



Sunlight

Blood Magic Book Four
L.H. COSWAY

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By L.H. Cosway

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PLAYLIST

To listen to L.H. Cosway's playlist for *Sunlight*, go [HERE](#).

Author's Note

Dear readers,

Thank you so much for taking this journey with me and letting these characters into your hearts. When I began writing this book, I knew that if I wrote it only from Tegan's point of view there would be something vital missing. From the very beginning, Finn has been a character whose voice came naturally to me, and I wanted to let him have his say and find happiness. In *Sunlight* that's exactly what he gets. I won't say anything more, because I don't want to spoil any surprises, but I sincerely hope you all enjoy the final installment in the series.

Yours always,

L.H. Cosway.

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*“Love shook my heart
Like the wind on the mountain
rushing over the oak trees.”*

Sappho.

1.

Tegan

My view of reality was foggy.

Ethan stood on the edge of the roof, his body shimmering with a silvery glow. Hundreds of vampires on the street below bowed to him as though he was a miracle made into flesh.

My magic showed me a vision of the entire city, where it seemed like every vampire had sensed Ethan's change into this indestructible, extraordinary being. No matter where they were, they bowed. Some in fear, others in awe.

The blood that rushed through his system wasn't merely his, but mine, too. And I felt his power like a physical pulse. The black chaos mist retreated from the humans, called away by its master, Theodore. I suspected he'd gone to regroup, laying low until he could figure out how to approach this turn of events.

Ethan's strong, familiar voice shouted orders, commanding the vampires to cease their violence on the human population. His Romanian accent was more dominant than it had been before; the modern cadence less evident.

The vampires stood to attention, taking his orders with renewed enthusiasm, their eyes staring up at him in amazement, like he was the ruler they'd been waiting for all this time. Gone were the days of the Herringtons, of Jeremy Whitfield and his wars. A new era had begun, and the possibilities were endless.

I was slumped weakly over the edge of the building, staring down at the vampires who now organised themselves into groups as they cleared away the dead bodies and carnage that had drowned the city in a sea of blood and mess.

I wondered in horror just how many innocent people were killed tonight.

Then, arms as hard as steel wrapped around me and lifted me, and my dizzy head sank into the crook of Ethan's neck, my safe place. My energy was vastly depleted from blood loss. He started to move at vampire speed, faster even than before. I couldn't handle the whooshing colours, and I slipped in and out of consciousness.

Then I slept.

When I woke up my head and my eyes felt sore. It was like I'd been asleep for days. I lay naked on a bed that wasn't my own, and a cool Egyptian cotton sheet covered my body as I stretched out my aching limbs.

The windows were wide open, and morning light shone into the room. I looked around, recognising Ethan's bedroom in his house on the south side of the river. The house Whitfield had exiled him from.

I sat up, and the sheet fell to my waist. Ethan was lounging in his armchair by the bookshelves in front of a window. His eyes were closed, and he held his serene face up to the sun. The soft, golden light cast his features in a peaceful glow. I'd never seen him look so at ease.

I repeat, he was sitting *in the sun*, enjoying its warmth without any concern of getting sick.

The events that led to my being here rushed through my head, and I gasped. Ethan's eyes flashed open when he heard my sharp intake of breath. *Oh wow*. They were incredible. Deep gold edged in silver. His blond hair shimmered even more so now, and his olive skin was even more flawless. He stared at me intensely, and for a second, I wondered whether or not I was safe, whether or not he was still Ethan, or *something* else.

"Am I safe?" I whispered, and he tilted his head questioningly in response.

"Are you *safe*?" he repeated back at me, his accent doing all sorts of hot things to my insides.

A long stretch of silence elapsed. I pulled the sheet up to cover my chest.

"Well, am I?" I asked uneasily.

"*Lumina mea*, you are safer than you've ever been. Do not cover yourself."

I blushed and let the sheet drop again. Ethan stood from his chair and walked toward me. He sat at the end of the bed and ran his hand over the fabric of the sheet.

"How long have I been out?"

"About a day," he answered, not lifting his eyes from the sheet. "I imagine you needed the rest to recuperate from the blood loss."

"You're probably right. My muscles are all sore." I stretched one arm up over my head and then the other. "What happened while I was sleeping? Where is everyone?"

A look of frustration entered his gaze. "I've not yet located the others. I

believe they fear I've changed into a monster and are in hiding.”

“Oh. And how do you feel?” I asked.

“I feel incredible. You have no idea the gift you've given me,” he replied earnestly, his eyes practically glittering.

I rubbed my arm, hesitating a moment before I spoke, “Pamphrock once mentioned that no one knew how much True Power blood it took to strengthen a vampire. It's believed that too much might cause you to decline.”

Ethan's features turned thoughtful. “I don't believe I drank too much. I'm stronger than I've ever been and other vampires sense my power, but I don't anticipate any decline,” he said and relief filled me.

“You have no idea how good it is to hear that. I'd been so worried...”

“Do not worry for me. I've never felt better. Vampires have been queuing up down the street waiting to speak with me, to pledge their allegiance, but I haven't opened my doors to any of them. They left at daybreak, and I went outside in the sun, something I have not been able to do in my entire life. The beauty ...” he trailed off, emitting a long sigh. “It's devastating. This is an unimaginable gift, Tegan. I can hardly describe it.” There was a pause as he took me in. “You look pale. I want you to take some of my blood. It will restore your strength.”

My mouth watered at the prospect, but I shook my head. “I shouldn't.”

He moved across the bed with warp-like speed, hovering over me. The air thickened, and my breathing grew laboured as my eyes roamed his chiselled torso. He wore nothing but a pair of light denim jeans.

“Your accent sounds thicker,” I commented to distract myself from his perfect body. “Why is that?”

“I've changed the way I speak over the years to acclimate to the times I live in. Now that I am transformed, I no longer feel the need to disguise my true self.”

“Oh.”

“You once told me you couldn't resist my Romanian accent,” he said in a low voice, bringing his hand up to run his knuckles along my jaw.

“I can't. It's very, um, nice,” I replied as he leaned closer.

“Where would you like to drink from this time?”

“I really shouldn't.”

“Yes, you should. I took from you, and now I want to return the favour. Choose a spot, Tegan.”

My eyes flickered to the masculine line of his throat. I really should try to resist, but I was too weak. I wanted the high too much. Besides, this could be the very last time. I'd go cold turkey after this. "Your neck," I answered quietly, feeling a little shy.

He smiled in approval. "Good choice."

My attention was drawn to the thumbnail of his right hand, which had grown to a sharp, blade-like point. "Is that one of the changes of your transformation?" I asked curiously.

"Yes. I've been experimenting a little, and seemingly, this nail is the only thing that can cut through my skin."

My eyes widened at that.

Using the nail, he sliced a thin line across the hollow of his neck. I could practically smell his blood as a trickle seeped out. It was no longer its usual colour; instead, it was now a silvery red. I licked my lips and brought my hands up to clasp his shoulders. He picked me up effortlessly and sat me astride his lap, fully naked.

Moments later my lips were on his skin, and I was gulping down the sweet nectar that ran through his veins. I practically orgasmed just from the taste of it.

Ethan groaned loudly, and his hands moved down my spine with delicious pressure. I continued sucking his blood into my mouth, my body coming alive with it. It slid down my throat like liquid magic, igniting everything it touched.

I moaned softly, clutching him to me. He felt powerful, addictive, *alive*.

Ethan slipped his hand between my legs, fingers plunging inside me. My sharp cry was muffled as I continued to drink.

"You are exquisite," he whispered to me. "You are my queen. Always."

His fingers pumped in and out of me fast, faster than I would have thought possible. The pleasure was too much, and I released his neck, falling back into the pillows and writhing against him. His eyes consumed me, taking in every part of me, my every reaction. With his other hand, he smeared his blood across my lips, and his eyes glittered at the sight.

"Oh, God, come closer," I mumbled, reaching for the waistband of his jeans.

He did as I asked, allowing me to lower his pants. His erection sprang free, and he positioned himself at my entrance. Foreign words tumbled from his lips. I closed my eyes, letting their deep vibrations shimmer through me.

Agonisingly slowly, he filled me. No ordinary man could tease me with such slowness, such attention to detail. He bent over me and sucked my nipple into his mouth, his tongue flicking over it in a fast, inhuman rhythm, like the wings of a butterfly.

My head spun with his blood in me—not just regular vampire blood, which was quite the high, but *true power* vampire blood. Everything in my line of sight sparkled. Psychedelic colours washed away the room, the house, my corporeal form, until I became an entity solely made to be pleased, to *feel*.

What was it that the Epicureans used to say? Pleasure is the highest good?

Well, if that was the case then I was being really, *really* good right now.

Ethan fisted my hair with his hand, pulling my neck back as his hard length sank into me again. He licked a line directly from the base of my throat to the hollow behind my ear.

“Whatever you want, my love, ask for it. I’m going to fuck you until you feel how much you mean to me; until you understand the gift you have given me, you beautiful, fragile, wonderful little thing,” he mumbled into my skin, his arm tightening around my stomach. I felt so small within his hold.

Sweat glistened on his skin as he made love to me, and even that smelled incredible.

Silver clouded my vision. All I could see was the core of him, and I was intrinsically drawn to it. I never thought I’d see the day when Ethan and I would fuck so freely under the light of the morning sun. It streamed through the window, and I reached out, touching a ray as though it was a tangible thing.

Ethan gripped my chin as he continued to thrust in and out of me. “The vampires in this city want me to be their ruler,” he breathed. “But all I care about is being yours.”

The intensity of his words was too much, and my eyes fluttered closed.

“Don’t look away,” he pleaded. “I need to see your bottomless blue eyes as I fill you.”

Meeting his gaze once more, I didn’t look away.

Finn

Holy Mary mother of *God*, she’s really gone and done it now. I always

thought Tegan had a reckless streak, but that was putting it mildly. I didn't think there was a single word in the English language to describe this madness. Nobody with half a brain would consider it a viable option to allow that bloodsucker to drink from her. And yet, there he stood, undeniably changed.

Was she even still alive? Did he drink her dry, or take just enough to transform?

Now, I understood this was a do or die situation. We were outnumbered as fuck, for a start. But seriously, there was no coming back from this. We all stared up at Cristescu from below, the entire vampire population of the city bowing down to him like he was some sort of effing High King of the Damned.

Relief washed over me when I spotted Tegan slumped weakly over the edge of the building, staring at him, too. She didn't look too fresh, but at least she wasn't dead.

Cristescu roared, and every fibre of me was repelled by the sound. I made eye contact with Gabriel first. Like me, my friend knew exactly what had gone down on that roof. In private he'd often spoken to me of his fears about Tegan. He worried that one day some power-hungry vampire would get his hands on her blood and everything would change. Well, now it had happened. Only I didn't know if Tegan volunteered herself or if he forced her.

The idea of him forcing her made me really bloody angry. The disappointment I'd felt when she told me she'd slept with him rose to the surface, but I pushed it back down. She chose *him*. There was nothing I could do to make myself feel better other than try to salvage what was left of my wounded pride.

"We have to get out of here," Gabriel said urgently, holding Alvie to him.

"You're right. Let's make a move while the vamps are distracted, eh?" I suggested, nodding to Delilah and Ira, who stood by her side in his animal form. That Lucas fella was bowing down just like the rest of the bloodsuckers.

Delilah looked shaken to her core, her pale face staring up at her brother in stunned silence.

"Delilah," I called for her attention. "We have to go now."

Ira whined and nipped at her hand. She finally pulled herself out of her

shock and nodded, wrapping her arms around herself. She tried to get Lucas's attention, but there was no breaking him out of his trance. Finally, she gave up and followed us down the ladder and back out onto the street.

Dead and unconscious human bodies filled the pathways. The five of us walked close together, dodging the bowing vamps. We sped up to a slow jog, needing to get as far away as possible before Cristescu called them to action. Delilah might be his sister, but he was no fan of the rest of us—me especially. Who knew what kind of plans he might be concocting with his newfound power.

The city was a wasteland. I suspected lots of people were hiding behind locked doors and windows, too frightened to venture outside.

Once we were clear of the vamps, I let out a long breath. We were close to the more residential areas now, which looked completely untouched by the chaos. The quiet, peaceful streets felt almost unreal after the madness we'd just been through.

Gabriel pulled Alvie close to him, his arm tight around his narrow shoulders. Ira rubbed his snout against Delilah's hip, and she let her hand drift through his thick fur. All of a sudden, I felt decidedly alone. No one cared about comforting me.

Oh well, fuck that shit. I'd been alone since my mother and sister died. Some things never changed. A brief image of sleeping in the same bed as Tegan flashed in my head, along with the feeling of companionship and warmth it had given me. I missed that fleeting period, where I thought something more might develop between us, but it wasn't to be.

Okay, I needed to stop feeling sorry for myself. Yeah, I fancied her, perhaps even had a few mushy sentiments towards her. But it wasn't like she was the only woman in the world.

Once we reached the outskirts of the city, I decided to start looking for some form of transportation. Walking wasn't going to get us very far. A few minutes later, I spied an abandoned minivan by the side of the road. The doors were open, and the keys were dangling from the ignition. Too good to be true, right?

Wrong.

There were several dead bodies littered on the ground outside of it. By the looks of things, they were driven mad by the chaos mist and killed each other. I stood over a bloated middle-aged bloke with shaggy red hair, his lifeless head hanging to one side. With the toe of my boot, I nudged his shirt

collar down, checking his neck for fang marks. None.

My suspicions were right. These poor sods killed each other.

“Looks like we’ve found a ride,” I told Gabriel with a morbid grin.

He scratched his head, not looking too thrilled about the prospect of taking some dead people’s car. All the same, he came and helped me lift the body out of the driver’s seat. The vehicle reeked of blood, but in my line of work, I was used to it.

Checking the dash, I saw that the tank was three-quarters full. Handy. I slid in and turned the key in the ignition, the engine roaring to life. Sticking my head out the window, I called, “Hop in boys and girls, we’re off for a picnic.”

Delilah gave me an irritable look. “You always have to be such a fucking piss taker,” she muttered, slipping into one of the back seats with Ira. “Now’s really not the time.”

“I won’t let your brother take the shine outta my sun,” I shot back.

She huffed, narrowed her green eyes to slits, and turned her head away, ignoring me.

“All aboard?” I shouted jovially, letting my arm hang out of the open window and banging hard against the metal door. Nobody answered. Guess my attempt to lighten the mood had failed. I pulled away from the side of the road.

We were only driving for about five minutes when all of a sudden a white stretch limousine appeared out of nowhere. There were tendrils of pearly, effervescent light shining from the windows as it sped by and overtook the minivan. With my driver’s side window open, I heard a sharp female cry for help erupt from inside the limo.

What the fuck?

“Oh, my goodness,” Alvie gasped.

“Where is all that light coming from?” Delilah questioned.

“Looks like magic,” Gabriel said.

On instinct, I increased my speed, following the limo. The door flew open a second later, and a woman dressed in a shimmering white evening gown jumped from the vehicle. She rolled along the road, huddled in a crouch for a moment, then got to her feet and broke into a run. She was about to come face to bumper with the minivan so I slammed on the breaks and came to a screeching halt seconds before I would have hit her.

Up ahead, a tall man emerged from the limo. He came marching

determinedly after the woman, who was now staring right into the minivan, shaking like a leaf. She had long, curly blonde hair and bright hazel eyes. When they met mine, I saw her desperation.

Without thinking, I hopped out and hurried to her.

“Are you okay?” I asked as her gaze flickered over me in an unfocused manner.

“Stay away,” she croaked, holding out her shaking hand at the same time the guy from the limo called, “Touch her and die, slayer.”

I looked to the tall guy, recognising him as Michael Ridley, one of Theodore’s warlock cronies and also the prick who set fire to Rita’s house.

Delilah, Gabriel and Ira emerged from the van, coming to stand beside me.

“I’ll do what I like, warlock,” I sneered back at him.

His attention went to the woman. “Alora, come back here now. You are being completely unreasonable.”

Alora flinched at the sound of Ridley’s voice and took a step toward me.

“Please, don’t let him take me. It hurts ... he hurts me too much.”

At this statement, my protective instincts kicked into high gear, and I pulled her to stand behind me.

“You hurt women, eh?” I asked, levelling my stare on Ridley. “Why don’t you try hurting me instead? See how well you fare?”

Ridley huffed out an angry breath and raised his hand into the air, on the verge of casting a spell. Luckily, Ira leapt at him with a snarl and clamped his big teeth down on Ridley’s hand before he got the chance to finish. I winced when he didn’t just bite him, but jerked his head and tore the hand clean off.

Well, Ira did have some, uh, *issues* with magic, so I couldn’t really blame him for overdoing it slightly.

An almighty wail erupted from Ridley. He stared down at his now handless arm in horror as blood gushed out. Ira dropped the hand to the ground with a wet thump and walked away with doggy style disinterest. Yep, I just said doggy style. It’d been way too long since I last had a woman beneath me.

“I’m going to kill that fucking dog,” Ridley screamed.

“You’ll be killing no one unless you get yourself to a hospital real soon, my friend,” I called out, grimacing at the sight of his severed hand.

He swore profusely, picked up his hand, and hurried back to his limo. The door slammed shut and the vehicle tore down the road. I turned to see

Alora running away from us now, in the opposite direction of the limo. Gabriel and Delilah stared after her, dumbfounded. Ira sat by the side of the van, licking the blood off his paws, and Alvie still sat inside, too shaken by the night's events to get involved.

I guessed it was my job to go after her then. I ran down the road, but she must've heard me coming because she quickened her pace. She was in her bare feet and I knew it had to hurt running without any shoes. A second later, I caught up to her, grabbed her by the waist, and pulled her to a stop. She wriggled in my hold, struggling to break free.

"Let me go, please," came her throaty cry. It sounded like she was on the verge of tears. "I need to get as far away from him as possible. I need to find my family."

"Hush," I whispered soothingly. "You're not going to get very far in your state. Let me help you."

She went still when I spoke and turned in my arms to look up at me. Her eyes, which I now decided were far more gold than hazel, continued to roam in an unfocused way. Suddenly, I realised why. She was *blind*.

Now that she'd stopped struggling, I took the opportunity to study her more closely. Her eyes were amazing. I'd never seen gold eyes in a human before, only in vampires. I felt like a dick noticing, especially since she was in obvious distress, but she had a fantastic rack and plump, heart-shaped lips. Her skin was lightly tanned and smooth, and her hair was a mass of silky curls. In other words, she was beautiful—and still trembling in my arms.

"I know your voice," she whispered, her forehead crinkling in thought.

"I don't think so, baby. We've never met before. I would definitely remember meeting you."

She shook her head. "No, you don't understand ..."

"Are you hurt?" I asked. "What were you doing with that son of a bitch Ridley anyway?"

Her soft breath hit the base of my throat as she breathed frantically. "He kidnapped me when I was on my way home from work two years ago. I haven't seen the outside of his house until tonight."

"He kidnapped you?" I asked in disbelief. "Why? Is he some kind of sicko?"

"Not in the way you're thinking. He called you a slayer. Does that mean you know about supernatural creatures?"

"Yes, you can speak freely," I replied.

She exhaled in some kind of relief, and then her small hands were cupping my face, moving over my features in concentration. “Can I trust you?” she asked as she tried to see me through touch. I stood stock-still, utterly entranced.

“Of course you can. I’m one of the good guys, Goldy.”

She seemed to blush at my response but continued moving her hands over my face. Next, they slid down my neck before resting on my shoulders. I swallowed hard, struggling not to get turned on. As I said, it had been a while since I’d been with a woman.

“I’m half-elf,” she said then, presumably concluding that she could trust me. “I have the talent of seeing into the future. At first, Ridley tried to drain my power to use it for himself, but he didn’t succeed. The spell went wrong and ended up blinding me. He decided to keep me prisoner so that whenever he needed a prediction, he could use my ability.”

“Christ,” I muttered, staring at her with wide eyes. “I bet you’re glad my friend Ira bit off his hand, eh?”

“Hearing his pain was a small revenge,” she said, nodding. “Where are we? Can you bring me back to the city? My parents live there.”

“The city’s a no-go area at the moment. You probably don’t know this, but there was a reason why Ridley was leaving. The vampires have taken over. They’ve been slaughtering humans, and there’s also been some magical business making the humans go crazy and kill each other. You don’t want to go there for a while.”

Suddenly, tears sprang to her eyes. “Are all the humans dead? My parents ...”

“No, no, they’re not all dead, but it’s still not safe to go there yet. Not with the vampires so bloodthirsty. Oh, and there’s a mad sorcerer on the loose.”

She slumped in my arms, her small frame resting against me. I guessed what I just recounted was a lot to take in.

“Come on, stay with me for a little while, and we’ll figure out how to return you to your family.”

She nodded, wiping at her eyes. “Yes, thank you. I appreciate your kindness and help.”

“It’s no trouble. Listen, I’m going to carry you back to my vehicle because I don’t like the look of those bare feet on the road.”

“Oh. Okay,” she said, nodding. She gave a soft gasp when I slid my arm

under her legs, scooped her up and carried her back to the minivan.

2.

Tegan

“Let’s go outside,” I said, my sated, naked body on top of Ethan’s, our limbs intertwined in rest.

We spent half the day having sex, but I didn’t feel tired. No, I felt *wired*. His blood was better than cocaine ... not that I knew what taking coke felt like, but this *had* to be better. I could run a marathon right now.

Ethan chuckled deeply. “Okay. Where would you like to go?”

“I don’t care. Anywhere. I just want to see you out in the sun.”

I hopped from the bed and began jumping up and down, completely hyper. I suddenly had all this energy that I needed to burn off. I only became self-conscious when I remembered I was naked, and Ethan was watching my breasts as they jiggled.

A hot, affectionate expression crossed his features, and a little jolt of panic hit me. There was so much love in his eyes. I’d never considered myself a commitment-phobe, but committing to the most powerful vampire in the city would give even the most relationship-needy person anxiety. What made me even more anxious was the love I felt in return.

I loved him.

Maybe it was the blood high, but I was feeling everything way too intensely. Bringing my hands up to my eyes, I could see every tiny line on my skin, every pore. It was like I had super detailed vision. Not only did I want to see Ethan in the sun, but I also wanted to see other things with this new sight before it ran out.

No high lasted forever.

Ethan pounced on me, scooping me up into his arms and carrying me to his bathroom, where he turned on the shower. He settled me under the spray and began lathering both of our bodies with soap. His hands roamed my skin, exploring every inch, before he turned off the water and wrapped me in a towel.

I didn’t have any clothes here, but Ethan laundered the ones I’d been wearing. They sat neatly folded on the arm of a chair, and I had a strange vision in my head of him doing laundry. So out of place.

I slipped on my jeans and T-shirt and laced up my boots. Once dressed, I found Ethan standing in his front garden, his face held up to the sun. He’d

been doing the same thing when he was sitting in his chair this morning. My heart fluttered at the knowledge that I gave this to him. I gave him my blood, but he didn't turn into a monster. He'd simply been made better. He was no longer imprisoned to live only in the dark.

I stepped up beside him and laced my fingers through his. His eyes turned down to meet mine, and he smiled fondly.

"What's been going on in the city while I was sleeping?" I asked warily as we walked away from his house and down the quiet street. I really didn't want to ruin my good mood with reality, but I was worried about Finn and the others. In fact, I was antsy as hell to know where they all were.

"My people cleared away the dead as I instructed them to. Much of the human population tried to flee, but they couldn't."

I arched a brow at him. "What do you mean they couldn't?"

Ethan sighed as though he had been hoping we could avoid the heavy subjects for a little while longer. "There's some sort of magical force field surrounding the city. Nobody can get out. There's also a block on all forms of electronic communication. No calls, emails, messages of any sort can get to the outside world."

I gasped, my heartbeat speeding up. "What?! Did Theodore do this?"

My skin crawled with claustrophobia. We were all stuck in Tribane. Indefinitely.

Ethan shrugged, and I found the gesture far too nonchalant for the topic we were discussing. Just because he was now indestructible didn't mean we shouldn't worry about being imprisoned in the city. "He's the most likely candidate."

"We have to find him, Ethan. I can't abandon Rita, and if you leave Theodore to his own devices for too long, he'll come up with something ... I don't know, something bad. The fact that he can imprison us all is frightening enough. Aren't you scared?"

"I wonder if I could kill him," Ethan pondered, ignoring my question. "Well, I'd have to find him first." He shook his head. "Normally, the only person who can kill a sorcerer is another sorcerer. A pity I don't have any of those in my address book," he joked and squeezed my hand, placing a kiss on my temple.

I narrowed my eyes at his louché attitude. Being out in the sun had made him a little too carefree. Then my thoughts raced at his statement. I may not have any sorcerers in my address book, but I did know of one out there. I

glanced up at Ethan. "Um, there's something I need to tell you."

His eyes flickered with interest. "Oh?"

"You remember Emilia? My grandmother? The one who took Pamphrock's daughter?"

"I do."

"Well, before she went all *Hand that Rocks the Cradle* on us, she told me that my mother was the result of an affair she had with a sorcerer called Roman. My grandfather is a sorcerer! There must be some way that I can get in contact with him. I mean, maybe he won't want to kill Theodore, but he might be able to offer us advice."

"So that's why you have so much magic," Ethan breathed, stopping to stand in front of me. He ran his hands from the ends of my hair down to rest on my shoulders. He seemed to mull the idea over a moment before dismissing it. "We would never find this Roman. Sorcerers are notoriously elusive."

"I could ask Emilia. That bitch owes me after all the trouble she caused, pretending I could trust her and then running off with Rebecca." I also still planned on getting Rebecca back. I couldn't leave the poor girl with Emilia.

"Aha," Ethan said, flashing me a hint of fang. "Shall we pay her a visit?"

I sighed. "Yes, but not today." Lowering my voice shyly, I continued, "I want just one day with you. One day that's just ... us."

He squeezed my hand and bent down, his voice a husky whisper. "I like that idea."

We continued our walk through the unusually quiet city. Normally the streets were packed, the shops, restaurants, and cafes bustling. Sure, there were some people on the streets, but not the crowds there used to be. Lots of shop windows were boarded up, and others were simply locked tight, not open for business as they would normally be in the middle of the day.

Things were far from back to normal.

And I would tackle that lack of normality, try to figure out a way to restore some sanity to the city, but for today, I refused to lose myself in worry. Today I was just a woman madly in love with a handsome man named Ethan.

I let go of his hand and broke into a run. His laugh drifted behind me as he watched me take off. I'd never run this fast before in my life. I was supercharged with vampire blood.

I hopped up onto a ladder affixed to the side of a three-storey building and climbed it effortlessly. I sensed Ethan was somewhere behind me even though I couldn't hear a single rustle of movement. I raced over the rooftop and went flying through the air, sailing over the narrow distance between this building and the next one. I felt like a little wingless bird. My heart beat wildly, and I grinned like a crazy person as my feet crashed down onto the hard surface.

Not a single stitch.

This was amazing.

I stood and got ready to continue my roof jumping antics when Ethan grabbed me and flipped me over his shoulder. I wriggled in his grip, but obviously it was a useless effort.

"What's gotten into you?" he growled before setting me down on the path. We were already off the roof and back on the street. Yeah, he moved *that* fast now.

"I'm having fun. You should try it sometime," I answered with a cheeky sideways smile.

"You could have severely injured yourself. What you're feeling isn't real, Tegan. It's a chemical high. You can't actually fly, you know."

"That's not what I thought," I said, pouting, because that's *exactly* what I thought. For a second, I truly believed I could fly.

He pulled me to him, wrapping his arms around my waist. "It's just the blood," he whispered. "Your human bones can still break if you fall."

"I know that," I answered, feeling embarrassed now.

All of a sudden, the sun was too bright. It dizzied me. I stared into the window of a boutique across the street where there were all sorts of glittery dresses on display. Despite the distance, I could see the stitch in every sequin, every thread weaved throughout the fabric. The details hurt my brain.

Somewhere close by, a seagull cawed, and I heard too many notes in the one sound, too many levels of noise. I clamped my hands over my ears to block it out.

"Tegan, are you alright?" Ethan asked in concern.

Before I had the chance to reply, I passed out.

When I woke up, I was lying on the couch in Ethan's living room, while

he held a cool, damp face cloth to my forehead. It felt soothing.

“Hey,” he said when he saw my eyes flicker open.

“Hey,” I replied, a little croaky.

“I think you might have drunk too much from me,” he went on apologetically. “That’s why you passed out.”

“I felt like I was going to go crazy from sensory overload,” I said. “Is that what it feels like to be you?”

A small smile curved his lips. “I have the natural ability to turn it on and off at will. Since you are human, you don’t have that ability. My blood had fully hit your system when we were out on the street, which is why you fainted.”

“I feel better now. The high is wearing off.”

I reached down and rubbed my shin where it ached, most likely from the jump I took across the roof. The blood didn’t protect me from being hurt, it just protected me from feeling pain in the moment. Huh. Not as fantastic as I originally imagined then. And now that the high was dwindling, I felt a sharpness in my veins crying out for more blood.

So, this was what it felt like to be addicted.

I licked my lips as my eyes zoned in on Ethan’s smooth neck. There wasn’t a single hint of the cut he gave himself this morning. Without realising it, I was sitting up and leaning closer to him, my breathing erratic.

He put both his hands on my shoulders and pushed me back down onto the couch.

“I hoped this wouldn’t happen,” he said, a look of self-remonstration on his face. “I should’ve been more careful.”

“What?” I asked, but I wasn’t really listening. Instead, I was imagining all the sweet blood rushing through his veins, singing for me to drink it.

“That you would want more. I didn’t think it would happen so quickly though, but you’ve developed an addiction.”

His words broke me out of my trance. “Oh.” A pause as the seriousness of what he said hit home. “Oh.”

A silence elapsed.

“Well, we just won’t do it again,” I said, pulling farther back and folding my arms across my chest with great effort. Ethan didn’t look happy at how I distanced myself from him.

“Fuck. But I really like it when you drink from me, Tegan.”

“I really like it, too,” I admitted, meeting his eyes. “But we can’t do it

anymore. It's too risky. We'll only do it if it's a life-or-death situation and I need your blood to heal. Alright?" I thrust my hand out for him to shake.

He looked at me with affection and then finally shook my hand. "Deal," he said before pulling me onto his lap and attacking my mouth, plunging his tongue inside. A minute or two later, somebody cleared their throat, and Ethan zipped away from me, his posture guarded, ready for an attack.

My heartbeat slowed when I saw it was only Lucas. He stood in the doorway with an eager look on his face. His eyes traced over Ethan, taking in the changes in his appearance. *The power*. Power that I gave to him. Then Lucas's gaze flicked to me, and I practically saw the thoughts churning in his mind. Was he thinking how he could drink from me and then he'd be like Ethan, too?

"Oh, quit looking at me like that," Lucas chided. "I have no intention of biting you. I don't want to be powerful. It's more trouble than it's worth. Better leave that job to someone else."

"Lucas," Ethan interjected. "How did you get in here?"

Lucas jangled a key in his hand. "I have a spare, remember?"

Ethan narrowed his gaze. "I hope you made sure nobody saw you coming inside."

"I might not be a super-vampire, but I'm not stupid," Lucas replied, walking to the window and glancing out. He whistled. "That's some queue. When are you going to deal with them?"

He must've been talking about the vampires waiting to pledge their allegiance to Ethan. They'd been gone during the day, but now that the sky had darkened, they were back.

Ethan went to stand beside Lucas by the window. "I don't have to deal with them. They can go about their lives as they had before. I have no interest in setting up any new hierarchy."

Lucas laughed. "Did your transformation cause you to forget everything you know about our people? We cannot function without a hierarchy, and all those vampires waiting for you to see them want to know where they fall in the new order of things. You might not have asked for the title, and hell, I know for a fact that you don't want it, but for all intents and purposes you are the new Whitfield, and you're going to have to embrace it. If you hadn't noticed, humans are piling up on the outskirts of the city trying to get out, but they're trapped. We're all trapped. Somebody needs to step up and fix things, and that someone is you, Ethan."

He pointed a finger at him and strolled from the window to sit down on one of the armchairs by the fireplace. Lucas crossed his arms over his chest, satisfied with his logic.

“Drinking from Tegan didn’t turn me into a warlock, Lucas. I’m just as clueless as to how to break the barrier as everyone else is.”

Lucas’s eyes flicked from Ethan to me. “What about you? Do you know how to lift the barrier?”

“I have no idea,” I whispered. “I wish Rita hadn’t gone with Theodore. She’s the only witch I know who has a chance of lifting it.”

Lucas snorted. “She’s probably the one who put it in place. Stupid bloody witch.”

“If she could trap us all like this, then she’s the opposite of stupid,” I said, defending my friend instinctively even though she wasn’t on our side anymore. The pain of her betrayal still cut deep.

Lucas brushed me off with a wave of his hand and returned his attention to Ethan, who was still staring out the window.

“So, when are you going to see them?” he asked again.

With an audible sigh, Ethan replied, “I suppose there’s no time like the present.”

Finn

After settling Alora in a seat at the back of the minivan, I returned to the front and started up the engine.

“Why are we taking her with us?” Delilah asked, disgruntled. “We’ve got enough to worry about without adopting every waif and stray we come across.”

I glanced at Alora in my overhead mirror and saw her visibly stiffen at Delilah’s statement.

“You don’t have to take me,” she volunteered meekly. “I can find my own way ...”

“You’re staying with us,” I interrupted firmly before meeting Delilah’s gaze. “She’s some kind of clairvoyant. Ridley kidnapped her two years ago so that he could use her powers. Two fucking years she’s been kept prisoner by that psycho. We’re helping her. It’s not up for discussion.” I tightened my jaw, giving Delilah one final look before I started driving.

“You always have to play the hero,” she muttered passive aggressively

under her breath, but I pretended I couldn't hear her.

I thought about that as I drove, wondering if it was true. I signed up with the DOH because I wanted to save people from vampires. I wanted to make up for the fact that I couldn't save my family from them. Then there was Tegan. The very first night I saw her with Cristescu after he'd annihilated a whole squadron of my men, I knew she was stuck in a bad situation, and I wanted to help free her from it.

I'd been trying to help her ever since that night to no avail. She stayed with him willingly. Maybe she never needed saving to begin with. Or maybe she was just a lost cause, too in love with a bloodsucker to see how she was falling down a bad path.

There was traffic piling up on the road ahead. I rolled down my window and stuck my head out, only to be greeted by the sounds of horns blaring and people shouting in desperation.

"What the heck?" I said, pulling the van to a stop on the motorway.

All four lanes on the side of the road leading out of the city were crammed with vehicles, while the opposite side was empty. Made sense. After all the madness and carnage that had gone down, it was only logical that people would want to flee.

Telling the others to stay put, Gabriel and I got out and went to investigate the holdup. Even if everyone was trying to get away from Tribane, the traffic shouldn't have come to such a dead halt, unless there'd been an accident.

We weaved through the stationary vehicles and people standing around kicking up a fuss about the delay. When we got about half a mile up the motorway, we saw that there *had* been an accident, only not the kind we expected. Several cars looked like they'd been pulverised to pieces, and stretching from the ground far up into the sky was a translucent purple shield, a barrier to the outside world.

Gabriel let out several low expletives as we continued closer to the shield. It vibrated with energy—magical energy. The sound of women and children crying filled the night, and among the shattered vehicles was a mess of blood and limbs. Most of the people, though, were staring up at the barrier in fear and fascination.

"This is Theodore's doing," Gabriel said quietly. "He's trapped us all in." He paused and pointed to the carnage. "Those people tried to drive through it and look what happened."

“Shit,” I whispered, not knowing what else to say.

I’d thought Theodore fled in terror when he saw Cristescu transform. Clearly, he wasn’t too terrified if he managed to construct something like this.

“Well,” I said. “It looks like nobody’s going anywhere right now. We’d better get back to the others and find somewhere for all of us to sleep tonight.”

Gabriel nodded, and we began walking back. Once we reached the minivan, I quickly filled everyone in on what was going on. Alvie trembled while Delilah looked out the window with a resigned expression. Ira rested his furry head on her lap, and Alora moved warily to the front of the van.

“Can I sit up here with you?” she asked hesitantly.

My eyes roamed her pretty face and her unseeing, unfocused eyes before I responded, “Sure, you can.”

She exhaled with relief and climbed between the seats. Once she settled in beside me her hands fumbled at her sides, trying to find the straps for her seatbelt. My eyes softened.

“Hey,” I murmured. “Let me help you.”

Her hands stilled, and she nodded once. I took the seatbelt and secured it over her chest and around her waist, my hands brushing the smooth material of her dress as I did so.

With Alora strapped in, I turned the van around and began driving away in the direction of the city. I thought about bringing everyone to my place but reconsidered. Perhaps it would be a good idea to stay under the radar for awhile until we could get the lay of the land. I exited the motorway, spotting a sign up ahead with the universal symbols for food and accommodation. A couple of minutes later, I turned into the parking lot of a large chain hotel, with a red brick, one storey diner beside it.

“Anyone hungry?” I asked as I parked in one of the many free spots. Almost the entire place was empty, but the lights were on in the diner and there were a few people inside, so I presumed it was open.

“I’m starving,” Alvie exclaimed, and Gabriel shot him an affectionate smile.

“Right, you all go and get some food while I book us into the hotel,” I said, sliding out of the minivan.

Everybody started walking towards the diner, but Alora remained by my side. Her cheeks were flushed as she said, “I’ll stay with you if that’s alright.”

Something about her statement pinched at my chest. Did she feel safe with me? Without a word, I slipped my hand into hers and guided her towards the hotel entrance. A woman with a purple rinse hairdo sat at the reception desk thumbing through a gossip magazine. She looked up when we entered and raised an eyebrow at Alora's long silk dress and bare feet.

I gave the woman my best charming smile as I stepped up and leaned one arm on the counter. "How are ya doing ..." My eyes went to her name tag. "Vera?"

She put her magazine aside and gave me the once over, her tongue wetting her lips as her eyes moved along my body. "Not too bad. Saw a few crazies on the news. Must be a full moon or something. It's been quiet around here though," she answered.

"That's good to hear. I need rooms for six people if you have availability."

She tapped on her computer screen. "I can give you three twin rooms or one family room. If you go for the family room, two of you will have to sleep on the sofa bed."

Real classy joint, this place.

I was tempted to go for the family room since it might be better if we all stuck together, but then I thought about how crowded that would be and opted for the three twin rooms instead. The two ladies could stay together, and I'd room with Ira, so Gabriel and Alvie could have some privacy.

I handed over my credit card, and Purple Rinse slid it through the scanner before giving it back to me.

"My friend here lost her shoes. We had a bit of a wild night. You wouldn't know where I could buy her a pair of slippers, would you?"

"I can get her a pair of the hotel flip flops we sell for the swimming pool," Purple Rinse suggested.

"Thanks, that'd be great."

She left her desk, and I slumped back against the counter. I hadn't slept properly in about a week, and exhaustion was beginning to take its toll.

"Are you okay?" Alora asked, and I opened my eyes, suddenly realising I'd closed them for a moment. "You seem tense."

I tilted my head questioningly. "What makes you say that?"

"Your breathing grew heavier."

With her lack of sight, I wondered what other things she noticed about people.

“It’s been a rough week.”

She turned her head away and crossed her arms over her chest. “I can understand that.”

“Are you cold?” I asked her, eyeing her thin, flimsy dress.

“A little,” she replied. “But I’ll be okay.”

I slipped out of my jacket and pulled off the thick work shirt I was wearing over my long-sleeved T-shirt. Handing it to her, I said, “Put this on.”

She took the shirt wordlessly, fumbling with it a moment before sliding her arms through the sleeves. Purple Rinse returned with the flip flops, and I paid her before helping Alora put them on. She gave me a small, grateful smile, and I shoved the key cards for our rooms into my pocket before guiding her over to the diner.

When we got there, we joined the others at a large table, and Alora slid in next to me. I ordered a steak while she only asked for a glass of water.

“Aren’t you hungry?” I said quietly, nudging her with my elbow.

“I don’t have any money,” she replied, her voice tight as though trying to keep tears at bay.

“I’m paying. Order whatever you want.”

“I don’t want to be a bother.”

“You’re not. And I won’t let you go hungry, Goldy, so go ahead and pick something.”

She turned her head in the direction of where the waitress stood. “Is there a tuna melt on the menu?”

“Sure is,” the waitress replied, and Alora smiled.

“I’ll take one of those then.”

The others chatted over us, speculating as to how Theodore managed to construct a barrier around the city.

“It’s been a really long time since I’ve eaten in a place like this,” Alora said. “It feels strange.”

A bolt of anger shot through me. “Ridley fed you, didn’t he?”

“Oh, yes. He kept me very well fed. In the beginning, I refused to eat, but eventually, I saw that wasn’t going to get me anywhere. I knew I needed to keep up my strength if I was ever going to escape.”

“Did he mistreat you?” I questioned her further.

She shook her head. “Aside from inadvertently blinding me when his spell went wrong, no. He treated me like I was precious. It was creepy. But whenever he tried to cast more spells to take my powers it would hurt.”

Frowning at her answer, I turned back in my seat as the waitress came back with our drinks, and I took a long swig out of my Coke. “So, he kept you locked away, and you predicted things for him. How does it work? Can you see what you choose to see, or does it just come to you?”

Alora stiffened. “I can’t choose. The visions come to me when they need to.”

“I’m don’t mean to pry,” I said, hoping she didn’t think I wanted to use her just like Ridley did.

“It’s okay. I just don’t really like to talk about it. Seeing the future isn’t a cool trick like most people think. The visions are painful. Think of it as akin to having an epileptic fit.”

“Shit, that doesn’t sound so great.” I sucked air in through my teeth.

“It really isn’t,” she sighed.

I wanted to ask her more questions, but I kept schtum, sensing it was a touchy subject. When the waitress delivered our food, I dug in ravenously. Alora ate eagerly, too. It must’ve been a while since her last meal. When we were done, I passed out the room keys, delegating one room for Delilah and Alora, one for Gabriel and Alvie, and one for me and Ira.

I noticed Ira had changed back into his human form and had salvaged some clothes from the back of the minivan—clothes that were way too small for a man of his size. It was a good thing, though, because I didn’t think Purple Rinse would be too happy about me trying to smuggle a dangerously large dog into the hotel.

“I want to stay with Ira,” Delilah said firmly, giving Alora an annoyed look.

Oh, for fuck’s sake. I was about to argue with her, but I really didn’t have the energy after the day and night I’d had.

“Fine. Alora can stay with me then,” I grumbled, handing Delilah a key card. The little blonde squirmed uncomfortably at my side, but she didn’t say anything. Was she uneasy at the thought of sharing a room with me? It didn’t make sense since she’d adamantly stayed by my side since I found her.

“Is that alright with you?” I asked her in a low voice.

“Yes, it’s just that I sometimes have visions in my sleep. It can be a little shocking at first, but you don’t need to worry. It passes after a while.”

I looked between her golden eyes, suddenly wishing she could see me properly for some reason. “Okay, anything else I need to know?” I said mustering a grin. “You don’t snore, too, do you?”

She giggled, and the sweet sound of it did something weird to my chest. “No. I don’t snore, Finn.”

I liked the sound of my name on her lips.

“Good, now that that’s settled, let’s go get some shut-eye. I’m wrecked.”

When we reached the room, I stripped off my jacket and T-shirt and threw them on the bed. It was big enough that it shouldn’t make Alora too uncomfortable sleeping with me, and I wasn’t enough of a saint to offer to sleep on the floor. Not after the night I’d had.

Alora put her hand on the wall, feeling her way into the room. I walked to her and took her hand in mine, leading her to the bed and helping her settle down on it.

“Do you want to shower first?” I asked her, straightening up.

“Oh,” she replied, the offer seeming to take her off guard. “Yes, actually, a shower would be great. My feet are filthy from running on the road.”

“I’ll go set everything up for you.”

Just as I was about to disappear into the bathroom, she asked, “Is there a bath?”

I nodded and then reminded myself that she was blind. “Yeah. You want a bath instead?”

“Please. I haven’t had one since I was taken. I was always showered by Ridley’s maids.”

The idea of some paid help actually assisting in keeping a woman captive made me grit my teeth. I took a deep breath and tried to relax. “A bath it is then.”

I filled the tub and set out some towels and a bathrobe for her. Once it was all ready, I went to fetch Alora, who was still wearing my work shirt over her dress. I guided her into the bathroom.

“Okay, so the tub’s here,” I said, placing her hands on the edge of it. “You can just climb in, and the towels are here.” I placed her other hand on the rail by the tub before letting go. “Call me if you need anything.”

She nodded her head, and I left quickly. I flopped down onto the bed in exhaustion and closed my eyes. I didn’t realise I’d fallen asleep until I felt someone nudging my shoulder.

“Finn. Finn,” called a soft, feminine voice.

I was flat on my stomach, so I rolled over onto my back, rubbing my eyes and opening them. “What is it?”

Alora stood over me, her hair wet and her body wrapped up in a white towel robe.

“I thought you might want to shower,” she whispered.

“Oh, yeah, right. Thanks.”

She moved past me and crawled into the bed, pulling back the covers and climbing under them. She rested her head on the pillow and closed her eyes. I made quick work of showering and returned to bed in my boxers and T-shirt. Alora was sleeping soundly now, her chest rising and falling gently.

The last woman I shared a bed with was Tegan, and we all knew how disappointingly that ended. Instead of getting under the covers with Alora, I lay on top of them. Maybe I wasn't prepared to sleep on the floor, but I was still a complete stranger to her. Also, I tended to gravitate towards spooning whoever was in bed with me, so best to stay on the safe side.

The events of the last twenty-four hours ran through my mind before I eventually fell fast asleep.

3.

Tegan

Ethan insisted I sit with him in his living room while he met with the vampires lined up outside. Apparently, he was going to talk to them in their family groups, which was how it worked in the vampire world.

I asked him why I had to be there, since it wasn't exactly something I was over the moon about.

"Because," he replied, "I need to show them that you are mine."

"I'm not a possession. I'm a person," I argued.

"I apologise. That was the wrong choice of words. They have to know that they cannot touch you. They all saw how I transformed on that roof, and they know that the only way a vampire can become what I have become is to drink from a human with your blood. Since you were the only human present, it doesn't take too much deducing to come to the right conclusion. I'll show them that any attempts to steal you will be severely punished."

"Oh," I breathed, my anxiety building. I hadn't even thought of that.

"I want you there to see how they react. After I have observed them, I'll know who wishes to take your blood for themselves and who is truly loyal to me."

"But how will you be able to tell?"

He came and knelt in front of me, taking my hands into his and rubbing the insides of my wrists with his thumbs.

"I'll switch on my sensory overload, as you put it," he grinned. "With your blood in me, my senses are now far superior. I'll be able to read every thought that goes through their heads simply from the expressions on their faces, including whether or not they are loyal."

My eyebrows shot up. "You can do that?"

"It's one of my new abilities, yes."

The first person Lucas ushered into the house was an older vampire, one of the oldest I'd ever seen. Ethan introduced him to me as Nicu Arcos, an old friend of his father's. I shook hands with the dark-eyed man as he took me in with interest.

Two females and one male vampire, Nicu's daughters and son, followed Nicu into the room. They took seats on the couch, while Ethan stood by the

mantelpiece.

“I asked you in before anyone else because you’re the only person I know I can really trust, Nicu,” Ethan said. “So, I’ll cut to the chase. If I’m to lead our people I want you in a prominent position by my side. I know you don’t usually partake in politics, but this new era isn’t going to be like any that have come before it. I want to rule differently. I want to end the wars.”

Nicu waved him off. “I’m a businessman, Ethan. You know I don’t involve myself in these things. I came here to ensure that none of my dealings would be affected by the change in leadership.” His accent was a thicker version of Ethan’s, and I wondered if they knew each other back in Romania.

“Of course, you may continue your dealings as you have been doing,” Ethan replied. “But I would like you to work with me, too. I’ve never met anyone with a better head for numbers, and I want you to be my treasurer. Whitfield left behind a lot of wealth, which goes to me if I’m to lead. You would have the top job in deciding how it should be spent.”

Hearing this, Nicu’s eyes lit up a fraction. He rubbed his chin, considering it, and then laughed. “You’re being sly, Ethan. You know that is an offer I can’t refuse.”

“I need you with me in this,” Ethan said.

Nicu looked to his son, who had an eager expression on his face, as though urging his father to say yes. None of this made any sense to me. The vampires had a treasury? I mean, it wasn’t like they were a country. What exactly did they spend it on?

Seeing as they were constantly being attacked by the DOH, they probably used it to buy weapons. Though with Pamphrock’s death, the DOH was now basically defunct in Tribane. I didn’t see how they’d need any more weapons. I’d witnessed with my own two eyes that guns didn’t work against magic, so it would be useless when facing Theodore.

There was a long stretch of silence as Nicu thought through his options. Ethan seemed to consider him a friend, so it wasn’t like he couldn’t say no.

Finally, the old vampire spoke, “I will take the position provisionally and see how things progress. As I said before, business is my area. I’m not certain I’ll be cut out for this job, but I’ll give it my best shot.”

Ethan strode toward him, his hand outstretched. “Excellent, Nicu. I assure you, you won’t regret this.”

“Hmm, I hope not,” Nicu said, shaking Ethan’s hand and gesturing for his son and daughters to follow him out.

For the next few hours, Ethan met with the vampires he felt he could trust the most, vampires he'd been friends with for a long time. Most of the meetings went similarly to the one with Nicu, except that these vamps seemed far more enthusiastic about taking political positions with Ethan. Half the time, I had to stifle the urge to yawn. It was all just so boring.

It was only when Lucas brought a brother and sister into the room that my Spidey senses woke up. There was something off-putting about the two of them, but I couldn't seem to put my finger on it. They both had sleek, jet black hair and green serpentine eyes. The way they regarded me far longer than any of the other vampires raised my hackles. I looked to Ethan as he watched them, and I wanted to know what he gleaned from their reactions to me.

Pulling my legs up under me on the cushioned armchair, I stared at them dead-on, not allowing myself to be eye shy. Eventually, they turned to greet Ethan and took seats on the sofa in the middle of the room. I remained in my corner, anxious that something bad was going to happen. My magical blood bubbled under my skin in warning.

"Angelica, Raul, it's a pleasure to see you both again."

"Likewise," Angelica said, folding her slim, pale arms across her chest. "You're wearing your years well, Ethan."

He inclined his head, acknowledging the compliment. "As are you. Now, I'd like to get straight down to business. We are all aware that you were both in Whitfield's inner circle, as I once had been. I need to know if you hold any grudges about how he died."

"None at all," Raul spoke up. "In fact, I'm eager to see how you fare as ruler. I always thought you had a good head for leadership."

Raul continued to lavish Ethan with compliments, while my attention was drawn to Angelica, who was very slowly rising from her seat. Quick as a flash she whipped out a stake and advanced on Ethan. Raul stopped talking and strode toward me with feral determination. I didn't hesitate for a moment before holding my hand out in front of me and releasing warning sparks. Angelica drove the stake at Ethan's heart, but it didn't even break the skin.

