasing left her when he finally exposed one breast and his face darkened with lust.

“They approve of this union,” he said, blowing over a pink tip before he put his mouth there. Pleasure sharpened and ached. “Soon, more people will approve of it.”

“Oh?”

“Yes.” His mouth moved to her stomach, his tongue trailing a hot, wet path. “The more approval, the more it messes with my brother. The less he becomes civil with me, the more he ends up showing his hand.”

“It’s pretty risky,” she stammered when he kissed her hip, then lowered her skirt. Her body sparked when his fingers came to play, rubbing up and down her entrance until she was quivering. “He might not...might not...”

“He will,” he assured. “Be careless, be easier to catch. To read.”

Fingers stretched her open. Then his mouth was there, licking her from top to bottom. Her hips jerked off the bed at the intense sensation, but there was no escaping it as the man continued pinning her in place so she could experience every inch. Winter moaned when his tongue plunged in, then turned her head and stifled a cry when his fingers joined the madness. But nothing could have prepared her for what came next: the sting on her thigh, warmth rushing forward, and—

“Nate. Oh, God, Nate.”

Her hands gripped his hair as she looked down at his head as he sucked her blood, gentle and erotic. It didn’t last long as he licked the slash shut, then placed her legs over his shoulders and proceeded to eagerly eat her out. Winter closed her eyes and gripped the sheets, sure that she heard a ripping at the force of her grip. But the pleasure drowned that out, blinding her when his licking changed to sucking and she was catapulted into a world of white-hot bliss.

Weakened and limp, Winter could only hold on when he positioned his cock at her entrance, then kissed her with a hunger that sparked the electricity all over again. Slow, powerful thrusts became their rhythm, his tongue playing the same rhythm with her tongue and his body rubbing mind-blowing friction against her. Then there was his voice, roughened with desire and luscious with its tiny grunts.

“You taste so good, darling. So wet. So warm. I can’t get enough. You are so tight and squeezing me so good, and I can’t stop wanting you. I can’t stop thinking about being inside you every time I look at you so I can fuck you like this and make you come. Over and over. Until you are begging and screaming like I am on the inside.”

Every dirty word was designated to make her lose control, inch by unbearable inch until she was a writhing mess in his arms. Abandoning the bedsheets, she clawed at his clothes insistently.

“Your clothes. Please. I need them off.”

He peeled them off without protest but didn’t take his eyes—or cock—off her. His hips were unstoppable, a surreal force that knew just how to find her pleasure point. He drove into her with precision, then with abandon, rhythm turning erratic and more aggressive—and through it all, he never stopped kissing her. The unraveling self-control gave her a surge of power, so she lifted her hips, ground back, and was rewarded with the lowest, sexiest moan there was.

She licked his earlobe and sucked on his tongue. She palmed his balls and planted her feet on the bed, taking him so deep in and clenching at his every movement. Just like that, the tables were turned as Nate trembled violently. In response, he jerked her hips off the bed and pumped so hard that she began to see stars—and screamed his name when the orgasm finally hit her without warning.

“Oh, Nate. That was...”

Lost in her second round of bliss, it took her a few seconds to comprehend that he had stopped moving. His rigid body over hers while still inside her had her at a loss, her body reacting to draw him closer. But his harsh words stopped her.

“Don’t.”

Belatedly, it all sank in: the sharp nails on her elbows, then his face buried on the mattress. When she urged him to face her, she gasped at the gray eyes rimmed with red and



finally got a trickle of what she couldn't read from him before: desire. Lust. A hunger so intense that he wanted to suck her dry and fuck her over and over until she was completely drained. The predator in him was giving in to the temptation, her blood calling him and about to make him lose control. Then there was his fear, freezing him in place, refusing to give in an inch and hurt her—even if it hurt him.

Anguish at what he felt had her gasping. Determination surged and had her pushing him, then reaching out when he would have backed off. Accounting for vampiric strength, she shoved him with all her might and straddled him, then sank on him to keep him in place. Dumbfounded, he gaped at her, fangs still out and gaze still reddening.

“Fight it. I know you don't want to hurt me. Just stay there and fight it.”

He looked into her eyes and read her understanding, locking his hands on the mattress as she did earlier. While he fought with control, she rode him, moving her hips in a rhythmical bounce as she read the cues on his face. The craving for blood transformed into a different need, and soon his hips were rocking against her to thrust, grind, and bury deeper. The nails and fangs retracted, and a different kind of tension entered his body.

“How do you feel?” she asked softly.

“Like I'm about to lose my mind. But keep going.”

Winter laughed. It turned into moan after moan when, to her astonishment, she was on the verge again and desperate to experience that third bout of climax. But she needed him there first, so she lowered her head, bypassed his mouth, and licked his neck before she grazed it with her teeth.

Hands squeezed her ass, then bounced her up and down his shaft. His body jerked up and his head tilted, letting her graze some more. Then he groaned the loudest groan there was, body spasming as he emptied himself inside her, finger flicking her clit until she couldn't hold on any longer. So, they

held on to each other instead as fireworks exploded in their senses, and Nate finished it off with a piercing on her throat, a little more sucking, and finally collapsing on the bed.

Other than their breathing, there was silence, an intimate blanket in the darkness. Seconds later, he turned on a bedside lamp and tugged her until she curled beside him.

“That...has never happened before.”

“You making a woman cum three times?”

A pinch at her side had her narrowing her gaze at him, but the relaxed look on his face had her softening.

“No. Wanting both so much that I almost go feral with it.”

“You wouldn’t have attacked me,” she said, and his stupefied reaction was everything. She smirked. “Besides, it’s not a hardship to ride you and make you forget every time you do get in that state—Nate!”

The kiss was unrelenting, desperate, and the most amazing feeling there was. She lost herself in it before they both pulled away, and he eyed her.

“You make me forget how dangerous this situation is. You make me forget the world.”

And he was making her forget it, too—that she had a role here, that she could never belong here, and that there was a happy ending with him. Not wanting to dwell on it, Winter rested her head on his bare chest.

“I could read you earlier. Tiny bits of how you felt, including how much you wanted my blood and how you would have fought yourself to the fullest before you hurt me.”

He paused, absorbing the information. She could sense how thunderstruck he was but not much else.

“And now?”

“It’s gone. I don’t know why. But it was a blessing.”

Nate shook his head. “Darling, you are the blessing.”

Her heart ached for it to mean more than his plans for his home, but she knew there was no chance. So, she inwardly berated that heart that was already feeling things it shouldn't be feeling and closed her eyes. *Temporary, Winter*, her head reminded.

*Don't get too attached.*

“Your brother wants to kill me.”

Nate stiffened, then nodded in acceptance. She mourned for the pain that clouded his features for a second before she settled in the peace they had here, away from prying eyes and expectations. At least she had this moment and all the other intimate moments with him. At least, when all of this was over, and he did what he needed to do, she could walk away knowing that she didn't just stand by watching the atrocities of this island without doing anything, like she had the first time.

Winter slept with that comfort despite knowing that the finish line wasn't on the horizon yet and there was no guarantee that Nate's side would win.

And she woke up to an urgent shaking on her shoulder and gray eyes already ready for the next battle.

“Wake up. Get dressed. The pirate is here.”

## Chapter 10

Getting Isaiah to come to Ostrov Krov earlier than his schedule was already an achievement, one that Nate would thank his parents for when the time came. For now, he stood before the man in a secluded receiving hall—also another thing to thank his parents for—and pretended to greet the trader with the intention of negotiating terms to outbid the others and monopolize the guy's imports.

There was a swagger to the pirate's steps as he approached Nate, as if being called upon by the royal house didn't faze him. The three rings on his nose glinted in the bits of sunlight that penetrated a lone window, but that was all the artifice there was. The simple cotton trousers, matching shirt, and worn-out boots were an anomaly considering the man's pompous, luxurious reputation, but he didn't comment on it and offered a greeting with a small bow.

"The prince of Ostrov Krov. Someone needs to pinch me because I think I'm still dreaming."

Isaiah's voice was gritty, matching a face that had been scarred once or twice. What was surprising was the playfulness of it and the sparkle in his brown eyes.

"It's not a dream, and you have been called," Nate confirmed, ushering for the man to sit on one of the many couches.

Isaiah took the offer, settling on the biggest couch and resting his boots on the table. "I hope you don't mind. It was a long trip, but I couldn't miss the invitation."

"Hmm."

"If you are going to offer me a deal—which I'm assuming you are—then I have to be honest and let you know that I provide quality goods to quality clients and don't settle for delays, cancellations, and bullshit. For me to be swayed by your offer, you would have to offer me double or triple what

my regular clients are already offering me. Mr. Nathaniel, isn't it?"

Nate was so mystified with the man's natural ease that he nodded. "Yes."

"As the second son and the one who probably deals with most of what the first son fails to do, I'm sure you understand where I'm coming from. I can't just bail on responsibilities, else it will leave me with a very bad reputation."

Nate bit his tongue to avoid pointing out that the man already had a bad reputation. "That is understandable. However, I don't think I can offer double or triple the price, only that I will not be a cause for delays and cancellations regarding trade."

"Oh. That's disappointing. Are you sure about that?"

"Positive."

Isaiah studied him curiously, a hint of wariness coming in. "And will the prince kill me with my refusal?"

"No."

Nate worked on the silence and waited until the first wave of discomfort came, but the pirate was quick to cover it up. Isaiah stood up, then stopped when Winter entered the scene wearing a white dress and carrying diamonds. He eyed the diamonds, glanced away dismissively, and focused on her.

"I see. You are upping the ante and trying to negotiate with other means. Diamonds are so cliché, and I have plenty of them, but I won't mind hearing about her. Is she up for trade? She could be useful in my ship and a sight we would all love to see." There was a smirk. "She could warm up some beds, too...."

The words were said mildly, but the idea of Winter on a ship with hungry, vicious men had him forgetting the irony and seeing red. His hand snapped out, reaching for the pirate's neck and ignoring Winter's protest. A blur later and the man

was pinned to the wall, fighting for his breath. Then she was there, hand on his wrist, voice soft and soothing.

“It’s not any different from what a lot are thinking here,” she said. “Don’t let it get to you. This is Isaiah, not an enemy. He’s not an enemy.”

It helped that she was right, because Isaiah had nothing to do with all the manipulative maneuvering the vampires were doing. When his hand loosened, there was no anger on the pirate’s face. There was no fear, either, but just a touch of nerves and an enthusiastic nod.

“There is no need for all this violence,” Isaiah said. “Unless you are a pirate like me, which you are not. I have no defense against the likes of you vampires, and I didn’t bring any weapons with me to honor this most wondrous meeting. Besides, I didn’t mean I was going to enslave her. That’s *your* thing. I was merely going to make her a crew member, and it’s her decision to warm up as many beds as she likes—ouch, fine, fine. No talking about beds when it comes to her.”

“Winter,” she offered, surprising Nate. But a glance at her told him that she was reading the man and wasn’t offended.

