



BONNIE

BECOMING THE VAMPIRE QUEEN: 2

BE BROUILLARD

Bond
Becoming the Vampire Queen
BE Brouillard

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Bartholomew

Blood.

It's everywhere. My hands are slick with it; the front of my shirt is splattered. A sticky sensation on my face has me wiping it with the back of my wrist. I look down to see my red-tinted hands and shirt, my sleeves and cuffs smeared with streaks and patches. The once-white fabric is now speckled with crimson. The same crimson fluid coats my chin and drips onto my shirtfront, saturating it with its wetness.

My mind is a fog, and I can't remember how I got here. There was havoc in my head – I know only that much. Chaos. An overwhelming need for...something. And then... I remember nothing more.

All I know is that I'm standing in a clearing surrounded by trees. There are no birds chirping, no sounds of rustling leaves or scampering animals. Not that I'm aware of, at any rate. The only sound I can hear is the pounding in my head as my heart thunders in confusion.

Beneath my feet, the grass has been trampled and spattered with red. The smell of iron is thick in the air. I try to recall what happened, but it all blurs together like a dream that fades away upon awakening. All I know is that I have no idea where I am, and there's blood everywhere.

What did you do, Bartholomew?

Suddenly, fragmented memories start to come back to me like flashes of lightning. Aurora – her beautiful face. Soft lips against mine, warmth radiating through me as we stood pressed together. But something was wrong; there was

something else mixed into that kiss: a taste of copper that sent shivers down my spine and made me feel strange, an unfamiliar stirring deep inside me. Dark and sinister, the hint of her blood on my lips. It had been sweet, almost intoxicating – but it had done something to me.

What the fuck did you do?!

A branch cracks behind me, and I spin to face the sound. A stag steps into the clearing and freezes, eyes wide with alarm as it takes me in. I stare back. The beast is magnificent. Its antlers span twice the length of my arms, majestic and curving gracefully. Its coat is deep and glossy, gleaming in the light as if polished to perfection. Its eyes are intelligent yet wild...growing wilder as it looks at me. Gathering powerful muscles, it prepares for flight, its movements lithe and graceful, almost hypnotic in their fluidity.

My nostrils flare. The air carries the scent of wildness, of the untamed forest and wet earth.

And blood.

Warm. Pulsating through living veins. My mouth waters. More memories are flooding, but I can't pin them down before the creature bounds to the side and bolts back into the thicket. Its hooves strike the soft earth, making a sound like rolling thunder as it crashes through the undergrowth.

Thirsty!

I'm so fucking thirsty.

My fangs extend, my nails sharpen, and my hands curl into fists. I feel everything within me coil and grow taut.

And then there's fog. More of it.

When it clears, I'm on the edge of the tree line.

How the fuck did I get here?

My mind starts to clear as I slowly become more aware of where I am. I have no recollection of covering the ground to where the stag had been standing. And still, a voice inside me

is screaming, baying for blood. I've never felt such an unquenchable thirst.

My heart keeps pounding in my ears. Lightheaded, I step back, shaking with the shock of it. I can't believe what I was about to do. I'd wanted its blood. Even as I was trying to figure out what had just happened to me, the sight of that animal had been like a switch had been flipped.

Control it!

I have to. I know I can. I just did, didn't I? I'd wanted to hunt it down, but clearly, I stopped myself. It's a small consolation, but at least there is that.

Yet nothing feels right. I don't know myself or this body I'm in.

Fuck, this is all so wrong.

I take a deep breath, trying to steady myself. The stag no longer visible in the thicket, I turn back to the center of the clearing.

What. Did. You. Do?!

The blood on my palms is caking as I force myself to focus on the ground at my feet instead of the beast that vanished behind me and its sweet scent that still lingers in the air.

Pull it together, Bellingham!

Ignoring the gore on my hands, I run my fingers through my hair as I try to piece together what happened to get me into this clearing.

Aurora.

The look of horror on her face. My reflection in the mirror. The silver rings around my eyes.

The Curse.

I'm fucking Cursed.

And I'd wanted to drain her. Draw the life and power and energy from her and make it my own.

I didn't do it. I couldn't have. Could I?

“By Blood!” My voice breaks the silence. It's deep and rasping, barely recognizable as my own until I realize that the vampire in me is simmering just beneath the surface. I don't like that. Normally, I keep hold of that part of me, but now, it's as if there are two of us sharing my body. And I'm not familiar with the other. It's not the vampire side of me that I know. It's something else.

I look down at my hands again. Beyond the blood, my skin is pale, the veins a blue tracery beneath it. Claws still protrude from my fingertips instead of nails, and I can feel that my fangs are still lengthened.

I shut my eyes and tip my head back, sucking in deep, soothing breaths as I fight for control.

Think, dammit!

I mentally retrace my steps. The conversation with Luther, when he had told me that we needed Aurora back in Ryacyn. I'd gone to Meadowside to ask her to reconsider. I'd been a dick. Sent her away...because Vespyr had threatened to harm her. The irony suddenly hits me like a blow to my chest.

Vespyr wasn't the one Aurora had to be afraid of... It had been me.

I shake my head; I can't waste time on recriminations right now.

I have to remember!

I remember that we returned to my rooms. Aurora had agreed to come back to help with the Curse. *My* Curse. A groan bubbles up my throat, but I force myself to focus.

“She came back,” I say out loud. “She came to help.”

I'd thanked her, and then my mouth was on hers. Plump lips, her skin so silky. Warm.

Pulling in another breath of air, I lick my lips. The iron tang of blood still lingers there. Hardly surprising since my face is smeared with it.

But this taste is familiar.

Grasping at tendrils of memories of that moment we kissed, I remember that sweet flavor. The heady fullness of it as it trickled over my lips, down my throat. I drank. I'd taken from her, and she'd wanted me to. My flesh burns at the thought of it.

And then something clicks into place.

It's not hers!

My eyes fly open, and I lift a hand to my mouth to flick my tongue over my palm, getting a better taste.

The blood isn't Aurora's. Is it? It can't be. There's no way I'd forget that crimson nectar.

But whose, then?

Animal? There's something wild in it...just like the scent of the stag that I can still pick up lingering on the air.

Foliage rustles, and sounds ring out from the woods nearby. I half wonder if the creature is about to reappear, but that's unlikely. I'd terrified it. Something else...

“Here!” someone shouts. “There's blood over here!”

No!

“Lord Bellingham?” Luther's voice cuts through the thicket. “My Lord?”

I spin in a circle, looking for a way out that won't take me straight to the voices.

Run? Why the fuck would you run, Bellingham?

Because I should be seeking out my own kind. Others with the Curse. Free Vespyr! Live out our destiny—

What the actual fuck?!

Taking in a breath, I straighten my shoulders and turn to face the sounds that are drawing nearer.

I can do this. I have to. Even if it's my own people coming for me, I will have to face the music. But as I wait, a part of me howls to run and never look back. To escape into

the darkness and forget everything that has happened,
everything that I am...

I can't, though. I know that more than anything.

There's no escaping the Curse.

Aurora

Sweet Earth Mother!

The face of the man in front of me bears no resemblance to the vampire lord I've grown to care for so much these past months.

Still tall. Still powerful. But Bartholomew Bellingham is hardly recognizable. The blood-drenched apparition in front of me is almost monstrous. Vicious-looking teeth gleam in a face that's red with blood. His eyes are wide and wild, the gold darkened to highlight the silver ring that seems to glow from them.

"Bart?" My voice is hoarse. Probably from calling for him. Maybe even from the shock of all that's happened tonight. But I know that the tightness in my throat right now is mainly relief.

"Bart!" I say again, instinctively rushing forward. Bartholomew's head snaps toward the sound of my voice, the movement unnaturally sharp. A heavily muscled arm blocks my path. Luther has turned to look at me, but it's Mortas who has barred my path.

"Wait." His expression is grim. He looks back to where Bartholomew is swaying in the dim light in front of us. There's something otherworldly about him. He stares down at his bloodstained hands and then back up at me.

"Aurora." The sound is a rough murmur, but still, it's his voice. I choke on a noise that feels dangerously like a sob.

Queens don't weep, Aurora!

I swallow hard and compose myself.

“My Lord!” It’s Luther now, his voice ringing out clearly. Bart swivels his head to take in the sight of him. It’s as if he’s trying to figure out who’s addressing him. As though he senses this, Luther continues, “It is I, Luther, my Lord.”

Bart’s chest rises and falls beneath his blood-soaked shirt.

Sounds from the bushes around us announce the arrival of the rest of the search party.

“Sire!” Faine’s voice is shrill as she crashes into the clearing.

“Stop!” Luther raises a hand, and the sounds cease, everyone coming to a standstill. Faine’s eyes dart about wildly, but even she wouldn’t defy an order of a Council Elder. Besides, this is a search party, not a hunt. And right now, Bartholomew Bellingham looks like he’s torn between flight... or fight. He looks ready to attack.

I wouldn’t want to go up against this man. Not after what I saw before.

That’s not who he is!

“Bartholomew,” I call out. “Bartholomew, we’ve come to help you.”

“Help?” The word is barely audible. He shakes his head, his lips curling into a humorless smile. “You can’t help me.”

It’s the first sign I’ve seen that he’s still in there. And even though his tone is dark and bitter, I feel my heart lighten.

“I’ll be the judge of that.” I step forward. When Mortas tries to stop me again, I brush his arm aside. “I know what I’m doing,” I say under my breath. With more confidence than I’m feeling, I walk into the clearing.

Bart’s eyes track my every movement. “You...you’re unharmed.” Relief colors his voice, and I nod.

“I’m fine, Bart.” I give a small smile. “You didn’t hurt me.” Even as I say it, I can feel the tingle in the curve of my throat where his fangs had sunk in. That was different, though. The sharp pinch had burned through me like a bolt of pure pleasure. There’d been no harm in that bite. Not till after... when I’d felt something change in him. When the Curse had descended. I tighten my jaw. I don’t want to think about it.

“That’s a matter of opinion.” His eyes have dropped to my neck, and I know he’s thinking about it, too.

I extend my hand. “Come home, Bart.”

He shakes his head but doesn’t say anything.

“My Lord...” It’s Luther again. “My Lord, you need to come back with us.”

“I can’t do that. It’s not safe,” Bartholomew says. He’s looking around as if he’s still considering making a bolt for it.

“It’s all right,” I tell him softly. “I trust you.”

“Trust me?” He makes a harsh sound that I’m gathering is supposed to be laughter. It sounds nothing like it. But when he looks back at me, his eyes are filled with something that makes my chest hurt.

Pain.

There’s so much pain in that look. I take a step closer and reach out my hand again. “Please,” I whisper, barely managing to keep the emotion from my voice. “Come back home with us.”

He stares at my hand for a few seconds.

“Come, my Lord. It’s time to go home. We need to get you cleaned up.” Mortas’s voice from behind me almost makes me jump. When he steps around me, Bart tracks the movement. Everything about him seems so...feral. I’m suddenly reminded of those moments when I’d faced that vampire male back in the dungeons of Ryacyn. The insanity in his expression had been amplified with the first mouthfuls of blood. Just like Bartholomew’s expression seems to look now.

Don’t think that way!

This is different. Bart is nothing like those crazed creatures. I won't let myself believe that. Besides, he's still standing there, not doing anything that shows he might be dangerous. It doesn't seem that his advisors feel the same way, because Luther has stepped up beside me, and now I'm flanked by him and Mortas. I ignore them.

"You never hurt me, Bart." I raise my arms as if by showing him my unmarred skin, I'll be able to prove that I'm okay. "You turned and ran. Went straight out of the window." I feel my throat tighten again as I remember it. The glass had ripped into his flesh. Torn at him.

But he's fine.

I run an eye over him, and there isn't a scratch on him. Aside from the blood – which must surely be his own. Although there's so much of it. How did he heal so fast?

Vampires have advanced healing...just like the Fae. But this seems impossible. It's barely been a couple of hours since I managed to trace him here. That had been odd, too. The feeling of knowing. Sensing him. Luther and the others hadn't questioned it when I told them I knew how to find him. Which was fortunate because I wouldn't have had any answers. Maybe the Heart Bond? Something else? I don't know how any of this works. But now is not the time to be trying to figure all of this out. We have to get him away from here. I don't know why, but it feels like danger is lurking, and it's not coming from him.

"There's a carcass over here, Lord Luther! Looks like a deer." A voice filters in through the woods, and I see Luther and Mortas exchange glances. Confusion flickers over Bart's face.

"A deer? But I never... I..." He shakes his head as if trying to clear it.

"We found several, Sire," Luther says gently. "This one seems close."

"I didn't..." Bart's throat works. "I didn't!" There's so much bewilderment in his expression that it almost makes him

seem even more unfamiliar. The Bart I know is forthright and confident. He takes everything in his stride. He always knows what he's doing.

This is different.

"I never did that." His chest heaves. He's looking down at his hands again.

"It's okay, my Lord. You did what was needed. The blood of the creatures saved other lives." Luther's voice is soothing. "Come now," he says in a slightly firmer tone. "Let's get you back to the palace. We can discuss everything when we get there." I see Bart hesitate and his eyes dart between Luther and me before finally settling on me.

"Not with her," he says, his voice low. "I'm not going with her."

"Bart...it's okay. I forgive you." I splay my hands. "Not that there's anything to forgive. You didn't hurt me." Apart from half scaring the life out of me. Although what terrified me hadn't been him as much as the sight of those silvery rings. I stare into his eyes again, looking for a sign of them. They'd been like glowing crescents when I'd seen them before, but now there's just a sliver of silver.

Does the light fade? Do they shine more brightly when the Curse is strong?

There are so many questions rushing around my head. But he's still staring at me as if he needs me to get out of his sight.

"We should go," he says to Mortas and Luther. I know he's not addressing me because, after that fleeting look, he won't meet my eye. His voice is taut as he goes on. "Now." He looks disgusted. Is that look aimed at me? Why would he feel that way?

I step back, my chest aching as if I've been punched. Tears prick at my eyes, and I blink them away quickly before anyone notices them. I wanted so much to help him, but it seems like he doesn't want it.

Mortas and Luther exchange uneasy glances before nodding their heads in agreement with Bart. I see him sway slightly, and I sense that he's lightheaded. But when I move to reach for his arm, he recoils as if I just struck him.

"Please..." I say, hoping I'll make him see reason, but I'm looking up into eyes that seem like cold gold.

"Just go, Aurora." He turns away from me and speaks to Mortas and Luther. "We need to leave this place. Immediately." His lip curls as he looks down at his shirt, where blood is now drying and congealed. For a vampire, he looks strangely repulsed by it. I can't find words to appeal to him. I'm rooted to the spot, trying to understand why he's behaving like this.

This is all wrong!

I know things went crazy back there when we kissed. But we shared a moment...before it all went to hell. That couldn't be helped. But I can help him now. I'm probably the only one who can.

"I can do something—" I begin yet again, but he turns his back on me completely. My chest feels like it's tightening.

Luther steps forward and places a sympathetic hand on my arm. "Come now, my Lady, let us get you home where you can rest and recover from all of today's events. We will talk more when we get there."

"But I don't want to rest!" I yank my arm away. I want to reach out to Bart and make this all go away. "Bart, for love of the Earth Mother, stop being like this!"

But he's already gathering himself and striding away. I catch a glimpse of his profile as he gives a half glance back. And then I catch his words as he heads onto the path that leads from the clearing.

"Get her away from me."

I die a little inside.

Bartholomew

I'm pacing. I'm barely aware of it, but as I turn and trace my steps back across the length of my living room, I realize I've probably walked the same trail for the past hour.

I nearly killed her. It's a sheer miracle that I didn't. Aside from those moments when our lips were sealed, I barely remember what happened. The reception room where we'd arrived has been sealed off, the shattered glass on the floor a chilling reminder of what happened in there.

I could have killed her!

But you didn't...

Even though I try to comfort myself with that thought, it's cold consolation. I hadn't realized I killed the stag, either. I'd been so convinced that I'd stopped myself at the edge of that clearing.

I hadn't.

I'd given chase. Hunted it down. Drained its life.

And I have no recollection of any of it. Or any of the others they told me I killed on the way to the clearing.

Taking a deep breath, I head toward the tall window overlooking the gardens and force myself to stand there. My shadow grows longer as the sun begins to set. That's where Luther finds me when he enters my suite hours later. He's flanked by Faine and Lamia. The women having been stationed at my door since my return. Not to guard me, but to keep me in. Though somehow I doubt they could stop me if they needed to.

I find myself blinking to get my bearings. Aside from the passage of the sun, I have no concept of time.

“My Lord.” Luther’s still using that same soothing tone he’d addressed me with earlier. As if he’s trying to approach a wild animal. Because that’s what I am. Not just wild. Rabid. They should put me down.

I slowly face him. In the doorway beyond, I see Mortas, Salem, and Radella hovering, features etched with concern.

“Come in,” I say. “I won’t bite.” I feel my lips curl up. They feel bloodless. Much like the rest of me. It had taken an hour of hot water to make me feel like I’d scrubbed away the blood. Still, I look down at my hands, as if I’ll see the stains there.

The blood had been my own, sustained as I smashed through the window...probably why it had seemed familiar. Yet not. That must be the madness. The Curse runs through me. Taken over me. I don’t know myself. I’d added to the gore with what I’d drained from the beasts I’d slaughtered. When they found me, I’d been drenched in it. I don’t want to imagine what happened there.

I’m not a fucking animal!

“We need to talk.” Mortas takes over, probably losing patience. Who can blame him? They’ve just seen their king go off the edge. They need answers.

So do I.

The four of them stand there, silent and expectant. I can tell they are waiting for me to speak first. It’s a struggle to find my voice in the silence that has taken over this room.

“I don’t know what happened,” I finally say. “I remember...seeing red, feeling rage, chasing after something or someone...but then it’s all a blur.” That’s not entirely true. It’s not a blur. It’s pure darkness. “I lost control.” My voice breaks, and I hate myself for it.

Luther steps forward. He is always the diplomat, ready with words of wisdom. He clears his throat before he speaks.

“You did not harm Aurora, Bartholomew.” His eyes are gentle. “You put yourself through that window before you laid a hand on her. From the amount of blood you lost, the damage was immeasurable.”

I look down at my hands and then my arms. My skin is unblemished. Too pale, but aside from that, there isn't a mark on me.

“Really?” I manage a dry laugh.

“My Lord, we have all been witness to your pain today, and we understand your anger and confusion.” Luther attempts to bolster me. It doesn't work.

“How could you?” I tilt my head. “How could you possibly understand any of it?”

Mortas folds his arms over his chest and runs his eyes over me. “Your healing has accelerated. It must be part of your condition.”

“My condition... Why don't we just call it what it is, Mortas? I have the Curse.”

“Yes. You do.” He nods, because that's his way. Maybe I prefer it to Luther's precious pussyfooting. “So tell us what was going through your head when you drank from the princess. You could have killed her, but you didn't.”

I shake my head. “It was too close. The stag in the woods. I did that.”

“It wouldn't be the first time one of our kind took blood from a beast.”

“I don't remember it.” I stare him down. He needs to understand the severity of this. “I scented it. I scented blood. And then...nothing. Everything from that moment until afterward is simply blank.” I feel my throat work. “I thought I'd stopped myself, Mortas.”

I feel a touch on my arm and realize that Radella has come up beside me. It's probably foolish. She should keep her distance. When I raise an eyebrow, she drops her hand, but her eyes are steady, and her face is full of compassion. “We cannot

guess at how these fits come upon you until we can better understand the Curse.”

“Oh, I plan to do that,” I assure her. There’s no way I’m going to let this thing consume me without putting up a fight.

“Then you’ll have to let the princess help.” Mortas still has his arms folded across his chest.

“No!” The word comes out with more force than I expected. “No,” I repeat, keeping my voice level. “She doesn’t need to be involved in this.”

“That’s exactly the reason she came back here, Bartholomew. We needed her for this very reason. We still do.”

“But not for me!” I inhale deeply to steady my nerves. “I can’t be trusted. I remember nothing.”

“You may not remember what happened in the moment, but if there is one thing I am sure of, it is this: nothing happens outside the scope of destiny.” Salem fixes her eyes on me. She’s always had a deep connection to the fates.

Right now, I’m not a believer.

“You’re saying the Curse is my destiny?”

“Perhaps.” Her expression is inscrutable. “What better way to commune with the afflicted than to become one of them yourself?”

I scoff. “I don’t see the rationale, Salem. I have no idea what I’m capable of.”

“That doesn’t mean you can’t help them. You’ll have a better understanding of it than anyone else.” She seems determined to see the bright side.

There is no fucking bright side.

“I won’t be any use if I’ve lost my goddamned mind, Salem!”

“There’s time.” Radella smiles. “We’ve seen how this thing progresses. You can keep it at bay by feeding at regular

intervals. The afflicted who are in the dungeons have shown us that.”

Luther clears his throat, and we all swivel to look at him. “It’s moving faster,” he says. “The Curse seems to be getting worse with increasing speed. It won’t be long until you need constant blood to fuel your powers and stay alive. But inevitably, you go mad with hunger and die.”

I feel my blood run cold. I’ve had an inkling of this – Luther had told me that the Cursed were beginning to die. But not that the madness was accelerating.

“How long?” I aim my question at him. He splays his hands in a gesture that speaks volumes.

“We have no way of knowing. It could be months. Years, even?” His expression is not as hopeful as his words are. He wouldn’t have raised his concern if he hadn’t seen a marked increase in the speed that the others have been deteriorating. “The Noctis Clan existed for years before they... met their end.”

Met their end.

What a trite description of the carnage that ended their lives.

I shake my head. “We must find a solution. Not just for me. For the others. For Vespyr. There has to be a cure.”

“Of course.” Mortas is nodding. “Which is why we’re going to have to come back to the original issue. Aurora needs to help us with this.”

Aurora.

The familiarity with which he speaks her name makes my hackles rise. For a second, I find myself staring at him through a pink haze that seems to be deepening. I can trace the faint lines of his veins pulsing beneath his skin. Without effort, I know where every artery begins and ends. And I can imagine sinking my teeth into his flesh and drawing deep.

Stop!

“She can work with the others.” My jaw clenches. “Not me.”

“Why not you?”

“Because I can’t fucking be trusted!” I roar. Radella leaps back a foot, and Salem clutches her throat. Mortas’s eyes are glowing, and I see the hint of fangs extending.

“I think you are less likely to harm her than anyone else, my Lord,” Luther says. He’s the only one who hasn’t reacted to my outburst with either fear or fury. “The condition hasn’t taken a grip yet. We can see that you are yourself. And the fact that you are aware of the issue tells us that there’s a way to go before we have to...”

“Have to what?” I fix him with a stare.

“Have to take extra precautions.”

I know what he means. Before they have to lock me up with the others. I won’t let it get to that. I can’t. I have a kingdom to run. People to lead.

People to save.

“I have to think,” I say curtly. Luther nods. The others exchange glances, as if unsure what to do next. “Leave me.” The words are a command.

Without resistance, they turn to the doorway and silently exit. There’s a lot to think about. A lot I have to do. But one thing’s for certain.

I can’t go near Aurora.

Aurora

He told me to leave.

The words keep swirling around in my head as I enter my quarters, a mix of emotions churning within me. Rejection stings like the sharpest thorns, but there's also confusion and concern for Bart. My brows draw together with worry as I try to make sense of it all. The lush growth that surrounds me in these chambers does little to lift my spirits.

Flicking a wave of hair over my shoulder, I move through the room, barely aware of what I'm passing. I can't help but think about what happened between Bart and me. That kiss...so sweet, in spite of all that happened after. I work hard to suppress the vivid memory of the madness in his eyes...the crimson of my blood on his lips.

He could have killed me.

But he didn't.

I keep replaying that thought in my head. I can't forget that part of what happened. I saw the insanity in the eyes of the vampires in the dungeons when I visited. They were defiant at first, then grew wily as they contemplated ways to get me to feed them. And then the bloodlust had come, and there was nothing rational anymore. The need to feed consumed them.

Bart hadn't done that. After that kiss, he'd stared at me sightlessly, as if fighting some internal battle. And then he'd turned and crashed out of the window.

He couldn't hurt me. I'm certain of it.

Which makes it hard to understand why he rejected me so completely once we found him in that clearing. I know that those moments had been tainted by the Curse. But surely he must have known what he'd done, too?

My fingers brush against the soft petals of a blooming flower as I walk past, lost in thought. This place should feel like a sanctuary, but instead, it feels suffocating. I want to scream, to make sense of the chaos inside me, but I know it won't bring any answers.

I need to find a way to reach Bart to heal the rift this incident has deepened between us. A rift I'd thought we'd finally overcome.

He can't deny the Heart Bond. It doesn't matter that he's fought it from the start – probably too pigheaded to let himself succumb – the Bond is there. I can feel it, and I know he can, too. It's been like a clawed hand around my heart since those moments when he first told me to leave all those months ago. I fought it; god knows I did. Even now, Nana Bee might still be searching for a solution. I don't want one. The pull to him is so strong it feels like a part of me. Though I still don't know if it's entirely the reason I could sense him when we were searching. That felt like something more.

As I pace the room, my thoughts grow more frantic, and I barely notice Vidarok's entrance until he's just a few feet away from me. He's always so loyal to me, standing like a steadfast protector. But today, something in his demeanor is different. His brows are furrowed as he watches me with a mix of concern and annoyance.

“You're angry.” I stop pacing and look at him.

A muscle flickers in his huge, square jaw. “Would you blame me? It is my duty to protect you, my Lady. You made that impossible today. If things had gone differently—”

“I was fine.” I jut my own jaw out. But part of me is aware that my defiance is misguided. I could have been in real trouble if Bartholomew hadn't been able to control himself. I still don't understand that part. “The Overlord didn't harm me.”

“But he could have. If not in those moments when he turned on you, then when he could have attacked after, when you rushed off on that foolish mission to save him.” His voice is gruff. It’s always gruff, but now, it’s a low, snarling rumble. I’ve never seen him this upset.

Still, I can’t let him chastise me like a child. “It was not a foolish mission.” I fold my arms over my chest. “We had to find him—”

“You could have waited for me!” he barks.

“No!” I snap back. “Time was of the essence. We had to go immediately, and somehow...” I frown a little because if he questions me on this, I still have no answers. “Somehow, I knew how to find him.”

Vidarok takes a deep breath, and I sense that he’s composing himself. “Lady Aurora, I know you’re worried about the Overlord, but he’s in good hands. You need to focus on your own well-being and your duties as ruler of Meadowside.”

His words sting like a slap to the face. How can he expect me to simply forget what happened? Bart is not just some stranger; he’s bound to me, and I can’t ignore the pain he’s in. My heart clenches at the thought of him pushing me away. I refuse to let Vidarok’s disapproval deter me.

“Vidarok, you don’t understand,” I say, my voice wavering. “He didn’t hurt me, and I need to help him. We’re connected, and I can’t just pretend that doesn’t matter.”

“Your Highness,” Vidarok replies, his tone stern, “your first responsibility is to your kingdom. This infatuation with the vampire king has clouded your judgment.”

Infatuation?

“This is no infatuation, Vidarok! We share a Heart Bond. Perhaps this is beyond your understanding, but it’s very real, I assure you.” My cheeks flush with anger and indignation, but I force myself to remain calm. It’s not like Vidarok to question me so blatantly, and I know he’s only

doing it out of concern. But that doesn't mean I have to agree with him.

“But your people—”

“My loyalty to my people and my kingdom has never wavered,” I retort. “But part of being a ruler means following my heart and trusting my instincts. And right now, my heart tells me that I must help Bart.”

Vidarok's eyes bore into mine, searching for any sign of doubt or weakness. But he won't find any. I've made up my mind. With The Hunger gone, my kingdom is stable, and my people are happy. I have more than enough advisors in place to ensure the smooth running of the realm if I need to take some time to resolve things in my life. Besides, I'm never more than a portal-trip away if I'm needed. Vidarok needs to see that his concern is misplaced.

“You're walking a difficult path,” he says.

“Who said love was easy?” *Love*. The word warms me. “You don't give up on people just because things get difficult. You fight, Vidarok! You fight with all your heart.” I think of the man and how tortured he looked when we found him. “Bartholomew is dealing with more than anyone should have to go through. He needs me now.”

Even if he won't see it yet.

I don't say that.

“There's 'difficult,' and then there is...this.” Vidarok sweeps an arm across the sprawling grounds in the direction of Bart's towering home. “Why would you put yourself through this, my Lady? This Curse?” A thick curl of dark hair falls onto his forehead as he shakes his head. He swipes it back with a slab-like hand.

“You think we get to choose the trials we face?” I glare at him. “You think I can go out and decide if the challenge I'm facing will suit me before I commit to it?” I scoff. “Life doesn't work like that. You take what you're dealt, and you work with it. And when it comes to matters of the heart, that's more important than ever.”

“But you have a choice!” His eyes are wide. “Why would you choose this?”

“Choice? You think I have a choice?” I snort. “You truly don’t understand, do you, Vidarok?” My shoulders lift into a shrug. “Maybe Heart Bonds don’t exist where you come from. Maybe Orcs are different. But I’m certain that there’s something in your culture that works the same. And then, your day will come, and you will understand.” I fold my arms over my chest once more.

The pair of us stand, eyes locked for long moments. I know he doesn’t want to back down, and I guess I can’t blame him; his whole life has been dedicated to my care. But I won’t back down, either. My mate is in trouble. I glare at the towering Orc guard before me.

“All right,” Vidarok finally rumbles, his dark hair falling into his eyes yet again as he looks away. He doesn’t sweep it back this time. I guess he’s unsettled. “But know this, my Lady: I will not stand idly by if your actions put you or your people in danger.”

“And I would never expect you to.” I straighten my shoulders when I hear myself soften. I can’t let him order me around. “But trust me, Vidarok. I know what I’m doing.”

He still doesn’t look convinced.

“My Lady?” Lily emerges through the doorway. “I heard raised voices. Is everything okay?” She stares from me to Vidarok and back again. His face is expressionless, but his annoyance is practically rippling from him.

“Everything is fine, Lily,” I assure her, trying to sound calmer than I feel. “Vidarok and I were just *discussing*...recent events.”

“Ah.” Lily nods, a knowing glint in her eyes. She shoots Vidarok a pointed look, then turns back to me with a supportive smile. “How is the Overlord, my Lady?”

“He is...as well as can be expected.” I hope he is, at any rate. At least he was lucid when we found him. That should count for something.

“And the...uh...Curse, my Lady?” Lily’s eyes are wide. Meanwhile, Vidarok’s eyes grow narrow. He’s seriously pissed with me. Or maybe with the situation. I left Meadowside in such a hurry – which was a mistake. Maybe part of me was just so relieved that Bart seemed to be warming to the idea of being with me.

Or maybe that’s simply what I wanted to believe.

“We’ll deal with the Curse. We already have a handle on it.” It’s an exaggeration. But we’ve learned to identify it. That’s a start.

“There, you see?” Lily turns to Vidarok. “The princess wouldn’t put herself at risk.”

“Is that true, my Lady?” Vidarok turns to me. He raises an eyebrow. I look at the floor. “Is it? Because the palace staff have been talking.”

I huff out a breath. “Okay, there was an incident.” I shrug as if it was no big deal. “A misunderstanding. But it all ended well.”

“What kind of incident, my Lady?” Lily looks at me. Vidarok tilts his head, as if daring me to go on. I’m pretty sure he knows more than he’s admitted.

“The Overlord had...a turn. After we arrived.”

“A turn.” Vidarok scoffs.

“What do you mean?” Lily looks confused.

“The Overlord went into a bloodlust and nearly drained our ruler; that’s what happened!” Vidarok snaps the words out.

Lily gasps. “I heard that he’d been stricken, but not that you’d been in danger, my Lady!”

“I was never in any danger,” I lie. “He was able to control himself.” I glare at Vidarok, who remains impassive. “And now, it’s my duty to help find a cure.”

Vidarok grunts, crossing his arms over his broad chest. “I still believe your priorities should lie with your kingdom, my Lady,” he says to me, his voice low but insistent.

I breathe out before answering because this is growing tiresome. “I appreciate your concern, but this is my decision to make. And I choose to help Bart. He needs me, and I won’t abandon him.”

“Your loyalty to him is admirable,” Lily interjects, clearly hoping to diffuse the tension. “And we must remember the pressure of the Heart Bond, Vidarok,” she addresses him. “Our lady has a destiny to fulfill.”

“Thank you, Lily.” I give her a grateful smile, appreciating her unwavering support.

“How can a Heart Bond exist with a creature who is doomed?” Vidarok’s words punch a hole in my heart. Why does he insist on choosing this course?

“He is not doomed!” I round on him. “We may not have found a cure yet, but I refuse to give up. He is my mate! Do not forget that! And do not forget your place.”

“Of course, my Lady. I understand.” Vidarok looks like he doesn’t understand at all. But he knows better than to push this further.

“Our Lady knows what she is doing, Vidarok.” Lily’s smile is gentle. My own expression remains stormy. My security chief is touching on questions I don’t have the answers to.

“We’ll find a cure.” My voice is firm. “They brought me here because I know this thing better than anyone. I held off The Hunger when it threatened Autumnburn. I found a way to identify the Curse when I came to Ryacyn. And I can do this, too. We’ll find a cure, and everything is going to work out.”

Lily smiles encouragingly, and Vidarok gives a nod. And I say nothing because as firmly as I keep saying this, I’m not sure it’s true. I know I have to save him, but I have no idea what I need to do to make that happen.

What if I can’t do it?

What if he dies because I can’t?

Bartholomew

The sunlight filters through the heavy drapes, streaming in like golden tendrils. It brushes my face, warming my skin as I lounge on the sofa, trying to escape the storm within me. The Curse is gnawing at my mind, ripping away my sense of security and replacing it with fear.

It's a feeling I'm not used to.

Time is running out for me, but more importantly, I'll leave my people leaderless. Next in line to the throne is Vespyr, and she's clearly not fit for the role. Our realm is already in turmoil with all that's going on. With me gone, there'll be chaos.

Not to mention that Aurora's safety is at stake, and it's all because of me.

Speaking of Aurora...I feel an odd sensation that she's near.

I hear her footsteps before she enters the room, soft and almost soundless. She could be invisible, and it wouldn't make a difference. I can feel her presence like a hand on my heart.

She walks quietly toward me, the scent of wildflowers clinging to her – goddamn intoxicating. My muscles tense, ready to recoil from her touch if she reaches out. I already know that she wants to talk, but I need distance. If only I could put miles between us, maybe then she'd be safe.

“Hey,” she murmurs, stopping a few feet from me, probably remembering how I sent her away when they found me. “You're up early.”

“Couldn’t sleep,” I mutter, avoiding her gaze. Her eyes are pools of green, like the earth after rain: verdant and full of life. But I don’t dare look into them, fearing what I’ll see reflected back at me.

“Neither could I.” Her voice is soft, hesitant.

“Try harder.” I flick a look at her. “You shouldn’t be here.”

“Bart, we need to talk about this. Whatever it is you’re going through, I want to help.”

“Help?” A bitter laugh escapes my lips. “Aurora, you have no idea what you’re getting yourself into. You should stay far away from me.”

“Like hell, I will.” There’s that stubbornness I remember, the fire in her voice that once made me admire her even more. Now, it just worries me. “We’re connected by the Heart Bond, Bart. That means I’m already involved, whether you like it or not.”

“Exactly! The fucking Heart Bond! It’s just making things worse.” My self-loathing bubbles to the surface, threatening to spill over. “Aurora, I’m a danger to you. You need to understand that.”

“I’ll never understand because it’s not true, Bart.” Her tone is pleading, desperate even. “Don’t push me away. Let me help you.”

“Help?” The word comes out as a growl. “You really think you can help me with this Curse? What if I lose control, Aurora? What then?”

“You won’t,” she insists, determination etched into her features. “You had the chance before, and you didn’t hurt me.”

“Dammit, Aurora!” My temper snaps, and I spring to my feet, fists clenched at my sides. Why is she so determined to cling to this ridiculous illusion? “You don’t get it! This isn’t some fairy tale where everything works out in the end. I’m not some prince you can save. I’m a monster—” I choke on the words, swallowing hard. “And I can’t let you anywhere near me.”

“Is that what you really want, Bart?” she asks, pain flickering across her face. “For me to leave you alone?”

“More than anything,” I rasp. It’s a lie. It’s the last thing I want. But it’s what she needs.

“I don’t believe you.” Her eyes are wide, catching flecks of gold from the sunshine. She’s so fucking lovely it hurts. “You came for me in Autumnburn. And that kiss... You know where we were going before you...before the Curse took you. We were ready to fulfill our Bond.”

“I took you from Autumnburn because we needed your help. You and I...” I twirl a finger between us. “We were going nowhere, Aurora! It was a moment of weakness, and if it had gone any further, we’d be in even more shit than we already are. Taking your blood would have bound us and—”

“Dammit, Bart! We’re already bound! The Heart Bond chose you for me. I refuse to let you ignore that.”

“It’s not up to me anymore, Aurora.” I feel my chest deflate as I try not to think of all that I’m about to lose. My kingdom. My world. This woman. My life.

“Maybe it’s not up to you,” Aurora says, her voice fierce with determination. “But I won’t just stand by and watch you suffer. We’ll find a way to control this thing. I held off The Hunger in Autumnburn. I found a way to identify the Curse faster than any of your team before me. I can find a cure. I *can*, Bart!”

Her words are like fire, igniting a spark of hope within me. Maybe she’s right. Maybe we can fight this. But the weight of responsibility and the fear of hurting her still hang heavily on my shoulders.

“Look, I know it’s hard for you to let me in, but this isn’t just about you anymore. My world is connected to yours because of the Heart Bond. And the people who look up to us...they need us, Bart. Your people need you.”

Her words resonate with something within me. I’ve been agonizing over this very thing. Am I being foolish by trying to protect her from myself when this could be the only

way out? I clench my jaw. As much as I want to push her away, I can't deny the fact that our worlds are intertwined. It feels like an impossible choice: protect her by keeping her at arm's length or allow her to try to help me and risk losing her completely.

"You don't know what I could do to you if I lose control again. I couldn't live with myself." My voice is hoarse.

Aurora steps closer, her emerald eyes locked onto mine. "And you think I could live with myself if I didn't try to help you? The thought of losing you, of seeing you become something you're not...that's what terrifies me." I shake my head, about to speak, but she holds up her hand. "You *could* have killed me, Bart. You didn't! You need to remember that."

"How long will that last, Aurora? That ability to restrain myself? It's going to get worse. We both know that. It's just a matter of how fast it will happen."

"It might not happen at all!" Her expression is so damned earnest I almost believe it myself. For a moment, I feel my resolve wavering. Maybe...just maybe, I can do this.

No, Bellingham!

There's an even greater chance that I'll lose all control and snap. That beast in the forest is proof of that. The deer. I don't even remember hunting it down. Until they found its carcass, I'd been convinced I'd stopped myself from giving chase.

"Dammit, Aurora," I curse under my breath, glancing away from her determined gaze, "I just... I can't risk it. I won't."

"Risk?" Aurora crosses her arms defiantly, a fire burning in her eyes. "What about the risk of you not being able to control this Curse because you're too stubborn to let me help you? What happens to your kingdom, then? To your people?"

"For fuck's sake!" My voice rises, frustration building within me. "You don't understand what I'm going through. No one does. Not even me! And that's what scares me the most."

“Then let me help you understand it!” she exclaims, her face flushed with emotion. “Please, Bart,” she whispers softly, her voice laced with desperation. “Don’t push me away. Not again.”

“Maybe that’s exactly what I need to do,” I mumble, feeling my heart crack as I say the words. “To keep you safe.”

“From what? From you?” She scoffs, her frustration growing. “If you think I’ll just walk away, you’re dead wrong. I’m stronger than you give me credit for, Bart. Don’t underestimate me.”

“Or overestimate myself,” I add bitterly, knowing that despite her determination, she may not be enough to save me from the darkness consuming me. At least not without putting herself in danger.

“I’m not giving up on you. No matter how hard you try to push me away.” She steps up closer, and everything inside me wants to reach out to her. I don’t. As much as I want to pull her to me, I can’t allow myself to. Instead, I steel myself against her.