My mind flicked back to earlier in the day when he'd shown me the sharp nail of his thumb and told me it was the only thing that could successfully cut him now. Angelica seized with panic as Ethan stood before her, not even bothering to fight back. Her attempt on his life was futile.

"Not another step," I warned Raul, whose eyes flickered from side to

side trying to figure out a way to get by my sparks. Ethan turned his attention to me, and if I wasn't mistaken, he looked proud. The vampires might know what I was, but I wasn't defenceless anymore. They could try to get to me all they wanted, but I had my magic to fight them off.

Angelica tried one more time to plunge the stake into Ethan. He grabbed her wrist and turned her body, clutching her to him. Her back was pressed to his front, one of his arms wrapped around her middle. It was a position that almost looked like a lover's embrace if you were to ignore the way his hand gripped her neck and smoothly wrenched it to the side. I heard the dull snap of bone just before he let her body drop to the floor.

Milliseconds later he was on Raul, incapacitating him with the same snapping of his neck. He picked up the stake that Angelica had tried to kill him with from the carpet and then dragged both bodies from the room as though they were weightless rag dolls.

I hurried out after him as he went down the hallway to his front door, opened it, and heaved both bodies out. The vampires waiting in the dark gasped audibly as Ethan stood stoically before them and announced, "This is what happens to those who try to cross me."

Lightning-fast, he plunged the stake into Raul and then Angelica before tossing their bodies out onto the road.

Dead silence filled the street as the assembled vampires looked on in terror, whispering hushed exclamations of shock and fear. Ethan turned and re-entered the house, bringing his attention to Lucas who was standing by me with a pleased expression. He was glad that Ethan had shown the vampires a display of power. And to be perfectly honest, I was, too. It would make any of them planning a similar assassination think twice about it.

Several hours later, Ethan had met with most of the vampires who had been waiting. He told those remaining to return the next night, and they left, quickly obeying his orders. Something about drinking Ethan's blood this morning kept my hunger at bay for a while, but now I was starving. I found a frozen pizza in the freezer that must've belonged to Delilah and put it in the oven.

Note to self: go grocery shopping as soon as possible.

When Lucas sat beside me on the sofa, I took the opportunity to ask him about the others. "Where is everyone? You were with them on that roof, weren't you?"

"I was. They were frightened when they saw what had become of Ethan,

and they fled. I haven't located them yet. I searched the slayer's house, but it was empty. They can't have gotten too far since we're all trapped in the city."

I sighed. "We have to find them, make sure they're okay."

"Delilah will return when the time is right."

"Speaking of my sister," Ethan said as he entered the room. "I would like her found now, Lucas. I don't like her out there alone."

"She's not alone. She's with Finn and the others," I pointed out.

Ethan let out a low sound of derision at the mention of Finn's name, and I rolled my eyes. Before I knew it, I was being flipped over his back and hauled upstairs to his room. Seconds later, he threw me down on his bed.

"Do that one more time and see what happens," he warned playfully, leaning over me and nipping at my shoulder with his teeth, no fangs—not yet.

I smirked at him and took my time doing one big leisurely eye roll. In response, he turned me over abruptly and spanked my bottom hard. I yelped.

"Ow, ow, okay, I'm sorry. Please forgive me, oh great one." I couldn't help giggling as I said it. "That good enough for you?"

Ethan growled and licked a line from the curve of my neck up to my ear, where he sucked my earlobe into his mouth. His hand slipped over my belly and down into my pants, his fingers sliding over the fabric of my underwear. I moaned in response, and he massaged lightly before pulling away.

I turned my head to stare at him in frustration.

"Glad to see you've learned your lesson," he smiled just as the timer went off downstairs, informing me my pizza was ready.

"Oh, come on. It's not polite to leave a girl with blue balls," I protested, and Ethan lifted an eyebrow.

"You have a curious way with words."

"So, do you," I replied, rising from the bed and walking past him to go remove my pizza from the oven.

Ethan rejoined me as I sat by his kitchen counter and pulled off a slice. He didn't say anything, just sat and watched me eat as though it was the most fascinating thing in the world.

"Want some?" I asked, shoving the cheesy slice in his face just to annoy him.

Ethan scrunched up his nose in distaste. "No, thank you."

I chuckled, eyeing him now. A lot had changed for him in a very short space of time, and I wanted to make sure he was okay with it. I mean, him drinking my blood had been the last resort of the desperate, and now here he

was with an entire city of vampires looking to him to guide them.

“You do want this, don’t you? Leading the vampires and all? I’m a little worried that you think you don’t have a choice.”

“I don’t,” Ethan said placidly.

“Of course you do. I’m sure there are a whole bunch of vamps who genuinely want the job. Just give it to one of them.”

“I could do that, but then I’d have to leave. They couldn’t rule comfortably knowing a far stronger candidate is still residing in the city. And I don’t want to leave, Tegan.”

I studied him a moment. “Well, maybe it’s a good thing. They always say that reluctant rulers are the best kind. You aren’t in it for the benefits or the lavish lifestyle. It means you might actually focus on what’s important instead of your own selfish interests.”

“That’s a good theory. But it could also go the opposite way. The fact that I’m reluctant might mean I’ll intentionally fuck up the job.”

I smiled at him. “I don’t think you’d do that. You’re too much of a perfectionist. It would just irritate you to do a half-assed job.”

He grinned at me. “Is that a compliment?”

“A roundabout one. That’s the best you’re going to get from me.”

He kissed me tenderly on the cheek, and I finished eating my pizza. There was plenty left, but I decided it would do for breakfast in the morning. If I was going to be staying here with Ethan, I’d really have to see about stocking his fridge and pantry. Human food wasn’t very plentiful in vampire houses.

I squealed when his arm reached under my knees, and he lifted me into his arms.

“Come on, Sunshine,” he whispered in my ear. “Let’s see what we can do about those blue balls of yours.”

I laughed as he carried me to his bedroom.

Finn

I woke up in the early hours of the morning because the bed was shaking. Glancing to my left, I saw Alora convulsing beneath the covers, and a surge of panic gripped me.

Rising onto my elbow, I put my hand to her forehead. She was hot and clammy with sweat. Alora mentioned this might happen while she slept, but

that didn't make it any easier to watch her. The convulsions that wracked her body looked painful. I wondered what premonition she was seeing. Would she be able to see the future of the city and what was going to become of us?

Would Theodore keep us trapped in his bubble forever? Or would we all be dead before the week was through?

One thing I knew for certain was that I had to make contact with Tegan. I had to know the choices Cristescu was going to make for his vampires. Would he spur them to kill or encourage them to live peacefully?

After a couple of minutes, Alora stilled and her breathing returned to normal. I lay awake on top of the covers, my hands clasped above my head and my mind on high alert. Too many 'what ifs' filled my head, making it impossible to get back to sleep.

Once seven o'clock hit, I got up, took another shower, and got dressed. Alora woke up just as I was sitting at the foot of the bed lacing my boots.

"Morning, Goldy. Did you sleep well?" I asked.

She sat up and rubbed at her head as though it ached. The robe she slept in was hanging open a little, showing me the round curve of her cleavage. I quickly averted my gaze and she must've realised she wasn't decent because she surreptitiously covered herself, wrapping the robe tighter around her body. Great, now I felt like a pervert for looking at all.

"I slept okay, but my skull is pounding," she replied as she rubbed her head again. She paused and glanced at me. "Did I ... did anything happen while I was asleep?"

I nodded. "You had a vision. At least I think you did. It was just like you said it would be. Your body shook with convulsions. Do you remember anything?"

She grimaced. "I always do, unfortunately."

"And?"

A small smile shaped her lips, and it transformed her features. She was already gorgeous, but the smile made her beautiful. "What? You think I'm going to tell you? I hardly know you, Finn."

Okay, so she had some sass in her. Good. "You know me well enough to share a bed with me," I shot back.

"Yeah, well, my options were pretty limited," she replied as she climbed from the bed and felt her way to the bathroom. A minute or two later, I heard the shower come on.

I went out to the minivan and drove to the nearest shopping mall, which

was a couple of miles from the hotel. I stocked up on necessities for everyone and bought Alora something to wear that was a little less conspicuous than a floor-length evening gown. I opted for some leggings and a couple of T-shirts and cardigans. I also threw in some socks, tennis shoes, and underwear, though I wasn't even going to try guessing her bra size.

Small boobs were easier to guess than big boobs, and Alora could be anywhere from a double D to a G. I loved how this was what my brain decided to focus on, instead of how I was saddling myself with yet another damsel in distress. I was sure a psychologist could have a field day with me. Always trying to save females because I couldn't save my mother and sister, the only two who really mattered.

When I got back to the hotel, I dropped off the bag of clothes I got for Ira. The poor bloke couldn't keep going around in jeans that barely covered his calves. When I reached my room, I found Alora sitting by the dresser, attempting to blow dry her long hair with one of those tiny hotel hair dryers. I dropped the shopping bags down on the bed.

"I bought you some clothes. I went as generic as possible because I don't know your exact sizes."

Her eyes drifted back and forth as though trying to spot me. She must have pinpointed my location because her gaze stopped where I stood by the wall.

"You didn't have to do that," she whispered, her voice aeons away from the sass she gave me earlier.

"I wanted to. Besides, it looks like I still have some work to do to show you I'm trustworthy."

Turning off the dryer, she set it down on the dresser and made her way over to the bed. She latched onto the bag and slipped a hand inside.

"You'll have to tell me what's what," she said quietly.

"Oh, right, yeah," I replied, slapping my head dumbly. Taking the bag from her, I pulled out a pale, yellow T-shirt, navy leggings, and a black cardigan. Next, I grabbed a pair of knickers and some socks.

"So, these are leggings, and this is a T-shirt," I told her, placing one in each hand and feeling like an idiot. I had no idea how to treat a blind person. "And, uh, here's some clean underwear," I went on throatily. "You can go change in the bathroom, and then I'll help you with the rest."

"Thanks," she answered, and if I wasn't mistaken, she seemed touched by how I was assisting her. She walked into the bathroom but left the door

open.

“At Michael Ridley’s,” she said, talking to me from the other room, “I always had maids to dress and wash me, so I never learned how to deal with my blindness. Most people would have little tricks to get by, but I haven’t had the chance to learn any yet. I feel so clueless.”

That made two of us.

“You’ll learn, Goldy. I can help,” I assured her.

A minute later, she came back out, and I tried not to focus on how the tight leggings clung to the curve of her hips and hugged her perfectly round arse. The T-shirt was a good deal tight as well. I must have gotten a size too small. Luckily, she still had the bra she’d been wearing under the gown, otherwise, she wouldn’t have gotten away with the tight T-shirt without giving every straight man in sight a massive hard-on.

I walked to her, took her hand, and led her over to the bed, sitting her down. “Here are your socks. Do you need help with them?”

She shook her head. “No, I have to get used to doing this by myself.”

Fumblingly, she put on the socks and the tennis shoes, and I helped her into the cardigan once she was done. Unexpectedly, she reached up, brought her hand to the line of my jaw, and placed a kiss on my cheek. My heart skipped a beat. She smelled like soap, and her lips were so fucking soft.

“Thank you, Finn. You’ve been incredibly sweet to me,” she said with gratitude, pulling away just as I was instinctively turning my lips to hers. I shook myself out of the urge to plunge my tongue inside her pretty little mouth. The air between us felt thick, but maybe that was just me.

“Any time. Come on, let’s go get breakfast.”

On the way to the diner, I informed the receptionist on duty, now a young red-haired woman, that we’d be staying another night. I used my DOH credit card, knowing that it had a decently high limit, and since Pamphrock was gone, nobody was going to care that I was spending the money anyway. A pang of grief hit me at the memory of Theodore suffocating him. He’d drained the life from his body like it was *nothing*. The leader I’d looked up to for years was dead, and I felt so... adrift.

I opened the door and ushered Alora inside the diner. When we joined the others at the same table we ate at last night, I noticed Delilah was looking a little worse for wear. She had dark bags under her eyes and her lips seemed pale.

“You alright?” I asked, eyeing her in concern.

“I’m just tired,” she answered, a little snappish.

“Are you sure?” Gabriel put in. “When was the last time you had blood?”

A-ha. Now, why didn’t I think of that? Sometimes I forgot that dhampirs needed blood, too. Not half as much as vamps, but they still needed a small amount.

Delilah scowled. “A while ago.”

“How much of a while?” Gabriel probed.

Now she sighed. “Just under a fortnight,” she replied flatly.

“That’s far too long to go without, Delilah,” Gabriel said in a worried voice.

“Yeah, well, I’ve been a little preoccupied.”

“You can feed from me,” came Ira’s low voice. I gaped at him.

“Did you just talk?” I questioned, shocked. The big, burly shapeshifter gave me a sheepish look.

“Oh, don’t look so surprised. He’s been talking to me for days,” Delilah said.

I sat back, folding my arms. “Well, now I’m offended. I thought we were buddies.”

Ira looked a little guilty, shooting me an apologetic expression, before Delilah gripped his shoulder. “I can’t feed from you. I only ever feed from human donors. Most of them are already addicted.”

“It’s just one time though,” Alvie interjected “Harmless, really.”

“I want to.” Ira stood firm. I still couldn’t get over the fact that he was talking. How had I missed that? Then again, we had been a little busy fighting for our lives.

Gabriel shot Delilah an encouraging look, and she threw up her hands, exasperated. “Fine, I’ll feed from Ira. Later though.”

“I can put a glamour around the table if you want to do it now. You look like you need it,” Gabriel offered.

She stared at him, galled. “I’m not feeding here in front of all of you.”

“Why not? We’re practically family,” Alvie said. “There’s no judgement.”

“Exactly,” I added, just to annoy her. Cristescu’s half-sister was particularly fun to rile.

Delilah bit her lip, glancing hungrily at Ira. “Are you sure?” she asked, and he nodded stoically. She chewed her lip some more. “Fine. But your

glamour better be a good one, Gabriel. I don't want to freak out any of the other customers."

My attention went to Alora, who was listening to the conversation intently. She seemed nervous.

"It's morning, right?" she whispered, leaning close to my ear. I suppressed a shudder when her gentle breath met my skin. What was wrong with me? Maybe the disappointment from Tegan choosing Cristescu had me channelling my attraction onto Alora. It was fairly pathetic to be on the rebound from someone who you were never even with in the first place.

"Yes, it's morning. Delilah's a dhampir. So is Gabriel. This is a vamp-free zone," I told her reassuringly.

"Okay. That's good." She exhaled.

I studied her curiously. "Have you seen vampires in your visions?"

"Yes. Many."

"Hmm," I said, rubbing my chin.

I wanted to ask her more questions, but my attention was drawn to Gabriel. He was muttering an incantation to create a glamour. Once it was up no one would be able to see that Delilah was feeding from Ira. The redhead leaned in close to my friend and seemed to take her time breathing in his scent. His posture went a little rigid as her small fangs descended down past her lips.

A moment later, she placed her hand on his shoulder, whispering, "Sorry if this hurts a little."

Then she sank her teeth into his neck and started to drink. Ira was one of those unreadable types. He never let his emotions show outwardly, but I had to wonder if he was turned on right now. Some kind of attraction had obviously been brewing between these two for a while.

It was kind of funny how awkward and quiet everyone became as we watched them. I had no love for bloodsuckers, but watching Delilah feed was oddly riveting. Several gulps later, she pulled away and licked her lips. Her pupils were dilated to the point where almost all the green iris was gone. Feeling devious, I jiggled the table leg with my foot.

"Hey, Ira. Get your stiffy under control."

Gabriel and Alvie burst into laughter while Delilah shot me a death stare. One end of Ira's mouth curved up, as though he was trying to suppress a smile. At least he still had a sense of humour. Next to me, Alora blushed even though the comment had nothing to do with her. Wow, this girl was *shy*.

I probably wasn't the best person for her to be around, since half the things that came out of my mouth needed an eighteen and up rating.

The waitress came and began setting food down in front of us, and I dug into my bacon and eggs with gusto.

"So, what's the plan for today?" Gabriel asked.

"I booked us in to stay here another night. Today, I was thinking we could drive into the city and scope the place out, see if the vamps are still killing, or if Cristescu has ordered them to behave themselves. We'll check my street out, too, and see if everything's okay. If it is, then we'll head back there tomorrow. I can't be putting you all up in the lap of luxury like this forever," I joked.

Delilah snorted. "*Right*. I think I saw a cockroach this morning."

"Ah, a nice bit of wildlife to give you the full experience," I replied with a wink.

Another snort.

"If we're going to the city," Alora said quietly. "Could you bring me to my parents' house? It's on Edmund Street just past the north side of the river."

I glanced at her, something tightening in my chest at the thought of her leaving already.

"Sure. We'll go and see if they're there. If not, and there's a big likelihood that they fled, you can stay with us."

She nodded and took a sip of her coffee. She looked cute in the clothes I bought her, just like the pretty girl next door. Seeing her appear out of nowhere in that ethereal gown last night made her seem almost like an apparition, but now she was sitting beside me eating her scrambled eggs, a light sprinkling of freckles across her cheeks, looking like everything I'd ever wanted in a girlfriend.

Christ, I really was on the rebound.

I thought about the possibility of Alora's family still being in the city. Would she want to stay in contact with me if they were? Perhaps when everything settled down, she might even let me take her out on a date. Asking her on a date wouldn't be weird, right?

We finished breakfast and then everyone loaded into the van. On my way back from the shopping mall earlier, I had stopped by the parameter of Theodore's enclosure and noted how even more people had gathered there. There was a frantic, desperate energy about the place.

Some people were saying the barrier was a sign of the apocalypse. Others thought that the devil had taken hold of Tribane. Most people were saying it was aliens. If I didn't know any better, I'd think it was aliens, too, trapping us in a cage so that they could study us or some shit.

The motorway was practically empty on the drive into the city, and when we arrived, the streets had very few people on them. Those present scurried from building to building, afraid that if they stayed outside too long, they might get snatched up by a fanged monster.

An old homeless man was sitting on the doorstep of a shop next to where I parked the van. He had a bottle of liquor in a brown paper bag and was taking sips every once in a while. I glanced around, and saw two human policemen on patrol on the other side of the street.

"Any spare change?" the man asked as I got out of the vehicle.

I stuck my hand in my pocket and pulled out a twenty I'd forgotten was there. Ah crap, I hated when that happened. Now I'd look like a prick if I didn't give it to him. His eyes lit up when I handed it over.

"Go wild," I said before jogging purposely toward the two officers.

"How's it going around here?" I asked them with a meaningful look.

They were both young, in their early twenties, with faces the picture of wary anxiety.

"Quiet," the blond one replied. "Not many people are leaving their houses. This morning there were several raids in supermarkets. People are stockpiling food." He paused and leaned closer, his voice turning conspiratorial. "There haven't been any more ... vampire attacks, but we're all expecting them tonight. They can only come out at night, right?" He swallowed hard.

"Yeah, that's right. You're safe as houses during the day. What about the telephone lines and the internet, are they still not working?"

Both officers shook their heads. The dark-haired one eyed my DOH jacket.

"You're one of those slayers, aren't you?" he asked with barely contained fascination. "My uncle was one before he died. At least that's the rumour in our family."

"I am, not that it means much anymore. Most of us have been killed."

His enthusiasm quickly deflated. "Is that why the vampires are killing people?"

"No. Listen, boys, I have to go, but you're doing a great job. Keep up

the good work and stay safe.” I patted each of them on the back before returning to the others who were still waiting inside the van.

Just before I got there, though, I spotted someone passing through one of the alleys just off the street. A suspiciously familiar blond head of hair. Stealthily, I slipped down the alley and climbed up a ladder to a small nook on the side of the building. I breathed as little as possible and kept watching.

Seconds later, Cristescu passed beneath me. The fucker really could come out in the daylight now. He walked at human speed and had this weird look on his face as though every little thing he saw fascinated him. A moment later, he was gone, disappearing down another alley. I let out the breath I was holding.

Seeing him walk by like that was strange. He didn’t seem like the all-powerful, scary new being that he did on the roof. He seemed like his usual self, i.e. a confident, ‘knows all too well how good looking he is’ prick.

I pulled out my phone to call Tegan, before remembering the lines were down. I wondered where Cristescu was hiding her.

Keeping my little sighting to myself for now, I returned to the van and filled everyone in on what the policemen told me.

“We’ll take Alora to her house first, and then we’ll drive around, see if we spot anything unusual.”

“We should try to find Rita,” Alvie said. “If we can somehow convince her to leave Theodore, I’m sure she’ll be able to break the seal around the city. She’s the only one who can.”

“Have you not seen your witchy friend recently?” I asked him. “She’s gone to the dark side, and I’m talking Darth Vader dark side. It’ll be very near impossible to get her back.”

“I never would have taken you for a trekkie nerd,” Delilah commented snidely.

I pointed a finger at her and smiled. “*Star Wars*, babe, not *Star Trek*, though I am partial to a woman in one of those tight Starfleet uniforms.”

“You like a woman in uniform. How original,” Delilah deadpanned.

“Rita’s stronger than you know,” Alvie went on, unable to give up on his best friend. “If anyone can break through darkness, it’s her.”

I gave him a considering look before pulling the van out of its parking spot. I knew Rita was powerful, but I still thought the chances of her coming back to us were about as likely as me pulling Scarlett Johansson – in other words: nil.

Alora's neighbourhood wasn't too far from my own, a ten-minute walk at most. She told me the address, and I stopped once I reached her house.

"We're here," I told her softly before getting out and walking around to her side. I helped her out of the van and led her to the front door. The garden gate lay on the ground, torn off its hinges. I didn't mention this to her because I didn't want to upset her, but it certainly wasn't a good sign. At least the front door was still intact. I pressed the button to ring the doorbell.

Radio silence.

I pressed again but still nothing.

"Maybe they've gone out," Alora suggested.

"Yeah, maybe."

"I wish I had my key to get in, that way you could leave me and get on with the other things you need to do."

"I'm not leaving you until I know you're with your family, Goldy," I said, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. I hadn't meant to touch her. It was just one of those instinctive things. She sucked in a quick breath, letting it out when I drew my hand away from her.

I tapped my toe against the step. "How do you feel about me breaking in?" I asked, eyeing the door and knowing it'd be a piece of piss to get open. Most people didn't realise how easy it was for their homes to be broken into, especially by sneaky buggers like me who knew exactly how to do it.

"Um, yeah, okay. But can you try to do as little damage as possible?"

"I won't leave a single scratch," I told her before pulling a small piece of wire from my wallet.

I stuck it into the keyhole, jiggled it around a little until I got some traction, and felt the lock turning. Seconds later, the door popped open, and I stepped back, allowing Alora to go in first. My jaw dropped when I saw the state of the place. I didn't know how to break it to her that her parents either fled in a hurry or their house got trashed. Whether it was by chaos infested humans or vampires, I couldn't say. Either way, things weren't looking great.

"What do you see?" Alora asked just before she tripped on a smashed picture frame. I managed to catch her by the elbow just in time.

"I hate to break it to you," I told her gently. "But the house is trashed."

"Trashed?" she questioned shakily.

"Yeah, I'm sorry, Goldy. Look, I'm gonna check all the rooms and see if I can find any clues as to where your folks might be."

She nodded and swallowed. She didn't look too hot when she grabbed

hold of my arm.

“I think I need to sit down for a minute,” she said right before her eyes fell shut and her body dropped, convulsions wracking her frame. It took me a second to realise she was having another vision.

4.

Tegan

I woke up to Ethan's familiar scent as he held me in his arms. It was odd to be able to conduct a daytime routine with him now, sleeping at night and going out during the day. His silky fingers trailed along my spine before caressing my lower back. I arched up into his touch.

"Hi," I practically purred as I revelled in the feel of him against me.

"Good morning, beautiful. Shall we go and visit your dear *bunică* today?" he asked with a hint of a smile.

"My *bunică*?" I questioned, brow furrowing.

"Your grandmother," he translated.

I snickered. "She might be my grandmother, but she's certainly not dear."

"So, you don't want to go?"

"I never said that," I replied, crawling out of his lap to stand at the foot of the bed. My clothes from yesterday were strewn across the floor, and I crinkled my nose at the idea of wearing them again.

"You don't happen to have anything I can wear lying around, do you?"

Ethan stretched his chiselled torso out, and my eyes were drawn to the V of his hips. "Go to Delilah's room and take whatever you like."

I crinkled my nose deeper at the thought of being stuck in something that Delilah would wear. I'd barely be able to fit my boobs into one of her tops, never mind everything else. Still, I went to her room and began searching through her walk-in wardrobe. *Ugh*. Everything she owned was so tight and form-fitting. No comfortable baggy jeans or tops for her.

After a good fifteen minutes of searching through silky dresses, I finally laid my hands on a pair of khaki combats, the kind you'd find in a women's boutique that's trying to be edgy, and a Metallica T-shirt. I guessed the T-shirt must have belonged to an ex-boyfriend of some variety because I highly doubted Delilah was into heavy metal.

I threw on the clothes and returned to Ethan's room, where I found him dressed in loose jeans and a long-sleeved T-shirt that framed his shoulders nicely. Downstairs, I ate a slice of cold pizza, which Ethan screwed up his nose at, but it was delicious, so he could judge all he wanted. Then we

hopped into his car to drive to Emilia's house.

Reaching her stately manor, I stared out the car window and up at the house where my mother was raised. *Who were you?* I wondered. It was almost impossible to link the Dora who birthed me with the Darya Emilia had raised. They lived in entirely different worlds.

Ethan stopped at the high gates and lowered his window to press the button for the intercom. A minute later, a well-to-do male voice came through.

"Good day. How may I help you?"

"Good day to you, too," Ethan replied politely. "My name is Ethan Cristescu and with me is Mrs Petrovsky's granddaughter, Tegan Stolle. We would like to meet with the lady of the house if it isn't too much trouble."

"I'll inform Emilia of your request," the voice replied before the intercom clicked off.

"She's not going to let us in," I said on a sigh, dropping my elbow onto the dash and resting my cheek dejectedly on my forearm. I was eager to see Rebecca and make sure Emilia was treating her all right. I was also of half a mind to take her with me, but Emilia wasn't just going to let me walk out of there with her precious daughter replacement.

Several minutes passed before the voice came back on the intercom. "Emilia has agreed to see you," came the unexpected reply. "Please, come in."

The gate buzzed open, and Ethan drove through. He parked by the front entrance, and we got out of the car. Just before he could knock on the door, I pulled his arm back and stared up at him.

"Don't you think it's a bit too convenient that she's letting us into her house?" I asked. "She's got a little girl in there that she's kidnapped and is desperate to keep. Why would she let me in?"

The stark remembrance that Pamphrock was dead hit me suddenly. Even if I did get Rebecca back, I wouldn't have anyone to return her to. Unless, of course, her mother decided to make a miraculous recovery from whatever institution was currently caring for her.

"She won't try anything, not with me there. My people would come after her if she did."

"Are you certain their loyalties run that deep?" I questioned, pulling no punches. "It wasn't too long ago that they were siding with Whitfield when he decided to exile you."

Ethan took a lock of my hair between his fingers, his knuckles grazing my skin. "Everything is different now. Trust me in this."

"I hope you're right," I muttered just before he knocked.

A well-dressed butler answered, and I presumed this was the same guy who'd been speaking to us through the intercom.

"Welcome," he greeted. "Emilia will be with you shortly."

He escorted us through a vast entryway and inside a high-ceilinged living room. The décor was very fancy, but I didn't like it at all. I enjoyed a good comfortable, lived-in space. This place was so pristine it felt like I was staining it just by standing there.

Ethan and I sat on the long sectional sofa, and the butler asked us if we'd like anything to drink.

"Yeah, a double vodka, please," I replied jokingly, even though I kind of wasn't joking at all. I needed some Dutch courage to face Emilia.

The butler nodded and left the room. Ethan arched an eyebrow at me.

"What? I need it. Emilia's not going to be a walk in the park to talk to. In fact, she can be quite the bitch. I get the feeling she hates that I'm her relative but feels this grudging obligation to get to know me."

"Has anyone ever said that your low self-esteem becomes you?" Ethan asked sarcastically, lounging on the sofa and still managing to look beautiful and laid back in such a stuffy environment. The scent of peonies was so strong it was almost cloying.

"I wear it like a badge of honour," I replied just as the butler returned with the vodka.

Ethan watched as I raised the glass to him in a salute before knocking it back. A minute later, Emilia appeared, and Ethan took my hand into his. Her eyes zoned in on the movement before she stepped over to an armchair in front of us and sat down.

Emilia wore a knee-length, burgundy silk dress with a V neckline. Her attention settled on Ethan.

"I don't believe we've met. Ethan Cristescu, isn't it?"

"That's right," he replied, leaning forward and taking her hand into his. He placed a kiss on her skin and glanced up, flashing his eyes at her. He must have willed them to go black for a moment because Emilia jumped back in a fright.

Her furious gaze darted to me. "Please tell me you didn't!" she cried.

"What? Tell you I didn't what?" I asked in confusion.

“This man is a vampire, and you allowed him to drink from you. There’s no other explanation as to why he’s sitting here in a room full of daylight.”

I smirked casually. “Oh, yeah. I did do that. It’s not what I came to talk to you about though. And relax, he’s not going to bite you. Not unless I tell him to.”

At this, Ethan shot me a grin.

Emilia visibly bristled and settled back into her seat. Trying to appear unruffled, she glanced down to study her fingernails which were painted the same hue as her dress. “So many men in your life, I can hardly keep up,” she tutted.

“It takes one to know one,” I shot back, and she narrowed her eyes at me with a scowl.

There was silence for a moment before she asked, “So, do you care to enlighten me as to why you are here? Or are we going to just sit here all day?”

“I dunno. The vodka’s pretty good. I don’t mind sitting here all day,” I answered, pouring myself another shot from the bottle of Grey Goose the butler brought in. I might as well get my money’s worth out of this unpleasant visitation.

“Tegan and I came to ask a favour,” Ethan interjected, taking my empty glass from me and giving me a stern look that said, *No more vodka for you, Sunshine*.

“A favour?” Emilia scoffed.

“See? I told you she was going to be a bitch,” I said tipsily.

“Let’s try and keep things amiable, shall we, ladies?” Ethan requested smoothly, taking my hand back into his. His touch calmed me slightly.

“Fine,” I muttered while Emilia proudly lifted her chin and nodded.

“I suppose you know about the barrier surrounding the city,” Ethan continued.

“I’ve been informed of it, yes,” Emilia replied stiffly.

“Doesn’t it bother you?” I asked.

She glanced back down at her nails. “I have no immediate plans to travel. And I’m sure the situation will resolve itself sooner or later.”

“I don’t think it’s going to be quite as simple as that,” Ethan disagreed. “All signs point towards Theodore as the culprit, and nothing with him has ever been easy. We’ve come here because you informed Tegan that her grandfather is a sorcerer, and she would like to get in contact with him. We

think he's the only one who will be able to help us."

"Roman?" Emilia exclaimed with an incredulous expression. "You want me to put you in contact with Roman?" Disbelief coloured her words as she shook her head. "He's not in Tribane. Nobody knows where he is, and certainly not I. Even if I did know, there would be no way for you to reach him since the barrier is up."

"He's a sorcerer. I'm sure he could find some way to break through it."

Emilia's gaze flicked from me to Ethan. "Isn't it better if it's left in place anyway? Without that barrier, humans would be fleeing the city and spreading stories about killer vampires and dark magic. Before long, the world's media would set their attention on us, and we'd all have to leave and start over. If the world ever found out the truth it would be a disaster. They'd try to kill us all."

Well, I never thought of it like that.

"What do you suggest we do then?" I questioned.

"I'm not suggesting anything. I'm staying out of all of this and focusing on keeping myself and my little girl safe."

"Your little girl?" I exclaimed. "She's not yours, Emilia. You stole her."

"She's mine now. Her father is dead. Who else is going to raise her?"

I smiled smugly. "She has a mother, you know."

Emilia paled. "What? Where? I was under the impression her mother had passed away."

"That's none of your concern. What is your concern is the fact that you're going to hand Rebecca over to me so that I can return her to her rightful parent."

I didn't know where my steely determination came from. All I knew was I felt a sense of loyalty to Rebecca that was almost sisterly, and I certainly wasn't going to leave her to be brought up by Emilia Petrovsky. I could just imagine the loneliness of growing up in this big, sterile house under the supervision of such a woman. She probably made Rebecca wear a flipping ball gown just to go brush her teeth.

Emilia folded her arms tightly over her chest. "You can't have her. I won't hand her over."

I laughed, putting on my best Oscar-winning performance. "Oh, Emilia, you have no idea who her mother is, do you?"

"Clearly I don't, and you won't tell me," she answered in annoyance.

"You should hand her over. Her mother is a scary woman, not someone

you'd want to piss off," I lied.

Emilia eyed me sceptically. "I don't believe you."

Damn, maybe my performance wasn't so Oscar-winning after all.

"Well, that's your funeral. If you want to put yourself in danger for a little girl who you didn't even know existed a week ago, and who isn't related to you in any way whatsoever, that's your choice."

"Are those sour grapes I hear in your voice? Are you jealous?" Emilia questioned somewhat smugly.

"Yeah, because I really want to be coddled by some crazy old witch," I bit back.

"We should leave," Ethan said, squeezing my hand.

"Yeah, we should. I don't need your help, and I will free Rebecca," I informed her coolly.

"She's not a prisoner. I'm giving her the kind of life most little girls can only dream about."

"We both know that's a lie, but whatever." I stood, and Ethan followed. The butler waited in the hallway to escort us out, and when we reached Ethan's car, I slammed my hands down on the dash in frustration.

"That was a complete waste of time."

"Not necessarily," Ethan said. "We might not have gotten any information on how to find Roman, but I can get the girl for you if that's what you want."

My interest piqued as I turned to him. "You can? How?"

"I can sense which room she's in. I could easily break in and get her."

"Yes, yes, go, please," I urged.

He leaned in and kissed me quickly on the lips. "Just out of curiosity, what are we going to do with the girl when we have her?"

"I'm going to return her to her mother as I said."

"Ah, okay. For a moment there I thought you wanted to keep her for yourself." Now he grinned.

"No way!" I exclaimed. "I don't have a clue how to raise a kid." Although saying that, if her mother wasn't fit to take her, I'd certainly give it a try. Rebecca was ten, so it wouldn't be too hard to care for her, right? Not as scary as being handed a new-born baby, anyway.

Ethan swiftly got out of the car. I watched as he used his vampire speed and agility to climb up the side of the building, landing on the roof. From there, he dropped down onto a balcony and slipped inside a pair of French

doors. Seconds later, he emerged with Rebecca struggling in his arms. I suddenly realised that she might've remembered Ethan from her first abduction by Whitfield. He didn't have any contact with her during that time, but he was there during my standoff with Whitfield and Eliza. Another second passed, and he was climbing into the car with a crying Rebecca. As soon as she saw me, though, she quit struggling.

"Tegan?" she whispered in disbelief.

"Hey, honey, come sit on my lap," I said, a feeling of relief washing over me.

"You came for me again," she exclaimed as she crawled over to me, and I gave her a big, squeeze hug.

"I did."

Her momentary happy expression faltered while Ethan put the car in gear and started driving away from the manor. "Miss Emilia said my daddy is dead. Is it true?"

God, what a bitch. I couldn't believe she told Rebecca about Pamphrock's death already.

"Yeah, honey, it's true. I'm so sorry," I said, gently stroking her hair.

Tears began to fill her eyes as she clutched onto me tightly. We'd just driven through the gates when I heard a sharp wail emanate from the manor.

"You better put your foot on it," I said to Ethan. "It sounds like Emilia's already discovered Rebecca's gone."

The little girl held my hand tight. "I don't like her."

I smiled. "Who would? She's crazy."

My gaze was drawn to the overhead mirror. A town car had suddenly sped up behind us. At the wheel was Emilia's butler, and Emilia sat in the passenger seat, a wild expression on her face.

"Don't let her take me again," Rebecca pled, tears spilling from her eyes as her lower lip trembled. "She said I had to change my name to Darya. I don't want to be called Darya. My name is Rebecca."

Lord, Emilia was even crazier than I originally thought.

"I won't let her," I told her firmly, tightening my hold around her.

Ethan's car swerved as a stream of Emilia's sparks lashed against the side of the vehicle.

"I don't think she'll come across the river into vampire territory. How far are we from a bridge?" I asked.

"Two minutes," Ethan answered before stomping his foot down on the

gas pedal.

We were out of reach of Emilia's sparks now, and I saw her in the distance behind us, half her body sticking out the top of her car through the sunroof. She threw her hands in front of her, streams of magic flowing from her palms. I almost regretted having taken Rebecca and making a true enemy of my grandmother when I saw the insane look in her eyes.

We got onto one of the busier shopping streets where lots of people were looting the abandoned stores. Emilia was so crazed that she didn't even bother to disguise her magic with a glamour. Several people paused their looting to gape at her, slack-jawed.

She began weaving fire through her sparks, and as it descended on Ethan's car, it burned through several men and women who had been unfortunate enough to be crossing the road. Their singed, blackened bodies left a trail behind us.

Fuck.

Panic erupted, and those left on the street started to flee.

I remembered Emilia describing the sparks as 'electrical fire', but I'd never been able to do anything like that with mine. I couldn't believe she just killed a shitload of people simply because they were in her way.

"She's F-U-C-K-ing nuts," I shouted at Ethan, spelling out the word so as not to swear in front of Rebecca, despite this being such a swear-worthy occasion right now.

"Yep," he agreed, swerving around a corner.

I spotted a bridge coming up ahead, looking like salvation in worn steel. My panicked heart rate slowed as we neared it just as something banged loudly against the side of the car. The next thing I knew, Ethan was curling his body around both mine and Rebecca's to shield us from the impending impact. Emilia's magic flipped the car completely over.

All I felt was his solid, impenetrable muscle protecting us as Rebecca started to cry again. Less than a second later it was over.

"Are you okay?" Ethan asked, staring down at me.

"I think so. We need to get out of here and over that bridge."

"I know, hold still."

He reached out and pushed at the door beside me. It groaned under his strength and, seconds later, fell off, meeting the ground with a loud clang. *Whoa.* I had a feeling that was something he couldn't do before he drank my blood. Ethan took Rebecca from me, and I crawled out as he followed

behind. A crowd had gathered to ogle the wreckage. I readied myself for Emilia's next attack, but it never came.

I looked around in bewilderment. The car she and her butler had been in was nowhere to be seen. That was when my attention was drawn to the freakish giggling coming from overhead. My eyes travelled up the building in front of me until I saw two figures standing on the roof dressed in all black. No, that wasn't right—there were *three* figures. One of them was Emilia, but she was unconscious as Theodore held her in his arms. Beside him was Rita, who gazed down at me without expression.

A swirl of purple smoke surrounded them, and when it dissolved, all three of them had disappeared.

“What the hell?” I whispered. What did Theodore want with Emilia?

Ethan stepped up beside me still carrying Rebecca. “Did you see what I just saw?” I asked him.

“Yes, it was Theodore,” he confirmed.

“He took Emilia.”

“He probably wants to use her for something. Perhaps he thinks she'll join his side.”

“Wonderful,” I grunted.

He grabbed my hand. “Come. We must get into vampire territory before they come back.”

I nodded, though I didn't think Theodore was coming back just yet.

When we reached Ethan's house, I put Rebecca to sleep in one of the guest bedrooms. All the action had drained her energy. She only had a small bruise on her temple, though, which was lucky since Ethan's car had been totalled. It was a good thing he was there to shield us from most of the impact.

Once I left her, I went and ran a bath, while Ethan was downstairs meeting with the last of the vampires from yesterday. I unplugged my phone from where it had been charging in Ethan's room and brought it into the bath with me. Ethan mentioned something about being unable to make any calls, but it looked like I finally had a signal again. The moment I turned it on it started beeping with messages from Amanda that had been sent the other night.

The first read, *Oh fuck! Just saw my neighbour get attacked right out on the street. WTF is happening? My parents went to visit my aunt's farm in the country and I'm all on my own.*

And the second, *Jesus, Tegan. The city is swarming with vamps gone nuts. I need you to call me ASAP.*

The final one said, *I'm hiding in the basement. Please call. I'm scared.*

Upon finishing the final message, I dialled her number immediately. It only rang once before she picked up.

"Tegan! Oh, thank God."

"Amanda, where are you?"

"I'm still in my basement. There's no food here, and I'm starving, but I can't leave. It's too crazy outside."

"You can leave now. Things have settled down. Listen, I need you to come to this address." I rattled off Ethan's house number and street name before reassuring her again that she'd be okay, then I hung up. I seemed to be gathering strays at record-breaking speed today. Next, I pulled up Finn's number, but the few bars of signal I had a moment ago flickered in and out before disappearing completely. Seemed like the reception was still patchy.

Setting the phone aside, I allowed my body to sink into the bubbles and closed my eyes. I got at least twenty minutes of uninterrupted relaxation before the door opened, and I sensed Ethan's presence. Even with my eyes closed, I could feel his nearness. He knelt by the large tub and dipped his hand into the foamy water.

"That's a good look for you," he murmured.

"Why thanks," I replied, a smile tugging at my lips. I reached up with my foot and turned the nob to let more hot water in. When I finally looked at Ethan, his fangs were fully descended and his eyes had grown dark.

"I told Amanda to come here. She's frightened at what's been happening and needs somewhere she'll be safe."

Ethan frowned. "I just sent Lucas out to gather food and clothing for you and Rebecca. He's staying in one of the guest rooms, though, so I'm not sure how comfortable your friend will be."

"Just tell him to keep away from her, and it should be okay. She's sober now and seems determined not to fall back into old habits."

"Okay."

Ethan's fingertips grazed my nipple, and I sucked in a harsh breath, opening my eyes. He shot me a wicked, lustful glance before standing to undress. My muscles clenched with anticipation as I waited for him to join me. His top fell to the floor, followed shortly by his trousers and boxers, and before I knew it, he was climbing into the tub.

His knee slid between my legs, nudging at my sex, and I moaned. Then he bent his head and took my breast into his mouth, his fangs grazing my skin with just the right amount of pressure to tantalize instead of cut. His arm came around my waist, lifting the lower half of my body out of the water before sliding his thick length into me, filling me up.

I moaned.

He lifted his head from my breast and stared intensely into my eyes. His expression was serious, his mouth hanging half-open as he thrusted in deliciously slow. Then, he smiled.

“I hope you don’t have any plans for tonight.”

“Oh, yeah, why’s that?”

“Because tonight, beautiful, you’re mine.”

For a moment, my chest seized with a pang of anxiety, my body’s instinctual response to possessive declarations from a dangerous creature. But a moment later Ethan sped up the pace of his thrusts, hammering into me with phenomenal speed, and I forgot all about my worries.

5.

Finn

It took half an hour for Alora to regain consciousness. When she did, she sat up and fixed her top into place as if nothing had happened. She ran her hands through her hair and asked very politely if she could have a glass of water.

I brought the others into the house after she'd started having her vision, so Alvie ran to get the water. I stared at her until he got back, trying to decide whether or not to ask her what she saw. She didn't seem too keen on telling me this morning, and I didn't think that was going to change any time soon.

Alvie returned and handed her the glass of water. She downed the whole thing in only a couple of swallows and set the glass on the floor by her feet. Alvie sat beside her and patted her on the back.

"You okay?" he asked.

Alora cleared her throat. "I'll be fine. I just have this God-awful headache, and the past few times I've had a vision I've been seeing the same thing."

"You don't normally see the same thing?" I questioned.

She shook her head. "My visions are usually unique. No repetitions."

"What did you see?" Delilah asked from where she stood by the door.

"I saw a little girl with blonde hair," Alora answered unexpectedly. "I saw her being important in bringing peace among the city's supernaturals for the first time ever. She'll be a formidable ruler. I guess that since it's all I've been seeing these days it's pretty important."

A little blonde girl? The person who most fit that description was Pamphrock's kid, Rebecca, who, I remembered, was still being held captive by Emilia Petrovsky. I needed to do something to rectify that situation as soon as possible.

"Do you feel up to leaving with us?" I asked. "Your parents aren't here, and it doesn't look like they're coming back any time soon."

Her eyes grew misty, and her throat moved as she swallowed hard. Now I felt shitty for being so tactless.

"Yeah," she finally whispered, getting up from the couch. Alvie helped her, but she seemed to be steady enough on her feet.

"Who do you think the girl in her vision is?" Gabriel asked me quietly

as we returned to the van.

“Sounds a lot like Rebecca.”

He nodded in agreement. “That’s what I was thinking.”

“There’s no way to tell how far into the future Alora’s prediction is. Rebecca’s still too young to rule. It could be ten or twenty years from now before there’s peace.”

Gabriel grimaced. “Let’s hope that’s not true.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Let’s hope.”

A couple of minutes later we pulled up outside my house, and the street seemed quiet. Dead almost. A couple of houses had their windows smashed in, but thankfully all of mine were still intact. Alvie and Gabriel went to check out the RV Rita had been staying in, and I led the others into my place.

A soft hand gripped mine, and I glanced down to see Alora by my side.

“Sorry. You don’t mind guiding me, do you? I’m still not used to moving around on my own in unfamiliar spaces.”

“No, of course not,” I answered, my voice coming out unexpectedly tender. Again, I felt that tightening in my chest. I should’ve known she couldn’t just walk around unescorted.

Inside, we found my place the same as we left it. It was a stroke of luck that nobody decided to break in and steal stuff, because I had an extra storage space full of weapons under the stairs that was probably going to come in handy.

“You hungry?” I asked Alora as I led her into the kitchen. I pulled a packet of chocolate chip cookies from the cupboard and handed them to her. She ran her hand over the packet hesitantly.

“What is it?”

“Cookies,” I explained

Silently, she nodded and opened them before pulling one out.

“I’ll be back in a minute. I just have a couple of things to take care of,” I said, leaving her sitting at the table.

Making my way to the stairs, I opened the door to the small closet underneath and dragged out the heavy-duty black trunk I kept locked in there. I opened it and retrieved my Benelli M4 semi-automatic shotgun. When I had to use firearms, this baby was my favourite.

Living in Tribane, where the supernatural reigned, guns weren’t always my weapon of choice. However, they could come in useful when you needed to make a statement and scare some people into acting right.

Since times were so uncertain, I decided to take this one with me. Upstairs, I changed into a clean set of clothes. The only stuff that was washed was my DOH uniform, so I threw that on, a sense of mourning sweeping over me as I thought of all my dead comrades. Of our dead leader. The organisation I'd dedicated my life to for years was gone. The only saving grace for me was the knowledge that there were other branches around the world. Perhaps I could rebuild things here in Tribane with the help of those branches.

I tightened my jaw and steeled myself for the battle ahead. Theodore wasn't going to get away with what he'd done, but first, I needed to save Rebecca. If Alora's vision was to be believed, then that girl might be the key to our survival and possibly the key to killing Theodore once and for all.

When I went back downstairs, Alora was still in the kitchen munching on the cookies I had given her. She heard me come in and straightened up, setting the packet down on the table and wiping crumbs from her face.

"Where's Delilah and Ira?" I asked.

"They went across the street to Delilah's house to get some of her clothes," she answered.

Right. I'd almost forgotten Cristescu had been living over there. Alvie and Gabriel came in from the RV, and I told them about my plan to go to Emilia Petrovsky's house for Rebecca.

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" Alvie asked warily. "She's a powerful witch. She won't take kindly to us showing up."

"She'll take kindly to it whether she likes it or not," I answered brashly. I wasn't normally so flippant, at least I liked to think I wasn't, but this whole shitty situation was really starting to get to me.

"Who is this girl?" Alora interjected.

I turned to her. "I think she's the one you saw in your vision."

"Oh," she whispered, and her brow furrowed.

"What is it?"

"Nothing. It's just I'm not sure if you're right. I mean, it could be her, but I just have this feeling that my vision was far in the future. I feel like the girl I saw hasn't even been born yet."

"Well," I said, clasp my hands together, "I could be wrong, but I need to get her anyway. She was abducted and is the daughter of my friend who recently passed away."

"I'm so sorry," she said, reaching out to touch my hand. Something

about the comforting gesture soothed me.

Half an hour later, we were all back in the van again, heading towards the district where most of the magical families had their homes. As we neared Petrovsky Manor, a black town car sped by us and stopped at the entrance gates. A smartly dressed man reached out the driver's side window, pressed a few buttons on the entry system, and waited as the gates opened up. I pulled in directly behind him before the gates had the chance to close again.

The town car stopped, and a man in his fifties emerged with an almighty scowl on his face.

"What do you think you're doing?!" he yelled, stomping towards the van.

"I'm looking for Emilia. She around?" I asked, getting out of the van and stepping up to face him.

He sighed long and hard and swiped his hand over his face, his forehead lined with stress.

"No, she's not here. She's been taken."

I furrowed my brow. "Taken by whom?"

"The sorcerer!" he cried. "What would he want with her? My goodness, he's going to kill her."

"Hey, hey, calm down. Theodore has a bone to pick with the vamps. Emilia's one of his own. Did he take the girl, too?"

The man shook his head. "She was kidnapped by a woman claiming to be Emilia's granddaughter. She came to the house with a vampire who could walk in the sun!"

He looked like he needed to sit down with a strong glass of brandy as he told me this. A smile touched my lips. Tegan came for Rebecca already. The little minx beat me to it. A sense of relief I didn't know I needed washed over me. If she and Cristescu were working together, did that mean we had nothing to fear from him? Was he going to rule over the vampires peacefully?

I patted the man on the shoulder. "You should go inside and rest. You look like you need it."

To be honest, he seemed like he was going to faint any minute. I thought he was about to nod in agreement when his steely reserve returned.

"I want you people off this property *immediately*,"

"Right you are, captain," I said, saluting him.

I hopped back in the van and quickly gave everyone an update. The gates opened, and I pulled out of Emilia's stately residence. What to do now

though? The sky was darkening, and it would be night soon. I was tempted to go to Cristescu's house and see Tegan, but then I thought better of it. I'd wait until the morning. That way, his army of vamps would be tucked safely into their coffins and I'd be able to talk to him man to man.

Hehe. *Tucked safely into their coffins.* That was a good one.

"Where are we going now?" Gabriel asked.

"Back to the hotel," I answered. "Tomorrow we're going to pay Tegan and Cristescu a little visit."

Delilah chewed on her lip worriedly at the prospect of seeing her brother. I guessed she was anxious about how much he'd changed. That made two of us.

We ate at the diner again, and I was beginning to get used to the greasy spoon vibe of the place. When we all separated to go to our rooms, Alora flopped down onto the bed and curled up in a ball. I bent over her, hoping she was all right.

"Hey," I murmured, putting a hand on her shoulder.

"Please, just leave me alone for a while," she requested quietly before pressing her face into the pillow. She clearly needed to have a cry about her parents being AWOL, so I left her to it. Sometimes we all needed a good cry to get it all out.