“Do you always talk this much?” Nate asked.

“Only when I’m negotiating for my life. Now, tell me what you want and what I can do.”

Nate let the man go, backing away with Winter and watching as he composed himself. The man rubbed his neck and straightened, sizing up Winter before turning to Nate in wait.

“I want you to meet another person in this room and tell me what you know about him.”

Isaiah’s eyes gleamed. “Oh, so this is becoming a party.”

“In a sense.”

“It depends on who the person is, by the way. As I said, I am loyal to my clients.”

Winter hid behind Nate, hiding a smile. What was she reading from the damned man? Before he could ask, the door was pushed open, and another figure came strutting in with utmost confidence...until he saw who was in the room.

Denison panicked and made a run for it, a knee-jerk reaction. But Maddox blocked the way and shut the door at once. At the same time, Nate was moving and on him in seconds, pinning the man to the floor and locking in parts that kept Denison from fighting him. Nate looked up.

“Is Denison one of your clients?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me what you know about him.”

Isaiah perused the scene, then shot Winter a disbelieving look. She shrugged, her lips sealed. It gave the man a chance to pick his side before his shoulders rolled back, and he approached the two with the same swagger when he came in.

“Denison is from House Rue and one of my clients. I mostly exchange recreational stuff with him, including drugs and spirits. A few weeks ago, he offered me double our usual deal for a little side job: to kill the daughter of House Rue, his cousin Stephanie, so he can be the next in line for leadership. He threatened me when I refused to do it but backed off at the last minute. He has never spoken a word of it since, and Stephanie Rue, who has private dealings with me—quality clothing and weapons to provide to her house’s human servants, who she trains to defend themselves when needed—is still alive.”

Shock visibly jolted Denison’s body, not expecting the tidbit. A glance at Winter was all Nate needed to guarantee it was the truth, and he stomped on Denison’s neck when the vampire attempted to talk.

“Does she know what you were asked to do?” Nate asked.

“No, but she was surrounded by a private protection squad during our last trade. I assumed she’s aware.”

There was no missing the relish in the tone. Nate raised a brow.

“Whatever happened to loyalty to your clients?”

Isaiah lifted a finger that looked shorter than normal and just as scarred as his face. “Keyword, quality. Denison loves to cancel orders or change his mind at the last minute. He also bosses me around too much and threatens me for fun. I can’t kill him, but I admit that I’m not a very big fan of him, either.”

“Can I have all of that in writing?”

“Sure. As long as I get to keep my other dealings.”

“You will.” There was a tap, then Maddox peeking in. “Take him to the dungeon. Alert House Rue so I can let them know what’s going on.”

Denison howled in protest, but the man was no match for Nate’s strength. Within seconds, he hit all the points that had the other limp underneath him, allowing Maddox to tie the man up and take him away. Isaiah watched the whole thing like it was a great form of entertainment until Maddox and Denison were gone. Then all remaining eyes were on him.

“Is that all?” he asked almost lazily. “If you don’t mind, I have other matters to attend to and a testament to write. I prefer to do it before the sun sets and all you crazy folks come out.”

Nate expected Winter to smile, but the way her mood instantly shifted had him going on alert. A surge to protect came but was stopped when she approached the pirate, searching his face.

“You know something else, don’t you?” she prompted.



There was no outward indication that he did except for the impressed glimmer when he examined her back. Speculation rose as brown eyes flicked at Nate.

“Maybe.”

“Do tell,” Nate intoned.

Silence.

“Your father’s life is in danger. I suggest getting the same protection squad that Miss Rue has and avoiding all that trouble.”

Ice skittered down his spine. “Who?”

“I don’t know. Denison talks a lot but never finishes his statements. He’s a very unreliable creature and all over the place with his obsession over becoming a leader.” Isaiah smirked. “Unfortunately, he doesn’t have the skill to do what it takes.”

And just like that, Nate already knew who was tasked to kill his father.

“Why are you telling me this?”

“You just imprisoned Denison and lost me a client. I’m going to need another one, and there’s only one person I’m looking at who can offer me a deal so there won’t be a dent in the business.”

Nate nodded and agreed. He sat through the written testament and the bloodied thumbprints, then the pirate making a show of doing him a huge favor and expecting not to be bothered with messy vampire politics again. He said all the right things to keep the pirate on his side—for now. But his mind was already elsewhere and planning his next move.

“What did you tell House Rue?”

“I showed them the testament. They have rallied their support—Stephanie, in particular—for me in future

endeavors.”

“And the queen?”

This one had been harder to navigate, considering a testament from Isaiah would have guaranteed that the pirate would have an open target on his back. But he squeezed Winter’s hand.

“She heeded my warnings. She followed my suggestion to isolate the king, even from his sons and daughters, and told her they would be in danger, too, if they stood too close to him.” Remembering his mother’s worried face had him smiling. “He has his protection squad now. I suspect she put one on the crown prince, too.”

That had her eyes glinting. “Every move monitored. That’s perfect.”

So perfect, in fact, that he couldn’t help taking her away from the castle when he should be inside, making deals...revealing the truth. Winter made a sound when he tugged her in the direction of the market.

“The sun’s out,” she protested. “What are you doing? Where are we going?”

“The sun will be down soon. And I need a day.”

“A day?”

“House Rue is interrogating Denison tonight,” he confirmed. “We need his testament on top of Isaiah’s to incriminate my brother. We need every account of his hunting parties and secrets to be out so that the king will see that he is not fit to give up the crown yet. So, we need to give House Rue time to gather the evidence—that is, if they are truly on my side. House Chatterley is on standby for whatever happens next.”

“I read Stephanie,” Winter reminded. “She’s on your side through and through. Are you also interrogating Denison?”

“Yes. It’s my turn if he doesn’t cave. And he will cave to me.”

“He will. But it still doesn’t explain what we are doing out.”

“Has someone ever taken you out on a market date?”

“No, and...” Her eyes widened. “Nate, you will be recognized.”

“Unless there’s a vampire here or a servant from a house, but these will take care of that.”

She stared at the uniforms he presented and the logo that wasn’t House Hendricks. At his cajoling, she hastily donned hers in an empty alley and scrutinized the outfit he had on: basic slacks, a basic shirt, and a vest.

“Matthew and Rebekah like to wear them when they want to check out the market.”

Comprehension dawned at what he wasn’t saying, and she followed him out, baffled. True to his word, the humans went on with their activities, not sparing them a glance as they strolled through rows of stalls bright with lights and rushed conversations. They avoided other figures in uniform and stopped at a stall with handcrafted jewelry pieces, where he haggled the price of a bracelet to uphold the servant status. The smile on her face was contagious when he clasped it on her wrist.

“You have done this before,” she accused.

“A few times before. Matthew and I scoured the streets and looked for those their house could save. Now they do it on the regular. The man’s amazing.”

The hand on his arm had him meeting her solemn blue eyes. “So are you.”

“It’s all his. His house takes them in, not me.”

“But you are there for him. You are making a difference.”

Her belief in him staggered, a beautiful balm to his heart that had always kept itself protected.

“Not enough.”

“Tonight, it will be more,” she promised. “Sticky sweets?”

Nate blinked when a red substance hovered in front of him, and she gestured at him to open his mouth. Anticipating the taste of blood, pleasure rose when it was something caramel-tasting instead, the taste sticking to his tongue even when he had already swallowed it.

“What is it?”

“Sugar. A source of energy bursts, especially for those who work in heavy labor or are on their feet the whole day.”

He noted that there were a lot of stalls selling those and bread, but none of the nutritious stuff that he and his staff were used to eating. Nate offered a silent prayer that tonight would go well and he could change this, too. For now, he looked at Winter, who stopped in front of the boat construction site.

“Summer and Dante stayed here in disguise. They were initially just supposed to help each other out but fell in love in the process—her the naïve girl who knew nothing about this world and only came here to find me, and him a prisoner from the Wasteland who wanted her out of the Otherworld as fast as possible.”

“Oh? And you are okay with this?”

She shrugged. “My sister isn’t a fool. And he’s not so bad. Their hearts found each other like all those romance books.”

His opened up, and he stared at her as she looked at the stacks of unbuilt boats and lights installed. Her nose was upturned, and a smile lingered on her lips as she studied the setup.

“These lights were not here before.”

“Matthew’s idea. Some houses whose servants run errands at night helped out.”

A yearning filled his soul when her face lit up as she followed the strings running all around the pathways, wishing she would look at him like that, too. He trailed after her, attention juggling between watching their surroundings and her until she circled back to the boat area.

“Winter.”

The yearning changed to a different kind of emotion when she turned to him, and her face did light up with joy. It reached out to him, squeezing his insides until he couldn’t take in air. He took her hand, guiding her out of the open space and to a corner stall that had already closed.

“Nate...” she whispered, but the rest was lost in the kiss they shared. Her mouth opened for him, soft and trusting, then bolder as she nipped his lower lip and willed him to keep kissing her. He growled low in his throat, then broke off the kiss as it switched to desperate.

“Not here.”

“The castle’s too far away,” she protested, then went so quiet, he could already see the wheels in her mind turning.

“Do you know a place here?”

“A storage space for some stalls on the other end. The family sleeps early. They wake up early, too, just before the sun comes up.”

He didn’t say a word, but his face must have been enough to send his message across as she gulped and led him there. They navigated the dwindling crowd, then opted for narrower pathways until they found a shortcut leading to the other end. The space she was talking about was dark and slightly cramped, but there was a portion at the back where they could move around.

He backed her into the wall and kissed her more passionately than he had outside, letting out what he had been

keeping from potential spectators. She responded in kind, her muscles relaxing as she sank into the kiss, but her hands ran busily all over his body. Every touch ignited fire until he was burning all over, and there was only one way to quench the thirst.

“I can make you come now with my fingers, and we can finish it up in the castle,” he grunted, already finding her wet and unable to stop his gentle thrusting. But she stopped him, hand tugging insistently on his wrist as she tiptoed to whisper.

“I want you inside me. Please.”

Maybe he could have resisted the request, but the please did him in, melting all defenses as his hands got busy, too. An unzipping here and a lift of dress there was the only thing they needed as he positioned his cock at her entrance and didn't wait to make its push. Blue eyes darkened when he was halfway in, then dilated when he was buried to the hilt.

“You are so big,” she whimpered, but there was no protest there.

He gritted his teeth, stupefied at the tightness that just kept going. Then Nate was hitching her up and moving his hips to seek more of that heat she offered, unable to get enough. She moved in time with him like they had been doing this for years, a rhythm that beat down his core and danced in his heart. When she moaned, he placed his fingers over her lips and cursed when she closed over his thumb and sucked. The strong, steady thrusts stuttered, but they still made her moan.

“Close?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said, then a series of more yeses fluttered out of her lips. He kissed every one of them as he hefted her butt, seeking more. She understood and wrapped her legs around his waist, held on to beams above them for purchase, and gave him the most mind-melting, spearing look there was. “Hurry.”