Aurora’s eyes shimmer with unshed tears, but she doesn’t back down. Her determination is as fierce as the fire in her hair, and I can’t help but admire her strength. Still, I can’t change my mind, either, and I’m sure she can sense it on me.

“We’re connected for a reason, Bart. The Heart Bond isn’t just some random enchantment. It means something, and we owe it to ourselves to see this through.”

“Even if it ends us both?” My throat is tight with the knowledge that all of this is going to end before it even begins.

“It won’t.” She offers me a brave smile. I shake my head yet again. It can’t happen. But she’s not giving up. Closing the distance between us, she lifts her hand and cups my cheek with her palm. For a second, I shut my eyes and feel her warmth seeping into my cool skin.

The temptation to lean into her touch is almost too strong. I can’t risk it; I can’t let myself be weak.

“Please, Aurora,” I whisper through gritted teeth, forcing my eyes open to meet her gaze.

“We can do this, Bart.” She gazes up at me, her thumb gently brushing against my cheekbone. “You just have to trust me. And yourself.”

My heart aches with the desire to do just that, but my fear for her safety overpowers everything else. With a surge of strength I didn’t know I had, I reach up and grasp her wrist, pushing her hand away from my face. The hurt in her eyes is almost unbearable, and I can see the tears threatening to spill over.

“Aurora, I can’t,” I say firmly, fighting to keep my voice steady.

But maybe...just maybe...

“Fine,” she says with a choked sob when I say nothing further. I don’t trust myself to speak because I’m worried I might change my mind. “If that’s what you want.” She turns away quickly, her long red hair cascading down her back like a waterfall of fire. As she walks toward the door, I see her shoulders shake, and my heart twists painfully. I know that she’s hiding her tears as best she can, but I force myself to remain still, rooted to the spot.

It kills me to watch her go. But she’s better off without me and my Curse, even if it means living in a world without her.

Aurora

I can feel his eyes on me as I walk away, my vision blurred by the tears I'm desperately trying to hold back. Each step takes monumental effort, as if I'm dragging my feet through quicksand. A sob claws at my throat, but I swallow it down hard. I refuse to let him see me break, even as his rejection shreds my heart.

Reaching the doorway, I pause for the briefest moment. Maybe he'll call out to me, tell me it was all a mistake. That the fear and doubt clouding his mind made him push me away, but now he sees reason. I wait, barely breathing, praying for his voice.

It doesn't come.

The silence is deafening, echoing in my ears along with my pounding heartbeat. I bite my lip, steadying myself, and continue. The door clicks softly behind me, a quiet punctuation mark on this painful chapter between us.

Once I'm down the hall, far from his suite, I lean my back against the cool stone wall and fight back the tears. They're not just for myself and the rejection I feel – I'm hurting for him. For the good man trapped beneath the Curse slowly taking hold of him. He doesn't deserve this agony, this loss of self. And I'll be damned if I'll let it consume him completely.

Bart told me to stay away, said it wasn't safe for me. But he's wrong. I know he would never intentionally hurt me, Curse or not. When I looked into his golden eyes just now,

past the torment swirling within, I saw the man I know is still in there. And I'm not about to abandon him.

I roughly dash a lone tear from my cheek, taking a deep, steadying breath. Bart wants me to walk away? We'll see about that. I have no intention of actually leaving him to battle this alone.

Quietly, I make my way back to my chambers, my mind racing. Bart may have supernatural healing abilities, but when it comes to emotional wounds, he's as vulnerable as any man. And the pain I'd seen in his eyes just now confirmed he's hurting badly. I need to find a way to get through to him, to make him see reason.

What do I do, Mother Earth?

I know that the Bond will keep us together, but I never expected things to be this damned hard. I can't force my help on him. That will just make him retreat further. I need to be smart about this. Subtle. I need to have a plan.

By the time I reach my rooms, the spark of determination within me has grown into a flame. One way or another, I will find a way to do this. But first, I need to speak with the one person I know will support me unconditionally: Lily.

As if reading my thoughts, Lily appears around the corner, nearly bumping into me. "Oh! My Lady!" She blinks in surprise. "I was just coming to check on you."

I manage a small smile. "Your timing is perfect. Will you walk with me?"

Lily falls into step beside me, her blue eyes studying me intently. She's always been perceptive, seeming to know my thoughts and moods instinctively. Now is no different.

"You spoke with the Overlord," she says. It's not a question.

I nod, keeping my gaze focused ahead. "I did. It was... difficult."

Lily makes a sympathetic noise in her throat. “Judging by your reddened eyes, I’d say difficult is putting it mildly. What happened, my Lady?”

Despite my resolve, I feel a lump form in my throat as I recall the pain in Bart’s eyes. “He is pushing me away, convinced it’s for my own safety,” I explain, my voice strained. “He’s worried about what might happen if he loses control.”

“But you don’t believe he would hurt you.” Again, it’s a statement more than a question from Lily. She knows me too well.

“No, I don’t,” I say firmly. “At least not intentionally. But he’s so worried about protecting me that he can’t see we’re stronger together. I could help him if he’d just let me in.”

Lily considers this, absently tucking a strand of strawberry-blond hair behind one delicately pointed ear. “Men can be foolishly noble when it comes to protecting the women they care for,” she muses. She’s right. He’s doing this because he cares for me. Remembering that will make it easier. Her eyes meet mine, a hint of a smile playing on her lips. “But we’re not nearly as breakable as they think.”

I can’t help but chuckle at that. “No, we most certainly are not.” Taking a deep breath, I continue, “Which is why I’ve decided not to give up on Bart. He believes he succeeded in pushing me away, but...”

“But you have no intention of actually giving up,” Lily finishes with a knowing look.

“Exactly.” I smile gratefully at her quick understanding. “The trouble is getting close to him again without triggering those protective instincts. I was hoping you might have some ideas.”

Lily taps her chin thoughtfully as we walk. “Well, since a direct approach seems unwise, perhaps something more subtle is needed. Perhaps you shouldn’t be doing this alone.”

I frown. “But who else could help?”

“There are many, my Lady.” Lily nods. “Our Grand Father Silverwing is very wise. And King Nightfall would be very happy to see that all is well with the vampires.”

I’m not so sure about that after all that’s happened these past months. But Nightfall has always been a level-headed man. “If nothing else, I’m sure they could give me some fresh ideas.” I nod thoughtfully.

“You’ve been trying to do this all alone, Lady Aurora.” Lily rests a little hand on my arm. “It shouldn’t have to be that way. We’ve seen how much this has weighed on you – Vidarok and I. We’ve been worried.”

“Vidarok...” I mutter, feeling my lips turn down. He’d been quite blunt in his disapproval during our last conversation. But if I’m honest with myself, his words came from a place of concern. I have good people around me. I should be reaching out for their help instead of trying to find a cure for this thing all by myself.

“You’re absolutely right.” I pull Lily into a quick, grateful hug. “Thank you, my friend. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“You’d have to dress yourself, for a start.” Lily gives an impish grin.

I swat her shoulder playfully; my heart is already feeling lighter. “When have I ever needed you to dress me, Lily?”

“Never. But you never know!” Her eyes twinkle for a moment before her expression grows more serious. “I just want to see you happy, my Lady. We all do. And I know in my heart that your happiness lies with the Overlord, Curse or no Curse. The Heart Bond is never wrong.”

It’s such a relief to hear her say that; Bart has fought it so consistently, it’s almost felt like I’ve been foolish to keep raising it. But unless Nana Bee has found a way around it, Bartholomew Bellingham is stuck with me. He may try to shut

me out, but I will find a way back to him. Bit by bit, if I must. I wasn't raised to be a quitter.

Several hours later, I'm back in my chambers after speaking with Nightfall and dear Silverwing. It seems that Lily wasn't the only one who's been thinking that I can't tackle this alone.

"We have something to share," Nightfall had said enigmatically. Now, I'm eager to learn more. And I hope that the vampires will be as enthusiastic. So far, they've all been open to most of my ideas – with the exception of Bart, who is probably the most pigheaded man I've ever met.

That will have to change!

Filled with determination, I make my way to the Council Chambers. I asked Luther to gather the advisors so we can discuss the next steps. The large, circular room is buzzing with quiet activity when I arrive.

Bart stands stiffly near the tall, arched windows, not interacting with the others. His face is stoic, but I can see the tension in his posture.

I don't get a chance to greet the others and find a seat because there's a flurry as the doors swing open, and Nightfall strides in with Grand Father Silverwing close behind.

"Aurora!" Nightfall's smile is warm. He sweeps across the room, stops in front of me, and takes my hands in his. "It is good to see you well. There has been talk of an incident?" His green eyes meet mine, full of concern.

I wave a hand. "A trifling matter, my Lord. Nothing of consequence." I feel several pairs of eyes swivel to fix upon me. Bart among them...because obviously, I'm not being completely honest with my king. But I don't feel like this is the time to be delving into what might become a tricky topic.

"Glad to hear it," says Nightfall, though he doesn't look convinced. Word of Bartholomew's "lapse" has been kept under wraps, but as I learned from Vidarok, there has been talk. Who knows what my king might have heard by now?

Before he can begin questioning me, I continue. “There is much to discuss.” I turn to face the others. “My lords and ladies, as you can see, King Nightfall and our Grand Father Silverwing will be honoring us with their presence today.” All of the vampire advisors incline their heads. Luther steps forward into a sweeping bow, while Salem and Radella curtsy. Mortas dips his head. But Bart remains unmoving.

Be polite, you ass!

Clearing my throat, I sweep an arm toward the large, round table, urging Nightfall and Silverwing to take a seat. Once they’re comfortable, I sit, too, and the others follow suit, with Bartholomew sinking into the royal seat that dominates the table. His expression is dark.

“Thank you all for coming.” I look around at everyone, trying not to linger on Bart. “I know there are concerns about the political climate,” I skirt over the issue of the war that almost happened between the vampires and the Fae, “but right now, we must remain focused on finding a way to stop this Curse.”

“Hear, hear,” Silverwing agrees in his gravelly voice. “Dark forces are at work. We must uncover their secrets.”

“Secrets that some may prefer remain hidden,” Nightfall adds darkly. His penetrating gaze sweeps over the vampires gathered.

Luther bristles. “If you are implying we would keep anything from you—”

I cringe a little because not only is it true, but right now, I’m keeping secrets from my king myself.

“I think that’s rich. How long did you withhold information about the vampire attacks before it was impossible to keep them secret anymore?” Nightfall glares at him.

“It was none of your concern at the time,” Mortas snaps. I’ve noticed that he’s quick to get into confrontations, and it’s the last thing we need right now.

“Can we let bygones be bygones?” I raise my hands placatingly. “Accusations will get us nowhere. We need to put

our heads together. Looking for a cure for the vampire Curse has become a matter of paramount importance, and I'm hoping that we can pool our resources to bring us closer to a solution."

"You're right. Of course," Nightfall mutters.

I smile at him. "So let's start by looking at what has been uncovered so far. As you know, the Curse brings with it varying powers that we haven't yet determined but need to be considered as a threat. However, we now know how to identify those who are afflicted by looking for the silver ring around their irises." I turn my focus to Bart. "Grand Master Bellingham, have there been any further developments that could provide more insight?" It's so hard to speak to him so formally, but right now, I know it's necessary.

Bart's jaw clenches, the muscles feathering. "Only that the Curse ultimately results in madness and the death of those afflicted. It was the reason Master Luther advised me to ask you to return." He's not looking at me as he says it, but his eyes flash with something I can't read. Probably guilt. He needs to let that go. "There's no pattern we can determine," he adds.

Murmurs ripple around the table. "It is becoming of vital importance that we get to the bottom of this," Luther says. "Our people are dying."

"You mean it wasn't vitally important when the ones who were dying were merely those your people were slaughtering?" Nightfall narrows his eyes on Luther.

"That was never the case!" Mortas barks. I see Nightfall's expression grow thunderous.

I raise a hand. "King Nightfall, the vampire realm has always taken this threat very seriously. You know that as well as I do. We wouldn't have been assisting them otherwise. You've been worried. We all have." I fix him with a firm look and see him ease back slightly. I know he didn't come here for a fight, but tensions have been running high. The vampire Curse could have far-reaching consequences. Finding a cure is in all of our best interests.

“If I may, Lady Aurora.” Silverwing leans forward, hands folded before him. “You are quite right in believing that we are concerned. It’s why King Nightfall and I have taken some time to investigate this matter further. With the nature of this Curse being so similar to The Hunger, it occurred to us that there might be something written about it in our libraries.”

“That’s good thinking.” I smile at the grizzled Elder. He’s always been a voice of reason. “Did you find anything?”

“While searching our archives, the king and I uncovered an ancient Fae text that was very curious to me.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Go on.”

“I brought it with us.” Silverwing reaches into his softly faded robes. When he extracts his hand, he’s holding a small, cylindrical object, a tube of some sort. Pulling off a cap at one end, he empties the contents onto the table before him. It’s a fragmented scrap of parchment, old and frayed around the edges, as if it has been rolled and unrolled many times. From where I’m sitting across the table from him, the ink looks faded but still legible. There are small runes or symbols scattered throughout the text that seem to shimmer in the light.

“It is in the Old Language, but I can still do a passible translation. It speaks of a ‘scourge of silver’ that could turn Day into endless Night.” Silverwing looks around at those at the table. He clears his throat and begins to read from the parchment. “‘When the moon is in the sky, three days before the night of endless darkness, a great scourge of silver will fall from the heavens, and all Day will become Night. This will bring a curse upon anyone who dares challenge its power, damning them for eternity in a form of darkness unseen before. A darkness that will cling to their souls and bring death with it. Only a chosen one, blessed by both Night and Day, can break this Curse and restore balance to our realm once more.’”

The room is utterly quiet as Silverwing finishes reading. He meets my gaze. “We believe it refers to this Curse.”

“Most ominous,” Radella murmurs. The others nod uneasily.

“There’s more.” Silverwing is still looking at me. “I have a theory.” He glances toward Nightfall, who shrugs. Whatever this theory is, Silverwing seems more invested in it. “I believe this ‘Day’ and ‘Night’ could be you and the Overlord, my Lady. The Day,” he smiles at me, “and the Night.” He looks over at Bart, who says nothing.

I blink in surprise. Me and Bart, bound as one by the Heart Bond? Excitement courses through me. “Did it say anything else? Any details at all?”

Silverwing shakes his head regretfully. “No, the rest is too damaged. But we felt it critical you know of the prophecy’s existence.”

“It seems like a stretch.” Bart’s voice is worryingly hoarse. I shoot a quick look at him, but there’s no sign of the damning silver rings.

“Not really,” Nightfall says. “After all, my queen and I were able to turn back The Hunger with our union. Why not you and Aurora?”

“I think it bears examination,” says Luther.

“Absolutely. This changes things.” I lean forward intently, mind whirring. “If Bart and I are meant to work together to stop this Curse, it gives me even more reason to help find answers.”

Bart remains silent. The others begin talking animatedly among themselves, energized by the glimmer of hope from the ancient prophecy.

“It might be possible, my Lady. If anyone could see it through, it would be you.” Silverwing smiles, and I feel myself warming. He’s always such a positive force.

Before he can go on, Mortas speaks up gravely. “Sadly, answers may come too late for some. This Curse...it progresses rapidly. Almost like it has a life force of its own that gets more ruthless with each new case. We lost two more of those in the dungeons today. Their descent into madness is accelerating much faster than previous victims.”

His words send a ripple of apprehension down my spine. The others fall silent, the bleak truth sinking in. We're in a race against time, and right now, the darkness feels like it's winning.

Bart's face tightens, his lips a thin line.

"The Curse progresses more rapidly now?" Nightfall's brow is furrowed. He levels a look at Bart. "How much time do you estimate your sister has before she meets the same fate?"

Bart's jaw clenches, a muscle twitching there. "It's impossible to say. Vespyr's symptoms have been inconsistent."

"We might be able to find more information in our libraries," says Silverwing, "but it's difficult to know what to look for. Is there anything else you can tell us that might help? Any scrap of information could prove useful. Perhaps one of your afflicted could be convinced to cooperate?"

Bart hesitates, avoiding my gaze. The tension radiating off him is palpable. Finally, he turns to Nightfall and Silverwing. "I should have told you this earlier. But the truth is...I am afflicted with the Curse as well."

Nightfall surges to his feet, dark hair flying as he stares Bart down. "What?!" he barks.

"I have it." Bart's words are simple, but the response they draw is anything but. Nightfall looks fit to explode.

"Explain this! Are you saying you've put us in danger by bringing us all here?" His eyes blaze with fury. "Lady Aurora? You took her under false pretenses and—"

Bart stands tall, holding Nightfall's enraged stare. "It manifested after I came for her. Believe me, I tried to send her away once I knew." His eyes meet mine. "For her safety."

"You knew about this, and you never told me?" Nightfall spins to look at me.

"We've only just found out, my Lord. Plus, I knew it had to be handled at the right time."

“The right time would have been immediately, dammit!” he snaps.

Silverwing seems shocked but regains his composure. He raises a hand. “There has clearly been a grave misunderstanding, King Nightfall. But the princess came of her own volition to help when no other would.” He levels a stern look at Nightfall until he sits, fists clenched.

“Be that as it may, she cannot remain here now that we know the truth,” Nightfall growls. He turns his eyes to me. “Aurora, you must return home before the Curse takes a firmer hold of him. I won’t put you at risk.”

“No!” My protest is fierce. I’m not some child they can order around at will. “The prophecy says we’re meant to face this together.”

Nightfall and Silverwing exchange a grave look. “Your king is right, my Lady,” our Grand Father says gently. His eyes hold sorrow. I shake my head.

“I will give you the night to gather your things, Aurora.” It’s Nightfall again. “I know we came here to work with the vampires, but this...this puts an entirely new spin on things.” He looks over at Bartholomew, who’s returned to his previous silence. “How do you know we can trust you, vampire?”

Bart shrugs. “You can’t. I have no idea what I’m capable of.”

I wish he’d answered differently because I can see from my king’s expression that he’s just made up his mind.

“That settles it.” Nightfall looks back at me. “You’re coming home. I will hear no argument.”

“But—”

“As your king, I command it!” he snaps. I stare at him in shock. I’ve never heard him speak to me this way. Frankly, I think he’s as surprised at his own fervor as I am, but he’s clearly made up his mind. “I’m sorry, Aurora. It has to be this way. You have the night to make your preparations. Then I want you out of here.”

Bartholomew

All is silent as I stare down at the gardens, mesmerized by their secrets and alluring beauty. There's something calming about looking out over them; it's as if Nature herself is speaking to me in a language I can understand. Aurora's language. The language of things that grow...things that are alive. And I need to be surrounded by it right now – now that I feel so dead inside.

Her king is right. It's what I've been telling her to do since the moment I knew what I was. And yet, it still made my chest tighten to hear him order Aurora out of Ryacyn.

It's for the best...

Though if I'm honest with myself, there have been moments when I have doubted that. And when they'd spoken of the prophecy...that had pulled at something in me.

Night and day.

Could it be true?

As my thoughts spin wildly, the room begins to grow smaller around me. I need to breathe. Before I know what I'm doing, I'm moving toward the stairs that lead down into the garden.

The night air is still, not a breath of wind stirring the flowering trees that surround me. It does nothing to calm the storm that rages within. Being near Aurora has been like basking in the warmth of the sun, even as it burns me. I know I should pull away, for both our sakes, but I am drawn to her light like a doomed moth.

When did you become so emotional, Bellingham?

Maybe when my world came crashing down around me. I carry a death sentence. One that threatens to take others with it. Even if the Fae believe they can find a solution, there's no guarantee of it. And there's little chance of it happening before I descend into the madness that's taking the others.

Rubbing a hand over my eyes, I draw in the air. I'm not finding the comfort I was hoping for. These gardens were my sanctuary once. Now, they mock me with their beauty, reminding me of all I stand to lose. Not just my kingdom, my people...but her. My ray of sunshine in the encroaching darkness.

Aurora.

Even her name means sunrise.

I walk aimlessly, not paying attention to where I'm going until a noise has me stopping in my tracks.

I know it's her. I can scent her. Smell the sweet honey of the blood in her veins.

I clench my jaw and bunch my fists. The last time I picked up a blood-scent, I killed something.

Aurora emerges between the trees like a vision, her pale skin glowing in the moonlight, red hair tumbling over her shoulders. My heart constricts at the sight. I don't know why I'm surprised to see her; if I'm honest with myself, my trail has taken me close to the quarters she and her staff have taken up residence in.

You wanted this...

"Bart." She looks as haunted as I feel, her luminescent eyes conflicted.

I should leave. Spare us both the agony of this encounter. But my feet remain rooted as she slowly approaches.

"You should not have come here," I rasp, desperation sharpening my tone.

“Somehow, I think you were the one who came to me.” Aurora halts, moonbeams caught in her hair like a silver crown.

Fuck, she's beautiful.

But I shrug, not wanting to admit she's right.

She keeps speaking. “Nightfall can't make me go, you know.” Her jaw sets. “He may be my king, but I have autonomy. And I have no intention of going, Bart. We're meant to fight the Curse together. The Heart Bond—”

I clench my fists, the effort of holding back almost painful. “You put too much faith in fate and prophecy. This bond between us...it means nothing now. Just an enchantment.”

Hurt flickers in her eyes. “An enchantment? How can you say that? I've explained what it means to me. To my kind. I didn't just pick you on a whim or put a spell on you. We have been fated.” She moves closer, as if she's unaware of the danger. “I know you feel it, Bartholomew. The connection we share.”

My muscles go taut, like those of a cornered beast poised to strike. Because that's what I am now – a beast who could attack. “What I feel doesn't matter! Don't you understand? The Curse has taken hold. I could hurt you, Aurora. I won't take that risk.” I'm starting to feel like it's all I ever say.

Fuck, if she'd listen to me, I wouldn't have to!

Aurora lifts her chin, undaunted. “If you truly believed you'd harm me, you would have left the moment I appeared. And yet...” She gestures at the space still separating us. “Here we are.”

Her boldness sparks irritation and admiration in equal measure. She thinks she knows me so well, that she can anticipate my demons. And perhaps she's right. I should run into the night before I surrender to temptation. But my traitorous feet remain planted.

“Please, Bart.” Aurora’s voice softens, thick with emotion. “We can do this.”

She reaches out as if to touch my cheek. Without thinking, my hand darts up to grab her slender wrist, stopping just short of holding too firmly. Her skin is warm, pulse racing beneath my fingertips. I stare at where my fingers encircle her arm tightly, horrified by my loss of control. Slowly, I release her.

Her lips part as she stares up at me. “If you truly want me to leave, then look in my eyes and say it.”

Our gazes lock. Her emerald eyes feel like they’re laying me bare. I open my mouth to speak the words – it’s for her own good – but I falter. Because in this moment of truth, I can’t bring myself to send her away.

I don’t want to.

In the breath between heartbeats, something shifts. The look in Aurora’s eyes changes, softening with longing. Or perhaps that’s just a mirror of my own desire. Without thinking, I crush her against me. My face hovers over hers for a moment as I take her in, and then our lips crash together.

By Blood, Bellingham! What are you doing?

But I ignore the voice in my head when she responds instantly, returning the kiss with a passion that steals my breath. For these stolen moments, nothing else exists but the taste of her mouth and the warmth of her body pressed to mine. I am lost, drowning in her.

The kiss intensifies, the flavor of her on my tongue sweet and wild, like forbidden fruit. I can feel her lips, soft and pliant and so damned sensual. I slide my arms around her waist and pull her to me firmly, her breasts flattening against my chest.

So soft...

“Mmm...” she murmurs into my mouth, her breath fluttering over my cheek. She slides her hands up my shoulders, fingertips trailing up my neck before sliding into my hair. “I want you so much.” The words move over my lips,

and temptation never tasted so fucking good. My body is alive with electricity, hardening against her, every nerve sparking with desire as she moves against me. I nip at her lip, and she gasps...

For a second, I freeze, but she cups my face in her hands.

“It’s okay,” she whispers. “You’re still you.” The moonlight traces the curve of her lips as she smiles. “Your eyes...I can tell when the Curse comes.”

As she says it, I realize it’s true. The simmering violence I’d felt before isn’t close now. When her lips brush over mine again, I feel myself sinking into her once more.

This can work. We can make this work. If I can just stay strong until we find a way out, maybe...

Her body is warm and yielding as I gather her up against me. So fucking soft I could sink into her and stay lost forever.

“Bart,” she moans, “god, I’ve missed this so—” But she’s cut short as a dry, echoing crack of sound splits the silence, making us both freeze. The hair on the back of my neck prickles up.

The gardens have eyes.

Without thinking, I pull Aurora behind me, spinning my head to scan the area around us. My nostrils flare as I seek out a scent. I pick up nothing aside from pine and earth. But there’s definitely something out there; whether it’s man or beast, I can’t tell. Whatever it is, it’s not friendly. I can sense the animosity rolling from it.

Without realizing it, my teeth have sharpened into fangs.

When Aurora puts a hand on my shoulder, I fight not to flinch.

I won’t hurt her. I won’t allow it.

“Sweet Petals! That scared the crap out of me! Can you tell who it is?” Aurora’s voice is low and urgent. I shake my

head. The scent is fading, but I still don't like it. There shouldn't be anyone out here at this hour. Certainly not watching us.

"Are they still here?" Aurora asks, her voice shaking slightly.

"I don't know," I answer honestly. "But we should go. Now."

Aurora nods, her expression wary as I put a hand to the small of her back and guide her to the path that leads to her quarters. We walk in silence for a few moments until I feel it's safe enough to speak again.

"Whoever it was, it's nobody close to us. I couldn't identify the scent."

Aurora shivers beside me, wrapping her arms around herself protectively. "Do you think it was someone from the estate?" she asks fearfully.

"No!" I answer firmly. "No one would dare spy on us like that here." I pause before adding, "Unless..." I shake my head. The thought is unsettling, but given my current predicament, it wouldn't be surprising if I was being followed by one of my own.

Would Luther do such a thing? Keep me under surveillance because I can't be trusted?

The thought bothers me. Although it shouldn't matter. It would be the right thing to do. Something I would do in his shoes.

I look down at where Aurora has rested a hand on my arm. It feels warm in a way that I shouldn't enjoy so much, but at this point, I'm beyond caring.

"It's nobody I recognized," I finally finish what I was saying. She's gazing at me, and it makes me swallow hard. Those eyes are like pools in the moonlight.

"What now?" Aurora says as we reach the entrance to her quarters. I still can't believe what she's done with these old buildings, so lush with growth and life now. I'd played down

here as a child. I was never quite sure why I sent her here when she came back to investigate the Curse. So many memories echo through these halls.

“Go back to your chambers, Aurora. Lock the doors.”

“I meant between us, Bartholomew.”

I don't have an answer to that. Nothing about what's happened between us has been predictable. From the moment we met, this woman has kept my head reeling. Fate, enchantments, Heart Bonds, and Curses...I never know what's going to happen next now that she's in my world.

“I have no idea, Aurora.” I run a hand through my hair.

“Should we talk about it?”

“What?”

“You know...what we're going to do next. Maybe we should come up with a plan.”

“Go to your room, Aurora.”

“But what if—”

“By Blood! Will you just do as I say?” The woman is maddening.

“I'm glad you're willing to consider this, Bartholomew. It's the right thing to do.”

“I haven't considered—” Before I can go on, she reaches onto her tiptoes and brushes her lips over mine one last time, then turns and disappears into the entrance. I watch until even her shadow fades from view, leaving me alone once more. At least, I hope I'm alone. Because as the remnants of her warmth slowly fade from my lips, I can't help feeling that there's someone else out here.

Aurora

I sweep into the estate library, determination fueling each step. Nightfall waits near an expansive wooden table, arms crossed over his broad chest. His piercing green eyes narrow when they meet mine.

“Aurora. I trust you’re ready to go?”

I lift my chin. “No. I’m not leaving, my Lord. My place is here, helping Bartholomew.”

“I thought we’d agreed.” He glowers at me.

“We did nothing of the sort. You gave an order. I never agreed to it.”

Nightfall’s nostrils flare, a muscle flickering in his jaw. “Need I remind you that I am your king?”

“You may be my king, but you know there are limits to how far you can push me, Nightfall.” I step closer, looking up into his face. He may be my ruler, but he’s also my childhood friend. “I can’t abandon him,” I say softly.

Nightfall takes a deep breath. He’s tense and trying to regain his composure. “You know he’s afflicted with this damned Curse, Aurora!” He narrows his eyes on me. “I don’t want you risking your safety by being here.”

“It’s my choice to make.” My voice rings out clearly. “Bartholomew is no danger to me. I know it.”

“How can you be so damned sure?” Those eyes are still narrow. I guess I can’t blame him. Aside from the danger, I was pretty hard-assed on him about Gina not so long ago. I’d

been so certain he should be marrying Princess Vespyr. What a fuck-up that would have turned out to be.

“I’m sure because I can feel it. Here.” I put a hand over my heart. Whatever else is going on, that’s one thing I know. Bart won’t hurt me. He just won’t.

“You’ve been speaking of a Heart Bond?” Nightfall cocks his head. I nod. I haven’t specifically discussed it with him, but I haven’t kept it a secret, either. Frankly, I want to shout it from the freaking rooftops.

“He’s the one, Nightfall. The Bond has chosen. And there’s the Fire...the Fae Fire when we...you know.”

Nightfall exhales audibly. He knows what all of this means. The fire that blazes when we are intimate with the one who is meant for us. It’s even stronger in my family line, with the Bond that has run through our firstborn female heirs through the generations.

“This complicates things.” He sighs, rubbing his forehead with his fingertips.

“You know it does. Because you went through the same thing.” I hold his eye. “I almost ruined things for you, Nightfall. Remember how wrong I was?” I watch as he pinches the bridge of his nose. “You, yourself, said that Bart and I may be the solution to this Curse.”

The shift in his expression tells me that he knows I’m right. He’s just fighting it – because he cares about me. I keep that in the forefront of my mind.

“Dammit, Aurora, I just wish—” he begins, then stops abruptly as the doors groan open, and we both turn. Bart stalks into the room, shoulders rigid, brow furrowed. His golden eyes meet mine across the distance, simmering with unnamed emotions.

“Bartholomew.” I’m not sure if I should feel relieved or apprehensive. After last night’s conversation, I think I’ve talked sense into him, but judging from his expression, he may have changed his mind.

Bart holds my gaze a moment longer before turning to Nightfall. “Your Highness.” He dips his head, and Nightfall responds in kind. I can almost feel the tension radiating from both of them. Bart goes on without any further formalities. “I would like you to reconsider ordering Lady Aurora to return to Autumnburn. I need her help.” A rush of relief leaves me lightheaded. “Aurora is right. We can’t do this without her.” He looks at me as he adds, “I was a fool to push her away.”

“Lord Bellingham, I’m sure you are aware that I am not happy with this situation,” Nightfall responds. Bart isn’t listening to him. Before I can react, he closes the space between us with swift strides. Gently, he reaches out to cup my cheek, his touch igniting a spark within me. Our eyes lock.

“I was only trying to protect you.” Bart’s voice has a hoarse edge to it. Shadows beneath his beautiful eyes tell me that he’s probably been as sleepless as I have. “But maybe you don’t need my protection. You’ve proven yourself brave and capable so many times over.” His thumb strokes my cheekbone so lightly that I shiver. “Forgive me, Aurora. No more pushing you away.”

My heart swells near to bursting. Covering his hand with my own, I smile back at him. “There’s nothing to forgive.”

At last, at long last, we understand one another. It feels like a great weight has been lifted from me, and I can finally breathe again. My heart feels lighter.

It’s the joy of the Heart Bond. I know it is.

There’s a sound of a throat being cleared nearby, and we spring apart. I’d almost forgotten Nightfall is standing here. He shifts his weight, looking uncomfortable. I can see that his resolve has softened.

“This is the right thing.” I smile at him.

“Fine, do as you must,” he huffs out, then glares at Bart. “But know that if you lose yourself to madness, if so much as a hair on Aurora’s head is harmed, I will hold you

accountable, Bellingham. The next war we wage might be a real one.”

Bart nods without hesitation. “I would expect nothing less.”

I know how much it costs him to make this concession. Nightfall may be king, but Bart isn’t used to bowing before anyone.

My king scrubs a hand down his face as if he’s still torn over this. “Aurora, I ask again: are you sure you want to do this?”

“Absolutely,” I reply solemnly. “It’s the only way I could live with myself.” I glance at Bart, who remains expressionless.

Nightfall’s broad chest heaves as he lets out a breath. “So be it. You may stay and help Bartholomew on three conditions.” He ticks them off on his fingers. “You report back to me daily on any developments. Vidarok never leaves your side. And if things deteriorate with Lord Bellingham, you will come home immediately.”

“Agreed.” My response is swift. I would have stayed regardless of Nightfall’s decision, but it’s good to know that I have him on my side. I glance at Bart, and there’s no resentment in his expression. He knows these precautions are reasonable.

“Then it’s decided,” Nightfall says. “I hope you are able to help the vampires overcome this Curse. We all need it.” Without waiting for an answer, he turns and strides from the chamber. “Don’t make me regret this, Aurora!” he calls over his shoulder an instant before the door shuts behind him.

Alone now, Bart and I stand in stilted silence. The air between us feels weighted, overflowing with unspoken words. I twist my fingers together, uncertain of what comes next. It’s a strange feeling for me.

Bart breaks the silence first. “Where should we begin?”

I pause for a moment, gathering my courage to get past the awkwardness. “You could kiss me.” I feel my lips curve up

into a smile. The sense of relief is suddenly overwhelming.

“Kiss you?” He chuckles. “I thought you were here for serious business.”

“You don’t think kissing is serious?” I step closer, tipping my head back to look into his face. I’ll never get over how beautiful he is.

Can a man be beautiful?

Bartholomew Bellingham is. It’s not the first time I’ve thought this. It won’t be the last.

And he’s my mate. I want to do a little happy dance. Everything is going the way it should be.

Without warning, he lowers his head and glances his mouth over mine.

Holy Hollyhocks!

I suck in a breath but don’t get a chance to respond before he breaks the connection and straightens again. The sensation of his lips is a fleeting taste of a thousand pleasures to come. And I want all of them immediately. At once!

I raise my fingertips to my lips, trying to hold on to the sensation.

“There now. Happy?” His eyes crinkle at the corners, and I melt a little. I nod because I *am* happy. So damn happy. A month ago, my world was upside down, and I was miserable. A day ago, I’d all but given up hope when I thought I’d lost him. And now...this. Who would have thought that everything could change so quickly? “There’s work to be done, Aurora.” His expression is stern. I want to pout. “Where should we start?”

I gesture to the expansive bookshelves. The table we’d met at is laden with heavy books. “After Silverwing said they found references in the Fae archives, I was thinking we might find something in the vampire texts, too. We could review the archives for any references to the Curse.”

Bart nods once. “Then let’s get to it.” He pulls out a chair for me before taking a seat himself. Side by side, we

pore over leather-bound tomes and crumbling scrolls, searching for clues to the Curse plaguing him.

It's tedious work made more difficult by our proximity. My skin thrums with awareness anytime his arm or thigh brushes mine beneath the table. His tantalizing scent teases my senses, conjuring vivid memories of our stolen moments together.

I steal furtive glances at his chiseled profile as we work, appreciating his intense focus. The furrow between his brows as he concentrates, the sensual fullness of his lower lip. Desire simmers within me, but I swallow it down. There will be time to explore these feelings later.

At least, I hope so. I'm still half expecting this all to turn out to be some elaborate fantasy. As if I'm going to wake up any moment and realize that this was all just a dream.

"Is everything okay?" Bart's frowning at me, and I realize that I'm staring at him, my hand poised to turn over a page.

"Couldn't be better." I dimple at him. His expression softens, and my heart skips a beat.

"Let me know when you're ready to take a break." He rests his hand over mine, and I give a little shudder despite the warmth of it.

"I could keep doing this for hours." My words are prophetic. Hours pass in focused silence. Eventually, Bart straightens with a groan, rolling his broad shoulders.

"We're getting nowhere. These records contain nothing of use." He scowls, clearly annoyed by our lack of progress.

"I'm sure there's something. Besides..." I stifle a smile. "It's giving me a chance to spend time with you."

"There are other ways to spend time with me, Aurora." He raises an eyebrow.

"I know. But this is different." I take his hand and love how it feels so natural to do it. "We've only ever sparred with each other."

“Sparred with each other?” He blinks at me.

“You know. That stuff men and women do when they’re feeling each other out.”

“If I remember correctly, you enjoyed that.” As he says it, my cheeks flush.

“I mean, we were playing those silly games people play. Wanting each other. Pretending not to. Wasting time... because this is what we should have been doing all along. Just enjoying each other. Isn’t it silly how we do that?”

“You may be right.” Bart turns my hand over, tracing idle patterns on my palm that leave fiery trails in their wake. “You know, we once spoke of taking mates,” he murmurs thoughtfully. “I never really wanted one...until you.”

He looks up, eyes glowing like embers – no silver now, just that gold I’ve grown to love. “From the first moment we met, I felt something stir within me. A strange fascination I tried so damned hard to resist.” His fingers tighten around mine. “I thought it was just lust. But it runs deeper than that. Much deeper.”

My pulse beats wildly beneath his touch. “What are you saying?” I whisper.

Bart cups my cheek with his free hand. “I’m glad I found you, Aurora.”

“I’m glad you did, too.” I smile.

“But promise me something...” His brows draw together. “If there’s ever a moment that you doubt me, that you’re afraid for your safety, I want you to go.” I shake my head, but he puts a fingertip to my lips. “Your king was right in setting those conditions. He’s a good man and a wise king. Your kingdom can’t afford to lose you. Not over something like this. Not over anything. The thought of losing you to my own madness is unbearable.”

My heart clenches at the stark pain in his eyes. “That’s not going to happen,” I say fiercely.

“But it might. If the Curse takes me, we have to be practical.” He lifts my hand and presses a kiss to my palm. “And if it does, I will end it.”

“End it?” I frown.

“I have made arrangements with Luther and the others. If the madness comes, they will do what is necessary.”

My blood runs cold. “What?! No!” I shake my head as realization begins to dawn. I don’t want to hear what he’s going to say next. I’d just allowed myself to start feeling as if this could work. “No, Bart, please—”

“It can’t be any other way, Aurora. We both know it.” He smiles gently, but it’s tinged with sadness. “If the Curse consumes me, I have instructed them to execute me. I don’t want you here if that has to happen.”

My head spins as I stare at him. Opening my mouth, I try to form words. None come.

It can’t happen. It just can’t.

Bartholomew

I storm through the halls of the estate, my shoes ringing out sharply against the cold floors. The encounter with Aurora has left me unsettled, my emotions seesawing wildly between hope and despair. I need answers, and there's only one place I know to get them: the palace dungeons, where Vespyr is imprisoned.

As I make my way to the cell block, the air grows heavier, as if bearing the weight of the burden within these walls. I keep my expression stony, not meeting the eyes of the guards stationed at intervals along the passage. We've beefed up security since Vespyr's last escape attempt. And now, with Aurora here, I can't take any chances of her getting out. She's already made it clear what she plans to do if she gets her hands on her.

Not on my fucking watch!

At the end of the hall is a heavy iron door, locked and bolted. One of the guards rushes to open it for me, and I stride through without a word.

Vespyr's cell is at the very end, separate from the others. Despite her betrayal, she is still royalty, after all. And my sister. Her accommodations are far more luxurious than the rest of the prisoners here. But make no mistake – she is every bit the captive.

I stop outside the barred door to her cell. Inside, I can just make out Vespyr's slender form draped across a velvet sofa. She looks up idly as I approach, a cunning smile curving her lips.

“Brother! To what do I owe the pleasure?” Her tone is light and mocking.

Ignoring it, I fix her with a hard stare. “We need to talk.”

Vespyr arches one carefully sculpted eyebrow. “Oh? About what, pray tell?”

“You know damned well what.” I fight to keep my voice steady. “The Curse that’s destroying us. Our people.” I pause before adding quietly, “Me.”