Yeah, I was secure enough in my masculinity to admit it.

To give Alora a little privacy, I turned on the television and went into the bathroom to shave. I brought some of my toiletries with me from the house, since something seriously needed to be done about the potential Gandalf beard I was cultivating.

Once finished, I peeked my head into the room to see Alora fast asleep on top of the covers. I went to kneel by the side of the bed, for some reason fascinated by the way her face looked in slumber. On instinct, I reached out to touch her before stopping myself. I didn't want her waking up and getting freaked out by me being up so close and personal like a total lech. Okay, so maybe she wouldn't be able to actually *see* me, but she'd definitely sense me, hear me breathing. Again, like a lech.

Deciding I needed to get out for a bit, I threw on my boots and jacket and headed for the minivan. I would've switched to my car when we went to the house, but there wouldn't have been enough room for all six of us, especially since Ira was such a giant. The van's engine sputtered a little and wouldn't start.

“Come on, baby,” I coaxed it. “Come on.”

Finally, it roared to life, and I tore out of the hotel parking lot. Through no conscious decision of my own, I found myself driving towards the parameter of the magical barrier around the city again. People were camped out in tents and caravans now. Some were simply lying on the ground in sleeping bags. I didn't envy them. It was as cold as a witch's tits out here tonight.

I stopped the van a good distance away and scanned the area, just sitting for a couple of minutes and trying to think. That was when I noticed something odd. Vehicles were coming through the barrier from the outside, but nobody could leave from the inside.

It all suddenly made sense. If people travelling into Tribane couldn't get past the barrier, there would be havoc and the outside world's attention would be on the city. The fact that people could get in but not out meant that there wouldn't be any suspicion. Well, at least not until someone started noticing that those who travelled to the city never returned.

Eat your heart out, Hotel California.

A chill ran over me. People jumped up and down, waving their hands at the vehicles coming inside, urging them to go no farther, but the people on the outside seemingly couldn't see in. It was all a part of the magic.

This needed to be stopped before things got even worse.

I started up the engine again and drove back in the direction of the city. This old wagon wasn't going to last much longer, and I needed a mode of transport that I could rely on. There were dozens of vans at the DOH compound, so I headed in that direction.

There wasn't a single whisper of life when I got there, and my gut sank. I'd been internalising the loss, trying not to feel the pain of losing something that was my entire reason for breathing for so long.

Everything was changed, I reminded myself, but all wasn't lost. I could start again.

I held onto the sentiment because otherwise I wasn't sure if I could keep going. Keep on fighting a battle that was no longer the same one I'd been fighting for so many years. The idea of peace chipped away at me. Ever since Alora told us about her vision, a sense of longing filled me.

A part of me wished to live in a world where there was no more fighting or killing.

Once I finally reached the entrance to the compound, I used my swipe

card to get inside. The emptiness of the place echoed as I headed to the garage and picked out a van. I loaded it up with a couple of crates of stakes, several handguns, some new arrows for my bow, and lots and lots of bullets.

Once done, I leaned against the side of the van and exhaled. I was torn between the need to kill vampires and the urge to just live a normal life. I'd spent so many years on edge, always waiting for the next catastrophe, that I wasn't sure I could ever be normal. What if there was peace? What sort of life did I want for myself in that world?

I was about to leave when something prickled at the back of my neck, some sixth sense telling me to watch out. Crouching low, I moved down the side of the van just as a dark-haired vamp appeared in front of me, fangs out and a smile on his face like all his Christmases had come at once.

So much for a normal life.

"Sorry, not tonight, Josephine," I told him with a wink. "There's a park down the street where I hear the rent boys do a booming business. You might want to try your luck there."

The words barely left my mouth before the vamp hissed and lunged at me. Luckily, I'd holstered one of my guns while I loaded weapons into the van, and I shot him in the stomach before he had the chance to bite me. The bullet wouldn't keep him down for long, but I didn't need long. I just needed one moment of opportunity.

I pulled a stake from my pocket and slammed it straight into his heart. *Damn, that felt good.* Nothing like a bit of vamp-staking to blow off some steam.

Oh, but if only it were that easy. At least another five came crawling out of the woodwork, and I swore loudly.

"We thought you'd all been killed," said a sharp-eyed female. "I guess there's always one that gets away." She licked her lips and stared at me like I was a prime piece of meat and she'd been starving for weeks.

"You don't want to do that," I warned her, aiming my gun at her head.

"Oh, really," she purred. "And why is that?"

"Because I'll blow your pretty head off. Now, kindly take a step back. I'll get in my van and drive away. Pretend this never happened."

She laughed at me as though amused. Fucking bitch. I hated vampire theatrics, and I'd witnessed plenty in my time. They had a bone to pick with slayers, and let's face it, why wouldn't they? It meant they were always very cat-like in killing us. They didn't just end our lives. They wanted to play with

us for a while, see us squirm before they crushed us.

Her laughter ceased, and she dove for me. It almost looked like she was flying for a second. I dropped to the ground and rolled out of her reach before putting a bullet in her head just like I'd threatened to do. I breathed heavily and swore again. That's when I realised I'd been stupid, because while I focused on the lady vamp, I hadn't been watching my back.

In this city, you always had to watch your back. I felt fangs sink into my neck before I saw him, a ginger-haired vampire with heavily muscled arms. His hand grasped my neck and squeezed.

"You don't want to kill me," I managed to sputter.

He grinned when he released my neck. "Sure, I don't." A trickle of my blood ran down his chin, and my stomach churned.

"No, really. Cristescu will be mighty pissed if he finds out I'm dead." Only because he probably wanted to do the honours himself, but lying was the only way I was getting out of this.

The vampire's grip loosened. "What did you just say?"

"Cristescu's your new Personal Jesus, right? He's a friend of mine. We go way back."

"A friend?" the vampire asked, gaze narrowed.

"I helped him out when you all had him exiled," I continued. "If you kill me, you'll be the next one in the ground."

I saw the cogs turning in the vampire's head as he made his decision. "Fine," he said, grabbing my wrists and pulling them behind my back. "I'll take you to Cristescu, and we'll see what he has to say. If you're lying, I'll torture you before I kill you."

"I wouldn't expect anything less," I quipped as he and his friends guided me away from the compound and into a garish canary yellow Ferrari, one vamp on either side of me to make sure I couldn't escape. The vamp I'd shot in the head was still lying on the ground unconscious. I expected she'd be making her own way home when she came to.

"I see you boys like to ride in style," I commented on the drive, earning myself a sharp punch to the jaw. *Shit, that hurt.* I wanted to rub where he hit me, but I couldn't since the vamps had tied my arms behind my back with cable. I was going to have a real pretty bruise on my mug in the morning.

A couple of minutes of total and absolutely creepy silence passed before we turned onto the street where Cristescu had been living before he was exiled. It looked like he'd decided to take his residence of choice back now

that he was a supervamp.

We came to a stop in front of the large, three-storey house, and I swallowed hard. Guess I wasn't going to have the chance to wait until morning to see him after all. I could only hope that Tegan was there and that he'd listen to her when she told him not to kill me.

6.

Tegan

I'd died and gone to heaven. Well, maybe not that, but it was close.

I lay on Ethan's bed while he licked me, his head between my legs and his tongue working some kind of freaking miracle on my clit. I grabbed tight onto the blankets, fisting them as I moaned. I'd never felt anything more exquisite.

Ethan raised his head for a brief moment, his voice a husky command as he said, "Come for me, *lumina mea*."

I couldn't hold back as I stared into his eyes and his tongue returned to my sweet bundle of nerves. His fingers thrust inside of me, and I undulated, shivering with an orgasm. I dropped my head back into the pillows and sighed, a big, stupid smile on my face. Ethan crawled up my body and nestled his head in the crook of my neck, pressing light kisses to my skin.

We'd had sex three times tonight, and I could already feel him hardening against me, eager for round four.

"You're unbelievable," I said, laughing, and he laughed, too, just as there was a knock on the bedroom door.

"Go away," Ethan ordered.

A second later, Lucas called, "There's someone downstairs to see you. I think you might want to take care of this now, Ethan."

"*La naiba*," he muttered grumpily as he climbed out of bed and pulled on a pair of jeans. I'd heard him say this phrase a few times. I thought it meant something like, *damn it* or *fuck's sake*. Either way, it always gave me a tingle. There was just something about a man saying stuff in a sexy foreign language that was incredibly appealing, especially when you had no clue what he was saying. He could be uttering romantic declarations or talking absolute filth.

Ethan threw on a T-shirt and some shoes before opening the door. I pulled the blankets over my body so that Lucas didn't cop an eyeful. He stood outside waiting and cocked his head inside as Ethan emerged, probably hoping to catch a glimpse of me in a state of undress.

Amanda arrived at the house a couple of hours ago, and I'd settled her into one of the spare rooms farthest away from Lucas's room. I told her he

was here, and she straightened her shoulders at the news, telling me she could handle him. I was proud of her at that moment.

“Tegan might want to come, too,” Lucas said to Ethan.

“Why?” both Ethan and I asked in unison.

“Because it has to do with your slayer friend,” Lucas explained.

“Finn?” I said, brow furrowed.

“Yes, he’s downstairs and only minutes away from being slaughtered by several of our people. He really knows how to kick up a ruckus, that one.”

My heart skipped a beat, and I shooed Lucas away so that I could get dressed. What, oh what, had Finn gotten himself into this time?

When I arrived downstairs fully clothed, I found Ethan and Lucas in the living room with another vampire I didn’t recognise. Finn was sitting on a chair with his hands tied behind his back. A bruise was emerging on his cheek and there was a bloodied bite mark on his neck. *Shit.*

I rushed to his side, kneeling on the floor by his chair. “Finn,” I breathed, my voice more air than sound. “Are you okay? You look like hell.”

“You should see the other fella,” he replied with a casual shrug.

Oh, Finn. Ever the comedian. I pulled him into my arms and hugged him tight, surprised by the amount of relief I felt at seeing him. I heard Ethan’s low growl from where he stood on the other side of the room, but I ignored it. Finn was my friend, and I was so incredibly happy to see him, so Ethan was just going to have to suffer through me hugging him.

“Where are the others?”

“They’re safe.”

“What’s going on here?” I asked as I surreptitiously eyed the muscular, red-haired vampire who was glaring daggers in Finn’s direction.

“I got jumped by a couple of vamps. I told them your boyfriend might not take too kindly to them killing me. Though, to be honest, by the way he’s looking at me right now, I think he’d take very kindly to it indeed.”

I pulled away from Finn and turned to look at Ethan. “Stop it. Nobody’s killing Finn tonight. Or ever.”

The red-haired vampire stared at me in awe as I addressed Ethan, while Lucas shook his head as if I were ridiculous for having the gall to give orders.

“He murdered one of my people tonight,” Ethan spoke coolly.

“I’m sure it was only in self-defence,” I countered. “And anyway, how many humans have your people killed in the last couple of days? If you want to kill Finn, you’ll have to go through me first.”

Just to show how serious I was, I summoned some of my magic, allowing it to spark and crackle from the palm of my hand. With each day that passed, it was becoming second nature to use my magic. Rarely did I need to be threatened anymore for it to make an appearance. I simply needed to call on the magic and immediately it answered. The red-haired vampire's body startled. He clearly didn't know I was a witch, and while it felt strange to say it, technically that's what I was.

A witch.

It wasn't an unpleasant thought. In fact, my magic practically purred under my skin as I accepted my new identity. It was like I'd finally come into my own.

I stared at Ethan just as sternly as he stared at me. "Have you forgotten how Finn welcomed you into his home not too long ago and made a pact to work with you when your own people shut you out?"

"No, I haven't forgotten," Ethan replied. "And really, I care very little for whatever killing has taken place. It is the way he looks at you that makes me want to murder him."

"Now you're being ridiculous," I retorted as my stomach tightened from the possessive gleam in his eyes.

"Hey, man," Finn interrupted. "I know she's with you now. There's no need for the caveman routine."

I inwardly wished Finn didn't always have to be so ready with a smart comment. He had a way with words that managed to rile people up, even when he was supposedly trying to be civil.

Ethan took a step forward, and I stood, placing myself in front of Finn. "If you hurt him, you'll lose me forever," I said, and I meant it.

Ethan looked deep into my eyes, an internal struggle going on in his own. The tension in the room was so thick it made me want to flee, but I stood my ground.

After what seemed like forever, but what was really only a matter of seconds, Ethan exhaled and turned his attention to Finn.

"You are lucky Tegan favours you," he said before dismissing the vampire who brought Finn here with a simple wave of his hand. The red-haired vampire looked palpably disappointed with Ethan's decision as he walked out with hunched shoulders.

"Well, now," Finn said once he was gone. "Who'd like to do the honours of untying me?"

I walked around to the back of his chair and slid the blade he'd given me from my jeans pocket, cutting through the cable tie.

"It's a good thing you decided to pardon me, your highness," Finn said, speaking directly to Ethan. I poked him in the shoulder, urging him to drop the sarcastic tone. He was way too cocky for someone who just barely avoided getting killed. He shot me an amused look before continuing, "Because I've got some news you might be interested in hearing."

"Oh?" Ethan said, going to sit down on the couch. "And what news is this?"

"Do you know about the barrier around the city?"

Ethan gave him a bored look that said, *Of course, I do.*

"Okay, but do you also know that while the barrier isn't allowing anyone to leave, it's letting people come inside? They just can't get back out once they pass through it."

Now he had Ethan's full attention as he sat up straight. "How do you know this?"

"Saw it with my own two eyes," Finn replied. "It spells trouble whichever way you want to spin it. There'll be riots and all sorts of trouble before the week is out. I spoke to two police officers earlier today, and they said people have been looting the stores and stockpiling food."

"That does sound bad," Lucas agreed.

"You need to find Theodore and figure out some kind of truce. Tell him he can have a portion of the city for himself if that will keep him happy," Finn suggested.

"If I thought that would subdue him, I'd do it in a heartbeat," Ethan said. "But Theodore isn't a man who will accept a percentage. He wants it all."

"You could at least try," Finn muttered in annoyance, and nobody spoke for a minute.

I was the one to break the silence. "Hey, I got Rebecca back from Emilia," I said to Finn, and he nodded, smiling.

"I know. You beat me to it. I went there today, but all I found was a distraught butler who told me Emilia had been taken by Theodore."

"Yes!" I exclaimed. "It was so weird. One minute Emilia was setting fire to anyone who got in her way as she chased us for Rebecca, and the next, she was gone. I saw Theodore holding her and laughing before he disappeared."

"Creepy."

"So creepy," I agreed.

“Have you other news, slayer?” Ethan interrupted us icily.

Finn scratched at his head. “Actually, yeah, I do.” He paused like he was unsure whether he should disclose this other news or not.

“Out with it,” Lucas interjected impatiently.

“Fine, fine. The other night we came across a woman.”

“What woman?” Ethan asked.

“I was driving along when a limo came speeding out of nowhere. All this white light was streaming from the windows. Magic, I’m guessing. Then this woman jumped out right in front of us. I almost ran her over. Then, get this, our old friend Michael Ridley emerged to chase after her. She was scared witless of him. We managed to fend him off. Well, actually, Ira did by biting off his hand.”

Lucas chuckled at that. I grimaced and swore under my breath. Ethan remained stoically silent.

“So anyway, this woman, her name is Alora and she’s half-elf. She can see into the future. Ridley kidnapped her two years ago and had been using her for her powers. He tried to cast a spell to take her ability from her, but it went wrong and ended up blinding her. I’ve kind of taken her under my wing, and she has these visions. She said that up until recently her visions were always different, but now she keeps seeing the same thing over and over.”

“What does she see?” I practically whispered, enthralled by Finn’s story.

“She sees a little blonde girl who will bring peace to the city. I think it might be Rebecca.”

I gasped and eyed Ethan, gauging his reaction to this information. His expression showed nothing except a tiny hint of interest.

After a stretch of silence, Ethan clasped his hands together, a thoughtful look on his face as he said, “So, we will keep Rebecca as safe as we possibly can. If she is to lead someday, and if this elf woman’s vision is correct, then no expense will be spared to ensure she reaches adulthood. I will see to it myself.”

Finn studied him, looking a little shocked by his response. “You care that much about peace?”

“You might not believe it, but I don’t enjoy war and bloodshed. If I had my way, all supernatural creatures would be able to live peacefully in Tribane.”

Finn’s eyebrows rose in surprise. “Well, I’m glad to hear it. But do you think it’s wise for a girl with Rebecca’s blood to be raised by vampires?”

“She will not be among vampires for long. I’ll make arrangements for her to be taken somewhere safe,” Ethan assured him.

“Wait,” I argued. “You can’t just send her to live with strangers.”

“Would you prefer to keep her here where she might be abducted yet again?” Ethan countered. I had no easy answer, falling silent as I worried my lip with my teeth. The likelihood of Rebecca’s mother being of healthy and sound mind enough to care for her was low. It was also unlikely that she’d have the resources to keep her as safe as Ethan could.

“Right,” Finn said, breaking through the quiet as he rose from his seat. “I better be going. Things to do, people to see.”

“Not too fast. I want you to bring Delilah to me. As you can see, I may be changed, but I am not a threat. My sister needs to come home now,” Ethan said.

Finn eyed him. “Okay, I’ll pass on the message.”

“See that you do.” There was a pause as Ethan eyed him with a serious look. “And thank you.”

Finn seemingly didn’t know what to say to that, so he kept schtum. “I’ll walk you out,” I said, and we proceeded to the door.

In the hallway, Finn turned to me with a serious look on his face. “You want to be here, right? He’s not forcing you? Because if he is—”

“What? No, I’m fine. He’s not forcing me. Drinking my blood made Ethan stronger than any vampire I’ve seen before, but otherwise, he’s still the same. He hasn’t gone all savage and blood-hungry or anything. He’s still a good man.”

Finn raised an eyebrow at that, but I didn’t argue with him, choosing instead to change the subject. “So, where have you all been staying?” I asked.

Finn sighed. “At some dive hotel on the outskirts of the city. I’m gonna head back to my place in the morning seeing as Cristescu is keeping his vamps under control.”

“I’ll come over tomorrow, then. I want to see everyone. And we need to discuss Rita.”

“Not you, too. Alvie won’t shut up about her either.”

“You shouldn’t underestimate her, Finn,” I said. “That girl can surprise all of us. She’s a little lost right now, but we can get her back.”

His expression was sympathetic, like he felt sorry for me and how I was holding onto this thin thread of hope for my lost friend. I swallowed and looked away, blinking back tears. When I felt like I had them under control, I

looked back at him.

“I’m going to hug you again now,” I said before folding him into my arms. He seemed taken by surprise but hugged me back. “I’m so glad you’re okay,” I whispered.

“I’m glad you’re okay, too,” he murmured, giving me a little squeeze before stepping back.

I reached out, trailing my fingertips softly over the bruise on his face. “Tell Alvie to make you one of Rita’s healing recipes. It should get rid of this in no time.”

He nodded and gave me a warm smile before turning to leave. When he was gone, I exhaled in relief. I was going to see my friends tomorrow. Even if Rita wasn’t going to be there, it would be good to see everyone else. It had only been a few days, but a lot had happened, and I missed them terribly.

When I returned to the living room, Ethan and Lucas were deep in conversation, discussing strategies on how to take on Theodore. A wave of tiredness hit me, so I left them to it and climbed the stairs to Ethan’s bedroom, where I promptly fell asleep.

Sometime later, I found myself in an endless white room. A part of my brain knew I was dreaming, but it all seemed so real. I peered about. There was nothing there, just endless whiteness. I had a momentary thought that this must be what limbo felt like when a man appeared.

He was tall, with jet black hair, deeply tanned skin and piercing blue eyes. He stared at me, his eyes a reflection of my own.

His body pulsed with power, and it strangely affected me. My pores tingled, making me feel so much more alive.

“Who are you?” I asked, my voice unexpectedly filled with wonder.

The man appeared to be middle-aged and was very handsome. He wore a pristine grey suit, a black shirt, and a silver tie. His tall form was broad, and I could tell he was sporting some serious muscle underneath his clothes.

A smile creased his eyes, and I got the distinct feeling that although he appeared to be no more than fifty years old, he was much, much older.

“You’ve been asking after me,” he said in a deep, attractive voice.

“I have?” My tone went up a notch at the end. I didn’t feel like I was in danger; however, I did feel a little intimidated.

“You have,” he stated. “I am Roman Patel.”

Roman Patel? My grandfather, Roman? Shock and awe filled me.

“Ah, right, uh, yes. Good. Thanks for, um, answering my call.”

This was so strange. How on earth could he have known I was asking Emilia about him when he wasn't even supposed to know that my mother was his daughter? Or that Emilia had been pregnant with his child at all, for that matter.

"I can hear when people say my name," he explained, answering my unvoiced question. "No one has uttered it in a long time, not until a couple of weeks ago when I heard an old lover say it to you." He paused, and the silence dragged out as a thoughtful look crossed his features. "Why did she say it to you?"

Right, so maybe he *didn't* know all the details, only that I was looking for him. Guess I'd better tell him then. "Because you're my grandfather."

The moment the words left my mouth he walked towards me until we were standing as close as possible. His chest pressed against mine, and his cool breath hit my cheeks.

"Your grandfather?" he breathed. "How?"

"Emilia Petrovsky is my grandmother. She had a baby girl who was yours, but she never told you about her. Her name was Darya. She passed away when I was little."

He absorbed the information with an emotionless face. "So, you are my kin." Reaching up, he trailed a hand down my cheek before gripping my shoulder. His hand was solid and firm.

"Yes," I breathed.

Another smile. "Wonderful."

And then I got the surprise of my life when his mouth descended on mine and he kissed me—with tongue! WTF?! I struggled to push him away, but his hands clamped down on me, holding me firmly in place. A tingle of what I could only describe as magic trickled through me, and I relaxed into the kiss, responding to it with an embarrassingly loud moan.

Oh, hell no! He just magicked me into liking the kiss! My stomach turned with how wrong this was, and I summoned every ounce of my power. Sparks shot from the palms of my hands as I shoved him away and finally managed to break the kiss.

"What the hell was that?" I accused, drawing away from him hastily.

He touched his hand to his chest where some of my sparks still singed him, burning through his immaculate grey suit. He appeared amused, intrigued even.

"Is your father a warlock or a human?" he asked.

I frowned, then replied, “Human. Why?”

“You have powers. More than I would expect from a Halfling.”

“A Halfling?” I questioned.

“Half-human, half-witch,” he explained.

“Okay, well, you still haven’t told me why you kissed me. Is that how you greet all of your granddaughters?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never had a granddaughter before, and you are very pretty.” He stopped for a second and studied me. “Ah, I see why you’re so appalled. You were brought up in the human world. If you had been raised in the way of magic, you would know that what you have been taught to refer to as incest is not frowned upon in our realm. In fact, it is encouraged. It allows us to maintain our pure bloodlines.”

I scrunched up my face, not knowing what to say. I was entirely grossed out. I shook my entire body, feeling like his kiss was a tangible thing that was stuck to me and I wanted it off.

I pointed a finger at him warningly. “I don’t care if you think it’s normal to French your granddaughter. Don’t do it again.”

He laughed long and deep, and I felt it vibrate right down to the pit of my stomach.

“You’re feisty,” he said, and with a sweep of his hand, the white room transformed into a beautiful library filled with old bookshelves and antique furniture. He gestured for me to sit on an armchair, and I obliged. I was still trying to get my head around the whole ‘incest equals good’, as opposed to ‘incest equals bad’ thing. I wanted to get to know my grandfather, but if he had romantic intentions, then I could definitely forego the family bonding.

Roman sat at the head of a gorgeously carved wooden desk and continued to stare at me. “You sought me out for a reason. What is it?”

“Don’t you even want to know my name first?” I asked.

He closed his eyes, and a faint smile touched his lips. “Tegan Stolle. Now I know your name. Talk.”

“Impressive,” I muttered, and a silence ensued.

Finally, I exhaled and proceeded to detail the predicament in Tribane, including Theodore’s barrier shutting the rest of the world out and how the human population knew about supernatural creatures following Whitfield’s vampire attacks. I finished up by requesting he help me undo the barrier and somehow erase the humans’ knowledge of supernaturals. Oh, and I also snuck in that I would very much like to make Rita good again.

Roman tapped a finger to his mouth. “Sounds like a tricky and complicated situation. I remember Theodore from my youth. He had already become a sorcerer at that point, but he wasn’t as powerful back then as he is now.” A look of nostalgia crossed his features.

“When exactly were those days of youth?” I asked curiously.

He appeared to be casting his mind back. “I turned fourteen in the year 1578 if I recall correctly.”

I gaped at him, doing the mental calculation. “That means you’re, like, over four hundred years old.” It also meant that Theodore was even older. A shiver ran down my spine.

“And I don’t look a day over forty,” he said with a confident smile.

More like fifty, but I didn’t correct him.

“I’ll be twenty-seven this year,” I said instead.

His eyes grew intense as he appraised me. “And you wear your twenty-seven years exquisitely.”

I rolled my eyes at his flirting, which seemed to amuse him. “I bet Emilia just loves you,” he commented with no small amount of sarcasm.

I chuckled. “Yeah, she thinks I’m a real prize.”

“I remember her well. She was never fond of women like you. She thought all girls should be taught to behave like ladies, never to talk back or give attitude.”

“That’s a joke. She wasn’t acting like much of a lady when she was spreading her legs for you with her husband at home none the wiser.”

“I hope you told her that.”

“I did, actually.” Roman laughed, thoroughly entertained by the idea. I tried to direct the conversation back to the matter at hand. “So, can you help me?”

He stood from his desk and walked to the chair I was sitting in, perching himself on the armrest. His long, cleanly manicured fingers trailed from the top of my head, down my hair, and along my spine slowly. I bristled at his touch but suffered through it, not wanting to offend him and his incestuous ways, even if they did creep me the eff out.

“I’ll look into it,” he said in a silky voice.

“And when will I hear from you again?”

“I will come to you when the time is right. You have my word. Sleep well, Tegan.”

And with that, I fell from the dream and into another one. When I woke

up the next morning, Ethan's hard body was wrapped around mine. I remembered the conversation I had with my grandfather vividly. All I could do was hope that he held true to his word.

7.

Finn

It was three in the morning by the time I got back to the hotel, where I tended to my injuries, stripped down to my boxers, and climbed into bed beside a sleeping Alora. As soon as I closed my eyes, it was lights out. When I woke up, Alora's side of the bed was empty, but I could hear her moving around inside the bathroom.

I got up and walked to the door before knocking on it. "Hey, Goldy, you okay in there?" I called.

"Um, yes," she answered hesitantly. "I'm just getting dressed."

"Need any help?" I asked automatically, only to realise she might interpret that the wrong way.

"Nope. I've got it under control, but thanks."

"Call if you need me. I'm going to make a start packing up our things."

I stuffed the rest of the clothes I bought her into a bag and gathered the remainder of my belongings. Somewhere along the way, the bathroom door opened, and the clean smell of the soap streamed out. I inhaled it deeply and continued what I was doing.

"We're going back to my house today. I'll make up a room for you, and you can stay as long as you need," I told her as I continued to pack.

"You don't have to do that if you don't have space for me," she said, and I turned to face her, my tone serious.

"I've got the space," I replied firmly, thinking of Tegan's vacant room. Something hollow stirred in my gut. She was with Cristescu now. I saw it in the way they looked at each other, and especially the way he looked at her—all reverent and possessive like he wanted to make her his queen or something.

Once I was done getting ready, I went to let the others know we'd be leaving soon. After I left Cristescu's place last night, I hightailed it back to the DOH compound, where I'd left the van stocked up with weapons and ammo. I found it in the exact place I'd left it and drove straight back to the hotel. The vampire who'd been lying on the ground with half her head blown off was gone. The only evidence of her presence was a circle of dark blood on the ground and a smeared line where she presumably crawled away.

Once everybody was loaded up into the van I drove out of the hotel and back onto the motorway. I certainly wouldn't miss the place. In my head, I was figuring out where everyone was going to stay. Ira could have his room at my place. Delilah would likely return to Cristescu's. Alvie and Gabe could either stay in the RV or go back to Gabe's place, and Alora could stay in Tegan's old room.

"So, when are you heading to your bro's place?" I asked Delilah on the drive.

She shrugged. "I'm actually thinking of staying in the house across from yours. Ira can sleep there, too."

I bet he could. I shot him a look in my overhead mirror, but he didn't argue with Delilah. Guess they'd gotten used to each other's company at the hotel.

"You sure Cristescu's going to be okay with that?" I went on. "He seemed eager to have you back under his roof when I spoke to him."

Delilah let out a humph of annoyance. "He's not getting me back in that house again. The whole time Whitfield was in power he hardly let me go anywhere by myself because there was too much hostility towards dhampirs. I'm keeping hold of my freedom this time around."

"If that's what you want," I said with a shrug.

Twenty minutes later, I pulled up outside my house. In the end, it was only me and Alora staying at my place because Ira silently took Delilah up on her offer. I didn't blame the fella. The redheaded dhampir was *hot*, and he'd been through a twenty-five-year dry spell. I wasn't sure if it was a love match between those two, but it was certainly a sex match.

I unpacked all the weapons and ammo from the van and hauled them inside the house. I'd just unloaded the last box and shoved it under the stairs when I noticed Alora hovering by the kitchen door.

"Can I make you some tea?" she asked, fidgeting. She looked like she was feeling kind of out of place and wanted something to do. "I've been getting used to the layout of your kitchen, so I think I know where everything is now."

Man, she was cute. There was a smile in my voice when I answered, "Sure, tea sounds perfect. I'm going to put my feet up in the living room for a while."

"I'll bring it in to you, then," she said and turned back into the kitchen, her hand sliding along the wall as she felt her way about.

I turned on the television and flicked through the stations, listening to her potter with the kettle and cups. Half of me was waiting to hear something shatter as she dropped it, but that didn't happen. A few minutes later, she entered the room holding a steaming mug in her hand and wearing a triumphant expression. Something in my chest stirred at seeing her so proud of making a simple cup of tea.

"Where are you?" she asked.

"Over here," I said, and she followed the sound of my voice. When she was standing before me, I took the mug from her hand and sipped.

"Ah, powerful cup of tea, Goldy. Thanks."

She tugged on the hem of her T-shirt and bit her full bottom lip. "Why do you call me that?"

"Goldy?" I questioned, and she nodded. "It's because of your eyes."

She wrinkled her nose. "They're hazel."

"They're gold," I disagreed. "And they're fucking gorgeous."

She blushed and hurried back out to the kitchen. I chuckled. A minute later, she came back in with her own cup and took a seat beside me on the couch. We drank in silence for a bit while a soap opera played on the television.

"How old are you?" I asked her. Despite the fact I'd invited her to stay at my house, I still knew next to nothing about her.

"Twenty-three," she replied. "I was only twenty-one when Ridley abducted me."

Just a kid, I thought to myself. I was practically a decade older than her. Given the amount of time I'd spent ogling her chest and arse, I felt like a bit of a dirty old bastard right then.

"Were you still at school?"

She nodded. "I was in my final year of college, studying for a degree in Biology. I also worked part-time at a bakery to pay for classes."

"Biology, eh? Little brainiac." I teased, nudging her with my elbow while she shook her head bashfully.

"I was far from the top of my class, but I did love the subject. Did you attend college?"

"Yeah, though it feels like another lifetime. I got a degree in computer programming back in Ireland. I'd just started a job with an IT firm when my mother and sister were murdered by a vampire."

"Oh, my God, I'm so sorry," she gasped. "Is that why you decided to

become a slayer?”

“Yes. Back then, I lived for revenge. This vamp seduced my mother first, then moved onto my sister. I’d been so busy with college and then my new job that I didn’t even see it happening right under my nose. Not all vampires are psychotic, but this bloke, he fancied himself a bit of a serial killer. Long story short, I finally tracked him down and lodged a stake in his heart. I got my revenge, but it didn’t feel like enough. That was when I learned of the DOH and did everything in my power to get recruited. I left my comfortable computer job behind for a cause I felt was righteous.”

“And do you still feel that way?” Alora asked.

I blew out a breath. “Nothing is the same as it was. I’m not sure how I feel anymore.”

We fell into silence, and I took another sip of my tea, studying her for a moment.

“Are you looking at me?” she whispered.

“Yes,” I answered simply.

“Why?”

“Because I like your face.”

A red flush coloured her cheeks as she lifted her mug to her heart-shaped lips. “If I wasn’t blind, I’d say I’d have to keep my eyes on you. You’re a terrible flirt.”

I chuckled as some sort of affection for her grew and expanded inside me. She was so easy to be around. “You’re too clever, Goldy. You have my number already, so you do.” She blushed again as I went on, more serious now, “Listen, everything’s kind of been a crazy rush this last day or two, and we haven’t really had the chance to talk. Is there anything you need? Anything that will make staying here more comfortable for you? Name it, and I’ll do my best to get it. I want you to feel at home.”

“I can’t believe you’re helping me like this,” she said, shaking her head in disbelief. “You hardly know me.”

“Well, I like to prove that the saying about relying on the kindness of strangers is true. I can also see that you’ve had a really tough time of it and you deserve to be protected. Given that the barrier is in place, Michael Ridley must still be in the city somewhere, and he could decide to come after you again at any time. I want to make sure you have someone looking out for you if that happens.”

“You’ve got a kind heart, Finn,” she said, a catch in her voice.

“That’s me, alright. Finn Roe: Kind-hearted vampire slayer. So, I repeat, is there anything you need?” Without meaning to, I reached over and put my hand gently on her shoulder.

“Um, I could use some toiletries, I guess. Shampoo and body wash, the girly kind.”

“Girly shampoo and body wash, done and done,” I told her, smiling. “What else?”

“That’s all,” she answered sheepishly.

“Low maintenance. I like it,” I said, teasing.

A moment of quiet passed before she spoke again. “Actually, there is one more thing.”

“Say the word, and it’s done.”

“Can you describe what everyone looks like for me? I want to be able to picture you all in my head.”

I grinned. “Sure. Let me see. First, you have Delilah. She’s a dhampir; petite, face like a china doll, pale skin, and curly red hair. Attitude for days, but you probably already know that. Ira’s a shapeshifter who typically turns into a large dog, but I think he can take on several animal forms. He’s tall, built like a brick shithouse, dark colouring. Gabriel’s a dhampir, too. He and Delilah are half-siblings. He’s got short brown hair and green eyes, average height, bit of a pretty boy. Alvie’s human, though he knows a little magic, too. He’s thin as a rake, brown eyes, dyed black hair, wears a lot of Goth clothes.” I paused and watched her as she absorbed it all. “And then you have me, handsomest motherfucker you’ll ever come across,” I joked.

She laughed. “Be serious!”

“Okay, okay. My eyes are blue, hair’s light brown. That’s about the size of it.”

“Stand up for a minute.”

Curious, I did as she requested, and she followed suit, reaching up to place her hands on my shoulders. I stood at least a foot taller than her. “Hmm, you’re tall,” she said as her hands drifted from my shoulders, down my arms, and across my chest. “And you’re lean.” Now her hands came up to my face. Her fingers were gentle as they tenderly searched my features. “I think you weren’t lying either when you said you were handsome.”

Jesus, I had to concentrate to keep my dick under control. My breathing came out all fast and shit. I really, *really* liked it when she put her hands on me.

“Keep touching me like that and I might have to kiss you.”

The husky words tumbled out of my mouth before I could stop them, and her hands froze on my face. A quick breath gushed from her, and her cheeks turned a bright shade of red.

“I’m sorry,” she apologised and moved away from me to sit back down on the sofa.

“Why? Those were the best thirty seconds I’ve had all week.”

A grin curved the ends of her lips as she stared at the floor. “I think you might be a charmer as well as a flirt, Finn Roe.”

At that moment, I knew I was going to kiss her. Not today, but someday. And when I did it might just turn out to be the best day of my life.

Later on, there was a knock at the door. I went to answer it, thinking it was Gabriel. Instead, I was greeted by Tegan on my doorstep, hand in hand with Cristescu and Rebecca by her side.

“Hey, come on in,” I said, gesturing into the house.

Alora had been resting in her room, so I climbed the stairs to get her. I knew she couldn’t exactly see Rebecca and confirm whether or not she was the girl from her vision, but maybe she’d, I don’t know, sense something. I rapped my knuckles on her door.

“Yes?” she called.

“It’s Finn. Can I come in?”

I heard sheets rustling before she answered, “Sure.”

When I entered, I found her sitting up in bed under the covers, her hair mussed from sleep and her lips swollen. *Damn.* Yet again, my dick woke up to say hello. *Go back to sleep, fucker.*

“Remember the little girl I mentioned who might be the one from your vision?”

She nodded.

“Well, she’s here now. How do you feel about meeting her?”

“Oh,” she replied, startled. “I’d love to. Just give me a minute to fix myself up.”

“Sure. See you downstairs,” I said, leaving her to it.

Then I went to get Gabriel and Alvie from the RV and Delilah and Ira from the house across the street. Ten minutes later, we were all assembled in

my small living room. Alora was the last one to enter, her hair now pulled back into a braid away from her face. I noticed Cristescu eye her with interest and felt like punching his lights out just for looking at her. Not that I'd be able to punch his lights out or anything. Definitely not now.

Everybody watched him warily, studying him and trying to pinpoint the changes brought about by Tegan's blood. The fact that he was sitting there in broad daylight was probably the biggest difference anyone could expect. His eyes were slightly silvery now, and his skin had a subtle, barely-there glow. Delilah embraced her brother briefly and told him it was good to see him. I suspected that was about as lovey-dovey as those two got when it came to family greetings.

Tegan proceeded to give everyone hugs, gushing about how relieved she was to see them all in one piece. Then she approached Alora, and for some reason, I held my breath.

"Hi, I'm Tegan," she said. "I'm a friend of Finn's."

Alora shook Tegan's hand then went still. "Say something else," she urged.

"Huh?" Tegan questioned. "What do you want me to say?"

"I've heard your voice before. I've seen you. I know you." Without asking permission, she pulled Tegan closer and put her hands on her face, sifting through her hair and getting a feel for her appearance.

"Hey, buy me a drink first," Tegan joked, but I could tell she was intrigued.

"You've seen her in one of your visions?" I asked Alora, stepping forward.

"Yes," she replied, withdrawing her hands from Tegan's face. "Sorry for just grabbing you like that. I got a little over-excited."

"No problem. What did you see?"

"You were there with the little girl I saw. You were older than you are now, but you didn't look old. I mean, it felt like you were older than you appeared to be. Like the way vampires are old, but they don't look it."

"Weird," Tegan said, raising an eyebrow. "How could I be older but not have aged? I'm human."

"Half-human," Gabriel corrected her.

"Yeah, but witches don't stay young like vampires," she disagreed. "They age the same as the rest of us."

"Unless they become sorceresses," Alvie interjected.

Tegan shot him an incredulous look. “Ha! I’m not going to become a sorceress. Screw that.” She folded her arms and walked back over to stand by Cristescu.

“You swore. That’s naughty,” Rebecca said, smiling up at her.

Tegan smirked and stuck out her tongue, and Rebecca giggled.

Alora’s head whipped in the direction of the girl’s voice, and she stilled. “She’s not the one I saw,” she stated unequivocally.

“Are you certain?” I asked.

“Yes. The voice I heard just now is not the one I heard in my head. She isn’t the future ruler.”

Something in Tegan’s demeanour relaxed, as though she had been hoping Rebecca wasn’t the girl Alora saw. I understood her relief. I wouldn’t condemn a little girl to the task of restoring peace to this fucked up city either.

“More unsolved mysteries,” Alvie said, shaking his head and folding his arms. “Do they ever end?”

“Nope,” I replied.

My attention was drawn to Cristescu as I wondered if he still planned on setting Rebecca up to be cared for somewhere away from vampires. It was too risky to just keep her in the city, and I was sure he knew that. I was also sure he didn’t want any other vamps becoming like him because that would mean his current position as top dog would be threatened.

All of a sudden, he grinned at me, and I tensed. He looked like he could hear every thought that ran through my head, and I didn’t like it one bit.

“What are you grinning about?” I asked with narrowed eyes.

“Of course I still plan on finding a safe place for the girl,” he said, and it took me only a fraction of a second to realise he was answering my unspoken question.

I stared at him, dumbfounded.

“That’s what you were wondering, correct?”

“Uh, yeah, but what the hell? You can read minds now, too?”

“The answer to that is no. I can predict your thoughts reasonably well from your breathing and the way your facial muscles move.”

“Shut up!” Alvie exclaimed. “That’s not a thing.”

“I assure you, it is,” Cristescu replied evenly.

“So, drinking Tegan’s blood turned you into a mentalist. Wonderful,” I said testily, running a hand through my hair. I didn’t like him being able to

tell what I was thinking. There were just way too many thoughts inside my head that he had no right to know.

“I have to be consciously doing it. And I have far too many more pressing matters to focus my attention on than continuously reading people,” he said.

“Well, focus on them then because we both know that you were reading me just there. Again.”

Cristescu smiled widely now. “Does it make you uncomfortable?”

“Ethan, stop it,” Tegan said, giving him a stern look.

Before I got the chance to tell him where he could stick his mentalist bullshit, the television began to crackle with static and the screen turned fuzzy. I walked over and banged my hand down on it, but it didn’t help. The crackling continued, and black and grey squiggly lines fizzled on the screen. It was an old television that belonged to my friend, Noel. I seriously needed to think about going digital. In fact, the entire house could do with an update. All the furniture and fittings were at least twenty years old.

I was about to go and unplug the TV, thinking I’d try fixing the signal later, when Ira reached over and put a hand on my arm to stop me.

He gestured back to the screen where the static was clearing up and a picture was forming.

“Oh, my God,” Alvie squealed, clasping his hands over his mouth in surprise.

The television showed a studio room somewhere that’d been decked out to look like a quaint, homely type of living room. I picked up the remote and tried changing the station, but every single channel showed the same picture.

On an armchair sat Theodore, wearing a plain brown suit and smart dress shoes. His hair had been combed into a neat style. He looked completely normal, and it was a stark contrast to his usual wacky appearance.

On the armchair opposite him was Rita, who, just like Theodore, looked nothing like her usual self. She wasn’t wearing a single scrap of make-up. Gone was the heavy black eyeliner and the ghostly pale foundation. Her hair was pulled back from her face by a clip, and she wore a white dress with a flowery design.

The camera focused on Theodore as he smiled and began to speak.

“Good people of Tribane,” he said. “I’m airing this emergency broadcast as there are dark forces at work in our city. Dark forces that need to be expelled. I’m sure you have all been affected by the attacks from those

Satanic fanged beasts that can only be described as ... *vampires*. I'm here to help you. My name is Theodore Girard and with me today is my daughter, Rita Girard."

The camera panned to Rita as she smiled benignly and nodded hello.

"Together we have decided to call on the people of the city to set up a force against the vampires. They are an infestation that needs to be expelled. We were here first, and we will be here when they have been exterminated. A lot of you will be aware that they have used their ungodly powers to trap us all inside the city so that they can kill us without interference from the outside world. I need each and every one of you to join me if we are going to succeed in defeating them. Together we can thwart their dark plans to murder us all.

"I make no claims to greatness. Like you, I am just an average man, but I refuse to allow the devil to win. I refuse to allow him to take away my right as a human being to a life free of constant threat. So, what I ask of you is this. If you are with me, take a piece of white chalk and draw a circle on your front door. The houses with circles will show where humans are living. If there is no circle, we will know there are vampires within. I have it on good authority that they all sleep during the day, so they will be unaware of this broadcast. They will not know why there are circles on your doors.

"At first light tomorrow morning when the vampires are asleep, I ask that you all gather on Champion Row with whatever incendiary devices you can find. Together, we will set the vampires alight, and they will burn in their dark slumbers. Please, do not be afraid to leave your homes. In just one day's time, we will all be able to live safely again. Stand with me. Believe in this, my people, *believe*."

As the last word left his mouth, the broadcast immediately cut off, and the channel went back to normal.

"Well," Gabriel said, his eyes wide in shock. "That was ..."

"Quite ingenious," I finished. "If I didn't know he was such a psychopath, I might actually be impressed."

"He intends to murder my people while they sleep in their beds," Cristescu said, his face etched in fury. "I won't stand by and let it happen."

8.

Tegan

Once Theodore's broadcast shut off, it was like everyone started talking at once, and I couldn't think straight. I put my hands over my ears to try and block them out, so I could think of a plan.

Theodore wanted the humans to set fire to the homes of vampires, but surely he must know that burning didn't kill a vampire. They either needed to be staked or decapitated. So, if he was aware of this, then why on earth had he set this mad plan into action? The words he used and the tone of voice he employed were very cleverly thought out. He wanted to incite a mob even as he came across as a humble, concerned citizen.

He even referred to himself as an average man. What a joke.

"Vampires can't be killed by burning," I said, but no one heard me over the din of voices.

"I said," I repeated, shouting now. "Vampires can't be killed by burning, so why is he getting the humans to burn them?"

Everybody's attention fell on me.

"Perhaps he doesn't mean to kill the vampires," Delilah suggested. "Perhaps he simply means to frighten them enough so that they'll leave. They're all vulnerable during the day, and Theodore wants to play on that vulnerability. Show them that even though they might be stronger than humans at night, they are far weaker when the sun is up."

"No, I don't think that's it," Ethan said. "We might not die from the fire, but it will certainly cause us severe pain. I think that's what Theodore wants. He wants to make us angry so that we'll attack the humans once night falls. He wants chaos again, only I'm not sure why."

"You're going to have to get the word out to your people about the chalk circles," Gabriel said. "Get them to put them on their doors, too. If every door has a white circle, it'll cause confusion, and the humans won't know which houses to burn."

"I have every intention of informing them," Ethan replied evenly. "But what then? If the humans cannot find anything to burn, then they'll know we're onto them. They'll have a lot of pent-up energy with nowhere to put it."

“That’s Theodore’s problem,” Delilah interjected. “Let him deal with them. All we need to do is ensure that the vampires know what’s happening and that they don’t under any circumstances try to lash out against the humans.”

After another half hour of discussing things back and forth, we finally decided that inaction was the best action to take. Well, for the most part. Theodore was looking to stir up trouble because a city in turmoil was easier to take over than a city under control. Ethan would spread the word among the vampires about the chalk circles, and Finn was going to go along to Campion Row tomorrow morning to suss out what exactly Theodore was up to.

I didn’t mention it to Ethan, but I planned on going, too. If Theodore was there, then it was likely that Rita would be as well. I had no idea what I’d do once I saw her. All I knew was I had to try something. The longer she stayed with her madman of a father, the more lost she was to us.

I said my goodbyes to my friends and drove back with Ethan and Rebecca to his place. After the crash Emilia caused, Ethan had replaced his car with an SUV almost identical to the previous one. As he drove, he also typed out messages on his phone, and it astounded me how he could focus perfectly on both activities.

“What are you doing?” I asked, eyeing his phone. He typed so rapidly that I couldn’t make out the words. His thumb made speedy, barely perceptible movements over the touch screen.

“I’m organising a little gathering of my own,” he replied, slipping the phone into his pocket and putting his hand on my knee. His fingers brushed back and forth, causing tingles to shoot between my thighs. Yeah, I wasn’t letting him distract me.

I gave him a steely look. “Elaborate.”

“I have to ensure that my people know about Theodore’s plan. The only way to do that is to gather them in one place and make an announcement.”

“And what place would that be?”

“They call it the Market Below. It’s an underground trading area for vampires and one of the few places I know Theodore will never step foot. Magical folks dislike it underground. I think it plays havoc with their powers somehow.”

Hmm, that was food for thought. “There’s an underground vampire market in Tribane?”

“There is. Would you like to see it?”

“Hell yeah.”

“Can I come, too?” Rebecca asked from the back seat.

Ethan turned his head to look at her briefly and reached out to ruffle her hair affectionately. “I’m afraid not, my sweet. It’s not a place for little girls.”

“You can stay with my friend Amanda while we’re gone. You’ll like her. She’s very nice.”

Rebecca’s eyes immediately lit up at the prospect of meeting someone new, instantly forgetting all thoughts concerning the vampire market.

“By the way,” Ethan said, eyes flicking momentarily to mine. “I noted something interesting about Alora, the half-elf.”

“Oh?” I replied, intrigued.

“She smells very similar to your young friend, Florence.”

My eyebrows shot up. “She does? Do you think Florence has elf blood, too?” I asked with interest.

“It’s possible. Her talent for reading emotions is certainly the type of ability found in elves. They’re a very old race, and very rare nowadays. It could be that she’s the distant relation of an elf who passed the empath gene down to her.”

“If we ever get rid of the barrier around the city I’ll contact her and let her know your theory,” I said, hoping Florence was still doing okay with her new boyfriend.

Later that evening, I left Rebecca in Amanda’s care while I headed out with Ethan and Lucas. I took Ethan’s hand into mine, and in a bold move, I wrapped my other arm around his neck and pulled him down to me for a kiss. What I had initially meant to be a quick peck turned into a full-blown snog as he slipped his tongue into my mouth.

“Hey,” I finally managed to say when I came up for air.

He grinned and slid his arm around my waist, pulling me snug against his side. Lucas watched all of this without saying a word. Ethan didn’t lead me to his car, instead taking me to the end of the street. His arm fell away from my waist as he bent to open a round manhole cover.

“Eh, no way am I going down there,” I said emphatically as Lucas’s eyes gleamed with mirth. I bet he knew all along I wasn’t going to be up for this.

Somehow, I’d failed to make the connection that an underground market would be among the sewage system. In my head, I’d imagined something a

little more mystical and a little less e-coli and rat-infested.

“I can walk you back to the house if you like,” Ethan offered, his silvery eyes looking back and forth between mine.

I glanced at Lucas for a moment, and the fact that he clearly assumed I’d turn back made me determined to keep going.

Taking a deep breath, I replied, “No, that’s alright. I still want to come. I just needed a minute to get used to the idea.”

“Once you get through the tunnels it’s not so bad. You can climb on my back, and I’ll get us to the market in a matter of seconds. You won’t have to endure the stench for too long.”

I eyed him warily. “Okay, then.”

Ethan went down on one knee, so I could climb onto his back. When I was securely situated, he moved toward the manhole and climbed down. Lucas followed suit. The second we hit the tunnel Ethan began moving at vampire speed, and everything became a blur of motion. Unfortunately, I could still smell the sewage.

Moments later he slowed down, and I realised I’d been squeezing my eyes shut to keep from getting dizzy. I opened them and looked around to see a mass of vampires gathered in a large open space. The place was huge, about the size of a football field. There were market stalls set up in orderly rows selling all variety of goods.

I stared in fascination, still holding firmly onto Ethan’s back as I took the place in. Vampires stood and chatted amiably, others hovered by stalls bartering and haggling for goods.

When Ethan entered, the conversation hushed, and they all turned to look at him with what appeared to be reverence in their otherworldly eyes. He patted me on the thigh, and I let go of his neck, hopping off onto the ground.