The woman was determined to make him lose semblance all the time, but he didn't mind—not when it felt this good. He poured his energy into his pounding, crazed over the taste of her mouth and the feel of her clenching, determined to give her whatever she needed. When he sensed her restlessness, he shifted the angle a little and watched as her expression blossomed into disbelief, then a pleasure so raw that he could taste it.

The triumph of finding her best spot raged over him as he repeatedly hit her there and witnessed Winter's climax taking over in the form of a molten gaze, mouth parted, and the sweetest cry releasing from her lips. He swallowed that cry with his tongue and kept up the pace until he could feel his balls tingling, too, then ringing with so much force that it bordered on painful. At that point, all bets were off and he drove with abandon, using her body as much as she used his, seeking that final snap. Then it happened, and he could only hold on as he shuddered his orgasm out and into her.

Like all of their moments coming together, he slumped into her, stunned at how good and intense it was each time. But something was different now, and a look at her sated, vulnerable features told him why.

“You didn't bite me.”

The craving for blood had been there, lurking at the surface. But the need to please her and just be inside her had been the center of his being when he had fucked her...no, when he had made love to her. Because this was no longer just a random attraction, but a woman he had fallen in love with.

Dumbfounded, he could only nod his head, hesitant to say the words that churned in his system. She wanted to travel to the Otherworld. She wanted to be free from this world, *his* world—and wasn't it his duty to keep to his promise when the time came and let her go if he did love her?

Even if it meant his heart would break just a bit.

“I can do it later. In the castle.” Nate attempted a smile. “Come on. Let’s go back and check on House Rue.”

They were more careful on their way back to the castle, with him trying to shut off his mind—and heart—to face what was ahead. They managed to sneak back in with no one the wiser, the smooth travel assuring him that the rest of the night would be smooth, too...until he took his first step inside.

An off feeling penetrated his calm before his heart skipped a beat. It had him walking faster and Winter calling his name before they stopped in their tracks at the ashen-faced, quivering servant ambling toward them. The man wasn’t even looking where he was going, and the vampire beside the man looked like she was ready to faint. Recognizing the latter, he strode forward but was halted when Winter took his hand with a soundless gasp.

“Winter?”

He watched her face drain of color and her head shake frantically. Then he looked at other vampires leaving their house areas and gathering as they murmured to each other in the distance...and his heart felt like it would rip in two when he finally caught wind of what they were saying.

*The king is dead. Murdered in his room. He’s dead.*



## Chapter 11

It felt like Winter was stuck in a dreamlike state as she shadowed Nate in his haste to get to the main area of House Hendricks, where a few houses had already gathered and were being waved away by the guards. They listened to the command and backed away while Nate glissaded forward, unseeing of the crowd parting for him. Her head throbbed at the great number of clashing energies pushing into her, cut off only when they entered a grand room and the doors were closed. Inside, the queen had her hands covering her face, Nicola was openly crying, and Nicholas was sitting at the side and peering over the glass window.

When Nate went for Nicholas, Winter blocked his path and gave him the deepest warning sign she could without saying a word. His lips flattened, appearing calm, but the grief and rage thrumming in his eyes were a dead giveaway to how he felt. When she shook her head, he grunted and approached his mother instead.

“Mother, tell me what happened.”

“He was murdered. Your father was murdered.”

Helena’s hands trembled. Before any of the siblings could comfort her, guards barged into the room and circled them, their golden seals glimmering. The clash of energies returned, distracting Winter as she rubbed her head, but it was the gush of hate directed towards her that had her gulping down the pain and searching for its source. Half of the guards were looking at her with accusations on their faces, but it was the severe look from the queen that had dread sinking in her stomach.

“Arrest them,” the older woman ordered.

Nate’s head snapped up. “What?”

“They killed the king.”

“It wasn’t me,” he argued, then toned down his voice to pleading. “Mother, listen to me. It was the crown prince. I have evidence.”

“Evidence of what, brother?” Nicholas interjected, already facing them. A smirk played on his lips as he spared a glance at Winter before directing his attention towards Nate. “Of you manipulating houses to get in with your plan? To carry out the murder of the father that you supposedly loved? Because we have all the evidence we need—”

There was a blur, then choking sounds as the smirk was wiped off Nicholas’s lips and he turned violet. Nate continued strangling him, the rage finally snapping out.

“You bastard! Do you think this is funny? Do you think you can get away with killing him?”

“I don’t know what you are talking about, brother—”

“Shut up—”

“Arrest him!”

The queen’s voice thundered in the room, louder than her usual soft tone and coated with steely command. A shudder ran down Winter’s system as the woman continued speaking while guards rushed to get Nate away from Nicholas. They pinned him down, knees pressing against his pressure points as he had done to Denison.

“Mother!” Nicola protested, scandalized as she hurried towards her brother. But more guards held her back and ignored her growling and glowering. Winter stepped forward, frantic when Nate began to redden.

“Your highness, it wasn’t him. He didn’t kill the king. If you could only let him explain, please—”

“They connived to murder my husband at the confession of Denison Rue, signed and sealed with his thumbprint. They were after the crown and are after my son next, and they already killed House Rue’s leader to get it.”

Amid the attack of negative vibes and shock, a sliver of something different came at her: triumph, a victory that felt so off and so strong. The amusement weaved into it took her aback, so separate from the tension unfettering from Nicholas. Her mind worked a mile a minute to untangle it from the rest. In slow motion, the direction it was coming from made itself known, and her heart dropped in her stomach.

The queen eyed her back, face a mask of anguish and the battle to be strong, but Winter couldn't read a drop of it from the woman.

"You murdered them," she whispered, body going numb as she recalled the first time they had met. The woman didn't know her and had been kind. But during dinner...

The putrid hate slammed forward, a perfect match to the one she had felt before. *Oh, God. Oh, no.*

"You would accuse the queen of such foul words?" Nicholas clipped out, sneering. "Mother, I think we found the source of Nate's rebellion."

"She is the instigator but not the main culprit," Helena agreed, voice trembling in effect. Then she visibly steeled it once more. "Take her to the dungeon. My son...take him to the other side."

Her eyes widened. So did Nicola's, the woman looking on with helplessness, vibe blank. There were several protests as she was jerked back aggressively, but it wasn't until she was carried off her feet that she realized all of them were coming from Nate and he was fighting for his life, trying to get away from the bodies holding him down. Winter met his gaze, saw the blaze of fear, and knew she wouldn't be alive in the dungeon for long.

She kept her calm, shaking her head at him. It didn't last long as one of the guards hit Nate hard and he slumped to the ground, and all rational thought fled her as she lunged forward. But she was no match for the strong arms gathering her up and dragging her away.

“Let me go!”

The doors closed. Pain shot at her abdomen and she doubled over when it spread all over her body. The fight left her as a dizzying feeling seized her up before negative energy bombarded her once more and clued her in that she and the guards weren't alone. Then the energy was gone and she was alone with them, farther and farther from the man who was at the mercy of his family's betrayal.

“No!”

The shout had her head snapping up. Her knees gave way when the hands on her loosened, and she blinked back her blurry vision when another set of hands picked her up. Winter gawked at Hilda, who was ushering her away from the unconscious group of guards, then struggled.

“No. Nate. We need to go back for him—”

“You will die if you go back. We need to get you out first before word gets out.”

Grief petered out, but she gulped it in and tried to listen to reason. She glimpsed Maddox sliding in and out of view, clearing the way for them as they raced away from House Hendricks.

“Stephanie. Is she still alive? They killed her father.”

Hilda's mouth thinned. “We heard. We don't know. We have to—”

They halted when Maddox was thrown backward. A second later, a figure glissaded towards them, eyes rimmed red and fangs in full view. Her pulse stuttered when she recognized the vampire she had once followed with his lover.

“Miss Winter. I just heard the news. I'm afraid I have to take you.”

But he couldn't have heard it, not when the rest didn't know yet. A look at Hilda confirmed that, too, before the woman stepped in front of Winter.

“Good evening, master. How may we be of service?”

Behind Hilda, her hands moved, the directions gestured quickly. Then knives were clutched and hidden as the woman smiled demurely at the vampire, composure intact and matching the steely determination radiating inside. A protest lurked in Winter’s throat but stayed there when Maddox snuck in behind the vampire.

“Step away. I just need her.” The vampire smiled. “Or maybe stay. I might need you later, too—”

Blood gushed, and the vampire choked. An eruption of shouts came as shadows crawled from the ceiling, and she heard one loud and clear.

“Go! Run!”

Someone swooped in to lunge at her, but she sidestepped and kicked with all her might. Then she was running away as more shadows came, the violence ringing in her ears at each step she took. Panic had her missing pathways before she forced her mind to focus, retraced her steps, and followed the map in her head until the shadows were no longer there. Then something ticked in her brain, and she jumped back, hiding in the closest corner.

*Calm down. Don’t think. Get ready.*

The mantra stilled her body, then her mind. Her mouth went dry as she felt a specific vibe kick in, frantic. When it hovered over her, she shoved hard and was yanked by a force that didn’t hurt. Bloodied and limping, Maddox let go of her hand and ushered her out of the hallway.

“Keep going. You can’t stop like this.”

She glanced behind him, waiting. When he moved, she raced after him.

“Where’s Hilda?”

“We need to go.”

Ice formed in her belly. “Where’s Hilda?”

“Miss—”

“Answer me, Maddox.”

He spun to face her.

“It’s too late for her.”

The stunning sorrow in Maddox’s eyes drowned her, but it was the way he fought off the tears and rage that made her heart clench tight. They were still moving, but everything was becoming numb as she was hit with the reality that the woman who had helped her fit in had gone another step to protect her. It sank into her belly, then down until her knees felt like jelly. Somehow, despite his sorrow, Maddox had more willpower as he dragged her endlessly into halls she didn’t know and pathways that didn’t make sense anymore. Before she knew it, they were out of the castle’s side exit and crawling down bushes to stay out of sight.

Her mind went blank, blocking out the feeling of losing Hilda and refusing to acknowledge that Nate might be gone, too. Her heart broke, detaching from her body that struggled for survival when the chances were slim. But when they got out of the grassy area, and it was Maddox who remained crouched, she snapped out of it and held out her hand. He looked at it, then at her.

“Don’t let her sacrifice be for nothing.”

If he howled in pain, she would have understood. But Maddox was silent as he took her hand and allowed her to help him up. That silence wrapped around them as they entered the market, hid from view, and continued navigating their way toward a row of buildings at the back. Colorful wares caught her eye, most of them for the kitchen. A woman in dirty clothes stepped forward, perused her, and pointed to a door.

“That way. Hurry.”

“Thank you.”

“Where’s Hilda?” the woman asked Maddox. He didn’t answer. “Where’s my sister?”