Something flashes in Vespyr’s golden eyes at my admission, but it’s gone before I can interpret it. Slowly, she unfolds her lithe body from the couch and prowls closer. Even in the dim light, her beauty is striking, but there is a sharpness to it now that was never there before.

“So. It’s taken you at last.” Her voice is a silken purr. “I knew it was only a matter of time.”

I clench my jaw. “Just as you knew it would come for you. Yet you said nothing. All those lives lost, Vespyr!” I can’t keep the accusation from my tone.

Vespyr’s eyes flash with defiance. “As if you’d have listened! Always so high and mighty, thinking you know best.” She bares her teeth in a feral grin. “Who has the power now, brother?”

I recoil at her words, struck by how warped her mind has become. This isn’t the sister I once knew. The Curse has twisted her into something dark and unrecognizable.

“The only power here is death,” I say coldly. “But we can fight it, Vespyr. If you would share what you know with me, we might be able to get to the root of it.”

Her laughter is mocking. “Oh, my god! Why on earth would I do that?”

I shake my head in frustration. “Can’t you see what’s happening? This Curse destroyed the Noctis Clan. It drove them to madness and violence until their thirst destroyed them. Is that what you want for our people?”

Vespyr tosses her mane of golden hair. “Spare me your noble speeches. You don’t know anything about what I want.” She leans closer, silver glinting around her eyes. “You call it madness, but I have never felt more alive, more powerful. My mind is finally free, Bartholomew.”

I stare at her, shaken. How can she willingly choose this insanity over fighting to regain herself? But her eyes blaze with fervor, revealing the depth of her delusion. She is lost to me.

“Free?” I scoff bitterly. “Look around you, Vespyr. You’re locked in a cell. How is that freedom?”

“You underestimate me, brother.” Vespyr smiles slowly, secretively. “Stone walls alone cannot hold me. When the time is right, I will have everything I desire.”

A chill runs through my flesh at the certainty in her voice. This is worse than I realized. The Curse has unleashed dangerous ambitions. There’s no way they can be left unchecked.

I harden my heart against the pang of grief those thoughts create in me. The sister I knew and loved is gone. “Whatever you’re planning ends here,” I state coldly. “I will find the cure for this Curse if it’s the last thing I do. And you will take it, whether by choice or by force. I won’t let you destroy yourself and our kingdom.”

Rage flashes across Vespyr’s face, and she slams a fist against the door between us with enough force that I’m almost worried it might splinter. “You already have destroyed it! Cowering and sniveling while our enemies surround us! I am Vespyr, Chosen of the Nightwalkers! It is my destiny to rule, not yours!”

I clench my jaw against her vitriol. She’s spitting curses at me now, clawing at the air between us. The madness glimmers in her eyes, silver rings shining bright. With a heavy heart, I turn my back on her ravings. There is nothing left of my sister here.

I stalk from the dungeons, shaken and discouraged. Vespyr is lost, consumed by delusions of power and greatness. And if what she says is true, the Curse has only increased her cunning and ambition, making her even more dangerous.

This changes everything. Vespyr cannot remain imprisoned here, where she might still influence others or, Blood forbid, escape. But it is not safe to set her free, either. I need to consult with Luther and the Council. If she cannot be cured, more permanent arrangements for managing Vespyr may be needed, though the thought fills me with sadness. It was one thing choosing to face execution myself. It's quite another to sentence my sister to death.

By Blood! Something has to be done.

For now, there is nothing more I can do here. Vespyr will not be moved by appeals to reason or sentiment. I must accept the harsh truth: she may be beyond saving.



Leaving the oppressive atmosphere of the dungeons behind, I make my way back through the upper levels of the estate, lost in troubled thoughts. The confrontation with Vespyr has shaken me more than I want to admit. Her descent into insanity seems beyond help, but the idea of confining my own sister indefinitely sits badly with me.

And as for the alternative...

No!

There must be some way to bring her back from the brink. Now, more than ever, we need to get to the bottom of this. Aurora had said she'd be working in the research center today, and I make my way there now, eager to focus on something more positive.

As I round a corner, still preoccupied, I nearly collide with a solid, unmoving form: Vidarok. Aurora's perpetually grim bodyguard stands sentinel outside the doors, massive arms folded across his broad chest. His green eyes narrow slightly as they fix on me.

“My Lord,” he rumbles. We have never been friends, and recent events have only added to the tension between us. But Aurora trusts him, so I incline my head in greeting and move to step past him.

Vidarok shifts subtly to block my path, eyeing me warily. “My lady Aurora is within,” he states. I feel a flash of irritation at being stopped, but it fades quickly. He is only doing his duty to protect her, after all.

“I need to speak with her,” I reply evenly. When he does not immediately move aside, I add a bit more sharply, “It concerns the Curse. I have news.” It’s not quite true, but it’s not an outright lie, either.

At that, Vidarok dips his head in assent and steps back, allowing me to pass. The doors swing open at my approach, and I stride inside.

I spot Aurora quickly, seated at a table with her head bent over a large book. Tendrils of fiery hair tumble forward, obscuring her face until she glances up at the sound of my entrance.

“Bartholomew.” She starts to rise, then pauses uncertainly. Her eyes are clouded, the shadows beneath them leaving me guilty at how hard all this has been on her.

“I’m sorry to barge in. I needed to see you.” I try to smooth the roughness from my voice as I approach. Our last conversation had not gone well. I suppose I handled it badly. But some things simply have to be dealt with head-on.

Like killing yourself?

I shake that thought off. It’s not like that. I’m not planning on taking the coward’s way out. But if worse comes to worst, I have to face the reality of my situation. Ryacyn can’t be left in the grip of not one but two crazed regents.

“Of course. Is everything all right?” Aurora searches my face. Even with all that’s gone on, her nearness soothes my frazzled nerves. I draw a steadying breath.

“I’m sorry about the way things went yesterday.” I run a hand through my hair.

She shrugs. “You said what you had to say. I just refuse to believe that we won’t find a way out of this. You’re not going to die, Bartholomew Bellingham!” Her voice is determined, and I feel my lips curl slightly. Her optimism is so damned refreshing.

“I don’t plan to,” I reassure her. “I’ve been thinking of other avenues to source information. So I went to speak with Vespyr, hoping she might reveal something that could help.”

“And? How did that go?”

“Not well.” I heave a sigh. “The Curse has taken a far stronger hold on her than I realized.” I swallow hard, the image of my sister’s madness fresh in my mind. “She’s lost to it entirely.”

“Oh, Bart.” Aurora’s eyes fill with compassion. “I’m so sorry.”

I give a brief shake of my head. “She’s gone, Aurora.” I hate the fact that my voice cracks. I keep holding out the hope that there’s still a chance for her.

Maybe...

I stop that thought. There’s no room for sentiment here. “Vespyr is dangerous. Obsessed with power.” I pass a hand over my eyes. “I should have seen the signs earlier. Prevented this somehow. Now...I’m not sure there’s anything we can do for her. And if we can’t, then she may have to be—”

“Bartholomew Bellingham!” Aurora stops me. “If you tell me you’d consider euthanizing your own sister, I’ll put you over my knee and give you that spanking you promised me all those months ago!”

I stare at her for a second. Then I bite back a laugh. “Well. That was unexpected.”

“Damn right. What is it with you vampires and leaping to the worst possible conclusion, anyhow? First, you planned a war with Autumnburn when Nightfall didn’t want to marry Vespyr. Now, you’re thinking of executing her because she’s sick?”

“It’s not like that, Aurora!”

“Actually, it’s exactly like that. She’s sick. So are you. So it’s a big deal, sure. But is it the end of the world? No!”

“It feels that way, after what I saw today. I don’t want to see her like that, Aurora. I can’t help feeling that if I’d just...” I trail off.

What could I have done?

Aurora reaches across the table to lay her hand over mine. “You did everything you could. This Curse twists people in ways we don’t fully understand yet. But it’s only a matter of time, Bart. I’m sure of it.”

Her firm conviction lifts my spirits like the sun breaking through clouds. Impulsively, I lift her hand to my lips, pressing a tender kiss to her knuckles. Her breath catches softly, and her cheeks flood with color. Emboldened, I circle the table and draw her up into my arms. She melts against me with a happy sigh.

“I’ve missed being close to you like this,” she murmurs, nestling against my chest. “No more walls between us.”

I nod in agreement as I let the feel and scent of her seep into my bones.

“Me, too.” I trail my lips along her hairline, savoring the silken texture against my mouth. She trembles a little, and I feel heat rising in me. When I lean down to capture her lips, she tilts her head back to meet me. It feels like it’s been too long, but it was only a day ago that I’d held her in the darkness of the gardens.

Aurora twines her arms around my neck, closing the space between us until we’re pressed tightly together. Her lips are soft, sweet, laden with promise. Our kisses deepen, teasing...taunting. I’m hard against her now, and when she tugs lightly at my hair, I groan, desire flaring hotly.

In this moment, nothing else exists but Aurora. My doubts and demons fall away, burned up in the fire she lights inside me. Backing her gently against the edge of the table, I

lift her to sit on it. She gasps as I press her knees apart and wedge myself firmly between her legs.

“Bart,” she breathes, “what if someone comes in?” But her fingers are busy with the buttons of my shirt.

“Let them,” I growl. Right now, I am beyond caring about who might interrupt us. I shrug out of my shirt, and Aurora’s eager hands are instantly upon my bare chest, mapping the contours of muscle and sinew. My own hands slip beneath the hem of her skirt, pushing the fabric up to bare her legs. She shudders as I stroke along her inner thighs. When I press her knees further apart, her breathing grows hoarse. With a deft move, I tug her silky tunic up and slide it over her head. She raises her arms to help me, then stares up at me as I run my gaze over her. Like a starving man, I feast my eyes on her, all graceful curves and creamy skin.

By Blood, she is perfect.

“Let me please you.” I breathe the words as she gazes up at me, unblinking. With one hand on her shoulder, I ease her down until she’s resting back on the surface of the table.

“Ohhh...” she sighs out as I sink between her thighs and brush my lips over her lace-clad mound. Her head is thrown back, eyes closed in pleasure. I take my time, exploring every inch of Aurora’s body with my fingertips and tongue. I dip my head to take a taut nipple into my mouth, and I inhale her scent, caught up in the aching need that only she seems to be able to bring out in me. Her lush breasts fill my palms so perfectly it’s as if they were made to fit together.

When she’s writhing and twisting against me, her cries hoarse, my hands wander down her hips and around to the back of her thighs until they find the edge of her panties. With one slow pull, I ease them off, rolling them past her knees and down her toned calves. Aurora gasps at the sudden contact of air against her naked pussy. Encouraged, I dip my fingers inside her, gauging her readiness. She’s hot and slick with desire, ready for me to take her fully.

It’s not going to happen right now. First, I need to taste her sweetness. Trailing kisses down over the slight curve of

her belly, I graze my lips against the soft fur of her pussy. She squirms against me, thighs pressing tightly against my shoulders as I slide a finger between her slick lips, spreading them. They glisten wetly, the tiny nub of her clit peeking from between the folds. I fasten my mouth over it, and she bucks.

“Oh! Sweet Mother!” she chokes out, a hand snaking down to tangle into my hair. “Oh! Oh! Oh!” Her hips undulate as I suckle on that sweet bundle of nerves. When I slide a finger into her heat, she throws her head back and gives a throaty groan.

“Hollyhocks!” she moans, and I fight back a smile.

Hollyhocks. That's a first.

But if my woman wants to speak of flowers, then I'll give her a whole garden full of them.

Sliding another finger into her, I start pumping to match the rhythm of my lapping on her clit. She has a hand on my shoulder, too, now, nails grazing my skin as she clutches at me. I feel the heel of her foot press between my shoulder blades as she angles closer to me.

“Yes, Bart! Oh...oh...god, yes!” Her hips move in time with the thrusting of my fingers. I pick up the pace, glancing up over her stomach and catching glimpses of her lovely face. Her cheeks are flushed a pretty pink, eyes glittering feverishly as she tosses her head from side to side.

Beautiful. So fucking beautiful.

I pick up my efforts, flicking my tongue and then sucking down on her clit in earnest as I keep up the steady motion of my fingers inside her. It doesn't take long to bring her to the edge. I don't keep her there. I want to see her come undone.

And she does...in a blaze of tossing scarlet hair and crimson cheeks and throaty moans that have my cock jerking hard enough to press up against my belly.

“Yes!” she shouts out. Her nails have grazed grooves into my skin, but they're marks of passion I'll bear with pride. Just as she arches her back and lets out another low cry, a

shimmer of color glows around her. It ripples in a wave that coats her skin and radiates like an emerald sea. I blink in surprise as it shimmers over my own skin, gleaming about my arms.

“Aurora?” I murmur as I finally raise my head. She’s staring at me, her expression dazed. She’s still shining. We both are.

“Fae fire,” she husks out, trailing a fingertip along my upper arm, over the curve of my bicep. “It’s what happens when we...” She smiles. I run my palm up to cup her full breast where her soft flesh is glowing.

“When you make love,” I say. Her smile broadens. She nods. “I saw it before. In Paris.”

“Yes.” She watches me as I trail the tip of my tongue over my lower lip, catching the flavor of her. Her cheeks go pink.

“You taste like...more.” My voice is gravelly. It makes me hesitate. Can I feel the beast close? One look in her eyes is all I need to know that I’m safe here. She’s safe.

“More,” she murmurs, reaching for me. “I want you, Bart. I want you inside me.”

I need no further invitation. My cock feels ready to explode, and she hasn’t even touched me. I make quick work of the rest of my clothing until no barriers remain between us.

“It’s been too long,” I groan as I grasp her hips and pull her to the very edge of the table. Her lips part on a sharp inhale as I position myself at her entrance, nudging slightly.

“I need you, Aurora,” I say roughly. At her answering whimper, I slide slowly into her molten heat. Inch by inch, I feel her tight walls expanding to accommodate me. The sensation is almost painfully intense, and I find myself clenching my teeth by the time I grind against her mound. Her breath hisses out, and I wait a moment until she relaxes against me. Our hoarse breaths echo through the room. Nothing has ever felt so right as being one with her.

“Please...” she breathes out, arching her back up. I begin to move, glorying in every pleased gasp I draw from her. She clings to me, rocking her hips urgently to meet each thrust. Trying not to break the rhythm, I dip my head to take a pert nipple in my mouth. I roll my tongue around it, remembering how it made her squirm before. She rewards me by tightening those muscles around my shaft.

“Oooohhh...” she mewls, clutching my head to pull my face closer to her chest. I turn my attention to the other puckered peak, laving my tongue around the taut flesh. It sets her writhing and rippling as pleasure surges through her.

The table creaks faintly beneath us, our panting breaths and soft cries breaking the silence. Her skin glistens with sweat, and my heart swells with emotion as I feel the intensity rising between us.

“Fuck!” I manage to get out through gritted teeth. She’s got me wound more tightly than a horny kid.

Close...

If she doesn’t come soon, I’m going to go off without her, and that would be a punishable crime.

When Aurora’s inner muscles begin to ripple and clench around my cock, I know that her climax is building. The signs are growing familiar now, and I find myself waiting for that soft glow of light that will surround us soon. When she stiffens against me, her fingers digging into the flesh of my arms, I lean forward and capture her cries with a fierce kiss as she shatters. It’s all I need to tip over the edge with her. A few more powerful drives, and I empty myself inside her with a harsh groan.

For endless moments, we remain suspended together like that, our bodies joined, and our heartbeats gradually slowing as we float back down.

At last, I withdraw gently, pulling her against me and wrapping my arms around her. She sighs contentedly against my chest.

“Wow...” Her lips move against my skin as she exhales the word. I smile in response. It’s fleeting because the sound of the door clicking shut has my head shooting up.

“Oh, my god!” Aurora stiffens. “Was someone watching?”

I chuckle. “Not watching. But I’m pretty sure poor Vidarok got an earful.”

Aurora clamps a hand over her face. “I’m going to die!”

“I doubt it. Besides, he’s a big boy. He’ll cope.”

Big is an understatement. Her Orc guard is one of the few males who makes me feel insignificant.

“I’ll have to speak to him. Or not!” She clamps her other hand over her face. I peel them away.

“You don’t need to do anything...except come back to my room with me.”

“Your room? But what about Vidarok?”

“He’s not invited.”

She snort-laughs. “Was that a joke?”

“Maybe.” I’m already tugging her up into a sitting position. “We can’t stay here all night. And I’m not letting you out of my sight.”

“I kind of feel the same way.” She dimples up at me. So damned lovely. I nod as I gather her clothes and slip her light tunic over her head.

Of course I’m not letting her out of my sight. Not just because she’s beautiful. But because the thought of anything happening to her makes my heart clench with fear.

Now, more than ever, I feel the pressure of Vespyr’s threats. But she’s safely locked away.

And that’s how I intend to keep it.

Aurora

The room is drenched in moonlight as Bart lowers me gently onto the edge of the vast bed. I sit obediently as he peels my dress off again and eases me back until I'm nestled in a bank of pillows. Then he strips and lies beside me, his golden eyes searching mine intently. I shiver in anticipation, but he doesn't move to touch me. At least not in that way.

"I like you naked. Our skin touching." He smiles at me. "This is where you belong." He cups my face. "Here. At my side."

I melt. "I'm glad you finally feel that way."

He nods, opening his mouth to speak and then pausing for a second. "Thank you, Aurora." His voice is a husky murmur.

"For what?" I feel my brows pull together.

"This hasn't been an easy time. Yet you've never faltered." He pulls me into the curve of his body.

In answer, I nuzzle my face into the curve of his neck.

Hollyhocks, he smells good.

"There was no other option for me, Bartholomew. The Heart Bond—"

"Damn the Heart Bond!" he says abruptly, making me blink in surprise.

I pull away slightly and stare up at him. "You can't say it doesn't exist after all that we've been through."

“I don’t care about some spell that binds us together.” His voice is gruff as he pulls me closer. “All I know is that it feels real.”

“It *is* real, Bart.” I reach up and stroke his cheek. The lines of his face have become achingly familiar. Though tonight, they seem more defined, as if he’s lost weight since I last saw him.

The Curse...

I push the thought from my mind.

“I don’t want to think that you’re here with me because of an enchantment. What if it’s broken, Aurora? What then?” His eyes search mine with such intensity that my breath catches in my throat.

“That won’t happen.” I smile up at him. “It’s been written. You’re stuck with me. Besides, I asked Nana Bee to find a way to break it, and she couldn’t.”

“Oh, you did, did you?” He quirks a brow.

“You told me to, remember?” I don’t say that I’d hoped Nana really would find a way when I was in the throes of my heartbreak. It was the worst feeling in the world. Even worse than knowing that Bart is gripped by this Curse. At least with the Curse, I can focus on fixing something – it’s scary but better than outright rejection.

He heaves a breath and brushes his lips over my forehead. “We’ve been pretty damn stupid, haven’t we?”

“Speak for yourself.” I smile. “I’ve been clear from the start.”

“I guess that’s true.” He chuckles. “I can be a bit of an ass.”

“A bit?” I’m grinning now. “But what an ass it is, my darling.” The lean lines of Bart’s body are highlighted by the low light, and yet again, I’m struck by how much I love looking at him.

I nestle against his chest contentedly as he wraps strong arms around me. For long moments, neither of us

speaks, basking in the euphoria of being so engrossed in each other. My eyelids grow heavy, my earlier exhaustion creeping up on me. Just as I'm about to drift off, Bart's voice rumbles softly.

"I think we need to make a habit of this."

I smile drowsily, tilting my head back to meet his gaze. "I like that idea," I reply.

Bart smooths a hand over my hair. "Having you in my arms, I've never known such...completion." His voice holds a note of wonder.

My heart swells, overflowing with emotion. I know precisely what he means. Since the first time we came together like this, it has felt like two fractured halves of one soul reuniting.

"Nor have I," I whisper. "It's as though I was always meant to find my way here to you." Suddenly, I don't want to speak about the Bond, either. Like he says, this feels...real.

The Bond is real, Aurora.

Bart's arms tighten almost reflexively around me. I sense a sudden shift in his mood, his silence at odds with the lighthearted tone from just moments ago. When I meet his eyes questioningly, they are grave.

"Aurora, there are things we should discuss."

I go still, sensing the serious turn our conversation has taken. "What is it?"

Bart runs a hand down his face wearily. "We both know that there are realities we cannot avoid."

My brow furrows. "Are you still on about that? Because I'm not willing to accept it."

His breath flutters my hair as he exhales deeply. "You already know that I've made...arrangements. We can't ignore that the madness may take me."

I stiffen. We've had this discussion before. I wish he wouldn't keep going down this road. "Do you have so little

faith in me?”

“I have all the faith in the world in you, Aurora.” He uses his fingertip to lift my chin. “It’s just a precaution. I don’t plan to go dying on you.” He gives a mirthless chuckle. “But we have to consider every scenario.”

My throat tightens painfully. I wish he wouldn’t keep raising this – especially not now. “I don’t know how you can talk about your own death so calmly,” I say thickly.

Bart’s expression softens. “Because it’s the only way I’ve been able to face what’s happening. The only way I can do what needs to be done for my people and for you.”

Tears well in my eyes. “But you’re talking as if it’s already decided. We don’t know—”

“We don’t,” Bart agrees gently. “Which is why having plans in place is wise. My advisors know what to do if I must be...stopped.” He averts his gaze briefly. “You won’t be here to see that happen. I couldn’t stand the thought of you witnessing it.”

“Because you believe I’m some fragile creature who must be shielded from reality?” Hurt makes my tone sharper than I intended.

Bart’s eyes flash. “No. Because it would destroy me to make you live through that, Aurora. Can’t you see?” His voice cracks with emotion. “I want your last memories of me to be untainted by the ugliness this Curse might bring out.”

My anger melts away. Of course this stoic, noble man would think first of sparing me pain, even in imagining his darkest hour.

“It’s not going to happen.” I shake my head. “But if it does, I’ll be at your side. I don’t care about the rest.”

“Even if it means watching me spiral into madness?” Bart asks hoarsely. “Seeing me turned into a crazed animal who doesn’t even know your name?”

“You’ll always know my name, Bartholomew. You forget that I’ve seen what this Curse does when I was studying

the afflicted vampires here. Whatever darkness it brings out, you'll still be you underneath it all. And I'll be there to remind you who you are."

Emotion flickers across Bart's face. "Your faith in me is a lot stronger than my own."

"It's not faith; it's fact," I counter gently. "I know your heart, Bartholomew." I splay my hand over the steady beat beneath his chest. "This Curse can never corrupt that."

Bart covers my hand with his own. "It won't be easy for either of us if worse comes to worst. Are you truly willing to shoulder that burden?"

I meet his eyes unwaveringly. "I am."

Bart crushes me against him suddenly, his embrace nearly stealing my breath. His voice is muffled against my hair. "By Blood, I don't deserve you."

I cling to him just as tightly, overcome by a rush of feelings.

Eventually, we draw apart just far enough to come together in a long, slow kiss. The kiss feels as if time has stopped, melting away all worries and doubts. Like a gentle embrace, it's both comforting and passionate. And tomorrow seems very far away.

When I finally pull away and gaze up into his face, my breath hitches. His eyes are glowing in the darkness, the gold touched with silver.

"Bart." My voice is hoarse. He shakes his head.

"Shhh...I know. It's close. I can feel it." He gathers my hands against his chest in both of his own. "But you're right. I'm still me beneath it all. You're safe."

I nod because I know that it's true. Still, when he closes his eyes, I feel a slight sense of relief. I don't relish this reminder of what we're about to face.

He heaves a deep breath, and I can sense that his mind is wandering. His expression has grown bleak.

“You’re thinking about her, aren’t you? Vespyn?”

His nod is barely perceptible. “I hate seeing what she’s becoming, Aurora. Even in her moments of clarity, she’s still clinging to this thing as if it’s some sort of gift.”

“All the more reason to get to the source of it.” I feel more determination swirling. “I know she’s not evil, Bart. You’ll have your sister back. Don’t give up hope.”

He gives a dry laugh. “Yeah. You won’t let me.”

“Of course I won’t. We’re strong. We’re healthy. We’re alive. Where there’s life, there’s always a way to find the path.”

“You know, I love...” Bart pauses, and I feel my heart speed up. “I love that about you.” He pulls me closer. “The way you bring life. What you did to the old buildings...the flowers that now surround the guest lodge. I’m sorry that I sent you there in that state. I guess I was trying to prove a point.”

“And you did. Just not the point you thought you were making – that we weren’t welcome. On the contrary, I knew you wanted me here. And I loved that place from the moment we arrived.” I smile at the memory. “You played there as a boy.”

He shifts slightly. “How did you know that?”

“I can feel the history of a place, remember?”

“Yes. Like in Paris...” His voice trails off.

“Like in Paris.” I grow warm at the memory. There are a lot of good memories from our short time in that city. It was then that I knew. Bartholomew Bellingham is the one. Call me pigheaded. Call me stubbornly romantic. But that was the turning point.

When the silence lingers, I break it. “It was a happy time for you. The time you spent there.”

“They were once our lesson rooms,” he says softly, as if lost in those moments. “Our tutors would meet us there. And

we were lucky. My parents believed that children should be stimulated. Learning was a pleasure.”

“I’ll bet. You’re pretty smart,” I tease.

He chuckles. “Yes. I’m pretty smart.” He hesitates. “Vespyr was the truly gifted one, though. Everything came easily to her. Arts, sciences. Philosophy. She could speak with the wisest elders while I was climbing trees.”

I stifle a giggle.

“What?” he says. “Still struggling with the idea of a vampire having a childhood?”

“Little bit,” I admit. “But it sounds like Vespyr didn’t have much fun growing up. Maybe that’s why she’s trying to break out now.”

“To a degree. Her learning came so easily, but she still had time to run wild. She was bold. Fearless. I was the one who approached things with caution. She had no boundaries – until we lost our parents and had to take on our duties.”

I swallow hard. Looking at him, I can see the caution he’s talking about. He has a way of handling everything in a measured manner that hints at deep-rooted self-control. It’s probably why he’s taking this Curse so hard. The thought of losing it.

“How did they die?” I ask the impossible question.

He’s silent for a long time, but I don’t press. “There were wars during my childhood. The vampires weren’t always unified.” His lips twist. “I guess just as they aren’t now. Some wanted to go their own way. My father was assassinated.” His throat works. “My mother...I suppose she couldn’t live without him.”

“Oh...Bart...” It makes my heart ache. Not only for the tragedy of lost love. But because it must have been shattering for two children to know they weren’t reason enough for their mother to cling to life.

“But enough of that,” he changes the subject abruptly. I feel a shift in him, as if he’s shaking off the painful memories.

“You are tired. There is a lot to do in the morning. We must sleep.”

“Are you telling me it’s bedtime?” I ask lightly.

“Yes.” He is stern. “If we stay awake any longer, I may be tempted to stop you talking by claiming that pretty mouth of yours.”

“I can’t think of anything I’d rather have you do.”

There’s laughter in his words when he replies, “Except we need our wits about us if we’re going to continue our work tomorrow. You’ve hardly taken a break since you got back.”

“That’s barely been a couple of days, Bart. I’m hardly about to drop dead of exhaustion.”

“Stop arguing with me. I told your king I’d take care of you, and I intend to keep my word. Now close your beautiful eyes.” He pulls the bedclothes over me, and I find myself snuggling up against him. “Take deep breaths, and think of fluffy white clouds.”

“Fluffy white clouds?”

“I’ve heard that works. If you’re not asleep in five minutes, I’ll start singing you lullabies. And I have a terrible voice.”

“I can’t imagine there’s a single part of you that’s terrible.” I take another deep breath of his clean, masculine scent. I’d happily roll in that fragrance like a kitten in catnip.

“Meow,” I say.

“What?”

“I’m sleeping, I’m sleeping!” And oddly, I almost am. A lovely languor seeps into my limbs as I sink into the mattress, surrounded by silky sheets and manly flesh. It just doesn’t get better than this.

I’m just drifting off when the bedroom door crashes open violently, jerking me from my blissful haze. Bart bolts upright, a snarl on his lips as he shields my body with his own

in one smooth motion. I peer over his broad shoulder to see Luther standing wild-eyed in the doorway.

“What is the meaning of this?” Bart demands angrily. His fury is tempered somewhat when Luther hastily bows his head.

“A thousand apologies, my Lord.” Luther is breathless. “But we must act swiftly. Princess Vespvr has escaped her cell.”

Bart goes rigid. “What? How?”

Luther shakes his head helplessly. “We don’t know how she managed it. Her guards never left their posts, but they saw nothing. Yet the cell lies empty.”

With a blistering curse, Bart springs from the bed and begins dressing quickly. I sit awkwardly, tugging a sheet around my chest as I look around for my clothes. Luther keeps his eyes carefully averted. If he’s wondering what I’m doing here, he doesn’t say anything.

“We’ve fortified every possible fucking escape route!” Bart looks livid. He’s buttoning his shirt hastily.

Luther shrugs. “I wish I had answers. The fact remains that she’s gone.”

Bart is issuing swift orders to Luther as I manage to fumble my way into my clothes.

“Sound the alarm at once. Mobilize all available men for an immediate search. Check the hidden passages, the main gates, everywhere she might flee undetected,” he barks. He turns to me then, grasping my shoulders almost roughly. “Aurora, I want you to stay here where I know you’re safe. Vespvr is completely unhinged. There’s no telling what she might do.”

I open my mouth to object, but Bart silences me with an imploring look. “Please. Just do as I say for once. Stay here. Vidarok will guard you until I get back.”

My protests die on my lips. I know it’s his fear for my well-being that is driving his request. With great effort, I nod

in agreement.

Bart's shoulders sag slightly in relief. He presses a swift, hard kiss to my mouth before rushing from the room, Luther on his heels. I sink slowly to perch on the edge of the bed, hugging myself against a chill that has nothing to do with the temperature.

How did she get out? And where the hell has she gone?

Bartholomew

My mind races as Luther and I stride swiftly through the darkened halls. Vespyr's escape is impossible. According to Luther, the guards swear no one entered or left her cell, yet she vanished into thin air. This reeks of the strange powers the Curse has manifesting in her. But how can she wield such forces while locked away, weakened by blood deprivation? None of it makes sense. The only thing I know for sure is that she's free, and Aurora is in danger.

"Tell me again what happened," I demand tersely as we descend the stairs leading to the dungeons.

Luther shakes his silver head. "There is little more to tell, my Lord. The guards followed standard protocol, delivering the princess her evening meal shortly after moonrise. Nothing seemed amiss. She took the blood ration and retreated to her sleeping quarters as usual. When they went to retrieve the empty containers an hour later, she was simply...gone."

My fists clench in frustration. "And they heard nothing? Saw no one approach or leave?"

"Nothing, Sire. She vanished without a trace." Luther's brows knit together. "Do you think she has manifested new powers?"

"It seems the only explanation." My jaw is tight. The extent of Vespyr's new abilities is deeply troubling. She was a force to be reckoned with before the Curse took hold. Now, there's no limit to the chaos she could sow if left unchecked.

We reach the heavy iron door leading to the cells and stride inside. Vespyr's vacant cell looms dark and empty at the end of the corridor. Cold fear sweeps through me at the sight. She'd been safely contained here, or so I believed. Now she's out there somewhere, free to unleash havoc. And Aurora is directly in her path if she seeks vengeance for her imprisonment. The thought makes my blood run cold.

I halt outside the open cell, peering into its shadowed depths. The bed lies undisturbed, the only sign of disorder a smashed ceramic dish and a small crimson stain where her evening ration splattered free. So the guards told the truth about delivering her meal. But how does a caged, weakened vampire simply disappear from a locked cell?

Luther examines the enclosure, his eyes missing nothing. With a puzzled shake of his head, he turns to me. "The locks are intact, no sign of tampering. I confess I'm at a loss, my Lord. Unless..." He rubs his jaw. "Do you think she could have created a portal?"

I shake my head. "Impossible. The dungeons are designed to dampen supernatural travel."

"Well, unless she walked through a wall, I can't imagine how she got it right." Luther heaves a breath.

My fangs grind together in frustration. "Keep looking for anything that might explain how she got out. And question the guards again, see if they remember any detail that could be useful."

Luther nods. "Right away. What will you do now?"

I rake a hand through my hair. "Double the patrols at every entry and exit. And set a rotating guard on Aurora's chambers. I don't care if I have to assign the entire fucking army. No one gets near her."

"Of course." Luther bows his head. "I will make the arrangements immediately." He hesitates, his expression grave. "And Princess Vespyr, my Lord? If we locate her?"

I meet his eyes bleakly. "Use any force necessary to contain her. But I want her alive." Much as Vespyr has fallen

to madness, I cannot bring myself to issue the order for her death. At least not yet. She's still my blood, no matter how twisted the Curse has made her.

Luther seems to understand my conflicted feelings. He simply nods. "We will do everything in our power to end this threat swiftly."

I try to take some cold comfort from his words. Right now, my only concern is getting back to Aurora and making damn sure no harm comes to her. Vespvr wanted her dead. Even if I have to stand guard at Aurora's door myself, she won't get that chance.

Leaving Luther to continue the investigation, I make for the upper levels. My feet carry me swiftly through the halls as my mind whirls with dark possibilities. The vise grip of worry around my heart won't ease until I'm certain of Aurora's safety.

Rounding a corner, I spy Vidarok's massive form standing sentinel outside the library doors. Aurora refused to heed my order to stay in my chambers, no doubt insisting on continuing her research.

By Blood, the woman is stubborn.

At least here, she's less isolated; the guards can respond quickly if trouble comes. Testing the air, I feel a subtle shimmer of power about me. She's also warded the room against intrusion, though I don't know how much good Fae magic will do if Vespvr has grown powerful enough to walk through walls.

Don't fight it, Bellingham.

As much as I want to keep her locked up safely, I'm coming to learn that my beautiful Fae Queen is a law unto herself. Besides, if she's working, it might distract her from thoughts of my sister at large. I want her to be aware of the danger, but I don't want her terrified.

"Vidarok," I say as I reach the man on guard.

Vidarok spots my approach, his craggy features set in grim lines. "My Lord," he rumbles with a cursory bow. "Any

sign of the princess?”

“Nothing yet.” I keep my voice low to avoid being overheard by Aurora inside. “Double your vigilance. Let no one through aside from myself or Luther.”

The big Orc nods, gripping his axe tightly. “She’ll be safe as long as I draw breath.” There’s fierce determination in his tone. As much as we’ve clashed, at least I know Vidarok can be relied on to defend Aurora with his life.

“See that you do,” is my only reply before slipping through the doors.

The cozy library is much as we left it hours before. Aurora is sitting near the table where I’d taken her just hours ago. The memory makes something tighten in the pit of my belly. Lust unfurls yet again. God, if I had the time, I’d have her again right now.

As I walk in, she looks up swiftly at my entrance. Relief flashes across her face.

“Bart!” In an instant, she’s on her feet, crossing the room to fold herself against my chest. I crush her close, the panic I’ve been battling all this while finally easing now that she’s safe in my arms.

“How are you?” I ask into her hair, inhaling her sweet scent like a lifeline.

Aurora pulls back to meet my eyes, her own shadowed with strain even as she offers a tremulous smile. “I’m fine. Just worried about you.” She brushes gentle fingertips over the grim set of my mouth. “Any sign of Vespyr?”

I shake my head with a frustrated curse. “Vanished completely. I’ve never heard of anything like this, Aurora.”

Her smile fades. “You’ll find her. I know you will.” Aurora’s faith helps steady my shaken nerves. She guides me over to sit close beside her on the leather couch. I keep an arm snug around her shoulders, needing the warm reality of her near.

“Luther’s investigating every inch of that damned cell,” I say wearily. “With any luck, we’ll uncover some hint of how she pulled this off. In the meantime, security around you has tripled. Vidarok won’t let so much as a mouse get through that door.” I exhale, dragging a hand over my eyes. “I just hope we find her before she can come for you.”

Aurora smooths her palm over my thigh. “You won’t let that happen. And I can take care of myself, remember?” Her attempt at bravado falls flat. I bite my tongue against voicing my fear and simply pull her closer.

“I know you can. But please, for my sanity, take extra precautions until she’s caught. And don’t go anywhere without Vidarok as an escort.” When she opens her mouth to object, I cut her off. “This isn’t up for debate. I can’t always be with you. Let him do his job and keep you safe when I can’t.”

Aurora presses her lips together, then sighs. “Very well. But the minute it’s confirmed she’s back in custody, the shadowing ends.”

I nod. “Agreed.” If we can contain Vespvr once more, I’ll happily relieve Vidarok of his duty. But until then, Aurora needs protection. I rise, drawing her up with me. “I don’t want to leave you again, but I need to be sure that the search parties are being rolled out.”

“I’ll keep working here.” Aurora glances back at the piles of books. “I was right in the middle of—”

“It can wait. It will be daybreak soon, and you’ve gone long enough without rest.” I keep my tone gentle but firm. Aurora’s independent spirit bristles at being told what to do, even when it’s in her best interest. But just this once, I need her to bend. “Please, Aurora. For me.”

She wavers, then concedes, slipping her hand in mine. “Oh, all right.” The hint of a smile touches her lips. “But only for you.”

Relief sweeps through me. But not for long. The doors crash open violently, and Lord Mortas strides in, chest heaving.

“Forgive the intrusion, my Lord!” His voice is urgent.

My eyes lock on his terse features. “What’s happened?” I demand. “Has Vespvr been located?”

Mortas shakes his head, expression grim. “No sign of the princess yet. But we’ve uncovered something else deeply troubling. More of the afflicted have vanished from their cells.”

“What?” I bark. First Vespvr, now this? “How many?”

“At least a dozen, though the number may be higher. We’re still confirming the details.” Mortas rakes a hand through his dark hair. “They disappeared in the same inexplicable manner.”

I spew out a blistering curse. Aurora’s fingers tighten on my arm. “How is this possible?” she asks in a hushed voice.

Mortas looks as shaken as I feel. “I wish I knew, my Lady. We’ve searched the dungeons thoroughly and found no breaches. No magic or force we know of could allow this.”

My fists clench. Vespvr’s escape was shocking enough. But now a small army of Cursed vampires has apparently gained the ability to vanish at will? The implications are staggering.

“Place more guards to watch the remainder of them – nobody takes their eyes off the prisoners, is that clear?” I order tersely. “And I want patrols tripled at once. Shut down all ports and checkpoints; nothing gets in or out of Ryacyn.”

Mortas nods. “Right away, my Lord. What shall we do if we encounter them?”

My expression hardens. “Use lethal force if necessary. They’ve clearly become too dangerous to contain by normal means.” Much as it pains me, I cannot risk letting these creatures roam free, growing ever more powerful. We’ve already had a taste of what they’re capable of when they were working undercover. I shudder to think what they’d get up to if they were rampaging freely.

Mortas bows briskly and turns to carry out my orders. As the doors shut behind him, I turn to Aurora. Her lovely face is etched with dismay. I pull her close, offering what comfort I can. But inside, my thoughts swirl darkly.

Things have taken an ominous turn. And if we cannot determine how the afflicted are escaping – and reverse it – then things may have just become infinitely more complicated.

Aurora

I make my way back to my chambers, exhausted in body and spirit after the dramatic events of this night. Vidarok stalks silently at my heels, tension radiating from his massive frame. My mind whirls with frantic thoughts: Vespyr's shocking escape, the strange new powers manifesting in her and the other afflicted vampires. And beneath it all, fear for Bart as the Curse progresses rapidly within him.

When we reach my rooms, I'm surprised to find Bart's guards, Faine and Lamia, posted on either side of the door. I thought they would have accompanied him to hunt for Vespyr.

"Lady Aurora." Faine inclines her head in greeting. There's no warmth in her eyes. I'm not surprised. I know that Bartholomew's private guards had been selected for their complete loyalty to him. Although I have a suspicion that, in Faine's case, it goes beyond loyalty. I suppose I should feel a twinge of jealousy, but then again, who could blame her? I've been smitten with the man from the first moment I laid eyes on him.

"Faine," I respond with a gentle smile. She nods once, then flicks her glance away, staring straight ahead. I walk through the entrance into the cool courtyard that's now lush with blooming flowers. I take a deep breath and try to let the scent of fertile nature soothe me.

"Try to rest, my Lady," Vidarok rumbles as I pause for a moment. "You're no good to anyone half dead from exhaustion."