Some of the vampires watched me instead of Ethan, and I knew that they were aware of what I was—of what I could give them. It was weird, though, because I didn’t feel unsafe. I had this odd sense of safety at Ethan’s side. I knew that none of the vampires would be able to get to me because of him.

Ethan slipped his hand into mine, a show of solidarity but also possession, and led me on a walk around the market. The vampires continued what they’d been doing, but without the same vigour as before. They were all far too curious about Ethan’s presence, anticipating his announcement.

A mezzanine floor ran around the edge of the upper wall of the market,

and tugging me to him, Ethan pulled me up onto his back again before climbing a ladder to the mezzanine. Once he reached the top, he let me off and walked to the railing. Placing his hands firmly down on the railing, he cleared his throat, and every vampire present fell silent for the second time.

They looked up at him, heads all turned to attention. I spotted Lucas below, standing by a stall. He picked up a gold watch and examined it, perhaps the only vampire in the whole place who wasn't staring at Ethan.

"Today, while you all slept," Ethan began, "the sorcerer Theodore made a televised broadcast to the humans of the city. To put it simply, he told them to mark their doors with a circle in chalk before gathering at Campion row. From there, he instructed them to visit every home without a circle and burn it to the ground."

The revelation was followed by exclamations of shock and surprised intakes of breath. Some vampires clutched their partners, unmistakable fear in their eyes. All of a sudden, I saw Ethan's species in a new light. They might live a lot longer than humans, might be a lot stronger, but they were still mortal. They could still lose the things that they held most dear.

"I have called you all here tonight so that you can be aware of this and mark your doors as the humans do."

Before Ethan could say more, a dark-haired vampire stepped to the front of the crowd. "Why don't you just let us all have a drink of your little blood whore, and we won't have to worry about daytime attacks?" he asked, his mouth a cruel slant across his face. My heart thundered in my chest at the suggestion. Remind me why I thought it was a good idea to come here?

Without a word, Ethan jumped from his spot and landed gracefully on the ground in front of the vampire.

"How dare you suggest such a thing," he seethed, fury emanating from him as he prowled around the man.

Suddenly, the man's demeanour changed. Something in Ethan's gaze caused him to fall to his knees.

"I'm s-s-sorry. I didn't mean it. Please forgive me." He bowed his head as though submitting to a king.

With one swift movement, Ethan kicked the man hard in the ribs. "Get up," he demanded.

The vampire fumbled quickly to his feet, his entire body shaking with fear. I almost felt sorry for him, but then I remembered his suggestion that they all drink from me and my sympathy faded.

“Apologise again,” Ethan commanded.

“I beg your forgiveness. I’m sorry a thousand times. Please, spare me,” he rattled out desperately.

Slowly, Ethan shook his head. “Not to *me*. Apologise to *her*.” He gestured up at me, and I inhaled sharply when the attention of the entire market fell on me. My palms grew sweaty as I gripped the railing tight.

“I’m sorry, my lady. Truly, I am,” the vampire said. “Please, accept my sincerest apologies for what I said. I’m merely frightened and—”

“That’s enough,” Ethan hissed, grabbing a hold of the collar of his jacket and flinging him into the crowd. “Anybody else have anything to say on this matter?” he asked, striding back and forth. Absolute silence answered him. “Very good.”

If I blinked, I’d have missed it, but his eyes flicked briefly to Lucas, who still stood by the market stall. Ethan gave him a barely perceptible nod, and Lucas slinked swiftly through the crowd to the dark-haired vampire. His hand slid to the inside pocket of his coat, and he pulled out a stake. Finding the vampire who’d spoken out against me, Lucas grabbed him by the throat and slammed the stake straight into his heart. Those standing close by gasped in shock, obviously getting the message. Anyone else who dared to threaten me would meet the same fate. I wasn’t sure how to feel about that, but my survival instincts kicked in. I’d much rather the vampires fear harming me than believe I was an easy target.

“I will suffer no more threats against my woman,” Ethan declared. “The punishment for this is death. I hope you all understand that now.”

There were low murmurings of assent, and nervous anxiety gripped tightly at my chest. Suddenly, it was hard to breathe. Ethan had to have a man killed for threatening me. Would it always be this way, or would the vampires eventually accept me as Ethan’s partner?

Having power wasn’t the cushy setup most people imagined it to be. You had to make hard decisions and do hard things. And I understood that. I got why Ethan had Lucas kill the vampire, but it still made my stomach twist with unease. I was so tired of all the death.

“The sorcerer Theodore is trying to incite us into violence again,” Ethan went on. “I will not allow that to happen because it is not the kind of ruler I intend to be. I am no Whitfield. An unhinged, power-hungry leader creates an unhinged, power-hungry populace, which is why I don’t hold your past violence against you. You were under the frenzied command of a blood

thirsty tyrant, and your actions followed suit. But hear this. There is to be no more unnecessary harm done to any humans. In order to survive, we need to be able to live peacefully among the human population in a symbiotic manner, and that is the kind of environment that I will strive to create for all of you. I will put a stop to Theodore's plans to ruin us. You have my word. And after that, we still endeavour to live in peace, and hopefully, prosperity, too."

As I looked down on the vampires all listening intently to Ethan's speech, I saw something change in them. They were taking in his words, and there was relief on their faces. They didn't want to be at war, and the kind of city Ethan was describing appealed to their hearts. A grain of hope formulated within me. Perhaps Alora was wrong when she said it would be a little girl who finally brought peace to Tribane. Maybe, just maybe, it would be Ethan who did it.

Finn

You know what I think? I think it should be made illegal for anyone to ever have to be up this early in the morning. I was awake and dressed at the arse crack of dawn. I'd had my breakfast, and I was currently in the process of arming myself to the teeth. You'd be amazed by the number of weapons a fella could store on his person once he put his mind to it. So far, I'd managed five guns, seven knives, and several stakes. Yes, it was morning and there weren't going to be any vamps around, but you could never be too careful.

I'd commandeered Ira into coming along with me to Theodore's gathering on Champion Row. We stood in the kitchen, a selection of knives scattered across the counter, when the door creaked open. Alora stepped into the room. She was dressed, her hair tied back in a ponytail, which instantly gave me ideas about pulling it out and watching all that golden hair fall over her shoulders.

"What has you up at this ungodly hour, Goldy?" I asked.

"I want to come with you," she answered, and I frowned immediately.

"No can do. This is an iffy situation we're going into, and if a riot breaks out, it's not going to be safe for you. I need you to stay here."

"But I can help," she said, and I had a hard time imagining how she could possibly be of assistance. She'd be far more of a hindrance since I'd have to be looking out for her the entire time.

Still, not wanting to come across like a prick, I entertained her idea. “Okay, how exactly can you help us?”

With her hand on the wall, she felt her way over to a chair and sat down. “I have a couple of other abilities as well as my visions,” she replied, and my curiosity piqued.

I folded my arms. “I’m all ears.”

She ran a finger back and forth over the surface of the table. “I can interfere with people’s emotions, so if the crowd becomes incensed, I’ll be able to calm them.”

“Well, that certainly sounds like it could come in handy,” I agreed, changing my tune. “What else can you do?”

“Um, well, that’s all actually,” she answered, sheepish. “Perhaps I exaggerated a little when I said a couple.”

“How many people can you affect with this ... ability?”

“A lot. Maybe a hundred.”

I leaned back against the counter and tapped my boot on the floor, considering it. Calming down a hundred people might not be everyone, but it would still make a big difference if things got out of control. The population had been damaged enough in the past few weeks, and we didn’t need any further casualties.

“And what if you get separated from me and Ira? How will you defend yourself?”

She chewed on her lip. “You could give me one of those knives over there?”

“You can’t see. How did you know ...?”

“I could hear you moving them around,” she quickly explained, and I grinned.

“Good hearing.”

“So, can I come?” she asked hopefully.

I sighed, having no clue why she would even want to come. If I had my choice, I’d be back in bed catching another forty winks.

“Okay, then. But you need to stick by me at all times. Understood?”

She smiled. “Understood.”

“I’m not sure this is wise,” Ira said as he slid a gun into one side of his shoulder holster and a second into the other side.

“I’ll keep her safe,” I said as we resumed silently arming ourselves.

Before we left, I took a piece of chalk and drew a circle on my door. I

didn't want anyone mistaking my house for a vamp den, even though I'd played host to my fair share of fangs in recent weeks. Oh, how my once immovable stance against them had been moulded to make allowances. I felt like I'd sold out. Then again, my choices had been kind of limited.

Once we were ready to go, we climbed in the van and drove to the city centre. Along the way, every house had a big white chalk circle on the door, and there were hundreds of people walking in the same direction as I was driving. I had to park a distance away from Champion Row because there was far too much foot traffic clogging up the roads as well as the pathways. When I got out, I took Alora's hand in mine, and we walked. I stopped when my phone started ringing, and I pulled it out to see Tegan's name on the screen.

"Hold on a second. I have to take this," I said to Alora and Ira before I answered.

"Well, I've never known you to be an early bird," I said in greeting. "Perhaps Cristescu's a good influence after all."

"Hilarious," she replied. "Where are you?"

I cocked an eyebrow, listening to the noise in the background on her end. "Where are *you*?"

"I'm at the top of the Blackfield monument. There are so many people here, Finn. I'm worried."

Oh, you silly, silly woman. I tightened my jaw. "Are you alone?"

"Yeah."

"Stay where you are. I'll be five minutes."

It actually took us closer to ten minutes to find Tegan because of the crowds. We climbed the steps of the monument, and I gave her my most disapproving stare.

"What?" she asked, and there was just the tiniest sliver of guilt in her voice. "I had to come. Rita could be here."

"Of course, you did. Where's Cristescu?"

Her mouth tightened. "Still asleep. He doesn't know I'm here."

I whistled. "He's not going to like it when he finds out."

"If he finds out," she corrected me. "And he won't if I have anything to do with it."

"He'll know. Have you forgotten how he read me yesterday? The bloke has a flipping radar for thoughts now, and we have you to thank for it."

I turned from her and guided Alora over to sit down on a step.

"It's not a bad thing. I believe he's going to rule the vampires

peacefully,” Tegan went on.

I instantly shushed her, eyes shifting to the people standing close by. “Less of the ‘v’ word around here, please. Unless it’s vagina. You can say that all you want.”

Alora’s mouth quirked in a small smile, and I smiled back at her even though she couldn’t see me.

“You should have seen him speak to them last night at the Market Below. It was an eye-opener. They all really respect him. Well, most of them do. It’s not like it was with Whitfield. Ethan is going to be a different kind of ruler.”

I stared at her cynically. “I’ll believe that when I see it. And what, pray tell, did you think you were playing at going to the Market Below? It’s ‘vagina’ central, and you might as well be their favourite kind of snack.”

“Ethan brought me. I knew nothing would happen if I was with him.”

“Oh, because he’s just such a big swooning hunk of manliness?” I said sarcastically.

She grinned. “That’s one reason, yes. Oh, and you better not refer to him as a ‘vagina’ to his face. I don’t think that would end well.”

“When people tell me not to say things, it kind of makes me want to do the opposite.”

Tegan groaned. “Don’t I know it.”

A silence fell between us as I sat beside Alora and scanned the gathered crowds for any early signs of disruption. I had to give it to her, Tegan had chosen a good spot. It was nice and elevated to take in lots of what was going on. There was a restless tension in the air. These people really wanted to burn themselves some vampires.

I glanced at Tegan, and she was twisting a strand of hair between her fingers. I’d noticed this was something she did when she was anxious.

“You really think Cristescu is going to be a good ruler?” I asked.

“Yes,” she answered seriously, her eyes on the crowd below rather than on me. “I do.”

I hated how her reply filled me with such hope. I wanted it to be true. I wanted Cristescu to rule peacefully, but I still disliked him as a general rule. “Hmm, we’ll see.”

“The day is going to come when you eat your words, Finn Roe.”

“I hope you’re right,” I replied, watching the mass of people. I spotted movement up ahead and pinpointed Theodore and Rita walking hand in hand

through the middle of the crowd. They were dressed the same as they had been when they were on TV, looking like a holier than thou preacher and his daughter instead of an evil sorcerer and his newly-turned-evil witchy progeny.

Theodore had a loudspeaker in hand, which he lifted to his mouth to address the crowd.

“Thank you all for coming. Before the day is through, we will have purged the vampire infestation from Tribane once and for all. Now, to get down to business. Please organise into groups and begin visiting homes on the south side of the Hawthorn. I have it on good authority that’s where most of the vampires reside. Leave no stone unturned. Maps are currently being distributed among you with clearly defined markings for all residential areas. When you discover a house without a chalk circle, do not knock on any doors or give any signs that you are there. Set fire to the residence and leave immediately. The vampires will be too deep in slumber to notice the fire until it is too late.”

I watched as several individuals moved through the throngs, handing out small maps. I recognised one of them as Marcel, and my blood boiled. I used to know that man, used to be on reasonably friendly terms with him, and although I knew he was capable of a lot, I didn’t think he would be capable of this. This was genocide, no matter what way you wanted to spin it. I had my fair share of bones to pick with the vamps, but burning them while they slept was nothing short of barbaric.

Theodore and Rita began leading a large crowd of people away from Campion Row, an eerie death-by-fire parade.

“We’ll follow Theodore and Rita,” I said, pulling my hood up over my head. I couldn’t risk being recognised. At the same time, Tegan withdrew a small cap and sunglasses from her bag and put both on. Ira was already wearing a black beanie. I wasn’t sure if Alora needed to worry about being recognised, but since Michael Ridley was a follower of Theodore’s he could be around here somewhere. Pulling her up from the step and standing in front of her, I tucked her long ponytail inside the blue hoodie she was wearing and pulled up her hood.

“Just a precaution,” I said, leaning close to her ear, and she nodded in silent acquiescence.

When I pulled back, Tegan was watching us both with one eyebrow raised over her sunglasses and a smirk tugging at her lips.

“Got something to say?” I asked.

“Nope. Nothing to say at all,” she answered with a cheeky lilt to her voice.

I took Alora’s hand, and together the four of us blended into the crowd. All around me I heard stories about Theodore spreading like wildfire. Not a single one of them was true. The most prominent was that he was a widowed doctor who spent most of his time providing free medical care for the poor. What a load of bollocks.

“I don’t doubt it,” one woman said to her friend as they walked past. “I like to think you can judge a person from their eyes, and Mr Girard has the kindest eyes I’ve ever seen.”

I did my best not to laugh. More like the craziest pair of eyes she’s ever seen.

“He’s done such good for the city by organising all of this. I think he should be voted in as mayor once the vampires are all killed,” said the other woman.

Okay, I couldn’t contain my laugh this time. Both women shot me dirty looks before continuing with their Theodore Girard panegyric. When we reached the first residential street, not a single house was without a chalk circle on the door. The people mumbled about it being a good, respectable neighbourhood, which explained why no vampires lived there.

I felt like telling them I knew for a fact that vampires lived in some of the most respectable areas in the city, but I held my tongue. We were on the fourth street now, and still, no circle-less homes had been found. A restlessness began to take hold, and people were growing suspicious.

A half an hour passed and still no houses to burn. A man standing several feet away from me looked like he was about to start lashing out, but then all of a sudden his face lost its agitated expression and a look of calm overtook his features.

I turned immediately to glance down at the pretty blonde whose hand was in mine. “Did you do that?” I whispered to Alora.

She nodded. “I could sense his rage. In situations like this, all it takes is for one person to lose their cool, and before you know it, there’s chaos.”

“I don’t doubt that,” I murmured, and we continued walking.

Tegan drew close, her voice a whisper. “At some point, Theodore’s going to know that something is up.”

“I think that point has already arrived,” Ira said.

Theodore walked down the centre of the crowd. It instantly parted for him, and all movement stopped.

“I think we have spies amid our ranks,” he announced as his crazy gaze inspected each person he passed. How could those two women mistake such crazy eyes for kind ones? I guess people sometimes saw only what they wanted to see.

Rita walked closely behind Theodore, inspecting people right along with him.

“Somebody has warned the vampires of our plan,” Theodore said loudly as he continued to walk through the crowd. “And I have a feeling that person is among us now.”

Outraged murmurings drifted among the gathering.

“Who is it? Who is it?” one lunatic woman cried.

I wanted to take my three friends and get the hell out of here, but if we moved now, we might as well be wearing big flashing signs on our heads that read, SPIES. All we could do was stay put and hope Theodore somehow managed to overlook the four people who had very subtly obscured their faces from view.

When I glanced at Tegan, she looked like she was holding her breath. I might’ve been holding mine, too. I’d been in so many dangerous and fucked up situations in my life, but this one took the cake. We were surrounded by several hundred angry people, and if Theodore pointed us out as traitors, we’d probably be crushed to death by the sheer numbers.

Remind me why I thought it would be a good idea to leave my safe, warm bed this morning for this shit?

Oh yeah, because I was a stupid, brave idiot with a hero complex.

I squeezed Alora’s hand and tugged her closer to me. She was shaking, but I couldn’t tell if it was because she was afraid or if she was using her ability to calm the people around us. When I noticed her lip tremble, I decided it was the former. She was scared and that only made me want to protect her more. I let go of her hand to wrap my arm around her shoulders, rubbing up and down in soothing motions.

A couple of yards ahead of our group, Theodore stopped in front of a skinny, brown-haired man and looked him up and down.

“Forgive me for saying so, but you seem rather nervous, sir,” Theodore commented.

The attention of the crowd zoomed in on this man and anticipation rose.

They needed a scapegoat, someone to channel their outrage on, and this man was a prime target.

“You’re right. I am nervous. The idea of vampires terrifies me,” the man replied, his voice a jittery mess.

Theodore took a step closer to him and pursed his lips. My attention was drawn to Rita. She wasn’t looking at the man her father had singled out. Instead, she was scanning the crowd, inspecting each face one by one. Thankfully, we were too out of the way for her to see us yet.

“Oh? And what exactly happened to your neck?” Theodore questioned.

“M-my neck?” the man stammered. “I don’t understand.”

“Some sort of marks are present,” Theodore explained before grabbing his collar and pulling it down. Those standing nearest to the man gasped in horror, and although I wasn’t close enough to see, I had a good idea what was discovered. Vampire bite marks. This guy must’ve been a blood donor for some vamp who told him to go along and observe what was happening.

“You are the spy,” Theodore accused in what I assumed was feigned shock and indignation. I had to admit, he was putting on a good show for the crowd.

“Please,” the man cried, tears running down his cheeks. “I was only doing what she asked me to. She compelled me to tell her of the plans to burn the homes of vampires. I had no other choice but to do it.”

“We always have a choice,” Theodore said dismissively. “And now you will have to face the judgement of your peers for what you have done.” He stopped and turned to address the crowd. “What do you all think we should do with him?”

I liked to think I was hard to shock, but I was taken aback when people started shouting suggestions like, “Hang him,” and “Shoot him.” How quickly they resorted to savagery. Whoever coined the term, ‘the madness of crowds’ was spot on, because this was pure insanity.

A conflict raged within me. I didn’t want to allow this man to be killed. But if I stepped up and tried to stop it, I’d basically be putting nooses around all our necks.

“Shoot him?” Theodore questioned. “Are you sure?”

My gaze was drawn to the hand that emerged from his pocket. Nobody else was looking, but his fingers began to move in rapid motions. He was casting a spell. Something small and dark formed in his hand. He’d just magicked himself a gun!

A man standing behind him got an odd, glazed look in his eyes as he stepped up close to Theodore, who then slipped the gun into his hand. The man stepped in front of the vamp blood donor and raised the gun to his head. Exclamations of surprise and shouts of encouragement erupted as the man prepared to shoot the guy who'd been labelled as a spy.

My fingers twitched as I held Alora close. I only had seconds to decide whether or not to intervene.

Fortunately, I didn't have to act, because someone else did.

Unfortunately, that person was Tegan.

9.

Tegan

Why was I doing this?

Why the *hell* was I doing this?

Of course, I knew the answer. I couldn't stand by and let a man be killed. I simply couldn't

"Stop!" I shouted, stepping forward with my hand braced in front of me. Sparks trickled from my palm, and I kept them there, a steady stream of magical defence.

Theodore's gaze immediately darted to me, and a grin shaped his lips a moment before he plastered a look of terror on his face. "My goodness, who are you? What are those?" There was a false look of fear in his eyes as he stared at the magic coming from my hand.

Some people saw my sparks and screamed in terror, while others simply stared at me, gobsmacked. Rita walked through the gap in the crowd until she was standing in front of me. Her head tilted to the side curiously, like I was a stranger she had the odd sense she knew from somewhere.

I wanted to say so many things to her, but my mouth wouldn't work. Emotion caught in my throat. Seeing someone you considered one of your closest friends look at you like they didn't even know you was heart-breaking.

"Rita," I whispered.

Her name seemed to be the only word I could think to say in that moment.

"Who is she?" someone shouted.

"What's wrong with her hand?" another wailed in fear.

"Rita," I whispered again but saying her name didn't elicit any response.

Suddenly, Theodore marched toward us and pulled Rita away from me as though to protect her. I felt like laughing and crying all at the same time.

"Don't hurt my daughter, you ... you abomination!" he cried, loud enough for everyone to hear.

The word 'abomination' seemed to create a frenzy among the crowd as they shouted in agreement that yes, the woman standing before them was an abomination and needed to be dealt with.

A sharp pain shot through my scalp as a woman grabbed my hair from behind and pulled hard. Another woman smacked me across the face, and I let go of the sparks for a moment to clutch my cheek in surprise.

The noise of a gun firing rang out, and I heard Finn shouting, "Get away from her, all of you, or I'll shoot."

Some people moved, but others continued to attack me. I regained my composure long enough to summon my sparks again, throwing them haphazardly at my attackers. Finn was still too far away to be much help, but seconds later, the attack stopped, and all I heard was an eerie snarl. I turned my head and found Ethan behind me, facing my attackers. His fangs were out, and his silvery gold eyes were murderous.

"It's a vampire!" somebody screamed in terror. "A vampire in daylight!"

Complete and total chaos followed as a stampede formed, the crowd now desperate to get away from Ethan. I couldn't decide if one guy was courageous or just plain stupid when he jumped on Ethan with a stake. Ethan swatted him away like he was nothing but a fly. The man hit the ground hard and scurried off, quickly realising the error of his ways.

Then, from somewhere close by, I saw a white light. I pulled myself to my feet and stood to see that the light was emanating from Alora. *Wow ... just wow.* The people who hadn't yet fled were strangely beginning to calm down. Finn stared at her with a look of amazement mirroring my own. Was she doing this? Was she somehow calming them?

My attention was drawn away from her when I heard Ethan snarling again, but this time his anger was directed at me. He pulled me into his arms and glared down at me.

"Coming here without informing me was a very bad idea, Tegan. If I hadn't found you in time you could have been beaten to death by those humans," he seethed.

"I know, but I wanted to see Rita," I said, tears forming, emotion clogging my throat.

"The witch is not worth risking your life for," he replied, his tone softening a smidge.

"She's risked plenty for me before all this happened. I know I can get her back. I just know it."

Ethan's hard expression faltered, and sympathy filled his gaze. "Don't ever do anything like this again," he said. "If you want to go somewhere dangerous, I won't stop you, but at least let me come so I can protect you."

His heartfelt words made my lungs fill with butterflies, and I wrapped my arms around his middle, pulling his rock-hard body into mine. I kissed his collarbone, which was the highest part I could reach on his tall frame without him bending down to me.

“Jesus, that was a close call,” Finn said, coming up to us with Alora at his side. Ira was on the other side of him, and I looked around to find that Theodore, Rita, and everyone else had fled the scene.

“The humans have seen you in daylight,” Ira said, addressing Ethan. “Even though it’s not exactly true, rumour might spread that vampires are not confined to the night and things should settle down.”

“In other words,” Finn added. “They’ll be too scared shitless to leave their homes, and the city will be a ghost town again.”

“Well, it’s not ideal, but it is preferable to what happened here today,” I interjected, meeting Finn’s eyes.

“Theodore knows we’re onto him now. He also knows where you live. You must all come and stay at my house until we know it’s safe,” Ethan said, and his words surprised me.

To be honest, I didn’t think he gave much of a crap about my little group of friends, but now I saw that he did, and my heart didn’t know what to do with that information.

“I hate to admit it, but you’re right,” Finn agreed, dismayed. “And I’ve only just gotten back into my own bed.” He paused and eyed Ethan. “Is there room in your place for all of us?”

Now I was surprised that Finn was going along with this and not putting up a fight. Perhaps we were all maturing.

“There is plenty. Go pack up your things and gather the others. You’ll need to act fast before Theodore decides to pay you a visit. I’m sure he knows where I live, too, but he’s scared of me. He won’t dare come to my house.”

Finn quietly agreed and began leading Alora and Ira back to wherever he parked his van. Silently, Ethan lifted me onto his back, and moments later, we were outside his house.

“I’m still mad at you,” he said. Something about his husky tone caused a deep, erotic stir in my belly, and I decided to goad him.

“Be mad all you want. You’re not the boss of me,” I retorted before sauntering into the kitchen to make something to eat. I left so early this morning that I didn’t have the chance for breakfast. My stomach rumbled.

Opening his fridge, I found the ingredients for a Spanish omelette and proceeded to throw them all together in a pan. While I did this Ethan watched me. I felt his eyes on me, and my arousal grew.

He might be mad, but he still wanted me.

“Your face is bruised, and I think you might have a couple of bruises elsewhere, too, given the hits you took before I got to you,” he said a few minutes into my food preparation. He was angry about my injuries, but he needn’t worry. I wasn’t too badly hurt.

“I’ll be okay,” I said.

Once the omelette was done, I dished it onto a plate and sat down to eat. Ethan watched me for several moments before leaving the room. When he came back, his shirt was off and the button at the fly of his jeans was undone.

Gulp.

He walked to a cupboard, rummaged around for a minute, and pulled out a new bottle of body wash.

“The one upstairs is empty,” he said, referring to how we used it all up. “I’m going to take a shower,” he continued. “Call me if you need anything.”

I need you to put some clothes back on so that I can physically close my gaping mouth. Even though we’d had quite a bit of sex in recent days, this was all very new, and I still found myself staring at his body in slack-jawed amazement sometimes.

The bastard knew it, too.

This was his punishment for me going out without telling him. I inhaled a deep breath and summoned up the willpower not to climb right up those stairs after him.

I heard the shower come on, and a couple of minutes later, the doorbell rang. When I answered it, Finn, Alora, Ira, Gabriel, Alvie, and Delilah were standing on the doorstep.

“Delilah, welcome home,” I greeted. “The rest of you, come on in.”

“Just thrilled to be back,” Delilah deadpanned.

“Look at this place,” Alvie cooed. “Very swanky!”

I led them all into the living room, helping with bags. Next, I gave them a tour of the downstairs. Once finished in the shower, Ethan came down, looking just as sexy as he had before he went upstairs. He kissed me briefly on the lips and began to guide everyone to their rooms. There were a lot of bedrooms in this house since it was comprised of three floors; one bedroom downstairs, four on the first floor, and three on the top floor, plus Ethan’s

study.

I went to check in with Amanda and Rebecca, who had taken to each other like ducks to water. Unlike me, Amanda knew exactly how to act around kids since she had a tonne of younger cousins growing up. I found them both playing an elaborate game of Barbie dolls on the floor of Rebecca's room.

"Where did all these toys come from?" I asked.

"Ethan got them for Rebecca," Amanda replied, and I was momentarily touched that he'd gone to the trouble.

"That was nice of him," I said, taking a seat and watching them play for a while. Their giggling made me smile until I got a tingling sensation in my brain. The tingling transformed into an itch, and suddenly, I was seeing Roman in my head.

I need to talk to you, Granddaughter, he said.

Amanda and Rebecca's game of Barbies had become the background and Roman's face the foreground.

Where? I asked.

Come to the roof.

You're on the roof?

Yes, come. And hurry.

Leaving Amanda and Rebecca to their game, I went up to Ethan's study on the top floor and crawled out through the window. There was a part of the roof that jutted out, allowing you to climb to the top. I whined a little as I pulled my body up since I had a few bruises from this morning's attack. Roman was perched on the roof, his arms folded, as he watched me struggle.

"Hey, Gramps, care to give me a hand up?" I asked.

"Why, of course," he replied smoothly and took my hand into his. A little zinging spark of recognition ran through me, my magic identifying him as kin.

I sat down next to him, taking him in now that we were meeting in the flesh and not in one of my dreams. If I thought he was handsome in a dream, it had nothing on him in reality. His face was almost too perfect, his eyes shining like bright blue sapphires.

He touched a finger to my cheek where there was a bruise blossoming.

"What happened here?"

"I mistakenly used magic in front of an angry mob. They thought I was an abomination and attacked me."

“Why would you do that?”

“They were going to kill a man who didn’t deserve it, and I was trying to stop them.”

“Ah, so you were being a hero.”

“More like a fool.”

He grinned now. “Hmmm, that, too.”

Cheeky bastard.

“So, what’s the big urgency to speak with me?”

“I have visited your city’s barrier and managed to easily slip through. Most magical folk would be able to pass it, just not humans or vampires. Also, it wasn’t constructed by Theodore.”

“Wait a second, what?”

“Magical folk can move through it,” he repeated.

“No, not that, the other thing,” I said, flustered.

“Ah, yes. It wasn’t constructed by Theodore. In fact, it shows all the signs of being a witch’s doing.”

“Was it Rita, Theodore’s daughter?” I asked.

“I’m certain it wasn’t. Actually, I know intimately the person who did it.” He made meaningful eye contact with me, and it took me a second to understand.

“Are you saying it was Emilia?” I asked in disbelief. “When I spoke to her, she acted like she knew nothing about who constructed it.”

I quickly thought back to that conversation, and it suddenly all made sense. Emilia had basically said the barrier was a good thing because it would keep the humans from fleeing the city and informing the outside world of the supernaturals living here.

Roman watched my face as though he was reading all my thoughts. “I believe Emilia constructed it to bide herself some time. I suspect she wants to cast a mass memory cleanse of the human population so that they won’t remember that vampires and magic exist. It’s one of the most difficult spells to cast, especially for a witch who is not yet a sorceress.”

I eyed him speculatively. “Could you do it?”

He looked at me like I’d just insulted him. “Of course I could do it.”

“Okay, I’ll rephrase that question. *Will* you do it? Something needs to be done about the humans, and I think that forgetting everything that’s happened these past few weeks will be the best solution. That way they can go back to their normal lives without living in fear.”

Roman eyed me speculatively. “I might do this for you, but only if you give me something in return.”

I bristled. “What do you want?”

His blue eyes gleamed. “I want you to allow me to train you to become a sorceress.”

I stared at him, saying nothing for at least a full minute, my mouth hanging open in surprise. When I finally gathered my senses, the best I could come up with was, “Uh ... what?”

“I have never had a granddaughter before, so I have never had the opportunity to pass on my knowledge to another person. I want to pass on that knowledge to you, Tegan, if you’ll allow it. Besides, haven’t you considered the negative aspects of your mortality? You will age and die while your vampire lover will remain exactly the same as the night you first saw him.”

I narrowed my eyes and folded my arms. “How do you know about my *vampire lover*?”

“I’ve been doing my research,” he answered with a knowing smile.

Suddenly, I remembered Alora’s vision where she said I was older, but I hadn’t aged. The idea that I might actually become a sorceress in the future was a little overwhelming.

“I need time to think about this,” I said, rubbing at the back of my neck, where a tension ache was forming.

“That’s quite alright. I need a few days to gather what I need for the mass memory cleanse. I’ll also need to find Emilia.”

“Theodore has her,” I volunteered.

Roman grimaced. “Ah, that makes things a little more difficult but not impossible. But not to worry, I will find her.”

“Could you get Rita for me, too, while you’re at it?”

Before he had the chance to respond, Ethan appeared at the edge of the roof and climbed easily to the top. His face was free of expression which usually meant he was either bored or pissed. In this particular situation, I was going with pissed.

“Who is this?” he asked in a low voice.

Yep, definitely pissed.

I placed a hand on his chest, meeting his gaze when I replied, “Ethan, this is Roman, my grandfather.”

“How did you ...”

“I didn’t,” I cut him off. “He found me.”

“Mr Cristescu,” Roman said, getting to his feet. “It is an honour to meet you. Or should I be addressing you as governor?”

Ethan shook his head. “I have no interest in titles.” He reached out and shook Roman’s hand, and there was a moment of silence as they measured each other up. I held my breath, waiting for them to break the handshake.

Finally, they did, and Roman’s attention went away into the distance. “I must be going. I’ll be in touch soon.” With that, he made a couple of strange hand gestures before disappearing into a cloud of silver and gold smoke.

Ethan stared down at me, a questioning look on his face.

“He’s going to help us,” I said, not ready to tell him about the whole becoming a sorceress thing yet. I needed time to hash it all out in my head before I told anyone else about it. I slipped my fingers through his, and a second later, he scooped me into his arms and dropped us effortlessly inside his large bedroom window.

10.

Finn

I'd say one good thing about Cristescu, his house was bloody fantastic. Vampires happened to be considerably fond of themselves, which meant they only settled for the very best in luxury. Back in my early DOH days, I had to break into a vamp home one night. The place had heated floors, solid gold taps, and in one room, there was even a glass ceiling.

I know, a glass ceiling for a vampire. How dumb could he be? I later discovered that they'd invented this kind of UV filtering glass that negated the effects of sunlight.

Clever bastards.

The room I was staying in had an amazing shower and a mattress that had to have cost a few grand. I lay in bed, about to turn off the lamp and catch some z's when there was a tentative knock on my door.

"Who is it?" I called sleepily.

"Alora. Can I come in?" came a quiet reply.

"Sure," I answered, wondering why she'd come looking for me.

She stepped inside and closed the door. Her hand glided along the wall as she felt her way to the bed, and I had a momentary flash of her hand gliding along something else—because as we've established, I was a massive pervert.

"What's up, Goldy?"

"I don't want to sleep alone," she said.

Those words shouldn't have been like music to my ears, but they were.

"Why not? You're safe here. No one's going to harm you," I reassured her, you know, trying to be a gentleman and all that. There was nothing I'd like more than to drift off with a beautiful half-elf in my arms, but I didn't want to take advantage.

"There are two vampires in this house," she replied. "There are also several standing guard outside."

"You don't like vamps?"

She shook her head. "A couple of years ago I had a vision of a woman being murdered by a vampire. He was sick and got off on her pain. He tortured her for a long time before he killed her. It's one of the worst things I

ever saw.”

She was still standing by the bed, so I took her hand in mine and gently pulled her down to sit. “Hey, you know the way in the human world there are good people and bad people?” I asked.

Her gold eyes were staring in the direction of our clasped hands. “Yes.” There was a hitch in her voice, but I wasn’t sure if it was down to fear or something else.

“Well, it’s kind of the same with vamps,” I continued, surprising myself with my logic. There was once a time when everything was black and white for me. Vampires were bad, humans were their prey. Now I was coming to see that there was a lot of grey in the mix. Don’t get me wrong, I wasn’t about to go declaring my undying love for Cristescu, but I was slowly coming to learn that he might not be as bad as I used to think.

I know, shock horror.

I’d probably killed just as many vampires in self-defence as he’d killed slayers who were trying to stake him. To be honest, vampires were just as wary of humans as humans were of them. Vampires might be strong, but humans outnumbered them by a huge margin.

“Some vampires can be pretty decent,” I went on. “They feed on humans, but they don’t kill them, and the humans they feed from want it. There are, however, other vampires who are complete psychos, and I’m guessing it was one of those you saw in your vision.”

“So, you trust the vampire who owns this house?”

I exhaled heavily. “Yeah. He’s a cocky prick and too good looking for his own good, but I think we can trust him. Well, as much as I ever trust anybody. There’s always a slim chance people will do something crazy that you don’t expect.”

I shut my mouth when I saw Alora tensing up again. Damn, I’d almost managed to relax her.

“Hey, come on. You can stay with me tonight. Will that make you feel safer?”

“Yes, thank you,” she inhaled a relieved breath, and I mentally prepared to keep my hands to myself. I mean, it was some feat not to touch a beautiful woman when she was lying in bed with you all sleep mused and soft and ...

Okay, I needed to get a handle on this.

I pulled open the covers for her to climb in, then turned off the lamp. I lay on my side and closed my eyes. A minute or two later, Alora slipped her

hand back into mine. I didn't breathe a word, just silently accepted the comfort of holding hands.

Her breath hit the back of my neck, and I turned to face her, reaching out to caress her smooth cheek.

"You're very beautiful," I whispered, and her breathing hitched.

"I didn't come here to—"

"I know. I just needed to say it. You're gorgeous." I paused and let out a long sigh. "Okay, now I should be able to sleep."

"Finn?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks for needing to say it. Sometimes a girl needs to hear it."

I chuckled. "Well, in that case, you're welcome."

When I finally did fall asleep, I did it while holding her hand.

I must have been moving around during the night because the next morning I woke up with Alora in my arms, her back to my front. I had one hand on her thigh and the other had slipped under her T-shirt to rest on her bare stomach.

Morning wood was an issue.

She stirred, and a soft whimper escaped her, but I wasn't sure if she was awake or dreaming. My eyes were drawn to the rise and fall of her breasts. Unable to resist, I pressed my lips to her neck in a tender kiss. She gave a quiet moan. Maybe she *was* awake. I swear I could've blown my load from that noise alone. On instinct, my hips moved, pressing my erection to her backside.

I heard her gasp, my name a husky whisper on her lips, "*Finn.*"

I groaned and kissed her neck again. She let out a shaky sigh.

"God," she murmured, her hand coming up to grip my shoulder as she arched her spine back into me. The feel of her soft, plush arse pressing into my hard cock made me lose my mind for a second. I gripped her chin, pulling her mouth to mine and brushing my lips across hers.

"We shouldn't," she whispered shakily.

"Tell me to stop, and I will," I said against her mouth.

"I don't want you to stop." The second the words left her, I took her mouth in a hungry, wet, claiming kiss. I thrust my tongue inside, and her

entire body trembled against me. I flipped her and positioned myself between her curvy, heavenly thighs, seating my throbbing cock against her softness. We were a perfect fit.

I continued kissing her, and her sweet little gasps and whimpers drove me crazy. I had to touch her. Slipping my hand under her T-shirt, I caressed her bare breast, her nipple a hard bead under my palm.

“Please,” she begged, writhing beneath me.

I broke our kiss, pushing her T-shirt up to bare her lush breasts. I’d never seen such an exquisite sight. After such a long dry spell, just seeing her was maddening. I was a starved man gazing upon a hearty buffet, and I didn’t know where to start first.

Lowering down her body, I took her pert nipple into my mouth, sucking hard. She cried out, and I smiled as I swirled my tongue around the delicate pink peak.

When I trailed my hand along her inner thigh and between her legs, she shuddered. I rubbed my thumb over her clit on top of her underwear, and she moaned, holding my head to her breasts now as I continued to lick and suck. I needed to feel her, all of her, so I slid my hand beneath the fabric of her underwear and groaned when I felt how slick and wet she was.

“Christ,” I muttered as I found her entrance and thrust a finger in, noticing how tight she was.

“Finn,” she breathed shakily.

“Relax,” I urged because I felt her tensing up. I circled her clit with my thumb, and her eyes drifted shut as her head fell back into the pillows and she relaxed again.

“You feel so good,” I rasped, my eyes intent on her face as I coaxed her to orgasm. I loved that moment when a woman just completely shattered beneath you, pleasure taking her over. I loved even more being the one who got her there.

And now I wanted to taste her. I wanted to make her come with my mouth.

Her eyes were still glued shut as I moved farther down her body. Her chest was rising and falling in quick breaths of anticipation. Then I dipped my head between her legs, quickly pulling her underwear to the side and touching my tongue to her clit. Her entire body jerked.

“What ... what are you doing?” she gasped.

I couldn’t help grinning. “What do you think I’m doing?”

“Finn, you need to know something—”

“Tell me later,” I said, bringing my mouth back to her sweet pussy. I couldn’t get enough.

I sucked her clit, my finger still inside of her, moving slowly in and out. Judging from how tight she was, I suspected the thing she wanted to tell me was that she was a virgin. She’d only been twenty-one when Michael Ridley kidnapped her, so it made sense. But she didn’t need to worry. I wasn’t going to try and fuck her or anything. I just wanted to make her come, and if she told me to stop, I would.

Besides, she deserved a decent orgasm after everything she’d been through.

And I was a decent enough bloke to give it to her.

“You taste incredible,” I murmured, my mouth still going to work on her as I stared at her breasts and her flickering eyelids. I reached up and pinched her nipple, and she cried out, her hands fisting the sheets.

“I wish I could see you,” she said on a moan when I swirled my tongue in a big circle, sliding over her folds.

“Imagine it in your head,” I replied huskily. “Think about my face, what you think it looks like. Think about my mouth on you, my tongue ...” I trailed off, groaning. I was going to make a mess of the sheets. She was just so fucking sexy.

“Oh, God,” she moaned, and I sensed she was almost there.

I sucked on her clit hard, and then she was coming, shaking against me and looking absolutely amazing. Moments later, I came, too. Kind of embarrassing, since she wasn’t even touching me, but like I said, it had been a while, and Alora was a wet dream come to life.

I crawled up her body and took her into my arms, kissing and nuzzling the hollow of her neck.

“Wow,” she whispered, her arms slipping around my torso and cuddling me tight.

“Yeah, wow,” I agreed, making a plan in my head to do that again as soon as possible.

A second later, there was a knock at the door, which was swiftly followed by Tegan’s voice calling, “Finn, are you awake yet?”

Perfect way to ruin the moment.

Tegan

“Why didn’t you inform me that Roman had found you?” Ethan demanded as he paced back and forth over the lush, expensive carpet in his bedroom.

I perched myself on the edge of the bed and rubbed at my arms, suddenly feeling a chill. “Well, I wasn’t sure that he *had* actually found me. He visited me in a dream, and I couldn’t tell if it was real or not. Tonight is the first time he came to me in the flesh.”

Ethan stopped abruptly and narrowed his gaze at me. “He visited you in a dream?”

I swallowed. “Yes.”

“And what happened in this dream?”

I didn’t get why he was being so icy all of a sudden, but I decided honesty was the best policy. I hated lying, and I didn’t want there to be any secrets between us. “He asked why I was searching for him, and I told him I was his granddaughter. Then he tried to kiss me in a very non-paternal way. I told him I wasn’t down with that, and he said that incest is the norm for magical folk. It creeped me out, to be honest.”

I paused and met Ethan’s gaze. He looked like he wanted to punch a hole in the wall or something. “He *kissed* you?”

I swallowed again. I seemed to be doing a lot of that tonight. “In the dream, so technically it doesn’t really count.”

“He’s a sorcerer,” Ethan growled. “It counts.”

Goosebumps claimed my skin at the rumble in his chest. “Well, anyway, as you can imagine, he took me completely by surprise. Where I come from, grandfathers don’t snog their granddaughters like that. I put a stop to the kiss right away, and he knows I don’t swing that way now. The plus side is that he’s agreed to help us.” I paused, worrying my lip. “He does want something in return though.”

Ethan’s eyes narrowed to slits. “What does he want?”

I hesitated because I’d planned on keeping this to myself for a while longer so that I’d have time to properly think it through. But maybe telling Ethan was a good idea. He could give me some advice on the matter. “He wants to train me to become a sorceress,” I said.

“Absolutely out of the question,” Ethan argued, his jaw ticking.

I furrowed my brow. “Um, it’s not exactly your decision to make.”

“He’s only requesting this so that he can spend more time with you ... and seduce you, most likely. Sorcerers are selfish beings. They aren’t

interested in passing on their knowledge because they know they are never going to die. If anything, he wants to bed you out of curiosity, and then he will probably leech your power and keep it for himself. He is not to be trusted.”

Ethan’s words gave me pause. I hadn’t even considered that Roman might only be out for what he could gain. But he seemed so different from Theodore, like he was a good sorcerer and Theodore was an evil one. The same way Rita told me there was good and bad magic.

“He said he wanted to help me. Apparently, becoming a sorceress would allow me to be with you for longer. Because I’m not sure if you’ve thought about this, Ethan, but I’m going to age and die, and you’re going to stay the same.” Saying it out loud made my stomach drop. “You’re not going to want to be with an old woman when you’re still young and virile.”

Ethan shook his head and walked toward me, shooting me a look like I was being ridiculous. “That’s not true. Your mortality is one of the most intrinsically beautiful things about you. Yes, you are beautiful on the outside, but physical attraction is a shallow thing. It’s attraction of the soul that links two people together.” He paused and gazed at me lovingly. “Besides, I’m not exactly a young pup myself. I will age a little over the next few years.”

I snorted and quipped, “Yeah, you’ll look thirty-six instead of thirty-five. How awful for you.” A pause as I thought about it. “Actually, since you’ve transformed, you probably won’t age at all. You’re immortal now, remember?”

He knelt in front of me and clasped each of my thighs in his hands. “Right, how could I forget?”

His hand moved up my thigh and along my stomach and chest to my heart. “Our bodies are mere shells, and you will always be beautiful where it matters.” His hand patted lightly against my chest, and I breathed deeply.

“You’re far too charming, Ethan Cristescu, but I’m still not convinced.”

“And you are far too edible,” he replied, pushing me back so that I was lying on the bed. He pulled my jeans off quickly and situated himself between my legs, pressing his face to my sex and nuzzling gently. Seconds later, my underwear had disappeared and his tongue was on me, his hands roaming under my shirt to squeeze at my breasts.

What was it we were arguing about again?

When I woke up the next morning, Ethan was already showered and standing by the window, yanking a T-shirt on over his head. I didn't think I'd ever get used to the thrill of seeing him standing in direct sunlight, how it brought out the striking gold colour of his hair.

"Where are you off to so early?" I asked, stretching out in the bed like a happy cat.

"Nicu Arcos is throwing a party at Crimson tonight. He's been taking care of the club in my absence and wants to celebrate my new position of power. I'm going to visit the place while it's empty to see how things have been going."

"Is a party wise though? Things seem a little strained among your people at the moment."

"And that is exactly why a party is such a great idea. They'll be able to let off some steam."

"Are any non-vampires invited?"

"Of course. Who else will be providing the drinks?" he joked.

"Ethan, be serious. Are Finn and the others allowed to come?"

"They may come if they wish. I'll see to it that they are kept safe."

"Great. I'll mention it to them. Now that I think of it, perhaps we all need something to take our minds off Theodore."

"Exactly," Ethan smiled and came to kiss me on the cheek. "Now, I have much to see to today. Will you be okay here at the house?"

"Sure, but, um, there's something else I need to tell you that we didn't get to discuss last night."

Ethan stared at me silently and waited for me to speak.

"It's about the barrier around the city. Roman said he thinks it was Emilia who constructed it, not Theodore. He believes she wants to keep the humans trapped until she can figure out how to cast a spell that will wipe their memories so that the city can go back to normal."

Ethan studied me, rubbing his chin, his eyebrows drawn together. "Hmm, I can't say I hate the idea."

"Me neither. Roman also said that the barrier only keeps humans and vampires trapped inside. Those of us with magic can move through it freely. So, I was planning on going through it today to call my dad. The phone signals are still crappy, and I haven't been able to get a call through to him. I think the barrier is interfering with the cell towers somehow."

"Okay, but you're not going alone. Get Gabriel to go with you ... and

maybe the slayer, too.”

I suppressed a grin. “He does have a name, you know.”

“Fine. Bring Finn with you,” he replied begrudgingly, not admitting to the fact that he knew Finn would do his best to keep me safe.

With that, he came over, gave me a spine-tingling kiss, and left the room. I lay back, smiling. It made me happy that Ethan was finally coming around to accepting Finn as an ally, even if we still hadn’t come to an agreement about Roman. I had to admit, a part of me was excited by the idea of training to become a sorceress, but perhaps that was a little premature. I barely knew how to be a witch yet.

A little while later, I showered, dressed, and went downstairs. Gabriel was in the dining room eating breakfast with Alvie, Amanda, and Rebecca. I took a seat beside him and poured myself a bowl of cereal.

“Can I commandeer you to bring me to the barrier today?” I asked.

“Of course,” Gabriel replied. “But why do you want to go there?”

I quickly filled everyone in on Roman’s appearance in my life and about the new information he provided about the barrier. Once I was done eating, I went to the room Finn was staying in to check if he was awake yet. I knocked on his door and called for him, hearing some shuffling but no answer.

When I knocked a second time, he opened the door a smidge and stuck his head out.

“What’s up?” he asked, his hair all mussed.

“Hmm, it’s not like you to sleep so late,” I commented. “Got a girl in there or something?”

I only meant to tease him, but when I saw the look in his eyes, I realised I’d inadvertently hit the nail on the head. A little rush of curiosity went through me as a grin split my lips. “Is it Alora?” I whispered as quietly as I could. I knew I sensed some chemistry between them.

Finn coughed and straightened, and I’d never seen him look so embarrassed. “I’ll be down shortly.”

Then he closed the door, and I turned away, feeling giddy. Alora was beautiful and sweet, and Finn was one of the best people I knew. He deserved someone like her in his life.

A little while later, he made an appearance downstairs, grabbing a quick bite to eat. I told him about wanting to go to the barrier, and he offered to drive. Gabriel, Alvie, and I sat in the back while Finn slipped into the driver’s seat, and I noticed that Alora wasn’t with him.

I slid forward and peeked around the driver's seat. "Sooo, spill the beans, lover boy. Who were you with last night?"

"You're very nosy this morning," he replied, still evading giving me any details.

"Oh, come on, don't be like that," I said, folding my arms in annoyance.

"Yeah," Alvie joined in. "Who *were* you with last night?"

"God, you're like a pair of gossipy old ladies. Give it a rest," Finn grumped.

"Oh, oh, oh! Let me guess, have you and Lucas finally decided to declare your undying love for one another?" Alvie asked jokingly.

Finn chuckled. "Yeah, that's it. Not only have I turned into a vamp lover, I've also turned gay. Well done, Sherlock."

"Come on you two, leave Finn alone," Gabriel chided, the voice of reason. There was a moment of silence before he continued with a big smile and a wink. "Besides, it's quite obvious he was with Alora."

"Ha! I knew it!" I exclaimed, clapping my hands together in glee.

"You lot are incredibly irritating sometimes," Finn muttered, but there was a smile tugging at his lips, and something squeezed in my stomach to see him happy.

When we reached the barrier, Finn took us to a less populated spot, saying we should try avoiding the crowds of crazies camped out awaiting the arrival of aliens, and I wholeheartedly agreed.

There were some woods along the barrier that were pretty much empty. We parked the van nearby and trekked through the trees until we arrived at the shimmering purple bubble that blocked out the rest of the world. I wondered if Emilia made it purple to make everyone believe Theodore was its architect and deflect attention from her.

I ran my hand over the barrier, and it fizzled at my touch. I felt that hum of recognition that told me I had a connection to the magic within. Yep, this had definitely been Emilia's doing. Hesitantly, I stepped forward and waved my hand through it. My hand moved past the barrier as though it were thin air, and I gasped.