Winter closed her eyes, unable to bear listening or feeling the next bout of grief. When she opened the door, she froze at the onslaught of even more emotions, cluing her in that she wasn't alone. A lamp hanging on a pole gave her a view of who was inside: Stephanie, bloodied and shoulders slumped. Rebekah, her arms wrapped around House Rue's daughter. There were several more faces she recognized at the parties that she had attended, but it was Matthew's grim face that pinned her in place as he trudged forward and held out his hand.

"Come. You will be safe here."

She took the offered hand, but safety no longer had a place in Ostrov Krov for the likes of her.

"Can Nate compel vampires?"

"No. Vampires cannot compel vampires unless they are special."

"But isn't Nate special?"

Rebekah nodded. "Nathaniel is. But he has wings, so his compulsion is a secondary thing and not as strong unless it is used on humans."

Winter didn't like hearing that. She didn't like a lot of things now, but her preferences didn't matter when she was stuck in a secret room below a building that sold wares and housed Hilda's mother. Maddox was nowhere to be found, out on an errand, and the familiar vampires she had gotten acquainted with in this room were back in the castle to pretend like the queen taking over the throne was the best news there was. That she was still alive two days after her escape proved that they could be trusted, but it wasn't enough to alleviate the restlessness growing in her system.

Stephanie wasn't much better, stuck in between the thirst for vengeance and longing for her dead family. The

woman kept to herself while Rebekah went back and forth between the two.

“I can’t stay here,” Winter blurted out.

“Me, neither,” Stephanie piped in as if just waiting for someone to say it first. The vampire marched for the door, then glowered when Rebekah blocked her path. Golden eyes turned a vicious shade of black. “Get out of my way.”

“No.”

“You have been warned.”

Before the tension could reach a boiling point, Winter stepped in between them, receiving the sharp nails headed for her jugular. Stephanie froze.

“Remember who the enemy is,” Winter murmured. “It’s not her.”

The vampire’s nails retracted as Winter sensed how appalled she was. Relief flooded as the two retreated from each other, allowing her to continue.

“Stephanie will be recognized when she goes out, but I’m inconsequential to them.”

“You are the prince’s fiancé and an ally to the murder,” Stephanie pointed out.

“And last I heard, they only searched the market once, and there are no wanted posters of me.” She turned to Rebekah. “Did you bring extra disguises?”

Rebekah pondered it for a bit before nodding reluctantly and helping Winter into raggedy clothes. Stephanie came over to help after a while, too, smudging her face with coal and completing the look with a hat over her head.

“Keep your head down,” the latter instructed. “Don’t talk to anyone. If you think you are being followed, don’t come back here. Find the second hiding location on the other end of the market.”



Rebekah gawked. “Why do I get the picture that you do this quite often?”

“Not as much as you,” Stephanie shot back. “Now, hurry and bring news. Preferably of the queen’s head already on a platter.”

And there was the thirst for vengeance returning with gusto. Winter slipped out, basking in the sunlight that hit her face even when it was already late afternoon. The first thing she did was look for wanted posters before she strolled around, ears perked. To her amazement, no one talked about the tragedy, the humans busy in their little world of selling, building, and interacting. It brought her some relief, but it didn’t last long.

A shout echoed in the distance, then spread until the panicked vibe hit her. Fear assaulted her senses and had her stilling when everyone snapped into movement, bumping into her to get away. The instinct to follow them kicked in, but she wrestled with it and pushed to the side where she could climb a stall. At the top, she peered at the crowd.

“Oh, no.”

There was a pale-looking creature staggering drunkenly, then snapping into movement so fast that he became a blur. Next thing she knew, blood was pooling on the ground and splattering on stalls, the vampire leaving a trail of dead bodies in his wake. But unlike most vampires, this one’s skin was rough, some parts falling off and other parts a mottled gray. The eyes were all pure red and sleepy but bright with a predatory gleam.

*Rogues are vampires who have gone mad. What they lack in physical appearance and thinking, they make up for in strength and hunger. Even vampires are wary of rogues. It’s one of the reasons the border is in place. They are not much of a threat when left alone, so the vampires continue throwing them to the other side instead of traveling to the Wasteland to dump them there.*

This one was a threat now as it eviscerated the humans in its path. When it neared, Winter climbed down from her position but paused as a cloaked man trudged over to approach the creature. She caught a glimpse of a youthful place before she sensed a presence beside her.

“I don’t even want to ask what you are doing outside.”

The sun was setting, a perfect recipe for disaster, so Matthew’s concern was understandable. But she ignored him for a moment to watch as Rohan wrestled with the rogue before another figure joined him to effectively put the creature down. The woman, leader of House Sicily and Rohan’s mother, stepped away just as quickly, blending into the crowd with no one the wiser. Glad that the killing spree had stopped, she hopped down.

“How did you know it was me?”

“I didn’t. I was going to scold the idiot who climbed the stall and made herself the next target if the rogue kept going.”

She winced. “I was coming down.”

“Good. Now let’s go.”

They joined the crowd, already calming down, then went in another direction. She examined the blood bags he carried at his side before searching his face.

“Any good news?”

Matthew’s darkening expression didn’t encourage. “Nate’s gone. So is Nicola. Helena has been crowned the new ruler. She has been addressing the houses about the death and the circumstances.”

Not good news at all. Her stomach heaved, but she kept her silence until they reached the secret room. Inside, he repeated the news and ushered Rohan in.

“Mother’s going back to the castle. She can’t stay out much and needs to keep up appearances.”

“I need to go back, too,” Matthew said, then rolled back his shoulders to deliver more news. Winter braced herself. “There are rumors that Nate has been thrown to the other side.”

“I heard her order that to her guards,” she confirmed.

“No one saw it happen, but there are creatures from the other side on the loose—not enough to overrun Ostrov Krov, but enough to kill humans here and there. Some vampires, too, who were caught unaware.”

Stephanie scowled. “And Nate will be blamed. I guess it’s no secret to the houses anymore that he is the culprit.”

“The news is out of his involvement. All houses are talking about it.”

“It will spread to the humans outside the castle soon,” Rebekah concluded. “And Winter’s role will be out soon, too.”

Maddox entered the room, sweaty but calm. The frustration thrumming inside him was a different matter.

“I can’t find Master Nathaniel. I tried. But there are cracks on the border, and Nicholas has been in and out of the castle.”

Stephanie growled. “I will kill him.”

“We will all get him,” Matthew assured. “But not just by killing him. If we kill him or the queen now—”

“She’s not my queen,” Stephanie snarled.

“Hmm. If we kill him and Helena now,” Matthew corrected himself, “Then we end up as the murderers in the eyes of Ostrov Krov. We don’t have evidence, and someone else will take over for her. We need to find a way to prove Nate’s and Winter’s innocence. We need to get the pirate back here.”

“Isaiah won’t be enough,” Winter declared, her mind latching on to one word repeatedly. *Proof.*

“What do you mean?” Rebekah asked.

Caught up in the moment, something clicked and had clarity descending over her next—and just like that, Winter knew what she had to do.

“We need concrete evidence, not just word of mouth. Even a blood testament won’t do since it can just be tortured out of anyone.” With all eyes on her, she took a deep breath. “I can get that proof.”

Isaiah arrived on the dock right on schedule, either unaware that things had changed on the island or just not caring. The man held the same swagger as he ordered his men about and shook a human staff’s hand before the two got into conversation and some gesturing towards the stack of boxes on the ship. Maddox and Rebekah crouched beside Winter in between some barrels, the only two who could stay out in the sun like this.

“Are you sure about this?” Rebekah asked, the worry visible on her wrinkled forehead. Other than that, there were bags under her eyes and a hollowness to her cheeks, signaling that the days of waiting were taking its toll on her, too. Winter nodded.

“Yes. There’s no other way. You can’t follow us. The sun’s too strong.”

The woman nodded reluctantly, falling back when Winter and Maddox moved closer to the ship. At their next stop, Maddox spoke.

“There’s an export from House Silva headed for Centro. Usually, it’s done at night, but there have been strict orders from the castle for all imports and exports to be done during the day. The theory is that a few houses are scared and want to flee, so House Hendricks is preventing it.”

“And again, I’m inconsequential,” she mumbled, which suited her just fine. “Tell me when to move.”

“Not yet.” The half-vampire eyed her. “Are you sure you don’t want me to come with you? I can protect you in case you get in trouble.”

“Your protection is better suited here,” she said, waiting until his disapproval abated. “Protect Hilda’s mother. Protect the others on our side. Protect yourself, too. I have the means to take care of myself.”

“We will wait. But if something comes up and you don’t return, we will proceed to plan B.”

“I will return,” she snapped, then paused at her vehemence. Maddox didn’t comment on it, allowing her to get rid of it. When she was calm, she continued watching the dock. Isaiah had disappeared, and another pirate dressed in a more bedazzled attire took over, hollering at the top of his lungs.

“Let’s go,” Maddox said.

She shadowed the man as they approached from the other side and snuck towards where House Silva’s box was... or boxes. She gaped at it.

“That’s it?”

The line of boxes was small and delicate, the outside coated in glitter of different colors. A small opening from a bigger box parted easily at Maddox’s maneuvering.

“It’s a gift to his shifter friends. I’m pretty sure they are the only boxes that will be handled with care and not tossed around.”

A glimpse at the wines inside and the crash of a box on the ship confirmed his guess. She winced, then climbed inside, squishing her body in whatever space was left. Maddox surveyed her, handed her a blanket, and closed the door, leaving her in darkness. But a small slit at the top gave her space to breathe and allowed her to watch as the man glissaded away.

When he was gone, she balled the blanket on her lap as nerves wrung her stomach dry. Her hands snapped for purchase when her box moved, the hollering voice coming closer.

“Git yer asses out of the ground and hurry up! Don’t ya dare drop those boxes, or I will have your heads!”

“Last I checked, I’m not a vampire, and cutting off my head is just a waste of energy,” someone chirped.

“Fine. Then I will rip yer heart out, you scrawny lad!”

There were hoots and laughter, then her box became steady again. She watched the feet passing in and out of her vision, then bit her tongue when her box was lifted yet again and she was placed somewhere dark and quiet. Minutes later, a horn tooted, and the voices from outside drifted away, secluding her further. A door opened and footsteps clicked.

“You shouldn’t jest with Marko like that. He has a terrible temper and will likely go off the rails if you keep angering him.”

*Isaiah*, her mind provided. Her ears perked as the chirping voice from earlier replied.

“It was just a joke. The man is wound too tight and can’t take jokes.”

“There are places to joke around and places where you can’t do that. Ostrov Krov is one of them.”

Winter bit back a snort, unable to connect the solemn advice to the man who had joked his way out of escaping Nate’s chokehold. The other man was skeptical, too.

“It’s not like they can touch us. They need us to provide them with goods.”

“There will be other merchants who can provide them with what they need. We are pirates and the bottom of the barrel in their eyes.”

“Then why are they trading with us?”

“Because we are the best at the bottom of the barrel—and we can get them goods that the merchants can only dream of delivering.”