I attempt a weak smile. "I'll try, my friend." But rest feels unlikely with so much turmoil plaguing my thoughts. Inside, I wander aimlessly, too keyed up to even think of sleeping. So much weighs heavy on my mind, and my stomach is in knots.

With a resigned sigh, I undress, pull on a nightdress, and throw myself down on the bed, mind racing. Bart had urged me to take care of myself, to rest more. At the time, I'd resisted, insisting I was fine, but now I have to admit he may have had a point. I'm utterly drained, both physically and mentally.

Tired. Tired. Tired.

It feels like it's in my bones.

But waiting here helplessly while Bart hunts his dangerous sister grates against my spirit. I itch to be doing something more useful. If only I could solve the riddle of this Curse! But answers continue to elude me, and now exhaustion clouds my thoughts.

"Petal poop!" I huff as I beat my pillow for the umpteenth time, trying to get comfortable. I know there has to be an answer to all of this, but right now, everything seems overwhelming. Flopping back yet again, I stare up at the ceiling.

Fluffy white clouds.

The thought makes me smile. For all his stuffiness, Bartholomew Bellingham has a quirky side that I find irresistible.

Who am I kidding? I find everything about him irresistible.

But the thought of those clouds soon fills my head, and I let the sensation envelop me. Somehow, I find myself sinking into a fitful sleep.

It must be hours later that I finally drag myself from my troubling dreams. The sun is up, and I can hear voices outside. Sitting and stretching, I rub my eyes and swing my

feet out of bed. Breakfast would probably be a good idea, but the thought of food makes my stomach object.

“Lily?” I call out as I reach for a robe and slip it over my shoulders. With all that’s gone on, the poor girl has probably found a quiet place to retreat. I wander through to the dining area. There are a couple of empty mugs with the remnants of cold coffee congealed at the bottom, but no sign of the breakfast she normally prepares. I heave a sigh.

“Poor little thing.” She must be scared witless. I shouldn’t have brought her here with all that’s been happening lately. A swirl of guilt makes my chest tighten, and I remember Vidarok’s words. I’ve put the welfare of my people aside in my determination to help Bart.

Stop thinking that way!

Turning to stare out into the gardens, I contemplate what I should focus on doing today. Obviously, another trip to the dungeons is off the cards – pity because the time I spent there in the past yielded so much information. More time in the library could be useful. Though, I wonder how much of it is truly useful and not simply fascinating insight into Bartholomew’s world. Vampire society seems to be as complex and colorful as my Fae world.

Strolling further toward the outskirts of the courtyard, I keep peering around for my little handmaiden.

“Hollyhocks! Where is that girl?” It’s really not like her to be out of earshot. A strange sense of foreboding begins to build in spite of the beauty of the gardens I’m looking into. Footsteps have me spinning around. I see Faine standing in the doorway.

“Princess Aurora!” She rushes over, slightly breathless. “Thank the Blood I found you. I have an urgent message.”

My pulse quickens with unease. “What is it?”

“It’s Lily, my Lady. She came to the estate asking for you. She’s waiting in the outer gardens by the lake. She said it’s imperative you come at once.”

“Lily?” Alarm shoots through me. “Is she all right?”

Faine nods reassuringly. “She’s fine, merely very anxious to see you. However, she was quite insistent that you meet her somewhere private, away from potential eavesdroppers.”

I hesitate, confused by this secrecy so unlike Lily’s sunny disposition. But it’s tempered by relief that she’s safe. “Did she say what she needs to discuss?”

“No, my Lady. Merely that it is urgent you come to her in the far gardens immediately.”

I glance down at my robe and slippers, wondering if I should take the time to change them. I doubt there’ll be anyone around to see me at this time of day. Dismissing the idea, I glance past Faine.

“Call Vidarok,” I tell her. “He’ll want to come with us.”

“I am afraid he’s stepped away from his post, my Lady.” She glances over his shoulder. “I am happy to accompany you... Although I’m sure he won’t be long. We could wait?”

I frown. I sense an urgency to this situation that’s making me edgy. I shake my head. “I’m sure it’ll be fine if we go down together.” If Faine is a competent guard to oversee Bart, then I’m certain she’ll be good enough to do the job for me, too. Tugging my robe closer around me, I nod toward the door to the gardens. “Lead on,” I say firmly.

With a curt nod, Faine heads to the door, glancing both ways before stepping outside. It seems like a useless gesture. If anyone’s out there, it’s not likely they’ll be hiding behind the doorway. Still, I guess she knows what she’s doing.

Faine sets a brisk pace into the shadowy parts of the grounds. As we near a secluded glen, foreboding prickles through me.

“Are you certain she said we should meet her here?” I ask Faine.

She turns to me with an encouraging smile. “Absolutely, my Lady.” She nods toward a spot in front of us.

Just ahead, the trees open into a clearing surrounding a glassy pond. My heart leaps as I see Lily's familiar form standing at the water's edge.

"Lily!" I rush toward her, flooded with relief. But as I draw near, she turns and stares at me with a tortured expression.

"No! Don't!" she chokes out.

"Lily?" I try to make sense of this. But it's suddenly becoming all too clear. It becomes even clearer as a figure steps out of the shadows nearby.

Vespyr smiles viciously.

"You!" I gasp, skidding to a halt. Shock lances through me as I take in Vespyr's malevolent grin, silver glinting around her eyes. I sense Faine coming up behind me and turn to look at her. She avoids my eyes. With cold betrayal, I realize she must be afflicted with the Curse as well. My suspicions are confirmed when Vespyr tosses something toward her. The glint of a blood vial shimmers in the air. Faine catches it eagerly and pops the cap off.

"Surprise, Princess," Vespyr sneers at me, tightening her hold on Lily's arm. "You walked right into our little trap."

I hear Faine sucking hungrily behind me, and my stomach churns. I know what I'd see if I looked at her now. The circle of silver. She has the Curse, too.

Mother Earth! Where does it end?

"It's okay, Lily. Everything's going to be okay," I say soothingly. Lily meets my eyes pleadingly, clearly brought here against her will.

But I'm powerless to help her as Vespyr starts to laugh. "Oh, but you're wrong. It's not going to be okay. It's going to be anything but okay."

"Let her go!" I demand, even though I know that it's pointless. I'm dealing with a madwoman.

"Poor Aurora. We have plans for you." Vespyr's smile curdles my blood. This is bad. Very bad. I freeze as she grasps

Lily by the back of her neck and presses her forward, using her as a shield as she moves up toward me. Sharp nails bite into Lily's pale skin, and her eyes go wide.

"Did you really think you could stop us?" Vespyr hisses. "That your false promises of a 'cure' would keep us from claiming what is rightfully ours?"

I shake my head mutely, unable to comprehend how thoroughly she's embraced this twisted corruption. Bart was right to lose hope for her redemption.

"Please, don't hurt her!" I hear my voice crack.

Vespyr's lip curls. "Worry more about yourself, Fae." Her cruel gaze is fixed on me. "Your fate is sealed. We are the future, and you have no power to stop us."

Fear coils coldly in my gut, but I force myself to meet her crazed stare steadily. "You're wrong, Vespyr. This Curse has poisoned your mind. But we can still help you if you let us."

Vespyr throws back her head and laughs. The sound is eerie. "You know nothing. But you'll learn soon enough."

"Never!" I hiss. "I'll fight you until my last breath."

Vespyr smirks. "We shall see. Take her!" she barks at Faine.

As Faine reaches for me, I twist violently, raking my nails across her face. She shrieks, then snaps up her arm and backhands me with such force I go reeling back.

"That's for trying to take what is rightfully mine," she growls through clenched teeth. Just as I thought, silver rings her irises. "He's mine, do you hear me? Mine!"

"Hush, pet," Vespyr says soothingly. "All good things come to those who wait. He'll be joining us soon enough." The pair exchange glances, and I stare at them mutely, lifting my hand to wipe at my mouth. The inside of my mouth has been slashed open against my teeth, and blood streaks the back of my hand when I look down at it. Faine stares at it hungrily, too.

“Let me have her. Just a taste,” she hisses at Vespyr.

The princess shakes her head. “You’re not strong enough to control the pull, pet. You’ll kill her. And we need her, remember?” Vespyr’s eyes run over me, making my skin crawl. “But you’ll have your chance when Bartholomew comes to us. I’ll reward your loyalty then – you can drain her dry and do whatever you wish with my brother.”

Faine’s lips twist, her eyes wide and wild. I feel bile rise in my throat as I stare over at a terrified Lily.

It may not happen right now, but there’s no doubt in my mind. They’re going to kill us.

Bartholomew

It's been twelve hours since I saw Aurora.

The strange sense of unease is unfamiliar to me as I think of how much I dislike being away from her. I've grown so accustomed to her calming presence over these past days that its absence leaves my thoughts spinning wildly out of control.

She settles me somehow. It's as if her unfailing determination has convinced me that I can keep this Curse in check. But when she's not with me—

I can still do it, dammit!

I won't be a slave to this affliction. I've only had one true lapse: that night we kissed. Since then, I've been aware of a strange simmering within my subconscious, but so far, that's all it's been. But right now, my personal battle feels like the least of my worries.

We still haven't found Vespyr.

The weight of failure feels heavy on my shoulders as I make my way back through the estate. A long night of searching the grounds and surrounding countryside for Vespyr has yielded nothing. She and the escaped prisoners have vanished without a trace, as if they never existed at all.

Now, in the cold light of day, I feel a sick churning in my gut. I need to make sure that Aurora is safe. Though I know she's under heavy guard, my anxiety spikes the longer we're apart.

Spotting Luther striding toward me, I quicken my pace to meet him. His silver brows are drawn together in a troubled

line, exhaustion etched on his features. We hardly need to exchange words to know we both have nothing to report. Still, I grasp at the hope that perhaps his men uncovered some shred of evidence.

“Any sign of them?” I demand roughly.

Luther’s grimace tells me all I need to know. “I’m afraid not, my Lord. We’ve scoured every inch of the estate and lands for miles. Questioned the guards again and again. But there’s not a trace.” He shakes his head, as baffled as I am by their disappearance.

Cursing under my breath, I rake a hand through my disheveled hair. “This shouldn’t be possible!” I’m sure I’ve said these words a thousand times or more.

“I wish I knew.” Luther’s eyes are grave. “The guards insist they never opened Vespvr’s cell, yet it’s as if she strolled out all the same. They swear the other prisoners never left their sight, only to vanish moments later. But then again, how good is their word?” he muses.

My jaw clenches so tightly it’s a wonder my teeth don’t shatter. “Are you suggesting my best men simply abandoned their posts and allowed them to escape?”

“Of course not, my Lord.” Luther lays a placating hand on my arm. “I’ve known these guards for decades. Their loyalty is unquestionable. I’m certain some strange magic is at work here.”

Magic. I seize on that word, a horrible notion taking shape. “You believe Vespvr is controlling them? Some form of mind manipulation?”

“It may be the only explanation,” Luther says wearily. “Once freed, your sister could have planted suggestions in their minds, bid them open the cells, and then make them forget their actions entirely.”

“By Blood!” The extent of Vespvr’s new abilities chills me. If she can bend even unaffected minds to her will, then no one is safe. Certainly not Aurora.

As if sensing my thoughts, Luther adds gently, “Lady Aurora remains under heavy guard, my Lord. And Vidarok has not left her side. You can be sure of that.”

I nod tightly, though his assurances only somewhat ease the icy grip of dread around my heart. Aurora’s bright spirit and steadfast courage make it easy to forget how vulnerable she could be to Vespyr’s twisted powers and bloodthirsty rage. And with this strange new magic at her command, nowhere in Ryacyn may be safe for long.

“Increase interrogation of the remaining prisoners and guards. Someone must know something useful.”

“Yes, my Lord.” Luther bows his head. But uncertainty lingers in his eyes. We both grasp how bad the situation has become, with an unknown number of deadly creatures roaming free. And if Vespyr has grown so skilled at concealing their movements, finding them again could prove impossible.

Impossible...until they strike.

An alarming thought occurs to me. “The prisoners who vanished...do we have any sense of their abilities?” If any possessed similar mental powers, they could wreak havoc.

Luther’s frown deepens at my question. “Most seemed to exhibit only increased physical strength from what we observed. However...” He hesitates ominously.

“What is it?” I fix him with a hard stare.

With a heavy sigh, Luther continues. “A few of the ones taken seemed to have...extrasensory talents manifesting. One female demonstrated an uncanny knack for reading thoughts. And one of the males somehow bent the bars of his cell one night.”

I suck in a sharp breath as understanding dawns, cold and terrible. With Vespyr orchestrating them, those strange talents could make them nearly unstoppable. Unbidden, my thoughts turn to Aurora once more. Vidarok’s fierce loyalty alone may not be enough to protect her if Vespyr comes for her.

Abruptly, I turn on my heel, resuming my brisk pace toward Aurora's quarters. I need the reassurance of seeing her with my own eyes, of holding her safely in my arms.

"My Lord, where are you going?" Luther calls after me, startled.

"To check on Lady Aurora," I reply without slowing.

Luther hastens his steps to catch up. "Of course. I'm sure she's fine—"

"I'll determine that myself."

Perhaps I sound harsher than I intend, but tension has shortened my temper. Aurora's sweet face, her beguiling eyes, and her warm lips fill my mind. Almost before I realize it, my strides have carried me through the estate grounds.

I heave a sigh of relief as I make out the hulking form of Vidarok standing sentry outside her door. Though still too far to read his craggy features, his posture appears alert but unfazed. Lamia, one of my most skilled fighters, stands guard as well. Their presence eases my mind fractionally.

As I approach, Vidarok's keen eyes alight on me. He offers a swift bow, though his stern gaze quickly returns to scanning the area around us. "My Lord," he rasps.

I try to keep my voice steady and calm as I ask, "How is Lady Aurora? Has she been resting?"

Vidarok shakes his head, his dark hair falling across his craggy brow. "Princess Aurora awoke early and has been anxious all morning. Faine informed me that she wished to bathe, so she is attending to her now."

I tense slightly, for some reason, not liking the idea of Faine being alone with Aurora, but Vidarok seems unconcerned. We talk for a bit about the lack of progress in finding Vespyr, and I fill him in on Luther's troubling theory about Vespyr's new mental powers. He listens intently, offering the occasional solemn nod. Despite our rocky start, I've come to respect the giant male's fierce dedication to protecting my woman.

My woman.

Is that what she is? We haven't taken the steps that would lead us there yet, but I can't think of her as anything else. If I have my way, she'll be mine forever.

Unless the Curse—

To hell with the Curse!

We'll beat it. I believe in her. And more importantly, I believe in myself. I won't succumb to this thing that seems to be driving my sister. I've never lusted for power the way that she seems to.

Vidarok shifts his massive feet, making me realize that I've been silent for too long. I give a tight smile and turn to the entrance. If I'm going to wait, I don't intend to do it outside the front door. Vidarok falls in step behind me as I head into the main living area of the suites. I feel his eyes on me as I walk. What the fuck is he looking at?

The man who might drain his regent dry, Bellingham.

I try not to shudder as I think about it. It's hard to accept that, for some, I'm not much better than my sister and her crazed followers.

"She's safe with me. You know this, don't you?" I turn my eyes to him.

He's silent for a beat. "Perhaps." He's a man of few words. Normally, I'd like that.

"I care for her. Deeply." I realize just how much as I say it. How deeply is yet to be seen, but right now, I know that there's never been anyone else with such a hold over my heart.

"Keep it that way...my Lord." His eyes are steely. I dip my head, knowing there's no point in trying to drive the point home anymore.

We wait in silence. After a while, though, I start to grow uneasy. Aurora should have finished bathing by now. A prickle of unease creeps down my spine.

“It’s been too long,” I mutter. “They should have returned.”

Vidarok frowns, glancing back at the closed door. Without another word, he strides forward and raps his knuckles sharply against the wood. “Princess Aurora?” he calls out gruffly. No response comes from within.

Unease coils in my gut.

Vidarok tries the handle and finds it unlocked. We exchange an ominous look before pushing inside. The rooms are still and empty, no sign of Aurora or Faine. Fear lances through me as we quickly search every corner, even throwing open the doors to Aurora’s private bed chamber. The sight of her unmade bed, sheets thrown back, doesn’t set me at ease. I run my hand over the coverlet. It carries no trace of her warmth. I can’t catch her scent in the air. It’s been a while since she’s been here.

Vidarok stands bristling, and I sense his growing tension.

“Where is she?” I snarl, anxiety rising. He flinches. It’s a strange reaction, and I realize that as understanding dawns, he’s beginning to question himself. I know what he’s thinking.

How did I let this happen?

I’m asking myself the same thing.

“Fuck!” The word comes out as a hiss. I rake my hand through my hair, spinning around to run my eyes over the room as if she’ll step out of the shadows at any minute. “Fuck!” I yell it now.

I am seconds away from raising the alarm and turning the place inside out to find her when something glints on the pillow, catching my eye. I freeze, rage and terror roaring through me in equal measure.

There, coiled mockingly on the pale linen of her pillow, lies a slender silver circlet.

The silver circle of the Curse. And Vespyr’s new calling card.

She's taken Aurora.

Aurora

The sharp crack of a hand across my cheek startles me from uneasy dreams. I jerk awake, blinking against the oppressive darkness. Another stinging slap makes my eyes water.

“Wakey wakey, Sleeping Beauty.”

Vespyr’s cold voice sends a spike of dread through me. As my vision adjusts, her blond mane and cruel smile swim into focus. I shrink back instinctively from the malicious gleam in her golden eyes.

Where am I? How did I get here?

I try to shake off the mental fog. My last clear memory is of following Faine down to the gardens...

Faine!

The realization of her betrayal hits me like a blow. She tricked me, led me right to Vespyr. Hot shame floods through me. I can’t believe I could have been so foolish to trust her.

What was I thinking? I’ve always suspected that she didn’t like me much. Or at all, if I’m honest with myself. Add a pinch of madness, and it was a recipe for disaster.

“Surprised to see me, pretty?” Vespyr taunts, drawing my attention back to her. “You walked blindly into my trap.”

I ignore her gibe, looking wildly around, taking in the nightmarish scene. We’re surrounded by grinning skulls and bones stacked in alcoves, surrounded by crumbling masonry. The air is dank, carrying a sickly sweet stench of decay. Water drips eerily from somewhere nearby, and a high-pitched squeak warns me that rats aren’t far off.

My blood turns to ice. Now I know where we are: the ancient catacombs beneath Paris. But this is nothing like the warmly lit passage from when Bart brought me here. No, Vespyr has brought us some place grotesque and evil.

Fear lances through me, but I work to keep my voice steady. “What do you want with me, Vespyr?”

She arches one brow. “I think you know, Aurora dear.” Vespyr crouches before me, venom in her smile. “You’re the bait.”

I frown at her. I’d expected something more personal. Bartholomew had warned me that she blamed me for all that had happened. Wouldn’t I be her prime target? Although I guess I should be grateful. I’ve seen what these creatures are capable of when in captivity. Being face-to-face with one without the safety of prison bars between us is downright terrifying. I feel like I’m facing a hungry tiger.

“Bait?” I say when she cocks her head at me, clearly waiting for a reaction.

“Yes, bait.” She heaves a sigh. “For that foolish brother of mine. And once Bartholomew comes for you, the real fun begins.”

“What ‘fun’ are you talking about, Vespyr?” My voice is sharp as anger starts to build. This woman is relentless.

“The fun of watching him change his tune, of course. As soon as he understands what he stands to win by joining me, all of this can be over, and we can rule as we were meant to.”

“Join you?”

“In ruling together. Brother and sister together again. The way it was supposed to be.”

She’s certifiable.

“And if he doesn’t?” I narrow my eyes on her.

“Well, then, it will be fun of a different sort.” She bares her teeth and flicks the tip of her tongue over a gleaming fang.

My heart stutters. She means to force Bart to join her – I’m sure of it. Either way, we’re pawns in her mad schemes for power.

I frantically scan the gloom, and my breath catches when I spot Lily’s huddled form against a wall nearby. My poor handmaiden looks terrified, her delicate wrists cruelly bound behind her back. But aside from wide, frightened eyes, she seems unharmed for now.

Sudden fury burns away my fear. “Let her go, Vespyr,” I demand heatedly. “Your quarrel is with me, not her.”

Vespyr shrugs, clearly indifferent to Lily’s suffering. “She’ll prove useful enough. Though not nearly as useful as you, *my Lady*.” Her smile makes my stomach churn with dread. Just what twisted plans does she have in store for me?

I shake my head, willing my voice not to waver. “Bartholomew will never submit to your madness, no matter what you do to me.” Even I can hear the desperate ring of a lie in my words. Because I know in my heart that Bart will move heaven and earth to save me, no matter the cost. Vespyr knows it, too.

She tosses her shimmering golden hair over one shoulder. “We shall see. Once he learns I have his precious princess, my brother will come running.” Her smile turns razor-sharp. “And then he’ll join our cause...”

Hot defiance flares in me. “He’ll never help you wage war on the innocent!”

“Innocent? Who the hell is innocent? At heart, we are all capable of evil. I’m just honest enough to make my motives known.” She shrugs. “You and your kind are fools if you think we really believe in all your “sweetness-and-light” shit.”

“Screw you!” I spit.

Vespyr’s hand cracks across my cheek again, making me gasp at the sudden burst of pain. “Still so defiant,” she mocks. “Don’t worry, I know how to break that fiery spirit.” Her gaze turns anticipatory. “Though that will have to wait until my brother gets here. I’m guessing he’ll have some way

of knowing whether you're alive or dead. If his powers are beginning to grow yet, that is." She taps her bottom lip with a fingertip. "I really hope he doesn't decide to be a problem. I'd hate to have to lock him away forever. But then again, that's exactly what he planned to do to me."

At Vespyr's words, Faine lopes forward out of the shadows. Revulsion twists my stomach when I see the tell-tale silver rings around her dilated pupils, confirmation that the Curse has her fully in its grip now.

"Your Highness..." Her voice is hesitant. "Remember that he was promised to me?" Her throat works, probably knowing that she's taking a risk by questioning the princess. Vespyr flicks a hand.

"All in good time, pet. Let's take one step at a time. First, we put our proposition to him...to rule together. After that...we'll see..." She aims a tight smile at the vampire warrior woman. I half wonder if the woman is beginning to outlive her usefulness.

"Thank you, mistress." Faine licks her lips, which seem dry. "I'm thirsty, mistress." Her eyes dart around anxiously like an addict needing a hit.

Didn't she just drink?

How long have we been here?

"Of course. I almost forgot." Vespyr rolls her eyes. Yes, it seems that Faine's definitely not high on the list of priorities. "Feast, pet." Vespyr jerks her head in Lily's direction as I look on in horror.

No! She can't be serious.

"Stay away from her!" My voice rings out sharply, desperate to protect Lily from Faine's vile intentions. But she pays no attention to me. She's too fixated on Lily's temptingly vulnerable form.

As Faine lunges toward Lily with grasping hands and bared fangs, some primal instinct surges up in me. With a yell, I send a burst of power outward and release a blast of green

flame toward her. The magic hurls Faine violently back against the far wall, where she slumps stunned to the ground.

Triumph flashes through me, but it's short-lived. Icy amusement flickers over Vespyr's face at my small act of defiance. Slowly, deliberately, she crooks one finger.

I gasp as dark, writhing shadows creep vine-like from the catacomb's walls, then creep toward me across the floor.

"What the—?" I blurt as one of them touches my foot and then slides around my ankle. The shadows take form, as solid as cold hands coiling themselves around me in a vice-like grip. The serpentine tendrils continue to wind tighter and tighter until I can barely draw breath. Black spots dance before my eyes. Just when I feel I might pass out, the shadows fall away, accompanied by echoing laughter that seems to come from the bones.

I sag forward, coughing and gulping air greedily. Vespyr watches me struggle dispassionately. When I meet her gaze, she says softly, "Let that be a warning not to try your magic on me, Aurora. I assure you, mine is much stronger. And each day that passes, I grow more powerful still."

Her effortless display of power sends ice water flooding through my veins. I knew Vespyr was cunning and ambitious, but this? This is unthinkable. And I'm utterly at her mercy here in this gloomy underworld.

Still, I refuse to cower before her. Bart will come for me; I know he will. And by all that's holy, Vespyr will not take us down easily.

As if reading my thoughts, her lip curls in a knowing smirk. "Feel free to resist me, Aurora. Struggle all you like – it will make no difference." She crouches down, grasping my chin hard between sharp nails. "You will serve my purpose in the end. You will bring Bartholomew to me."

I wrench my face from her painful grip, glaring back silently. Vespyr rises with an icy laugh and sweeps out, Faine slinking obediently behind. Their footsteps fade, leaving a heavy silence broken only by echoing drips of water.

Finally, alone, except for Lily, I sag back against the slimy stones, ravaged nerves giving way to despair. This is a nightmare I can't seem to wake from.

Bart, where are you? We need you!

Dark visions swirl through my mind, shaking me to the core. Vespyr is twisted, dangerous; I'm certain that her threats aren't just empty ravings. She fully intends to force Bart to join her or face the consequences. And she'll use me to make him do it.

I can't stand the thought of being part of whatever Vespyr has planned. Panic wells up, uncontrolled. I can't let it happen! But I'm trapped here, weaponless. Vespyr's powers are unfathomable to me in this dark realm.

You're stronger than you know, Aurora. Don't give up hope!

I repeat those words like a mantra, clinging to my conviction that Bart will find me. He'll move heaven and earth to get me back safely. I know this without a doubt.

Gradually, my frantic gasps slow. I can't afford to wallow in despair. I need to keep a clear head if Lily and I are going to have any chance of getting out of this.

Blinking back useless tears, I take in several deep, steadying breaths.

That's better. Hold it together!

I'm still afraid – I'd be a fool not to be – but I refuse to crumble. I'll find some way to resist Vespyr, I swear it. She wants to use me as a pawn? Like hell! I'll fight her until my last breath. There must be a weakness, some flaw in her defenses I can exploit. But I can't afford to show my hand too soon.

Slowly, cautiously, I shuffle closer to Lily until I can touch my forehead to hers. She whimpers, pressing close for comfort. My heart aches; the poor thing is scared out of her wits. Hell, so am I. But I must be strong for her.

“It’s all right, Lily,” I murmur reassuringly. “I’m going to get us out of this, I promise.”

She nods, lower lip trembling. I wish I could wrap my arms around her, but my wrists are still tightly bound. Whoever tied us made sure we can’t easily free ourselves. But I’ll be damned if I don’t find some way around that.

Gritting my teeth, I strain against the ropes, twisting my wrists this way and that. The fibers bite into my skin but refuse to give. Summoning my magic, I aim my thoughts at my bonds but receive a sharp jolt of current through my skin as a result.

Sweet Earth Mother!

There must be silver woven into the strands. No matter how hard I try, there just seems to be no escape. But I’ll keep trying. There must be something in this dungeon we can use to free ourselves.

In the meantime, I take what comfort I can from Lily’s nearness. At least Vespyn seems content to leave us alone for now. Small mercy, but I’ll take it. It gives me a chance to clear my head and think.

Bart will come for me. He will!

But maybe that would be the worst thing he could do.

Bartholomew

Rage and disbelief roar through me when I see the silver circle lying mockingly on Aurora's pillow. In that instant, the implication of Vespyr's vicious calling card sinks in. She has gone too far this time. Abducting my mate is an unforgivable act of war.

Mate?

She *is* my mate, by Blood! I can't agonize over this fact every time it comes up somehow. The blood-sharing hasn't happened yet, but that means nothing. I feel her where it matters. In my soul.

A roar rips from my throat, and I slam my fists down on the small table near the bed, obliterating it in a spray of splintered wood.

I storm from Aurora's empty chambers with Vidarok close on my heels. The big Orc had been a stalwart guard outside her door yet somehow failed to realize she'd been taken right under his nose.

Wheeling on him the second we're in the hallway, I slam him up against the wall. He grunts as my forearm presses crushingly across his throat.

"You were supposed to protect her!" I snarl into his face. His eyes widen, then begin to glow emerald as his own fury rises in response to my assault. I should rein in my temper before he retaliates, but blind rage clouds my thoughts. Part of me wants to rip his throat out where he stands.

“The princess was under my guard,” Vidarok chokes out. “No one could have breached these rooms without my knowledge!”

With a monumental effort, the huge male shoves me off, sending me stumbling back a step. He rubs his throat, glaring back at me warily.

Without thinking, I lunge at him again. He’s shimmering slightly, as if I’m looking at him through a heat haze. Before I can lay into him, a huge hand in the center of my chest shoves me several staggering feet back. I regain my balance and prepare to fly at him again, claws out, teeth bared.

“You...you...!” I roar, barely recognizing the animal growl of my own voice. I’m not just going to tear him apart; I’m going to drain the marrow from his very bones.

“Lord Bellingham, control yourself!” he exclaims hoarsely. “You are not...who you should be.”

I stop short, blinking in confusion. Then understanding sinks in at the undisguised horror in Vidarok’s expression. My fangs are fully extended, my upper lip peeled back in a vicious snarl. The overpowering hunger clawing inside me isn’t normal thirst. It’s the same ravenous bloodlust that possessed me the night I kissed Aurora and turned.

The Curse has flared to life within me.

I force myself to take a deep breath, fighting back the red haze threatening to overwhelm me. As my fangs slowly retract, the room comes back into sharper focus. Vidarok stands utterly still before me, poised as if ready to defend himself. His pulse hammers loud enough for me to hear it.

“The silver,” he says hoarsely, raising a hand and pointing at my face. “Your eyes...”

I squeeze my eyes shut, willing the Curse back into submission through sheer force of will.

You don’t control me. You don’t fucking control me!

When I open them again, Vidarok has relaxed fractionally. The temptation to indulge the thirst simmering

inside me passes.

For now.

He starts talking, going through the events before I got there. “We never let her out of our sight.” He shakes his head. “There was always someone with her. Always!” As much as the rage is still gnawing at me, I can see that he’s just as enraged...at himself. “I should have... I should... She was safe. I swear it on the blood of the ax... *Safe*, dammit!”

“Then how is she gone?” I demand.

“I don’t know.” He shakes his head again, as if trying to force the pieces to fall into place. “Your guard told me my Lady needed privacy to bathe.”

“Faine?”

He nods. Something flickers in his expression. I feel a twinge of discomfort building as a thought begins to take hold. It seems that the same thought occurs to the Orc.

“It was her!” he barks. “The vampire female! Your guard. She told me she was going to be with Lady Aurora while she bathed – clearly, she had other intentions. She took her!”

“You lie!” I don’t want to believe it. Faine has been my loyal protector since the last assassination attempt. She’d give her life for me; I’m certain of it. “You’re trying to make excuses for your incompetence.” But even as I say it, I know that what he’s saying is true. Who else had access to Aurora?

And there has always been something odd about the way Faine watched over me. I’d thought of it as an asset. Now I’m not so sure.

“It was her,” he says again, hate dripping. “I don’t know how she managed it, but she will pay dearly for this betrayal, I swear it!” He slams a massive fist against the wall, cracking the stone. The big Orc is nearly shaking with fury, clearly hating himself for allowing Aurora to be taken.

My own anger remains white hot, but his misery tempers it somewhat. I know his dedication to Aurora is

absolute; her disappearance guts him just as much as it does me. Still, I can't contain the crushing fear and rage Vespyr's sadistic action has unleashed.

But Faine?

He's right. I've been a fool.

"We have to find her!" My voice comes out raw, barely human. Vidarok's gaze locks on my face, and I realize that my control is slipping again.

I press my fingertips to my eyelids, sucking in a deep breath in an effort to calm the maelstrom inside me.

Get it together, Bellingham!

Aurora needs me with a clear head.

After a few moments, I lower my hands and open my eyes. Vidarok is staring at me warily, shoulders tensed once more.

"The silver rings...they faded when you calmed yourself," he rumbles. I nod tersely. These episodes give me just a glimpse of the madness Vespyr has fully embraced. No wonder she's so far gone: it's out of her hands.

I can't let it take me, too.

"My control has been uncertain since this Curse manifested," I admit. "But never more than now, with Aurora..." I trail off, a fresh wave of fear for her threatening to crack my composure again.

"Don't lose yourself to it, my Lord," Vidarok says gruffly. "Our Lady would not want that." He hesitates, then adds, "Nor would it help us find her."

He's right. I force myself to focus, pushing back the clamoring emotions. But it's difficult when each second that ticks by could mean Aurora is deeper in danger...further from me. The not knowing shreds my nerves.

Sharp edges graze my lips, and I know my fangs have extended again.

“I need blood,” I mutter. It’s been too long since I fed. The gnawing thirst is clearly making my control even more tenuous.

Vidarok’s eyes flick to my mouth. “If you need to feed, I can withstand it.” He extends a thickly muscled arm.

I stare sharply at Vidarok. The hulking Orc meets my gaze unflinchingly, offering his own blood without hesitation. My eyes trace the pulsing veins just below the surface of his skin. Warm, rich life flows just beneath—

Revulsion twists my gut. “No! I won’t risk losing control and draining you.” Vidarok is strong, but if the madness takes me fully, I could end up killing him. Aurora would never forgive me.

Vidarok remains stoic as ever. “You must feed, my Lord. Starving yourself will only make the Curse more volatile.”

I know he’s right. After the incident with Aurora, I’d avoided taking substantial blood, afraid of what it might awaken in me. But obviously, that was a mistake.

“Not from you,” I tell him, ignoring the narrowing of his eyes. Before the Orc can argue, I turn my head and shout down the hallway, “Lamia!” My voice is a hoarse croak. I clear my throat and try again. “Lamia!”

A moment later, the female vampire guard hurries over, her expression grim. She’s probably overheard the commotion inside. Her sable hair spills over one shoulder as she bows. “How may I serve, my Lord?”

I eye her for a moment, wondering if she can be trusted, too. After the revelation about Faine, my senses are on full alert.

“I need blood. Now,” I order tersely. With trepidation, she sinks to her knees and raises a wrist. Feeding from my guards has been something I’ve done in the past, though seldom from a vein. She’s shaking. It’s no secret what I’ve become – she’s clearly terrified, but she doesn’t hesitate, which answers my questions about her loyalty.

I flick a hand at her in dismissal. “No. Get me vials. I need all you can get your hands on.” There’s a flash of relief in Lamia’s eyes before she nods and stands again. “Call together the Council, too,” I add. “Lord Luther and the others. Tell them I need to meet with them immediately. Lady Aurora has been taken.”

We have to make a plan.

Wide-eyed, she nods. “Yes, my Lord.” She rushes off to fulfill the command without question. I know she’ll ensure I’m well stocked with whatever provisions are needed to keep me sated. And I’m relieved to know that whatever turned Faine hasn’t affected her.

The fucking Curse. It’s taken too many of us.

Vidarok watches this exchange silently. Turning back to him, I say more steadily, “I appreciate your offer, Orc.” He needs to know I haven’t taken his gesture lightly. “But until we can get Aurora back, I’m not taking any chances on losing my grip. The temptation to drain you might be too much for me.”

The ghost of a smile touches Vidarok’s craggy face. “Sounds wise.” His respect for my restraint is evident. I only pray it will be enough to withstand the dark urges simmering inside me if they grow stronger. Each second we’re apart, I can feel the vise tightening. Having Aurora near has helped keep me from slipping, I realize now.

I have to get her back before the monster inside me consumes every last shred of my humanity.

Vidarok clears his throat. “What are your orders?” His tone makes it clear he’s waiting for instructions on how to make amends for his failure – imagined or not – to keep Aurora from harm.

“We’ll meet with the Council,” I reply at once, “and comb the city, search the countryside, and do whatever it takes to find her.” My voice drops to a menacing growl. “I’ll tear this kingdom apart stone by stone if I must.”

As much as my words are filled with determination, I have a sinking sense of anxiety growing. We’ve already spent

the past two days doing exactly that, searching for Vespyr and the others. There's been no sign of her or any of her allies. It's as if they move with the wind, sweeping in and out of our midst without leaving a trace of their passing.

How the fuck are they doing it?

We were able to catch her quite quickly after her past escapes. This time, it's different.

Her powers have grown.

I pass a hand over my eyes, weariness creeping through my veins. The emotional turmoil is draining me. Aurora's captivity at Vespyr's hands gnaws at my gut. What twisted torments might my mad sister be subjecting her to even now?

I need to get out there!

I should be out there searching for Aurora myself. But in my current state, I could end up doing as much harm as good if I fly off the handle. Frustration eats at me as I try to balance my need to save her with the common sense of not putting everyone in danger.

Think, Bellingham!

I have to keep my wits about me.

"Lamia had better return swiftly with that blood," I mutter. The gnawing thirst is becoming harder to ignore. Distraction is what I need most right now. I can't afford to let my thoughts spiral. I need to focus on getting Aurora back unharmed.

If we can just figure out where she's gone, it'll save us the time of more fruitless searches. Wherever Vespyr's taken Aurora, it must be some place well-hidden even from my most skilled trackers. If I know my sister, she will be arrogantly confident in her newfound power. She'll keep Aurora tauntingly close, anticipating my inevitable attempt at rescue. And she knows our territories better than most, every hidden cave and secret enclave.

Somewhere out there, Vespyr plots and schemes, confident her twisted trap has been sprung perfectly. She expects me to dance to her tune like a mindless puppet.

My sister should know better. When you taunt a beast and threaten the sun that is his mistress, you invite only one outcome: a merciless onslaught.

I'm coming, Vespyr.

And woe betide anyone who stands in my way.

Bartholomew

There's a grim sense of foreboding in the air as I storm into the Council chambers. Four pairs of eyes turn to look at me. I know what they're doing. I feel them searching my face for signs of the Curse we all know is there. Lamia must have warned them.

Fresh with blood, I know my cheeks have filled out, my skin practically glowing with it. Hesitating in the doorway, I take a moment to calm myself. The Orc guard said the silver subsided when I was calm. Taking a deep breath, I slow my stride and walk toward them.

Calm. Be calm.

"My Lord," says Luther, dipping his head. "Your guard updated us."

About me?

"Aurora is gone," Mortas joins in, getting straight to the heart of it. Thank fuck. They're not going to fixate on my "little problem."

"Yes." I nod. "Vespyr left this." I toss the silver circlet onto the meeting table. It clatters across the pitted wood, the sound mocking me.

"So she got in." Mortas sets his jaw. "How?"

"My guard helped her." It still galls me to admit it. "She lured Aurora out. Probably to get her to meet with Vespyr someplace less exposed."

"Her Fae handmaiden is missing, too." Vidarok has stepped up beside me.

I recall the petite female who'd been Aurora's shadow.

"Do you think she was involved?" Radella asks. I glance at her. The Orc is eyeing her, too.

"Never." He barks out the word. "Lily would lay down her life for our ruler. As would I."

That's what I thought about Faine. And now here we are.

Still, there's a difference here. Faine has the Curse. There's no doubt in my mind. The Fae are not susceptible to it. Lily wouldn't have it.

"The handmaiden was taken against her will," I say firmly. "I wouldn't be surprised if Vespyr used her to draw Aurora out."

"Yes." Vidarok nods. "She had been missing, now that I come to think about it. I didn't see her when Lady Aurora returned from her studies last night. Nor was she around this morning."

It makes perfect sense. Aurora wouldn't just wander off a whim. She may be willful and headstrong – which I love about her – but she's certainly not foolish.

There are mutters among the others as they deliberate over all of this news.

"So now we hunt for Vespyr and the Fae princess, too." Luther heaves a breath. This is all becoming overwhelming. Between the uprising among our people and the months of searching for answers to the affliction, we've all been under pressure for too long. I know Luther has had his hands full trying to keep quiet the increasing number of deaths linked to attacks by the Cursed. And I have a feeling that's just the tip of the iceberg.

My own concerns seem to pale in comparison.

But losing myself to the Curse would bring a new set of troubles. Who would lead my people?

I look around the gathered group. Each one wise in their own unique way. Luther is a good candidate, but I doubt

he'd relish the role. Leadership takes a certain type of temperament, and my old advisor prefers to stay out of the limelight. My eyes land on Mortas. He returns my stare steadfastly. He might be able to step into my shoes.