With a deep breath for courage, I walked through it and came out the other side. I looked back at my friends and saw them calling to me, but I couldn't hear a sound. Wind whistled past my ears, and I suddenly felt terribly alone. Finn, Alvie, and Gabriel were all tinted purple, and the longer I stared at them, the blurrier they became.

Right, on to the task at hand. I pulled my phone out and dialled the number E.J. Edwards gave me to contact him. It rang, but no one answered. Frustrated, I hit 'call' a second time. After three rings, he finally picked up, "Hello, is that you, Tegan dear? I'm so sorry. I was putting a pie in the oven a moment ago."

I smiled because the image of Edwards putting a pie in the oven was kind of adorable. "That's alright. How's my dad doing?"

Edwards sucked in a breath before letting it out. "He's making progress, but it's slow. It will probably be several more weeks before he's back to his old self."

I held the phone tighter to my ear and tried to keep the disappointment from my voice. A selfish part of me wanted him to be better already. "Well, at least he's progressing, even if it is slow."

"Very true," Edwards agreed, and a silence fell between us.

"Do you ... do you think I might be able to talk to him?" I asked hopefully.

"That might not be the best idea just yet. But do call back in a fortnight; he could be up to speaking to you then."

My gut sank with disappointment, but I tried to keep a brave face. "Okay. I'll call back in two weeks then."

"Right you are. Listen, I better get going. I need to administer your father's medicine for the day."

"No problem. Please, tell him I called," I said, hanging up and slipping my phone back in my pocket before sinking to my knees. Being on the other side of the barrier, away from everyone else, I let myself be upset for a minute. Tears filled my eyes, and several sobs escaped me. Not being able to talk to my dad made me realise just how much I missed him and how much I needed to hear his voice.

Finally, I pulled a tissue from my pocket and wiped away the tears. I steeled myself and turned back around, walking through the barrier and returning to the other side.

11.

Finn

Even though I couldn't see much of Tegan through all that purple shit, I could still tell she was upset. Her blurry form was knelt on the ground, her back turned to us. I hoped she hadn't gotten bad news about her dad. A few minutes later, she stood, brushed herself off, and walked straight back through the barrier.

"Dad's still not better yet. Edwards said it'll be another two weeks at least before he's up to talking to me," she said, clearly disappointed.

I threw my arm around her shoulders and gave her a quick hug. "Two weeks will go by in a flash."

She nodded quietly, and we walked back to the van. I decided to go for a drive instead of heading straight back to Cristescu's. There was a deserted old farmer's field on the outskirts of the city that I liked to go to sometimes when I needed some thinking time.

"By the way, everyone's invited to a party at Crimson tonight," Tegan said. "The vampires are throwing it for Ethan to celebrate his new position as their leader."

"Yeah, no offence, but I'm not going to that," I scoffed.

"You can count me out, too," Gabriel added.

"Oh, come on, it might be fun for us to blow off some steam," Tegan urged.

"I'm not in the habit of blowing off steam in the company of vampires I've tried to kill and who've tried to kill me. It's just not a smart idea. And anyway, I know a better way of blowing off steam."

Tegan raised an eyebrow, assuming I was making an innuendo. "Finn ..."

"Ah, now, look where your filthy mind wanders," I chided. "I didn't mean sex. I meant something else. You'll see."

When we reached the empty field, I parked the van and hopped out, going around to the back, and they all followed suit. Taking out a handgun, I gave it to Tegan.

"You know how to use this?" I asked her.

"I have a fair idea."

“Good, let’s go.”

At the back of the field, there was a low wall littered with empty cans. I’d set them up the last time I was here.

“What is this place?” Alvie asked.

“It’s sort of like target practice,” I said before I started shooting at the cans. I’d always found it liberating, the sensation of letting the bullets loose, kind of the same way some people loved bursting the bubbles in bubble wrap.

Taking a break, I turned to look at Tegan. “Go on. Have a go.”

Gabriel and Alvie sat on the hood of the van, their arms linked as they watched us. Tegan glanced down at the gun in her hand. A moment passed, and when she finally decided to shoot, she actually wasn’t half bad.

When she saw my impressed expression, she explained, “My dad gave me a lesson on how to shoot, back before he…” she trailed off, her voice catching with emotion.

Ah, crap. I’d been trying to take her mind off her dad but I’d inadvertently done the opposite. “He taught you well,” I said. “He should be proud.”

Tegan silently nodded, lifting the gun again and firing off a few more rounds.

A couple minutes went by, and I saw she’d started to enjoy it.

“Feel better now?” I asked when we’d both run out of bullets.

She smiled. “Strangely, yes.”

“Good. Now, come on. Let’s get back to the house. You have a vamp party to get ready for tonight.”

“Do you really not want to come? Ethan said he’d ensure your safety.”

She obviously didn’t realise how emasculating that sounded. I shook my head. “No, I’m good. I have my heart set on a quiet night in.”

When we got to Cristescu’s, Tegan rounded up the gang and invited them all to the party at Crimson. Delilah and Ira were the only two who agreed to go while everybody else respectfully declined. We might be guests in a vamp house, but that didn’t mean we wanted to be in a club with hundreds of them—me especially.

Later on, I found Alora sitting on a couch alone in the living room.

“Hey, Goldy. How’s your day been?” I asked as I entered.

Her cheeks got a pretty red tint when she heard my voice, and something about it caused a warm, pleasurable feeling in my chest. Was she remembering the way she woke up this morning in my bed? I hoped so,

because personally I couldn't stop thinking about it. Best morning I'd had in a long, long while.

"Hi, Finn. My day's been okay. You?"

"Can't complain," I replied, stroking the back of her hair affectionately before lowering to sit beside her. She shimmied closer so that our thighs met, and I resisted the urge to pull her onto my lap and kiss her senseless. Instead, I took her hand in mine and ran my fingertips over her upturned palm. I never really connected with people on this level—touching just for the sake of it.

"That feels nice," she whispered.

A thick wave of arousal swept over me, and I wished we could go back to my place, where I could lay her down on my own bed and make her feel good for hours on end. Being with her under someone else's roof just didn't feel right. My hand fell away from Alora when Delilah and Ira entered the room and sat down on the couch across from us. Delilah eyed me intently while Ira picked a book up from the coffee table and began flicking through it. I raised a 'what the eff are you gawking at?' eyebrow at Delilah, and she turned away with a little smirk.

Clearly, she suspected my feelings for Alora. Well, goody for her. I wasn't going to act embarrassed. I liked Alora, and from the way she reacted to me this morning, I suspected she liked me back.

It had all come on so fast, but having her around made my chest feel less tight. There was a light, airiness there whenever she was close. It made no sense since I'd only known her a few days, but her quiet presence was soothing, a balm to my soul.

Leaning forward and ignoring Delilah's shrewd observation, I gave Alora a tender kiss on the cheek.

"I'm going to do a quick circuit of the city and keep an eye on things," I told her. "Do you want me to bring anything back?"

She shook her head, a shy look on her face at my show of affection. "I don't need anything, but thanks."

"Hey, Finn, I wouldn't mind some Mexican food if you're offering," Delilah said cheekily, and I shot her a wry look as I pointed at her.

"You can go get it yourself," I said, and she chuckled as I left the room.

Aside from Theodore, I hadn't seen many witches or warlocks about. Marcel, in particular, had been uncharacteristically quiet this past while. Although, I had spotted him at Champion Row the other morning handing out maps to members of the angry mob.

I drove towards Indigo only to find the place locked tight. There were a few shops nearby still open for business, but most of them were empty. Every once in a while, some police officers walked by on patrols, but otherwise, the streets were dead.

I sat in my van, biting at my short fingernails and worrying if this was what we had to look forward to from now on. People too afraid to leave their homes for fear of being attacked.

It was evening by the time I got back, and all I had managed to do was save one old lady from being mugged by a group of human teenagers. I also gave a man directions to the nearest open grocery store.

You know, real hero stuff.

After so many years of constantly fighting a battle, I didn't trust the quiet. It made me antsy.

At the house, I found Tegan, Alvie, and Amanda in the kitchen preparing dinner. They all seemed to be working together to make a stew, and the counter was a mess of chopped vegetables.

"Ever heard of the saying 'too many cooks spoil the broth?'" I asked humorously, sitting down on a stool to watch them. I picked up a raw carrot and took a bite.

"Oh, shush," Tegan said as she turned back to consult the recipe book she was working from. "I'm just not used to catering for so many people."

"I say you give up now and order a pizza."

"What's going on in here?" Lucas asked as he entered the kitchen. Amanda tensed at the sound of his voice.

"We're cooking dinner," she replied, meeting the dark-haired vampire's eyes coolly. She stood with her hands on her hips, staring him down.

His gaze seemed to move along her body appreciatively before a guilty look crossed his features. I remembered Tegan mentioning that he'd been the one to introduce Amanda to the vampire world. That was how she became addicted to being bitten. It was interesting to know he felt remorse about it.

"You look good. Healthy," he said, and Amanda's lip trembled.

I watched her actively fight whatever feelings she was having before plastering on a neutral expression. "Thanks."

An awkward silence ensued. I glanced at Tegan, and she shrugged her shoulders. Lucas cleared his throat. "Right, well, I better get going to Crimson. Are you all coming to the party later, or ..." His eyes went to Amanda once more, but she refused to look at him.

“Only me, Delilah, and Ira are going,” Tegan answered. “Everyone else is staying here.”

Lucas nodded. “Right, well, I’ll see you later then. The rest of you have a good evening.”

He left, and Amanda seemed to slump in relief once he was gone. Poor girl. It must’ve been rough getting clean from addiction and then having to stay in a house with the thing you’d been addicted to. Tegan put a hand on her friend’s shoulder in a gesture of comfort. Amanda gave a little nod to show she was okay, and they continued to prepare the stew.

When Alora entered the kitchen, I was distracted from everything else. She seemed to have that effect on me. I called her over to where I sat on the stool before pulling her between my legs and wrapping my arms around her middle, her back pressed to my front. Tegan and Alvie were not so subtly watching us out the corners of their eyes, but I didn’t care. I wanted Alora to be my woman, and I couldn’t give a crap who knew about it.

Leaning forward, I placed a soft kiss on her neck, and she shivered.

“You hungry?” I asked in a low voice.

“Mm-hmm,” was the only reply she gave, and I could tell she was shy about me being openly affectionate with her in front of everyone. Well, she’d better get used to it because I had no intention of stopping.

I stroked my hand across her belly, and when Tegan began gathering vegetables and dumping them into the pot, she watched us curiously. The front door opened and shut, and seconds later, Cristescu strolled into the room. He laughed tenderly when he saw Tegan fretting over her concoction. The tender way he looked at her gave me pause. I’d never really seen the two of them in an everyday environment like this. It made them both seem so normal ... and so *in love*.

So, vamps were capable of real emotions. I had proof standing right in front of me. Another brick on the wall of my prejudice fell crumbling to the ground. I was so caught up in my thoughts that I didn’t immediately realise Alora was tugging on my sleeve.

“Are you okay?” she whispered.

“I’m good,” I said, lowering my voice to a whisper. “I’m always good when you’re near.”

The way her long lashes cast shadows on her face as she glanced away sent a bolt of arousal through me. Interesting. It seemed I liked it when she got shy. Sadly, my burgeoning stiffy was a problem. I had to think about

something gross so as not to embarrass myself ... such as Theodore naked.

Brrr.

Yep, that did the trick.

We all sat down for dinner once Tegan's stew was ready, and despite the mess they made of the kitchen, it actually wasn't half bad.

Once night fell, Tegan, Cristescu, Lucas, Delilah, and Ira left for the party at Crimson

while the rest of us retreated to our rooms. I thought about inviting Alora to spend the night with me again, but I didn't want to rush things. With the city how it was, I couldn't court her properly, couldn't take her out on a date like I normally would. There was also the possibility that she might be a virgin, which meant going slow was important. I wanted her to feel safe with me and not pressured into doing anything she wasn't ready for.

I lay down on the bed, bunched up the pillow until it was just right, and closed my eyes. Several minutes later, I started to feel cold, and I realised that the temperature in the room had dropped drastically. I glanced out the window, and there was frost on the glass. The weather wasn't exactly warm today, but it certainly wasn't cold enough for frost.

Sitting up from the bed, I walked over to the window and ran my hand along the surface of the glass. I quickly withdrew my hand when a zing of what could only be described as magic flitted across my skin. This was just too weird.

The frost had grown so thick that I couldn't see out anymore. I jumped when something moved across it, clearing some of the ice, and my heart thumped when I saw a hand. Someone was on the other side of the window—a window high up on the second floor.

Moments later, a circle had been cleared, and I found myself staring through the pane only to be met by Rita's dark gaze. An unnatural grin formed on her lips as she crooked her finger at me.

Tegan

I'd say one thing for Nicu Arcos, he really knew how to throw a party. I entered Crimson arm in arm with Ethan. Delilah, Ira, and Lucas were behind us, and all I could see was glittering gold and red confetti as it fell from the ceiling. It was sort of magical how the lights reflected off the confetti, making the entire place seem as though it was sparkling.

The vampires all cheered at Ethan's arrival, some of them even thrusting bouquets into his arms. If it was anyone else, they might look bewildered, but not Ethan. He took it all in his stride with an urbane smile and genteel words of appreciation.

For a second, I was reminded of the victory march of an ancient Roman general, returning home with the spoils of war. Only I wasn't sure that holding power in Tribane was a victory so much as a poisoned chalice. I considered the fates of every governor I'd met. Herrington, Pamphrock, *and* Whitfield had all suffered distinctly gruesome deaths.

A large table had been set up in the VIP section, and Nicu guided us over to be seated. Those who drank liquids other than blood were provided with glasses of champagne, while the vamps sipped what appeared to be red wine, but I was pretty sure it wasn't.

Our table was a flurry of activity as vampires came and went, all wishing to have private words with Ethan. The two occasions where he showed them what happened to traitors must have made them extra eager to convince him of their loyalty.

I wore a tight black sleeveless dress that was moulded to every curve of my body, courtesy of Delilah. I'd already caught a couple of vampires surreptitiously giving me 'I vaaant to suck your blood eyes'. It didn't mean they were going to do it, of course, not when Ethan would tear their heads off for so much as laying a finger on me.

Still, I drew my magic to me as a precautionary measure, just in case any of them decided to act on their instincts. Delilah and Ira were on the dance floor, and I watched as Ira lifted her off the floor and twirled her around as though she weighed nothing. For a big guy like him, she probably didn't.

A warm hand slid up my thigh, and I turned to see Ethan's eyes practically glowing as he stared at my cleavage.

Knocking back a sip of champagne, I asked, "Feeling frisky, are we?"

His smile held an erotic promise. "With you, always."

The next thing I knew he was leaning forward and capturing my mouth with his. His fingers moved farther up my thigh to my underwear, and I gasped when he pressed his palm between my legs. His other hand sank into my hair and gripped the base of my neck, pulling me closer to him.

"Ethan," I whispered hoarsely. "This is a little public for my taste."

"Shall we go somewhere private then?"

A tremble went through me. “That would be terribly rude to your guests.”

A waiter walked by and replaced my empty glass of bubbly with a new one, while Ethan’s heated gaze zoned in on my tongue as it snuck out to wet my lips.

“I suppose I’ll just have to get you later then,” he murmured right before Nicu appeared at the table with another old vampire who wanted to be introduced to Ethan.

I took the opportunity to pay a quick visit to the bathroom. After I’d done my business, I was accosted by two lady vamps who oohed and aahed over my dress and my hairstyle, complimenting me endlessly about every little detail of my outfit. I never realised just how much there was to be said about a plain black dress and matching heels, I thought to myself sarcastically.

“You must come shopping with us sometime,” said the blonde one. “I know a little boutique that you’d just love.”

“Oh, yes,” said the other, “and come for book club at my house. We always have small get-togethers on Thursdays, and we’d love if you’d join us.”

On and on they talked, and it finally dawned on me what was going on. They wanted to get in good with Ethan’s girlfriend because getting in good with me was a step closer to getting in good with him. For a brief second, the blonde’s eyes flashed black and her fangs slipped out. She seemed embarrassed as she quickly regained her composure, and her fangs disappeared back inside her mouth.

“I apologise,” she said. “You just smell so good.”

The other one laughed. “I didn’t want to say anything, but I was thinking the exact same thing.”

Suddenly, I didn’t feel all that comfortable being stuck in the ladies’ room with these two, so I hastily made my excuses and left. Sometimes I felt like a pot of honey next to a swarm of hungry flies when I was around vampires. Also, the champagne probably wasn’t such a good idea because I was starting to edge into the realm of ‘too tipsy for a vamp party’. Eager eyes seemed to watch my every move as I made my way through the club.

I was struck with the thought of how easily any one of them could attack me, and my heart skipped a beat. Panic gripped me. I really needed to find Ethan.

The place was so crowded that it took what felt like forever to get back to the VIP section. I couldn't see Ethan anywhere, and my breathing quickened. Then someone gripped my arm, and I turned to find Lucas standing over me, his expression surprisingly etched with concern.

"Tegan, are you okay?"

I swallowed hard. "Um, yes. I mean, no. Yes. Uh, I think I might be having a panic attack." I put my hand to my chest and rubbed, trying to calm myself down. "The crowd is freaking me out," I said, and Lucas nodded.

"Come on, I'll take you to Ethan's office. You can have a moment to relax in there."

He led me back to the office and opened the door to the empty room. I stepped inside and instantly felt much better. Lucas stepped in after me, but he left the door open a little, and I was grateful for that.

"Thanks," I said to him. "There were these two women in the bathroom who wouldn't leave me alone, and I just panicked."

"They wouldn't leave you alone?" he questioned.

"Well, not in a bad way. Not really. They were just being nice, *too* nice. And then they started getting all fangy and saying how good I smelled, and I had to get away."

Lucas chuckled. "Fangy? Really?"

I waved him off. "You know what I mean."

Lucas walked into the adjoining bathroom and returned with a glass of water, handing it to me. "Drink this. It might sober you up a little."

"I'm not drunk."

The only response I got was a cynically raised eyebrow.

"I'm serious. This is what I call tipsy. Drunk is a whole other ball game."

His eyes trailed to the ceiling, and he seemed bored now. I sipped on the water and studied him.

"So, what was that all about with Amanda earlier? Ethan said you'd agreed to steer clear of her, and yet, there you were, getting in her space."

"I wasn't getting in her space. I was merely being polite. She needs to know I'm no danger to her."

"It's not that you'd be a danger to her. It's more like she's a danger to herself when she's around you. She might feel the urge to offer you her blood."

"Even if she did, I'd never take her up on that offer. I told you before, I

care about her wellbeing.”

I eyed him now, curious. “Do you care about her romantically?”

His shoulders stiffened. “That’s none of your concern.”

“Oh, my God, you have real feelings for her, don’t you? You loooove her,” I sing-songed, something I’d never do if I wasn’t tipsy from champagne.

“Alright, you’re obviously feeling much better now. Come on, we should get back out there.”

Lucas guided me from the office, and we walked down the corridor that led back out to the main area of the club. Something felt off though, and when we emerged, I noticed that the previously crowded dance floor was deserted. Vampires huddled around the outskirts of the club, an air of fear permeating them. When I moved to get a closer look at what was happening, my heart literally stopped beating for a second.

In the centre of the dance floor stood Theodore and Rita, and in front of them were ten people, each wearing a black bag over their heads and matching black jumpsuits showing numbers from one to ten. Several witches and warlocks stood by the exits, blocking anyone from leaving the club.

Ethan emerged from behind the crowds of huddled vamps, his eyes glittering with silver and gold, his fangs gloriously extended.

“What do you think you’re doing here, Sorcerer?” he demanded in a calm voice laced with undertones of simmering rage.

Theodore giggled in that high-pitched way of his before answering, “I thought I’d pay a visit so that we could play a little party game.”

“Go. Now,” Ethan commanded, but Theodore shook his head slowly and wagged something in his hand. It looked like a tiny black remote control.

“Ever heard of a nail bomb?” Theodore asked, and Ethan stilled.

“What have you done?” he seethed.

“No?” Theodore chirped, ignoring Ethan’s question. “Well, I’ll tell you. A nail bomb is just like a regular bomb, except it’s packed with nails in order to maximise the damage caused. I’ve always found it a fascinating idea and decided I’d come up with my own version: a stake bomb.” There was a collective intake of breath. “Much larger in size and slightly more cumbersome, a stake bomb is a wonderful device when taking down vampires.”

Theodore spoke as though he was a presenter on the Shopping Channel describing the latest design in electric toothbrushes. A heavy sweat broke out

on my skin as I started to hyperventilate.

“I’ve rigged several of these bombs in various locations around your club, Mr Cristescu, and oh look,” he paused and pressed a button on his remote, “I’ve just activated them.”

A clock in the centre of the ceiling lit up and began ticking down from fifteen minutes. Several vampires advanced on Theodore, but he held his hands up to them.

“Now, now, don’t be so hasty. I can deactivate the bombs easily, but the deactivation requires a spell that only I know how to cast. Also, if you kill me now, the bombs will instantly go off, so hold your horses and hear me out.” A titter of laughter escaped him before he continued. “All I want is for you to play my little party game.”

Ethan looked like he was ready to commit mass murder when he said, “What is this game?”

“Oh, goody,” Theodore exclaimed, clapping his hands together in glee. Rita stood stoically by him all the while, not uttering a single word. “Well, this is how it works. Before you, there are five humans and five vampires. Actually, no, I stand corrected. Five vampires, four humans, and a dhampir.”

Theodore slipped his hand into his pocket and pulled out a small silver gun. “So, what you need to do, Mr Cristescu, is play a game of pseudo-Russian roulette. There are no empty chambers in this gun. It’s fully loaded. However, if you shoot a human in the head, they will die. If you shoot a vampire, they will heal. What you need to do is figure out who are the humans and who are the vampires.”

Theodore stopped speaking and walked to Ethan, handing him the gun. There was a brief second as the gun was transferred from Theodore’s hand into Ethan’s that my lover looked like he might kill Theodore anyway, even if the bombs were going to go off. But he didn’t. He took the gun calmly and turned to look at the line up in front of him.

“If I play this game of yours,” Ethan said. “Who’s to say you won’t allow the bombs to go off anyway?”

“Trust,” Theodore said with a sickening grin. “Blind trust, and the fact that you don’t exactly have another choice.”

Once the words left his mouth, I suddenly realised what was going on here. Theodore might not have the physical strength to go up against Ethan, but he had cunning. This whole scenario had been cleverly designed to make Ethan lose face in front of his people, the same way Theodore lost face when

his chalk circle plan with the humans didn't pan out as he'd wanted.

"Go ahead, my friend," Theodore said. "Pick a number."

Everything seemed to move in slow motion as I focused my attention on the lineup. My gaze lingered on each individual and panic seized me. This wasn't ten random people. The first person I recognised was number three, Finn. Then I made out Amanda, Gabriel, Alvie, and, I guessed, Alora, though I didn't know her body well enough to be sure. The rest were five vampires, and I was willing to bet they were the ones Ethan left to keep guard over his house while he was gone.

I felt like I was going to be sick.

Ethan didn't know my friends as I did. He might not be able to discern them from the vampires, not with those fucking bags and matching jumpsuits. I dashed from my spot and ran straight onto the dance floor, screaming one word, "Wait!"

I tried to throw myself in front of Finn, but suddenly my body wasn't moving anymore, and my mouth was clamped shut. Rita stared at me, her hand raised in the air in a spell to prevent me from moving or speaking. Furious tears ran down my cheeks.

"What have you done to her?" Ethan fumed as he flashed to my side.

I wanted to say so much to him, but I couldn't move, couldn't utter a single word. All he could see were my tears.

"We wouldn't want our dear little Treasure giving you any clues, now would we?" Theodore chirped. "Tick-tock, Mr Cristescu. You better get a move on."

Ethan stared at him murderously, turning back to the anonymous bodies in front of him. He raised the gun, and a look of indecision crossed his face. I stared at him, desperately willing him to make the right choice. What if he didn't see what I saw? What if he didn't see my friends but ten anonymous strangers?

Then, quick as a flash, he shot at number seven, and my gut squeezed in relief because I knew it was a vampire. A disturbing thought hit me. Theodore was even more cunning than I realised. This game meant that even if Ethan guessed correctly, he was still shooting his people in the head to save a handful of humans.

"Time to pick another," Theodore said. "You've only got eight minutes left before it's stake bomb time."

Vampires all around extended their fangs at Theodore and hissed, but

they were powerless to do anything other than that small show of aggression. Ethan successfully pinpointed another vampire, and the guy instantly dropped to the floor when he shot him. I had to keep reminding myself that he would heal. Bullets weren't fatal to vampires. Humans, however ...

No, I refused to think about that.

Minutes passed, and Ethan shot another two vampires. Hope seized me as I started to see light at the end of the tunnel. He only had to guess the final vampire and my friends were safe. Unfortunately, my hope vanished when he aimed the gun at Amanda. Thanks to Rita preventing me from moving or speaking, I was powerless to stop him from making the wrong choice.

Seconds later, he pulled the trigger, and I could practically see the bullet whizzing through the air towards Amanda's head. My heart pounded, but then Lucas appeared out of nowhere, diving in front of her and taking a bullet in the chest. He fell to the floor, bent over in pain.

"No, no, no that's cheating. That's not how you play the game!" Theodore cried.

His expression contorted into that of a madman as he glanced up at the clock on the ceiling. There were only sixty seconds left before the bombs ignited.

Instead of deactivating them like he said he would, Theodore disappeared into his trademark cloud of purple smoke with Rita by his side. The witches and warlocks who'd been guarding the exits vanished, too. Absolute mayhem broke out as vampires fled in every direction. I ran straight to my friends, yanking the bags off their heads and hurrying to get them out of the building before the bombs went off.

I couldn't see Ethan anywhere, but I knew even if he got stuck inside the club he'd survive. If the myths about my blood were true, then he was pretty much indestructible.

The exits were crowded, and a sense of dread consumed me. There wasn't enough time. We weren't going to get out of there. I looked at Finn, Gabriel, Amanda, Alvie, and finally at Alora. I hadn't had the chance to get to know her properly yet, but having seen the way Finn lit up in her presence, I felt just as much affection for her as I did for the others. An odd sense of acceptance swept over me.

If I was going down, I was going to go down with my friends.

But not before I did everything in my power to get us out of there first.

I took hold of Alvie's hand and then Amanda's as Theodore's pre-

recorded voice filled the club speakers, an eerie countdown from ten.

Ten, nine, eight ...

We were still moving as fast as we could towards the exit, but there were just too many people trying to get out all at once.

Seven, six, five ...

My pulse raced, the realisation that we were all about to die taking over, and all I could think about was how I never got the chance to save Rita.

12.

Finn

The moment I saw Rita looking at me through the window, I knew something bad was going to happen. Her hands began to move in a spell, and before I could stop myself, I was opening the window against my will and allowing her and Theodore to come inside. It felt a lot like when some vamp managed to pull me under their compulsion, only stronger.

The two of them rounded us all up and told us to put on black overalls and bags over our heads. Being under some kind of magical thrall, we did it all without protest. Don't get me wrong, inside my head I was protesting something fierce, but I was powerless to do anything with my actual body. We were then loaded up into a van, and I couldn't figure out where we were until the van stopped and we were brought inside a building.

When I heard Theodore talking to Cristescu I knew we were at Crimson. I heard what Theodore proposed, some twisted version of Russian Roulette, and there was no denying the sick game he was playing. The whole time Cristescu took those shots I was praying he got them right. I was also praying that he cared enough to shoot only vampires and not us humans.

Since we were all still alive and kicking, I guessed that he did.

I was saying a prayer to God and thanking my lucky stars I'd avoided a bullet in the head when life went and threw another spanner in the works. Theodore decided to disappear without deactivating his bombs.

What an absolute wanker.

Everybody was pushing and shoving to get out, and Tegan was looking at us all like this was the last time she'd ever lay her eyes on us. Well, fuck that for a game of soldiers. I was getting all of us out of there come hell or high water.

"Move!" I shouted, gathering everyone in front of me and surging forward. Alora was holding onto my arm, and I couldn't imagine how scary this must be for her, considering she couldn't see what was happening. She could only hear the desperate cries of those around us.

A second later, I noticed someone jump over the crowd and then Cristescu was at the exit, tearing the doors off their hinges and kicking down walls like they were made of nothing but sand.

Jesus H. Christ, even I had to admit that was impressive.

The enlarged opening allowed everyone to get out quicker, and with only seconds to spare, I felt the blessedly cold outdoor air hit my face. Cristescu picked up Tegan, Amanda, and Alvie in one swoop and zoomed with vampire speed away from the building. I threw Alora onto my back and ran like our lives depended on it.

I only managed to round the entrance to the parking lot when the explosion went off, and I was deafened by the sound. I stumbled and hit the pavement, taking most of the impact of the fall with Alora on my back, but I was able to get to my feet again and keep running even as smoke and ash filled my vision. I could barely see a thing. All I knew was I had to keep moving.

A minute or two later, I finally stopped to catch my breath. I let Alora down and ran my hands over her, searching for injuries. I sucked in a harsh breath when I discovered a piece of glass lodged firmly in her shoulder. It wasn't too deep, so it was safe enough for me to pull it out. A trickle of blood seeped from the wound, and I ripped a piece of material from my sleeve to stem the bleeding.

She shook as I removed Theodore's coveralls to check the rest of her body, but I didn't find any other injuries. She only wore leggings and a T-shirt underneath, so I wrapped my arms around her to keep her warm.

"Fuck, Goldy. We were almost goners there for a minute," I said, breathing harshly. I pulled her in tight, feeling like the luckiest prick in the world to have survived that ordeal. I was shaken, and I definitely needed to hold Alora just as much as she needed to be kept warm. Her chest heaved, and when I raised her chin to look her in the eye, I found that she was crying.

"Don't cry. You're safe now, I've got you," I murmured to her softly, kissing the top of her head and her wet cheeks. I captured her face in my hands and rubbed my thumbs under her eyes to dry her tears.

She snuggled into me closer, gripping me tightly, and a wave of emotion overtook me. I barely knew this girl, yet she made something deep inside of me ache for more. More of something I'd never felt before, not like this.

I wanted to take care of her and make sure nothing hurt her ever again.

Lowering my mouth to hers, I took her lips in a tender, exploratory kiss. My tongue slid along hers, and she responded with a gentle moan.

"Finn!" I heard someone call out. Reluctantly, I stopped kissing Alora and looked up to see Tegan and the others running toward us.

“Where’s Cristescu?”

“We can’t find Lucas anywhere. Ethan’s gone back inside the club to find him. He thinks that because he was shot, he didn’t get the chance to recover and leave the building before the bombs went off.”

“He could be dead. There were stakes in those bombs.”

I immediately regretted saying it when Amanda burst into tears. Tegan shot me an annoyed look for being so insensitive.

“What?” I whispered uncomfortably. “He could be.”

“You couldn’t see because you had a bag over your head,” Tegan explained. “But Ethan mistakenly chose to shoot at Amanda on his last shot. Lucas threw himself in front of the bullet before it could hit her.”

He sacrificed himself for a human? Suddenly, my opinion of Lucas changed drastically.

“Ethan said to find you and get everyone back to the house,” Tegan continued.

I was about to argue with her because the fact that we all got taken from there meant it wasn’t exactly safe. But then when I thought about it, nowhere was really safe anymore. Not with Theodore and Rita on the loose.

“Okay, we need a vehicle though,” I replied, just as a van came barreling down the road to us. It stopped just shy of Tegan. Ira sat in the driver’s seat with Delilah beside him.

“Get in,” Delilah called, and I ushered everyone in the back.

We drove by Crimson, which was nothing but a pile of burning rubble now. Cristescu emerged from the wreckage carrying a limp body in his arms. I knew it was Lucas when I heard Amanda let out a whimper of relief. Cristescu silently slid into the car with his unconscious friend in his arms, and Ira started the engine back up.

Fifteen minutes later, we arrived back at the house, a mournful atmosphere among the group. Everyone was tired and silent, suffering from a touch of after-shock. PTSD, maybe.

Cristescu handed Lucas over to two waiting vampires, and they carried him to an upstairs bedroom where I presumed he was going to sleep and heal. I was vaguely aware of Tegan going from room to room, searching for something. When she came up empty after searching through the entire house she started to panic.

“Rebecca’s gone!” she cried. “Theodore’s taken Rebecca.”

Oh shit.

What with everything that had been going on, I'd completely forgotten about the little girl.

"Don't panic," Alvie said, placing a hand on Tegan's shoulder. "He's probably given her to Emilia. She won't harm her."

Tegan's face turned red with anger as she stormed from the room, and seconds later, a loud crash came from the kitchen. I'd never seen her so furious. Cristescu hurried to her, and everything went silent. I tugged Alora down onto a chair with me and wrapped my arms around her middle.

A couple of minutes later, the two returned from the kitchen, and Tegan looked considerably calmer. Cristescu clearly managed to calm her down.

"I don't understand," she said, shaking her head in bewilderment. "We cast a spell that was supposed to protect Rebecca from anyone who would do her harm."

"There are few spells that a sorcerer like Theodore can't break through. He knew about your blood even though your mother cast a spell to hide it," Gabriel reminded her.

"Theodore cannot be allowed to get away with this," Cristescu cut in angrily as he stood by the window with an arm around Tegan.

"What exactly do you propose we do?" Gabriel asked. "He basically manipulated all of our bodies to do his bidding with magic. You might be unkillable, Ethan, but the rest of us aren't."

An argument ensued between the two half-brothers before I interrupted them. "Hey, calm down the both of you. Fighting amongst ourselves won't achieve anything." At my statement, they lost some of their steam.

Cristescu cast Gabriel an apologetic glance. "I'm sorry. I spoke out of turn."

"Don't worry about it," Gabriel replied, looking surprised that Ethan actually bothered to say sorry.

"I could ask Roman if he has any ideas," Tegan offered, and Cristescu's smile vanished. So, he didn't like Tegan's long-lost sorcerer grandfather? I bet there was a story there.

"We're not going to Roman," Cristescu snapped.

Tegan shot him an irritable look. "Why not?"

"Because he wants to get in your pants, that's why."

"Your granddaddy wants to get in your pants? Eww, TMI, way TMI," Alvie exclaimed.

Tegan exhaled tiredly. "Apparently the magical families are down with

the whole incest fandango. In fact, they favour it to keep their bloodlines pure.”

Well, that certainly explained why Ethan didn't want to enrol the sorcerer's help.

No one spoke for a few long moments before Cristescu broke the quiet. “A number of my people didn't manage to escape the bombs tonight and have perished. As a mark of respect, I'm not going to act on this until the morning. Tonight, we rest. Tomorrow, we will devise a plan to kill Theodore once and for all.”

I had to admire his determination. In fact, it was a relief. Theodore needed to die, so we could all get to work restoring normality and bringing peace to the city. The sooner we could start on that, the better.

Ethan strode from the room, and Tegan followed him out. When I looked down at Alora I found her asleep in my lap with her head resting on my shoulder. I carried her to my room and laid her down on my bed. When I started to undress, I found a piece of red plastic buried in my shin and grimaced.

I'd been injured so many times over the years that my body was starting to get used to certain levels of pain. Clenching my jaw tight, I pulled the plastic out of my leg and managed not to make a sound even though I kind of wanted to swear up a storm. I tossed the plastic onto the floor and grabbed some bandages from the main bathroom. When I returned, I found myself staring at the piece of red plastic, suddenly recognising where it came from. It was a piece of the glowing red “Crimson” sign that used to hang over the front door of the club.

The place was ground zero now.

It was funny how, for so many years, I imagined blowing that building up in my head, fantasised about how satisfying it would be to see a club full of vamps burn. Now it had happened, and I didn't feel satisfied at all. I only felt a mixture of sadness for the lives lost and relief that we'd managed to get out of there alive.

Tegan

In the bathroom adjoining Ethan's room, I stripped down to nothing and stepped inside the shower. He was already in there, his forehead leaning against the expensive tile, his hand braced on the rail, holding his body up. I

rested my head against his back. He was so tall that my face barely met his shoulder. Some of his tension fell away when I pressed my lips to his skin, and one of his back muscles twitched in response.

I glanced down and saw the debris that had been stuck to our bodies washing away down the drain. I had scrapes and cuts all over, and they stung when the water touched them. Even with a vampire to whisk me away from the explosion, I didn't avoid all of the blast.

Then I noticed a slightly pink tinge to the water. There was a small gash on my arm that was bleeding. Ethan's body went frighteningly still.

"Fuck, Tegan," he whispered, his breathing harsh.

"I'm sorry. I didn't realise I was bleeding," I said, moving to leave, but he stopped me.

"Don't go. Stay and drink from me. You are hurt."

"Remember we said we weren't going to do that again?" I tried to remind him, even though my mouth was already watering. While my mind was determined to quit, my body hadn't forgotten the addictive pleasure of his blood.

Ethan whipped around shockingly fast and then his lips were on the wound on my arm, his tongue licking away the last remnants of my blood. I moaned from the feel of it.

"I know what we agreed, but we can also agree that tonight has not been an ordinary night? I need to be with you as deeply as I possibly can. I need to feel you drink from me, to heal you, to be in control of this one little thing."

"You're in control, Ethan," I murmured as I ran my hands through his hair. "Don't let Theodore undermine you. That's what he wants."

Ethan's face turned angry. "He blew up my club! Of course I'm not in control."

My gut instinct was to get away from him when he was like this, but I didn't do that. Instead, I stayed and kept touching him.

"A club is a club. You can always open another one. It's inconsequential. Theodore is obviously running out of ideas, and resorting to using bombs when he has so much magic is the act of a desperate man. Surely, you can see that, right?"

The anger in Ethan's features dissolved. "Yes, I see that." His strong hands slid along my neck. "*Lumina mea*, you are wise beyond your years."

"No, I'm not. It's just easier for me to see clearly because I'm not letting anger cloud my vision."

Ethan pinned me in with his arms, pressing into me until my back was flat against the tiles. Drops of water trickled down his perfect torso, distracting me from the conversation.

His stare was intense as he looked at me. “Your friends could have died tonight if I had chosen incorrectly. Theodore has taken Rebecca. You should be just as angry as I am.”

“Yeah, maybe I should, but getting angry isn’t going to help. It’s not going to help me think clearly enough to get Rebecca back.”

I trailed a finger down his wet abs, lingering just above his pubic bone, a question springing to mind. “How could you not tell which heartbeats were human and which were vampires?”

Frustration marked his features. “Theodore had spelled them silent. There might as well have been ten dummies presented to me, for I could not hear or scent a thing.”

“Oh. Well, I’m glad you guessed right. And I’m glad Lucas jumped in front of the bullet meant for Amanda.”

“He owed her that,” Ethan whispered, his eyes now focused on my chest and my rapidly hardening nipples. Even amidst chaos and tragedy, he still managed to turn me on.

“Yeah, he did,” I whispered back as he picked me up and pulled my legs around his waist. He reached behind him to turn off the shower before swiftly sliding his cock inside me. I shuddered at the exquisite invasion. He carried me to the bedroom, our bodies wet, him still seated deep inside me. When he lowered me onto the bed, he began to thrust his hips, moving in and out, torturously slow.

Then he rose to his knees and used his thumbnail to cut a line down his wrist. I was too lost in the sex to tell him no, and when he held it over my lips and a single drop trickled out, I couldn’t help but lick it up with my tongue. Even that one drop filled my body with a maddening sense of pleasure. I felt my scrapes and cuts healing already.

I licked the blood away from his skin, not allowing myself any more than that, and then pulled him down for a kiss.

When he came inside of me, he whispered endless declarations of love, and I fell asleep wrapped in his arms. I woke up in the middle of the night, which was something I didn’t normally do. My stomach grumbled loudly. I was absolutely starving.

Sneaking downstairs, I prepared a grilled cheese sandwich, devouring it

almost as soon as it came off the pan and burning my tongue in the process. Rummaging through Ethan's cupboard, I found an array of fancy condiments that I presumed belonged to Delilah. I began experimenting, making grilled cheese with truffle oil, grilled cheese with cured bacon, grilled cheese with balsamic vinegar, grilled cheese with pesto, eating them all ravenously. I'd never been hungrier in my life, but I put it down to almost dying.

By the time I was finally full, I sprawled out on the couch in the living room, too stuffed to make it back upstairs. Alvie was the first one up in the morning, and he laughed when he found me half asleep on the expensive sofa, which probably cost more than all the beds I'd ever owned combined.

"What are you doing down here? Did you and lover boy have a tiff or something?" he asked in bemusement, tying the belt on his black silk kimono.

"I got hungry in the middle of the night, ate too much, and fell asleep. Don't tell anyone. It's embarrassing."

Alvie chuckled, shaking his head as he went to the kitchen to make coffee. I sat up, and a strange feeling washed over me. I felt exhausted and full of energy all at once. Well, that was what I got for stuffing my face like such a pig last night. It was way too many carbs.

My stomach let out an audible gurgle and then queasiness took over. Oh no, I was going to vomit. I raced up the stairs to the bathroom and slammed the door shut. Seconds later, I was crouched over the toilet bowl, heaving every scrap of those grilled cheese sandwiches back up.

A few minutes later, my stomach finally calmed down, and I splashed water over my face to freshen up before brushing my teeth. I thought I might have a temperature. Or maybe I was just hungover? I mean, I did drink an awful lot at Ethan's party, and it didn't matter how expensive the alcohol was; it all felt the same the next morning.

There was a knock on the door followed by Ethan asking, "Tegan, are you alright in there? I heard you throwing up."

"I'm fine. Just really hungover."

There was a smile in his voice now. "Ah, well, I'll make you up a good cure, shall I?"

"Depends on what it is."

"Raw eggs and tomato juice," he answered, and I groaned.

"Jesus, are you trying to make me sick again?"

The door opened and he scooped me up into his arms. "Come, my

darling, get some rest and you'll be right as rain."

"What I don't get is how your blood hasn't healed up all my ailments. I think I might be developing a resistance," I whined.

"One does not develop a resistance to vampire blood, especially not mine. Besides, you only had a drop."

A minute after Ethan tucked me in bed, Delilah came strolling into the room without knocking.

"Brother, I was wondering if I could have a word with you ..." she began but trailed off when her eyes locked on mine. Her posture went stiff as she gaped at me.

"Of course, what is it you want to speak about?" Ethan studied her curiously.

"What? Um, never mind," she hurried to my side. "Oh, my God, Tegan! Oh, shit!" she swore as she ran her hand over my sweaty forehead before turning back to Ethan.

"How could you be so foolish?" she hissed.

"Delilah, don't take that tone with me. What has you so riled up?"

"I thought your senses had been bettered, not dulled, brother. Are you so blind that you can't see? Look at her, see how she sweats, see how her skin is tinted with a blush, how she practically glows all over?" Her hand moved from my face to my chest. "Hear how two hearts beat instead of one?" she whispered.

A headache came on. I had no idea what she was going on about, but Ethan seemingly did. He gazed at me and so many emotions passed over his face; shock, fear, anxiety. By contrast, those were followed by joy, wonderment and awe. Then so much love and tenderness filled his eyes as he smiled the biggest smile I'd ever seen.

"What's going on?" I asked, my headache getting worse.

"You're pregnant," Ethan beamed.

Okay, it was a good thing I was already lying down because now I felt like I was going to faint.

13.

Finn

“Please tell me you’re joking,” I said, rubbing my tired eyes and staring at Delilah like she’d grown two heads.

She carefully spooned a lump of sugar into her teacup, Ira sitting beside her. Gabriel and Alvie were on my side of the table, both wearing identical expressions of shock.

“I know a dhampir pregnancy when I see one. The foetus develops fast, and Tegan’s showing all the signs. The two of them have been fucking like rabbits anyway, too in love to use the proper protection, so this is the obvious outcome. Although I had thought my brother would be a little more careful. He knows how dangerous it is for a human to become pregnant with a vampire’s child. He allowed himself to get lost in his connection to Tegan instead of keeping his wits about him.”

“But Tegan’s not entirely human,” Gabriel interjected. “She’s half-witch and she has incredibly powerful magical blood. Surely that will help give her a better chance of surviving the birth.”

“Here’s hoping that’s true,” Delilah replied, and I couldn’t take it any longer. I had to broach the ugly subject nobody wanted to bring up.

“Has she considered aborting it?” I asked in a low voice, and Alvie let out a quiet gasp. Delilah stared at me like I just spit in her teacup.

“No, she hasn’t ... considered that. But it doesn’t matter anyway. An abortion poses the same amount of danger as childbirth in this particular case.” She lowered her voice. “And a word of warning. Don’t go around saying anything like that in front of my brother. Children are, um, a touchy subject for him.”

“Ethan has had several children in the past,” Gabriel explained, and I was surprised he knew this since they’d spent most of their lives estranged from one another. “All of them died.”

“Oh,” I muttered, looking away. “Poor bloke.” I never thought it could actually happen, but I felt sympathy for a vampire.

A moment later, there was a knock at the front door, and I used it as an excuse to escape the awkward tension my big mouth created. I finished off the slice of toast I’d been eating and stuck the other in my mouth, because,

you know, I was a growing boy who needed his energy.

When I opened the door, I found a tall, dark-haired man standing on the step. He wore a suit, and his blue eyes were intense. One thing was for certain, he was a warlock, and a powerful one at that.

There was no point pulling out a weapon when the person you would be aiming at had magic, so I simply stood there and waited for what he had to say.

The man closed his eyes, and a little shimmer swept over his face before he opened them again. “Finn Roe, it’s a pleasure to meet you. May I come inside?”

Impressive as it was that he could just magic up my name, I lifted a hand to stop him from passing over the threshold. “State your business first.”

“I’m Roman. My granddaughter, Tegan, must have told you about me, no?”

Not a warlock then, not even a really powerful one like I’d thought. A *sorcerer*.

“Uh, yeah, she did.” I glanced over his shoulder and down the street. There didn’t seem to be anyone else around. I considered telling him to wait outside until I consulted with the others, but there was really no point in that. I doubted a closed door would be much of an obstacle to a man like this.

“Come on in,” I said, stepping out of his way. “I’ll go and tell Tegan you’re here, but she’s been sick this morning so she might not be up to visitors.”

“That’s quite alright,” Roman replied. “If she is ill, then don’t bother disturbing her. I came because I need a couple of volunteers. Today I will endeavour to take Emilia Petrovsky from Theodore, and I will require the help of at least two able-bodied men. I also sense that there is an elf staying on the premises. Am I correct?”

I narrowed my gaze at him. “You might be.”

“We will need her, too. She was the one Michael Ridley had been holding hostage, yes?”

“Do you always speak in questions?”

“I do when I require answers,” he said, staring at me blandly.

I let out a sigh. “Yeah, she’s the one Ridley kidnapped. What do you need her for?”

Roman smiled now. “She will be our decoy.”

At this, my expression hardened. “I don’t think so.”

“Trust me. She won’t come to any harm.”

“Alora’s not being used as a decoy,” I stated firmly, and Roman’s lips curved in a smile.

“Ah, now I see why you’re protective. She’s your significant other.”

“What she is to me is none of your business.”

“Well, if you want this to work, we’ll need her,” Roman said, all matter of fact as we entered the kitchen. I made some quick introductions. Gabriel and Alvie both stared at him like they were meeting a celebrity while Delilah gave him a cordial smile. Roman took a seat at the table and explained that he needed to retrieve Emilia in order to break the barrier spell she’d cast around the city. I informed him of Rebecca’s recent abduction, so he altered his plan slightly to include rescuing her also.

“What do you think you’re doing here?” came a voice, and we all turned to find Cristescu standing in the doorway glaring at Roman.

“I’m sure you already know,” Roman replied evenly. “You can hear everything that is said under this roof.”

A deadly silence ensued. Was that true? I wasn’t sure I liked the idea of Cristescu being able to hear everything I said when he wasn’t in the room.

“Get out.”

“I’m here to help my granddaughter, and you, too, for that matter. Please don’t allow your petty insecurities to get in the way.”

Cristescu looked like he was trying to calm himself down when he replied, “The last twenty-four hours have been eventful for us, sorcerer. You’ll excuse me if I’m highly strung.”

Roman wore his bland expression again. “Of course.”

Another God-awful silence fell. I decided to break the tension when I spoke, “Right, well, I’m going upstairs to talk to Alora. If she agrees to be your decoy, fine. But if she doesn’t want to, I won’t let you force her.”

“Very well,” Roman replied, and I headed upstairs.

I found Alora in my room getting dressed. I put Roman’s plan to her, expecting her to be too scared to be a part of it. She surprised me when her jaw set determinedly, and she insisted on helping. Maybe she wasn’t such a damsel in distress who needed my protection after all. There was grit to her, and I suspected some of it was related to her need for revenge. Theodore and Ridley were close, and killing Theodore meant the man who stole two years of her life lost his most powerful ally.

When we were ready to leave, instead of using a vehicle, Roman cast a

spell to transport us to our destination. I felt like I'd just woken up from a dream when I opened my eyes and saw that we were no longer at Cristescu's place but crouched behind some trees outside a large family home.

It was a cookie-cutter house surrounded by dozens of similar homes. It was also in an area where only humans lived. Camouflage, I guessed. Theodore wanted to blend in with the crowd and make himself harder to find.

I saw Roman whispering in Alora's ear, giving her instructions, and while I couldn't hear all that he said, I understood why he wanted to use her when I spotted Michael Ridley standing guard at the front door. My protective instincts kicked in before my gaze lowered.

Oh, shit. A grin tugged at my lips. There was a small metal hook where his hand used to be, thanks to Ira biting it off. I had to hold in the urge to smile as I glanced at Alora and told her what I saw. She seemed pleased at the reminder that Ridley lost his hand during her escape from his capture.

"You sure you're okay with this?" I asked her.

She nodded stoically. "Yes. I'm sure."

Roman began constructing an invisible bubble of magic around her so that when she approached Ridley, he wouldn't be able to harm her. I put my arm around her shoulders and gave her a quick hug before she stepped out from behind the trees and started walking toward the house.

The second Ridley spotted her his entire body tensed, and his beady eyes darted back and forth to scan the area for threats. When he was satisfied that she was alone, he gave a predatory smile. It made me want to punch him.

"I knew you'd come back," he said, walking toward her.

I clenched my fists at the smug look on his face. Patience. All I needed was to be patient.

Alora stopped just outside the gates to the house, going no farther. This was all a part of the plan. We needed him to come outside the house, outside the zone of Theodore's protection.

"My family have fled the city. I didn't have anyone else to turn to," Alora said in a purposefully meek voice.

"You'll always have a place with me, child. I might even find it in my heart to forgive you for what that mutt did to my hand. That is, of course, if you have any good predictions for me."

Ira growled low in his throat when Ridley called him a mutt, but I placed my hand on his shoulder as a sign for him not to make any more noise. We couldn't afford for the warlock to discover we were there.