She shivered, not wanting to know what kind of goods he was talking about. The two kept conversing until she got an inkling that the other pirate had to be a teenager with all his questions, but neither stood in front of her for her to confirm. She heard the other pirate bid Isaiah goodbye and tensed when Isaiah finally approached, looking around. He paused in front of a glittery gold box, opening it and humming.

“Expensive.” There was a click, then chugging sounds. “Terrible.”

But the man continued hovering over the next few boxes and randomly grabbed bottle after bottle. He stopped in front of her box, swearing ripely when he nearly dropped a bottle. She braced, hand clasping a bottle so she could throw it at him.

“Shouldn’t be greedy,” he muttered, then let out a laugh as if the notion amused him thoroughly.

Winter relaxed when he left. She rested her head on the door when the ship finally began to move, the vibration of the engine oddly comforting. Then she straightened when it occurred that with the blood contract still up, she shouldn’t have left Ostrov Krov so easily. Wasn’t that what Nate had said?

*You trying to escape will be the most excruciating pain you will ever experience, so I suggest not putting yourself in that miserable position.*

There was no pain. Her head knew why, but her heart refused to believe it. Her soul crushed into tiny pieces as air rushed out of her lungs, and an image sparked of Nate lying in a pool of his blood. Hot tears streamed down her cheeks, so she wiped them away with her blanket.

“Get it together,” she whispered to herself, willing her sheer refusal to give up to carry her through.

The hours flew by and she slept. She woke up sometime later but stayed in her box, then slept some more when there was nothing to alleviate the pangs of hunger. A rough vibration jerked her awake, her arms snapping out to stop a bottle from crashing into her face just in time. The steady drum of activity outside put her on alert, and it wasn't long before her box was moved again.

With the ocean waves rougher now and swaying the box aggressively, she was dizzy by the time she was dropped at the port, carried to a vehicle, and driven elsewhere. When it stopped in a busy place to drop some wares, Winter scrambled out, stumbled, and managed to get herself out of the way before the drivers spotted her. She glanced back at the box's slightly open door and kept going until she was lost in the crowd.

Centro's main district was large, with stores and buildings lining up the sides and towering to the skies. She exchanged her coins for food and ate along the way until she found a spot to pee. It took her longer to get rid of her dizziness, but the time was much needed as she gathered her bearings and retraced around the island that she had once explored with gusto.

Winter ditched the main district for narrower paths, still filled with more wares and sellers. She ignored restaurants calling her senses, her head mapping the route as she hastened. Her heart pounded in her throat when she spotted the store she had visited before, its signage faded in the sunlight.

"What do you want?" the owner asked as soon as she entered the place, scrutinizing her ordinary dark clothes. Winter smiled pleasantly.

"I'm looking for earth collectibles. Are you selling gadgets by any chance?"



## Chapter 12

Blood filled his vision, a dark red liquid that streamed down his throat and circled him until he was drowning in it. Nate fought it, the need to get out alive pounding in his system. He shouldn't be drowning in blood. He shouldn't be swimming in it or anything at all, and that was the first clue that kicked his senses in and had him sliding out of the nightmare.

Nate woke up to sunlight burning parts of his finger that had somehow managed to leave the cave he was curled in. He hissed and retracted his hand, then scanned the dark spots that looked charred. Pain fluttered there, but a quick fisting determined that it hadn't burned through and through and would be okay soon. His whereabouts were another matter.

"Here we go again," he voiced out, then searched around his cramped space until he found the bag of blood he had collected from the night before. He filled his stomach with small, careful sucks, aware that he couldn't waste a single drop and already thinking of where he would find his next source. More animals? Humans already dead? Rogues?

Speaking of rogues.

A bunch had retired for the day in one of the caves in front of him, bigger and surrounded by large clumps of trees where he was certain that more of them had retreated. With the sun still shining, he took stock of his items in his corner, then buried two more blood bags and a stack of makeshift wooden weapons in a mound of dried grass and dirt. At the sun's last stretch, his body braced in wait.

"One more minute. Or two."

The minute ended, and the sun disappeared. Carefully, he snuck out of his cave and raced to the back, putting enough distance before he spread his wings and heaved himself up. The sky was cloudy and the moon was nowhere in sight, but

his razor-sharp vision allowed him to see the dots of life coming out of their hiding places.

He hovered in the clouds, ignoring the cold and trailing after the larger group as they made their way to a pit. Bones and bodies were piled high, but the rogues dove in without hesitation and swam through it until they found bits of flesh and drops of blood they could still take. Another group went for a mutated deer, but the deer was faster and managed to outrun them. A mutated bear wasn't so lucky, tackled to the ground before he could reach them. Ahead was a tall gate built from wood and made sturdy with bones weaved in between, and beyond that were houses made of the same material where the rejected vampires had made their little community. Some were clumped together, while others had sub-barriers in place, refusing to mingle.

When it looked like the rogues would leave the gate alone again, Nate flew to the other end, where another border was set up. This one hovered up to eternity, a semi-invisible sheen that only vibrated when a great force touched it. His father had kept it sturdy for years, a testament to how well they lived versus how the creatures they had cursed to this place tried to survive.

“How about five loaves of bread in exchange for a day in House Powell's kitchen? Just a tour, and I will be out of your way the next day.”

“Fall in line, girl, and stop flirting already. We don't have all day.”

“Thief! Stop him! Hurry!”

The most interesting thing was how he could hear random voices filtering through, especially those coming from the market. While the regular market talk was comforting, it was the snippets of castle talk that provided him with news of the other side of the island. He settled himself in a spot with more clouds, sifting through the conversation like he had the previous nights.

“I will hit you if you disrespect me like that again. Remember how easily the ranks can change, and this house will no longer be disrespected.”

“Did you hear about the queen? She’s in mourning and won’t come out, so her eldest son has been taking the reins.”

“They are vampires. They are evil. Never trust a single one and keep your head down.”

“If they attack us here again, we won’t have a market left. I wish they got it together.”

“The second son is a killer. He’s the one making this happen. We are doomed.”

There was no mention of what he had made happen, but he was pretty sure that either Nicholas or his mother was pulling the strings on that tidbit. Nate gritted his teeth but stayed to listen to more accounts of how he had murdered his father. He switched areas when a couple of rogues ambled below, then looked up to the sky and sniffed the air. One spotted him and snarled, so he ended up flying further than anticipated until he could land in a barren area where the rocks provided no hiding place. It was darker than the rest and would give him some reprieve—until a shadow blurred before him and made him realize the mistake he had made.

Nate booked it away, then slowed down when no figure followed him. He tried to listen to noises other than the random voices, any sign that could help him identify where the creature had gone.

“There’s a room available. How much do you have?”

“I will sell this to you if you give me double the price.”

“I don’t think the prince did it. It has to be a lie. Maybe his lover killed the king. That’s why they killed her.”

His body stopped moving. The rest of the voices became a blur as his chest squeezed tightly before his heart gave out. His father’s death had broken it in two, but the idea of Winter not making it had it shattering into pieces until there

was nothing left. An image floated of her lifeless body, hacked beyond recognition because that was how it was done—his merciless family not sparing her anything even in death, perhaps even bragging about her murder to the rest of the houses.

Rage bubbled, a froth that coursed out of him. When something charged, he flung his rage into attacking back, startling the rogue before it could even reach out and tackling it to the ground. The rogue stayed down for a good three seconds before rising, but it wasn't up long as Nate shoved it back and punched it repeatedly. Claws swiped on his shoulders, strongarming him into submission, and the two began to roll around in a blur of fists and fangs. Another creature joined in, but they were no match for his wrath, and soon the two were immobile. When a hiss came from behind him, he spun to tackle the next one, then froze when he found a line of rogues hastening their way toward him.

*I love her*, drummed through his mind. And he didn't get to tell her, so focused on exposing his brother that there had been no room for anything else. Now it was too late, and the grief of that snapped his freezing back into motion as he lunged at the throng. Nate didn't know how the fight lasted, but he came out of it half-dead himself, his body working like an automaton as it flew itself out of the madness and to a dead tree for a reprieve. He looked down with eyes half-shut and pain pulsing in his bones, then managed to crawl his way to another cave-like structure before the sun rose—except now they knew where he was because he hadn't been careful about it.

He closed his eyes, willing the world to disappear. His sleep was filled with dreams of blood gurgling from Winter's throat, and he woke up to the sounds of hissing, but now they were accompanied by banging noises. Moonlight streamed in the opening of his cave, allowing him to see the buzz of movement outside. One came charging at him but was yanked back by an unseen force.

*Fight*, his mind screamed, and instinct had him moving before he could even contemplate it. Then he was outside searching for the force...then, gaping at it as stupefaction swelled in his system.

“What are you doing here?”

Maddox glanced at him, then ducked when a rogue leaped for his head. The half-vampire tackled the next one with a swish of a knife—no, sword to the head—and a major sidestepping from all the blood spraying out.

“Risking it all, apparently, with everything that’s running around here. These creatures are vicious. How did you survive?”

“The perks of being special. *You* don’t have that defense.” On cue, another rogue snuck up to Maddox, but Nate was there, kicking it hard before it could touch the man. The two worked together to fight off the rest, managing to create a gap they could escape through as they ran for their lives—literally. When they were a suitable distance away, Nate spread his wings, grabbed Maddox, and flew him off. “How did you find me?”

“It was pretty easy. I followed where all the rogues were lying in wait until the sun came down. Pure luck, too, since I was in this general area. I think you just formed a hate club.”

“Yes, well, I think they hate everybody they encounter.” The rest of the flight was in silence as they roamed around until they found a decent space to land in at Maddox’s insistence. Then Maddox was leading the way further. “Maddox, what are you doing here?”

“I needed to see if you were alive. We were all lying in wait for you and Winter.”

The heart that had been dead pulsed back to life. He grabbed Maddox, stopping the man in his tracks. “Winter is alive?”

“She is. She...oh. Someone talked about her death news?”

“Where is she?”

Maddox’s expression didn’t bode well, and the answer had dread rising. “She left the island to get something and prove your innocence.”

“How long?”

“Five days ago. Running on sixth.” The man hesitated. “I burned your blood pact. I’m not sure if she’s coming back.”

His heart screamed that she was going to, but logic dictated that only the stupid ones did. Winter was smart and knew she would die the minute she stepped foot here again, and there was nothing more he wanted than her safety. Coming to terms with this despite the loneliness that ached in his soul, he nodded.

“All right.”

“Oh, and you apparently released these rogues to the rest of Ostrov Krov and have struck fear among the hearts of the humans.”

So, that was what he had made happen? He growled, imagining a gleeful Nicholas doing the dirty work.

“I will kill him.”

“How about winning those human hearts back, including the houses on your side and those on the fence?”

Nate frowned, unsure what the other man was talking about. They had walked further into territory he hadn’t explored yet, wary of too many rocky terrains with too many potential hiding spaces. He peered at the cracks that seemed to decorate this side of the shimmering wall more, thin at the bottom and thickening into great slashes at the top.