By Blood, Bellingham!

I can't be thinking this way. Not now.

Then when?

It may be too late if I wait any longer. I realize I'm pacing when I find myself across the room. They're all watching me again.

Calm. Be fucking calm, dammit!

I take in my surroundings. The tall, airy windows. The gardens beyond them. The bright interior of the room. I breathe in deeply and then exhale. Then, I walk back toward them and take a seat.

Be calm.

"We have to put our minds to this." My voice is steady. Thank fuck.

"Of course," Salem agrees. "What do you propose? You know we've searched every inch of Ryacyn without success. There's been no indication that they've used one of the portals to get to any of our other territories. If there are any among us, we haven't been able to pick up the sign of the silver."

I want to snap at her. I don't. "Yes. I know," I say. My voice is calm. I run my tongue over the edges of my teeth. There's no longer a sharpness there. The blood has done its work. I suddenly feel like I can handle this. In fact, I feel fucking invincible. When I tap my fingertips against the surface of the table, there's a tingle in them.

Magic.

I look up suddenly. "We starve them out."

"What?" Radella frowns at me.

“We starve them until they reveal themselves, and then we get them to talk,” I elaborate.

“But we’ve already interrogated the prisoners. They’re either not talking, or they know nothing. I’d go with the latter.” Mortas looks at me. “Your sister’s smart enough to have kept her tracks covered. Whoever she left behind in the dungeons won’t know of her plans.”

“I’m not talking about the prisoners.” I smile because an idea is beginning to form. “I’m talking about the ones among us who haven’t been uncovered yet.” The silence that meets my words reminds me that this is a sore point. We have traitors in our midst.

I refuse to be one of them.

“They’ve fed recently in order to hide themselves,” I go on. “They must have known this was coming, so they were prepared. We cut off their blood supply until they show themselves.”

“So, how do you propose to do this?” Luther looks at me. “We can’t block every drop of blood in the whole of Ryacyn.”

“We don’t need to.” I glance around the table. “We only have to lock down the estate.”

There’s a murmur among the others. I know what they’re thinking, and they’re resisting it. It’s one thing to know that the Cursed live within our realm. It’s quite another to be aware that they’re so close.

“But my Lord!” Radella starts, her eyes wide. “You’re saying it could be any one of us.” Eyes dart around the table. Now that I’ve planted the seed, suspicions are rising. They don’t want to imagine that one of them could be Cursed.

Why should it come as a surprise, though? I’m living proof.

“We have to be realistic, Lady Radella.” I keep my voice level. “We spent too long denying this problem. Then, we wasted more time trying to hide it. It’s time to face the truth. This is an epidemic. Anyone could be Cursed. We have

no idea how it spreads yet.” I raise my hand. Sparks crackle between my fingertips, and there’s a chorus of gasps. “I don’t know how I came to be affected, after all.”

“So you want to starve them.” Mortas gets the conversation back on track. “To what end?”

“Whoever is walking freely among us would be one of her allies. Perhaps they helped her escape. In any event, they’ll have information. We simply press them for it.”

“But that could take days!” Salem looks unsettled. “The princess may not have that long.”

“I would share your concern, Lady Salem. But I don’t think it will come to that.” I’m still formulating this, but I’m growing more certain as I speak. “I lasted several days after I fed. But I’m still...new.” I don’t have a better word for it. “We’ve seen that the affliction has been becoming rapidly worse. Some in our cells need to feed several times a day to maintain themselves. And after what happened to Magna and his coven, we know the consequences of starvation.”

“They self-combust,” Luther says grimly. As if we don’t already know it. And “self-combust” is hardly the word for it. The charred remains of Magna’s followers had been shocking. They’d turned on each other in their desperation.

“I’m certain that there are others who are as far gone as those in our care. They’ve been hiding, drinking as often as they can without calling attention to themselves. Take that from them, and they’ll soon reveal themselves.”

I’m certain of it. I’ve only had a tiny taste of what’s to come for me if we don’t find a cure.

We’ll find a fucking cure! Not just for me but for the others who are Cursed. My people.

“It may only be a matter of hours,” Luther muses, looking down at where his hands are folded on the oak of the table.

I nod. “Precisely. They’ll grow desperate before long. And then we’ll know.”

“But what if they attack someone?” Salem looks stricken. “We can’t risk a life to save the Fae princess. Royalty or not, she’s no more important than any one of our own.”

The words set my teeth on edge. But she has a point. I can’t sacrifice someone for the woman I care for...can I?

No!

What kind of a king would I be if I made a decision like that?

A desperate one.

I can’t lose her.

“It’s a risk, I grant you that.” There’s no other way. But I’m starting to feel like I’m stuck in a corner.

“It’s doable,” Mortas rubs his chin, “if we call in the patrols and have them stand watch within the estate. They could crack down on the first sign of trouble.”

Salem slowly nods. “That could work.”

“I’m with Mortas on this.” Radella looks resolute. “We’ve been at the mercy of this damned affliction for too long now. It’s time to take a stand. If Vespyr is spearheading this thing, capturing her is not just about the princess. It’s about nipping the uprising in the bud.” She looks around at us. “We’re facing a war from within. We know this. It’s time to fight back.”

I feel a sense of relief at her words. Part of me had been asking if I’d allowed myself to spiral into selfishness, rushing out into a foolish race to save Aurora. But Radella’s right. At the root of it all is the urgency of what we’re facing. We have to fight back.

“So we’re in agreement?” I look around at the others. Luther gives a curt nod. So does Salem. I already know how Mortas feels. I look at him now.

Mortas turns his eyes to me. “What we’re about to do will have far-reaching consequences,” he says. “The future of Ryacyn is at stake. Are you up to this, Bellingham?”

“Of course I am!” I snap. “You dare to doubt me?” I jut out my jaw, even though I’m fighting to ignore my own self-doubt. If he thinks I’ll do anything other than my best, he’s sorely mistaken.

But what if it’s out of my hands?

Calm. Stay calm.

I still have control. And while I do, we’ll see this through. We’ll find Vespyr’s allies, and then we’ll discover what she’s planning. The answers lie with someone on the estate; I know it.

I just pray it’s not someone I trust.

Aurora

It's hard to monitor the passage of time in this dark, dank place, but I'm sure we've been here a while now. At least a day and a night, if my thirst and exhaustion are anything to go by. Vespyr hasn't been back since that first confrontation; it feels like both a blessing and a curse. Part of me wonders if she's lost it entirely and forgotten we're even here. On the other hand, it's given me time to collect my thoughts.

I've spent most of the time focusing on keeping Lily's spirits up, chatting lightly as if we were off on some bizarre adventure. If I'm honest with myself, I'm doing it as much for myself as I am for her.

The cold air of the cavernous catacombs surrounds me, sinking into my bones. The blackness is so heavy it feels like a weighted blanket over us.

There'd been dim light from a flickering torch until a while ago, but that flame burned out, and now we're left with just the dark.

Water drips.

"My Lady?" Lily's voice quavers.

"I'm still here, Lily." I've been trying to keep her spirits up, but it became harder after the light went out. "Just thinking up ways to get us out of here." I inject a smile into my voice. It's pretty hard since I still don't have a clue. The bonds on my wrists and ankles haven't budged at all. I'll only get out using magic, but the silver is stopping me from doing that.

Think, Aurora!

I have to find a way.

I focus on the area around me and take a deep breath.

What do I have here? What can I use?

I can't get through the ropes...but that doesn't mean I can't influence something else to do it.

Bones!

I can use them.

Gritting my teeth against the distastefulness of it all, I inch along the cold, wet wall until I feel what I'm looking for.

Come here...come here...

It's probably the strangest reanimation I've ever practiced.

It's just like a dead plant, Aurora! Or a bird.

Except it's not. A skeletal hand pulls free from the macabre wall and then skitters over the cold floor behind me on twitching fingertips.

"What is it, Lady Aurora?" Lily's voice pitches high.

"I'm working on something, Lily. Give me a minute." There's no way I'm letting her know there's a pile of bones on its way to untie the rope around my wrists. I cringe a little as icy fingers rub against my skin as the hand inches over me. I can feel it scraping eerily as it fusses with the tight knots.

Ick!

I push my reservations aside when I feel the ropes grow looser.

"That's it! You're doing great!" I don't know who I'm encouraging because the body that hand belongs to is long dead, but I'll take any help I can get.

"Are you talking to me, my Lady?" Lily's voice is tentative.

“Of course I am! You’re doing great. Well done!” I lie through my teeth. I’m talking to the disembodied hand. I feel a rush of relief as the ropes suddenly pull loose completely.

I’m free!

“I’ve done it, Lily!” I can’t suppress my excitement, even though we’re far from out of here. Still, I can feel a tiny glimmer of hope amid the darkness. Focusing my energies, I summon more magic. Suddenly, a spark appears in front of me and immediately starts growing larger until it’s a bright blue flame burning away all the shadows that had been enclosing us.

I see that Lily is cowering against a wall nearby. She gapes at me as the light fills the small chamber. I flash her an encouraging smile.

“We’re going to get out of here, Lily!” I untie my ankles, then scurry over to her and set her loose, too. She rubs her wrists to get the blood flowing while I run an eye over the surrounding walls. I know there’s probably a door leading out of here – it’s how they brought us in here – but I’m certain it will be guarded. Maybe by Faine.

I set my jaw as I think of the traitorous vampire. Not only does she bear the Curse, but she has designs on my man.

Well, that’s not going to happen!

If we can get out of this place, maybe I can stop him from charging in here. Because I have no doubt that he will.

I just have to find a way out. I wave my arm, and the flame grows in intensity until it’s bright enough for me to get a good look at the place. I’m met by the dead stare of a thousand lifeless skulls.

“Eeep!” Lily squeaks as she stares around us in horror. I suppress a shudder of my own. “By the Mother, what manner of place is this?!”

“It’s just an old burial site, Lily. Don’t be afraid. There’s nothing here that will harm you.”

I hope.

An earthy stench of decay and death hangs in every corner, making my skin crawl with dread. It's not surprising she's so terrified. I am, too.

Pull it together, dammit!

I'm still looking about us. I stop as I see something. There's a dark opening in the far corner of the dingy room. Moving closer, I peer inside. Gritting my teeth, I stretch my arm inside, feeling nothing. I poke my head into the narrow space, too.

"It's a tunnel, Lily!" I look over my shoulder. "We could go—"

"No!" She shakes her head vigorously. "No-no-no-no-no!"

"Yes!" I nod, dropping to my knees and squeezing my shoulders through. Slimy moisture seeps through my thin gown, sending chills rippling over my skin.

Ugh! Why didn't I get dressed before going out with Faine? Then again, how could I have known what we'd be facing?

"Come on, Lily. Would you rather face Faine?"

Lily looks stricken. She'd almost been a vampire feast just a few hours ago. Scrambling quickly behind me, she presses against me as I crawl into the tiny space.

"See? There's nothing to be afraid of," I say brightly, even though my stomach churns as my palms slip along the slick surface. Something scuttles over my fingers, and I shriek.

Petal poop!

"Lady Aurora?!" Lily bleats.

"It's fine! All good!" I keep my tone upbeat. "Just slipped a little, that's all."

She's so close I can feel her frantic breaths on my back as I keep crawling, finding my way forward.

I have no freaking idea where we are going!

I keep silent as I focus on moving forward. The only sounds are the echoing plink of water droplets and the scurrying of unseen creatures. The skulls and bones lining the tunnels watch with empty sockets as I creep past, forced to rely on my senses to guide me in this torturous maze.

The space grows increasingly tight; in some sections, we're forced to drop to our bellies and drag ourselves through. I don't let myself think about what will happen if we come to a dead end.

Dead end. Hah! That's funny.

"My Lady? Is everything okay?" Lily's voice has me realizing that I've just laughed out loud. That's good. I'll need a sense of humor to get through this mess.

Lily whimpers, clinging close behind me, her usual ethereal grace diminished by fear. My heart twists, hating that my faithful handmaiden is tangled up in this nightmare. Vespyr will pay for involving her, I vow fiercely. For now, getting out of here is our only goal.

I pause at a fork, peering down each option but unable to determine which path might lead to freedom. It's impossible to get a sense of direction in this endless labyrinth. Squeezing my eyes shut, I send a prayer to the Earth Mother, trusting in her guidance. I choose the left tunnel on instinct, praying it will get us to safety. Lily follows my lead without question as we creep deeper into the unknown.

"Not long now, Lily. I can feel it!" I'm determined to keep her spirits up, even though my own are flagging. We've been crawling for what feels like hours, although down here, it's impossible to tell.

The path twists and turns until I'm thoroughly lost, with no choice but to keep going through the maze of bones.

Oh, please...please...

Just when despair threatens to overwhelm me, I feel a subtle shift in the air. A draft, perhaps? I freeze, every sense straining...

Yes!

It's coming from up ahead.

"I can feel something!" I whisper to Lily, hope rekindling. The draft means an opening, and that means a chance to escape from this nightmare underworld. We shuffle ahead urgently, no longer concerned with silence, our focus solely on that beckoning breath of moving air.

Suddenly, I stop short. Lily bumps right into me. Before us, the tunnel comes to an end, looking out into another cavern. I know this because there's a dull glow of light.

Light?

Please, let it be a way out of here. Maybe an access point for tourists. I read that they conduct tours through these grim caves.

"Up ahead, Lily. Look!"

"Are you sure it's safe, my Lady? What if..." Lily's voice trails off.

"It's our only way. We can do this!" My determined words seem loud in the confines of the passage. With our only other choice being to turn back, I steel myself and plunge forward, knowing that the loyal little Fae will be right behind me. The tunnel widens and then opens up until I can almost stand. There's another chamber up ahead. I clamber out into it on shaky limbs, gulping air and fighting nausea. Beside me, Lily collapses in a heap, sobbing with reaction. My heart twists for her, even as euphoria hits me.

It's a feeling that doesn't last long.

"Took you long enough," says Vespvr.

Fuck!

I freeze, pulse hammering as she emerges from the shadows. Another figure comes out beside her, then another, and another...until a dozen vampires with silver-ringed eyes stand gazing back at me tauntingly.

"No!" I gasp, shock washing over me in a cold wave. How can they be here? I was so sure we'd finally escaped!

Cruel laughter echoes around the chamber as Vespyr eyes me with vicious satisfaction. Lily is cowering behind me, trying to become invisible. My shoulders slump in despair, even as fury blazes through me. To come so far and still be trapped in this viper's nest!

She'd expected it all along.

God, I'm a fool. She's been toying with us.

"Did you truly think it would be so easy?" Vespyr mocks. Her deranged followers chuckle ominously. I glare up at her silently, unwilling to let her see how deeply her sadistic game has shaken me. Inside, my spirit feels flayed raw from crawling through that grisly tunnel, only to wind up right back in her clutches.

My nails bite into my palms, rage warring with despair. Is there no escaping the tangled web Vespyr has spun? I should have known the Curse-touched vampire would not relinquish her prey so readily. But I refuse to surrender meekly.

The circle of vampires converges on us, silver eyes gleaming with terrible hunger. There are more of them than I realized. Too damned many. I shield Lily behind me.

"You've had your fun, Vespyr," I spit with false bravado. "We'll go back to our cell, and you can stop playing these games."

"Your cell?" Vespyr sneers. "But our fun is just beginning." She pauses and looks to the side as a form steps up beside her.

"Well, well, well... She's even lovelier than you said, Vespyr."

Vespyr's answering smile chills me. "And I'm sure she will taste just as good."

I take in this new figure with mounting dread. He is tall and broad-shouldered, his features hidden beneath a mask of shadows, save for the silver rings around his eyes that proclaim him one of the Cursed.

“You’ve done well,” he continues silkily, eyeing me with an unmistakable hunger.

My pulse hammers painfully in my throat.

“And who might you be?” I demand, fixing the mysterious figure with a cold glare that belies the fear beating in my chest. The others look surprised at my boldness, but Vespyr merely smiles cruelly before answering for him.

“This is Lord Magna,” Vespyr purrs, “of the Noctis Clan.”

My mouth drops open. “But...but...you’re dead!” I choke out. I’ve never seen the man, but I’d heard enough while learning about the Curse. Magna’s Coven was decimated when they were trapped without blood.

Magna steps forward and looks me up and down appraisingly. He’s strikingly handsome in that way vampires are, though the lines of his face are slightly gaunt. The thirst is close. Ice slides through my veins, but I refuse to let his scrutiny unnerve me.

“Dead? Clearly, I’m not.” His lips curl up. “I’m not that easy to end.”

“How? I don’t understand.” Insanely, hope surges for a second. If the Clan survived, then maybe there’s a chance that Bart might, too.

“I fed on the others. My coven.” Fangs gleam as he grins at me. “You think I’d let myself die when they had so much life coursing through them? They were a ready source of sustenance. I simply subdued them and fed until I was able to escape the tunnels.”

“You fed on your own people?” Bile rises up my throat.

“They were growing tiresome. All that whining about thirst. It was like taking care of children.” He flicks a hand.

“How did you subdue them?” None of this is making sense.

“Magic.” He shrugs. “It’s the power that the Curse gifted me with. And I believe yours is powerful, too.” He glances at Vespyr.

She nods. “She’s strong, Lord Magna. Her power will fill you. Nourish you far better than any puny human could.”

He inhales deeply, his eyes glowing. “You’ve done well, Princess.” He pats Vespyr’s shoulder, and she beams at him.

“But why...?” I look around, confused.

“Why let you escape?” He tilts his head. “Hope, dear heart. It sweetens your blood.”

“So you plan to kill me while I taste sweet?” I stare at him in disgust.

“Oh, I don’t plan to kill you, Aurora.” Magna chuckles. “You are mine. I’ll feed on you when I need to. As Vespyr says, your magic is strong. It will strengthen my own.”

My brows pull together. “When you need to?”

“Perhaps I’m not being clear. I’m going to keep you.” His smile makes me want to throw up. All of this does. “I’ve grown tired of going out to hunt.” He shrugs again. “It was exciting once, but now I’d like to focus on more calming pursuits. It will be useful to have your blood on tap.”

I recoil in disgust as he steps closer to me, fangs extending terrifyingly. Before I can back off further, he snaps out a hand and grasps my wrist. “No!” The word is barely out before he’s dipped his head.

“Don’t worry. I won’t take it all,” he murmurs. There’s a sharp flash of pain, and then I feel the gut-churning pull of his lips against the skin of my wrist as he shears a vein. He sucks greedily.

He’s drinking from me!

“Stop it!” I kick out at him, but as the seconds drag by, I feel myself growing lightheaded. My toes glance off his shin in a kick that’s just too feeble.

Vespyr's delighted laughter rings out before she turns away and heads to the stairs that lead to a doorway overhead. "Much as I'd love to watch you struggle, the hour is late," she purrs. "When Bartholomew arrives, the true entertainment begins!" Her laughter dies away as she heads out through the door.

Magnis raises his head at last, his lips smeared with red. I gag at the sight of it.

"So sweet," he groans. His face has fleshed out, gaunt lines now gone. His skin is glowing, his eyes alight. With power... The power of my freaking blood! I can feel how it's been drained from me. I'm dizzy.

I shake my head, fighting back the growing darkness as the enormity of our situation grows clearer to me. If Bart comes to save me, Vespyr and these creatures will trap him. There are too many of them here.

And I'm going to be this monster's food source forever.

It's the last thing I think of before I pass out.

Bartholomew

The entire estate is under lockdown, with teams of guards stationed at every entry and exit point. Nobody can come in or out without explicit permission. Now we're waiting to see what happens.

They'll come out. That's what will happen.

I'm pacing.

Tensions are high. We know there are more Cursed vampires hiding among us. Luther and Radella stand watching me in the Council Chambers as we await reports from the search parties combing the estate. Mortas and Salem have left the room, Salem to freshen up, and Mortas to observe what is happening outside. And probably to get away from my endless pacing.

I'm thirsty. Even after the blood this morning, I can feel it clawing at my chest. It's probably the agitation depleting my energy. My only consolation is that if it's affecting me this way, it's doing the same to whoever is out there.

"She's going to be fine, my Lord." Luther has said it so many times I barely hear him anymore. "It's only a matter of time."

"We don't have fucking time," I snap, not looking up at him. Now, more than ever, I feel the clock ticking down for me. It's strange how you think you have all the time in the world...until it's taken from you. If I'd known a month ago what I know now, there are so many things I'd do differently.

Not send her away, for a start.

Fuck.

I've squandered so much. So—

“No!” a female voice says sharply just as the doors fly open. Salem stands there, eyes wild, her face pale and strained. “Bartholomew.” Her voice is ragged.

Oh god. Please no! Not Salem.

“Salem...” The female has been on my Council for as long as I can remember. Always so gentle and measured in her counsel.

She makes a choking sound, then lunges forward. I'm a step away from flying at her, claws out when I stop in my tracks.

There's a tall male vampire behind her, a blade pressed to the side of her throat. His eyes are blazing madly as he drags Salem into the room with him as if she weighs nothing. “No one move...or she dies,” he snarls, his voice low and menacing.

His eyes dart around, taking us all in before settling on me. He bares his fangs in a predatory smile.

“I think we can make a deal,” he growls, tightening his grip on Salem's neck until she gasps in pain. “Let me go free, and I won't hurt her.”

“You know I can't do that.” I keep my voice even. He hisses at me. Salem flinches and a bead of blood grows from a small cut he makes in her neck and then trickles into the top of her dress, soaking into the white fabric. It stains, a damning reminder of the fact that I can't do as he says.

“I think you can.” Cruel lips curl up. They reveal sharp teeth. I run my eyes over his features – his flesh is pulled tight to the point that his face is almost skull-like. He's drawn this out as long as he possibly can. Even now, I can see him flicking quick glances to where Salem's blood is trickling. He licks his pale lips.

“Mouth feeling dry?” I cock my head.

“Fuck you! You don’t know what you’re talking about,” he sneers.

“It’s like a fire inside, isn’t it?” I keep my voice low. “A burning need that never stops and never goes away. It’s enough to drive you crazy with hunger.” I lock eyes with Salem, who gives a tiny nod. She knows what I’m doing here: driving him to the brink.

He shakes his head, staring at me defiantly, his blade still against Salem’s throat. “It’s nothing. I can withstand it.”

It’s a lie. He wouldn’t be here if that was the case.

I go on. “Blood. Nothing in the world can cool that fire. The raging hunger that consumes you until all that matters is slaking your thirst. It’s a disease.”

“It’s not a disease! It’s a gift!” His eyes blaze again, but there’s more desperation in them than defiance now.

“If you don’t drink soon, you’ll see why we call it the Curse.” I smile. “It will consume you. And there is nothing you can do about it. Except feed.” His eyes dip to Salem’s neck as I say it. To the trickle of blood there. “It must be hard,” I add. “Being so close and yet so far from satisfaction.”

When he flicks his tongue out over his lips, I can see that it’s dry, too.

“But you can’t do it.” I laugh. “Without her, there’s no way out of here.”

He knows it’s true. And now he’s torn between easing the pain of his need and getting out of here. He gives a low moan.

And that’s when Mortas barrels through the door. He takes one look at the scene before us and then moves faster than I’ve ever seen him move before. He is a blur of motion as he launches himself across the room, tackling the vampire holding Salem. He grabs the vampire by the throat and slams him against the wall. The vampire gasps for air as Mortas pins him in place with one hand.

“You were right.” He looks over his shoulder at me. “They didn’t last long.”

“You doubted me?” I cock an eyebrow at him. He shrugs. Salem has staggered away, a hand going to her throat.

“Drake, why?” Salem’s eyes are tortured as she gazes at the male. He turns his eyes from her.

“He’s one of yours?” Luther asks.

She gives a slow nod. “One of my most trusted servants. Drake...” Releasing a sigh, she turns from him, heads toward the Council table, and slumps into a seat. Radella moves to sit beside her, resting a hand on her shoulder. I’d go to comfort her, too, but there are important matters to take care of.

“Secure him,” I tell Mortas. We’ve anticipated this, and there are silver chains heaped in a mound beside the doorway. Luther and Mortas make fast work of binding Drake and then dragging him to the center of the room. He thrashes and twists, though I think that’s more to do with the thirst than trying to get away. He’d waited as long as he was able, and now the need has him in its grip. Soon, the effects of starvation will unhinge his mind.

We have to work fast.

“So you were working against us.” The words snap out. I don’t feel charitable toward this damned animal.

“All along.” He smirks at me. “Watching you and your filthy Fae and the way you fawned over her.”

“You were following me? Telling my sister what she needed to know?”

It was him. It must have been. The one watching when Aurora and I had been in the garden...and who knows where else he’d followed me to?

“You weren’t hard to observe. So new and clumsy in your powers. If you knew how to use it, you’d be far better off.”

I ignore him. I don't want to think about the power the Curse might have brought.

"Where is she?" I demand, towering over him.

"Where is who?" His teeth are gritted, so the words are distorted, but still, I can hear the mockery in them. I set a foot over his throat, waiting for him to start gasping before I speak again.

"Where has my sister taken the Fae princess?"

"The only true princess I know of is Vespyr," he chokes out. "And soon, she will be our true queen!" His lips are flecked with spittle as he hisses the words out.

"That's not what I asked." I press down more firmly with my foot, feeling the cartilage of his throat grinding.

"It's all you'll get from me." He's gasping but continues, "That, and a warning. Our ruler has gathered many followers. Many are loyal to her cause."

"And what cause is that?" I suspect I know the answer, but I'd like to hear what these people think they're fighting for.

"The real order." There's a flicker in his eyes. "The order by which we should have lived for centuries. The order of blood. Where vampires rule over all others."

He's mad.

"Vampires have all we need," I tell him. "Ryacyn. Our Earth territories."

"We do not have full *power*." Venomous eyes glitter up at me. "But we will have it. Soon."

He's beginning to shudder now, and I lift my foot from his throat a little. In the time since he arrived here, his body has shriveled. If I'd thought his face was skeletal before, it's downright ghoulish now. His hair seems sparse, the thick waves now diminishing to fine tufts. He's aging before my very eyes.

We don't have long.

“Let him drink, my Lord.” Salem has her hand on my arm. “He’ll cooperate if we let him feed.”

Somehow, I doubt it. But she may have a point – I don’t know how long he’ll last like this. That would make him useless to me.

I take a step back and turn to Lamia. “Bring blood.”

Lamia nods and dashes out of the room, leaving behind a tense silence. Drake’s breathing is becoming more labored by the second, and I feel something like pity stir inside me as he mutters something under his breath. I can’t make out what it is, but whatever it was sounded like a plea for mercy.

“Burning!” This word is clear now. “I’m burning!”

Before we can act, Drake starts to scream – a horrible, high-pitched sound that seems to echo through the walls. I jump back instinctively, half-afraid he’ll take me with him in his insanity.

What are you doing, Bellingham?

I can’t falter now. This is my last chance to get him to speak! Dropping to his side, I put a hand on his shoulder. He’s hot. Scorching my fingers.

“Tell me what I need to know, Drake. Do the right thing, by Blood!” But he’s too far gone. He just keeps screaming until suddenly – without warning – smoke begins to smolder from his skin. I snatch my hand away and then recoil, putting distance between us. More smoke pours from him, and then flames begin to crackle through his clothing. I watch in horror as he bursts into flames that consume him in an instant.

Fuck!

There’s nothing left, just ashes on the floor where, moments ago, there had been an evil vampire bent on destruction.

“No!” I yell. I stoop down and scrape a hand through the dust that is all that is left of him. “No, damn you!” Straightening, I spin on my heel and pace away, raking my hand through my hair before turning back.

The others watch me apprehensively.

“I’m so sorry, Bartholomew.” Luther’s voice is gentle. His eyes are, too.

“We’ve lost her!” I roar, wanting to hurt and mangle something, but not sure where to turn my rage. “How the hell will we find her now?”

Lamia has just arrived in the doorway, holding a container that I know holds the blood I should have given fucking Drake. She backs off as she looks at me. They all do.

The Curse has been awakened by my rage.

Calm. Stay fucking calm!

But how do I do that now, when our only chance at getting information just went up in smoke?

I inhale deeply, shut my eyes, and then exhale slowly. I do it again and again until I feel the heat within me die down.

“We need to do it again,” I say, looking around at the others. “If he was out there, there must be others.”

The others exchange glances.

“Do you really think we won’t be met with the same response, my Lord?” Radella asks. I frown at her. She’s probably right.

“It’s the only option we have.” I hate saying it, but I’m all out of ideas. Unless you count rampaging like a lunatic.

“Perhaps not.” Luther is looking at me strangely.

“What do you mean?”

“Something has just occurred to me...something odd, but hear me out. That night you turned and then disappeared, Lady Aurora said she could find you,” Luther says. I glance at him. “She said she could ‘feel’ you.”

“What of it?” I say, knowing I probably sound belligerent. I’m being a dick.

“Have you had the same experience, my Lord?”

“No, I...” I stop talking because that’s not true. I *have* felt her. Always an instant before she comes to me. I felt her in the gardens that night. I’ve had the same sensation before. As if I know when she’s near. But I don’t see how that could help me right now, since she’s so obviously *not* near, goddammit!

I go back to pacing the room, knowing it will achieve nothing, but I’m finding the repetitive motion strangely soothing.

I’m so goddamned torn right now.

“She may be dead already.” I rub a hand over my face. The words claw at me.

“The Lady Aurora is alive.” The words have me spinning around to pinpoint the source. Vidarok is standing in the doorway, filling the space like a living mountain.

“How do you know this?” I almost wonder if he might have some inside information. “Vespyr told me herself how she planned to kill Aurora.”

“I’m going to tear her to pieces, one screaming inch at a time,” she’d said to me.

I shudder at the memory. Is that happening to Aurora right now, as we stand here spinning our wheels?

“She won’t kill her,” Vidarok says. “Yet.”

That’s hardly comforting, but I’ll go with it.

“What makes you say that?”

“She left the circlet.” He walks further into the room. “She wanted you to know it was her, and she didn’t want you to waste time figuring it out.”

“So? What of it?” I frown at him.

“She wants you to go to her. Aurora is bait.”

The words make my stomach churn. But it makes sense.

“The Orc is right.” Mortas nods.

I don't respond immediately. As they've been speaking, something has been niggling at the back of my mind. I stop short.

"My Lord?" Radella is looking at me. I realize I've been staring vacantly into space.

Images are forming in my head. Grim features, not unlike the vampire who just exploded in front of us.

I suck in a deep breath. "I know where we have to go."

"What?" Mortas's voice cracks out. I'm not paying attention to him.

"Summon all available forces back to the war room at once. We leave as soon as they're assembled." I'm already striding to the door. More images flash in front of me.

Aurora.

I can see what she's seeing.

I know where she is.

Bartholomew

The tension in the war room is like a living, breathing thing, crashing against me as I try to focus on the conversation going on around me. Luther's voice is a steady hum in the background, his words measured and cautious. He's trying to rein me in, but all I can think of is Aurora.

"Do we have to waste so much damn time?" I snap. The need to get out of here is intolerable.

"Patience, my Lord," he says, his eyes locking with mine. "Rushing into this will only put Aurora in more danger."

I clench my fists, feeling the anger rise within me like a tidal wave, threatening to unleash the Curse upon everyone in the room. How the fuck am I supposed to stay calm when Aurora is out there, possibly suffering.

"Easy for you to say," I snap back, my voice a venomous hiss. "You don't have the woman you love in the hands of a monster."

"True," Luther concedes, his gaze never leaving mine. "But I do have a king – a friend – who needs my help. And I won't let my emotions cloud my judgment."

His words hit me like a physical blow, forcing me to take a step back and truly consider what he's saying. As much as I want to charge in like a raging bull, I know that strategy and patience are key to rescuing Aurora without putting her in even greater danger.

"All right," I sigh, running a hand through my hair in frustration. "What's your plan?"

Luther unfurls maps of the vast catacombs beneath Paris, a twisting labyrinth of over two hundred miles.

“Impossible to search it all,” he says wearily. “We need to gather more intel.” He gestures to the map before us. “We need to know exactly where they’re holding her, how many guards they have, and what their defenses are like.”

“Time is of the essence,” I remind him, my heart pounding in my chest at the thought of every second that ticks by with Aurora in captivity. “There’s no way we’re going to be able to strategize in minute detail.”

“Agreed,” he replies, a hint of sympathy in his eyes. “But going in blind will only lead to disaster. At least let’s get an outline together.”

As much as I hate to admit it, I know he’s right. My feelings for Aurora are both my greatest strength and my greatest weakness, driving me forward, but also threatening to be my undoing if I let my emotions get the best of me.

“Fine,” I mutter, unable to keep the bitterness from my voice. “We’ll do it your way.”

“Good,” Luther says, a small smile playing on his lips. “Now, let’s get to work.”

With a deep breath, I force myself to focus on the task at hand, pushing thoughts of Aurora’s suffering to the back of my mind. I can’t afford to lose control now, not when her life hangs in the balance. It’s time to prove that I can keep a clear head – that I can be the strategic leader Aurora needs me to be.

“Assuming she’s being held in the catacombs—” Mortas chimes in.

I interrupt him. “She’s there, dammit! I’ve told you, I can feel where she is!”

“Of course, my Lord.” His voice is uncharacteristically placatory. “When we get there, we’ll need to get inside without alerting the guards.”

“Stealth is our best option,” Luther agrees.

“Even if we do manage to get inside undetected, there’s no telling where they’re keeping her,” Mortas adds.

My knuckles turn white as I clench my fists. “I *will* know.” It’s infuriating that they’re not taking me seriously. I can literally visualize the room around her. It’s like seeing through her eyes.

“Fine,” Luther concedes, his eyes meeting mine. “We’ll trust your instincts, Bart.” He turns to the others. “Lady Aurora’s ability to track our king was quite uncanny – there’s clearly magic involved. I know this will work.” He nods.

“Thank you,” I say, feeling oddly empowered by his acceptance of my unusual connection to Aurora. It shouldn’t come as a surprise to Luther; he’d been the one who raised the possibility of it working, after all.

“So, where do we begin?” It’s Vidarok now. He’s been watching the exchange silently, but with keen interest.

“Right here.” I point to a spot on the map. “There’s a hidden chamber that will allow us to use a portal without detection.”

“A portal?” Salem cocks her head. “Isn’t there an access point to our Paris residence?”

I nod. “There is. But it’s narrow and easy to monitor.” I’d used that particular doorway to take Aurora to our location in France once before. The thought brings back a flood of memories of our first night together. They leave me breathless at the thought of never having her at my side again.

“Are you certain a portal is our best option?” It’s Vidarok again.

“Why wouldn’t it be?” I frown at him.

“Because they’re detectable. A shift in the energy fields will be felt immediately.”

“I can do it without them being aware.” I know I can. I’d always traveled silently before. I’m sure I’ll be able to do it with a group of fighters.

“I just don’t want to take any chances.” Vidarok’s jaw clenches. “If I’d been more attentive before, I would never have allowed Faine to take Aurora. It’s my fault she’s gone.”

There’s more than a hint of remorse in the Orc’s eyes. “There’s no time for self-recrimination now, Vidarok. Let’s focus on getting this done. Trust me,” I add, holding his gaze until he nods. We turn back to the maps.

“Very well,” Luther says, taking charge once more. “We’ll gather our forces and approach from the chamber. Bart, you lead the way using your connection to Aurora. The rest of us will take out any sentries she may have posted. I am sure there will be many. She will be expecting us.”

It’s a fact that I am painfully aware of. It’s no secret that we’re walking straight into a carefully planned ambush. Vespyr is waiting for our arrival, and she knows we’re expecting a battle. I have to anticipate some sort of deception to throw us off guard.

“She’s going to have something up her sleeve,” I say the words that are on my mind.

Mortas eyes me grimly. “You are right, of course. So we know there will be greater numbers than we’d previously expected. She will use magic in ways we might not anticipate.”

“We have to assume that she will have powers to control us mentally,” Salem says. “We’re already sure that’s how she escaped her cell. She bewitched her guards to release her. There’s no sign that she found a way to create a portal out of there; we would have detected a residual fracture in the energies.”

Radella is nodding in agreement. “I think you’re right. She compelled them to unlock the doors, and then she walked right out of there, taking several of the prisoners with her. I’d imagine they would have been her most powerful followers. The ones she left remained to confuse us. It’s why our interrogations proved so fruitless.”

It all makes sense. The information we've gathered after Vespyr's escape has been so confusing and conflicted that it is practically useless.

"So how do we stop ourselves from being influenced the same way?" Salem asks.

"I can protect you," I say with such confidence that I surprise myself. They've all turned to look at me. "I...can shield you from her powers."

"How do you know this?" Mortas looks skeptical. So do the others, especially the giant Orc guard.

"Because...because I simply know it." Before anyone can say anything further, I glance down at the maps in front of us, and they start to flutter. Within a moment, they've lifted and are swirling. Another moment later, they form a circle overhead and swoop around us like a flock of giant birds.

"By Blood!" Luther chokes out. Salem has put a hand to her mouth.

"Would you like to see more?" I raise a hand where blue light is crackling between my fingers. Even as I watch it, I'm beginning to feel the enormity of what my powers can do. It's like an entire world is opening up in front of me, and I can see with a clarity that I've never had before.

Fuck.

No wonder Vespyr calls this a gift. I feel all-powerful. Immortal. The Curse is roiling within me like it has a life of its own.

Calm. Stay calm.

"I've seen enough." Mortas nods curtly. "So, essentially, we rely on you to shield us. You lead us to the princess, and we use our numbers to subdue any resistance, leaving you to get Aurora to safety."

"Precisely." It all sounds too simple, but somehow, I feel confident. "Whatever Vespyr is capable of, I can do, too. And there has to be a limit to how many others she can have down there with her. I think this will work."

The words have barely left my lips when the door to the war room bursts open with enough force to make us all spin around in surprise. The maps overhead drop abruptly as my attention is diverted. The Fae king storms in, his face a mask of fury, green eyes blazing with anger.

“Explain to me,” he snarls, hands clenched at his sides, “why I wasn’t informed of Aurora’s abduction!”

Shit.

I should have known this would happen.

“King Nightfall, we—” I begin, but he cuts me off, looking fit to burst with rage.

“Did you think I wouldn’t find out? I arrive here and find myself turned back by a battalion of soldiers! What the fuck? We had an agreement, Bellingham! By the Mother, I should end you for this!” His voice is strained, his protectiveness for Aurora clear as day.

“I know that.” I want to reassure him, but it’s not easy since I know that he’s right. I swore she’d be safe with me. I was wrong. “I underestimated my sister’s influence. Her power. I was a fool.”

He stares at me with this unflinching acknowledgment. I can sense him tussling with what to do next.

I continue quickly before he can decide he needs to lash out. “We had to act quickly, contain the vampires so we could find one with the Curse, and interrogate them. We had no intention of hiding any of this from you. We had no other choice.”

I can feel the tension in the room thicken as everyone watches our exchange. The anger radiating from Nightfall is like a storm cloud, but beneath it, I sense something else: fear. Fear for Aurora’s well-being. And I understand that feeling all too well.

“So what are you going to do about it?” He’s still angry, but the ragged edge has left his voice.

“We have a plan. I think it’s a good one.” At least, I pray it is. Who knows how far my newfound abilities might extend? I’m taking a calculated risk. “I will do everything in my power to bring her back safely.”

Slowly, the anger in Nightfall’s eyes fades, replaced by determination and a readiness to cooperate.

He takes a deep breath, his chest heaving, and then nods. “You’d better not break your word again. Now explain to me what this plan of yours is.”

I point to the table, where our maps and blueprints are now piled in a crumpled heap. Reaching for one of them, I straighten it out and go through what my advisors and I have just been discussing. Nightfall eyes me with doubt for a moment, then finally releases a breath.

“It could work.” He presses his lips together, mulling this over.

“You sound more convinced than I’m feeling,” Mortas mutters, sliding me a side-eye. I ignore it.

“Magic is far more accepted among the Fae.” Nightfall looks at him. “We acknowledge its existence and use it extensively. If your king has been granted this ability, I say you should take advantage of it.”

I feel a tremor of relief. I’d argued my case strongly, but I’d be lying if I didn’t admit to a glimmer of self-doubt.

“Then it’s settled.” I step back from the table. “It’s time to put this into action. We need to start now!”