“I’ve had a number of visions over the past few days. I’m sure you’re eager to know what I’ve seen.”

Ridley continued to get closer to her, but when he reached the gate, he simply opened it and gestured for her to come inside. Damn, he wasn’t going to leave the parameter of the house.

I was gearing up to intervene when Roman put a hand out to stop me.

“Patience, Mr Roe,” he whispered. “We need to wait for her to touch him.”

My eyes were drawn back to Ridley and Alora, and I saw that he was holding out his hand to her, the one that wasn’t a hook. Time seemed to move in slow motion as she reached out to take it. The second their palms met, Roman emerged from his hiding spot. His lips moved rapidly as he cast a whispered spell, and a variety of colours streamed from his body. Ridley froze in place when he saw the sorcerer advancing on him. He tried to pull his hand from Alora’s, but she gripped it tight.

“You stole this young lady’s sight, warlock,” Roman announced. “Now I shall take one of your senses to return the eyes you took from her.”

Wait, what? Yes! Go Roman!

“What madness is this!?” Ridley shouted desperately. “I have already lost a hand because of her.”

“That was nobody’s fault but your own. To attempt to steal the power of another is one of the worst crimes a warlock can commit. You must be punished.”

Roman threw a blast of golden magic at Ridley’s face. It slithered right into his ears, and he started to scream. Alora was still holding his hand, still listening to what Roman was doing to Ridley with a mix of horror and fascination on her face.

With only the slightest nod of his head, the magic shot from Ridley’s ears into Alora’s eyes. I’d seen some crazy shit in my time, and now I had another to add to the list. She whimpered and finally loosened her hold. I hurried to her side, catching her in my arms before she hit the ground. She stared at me as I took her in, blinking her eyes as they focused on me.

She could see.

“Hey,” I murmured, rubbing my thumb along the base of her neck.

“Hi,” she murmured back, staring at me in amazement. I smiled, and she returned the expression, eyes wide as she took in every inch of my face.

“Like what you see?” I asked huskily.

“Yes, actually,” she replied, a shy look marking her features. “I do.”

“I can’t hear! I can’t hear!” Ridley shouted, clutching at his ears.

Roman grabbed him and made a motion akin to stuffing a gag in someone’s mouth, and Ridley fell completely silent. A second later, the door to the house flew open and Marcel emerged. He took in the scene before him, his mouth gaping wide.

“What have you done to him?” he asked, stunned.

“Take us to Theodore, or I will end his life here and now,” Roman threatened.

Marcel looked at the sorcerer properly, and his mouth fell open even wider. “Roman Patel, it cannot be,” he whispered in shock.

“I’m afraid it can and it is. Now, take us to Theodore, or you are both as good as dead.”

Finally, Marcel came to his senses and led us inside the house.

Tegan

I wondered if I was dreaming.

I’d been stupid. No, *we’d* been stupid. Ethan and I had been too lost in each other, too eager to sate our passions and desires that we hadn’t given a single thought to the possible consequences. I was on the pill, sure, but we should’ve been using protection, too. The problem was, after that first time without a condom, we pretty much abandoned the idea altogether. It felt too good not to use one, and now, well, now we were paying the price.

The weird thing was, I didn’t exactly hate the thought of having Ethan’s baby. In fact, the opposite was true. Everything was moving way too fast, but I still felt a weird sense of contentment at the idea of us having a child.

But it wasn’t all sunshine and roses. Far from it.

According to Delilah, a high percentage of mothers carrying dhampir babies didn’t survive the birth. And then other times the baby didn’t survive. An overwhelming sense of grief hit me at the thought of losing my child. I’d only just discovered I was pregnant, and I already couldn’t stand the idea of losing the baby. I wasn’t strong enough to deal with that kind of heartbreak right now. There was already so much else to deal with.

I looked up at Ethan, and there was no mistaking the utter joy on his face, tinged with an edge of guilt. He was remorseful that he hadn’t been more careful with me, but his joy was so intense that it outshone the remorse

tenfold. He *wanted* this. He really, really wanted it, and whatever worry he might be feeling that something could happen to me or the child was eclipsed by the sheer intensity of his want. He wanted us to have a family together, and though I was fearful of what might happen, I wanted a family with him, too.

I reassured myself with the fact that I was half-witch. I also had power in my blood. It felt like those factors strengthened the possibility of both me and the baby surviving.

I had to hold onto optimism if I was going to get through this.

Delilah must've sensed we needed privacy because she quickly made her excuses and turned to leave. Before she made it out the door, she stuck her head back in and asked, "Um, should I tell the others?"

I shrugged and turned to stare out the window. "Sure, if you want."

I didn't really care about them knowing. I was too wrapped up in my own worries. I tugged the blankets tight around myself, my stomach queasy as hell. It rumbled, and a stab of pain shot through my gut. Bloody hell. I didn't know much about regular human pregnancies, but I had a feeling they weren't anything like getting knocked up by a vampire. Delilah mentioned something about the foetus forming a lot faster and that it could be faster still, considering I was half-witch.

I didn't make eye contact with Ethan when I said, "There's a chance she could be mistaken, right? This could just be a case of food poisoning, or a bug or something."

He frowned and stood, walking over to sit on the edge of the bed. Taking my hand into his, he gave me a tender look. His other hand moved across my chest and down to my belly.

In a low voice, he replied, "Food poisoning doesn't put an extra heartbeat inside of you, Tegan. I wasn't paying enough attention before. Now that I am, I can hear it beating as loud as a drum in my ears."

"You can hear it?" I whispered.

His only response was a smile.

After a few moments of quiet, I asked, "You really want a baby with me?"

"Of course, I do. I adore you. I *love* you. Knowing you are with child makes this one of the happiest days of my life," he answered fervently.

"Well, that's certainly high praise considering just how many days you've been alive," I joked half-heartedly to distract myself from my inner

turmoil.

Ethan laughed softly. "It's rude to remind a vampire of his age, you know."

"Yeah, I know," I grinned. "That's why I did it."

A tinge of sadness entered his gaze. "I should have been more careful —"

"Don't," I interrupted. "There's no point in that kind of talk. I have your child inside me now, and all we can do is try our best to ensure its survival. Besides, it does take two to tango. I was careless as well."

He moved deeper onto the bed and wrapped his arm around my shoulders. "You continually amaze me with your strength," he said tenderly before his expression sobered. "I'll arrange for a vampire physician to come and examine you. We need to know how far along you are. It can't be more than a week or so, but I want to ensure you're at optimum health."

"Okay, that sounds like the responsible thing to do."

I drifted off for a nap, Ethan's arms around me a reassuring comfort. I was woken up a few hours later by Delilah, who gave me an uncharacteristically gentle smile that held too many emotions. I wished she'd stop. I couldn't handle smiles like that right now.

"Dr Hendricks is here," she said softly. "Is it okay for him to come in?"

"Sure."

She returned quickly with a young-looking vampire with brown hair and dark eyes. He introduced himself and congratulated me on the baby. I didn't know how to react to congratulations just yet, so I didn't say anything. It was kind of weird being congratulated when both you and your child had a slim chance of surviving.

Dr Hendricks asked me an endless number of questions before examining me.

"How long does this take?" I asked, and he quirked a curious eyebrow at me. "I mean, how long am I going to be pregnant? Is it nine months like human births?"

He pursed his lips and began packing away his stethoscope. "No. Dhampir gestation periods are usually between three and four months. Development is much quicker in these ... sorts of cases. That's why there's already a heartbeat."

"Well, that's good, isn't it? It means I won't be the size of an elephant for too long," I said, trying to inject some humour into the conversation that I

definitely didn't feel.

"May I speak frankly?" he asked, and I nodded, my nerves building. I sensed I wasn't going to like what he had to say next.

"Vampire babies take just two months to be born from the date of conception. Dhampirs take longer because you are essentially putting a vampire foetus in a human body that is not equipped with the proper genetics to carry it, which is why both mother and baby often ... do not survive."

"Yes, I know that already."

He grew quiet for a moment, almost like he was hesitating over whether or not to say something else. "I've been informed of your, shall we say, powers. Perhaps there's a way you could channel your magic into the foetus?"

"I wish I knew how to do that," I told him honestly.

"Are there any female relatives you might consult with?" he suggested.

I bit my lip, thinking of Emilia. The chances of her giving me pregnancy advice were slim to none. "No, sadly not."

At this, Ethan entered the room and asked how everything was going. He and the doctor stepped away, speaking in hushed tones. I tried to follow their conversation but found my mind drifting off. I'd never considered myself to be a particularly maternal person, but all of a sudden, I felt like I'd die to protect this tiny little being that was growing inside of me.

I felt almost primal in my need to protect my child, to ensure its survival, and the instinct was incredibly jarring. Yesterday, I'd barely given having a family a second thought. Now here I was, desperate for both me and my baby to survive. I'd do whatever it took.

And that included getting down on my knees and grovelling to Emilia to help me find a way to save it.

14.

Finn

Marcel marched into the house like a moody housewife whose visitors had shown up before she had the chance to make the place presentable. Roman still had a hold on Ridley, who was seething with barely contained rage.

I almost felt sorry for the bloke, but then I remembered that this was the same man who set fire to Rita and Noreen's house all those weeks ago. He was also the same man who kept Alora locked up in his house like a prisoner.

Yep, not feeling so bad for him anymore.

Inside, there was barely a scrap of furniture to be found, just white walls and beige carpets.

"I really love what you've done with the place. Minimalism is so hot right now," I joked, and Marcel narrowed his eyes to slits.

We walked through the house and out to the back. It seemed that all the effort to jazz up the place had been put into the garden. There were swings, monkey bars, and a variety of playground toys amidst the perfectly segmented flowers and bushes. While Theodore hung upside down by the legs from one of the monkey bars, Rita was perched on the swing set wearing a long black dress. Rebecca was standing perfectly still on a large, brightly coloured box by a blossoming rose bush. The little girl's eyes were closed, as though she'd been induced into a magical slumber, and there were tubes coming from her arms with blood flowing through them.

Okay, what the fuck?

I half expected Emilia to be lounging nearby with a glass of lemonade in hand, but she wasn't. She was sitting on a bench, her arms tied behind her back with duct tape, and the same went for her legs. She must have been crying at some stage because her mascara had run down her face.

I stared at Rebecca again and understood exactly why Emilia had been crying. The little girl's blood was flowing through the tubes and out of her body, where it floated in the air in the shape of a rose. Theodore swished his hands at the blood when he saw me looking, and the shape changed into a monstrous face. I jumped because he did it so quickly. He giggled, and the face dissolved and transformed into glittering star shapes.

“This blood really is a wonder,” he mused, seeming not at all bothered by our sudden presence. He swept his hand out in front of him, and the blood stars turned into glittering red rubies hovering in the air. Rita continued to swing back and forth, taking us in with no reaction. Roman, on the other hand, stared at her with interest.

As the blood swished through the air around Rebecca, I saw that she was standing on a human-sized music box. The blood began to whistle as it moved rapidly through the air, creating a shiver-inducing tune. Rebecca’s body started to turn around in circles, and Theodore clapped in delight as he watched his horrific creation. He was playing with her blood, entertaining himself with the power it contained.

The sorcerer’s eyes flicked to Roman. “I felt your presence return to the city, young Roman. Welcome home. It’s been a while.”

“That it has,” Roman replied, and I wondered if I was the only one who found it odd that Theodore referred to him as young. It begged the question, exactly how old was Theodore?

“We’ve come for Emilia and the girl,” Roman went on. “Release them and there will be no bloodshed.”

Theodore suddenly looked intrigued. “Is that a threat?”

“Of course.”

“I don’t like threats.”

“Few people do.”

“You know, I was once threatened by another sorcerer about your age,” Theodore recalled. “I cut out his heart for doing so. It was actually a lucky thing because I needed the heart for a spell I was casting.”

“Fresh hearts are a rare commodity,” Roman agreed blandly.

It was almost funny how they spoke in such benign tones, as if they were having a friendly chat over a cup of tea.

“This is outrageous,” Marcel exclaimed. “They have taken Michael’s hearing! Something needs to be done.”

“Hush now,” Theodore said, motioning him to quiet before returning his attention to Roman. “Why do you want them?”

“They are not yours to keep, and I have promised my kin that I would assist her in this matter.”

Now Theodore really looked intrigued. “Your *kin*?”

“Tegan,” Rita said out of nowhere. I’d started to think she’d lost the ability to talk since it’d been so long since I’d heard her voice. “His magic

looks like Tegan's."

Roman smiled widely at her, so wide it was a little creepy. I couldn't tell whether he wanted to kiss her or kill her—perhaps a mixture of the two.

"You are related to my dear little Treasure?" Theodore questioned with a disconcertingly cheerful expression. "Why, this is a cause to celebrate."

"I'm afraid I won't be doing that, Theodore," Roman disagreed. "Now, return the girl's blood to her body so that we can be done here. I will kill this warlock I am holding if you refuse."

"Go ahead and kill him. I have no use for a deaf warlock," Theodore said with startling casualness.

"Theodore!" Marcel cried. "Michael is our friend. We can't let him die just like that."

"Yeah," I interjected. "Poor old Captain Hook here already lost his hand." Almost everyone ignored my comment, which, might I add, was pretty funny.

"Would you prefer I gave up Emilia and the girl?" Theodore questioned sharply, and I saw the crazy coming out in his eyes.

Marcel fell silent.

Unexpectedly, Roman released his hold on Ridley, shoving him away. I was about to ask him what the hell he thought he was doing when he disappeared. Seconds later, he reappeared behind Rita. He took the chain of the swing she was perched on and wrapped it tight around her neck.

She squealed and began trying to cast a spell to get away from him, but Roman cast one quicker, and her hands fell limp. He leaned close enough to whisper in her ear, "Relax, little witch, there is no use trying to fight it. I am stronger." His hand travelled down her body in a possessive manner as though to taunt Theodore, who suddenly jumped down off the monkey bars.

"Let her go," he demanded.

"I will once you do as I have asked."

Theodore didn't make a move, and Roman tightened the chain around Rita's neck, wrenching a gurgled cry from her. Theodore's eyes went black as tar, the dark irises completely covering the whites.

"You will regret this," he seethed, but Roman made no move to release Rita.

Theodore closed his eyes and moved his hand, shifting Rebecca's blood back through the tubing on her arms and inside her body. The box she stood on stopped moving, and the awful music ceased. Once all of her blood had

been returned to her, she opened her eyes and blinked.

Strangely enough, the first person she recognised was Ira. She jumped off the box and ran to him. He picked her up, holding her safely in his arms.

A chill ran down my spine when Theodore's eyes landed on me. "You, release Emilia from her restraints."

"That I can do," I said, hurrying to the older woman. I pulled a Swiss army knife from my pocket and cut off the duct tape, which sizzled as though it had been infused with magic. Emilia exhaled in relief once she was free, and I led her across the garden to the others. She reached for Rebecca, but the little girl held tighter onto Ira, refusing to allow Emilia near her.

What happened next went down so fast that if I'd blinked, I'd have missed it. Roman loosened the chain from Rita's neck and my head went foggy as he transported us back to Cristescu's house. When I could see clearly again, I was standing on the street in front of Alora. She leaned against the gate, staring at me in wonder. I smiled at her so big my cheeks hurt.

"Well," I said, jokingly. "Am I as handsome as you thought I'd be?"

She smirked. "Shut up."

"What? It's a legitimate question. You said you thought I was handsome, but I'm not sure how good of a judge a pair of hands are."

She glanced up at me now, her expression serious. "You're very handsome, Finn. My hands are a fine judge."

I took a step toward her, closing the distance between us until there was none left. "And you are so fucking beautiful it's hard to look at you sometimes," I told her in a low voice, trailing my fingers along her jaw. She sucked in a shaky breath, unable to make eye contact.

"We should go inside," she suggested. I glanced around and noticed that everyone had gone into the house already.

"Yeah, we should. But first, how are you feeling? Any weirdness from the magic?"

"No. I feel fine. All this light is a little hard to get used to though," she said, wincing slightly. "But I'll adapt."

I wrapped my arm around her middle and led her inside. It appeared that Emilia had simply replaced one pair of restraints for another because Roman was in the process of magically bidding her hands with rope, so she couldn't cast any spells. Tegan knelt on the floor hugging Rebecca.

"I'll never let anyone take you ever again," she whispered in her ear. "I

promise.”

Emilia studied her granddaughter closely before exclaiming in shock. “Oh, my God, please tell me it’s not true. You’re pregnant!”

Tegan turned to her in surprise. “How do you know?”

Emilia scoffed. “It’s plain as day to see.”

“Yeah, well, it’s none of your business.”

There was a touch of something desperate in Tegan’s voice, and Emilia’s eyes lit up.

“You need me to help you, don’t you? You need me to teach you how to survive the birth.”

“Shut up. I’ll come and talk to you later,” Tegan said, dismissing her as she led Rebecca upstairs to her room.

“Emilia,” Roman said once Tegan was gone. “She is your granddaughter. Why do you treat her so disdainfully? You should be cherishing her.”

“Don’t you dare talk down to me. She has been nothing but rude to me since the day we met. Somebody needs to put manners on the girl.”

“And that person is you, is it?” Roman questioned.

“Ha! I have far better things to be doing with my time.”

Icy silence elapsed between the two of them, and I cast Alora a ‘this is incredibly awkward’ glance. She shot me a little grin, and I tried to hide my elation at the fact that she could actually see me now. I wanted to know everything she was thinking, everything she thought about me.

“I saw how you looked at Theodore’s daughter,” Emilia said to Roman, breaking the silence. “You want her.”

“She is a powerful witch, too powerful for her age,” Roman replied as if that explained his attraction. Emilia snorted.

Cristescu, who had been standing by the window the entire time with his arms folded over his chest, absorbed the back and forth between the witch and the sorcerer.

“Roman,” he said, uncharacteristically polite after the way he’d demanded he get out of the house earlier this morning. “Might I request that you bind the house with magic to prevent Theodore from getting inside? He’s going to move against us after today, and we need to be prepared for when that happens.”

“It would be my pleasure,” Roman answered and swiftly left the room.

Cristescu strode toward Emilia and stopped in front of her. She watched

him with wary eyes as he levelled her with a sincere look.

“I apologise profusely for all of this. It pains me to restrain a beautiful and powerful witch such as yourself, but for the moment, we must take every precaution for our safety, and your allegiance has not yet been solidified. I will put you in a comfortable room, and you will be provided with food and anything else you might need. Please, call for me if you require anything.”

Okay, I had to admit he was good. The defiance in Emilia’s posture dissolved. She didn’t smile at him, but she was no longer scowling.

“Thank you. I appreciate being treated with respect,” she said with a sniff.

“A lady of your fine standing deserves nothing less,” Cristescu replied smoothly as he helped her up off the sofa. “Come, I have had a room set up for you. You will be able to rest there.”

“Your brother really knows how to charm the ladies,” I said to Delilah once they were gone.

She stood next to Ira. “Ethan understands how essential it is to leave people with their dignity. He also knows the right things to say to earn their trust.”

“He should become a politician,” I joked.

“Well, he kind of is one now, isn’t he,” she said before motioning Ira to follow her from the room.

I was grateful to be alone with Alora once more and pulled her swiftly into my arms. She gasped in surprise, but I muffled the sound with my mouth when I kissed her.

“Want to get out of here for a while?” I asked, breaking the kiss, and she nodded fervently.

Outside, it had started to rain. We found Roman walking circles around the perimeter of the house, golden magic streaming from his hands and wrapping around the building as he muttered an incantation. He seemed to be deep into it, so we made sure not to distract him from his task.

I’d only known him a day, and he might’ve been a little eccentric, but there was something about Tegan’s grandfather that made me feel like he was one of the good guys. And staying good when you had power like Roman’s was no small feat.

I led Alora to my van and helped her into the front passenger seat. Having spent the last few days assisting her with every little thing, I was having a hard time getting used to letting her go it alone.

I had her seatbelt in my hand as I secured it around her waist. “Sorry. Old habits die hard.”

“It’s okay. It’s nice to know someone cares enough to help. Still, I’m glad to have my sight back. I’ll need to thank Roman personally once things quieten down.”

I slid into the driver’s seat and started the engine. “Oh, yeah, and how would you do that?”

“Well, normally if you’re a seer like I am, the best way to thank someone is to tell them something you’ve seen about their future. However, I’m not sure how much a sorcerer his age cares about stuff like that. It’s mostly humans who fret over what’s going to happen to them.”

I pulled away from the house and selected a random direction. I didn’t really care where we went, so long as I got to spend some time alone with her.

“He’s certainly old, but I’m sure he wouldn’t say no to a little prediction.” I paused as I considered her. “So, since I’ve helped you these last few days, do I get one, too?”

She arched an eyebrow. “Who’s to say I’ve seen anything of your future, Finn?”

“Well, have you?”

She glanced out the window at the world passing by. “I might have.”

Something in my gut twisted at her hesitation. “It’s bad, isn’t it? That’s why you don’t want to tell me.”

She hurried to correct me. “No, that’s not it. It’s not bad. It’s just kind of, well, personal.”

I glanced at her sideways. “I can deal with personal.”

She bit her lip, which I noticed was a nervous tick of hers. “It actually involves me.”

Now I grinned big, glancing from the road to her. “Really? It must be good then. Come on, don’t leave me hanging. Tell me.”

She didn’t say anything for a long moment, then finally replied, “Remember when we first met? When I said I’d heard your voice before?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I heard it in a vision I had when I was sixteen. It’s rare that I see something that’s about me, so I always held onto the memory of it. That, and it was one of the few happy things I’d seen.”

I liked the sound of a happy ending. It’d certainly make all the crap we’d

been through lately feel like it was worth it. “Oh?”

Alora stared down at her lap. “I was older in the vision, in my late twenties or early thirties, and I was laughing and running through a country meadow.”

I swallowed as I listened to her description, waiting with bated breath for her to finish.

“I was being chased by someone, like, in a playful way,” she continued. “It was a man with an accent I wasn’t used to hearing, an accent just like yours. He was calling me, teasing me that he was going to catch me. Finally, I was caught up by a pair of strong arms and hauled into this completely loving embrace. That’s when the vision ended. Now that I’ve heard your voice, Finn, I know undoubtedly that the man was you.” She paused, swallowing thickly before finally meeting my gaze. “It’s why I felt so comfortable with you from the beginning. I wouldn’t typically share a bed with a man I’d never met, but with you, it was okay because my vision had shown me that we ...” her voice broke, thick with emotion. “That we ended up together,” she finished in a whisper.

Overcome with feeling, I pulled over onto the side of the road and dragged her from her seat onto my lap. Framing her face in my hands, I looked between her eyes, trying to figure out if she was playing with me. All I saw was complete and total honesty, and I knew she was telling the truth. This beautiful woman saw me in her future. She saw the two of us being happy together, and I couldn’t help feeling stunned. I’d never been more hopeful.

“You really saw that?” I asked as I ran my lips over her silky soft cheek, and she sucked in a harsh breath.

“Yes. I’m not sure what it means exactly—”

“You know what it means,” I cut her off. “It means we belong together.”

“Finn, those are awfully committed words to be saying to a girl you hardly know.”

“I trust in your sight, Alora. Neither of us knows what road is going to take us to that place you saw us. It could be a road full of pain and strife, but so long as I know that’s where we’re going to end up, I can be happy. I’ll go through all of it just to get there, to that little spot in the country where we’re together and finally at peace.”

She blinked, stunned by my words. I might’ve been a little bit stunned by them also. I didn’t know I had it in me to be so romantic.

Moving her so that her legs were astride my lap, I ran my hands up and down her thighs.

“I like touching you,” I said in a gravelly voice before dipping my mouth to her neck. “Do you like being touched by me, Alora?”

“Mm-hmm,” she mumbled. “I do.”

“That’s good.”

Pressing my lips to her skin, I trailed kisses from the spot below her ear down to her collarbone. She sighed, and both her hands clutched my shoulders tightly. I was so hard I worried I might be scaring her a little, but she only moved against me, seeking friction. Moving one hand to the back of her neck, I pulled her mouth to mine, licking inside her lips with my tongue.

I’d forgotten how relieving it was to just lose myself in a woman. I was always so on edge, always waiting for the next disaster to hit.

Moments later, my hands were under her top, pulling down her bra and palming her breasts. Her hands lifted my shirt up and over my head, throwing it onto the other seat. I wanted this to happen. In fact, I needed it to happen. However, I didn’t want to make love to her for the first time on the side of the road in the front seat of a van.

I wanted her in a bed. More importantly, I want her in *my* bed.

I groaned, knowing I was going to have to stop this now. The problem was, she felt way too good to stop. She started fumbling with my belt buckle, and before I knew it, she’d slipped her fingers inside my pants, palming my erection.

The feel of her slender fingers wrapping around my thick length almost undid me.

“Baby,” I murmured, but she didn’t stop. She kept on moving her hand up and down, and I closed my eyes from the pleasure. Jerking off never really did it for me anymore, but having Alora touch me was like starting anew. I felt like a randy teenager who was going to come within seconds.

I pinched at her nipple and fisted one hand in her long hair, kissing her with urgency and feeling the need build inside me. I could tell that she was excited, too, because her breathing was all erratic and her cheeks were flushed. Her lush lips seemed to have become even softer, more pliant. I couldn’t get enough of her taste.

When she broke the kiss and whispered, “Come for me, Finn,” in my ear, I couldn’t hold back any longer. I blew my load in her hand, and she smiled against my lips. I grabbed a box of tissues from the glove

compartment to clean up, and she curled herself around me. Holding her in my arms, I closed my eyes, and a feeling of contentment took over.

“That was ... embarrassing but incredible,” I breathed, kissing her hair.

“Why embarrassing?”

“Because I’m a thirty-one-year-old man and I haven’t come from being jerked off by a woman in a really long time.”

She stared at me, and I wondered if I said something wrong. “You’re thirty-one?”

Ah, so she wasn’t aware of our age difference. I laughed self-deprecatingly. “Should I be worried by the shock on your face, or should I take your surprise as a compliment that I don’t look my age?”

“Um, I guess I just didn’t think you were that much older than me.”

“Is it a problem for you?”

“No,” she answered quickly. “Of course not. You just took me off guard.” Now she smiled. “Actually, I kind of like it. It’s sophisticated to go out with an older man, right?”

“Way sophisticated, Goldy. All your girlfriends are going to be, like, *totally* jealous.”

She punched me playfully in the chest, and I pretended she winded me. “Stop making fun.”

“Sorry, no can do. There’s something you should know about me,” I said leaning close to her.

“What is it?”

I let my voice drop several notches lower when I answered, “I’m a *massive* tease.”

She narrowed her eyes at me, amusement tugging at her lips. “Shut up.”

I was about to say something else when there was a loud thump on the hood of the van. It was raining so I had to turn on the windshield wipers to clear the glass. When I did, I saw Marcel standing in front of the vehicle. He was dripping wet, his long grey hair straggled around his face—and there was a massive bloodstain smeared across his hemp shirt.

15.

Tegan

The atmosphere in the house settled down once Roman brought Emilia and Rebecca back from Theodore. I sat in the living room, nibbling on a selection of cream buns and scones that Alvie had bought for me (yeah, my appetite was still crazy strong), when a loud ruckus sounded from the front door.

I jumped up just as Finn burst into the room, dragging a rain-soaked Marcel by the scruff of the neck.

“Evening, Tegan,” he greeted. “I brought a visitor for you.”

My mouth curved into a little in a smirk as I eyed Marcel. I held the plate out to him, my tone casual. “So nice of you to stop by. Scone?”

Marcel shook his head, his usual confidence gone. He looked scared and desperate.

“I need your help,” he said, and it sounded like he sacrificed a good deal of pride just to spit those words out.

“Evidently. Is that your blood or someone else’s?”

“It’s not mine. It’s Michael’s.”

“Michael Ridley’s?” Finn asked, stepping forward. Alora hovered by the door, watching Marcel closely. She looked like she was trying to figure out if this was a ruse. I was wondering the same myself.

“Is Michael dead?” Alora questioned.

Marcel glanced at her and nodded solemnly. “Yes.”

The tension in Alora’s shoulders dissolved when she heard this, and I understood why. I’d be relieved too to know my kidnapper was dead.

“Theodore killed him,” Marcel went on. “He flew into a rage after Rebecca and Emilia were taken. He said it was Michael’s fault for allowing himself to be overpowered. He was being completely unreasonable. Everyone knows that there’s no way for a mere warlock to fight off a sorcerer of Roman Patel’s power.”

“So, Theodore just ... killed him?” I asked.

“He did. I fear he would have killed me too simply to assuage his fury, but I managed to escape when Rita began to calm him down.”

Oh, how the mighty had fallen. I folded my arms. “And now you’re here

to beg for sanctuary?”

“I didn’t know where else to go. I thought Theodore was the answer to making the magical families reign supreme in Tribane, but now I see he’s too old. His age has caused his sanity to slip. Most of the magical families are afraid of him and are in hiding.”

“You should have thought of that before you decided to bring him back from hell,” I said with no small amount of disdain as I nibbled a scone. It wasn’t too long ago that Marcel thought he was so high and mighty with Theodore on his side. Now his plan had backfired, and it served him right for what he did to my poor father. Just thinking of my dad made my throat grow tight with emotion.

“I know I’ve made a terrible mistake, and I’ll do anything in my power to make up for it. All I ask is for protection.”

“And how do we know Theodore didn’t send you here himself?” Ethan asked, suddenly stepping into the room.

Marcel’s eyes bugged when he saw Ethan. Obviously, he could sense the change in him, feel the power.

“I can prove it, I promise. I’ll tell you all of his plans,” Marcel replied in a jittery voice.

Ethan walked to me and sat, pulling me into his side, his strong arm wrapping around my waist. “Go ahead.”

“I need a promise from you first that ensures my safety.”

Ethan raised an eyebrow. “I will promise you nothing, warlock. You will tell me Theodore’s plans and then I’m going to lock you up until I see with my own two eyes that these plans are real and not some ploy to lead us into a trap. Once we have defeated the sorcerer, then and only then, will I set you free.”

“That sounds mighty generous,” Finn interjected, nudging Marcel’s shoulder. “I’d take that offer if I were you, mate.”

“Yes, yes, okay,” Marcel said in a fluster, running his hands through his long, wet hair.

“I’m waiting,” Ethan said, his words edged with impatience.

“He’s going to release the chaos again,” Marcel answered swiftly. “But this time it will be far more powerful. He’s been summoning it from the hell dimension, building up a store to release when you least expect it.”

“And when would that be?”

“Sunrise, three days from now. He’ll release the chaos, but because it’s

stronger than before, it will kill the humans the moment it enters their bodies. By the time night falls and the vampires awaken, the humans will all be dead. There will be no blood for them to feed on, so they will weaken. Theodore will wait a few days and then he's going to open a portal from the hell dimension and let all variety of entities through. Those entities will kill the vampires in their weakened states."

"That is quite an ambitious plan," Ethan mused, scratching his chin. "But why did he want Emilia and Rebecca?"

"He needed Rebecca's blood to cast the spell that will open a big enough portal. He has a vial of it that he's kept hidden somewhere safe. He was holding Emilia hostage to keep her from undoing the barrier spell around the city. It was an added bonus to his plan because not only would the vampires be weakened when he opened the portal, they would also be unable to flee."

"Lovely. But what, pray tell, does Theodore want with an empty city? The magical families can't number more than a hundred or so people at this stage. That's not much of a kingdom to rule."

Marcel chewed on his lip. "That's just it. He doesn't want to rule only Tribane, he wants to expand. If he can take the city and continue bringing entities over from hell, then he can build a dark army and move out until the entire country is within his hold. Tribane is just the beginning."

My palms grew sweaty as I listened to Marcel speak. These plans of Theodore's may be pretty grandiose, but I could see how they were achievable. Who knew what kind of creatures he'd be bringing over from hell?

"Well, obviously he needs to be stopped," Ethan said.

"How we do that is the million-dollar question," Finn added.

Nobody said anything for a long time, our minds struggling to conjure up ideas.

"We need to fool him into believing his plan is working," I said. "If we can make it look like the people have all been killed by the chaos, lull Theodore into a false sense of security, then we can get to him and kill him before he has the chance to open up the portal."

"There's no way to fake that kind of carnage," Marcel argued.

"What about a glamour?" I suggested.

"What about it?" Finn asked.

"Well, a glamour makes something look like something it's not, right? So, why can't we construct a glamour that makes it look like everyone's dead

when really they're still alive?"

"Because that kind of magic is far beyond any of our expertise," Marcel answered.

I smiled. "True, but I doubt it's beyond Roman's."

They all stared at me, realising that I just might be right. Before anyone could say a word, the door opened and my grandfather stepped inside.

"My ears are burning. Has somebody been talking about me again?" he questioned.

The rest of the evening was a buzz of activity. I spent most of my time helping make plans while also eating everything I could get my hands on. Ethan smiled and told me it was perfectly normal for me to be hungry all the time. He said that dhampir babies needed far more nutrients than human ones since they developed more quickly.

No matter where I was, he was never far away, always keeping a watchful eye over me. The love I used to see in his eyes when he looked at me had grown even more intense. The way he looked at me spoke volumes. It said he'd die to keep me and our baby safe, and that knowledge assuaged some of my worries.

Marcel was brought to the basement, where Roman magically bound his hands and legs just like he did Emilia's. There was no point in using regular old restraints for witches and warlocks, who could easily use magic to undo them.

Roman said that the kind of glamour I suggested *was* possible, but that there was a much better way of achieving a similar goal. He told us of a spell that would allow the humans to be taken over by the chaos mist, but when they died it would be a false death. They would essentially sleep and wake up after twenty-four hours, just like Shakespeare's Juliet, Roman told us. And because this was a spell he'd designed himself, and one which had not been attempted before, Theodore wouldn't recognise it.

He informed us that he would require a day or two to gather what he needed and then swiftly departed. Not long after Roman was gone, I started to feel sleepy, so Ethan picked me up and carried me to our bed.

I slept soundly, and I knew it was because Ethan held me through the night.

When I woke up, he was gone, but I wasn't alone. Rebecca sat at the end of the bed. She hugged a pink teddy bear to her chest, looking happy that I was finally awake.

I sat up and rubbed the sleep from my eyes. "Rebecca, what are you doing in here?"

"Amanda's still sleeping, and I'm hungry."

Ah, I'd forgotten Amanda had sort of been relegated to Rebecca's unofficial carer.

"You could have woken her. She wouldn't mind," I said, getting out of bed and walking to the wardrobe to find something to wear. Finn had brought my stuff from his place, so I had all my clothes in Ethan's room now. I felt weird with how fast things were moving with us, but I couldn't seem to find a way to slow the momentum. Besides, now that I was pregnant, there was no hope of taking things slow.

Rebecca got a shy look in her eyes, but she didn't say anything.

"What's wrong, honey?" I asked, pulling out a long black skirt and a lacy off-white top.

"I think there's a man in Amanda's room with her," she whispered conspiratorially.

My eyes widened. "A man?"

"I saw him go in there last night. The vampire with dark hair."

Now my eyebrows practically shot right up into my hairline. "Lucas?"

Rebecca pursed her lips and twisted the hem of her top. "I don't know his name."

Yeah, it was definitely Lucas. I quickly dressed, washed my face, and brushed my teeth, while Rebecca followed my movements and played with a gold charm bracelet on her wrist.

"That's pretty," I commented. "Did your daddy give you that?"

She nodded. "He said it belonged to my mother."

Huh.

Once I was done getting ready, I told Rebecca to stay put and that I'd be back in a minute. Then I marched straight to Amanda's room like a woman on a mission. I didn't even bother to knock. I simply pushed the door open and strode inside. The blinds were drawn, the room encased in darkness. For Lucas's sake, I presumed.

A lamp flicked on, and I saw the vampire fast asleep in bed before I noticed Amanda staring at me, looking equally surprised at my invasion and

embarrassed at being caught.

“Tegan,” she gasped. “You should have knocked.”

“Why, so you could hide the naked, two-hundred-pound vampire in your bed?”

“Talk quieter, you’ll wake him,” she replied in a hushed voice.

I rolled my eyes. “A chainsaw wouldn’t wake him this early in the morning. Fuck, Amanda, I didn’t nurse you back to health only for you to go straight back to square one again. Yes, he saved your life, but still. I thought you were smarter than this.”

She winced at my words. “I am smart. It’s different this time. He said he wants things to be different, and I do, too. I won’t ask him to feed on me. He threw himself in front of a bullet for me, Tegan.”

“Yeah, well, it might not be as valiant as you think. Vampires getting shot is like a human getting hit with a paintball. They heal from it pretty easily.”

She grew agitated now. “Please don’t talk to me like I’m stupid.”

I threw my hands in Lucas’ direction. “Someone with an addiction to vampire bites sleeping with a vampire is pretty stupid.”

“That’s rich coming from you, standing there pregnant with a vamp baby. Yeah, I heard everyone talking about it.”

“That’s different!” I argued.

“No, it’s not. You think you’re the only one special enough for a vampire to want to be with you. It’s obvious.”

“That’s not true. You know Ethan can’t drink my blood the way Lucas used to drink yours. That’s why our situation works. How do you know Lucas won’t bite you in the heat of the moment?”

“We had a really long talk last night. He doesn’t want to be alone anymore, and I believe him, Tegan. He’s jaded with his life and wants to make a change.”

I sighed, knowing there was no talking her out of this, but perhaps there was a good compromise. “Okay, well, maybe that’s true, but will you do something for me just in case?”

“What is it?”

“If I can come up with a potion that will make your blood taste awful to Lucas if he drinks it, will you take it for me?”

She nodded. “Sure, if it will put your mind at ease.”

“It will.”

Returning to my room and Rebecca, I grabbed a magic book that Rita had given me a couple of weeks ago from my bag and brought it downstairs with me. I laughed when Rebecca and I reached the kitchen and found Finn standing by the cooker wearing an apron and making breakfast for everyone.

I peeked over his shoulder to stare at the pan and my mouth watered. “Wow, I don’t think I’ve ever seen that much bacon before.”

He laughed and patted me softly on the back. “You having any strange cravings yet, preggo?”

I scrunched up my face. “Don’t ever call me that again, and yeah, not exactly cravings for any food in particular, just food in general. I literally feel like I could eat anything and everything.”

“Okay, well go and sit down. I’ll bring a plate over to you.”

I sat in between Rebecca and Delilah and began flicking through the magic book. I found the spell I was looking for easily enough. The main ingredient I needed was rosemary. Apparently, vamps couldn’t stand the herb and found the taste of it sickening in the extreme. So, if it was ingrained in Amanda’s blood, then Lucas would probably vomit if he tried to bite her.

There was a spell on another page that really caught my interest. It was similar to the one Rita cast to find my dad when he’d been kidnapped by Marcel and Ridley. This one didn’t require the use of dowsing rods, but it did allow you to find a person’s location if you had something personal that belonged to them.

My eyes flicked to Rebecca, catching on the shiny gold bracelet around her wrist. I never did get Pamphrock to tell me the location of her mother’s psychiatric facility, but perhaps I could use magic to find it by myself. It wasn’t fair for the girl to be shifted from pillar to post like she had been these past weeks. She needed stability, and the only person who could give that to her was a parent. The problem was, her mother could be so unwell she was incapable of caring for a ten-year-old.

Well, there was only one way to find out. I determined that today I was going to find Rebecca’s lone surviving parent. After I ate more than my fill of bacon, eggs, pancakes, and maple syrup (and after Finn set a second plate down in front of me with a wink after I’d shovelled down the first), I enlisted the help of Gabriel and Alvie to cast the spell.

It took a bit of persuading to convince Rebecca to temporarily give up her charm bracelet, but I eventually managed by promising to let her have ice-cream for dinner. And okay, perhaps that was an easy bargain since I

could definitely go for a whole tub of the stuff in my current condition.

We completed the rosemary potion for Amanda first, and I sealed it away in a glass bottle for later. Then we cast the location spell for Rebecca's mother with a map of the country spread out on the floor between the three of us. I briefly remembered Pamphrock saying her name was Felicity when he spoke of her. The spell worked kind of like an Ouija board. We placed the charm bracelet beneath an upturned glass, and the glass moved to the location of the person we were looking for. In this case, it slid straight across the map, landing on a small town on the other side of the country, thousands of miles from Tribane.

"It's too far to go there right now," Gabriel said. "You should wait a few days until Theodore has been taken care of before you start looking for this woman."

"Yeah, I suppose you're right," I agreed.

The door creaked open and Ethan stepped inside, taking in our spell with a bemused expression. "What are you three conspiring about?" he asked, coming to sit beside me as he eyed the random assortment of items for the spell.

He picked up the potion for Amanda, popping open the cork and taking a whiff. "Ugh, this smells awful."

"We were casting a spell to find Rebecca's mother. I'm going to find her once the Theodore situation is dealt with. That," I said, grabbing the bottle from him and recapping it, "is for Amanda. She and Lucas are all shackled up again after his valiant attempt to save her life, so I've concocted a potion to keep her safe. Once she's taken this, Lucas will be vomiting his guts up for days if he tries to drink from her."

Ethan eyed the bottle. "I don't doubt it. It smells like a battlefield full of week-old corpses."

"Eww, I do not want to think about how you know what that smells like," Alvie said with a shudder.

I grinned at Ethan. "It only smells that way to you. It's supposed to be repellent to vampires, that's the whole point."

He pulled me to him and began kissing my neck. "You're such a clever little thing, aren't you," he murmured in a seductive voice, his hand roaming over my hip.

I heard Alvie giggle just as Gabriel subtly dragged him from the room, allowing us our privacy. Sighing, I placed my hand on Ethan's obvious

erection, eliciting a goosebump-inducing growl.

“How is it that I haven’t been inside you for over a day? Surely, that is a sin,” he rumbled as he inched my top up over my breasts. Pinching a nipple, he hovered over me before taking it into his mouth.

“Ethan,” I moaned.

“Yes, my love?” he asked with a devilish smile.

It took every ounce of willpower to get my next words out. “The house is full of people, most of them with supernatural abilities. They’ll hear us.”

“I will fuck the mother of my unborn child in my own house when and how I want. I don’t care who hears.”

I shuddered at his possessive declaration. His hand went under my skirt and straight between my legs.

“But ... I ... do,” I protested weakly.

“I like it when you get embarrassed,” he murmured, rolling his tongue around my nipple now.

“Ethan,” I breathed.

“You’re soaking wet.”

“Your ... fault.”

“Yes, I like that it’s my fault. Come, let’s get you out of these troublesome clothes.”

Ethan lifted me and carried me to our room, where he carefully removed every article of clothing I had on. Moments later, I was naked while he was still fully dressed. He slid a finger inside me as he lowered his head between my legs and started to lick. I ran my hands through his luscious hair, so silky it begged to be touched.

Ethan flicked his tongue in this rapid vampire way that was kind of weird but also the most exquisite thing I’d ever felt. He really was too good at this.

“Why do you still have all your clothes on?” I asked in frustration.

“Because this is about you,” he answered, moving his mouth up my body. He nipped and sucked at every inch of my skin, his fingers still thrusting inside me. I wasn’t sure I had the brain capacity to talk anymore. Then his mouth was on mine and I was lost to his kiss. I closed my eyes, no longer bothering to protest, just letting him whisk me away on a cloud of pleasure.

Later on, I rummaged through Ethan's freezer in search of ice-cream and pumped my fist into the air in triumph when I discovered a huge tub of double chocolate chip. I dished it out into two bowls. Alright, one normal bowl and one gigantic fruit bowl for me because apparently I had a hole in my stomach that could never be filled now. I carried both bowls to Rebecca's room, where I found her sitting in the corner playing with her toys.

"Ice-cream's up," I called, and she smiled big when she spotted the bowls.

We ate in silence for a little while, and I remembered to return her charm bracelet, helping her put it back on. I sat back against the pillows and watched as she finished off the last of her ice-cream. There were times when she got extra quiet, and I sometimes wondered if she was thinking of her dad. With everything that happened, she never really had the chance to grieve for him.

"Do you miss your dad?" I asked, my tone gentle.

Rebecca nodded, a sadness in her eyes that shouldn't exist in a person so young. "All the time, but he's with my mummy now, so I know he's happy."

I paused, considering what to say next. "What if you could have your mother, would you want to live with her, even though she'd be a stranger?"

Rebecca gazed at me, her big brown eyes full of hope at the mere idea. "I think so."

Her answer made me feel much better about what I planned to do, and I didn't fail to notice how she fiddled with her charm bracelet the whole time I'd been talking to her. In fact, she played with it a lot, like it was a comfort to her. Perhaps this little girl wanted her real mother more than she even knew herself.

16.

Finn

I'd never felt softer lips in my entire life. Alora moaned when I kissed her, and my tongue tried to memorise the taste. After spending hours in bed talking about our lives and getting to know everything about one another, I'd stripped her down to just her underwear and a T-shirt, and shit, I didn't think it was possible to find plain white briefs this sexy.

She breathed in quick little bursts, all revved up, and it drove me crazy. I'd barely touched her aside from the kiss, and yet I could just tell if I slipped my hand between her legs right now, she'd be slick and ready for me.

Just as these thoughts were flitting through my brain, her entire body stilled. I pulled my mouth from hers to find her eyes rolled back in her head as she started to convulse.

Crap, she was having a vision. Panic seized me.

It was just so hard to see this happening to her. I grabbed her hands, and just as I was about to pull her into my arms, something strange happened. I felt myself being drawn closer to her. My eyes drifted shut, and then there was only darkness.

When I came to, I was standing in a long hallway, hand in hand with Alora. I looked at her, and she seemed just as shocked to see me as I was to be there. The carpet we stood on was lush, and on the walls was that expensive silk wallpaper people used to have in the 1800s. It had pictures of birds and flowers on it.

"You're in one of my visions," Alora said, awed, her voice bringing my attention back to her.

"Yeah," I breathed, unable to figure out how this was happening.

"Something isn't right."

"What do you mean?"

"We're not in the future," she explained. "We're in the past. This has never happened before."

"How am I here with you?"

"It might be because you were touching me when the vision took hold and probably because of how close I felt to you when we were kissing."

Before I could ask any more questions, a door at the end of the hall

opened and Theodore stepped through. His clothes weren't modern, but they still held that whimsical touch. He wore an old-timey suit with a cravat, and his socks were purple with blue stripes.

I held my breath as he approached, but he simply walked right by us.

"We're not really here," Alora informed me. "We're just spectators. Come on."

Hand in hand, we followed Theodore down the long hall. I got the impression that we were in some sort of fancy hotel. Theodore smiled as he slid a copper key from his pocket and stuck it into the door of room 203. He pushed the door open and stepped inside.

As we continued to follow him, I was struck with the harsh scent of lavender perfume—and the unmistakable aroma of blood and sex. The key Theodore had been holding dropped from his hand and clinked to the floor as he stormed through the suite. He stopped when he reached the bed, where there was a woman with long, dark hair and brown eyes lying naked in the arms of a muscular blond guy.

When the woman saw Theodore, her eyes widened, and her fangs extended as she smiled. Shit, she was a vampire. The man she lay with had bite marks all along his neck, and he looked completely zoned out from blood loss.

"No," Theodore whispered in disbelief. "How could you ...?"

The vampire laughed cruelly. "Oh, come on, you didn't think I was going to stop, did you?"

Theodore's eyes narrowed to slits. "I thought you were mine. I told you I would give you all the blood you needed, so long as you stayed faithful to me."

"The thrill of the hunt is half the joy of feeding, Theo dear. Surely, you can understand that."

"I told you I loved you," he seethed.

The vampire continued to laugh. "People our age don't know the meaning of love. Love is for mortals."

"You are mortal, Jessica."

"Not the way a human is. I'm six hundred years old."

"And I am two centuries older than that, but still, I did love you. At least until I found you here ... copulating."

"You have to stop taking things so seriously," Jessica replied. "I like to play with my human toys every now and again. You'll just have to learn to

live with it.”

Theodore’s anger came to a bursting point when he boomed, “No! I will not learn to live with it!”

He jumped onto the bed and grabbed the zoned out human, pressing his hand into his face. Magic sizzled from his fingertips, and the man’s life started to drain until his complexion paled and his life left him. Jessica watched Theodore kill the guy she’d just been drinking from and having sex with, no emotion in her eyes. She didn’t even seem shocked.

She did, however, look scared when Theodore turned his attention to her, purple magic still zinging from the palm of his hand.

“Don’t,” she said, in a voice that sounded calm on the surface but contained barely concealed panic underneath.

He grabbed her by the hair and threw her from the bed to the floor.

“You vampires,” he spat, “I thought you had hearts, but now I see I was wrong. You’re all dead inside with nothing but blackened stones inside your chests.”

“Theo, please, don’t do this,” Jessica begged, all pretences of calm completely gone now.

“Why not? I’m done with you. Never again will I allow myself to be fooled by one of your kind. I hate you. I hate all of you.”

At this, he threw both his hands forward, gesturing a rapid and intricate spell. He wasn’t even touching her anymore, but her head started to twist. It kept turning until her neck snapped and she was rendered unconscious. She wasn’t dead though. Not yet. Theodore strode to the four-poster bed and smashed it apart with his magic. He picked up a broken, jagged piece of wood before walking back to Jessica. Without preamble, he aimed the wood at her heart and stabbed her, emitting a heartbroken grunt as he did.

Theodore dropped to the floor, his face in his hands. It took a second for me to realise that he was crying.

“This is why he hates vampires so much,” Alora whispered, suddenly enlightened.

A second later, we were both descending back into darkness. The next time I opened my eyes, we were in Tribane again, standing on a path on Champion Row. There were people everywhere, and it was even more crowded than it had been the day Theodore had gathered his mob to burn all the vampires in their homes.

“Are we in the future now?” I asked Alora.

“I think so,” she answered quietly.

People chattered excitedly all around us, sort of like they were waiting impatiently for their favourite boy band to make an appearance. It was daytime. The skies were clear and sunny above us. Then I heard someone gasp and others started to cry out in terror. The atmosphere changed so rapidly that it took me a moment to pinpoint what was happening.

I looked up and saw the sunny sky darkened as a black cloud descended. It was Theodore’s chaos mist. All light was completely obliterated within seconds, and the chaos drifted down from above, invading the bodies of the humans below. Instantly their bodies fell and convulsed, and no more than a minute later they went still. I turned to look at Alora in time to see the chaos hovering above both of us. It bypassed Alora and came straight for me. There was nothing I could do to fight it, and then there was no more time left. The mist had taken me over and drained the life from my body.

Waking up, I was covered in sweat and shaking all over. I was back in bed. Relief washed over me when I realised none of that really happened, not yet anyway. Alora came to beside me, her mouth open in shock.

“You were inside my vision,” she said, her expression showing clear amazement.

“You said you thought it was because I was touching you when it happened. Has anyone ever been touching you when a vision came before?”

She shook her head. “No, most people’s reactions when I start convulsing is to get as far away as possible.” She let out a sad little laugh. “Like this crap is contagious or something.”

I pulled her close and rubbed her shoulders soothingly.