“My father used to keep these secured.”

“The queen doesn’t care. And that can be your starting point. You can reach out while in hiding, hold secret meetings,

and make anonymous speeches. Send announcements without showing yourself. Our proof isn't enough, but making it public might help."

"It's not enough." But Maddox had risked coming here for him—and Maddox wasn't the only one counting on him. "But we work with what we have."

The man scaled a dead tree until he reached a gap wide enough for him to squeeze into.

"Hurry. Before the rogues find this," Maddox said, then was gone in the blink of an eye.

Nate mirrored his path, crouched on a thick branch and surveying his surroundings once more. No creature lay in wait, and his senses weren't pulsating in danger. He braced his body, then shimmied into the crack, feeling the cold edges of the wall touching his skin and shivering from it. When he landed on the other end, the silence in his head disappeared as sirens dinged in warning, alerting him that the safe moment was over.

Maddox was there, held down by guards from the castle with the royal emblem. Beside them stood Nicholas and Matthew, the latter expressionless and the former smirking smugly.

"Hello, brother. Your little lapdog just made our jobs easier. Welcome back to the land of the living."

Maddox was the perfect hostage to ensure Nate wouldn't go for Nicholas's throat, and Nate behaved the whole way back to the castle after being assured that they wouldn't hurt the half-vampire. It was with relief when Maddox's departure towards the prison chambers was supervised by Matthew, who glanced back in subtle apology, stating without words that he had to keep pretending to be on the throne's side. Now Nate could attack his brother, but it proved too late as chains were already

on him, and he was ushered to the throne room for the first time.

It looked the same as it had before, polished and gleaming with crystal chandeliers and a golden chair towering above the rest. The queen sat on it comfortably, garbed in velvet red and a dainty crown encrusted in gemstones. But she wasn't alone, as Nicholas stood on her right and a few house leaders lined up both sides, scrutinizing him on his march to the front.

Helena frowned when he stopped moving—or when they stopped dragging him—concern and pain quivering her mouth. Then she appeared to compose herself.

“You have some nerve trying to escape your punishment when it's not enough for what you have done.”

“You have some nerve sitting there when we both know what happened—”

He choked as one of the guards whipped his chain back until stars exploded in his vision. Nicholas snarled.

“Don't you dare insult the new ruler like that, you filthy murderer. With what you have done, you deserve to be eaten alive! You deserve to be ripped to shreds!”

“There is no need for all this violence, Prince Nicholas,” someone called out from the line of houses. “Isn't that what we are here for?”

Nicholas reined himself in, the perfect image of sober apology and distraught charm. “I apologize. I got carried away. You have to understand that it's still fresh.”

“They are right,” the queen piped in, composed as ever and authoritative. “We must do as we have discussed and let a proper interrogation decide his fate.”

Shock washed over Nate, not expecting that. But the murmured agreement from the crowd had him realizing it hadn't been the queen's decision at all. While the queen continued speaking, he scanned his sides, taking note of the



house leaders nearby and their unreadable faces. Hope flared, but he tucked it in as he was tugged away and the scene changed again.

Some minutes later, he was taken to a different room devoid of sparkly artifice or a throne chair. A scholar sat to the side dressed in dark robes, Nicholas and the house leaders were gone, and Helena stood before him, her eyes lacking the compassion they held earlier. She spoke with cool precision.

“We have gotten Denison’s confession, but it is not enough for the houses. You have caused quite an uproar, my darling, one that cannot be contained unless we get your confession, too. They demand it. Today, scholar Maximus will bear witness to what goes on in this room and provide the truth to them so that peace will finally inhabit this island that you tried so hard to destroy.”

Maximus didn’t say a word, already writing down on his scroll.

“So, what is this now?” Nate intoned, refusing to let his mother take the lead. “Will you torture me to death until I enter a bargain deal with you like Denison did, only for you to kill me in the end—”

Again, his chains were tugged, signaling that the guards were on alert.

“Silence,” Helena said belatedly, glaring at him. “We don’t want your nonsense, only the truth.”

“You already know the truth.”

“Then state it.”

“You killed your husband. You connived with Nicholas.”

“That’s not the truth.”

“You betrayed the crown.”

“Not the truth.”

Again and again, his chains were yanked until his neck was tender, and his legs were trembling from having to kneel abruptly, repeatedly. Then it was switched as the queen began her verbal accusations.

“You murdered the king in cold blood. You let yourself be influenced by your lover who had nothing but greed in her heart.”

“Lies.”

“You killed House Rue and Denison to get rid of the evidence.”

“Lies.”

“You used me. You used all of us because of your ambition to be king.”

“Stop lying, mother.”

It went on and on, switched back and forth until his ears were ringing, and his body was riddled with agony. His head snapped up when he scented blood, and he growled when he spotted a human servant approaching him with her neck exposed and her arms reaching out. Hunger flared for sustenance, but he shoveled it in and scrambled back—only to be kicked forward until the human servant was catching him.

“Be grateful for the kindness we offer,” the queen stated. “Come drink and find it in your heart to tell us the truth.”

He glanced at the scholar, who scribbled the scenario, no doubt painting the queen’s unending show of compassion despite the odds she faced. When he refused to give in and take an ounce of blood, his face was shoved toward the servant’s neck, where blood was already trickling. Nate’s stomach heaved, but he roared and heaved away as far as his chained body could carry him, toppling a few guards along the way. The next few minutes became lost in a haze of legs stomping and kicking him down and someone boldly knocking his head. The stars returned until he was numb from the pain; all he could do was curl there and wish for it to be over.

“Enough!” the queen called out, voice faint through the haze. “What on heavens are you doing, son?”

He opened his mouth to answer, but even making that movement was agonizing. Belatedly, it occurred to him that the last question wasn't meant for him. Helena went on, rattling off in a symphony of irritation and exasperation, forgetting about her composure momentarily. There was an order for the guards to leave, and Nate heard the hammering sounds before he was pinned in place and they were gone. Nicholas's voice floated in, brimming with glee.

“It's too good to pass up, mother. I had to bring her here.”

“They know she's dead. This was a stupid move, son.”

Nate's eyes snapped open, wondering if he was dreaming. Or dead. Or maybe they were talking nonsense. He could make out the scholar still in the corner, more alert as the man peered at the scene ahead while his pen kept wriggling. The queen and the crown prince were standing close, tension in their body language as they got into some heated discussion...but they weren't alone. In Nicholas's hands, held very tightly with sharp nails on her jugular, was Winter, head held high and looking like she had been through hell and back with her torn, dirty clothes and her pale complexion.

His heart stuttered, then beat rapidly. He lunged, but the chains hammered down made movement impossible, and there was nothing he could do but helplessly watch on while Nicholas had her in his grip. Winter didn't look at him, her attention on the pair before she cleared her throat. The queen's head snapped at her, the annoyance redirected.

“You dare to interrupt us?”

Winter cleared her throat. “Your son found me first and made sure I wouldn't be seen by the others. It was surprising to find myself announced dead, but I suppose it works out perfectly.”

Perhaps expecting her to beg and whimper for her life, the pair didn't know what to do with her statement.

Helena's eyes narrowed. "Why is that?"

"I need to talk to you alone. I have valuable information to negotiate."

Nicholas's brows rose, and his fingers tightened. "Let's hear it—"

"Alone," Winter hissed. "It's valuable information, and the queen needs to know first before she decides what to do with it."

Her persistence threw everyone for a loop, and he wished he knew what was going on in her head. But the biggest surprise was the queen stepping back, assessing Winter thoroughly, then squaring her shoulders. Nate's body turned rigid in response.

"Nicholas, will you leave us alone?"

Nicholas scowled, not liking it one bit. "No."

Helena glowered, then flicked a glance in Nate's direction. The lack of compassion had Nate feeling the last spark of hope for his mother die, realizing the woman who had raised him was no longer there.

"It might help us incarcerate your brother faster."

"I don't like it," Nicholas protested.

"We all have to sacrifice things for the crown, my darling," the queen said, giving a pointed look at the scholar. The message was clear: *write that down*. "Maximus, please do not write Winter's name down until this is clarified. I will come back with news, and we will continue getting the truth out."

The woman took over, removing Winter from Nicholas's grasp and holding her less severely but nonetheless still tightly. They passed by Nate, two forms ramrod straight and equally determined. For a second, he feared it would be

the last he would see her without even looking her in the eye...and then, he did look her in the eye when her head turned slightly as if to cough, but it was really to catch his gaze. Ice blue orbs seared into him, fiery with intent and shining with the love he felt in his heart. Then it was gone as she looked away, but one thing was clear. Winter had come back willingly and she had a plan—a mad plan, an unknown plan...a big one.

And Nate could only hope that the plan wouldn't get her killed.

## Chapter 13

Winter thought that being captured by Nicholas had been nerve-wracking, but it was nothing compared to the feeling of having the queen lead her to a space where they were essentially going to be alone. They bypassed the main hall where the guards were, walking a short distance until they reached what appeared to be a private dressing room. Inside, she took note of the fancy garbs hanging in golden closets before the click of the door pulled her back to reality.

*You only have one shot*, was her mind's quiet reminder. So, she threw herself into it.

"Finally. I'm so glad I got you alone."

The relief in her voice was overly dramatic, but she supposed that was how she would have sounded if getting the queen alone was her life's mission. Helena assessed her sharply, scanning every inch and wrinkling her nose, every bit the royalty who looked down on her subject.

"Am I to assume that there is no valuable information?"

This was the part where she would probably die a quick death. Winter braced herself and bowed at the queen, apologetic and embarrassed.

"I wish I had information, your majesty. Unfortunately, even my alert mind couldn't make something up on the go. But I'm just so relieved that it worked."

"What worked?"

"Getting you alone."

"You still haven't told me why you wanted me alone. Did you think you could overpower me?"

Helena frowned, trying to figure her out. Impatience brimmed in the woman's vibe, but so did amusement, as if the very idea of being overpowered by Winter was laughable.

Winter worked with that, shaking her head vigorously and waving her hands up to show that she had no weapon on her.

“No, of course not.”

“I see. Then you wanted to buy some time for Nate. That’s why you are wasting mine here.”

The regal figure blurred. A second later, a hand wrapped around Winter’s neck, holding her in place and ready to lift her off the ground.

“Your majesty, you are mistaken,” Winter blurted out. “I’m on your side!”

She waited for the tight squeeze, but it didn’t come.

“You are?”

“Yes,” she said quickly, refusing to back down now. Winter mustered as much sympathy as she could in her expression. “It must be so hard being under your son’s careful watch. What a monster he is.”

“Which son are you referring to?”

“The one who manipulated this whole situation. The crown prince. It was too shocking at first, and I couldn’t figure it out. He had everyone fooled, but it took me a lot of reflection to finally figure things out.”