“Before we go any further, there’s something else,” Nightfall interrupts me. “The reason I came here in the first place. I have news from Silverwing.” He hesitates for a moment, glancing around the room as if unsure how to proceed. “He’s deciphered an ancient text that contains a spell to cure the Curse.”

Radella takes in an audible breath. “Is this true?”

“I’m pretty certain of it.” Nightfall looks at me. “As we’d expected, it has a connection to The Hunger. But since

it's isolated within each individual, we can target it specifically. The Hunger was more pervasive.”

A cure!

I feel a slight buzz of excitement. Every fiber of my being wants to leap at this chance. We've just seen what happens when this affliction takes hold. The way Drake's life was ended. But there's another part of me that can't ignore the danger to Aurora.

“Tell us more,” I say, forcing myself to focus.

Nightfall turns, and an attendant steps forward, holding a small satchel. The Fae king retrieves a worn scroll from it, unrolling it with care. The parchment crackles under his fingertips as he reveals the elegant script within. “The spell is intricate, involving a delicate balance between Light and Dark. It uses targeted joy. It's what Aurora figured out when she was planning those,” he clears his throat, “parties.” He's speaking of the pleasure parties Aurora had created that held back The Hunger that once threatened to devour the Fae kingdom of Autumnburn. Orgies. I'd smile now if the situation wasn't so dire.

“Targeted joy?” Mortas frowns. “What the fuck is targeted joy?”

“We use the spell to bottle happiness, Lord Mortas.” Nightfall is reaching into his satchel again and takes out a small, glowing vial. When he shows it to us, I could swear I hear laughter.

“Bullshit,” Mortas scoffs. “You can't bottle happiness. Where would you get it from in the first place?”

“Autumnburn is rich with it. We Fae are a joyful bunch. Unlike you miserable vampires. You're a grim bunch of bastards.” Nightfall smirks at my advisor, who proves his point by looking more stormy.

“I love it!” Salem is beaming.

“It makes sense,” Luther agrees. “Night and Day. Darkness and Light. The Darkness of our kind with the

Lightness of the Lady Aurora and her kind. Yes.” He nods thoughtfully. “It is just as the texts told us.”

“Precisely,” says Nightfall. “That’s how we will know it will work. In fact, we tried it out on some of the lands that had been consumed by The Hunger. It worked. There is growth in places we thought would be fruitless forever.”

“And you will have enough for our afflicted?” Radella asks.

“We have enough for everyone! As we speak, we have Fae gathering to fill our reserves. We’re going to use it ourselves.” It’s hard not to see his enthusiasm.

“This is the answer, my Lord,” Luther says to me. I can see the hope shining from his eyes.

I wish I could reflect it. I can’t deny the allure of the cure, but I’m also painfully aware of the urgency of our mission. How can I reconcile the two? My thoughts race, my chest tightens, and I feel the weight of the decision bearing down on me.

“How long will it take?” Luther asks. But even as he asks this, something is dawning on me. I sense the others watching me.

I clench my fists, feeling the Curse stirring inside me, threatening to break free. But I can’t let it. Not now. I have to use it.

“Not long,” says Nightfall. “We could complete it before the rescue attempt.”

“You mean our king could be cured?” Luther’s features are still alight. I know what he’s thinking, and part of me wants to do it.

I can’t.

“Yes, he could be cured.” Nightfall looks at me again, but I’m shaking my head.

“No.” There’s finality in my voice.

“My Lord!” Luther blurts. Salem looks stricken.

I turn my attention away from them and fix my eyes on Nightfall. “I need you to remain here and heal the others. Those in our care.” I ignore the fact that his brow has furrowed, and he has opened his mouth to speak. I don’t give him a chance. “Our plans hinge on me being able to use my powers to get us in there. I can’t lose them now.”

“But, Bartholomew! You could...you...” Luther struggles for words.

“You could be consumed. End up like the prisoner,” Mortas concludes. I know he’s thinking of the heap of dust that remains of Drake. We all are. I feel them staring at me. I have to think beyond this.

“It’s a risk I’ll take.” I shrug. “Tend to the others,” I say to the Fae king. Then I leave the table and walk out of the room.

Aurora

I blink awake slowly, momentarily confused about where I am. As my vision adjusts to the dim candlelight, recognition dawns. Lush furnishings, heavy drapes. I'm in the opulent bed chamber in Paris where Bart and I first made love. Even now, despite my predicament, bittersweet memories of that night wash over me.

I try to sit up, but I'm held fast, tied down, and bound too tightly, wrists and ankles secured to the elegant bedposts.

Petal poop!

I tug at the bindings, then summon up my energies. It doesn't work. An attempt to use magic to free myself fails; my powers are still too depleted after Magna fed on me. Fear and fury war within me.

How dare they do this to me!

Before I can dwell on it further, the bedroom door opens, and Vespyr saunters in, an anticipatory smile on her lips. "Ah, Sleeping Beauty is awake. We have much to discuss before my brother arrives."

Behind her slinks Magna, though he keeps to the shadows. Unease prickles my spine at the sight of him. Vespyr perches on the edge of the bed while Magna lingers several feet away, eyes gleaming in the candlelight.

"Where's Lily?" I demand. The last thing I remember was passing out in that chamber after Magna drained me.

"Your handmaiden is being kept elsewhere for the time being," Vespyr says dismissively. "She's irrelevant now. This

is between you, me, and Bartholomew.”

I glare at her silently, a maelstrom of emotions churning inside me. Vespyr notes my defiance with amusement.

“I know my brother is on his way even as we speak. The Hero racing to his Lady’s rescue.” Her tone drips contempt. “He always did have a regrettable soft spot for you.”

“Because he’s not a monster like you,” I spit back.

Vespyr’s eyes flash dangerously. In a blur, her hand cracks across my cheek. Pain flares as my head whips to the side.

“Mind your manners, Princess,” Vespyr says coldly. “We have plans to discuss before Bartholomew arrives. And they involve you, so I suggest you listen closely.”

I taste blood in my mouth from where my teeth cut my cheek. Still, I stare back at her malevolently, refusing to show fear.

“I’ll fight you. I’ll fight every plan you make and everything you expect me to do to help you!” I snap.

Vespyr sighs. “Very well. We’ll do this the hard way.” She nods to Magna.

Before I can react, he’s at my side, grasping me in an iron grip. I try to writhe away, but it’s useless. He grasps a fistful of my hair and ruthlessly tugs my head to the side, exposing my throat.

“No!” I choke out. But it’s too late – his fangs sink into my neck in a burst of agony. I scream as he starts to feed, taking deep draws of my blood.

“That’s enough for now,” Vespyr says after a moment. “We need her alive when Bartholomew arrives.”

Reluctantly, Magna releases me, lifting his red-smeared lips from my throat. Revulsion and lightheadedness sweep over me. I’m too dazed to resist as Vespyr leans in close.

“Let’s try this again, shall we?” She pats my cheek condescendingly. “When Bartholomew gets here, he’ll expect a fight. But you’re going to convince him not to resist us.”

I shake my head helplessly. “I won’t be part of your twisted schemes.”

Vespyr tsks. “How quickly you forget our leverage.” She glances at Magna, who slashes a claw across his palm, letting his dark blood well up.

Realization hits me like a blow. “No!” I’ve heard of the vampire’s kiss. Bartholomew had told me of it that night we were here: a mate bond much like the Heart Bond of my family line. “I won’t do it!” I pinch my lips closed.

Vespyr grasps my jaw in an iron grip. “One drink from Magna will bind you to him permanently. You’ll have no choice but to obey his every command.” Her smile turns sharp as a blade. “So I suggest you rethink your stance, or even Bartholomew will be powerless to drag you from his grip.”

“If Bart gets here, you won’t be able to! He’ll fucking end you!” I snarl the words, aiming all my hate at her.

“If that happens, I’ll see to it that you take my blood regardless, little pet. I’m stronger than you think. And then you’ll be a willing weapon against him.” Magna is leering at me. “Either way, you’ll end up mine.”

I sag back, mind reeling as their ultimatum sinks in. They’ve backed me into a corner, and we all know it. Because there’s nothing I won’t do to keep Bart safe.

“What do you want me to do?” I husk out.

“Good girl,” Vespyr croons. “When he gets here, you will let him think he’s saved you. And then you will distract him long enough for me to get past his magic. I have things to tell him, and I don’t want to do it during a battle. He doesn’t need to know about Magna. That trump card will be mine to reveal when it’s necessary.”

The idea of it makes my heart stutter. In my despair, I barely notice when she and Magna slip from the room, clearly confident they’ve made their point.

Alone now, I blink back despairing tears. No matter what happens when Bart arrives, it seems I'm doomed to be used against him.

Forgive me!

Minutes tick by, and then I'm aware of noises from outside.

What do I do? Earth Mother, help me!

Suddenly, the bedroom door crashes open so violently the walls shake. Before I can even react, Bart is across the room in a blur, ripping away my bindings with trembling hands. My heart clenches at the sight of him. Even now, he's so beautiful to me. Maybe more so, since he's my avenging angel, golden and glowing.

"Aurora!" His voice is ragged as he crushes me against him. "Thank the Blood, you're all right!"

I'm remembering Vespyr's instructions. Distract him. Get him to let his guard down so they can get past his magic.

I can't do it. I'll bear the consequences if I have to.

I open my mouth to warn him that Vespyr is in league with a madman, but his frantic kisses silence me. I cling to him, every part of me melting at being so close to him again.

God, he feels good.

"I thought...I thought I'd lost you!" His arms are still around me as he pulls me against his chest, his palm cradling the back of my head as he draws my face into the curve of his neck. For just a second, I almost want to stay here forever, here where it feels safe.

I can't!

Bart draws back, surveying me with concern. "You're so pale. Did they hurt you?" His thumb brushes the fang marks on my throat, and rage flickers across his face.

"Please, Bart! Vespyr and Mag—" I try again desperately.

“Shhh, there’s no time.” His eyes glow silver and gold. “I can hold them off for now. My power has strengthened – I’m using it to shield my men so they can keep Vespyr’s Cursed vampires at bay. But we don’t have long. We have to get you away from here.”

“You don’t understand!” I say hoarsely a second before the door swings open, and Vespyr steps in. She aims an ugly little smile at me, then looks away.

“Hello, brother.” Her eyes are on Bart, who twists to face her.

“Back off, Vespyr.” He spits the words out. “I’m leaving here with Aurora. Don’t try to stop me. My men have your guards under control. I won’t go down without a fight.”

She rolls her eyes at him. “That’s of no importance. I didn’t plan to end your life here, brother. I have something to discuss with you.”

“There’s nothing to discuss. You’ve made your choices. Your place is back in Ryacyn. We have a cure.”

“Never!” Vespyr barks. “I have no intention of giving up my gift.” She takes a step forward, a hand outstretched. “I want to share it.”

“Share it?” Bart’s lip curls.

“Yes. Share it. Surely you can feel it, too, Bartholomew. This power inside?” Light shimmers around her fingertips.

“It’s evil, Vespyr. You’ve been seduced by it.” Reluctantly, Bart turns from me to face her. “Let me help you. The Fae can heal you.”

“The Fae!” She snorts, aiming a baleful look in my direction. “You and your fucking Fae! They’ve blinded you. Can’t you see that?”

“They haven’t, Vespyr. You’re the one who’s blind. This thing is going to destroy you, dammit. I’ve seen what it can do. The death you’ll face...” There’s a tremble beneath my

fingers where I've kept them on his arm. He's just shuddered. Whatever he's thinking has left him unsettled.

"There'll be no death, Bartholomew." Vespvr takes a hesitant step forward. "With blood, we won't die. I can show you. I've borne this gift for long enough to know how to tame it."

"You don't tame this fucking thing! Why can't you see that? It devours you. It'll take your soul." Bart's shaking his head. I can literally feel the pain flooding him. He truly wants what's best for his sister. But as I look at her, the venom that had always been aimed at me has faded. Her eyes on Bart are soft and warm. For all her insanity, she cares for him, too.

She...loves him.

My heart breaks for both of them.

"Bartholomew..." Her voice hitches. "I never intended to rule alone. I want you with me." She's almost at the foot of the bed now. He rises and faces her. "I just..." Her throat works as she swallows hard. "Remember how it was for us? We weren't just siblings. We were best friends. My only friend. You've always been my *only* friend." She chokes out the words, and now I really feel bad for her. Bart had said they'd had a lonely childhood. Just each other to turn to. Especially after they lost their parents.

She's an evil bitch, Aurora!

But it's hard to feel that way when those huge blue eyes are pooling with tears.

"Please come home with me, Vespvr," Bart all but whispers. "It can still be the way it was before..." He pauses, taking a breath. "We can still be the friends we once were. Just with both of us strong and healthy. Not under the power of this..." He sweeps a hand between them abruptly. A gesture of disgust at the Curse that has taken them.

"I...I..." Vespvr licks her lips.

Is she considering this? It seems impossible after the lengths she's gone to take over their realm. Would she simply step back now?

From the way that she's looking at Bart, maybe...just maybe...

“We can still rule together, Vespvr. I never denied you that. I just assumed that the throne wasn't something you wanted. You'd already had so much of that bullshit forced down your throat when we were young. I was trying to shield you from that. To let you have a good life. A family. Love.”

It's probably why he'd fought so hard to set up the marriage with Nightfall. Misguided but well-intentioned. It's falling into place now.

Vespvr sags a little, as if the fight seems to go out of her. She rubs her eyes. He reaches a hand toward her.

“Bartholomew—” She doesn't get further.

The door flies open, and Magna stalks inside. “I think this has gone on long enough!”

Shit!

I'm so sure she was about to give in.

At the sight of the towering vampire, shock washes over Bart's face. His mouth drops open. “Magnis of Noctis? But you're dead!”

“Not as dead as you'll soon be.” Magna smiles cruelly as power begins swirling around him. Before Bart can react, Magna hurls a crackling bolt of energy at him, making him cry out in pain. I scream Bart's name, but it's useless – Magna's magic has him on his knees.

“You...how...?” Bart looks like he's dazed at seeing him.

“I fed off my coven, you fool!” Magna laughs. “Something you would never do. Because you're weak! A weak ruler. A weak vampire!” As Bart fends off the blast that seems to surround him, Magna aims another hand at him. Shadows take form and twist their way up Bart's legs. I know how that feels – Vespvr had used the same enchantment on me. How long have they been working together?

“Please!” I scream. My limbs feel like lead as I try to drag myself up. If those tendrils wrap themselves around him, the life will be choked from him.

Why? Why am I so weak?

The thought of Magna’s fangs in my skin makes the bile rise up my throat.

“Your own kind!” Bart gasps out as he stares at the male. “You fed from your people! *Our* people.”

“Cattle.” Magna’s lip curls. “And they served a good purpose. Filled me with their strength. You’ll never match it, you fool. Never!”

I can see Bart failing. Even though the air is practically crackling with magic, he’s still new to his powers. How could he possibly know how to match someone as wily and ruthless and purely evil as Magna? As if reading my mind, Vespyr springs into action.

“Magna! Wait!” She’s flying toward him, her expression tormented. “You promised! You promised you wouldn’t hurt him!”

“Shut your mouth, you fucking idiot! Do you really think I’d ever let him live?” Magna flicks a wrist at her, and she stops in her tracks as if frozen. She stares at him like she’s seeing him for the first time.

“Let him live! I’m begging you!” Now she’s writhing as if fighting off some unseen force. “We had a deal!”

“We had no damned deal! You were just a means to an end. A way to get close to the throne.” He laughs maniacally. “You were a pawn, you stupid woman!”

Vespyr looks shattered, struggling against whatever is holding her. I can see that Bart is still struck between the shock of the vampire’s revelations and the overwhelming onslaught of magic he’s just been hit with. The ancient vampire has spent too long honing his powers to be bested by either of them.

And then it occurs to me. With Bart down, the others won’t be able to defend him. The powers of the Cursed will

hold them back.

Please, Earth Mother!

We're alone here. This situation has gone from bad to disastrous within seconds.

"You're going to die now." Magna chuckles. Bart and I share one last agonized look as Magna closes in for the kill, savoring his victory. "I'm going to drink the life from you, and then I'm going to wipe you out of existence," he hisses. He bends over Bart, who's managed to twist his hands free from the shadows that are pinning him. It's too little too late.

Magna swoops over him, grabbing a handful of hair and wrenching his head back to expose his throat. I scramble to get to the edge of the bed, letting out a wail as my legs buckle when I hit the floor.

Move! By all that flowers and grows, I have to move!

"You bastard!" I hear Vespvr scream. She tears herself free and launches at Magna. He sweeps an arm, and I watch in horror as she flies across the room and hits the wall. She's deathly still as she crumples, her arms and legs limp as a discarded rag doll.

Sheer force of will keeps me moving as I crawl toward the wrestling pair. But I'm too slow. And what would I do, anyway? Before my horrified eyes, Magna tears into Bart's throat like a rabid animal. Power crackles around Bart's fingertips, but it's not enough to save him. His arm drops limply as Magna drinks hungrily.

I keep crawling. It's pathetic and pitiful, but I'll do anything I can now.

You're going to die, Aurora!

I don't care. As long as I die at his side, at least I'll have done all I can. With my last surge of strength, I haul myself up and stagger forward. Even if I don't have magic, maybe I'll still be able to rake my nails across the vampire's disgusting face.

Bart makes a harsh gurgling sound as he struggles for air. It's a sound that's drowned out by an almighty crash as something bursts straight through the wall. Heavy stone, mortar, and dust fly around us as Vidarok charges in like an avenging beast.

Releasing Bart's throat, Magna twists to see what's happening, his eyes widening at the sight of the Orc barreling toward him. It's the last thing he sees. In one smooth motion, Vidarok swings his massive axe, beheading Magna in a spray of crimson before he can even react.

My mouth drops open in absolute shock at the unexpectedness of it. The rest happens in a blur. Vidarok, Mortas, and Bart's other warriors flood the room behind him, blood-splattered and battered. They've fought fiercely, and from the looks of it, they've won.

But it's too late for Bart: Vidarok's timing saved him from instant death, but not horrible injury.

I make the last steps toward him and collapse at his side, where he lies motionless in a pool of red. I fight down a gag at the sight of his torn throat.

He's pale. Deathly pale.

"No, please no!" I sob, cradling his head in my lap. His breath comes in ragged gasps as I cling to him.

"Forgive me," he rasps, blood bubbling on his lips.

"Shhh, don't speak," I plead through tears. "Just hold on!"

But as his eyes slip closed, we both know it's too late. Fate has played a cruel trick, letting us find each other only to be torn apart.

"Don't leave me," I whisper. But the light in his beautiful eyes has already gone out. Anguish, unlike anything I've ever known, crashes over me in waves.

It can't end like this. It can't!

But it has. My head tips back, and I howl like a wounded animal.

Around us, the sounds of shouting and battle fade away. But I am deaf and blind to it all; my world narrowed to the broken man in my arms.

And the yawning void in my soul where light and hope used to live.

Bartholomew

The edge. I'm going over the edge. I know there's a clamor around me, but everything seems muffled and unreal.

The beast drank from me. That thought keeps playing over and over in my mind. How did he have such a hold on me? It's incomprehensible. I'm strong. I should have been able to fight him off. I should never have allowed myself to be so unsettled by his admission. The creature drained his own people. Vespyn had almost put that animal in a position of power over us. How could she have been so naïve? So blind?

The Curse. It's no gift. It takes away all rational thought, leaving only greed and madness.

But none of that matters now. There's little chance that the Curse will end me when I have far more pressing issues to face. Consciousness flutters just out of reach, beyond the darkness that threatens to consume me. An agonized wail has my heart stuttering...although whether it's stuttering back to life or its last throes of beating is something I can't determine right now.

Live.

By Blood, live!

I have to fight this. For Aurora. For Ryacyn. I have to fight this.

But everything seems so damned hard. I'm thirsty. And so tired. Exhaustion feels like it's overwhelmed me. So much that it's dulled the pulsing pain that had racked my throat just moments ago when Magna sank his teeth into it.

Aurora. I can feel her hands on my face. She's weeping openly. Tears splash onto my skin, warm, fat droplets. I can almost picture the dewy drops glistening and bursting open as they land. So surreal. She's crying for me.

My Aurora. Sweet angel. However this turns out, at least she's safe. Whether I live or die, that's settled. I just wish I could tell her how I feel. But my lips feel bloodless. Fuck, all of me feels bloodless. But I manage to part them now.

"Aurora," I hear myself whisper, the sound like rustling leaves. "Love." It's all I can get out, and I hope that it's enough because it's my final truth. I love her. And if I have to go now, I need her to know it.

Why? Who cares?

She'll care. I've denied it from the beginning. Denied the Heart Bond that's so important to her. Denied her feelings.

I've been a fucking fool.

I feel a shudder as she chokes in a breath.

"Bart?"

"Love," I say again. Why won't the words come out? Moist lips brush my forehead and dot over my cheeks. Wet. Her face is wet. I know she's crying. Huge, gasping sobs that tear at my heart.

Don't cry. Please don't be sad over me.

I'm not worth it. I'm the one who deserves heartbreak. Never her. My beautiful, magical princess. It's so fucking unfair that we didn't have more time together.

"I. Love," I finally manage. Maybe that's all she needs to know. She's holding me so tightly that I'm sure it's registering somehow.

"Yes! Yes, I hear you! I hear you, Bart. Hold on! Please hold on!" she says urgently. "He's alive!" I hear her call out as she straightens. "Help me! We have to do something! Please!"

I want to tell her it's going to be okay, but it's a promise I can't make right now. It feels like the life is leaking

from me through the gaping hole I know is in my throat.

Fucking Magna.

If I wasn't dying myself, I'd kill him. Somehow, I suspect that won't be necessary. I have a recollection of his head flying through the air above me. There had been a dull roar, a swish of a blade, and then a shower of vile stickiness as his blood coated me. The Orc came through. I wonder how he did that. He'd have to have broken the hold of Vespyr's Cursed horde. Or did I manage to help them after all? It all seems so fuzzy. Not real. The edges of the world have grown blurred.

"Please!" Aurora screams again. It seems as if the sound is coming from a great distance. "Vidarok! Help me!"

Footsteps thunder and I swear I feel the earth shake. Through my lashes, I'm getting glimpses of the shadowed features looming over me. The Orc is there. Mortas beside him. And then Luther. My people. They're all here. Aurora is safe with them.

"He needs blood!" Luther looks around them.

"He's too far gone." Mortas would earn a kick in the ass from me if I was in better shape. "There's nothing to be done. Look at him! Nobody can come back from that."

"No!" It's Aurora. "He's strong! He can fight this." Her voice is hoarse from crying, but there's strength behind it. I'm glad she's arguing for me because I can feel something tingling within my flesh. The Curse is trying to revive me. Flesh is beginning to heal. If only I wasn't so fucking thirsty.

"Well, unless you know where we can get some sort of elixir of life, I don't know what our options are." Mortas is still asking for a beating.

"Magic," Aurora breathes. "I have magic. I can bring life to things! It might work for him, too. I'll do it."

No! You're too weak...

How do I tell her that? Magna took too much from her – I could see how fragile she was when I got here. She can't

do this for me. But all I can do is part my lips on a mute croak to try to stop her. It doesn't work. I catch a glimpse of her biting down on her wrist. Something splashes onto my mouth. Something warm and sweet and familiar. The nectar I'd tasted the night she came back with me.

"My Lady, no! If you awaken the Curse within him—" the Orc's voice rumbles. He's right. It might take hold of me. What if I can't control it? The thought makes me shudder as I remember the madness in Magna's eyes. I'd rather die than become that.

"I don't give a fuck about the Curse!" she snaps at him. The splashing becomes a stream. And then she's pressing her smooth skin against my lips. A vein pulses and throbs and my mouth fills. Without wanting to, I find myself swallowing and then drinking as if my life depended on it. Because it does.

I feel my nostrils flare as I suck in air. It fills my lungs as sweetly as the blood that's gushing into my mouth.

"Look!" Aurora husks out. Her voice sounds too weak, but I can't stop drinking now. "His throat! Look! The wound is closing up." I don't have to be able to see it myself to know that my flesh is healing. I open my eyes and stare up at her. "Sweet Mother Earth!" Her eyes are filled with tears as she stares back at me.

"It's enough! He doesn't need more!" The Orc's voice has an edge of warning to it.

"He does!" Aurora half yells, pressing her wrist more firmly against my lips. "Keep away, or so help me—" She hisses the words, sounding more like an enraged tigress than the sweet woman I know. And I couldn't argue with her if I wanted to. I keep swallowing thirstily, and she whimpers.

So good. So fucking sweet.

She looks back down at me. Our eyes lock, and she chokes out a sound that's half sob and half laugh. "Yes! Come back to me... Come back to me, my love."

Love. That's the word I need to say again. Say it clearly. But the thirst within me isn't satisfied yet.

“I said enough!” the Orc roars, and suddenly, her arm is being wrenched away. I’d kill him if I didn’t know it was the wrong thing to do. Aurora doesn’t fight him now. Pulling free of him, she gathers me against her. It’s so strange to be held like a child, but for a while there, I felt as weak as one. The strength is returning in a surge that’s leaving me warm and tingling. I manage to lift up as she tightens her arms around me. I heave in a breath and feel my heart surge and then thump harder. The erratic beat of it starts to steady into a pounding rhythm that has the blood rushing through my veins. Aurora’s blood. It’s seeped into every cell of me. I’m on fire with it.

“Oh, my god! Oh, my god!” she says over and over as she presses her cheek against mine. My breath comes out like a sigh, no longer the gasping, choking sound that had threatened to halt at any second. What am I thinking? For a minute, it *did* halt. I’d teetered on the edge between life and death. And she brought me back.

“I love you,” I murmur into the shell of her ear. It feels like such a blessing to finally get the words out. She chokes on another sob, her arms tight enough around me that she’d take my breath away if I wasn’t inhaling so deeply now. When she pulls back, there’s wonder in her eyes. My lips tilt up at the corners. I hope I don’t look like a grinning skull. Maybe I don’t because her expression softens enough to melt my heart.

“Bart...” She brushes her lips over mine. “You have no idea how sweet those words are.” The tip of her nose brushes mine. She’s so fucking adorable.

“Say...” My voice is hoarse, and I swallow hard. I feel the skin move over my throat and know it’s completely healed now. “Say it back,” I finish.

The little laugh she blurts out is a touch hysterical, but then, who can blame her? These past few days have been a mind-numbing clash of chaotic emotions – mainly terror and anxiety.

“I love you,” I say more firmly. “Say it back.” I need her to. Because if she doesn’t feel the same way, bringing me back from death would have been a complete waste of energy.

“God, Bart...” She cups my face in both her hands. “Do you even have to ask?” I nod because I want to hear her say the words. “Of course I love you. I’d give you every last drop of my blood if it meant I could say the word every day for the rest of my life.”

“That won’t be necessary. You’ve given me enough. For now.” My voice is clear and true now. Recognizable, not like the ghoulish croak it had been just moments ago. Her blood is powerful. Sweet. Addictive.

Calm. Stay calm.

I keep the Curse caged.

“I love you, Bartholomew Bellingham.” She smiles at me through tears. “I’ll always love you.”

“That’s a good start.” I smile back at her, feeling lost in a moment that I never thought I would experience.

You don’t deserve this, Bellingham.

But I’ll take it. It just feels so damn good right now. Aurora has gone back to pressing kisses to my face. And that feels good, too.

“You’re my hero, you know that? You saved my life.” She’s gazing into my eyes.

“You saved mine.” I’m feeling almost strong enough to sit up now. She won’t let me. “I think we’re even.”

I realize that the others have melted away from us, allowing us this quiet time together. The sound around us fades away as I feel the beat of my heart matching hers. Her blood pulsing through me. Her life reviving me. This is what a man like me lives for.

There’s only one more thing that could make it complete.

Aurora

“You’re weak,” he says as the others leave us in peace. That’s rich, coming from someone who was literally dead just a minute ago. I brush a curl of hair from his forehead and smile. I feel so tender that my heart aches.

“I’m fine,” I lie. Even the simple act of raising my hand leaves me drained. It was bad enough feeling so tapped out after that bastard Magna laid into me. Just the thought makes my stomach turn now. Yet I hadn’t hesitated to offer the same thing to Bart.

That’s different. There’s love here.

Love. The word is out now. There’s no getting around it. My lips tilt up at the corners, and I lean forward to brush them over his yet again.

“Are you strong enough to stand?” I ask when I straighten. He’s already half-sitting, and he nods.

“I was going to ask the same of you.” There’s concern etched on his face. We’re eye-to-eye now, and he slides his arms around me.

“My Lady.” Vidarok towers over us. “There is still work to be done here.” He glances around. “But I would suggest that you get up off the floor.”

“You echo my thoughts, Orc.” Bart’s voice has grown stronger, almost his old self. He’s on his feet, reaching a hand down toward me. When he pulls me up beside him, I sway.

My head’s so light.

“Our princess needs rest.” Bart looks around us, and before I realize what he’s about to do, I’m swept up off the floor.

“Bart!” I squeal. “Put me down! You shouldn’t be doing this!”

“The Overlord is right, my Lady.” Vidarok seems to have forged a strange connection with Bart. “You’ve lost a lot of blood.” He flicks a look at Bart. “You should be lying down.”

“That’s where we’re headed.” Bart tilts his head toward the nearby bed. I twine my arms around his neck as he strides toward it, then sets me down. He’s still too pale but seems to be getting stronger by the moment, thank the Mother.

Just then, Luther strides over to us. “Vespyr’s followers have fled into the catacombs.” His frown is dark.

“We need to round them up.” Bart starts to stand. I cling to his hand. The thought of letting him out of my sight makes me shudder.

“I think you should remain here until you’re stronger, my Lord.” Luther fixes Bart with a stare. “And the princess, too. She should not be left alone.” I heave a sigh that leaves me even more lightheaded. Though it probably has a lot to do with blood loss. I flop back against the cushions, feeling limp with a strange combination of relief and exhaustion. My eyes flutter shut.

“Where is Vespyr?” The words have my lashes flashing open again. I struggle up, my head lolling as I look around the room. The place where she’d landed on the floor is empty. She’d seemed so broken, but if she has Bart’s astonishing powers of regeneration, she probably healed while we were all distracted.

“She has fled.” Vidarok is grim-faced. “I will seek her out.” He aims a look over his shoulder at me as he strides to the door. “You won’t be safe until she’s apprehended, my Lady.” Before I can object, he’s out the door. It’s probably a good idea, though. The thought of her still out there makes me

shudder, although I can't feel the same hatred for her that I did before. The hurt in her eyes when she pleaded with Bart has me seeing her in a different light now. She's not evil.

She's alone.

But I'm not. I nestle closer to Bart, who looks down at me from where he's sitting by my side. "I should take you back to Ryacyn." His eyes are gentle.

"I would advise against that, my Lord," says Luther. "The tunnels aren't safe, and I doubt you have the power to open a portal right now. Wait here. We'll keep the doors barred and guarded. You'll be safe for a few hours. And by then, I'm sure you'll be back on your feet." He smiles warmly. "You gave us a scare!"

Bart looks as if he's about to object, then looks at me and seems to think better of it. "You're right." He leans closer to me until our foreheads almost touch. "I'm not letting you out of my sight again."

My smile is faint, but I'm sure there's light in it. Even twitching my lips takes effort.

"I'll leave you in peace, Bartholomew," I hear Luther say, but his words seem to be fading. As hard as I try, I can't stop the darkness of sleep from taking me.

I don't know how much time passes, but when I wake, I stare straight up into Bartholomew's face. His beautiful eyes soften.

"Welcome back." He strokes a fingertip down my cheek. It takes me a second to get my bearings.

"Where...?" I frown. "Have the others returned?"

He nods. "Luther and Mortas have been taking captives back to Ryacyn for the cure. They'll be a while yet."

"Cure?" Understanding hits me, and my eyes fly wide. "There's a cure? For the Curse?" I struggle to sit, but Bart gently eases me back down.

“Yes, Aurora. Your king found a cure.” He smiles, and my heart runs rampant.

“And did you...have you...?”

Bart shakes his head. “Not yet.”

“Why not?” I choke.

“I knew I’d be stronger while I still carried the Curse. I needed it to get to you.” He shrugs.

“My god, Bart, are you mad?” I’m pretty sure I must be wild-eyed. I put a hand over his. It’s not so hard to move anymore, but I still feel like I’m wading through water.

“Yet it worked. And without it, I would have died.”

I can’t argue with that. “We have to get back now!” I try to get up again. “You need to take it.”

“I will. But first, I need you stronger. I can’t get you through a portal in this state.” He brushes a kiss over my forehead, and yet again, I’m melting.

“Some rest. Just a few minutes,” I admit. It feels like I could sleep for a thousand years, and it wouldn’t be enough.

“Actually, I had something else in mind.” Bart cups my face in his hands. “You need to drink.”

“What?” My brow furrows because my head is still too foggy to think straight.

“I want you to take from me.” He stares into my eyes, and I feel my breath hitch.

“Your blood?” I say stupidly. “But that would mean...”

“Yes. It would. We’d be bound.” He licks his lips. “Will you do that? Be mine?”

“I’m already yours, Bartholomew. And you are mine.” I put my hand over his, where it’s still cupping my cheek.

“Yes. You’re right. And I’m sorry that I fought you so hard. I was such a damned idiot.” His lips brush mine, and I feel myself going limp for a different reason than low blood.

pressure. “I want you to say yes, but this is a decision that you alone can make. It’s a big one.”

“Of course yes!” I barely have to give it a moment of thought. He lets out a breath as if he’d been holding it, waiting for my answer.

“Thank you.” His lips meet mine in a kiss that almost stops my heart in its tracks. Soft, exploring, he parts my lips and trails his tongue along my teeth, then delves further. When he pulls back, I’m breathless.

“Yes,” I say again, not sure what I’m supposed to do next.

“It’s better when it’s done during intimacy. But only if you’re strong enough.”

“You mean...while we make love?” Just the thought of it sends a warm ripple through me.

“Yes, while we make love, Aurora. Here, in this place where it all began.” His words turn that ripple into a tingle that tightens my nipples and sends a zing through my core. The reminder of that first night has me wet with want.

“I... Yes. Yes, I’d like that,” I manage to get out. My reply is unnecessary because he’s already peeling back the edges of the ridiculous robe I’ve been stuck in since they took me. I grimace. “I haven’t bathed.”

“You’re perfect.” His lips graze down the side of my neck as the robe slips over my shoulders. I’m wearing a silky nightdress beneath it, and he pushes the narrow strap down, following it with his lips.

“Ohhhh...” I exhale. Tiny bumps shiver over my skin as he dots kisses along my collarbone.

“You’re beautiful,” he murmurs as he reaches the soft swell of my breasts. He teases each one in turn, licking and kissing until I’m arching into him, desperate for more. His hands slide up my thighs as his lips move lower still.

“Yes...God...Bart...” I moan when he takes a nipple into his mouth. His tongue circles it, sending a jolt of pleasure

straight to my clit. My fingers curl into his hair as he moves to my other breast, teasing it with his teeth until I'm shuddering against him.

"You taste so sweet. Like the life you poured into me," he says against my skin. It sends tremors through me as his lips move. My throat is so dry, it's all I can do to simply groan in response.

He moves back up, and our eyes meet again before his lips crash into mine. His hands rove over me, exploring every inch of me as he plunders my mouth. Light stubble leaves my skin tingling as he cups my head with his hand and pulls me hard against him. His other hand continues to explore, and I gasp when he reaches the apex of my legs, sending sparks of pleasure through me.

Without thinking, I spread my thighs as he trails a fingertip along the cleft of my pussy. His touch is gentle, barely there, but it sets off an ache that tightens inside me. He teases me with more light touches, exploring and caressing.

"Oh! Right there!" I squirm as he teases my clit, making me hot with need. When his finger finally dips inside me, the pleasure is almost too much to bear. It's only then that I realize he's taken off his clothes and is now pressed against me, his skin smooth and warm enough to burn.

"Hollyhocks!" I choke out, and he chuckles at the sound, then taunts me to distraction with that teasing fingertip. I want him so much it hurts. But before I can reach for him, he takes both my hands in his. His expression is taut with desire...and something else.

"I need you to do something for me," he says.

"Anything," I pant. I can feel the hard length of his cock pressing against me, and I want nothing more than to feel it inside me.

"I need you to tie me." He glances up at the posts of the bed.

"Wait...you need me to what?" I blink at him stupidly.

“When you drink, it will wake something in me. I’m afraid it might stir the Curse. I can’t...I don’t want to risk hurting you.”

“But you won’t!” I shake my head.

“I might, Aurora. I need you to do it.” Turning slightly, he shifts back up against the headboard. He raises his wrists to me. I stare at him for a moment, naked and golden. A buffet of male flesh, all mine for the taking. My eyes dip to the thick shaft of flesh pressing up against his belly, and every muscle in my channel tightens with need.

“Okay,” I say at last, shifting up to kneel beside him. I take one wrist at a time and bind them firmly to the bedposts using the same sturdy rope that had been used to tie me. When I’m certain that he’s secure, I lean back on my heels.

“I’m all yours.” He grins at me, and I’m suddenly filled with a strange sense of confidence that almost overwhelms the feebleness I’ve been fighting.

“You’re mine,” I repeat, sliding over his thighs and straddling him. He nods, watching hungrily as I position myself over the head of his cock. I’ve never done anything so bold, and the feeling is heady.

“Aurora,” Bart groans as I begin slowly inching down his thick length. It takes a while to get used to the girth of him, but I’m in control of the movement, and I take my time, sliding slickly. His chest is heaving by the time I settle onto his lap, completely impaled. His hands clench and unclench into fists, and I see him straining against the thick ropes.

“Fuck. If only I could touch you.” His voice is a low rasp.

“You could if—”

“No.” His eyes lock with mine. “When you feed, I don’t know what I might do.” He gives a tiny shake of his head, and I realize his eyes are glowing. I slide my tongue up the strong column of his throat, and he jerks, a sound rippling up from deep in his chest.

“I love the way you feel against my mouth,” I whisper. Slowly, I begin rocking my hips, feeling his thickness filling every part of me.

“By Blood!” he chokes out. He tilts his head to the side slightly, and I trace the tip of my tongue along the vein there.

“I don’t know what to do,” I murmur.

“Close your eyes. You’ll know.”

My lashes flutter shut, and I brush my lips lightly, feeling a pulse against them. Taking in a deep breath, I fasten my teeth against his skin and bite down. Bart gives a sharp grunt, his back bowing as he jolts toward me. But I’m barely aware of anything apart from the warm gush of blood over my tongue.

Hot...sweet...the metallic tang has my mouth watering.

“Yes...yes...” Bart’s words come out on a gasp. “Like that.”

I take another deep pull, and he thrusts his hips up with enough force that it would have unseated me if I wasn’t so firmly lodged on his cock.

I don’t know what sets me off: the next powerful thrust or the blinding wave of light that feels like it consumes me. It’s like freaking fireworks. I’d scream if my mouth wasn’t so firmly closed around his skin. The third gulp has the mother of all orgasms bursting through me.

“Aurora!” Bart growls, and I can feel his body tense beneath me. His pleasure follows mine quickly, powerful thrusts pushing into me as he reaches his own explosive climax. My arms are twined around his neck as I cling to him like a life raft in a storm.

“Oh! Oh...yes! Mother Earth, yes!” I babble when I unlatch my teeth and drop my head back, riding the wave of his rolling hips. With my back arched as I grind down on him, he’s able to dip his head and suck down on my nipple, sending another wave of sensation through me. Every touch and breath

and movement feels amplified. It's mind-numbing enough to make my toes curl.

Finally, after what feels like an eternity, I raise my head and look into his gorgeous face. Huge chest heaving as he takes in great gasps of air, his cheeks are flushed, his eyes glittering, and I...I feel like I've just been charged by a bolt of pure lightning. Power pulses in me like a living thing. Any sense of weakness has been washed away in a life-giving flood.

"Wow..." I exhale, trying to find my breath and failing. "So that's what it's like."

He gives me a lazy half-smile. "Yes. That's what it's like." He takes in a deep pull of air. "I'm sorry."