“We were in the past,” I murmured, trying to figure out what it all meant.

“My ability must have shown me that for a reason. It wanted me to know that Theodore has a cause for wanting to wipe out vampires.”

“The guy must have a very easily wounded ego. I mean, he got cheated on. Build a bridge and get over it.”

“Sorcerers are so old though. It makes them crazier. Every little thing is a personal affront, so imagine how angry being cheated on would make them.”

“I’m still trying to get my head around the fact that such a hot vampire was with Theodore.”

Alora shrugged. “Some women find power a strong aphrodisiac. And

Theodore has lots of power. He was eight-hundred years old back then. That means he must be over a thousand now.”

“He’s older than the oldest vampires,” I said in awe, studying her closely. “Are you okay? Those visions have to take a lot out of you.”

“They do, but I’ll be alright.”

I pulled her closer, keeping her in my embrace as we both fell into quiet thought. Somewhere along the way, she nuzzled my neck, and a bolt of arousal shot through me. I brought my mouth to her earlobe and sucked, soliciting a soft moan from her.

“I love it when you make that noise,” I rasped and flipped us so that she was lying flat on the bed. I stared into her eyes, and a sense of urgency took over. Maybe it was what I saw in that vision and how I was almost certain I died in it, but suddenly everything seemed so vital, almost like we only had so much time left.

It always felt like that in this city. There was the constant knowledge that your next breath could be your last, which was kind of an occupational hazard when your job involved slaying vampires. Well, I guess that wasn’t really my job anymore.

Capturing Alora’s mouth in a kiss, I cradled her face in my hands.

“Finn,” she gasped as my hand drifted down between her legs.

“I want you,” I breathed, and her thighs fell apart, welcoming me in. I shoved her T-shirt up and over her head before swiftly discarding her bra. Then her beautiful tits were bared to me, and I groaned aloud. She was too fucking perfect. I trailed my hand down her side, revelling in how her hips curved out lavishly from her small waist.

“Finn, I’ve never done this before,” she finally confessed, and my heart stammered.

“That’s alright.” I reassured her, meeting her pretty gold eyes. “Do you want me?”

“Yes, God, I want you so much.” Her gaze drifted down my chest with need, and I smiled, obliging her by removing my shirt so that she could look her fill.

She shyly reached out, trailing her fingers down my abdomen. My muscles jumped at her touch. I closed my eyes and enjoyed the sensation of her tentative fingers as they explored me.

I flipped us again, and my back hit the mattress while she straddled my thighs. Her hands continued to move over my bare chest before fumbling

with my belt buckle and undoing the fly of my jeans. I was so busy staring at how incredible her tits looked from this angle that I didn't immediately notice her struggling with my pants.

I chuckled softly and helped her get them off. A few seconds later, I was naked as the day I was born. Gripping the back of her neck, I pulled her mouth down to mine, kissing her hard and possessive. She moaned as she ground herself into my erection, and I swore I almost came. Both our chests rose and fell as our arousal built. I hooked my fingers under her knickers and eased them down an inch.

Her mouth moved to my neck, and I couldn't take it any longer. I had to be in her now. Her underwear came off, and I continued to kiss her as I reached over to the nightstand where I left my wallet.

Alora broke the kiss to watch me pull out a condom. I tore open the packet and rolled it down my length. Her eyes were wide, taking everything in. Next, I pulled her under me and spread her legs apart. I let my hand drift over her wet folds, rubbing circles into her clit. I wanted her to come first, that way she'd be more relaxed when I pushed inside.

Her orgasm came swiftly, a rosy blush colouring her cheeks. Wow. I didn't think I'd ever get tired of making her come.

"That feel good?" I asked, my voice low and throaty. It was taking every ounce of willpower I had not to plunge inside her hard and fast.

"So good," she sighed, and I nudged my tip against her opening. "Oh, God, please," she begged. "I want to feel you, Finn."

"I want to feel you, too," I groaned and brought my mouth to her ear, licking the shell and sucking. I entered her just the slightest bit, and she whimpered.

"Fuck, you already feel incredible," I practically growled.

"Please."

I pushed in a bit more, and she clamped her thighs around me tight, her legs locking around my waist. I tried to focus on keeping this slow and steady, but damn, she felt amazing. I knew this had to be hurting her, and I hated the idea of her feeling any pain. Steadily, I pushed through that thin barrier, seating myself fully. I held still, and she grew quiet. I braced myself on my hands, pushing up to see her face, and found her eyes were squeezed shut.

"Tell me if you want me to stop," I whispered, watching her intently.

Finally, she opened her eyes. "No, I just needed a minute. Keep going. I

want you to.”

I rocked my hips forward, never breaking eye contact with her.

“You’re gorgeous, so beautiful,” I said, continuing to utter sweet things to her as I lost myself in the sensation. Our slow rhythm allowed me to feel every inch of her around me. Her muscles clenching on my dick was almost too much to take.

“Finn,” she moaned. “More.”

I quickened my thrusts just a little, and her mouth fell open in response. Moving my hand to her clit and my mouth to her breast, I was determined to make her come again. This time on my cock. Her muscles clenched around me exquisitely when I touched the tiny bundle of nerves. Her thighs locked around me tighter as I felt her orgasm building.

“Yes,” I rasped mindlessly. “You’re mine. All mine.”

Alora let out a cry of pleasure, and I knew I was going to come soon. I waited until I had her right on the cusp, and then, just as she shattered beneath me, I let loose, coming inside her.

“I love you.” I thought I heard her whisper so quietly that I couldn’t be certain she actually said it.

I rolled us so that I was cradling her in my arms. I hesitated, unsure whether to ask her to repeat herself. There was a chance I was hearing things.

A minute later, I finally summoned up the courage. “Alora, what did you just say?”

There was no response, and when I glanced down to see her face, she was breathing deeply, her eyes closed.

She’d fallen asleep.

I tried to fall asleep, too, but I couldn’t seem to manage it. I just kept thinking about her words, wondering whether or not she actually said them. We’d only known each other a few days. She could hardly feel like she loved me already. But then, there was her vision of us together in the future. There was also the fact that she’d just given me her virginity.

With these thoughts filling my head, I wasn’t going to be getting to sleep any time soon.

Making sure not to wake her, I rolled over and off the bed, pulling on my jeans and shirt. I decided a quick bite to eat might make me sleepy, so I went down to the kitchen to see what I could rustle up. Gabriel, Alvie, and Tegan were sitting at the table drinking tea and talking.

“What has you all up so late?” I asked, taking a seat beside Alvie.

“Oh, you know, we’re just hashing things over, trying to see if there are any holes in Roman’s plan,” Gabriel replied.

“And ... are there?”

Alvie sighed. “We can’t be certain. But you have to plan for every eventuality.”

I couldn’t argue with that. Looking between the three of them, I decided to tell them about what happened with Alora and what we both saw in her visions.

“Jeez, talk about a spurned lover. I never understood how anyone could be crazy enough to kill their partner because they caught them cheating,” Tegan said. “I mean, yes, it’s got to sting, but killing them for it? It just seems so extreme. Though it does explain how determined Theodore is to rid the vampires from this city.”

“There’s only one more day until Theodore lets the chaos free,” Gabriel said, and we all went quiet.

Tegan met my gaze. “Finn, when you were in the vision with Alora, did it feel like the people were dead when the chaos got into them or did it feel like it was Roman’s spell taking effect?”

“Honestly, I have no idea.”

She let out a long breath, a crease forming on her brow. “There must be an easier way of doing this. I don’t see why we can’t just find Theodore and kill him before he even releases the chaos.”

“Well, we don’t know where he is for a start,” Gabriel said. “He won’t have stayed in the house Roman found him in for long. It’s too risky.”

“I guess.”

Tegan clasped her hands together, and a thoughtful expression came over her, but she didn’t say anything. If I didn’t know better, I’d say she was concocting something that was going to get her into trouble. But no, she wouldn’t be that stupid, not in her delicate condition.

I grabbed a quick bowl of cereal, then returned to bed, climbing in beside Alora. I wrapped my arms around her, making the most of the time we had left because, if Theodore got his way, we’d all be done for soon enough.

17.

Tegan

I couldn't stop thinking about the All-Knowing Tome. It showed me how to kill a sorcerer. I had this innate feeling that I couldn't seem to shake. What if the book told me how to kill Theodore because it was *my* responsibility to do it?

Cut off his head.

Burn his body.

I could do that, right? I had killed Eliza, after all. Theodore might be a little trickier, but it was still doable. There was the small obstacle of having to find him first, but I had a plan.

There was a scarf among my things that belonged to Rita. I borrowed it and forgot to return it, which was lucky because I could use it to cast a location spell. If I found out where Rita was, it went without saying that Theodore would be somewhere close by.

Bob's your uncle and Fanny's your Aunt.

Sure, I suspected it wasn't going to be that simple, but I had to try.

Very early the next morning, when Ethan was out of the house, I got to work on the spell. I cut off a piece of the scarf and placed it under the glass on the map that was spread out on the floor. With bated breath, I watched as it moved along the paper and finally landed on a spot close to where Emilia's barrier was. I recognised the area, but as far as I knew there was nothing there, no buildings to hide inside anyway.

With this information, I steeled myself to talk to Emilia. I'd been putting the conversation off since she was brought here, but now I really needed to get it over and done with. I found her sitting on the bed in her room, her legs crossed and her hands in her lap. Always so prim and proper.

She didn't say anything to me as I entered and leaned back against a wall to study her. "So, I guess you know why I'm here."

"You want to save yourself," she answered evenly.

"I want to save myself and my baby, Emilia. Can you tell me how to do that?"

She glanced down at her hands and then back to me. "If I do this, will you instruct your vampire to set me free?"

“If you agree to leave Rebecca alone, yes. But not before then and not before I see that your method works.”

Her eyebrows shot up as she let out a hard laugh. “So, I will have to wait here, confined in this room, until you give birth?”

I sighed and slid down the wall until I was sitting on the floor. The idea of keeping Emilia captive for the next however many months was exhausting. “I don’t see any other way right now.”

Her eyes narrowed as she watched me, a million thoughts flashing in her gaze. A couple of minutes of absolute quiet passed before she spoke, “Go and get a pen and paper. You’ll need to take down a list of ingredients.”

“For?”

“For the medicine that you’re going to take to make sure the child you’re carrying doesn’t die. There’s no sure-fire way of saving both of you, but there is a potion that will at least ensure the baby lives.”

“Fuck.”

“This is all I have to offer. Also, your language is unseemly.”

“Fine,” I said, gritting my teeth. If I couldn’t save myself, then I could at least save my baby. I couldn’t stand the idea of Ethan losing another child. I’d go to the ends of the earth to prevent it.

I left the room and returned with a pad and pen, taking down the ingredients as Emilia called them out. Once she was finished, she instructed, “You will drink this medicine every morning and every night for the duration of your pregnancy.”

“Right,” I replied, scanning down the list and trying to figure out where I was going to get a three-to-four-month supply of all this stuff. Then I remembered Rita’s RV back at Finn’s house and how it was jam-packed with spell ingredients.

“We never had to be enemies, you know,” I said, facing Emilia. “I could have been a granddaughter to you. Sometimes you just have to accept the imperfections in people to find the pearl inside the ugly oyster shell.”

She held her silence, so I gave up and thanked her for the list of ingredients. Just as I returned to my room and started packing away the location spell from earlier, there was a light tapping on the window. I turned and found Roman hovering in the air outside. What on earth? I hurried to the window and let him in.

“You can fly,” I gasped.

“Not naturally,” he answered as he casually climbed inside. “It’s a

spell.”

“Ah, I see.”

Slipping off his coat, he walked over to the bed and sat down. I swallowed hard and glanced at the door. Ethan was out inspecting the wreckage at Crimson, but I still couldn't help being nervous that he was going to walk in on us at any second. He wasn't too fond of Roman, and I didn't know how he'd react if he found him here with me in our room.

Roman clasped his hands together and smiled at me.

“So,” he began. “Have you had enough time to consider my proposition?”

His proposition? Oh, right. What with everything that had been happening, I'd completely forgotten about the whole sorceress thing. Since he'd retrieved Emilia and Rebecca from Theodore, I technically did owe him. Then again, he still hadn't used Emilia to take down the barrier, nor had he gotten Rita back.

“You know I'm pregnant, right?” I said, trying to distract him and buy myself more time.

“I do. I would say congratulations are in order, but that would probably be in bad taste.”

A shiver ran through me as I tried to push vivid thoughts of dying in childbirth out of my head.

“I also know that you're planning on going after Theodore by yourself,” he continued. “Tut tut, Tegan. That's a very bad idea. You have no chance of defeating him.”

“How the hell do you know that?”

He tapped his temple. “I know a lot. Too much, really.”

I exhaled and slumped down onto the bed beside him. “I'm just panicking, okay? If I survive my pregnancy, then I want to know that I'm bringing my child into a world that's stable. In order to do that, Theodore has to die.”

“Well, I could help you with that, if you agree to my offer. There's also something else I could add to the bargain. Something I'm sure you'd find very valuable given you're in a romantic relationship with a vampire.”

My curiosity piqued. “Oh?”

“There's a spell that would allow him to feed from you and only you. He'd no longer have to find random humans to take blood from, and you wouldn't have to suffer the jealousy of thinking about him sinking his fangs

into anyone else.”

Okay, so I was definitely interested. Practically, I knew Ethan had to feed, but personally, I didn't enjoy the thought of him feeding from other people, other women in particular. I peered at Roman. “How does it work?”

“Since he is transformed, your blood doesn't pose any further harm to him. In fact, drinking your blood is now the same as him drinking any other human's blood. The power contained within has already been transferred. However, it is still unhealthy for you to be bitten so often, given your human half can become addicted to his bite. It also isn't advisable to lose blood on such a regular basis. However, if I were to teach you this spell, it would allow you to use your magic to regenerate the blood you've lost, while also warding off the possibility of addiction.”

I stared at him. What he was offering was certainly appealing. If I was the only one Ethan fed from it would bring us even closer together, strengthen our already strong bond while allowing me to avoid the jealousy of him feeding from other women. But becoming a sorceress? I still wasn't sure if I was powerful or clever enough for such an endeavour.

Pursing my lips, I stared down at my hands, searching for answers that weren't there. “If I become a sorceress, would I still be me?”

Roman laughed. “Of course you would. The possession of magic comes with a choice. Take Theodore and me as an example. Theodore made the choice to use his magic for bad, while I chose to use mine to do good.”

“It's that simple?”

“Most things are when it comes down to it.”

A million thoughts rushed through my head. Finally, I came to a decision. I mean, I was already in dire straits, all things considered. What else did I have to lose? I turned and held my hand out to Roman.

“Alright, Granddad, you've got yourself a deal.”

He took my hand into his immediately, and we shook on it, a beatific smile spreading across his face. “Marvellous.”

Standing up, I walked over to the closet and pulled out the backpack I'd stashed there last night. It contained a very sharp sword, which I took from Ethan's weapons room hidden in the back of the basement, several litres of petrol, and a good old-fashioned packet of matches. Oh, yeah, and a zippo lighter just in case the matches happened to get wet. The sword was too big for the backpack and stuck out awkwardly at the top, so I took it out and strapped it across my back instead.

Hitching the bag over my shoulder, I faced Roman again, and he was grinning at me.

“I see you’re prepared.”

“Absolutely. Now, let’s go kill ourselves a sorcerer.”

“It would be my pleasure.”

In a matter of seconds, Roman had transported us to an empty meadow, quite close to the spot where Finn brought me to call my dad. The purple barrier hovered in the air and shot up into the sky just a short distance away.

“Come, we’ll walk from here.”

“Where are we going? There are no houses for miles.”

“Correction, no visible houses.”

“Right,” I replied, not entirely sure what he meant by that.

Roman strode ahead of me, and when he reached the barrier, he walked directly through it. I followed him, but when I reached the other side there were still no houses in sight.

“Theodore’s been staying on the other side of the barrier?” I questioned.

“After what happened the other day, I presume that he decided remaining just outside of Tribane was the safer option.”

He swept his hand through the air and gold shone from his palm. It was like he was using an eraser to wipe away the glamour because each time he swiped his hand a new piece of a hidden picture started to emerge. Theodore hadn’t just hidden any old house here in the middle of nowhere, he’d hidden his mansion. The very same mansion that I saw crumble to the ground with my own two eyes on Ridley Island almost a year ago.

To be able to recreate a house that’d been destroyed was just mind-boggling to me.

When Roman was done and the entire mansion was revealed to us, I instinctively took a step back. I had a bad feeling about this and that bad feeling was confirmed when the door opened and a small, dark figure emerged.

Rita.

We were a short distance from the building, so she began to walk towards us. I looked to Roman for guidance on what we should do, but he was staring at Rita like the very sight of her enthralled him. Well, okay then.

“Um, what’s happening?” I asked.

“It appears that Theodore has decided to send his protégé to come and face us instead of doing it himself.”

I snorted. “Scaredy cat.”

“More like a clever cat. He knows you love her like a sister and that no matter what happens you won’t kill her.”

“Well, that’s just cheating,” I replied, annoyed now.

“Little witch, what a pleasure,” Roman called out. “I’ve been hoping we’d meet again.”

“Fuck you,” she spat. “Neither of you should be here.”

“Rita …” I began but trailed off when her eyes cut to me, and my heart chilled to its very core at the look she gave me. *Pure hatred*. “Oh, don’t start this shit again, Tegan. I’m not your Rita, so stop giving me those bloody puppy dog eyes and thinking I’m going to come back to you.”

This was the most she’d said to me since she went to join Theodore, so despite her venom, I took hope from the fact that she was actually talking to me.

“I’m not going to give up on you,” I shot back. “Even if you have turned into a massive bitch.”

Roman chuckled. Something flickered behind Rita’s eyes, but she quickly disguised it.

“Say whatever you want. I think I’ll kill you now so that I can be done with you turning up all the time trying to save me.”

“You’d really do that?” I asked, unable to help the wobble in my voice. “You’d kill me?”

Her mouth tightened. “Why not? You’re nothing to me, nothing but an irritation.”

Roman was still laughing like he knew a secret, and I wished he’d stop. This wasn’t a laughing matter. He shot Rita a seductive look, and I suddenly realised that he had the hots for her. *Great*. That was all we needed to add to an already complicated situation.

“Tegan, do you think you can handle her on your own?” he asked. “I want to go and find Theodore.”

“No!” I screeched. “She just said she’s going to kill me and you want to leave me alone with her! What the fuck?”

“I wouldn’t be leaving if I didn’t think you’d be safe,” Roman replied like he hadn’t a worry in the world.

“I don’t care what you think. You’re not leaving me.”

He took a step closer and stared deeply into my eyes. “You can do this. I believe in you.”

And with that, he disappeared.

Several very loud expletives erupted from my mouth.

Rita grinned viciously.

Before I had the chance to do a thing, she threw a bolt of magic at me, knocking me to the ground. I yelped, feeling the pain shoot right up my back.

“Christ, Rita!” I snapped. A sharp sting shot through my middle, and fear clutched at me. I pressed my hand to my stomach, hoping the baby was okay. Rita’s gaze followed the movement, and her eyes narrowed in something close to disgust.

“You’re pregnant with a vampire abomination,” she said, while tiny flecks of magic dripped from her fingertips like water.

“You and your daddy really are fond of that word, aren’t you?”

She turned her head and looked off into the distance like she was pondering something. “I should cut the thing out of you.”

“Why bother?” I retorted, even though my gut churned at the thought of it. “The birth will more than likely kill the both of us.”

“Hmm, that’s true.”

“Look, Rita, I know a vampire killed Noreen, but things don’t need to be this way. You can come back to us.”

“Don’t you dare say her name. You have no right!”

“Alvie really misses you,” I went on, and I might’ve been mistaken, but I thought I saw her hard façade waver a little. “Everybody misses you. Come on, it must be awful living with old clown face in there.”

I startled in fright when she lashed her magic at me again. It missed by the barest fraction of an inch, and it singed the grass where I’d landed flat on my arse just moments ago. My hands shook as I lifted them in front of me.

“Please, just calm down, okay? I’m sorry I called your dad a clown face. If anything, he’s more like one of those marionette dolls.”

The old Rita would have laughed at this, but not this Rita. This Rita simply stared at me without emotion. She started to pace, muttering to herself. I took the opportunity to summon my sparks and have them ready to attack if needed.

I was determined to find some trace of her old humanity, so I continued talking. “What’s it like living with him anyway? Must be kind of weird. Does he use the bathroom like normal people, or does he just magic that stuff away? I mean, I’ve often wondered if sorcerers even have to sleep. Like, they’re immortal and all, so maybe they don’t.”

Rita's eyes cut to me. She didn't say anything, but she didn't seem too happy about me prattling on about Theodore either.

"These are important questions, you see, because Roman's going to train me to become a sorceress, so I should probably know this stuff before I really commit. I think it might be weird not going to the bathroom anymore. And I really like to sleep. Finn says it's my favourite pastime."

"You, a sorceress?" Rita scoffed, and I felt a rush of triumph that I got her to react. "Don't make me laugh. You're so clueless about even the basics of magic."

Well, that was nice and bitchy. Still, I'd take 'bitchy Rita' over 'I'm going to kill you and cut out your baby Rita' any day of the week.

"I might be clueless, but I have power. That's the most important thing. The other bits I can learn as I go along."

"Your only power is the ability to spread your legs for vampires and let them feed on you," she replied derisively.

"I only let that happen once," I pointed out. "Once doesn't make me a slut. Well, the feeding thing happened once. The spreading of the legs happened a few times. But you should try it, you know. It's a lot of fun."

Purple started to swirl in her eyes now. "You're vile."

"Am I? Don't say I said anything, but I think Roman might have a bit of a thing for you. Pretty sure I saw you blush when he gave you his come-to-bed eyes, too. You should take the opportunity to get some action. You do seem very tense these days."

"I did not blush!" she shouted, and I dove out of the way when she flung her magic at me again. I didn't emerge entirely unscathed this time. The sleeve of my jacket got singed.

"Whoa, you must like him back, considering how much you're lashing out," I quipped, raising my hand as she was about to throw more magic at me. "Now, now, let's not be so hasty, Rita. I let you get in a couple of shots for free. The next time I'm going to have to retaliate."

At this, there was a loud smashing sound from the mansion, and purple magic began to swirl out of the large chimney. Rita hurried to investigate, and I followed her, making sure to keep a good distance behind. In the foyer, a gigantic crystal chandelier had crashed to the floor, but there was no sign of Theodore or Roman anywhere.

"Where are they?" I asked.

Rita didn't reply. Instead, she closed her eyes, and a light started to

shimmer from her body.

“They’re gone,” she answered flatly. “I guess it’s time for me to kill you now.”

Roman was gone? I swallowed hard and considered the ramifications of him abandoning me like this. It was one thing to go inside and leave me alone with Rita, but it was another entirely for him to just disappear.

“Don’t do it. You aren’t always going to feel this way. If you do this, one day you’re not going to be grieving for your mother anymore and you’ll hate yourself for what you did. This feeling you’re having is only temporary.”

“It’s not temporary. I will never be the same again, and it’s all because of the vampires. They are going to pay for what they did.”

“*They* didn’t do anything. It was one vampire who killed Noreen. One, Rita. And Ethan killed him. If anything, you should be thanking Ethan instead of trying to kill the mother of his unborn child.”

“I’ll never thank him. They’re all the same, all heartless.”

For a second, I wondered if this was Rita talking, or if Theodore had somehow brainwashed her into thinking all vampires were evil. She started to advance on me quickly now, and out of instinct, I threw a blast of sparks at her as I backed up outside. She wailed in pain when they hit her body, but she quickly recovered and transformed it into anger.

“You’ll pay for that.”

“Hey! I didn’t mean to do it. You frightened me. Look, there’s no need for either of us to get hurt here. Roman could have killed Theodore already. You need to come home with me, Rita. We’d all welcome you back with open arms.”

“You talk a lot. Why don’t you just shut up for once and fight me?”

She crouched low to the ground, placing her hand to the earth, and suddenly the grass was exploding and balls of dirt were shooting up into the air like mini landmines. Instinctively, I raised my hand to my face and created a barrier of sparks around my body so that I didn’t get pelted. Rita let out a growl of annoyance when I defended myself, and I decided I couldn’t afford to stay passive anymore. I had to fight back.

Perhaps if I could show her that I was more powerful, then maybe she’d finally listen to me—not that I actually *was* more powerful than her. I just had to fake it. Rapidly, the All-Knowing Tome opened in my head, the pages flicking before landing on more information about my blood.

Okay, so I could pretty much add it to any magic and it'd be rendered ten times stronger.

I still had the blade Finn gifted me in my pocket, so I pulled it out and cut a small line into the tip of each finger on one hand. Immediately, it mixed with my sparks, and they started to pop and sizzle. They weren't just glittery and white anymore. Now they were every colour of the rainbow.

Rita spotted what I'd done and started to move away, but she wasn't fast enough. I shot a blast at her, and she screamed when my magic burned her worse this time. She put both hands over her ears because my magic was making a high-pitched squealing sound. I watched as it slithered over her face.

I closed my eyes and ordered it to stop because I didn't actually want to send Rita crazy. She was already halfway there without any help from me. I just wanted to show her what I was capable of.

"I told you I had power," I called to her.

She rose to her feet and swept her hand to the side, knocking me down with a gust of wind I hadn't been expecting.

"You still talk too much. And your power is worthless without the knowledge of how to use it."

"Oh, I'm learning."

Before she could react, I threw enough sparks at her feet to knock her down. What could I say? I was sick of being the only one falling over all the time. Rita managed to get up quicker than me, and before I knew it, she was running at me full steam ahead. Without thinking, I pulled Ethan's sword out of the holster on my back. Just as she was about to throw more magic at me, I slashed her hand, and she reeled back, staring in shock at the painful looking gash across her knuckles.

"Fuck!" she growled, clutching her bleeding hand to her chest. "You almost chopped off my finger," she shrieked.

"You're the one who came running at me. What did you expect me to do?"

"I expect you to ... shit that hurts." She was distracted by all the blood, so I got up slowly and walked toward her.

"I can help you to heal it," I told her softly, and she peered at me, unsure. Then her dark eyes turned blank again.

"I don't need your help! I need you to leave me alone."

I got a shock when she leapt at me, pushing me down onto the muddy

grass. I gulped and tried to breathe, but her hands were around my throat, squeezing.

“You see, Tegan, you’re not the only one who can use human means of inflicting pain,” she said hatefully.

She had my hand pinned under her knee, but I managed to move it just enough to burn through the black fishnet tights she was wearing. She suffered through the pain while digging her knee harder into my hand. She lifted her knee the slightest bit before slamming it back down again. *Shit, that hurt.* I thought she might have broken one of my fingers.

I raised my free hand and smacked her hard across the face. It gave me an advantage for just a second, which was enough time for me to shove her off me. I didn’t get far enough, though, because she launched herself onto my back, her arms wrapping tight around my neck.

“Get off,” I grunted, trying to dislodge her.

“No chance,” she replied breathlessly, and seconds later, she was pulling me back onto the ground. Bits of dirt hit me as she pushed me face down into it. *Okay, now it was on.* I rolled my body and punched her in the gut, which earned me an uppercut to the chin. My entire abdominal region was screaming in pain with her on top of me. For someone so small she seemed to weigh a bloody tonne.

“You can’t replace Noreen with Theodore,” I managed to gasp.

“Shut up!” she wailed.

“Noreen was the only real parent you’ll ever have.”

“I said shut the fuck up!”

“Rita, he’s evil. You’re not evil. You’re good, just like your mother was.”

She smacked me hard, sending my face flying sideways. I tasted blood in my mouth, and when I managed to turn my head and look at her again, furious black mascara tears were running down her face.

She clutched my throat, squeezing the air from my lungs. My head grew dizzy as I heard her seethe, “I’m not letting go until you’re dead.”

I tried to say something back, but I had no strength left. I needed oxygen. Where the hell was Roman?

He needed to get back here now because I wasn’t sure how much longer I could hold out.

18.

Finn

I was doing one of my routine circuits of the city early in the morning when I was approached by a thin, nerdy-looking fella. He handed me a flyer, telling me he hoped to see me at the rally, then continued on his way.

Rally? What rally?

I unfolded the flyer to reveal Theodore's face smiling back at me, giving me a momentary fright. That was one ugly motherfucker—and not someone I wanted to see up close and personal first thing in the morning, thank you very much. He wore his ordinary concerned citizen clothing and a kind expression on his face. The text on the flyer read:

THE THEODORE GIRARD FOUNDATION PRESENTS,
AN ANTI-VAMPIRE CAMPAIGN RALLY.
THIS WEDNESDAY, 10 AM SHARP ON CAMPION ROW.
COME AND SHOW YOUR SUPPORT FOR HUMANITY.
TOGETHER WE WILL DRIVE OUT THE DARKNESS.

Christ, he really didn't give up. You'd think he'd have learned his lesson from the fiasco that went down the last time. I kept walking through the empty streets, knowing they wouldn't be empty soon enough. It was just gone eight-thirty, which meant there was an hour and a half before Theodore's rally began. What exactly was he trying to achieve with this?

And that was when it hit me.

He was going to release the chaos. Gathering all the humans in one place would make it that much easier for him. According to Marcel, he was supposed to be doing it *tomorrow* morning, but he must've put two and two together and figured out that Marcel betrayed him and revealed his plans to his enemies. Now he had to act earlier than scheduled. I rushed to the van and hightailed it back to the house.

Everybody was gathered in the large kitchen eating breakfast. I walked straight in and slammed the flyer down into the centre of the table. Cristescu calmly reached over and picked it up, his sharp eyes quickly scanning the words. There was ash in his hair and black soot on his face, showing he'd recently paid a visit to the bomb site at Crimson. He looked tired, and I almost felt bad for throwing this doozy in his lap, but there was nothing else

for it.

“He’s acting a day early,” he said in a low, angry voice.

“Yeah, which means we need to find Roman ASAP.”

“Tegan will have to summon him. She’s still in bed. I’ll go get her.” The vampire stood and left the room. Less than a minute later he returned, looking both angry and panicked.

“She’s gone.”

“Huh?” I said, looking to everyone around the table. “Did Tegan tell any of you she was going out?”

“No,” Amanda spoke up. “But I did see her casting a spell this morning.”

“What kind of spell?” Gabriel asked with suspicion.

“Um, she had an upturned glass on a map and a piece of a scarf under the glass.”

“That was a location spell. She was looking for someone.”

“What did the scarf look like?” Alvie questioned.

“It was red and black, sort of silky.”

Alvie gasped and put his hand to his mouth. “That’s Rita’s. She’s gone after Rita.”

I was about to swear loudly when the front door flew open. I heard feet stumbling weakly down the hallway. A second later, Tegan emerged covered in dirt and blood and looking like she just stepped out of a warzone. Cristescu immediately scooped her up into his arms, asking what happened.

“Rita ...” was all she could manage.

“Yeah, we figured that bit out.”

“She tried to kill me ...” she whispered and then passed out in Cristescu’s arms. He carried her to the kitchen counter, swiping everything out of the way to clear the space. Then he began running his hands over her body to check for injuries. He stopped when he reached her left hand, holding up the index finger.

“This is broken. It will need to be taken care of by a doctor.”

“If you have a First Aid kit, I can see to her,” Alora put in. “I’m a trained first aider, and I used to volunteer at the hospital on the weekends when I was still at school.”

Cristescu gave her a look of approval. “Yes, thank you. I will bring her upstairs. The First Aid kit is on the shelf in the laundry room. Retrieve it and follow me up.”

“What about Theodore’s rally?” I interrupted. “We need to find Roman so that he can cast his spell.”

Before Cristescu could answer, the back door swung open and the sorcerer himself entered. His normally pristine hair and suit were slightly dishevelled.

“I am here,” he said as though he heard every word I just said. “I need volunteers and I need Emilia. She’s the only witch powerful enough that we have at our disposal.”

He noticed Cristescu holding Tegan and walked over, running his hand softly over her face. “Ah, you survived, little one. I knew you would,” he murmured.

Cristescu’s eyes cut to the sorcerer. “You were with her?”

“I was. I got caught up chasing Theodore, and Tegan was left with the witch ...”

“Enough,” Cristescu cut him off, quietly fuming. “We don’t have time for this. Theodore is releasing his chaos onto the city in only an hour. I expect you’re ready to cast your spell?”

“Absolutely. But I will need to release Emilia.”

“So, release her. Just get it done.”

He finally left carrying Tegan. Alora followed behind him with the First Aid kit tucked under her arm. Fifteen minutes later, I was standing in a circle with Gabriel, Alvie, Delilah, Ira, Cristescu, and Emilia. Roman transported us all to Champion Row, where it was now jam-packed with humans gathered for the rally.

The avenue was just how it had been in Alora’s vision. Dread filled my gut as I remembered how the chaos entered the bodies of the humans, killing them on the spot. If Roman wasn’t successful here, then the vast majority of us were as good as dead, including me.

When I looked at Roman, I saw he was holding a huge ball of shimmering red string, energy humming from it. He handed one end of it to Emilia and began instructing everyone else to take hold. When it was my turn, I noticed how he wasn’t just giving me the string, he was magically fusing my hand to it.

“This is a very rare and potently magical material. We are going to use it to create a vein of magic that will run through the gathered crowd. Think of it like an electrical wire. In this case, the ends are the most important parts, and therefore the strongest casters need to be holding them. Those two people are

Emilia and me. Be as inconspicuous as you can; we cannot afford for Theodore to figure out what's happening.

"Emilia will walk to the lower end of the avenue, and I will walk to the top. Once the spell has been cast and Theodore has released his chaos, believing all the humans to be dead, that will be our moment to strike. I will be closest to him, so I will be the one to catch him. Make no mistake, he will have many tricks up his sleeve to get away. That's why it's going to take all of us to kill him. I will cut off his head, and young Gabriel here will douse him with petrol. Mr Roe, I will allow you the honour of setting his body alight."

"I can do that."

Addressing Cristescu, he said, "You will have to restrain the daughter. She could prove troublesome, and you are the only one with the physical strength to outmatch her magic. Get her hands first. If you can keep her from moving them, then she won't be able to use magic against you. You will be beside me in the line." He paused and looked at each of us in turn. "Once I summon the magic, only those holding the string will be able to see it. Any questions?"

We all shook our heads. I was surprised Emilia hadn't put up a fight since she was basically being forced into taking part. Instead, she remained stoically silent. Maybe she was sane enough to realise this was all for the best.

"Very good. Please ensure there is at least thirty yards between you and the person next in line. We need to cover as much ground as possible."

I found myself being the second last person in line next to Emilia. She started to walk swiftly down the street, and I waited a minute or two before following her. I wasn't entirely clear on the details of what Roman planned to do here. I was guessing he simplified it for us just now, but I put my blind faith in him.

With so little time left, we didn't exactly have any other options.

By the time we were all lined up and camouflaged into the gathered crowd, Theodore had stepped out onto the temporary stage that had been set up at the top of the avenue. He stood in front of a microphone and coughed to clear his throat. People cheered when they saw him, shouting praise and declarations of faith. Some even held up banners proclaiming him as their savior.

They'd all been drinking some serious amounts of sorcerer Kool-Aid.

I spotted Rita standing off to the side of the stage wearing a long, flower print dress, her hair in two short pigtails.

The string in my hand started to pulsate.

“Thank you all for coming today,” Theodore said, his voice booming through several speakers that had been set up around the area. “As some of you might be aware, I have taken the liberty of putting together a foundation to fight against the vampires. You are all welcome to join, and there will be sign-up sheets circulated at the end of the rally. Now, before we get down to business, I would like to observe a one-minute silence as a mark of respect to those we have lost in recent weeks. Please, take hold of the hand of the person beside you to signify your solidarity.”

There were hushed whispers of approval among the gathered crowds before they all began to take each other’s hands. I realised Roman had glamoured us all to be invisible because nobody looked at me or tried to take my hand. A ripple vibrated through the string and zipped into my body. I heard Roman chanting in my head now, even though he was halfway up the street. He wasn’t speaking in any language I could understand, but his tone struck a chord. A deep-down part of me sensed that something miraculous was about to happen.

He stood close to the stage, but Theodore couldn’t even see him. If ever there was a case for choosing good over evil, then this was it. Theodore was at least twice Roman’s age, and yet Roman’s magic was potent enough to render himself invisible to the ancient sorcerer.

“Close your eyes, hold your neighbour’s hand, and think of all the lives that have been lost and all the lives that will be saved because of your dedication to this cause.”

The crowds fell silent, and now I could hear Roman’s chanting even louder in my head. My pulse sped up, and it felt like there was electricity shooting from the string and into my body. I felt it intensely, rushing through my system. The red of the string started to glow, and I saw little glittering veins spreading out from it and into the crowd, connecting one person to the next.

Once a person got connected to the string, a bright red glow formulated around their body. This was amazing. My mouth was gaping open as I watched.

My amazement was cut short when the bright morning sky began to darken. I glanced overhead and into the distance to see a black chaos cloud

approaching. Everyone in the crowds had their eyes shut, so they had no clue what was coming their way.

I reminded myself that Roman's string was going to protect them all from dying. They'd go to sleep and wake up at the next sunrise. Turning my head to the stage I saw that Theodore was no longer closing his eyes and faking like he was observing a minute of silence. Now he was staring at the people before him with a sick, twisted smile on his face.

His entire body practically hummed with anticipation. He was getting a kick out of this. He wanted to watch the chaos kill all these people. Soon the mist had blocked out all the light, and I could barely see a thing. It might as well have been the middle of the night. The only way I could see anything at all was because of the glow from the string and the magical veins that connected each person to the one standing next to them.

Just like when I'd been inside Alora's vision, the chaos descended from the sky and invaded the bodies of the humans, slipping into any opening—mouths, ears, eyes. Seconds later, there was a sound I hoped to never hear again. The sound of thousands of bodies dropping lifelessly to the ground.

The black cloud started to abate and drift away, the silence broken only by Theodore's ridiculous cackling. Then I heard someone struggling for breathe close by. Turning my head, I spotted Emilia still holding the string with one hand, she clutched her chest with the other.

Oh, crap. I knew a heart attack when I saw one.

She didn't have the strength left to hold the string any longer. Weakly, she fell to the ground on her hands and knees. Immediately, I felt the magic sail right out of my body, and with it, the glamour that had been hiding us all from view. The line had been broken. I rushed to Emilia and started CPR, while at the same time Theodore wailed in outrage.

“What trickery is this?!”

I looked up from where I was pumping my hands into Emilia's chest and saw Roman advancing on Theodore with a sword. I tried to focus on Emilia, but my gut sank when it became evident that there was nothing more I could do. She was dead. Roman's magic must've been too much for her body to handle.

I brushed some hair away from her aged but still beautiful face and closed her eyelids. That was all the goodbyes I had time for because the others needed me now. Cristescu used his ultra-vampire speed to flash to Rita, pinning her arms behind her back as she struggled and kicked at him to

let her go. She even tried to bite him, snapping her teeth like a feral dog.

“You need to let go of me! You need to let me go!” she screamed, but Cristescu didn’t budge an inch.

Gabriel was holding a can of petrol nearby, waiting for Roman to gain the upper hand with Theodore. Unfortunately, it looked like our hero was failing in that department. Theodore was throwing bolts of magic at him, easily keeping him far enough away so that there was no chance of him using the sword.

Pulling my bow from off my back, I shot an arrow at Theodore, clocking him right in the stomach. It didn’t even make him bleed. The arrow simply popped right out, and I got a blast of magic thrown my way in retaliation. It burned like acid seeping under my skin. The skin on my hand bubbled and spit, and I swore profusely with the pain.

Ira, who had shifted into his canine form, approached Theodore, who was distracted by Roman, from behind and clamped his fangs down into Theodore’s shin. The sorcerer showed minimal signs of discomfort when he winced at the bite. A moment later, he easily kicked Ira away and continued battling Roman.

What a fuckup this was turning out to be.

Theodore raised both his hands in front of him and purple light streamed out, blasting Roman full force and knocking him entirely unconscious. Then he pulled a vial of blood from his pocket and popped open the cork. Bringing it to his mouth, he downed the entire thing in one go.

Oh, gross.

He reached up into the sky, his magic still streaming from his hands. A loud tearing sound erupted as a hole was torn in the clouds. A gigantic, fiery rip was created, and I swore I almost pissed my pants when I saw dark, winged shapes hovering around the outskirts, waiting to come through.

I was willing to bet that was Rebecca’s blood he just drank, and the hole was a portal from hell. This time, though, nobody was being banished there. No, this time whatever was over there was coming here.

“Let. Me. Go!” Rita screeched before finally managing to free one of her hands from Cristescu’s hold. She smacked him hard in the face with magic, and he reeled back long enough for her to get away. I hadn’t noticed before, but she actually had a sword strapped across her shoulders underneath a plain black backpack. She whipped off the sword and went charging to the other side of the stage.

Roman had just now regained his consciousness and was advancing on Theodore, whose satisfied attention was on the ugly tear he created in the sky.

“Come on, my pretties, don’t be shy. There’s a whole world for you to feast on down here,” he sang to the shadowy creatures. I could almost feel them pushing against the thin membrane between our dimension and theirs.

I started to run, thinking I might be able to stop Rita before she got the chance to saw off Roman’s head. I wasn’t fast enough though, and she rushed easily by me. The sorcerer was our final hope and now he might as well be done for. The little witch leapt up into the air, the sword held high above her head. I could hardly look as the blade came within inches of Roman, but instead of swinging it his way, she changed direction and sliced right through Theodore’s neck.

We all froze, staring at Rita in shock and awe. Rita cut her father’s head clean off, and for a second, or maybe even a minute, my brain was too discombobulated to figure out what just happened.

Rita decapitated her father.

The second his head hit the stage floor, the tear in the sky closed, and the creatures that had almost broken through completely disappeared. White fluffy clouds filled the sky once more.

We all gaped at Rita, dumbfounded, as she let her sword fall to the ground and pulled off the backpack. She didn’t look at a single one of us as she zipped it open, took out a can of petrol, and began dousing Theodore’s head and body.

I heard the shake of a box of matches just before she whipped one out, struck it alight, and flung it at her father’s corpse. It caught fire instantly and went up in a mesmerising display of purple and black flames.

Tegan
Three hours earlier

I blinked my eyes, knowing I felt way too shitty to be dead—unless by some sick twist of fate I’d ended up in hell. I peered around myself and discovered that no, I wasn’t in hell. I was still lying flat down in the mud, my neck sore and swollen from almost being choked to death.

I heard sobbing coming from nearby. Weakly, I pulled myself up to a sitting position and spotted Rita a few feet away, her arms around her knees

as she cradled them to her chest. She was quietly weeping, tears running down her face. The last thing I remembered was that same face looking at me with pure hatred. Now there was nothing left but sadness.

I shifted my body a fraction, and her eyes whipped to mine.

“Not another move, Tegan.”

“Rita ... I ...”

“I said, *not another move.*”

“Okay, I won’t move.”

She looked away from me then and wiped her eyes with the long sleeves of her dress. Both our clothes were completely destroyed with grass and dirt. I felt like I’d simultaneously been punched in the throat and swallowed a bag of sand.

“Why didn’t you finish me off?” I asked in a sore, raspy voice.

She didn’t answer me for a very long time, then all I got was, “I don’t know.”

“You must know. What made you stop?”

“I said I don’t fucking know. Now will you please just shut up?”

I reached up and rubbed at my bruised neck, which was when I noticed there was something wrong with my hand. The index finger was hanging limply, and I couldn’t seem to move it. My body must have gone into shock and blocked out the pain for a time because now my entire hand was screaming in agony. I sucked in a sharp, hissing breath and tried to focus through the pain.

“You broke my finger.”

“You got lucky then.”

“Rita, I know why you stopped. You stopped because you couldn’t bear to kill someone who’s your friend. No matter how much you try to convince yourself you’re evil, you know it’s not true. You know that Theodore is a madman, and I’m sorry to have to tell you this, but even though he’s your biological parent, you’re nothing like him.”

Talking seemed to be distracting me from my effed-up finger, so I kept going.

“Even now when I look at you, I see Noreen. I see her in your eyes and your hair. I see her in your face. She will always be a part of you, a far bigger part because she’s the one who brought you into this world and she’s the one who raised you. Theodore is no better than a passing sperm donor, and you know it.”

I didn't feel like I'd gotten through to her, and I didn't know what else to say. But then, Rita spoke quietly, "If that's true, then how come every time I look in the mirror all I see is him? All I see is a lost cause."

"If you were a lost cause, you would have killed me, but you didn't. The good in you stopped you from following through with it."

"I can't find the good."

Summoning my courage, I got up on my hands and knees and crawled to her. She didn't tell me not to move like before. Instead, she waited patiently for me to get to her.

"I can help you find it," I whispered, kneeling before her now. Her eyes lifted to mine, and there was a trickle of hope within their watery, tear reddened depths.

"Okay, then. Help me," she said, her voice barely audible.

"First you need to kill the darkness."

"How?"

"By killing the person you think put it there. You have to kill Theodore."

Her eyes widened in disbelief. "I can't do that. You don't understand how powerful he is. I've spent time with him. The magic he possesses is unfathomable."

"That doesn't matter. Everybody has a weak spot, and I think you just might be his. He'll never expect you to be the one who kills him. You have the element of surprise on your side."

"Element of surprise or not. I don't know *how* to kill him, Tegan."

"Ah, but I do," I said, pulling off my backpack and Ethan's sword. "I have everything you need right here."

It took only a minute or so to explain to her what I needed her to do. We both rose to our feet, and I took her into my arms, hugging her tightly. This might be a tentative arrangement, but I allowed myself a small measure of hope.

The second we broke the hug she disappeared and I cursed. Theodore must have shown her how to magically transport herself, while I was left here in the middle of nowhere.

Shoving my hand in my pocket, I retrieved my phone only to find the screen had been cracked in several places from our earlier scuffle.

Great.

I stared out at the long stretch of empty field ahead of me and knew I

had a long walk back to Ethan's. Fingers crossed I didn't pass out before I got there.

19.

Finn

Stunned, the silence went on for forever as we watched Rita do away with Theodore's remains.

The silence was broken, however, when Cristescu asked incredulously, "Is that *my* sword?"

I couldn't help but burst out laughing. Then Gabriel and Alvie joined in. Soon enough, we were all cracking up. Our relief at having escaped a full-scale apocalypse by the skin of our teeth came out in uncontrollable laughter.

Once the flames died down and there was nothing left of Theodore but a pile of ash, Rita looked to Cristescu and answered, "The sword is probably yours, yes. Tegan gave it to me."

"Hold on a second. Tegan was in on this?" I questioned. That crafty little mare.

Rita nodded and sat down on the edge of the stage. "We fought. I was going to kill her, but I realised I couldn't do it. That's when we made a deal. She said she'd help me find the old me, but first I had to kill Theodore because he was the one pulling me into the dark."

I walked over and tentatively sat down beside her, throwing my arm around her shoulders. She tensed for a moment but soon relaxed into it. "I don't think you need any help. I think the old you was there all along, you just didn't know it."

Her nod was almost imperceptible. A minute or two later, Alvie approached and sat down on the other side of Rita.

"Reet," he choked out, and she turned her head to him.

I wasn't sure what she was going to do, but she pulled away from me and wrapped her arms around Alvie's small frame, squeezing him tight. They both started crying. The others joined us to sit on the edge of the stage, a sea of bodies before us.

"There are going to be many changes in this city," Cristescu said, a solemn but determined sound to his voice.

Nobody replied, but we all knew it was true.

It was certainly a surreal feeling to look down and see thousands of people lying prone on the ground, a charade of death. When we were kids, my sister's favourite fairytale was Sleeping Beauty. Right now, I was looking at thousands of sleeping beauties. I hoped that, just like the princess, they were all going to wake up soon.

It was a few minutes before sunrise. I'd brought Alora with me up onto the roof of a department store on Champion Row, so we could watch and wait for everyone to come back to life.

Apparently, I'd been right about Emilia's heart giving out because of the magic from Roman's spell. Now that she was dead, her barrier around the city had also been lifted.

Ira wore a strange expression when he heard what had happened to her. It was more like sadness than the relief I'd expected. I guessed that, despite what she'd done to him, he'd started to feel sorry for the lonely old woman she'd become in the end.

Tegan also seemed a little taken aback by the news of Emilia's death. Her eyes grew watery and she left the room when we told her. Later on, Rita put together one of her special healing salves for my hand, which Theodore had burned with his magic. Now it was already good as new.

I looked down at Roman as he walked through the bodies, a delicate silver light streaming out of his hand and touching off each person in turn. This was to ensure that they forgot everything that had happened in Tribane over the last few weeks. The memory cleanse would pass from person to person, until at last there would be no human left in the city who remembered the horrors of recent weeks. Well, except for me and Alvie. Roman had given us both an antidote to the memory cleanse so that we could remember.

I'd use the memories to fuel me to help bring about peace. I never wanted anything like this to take hold of Tribane ever again.

A year ago, I never would have condoned the act of keeping people in the dark, but now I knew there was no other way. If they knew the truth, they'd all go crazy and start following some other cult leader in much the same way they'd started to follow Theodore.

I wrapped my arms around Alora's soft, curvy waist and rested my chin on her shoulder. The dark started to ebb away as the sun rose over the skyscrapers of the city. There was a sweet, musical sound from Roman's magic as the people started to wake up.

Getting to their feet, they yawned, rubbed at their eyes, scratched their

heads, and completely ignored the bizarre fact that they'd all been asleep right there in the middle of the street. As Alora's eyes were scanning the people below, she tensed in my arms.

"Finn, I think I just spotted my parents. Come on, I have to go to them."

My heart stuttered as she pulled away from me. "Wait, Goldy. They haven't seen you in over two years. Perhaps this isn't the right time."

"I'm not waiting," she answered before hurrying to the stairway that led back down onto the street. I followed her, trying to figure out why I felt so dejected. Was it because deep down I worried she wouldn't need me anymore once she got her family back?

Maybe.

Down on the street, I stayed far behind as she raced to her parents. Her mother was blonde just like her, but her father was a tall, brown-haired man. I stood back and watched her, my heart sinking further until I thought it might just plunk down into my boots.

Her mother started to cry when she saw her, and she pulled her daughter into her arms. I looked at her dad and saw that there were tears in his eyes, too. He put his arms around his wife and daughter both. A bittersweet family reunion.

Alora hadn't once looked back to see if I was still here. I turned around, thinking I'd leave her with them. There was no danger to her anymore now that Ridley was dead, and Theodore, too. Just as I was about to start walking away though, I heard her call my name.

"Finn, come and meet my parents."

Taking in a deep breath, I turned back around. Perhaps she did still need me after all.

As it turned out, Alora's parents had fled their home and were staying with friends because they got frightened when the vampire attacks started happening.

Their names were Tom and Beena, and I started to become uncomfortable at how profusely they thanked me for keeping their daughter safe. Beena was a full elf and Tom was human. When we got back to their house and they saw how trashed the place was, they assumed it had been broken into, and Tom started making calls to their insurance company.