Silence. The hand loosened, then disappeared, as Helena stared.

“What are you talking about?”

“He orchestrated everything.”

“Everything?”

When the woman didn’t come for her neck again, Winter was free to move around, pacing the room as if she couldn’t quite contain her energy. She gestured wildly, half-crazed, and let it all gush out.

“Everything,” she confirmed. “Let’s both not kid ourselves since it’s just us here. You can search the room

yourself if you want.”

“Don’t order me around, you fool. I know we are alone. And speak faster if you don’t want to lose your life.”

“I know he killed the king, not Nathaniel. I know he shifted the blame on us by eliminating all witnesses. But instead of taking the crown, he gave it to you, because he understands how the kingdom works and knows more houses will side with you. When he found out we were close to discovering the truth, he put his plan into motion faster and let you take all the credit.”

A stunned flash seized Helena’s vibe before she schooled it into coolness.

“Oh?”

“You must have been so smothered from all that he has been forcing you to do and needed a moment of reprieve. It must be so hard to take one son’s side while your other son suffers, but there’s nothing you can do because there’s no more proof.”

“You think I had nothing to do with this?” Helena clarified, visibly mystified.

“No. You are stuck and helpless.”

“I am the queen. I am not helpless.”

“But you are still stuck,” Winter insisted. Anxiety formed inside her as the woman slowly approached her, a stalking that had more to do with being genuinely curious about what she had to say than giving her a chance. “And there has to be a way that I can help you.”

At that, Helena blinked. Then the woman laughed, a soft, tinkling sound made for dainty princesses or vibrant queens who had kind, golden hearts. Not villains.

“What if I tell you that I’m the one who did it?”

Winter’s heart pounded, and it took everything inside her to will it down to submission and not react with triumph.



Instead, she shook her head again, the picture of persistent disbelief.

“I don’t believe that you have the guts to do any of it,” she said. “You are too soft to get your hands dirty, so it has to be your son. He’s the mastermind. He’s stronger. More powerful.”

“He’s not.”

Winter let her eyes widen. “Oh.”

“Do you get it now?”

“Yes. Oh, I’m so sorry.” She bowed again to confuse the woman. “I just embarrassed you, and I didn’t mean to. You don’t want people to know that you are weak, even me. But don’t worry, your majesty, because it won’t get out. I promise I won’t let anyone in on this secret. No one has to know about this weakness.”

Pity coated her tone, which echoed towards the queen. For the nth time, Winter felt a spark of fear for her life as Helena rose to her full height until they were inches from each other. In her face, Helena sneered, quaking with insult.

“He’s not stronger or more powerful. It’s all me. I orchestrated everything, you little sap. I’m the mastermind, not my reckless son. It takes a brilliant mind to make everything believable, and that brilliant mind is all mine.”

Winter pretended confusion. “I don’t understand.”

The silence drove her crazy. But it was the next words that sent a chill down her bones as Helena detailed everything that she had done, from ordering the crown prince to carry out her orders to killing the king herself. The power in her voice was insane, and when she was done, Winter was trembling, too, and gasping as she clutched her chest.

“You did it?” she whispered, dazed. “You’re not innocent?”

“No. And I refuse to let a simpleton like you believe otherwise.”

Bingo.

*The royal family has an ego. It's the driving force that provides them the drive to run Ostrov Krov smoothly, with no one protesting a single thing. They hold the people with authority and will never let their perfect image be tarnished, no matter what. Ostrov Krov is seen as a threat by the rest of the Otherworld because that's how the royal family weaved it. They are dangerous, but their ego gives an added layer to make sure that everyone knows they are also formidable.*

The melodic voice ascended, then faded. Winter had banked on that ego, but she didn't think she would get to this point. Panic fluttered at what came next, but sheer will had her kneeling in front of the woman with a gasp.

"I thought...I never imagined...oh, no." Another gasp, then, "Please, just kill me now. End it quickly. I can't bear the thought of Nate witnessing my death, or any of the humans witnessing it, too. It will hurt them...it will hurt him. I love him. Please don't let him see me die."

She trembled for effect, her voice quivering with fear. She waited for the eventual wave of glee to come forth, so similar to her older son's vibe that the next words were no longer surprising.

"On the contrary, I think a public trial works perfectly for the likes of you. But how about a bargain?"

"What bargain?"

"Confess. If you truly love my son, make everyone believe it was you. Then I will spare him."

Her arms strained against the chains put on her, decidedly thinner than the ones on Nate. They stood together in the throne hall where they had been brought back, dragged to the huge balcony so that they could face the crowd of humans that had gathered below, too, risking the darkness to watch the spectacle. The house leaders were back in line while their

families stood in dozens of balconies scattered around the castle, watching as eagerly as the humans. The rest were either outside the double doors or down below, waiting with the humans in a separate corner.

Longing hit her at Nate's closeness, and she could sense it on him, too, when he leaned just a little bit closer. But he was a welcome reprieve from all the different vibes bouncing off her, so she touched her shoulder to his, allowing herself that comfort. She wished she could tell him things. She wished she could confess how much she loved him and how everything was going to be all right, but there was no room for those words as the trial began, and the queen watched her the whole time.

“Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming on such short notice. I commend everyone's order despite the chaos we have been thrown into upon the king's death and rest assured, the justice that we have been seeking out endlessly in the past few days will be served. Let me start with the topic that I'm sure everyone is curious about: Winter Willow.”

Helena pointed in her direction. Again, Nicholas was beside her, pulsing with curiosity and the same impatience that his mother had possessed at the lack of answers. There was more of that going around with the crowd, and her gaze latched on to Matthew, who stood among them.

“We have assumed the death of Nathaniel's fiancé and were very surprised when she came back, but even more so with the news that she bears. It's so shocking that I advise you all to brace yourselves. Winter?”

Winter returned her attention to the queen. “Yes?”

“Please repeat what you told me in our private meeting. Repeat your confession to our kind leaders and the people gathered below. Reveal the truth.”

Just like that, all eyes were on her, an unbearable heaviness that weighed down her soul. She pushed past it, rolling her shoulders against it and the heavy chains, then

counting to ten in her head to calm herself down. She opened her mouth.

The doors slammed open before she could begin speaking. Footsteps stomped forward with loud, uneven thuds before a figure stumbled into view, then giggled incessantly. Hazy green eyes looked around before realizing that she had just interrupted an important moment, which made Nicola cringe hard and whirl to face the queen.

“Nicola—” Nicholas hissed in anger.

“Mother, I’m so sorry,” Nicola said, ignoring her brother. “I was told we all needed to come, and I just got the message. You see, I was reading up in the library to find evidence and lost track of time. It gets boring in there when there’s nothing but books to keep one company, so I got carried away.”

No one could have misconstrued what carried away meant. Nicholas was the first to voice it out, disgusted.

“Are you drunk?”

“As I said, I got carried away.”

“Carried away? Are you serious? You—”

“Silence, both of you.” Helena’s voice was like thunder in the halls, silencing everyone. “Nicola, you bring disgrace to our family, but that will be dealt with, too. Stand aside while we continue this trial.”

“What trial? What—” Again, Nicola whirled, then gasped as she latched on to the sight of the chains. “Brother! Winter! Oh, my, goodness.”

“Nicola...” It was Nicholas again, this time sounding more controlled, almost cajoling. When Nicola looked up at him, he smiled and gave an encouraging nod. She blinked.

“Yes, yes, I’m sorry. I didn’t realize what this was.” She cleared her throat, sounding so morose and regretful. “Mother, can I please apologize to the crowd first? If it would not be too much to ask. I am deeply regretful of my actions.”

Silence.

“Very well.”

Nicola beamed at her chance, then struggled to sober up and bow down. But she managed, spreading a murmur over the crowd.

“I’m very sorry, house leaders and people of Ostrov Krov...that it took me a while to get to the bottom of this. But now I have the answers that you are looking for.”

Light blasted a wall in the hall, then a flat area outside the castle. The same image formed on the two spaces, starting when the queen had closed the door to the private dressing room. Like magic, the rest of the scene unfolded to where Winter goaded her until the queen revealed her confession, bit by dirty bit. It was interwoven with Winter recording her journey upon procuring the video camera, recording when the seller explained where the device was from and how it worked—with multiple confirmations from other merchants. The entire video wasn’t overly long, ending with Helena’s sweet, smug words.

“Confess. If you truly love my son, make everyone believe it was you. Then I will spare him.”

The murmur turned into a hush, eerie and powerful. Shock glissaded at Winter from all directions, but it was a time bomb ticking and coming to an end. She froze when that snap came, a shattering of movement, voices, vibes—everything—turning order into chaos. Her gaze strayed to the queen, no longer as put-together as the woman seemed to realize that she had been cornered. For the first time, the panic was there, then a great surge of anger as those soft eyes hardened and flicked towards Winter.

*You trapped me*, they seemed to say.

“Yes,” Winter mouthed, unable to resist.

The fury slammed into her hard, like a physical punch. The next few seconds were a blur as the energies around her turned haywire, her system unable to take it and shutting down

in reaction. When she managed to return to awareness, Nate had hauled his body to cover hers, blocking whatever attack was coming, but she didn't feel it hit him.

“Nate,” she called out, anyway, unable to hear her voice through the cacophony. But she felt his hand clasp hers and heard his voice whispering in her soul.

“I'm here.”

The chains were taken off them, and it dawned that someone was helping them. It also dawned that there were lesser attacks than she had anticipated and more house leaders forming a circle to protect them, holding off whatever aggression was thrown their way. Unable to do anything in the hum of power, she peered down and made a sound when she discovered that there was restlessness below, too, and houses banding together to hold off guards. But there was something else.

“Rogues!” she screamed. “Rogues below!”

In the throng of people fighting, how she spotted Nicholas was a miracle. She shouted his name, too, endlessly and repeatedly, until her voice was hoarse and her throat was sore. It didn't matter because someone heard, and soon the vampire who had been sneaking to make his escape was yanked back with precision and held down with intention. Nicholas howled, refusing to stay down until Nicola flew into the grounds, an angel of vengeance.

Winter gawked as she beat her brother down into submission, then directed the rest of the men to hold the rogues off and seal the border. She watched as in the hall, the queen was captured, too, but was ballsier in rallying her loyal followers.

“Kill them all! Help me escape!”

It worked but not for long as a majority of the vampires wrestled them into submission. Refusing to bend over despite the defeated vibe beating wildly, Winter felt the woman's next move before it could even happen and clutched Nate as tightly

as she could, understanding how much this next part would hurt.

On a rampage, Helena grabbed heads and yanked them out of necks out of sheer spite and willpower. Then she ripped her heart out, dying a glorious death but taking as many bodies as the woman could with her.

## Chapter 14

“How are you holding up?”

The question had been repeated for as long as Nate could remember, asked by different parties from powerful houses down to the servants in his house who had survived, including Maddox. But Winter asking felt like a blanket wrapping around him because, with her, he knew there would be no holds barred.