"Why? You didn't even try to hurt me. You controlled it. You'll always control it...but with the cure, you won't need to." I cock my head, flicking my tongue over the spot where I'd sunk my teeth into him. A tiny bead of blood has formed there, and I take it into my mouth, giving a shiver. I'm going to end up addicted to this.

"That's not what I'm sorry about. I should have believed you. About the Bond. I've wasted so much time – *our* time – with my foolishness." His expression has darkened. "And I nearly lost you."

"I thought I'd lost you, too. But that's all over with. We have now...and forever." I smile as I reach for first one wrist and then the other, releasing him. "And I know how I'd like to spend that time."

"You do?" His arms snake around my waist, pulling me down onto him. I haven't made a move to slide off of him, and I tighten my muscles around his thick shaft. He's still hard, and he growls deep in his throat.

"I want to do that again." I stroke his face as I kiss his sweet lips.

"You can. Whenever you want. Because you're mine," he says, gazing up into my eyes.

“Yours,” I reply. And I am. Wholly, totally, and completely.

I’m lost...in the best possible way.

Bartholomew

The world ripples as we step through the portal and into Ryacyn. Aurora sways on her feet, and I catch her against me, still worried she's too frail after our ordeal. But as I gaze at her upturned face, color is already returning to her cheeks.

"I'm all right," she murmurs, emerald eyes sparkling like jewels in the light. How did it take me so long to realize how precious she is? She smiles. "Just takes a moment to get my bearings."

"I don't want you to take on too much. You've been through a lot these past days." Unable to resist, I brush a soft kiss over her waiting lips. Even that brief contact sends desire humming through me.

Fuck, I can't get enough of her.

I want nothing more than to whisk her away and spend hours learning every intimate detail of her exquisite body. But there are duties that demand our attention first.

"Come." I know the others are waiting. I take her hand, and together, we make our way to the Council Chambers to meet them. As we enter, a chorus of cheers and applause erupts from those gathered.

"Hollyhocks!" Aurora's cheeks have flushed pink. "I wasn't expecting such a warm welcome."

I want to tell her to get used to it. As my queen, she'll be received joyfully wherever we go. But right now, there are things to discuss. And I have to get an update from my advisors on all that's happened today.

Luther strides forward to clasp my shoulder warmly.

“Thank the Blood you’ve returned safely!” His smile encompasses us both.

Before I can reply, a blur of wispy blond hair barrels past, almost knocking me aside. Lily flings herself at Aurora with a joyful sob.

“My Lady! Oh, praise the Mother, you’re all right!” she cries, clutching Aurora tightly. My mate laughs even as tears shine in her eyes at the reunion. Nearby, Vidarok observes the scene, his stony features softening slightly.

“You got back safely!” Aurora’s relief is tangible.

“Lord Luther and Lord Mortas saw to it.” The little Fae’s voice is muffled from where her face is pressed against Aurora’s chest.

When Lily finally releases her, Aurora turns to me, love and purpose shining from her vibrant gaze. “Bartholomew, there is something we must tell everyone.”

A hush falls over the room as all eyes turn to us. Claspng her hand tightly in mine, I announce, “Princess Aurora has consented to be my mate and future queen of Ryacyn.”

For a moment, stunned silence. Then the room erupts into rowdy congratulations.

“Lady Aurora!” Lily squeals, claspng her hands to her mouth and hopping on the spot. Vidarok remains impassive, though he inclines his head in my direction. When Aurora turns her radiant face to him, the huge Orc actually cracks a smile.

“This is wonderful news! Wonderful news!” Radella’s eyes are shining. I hadn’t realized that the others would be as pleased as I was. The small group surges forward to offer congratulations and well wishes. I’m nearly crushed by backslaps and handshakes from Luther and Mortas while Radella and Salem are gravitating toward Aurora.

“You’ll be so wonderful on our Council team, Princess.” Salem is gushing, her face wreathed in smiles. “And then a great ruler as our queen!”

“And I will be grateful to welcome you into my own court.” Aurora is beaming. It suddenly occurs to me that with this union, we’ll be joining two powerful realms. And if Aurora is to become my Vampire Queen, would that make me her Fae Prince?

“What are you chuckling about, Bartholomew?” Luther is at my side with a large decanter of whisky. He splashes a measure into a snifter, handing it to me before pouring for the others.

“Just a stray thought, Luther. I think we may have some changes to look forward to.” It seems to me there’s going to be a mingling of Fae and vampires, after all. My smile fades as I think about that. The last time we’d negotiated such a treaty, it was between my sister and King Nightfall.

How much things have changed since then.

Once things have settled, Vidarok approaches me, dipping his head respectfully. “You have chosen well, Lord Bellingham. My Lady is a woman of great strength. You will do well to have her at your side.”

I clasp the big Orc’s arm gratefully. “Thank you, Vidarok. And thank you for protecting her when I could not.”

He acknowledges my words somberly. “I could have done better.”

“You had no idea what we were up against. You did all you could, Orc.” I put a hand on his shoulder. With another nod, he moves to stand guard at Aurora’s side once more. I guess old habits die hard. I know I’ll sleep easier knowing that the big male is so loyal. Though reserved, I sense he is as pleased by this development as anyone.

“I think it’s time to discuss the events of the day,” I say as the congratulations die down. I head toward the Council table and take my usual seat. Aurora sits in the chair to my

right, and it feels as if it was always meant to be this way. I put my hand over hers where it rests on the worn wood.

“Let’s start with the capture of the vampires,” I say, glancing around the table. Luther and Mortas exchange a glance before Luther speaks.

“It was not a pleasant process,” he begins, his face lined with tension. “There was resistance, of course. Some refused outright, while others couldn’t believe it would work. Even thought it would worsen their condition. We were forced to hold them captive in the dungeons while Nightfall made preparations. He arranged for healers to administer the cure, and—”

“Tell me more about this cure.” Aurora leans forward. “Was it as they said? Day and Night?” She shoots a look at me. I know what she’s thinking. Silverwing had been certain the words had referred to us. Perhaps it’s a romantic notion, and I don’t blame her for it. Frankly, I don’t care how it works as long as it does.

“It was very much along those lines, my Lady,” Luther says. “The Grand Father learned of a spell that allowed your people to gather...” He clears his throat. “To gather joy,” he finishes. “They bottled it. Made it into a serum.”

“Ah.” She nods as if this makes perfect sense. “Positive energy. Just as we used with the pleasure parties.”

“Quite.” Luther nods. I bite back a smile, feeling my fingers tightening over hers. If she notices that I’m amused, she says nothing.

Orgies.

The word takes on new meaning now. I plan to spend the foreseeable future exploring all manner of pleasures with my beautiful mate.

“I’ll admit, I had my doubts.” Mortas turns to us. “But it works.” He shrugs. “Remarkably well, in fact.”

“It was almost immediate.” Salem sweeps a platinum strand from her forehead. “We’d expected some sort of healing

phase, but you can practically see the transformation take place.”

“It’s quite remarkable,” says Radella. “The Fae king has chosen the gardens as the best place to perform the healing. Something to do with being in a place of growth and renewal.”

Doesn’t surprise me. The Fae set great stock in such things. I love that about my new mate.

“Well, that’s good news.” I’m stroking small circles over the back of Aurora’s hand with my thumb. Her blood still thrums in my veins and mine in hers. And it’s the most natural feeling in the world to have her this close. “What was the response from those afflicted once they were given the serum?”

“Overwhelmingly positive,” says Mortas. “As much as they fought us, once cured, they seemed to experience an overwhelming relief at being released.”

Luther’s expression is earnest. “We are just happy that so many lives have been saved – both human and vampire alike.”

Not to mention Fae.

I don’t say it. I don’t want to imagine what would have happened if Vespyr’s plans had come to fruition. Taking over Autumnburn. My jaw tightens as I think of my sister. Had she been under Magna’s influence all along? It wouldn’t surprise me. The madman had always had delusions of grandeur, the wild belief that vampires were a superior species and that all others were simply there as food.

Vespyr’s loneliness would have made her easy to manipulate.

“You’ve always been my best friend.”

Her words echo in my head. My heart hurts as I think about it. I let her down. Marrying her off because I’d convinced myself it would make her happy...when it was a move that mainly suited my own purposes.

“Are you okay, my love?” Aurora’s voice draws me from my brooding. I look up at her with a smile.

“How could I not be?” I squeeze her fingers gently, threading mine through them.

“You’re worrying about your sister, aren’t you?” As she says this, the others grow silent.

I nod. “There’s been no sign of her yet?” I look around the table.

Vidarok steps forward from where he’s been standing behind Aurora’s seat.

“I searched throughout the catacombs. Every chamber.” His shoulders slump. I know he’s taken this personally.

“She wouldn’t have gone up to human territory,” Mortas muses. “Not in the condition she was in.”

I have a vague recollection of my sister’s bloodcurdling screams as Magna flung her across the room. She must have been badly injured. She’d want to go someplace safe to heal.

“We have to find her. She needs our help.” Aurora surprises me by being so concerned. Vespyr had almost killed her, after all.

“Yes,” I agree. “We can help her.” I think of the mad rush of power the Curse brings and can only imagine the levels of insanity my sister must be facing.

Is it even possible to bring her back from that?

It has to be!

“I will find her.” Vidarok’s voice rumbles, and I fix a look at him. The Orc’s face is resolute.

“You have duties here,” I tell him. I’m not sure I like the idea of him not at Aurora’s side.

“I think it’s a good idea, Vidarok.” Aurora’s agreement makes me turn to her.

“Are you certain?” I know I’m frowning, but it can’t be helped.

“I will be quite safe here with you.” Her smile is gentle. “Our greatest threat was never Vespyr. It was Magna. He’s dead. And with her in the wind, I’ll be fine here. We both will. And who better than Vidarok to track her down?”

I purse my lips.

“Very well, then.” I turn my focus back to the Orc. “Go. Find her. Bring her back to us.” The thought of my sister running scared makes my heart clench. And right now, when I’m getting used to it feeling so full, it’s a sensation that I don’t enjoy. Without another word, the huge man bows to Aurora, then turns and leaves the room.

“If anyone can do it, it’s him, my love.” Aurora’s fingers are still interwoven with mine. “And now that we’ve resolved this, there’s something more important that needs to be done.

With our hands interlocked, she rises and draws me from my seat. And then we’re walking out of the doorway and through to the gardens.

Aurora

Joy washes through me as Bart and I make our way hand-in-hand to the gardens where the healing is taking place. Night has fallen, granting us privacy beneath the moonlit trees, the scent of flowers hanging heavy in the air. Everything finally feels right in a way I'd almost lost hope of experiencing. Claspng Bart's strong hand, my heart swells near to bursting with love for this complicated, noble man fate destined me to be with.

Mine.

The word feels like it's been branded into my soul. If this is the feeling that Mom and Nana Bee had been trying to tell me about, then I'm more grateful than ever that they hadn't found a way to break the Heart Bond.

Holy Hollyhocks, I can't believe we made it!

After the ordeals we've faced, it's almost hard to believe we've come through it intact. Well, nearly intact in Bart's case, I amend with an inner shudder, recalling his broken body in my arms. But now he stands tall and proud at my side.

And beautiful. My god, the man will always take my breath away, no matter how many times I look at him.

As we pass through the garden gates, I spot Nightfall conferring with several people I don't immediately recognize. At our approach, he turns, relief washing over his features.

"Aurora! Thank the Mother, you're safe." In three quick strides, he closes the distance between us and folds me in a crushing bear hug. I return the embrace warmly before stepping back.

“Of course I’m safe. You know Bart would move heaven and earth to protect me.” I tip my head to smile tenderly at the man in question. Bart’s mouth tilts up slightly in response.

Nightfall clears his throat. “Yes, well, I was prepared to wage war if she’d come to harm,” he says gruffly. I know it’s mostly for show – underneath, my dear friend is really just a big softie.

“There was no need for such drastic action.” I wave a hand airily. “The real threat was Magna, and he’s been dealt with.” I don’t mention how close we came to death at the mad vampire’s hands. Some things are better left unsaid.

“We have a lot to discuss.” Bart gestures to a nearby bench. “But first, I would like to share our news.” He smiles tenderly down at me. “Aurora has consented to be my mate.”

Nightfall’s eyebrows shoot up in surprise. “Truly? Well, I can’t say I’m entirely shocked.” His eyes dance. “About time you came to your senses, Bellingham.”

Bart clears his throat but doesn’t contradict him. I stifle a giggle behind my hand. My mate’s prideful nature makes it difficult for him to admit when he’s wrong. But I don’t need him to; I already know that he understands how foolish it was to fight the Heart Bond between us. And that’s all that matters.

Just then, a familiar figure catches my eye, lingering at the edge of the group. Faine meets my gaze briefly, shame written across her face, before dropping her eyes. I’m amazed to see her here – the last I knew, she was fully in the Curse’s clutches. She must have been one of the first recipients of the cure.

Amazing! This is wonderful news.

When I point Faine out, Bart tenses, his expression shuttering. “She won’t be returning to my personal guard,” he says curtly. “Her betrayal endangered you, and I won’t forget that.”

I nod in understanding, even as sympathy wells up inside me. Faine wasn’t herself when she committed those

acts. Still, I can't deny feeling a rush of relief that she's been removed from temptation's path. Under the Curse's influence, she'd made her jealousy over Bart clear. If I'm honest with myself, I'd always known it. I saw her expression the day he'd drunk from her wrist. And if the sensation was anything like what I've felt with him, then there's no freaking way I'm going to be happy with her around him.

I lean closer to my mate possessively. "I'm just happy no one will be trying to steal you away from me again."

Bart chuckles, the sound rolling pleasantly through his broad chest. He kisses the top of my head. "As if they'd stand a chance."

Warmth blooms inside me at his words. I know without doubt that I have nothing to fear. Bart is mine, just as I am his. Our souls were Fated to be bound, and now the deal is sealed.

"Come, let me introduce you to some of those already cured," Nightfall says, steering us toward a group speaking quietly nearby. They turn at our approach, regarding us curiously. My heart constricts to see the lingering shadows in their eyes, remnants of the horrors they endured. But the silver tint is gone, replaced by clear gazes that prove the Curse no longer holds sway over them.

"Your king wishes to speak with you," Nightfall announces. The vampires dip their heads respectfully. "And the Lady Aurora along with him."

"We owe you a great debt, my Lady," says a tall, slender woman with tumbling ebony curls. "Your people saved us from the madness." Murmurs of agreement echo around the group.

"I'm just happy we could help," I reply gently. "You should feel very proud – by accepting the cure and overcoming the Curse's hold, you've proven how strong you truly are."

They exchange glances, some with wonder, as if the notion of inner strength was something they'd lost sight of. A

broad-shouldered male with a shock of dark hair speaks up earnestly.

“You’re right. We did have the strength, deep down. But the Curse...it burned away our ability to control ourselves. We became slaves to the hunger, lost to reason.” His hazel eyes are haunted. “I’m ashamed now, thinking of the things I did while afflicted. But all I could think of was getting my next fix of blood.”

Just as I’d thought, this disease was like an addiction.

The others nod grimly. I feel Bart tense beside me. He’s been oddly silent through all of this, and I imagine how hard this must all be for him. I know that this has been his worst fear: losing all rational thought and hurting innocents. I squeeze his fingers in silent support.

After speaking with the group a while longer, I sense Bart growing antsy. I’m sure he’s ready to get this over with. I know the not knowing – how the cure will affect him, what changes it may bring – must be eating at him. I’ve learned that my mate is a man of action. Waiting patiently doesn’t come naturally.

“Can we speak?” I murmur into his ear as the conversation ebbs and flows around us. He nods, and I slide a hand through the crook of his elbow, stifling a sigh as his warmth soaks into me.

Drawing him away, I lead him to a secluded spot nearby. Figures move about us, their slender forms and pointed ears telling me that Nightfall must have brought more of our people here. Deft hands move quickly as they set out what I now know are vials of bottled joy. The thought makes me smile. Trust the Fae to find a magical cure rooted in happiness.

“Are you ready?” I nod in their direction, then watch as he narrows his eyes on them.

“Of course.” His smile is tense.

“It’s going to work, my love. You have nothing to worry about. Nightfall wouldn’t have risked lives by bringing something dangerous here.”

Bart smiles crookedly. “It’s not fear holding me back. This power inside me now...” His eyes flash silver, and I sense the Curse stirring. “It’s intoxicating, Aurora. I’ve never felt such strength. When I took your blood, it was like liquid fire in my veins. I have drunk before, but it’s never been like that.”

“Perhaps it’s because it was the blood of your true mate you were drinking, Bartholomew Bellingham,” I reprimand him gently. “You’ll feel that every day if I have my way.”

“Of course, I know that, but...” Despite his words, there’s a glimmer of hesitation in Bart’s eyes. I know that he’s not as enamored with the Curse’s perceived gifts as Vespyn was. But still, letting go of that feeling of invincibility might not be easy.

There’s no way I’m letting him slide down that slippery slope.

It’s the Curse speaking. It has its hooks in him!

“The only fire I want you to feel is Fae Fire,” I tell him gently. “We have a love like no other, Bart. A love written in the stars. And we’ll build a future more wondrous than any power the Curse offers.”

Bart searches my eyes for a long moment. Then his shoulders relax, and a smile tugs at his mouth. “You’re right. As always.” He places a tender kiss on my forehead. “All the power I need is right here.”

“We’re ready,” I call out, turning to the others. One of the healers brings a vial over, handing it solemnly to Bart. The liquid within gleams rose pink, sparkling as though tiny stars are suspended within. Bart glances at it dubiously before focusing on me.

“This is it,” he says. I reach over and wrap my hands around his, where he clutches the cure. He’s still hesitating. There’s a war waging inside him. I can sense it. Feel it as clearly as when I’ve felt him in my heart.

“You can do it, Bart.” There’s an urgency in my voice.

He takes a deep breath and stares into the vial, then glances at me. “You know that I’ve been able to control it, don’t you? These powers are useful – I can use them to find the other afflicted vampires and maybe even Vespvr. We can use this Curse for good, not evil.”

There’s a sharp intake of breath from behind me, and I realize the others have gathered.

“By Blood! What foolishness is this?” I hear Mortas from nearby.

Bart’s eyes are glowing silver again, and I feel a knot of fear building in my belly. What the hell is going through his mind?

This isn’t him speaking! It’s the Curse.

I can almost see it struggling within him, like a living thing fighting for survival.

“Don’t you see, Aurora? I could—” he begins.

“No! You’ve controlled it because you are strong. But how long could that last, Bart? It will consume you eventually. You’ve seen that. Vespvr was strong, too, yet look what it did to her.”

I see his hand tremble as he holds the vial up. The others are watching us with bated breath.

“My Lord...” Luther murmurs.

Oh, please! Please drink it, my love!

I keep tortured eyes locked on him. What do I do now? I can’t force it down his throat. Casting an anxious look at the others, I step up close to him and cup his cheek with my hand. He presses his face against my palm, and I pray I can get through to him.

“Please, Bart. This is the Curse trying to manipulate you. Please! You have to do this!”

But I’m staring into silver-ringed eyes and wondering what just happened to my man.

Bartholomew

Two weeks later...

“And that’s when she slapped me.” I’ve told this story at least half a dozen times, and still, it draws rowdy laughter from the matriarch of Aurora’s family.

“Good for you, Aurora!” Briar chuckles, wiping her eyes. She sets down her goblet and reaches for a plump strawberry. The family has set up an alfresco lunch out in the glade for us. It’s peaceful lounging on rough-hewn benches around a heavy wooden table in the dappled shade of the trees.

“Nana Bee!” Aurora rolls her eyes. “Are you ever going to stop teasing Bart about this?”

“Never.” Her grandmother chuckles. “I just wish I’d been there to see it. Not that I’m condoning violence, mind you!” She winks at me. “But sometimes there’s no other way to get through to a man with a curse.”

“And just how many cursed men have you had to slap, my love?” Her mate, Gavriel, raises an eyebrow.

“None, so far.” She smiles back at him. “Though it’s always good to be prepared for such things.” She aims another amused look at me. “If you hadn’t taken that cure, I would have had to give you a firm talking to myself!”

“But enough of that.” It’s Stardust now. Aurora’s mother is as sweet and gentle as her grandmother is sharp and witty. The pair of them have seated themselves on either side of me, and I feel bookended by Fae women. “We have a ceremony to plan.” She claps her hands together, and a flock of butterflies lifts from the flowers around us. It’s a lot more idyllic out here than I’m used to. I like it.

“There will be the vows, of course.” Briar looks at Aurora, who smiles indulgently. “We have various customs we like to include. And our Grand Father will preside.”

Across the table, Silverwing nods solemnly. “I would be honored. It’s been too long since we had a mating ceremony in Meadowside.”

“Sounds good to me,” I say because I don’t care what they have planned. All that matters is that I share the moment with the crimson-haired beauty who’s aiming sidelong glances at me from two seats away.

Too far.

I hate it when I can’t touch her. Her lashes flutter as she slides a look down my throat, and I feel a tightening in the pit of my belly. I reach for my wine goblet and take a long drink.

“And I’m assuming that you will have family present?” Stardust turns to me.

I pause before answering. “There are... No. But my advisors will be there. And some attendants from Ryacyn.”

“No family?” Stardust’s brows pull together. “But that’s just wrong.”

“Mama!” Aurora shoots a pointed look at her mother, who blinks in confusion.

“There is nobody remaining on my side.” I try to keep my voice neutral. I have no family left. Not after Vespyr fled. I press my lips together.

“Bart’s parents passed when he was a boy,” Aurora says quietly. The look she’s giving me now is as tender as a kiss. It eases the hurt a little.

“Both of them?” Briar is wide-eyed. “But how?”

“Nana!” Aurora gasps.

I shake my head at her. “It’s okay.” I know this needs to come out sometime. Now is as good a time as any. There’s an awkward silence, which I finally break. “My father was

assassinated during the vampire wars. And my mother..." I search for the right words. "My mother couldn't live without him."

"Oh, my dear child!" Aurora's grandmother is earnestly sympathetic. It's unsettling to be addressed like a boy by a woman who looks no older than my own mate. But there's an understanding in those gentle eyes that speaks of centuries of wisdom.

"It was a long time ago." I shrug.

"But something you'd never forget." Stardust sighs and reaches for the hand of her own mate. Mercury lifts her fingers and kisses her knuckles. I like that about this family. Affection is openly displayed.

"To watch as a loved one withers away..." Briar shakes her head. "It must have been awful to watch as she lingered."

"She took her own life." The words are abrupt and almost surprise me. "She didn't linger at all."

Briar gasps, and Stardust clutches a hand to her throat. Aurora is on her feet and suddenly behind me, sliding her arms around my neck and clasping her hands over my chest. She hugs me against her and brushes her lips over my hair. Mercury and Gavriel exchange glances, and Silverwing sets his goblet down sharply.

Fuck.

Perhaps I shouldn't have blurted that. But the words spewed out before I could stop them.

"I'm so sorry, my love," Aurora whispers. It's not like this is news to her, but she still treats it like some fresh disclosure. As if she's shaken by the enormity of it each time I tell her.

"Darling boy!" Briar pats my hand. "No wonder you had such a hard time accepting our Aurora's love. You must spend your days waiting to be abandoned again."

“I wasn’t abandoned. I was...” I trail off, because suddenly I realize that’s exactly what it felt like. “Well, it’s all over now. I’m fine.”

“It’s never over, Bartholomew. Not a loss like that. You carry the wound to your grave. Luckily, Aurora is a gifted healer.” Briar smiles up at her granddaughter. “You are in good hands. She will treat your heart like a precious gift.”

“I guess she would, wouldn’t she? Between the vampire’s kiss, the Fae Fire, and the Heart Bond, there’s no chance of her straying.” I give a mirthless laugh. “Good thing you couldn’t find a cure for all that magic.”

What the hell, Bellingham?

It was a shitty thing to say. But speaking about my parents always has my bitterness surging.

Aurora gasps and then stiffens. “Bartholomew Oberon Bellingham! You take that back! You know that’s not how it is. The Heart Bond merely brought us together. Connected us.”

There’s an odd silence from the others. I feel a frown form as Stardust, Briar, and Silverwing share looks that seem oddly meaningful. From the tension in Aurora’s grip, I sense she’s aware of it, too.

“What is it, Nana Bee?” Her voice has grown strained. “What haven’t you told me?”

Briar doesn’t answer her immediately. “Stardust, darling?” She looks over at Aurora’s mother, who is staring down at the table. “I think you should explain.”

Mercury slides his arm around her waist and pulls her close against his side. “It’s time, angel. She needs to know.”

“Mama?” Aurora is now as stiff as a board against me. I rub my hand over her arm, where it’s now clasped almost too tightly around me.

“There’s no Heart Bond.” It’s a whisper. Stardust is still looking down at the table.

“What?” Aurora gasps. “But...but...I’m the firstborn daughter. The Heart Bond is passed down to—”

Stardust is shaking her head. “You had...” Her words grow strangled, and she hunches slightly. Mercury pulls her head into the curve of his neck. It’s clear she can’t speak right now.

“You had a sister, Aurora.” Briar turns in her seat to face Aurora. “A little girl who was stillborn.” At her words, Stardust chokes on a tiny sob.

“Oh, my god.” Aurora’s voice is strained. I hold her arm more firmly, pulling her closer to me. I can feel the emotions warring within her. “Born before me...”

“Yes,” her grandmother says. “She would have inherited the Bond, my darling.”

“Oh, Mama.” Aurora husks the words, then releases me and sinks to wrap her arms around her mother. “Mama, why didn’t you tell me?”

Stardust is still nestled against her mate. “I couldn’t talk about it. And you were just so perfect... It became easier and easier to push the pain away as I watched you grow.”

“But still—”

“We figured that you wouldn’t really need to know, Aurora,” Briar interrupts Aurora. “Your heart is strong. We knew you’d find love. What difference does a bond make?”

I know my mouth has dropped open. “But the Bond... the enchantment...”

Gavriel looks at me. “There wasn’t one.”

“That makes no sense!” I can’t understand this. “Why...why did we feel the way we did? Why do we feel that way now?”

“Because you are in love, foolish boy!” Silverwing’s gravelly voice breaks through my confusion. “You believed in the Bond. Don’t you believe in love, too?”

“Well, of course! But I—” I shake my head. Aurora is still standing close to her mother, but she puts her hand on my shoulder. “She didn’t enchant me?”

“That’s a matter of opinion.” Briar laughs, lightening the mood. “I happen to think our Aurora is utterly enchanting.”

Beside me, Stardust has managed a weak smile.

“So, you see, the Bond wasn’t important.” Silverwing is smiling, too, now.

“It was important to me,” I mutter.

“It was?” Briar raises an eyebrow. “Now, why would that be?”

“Because I thought it was the reason we were together. The reason Aurora thought she cared for me.” I feel like a fool.

“Oh, my love!” Aurora’s holding me again now. I like it altogether too much. “There are a thousand reasons why I care for you! Your eyes, your mouth...your beautiful heart.” I feel her lips graze my earlobe as she adds in a whisper, “There are other things, too, but we can discuss those later.”

I feel a grin forming. The mood is suddenly growing easier.

“I imagine that if you *must* believe you’re magically linked, there’s always the Fae Fire,” says Silverwing. “And I hear that your vampire’s kiss is quite a connection.”

“Taking blood?” I look over at him. There’s no way I’m going to try to explain how that particular bond works. Not with Aurora’s mother and grandmother sitting right next to me. “It’s a more...intimate matter,” I settle on.

“A sex bond!” Briar laughs. “Well, I never!”

By Blood! Did she have to do that?

“Yes, I suppose you could say that. But it’s not always about love. It’s more about control.” I’m not looking the woman in the eye.

“That’s what Vespyr meant when Magna—” Aurora grinds to an abrupt halt as everyone swivels to look at her.

“When Magna what?” Silverwing asks sharply.

Aurora takes a breath. “When I was taken...” Thankfully, she doesn’t highlight the fact that it was my sister who took her. “I was threatened by one of the Cursed. I was told that if I drank from him after he’d taken from me, he’d be able to control me.”

“Good god!” Mercury sounds horrified. “My little girl. If I could get my hands on those animals who hurt you...” He trails off, then looks at me. “Is it true? What she says?”

“It’s true to a degree,” I acknowledge, wondering if there’d ever be a bond strong enough to control my headstrong woman; not that I want to. “Though it’s still not love. That’s something else.”

“Well, if you really insist on having magic to bind you, there’s always the Fae Fire,” Silverwing says. “Not that I’m saying you need it. But you seem fixed on this whole idea of being unlovable unless there’s a spell.”

“The Fire is also for sex, old man.” Briar winks at him. “Gets the juices flowing.”

I’d cover my face with my hands if I was a weaker man.

The elder shrugs. “Just saying.”

“Holy Hollyhocks!” Aurora is giggling behind me, and now the mood is definitely lighter. “Will you just leave my poor man alone?”

“Of course we will. Because we’ve settled it!” Briar claps her hands, and just like when Stardust did it, butterflies swirl. She points at me. “You are in love – no spells or bonds necessary. You will be together forever. And you will give us plenty of grandbabies...little vampires with pointy ears and golden eyes.”

“Nana!” Aurora is laughing with abandon now. And I am, too. Because I have a family who cares for me, and a woman who loves me...and never in a million years would I have imagined that this is how my life would turn out.

I just pray that it stays this way.

Aurora

Two weeks later...

“Say it again.”

“I love you, you fool!” I’m laughing because it seems he can never hear it enough. Even when we joined our councils to create a combined vampire–Fae union, I had to reassure him that his heart was still safe with me.

It always will be.

“I’ll love you forever,” I add for good measure. I like saying it.

“Damn right.” Bart rolls over in the lush grass to face me, propping his head in the palm of his hand. It’s been a whirlwind these past weeks, and it’s nice to sneak away from the endless duties our combined roles have brought into our world. “Because if the answer was anything else, I’d have to give you that spanking I promised.”

“My god, you still remember that? It must have been a year ago.” When he’d caught me eavesdropping in the hallway of Nightfall’s castle. It feels like a lifetime has passed.

“I remember everything when it comes to you.” He reaches for the stem of a dandelion, plucks it, and then trails the fluffy little flower along the curve of my neck.

I give a shiver, feeling my nipples tighten. If I wasn’t lying on my belly in the grass, he’d be getting an eyeful.

“You’d never say so.” I keep my voice light.

“And why is that?” Bart is focusing on where the puffball is stroking over my skin. I sigh happily. I love how

we've been able to slide so comfortably into this relationship. We're going to rule so well together.

"Because you've never done it. I think you're just a big tease." It's easy to be brazen. We're a world away from anyone. I've brought him to my favorite place near the banks of a quiet lake in Meadowside.

We need this time alone. Only the Earth Mother knows when our time will be our own again.

"A tease? Is that so?" He sits up. "You're telling me you want a spanking the day before our mating ceremony?" He runs his hand up the back of my thigh, pushing the hem of my dress up with it.

"I'm not saying anything at all. I'll leave that for you to figure out. If you're smart, it would be simple."

He bends down and brushes his lips against my ear, nipping the tip of it. "Cheeky imp. I should spank you for that alone."

I giggle. Now, it's not just my nipples that are paying attention. There's a clenching between my thighs, too. "I'm not an imp. I'm Fae. If you were smart, you'd know that, too."

"Oh, now you're asking for it!" His hand has pushed my skirt over my hips, and he's palming my ass.

"I'm not asking for anything. I'm just saying that if you're smart, you'd—" I let out a yelp as his hand cracks down sharply. "Sweet petals!"

"What was that?" He's rubbing soothing circles over my butt cheek.

"That all you got?" I'm pushing my luck, but this has intrigued me for ages. Just because I was a virgin when I met him doesn't mean I'm not adventurous...or curious. Though right now, curiosity might just kill the cat because his next slap has me bleating and flailing a hand back to cover my stinging buttock.

"Better?" He's laughing at me, the bastard. When I don't answer, he hikes my hips up and spanks me so soundly

that I'm kicking and squealing by the time he's finished. "How about now? Satisfied, little Fae?"

"Ohh..." I groan because I'm not satisfied at all. In fact, if anything, there's a strange need building. The tingling burn has combined with the smooth circles he's stroking over my ass in a way that has me aching. Hollyhocks, I'm horny!

Who knew?

"I asked if you're satisfied..." Bart pulls me up to straddle his lap, and now I'm staring into his eyes. I give my head a little shake. "You want more?" He raises an eyebrow.

"More...something." I nip at his lip. My thighs are slick, and I realize that I'm wet with need.

"I think I can give you more...something." His voice has grown husky. Sliding a hand between us, he dips his fingers beneath my panties. "Fuck...you're dripping."

I don't reply. I can't find my voice now that his fingertip is swirling over my clit. As the sensations start to build, I reach down and tug at the waistband of his pants. Even with the weight of me on top of him, he lifts his ass easily and lets me tug his pants down over his hips. His cock is thick and heavy in my hand as I release it from its confines.

Yes, yes, yes!

This is the part I love best: the anticipation of being entirely flooded with him.

Still taunting the nub of my clit, Bart nuzzles my neck. I tilt my head to the side.

"You realize," he says against my skin, "that the next time we do this, you will be my queen."

I nod. When I speak, my voice is a hoarse croak. "And you'll be my prince regent."

"Sounds fancy," he breathes out. Teeth graze my skin, and everything inside me begins to coil. He isn't even in me yet, and already, I can feel the tingle beginning. I've been conditioned like one of Pavlov's dogs. I'm already panting for him.

That's it. I'm a goner.

“Very fancy.” I lift onto my knees, positioning the head of his cock at my entrance. He gives a low groan when I begin to sink down. It's slow going... Even now, it takes a while to get used to the sheer size of him stretching me. With his hands linked beneath me, I feel him cup my ass, kneading the flesh as he begins to raise and lower me.

“By Blood, you feel good.” He dips his head to look down at where we're joined. When he looks up again, his eyes are glowing. He's going to drink from me today. And I am going to drink from him, too. It feels right when we come together like this.

So right...

When he tips his chin and tilts his head to bare his neck, the invitation is unmistakable. I lower my face and nip down sharply, waiting for the rush I've grown to ache for. I know that within an instant of my first gulp, I'm going to be lost in the throes of unthinkable pleasure.

I'm not disappointed. The next time his cock slides home, I come apart like a volcano erupting. As always, when we love like this, there's no way I can cry out – but it doesn't matter. The ecstasy sings its own chorus through my shuddering body as nerves tingle and fireworks shoot off behind my tightly shut lids.

Yes...yes...yes!

I can only hear the words in my mind, but I'm certain that Bart is aware of them, too, because he's rocking his hips in a way that has his cock hitting all the right places.

And who would have thought there'd be so many “right places?”

Bart clasps the back of my head, holding my face more firmly against his throat as I buck against him.

“Sweet, sweet woman...” he groans, his fingers tangling into my hair. I almost wail when he pulls my head away. “My turn.”

I stare at him in a daze as his lips curl up. And then his head lowers. There's the familiar pinch, and then I stiffen as he sucks down in a movement that feels like it's directly connected to my zinging clit.

"Bart!" I half shout. Even as I'm riding through the last waves of my orgasm, I'm feeling another tide surging. His hand is still twisted into my hair, holding my head to the side as he continues to drink, his lips warm where they're clamped over my skin. It's mind-numbing, the pull of it tightening my nipples and sending ripples through the clenching muscles of my pussy. I'm coming again before I've recovered from the last climax, and it leaves me shuddering.

"Fuck! Oh, fuck!" My chest is heaving, my body trembling, and still he's drinking, still thrusting deep. A light flick of his thumb against my clit has me stiffening a moment before I come yet again.

"Oh! Oh, oh, oh, ohhhh!" I'm all-out yelling now, barely aware of the words that I'm babbling. It's almost too much, and I feel myself go limp as the final waves slowly subside. "Hollyhocks!" My voice is so hoarse I barely recognize it. But Bart hasn't stopped yet. "So thirsty, my love?" My words are choked. Shifting a little, I slide my hand into his hair and tug a little. This is starting to feel like too much. "Bart..."

"Mmmmm..." he groans against my throat. I give yet another deep shudder, but I'm certain that I couldn't possibly survive another of those earth-shattering orgasms. He makes another of those sounds. It comes from deep in his throat and seems like more of a growl than a groan. I'm used to that now, but somehow, this doesn't seem right.

"Bart!" I say more sharply, tugging at his hair. "Stop!" I almost have to use brute force to pull his face free. When I do, I stare at him, and I freeze. And then I'm shoving at his chest, frantically scrambling off of him, ignoring the sharp ache of emptiness as I do it. Scooting back on my ass, my heels dig into the soft grass as I put distance between us.

“Aurora...” His voice is rasping, a deep, low snarl that has the tiny hairs standing upon my skin.

“Sweet Earth Mother!” I clamp a hand over my mouth to muffle the scream that comes unbidden. It’s impossible to completely stop the desperate sound, though. I’m panting so hard my chest is rising and falling in quick succession as I stare at the face of the man I love.

Gleaming fangs glitter in his open mouth. Blood is dripping from his lips and down his chin. My blood. A lot of it.

And I’m fighting back a surge of emotion that feels like a frantic combination of terror and pure sorrow.

Because I’m looking into eyes that are circled with glowing silver.

Bartholomew

I'm running from my bloodlust again, but this time, Aurora has my hand clasped firmly in hers.

By Blood, I nearly killed her!

“You're going to be okay, my love! We'll get through this!” There's a frantic edge to her voice that connects with something inside me.

Not prey. She's not prey!

I repeat the words in my head until they feel like they're hardwired there.

“We'll find Nightfall! He'll be able to tell us what's going on.” She's speaking quickly, the urgency of her thoughts clear in her tone. I don't respond to her. I'm too busy clenching my teeth and fighting down the feeling of madness that keeps rising as the Curse tries to take hold of me.

Calm. Stay fucking calm!

I took the cure. How could it be back?

How?!

Aurora is guiding me back to the family home, where we know we'll find Briar, Stardust, and the others. I need to get back to Ryacyn – I haven't told Aurora, but the dungeons feel like they'd be appropriate – except I'm too disoriented to create a portal right now.

“Nearly there!” Aurora's fingers tighten around mine. I'd been afraid to let her come near me at first, but now this small contact is like a lifeline. I'm using her to ground myself.

I nearly killed her!

No. I would never have hurt her. Never! But the thirst that had overcome me back at the lake has left me shaken. I'd almost lost control in those wild moments when her blood and my pleasure combined.

What if I'd taken too much? What if—

I shake the thought from my mind and focus on where we're going.

A winding grass path is leading us into the center of Aurora's childhood home; it's a green haven of growth surrounded by trees and blossoms, and it feels like a safe harbor. Until a Fae steps into our path and immediately leaps backward at the sight of us.

"I shouldn't be here!" I say the words out loud, but Aurora ignores them. She's not going to give me a chance to tell her I might hurt someone.

She may refuse to believe it, but I'm not convinced that I won't. The thirst is still so close to the surface.

It's no surprise that I'm frightening the Fae, who are hovering around us. I'm pretty sure I look wild. Our clothes are disheveled, and Aurora's hair is a fiery mane around her shoulders. Tears had streaked her cheeks as she'd stared at me when I'd become a monster in front of her. She's dashed them away, but she's left muddy smears on her skin. She's not crying anymore now.

But I never want to see her looking at me that way again. It ripped my heart from my chest.

"It's going to be fine. It's all going to be fine!" She glances at me quickly and offers a tight smile.

My brave, beautiful queen.

I try to return the gesture but don't manage much more than a twitch of my lips.

She looks away, scanning the area. "Nana Bee! Mama!" Her voice cuts through the silence.

I don't call out for them. It doesn't feel right. And besides, I don't know what my voice might sound like.

A bloodcurdling growl.

That's how it had sounded back when I'd taken blood from Aurora.

How? How the fuck has the Curse come back?

"Nana Bee!" Aurora is calling out more urgently now. The sound of voices and footsteps is punctuated by the sight of Briar and Stardust.

"Aurora!" her mother calls out.

"Mama! Mama, it's happening again! Bart has—" She stops short at the sight of two familiar shapes looming behind her mother and grandmother.