Alora came and sat down on my lap in the living room while her mother tried to salvage what she could from the kitchen to make us all a cup of tea.

“So, I guess this means I’m losing you,” I said in a low voice as I caressed her thigh. I’d never get tired of touching her.

She startled when I said it and turned to look at me. “What do you mean?”

“Well, you’ve got your folks back. Ridley’s dead. You’re safe. You don’t need me anymore.”

“Finn, I—”

“It’s okay. I see how you look at them. You’ve missed them like crazy. I can understand that you’ll want to stay here. If I could have gotten my mother and sister back, I’d want to spend every second I had with them, too.”

“Finn, just stop. Yes, I’ll be living with my parents, but that doesn’t mean you’re losing me. God, I mean, after all we’ve been through, after all we’ve spoken about, how could you think that? I’ve seen our future, and in that future, we’re together.”

I shrugged and tightened my jaw. I’d never been good with emotional crap.

She pulled my face to hers so that her mouth was above my ear when she whispered, “I’ve fallen in love with you. I want to be with you for the rest of my life, you silly man.”

Something caught in my throat, causing me to swallow hard. “What?”

“I said, I love you,” she answered, eyes looking back and forth between mine with uncertainty as though waiting for something. Then, like a sledgehammer, it hit me.

She was waiting for me to say it back.

It took me a couple of seconds to find my voice. “Shit, isn’t it obvious that I love you, too? I can hardly keep my eyes off you when you walk into a room.”

She giggled and rested her head in the crook of my neck. “Well, that wasn’t the most romantic way for you to declare your love for me, Finn, but at least you said it. I was beginning to think it was all one-sided.”

I cupped her cheek in my hand, pulling her mouth to mine and kissing her long and deep. A warm, foreign sensation spread through my chest. I’d been on my own for so long that I forgot how it felt to have someone. To belong to them unequivocally.

We were interrupted by the sound of her mother stepping into the room

and clearing her throat. Beena's eyes danced as she took in the two of us together, and I was relieved that she approved of my relationship with her daughter. Now I only had her father to contend with.

Beena set the cups and teapot down on the coffee table that had managed to survive getting damaged when the house was trashed. Tom returned, shoving his mobile phone into his pocket and rubbing at the stress lines on his forehead.

"Well, that's all taken care of. They're sending someone out to inspect the damage tomorrow."

"That's good, love," Beena said, pouring the tea.

Tom's eyes narrowed when he noticed Alora sitting on my lap. Embarrassed, she quickly scooted off and sat on the other side of the sofa. I wanted to smile, but I held it in. We made polite chit chat for a couple of minutes, and I almost spilled my tea everywhere when Beena let out a loud gasp. Turning my head, I found that Alora was having another vision, her body going into convulsions.

I pulled her into my arms and waited for the shakes to ride out.

"It frightens me every time this happens to her," Beena said with an anxious expression. Tom rubbed his wife's shoulders to calm her down.

"You don't get visions like Alora does?" I asked Beena a couple of minutes into the episode. Alora's convulsions were still going strong.

She shook her head. "No. I'm an empath. I read people's emotions."

"Oh."

"I can see the depth of your affection for her. I'm glad she's found someone that feels the way you do about her."

Just before I got the chance to ask what she saw in Alora's feelings for me, the woman in my arms stopped shaking and blinked open her eyes.

"Hey, Goldy," I said softly. "You okay?"

She nodded and sat up, asking her mother for a glass of water. I rubbed her back and whispered soothing reassurances in her ear.

"I think we need to go and see Tegan," she told me after she downed the water her mother got for her.

I furrowed my brow. "Why?"

"Because I saw something about her baby."

Tegan

“What do you think?” I asked Rita as we both sat in the back of Ethan’s new car. We were parked on the road outside her house. Construction had just been started to repair the damage done by the fire all those weeks ago.

“Well, it’ll certainly beat living in that RV. I might be a small woman, but even I need my space.”

“The house should be as good as new within a couple of months,” Ethan said from the front.

“Oh, before I forget, I want you to look at these spell ingredients,” I said, pulling out the list Emilia gave me before she died. “Emilia said that if I take this every morning and night my baby will survive the birth. Was she telling the truth?”

Rita took the list from me and looked it over. “Hmm, there’s nothing suspicious looking on here. It should be alright for you to take it.”

I sighed in relief. “That’s good news.”

“It looks like your dear *bunică* did one kind thing for you before she died,” Ethan said.

A tiny trickle of grief settled in my belly. Now that she was gone, I regretted some of the things I said to her when she was alive. I knew she was hardly going to be getting any Grandmother of the Year awards, but maybe I could have tried harder to have a friendship with her.

“Yeah, I guess she did,” I finally replied.

We spent another few minutes watching the builders work on Rita’s house before my stomach started to rumble. Ethan chuckled affectionately. “Sounds like somebody’s hungry.”

“I’m starving,” I admitted. “And do you know what I’d love right now?”

“Tell me, and your wish is my command.”

“The biggest, greasiest, unhealthiest cheeseburger we can find,” I said.

“Oh, I could definitely go for a burger, too,” Rita agreed.

“So, it’s settled then,” Ethan said before he started the engine and pulled away from the side of the road.

I broke my personal record when I managed to stuff my face with three huge burgers. Rita and Ethan watched me eat in amazement. The funny thing about being pregnant with a dhampir baby was that you could eat and eat and you hardly ever felt full. The energy was burned up too quickly.

We arrived back at the house just after lunchtime and found Alora and Finn waiting for us in the living room. Everybody moved out of Ethan's yesterday and went back to their own homes now that the danger was gone, so I wasn't sure what they were doing here.

"Alora had a vision about you," Finn said as I took a seat. Ethan perched himself on the armrest beside me, rubbing soothing circles into my back.

I looked at Alora expectantly, and she began to speak. "It wasn't actually about her, Finn," she corrected him before focusing on me. "It was about your baby."

Instinctively, my hand went to my stomach, where a round bump had started to grow.

"Remember when I said I saw you in the future with a little blonde girl who would one day rule Tribane?"

"Yes," I replied, my heartbeat speeding up.

"Well, it was your daughter. She's the one from my vision. I was right when I felt like she hadn't been born yet."

My eyes flicked to Ethan's and then back to Alora. "So, you saw me with her, does that mean we're both going to survive?"

"If my vision was correct, yes."

"What do you mean 'if'?" Ethan questioned.

She coughed to clear her throat. "Sometimes I see things in the form of warnings. So, if a certain sequence of events comes to pass that's what will happen. I had a vision a couple of days ago where Theodore released his chaos on the city and the humans died as he'd planned. But in reality, Roman intervened and that didn't happen. In your case, I'm guessing that if the both of you survive, your baby will become a ruler one day. If you don't, then something else will happen instead."

"But it's highly likely your vision is correct, right?"

"Yes. My visions have come to pass as I see them more often than not," she said reassuringly.

Somehow though, I wasn't as reassured as I wanted to be. Ever since I found out I was pregnant, there'd been a sense of dread at the back of my mind, a feeling that this was the beginning of the end for me.

But maybe that was just me, always looking for the negative as opposed to the positive.

"You're tired," Ethan said, cutting through my morbid thoughts. "Let me bring you upstairs for a nap."

I nodded and let him lead me from the room after I thanked Alora for being truthful with me on what she saw. I wanted to be realistic about this. I didn't want anybody giving me false hope.

When we reached our room, Ethan pulled back the sheets, ordering me to strip off.

"I thought I was taking a nap," I replied flirtatiously.

He smirked. "That was the plan, but if you have something else in mind, I'm all for it."

All of a sudden, I had just the remedy to take my mind off my troubles. I pulled my T-shirt over my head, but what I intended to look suave and sexy just ended up being awkward, since I was wearing a splint on my broken finger. Ethan had a human doctor come to the house and fix it up for me, seeing as how I was cut in a few places and he couldn't trust a vampire not to get all lusty at the scent of my blood.

Deep chuckling rumbled out of Ethan's chest, and I scowled at him when I finally got my top off. His chuckling ceased when he got a load of my lacey bra, which quickly became my lack of a bra when I reached around with my good hand and unclipped it.

Less than a second later, his face was in my breasts, nuzzling tenderly. He scooped me off my feet and laid me carefully on the bed. Before he would have thrown me down roughly, but not now. Now he handled me as gently as he would a snowflake he didn't want to crumble.

When we finally got all our clothes off and he sank himself into me deep, I threw my head back and closed my eyes. His lips traced a path along my neck, sending tingles shooting down my spine.

"I love you, Ethan," I whispered almost incoherently.

His hips move in and out, his body like a solid work of art.

"I love you, too, *lumina mea*," he answered fiercely, cradling my face in his hands, his eyes tracing my every feature as he made love to me tender and slow.

20.

Tegan

I woke up hours later in Ethan's arms, his fingers running affectionately through strands of my hair.

"When you're up to it, could you tell Rita I want to talk to her privately in my study?" Ethan asked, sensing I was awake.

"Sure. What's it about?"

"You'll find out soon enough."

"Cryptic much?"

He only smiled in answer, knowing I hated being left in the dark about things. I stretched my body out and rose from the bed, rummaging for some clothes from the wardrobe and throwing them on haphazardly. I found Rita in the living room, flicking through the stations on Ethan's flatscreen television.

"His lordship would like a private word with you in his study," I told her, leaning against the doorframe.

Her eyes widened as she clicked a button on the remote and the screen went blank. "Oh, yeah? Do you know why?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. He's being all Johnny Tight Lips about it," I replied sulkily.

Rita laughed and stood up. "Well, I'd better go and see what it is then. Promise to tell you all the deets when we're done." She winked and disappeared from the room. And I mean she *actually* disappeared. Show-off.

That was definitely going to take some getting used to.

In the kitchen, I find a box of Turkish Delight, the fancy kind that was dusted in powdered sugar. I sat up on the countertop and popped one into my mouth. The house felt way too empty now that everyone but Rebecca had gone. Ethan grudgingly accepted that Delilah would live in the old house across the street from Finn's place, and I was glad for her because I knew she'd been dying to have some independence.

Ethan also released Marcel from the basement, but only to exile him from the city. He told him that if he ever stepped foot in Tribane again, he'd be killed on the spot. Marcel just seemed grateful to be let out of the basement, agreeing that he would be gone before the day was through. Ethan told him he had three hours. Marcel didn't argue.

There was a knock at the front door, so I jumped down off the counter to answer it, glad for the distraction. I couldn't stop thinking about what Ethan might be discussing with Rita. When I opened the door, I found all my friends camped out on the step waiting to be let in.

"Uh, what are you all doing here?" I asked, stepping aside so that they could get by me.

"Cristescu told us to come for a meeting. He said he has something important to discuss with us," Finn explained.

"Well, well, well, isn't this all very intriguing," I replied, folding my arms across my chest. I noticed Alora standing next to Finn, his arm tight around her waist, and I gave her a warm smile. I sensed that whatever there was between those two, it was serious. Definitely not a casual fling.

The living room was a riot of curious chatter, and I went to grab some drinks for everyone while we waited. Lucas followed me to the kitchen to help.

"So," I said, eyeing him shrewdly. "You and Amanda, huh?"

"Is that a statement or a question?" he asked, his lips curving in a smile.

"It's a question and you know it."

He sighed and shook his head. "Yes, Tegan. We are an item, but I'm taking it slow. I plan on making this work."

I pointed an unopened beer bottle at him. "You'd better."

His grin widened as I continued taking drinks out of the fridge. I grinned right back at him. I had no way of predicting whether he and my friend would live happily ever after, but at least I had the reassurance of knowing Amanda drank my potion, so if Lucas did end up biting her, he'd be in for a big surprise.

I patted him on the shoulder. "Come on, then. Help me bring these drinks inside."

"Happy to oblige."

About twenty minutes later, Ethan and Rita emerged from the study. Rita bounced on the balls of her feet like she couldn't contain her excitement while Ethan was his usual, unreadable self. He stood by the fireplace, and Rita took the spot beside him.

"We have an announcement to make," Ethan said. "I have come to realise that this city cannot go on any longer with a divided population. Having two opposing sides living in such close proximity to each other is a disaster just waiting to happen."

“A ticking time bomb about to explode,” Rita elaborated. When she was met with silence, she added, “What? Is it too early for bomb jokes?”

“Hey, you killed Theodore for us. You can make all the inappropriate jokes you want,” Finn said with a soft chuckle.

“So,” Ethan continued, “I have come to the realisation that we need to be united, vampires, dhampirs, witches, warlocks, and all other supernatural species who dwell here. That is why I have sought out Rita. For now, I want to share my position as ruler with her. Over time, we will create a council with a representative from each supernatural grouping, with the aim of making decisions and living in harmony together.”

Oh. I stared at Ethan, open-mouthed, and to be honest, pleasantly surprised. I knew he was never a huge fan of ruling, but I didn’t expect him to want to divide the role like this. I never even considered the idea of combining forces, of creating a council. A sort of supernatural government, if you will, but it made perfect sense.

“Sounds like a good idea to me,” Finn said enthusiastically.

“And me,” Lucas added, while everyone else made noises of approval.

“The city is in a state of disarray right now,” Ethan went on. “We need to rebuild, and once stability has been secured, we endeavour to create the council. Since vampires and the magical families have the largest numbers, we will start with a leader for each. Once we have brought about some semblance of unity, we can branch out to include the other minorities.”

“I don’t mean to throw a spanner in the works, but will the magical families even want to follow Rita?” Alvie asked tentatively. “Not too long ago they all shunned her as a wannabe witch.”

“But that is not what she is,” Ethan countered. “She’s a Girard, and now that Marcel has been exiled, she’s one of the few remaining members of that bloodline. They know that she killed Theodore to restore peace, and they are also aware of the power she wields. They will have no choice but to accept her.”

“Well, if you ask me this is the best plan for everyone,” Delilah spoke up. “I don’t think it’s going to be easy trying to make the city whole, but I do think we have to try. Otherwise, there will be another war before the year is through.”

“Thank you, sister,” Ethan said before addressing all of us. “The new Tribane starts here in this room. We, as a group, represent the vast majority of supernatural species living in the city, so if we can agree to this plan then it

is a good omen for what is to come.”

A very short silence elapsed before I stepped up and hugged Rita and then Ethan. “You have my vote.”

“And mine,” Alvie said.

“Mine, too,” Gabriel added.

Soon everybody was agreeing to Ethan’s plan and more drinks were brought out to celebrate. Obviously, I stuck to orange juice, but it filled me with a deep sense of joy to see everyone getting along. Whenever I used to think of this city, I saw it as place that would always be immersed in turmoil. But now I saw light at the end of the tunnel. I saw how this might work.

A band of worry that had been tight around my heart released and a feeling of hope replaced it.

Pulling myself from my thoughts, I left the room where my friends were celebrating to go and make an important phone call. I locked myself in Ethan’s study and took a seat at his desk. Earlier today, I looked up the phone number to the care facility where I suspected Rebecca’s mother was living. It was a group home for people with mental illness called Maplewood House.

The phone rang several times before a prim female voice answered, “Maplewood House?”

“Hi, um, I’m looking for a resident living with you there. A Felicity Pamphrock?”

There was a long silence before the woman replied, “She stopped going by Pamphrock many years ago.”

“Oh, right. Well, can I speak to her?”

“Are you a family member?”

“No, I’m an old friend,” I lied.

The woman sucked in a breath and let it out. Her voice was soft and consoling when she said, “I’m afraid Felicity died just over a week ago. She ... she took her own life.”

I gasped, a heavy brick sinking to the bottom of my stomach.

“I’m so sorry. We had a small funeral for her, and she was buried in the local graveyard. We couldn’t trace any of her family. The only person who would visit her was her ex-husband, but we couldn’t seem to get into contact with him at all.”

That was because he was dead, too, I thought sadly. Now poor little Rebecca had no one. I thanked the woman and hung up, nervously fidgeting with a pen on Ethan’s desk. What was I going to do?

I agonised over the choices. Either I sent her away as Ethan planned to, have her raised in safety by people who were strangers to her, or ... I could raise her myself. Was I ready for that? Was I mature enough to take on the role of parenting a young girl?

As if sending me a sign that I was already destined for motherhood, I felt my baby kick for the very first time, and I sucked in a surprised breath. My bump was still tiny, only slightly protruding, but I guessed this wasn't a normal pregnancy. Babies weren't supposed to kick until much longer down the line, so maybe I imagined it?

A moment later, it happened again, and I knew I didn't imagine it this time. Instinctively, I closed my eyes and called on my magic. A soft white glow emanated from my hand, and I ran it over my stomach, soothing her. Since Alora told me of her vision, I more or less knew I was having a girl. The kicking sensation became more distinct now, and I laughed in surprise.

"What do you think, little peapod, would you like a big sister when you come into the world?"

She kicked again.

"Okay," I chuckled. "I'll take that as a yes."

"Are you talking to the baby?" a voice asked, and I lifted my head to find Ethan standing in the doorway, his eyes all soft and melty as he took me in.

"She's kicking," I told him, my voice full of awe.

Milliseconds later, he was kneeling down on the floor in front of me and putting his hands over my belly. Another kick came, and Ethan's face transformed with happiness.

"I felt that one."

"It's crazy. I'm not even that far gone."

"You're thinking about this in human terms. Since you're only going to be pregnant for three months, give or take, you are much further along than you think."

"Oh. Wow."

"Yes, wow," Ethan beamed and pulled my face to his for a kiss.

I broke it saying, "I need to ask you something."

"Ask me anything."

"Okay ... what do you think about Rebecca living with us, like, permanently?"

"I think that's a big decision. What happened to you finding her birth

mother?”

I shook my head sadly. “That’s a dead end.”

There was understanding in Ethan’s gaze when he replied, “She can stay with us then.”

I glanced up quickly. “You mean it?”

“Of course, I mean it.”

Without thinking, I threw my arms around his neck, hugging him as tightly as I possibly could. “Thank you,” I whispered, emotion catching in my throat before I quietly continued, “And if I don’t survive the birth, you’ll still keep her with you, right?”

His eyes grew dark and intense when he replied, “You’re going to survive.”

“Just promise me, Ethan, for my peace of mind.”

A sigh. “Alright, I promise.” A stretch of silence elapsed. “Our little family is growing bigger by the day.”

“That it is. And so is my belly,” I joked to break the tension.

“Come back out and celebrate with us?”

“I will. I just need a few more minutes in here. I’m still in shock that the baby kicked.”

“Alright, call me if you need anything.”

“I will.”

I wanted to go and tell Rebecca the good news, but that could wait until later. Right now, I just wanted to savour this feeling of contentment. For the next few minutes, I rubbed my hands over my belly, even though the kicking had stopped. I imagined her closing her eyes and taking a nap, exhausted from all the activity.

I got a momentary fright when my phone buzzed on the desk. Picking it up, I found Edwards’s name on the screen. I answered straight away.

“Edwards? Is everything all right with Dad?”

“Hi, honey,” a voice spoke softly, a voice I haven’t heard properly in too long.

“Dad?” I whispered.

“It’s me,” he replied, his voice low and full of emotion.

“Are you ... are you okay? I mean, are you better now?”

He coughed. “Just about. I feel like I’ve woken up from a really bad nightmare.”

His answer made me smile. “Maybe you should just pretend that’s what

it was. It would probably be easier to comprehend that way.”

“Yes, I think I just might do that,” he said, and there was a smile in his voice now, too.

“It’s so good to hear you speak,” I said in a rapid gush. “I’ve been worried sick.”

“I’m sorry about everything that happened, about never telling you who your mother really was until it was too late.”

“You don’t need to apologise. I’m just so happy you’re feeling better.”

“I can’t wait to see you. Edwards says I’ll be ready to go home soon.”

“That’s brilliant news,” I beamed, my heart lifting at the prospect of seeing Dad. He’d probably even be here for the birth of the baby, which I decided I’d wait to tell him about until he was feeling a little better. I didn’t want him worrying about whether or not I’d survive the birth while he was still in recovery.

After another couple of minutes of talking, I hung up the phone and sat back in the chair. It really felt like everything was coming full circle today.

“That was rather touching, even if I do say so myself,” came a familiar voice from the far corner of the room. I turned in my seat to find Roman leaning against the side of some bookshelves.

“Yeah,” I said, unsure as to what he was doing here. “That was my dad. He’s fully recovered.”

“I gathered as much,” he replied and walked over to me, perching himself on the edge of the desk. “I hope you haven’t forgotten our agreement.”

I swallowed. “No, of course not.”

“Very good,” he said before handing me a piece of paper folded in half. “Here are instructions for the spell I promised you.”

I took the paper, staring down at it. With this spell, Ethan would be able to feed from me and *only* me. My heart shimmered with a sense of possession. “Thank you. This means a lot.”

“No need to thank me. Your training begins tomorrow.”

“So soon?”

“The sooner the better. If you’re going to stand at the side of a ruler you will need all the power you can get.”

“I guess you’re right.” I looked him dead in the eye now, and there was a sparkle of excitement in his gaze. He was really looking forward to this, and as I watched him, some of the excitement began to rub off on me, too. I

had no idea what being a sorceress was going to entail, but the endless possibilities filled me with a thrilling sense of anticipation.

“Hey, Tegan, I was looking for you,” came Rita’s voice as she entered the room.

Roman turned to appraise her, and she stared at him coolly. “Oh, you again,” she said casually.

“Hello, little witch. It is a pleasure, as always.”

Rita cocked an eyebrow and snickered. “Whatever. Tegan, are you coming back out, or do you plan on staying in here all night?”

“Come and join us,” Roman said. “I think you might be interested in what we are discussing.”

“Oh, yeah?” She folded her arms and closed the door, walking deeper into the room and stopping a couple of feet in front of Roman.

Roman looked at Rita for a long moment, and if I wasn’t mistaken, he seemed to be undressing her with his eyes. Rita’s casual demeanour faltered a little as she cleared her throat. Then Roman turned to me, “Tegan, how would you feel about having a classmate?”

It took me a second to get what he was saying. “You mean you want to teach Rita, too?”

“Teach me what?”

“Teach you how to become a sorceress,” Roman explained.

“Oh,” Rita said, her eyes growing round. Gone was the sassy attitude as interest marked her features.

“I think it’s a great idea,” I put in. “It will be less scary than going it alone.”

“Yeah, it is a great idea, but how do we know he’s not up to something?”

“It’s always good to be suspicious.” Roman gave an approving nod. “But I assure you, I have no ulterior motives. I simply wish to pass my knowledge on. I’m not like other sorcerers, and I’m sick of keeping my powers all to myself. I feel it’s time for a change, and I want to share.”

There was a long stretch of silence as she mulled it over.

“I’ll give you a month. If I decide it’s not for me, then I can back out any time before the month is up,” Rita said. “Deal?”

Roman smiled widely and held out his hand for her to shake it. “Deal.”

Hesitantly, Rita stepped forward and took his hand. They shook for a moment, and then all of a sudden, Roman tugged Rita into him and captured

her mouth in a passionate kiss.

Well, that was unexpected.

She struggled for a minute but then sighed and submitted. I knew I should probably turn away, but I couldn't seem to stop watching them.

Finally, they broke their kiss, and Roman lifted her hand to place one last peck on the inside of her wrist. "I very much look forward to training you, little witch," he said with hot, smoky eyes.

Rita looked from him to me as though this was the first time in her entire life she'd been completely speechless.

"Until tomorrow, my lovelies," Roman bid us goodbye and vanished from the room.

Rita looked like she was still in shock as she slumped bonelessly down into a chair. After a minute or two passed, she said, "Did that really just happen?"

I chuckled. "Yes. Roman can be very, um ... friendly."

"You can say that again," she said and groaned, throwing her hand over her face in annoyance.

"What's wrong?"

"That man is going to be serious trouble, Tegan."

"Serious trouble to your knickers, you mean," I replied, still laughing.

"Yeah," she said, exasperated. "That's exactly what I meant."

I walked to her and pulled her up from the chair, throwing my arm around her shoulders and leading her out of the room.

"Let him be trouble, Rita. You deserve a little fun."

She scowled at me but there was the faintest hint of a smile tugging at her lips. "Yeah, maybe I do."

Two and a half months later...

I never considered how much quicker vampires could build stuff compared to humans. In a matter of days, the bomb site at Crimson was cleared, the remains of the building knocked down, and a whole new and completely different structure was built in its place.

Now the spot where vampires and humans used to spend their time dancing and getting drunk had been transformed into a round, dome-like

building. Ethan and Rita put their minds together and came up with The Hawthorn Centre, named after the river that once separated the city into two halves. It was where they would form their future council consisting of a representative from each supernatural species.

There had been surprisingly little resistance to this new plan, mostly because everyone was glad that the fighting had finally come to an end. Tonight vampires, magical family members, and all other varieties of supernatural creatures gathered at the river to throw white lotus flowers into the water as a symbol of peace.

I thought it was beautiful.

I stood beside Ethan and my dad, who had returned home several weeks ago, and watched as the witches and warlocks lit the river up with their magic to make it look as though the flowers were glowing.

Now a big party was being thrown at the Hawthorn Centre, and the entire street had been closed off to accommodate for the crowd of people. I sat at a table with Ethan while everyone got drunk and merry around me. I even invited Florence and her boyfriend, Frank, to attend, glad to see their relationship was still going strong.

On the other side of the table, Rita and Roman bounced off one another as Roman flirted and Rita tried her best to resist his charms. Gabriel and Alvie were dancing like they were having the time of their lives. Finn and Alora were dancing, too, all slow and romantic even though the music being played was fast. They smiled into each other's eyes like they were the only two people in the entire world. Delilah sat atop Ira's lap, feeding him hors d'oeuvres. Beside them were Amanda and Lucas, and I was so relieved to see them doing well. Amanda had never looked happier.

I saw all of my friends around me, happy and looking to the future. So why did I feel so sad? I felt as though I could be seeing them for the very last time, but that didn't make any sense. Ethan pulled me from my thoughts when he took my hand into his, rubbing tender circles into the centre of my palm.

"You haven't touched your crab," he said, his deep voice resonating through me.

"Is that what it is?" I said, trying to sound light-hearted. "I thought it was chicken."

"What's wrong? You seem on edge."

"I'm not. I just have this bad feeling."

He took both my hands into his now and looked me right in the eye, his expression serious. “Nothing bad is going to happen, Tegan. You’ve lived with uncertainty for so long that you’re uncomfortable with stability. Your life is going to be good and safe from now on.”

“Yeah, you’re right. I’m just one of those glass half empty kind of girls, always looking for the catch.”

Ethan shushed me, taking my fork and lifting some crab to my mouth. “Eat and enjoy the party, Sunshine.”

I nodded and dug into my food. Finn and Alora returned to the table, Gabriel and Alvie following closely behind them. They were all laughing about something, but Gabriel looked unamused.

“Hey,” Finn said teasingly, his hands raised in the air. “Whatever raises your flag.”

“It’s not that weird,” Gabriel muttered in annoyance.

“What’s not that weird?” Rita asked.

“We were talking about poor old Marcel,” Alvie replied. “Gabe thinks he was attractive.”

“I just think he had a handsome face and an alright body for his age. Jesus, you’re making too much of a big deal out of it,” Gabriel grumbled.

“Eww, that’s gross,” Rita said, scrunching up her nose. “I don’t even want to think about what the two of you got up to when you spent so much time cooped up in Indigo together.”

Gabriel shook his head and sighed in exasperation. “I should never have opened my mouth.”

Alvie gave him a peck on the cheek. “It’s okay, Gabe. I still love you, even if you do have a penchant for wrinkly old men.”

Gabriel blushed and looked away, keeping his attention on the wine glass in front of him. Everyone at the table started laughing, all except for Ethan. His attention was focused completely on me, and there was a startling look of horror in his eyes. I followed his gaze to the lap of my pale silk dress to see it wasn’t so pale anymore. Now it was covered in deep, red blood.

I lifted my hand to my mouth in shock, a soundless gasp rushing from my lips, and that was when the pain hit me. Pure, undiluted agony shattered through my body, causing me to cry out. I was vaguely aware of the vampires nearby and how their eyes came alive at the scent of my blood.

I felt as though I was being ripped open from the inside out, and all I could think about was the baby. Was I losing her? The doctor said I was still

two weeks away from my due date, and judging by how much blood there was, it wasn't a good sign.

I could barely focus anymore. The pain was just too great, the strength of it tearing into my body at breakneck speed. Ethan took me into his arms and started shouting orders at people to get out of the way, but I was too out of it to concentrate on his words. Then it all became too much. I couldn't handle a single second more of this agony.

My eyes fell shut and blackness took over.

21.

Tegan

Birdsong twittered in my ears and the scent of flowers and freshly cut grass filled my nose. It would be pleasant if it weren't for the lingering scent of anti-septic. It was hard to open my eyes, but when I finally managed to pry my lids apart I found myself in a clean, sparsely furnished space, sort of like a hospital room.

I was hooked up to an IV machine, and I winced at the tubes stuck into my arms. I tried to sit up, but a heady sense of weakness overcame me and I had to lie back down again for a minute. The events that happened before I passed out rushed through my head. How long had I been out for?

And oh, God.

What happened to my baby?

I ran my hand down my abdomen, the rounded bump no longer there. Pulling the pale white sheets off my body, I looked down at the loose nightdress I was wearing. I lifted it to reveal my stomach, and there were no signs of stretch marks, no signs of pregnancy at all. A terrible swell of loss made my throat clog with tears.

Where was Ethan?

The pain I felt at the party was gone completely. I managed to summon up enough strength to pull the IV from my arms, climb out of bed, and walk to the open window. There were pretty lawns outside with a few people sitting on benches or walking the grounds. Farther away I spotted an entrance gate, over which hung a big stone sign proclaiming the name of wherever the hell I was, but I was too far away to make out what it said.

I startled when a knock sounded on the door, and a middle-aged woman dressed in an orderly's uniform stepped inside.

"Ah, you're awake," she said, frowning when she saw the tears running down my face.

"Where is Ethan? Who brought me here?" I asked frantically, my heart racing.

"Please, calm down," the woman urged. "You don't want to go upsetting yourself."

"Where is Ethan?" I repeated. "Where's my baby?"

“I have no idea who you’re talking about, Miss, but if you would just get back into bed ...”

“I’m not getting back into bed until somebody explains where I am!” I shouted.

“You’re in St. Frances’ Psychiatric Hospital,” she answered. “Now please, at least sit. You shouldn’t have removed the IV. Just look at the mess you’ve made.”

I narrowed my eyes at her. “Psychiatric hospital?”

“That’s right. You’ve been here for quite a while,” she said as though I was stupid not to already know this.

Suddenly, my head hurt, a terrible ache pulsing in my skull. I put my hands to my temples and sat down on the threadbare armchair by the window. What the hell was going on? Why was I in a freaking psychiatric hospital? And where the hell was everyone? I wanted to ask the orderly more questions, but the pain in my head was too much.

Everything started to feel strange, and weird ideas took shape in my head. Like, was this reality and whatever I thought my life had been up until now just a dream? Grief swelled in my chest, and I started to cry again. The orderly looked at me uncomfortably, said she was going to get some cleaning supplies, and left the room.

This couldn’t be real.

I couldn’t have lost everything. Or did I even have it to begin with? Were all the vampires, witches, and warlocks just a figment of my imagination? Did I somehow go mad with grief after Matthew committed suicide and get admitted to this place?

No. Everyone was too vivid for me to have made them all up. I could see their faces, remember the way they smelled, the little nuances they each possessed. My brain might be a colourful place, but it wasn’t *that* colourful. But then I started to think about how much Rita resembled my sassy side, and how Finn and I had almost the exact same sense of humour, the way Gabriel reminded me of how sometimes I could be terribly shy, and I wondered in horror, did I make them all up?

The idea that it could be true, that I was just some madwoman in a psychiatric hospital made me feel like the walls were closing in on me. I had to get out. My heart hurt. I stood on wobbly legs and left the room. Walking through the long hall, a few other patients watched me go by, but they didn’t try to stop me. Nobody stopped me.

When I found a side exit, I pushed open the door and allowed the fresh air to wash over my face, and I felt the sunlight caressing my skin. I stepped out onto the grass and felt like I could breathe again as the cool blades of grass tickled the soles of my feet. The grounds of the hospital were vast, so I kept walking, feeling like if I walked far enough, I'd be able to escape my brain and the awful things it was trying to make me believe.

Two older men were sitting on either side of a wooden picnic table playing chess. I stood still for a long time, just watching them make their moves and chat about nothing important. Then my gaze was drawn farther afield, to a bench in the distance where a man sat alone. His hair was blond, and the sun glinted off it, making it seem as though it was sparkling.

Hope caught in my lungs.

My feet were moving of their own accord now, and the tears from before started up again, but for a whole new reason this time. I stopped several feet away as the man lifted his arms, and in his hands was a baby girl with blonde hair, a shade lighter than his. She couldn't be more than a couple of weeks old.

She let out a little gurgling sound when he lifted her, and he laughed as he lowered her back down onto his lap. He cradled her in his arms, rocking her back and forth, and I stood there transfixed, unable to move. I took a step, and he froze, his head turning slightly to the side.

His voice was full of affection when he called, "I was wondering when you were going to wake up."

My legs wouldn't hold me up anymore, and I fell to my knees. I was wrong. It wasn't all a dream. It was real. There was once a time when I would have wished for vampires and magic to be a dream, but not now. Now my heart belonged to the world I discovered, and I wouldn't survive if it was taken away from me. More importantly, my heart belonged to the man sitting on the bench four feet away and the baby he held in his arms.

Ethan stood and walked to me. I stared at my hands, unable to look at him. He tipped my chin up so that my teary eyes met his.

"I believe you two have yet to meet," he said, holding my baby girl out to me.

From the very moment I laid eyes on her, I knew she was mine. I felt it like butterflies under my skin. I took her in and was met with big, bottomless blue eyes, and perhaps it was the sheer emotion of the moment, but I laughed and cried at the same time.

“She’s so beautiful,” I whispered, afraid to touch her in case she broke.

“Just like her mother,” Ethan said, shifting her into one arm so that he could help me off the ground and lead me over to sit on the bench. He placed her in my arms, and a wave of emotion washed over me. She felt so small and delicate.

How could someone so breakable be destined to become a ruler?

“She doesn’t have my blood,” I realised suddenly. I didn’t get the same feeling from her that I got from Rebecca.

“No,” Ethan said. “I suppose we can count ourselves lucky that she doesn’t.”

Cool relief washed over me.

A long time passed as we sat in silence. I was fascinated by her little hands and her tiny feet, by her ridiculously golden eyelashes and the porcelain shade of her skin. You could certainly tell she was a dhampir because no human baby had ever had such vibrant, perfect features. Or maybe I just felt that way because she was mine.

“I don’t understand why we’re here,” I said, at long last breaking my reverie.

Ethan leaned forward and ran a finger down our baby’s cheek, his arm tight around my shoulders. I didn’t ever want to leave this moment.

“The doctor I had you seeing,” he started to explain in a gentle voice, “he does a lot of work for supernaturals, but in order to go unnoticed by the human population, he uses this hospital as a front. Half of the building is a normal, functioning psychiatric hospital and the other half is a supernatural hospital. I had you kept in the human half to keep the vampires from smelling your blood. You had a C-section, and I fed my blood to you intravenously to help you heal.”

“Ah, so that’s why I don’t have any scars. You know, I thought I’d had a mental break when I woke up here. How long have I been out for?”

“A month. The longest month of my life. For a while, we didn’t know if you would make it,” he answered, and there was a vulnerability in his voice.

I turned my head so that I could kiss his cheek. “I’m sorry you had to go through all that.”

He pulled me tighter into his side. “Don’t be sorry. I’d go through it a thousand times more if it meant I could have the both of you.” He paused. “So, what do you think we should call her?”

I gave him a surprised look. “She’s been alive a whole month and you

haven't even given her a name?"

"I wanted to wait for you. I thought you'd like to choose."

I stared at her and wracked my brain for names, then gave her a little kiss on the top of the head when I came to the perfect decision. "I think we should call her Darya," I said. "In honour of my mother."

"I like that choice," Ethan agreed. "Darya Cristescu."

I smiled at him and he nuzzled my cheek. I rested my head on his shoulder and when I looked at Darya again, I found she'd fallen asleep. I breathed in deep and closed my eyes, letting the feeling of wholeness wash over me. For so long I felt alone in the world, but now I had a family. It might have been a difficult road to get here, but as Ethan said, I would go through it all a thousand times more just to have this one moment ... right now.

END.

Thank you for reading *Sunlight*. Please consider supporting an indie author and leaving a review. If you'd like to read a bonus epilogue from Ethan's point of view, make sure you're signed up for my newsletter [HERE](#). The bonus epilogue will be sent in my April newsletter <3

P.S. If you are eager to read more about Tegan and Ethan's daughter, Darya, as well as other characters in this universe, keep an eye out for *Foretold* (A Tribane Institute Novel) coming soon from L.H. Cosway!

Six of Hearts Sneak Peek

If you enjoyed The Blood Magic Series then you might also like L.H. Cosway's highly acclaimed Hearts Series, available now in Kindle Unlimited. Read on for a sneak peek of book #1, *Six of Hearts*.

BLURB:

When Jay Fields, world-renowned illusionist, walks into her dad's law firm Matilda is struck speechless. Not only is he one of the most attractive and charismatic men she's ever met, he's also a mystery to be solved.

Jay wants to sue a newspaper for defamation, but all is not what it seems. Matilda is determined to discover the true story behind Jay, however, when he becomes an unexpected roommate, she is not ready for how he will wheedle his way into her affections and steal her heart.

The man is a mystery wrapped in an enigma, and though she can't yet see the bigger picture, Matilda can't resist following along for the thrilling and heart-stopping ride.

EXCERPT:

Making my way down the narrow staircase that leads out of the building and onto the street, I bump into a tall man with golden-brown hair. I wouldn't normally notice a man's hair so specifically, but this guy has some serious style going on. It's cut tight at the sides and left long on the top, kind of like a sexy villain in a movie set in the 1920s. I stare up at him, wide-eyed. He's wearing a very nice navy suit with a leather satchel bag slung over his shoulder. Even though it was the first thing I noticed, his hair pales in comparison to the wonder that is his face. I don't think I've ever been up close to such a handsome example of the male species in my life.

Why can't men like this write to me online? I ponder dejectedly.

Because men like this don't even know the meaning of the term "socially

awkward,” my brain answers.

My five-foot-something stares up at his six-foot-whatever, and I think to myself, *what’s a prize like you doing in a dive like this?* Actually, now that I’m looking at him, he does seem vaguely familiar, but I can’t put my finger on where I’ve seen him before.

Probably on the pages of a fashion magazine, if his looks are anything to go by.

If it hasn’t already been deduced from the fact that I can’t even find a date using the romantic connection slut that is the Internet, then I’ll spell it out. I’m useless with men, and I’m talking all men. Even the nice approachable fellows. And I’m not looking at a nice approachable fellow right now. I’m looking at a “chew you up and spit you out” tiger.

Rawr.

Since the entrance to the building is so narrow, we have to skirt around each other. I give him a hesitant smile and a shrug. His eyes sparkle with some kind of hidden knowledge as he lets me pass, like beautiful people know the meaning of the universe and are amused by us ordinary folks who have to bumble along in the dark.

I’m just about to step out the door when the tiger starts to speak. “I’m looking for Brandon Solicitors. Do you know if I have the right place?”

I step back inside.

He sounds like Mark Wahlberg when he’s letting his Southie roots all hang out. His deep American accent makes me want to close my eyes and savour the sound. But I don’t do that – because I’m not a complete psycho.

“Yeah, this is the place. I work here, actually. I’m the secretary slash receptionist slash general dogsbody. It’s my dad’s firm,” I reply. Too much information, Matilda. Too. Much. Information.

The tiger smiles, making him better-looking, if that’s even possible. And thankfully, he doesn’t comment on my fluster. “I have an appointment with Hugh Brandon at nine. I’m Jay,” he says, and takes a step closer to hold his hand out to me. My back hits the wall, his tall frame dwarfing mine. I don’t think he realises just how narrow this space is, and now I can smell his cologne. Wow, it’s not often that I get close enough to a man to smell him. And Jay Fields smells indecently good.

“Ah, right. Jay Fields. Yeah, I have you pencilled in. You can go on upstairs, and Dad will take care of you,” I reply, shaking his hand and letting go quickly so that he doesn’t notice my sweatacular palms. “I’ve got an

errand to run.”

He stares at me for a long moment, like his eyes are trying to take in my every feature, but that can't be right. When he finally responds, it's a simple, “I won't keep you, then, Matilda.”

God. Why does the way he says “keep you” in that deep voice have to make my heart flutter? It's been literally thirty seconds, and I'm already well on my way to developing a crush.

He makes some keen eye contact with me, then turns and continues up the stairs to the office. I'm already on the street when I realise I hadn't offered my name, and yet he knew it. Perhaps he'd been browsing our website. Our offices might be shoddy, but I always make sure to keep our online presence up to scratch. There's a picture of me, Dad, and Will, the other solicitor who works for the practice, on the “About Us” page.

So if he knew who I was already, why did he ask if he had the right place?

Miracle of all miracles, was he actually, like, chatting me up or something? Be still my beating heart. Or is he just the friendly, chatty type? I consider these questions as I walk inside the café three buildings down from our office and order two lattes to go. I briefly think about ordering something for the tiger, aka Jay Fields, but he might be one of those picky coffee drinkers, so I don't.

When I get back, I find Dad's shut himself inside his office with Jay, and the next appointment is already waiting to be seen. She's a middle-aged woman wearing a neck brace. I haven't had the chance to look at her information, but I can imagine what she's here for. Some sort of accident claim.

What I really want to know is what Jay's here for. Yep, I'm already wondering about this man way too much. I remember him calling up last week to make the appointment, and somehow I neglected to ask him what kind of a claim he wanted to make. It's weird, too, because I have my set spiel for appointments, and I never forget to ask for all the information I need. It's almost like my subconscious knew I was speaking with a gorgeous man, thus rendering me double “F-ed”: frazzled and forgetful.

Knowing Dad will want his caffeine fix as soon as possible, I knock lightly on the door and wait to be let in. Dad calls for me to enter and I do, opening the door with the paper coffee cup in my hand. Jay's sitting in the seat in front of Dad's desk, his hands clasped together over his head as he

lounges back, casual as you please. I can feel his eyes on me as I walk to Dad and give him his beverage. He seems a little out of sorts, so I put a hand on his shoulder and ask, "Everything okay?"

Dad looks lost in his own head for a minute, and I have to repeat the question a second time to get him to answer me.

"What? Oh, yes, everything's fine. Thanks for the coffee, chicken," he mutters.

"It might be me who's the problem," Jays puts in. "I just presented your old man with a case he's not sure he wants to take."

I look at Jay now, my brow furrowing. Who the hell is this guy? What he's said has piqued my curiosity, though, so I close the door and fold my arms. Unless I'm needed to take notes, I don't normally sit in on meetings with clients, but Dad's demeanour has put me on edge, my protective instincts kicking into gear.

Jay grins in a way that makes me think he's pleased with my attention. "Oh, now she's curious."

Okay, this man might be beautiful, but he's also kind of strange.

"Did you want to make a claim against someone?" I ask, because Dad still isn't talking. I suppose he's still considering whatever Jay's case is.

"Nope. I want to sue someone," says Jay, all matter-of-fact.

"For what?"

"Defamation of character," he answers before pulling a newspaper out of his bag. He flips through it, folds it open to the page he's looking for, and hands it to me. I glance down at the tabloid, scanning the bold headline that reads, "Illusionist Jay Fields Causes Death of Volunteer." I let my eyes drift briefly over the article, which features a promotional picture of Jay holding up a six of hearts card. *Oh*. Now I remember where I know him from.

A couple of weeks ago *The Daily Post* broke a story about an Irish-American illusionist with a new show coming to RTÉ. He was filming an upcoming episode when a tragic accident hit. I scan the article before me, recalling the details. A couple of hours after wrapping up the filming of an episode where Jay was paying homage to Houdini by re-creating a version of his "Buried Alive" stunt, the volunteer who'd taken part had died of a heart attack.

What Jay proposed to do was to put the volunteer, David Murphy, into a hypnotic state whereby he would only breathe in very little air, allowing him to be buried for twenty-four hours in an empty grave and not suffocate in the

process. An impossible feat, many would say. The volunteer was given a panic button, and if anything went wrong, he could press it, and he'd be immediately dug up. In the end the panic button wasn't needed, and he miraculously managed to survive the entire twenty-four hours underground. However, when he went to bed that night, he suffered a fatal heart attack and died.

Needless to say, the tabloids caught on to the story and began posing questions about whether or not Jay's stunt had somehow caused David Murphy to have his heart attack. After all, being buried alive is quite the traumatic experience.

The piece before me, written by a well-known crime journalist named Una Harris, who was the one to break the initial story about Jay, is certainly extreme. It delves into Jay's background in America, where she claims he spent a year in a juvenile detention facility for assaulting a man on the street. Before that he'd been a runaway, squatting in derelict buildings in Boston.

Harris poses questions about Jay's less than squeaky-clean background. She wonders how a man who spent time in prison, even if it was a young offenders' prison, would be given permission to carry out dangerous stunts as he had been doing in his show. She also wonders why Jay, who had been performing some very successful live shows in Las Vegas, would give all that up to move to such a small pond as Ireland to film a series that would only reach a tiny audience in comparison to the States.

Overall, she basically out and out claims that Jay had shady motives for coming here, and perhaps he even *intended* for David Murphy to die. He did, after all, almost beat a man to death when he was just fifteen. Perhaps he's simply come up with a more elaborate way to feed his need to harm people, Harris muses.

Whoa, this woman really doesn't pull any punches with her insinuations. It's almost like she's begging for a lawsuit. I mean, I've worked with my dad long enough to know that you should always have hard evidence before you publicly make claims about people that could be construed as libellous. And aside from a few hazy pieces of information about Jay's teenage years, Una Harris has zero evidence.

I draw my attention away from the newspaper to find that my dad and Jay had been having a conversation while I was lost in the article.

"Don't get me wrong," says Dad. "The thought of taking on such a case excites me. I haven't worked on anything like this in years, but at the same

time I need to be selfless and tell you that there are far better solicitors out there for the job. I can even give you a few names to contact. You do actually want to win this case, I presume?”

Jay uncrosses his legs and folds his arms. “Hell, yeah, I want to win it. And I know you’re the man for the job, Hugh, no matter how much you try to convince me otherwise.”

I silently hand him back the newspaper and he takes it, his fingertips brushing mine. The contact makes my skin tingle. Stupid handsome bastard.

Dad stares at Jay, and I can tell by the look in his eyes that he wants to say yes — he just doesn’t have the confidence to do it. In all honesty, I’m hoping he continues to say no. I know how stressful the kind of case Jay is proposing can be, and I don’t want Dad going through all that. He just turned sixty last month. The landmark birthday only functioned to make me more aware of how many years he might have left.

“I’m sorry, Mr Fields, but I’m going to have to stick to my guns on his one,” Dad says apologetically. “Taking on a journalist is one thing, but suing a newspaper is going to require a top-notch firm. As you can probably see, we’re not that.”

Oh. Jay wants to sue the actual newspaper? I’m impressed. That takes some serious balls.

Okay, Matilda, stop thinking about the man’s balls.

Jay lets out a long sigh and turns his head to the window. A second later he gets up from his seat and thrusts his hand out at Dad. “Well, if there’s no way I can convince you,” he replies, and the two men shake hands. “Thanks for your time anyway.”

Jay goes to walk out the door but then turns back for a second, an impish gleam in his eye. “Oh, before I go, can you recommend anywhere I might be able to rent a place close to the city? I’ve had to move out of the apartment I’d been staying in.”

I take in a quick breath as Dad’s eyes light up. A couple of weeks ago he got it into his head to renovate the spare bedroom in our house so that he could take on a lodger and make a little extra money. I haven’t been too keen on the idea, since I don’t really want to share my living space with a stranger, but once Dad settled on the idea, there was no deterring him.

I certainly don’t want to share my living space with Jay Fields. Not because of his supposed history mapped out by Una Harris, but because I wouldn’t be able to relax around him. He has this magnetic energy that

makes me feel anxious and excited all at once.

“It’s funny you should ask,” says Dad. “I’ve been planning on renting out our spare room — if you’re interested, of course. It’s got an en-suite, newly refurbished.”

I squeeze my fists tight and walk back out to the reception area, taking a seat at my desk and slugging back a gulp of my coffee. I don’t like how rapidly my heart beats at the thought of Jay moving into that room, so I leave before I hear his answer. Please, please, please let him say no.

My Dad’s raucous laughter streams out from the office; Jay’s obviously in there charming the pants off him. I silently curse my father for being such an easily charmed hussy.

No more than a minute later, both Dad and Jay leave his office. I can see Jay looking at me out of the corner of my eye, but I continue typing into the computer in front of me, feeling like if I look directly at him, he’ll somehow be able to tell how attractive I find him.

“Matilda, could you do me a huge favour and bring Jay out to the house on your lunch break to see the room? I’d do it myself, only I have a meeting to go to.”

Oh, Dad. You have no idea how you’re torturing me right now. It takes me several beats to answer. When I finally do, my voice is quiet. “Yeah, okay.”

What I really want to say is *hell, no*, but that would make me look like a bitch. And I’m not a bitch. Well, outside my own inner dialogue, I’m not.

“Great,” says Dad before turning to the waiting neck-brace woman. “Ah, Mrs Kelly. You can come on in now.”

Mrs Kelly follows Dad into his office, leaving me alone with Jay.

“What time do you have lunch?” he asks in a low voice, stepping closer to my desk.

“One o’clock. We’ll have to get a taxi, because I need to be back here by two.”

“That’s okay. I can drive us,” says Jay, and I bite my lip, looking up at him now. Wow, his eyes are kind of mesmerising, not quite brown, not quite green. We stare at one another for a long moment, and there’s a faint smile on his perfectly sculpted lips.

“All right. See you at one,” I tell him breezily, and then my eyes return to the screen in front of me as he leaves. On the outside I’m all business. On the inside I’m a nervous wreck. How in the hell am I going to act like a

normal human being while spending at least an hour in his company? He really doesn't know what he's in for.

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Meet the Author

Greetings! 'Tis a pleasure to make your acquaintance. My name is L.H. Cosway and I wrote the book you just read. I hail from Dublin, Ireland, where I live with my husband and two tiny dictators of the canine variety. My favourite things in life include daydreaming about fictional characters, eating in fancy restaurants, looking at dresses online that I'll never buy, having entire conversations with my dogs, listening to podcasts and of course, reading books. I happen to believe that imperfect people are the most interesting kind. They tell the best stories.

Here is my website where you can find various and sundry information about me and my books: [**www.lhcoswayauthor.com**](http://www.lhcoswayauthor.com)

Want to chat about my stories with like-minded readers or pick my brain? You can join my reader group [HERE](#).

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