“I’m doing all right. A bit shitty because Nicholas decided he’s not done with his lies and is trying to cause trouble in the prison chambers. It’s not working, but it’s making me wonder if I made the right decision.”

She tilted her head, eyes as watchful as always as she walked to his side. He had his arms around her waist before she even stopped walking, drawing in her warmth as he perused her. The bruises were gone, and she looked like she had a few good nights of rest. That was a balm, too, after the days of worry and heartbreak.

“Killing him would have been the right thing, but it wouldn’t have been you,” she concluded after a while, her gaze on the horizon. They stood on the balcony overlooking the market and the front of the castle, now at peace after the border had been resealed. “It wouldn’t have proved a point, not when the mastermind to your father’s murder is already dead, and you are not one to do things just for the sake of doing it. You wouldn’t kill him just to be petty.”

“Maybe I want to kill him for putting his hands on you.” His fingers grazed her neck, feathering over where the wounds once were. She arched, letting him have a better view, and shook her head.

“You won’t. Everything is as it should be all because you wouldn’t rest until you found the answers and a solution for Ostrov Krov.”



“Yet you and my friends were the ones who made it happen. What was that device called again?”

She smiled in exasperation, then began to talk about the video camera with her eyes lit up and her face radiating joy—and really, that was the only reason he had even asked in the first place, considering he already knew what the device was called. Nate witnessed her in her element as she listed its pros and cons, then gushed over it like it was her love child.

“I sold the one I brought to the Otherworld during my first land in Centro because I needed the gold to get away from some Fae.”

“I’m sure you did.”

“But oh, it’s a wondrous thing. I think you should have it installed in specific areas around the castle to ensure that the new rules you put up will be followed accordingly.”

“Yes, that’s a good idea,” he said, not mentioning that he had already held a meeting with Isaiah to finalize a huge order of said devices. It would be better as a surprise so he could watch her face light up once more.

“It will make your lives easier. No more of that he said she said stuff and blood oaths easily manipulated. A captured and recorded video has everything you can ever dream of: clarity, function, and second by second of clear-cut proof should you ever need it. No one will ever question the truth again. It will make the humans’ lives easier, too.”

“I’m getting jealous, my love, of how much you are praising that little thing,” he teased.

She huffed. “That little thing, as you put it, helped you achieve what you have now.”

“Us,” he corrected, tilting her head so he could gaze into glacier blue eyes. They weren’t cool but fiery, passion glimmering on the surface. Unable to resist it, he leaned in to kiss her cheek, then lowered his lips so he could meet hers and indulge a bit.

In this aspect, things hadn't changed as she met the kiss fully with openness and enough heat to burn them both. They sank into it, the world fading as she became the only anchor he needed. He tasted her hunger and matched it with his. Unable to get enough, he leaned in further and deepened the contact until he was swept away in a rush of pleasure and something distinctly Winter.

Dizzy, it took him a long time to break the contact, and even then, he had to hold on to the balcony railing to keep himself steady. She held on to him, hands fluttering up his chest before resting on his shoulders, body molded so sweetly to his that he couldn't help but groan. When she took a deep, shaky inhale and pushed those tits tighter against him, he was ready to utter an oath.

“Winter, my love, as much as I want to carry you to bed right now and make the longest, sweetest love to every inch of your body—”

Her breath hitched, the very idea as arousing to her as it was to him.

“I have a meeting to attend,” he finished regretfully. In his head, he was already swearing a thousand gods about having a meeting he needed to attend, even if it was a very crucial one. He sighed, embracing her to make up for what they couldn't do, and placed another kiss on her forehead. “Perhaps I could try to get out of it earlier....”

“No.”

Her voice was firm and decided. This time, it was Winter who broke away from his grasp, looking at him with pleading eyes underlined with steel. “Attend that meeting. Address your people. Make yourself known. Do it so you won't regret it. You must, Nate.”

“I know. I must.”

After a few more kisses and a little bit more hugging, they finally parted ways, but with Maddox keeping a watch on her door as always—a precaution that had become a natural

routine between him and the original people he had trusted. Many more members were added to that group after the video revelation, so much more than he had banked on, and showing up today was yet another way to convey his gratitude and instill that yes, he would be there for them, too. He would be present, would answer questions, and would take into account what every house had to say, even the least powerful one.

He would make decisions that were best for Ostrov Krov as a whole, but now it wouldn't just be for the vampires but the other creatures that made up the island.

“Good evening, fellow leaders and house,” he greeted upon entering the room, a large, dome-like area where they could seat themselves in rows upon rows while he stood at the center podium. “Thank you for coming on such short notice. Shall we start?”

It lasted hours, as he expected it would. He longed for Winter in most of those hours but still managed to get his act together and be in the moment, especially when arguments broke out. While those happened, Nate paid attention to one person the most, observing the man stand up and intervene calmly but firmly.

“Josephine, I beg your pardon, but I hardly think that's necessary. We are a united kingdom belonging to one island, not different factions. Our houses mean we have the freedom within our households to function as we deem necessary, not to separate us when that's the last thing we need now.”

Josephine Umbert lifted her chin but didn't protest the words. The other party in the argument, Andres Santiago, braced and listened.

“Andres, I agree with you, but perhaps we should think over our words. There has been so much tension between us, especially with the queen's and Nicholas's lies, and it would be best if we treat each other more respectfully. We have lost so much and are still in mourning for the houses that have betrayed us and given up on our island, blinded by the false truth. Please, can you kindly state your point again?”

It worked, as Andres restated his opinion but was gentler about it, helping Josephine relax until she reluctantly agreed. There were more moments, all of which Nate allowed to go longer than necessary—and all of which put Matthew Chatterley to light as he played mediator between contrasting parties, made more sense than most, and declared his points without forcing them.

At the last stretch, everyone had voiced out their opinions, and it was Nate's turn. He let the moment of silence wash over the room before he finally spoke.

“The market is a much better place now thanks to our rules. So are the castle and its servants. We can all see the benefits of what our previous rulers tried to implement, and this time, we need to stick to it so what happened with the previous queen won't happen again.”

He let the murmurs of agreement vibrate around the room, too, noting reluctance in some but a willingness to let it slide. He cleared his throat.

“I have a new rule, and it's probably the last one I will make in a while. I promise it will help, and you can all vote on it. From now on, the royal house can decide to give up its crown and nominate which house can be the next in line. The rest of the houses can nominate, too, and take their vote. That new line will take over until they decide who is the next best candidate. Let's discuss.”

It caused an uproar, but not as much as anticipated as Nate explained how this democracy was actually a good practice to provide the best leader for a kingdom consistently, instead of just following a bloodline. He thought of Winter once more, who had mentioned how it worked for her original home, and sent a silent thank you her way as minds opened and the discussion began.

A few hours later, Matthew Chatterley was voted the new king by a majority vote, and a ceremony was scheduled for the official induction. Just like that, House Hendricks was no longer in line for the crown, and Nate was no longer the

kingdom's future king—and now he had all the freedom in the world to do as he wanted.

And there was only one thing he wanted.

Finding Winter missing from the room and most of her favorite castle areas sent him a mini heart attack, but Maddox's cryptic tracks had Nate shadowing the places they went to. The second to last stop was at House Silva, where Hughes gave him a puzzled look.

“Did we have a meeting, your highness?”

“There is no need to call me that, Hughes.”

Hughes smirked. “You are still the king until the ceremony. Let people call you that in the meantime.”

Nate hid a smile, then looked around, trying to figure out what Winter would have visited here for. A glint entered Hughes's features, light with humor. Then the man cleared his throat.

“Your fiancé is a brave one for exploring the castle and venturing here, knowing I live very far away from House Hendricks.”

“Yes, she is.”

“She's even braver for asking me the schedule of incoming and outgoing shipments.”

Nate stared at the man as it finally clicked. “Thank you. Have a good night.”

He got out of there and searched for the nearest common balcony, then climbed up and heaved his way to the skies. It didn't take him long to find her when he already knew where to look. Winter and his sister stood by the docks, laughing over something before Nicola hollered at the top of her lungs and got a few dock workers scrambling to do her

bidding. He landed beside Maddox, who glanced at him and shrugged.

“They wanted to play while the big bosses were playing, too.”

“My sister’s words, I presume.”

“That’s right, brother,” Nicola chirped, already beaming beside him. “Just a quick stroll before I go out with the scholars again.”

“Another one?”

“There can never be enough research,” she quipped. “And I can’t wait to go wild, now that I’m no longer related to the king of the island.”

There was a touch of sadness visible in her smoky green eyes, but overall, Nicola didn’t regret her actions and chose to side with him down to his last decision. The grand statement was punctuated with a grand poof before she turned into a bat and was frolicking to the skies. Nate sighed, lips quirking. Then he waved Maddox off with a nod.

Winter was observing the flying bat when he walked to her side, the fascination written on her face. “Wow.”

“Neat trick?”

“Neater than yours.”

That had him grinning before he got right onto it.

“You are leaving. That’s why you wanted to know shipment schedules. It’s a good alternative to just diving in the ocean and jumping coordinates to the next island.”

“Oh.” She looked taken aback but recovered quickly. “I didn’t think about it yet. I just...wanted to check. To scout things. I still want to explore the Otherworld—not that I don’t like it here, especially with how things have turned out, but...”

A lot of them still hadn’t gotten over their prejudice. Or the idea that it was Winter who had saved the day when

they could easily put Nate in the role of the hero—because he was one of them and she wasn't.

The unsaid words galled, but it was the truth he couldn't walk away from. So, he took her hand.

“How about in a week or so?”

“What?”

This time, Winter fully gaped at him. Hurt formed in her expression, misunderstanding completely, and mortification hit him hard before he rushed through the rest.

“I gave up the crown. House Hendricks is no longer in line, and Nic and I are happy about it. We are free. Matthew will be a good king. It's a long story, but,” he took a deep breath, heart galloping fast and mind a relentless roar. He needed that breath to calm down for the most important part. “I don't want it. This is still my home, and our house will help him out, but most of my years were spent settling for that life. I don't want to settle. I want you. I love you. You made me see better, feel better, and want better. But I don't want to keep you here, either, knowing where your happiness lies. So, what I meant was that in a week or so, after Matthew's official induction, I'm free. Really free. I can go with you. We can explore together. That is, if you will have me—”

His statement ended with an oof when she came to him, tight arms banding around him until his nerves dissipated. He didn't even know there were nerves, but now all he felt was peace.

“My happiness lies with you,” she whispered as if the hug didn't make that clear. Then she punctuated her point even further with a kiss that warmed him up all over. “And what I meant by that is...”

“Yes. You meant yes.” He grinned, kissing her back.

“Big yes.”

A ship honked somewhere in the sky, signaling its arrival. Two human workers started arguing with each other,

shouting in the distance. Fluttering sounds flitted by, too, his sister in bat form, probably spying on them before moving on.

And nothing could have been more perfect.