"Luther." I rasp out the name as my advisor steps around the women in front of him. Silverwing is close on his heels.

"Bartholomew! Thank the Blood, I'm not too late!" Luther hurries toward me.

Not too late?

I want to laugh out loud at how ridiculous that is. Of course it's too late. It's over. All over.

"The cure!" Luther says urgently. "It's... It's not permanent."

Aurora and I exchange glances. He takes in the sight of us and stops short. Silverwing stands beside him.

"They know." The grand old male heaves a sigh, his features wreathed with remorse. "I'm so sorry, Lord Bellingham."

The words are cold comfort. It's not his fault, though.

"What...happened?" I grit out. My voice sounds almost like my own again, but the beast is still too close for comfort.

Stardust is staring at Aurora, painting anxious little movements in the air with fluttering fingertips. I step away slightly, and the Fae woman rushes forward and wraps her arms around her daughter.

She's afraid of me.

“Darling! Are you all right?” Pulling back, she runs her hands down Aurora’s arms to her wrists, her eyes moving over her.

“I’m fine, Mama.” Aurora clasps her mother’s hands in her own before releasing them and reaching out for mine once more. I’m reluctant to let her, but there’s still a part of me that needs this connection.

Who am I kidding? I’ll always need it.

I take her hand.

“Bellingham?” Mercury has stepped forward, flanked by Gavriel, as the pair of Fae males move around their women. I don’t want a confrontation, but I’m a little afraid that one is coming.

“He didn’t hurt me.” Aurora is about to step between me and them, but I halt her.

“I would never hurt her.” I look at each one in turn. Their hesitation speaks volumes, and I suppose I would be offended...if it wasn’t for the fact that I know where this is coming from. They’re just protecting Aurora. And I’d never hold a grudge against anyone who did that.

“There’s no danger...yet.” Luther moves up to join us, addressing the others, before meeting my eye again. “This is just the beginning.”

That really doesn’t make me feel better.

“Explain,” I demand, my grip on Aurora’s hand tightening.

Luther’s expression turns grave. “Back at Ryacyn, the vampires who’d been given the cure have begun showing signs of the Curse again,” he reveals. “They haven’t

succumbed completely, but...” He takes a deep breath. “It’s only a matter of time. I’m so sorry to—”

“How much time?” I interrupt.

Luther gives a shrug. “There’s no way of knowing, my Lord.”

“What could cause this to happen?” Aurora asks softly, her voice trembling. I want to pull her to me and hold her tightly – although I don’t know if it would be for her or for me right now.

Luther shakes his head slowly, as if he still can’t believe what he’s saying. “We don’t know yet,” he admits reluctantly.

“We will find out, however.” Silverwing reaches out a hand and sets it on Aurora’s shoulder. “All we know is that right now, the cure won’t hold back the Curse indefinitely.”

Aurora nods slowly, then looks at me. “We’ve had a month together.”

I swallow hard because it was the best month of my life. “Yes.”

She looks back at Silverwing. “Do you think we’d get another month if he took it again?”

Silverwing looks thoughtful. “I don’t see why not.”

“So we just keep giving it to him.” Her hand tightens on mine. “That’s all we need to do. He just keeps taking it. They all can. We’ll hold it at bay.” There’s an edge of desperation to her voice, and that’s fucking killing me.

“I don’t know if it would work that way, Aurora,” I say gently.

She spins to look at me. “Why not?” Her voice is sharp.

“Because the Curse gets stronger, my Lady.” Luther is starting to understand what’s dawning on me.

“So what? We keep making the cure stronger, too! We find other ways!” Her words are getting faster, running into

one another. “I’ll figure it out! If happiness is what it takes, I can give him gallons of it!” She aims a smile at me, and it’s filled with so much desperate hope that my heart aches for her.

“It won’t last forever, my love. Sooner or later, it just won’t be enough. The affliction will become too much. And then...”

And then I’ll spiral into madness and turn into a rabid beast. Except that the next time she sees the beast surface, I might not be able to control it.

You’ll never hurt her!

But maybe...I just might.

Gently drawing my hand away from her, I face Silverwing. I’m almost afraid my voice will be gone when I say my next words. “We have to cancel the ceremony tomorrow.”

It seems so fucking unfair that this would happen the day before the moment we’d planned to cement our union.

There’s a combined intake of breath as I speak.

“Bart! No!” Aurora steps up toward me, and suddenly everyone else seems to fade away from my awareness. It’s all just her. Staring at me in dismay. “Why would you do that?”

“Because we can’t go ahead with it now. You heard them. We can’t cure the Curse.”

“So? I don’t care about that.” She’s scowling at me.

“But you should.”

“I’ll be the judge of that!”

By Blood, she’s beautiful when she’s like this. And it makes what I have to do even harder.

“It’s a death sentence, Aurora. I could die any day. I won’t have you living with that.”

“That’s not your choice to make.” Her jaw juts out.

“I think it is. And I’m making it for both of us.” My life might be spiraling into madness, but there’s at least one

thing I can control, and this is it. I won't have her suffering, watching me disintegrate.

She's silent for a long moment, and then she speaks. "Do you know when I'm going to die?"

"What?" I frown at her.

"When will I die, Bart? In fifty years? Ten? Tomorrow?" Her hands are on her hips. "Go on, tell me."

"I have no idea. But I am sure you will have a long and happy life."

"Can you guarantee that?" Her eyes narrow on me.

"Aurora, don't be ridiculous." I run a hand through my hair. "Of course I can't guarantee that."

"So you don't know if I'll be alive tomorrow. I might get struck by lightning!" She glares at me, and my lips twitch in spite of the weight of this conversation. "And you also can't guarantee that you'll be dead tomorrow, right?"

"No, I can't do that." I heave a frustrated breath because she's not making this easier.

"So what you're saying is that you might be here tomorrow, but you'd take that day away from me. And the day after, if you're around. And all the other days that you have left." She swallows hard. "You'll be walking around, going about your business, and I'll know that you are, but you won't allow me to be with you. You'll push me away."

"It's not like that." Why the fuck can't she just see this?

"It's exactly like that!" She shifts her weight. "Do you love me?"

"You know I do. More than I can put into words."

"And you know I love you, too?"

I nod. "But it will pass. You'll move on. Find someone else."

“While I know that you’re still around for me to love? That’s not going to happen, Bart. I’ll never love anyone else while you exist in this realm...or any other.”

“Why would you do that?” I can’t believe she’d choose pain instead of moving forward.

“Because you don’t give up on love just because it gets hard. Love isn’t all sunshine and happiness. Sometimes, it comes with darkness. That’s when it needs *us* to be the light. Don’t you see that? We shine our light on it until we get through the dark times.”

“But eventually, the dark times will be all that is left.” I heave a deep breath.

“Maybe that’s how you see it. But every moment that I have with you will be good. However hard things may get.”

“They’re going to get too hard, Aurora. I’ve already told you that I’d made arrangements with the Council on what to do if the madness took me.”

“You plan to kill yourself.” It’s a blunt statement that hits me in the gut.

“Not kill myself. A necessary execution. It would be for the safety of Ryacyn and my people. And you.”

“Bullshit. I bet anyone you speak to would feel exactly the same way I do. We’ll fight this every step of the way until the very last minute.”

“I don’t want you to have to fight. I want you to be happy.”

“But I won’t be happy.” She shakes her head vigorously. “I’ll be angry. Because you’ll be stealing from me. Stealing your last days with me because you’re worried I’ll be hurt when I lose you.”

“It’s not—”

“Bartholomew Oberon Bellingham!” Whenever she calls me that, I know I’m in for a lashing. “That’s exactly what you’ll be doing. Stealing our happiness together because you’re afraid that I’ll be in pain when you’re gone. Well, let

me tell you something!” She pokes a finger in my chest. “I’ll be in pain *before* you’re gone if you do this. And it will be worse! Because I’ll know we could be having all that love, except you won’t give it to me!”

“You’ll have my love for as long as I’m alive. Just not —”

“Not with you, you mean? Well, that’s just daft. And I won’t allow it.” Her eyes blaze when I open my mouth to speak. “We have real love – *true* love – and that is a gift! You don’t squander a gift – not one second of it, however fleeting it might seem. And you don’t turn it away.”

“Aurora, why are you making this so hard!” I rub a hand over my face.

“Because I’m a fighter, Bartholomew. I fight for what I believe in...and I believe in you. Our love. What we have together. Are you telling me you won’t fight, too?”

“No, I’m not saying that.” Although when she puts it that way, that’s exactly what it seems like I’m doing.

“Fight for us, Bart. Fight for every moment we have left. Please!”

I look into her lovely face, those earnest eyes that are so filled with determination and hope. Eyes that should be feeling that hope for someone who can be there for her. For her future. For a family...and happiness.

My mind is a clusterfuck of confusion, warring between what I want and what I’m certain is the right thing to do. The right thing for *her*.

“Aurora, I just don’t know how to do this.” I shake my head. “I don’t think it’s right.”

And for once in my life, I have to do the right thing.

Aurora

He's beautiful. It's not the first time I've noticed this, and I'm so glad that it won't be the last. Lord Bartholomew Oberon Bellingham is a freaking knockout.

I'm going to have inappropriate thoughts about this man for as long as we both draw breath.

I trail a heated look over him yet again. Nobody would ever blame me for noticing it all right now. My mate is a work of masculine art. From his chiseled lips to his strong jawline to the thick wave of caramel gold hair that he's somehow tamed. Much like the rest of him. Barely restrained power. It radiates from him. And yet again, it's those damned eyes that floor me.

They always will...and I don't care that there will come a time when there's a touch of silver in them.

They catch mine now, and my breath hitches. Today, they're pure gold, with that dark band around the irises that gives his stare an intensity that makes me want to squirm...but there are too many people around me.

I take in the sight of him, dressed in his formal court apparel for the occasion – a dark brocade waistcoat pulls snugly across his broad chest beneath a tailored golden coat that skims his knees. His black trousers do very little to hide the lean muscles of his long legs.

Holy Hollyhocks!

He's aware of me watching, and I see something change in his expression. It's a softening, a tenderness that

makes my heart feel like it's melting. Gold flashes as he locks eyes with mine.

I can't look away.

Sweet Petals, I'm going to spend as long as I can simpering over this man. There's just no other way for me.

I watch as he turns to face me fully, ignoring the assembled dignitaries. Kings, queens, rulers of kingdoms... everyone goes quiet as they wait for me to walk in. I think Bart's holding his breath. I know I am.

Isn't it funny how things come full circle? Because it was just a year ago, at Nightfall's banquet, that I looked at this man just as I'm doing now and thought these same thoughts. And our journey has just begun.

"Shall we go, my Lady?" Lily has finally stopped fussing about me, but her hands are still fluttering. I know she's itching to straighten the pearlescent skirt of my gossamer wedding gown. She satisfies herself by smoothing a fingertip over one of the glittering stones that frame the scalloped neckline. I nod as I take in a breath and prepare to walk down the aisle toward my destiny.

My feet seem to glide across the mossy path as I make my way toward the man waiting for me beneath the petal-decked bower. Every step brings me closer to him. I can feel my own breath coming in short, quick gasps as nerves start to take over. He's still watching me intently, and nothing else seems to exist in this moment but the two of us.

I think it will always be like that, the world fading away when I get lost in that golden gaze.

As I approach him, he takes a step forward and extends his hand out to me. I don't hesitate before twining my fingers through his and then take my place beside him. As always, his touch sends a tiny shiver through me, and his lips curl up as he notices my reaction.

"Ready?" he asks.

"So freaking ready!" My voice is a little high-pitched.

Silverwing, who's standing beneath the bower, facing us, smiles warmly at my enthusiasm. He gathers his softly faded robes and straightens his shoulders. "Lady Aurora of Meadowside, Grand Master Bellingham of Ryacyn... Shall we begin?"

I nod like a fool, my hand tightening on Bart's as if I'm afraid he'll get away.

Maybe I am. Maybe I'm worried that he'll have another misguided idea about protecting me.

No, I'm not.

He's mine, and I'm his, and nothing can ever change that.

Silverwing starts to speak, but I don't hear a single word. All I can concentrate on is the feel of Bart's arm beneath my fingers, the warmth of his gaze as it falls on me, and the love that binds us together.

Suddenly, I'm aware that Silverwing has stopped talking. I turn to look at him. His head is tilted in expectation, and I realize he's waiting for something.

"I...I..." I stammer, wishing I'd been paying more attention.

"Your union is sealed, my dear." Silverwing is fighting down a smile. "All that's needed now is..." He bobs his grizzled eyebrows. My cheeks go warm at the thought of what I'd really like to do to seal this union. "The kiss," Silverwing says, as if aware of what I'm thinking. "Just a kiss," he adds.

But it'll never be just a kiss when there's so much more to it. I know I'm shaking.

"I'm right here." Bart's voice is warm and rich and ripples over my skin like a touch. Towering over me, he uses a fingertip to raise my chin as he smiles down at me. I take in a breath. His expression is full of emotion as he leans in toward me. Our eyes meet one last time before mine flutter shut, and our lips come together in a passionate kiss that binds our fate forever.

It feels like time stands still as he wraps his arms around me and pulls me close. Finally, he breaks away and looks down at me with a softness that takes my breath away.

“I love you,” he whispers.

“And I love you. Forever,” I whisper back.

“For all the time that we have together...and then beyond.”

And that makes sense to me. Because I’m certain I’ll love him into the next life, too. But that’s a matter for another time. This moment is what we have, and I plan to revel in it.

He brushes his lips over mine again, as tender as butterfly wings. It’s a sensation that’s reinforced by a wave of color that swirls around us. We pull apart, and I realize we’re surrounded by a rainbow of swooping butterflies. Turning, I see Nana Bee and Mama beaming back at me from the circle of onlookers who’ve gathered around us. Luther is there, too, and all the other advisors. All those who will fight for Bart, too – not just for him, but for the rest of his kind. And though I know it must hurt him that Vespyr is not there, he seems joyful to see his people there. Besides, I have enough family for both of us.

“Aurora, darling, it’s time to celebrate!” Nana Bee is close now, and she pulls me into a warm embrace before Mama and Pops push in to take her place. Nana has her hand on Bart’s shoulder, and he dips his head when she lifts onto her toes to whisper something into his ear. He gives a smile, dimples popping.

“Is she threatening to hurt you if any harm comes to me?” I ask when we have a brief moment between well wishes.

“Actually, she says she’ll take care of me, too.” He chuckles. “I never thought that would happen to me. Yet here we are.”

He shrugs, and I grin because that’s just typical of Nana Bee. We’re a family that pulls together. We’ll face this Curse head on...and it’s only a matter of time before we find a

way to get rid of it. Bart might not believe it just yet, but I'll never give up hope.

Sliding my hand through Bart's elbow, I press up against him, basking in his warm strength. My brave, strong man. He's tough enough to fight this thing, even if he sometimes thinks it's a fight that I shouldn't have to face with him. I'll show him that he's wrong every day if I have to. I'm determined enough for both of us.

Settling into my seat at the table that's set aside for us, I take a look at where everyone is gathered, preparing for the celebrations. As is custom for Fae unions – and any other Fae celebration, for that matter – we're outdoors, surrounded by the trees and the flowers and the living things that form our world.

“A toast to the happy couple!” Nightfall's strong voice cuts through the chatter. Beside him, Gina is cradling little Starlight, who's managed to sleep through all of this. Nightfall holds up his drink and turns to look at me. “I never thought I'd see this day, Lady Aurora. I'd always thought you'd be too hard to pin down. It would be like trying to catch sunlight, after all.” He grins at that murmur of laughter that ripples through the others. “But now that I look at the pair of you, I can't imagine a better match.” He looks at Bart. “Our Lady is precious. You take care of her, Bellingham.”

“I will.” Bart looks down at me. “Always.”

I sigh happily. I don't care how many tomorrows we have ahead of us – we'll love every minute, and we'll tackle whatever they may bring. And as for today... Today, everything is perfect. My friends. My family...my beautiful mate. Everyone who matters is right here with me.

Everyone except one.

I try not to look around us because I know I'm not going to see the one person who's missing.

“What is it, my love?” Bart murmurs into my ear.

I fight down a little frown, troubled as I think about the giant, Orc-shaped hole in our world I'm aware of right now.

It's been too long since we heard from him.

“I'm worried about Vidarok.”

Vespyr

Voices echo through the cavernous spaces around me. I retreat into the narrow tunnel, fighting back a wave of pain as I seek out safety in a space that feels too small for me.

“She’s not here!” someone calls out. I hold my breath, fear curdling in my belly at the knowledge that I’m being hunted.

“I have searched the chambers below. Also, the network of tunnels that lead to the area marked out for Ryacyn,” another voice responds.

“There’ll be a lot more to work through. It would be impossible to comb through all of them. These tunnels extend for miles. And many are little more than narrow gullies fit for rats.” I recognize this one now. It’s Mortas. The man is shrewd. A skilled tactician. I’ll have my work cut out for me to evade him. Especially in the condition I’m in.

“I will find her.” This new voice sends a shudder through me. I don’t recognize it, but I’ll never forget it now. The low rumble triggers a tiny ripple that lifts the hairs on my arms. Everything within the timbre of it spells danger to me. I have no doubt about it.

I retreat.

The shadows cling to me like a shroud as I slink away through the maze that lies beneath the streets of Paris. My breaths come short and ragged, more from fear than exertion. I’m not used to fear. I’m used to being in control. There’s no hope of that now. I’m a fugitive. It’s a feeling I’ve never had and brings a hollowness that makes my chest ache. Yet another

ache to add to the litany of agony I'm trying to ignore right now.

The thunder of boots echoes relentlessly as my brother's forces scour every crevice, searching for me.

Think, Vespyn! You have to get out of here.

I am certain that I won't last long like this. I'm wounded, weak from the need for blood – it would take just one lucky strike of an axe or sword to finish me. My magic is too feeble after the blast I suffered earlier. So I keep to the dark, using what's left of my powers to cloak myself.

Despair wars with defiance inside me.

How did everything go so wrong?

The carefully laid plans, months in the making, destroyed in an instant by cruel betrayal.

Magnis, damn him!

He used me as a pawn to get close to Bartholomew. Closer to the throne. A place that he'd promised would bring Ryacyn to the glory it deserved.

Lies! All lies!

I was a fool to trust that snake – but how could I have known? He seemed like a kindred spirit, touched by the glorious gift, just as I am – this thing they call the Curse. I know better. Together, we should have ushered in a new era for our kind. If he hadn't been a traitor.

Now, all is in ruins. The few followers I have left are outmatched, on the run. If they're alive at all.

I try not to think about that. Good people whose only flaw was to have faith in me. I let them down.

And Bartholomew...I swallow hard. My dear brother's mind has been poisoned against me by the wiles of that witch, Aurora. He refused my offer to stand together, convinced by the Fae that my gift is some foul curse to be eradicated. What I wouldn't give for one more chance to make him understand

that together, we could achieve greatness beyond imagining for our people!

But it's too late for that. The die has been cast, the lines drawn. I'm a fugitive now, in truth, just as Bartholomew believes me to be. There will be no warm welcome back in Ryacyn, only imprisonment and this "cure" forced upon me, leeching away all that I've become.

Better to live free in darkness than submit.

I pause, pressing myself into the shadows as footsteps approach down an adjacent tunnel. My pursuers are tireless, methodical. But I know these tunnels better than they; I spent days here in all those times I'd been away from our realm. It had been a way to escape the smothering duties that were expected of me. Back when my golden brother still thought I was good.

I am good!

If only he'd see that. See how we could work together.

Heaving a breath, I sink back against the dripping surface of a wall. It's so tight here that I feel closed in. Trapped. It's almost as overwhelming as the pain that wracks my body. I need to find a place to heal. To recover.

As the sounds recede, I venture on through the gloom, my thoughts heavy with remorse and loss. The scent of the city above teases me, impossibly out of reach. Staggering out into the human realm right now would be a mistake. I'd be exposed. Even the thought of easily accessible blood isn't enough to draw me up there. Plus, there are miles of stone and earth separating me from freedom. I need the vampire realm. A place to rebuild my powers. I have to get above ground, to slip away through one of our portals before I'm found.

It's a desperate plan, but I'm out of options. In my current state, I wouldn't survive a direct confrontation. And capture means the end – of my dreams for my people and of the glorious power thrumming in my veins. That, I cannot abide.

Shouts sound, closer now, and I freeze. Have they picked up my trail? I force ragged breaths through my throat, straining for any hint of movement in the darkness around me. There's no good choice here. I can flee deeper into the unknown or stand and fight against hopeless odds. Neither guarantees my survival.

As the echoing voices grow nearer, I hold my breath. Seconds crawl by, breaths trapped burning in my throat. Anticipation twists my gut. Where are they?

But just as quickly, the sounds fade, and I'm left alone.

Alone. All alone.

Sinking to the cold ground, I curl into a ball and try not to weep.

I fail.



I don't know what has changed because it's impossible to tell the passage of time down here, but I know that it's later. Much later. Pushing myself up onto the palm of my hand, I peer around me. The darkness is still heavy, but waking up into it helps my eyes to adapt to it.

I stand. It takes a while because my limbs are stiff from the cold, and I'm still aching. I feel like I've been hit by a bolt of lightning that had my blood boiling within me.

Perhaps that's what he did.

Magnis.

Magnis and his vile magic. It feels like he tried to cook me from the inside out.

I still feel a swirl of rage every time I think of him. So many lies. So many broken promises. I was such a fool to believe any of it.

Did I make a mistake?

I don't want to believe that I did. A chill moves through me just thinking about it.

I take a deep breath, trying to collect my thoughts. I'm alone, and there's no going back. I need to find the vampire realm if I'm to survive and regain my strength.

It's hard to tell down here in the darkness, but my instincts are screaming at me to turn back. The closer I get to the surface, the more danger I am in. If I push forward without a plan or backup, then it could all be for nothing. I could be walking right into a trap – one that would solve all of Bartholomew's problems at once. If he gets me in his grip again, he's going to give me that so-called cure. And that might end me. My gift has lived in me so long it's wired into me, a part of me. I can't let that go. I *won't* let it go.

I take another deep breath and straighten up from my crouch. No matter what, I have taken this path, and there is no going back now – only forward.

Taking another moment to get my bearings, I look around and then pick a path. It's slow going as I fight aching muscles and a thirst that is all-consuming. Blood would strengthen me now, but now that the voices have died down, I know that there isn't a ready source.

Earth...

No! I can't go up there. Even if the humans didn't uncover my true identity, it's probably the first place Bartholomew would look.

I have to go back to Ryacyn. I have to go home. The thought of it draws me like a warm beacon. Closing my eyes, I let instinct take over. When I open them again, I know which way to turn. I keep allowing that faint pull to lead me until things start to feel familiar.

I know where I am!

Hope lights up in me like a fire. It energizes me, and I move more quickly, feeling the flame burning more strongly with every step. Ahead of me lies a path that will lead to one of the vampire doors. A portal back home that won't require me to use any magic. It's a relief because I've used almost everything I have left to keep myself alive. When I glance

down at my hands, even in the inky blackness, I can see the tracing of veins, my skin so pale and fragile that I'm afraid the bones might protrude through.

The last few steps toward the dark space that marks the doorway have me staggering forward. Invisible to anyone but my kind, it calls to me like a beacon.

Close! So close! On the other side lies redemption. I'll find blood...somehow.

But I stop short when my attention is snared.

There's something there.

Something alive. Something big...brooding.

Staying completely still, I steady my breath, letting it turn shallow. I'm almost afraid that the pounding of my heart will be audible to whoever is out there.

Because I have no doubt that someone is out there.

Just when I'm certain I'll scream with the waiting, shadows move at the tunnel entrance. I tense, ready to loose what little magic I have left. It might kill me, but what choice do I have?

Hide.

I sink back into the shadows, adrenaline streaking like fire in my veins as a shape looms beyond the doorway. Impossibly big. I clamp a hand over my mouth to stifle my rasping breath.

Shooting a look back over my shoulder, I weigh up my odds.

I could go back there, into the darkness. The place I just stumbled through for who knows how long. But even as I think it, I know it would be useless. I need to feed. I need to get strong. I'll die back there if I return. The only way out is forward.

Gathering every ounce of my strength, all of my power, I lunge ahead. The sizzle of the portal touches my skin as I burst through the doorway.

Barreling like a cannonball, I shoot through with a speed that surprises me. It surprises whoever is out there, too, because I'm aware of startled green eyes for an instant. And then those eyes narrow and grow uncompromising.

“Stop!” It's that voice from before. The one that made my skin tingle. It ripples through me, stirring a sensation that I shove to the back of my mind.

I don't stop.

I keep moving. Past the massive, towering form that steps forward to bar my path. I duck around, using a nimbleness I didn't know I had. But I'm close...close enough to catch his warm, woody scent. Close enough to get a quick glimpse of rippling muscles beneath a thick layer of leather and iron. Close enough to see gleaming tawny skin traced with swirls and spirals of dark patterns. I don't linger to make out any more; I've seen enough.

I bolt. There's a fleeting sense of shock as a meaty hand grazes the skin of my arm, but I move too fast for him to get a grip on me.

“I said stop!” There's that voice again. I ignore it. Of course I do. Does he think I'm a fool? Whoever he is, he means danger. He's here to capture me. Take me back to face whatever horror my brother and his witch have planned for me. Going back there is not an option. It will never be an option. And that pulls a choked sound from me because, for the first time in my life, I have nowhere to go. And I have nothing. I *am* nothing. No longer a princess. Did I think I was going home? Because there's no home to go back to.

I don't belong there anymore.

Without looking back, I tear free, and I do the only thing that I can.

I gather everything I have left in me.

And I run.

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Cursed

1

Quinn Jones

“Come on, Barry, just hop on down. You can do it,” I croon, extending a hand and trying to look encouraging. Beady eyes stare at the gauntlet I’m wearing – the heavy leather glove will be vital if his intimidating talons were to wrap around my wrist. I suspect that’s not about to happen any time soon. His eyes are filled with suspicion, and he won’t come anywhere near me. I edge closer, rising onto my toes and getting a grip on a branch just below the huge bird. His eyes flicker. Vast wings flap once, and he’s suddenly three branches higher.

Darn it!

“Please, Barry,” I coax. “Just hop on down to me.” *Ugh!* If I don’t get the stupid bird back in his cage before my boss gets back, she’s going to be upset. I make soft kissing noises. He normally likes those. I make the same sounds whenever it’s feeding time – mainly to stop him removing one of my fingers when I hand over the chunks of meat.

I’ve been working with the injured Turkey Buzzard since he came in several weeks ago after flying into a power line. Now his wing is almost fully healed. A fact I’m learning the hard way, because he took the first chance he had to fly away when I brought him out into the aviary. The zoo where I work as a junior zookeeper is known for its spectacular raptor enclosure. Which isn’t helping me right now, because it’s huge, and Barry the buzzard has flown up one of the tallest trees. When he shouldn’t even be out of the vet area yet. But I couldn’t help myself. He’s been getting so much better, and every day, it’s like I can see the frustration in his eyes. He’s been longing to flap those giant wings and soar. He’s wild, after all. How am I going to get him back in his usual cage?

Smart move, Quinn.

He soared away the minute I walked in and he's not due to be let out for at least another week. My boss Emma's a great head zookeeper, and also a good friend, but as the birds of prey specialist and onsite vet, she's strict about treatment protocols. And I've pretty much broken all of them by bringing Barry out now.

"Come on, Barry," I beg. "I'm your buddy, remember? The one who brings you all the treats...nom nom nom? Please come down? Please?"

I clamber higher, trying to ignore the sound of voices from nearby. I don't want Barry spooked. Or myself, either. I'm not great in the spotlight. But the voices are getting louder. The excited banter and babble of little kids. I shove my eyeglasses up the bridge of my nose and sneak a look over my shoulder. It looks like an entire busload of preschoolers has just trooped up to the edge of the enclosure.

Great...just great!

I grit my teeth and turn my attention back to the bird. He's going to listen. It's all going to be okay.

"Barry, I want you to come back here right now!" I say firmly. Barry cocks his head, eyeing me. I see him ease slightly forward. "Yes...good boy! You can do it! I'll give you an extra mouse if you'll come back."

Barry cocks his head again, then flaps once more and suddenly he's at the top of the tree.

"Barry! Darn it, you silly bird!" I blurt.

Below me, the chatter has grown more animated.

"What's that lady doing, Miss Aintree?" a small voice pipes up. I can feel dozens of little eyes on my back now. It makes me want to twitch, almost burning between my shoulder blades.

"I'm sure she's busy with something important, Sam," the schoolteacher replies. "Maybe some maintenance on the

cage or something.” She doesn’t sound too sure. As if I would actually choose to be up here. I’m a little scared of heights.

Not looking down!

Not looking!

I try to ignore them, still scrambling after the bird. I’m halfway up the tree now, my thick boots scrabbling for purchase. There’s silence as the kids keep watching.

“I wanna see the monkeys!” a kid says. There’s a babble of voices as other kids chime in. I hear feet moving as the group starts to dissipate.

I guess a chubby woman climbing a tree doesn’t rank high on their list of fascinating viewing. Thank heavens.

Yes, go see the monkeys!

“Barry, come down here!” I hiss. That full-of-nonsense bird is staring at me again. I swear, I’ll throttle him if I get my hands on him. Actually, I don’t mean that, and he probably knows it too. That’s why he’s staying right where he is. I hear a slight rustle as he collects himself, and then his wings spread wide and he’s swooping straight over my head.

“No!” I yell. Without thinking, I twist and snap out a hand, leaping as I grasp at the feathers overhead. Barry flaps his wings and aims up towards the top of the cage. My arms strain as I narrowly miss the plumage of his underbelly.

Close...so close...!

If I just reach a little higher, I’ll get him, I’m sure of it.

Come on...come on...

“She’s flying!” a voice says sharply beneath me.

I snap a glance down to where a couple of kids are still standing below...far below. One is pointing up at me, the other has an ice-cream stuck in his mouth while he stares up at me, wide-eyed. The ice-cream falls.

Something bumps against the top of my head, and I twist to look up at it, grimacing as my eyeglasses are pushed askew. I’ve just hit the top of the bird enclosure...my face

mashed up against the bars. I shriek and grab onto them with both hands.

“Oh, my word!” I push out. I’m dangling from the roof of the aviary, the floor two stories beneath me. Yet I can’t feel my weight as I cling to the bars. What’s going on? How did I...? What...? My face is smooshed up against the bars, I can’t turn my head. It’s like someone is pushing me from below... but that’s absurd.

“Miss Aintree!” the kid calls out again. “She’s flying! Come see!”

All thoughts of Barry are dashed away as I frantically pull myself along the bars of the roof, trying to reach some place that I can climb down. My grip is slipping, though. It’s not made easier by the fact that one hand is encased in the leather gauntlet, and the other is slippery with sweat. Terror surges through me. And then I lose my grasp and plummet. I shriek and windmill my arms...legs too. From this height, I’ll break every bone in my body when I hit the ground.

But I don’t hit the ground. I’m...I’m hanging. From *nothing*. I spin my head from side to side, then up again. I’m not holding onto anything at all. But I’m not falling either. I’m making these squeaking noises.

A glance over my shoulder reveals a blur of motion that looks very much like what Barry looked like when he flew by. Feathers. Wings. What? Did he catch me?

Don’t be ridiculous, Quinn.

Then I look up and see Barry staring down at me with a quizzical look on his face. What, then... What...?

“Wings! She’s got wings!” the kid yells. I hear the sharp sound of heels on paving and realize that the teacher must be returning.

“Sam, what on earth are you doing back there?” I hear her calling out.

Oh lordy...oh, lordy lordy!

What's happening to me? I can't have wings. I can't! It's not possible! I must have them. There's no other explanation. I have wings and this school teacher is about to see me like this.

Why do I have wings?

What's wrong with me?

I glance around frantically, realizing that I'm gradually descending. But as the sense of panic builds, I feel myself drop abruptly. I land on my butt on the dry earth beneath me. The jolt knocks the wind from me, but I wasn't high enough to do any real damage. I scramble to my feet, dusting myself off just as the teacher reaches the kids. She stares in at me curiously.

"She was in the air...with wings," the kid says again.

I ignore the little voice in my head that's telling me to feel my back.

"Of course, Sam," the teacher says. "Birds have wings. That's how they fly."

"No! The lady! The *lady* has wings," the kid insists. The teacher stares at me for a moment, her eyes narrowing. Then she gives a little shake of the head and a knowing smile.

I shrug. "Morning," I mumble. "Lovely day for an outing, isn't it?" I keep my front to her because...my back feels chilly. Like there's a breeze blowing on it, from where a pair of wings ripped through the material of my uniform.

No! Come on! That's insane.

Maybe I've lost my ever-loving mind. It's quite possible.

She gives a hesitant smile.

"She was flying, Miss Aintree, honest!" the kid insists.

I shrug again and pull a face. "Kids, huh? What an imagination..."

Miss Aintree rolls her eyes and gives a small nod.

"Come on, Sam. They're feeding the monkeys."

“But she was! I saw it...I saw her wings!” he insists, turning to stare back at me as the teacher gently guides him away. The other kid pauses for a second, then turns and bolts. I exhale a shuddering breath.

What the actual heck?!

A scrambling sound beside me shows that Barry has landed next to me. I barely acknowledge the bird. My head is still reeling.

I move numbly toward the door of the enclosure. There’s a small building adjoining the aviary. We handle all the behind-the-scenes bird care there – vet area, feed bay, general storage, as well as some darker living areas for the nocturnal birds. I push the door open and make my way inside. Barry is hopping along with me, meek as can be. I feel like I’m squinting through a blurred haze as I walk out of the bright daylight into the cool interior.

“Pull yourself together, Quinn,” I mutter to myself. For a moment, I battle to get my bearings. Barry needs to go back into his cage, and I stumble toward it. I pull open the door, and he jumps inside like some kind of trained seal. Why wasn’t he behaving so well when we were out earlier? And what’s brought about this sudden change in attitude? I almost broke my neck for him.

Darn bird!

I shut the door, then slump onto a seat near the small table where Emma and I often have coffee together. I pull off my glasses, rub my eyes, then put them back on. I can barely see straight right now. But who could blame me? This is insane!

I’m about to get up to make myself some tea when the door swings open. Emma’s returned. Thank heavens I’ve managed to get some semblance of normality back.

Normality? I just grew wings and flew!

“Hey, Quinn,” she says brightly. “All good?”

No!

Not even close.

I nod. “Sure. Everything’s hunky dory,” I lie. “Just did some tidying up around the enclosure. Checked on Barry.” I stare at the buzzard as if he’s about to rat me out. “He seems to be doing really well.”

“Yeah,” Emma agrees. “I’m thinking we might be able to integrate him with the rest of the birds soon. Poor boy. After what happened to his wing, he’ll never be fit to be released into the wild, but I think he’ll fit into the main aviary very well. And clearly, he’s getting sick of being locked up.”

I resist the urge to pull a face at the bird. Instead, I nod and smile. Emma gives me a strange look.

“Everything okay?” she asks. She’s definitely looking at me funny.

“Sure, couldn’t be better,” I reply too brightly.

“You sure? Because your, uh...glasses...” She makes a vague gesture toward my face. I lift my hand to the frames of my spectacles. They’re on crooked. I remove them, about to wipe the lenses. There’s a huge crack running through one of them.

Shoot! No wonder everything was blurry.

“Oh...boy...” I mumble. “Don’t know how that happened.” I drop the ruined frames on the table between us. “Must’ve been while I was scrubbing out the owlhouse.”

“Is that when you tore your shirt too?” Emma asks. I frown at her.

“My shirt?” I glance down to where the crisp khaki of my uniform is pulled snugly over my chest. Damn! I haven’t been eating all that healthy lately. I’ve obviously put on some weight.

I can’t see anything wrong with my shirt. Though without my glasses, that’s hardly surprising. I’m blind as a bat without them.

“No...um...at the back,” Emma says. “You seem to have torn it.” I crane my neck to look over my shoulder. I

reach a hand over too. My fingertips encounter torn fabric. Try as I might, I can't see far enough to figure out what I'm feeling. I move to the small restroom adjoining the work area. There's a tiny mirror above the handbasin and I stand with my back facing it, trying to get a better look at my shirt. A blurry look. Still half-blind, darn it. So the breeze I felt not so long ago was real.

And I can just make out that there are two neat rips down the back, roughly over each of my shoulder blades.

Oh, heck!

I feel under the fabric, half-expecting to find some sort of injury. Broken skin, or grazing. But there's nothing...aside from two soft ridges that tingle slightly when I touch each one.

This makes no sense. But Emma is still looking at me, obviously expecting some kind of answer. I huff out a breath.

"I'm so clumsy," I say. "I probably got hooked on the top of the door. You know how rough those edges are where they put in the new hinges. Or on one of the trees in the enclosure."

It definitely wasn't wings.

No!

Nope!

"Hmm, you're right," Emma says thoughtfully. "I asked Tony to take a look at those a week ago already. Obviously, he hasn't yet. I'll have a word with him."

I try not to cringe. The zoo handyman is a grouch, but I hope I'm not landing him in trouble.

Sorry, Tony!

"I have a spare shirt in my locker, if you'd like to change," Emma adds. I shake my head with a tight smile, running an eye over her trim shape. My boss is sweet for offering but there's no way I'd squeeze myself into one of her shirts.

“I have my jacket,” I say. “It’s cool enough to wear. I was getting a bit chilly anyhow.” It’s not a lie – the temperature has dropped since earlier in the day. It may be cool enough to deter afternoon guests from coming to the zoo. Which would suit me just fine. We normally do a brief demonstration with some of the more habituated birds around mid-afternoon if there are enough visitors. But if the weather’s rotten, maybe we’ll skip it.

Please let us skip it!

I don’t relish the thought of dealing with the public right now. Why? Because I just sprouted wings and flew to the roof of the aviary! I couldn’t have, though. I rub my eyes. I’m overtired and I need some quiet time to myself. That’s it! I’m all peopled and buzzarded out.

“Are you sure you’re okay, hon?” Emma seems quite concerned now. “You’re really quite pale. Maybe you hit your head when you bumped your glasses.”

“You know, I think you’re right,” I answer, rubbing my forehead. There’s definitely a headache brewing.

“How about you get packed up here and head home?” Emma says, reminding me why I like working with her so much. “I can hold down the fort this afternoon. Looks like we’ll have a quiet day anyhow. I’ll do the rounds before I oversee the feeds later. There isn’t any vet work to worry about right now, so I have time.”

“Thanks, Em,” I finally answer. “I’d appreciate that. I’ll come in early to make up for it, okay?”

She gives a dismissive wave and shakes her head. “Don’t be silly. Just go have a lie-down. You’re always here first and you’re the last to leave. You need to do *you* for a change. I’ll see you in the morning.”

I slide my arms into the sleeves of my jacket, and reach for my backpack, giving a final wave as I head for the door. I’m pretty proud that I keep my voice steady as I call out a final goodbye.

That's it! The only explanation that makes any real sense. I hit my head hard and then imagined growing wings. I definitely need to lie down. I'll be just fine after some rest.

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About the Author

Hello there, lovely readers!

I'm BE Brouillard, and I am absolutely thrilled to welcome you into the captivating world of my latest creation in the "Becoming the Vampire Queen" series. For the past two decades, writing has been my ultimate passion, and creating Blood has truly ignited my imagination.

As an author, I find immense joy in weaving tales of paranormal romance that whisk you away from the ordinary and into the extraordinary. The intricate dance between forbidden love, ancient mysteries, and the allure of the supernatural has always fascinated me. In this latest book, I delved deep into the realms of passion, power, and heart-pounding suspense.

One of the most exhilarating aspects of crafting this story was bringing to life the fiery dynamic between our protagonists, Aurora and Bartholomew. The electric friction between their characters ignited sparks for me, and I can only hope that as you read, you'll feel your heart race just as I did while writing their journey.

Thank you for embarking on this supernatural journey with me. I hope my words will sweep you off your feet and immerse you in a world where love knows no bounds and mysteries abound. Let's stay connected, and until our next magical encounter, may your days be filled with love, laughter, and of course, a touch of the extraordinary.

Warmly,

BE Brouillard

I would love to hear from you, so please look me up:

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